

WALLACE BERMAN: A SEMINAL INFLUENCE

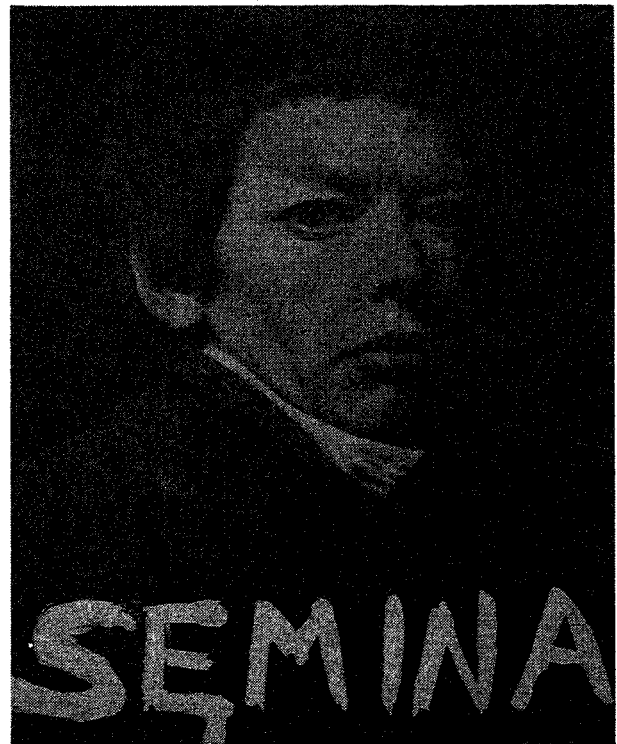
Editor's Note: Wallace Berman is so important as a pioneer in copy art, mail art, and concrete poetry that we felt it was important to familiarize our readers with this most important artist. Clair Wolfe is a former editor of *Artforum*, a writer for various publications, and an independent filmmaker in Southern California. He was also a friend of the artist.

From 1955 to 1964 Wallace Berman produced a series of nine highly personal works that are assemblages of photos, drawings and poems in a rough album or book-like format. After learning how to print from his friend Bob Alexander, he made them himself avoiding the onus of censorship, professional limitations, or high costs. They were rendered in editions of about 200, many of which were given or sent to friends. All are poignant, but with the touch of his personal charm. Rather than "books" or "albums", they may be best thought of as "containers" for his deepest concerns. As William Seitz has written, . . . "Identities drawn from diverse contexts and levels of value are confronted. . . metaphysically and associationally (and modified by) the unique sensations of the spectator." (John Coplans, *Artforum*, March 1964). They contained carefully selected works of his friends as well as works he admired from all histories and times. He was the first to publish the writing of William Burroughs.

Semina 1 became an important part of his assemblage *Temple*, which was shown at his now legendary 1957 exhibit at the Ferus Gallery. The work has since been destroyed but was faithfully recreated two years ago at the Timothea Stewart Gallery. Los Angeles.

The event of his arrest for displaying lewd material at the Ferus show helped color the entire *Semina* series into areas of the pathetic—sympathetic and empathetic. He thought the objection to the show would be due to his use of religious symbols, but what some anonymous caller to the police complained about was a small "pornographic" ink drawing by the flamboyant Cameron (Kenneth Anger's *Whore of Babylon*). On the morning of June 27, 1957, police swept through the gallery and asked, "Is this an art show? Where is the art?" Ed Kienholz pointed out the little drawing spread among other leaves of *Semina 1* and Wallace was duly arrested.

Walter Hopps has said of this, in an interview with Dean Stockwell, that . . . "The rejection of the exhibition, Wallace knew, would be focused on the question of life force, regeneration—The Cross. The complaint was clearly focused on that flowery symmetrical close-up of male and female



organs and intercourse: from these images would arise the controversy. One of the triple twists of irony occurred when vice officers arrived. They made this elaborate pass through the gallery to find the offending object, and they couldn't even see the offending object. . . Wallace told me, I want to stand there myself, it's not going to be you, Walter. This is my show, and I'll be there." He made a point of being there, just waiting alone. Now indeed, we all remember at the end of the trial (there was no jury) when judgment came down, Wallace said aloud, "There is no justice, just revenge." He wrote that phrase on the blackboard. And he was fined." (Quoted from the catalogue of Wallace Berman's recent retrospective at the Otis Art Gallery, Los Angeles).

The *Semina* is the most important of Wallace's "mail art". Of the drawing itself, its sexuality is hardly likely to arouse illicit lewdity in any but the Freudian minds of police informers. Caught by his own sense of impotence at the trial, he continued to produce *Semina 2* from Crater

Lane. On the back he stated, "I will continue to print *Semina* from locations other than this city of degenerate angels." He worked on it from July to December 1957 and devoted his theme to the concept of the "victim" or "martyr"—in his words, to avoid "past recording future." Merrill Greene refers to it as "an anthology of jeremiads." (*Artforum*, February 1978).

The "junky" emerges as the modern victim, but on the last page we find the phrase that is Wallace's primal message: Art is Love is God.

Not altogether interested in merely recording phenomena, he struck after the sublime and the transcendental through wholly human metaphors. That an object is conceived as beautiful through sensation is a fact, but here there is an aggrandizement of beauty's meaning that is objectified in acts, and this is the art that does approach the sublime, incorporating the pathetic, the cruel, the tragedy. But, as only fine art has the power to do, these unhappy realities he somehow resolves in the artwork. This is characteristic in his art and in his life, and is particularly revealed in the *Semina* series—a series of 9 personal gestures communicating one to one.

As fine a literary poet as a visual one, we find in it:

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 (his pseudonym)

Semina 3 is entirely Michael McClure's *Peyote Poem* (1958). *Semina 4* is a sampling of North Beach (San Francisco) and Los Angeles poets, and includes offerings by Yeats, William Burroughs, William Blake and Allen Ginsberg. All of them were published under conditions of "noble poverty", and in the late summer of 1960 the economic pressures were crucial. *Semina 5* was issued in an edition of 350 and was devoted to Mexico. Nowhere do we find more clearly the brooding melancholy of that land, as though he saw an entire people in the role of martyr.

MORNING

in el zocalo
the faces are wrinkled
& worn as the stones

pious-shawled women
mourning poverty in the sun
Impassively, with their eyes
William Margolis

On the cover is Charles Brittin's photo of an enormous pre-Columbian stone phallus, on the back a painting of Sor Juanna Inez de la Cruz, Mexico's first poet (1651-95).

Semina 6 is a long poem by David Meltzer, *The Clown*. By this time Wallace and his wife Shirley had moved to Larkspur to avoid the increasingly chaotic scenes on San Francisco's North Beach. He writes to a friend, "Im in a corner don't want to move dont want to hang up landlady shes as beat



was we are—been pasting up *Seminas* like demented but this is only day to day loot."

Semina 7 is elegaic:

BOXED CITY

My beautiful wife
Rearranges deaf photographs talks
Rococo & dances off four walls
Son Tosh pencils the faithful
Image & ignores the subtle drama

Stoned in black corduroy I continue
To separate seeds
From the bulk

The cover is an old poster of Susan Hayward from the 1958 movie, *I Want to Live*. The face is rubbed out.

In May of 1961 the Bermans moved back to Los Angeles and *Semina 8* was issued again from Crater Lane. *Semina 9* was a single poem, Michael McClure's *Dallas Poem*.

In December of 1964 the house was destroyed, along with much art, in a landslide, and the Bermans moved to Topanga Canyon. Shirley Berman told Merrill Greene this story in 1971: A young man arrived at the door of Wallace Berman's Topanga Canyon home looking for the center of the Earth. Someone had told him, he claimed, that Wallace Berman's house was at the center of the Earth, and he had come from England to find it.

In that vast crowd of extraordinary people that appear collaged on the Beatles' *Sargent Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* album, Wallace's face may be seen with his faithful reminder that "Art is Love is God." Wallace was fatally wounded in an automobile accident in February of 1976. His art, of course, triumphs over mortality.

—Clair Wolfe