

## INTRODUCTION

### "A Secret Mission"

In 1957, at an exhibition at the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles, Wallace Berman displayed three large works that would be called today assemblages or installations. One of them, *Temple*, consisted of a rough black shed, open on one side and large enough to contain a life-sized figure robed in white, its head twisted 180 degrees away from the viewer and with an enormous key around its neck. On the floor of this inverted confessional or magician's parlor were tossed sheets from the first issue of *Semina*, a loose-leaf journal Berman published to showcase the art and poetry of a circle of friends. One of the sheets came to the attention of a policeman who had been called in to close down the show as obscene. The sheet contained an ink drawing by (Marjorie) Cameron, purportedly from a peyote vision, which portrayed two humanoid figures engaged in intercourse (Fig. 1). The confiscation of this drawing resulted in Berman's arrest and conviction for indecency, as he reported in *Semina 2*: "the righteous judge, Kenneth Holiday [*sic*], . . . taking the allegorical drawing in question out of context, declared me guilty of displaying lewd and pornographic matter" (Duncan and McKenna 52).<sup>1</sup> Commenting on this passage in a 1978 essay for a retrospective exhibition of Berman's work, the poet Robert Duncan seized on the word *context* as crucial to an understanding not only of Berman's collage and assemblage art but of

a range of aesthetic and social practices that coalesced in California during the fifties and sixties:

The question of “context” in the affair goes beyond the usual matter of context in such trials, for Berman’s very art is the art 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. The collage itself, which had been seen by Dadaists and by Surrealists as a mode of attack upon the real or upon established relations, . . . had, after all, projected in the attack the context of what we recognize as Dada and the Surreal. Now, in our conscious alliance with the critical breakthrough of Dada and Surrealism as in our alliance with the Romantic Movement at large, we began

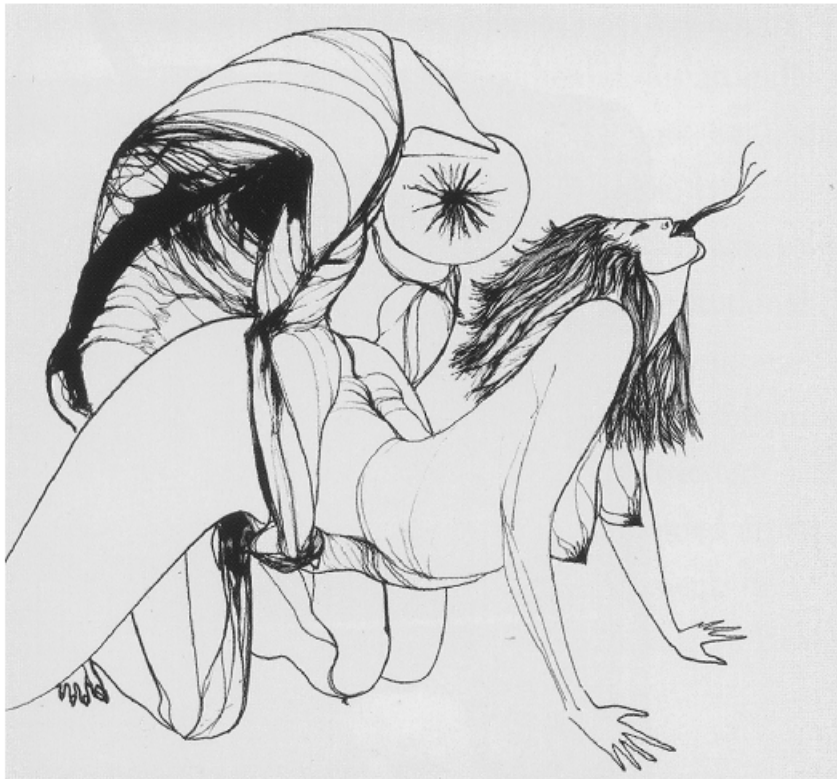


FIGURE 1. Cameron, Untitled (“peyote vision”), ink drawing, c. 1957. Cameron Parsons Foundation.

to see ourselves as fashioning unnamed contexts, contexts of a new life way in the making, a secret mission. (*SP* 198)

As Duncan notes, aesthetic breakthroughs can go beyond offering new techniques to opening up entirely new ways of perceiving and conducting life, as happened with Dada and surrealism: the adjectives “Dada” and “surreal” now describe attitudes, activities, and perceptions—*contexts*—that extend far outside the realm of art *per se*. Inspired by Dada, surrealism, and romanticism and by a shared sense of rebellion against the mores of postwar American culture, the poets and artists who participated in the context that Berman helped establish did not set forth to launch a movement; rather, they fashioned “unnamed contexts,” both in their collage-based art works and in their social relations, which had the “secret mission” of proposing “a new life way.” In the playful, erotic, transgressive, communal, collagist approach to making art that arose at this time, there is an untold story—a story about an undiscerned yet eventful and influential turn in post-World War II American poetry and the visual arts toward a contextual practice.<sup>2</sup>

A contextual practice initiates an art devoted to contexts, building works not around a central idea, theme, or symbol but by plucking and arranging images, materials, language, or even people from the surrounding milieu, “fashioning . . . contexts of a new life way in the making.” Of necessity a vernacular procedure tied to the everyday and the overlooked, contextual practice works by uncovering new energies and images through juxtaposing found materials or by directing aesthetic attention to an existing but previously ignored context. With its juxtapositional bent, contextual practice applies the most far-reaching formal innovation in the arts of the twentieth century—the principle of collage—in striking and unforeseen ways to the conduct of life. In this way, contextual practice combines the structural principle of collage with a transformative aesthetics that can be designated an “erotic poetics.” With poets and artists at its forefront, the period from 1945 to 1970 saw an urgent return to the body; the body and sexuality were invoked as central carriers of culture, infusing eroticism not only into works of art but also into anarchist politics, post-Freudian psychology, and emergent forms of ecstatic mysticism. Contextual practice disclosed an erotic poetics of burgeoning force that had a profound effect on the social life of the time and that continues to haunt contemporary art and culture.

In order to understand how contextual practice appeared and why its impact has not been acknowledged fully, it is helpful to consider its historical

background. Beginning with romanticism in the eighteenth century, a paradox governs the history of artistic innovation: the more autonomous art becomes, the more it subsumes cultural functions that belong to other realms, such as religion, philosophy, psychology, and politics. By this I mean not that art takes its subject matter from these other realms (which it has always done) but that by virtue of a newfound autonomy it substitutes itself for cultural practices whose legitimacy it draws into question, spawning strange amalgams such as art-as-religion, art-as-philosophy, art-as-psychology, and art-as-politics.<sup>3</sup> In the first half of the twentieth century, as this trend accelerated on every side, innovative work in the arts was animated particularly by the marriage of aesthetics and epistemology, which resulted in a reconception of the medium of art through a questioning of its essence, its limits, and what can be known within it. Modernists often envisioned an art that would occupy an equivalent place in modern culture with that of science—that most autonomous and subsuming of cultural practices—in which artistic ways of knowing, both objective and subjective, would approach in complexity and sophistication scientific ways of knowing. Just as modern science upset many of the categories providing stable forms of knowledge for the society at large and reconfigured the categories in new and forceful ways, the arts upset and reconfigured the generic categories that comprise the frameworks for how things can be known in art.

In the course of generic innovation, the arts invented the new hybrid frame or meta-genre of collage. Although genres in various arts had been broken and reframed as new hybrids starting in the nineteenth century, the first work of art that bore the designation “collage” (*Still-Life with Chair Caning*) appeared in 1912, when Picasso glued to a canvas a piece of oilcloth on which a chair-caning pattern was printed. He then painted a cubist chair around the “imitation” seat, thus throwing into question the whole notion of art as an imitation of life. A discarded commodity, the oilcloth already resided within the contemporary world; pasting it into a canvas to “represent” chair caning—that is, transferring into his art an element from life that already had a representational purpose—Picasso parodied the Western belief that art imitates life. By suggesting new relationships between representation and understanding and between art and life, the developing meta-genre of collage fed on the breakdown and interpenetration of genres. In skeletal form, collage can be defined as combining two actions: the selection of objects from the real world for incorporation into an artwork, and the juxtaposition of objects

in unexpected—that is, nonlinear, irrational, or antihierarchical—ways.<sup>4</sup> For theorists such as Theodor Adorno, David Antin, Marjorie Perloff, and Gregory Ulmer, collage became, in the words of Ulmer, “the single most revolutionary formal innovation in artistic representation to occur in [the twentieth] century” (Hoffman 384).<sup>5</sup> Following Picasso’s breakthrough, it played an especially central role in the epistemologically adventurous movements of cubism, Dada, and surrealism.

After the devastation of World War II and the revelation that “enlightened” science had invented the means for the unimaginable brutality of the Holocaust and Hiroshima, many in the arts participated in a sweeping revulsion against instrumental thinking and began to substitute an emerging existential impulse for the epistemological one. As their trust in dominant ideas, ideologies, faiths, methodologies, and institutions seemed to reach a nadir, the urgent question for these artists changed from how to invent advanced methods for probing the basis of knowledge to how the modern methods and forms recently discovered might suggest new ways to make sense of and to conduct individual and social life. During what W. H. Auden called in 1947 the “Age of Anxiety,” the response of some influential poets, such as Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and John Berryman, and certain painters, such as Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, and Willem DeKooning, was to dramatize the struggles of a psychologically wounded individual against an oppressive social reality.<sup>6</sup> Among a number of less celebrated artists and poets, a contextual practice grew up that enabled the expression of social critique both through art works and through aesthetically motivated lifestyles. As Robert Duncan remarked, these countercultural artists looked to the anarchism, antirealism, and eroticism of the Dada and surrealist movements and to the formal inventiveness of collage for inspiration. Contextual practice intensified earlier efforts at aesthetic provocation and generic mixture by bringing an erotic poetics much more forcefully into the conduct of daily life. When their aesthetic practices devolved from primarily epistemological to existential concerns, poets and artists in California and New York in particular embraced sexual and drug experimentation, anarchist communalism, political protest, and research in occultism, archeology, anthropology, and phenomenology—all as part of the “work” of art.

During the postwar period, avant-garde poetry made an extraordinarily generative contribution to the arts and to the larger culture. The label that describes this poetry comes from the title of Donald Allen’s groundbreaking 1960 anthology, *The New American Poetry*. Allen took it upon himself to

name particular movements within the New American Poetry, dividing the cutting-edge poets of the time heuristically into four porous groups: the Black Mountain School, the San Francisco Renaissance, the Beat Generation, and the New York School. With William Carlos Williams as their most apparent common denominator, these poets valorized the body, the vernacular, and the everyday, using open verse forms that stress spontaneity and the gathering of disparate materials addressed to a particular context. The erotic poetics of the New American poets also marks a rebirth of Whitmanian virtues of informality, openness, vulnerability, nakedness, ecstasy, and camaraderie. The present study draws its poetic exemplars primarily from the ranks of the New American poets, focusing especially on Robert Duncan (1919–1988) and Robert Creeley (1926–2005). The other two central figures that round out a presentation of the contours of contextual practice are Wallace Berman (1926–1976) and the folk music anthologist, filmmaker, and painter Harry Smith (1923–1991). A number of other poets play a significant role herein—Charles Reznikoff (a member of the earlier generation of Objectivists, but newly active during the postwar period), Allen Ginsberg, Jack Spicer, David Meltzer, and Denise Levertov—as do Jess (Collins) and other California artists and filmmakers and the radical psychoanalytical thinker Norman O. Brown. Although contextual practice is a significant component of artistic currents that have been treated in detail, such as the Beat Movement, Pop Art, Fluxus, and the performance art movement under the aegis of John Cage, this study will concentrate on figures who were not central to these movements, figures who by their very eccentricity and marginality can help bring an unrecognized artistic practice into the sharpest focus. And it will make a case not often mooted regarding the arts of the twentieth century in general: that poetry and poetics are at the heart of the contextual turn.

With Duncan, Creeley, Berman, and Smith as primary figures, an account of contextual practice can be given that makes clear its relevance to a wide range of artists and art forms during the postwar era, while also bringing to light new elements in and among these four figures. Until now, the majority of critical attention Creeley and Duncan have received is as members of the Black Mountain movement in the arts. This has obscured Creeley's role as a theorist of the art of context and Duncan's placement at the epicenter of the erotic arts of assemblage in California. Smith and Berman have managed nearly to escape extended critical discussion until quite recently. Signs that this neglect is waning can be seen in the scholarly symposium "Harry Smith: The Avant-

Garde in the American Vernacular,” hosted by the Getty Research Institute in 2001, and in the Santa Monica Museum’s landmark exhibition *Semina Culture: Wallace Berman and His Circle* (Duncan and McKenna), which traveled the United States from 2005 to 2007.<sup>7</sup> In many of the chapters, Duncan plays a central or contributory role, emerging as the most committed, accomplished, and influential practitioner of an erotic contextual art. By choosing Duncan, Creeley, Berman, and Smith as primary subjects rather than, say, Charles Olson, Frank O’Hara, Joseph Cornell, and John Cage, I mean not to ignore the contextual practice of the latter four artists but to offer an account that centers on figures who at once force us to rethink critical orthodoxies about the period and who produce work that cannot be readily understood without recourse to a notion of contextual practice.

### The Chapters

The first chapter, “Forging a Contextual Practice: Assemblage and Erotic Poetics,” introduces the two major aspects of contextual practice. The first half of the chapter concentrates on the groundbreaking 1961 exhibition *The Art of Assemblage*, organized by the Museum of Modern Art, which joined the new collage art created after World War II with its prewar European precursors. Designating the new art “assemblage,” the curator, William Seitz, argues that the term more accurately describes the postwar innovations that extend collage into three dimensions, and beyond that into installations and happenings. Throughout the catalog, he takes pains to demonstrate the significant role poetry plays in the art of assemblage. In particular, he labels the contextual quality of assemblage—its use of objects with associations or as metaphors—as “poetic” in order to signal the contribution of poetry to a visual art that moves beyond formalism. The second half of the chapter focuses on erotic poetics, discussing Norman O. Brown’s counterculture classic, *Love’s Body* (1965), an aphoristic work of visionary psychoanalysis informed by the poetry of his good friend Robert Duncan. Duncan, in turn, critiques *Love’s Body* as itself an unacknowledged work of prose poetry, disclosing thereby many of the premises of the erotic poetics he shares with Brown. Within Brown’s aphorisms and Duncan’s poetry and poetics, psychoanalysis mingles with liberatory anarchism and the sexual mysticism of Tantra and the hermetic. This blend of the sexual, the political, and the mystical represents a précis of the erotic directions taken by contextual practice.

The second chapter, “The Contextual Art of Robert Creeley’s Interviews,” reads Creeley’s interviews both as works of contextual art and as expositions of its theory. One of the most erotically and theoretically engaged contextual practitioners, Creeley forged a poetry of intimacy that constantly probes the writer’s relationship to impinging contexts of every sort: the body, other people, social and political conditions, aesthetic concerns, dreams and memories, drugs, words and numbers, and the media used for inscription. In his book of conversations, *Contexts of Poetry* (1973), he presents interviews conducted with him by others as documents of contextual practice, making *Contexts of Poetry* probably the first book of interviews included by a writer within his or her own oeuvre. The chapter examines Creeley’s interviews from three angles: by looking at the innovative relationship to context in his poetry and poetics, by rehearsing his model of conversation as an existential encounter, and by analyzing his invocation of artistic aphorisms as a form of what the philosopher Pierre Hadot calls “spiritual exercises.” As part of the larger project of chronicling the rise of contextual practice, the chapter also discusses the emergence of the interview genre in the postwar period. Creeley’s interviews demonstrate how talk about art bleeds into talk as art. In fact, much of the New American poetry can be characterized as a precipitation of verse out of conversation or as epistolary poetry.

The third chapter, “Assemblage as Archeology and History: Harry Smith’s *Anthology of American Folk Music* and Charles Reznikoff’s *Testimony*,” follows on the concerns of the first two chapters with a further discussion of how collage informs contextual practice. From a theoretical perspective, the art historian and philosopher Donald Kuspit demonstrates how the open-ended qualities of postwar assemblage make it like an archeological excavation into the present world. Harry Smith, an enigmatic artist, filmmaker, musicologist, and anthropologist, practiced assemblage as a form of archeology, excavating for occult patterns in the present moment and in the arts of many times and places, seeking solutions to the “problem of rhythm in relation to thought.” An influential and assiduous contextual practitioner, Smith incessantly created artworks and acted roles in daily life, making him a proto-performance artist as well. The chapter concludes with an extended comparison of Smith’s epoch-making musical assemblage *The Anthology of American Folk Music* (1952) (drawn from 78s recorded in the late twenties and early thirties) to Charles Reznikoff’s two-volume *Testimony: The United States (1885–1915)*, extracted from law books covering trials during the same tumultuous turn-



of-the-century period in which the folk songs of Smith's anthology were composed. These two works recount an unorthodox history of the United States, told from the perspective of the underclass and structured as assemblage on a grand scale.

The discussion of Smith in the fourth chapter, "Visionary Assemblage: Harry Smith and the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg, Robert Duncan, and Jack Spicer," constructs a continuum of visionary poetics based on a comparison of his work to that of three poets whom he knew personally. He was closest to Ginsberg, and in fact the indigent Smith lived for extended periods of time in Ginsberg's New York City apartment. In the poem "Journal Night Thoughts" (1961), Ginsberg records an evening of drug visions in the company of Smith. The poem thus affords a vehicle for comparing and contrasting their stances toward the erotic, especially toward tantric mysticism. Duncan, who like Smith hailed from a Theosophical background that incorporates Tantrism, evinced an abiding interest in the occult and a penchant for metaphysical collage. A fundamentally syncretic thinker, Duncan coined the term "Grand Collage" to describe his own work and that of the mystically inclined poets, artists, filmmakers, and composers who surrounded him. Through a consideration of Duncan's poem "The Architecture, *Passages 9*" (1964), the chapter highlights elements common to his work and that of Smith: use of assemblage as a method, engagement in occult speculation, pursuit of shamanistic states, fascination with dream landscapes, and conversion of the artist's room into a cave of alchemical transmutation. With the third poet, Jack Spicer, Smith collected records in Oakland in the late forties that informed both *The Anthology of American Folk Music* and Spicer's "Most Educational Folk-Song Program West of the Pecos" on KPFA, the fledgling public radio station. Like Smith, Spicer theorized and practiced a contextual art of dictation and divination, in which mind-altering substances keep the artist's ego at bay and help open the way for what is "outside" to enter the composition.

One of the pioneers of West Coast assemblage art, Wallace Berman was a highly influential catalyst for the art and culture of postwar California. The fifth chapter, "Surrealism and Kabbalah in Semina Culture: Wallace Berman Cultivates the Erotic in California Poetry and Art," investigates the erotic poetics of the poets and artists who congregated around *Semina*, the journal he produced from 1955 to 1964. Through *Semina* (which consists of collages, poems, and photographs on loose-leaf cards, stuffed into decorated envelopes and mailed to friends), Berman acted as midwife at the communal birth of

a contextual practice. The best-known poets involved in *Semina* were Duncan, David Meltzer, Michael McClure, John Wieners, Philip Lamantia, Bob Kaufman, and Jack Hirschman; artists included Bruce Conner, Jess, George Herms, Jay DeFeo, Joan Brown, Cameron, Dennis Hopper, and Berman himself. Although the *Semina* cohort imitated to some extent the group ethos of surrealism, they were attracted less to doctrinaire surrealists than to heretics such as Jean Cocteau and Antonin Artaud. Emulating Artaud's peyote sessions with the Tarahumara Indians, many of the *Semina* figures took peyote in the fifties and contributed to *Semina 5*, an issue devoted to Mexico. Another erotic element in the mix of *Semina* culture was Kabbalah, which formed the basis for Berman's art incorporating Hebrew letters and for the poetry of Meltzer and Hirschman. Duncan introduced many poets to Kabbalah; his volume of poems *Letters* (1958) brings kabbalistic readings forcefully into the poetry of the period. Joining surrealism with Kabbalah, *Semina* culture was rooted in contextual practice, which often included mail art and other works created as conversation. The catalog *Semina Culture: Wallace Berman and His Circle* demonstrates the ascendance of contextual practice through works of collage and assemblage created by artists, poets, photographers, filmmakers, and former child film stars—works with a palpable eroticism fed by drug use, sexual display, mysticism, and anarchism.

A lifelong champion of mysticism, anarchism, and sexual display (but not of drugs), Duncan reached a point of crisis in his erotic poetics during the Vietnam War, which mimicked the crisis felt by the nation. The sixth chapter, "Before Caesar's Gate, Robert Duncan Comes to Grief: The Vietnam War and the 'Unengendered Child,'" investigates Duncan's erotic collage poetry of the Vietnam War period, as found in the second edition of *Caesar's Gate* (1972) and in poems from the late sixties and early seventies in *Ground Work: Before the War* (1984). This was a phase of Duncan's work dominated by unappeasable grief, which was occasioned by the war, by the demise of his friendship with Denise Levertov sparked by their disagreement over the relation of poetry to protest, and by his recognition that as a homosexual poet he was in mourning over never having had a son. Duncan explores the grounds of his grief about war and about being "sonless" by identifying with gay predecessors Walt Whitman and Federico García Lorca, both of whom suffered this same complex of emotions during their own experiences of war.

The painful dissolution of Duncan's friendship with Levertov after their close identification for two decades was part of a psychic disturbance he called

an “anima rebellion,” which reached its most virulent form in his condemnation of Levertov as an avatar of the ferocious Hindu goddess Kali in “Santa Cruz Propositions” (1970). My seventh chapter, “In Robert Duncan’s ‘Anima Rebellion,’ Denise Levertov Meets the Goddess Kali,” explores how the erotic charge that Kali carries for Duncan shows up in his figuring of death as a realm of sexual frustration in *Caesar’s Gate* (and in collages by Jess that accompany the text) and recurs in the early poems of *Ground Work* that invoke a terrifying mother figure. Also present in his most famous poem, “My Mother Would Be a Falconress,” this figure of the predatory mother represents the only mythological image in Duncan’s work not submitted to a thoroughgoing hermeneutical inquiry. Arising ultimately from the loss of his mother at birth, the “anima rebellion” represents a grief he finds too deep to face directly, and it forces a breakdown in his own erotic poetics at the end of the period treated in this study.

The conclusion, “Jerome Rothenberg’s ‘Symposium of the Whole,’” explores Rothenberg’s anthology of ethnopoetics, *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia, & Oceania* (1968), in which he takes Harry Smith’s *Anthology of American Folk Music* and Donald Allen’s *New American Poetry* as exemplars of an anthology composed as assemblage. Rothenberg’s conception of the erotic poetics lurking within the art of assemblage is also deeply informed by Duncan’s poetry and poetics. Citing Duncan’s phrase “a symposium of the whole” as a talisman for his enterprise, Rothenberg creates a Grand Collage of “primitive” and archaic poetries from around the world, which he juxtaposes with avant-garde poetry and performance art. *Technicians* can be seen as a culminating work of contextual art and as a transition into the related cultural and artistic movements of the seventies and eighties, such as multiculturalism, ethnopoetics, conceptual art, minimal art, performance art, and investigations of the relationship between orality and literacy.