

**ART  
IS LOVE  
IS GOD**

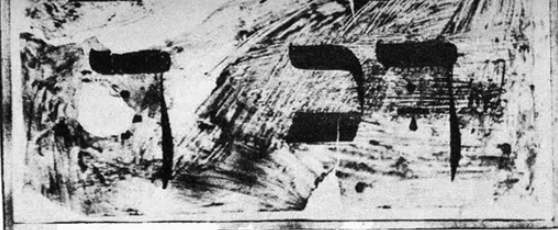


Wallace Berman, "Homage to Hesse," 1949.

### JOHN COPLANS

The California assemblage movement stems from one artist, Wallace Berman, who in 1947, with very little formal art training began to draw with bizarre, naive and vulgar American surrealist overtones. In these drawings he projected all the underground vernacular of the jazz world and the dope addict, sometimes reconstructing portraits of jazz musicians such as Joe Albany and Charlie Parker or erotic fantasies with overtones of magic realism mixed with bebop and surrealism. In 1949, while working as a laborer with distressing imitation American period furniture, he moved absolutely naturally into assemblage sculpture by combining together waste odds and ends lying around the factory. Later, he was to add photographs, drawings and word images or to combine these diverse elements into a tableau.

Berman is the major link to the existential and surrealist poets, dramatists and writers, and he established assemblage in California as a poetic art with strong moral and spiritual overtones. He will often employ the legend ART IS LOVE IS GOD, but has no simpering holier-than-thou attitude. The spiritual overtones in his work are very genuine and real but tempered by an incredibly raw and existential wit which is expressed with great simplicity and directness. There is a strange and compelling mixture of awareness and ingenuousness in Berman that almost defies verbalization. A completely unobtrusive artist (there is no mention of him in the Museum of Modern Art's encyclopedic compendium on the Art of Assemblage), his first



Wallace Berman, untitled collage, 19½x19½", 1957.

and only exhibition took place at the old Ferus Gallery in 1957. Despite being given the opportunity to withdraw one item, he refused and was arrested, convicted and fined for inciting lewd and lascivious passions, the exhibition being abandoned and much of the work destroyed. He has not exhibited again preferring to work on *Semina*, a printed container or album of diverse images—poems, photographs and drawings. With a small handpress he is able to print without the limitations of the professional printer, risk of censorship or the need to domesticate his art. The restrictions of bulk and storage disappear as do the bonds of creating objects to be exhibited or sold. (He gives them away to friends.) The first issue of *Semina* was in 1955 and there have been seven more since, each edition approximately two hundred in number. He prints his own work often mixed up with poets or artists he most admires (Berman was the first to print the work of Burroughs).

It is difficult to determine if Berman structured *Semina* in admiration of the album format—a container of diverse elements—or out of the sheer necessity of bypassing the problems and expense of binding or even because of a notion that in creating things in a beat way, they have a charm of their own. Probably it was a mixture of all three, but it allowed him to place a matrix of images in an envelope in random order, the images inevitably changing sequence at every inspection. 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."

Berman has had a strong influence, directly and indirectly, on a number of artists, in particular George Herms, Ben Talbert, John Reed, Bruce Conner (and to a much lesser extent) Edward Kienholz as well as a whole stream of younger artists. Talbert's work picks up on a particular aspect of Berman concerned with the toughest form of vulgar narrative, the highly erotic issues of pornography. As such, Talbert's work is virtually unexhibitable and, consequently, hardly known. Herms is an acolyte of Berman and in close accord with his spiritual overtones—he invariably marks his work with the legend "LOVE" Reed was a proto-pop



Wallace Berman, "Temple," 1957. 84" h. (destroyed).

artist and assembler of junk who drifted into Berman's orbit and then disappeared. Conner came in from Kansas to the Bay Area where Berman and Herms were living at that time. Up to then he had painted and worked in an essentially flat form of collage. His meeting with Berman was to induce a decisive change—he adopted the nylon stocking as a container and veil, to work in the most ethereal of poetic symbolism. Kienholz had developed independently using a more painterly procedure, later collaging lumps of wood and objects onto his surfaces. Berman's exhibition at the Ferus Gallery (which Kienholz directed at that time) indicated the answer to his own problems. Berman is a highly skilled photographer and as such is never dependent on found images. His ability and skill in this direction was to influence all these artists with the exception of Kienholz, who almost never uses photographic images. Conner, for example, made a number of very interesting movies by collaging newsfilm, comics and shot sequences. California assemblage, as a result of Berman's influence, is completely autonomous, full of rich narrative and the closest development to a true surrealist root in the American vernacular. ■



Robert Indiana, "Demeter Decagon."  
Bruce Conner, "The Heart Worm Mirror."



#### J. BARRY LORD

About one year ago in the Guggenheim Museum, "Six Painters and the Object" was hanging on the upper coils of the spiral, while below was the Kandinsky retrospective. A walk down the ramp with both ears open was illuminating: even in New York, even after all these years, the public relation to Kandinsky varied from polite puzzling to bemused scoffing to outright exasperation; before the "Pop" canvases there was anger, laughter, amazement but never bewilderment. If the people were hurt, amused, attacked they knew how and why and where they were affected. This much clarification, at least, for the image makers.

Since then Pop Art, new realism, neo-Dada have been labelled, defined, classified, analyzed, explained, interpreted and related to art history and to our times, so that it becomes difficult to look at the works themselves. But if we escape from the klieg lights and sociology we discover that a good number of interesting paintings and objects, and possibly a few great ones, have already been produced by the movement. Alvin Balkind, director of the University of British Columbia's Fine Arts Gallery, recently gave the Vancouver public its first opportunity to assess the new images in an exhibition of thirteen Pop and near-Pop works from the collection of Mr. and Mrs. Bagley Wright of Seattle. A few had been seen a year ago in Seattle, but most were being shown for the first time.

When we turn to the paintings, we find the crucial difference between those artists who have recognized that they are not creating "objets d'art," and those who still try to interest us by painterly means. Thus the creamy texture and related color smears of Wayne Thiebaud's "Dressing Wells" (1961) simply produce a marginally interesting painting, but its chief fault is that it does in fact remain "a painting." So does Bruce Conner's "The Heart Worm Mirror" (1960), in which a mirror, string, a wedding band and a sardine can are smothered along with other "objets perdus" (as they have been called in this journal) beneath an obscuring pitch and the occasional glint of gold. The mirror has a long history in dada and surrealism, and its reflection here of a black protrusion along with the viewer's face is somehow neither surprising nor effective.

Again, in Jasper Johns' "Thermometer," (1959), it is the painterliness which distracts from the object; the discordant splashes of color have no relation to abstract expressionism but are so interesting in them-

selves that we must regard the work as an "objet d'art" in the traditional sense.

Another pre-Pop artist, Robert Rauschenberg manifests in the two works shown the exciting visual spectacle of a white-hot creative spirit working precisely on this line between "l'objet d'art" and art object, between painting and image. His "Octave" (c. 1960) is a total organization within the picture's edges of the relative strengths of material textures, masses and warm colors, altogether as fine an example of junk culture as the Wrights or anyone else could own. But "Manuscript" (1963) presents an entirely new problem never encountered by Pollock or Kline, as the scaffolding composition of "Octave" certainly was. In "Manuscript," as in the paintings of Clyfford Still and perhaps even earlier in some of Rothko's work, a new conception of space is being grasped, a wholly different placing of the work and its bounds in relation to the world and to us. This work "takes place" in a dynamic context, not within the restrictions of a canvas or a wall; images occur within it, not as compositional problems but as unresolved fragments of visual experience, and the work of art is no longer a coherent entity. As has been said of Still's canvases, "these paintings have no edges."

"Manuscript" simply records the decisions of a man destroying, obscuring, revealing by means of strokes and smears of paint recognizable silk-screen images. This struggle with the image shows us at once the cutting edge of Pop Art, and Rauschenberg's new conception of what the act of painting is. These images are not arranged; they cluster around a central horizontal line as if by electronic accident, and the painter's monochromatic smears, reflecting the tones of the reproductions, by no means "compose" them. On the contrary, the implication is that they are extended infinitely in every dimension. Rauschenberg's victory in this work is a metaphysical one: the texture and presence of paint and the brilliant clarity of color presented in simple notes on a white "palette" and echoed in very slight lines throughout the surface appear real, and the suppressed recognizable silk-screen images unreal. The use of black as one of the color notes gives us the key, black-as-color, literally lending its immediacy to the monochrome paint and reproduction ink in the rest of the painting. The images retreat, excepting of course Rauschenberg's chief protagonist, the American eagle, whose startling clarity below a feathery black paint texture stubbornly remains to hold the field for the

mass image against the manu-scribed efforts of individual decision. In this work we recognize a clear statement of the problem about which Pop Art turns: the question of the validity and worth of personal creative effort, of the act of painting, in the face of an overwhelming flow of mechanical mass reproduction. The existential gesture is placed in social context, and art becomes reality.

So Rauschenberg stands on the battle-line between the act and the image of the act; beyond him victory is sought by seeming surrender to the mass technique. Seeming; because even if the popular image or object itself is merely presented, the presentation in a fine-arts context is itself the transformation of that object. Roy Lichtenstein's "Drowning Girl" (1963) was the only such example of this "pure pop" here.

The increase in size from the original comic-book panel is not of course a significant transformation; the selection of this particular panel for presentation is. And this choice is just that vestigial remnant of individual creativity which makes Pop Art exciting.

The popular appeal of the panel—its potent erotic (though not sensual) content—is evident at once, and we are curiously free to enjoy it for its own sake, "to dig our own material culture" as the painters themselves have said. We are looking at a parody of baroque composition, with the sperm-like wave rolling from lower left to upper right behind the girl's head sinking in the trough which recedes from lower right to upper left. The solid hues and blacks of her hair and the wave shadows contrast in their modeling effect with the stencilled reproduction dots, especially on her seductive shoulder. The frequency and pattern of dots on this scale produce an effective range of intensities, or her lips for instance, and in her gluttonous tears where a few spots have strayed into the blank white areas due to an imperfect—or unwittingly too perfect—reproduction process. A sinuous slick line delineates every form, and the agitation of the short hair of the eyebrows and lashes and at her ear remain flat.

Whether or not Lichtenstein is conscious of the social implications of his vulgar work or even admits to them is surely beside the point. He is doing the artists' job, presenting an aspect of his visual experience which has been urgent and consistent enough to find expression in an art object. The fact that Lichtenstein must simply enlarge a romance comic-book reproduction in order to do this job, and the extent to which the result is an authentic image of our own active or acquiescent vulgarity is our prob-





Andy Warhol, "Do It Yourself."



Tom Wesselmann, "Still Life."

lem, and we can walk away from the gallery with it.

Between the extremes of Rauschenberg and Lichtenstein the various degrees of transformation, the individual's weapon in his battle with the public image. Andy Warhol's "Do It Yourself" (1962) transforms subtly by stencilling the numbers-to-paint-by over both the painted and the unpainted areas. We are perhaps invited to work on both portions, in fact to re-paint the entire work. Again the problem of the worth of the creative act is posed, the reality of painting is questioned, and painting becomes reality.

Ed Ruscha's "Box Smashed Flat" (1960-61) is an instructive failure in this regard. The badly-painted box remains only a badly-painted box, apparently because its painterliness can be identified with the package itself. The horizon line should be but isn't Rauschenberg's brake in infinity around which images and decisions cluster; here it simply divides two flat areas related by the painter's conventional color devices, the yellow sun of the box stroked across the lower square, the red splattered across the line. Ruscha's transformation is only apparent because his painting attempts to **affect** reality, and cannot accordingly **become** anything other than the rather uninteresting painting which it is.

Tom Wesselmann's "Still Life" (1962) achieves characteristic power by skillfully combining paint and image, rather than attempting to mingle them. The painted background violently complements the colors of the advertisement reproductions, and their forms have been allowed to dictate composition. Each element in this work has its own spatial stratum, the strong blue and orange grounds being deepest, then the corn-flakes bowl—so wretchedly painted that it at first appears to be a reproduction like the raspberries which float succulently above it. The textured white cloth at the bottom of the painting—like Chardin's tables in its immediacy of presence and supportive function—crowds out the tomato section and definitely crops the green shoots of the radish, which vegetable however appears to be down front, with its roots stretched tenuously across the Lipton's box. So Wesselmann knits his picture together—a convincing performance, even if essentially more conventional than Rauschenberg's.

The content of Wesselmann's "Still Life," like his later "Great American Nude" series, is heavily erotic without being at all sensual in a much less obvious manner than Lichtenstein's. The increase in subtlety, to the adult viewer, is probably due to the fact that we are more familiar with slick magazine ads filled with organic quasi-genital forms than we are with comic books. In fact, many appear to be so familiar that they miss the Madison-Avenue sexuality entirely; incredible as it seems, Wesselmann does not offend. Even "the hidden persuader," a gurgling sound from a speaker concealed behind the work, drew only smiles.

Wesselmann's painted bowl and reproduced raspberries point up the interest which these painters share in different aspects of representation—comments on the proposition that popular images are almost always representations, but not all representations are images. Robert Indiana's "Demeter Decagon" (1962) "represents" its subject as an actual decagon, the figure 10 and the word DECAGON stencilled twice. The decagon's form suggests both the circle which completes it, and in its angularity the vertical rectangle on which it is placed. So the horizontal and circular stencilling of DECAGON, along with the color links of a gun ground beneath the decagon surrounded by black lettering on a white ring, bind the work together. The poetic associations (DEMETER) of the subject are more suppressed here than in much of Indiana's work, and it begins to appear that his magic may depend on scale, since for all the geometric and semantic interest of this small painting its visual excitement is very limited. The geometry remains Euclidean and the painting has edges.

This is not true of the other predominantly formal work in the show, Ernest Trova's "Falling Man Series #72." Again the images occur around a horizontal axis, although their balance for Trova is more precise than Rauschenberg's and more complex than Ruchcha's. Two rectangles meet in a line which divides their wholly different planes, while within these rectangles are images whose subtle correlations reinforce the visual suggestion of the inevitability of the chance juxtaposition of these two forms. The world within the open square of brilliant red, the world of falling man, finds its completion in the classical perfection of the black circle and the sphere which it encloses.

Trova, like Rauschenberg, gives us the reality of paint, the reality of a new space, and the reality of individual character. The devices of mass control seek continually to deny this reality of the individual; it is the presence of the individual painter, however marginally or unwittingly, which is the source of our excitement about Pop Art and New Realism. It is their clear statement of this reality which reached visitors to the Guggenheim last year, and hopefully affected the Vancouver public in this show. And a moment's reflection gives us perspective on the movement—for if we approach the paintings of any age not as historians but as men, what is it at which we thrill except precisely that?—the individual human spirit, perhaps genius, choosing, changing, creating from an indifferent environment.

In that sense art has always been reality. Rauschenberg, Lichtenstein, Wesselmann and Trova remind us that it must become real again and again. They also pose the pressing question of the future tense: whether art, whether the individual, whether the living spirit can persist. ■

