



This page: Photographed by Allan in 1956, Vaughan on the beach in Provincetown, Massachusetts. Opposite: Allan and Vaughan with (l-r) Anton, Nina, and Amy, at their home in Glen Head, Long Island, 1965. Photo © 2008 Regina Bogat / Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.

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Written by **Sylvia Sukop**  
Photographs by **Vaughan Rachel**

# VAUGHAN RACHEL

THE PHOTOGRAPHER'S ART + LIFE WITH ALLAN KAPROW

Allan and Vaughan Kaprow were married under a *chuppah*, in a small ceremony at the Waldorf-Astoria in New York City, on March 27, 1955. They celebrated with kosher wedding cake, but no dancing, before heading off to a festive party at Allan's parents' apartment on the Upper West Side. All the furniture had been moved into the basement, and a giant ice sculpture commissioned by Allan's mother now dominated the large dining room. Two musicians who performed—an avant-garde pianist friend of Allan's and a klezmer accordion player who lived next door to his parents—were a study in contrasts. They epitomized the disparate worlds of innovation and tradition that Allan and his new bride (who, while a recent convert, had an authentic affinity for Jewish life) would straddle, not always easily, throughout twenty-eight years of marriage.

Vaughan Eberhart Peters and Allan Kaprow were both painters when they met the previous summer at Hans Hofmann's art school in Provincetown, Massachusetts. He was 26, a pipe-smoking intellectual and newly minted professor of art history at Rutgers University. She was 20, living in Greenwich Village and working in an office at Rockefeller Center. Their daily life was populated by soon-to-be-famous artists, including George Segal, Roy Lichtenstein,

Claes Oldenburg, Robert Frank, George Brecht, and Wolf Kahn, and acclaimed Beat Generation writers Jack Kerouac and Gregory Corso, whose then-girlfriend was a friend of Vaughan's. Free-spirited, physically attractive, and with a mutual taste for mischief, Vaughan and Allan soon fell in love. He proposed to her on the Provincetown sand dunes and, after they wed, the couple moved into a small cottage on a pond in North Brunswick, New Jersey, that previously had been Allan's home and studio.

Three years into their marriage, Allan's groundbreaking essay, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," was published in *ARTnews*, forever altering the course of art history. Allan was garrulous, charismatic, a networker. Vaughan, too, was exceedingly articulate but, due in part to a childhood hearing loss, was soft-spoken and less comfortable in large groups. She consciously set aside her own artistic ambitions to support Allan's, as his wife and the mother of their four children, Anton, Amy, Nina, and Marisa. Allan continued painting, but it was his invention of "Happenings," in the late fifties and early sixties, combined with a lifetime of teaching and writing, that sealed his fame both as an artist and transformer of culture.





Clockwise, from left: On their 1955 honeymoon in Florence, Allan pauses during an afternoon of painting. Feminist pioneers: artist Barbara T. Smith (center) and choreographer-filmmaker Yvonne Rainer, Pasadena, 1973. New York painter Pat Steir and New Museum of Contemporary Art founder Marcia Tucker on a visit to Pasadena in 1972. Tucker died in 2006.

As Allan climbed the career ladder, the Kaprows moved first from New Jersey to Long Island and then, in 1969, to Pasadena. California held the promise of a fresh start following the tragic death, in 1967, of the couple's 2-year-old daughter, Nina, who was hit by a car near their house in Glen Head. Allan joined the new California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) as associate dean even before its construction was completed, and Vaughan went back to art school. A decade earlier, the gift of a camera from Allan's gallerist, Ivan Karp, had prompted Vaughan's first explorations in photography. Today, black-and-white film-based photography continues to be her primary medium. Her immense archive of images documents her private life with a legendary figure revered by colleagues and former students around the world.

The couple divorced in 1983, and Allan later remarried. Vaughan took her Hebrew name, "Rachel," and made it her last name. After a period of estrangement, Vaughan reached out to reconnect with Allan toward the end of his life. When he died at age 78, in 2006, Vaughan began to realize that her photographs of their life together—within their family, and an intimate circle of friends and artistic colleagues—comprise more than just a family album; they form a unique and revealing document of dramatically changing times. A selection of Vaughan Rachel's photographs, taken in the United States and Europe from the 1950s through the 1970s, is published here for the first time. Allan's legacy to the art world was the transformation of experience itself into art. He famously took art "off the wall" and, through the use of ordinary objects and activities, made the spectator an integral participant in its realization.

The Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles is currently hosting the only U.S. presentation of the artist's first major retrospective, *Allan Kaprow—Art as Life*. Through the end of June, MOCA serves as the epicenter for an unprecedented, multi-site explosion of "Happenings," re-created by twenty-nine arts organizations and schools throughout Southern California, thanks to substantial funding from the Getty Foundation. The exhibition is accompanied by a richly illustrated 408-page monograph published by the Getty Research Institute, home of the Allan Kaprow Papers.

One highly anticipated re-creation is "Fluids," from 1967. Multiple re-creations of this piece (coordinated by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art) will take place across Los Angeles, from April 25 through 27, many at some of the same locations where the piece was originally staged by Allan. Barn-raising-style, teams of volunteers will build four-walled enclosures—each up to 7 feet tall and 30 feet long—out of ice blocks. Taking up to a day to complete and up to three days to melt, each structure provides a potent visual metaphor for the temporary nature of all life and experience. And for those who participate in building it, the memory of the collaborative effort will long outlive the thing itself.

**DURING A SERIES OF RECENT INTERVIEWS AT HER HOME IN PASADENA, VAUGHAN RACHEL SPOKE CANDIDLY ABOUT HER LONG MARRIAGE TO ALLAN, THE LOSS OF THEIR CHILD, HER OWN SPIRITUAL AND ARTISTIC JOURNEY, AND HOW GROWING OLD CAN ALSO BE A TIME OF "GROWING UP."**

**SYLVIA SUKOP: You and Allan both studied with the New York School painter Hans Hofmann.**

VAUGHAN RACHEL: Yes, Allan was a figurative painter when we met, very productive and showing his work professionally in New York. I remember setting up an easel for myself in the second house we lived in. But ultimately I stopped painting. **ALLAN'S LIFE WAS EXTREMELY INTENSE**

**AND I MADE THIS DECISION THAT I WOULD SUBLIMATE MY**

**WORK CREATIVELY TO DOING WHAT NEEDED TO BE DONE**

**TO FURTHER HIS CAREER.** I remember thinking, "It's so much easier to be the wife of an artist than to be an artist myself." At the time I thought, "Well, that's a cop-out." But it didn't matter. The stronger impulse was to be a wife.

**You actually had two marriage proposals at the same time. One, you turned down because Allan was so much more...**

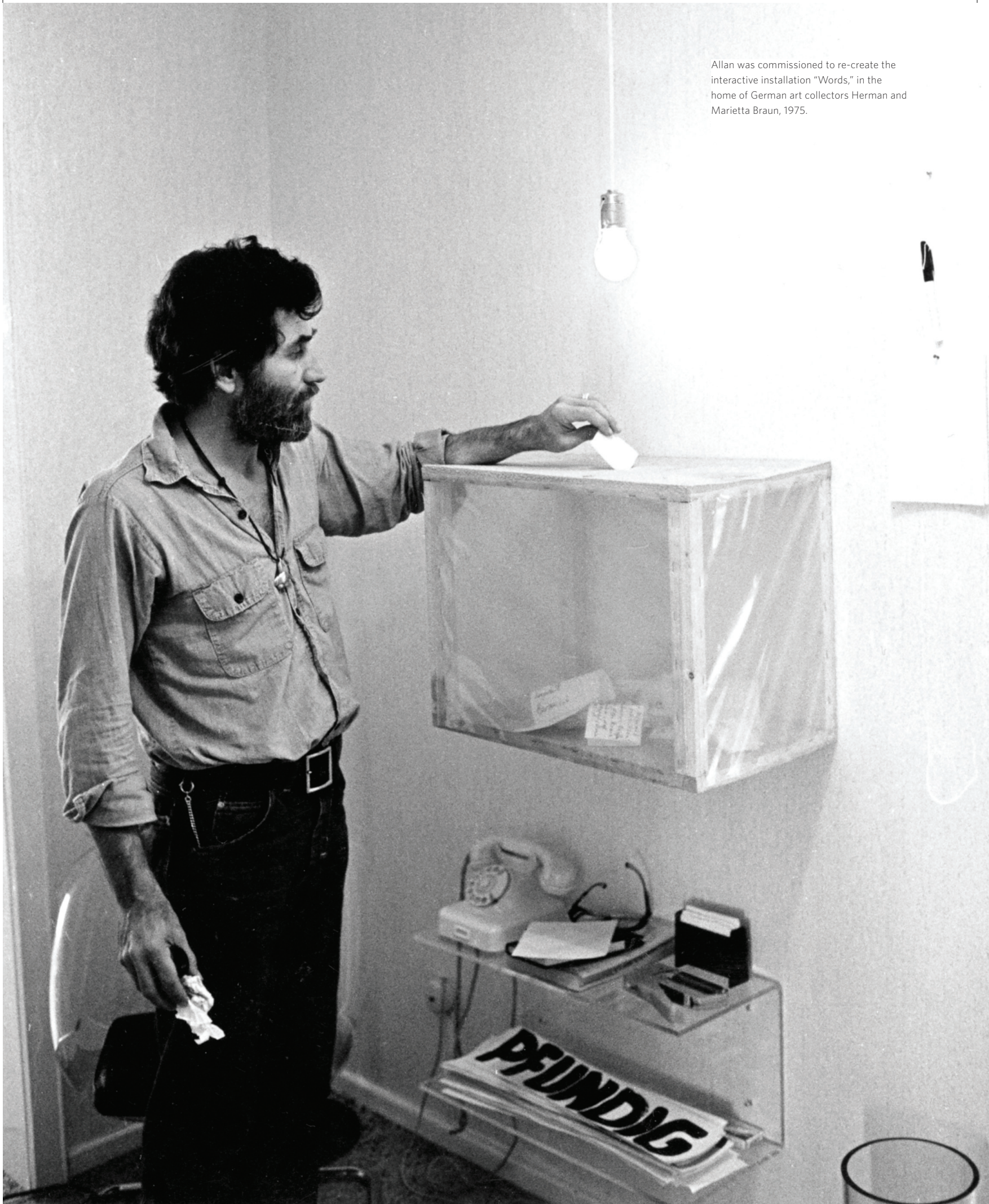
...compelling, absolutely compelling. No question about it. And it was very mutual. Allan was 26 and I was 20, so he was actually *looking* for a wife. Back in the early fifties, I was a prime marriage candidate. My grandmother made sure I had all the right clothes and, as a teenager, I was taken to nightclubs and restaurants in New York, so that I could practice dating. The whole dating scene was not something I liked, but I did it. There had been other boyfriends, but I was convinced that I would never meet a man who was my equal, so I was not in any rush to get married.

**What do you remember about your wedding?**

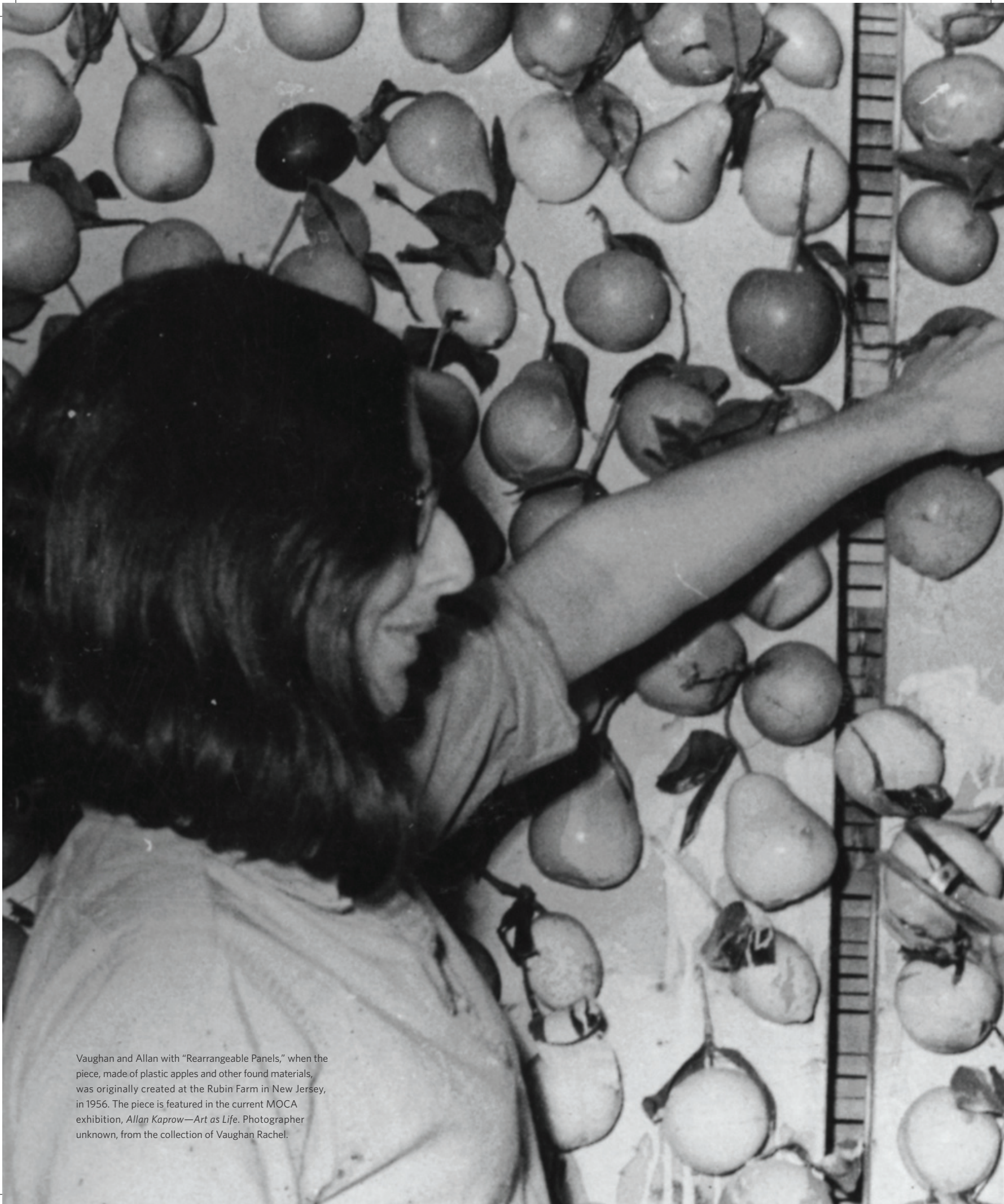
The wedding took place in the Waldorf-Astoria and my grandmother paid for it. We hadn't been married but a few minutes and Allan's ring finger began to hurt him terribly. We had hands very close in size and I was wearing his ring by mistake. Allan had to go into the bathroom and soap his hand to get "my" ring off his finger. That was a portent!



Allan was commissioned to re-create the interactive installation "Words," in the home of German art collectors Herman and Marietta Braun, 1975.

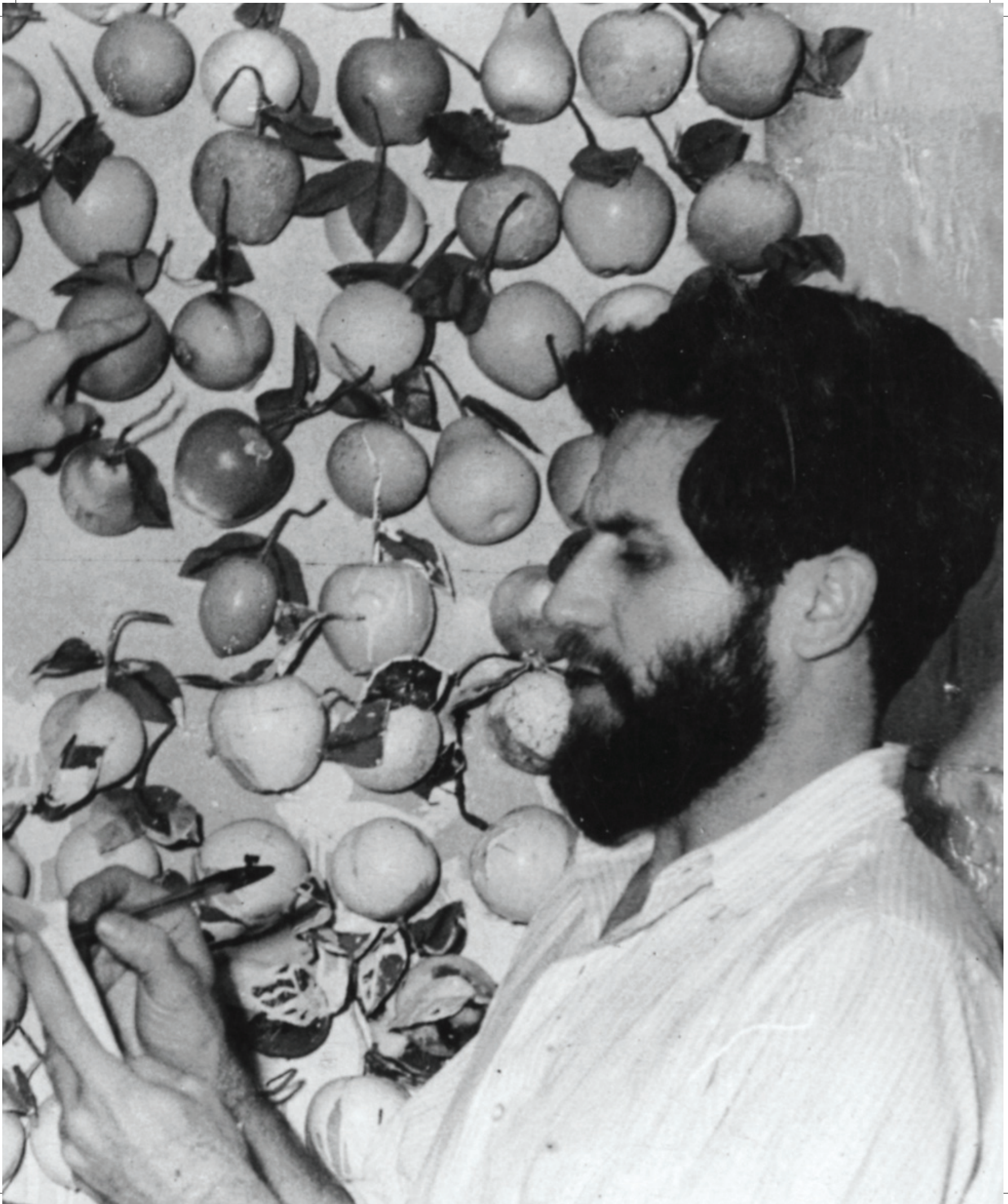






Vaughan and Allan with "Rearrangeable Panels," when the piece, made of plastic apples and other found materials, was originally created at the Rubin Farm in New Jersey, in 1956. The piece is featured in the current MOCA exhibition, *Allan Kaprow—Art as Life*. Photographer unknown, from the collection of Vaughan Rachel.







### How did your hearing issues play out with Allan?

He said it had never made a difference, but that's not true. It makes a difference with my friends. It made a difference with his family. His father was upset that I had a severe hearing loss and, at that time, I did not wear hearing aids. His father was also upset that I wasn't a vivacious, young, pretty Jewish girl.

I had met Allan's mother and I liked her very much. She seemed strange to me in that I thought she was overly attached to her "boy," her son, who was, to me, a grown man. He had been sick with a cold, nothing I thought was too serious, and she came up from New York City with her shopping bags full of healthy food for Allan. I drove her around Provincetown in his Chevy. And she liked me. I remember she told her husband, "If this young woman were Jewish, she would be a perfect wife for our son." I arrived just as Allan's father became more observant as a Jew. Papa's father had died the previous year, and [Allan's father] Papa was saying Kaddish for his father, twice a day. What shook me up was he really did not want me in his house. I mean, I knew that Gentiles could be prejudiced against Jews, but I had no idea that Jews could feel so uncomfortable with Gentiles. That was an eye-opener.

I liked Allan's mother and I liked his sister, Miriam. She welcomed me, but it wasn't until I agreed to convert to Judaism that Allan's father was able to relax enough to welcome me into the household. From Papa's point of view, it was a condition of the wedding. Allan didn't think this was too keen an idea that I had to convert, but he was torn. He didn't say to me, "Look, we have a problem. Let's just elope and we'll patch this up later," and I didn't take the initiative to suggest that. It might have been a good idea because we had a lot of dissension. Allan's father was a lawyer and was very dubious that I would be a good wife for his son. I remember one visit to his office, where he pulled out a drawer from a filing cabinet full of divorce folders, and said, "See, these are all intermarriages that failed." I was sensitive, and it hurt me.

### Despite all these power dynamics, somehow you found a genuine desire to become Jewish. What attracted you, since you grew up without religion?

My closest childhood friend was Jewish. Her parents had an assimilated intermarriage at the time and the family did not observe Judaism, but there was something that her grandmother and her mother and she had that I recognized as being something that I wanted to absorb. I couldn't define what it was, but later, I would say that I knew I wanted to become a part of the tribe. My friend's family placed a great emphasis on education. They read *The New York Times* every day. My father read Hearst newspapers. And they had

books—we had books, too—but somehow it felt like a different culture. I was drawn to that emphasis on an intellectual life.

### Your Jewish connection was really with Allan's family, not with Allan himself?

It was his family. From the beginning, Allan did not think of himself as being Jewish, but his family was pure "Yiddishkeit." The love that I got from all those people who didn't know me—the bigness of everything, the loudness, the zest for life, the storytelling, and all the wonderful, old people—they shared something, a kind of community that I found very absorbing. I had never seen this.

Allan had grown up separated from his family and felt alienated from them. Because of his severe asthma, his parents sent him to schools in Arizona, from first grade through junior high. So he grew up surrounded by Baptists and cowboys, with no sense of his own family life and of this Yiddishkeit that I was learning about. It wasn't that he denied being Jewish, he accepted that, but he didn't want to celebrate or observe any of the holidays. And when they took place at his family's house, it was extremely uncomfortable for him. When I went with Allan to Atlantic City for my first Passover at his grandmother's, he ended up in the hospital with an asthma attack. Allan later became a Zen Buddhist, and I believe this was a very sincere and devout decision on his part. That was after we had separated, in the late seventies.

### Allan wrote his famous essay on Pollock during the first months of your marriage. He finished it in 1956, but it wasn't published until October 1958.

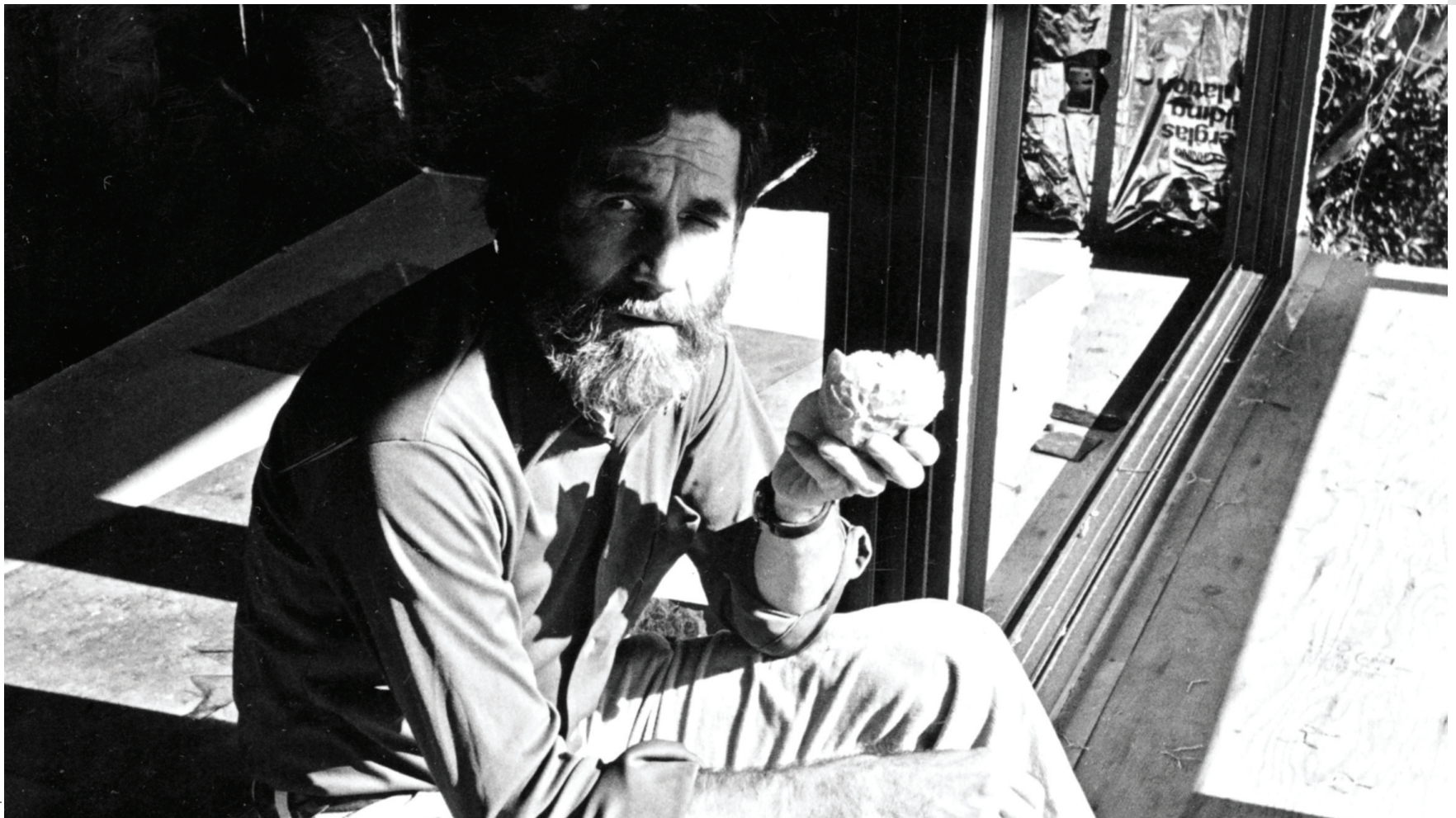
Yes, he wrote the Pollock article when we lived at the Rubin Farm, after moving out of his cottage. He struggled with it. It was not easy for him to write and it was not easy for him to get it published. And then he did interest Thomas Hess at *ARTnews* in publishing it, but it was an on-again, off-again promise. The issues would fill up with something that was timely and it had to be postponed, so he kept waiting and waiting. **HE WAS EXTREMELY DETERMINED**

### AND FOCUSED IN HIS WORK AS AN ARTIST AND AS A

### WRITER. IF ALLAN DIDN'T HAVE HIS ART, HE WOULDN'T

### HAVE A SENSE OF WHO HE WAS. IT WAS SO NECESSARY TO

### HIM TO HAVE THIS IMAGE OF BEING AN ARTIST. One reason,







Opposite: Allan, in the Hollywood Hills, 1978, paired with Vaughan for his group activity "Seven Kinds of Sympathy." Above: Allan and Vaughan (leaning in) at his parents' New York apartment celebrating after their wedding, 1955. Photo by Gene Lesser.

perhaps, was that he had been teased by some of his colleagues in New York for being "the professor." It was a matter of envy, I think, because Allan did have a full-time job, and many people in New York were working job-to-job and were not financially in the same place that Allan was.

When I read the Pollock article, I understood that this was a big departure for him. Allan had, in the past, been a figurative artist. He was never a naturalist painter, but he had a talent for making things look like they really were. His mother loved that and she tried to encourage him to paint realistically because you could sell those works. His work began to get reviews and to be more accepted by the critics. As soon as he felt that he had "done that," he would go to the next step in his evolution as an artist. He was always moving ahead to the "new," whatever he was going to find for himself as new. He was an art historian, he knew how artists' work evolves. He didn't like to be pigeonholed with a trademark. He wanted to *discover*. I believe it was very intentional.

One time, he painted this group of paintings and he asked me what I thought of them, and I told him they looked like bad Elaine de Koonings. Well, he picked them up in his arms and he took them out to the trashcan and they were on fire! He knew immediately that they were bad. To Allan, Elaine de Kooning was not a class-A artist. Maybe if they had been copied after Bill de Kooning. [She smiles.]

**In terms of his teaching, his writing, his art, was it hard for Allan to have so much on his plate?**

He had to have so much on his plate! He would feel completely lost if he wasn't involved in writing something, painting something, going to New York. He was never a classic family man. Allan never relaxed in the sense of going fishing, or going to a ballgame. There was nothing "easy" about him, ever. He was very intense, he was very driven, he was very focused. I

sometimes thought to myself, "This is really a Jewish marriage." I was running the household and he was like the Talmud student who was constantly of the mind, or, as Allan was, thinking about and making his art.

**I imagine that didn't come as a surprise to you.**

Well, it unfolded slowly. There was much that I did with him: we went to New York frequently, there were lots of parties, there were loft parties, there was the Hansa Gallery—it was a nice group of people, and we all became friends. They mostly lived in New York: Miles and Barbara Forst, Jan Müller, Dodie Müller, Jean Follett, Mary Frank, Robert Frank, Alfred Leslie. It was a close group. But then once the children came, I was busy being a mother, as well as being a wife. We had our first child, Anton, in 1957.

**Your third child, Nina, died in 1967. It must have been devastating for both of you.**

It was. And for the children. It was just horrible. To this day I don't think any of us are not still affected. Nina was hit by a car. The accident took place close to our home. She died perhaps three or four days later. [Crying.] I thought she was going to be OK.

**Was there a funeral?**

Papa [Allan's father] took charge. There was no funeral. We had a burial service. Papa had already bought a family plot in Huntington, Long Island. He took care of all the arrangements. It's not that every day I saw the site where the accident happened, but, in general, I wanted to leave where we were. Allan may have disliked teaching school there, but I did not like living there, in the suburbs. When Allan's job offer came, I looked forward with great pleasure to moving to California. We made a tour beforehand with the children to see what it was like.



### **You settled in Pasadena?**

We rented a wonderful house, a big U-shaped mansion, and it was divided in half. It was huge, which was both good and bad. It was too large because it lacked the family intimacy that a smaller house would have made possible. But it was beautiful. I said to Allan, “This is the kind of house I’ve always dreamed of.”

### **Did you and Allan choose it together?**

No, Allan came out and found it. I did not want to live in Pasadena. I wanted to live further west because I wanted to be close to a Jewish neighborhood. I knew Pasadena would be a town not so different from the WASP environments I had grown up in—though, at that time, it was still a small town and my children could be free, and that was good.

### **When did you first take up photography?**

I took snapshots all the time and kept a record of our family. There was no intention on my part that these would be special to anyone but myself. I didn’t start taking photographs seriously until we came to California—not until feminism actually made it important to photograph one’s domestic life, gave it a certain value that it hadn’t had before. Allan had told the art world that you could use anything to make art, but it wasn’t until feminism told me that we, as women, could use anything in our domestic lives to make art that I began doing that. I remember with great amusement when I saw the first lint artwork—women would take the lint from the clothes dryer. I laughed! But this was sort of a symbol of our domestic liberation.

I had a scholarship to CalArts, so that’s when I went back to school. I loved it, though I had mixed feelings. It was hard to so often be away from home and from my children. I was away a lot and their father was away a lot. Still, more than one friend has said to me, “Vaughan, you were the glue that held that family together,” which is true. But I loved going to school: the classes, the students, the teachers, all these minds. It was a very heady time and that’s when I put together a portfolio, with Allan’s encouragement, to apply to the design school as a photography student. There, I studied with a teacher, Ben Lifson, who was very much an influence on my work. **BUT AT THE SAME TIME I WAS STILL VERY MUCH**

**A WIFE—AND AN ARTIST’S WIFE. WE STILL LIVED WITH THIS FLOW OF PEOPLE COMING THROUGH THE HOUSE, AND OUR ATTENTION WAS ON THAT. MY ATTENTION WAS TO**

**SCHOOL AND TO ALLAN AND TO FEMINISM.** I was quite active as a feminist in the seventies.

### **Tell me about the impact of feminism in your life.**

It came in one big sweep. I was very anti-Rose Parade, the queens, the beauty pageant, and I went to the Crenshaw Women’s Center to get advice on how to organize a demonstration. There, I was told about Pasadena Women’s Liberation, a consciousness-raising group. We did demonstrate against the Rose Parade and even got a mention in *The New Yorker*. We were a collective and had other demonstrations in Pasadena. I was also a member of Double X in Los Angeles, a women artists collective.

### **How did Allan feel about all this?**

We had a lot of arguments because I would get teased by men friends for my feminist stance. They thought I was a bit militant. **AND I HAD GREAT**

**DIFFICULTY WITH ALLAN BECAUSE, AS A PROFESSOR, HE WAS VERY VERBAL, VERY ERUDITE, VERY SKILLED WITH LANGUAGE IN A WAY THAT I AM NOT, AND HE COULD RUN RINGS AROUND ME IN AN ARGUMENT AND IT WAS VERY**

**FRUSTRATING.** I had told him several times he thought he was Mr. Perfect. He did not like that one bit. It rankled because part of his persona was that he was all things to all people, and his ego was big.

### **Eventually you separated and then divorced.**

Our divorce was final in 1983, and before that time I had taken a job at the *Los*

*Angeles Times*. This was a first for me, to have to support myself, but it was a wonderful job. I worked in the editorial library and worked all day with two loves of my life, news and photographs. I kept that job for eight years, from 1981 until 1989. I also taught some classes in photography.

By this time we had moved to Eagle Rock, to a large country house, but it was in a great state of disrepair—the land kept sliding. To keep it together was a big job. I did not see that much of my friends in the arts community, or my family. I have no memory of photographing at that time. I hibernated. After retiring, though, I did have time to focus on myself and my work as a photographer. Twice, I traveled to Israel and took many photographs there. Around 1996, I joined a synagogue, Beth Chayim Chadashim, in Los Angeles, where I made close friendships and was guided by my rabbi and the clergy and the congregants. I also traveled to Israel with them. I treasure all the years that I’ve had as a member of my congregation. It’s a tremendously supportive environment.

I recently closed down my darkroom and have spent the last year or so putting my archive together. I have also been doing some writing that was long overdue. My hearing loss is one subject that I have a large amount of material on and I decided to make a book about that. The title is very simple—it’s *Say*. There is a test that audiologists give people who don’t hear well, and they say, literally, “Say the word: Cowboy. Say the word: Ice cream. Say the word: Doughnut.” And you repeat these words. **IF YOU**

**HAVE THE KIND OF HEARING LOSS I HAVE, THERE ARE**

**MANY WORDS SAID THAT YOU NEVER HEAR, AND THIS**

**LOSS IS DEEPLY FRUSTRATING. YOU ARE UNABLE TO SAY**

**THE WORD BECAUSE IT IS NOT IN YOUR BRAIN.**

I regret that I haven’t written more. I regret that I didn’t better prepare more for my financial security. Generally speaking, I have the regrets that all of us have for making wrong choices. The regrets are certainly fewer in terms of my worldview. I miss too many people in my life who have died. That’s one thing that’s not so much fun about getting old—that other people get old, too, and then they leave and then they are gone. This is a shock.

**You and Allan had a reconnection toward the end of his life, and you were able to visit him.**

What was bittersweet is that I didn’t begin that process soon enough. Allan was not well—he was diagnosed with dementia—and that interfered with our communication, so by the time I began to spend more time with him, it was really keeping him company for the afternoon, rather than an exchange of ideas, of talking about things that might be meaningful to us. I did want a rapprochement, to start a friendship, but that wasn’t possible. Yet I do think Allan welcomed these visits. I should have contacted him many years sooner, but there was a lot of animosity between us when we divorced, and for a time I did not want to. I had nothing to say to him, nothing to say. We made some attempts to communicate because of the children, but it was minimal. It took me time to grow up in some ways, and now was the time that we should have been talking gently about what was happening in our lives. But, at that point, it was, unfortunately, too late.

### **AFTER ALLAN WAS CREMATED, I ASKED**

**FOR SOME OF HIS ASHES. WHEN I ASKED HIS WIFE FOR**

**THEM, I THOUGHT SHE WAS GOING TO GIVE ME A LITTLE**

**BAGGIE WITH THREE OR FOUR TABLESPOONS OF ASHES.**

**INSTEAD, SHE GAVE ME A BEAUTIFUL MARBLE BOX**

**WITH THE ASHES INSIDE.** I took some of them to my grandparents’ cemetery in Inglewood, and I dug a hole and put them in the ground. When my grandmother’s husband died in 1911, she had bought a stone that said “Husband.” So I put Allan’s ashes in front of the “Husband” stone. I thought that was appropriate.

Then I still had some left over and I thought, “Well, I’d like this to be meaningful in another way.” I took them down to the Arroyo, in Pasadena, where we used to picnic with friends. There are two streams, and I put some of the ashes into the stream. And I do not go back there to take photographs. Where his other ashes are, I have no idea.☒





In the Kaprow kitchen: American multimedia artist Bruce Nauman with his first wife, Justine, and their son, in 1973. Below: Allan visiting with German art collector Wolfgang Feelisch, in 1978. Feelisch owns the rights to one of Allan's best-known works, "Yard," an interactive installation involving hundreds of used tires—a legal arrangement that remains highly unusual in the history of Happenings. At right is Marietta Braun, who hosted the get-together in her home.

