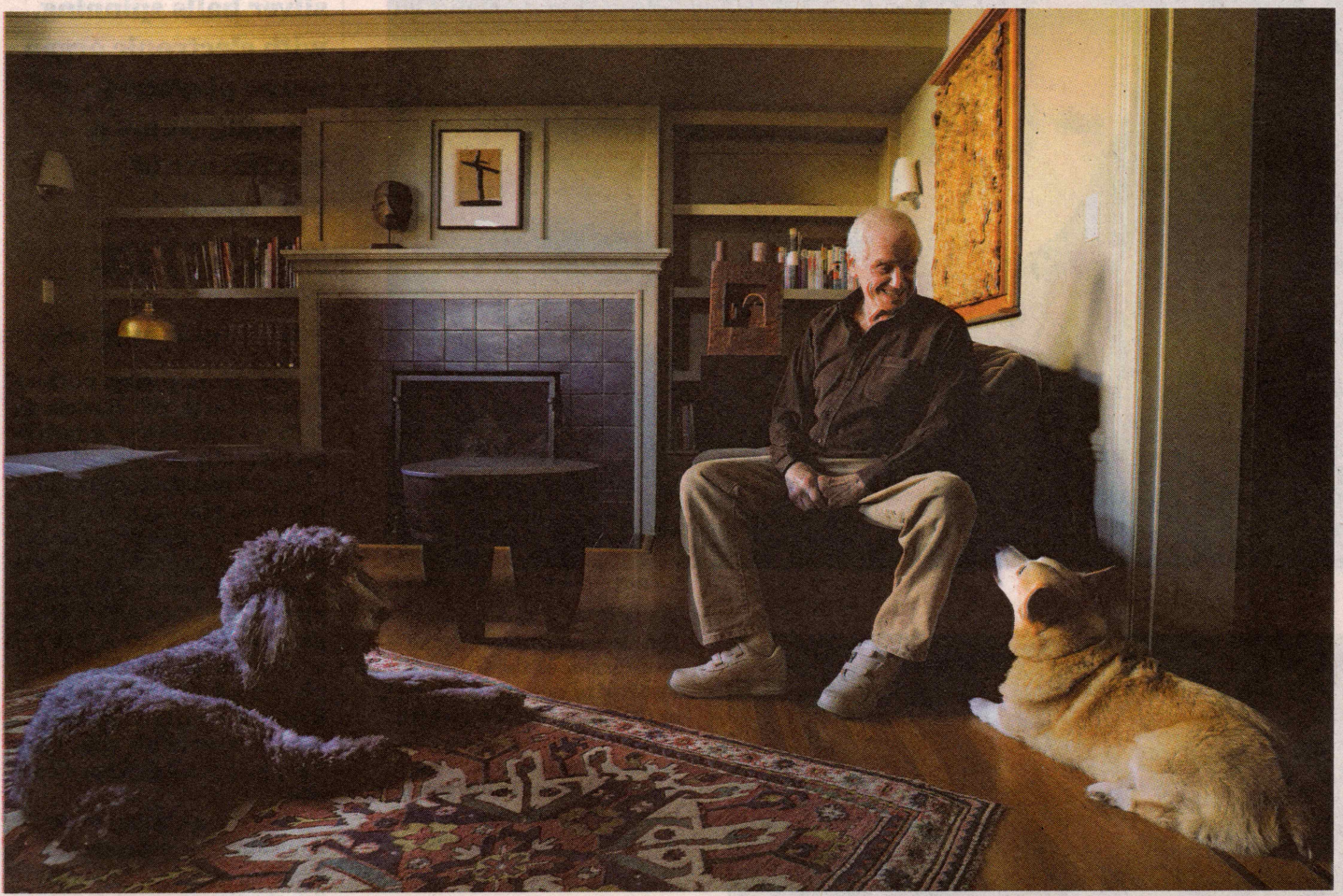




Carlos Avila Gonzalez / The Chronicle

CHARLES DESMARAIS *Art*

A lifetime of bringing bold creations to light

Newman a proponent of avant-garde art, new music for 7 decades and counting

Jim Newman is a handsome man of 84, but he is likely recognized only by friends at the art events he often attends. He stands with an almost military bearing, though he steadies his walk with a cane — the result of a childhood bout with polio. Quiet and unassuming, he could be any interested fan, shyly skirting the edge of the crowd.

To those who know the history of art and music on the West Coast, however, Newman is hardly a peripheral figure. From the early 1950s until very recently, he has played a central role, helping forge the Bay Area's identity as home to the experimental and the visionary.

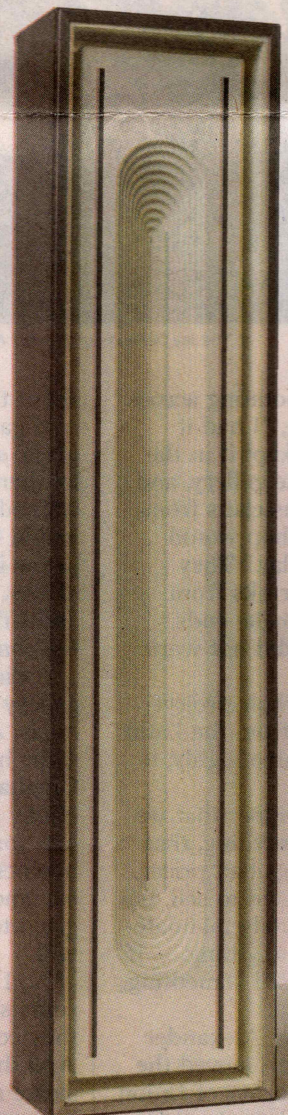
Above: Jim Newman, at home in S.F. with Sabine (left) and Milo, co-founded the avant-garde gallery Dilexi in 1958, which showed work like Tony DeLap's sculpture "Day," at right.

Newman was among the first to seriously promote as collectible the avant-garde art of San Francisco. Beginning in the 1960s, his work as a television and film producer helped bring underground art and music into the light, and his support of new music as co-founder of the form's best-known annual festival has helped expand the definition of "classical" for the past 25 years.

Walter Hopps, the curator who organized the first Marcel Duchamp retrospective and the first show of Andy Warhol's "Campbell's Soup Cans," talks about Newman's early efforts in his engaging book, "The Dream Colony," published posthumously in June 2017. The two met around 1950 at Stanford University, where they tried to organize jazz concerts.

Hopps writes, "When every attempt to book one on the Stanford campus was blocked by the administration — they wouldn't

Newman continues on E2



ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Seeking the new in art and music

Newman from page E1

have black musicians on the stage of the Memorial Auditorium — (Jim) transferred to Oberlin College.” Hopps moved to UCLA, but they formed a cross-country partnership called the Concert Hall Workshop.

“I was sure that jazz musicians would become heroes and rake in the fortunes they deserved. But I didn’t think the art I loved was ever going to go anywhere, really; there was no way the world would embrace it. I had everything absolutely backward, of course. The artists would make the money, and the jazz musicians would die off.”

The two continued to indulge their parallel interest in visual art, however, consulting long distance by telephone and, to save money, by shortwave radio and by sending tape recordings through the mail. They discussed, but Newman claims no credit for, what became the first exhibition of West Coast Abstract Expressionism, formally titled “Action One” but called by everyone “The Merry-Go-Round Show” (it was held at the Santa Monica Pier carousel).

Still, that show was held in 1955, just a year after Newman and his friend “Chico,” as Hopps was known at the time, made the rounds together to San Francisco studios. The exhibition ultimately included works by many of the artists they met that summer, Newman told Paul Karlstrom in a 1974 interview for the Archives of American Art. Among the people they visited were such now-legendary figures as Jay DeFeo, Sonia Gechtoff, Wally Hedrick, James Kelly, Hassel Smith, Julius Wasserstein and “quite a number of other painters.”

Hopps and Newman co-founded an art gallery called Syndell Studio in Los Angeles in 1954. Newman lived in the back until he decided to move to San Francisco, just as the gallery closed. Hopps then opened the seminal Ferus Gallery in March 1957.

“I was sort of an out-of-town distant partner in that operation,” Newman said. “At that time, our thought was eventually to have an operation going in San Francisco and in Los Angeles. ... We were totally captivated by all the strange images that were being produced — and being put into some ... bizarre concrete forms by these artists that we were meeting.”

In 1958, Newman decided to open his own space, working with an artist partner. In a recent interview at his home, he said, “the Jazz Workshop, which was a prominent jazz club on Broadway in North Beach, had an empty floor up above. We used to go there a lot to listen to music, and met the owners. Bob Alexander and I somehow broached the idea of renting the upstairs space and putting an art gallery in there, which we would keep open on evenings and on weekends.”

They opened with a group show, with a small bookstore in back. “This piano, actu-

ally,” he said, pointing across his living room, “I had it shipped out. I kept it in the main part of the gallery, and some of the musicians from the Jazz Workshop would come up and play.” They hoped to sell drinks from downstairs to make ends meet, but that did not work out.

They called their project Dilexi Gallery, from the Latin “to select, to value highly, to love.”

“I can’t remember that we sold much of anything, that first year. Things had prices, and artists wanted to sell, but it wasn’t absolutely mandatory that we sell anything. ... If somebody did sell something, it was an event.”

Within a year, Alexander left and Newman moved the gallery to the corner of Union and Laguna streets. In 1965, he moved again, to Clay Street. Each space marked an improvement in the gallery’s fortunes, but it was never

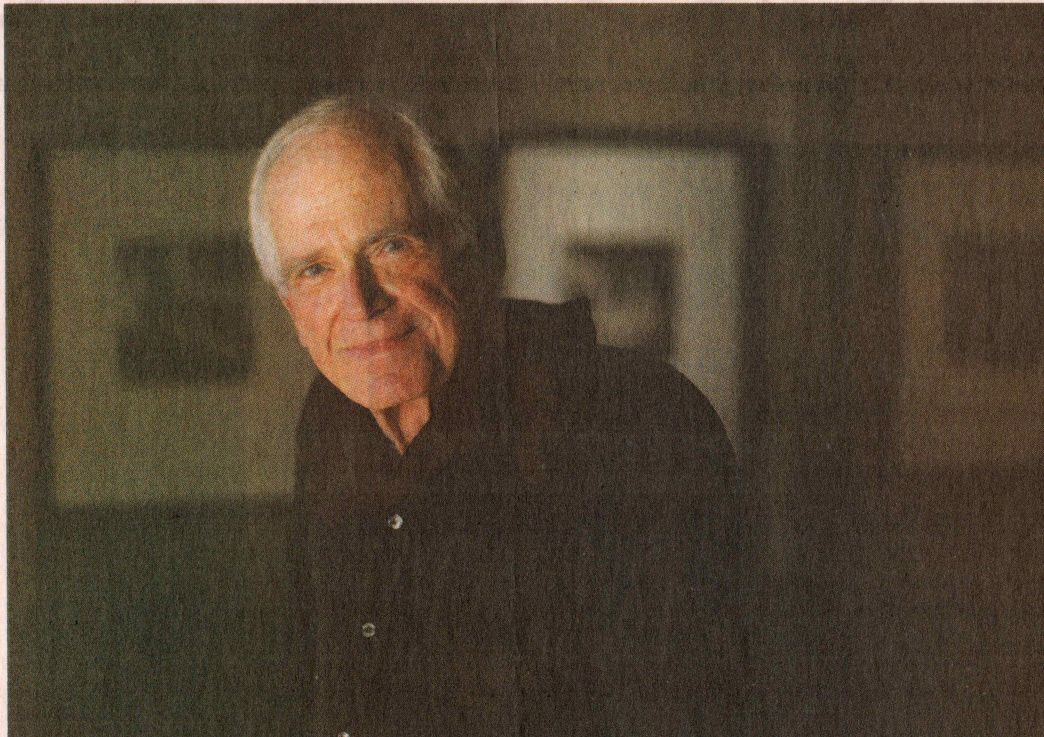
about the money.

“I gave (the artists) a showplace, and I was very open to let them do exactly what they wanted to do. And they would be very much involved in the installation of their shows. They were friends, and I think valued some of the contacts I made for them.”

It didn’t cost much to run a gallery — certainly not like today. And Newman had some help, coming from the Omaha family that owned the Hinky Dinky market chain. “I had some stock in my family’s business — you know, a modest amount. Some of it was given to me in my mother’s will.

“... I would occasionally sell some shares to my brothers — they could see the value in it. And that kind of helped subsidize my operating the gallery over a period of time.”

One person who did buy occasionally was Robert Branstien, now a steadfast supporter of contemporary art pro-



Carlos Avila Gonzalez / The Chronicle

Jim Newman, above, is the co-founder of the Other Minds Festival of new music as well as the Dilexi Gallery, which exhibited such avant-garde work as Jay DeFeo’s “The Annunciation” (1957/59), left, now in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago.



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gramming at the Fine Art Museums of San Francisco. Dilexi “was *the* place in San Francisco for contemporary art. There was nothing that competed with it,” he said by phone.

“Art was so different from what it is today. Then it was more like book collecting — it was a small group of people that were interested.”

Newman “was totally engaged,” Branstien said. “He cared for his artists. They tended to be local — ‘local’ meaning California.”

A 1984 exhibition at the Oakland Museum, “The Dilexi Years, 1958-1970,” chronicled the artistic achievement of the gallery. It included the work of 36 artists — people like Roy De Forest, Tony DeLap and Deborah Remington.

The late DeFeo, also in the show, was quoted in the exhibition catalog. “Jim came along with something that was an absolute original,” she said. “He was in a position not to be commercial but to be selective in the artists that he chose to handle, and because of that he was totally unique from the so-called more commercial schlocky kind of galleries that will always prevail, I suppose.”

Wanting to reach a broader public, Newman produced a series of open-air events, and began to work with the Bay Area public television station, KQED. He closed the gallery in 1970.

“I particularly remember a show he did (in 1968) with Terry Riley and Arlo Acton called ‘Music With Balls,’ the composer Charles Amirkhanian said in a recent interview. “The entire TV program consisted of 30 minutes of these silver balls spinning, with electronic organ music playing. I thought, ‘What a terrific use of television!’ ”

Other artists he enlisted included Anna Halprin, Warhol and Frank Zappa. He also produced films, including one

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Charles Amirkhanian, composer, on a 1968 show by Jim Newman on KQED

on the jazz musician, philosopher and seer Sun Ra called “Space Is the Place,” which was recently re-released.

Amirkhanian, meanwhile, had been playing a major role in introducing new music to the region through his efforts as music director at the non-profit FM station KPFA from 1969 to 1992. When it was announced he was leaving to be co-director of the Djerassi Resident Artists Program in Woodside with his wife, Carol Law, he got a call from Newman.

“What am I going to do?” Amirkhanian remembers Newman saying. “I get all my information on contemporary music from your program. Is there anything I can do for you to keep some kind of presence in the city?”

The result was the Other Minds Festival, which was first produced as the grand opening event for the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in 1993. That one brought together Robert Ashley, Philip Glass, Meredith Monk, Conlon Nancarrow, Trimpin, Julia Wolfe and others. The festival saw its 22nd edition in 2017, and has grown to include a record label; a regular show on KALW, 91.7 FM; two websites (www.otherminds.org and www.radiom.org) and occasional non-festival concerts.

“When Jim spoke about music, he was not coming to it from the stance only of a listener but a practitioner. I’m not sure how many in the visual arts world ever knew that,” said Amirkhanian. For more than 30 years, Newman played baritone saxophone with the Junius Courtney Big Band in the East Bay.

Newman has been reducing his load of public activities of late. He recently retired from playing the sax and left the board of Other Minds. He and his second wife, photographer and former gallerist Jane Ivory, hold weekly screenings for friends of international films in their home. But it is hard to say there might not be a next intellectual chapter for the octogenarian avant-gardist.

“He’s a calm, curious guy who enjoys — ‘cutting edge’ is a cliché — he’s eclectic and broad in his interests,” said Branstien, the collector.

As Amirkhanian put it, “He’s most excited when he hears something he’s never heard before.”

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