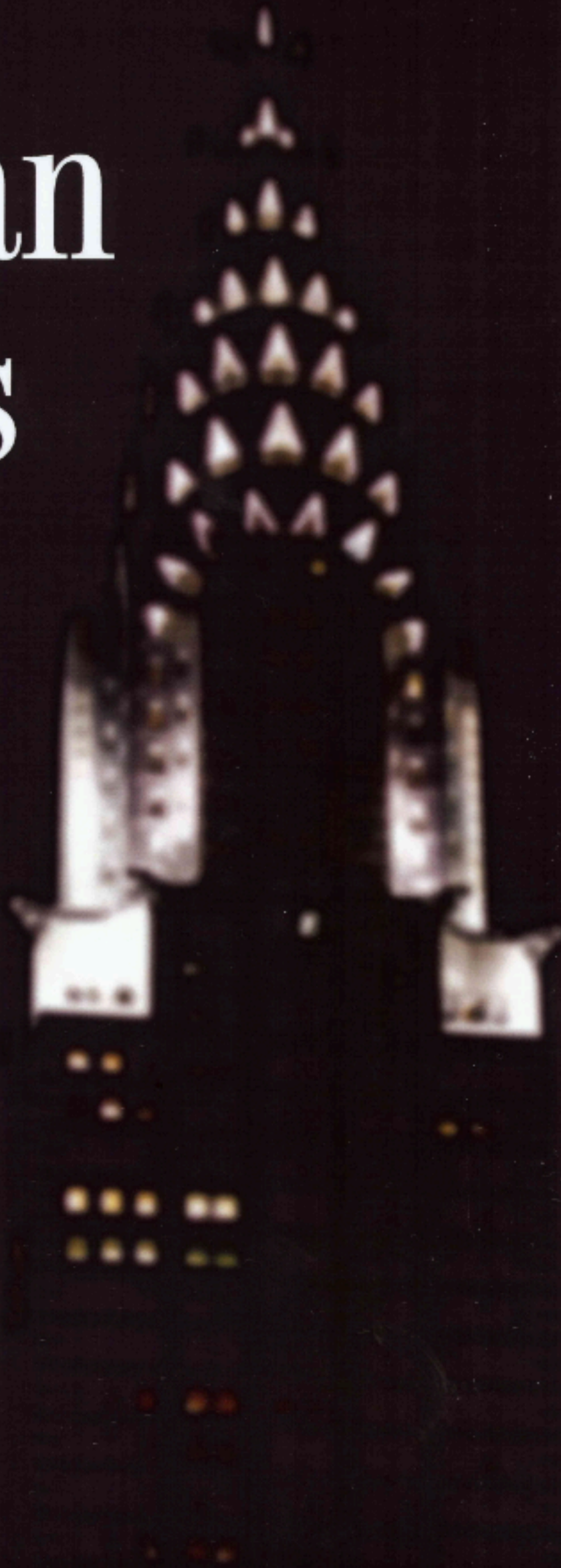


Manhattan Memories

an autobiography

by John Wilcock



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DURING WHAT WAS to be my last year as a *Voice* columnist I met an attractive lady named **Sherry Needham** and before leaving for Europe dallied with her just long enough to plan a four-picture 'story' for my column in one of those 25c photo booths. Before my return, however, she got involved with **Walter Bowart**, an East Village artist, who was planning a new kind of paper, the *East Village Other*. He had been in New York only a short time, the consequence of tossing a coin back home in Oklahoma to determine whether to begin his new life in the East or the West.

Warily, he agreed to attend the 'photo shoot' we had planned before I went away. This consisted of Sherry holding a French Legionnaire's hat in front of her chest for the first three pictures and replacing it on her head for the fourth—thus revealing a shapely, bare breast. "The Singing Tit-O-Gram" was the title it bore when it ran in that week's column. In return, I agreed to write a (free) weekly column for the fledgling *EVO*, devoting my first Other Scenes column to one of my favorite themes: the subject of artist forgery.

THERE'S AN AGE-OLD precedent for forgery in the art world, the best-known practitioner probably being the eccentric Dutch art dealer **Hans Van Meegeren** whose specialty was painting fake Vermeers atop 17th century canvases, one of which he sold to **Hermann Goering**. His emulation of *The Last Supper* fetched \$7.5 million. Van Meegeren created at least a dozen originals in the style of earlier Dutch masters which predictably caused near-panic in art business circles.



A former FBI art forgery expert, Joseph Chapman, once estimated that half of the modern paintings sold in the U.S. each year were not painted by the artists whose names they bore. As for Europe, he said, faking Utrillos was France's fourth largest export industry. Who could possibly estimate how many of the 'masterpieces' in the world's top museums were actually fakes—despite the assurances of 'experts'?

Thomas Hoving asserted that in the decade and a half he spent as director of New York's Metropolitan Museum, he probably examined 50,000 works of art. "Fully 40 per cent" he later wrote, "were either phonies or so hypocritically restored or so misattributed that they were just the same as forgeries". And **Picasso**, asked once how he could remember the details of his voluminous output, explained: "If I like it, I say it's mine; if not, I say it's a fake".

Forgery, in fact, is one of the art world's ever-sustaining stories and I presume there have been more than a few books and films about it. The prime subject, I suppose, would be the loveable old rogue who chooses to reproduce one dollar bills rather than twenties—art for art's sake, you might say, especially as nobody likes to get stuck with a dud twenty (although most people I know wouldn't hesitate to pass it along if they thought they could get away with it).

And if you're writing for the underground press, as I now was, there's a whole other configuration to be assumed: the radical actions of artists against the state. *Resist Authority* in whatever way is timeless.

Every government, despite its hypocritical posturing, is in the forgery business: copying currency, passports etc. for its spies and fake documents to undermine enemies. In WWII, the Germans planned to flood Britain with millions of fake ration books; the British were paying off suspected double agents with phony money and in prison camps everywhere there were no scruples about reproducing any kind of document that would help in escapes.

But if some of these former prisoners apply their copying skills back home, listen to the outraged cries! We're warned that it's immoral and criminal to make for yourself a document when nobody will issue it; to trade with your own money; to use Mexican pesos in slot machines or slugs in parking meters and to use stamps of your own design on your letters.

Because of their importance as Establishment symbols, such things as stamps, banknotes and currency have always been a target for artists: forgeries to make a point rather than a profit. The old artist paradox of resenting the way art is evaluated by \$\$\$ rather than aesthetics while simultaneously watching the way their prices rise, can still be found today in the inevitable era of Damien and Koons.

ANYWAY, THE BEST PART of the art forgery scam came into my view later when, as a publisher, I ran across the astonishing work of J.S. Boggs some of whose fine work I was later able to publish.

J(ames) S(tephen) G(eorge) Boggs uses only Kohn-I-Noor pens, colors, and his skills, to duplicate currency all over the world. He never tries to pretend they're the real thing and thus has achieved the ultimate irony of producing bills so "real" that they became collector's items and sell for more than their face value. He's created £10 notes in England, 100-franc bills in France and Switzerland, Deutsche marks in Germany, whatever happens to be called for.

His method is simple, entering a café or other public space and, on the spot, sitting and copying a banknote in exact detail. Then, he offers the waitress the phony bill to pay for his meal, and carefully packages in a take-out baggie the change, the check and details of the transaction. This he takes to his Swiss art dealer, **Rudi Demenga**, who on the radio offers to pay ten times the face value of the note for any Boggs originals. More than one coffee shop waitress who accepted a hand-drawn tip, found her faith rewarded with a \$500 profit. One Swiss taxi driver who volunteered to drive the artist from Basle to Zurich—a \$700 journey—was repaid with a unique (non-existent) 30-franc created especially for him.

By the time **Lawrence Wechsler** wrote about him in an 1988 *New Yorker*, Boggs had completed 700 transactions of this nature and the gallery was maintaining a waiting list for his work which often brought thousands of dollars.

"Part of my work", Boggs explained, "is to get people to look at bills closely—the detailing, the conception, the technique. This brings art directly into daily life, achieves something I've wanted for years. I think artists throughout history have desired to reach the man in the street without compromising their art. I've found a way of reaching people who don't go to galleries and museums".



A fake bill by J.S.G. Boggs

ONE OF MY EARLIEST FRIENDS in New York was a charming fellow named **Hugh Paulk** who came to most of my parties where he captivated everyone with his insouciant manner and friendly smile.

Starting as a door-to-door bible salesman in Maryland, Hugh had acted as an advance man for a carnival, saw service as a naval officer and produced the first jazz concert in the Symphony Hall at Boston where he settled into a mail order business. His first big success came with his purchase of tens of thousands of surplus parachutes in Kansas City. Material was scarce after WWII, and women used the parachutes to make curtains, bedspreads, and many other things, including wedding dresses.

I met him soon after his move to New York when he adapted my Surprise Club (readers of my columns were sent off items such as Hong Kong lottery tickets) into a commercial enterprise. "You won't know what you are going to get" his ads ran, "You won't know when you are going to get it, and sometimes you won't know what to do with it when you get it."

One item was a set of twelve Fake Book Jackets with such titles as:

FUNERALS CAN BE FUN! by Mort Tition

PREGNANCY, ITS CAUSE AND CURE by Justin Case

SIX SURE WAYS TO TELL A VIRGIN AND WHAT TO TELL HER

As well as the one shown below. This brought him an invitation to Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show*. For a couple of years, Hugh's partner in the mail order business was Ed Downe, later owner of the *Ladies Home Journal*, *Family Weekly*, etc, and many TV stations, and he developed other products with partners who died before they could be brought to fruition. Now semi-retired, he lives in Florida and is writing books.

AND SO, TO BACKTRACK, here I am writing *Art & Other Scenes* for Walter's new paper, in my waning days as a *Voice* columnist. Two days after *Other Scenes* appears I am summoned before **Ed Fancher** and **Dan Wolf**. They demand that I abandon *EVO* or forfeit my *Voice* column. Other *Voice* contributors were writing for numerous publications but *EVO* presumably seemed a dangerous rival. Iconoclastic radicalism vs. namby pamby liberalism. A new era had dawned which the *Voice* clearly did not appreciate.

Canned after ten years and 500 columns, I moved into the grubby storefront on Avenue A in the East Village from which the next nine issues of *EVO* emerged bearing a masthead proclaiming—Walter's little joke—"Editors: *William Randolph Hearst & John Wilcock*".

Walter and I were good for each other, at least professionally, because as an artist his preference was for white space over text whereas my writerly preferences were always for cramming in as many words as possible. Naturally we ended up compromising, which taught me more about layout and possibly increased his editorial skills. (Years later when we met he was the unlikely editor of *Palm Springs Life*).

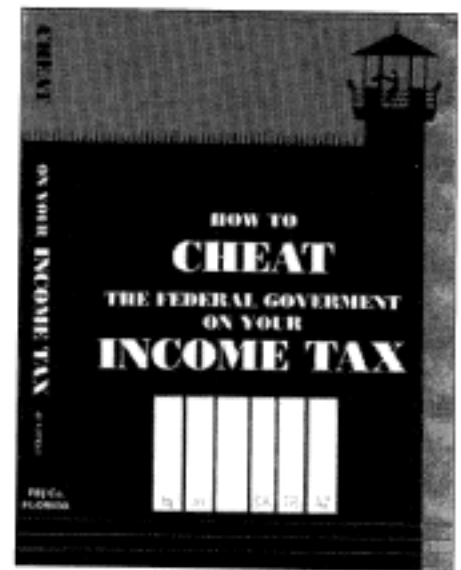
At any rate, before we take leave of the subject of forgery, which is how this chapter began, I hope I've been able to emphasize how important a weapon it is for the powerless, lingering as it does in the twilight zone between crime and antisocial behavior, a place where anarchy is acceptable in the guise of art: a battle ground on which the individual can always fight a biased system.

In the mid-Sixties most of the world's youthful protest movement coalesced around two major issues—the Vietnam War and marihuana. Revolution was in the air and **Walter Bowart** was finely attuned to the changing mood. He devoted an issue to the plight of America's Indians at a time when it was just about the last thing on anybody's mind, and then turned his attention to broader themes. **Black Power** was the headline that filled *EVO*'s front page, reporting a speech by **Stokeley Carmichael**. It was the first time I became aware of that particular phrase. The Streets Belong to the People....The Music *is* the Revolution....Support the Smoke-In.... were among our hectoring admonitions. Ending the war and legalizing dope were the twin aims of the emerging new society and our discussions in the *EVO* office centered around how to focus some of this discontent. We had run some eye-catching covers including mug shots and fingerprints of "America's Most Wanted", a mock poster featuring **Tim Leary**, **Allen Ginsberg** and **Ralph Ginzburg** whose aesthetically beautiful *Eros* magazine was causing fury among American puritans.

My editorial formula was Pot, Art, Religion, Politics, Sex, Sociology, Revolution and Humor and every issue I tried to have each category represented, not necessarily in separate stories. A picture story about the short-lived trend for transparent bras, for example, might cover—oh dear!—a couple of different aspects.

One afternoon I sat at the typewriter pecking out the manifesto that Walter, *EVO* co-founding **Katzman** brothers and cartoonist **Bill (Captain High) Beckman** were painstakingly constructing. It was born of the realization that as our beliefs seemed to be shared by **Max Scherr's Berkeley Barb**, **Art Kunkin's Los Angeles Free Press**, the **San Francisco Oracle**, **Jeff Schero's The Rag** in Austin, and **The Paper** in Lansing, Michigan, a syndicate should be formed through which we could swap papers and share stories. But what would it be called? My childhood memories of the French *Maquis*, the underground, were endorsed enthusiastically: thus, the Underground Press Syndicate.

I was later to define "underground" at the request of **Andy Warhol** who sought to include my thoughts in a special issue of a magazine called *Aspen* he had been invited to edit. (It was presented in a fake soap flakes box).



One of Hugh's book covers

AT ITS HEIGHT, UPS had 600 members in several countries with at least as many papers linked sympathetically if not actually on the official UPS list. The best papers—those above plus Philadelphia's *Distant Drummer*, Abe Peck's Chicago *Seed*, Detroit's *Fifth Estate*, the San Francisco *Oracle*, Milwaukee's *Kaleidoscope*, New Orleans' *Nola Express*, Vancouver's *Georgia Straight* and Montreal's *Logos*—were highly professional and sophisticated with good graphics and use of color. Eventually there were four underground papers in New York City: the *East Village Other*, Jeff Shero's *The Rat*, Rex Weiner's *ACE* and my own *Other Scenes*.

Apart from myself, most of the editors were under 25, lucid thinkers who were very much in touch with what was going on around them, some exploring communal or other societal experiments. They were active revolutionaries who eschewed the familiar journalistic rules that called for "objectivity"; underground newspaper writers got their heads beaten along with everybody else in the demonstrations.

What made all this inexpensive literary action possible was a technological revolution in the physical way that newspapers were made. Up to that time, the "hot type" process meant that every line had to be typeset individually on a slug of molten alloy which cooled instantly to create an inch-deep metal slug with the type in reverse along the top. All these individual lines were laboriously fitted into a metal form from which a *papier maché* impression was taken. I told you in an earlier chapter that when I'd worked at the *Times*, my Wednesday night task was to work "on the stone" down in the print room.

The 'form' was locked up; a *papier maché* impression of it made; from that a curved alloy "plate" created; this in turn wrapped around cylinders on the press itself; finally reels of newsprint were threaded through and printed. A lengthy, complicated and expensive process.

ALONG CAME OFFSET, (a process that had been around for years but hadn't been used to print newspapers) and where something that had been merely typed could be pasted down, along with pictures or graphics of any kind. This page is photographed, printed in "negative" on a thin, aluminum or plastic sheet and used as the master from which almost unlimited copies are run off. A poet can print his/her poems; somebody with a tiny press not much bigger than a mimeograph machine can turn out brochures for pennies; and, most significantly, a kid with two hundred bucks and a typewriter could be in the newspaper business.

And all this came at a time when, for the first time in history, it wasn't necessary to grow old, or to pay years of dues, before being a success, or at least making the sort of money that young people previously had barely dreamed of. Kids were leaving college, forming pop groups and making their fortunes every day. The balance of power was shifting dramatically and the underground press was creating a vast backdrop of and for it. And America was not only at war—an unjust war, most believed—but increasingly at war with itself and here the underground papers were on the front line of the battle.

BY THE LATE SIXTIES, the revolution had spread to the Army and Andy Stapp's *The Bond* was telling servicemen that being used as cannon fodder in an unjust war to retain US dominance over the world was no reward for the degradation of groveling before officers, snapping one's heels together and saluting. It was widely known that the misery and boredom of serving in Vietnam was creating a huge drug problem among the grunts. Then the 'fragging' began—an increasing number of officers dying from 'accidents' with grenades going off in their bunkers. Stapp told of the sad demise of much-decorated Lt. Col. Weldon Honeycutt of the 101st Airborne Division who, after repeatedly ordering his men to storm Hamburger Hill, had a \$10,000 price put on his head by the mimeographed sheet, *GI Says*.

"The mood of guys in the army is one of restlessness" Andy said. "On the one hand you have this tremendous feeling, a great upsurge of mass sentiment against the war and the officers. But the men are still somewhat intimidated. They are still scared of the brass, scared of the lifers. There have been very heavy prison sentences meted out in retribution.... The officers are all for the war. The role they play makes it much less dangerous for them. They get much higher pay, awards and glory and all that, plus they are indoctrinated with a fascist-militarist education in ROTC. The enlisted men are not so heavily indoctrinated and they are scared they are going to get maimed over there... The men hate the officers but the only thing holding them back is fear. They are scared. What the ASU (American Servicemen's Union) is trying to do is to rip away this veil of fear, trying to make the guys feel more confident."



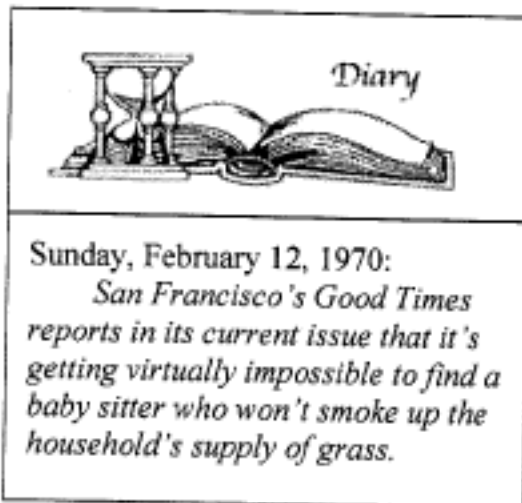
The scene at The East Village Other

Bill Beckmoan's depiction of the EVO office.
JW is on the floor under the table

The ASU's platform included

- An end to saluting and sir-ing of officers. "Let's get off our knees"*
- Election of officers by vote of the men*
- Racial equality*
- Rank and filers' control of court martial boards*
- Federal minimum wages*
- The right of free political association*
- The right of collective bargaining*
- The right to disobey illegal orders*

THE GENERATION that had come before, the Eisenhower '50s, might have suspected that something was wrong but they were either too complacent to change it, or they were unable to discern a means by which it could be accomplished. And that was fine with the older generation which basked in the privileges that had always come with being part of the Establishment (for want of a better word). But in the Sixties, the older generation didn't at all like what they were seeing—while at the same time secretly envying it. I ran a cartoon in *Other Scenes* showing two straight guys putting down hippies, one saying; "They've got long hair and they're always smoking dope and they fuck everybody—and I wish I was one".



The manner in which this anxiety/jealousy manifested itself was through repression from the authorities. Underground newspapers were a sitting target and one after another was busted for selling in the streets without a license, working out of allegedly unsafe premises, busted for selling to minors, busted for so-called obscenity, busted because it was said marihuana had been found on the premises (often true, sometimes planted). This was nothing new; there have been plenty of precedents in history for cracking down on a "free" press, and presumably always will be.

"A lot of underground press people that I've talked to seem to believe that you can't possibly get the truth from the establishment press" my old friend **Neil Hickey** observed during a long discussion we were having about the subject. "That seems to be a premise that unites the underground press".

"Yes, I said, "I think that one of the main things is the way the straight press deals with marihuana which everybody knows is harmless, including the reporters and some of the editors who smoke it themselves. And yet they'll describe this kid who's been found growing it in his window box as a junkie and a menace to society and it's all so hypocritical. They know it's harmless and they pretend it isn't; how can we believe them about anything else? It's like the so-called 'body-count' from Vietnam—a figure basically plucked out of the air each day to give the press something to report".

A few days earlier the actress **Viva** had made something of the same point when I'd asked her why so many people put down the Warhol scene for being—what they incorrectly assumed—was sexually licentious.

"It's because they're all so guilty that their country is committing genocide" Viva explained. "They can't face the fact that they're all like Nazi Germany. They've got to work off their guilt on something else so they try to find, you know, something wrong with the morals of the country. So they can feel they should be complaining about something, when they *should* be complaining about the war".

It was an interesting point because it had already occurred to a lot of people that everything that was going wrong with America was centrally linked, yet the advocates of "bombing the gooks out of existence in Vietnam" were continually trying to say they were unconnected; the best example maybe, when Martin Luther King had tried to fuse the plight of the black working class with the anti-war movement or when Leary's acidheads found common ground with **Dick Gregory's** battles against racism. Interestingly enough, the Left—or the Movement as it was rapidly becoming—was itself polarized, as I subsequently discovered was always the case, although I still hadn't yet learned how short-lived our "revolution" was going to be and how brief our spell in the public eye.

When the Sixties first arrived I was past 30, and thus older than most of my fellow underground editors, but age seemed less relevant at a time when an entire cross-section of society appeared to share so many common aims. When the decade was over we came to realize how little had changed, how few of our dreams for a more equitable society had been realized. The bad guys, which the radical movement identified as the right wing—the gluttons who never had enough—were still in charge, their self-



interest and greed still the guiding principle. (A study of how the Communist nomenclature of Russia and China transformed themselves, from custodians of the people's resources into capitalist owners of the same, may be instructive here).

There had been some changes, of course, and most notably it was not only in the way that the underground press had shown an entire generation that there was an alternative truth to that being served up by the Establishment media (the "straight press") but that that media itself had undergone a transformation. If they had watched our machinations with interest they had steadfastly declined to support our campaigns or, indeed, our rights, but some of them at least had veered off in a new direction. There was much talk of "the new journalism" as displayed by **Tom Wolfe**, **Jimmy Breslin** and the rest of **Clay Felker's** merry gang at the *Herald Tribune*, although what they mostly displayed was a lively change of *style* rather than content. Although they shared our penchant for making the stories more personal, they were not—with rare exceptions—writing radical copy. Underground writers tended to feel that most disputes had a *right* and a *wrong*, and rather than seek "balance" they didn't hesitate to take sides.

A T THE TIME none of us were giving much thought to defining ourselves, and it was not until a couple years later that I had the occasion to spell out exactly what we were up to. The impetus came from **Andy Warhol** who had been invited to produce an issue of the upscale magazine *Aspen* and asked me to contribute.

In its simplest sense, I wrote, the underground was the loosely (dis)organized collective of artists, writers, creative people whose work—while appreciated by each other—was still not acceptable to the Establishment. And sometimes, even after high-level esteem, that aura of "underground" might still hang around a former hero, **Bob Dylan** and **Allen Ginsberg** being prime examples.

It appeared to be no accident that so many underground heroes were poets, for poets—sensitively attuned to society's fast-changing nuances—were usually the first to put into words what so many of their contemporaries felt. Their language, a kind of code, was a scream for revolutionary change (if they were good poets), articulating society's needs and especially the needs of the young who always felt constrained by the rules and traditions of their elders.

And so here and now, in the mid-1960s, for the first time in history, the young dissenters, malcontents, actually had a medium of their own—the underground press—through which to express their dreams and demands.

But underground or not, every creative soul with integrity and ambition sooner or later faced the dilemma, obliged to choose between success or "selling out". Of course an artist wanted acceptance, to be appreciated (and rewarded) for his/her talent. But at what price? Naturally life becomes easier if days of grubbing around grungy downtown galleries are replaced by glossy acceptance on the upper East Side, serious reviews in the art pages and all the tokens of the good life.

But in return, our aspiring art star must produce. No longer the luxury of creating when the muse happens to strike, he must satisfy the demands of his new master, the gallery owner (the French *marchand* seems more appropriate) who needs to pay an exorbitant rent on the backs of his artists.

So how much of the subsequent art was art-to-order and how much still came organically? And was there a difference? These were questions the genuine artist preferred to put aside as long as possible, often remaining in the "underground" rather than grabbing the first commercial offer that came along.

WALTER RETURNED FROM an acid bath weekend at Millbrook with a wild look in his eye and a vow to re-energize his *East Village Other*, although it seemed to me that we were already about as involved as we could be with this whirlwind of youthful dissent. Misguidedly, however, Walter's first idea was to trash a dramatic portrait of LBJ wearing a swastika armband which we had planned for our next cover. Luckily he announced this intention just far enough in advance for me to hide a photocopy of it in a drawer. The cover was saved.

Our next battle came over **Andy Warhol** with whom I had been hanging out since Cinematique's **Jonas Mekas** shamed me into watching his films. Bowart's filmmaker pal **Dick Preston** sneered that Andy was no filmmaker, emphasizing his lack of talent. And Walter himself insisted on us running an exceptionally naïve piece trashing *Chelsea Girls*. I said it shouldn't run; it made us look so un-hip. Walter overruled me and I quit, planning to recoup out west with Amber, before setting off to revise my book in Japan.