

Wallace Berman: *Off the Grid*

By [Ann McCoy](#)



Wallace Berman, *Untitled (Jack Ruby)*, 1964. Photograph with hand written poem, 28.5 x 29 inches. Courtesy TOTAH.

ON VIEW

TOTAH

Off the Grid

September 8 – October 30, 2021

New York

Wallace Berman was for me, as a young '70s Los Angeles artist, a magnetic Topanga initiate, mystic visionary, and kindly soul who showed us what art as a higher calling could be about. Who could forget his profoundly moving wood box sculpture *Untitled, Art is Love is God* (1955)? In a town dominated by male artists like Billy Al Bengston, who were obsessed with finish-fetish surfaces, Berman's obsessions ran deeper—Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf* and French Surrealist poets like Jules Supervielle. Poems by Jean Cocteau, Antonin Artaud, Michael McClure, and Robert Duncan were his launching pads. Berman inhabited a world of poets, both in his San Francisco stints and with Los Angeles visits by Allen Ginsberg among others. *Untitled (Jack Ruby)* (1964) has Michael McClure's poem "Double Murder Vahrooom" written over the image.

During the rampant misogyny of '60s and '70s Los Angeles, women were excluded from galleries and exhibitions like the Los Angeles County Museum's *Art and Technology* show. Yet, Berman's hand-printed *Semina* journal championed women artists like Rachel Rosenthal, (Marjorie) Cameron, Jay DeFeo, Aya (Tarlow), and Diane Di Prima. Wally even went to jail on an obscenity charge for including a Cameron erotic drawing, *Untitled (Peyote Vision)* (1955), in his 1957 Ferus Gallery show. Who could forget Cameron as the Whore of Babylon in Kenneth Anger's *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (1954). Wallace Berman had brought her work into the Ferus all-boys club—talk about a transgressive act. He began as a Zoot Suiter, jazz aficionado, swing dancer, and gambler and shape shifted into a Kabbalist exploring esoteric mysteries.

Descending into the cellar at TOTAH feels like entering a sanctum sanctorum, the holy of holies. The leitmotif of this exhibition could be the theme of intimacy, images feeling like handheld windows into the artist's psyche. In celluloid, Wallace Berman returns in spirit at a time when we need his purity of vision the most. His short looping film *Aleph* (titled by his son Tosh) from 1957-1966 is projected at TOTAH on a screen with chairs for viewers. Berman never presented it in a theater; rather, it was shown at his house to one person at a time, sometimes even projected on the refrigerator. *Aleph* was Berman's only film, and it was carefully restored and transferred from 8mm to 16mm with much effort by the filmmaker Stan Brakhage. It is a personal diary but includes images shot from television like Rudolf Nureyev's *Swan Lake* and footage of Mick Jagger. The images of Berman's home life feel personal in contrast to the way Brakhage portrayed even his wife in home childbirth as an archetype. This handheld film was certainly influenced by Brakhage in his use of dyes, manipulation, and hand painting and Bruce Conner's *Break Away* (1966), as well as Léger's Dadaist film *Ballet Mécanique* (1923–24). That the artist made only one film in his lifetime that remains a masterpiece is remarkable.



Wallace Berman, *Untitled (Mandala with Aleph Center, Mushroom Below)*, c. 1965. Negative verifax collage, 10 x 8.5 inches. Courtesy TOTAH.

Many of the works in the exhibition feature images placed on the face of a 1964 Sony Megaphone pocket-sized transistor radio, as though the images are broadcast using sound. During a brief stint in the Navy during WWII, Berman was trained as a sonar technician, and one

of his favorite books was Harry Smith Williams's *Radio-Mastery of the Ethers* (1923), which dealt with the necromantic realities of radio and the "Edison effect." In a conversation with Walter Hopps, Berman waxes poetic, "they're [the images] poems coming in on the ether"—like a radio signal. Ken Allen's essay, "Radio Mastery of the Ether: Wallace Berman, Mysticism and Meaning in the 1960s" from the catalogue *Wallace Berman: American Aleph*, is perhaps one of the most brilliant sources for a discussion linking sound, spirit, and image. In these works, made with a Verifax, a short-lived copier that quickly became obsolete, Berman holds the little radio in the palm of his hand as images of the cosmos, mushrooms, cave painting, footballers, Vietnam prisoners, and even Brian Jones float toward the viewer.

Early works like *Untitled* (1956-7) feature the *alef-bet*, the Hebrew alphabet. Berman knew the letters but could not read Hebrew. There are stories in Jewish folklore of seekers who asked G-d and the angels to arrange the letters for them in prayer. Berman relied on the angels: *aleph* was his personal symbol encompassing the eternal mystery beyond the biblical G-d, *bet* was the mouth and speech, etc. The *Dead Sea Scrolls* had just been discovered, and Berman knew the mystical importance of lost texts, and occluded meanings. In a *Print Collector Newsletter* (March/April 1975) Berman said it best: "Letters with fantastic creative energy I want to bring to new areas, to relate to today as well as the past ... each panel a new adventure in universal connections." David Meltzer has described Berman's mystical aesthetic and work as both "ocular and occultic"—with meanings both "revealed and concealed."

In today's art world, so taken with grand gestures, mega galleries, and hollow celebrity, the TOTAH Berman exhibition feels like a course correction. Showing the film to one person at a time has an intimacy we have forgotten, once reserved for lovers and gurus and adepts. This was not the world of mass audiences and mega-bucks. When Wallace Berman was killed in a car accident in 1976, this old Catholic felt a crucifixion had taken place, foreshadowed by his Ferus Gallery *Cross* (1957). We had lost a light-bringer who showed us a path. A trip to TOTAH feels like a pilgrimage.

Contributor

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