

P R E F A C E

We began to see ourselves as fashioning unnamed contexts,
contexts of a new life way in the making, a secret mission.

Robert Duncan

This book makes the argument that some of the most innovative works of poetry and art in the postwar period (1945–1970) engaged in a “contextual practice.” The term refers both to a way of making art, for which the magpie art of assemblage is the most vivid representative, and to a new relationship between art and life, which can be called “erotic poetics.” In a time that seemed evacuated of meaning by the devastating experiences of the Great Depression and World War II, contextual practice involved drawing together discarded or unremarked fragments (whether visual or verbal) from daily life in order to reveal “secret” meanings and to insist on the regenerative potential of everyday experience. In rejecting the grand, sweeping gesture in favor of a vernacular vocabulary composed of the near-at-hand, poets and artists turned particularly toward the body as a repository of unrecognized cultural potential. Basing their work in the body and its erotic energies, they created an art of daily life that reveled in sexual display and drug experimentation, espoused an anarchist politics and a communal sociality, and encouraged mystical and shamanistic excursions. Contextual practice informed all of the branches of the New American poetry; the writing, art, and filmmaking of the Beats; the performance of happenings, events, and dance theater; the underground film movement; and currents of assemblage, collage, junk art, and pop art. Having never been looked at together before, the central figures treated in this book—poets Robert Duncan and Robert Creeley; artist Wallace Berman; and filmmaker, artist, and folk music anthologist Harry Smith—form a constellation

that illuminates the theoretical and practical stakes involved in a contextual practice. Taking this artistic mode as a lens allows us to look back and see the first stirrings of a countercultural ethos that was to have a profound effect on society at large.

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