

CALIFORNIA MODERNISM AFTER WORLD WAR II

So in America when the sun goes down and I sit on the old broken-down river pier watching the long, long skies over New Jersey and sense all that raw land that rolls in one unbelievable huge bulge over to the West Coast, and all that road going, and all the people dreaming in the immensity of it, and in Iowa I know by now the children must be crying in the land where they let the children cry, and tonight the stars'll be out, and don't you know that God is Pooh Bear? The evening star must be drooping and shedding her sparkler dims on the prairie, which is just before the coming of complete night that blesses the earth, darkens all the rivers, cups the peaks and folds the final shore in, and nobody, nobody knows what's going to happen to anybody besides the forlorn rags of growing old, I think of Dean Moriarty, I even think of Old Dean Moriarty the father we never found, I think of Dean Moriarty.

JACK KEROUAC, *ON THE ROAD*

POSTWAR EXCHANGES

Most historical accounts of cultural and artistic developments in the United States after World War II have offered little information about trends affecting artists across the country. In the rush to figure out who did what first and to locate it geographically—usually in New York—the historians have ignored the fluid interchanges between the two coasts, and cultural opportunities offered on either of them in these postwar years. Yet an important fraternal relationship between New York and San Francisco had begun by the mid-1940s, when San Francisco supported and inspired artists working in the early stages of Abstract Expressionism,¹ and continued through the 1950s and 1960s, when the Bay Area's radical counterculture initiated a spirit of protest that had repercussions across the United States.

Before World War II, European culture and art set the standards against which contemporaneous developments in the United States were measured. Museums mounted relatively few exhibitions showcasing art made in the United States. Perceptions changed gradually during the war; the art historian Susan Landauer has observed that “nation-

FIGURE 15 (*opposite*)
Gui Mayo (de Angulo), *Allen Ginsberg*, ca. 1957. Gelatin silver print.

ally, Modernism, in both its figurative and abstract forms, had been gaining ground since the beginning of the war, but in guises [the art world] had generally dismissed as imitative of European Modernism.”² After World War II, the United States moved into a position of political and economic leadership and a new trend was under way. Museums such as the National Gallery in Washington, DC, “made notable expansions in their collections of American art,” according to the art historian Sidra Stich. Stich lists several important examples of the exploding interest in American art in the 1950s:

In 1951 the first training center for the study of American art and culture was established at the Henry Francis Du Pont Winterthur Museum; in 1954 the Metropolitan Museum of Art mounted *Two Centuries of American Painting*, a comprehensive exhibition that filled twenty-four galleries; in December 1956 a *Time* cover story, accompanied by eight pages of color reproductions, championed American art; in summer 1957 the Metropolitan Museum *Bulletin* heralded the opening of eight permanent, newly renovated galleries for American painting; and during the winter of 1958 Madison Square Garden hosted *Art: USA: 58*, a grandiose display of mid-twentieth-century American art (1,540 paintings and 300 sculptures).³

Clearly, the cultural landscape in the United States was changing rapidly at midcentury. Critics were quick to assert that work being made by Americans was as important as that of their European counterparts. The critic Clement Greenberg, in particular, championed American artists living and working in New York City. Evoking characteristics that just decades earlier had made the idea of “American culture” an oxymoron, he wrote in the *Partisan Review* that “isolation, alienation, naked and revealed unto itself, is the condition under which the true reality of our age is experienced. . . . The alienation of Bohemia was only anticipated in nineteenth-century Paris; it is in New York that it has been completely fulfilled.”⁴

With these changes came a sense of urgency, among artists, critics, and arts institutions, to establish and maintain this new position of cultural leadership. Abstract Expressionism had brought about an “outspoken and self-conscious concern about establishing an American identity for art: that is to say, the recognition of a body of art as the product of American artists, living in America, and producing an art of equivalent or superior value to European art.”⁵ New York City quickly emerged as the leading international arts center, and Abstract Expressionism was named heir to European Modernism. Although countless formal, critical, and historical analyses of the period have been undertaken in the decades since the emergence of this new order, few have acknowledged the complexity of the postwar culture outside New York.

Susan Landauer and Richard Cándida Smith stand out among the handful of historians to offer carefully documented evidence of early postwar interchanges between the East and West Coasts and, to a lesser extent, so do Sandra Leonard Starr and Sidra Stich. Landauer, in her book *The San Francisco School of Abstract Expressionism*, identified the

1944 exhibition *Abstract and Surrealist Art in the United States* as the survey that first revealed the “substantial overlapping of abstraction and Surrealism occurring across the nation.”⁶ Organized by Grace McCann Morley, the founder and director of the San Francisco Museum of Art and the art dealer Sidney Janis, it included works by Charles Demuth, Arshile Gorky, Hans Hofmann, John Marin, Georgia O’Keeffe, Jackson Pollock, and Max Weber. Robert Coates, a longtime critic for the *New Yorker*, reviewed the exhibition. He found himself at a loss to explain the aesthetic of what he referred to as “this new school,” remarking that “there’s a style of painting gaining ground in this country which is neither Abstract nor Surrealist, though it has suggestions of both, while the way the paint is applied—usually in a pretty free-swinging, splattery fashion, with only vague hints at subject matter—is suggestive of the methods of Expressionism. I feel some new name will have to be coined for it, but at the moment I can’t think of any.”⁷ A little more than a year later, in 1946, Coates himself was the first to apply the term *Abstract Expressionism* to American art.⁸

In 1951 Robert Motherwell organized the exhibition *Seventeen Americans: The School of New York* at the Frank Perls Gallery in New York. Motherwell was raised in San Francisco, studied briefly at the California School of Fine Arts, and received his undergraduate degree in philosophy from Stanford University. He moved to New York in 1940 and became firmly ensconced in the New York art world as a painter and a theorist.⁹ Though he emphasized in the opening lines of the exhibition catalogue that the term *School of New York* in the title was not a geographical designation so much as a general “direction” in American painting, the priority of the art world in New York over that in San Francisco, his home turf, is implicit in the name.¹⁰

That same year, however, he compiled a book, together with Ad Reinhardt, entitled *Modern Artists in America* that gave equal attention to Abstract Expressionism on both coasts. Intended “to convey the sense of modern art as it happened,” the book offered an exceptional glimpse into the emerging Abstract Expressionist world and included transcripts from two conferences in which prominent artists, architects, and critics participated: Artists’ Sessions at Studio 35 in New York, attended by Louise Bourgeois, Hans Hofmann, Willem de Kooning, Richard Pousette-Dart, and Ad Reinhardt, among others; and the Western Round Table of Modern Art in San Francisco, held at the San Francisco Museum of Art, in which Marcel Duchamp, Douglas MacAgy, Mark Tobey, and Frank Lloyd Wright took part. Motherwell emphasized the national character of the movement in the opening sentence of the *Modern Artists* book: “Today the extent and degree of Modern Art in America is unprecedented. From East to West numerous galleries and museums, colleges and art schools, private and regional demonstrations display their mounting interest in original plastic efforts.”¹¹

By the time Motherwell’s book came out in 1951, San Francisco was perceived across the United States as the other capital of abstraction. In the winter of 1950, the poet, artist, and *New York Times* writer Weldon Kees observed, “Next to New York, San Francisco strikes at least this observer . . . as the liveliest center of art activity in the country

today.”¹² Artists such as Elmer Bischoff, Diebenkorn, Frank Lobdell, David Park, Hassel Smith, and Clyfford Still were receiving national attention, and the vibrant program at the California School of Fine Arts had a faculty that included established local artists and a steady stream of renowned visiting instructors.

In addition, the San Francisco Museum of Art, led by Grace McCann Morley, was developing an impressive record of supporting Modernism.¹³ Morley gave experimental young artists far more first museum shows than did Alfred Barr, her counterpart at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Among the artists given early shows at the San Francisco Museum of Art in the 1940s were Kay Sage and Arshile Gorky in 1941; Isamu Noguchi and Clay Spohn in 1942; Clyfford Still in 1943; and Hans Hofmann, Mark Rothko, and Robert Motherwell in 1946.¹⁴

Despite such crucial support, however, over the next few years San Francisco was effectively written out of the primary narrative of Abstract Expressionism. While the definition of the movement itself has long been a source of heated debate, the geography of Abstract Expressionism has rarely been contested. In mapping the broader development of the arts in the Bay Area in the 1950s and 1960s, this study does not argue the geographical issue at length, beyond demonstrating that San Francisco did contribute to broader national currents in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s before being effectively dropped from the narrative of most postwar histories.

Abstract Expressionism’s “elusive stylistic core,” as William Seitz aptly called it,¹⁵ had become inexorably identified with an East Coast ethos. In New York, artists became locked in a critical and at times market-driven orthodoxy summed up in Greenberg’s dictum that contemporary art “should confine itself exclusively to what is given in visual experience, and make no reference to anything given in other orders of experience.”¹⁶ As commercial and theoretical interest shifted more and more to the New York School in the United States, the comparative lack of critical attention to the West Coast, as well as the absence of a commercial market for the art produced there, meant that California artists were not subject to the same pressures that gripped East Coast artists. Consequently, even though Abstract Expressionism still dominated exhibitions in the Bay Area, the more Surrealist elements of the movement were combining with the burgeoning Beat culture to create a distinctly regional genre.¹⁷

Clay Spohn’s 1949 *Museum of Unknown and Little Known Objects*, an exhibition consisting of a dozen or more of the artist’s constructions, was one of the earlier manifestations of the tendency to combine Surrealism, Expressionism, and Beat culture on the West Coast. In the early 1960s Spohn told his longtime friend Mary Fuller, *Art in America*’s San Francisco correspondent, that *A Forking Situation* (1949), included in the *Museum* installation, was meant as an evaluation of the state of painting in the United States. The work consisted of six or seven mismatched forks, curled and bent so that they were useless as utensils and then laid out on a black velvet cloth. “I think it is a Forking Situation—I mean, that it is in a Situation of Forks condition,” he observed wryly. “That is, no one seems to know where things are going exactly.”¹⁸

Fuller, in a profile of Spohn written for the magazine in 1963, argued that his *Museum* was a provocative, groundbreaking installation that had anticipated the artistic investigations of the 1950s: “The ‘Museum’ of 1949 was a little burst of neo-Dada on the West Coast, premature but leaving a remarkable imprint considering that it lasted for so brief a time—the night of the party and then a month or so before it was dismantled to be given away or used in the still-life classes by the students.”¹⁹ Spohn himself shied away from categorizations such as Dada or Neo-Dada; in a one-hundred-page letter to Fuller that described the *Museum* (and his life) in great detail, he explained: “Dada was anti-art. And my things of the ‘museum’ were never about that.”²⁰ He preferred to call his assemblage works by a different name: “The objects in the museum were a form of *prankism*, highly metaphorical and emblematic—they were never vicious, satirical, or mean. . . . I did not think of them as dada or surrealism, although they may have had qualities of both of these—but they were not that self-conscious.”²¹

Assemblage in San Francisco in the 1950s reflected Spohn’s resistance to categories and his subversive spirit. Jess, for example, called his collages paste-ups and his assemblages, assemblies. The curator Ingrid Schaffner, in a sustained analysis of Jess’s work, notes that Jess coined these terms, along with the term *necro-facts* for other assemblages, to set his work apart from Dada and Surrealist precedents.²² For other artists, the subversion of assemblage took the form of an aggressive critique of society, as in Conner’s CHILD (1959–60; fig. 16), in which a charred-looking human figure (actually black wax) strapped into a child’s high chair expressed Conner’s outrage at the death sentence handed down to Caryl Chessman, a death row inmate at San Quentin Prison who was found guilty of robbery, kidnapping, and rape on June 25, 1948, and executed on May 2, 1960, at age thirty-eight. Chessman maintained his innocence throughout his incarceration, wrote four books between 1954 and 1960, and sold the rights to his autobiography to Columbia Pictures, which made a film of it in 1955. His demonstration of intellect may have compelled Conner, himself a consummate intellectual, to take up his cause.

Conner’s CHILD was first exhibited in 1959, at the San Francisco Art Association annual members show. It’s a difficult work: the innocence implicit in a child’s high chair contrasts jarringly with the violation denoted in the slumped, scorched-looking figure with the gaping mouth and large penis. The figure’s “skin” hangs and drips in jagged sheets. In an interview of 1974, Conner told Paul Karlstrom that he had originally planned to show MA JOLIE RAT BASTARD (1959; fig. 17) but Fred Martin, the artist who organized the show, talked him out of because he feared that MA JOLIE RAT BASTARD, which included a doll’s hand encased in a condom and holding a ratty purse out to the viewer, would be rejected by the de Young Museum, where the show was held, and thereby jeopardize the entire show.²³ It’s hard to imagine that CHILD would have been any less inflammatory, but Conner did as Martin asked. Peter Selz, then curator at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, saw CHILD and recommended it to Philip Johnson, a MoMA trustee, for purchase.²⁴ The work was added to MoMA’s collection in 1970.

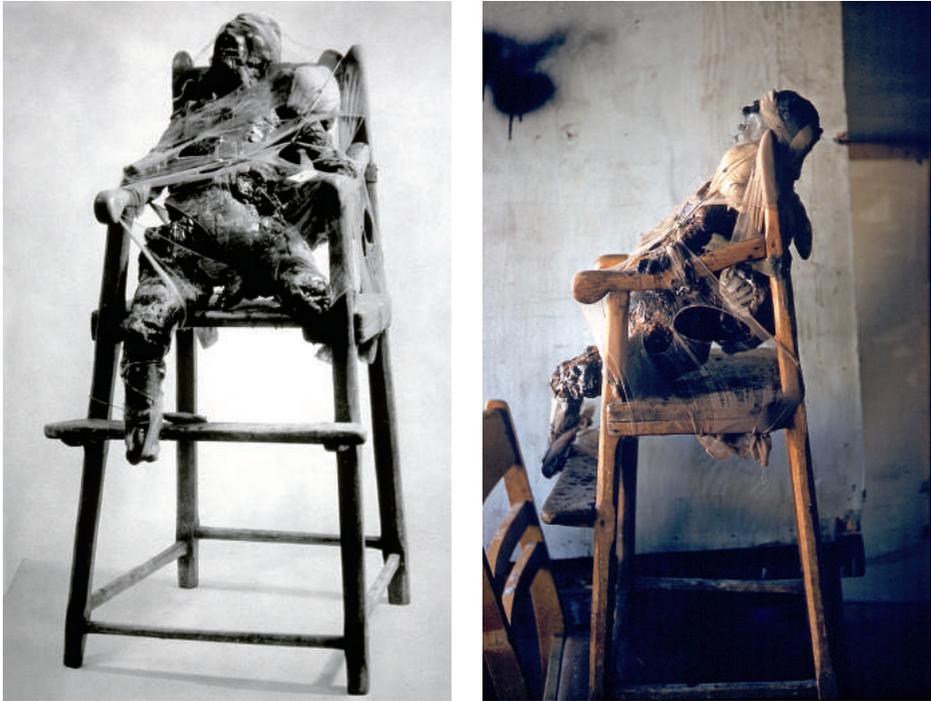


FIGURE 16
Bruce Conner, CHILD, 1959–60 (*front and side views*). Wax, nylon, cloth, metal, twine, and high chair, $34\frac{5}{8} \times 17 \times 16\frac{1}{2}$ in. Collection Museum of Modern Art, New York. © 2015 Conner Family Trust, San Francisco / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

SIMON RODIA'S WATTS TOWERS (1921–54)

Histories of twentieth-century California art often begin with Simon Rodia, an unschooled Italian tile setter who had immigrated to the United States at the age of fifteen, and worked a variety of construction jobs during his lifetime. He settled in the Watts district of Los Angeles in 1920, following a divorce from his wife and a long struggle with alcoholism, and the following year began building the Watts Towers (which he called *Nuestro Pueblo*, Our Town) on the triangular plot that was his backyard. He worked on the towers in his spare time for thirty-three years. A collection of seventeen structures, some reaching a height of nearly one hundred feet, the towers were constructed by hand, of steel pipes and rods wrapped with wire mesh and coated with mortar, and built without the use of scaffolding. Then pieces of porcelain, tile, rock, and glass were embedded in the structures, which were also decorated with found objects, including bed frames, bottles, ceramic tiles, scrap metal, and sea shells.

In a documentary film on the towers directed and produced by Rodia's grandnephew Brad Byer and the filmmaker Edward Landler, the architect, designer, and futurist Buck-



FIGURE 17
Bruce Conner, MA JOLIE RAT
BASTARD, 1959. Mixed-media
assemblage, 18 × 12½ × 6½ in.
No longer extant. © 2015 Conner
Family Trust, San Francisco / Artists
Rights Society (ARS), New York.

minster Fuller hails Rodia as “one of the greatest sculptors of the twentieth century.”²⁵ “People called him insane,” observes John Outterbridge, a Los Angeles assemblage artist, the first director of the Watts Tower Arts Center, and the film’s narrator. “But I think in time, they discovered that Rodia was draped in the kind of insanity we all need.”²⁶ The documentary is overlaid with audio recordings of Rodia from the 1960s. In one of them, Rodia states that he began work on the Watts Towers partly out of a determination to overcome his alcoholism, but also simply out of a desire to “build something big.”²⁷ Many artists living and working in California in subsequent decades, however, saw Rodia as a quintessentially modern American artist. Cándida Smith argues that “even if Rodia came to the United States from across the Atlantic, he discovered the principles of modern artistic expression as he engaged the life and values of his new home, a factor not uncommon with other immigrant artists such as Joseph Stella, Knud Merrild, or Willem de Kooning, but indisputable in Rodia’s case given his lack of formal art training.”²⁸

Nuestro Pueblo is not only a town but a vast, complex constructed environment, an assemblage, and a work of art that predicts characteristics of twentieth-century art

movements in the United States to follow. By the 1950s, the narrative of Rodia's construction of the Watts Towers, as a monument that had risen from the imagination of a poor immigrant with outsider status, had achieved mythic proportions. When in 1959 the Department of Building and Safety for the city of Los Angeles, neither knowing nor appreciating what the towers were, ordered that they be torn down, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art curator Jim Elliott and a group of concerned neighbors, artists, actors, filmmakers, and other Los Angeles residents formed the Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts. The committee also solicited support from the artistic community in San Francisco; Bruce and Jean Conner, for example, were driven to Los Angeles to visit the Watts Towers in 1959.²⁹

Hoping to repair and maintain the towers, the committee applied for a building permit. When the application was denied, the committee collected signatures and money and hired an engineer to prove that the towers were in fact safe. Eventually the public outcry prevented their destruction and left in its wake, in the words of the cultural historian Sarah Schrank, "a unique and fragile, if enormous, personal creation to serve as the inspiration for new and innovative public art programs, a lightning rod for increasing racial tension in an economically declining neighborhood, and a politically charged civic symbol."³⁰

The Watts Towers, portrayed by city officials as a public safety hazard but celebrated in art journals as an artwork of national importance, had become emblematic of the city that was growing and developing around them. Diverse groups adopted the towers as their own. The artist Man Ray, who, displaced from his adopted home in Paris during World War II, lived in Los Angeles from 1940 to 1951, photographed the towers periodically during those years.³¹ The renowned architectural photographer Julius Shulman, whose iconic photographs of the so-called Case Study Houses of Los Angeles, by architects such as Charles and Ray Eames, Pierre Koenig, and Richard Neutra, helped spread California's midcentury modern design style around the world, also photographed the Watts Towers (see fig. 12). Finally, and perhaps most significant for the purpose of this narrative, the Museum of Modern Art curator William Seitz devoted four full pages to Rodia's Watts Towers in his catalogue for the 1961 exhibition *The Art of Assemblage*, including two color and four black-and-white reproductions. There he insisted that "to dismiss this unique creation as a quaint folly—as one more bizarre production of an eccentric folk artist—would be an error. Less capricious than many of Gaudi's structures, Rodia's Towers are much more than uncontrolled accretions of junk. His innate artistry is everywhere."³²

The writer Thomas Pynchon, in a brilliant exposé for the *New York Times* in 1966, described Rodia's backyard construction as "perhaps his own dream of how things should have been: a fantasy of fountains, boats, tall openwork spires, encrusted with a dazzling mosaic of Watts debris." But Pynchon also saw the specter of failure and decay: "A kid could come along in his bare feet and step on this glass—not that they'd ever know. These kids are so tough you can pull slivers of it out of them and never get a

whimper. It's part of their landscape, both the real and the emotional one: busted glass, busted crockery, nails, tin cans, all kinds of scraps and waste. Traditionally Watts."³³

Pynchon made his observations not long after a major uprising in Watts, which was then primarily an African American neighborhood.³⁴ He could also be said to have described the dark side of the mirror that many assemblage artists evoked in their works, in the decentralized urban sprawl of Los Angeles and among the more heavily concentrated populations of San Francisco. The emphasis on the towers' relationship to both folk art traditions and a regional aesthetic, on the one hand, and their perceived commentary on the human condition in modern times, on the other, constitute the strain of midcentury modernism practiced by artists up and down the West Coast. Rodia, as an immigrant in a working-class neighborhood, was isolated from the art scene, such as it was, in Los Angeles. He did not socialize with other artists, host studio visits, court curators and dealers, or attempt to show his work in museums. For him, creativity did not depend on money, privilege, or even recognition. Nor was he creating for an audience, perhaps understanding that his isolation was not unusual—was perhaps even typical—for his time and place. An entire generation of young California artists growing up in both Southern and Northern California took inspiration from Rodia's example, considering, when making their art, neither the art market nor an audience beyond other artists. Like Rodia, they followed their own vision of modernity—which, for many, led to assemblage.

CLAY SPOHN'S MUSEUM OF UNKNOWN AND LITTLE KNOWN OBJECTS (1949–1950)

In the Bay Area, as in Los Angeles, midcentury conditions were conducive to an ever-widening range of artistic and political expression. But whereas in Los Angeles modern art was increasingly synonymous with modernist architecture and design, in San Francisco artists showed a growing tendency to reinvent Dadaism. Most notable, perhaps, in the early postwar years, was the installation by Clay Spohn, an artist and a member of the faculty at the California School of Fine Arts. He assembled his *Museum of Unknown and Little Known Objects*, at the school in December 1949, on the occasion of the San Francisco Art Association's annual costume ball, which was held there.

Spohn himself chose the theme of that year's gala, which he titled "The Artist's Ball: A Costume Carnival of the Unknown" (fig. 18). A society writer for a local newspaper visited the school before the gala to quiz Spohn on the meaning of the name. "It can't be defined," he responded, "because by definition The Unknown becomes The Known." The reporter, Jane Neylan McBaine, wrote that she "gulped another mouthful of coffee" as he analyzed the theme: "It could be any real truth regarding The Known, for the admission of not knowing is a degree of knowing. . . . Consequently, The Unknown becomes The Known and The Known becomes The Unknown; which makes nonsense become sense, and makes one wonder what does make sense!" Mr. Spohn con-

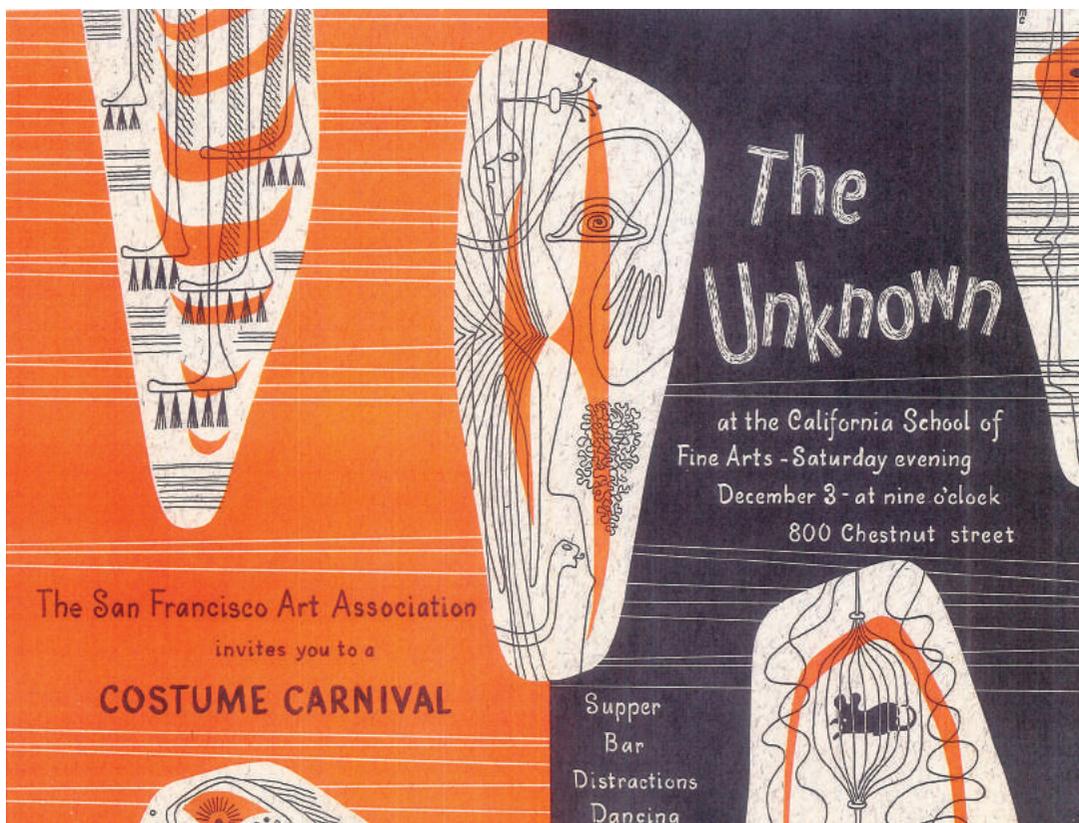


FIGURE 18
 Announcement for “The Artist’s Ball: A Costume Carnival of the Unknown,” at the California School of Fine Arts on December 3, 1949.

cluded with a pleasant uncluttered smile, and I made a dash for the garden to clear my addled brain.”³⁵

The ball, by all accounts, was a wild success.³⁶ The *San Francisco Examiner* reported the following day that “fifteen hundred of the town’s more spirited citizens made it revelry at its limber and liquid best.”³⁷ Spohn’s *Museum*, originally conceived as a one-night exhibition only, proved such a hit that the school’s director, Douglas MacAgy, decided to keep it open for over a month after the gala. He wrote in a press release announcing his decision that “the imaginary lens of the mind’s eye employed by Spohn and his collaborators located mines of meaningful imagery in the refuse and wreckage of civilized neglect. Their discoveries expressed the spirit of the Ball, which took the theme ‘The Unknown.’”³⁸

Period accounts of Spohn’s *Museum* have nearly disappeared with time. But the installation, a gallery’s worth of artworks that Spohn assembled at the school with the help of fellow faculty members Richard Diebenkorn, Adeline Kent, Hassel Smith, and

Elmer Bischoff, was arguably as important to the development of Bay Area artists' work and artistic development as Rodia's Watts Towers were further south.³⁹

Spohn, born in San Francisco in 1898, attended the Art Students League in New York from 1922 to 1924, worked in New York for two more years, and then went to Paris, where he studied at the Académie Moderne from 1926 to 1927. In Paris he met Alexander Calder, who was the same age as he. Though they had both been enrolled at the Art Students League at the same time, studying with Thomas Hart Benton and John Sloan, among others, they did not become friends until they met in Paris.

By Calder's own account, Spohn's use of wire and assembled objects was a recurring device even in his student years, and Spohn influenced Calder. Indeed, Calder arrived in Paris aspiring to be a painter, but by the fall of 1926 he had begun to create his first wire sculptures, for the work he would later title *Calder's Circus* (1926–31), a miniature circus fashioned from wire, string, rubber, cloth, and other found objects.

Spohn, returning to San Francisco in 1927, was an active presence in the Bay Area art scene, though his work came into public view only twice before the end of World War II.⁴⁰ As an artist for the Federal Art Project in San Francisco from 1935 to 1942, Spohn worked on several murals in San Francisco before Jermayne MacAgy, the director of the California Palace of the Legion of Honor (and the wife of Douglas MacAgy), asked him to teach painting at her institution. This post led to a teaching position at the California School of Fine Arts, where Spohn was appointed professor of drawing and painting in the fall of 1945 and quickly became a popular teacher. His position at the school led to friendships with Rothko and Still, who were also on the faculty there (though, in Rothko's case, only during summer sessions).

Spohn's *Museum of Unknown and Little Known Objects* was made up of the detritus of everyday life he found at home and around the school. The exhibition—an extension of a practice of assemblage that for Spohn was already firmly in place—consisted of forty-two pieces composed of scrap metal, dust, food, and unusual objects that he had been collecting for some time and storing in a room at the school. "I had collected an awful lot," Spohn recalled in a 1976 interview:

So MacAgy said, "Why don't you use some of that at the museum." So that's what I started doing. For instance, in my kitchen cabinet way in the back I found a bottle of rice. The rice hadn't been cooked and it had all turned green and I thought, gee, that looks like little mouse droppings. So I put them in a bottle and called them "mousies." Another thing: I gathered up a lot of stuff from the brush of the vacuum cleaner, stuff from the carpet, and called it "Bed Room Fluff." Just to stimulate thinking and give people ideas or something, no matter how vague.⁴¹

Spohn distinguished between the works he was making, which he called constructions, and works composed only of found objects, as some of his assemblages had been described in local reviews: "All of them were constructions, all except maybe one. They



FIGURE 19
Clay Spohn, *Chastity Belt (contemporary)*,
1949. No longer extant.

were all wired together. I would pick up little pieces of cast off parts of machinery and then get some wire and a piece of metal and put it all together, wire them together and make a little object of it. One had a little watch attached to it that I found; it was called ‘Starter for a Rat Race,’ another one was ‘A Hat Tree for a Neighborly Garden.’ It was a construction. They were interesting shapes and forms.”⁴²

Eventually the *Museum* exhibition was dismantled and dispersed. Though Spohn made little effort to preserve the individual pieces, several documents still extant supply specific details. Photographs of the installation as well as five of the individual objects that appeared in it were reproduced in 1963, in Mary Fuller’s *Art in America* profile of the artist: *Chastity Belt (contemporary)* (fig. 19): *Old Embryo*; *A Forking Situation*; *Mole Samplers—Mouse Seeds*; and *Bedroom Fluff* (fig. 20)—all from 1949. In his hundred-page letter to Fuller dated April 25, 1963, Spohn described the 1949 exhibition in great detail. Though by this time he no longer remembered each of the forty-two or more pieces (by his own count), he recalled at least ten in vivid detail.⁴³ Finally, in 1999, a close friend of Spohn’s published a valuable biography of the artist—a true labor of love—that included reproductions of twelve works from the show.⁴⁴

Spohn made both his *Chastity Belt (contemporary)* and his *Chastity Belt (ancient)* for the installation from discarded metal bicycle seats. The key difference between the two, for Spohn, was that *Chastity Belt (contemporary)* was trimmed in lace. The seat hung, bottom facing out toward the viewer, by two garters clipped to a length of wire. A small household lock dangled from between two exposed seat springs. The work was a hilarious send-up of Pablo Picasso’s infamous *Head of a Bull* (1942). Spohn replaced Picasso’s



FIGURE 20

Clay Spohn, *Mole Samplers—Mouse Seeds, Bedroom Fluff* (three larger jars), 1949. No longer extant.

bicycle handlebar bullhorns with garter belts, and the smooth contours of the bull's face became an unsettling view of the bicycle seats' underside. In Spohn's interpretation the gender of the homage shifts decidedly from male to female, with the petite chastity belt locked in place between two coiled springs that are positioned like ovaries in the "abdomen" of the seat.

Spohn deadpanned in the same long letter that *Bedroom Fluff* was "a bottle of a strange kind of dust I had gathered from the floor of someone's bedroom, from a corner that had been hard to reach (under the bed) and apparently had not been touched for a very long time." He continued: "It was an accumulation of semi-transparent carpet dust or what-not that had a strange, fascinating texture and quality to it that no one could easily describe or associate with any other dust one had seen. It seemed to have a *kind of florescent energy* one couldn't quite put his finger on—so-to-speak!"⁴⁵ Spohn spent the 1920s moving in artistic circles in Paris, so he must have known about *Dust Breeding* (1920), an iconic image of the Dada movement that represented a culminating moment of artistic collaboration between two of its best-known and most highly regarded practitioners, the French artist Marcel Duchamp and the American painter and photographer Man Ray. Although the photograph was taken at the height of Dada activities in New York, the image did not become well known until after Man Ray moved to Paris in 1921. It was published to great acclaim in the October 1922 issue of *Littérature*, accompanying an article on Duchamp written by the editor, André Breton.⁴⁶

Both Man Ray and Spohn delighted in embracing the possibilities offered by ephemeral materials. Spohn's highly original exercise anticipated by nearly twenty years Claes

Oldenburg's *Mouse Museum* (1965–77), a walk-in miniature museum filled with 385 objects, including souvenirs, kitsch objects, and studio models. Spohn's works answer the question why his *Museum* became a legendary event in the history of the school: More than an indisputable formal and conceptual precedent to the assemblage works produced by Bay Area artists in the 1950s, the project also foreshadowed the environments and happenings held throughout the Euro-American art world in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

For those artists living and working on the West Coast who were already inclined to reject the formalist paradigms and market-oriented production governing more traditional mediums, Spohn's *Museum of Unknown and Little Known Objects*, together with Rodia's renowned Watts Towers—also greatly admired in the Bay Area—represented a much-sought-after break with tradition. The defining moments in the dismantling of pictorial space, begun with Picasso's and Georges Braque's incorporation of collaged elements in the Cubist canvas between 1912 and 1920, would lead to ever more experimentation in three-dimensional assemblage and ultimately to works of art that reached out from the wall to occupy a room or a gallery, and even to dominate a place in the urban landscape or the rural world beyond.

PAINTERLAND AND THE RAT BASTARDS IN THE WESTERN ADDITION

In the decade following Spohn's *Museum* at the California School of Fine Arts, the Fillmore neighborhood was in a state of transition. In 1948 San Francisco city officials had declared it "blighted" under the California Redevelopment Act of 1945.⁴⁷ Its residents were largely African American, and many, including the author James Baldwin, referred bitterly to the Redevelopment Act not as urban renewal but as "Negro removal." Baldwin, in a nationally televised interview by Kenneth Clark, a professor of psychology at City College of New York in 1963, expressed disbelief and outrage at what was still taking place in San Francisco and around the country:

BALDWIN: A boy last week, he was 16, in San Francisco, told me on television—thank God we got him to talk—maybe somebody thought to listen. He said, "I've got no country. I've got no flag." Now, he's only 16 years old, and I couldn't say, "You do." I don't have any evidence to prove that he does. They were tearing down his house, because San Francisco is engaging—as most Northern cities now are engaged—in something called urban renewal, which means moving the Negroes out. It means Negro removal, that is what it means. The federal government is an accomplice to this fact.

Now, we are talking about human beings, there's not such a thing as a monolithic wall or some abstraction called the Negro problem, these are Negro boys and girls, who at 16 and 17 don't believe the country means anything that it says and

don't feel they have any place here, on the basis of the performance of the entire country.

CLARK: But now, Jim—

BALDWIN: Am I exaggerating?⁴⁸

Over the years from 1948 to the early 1970s, the city of San Francisco destroyed the Fillmore. The area had a complex history: from roughly the turn of the century to World War II, it was inhabited predominantly by Japanese immigrants. In 1942, however, after President Roosevelt had signed an executive order relocating some 120,000 people of Japanese origin to internment camps throughout the western United States,⁴⁹ the homes they vacated attracted African Americans, who were migrating to the Bay Area from Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Mississippi, and other places in the Deep South for jobs in munitions and in other rapidly expanding war production industries. Because the Japanese American relocation had left many homes empty, housing in the Fillmore was cheap.

According to the U.S. Census, the number of African Americans living in San Francisco in 1940 was just under five thousand. By 1950 that number had grown to nearly forty-five thousand.⁵⁰ A large number of those new residents settled in the Fillmore. Many black musicians from around the country visited, and some stayed. Nightclubs proliferated, bringing to the neighborhood major musical icons such as Miles Davis, Ella Fitzgerald, Thelonious Monk, Louis Armstrong, and Billie Holiday. The district quickly became known as the West Coast capital of jazz and blues. Nonetheless, beginning in 1948, the city, using eminent domain, the Redevelopment Act, and federal funding, began systematically to destroy the neighborhood, block by block, forcing 4,729 businesses to close, pushing some 2,500 households out of the neighborhood, and moving or demolishing 883 Victorian era homes in the Fillmore (fig. 21).⁵¹

Wallace and Shirley Berman, Joan and Bill Brown, Bruce and Jean Conner, Jay DeFeo and Wally Hedrick, Robert Duncan and Jess, George Herms, and Michael and Joanna McClure were among those who made their homes in and around the Fillmore neighborhood in the 1950s, as African American families were driven out. Though well aware of the changes afoot, they were drawn to the area by the same factors that brought other families there: cheap rent and a vibrant arts community. “We were enjoying the black stores, the black ambience, the black music,” McClure recalled. “We had our faces toward them but our butts toward Pacific Heights.”⁵²

The artists of the Rat Bastard Protective Association who worked and exhibited together most consistently created many of their early assemblage works from broken machinery found in the trash, and wood scraps, bits of wallpaper, and old clothing pulled out of the abandoned and soon-to-be-demolished Victorian homes in the neighborhood. The works made from these materials and the artists' recycling of used and



FIGURE 21
Moving Victorian houses in the Western Addition, San Francisco, 1970s. Photographs by Dave Glass.

obsolete materials in general can be read as a form of protest art—a satire of the wastefulness of American society and a critique of postwar modes of consumption. In the case of Conner, who returned again and again to household items, the work can be read as a critique of the “urban renewal” going on around them.⁵³

Conner’s assemblages and collages incorporated a large number of objects from the interiors of abandoned homes: fireplace surrounds, lace tablecloths, curtains, and scraps of wallpaper. *SECRET TITLE COLLAGE* (1960), for example, appears to be a rectangular section cut from an actual wallpapered wall, which Conner framed in beveled scraps of wood taken from a doorjamb. Newspaper clippings and a maroon fringe, like that typically used to give a decorative edge to a pillow or a curtain are pasted on the wallpaper. The fringe cuts across the center of the composition, dividing top from bottom. Below the fringe, Conner washed the floral wallpaper with a transparent brown varnish; above it, the wallpaper remains bright, if faded, with a newspaper clipping of a topless black female performer, probably Josephine Baker, collaged near the top of the composition. Just below and to the right of the newspaper clipping, in a smaller faded, faintly visible black-and-white photo, three white women pose in what appears to be a beauty pageant. In this work, as in his collages, Conner included not only photos of showgirls but also their accoutrements—feathers, nylons, costume jewelry.

Despite the rough frame, the overall character of the work is delicate, its formal balance precise. This delicacy is undercut, however, by the viewer’s realization that the (white) top half of the composition is segregated from the (brown) bottom half. Likewise the women on display in the paired photo and newspaper clippings are literally and formally separated by race. The composition is simple, but the ongoing loss of both homes and the vibrant African American culture in the Fillmore around Conner’s home gives the work a special poignancy.

The styles and subjects of the RBPA artists were diverse, but their work and Cali-

fornia assemblage art in general was unified, as Cándida Smith has observed, “by a commonly felt need to comment on life in America, to break down boundaries between subject and object, reality and fantasy, life and art, literature and the visual arts.”⁵⁴ For a relatively brief time after Seitz’s *Art of Assemblage* exhibition gave institutional validation to mixed-media work, numerous scholarly articles and exhibitions explored the distinctive qualities of assemblage, as implemented on both coasts. Much of the early critical framing of this art appeared in *Artforum* between 1962 (the year the magazine was founded) and 1964.⁵⁵ In August 1962, the associate editor John Coplans, who was also an artist, described the development of California assemblage by stressing the Neo-Dada components of the work and connecting it with similar developments in New York and Europe, such as Robert Rauschenberg’s “combines” and Arman’s accumulations of objects.⁵⁶ In October 1962 the social historian Donald Clark Hodges weighed in with his article “Junk Sculpture: What Does It Mean?” in which he identified assemblage as a critique of consumption in the United States and thereby a form of protest art.⁵⁷ The following summer Donald Factor, a collector and a frequent contributor to *Artforum*, compared East and West Coast assemblage in his review of the work of Ed Kienholz and found that California assemblage artists generally prioritized subject matter—especially social and political issues—over formal concerns, unlike their East Coast counterparts, who used objects more for their formal possibilities.⁵⁸ Similarly, Coplans, in the same issue of the magazine, reversed his position of just twelve months earlier and argued that California assemblage, which often expressed overt criticism of society, entailed processes different from those deployed by East Coast and European artists, as well as a distinct sensibility.⁵⁹

The confusion over how to interpret assemblage—on either coast—reflected the multifaceted nature of the work in question. Artists on both coasts used assemblage to point to the disjunctive nature of the contemporary urban environment; their work, even when it addressed specific issues (such as Conner’s CHILD), resisted distillation into a simple or direct political statement. Because a historical and theoretical investigation of the conceptual basis of “assemblage” as a category of art might point to a way through the confusion, Chapter 2 returns to the East Coast to begin that inquiry.

THE BEAT SCENE

During a brief moment in the late 1950s and early 1960s, New York became enamored of San Francisco artists. Although for many the New Yorker Allen Ginsberg’s reading of *Howl* at the Six Gallery in 1956 marked the beginning of the Beat scene in San Francisco, the idea of the Beat generation took hold of the nation’s imagination in May 1957, when Lawrence Ferlinghetti was arrested on obscenity charges for selling Ginsberg’s “*Howl*” and *Other Poems* at his City Lights Bookstore (see fig. 15).⁶⁰ In 1958 the *New York Post* ran a twelve-part series titled “The Beat Generation,” and in 1958 and 1959 lead stories on the so-called Beats abounded in such popular magazines as *Life*, *Time*, *Look*,

and even *Playboy*. Images of the Beats in the press played an important role in creating a mythic image of the artists at work and at play.

As the 1950s came to an end, however, many artists retreated from the scrutiny of the press and rejected the Beat label. As Conner stated, “I don’t know any artist that would call himself a beat artist. . . . If somebody did, you’d consider him a fake, a fraud running a scam.”⁶¹ In fact the scam appears to have been perpetrated by Wally Hedrick, together with Henri Lenoir, the owner of a favorite North Beach artists’ hangout, Vesuvio’s Bar, located just across the alley (now named Jack Kerouac Alley) from City Lights Books. “In the early 1950s,” according to one typical account, “Lenoir famously employed the artist Wally Hedrick to sit in the window dressed in full beard, turtleneck, and sandals and create improvisational drawings and paintings.”⁶² Hedrick, ever the prankster, was probably delighted to collaborate, both for the income and for the spoof.

Busloads of tourists descended on the North Beach neighborhood, hoping for a glimpse of Kerouac and other Beats. At the peak of the Beat craze, Lenoir even sold a “Beatnik Kit” that included black-rimmed eyeglasses, a beret, a pair of sandals, a black turtleneck sweater, and a slip-on beard.⁶³ The mainstream press made no effort to discriminate between the creative efforts of the Beats and the extracurricular goings-on of poets, artists, musicians, and hangers-on so that by the end of the 1950s many artists were deeply embarrassed by the negative portrayals and caricatures of so-called beatnik activities in the national media and the literary press. As the art historian John Bowles noted:

The group occupies a near-mythic position in the history of art in California, having provided the impetus for art historians to create histories of the so-called California assemblage and Funk art movements, which consequently has led to misrepresentations of their artwork. . . . [The term *Beat*] must be understood as a construction of the popular discourse in late-1950s and early 1960s America, which served, through collective affirmation and debate, to produce and disavow specific behaviors. Artists such as Jess, Jay DeFeo, and Bruce Conner participated in this construction, even as they made efforts to disassociate themselves from it.⁶⁴

East Coast media outlets seemed particularly fascinated with the goings-on in the city by the bay. The *New York Post*’s twelve-part series on the San Francisco Beats, which served to increase the attention not only of the national media but also of local authorities, quoted San Francisco’s police chief Thomas J. Cahill: “We had no trouble with the beatniks at all until the newspapers started writing them up. Then they learned they had some type of identity, so they began to gather . . . and put on a show in their own way, drinking, dancing, acting like kids do when someone comments on them. What happened was that they attracted young people, and young people, naturally, attracted police.”⁶⁵

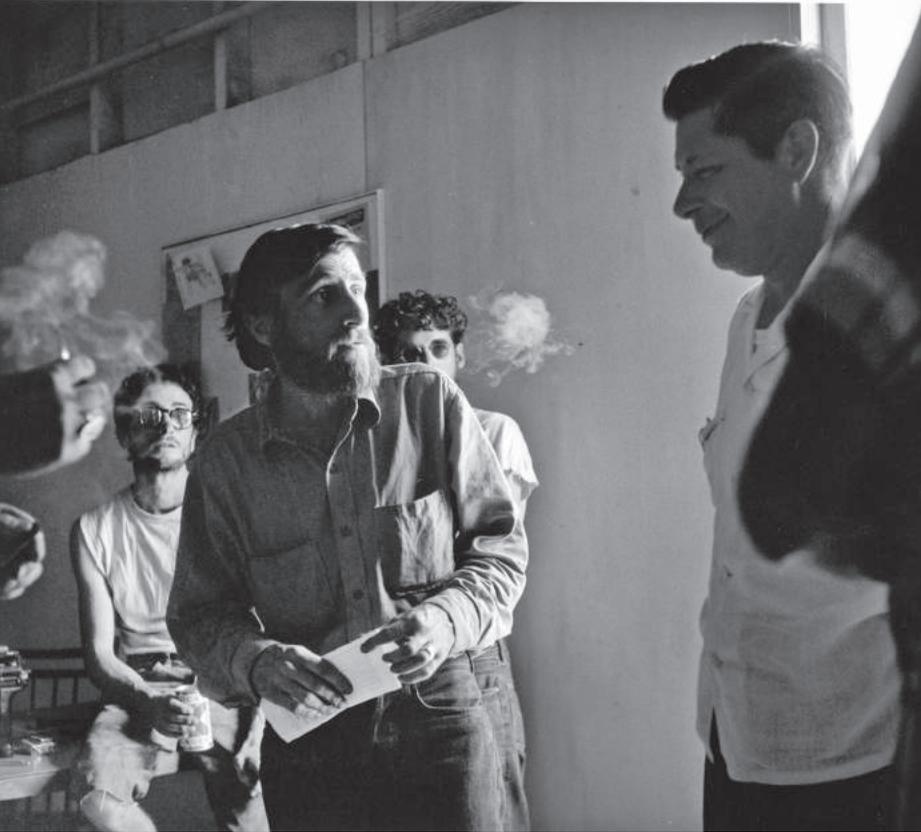


FIGURE 22

Wallace Berman, Artie Richer, and John Reed during Berman's arrest at the Ferus Gallery, 1957. Photograph by Charles Brittin. © J. Paul Getty Trust. The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2005.M.11.8).

Indeed, the police appeared to mount a campaign against what the media had portrayed as an enclave of homosexual activity, illicit drug use, and general promiscuity. In 1956 George Herms was arrested and served six months in jail for possession of marijuana, a sentence that nearly ended his marriage and made subsequent employment difficult.⁶⁶ In May 1957 Ferlinghetti was arrested in San Francisco for selling Ginsberg's *Howl*; in June 1957 the artist Wallace Berman was arrested in Los Angeles, also on obscenity charges. Berman's offense was the display of a small sexually explicit ink drawing, by the artist Cameron, in his large assemblage titled *Temple* (1952–57), on view in his solo exhibition at the Ferus Gallery (fig. 22).⁶⁷

Reviewers in the *New York Times* also weighed in on the Beats, simultaneously fascinated, bemused, and disgusted. The *Times* columnist and celebrated World War II Marine Corps combat correspondent David Dempsey, reviewing Jack Kerouac's *On*

the Road, noted that “thirty years ago it was fashionable for the young and the weary—creatures of Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald—simply to be ‘lost.’ Today, one depression and two wars later, in order to remain uncommitted one must at least flirt with depravity.” Dempsey concluded acidly, “Jack Kerouac has written an enormously readable and entertaining book but one reads it in the same mood he might visit a sideshow—the freaks are fascinating although they are hardly part of our lives.”⁶⁸ Is it any wonder, given the tone of such criticism, that many artists subsequently went underground, refusing to participate in the media circus that built them up only to tear them to pieces?

Despite the intense media scrutiny and increasing police surveillance resulting from the Beats’ wild popularity in the public imagination, the national attention brought some positive results for serious artists and their careers. Mainstream media coverage elicited the attention of curators and critics on the East Coast. In 1952 and again in 1958, for example, the Museum of Modern Art curator Dorothy Miller came to San Francisco to conduct studio visits. Since 1942 Miller had been curating an influential series of exhibitions called *Americans* that featured works by promising artists together with works by more established artists from the United States.⁶⁹ Miller’s exhibitions typically introduced mostly New York–based young and under-recognized artists to the public, but as the 1950s progressed, she sought out divergent art trends. In the catalogue for her 1959 exhibition *Sixteen Americans*, she highlighted the geographic breadth that the artists in her show represented, noting that “geographical distribution, not consciously sought after, is nonetheless remarkable: though ten now live in New York City, only one was born here. The other fifteen were born in fourteen different states or countries: California, Connecticut, Egypt, Germany, Indiana, Kentucky. . . . Two now live in San Francisco, one in the Los Angeles area, one in New Haven, one in Providence, Rhode Island.” She emphasized that she had a long-standing interest in exploring “differences rather than similarities in points of view, as well as in age, experience, and fame,” and that the 1959 show “continues the pattern by bringing together distinct and widely varying personalities, contrasting these personalities sharply rather than attempting to unite them with any given movement or trend.”⁷⁰

As a result of Miller’s West Coast visit in the summer of 1958, both Jay DeFeo and Wally Hedrick were included in her important exhibition. In contrast to typical large group shows, in which emergent artists normally received early exposure for only one or two key works, Miller’s *Americans* shows included fewer artists and more works by each of them. Many of the artists who participated in Miller’s exhibitions as young artists—Jasper Johns, Ellsworth Kelly, Louise Nevelson, Robert Rauschenberg, and Frank Stella, for example—are now considered among the most important twentieth-century artists.

Though inclusion in the *Americans* show signaled official endorsement from one of the most prestigious art institutions in the United States, DeFeo and Hedrick chose

not to attend the opening and never saw the show.⁷¹ Why the artists would effectively turn their backs on this accolade is something not even they could fully articulate. Rebecca Solnit has speculated that DeFeo and Hedrick weren't looking for success, so they hardly recognized it when it came. DeFeo gave the following account to Paul Karlstrom:

Wally and I didn't realize the stature and prestige of being included in such a show. I was really unaware of the situation. It surprises many people that we were the only people included in that show who didn't make an effort to go back for the opening. The whole show was a kind of coming out party, I discovered later. It was intended to be for galleries in search of new talent. I was approached by the Stable Gallery [in New York City] through correspondence, which I turned down, because at this stage of the game I had launched into the painting of *The Rose*.⁷²

In fact, earlier that same year DeFeo had also turned down an opportunity for a one-person show in San Francisco, organized by her former University of California, Berkeley, classmate Fred Martin for the San Francisco Art Association. In her letter rejecting the invitation she wrote, "I feel I must be able to understand my work . . . before I hang it up and hope the other people may see it as I do. In this sense, I perhaps place too much importance on the show. . . . As for the actual 'prestige-value' of the show—I can very easily give this up as it means little to me. So nothing is lost."⁷³

Both DeFeo and Hedrick routinely defied social and artistic conventions. Hedrick was openly hostile to the mainstream art world and frequently turned down opportunities to exhibit. In fact, of the Rat Bastards, only Conner exhibited consistently and was represented by a gallery in New York, the Alan Gallery on Madison Avenue, from 1956 to the mid-1960s.⁷⁴ In fact, in December 1958 the twenty-five-year-old Conner participated in a group exhibition there that included such well-known artists as Joseph Cornell, Jasper Johns, Robert Motherwell, and Robert Rauschenberg. In characteristic fashion, Conner saved the announcement for the show, preserving it in volume 1 of what became a four-volume set of scrapbooks he created that chronicled his life and career from 1943 to 1978 (fig. 23).

Not long after DeFeo and Hedrick sabotaged their chances for recognition in the New York art world, William Seitz came to the Bay Area looking for artists to include in his upcoming survey exhibition of assemblage. He visited Conner first, for Peter Selz, Seitz's colleague at MoMA, had recently awarded first prize in a national competition to Conner's assemblage *THE BOX* (1960). (The museum acquired the work for its permanent collection in 1961.) Conner promptly gave Seitz a tour of second-hand stores and a Chinese laundry in San Francisco and then sent him on to the studios of Wallace Berman and George Herms in Larkspur. Seitz saw Herms's work *The Librarian* (1960) in Larkspur that day and considered it for inclusion in the *Art of Assemblage* show but ultimately chose *Poet* (1960) instead, which he had seen in the group show

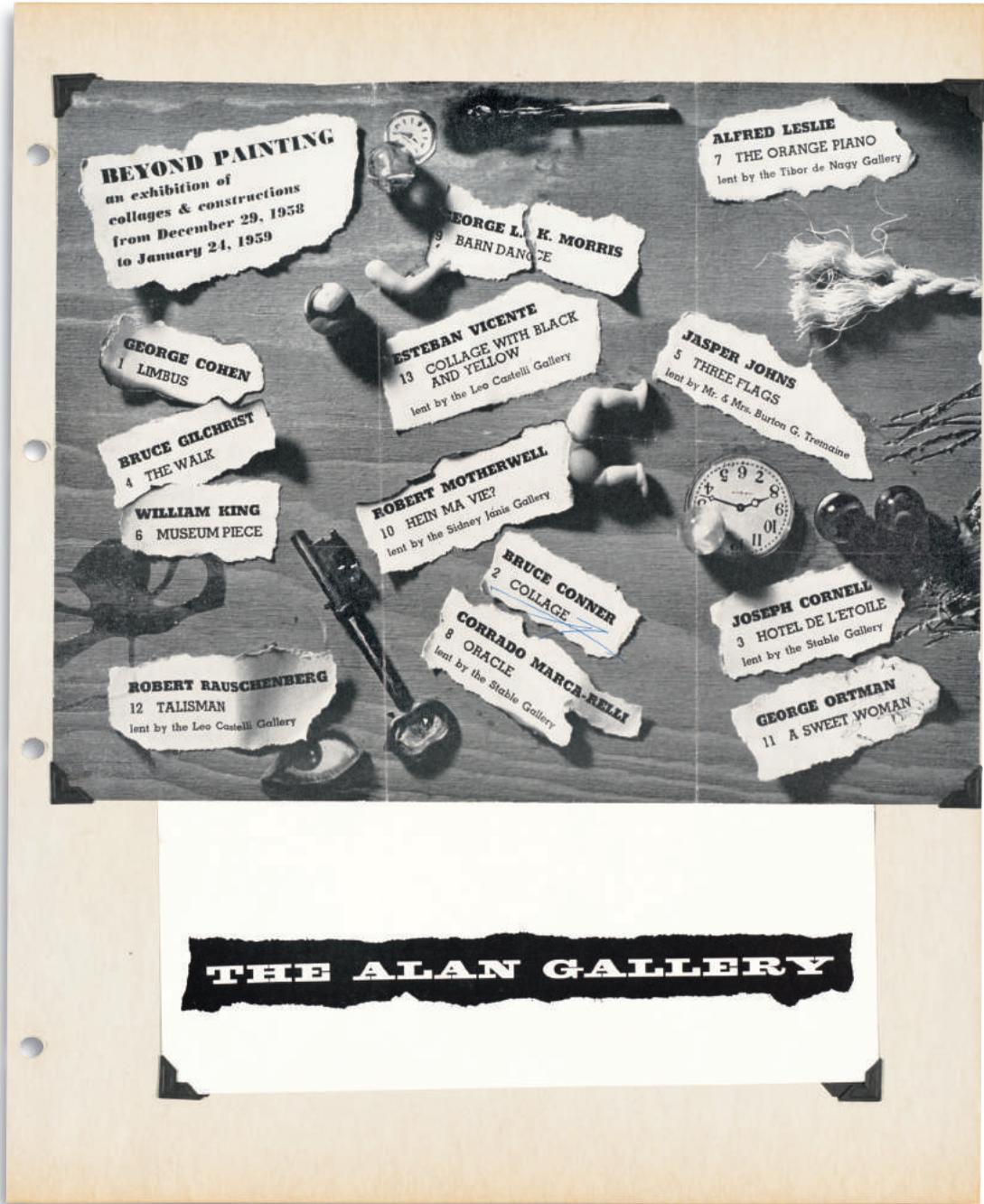


FIGURE 23

Announcement card for *Beyond Painting: An Exhibition of Collages and Constructions* at the Alan Gallery, New York, December 29, 1958–January 24, 1959. Bruce Conner scrapbooks, vol. 1: [1943]–1963. Courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

titled *Gangbang* at the Batman Gallery.⁷⁵ In the end Seitz chose only four West Coast artists—Conner, Herms, Jess, and Ed Kienholz—out of the one hundred forty-one in his seminal *Art of Assemblage* exhibition. Seitz thanked Conner in the foreword of the exhibition catalogue⁷⁶ and, unlike DeFeo and Hedrick, Conner did not let the opportunity slip away completely—though his attendance at the opening was not without its complications, as we will discover.

