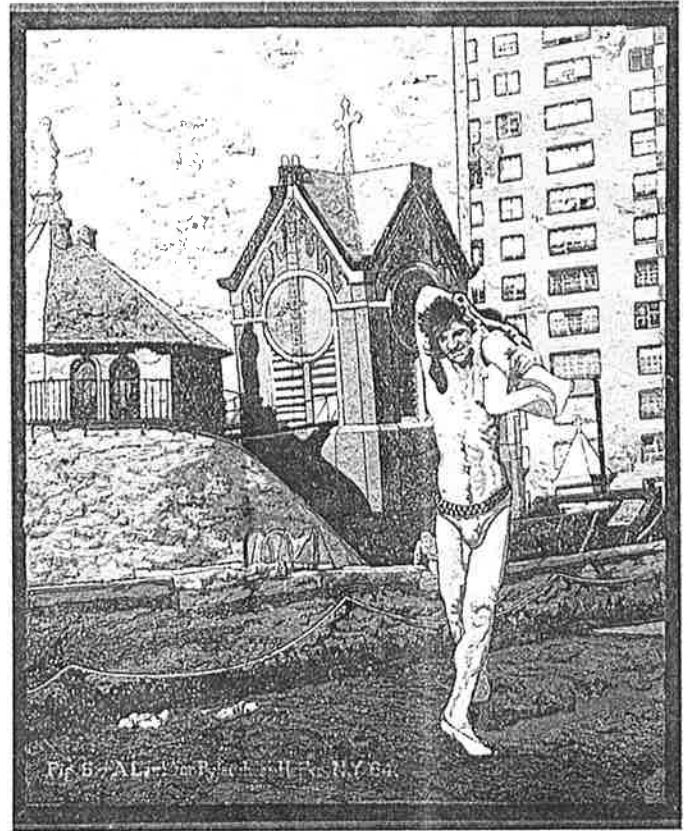


Bruce Connor, *July George (verso)*, 30" x 27.5" x 7" mixed media, 1962.
Except as noted, all photos courtesy Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco.

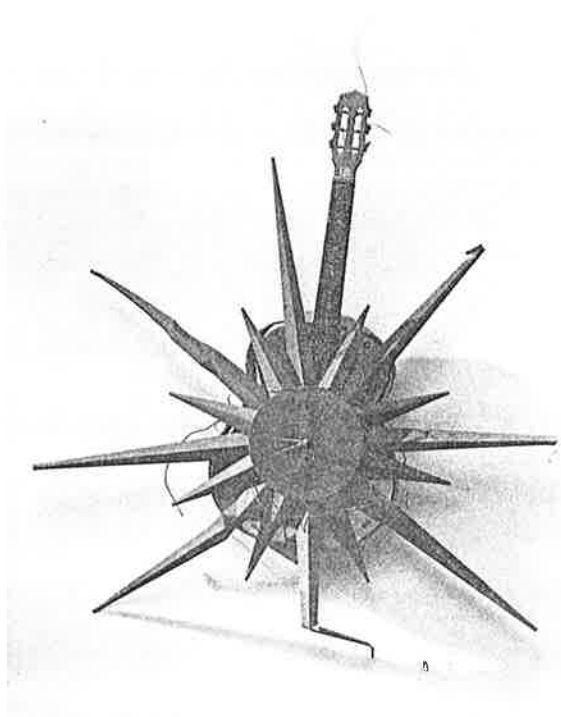


Jess, *6-A Lamb for Pylachos*, 24" x 20" oil on canvas, 1964.

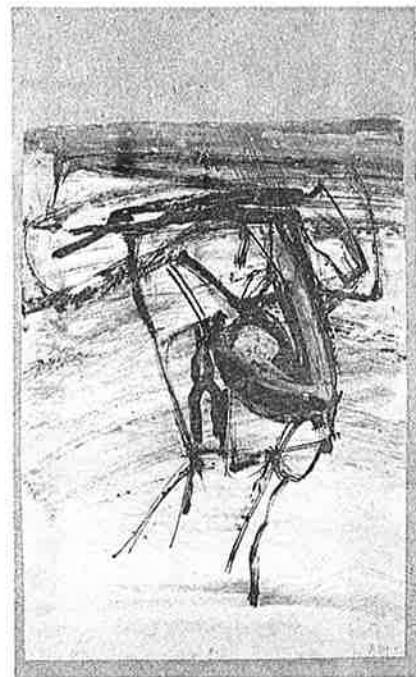
RELIQUARIES AMONG FRIENDS

Bill Berkson

George Herms, *Guitar Burst*, 50" x 40" x 18" assemblage, 1988.



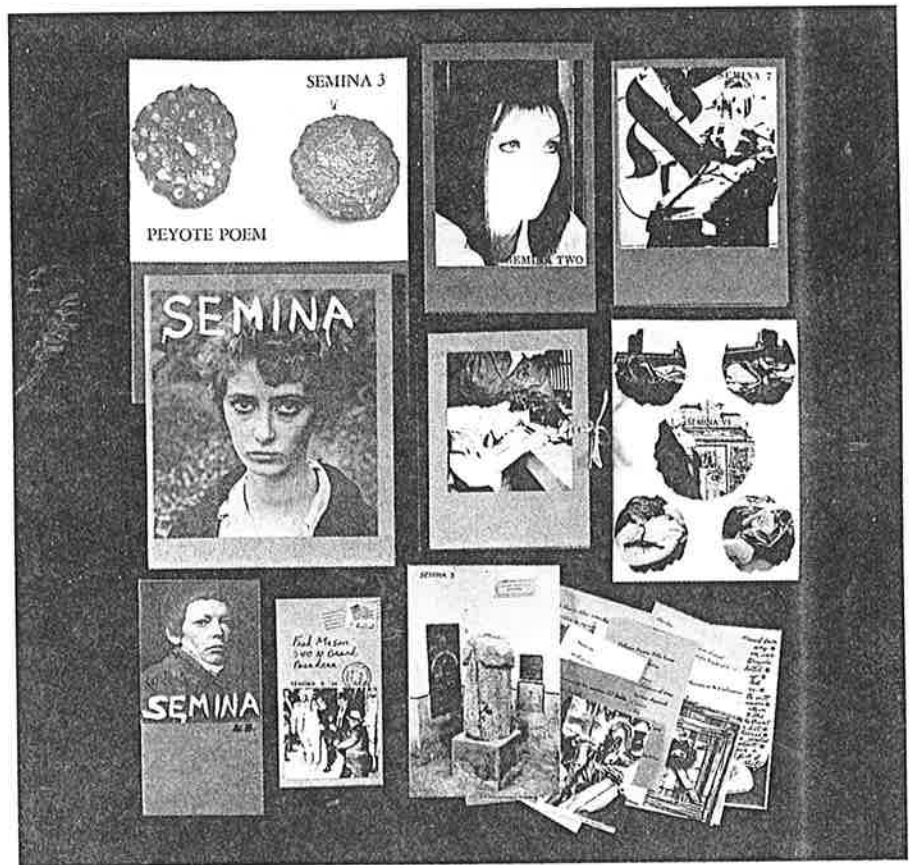
Jay DeFeo, *Untitled (Florence)*,
23.5" x 14.5" tempera on paper, 1952.



Think of six artists—Jay DeFeo, Wallace Berman, George Herms, Wally Hedrick, Bruce Conner and Jess—so associated in their multifarious, hybrid practices, and by now in the annals that comprise a forty-year history, but each with a markedly distinct originality. What they share is not a style but a world view and ways of asserting peculiar sensibility within it—how, literally, to make a life with thoroughgoing artistic attentiveness at the core, a larger fact than the maintenance levels of either art or everyday life would ordinarily admit. Attitude thereby is the key.

Style never seems to have occurred to any of these artists as a mediating factor. Rather, there are rudimentary, even neutral, principles of arrangement, blunt as puns: everything has its place; many things fill a given design (or grid) or make a jumble across the board; a few hang or stick crosswise; a single object held up for contemplation goes (where else but?) smack in the middle of the accommodatingly roomy, bare support. Cruciform armatures and other simple symmetries have long supplied the majority of these artificers with practical devices that also figure as emblems of spiritual intent. (Only Jess, whose work can be seen as neighborly to the others' but not of the immediate household, has regularly been concerned with composition as a setting for intricate spacial teeters and twists.) Herms's comment on his own procedure is exemplary: "Some of the works I do are like a tossed salad, and others are like dart boards."

The discrepancy between a cross as emblem of organized belief and the wayward stuff hung upon it is less a matter of irony than of mindful ardor: The world needs us to give credence to its dynamics of scrap and unheralded epiphany. The pressures—up, down, sideways—are radically devotional. Michael McClure has remarked on how, seeing Herms's work, "one thinks that they are by someone who is near-saintly in his care for the objects that are put together." If Herms is the archaeologist-conservator of this reliquarian tendency, then Jess is the illuminator, Conner the seraphic trickster, Hedrick the astronomer, and Berman and DeFeo the psychopomp and geomancer, respectively. Nary a work by one can be mistaken for that of another, but see how swimmingly they converse. The symbiosis is life-affirming, specific and hardly obscure: in the '50s, while no one else was looking, these Californians formed a daisy chain of mutual permissiveness for intervening along the edges of art, as well as for a general refurbishing of what civilized living in mid-20th-century "hobohebian" fashion might entail. Taking one another as prime audience, they became collaborators in a call-and-response species of artmaking that, not so incidentally, deepened their crisscrossing affections. Imaginative portraiture—often in



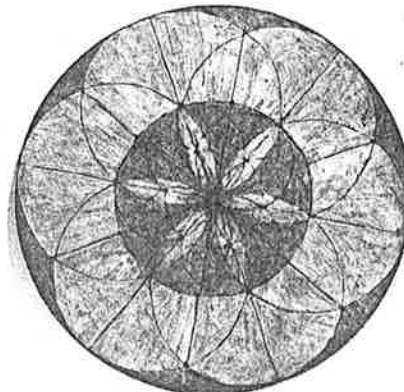
Wallace Berman's *SEMINA*, a nine volume set of journals devoted to poetry and art, originally published between 1957-64. Facsimile edition produced by George Herms, published by L.A. Louver (ed. 300).

freestanding, tabletop constructions—of an uncannily precise, allusion-packed inscape variety has been one of the main avenues of communication among friends.

The family album of this extended microculture was *Semina*, the serial anthology of texts and images that Berman produced on small hand presses from 1957 to 1964 (now newly issued by L.A. Louver in a limited facsimile edition supervised by George Herms, with the poems reprinted by Alistair Johnston). A sample packet with its modified,

plain-brown commercial envelope might contain poems by John Wieners, David Meltzer, Bob Kaufman or "Pantale Xantos" (Berman's *nom de plume*) shuffled next to others by John Keats or Antonin Artaud; draw from the bottom and you might find an opium phantom pirated from Jean Cocteau or a photocollage of Lenny Bruce attacked in a crown of leaves and butterfly wings. Fittingly, in this year of Hollywood's and other re-rakings of smoldering conspiracy theory, we get to take yet one more hard look at the image (slightly altered by Berman) of Jack Ruby dispatching Lee Harvey Oswald: this photograph, accompanied by McClure's "Dallas Poem" on the inside, decorated the wrapper for *Semina Nine*, the last issue of the magazine. □

Wally Hedrick, *Love Feel*, 59" diameter, oil on canvas, 1957.



"Poem Makers," an exhibition featuring works by Wallace Berman, Jess and George Herms, and celebrating the newly produced facsimile edition of *Semina*, was held at L.A. Louver in Venice, CA, June 5 - July 3; "Sight/Vision: The Urban Milieu, Number Three," with works by Berman, Jess, Herms, Jay DeFeo, Bruce Conner and Wally Hedrick, appeared at Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco, June 9 - July 9.

Bill Berkson, poet and art critic, co-curated "Sight/Vision: The Urban Milieu, Number Three"; the above text is an extended version of his brochure essay for that show.