

A legendary figure of the California Beat movement, Wallace Berman is generally remembered as unassuming, mystical and exceptionally charismatic. According to Dennis Hopper, "he affected and influenced everybody seriously involved in the arts in Los Angeles in the 50's. If there was a guru, he was it – the high priest, the holy man, the rabbi." Walters Hopps recalled "his magical touch of wit" – a magical touch still operating on younger generations who discover Berman's work today. For the first solo exhibition of the artist ever organized in France, the Galerie Frank Elbaz presents a selection of grids and "shuffles" from his pioneering copy art works, the Verifax Collages.

Berman started using the Verifax photocopier around 1964. It remained his main artistic tool until his accidental death in 1976. Given his fascination for the power of words, the name "Verifax", meaning something like "True Facts", must have held a symbolic significance. It recalls for instance the titles of earlier works, *Factum Fidei* (1957) and *Veritas Panel* (1952-57), featured at the Ferus Gallery in 1957 – a legendary show closed by the police on grounds of pornography. With the Verifax, Berman was able to fuse several mediums that had long interested him, i.e. photography, collage and printing. The two-step gelatin dye transfer process of the Verifax is very similar to that of photography, although entirely automated. The original to be copied was placed on the Verifax glass plate and photographed; a negative image of the original was produced and needed to be re-introduced in the machine, before being discarded, to allow the final positive copy to be printed.

In the Verifax Collages, Berman made extensive use of an image of a hand holding a transistor radio, taken from an advertisement for a small 1963 Sony transistor, probably found by chance in a magazine. Berman covered the text of the ad with white paint, retaining only the image, and then cut out the rectangular space of the speaker to replace it with various other images, found in the press or in books. The artist worked directly on the Verifax plate, without creating an actual pasted down composition beforehand. In other words, there is no "original" collage in the ordinary sense: the photocopy of the ephemeral piece is the original work of art. Berman experimented with the process, varying the required dosage of activator baths, as well as the development and exposure times. He also incorporated the negatives into finished works instead of disposing of them. Furthermore, the printed photocopies were usually not simply left in the form they came out: chemicals applied on the still wet paper produced degrees of highlights, shades of sepia, as well as spots and splashes that look like accidents. As a result, exactly identical "copies" of any one "original" were never obtained.

After completing a series of single photocopies, actual collages were composed by gluing down on a board from 4 to 56 different "hands", side by side in a square grid pattern or overlapping in a "shuffle". This is in fact the only time a real collage takes place, with visible joints between the

fragments – this of course doesn't happen with photocopying, which neutralizes all of the colors, paper qualities, layers and junctions. The so-called Verifax Collages (like today's digital art) are hardly collages in the sense of cutting and pasting materials to a surface, but rather disparate visual elements blended by a quasi-magical operation. The visuals resulting from the automated process, fortuitous incidents and controlled hands-on manipulations were many times removed from the images placed in the Verifax at the beginning of this creative routine, in which artist, chance, and machine alternately took the upper hand.

- Sophie Dannenmüller

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