

## Artists in Dialogue: Jay DeFeo and Sonia Gechtoff in 1950s San Francisco

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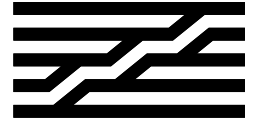


Saloua Raouda Choucair, *Fractional Module*, 1947-1951, 49,5 x 59 cm, Courtesy Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation

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Speaking about San Francisco in the 1950s, artist Jay DeFeo (1929-1989) recalled of her neighbor, painter Sonia Gechtoff (1926-2018): "Often times our ideas would... overlap to the point where I would go over and see her, and there would be the painting before my very eyes that was still in a germinal state of affairs up here in my head."<sup>1</sup> This description of their almost psychic connection was the springboard for this paper exploring their shared experiences and overlapping aesthetic concerns. From 1955 to 1958, the two friends lived next door to each other in the famous artist's building on Fillmore Street from which DeFeo's massive painting, *The Rose* (1958-1966), was lifted down from the second story through an opening created by removing a window and portion of the exterior wall. This case study of DeFeo and Gechtoff's mutually influential relationship serves as one model for examining a network of women artists working in San Francisco in the 1950s, including Bernice Bing (1936-1998), Joan Brown (1938-1990), Madeleine Dimond (Martin) (1922-1991), Deborah Remington (1930-2010) and others. These artists played a central and underappreciated role in the counter-cultural community in the 1950s, often referred to as the Beat Generation. Although the term "beat" might conjure up male writers like Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, visual artists, many of whom were women, contributed to this creative and experimental social environment. While DeFeo is the best known, others are only beginning to receive art historical attention; for example, Gechtoff and Remington were included, along with DeFeo, in *Women of Abstract Expressionism* (2016) organized by the Denver Art Museum in Colorado.<sup>2</sup>

In expanding this area of research, I am building on Susan Landauer's foundational work documenting abstraction expressionism in San Francisco, Joan Marter's feminist approach to recovering the contributions of women artists in the New York School, and Ann Gibson's challenges to the discriminatory ways abstract expressionism has been constructed as a category, just to name a few important examples from the literature.<sup>3</sup> I also draw on such authors as Rebecca Solnit and Anastasia Aukeman who have studied San Francisco's interdisciplinary countercultural artists groups. Their scholarship highlights DeFeo's influence, referencing for example Manuel Neri taking up plaster as his medium after seeing DeFeo's

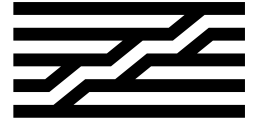


sculptures; Wallace Berman's fascination with her collages; and Bruce Conner's inspiration to use dangling elements in his assemblages after seeing Christmas presents she had wrapped and hung from the ceiling of her Fillmore flat.<sup>4</sup> It is noteworthy to read of a female artist's impact on the practices of male artists considering that art history has almost always told the reverse story, reinscribing the historical sexism in the art world. I intend to explore further the reciprocal and interconnected nature of the work that emerged in this community of artists and to bring to light some of the lesser-known women in the scene.

In the immediate post-WWII period, San Francisco had seen an influx of art students due to the G.I. Bill which helped American veterans pay for education. In 1945, the board of the California School of Fine Arts (CSFA, now the San Francisco Art Institute) appointed curator Douglas MacAgy director of the school in hopes that he could revitalize the failing institution. Within a few years, he created a progressive art school known for experimental abstraction. He increased enrollment dramatically and convinced well-known artists to join the faculty. Arguably the most famous and influential painter was Clyfford Still (Mark Rothko and Ad Reinhardt only taught for short periods). Other instructors during MacAgy's tenure through 1950 included Elmer Bishcoff, Dorr Bothwell, Edward Corbett, David Park, Hassel Smith, Clay Spohn, among others. Out of this revival came several accomplished younger artists who helped forge the nascent art scene in the city.

While the commercial gallery opportunities were minimal in San Francisco at mid-century, there was some support from the local art museums.<sup>5</sup> Grace McCann Morley, Director of the San Francisco Museum of Art from 1935 to 1958, had great influence on the course of modern art in the area. She promoted avant-garde art and brought important exhibitions from New York's MoMA to the West Coast in the 1930s. In the 1940s, she presented the first solo museum exhibitions of Arshile Gorky (1941), Clyfford Still (1943), Jackson Pollock (1945), and Robert Motherwell (1946).<sup>6</sup> She also dedicated museum space to local contemporary artists, and the San Francisco Art Association's juried annuals at the museum gave them further exposure.

Sonia Gechtoff described her time in San Francisco in the 1950s as one of fervent dedication to art, encouraged by the activity in the orbit of CSFA and the conversations, exhibitions, and parties that took place in studios, galleries, bars, and cafes. After finishing her undergraduate degree at the Philadelphia Museum School of Art in 1950, she moved to San Francisco in the fall of 1951 on the recommendation of a friend who described with excitement the unusual paintings she had recently seen (they were Clyfford Still's). The city appealed to Gechtoff because it was far from home, cheaper, and less intimidating than New York. She took a course in lithography with Budd Dixon at CSFA and got to know the tight-knit group of faculty and students. Although Still had left the city just before her arrival, one of his students, Ernest Briggs, talked with her at length about his ideas. She reminisced, "It all sounded so unique and dramatic and fantastic to me, this whole idea of painting for its own sake and that the idea of searching for an image went out the window. It was like opening up a huge door. I was twenty-four years old and ready for something like that"<sup>7</sup> Shortly after moving to San Francisco, she abandoned figuration for non-objective abstraction and developed the distinctive features of her individual style.

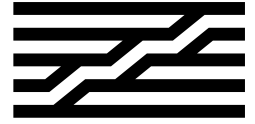


Unlike Gechtoff, Jay DeFeo was from the San Francisco Bay Area and attended the University of California Berkeley for her undergraduate and graduate degrees in studio art. The influence of her education melded with the reverberations of what was happening with the abstract expressionists working across the Bay in San Francisco.<sup>8</sup> After completing her master's degree and teaching credential in 1951, she traveled to Europe on a fellowship where her stay in Florence was particularly generative, resulting in over 200 works, many of them gestural and abstract tempera paintings.<sup>9</sup> Returning to Berkeley in 1953, she worked in a variety of media in addition to painting, including plaster and wire sculpture and jewelry. She also met and married artist Wally Hedrick, and they moved to a small apartment in San Francisco in 1954. Her first one-person show in San Francisco was at The Place, a North Beach bar and beat hangout where she exhibited paintings from her trip abroad.

In 1955, DeFeo and Hedrick (m. 1954) moved into a larger flat in the building on Fillmore St. followed shortly thereafter by Gechtoff and her husband painter James Kelly (m. 1953) whom she met through CSFA.<sup>10</sup> The couples were already acquaintances through the San Francisco scene. Aukeman writes that poet Michael McClure who moved into the building with his wife Joanna McClure in 1956, coined its apt name "Painterland."<sup>11</sup> Also living there mid-decade were painters James Weeks and Lynn Williams Weeks, Craig Kauffman, James Newman, who opened the Dilexi gallery in 1958 with Robert Alexander. When Gechtoff and Kelly moved out, Joan Brown and her first husband, Bill Brown, took over their flat.<sup>12</sup>

The lack of commercial galleries and significant sales in San Francisco meant that the artists had to support themselves with other jobs and create their own exhibition opportunities. Hedrick was a founding member of the Six Gallery (1954-57) with a group of friends, Deborah Remington, John Allen Ryan, David Simpson, and Hayward King, and their English teacher, the poet Jack Spicer. The group of young artists had moved north to San Francisco from Pasadena together to pursue their studies at CSFA. The Six took over the space vacated by King Ubu Gallery (1952), established a few years earlier by poet Robert Duncan and artists Jess and Harry Jacobs (Jacobus) in a converted garage on Fillmore Street, not far from the art school.<sup>13</sup>

The Six's founders announced their intentions: "We commit ourselves to exhibiting not only successes and matured achievements, but half-steps, blunders and fumbblings by the way."<sup>14</sup> Like King Ubu, the Six Gallery held exhibitions of art and film, poetry readings, and jazz performances. They self-consciously channeled the spontaneous and irreverent spirit of Dada.<sup>15</sup> In 1955, Allen Ginsburg's first reading of "Howl" took place as part of a poetry night. Other legends include the destruction of a piano on-site and Manuel Neri exhibiting paintings so fresh that they were still wet at the opening.<sup>16</sup> He later recalled, "nobody was selling anything, and that gave us incredible freedom, not having a commercial side to the art world. In '56 and '57, when I started spending a lot of time around there, no other galleries were really available. Stuff didn't have to sell for it to be exciting."<sup>17</sup> In 1955, Gechtoff's mother, Etya [Ethel] Gechtoff who had run galleries in Philadelphia and supported her husband's career as a landscape painter, opened East & West Gallery, across the street from the Six adding another venue for these artists initiating a small gallery district.

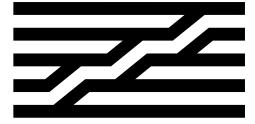


The personal and professional lives of DeFeo and Gechtoff intertwined through these spaces and social relationships, the most significant being their proximity as neighbors. DeFeo remembered, "we had this continual, you know, kind of feedback, one to the other, both being on the opposite sides of the wall as it were. Well, it was kind of a funny thing that happened between us psychologically. It didn't only happen with painting. But we'd actually, you know, go downtown, for instance, make separate trips downtown, and come home maybe with the same pair of shoes."<sup>18</sup> This humorous telepathic connection is indicative of a close female friendship and evokes their shared experiences as women.

During this time, both artists transitioned from abstract painting styles balancing figure and ground, to all-over compositions, and then to a more central format.<sup>19</sup> The move to the larger apartment space impacted the size of DeFeo's work as she began the *Mountain* series from 1955, inspired in part by the stories of the first summits of Mount Everest and K2 that fascinated her circle.<sup>20</sup> She worked with a primarily black, white, and gray palette creating almost otherworldly think terrains of rippling paint. Gechtoff transitioned to her own series of gestural abstractions referencing landscapes in their predominantly earthy browns and greens with occasional bright accents, including *Look to the Mountains*.

DeFeo's *Origin* and Gechtoff's *Mystery of the Hunt*, both 1956, draw from nature suggesting the movement of grasses or the force of a cresting of a wave. Some of their drawings during this time also shared this sense of organic movement.<sup>21</sup> Landauer has noted that they both began using palette knives to apply paint in thick swaths, combining multiple colors on the knife and then applying with a swipe to the canvas. She writes that "in 1956, DeFeo began the first of several large-scale abstractions teeming with movement, consisting of flurries of dabs and strokes, each a brush- or knife-load of more than one color at a time. The technique was similar to Gechtoff's, but the surfaces of some paintings became densely piled encrustations with a topography of ridges and valleys deep enough to cast shadows."<sup>22</sup> Of *Origin*, conservator Carol Mancusi-Ungaro who studied the work wrote, "the versatility provided by various brushes and a palette knife, coupled with the incorporation of particulate matter in the medium, enables the simultaneous creation of flattened swaths of viscous paint and strokes with a decidedly bumpy topography."<sup>23</sup> Paintings by both artists exhibit a variation in thickness and application. The touches of color in DeFeo's paintings are subtler, and she spoke of her interest in texture as closely tied to her choice of limited and lowkey color.<sup>24</sup> She retrospectively designated *Origin*, *The Veronica* and *The Rose* a triptych, stating that "They all draw upon plant forms of some sort" and "represent three stages of life."<sup>25</sup>

In contrast to DeFeo's sparing use of color, it usually played a strong role in Gechtoff's compositions, sometimes in discordant combinations. Regarding these paintings, Gechtoff wrote: "From 1956-57 I did a series of very large paintings of which this is one [*Painting IV*], that used an all-over small knife stroke image intended to evoke landscape images." Like DeFeo's paintings, they envelop the viewer in a field of pattern and texture. She noted that *Mystery of the Hunt*, which takes its name from a Michael McClure poem, was "meant to evoke landscape in a panoramic vision... I also wanted it to have a mystical look and used bits of



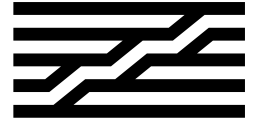
bright color behind the monochromatic color.<sup>126</sup> She described a "monochromatic silver tone" produced by the light in San Francisco as one of the natural elements that influenced her work and that of others.<sup>27</sup>

The artist's references to nature opens out to the broader interest in both the spiritual connotations and direct experience of nature in their artistic circle. More generally, the environment of the Western United States with its open and accessible landscape and mild climate has been posited as one of the factors of difference between the San Francisco and New York schools of abstract expressionism.<sup>28</sup> The steep hills of San Francisco provided panoramic views of the bay and the mountains outside the city. The materiality and mystery of nature was central to the poetry as well. About the Six Gallery period, McClure wrote, "The poetry was then, as it is now, irretrievably and subjectively searching for liberation, for nature, for physicality and for what I call soul-making."<sup>29</sup>

Ninfa Valvo, curator of painting and sculpture at the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum, gave Gechtoff an important solo exhibition in January of 1957, against the wishes of her director who upon seeing the show demanded that "lousy stuff" be taken down.<sup>30</sup> However, reviews in the San Francisco press were more positive.<sup>31</sup> In the exhibition, Gechtoff used a quote from McClure's poem as her statement.<sup>32</sup>

Curator Walter Hopps, who fostered contemporary art in California, brought Gechtoff's show down to Los Angeles to be the first one-person exhibition at the new Ferus Gallery. He supported both DeFeo and Gechtoff with solo shows and numerous group exhibitions in Southern California. Both were selected (along with Deborah Remington and Madeleine Dimond) for *Action I (Merry-Go-Round)* show organized in 1955, which brought together artists from Northern and Southern California in what is remembered as the first major public exhibition of west coast abstract expressionism.<sup>33</sup> The Ferus Gallery's inaugural exhibition featured new abstract painting from both cities including works by DeFeo and Gechtoff and more established painters such as Hassel Smith and Clyfford Still.<sup>34</sup> DeFeo and Gechtoff were often associated (for better or worse) because of their shared aesthetics and because they were women, frequently the only two women included in group shows.

By 1958, Gechtoff's paintings tended toward a central image suggesting a symbolic significance rather than "allover" composition or field referencing landscape. *The Map* (1958), for example, is grounded by a white and black cruciform shape, a motif that had often circulated in DeFeo's work among other religious and mystical imagery. Towards the center, as the black paint becomes denser and darker, an explosion seems to generate from within, twisting and turning into a bright knot of color. DeFeo began her most well-known piece, *The Rose*, that same year. While very different in its highly sculptural quality and starburst design, both paintings have an unusual symmetry and radiating energy. Although both artists were creating on a large scale, and there are some affinities in their visual vocabulary, the difference in how they apply their medium is also apparent in Gechtoff's painterly action on the surface of *The Map* compared to the sculptural thickness of paint built up by DeFeo in *The Rose*.

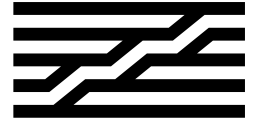


The productive correspondence they felt between their work eventually became unsustainable. DeFeo described the way their similar ideas "took the joy of discovery away."<sup>35</sup> She also took to heart Gechtoff's critiques of her paintings, occasionally destroying a work.<sup>36</sup> Their different personalities and attitudes may have also strained their relationship. Gechtoff was initiated into the workings of the professional art world on the East Coast, while DeFeo was more subversive of institutional rules and decorum. Gechtoff was also painting quickly, sometimes finishing a painting in a day. As we know from the eight years she spent on *The Rose*, DeFeo was headed in a different direction; she said, "In those days, being an abstract expressionist meant that if you didn't do two or three things in one day, at least you did one... I would hope that my spontaneous approach to the material, you know, hadn't changed, visibly, but my attitude became slower and slower, and these things didn't happen in a single day."<sup>37</sup>

Gechtoff left San Francisco for New York with Kelly in 1958, joining Poindexter Gallery, building on the momentum of national and international group shows. Morley had selected Gechtoff for several of these exhibitions, including the US Pavilion at the Brussels World's Fair in 1958, for which she attracted national press coverage.<sup>38</sup> (Morley also acquired her work for the museum's collection with funds the institution had given her to buy a desk.) In New York, Gechtoff first continued her use of bold gestures bursting from the center of the canvas in a bright array of colors. She also explored circular shapes and other geometric compositions in prints, drawings, and paintings, arriving at a more visually controlled form of her exuberant expressionism with combined acrylic and graphite.

In 1959, MoMA curator Dorothy Miller visited DeFeo's solo show at the Dilexi gallery in San Francisco, and after a studio visit invited her and Hedrick to participate in *Sixteen Americans* (1959-60), an exhibition that signaled the trends of the 1960s avant-garde. *Origin*, *The Veronica*, and three large-scale drawings were included. (DeFeo held *The Rose* back to continue working on it). This could have been a career-making exhibition, but DeFeo took a different path. She certainly gained attention in the press and continued showing in the West Coast galleries yet stopped working for four years after putting the final touches on *The Rose* in 1966. She returned to painting, collages, drawings, and photographs in the 1970s. In the decade before her death, she created several large-scale paintings, in oil with other media, whose dynamic compositions of organic and geometric elements are further activated by her characteristically haptic surfaces.

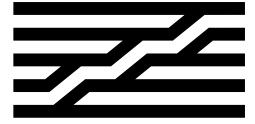
In DeFeo's and Gechtoff's later paintings, the combination of expressive brushstrokes and geometric forms, as well as their individual palettes, appear as traces of the aesthetics each developed in the 1950s, suggesting the significance of the artists' brief but intense convergence. DeFeo's statement in the *Sixteen Americans* catalogue might summarize the shared approach of both artists: "I regard myself as an expressionist as well as a symbolist. If expression implies emotional impact, I can realize it only by restraint and ultimate refinement."<sup>39</sup>



Considering the networks of friendship between DeFeo and Gechtoff in 1950s San Francisco allows us to understand how their dialogue fueled this generative period as they honed their unique creative responses to the challenges that engaged painting at that moment.

## Notes

1. Jay DeFeo, oral history interview with Paul Karlstrom, July 18, 1975. Audio recording. Oral history interview with Jay DeFeo, 1975 June 3-1976 January 23. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview took place on June 3, 1975, July 18, 1975 and January 23, 1976. Author omitted direct address to interviewer for clarity.
2. For example, on Jay DeFeo, see Dana Miller, *Jay DeFeo: A Retrospective* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2012) and the recent "Jay DeFeo: A Symposium at The Courtauld", May 28, 2021, featuring new research: <https://courtauld.ac.uk/whats-on/jay-defeo-a-symposium/>.
3. Susan Landauer, *The San Francisco School of Abstract Expressionism* (University of California Press, 1996); Joan Marter, ed., *Women of Abstract Expressionism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); Anne Eden Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).
4. Rebecca Solnit, *Secret Exhibition: Six California Artists of the Cold War Era* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1990), p. 51, p. 62; Solnit, "Heretical Constellations: Notes on California, 1946-61," in Lisa Phillips, ed., *Beat Culture and the New America: 1950-1965* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1995), p. 82; Anastasia Aukeman, *Welcome to Painterland: Bruce Conner and the Rat Bastard Protective Association* (University of California Press, 2016), 184.
5. See Susan Landauer, "Advantages of Obscurity: Women Abstract Expressionists in San Francisco," in Jane Marter, ed., *Women of Abstract Expressionism*, op.cit., 42-57.
6. Kara Kirk, "Grace McCann Morley and the Modern Museum," February 2017. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, <https://www.sfmoma.org/essay/grace-mccann-morley-and-modern-museum/>. First published in *San Francisco Museum of Modern Art: 75 Years of Looking Forward* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2009), 71-77.
7. "Interview with Sonia Gechtoff by Marshall N. Price, 2006," *Sonia Gechtoff, The Ferus Years*, digital catalogue, Nyehaus Gallery, New York, 2011.
8. Jay DeFeo, oral history interview with Karlstrom, July 18, 1975.
9. Dana Miller, "Jay DeFeo: A Slow Curve," in *Jay DeFeo: A Retrospective*, op. cit, 17.
10. Jay DeFeo, oral history interview with Karlstrom, July 18, 1975, op. cit.
11. Anastasia Aukeman, *Welcome to Painterland*, op. cit., 4.
12. For a thorough account of the Fillmore St. building as a nexus of the art community through the mid-1960s see Anastasia Aukeman, *Welcome to Painterland*, op. cit.
13. *An Art of Wondering: The King Ubu Gallery, 1952-1953*, exh. cat. (Davis: Natsoulas Novelozo Gallery, 1989).
14. *Lyrical Vision: The 6 Gallery, 1954-1957*, (David: Natsoulas/Novelozo Gallery Press, 1989), 13.
15. Bruce Nixon, "The Six Gallery," *The Beat Generation: Galleries and Beyond* (Davis, CA: John Natsoulas Press, 1996), 89.
16. Bruce Nixon, "The Six Gallery," op. cit., 88-89.
17. Manuel Neri quoted in Bruce Nixon, "The Six Gallery", op. cit., 91.
18. Jay DeFeo, oral history interview with Karlstrom, July 18, 1975, op. cit.



19. Bill Berkson notes that DeFeo and Hedrick "shared a taste for mandalic formats and other such centering devices as triangles, priapic shafts, orbs, and crosses," in Bill Berkson, "Without The Rose: DeFeo in Sixteen Americans," *Jay DeFeo and the Rose* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 45.
20. Dorothy C. Miller, "Jay DeFeo: A Slow Curve," 21.
21. See for comparison, Sonia Gechtoff, *Untitled*, 1956, drawing on paper, 26 ¾ x 20 in., San Jose Museum of Art and Jay DeFeo, *Untitled*, c. 1957, graphite, charcoal, ink, wax crayon, oil and tempera on paper, 66 ½ x 41 in. Wally Hedrick recalled, "Jay was really looking at Leonardo's drawings of water flow/eddies and plant studies." (quoted in Marla Prather, "Foreword," in *Jay DeFeo and the Rose*, op. cit., p.xiv).
22. Susan Landauer, "Advantages of Obscurity," op. cit., 55.
23. Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, "When Material Becomes Art," in *Jay DeFeo: A Retrospective*, op. cit., 81.
24. Ibid.
25. Jay DeFeo, oral history interview with Karlstrom, July 18, 1975, op. cit., and Jay DeFeo, "Chronological History of Major Blocks of Work," quoted in Dorothy C. Miller, "Jay DeFeo: A Slow Curve," op. cit., 30. DeFeo said elsewhere that the trilogy began with *The Eyes* (1958). ("Rough notes of conversation with Jay DeFeo, San Francisco, April 6, 1969," letter from Douglas Davis to Jay DeFeo, 2 June 1969, Berkeley, University of California, The Bancroft Library, Jay DeFeo Papers, BANC MSS 98/56 c).
26. Sonia Gechtoff, Permanent Collection Questionnaire, c. 1986, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art Archives.
27. Sonia Gechtoff, ART CART Oral History, Research Center for Arts and Culture, published January 29, 2014, Columbia University Libraries: <https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/doi/10.7916/D8XK8CHK>
28. Mary Fuller, "Was there a San Francisco School?," *Artforum*, vol.9, n°5 (January 1971), 46-55.
29. Michael McClure, "Poetry of the 6," *The Beat Generation*, op. cit., 74.
30. Berit Potter, "Grace McCann Morley: Defending and Diversifying Modern Art," June 2017, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, <https://www.sfmoma.org/essay/grace-mccann-morley-defending-and-diversifying-modern-art/>.
31. Alfred Frankenstein, "Sonia Gechtoff Exhibit Blazes with Vision", *San Francisco Chronicle* (January 23, 1957), 19.
32. Alexander Fried, "Smell the Paint? Sonia Gechtoff Puts Furious Energy Into Her Oils", *San Francisco Chronicle* (1957), clipping, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Sonia Gechtoff Papers, 1952-1980
33. "From interview with Walter Hopps, September, 1996," in *The Beat Generation*, op. cit., 100.
34. "Objects on the New Landscape Demanding of the Eye", Ferus Gallery, 1957.
35. Jay DeFeo, oral history interview with Karlstrom, July 18, 1975.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
38. "Interview with Sonia Gechtoff by Marshall N. Price, 2006," op. cit., 10; "Americans at Brussels: Soft Sell, Range & Controversy", *Time Magazine* (1958), clipping, Sonia Gechtoff papers.
39. Jay DeFeo in Dorothy C. Miller, *Sixteen Americans*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1959), 8.