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WALLACE BERMAN
by Vincent Katz

SEMINA 3

PEYOTE POEM

We were in a sense turned outward. We found in Wallace a man who was. . . willing to look in with vivid eyes. We could. . . catch Wallace in the act of looking in.

Michael McClure[1]

What Wallace is capable of doing is to point out that the roar of the jet is actually ugly, a real drag.

George Herms[2]

Chameleonic, mythical, secretive—all could describe Wallace Berman, West Coast legend and—now that we are coming to know his *work*—artist. For, in the first place, Berman is an artist of great energy and latitude. It is second that he is a seminal guru to a generation of varied artists, from Michael McClure to Dennis Hopper. Looking at Berman's output, I am struck not by what his champions call his "message"—although that is here—but by his consummate craftsmanship, his mastery over a wide range of media, his formal acuity, his fresh imagery, his sense of humor.

A great place to start is the stunning book *Wallace Berman: Support the Revolution* that accompanies the current retrospective of his work organized by the Institute of Contemporary Art/Amsterdam.[1] The first monograph on Berman, it is a beautiful homage to the artist. All Berman's periods are gracefully detailed with hundreds of color and black and white reproductions and an array of essays and interviews.

Berman came of age in late-'40s Los Angeles, frequenting jazz bars and hustling pool. In his early 20s, he did surrealistic drawings of jazz and blues figures, helped Jimmy Witherspoon write a song, and did an album cover. Next came an obsession that was to absorb Berman the rest of his life, until his untimely death in 1976 at the age of 50 (Berman had predicted he would die on his 50th birthday, and he did)—the random

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Wallace Berman, *Untitled*, Verifax collage (11-3/4x11-3/4 in.), 1969. Courtesy L.A. Louver, Venice.

use of Hebrew letters. There is a very good discussion of this in the book, from several quarters, including the poet David Meltzer, who contributes a fascinating analysis (Meltzer's poem "The Clown," published by Berman as *Semina VI*, is also excellent). Apparently, Kabbalists taught that the universe was created through letters and that the letters had a power of their own, apart from the meaning attached to them alone or in groups. Berman seems almost entranced by the fat shapes of the letters as he spells them out on parchment and stones. This work carried from the mid-'50s into the '70s.

Berman had his first, ill-fated, show in Los Angeles in 1957 at the Ferus Gallery, owned by Ed Kienholz. Someone ratted to the police that there was "pornography" in Berman's show. The cops rushed in, but couldn't see anything pornographic in the totemic three-dimensional structures, resembling religious artifacts, that Berman had created. They completely bypassed a diaphanous drawing of genitalia copulating that was hanging from a cross, probably the cause of the complaint. Finally, after some effort, they located an erotic and surreal drawing by the occultist Cameron inside a piece called *Temple* and hauled Berman in. As a result, Berman moved to San Francisco for four years with Shirley and Tosh. He was there at just the right time to experience the city's great florescence. He became acquainted with artists like Jess, George Herms, and Bruce Conner who were doing assemblage of found objects and were part of a lively scene that became known as the "funk" movement. Berman fit in, but he was also something separate. In 1961, he moved back to Los Angeles, settling in Topanga Canyon.

In 1964, Berman was given a Verifax copying machine, a sophisticated photocopier that used a wet print process with disposable negatives and treated paper. He embarked on a series of prints and collages that would continue prolifically the rest of his life. Although he created various imagery with the Verifax, he focused on one particular composition and persisted in it throughout his career. It takes as its base a photograph of Berman's own hand holding a transistor radio. Berman treats the space where the speaker should be as a kind of video screen, where he places a seemingly endless parade of visuals, many taken from magazines and newspapers. Rock stars, leopards, hallucinogenic mushrooms, girlie photos, Kabbalist symbols are all delicately, precisely placed in the "screen" of the radio. This is an interesting juxtaposition, and one typical of Berman—that we *see* something on the radio, rather than hear it. In an essay on a short silent film Berman made over a number of years, the artist's son, Tosh, explains that a plenitude of musical imagery in the film (James Brown, The Rolling Stones, et al.) precludes the need for a soundtrack—"There is no need to hear, when the eyes are enjoying the sounds."[4] It is the same with the Verifax images—you hear them. Conversely, people today talk about *seeing* a concert, rather than hearing one, as formerly.

The transistor/hands often appear in grids, but I find them more interesting when Berman overlays them, using color to create a great visual punch. There is a similarity to Pop, slightly reminiscent of Warhol, in the use of media imagery and solid colors, but the aesthetic is completely different. Where Warhol projected indifference, preferring to have someone else, an assistant, make his prints, Berman worked slowly and precisely. Berman's wife, Shirley, remembers. "It would take him a while to finish a piece. Once, we were in Europe for a month, and we had to come home, because he couldn't work away from the studio. It was a definite need!"[5] Warhol couldn't care less about registration, as long as the image jumped. Berman's images are refined and possess a stunning clarity. When Berman realized he could print the Verifax negatives, this opened a whole new field that he explored exhaustively in single prints. In 1974 Gemini G.E.L. published *Radio/Aether Series 1966-1974*, a boxed portfolio of offset lithographs reproducing 13 of Berman's four-panel Verifaxes. He considered each panel "a new adventure in universal connections," he explained at the time, calling the symbols from the Kabbala "letters with a fantastic creative energy I want to bring to new areas."[6]

Berman's greatest achievement, though, may have been *Semina*, the publication he put out from 1955 to 1964. Printed by Berman himself on a hand press in editions of about 300, the publication was an unbound packet of poems, photographs, and other graphics. *Semina* could not be purchased. You could only get one if Berman sent one to you. The poems represent an amazing range for the time, from Burroughs, Ginsberg, Robert Duncan, and John Weiners to West Coast writers like Philip Lamantia to the 20th-century classics Artaud and Hesse. Berman himself also contributed poetry, under the name Pantale Xantos.

It is in *Semina* that you begin to see Berman's range. Although he did use found photography, especially in the Verifaxes, in *Semina* you start to realize that much of the photography in Berman's work is his own, and a recognizable style emerges. A mastery of the medium, a subtle use of focus, and a classical sense of composition inform Berman's photos. *And* they are lovely, intimate. In one, a woman with bare breasts looks directly at the viewer, smiling slightly. The photo is very dark, almost completely so, the light making strange, beautiful forms of her breasts and hands. How different this is from the found girlie shots he uses elsewhere. Berman didn't think of himself as a photographer, though, according to Shirley. "It was just another tool," she explains, "to make his work."[7]

Berman's work can all be considered collage—sometimes literally, sometimes in an extended sense—of separate entities placed together to form a new whole. That is the case with *Semina*, and it even extends beyond actual works of art, to personal, social relationships. The poet Michael McClure tells how Berman introduced him to the hallucinogenic cactus Peyote. Fortunately for us, this event exists not only as a story but in a wonderful poem by McClure, "Peyote Poem," which became *Semina 3*, with a cover photo by Berman of two peyote buttons. "Wallace came over and gave me five dried buttons of peyote," remembers McClure, "and told me how to take the strands of silvery, platinumlike fur out of the centers of them. That's where the flower is when the plant is blooming. And then he advised not eating any meat or drinking any alcohol the day before. Then taking it with a lot of fluids, having the high, and then celebrating with meat and vegetables, anything you wanted. And during the time I was high he sent over George Herms, whom I'd never met before. He came into my house, and I thought he was the God of Foxes! 'With dirt under the nails of his paw, fresh from his den,' as I said in the poem."[8]

I am free from Time. I accept it without triumph
- a fact.
Closing my eyes there are flashes of light.
My eyes won't focus but leap. I see that I have three feet.
I see seven places at once!
The floor slants - the room slopes
things melt
into each other. Flashes
of light
and meldings. I wait
seeing the physical thing pass.
I am on a mesa of time and space.
!STOMACHE!
Writing the music of life
in words.
Hearing the round sounds of the guitar
as colors.
Feeling the touch of flesh.
Seeing the loose chaos of words
on the page.
(ultimate grace)
(Sweet Yeats and his ball of hashish.)

This amazing event is a telling example of something that Berman instigated constantly, perhaps daily. He was someone who stimulated other artists, giving them books, inviting them up to see his work. Though reclusive professionally (he rarely sought public exhibitions of his work), Berman loved contact with others, especially artists of all stripes, and his influence spread beyond the circle he knew intimately. Through the efforts of Dennis

Hopper, for instance, who was a longtime friend and fan, Berman's work was seen by the English dealer Robert Fraser in the mid-'60s, leading to some popularity in England and Berman's inclusion among the iconic heads on the cover to the Beatles' album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. Hopper also gave him the part of a seed-sower, appropriately, on a commune in the film *Easy Rider*.

Other editions of *Semina* include number 5, based on Mexico, and number 7, subtitled *Aleph*, which bears on the colophon the inscription "a gesture involving photographs drawings & text by Wallace Berman 1961 for Shirley & Tosh I love you." All the work in *Aleph* is by Berman. *Semina Two* contains the Pantale Xantos poem

> **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.**
>
> PANTALE XANTOS

In 1991, the L.A. Louver gallery embarked on a facsimile *Semina*, an edition of 320, which has proved to be a highly successful act of historical re-creation. George Herms, who knew Berman's processes intimately, was hired to supervise the project. "There was that moment," says Herms, "when he slapped one in your hand, that felt so great. With the facsimile there's that same emotional charge. That great exchange. It must be like what terrorists do with bombs."[9] Herms signed on Alastair Johnston, who has published Beat-inspired editions for Poltroon Press. The greatest difficulty was that Berman always used ephemeral materials. He printed *Semina* on a 5x8-in. tabletop platen press that was slightly warped, distorting the printing somewhat. He used various typefaces and papers. The publishers of the facsimile have tried to duplicate all this, in an effort to reproduce not only Berman's product but his attitude. Johnston explains, "He printed on whatever he could get hold of—from acidic, brightly colored coverstock, to imitation parchment, to newsprint. I recognized that the hardest job would be finding all the papers used in the original printings, since paper has undergone a revolution and many of the older acidic papers are no longer made."[10] In order to duplicate Berman's idiosyncratic printings and type, Johnston made relief blocks from negatives of the originals. As to *Semina*'s ephemerality, one of its most important qualities, Johnston notes, "This facsimile... approximates the original as much as possible, again using acidic papers and newsprint, so there will be a renewed cycle of decay."[11]

Berman appeared critical of mass culture. He never sought fame, and his work comments ironically on the flaccid power of most commercial imagery. However, he loved the Beatles as much as he loved the esoteric jazz singer Slim Gaillard. He was no elitist. He knew the power of the street, having come from it himself. Looking at the oeuvre presented in *Support the Revolution*, it is easy to see how assiduously Berman worked. He is an entrancing artist, at home in photography, collage, Verifax printing, construction, sculpture, and poetry. He enjoyed equally Charlie Parker and the Kabbalists. Herms gets reflective. "He spanned the graveside. He put Blake and McClure in the same league. They're both immortals."[12] Perhaps that is what makes him so vibrant to today's audiences—the multiplicity of his interests and approaches, combined with the desire to connect to artists of like mind, a feeling of collectivity, and a strong work ethic.

[1]Michael McClure on Wallace Berman. Interview by Uri Hertz, *Third Rail*, no. 9, 1988.
[2]George Herms on Wallace Berman. Ibid.
[3]*Wallace Berman: Support the Revolution*, Institute of Contemporary Art/Amsterdam, 1992, with writings by Tosh Berman, Walter Hopps, Christopher Knight, Michael McClure, and David Meltzer and interviews with George Herms, Dennis Hopper, Jess, and Ed Ruscha. The monograph accompanies a recent exhibition at ICA traveling to France, Germany, and, in 1994, the United States.
[4]Ibid., p. 76.
[5]Interview with the author, February 27, 1993.
[6]*Print Collector's Newsletter*, 6, March–April 1975, p. 14.
[7]See n. 5.
[8]Interview with the author, February 27, 1993.
[9]Interview with the author, March 5, 1993.
[10]A. Johnston, *Bookways*, no. 3, April 1992.
[11]Ibid.
[12]See n. 9.

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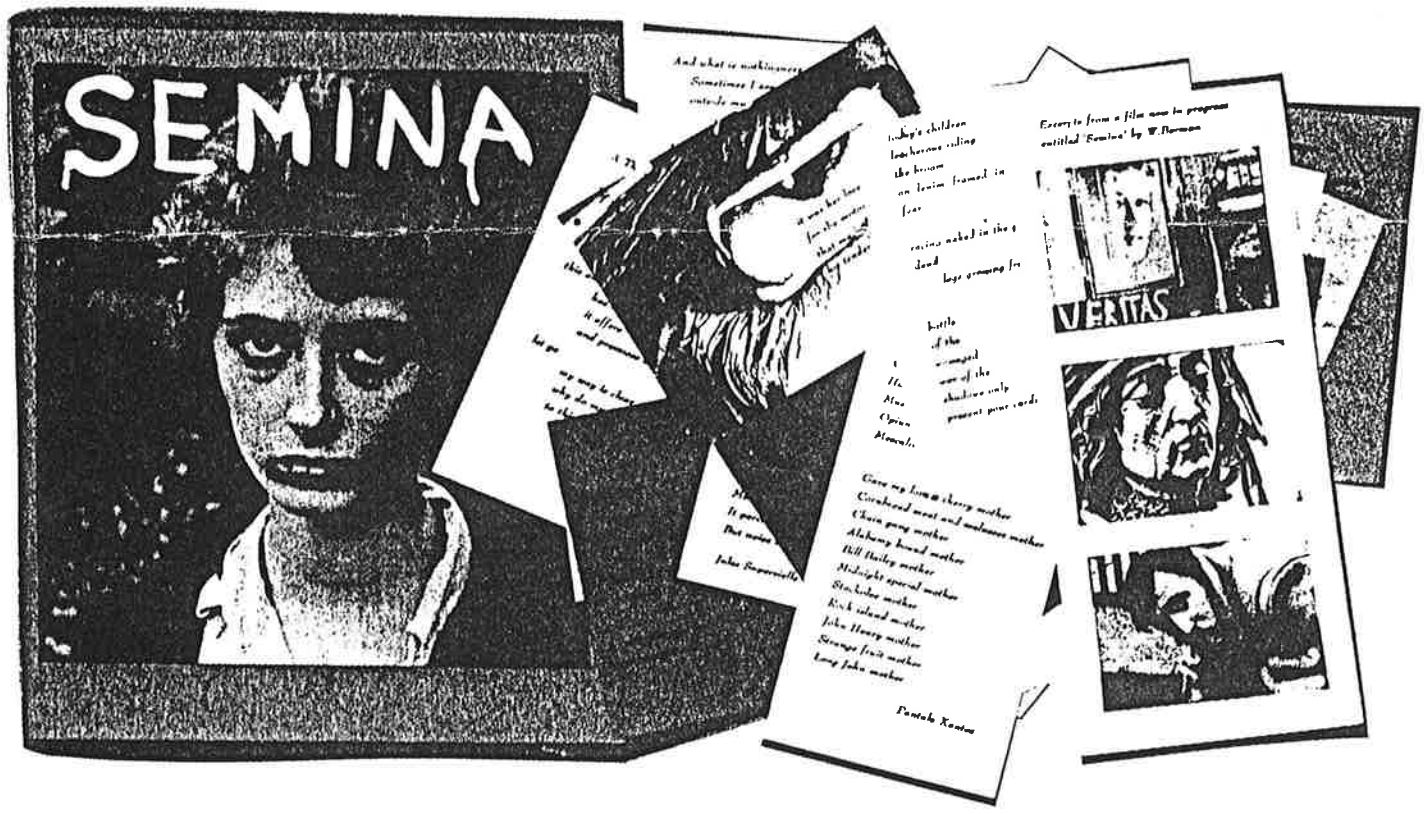

Wallace Berman, *Semina*, number 4, 1959, facsimile 1992. Courtesy L.A. Louver, Venice.