

Negative Multiplicities

Gordon Ball

BEAT

Christopher Felver

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Beat is Christopher Felver's newest book, and it's a charm. It consists not merely of single-image pages, but "spreads." Felver writes, "It's my cinema vérité movie only in stills...of an American cultural family." His "movie" or scrapbook collage projects chronologically, mapping major portions of the last 28 years of his life by geographical location, filling his screen with extraordinary shots of the remarkable women and men he sought out and befriended along the way, sharing it with their artifacts, mementoes, holographs, ephemera. (Its mix of image and word reminds one of his earlier *The Poet Exposed* [1986], but *Beat* features much greater variety of material and layout.)

Introductions by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Amiri Baraka, David Amram; a handwritten prison letter from Neal Cassady to Carolyn Cassady; a fine piece by Felver on Allen Ginsberg's address book; the first purple-inked pages from the 1956 "mimeo-ditto" (as Ginsberg has it) of *Howl*; and other prefatory material, precede the book's first and longest major section, "San Francisco," where Felver settled in 1979. (Each major section is introduced from an autobiographical standpoint by the author/photographer.) "Naropa" follows, then "New York" and "Celebration" (including some shots from Europe as well as America East and West). *Beat* closes with "Twilight," which offers some of Felver's last images of Philip Whalen, Philip Lamantia, Ginsberg, Jan Kerouac, Herbert Huncke, and Gregory Corso. (Handy and informative nutshell biographies of the 200 who've been pictured close the book.) The cover's a striking, noirish close-up of William S. Burroughs bent over a book he inscribes with Bic ballpoint, fedora on head, shortened left pinkie resting on open page, Academy of Arts and Letters pin on lapel. Within, end papers consisting of the first and last pages of Jack Kerouac's later *On the Road* typescript embrace the gang of souls (and then some) about whom Ginsberg once said "Jack has imagined us all." The quality of reproductions, overall, is superb.

*This book sparkles
in its multiplicity.*

Beat's mixed media format differs radically from Felver's most recent large collection, *The Importance of Being* (2001), with its 400 full-page portraits, a single person to a page, no subject appearing more than once. Now, with half that number of subjects, certain individuals appear again and again (Ginsberg on 23 pages, Ferlinghetti on 19, Corso on 14); some (Richard Brautigan, Herb Gold, Jay DeFeo) appear but once. Almost all share their white space with other photos, words, musical notations, programmes, news articles. But is Felver's formal innovation, in this, his seventh book, effective?

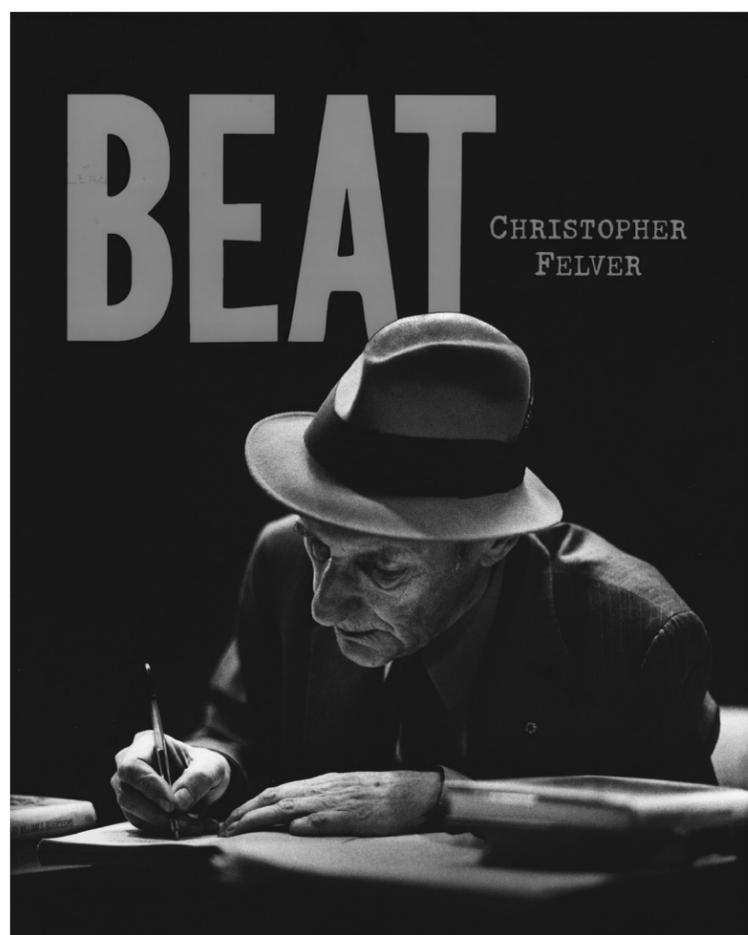
It breaks the regularity of the 2001 volume,

and enriches the already-rich photographic image with personal and historical dimensions. It lends other perspectives as well to one of Felver's great strengths, his preference for frontality ("My only requirement," he said of his subjects, "is that they look me in the eye"). Now at random I open *Beat* and encounter a huddled Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, and Nancy Peters staring back at me from the small entrance to City Lights, alongside a hymn to poets and poetry in Ferlinghetti's hand.... A turn of pages and Al Aronowitz straddles the center stripes of a wet New York street beneath a beaming John Tytell in front of a grand piano, as a column of three photos of Ann Charters smiles at me.... Later on, a pristine shot of Amiri Baraka at home rests above his own scatological, political cartoon, "Ass Craft Landing"; across the way, an unusual triumvirate of Joyce Johnson, Ted Joans, and Hettie Joans looks out to me.

The variety and layering within the pages and the "spreads" is, then, often striking. But on occasion, the multi-imaged page doesn't work as well, as with the lovely shot of sweet-faced and overalled Willem de Kooning in the massive rocker from which he'd view his work: it deserves a whole page rather than to rest above three small pleasant close-ups of Willem de Kooning, Elaine de Kooning, and Robert Rauschenberg. And a few are too cramped, as with the whole page shared separately by Rudy Burckhardt, John Ashbery, John Cage, Barbara Guest, and Frank O'Hara's tombstone epitaph.

Otherwise, the book sparkles in its multiplicity, its interrelationship of materials, and even, by themselves, its single shots. Felver catches the energy of Naropa's Professor Corso seated afront the blackboard at a desk with matches, cigarette box, and Remy Martin bottle, gesturing didactically toward the camera, unbuttoned, long-sleeve cuff hanging loose. Beneath it, a chummy Ginsberg and Corso sit close on a couch, profiles in mutual appreciation, drink, and ciggyboo, adjoining a text in Corso's hand which calls us back to the chalked lettering on the Professor's blackboard in the shot above. Against the musical score sheet for his "Honor Song for Sitting Bull," David Amram conducts a symphony orchestra across the page from Pete Seeger and banjo poised along the Hudson. A small triptych of images with a plaintive, bittersweet close-up of a behatted Carl Solomon and a wistful John Clellon Holmes sandwich the iconic shot of Abbie Hoffman in hands-to-temples ecstasy, "HOWL" gracing his breast. And Diane Di Prima, in profile, at work, pen in hand, next to a close-up of Di Prima facing us, shares the pale page with her lovely winter solstice poem on dark and light.

Certain single shots (like certain single texts, such as Ed Sanders's hymn to self-publishing, from William Blake to Walt Whitman to Woody Guthrie to Ginsberg) also keep their hold on us. I'm struck by, among many others, the wonderful one of Ferlinghetti peering out from his upstairs City Lights office window, above the paparazzi below, cameras between eye and hand pointed his way; Denise Levertov, seated on a sofa's arm before a wall



of books, turning to face the photographer; Diane Di Prima's and Robert Creeley's warm embrace in a shot that reminds me of Andre Kertesz. Some are amusing: David Amram, in white-tie formal wear, French horn in hand, is nuzzled by one of his cows; some contribute to the historical record (Carolyn Cassady going strong and still cheery at eighty); some offer historical charm: Robert LaVigne four decades later in soft white shoes with velcro straps, sport coat, and glasses, programme in hand, in front of his large "Nude with Onions" portrait of Peter Orlovsky which introduced Ginsberg to his longtime partner. Finally, in the strong "Twilight" section, several are especially affecting: the fine medium shot of Ginsberg, lit from the side, a look on his face too complex to discern, head tilted slightly, chin tucked, one hand resting on the other next to a City Lights bag; Jan Kerouac at her father's grave, hands and forearms extended as if bemused and helpless as beer cans, photo, cigarettes, and lighter embellish the tombstone; Amram playing flute in out-of-focus background to a gaunt and dying Corso.

So: take it as you like it—single shot, memento, artifact, spread. *Beat* offers us a near three decades of images and words and associated details of people you've known or known of; some may have changed your life—or are about to. Christopher Felver, master of portraiture, has once again given us a treasury, different—and greater—in many ways from his earlier books. *Beat* is a rich and splendid work.

Gordon Ball is a photographer, filmmaker, writer whose website of image and word is <http://www.gordonballgallery.com>. His books include '66 Frames: A Memoir (Coffee House Press), Dark Music (Cityful Press), and the chapbook "Scenes from East Hill Farm: Seasons with Allen Ginsberg" (Beat Scene).