

GREY ART NYU GALLERY

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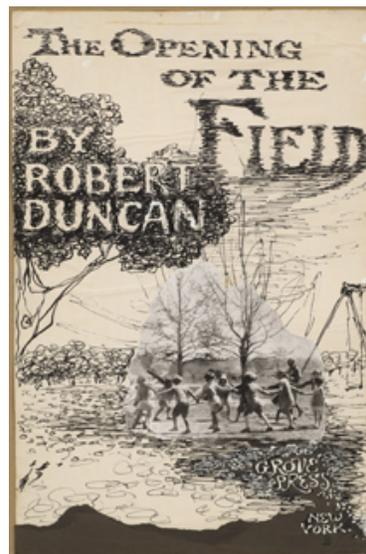
An Opening of the Field: Jess, Robert Duncan, and Their Circle
at the Grey Art Gallery on Washington Square
January 14–March 29, 2014

**NYU's Grey Art Gallery Throws the Spotlight on One of the Twentieth Century's
Most Innovative Artistic Partnerships**

Experience the Revolutionary Spirit of the Bay Area at the Birth of Postmodernism

New York City (October 23, 2013)—Artist Jess (1923–2004) and poet Robert Duncan (1919–1988) number among the most fascinating artistic couples of the twentieth century. After meeting in San Francisco in 1950, they created a domestic life together based on mutual intellectual and aesthetic interests that resulted in an array of fascinating artworks and writings. From January 14 to March 29, 2014, **New York University's Grey Art Gallery** presents the first overview to showcase their rich artistic production alongside works by their remarkable circle of friends. *An Opening of the Field: Jess, Robert Duncan, and Their Circle* derives its title from one of Duncan's key books and features approximately 130 artworks—many of which have never before been shown in public—as well as numerous documents, books, and intimate ephemera. Figuring prominently are a rich cross-section of Jess's paintings and collages, Duncan's colorful abstract drawings, and approximately 85 works by members of their coterie. Organized by independent curators **Michael Duncan** and **Christopher Wagstaff** for Sacramento's Crocker Art Museum, *An Opening of the Field* reveals the complex interplay between poetry and art in the mid-century Bay Area cultural scene.

In his art, Jess, a progenitor of postmodernism, retrieved images from a culture overflowing with them. Trained at the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute), he quickly shifted from abstraction into a unique style of painting that reflected his interests in literature and mythology. In his collages—or, as he called them, “paste-ups”—he created mind-bending and fantastic juxtapositions, employing images lifted



Jess, *The Opening of the Field*, 1960
Ink drawing with collage. The Jess
Collins Trust

from sources ranging from Dick Tracy to Albrecht Dürer. Jess filtered these far-flung references through a self-described Romantic sensibility, one that valued the transformative power of the imagination above all else.



Robert Duncan, *Untitled*, 1947
Wax crayon on paper. The Poetry
Collection of the University
Libraries, University at Buffalo,
The State University of New York

Known as one of the most erudite poets of his time and likewise fascinated with myths, Robert Duncan appreciated all forms of poetic imagination. He was a voracious reader of everything from Paracelsus to L. Frank Baum, and published over forty volumes. His method, inspired by Ezra Pound, combines motifs and themes from diverse sources. Although not widely known, Duncan's crayon drawings and set designs provide a fascinating backdrop to his writing. Recalling works by Picasso, Matisse, and Cocteau, Duncan's colorful abstract compositions confirm his belief in the protean nature of form. Like Jess, Duncan believed in metamorphosis as a guiding beacon.

At their Victorian house in the Mission District and their cottage at nearby Stinson Beach, Jess and Duncan established domestic spaces that fostered creativity and inspired a generation of Bay Area artists and poets. The couple filled all four floors of their rambling San Francisco abode with libraries—Oz books and fairy-tale editions in the bedroom, French literature and an exhaustive modernist collection upstairs. All remaining walls were covered with visionary art by friends such as Helen Adam, Wallace Berman, Edward Corbett, Norris Embry, George Herms, and R. B. Kitaj. Many works in the show were once in the couple's personal collection.

“Their Victorian home,” notes the show's co-curator, critic Michael Duncan, “embodied an artistic philosophy shaped by two complementary sensibilities bent on revitalizing and re-inhabiting culture at large. The alternative aesthetic that Duncan and Jess espoused, and their symbiotic relationship and the cultural view it generated, are evidenced through their work and that of their immediate friends and colleagues.” Co-curator Christopher Wagstaff, an editor, writer, and friend of the couple, observes: “Jess's collages and drawings were often published to accompany Duncan's writing, acting as springboards or counterpoints for specific poems and essays. Duncan's poems and ideas in turn permeated the complex imagery of Jess's sensitive works.”

In his collage *On the VIIIth Wave* (1979), Jess draws from arcane Celtic mythology and contemporary culture to produce a crest of sensual images that reference science and folklore. In *The Enamored Mage: Translation #6* (1965), he alludes to Duncan's interest in hermetic and mystical thought, collaging Duncan's portrait in the company of his esoterica. An untitled crayon drawing of 1947 by Duncan radiates with color and energy, in bright hues that spiral, coil, and intrigue.

To varying degrees, the visual artists and poets who were intimates in their circle shared a penchant for romanticism, myth, and play. Helen Adam's *Where are the Snows* (c. 1957–59), juxtaposing a glamorous woman with fluffy kittens in a lakeland setting, echoes the humor and

audacity of Jess's early collages. Lyn Brown Brockway, another longtime associate and friend, displays unabashed lyricism in *Breakfast in a Paris Lodging* (1951); this pioneer of figurative painting in the Bay Area was unrivaled in her use of bright, Fauve-like, and hallucinatory colors in her depiction of cafés, striped rugs, trees reflected in water, spring flowers, dark trees, and domestic scenes. In assemblages of found objects and richly weathered discards, the visionary George Herms sought to reinterpret and reinvigorate the past, accruing new connotations for detritus, as exemplified in the tongue-in-cheek *Donuts for Duncan* (1989). Norris Embry's *Untitled (Woman sitting at a table)* (1951), reveals his passion for oil crayons, which he shared with Robert Duncan. This medium traditionally used by children granted freedom from the confines of "sophisticated art." The associations Duncan and Jess built over time often resulted in notable collaborations; long-time friend R. B. Kitaj drew pictures of Duncan the sage, reading and writing, for the latter's limited edition collection of poetry, *A Paris Visit* (New York: Grenfell Press, 1985).

Also featured are vanguard films by James Broughton and Lawrence Jordan. Other works demonstrate the circle's broader reaches, including collages and drawings by the poets Robin Blaser, Michael McClure, and Jack Spicer. The exhibition also includes a group of posters Jess made in the late 1950s and early '60s for Berkeley's Cinema Guild and Studio, which was run by the young Pauline Kael.

"As a university museum, we are always eager to showcase innovative exhibition strategies. By concentrating on the work and influence of one couple and the amazing artistic domestic environments they created, this show offers a fresh way to understand artworks in context," notes **Lynn Gumpert**, director of the Grey Art Gallery. "Likewise, with their wide array of friends and associates—including artists, poets, writers, filmmakers—Jess and Duncan's relationship also opens up an alternative vantage point from which to appreciate the dynamism of the mid-century San Francisco cultural scene."

Indeed, by focusing on the artistic production and relationship between the artist Jess, his partner poet Robert Duncan, and their remarkable circle of friends, this exhibition presents imaginative works that catalyzed an entire generation of poets and artists. For the most part, these figures operated outside the marketplace, making lyrical, intimate, and humorous works for their own edification and enjoyment. Their works in this exhibition collectively demonstrate both the heritage and the legacy of Jess and Duncan's radical experimentation. Focusing on the rich intellectual and mythopoetic worlds spun by Jess and Duncan, *An Opening of the Field* features art with a refreshingly different set of values from mainstream art fare and spotlights a key moment in the birth of postmodernism.

Exhibition catalogue:

An Opening of the Field: Jess, Robert Duncan, and Their Circle is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue with over 260 illustrations and essays exploring the life and work of Robert Duncan and Jess, and the artistic milieu they fostered. Michael Duncan's introductory essay "An Opening of the Field: Jess, Robert Duncan, and Their Circle" peers into the world of myth and art they created. In "This Here Other World": The Art of Robert Duncan and Jess," Christopher Wagstaff explores the relationship between the sacred and the everyday in their work. William Breazeale's "Paste-ups by Jess: A Reading in the Labyrinth" is a close reading of the forms and

meanings in one of Jess's complex layered works, and "Poetry as Primary Community: Duncan, Spicer, Blaser, McClure, Olson, Levertov, and Creeley," by James Maynard, examines the network of overlapping communities that formed around Duncan and Jess, in which some of the most important poetry of the second half of the twentieth century took shape. Published by Pomegranate, the catalogue also includes selections from interviews with Jess, a photo album of some of the artists' lives, and an exhibition checklist.

Exhibition tour:

An Opening of the Field: Jess, Robert Duncan, and Their Circle will travel to the Katzen Arts Center at American University and the Pasadena Museum of California Art.

Sponsorship:

An Opening of the Field: Jess, Robert Duncan, and Their Circle was organized by the Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, California. The presentation at the Grey Art Gallery is made possible by the generous support of Francis H. Williams, the Jess Collins Trust, and Tibor de Nagy Gallery; the Grey's Director's Circle, Inter/National Council, and Friends; and the Abby Weed Grey Trust.

About the Grey Art Gallery:

The Grey Art Gallery is New York University's fine-arts museum, located on historic Washington Square Park in New York City's Greenwich Village. It offers the NYU community and the general public a dynamic roster of engaging and thought-provoking exhibitions, all of them enriched by public programs. With its emphasis on experimentation and interpretation, and its focus on exploring art in its historical, cultural, and social contexts, the Grey serves as a museum-laboratory for the exploration of art's environments.

Exhibitions organized by the Grey have encompassed all the visual arts: painting, sculpture, drawing and printmaking, photography, architecture and decorative arts, video, film, and performance. In addition to producing its own exhibitions, which often travel to other venues in the United States and abroad, the Gallery hosts traveling shows that might otherwise not be seen in New York and produces scholarly publications that are distributed worldwide.

General Information:

Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 100 Washington Square East, New York, NY 10003
Tel: 212/998-6780, Fax: 212/995-4024
E-mail: greyartgallery@nyu.edu
Web site: <http://www.nyu.edu/greyart>

Hours:

Tuesday, Thursday, Friday: 11 am–6 pm
OPEN LATE Wednesday: 11 am–8 pm
Saturday: 11 am–5 pm
Sunday, Monday, and major holidays: Closed

Admission: Suggested donation: \$3; NYU students, faculty, and staff: free of charge