

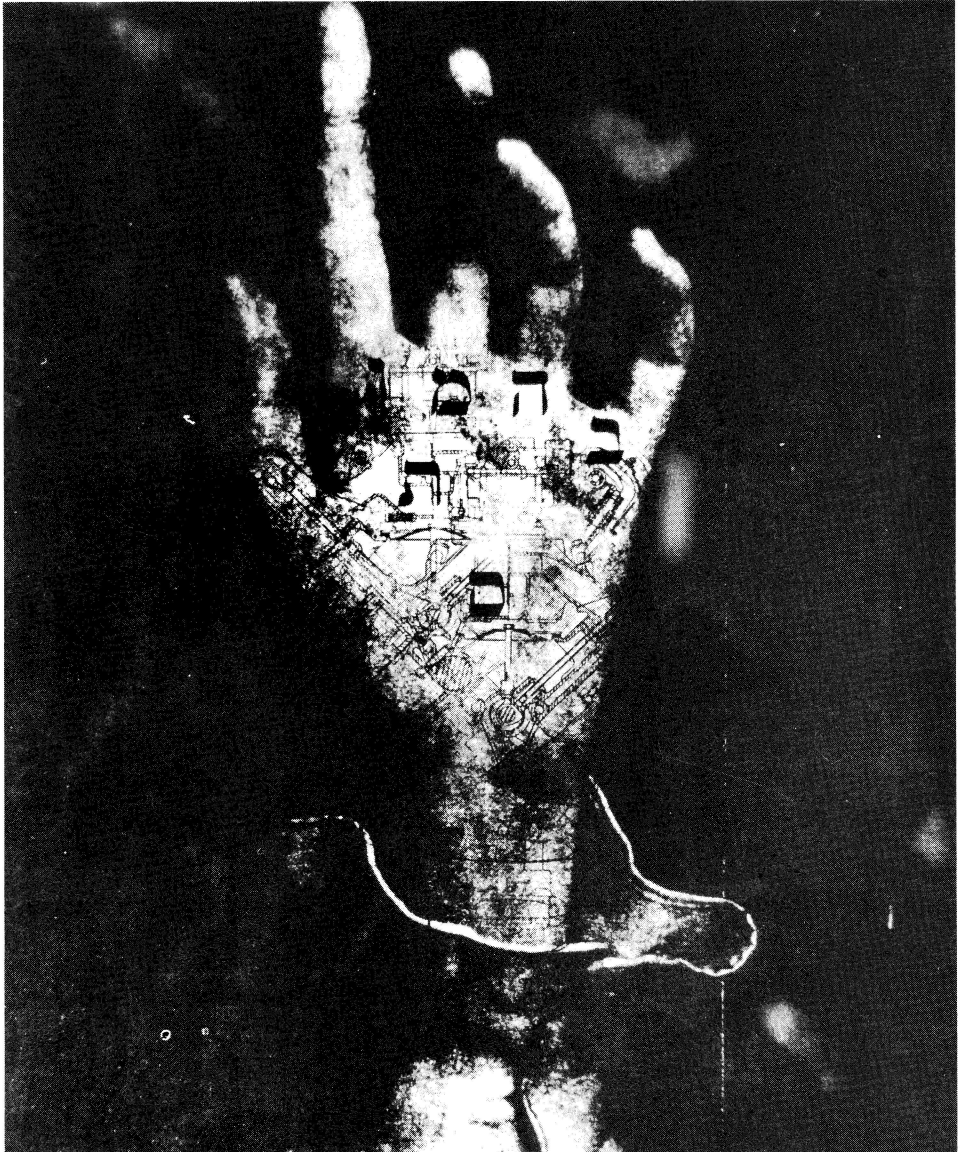
15 Subjectivity between Myth and History

In his poems on the Hebrew alphabet, Stuart Perkoff wrote,

history is the hand's fingers reaching, reaching for power.
history is the hand's fingers pointing to the future.
unknown, unknowable. no tool can carve its image.
man as angel. as debased monster. potential is infinite.¹

Within the avant-garde this was a statement of a basic, even banal position: if potential were infinite, then men and women needed to make choices. They needed vitally to observe the world they lived in and reflect upon their experiences. Few outside artistic circles were willing to embrace semantic multiplicity and epistemological indeterminacy so readily, for it meant placing their own identities and social roles into perpetual crisis. Labeling the group that dedicated itself to personal freedom through epistemological uncertainty “beats,” or more contemptuously “beatniks” and later “hippies,” was a way of putting boundaries around a problem much larger than art, but which during the two decades following World War II was most clearly visible in the practice of experimental, elite art.

Scientific languages were powerful in the results they could generate, but understandable only to those in each specific field. Within those fields scientific models tended to follow game theory, as in quantum mechanics. The



58. Wallace Berman, birthday card for Joan Brown, 1972. Wallace Berman papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

relation of science and everyday experience had become more attenuated, so that the wealth of society had come to depend upon epistemological uncertainty. Yet when scientific models crossed over into engineering, they underwent a sea change. Achieving a goal with consistency, be it the production of an automobile or the launching of a missile, required accepting the absolute validity of laws and techniques applicable to the situation. Context was discrepancy to be removed. The growth of systematic professions organized to execute specific purposeful rational action satisfied important aspirations, emotional as well as material. Professionalism provided people with clear tasks and consensually approved standards for measuring performance.

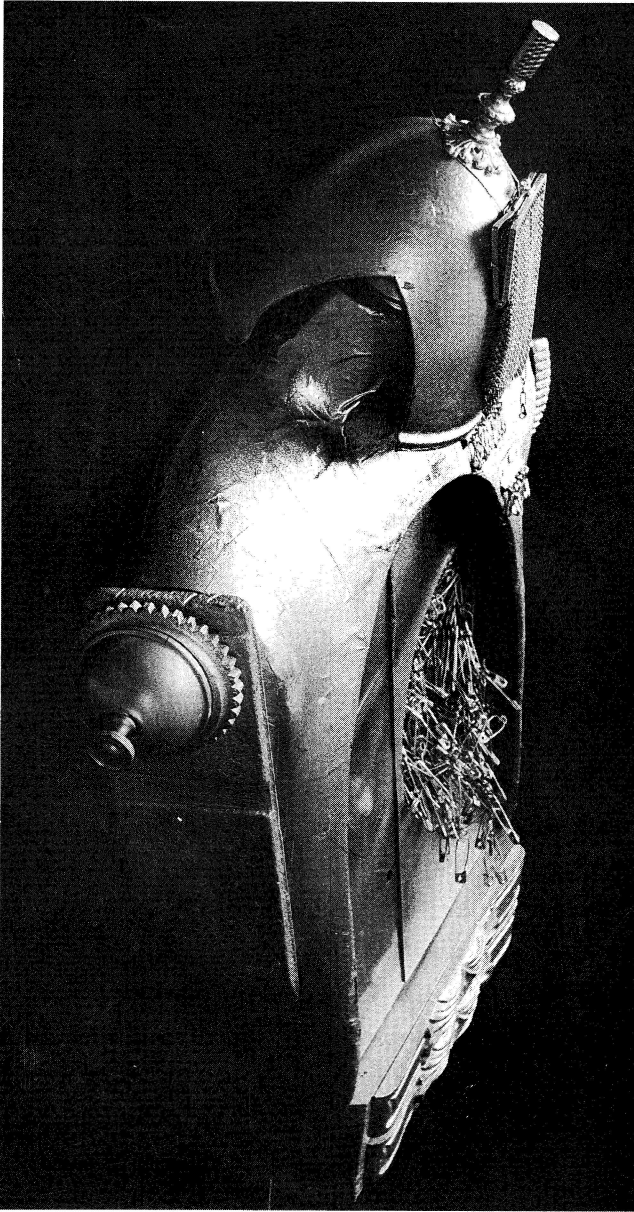
Practitioners of aesthetic production were also professionalizing and specializing, but their situation was different in one fundamental respect from the activities of other systems of practice. The purposeful rational action of artists and poets was symbolic interaction directed toward mutual understanding of experiences. The more refined work of artists and poets involved confronting the ambiguities of language and perception.

Professionalization in the arts involved superficially contradictory movements. Poets appeared to be speaking for the continued relevance of generalized discourse that would more effectively share highly individual situations. At the same time, there was a turn to ancient technologies of symbolic interaction. To many poets, premodern societies appeared to be more concerned with social interaction than the accomplishment of purposive-rational tasks.² Poets could look back to ancient forms of thought such as the kabbalah, tarot, the *I Ching*, and other gnostic traditions to find sophisticated models for their work. Poets appeared to be reviving archaic modes of thought in opposition to modern society, but they were creating their own episteme of knowledge that would give weight to poetic experimentation.

Conflict between poetic practice and other forms of social activity also derived from poetry's origins as a method of shared interaction. Aesthetic production challenged the priority given noncontextual rationality in other fields. Yet as long as poets and artists produced work in order to seek a place

within society, they were also operating in a rational, functional manner. The challenge to rationality then covered a less sweeping task: to become proponents within society of the need to consider the individual situation, the need not to treat human beings as interchangeable parts of a social machine. The success and dangers of rational thought demanded a growing sphere for personal choice and growth. Poets helped articulate that need by emphasizing the negotiation that went into personal relationships rather than the following of prescribed rules, the individuality of utterance rather than context-free formulae such as those used in production but also found in other areas of society, the need for individuation and choice rather than the growth of productive forces and extension of power. As poets professionalized their claims, they transformed artistic production from the conveyance of stable symbolic values into a game of potential meaning. Language not only did not need firm referents, but the mystique of serious work was enhanced if it dramatized multiplicity and indeterminacy. In the antinomian tendencies of the avant-garde, the word and the thing coincide only temporarily, if only because words become saturated with social context. Pastiche captured a range of meanings that might envelop a thing during a given temporal and social period—much like the electrons surrounding the nucleus of an atom. The specific position can never be pinpointed, but the shape of possible positions can be delimited precisely. Artistic production did not shed its symbolic functions, but aesthetic process itself became a symbol of freedom and creativity, beyond the specific context within a poem or an artwork.³

None of this was socially or politically neutral, although these developments involved a move away from politics as a source of interpretive value. By emphasizing the importance of personal experience, the avant-garde in effect challenged the right of those with institutional power to proclaim what the values guiding social activity would be. The avant-garde did this in an anarchist pose, denying the right of all authority, but the question was more profound than simple power relations. Individual experience and a priori norms



59. Noah Purifoy, *Sir Watts*, mixed media, 1966. Courtesy of the artist.

were potentially incompatible approaches to the regulation of social interaction. What had been a problem of interest to technicians of the word and the image undermined the equilibrium of all activities and institutions. Solutions were to freeze meaning, the preference of social conservatives who proffered a reified vision of an enduring Christian civilization of which the United States was the highest instance (or, what was in fact the same thing, the most degenerate); to imagine society proceeding to natural law, which was an unstable concept since the degree that technology increased human power and thereby the potential for expression of individual creativity undercut the lawful basis upon which that progress depended; or to accept the liberating, if dangerous, potential of epistemological uncertainty, a world comprised of effervescent, shifting, pulsating meaning that might or might not be suitable for rational planning.

For reasons both external and internal to the avant-garde, its particular perspectives provided public discourse with a form of dissent based on defining one's needs, which required first examining one's relationship to the total environment. To maintain the possibility of autonomy and personal choice required finding value in confusion. Freedom grew from the possibility of unbounded texts, which, if not based on some utopian scheme, became as ephemeral as human life.

The claims of irrationality were not localized to the West Coast. Around the country, people involved in aesthetic experimentation moved in parallel directions. Paul Goodman and John Cage found national audiences for their critiques of instrumental rationality. Goodman's *Growing Up Absurd*, as well as his books on community planning and Gestalt psychology, were explicitly political and designed to transform personal discontents into rebellion against restrictions on purely personal behavior and against government policies that perpetuated status and privilege at home or abroad. Cage retreated from all political disputes, but he considered his theory of chance operations to be a way of relying upon apparent accident to free oneself from "choices" already predetermined by ideology and social convention. The Black Moun-

tain poets, particularly Robert Bly from Minnesota, replicated many of the developments found in the San Francisco poetry movement, although with somewhat greater attention to formal issues. Walker Percy in New Orleans converted to the Catholic faith and found in the sense of grace following the sacraments an inner experience the truth of which escaped all purely sociological explanation, an experience that led him to reject segregation and racism as the products of a rationality that controlled through categorization and typologizing. Amiri Baraka and the Umbra poets group in New York used poetic practice as a way of expanding what could be said about African-American experiences, an aim that culminated in the revival of Afrocentrism in the mid-1960s. Baraka had also been coeditor with Diane De Prima of *Yugen*, the widely read beat journal published on the East Coast. Alfred Ligon and the Aquarian movement with its interest in ancient Egyptian gnosticism as the hidden source of African wisdom also provided many of the specific cultural features of the black power movement.⁴

The common theme of protest movements in the 1960s influenced by the ideas of artists and poets was the insistent demand that the principal decisions of one's life be voluntary and not coerced. At the very minimum, individual autonomy meant the right to define the meaning of one's own experiences, and that might include the decision that the satisfaction of desires hitherto decreed vicious was positive. Shifts in the boundaries between public and private authority coincided with escalation of United States troop levels in Vietnam, but the war was not the determining factor in the spread of these ideas. Attitudes and styles flowing from the artistic avant-gardes were already a well-developed and expanding force in American society by 1965. The conflict in Indochina stimulated the projection outward of radical utopias as many turned to the subjective powers they experienced to propose alternatives to a public order believed to be completely evil. To see private experience and public life as two distinct, antithetical orders had profound ramifications for how one defined the scope of political life and the proper questions that should be included in its deliberations. The relocation of value from public

order to private experience meant, for example, that “freedom” as the right to participate in civic life with the corresponding obligation to abide by its decisions yielded to a sense of independence from civic life and a diminution of its sacral character.⁵

Yet the relation with social reality was more complicated than the elaboration of myths of freedom that validated the importance of personal choice. In their own movement for personal, subjective freedom—that is, the ability to determine meaning for one’s own experiences—artistic creators claimed to speak for all who have been excluded from participation in public symbolic production, even those who might despise the avant-garde and its activities. Even as the figures we have studied asserted the right of personal choice against collective authority, thereby restricting the realm of public life, they sought to redefine and expand the public order as a forum for exchange and perpetual revision of meaning, as an arena where the imaginary could be put into flux so that people could repropose themselves, that is to say, repropose the relationships determining their position in society. In this conception of social life, the arts, both popular and elite, become a primary form of collective governance, though one lacking any effective sanctions other than ridicule.

The degree to which issues of personal morality and symbolic production have replaced substantive economic policy as central questions of political debate in the two decades since American withdrawal from Vietnam should underscore how much the perspectives of mid-century arts and poetry communities pervaded other sectors of United States society, though often in an inflected form. Out of the cultural conflicts of the late 1960s three factors in particular became important political realities, factors that we can use to define the tentative subjective shifts of which avant-garde artists and poets were both authors and representative examples: (1) greater frankness in public expression about varieties of individual behavior, particularly as related to sexuality; (2) distrust of public life as a persistent threat to the primacy of personal

experience; (3) fracturing of a unified American identity based on shared myths of a common natural history.

The first factor stemmed from the suspension of many legal restrictions on personal behavior. Among the rapid changes between 1965 and 1975 in the legal rights of individuals to make fundamental decisions about the conditions of their lives were the end of censorship of artistic statements and circulation of information on sexuality; relaxation of enforcement, if not actual repeal, of laws against homosexual relations; and most important, the Supreme Court's 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision protecting a woman's right to an abortion through an extension of the privacy doctrine. Each of these developments became an area of intense political contest, and by the end of the 1980s, conservatives had succeeded in using their control of the administrative and judicial branches to limit access to abortion and to narrow the speech rights of those who accepted government funds. The American body politic remained divided over the degree to which individuals should be allowed to propose their own interests and identities, while the conservative voting bloc contained a well-organized minority that passionately rejected the transfer of moral authority from established hierarchical institutions to individual decision.

If public opinion polls are to be trusted, the retreat of the government from controlling intimate personal behavior did not initially develop from popular demand. In 1972 two-thirds of women and three-fifths of men in the United States opposed legalization of abortion, and state referenda attempting to win abortion rights consistently failed by large margins.⁶ The demand for abortion rights appears to have come from a relatively small but influential group, largely college educated, whose interests converged with those of a long-established civil liberties lobby that had developed legal theories to support abrogation of majority rule in situations concerning purely individual and personal behavior.⁷ The sectors in society most strongly supporting abortion were indeed the core cultural consumers in the United States, not only

for elite culture, but for much of popular culture. Their attitudes therefore tended to find a disproportionate share of public cultural expression if only because motion picture and music producers, publishers, advertisers, and, increasingly, television programmers targeted their product toward a younger, college-educated, professionally oriented population.⁸

Motion pictures, popular music, television became freer in the subjects they explored and in the language used, while formal concerns in the elite arts dissolved into a sometimes joyful, sometimes morose, often puzzling aesthetic based on the ruptures between signifiers and signified, which furthered exploration of how the languages we use to represent and analyze experience create what we believe to be the events of our lives. Culture became a field where “anything goes,” meaning that vicarious exploration of the wide varieties of individual behavior became a major interest for both creators and audiences. The direction of the counterculture, of the bohemian project as it entered into mass culture, was not social, but subjective reform. The ability to speak of experiences that had always been painful but had only recently become expressible did not mean, however, either that pain vanished or that its causes were known. The narration of self was the first step in a process with no predefined conclusion, but which would at the very least force others in society to acknowledge the variety of experiences their world encompassed.

The second outcome was the success of the antiwar movement in discrediting the motives of public leaders. Opponents to the war appear never at any point between 1965 and 1973 to have gained majority support for their views. The counterculture and the New Left more likely helped establish the conservative hegemony over the executive and judicial branches after 1968. By reducing political questions to existential choices, the countercultural opposition helped a majority of voting Americans (many of whom were not part of the key culture-consuming groups) to clarify their positions. As the public observed the symbolic struggles waged during the intensification of the Vietnam War, many did in fact “get it,” and realized that their hearts were not the same as Snyder’s and his colleagues’.

Nonetheless, in 1969 the editors of *Fortune* magazine, dubbing antiwar protestors “forerunners,” predicted that their general opinions on government and business would ultimately find a receptive audience in the general public, even if attitudes toward demonstrators remained ambivalent.⁹ In the aftermath of the war large majorities of the American public did abandon unquestioning trust in the inherent goodness of their government to become equally suspicious of the motivations and competence of all public leaders. In 1978, 74 percent of those interviewed for the *New York Times* agreed that the “government was controlled by big business for its own profit,” a statement with which only 18 percent had agreed in 1958. Disenchantment with public solutions to social problems was a factor in decline in voter-participation rates, particularly among those who reached voting age after 1965. A *New York Times* survey of nonvoters in 1979 found that 58 percent of those who did not vote gave as their primary reason that the country needed “greater change than was possible to achieve at the ballot box,” while 41 percent of those who voted agreed with the statement. Of those who held this opinion, 67 percent classified themselves as conservatives, 31 percent as liberals, indicating the degree to which distrust of public authority reflected but also crossed ideological alignment.¹⁰ Americans had won greater personal freedom, but had sacrificed in exchange their faith in an effective public order.

The belief that crimes lay at the founding of the American state was a specific instance of a broader distrust of all institutions, which was felt most strongly by those groups finally able to speak of the oppression that had shaped both their collective histories and their members’ individual development. A third outcome developing from honoring the truth of personal experience was widespread recognition that American national myths had little relevance for, and often falsified and mocked, the actual histories of the country’s many social groups.

The claims of the aesthetic avant-garde foundered in this awakening of multiplicity that it had helped foster. The claim to universal truth found through the special link aesthetic process had to cosmological process in fact

limited the variety of experience by projecting artists' and poets' relatively narrow situations onto a purported universal (counter)subject. The rise of women's, ethnic, gay, and lesbian arts movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s marked the end of an aesthetics-defined avant-garde. These new movements challenged the largely white male contours of the older avant-garde, but more important, artistic process itself no longer provided the critical image of liberation or the adventure that gave a new identity through discovery of timeless elements within and without. These artists and poets turned instead to examine the repressed histories of their groups to help (re)construct autonomous cultures and confirm the identities that those histories gave them as individuals. Creative people were among the first to bring the experiences of women, gays, lesbians, as well as those of the variety of nationalities and races constituting the American polity, to the surface in a form of ongoing national shock treatment. Changing ways of understanding and representing subjectivity were central to the processes by which subordinate groups attempting to assert their own authority and multiplicity contested with some success the previous ideal of a unified, consensual body politic. The battle for increased opportunity and access to the instrumentalities of power had coincided with a claim for the freedom to tell one's own story for oneself.

Radical utopia was a way of turning to the elements within subjective experience for a reformulation of social organization. The known satisfactions of personal life would replace the confusions and frustrations of public life. The imagination of community was a necessary step in achieving a sense of the self that could take its place in society without necessarily accepting the social narratives proposed by those at the top of the hierarchy. Confronting "repression" was part of this process as it stigmatized convention as compulsion and valorized exploratory openness to changing patterns of connections. Yet any vision of community was unstable as long as its foundations lay in the shared

hopes of potentiality rather than mutual obligations that restricted the scope of further change. In 1956 Gary Snyder wrote in his journal that

the poet must choose: either to step deep in the stream of his people, history, tradition, folding and folding himself in wealth of persons and pasts; philosophy, humanity, to become richly foundationed and great and sane and ordered. Or, to step beyond the bound onto the way out, into horrors and angels, possible madness or silly Faustian doom, possible utter transcendence, possible enlightened return, possible ignominious wormish perishing.¹¹

At a period when he supposedly was breaking with his homeland, Snyder already recognized that innovation was a path for affirming continuity through selecting those aspects of one's life that were most meaningful and developing them as the basis for future growth. To formulate hopes for the future required narrating one's experience and repositing oneself as a subject of a story one did not fully control, nor could ever control without replicating the imperial monster that one sought to escape.

Thirty-five years later, in 1990, Snyder defined freedom as the ability to work within the limitations of impermanence and imperfection. Human inadequacy he felt was the source of freedom, as was the tendency for ideas to fall short of reality, because failure created "play in systems, room for change, though at the cost of pain."¹² Zen had been a path of freedom for him because he learned that nothing was established, everything changed, and no individual was determined. Unlike the fundamental postulate of European rationalist philosophy, *nihil ex nihilo*, Zen taught him that everything ultimately came out of nothing and manifested itself first through action that on its initial appearance had no discernible motive or predictable effect. A Zen roshi might tell an adept who complained that life in the monastery was too rigid:

"You have complete freedom here. Express yourself. What have you got to show me? Show me your freedom!" This really puts you on the line—"Okay, I've got my freedom; what do I want to do with it?"¹³

Judgment and power in and of themselves were not freedom, even if essential aspects of human action. Instead, the scope of free human action was rather narrow: the ability to act and demonstrate one's virtue in specific situations where the end results were not and could not be predictable.

In less dramatic but more commonplace manifestations, freedom meant only an ability to evaluate one's life and make significant life-course decisions with the full knowledge that one's commitments limit further action and reduce the scope for future freedom of responsible action. For if freedom comes into being through action, its presence reveals a need to redefine relationships with other beings. As relationships mature and become more complex, the ability to change them becomes more restricted because the consequences for those involved become increasingly more serious. The life that has been lived is no longer a source of freedom because the story of that life involves the people that its actions enveloped.

In the mid-twentieth-century, youth and artists symbolically occupied a position in United States culture representing popular concerns and yearnings for innovation. Both "youth culture" and the avant-garde increasingly gained more significant and lucrative places in the national imagination. By the early 1960s, elements of youth culture and the avant-garde began to merge so that work directed toward educated young people became vehicles for transmitting the once arcane ideas of artists and poets into the general culture. Americans felt that they had the greatest potential for change at the transition from adolescence to adulthood when a person had no fundamental ties, while artists, demonstrated with particular clarity in Kerouac's novels, seemed to have discovered a method for prolonging that state of transition indefinitely. Kerouac's fame served, however, a double function in the public imagination, for the scandal surrounding him reminded his readers that refusal to enter into responsible relationships in itself becomes a restricting rather than liberating factor. As the range of action coincides more and more with irresponsibility, the costs of freedom increase to a point where the most free act is to accept the consequences of one's previous actions. This was the position at

which most avant-garde poets and painters arrived in their variations on domesticity and professionalism. They affirmed traditional goals and values as the highest, though not obligatory, product of individual liberty.

By far the most common source of utopian vision was found in an ideal of love, family, and household which reached one of its most consistent expositions in Gary Snyder's proposals that the family could become the basis for global reorganization. Those who acted as if domestic relations could provide an alternative to a public order they deemed hopelessly brutal and doomed passed over the possibility that the external oppressive context was essential to what made the promise of domesticity attractive and necessary. To place one's hopes in domesticity was to affirm a pillar of conservative social thought in twentieth-century America, one of the key images in the monolithic ideology of the "American Way of Life" that they fought in so many other ways. In no aspect of human behavior were stereotypes more deeply entrenched than in the areas of sexuality and engenderment. The attempt to find "prelinguistic" truth often meant accepting stereotypes as the expression of an "original," natural order that could be turned against society's dictates.

The result was an apparent anomaly: regressive, if more traditional, aspects of social thought undermine more progressive forms of social organization in order to create a space where the individual can move with greater autonomy from collective authority. Reflection upon experience proved not to be an external fulcrum for changing society. Yet to attack the authority of government, established religion, and employers to impose their meanings upon ostensibly free citizens was to undercut a system of subordination and the structured hierarchy in which domestic relations had derived some of their characteristics. Domesticity was a form of manipulated consent when its institutions constructed an identity the terms of which superiors defined and enforced. But what if people, in assaulting what they considered the arbitrary powers of others over their lives in professional position and employment, chose to idealize living arrangements that had been part of an oppressive social structure? Do they then unknowingly reproduce the oppression from which

they have sought to escape? The question is complicated but central because upon the answer one gives hangs an assessment of the validity of personal judgment and desire as guides to action, of the theoretical capability of people to define a position for themselves that is genuinely theirs and not simply the replication of a subordinating ideological structure. If, as Robert Duncan argued, theory contained at the heart of its rational structures a mythologized form of irrational desire, there could never be an objective fulcrum for leveraging social change. All approaches replicated the contradictions that made transformation seem urgent. Those involved in change also sought to maintain privileges and pleasures, as well as power over others. Theory and experience were needed to correct each other, for they reproduced different aspects of the system from which they emerged. Escape was impossible, so any change had to start at a point of vulnerability. Whether desired or not, innovation always involved an element of continuity.

Could the postwar American aesthetic avant-garde have possibly found a platform for challenging the exercise of power without simultaneously affirming an element of interior life that could act as a counterauthority, that is without necessarily relying on fantasy images of stereotypes that satisfied desires for both change and stasis? Or conversely, to continue with the one issue of domesticity, could they have found a way for companionate marriage to continue as a practical ideal in their own lives without subverting the entrenched, authoritative ideologies surrounding love as unfulfilled sexual need and marriage till death springing from impulsive ignorance? The prevalence of stereotypes guaranteed that the poetic language of post-World War II America was infected with the deception of social lies, but that was a condition for poetic language operating as a challenge to the very falsity and deception infusing it. There could be no untainted experience, so, to use Duncan's paradigm, poetic language was utterance that brought to the surface (even when it refused to acknowledge its own contradictory sources) the civil war of its inception—a desire to belong was yoked to a desire to separate, at least to the point where the basic conditions of one's existence appeared voluntary,

a desire to be free linked to a desire to exercise arbitrary power and to find one's position through "dependents." In this confusion of apparently contradictory demands emanating from different aspects of one's life lay the basis for choice.

Stereotypes that linked people back to the society they criticized nonetheless established the imaginative basis for, hence the possibility of, independent action. One need not have, and indeed is unlikely to have, a fully developed philosophy behind one's actions. "Discipline of following desires, *always* doing what you want to do, is hardest," Snyder wrote in his journal in 1955. "It presupposes self-knowledge of motives, a careful balance of free action and sense of where the culture taboos lay—knowing whether a particular 'desire' is instinctive, cultural, personal, a product of thought, contemplation, or the unconscious."¹⁴ Stereotypes provided an alternative to the hard work of self-reflection. Cultural shifts begin with the opening of a door previously shut, an awareness of having to choose between apparently contradictory demands, with a vision of new possibilities that do not preclude maintaining access to the position from which one began. One possible, indeed likely response is to refuse as long as one can to recognize the distinction between continuity and innovation, as one young girl in the Haight-Ashbury did when she told an interviewer in 1967 that her goal was to enter into a marriage that would last until death. Knowing that this contradicted widely held preconceptions about the counterculture and free love, she added, "The thing that isn't traditional is that I won't get married because I want to sleep with somebody. I'll get married when I feel like I want to have somebody's children, and raise them with him for the rest of my life, their lives, our lives. But I don't feel that you've got to have permission from society in order to live with somebody."¹⁵

After the 1968 elections public life in the United States entered a period of disjunction between increasingly more open cultural and relatively conservative political preferences. The stalemate left open as a divisive social issue questions of how much control government should have over private deci-

sions. Did the subjective focus of the aesthetic avant-garde that found in private life a haven from the disorders of public life ultimately reaffirm structures that organized consent to a hierarchical and oppressive system? Or did they work to loosen those structures so that play of potential meaning undercut the ability of those who had monopolized power to transmit a single point of view and thus enforce their will with relative ease? Is it possible to develop normative standards for distributive justice without negating heterogeneity of experience? These remain open problems of contemporary American culture because, while the political tensions are real, from a perspective that focuses on subjective process these apparent oppositions dissolve. The balance between private and public components of identity involves the degree to which individuals combine their own experiences with the theories available to them and leave open the ability to act without certainty of the results but within a model of the world that coheres in a relatively predictable way. Innovation stands forth as a strategy for conservation, even apotheosis, of one's past. Processes of consent lead to multiplicity so that, for example, the nearly universal ideal of domesticity becomes the field for the most intense cultural warfare over various definitions of what a family might be.

A retreat into an aesthetic vision proved to be a way of maintaining and deepening critique of social reality, but in a manner that refused to reduce itself to categories subservient to political ideology. The conclusion that art could be autonomous from civic life may be an illusion (as to a degree all human beliefs are), but it was one that grew out of reflection on the history of the times. Nor did it preclude active involvement, but the perspective cautioned that alongside the public persona was a private imagination, the truths of which were also essential for achieving one's goals.

The polarities I have identified in cultural statements from California's poets and artists—potentiality/necessity, commerce/imagination, public/private, rationality/irrationality, innovation/continuity, aesthetics/politics—reflect a stage in the synthesis of what had previously been perceived as historical opposites. Within the subjective consciousness of artists and poets, a

cultural adaptation can be seen, an adaptation that allowed them to move from the interwar posing of tradition and experimentation as *political* opposites—André Breton's choice of social change through automatic writing or T. S. Eliot's choice of social hierarchy and the poem that rooted itself firmly in the collective wisdom of tradition—to the postwar period where conflict-ing approaches to the function of art within society merged and became a basis for a presumed direct expression of an authentic personal experience. The separation of art and social praxis was a developing fact as artists withdrew into the relative autonomy of their own institutions, but the apparent elitism of the postwar avant-garde was deceptive. Difficulty was not necessarily in conflict with democratic values, nor was the desire to create a practice independent of mass communications. Neither proved insurmountable obstacles to finding celebrity status and relatively large audiences. The practice of art became a field that allowed private concerns to enter into the realm of public discourse in ways that ultimately altered the terms of political contention.

Proliferation of narratives has forced institutions to treat conflict rather than harmony as the practical basis of civic life. To use Robert Duncan's metaphor, social interaction has become a debate between poems, in which each person tries with varying degrees of success to convey the meaning that he or she has found. All that emerged from the travails of the artists and poets whose stories we have turned and returned was mere possibility. They helped for a yet-undetermined length of time to widen the scope of experience to which society will listen and respond. Those so moved can testify in as concrete terms as possible of their lives, bringing to the surface the confusing multiplicity of experience, including the shifting interpretations and the fabulistic roots of consciousness that in its socially determined forms seek expression in stereotypes. There was no happy ending of mania exhausted and order restored, or of tyranny toppled and a new psychosocially therapeutic regime growing from the ruins. There were no utopias whatsoever emerging from the 1960s, of either the right or the left, of stasis or innovation, of freedom unchained or repression reinstated, only a peculiar symbiosis in which

consciousness bridged desires for stability and innovation in unremitting tension. Only a potentiality, a modest increase in “freedom of speech.”

Yet through the assertion of needs that poetry and art do little more than describe with varying degrees of eloquence, new social facts sprang into existence, if only because expression required someone else—be it a lover or the president—to make a response. Strangely, freedom is a meaningful category to the degree that it becomes unfreedom, that is, when human action is no longer simply the epiphenomenal play of possibility but creates facts that others must consider in the contingency that presses upon them.

Chapter 15

1. From Stuart Perkoff, “Yod,” in *Alphabet* (Los Angeles: Red Hill Press, 1973); quote from author’s ms. in Wallace Berman papers, AAA.

2. See Jürgen Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 91.

3. *Ibid.*, 93.

4. The differences between the individuals and movements involved in the turn to irrationality were great, but existentialism provided a common link. A focus on the finitude of human life encouraged seeing each person as a unique occurrence, the meaning of which was best found through narration. On the Umbra poets, see Michel Oren, "The Umbra Poets' Workshop, 1962–1965: Some Socio-Literary Puzzles," in *Studies in Black American Literature*, vol. 2, *Belief vs. Theory in Black American Literary Criticism*, ed. Joe Weixlmann and Chester J. Fontenot (Greenwood, Florida: Penkevill Publishing Company). On the Aquarian movement, see Alfred Ligon, "All the Lights the Light," interviewed 1982 by Ranford B. Hopkins, OHP/UCLA.

5. Hannah Arendt argued that the European concept of political freedom arose from a theological suspicion and hostility toward the public realm as such. While recognizing that the avant-garde of the twentieth century was not a Christian movement, she thought it called upon traditions in the Christian church going back to the last centuries of the Roman empire. See Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Viking Press, 1968), 150ff.

6. Ben J. Wattenberg, *The Real America: A Surprising Examination of the State of the Union* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1976), 158–160, 218–219, 223. The influence of the post-World War II avant-garde on the young people who constituted the New Left and the counterculture is a topic beyond the scope of this study. Daniel Yankelovich's public opinion surveys; Robert Kenniston's psychological tests of young people in Cambridge, Massachusetts; and Robert Wuthnow's survey of students at the University of California, Berkeley, provide rough glimpses of how attitudes in different age cohort and ideological groups shifted between 1965 and 1975. See Kenneth Kenniston, *The Young Radicals* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968) and *The Uncommitted* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969); Daniel Yankelovich, *Generations Apart: A Study of the Generation Gap* (Columbia Broadcasting System, 1969), *Youth and the Establishment* (Daniel Yankelovich, Inc., 1971), *Changing Youth Values in the 70s: A Study of American Youth* (Daniel Yankelovich, Inc., 1974), *The New Morality: A Profile of American Youth in the 70s* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), and *New Rules: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down* (New York: Random House, 1981); and Robert Wuthnow, *The Consciousness Ref-ormation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976). See also *Youth in Turmoil: Adapted from a Special Issue of Fortune* (New York: Time-Life Books, 1969). Opinion polls are difficult to compare with other forms of subjective evidence. Responses to questionnaires fail to show how different people actually incorporated the opinions

they stated into their personal meaning system, as can more open-ended interviews that uncover the choice of words and narrative strategies, the images by which concerns and values take on symbolic form. The study of Ronald Fraser et al. on student activism in five countries provides some insight, but with insufficient detail to the narrative structures that are the evidence of the uses of such material. See *1968: A Student Generation in Revolt, an International Oral History*, ed. Ronald Fraser (New York: Pantheon, 1988). Luisa Passerini's *Autoritratto di gruppo* (Firenze: Giunto Barbèra, 1988) provides a model for studying the subjective response of student activists of the 1960s. Her subjects were Italian, and the United States situation differed from the European in terms of the pervasive, if often contested influence of beat and countercultural values within the New Left.

7. On segments supporting abortion see *Youth in Turmoil*, chapter 2 and following charts; Yankelovich, *Changing Youth Values in the 70s*, tables 5 and 6; and Yankelovich, *New Rules*.

8. Arbitron weekly reports on television and radio audiences show that between 1963 and 1967 the prime audience for radio was the 18-to-34 age group, while the prime audience for television was the 35-to-49 age group. In 1967 a shift began and the prime audience for television became younger, so that by 1973 target audiences for advertisers looking at television and radio were the same age group. Radio remained, however, a much more highly segmented market, with programs aimed at groups with specific tastes, while television programmers were more tentative in developing shows targeted at specific segments of the television viewing audience. The influence of age and social distinctions on cultural product was most dramatically revealed in motion picture distribution. Between 1965 and 1975, 76 percent of motion picture tickets were bought by people under the age of thirty. Sixteen-to-twenty-nine-year-olds purchased 61 percent of motion picture admissions but made up 31 percent of the United States population. Of that group of ticket purchasers, 80 percent were or had been college students. Only 40 percent of the total population in that age group were college students or alumni. See Edd Whetmore, *Media America* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1978), 229–231.

9. See *Youth in Turmoil*, 7.

10. "Voters, Non Voters Alike Held Disaffected, Not Disillusioned," *New York Times*, 20 November 1979, 1.

11. Gary Snyder, "Japan First Time Around," in *Earth House Hold*, 39.

12. Snyder, "The Etiquette of Freedom," in *The Practice of the Wild*, 5.

13. Snyder, *The Real Work*, 99.

14. Snyder, "Lookout's Journal," in *Earth House Hold*, 19.

15. Leonard Wolf, ed., *Voices from the Love Generation*, 243.