

KOHN GALLERY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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WALLACE BERMAN American Aleph

Opening Reception: May 6, 2016
Exhibition on view through June 25, 2016



Los Angeles, California – Kohn Gallery is pleased to present *Wallace Berman: American Aleph*, the artist's first comprehensive Los Angeles retrospective in almost four decades. Commemorating the 40th anniversary of Berman's accidental death at age 50, the exhibition surveys the entire *oeuvre* of this seminal American artist from the late 1940s to 1976. Berman has been long heralded as one of the most significant and influential artists to emerge in Southern California. Spiritually inclined, yet steeped in popular culture and the political events of the day, he conducted reconnaissance far beyond the borders of Southern California, mining the American psyche and broadcasting his ideas through mysterious letters, publications, and multi-

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layered art works. Curated by Claudia Bohn-Spector and Sam Mellon, *American Aleph* seeks to recast Berman as an American rather than a strictly Californian artist, whose importance far transcends the regional context in which he is traditionally seen. The title refers to Berman's use of the Hebrew letter Aleph, a recurring motif that appears in works made throughout his career.

Wallace Berman's illustrious background in the art world began in 1957, with his first Los Angeles solo show at Ferus Gallery, owned by Ed Kienholz and Walter Hopps. Many famous Pop artists made their West Coast debuts there, such as Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein. Expanding his appeal abroad, Berman was part of a group exhibition in London at the Robert Fraser Gallery in 1966, where other artists in the gallery's roster included Richard Hamilton, Bruce Conner and Peter Blake. Famously, Blake put Berman's face among the notable crowd in his Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* album cover, attesting to his far-reaching creative influence beyond the borders of the United States. Berman's works are included in some of the world's most prestigious art museums including Centre Pompidou, Paris; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Tate Gallery, London; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; MOCA, Los Angeles; LACMA, SFMOMA, and the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington DC.

"We are very excited by the rare opportunity to show Berman's work, and to reevaluate it in the context of American art and culture during the 1950s, 60s and early 70s," says curator Sam Mellon. Through an interdisciplinary display of original art works, ephemera and videos the exhibition captures the spirit of irreverence and innovation that permeated this important era in modern art. Co-curator Claudia Bohn-Spector notes: "Our exhibition hopes to show that Berman was a transitional figure, who deftly blended the art of the European avant-garde with native vernacular traditions, like jazz and folklore, and his own hybrid version of American and Jewish mysticism." As interest in West Coast art has increased over the past 40 years, scholars have consistently viewed Berman as a quintessentially Californian artist, whose entourage of like-minded friends was essential to the formation of his creative vision. At once the prophetic and charismatic progenitor of "Semina Culture," Berman has long been considered a mostly

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regional player, due in part to his own disinterest in critical fortunes and his secluded, decidedly underground position in Los Angeles. “Wallace never physically traveled the world,” says the artist’s son, Tosh Berman. “Yet his ears and eyes always looked outside his workspace and he appeared to pick up vibrations from the other corners of the world.” More recently in 2009 Richard Prince helped organize an exhibition of his paintings and sculpture along with works by Wallace Berman, whose work Prince collects for his personal collection. This exhibition shows that today Berman’s art deserves a bigger stage, proposing that his *oeuvre* is best appreciated not only in the context of his immediate circle, but in direct comparison to some of the leading American and European artists of his day.

Accompanying the exhibition will be an illustrated catalogue designed by Lorraine Wild of Green Dragon Studio and featuring essays by Bohn-Spector, Mellon, Kenneth Allen (University of Seattle, WA), with an introduction by Tosh Berman, reassessing Berman’s significant contributions to the history of 20th century American art.

About Wallace Berman

Wallace Berman (1926-1976) was born in Staten Island, NY and came to Los Angeles when he was four years old. Essentially self-taught, he briefly attended Jepson Art Institute and Chouinard Art Institute, leaving both without a degree. In 1955, after immersing himself the L.A. jazz and Beat scenes, he founded the small but influential mail art publication *Semina* – a brilliant, loose-leaf compilation of the most advanced artists and poets of his time, including William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, and Jess (Collins). During the 1960s and early 1970s his home and studio in Topanga, CA, were a meeting place for musicians, artists and actors, from Brian Jones of the Rolling Stones to Dennis Hopper. Today, Berman is best known for his Verifax collages, sepia-colored photo-based works created with a forerunner of the photocopy machine. Influenced by Dada, surrealism, and assemblage, while keenly aware of contemporary artists like Robert Rauschenberg, John Cage, and Andy Warhol, Berman produced multi-

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layered works that combined the picture of a hand-held transistor radio with images culled from newspapers and popular magazines.

About Kohn Gallery

Since its establishment in 1985 by former Flash Art editor Michael Kohn, Kohn Gallery has presented historically significant exhibitions in Los Angeles alongside exciting contemporary exhibitions, creating meaningful contexts to establish links to the greater art historical continuum. Significant exhibitions include Andy Warhol's Campbell's Soup Boxes in December 1986, which opened just weeks before the artist's untimely death; She: Works by Richard Prince and Wallace Berman which brought together—for the first time—two generations of leading artists from different coasts; Bruce Conner: Work from the 1970s, which inspired the artist's first solo retrospective in Europe at the Kunsthalle Wien and Kunsthalle Zurich (2010). Exhibitions of important New York-based artists have included new works by Christopher Wool, Richard Tuttle, Mark Tansey, Kenny Scharf, and Keith Haring. Kohn Gallery represents important West Coast artists with long careers and rich histories such as Larry Bell, Joe Goode and Lita Albuquerque, as well as the Estates of Bruce Conner, Wallace Berman, John Altoon and Charles Brittin. Finally, Kohn Gallery boasts an exciting roster of emerging and mid-career artists including Ryan McGinness, Rosa Loy, Dennis Hollingsworth, Mark Ryden, Tom LaDuke and Troika. Visit kohngallery.com for the latest information on upcoming exhibitions.

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