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# Surrealism Meets Kabbalah: The Place of *Semina* in Mid-Century California Poetry and Art

Stephen Fredman

Taking Surrealism and Kabbalah as central features of *Semina*, a journal produced by Wallace Berman in California from 1955-1964, this essay first looks at the larger poetics involved in Berman's creation of an artistic context within the California arts scene, then focuses upon the influence of Artaud, who led the *Semina* poets and artists into Mexico in search of peyote. The second half explores Robert Duncan's advocacy of Kabbalah and his incorporation of it in his own poetry, especially in the volume entitled *Letters*, then considers the ways in which Berman, Hirschman, and Meltzer adopted Kabbalah as an improvisatory compositional practice. Combining Surrealism and the occult with the political anarchism rampant in California after World War II, Berman and the poets and artists associated with *Semina* fostered a richly creative milieu that played an important part in generating much of what is distinctive about California art and culture.

This essay investigates the aesthetics of the poets and artists who congregated around *Semina*, a journal produced by Wallace Berman in California from 1955-1964.<sup>1</sup> Berman (1926-1976) was a pioneering California artist of the post-World War II era. Born in New York, he grew up in Fairfax, the Jewish district of Los Angeles, where as a zoot-suited high school student he was expelled for gambling and became a fixture in the dynamic L.A. jazz scene. Although his first precocious pencil drawings graced the covers of jazz albums, he gravitated toward collage and assemblage, becoming one of the primary artists in the California assemblage movement. His first, and only, public exhibition, mounted at the legendary Ferus Gallery (1957), was deemed obscene and closed down by the police. Severely shaken by this incident, Berman moved to Northern California and helped launch the counter-cultural revolution

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<sup>1</sup> A portion of this essay first appeared in Duncan and McKenna, 40-48.

in the arts that fostered communal living, anarchist politics, occult research, drug exploration, and sexual display. One of the expressions of this communal artistic practice was *Semina*, which Berman printed on loose-leaf cards, stuffed into decorated envelopes, and mailed off to friends. *Semina* ran for nine issues as a contemporary "museum without walls," combining Berman's photos and collages with reproductions of work by other California artists and filmmakers and with an equal representation of poetry, mostly by California writers. Beginning with *Semina* 7 (1961), the only issue devoted entirely to his own work, Berman's art becomes dominated by Hebrew lettering. His most well-known works, for instance, are the *Radio/Aether* series of kabbalistically flavored collage-facsimiles, made up of multiple iterations of a hand holding a transistor radio, with each version housing a different occult, mundane, or erotic image. One of the indispensable artistic instigators of the Hippie movement, Berman himself became an icon, appearing both in the collage on the cover of the Beatles' album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* and as a communal farmer in his friend Dennis Hopper's film *Easy Rider*.

*Semina* occupies a legendary place within the California art world as *the* club for those in the know. An experiment in private, improvised art distributed among friends, *Semina* can be compared to the fascicles and letters of Emily Dickinson a century earlier; both Dickinson and Berman sought through their hand-made, private creations, often sent out as "mail art," to coalesce a community that was at odds with the official world. Within the charmed circle of the *Semina* coterie, distinctions between literature and art collapsed: poets drew and made collages; artists and filmmakers wrote poems. Speaking for Berman, his wife Shirley asserts that he published *Semina* "because he loved poetry so much" (Starr, 81). "We spent a lot of time reading poetry," she recalls, insisting that poetry was a more fecund source of inspiration for Berman than two other art forms he adored, music and film: "His working process was to read poetry, all the new young poets" (70). By reading seriously California poets such as Robert Alexander, David Meltzer, Michael McClure, Robert Duncan, John Wieners, Philip Lamantia, Jack Hirschman, Bob Kaufman, Ray Bremser, and Kirby Doyle, Berman gained entrée into a vast range of modern and occult literary ideas and forms. In fact, his poetic explorations opened up fields of experience and experiment that took Berman beyond what he was learning from the visual artists who congregated around him. In particular, the poets joined him

in a lifelong fascination with surrealist writers and intermedia figures such as Jean Cocteau and Antonin Artaud. The surrealist literary tradition, Shirley attests, provided Berman more instruction than did surrealist painting: "He was really more involved with [surrealist] poetry than he was with the artists – Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, and Cocteau" (70).

Like two of the poets central to the San Francisco Renaissance, Robert Duncan and Jack Spicer, Berman admired Cocteau "as a Renaissance man, because he did so many different things" (70). This model of the artist whose work extends into different media and ultimately into an aesthetic approach to life had another exemplar in Artaud, who was renowned as both writer and psychic pioneer; Artaud provoked an unquenchable fascination in Berman and many of the other poets and artists around him. Shirley affirms emphatically that Wallace "did love Artaud." Like the California poets for whom Surrealism was a major preoccupation, Berman also undertook a variety of occult investigations, which ultimately flowered in the kabbalistic conjuring with Hebrew letters that became the signature of his visual art. In concert with Berman, the poets Duncan, Meltzer, and Hirschman all made Kabbalah a central feature of their artistic/spiritual practice. Taking Surrealism and Kabbalah as central features of *Semina* aesthetics, the essay that follows examines those features by considering in four sections the work of Berman and the poets he gathered around himself. The first section looks at the larger poetics involved in Berman's creation of an artistic context within the California arts scene. The second focuses upon the influence of Artaud, who led the *Semina* poets and artists into Mexico in search of peyote. The third explores Robert Duncan's crucial advocacy of Kabbalah and his incorporation of it in his own poetry, especially in the volume entitled *Letters*. The final section considers the ways in which Berman, Hirschman, and Meltzer adopted Kabbalah as an improvisatory compositional practice. Combining Surrealism and the occult with the political anarchism rampant in California after World War II, Berman and the poets and artists associated with *Semina* fostered a richly creative milieu that played an important part in generating much of what is distinctive about California art and culture.



## 1. The Poetics of Context

*From the first, the intent of Semina was not a choice of poems and art works to exercise the editor's discrimination and aesthetic judgment, but the fashioning of a context.*

Robert Duncan

In a time when the idea of performance art has become so ingrained in how we conceive of culture that an entire popular genre, "Reality TV," has emerged, based on the premise that life and art are indistinguishable, it is not surprising that artistic figures hitherto confined to the margins of Beat culture like Wallace Berman or Harry Smith – figures who consistently blurred the boundaries between life and art – have come to exert an irresistible fascination. Smith, an avant-garde filmmaker, painter, anthropologist, notorious scrounger, and editor of the groundbreaking 1952 *Anthology of American Folk Music*, regarded the practice of everyday life as an occult art of foregrounding and rearranging contexts. In a sense, Berman and Smith were early practitioners of postmodernism, staking a claim to aesthetic innovation by a stunning appropriation and arrangement of existing artifacts rather than by creating original masterworks. The essence of their influence, though, derives not so much from new appropriationist techniques as from the magnetism of their personalities – from what they thought, what they did, their attitudes toward art and life, their uncanny ability to shine a new light on events happening around them. Resolutely anti-commercial, unconcerned with producing enduring artifacts for collection, Berman and Smith acquired the aura of living works of art; their presence and example likewise inspired creativity in others. Latter-day shamanic figures, they share a number of features in common: they refused to live their lives conforming to institutional norms or expectations; they made the conduct of life itself an ongoing artistic composition; they so conflated art and a hermetic spirituality that it is impossible to say which was the dominant factor in their work; they engaged in an all-consuming artistic/spiritual quest; and their personalities exerted an uncanny magnetism upon other people.

In direct opposition to the mind-numbing voyeurism of Reality TV, which reduces the unpredictable personal forays of performance art to a media-manufactured spectacle, there was a productive secretiveness to the performance art of Berman and Smith. They shunned publicity and promoted the formation of self-contained, counter-cultural communi-

ties. This creative ability to draw "a new circle" (as Emerson put it in his essay "Circles" [401]), to see new possibilities and thus invoke a new context for a group of people, a group of ideas, or a group of objects, constitutes what I would call a "poetics of context." Smith drew a new circle around the scattered remains of the "Race" and "Hillbilly" music recorded by major record labels between 1927 and 1932, creating in his *Anthology of American Folk Music* not a folkloristic compendium but an endlessly mysterious collage of songs that comment directly upon one another and cry out for participatory interpretation by listeners and later performers. Berman made *Semina* a unique artistic context in which words and visual artifacts have equal priority, so that instead of the visual illustrating the literary, or vice versa, all of the artworks in each issue are drawn into an aesthetic, spiritual, and often political context.

Through his mastery of the poetics of context, Berman became a major innovator in what must be seen as a broad cultural shift, one that has foundations in the phenomenological orientation of nineteenth-century Romanticism. In the ensuing two centuries, changing modes of perception and cognition have given rise to an aesthetic approach to life, such that life can now be lived and understood as if it were an artistic composition. In the largest sense, this new practice of taking art as a model for the conduct of life is a symptom of the breakdown of traditional values in Western culture, especially those sanctioned by organized religion. The substitution of artistic for religious frames around lived experience took on a particular cast at mid-century on the West Coast, amid the abiding aesthetic combination of avant-garde provocations with esoteric philosophies and anarchist politics. This aesthetic stance has been quite potent in West Coast culture over the past half-century, inspiring in various ways large social movements as diverse as the Beats, the Hippies, Punk, and New Age spirituality. Native Californian John Cage brought this mix of the avant-garde, the occult, and the anarchist to New York, combining the "perennial philosophy" cooked up by Aldous Huxley in California with the Zen sensibility of D.T. Suzuki and the anti-art aesthetic pioneered by Marcel Duchamp. Insisting that art and life should be ever more closely intertwined, Cage has made what was originally a California perspective into a gigantic force within the world of art, both nationally and internationally. Although it is true that Cage and Smith gained renown after moving to New York City, it is important not to forget that both grew up in a West Coast intellectual milieu saturated in mystical philosophies such as theosophy, spiritual-

ism, and Vedanta, where political movements such as anarchism and anarcho-syndicalism played a signal role.

Wallace Berman occupies a place at the center of the mid-century California aesthetic because of the vital context he created for the flourishing of that aesthetic, a context he named "Semina." Semina is best imagined as an open-ended, traveling exhibition that manifested in a variety of forms: as nine sets of printed cards sent out to friends over a period of nine years; as installations of visual art and poetry organized by Berman in a number of physical spaces; as a nexus of mail-art produced by many hands; and, more broadly, as a principle of association among people, objects, artworks, photographs, texts, experiences, and ideas. In other words, Semina is the name of an aesthetic context that generated a way of life. "From the first," notes Robert Duncan, "the intent of *Semina* was not a choice of poems and art works to exercise the editor's discrimination and aesthetic judgment, but the fashioning of a context" (Duncan, *Prose* 198). Taking cues from the earlier movements of Dada and Surrealism, Berman assembled a context that was at once aesthetic and existential, an outlaw context that sought escape from prevailing social and political norms. Declaring himself part of that context, Duncan, the most accomplished and influential California poet, claims that, "in our conscious alliance with the critical breakthrough of Dada and Surrealism, . . . we began to see ourselves as fashioning unnamed contexts, contexts of a new life way in the making, a secret mission" (198).

If Semina is the name of a context that encompasses "a new life way" and "a secret mission," then it must be regarded as much more than the name of an artistic/literary magazine. To enter the Semina context involves dedicating oneself to an emerging way of life – in which aesthetic values become the basis for life decisions – and to the secret mission of overthrowing the mundane reality of the fifties and early sixties, substituting a transgressive, ecstatic mode of life.<sup>2</sup> The secret mission of Semina can be seen as a Beat project, and so Semina has

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<sup>2</sup> In her book depicting the Semina context, Rebecca Solnit takes the title of George Herms's *Secret Exhibition*, an outdoor installation of assemblages viewed only by Berman and John Reed, as the overall title for her text. From Solnit's perspective, this secret exhibition symbolizes the values and strategies of the entire movement: "For them the making of art was an end in itself, a spiritual exercise, because there was no market or showcase for the result. Many works were made as gifts with a particular recipient in mind, but many more were made in the same spirit as jazz – for the joy of creation itself" (15-16).

been placed alongside other Beat activities in venues such as the Whitney Museum's exhibition "Beat Culture and the New America: 1950-1965." While participating in the larger currents of Beat culture, Semina's distinctive union of art and life took its own path through those currents, drawn less toward the quietism associated with Buddhism and more toward the provocation associated with Surrealism. Semina was inspired especially by three aspects of Surrealism: by works that depict a life lived according to aesthetic principles (such as André Breton's novel *Nadja*), by the interwoven artworks and lifestyles of less-doctrinaire surrealist figures such as Artaud and Cocteau, and by the long French avant-garde tradition of aesthetic rebellion as a way of life.<sup>3</sup> Growing out of surrealist experiments with drugs, dreams, madness, and sexual transgression, Semina ultimately became the first Hippie context, in which expanded perception and sexual display were celebrated as aesthetic achievements in their own right.

Although drugs and sex were stimulants for the Semina breakthrough, the major artistic vehicle for expanded perception and bodily display was collage. The most crucial stylistic innovation in the arts of the twentieth century, collage provided Semina with a principle for both aesthetic and existential innovation. In this sense, too, Semina harks back to Dada and Surrealism, for just as collage had been used by those movements to generate iconoclastic, anti-real actions that would, at the same time, coalesce into an artistic movement, so it was used by Semina as the basis for a new, transgressive social/artistic context (Duncan, *Prose* 198).<sup>4</sup> Collage was practiced by Semina artists in their mail-art, in works of assemblage, and in the meta-collage of *Semina* itself. An important exhibition, "Semina Culture: Wallace Berman and His Circle,"

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<sup>3</sup> In the sense in which the Semina group understood it, Surrealism also contained Dada. Berman's closest friend, Robert Alexander, testifies to the eye-opening journey back from Surrealism to Dada that he and Berman undertook around 1949 or 1950: "Dada set us free. After Dada, everything else around us opened up. Everything blossomed like a flower, because we knew we could do anything. That made every creative act that said something a piece of art. You don't need a license anymore. You don't have to be a part of this school or that school. We got stuck in Dada for quite a while, Wally and I did" (Starr 65).

<sup>4</sup> Philip Lamantia, one of the Semina cohort and also one of the most dedicated American surrealist poets of the second half of the twentieth century, recalls Berman's fascination with Surrealism as a movement: "Something he was very emphatic about when he talked about poetry, he seemed to be particularly impressed by the surrealist movement. 'They're the only group,' he said, 'that has remained together for' – by that time, late fifties, 'forty years'" (Phillips 76).



curated by Michael Duncan and Kristine McKenna, reveals for the first time how everyone in the Semina circle – including the poets – made collages and saw it as the art form most conducive to their thinking and interacting. David Meltzer, another poet central to Semina, puts his finger on the contribution the collage aesthetic made to the new modes of awareness the group cultivated: “The Bermans attached themselves to the mysterious quality intrinsic in many things. Any object could be transformed into something of great interest; it was a matter of placing it in the right context. Wallace would say something was ‘strange’ or ‘weird,’ in that re-ordered perception, and by looking at it with greater intensity or assumption it would take on a new meaning” (Meltzer, “Door” 100).

By finding objects in daily life and placing them in “the right context,” where they would take on a new, “mysterious” resonance, Berman extended the compositional method of collage out from the realm of art-making, *per se*, and into the realm of lived experience. At the heart of collage as it has been practiced in the arts during the past century are two activities: 1) the selection of objects from the real world for incorporation into the artwork; and 2) a compositional process that involves creating new contexts by juxtaposing objects in unexpected (non-linear, irrational, or anti-hierarchical) ways. Berman and others in the Semina cohort – including artists who worked in collage and assemblage (such as George Herms, Jess, Bruce Conner, Edward Kienholz, and Dennis Hopper) and poets with a surreal bent (such as Robert Duncan, Philip Lamantia, David Meltzer, Michael McClure, Jack Hirschman, John Wieners, Bob Kaufman, and Allen Ginsberg) – used collage principles to bring “new meaning” to a mundane reality lived amid the detritus of California urban existence. In their adoption of an essentially surrealist form of collage, the Semina group, both poets and visual artists, entered what Kenneth Rexroth calls “the international avant-garde,” transposing the French inflections of surrealist collage to the California environment.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In his famous “San Francisco Letter” in the 1957 “San Francisco Scene” issue of the *Evergreen Review*, Rexroth states, “Of all the San Francisco group Robert Duncan is the most easily recognizable as a member of the international *avant garde*” (10). In a 1969 interview, speaking of Philip Lamantia, Rexroth expands the membership of Bay Area poets in the international avant-garde: “Philip represents as all of us represent something that for many years has been an absolute obsession with me – and that is the returning of American poetry to the mainstream of international literature” (Meltzer, *Beat* 248).

## 2. With Artaud in Mexico

*I cannot conceive of a work of art as distinct from life.*

*Antonin Artaud*

Antonin Artaud, poet, actor, theater revolutionary, and madman, was one of the renegade Surrealists whose concepts and practices proved instrumental to Berman and the Semina poets. In particular, Artaud's texts "To Have Done with the Judgment of God" and "Concerning a Journey to the Land of the Tarahumaras" gained early translation and became touchstones for the Semina group (Duncan, *Prose*, 199). As a young man, Artaud had proclaimed, "Where others want to produce works of art, I aspire to no more than display my own spirit. . . . I cannot conceive of a work of art as distinct from life" (Esslin, 5). Since his death in 1948, Artaud has been an international icon of the aspiration to live life as a continual experimental performance; his influence upon theater and performance art has been incalculable. One of Artaud's experiments that greatly impressed the Semina group was a trek to Northern Mexico for the purpose of ingesting peyote with the Tarahumara Indians. Artaud's 1936 report of his "Journey to the Land of the Tarahumaras" – like Aldous Huxley's 1954 chronicle of mescaline experiments, *The Doors of Perception* – is one of the first modern depictions of psychedelic experiences.<sup>6</sup> Over and above the extensive influence of his "theater of cruelty," which emphasizes spectacle, bodily danger, and personal and social transformation, Artaud directly inspired the Semina group to imitation by describing the effects of peyote and by invoking Mexico as a magical and forbidden realm.

In an essay entitled "Artaud: Peace Chief," Michael McClure hails Artaud as "more than a man of literature," adding, "He has turned his body into an instrument of science and become a being of history" (McClure, 77). McClure found occasion to turn his own body into such an instrument early in 1958, when Berman left off five peyote buttons at his apartment (Cándida Smith, 247; Solnit, 69). The morning after, McClure wrote "Peyote Poem," which Berman then printed as a single long sheet and made the sole contents of *Semina 3* – graced on its cover

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<sup>6</sup> Berman's friend Cameron recalls taking peyote for the first time in 1954 after hearing Huxley speak. Her peyote session resulted in an "allegorical" erotic drawing that Berman included in *Semina 1*, which, placed in one of his own artworks, was responsible for his arrest and the closing of his Ferus show in 1957 (Starr, 77-8).



by a photo of two peyote buttons. The poem depicts the ecstasy of expanded consciousness, in which an "I" witnesses itself intersecting with an external world in ways both fantastic and fleshly:

I am separate. I close my eyes in divinity and pain.  
 I blink in solemnity and unsolemn joy.  
 I smile at myself in my movements. Walking  
 I step higher in my carefulness. I fill  
 space with myself. I see the secret and distinct  
 patterns of smoke from my mouth  
 I am without care part of all. Distinct.  
 I am separate from gloom and beauty. I see all.

In certain ways, this report of McClure's echoes the famous visionary experience of becoming a "transparent eye-ball" that Ralph Waldo Emerson reports in his essay *Nature*: "I am nothing; I see all; the currents of Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God" (10). Despite the similarity of language used in describing them, though, the two visions result in different outcomes, for Emerson embraces his as confirming a Platonic tendency to see transcendent forms as most real, while McClure is moved by his experience to see the fleshly as inherently spiritual, an insight that sets him off on the path of biological mysticism he has followed since that time.

The Semina equation of Artaud with Mexico and drugs reaches a climax in *Semina 5*, an entire issue dedicated to an Artaudian view of Mexico. The complementary cover images of a huge Pre-Columbian stone phallus and a portrait of the classic poet/nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz articulate a complex union of opposites that runs throughout the issue: both the images and the poems seek to blend antinomies such as male and female, voluptuous and ascetic, fleshly and spiritual. In this issue of *Semina*, sex, drugs, and an earthy spirituality that both Artaud and the Semina group associate with Mexico operate as catalysts to bring about a kind of alchemical conjunction of opposites. Artaud's invocation of this alchemical operation can be seen on one of the cards that contains an excerpt from his "Le Mexique et la Civilisation:"

and to Mercury corresponds the movement,  
 to Sulphur corresponds the energy,  
 to Salt corresponds the stable mass  
 even as the activity of fundamental sources

manifests the Mexican thing, an image, its powers perpetually renewing itself.

By bringing elements fundamental to the conduct of alchemy, such as mercury, sulfur, and salt, into the Mexican landscape, Artaud portrays it as dynamic, transformative, and perpetually self-regenerating. Possessed of remarkable alchemical abilities, Mexico seems to represent for Artaud both an image in its own right and the power to create images. He acquired this sense of the assertive, transformative quality of the landscape during peyote sessions, when the mountains and stones took on a series of biomorphic shapes: "I seemed to read everywhere a tale of childbirth amid war, a tale of genesis and chaos, with all these bodies of gods which were carved like men, and these truncated human statues" (Artaud, 71). In another card from this issue of *Semina*, "In Mexico After Artaud," poet Kirby Doyle imitates Artaud's initiation into the dynamic powers of the Mexican landscape by throwing himself into the same crucible of madness that Artaud courted by ingesting peyote: "Stricken by my unconscious impotence, / Dizzy from intelligent spells of madness / Revealing the same thoughts, / I fall into Nature already prepared."

Other cards evince a similar sense of being "prepared" by Artaud. In particular, many depict states of derangement and insight achieved through the use of drugs. "Memoria" is Lamantia's paean to marijuana as a Mexican seeress, who "spoke sibyl sentences silver and cut the throats of time!" A photo by Berman of Lamantia injecting heroin on one card is matched on another by a poem of Bob Kaufman's that ends with the lines, "O Mexico, give me your Easter Faced Virgin / And your Junk."<sup>7</sup> Likewise, in his "Peyote Poem," John Wieners finds himself "inhabited by strange gods" and wonders, "who / are they, they walk in white trenchcoats / with pkgs. of paradise in their pockets." The filmmaker Larry Jordan contributes a poem, "Rockets," that seems to chronicle a peyote-enhanced trip to Mexico:

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<sup>7</sup> This photo is one of five on the cover of Lamantia's *Narcotica*. Underneath the photos, the author's name is listed as "Lamantia - Artaud."

Motor oxydizing  
Space-raped Breugel sand oxydizing

Blue sky oxydizing  
Peyoton cloud oxydizing  
Pepsi-cola oxydizing

The undeceived rearview mirror  
blasting back an oxydized grey stripe.

Burnt, skin & spirit, we returned

More purified than we knew.

Through a drug-inspired vision of the world rusting away, Jordan partakes of the Mexican alchemy outlined by Artaud, in which breakdown and burnout are the first stages of an eventual purification and regeneration.

Just as there is a union of the opposing qualities of rust and purity in Jordan's poem, other cards in this issue of *Semina* portray Mexico as either dangerous or seductive or both. John Reed invokes the ancient Mexican sense of the macabre with a drawing of a ferocious, partially skeletalized torso alongside a horrific poem presided over by vultures. Christopher MacLaine speaks in "Callejon García Villa Lorca" of the archetypal experience of Mexico as "a stone / flung into the otherness of time." Notwithstanding his invocation of the Spaniard García Lorca in his title, MacLaine sounds more like the Mexican poet Octavio Paz when he portrays Mexico as a stone following an aberrant trajectory through history. John Chance imagines his own death, impaled on "Mexican green bull horns / Growing out of the Aztec Earth," in his poem "How I Died," while John Hoffman offers a more peaceful image of the ocean "clos[ing] the break of land / Into its time-deep crystal." David Meltzer envisions the dead Pancho Villa, whose ear "hangs like a rotted flower, / its blood nourishing the flies & / a disfigured unknown cactus." In contrast, Michael McClure's reverie about Mexico has a gentle quality, invoking "pastel / adobe houses. Pink, Salmon, and Blue / piñatas and crinoline hems." Seemingly addressed to a lover, McClure's poem opens up to the feminine side of the packet, in which Sor Juana, Mexico's first poet (translated by Lamantia), asks whether it is worse to be the seducer or the seduced, the prostitute or her client. Poet and filmmaker Ruth Weiss contrasts the "calendar-poster of saints" with

"the open-legged girl [who] IS the / mother of your children," in order to illustrate what she calls "the two-sided coin" of Mexico. The feminine side of Mexico is rounded out by William Margolis in a sentimental depiction of "pious-shawled women / mourning poverty in the sun / impassively with their eyes." For the Semina cohort, Artaud's Mexico is a place of exploration and escape, of breakdown and transformation, where the strait-laced reality of fifties America can be undone in a seductive embrace with otherness.

### 3. Kabbalah and Robert Duncan's *Letters*

*[I]n mystical traditions of Judaism, religion was passing into imagination.*

*Robert Duncan*

Artaud was one of a number of Surrealists, including René Daumal and Kurt Seligmann, who commandeered esoteric religious imagery for an assault upon the reign of rationality. Author of an extensive *History of Magic*, Seligmann, like Artaud, made a profound impression upon Lamantia. As a teenager in Los Angeles and New York, Lamantia had direct access to what he calls "the surrealist diaspora" of writers and artists who had fled Europe during World War II: "Surrealism was what brought me to what you call hermeticism. . . . The key for me was my weekly lunch with the painter-engraver Kurt Seligmann, who graciously allowed me to look at his many volumes of very early, amazing alchemical texts. This was an unforgettable experience" (Meltzer, *Beat* 137). Alongside alchemy, another major strand in the Western hermetic tradition, Kabbalah (literally, "tradition" or "transmission"), the mystical wing of Judaism, also held an enormous fascination for the Surrealists. When trying to understand how patterns repeated in the Mexican landscape have a mathematical regularity, a regularity imitated in the patterns of the Tarahumara rituals and dances, Artaud turns to Kabbalah for an explanation:

There is in the Kabbala a music of Numbers, and this music which reduces material chaos to its prime elements explains by a kind of grandiose mathematics how Nature orders and directs the birth of forms she brings forth out of chaos. And all I beheld seemed to be governed by a Number (Artaud 71).

Kabbalah has become important to modern poets not only for its numerological magic but also because of the powerful, even cosmic, significance it accords to words. As David Meltzer explains, "The Kabbalah, as much as poetry, is the study of and submission to the mysteries of the word. The language used by Kabbalists is so intricately dimensional that it is almost impossible to fully convey the simultaneous levels of meaning revealed in the simplest of words. It is said that one word is the seed of a particular universe, a system of interactions and realities as complex as the birth and death of a sun" (Meltzer, *Garden* xiii). The kabbalistic conception of a word as a cosmic seed is implicit in the term "Semina" – which explains in turn why poetry, with its insistence on the generative force of language, plays such a prominent part in *Semina*.

Of all the forms of magic outlined in Kurt Seligmann's *History of Magic* (such as astrology, numerology, divination, casting of spells, mortuary magic, alchemy, Kabbalah, Tarot, witchcraft, and black magic), Kabbalah appeals most directly to poets because it is a kind of alchemy that engages with the basic materials of writing: the word, the letter, and the book. In Kabbalah all of the levels of occult "work" – magical practice, meditation and contemplation techniques, visionary excursions, and spiritual and psychological self-transformation – can be found, as they would be in any esoteric system, but all derive from investigations of language and writing. Kabbalah made its way into the Semina circle primarily through the advocacy of Robert Duncan, who heard it whispered of by his parents at theosophical meetings during his childhood (Kamernetz 9-10). The most important kabbalistic text, the *Zohar*, was read by Duncan's parents as one of the keys to the mysteries of the universe; from his own perspective, the *Zohar* ought to be read instead as "the greatest mystical novel ever written" (*Garden* x). Duncan's enthusiasm for Kabbalah had a profound effect upon the Semina poets and artists, especially upon Berman, Meltzer, Jack Hirschman, and, to a lesser extent, Lamantia. It is remarkably ironic that Duncan, raised as a Christian hermeticist, became the instigator of lifelong research by such Jewish figures as Berman, Meltzer, Hirschman, and Jerome Rothenberg into a Jewish form of mysticism. Meltzer, for instance, who edited a journal devoted to Kabbalah, *Tree*, and an anthology of kabbalistic texts, *The Secret Garden*, calls Duncan "my exemplar" in Kabbalah studies (x) and credits Duncan with introducing him to the works of Gershom Scho-



lem, the modern scholar responsible for reviving interest in Kabbalah (xv).<sup>8</sup>

Duncan began drawing extensively upon Kabbalah for his own poetry during the writing of the book *Letters* (1958), composed between 1953 and 1956, which was also the time period when *Semina* was born. The actual meeting between Duncan and his partner Jess and Wallace and Shirley Berman took place in 1954 (Duncan, *Prose* 197), during a moment when the triumvirate of Duncan, Jack Spicer, and Kenneth Rexroth dominated the San Francisco poetry scene. Nearly everyone in the Semina group – whether poet, artist, or filmmaker – was mentored by at least one of these poets. Although *Letters* has received relatively little critical attention, Duncan's recently reissued book is a remarkable achievement, both for the impact it had upon the Semina group and others on the scene at the time and for discoveries he made within it that set the course for much of his subsequent poetry. In an interview devoted to his explorations of Kabbalah, Duncan acknowledges how its study was instrumental to the writing of *Letters*: "Even the name *Letters* comes from the *Zohar* which I was reading in that period" (Kamenetz 13). In Kabbalah, as expounded both in the *Zohar* and in the earlier *Sefer Yetzirah*, the letters of the Hebrew alphabet are conceived of as the basic building blocks of the universe. David Meltzer summarizes this notion:

The *Yetzirah* expresses the concept of God creating the universe through letters which hold the possibility of creation's entire vocabulary. The world is entered and invented through language rooted in alphabet systems. God translates Himself, condenses into alphabet. To know alphabet is to approach creation's workings. Within and without are the letters (Meltzer, "Door" 93).

For Duncan, this creative activity of the letters is not literal but imaginative; in his conception, the poet participates through letters in the unending creative work of the cosmos. Although he states in the preface to *Letters* that "the lore of Moses of Leon in the *Zohar*, has been food for the letters of this alphabet" (xii), Duncan sees himself not as a believer in Kabbalah, but as a poet greatly stimulated by it as a theory of the power of the imagination: "It seemed to me," he says in the interview,

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<sup>8</sup> Duncan's conception of the *Zohar* as a novel was influenced by a statement of Scholem's: "The *Zohar* is written in pseudepigraphic form, almost, one might say, in the form of a mystical novel" (*Major Trends* 157). Eric Selinger discusses Duncan's role in exciting interest in Kabbalah among the Semina poets and Rothenberg (255-7).



"that in mystical traditions of Judaism, religion was passing into imagination." While maintaining an abiding fascination with Kabbalah, Duncan refused it his belief because his concern was not with certainty but with imaginative possibility; from his perspective, "imagination is the final ground of reality" (Kamenetz 13). Drawing upon the examples of the letter meditations in kabbalist *gematria* and the alphabetic puns in Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, Duncan conceived of *Letters* as an exploration of the creative matrix that letters form in the imagination and the cosmos: "*Letters* is influenced toward a creative veil or world-cloth which would be identical with the maya in which it's woven all the way through. The warp and woof are connected and the figures emerge and disappear" (12). For Duncan, to work in art is not to strive for uniqueness or originality but to participate in this "maya," this world-weaving, and he passed along this sense of creative participation in every moment of life to the poets and artists around him. As Diane di Prima testifies, "Robert was probably one of the closest, most intimate lovers I ever had, even though we never had a physical relationship. I learned a lot of different kinds of things from him. One of the things I learned – in a way no teacher of Buddhism ever showed me – was how precious my life was. How precious the whole ambience of the time. A real sense of appreciating every minute" (Meltzer, *Beat* 17).

In the preface to *Letters*, Duncan describes this exquisite awareness as a balance between creativity and self-consciousness (ix-x). Ultimately this creative awareness translates into the ability to uphold a balance between art and life, in which each penetrates but does not overwhelm the other. Duncan wanted to stand for the view that art and life are like warp and woof: both participate in and help create the design the artist makes. In his preface, Duncan singles out Artaud as an attractive but finally destructive example of someone whose life overcomes his art: "Artaud is torn apart by actual excitations which are intolerable to his imagination and to his material" (x). Duncan sounds this cautionary note in *Letters* and continues to sound it throughout his career. In his 1978 appreciation of Berman (who had died two years earlier), Duncan acknowledges the Semina group's romance with drugs and speaks parenthetically of his and Jess's "avoidance of the drug culture scene so that we did not cultivate [Berman's] Larkspur house." He recognizes, though, that there was also a creative side to that dangerously self-destructive scene: "The word 'junk' that in the 1950s would have meant the trashing of the drug heroin, in the 1960s came to mean the redemp-

tion of trash in the recognition of devotional objects, emblems and signs rescued from the bottom in the art of a new context" (*Prose* 202). California Junk Art represented for Duncan an art of survival, in which the artist, threatened by (self-)destruction, manages to reclaim an imaginative sway over a brutal reality. In a prose poem dedicated to the Bermans from his 1964 *Roots and Branches* (a title that again alludes to Kabbalah by invoking its image of the Tree of Life), Duncan speaks of "the artists of the survival" and asks, "How to shape survival! In what art to survive!" (169).

When the "artists of the survival" engage in "a descent into the underground of the city and [a] programmatic use of forbidden drugs" (*Prose* 200), Duncan views this Semina descent as part of "an alchemical process in which the *nigredo* or *melanosis*, 'the horrible darkness of our mind,' is the initial stage of a promised individuation." Through offering themselves, as Artaud did, to a psychic/artistic crucible, in which they would burn away within themselves the values of an unlivable society, the Semina group might hope to offer a new, creative vision for transforming that society. There was, in fact, an astonishing potency to this art of survival, whose discoveries continue to radiate far afield. "*Semina* is to be seen," Duncan proposes, "and the later work of Berman as themselves 'seminal,' as the seeding of 'that black, magically fecund earth,' as Jung describes the alchemical antinomy" (200-1). In their transformation of darkness and destruction into the potential for new creativity and community, the Semina group participated in the larger cultural phenomenon of the Beats. As Lisa Phillips notes, "The search for alternative consciousness, the mystical side of the Beats, goes hand in hand with their gritty realism and rebellion. These two sides – the ecstatic and the horrific, the beatific and the beaten, define the poles of Beat experience" (33). Even more directly than many of the other Beats, the Semina group combined mysticism, communalism, drug use, sexual frankness, and political protest into a survival art that became a prototype for the Hippie movement.

## 4. From Seeds to Tree

*Above the triteness and everydayness of this image continuum was Aleph – the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet.*  
David Meltzer

In the Kabbalah of Isaac Luria, which the Semina group read about in Gershom Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, the transformative art of survival is known as *tikkun*, the restoration of the broken world (265-86). The sense of wholeness implied by *tikkun* is essential to the Kabbalah of Isaac Luria and is consonant with a number of other mythical kabbalistic symbols, such as the Tree of Life and the figure of Adam Kadmon, the Cosmic Human Being. Berman adopted another symbol of wholeness, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *aleph*, as his personal signet. Scholem points out that *aleph* is a silent consonant that "represents nothing more than the position taken by the larynx when a word begins with a vowel" (*Kabbalah* 30). *Aleph* is the silent source of all articulation, the seed of the entire alphabet, "and indeed the Kabbalists always regarded it as the spiritual root of all other letters." The *Zohar* recounts the most famous story concerning the letter *aleph* as the silent source: "When the blessed Holy One wished to fashion the world, all the letters were hidden away. For two thousand years before creating the world, the blessed Holy One contemplated them and played with them. As He verged on creating the world, all the letters presented themselves before Him, from last to first" (11). Each letter stepped forward in turn and asked the "Master of the world" to "create the world by me" (12). The Holy One praised the virtues of each letter based upon a particular word that it begins, but refused to create the world with it, until the letter *bet* entered and said, "Master of the world, may it please You to create the world by me, for by me You are blessed above and below" [*berakhah*, blessing, begins with *bet*]. The Holy One agreed. The letter *aleph* had remained outside this scene in humility, at first not wanting to assert itself where other letters had failed and then not wanting to usurp the favor that had been granted already to *bet*.

The blessed Holy One said, '*aleph, aleph!* Although I will create the world with the letter *bet* [using *be-reshit*, the first word of the Torah], you will be the first of all letters. Only through you do I become one [*aleph* is the number one]. With you all counting begins and every deed in the world (16).

*Aleph* is the source of creation, although it remains inactive, incipient. Berman stamped this originary letter everywhere, from his motorcycle helmet to *Semina* 7, entitled "ALEPH," which is an entire issue of photography, drawing, and writing by Berman dominated by the letter *aleph*. Speaking of Berman's collages and assemblages, Meltzer notes how *aleph* functions in relation to mundane imagery drawn from print sources: "Above the triteness and everydayness of this image continuum was Aleph – the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which put everything into a strange tension, because on the one hand you'd see the normative images that newspapers and magazines use to increase circulation held at bay by this letter" (Meltzer, *Beat* 200). In this way, *aleph* took on a transformative, sacralizing function, as though it were capable of conferring a blessing upon a degraded, commodified reality. In *Semina* 7, a huge *aleph* is stamped alongside or on top of a variety of photographs: on the cover, a woman strapped into an electric chair awaiting execution; Berman's young son, Tosh, holding a rifle and wearing a Davy Crockett leather jacket; a vigorous stand of marijuana plants; a memorial collage for Charlie Parker; the bust of his wife, Shirley, with a large medallion between her exposed breasts; photographer Patricia Jordan nude, wearing a mask and beads; a saxophone being played; and a figure seen through a window in two poses. The obsessions of Berman's life – his family, his friends, his devotion to jazz, his love of sexual display, his outrage at society as death-affirming – are all stamped with the sacralizing signet of *aleph*.

Berman's employment of *aleph* not only introduces an "intuitive Kabbalah" that confers blessings upon the most vital facets of his life (Meltzer, "Door" 100), it also has an elegiac quality by virtue of its use as an iconic element so soon after World War II. Berman grew up in the Fairfax District of Los Angeles, where the Hebrew lettering of the Yiddish language was prominent in the windows of shops and in newspapers; invoking that world in the aftermath of the Holocaust draws attention to the death of the Hebrew letter, not only because the Yiddish-speakers of L.A. were dying out but also because the extermination of Jewish culture in Europe had incinerated the letters, both written and spoken, and rendered them ghostly. Like many gestures within his life and art, Berman's depiction of Hebrew letters on photographs, in assemblages, on parchment, and upon massive stones is fraught with opposing motives: the letters invoke suffering and disappearance while at the same time promising redemption.

If Berman's relationship to Kabbalah is more intuitive than doctrinaire, two of the other members of the Semina group, Jack Hirschman and David Meltzer, have made it the focus of serious study and a centerpiece of much of their poetry. Hirschman, who wrote an essay promoting "Kabbalah Surrealism," has set about actively integrating these two major influences into works of poetry and painting that also have an aggressive political character. Like Duncan, Hirschman views Kabbalah as opening up the most explosive poetic potential in words. Of his favorite kabbalistic thinker, Abraham Abulafia, whom he has translated, Hirschman claims, "Abulafia was the poet who changed the Tetragrammaton and put the name of a poet in. He identified with David the poet, and that's who God was to him, ultimately" (Meltzer, *Beat* 118). The Tetragrammaton is the four-letter name of God, never to be uttered, the holiest word in the Hebrew language. Hirschman contends that because Abulafia recognized the tremendous creative potency of the kabbalistic manipulation of letters, he was able to see that writing poetry as sublime as the Psalms makes the poet equivalent to the One who creates the cosmos. Like Berman, Hirschman is attuned not only to the spiritual but also to the graphic qualities of Hebrew letters, thinking of them as hieroglyphs and as forms to be explored by calligraphy.

Although Hirschman does not appear in *Semina*, he was a wholehearted participant in the Semina context. His first major collection of poetry, *Black Alephs* (1969), contains a cover collage by Berman (featuring a torn photograph of a bride and groom, with a kabbalistic diagram and two large *alephs* emerging from the tear) and three of Berman's Verifax collages as half-titles. Not only does Hirschman share Berman's fascination with the letter *aleph*, he also made artworks out of Hebrew letters. By smashing inked Hebrew block letters onto sheets of paper, Hirschman felt he was pushing the gestural aesthetic of abstract expressionism in a kabbalistic direction (Meltzer, *Beat* 118; *Tree* 34-45). The sense of heroic gesture attributed to abstract expressionism was also present for the Semina group in the improvisatory aesthetic of jazz. David Meltzer has called his own poetic method "Bop Kabbalah," which corresponds nicely to Hirschman's "Kabbalah Surrealism" – and to Jack Kerouac's "spontaneous bop prosody." In an essay for the 1978 retrospective of Berman's work, Meltzer quotes a long passage from Abulafia comparing the manipulation of letters in kabbalistic meditation to a kind of musical composition ("Door" 96-7). Meltzer himself claims that "Bop" and "Kabbalah" can blend into one mystical exercise:



"They're based on sonic and rhythmic practices and utilizing systems, musical or alphabetical, that have, if you so choose, profound dimensionality to them" (Meltzer, *Beat* 213). After describing the many permutations of words inside of words that occur in kabbalistic *gematria*, Meltzer concludes that as a practice *gematria* follows the same regimen as jazz: "That's attention and submission and at the same time improvisation" (214). For both Meltzer and Hirschman, Kabbalah is less a form of biblical commentary than it is a wide-ranging poetics of linguistic improvisation; they practice what might be called a "Tantric Kabbalah" of physical and psychic experimentation, rather than studying Kabbalah in order to deepen a traditional religious observance.

In the early seventies, Meltzer's magazine *Tree* took up where *Semina* left off in the mining of Kabbalah for artistic stimulus. Besides translations of and commentaries on kabbalistic texts, *Tree* published from the Semina group writing by Meltzer, Hirschman, Wieners, McClure, George Herms, and Idell Romero (Aya Tarlow), and images by Berman, Herms, Hirschman, and the actor Russ Tamblyn. Meltzer also reached out to a number of other poets looking to combine Kabbalah with Surrealism, such as Jerome Rothenberg, Nathaniel Tarn, Clayton Eshleman, Robert Kelly, Richard Grossinger, and John Brandi. And with remarkable foresight, Meltzer published the first selection to appear in English from Edmond Jabès's monumental *Book of Questions*, the Egyptian Jewish poet's consummate synthesis of Kabbalah and Surrealism, which interrogates the intertwined issues of Jewishness, writing, and the Holocaust. By looking at the poetic innovations sponsored by *Tree*, it becomes clear just how instrumental the Semina group was not only in inventing the Hippie lifestyle but also in founding a new poetic and artistic vision. Because Berman dedicated himself to an art in which the letter and the word are equal in power to the visual image, the Semina context of writers, artists, and filmmakers he convened was characterized by remarkable cross-fertilization. From the fifties through the seventies, the mixture of Kabbalah and Surrealism fostered by Semina was at the base of much of the poetic production, the drug and sexual experimentation, the film-making, and the collage and assemblage art of the West Coast. Semina was a significant instigator and exemplar of the California aesthetic at mid-century, an aesthetic whose combination of Surrealism, the occult, and anarchism encourages a constant interplay between artistic practices and ways of life.



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