

SUMMER OF LOVE CONFERENCE JULY 2017 — PRESENTATION

FRAME 1



Wallace Berman, Verifax collage, ca. 1966

Two keywords guiding this conference are “counterculture” and “community.” Both terms were used throughout the 1960s to proclaim the emergence of a revolutionary consciousness to replace consumerism, militarism, bureaucratic rationality, sexual repression, racism, exploitation of the environment, and so forth. How that transformation occurred remained unspecified. Radical change started inside each person. Personal transformation led to new types of behavior and new priorities that then reshaped social and political life. This vision of counterculture appealed to many ambitious artists and writers, as well as other cultural workers, for what they did was central to the imagined cultural revolution.

The word *counterculture* leads me to Antonio Gramsci. I have no idea if Gramsci influenced the articulation of the counterculture in the 1950s and 1960s. Not impossible, not even improbable given extensive interactions between Americans in the bohemian/beat subculture with cultural figures from the European New Left. Still, even if there had been absolutely no Gramscian connection, Gramsci’s ideas are helpful in understand post-World War II cultural movements in the United States. Building a counterculture, per Gramsci, is vital for any revolutionary movement, which must create spaces where revolutionary subjects step forward in a process of reimagining humanity, society, and the cosmos, independently of the hegemonic ruling establishment that the revolution must destroy. Every successful revolution requires autonomous institutions for expressing ideas and for trying out new ways of thinking. As these institutions grow, they foster talent. New cultural leaders emerge; some move into dominant institutions and use them to publicize countercultural values. In California, we

might be talking about a range of organizations like the California Labor School, or People's Songs, or Pacific Radio, or the Mattachine Society, all specifically working to change consciousness. We could also be talking about the California School of Fine Arts, the San Francisco Poetry Center, or Canyon Cinemathèque, focused specifically on promotion of culture but in each case operated by people embracing a countercultural vision of the arts. We might also be talking about entrepreneurial activities like music clubs or regular festivals for folk music or jazz, as well as underground newspapers. Some organizations were ephemeral and might be considered tactical expressions of counterculture. Others were more strategically placed and enjoy the respect of society at large. Following Gramsci's model: movement intellectuals formed in the ad hoc organizations that the counterculture initially creates move into established cultural institutions, including Hollywood, mainstream publishing, and the commercial music business. The movement of the counterculture into cultural institutions that turned the interests of ruling elites into self-evident common sense was an important signal of the transition of the revolutionary movement from guerrilla to positional combat, turning established institutions into instruments of popular struggle. One of the ways it might do that is publicize a place like San Francisco as "liberated" space and tell the youth of the world that they want to come here and join a focal point for the expression of resistance.

[In Gramsci, there is an implicit tension between the one institution that binds them all, the revolutionary party, and other organizations formed to express and direct different aspects of popular will, ideally towards a common goal. Given

McCarthyism and the splintering of the left in the United States after 1945, that was not a problem in California in the 1960s. Lacking a revolutionary party, the counterculture became all about creating “community.” Underneath that wispy, aspirational word lies a need for institutions and organizations that let everyone see “community” in action.]

FRAME 2



Allen Ginsberg and friends, Berkeley 1956

While California was, like the most of the United States in the 20th century, an institution-rich society, there were only a handful of established cultural institutions, most were small and doing their work with limited funding. The solution for young artistic talent was: create your own space!

In the Bay Area, the largest arts coop was probably the Six Gallery, founded in 1953 by five artists, all Korea War veterans using their GI Bill benefits to study at the California School of Fine Arts, and one poet, their humanities teacher at the school. The students wanted a place for showing off what they could do without it being automatically labeled “student work.” The poet, Jack Spicer, wanted a space that the poet professors in the major regional universities did not control. All six believed in “creative process” as inherent to humanity’s problem-solving abilities. They wanted a space that was not defined by a professional segmentation of the arts into literature, visual arts, and performing arts. The Six Gallery was a membership group for anybody interested in creative expression. For \$2 a month, you earned the right to show your work, whatever medium or format it was. The Six Gallery was first and foremost a social space. Exhibitions, readings, performances, screenings culminated in large, wild parties that themselves expressed the transcendent, ecstatic relation to existence that Six Gallery members prized.

Perhaps the single most famous event at the Six Gallery, though it was in no way isolated or singular, took place the evening of October 7, 1955, when Allen Ginsberg gave the first public reading of “Howl.” Ginsberg was twenty-nine. He had recently left New York to follow Neal Cassady, the first intense love of his life, westward to California. That relationship ended disastrously, but Ginsberg stayed in San Francisco and found a job as a copywriter in an advertising-marketing firm. He joined the growing community of young artists and poets who had migrated to San Francisco from all over the nation—and indeed the world. Their explorations, creative, sexual, and spiritual, convinced them that San Francisco was a “power

place” (to use the language of the time). To breathe its air and walk its streets was to discover what was needed for “liberation.”

The reading at the Six was Ginsberg’s coming out, as a poet, as a queer, as a new type of revolutionary. He was one of six poets who read that evening, six angels as Ginsberg’s flyer proclaimed, to an audience of about 150 people. The six poets together articulated a set of interests and perspectives that came to define the post-World War II-era counterculture. Philip Lamantia was the only poet on the program who had been published. The work he read came out of his interest in the use of drugs, peyote and heroin in particular, to create a new consciousness by uncovering parts of the mind that society actively suppressed. Michael McClure, recently arrived from Kansas, at twenty-three was the youngest reader on the program. His two poems expressed the young poet’s developing biological mysticism. One work, “For the Death of 100 Whales,” responded with rage to a recent news report that U.S. soldiers stationed in Alaska had slaughtered a pod of whales just for the fun of it. Although the poem started out as protest, it ended with an austere religious vision of a spiritual force linking humanity to all other life. Even if U.S. society desecrated everything genuinely divine, McClure asserted that the force of what he called the “undersoul” was ever present in flesh, in plant life, in mountains surrounding San Francisco, ready to replenish the spirits of whoever turned to wilderness.

Philip Whalen, at thirty-two the oldest person on the program and a leader in San Francisco’s small Buddhist community, read “Plus ça change,” a stark, if humorous set of punning images playing on the varied connotations of the word “brooding.” His contribution to the then-trendy theme of *ennui* stressed how fear of

communication, whether verbal or physical, effectively isolated Americans from each other and trapped each person in the prison of his or her unfulfilled longings. Gary Snyder, about to head off to Kyoto, Japan, to begin an apprenticeship at the Daitokuji monastery, concluded the evening with "The Berry Feast," a group of poems evoking the Native American mythic figure of Coyote, the archetypal trickster whose deceptions suddenly reveal hidden cosmic truths: a sardonic role model for young contemporary poets whose messages of a divine order immanent in all things fell on deaf ears. Given the indifference they faced, poets would have to trick Americans into paying attention.

The emotional highlight of the evening was Allen Ginsberg's reading of the first section of "Howl." Never having read in public before, Ginsberg was nervous, but as his litany of images cataloguing the bleak state of contemporary life in the U.S. marched forward, his voice grew stronger and more confident. He began with the soon-to-be-famous indictment that he had seen "the best minds of my generation" driven mad and left to face the world "starving hysterical naked." The phrase referred specifically to Carl Solomon, a young intellectual in New York whom Ginsberg had met when they were both confined to a psychiatric hospital. More generally "the best minds" belonged to any young man that Ginsberg knew and loved. A quick succession of cinematic images catalogues events in his own life and in those of his closest friends that revealed the dangerous hypocrisy of modern American life. The insistent drumbeat of the word "who" is repeated sixty-one times, initiating precise but often puzzling images such as "who walked all night with their shoes full of blood on the snowbank docks waiting for a door in the East River to

open to a room full of steamheat and opium.” The narrative spine of the poem protests the cruel medical treatments that doctors devised to destroy Solomon’s individuality, but the poem speaks broadly and generally of drug addiction, of poverty and self-degradation, of turning to prostitution or crime, of traveling randomly across the United States and Mexico, of boring jobs, of the anxieties that life in a militarized, death-oriented nation induces. Ginsberg spoke in direct language of sex, a source of sorrow and frustration, but also a path to redemption given that it revealed the powerful force of the divine within each person.

Ginsberg’s themes, as well as his critique of U.S. society, were consistent in content and spirit to the work that Whalen, McClure, and Snyder presented, but Ginsberg did not balance his rage with images of a transcendent cosmological reality nor with clever language games. All that came later in subsequent work. The first section of “Howl” presents the author’s personal descent into the inferno of contemporary America, and he used clear, direct language to describe and diagnose the catastrophe. Ginsberg used everyday words like *cocksucker*, *fuck*, and *asshole*, all ultra-taboo at the time and therefore exhilarating for the audience to hear in a public situation used to describe real-life problems that they all could identify with, even those who weren’t gay men.

Ginsberg not only confessed but celebrated his desires. To be free, Ginsberg had to celebrate everything that made him different from the American norm. Yes, he was Jewish; yes, he was a socialist; yes, he was a poet. He was also a queer who desired the caresses of other men, and that was what most made him a threat, as he saw it. He embraced all his identities, but youth and sex expressed most clearly the

divine force within every person, the only force powerful enough to confront social convention. His acceptance of same-sex desire as an ordinary, positive part of life made the work appear powerfully frank and particularly suspect to defenders of public morality when the poem finally reached a broader public.

[At the end of the first section, the poet stands naked, as Ginsberg did literally a few months later when reading the poem to a group gathered in Los Angeles, Ginsberg stripped off every last stitch of his clothing by the time he finished. At the Six Gallery, the audience called out to him as they might to jazz musicians who had started with a simple tune but quickly leaped into sonic explorations granting the chaotic inner movements of the soul a temporary, fragile, but excruciatingly beautiful form. The pure passion that soared from his body was as hard-edged as a solo by Charles Parker, and, in a poem that described the cry of a jazz saxophone as an angelic voice emerging from America's desire for love, it was meant to be.]

FRAME 3



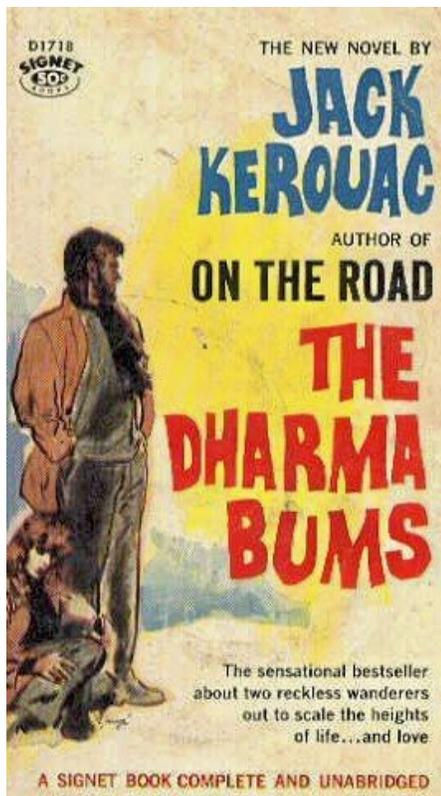
Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac in San Francisco, 1954

Word of mouth about the reading spread quickly. The poets gathered again perhaps a half dozen times in different locations around the Bay Area to repeat the program. Lawrence Ferlinghetti contracted with Ginsberg to publish a first book starting off with “Howl” followed by ten shorter poems. A decision in 1957 by U.S. Customs agents to confiscate and destroy a set of the books printed in England drew national attention to Ginsberg’s work. Ferlinghetti reprinted the book in the United States and put them on sale. The San Francisco district attorney then filed criminal charges against Ferlinghetti and City Lights bookstore sales clerk Shigeyoshi Murao for selling obscene materials. For the prosecutor any poem that used words like “cocksucker” or alluded to anal intercourse could not possibly contain ideas worthy of attention. A slew of expert witnesses on modern poetry disagreed, and so did the judge, who ruled that “Howl” was an honest expression of personal vision protected by the First Amendment.

The publicity surrounding the “Howl” case helped convince a major New York publisher to issue Jack Kerouac’s novel *On the Road*, on the market without a buyer for the previous six years. Kerouac was the best known of the beat authors, in part because he produced a new novel almost every year. In *The Dharma Bums*, published in 1958 and written quickly at the publisher’s insistence to capitalize on the commercial success of *On the Road*, Kerouac wrote what has long been the best-known account of the Six Gallery reading—but while acknowledging the power of Ginsberg’s breakthrough, Kerouac celebrated Gary Snyder’s reading as the emotional heart of the evening. Kerouac

presented Snyder's more dispassionate rejection of Western rationalism as more genuinely radical than Ginsberg's path of confessional redemption. In truth Snyder appealed to Kerouac as a manly, heterosexual, old-stock American from the Pacific Northwest who fit the Jeffersonian archetype of the self-sufficient, self-governing citizen. *The Dharma Bums* served as a manual of how to be "countercultural": there are lessons on forming communes, eating new foods like wheat germ, growing a beard and letting your hair go long, and most especially lessons in reproducing patriarchal relations. This is a revolution, if we follow the novel, where women are securely "dependents" once again, but spiritually satisfied because, satisfied with the power of "feminine magicals," the desires for worldly wealth or their own public careers no longer possess them.

FRAME 4



In the mass media, stereotyped images of beats indulging their passions regardless of what others might think provided yet another opportunity to discuss whether American institutions promoted or stifled individual creativity, whether consumer society undermined personal responsibility, whether modern bureaucracy had created a mass culture that punished anyone who strayed too far from the opinions of friends, neighbors, and employers. Ginsberg's complaints in "Howl" (or Kerouac's caricatures in *The Dharma Bums*) complemented the opinions of sociologists, psychologists, historians, novelists, and journalists. When the City Lights edition of *Howl* hit bookstores, it joined a broad range of books successful because they strongly criticized American society for repressing individual creativity. Efforts by the customs inspector and the district attorney to ban Ginsberg's book confirmed the power of conformity and its deadening influence over the nation. The discipline that had made the United States an industrial and military power stifled personal growth.

[Discussions of conformity and individualism in the mass media typically avoided the most tangible political issues of the decade: the loyalty oaths required of educators during the McCarthy purges, the resurgent movement for civil rights fought in both the courts and in the streets of southern cities, debates over the militarization of U.S. society during the cold war and the threat of atomic warfare, the persistent high levels of poverty in the world's wealthiest country. The problems facing the nation were defined as existential rather than political. Criticizing the United States for being *overreliant* on technology, for being *overly* influenced by market values assumed that the citizens of the wealthiest nation in the

world ought also to be the happiest, the most spiritually enlightened.

In 1957 when the Soviet Union put a satellite in orbit around the world, a triumph that contrasted dramatically with several spectacular U.S. failures, the media term *beatnik*, synthesizing Kerouac's "beats" with *Sputnik*, the Soviet space vehicle, suggested how much media interest in the nation's bohemian enclaves was linked to fears over U.S. decline. The beatniks were objects of derision, but they emerged as the mass media challenged readers and viewers to meet the growing Soviet threat by asserting themselves more, by pursuing personal excellence whatever that might be, and in particular by encouraging their children to think for themselves.]

FRAME 5



Hannah Arendt, ca. 1957

I will end with the observations of the political philosopher Hannah Arendt on the growing demand coming from the mainstream media that people resist the pull of conformity. She saw evidence that two competing ideals of social organization, equally important within the history of the United States, had once again entered into conflict. As Arendt saw it, the American revolution had been political, with new institutions expanding the possibilities for white men to compete with each other for leadership. The pursuit of personal excellence that political liberation had broadened promoted rapid economic growth but generated fears that the country was in danger of losing its moral moorings. Liberal-minded Protestant divines promoted an ideal of social harmony to counter the negative effects resulting from increased individual mobility. As a result, Arendt noted, since de Tocqueville's visit to America in 1831, European observers consistently returned home puzzled over the peculiar mixture of aggressive individualism and craven conformity in American society.

The conformism that the ideal of social harmony required endured at the cost of repressing individual ambition for the majority and channeling white male aspiration into a narrower range of competitive domains. Arendt thought that mechanisms for suppression grew increasingly costly the longer the ideal prevailed. Stalinist Russia had followed the idea of social harmony to its logical extreme, creating the ideal workers state on the corpses of the millions who did not fit its design. The U.S. ideal, Arendt noted, was less systematic; it still rested on the lynching, murder, and imprisonment of individuals in subordinate groups who refused to accept their inferiority. For the majority, she thought conformism meant

personal isolation accompanied by unusually high rates of alcoholism and depression; periodic outbursts of mass hysteria about immigration, crime, communist infiltration, or moral impurity; and persistently high rates of violent crime. Arendt worried that the crusade against “conformity” was likely to unleash destructive and disruptive forces. “Self-realization,” to use a common phrase of the 1950s, was a matter of individual definition, not subject to collective management except through coercion. The ideal of social harmony, however repressive it could be, at least required a continuing national debate over what people were willing to sacrifice for the sake of an abstract common good. She predicted that the question of how to make personal desire morally responsible would be the greatest challenge facing the next generation. That challenge required a different type of organization than those young cultural workers or their promoters were building. Without the internal controls of a revolutionary movement of the kind that Gramsci expected, pride, competition, lust, violence were more likely to define the gritty reality of how people actually connected rather than their coming together with hope to improve society. What happened in 1967 was that it was no longer credible to counter the more negative evaluation of the counterculture with the hopes and illusions that allowed a generation to believe that their personal liberation introduced something radically new into U.S. society.