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The art of California counter-culture in the 1950s

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- 1 Different and marginalized, California stood for a long time on the fringes of the major debates and artistic events that agitated the New York scene, which is why it has remained until today the poor relation in studies of American art. Whereas New York celebrated the triumph of Abstract Expressionism, the California art scene was plagued by a shortage of exhibition space and a lack of interest in contemporary art in general, and local art in particular. This lack of visibility contributed to an image of the region as a “true desert,”¹ to quote Man Ray, who lived in Hollywood for ten years. In the late 1940s, however, in a climate of the Cold War and McCarthyist persecutions, an artistic sensibility emerged that went against the grain of the “American Way of Life.” Influenced by jazz and spirituality, it shaped a fragile and ephemeral output intended for a small circle of friends, and involving the full range of artistic media: painting, sculpture, assemblage, installation, film, magazines, artists’ books, performance, mail art, etc. During the 1950s, various labels flourished: from *beat* to *beatnik* to *rats*, they evoke the quasi-pariah status of these individuals opposed to the dominant ideology. Although the movement surrounding the Beat Generation has been widely studied, only literature and, to a lesser extent, film are generally represented. This article proposes a reconsideration of this little-known chapter in American art, which was the source of the counter-culture that expanded so spectacularly in the 1960s. The study of this unexplored history can also shed light on the shifting, but codependent relationship of the mainstream to the fringes.

Overview of recent exhibitions and publications on Californian art

- 2 During the last ten years, major exhibitions have attempted to reevaluate and draw attention to art from California – especially the Los Angeles scene. The most important

of these was *Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945-1980* (*Pacific Standard Time*, 2011). Involving more than sixty museums and cultural institutions all across Southern California, this project aimed to save hitherto neglected local production from oblivion by collecting testimonies and documentary archives.² Extending over a ten-year period, from 2001 to 2011, it sought to redress a perception of American art as largely New York-centric by evaluating the contribution of Los Angeles to the development of artistic modernity. As part of this program, the exhibition *L.A. Raw: Abject Expressionism in Los Angeles 1945-1980, from Rico Lebrun to Paul McCarthy* (*L.A. Raw*, 2012), proposed a genealogy of the darker strand of Expressionism embodied by leading figures of the 1980s such as Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, Raymond Pettibon, and Jim Show – to name a few – by presenting forty-one artists who opened this path. In Europe, this rehabilitation was fostered by smaller projects such as *Los Angeles 1955-1985* at the Centre Pompidou (*Los Angeles...*, 2006) and *Time and Place: Los Angeles 1957-1968* at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm (*Time and Place*, 2008). As unusual as they were, these various initiatives on both sides of the Atlantic were intended to offer a panorama of artistic creation in Southern California, from the postwar period to the 1980s.

- 3 Pioneering in its scope, the exhibition *Beat Culture and the New America, 1950-1965*, presented at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York (*Beat Culture...*, 1995), concentrated on the genesis and manifestations of American counter-culture, offering one of the most comprehensive documentations of this subject to date. At times, this dissident spirit in California was addressed in collective exhibitions – *Pacific Dreams: Currents of Surrealism and Fantasy Art in California, 1934-1957* (*Pacific Dreams*, 1995) and *Reading California: Art, Image, and Identity, 1900-2000* (*Reading California*, 2000) – and was also the sole subject of Richard Smith Cándida's book *Utopia and Dissent: Art, Poetry, and Politics in California* (SMITH, 1995), which has become a reference work on the topic.
- 4 Since then, more targeted exhibitions and publications have helped to direct attention to the work of individual artists who were behind this dissent spirit: exhibitions such as *Semina Culture: Wallace Berman and His Circle* (*Semina Culture*, 2005), which identified artists working in the ambit of the charismatic figure of Wallace Berman; *Spirit into Matter: The Photographs of Edmund Teske* (*Spirit into Matter...*, 2004), which was the first major retrospective of a photographer known for his characteristic practice of composite printing; and, more recently, *Cameron: Songs for the Witch Woman* (Cameron, 2015) a monographic exhibition on Cameron, who played an important role within this community, thanks to her mystical aspirations. This reevaluation has been supplemented by other publications, such as Kevin Hatch's book devoted to the work of Bruce Conner (HATCH, 2012); a two-volume work by George Herms, *George Herms: The River Book* (HERMS, 2014), and *Jess: O! Tricky Cad and Other Jessoterica* (Jess, 2012), devoted to the artist's collages combining illustrations and texts.
- 5 Unlike Los Angeles, the San Francisco Bay area has not undergone a comparable rediscovery and dissemination of its artistic output in general, or its dissident art in particular. The seminal exhibition *Rolling Renaissance: San Francisco Underground Art in Celebration, 1945-1968* (*Rolling Renaissance*, 1968) appeared as an early but isolated attempt to revisit this history. In this context, Thomas Albright's book *Art in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945-1980* (ALBRIGHT, 1985) is an excellent source in that it situates this nonconformism within a singular landscape, bringing to the fore figures completely neglected by even the most recent historiography. Similar research has since been advanced by several, mainly monographic, exhibitions, organized by Californian

museums, such as *The Art of Joan Brown* (*Art of Joan Brown*, 1998) and *An Opening of the Field: Jess, Robert Duncan, and Their Circle* (*An Opening...*, 2013), which concentrated on the interaction between Jess and Robert Duncan. It was the Whitney Museum of American Art, however, that orchestrated the first retrospective of Jay DeFeo, one of the major artists of this underground scene (*Jay DeFeo*, 2012). This initiative appears all the more remarkable when one considers that it was undertaken by a New York institution, given the fact that, even today, the East Coast has tended to display a certain reserve toward art from California, perceived as typically vernacular.

The California art scene at the dawn of the 1950s

- 6 While such figures are now beginning to surface, during the 1950s they were working in near-obscurity. Unlike New York, Los Angeles was not a favored destination for exiled European artists during the Second World War.³ In their choice of the East Coast, they diverged from their writer, filmmaker, and musician colleagues who responded very early to Hollywood's call.⁴ Despite the existence of collections and the presence of eminent figures such as Louise and Walter Arensberg and Galka Scheyer, the lack of a true artistic community nurtured by galleries and supported by the public made Los Angeles a city lost to the cause of modern art. Whereas European modernity arrived in New York even before the Armory Show, California developed an interest in it later – especially in Los Angeles, which, until a much later date, lacked structures capable of welcoming European modernism. Dominated by a reactionary group that promoted old masters and the “Eucalyptus School”,⁵ cultural institutions were slow to make space for modernity. Such censorship, necessary for the promotion of local art free of any European influence, culminated in 1951 when the Los Angeles City Council, officially equating modern art with communist propaganda, banished it from public view. Even as late as 1965, the only museum in Los Angeles devoted to art belonged to one of the three sections of the Museum of Science, History and Art. “Instead of going to the museum to learn about the universality of art or to contemplate a few masterpieces, visitors to Los Angeles County's museum saw familiar sights: arroyos, deserts and scenes of the coastline frequently rendered in a banal manner” (HIGGINS, 1963, p. 14).⁶ The interests of the more adventurous art collectors, mostly from the Hollywood film industry, rarely extended beyond Post-Impressionism.
- 7 By contrast, between the mid-1910s and the early 1930s, San Francisco hosted a number of exhibitions, starting with the *Panama-Pacific International Exposition*, mounted in 1915 at the Palace of Fine Arts. This event, with a scope comparable to that of the Armory Show, included the Italian Futurists who were first introduced to the United States at that time (KARLSTROM, 1996, p. 98). Although the city showed an early interest in European art, few places were likely to display contemporary art, especially that of local artists. During the 1940s, the San Francisco Museum of Art was virtually the only institution to give access to work of this kind, which was exhibited in the fourth-floor galleries.⁷ Abstract Expressionism was certainly the main style of avant-garde painting, and the few galleries that appeared in California were generally involved in promoting this movement that took on a local color, as evidenced by the Bay Area figurative painting (*San Francisco School...*, 1996). In 1954, Walter Hopps organized *Action I* (1955), the first major exhibition dedicated to Californian Abstract Expressionism, in his new space, the Syndell Studio in Los Angeles. *Action II*, organized the following year

according to the same principle of juxtaposing artists from Northern and Southern California, opened in the Now Gallery, founded a short time before by Edward Kienholz in Los Angeles.

- 8 At the same time, a promising underground trend had already begun to flourish. Artists involved included Jess, Wally Hedrick, Jay DeFeo and Bruce Conner. The path they took, while not breaking with Abstract Expressionism, led them to explore new territory. In an artistic context marked by a shortage of exhibition spaces and a general lack of interest in contemporary art, however, they were condemned to work in the shadows. This experiment in isolation, deprived of any possibility of external recognition, determined to a large extent the nature of their work.⁸

The origins of a dissenting artistic expression: bohemia, funk, funky

- 9 During those dark years of persecution and unbridled patriotism, dissident artists, later grouped under the banner of “beat,” were the first to denounce the “American Way of Life” that the poet Michael McClure associated with “the Korean War, the grey flannel suits, the military preparedness to wage war behind the Iron Curtain or the Bamboo Curtain” (Wallace Berman, 1992, p. 60). Facing the conformist and obedient masses, there emerged the figure of the individual in search of identity through an existential quest, found in novels as distinct as *The Catcher in the Rye* (SALINGER, 1951) and *On the Road* (KEROUAC, 1957). Insistence on the subject as a unique and singular identity taken to such an extreme was, indeed, a challenge to the values of standardization generated by the technocratic capitalist system.⁹
- 10 Immortalized in 1952 in an article by John Clellon Holmes (HOLMES, 1952), the term “beat generation,” which was coined by Jack Kerouac, has often been used for the lack of any equivalent term. First applied in the literary field, it was soon extended to the visual arts, not without some reluctance from the artists concerned who, for their part, more readily used the term “Bohemia.”¹⁰ As for “Beatnik,” it was simply a derogatory version of “Beat” that appeared in 1958, in an article by Herb Caen for the *San Francisco Chronicle*.¹¹ It was not until the late 1960s that a term for art that formed an extension of the “beat” tendency was introduced: *Funk*.¹² Already current in jazz circles from the 1920s, this term was adopted in 1967 by Peter Selz as the title of an exhibition organized at the Berkeley Art Museum and featuring several Californian artists – more specifically from the Bay Area of San Francisco – working against the current of the minimalist “purity” that was then at the forefront of the New York art scene (*Funk*, 1967).
- 11 While Abstract Expressionism and Bay Area figurative painting emerged from art schools, *funk* came from the bohemian milieu. As Albright points out, it was not a style, but “a constellation of attitudes and ideas shared by various circles of friends who met in bars and coffee houses and displayed their work in informal, cooperative ‘galleries.’ These ideas and attitudes found expression in all the arts – painting, sculpture, poetry, music, theater, film – and tended to break down the traditional barriers between them” (ALBRIGHT, 1985, p. 82).

An impure and ephemeral visual production

- ¹² This cohort, though difficult to define, shared the practice of assemblage, a certain spirituality and a fascination for jazz and blackness. In Los Angeles, Wallace Berman, Robert Alexander, and later George Herms were pioneers of this movement. These fragile artworks originated in spontaneity, were not designed to withstand time, and have often disappeared. Only retrospective testimonies and photographs allow us to reconstruct their fragmented history. Far from being an epiphenomenon, this art conferred an uncontested freedom on artists who never had to respond to the pressure from representatives of the art market and instead formed an internal network for the circulation of works and ideas.¹³ Based on the intimacy between the author and the recipient, these conditions gave rise to creations that differed significantly from those intended for the anonymous space of a gallery.
- ¹³ The best example of such a private practice is probably Berman's design of *Semina* magazine, published in nine issues from 1955 to 1964. It appeared in the form of loose-leaf pages that the reader could arrange at will, representing a veritable visual assemblage, and creating a resonance among disparate works that favored multiple levels of reading. Printed in a varying number of copies – between 150 and 350 – it brought together contributions from friends and personalities Berman admired and was addressed to a small circle of intimates. Through *Semina*, Berman aspired to awaken the conscience of a small number of people whose impact in the long term would be felt through the creation of a resistance movement. This belief was based on an optimism that was not unrelated to the Kabbalistic thought that nourished his work. Indeed, his interest in this tradition allowed him to think of artistic activity in terms of the model of creation in general, and the artist as the one who bore the responsibility for consciously contributing to restoring primordial unity. Gershom Scholem speaks of this phenomenon: "The process of creation involves the departure of all from the One and its return to the One, and the crucial turning-point in this cycle takes place within man, at the moment he begins to develop an awareness of his own true essence and yearns to retrace the path from the multiplicity of his nature to the Oneness from which he originated."¹⁴
- ¹⁴ Surrounded by poets, musicians and filmmakers, from the early 1950s bohemian artists in San Francisco congregated in specific areas, most commonly in the cafes located in North Beach: Vesuvio, Miss Smith's Tea Room, The Cellar, and The Place. At the same time, galleries conceived as exhibition spaces for art that had no place in official circles started appearing. Founded in 1949 by twelve of Clyfford Still's students and modeled on a cooperative, Metart Gallery represented a first attempt at compensating for the absence of structures that could house their work.¹⁵ This initiative was prolonged through the successive creation of the King Ubu and Six galleries, which, unlike Metart, consciously embraced an interdisciplinary approach, envisaged as a fortuitous and improvised cohabitation of different artistic media.¹⁶
- ¹⁵ In retrospect, the reading of the poem *Howl* by Allen Ginsberg is seen as the most important event in the history of the Six Gallery, symbolically opening a new era: the San Francisco Renaissance. As recounted by Jack Kerouac in his novel *The Dharma Bums* (KEROUAC, 1958), that evening of October 7th, 1955, presided by Kenneth Rexroth, put the poets of the Beat Generation in touch with the visual artists from the gallery in a novel way and thus forged new links. The intimate connection between poetry and the

visual arts seems to be one of the characteristics of the California phenomenon. Whereas on the East Coast at this time, poets – be they Frank O'Hara or John Ashbery – were relegated to a peripheral role in relation to the visual arts, in the West, poets were actually at the center of the art scene. Moreover, it was often in connection with readings of poems or plays that related events – involving musicians and/or visual artists – took place. Furthermore, DeFeo confessed: “Whether I sought it out or not, I became kind of a poet’s painter” (*The Dilexi Years...*, 1984, p. 48). The mixing of the literary and the visual is apparent in Jess’s works, which rely on a true interweaving of the two.¹⁷ Such interest in literature, and particularly poetry, was coupled in the case of Berman and Herms with a penchant for mysticism: these artists were looking for a kind of universal language that could directly reach the soul.

The figure of the hipster

- 16 In a period dominated by the threat of the atomic bomb and a ferocious witch-hunt that paralyzed the country, a small minority of American youth saw the black man, embodied in quintessential form in the jazz musician, as a possible source of renewal. Since the early 1950s, through his studies of jazz musicians in particular, the sociologist Howard S. Becker had helped legitimize marginality (BECKER, 1963). In his 1957 essay “The White Negro,” Norman Mailer created the inspiring figure of the “hipster,” whose appearance was based directly on the post-World War II sociopolitical context: “It is on this bleak scene that a phenomenon has appeared: the American existentialist – the hipster, the man who knows that if our collective condition is to live with instant death by atomic war, relatively quick death by the State as *l’univers concentrationnaire*, or with a slow death by conformity with every creative and rebellious instinct stifled” (MAILER, 1957, p. 277). Cameron, on the other hand, establishes a link between the achievement of consciousness through the ordeal of war and the pursuit of salvation through jazz: “We were totally disillusioned. The public in general was not as sophisticated about the Second World War as most of the people who had been in it, and coming back we didn’t find much sympathy or interest. So we kind of hung together as a group. We were all feeling somewhat alienated from the culture in general. The common interest seemed to be jazz” (*Lost and Found...*, 1998, p. 63).
- 17 During their formative years, from the mid-1940s to the early 1950s, these artists identified with a figure in whom marginalization, persecution and creativity came together. The black musician seemed invested with a spirituality from which the white man had obviously broken away. Such identification of white artists with black jazz musicians corresponded to that of blacks with jazz. With the arrival of bebop, jazz appeared as a pillar of African-American culture. Given the importance it accorded to improvisation, the music certainly provided a paradigm for the other arts: “What the jazz musicians had achieved needed to be achieved in the theater, film making and the plastic arts.”¹⁸ As in jazz improvisations, for these Californians creating visual art was about shaping matter in the spontaneity of the moment, without thinking of posterity. If, as Gérard Genette has emphasized, “the autonomy of an improvisation, even when narrowly defined, is never absolute,” the fact remains that, in jazz, “the work is done in the now.”¹⁹ This presentism conditioned in a more general way their relationship to time: “and one exists in the present, in that enormous present which is without past or future, memory or planned intention” (MAILER 1957, p. 278). The same desire to be

anchored in the present was at the origin of the Instant Theatre created by Rachel Rosenthal in Los Angeles in 1956 (ROTH, 1997). Based on improvisation and the constant renewal of its actors, this traveling practice born out of performance drew its inspiration from jazz and concrete poetry.

The late 1950s: the turning point

- 18 During the late 1950s, media coverage of the beat phenomenon dealt a decisive blow to this period of underground experimentation. Theodore Roszak described the mechanism at work: “a kind of cynical smothering of dissent by saturation coverage, and it begins to look like a far more formidable weapon in the hands of the establishment than outright suppression” (ROSZAK, 1969, p. 37). Most of the underground artists attempted a kind of counter-offensive through their association in the Ratbastard Protective Society founded by Bruce Conner – along the lines of the Scavenger’s Protective Association, a garbage-collection service in San Francisco – which aimed to unite the various dissenting individuals in a form of “secret society”. Nevertheless, at the turn of the decade, many deserted San Francisco: Herms left for Tuolumne, Jess and Duncan moved to Stinson Beach, Berman moved to Larkspur, where he opened his gallery Semina, and Conner flew to Mexico in 1961.
- 19 While there was an unusual interest in local art, the California art scene experienced a very clear evolution. The closing of the Six Gallery symbolically marked the end of the production of art within a closed circle, while an art market emerged, demonstrated by the opening of the Dilexi, Ferus²⁰ and Batman galleries, as well as the creation in San Francisco of *Artforum* magazine in 1962. Such an upheaval above all affected the practice of the artists whose works were at the time designed to withstand time. According to Albright, “There was also a new emphasis on durability, if not on craft as such (for a deliberate awkwardness and rusticity was often a part of the new style). Unlike the perishable assemblages of the North Beach funk artists, Bay Area art in the 1960s was increasingly built to show, and to last” (ALBRIGHT, 1985, p. 116).
- 20 Under the leadership of Walter Hopps and Irving Blum in particular, the Los Angeles art scene witnessed an unprecedented dynamism. The city was host to great art events such as Andy Warhol’s first solo exhibition at the Ferus Gallery in 1960 – where he exhibited the famous series of Campbell soup cans – a Kurt Schwitters retrospective at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1962, and the first retrospective of Marcel Duchamp’s works organized the following year at the same venue. The end of the 1950s was also marked by new links forged between artists from the East and West coasts. Dorothy C. Miller’s exhibition *Sixteen Americans* at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 1959 marked an important step in that direction: it included works by DeFeo and Hedrick alongside those of Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Richard Stankiewicz, among others. Two years later, in 1961, the inaugural exhibition *The Art of Assemblage*, also at MoMA, included works by Conner, Herms, Jess, and Kienholz. Conversely, New York artists, specifically Rauschenberg and Johns, began to exhibit in California, especially in Los Angeles.²¹ By the late 1950s there appeared the first works that demonstrated communication between the two poles (which generally traveled from East to West). Jess’s assemblages made from the mid-1950s also began to reflect the influence not only of Joseph Cornell’s boxes but also of Rauschenberg’s *Combines* (Jess, 1993, p. 52). Similarly, some of Herms’s constructions from the early 1960s can be seen, to some

extent, as being at the crossroads between Schwitters and Rauschenberg. Kienholz's assemblages embody this shift toward an expression which has integrated the art of new-york assemblagists and whose destiny was from the start to go beyond the narrow boundaries of California.

On the concept of counter-culture

- 21 The term counter-culture was popularized by Roszak, through his book *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (ROSZAK, 1969). In this study, the historian analyzes the sociopolitical and spiritual foundations of this dissident movement which opposed the technocratic system as a source of alienation. The origins of the term counter-culture, however, can be found in an article by the sociologist J. Milton Yinger, "Contraculture and Subculture," published in *American Sociological Review* in 1960, in which he contrasts counter-culture with subculture.²² While the first competes with the dominant culture in an attempt to transform its norms and values, the second refers to a disadvantaged minority faction of a society whose torments it suffers. Roszak, on the other hand, defines counter-culture as disconnected from the technocratic society which it opposes: "Indeed, it would hardly seem an exaggeration to call what we see arising among the young a 'counter culture.' Meaning: a culture so radically disaffiliated from the mainstream assumptions of our society that it scarcely looks to many as a culture at all, but takes on the alarming appearance of a barbaric intrusion" (ROSZAK, 1969, p. 42).
- 22 With regard to these contrasting approaches, it is clear that what belongs to the center and what is at the margins is never settled once and for all, their relationship remaining in a flux throughout the course of history. As two sides of the same entity, they cannot be considered separately. As Foucault noted when he stated that "we are always on the inside,"²³ margins are built from the center. A dissent can emerge only within a standardized and alienating system against which it takes position. T.J. Clark states that "the Bohemian style works only in a capitalism with a myth of itself, a belief in its future. [...] hence its reappearance in California" (CLARK, 1973, p. 34).
- 23 The Californian counter-culture has undoubtedly benefited from a renewed interest in recent years. This is apparent, for example, in the exhibition *West of Center: Art and the Counterculture Experiment in America, 1965-1977* (West of Center, 2012), which examined alternative visual and performative practices of the 1960s and 1970s, mostly in the American West. In architecture, the work of Caroline Maniaque-Benton, in *French Encounters with the American Counterculture, 1960-1980* (MANIAQUE-BENTON, 2011), demonstrates the impact of American architectural models based on ecology, the return to nature and appreciation of ethnic cultures, on the emergence of a French-style counter-culture. The existence of documentation relating to counter-culture since the 1960s makes the bibliographic deficiency characteristic of the previous decade even more obvious.²⁴ The few exhibitions devoted to the earlier decade generally belong to isolated initiatives, organized by personalities dealing with Californian institutions, but often failing to convince the New York art world of their initiative's value. We can observe a similar phenomenon in Europe, where American art is still identified with art produced in New York.
- 24 This historiographical lacuna relating to the 1950s is understandable due to the discreet or private nature of the *underground* modes of expression, which clearly

contrast with the ostentatious activism of artists in the following decades. Characterized by an intimacy that affected both its production and its dissemination, it relied more on the possibility of a spiritual evolution by an awakening of consciences than an openly antagonistic politics. This silent community was relying on the art's own revolutionary power, which they considered capable of initiating global change. In doing so, the pioneers of the Californian counter-culture inscribed themselves in the lineage of historical artistic avant-gardes, which endowed art with a messianic quality anticipating the coming of a new world and a new humanity. This desire for transformation without a final split aspired more to evolution than revolution, while adopting positions that were more defensive than offensive.

- 25 Nevertheless, these artists did not consider themselves to be at the forefront of an avant-garde ready to become the mainstream of the future. While remaining in the background, they adhered closely to a tradition to which they willingly referred; this gave an anachronistic dimension to their work which was highlighted by many critics. T.J. Clark distinguishes between the "avant-garde" and "bohemia," constituting two distinct socio-political classes. The first, consisting of bourgeois intellectuals, differed from the second, made up of "an unassimilated class, wretchedly poor, obdurately anti-bourgeois, living on in the absolute, outdated style of the 'Romantics,' courting death by starvation" (CLARK, 1973, p. 33). Having made this distinction, the author also emphasizes the "fundamentally unstable, illusory" (p. 13) aspect of such a category as the avant-garde. Its "real history" is "the history of those who bypassed, ignored and rejected it; a history of secrecy and isolation; a history of escape from the avant-garde" (p. 14).
- 26 While the dissident generation of the 1960s designated the mainstream as the enemy – with art becoming an element of political protest²⁵ – the previous decade's dissidents foiled such opposition by expressing their defiance through behavior described as "cool." According to the poet David Meltzer, Berman took from jazz precisely this "sense of cool, a sense of art as a form of resistance, as a form of self-protection" (SOLNIT, 1990, p. 5). Based on the exacerbation of conflict, jazz, in its essence, is a music of protest. As noted by Lawrence Lipton, "to the beat generation it is also a music of protest. Being apolitical does not preclude protest" (LIPTON, 1959, p. 212). "Cool" was an expression that appeared in the jazz clubs of the 1930s: "When the air in the smoke-filled nightclubs of that era became unbreathable, windows and doors were opened to allow some 'cool air' in from the outside [...]. By analogy, the slow and smooth jazz style that was typical of that late-night scene came to be called "cool." Cool was subsequently extended to describe any physically attractive, male jazz musician or aficionado who patronized such clubs."
- 27 At the outset, the concept of "cool" was the concept of *itutu* found at the heart of animist ontologies of certain West African civilizations, and in particular the Yoruba and Igbo people (*African Art...*, 1974; THOMPSON, 1984). Deported in large numbers to American soil by the slave trade, they retained this characteristic attitude and adapted it in order to cope with continual discrimination and thus maintain their pride (MAJORS, BILLSON, 1992). Thus, "cool," a constitutive element of a *hipster*, appears as a trace of a distinct identity characteristic of an African culture taken at that point as a model. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the verb "to cool" in this way: "To become less zealous or ardent; to lose the heat of excitement, passion, or emotion." A similar reserve is characteristic of the behavior of the artists that interest us, whether in relation to

power or institutions. Though they do not try to fight openly against political authorities, they rely on the transformative capacity of art, on its alchemical ability of passing from one state of consciousness to another.²⁶

- 28 A relationship to the sacred and thereby to ritual appears as a founding element of jazz. "All music is sacred and ritual in origin, but in European music these origins have long been 'refined' out of it. In jazz they are still close to the surface" (LIPTON, 1959, p. 210). The same qualifier of "beat," to which these artists were later associated, also evokes jazz. "[The Beat generation] is basically a religious generation. [...] Beat means beatitude, not beat up. You *feel* this. You feel it in a beat, in jazz – real cool jazz."²⁷ Their most obvious form of resistance to capitalism was perhaps their aspiration to spirituality in a time dominated by feverish consumerism. As Marlene Kim Connor has noted, at its origin, the cool was closely linked to the sacred: "Cool is perhaps the most important force in the life of a black man in America. Cool is the closest thing to a religion for him."²⁸ This relationship with the sacred is an archaic one that in fact reveals the counter-culture movement of the 1950s to be a descendant of the anti-materialism characteristic of New England Transcendentalism.
- 29 Considered as the forerunner of the 1960s counter-culture closely associated with the hippie movement, the dissident movement that emerged during the previous decade is rarely studied in its own right. This neglect is all the more obvious when it comes to visual artists, who are seldom mentioned, although they participated fully in the emergence of the phenomenon. Working in the shadows, these artists invested various artistic media with their creativity, played with their hybridization and invented new art forms. Initially practitioners of a pacifist and constructive resistance, both utopian and libertarian, they took positions less against a certain culture than for the ideals they defended in secrecy, through their way of life and an art marked with the seal of a being-in-the-moment that found its equivalent in jazz improvisation. Such celebration of the present went hand in hand with a political perspective according to which individual transformation alone, a movement of the subject in relation to itself, could lead to a general change in human activity. In so doing, they aimed to shift the issue of political power onto an ethics of the subject, an intuition shared with Foucault when he noted that "there is no other point, first and last, of resistance to political power than in the relation of the self to itself."²⁹

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NOTES

1. The stigmatization of California as a “cultural desert” appears in the writing of many artists, including Man Ray: “With the realization through the years that California was a wilderness for me...”, (MAN RAY, 1963, p. 352).
2. Most of the exhibitions organized as part of *Pacific Standard Time* have related publications. The catalogs listed in the final bibliography are the ones directly connected to this article’s purpose.
3. According to Paul J. Karlstrom, New York offered a more traditional and familiar milieu to European immigrants (*Turning the Tide*, 1990, p. 40, n. 32).
4. Among prominent members of this group of émigrés figure Thomas Mann, Arnold Schönberg, Theodor W. Adorno, Bertolt Brecht, Igor Stravinsky, Josef von Sternberg, René Clair, Luis Buñuel, Billy Wilder, Jean Renoir, Aldous Huxley and Kate Steinitz.
5. Merle Armitage, review, *West Coaster*, Sept. 1st, 1928.
6. William Copley made a similar comment: “There was a mausoleum of a structure way downtown called The Los Angeles County Museum, which harbored some misacquisitions of William Randolph Hearst and a few stuffed animals” (*CPLY*, 1979, p. 6).
7. The painter Harry Jacobus said about that period: “By then, Jess didn’t have an ambition for shows, having tried unsuccessfully a couple of times to get into Annuals in San Francisco. In those days you had to go down to the Museum and stand in line with your paintings” (Christopher Wagstaff, “An Interview with Harry Jacobus,” in *Northern Lights: Studies in Creativity*, 2, 1986, p. 90).
8. Jean-Marc Poinot underscores the link between the production of a work and the circumstances in which it is exhibited: “The exhibition is a complex discourse that has its own permanently evolving rules, but does not have its own history independent of the aesthetic function it actualizes. Each work produced is designed with full knowledge of these rules, whether they are implicitly admitted or explicitly stated, or even transgressed. By knowing these rules artists can create works that adapt in various ways to the manifestations of the

discourse, while continuing to transform them” (“L’exposition est une situation de discours complexe qui possède ses propres règles en permanente évolution, mais n’a pas d’histoire propre indépendante des prestations esthétiques qu’elle actualise. Chaque œuvre produite est conçue en connaissance de ces règles, qu’elles soient admises de manière implicite, ou qu’elles soient explicitées, voire même transgressées. C’est par la connaissance de ces règles que les artistes peuvent concevoir des œuvres qui s’adaptent de manières variées aux situations de discours tout en continuant à les transformer” in Jean-Marc Poinot, *Quand l’œuvre a lieu*, Villeurbanne/Geneva, 1999, p. 35-36).

9. Douglas Brode developed a novel theory according to which Walt Disney’s cinematographic work played a major role in the emergence of the dissident movements of the 1950s (BRODE, 2004).

10. John P. Bowles has said of this subject: “To be labeled Beat presented a dilemma for DeFeo, Conner, and others, such as the artist Jess (formerly Burgess Collins)” (John P. Bowles, “Shocking ‘Beat’ Art Displayed: California Artists and the Beat Image,” in *Reading California...*, 2000, p. 221). As Francis Rigney reminded us, “bohemia” was far from a new name or a recent phenomenon: “Over the past hundred years, various groups of artists, writers, musicians, and hangers-on have congregated in that special day-to-day pattern which has been called a bohemia community. From the 1840’s to today’s Haight-Ashbury, such communities have been forming, existing, and then falling apart, some replacing their predecessors, some starting on their own” (Francis Rigney, “Creativity in Bohemia,” in *Rolling Renaissance*, 1968, p. 12).

11. Herb Caen, “Baghdad by the Bay,” in *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 2, 1958.

12. In contrast to *beat*, the name *Funk* seems to have been accepted to some extent by the artists in question. Bruce Conner nonetheless preferred the term *Funky*, which described an apparent tendency in art from the mid-1950s, linked to the authentic *Beat* movement, whereas *Funk* referred to the organized or institutional version of *Funky*, which appeared in mid-1960s (see Bruce Conner in ALBRIGHT, 1985, p. 81). Harold Paris picked up on this distinction: “Funk vs. Funky: Almost imperceptibly, funk art has grown away from the funky art of the fifties” (Harold Paris, “Sweet Land of Funk,” in *Art in America*, 55/2, March–April 1967, p. 95). Thomas Albright, on the other hand, opted for a distinction similar to Conner’s, in contrasting *funk* to *Funk* (or *Funk Art*) in order to distinguish between the original movement and its later developments (ALBRIGHT, 1985, p. 81).

13. Manuel Neri stated: “At that time, I think the average price had gone up to 25 bucks, but nobody was selling anything, and that gave us an incredible freedom, not having a commercial side to the art world” (Manuel Neri in Bruce Nixon, “The 6 Gallery,” in *Beat Generation Galleries...*, 1996, p. 91).

14. Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah*, New York/Ontario, 1978 (1974) p. 152.

15. We must not forget the existence of Marcelle Labaudt’s gallery, which from 1946 offered certain artists – Hassel Smith, Sonia Getchtoff, and Fred Martin, among them – a unique opportunity to exhibit their work. See Jenny Fink, “Bay Area Art Galleries, 1940s-1960s” in *Directions in Bay...*, 1983, p. 26. Metart Gallery’s mission statement is clearly expressed in their opening press release: “Metart Gallery was formed in direct response to the problem of bringing the work of the creative artist to public attention under conditions which leave the artist freest from outside control in exhibiting” (*Directions in Bay...*, 1983, p. 26).

16. On this topic, see Wally Hedrick’s statement: “People were thinking about the complete art work at that time. [...] And the jazz-poetry thing was one aspect of that” (KARLSTROM, 1974b, p. 9).

17. Jess considered his early paste-ups as “picture-poems” (JESS, 1983, p. 14).

18. Interview with George Herms, Los Angeles, July 4, 2004.

19. “L’autonomie d’une improvisation ne peut être absolue” (Gérard Genette, *L’Œuvre de l’art : immanence et transcendance*, Paris, 1994, p. 68); “l’œuvre se fait dans le maintenant” (Lucien

Malson, in Philippe Carles, André Clergeat, Jean-Louis Comolli ed., *Dictionnaire du jazz*, [Paris, 1988] Paris, 2000, p. 580).

20. On this topic, see George Herms: “Well, I think in Los Angeles with the Ferus Gallery, you have the beginnings of a New York-type gallery situation, and then, you know, things came from that” (KARLSTROM, 1993, p. 161).

21. Examples are the *Jasper Johns/Kurt Schwitters* exhibition at the Ferus Gallery (September 6-30, 1960) and Rauschenberg’s show at the Dwan Gallery in Los Angeles (March 4-31, 1962).

22. J. Milton Yinger, “Contraculture and Subculture”, *American Sociological Review*, 25/5, Oct. 1960, p. 625-635.

23. “On est toujours à l’intérieur” (Michel Foucault, “L’extension sociale de la norme” [1976], in *Dits et Écrits*, 2, Paris, [1994] 2001, p. 77).

24. Alice Echols summarized it thus: “The sixties has overshadowed the fifties” (ECHOLS, 2002, p. 51).

25. Roszak distinguishes between a “bohemianism” pertaining to “beatniks and hippies” and a “dissenting activism” characteristic of the New Left (ROSZAK, 1969, p. 65).

26. Roszak defines counter-culture as “essentially, an exploration of the politics of consciousness,” (ROSZAK, 1969, p. 156).

27. Jack Kerouac quoted in John Clellon Holmes, “The philosophy of the Beat Generation,” in *Esquire*, 49/2, February 1958, p. 35.

28. Marlene Kim Connor, “What Is Cool?: Understanding Black Manhood in America,” quoted in MACADAMS, 2001, p. 19.

29. “Il n’y a point d’autre point, premier et ultime, de résistance au pouvoir politique que dans le rapport de soi à soi” (Michel Foucault, *L’Herméneutique du sujet: cours au Collège de France (1981-1982)*, Paris, 2001, p. 241).

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