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What is Beat?

Beat Culture and the New America 1950-1965, Whitney Museum of American Art, November 9, 1995 - February 4, 1996

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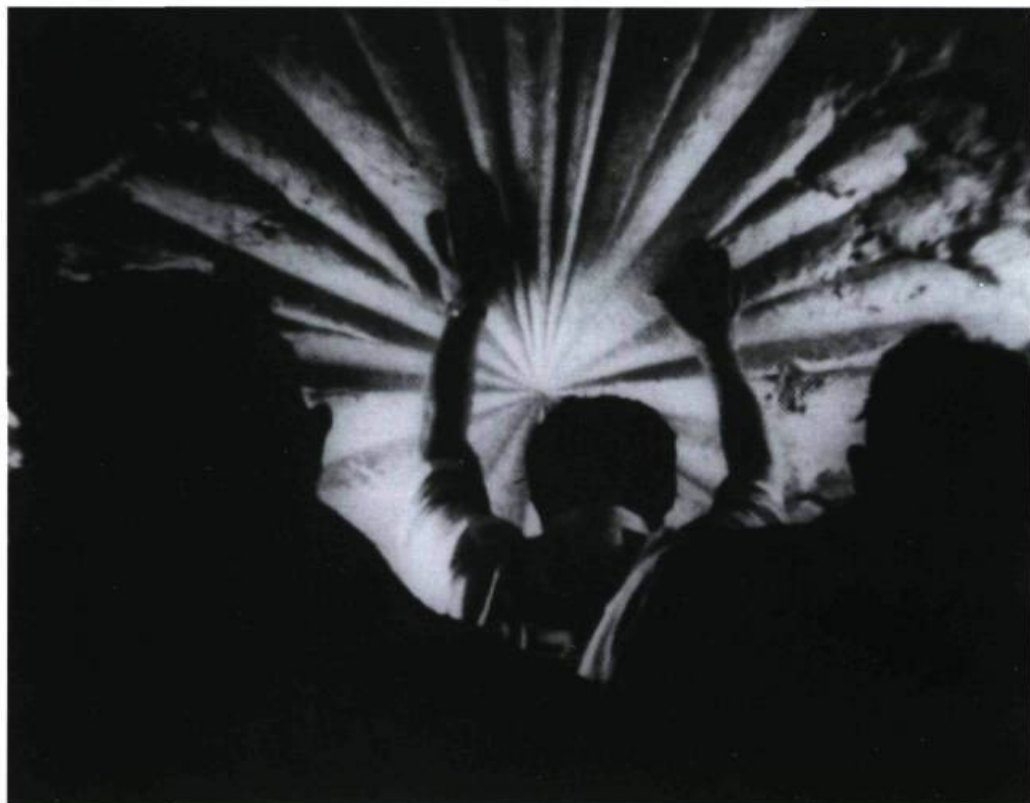
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ACTUALIZÉS/EXPOSITIONS

NEW YORK WHAT IS BEAT ?

Beat Culture and the New America 1950 - 1965, Whitney Museum of American Art, November 9, 1995 - February 4, 1996



The White Rose, 1967. A film by Bruce Conner; 16mm film, B & W, sound, 7 minutes. Courtesy of Bruce Conner and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Whoever said “you can’t go home again” did not see the Beat Culture exhibition at the Whitney Museum, a show so assiduous in its documentation, so determined to resurrect the *Zeitgeist*, that it patently wants to turn the clock back forty years and give us the experience of actually having been there. Whether or not BeatWhit finally answers that oft posed question — “What is Beat ?” — it is certainly not for lack of trying.

In addition to the paintings, drawings, collages, sculpture and installations. In addition to the paintings, drawings, collages, sculpture and installations one would expect in an art museum, there are corridors lined with snapshots of Beat luminaries, long vitrines filled with manuscripts, magazines and memorabilia, headphone stations where one can dig the voice of Beat poetry, a time line that charts events in the Beat mileus of New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco, and an archival film and CD-ROM entitled “The Beat Experience” produced by the Red Hot Organization, with rapid fire editing of performances and newsreel footage enlivened by spoken word from William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, Amiri Baraka and a heady jazz soundtrack. There is even an audio tour of the show narrated

by Allen Ginsberg. Plus a schedule of symposia, performances and readings, a film and video program including work by Bruce Conner, Jack Smith, Kenneth Anger, John Cassavetes and the immortal PULL MY DAISY by Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie. And a large catalogue with ten essays on various Beat topics (e.g. Beats and the Law, Black Beats and Black Issues, Notes on Beat Films) and lots of photographic reproductions.

BeatWhit arrives at a propitious cultural moment : when the search for roots and authenticity seems paramount, when the excesses of the 80s have given way to BeatWhit arrives at a propitious cultural moment : when the search for roots and authenticity seems paramount, when the excesses of the 80s have given way to the more modest and introspective ethos of the 90s, when the goateed masses are flocking to coffee bars in search of spoken word and jazz improv, when MTV sometimes goes unplugged and the key media buzzword is “interactive”. For the current generation of art school grads, BeatWhit can be received as a naive celebration of their grandfather’s downscale bohemia. Like wow, daddy-o! Dig those gone cats and cool chicks in their cold water flats and funky lofts, up all night on benzedrine,



Bruce Conner, *Couch*, 1963. Cloth-covered couch with wood frame, cloth, paint. Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena, CA.

seeking kicks and love and satori, getting high on jazz and junk and booze and poetry.

The Beats were the first postwar underground, supremely self-conscious in their rejection of mainstream square culture. Their revolt against 50s get-a-job conformity, their derision of Cold War affluence and the mindless faith in technology and progress, their purposeful unpolished rawness, extremes of expression and behavior, outrageous flaunting of sexual and social taboos, quest for direct and immediate experience unfettered by academy, their embrace of Eastern mysticism, Black culture and the marginalia of the street — all set a precedent for subsequent boho subcultures: mod and hippie and punk and, of Eastern mysticism, Black culture and the marginalia of the street — all set a precedent for subsequent boho subcultures: mod and hippie and punk and, currently, the grunge/slacker thing.

I was born in the 50s, just prior to the publication of "On The Road". BeatWhit brings me back to my high school days, to the liberating discovery of Kerouac, Burroughs and Ginsberg, of Ken Kesey and Neal Cassady, of Charlie Parker and bebop. Informing my first aesthetic stirrings and my precious adolescent rebellion was the knowledge of an alternate and oppositional culture that could be appreciated, emulated, maybe even entered. My life was saved not just by rock and roll (pace Lou Reed) but also by the Beats. Their artistic audacity left an indelible impression. But even more appealing was their cool immunity to a society that was all too neat and orderly, that threatened to circumscribe my entire existence if I let it. As summed up by Bob Dylan in "Subterranean Homesick Blues": "Get born. Keep warm. Short pants. Romance. Learn to dance. Get dressed. Get blessed. Try to be a success. Please her. Please him...Twenty years of schooling and they put you on the day shift". The Beats could not be touched by the mainstream because they played by a different set of rules. Because, in their gleeful, enlightened insouciance, they just didn't care. This touched by the mainstream because they played by a different set of rules. Because, in their gleeful, enlightened insouciance, they just didn't care. This detachment was, ultimately, their salvation. It was their legacy to budding young hipsters like me. And, dare I say, to my generation of critics and curators. Once the Beats mark you with the scarlet "A" (for Anarchy) it's hard to take anything too seriously.

The Beats were sloppy. They hung loose. Museums, by definition, do not. A museum is orderly, hierarchical, precise, both in its institutional framework and its mandate to codify art history. The Beats are a round peg, the Whitney a square hole. Even before seeing the exhibition, I wondered how the two would fit together. Could the Whitney preserve the Beat's existential spontaneity and not embalm it in a well-meaning but devivifying art historical glaze? Or would the contagious, transcendent soul of Beatness suffer in captivity? Whitney curator Lisa Phillips, who organized BeatWhit (and will preside over next year's Biennial), seems aware of the inherent contradictions. On the one hand, she imbues the show with a forceful will to convince that can feel at odds with typical Beat slackness. She is, after all, building a case not just for the immediate milieu but for its legacy to American culture, which accounts for her typical Beat slackness. She is, after all, building a case not just for the immediate milieu but for its legacy to American culture, which accounts for her inclusion of a lot of New York School work (Pollock, Jim Dine, Oldenberg, Rauschenberg, John Chamberlain) that is contemporary with but not necessarily part of Beat.

On the other hand, Phillips is not afraid to let the holy mess shine through. And it's not just the burlap-covered walls. Phillips spreads her curatorial net wide. Recognizing that Beat found its primary release in literature and performance, rather than in the plastic arts, she has assembled a reliquary treasure trove of original manuscripts and artists' books, as well as photos of Beat happenings and even domestic scenes. Ginsberg was a particularly avid chronicler of his friends, and is represented by photos chez Burroughs and Kerouac, of original junkie/hipster Herbert Huncke, and of Beat demiurge Neal Cassady. But no matter how close we are brought to the Beat *quotidienne*, there is still a tendency to apotheosize the subject, and sometimes to good effect. I'm thinking of Kerouac's original manuscript of "On The Road", a continuous roll of teletype paper fraying at the edges, which is presented with all the flourish that its mythical status deserves: on a platform, in a vitrine, roll of teletype paper fraying at the edges, which is presented with all the flourish that its mythical status deserves: on a platform, in a vitrine, glowing under low light (so as not to further decompose the flimsy paper stock), it resonates with talismanic self

importance, like the Beat Dead Sea Scrolls. You can almost hear the trumpets blow (but muted, cool) in its presence, a Fanfare for the Common (Beat) Fan.

Phillips gives a lot of space to the West Coast assemblagists — George Herms, Bruce Conner, Ed Kienholz — work that, in its material pathos, seems a precursor to Arte Povera or Post Minimalism, but is dominated by the quaint, musty aura of the junk shop, and even seems to have one foot (or at least a couple of toes) in folk art. The first piece we are confronted with, immediately upon disembarking the elevator, is Herm's "The Librarian", a worthy sentinel of mock serious authority and figurative bifurcation, and an apt presager of the mad doings within. In the West Coast room, Conner weighs in trenchantly with his funky, distressed, post-apocalyptic "Couch" of little ease and Kienholz shows an early (1961) example of anti L.A.P.D. bravado in "A Bad Cop (Lt. Carter)". All this is part of art historical revision, an attempt to do better by our somewhat neglected California brethren in Beat, and this effort goes beyond the All this is part of art historical revision, an attempt to do better by our somewhat neglected California brethren in Beat, and this effort goes beyond the Whitney's walls. Running concurrently with BeatWhit are shows by Conner and Herms in several SoHo galleries. Meanwhile, a Kienholz retrospective is scheduled at the Whitney immediately following BeatWhit.

No matter how familiar the terrain, every survey show should hold a couple of surprises. I had heard of Wallace Berman but his work had largely gone unseen. L.A. hipster, jazz aficionado, one of the founders of the Ferus Gallery, editor of the seminal Beat zine "Semina", Berman drew bebop album covers and inscribed Hebrew letters on his kaleidoscopic photo/text collages (merging Cabala with the commonplace). He was a printmaker, mail artist, filmmaker and multimedia visionary; his emphasis on art as part of a total environment is a precursor to much of the interdisciplinary work of the 60s. He provided a catalyst to many younger artists and seemed to know just about everyone on the California circuit — from Herms and Conner to curator Walter Hopps to poet Michael McClure to actor/artists Dennis Hopper and Dean Stockwell. In fact, if you look closely at the film "Easy Rider", you will see Berman cast as a member of the hippie commune, the one sowing seeds, a nifty homage by Hopper to this great uncle of the film "Easy Rider", you will see Berman cast as a member of the hippie commune, the one sowing seeds, a nifty homage by Hopper to this great uncle of West Coast Beatdom, who died in 1976.

One of Berman's friends and collaborators was the San Francisco based painter Jay DeFeo. Her monumental

painting "The Rose" is the second big surprise and the tour de force of BeatWhit. Beginning in 1958 with the idea of a central radiating form, DeFeo labored on the piece constantly over the next seven years, gluing the initial work onto a larger canvas, adding bits of wood, beads, pearls and mica, building up and scraping back layers of paint. Various known as "The Death Rose", "The White Rose", and finally just "The Rose", the painting acquired a cult status while still in progress. It became DeFeo's daily ritual, her meditational tool, a personal act of dedication, an investigation into the cycles of art history. The process came to an end in 1966, when DeFeo was evicted from her apartment on Fillmore Street, and the piece, then (as now) 11 feet high, 7.5 feet wide, 8 inches thick, and weighing over a ton, had to be lowered out the window by cranes and moving men (an incident documented by Bruce Conner in his lyrical short film "The White Rose").

Walled up and moldering for over twenty years in a conference room of the San Francisco Art Institute, the painting had to undergo massive restoration before it could be transported to the Whitney, where it is given a hero's welcome (and is in the process of being acquired for the museum's permanent collection). Presented at the end of a long corridor, it hovers, despite its massive bulk, like an apparition in ghostly white, its mandalalike ridges radiating vibrant, hyperbolic light into an occluded periphery of gnarls, whorls and shadows. like an apparition in ghostly white, its mandalalike ridges radiating vibrant, hyperbolic light into an occluded periphery of gnarls, whorls and shadows. "The Rose" has undeniable physical presence and a brooding, rapturous spiritual resonance.

DeFeo, unfortunately, did not live to see her masterwork unveiled. She died in 1989. But her vision, like the rest of this commemorative show, lives on. If you missed it at the Whitney, it will be at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis from June 2 to September 15, and at the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum in San Francisco from October 5 to December 29.

STEVEN KAPLAN