



Wallace Berman, *Untitled #120*, ca. 1964–76, Verifax collage, acrylic, 6 × 6 1/2".

Wallace Berman

TOTAH

Wallace Berman showed in New York only once in his lifetime (at the Jewish Museum in 1968), and his work has been seen only fitfully in the city since then. It's surprising to realize

that he was a native New Yorker—Staten Island born—given that he was central to the art and counterculture of California from the mid-1950s until his death on February 18, 1976, his fiftieth birthday. The University of California, Berkeley Art Museum’s great exhibition of 2006, “Semina Culture: Wallace Berman and His Circle”—which, luckily, traveled to New York University’s Grey Art Gallery the following year—positioned him at the heart of a widespread network of artists, poets, and motley eccentrics connected through Semina, a truly, dare I say, seminal magazine he produced between 1955 and 1964. This presentation of forty-five works, “Off the Grid,” offered an all-too-rare East Coast glimpse of one of the still poorly understood protagonists of postwar American art, an artist who rightly should be more than just the cult figure he’s so far been fated to be.

The exhibition was preponderantly devoted to the Verifax collages that Berman began making around 1961—roughly two years before Romare Bearden, on the other coast, began using a photostat machine to print his collages. Like the photostat, the Verifax was a precursor to the photocopier, and these artists were exploring the intersection of reproductive technologies with the associative leaps available to untrammelled intuition. Again and again, Berman used the image of a hand holding up an am/fm transistor radio (said to be the most popular communication device of the 1960s and ’70s) that framed some other image, which seemingly could be of anything—a satellite view of a hurricane (*Untitled #79*, ca. 1964–76), a mushroom (*Untitled #120*, ca. 1964–76), or rifle-toting soldiers (*Untitled #129*, 1976)—or even of something practically unnameable. He presented them singly or in gridded arrangements of anywhere from four to (in this selection) twenty-five radio-framed pictures; they could be printed as positives or negatives and were sometimes hand colored. Usually, Berman added lettering in Hebrew, a language in which he was not conversant. These works seem to present enigmatic messages from some other dimension on the flip side of the social realm: One might think of Andy Warhol’s recycled media imagery as a correlative, but Warhol celebrated the surface, whereas Berman seems to imply that there is always an ungraspable meaning lurking beneath. Mass culture harbors unfathomable mysteries.

The recurrent radio motif evokes the poetics of Jack Spicer, who—inspired by Jean Cocteau’s 1950 film *Orpheus*, in which a car radio becomes a link to the beyond—declared that “the poet is like a radio receiving transmissions” from what he called simply “the Outside.” Today, we have handheld devices that transmit so much more than sound and keep us all in their thrall: those phones that are indeed smarter than we are. Berman seems to have foreseen our current condition. But he holds out the hope that there might still be an arcane frequency amid the static where some kind of wisdom will be on offer. In *Aleph*, the silent seven-minute 8-mm film the artist began working on in 1956 and never completed, a precipitous montage, reminiscent of the film works of Bruce Conner, mashes up views of some of the Verifax collages with other, mostly found bits of footage, overlaying them with transitory glimpses of words (in the form of Letraset applied directly to the film stock, for instance). These communiqués, which disappear before one can read them, suggest that meaning will always be too abundant and too intangible to do more than tease the imagination. The work’s visual and semantic instability is just disquieting enough to suit our own time, aflame as it is with apocalyptic presentiments.

— *Barry Schwabsky*

