

The un-Beatable ruth weiss

AHIS 325 S002 – Presented to Art Perry

by Marion Landry

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The Art History course on the Beat Aesthetic offered by Art Perry at Emily Carr University of Art and Design has generated strong interests in me that could only be appeased through complementary research. As the course developed I grew more curious about the women of the Beat generation, which, were rarely talked about and badly represented, in the patriarchal society of the 60s. Early in my research process I stumbled on the work of ruth weiss, a German born poet, performer, playwright and artist, often associated with the Beat Generation. Fond of weiss's work, I related to her life story and connected with her poems. However, to my surprise neither of the required books for the class — written by Ann Charters, a Professor of American literature and highly respected for her focus on the Beat writers — mentioned weiss' work. Charters is the editor of numerous volumes on Beat generation and 1960s American literature including the required readings for the class, *The Portable Beat Reader* and *The Portable Sixties Reader* which I have focused my attention on for this argument. In this essay, I will try to explore the possible reasons for Charters' exclusion of the innovations and influences of ruth weiss on the Beat Generation. My research allowed for a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by literary women of that generation while drawing parallels with the life and work of weiss. My desire is to understand what one needs to be recognized as "Beat" and, as such to receive the support of an important scholar such as Ann Charters.

My first experience with Beat writings was the book titled *Last Exit To Brooklyn* by Hubert Selby Jr, which was the third required reading for the class. Although I had a hard time adjusting to the unconventional writing style which ignores most of the conventions of grammar, I devoured the book quickly. The authenticity of the characters and the crude style in which their stories are exposed offered a good canvas, which helped me contextualize the harsh conditions of the marginalized society after the Second World War in America. Uncensored and direct, the tone of the novel reads as if a friend is telling you the story. The subjects, unspoken in the 50s, touch on topics such as transgenerness, prostitution, drug filled parties, criminals, alcoholism, and homosexuality. Even if some of the topics are less shocking today than they must have been then, I sometimes had to put the book down in order to digest its content. The fierceness in which Selby delivers the stories was a new experience for me and served as a great introduction to the style shared by other Beat writers.

Shortly after, I started to read the other two required books by Ann Charters. The first book was Charters' anthology *The Portable Beat Reader*. It exposes, through the writings of what she views as "the best minds of that generation", the guiding ideologies of "new consciousness" and countercultural phenomena of the Beat Generation. Through her definition I was able to understand that the writers aspired towards a lifestyle that rejected conformity and focused on the value of individual experience. The writers believed in the literature of the common man and often wrote whatever they thought in a rapid, manic stream of consciousness. As mentioned by Charters in her introduction to the book, the Beat writers exposed the life of the forgotten ones when she states that, "They became the spokesmen for people rejected by the mainstream, whether drug addicts, homosexuals, the emotionally disposed, or the mentally ill." (Charters, 4) With their bohemian lifestyle, rebellious actions against society, as well as radical political views, the Beat writers attempted to redefine themselves after the depression of the Second World War. They valued fresh perspectives on life and felt the careful structuring of earlier writings was an aberration of the truth. Drug use was rampant among the writers and used as a way to find unique new perspectives. In the midst of a cultural revolution, the movement was about openness and freedom of speech. Their writings were often viewed as obscene and consequently banished. In the second book, *The Portable Sixties Reader*, Charters offers background information about the political unrest and radical experiments of the sixties. A clearer understanding of the 60's helps to provide context and appreciation for the need of such drastic exploration from the Beat writers. In this book Charters includes a broader selection of essays and poetry that relates to or inspired the Beat writers.

As I became more accustomed with the writings of Ginsberg, Kerouac, Burroughs, Cassady, Ferlinghetti and Snyder, I started to notice the distorted patriarchal views towards women. The predominantly male voices accounting for male experience with tales of testosterone and frivolity left me wondering about the woman's perspective. This gender imbalance, which reinforced the patriarchal notions of women's inferiority, started to affect my objectivity towards the movement. I started to be interested to knowing how the women dealt with such men, how they broke away from the patriarchal paradigm, while also living similar radical lifestyles. I was becoming quite aware that the Beat Generation was in fact a specific "clique" of white men writers that was a lot less

inclusive then their aspirations of “openness” claimed to be. In the introduction of *The Portable Beat Reader*, Charters makes an allusion to the general status of the women writers when she states that “Reflecting the sexism of the times, the women mostly stayed on the side-lines as girlfriends and wives.” (Charters, xxxiii) Surprisingly, I had to navigate to part four of *The Portable Beat reader* before I could find the first woman writer. Listed in the book are some of the most known writers such as Diane diPrima, Brenda Frazer, Anne Waldman, Carolyn Cassady, Joyce Johnson, Hettie Jones and Jan Kerouac. It was within the writings of diPrima that I found the most commonality in terms of a radical writing style based on bohemian and “outside the norm” life choices. However, I had a hard time connecting with the antagonizing tone of diPrima. So I read a Carolyn Cassady excerpt from her book “Off The Road” in which she relates her memoirs of her life with Beat writer Neal Cassady. I found myself bothered though by the role of “victim” she played in her relationship with Neal. I certainly enjoyed and shared her admiration for his creative mind, but I couldn’t understand why she accepted to be constantly hurt by his unfaithfulness. To me, it was strange that she admired his radical lifestyle and yet expected him to fulfill her need for the typical family unit. Radical for her time, she didn’t conform to the expectations for a woman in the 50s before meeting with Neal. She lived on her own and sustained herself while getting a University degree. But, after meeting Neal, she found herself unable to walk away from him and instead got stuck in a role of a female at the mercy of a man. Joyce Johnson provides some explanation of the complicated paradigm women faced in her interview with Ann Charters published in the book *Beat Down to Your Soul* when she states that

“I think what a lot of younger women don’t understand is that at that time, in the late fifties, it was an enormous thing for a young woman who wasn’t married to leave home, support herself, have her own apartment, have a sex life. This was before the pill, when having sex was like Russian roulette, really. It wasn’t the moment *then* to try to transform relationships with men. Just to get your foot out the door into the world as an independent person was just such an enormous thing.” (Johnson, 629)

Consequently I found it interesting that these women fought hard for their independence and yet found themselves in the very situation they had rebelled against. In the introduction of *The Portable Beat Reader*, Charters mentions how limited the amount of

writing women could really do when she states that “The writing of the exceptional Diane DiPrima flourished, but most women living with or married to the Beats, took care of the children, worked to support the family, and did little writing, mostly memoirs years later. “ (Charters, xxxiii) Somehow I was disappointed with Charters statement and refused to think that that was it for women of the time. I wanted to believe that women were also capable of pushing boundaries and were audacious enough to talk about subjects never explored before. I gather they also engaged in new ways of thinking and writing, and disrupted notions of female passivity and conformity. I was thirsty for unconventional stories from women and felt the need to expand and find further writings.

A brief research leads me to the writings of ruth weiss. According to other authors such as Brenda Knight, Nancy M. Grace and Ronna C. Johnson, I found out that weiss is considered to be a Beat writer. Sometimes referred to as a Jazz Poet or the ‘Goddess of Beat’, she is known to perform her poems in the company of Jazz musicians. Upon finding more about the life and writings of ruth weiss, I started to wonder why she had not been part of extensive list of writers cited in Charters’ anthology. Was weiss not considered part of the Beat writers from Charters’ point of view? How could she fail to mention weiss when weiss’ life and work is intertwined with the writers included in Charters’ books? One of the references I used was the book *Breaking the Rule of Cool* by Nancy M. Grace and Ronna C. Johnson. The book is based on interviews and writings from women of the Beat Generation. According to the authors – who divided this movement in three generations of writers – ruth weiss leads the way. Furthermore, the authors also consider Ann Charters to be part of the third generation of Beat writers. This book is not the only one to recognize the influence of both women on the Beat generation. For another example, Ann Charters wrote the afterword in the book *Women of the Beat Generation* by Brenda Knight. In that book, Ruth weiss is respectfully referred to as ‘one of our ‘finest living poets’ by Knight. In order to write the afterword, Charters would certainly have to read the chapter on weiss, which to me, confirms that she is intentionally chose not to talk about weiss’s work in both of her books.

A closer look at weiss' life story can help understand why other authors see her as an instrumental part, and to some, an innovator in the Beat movement. In 1948, weiss lived in one of Chicago's art circles occupied by writers and painters. One night she was unexpectedly invited to read her poem at a gathering where Jazz musicians were playing. To her surprise, when she started reading, the musicians continued on playing. The blending of jazz and poetry was a catalytic moment for weiss, and in many ways the beginning of her journey. In 1952 she hitchhiked across the country from Chicago to San Francisco and landed in North Beach, where her last ride told her "This is where you belong." North Beach would later become known as the West Coast Centre of the Beat Generation. First, she found a room for rent at 1010 and subsequently 1014 Montgomery, the same building where Ginsberg wrote part of *HOWL* three years later. It is during that time, before the explosion of the Beat Generation in 1956, that she hangs with the likes of Kerouac and Cassady. She developed a friendship with Kerouac based on their discussions about new writing styles, such as stream of consciousness. Together, they also practiced writing haiku, a Japanese style of poem which, according to Kerouac, weiss excels. She also develops a friendship—which she cherished until his passing in 2005—with surrealist poet Philip Lamantia. Interestingly, he refused to be attached to the Beat movement. Lamantia was however invited to read his poem during the famous night at Six Gallery on October 7, 1955, with weiss present in the crowd but not included in the list of poets. Then, through a series of jobs in the North Beach area, she started to perform her poems at various events and in the neighborhood streets. When her close friend opened The Cellar she was asked to organized poetry reading every Wednesday night and did so for the next two years. However, it was only after she left that The Cellar would become known for his innovative live poetry readings when the male Beat writers entered the scene. In her interview with Nancy Grace in *Breaking the Rules of Cool*, she recalls the event as the following:

"I did poetry and jazz. I did this for months, and then I started inviting other poets. I did this for about two years of so. Then one day I needed to leave the city, so I went to Big Sur. Well, it was only after that that some of the other well-know poets, whose names I'm not going to mention because everyone knows them, ended up doing the same thing. Only they were very smart. They recorded them and got records out of it. So

nobody knows that I did this, innovate jazz and poetry in San Francisco in 1956 at The Cellar.” (weiss, 71)

During that period weiss contributed a number of poems to the now legendary literary magazine *Beatitude* edited by Bob Kaufman. It was distributed in mimeographed copies and served as a platform to some of the better and less known writers of the scene. Nevertheless, she struggled to get a book published after Lawrence Ferlinghetti – who founded City Lights Booksellers and published Ginsberg’s *HOWL* in 1956 – bluntly refused to publish her work because of the simple fact that she was a woman. She remembers the event in the same interview as the following,

“When it came right down to it, we were not invited into the center of things, just the periphery.... No, we don’t publish any women. Ferlinghetti said to me. ... But I also knew a lot of male poets, quite wonderful, who were also not acknowledge because they were not in the center of things. So it wasn’t only women. Some of these men made it a very cliquish situation. (weiss, 73)

Post-War America was built upon conformist ideals, particularly regarding women’s roles in society. Therefore, for those women with desires of a literary career, the gateway was very narrow, and weiss definitely suffered from the same challenges of her generation. She not only fought the same battles of freedom shared amongst the Beats, she also had to fight the patriarchal society who denied her access to equal opportunities. Finally, in 1959 she published her first Book titled *Gallery of women* honoring female poets she admired. Another great opportunity came in 1960 when she was asked by artist Paul Beattie to turn her poems into a movie script. She accepted with great fervor, and *THE BRINK*, a black and white movie was released in 1961. However, according to weiss, it was only in 1977 that she published what she refers to as her “masterpiece”, a book titled *DESERT JOURNAL*. It is upon reading and watching ruth weiss performing excerpts from her *DESERT JOURNAL* collection of poems that I fell in love with her work.

The first time I heard weiss perform was in a YouTube video where she read excerpts of DESERT JOURNAL in New Orleans on April 5, 2012 with the Poet of New Orleans Brass Band and Hal Davis. I was immediately charmed by the poem as I felt it offered what I was looking for: First hand experience of a woman Beat poet living on the fringes of society and not conforming to the expectations of a patriarchal society. Her poem was fresh, free, and for once, not about her intimate relationship with a known Beat writer, but her own independent lifestyle. I agree with the description offered by Nancy M Grace in her review of DESERT JOURNAL (published in the *Encyclopedia of Beat Literature*) when she states:

“The characteristic that most distinctly renders her work “Beat” is her use of a spontaneous method of free association akin to Tristan Tzara’s Dadaism, William Butler Yeats’s automatism, jazz improvisation, and Buddhist intuition. She also believes deeply in the collaborative nature of artistic production, and many of her readings are performances involving collaboration with jazz and other musicians and the audience members themselves.” (Grace, 60)

Weiss has a free attitude towards life filled with an untouchable optimism that allows her to thrive with or without accolades. In the YouTube video performance of her poem DESERT JOURNAL, the opening line is “How many times have I told you to put your illusion away.” The word illusion might refer to drugs, it can refer to dreams, or perhaps signifies unachievable goals for a woman of her time. However, it is immediately followed by “do not fear to fall”, which is empowering. For me, she suggests that, perhaps, even if she doesn’t receive praise, she believes in her art and continues on writing. Her optimism gives her the strength to persevere even if she is scared. As she mentions in her poem, she has nothing to lose. This rebellious ideal is one of the core beliefs of the Beat Generation. Ann Charters mentions in her anthology *The Portable Beat reader* that Beat writers often dreamed of unrealistic goals when she quotes Barry Miles saying that “... this awareness of “everybody lost in a dream world of their own making ... was the basis of the Beat Generation.” (Charters xix) Weiss’ poem continues with “do you believe even when there is nothing left to believe in”, which is, again, loaded with the feelings of loss and exasperation of the Beat generation. Nevertheless,

she follows immediately with “never but why not” which demonstrates her open-minded attitude, another core belief shared by Beat writers. However, at one point in the reading she offers a sentence that might reveal why she stayed in the background for so long. The line says: “avoid to not be avoided”. Fully aware of the challenge of being a woman in a patriarchal society, she chooses to stay in the background by avoiding rather than pushing her way through. Weiss is asked to expand about her experience as a female poet in the 1950s in an interview by Lourde Acevedo for the online blog *Her Circle Ezine* on October 24, 2011. The following quote by Acevedo helps to understand weiss’ views:

“I asked ruth what it was like to be a female poet in the 1950s; I asked if she felt that she was a part of the artistic circles completely, or if she felt that there was more of a camaraderie between the male artists. She said that she felt that way only among the poets that she was “left in the background.” She did not feel that way with the musicians. The poetry circles were quite closed; there was a very close-knit ‘clique’ and inner circle (including Jack Kerouac, Ferlinghetti, Ginsberg and others). I asked her point blank if she felt that she was left in the background in good part because she was a woman. “Absolutely,” she said, with emphasis. But she added that there were very good male poets as well that were left out of the inner circle of the poets.”

What I respect the most about weiss’ answers is her ability to be respectful and consider others that were also excluded from the ‘clique’ while not making herself a victim of a patriarchal society. She doesn’t let people or situations beat her down; she acknowledges the struggle and continues on. To me, that is the essence of the Beat Generation in itself. Instead of conforming to the expectations of the male ‘clique’, she turns around and creates her own. She hangs out with musicians and artists that enhance her creativity rather than put her down. She creates her own circle and her own events, which is totally outside the norm, especially for a woman. She definitely disrupts the notions of female passivity and conformity. She challenges conventions and most likely rebelled against more limitations than the men ever did. She arguably might have a lot more guts than any of her male counterparts. For those reasons, one must agree with her reasons to initially dissociate with the Beat writers either in style or by conventions. In her interview in the book *Breaking the Rule of Cool* she explains how she came to

accept the “Beat” nomination and embrace it later on in her career when she states, “If somebody had said Beat, I would say no, no, I am not a Beat, you know, I am not Beat. But, you see, it has come to turn around –it has come to mean an alternative approach to life away from the materialism that exploded after World War II. “(weiss, 59) She at first strongly rebelled against the Beat or any labels, which ironically made her “Beat”.

Her poems recall her own personal experience, explore streams of consciousness, tell stories of the bohemian lifestyle, and are filled with marginalized ideas – all which align to the writings of the Beat Generation. However, they are not down-and-out; they are not filled with rage and fierce opinion toward an unfair society. Perhaps this is the main reason why Charters does not recognize her as “Beat”. Conceivably weiss might be lacking the spirit of being “Beaten- down” as experienced by Kerouac. Rather she stands on the opposite side and believes in synchronicity. She doesn’t allow herself to be beaten up and finds positive outcomes in what could be viewed by others as a negative occurrence. In an interview hosted by Soroptimist International of Novato, Fredda Kaplan asked her if she had suggestions for young female writers. Weiss suggests, “Timing is everything. Don’t follow anybody else’s advice.” In her book *Can’t Stop The Beat* she makes a dedication that sums up her views on life when she states “This book is dedicated to all the travelers who trust the bend in the road.” When Fredda Kaplan asked her to elaborate on this, weiss elegantly answers by explaining that nothings happen for no reason and that timing is everything. I myself strongly believe in synchronicity and my life is full of such examples to support my perspective. For those reasons, I connect strongly with weiss and can easily relate to her writings.

As a result, I find it difficult to find reasons why Charters chooses not to talk about the life and writings of weiss in either *The Portable Beat Reader* or *The Portable Sixties Reader*. Though I can find certain justification for this in her anthology due to the fact that it is a collection of literary works chosen by the compiler. In her interviews in the book *Breaking the Rules of Cool*, Charters is dismissive of Denise Levertov’s writings when she states, “I thought she was very interesting, but I never felt that she was as passionately engaged, emotionally engaged. No, I was interested, but she ultimately bored me.” (Charters, 222) In light of such comments, it is possible that Charters didn’t enjoy the writings of weiss and chose not to incorporate her in her anthology. However,

even if she clearly did not enjoy Levetov's writings, she still includes her in *The Portable Sixties Reader*. Surprisingly, weiss is still left out of the long list of writers who she feels influenced the 60s. Perhaps the fact that weiss was never involved intimately with Kerouac or any of the Beat writers made her less news-worthy or valid for memoirs relating her experience with these men.

Another obstacle weiss faced was that she never became one of Allen Ginsberg's friends. As a matter of fact, she recalls his attitude during her two encounters with him as being 'rude' and 'dismissive'. When reading more about Ginsberg's views of the female Beat writers, I am actually surprised that for a man who claims to be open minded, his perception of the female is right out of patriarchal thinking. During Joyce Johnson's interview in *Breaking the Rule of Cool* she shares her experience with Ginsberg's views when she states that "...Allen Ginsberg assumed that a women writer really worth developing would have been nurtured in the group. As he has suggested, the "strong woman writer who could hold her own" should have been able to shoulder her way into the group." (Ronna C. Johnson, 6) Ginsberg is widely acclaimed and respected in helping a lot of writers within his group to be published and recognized. But by dismissing equal opportunity for women in his "clique" of writers he only perpetuated the already existing inequality in society for women. I found that Charters also perpetuated this in her failure to recognize weiss as an important influence for the Beat generation. Charters was also close friends with Ginsberg and his "clique" perhaps that gave her a certain subjectiveness as to who was considered "in". Perhaps, in order to be accepted in the core of the group, she first had to align with their views. I am guessing that not having Ginsberg on weiss' side must have been an added obstacle to her gaining recognition. Possibly, at the core of her belief, weiss just didn't care about the fame all-together. That attitude is shared amongst other writers of the Beat movement. Gregory Corso is often quote as saying that he enjoyed staying in the background rather than being in the spotlight; however, he received the support from both Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti at City Lights book store which published his writings. Without the support of both Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti – who refused to publish weiss – her opportunities were severely limited. In addition, Charters expresses her love of the Beat style of writing for the romantic optimism when, in her interview in *Breaking the Rules of Cool* she states,

“I like Kerouac’s books and the work of others in the counterculture group of the literary Underground because I responded to what they were writing in an immediate, personal way. Trained as an academic, theoretically I should have been doing research on Establishment writers.... I respected them as artists because I shared their Romantic optimism and their political commitment, their nagging feeling that long ago something in America, as the dancer Merce Cunningham once expressed it to me, had gotten off on the wrong foot” (Charters, 16)

There is certainly no lack of Romantic optimism in weiss’s work; however, Charters’ respect for her work is absent. It is surprising that a female scholar – who thrives in a male dominated environment and most likely understands the challenges that comes with it – would choose to avoid a woman who speaks the same language she admires in the male subjects of her work.

To conclude, I can’t confirm whether or not Charters continues on denying the influence of weiss in all of her subsequent publications. Nor can I fully understand the reasons why Charters doesn’t recognize her as an influential writer of the 60’s. What I know is that weiss opened the door and gave hope to the women of her time by being an example and demonstrated throughout her life that it is possible to break the rules. I am disappointed Charters doesn’t acknowledge this. Weiss’ life is a testament to what Charters claims to be ‘Beat’; a lifestyle that rejects conformity and focuses on the value of the individual experience. Weiss has redefined herself and continues to value fresh perspectives that keep her current, even today. She is only starting to receive the attention she deserves. In 1996, her movie *The Brink* was screened at The Whitney Museum of American Art during the exhibit *Beat Culture and the New America, 1950 – 1965*, as well as at the Venice Biennale Film Festival. In 2005, she was also nominated for Nobel Peace Prize, a testament to her achievement. In her interview in the book *Breaking the Rules of Cool*, she demonstrates her positive attitude towards her past when she states,

“What happened back then is all part of now. It just reverberates and reverberates like a pebble tossed into a pond... just keeps going on in

waves. This dot on the planet – no façade, nothing fancy, no frills was an exciting vortex – this wonderful mix of street people, of wanderers from high and low places. They brought their real selves there. They could not help but be real there as true poetry is real. “ (weiss 78)

She speaks of authenticity as someone who has experienced it deeply. She did exactly what any Beat writer would have done; She became the spokesperson for the people rejected by the mainstream, and she was rejected herself. She broke more rules than many of her male counterparts, and had more guts to continue on in a patriarchal world that was systematically working against her – even in radical poetic circles. She was patient enough to wait for her time to come, as she didn't care for fame, but rather sought only true and simple authenticity.

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