

“Art is Love is God”: Wallace Berman and the Transmission of *Aleph*, 1956-66

by

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#### ABSTRACT

In 1956 in Los Angeles, California, Wallace Berman, a Beat assemblage artist, poet and founder of *Semina* magazine, began to make a film. Over ten years, the film now known as *Aleph* became Berman’s personal record, documenting family, friends, Verifax collage artwork and inspirations from popular culture. Paint and Letraset were applied across the film celluloid, creating a palimpsest of code and gesture. *Aleph* is also delineated with Hebrew letters, representing Berman’s interest in the Jewish mystical Cabala. Translated as “tradition,” “reception” or “transmission,” the Cabala ascribes the word of God with hidden meaning, creating a channel from the divine to the human – a transmission of secret codes.

The core of this thesis frames Wallace Berman’s film *Aleph* as both a transmission and an unfinished, unstable document. The form and content of *Aleph* enact the process of transmission and represent transmission itself. However, since the film is unfinished, abandoned and left with excess fragments, it possesses unstable meaning. This thesis will not substantiate a stable art object; rather, it will frame a process – transmission – through which multiple meanings are carried, and through which the unfinished, unstable film object operates as a catalyst towards one possible unity of message: “Art is Love is God.”

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*“The Lord said to her:*

*Aleph, Aleph,*

*Although I begin the world’s creation with Beth,*

*thou will remain the first of my letters.*

*My unity shall only be expressed through thee.*

*On thee shall be based all the calculations and operations of the world.”<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Zohar: 1, 3b, quoted in David Meltzer, “The Door of Heaven, the Path of Letters,” in Hal Glicksman et al., *Wallace Berman: Retrospective, October 24-November 26, 1978* (Los Angeles: Fellows of Contemporary Art, Otis Art Institute Gallery, 1978): 91.

Scene: A dark night in Beverly Glen, Los Angeles, California, January 23, 1963

You park your car, at the edge of the dead end, and walk towards the hillside. Down the dark, weed-lined path, you hear music on a record player in the house, and you reach the front door of the Berman's home. Shirley answers the door, gives you a hug, a kiss on the cheek and a smile, and walks you through the kitchen, from which you enter into the living room. The living room is cluttered with many different little objects, and has a desk, a couch and a bed in the corner where Shirley and Wallace sleep. The room is small but very comfortable, and no other visitors are over, unlike most nights, when the entire house is filled with the voices and bodies of friendly wanderers. Wallace sits tooling away at his studio desk as you enter; he sees you, gets up from his chair, and greets you with a light hug and a pat on the shoulder. He's never been very chatty, but tonight he's warm and happy to see you. He invites you to relax, and for a long while, the two of you sit on the floor or on the couch, leaning back and reading. He sits intently reading *The Diary of Nijinsky* for the tenth time, then spontaneously picks up another book, *The Wisdom of the Kabbalah* by Dagobert D. Runes. You do the same, switching between reading compilations on symbolist poetry and some essays by Antonin Artaud, all of which you very much like. At some point, Wallace asks if you want to smoke some weed, to which you agree, and he makes up a joint, which you share. You've been listening to a range of albums, from Charlie Parker to the Rolling Stones, and you both mellow out more, listening to the music as the room fills with a haze. Wallace starts showing you his latest installment of his mail-art magazine *Semina*, little collages and drawings printed on little cards. You will likely get this issue in the mail sometime in the next few months. Then he turns to you and asks "Do you wanna see my film?", to which you reply "of course," because you had no idea that he was working on a film in



the first place, and you're definitely intrigued. He suddenly jumps into action, getting his portable 8mm projector, a grey box the size of a small, cube suitcase, sets it up on his worktable, and you sit back down on the floor, leaning against the couch. Shirley comes in from the kitchen and sits down, and Tosh is nowhere to be found; Shirley tells me he's in his room, the only bedroom in the house, and had fallen asleep a while ago. Wallace points the projector at the wall, and puts the film on the spool. He says that he's still working on it, but that it's going to be a 22-part Cabalistic film when it's done. He seems to be having some trouble feeding the film into the projector, through the spool teeth at the base of the box projector, but eventually he gets it wound, and he turns the projector on. The "screen" leaps to life, and the experience of the film begins.

While it's clear that the film is silent, Wallace puts on a record as the film begins – James Brown's single of "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag," a great choice, in my opinion. The first note of horns blasts through the record player just before a figure on the screen seems to be prepping to shoot up heroin – though it's hard to tell what's going on, because the film is so dark and the images are jumping all over the place. As images of photographs and people skip and jump through a rapid montage effect – you aren't left to contemplate an image for more than two or three seconds – the gentle whir and tick of the projector and the music interact and play with each other and the film. While the images seem to mostly be in black and white, there are also big dark splotches that run across the images, and large bursts and dances of pulsing color – reds and browns, it seems – that obscure the images. Two joints in, and it's all a bit of a sensory overload, but it's also amazing to watch. The images demand your attention, yet the music puts them into a frenetic yet intelligible rhythm, dancing along with Brown's vocals and funky beats. Then suddenly, a few loud pops and snaps emit from the projector, and the screen goes blank.

Wallace jumps up upon hearing these sounds, as though he already knows what the problem is, and immediately turns the projector off and begins to tinker with the feeding component area. As I watch, he rips a section of film out from the feeding teeth, a section that was seemingly stuck, and he cuts the film piece off with scissors. He then quickly takes the film off the projector, puts it on his splicer with the previous section of film, makes a quick cement splice, and lets it sit to dry for a minute or so. He tells me that the film is so built up with paint and with Letraset transfer letters that it makes the film celluloid brittle, which in turn makes it easier to break in the projector. After the splice is dry, he winds the film back on, finds the section where the film stopped just before it broke, and turns the projector on to begin again. And the experience of the film, the personal cinema experience in the most welcoming home in Los Angeles, begins anew.

## Introduction – Wallace Berman and *Aleph*

In 1956 in Los Angeles, California, Wallace Berman, a Beat assemblage artist, poet and founder of the underground mail-art magazine *Semina*, began to make a film. Over the course of approximately ten years, a rapid-montage 8mm film later titled *Aleph* served as a personal record of Berman's life, documenting his family and friends, his Verifax reprographic collage artwork and various other inspirations, including music, popular culture and religion. Across these images, Berman applied paint and Letraset transfer letters to the film celluloid, creating a document of both code and gesture. Delineated with a complete though limited set of 10 Hebrew characters, Berman also represented his interest in the Jewish mystical system of Cabala within the framing of *Aleph*.<sup>2</sup> Translated as “tradition,” “reception” or “transmission,”<sup>3</sup> the Cabala ascribes the word of God with hidden meaning in letters and numbers, creating a channel from the divine to the human – a transmission in the form of code.

Wallace Berman's film *Aleph* is both a transmission and an unfinished, unstable aesthetic document. Since the film object is unfinished, abandoned by the artist and left incomplete with excess fragments, it possesses unstable meaning. Yet through this instability, an expansive artistic process is brought to light. *Aleph* is a physical representation of a continual process, a process that unfolds in the making of the film, in the experience of the film, and embedded in the film itself. This process is what marks the film object as both enacting a transmission of artistic meaning and as a representation of transmission. This thesis will not seek to substantiate the existence of a

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<sup>2</sup> For the distinction between the “Cabala,” the “Kabbalah” and the “Qabbalah,” all related spellings of the same Jewish mystical system, please see the later section (and its related footnote, number 62) “The Cabala/Kabbalah/Qabbalah in History and in Art.” My use of the term “Cabala” is also explained in footnote 62.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Cándida Smith, *Utopia and Dissent: Art, Poetry, and Politics in California* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 222.

stable art object; rather, it will seek to frame a process – transmission – through which a multiplicity of meaning is carried, and through which the unfinished, unstable film object operates as the catalyst towards one ultimate message: “Art is Love is God.”

This study will construct a framing of *Aleph* through two conceptual lenses: transmission and the unstable, unfinished art object. An interaction between these two elements of *Aleph* opens onto an understanding of transmission as a procedure of Berman’s film, with both scientific and spiritual implications in 1950s and 60s America (and in particular California), while also simultaneously alluding to a complication of transmission in *Aleph*’s manipulation in pre- and post-production. This thesis as such will be organized into two large sections: one involving the concept of transmission, and one involving the unfinished, unstable film object. Key areas in the life of Wallace Berman, his art, and his greater historical and geographical context will be discussed throughout this thesis, in order to unpack the mechanism of transmission as it unfolds in the production and representation of the film *Aleph*.

The first section of this study will address multiple areas related to the concept of transmission in *Aleph*. First, transmission will be explored through the lens of philosophy, religious thought and the Cabala. Second, this concept will be framed through specific events and details in the life, work, and influences of Berman. Finally, this section will begin to unpack the film’s form and content as expressive of both a mode of transmission and representative of transmission – in other words, as being *a* transmission and *about* transmission.

*Aleph* will be framed through its process, and it is in fact through process that transmission and the unstable object will collide. An underlying current of my argument is that the process of this film is as important, if not more important, than the film itself. As the second part of this study will explore, the production of *Aleph* – particularly in editing and post-production – reveals the unstable

nature of the “unfinished,” mutable film object. Through the experience of chance in the editing process, as well as with the application of Letraset transfer letters and paint directly onto the film celluloid and the consideration of other key historical evidence, *Aleph*'s position as an art object is destabilized. Additionally, with the destructive editing of the film in the essential mechanism of cinema, the projector, a new unstable object was born: *Artifactual: Films From The Wallace Berman Collection* (2006-07). With the consideration of *Aleph*'s process and its document of excess in *Artifactual*, the film's transmission is distorted – though not destroyed – and one fractured message is made coherent within the film's mutable form. In the end, an integration of transmission with the unfinished, unstable film object leads to a more complex and more complete understanding of the process that is *Aleph*.

## Part I: Transmission

### An Introduction

What does “transmission” mean? In the most physical sense, it relates to way in which information is passed from point A to point B. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the telegraph was a machine that sent a message through electrical wires in code and translated into language at its destination, producing a telegram. To receive a printed telegram was to receive a transmission that started and stopped, transformed from language to code and back to language. With the advent of radio, and later television, transmission came to represent a continuous system of transferring sound and image through more complex electrical systems, from the radio broadcast station through broadcast electromagnetic waves to the antennae on radio boxes and TVs, and finally through the internal components of the radio of television and out through the speaker. While there is a lag between the broadcast leaving the station and the broadcast coming out of the radio, and also between the broadcast coming out of the radio and reaching the listener’s ear, the message is perceived as instantaneous and continuous. Even when one changes the channels of the radio, or a television, the stream of transmission is understood to be uninterrupted. Transmission in scientific parlance, then, is understood as the process of relaying a message between two places, an origin and a destination, that is perceived to be continuous and therefore – at least theoretically – identical in form.

The concept of transmission also arises in other bodies of thought, including in philosophy and theology or mysticism. In philosophical terms, transmission can speak to the communication of knowledge on a broad theoretical plane, or to the persistence of an “entity” or

“object” through two different events in time. In the former case, transmission is used to connect the transference of understanding (knowledge) between one person and another.<sup>4</sup> In the latter case, that which is transmitted is referred to in terms of a solid body, an object or energetic force that is not distorted as it moves from one point in time (point A) to another point in time (point B).<sup>5</sup> In either of these cases, there is a connection between one point in space or time to another, and an assumption that what is being transmitted is, ideally, unaltered in the process. However, the receiver may introduce a level of subjective error in the first position, while in the second position, the concept of transmission is dependent on the continued integrity of its message – for a transmission to be uncompromised through its process.

On a theological or mystical level, the transmission of knowledge involves transmitting obscure or secret truth, or with passing doctrinal knowledge down from person to person, generation to generation, through written and oral traditions. The Gnostic tradition, with roots in Jewish mysticism, Christianity and Eastern mystical systems like Zoroastrianism, expresses its core tenet as the transmission of knowledge from the divine to an individual. Gnosis, meaning “knowledge,” is given in a flash of “revelation” of “divine secrets” to a particularly receptive individual, or to “the elect who are capable of receiving it.”<sup>6</sup> This gnosis is articulated by writer Marcus Boon as “a transmission from another cosmos or transcendental dimensions in which the

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<sup>4</sup> This transference of knowledge can only happen, according to Michael Welbourne, through belief: “The mechanism by which knowledge is transmitted is belief... There can be long chains of transmission of various different kinds, but each chain must contain links of this fundamental kind.” Michael Welbourne, “The Transmission of Knowledge,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* Vol. 29, No. 114 (January 1979): 3.

<sup>5</sup> Max Kistler, “Reducing Causality to Transmission,” *Erkenntnis* Vol. 48, No. 1 (January 1998): 8. This understanding of transmission is to a great extent informed by the field of physics.

<sup>6</sup> Kurt Rudolph and Robert McLachlan Wilson, trans., *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1985): 55, 56.

truth resides.”<sup>7</sup> A similar concept, along the lines of vision, also exists in the concept of emanation (“a mystical light that penetrated the aeons...and was mingled, though imperceptibly, with the corrupt matter of the visible world”<sup>8</sup>).

The principle of gnosis especially parallels the Cabala, where “one of the central paradoxes [is its] claim to transmit a truth that must be by definition secret or concealed.”<sup>9</sup> One of the most important texts in the system of the Cabala, *Sepher Yetzirah* (The Book of Formation), was intentionally written to make obvious understanding difficult, or even impossible.<sup>10</sup> The transmission of the Cabala is that of meanings under the “code,” the letters themselves. But as later Cabalistic thinkers, such as the Spanish Rabbi Abraham ben Samuel Abdulafia of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, emphasize, the Cabala also reveals truth through the individual’s own practice and interpretation of this code.<sup>11</sup> The interpreted meanings, therefore,

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<sup>7</sup> Marcus Boon, *The Road of Excess: A History of Writers On Drugs* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2002): 30. Boon’s quote is also referenced in Louis Kaplan “Aleph Beat: Wallace Berman Between Photography and Film” in *Still Moving: Between Cinema and Photography*, eds. Karen Beckman and Jean Ma (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2008), 208. Boon’s discussion of gnosis is in reference to the German Romantic philosopher and poet Novalis as “one of the originators of a modern Gnostic approach to drugs” (30), where opium could be used as a gate to divine transmission. While the discussion of drugs and transmission will not be a focus of this discussion, it is an interesting subject matter in the context of *Aleph*.

<sup>8</sup> Kurt Seligmann, *Magic, Supernaturalism and Religion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971 edition), 62.

<sup>9</sup> Kaplan, “Aleph Beat,” 221.

<sup>10</sup> “In order to render his work unintelligible for the profane, [Rabbi Akiba ben Joseph, attributed author of the *Sepher Yetzirah*] used a veiled language, and expressed himself in riddles and conundrums.” A. E. Waite, ed., *The Book of Formation or Sepher Yetzirah* (Berwick: Ibis Press, 2004), 17.

<sup>11</sup> Abdulafia was known for his use of permutations of Hebrew letters, a form of what he called “Prophetic Kabbalah,” where “individual Hebrew letters in combination do not have to have any meaning in the ordinary sense,” but that these permutations can recall an “intuitive Kabbalah.” Carolyn Peter, “Wordsmithing: Mixing the Verbal and the Visual in the Art of Wallace Berman and Robert Heinecken,” in *Speaking In Tongues: Wallace Berman and Robert Heinecken, 1961-1976*, ed. Claudia Bohn-Spector and Sam Mellon (Pasadena: The Armory Center for the Arts, 2011), 37. See the later sections “The Cabala/Kabbalah/Qabbalah in History and in Art” and



are as multiple as the messages; the transmission of knowledge from the divine to the individual, in other words, is ultimately completed in the procedure of interpretation.

To what does transmission speak in Wallace Berman's concept of art? In an essay describing Berman's work, the writer Merrill Greene states that Berman's *Verifaxes* and *Semina* magazine exist as "signs (emblems) through which the initiated conjure the keys to gnostic wisdom."<sup>12</sup> Berman's art speaks to an esoteric yet continuous communication. It points to correlation or a passage between one side and another, one realm to another, and one idea to another. Transmission, in Berman's artistic expression, is direct yet obscure, a series of images both loaded with meaning and attempting to operate as a stream of consciousness, expressive yet without need for deciphering. The artist attempts to explore a duality between wanting an image to stand for itself, empty yet open to all interpretations, and filling that image with a multitude of layers of symbolic meaning. Berman's transmission, most of all, does not ultimately differentiate between art and life, art and spirituality, spirituality and life, but rather includes them all in an unmediated continuum, all equal, all possessing the greatest potential for inspiration.

"Art is Love is God"

From the second issue of *Semina*, Wallace Berman's well-known mail-art magazine, a tagline or motto of sorts, "Art is Love is God," began to appear in various contexts of the

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"Berman's Use of the Cabala: Casual or Serious?" for more analysis on Berman's approach (and the debate of his approach) to the Cabala.

<sup>12</sup> Merrill Greene, "Wallace Berman" in *Art As A Muscular Principle* (1975), 50, excerpt from Archives of American Art (AAA), Wallace Berman Papers (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art, Microfilmed 1988). Accessed April-May 2011.

magazine.<sup>13</sup> Its placement in an issue was usually at the beginning – stamped onto the interior envelope sleeve – or at the end, pasted on a card in the very back or pressed vertically on the back cover. A simple equation, its presentation belies its obscure meaning; are all of these terms equal in Berman’s life, or of equal importance?<sup>14</sup> Does everything fold into God? Or into Art, or Love? Each key word – Art, Love, God – holds potential for varied meaning, interpretation and expression. Yet on the level of logic, the “is” between each noun serves to connect the terms on an equal plane, to draw a line of active correlation – to establish a message of transmission. “Art is Love is God” acted as a motto or a personal affirmation for Berman, but also as a mantra, a phrase repeated in succession, in a constant stream, as a meditative tool. The phrase streams Wallace Berman’s core tenets through the medium of his work. It is in all of this work, and in particular in his one and only film *Aleph*, that Berman’s mantra is most activated. *Aleph* transmits Wallace Berman’s conceptions of art, life, family, friends, popular culture, poetry and God into a living, breathing document of personal exploration. “Art is Love is God”, according to David E. James, “brought [Berman’s] aesthetic, social and spiritual concerns into a common

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<sup>13</sup> In 1955, Berman conceived of his first magazine issue, a magazine that was about dispersion and connection of ideas and images. Passed from hand to hand, *Semina* planted its pod of ‘seeds’ – the Latin ‘seed’ and the semen seed – into the minds of 150 to 300 people per issue from the mid-50s to the mid-60s up and down California and elsewhere. It is now seen as a forerunner of the medium of mail-art, and continues to be one of Berman’s greatest known artistic achievements in art historical contexts, evidenced, in part, by key exhibitions like “*Semina* Culture” in 2005 at the Santa Monica Museum of Art. An in-depth discussion of every issue of *Semina* will not take place here, as this body of work has been given great attention in many sources elsewhere. However, aspects of *Semina* will be drawn upon for discussion into key insights of Berman’s personality, artistic mode and the focus of this study, transmission and the film *Aleph*.

<sup>14</sup> Poet David Meltzer argues himself that “Art is Love is God” “can be rotated easily for renewable and renewing meanings.” David Meltzer, “The Secret Text Lost in the Processor” in Eduardo Lipschutz-Villa, et al., *Wallace Berman: Support the Revolution* (Amsterdam: Institute of Contemporary Art, Amsterdam, 1992), 55.

focus.”<sup>15</sup> This focus culminates in a cohesive encoded message, arising from variable component messages, in the transmission of *Aleph*.

In an exploration of *Aleph*, then, it is important to return to this motto or mantra, and its placement in *Semina*.<sup>16</sup> While the phrase is considered to originate with Berman himself, it is in the last passage of an entry in *Semina I* (1955), “TO A TOCCATA by BACH,” written by Herman Hesse, that the essence of “Art is Love is God” can be most directly received. The intertwining of Art, Love and God within Hesse’s words, a favorite writer of Berman’s, speaks to the word-seeds of Berman’s motto, as they each permeated and carried through, in a streaming transmission, the life and the work of Wallace Berman.

*And further the great creative urge swings back toward God,  
And surges through the inner being of every creature  
Toward the Paternal Spirit.  
It becomes desire and need, speech, picture, song,  
It heaps world on world to form a triumphal arch  
Of the vault of Heaven!  
It is drive, it is spirit, it is struggle and joy.  
It is love.*<sup>17</sup>



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<sup>15</sup> David E. James, “Los Angeles Collage: Wallace Berman and Betye Saar,” in *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles*, by David E. James (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 278.

<sup>16</sup> The phrase’s first known appearance is in the flyer for Berman’s 1957 Ferus Gallery show, written in handwriting at the bottom of a photograph featuring Wallace and a young Tosh in his arm. However, it is in *Semina* that the phrase becomes more prolific, and in which it becomes most associated with Berman’s work and life.

<sup>17</sup> Herman Hesse, trans. Ruth Baker Day, “TO A TOCCATA by BACH,” *Semina I*, 1955. Obtained from a microfilm scan of *Semina I* in the “Wallace Berman Papers,” Archives of American Art (AAA). Accessed April and May 2011.

## Begin Transmission: Early Influences

Wallace Berman's life before his 1940s bebop jazz years exhibits key ingredients that later inform the construction of *Aleph*: a predilection towards language and signs, a symbolic and poetic interest in code, and the integration of personal experience with these aspects. Wallace Berman's attraction to secret signs, mysterious language and symbols of the unknown was evident in his earliest years. Growing up in the Boyle Heights neighborhood in Los Angeles (L.A.), after transplanting from Staten Island, NY with his family in the 1930s, Wallace found great beauty and intrigue in the Yiddish signage of the store windows in his predominantly Jewish-American neighborhood. He did not speak Yiddish at home, but his family ate kosher food and his father read Yiddish newspapers; Wallace recalled to friends later in life about how beautiful he thought the letters looked on the pages as a child.<sup>18</sup>

A foundational period in Berman's early life, however, began just as he was entering his jazz years, the years that made him into an artist: his brief enlistment in the Navy. While most accounts of Berman's life acknowledge his military "stint," few explain how he got there. In 1943, after being expelled from Fairfax High School for gambling, Berman began to dive deeply into the world of pool halls and dark clubs. Within a year of being expelled, he was arrested for marijuana possession and given a choice: go to jail, or join the Navy.<sup>19</sup> Berman chose the Navy, and he was enlisted in San Diego, CA in May of 1944. In a little more than a year, World War II would be over, but until then, Berman was to be trained in a position whose sole duty was the

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<sup>18</sup> In speaking about Berman's Verifaxes, Melinda Wortz states that "Berman, who was given the [Verifax] machine by a friend, was reportedly attracted to its sepia tonality because it reminded him of the printing of the Hebrew newspaper, *Daily Forward*, which his family subscribed to. Melina Wortz, "Los Angeles: The Zen-science of light," *Artnews* Vol. 76 (November 1977): 204.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Duncan and Kristine McKenna, *Semina Culture: Wallace Berman and his Circle* (New York and Santa Monica: D.A.P. and Santa Monica Museum of Art, 2005), 323.

mechanism of transmission: a sonar technician. Berman learned “how to listen for the faint blips and blasts of marine life and enemy vessels”, sound waves that indicated a form traveling through water, and at what distance and speed.<sup>20</sup>

Details on Berman’s time in the Navy are scarce, in part because the duration of his enlistment was cut short due to the outcome of an unfortunate event. Berman, it has been said, accidentally “blew up” a whale with a sonic transmission.<sup>21</sup> On December 8, 1944, Berman was honorably discharged from the Navy, after suffering a “psychological breakdown” as a result of this mistake.<sup>22</sup> No information is known about what Berman experienced or whether he received treatment, but whatever the case, it was certainly traumatic and left very negative feelings that lingered long afterwards.<sup>23</sup>

Both strange and terrible, this event is significant for two reasons. First, the 1957 raid of Berman’s solo exhibition at the Los Angeles Ferus Gallery, which resulted in Berman’s arrest for obscenity charges, is the only other event in Berman’s life outside of the Navy that indicates a

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<sup>20</sup> Claudia Bohn-Spector, “Rearguard Revolutionaries: Wallace Berman and Robert Heinecken,” in *Speaking In Tongues: Wallace Berman and Robert Heinecken, 1961-1976* (Pasadena: The Armory Center for the Arts, 2011), 14.

<sup>21</sup> Rebecca Solnit, *Secret Exhibition: Six California Artists of the Cold War Era* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1990), 7, and Colin Westerbeck, “Tongue In Cheek: The Strange Relationship Between Robert Heinecken and Wallace Berman,” in *Speaking In Tongues: Wallace Berman and Robert Heinecken, 1961-1976* (Pasadena: The Armory Center for the Arts, 2011), 5. While Westerbeck claims that the whale was blown up “with a sonic transmission”, it is unclear as to whether the transmission blew up the whale, or whether Berman himself blew up the whale, with something like a missile, after mistakenly identifying the whale as an enemy submarine. Whales can die as a result of sonar, which is the most likely of scenarios, but the exact details of this event are needed to confirm this fact.

<sup>22</sup> Bohn-Spector, “Rearguard Revolutionaries,” 21, footnote 52, and Duncan and McKenna, *Semina Culture*, 323.

<sup>23</sup> Colin Westerbeck argues that this breakdown was a “totally alienating” experience for Berman and that the “bad vibes” left from the experience “were intensified by other brushes with authority he had later in life” (5). It is here that one can note that Berman was also seen as a sensitive kid, a quality that perhaps carried over into his Navy experience.

drastic mental/emotional shift in Berman's recorded life history.<sup>24</sup> Second, this breakdown in the Navy was a result of an error – or perhaps of tragic accuracy – in transmission. Berman, still learning how to utilize and decipher sonar codes (or perhaps a bit too nervous with the controls or with his own abilities), likely misjudged a situation and, as a result, terminated a life with the blast of a sonic force. Wallace Berman may have realized from this experience that transmission should ideally be sensitively gauged – to not be too overt or aggravating (so as to be traumatic), but instead to be subtle and implicit.

Berman went on in his life after he was discharged, but he was clearly confused, depressed and disheartened by the experience. He entered the Chouinard Art Institute on a scholarship near the end of 1944, only to drop out within a year.<sup>25</sup> Berman was “drifting” in art school, according to Bob Alexander, and it was jazz and literature – especially poetry – that

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<sup>24</sup> Wallace Berman's Ferus Gallery exhibition of 1957 is one of the most highly discussed aspects of Berman's career, and one of the most defining (or at least infamous) moments of Ferus's beginnings in 1950s Los Angeles. A gallery which approached later fame with owner Irving Blum and the “Cool School” of Los Angeles artists, including artists such as Billy Al Bengston, Ed Moses and Robert Irwin, Ferus was founded in 1957 by artist Ed Kienholz and the young curator Walter Hopps. Wallace's show, a solo exhibition which opened June 7th, included his Hebrew *Parchment* pieces and his early assemblage works (*Panel* (1952-55), *Cross* (1957), *Temple* (1952-57), and *Homage to Herman Hesse* (1949-54), the latter of which came to embody the beginnings of what John Coplans called “California Assemblage.” Two weeks after the show's opening, however, the L.A. Vice Squad was called to Ferus to follow up on an anonymous complaint made about “obscene” art on display. Many sources on Berman recount the two officers being confused about the art on display and not being able to locate an offensive item, to which Ed Kienholz directed them to a small drawing scattered on the floor of the assemblage *Temple* from Berman's first issue of *Semina*: a drawing of a sexual peyote vision by the artist and occultist Cameron. The squad officers arrested Berman and shut down the Ferus Gallery, and Berman was held in jail for one day and found guilty of public obscenity charges in court the next, with the Hollywood actor and friend Dean Stockwell posting his bail. A greater account of this event is not necessary here; however, this event is noted here as a defining experience of Berman's life, one that ultimately left him deeply hurt and distrustful of the gallery system and public life that was required of an artist. See *Semina Culture* and *Secret Exhibition*, among other sources, for more information on the Ferus Gallery closure.

<sup>25</sup> Berman also attended the Jepson Art School briefly, sometime after 1945, the year that it opened, and before 1948, when he began working at the Salem Furniture Company manufacturing Shaker-style furniture.

pulled them back from the brink and “saved” them both. “I don’t think any of us would have made it [without jazz],” Alexander states. “We’d have all been candidates either for an insane asylum or suicide.”<sup>26</sup>

The story after this period is more well-known in California Beat history: Wallace becomes a zoot-suit-jazz aficionado who finds his first artistic calling in pencil drawings and bebop jazz album covers; he begins to work at the Salem Furniture Company in 1948 and plays around with materials in the making of his first sculptural assemblages; and with the 1957 Ferus Gallery show, the rest is history. But what can be taken from these early years – these pre-jazz years, the years before the canonized-Wallace-Berman –that are of the most importance in Berman’s beginning transmission? His early exposure to Yiddish written expressions forecast his interest in language, code and sign as an adult. His Navy experience, however, placed an experience of institutional (military/law) trauma, and initiated a lingering sensitivity, to the effects of the process of transmission.

#### Waves of the Radio-Ether: Modern Science Meets Arcane Mysticism

Among Wallace Berman’s literary choices,<sup>27</sup> one book in particular diverges from his usual artistic and poetic line and introduces the scientific properties of transmission.<sup>28</sup> Titled

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<sup>26</sup> Sandra Leonard Starr, *Lost and Found in California: Four Decades of Assemblage Art* (Santa Monica: James Corcoran Gallery, Shoshana Wayne Gallery and Pence Gallery, 1988), 57.

<sup>27</sup> See “Appendix I - Literary Library, Music and Film Sources” for more information on Wallace Berman’s library, including known literary and music sources.

<sup>28</sup> Amongst the pervading consensus of his life and personality, Berman’s high level of literacy was keenly known and greatly respected. He was known for handing a book to a friend or acquaintance (although “acquaintance” is a debatable term, once one entered the periphery of the Berman circle) and, without a word, eluding an implicit seal of approval, and a stamp of recommendation, to the recipient of the gift. Books amongst the Berman circle were highly circulated, and became treasured sources of hidden knowledge and poetic truth. The gesture of

*Volume IX: Radio-Mastery of the Ether* from the series *The Story of Modern Science* by Henry Smith Williams (1923), this small book series sought to describe the origins of scientific advancements in easy-to-read laymen terms. Williams uses the book to outline both the scientific principles of the early radio and the history behind its foundational technologies and inventors.

Yet with chapters like “The Necromantic Realities of Radio” and “The Radio Messengers Themselves,” mystical underpinnings are not difficult to detect in this scientific study. The word “ether,” for example, is used in the book to describe air or space in which airwaves travel, while in some mystical systems, “ether” can point to a heavenly region or space beyond the material, such as the expansive realm Ain Soph (literally, “no end” or the Infinite of space), or related to the element of Air in the Cabala.<sup>29</sup> For Williams, “no medium but the ether of space (or space itself if you prefer), is required as a channel of transit for the electromagnetic [radio] waves.”<sup>30</sup> Further, “the ether is always vibrant with many messages” which “are coursing not only through your room but through your body without saying so much as ‘by your leave’...bearing messages that are intelligible to listeners far away...”<sup>31</sup> The ether carries “the messages,” or the audio “code” of the radio in electromagnetic radio waves from the transmitting station to the radio antenna in a person’s living room. “When the radio waves rushing through the ether encounter the antenna of the receiving apparatus (either an outside antenna or an indoor loop-aerial), they

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giving a book, and the benefit of receiving one, placed one at the center of an underground artistic network.

The role of the book, then, is an important one to consider in Berman’s art, and, more broadly, in the burst of poetic and artistic energy of the 1950s and 60s in California. It is through books that many artists of this diasporic group reached their full artistic potential, and through sharing these sources gained greater insight into the core issues and ideas, ephemeral and ethereal, of the era.

<sup>29</sup> See Waite, *Sepher Yetzirah*, for more information on these elements in the Cabala.

<sup>30</sup> Henry Smith Williams, *The Story of Modern Science: Volume IX: Radio-Mastery of the Ether* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1923), 111.

<sup>31</sup> Williams, *The Story of Modern Science*, 5 and 20.



set up an alternating current at the transmitting station.”<sup>32</sup> With this alternating current, the messages are passed from one device to the other and transmit information back and forth. The magical quality of this act is not lost on the author, who exclaims that the radio is really “a marvelous ether trap made of a few pieces of wire and a fragment of stone!”<sup>33</sup>

For Berman, who likely picked this book up in the early 60s, its subject matter, and its implicit mystical connotations, were revelatory. The interaction between the scientific explanation of radio waves and the pseudo-mystical concept of the ether likely resonated profoundly with Berman. The relationship between the radio as a device for transmitting and receiving transmission and the Cabalistic and mystical understanding of the transmission of knowledge gives way to an obvious analogy in light of Williams’ text. Berman’s experience of scientific transmission, it can be seen, therefore evolved from the traumatic in his Navy experience towards the magical and spiritual encountered with radio transmission implicit in *Radio-Mastery* – away from military control and towards mystical variability and freedom.

Most tellingly, according to Shirley Berman, Wallace got the idea of his Verifax series *Radio/Aether* (1966-74) from reading *Radio-Mastery of the Aether*, which she calls a “small science book from the 1930s” titled “*Radio Aether*”.<sup>34</sup> The *Radio/Aether* series was a lithograph box-set released in limited edition by the printing company Gemini G.E.L. which included 13 prints of tiled Verifax collages, two by two in a square layout, with Berman’s most iconic artistic image: a hand holding a transistor radio [Figure 1]. The images inside the face of the radio change with each image, and are flanked by Hebrew lettering. The Cabala is circumscribed as

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<sup>32</sup> Williams, *The Story of Modern Science*, 11. Williams later distinguishes between the words “antenna” and “aerial”: “...the word aerial to include the entire mechanism, from sky to ground; and the word ‘antenna’ for restricted application to the wire-system up in the air...” (104).

<sup>33</sup> Williams, *The Story of Modern Science*, 14. Parallel’s to Berman’s use of stones later in his career are interesting to note here, especially often draped with chains and placed in boxes.

<sup>34</sup> Starr, *Lost and Found in California*, 115.

the running current, the most foundational transmission of the series, as the sole content of the cover of the lithograph box displays the Hebrew alphabet in a line, with the numerical correspondences of the letters indicated above each. This particular detail, I would argue, is a clear indicator of Berman's serious yet "intuitive" study and exploration of the Cabala as a system for understanding and utilizing Hebrew letters.<sup>35</sup>

Radio transmission, in Williams' book, is invisible and possesses an almost mystical sensibility. However, according to Williams, it is the antenna, strictly speaking, that transmits and receives, not the radio waves.<sup>36</sup> The builder of a home-radio has the ability to " 'tune' his instrument to receive the message" from the transmitting station.<sup>37</sup> The principles of transmission in radio, therefore, express that one must rely on points A and B – the origin and destination of the radio waves – to carry and translate the waves between each source. It is the radio device and the station that allow the waves to be deciphered, received, and further transmitted through the ether.

The antenna in this instance can indicate many things, but most especially, it is, metaphorically, the artist. The film historian Amos Vogel might as well have been writing about Wallace Berman and Beat post-WWII disillusionment when, in his 1974 book *Film As A Subversive Art*, he writes that the artist "is merely the most nakedly sensitized antenna extended towards our collective secrets. In poetic, oblique, mysterious shapes he inevitably reflects (or prefigures) an era of disorientation, alienation, and social revolution and leads us to knowledge

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<sup>35</sup> This argument, Berman's use and artistic framing of the Cabala, will be discussed in further detail in the later sections "The Cabala/Kabbalah/Qabalah in History and in Art" and "Berman's Use of the Cabala: Casual or Serious?"

<sup>36</sup> "There is just as much difference between radio antennae, transmitting and receiving, and electro-magnetic (radio) waves, as there is between piano strings and sound-waves." Williams, *The Story of Modern Science*, 153.

<sup>37</sup> Williams, *The Story of Modern Science*, 19-20.

without utilizing the tools of reason. It is up to us to learn to decipher his secret communications and warnings.”<sup>38</sup>

Indeed, it is the artist who receives and deciphers the code, for him/herself to transmit to others through the “radio waves” of art. The transmission is both the content of the message (the radio waves) and the beginning and end transmitters/receivers of transmission (the artist, God, the viewer, etc.). “Wallace Berman,” Merrill Greene states, “lives in an aether-ocean of images fed from all sources and flowing in all directions at once.”<sup>39</sup> Berman is the artist-as-antenna in the “aether-ocean of images” – and it is in his most archetypal template, the radio, that the first form of transmission in *Aleph* arises out of a unique artistic medium: the Verifax collage.

## Verifax Collages

### Breakdown of the Film: Introduction to Verifax

The series of scenes that follow the opening of *Aleph*, of a man shooting up heroin,<sup>40</sup> are rapid in succession and obscure in their juxtapositions. A close up of the outside of a building, focusing on a decoration on a door or an electrical switch, is dwelled upon as a running current

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<sup>38</sup> Amos Vogel, *Film As a Subversive Art* (New York: Random House Books, 1974), 22. Interestingly, this statement is likely to have been influenced by “Introduction to the Second Edition” of Marshall McLuhan’s *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Signet Books, 1964), xi, where he states: “Ezra Pound called the artist ‘the antennae of the race.’ Art as radar acts as ‘an early alarm system,’ as it were, enabling us to discover social and psychic targets in lots of time to prepare to cope with them.”

<sup>39</sup> Merrill Greene, quoted in Kaplan, “*Aleph Beat*,” 221.

<sup>40</sup> This is identified by Louis Kaplan as Robert “Bob” Alexander, Wallace Berman’s close friend and a Beat poet in his own right, who was a prolific narcotics user, but later, in the section “The Beginning and the End,” I will complicate this identification by tentatively identifying the person shooting up heroin in the introduction as Wallace Berman.

of indeterminable black splotches and lettering (Letraset) run over the center of the image.<sup>41</sup>

From this, a still image of a bald man in a suit and tie, wearing large earphones and a blindfold inside of an airplane cockpit, appears,<sup>42</sup> followed by a very brief, full-color shot (approximately a half second) of the cover of William Burrough's 1953 novel *Junkie*.

The first appearance of Wallace Berman's own artistic endeavors is encountered right after *Junkie*: a series of Verifax collages, beginning (and lingering) with an image of Flash Gordon inside of Berman's "transmission" archetype of the hand holding a transistor radio [Figure 2].<sup>43</sup>

The Verifax collages proceed further and more rapidly after the Flash Gordon image: a monster with huge bug eyes,<sup>44</sup> a picture of a woman's legs from the hips down [Figure 3], a flash of Flash Gordon again, and a ventriloquist with his dummy [Figure 4].<sup>45</sup> This section of film further displays swaths of red paint; remnants of Letraset lettering in long strings of characters or words; and choppy discolorations, scratches and marks that dance across the film celluloid.

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<sup>41</sup> This image, interestingly, is on color film; this is somewhat of an anomaly in the film footage, as there are only two recognizable sections on color film, with the *Junkie* cover described below being the second section. David E. James identifies the second color image to be "an electric switch" on pg. 279 of his book *The Most Typical Avant-Garde*.

<sup>42</sup> This blindfolded man is identified by Louis Kaplan as the author and poet William Burroughs. Kaplan "Aleph Beat," 202.

<sup>43</sup> This particular Verifax image, with Flash Gordon in the inside of the radio, was also later made into a colored Verifax called *Portrait of Kenneth Anger* (1968-69), and the lingering of the film on this image is perhaps no coincidence. The image of Flash Gordon, and the comic book character from which the image was based, was an archetypal male figure that was revered by Anger, as well as Andy Warhol, and Berman's nod to Anger in this Verifax is validated further in the filming of this collage for *Aleph*.

<sup>44</sup> The source, and exact identification, of this image is yet to be known.

<sup>45</sup> This image has been identified as Edgar Bergen, the ventriloquist, and his famous puppet Charlie McCarthy, from the Charlie McCarthy Show. Thanks to Caroline Jones for identifying this reference.

“The Hand That Holds the Radio That Sees”<sup>46</sup>: Verifax & Transmission

Outside of *Semina* magazine, Verifax collages are the most widely known, and most widely discussed, artworks by Wallace Berman.<sup>47</sup> In 1964, the artist Bill Jahrmarkt, a neighbor of the Berman’s, gave Wallace an old Verifax photocopier, a machine that by the mid-1960s was an already outdated reprographic technology. While architects most especially used the Verifax at its prime in the 1950s for blueprint duplication,<sup>48</sup> Berman sought a very different purpose for the machine: to create unique and original artwork through reproduction. In a recent description of the process by Richard Cándida Smith, Berman was known to have “built the collages layer by layer by rerunning the paper through the system to add another image. While the paper was still wet, he often rubbed out sections or applied other chemicals by hand to alter the image.”<sup>49</sup> The Verifax, therefore, was used by Berman to reproduce images where an external frame – most famously a hand holding a transistor radio<sup>50</sup> – would be replicated, while the images placed inside would change from frame to frame. Each image printed would contain a hand holding a transistor radio with a single interior image, and each of these collaged images would then be

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<sup>46</sup> Dennis Hopper, speaking about Wallace Berman’s Verifax collages, quoted in Kaplan, “*Aleph Beat*,” 207. Also quoted in Colin Gardner, “The Influence of Wallace Berman on the Visual Arts” in Eduardo Lipschutz-Villa, et al., *Wallace Berman: Support the Revolution* (Amsterdam: Institute of Contemporary Art, Amsterdam, 1992), 86.

<sup>47</sup> Historian Christopher Knight loosely translates Verifax as “true facts,” based on the Latin *verus* and *fac simile* joined together. Knight correlates this meaning with Berman’s use of Latin in his early assemblage sculpture works, including an inscription on *Cross* reading “factum fidei.” Christopher Knight, “Instant Artifacts: The Art of Wallace Berman” in Eduardo Lipschutz-Villa, et al., *Wallace Berman: Support the Revolution* (Amsterdam: Institute of Contemporary Art, Amsterdam, 1992), 40.

<sup>48</sup> Cándida Smith, *Utopia and Dissent*, 283.

<sup>49</sup> Cándida Smith, *Utopia and Dissent*, 283.

<sup>50</sup> Berman, tellingly, began making Verifaxes with different prints of images on paper, transitioning into the repeated use of a portable television set before reverting backwards technologically to the transistor radio framing image. Shirley Berman states that Wallace thought that the hand in the ad “looked exactly like his hand”. Bohn-Spector, “Rearguard Revolutionaries,” 17.

tiled together in a grid form (two by two, four by four, or eight by eight were the most common). The series together, then, would make up one piece, and could be “read” in any direction and in any order by the viewer.<sup>51</sup>

The original image of the radio was taken directly from a Sony transistor radio ad in *Life Magazine*'s June 1964 issue. It was an image that signaled ubiquity, as the transistor was a technological device used by people in all walks of life in the 1950s and 60s.<sup>52</sup> It also signaled a move for Berman towards further exploring the concept of radio transmission. “Sounds,” as art critic Christopher Knight writes, “are transformed into pictures by the depiction of a transistor radio pulling invisible images from the aether and broadcasting them to viewers.”<sup>53</sup> The transistor radio emblemized transmission through a concrete, repeatable template, and offered the potential to explore hidden meanings within each image on the transistor's revolving dial face, or more aptly its “screen.”

The filmic properties and correlations applied to Berman's Verifax collages are plentiful and frequent. Critic Grace Glueck and curator Jane Livingston respectively called them “cinematic poems” that employ a “filmmaker's approach” in the 1960s,<sup>54</sup> and curator James

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<sup>51</sup> The other most common layout that was used was displayed in his Verifax series *Shuffle* (1967), where multiple hands with the transistor radios were fanned out on top of one another and often hand-painted [Figure 5].

<sup>52</sup> “With the mass production of transistors in the late fifties, radio became the medium you could enjoy anywhere, alone, outdoors, or under the covers (even if you were supposed to be asleep)...The largest generation ever – which was united almost everywhere by the radio.” Charles Kaiser, *1968 in America: Music, Politics, Chaos, Counterculture, and the Shaping of a Generation* (New York: Grove Press, 1988), 191-192. Sony radio ad reference, including an image of original ad, can be found in Bohn-Spector, “Rearguard Revolutionaries,” 14.

<sup>53</sup> Knight, “Instant Artifacts,” 46. Also quoted in Kaplan, “*Aleph Beat*,” 207-208, who states that the radio Verifaxes become “visual transmissions through a sonic medium” when taken into the lens of the Cabala.

<sup>54</sup> Grace Glueck, “From Face To Shining Face” in *The New York Times*, September 29, 1968, in “Wallace Berman Papers,” Archives of American Art (AAA), accessed April-May 2011 (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art, Microfilmed 1988). Jane Livingston, “Two Generations in L.A.,” *Art in America* Vol. 57 (January 1969): 96.

Monte considered Berman “one part painter, one part photographer, and one part filmmaker, with the latter pushing on the first two for dominance” in 1968.<sup>55</sup> Berman himself also drew an implicit correlation by printing Verifax designs for the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Los Angeles Film-Makers Festival in the early 1960s. The Verifax radio collages, therefore, expressed a desire to create a feeling of filmic transmission out of a series of artworks. A description from arts writer Merrill Greene, writing in the 1970s, thoroughly encapsulates this “filmic” quality of the Verifaxes:

The effect is cinematic: we are asked to conceptualize time, to submit to sensations of expansion and compression, of nonlinearity, of swirling, shifting points of view, out of which emerges the awareness of a ‘conspiracy’ of objects and events, and active sur-reality. The viewer is inclined to surrender distinctions between fantasy and reality.

Meanings emerge as the viewer becomes involved in a series of rapid transformations in which space and time become shadows thrown across an imaginary screen, projections of a language perceived in the movements of its own creation.<sup>56</sup>

In *Aleph*, the collages become activated visual art-film hybrids, animating their own filmic movement as messages of transmission. In the first appearance of the collages in the film (within 30 seconds of the film’s beginning),<sup>57</sup> the radio “transmits” a series of images within the transistor: a picture of Flash Gordon, a bug-eyed alien, a woman’s legs, Flash Gordon again and the 1920s and 30s comedy ventriloquist duo Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy. The Verifaxes, once static on a wall, now simulate pure radio transmission. Wallace Berman projects

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<sup>55</sup> James Monte, *Wallace Berman: Verifax Collages* (New York: Jewish Museum, 1968), 2. Monte’s quote also in “Wallace Berman Papers, Archives of American Art (AAA),” Accessed April-May 2011 (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art, Microfilmed 1988), and Kaplan, “*Aleph Beat*.”

<sup>56</sup> Merrill Greene, “Wallace Berman: Portrait of the Artist as an Underground Man,” *Artforum* Vol. 16 (February 1978): 60.

<sup>57</sup> This time is measured through the Ubuweb.com version of this film, which is 7 minutes 42 seconds, at 18 frames per second (fps). <http://ubu.com>.

visions outwards through Verifaxes, but it is through their activation on film that the collages reach their full transmitting potential.

With his artistic exploration of the Verifax machine, Berman entered the most publically visible period of his artistic career. Irving Blum, the owner of Ferus Gallery after Walter Hopps, took a great liking to Berman's composed Verifax artworks and began to show them to other people. By early 1966, Berman's Verifaxes landed on the January cover and spread of *Artforum*, and within two years, he was displaying his work at the Robert Fraser Gallery in London (1966) and the Jewish Museum in New York (1968). But by the end of the Jewish Museum exhibition, Berman retreated again from the spotlight, back into his private life in the artistic and countercultural enclave of Topanga Canyon, on the western rural edge of Los Angeles.

At the Jewish Museum show, however, Berman spoke a few rare words to Grace Glueck of *The New York Times* about his Verifaxes, and their explicit resonance, in the form of the transistor radio, to the concept of transmission in the Cabala:

The images all relate, but I can't tell you what they mean... That would be like translating poetry. The transistor image is a kind of vehicle. It provides a contemporary thread.

Kabbala: transistor – I like that association of old and new.<sup>58</sup>

Meaning is present, and it is multiple. The transistor is the 'vehicle' of Cabalistic meaning. Connectivity is paired with obscurity. The Verifaxes speak to the individual in unique ways; the transmission is personal. In the words of Lewis Kaplan, "In the Verifax collages and in... [the collages in] *Aleph*, Berman uses a modern portable invention, the transistor radio, as a means to convey an important meaning of the Kabbalah as a mode of transmission."<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Grace Glueck, "From Face To Shining Face," 1.

<sup>59</sup> Kaplan, "*Aleph* Beat," 208.



In the context of Kaplan's argument, the Verifax and its appearance in the film *Aleph* most certainly express the meaning of Cabala as "transmission," and a mode of transmission, in the work of Wallace Berman. However, this argument, I contend, does not go far enough. While *Aleph* represents Berman's interest in the Cabala's role as a 'mode of transmission,' it is also *itself* a transmission. Additionally, the film's relation to ideas of transmission extend beyond the Verifax collages to encompass all visual representation in the film, and as such, *the entire film* is *about* transmission. It is the transmission of Berman's core ideals, his personality, his personal life, including family and friends, and the world around him as he saw it in the 1950s and 60s. *Aleph*, then, is a film *about* transmission and a transmission *in and of itself*.

The Hebrew 'Sections' of *Aleph* and the Cabala

Breakdown of the Film: Enter Beth (and Cabala)

Suddenly, the face of a live person appears, a light-haired white woman, bright and somewhat joyful emerging from the darkness.<sup>60</sup> The camera lingers on her face and her upper chest as she directs her attention to the left of the camera's gaze, letter remnants pass over her filmic body. The camera scans her quickly from her face to her torso down to her legs and back, enough to show her shift to the right and be cut off by the next scene, a close-up image of an unknown figure, perhaps from a sculpture or painting, with long dark hair, wearing a white gown

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<sup>60</sup> This woman is most likely identified as DiDi Morrill, a friend of Wallace Berman and a Beat poet/artist. Identified by Andrew Lampert in conversation, November 9, 2011, at Anthology Film Archives, New York.

and a white blindfold.<sup>61</sup> The live woman then comes back, her face once again flashing across the screen, cutting quickly to an upper body shot of her dancing, a series of windows behind her giving the impression of a room. The camera scans her body quickly as she dances to music you cannot hear, except perhaps the music that may or may not accompany the film (more on that later).

Then a symbol appears, on a black ground with no other frame of reference: Beth (Bet), the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the letter B in English, and the number 2 in the Hebrew system of the Cabala [Figure 6]. The appearance of this letter signals a pause from the live-action footage and popular and aesthetic images before it. This is, for the first time in the imagery of the film, the introduction of language, an introduction of a transmission of Cabalistic signs.

#### The Cabala/Kabbalah/Qabbalah in History and in Art<sup>62</sup>

The origins of the Cabala are in some ways as obscure as the system itself. Many of the Cabala's ideas have been attributed to writings from Biblical times (the early centuries A.D. (C.E.)), but the formal creation of a doctrine of thought may also date back to Neo-Platonic and Pythagorean

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<sup>61</sup> Further future research is needed to identify this image, as well as many other images present in the film, which are likely sourced from a wide range of popular magazines, nudist and porn magazines, journals, and books of many kinds.

<sup>62</sup> For the purposes of this discussion, I will be using the term "Cabala" to designate this Jewish mystical system. There are a few reasons for this choice: 1) Qabbalah is typically used as a spelling in Western Hermetic traditions of occultism, 2) Cabala derives from the term "cabal," meaning a secret organization, which ties metaphorically into the "underground" community of poets and artists in the West Coast Beats that Berman helped in part to establish, and 3) I would like to distinguish this system from the popular Kabbalah practiced today with the advent of the Kabbalah Centre, famous for converts like Madonna and John Travolta. While the term "Kabbalah" is most often used for this mystical system, for clarity I will use "Cabala" in this paper to distinguish the ancient mystical system from the Kabbalah Centre today. The exact spelling of this word is up for debate, as each Hebrew letter has several English equivalents, thus making a particular spelling the "official" spelling difficult.

influences from the 6<sup>th</sup> through 11<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>63</sup> The Cabalistic concept of the world being “constructed on numbers and letters” was, according to the Surrealist writer and religious/mystical scholar Kurt Seligmann, influenced by Greek philosophy.<sup>64</sup> As a system, the flowering of interest and further development of the Cabala goes back to the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries in Spain, where figures like Abraham ben Samuel Abdulafia helped to create an esoteric system whereby each letter of the Hebrew alphabet stood for a numerical value: Aleph (also spelled Alef), the letter “A” in English, for example equals 1. It was also in the 13<sup>th</sup> century that the *Zohar*, the “pillar of Cabalistic wisdom,” was developed into a more concrete form by the scholar Moses de Leon.<sup>65</sup> With Christian Humanist scholars searching for a “philosophical or metaphysical system that could free them from the medieval bonds of Aristotelianism,” the Cabala was additionally taken up by figures like Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Cornelius Agrippa and Robert Fludd in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>66</sup> These scholars began to blend Jewish mystical thought with a wide range of alchemical and magical/occult connotations. Pico della Mirandola combined elements of Neoplatonism, Hermeticism and the Hebrew Cabala into a system “using the power of Hebrew names and numbers” that “seized on the word – on language itself – to produce material realities, as it were, magically.”<sup>67</sup> Later, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, two foundational texts on the Cabala – Knorr von

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<sup>63</sup> Kurt Seligmann, *Magic, Supernaturalism and Religion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971 edition), 233.

<sup>64</sup> Seligmann, *Magic, Supernaturalism and Religion*, 233.

<sup>65</sup> Seligmann, *Magic, Supernaturalism and Religion*, 233.

<sup>66</sup> Seligmann, *Magic, Supernaturalism and Religion*, 231.

<sup>67</sup> Pico’s practice combined Christian ideas with the Hebrew Cabala to produce a new blend of “Christian Kabbalah,” which applied Christian names to correspondences from the Hebrew Cabala. This inspired what the historian France A. Yates calls “Practical Cabala,” which “invokes angels, archangels, the ten sephiroth which are the names or powers of God, God himself, by means of which are similar to other magical procedures but more particularly through the power of the sacred Hebrew language.” The Franciscan friar Francesco Giorgi of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries went on to more thoroughly develop the “Christian Kabbalah” influence of Pico’s work. Frances A. Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), esp. 33-44, quoted in Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of*

Rosenroth's *Cabala Unveiled (Kabbala Denudata)* (1677, 1684) and Stephan Rittangel's Latin translation of the *Sepher Yetzirah (Book Yetzirah, or the Book of Formation, whose origins are said to be in the 6<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> centuries)* (1642) – were published and became highly influential for the study of the Cabala in the centuries to come.

At the most basic level, the Cabala is, in the words of Seligmann, “a metaphysical or mystical system by which the elect shall know God and the universe.”<sup>68</sup> Strings of Hebrew words could be formed and related to one another based on the numerical value assigned to each letter.<sup>69</sup> Each value could be added together in a whole “word,” leading to the possibilities of new words with similar values. Thusly correlations could be made between words and their total numerical values. Every letter is therefore embedded with seemingly infinite possibilities of a greater understanding of the universe, and of God, through the numerical meanings of the Cabala. However, it is not simply these values of letters that is important in this system. David Meltzer, a Beat poet and friend of Wallace's who thoroughly studied the Cabala, emphasizes the system's multi-dimensionality of interpretation: “It is a four-dimensional alphabet. Each letter represents a literal self, a number, a symbol and an idea.” The Cabala can therefore form “infinite combinations” of

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*Mind & Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 30.

<sup>68</sup> Seligmann, *Magic, Supernaturalism and Religion*, 232.

<sup>69</sup> “Scripture is interpreted not only through study of its text and individual words but also through the relationship of its letters and numbers to one another.” Stephanie Barron, Sheri Bernstein, Ilene Susan Fort et al., *Made in California: Art, Image, and Identity, 1900-2000* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California and Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2001), 213. Additionally, Fredman describes how David Meltzer first read Scholem's book to try to find out why Robert Duncan felt that the book was important, only to be bored until he began to read Scholem's chapter on Abdulafia. Stephen Fredman, *Contextual Practice: Assemblage and the Erotic in Postwar Poetry and Art* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 115. Also see David Meltzer, “The Door of Heaven, the Path of Letters,” in *Wallace Berman: Retrospective, October 24-November 26, 1978*, by Hal Glicksman et al. (Los Angeles: Fellows of Contemporary Art, Otis Art Institute Gallery, 1978) for a brief summary on Abdulafia's work.

meaning when placed amongst other letters in the creation of words.<sup>70</sup> Additionally, as Ilene Susan Fort states,

The Kabbalah presents a highly arcane theology describing an unknowable Godhead and its representation in ‘emanations.’ According to Jewish mysticism, it was through the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet that God created the universe, so to know that alphabet was to understand the creative act.<sup>71</sup>

The “creative act” of God, interestingly, was in some ways reflected in the malleable and interpretive nature of the Cabala. The influence of other systems of thought, such as Gnosticism and Stoicism, forced early Cabalists to reconcile their Cabalistic interpretations with the holy books of Jewish Scripture. In that process, they changed the value of some letters and the spelling of some words to align themselves with the ideas that they read into in the texts.<sup>72</sup> While this act may be translated as controversial, or even heretical, to a doctrinal system, the flexible nature of the Cabala was in fact built into its formation. Its basis in interpretation, through the multi-faceted expressions of its letters, numbers and words, places its structure as not only a mystical system – interpreted on the basis of the experience of the individual – but also as a magical system, and therefore as an art in and of itself.<sup>73</sup> “The practical Cabala”, Seligmann writes, “is nothing else but magic, endeavoring to induce marvellous (sic) effects through the power of the spoken word.”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Meltzer, “The Door of Heaven,” 92. Carolyn Peter draws an interesting parallel between the 4 images on each print of the Radio/Aether series and the definition of the Cabala by David Meltzer as a “four-dimensional” system. Whether this was an intended maneuver of Berman is unknown. Carolyn Peter, “Wordsmithing: Mixing the Verbal and the Visual in the Art of Wallace Berman and Robert Heinecken,” in *Speaking In Tongues: Wallace Berman and Robert Heinecken, 1961-1976*, ed. Claudia Bohn-Spector and Sam Mellon (Pasadena: The Armory Center for the Arts, 2011), 37.

<sup>71</sup> Ilene Susan Fort, “Altered State(s): California Art and the Inner World” in *Reading California: Art, Image and Identity, 1900-2000* (Los Angeles: University of California Press and Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2000): 46.

<sup>72</sup> Seligmann, *Magic, Supernaturalism and Religion*, 234.

<sup>73</sup> Beat poet Jack Hirschman argues that ben Abdulafia is, in fact, one of the first true artists with his creations of permutations in the Cabala. “The individuality of A. [Abdulafia] was precisely in

This somewhat magical quality of the Cabala within language was a particularly attractive to the California Beats and their poetic experiments of the 1950s and 60s, including the poets Robert Duncan, Jack Hirschman, David Meltzer and Stuart Perkoff, among others. However, there are also other artistic precursors of the Cabala that are worthy of note. The 16<sup>th</sup> century engraver Robert Fludd was not only an astronomer and philosopher, but was also intensely interested in the proto-Medieval practice of alchemy and the Cabala as it relates to mapping man's body and mind on the cosmos of God.<sup>75</sup> His most famous etchings deal with conceptualizing the primordial creation of Genesis and the Jewish mystical Tree of Life, visible in the massive volume series *Utriusque cosmic historia (History of the Two Worlds)*, which embodied Fludd's understanding of the "Great World of the Macrocosm and the Little World of Man, the Microcosm."<sup>76</sup> While Fludd was more heavily concerned with alchemy, his personal cosmology reflected a strong Cabalistic basis that resonated throughout his artistic expressions. In addition to Fludd, some scholars of William Blake have contended that Cabala was of integral importance to his mystical etchings, particularly as it relates to his print *Laocoon* of around 1820. Others, however, assert that Blake's use of Hebrew letters show a greater level of ignorance in

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this: that he is the first Hebrew 'artist' – using the modern sense of the term – because he is cruxed at a paradox of Poetry and God." Jack Hirschman, "On the Hebrew Letters" in *TREE: 2* Vol. 2 (Summer 1971): 40.

<sup>74</sup> Seligmann, *Magic, Supernaturalism and Religion*, 234. This is also represented in the three primary methods of the "symbolic" Cabala: 1) Gematria, which is a "process of discovering relations between words through calculation of their numerical values"; 2) Notarikon, which is "to consider Hebrew words as consisting of abbreviations, each letter of a word being the initial of another word"; and, most notably, 3) Temurah, which "transposes and alters letters or words", such as in an anagram. Seligmann, *Magic, Supernaturalism and Religion*, 235-236.

<sup>75</sup> His interest in the Cabala stemmed from Rosicrucianism, an early Christian mystical order that borrowed interest in the Hebrew Cabala and applied it to Christian mystical understandings.

<sup>76</sup> Albanese, *A Republic of Mind & Spirit*, 46.

understanding Cabalistic meanings – an accusation that will later be applied to Berman and his use of Hebrew.<sup>77</sup>

Elements of the Cabala and other mystical systems can be further traced into artistic expressions in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, revealing a pervasive thread largely obscured in art historical study. Marcel Duchamp's film *Anemic Cinema* of 1926, with its spinning letters and numbers, is said to have been informed by alchemical and Cabalistic thought, two fields that Duchamp was known to have had personal interest in.<sup>78</sup> A more direct example contemporaneous with Berman is the work of Barnett Newman, whose interest in the Cabala inflects his minimal "zip" paintings with a search for the primordial in the essence of Creation.<sup>79</sup> While he used understandings of Cabala and Jewish mysticism overtly in titles of his paintings, such as *Onement*, *Genesis*, *White Fire* and *Black Fire*, he only subtly acknowledged the Cabala's

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<sup>77</sup> "Some argue that the dozen or so Hebrew inscriptions in Blake's etching and watercolors show that Blake was fluent in Hebrew. But close analysis of the works...reveals that Blake had not even mastered the letter *alef*. Reading Kabbalah in Hebrew without knowing the first letter of the *alef-bet* would be as implausible as tackling "Finnegan's Wake" with barely a grasp on the English alphabet." Menachem Wecker, "Did William Blake Know Hebrew?," *The Jewish Daily Forward*, accessed November 19, 2011, <http://www.forward.com/articles/120109/>. Berman has been compared to Blake by commentators, including John Coplans, who contends that "Berman can be very easily linked to Blake in the manner in which he enters visually into the realm of poetry." John Coplans, "Los Angeles: Object Lesson," *Artnews* Vol. 64 (January 1966): 67.

<sup>78</sup> Maurice Tuchman, "Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art" in Maurice Tuchman, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985* (New York: Abbeville Press & Publishers, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1987), 47. While it is unknown as to whether Wallace Berman himself saw this film, he did attend Duchamp's retrospective at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1963, where he likely met Duchamp, as Tosh Berman recalls meeting Duchamp at the exhibition (Tosh Berman, "Wallace and I," *Blastitude* Issue #13 (August 2002), accessed February-May 2011, [http://www.blastitude.com/13/ETERNITY/wallace\\_berman.htm](http://www.blastitude.com/13/ETERNITY/wallace_berman.htm)). Merrill Greene also relates Berman to Duchamp, stating that "Indeed, Berman and Duchamp are much alike. Both loved to play jokes on the viewer/voyeur by drawing his attention to something 'there' to indicate the 'not there,' just as often drawing attention to the 'not there,' while begging the question of whether the 'not there' was 'there' in fact!" Greene, "Wallace Berman: Portrait of the Artist," 61.

<sup>79</sup> "The Jewish Experience in Art," *Artforum* Vol. 64 (May-June 1976): 45. Solnit also calls Berman "a low-rent L.A.-Hebraic Marcel Duchamp." Solnit, *Secret Exhibition*, 5.

presence in his work.<sup>80</sup> Even in a plan for a synagogue, displayed in an architectural show at the Jewish Museum in 1965, Newman made very few statements about the plan's inspiration – the Cabalistic structure of the Tree of Life – and “kept this preoccupation private.”<sup>81</sup> The historian Thomas Hess suggests that Newman's silence about the Cabala was “not secret” but “masked,” simply not talked about. “I think that if anyone had asked him a direct question about it, he would have given them a direct answer. Nobody did.”<sup>82</sup> Newman's subtle reluctance to not discuss the Cabala parallels Berman's near-total silence about its impact on his work.<sup>83</sup>

In its translations as “tradition,” “reception” or “transmission,” the Jewish mystical system of the Cabala acts to create a channel of transmission from the divine to the human through the interpretation and symbolic associations of the Hebrew language. As the artist is the antenna of society, then God, in the Cabala and in Gnostic thought, is the broadcast station, sending out a signal of divine truth that can be picked up by the artist. Yet this signal is also interpreted in its reception by the artist, and as such, it is in the making of meaning that God's act of Creation is made manifest through language. It is through the Hebrew language, and the

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<sup>80</sup> *Onement*, for example, refers to the idea of wholeness, but also to At-Onement or Atonement, in reference to the events of Yom Kippur, and Cabalistically, to the “ideal moment for meditation” on Creation, or Genesis. Thomas B. Hess, *Barnett Newman* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1971), 53.

<sup>81</sup> Hess, *Barnett Newman*, 114.

<sup>82</sup> Hess, *Barnett Newman*, 114. Hess admits that he may be “pushing the Kabbalist interpretation too far,” but that he also left many clues in his titles and possessed “several books on the Talmud and on Kabbalism in his library” (56-57). In this way, Newman's exploration of the Cabala was perhaps parallel in some ways to Berman's experience, a discussion that will follow in the next section.

<sup>83</sup> But this hesitation is also, in turn, symptomatic of two entirely different aspects of this art and its place in art history. First, that mysticism and mystical thought in art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, outside of Abstract Expressionism's embrace of Native American spirituality, was largely ignored or went underground in a growing secular artistic culture in America; and second, that in many ways, the hidden or “masked” quality of Cabalistic reference was precisely written in the tenets of the system – the secret knowledge of the few. This last point, in a sense, is what embodies the experience of the artist harkening back to the Romantics: the individual experience of imaginative transcendence.



multivalent associative meanings pregnant in each letter, that messages are transmitted and received. But what does this mean for Berman's use of Hebrew in the film *Aleph*? In order to understand the role of Hebrew as a structure of the transmission of meaning (messages) in *Aleph*, two aspects must be further addressed: first, how Berman was influenced by the Cabala, and second, how his interest – and application – of Hebrew and the Cabala in his work manifested in his attribution of a personal symbol: the first Hebrew character Aleph [Figure 7].

#### Berman's Use of the Cabala: Casual or Serious?

Some commentators, including Tosh Berman, Wallace's son, have speculated that Wallace became interested in Hebrew merely out of curiosity and nostalgic intrigue for his Jewish-American background. Scholar Stephen Fredman additionally theorizes that Berman's use of Hebrew letters in the 1950s and 60s served to "draw attention to the death" of Yiddish speakers in general in L.A. and the genocide of the Holocaust in a post-World War II world.<sup>84</sup> These theories are certainly compelling, and contextualize Berman's expressions within a larger historical milieu. Berman's personal background, in other words, undoubtedly contributed to his attraction to the use of these letters in his art; however, it is also through friends and literary reference, in addition to his initial curiosity, that lead him towards studying Cabala as a mystical system.

Very little is known about how exactly Berman came across the Cabala, or who first introduced it to him, but there is a great deal of evidence that his interest likely arose from two places: reading literature and poetry that he found himself and that was lent to him by a myriad of

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<sup>84</sup> Stephen Fredman, "Surrealism meets Kabbalah: Wallace Berman and the *Semina* Poets" in Duncan and McKenna, *Semina Culture*, 47.

friends and acquaintances, and from discussions arising within his group of friends.<sup>85</sup> Art historian Matthew Baigell argues that Berman most likely learned of Cabala from Gershom Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (translated 1954), since material on the Cabala was otherwise difficult to find in the 1950s and 60s,<sup>86</sup> yet Berman also had other books on the Cabala in his library after his death, including *The Wisdom of the Kabbalah* by Dagobert D. Runes (1957) and *Kabbalah* by Rabbi Levi L Krakowski, which may have been published as early as 1937.<sup>87</sup> Nonetheless, the greater influence of these texts on Berman was quite likely a direct product of conversations with friends, particularly the poets Robert Duncan,<sup>88</sup> David Meltzer, Jack Hirschman and Philip Lamantia.

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<sup>85</sup> Some commentators, including Tosh Berman, Wallace's son, have speculated that Wallace became interested in Hebrew merely out of curiosity and nostalgic intrigue for his Jewish-American background. Growing up in the Boyle Heights neighborhood in Los Angeles (L.A.), after transplanting from Staten Island, NY, Wallace spoke to friends later in his life about the beauty of the Yiddish signage in the store windows of his predominantly Jewish-American neighborhood. He did not speak Yiddish at home, yet his father read Yiddish newspapers, and he had recalled to friends later how beautiful he thought the letters looked on the pages. In speaking about Berman's Verifaxes, Melinda Wortz states that "Berman, who was given the [Verifax] machine by a friend, was reportedly attracted to its sepia tonality because it reminded him of the printing of the Hebrew newspaper, *Daily Forward*, which his family subscribed to. Wortz, "Los Angeles," 204. Ferus Gallery owner Walter Hopps alludes to Berman being inspired to begin work on his Hebrew parchments and other Hebrew forms after a visit to see Robert Duncan and the artist Jess at the King Ubu Gallery in San Francisco in the early 1950s. Hal Glicksman et al., "An Interview with Walter Hopps" in *Wallace Berman: Retrospective, October 24-November 26, 1978* (Los Angeles: Fellows of Contemporary Art, Otis Art Institute Gallery, 1978): 11.

<sup>86</sup> Matthew Baigell, *American Artists, Jewish Images* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2006): 117.

<sup>87</sup> "Wallace Berman Papers." Archives of American Art (AAA). Accessed April-May 2011. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art, Microfilmed 1988. The date for Krakowski (spelled "Krakowsky" in the AAA files) is unknown in the files, but there is evidence to suggest that Krakowski began publishing materials in English on Kabbalah "as early as 1937." Micha Odenheimer, "Haaretz: Latter-Day Luminary," Kabbalah.info, accessed December 10, 2011, <http://www.kabbalah.info/engkab/kabbalah-worldwide/haaretz>. In addition to these authors, Carolyn Peter states that Berman was also "particularly interested in the German Jewish author Jakob Wassermann as well," according to a conversation Peter had with Meltzer about Berman. Peter, "Wordsmithing," 32.

<sup>88</sup> Stephen Fredman contends that "Kabbalah made its way into the Semina circle primarily through the advocacy of Robert Duncan," while also describing how Philip Lamantia had a personal friendship with the Surrealist and heavy Cabala thinker Kurt Seligmann when Lamantia associated with the Surrealists (especially Andre Breton) in New York and L.A. in the post-war

References to the Cabala also inflected texts that were influential to California Beat poets, such as “Journey to the Land of the Tarahumara” by the Surrealist Antonin Artaud, where Artaud wrote that “there is in the Kabbalah a music in Numbers, and this music which reduces material chaos to its prime elements...And all I beheld seemed to be governed by Numbers.”<sup>89</sup>

The central consideration of *Aleph* in a discussion on Cabalistic influence lies in how to interpret Wallace Berman’s depiction of Hebrew letters. Tosh Berman contends that Wallace saw the Hebrew letters in *Aleph* more as “graphical” characters than as Hebrew letters with Cabalistic meaning.<sup>90</sup> While this aspect may have propelled Berman into looking at Hebrew letters as a potent visual device, this aspect alone, I argue, did not keep him coming back to these letters as a repeated source of poetic and artistic material. What remained for Berman was a curious sense of the archaic obscurity of the letters, and their expression perhaps only deepened when their origin in a system of mystical interpretation – the Jewish Cabala – was explained to Berman in greater detail by a small number of Beat poet friends.

Yet the skepticism over Berman’s interest and exploration in this mystical system lead to a series of important questions: did the Cabala really matter to Berman? If not, why did he use the letters? And if so, what message, or messages, was he trying to convey? “Intuitive Kabbalah,” a designation made by David Meltzer in the 1970s to describe Berman’s use of the system, is only a partially accurate description of what one could argue is Berman’s method of utilizing the Cabala.

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period. It is through these poets, according to Fredman, that Berman learned about a “myriad” of “modern and occult literary ideas and forms.” Fredman, *Contextual Practice*, 102-03, and Fredman, “Surrealism meets Kabbalah,” 45.

<sup>89</sup> Quoted in both Fredman, *Contextual Practice*, 113, and Fredman, “Surrealism meets Kabbalah,” 46. It is essential to note that “all” Artaud “beheld” was under the influence of peyote, as he participated in a peyote ritual in the mountains of Central Mexico in the 1930s. The role of drugs amongst the Surrealists, especially opium, is an important correlative to the Beat’s use of narcotics (especially heroin) and marijuana, and unfortunately cannot be discussed here due to space and topic constraints.

<sup>90</sup> Conversation with Tosh Berman, Son of Wallace Berman. August 9, 2011, Los Angeles, CA.

On the one hand, some historians use this term by Meltzer to deride any Cabalistic tendency in Berman's work – an assertion that does not consider the full scope of his art works, including his film, nor the literature that he owned on the subject.<sup>91</sup> Berman's contradictory descriptions of his work to friends also do not help to clarify to his intentions.<sup>92</sup> On the other hand, the term "intuitive Kabbalah" has often been used in conjunction with the poet Jack Hirschman's "Kabbalah Surrealism," an employment of the Cabala as a primary resource for poetic interpretation.<sup>93</sup>

Berman, I contend, exists in a (perhaps unstable) middle ground, as both an amateur Cabalist and as instituting an "intuitive Kabbalah" of his own devising. After categorizing Berman as practicing an "intuitive Kabbalah," David Meltzer goes on to state that "The Kabbalist isolates himself from the Kabbalah in order to enter it as if entering Eden, clear, unattached to systems. The Kabbalist exiles himself from Kabbalah in order to create it again."<sup>94</sup> In the traditional practice of the Cabala, the student learns the system and then seeks to discover his or her own path through personal interpretation and use – a path likely very appealing to the

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<sup>91</sup> Matthew Baigell is one historian who uses this statement, which he quotes from Meltzer's article in *Wallace Berman: Retrospective*, to dismiss Berman's use of Hebrew as an exploration of the Cabala, claiming that the only way to study the Cabala is as a "serious" study (Baigell, *American Artists*, 117). See Appendix I – "Literary Library, Music and Film Sources," for a full list of sources that Berman kept on the Cabala.

<sup>92</sup> Berman himself has derided claims that his work has greater Cabalistic meaning (to Philip Lamantia, for example, with his parchment works) and yet has also spoken of his film as a "22-part Kabbalistic" film. However, this account is expressed in a different (and perhaps more accurate) light in another text, where the author Erik Davis states that "During one early show of the parchment paintings, Berman told the actor Dean Stockwell about the work's Kabbalistic dimensions; to the poet Philip Lamantia, who unlike Stockwell, actually knew something about Jewish mysticism, he denied any connection." Erik Davis, "The Alchemy of Trash: The West Coast Art of Spiritual Collage," accessed February-May 2011, [http://www.techgnosis.com/index\\_alchemy.html](http://www.techgnosis.com/index_alchemy.html). This may also be due to a difference in time, from the early 50s to the early 60s, where Berman's interest (and his art with Hebrew letters) increased. Starr contends that there is "no evidence from people who knew him over a long period of time that the interest extended beyond a generalized exploration of sign and symbol," but even this, I would argue, incorporates the key mode of the Cabala: that of deciphering and interpretation of signs and symbols. Starr, *Lost and Found in California*, 15.

<sup>93</sup> Fredman, *Contextual Practice*, 121.

<sup>94</sup> Meltzer, "The Door of Heaven," 100.

experimental/experiential Beats. Most of Berman's combinations of letters in his art do not create actual Hebrew words, and as such, many accounts of Berman's work have discounted the Cabala as a key influence. Yet for others, including Melina Wortz and David Meltzer, this fact does not rule out the significance of these letters within Berman's own sense of the Cabala. "Some of Berman's letters cannot be read as Hebrew," Wortz states, "so he was evidently articulating his own version of a mystical code, which is also part of the Jewish tradition in the Cabala."<sup>95</sup>

Wallace Berman's exploration, then, was in the tradition of a Cabalist, an individual endeavor stemming out of the roots of the tradition. While perhaps not a serious student, his use of Cabala was also not an uninformed practice distinct from the system's known symbolic and numerological correspondences. A copy of an occult and Cabalistic journal called *AION* in Wallace Berman's library shows an elaborate chart, written in Berman's handwriting, in the back of the journal with what appear to be Cabalistic calculations with numbers.<sup>96</sup> Further, Tzaddi, the Hebrew letter that Berman placed across the artist Jay DeFeo's chest in a 1959 photograph, has been found to be numerologically equivalent to DeFeo's name, a meaning that Berman,

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<sup>95</sup> Wortz, "Los Angeles," 204. This position is also explored in great length by the historian Carolyn Peter, in her chapter of the recent *Speaking in Tongues* catalogue at the Armory Museum in Pasadena. Peter, unlike Baigell, believes that "There is much speculation about how deeply [Berman's] investigations reached," but that "he certainly showed interest in the Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism) and other forms of the occult" and that he worked "intuitively...with the notions of the Kaballah." Additionally, she presents how Bruria Finkel, "a Kabbalah scholar and friend of Berman, has interpreted his artistic practice as being akin to the Kabbalah practice of permutations...Understanding that Berman was not a formal follower of the Kabbalah, both Finkel and David Meltzer still believe that his random approach was very much in the spirit of Kabbalah." This approach was touched upon earlier in discussing ben Abdulafia and his practice of permutations – the intuitive arrangement of Hebrew letters together to create "words" with specific numerical or divine meanings – which were "in the spirit of Kabbalah," even if actual words were not produced. Peter, "Wordsmithing," 37.

<sup>96</sup> Charles Stein, *AION: A Journal of Traditional Science* (No. 1, December 1964) in Archives of American Art (AAA), Wallace Berman Papers (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art, Microfilmed 1988). Accessed April-May 2011.

according to Robert Berg, “undoubtedly explained” to DeFeo.<sup>97</sup> These two aspects suggest that Wallace Berman was indeed interested in the mysterious poetic properties of the Hebrew letters as they relate to their numeric properties, to other associative meanings, to one another and to imagery, and he related to them on multiple levels: as a graphical sign and a multivalent symbolic carrier.<sup>98</sup> As he moved into studying the Cabala, its obscure mystical characteristics, combined with its interpretive value of symbols, providing an ideal venue in which to define a unique system – a system of transmission. Further, it is in Berman’s transmission that his personal symbolic self – the Aleph – attains a heightened level of importance, in his art and, most especially, in his film.

#### The Aleph: The Mystical Sign of Berman’s Art and Film

In the Cabala, the first letter Aleph (represented as א, and also spelled Alef) is perhaps the most important. According to the prominent Cabala scholar Gershom Scholem, the Aleph is “the silent source of all articulation” and “the seed of the entire alphabet,” the “spiritual root” of the rest of the Hebrew alphabet to come.<sup>99</sup> In the terms of Kurt Seligmann, “the number one

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<sup>97</sup> Robert Berg, “Jay DeFeo: The Transcendental Rose,” *American Art* Vol. 12, No. 3 (Autumn 1998): 71. Berg also discusses the relationship between the letter Tzaddi and the word *tzaddik*, meaning the “righteous man,” holy man, or “perfect human being” in the Cabala, similar to the representation of the “all-encompassing man” of the Aleph discussed in the next paragraph of this thesis (74).

<sup>98</sup> This duality of the graphic and the symbolic is also supported by Carolyn Peter, who states that, in addition to Berman’s interest and personal practice of the Cabala, he “was also very drawn to the graphic and aesthetic qualities of Hebrew letters.” Peter, “Wordsmithing,” 37.

<sup>99</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (translated 1954) pg. 30, quoted in both Fredman, *Contextual Practice*, 118, and Fredman, “Surrealism meets Kabbalah,” 47. Richard Cándida Smith additionally states that “Kabbalists taught that the Hebrew alphabet was an interpretive key to reading God’s intentions when he created the world. Interpreters of the kabbalah gave three primary readings to aleph: primal chaos as potentiality of meaning; Adam in his capacity as the bestower of names upon the divine creation; and the ox, the beast of burden

(Aleph)...is the most sublime and the most absolute manifestation of God: His thought and intelligence.”<sup>100</sup> It is a sign that spurs creation,<sup>101</sup> the symbol of Adam,<sup>102</sup> and as such is the perfect symbolic figure for artistic creation and the general expression of the imagination. For Berman, the Aleph character came to be a personal talisman: he painted the symbol on his motorcycle helmet (famously photographed by Dennis Hopper in 1964 [Figure 8]), signed letters to friends with the letter, and featured it as the sole theme of *Semina 7* (1961).<sup>103</sup> To Berman, the letter represented the “all-encompassing man” or “universal man.”<sup>104</sup> Berman’s use of this letter repeatedly in his work is, in its essence, a poetic and symbolic representation of what he strove to be – the “all-encompassing man” – and how he sought to understand his universe.

There are multiple interpretations of the letter Aleph in the Hebrew Cabalistic system and by Berman and others in the California Beat circle: the letter A, the number one, the “all-encompassing man,” the Tarot card of The Fool (or the Magician), the beginning of the universe, the element Air. The last signification, Air, points to an additional understanding of Aleph as the letter before articulation, residing in the throat, before sound, in the breath.<sup>105</sup>

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that brings order to the wilderness and yet can never be fully tamed of its own streak of inner wilderness.” Cándida Smith, *Utopia and Dissent*, 496, footnote 15.

<sup>100</sup> Seligmann, *Magic, Supernaturalism and Religion*, 243.

<sup>101</sup> “[Berman] was intrigued by the power of signage itself, both formally and conceptually, as a device capable of cutting through the specific into that open terrain where the viewer has room to bring his own associations into dialogue with the artist.” Starr, *Lost and Found in California*, 15.

<sup>102</sup> Cándida Smith, *Utopia and Dissent*, 221.

<sup>103</sup> *Semina 7* was titled “ALEPH/a gesture involving photographs, drawing and text” by Berman, which has a fascinating parallel to Thomas Hess’s concept of Barnett Newman’s “zip,” where the zip reenacts “God’s primal gesture” of creating “an independent shape – man – the only animal who walks upright.” Hess, *Barnett Newman*, 56.

<sup>104</sup> The original source of this statement is found in Greene, “Wallace Berman: Portrait of the Artist,” 53, but is also quoted in Baigell, *American Artists*, 117 and Cándida Smith, *Utopia and Dissent*, 496, footnote 15. The “universal man” comes from an oral history statement by Shirley Berman, in Starr, *Lost and Found in California*, 116.

<sup>105</sup> The early Christian Cabalist Athanasius Kircher once said that the letter Aleph “is symbolic of air & may be thought of as a breath-spirit,” a mystical sign that embodied the force of this phase before the formation of words or even the production of sound. Kaplan, “*Aleph Beat*,” 210.

In the 1950s, the modernist poet Charles Olson formulated a theoretical argument of the breath that echoes the mystical principles of the Air of the Hebrew Aleph. Once the rector of the famous modern art mecca Black Mountain College, Olson influenced the practices of a great number of poets, artists and filmmakers, most especially Stan Brakhage, the most active proponent for the preservation of *Aleph* after Berman's death.<sup>106</sup> In his pivotal essay "Projective Verse" (1950), Olson argues that the breath should guide the poet's actions in both written and aural forms of poetry, rather than "rhyme, meter, and sense."<sup>107</sup> The breath, Olson explains, leads the poet towards engaging with the "typographical" ("the line" as a unit led by the breath) and the element of sound ("the syllable" as a unit led by the ear) in his or her work.<sup>108</sup> The breath, then, animates the word of the poet for Olson. The potency of this activation before articulation, before expression, finds its source in the body and in perception. In the Hebrew Cabala, it is in the breath, the movement of the body just before articulation in sound, that the Aleph resides. In

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Additional references to these significations in Air can be found in Waite, *The Book of Formation*.

<sup>106</sup> Olson is particularly known for his theory of objectivism, a concept based on "the individual as ego", and a critique of Aristotelian dualisms of consciousness and the external world. The "reintegration of man as continuous with reality" was Olson's philosophical goal through a breakdown of "historically and socially conditioned consciousness and the grammar of its language." Olson's "immanentist" philosophy of poetry sought to eliminate the ego's place in between consciousness and nature, allowing the two to come in "direct contact" with each other and to "allow the poet to go beyond the imagination to unmediated perception." Poetry then, for Olson, is both an "articulation" and a vehicle towards achieving this contact, and as the ego is now ideally "displaced" from this contact, the "significant drama" moves into the physical body and the body's experience of perception. This leads Olson to a central concept of the role of the body, as what he called a "site of *proprioception*," in mediating perception: the breath. David E. James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton and Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1989), 40 and 41.

<sup>107</sup> Unknown, "Introduction," to Charles Olson, "Projective Verse (1950)," on Poetry Foundation – Essays on Poetic Theory (<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/essay/237880?page=1>). (Accessed March 29, 2012), 1.

<sup>108</sup> "The HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE/The HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE." Charles Olson, "Projective Verse (1950)," on Poetry Foundation – Essays on Poetic Theory (<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/essay/237880?page=1>). (Accessed March 29, 2012), 2.



the terms of Olson's modernist poetics, then, the Aleph is that which enters into the written and the auditory elements of language at a moment of utmost potential. The letter Aleph, within its multiple associative meanings, is therefore the center of potential – the seed, or 'Semina' – of the transmission of *Aleph*, embodied in the moment just before the message is created and transmitted.<sup>109</sup>

The Aleph, however, is not a singular entity, but a duality, represented in the forms of Dark and Light, the mutual poles of the Cabalistic universe. In 1945, the writer and poet Jorge Luis Borges engages in this duality in his fictional essay "The Aleph." In the story, the narrator comes to terms with the experience of seeing an infinite light inhabiting the dark void of a basement, an experience of such overwhelming profoundness that he decides never to speak of it again.<sup>110</sup> Further, in Gnostic thought, light and darkness express the dualistic universe, where the light of divinity contrasts the darkness of matter and chaos.<sup>111</sup> Similarly, for Robert Fludd, The Dark Aleph and the Light Aleph represent the dual nature of God:

God existed as a divine 'Nolunty' and 'Volunty' ... 'the first of these is defined as remaining in potentiality, or not willing (nilling), reserving itself within itself, and is represented by darkness and privation (Dark Aleph); and the second is the willing, or

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<sup>109</sup> Carolyn Peter argues that the "multiple meanings" of the Aleph "became wrapped into Berman's mantra, 'Art is love is God.'" Peter, "Wordsmithing," 33. I do agree with Peter here that the Aleph and its "multiple meanings" are absorbed into "Art is Love is God"; however, I seek to further argue in this thesis that the Aleph and its "multiple meanings" are not the sole meanings expressed in the cohesive message "Art is Love is God." My position considers that the messages of *Aleph* are numerous, and that the coalescing of this mantra – a result of the enacting of "noise" upon the process of transmission – embodies not only the multiple messages of the Aleph, but also the messages within the visual, experiential and historical components of Berman's film.

<sup>110</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, "The Aleph," in *The Aleph and Other Stories*, by Jorge Luis Borges (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1970): 15-30.

<sup>111</sup> Kurt Rudolph, (Robert McLachlan Wilson, trans.), *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, English translation 1980, 1985): 58.

acting of God, represented by the outpouring of life-giving, and sustaining, light (Light Aleph).<sup>112</sup>

The light and the dark of Wallace Berman's Aleph encapsulate duality, but the Cabala frames this as a necessary duality within the unity of God. Within the Aleph are the foundations of the universe – order and chaos, the revealed and the obscured, sound and silence – and these elements are distilled into this first letter, the unarticulated seed. Despite not being figured as a Hebrew letter section in the film, it is the Aleph that forms the core of Wallace Berman, and the core of the film *Aleph*. “The key to Berman’s art,” as Jack Hirschman states, “is the Aleph, that infinite letter of the breath of a man streaming invisibly on...”<sup>113</sup>

Berman understood the Aleph's centrality to the Hebrew universe, centered upon the creation of the Hebrew language and its mystical interpretations in the Cabala. And while the Aleph is dual-natured, it is also the unifying principle of these dualities; its unity is necessary to creation, to the birth of the Hebrew language, and to framing the structure of the universe. *Aleph* is circumscribed with this letter – both literally, on the 8mm's original canister, and figuratively through the film's naming – distilling the appearance of the 10 Hebrew letters, Beth (Bet) through Kaph (Kaf), that appear in his film into a streaming flow, into a transmission.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Catherine L. Albanese and William H. Huffman, *Robert Fludd and the End of the Renaissance* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 105-106, quoted in Albanese, *A Republic of Mind & Spirit*, 46-47.

<sup>113</sup> Jack Hirschman, Description for exhibition for “Wallace Berman” at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, April 30- June 2 1968, in Archives of American Art (AAA), Wallace Berman Papers (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art, Microfilmed 1988). Accessed April-May 2011.

<sup>114</sup> A painted or Letraset-style Aleph is stamped on the original film canister given to Stan Brakhage, and later to Anthology Film Archives, directly in the center of the circular canister. The absence of the Aleph in the film celluloid, in the Hebrew letter sections of *Aleph*, is complicated later on by its appearance in *Artifactual: Films From the Wallace Berman Collection*, discussed in the second half of this thesis.

## Letraset and Paint

The inclusion of Hebrew letters, contained within the Aleph of the film, operates as a measured structural device for framing a Cabalistic sense of transmission: associative meanings are “coded” through the letters of the divine (“God”) and transmitted through the medium of film (“Art”). The letters are singular, yet together they form a linear continuum, a unity embodied in the first of its letters, the (absent yet universally present) Aleph.<sup>115</sup> Another set of letters similarly activates the transmission of the film, but on the level of the film celluloid: Letraset transfer letters. Through Letraset, the celluloid explodes with encrypted, coded meaning, and through a distinctive counterpart, paint, the celluloid is embedded with gesture and made fluid and variable, capturing the continuous yet mutable nature of transmission.

Letraset is a transfer process, still available today, that applies type-face letters and numbers from a transfer sheet onto a surface with rubbing, usually applied with pressure from a lead or graphite pencil tip. Letraset, a brand of transfers released on the market in 1961, offered a popular, inexpensive mode for producing and “setting” type by hand on a surface with only the need for minimal artistic or graphic design skill.<sup>116</sup> Utilized particularly in design and architectural firms, Letraset was a method of typographical standardization that was available in a variety of font types. This standardization was Letraset’s primary asset, and one that Berman took to a very distinct, and even subversive, level.

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<sup>115</sup> This absence will be discussed further in a following section, “The Absence of Letters, The Meanings of Numbers: *Aleph*’s 10, Not 22.”

<sup>116</sup> Lorraine Ferguson and Douglass Scott, “A Time Line of American Typography” in *Design Quarterly* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, Design Quarterly, No. 148, The Evolution of American Typography, 1990): 49. This date, 1961, is important to note here in the process of producing *Aleph*; Berman could have in no way applied these letters to the film before 1961.

Specifically, Berman applied these letters directly onto the film, in single letters or in streams of letters, and even in single numbers (a “3” and an “8” can be found upon close inspection), after the film was processed.<sup>117</sup> These Roman letters and Arabic numerals exhibit distinctly notable differences to the Hebrew in *Aleph*’s transmission, as they appear directly on the film, while the Hebrew appear as singular numbers/letters, filmed floating on a black ground. When projected, the Letraset letters and numbers become indistinguishable characters dancing across the screen, animating a jumbled dialogue that, at projection speed, is too fast to be legible [Figure 9]. The lettering, further, becomes embedded into the filmic image itself through application, and even more so with the application of paint to sections of the film celluloid. The Letraset interacts with the paint in Berman’s post-production, and together they operate as a palimpsest to the streaming images underneath. Each layer is both distinct yet merged with the others. *Aleph*’s transmission is faceted yet unified on the level of the celluloid, a processed signal containing a multiplicity of messages.

The ways in which Letraset is transmitted through the film celluloid of *Aleph* are parallel to the operations of some of Wallace Berman’s greatest aesthetic influences: Symbolist poets. In her book *The Visible Word*, typology historian Johanna Drucker argues that the use of typology as an experimental artistic/poetic tool in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century conferred a unique position to written text, in terms of engaging both the malleability and appearance of language – what she terms the “materiality” of written type.<sup>118</sup> For example, the Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé, a

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<sup>117</sup> It is clear from examining the film celluloid that Berman used a variety of font types in Letraset, though how many and exactly which ones is unclear. Some sections of words or letters appear to be very similar to Helvetica Light, but others appear to have resemblances to Helvetica Medium, Helvetica Bold and Futura styles (Light through Bold). Letraset Limited, *Letraset* (London: Letraset Limited, 197-?), 34, 36, 38, 46-48.

<sup>118</sup> Drucker’s foundation in this argument is, she contends, the overall inability for linguists, beginning with (and most centrally based on) Ferdinand de Saussure, to acknowledge the integral role of the written word (“materiality”) in semiotics and other linguistic theory. Saussure’s

favorite of Berman, famously played on the jumpy, variable movements of a dice across a page – and the intrigue of going beyond “the tedious patterns of verbal presentation” – in his famous poem *A Throw of the Dice (Un Coup de dés)* (1914).<sup>119</sup> The poem, while still read left to right and indeed intelligible, dissolves the standard conventions of reading and the visual conventions of poetry by breaking with words in columns. Through a playful and seemingly “random” arrangement on the page, Mallarmé’s words and letters become significant in and of themselves, and their visual presentation becomes an artistic mode in which written forms are framed anew. Mallarmé’s *A Throw of the Dice*, and in some ways the poetic experiments of another figure in Drucker’s discussion, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti,<sup>120</sup> challenge the medium – the printed page – and the organizational structure of written language, emphasizing its intrinsic ability to be manipulated by the author-artist.

*Aleph*’s display of Letraset works upon its given medium, film, toward this same end.

The Letraset points to its anomalous nature in a medium dominated by images – even the Hebrew letters structurally exist as images loaded with their own potent meaning – while also

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semiotics, according to Philip Rosen, revolve around the concept of the *sign*, consisting of a *signifier* (“perceivable material which appears to stand for something”) and *signified* (“the mental state called up by the perceivable material - meaning”), which, according to Saussure, depend on *langue* (an “abstract, underlying system”) to produce meaning in the sign. Philip Rosen, introduction to *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, by Phillip Rosen, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 4. Drucker introduces other, later semiotic theorists such as Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida as foils to Saussure’s system of the “acoustic” *sign*, but most essentially, Drucker asserts that “...writing has been systematically excluded from the study of linguistics, which was nonetheless dependent upon written language as a basis on which to found its own studies.” Johanna Drucker, *The Visible Word: Experimental Typography and Modern Art, 1909-1923* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994), 26-27. This thesis will not take the whole of linguistic and semiotic theory in this argument of transmission, a task far too vast to do full justice here. Rather, Drucker’s comments on typology in Symbolist poetry will be briefly addressed in order to open out the ways in which Letraset, especially in projection, becomes a streaming visual poetic, drawing attention to its palimpsest – its layering – on the film and to a pervading play of order and chaos, intelligibility and unintelligibility, in the duality united in *Aleph*.

<sup>119</sup> Drucker, *The Visible Word*, 56.

<sup>120</sup> Drucker, *The Visible Word*, 105.

creating its own visual expression that Berman, the author-artist, manipulates into a streaming series of letters and words. As Mallarmé's *A Throw of the Dice* emphasizes, the positioning of text on a page is multi-dimensional and not a given standard, playing upon both the medium of application and the visual components of letters and words. Letraset's appearance on film subverts a standard presentation in its common paper-based application, and dissolves a normal reading of text into the merely perceptible, in the rapidly moving image of the film. Berman's Letraset is a coded series of messages – messages that, as will later be seen, of process, entangling commercial production with the hand-made, intelligibility with unintelligibility, chaos with order, into *Aleph*'s system of transmission.

While Letraset transmits a layer of coded messages that challenges its conventional application and reading in language, paint transmits expressionistic gestures. Paint has an extensive history in the production of color in film, and within this history Berman's use of paint is aligned most closely to the historical context of film techniques in early 20<sup>th</sup> century American film and American avant-garde film of the 1940s on. Stan Brakhage is most famous in the American avant-garde for his practice of painting directly onto the film celluloid, but there are many notable precedents, including Len Lye and Joseph Cornell in the 1920s and 30s, and Harry Smith from the 1930s into the 1950s. Lye experimented with color on film as an artistic practice and in theoretical terms, and he was deeply interested in the ways in which color could be manipulated to create its own film style and content.<sup>121</sup> Cornell hand-painted or tinted individual

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<sup>121</sup> Lye's 1935 film *A Colour Box*, in particular, presents an interesting example towards color and lettering as a filmic sense of transmission. The color, painted in patterns on the celluloid and undergoing Dufaycolor processing, dances and flows continuously from one moment to the next. Made for the British General Post Office to advertise a "cheaper parcel post," *A Colour Box* also prominently features text stamped in paint or ink onto the film celluloid, much in the typeset fashion of Berman's Letraset. As the painted color becomes transmitted across the film, the words that appear on the screen in a distinct, readable, horizontal orientation translate the message of the film, and its color, into an almost verbal system of communication. Letters spell

frames, which shifted the perception of the viewer between visions and realities.<sup>122</sup> Harry Smith painted series of abstracted shapes onto film celluloid and used a “batik” process to adhere images to the film in the first few films of his series *Early Abstractions*, from 1939 to 1946.<sup>123</sup> Paint’s role as a stylistic representation of transmission, in its purest form, is most evident in the works of Smith, where abstract designs modulate from frame to frame in minute detail, producing an accurate visual continuum when viewed projected.

Color does not operate as a dominating mode of visual production in Wallace Berman’s *Aleph*; rather, it permeates the film as a reflexive device, allowing its variability and concentration of application to draw further attention to the medium itself. For Lye and Smith, color was totalizing and created the content and the formal structure of each film, following the influence of European abstract painting in film of the 1930s, 40s and 50s.<sup>124</sup> Brakhage, as well,

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out “G.P.O.” and then the words “cheaper parcel post,” proceeding then to state the new rates of parcel post (“3 lbs. for 6d.,” “4lbs. 7d.,” etc.). Even with the inclusion of a vaudeville-style musical score, *A Colour Box* is a film unlike most films of its era in utilizing color and paint as an application of both words and designs. Len Lye, Textual introduction in “08. A Color Box (Len Lye, 1935),” YouTube, accessed March 19, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T33tS9FeS3U>.

<sup>122</sup> “The directions in the script [of *Monsieur Phot (Seen Through the Stereoscope)* (1933)] state that the film begins in black and white, shifts to color, and the continues to shift back and forth – color film, of course, did not yet exist at this time (films were either hand painted or colored by technical means).” Diane Waldman, *Joseph Cornell: Master of Dreams* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2002), 121.

<sup>123</sup> The American Federation of Arts, *A History of the American Avant-Garde Cinema: A Film Exhibition* (New York: The American Federation of Arts, 1976), 80.

<sup>124</sup> The work of the Dynaton group in California in the 1940s and 50s also echoed this work, particularly under the influence of experimental filmmaker Oskar Fischinger. Fischinger, Jordan Belson and other filmmakers (with Harry Smith on a peripheral level) were interested in synesthetic experiences on film, taking the synesthetic experience of art through figures like painter Wassily Kandinsky and seeking to replicate them in film form with abstract shapes and brilliant colors interacting with sound, especially classical music, and rhythm. “To this group the medium is not only an instrument, but an end in itself. . . They are exclusively concerned with so organizing shapes, forms and colors in movement that out of their relationship comes an emotional experience. Their aim is to manipulate images not for meaning, but for plastic beauty.” Lewis Jacobs, “Experimental Cinema in America (Part Two: The Postwar Revival),” in *Hollywood Quarterly* Vol. 3, No. 3 (Spring 1948): 283.

falls into a similar category, as his painted forms, particularly later in his career, are designs operating as the film's primary content.<sup>125</sup> Berman's use of color lies between Brakhage and Cornell. Like Cornell, Berman used only one or two colors to "tint" the film, but much like Brakhage, Berman left this paint tinting very loose and expressionistic, allowing brushstrokes to inhabit the canvas of the film celluloid [Figure 10]. The highest concentration of colors in *Aleph* most often occurs in sections of Verifaxes, where a singular color (red and brown are the most common) was painted unevenly over the film, producing a very painterly quality across Berman's most recognizable artistic images.<sup>126</sup> This uneven application of paint embodies both fluctuation and continuation within the film, offering a transmission that is fluid yet varied within a painterly construct. Additionally, it is here, within the frames of the Verifaxes, that Letraset and paint color most emphatically converge in representing *Aleph*'s layer of transmission, the radio signal transmitting on the level of its filmic canvas, the celluloid itself. The dual nature of these layers of transmission applied to the surface of *Aleph* gives way to another applied layer of dual-yet-singular transmission, in the realm of the auditory.

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<sup>125</sup> In his work in the 1980s and 1990s, Brakhage particularly utilized paint as a means in and of itself to produce content, but his use of paint and scratching techniques on top of developed filmic images dates back to his earlier work, such as *Dog Star Man: Prelude* (1961). In *Prelude*, Brakhage explored such techniques as "the use of black leader and solid color flash frames" and "the scratching, painting, dyeing, and baking of film and allowing it to mold." In this way, Brakhage's subjection of the film to various external elements informed Berman's practice (though there is no direct evidence suggesting that Berman discovered the act of painting on film specifically from Brakhage's work.). James, *Allegories of Cinema*, 48.

<sup>126</sup> These sections are also generally where the highest concentration of Letraset are applied, which speaks to not only the integral dialogue between these two post-development procedures, but also perhaps to an interest in the Verifax sections as the primary display of Berman's own work outside of film, his own personal images, represented in the Verifax.



## Music

The Aleph of the Hebrew language is the unity of duality, and within its structure is the *potential* for sound – a form of silence in the breath – and sound *itself*, as it transmits its articulation in language to the ear of the listener. As Aleph is the central source of transmission (the seed at the center of *Aleph*), so too is silence the seed of sound. In a dual series of Verifax collages, Berman created *Sound* (c. 1960) and *Silence* (1965-68), with the *Silence* series printed in photographic negative (black background, white print) and the *Sound* series printed positively, each in a four-by-four or two-by-two grid format [Figure 11]. Each series is the reverse of the other, formulating a dialogue when understood together. As Dark and Light represent two sides of one coin in the Aleph, so too do sound and silence embody an essential duality in Wallace Berman's work. The process of transmission intrinsically involves this duality of sound and silence, interacting together in a structural unity, to accurately transmit a message. It is with sound and silence that *Aleph's* transmission becomes layered onto, and mutable with, the visual within a key experiential mode: music.

To begin to consider the role of music in transmission, it is clear that one must begin at the beginning, in Wallace Berman's private screenings of *Aleph* for friends in the 1960s. Berman was deeply entrenched in the underground bebop jazz scene throughout the 1950s in Los Angeles, and as the frenetic energy of the 1960s was beginning to emerge, Berman extended his musical interests to everything from the Supremes to Vivaldi, from the Beatles to the Rolling Stones. Music drew people together – artists, poets and social deviants – in the California Beat culture, and Berman was at the center of that culture in the late 1950s and early 60s. It is important to note, therefore, that music and art (“Art”) were always joined together in Berman's

private life and desire for personal freedom (“Love”), and with this natural meshing of interests, his artistic creations were informed and inspired by his early life in the music world.

The transistor radio of Berman’s Verifaxes is only one of the varied potent examples of sound intertwining with image. Most especially, Berman was known to incorporate his profound interest in music into the screenings of *Aleph* in his home, typically for a small group or one person at a time, a process that effectively created a new viewing experience with each showing.<sup>127</sup> As a silent film, *Aleph* became activated in unique ways when accompanied by music. Choosing the music intuitively and in the moment, Berman would play the film with a “45” (7-inch, 45 revolutions-per-minute (rpm)) record like James Brown, Edgar Varese, or Moroccan folk trance music.

Watching *Aleph* at Berman’s home in the 1960s was likely a uniquely casual and intimate experience.<sup>128</sup> David Meltzer gives a very detailed account of the interior of Berman’s home in Beverly Glen, describing “mats on the floor and pillows and small mattresses” where people would sit, as well as a low, round table, a cluttered worktable in the corner where Berman would do his art, and a bulletin board filled with inspiring images and texts.<sup>129</sup> Meltzer also recalled

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<sup>127</sup> Tosh Berman, “Wallace and His Film,” in *Wallace Berman: Support the Revolution*, Eduardo Lipschutz-Villa et al. (Amsterdam: Institute of Contemporary Art, Amsterdam, 1992), 73.

<sup>128</sup> The practice of screening a film for a small audience or an individual in a person’s home was not uncommon, particularly among small pockets of artists, filmmakers and poets in the 1950s and 60s. Underground films on the West and East Coast were often screened in small galleries and individuals’ homes, places that could offer a venue for obscure filmmakers to show their work without approval (or, most especially, without censorship) from mainstream cinema and box offices. “What the underground (including Brakhage),” David James contends, “developed for consumption – the co-op system and practices of personal showings before small groups, which had more in common with a poetry reading than with the situation in which mass film was consumed – may in its earliest stages have seemed like an attempt to confront Hollywood or compete with it, but eventually became simply an alternative.” David E. James, “The Film-Maker as Romantic Poet: Brakhage and Olson,” in *Film Quarterly* Vol. 35, No. 3 (Spring 1982): 37.

<sup>129</sup> David Meltzer, quoted in Solnit, *Secret Exhibition*, 9. Important to note here is that the Berman’s lived in two primary residences in Los Angeles during the 1960s. The Berman’s

“music on the hi-fi” in his description: Bach, Bird Parker, Lester Young, Vivaldi, and Purcell’s ‘Come Ye Sons of Art.’<sup>130</sup> Berman liked the projected image “to be small, about the size of a TV screen,” and “to be seen by an audience of three or four at a time,” thus increasing the sense of visual and social intimacy.<sup>131</sup> To further add to the private, laid-back scene, alcohol and marijuana were common at get-togethers. As social life often merged with sharing art and ideas amongst friends, Berman’s home came to function as a Beat artist’s retreat, a venue free from judgment or institutional ire, in the tumultuous and confusing American post-war world.

The home environment of *Aleph* also fit seamlessly into what could be defined loosely as a Beat cinema, which sought to embody “a desire to capture – or re-create – an apparently spontaneous cinema.”<sup>132</sup> The viewing experience of *Aleph* was likely as spontaneous as any other event that may have taken place at the Bermans. Entering his home, one would likely have socialized some time with Berman before being invited to watch his film. Picking out the music he felt like listening to, if any at all, Berman would then turn on the small 8mm film projector and begin the experience of *Aleph*.

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Beverly Glen home at 10426 Crater Lane was their mainstay in Los Angeles until 1965, when the house was destroyed by a mudslide. After this time, the Bermans moved to Topanga Canyon, where they lived until after Wallace’s death in 1976. The Beverly Glen home, however, was the Berman’s most communal residence in Los Angeles, a place where friends could stop by whenever and were welcome in for as long as they decided to stay, while the Berman’s became somewhat more private after the move to Topanga Canyon. This account by Meltzer, then, would be different to some extent than the Berman’s residence in Topanga Canyon.

<sup>130</sup> Solnit, *Secret Exhibition*, 9.

<sup>131</sup> David Bourdon, “Art - Wallace Berman,” *Village Voice* August 19, 1965, 6. Also excerpted in J. Hoberman, *Home Made Movies: 20 Years of American 8mm and Super-8 Films* (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1981), 26-27.

<sup>132</sup> Jack Sargeant, *Naked Lens: Beat Cinema* (Berkeley: Soft Skull Press, 2008), 13. The word “cinema,” as opposed to “film,” is often considered in film history and theory to encompass the film itself, the experience of viewing the film, and its theoretical and historical contexts. “Following Christian Metz, we designate the ensemble of materials and social processes that produce the filmic text as *cinema*.” James, *Allegories of Cinema*, 6.

Each viewing of *Aleph* with music, both past and present, produces a different soundtrack and, with it, a different mode of understanding the film. The images on the film celluloid are in this process inflected with a variety of rhythms and tempo, depending on each music choice.<sup>133</sup> Without music, the film projector performs its own rhythmical, musical cadence, ticking through the sprockets and producing a certain “beat” on top of the visual imagery.<sup>134</sup> Rhythm and variation are at the heart of the personal experience of viewing *Aleph*, as the effect of music and its counterpart, the projector, binds the rapid montage projection of imagery to the aural in a syncopated dance of expanded experience. Indeed, this personal experience would have had some resonance with Gene Youngblood’s later description of “expanded cinema” in 1969, where the merging of the senses is produced in concert with filmic form.<sup>135</sup>

Transmission, then, is elevated to a level touching on the audible with the incorporation of music in *Aleph*. The visual forms of music that appear in the film – the Rolling Stones in concert, a photograph of Charlie Parker, and multiple uses of dancers throughout – carry the film further through this process, as the distinction between mediums becomes blurred and interlaced. Music is, in the experience of viewing *Aleph*, another added palimpsest layer created with

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<sup>133</sup> For instance, with James Brown’s “Papa’s Got a Brand New Bag,” a favorite song of Berman’s, the film can be to possess a greater emphasis on images that resemble dancing figures and a more pervasive swaying tempo, whereas when the film is played with its more contemporary soundtrack – an improvisational jazz song by John Zorn, as seen on the *Treasures IV: American Avant-Garde Film, 1947-1986* DVD box set – other qualities, like the cadence of Letraset over the underlying images, or the jumpy quality of the camera’s movements from scene to scene, appear to exude a more prominent effect on the viewer.

<sup>134</sup> “Only a few types of sound can be regarded without doubt as cinematic...[including] the case in which one hears the sound of sprockets acting as a commentary on the length each frame of visual image has in time.” Paul Sharits, from “Words Per Page,” in *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 263.

<sup>135</sup> “The synaesthetic mode...the viewer is forced to create along with the film, to interpret for himself what he is experiencing...Actually the most descriptive term for the new cinema is ‘personal’ because it’s only an extension of the filmmaker’s central nervous system.” Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1970), 64-65, 82.

Letrasets and paint on the celluloid: extraneous yet integral, variable yet continuous. However, while Letrasets and paint transmit coded messages and a dual-nature painterly construct, music echoes the signal's broadcast through *Aleph*.

The viewing experience of *Aleph*, however, has now gone beyond its original context. The film's interplay with sound expands dramatically when contemporary methods of viewing the film, with or without music, are considered. The contextual and technological options available to see *Aleph* today vary from live showings (at Anthology Film Archives, the film archives which has preserved *Aleph*, or other art-related institutions), to DVD (on the *Treasures IV: American Avant-Garde Film, 1947-1986* 2-disc box-set), to streaming online (Ubuweb.com or YouTube.com). With an option on *Treasures IV* to view the film with a specially-composed track by jazz musician John Zorn, or in its "original silent" form, the viewer is left to "self-curate" his or her own viewing experience – a process that is taken even further with online viewing and music programs such as iTunes. The variability of the experience is, in the age of unrestricted access, boundless.

Music transforms the viewing of *Aleph*, past and present, and emphasizes a pervading dialectic in the film: that while transmission is expressed most especially as a singular stream, the process necessarily contains facets that can complicate a cohesive picture of the film. As each experience in sound produced a unique experience of the film, a different film was "made" for the viewer each time. The film's constant malleability and evolution through distinctive expressions of musical rhythm help to place it as an object of process, a mutable transmission, by which both vision and sound are more clearly explored.

Within the multiplicity of meanings and functions of the Hebrew alphabet, the Letrasets, the paint in the expression of the film, does *Aleph*'s pairing with music, with an auditory form,

dissolve the possibility of a stable transmission? In all of its fluctuation, can the transmission of *Aleph* ever be conceived of as a coherent operation? With these questions, *Aleph*'s transmission becomes complicated, though, as I will argue, not erased. Complication, in fact, is most essentially the process of bringing new information to light, and, ideally, its incorporation into further understanding of a process. It is through this light, then, that this study moves towards the paramount and multivalent complication to Wallace Berman's *Aleph*: the unfinished object.

### Complications of Transmission: Leading Towards the Unfinished Object

#### The Beginning and the End

Structurally, the transmission of *Aleph* is, at first glance, most apparent in the thematic framing of the film, the beginning and end. In the first few seconds of the film, a man is shown, through a series of cut sequences, preparing his forearm to be injected with a needle filled with narcotics, most likely heroin ("junk" in 1950s parlance). The last few seconds, as well, appear to return to this sequence, more clearly showing one of Wallace's oldest and closest friends, the Beat poet and printmaker Robert "Bob" Alexander, injecting his arm [Figure 12]. This last sequence makes up almost the sole content of the last Hebrew section, the eleventh Hebrew letter Kaph (Kaf).<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> The only other images that appear in this section are a brief flicker of the Rudolph Nureyev and Margot Fonteyn footage from *Swan Lake*, broadcast on American television in the mid-1960s, and a clip of a cardboard cut-out (or an object to that effect) of Lewis Carroll's drawing of Alice from *Through The Looking Glass, And What Alice Found There* (1871), where Alice "fed her head" and expanded her neck "like the largest telescope that ever was." Kaplan "*Aleph* Beat," 203.

This formal device, the “framing” of the film with the injecting of heroin, initially appears to be a “recycling film loop,” in the words of Louis Kaplan, where the film cycles back upon itself.<sup>137</sup> For Tosh Berman as well, this framing device is a distortion to filmic time. “In my father’s favorite film, Jean Cocteau’s *The Blood of A Poet*,” Tosh Berman states, “this poetic classic starts with a building about to fall down and at the end of the film, the same structure is instantly destroyed. The interval exists only in seconds between the inception and fall of the building.”<sup>138</sup> Wallace’s *Aleph*, Tosh argues, echoes this mechanism: “Time is also distorted in Wallace’s film. What happens in between the two scenes of the individual shooting up narcotics...is a world exploding into images – light and dark.”<sup>139</sup>

What is suggested here is that *Aleph* becomes a repeatable filmic continuum, a closed transmission loop. However, the transmission of *Aleph* is continuous and faceted, even dream-like, but not a loop. The definition of a “film loop” implies that the first sequence would be repeated again in or after the end sequence, or that the “trip” (of heroin and the film) is begun and completed fluidly through an exact cut of film, from the first scenes to the last. In reality, neither of these actions takes place. What is really shown instead suggests an evolution of the film rather than a loop or a completion of a trip. Upon close inspection, the individuals depicted in each scene – a man with ear-length dark hair, shown only fleetingly and dimly in the darkness, and Bob Alexander, with a buzz cut and glasses – appear to be different people, and in fact, the first man, in hair style and facial appearance, has a distinct resemblance to Wallace Berman

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<sup>137</sup> This “recycled film loop,” according to Kaplan, is rather than a “linear narrative” because of this beginning and ending framing of heroin injection. Kaplan “*Aleph Beat*,” 202.

<sup>138</sup> Berman, “Wallace and His Film,” 75. C.G. Wallis also further explains this principle in an essay on *The Blood of A Poet*, “the total action [of the falling smokestack] is timeless or without duration, and is therefore an allegory of eternal objects rather than a story of particular things.” C.G. Wallis, “The Blood of a Poet,” in *The Kenyon Review* (Gambier, OH: Kenyon College, Vol. 6, No. 1, Winter 1944): 25.

<sup>139</sup> Berman, “Wallace and His Film,” 75.

himself.<sup>140</sup> The identification of Alexander as both of the men, a claim made by David E. James and others, would allude to a loop-type sequence, but with a palpable difference in appearance between the two figures, this structural model becomes even more unlikely.<sup>141</sup> The similarity between the two sequences is further complicated by the distinctness accorded to setting and angles. The introduction sequence is its own rapid montage of a room dimly lit with natural light from two windows, and multiple jagged cuts from a forearm to a profile of a face to other angles of the setting and the person in it. In the last scenes, in contrast, the camera is positioned at one static angle facing Alexander, while Alexander wraps his arm with a makeshift tourniquet, presses it on a nearby table, and releases the arm and tourniquet to the table, post-injection.

In this final section, though, a unique operation of what Kaplan and James intend for *Aleph*'s framing of transmission happens in miniature. Bob Alexander both prepares to “shoot up” heroin and finishes shooting up heroin, while flickers of other film content – Rudolph Nureyev and Margot Fonteyn dancing on television, Alice from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, expanding her neck (a.k.a. her consciousness) – echo the durational model just before. The last section Kaph can therefore be seen as a microcosm within the macrocosm of *Aleph*'s transmission. What Tosh Berman presumes of Cocteauian (and Serge Eisensteinian<sup>142</sup>)

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<sup>140</sup> This identification is based on a comparison of still images of the first heroin-shooting man with images later in the film of Wallace Berman's face, where the hair cut and facial structure appear to be very similar. This is a confusing discovery, however, as Berman was not known to do heroin, and was, in fact, known to be turned off by the destructive “junkie” lifestyle of friends like Alexander. If this man is not Wallace Berman – a completely positive identification is unlikely, given the dark shots of the man's profile – it may also be Philip Lamantia, another Beat poet, Cabalist and friend of Berman's, who was known for using heroin and was photographed showing his forearms. Duncan and McKenna, *Semina Culture*, 204.

<sup>141</sup> James, “Los Angeles Collage,” 279. Both Kaplan and Tosh Berman suggest the men are a singular individual, using the terms “an unidentified man” and “an individual,” respectively.

<sup>142</sup> The early 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian filmmaker Serge Eisenstein was the proponent of the structural technique of film *montage*. A term used throughout this thesis, from the French *monter*, “to mount,” montage consists of placing different cuts of images together in a film sequence, in order to create the effect of association through juxtaposition. See Sergei Eisenstein and Jay



looping, with the film being framed between two scenes of a man shooting up heroin, becomes a framing not of the entire film, but of the last section of the film, indicating a smaller scale, closed transmission within the open, continuous transmission of *Aleph*.

Whether Wallace Berman intended this sequence to be a loop, but was lacking in footage or resources to fully illustrate that effect, may perhaps never be known. One could argue that a loop effect is expressed in the mirroring of Verifax images and William Burrough's novel *Junkie* flashing in the first few seconds of the film and in the last seconds of the Teth (Tet, ninth) section of the film, but even this argument is dissolved when the film continues for two more sections. Yet what this contradiction reveals is how a formal device previously assumed in the film – the tight framing of the film through a sole heroin user – does, in fact, point to a complication of *Aleph*'s transmission, a complication that begins to draw the stability of the filmic object into question.

#### Transmission: Signal and Noise

The concept of transmission within the context of this study has thus far led to certain discoveries in its unfolding in Wallace Berman's film *Aleph*. First, transmission is a process in *Aleph* within which filmed images – particularly Verifax collages and Hebrew letter sections – and celluloid layers – Letraset, paint and music – appear as multifaceted and mutable. Further, these multiple representations are made continuous in a stream of code. This code is the basis of the transmission, and it is within a signal – from God, through a radio broadcast, or through visual representation – that code is transmitted.

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Leyda, trans., "A Dialectic Approach to Film Form," in *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory and The Film Sense* (Cleveland and New York: Meridian Books/The World Publishing Company, 1957), 48, for more information.

Transmission, while present in theological terms for centuries and in terms of the medium of radio since the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was heightened and accelerated on a technological level during World War II. As Berman was being introduced to sonar systems in 1944, scientists and mathematicians were in the midst of systematizing, theorizing and improving technological means for greater, faster, easier communication.

Effective transmission, on a technological level, was especially necessary in the war effort, and as such transmission and electrical communication became a central focus to many individuals working in the 1940s – including those in other non-technological fields. According to historian of science Peter Galison, the mathematician Norbert Wiener saw the potential in electrical communication technologies for war, such as the anti-aircraft predictor device, to further illustrate communications theories within the humanities and other sciences. This field became later known as cybernetics, “a science that would embrace intentionality, learning, and much else within the human mind.”<sup>143</sup> Communications theory, then, began an evolution forward (in some ways, back) toward applications across different fields, particularly interpretations in neuroscience and the humanities, that extended into the 1950s, 60s and 70s, even into the arts and popular culture.

One figure in particular, however, was championed for his theoretical contributions to transmission and communication theory, and became a major influence akin to Wiener: the American mathematician, electronic engineer and cryptographer Claude E Shannon.<sup>144</sup> In 1948, Shannon introduced the world to a new model of understanding communications in his essay “A Mathematical Theory of Communication.” In this text, Shannon creates a schematic of a

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<sup>143</sup> Peter Galison, “The Ontology of the Enemy: Norbert Wiener and the Cybernetic Vision,” *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 21, No. 1 (Autumn 1994): 229.

<sup>144</sup> Both of these men were also associated with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), which has a much more in-depth history with World War II and the military in general than will be discussed here. See Galison’s text for more information.

communication system, within which a few basic terms operate [Figure 13]. An “information source,” the location from which a message originates, proceeds to hand a message to the “transmitter,” a process that operates on the message to produce a signal for transmitting through a channel. The transmitter sends a signal across a channel that is received by a “receiver.” The receiver then translates the signal back into the message, which is then transferred to its “destination,” a person or thing that receives the message. Additionally within this system, a signal is always acted upon by a “noise source,” a process that can distort or alter a signal, and therefore the message being transmitted.<sup>145</sup>

Claude Shannon’s communications schematic became very influential in the years following 1948, and it is from this theoretical base that *A Communications Primer*, an instructional film made in 1953 by the architecture/design couple Ray and Charles Eames, takes its subject matter. Elucidating Shannon’s communications theory (and Wiener’s cybernetics) and applying its system to a broad scale of disciplines, including psychology, neurology, biology, economics and sociology, the film treats communication, and the transmission of information, as the basic function of human action, behavior, cognition and language. Transmission, it suggests, is the process of Shannon’s communication schema, yet the terms are explored in various contexts. This analysis takes place most particularly in the artist/viewer relationship, where the “information source” becomes the mind and experience of the artist, the “message” the idea of the art, the “signal” as the painting itself, and the “receiver” and “destination” being the viewer and his or her mind perceiving the art. Perception and experience, then, are broken down to the terms of communication. Communication, the film states, “is that which keeps any organism

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<sup>145</sup> See C.E. Shannon, “A Mathematical Theory of Communication,” in *The Bell System Technical Journal* (Vol. 27, July and October 1948, 379-423 and 623-656), 2. (<http://cm.bell-labs.com/cm/ms/what/shannonday/shannon1948.pdf>) (Accessed March 20, 2012).

together” and represents “the responsibility of decision” in the human’s relationship to technology.<sup>146</sup>

*A Communications Primer* also constructs the principle of noise in Shannon’s system as disruptive to a signal and therefore, the film contends, an “undesirable” effect in communicating a message. While it is unknown whether Wallace Berman was familiar with Shannon’s theories, or had ever seen the Eames’s film, it is in the 1950s and 60s that the integration of technology with ideas about human communication became pervasive and compelling – and where noise, for the Eames and others, came to be perceived as “undesirable” to a system.

Transmission does indeed possess complications in Shannon’s system. There are complications that can arise within the act of receiving, in the mechanism of the antenna. There are complications that arise in translation, of maintaining the integrity of the code throughout a signal. And there is the one complication that arise as a result of external forces, encapsulating both of the above complications into one: noise. It is in noise – the effect of distortion acting upon the communication system – that *Aleph*’s pre-post-production history as an unfinished, unstable object is framed.<sup>147</sup> Shannon’s theoretical system, in short, holds a key component to understanding *Aleph*’s mechanism of transmission: while *Aleph* represents transmission and operates as a transmission itself, it is also acted upon by an outside process – *Aleph*’s framing as

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<sup>146</sup> Ray and Charles Eames, “A Communications Primer (1953) by Ray & Charles Eames” (Prelinger Archives) (<http://laughingsquid.com/a-communications-primer-1953-by-ray-charles-eames/>) (Accessed March 20, 2012).

<sup>147</sup> “We now consider the case where the signal is perturbed by noise during transmission... This means that the received signal is not necessarily the same as the that sent out by the transmitter... If the channel is noisy it is not in general possible to reconstruct the original message or the transmitted signal with *certainty* by any operation of the received signal... Since, ordinarily, channels have a certain amount of noise, and therefore a finite capacity, exact transmission is impossible.” Shannon, “A Mathematical Theory of Communication,” 19-20, 47-48.

an unfinished, unstable object – producing a distortion, or complication, to the film’s process of transmission.

What is the significance of transmission and the unfinished, unstable object in the case of *Aleph*? Does transmission necessitate stability? Does the unfinished (and therefore unstable) object render transmission null and void? With *Aleph*’s unstable signification in its historical context, the mechanism of transmission becomes complicated. The unfinished, unstable object, however, does not eliminate or cancel the act of transmission; rather, it alters or distorts the message it transmits. In the terms of Claude Shannon’s system of communication, the unfinished, unstable object is the noise source that acts on the signal of transmission, creating the possibility for distortion of the signal.

Noise, however, is also an integral component of a communications system, always present in the process of transmitting a signal. It is not a negative effect within a system, but rather a process essential to communicating a message. In considering the unfinished and unstable components of *Aleph*, the effect of noise is made tangible in the process of transmission, and *Aleph*’s multiplicity of messages – such as “Art,” “Love” and “God” – streaming through the transmission signal, are made more accessible. In this way, the “undesirable” qualities of noise emphasized in the film *A Communications Primer* can be seen as relational to the “desired” institutionalized effect emphasized by the Eames’s – undisturbed, uninterrupted intelligibility. If, however, the effect desired from a transmission is cohesion and comprehensibility found within mutability and variability – an effect, I argue, of *Aleph*’s transmission – then the noise, as the unfinished, unstable object, can be further seen as an essential characteristic to a more complete historical transmission of *Aleph*. The full expression of *Aleph* then, is achieved through the integration of the unfinished, unstable object with the process of transmission.

## Part II: Pre-Post-Production: *Aleph*'s Unstable Signification

### (Re)Process: The Unfinished Object of *Aleph*

*Aleph* has been explored so far in this thesis as a process of transmission, a process that defines the film as a fluid procedure, both *mutable* and *continuous*. But what if the solidity of the object of this inquiry, the film *Aleph*, is challenged by the circumstances of its making – if the film is, in fact, unfinished? Further, what happens to an understanding of Berman's transmission in film when what we know as the “final product” of *Aleph* differs from the histories told of its making?

There are five primary complications to Berman's *Aleph* as it is seen today: 1) the visual representation of Berman's “film in progress” in his 4<sup>th</sup> issue of the mail-art magazine *Semina*, issued in 1959; 2) the revolving assignment of titles accorded to Berman's film; 3) the absence of a complete set of Hebrew letter sections, representing the entire Hebrew alphabet; 4) the further destabilizing of the filmic medium through Letraset letters, words and phrases, and the sculptural-izing of *Aleph* through Letraset and paint; and 5) the dichotomy of control and chance, and the ultimate undoing of the literal product of film, the film celluloid, through the process of projection. The first two categories speak to aspects independent of the film celluloid, yet all challenge the cohesive object that is assumed of the film now known as *Aleph*.

*Aleph* exists as an unstable document. When Berman put this film aside by the 1970s for other projects, it became an unfinished object, therefore possessing unstable meaning. Yet *Aleph* is framed today – by Louis Kaplan, David E. James and others – as a finished object, a deliberate

and rigorous process of Berman's own intention. The story of *Aleph*'s making, and its complicated un-making, illustrate the ultimate instability of this (assumed stable) filmic object. Yet this instability does not frame the demise of transmission. On the contrary, instability frames the overarching, ever-evolving process of *Aleph*'s transmission, as the unstable object becomes an essential complication, an integral bearer of meaning, in the broader historical account of Wallace Berman's *Aleph*.

#### "Film in Progress": *Semina* Magazine Film Stills

In 1959, less than 2 years after the Bermans moved to San Francisco from Los Angeles, Wallace produced a fourth installment of *Semina* magazine on his "beat 5 x 8 Excelsior hand-press." With a cover photograph of a blank-faced Shirley Berman and a pocketed interior of small, easily shuffled cards with delicate typeface pressing poetry into paper, *Semina 4* was similar to the previous issues in format and style. It is, however, an anomalous piece of paper included in this issue, and its significance to the legacy of *Aleph*, that shall be the center of the present analysis: a "pamphlet," so to speak, of Berman's "film in progress."

This piece of paper, triptych-folded, in *Semina 4* is the first known reference to Berman's film, and serves as a potent artifact of his initial intentions of the film. In a mail-art magazine whose dominant form consisted of small stock cards of poetry, the 8 ½ by 11" sheet folded three ways stuck out as visibly large amongst the other materials in the *Semina 4* packaging. The content of the printed sheet consisted of nine black-and-white film stills in a three-by-three grid.

A descriptive caption is pressed, in Berman's signature font style, in the top left hand corner: "Excerpt from a film now in progress / entitled 'Semina' by W. Berman" [Figure 14].<sup>148</sup>

Six of the film stills show recognizable figures from Berman's life, while three of the stills show other, more obscure figures and objects.<sup>149</sup> The film stills are personal, diverse and intriguing in juxtaposition to each other, with no clearly visible linear sequence, yet they all allude, though opaquely, to Berman's private life and thoughts. The presence of Shirley, Wallace's wife, whose face is reflected in a mirror in the first still (when read top to bottom, left to right), and his son, Tosh, playfully smiling in the last, emphasizes Berman's vision of his film within family – his most overarching expression of a central "Love," in a distinctly Beat sentiment of the family unit.<sup>150</sup> The most compelling aspect of these images, however, is the notable absence of most of these "stills" in *Aleph* as it is seen today. In fact, only two images

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<sup>148</sup> This pseudo-'pamphlet' represented a film that was "now in progress" to his readers, aka his friends and acquaintances. Yet it also, I would argue, did something else: by its very format and title statement, "Excerpt from a film now in progress / entitled 'Semina' by W. Berman," Berman was, in a sense, coyly marketing his film to his readership.

<sup>149</sup> From left to right, top to bottom, the film stills are, respectively: the side of Shirley Berman's face in a mirror amongst objects in Wallace's studio; Louise Herms, George Herms' first wife, with the tip of an opium pipe in her mouth; two hands lighting and holding an opium pipe; the face of a sculpture of a male, appearing to be Medieval in style/origins; a nun in a room; Patricia and Larry Jordan, with Patricia reaching into a film camera and Larry in profile; Wallace Berman leaning over something, looking into the camera; Wallace's face turned upwards, double-exposed with a close-up scene of a mantle with books; and Tosh Berman in a big floppy hat and coat, looking at the camera. See Figure 14.

<sup>150</sup> Cándida Smith describes in great detail the importance that Berman and others in the diverse California Beat community held to ideas of domesticity and family. "Berman positioned himself in society through the relationships he developed with his wife and son...domesticity became the focal point for defining both himself and the art that he created" (224). While I argue that the larger pop cultural society played an equal or greater role in Berman's life than Cándida Smith asserts, it is his home life, most assuredly, that grounded him. A higher degree of equality was also accorded to women in the Beat culture, as equal partners and as individuals capable of producing great art amongst a league of men (even as some traditional and practical roles, such as child-rearing and day-to-day home life, remained largely the wife's role – with the interesting exception of the Berman's, where Wallace cared for Tosh while Shirley worked). The domestic sphere, however, was an intimate and somewhat sacred ground (or a "magical kingdom" needing to be protected, in the words of Larry Jordan, speaking about the artist Jess and his poet partner Robert Duncan's home). Cándida Smith *Utopia and Dissent*, 224, 257, 265.



from this pamphlet are within the film in its present form: the image of friend Louise Herms with the opium pipe tip in her mouth (top middle) and the image of the two hands operating the opium pipe (top right).

What are the implications of the absence of seven of the nine stills in the film *Aleph* seen today? While this pamphlet can be seen as an intentional prototype, it is also a document consciously laid out to reflect Wallace Berman's vision (or at least *a* vision) of the film. The presence of only two of these nine images seen in *Aleph* today suggests either a disconnection between Berman's intention (or vision) laid out in images and the film's final product, or perhaps the loss of film footage that once displayed the other 7 images. The "excerpt" of the film, implying a unity between the nine stills shown, is left itself in an unstable state of "in progress." The earliest artifact of *Aleph*'s making is embedded within its own time, as a static document, yet one that historically reveals the film as constantly shifting definability. This shifting nature of the progressive visions of the film is further revealed within the written content of the pamphlet: the titling of the film as 'Semina,' not *Aleph*.

"Semina," "my movie/film," "Untitled" & "Aleph": The Evolution of Titles

That *Aleph* was not the original title of the film remains largely unexplained in the narrative of Berman and his film. In Berman's 1959 "pamphlet" of his film from *Semina 4*, the film is "entitled 'Semina' by W. Berman."<sup>151</sup> The "seed" that Wallace selectively disperses to his friends and acquaintances, in the form of *Semina*, was in essence to become a filmic extension, in the representative "seed" of the Hebrew alphabet, the Aleph.

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<sup>151</sup> Duncan and McKenna, *Semina Culture*, 57.

The title “Semina” appears in only one other source, the earliest review of Wallace Berman’s film, written by the film critic David Bourdon in the *Village Voice* in August 1965. Bourdon calls the film “Semina,” stating that “[Berman] began in 1955 to shoot a cinematic Semina,” and again referred to the film with the title “Semina” later in the review.<sup>152</sup> The title “Semina,” however, was disregarded sometime between the publication of the review in 1965 and Wallace Berman’s death in 1976; if it was not outwardly disregarded, it became somehow subordinated to Berman’s repeated reference to the film as “my film” or “my movie.”

Berman most often referred to the film as “my film” or “my movie,” according to sources, a fact that is expressed in a 1992 essay by Tosh Berman about his father’s film, “Wallace and His Film,” in the exhibition catalogue *Wallace Berman: Support the Revolution*. In this essay, Tosh refers to the film as *Untitled*, but contends that his father never really named it and instead talked about it as his film or movie. Tosh assigned the title *Untitled* after Wallace’s death, claiming that he was uncomfortable titling the film in place of his father. Tosh writes:

The film is called *Untitled* because this work had no established name. An early version was called *Semina*, after his small hand-printed publication of that name, but this title was neither spoken nor requested. He had always called the work ‘my film’ or ‘my movie.’

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<sup>152</sup> Bourdon, “Art - Wallace Berman,” 6. Bourdon was quoted in his original 1965 *Village Voice* article stating that the film was named “Semina,” yet interestingly the inclusion of an excerpt of Bourdon’s review in the film series catalogue *Home Made Movies: 20 Years of American 8mm and Super-8 Films* (1981) intentionally removes mention of this name. Bourdon states that “Semina’s tone is dispassionate, the flickering parade of images, having the elegant, unemphatic simplicity of a rock’n’roll beat,” while the *Home Made Movies* catalogue replaces “Semina” at the beginning of this sentence with “(The)”, and leaves out the entire sentence quoted above, the sentence including “a cinematic Semina.” Hoberman, *Home Made Movies*, 26-27. See the later section “(Towards a) Conclusion – Reconstructing the Film Object: The Question of *Artifactual*” for a full text of David Bourdon’s review. “Semina” as one title for Berman’s film is used in my text to distinguish it from Berman’s magazine, which I refer to as *Semina*.

For practical purposes I decided on *Untitled* as the formal title. I was not contented with naming a work after my father's death.<sup>153</sup>

*Untitled* then became the title, expressing the absence of an "established" title. However, *Untitled* is still very much a title – a title seemingly absent of direct meaning, but in the context of Berman's work, a potent reference nonetheless. Wallace's sculptural works are among the only individual art works that he assigned formal titles to, including his assemblages displayed in the 1957 Ferus show – *Panel*, *Cross*, *Temple* and his first sculptural work, *Homage to Herman Hesse* – and his white boulder painted with Hebrew, *Topanga Seed*.<sup>154</sup> Most of Berman's other works, especially his early jazz pencil drawings and his Verifax collages, are titled *Untitled*, with some subtitling in parentheses, varying from catalogue to catalogue.<sup>155</sup> *Untitled*, then, sought to serve its own purpose as a generalized title: to provide a blank slate, an obscurity or absence of meaning. In the way that Barnett Newman's titles evoked Cabalistic representations or mystical states of mind, Berman's un-titles expressed both the desire to avoid or conceal relatable meaning and to open all possibilities of reading to the viewer – to allow the work to be "filled" or not to be, to be interpreted with multiple meanings or to experience it for one's own self.

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<sup>153</sup> Berman, "Wallace and His Film," 73, and Conversation with Tosh Berman, August 9, 2011.

<sup>154</sup> The only known exception to this statement is Berman's assemblage collage, *Papa's Got a Brand New Bag* (1964), a two-dimensional collage that features James Brown's face inside a transistor radio in the upper right hand corner.

<sup>155</sup> This discrepancy may mean indicate that the subtitles were added later, either by Berman or by a cataloger (L.A. Louver Gallery, for example, lists subtitles for works). Some subtitles from catalogues can be quite telling, however, such as *Untitled (Faceless Faces)* (1963) or *Untitled (Man's Ear)* in the case of Verifax collages with rubbed-out faces, and one in which a man's ear is the first image, read from left to right, top to bottom, in the series. Also, two exceptions to this rule of the Verifaxes exist: *Portrait of Kenneth Anger* (1968-69), with a single, hand colored hand holding a transistor radio containing a picture of Flash Gordon inside; and *Scope* (1965), a very anomalous Verifax collage much in the same structure as the collage *Papa's Got A Brand New Bag*, with a very heavily collaged section on the bottom that leads to an open space on the top, with a group of three black veiled women walking towards an Aleph out of the erupting chaos below their feet.

However, the shifting name game did not end there. The final evolution, from *Untitled* to *Aleph*, was largely a result of the film's preservation. When the original film reel was taken by Brakhage and given to Anthology Film Archives, the film canister had nothing written on it except for a glue-applied Aleph symbol right in the middle.<sup>156</sup> The Aleph character sits in the middle of a circular structure, its framing device, its (Cabalistic) conception of the universe.

The name of the film became *Aleph* after the Aleph letter was pointed out, yet a conflict as to when this happened in the timeline of *Aleph* appears to complicate this picture.<sup>157</sup> The first known public presentation of *Aleph* was in 1981, when an Anthology Film Archives curator, J. Hoberman, produced a series of film screenings called "Home Made Movies: 20 Years of American 8mm and Super-8 Films." Berman's film was screened in a showing on May 1<sup>st</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> of that year and listed as *Aleph*, not as *Untitled*.<sup>158</sup> This detail suggests that Tosh may have reversed the titling of his father's film to *Untitled*, only to change his mind back to *Aleph* at some

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<sup>156</sup> Conversation with Tosh Berman, August 9, 2011, and Conversation with Andrew Lampert, Film Archivist, at Anthology Film Archives. July 19, 2011: Personal notes from phone interview. November 9, 2011: Personal notes from meeting at Anthology Film Archives, New York, NY. It is very likely, inspecting the original canister with the Aleph symbol, that this symbol was a Letraset transfer, due to its precision of shape and application. Berman used Hebrew letters applied to his Verifax collages and to his series of stones, and when viewed closely in person, a slight layer of glue can be seen over these letters. These letters, then, were likely applied from transfer and then layered lightly with glue to keep them preserved and in place. Not all of Berman's artistic use of Hebrew is the same. With *Topanga Seed* (1969-70), for example, the letters were painted on the rock, as can be seen in photographs and upon close inspection of the rock. It is interesting in and of itself to note where Berman used handmade processes where mechanical or typographical methods would be effective; in many of Berman's brightly-colored Verifaxes, especially the ones laid out in fan-like shapes of hands and transistors, the colors are hand painted, not applied via screen print, as reproductions tend to emphasize.

<sup>157</sup> Conversation with Andrew Lampert, November 9, 2011.

<sup>158</sup> Hoberman, *Home Made Movies*, 26. An earlier date of 1965 appears in a review in *The Village Voice* by David Bourdon, but it is not explicitly stated whether Bourdon saw *Aleph* in a private screening or publically. As Berman was still working on the film during this time, it is probable that the screening was private. The removal of the title "Semina" from these quotes, discussed in footnote 146, alludes here to the likelihood that *Aleph* was assumed to be the title at the point of the film screenings in 1981.

point between 1992 and the early 2000's, when *Aleph* began to be screened again by Anthology,<sup>159</sup> and most definitively by early 2005, when the Jewish Museum showed a looped DVD of *Aleph* in their galleries.<sup>160</sup> Tosh's un-titling was perhaps a practical choice, but its significance speaks further to the instability of the progressive re- (and maybe de-) naming of Berman's film.

One could here speculate on a few reasons why Berman never stabilized the title of his film. Perhaps he could not decide on a name or was never concerned with it, that he was unsure about the initial title "Semina" and therefore did not know what else to name it, or that it was part of his artistic style to not name his work, to keep a suggested meaning at bay. Yet what is most apparent within these procedures of titling and un-titling is a fundamental destabilizing of the filmic object, at the level of its historical framing of singularity. Known by many names, *Aleph* itself, as a film represented in a title, is left in a state of precarious ambiguity, leaving one to turn to its content to find cohesion and comprehensibility. The film's content, however, shows its own absences and complications, framed within three internal characteristics: *Aleph*'s Hebrew letter sections, its Letraset and paint application, and its editing process.

The Absence of Letters, The Meanings of Numbers: *Aleph*'s 10, Not 22

The absence of certain Hebrew letter sections – the letter "Aleph" itself, and the last 11 letters of the alphabet – points to a particular anomaly in *Aleph*. The film, a seemingly "whole" document today, is, in short, a fragment of its original intention. Intended as a 22-part

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<sup>159</sup> Andrew Lampert states that he first saw *Aleph* in a screening at Anthology in "the early 2000's". No records were found of screenings between 1981 and 2005.

<sup>160</sup> "Aleph: A Film by Wallace Berman, January 04, 2005-March 06, 2005," The Jewish Museum, accessed February-May 2011, <http://www.thejewishmuseum.org/exhibitions/Aleph>.

“Kabbalistic film,” *Aleph* today falls short by 12 letters [Figure 15]. What is the reason for this? And what does this detail lend to the signification of *Aleph*’s transmission?

The film, it may be seen, does not start sequentially, on what would be the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, Aleph; rather, the film’s first “section” begins on the second letter, Beth, around thirty-four seconds into the film.<sup>161</sup> The letter Aleph, I would argue, instead circumscribes the entire film, in the way that the letter Aleph circumscribes Berman himself – as a Cabalistic signifier of “oneness” and the ultimate essence of the universe, the highest possible expression of being. By starting on the letter Beth, Berman may have also instinctually been following the scriptural understanding of the Aleph in the most central sacred Cabalistic text, the Zohar, presented at the very entrance of this study: “*Although I begin the world’s creation with Beth, thou [Aleph] will remain the first of my letters.*”<sup>162</sup> To this end, the letter Aleph applies an overriding inscription to the whole of the film, breathing life through each frame’s flickering movements. Louis Kaplan explicates a similar position when he emphasizes how the Aleph’s absence “is very telling and links up with the silent and hidden aspects” of the letter.<sup>163</sup> Berman’s “personal talisman” maintains its hold as the center of the film, the symbol inscribing itself as the physical and figurative container of the film.

*Aleph*, however, also displays 10 letters in the film – Beth through Kaph, number 2 through number 11 – out of 22 total letters. A second question, then, surfaces: where are the last 11 letters? One of the most detailed articles about *Aleph*, written by the well-known American

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<sup>161</sup> See Appendix II – “Map’ of *Aleph*,” for exact times and context of each film section.

<sup>162</sup> Zohar: 1, 3b, quoted in Meltzer, “The Door of Heaven” 91. Emphasis in text. This theory is only complicated by the presence of the letter Aleph – as a black letter on a white ground – in the excess of *Artifactual: Films From the Wallace Berman Collection* (2006-2007), which will appear in a discussion in the latter half of this thesis. It is likely that Berman removed this graphical element in his constant (re)processing of his film, a process of chance that will also be later detailed, thereby making Beth the first letter to be presented to the spectator, as it is the creation of the world that is evoked in the appearance of Beth.

<sup>163</sup> Kaplan, “*Aleph* Beat,” 210.

avant-garde film critic P. Adams Sitney, sheds some light onto this problem. In December 1968, Sitney wrote a film review during a trip to San Francisco to see Stan Brakhage, on one of Brakhage's trips out of the mountains of Colorado. The article, titled "A Tour with Brakhage: Underground Movies Are Alive Along the Pacific," offers a detailed account of a series of films by various California and Bay Area filmmakers, including Russ Tamblyn, Brakhage and others. Near the end of his review, Sitney touches on *Aleph*, a film that Wallace Berman, according to Sitney, had been "working and reworking...for seven years and seems in no rush to finish it." Sitney's review is positive and enthusiastic, claiming that while he only saw a small portion of the film, it certainly impressed him – in fact, it made him "very anxious to see the *whole*."<sup>164</sup> He also, most curiously, begins the small paragraph of *Aleph*'s sole 1960s review by stating that the film is intended to be a "24-part Kabbalistic film."<sup>165</sup>

There are a few implications to this statement. First, Sitney likely had misunderstood Berman's explanation, as there are only 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet.<sup>166</sup> Second, this reference to a 20-something "Kabbalistic film" of Berman point to an incongruity – the film, as it is seen today, is only in 11 "parts," and indeed not even that (10 Hebrew letter sections, with the absence of the letter Aleph). So where are the final 11 letters, and their representative "scenes" in between "sections"? Were they never created and never meant to exist? Was this stopping point – in the middle of the Hebrew alphabet, and the Cabala system – an intentional move by Berman?

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<sup>164</sup> P. Adams Sitney, "A Tour With Brakhage: Underground Movies Are Alive Along the Pacific," *The Village Voice*, December 5, 1968, 53, in "Wallace Berman Papers." Archives of American Art (AAA), accessed April-May 2011 (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art, Microfilmed 1988). Emphasis added.

<sup>165</sup> Sitney, "A Tour With Brakhage," 53.

<sup>166</sup> It is more likely, however, that Pitney misunderstood or wrote the number in his notes incorrectly; the actor Russ Tamblyn, one of Berman's good friends in Los Angeles, recalls Berman telling him that his film was intended to be a "22-part Kabbalistic film." Duncan and Kristine McKenna, *Semina Culture*.

The question of intention is certainly a pointed one here. In the last article written during Berman's lifetime, titled "Wallace Berman: Portrait of the Artist as an Underground Man" (1976), Merrill Greene attempts to interview Berman (a difficult task with a taciturn participant) and discusses his influence on the West Coast artistic scene of the 1960s. In the middle of this discussion, however, a particular detail of Berman's first Hebrew-lettered works, his parchments of the late 1950s, jumps into focus: "There are 12 or 13 untitled pieces of identical size: Hebrew characters in chance arrangements written on paper carefully treated to invoke antiquity. Wallace had worked on one large sheet of paper, tearing apart each fragment and mounting it on a stretched canvas. *Twenty-two pieces had been planned; the series was abandoned at the halfway mark.*"<sup>167</sup> While 12 or 13 parchment works is not a precise "halfway mark" of 11, it is a similar "halfway" in the Hebrew alphabet.

Tosh Berman dismisses the intention of the film as a 22-part Cabalistic film, claiming that his father likely got "bored" and decided eventually to scratch the idea of completing the letter cycle.<sup>168</sup> An equal possibility – that *Aleph* was intended to eventually become a 22-part Cabalistic film – still remains present, and even necessarily complex, in the historical narrative.<sup>169</sup> Similarly, the significance of both of these projects ending at a "halfway" point, through abandonment, boredom, or otherwise, precludes the film's most essential quality: an unfinished, constantly "in progress" document, a complicated transmission, of an artist's life, art and spirituality.

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<sup>167</sup> Green, "Wallace Berman: Portrait of the Artist," 53-61. Emphasis added.

<sup>168</sup> Conversation with Tosh Berman, August 9, 2011.

<sup>169</sup> Berman's efforts towards a "22-part" Cabalistic film will particularly be addressed in a later chapter of this thesis involving *Artifactual: Films From the Wallace Berman Collection*, where two Hebrew letters not included in *Aleph* seen today – Nun, the 14<sup>th</sup> letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and, most importantly, number one, Aleph – are seen amongst the "excess" of footage that was compiled.



## “ARTWORK” “BLUEPRINTS”: Destabilizing the Filmic Image

In the introduction to an article titled “The American Independent Cinema, 1958-1964,” John Hanhardt acknowledges an ideological shift in the status of the “apparatus” in underground cinema in the late 1950s into the mid-1960s.

Between 1958 and 1964 the relationship of the film image to the cinematic apparatus (camera, film, projection system) shifted: instead of projecting a symbolic, hallucinatory dream state representing the unconscious along narrative lines, filmmakers focused on the direct acknowledgement of the material properties of film and of the artifice of the production process.<sup>170</sup>

Wallace Berman’s *Aleph*, squarely placed within and beyond these dates, operates within this shift, a shift that is most particularly evident in the word play of Letraset on the film celluloid. While Berman’s images echo a myriad of symbolic streams strung together into “one” celluloid, his Letraset and paint layers address the “material properties of the film” and a subversion and complication, rather than artifice, of the traditional process of production.

Much in the way that *Aleph*’s titles create their own palimpsest on historical archives, so too do the artistic materials applied to *Aleph* – paint and Letraset – create their own record of process that further destabilizes the film object. The transmission of Letraset and paint is a mutable stream reverberating across each frame, transmitting a code made with letters and an artistic material that represent two poles: the streamlining of production, and the individualistic, unique gesture. Each of these layers acts upon the film and integrate with this film, but they also

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<sup>170</sup> John Hanhardt, “The American Independent Cinema: 1958-1964,” in *BLAM!: The Explosion of Pop, Minimalism, and Performance 1958-1964*, by Barbara Haskell (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1984), 119. Filmmakers included in the first category have canonically included, most centrally, Maya Deren (argued frequently by film historians as the fore-bearer of the American avant-garde), Kenneth Anger and Stan Brakhage.

in some ways undermine the film; their application transforms the conventional mode of film – celluloid spliced together – into a palette of personal interactivity between artist and medium. Letraset and paint are the artist’s tools for both enacting transmission and complicating transmission.

Wallace Berman’s representative use of Letraset is of particular import to the destabilizing of the filmic transmission of *Aleph* in two definable ways: in its letters and in its combinations of letters into words and phrases. Upon close inspection of the film reel, it is evident that most of these letters were not formed into recognizable words. But in much the same way that the Cabala, and the Cabalist, interprets his or her own symbols through language, this unintelligibility does not mean that the lettering cannot be deciphered. This code in letters – with ben Abdulafia’s permutations of inspired Hebrew “words,” arranged intuitively, in mind – is personal to Berman’s own interpretation. Nonetheless, it is through actual, intelligible English words and strings of words on the film celluloid that Berman most thoroughly activates the film’s ability to transmit codes in letters, while, in turn, simultaneously deactivating the filmic image underneath.

The film reel, when laid out on a light box, reveals certain sections which have large, readable English words adhered to them in Letraset, some in bold capital letters, some in lowercase, some in a sequence of words, all sharing one characteristic in description: artistic process. Capitalized single words like “ARTWORK” and “BLUEPRINTS”, for instance, run over 2 or 3 frames of film, echoing an identification of an object that Letraset would most typically be applied to. Even more, full mechanisms of Letraset production are described over multiple frames of film throughout *Aleph*: “pressure in case of”, “in case of error letter can”, “slides and many”, “transferring position – rub letter with any”, and most simply “pressure”. The

phrase “soft pencil erase”, for example, can be found etched over frames of a Russian-esque dancer and a cat in the Beth Hebrew letter section. In addition, incomplete words are also used, such as “the instrume” and “operintin”, of unknown origin. Even the numbers “3” and “8”, crackled but visible, appear among the frames of the film, in a code extending beyond the alphabetic [Figure 16].

According to film archivist Andrew Lampert, the origins of the phrases can be traced, literally and figuratively, to the Letraset sheets themselves. With Letraset transfer sheets, the entire sheet is printed, so any print, whether it is the Letraset logo, a description or a trademark, can be transferred from the sheet. Lampert speculates that the phrases referring to process were transferred from the instructions displayed on the edges of the Letraset sheets, and not from the body of the Letraset sheet, which usually lists multiples of letters, numbers, punctuation and other graphics in a specific order along a line.<sup>171</sup> In this case, Berman could be seen to be performing two acts: subversion of this procedure, in utilizing the words already assembled on the Letraset sheet instead of the primary letters requiring assemblage, and further enacting of this procedure, by (literally and figuratively) “applying” descriptions to a surface.

So what are the implications of these (more explicit) Letraset messages? They transform the film celluloid into a “readable” document, destabilizing its filmic, moving image quality. The

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<sup>171</sup> Conversation with Andrew Lampert, November 9, 2011. In inspections of photographs of older Letraset sheets, however, it appears difficult to determine whether such a description was placed on a sheet. Small descriptions were often displayed at the top or bottom of the sheet, but a handbook that Letraset released in the 1970s showed photographs of Letraset sheets where the descriptions at the bottom of the sheet detailed patent information, not application instructions. Thusly, it is not definitive that Berman used the words describing the process of application from Letraset sheets. Another possibility may involve a separate instruction sheet printed on the dry transfer sheets used for the actual Letraset letter sets. In two sections in *Letraset*, “How to use Instant Lettering” and “Hints and Tips,” words like “soft pencil”, “pressure” and “transferring position” are featured in the book’s description of the process of applying Letraset letters. Additionally, Letraset Gloss could be used to secure the letters to a “difficult surface,” a possibility for Berman’s methodology on applying the letters to film. Letraset Limited, *Letraset*, 6, 8 and 9.

interrupted words and phrases drop off abruptly, leaving one to guess what comes next or even to “fill in” the rest internally (“the instrume” is only made intelligible when the viewer completes the word with “-nt” in his or her mind’s eye). Most phrases and words speak to process and mechanisms of process – the pencil rubbing the letter, the letter needing to be removed. But the bold, uppercase words “ARTWORK” and “BLUEPRINTS” are unique to this categorization, in that they are words that, in this context, are self-referential and even snarky. “ARTWORK” lays claim to the (desire for) legitimacy of the film as an art object; “BLUEPRINTS”, on the other hand, alludes to the unstable process of the work, to its mutable foundation, and to its ability to be changed or altered. The film, within these two words and the others, becomes both the final outcome of the art object and the process of the art object simultaneously: an unstable art object.

The Letraset also introduces a new complexity to the role of language in *Aleph*. While the Hebrew characters possess embedded meaning, associated most especially with the Cabala, they also remain enigmatic, “graphical” elements from first appearances, a quality shared by the “unreadability” of the Letraset when projected. However, in some ways, the Letraset of *Aleph* can be “read” as a document transcribed poetically with obscure words in Beat poetry-like phrases in short, choppy sections. Within the foundations of semiotics, Ferdinand de Saussure argues that to avoid meaning in language and linguistic signs – to ignore the “abstract, underlying system” of *langue* that aids in producing meaning – is to produce “non-sense.”<sup>172</sup> Only poetry and other forms of literature may be allowed to “[play] at the edges of the parameters of the linguistic system,” and as such produce non-sense separated from meaning.<sup>173</sup> The jumbled Letraset letters of *Aleph* may intentionally produce a poetic nonsense, but just as often, these letters appear to magically combine together to produce intelligible words and

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<sup>172</sup> Philip Rosen, introduction to *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, 9.

<sup>173</sup> Philip Rosen, introduction to *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, 9.

phrases, all speaking to the process of its production. The Letraset, then, folds in and out of chaos and order, nonsense and meaning, in the dual operation of the Aleph.

An overarching problematic may be easily deduced here with the position of Letraset words and phrases in *Aleph*: intelligibility is only available to those with direct access to the film celluloid – in other words, the projectionist or preservationist. This harkens back to the Cabala, a system whose associative meanings are revealed, or made more intelligible, to those who seek out its system of knowledge. Bruce Conner, a prominent underground West Coast filmmaker and artist, and close friend of Wallace Berman, once stated how his most well-known film, *A Movie* (1959), was developed out of his deep fascination with the numbers, words and letters that carried through the film leader, the notational devices that only the projectionist could see.<sup>174</sup> This internal film language created a system of “secret messages, coded and private,” in the words of Conner. Wallace Berman’s Letraset transcriptions are also secret messages of this kind, coded into a transmission and private in their obscurity. These words, phrases and streams of letters are only just out of reach of the viewer, and only just intelligible to the projectionist.<sup>175</sup>

Letraset reaches through its medium in *Aleph* with secret words, phrases and streaming letters, coded messages (signal) to be deciphered by the viewer (receiver and destination). The Letraset destabilizes the film celluloid by rendering it “readable” in the position of the projectionist, yet it also destabilizes this “reading” by denying the possibility of that action to the

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<sup>174</sup> “I was fascinated by all the images, letters, numbers, and words in the unseen and hidden film leaders at the beginning and end of films – the part known only to the people who handle film presentation, like a censorship of secret messages, coded and private.” Bruce Conner, “How I Invented Electricity,” in *Radical Light: Alternative Film and Video in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945-2000*, edited by Steve Anker, Kathy Geritz & Steve Said (Berkeley: University of California Press and Pacific Film Archives, 2010), 93.

<sup>175</sup> They are also intelligible to the modern viewer in the digital age, with the ability to pause a still on-screen, yet only on the level of individual letters and the inclusion of numbers, such as the still where “8” can be easily read. Please see Appendix II - “Map of *Aleph*,” for more on this last point.

viewer watching the film through projection; an alternative position of “reading” the text of the film is created with the projectionist, while the position of the audience in “reading” the text is negated. It is this layer of letters and of signs, riding a shifting line of the linguistic and the visual, which renders the film celluloid of *Aleph* into an unstable film object of visual and poetic import.<sup>176</sup>

The Letraset, as well as paint layers, on *Aleph* lastly also destabilize the images hidden underneath, and *literally* destabilize the film celluloid itself. They obscure faces and objects behind fractured letters, fractured from both the process of transfer and through the film’s own deterioration over time, as it became layered in coats of dust due to improper storage.<sup>177</sup> Some sections of film are virtually unreadable, with the motif behind so obscured with letters and sections of letters that the underlying images are indeterminable. The film begins to serve the sole role of a surface for coded transmission. Even this role, however, is tenuous. The layers of paint, Letraset and dust that were caked onto the film made the 8mm film, a small and fragile film format in and of-itself, even more fragile and unstable. Anthology Film Archives preservationist Andrew Lampert, in a telling understanding of the film, comments about how “it’s remarkable that this unruly, easily breakable reel made it through a projector.”<sup>178</sup> Lampert considers *Aleph* to be more of a “sculptural object” than a film – an object that possesses its own

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<sup>176</sup> In the words of Carolyn Peter, “the boundaries are blurred between the visual significance of the text and its linguistic meanings” in Berman’s art works. Peter, “Wordsmithing,” 34.

<sup>177</sup> Andrew Lampert has stated that Berman was not particularly informed or concerned doing things “correctly” in terms of storing or preserving *Aleph*. Therefore, while the film was in a film canister when it was found in the Berman’s home, the film was very fragile from the layers of paint and Letraset, and had accumulated dust as well. Conversation with Andrew Lampert, July 19, 2011 and November 9, 2011.

<sup>178</sup> Andrew Lampert, “Aleph Essay,” accessed June 16, 2011, [http://www.andrewlampert.com/index/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2011/04/Aleph\\_Essay.pdf](http://www.andrewlampert.com/index/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2011/04/Aleph_Essay.pdf), 1.

tactile quality, not only in inspections of the celluloid, but also in its projected form.<sup>179</sup> “Pieced together by hundreds of dubious cement splices, made extra-thick by dry-transferred numbers and letters, hand-painted on both sides and heavily scratched,” *Aleph* is both a haptic object and a moving object.<sup>180</sup>

In this way, *Aleph* can be seen to further exist at an unstable intersection in terms of medium: as an (unstable) film object but also as an assemblage, an artistic process which Berman has been credited, somewhat dubiously, as the “father” of in California.<sup>181</sup> As Sandra Leonard Starr notes about California assemblage art, “Assemblage is the only art form that consistently reminds us of the *processes* that brought it into being.”<sup>182</sup> These processes are written on the film celluloid itself, in the paint and Letraset applied to the film, and embedded in the film and transmitted through their projection.<sup>183</sup> This is the unstable film object of *Aleph* – the

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<sup>179</sup> Conversation with Andrew Lampert, July 19, 2011 and November 9, 2011.

<sup>180</sup> Lampert, “Aleph Essay,” 1. As Lampert states, the film was also heavily scratched in some parts, especially visible in the footage of The Rolling Stones live concert in the Gimel section of *Aleph*. This scratching, though appearing very little in comparison to paint and Letraset, is an additional destabilizing mechanism, as the film is simultaneously negated and revealed through the “rubbing out” of its surface. See Appendix II – “Map’ of Aleph” for reference.

<sup>181</sup> Berman was originally described as “the father of California Assemblage” by John Coplans, in Coplan’s 1964 article for *Artforum*, “Art is Love is God.” The phrase is placed in scare quotes here to suggest both a title often given to Berman as well as debate about this title, whose serendipitous application to Wallace came, in some accounts, from a suggestion by Bruce Conner to Coplans in the early 1960s. John Coplans, “Art is Love is God,” *Artforum* Vol. 2, No. 8 (March 1964): 26-27. See Solnit, *Secret Exhibition*, 102, and Gardner, “The Influence of Wallace Berman,” 79 for two perspectives on Bruce Conner’s account. According to Gardner, when asked by Coplans about how to “define West Coast Art,” Conner, wanting to avoid the question, said “‘You don’t want to talk to me, John. You want to talk to Wallace Berman, because he’s the center of *everything* that’s happening here.’ And one of the main reasons I [Conner] did that was that I knew that Wallace wouldn’t tell him a damn thing.”

<sup>182</sup> Starr, *Lost and Found in California*, 9. Emphasis mine.

<sup>183</sup> A parallel process of “assemblage” in film, and of enacting other layers onto the film celluloid, can be contemporaneously seen in the work of Carolee Schneemann in her film *Fuses* (1967). A description of her film in some ways is representative of many experimental processes, including elements involving chance, during the 1960s in film: “There were whole sections...where the film is chopped up and laid onto either black or transparent leader and taped down. I also put some of the film in the oven to bake it; I soaked it in all sorts of acids and dyes

unintelligible and the intelligible, the obscure and the revealed, the visual and the linguistic, complicating the medium and its projection. It is here that this study returns, in a way, to the beginning, and focuses on the role of the projector. For it is in projection, ultimately, that *Aleph* is both made and unmade, complicating the signal with noise.

#### Chance versus Control in the Making of *Aleph*

Four key components have thus far contributed to the destabilization of the “finished” art object known as *Aleph*: Berman’s original 1959 “film in progress” pamphlet for the film in *Semina 4*; the re- and de-naming of the film over time; the incomplete Hebrew sections; and the destabilization of the film through Letraset and paint. Yet even more central to this enigmatic filmic object is the dialectic of control versus chance in the editing process of *Aleph*.

While Berman’s reputation as a pool shark and aura as an artist promoted a spontaneous, largely intuitive outward identity, Berman was also known to be serious, methodical and even very controlling over his artwork. In Tosh’s account of his father, he describes Wallace as a man who took his art seriously (even if he didn’t take himself seriously), often laboring over one art work for days, weeks or years, and at times looking at one piece from different angles to determine what he should do next or whether he was done.<sup>184</sup> When patrons bought work by Wallace, such as a Verifax collage, Wallace would often go to a patron’s house to hang the art

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to see what would happen. I cut out details of imagery and repeated them. I worked on the film for three years.” Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema*, 119. Splicing, as well, plays a part in the “assemblage” of film, and another filmmaker contemporaneous to Berman who explored this element was Saul Levine. Levine sought to make splices “jagged and messy” to “give evidence of the filmmaker’s presence,” producing an eerie disorienting visual experience, such as in *Note to Pati* (1969). “Note to Pati” Booklet description, in *Treasures IV: American Avant-Garde* (DVD box-set) (San Francisco: National Film Preservation Foundation, 2009), 31.

<sup>184</sup> Berman, “Wallace and I.” Also, Conversation with Tosh Berman, August 9, 2011.



himself on the wall, in the way that he saw the work should best be hung.<sup>185</sup> As a result, Tosh argues, Wallace's art is much more intentional and planned out than even Wallace made it seem.

These poles of chance and control can be seen directly in *Aleph*. A film planned out for 10 years but never truly "finished," Wallace was said to have worked and reworked sections over and over again.<sup>186</sup> To see it most plainly, every time an image or sequence changes in a film, a splice has been made; therefore, each splice indicates when the original film sequence has been altered and joined with a new piece. The medium of film can be characterized, in part, as a meshing of many small pieces of film stitched together, carefully arranged by the filmmaker to achieve his or her desired effect and message. With *Aleph*, however, Berman's intentionality is countered by an unintentional editorial act that was a product of an intermediary device of film, its core apparatus: the projector.

An account by Andrew Lampert is considered here, in full, as told to him in part by one "witness," Larry Jordan, the Beat filmmaker and friend of Berman's who lent Berman a 16mm camera before Berman decided to change over to the more hand-held, "personal" format of 8mm film.<sup>187</sup>

Witnesses recall haphazard screenings filled with mechanical mishaps and much on-the-spot editing. Irreparable bits of film were torn off and thrown into a box, a quick splice

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<sup>185</sup> Berman, "Wallace and I," 6.

<sup>186</sup> See P. Adams Sitney's comment: "[Berman] has been working and reworking the film for seven years and seems in no rush to finish it." Sitney, "A Tour With Brakhage," 53.

<sup>187</sup> Conversation with Andrew Lampert, July 19, 2011 and November 9, 2011. Berman is quoted as stating that after he acquired an 8mm Bolex camera around 1964, "the camera for the first time feels 'rite' – like a brush or... With 16 I was never comfortable—now find great excitement..." "Mary Ann Caws, *Surrealism and the Literary Imagination*, The Hague, 1968, p. 59., cited by John Vernon in *The Garden and the Map: Schizophrenia in Twentieth-Century Literature and Culture*, Urbana, IL, 1973, p. 101," quoted in Greene, "Wallace Berman: Portrait of the Artist" as an Underground Man," 59. See Appendix III – "The Witnesses: David Bourdon, Stan Brakhage, Larry Jordan, P. Adams Sitney and Russ Tamblyn" for more information on accounts of those who were known to have seen the film.

made before the show started up again. In a sense it seems that attrition as much as selection was partially responsible for the final edit of *Aleph*. Nearly all the footage durable enough to withstand Berman's projector ended up in the completed work.<sup>188</sup>

This aspect of viewing *Aleph* at Berman's home was likely a remarkable sight to see: Berman starting the film on the portable 8mm projector in his living room – images jumping across the wall, music blaring in the background – only for the experience to end abruptly with the projector grinding to a halt. Prying the film out of the feeder and ripping sprocket holes in the process, he tears off the now-broken or offending section; discards it into a box; takes the two larger sections of film and glues them together with cement; and winds the film back up into the feeder to begin again with the projection. This constant process of editing, and its temperamental nature in playing through a projector, produces an infinitely receding object.

What Lampert above calls “attrition” contributed to Berman's experience of the force of chance in *Aleph*, and marks a sharp contrast to his pervasive sense of control over his work. It is unlikely that Berman anticipated the breakage in his celluloid – in the way that John Cage consciously composed works for piano using the I Ching and the element of “chance” in the 1930s, 40s and 50s – yet it is possible that these occurrences did not deter him from his filmmaking, and perhaps in some ways amused him more than upset him.<sup>189</sup> This disregard also contrasts with Stan Brakhage's insistence on film obeying one key characteristic: that the “finished film is projectionable (sic).”<sup>190</sup> Brakhage's claim has two important implications for

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<sup>188</sup> Lampert, “Aleph Essay,” 1.

<sup>189</sup> Lampert believes that the breakage of film that happened with *Aleph* was likely due to a lack of skill with the material, not an intentional maneuver or a stylistic choice. In considering Berman's quirky and somewhat goofy personality (see Tosh's descriptions of his father in “Wallace and His Film” and “Wallace and I,” as well as other friend's descriptions elsewhere), one may be lead to believe that Wallace likely was at peace with these changes once they were made to the film.

<sup>190</sup> James, “The Film-Maker as Romantic Poet,” 38.

*Aleph*: one, that the film must be able to be wound and played through a standard film projector; and two, that it would be *finished*. This last point in particular lends its own complication to *Aleph*, as a film that is *unfinished* and therefore possessing instabilities in its chosen medium, and as an unstable object bordering a tenuous line between the filmic and the sculptural.

What does the dichotomy of chance and control mean for *Aleph*'s messages? This fine-tuned control of each image and each section of film and its contents, mixed with a large dose of chance in the destruction of sections and images, complicates the present form of *Aleph* in many fundamental ways. The nature of the film, and its transmission to the viewer, is ultimately a product of this exchange of control and chance. In a sense, this experience encapsulates the predicament of transmission: that the message, the encoded and transmitted meaning, that is being transmitted can, at times, be altered with chance – a.k.a. noise. But chance, as Shannon's theory has articulated with noise, can also be thought of as an integral component to Berman's filmic process, and as such, an understanding of its foundational role in the making of *Aleph* aids in completing a more cohesive historical framing of this film by Wallace Berman.

*Aleph* today must be fundamentally different from both Berman's "original" vision (at least before pieces of celluloid were torn away in projection) and from what witnesses, such as Larry Jordan, had seen of the film in the 1960s. *Aleph*, described by P. Adams Sitney as a projected "24-part (sic) Kabbalistic film," surely would differ drastically from the 10-part, less than 8 minute-long celluloid seen today. Indeed, where does the "original" *Aleph* begin and the "processed" *Aleph* end? This study may not be able to fully answer that question. But one effect that is produced by this inquiry is the search for the "original" hidden within the "processed," an "intact" vision of *Aleph*. While the original is elusive – the receding object that has always been

unstable – what remains of *Aleph* are its remains, in two forms: *Aleph* the (complicated) object of today, and its excess, *Artifactual: Films from the Wallace Berman Collection*.

(Towards a) Conclusion – Reconstructing the Film Object: The Question of *Artifactual*

## An Introduction

The most detailed account of *Aleph* by one of the few witnesses to see the film in the 1960s is in the form of a review, written in the August 19<sup>th</sup>, 1965 edition of the *Village Voice* by David Bourdon, a writer and critic who met Berman in 1965.<sup>191</sup> Bourdon writes:

[Berman] began in 1955 to shoot a cinematic Semina. He has now completed about 20 minutes of a projected 30-minute film, which is to have 13 parts and is based on the Cabala. The film is a serial of fleeting images, with live action interspersed by a multitude of stills – Nijinsky, Nureyev, the Singing Nun, etc. There are repeated closeups (sic) of needles plunging into arms, female pelvises sliding into bed (the nakedest footage I've ever seen). Almost every frame has been handpainted (sic) with Hebraic characters and numbers, and lengths of film have been painted. Semina's tone is dispassionate, the flickering parade of images, having the elegant, unemphatic simplicity of a rock'n'roll

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<sup>191</sup> A letter from Bourdon to Berman reads: "Dear Wally,/ Ugh – wait till you see the lurid, overwritten account of you in the 8/19 V.V. My editor, Diane Fisher, insisted on having a piece about you, anything at all, she was so keen on the idea..." Most especially, Bourdon also talks about his own pursuits in film, and references Berman's own methodology: "I bought a second-hand Bolex 16mm, very complicated (and expensive). I think you are doing the right thing with 8mm. Electric eyes and reflex zoom lenses are really what count." Letter from David Bourdon to Wallace Berman, August 16, 1965, in "Wallace Berman Papers." Archives of American Art (AAA), accessed April-May 2011 (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art, Microfilmed 1988). A full description of the other "witnesses" of the film can be found in Appendix III: "The Witnesses: David Bourdon, Stan Brakhage, Larry Jordan, P. Adams Sitney and Russ Tamblyn."

beat. Berman prefers the intimate scale of 8mm. He likes the projected image to be small, about the size of a TV screen, and to be seen by an audience of three or four at a time.<sup>192</sup>

The implications of Bourdon's words for understanding the content of the film are immense. Both dancers Vaslav Nijinsky and Rudolph Nureyev appear in the "final" version seen today, as well as "needles plunging into arms" (although not in technical close-up form) and Wallace Berman's landlady (referred to simply as Phyllis) as the "female pelvis[es] sliding into bed" in multiple nude sequences at Berman's home [Figure 17].<sup>193</sup> The most jarring information, however, lies in Bourdon's statement of "parts" and time: 20 minutes "completed" of a "30-minute" long film, with 13 parts. As the film is seen today, only 8 minutes and 11 parts, in the form of Hebrew letter sections, exist. Similar in content to the anticipated "24-part (sic)" film reviewed in 1968 by Sitney, Bourdon's review presents a similar account of a much longer film than is known today. What happened, then, to the "extra" 12 minutes and 2 parts of Bourdon's telling of the film, a substantial amount of time in footage?

The discrepancy between Sitney and Bourdon's accounts of *Aleph* and the "final" yet "unfinished" *Aleph* seen today – the film of chance and control in editing – can be found in another, later document: *Artifactual: Films from the Wallace Berman Collection*. Produced by Anthology Film Archives from 2006 to 2007, *Artifactual*, a combination of the words "artifact"

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<sup>192</sup> Bourdon, "Art - Wallace Berman," 6. Also excerpted in Hoberman, *Home Made Movies*, 26-27.

<sup>193</sup> Identification of Phyllis made by Andrew Lampert. Conversation with Andrew Lampert, November 9, 2011. While such content's associated meanings is not greatly discussed in this thesis, it can be noted here that the theme of sexuality and sensuality – evident with Phyllis, with a nude Shirley Berman and, to some extent, with the sequences of dancers – is very prevalent within *Aleph*. The presence of these sequences serves to illustrate a fundamental quality of the Beat culture: free and open expression of sexuality. Openness about sexuality in the family unit and among friends was part and parcel of Beat culture, and later a staple of the counterculture movement. Thusly, the "Love" of "Art is Love is God" is present in many forms with Berman's art: freedom and desire of freedom, open sexuality, family and friends. In Hesse's poem, "It is love" (and "desire") which, in the end, forms the central component of Berman's motto, propelling the "the creative urge" of "God" into the creation of "Art."

and “factual,” is not *Aleph* itself, but is said to contain “remnants of *Aleph*”.<sup>194</sup> The point of origin of these uncovered “remnants” is revealed in the process of projection, through the words of Andrew Lampert: “Irreparable bits of film were torn off and thrown into a box.”<sup>195</sup> These film bits, cast aside in the process of chance editing through the mechanism of projection, are sections that were discarded when the sprocket holes on the edge of the film were torn out of the projector, and were therefore unable to feed through the teeth of the projector. These strips of film celluloid became the remnants – the excess – of a “more whole” *Aleph*.

How, then, does *Artifactual* fit into the history of *Aleph*? Should *Artifactual* be considered its own film object? Or as a film document cataloging the remains, what was previously known as *Aleph*? And how does the framing of *Aleph*, as an unfinished, unstable art object, become complicated further when considered through *Artifactual*? The story of *Artifactual*, its history in Anthology Film Archives, and its interaction with *Aleph* are the focus of the last discussion of this study. This analysis by no means exhausts the dialogue between *Aleph* and *Artifactual*; more historical research into the contents of *Artifactual* is necessary in the future to ensure a more comprehensive discussion, and greater inclusion in historical accounts of *Aleph*, takes place. Rather, the purpose of this concluding discussion is to open the gates to an introductory understanding of this additional film document, in order to further question both the

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<sup>194</sup> Andrew Lampert states that he and Tosh Berman created the title *Artifactual* out of a combination of these two words. Conversation with Andrew Lampert, November 9, 2011. Merrill Greene also makes an interesting assertion that relates William Burrough’s concept of factualism to Berman’s work, particularly his Verifax collages: “In both the ‘Sound’ and ‘Silence’ series [of Verifax collages], Berman identified through independent means with a philosophy that Burroughs has termed ‘factualism’ – an impersonal nonjudgmental vision which eliminates the concept of ‘taste’ as instrumental in the creative process.” Greene, “Wallace Berman: Portrait of the Artist,” 60. The word “artifactual” is also an adjective derivative of the word “artifact” (the latter defined as “an object made by a human being, typically an item of cultural or historical interest; something observed in scientific investigation or experiment that is not naturally present but occurs as a result of the preparative or investigative procedure.”) (OED Online).

<sup>195</sup> Lampert, “Aleph Essay,” 1.

stability of the film object of *Aleph* in light of its “excess,” as well as the role of the archives in preserving and organizing this footage and accompanying it with *Aleph* as it is seen today.

## Historicizing Anthology: “Film As An Art” and Anthology’s Role in the East Coast

### Underground Film Scene

The founding of Anthology Film Archives (AFA, or simply Anthology) in New York in December 1970 was, for many in the so-called New York “avant-garde” film scene, a culminating moment in 20<sup>th</sup> century American experimental cinema. Filmmakers Jonas Mekas, Stan Brakhage and Peter Kubelka, together with film critic P. Adams Sitney, founded Anthology with the intention to screen and preserve underground films that otherwise would never been seen by a broader audience. Just five years after video technology was made commercially accessible to artists, with the Sony PortaPak in 1965, the AFA sought to situate itself, in its manifesto, as “the first film museum exclusively devoted to the film *as an art*.”<sup>196</sup>

The attraction of *Aleph* for Anthology’s archives is made more palpable through another line from the manifesto: “As a polemical group the selection committee of Anthology Film Archives has affirmed consistently that the art of cinema surfaces primarily when it divests itself of commercial norms.”<sup>197</sup> In its obscure, outsider status, *Aleph* posed itself as the ultimate underground film project that Brakhage, Sitney, Mekas and Hill and other filmmakers and critics could get behind. In seeking films that diverge from “commercial norms,” *Aleph* represented the

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<sup>196</sup> P. Adams Sitney, introduction to *The Essential Cinema: Essays on Films in The Collection of Anthology Film Archives, Vol. 1*, by P. Adams Sitney, ed. (New York: Anthology Film Archives & New York University Press, 1975): vi. PortaPak information in David Ross, “A Provisional Overview of Artists’ Television In the U.S.” (1976) in George Battcock, ed., *New Artists Video* (New York: E.P. Dutton Paperback, 1978): 142.

<sup>197</sup> Sitney, *The Essential Cinema*, x.

most personal, and purposefully un-distributable, of avant-garde filmmaking – the film meant for one, and made for one. Anthology, then, paid particular attention to a key principle: “that a high art emerges primarily when its artists are most free.”<sup>198</sup> The mutable document known as *Aleph*, to at least a few of these men, represented a vision unique in its kind, free in its own way, and operating with a myriad of messages streaming through it, from Berman to society and back.

Preservation and Reconstitution: Anthology Film Archives and the Formation of *Artifactual: Films From the Wallace Berman Collection* (2006-2007)

Stan Brakhage was the first person to approach the Berman family after Wallace’s death, around the late 1970s, in order to preserve *Aleph*.<sup>199</sup> Brakhage was one of the very few recorded viewers of *Aleph*, and in a famous statement about *Aleph*, Brakhage says “This film took a decade to make and is the only true envisionment of the sixties I know.”<sup>200</sup> Berman, for Brakhage, propelled “whole new forms” in his art, a skill that most certainly made an impression on the experimental avant-garde filmmaker when he viewed *Aleph* in 1968 with P. Adams Sitney on Sitney’s West Coast film trip that year.<sup>201</sup> In approaching the Bermans, Brakhage was given a 8mm roll of film, likely within the infamous *Aleph* canister, which he took to a “local film laboratory” in Los Angeles to make a few sets of 8mm prints.<sup>202</sup> These prints were at some point

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<sup>198</sup> Sitney, *The Essential Cinema*, xi.

<sup>199</sup> Conversation with Tosh Berman, August 9, 2011. Brakhage and Berman met, according to David E. James, through Kenneth Anger on a trip that Berman and Anger took together to San Francisco in 1954. James, “Los Angeles Collage,” 279. Date and circumstances of account also verified by the artist Jess in Gardner, “The Influence of Wallace Berman,” 80.

<sup>200</sup> “Aleph” Booklet description, in *Treasures IV: American Avant-Garde* (DVD box-set) (San Francisco: National Film Preservation Foundation, 2009), 28.

<sup>201</sup> Cándida Smith, *Utopia and Dissent*, 214.

<sup>202</sup> Lampert, “Aleph Essay,” 1. Conversation with Andrew Lampert, July 19, 2011.



brought back to New York by Brakhage, where he handed the prints and the original over to Anthology.

Little of the circumstances of *Aleph* had changed until 2004, when Anthology Film Archives decided to make a new 16mm blow-up print of *Aleph* for its archives.<sup>203</sup> From 1981, when *Aleph* was featured in Anthology's film series "Home Made Movies: 20 Years of American 8mm and Super-8 Films," until the new 16mm print blow-up, there were no known exhibitions, screenings or other events featuring Wallace Berman's film. In the process, Anthology Film Archives, through Andrew Lampert, contacted Tosh Berman around 2005 about this 8mm-to-16mm preservation, specifically to see if the film that Anthology had was Wallace's only known footage. From this inquiry, Tosh uncovered three cigar boxes, all filled with various-sized fragments of developed 8mm and 16mm film celluloid.<sup>204</sup> Out of this excess footage, through careful sorting, consideration and, most importantly, the selective assemblage of Anthology and BB Optics, was born as *Artifactual*.

A 36-minute long DVD, *Artifactual* is a compilation of the footage from those boxes that were "selected", edited and arranged by BB Optics, an optical printing company that specializes in 8mm-to-16mm blow-ups. BB Optics partnered with Anthology to digitize the film footage found in the three cigar boxes and made it into the compilation DVD. *Artifactual* was help funded in part by the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Arts, and as *Artifactual* and Anthology's preservation work is funded by government organizations and non-profit institutions, so too was *Aleph*'s funding dependent, in large part, by a few key individuals at Anthology.<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> Lampert, "Aleph Essay," 1.

<sup>204</sup> Wallace Berman, *Artifactual: Films from the Wallace Berman Collection (2006-07)* (DVD) (Accessed October 5, 2011 at Anthology Film Archives).

<sup>205</sup> According to Lampert, Anthology is funded by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and other government organizations. Conversation with Andrew Lampert, November 9, 2011.

## Anthology's Role in Funding *Aleph*

In writing about *Aleph* for his West Coast film tour in 1968, P. Adams Sitney was very intrigued by what he had seen of this film. In December 1968, a few months after visiting the West Coast, Sitney wrote a letter to Wallace Berman praising his recent Jewish Museum show, thanking him for posters that Berman sent him of his work, and stating “If you come back to New York for a longer stay, bring some more reels of your movie. I was very pleased to see it; and after I told them about it, Jonas Mekas and some other friends here would like to look at it.”<sup>206</sup>

This is how Jonas Mekas, founder of Anthology Film Archives and the magazine *Film Culture*, came to find out about *Aleph*, and in turn, how a relationship – particularly monetarily – was begun between Anthology and Wallace Berman. Without seeing “a single frame,” and through the influence of positive word-of-mouth, Mekas directed a \$40 per month grant to Berman for one year, to support his filmmaking endeavor.<sup>207</sup> This \$40 per month grant was provided by an “anonymous donor,” but the source of the funding was identified as early American avant-garde filmmaker and philanthropist Jerome Hill.

According to Lampert, Jerome Hill was the most prominent benefactor of Anthology at the time that Berman would have received the grant, sometime likely in the mid-to-late 1960s. The grant was anonymous in that Berman did not know whom it was from at Anthology, but

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The preservation of *Aleph* was funded by The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts. “Aleph” Booklet description, 29.

<sup>206</sup> Sitney, “A Tour With Brakhage,” 53.

<sup>207</sup> Lampert, “Aleph Essay,” 1, and Conversation with Andrew Lampert, November 9, 2011.

Mekas was in partnership with Hill at that time, for Hill to financially help filmmakers that Mekas deemed worthy of funding for their creative innovation.<sup>208</sup>

Other sources of money for *Aleph* were likely raised through gallery sales of Berman's other works, most especially in selling his Verifaxes, and from artistic grants. He received a grant for \$2000 from the William and Noma Copley Foundation in 1965 and another for \$5000 in 1966 from the National Foundation of the Arts and the Humanities, and after his Verifax debut in *Artforum* in January 1966 and his shows at the Robert Fraser Gallery in London (1966) and the Jewish Museum in New York (1968), Berman was at his most well-known – and his most visible – point in his entire artistic career. But the echoes of the Ferus Gallery shutdown stirred Berman to avoid the spotlight, and after the Jewish Museum, Wallace resorted to small one-day exhibitions in Topanga Canyon, his new neighborhood after a mudslide destroyed the Berman's home in Beverly Glen. These grants from various organizations and from Anthology, then, were essential in supplementing Wallace's art as he waxed and waned from the public view, retreating into his own private visions in art and in film. These visions, especially those in film, would become, through *Aleph*'s undoing, separated into a unique duality: *Aleph* and its excess.

### Three Cigar Boxes and an "Aleph" Canister: *Aleph* versus its Excess

Through chance processes, *Aleph* was discarded in sections and thrown into boxes. The content of *Artifactual* was culled from these boxes, boxes that were found years later by Tosh Berman with a jumble of footage within each. The assembled document of *Artifactual* consists of three primary sections of footage: 1) Wallace Berman riding his motorcycle, 2) an exhibition of

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<sup>208</sup> Conversation with Andrew Lampert, November 9, 2011.

George Herms and Edmund Teske at the Semina Gallery in Larkspur, CA in 1960, and 3) “a variety of footage all related to the film *Aleph*.”<sup>209</sup>

In understanding the relationship between *Artifactual* and *Aleph*, it must first be determined what *Artifactual* shows that *Aleph* does not. The first two sections of film described above are separate from *Aleph* entirely, but the last section, the “variety of footage all related” to *Aleph*, contains a mixture, sometimes within the same length of film, of both repeated images from *Aleph* and new images.<sup>210</sup> Verifax collages seen in *Aleph*, such as Flash Gordon, a woman’s legs and an alien/bug character, join together with brief flashes of images that are unique to *Artifactual* – such as footage of a man’s hand running over wood, and a shot of Wallace reflected in a mirror. Other flashes of images appear in *Aleph*, such as footage of a woman’s legs dancing and a Greek or Roman sculptural head, and at times, in the case of an unknown image of a blindfolded girl in white, are repeated frequently within a sequence, even more so than in *Aleph*.

The images that appear only in *Artifactual*, however, are the most intriguing because of their glimpses into Berman’s intention with the “original” (though always unstable) *Aleph*. There is much more recognizable footage of family and friends, including Shirley, Tosh, the artist and occultist Cameron, and Dean Stockwell playing pool, as well as longer, more elaborate sections that give greater context to scenes within *Aleph*, like a longer sequence of Nureyev and Fonteyn dancing on television, with the frame of the TV set visible surrounding the image. New and longer sequences of Verifax also appear, flashing different images than those shown in *Aleph*:

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<sup>209</sup> Wallace Berman, *Artifactual: Films from the Wallace Berman Collection* (2006-07) (DVD) (Accessed October 5, 2011 at Anthology Film Archives). The Berman’s moved to Larkspur after fleeing the Beat media frenzy in San Francisco in 1960, where the Berman’s lived on a houseboat on a marsh for a year before moving back to L.A.

<sup>210</sup> *Artifactual* states that “in this assemblage [of *Aleph*’s excess] one second of black leader has been inserted between fragments to indicate an edit that was not made by Berman.” Wallace Berman, *Artifactual: Films from the Wallace Berman Collection* (2006-07) (DVD) (Accessed October 5, 2011 at Anthology Film Archives).

nuns, a dancing nude woman, a palm reader image. Berman's art and family/friends, then, are drawn into the excess of *Aleph* in a deeper and more profoundly overt way than *Aleph*'s final product.

In all of this additional footage, however, one visual component of *Artifactual* is especially telling in its relationship to *Aleph* and to an understanding of film. First, the inclusion of two additional Hebrew letter sections: the letter Nun (the 14<sup>th</sup> letter of the Hebrew alphabet) and, twice, the letter Aleph, with the colors reversed from the usual white-letter-black-ground (both instances of Aleph appear as a black letter on white ground). The presence of Nun appears anomalous, considering the sequences of *Aleph* appear only until the 11<sup>th</sup> letter, Kaph, raising the question of whether Berman skipped over the 12<sup>th</sup> (Lamed) and 13<sup>th</sup> letters (Mem) intentionally, whether they were truly "missing" from the footage of *Artifactual*, or whether they were never made at all. The presence of Aleph twice, however, strikes a potent chord. Did Berman intend on framing the film with each of these appearances? This is unlikely, as the two frames of Aleph exist within the same segment of film. With their reversal in appearance from the other letters, Berman certainly intended for each to stand out against the streaming transmission of not only images, but also of Hebrew letters, and the presence of two of them may suggest the Aleph's duality – the Dark and the Light, the intelligible and the unintelligible, the obscured and the visible.

The case of the "Aleph" canister has been described throughout this study as a gesture that harkens towards the inherent unity of the Aleph that defines and encapsulates the film *Aleph*. No markings of any kind existed on the film canister except for a small Aleph character placed directly in the center on the front of the canister. Due to a small film of glue over the Aleph, it

appears that this Aleph was a product of transfer lettering – in other words, of Letraset.<sup>211</sup> *Aleph* as we see it today, then, was distinguished from its excess by its presence in this canister, its container or vessel that held the fragmentary, unstable object together, in an act of tenuous unity – transmission amidst the noise.

## Films “From the Wallace Berman Collection”: *Artifactual* and The Editing Agency of the Archive

In finding three cigar boxes separate from Berman’s *Aleph* canister, the “final” version of *Aleph*, the “unfinished” film becomes an editorial process of its excess. The sections of film that are included in *Artifactual*, however, are not all of the sections from the three cigar boxes of footage. This editorial process of the archives, determined by BB Optics with consent from Anthology, was a matter of choosing, from many loose sections of film, what was the most “important” and most “relevant” to Wallace Berman – in other words, what was the most valuable for the story of *Aleph* and Wallace Berman’s life. Specifically, BB Optics, in a letter describing the details of the compiling process of *Artifactual*, chose footage that showed Wallace Berman in the footage; that was believed to have been shot by Wallace Berman, indicated in the leader of the film; or that features film footage of events that were pertinent to Berman’s life,

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<sup>211</sup> There is an interesting distinction to be made here between the hand made and the commercially produced with Wallace Berman’s use of Hebrew. In the case of Berman’s artwork, most of his use of Hebrew is painted onto a surface when viewed closely, despite its machine-like appearance from far away. However, in certain cases, as in the Verifax collages and the case of the film canister, a thin layer of glue is visible upon close inspection over each Hebrew letter, indicating an adhesive that is placed on top of a Letraset-like character. When Letraset began to produce Hebrew lettering is unknown. This dichotomy between the commercial and the handmade finds a common thread in Berman’s work, as it can be strangely unnerving when one finds that the brilliant, graphic-like color in Berman’s Verifax *Untitled (Shuffle)* series are, in fact, meticulously hand-painted. Berman himself here serves the role of the machine, as the machine (the Verifax) is making his graphical vision complete.

such as a gallery opening at the make-shift Semina Gallery in Larkspur, CA in 1960.<sup>212</sup> This procedure reflects a secondary layer of the relationship between the unstable film object of *Aleph* and its excess in *Artifactual*: that the process of “chance” editing can even be found in the assemblage of its supplement.

Today, *Aleph* and *Artifactual* are often screened side-by-side, or back-to-back, at institutions including Anthology Film Archives screenings, where John Zorn and his band have been known to improvise live on stage as *Aleph* streams onscreen. Understood by Lampert as a sort of “study reel,” *Artifactual* is framed institutionally as a compilation of film segments by and involving Wallace Berman.<sup>213</sup> Yet how does the viewer come to understand the relationship between the two film documents? Is there a clear distinction made between each, or do the two appear to overlap? Does the audience consider each document an integral part of the other? The juxtaposition of these two viewing experiences may be understood differently depending on context. However, I would argue that it is in *Aleph* and *Artifactual*'s commonalities that a historical process is most thoroughly framed. Both *Aleph* and *Artifactual* share a status as remnants – both as collections of remnants, and one the remnants of the other. It is within *Artifactual* that *Aleph* is more revealed, while indeed it is also simultaneously more concealed, as *Aleph* becomes the unfinished object entering into process – into a transmission.

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<sup>212</sup> Notes from a letter from BB Optics to Anthology Film Archives, January 30, 2007. (Accessed October 5, 2011 at Anthology Film Archives).

<sup>213</sup> Andrew Lampert, Film Archivist, at Anthology Film Archives. November 9, 2011: Personal notes from meeting at Anthology Film Archives.

## Conclusion: Transmission and the Unstable Film Object

*It is the poet's effort to draw together all the persons, symbols, places, artifacts, events, and memories that compose his past, to give them objective life so that he may one last time see and know them and, in a way, love himself and his past. But he also wants to draw us into his filmed dream, to make us his accomplices and his lovers.<sup>214</sup>*

### aleph

*it is the man, himself  
man,  
lord & master, the center  
of his own  
structured cosmology*

*it is  
he is  
the central point, the line  
the direction taken  
the road life walks thru his cells & stars*

*the power of the single  
thrust, the pure  
gesture of  
self...<sup>215</sup>*

Wallace Berman was killed in a car crash by a drunk driver on the eve of his 50th birthday, February 18, 1976. Strangely, Shirley Berman has said that Wallace “knew he was going to die on his fiftieth birthday,” a premonition that he had talked about as a child to his family.<sup>216</sup> In a very fitting synchronicity, at Berman’s funeral ceremony at Mount Sinai Cemetery, the speech written by the presiding Rabbi for the ceremony was caught by the wind

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<sup>214</sup> Neal Oxenhandler, “On Cocteau,” *Film Quarterly* Vol. 18, No. 1 (Autumn 1964): 13.

<sup>215</sup> Stuart Perkoff, “Aleph,” in *Alphabet*, in Archives of American Art (AAA), Wallace Berman Papers (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art, Microfilmed 1988). Accessed April-May 2011.

<sup>216</sup> Solnit, *Secret Exhibition*, 108.



and blown away, taken on the breath of the divine.<sup>217</sup> It was a moment that captured the loss of organized speech, a play with enigmatic poetry, and a move into in-articulation.

Transmission in this thesis is, first and foremost, the process of Wallace Berman's life, his art, and his spiritual understanding of the world, all of which distill into the visions of *Aleph*. In personally identifying as the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet – the letter Aleph – Wallace additionally placed himself at the center of Cabalistic thought, as the “all-encompassing” or “universal” man and the foundational unity of the interpretational Cabala. Wallace's private mantra, “Art is Love is God,” is one distillation of transmission into a single phrase, and within this phrase, Aleph, the letter and the film, operates as its core. The ideas of this mantra – Art, Love, and God – are transmitted through the film, encoded into multiple visual and auditory expressions. But once the transmission is acted upon by the unfinished, unstable object – the “noise” or complication of this work – a message is created from among these mutable, variable components, a message that defines the complete historical framing of both of these processes: “Art is Love is God.”

This study has sought to present Wallace Berman's film *Aleph* through two symbiotic lenses: transmission and the unfinished, and therefore unstable, film object. In a final consideration of Wallace Berman's *Aleph* and its implications, I will introduce an important and little-cited document, a set of rare transcripts of two interviews involving Berman and interviewers Tanya Belami and a person named “Sandrada” (likely Belami herself) in 1967 in London.<sup>218</sup> These texts offer a special glimpse into Berman's own words, a rarity in historical

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<sup>217</sup> Solnit, *Secret Exhibition*, 108.

<sup>218</sup> These transcripts, consisting of a few cut fragments of type-written paper, appear to be involving the same interview, but one fragment reads “transcribed from interview 1967 London interviewer Sandrada,” while another reads “excerpt from transcribed interview London 1967 by Tanya Belami.” However, based on the typing style of both fragments and the other documents (the interview with Belami, according to Richard Cándida Smith, was conducted under the

documentation, and as such, they will be excerpted throughout this concluding section to gain further access into Wallace's intentions, his ideas and conceptions of his art, and further, into *Aleph* and its process of transmission.

*Aleph's* transmission, it has been shown, is marked by Berman's pre-Beat-art years in the Navy, his literary dabblings in science, and his spiritual exploration of the Cabala, all of which planted the 'seeds' (the activating Semina) of Berman's artistic endeavors. Through his work on the Verifax machine, the transistor radio became Berman's hallmark image, parallel in importance and relevance in transmission to his personal symbol, the Aleph. The radio antenna receives the signal and deciphers the code, transforming it in to a visual expression on the frame of the transistor radio; through Verifax, and especially in the medium of film, the transistor also animates the imagery and sends out the signal to the viewer through the screen, in visual code to be received. The antennae, therefore, are Berman and the viewer, the artist and society.

With Henry William Smith's 1923 *Radio-Mastery* and with the Cabala, Berman aligned himself in early conceptions of transmission in the sciences and mystical arts, yet he also incorporated himself into the sea of images surrounding him in 1950s and 60s popular culture. With one foot in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde and the other in the modern Beat and emerging counterculture, Wallace Berman translated transmission into a theological, personal and aesthetic model of human experience. The sonar pulse of the submarine and the broadcast of

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influence of a large quantity of hashish smoked by both Berman and Belami), it is possible that "Sandrada" was a name given to Belami, or taken by Belami, in the process of the interview. Cándida Smith, *Utopia and Dissent*, 287. "Sandrada" and Tanya Belami, "Transcription from Interview with 'Sandrada,' 1967, London" and "Transcription from Interview with Tanya Belami, 1967, London," in "Wallace Berman Papers." Archives of American Art (AAA), accessed April-May 2011 (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art, Microfilmed 1988).

the transistor radio shared a common goal of transmission, but in the end, the artist aligned himself with the transistor. In the words of Berman, “transistor as memory,” the “transistor as denominator,” and the “transistor as magical counterpoint” were the ultimate tools for the dissemination of information, available to the masses and yet personal to the listener.<sup>219</sup>

A consideration of *Aleph*'s transmission would certainly be lacking if the role in which Hebrew played in Berman's life and art was not addressed. As other artists illuminated, both before and during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Cabala is the foundational structure of a multivalent system of mystical, symbolic code, where meaning is found both in the range of the system and in the mind of the practitioner. As the system of the Cabala represents a “creative act” of God, so too do its modes of interpretation pervade the creative practices of the Cabalist, as evidenced by early Cabalistic figures like ben Abdulafia. God, for the Cabalist, transmits a secret mystical code, which is, in turn, translated by the Cabalist and practiced in his or her own way. Despite the dismissal by previous scholars of Berman's interest or adeptness at the Cabala, it is undeniable that an exploration of the system, and a consideration of its primary precepts, inform Berman's work, especially in the “22-part” Cabalistic film later named after the Cabala's universal core, the Aleph. As Stuart Perkoff writes in the epigraph of this conclusion, “*it is/he is/the central point, the line...*”. For Berman, the point of Aleph extends to a line with Beth, where “the letter Beth which is the mouth as mans (sic) organ of speech..his interior..his habitation..when in conjunction with the one preceding it..the Aleph forms all ideas of progress...of graduated advance...the passage of one state into another...locomotion...”.<sup>220</sup> Beth for Berman, then, is articulation, while Aleph is the point just before, the breath before speech, and the all, the whole, comprising them both. The passage occurs between the two in the first 35

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<sup>219</sup> “Sandrada” and Tanya Belami, “Transcription from Interview with ‘Sandrada,’ 1967, London” and “Transcription from Interview with Tanya Belami, 1967, London,” 1.

<sup>220</sup> Tanya Belami, “Transcription from Interview with Tanya Belami, 1967, London,” 1.

seconds of *Aleph*, and even into the film as a whole, as the dichotomy of silence and sound extends Cabalistic transmission.

Further, transmission is an embedded component of the film celluloid itself, operating as channel of encoded messages, both linguistic and visual, through Letraset, paint and scratches applied to the film. They constitute a palimpsest, layers that are distinct, yet also necessarily merged together. These procedures operate within their own avant-garde history, and they serve as mutable components that encode secret messages and form expressive gestures. *Aleph*, through these processes, becomes a transmission both fluid and varied, possessing the qualities of contingency and change – a state moving in and out of unity and duality. Such is also the state of the influence of music on *Aleph*, as the viewer’s experience collides, in Berman’s words, “great dynamoes (sic) [in] music of today” with the visual transmission of *Aleph*, weaving in and out of cohesion into states of variability and adding layers to the palimpsest. Music has the potential, in concert with the film, to produce a mutable film object, and in this way, it serves as a process at the crux of the introduction of the unfinished, unstable object of *Aleph*.

Transmission, as this discussion has illustrated, is complicated by the concept of the unfinished, unstable object of *Aleph*. This concept, I argue, is most fundamentally representative of the “noise source” of Claude Shannon’s communication schema, a schema that found wide acceptance in a range of fields following World War II, including cinema. Noise is an external force acting upon a system to alter or distort it in a fundamental way, so that the message, embedded in the code that is transmitted through the signal of a communications system, changes from its information source and transmitter to its receiver and destination. In the case of *Aleph*, the enacting of noise (the unfinished, unstable object) on transmission (the continuous yet multiple messages produced in form and content) changed the system from chaos and

disharmony into a greater order and harmony – or, in the terms of Wallace, “to gift the obscure with new meaning”.<sup>221</sup> The inclusion of this unstable chapter into a theoretical conception of *Aleph* as transmission cultivates a richer historical understanding of Wallace Berman’s art, life and spirituality in *Aleph*.

Meaning for Berman was necessarily multivalent, but he did strive to bring the myriad of codes presented in *Aleph*’s transmission – in language and in the visual – into a common stream. When asked about meaning in his work by “Sandrada” (“One can hardly ignore the very mystico-magical quantitews (sic) in these pieces, Are they purely intuitive, or might one search for actual (sic) philosophical imports in them?”), Berman “replied” in the transcript with various phrases that emphasized the bringing together of sections into a whole: “well....a tightening up of choice fragments...or rather an involvement with pulling it all together....”; “an involvement with fragments...artificial dynamos....current events..unorthodox mysteries...other fragments....”.<sup>222</sup> While he himself spoke in Beat-poet fragments (or was that the product of the hashish-dazed interviewer “Sandrada”?), Wallace Berman sought to “pull it all together,” even when he left a definition of “it” open. It is within absence, and in fragments, that the unfinished, unstable object most essentially lies.

The complications of *Aleph* do not negate the transmission of the film, but are instead key to the conception of the unfinished, unstable object, which influences the ultimate message of the film. The destabilization of the film takes place primarily through the absence of a full set of Hebrew letters, its distinction from its “pamphlet” in *Semina 4*, its constantly shifting titling, its breakdown of the filmic medium in Letraset and paint, and its ultimate undoing (and ultimate making) in the dialogue of chance and control in the projector. These key historical distinctions

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<sup>221</sup> Sandrada, “Transcription from Interview with ‘Sandrada,’ 1967, London,” 1.

<sup>222</sup> Sandrada, “Transcription from Interview with ‘Sandrada,’ 1967, London,” 1.

of form and content define *Aleph* as a film left unfinished, and within its definition, creating a film object that is unstable in signification and in meaning.

It is its unfinished quality, however, that provides *Aleph* with some of its greatest strengths. As David E. James notes, the film “lived as a process rather than a product.”<sup>223</sup> Berman, Richard Cándida Smith explains, “had arrived at an aesthetic where the object itself was far less important than the care it inspired.”<sup>224</sup> It was not the end result that mattered to Berman; otherwise he would not have left it aside if a final product was the end goal. The film was a representation of his life, and as such, it was not meant to be finished. It was what Tosh Berman calls a personal “diary,” and as a diary, the end was only met by the author’s death, or in this case, by the author’s abandonment of the project.

Unfinished films, according to some, are part and parcel of American experimental and avant-garde filmmaking of the 1950s and 60s. The 1950s and 60s filmmakers James and John Whitney, known collectively as the Whitney brothers, were known to refer to their films as “exercises” to emphasize their process, not their finality and completion.<sup>225</sup> Frank Stauffacher, an artist in San Francisco who founded the Art in Cinema film series in 1946 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, argued that a certain quality of ‘experimental’ film emphasized film as “an interim report on a cinematic investigation still under way.”<sup>226</sup> The unfinished film, therefore, may harbor unstable meaning, but an emphasis on process, not product, in the American avant-garde and experimental film of the 1950s and 60s also ensures that multiplicity of meaning can enter into the model of transmission. The procedure of transmission, of course,

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<sup>223</sup> James, “Los Angeles Collage,” 280.

<sup>224</sup> Cándida Smith, *Utopia and Dissent*, 231.

<sup>225</sup> Scott MacDonald, “Art in Cinema: Creating an Audience for Experimental Film,” in *Radical Light: Alternative Film and Video in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945-2000*, edited by Steve Anker, Kathy Geritz & Steve Said (Berkeley: University of California Press and Pacific Film Archives, 2010), 33.

<sup>226</sup> MacDonald, “Art in Cinema,” 33.

*depends* on process, and as such, the unfinished, unstable object and transmission collide within process.

Lastly, the complication of *Aleph* is extended one step further with the inclusion of *Artifactual: Films from the Wallace Berman Collection*. A carefully selected compilation of excess, *Artifactual* introduces film footage that frames Berman's life and, most particularly, frames *Aleph* as an object defined by chance and "attrition." Wallace himself continues in his transcript to propose a further series of goals or intentions associated with his work: "elimination of excess...counterpoint...musical & magical...communications...the tightening up of fragmentaries..."<sup>227</sup> These word fragments – much like the Letraset word and phrase fragments – point to a few specific implications to the later institutional figuring of *Artifactual* from within *Aleph*'s remains. First, that the "elimination of excess" is, in this case, not truly eliminated; with the creation of *Artifactual* by Anthology Film Archives, the "excess" of *Aleph* is considered anew, even alongside the vision of *Aleph* today. Second, that "counterpoint" implies division, forcing a duality with "the tightening of fragmentaries." Berman, in other words, is interested in the *entire* process of transmission, of "pulling it all together" and yet understanding its inherent divisions, its "counterpoint[s]." Finally, "communications" are at the core of Berman's art and film work (and his poetics). It is in the production of communications that *Aleph* and *Artifactual* exchange similarities and differences between each other. Shown today in conjunction with each other, these two unstable documents lead toward the central essence of Berman's work – communication – and within that, the silence and sound, Dark and Light, of the eternally streaming *Aleph*.

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<sup>227</sup> Sandrada, "Transcription from Interview with 'Sandra,' 1967, London" in Archives of American Art (AAA), Wallace Berman Papers (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art, Microfilmed 1988). Accessed April-May 2011.

Wallace Berman's life itself was a transmission, one that seemingly ceased only upon his death in 1976; a 50-year transmission where ideas and images streamed from Berman into his radial circle of friends, admirers, acquaintances and beyond. However, Berman's life was in his work, and with this, his transmission continues on. His art and film work is still very much present, gradually coming under greater and greater canonization in the currents of art and film history. Yet a procedural by-product of canonization is the making of the static, "finished" art object, locked into its own time and forever subject to institutionalization. Wallace Berman's mutable *Aleph*, nonetheless, aims to defy this forever-fixed positioning, a positioning that follows, in a way, Berman's own life-long rebellion of institutionality. His transmission, by its own design, seeks to remain malleable in its historical expression, and as such, it persists as a necessarily complicated object in art and film history. As long as *Aleph* exists, Wallace's unique artistic transmission, and implicit defiance of the stable canonized art object, while faint, will continue to flicker in the radio-ether. It is its own current, its own transmission, relaying a signal encoded with meaning, made fragmentary and unified again, out to anyone who sees and experiences it. It is Art, it is Love, and it is God, flickering faintly, in a streaming coded signal, into the void of Aleph.



## Appendix I – Literary Library, Music and Film Sources

This is an incomplete list of all of the music and books that Berman may have listened to and read during his lifetime. Berman was repeatedly described as “highly literate” and a “prolific reader,” so this list is not, and never will be, complete. However, this list does provide interesting insights into the life of an archetypal Beat artist’s learning.

The book list is divided into sections by type (poetry magazines, art magazines, poetry, novels, etc). The music list is much broader and shorter, generally listed by band or musician. A short list of films or filmmakers is also listed at the end of this section. Each book and piece of music is labeled with an indicating source, with a key listed directly below.

### *Key to Sources:*

+ = The Wallace Berman Papers, Archives of American Art. Books have cover scanned and tables of contents, while some journals & magazines are scanned in full. Available on microfilm. Accessed April-May 2011. The Bruce Conner reference, below, can be found in a statement about Conner by Berman that accompanied a showing of his film *Cosmic Ray* (1961).

~ = Sandra Leonard Starr, *Lost and Found in California: Four Decades of Assemblage Art* (Santa Monica: James Corcoran Gallery, Shoshana Wayne Gallery and Pence Gallery, 1988), 57, 58, 59, 62, 69, 70, 85, 110.

@ = Merrill Greene, “Wallace Berman: Portrait of the Artist as an Underground Man,” *Artforum* Vol. 16 (February 1978): 53-61.

# = Ken D. Allan, “City of Degenerate Angels: Wallace Berman, Jazz, and *Semina* in Postwar Los Angeles,” *Art Journal* Vol. 70, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 75.

% = Lucy Bradnock and Rani Singh, “Chapter 2: Papa’s Got A Brand New Bag: Crafting An Art Scene,” in *Pacific Standard Time: Los Angeles Art, 1945-1980*, eds. Rebecca Peabody et al. (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute and the J. Paul Getty Museum, 2011), 80.

^ = Richard Cándida Smith, *Utopia and Dissent: Art, Poetry, and Politics in California* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 214.

& = David Meltzer, “The Secret Text Lost in the Processor” in Eduardo Lipschutz-Villa, et al., *Wallace Berman: Support the Revolution* (Amsterdam: Institute of Contemporary Art, Amsterdam, 1992), 55.

\* = Rebecca Solnit, *Secret Exhibition: Six California Artists of the Cold War Era* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1990), 8, 9, 95.

§ = Tosh Berman, “Wallace and I,” *Blastitude* Issue #13 (August 2002), accessed February-May 2011, [http://www.blastitude.com/13/ETERNITY/wallace\\_berman.htm](http://www.blastitude.com/13/ETERNITY/wallace_berman.htm).

¶ = Tosh Berman, “Wallace and His Film,” in *Wallace Berman: Support the Revolution*, by Eduardo Lipschutz-Villa et al. (Amsterdam: Institute of Contemporary Art, Amsterdam, 1992), 76.

### Books

#### *Art Books/Magazines*

Andy Warhol’s Interview Magazine, Vol. IV, No. 11 & 12 +  
*Artforum* §  
Billy Al Bengston and Ed Ruscha -- *Business Cards* -- 1968 +  
*Black Mountain Review* %  
*Caterpillar 14*, January 1971 +  
*Documents of Modern Art Series* – all issues ~  
*Evergreen Review* %  
Jess -- *Gallowsongs: Galgenlieder by Christian Morgenstern* Versions -- 1970 +  
Henry Miller -- *The Waters Reglitterized* -- 1950 +  
Robert Motherwell, ed. -- *The Dada Painters and Poets* – ~ # % &  
Georges Noel, preface -- *Images de Jean Cocteau* -- [1957?]  
*Origin* %  
Charley Plymell -- *Robert Ronnie Branaman* – 1963 +  
Unknown - “The Moulin a Papier Richard de Bas in Ambert, France” -- 1970 +  
*VIEW* – all issues ~ # %  
Wolf Vostell -- *Television Decollage & Morning Glory/ 2 Pieces* -- 1963 +  
*VVV* # %

#### *Childhood Books*

T.E. Lawrence -- *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* – edition unknown @ ^  
Oscar Wilde complete works (edition unknown) @ ^

### *Fiction*

L. Frank Baum -- *Osma of Oz* -- 1907 +  
Herman Hesse -- *Steppenwolf* -- 1929 (English trans.) ~ &

### *Kabbalah Books*

Enel - *Rota ou & La Roue Celeste* - 1930 +  
Jack Hirshman -- *Black Alephs* -- 1969 +  
Jack Hirshman -- *Kabbala Surrealism: An Essay* -- 1972 +  
Simon Kasdin -- *The Esoteric Tarot* -- 1965 +  
Rabbi Levi L Krakowsky -- *Kabbalah* -- undated +  
Rabbi Moses C. Luzzatto -- *General Principles of the Kabbalah* -- 1970 +  
David Meltzer -- *Knots* -- 1971 +  
Stuart Z. Perkoff -- *Alphabet* -- 1973 +  
Charles Ponce -- *Kabbalah* -- 1973 +  
Dagobert D. Runes, forward -- *The Wisdom of the Kabbalah* -- 1957 +  
Knut Stenring -- *The Book of formation or Sepher Yetzirah* -- 1923 +  
Charles Stein -- *AION: A Journal of Traditional Science*, No. 1, December 1964 +  
*Work of the Chariot*, undated +

### *Non-fiction/History*

William E. Barrett -- *The First War Planes* -- 1960 +  
Aleister Crowley -- *Diary of A Drug Fiend* -- 1922 ~  
Vaslav Nijinsky -- *The Diary of Nijinsky* -- 1936 ~  
Henry Smith Williams -- *The Story of Modern Science, Volume 9: Radio-Mastery of the Ether* -- 1923 +

### *Philosophy*

Jean-Paul Sartre ~  
Albert Camus ~

### *Plays/Theatre*

Fritz Honig -- "Kolner Puppet Theater," Vols 2 and 4 -- 1908-1910 +  
Unknown -- *Phanopoeia Pavane: Dance - Play in Verse* -- undated +

Poetry

- Helen Adam, illustrated by Jess -- *Ballads* -- 1964 +  
I.E. Alexander [Robert "Bob" Alexander] -- *Collectanea* -- 1957 +  
Guillaume Apollinaire -- *Selected Writings of Guillaume Apollinaire (New Directions Books)*, 1971 &  
Antonin Artaud ~ %  
Bartholomew -- *Spectral Measures on the Unit Disc* -- 1973 +  
Charles Baudelaire ~ %  
Charles Bukowski -- *Another Academy* -- 1970 +  
Cameron -- *Black Pilgrimage* -- 1964 +  
Samuel Charters -- *A Portents Semina, Portents #6, (for Wallace Berman)* -- 1967 +  
Jean Cocteau ~ % &  
Bruce Conner and Michael McClure -- *Bruce Conner/Michael McClure (Mandala Deck)* -- 1966 +  
Bobbie Creeley -- *The Finger* -- 1968 +  
Robert Duncan -- *Letters* -- 1958 +  
Robert Duncan -- *Poems 1948-49* -- [1949] +  
Kirby Doyle -- *Sapphobones* -- 1966 +  
Paul Éluard %  
Steve Elvin -- *A Dream* -- 1967 +  
Clayton Eshleman -- *Altars* -- 1971 +  
Ernest Fenollosa, ed. Ezra Pound -- *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* -- 1936 +  
Wallace Fowlie -- "Collection of modern French poetry" -- &  
    • Perhaps *Mid-Century French Poets: Selections, Translations and Critical Notices* -- Wallace Fowlie (1955)?  
Michael L. Fram -- *Love Dragon Poem* -- 1967 +  
Allen Ginsberg -- *Howl* -- 1956 +  
Piero Heliczer -- *The Soap Opera* -- 1967 +  
Jack Hirschman -- *A Correspondence of Americans* -- 1960 +  
Jack Hirschman -- *Cantillations* -- 1974 +  
Jack Hirschman -- *DJackson* -- 1974 +  
Jack Hirschman -- *The R of the Ari's Raziél* -- 1972 +  
Jack Hirschman -- *Scintilla* -- 1971 +  
Jack Hirschman -- *Shekinah* -- 1969 +  
Jack Hirschman -- *William Blake* -- 1967 +  
Idell -- *Poems for Selected People* -- 1961 +  
Idell -- *Zen Love Poems* -- 1967 +  
Bob Kaufman -- *Golden Sardine* -- 1967 +  
Philip Lamantia -- *Destroyed Works* -- 1962 +  
Ron Loewinsohn -- *Lying Together; Turning the Head & Shifting the Weight; The Produce District, & Other Places; Moving -- A Spring Poem* -- 1967 +  
Nickolas Logan -- *The Pearl Tears* -- 1956 +  
Stephane Mallarmé ~  
Stephane Mallarmé -- *Igitur* -- 1974 +

Michael McClure -- *Ghost Tantras* -- 1964 +  
 Michael McClure -- *Hail Thee Who Play* -- 1968 +  
 Michael McClure -- *Hymns to St. Geryon and Other Poems* -- 1959 +  
 Michael McClure -- *Hymns to St. Geryon and Other Poems/Dark Brown* -- 1969 +  
 Michael McClure -- *The Mammals* -- 1972 +  
 Michael McClure -- *Rare Angel* -- 1974 +  
 Michael McClure -- *September Blackberries* -- 1974 +  
 David Meltzer -- *Knots* -- 1971 +  
 David Meltzer -- *Greenspeech* -- 1970 +  
 David Meltzer -- *Hero/Lil* -- 1973 +  
 David Meltzer -- *Luna* -- 1970 +  
 David Meltzer -- *The Process* -- 1965 +  
 David Meltzer -- *Ragas* -- 1959 +  
 David Meltzer -- *Round the Poem Box; Rustic & Domestic Home Movies for Stan & Jane Brakhage* -- 1969 +  
 David Meltzer -- *We All Have Something to Say to Each Other* -- 1962 +  
 Henry Miller ~  
 Anais Nin ~  
 Kenneth Patchen -- *The Journal of Albion Moonlight* -- 1944 +  
 Kenneth Patchen -- *Pictures of Life and of Death* -- 1946 +  
 Arthur Rimbaud ~  
 Rabinandrath Tagore ~  
 Ben Talbert -- *An Excerpt from "The Disconcerting Games of Vadim the Mechanic"* -- 1971 +  
 Zack Walsh -- *Points in Time* -- 1963 +  
 Ruth Weiss -- *Gallery of Women* -- 1959 +  
 Lew Welch -- *Wobbly Rock* -- 1960 +  
 Paul Valéry %  
 John Wieners -- *Chinoiserie* -- 1965 +  
 John Wieners -- *The Hotel Wentley Poems* -- 1965 +

### *Scripts*

Michael McClure -- *The Beard* -- 1965 +  
 Don Sherman, Dennis Hopper & Peter Fonda -- *The Yin and the Yang* -- 1966 +

### Music

Bach \* ¶ ~  
 Syd Barrett §  
 The Beatles § ¶  
 David Bowie §  
 James Brown  
 • "Papa's Got A Brand New Bag" ¶

John Cage ¶  
 Slim Gaillard \*  
 Billie Holiday §  
 Albert King ¶  
 The Kinks  
     • “Who’s Next In Line” § ¶  
 Moroccan trance/folk music ¶  
 Motown § ¶  
 New York Dolls §  
 Charlie Parker \* § ¶ ~  
 Iggy Pop §  
 Purcell  
     • “Come Ye Sons of Art” \*  
 The Rolling Stones  
     • “Satisfaction” §  
 Roxy Music  
     • “For Your Pleasure” §  
 Santana §  
 Patti Smith  
     • *Horses* album §  
 The Supremes  
     • “Baby Love” § ¶  
 Edgar Varese ¶  
 Vivaldi \* ~  
 Jimmy Witherspoon ~  
 Lester Young \*

### Films

Kenneth Anger  
     • *Fireworks* – 1947 ~  
 Jordan Belson ~  
 Jean Cocteau  
     • *The Blood of A Poet* – 1930 ~  
 Bruce Conner  
     • *Cosmic Ray* – 1961 +  
 Hans Richter  
     • *Dreams That Money Can Buy* – 1947 ~  
 Andy Warhol  
     • *Tarzan and Jane Regained...Sort Of* – 1963 ~  
 The Whitney Brothers (John and James Whitney) ~  
 Robert Wise  
     • *I Want To Live!* – 1958 \*

## Appendix II – ‘Map’ of *Aleph*

This is a ‘map’ of the contents of *Aleph*, “fixed” in time by Anthology Film Archives, by chronological time and ‘section’ (a.k.a. Hebrew letter). The purpose of this mapping is to catalogue each sequence in *Aleph* for quick reference, as well as provide an alternative method to watching the film for ‘reading’ the structure and form of the film. Note that not every frame is catalogued below, but rather content or suggested content has been identified, to the best of the ability of the author. To calculate the time for each visual cue, the streaming video of *Aleph*, available for free on Ubuweb.com, was used. This time, however, is not exact, as many that are listed within the same second are half-second frames, and some that are listed as one second are also at times half-second frames. Therefore, there is a minor level of error to account for in this mapping. Additionally, identifications of people or things within the footage are compiled from identifications made by the author, Caroline Jones, Kristel Smentek, Louis Kaplan and David E. James (the latter two authors who profile *Aleph* in their writing).

### Section 1

- 0.00-0.13 – Footage of man (Wallace Berman? Philip Lamantia?) shooting up heroin
- 0.13-0.16 – Light switch/door, on color film
- 0.16-0.17 – Blindfolded man in cockpit of plane with headset (William Burroughs?)
- 0.17-0.18 – William Burrough’s *Junkie*, on color film
- 0.18-0.19 – Verifax transistor radio: Flash Gordon
- 0.19-0.20 – Verifax transistor radio: Alien/Bug
- 0.20-0.21 – Verifax transistor radio: Women’s legs
- 0.21-0.22 – Verifax transistor radio: Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy
- 0.22-0.26 – DiDi Morrill (Artist and friend of the Berman’s – blond woman)
- 0.26-0.28 – Photograph/picture of blindfolded, long-haired figure in white nightgown

0.28-0.34 – DiDi Morrill dancing in room, scanned with camera

0.34-0.35 – Beth character

## Section 2: Beth

0.35-0.37 – Wallace Berman's face, scanned with camera

0.37-0.38 – Shirley Berman looking into mirror (from back with face seen in mirror)

0.38-0.38 – DiDi Morrill dancing

0.38-0.40 – Photograph/picture of blindfolded, long-haired figure in white nightgown

0.40-0.41 – Sculptural head (female, possibly Greek or Roman), from 3 angles

0.41-0.43 – Dancing figure that appears like Christ with arms out (possibly Russian?)

0.43-0.45 – Cat in 3 cuts – looking up from bowl, sitting down, walking

0.45-0.49 – Dark, indeterminable image, partial profile of face in upper right corner

0.49-0.50 – Symbolist portrait of woman leaning on hands

Close-up of Fernand Khnopf, *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* (1891).

0.50-0.51 – Cat licking itself

0.51-0.52 – Symbolist portrait of woman leaning on hands, scanned

Close-up of Fernand Khnopf, *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* (1891).

0.52-0.53 – DiDi Morrill talking and dancing

0.53-0.53 - Symbolist portrait of woman leaning on hands, obscured by Letraset

Close-up of Fernand Khnopf, *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* (1891).

0.53-0.55 – Cat licking itself

0.55-0.56 – Outside of industrial building with large windows

0.56-0.58 – Cat licking itself

0.58-0.59 – Photograph of Charlie Parker playing saxophone, scanned

0.59-1.00 – Cross in stained-glass window, possibly made by artist/friend Billy Gray.

1.00-1.01 – Gimel character

## Section 3: Gimel

1.01-1.05 – Dried marijuana being sorted and bagged, 6 cuts

1.05-1.08 – Live marijuana plants, scanned, 2 cuts (Artie Richter's – Louis Kaplan)

1.08-1.09 – Indeterminable image, possibly a human face in corner.



1.09-1.10 – Patricia Jordan talking on a street  
1.10-1.13 – Live marijuana plants, scanned, 5 cuts  
1.13-1.14 – Two hands with lit match smoking from Chinese opium pipe  
1.14-1.14 – Photograph of two men being held and beaten by police  
1.15-1.18 – Statue of an unknown saint, scanned from feet to head  
1.18-1.19 – Tosh Berman, Wallace’s son, holding a bag  
1.19-1.19 – Darkness with sneaker  
1.19-1.21 – Photograph/picture of blindfolded, long-haired figure in white nightgown  
1.21-1.22 – Hand opening, likely Wallace’s left hand (rings on pinkie & ring fingers)  
1.22-1.23 – Photograph of John F. Kennedy and an unknown man to his left  
1.23-1.23 – Photograph of seagulls/birds flying/taking off  
1.24-1.24 – Hand opening, likely Wallace’s left hand (rings on pinkie & ring fingers)  
1.24-1.24 – Photograph of seagulls/birds flying/taking off  
1.24-1.25 – Hand opening, likely Wallace’s left hand (rings on pinkie & ring fingers)  
1.25-1.26 - Sculptural head (female, possibly Greek or Roman), from 2 angles  
1.26-1.27 – Verifax transistor radio: Native American dancing in ceremonial dress  
1.27-1.27 – Verifax transistor radio: Runner with “466” number running on track  
1.27-1.30 – Automata doll by Pierre Jaquet-Droz, “The Clerk” (1774)  
1.31-1.31 – Hand opening, likely Wallace’s left hand (rings on pinkie & ring fingers)  
1.31-1.33 – Photograph of white galaxy against black space  
1.33-1.34 – Automata doll by Pierre Jaquet-Droz, “The Clerk” (1774)  
1.34-1.37 – Tosh Berman holding cluster of leaves & raising it to his mouth to eat  
1.37-1.38 – Tosh Berman holding different cluster of leaves & smelling them  
1.38-1.39 – Photograph of white galaxy against black space  
1.39-1.40 – Photograph of industrial smoke stacks  
1.40-1.40 – Sculptural head (female, possibly Greek or Roman), from 1 angle  
1.40-1.42 – Bob Dylan, from 2 angles, moving - possibly from a movie  
1.42-1.43 – Sculptural head (female, possibly Greek or Roman), from 1 angle  
1.43-1.43 – Photograph/picture of blindfolded, long-haired figure in white nightgown  
1.43-1.47 – Indeterminable image, possibly a runner holding a torch – foot at end  
1.47-1.49 – Photograph of woman in white getting into car (car door only visible)

1.49-1.50 – Profile of a different woman wearing white dress, close-up  
1.50-1.51 – Tosh Berman, in profile and looking at camera, 2 cuts  
1.51-1.52 – Photograph of unknown military capture (men w/arms on head in uniform)  
1.52-1.53 – Tosh Berman, scanned from side  
1.53-1.56 – Photograph of unknown woman, eyes closed, hand w/fur to face, man  
1.56-1.56 – Photograph of blond woman and dark-haired man kissing & embracing  
1.56-1.57 – Photograph of white galaxy against black space, zoomed into middle  
1.57-1.59 – Verifax transistor radio: Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy  
1.59-2.02 – Verifax transistor radio: Nude woman, framed from neck to knees, bending  
2.02-2.03 – Indeterminable image, likely an under-exposed image of a nude woman  
2.03-2.08 – Photograph of two nude women holding object between them, laughing  
2.08-2.11 – Photograph of Nikita Khrushchev and aides/men in suits  
2.11-2.12 – Photograph of Marilyn Monroe with dark sunglasses  
2.12-2.15 – Photograph of Dean Stockwell walking on railroad tracks  
2.16-2.17 – Photograph of side-angle of gate or bars, with unknown uniformed guards  
2.17-2.18 – Blank (white) frame with Letraset “8”  
2.18-2.20 – Photograph of two nude women holding object between them, laughing  
2.20-2.21 – Blank (white) frame with Letraset letters  
2.21-2.21 – Photograph of two nude women holding object between them, laughing  
2.21-2.24 – Photograph of members of The Rolling Stones  
2.24-2.25 – Photograph of two nude women holding object between them, laughing  
2.25-2.27 – Photograph of the face Mick Jagger, singer of The Rolling Stones  
2.27-2.34 – Footage of Mick Jagger singing, close-up of face, likely filmed in theatre  
2.34-2.38 – Footage of Brian Jones, Rolling Stones’s guitarist, and audience, scratched  
2.38-2.42 – Footage of Mick Jagger singing into mic, close-up of face  
2.42-2.48 – Shirley Berman from behind, nude, bending, applying make-up in mirror  
2.48-2.50 – Footage likely of Mick Jagger, possibly of James Brown, performing  
2.50-2.50 – Back of Shirley Berman  
2.50-2.59 – Dancing women’s feet, scanned up to naked behind and down, flower rug  
2.59-2.59 – Photograph of unknown person in shimmery shirt (James Brown?)  
2.59-3.00 – Photograph of the face of Mick Jagger

3.00-3.02 – Dancing women’s feet, scanned up to naked behind and down, flower rug  
 3.03-3.03 – Woman’s crotch, framed from below belly button to upper thigh  
 3.03-3.08 – Footage of Mick Jagger singing into mic, close-up of face  
 3.08-3.12 – Footage of audience and likely Brian Jones (very dark)  
 3.12-3.15 – Footage of moving tambourine and profile of drum kit, Rolling Stones  
 3.15-3.15 – Dark film with Brian Jones’s mouth/teeth in lower right  
 3.15-3.17 – Footage of Mick Jagger singing into mic, close-up of face  
 3.17-3.17 – Dark film with scratches  
 3.17-3.18 – Footage of Rolling Stones on stage, likely at *The T.A.M.I. Show*  
 3.18-3.19 – Close-up of audience members, with man in suit/tie and woman  
 3.19-3.20 – Close-up of black and white audience, with black man & white woman  
 3.20-3.21 – Close-up of white woman from previous shot, bikini outfit (go-go dancer?)  
 3.21-3.22 – Photograph of two nude women holding object between them, laughing  
 3.22-3.22 – Photograph of runners, with black runner in number “705” at front  
 3.22-3.24 – Photograph of saxophonist, possibly Charlie Parker or other jazz musician  
 3.24-3.24 – Photograph of two nude women holding object, upside-down  
 3.24-3.25 – Indeterminable image, possibly an upside-down partial shot of skeleton  
 3.25-3.28 – Photograph of two nude women holding object, upside-down and upright  
 3.28-3.28 – Indeterminable image, likely photograph of runners, with number “705”  
 3.28-3.28 – Photograph of unknown runners, running from side  
 3.28-3.29 – Indeterminable image, likely photograph of runners  
 3.29-3.30 – Photograph of unknown woman, possibly Louise Herms (*Semina 4*)  
 3.30-3.32 – Shirley Berman from behind, nude, bending over  
 3.32-3.33 – Woman nude from behind, likely Shirley Berman, possibly landlady Phyllis  
 3.33-3.34 – Daleth character

#### Section 4: Daleth

3.34-3.36 – Bearded Russ Tamblyn reading a book with spectacles (another person?)  
 3.36-3.38 – Close-up of Tamblyn reading a book  
 3.38-3.39 – Profile angle of Tamblyn reading, very dark  
 3.39-3.41 – Close-up of unknown machinery, likely a typewriter or industrial machine

- 3.41-3.41 – Close-up of Tamblyn’s face reading, with cigar and spectacles
- 3.41-3.42 – Close-up of unknown machinery, likely a typewriter or industrial machine
- 3.42-3.42 – Close-up of hand holding end of cigar/cigarette/marijuana joint
- 3.42-3.43 – Indeterminable series of 3 images, possibly hand moving with joint
- 3.43-3.43 – Photograph of snowy hill with trees from a distance
- 3.43-3.44 – Side profile of Tamblyn’s face, leaning down
- 3.44-3.45 – Tamblyn puffing on cigar
- 3.45-3.46 – Photograph of industrial electrical coils, in 2 cuts
- 3.46-3.47 – Tamblyn blowing out smoke
- 3.47-3.47 – Tamblyn’s face in side profile
- 3.47-3.47 – Unknown small blond child playing on floor
- 3.47-3.48 – Unknown blond woman leaning over
- 3.48-3.49 – Unknown woman with purse by feet in nice coat, short dark hair
- 3.49-3.51 – Unknown blond woman and small blond child, looking at woman, 3 cuts
- 3.51-3.53 – Tosh Berman’s hands, pinching something and rolling it between fingers
- 3.53-3.54 – Close-up of Tosh’s face, scanning from eyes to lower face
- 3.54-3.55 – Close-up scanning cover of *The Lost Princess of Oz* by L. Frank Baum (1917)
- 3.55-3.57 – DiDi Morrill in profile and talking
- 3.57-3.58 – Photograph of the face of Mick Jagger
- 3.58-3.59 – Indeterminable photographic image, possibly of a man
- 3.59-4.01 – Photograph of male runner putting on jacket w/male throwing javelin
- 4.01-4.02 – Cat jumping off of table in outside area
- 4.02-4.03 – Cat walking around wooden floor towards camera
- 4.03-4.03 – Unknown photograph/artwork of a man and woman, possibly from 20s?
- 4.03-4.04 – Heh character

### Section 5: Heh

- 4.04-4.05 – Woman in white nightgown sitting on bed doing makeup, likely landlady
- 4.05-4.06 – Headlight of a car or motorcycle at night
- 4.06-4.11 – Landlady in white nightgown sitting on bed doing makeup
- 4.11-4.14 – Landlady appearing nude sitting on bed in same position doing makeup

4.14-4.18 – Landlady again in white nightgown sitting on bed doing makeup  
4.18-4.20 – Photograph of woman in what appears to be a home advertisement  
4.20-4.21 – Woman, likely landlady, nude from behind moving the sheets on bed  
4.21-4.23 – Indeterminable film segment, possibly landlady with arm in air  
4.23-4.26 - Photograph of woman in white getting into car w/car door, zoom on man  
4.26-4.29 – Landlady nude getting out of bed and walking by camera, 3 cuts  
4.29-4.31 – Woman nude from behind, likely landlady, 2 shots, then turns in profile  
4.31-4.32 – Photograph of black man, singing into a mic or covered in blood, scanned  
4.32-4.32 – Photograph of woman in white getting into car, close-up on woman  
4.32-4.33 – Woman’s body turning with arms bent, glimpse of breasts and stomach  
4.33-4.34 – Vau character

#### Section 6: Vau

4.34-4.37 – Landlady nude, holding coffee mug, smoking and swaying, scanned twice  
4.37-4.39 – Photograph of outside of apartment building or office building, zoomed  
4.39-4.42 – Landlady gets into bed, lays back on bed, 2 cuts  
4.42-4.43 – Photograph of outside of a large house, scanned from roof to left  
4.43-4.44 – Landlady getting into bed and pulling sheet up over body  
4.44-4.45 – Indeterminable image, possibly a face or a mask  
4.45-4.46 – Unknown man, likely Nureyev or another public figure  
4.46-4.48 – Landlady getting into bed and pulling sheet up over body, 2 angles  
4.48-4.51 – Landlady holding cigarette in bed, 3 cuts  
4.51-4.52 – Photograph of Mick Jagger wearing turtleneck  
4.52-4.53 – Photograph of a grand staircase inside a building, scanned right to left  
4.53-4.54 – Michael McClure dressed in lion’s costume for cover of *Ghost Tantras*  
4.54-4.56 – Photograph of football players, 3 cuts  
4.56-4.58 – Photograph of a city with cars and people, scanned  
4.58-5.01 – Landlady nude sitting on bed and getting out of bed, 5 cuts  
5.01-5.02 – Photograph of Jacqueline Onassis wearing black in car  
5.02-5.05 – Woman, likely landlady, walking through outdoor area  
5.05-5.06 – Light switch/door outside, very light and now on black and white film

5.06-5.07 – Zain character

### Section 7: Zain

- 5.07-5.08 – Photograph of police officer, looking out of something at face
- 5.08-5.09 – Scan of left side of woman's nude body, likely landlady
- 5.09-5.11 – Landlady's face and upper part of body with arm in air, scanned, 4 cuts
- 5.11-5.12 – Landlady's nude body scanned, from bottom to top and back
- 5.12-5.14 – Woman's feet dancing on floral rug, scanned, 2 cuts
- 5.14-5.15 – Landlady's nude bottom and side body with side breast, 2 cuts
- 5.15-5.16 – Photograph of bald white man with dark rimmed glasses, possibly writer
- 5.16-5.23 – Landlady's nude body turning and flopping backwards on bed, 10 cuts
- 5.23-5.26 – Photograph of table setting with woman in background, advertisement
- 5.26-5.26 – Photograph of woman, likely Louise Herms smoking out of pipe
- 5.26-5.29 – Landlady smoking cigarette, zoom in on hand w/wedding band, 2 cuts
- 5.29-5.30 – Indeterminable image, likely blurry close-up of nude legs and body
- 5.30-5.32 – Photograph or picture of Egyptian architecture, possibly man at podium
- 5.32-5.33 – Photograph or picture of Egyptian statue head, pharaoh (Tutankhamun?)
- 5.33-5.35 – Photograph of man and woman's legs, cross-legged, sitting on couch
- 5.35-5.37 – Light switch/door, black and white, zoom in, 3 cuts
- 5.37-5.39 – Man in suit embracing something, face obscured, zoom in to hand
- 5.39-5.39 – Blank (white) screen with Letraset
- 5.39-5.41 – Close-up of torn photograph of blond woman
- 5.41-5.44 – Photograph/picture of blindfolded, long-haired figure in white nightgown
- 5.44-5.46 – Photograph out of window of plane with group of skydivers linked, zoom
- 5.46-5.48 – Photograph of single skydiver floating against sky, zoom
- 5.48-5.49 – Hand quickly shuffling/tossing Tarot cards
- 5.49-5.49 – Close-up of torn photograph of blond woman, close-up on lower face
- 5.49-5.50 – Cheth character

### Section 8: Cheth

- 5.50-5.51 – Close-up of torn picture of blond woman, close-up on lower face

5.51-5.53 – Wallace Berman’s face, scanned, from profile and eyes at camera, 4 cuts  
5.53-5.54 – Torn photograph of blond woman, zoom in from afar  
5.54-5.55 – Wallace Berman’s face, right profile with hair, left profile, looks at camera  
5.55-5.58 – Torn photograph of blond woman, from afar, 2 cuts  
5.58-5.59 – Close-up of skydiver floating against sky  
5.59-6.01 – Close-up of torn photograph of blond woman  
6.01-6.01 – Close-up of photograph of lower face of Rudolph Nureyev  
6.01-6.04 – Photograph of statue of man dressed in armor, carrying something  
6.04-6.05 – Close-up of photograph of lower face of Rudolph Nureyev  
6.05-6.08 – Photograph of dancer, likely Vaslav Nijinsky, leaping in air, head turned  
6.08-6.09 – Teth character

#### Section 9: Teth

6.09-6.11 – Close-up footage of blond woman dancing, likely *The T.A.M.I. Show*  
6.11-6.14 – Footage of television broadcast of Nureyev dancing *Swan Lake* (~1965)  
6.14-6.15 – Close-up footage of Tosh’s hands tearing and rolling up a leaf  
6.15-6.17 – Close-up footage of blond woman dancing, likely *The T.A.M.I. Show*  
6.17-6.19 – Footage of television broadcast of Nureyev/Margot Fonteyn, *Swan Lake*  
6.19-6.19 – Close-up photograph of Nijinsky leaping, only part of bottom leg shown  
6.19-6.19 – Close-up of torn photograph of blond woman, close of face  
6.19-6.23 – Close-up of skydiver floating in sky, camera turns around image in circle  
6.23-6.25 – Even closer close-up of skydiver floating in sky, camera turning, 3 cuts  
6.25-6.29 – Photograph of statue of man dressed in armor, standing on rock, 4 cuts  
6.29-6.30 – Close-up of photograph of the face of young Nijinsky  
6.30-6.34 – Close-up photograph of Nijinsky leaping in air, scanned  
6.34-6.35 – Close-up of skydiver floating in sky, zoom in to sky below skydiver  
6.35-6.40 – Photograph of woman standing next to car, touching window  
6.40-6.43 – Photograph of woman Russian/European (?) gypsy-like dancer  
6.43-6.45 – Close-up photograph of the face of young Nijinsky, scanned, 3 cuts  
6.45-6.46 – Photograph of woman Russian/European (?) gypsy-like dancer, torso  
6.46-6.47 – Photograph of bald man and short-haired woman, blurry, unknown origin

6.47-6.48 – Photograph of man hitting other man on his head with chair, 3 cuts  
6.48-6.48 – Dark footage of Dean Stockwell in room  
6.48-6.49 – Photograph of unknown baseball pitcher in a wind-up, 3 cuts  
6.49-6.50 – Footage of Dean Stockwell, scanned fast, 5 cuts with one cut of face/arm  
6.50-6.50 – Photograph of unknown baseball pitcher in a wind-up  
6.50-6.51 – Photograph of Dean Stockwell, hand on face & eyes open wide  
6.51-6.51 – Photograph of unknown baseball pitcher in a wind-up  
6.51-6.51 – Photograph of unknown umpire and catcher, shot from behind  
6.51-6.51 – Photograph of Dean Stockwell, finger on chin, gritting teeth  
6.51-6.52 – Indeterminable image – too obscured with Letraset to identify contents  
6.52-6.52 – Photograph of Dean Stockwell from side profile, sunglasses  
6.52-6.52 – Indeterminable image from 6.51 – still too obscured with Letraset  
6.52-6.53 – Photograph of Dean Stockwell, 2 cuts, different image of head  
6.53-6.53 – Indeterminable image – possibly outdoor scene  
6.53-6.55 – Photograph of Dean Stockwell with sunglasses holding hands, 7 cuts  
6.55-6.55 – Indeterminable image – same as 6.51 & 6.52 – may be woman lying down  
6.55-6.56 – Photograph of Dean Stockwell, smoking cigar/cigarette, 6 cuts  
6.56-6.56 – Indeterminable image – may be woman lying down  
6.56-6.57 – Photographs of Dean Stockwell, 3 cuts, 3 different angles  
6.57-6.57 – Blank screen w/Letraset  
6.57-6.57 – Indeterminable images – 2 cuts of unknown images  
6.57-6.58 – Photograph of Dean Stockwell with hand on chin, scanned, 3 cuts  
6.58-6.59 – Indeterminable image – may be woman lying down  
6.59-6.59 – Two indeterminable images, both abstract  
6.59-7.00 – Photograph/image of drawing of a skeleton torso, possibly from Tarot  
7.00-7.00 – Photograph/image of face of man, likely Salvador Dali (w/moustache)  
7.00-7.01 – Two indeterminable images, both abstract (same as 6.59)  
7.01-7.02 – Three photographs of Dean Stockwell, 3 cuts, each w/hand on chin  
7.02-7.03 – Photograph of space picture of the moon or Earth (more likely moon)  
7.03-7.03 – Photograph of Dean Stockwell in profile with glasses  
7.03-7.03 – Photograph of space picture of the moon or Earth (more likely moon)



7.03-7.03 – Photograph of runner with mouth agape, running over finish line  
7.03-7.03 – Photograph of unknown runners running around track  
7.03-7.04 – Photograph of runners running around track, “705” number on one man  
7.04-7.05 – Photograph of runner running around track, “615” number, 3 cuts  
7.05-7.05 – Footage of Dean Stockwell, from side of body turning  
7.05-7.06 – Photograph of man with hands over his head & mouth open (comedian?)  
7.06-7.06 – Photograph of two nude women holding object, upside-down  
7.06-7.07 – Photograph of Pope (likely Pope Pius XII, Pope from 1939-1958)  
7.07-7.07 – Blank screen w/Letraset  
7.07-7.08 – Photograph of two nude women holding object, scanned  
7.08-7.08 – Photograph of Pope (likely Pope Pius XII), scanned  
7.08-7.09 – Photograph of two nude women holding object, scanned  
7.09-7.09 – Photograph of Pope (likely Pope Pius XII)  
7.09-7.09 – Photograph of two nude women holding object, scanned  
7.09-7.10 – Photograph of Pope (different photograph than 7.06-7.09 - Pius XII?)  
7.10-7.11 – Photograph of nude woman with man behind her  
7.11-7.11 – Verifax transistor radio: Alien/ Bug  
7.11-7.11 – Verifax transistor radio: Flash Gordon  
7.11-7.12 – William Burrough’s *Junkie* (color film)  
7.12-7.12 – Verifax transistor radio: Flash Gordon  
7.12-7.13 – Yod character

#### Section 10: Yod

7.13-7.17 – Footage of Russ Tamblyn riding around in circle on motorcycle, 6 cuts  
7.17-7.18 – Footage of DiDi Morrill talking and pointing out a window  
7.18-7.20 – Footage of Russ Tamblyn riding motorcycle, 3 cuts  
7.20-7.21 – Footage of Dean Stockwell with pipe  
7.21-7.21 – Footage of streetlights  
7.21-7.23 – Footage of Pix movie theatre marquee (formerly at 6126 Hollywood Blvd),  
Stanley Kramer’s *It’s A Mad Mad Mad Mad World* (1963), playing in L.A.  
7.23-7.24 – Footage of bottom of neon “TOYOTA” sign (“OYOTA” and “YOTA”)

- 7.24-7.25 – Footage of Dean Stockwell lighting a pipe, 2 cuts
- 7.25-7.29 – Footage of Russ Tamblyn riding motorcycle in circle, 3 cuts, close-up
- 7.29-7.30 – Footage of Dean Stockwell in darkness with hand/cigarette, 3 cuts
- 7.30-7.31 – Kaph character

Section 11: Kaph

- 7.31-7.34 – Footage of man (Robert “Bob” Alexander) picking up something on table
- 7.34-7.34 – Footage from television of Nureyev and Fonteyn performing *Swan Lake*
- 7.34-7.38 – Footage of Alexander putting tourniquet around arm
- 7.38-7.39 – Close-up of drawing of Alice with long neck (*Through the Looking Glass*)
- 7.39-7.41 – Footage of Alexander releasing tourniquet and arm to table
- 7.41-7.42 – Black screen

Appendix III – The Witnesses: David Bourdon, Stan Brakhage, Larry Jordan, P. Adams Sitney and Russ Tamblyn

In this section, descriptions by those individuals who saw *Aleph* in the 1960s – David Bourdon, Stan Brakhage, Larry Jordan, P. Adams Sitney and Russ Tamblyn – are listed. In the infamous Ferus Gallery show of 1957, Wallace Berman spoke to owner and friend Walter Hopps about his Hebrew parchment pieces, the 12 framed “instant artifacts” that Berman placed around the room. These works were obscured by the more prominent sculptural assemblage works in the wake of the Ferus fiasco, but the parchments’ quiet influence testifies to the roots of Berman’s interest in the Cabala, to the power of language and, ultimately, to transmission. “Wallace himself spoke of the stream of consciousness,” Hopps said when he pressed Berman on the meaning of the parchments. “He said to me, ‘I’m letting it come through from dead Poets.’ These were the Witnesses.”<sup>228</sup> In this same vein, the records of *Aleph*’s Witnesses – David Bourdon, Stan Brakhage, Larry Jordan, P. Adams Sitney, and Russ Tamblyn – allow the impressions of the film at the time of its making to transmit through the ether to inform contemporary readings.

The most detailed of the descriptions of this film, and perhaps therefore the most telling, is by David Bourdon, detailed earlier in this thesis.<sup>229</sup> Bourdon writes, in full:

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<sup>228</sup> Frank Gettings, “Wallace Berman,” in *Different Drummers*, by Frank Gettings (Washington D.C.: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, 1988): 19. While Cocteau may have disagreed with the practice of automatic writing and criticized it in *Orpheus*, it is in the experience of a stream of images that Cocteau lets free his subconscious and unconscious in the mode of film.

<sup>229</sup> A letter from Bourdon to Berman reads: “Dear Wally,/ Ugh – wait till you see the lurid, overwritten account of you in the 8/19 V.V. My editor, Diane Fisher, insisted on having a piece about you, anything at all, she was so keen on the idea...”. Most especially, Bourdon also talks about his own pursuits in film, and references Berman’s own methodology: “I bought a second-hand Bolex 16mm, very complicated (and expensive). I think you are doing the right thing with 8mm. Electric eyes and reflex zoom lenses are really what count.” Letter from David Bourdon to Wallace Berman, August 16, 1965, Archives of American Art (AAA), 1.

(Berman) began in 1955 to shoot a cinematic Semina. He has now completed about 20 minutes of a projected 30-minute film, which is to have 13 parts and is based on the Cabala. The film is a serial of fleeting images, with live action interspersed by a multitude of stills – Nijinsky, Nureyev, the Singing Nun, etc. There are repeated closeups (sic) of needles plunging into arms, female pelvises sliding into bed (the nakedest footage I've ever seen). Almost every frame has been handpainted (sic) with Hebraic characters and numbers, and lengths of film have been painted. Semina's tone is dispassionate, the flickering parade of images, having the elegant, unemphatic simplicity of a rock'n'roll beat. Berman prefers the intimate scale of 8mm. He likes the projected image to be small, about the size of a TV screen, and to be seen by an audience of three or four at a time.<sup>230</sup>

Except for Stan Brakhage's description of *Aleph* as the purest "envisionment" of the sixties, no other written record of Brakhage's conception of the film exists.<sup>231</sup> Larry Jordan's account of the film, related to Andrew Lampert of Anthology Film Archives, is detailed in the section "Chance versus Control," describing the haphazard experience of "chance" editing in the process of *Aleph*'s making.

P. Adams Sitney and Stan Brakhage's accounts are, to some extent, intertwined, as their West Coast film trip of 1968 was a joint effort by these two figures. This West Coast trip is largely discussed earlier in this study. However, Sitney writes, in full, about *Aleph*:

This is also the case with a tiny preview of Wallace Berman's 24-part Kabbalistic film – what I did see, an incompleting version of one of the parts makes me very anxious to see the whole. Berman, who presently has a show at the Jewish Museum (which he says will be his last show) is well-known in California for his photographic collages. His film, like

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<sup>230</sup> Bourdon, "Art - Wallace Berman," 6. Also excerpted in Hoberman, *Home Made Movies*, 26-27.

<sup>231</sup> "Aleph" Booklet description, 28.

the collages, is very dense, worked over, painted, scratched, printed upon, with recurring images out of his still work, primarily a hand holding a portable radio in which there is an image, and visions from his home, his son, a naked woman. Much more than Tamblyn's Japanese film, Berman's movie seems an enlightened home movie, as are Brakhage's 'Songs.' He has been working and reworking the film for seven years and seems in no rush to finish it.<sup>232</sup>

Sitney additionally expresses that he is "anxious to see the whole" after seeing only "an incomplete version of one of the parts" of the film, indicating that a "complete" film with greater Hebrew "parts" was, at least implicitly, intended by Berman.<sup>233</sup>

Russ Tamblyn, a well-known Hollywood actor and close friend of Berman's, expressed the most personal of the very limited accounts of an *Aleph* screening. "Wallace showed me a film he was working on, which had a tremendous impact on me emotionally. I remember him telling me that the film was in twenty-two parts correlating to the twenty-two letters of the Kabbalah, and that the letters of the Kabbalah are in the shape of God's tongue and are more like a breath."<sup>234</sup> Tamblyn has recalled Berman's influence on him extensively in interviews, and along with another well-known actor and close friend of Berman's, Dean Stockwell, appears in some of the later sections of *Aleph*. Tamblyn's account helps to date the footage of his own multiple appearances in the film to be later than the first few years of *Aleph*. Additionally, Tamblyn's description shows that Berman's intent on making a "22-part" Cabalistic film had already been articulated. The date of this interaction may well have been close to the time that Tamblyn first met the Bermans, who were guests at a party Tamblyn threw for his friend Henry Miller in 1963.

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<sup>232</sup> Sitney, "A Tour With Brakhage," 53.

<sup>233</sup> Sitney, "A Tour With Brakhage," 53.

<sup>234</sup> Duncan and McKenna, *Semina Culture*, 274.

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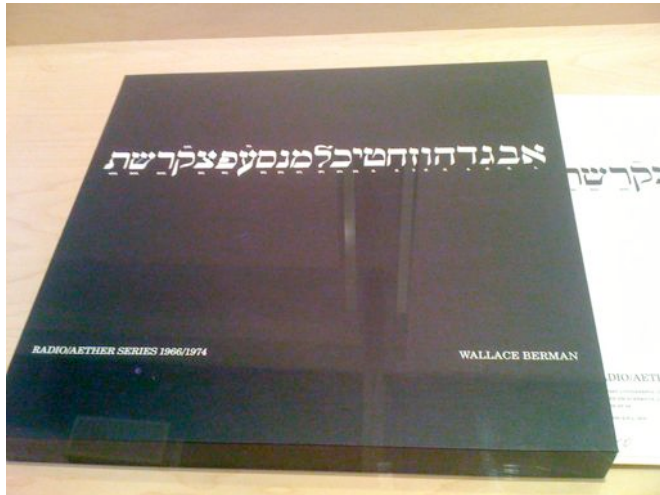
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*Images*

Figure 1



Front and Inside covers of *Radio/Aether* Series box set.  
Photograph by Chelsea Behle.

Figure 2



Flash Gordon Verifax Film Still, *Aleph*.  
Source: Ubuweb.com.

Figure 3



Nude woman Verifax Film Still, *Aleph*.  
Source: Ubuweb.com.

Figure 4



Charlie McCarthy and Edgar Bergen Verifax Film Still, *Aleph*.  
Source: Ubuweb.com.

Figure 5



*Untitled (Shuffle).*

Source: Lipschutz-Villa, Eduardo, Walter Hopps, Charles Brittin, Christopher Knight, David Meltzer, Michael McClure, Tosh Berman, and Colin Gardner. *Wallace Berman: Support the Revolution*. Amsterdam: Institute of Contemporary Art, Amsterdam, 1992.

Figure 6



Beth Hebrew character Film Still, *Aleph*.

Source: Ubuweb.com

Figure 7



The Hebrew character Aleph, in a work by Wallace Berman titled *Untitled*, with unknown date. Source: Lipschutz-Villa, Eduardo, Walter Hopps, Charles Brittin, Christopher Knight, David Meltzer, Michael McClure, Tosh Berman, and Colin Gardner. *Wallace Berman: Support the Revolution*. Amsterdam: Institute of Contemporary Art, Amsterdam, 1992.

Figure 8



*Wallace Berman*, Photograph by Dennis Hopper, 1964. Source: Lipschutz-Villa, Eduardo, Walter Hopps, Charles Brittin, Christopher Knight, David Meltzer, Michael McClure, Tosh Berman, and Colin Gardner. *Wallace Berman: Support the Revolution*. Amsterdam: Institute of Contemporary Art, Amsterdam, 1992.

Figure 9



Multiple frames of Mick Jagger with Letraset and Paint, *Aleph*.  
Source: Lipschutz-Villa, Eduardo, Walter Hopps, Charles Brittin, Christopher Knight, David Meltzer, Michael McClure, Tosh Berman, and Colin Gardner. *Wallace Berman: Support the Revolution*. Amsterdam: Institute of Contemporary Art, Amsterdam, 1992.

Figure 10



Flash Gordon Verifax Film Still with Paint, *Aleph*.  
Source: Anthology Film Archives.

Figure 11



*Silent Series # 7*, 1965-68

Source: Lipschutz-Villa, Eduardo, Walter Hopps, Charles Brittin, Christopher Knight, David Meltzer, Michael McClure, Tosh Berman, and Colin Gardner. *Wallace Berman: Support the Revolution*. Amsterdam: Institute of Contemporary Art, Amsterdam, 1992.

Figure 12



Top image, man shooting up heroin from beginning of film. Bottom image, Bob Alexander, from end of film.

Source: Ubuweb.com.

Figure 13

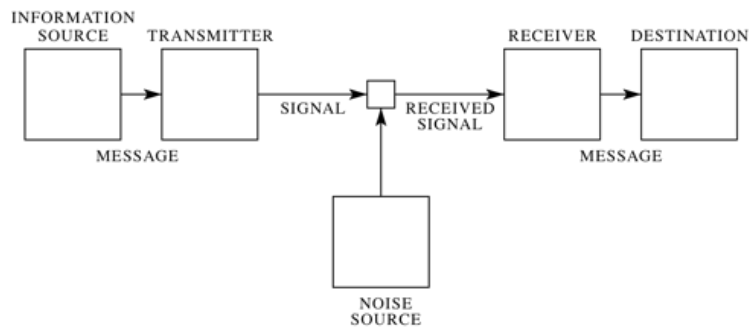
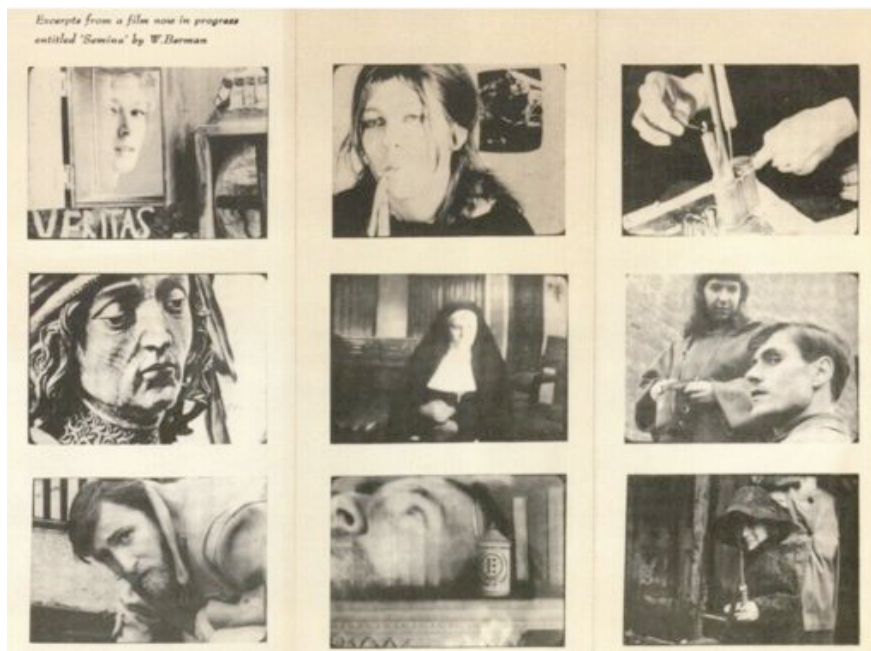


Fig. 1 — Schematic diagram of a general communication system.

Claude Shannon's schematic diagram of a general communication system.

Source: Shannon, C.E. "A Mathematical Theory of Communication." In *The Bell System Technical Journal* Vol. 27 (July and October 1948), 379-423 and 623-656. Accessed March 20, 2012. <http://cm.bell-labs.com/cm/ms/what/shannonday/shannon1948.pdf>.

Figure 14

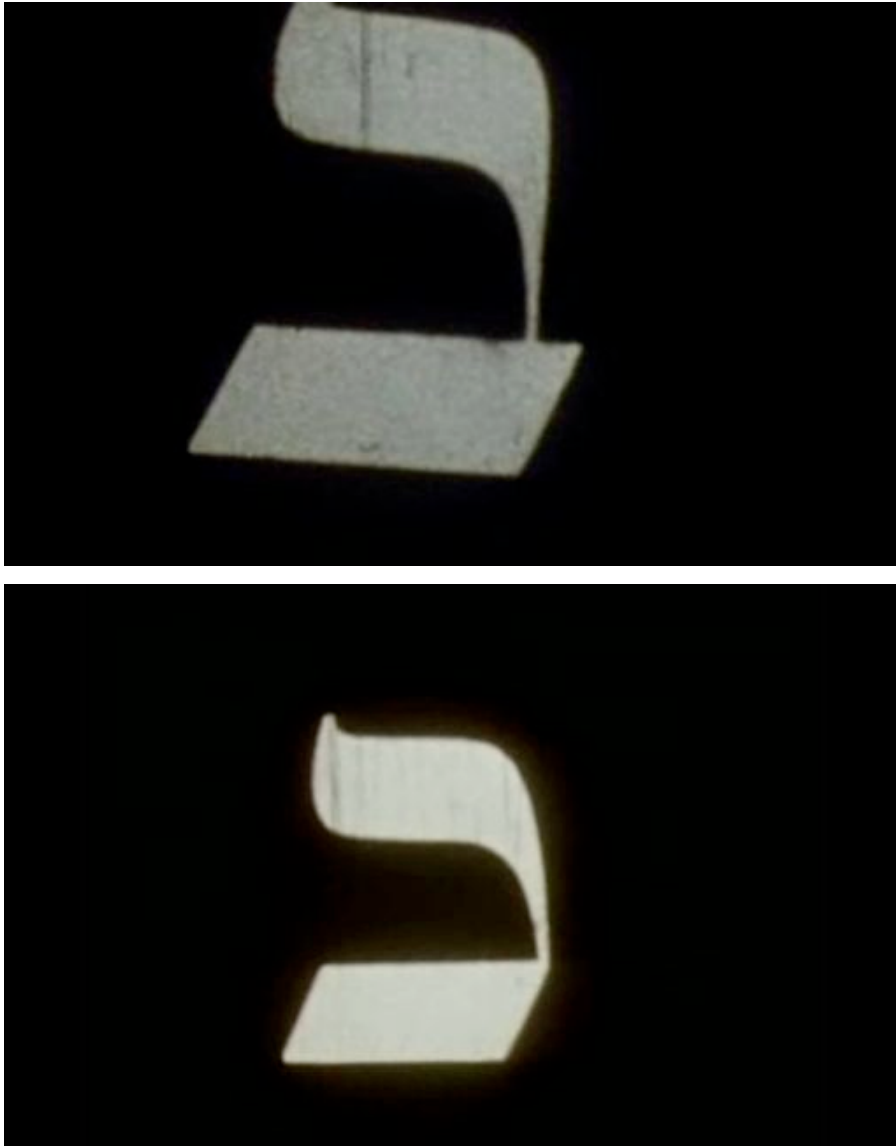


"Excerpts from a film now in progress" from *Semina 4*, 1959.

Source: Duncan, Michael and Kristine McKenna. *Semina Culture: Wallace Berman and his Circle*. New York and Santa Monica: D.A.P. and Santa Monica Museum of Art, 2005.



Figure 15



Beth and Kaph characters, the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> letters of the Hebrew alphabet, framing the beginning and end of the Hebrew sections of the film *Aleph*.  
Source: Ubuweb.com.

Figure 16



Multiple frames from *Artifactual* (left) and *Aleph* (right), showing the readable English word “letter” and the number “8.”

Source: Anthology Film Archives.

Figure 17





From top: Nureyev and Fonteyn dancing on television to *Swan Lake*; beginning sequence with “needles plunging into arms;” and the “female pelvis” of Phyllis the landlady.  
Source: Ubuweb.com.