

JEAN BROWN, 1911-1994

Jean Brown has been variously described as "the Archivist of the Avant Garde" and "the Den Mother of Fluxus." One tends to want to capture her essence in a well-turned phrase, because this was a lady who was obviously a unique personality. She was known as one of the world foremost collectors of challenging art, but for those who knew and loved her, sharing was her greatest asset.

In the fifties, a time when collectors of Dada went begging, Jean and her husband Leonard, a Massachusetts insurance agent, began acquiring the printed ephemera of the movement. Having attended Columbia University, Jean was a public librarian in Springfield, Massachusetts. Not particularly wealthy, the couple focused not on the more expensive original artwork, but on the publications, manifestos, letters, and other poignant mementoes of a movement which exposed the underbelly of its meaning.

Having amassed one of the most comprehensive study collections on Dada, Surrealism, the Browns turned their attention to the contemporary scene in the mid-sixties and became early supporters of Fluxus. After gaining the confidence of George Maciunas, the Brown's archive became in essence the depository library of the movement, and the repository for many of Maciunas' private papers.

After Maciunas was attacked in New York City, in the process of developing affordable housing in the Soho area for a community of artists, he moved to Great Barrington, some thirty miles from Jean's home in Tyringham. Having made her home in a former Shaker Seed House, she had Maciunas fashion an archive in the spirit of the religious sect. Stark in design, yet warm in character, the archive became an international meeting place for those interested in experimental art.

After Leonard's death in 1971 the collection was expanded to include art books and periodicals, concrete/visual/sound poetry, happenings and performance art, and mail art. It was an anomaly of amazing proportions. Nestled in the placid Berkshire mountains, housed in a structure devoid of pretension, this archive of the improbable flourished and provided inspiration for a generation of adventuresome artists.

When John Lennon and Yoko Ono came to look over this treasure house of contemporary currents, their visit caused headlines in the local paper. The great European art critic Pierre Restany wrote about her in the pages of *Domus*. But more often than not, it was the unknown but vitally interested who came to visit Jean Brown. I was one of those.

As a young man fresh out of library school, Jean treated me with the same courtesy shown the most celebrated of artists. Her ability to focus on the needs of those in her presence was extraordinary to behold. Jean made you believe that you mattered. It was the same consideration she bestowed upon the she sheltered from an otherwise unreceptive public. It mattered to her.

On 1 May 1994, Jean Brown died at the Berkshire Medical Center, Pittsfield, Massachusetts. She was 82 years old and had been in ill health for several years before her death. In 1985, the J. Paul Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities in Santa Monica, California, obtained her collection. It was one of the first times the Center had acquired twentieth century material.

Jean is survived by two sons, both active in the art world. Jonathan is an historian at the Institute of Fine Arts in New York City and a noted writer. Robert is a partner in the Reinhold Brown Gallery, also in New York City. She leaves behind a multitude of friends and admirers. For many years she labored to document unheralded art. She leaves behind a legacy yet to be fully examined.

--John Held, Jr.
Dallas, Texas
1994

