

BEAT—SPONTANEOUS GENERATION

By Judicaël Lavrador – June 26, 2016 at 5:11 pm

At the Centre Pompidou, an invigorating dive into the artistic blossoming that spread rapidly in all directions after its launch in the mid-40s by Burroughs, Ginsberg and Kerouac.

[Image]

Untitled (Primrose Path), 1965, by Brion Gysin and William S. Burroughs. Photo: Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

At the Centre Pompidou, the roll of tracing paper on which Kerouac typed *On the Road* stretches its full length, flowing onto the floor of the exhibition. The “Beat Generation” retrospective will keep this initial promise, unfolding the many layers that constitute its subject, the works, techniques, mediums, and personalities, both the stars and the supporting cast.

Who is Beat, and who is not? By what criteria is the selection made? The show’s staging, which comprises open space and recessed alcoves, gives a preliminary answer. There is, in

this regard, no *a priori* Beat aesthetic, as there may have been, in the same period, in the 1940s–50s, with the Abstract Expressionist school. The Beats were a band of friends with fuzzy and porous outlines, varying in shape, with people coming and going, traveling a lot. The exhibition, too, is organized around geographic areas more than by theme (drugs, Buddhism, jazz, spiritual quest, political involvement, liberation from convention, the prankster...). In the end, these themes are closely intertwined throughout.

The movement's birth dates to the meeting of Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs on the Columbia University campus in the winter of 1943, and then, from the connections this strong core of intellectuals, once settled in Manhattan, established with "*the underworld*," as Barry Miles writes in the catalogue, "*a world at the sidelines of bourgeois normalcy*," as exemplified by a certain Herbert Huncke, "*a homosexual prostitute and thief*." The guy, flat broke, complains with these words: "*I'm beaten down*." He is discouraged, burnt out: this is where the term "*lost generation*" would come from, which is also colored by the staccato beats of jazz and an aspiration to bliss.

Puritanical context

At the exhibition, many films and photographs document a destitute, postwar New York, with a population in distress—figures of poor people, survivors, to which the sputtering and graying texture of the images lends a spectral yet beautiful appearance. A concern about the future seeps into these works: the Beat Generation does not lull itself with not caring; it is full of concerns. The theme of the Apocalypse in the form of the atomic mushroom appears in several pieces (notably *Doomshow*, by Wisniewski), even motivating Bruce Conner to go into exile in Mexico in 1962 to "*wait out the nuclear holocaust safely*," as one reads in his film *Looking for Mushrooms*, where the artist documented in a series of syncopated takes, saturated with gooey colors and a mesmerizing soundtrack, his search for hallucinogenic mushrooms in the company of an expert, Timothy Leary, principal promoter of LSD. The historical context of a McCarthyist and segregationist, homophobic and puritanical America weighed on the hearts of these young people, and this led, certainly, to the production of works by taking to the air and the road (notably, the series "*Americans*" made in 1951 by Robert Frank), but also, more surprisingly, to the production of indoor works. *Pull My Daisy*, co-directed in 1959 by the same Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie, thus

takes as its set location, closed-off, the studio of the latter. A cheerful crowd flocks there, coming and going among the jazzmen, while in a voiceover, Kerouac delivers his impromptu comments. At the other end of the exhibition, it is another enclosed space that is reproduced: the room occupied by Brion Gysin, at the Beat Hotel, hideout of the band in the early '50s, a third-class establishment run by a motherly Mrs. Rachou, at 9, rue Git-le-Coeur, toward Saint-Michel (Paris V^e). This is where the *Dreamachine*, a bricolage of a slit lampshade, a yellow lightbulb and a turntable, issued its first hypnotic rays.

[Image]

Entrance [/ Exit], by William S. Burroughs, 1988. Photo by A. Mole, courtesy of Semiose Gallery, Paris

Created with urgency

The Beat works emerge from an art of bricolage, which tackles the material — sound, text or plastic — by becoming familiar with *“modern reproductive techniques,”* explains Philippe-Alain Michaud, co-curator with Jean-Jacques Lebel. *“So they use the record player, the turntable, the tape recorder (the recorder, then the tape), all the artisanal printing systems, mechanical printers, the camera and the photography apparatus.”* For many of the machines (on display at the entrance of the show), they do not exactly follow the instructions. Besides Kerouac, who makes his typewriter spit out a continuous roll, Burroughs makes his device play in a loop, even surprising himself, taking photos of the photos he has taken, that he cuts out and reworks, until these images stutter and no longer seem anything more than an intoxicated series of coarse and spontaneous manipulations. This is what ties these works together: a way of letting go, of drive, of felt urgency, a method of creation. One that does not involve pushing straight ahead: there are a thousand setbacks, hesitations, hiccups. The Beats start like clockwork but go through a thousand detours. A zigzagging path that is

heard in the numerous soundtracks of poems chanted in an inimitable rhythm, a mixture of held and released breaths. Allen Ruppersberg's fluorescent *Singing Posters*, which covers two walls, tries to transcribe the text of the poem *Howl*, written by Allen Ginsberg, with the musicality of the author's reading in 1955, in a small gallery in San Francisco.

Free electrons

Obsessively revisiting words and shapes: one rediscovers this "addiction" with one of the few women of the show, Jay DeFeo (who died in 1989). An artist who has acquired a cult following because of a very special masterpiece, *The Rose*, a painting that weighs a ton and contains starlike petals, where one mainly perceives the stubborn persistence of the artist getting down to work by stacking layers of paint, for eight years, from 1958 to 1966, until it is no longer possible to get this work, monumental and mind-blowing, out of the studio without breaking the walls. Jay DeFeo — whose paintings and abstract drawings, fragmented forms with thick surfaces, are currently on display at the Galerie Frank Elbaz — crossed paths with the Beats where she lived, in San Francisco, not far from the famous bookstore City Lights, owned by Lawrence Ferlinghetti. But she remained a free electron... like many others from that generation. In fact, like most of them, including Burroughs, whose paintings from the 1980s are hanging in the Semiose Gallery: wooden planks, on which the author of *Naked Lunch* spray-painted (in the manner of his new friends, Basquiat and Warhol), faces of aliens, with big eyes and hydrocephalic heads, before shooting them with a shotgun. Hit, perforated, going outside the lines, these paintings from the 1980s by one of the pioneers of the Beat Generation, late works in relation to the timeline of the retrospective at the Centre Pompidou (approximately 1943–1969), remind us that the Beats are an ageless generation who never gave up on creating purposeful blows to society and art.

Read: "Pull My Daisy," ed. Macula, 20 €. Also: "Beat Generation" in the magazine "Mettray," September 2016, € 15.

Beat Generation Centre Pompidou, 75004. Until October 3rd. Info: centrepompidou.fr

Jay DeFeo Frank Elbaz Gallery, 75003, until July 30. Info: galeriefrankelbaz.com

William S. Burroughs Semiose Gallery, 75003. Until July 23. Info: semiose.fr