

# Bookways

A Quarterly for the Book Arts  
Number 3, April, 1992



*Printed and published by W. Thomas Taylor  
in Austin, Texas*

# Replanting the Seed

BY ALASTAIR JOHNSTON

When I moved to the San Francisco Bay Area to pursue the craft of printing in 1973, I had one book of small press poetry, Jack Spicer's *The Heads of the Town up to the Aether*. Though it had been published only a decade before, I found no one who could tell me anything about the publisher, Auerhahn Press. I decided to rectify matters by writing a bibliography of the press. In order to get into the spirit of the era, I composed the text spontaneously in the typstick (from my notes) and revised it on the bed of the press (hence, illustrations appear where I decided to omit a paragraph or more). The Beat era intrigued me, and I later compiled a bibliography and history of Auerhahn's contemporary, White Rabbit Press, whose principals were interested in the roots of Western religion and Greek mythology as opposed to the Zen questings of the Beats and preferred alcohol to pot, but also wore ill-fitting black garb.

In my researches I also discovered a magazine called *Semina*, assembled and published by Wallace Berman. Far from "fine printing" in the sense of self-conscious puffed-up work with pretensions, the magazine is an important catalogue of the art and ideas of some key figures in the Beat generation. Berman, a painter and one of the fathers of the funk movement, died in a car wreck on his fiftieth birthday in February 1976—an event of which he'd had a premonition. A major retrospective of his work at the University Art Museum in Berkeley impressed me with his strong individuality and multifaceted art. He assembled sculpture from trash, not elevating the fragment, but reevaluating the debased detritus he put together. The California assemblage movement had begun with Jess (another literary painter, who provided cover art for the White Rabbit books) and also included Bruce Conner and George Herms, whose similar questings *au garbage* led to art.

Inspired by the further reaches of the mind-expanding drugs, peyote, heroin, and LSD, these artists

got down and funky. It took thirty years for the East Coast art establishment to recognize their importance, a sure sign that they were doing something new. Because there was no recognizable theoretical basis for their work, it couldn't be properly assessed by the art world, but the artists knew that a lineage of contextualizing criticism would defuse their power as it legitimized them to museum culture. The artists also frequently confused critics by mixing their media: Wallace Berman switched from assemblage to publishing his revolutionary underground magazine, *Semina*. He also produced "site art," painting Hebrew letters on rocks in Topanga Canyon and, after a lot of experimentation, created a unique series of prints using an obsolete image-generating machine from the days of wire service photo transmission. The Verifax was an early version of the machine later popularized by Xerox; its one drawback was a photo-chemical bath that fixed the image. Berman discarded the receiver sheets till one day, looking through the pile of rejects, he saw how readable the negative images were and began to concentrate on them for his collages. These Verifax collages are among the most haunting, resonant, and compelling of all the work from the sixties. They are negative rather than positive images, and many of them are framed by a hand holding a cheap radio, suggesting not only another form of broadcast but also things in the air.

Berman was recognized by contemporary artists on the West coast—Dennis Hopper, who collected his work, gave him a cameo in *Easy Rider* (fittingly, as a sower of seeds in the commune scene)—and in London he so impressed the art world he made it to the cover of *Sgt Pepper's*. But in the United States the mind-numbing work of Warhol and Lichtenstein became the big ticket with mainstream art critics, while the infinitely more interesting and original output of Jess, Herms, Berman, Conner, et al., remained in obscurity. The recent resurgence of interest in the Beat era artists has led to an excellent study, *Secret Exhibition, Six California Artists of the Cold War Era* by Rebecca

Solnit (*City Lights*, 1991), which discusses the movement with great insight.

*Semina* was a packet of little things that arrived in the mail unsolicited, if you were lucky enough to be in Berman's address book. Berman had learned letterpress from Robert Alexander of Baza Press. Another apprentice of Alexander's was Ed Ruscha, who became the godfather of the artist's book movement in Southern California. With a small five-by-eight-inch Excelsior tabletop model platen press (at first described appropriately in the colophon to one *Semina* issue as "beat," later as "warped") and some scrounged type and paper, Berman began printing *Semina*. He printed on whatever he could get hold of—from acidic, brightly colored coverstock, to imitation parchment, to newsprint—determining the final size of his project (I conjecture) by the size and shape of available paper.

Berman contributed poetry as Pantale Xantos, a Greek pseudonym—the surname referred to a precious stone of a golden color mentioned by Pliny; on a more mundane level it might mean "jaundiced." (However Berman came about the name, he later discovered someone whose name it really was.) *Semina* also included a wide array of his contemporaries, including William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, Alexander Trocchi, Charles Bukowski, John Wieners, Michael McClure, David Meltzer, and Bob Kaufman. Walter Hopps and Charles Brittin contributed photographs, making enough individual prints to go into the couple of hundred copies of the magazine circulated by Berman.

Last year George Herms contacted me about creating a facsimile of the *Semina* series, a project which appealed to me as challenging and fascinating and an opportunity to get closer to the mind of the artist who had created it. This facsimile is being published by the Louvre Gallery of Los Angeles (with simultaneous shows planned on the East and West coasts in March 1992) and involved recreating hundreds of small idiosyncratic and ephemeral pieces and assembling them from letterpress and offset with glue, staples, and even manuscript additions. I was recommended for the job by David Meltzer, poet and friend of Berman and Herms, who thought my efforts at Poltroon Press somehow continued the spirit of exploration of the Beat era.

From a practical point of view, I recognized that the hardest job would be finding all the papers used in the original printings, since paper has undergone a revo-

lution and many of the older acidic papers are no longer made. Commercial papers of thirty years ago, if discontinued, are likely to be almost impossible to find. Therefore I asked George Herms to find all the paper as one condition of undertaking the job. That way any decisions about substitutions would be made by him, with his artist's eye. That still left cutting and tearing and keeping track of the myriad small packets of paper. (One packet arrived from Herms with a note that one side was true but the other was "cut by the cross-eyed mumbler.") Measuring the individual pieces led me to conclude that although the paper had often started as standard sheet sizes such as eight and a half by eleven inches, Berman had not trimmed his stacks to be uniform. A little drift in the measurement while cutting down large sheets preserved this variation.

The next problem to tackle was the odd assortment of scavenged types that Berman employed. Most of them are identifiable and could be found or approximated, but that was not the end of the typographic quest, for Berman's type wore out, his tabletop platen was warped, his ink rollers maladjusted; and there were the erratic spacings, inverted letters, wrong fonts, and thousands of other quirks to consider.

The only solution was to make relief blocks from the best possible negatives of the originals. Then the warpage and ink squash would be built in, and I wouldn't have to put my press out of kilter. In a few cases, Herms sought several variants of an original to locate the ideal or most readable example, and after trials we also reshot some. The worst examples came from *Semina Six*, "The Clown"; by stripping together a couple of negatives and scratching in squashed characters we managed to compose a readable version without compromising the original (illustrated on page 44). For one poem, printed in purple ink over a black-and-white halftone, Herms had his cameraman in Los Angeles scratch out the letters and try various tricks with masks and multiple exposures to get a usable separation. Fortunately, the cameraman was sympathetic to the project and understood why we didn't want to "improve" on the originals by holding back the exposure. The engravers in Iowa did their part well; it only remained for me to play with the packing and the ink coverage to get a close approximation of the original. Many of Berman's colors had small amounts of black in them (a state familiar to printers who don't wash up their presses thoroughly), but generally they were out-of-the-can reds, browns, and blacks and an

occasional purple or green. Though there was no constraint to print them in chronological order, it might interest readers to see how the series evolved.

*Semina One*, some looseleaf poems (set in Linotype) in an envelope, was a modest beginning. But like a seed packet, it contained a living and growing form. The envelope was adorned with a photo of Cameron, who contributed a drawing in the "transparent penetrated style" of Hans Belmer that led to trouble for Berman.

In 1957, Berman was arrested for obscenity during a show of his sculptures at Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles and found guilty. (The same judge presided over Henry Miller's obscenity trial.) In a note glued to the back of *Semina Two*, Berman described how the Vice Squad "confiscated Semina No 1 which was exhibited as an important part of a work entitled 'Temple'. Brought before the righteous judge Kenneth Holiday, who, taking the allegorical drawing in question out of context declared me guilty of displaying lewd matter. I will continue to print 'Semina' from locations other than this city of degenerate angels. Wallace Berman / Los Angeles / Dec. 1957."

Berman packed up and moved to the Bay Area, where David Meltzer and George Herms received him. He decided to make a book out of *Semina Two*. He stapled together pages of kraft paper into a chipboard cover, then pasted in poems, drawings, and photographs. The inserts were not in the same sequence in any two copies, though he maintained the balance of each pair of facing pages, perhaps by opening the books at random. Some of the poems were again set in Linotype, but others were clearly handset. In addition to different weights of Futura, Berman got hold of some 18-point Perpetua Italic and some illegible script and novelty types. Artwork was provided by John Altoon and Jean Cocteau (unwittingly; Berman lifted a drawing from Cocteau's book *Opium*). There were also photos by Walter Hopps, a pair of strange trick photographs of a boy signed Lewis Carroll, and two photos of someone shooting up. This most arresting spread faces a poem in magenta ink set in 24-point Century Bold:

*A face raped by innumerable  
messiahs places into sodden c  
otton an anxious needle  
A face hisses rules to cathedr  
als and prepares for the narco  
myth.*

The poem is signed "Pantale Xantos." Alex Trocchi, the Scots novelist who also wrote of heroin addiction, saw it as more than a force of self-destruction: "It was born of a respect for the whole chemistry of alienation." Mike McClure sensed the impact of Berman on the Bay Area poetry scene:

*I wanted to turn to electricity. I needed  
a catalyst to turn to pure fire*

The last page of *Semina Two* has Berman's motto "Art is Love is God." The three copies of *Semina Two* I examined not only had different page sequences, but even had the colophon strip of newsprint in two different type settings and in two different sizes, suggesting Berman ran out and reprinted the item. (I tried printing two versions of the colophon but in the end just used one, figuring there was enough variation in the subtle differences of papers and my presswork. In the case of one broadside poem, we had "zincs" made from both an overinked and an underinked original; unable to choose between the two, I printed half the run from each.)

*Semina Three*, published in 1958, signaled a departure, in keeping with his new location. Berman had given poet Michael McClure five peyote buttons, and McClure sat down and wrote a long meditative poem on the experience. *Semina Three* was typeset in Linotype and was not printed in-house, since the printed area is much larger than that of the five-by-eight-inch Excelsior. The cover bears a photograph of two peyote buttons.

*Semina Four* is again printed on an assortment of off-cut papers, this time loosely inserted in an envelope glued onto a card folder with a cover photo, "Wife," by Berman. There is also a sheet of nine stills from a film in progress entitled "Semina." The presswork is very uneven, and all the poems are set in a quirky italic that became the house type. (I believe it is Duchess, a Monotype copy of ATF's Bernhard Modern Bold Italic.) Again the lineup of authors is eclectic and impressive: John Chance, Charles Guenther, Jules Supervielle, Ray Bremser, Philip Lamantia, Beverly Collins, Idell T. Romero, Stuart Perkoff, Blake, Yeats, Judson Crews, Allen Ginsberg (a poem to Vachel Lindsay, printed on kraft paper), and I. E. Alexander. It also includes Xantos's poem, "Morphine Mother," and an excerpt from "Pantopon Rose" by William Burroughs, the first broadside publication of this author in the United States. Perhaps because of collat-

ing errors, a shortage of some pieces, or Berman's preference for randomness, no two copies are likely to contain the same poems. (However, collectors may rest assured that if they acquire a variant copy of the new edition, it will be despite the best efforts of Herms and his collators.)

*Semina Five*, with a theme of Mexico, includes in its packet a romanticized vignettted photograph of shooting up, signed "Pantale Xantos 9.8.59." By 1959, the Beats were a freaky tourist attraction, regularly garnering attention in the press for their antics. The November 30 issue of *Life* ran a story under the banner: "The Only Rebellion Around," subtitled: "But the Shabby Beats Bungle the Job in Arguing, Sulking & Bad Poetry." Among the revelations we learn: "There are no fewer than 2000 Beats in Los Angeles, mostly in the crumbling suburb of Venice West. They live with such basic furnishings as a mattress, a few cans of tinned food and a record player or set of bongo drums in abandoned stores or cheap rooms near the hot dog stands which mark the Pacific shore."

*Semina Six* refined the style of presentation even more. Once again a folder with an envelope attached inside contains looseleaf cards, this time all one poem, David Meltzer's "The Clown." The thirteen cards are printed in red ink, in the house italic face (now showing a lot of wear). There are apparent problems with the warped platen or chase and illegible lines indicating roller flatspots as well as worn type. The ink is extremely slushy on the type, though the title-page drawing printed in black ink is crisply executed. This work has a real colophon: "The Clown a poem by David Meltzer 335 copies printed / Type handset on warped 5 x 8 inch Handpress / Cover photo — Wallace Berman / Larkspur Calif. 1960." Having moved from Scott Street in San Francisco, Berman was living on a houseboat, and the cover photos show the exterior of an abandoned craft between Berman's and Herms's boats that Berman used occasionally as a temporary art gallery or for setting up still-life shots. The central image is of the door, adorned with Hebrew letters and collaged photos, surrounded by smaller photos of a semi-nude woman sleeping with a pistol. According to Herms, the shapely sleeping beauty was Berman's landlady.

The following year *Semina Seven*, subtitled "Aleph," appeared in a similar format, in an edition of two hundred copies. This time all the poems, photographs, and drawings in the envelope were by Berman, and they all had superimposed alephs. The cover collage in-

cluded a photograph of an electric chair. The issue was dedicated to his wife Shirley and son Tosh.

After a two-year hiatus, *Semina Eight* appeared from Los Angeles in 1963. A sturdy chipboard folder has the cover image of a man held by sheriffs, marking an "X," perhaps an enforced confession. The assortment of small cards inside each bear a poem and a picture (illustrated on page 44). The italic, in a variety of colors, is accompanied on one broadside, "Fongmother," by some Chinese characters. On a poem signed "A.A." (Antonin Artaud), a photo of a desiccated corpse holding a flower is attached. A poem on goldenrod, "Increasing," has an inverted photograph of the poet Robert Duncan floating in a pool. Keats, McClure, and Wieners also contributed poems.

The final *Semina*, number nine, came out after the assassination of President Kennedy. The graphic image of the consequent murder of Oswald by Jack Ruby portrays an attitudinal shift by Berman away from his "Art is Love is God" precept. McClure's poem "Double Murder! Vahroooooohr!" is printed from Linotype italic.

If all goes well, George Herms and his crew will have finished the collating and gluing by the time you read this, and the *Semina* project will once again be launched on the art world, with probably as much shock and surprise as it produced initially three decades ago. (For indeed, if anything, the great social and personal insights and advances of the sixties now seem like a pipe dream.) No doubt a few collating errors will recur; as in the original no two copies will be identical. George Herms will provide the manuscript additions where necessary and decide to whom he should address the envelopes after affixing the five-cent stamps.

Of course compressing all this energy into a few months of labor seemed like a Herculean undertaking; there is no doubt that Berman was driven and never ran short of ideas. The printing press was an adjunct of his collage and sculpture-making and was supplanted in the mid-sixties by the Verifax machine, which could produce editions but was more flexible and allowed for more variety than a tabletop platen press. The meditative process of feeding a platen press let me feel engaged with the wide breadth of material (I had forgotten how important Hermann Hesse, who appeared in *Semina Two*, and Antonin Artaud were to the philosophy of the sixties), the humanity as well as the seaminess of the era.

The Beat movement is now canonized. It may seem



strange that drug-taking anarchists would today receive such treatment, but in our ultra-right-wing times the surest way to neutralize a threat is to turn it over to the academy. The potential power of art as an active humanizing agent in social change cannot be ignored. Like Conner's film of the atom bomb, Berman's use of images of the electric chair and the Oswald murder provoke the viewer into a political stance.

The materials used by the funk artists were unimportant; only the ideas expressed were of value. In fact, much of the work vanished because it was insubstantially constructed, or thrown away. For this reason the works are scarce today and, ironically, of increasing value. This facsimile of *Semina* approximates the orig-

inal as much as possible, again using acidic papers and newsprint, so there will be a renewed cycle of decay, but perhaps Berman's work will survive to be rediscovered in another fifty years. As an artifact, the new set of *Seminas* is well crafted (given the limitations of the original enterprise) and should generate renewed interest in the oeuvre of this unique artist. The gallery decided to print only three hundred copies (plus a few for family and friends), since that was the maximum of any original edition of *Semina*. That Berman printed in one of his colophons "first and final edition," does not bother Herms. He feels this current facsimile is somewhere in the middle.

## What in the world is AlphaBind?

John Ruskin once wrote "Quality is never an accident. It is always the result of intelligent effort. There must be the will to produce a superior thing."

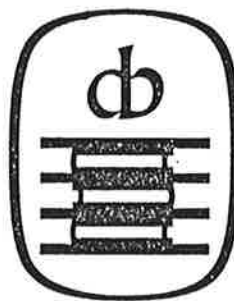
For more than 40 years, Campbell-Logan Bindery has worked to achieve John Ruskin's vision in the bindings we produce.

Intelligent effort on our part has led us to develop new bookbinding structures. These bindings are aesthetically pleasing. They surpass the mechanical characteristics of conventional library bindings. They cost a fraction of what is charged for single item conservation treatment, yet embody many of the same conservation principles.

These new, superior binding structures are being christened under our trade name, AlphaBind™. Complete particulars and our AlphaBind™ specifications are presented in our brochure. We will welcome your comments and a trial order at any time.

### The Campbell-Logan Bindery, Inc.

Telephone 612-332-1313 (FAX 612-332-1316) or toll free in the U.S. and Canada at 1-800-942-6224  
212 Second Street North, Minneapolis, MN 55401



I  
i  
4  
c  
C  
ti  
C  
a  
C  
A  
a  
T  
o  
  
B  
e  
e  
ly  
sc  
E  
e  
fi  
le  
tc  
re  
ar  
  
m  
T  
a  
ni  
se  
gr  
T  
sw  
M  
an