Inside and Around the 6 Gallery

with Co-Founder Deborah Remington

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As the site where Allen Ginsberg introduced "Howl" to the world on what the record most reliably says is Oct. 7, 1955, the 6 Gallery resonates for many as sacred ground, something akin to Henry David Thoreau's gravesite in Concord, Massachusetts, or Edgar Allen Poe's dorm room at the University of Virginia, or Willa Cather's clapboard home in Red Cloud, Nebraska. Those who travel today to the site at 3119 Filmore in San Francisco find an upscale furniture boutique called Liv Furniture (Photos below courtesy of Tony Trigilio).

Nonetheless, we imagine the 6 as it might have been, a vision derived primarily through our reading of *The Dharma Bums* by Jack Kerouac and "Poetry at The 6" by Michael McClure.

Continuing the recovery work related to women associated with the Beat Generation that I began about ten years ago with Ronna Johnson of Tufts University, I've long

wanted to seek out a perspective on the 6 Gallery that has been not been integrated into our history of the institution: That of Deborah Remington, a co-founder – and the only woman co-founder—of the gallery. Her name appears in a cursory manner in descriptions of the 6, but little else to give her substance and significance.

As sometimes happens, the path I took to find Remington was not conventional. In fact, she figuratively fell into my lap. Allison Schmidt, a professor of education at The College of Wooster where I teach, happens to be her cousin, something I didn't know until Schmidt contacted me about two years ago and told me that Remington might be interested in talking with me as part of a family oral history project. I couldn't pass up that invitation, so after e-mailing Remington I found myself a few months later in her loft on West Broadway in New York City, talking about the San Francisco Beat movement and her life as a highly successful painter (Photo at left of Remington from her Web site).

Remington was born in 1935 in Haddonfield, New Jersey. She's the grandniece of the painter Frederick Remington, so she inherited a distinguished painterly pedigree. When Remington was a young girl, she and her mother moved to Pasadena, California, where she attended high school with Wally Hedrick, John Ryan, Hayward King, and David Simpson – all of whom went on to attend the San Francisco Art Institute, and, with the poet Jack Spicer who taught at the Institute, to found the 6 Gallery. While in high school, the group experimented with many art forms, including abstraction, collage, and even

light machines, Remington recalling that "[w]e were teaching each other and supporting each other. We were always trying to marry the arts. We didn't know what we were doing," she admitted, "but that didn't matter!" (Interview #1)

When they moved on to the Art Institute (then the California Institute of Art), they found fertile ground. Art critic Dore Ashton describes the Institute as "one of the few postwar art schools in which a spirit of rebellion infused both teachers and students. A sophisticated, energetic director, Douglas MacAgy, had set out to make a totally new kind of art school on the West Coast. It would gather artists from both coasts into a kind of community in which avant-garde attitudes would be played out in the classroom" (17). The "spirit of rebellion" that MacAgy propogated directed the Institute toward what Wally Hedrick perceived as "the ultimate art school where . . . [t]here would be no degrees, no lecture classes, probably only painting, sculpture, and drawing" (*Oral History*). While the school's board of trustess eventually rejected MacAgy's vision, the atmosphere at the Institute provided a blending of disciplines and perspectives for students like Remington: "We had a lot of poets," she recalled, "but they were there ostensibly to paint. We just thought, well, you're a poet, but a lot of the poets painted and a lot of painters wrote poetry" (Interview #1).

Primarily an abstract expressionist in college, Remington's work reflects what historian Paul Schimmel calls "the particular California orientation toward super saturated colors that have a luminescent, ethereal and vibrant quality. . . Remington went on to develop highly personal, visually charged painting containing some of the concerns of spiritual art" (9). Remington, as well as her critics, credits her travels in the late fifties throughout the Far East, including Japan, Cambodia, and Nepal, with propelling her art

along these lines. After she graduated from the Art Institute in 1955 (see photo below)[2], she traveled extensively throughout the Far East, a decision fostered by the fact that she grew up with a mother who collected Japanese prints, that she was studying Japanese with a female Japanese student at the Institute, and that she and Gary Snyder had many conversations at The Place about travel to Japan: "We'd talk about this stuff endlessly," she remembered. "It was really interesting" (Interview #2). Snyder spent the years 1955-1958 in Japan; Remington traveled to Asia a year later but says she never saw Snyder during her travels.

Initially, she lived with a Japanese family with whom she learned to read and write Japanese. Jobs as a cook and actress help her pay her way as she studied traditional Japanese and Chinese painting and calligraphy. Learning to speak the language in conjunction with studying calligraphy significantly influenced her work: "I have such a love of drawing, and [calligraphy] really inculcated a sense of black and white and gray, so drawing doesn't have to have color for me. The Japanese would always say, 'Can't you see the color there in the black and white?' It's implied, and if you're a really good artist and if the paintings are wonderful enough and if they really sing, then the viewer

gets a sense of color. That influenced my work a lot, mostly the philosophy of calligraphy" (Interview #2). Likening it to haiku, which creates meaning through the juxtaposition of disparate elements, she noted that the process "makes the mind think": "You have to figure out if X is opposing Y, then what is the juxtaposition that might be unstated?", she explained (Interview #2).

From Japan, she traveled to Cambodia and Nepal, and when she returned to the United Stated in 1959, her art had become, in Schimmel's words, a "highly personal, visually charged painting containing some of the concerns of spiritual art, manifested in highly emblematic, shield-shaped forms" (9). Since then, she has made her living as an artist, taking great pride in never having a full-time job other than painting.

Anathema 1952

Memphis 1969

While Remington gladly discussed her art with me, she appeared especially concerned about setting the record straight. Memory, of course, can be misleading, so we need to understand that any narrative being told, especial personal reminisces such as Remington's, is a subjective and practiced script, not intentionally deceptive but rather a

construct that becomes more concretized as it's told and retold. Despite this caveat, and perhaps because of it, in many respects, her story of the 6 Gallery affirms key elements that have made their way into literary history, such as the fact that (1) the space had been an old garage previously housing the King Ubu Gallery, operated by and the poet Robert Duncan and his partner the artist Jess Collins, and (2) on the night that Allen Ginsberg read "Howl," Kenneth Rexroth introduced the event and a collection was taking up for wine. With respect to Ginsberg's performance of "Howl," she said that when Ginsberg performed the poem "[w]e were overwhelmed that this thing was so accurate and so *poetically* accurate, that somebody could actually put into words everything that we were doing and thinking and being and trying to create. It was an astonishing feat" (Interview #1). She also remembers Snyder reading but has no memory of performances by Michael McClure, Philip Lamantia, and Philip Whalen.

Some of her memories, however, extend or modify the standard accounts of the 6. For instance, she explained that they started the 6 because they, along with their teachers at the Institute, needed some place to show their work. She also claims that prior to the Oct. 7 reading of "Howl," she and others had heard Ginsberg read portions of the poem "three or four times" at Blabbermouth Night at The Place, run by Leo Krekorian and Knute Styles, "because he wasn't really confident about the work" (Interview #1). About her fellow co-founders, Remington remembered that the painter Hayward King, the only African-American in the group, would repeatedly lose what she called "posh" jobs, not because of his race but because his employers would learn that he was gay. With respect to gender, she maintains that she experienced no sexism since the men in the group

respected her as an artist, a position not inconsistent with the way some Beat women have interpreted their experiences.

Remington was also adamant about clarifying that the name of the gallery is often misrepresented in print. It is not the word "six," but rather the numeral "6." When I asked why, she told me this story: "We sat there one afternoon in the beginning before we opened—from about 3 o'clock to 6 o'clock, all of us thinking what are we going to name this place. We went through name after name. Finally David Simpson had to get to work. . . because he had a job pumping gas at a gas station. (Well, I guess most of us had dumb jobs.) So we had to wrap it up. And I remember—I remember this as clearly as if it were yesterday—just out of desperation, I said, 'Listen, there's six of us. Let's call it the 6 Gallery.' And fine, okay, goodbye. So that's what we did!" (Interview #1).

She noted as well that the gallery was a cooperative, each member contributing a small of amount of money each month toward expenses; the treasurer was Beverly Pabst of the Pabst beer manufacturing family. Group members collaboratively decided whose work should be shown, based on whether they thought it was "interesting and serious and had a kind of spark to it" (Interview #2). To the best of her recollection, the gallery was open Wednesday through Saturday, during the afternoons and evenings. Wally Hedrick assumed the primary role of director, and Remington became secretary/treasurer. In that role, she was responsible for publicity, but the idea of calling a reporter terrified her, so she sent event and exhibition announcements on little white penny postcards. To save them money, Hayward King would surreptitiously mimeograph the postcards at the Institute where he had a part-time job. The gallery closed in 1957, Remington recalled,

because others, such as the East and West Gallery and the Spotsa Gallery with whom they were friendly, had appeared on the scene, lessening the need for the cooperative.

While details such as these are interesting and historically significant, perhaps more important are the ways in which Remington's stories reveal how Beat artists depended upon those in positions of socially accepted authority to negotiate for them a path that ironically nullified Beat art as dangerous. Remington didn't state this explicitly but rather implicitly through casual remarks about the art critic Alfred Frankenstein who wrote for the San Francisco Chronicle. Remington recalled that she sent Frankenstein post cards announcing events at the 6, and in response he took an early interest in the gallery. In fact, columnists H. R. Hagan and Herb Caen, who created the term "beatnik," also periodically publicized the 6. Even the group's pre-opening event on Sept. 26, 1954, at Aquatic Park, made a Caen column, in which he breezily described a booth "sponsored by six peopled interested in art, music, poetry, integrity and other worthwhile things." Remington says that they never saw Caen at that event, but he wrote that he observed them listening to poetry accompanied by polytonal music, which Remington identified as a recording of Spicer reading his poetry.

It was also a column by Frankenstein that legitimized the grand opening of the gallery on Halloween, Oct. 31, 1954. "No self-respecting art community," he announced in the Nov. 17 issue of the Chronicle, "is ever complete without a small, informal gallery run by the artists themselves and dedicated to emerging talents and experimental ideas . . . . The latest. . . known simply as 6 . . . proposes to exhibit, perform, and sell poetry, to present new combinations of poetry with music and painting, and most extraordinary of all, 'to make poetry pay. It predicts that it will 'make grievous errors in taste and grievous

errors in tone but will never be dull.'" He concluded that "[w]hat I saw was neither grievous in taste nor grievous in tone, but it was not too incredibly exciting." He was also amazed that the gallery was actually open when it announced that it would be.

Fifteen painters were included in the opening, along with Spicer's poetry, which was juxtaposed with various visual works that appeared to mime Chinese calligraphy. Of that, Frankenstein spoke somewhat disparagingly: "The poetry displayed is by Jack Spicer, and while it is outside my province, it struck me as notably skillful and very rich in content, but the visual comments whereon which hung next to the manuscripts were almost uniformly feeble, not to say embarrassing. The Chinese know how to combine poetry and pictures . . . but that sort of thing seems forced and even sentimental when attempted within the framework of our tradition." (Below: Jack Ryan at the opening of the 6).

John Allen Ryan at "6", 1954.

On Jan. 22, 1955, Frankenstein made a point of writing about the young artists' commitment to pushing boundaries:

> In a statement posted on the walls of the 6 Gallery, the group …
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> commits itself to exhibiting not only successes and matured

> achievements but half steps, blunders and fumblings by the way. This emphasis on process. . . is displayed in an extreme form in the 6 Gallery's current show. . . The spontaneous, unpremeditated action is always revealing, but a planned program of spontaneity can be a little wearisome, and when Manuel Neri fixes a pair of overalls to a canvas and covers it with a film of paint, one thinks of nothing so much as the song about Mrs. Murphy's chowder. . . . The whole thing is both fascinating and a little appalling as a workshop demonstration, but there are a few things in it that transcend the workshop.

Remington did not recall Neri's experiment but did state that the attention to process was probably a one-time event at the 6 (*Interview #2*).

In effect, then, by integrating the gallery project into the greater narrative of artistic processes and art communities, Frankenstein affirmed and encouraged the experimental work being done at the 6, but also blunted some of the iconoclastic edge that the young artists sought. Oh, they were hip—"distinctly on the experimental fringe of the local art world," as Hagan described them (Feb. 11, 1955), but not hip enough that they threatened anyone.

No article mentioned the Oct. 7, 1955, poetry event, but interestingly, in the weeks immediately preceding, the Chronicle ran a series of articles, columns, and letters to the editor that in introspect underscore what Remington most wanted to communicate to me: that is, the direct connection between Beat art and repressive cold war culture: "This was the time of the Rosenbergs and the [Estes] Kefauver hearings, the Hollywood

blacklisting. It was horrible. The police were everywhere, and it was kind of a fascist country. This was the climate within which and against which we were working. We were trying to break all the rules. It didn't matter: you just broke the rules. You rarely got anything substantial out of it, but by hit and miss we did" (Interview #1). She punctuated her point by critiquing the recent exhibition titled *Semina Culture: Wallace Burman and his Circle* by Stephen Fredman et al. The actor Dennis Hopper was part of the circle, as well as an acquaintance of Remington's, and she told me how disappointed she'd been when she'd heard Hopper interviewed about the exhibit in front of a student audience at NYU: "He never mentioned the political thing, the whole basis of it. The students would ask questions afterward: What was all this about? What was it all predicated on? Why were you people so rebellious? He never got into it. And neither did the *Semina* exhibitors" (Interview #1)[1].

Despite Alfred Frankenstein's coded message that the underground can be tactfully managed with relative ease, the times could be hostile toward certain kinds of art, which were often conflated with communism and homosexuality and characterized as dangerously deviant. Some artists openly rebelled and suffered direct political and legal retaliation. Even Remington's group considered themselves "reds" (although not "too red," according to Hedrick) and in the late forties were investigated by a government subcommittee for calling themselves the "Progressive Art Workers," a communistic variation on the Work Progress Administration. Fortunately, they quickly revealed themselves as non-threatening, and Hedrick was later able to laugh about it (*Oral History*). To the best of my knowledge, the visual artists who showed at the 6 were equally fortunate during its lifespan. Ironically, however, it was the Russian émigré and

San Francisco muralist Victor Arnautoff, not a Beat subterranean but a Diego Rivera disciple, who was not. His transgression, played out in the San Francisco Chronicle and other national media, became a part of the immediate political background against which Remington's 6 Gallery hosted Ginsberg, which opened the door to the public censoring of "Howl."

In the fall of 1955, Arnautoff entered a small color lithograph titled "Dick McSmear" in the San Francisco Art Festival (See photo below). The lithograph shows the then-vice president Richard M. Nixon as a black-masked hoodlum. In one hand, he's carrying a brush daubed in red and a bucket labeled SMEAR. In the other hand, he's carrying a pumpkin. The Smear refers to the charge that Nixon had used Communist subversion issues unfairly against his enemies, and the pumpkin refers to the Alger Hiss case, during which Whittaker Chambers had concealed evidence against Hiss in a pumpkin on his farm – the famous Pumpkin Papers.

In September, Harold Zellenbach, president of the San Francisco Art Commission, ordered that the cartoon be removed on the grounds that it was offensive and shouldn't be supported with public monies. Whatever we may now think of Nixon, here's what the ACLU reported that year regarding Nixon's response:

> Mr. Nixon immediately telegraphed the San Francisco officials. He said that most Americans probably approve of the work he did in the Alger Hiss case but that the artist had 'the right to express a contrary opinion . . . and the people should not be denied the right to see or hear his expression of that opinion.' He further observed that [since] the artist was on the teaching staff of [a major university] his views on any subject have particular significance.' Nixon understood the view of the Commission that partisan political cartoons might not have their proper forum in a public exposition at public cost, but felt that in this instance the public should have 'full opportunity' to see the work. (Keogh 74-75)

In response to Nixon's defense of freedom of expression, in a Sept. 21 column, Frankenstein wrote that "Nixon has reaffirmed a basic American principle which one is very happy to see underlined; [but] . . . It is an invitation to all left-wingers in the Bay Region to swamp the next Art Festival with their propaganda, and it is difficult to imagine their not taking advantage of it."

As one can imagine, Arnautoff felt compelled to rebut, and in early October they battled back and forth on the issue, with Frankenstein getting in the last word: that is, Arnautoff's political art constituted a waste of time and was far inferior to "his distinguished [public] achievements at George Washington High School, The Presidio Chapel, and Coit Tower" (Below: "City Life" in the Coit Tower).

What strikes me as significant about this event is that Frankenstein's support of the 6 Gallery artists fundamentally aligned them with his preferred "non-political" art, art that by its very existence as sometimes workshop sloppy yet sometimes technically transcendental remained an essential non-threatening component of a healthy citizenry because it fit his definition of fine art. It also fit theirs, or at least Remington's, who while she did not recall the Arnautoff controversy dismissed it as inconsequential: "I don't think it would have been too interesting for us because it was caricatures, something that really wasn't in the fines arts area. With the poetry and the painting and everything else, we were all very serious. So when someone does a caricature it's almost like a comic book thing" (Interview #2). Remington hypothesized that they would have thought the controversy funny, nothing more, and she aligned herself with Frankenstein in his attempts to reconnect Arnautoff with what she called "something meaningful on the serious side" (Interview #2). In effect, then, apparently much of what the 6 Gallery artists were doing, born of righteous opposition to serious threats to civil liberties, was not so much about righting the political scene—"Dick McSmear" addressed that concern—but rather about invigorating the arts community itself, which they consciously courted—and which accepted them from day one as partners.

The 6 Gallery artists no doubt believed that everything they were doing was rebelliously experimental, but little of it affected Frankenstein's (and their) hegemonic art community the way Arnautoff's cartoon did. It would take Allen Ginsberg to do that indirectly on behalf of the Beat painters, when two years later Lawrence Ferlighetti was tried on obscenity charges for publishing "Howl."

Notes

1. Remington was right about this: The exhibition catalogue for this otherwise extremely impressive collection does not address the political contexts of the times. Neither does the Natsoulas/Novelozo Press exhibition catalogue *Lyrical Vision*, the only text that I've found that attempts a historical documentation of the 6 Gallery.

2.This photo is from *Lyrical Vision: The 6 Gallery 1954-1957*. The photograph of Dick McSmear is from *This is Nixon* by James Keogh.

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