

**Utopia and Dissent : Art, Poetry, and Politics in California : Richard Cándida Smith**



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Art, Poetry, and Politics in California

Richard Cándida Smith

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## Introduction

Henrietta Shore explained her decision to become a painter with an anecdote of an accidental encounter: “I was on my way home from school and saw myself reflected in a puddle. It was the first time I had seen my image completely surrounded by nature, and I suddenly had an overwhelming sense of belonging to it—of actually being part of every tree and flower. I was filled with a desire to tell what I felt through painting.”<sup>1</sup> Born in Toronto in 1880, Shore moved to New York to study with Robert Henri. She migrated west to Los Angeles in 1913, where she helped found the Los Angeles Modern Art Society in 1916 and worked with others who shared her perspectives to educate the public to experimental art. In 1931 she retreated from an active public life as educator and moved to Carmel, then a small village on the coast three hundred miles north. While running a diner she pursued the all important task of self-discovery through painting until her death in 1963.

Two features in Shore’s engagement with modernism in the arts became typical patterns of California aesthetic experimentalists. First, her work sprang from a belief that the creative process was a technique for transforming mystery from an “accidental” encounter into a “natural” foundation to everyday life that viewers or readers could reexperience at will. Shore and those who shared her conception of art believed that they had discovered in the creative process a function that no other human activity could perform. They acknowledged that examples of the power of creative people to reveal pro-

found mysteries existed throughout the history of art, literature, and music. Modern art, however, stripped away everything but the essential. The arts no longer needed to be decoration or illustrations of shared beliefs. Instead, the work presented private truths that emerged from a leap of union between the soul and the cosmos. Aesthetic experiment captured hidden truths about the relationships that human beings created for themselves. The aesthetic process created a stage where both the private and public components of identity comported as mythic and historical actors contending with each other for dominance. The creative process then was a paradigm for representing at one and the same time both dissolution of the self into cosmic being and individuation as a separation from historical necessity.

This subtle, perhaps impossible task could not be done successfully if one's work grew from a desire for fame and commercial success. Worldly ambition tied the creative person back into history, the accidental and temporary aspect of human existence that stood in opposition to mystery. Shore's decision to retire from the world in order to paint points to a second pattern we will see repeated by many others. Isolation, however, was not the same thing as solitude. Artists and poets built "communities" where they imagined themselves successfully challenging a world overstructured by order, hierarchy, and dogma. Sometimes these communities were geographically based, sometimes they took the form of professional associations, but most frequently they consisted of ad hoc networks of friends who supported each other's efforts to create what they hoped would be a new kind of actively engaged audience.

As California transformed into one of the world's metropolitan centers, these complex and contradictory efforts to reconcile privacy with a sense of public responsibility began to shape American and world culture, but it was often misunderstood and reduced to stereotypical images—a "cult of sex and anarchy" one writer labeled the California arts world in 1947.<sup>2</sup> The central figures we will encounter in this book certainly celebrated irrationality, but not in the pathological sense popularized by the surrealists. Irrationality in

the California context stood on more ascetic philosophical ground: the most basic aspect of the human condition was potentiality, and therefore human action could never be predicted or systematically explained with any degree of lawful certainty.

This view posed against all forms of determinism the fundamental role of desire and choice in human development. Against history stood poetry, understood as any meaning-finding reflection on experience. By the mid-1940s, a central political tenet crystallized out of this definition of poetry: the most important corrective to the barbarities of the twentieth century was that people excluded from power claimed the right to speak for themselves about their lives. The narration of human experience in all its complexity, particularly from those who are despised and excluded from society's rewards, challenged all complacent views of social life and subverted the power of any hierarchy pretending to be able to explain human action.

This book examines the emergence and development of this social ideology. What follows is not a comprehensive survey of the art and poetry produced in the state, nor is it a history of arts communities. The focus throughout remains on the analysis of ideas and the influence those ideas had upon both aesthetic practice and the conceptions of the relationship of self to society in the mid-twentieth-century United States. The organizational structure follows a sequence of concepts, each of which emerged and matured in the course of attempting to resolve the contradictions of applying aesthetic thought to questions of social relations. Part 1 outlines the formal, institutional, and subjective factors in the transplantation of modernist ideas into California. Part 2 explores how the post-World War II generation used mythopoetic thinking to establish a realm for personal meaning-finding in opposition to established authority. Part 3 uncovers the ways a mythopoetic interpretation of psychoanalysis contributed to political debates in the 1960s about free speech, cold war policy, the Vietnam War, and the nature of the American polity.

The ability of a small number of relatively obscure artists and poets to influence public policy debates brings us to the underlying question of this book: how and why the concerns of the arts communities came to enter into the general culture. The work of Jerrold Seigel and Carl Schorske has shown that bohemia has a political history long preceding the period covered here. I have found Seigel's argument that the milieux surrounding the arts helped mark the fluid boundaries of bourgeois identity in nineteenth-century France to be persuasive and applicable with necessary modifications to the twentieth-century United States. Similarly, Schorske's examination of the links between psychoanalysis, aesthetic experimentation, and crises of liberal ideology in fin-de-siècle Vienna is a model without equal for understanding how conceptions of subjectivity and public order work together to create new cultural forms.<sup>3</sup>

Studying the California experience contributes to the study of the relationship of avant-garde culture to politics by providing insight into the appeal bohemian ideals had for a broader public. In most societies prior to 1960 the concerns of the aesthetic avant-garde were of interest primarily to small, select, relatively well-educated coterie whose members claimed personal distinction for their appreciation of the difficult and arcane. California, however, was one of the places where the thinning of the line between bohemian and popular culture took place earliest, most clearly, and most systematically. Ideas that had once interested only a handful influenced resistance to the Vietnam War and animated other social movements in which rediscovery and re-creation of identity were particularly important motifs. Countercultural ideas that promoted the truth of experience against all forms of collective authority spread widely into popular music and movies to become an accepted, if contested, current weaving throughout American culture. The result was a greater frankness in public discussion of the varieties of individual behavior. The intellectual framework developed in the arts communities, however, also contributed to a growing distrust of public life and to a fracturing of the myth of a unified national history.

I do not argue that California artists and poets were independent of parallel developments elsewhere. They were part of a global interrogation of instrumental rationality and its potential dangers in a world with nuclear weapons. Formations on the West Coast related to existentialism, literature of the absurd, and varieties of neodata. As important, the juxtaposition of aesthetic and social theory found in California developed through opposition to the institution of canonical modernism after 1945. Nonetheless, to dissolve the local conversation in a broader picture would merely reaffirm without reflection the hierarchical relationship between metropolitan centers and their dependencies. To explain the particular nature of the social power that the ideas of California artists and poets achieved, we need to examine what was unique and autonomous about the local situation. The question then deepens: why did the concerns of marginal creative figures take on significance for others who by and large were unfamiliar with the actual poems, paintings, assemblages, novels, plays, and motion pictures by which this regional avant-garde established a place in the world? The approach to that question opens another field of inquiry with significance greater than the particular histories of regional arts movements: why at this time in American history did the arts in general become an increasingly potent social force, apparently posing questions of relevance to contemporary society that no other human activity seemed as readily poised to answer?

As the answers to these questions develop around changing representations of the self, a significant body of evidence used in this study comes from oral sources. Rather than creating new interviews specifically for this study, I have preferred to probe already existing oral evidence to see what those sources can reveal about subjective states and their changes. Extant interviews had the virtue that my interpretive assumptions shaped neither the content nor the narrative's formal attributes. The "data" of interviews are the ways in which a person reconstructed the past to negotiate the ever-fluid process of identity construction. From this perspective, the factual veracity of interviews is less important than the rhetorical strategies revealing the horizon of speak-

ers and their communities. The methodological hypothesis, following an observation of Luisa Passerini, is that “the protagonists of cultural change—each in his own style, in her own level—carry within them the traces of that change in the structure of their memories, even if the process is still ongoing or in certain cases appears interrupted.”<sup>4</sup>

Subjectivity is a term defined by negation. Against the universal, the lawful, the context-free, subjectivity expresses the individual and unique; it is unexplainable by recourse to anything outside it. But because objectivity is singular, so must be subjectivity—at least in a form that allows for external study. Subjectivity separates from the ephemeral flux of pure being through narration. If pure subjectivity is known only to the person who experiences it, practical subjectivity finds expression in the forms that people use to represent, to themselves and to others, the self as an historical actor. The subjective position in narration differs from psychology through an emphasis on exterior manifestation and the element of purposeful activity involved, be it limited only to an ability to draw conclusions from events and to arrange knowledge into categories. Distinct from immediate experience, reflections on the self form the basis for ideas used to ground oneself in the world. In the course of tracking changes in self-presentations, our goal is not to recount how people felt, but to trace how ideas, feelings, and understandings of self grew from and altered more general social and cultural developments.<sup>5</sup>

Because oral evidence is largely retrospective, it must be combined with other sources. The narrator knows how events turned out, and the account involves an effort to explain that conclusion. Original documents from the time narrated—letters, articles, diaries, etc.—have a parallel bias. The pressures of ambition and hope shape primary documentary sources, which often express what a person wants to see happen and therefore tend to ignore or downplay obstacles and weaknesses. Oral sources can reveal what people knew but censored in earlier public expressions. Together, retrospective and projective documents give a more layered view of historical phenomena and

offer for our purposes the possibility of seeing how aesthetic categories used to define the self changed across time.

Creative work and personal statements, both oral and written, represent two distinct, though linked, cultural forms. Statements, particularly those recorded in oral sources, spring from the normally sequestered life of conversation as a forum for working out shared projects. Differences between creative work and recorded statements reflect the distinguishable material, place, and function of each: conversation is the form through which inner-group unity and diversity are marked, while creative work strives for an individualized signature that establishes an ostensibly independent, "authorial" stance. The making of "community" will be an ongoing concern as we discuss how and why particular groups came together and defined their most important aims. Finished work must represent the creator's intentions by being able to stand on its own, capable of varying uses and interpretations; but new work reaches a broader public because of the efforts of editors, curators, agents, critics, and colleagues, who as personal acquaintances have intimate knowledge that allows them to introduce and explain new creative work to a public not privy to the ongoing discussion within which the work took shape. Public institutions such as schools, museums, or granting agencies may often be impersonal, but they rest on networks of intimacy, which, however ephemeral their traces, are immediate and powerful in their ability to mobilize rewards and punishments. One of our tasks will be to bring to the surface the discourses of familiarity that interweave with those of authority to create the matrix for a professional life. Neither analysis of work nor analysis of utterance alone is sufficient, because both contain each other, although in ways that mask the other voice. Throughout this study recourse to one set of evidence must always be provisional until the alternate voice is added.

The confrontation with subjective sources plunges us deep into the power of stereotypes. Discussion of avant-garde arts movements in the United States, particularly those figures related to the beats, has been emotional and

overburdened with stock images of sexual experimentation, drug taking, and mysticism. The persistence of stereotypical thinking is evidence that the topic is connected to deeply rooted fears and confusions about the relationship of public and private life. I will argue that public fascination with the avant-garde was one of the first symptoms of a crisis of confidence in the effectiveness of American institutions. By closing off past polemics that either celebrated or condemned the activities of avant-garde movements and focusing instead on the specific intellectual, symbolic meanings placed on different transgressive acts, we can make stereotypes work to elaborate rather than shut down discussion.

The obstacles I hope to remove are precisely those that insist upon a self-justifying either/or reading of the past. The California situation reveals that aesthetic practice was both a field for the construction of identities that reproduced existing hierarchical relations and an arena for subversion and disruption of those same identities. This should not be surprising. Since subjectivity denies the possibility of there being a stable central point for the self, it tends to disrupt identities and become an arena for conflicts of power on a cultural or symbolic plane, with direct implications for the boundaries for effective action that people believe exist for them. Deeply held stereotypes about ethnicity, gender, and sexuality mobilized through artistic practice became the basic building blocks for oppositional movements against the very hierarchies that grew from those stereotypes. The turn to private experience as a counter to public authority meant, for example, that the ideology of domesticity, which historians have correctly identified as a pillar of conservative social thought, was also, at least after 1945, a source of disruptive change. Utopian vision, we will see, projected private relations as a replacement for a perceived oppressive public order, but without any consideration of their connection. This critical omission caused utopian projects to collapse back into the repressed material of their origins. To state that a highly subjective aesthetic ideology did not escape the limits of its contradictions is not to deny its importance as a source of ferment and change. If there is no external fulcrum from



which the critique of society can proceed, then the questions of social organization that artists and poets addressed return us to a still unsolved puzzle: can efforts to understand social relations root themselves in the immediate conditions that prompted desire for change without being mired in the power of stereotypes, of mental reductions that are identity giving, to define our vision of complex social realities?

The fissure between theory and experience remained a puzzle to the more serious thinkers who sought in the arts a foundation for reforming human relations. The best they could offer in their faith in the validity of personal truth against all preconceived objectifications of that experience was that the solutions that theory provides have no necessity; that theory replaces the actual messiness of life with arbitrary, and ultimately illusory, conventions; that contradictions are the inescapable, tragic components of life. The question for them as creative people with ambitions to affect the quality of social life was something much smaller than a model for social action, but nonetheless still quite ambitious, given the restrictions placed on freedom of expression in the United States until the mid-1960s: to foment a continuous statement and questioning of personal experience. This was no “solution” that claimed to eliminate in one fell swoop problems rooted in long-established social privileges. To speak one’s life and to pose interpretations allowed nothing more than the possibility of testing a model of experience against further experience.

Change and confrontation appeared as an open-ended process with no predictable conclusions—and if they were predictable, they would be by definition unfree and therefore contradictory to a goal of human liberation. In the years following World War II, one powerful source of challenge to constituted authority came from those who conceived the poetic act as a form of testimony. To insist on speaking one’s “autobiography,” even if it assumed forms that were compromised and falsifiable, was to promote the overthrow of institutional arrangements that failed to take into account that experience.<sup>6</sup> The search for authority—be it ideological, national, religious, patriarchal, or

even communal—ended when one was prepared to face the contradictory and ambiguous nature of experience but still trust that experience as the taproot for further understanding and growth. This persistent questioning of the boundaries between reflection and experience became the source of power for California's art and poetry movements as private dreams transformed into challenges to structures of public order.

## Notes

### Abbreviations

AAA	Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
BL	Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
CLP	Kenneth Rexroth. <i>The Collected Longer Poems of Kenneth Rexroth</i> . New York: New Directions, 1968.
CSP	Kenneth Rexroth. <i>The Collected Shorter Poems of Kenneth Rexroth</i> . New York: New Directions, 1966.
DSC	Department of Special Collections, University Library, University of California, Los Angeles.
OHP/UCLA	Oral History Program, University of California, Los Angeles.
PAS	Public Affairs Services, University Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.
PT	Kenneth Rexroth. <i>The Phoenix and the Tortoise</i> . Norfolk: New Directions, 1944.
ROHO	Regional Oral History Office, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
SFAA	San Francisco Art Association Archives, Library, San Francisco Art Institute.
WOW	Kenneth Rexroth. <i>World Outside the Window: The Selected Essays of Kenneth Rexroth</i> . New York: New Directions, 1987.

### Introduction

1. Quoted in Roger Aikin, "Henrietta Shore: A Retrospective, 1900–1963," in *Henrietta Shore: A Retrospective, 1900–1963* (Monterey: Monterey Peninsula Museum of Art, 1986), 21.

2. Mildred Edie Brady, "The New Cult of Sex and Anarchy," *Harper's* 194 (April 1947): 312–322.

3. Jerrold Seigel, *Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830–1930* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986); Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981). Related works are T. J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982) and *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986);

and Debora L. Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France: Politics, Psychology, and Style* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989). I have adopted as a working definition of “avant-garde” Peter Bürger’s proposition that formal innovation in an avant-garde was motivated by the goal of eliminating the distinction between art and life. See *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

4. Luisa Passerini, *Autoritratto di gruppo* (Firenze: Giunti Barbèra, 1988), 39.

5. For further discussion of subjectivity and the use of oral sources to analyze it, see Jean-Crétien Bouvier et al., *Tradition orale et identité culturelle* (Paris: Editions du CNRS, 1980); Maurizio Catani, “Algunas precisiones sobre el enfoque biográfico oral,” *Historia y Fuente Oral* 3 (1990): 151–164; E. Culpepper Clark et al., “Communicating in the Oral History Interview: Investigating Problems of Interpreting Oral Data,” *International Journal of Oral History* 1 (1980): 28–40; Louis Dumont, *Essais sur l’individualisme: Une perspective anthropologique sur l’idéologie moderne* (Paris: Seuil, 1983); Gelyah Frank, “Finding a Common Denominator: A Phenomenological Critique of Life History Method,” *Ethnos* 7 (1979): 68–94; Ronald Fraser, “La Formación de un entrevistador,” *Historia y Fuente Oral* 3 (1990): 129–150; Ronald J. Grele, “Listen to Their Voices: Two Case Studies in the Interpretation of Oral History Interviews,” in *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History*, 2d ed. (New York: Praeger, 1991), 212–236; Tamara Hareven, “The Search for Generational Memory: Tribal Rites in Industrial Society,” *Daedalus* 107 (1978): 137–149; *International Annual of Oral History, 1990: Subjectivity and Multiculturalism in Oral History*, ed. Ronald J. Grele (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992); Francis Jacques, *Différence et subjectivité: Anthropologie d’un point de vue relationnel* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1982); Lewis Langness and Gelyah Frank, *Lives: An Anthropological Approach to Biography* (Novato: Chandler and Sharp, 1981); Ernesto De Martino, *La Fine del mondo. Contributo all’analisi delle apocalissi culturali* (Torino: Giulio Einaudi editore, 1977), 86–91, 94–112, 389–414, 555; Luisa Passerini, “Documento autobiografico e tempo storico,” *Rivista di storia contemporanea* 16 (1987); Luisa Passerini, “Diritto all’autobiografia,” in *Storia e soggettività: Le Fonti orali, la memoria* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1988), 1–30; Alessandro Portelli, *Biografia di una città* (Torino: Giulio Einaudi editore, 1985), 3–22; Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991); Richard Cándida Smith, “Popular Memory and Oral Narratives: Luisa Passerini’s Reading of Oral History Interviews,” *Oral History Review* 16, no. 2 (1988): 95–108; Paul Thompson, “Memory and Self,” in *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 150–165; Jan Vansina, “Memory and Oral Tradition,” in *The African Past Speaks: Essays on*

*Oral Tradition and History*, ed. Joseph C. Miller (Folkstone: Kent, 1980), 262–279. Warren Susman's discussion of "personality" in *Culture as History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984) contains a parallel though distinct discussion of the self as the "fundamental problem of modern cultural development" (p. 274).

6. On this point, see Luisa Passerini, "Diritto all'autobiografia," 6–10, as well as Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Work of Nikolai Leskov," in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 83–110; Émile Benveniste, "Subjectivity in Language," in *Problems in General Linguistics* (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1971), 223–230; Jacqueline Rose, "The State of the Subject (II): The Institution of Feminism," *Critical Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (1987): 9–15; Ramón Saldivar, "Ideologies of the Self: Chicano Autobiography," in *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 154–170. For a contrary view see Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement," *MLN* 94 (1979): 919–930.