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THE LETTERPRESS IN THE MIMEO REVOLUTION

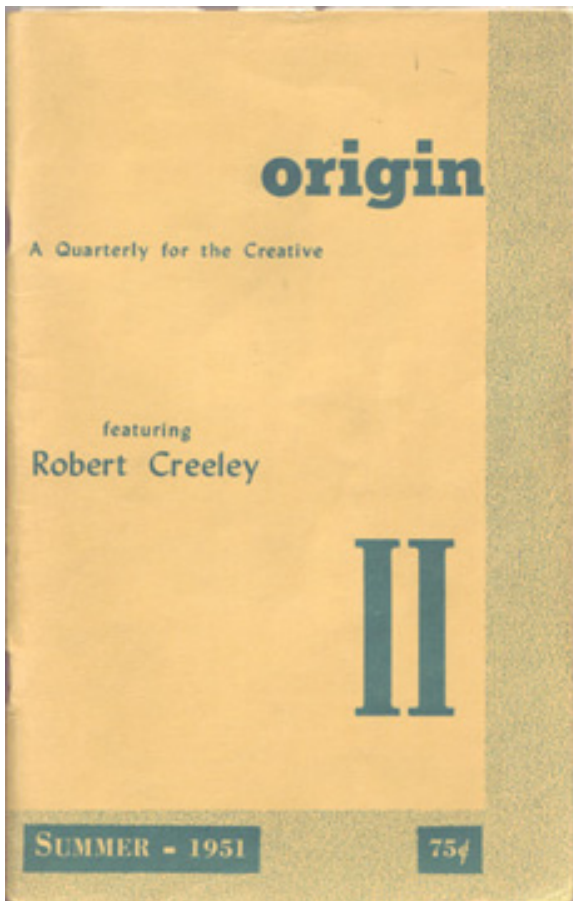
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Typography is the visible language of modern American poetry—the horizon where the literary and visual arts meet, and I feel that too little has been written on the role of the literary fine press as a genre distinct from artists' books, the genteel tradition of private press publishing, and the mimeo revolution. Loss Glazier, among others, has argued that the mimeo revolution of the sixties was not limited to magazines that actually used Edison's machine. For aspiring poets, activists and publishers, the allure of the mimeograph was its approachability, immediacy, affordability, and no-frills DIY aesthetic.

Given that the parallel proliferation of digital type and electronic publishing have perpetuated one another since the end of WWII when the letterpress became commercially obsolete, a grassroots renaissance in fine printing began in America during the nineteen-forties that rivaled the works of the European Dadaist, Cubists, and Futurists of the early twentieth century. The countercultural politics of print in postwar America follow in the historical trajectory of the revolutionary potential that has stimulated cultural, religious, political, and aesthetic transgressions since Martin Luther.

Like many young poets, my mentor Robert Creeley began corresponding with his significant peers and elders by inviting them to contribute work to a magazine. His first experience as a printer came rather unexpectedly: "I had tried to start a magazine with the help of a college friend, Jacob Leed. He was living in Lititz, Pennsylvania, and had an old George Washington handpress. It was on that that we proposed to print the magazine. Then, at an unhappily critical moment, he broke his arm, I came running from New Hampshire—but after a full day's labor we found we had set only two pages, each with a single poem. So that was that." The magazine never materialized, and he eventually gave Cid Corman the work he had collected, including poems by Denise Levertov, Paul Blackburn, Charles Olson, and his own poem, "Hart Crane" for the first issue of *Origin*. Their dispute over the printing of the first issue serves as a particularly insightful rift because it sets the stage for the charged debates between the things we have come to associate with letterpress (quality, prestige, sensuality, beauty, authority, tactility, etc.; as represented by Creeley) and the renegade DIY aesthetic of an emerging mid-century counterculture that Corman endorsed. Letterforms are nothing if not controversial. In the early fifties, when letterpress

printing was not entirely obsolete but certainly on the decline, Corman felt that it was pretentious, and opted for a combination of varitype and photo offset printing, much to Creeley's dismay. Although Corman felt that the first issue was "no marvel of printing," its reception was more than favorable: Vincent Ferrini, whom Cid had gone to join in Gloucester to celebrate the occasion, was thrilled. Olson, whose contributions claimed the bulk of the issue, was ecstatic. To read the magazine had given him the fullest satisfaction he'd ever had from print. However, the most exuberant praise, first by telegram of 20 April, then by letter, came from the poet who had but a single poem in the issue. It was a very fine job, Creeley admitted, clean, wonderfully flexible, and altogether without pretension.



Today I'm going to talk a bit about the "letterpress in the mimeo revolution," highlighting the books and periodicals of a few magpie poets who, dissatisfied with the mainstream academic and new critical culture, decided to take the face of contemporary writing into their own hands by teaching themselves how to print and set type in order to publish the writing they wanted to read.

According to Len Fulton's *International Directory of Little Magazines & Small Presses* the number of poetry magazines soared from 250 in 1965 to 700 in 1966. Coincident with this swell, the phrase "hypertext" was coined, Vietnam became the first televised war, Xerox introduced the first Telecopier fax machine, and Kodak introduced Super 8 film for home movies. Not only did these developments change the way people saw themselves and the world around them, but they gave them more control over the ways in which they chose to order and introduce an ever-escalating quantity of information—particularly visual. By the time President Nixon resigned from the White House, there were 2,000 magazines in circulation, Steve Jobs had sold his Volkswagen microbus to raise funds to build the first Apple computer, and Edison's patent on the Electric Pen turned one hundred years old.

War isn't everything, but it changes everything: how we write, what we read, how we think we feel about what we see or "know." In America, the war industry has done more to advance, and define the role of media and technology than any other force of the twentieth century. As co-curators Steve Clay and Rodney Phillips demonstrated in their relentless scavenger hunt for mimeo magazines featured in their Secret Location on the Lower East Side exhibition know, there is more to be learned about the history of letters at large through the study of the minor events in publishing than subscrib-

Origin, edited by Cid Corman. Summer, 1951 featuring Robert Creeley. Image courtesy of the Poetry Collection, UB.

ing to *the* ideology of *the* great books club. History is not only written by the victors, but for the victors, and distributed in the medium and language of their design. Studies of popular media such as handbills, posters, and magazines offer an account of the past that interrogates the barbarity of power struggles, transcends the boundaries of the working class and the social elite, and mends the violent ruptures of official histories. As the narrator of French filmmaker Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* reminds us, "history throws its empty bottles out of the window."

The Untide Press was conceived in the midst of a broken world. William Everson was stationed in a conscientious objectors' camp in Oregon when he published his



Waldport 1945. Adrian Wilson, Clayton James, Vladimir Dupree, and William Everson. Page 4 Waldport 1943. Dupree, Eshelman and Everson. Images courtesy of Adrian Wilson's *Two Against the Tide*.

own poetry in an unofficial mimeographed newsletter entitled *The Untide*—launched in 1943 with the assistance of other like-minded artists, activists and writers including Adrian Wilson, who went on to become a successful printer and writer working with independent theatres in the Bay Area, and the actor, poet, and playwright Kermit Sheets. In a time of political unrest, Everson and company produced *The Untide* as a response to the camp's official newsletter, *The Tide*. Its purpose was decisive and tersely stated in the first issue, "This is the time of destruction, against which we offer the creative act." *The Untide* is a threshold between art and activism, poetry and politics, pre- and postwar life, books and periodicals, and the technologies of the mimeograph and the letterpress. Everson and company ran the mimeograph machine to produce his own *X War Elegies* and other small volumes before realizing their collective abilities in the production of Kenneth Patchen's *An Astonished Eye Looks Out Of the Air* in 1945 as the war was ending. In a letter to his wife Joyce dated 13 September 1944, Wilson expressed his reservations about Patchen's poems, which was the last, and most sophisticated book The Untide Press produced in Waldport.

The Patchen poems—thirty-four of them that will take at least fifty pages—arrived. To me and Bill they were a great disappointment and Bill wanted to send them back even if Patchen did have a fit, but the rest of the Press wants to publish, perhaps for the name . . . Of the movements of the Allies I am unaware. It's insane; the arts, the forest, and the ocean here are a direct antithesis . . .

At mid-century, burgeoning dialogues between artists and writers took a post-modern twist, and journals played a key role in creating a sense of community among American poets living outside of

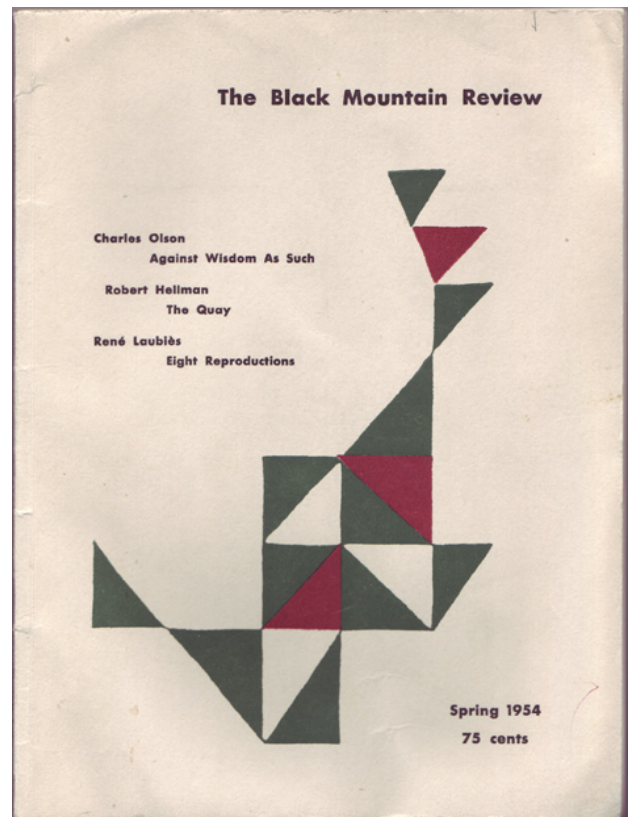


metropolitan literary hubs. The magazines of the mimeo revolution had a disposable allure; they were easy to produce, inexpensive to purchase, fun to give away, and could literally materialize overnight. The mimeo was the perfect medium to efficiently advance experimental writing and art into public domain. Mimeograph magazines are characterized by their standard dimensions, side-stapled spines, non-archival paper, hazy typewriter fonts, and lingering inky odor. Editors frequently published visual art, promoted collaborations between artists and writers, and solicited artists such as George Schneeman and Joe Brainard for images to spice up the covers of their journals. For example, early issues of the Irving Rosenthal's Chicago-based Beat mimeo *Big Table* featured the art of former Black Mountaineers Aaron Siskind and Franz Kline, as well as the polemic anti-war artist Leon Golub on its covers.

As editor of *The Black Mountain Review*, Creeley published poets and artists—some of whom were in direct affiliation with the experimental Collage in rural North Carolina, others not. Following Pound's suggestion, Creeley thought of the *Review*, ". . . as a center around which, 'not a box within which/any item . . .'" could appear. Akin to Pound's dictum, "verse should consist of a constant and a variant," the *Black Mountain Review* had a group of regular contributors, while Creeley made a point of introducing new writings from emerging and marginal authors to insure a balance between the familiar and the unknown. The first issue appeared in 1954, and Jonathan Williams sold copies on the road with his Jargon Society books, while Paul Blackburn took responsibility for distribution in New York City. Reproductions of images by visual artists Philip Guston, Harry Callahan, Jess Collins, Franz Kline and Aaron Siskind were featured in a specific signature, accompanied by a brief

introduction from the editor, whose friendships and collaborations with these artists and many others sustained three generations. It was modest, handsome, and affordably printed letterpress by Mosen Alcover, the jobbing firm in Palma de Mallorca who also produced the books he published as the editor of his own Divers Press. The College closed in the spring of 1956, and Williams became the publisher of the final issue. Allen Ginsberg (whose poem "America" appeared here for the first time) became the contributing editor, and published "Book III" from "William Lee's" (Burroughs') *Naked Lunch*. Creeley moved from the rural South to the arid Southwest, and his proximity to the West Coast poets, combined with Ginsberg's editorial sensibility, is reflected in the selection of writers whose works appeared in the seventh issue: Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder, Phillip Whalen, Edward Dorn and Michael McClure.

Black Mountain Review, edited by Robert Creeley, Spring, 1954. Image courtesy of the Poetry Collection, UB.





DAVE:
Has anything been
done since 'Spine'
broke - if so send
down.

LOVE.

Wallace B.

One of the most radical small press operations to emerge from California was the brainchild of Wallace Berman, the visionary artist behind nine issues of *Semina* (1955-64). Berman acted as a regular contributor, founding editor, printer, designer, and distributor. Berman's admirable autonomy may be at least partially attributed to his desire to keep a low profile, to avoid entanglements with authorities on the grounds of censorship. Following his first exhibition at the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles in 1957, he was arrested, tried and found guilty of exhibiting "lewd and lascivious pornographic art" by the same judge who had convicted Henry Miller on similar grounds. In December 1957, Berman explained the journal's circumstance on a small card pasted to the back of the second issue:

During the second month of a scheduled exhibit of my paintings and sculpture, members of the vice squad entered the Ferus art gallery & confiscated a copy of 'Semina no. 1' which was used as an important part of a work entitled 'Temple'. Brought before the righteous judge Kenneth Holiday, who, taking the allegorical drawing in question out of context, declared me guilty of displaying lewd matter. I will continue to print Semina from locations other than this city of degenerate angels.

According to the colophon glued to the rear, inside cover, this issue was stapled and "handset with miscellaneous available type and papers." The poems are printed on a variety of paper swatches in numerous inks and founts, creating a sensual collage of colors and textures that reflects the discrepant content. Its hand-wrought character is accentuated by the astonishing amount of time it must have taken Berman to tip all of the poems into the otherwise blank, craft brown pamphlet.

Semina 3 was devoted to Michael McClure's "Peyote Poem," the first issue devoted entirely to the work of a single author, giving it the feel of a chapbook. The poem is printed letterpress on a single sheet of white paper, folded into fourths and glued into a brown folder made of construction paper. The title is printed in black ink on a card bearing the image of two peyote buttons. In future issues of the journal, Berman constructed folders, or portfolios with envelopes inserted (not unlike those that secured the check-out cards that used to appear in library books) to hold a hodgepodge of loose poems and pictures together. *Semina* had a decidedly non-commercial element; it contained no advertising and copies were not available in any bookstore. It was distributed through the mail, and in a sense, Berman's mailing list circumscribed the scope of the magazine's underground audience. Editions were small, ranging from two to three hundred, and much of the printing was performed on his own wonky letterpress in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and a handful of places he inhabited briefly in between. Very few copies of this obscure publication remain—a friend in Rochester tells me that Berman gave him a suitcase of *Semina* to take to Woodstock where he distributed them to hippies "tripping" in the mud. More were lost in a landslide that destroyed Berman's home in 1964, about twelve years before his sudden death in an automobile accident on his fiftieth birthday in Topanga Canyon. Robert Duncan recalls:

Semina was a cult magazine. It meant to reveal the possibility of the emergence of a new way of feeling. Cult means the cultivation of something . . . Wallace Berman gathered writers and artists he knew that gave him a sense of his own personal identity, and taking hold of the personal beginnings of his art.

Semina 8, edited and produced by Wallace Berman (1963). Inscribed to Dave Haselwood of the Auerhahn Press. Image courtesy of the PoetryCollection, UB.

DAILY WORLD BEAN

SPECIAL!



FRISCO, 22 SEPT ... BNS SHORTLY AFTER YOU KNOW WHEN THIS AFTERNOON SARA MOORE, AN ALLEGEDLY LAPSED MEMBER OF A SIXTIES CIA MOD SQUAD, GOT A .38 SLUG STRAIGHT OFF INTO THE CLEAR BLUE SKY A-



Sara Moore

BOVE KNOB HILL AND EL PRESIDENTE SWALLOWED HIS BUBBLE GUM FOR THE LAST TIME IN THE REPUBLIC OF CALIFORNIA. HE WAS CARRIED TO AF I IMMEDIATELY, HIS FACE AS

PALE AS THE BACK OF A DOLLAR FOOD COUPON.

THIS SECOND EPISODE WITHIN THE MONTH HAS REMINDED OUR FRIENDS ACROSS THE MOUNTAINS THAT A HANDFUL OF BOOZY GOLD - SEEKERS DO NOT NECESSARILY AN ACCESSION MAKE.

ma xochicuico, ma ihtoa nichuana teihuanti xochiti ☼ yeheoc ye nican poyoma xahuallan timaliuh-tihuitz ☼ mavochitl oyehoc ye nican zan tlahuicochids moyahua ☼ motzeteloa ancazo yehuatl nepapan xochiti ☼ zan comoni huchuetl maya nehtosilo ☼ in quetzalpoyomatl a ic icuilihuic noyol, nicuicanitl ☼ in xochitl a ya tzetzelihuipancuel nicuiya, maxonahuican ☼ zan noyolitic ontlapani in cuicaxochitl nicyamoyahua in xochitla ☼ cuicatl ya ninoquinilotehuaz in quenmanian ☼ xochinenelihuiaz noyollo: yehuan tepilhuan on teteuctin in ☼ zan ye ic nichoca in quenmanian ☼ zan nicayaihtca noxochiteyo nocuicatoca ☼ nietlali-tehuaz in quenmanian ☼ xochinenelihuiaz noyollo: yehuan tepilhuan in teteuctin in. ☼☼

Bean News was a tabloid-sized newspaper edited by Ed Dorn in collaboration with Holbrook Teter and Michael Myers of the Zephyrus Image Press in San Francisco. To the outsider, *Bean News* is a dense and cryptic compilation of, “. . . letters, articles, poems, puns and rebuses.” In addition to the newspaper, that included a lightweight overseas version printed on Bible tissue paper, the dynamic duo behind the Zephyrus Image Press also produced press passes, letterhead, business cards and other miscellaneous ephemera to make the paper seem as true to its mythology as possible. Copies are extremely rare, both in special collections libraries and among rare book dealers. Few would know anything about it if not for a bibliography by Alastair Johnston, who writes:

To my mind, the paper is so full of in-jokes and self-indulgence that it doesn't hold up. The form is amazing, but the content is rather opaque. When I expressed this to Raworth, he replied: 'One of the things that made that period work for me, and probably the reason *Bean News* doesn't wear well (and after all, these things were meant to be ephemeral) for you now, was that total feeling of open mind (with Ed, Holbrook and Michael) . . . there needed to be not even the minutest break between thought and language . . . and even beyond language; gesture . . . a finger movement would communicate. It certainly moves things along.'

Now that I teach typography at the university I feel that I must reconcile my incongruous affinity for mimeo culture. I spend my days scolding students and preaching the golden rules of legibility while secretly waiting to go home to read my decaying, illegible, “dirty magazines.” Why should I condemn aspiring graphic designers for making the same mistakes I not only condone, but celebrate in mimeo magazines?

Making clear distinctions between: art and craft; craft and design; and design and art has never been easy, and the standardization of the personal computer in the home and office over the last two decades has made these distinctions even more complex—but why define? Look up ‘D.I.Y.’ in Wikipedia, and you will find the following warning at the head of the page: ‘This article or section does not adequately cite its references or sources.’ Sites like this are forums for direct democratic meaning-making free from the scrutiny of the ‘experts’ responsible for manufacturing ‘authoritative’ sources. The Oxford English Dictionary defines D.I.Y. as: “The action or practice of doing work of any kind by oneself, esp. one’s own household repairs and maintenance.” Simple enough, but not entirely satisfying. This speaks to the post-war era when people canned their own food, fixed their own engines, and darned their socks. These skills and values are, as they say, a thing of the past.

Before Stewart Brand became *the* Stewart Brand, the young counter-cultural figure rented a state-of-the-art IBM typewriter to create issue number one of *The Whole Earth Catalog* in 1968. It was subtitled: Access to Tools. The Catalog was designed to enable independent thinkers and back-to-the-landers to lessen their dependence on conventional modes of passive consumption. For better or worse, the personal computer and Internet have given almost everyone the opportunity to perform the tasks of a publisher with (and more often without) the professional credentials that would have been necessary for publishers of the first half of the twentieth-century.

In closing, I would like to return to Glazier’s claim that the literary fine press has more in common with the mimeo revolution than the private press tradition if only to get at the state of DIY publishing today. Due in no small part to desktop publish-

Daily World Bean Special, produced by Zephyrus Image. September, 1975. Image courtesy of the Poetry Collection, UB.

ing software, the transformation from consumer literacy to producer literacy has become irrevocably blurred. The word 'design' once implied that a product was ultra-hip: designer jeans, designer teapots, and even designer drugs were all the rage. In Yuppie-times, The Sharper Image was where it was at—but although 'design' still summons notions of slick sports cars, sleek interior decorating, and seductive websites, the mimeo revolution was not about shopping, decorating or perpetuating the myth that our world has been designed by professionals endowed with specialized tools, skills, and knowledge. D.I.Y. is about making decisions and asking questions about who we are, what we do, and how we live, because writing, like printing, is both a thing and an activity.