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WALLACE BERMAN

Wallace Berman (February 18, 1926 – 1976) was an American artist, member of the Beat generation, who worked with a variety of media including photography, film, sculpture, and mail art.

Born in Staten Island, New York in 1926, he grew up in Los Angeles, the only son of Jewish immigrants who fled Russia during the pogroms of 1906. At 16 Berman dropped out of high school, time in which he became involved with the L.A.'s legendary jazz scene of the 1940s. He attended the Jepson Art School and Chouinard Art School, but dropped out after finding the training too academic. While working as a finishing antique furniture in a factory, Berman began to salvage scrap material and construct some of the earliest assemblages.

As a member of a generation generally addressed as the Beat movement, Berman interacted with poets, artists, writers, and intellectuals who rejected middle class conformity and sought to harness the power of word, music, movement, and art to find an alternative to a pre-determined life. They turned towards the metaphysical, exploring and experiencing religion and ritual.

Triggered by his interest in the occult, Berman's explorations into Kabbalah, ritual practices, spirituality, signs and symbols come across in his use of distinct codes and particularly Hebrew letters as visual experiences, pushing language into a mystical realm of deeper communication while –at the same time– showing his deep respect for poetry.

In 1957, Berman had his first gallery show at the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles. However, after only two weeks, the police came to the gallery on an anonymous tip searching for a work that had been described as pornographic. A small, appropriated image near the exit caused the police to deem the show obscene, demand its immediate closure, and arrest Berman.

For the rest of his life, Berman shied away from interaction with the art world and kept his work mostly private, amongst friends and family. Perhaps as part of this desire to have a more direct, unmediated communication between artist and viewer, he began a mail art publication entitled SEMINA, of which he produced 9 editions from 1955-1964. Berman was interested in the transformational power of the mail system and the personal exchange between an artist and receiver.

In 1960, he opened the Semina Gallery on a houseboat near his home in Larkspur, California, where he lived with his wife and son, Tosh. He was an active member in the Beat communities of Los Angeles and San Francisco until he was killed in an automobile accident on the eve of his 50th birthday in 1976.