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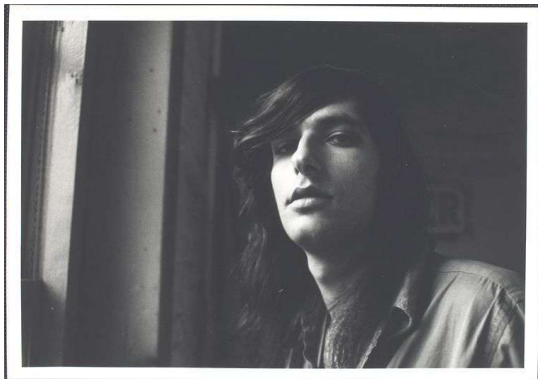
Lewis Warsh: Poet of Community

By Julie Carlsen, Assistant Curator

Henry W. and Albert A. Berg

Collection of English and American Literature
(Stephen A. Schwarzman Building)

Originally published on the New York Public Library website, Apr 11, 2025



Photograph of Lewis Warsh, Granary Books, NYPL Berg Collection

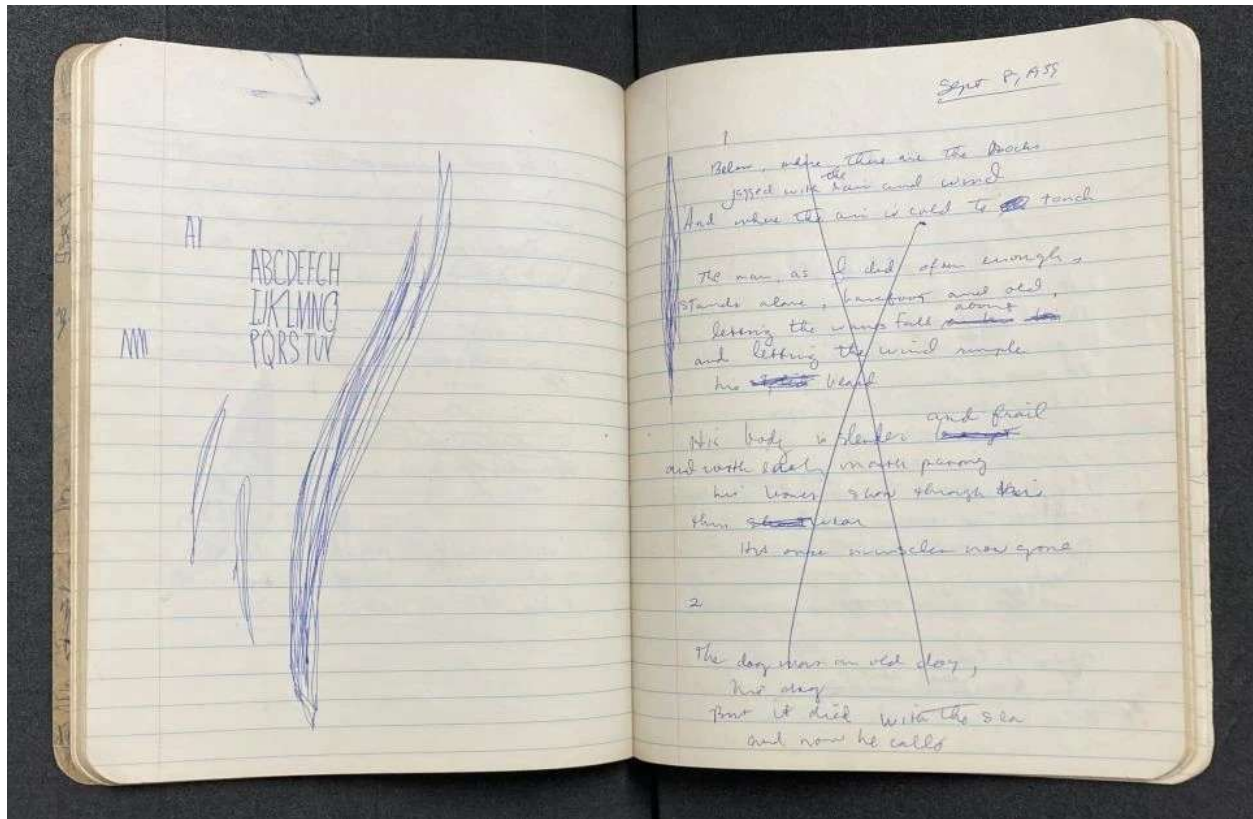
In celebration of National Poetry Month, the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature is highlighting award-winning American poet Lewis Warsh (1944–2020). Warsh's archive, which comprises 85 manuscript boxes, includes his handwritten drafts of his poetry, professional correspondence, letters to friends and family, notebooks and journals, original collage artwork—and so much more. The collection, which was recently processed by the Library's Archival Processing Unit, is newly described in an online finding aid and is available for research.

Warsh began his lifelong practices of keeping poetry notebooks and writing collaboratively at a young age. He started his first poetry notebook at fifteen while attending the Bronx Highschool of Science, and he started meeting with his classmates as a writing club outside of school hours. After graduation, Warsh enrolled in the City College of New York and began developing more meaningful connections with more established local poets, including several members of the New York School. He attended Kenneth Koch's poetry class at the New School, where he first drafted the poem that would become his first book, "The Suicide Rates," which Koch praised as "terrific." Warsh would later credit Koch's feedback for being formative to his career.

Warsh also became deeply connected to the West Coast poetry scene early on in his career. He attended the Berkeley Poetry Conference in 1965, where he connected with poet Anne Waldman, with whom he would co-found the landmark magazine *Angel Hair*.

After returning to New York, Warsh and Waldman found jobs as a caseworker for the Welfare Department (Warsh) and an assistant at the newly formed Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church (Waldman), and got to work printing *Angel Hair*. Their home became a local salon for artists and writers, and Warsh and Waldman used *Angel Hair* to publish the "constant stream of visitors who passed

through our door," including Ted Berrigan, Joe Brainard, Bill Berkson, and dozens of others. Warsh and Waldman also published friends from California in *Angel Hair*, creating a bi-coastal community of poets—one that was, as Warsh later wrote, "based on a feeling of connectedness that transcended small aesthetic differences, all the usual traps that contribute to a blinkered pony vision of the world"—in the magazine's pages.

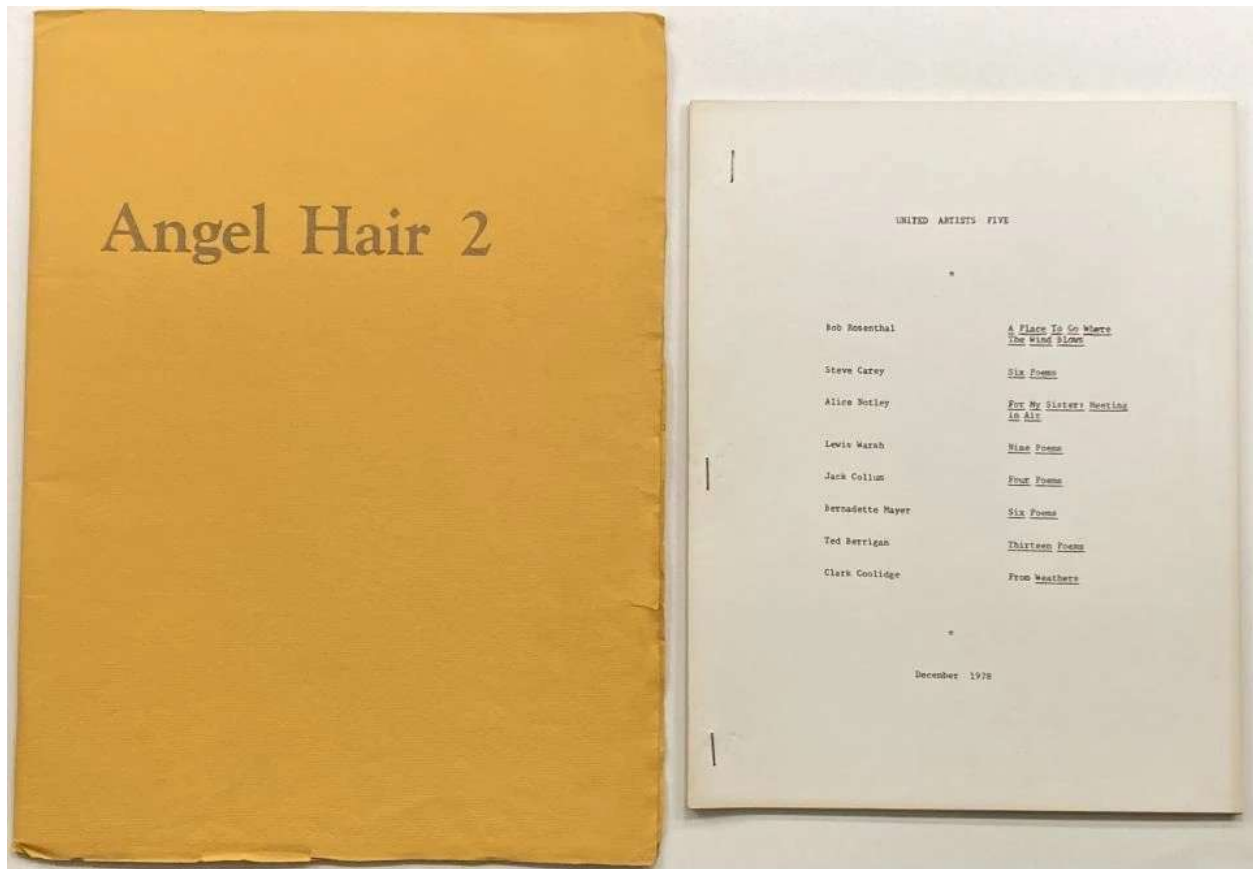


Warsh's earliest poetry notebook (1959), NYPL Berg Collection

Although *Angel Hair* was short-lived, Warsh continued writing, editing, and publishing poetry throughout his life. After leaving the city and relocating to New England in 1975, Warsh and poet Bernadette Mayer co-founded the magazine *United Artists*, which connected new friends (like Clark Coolidge) and old collaborators (like Alice Notley) alike. "We were living in relative isolation in Lenox, Massachusetts," Warsh later reflected, "and editing the magazine put us in touch with poets and friends we had left behind in New York." In the Library's 1997 exhibition *A Secret Location on the Lower East Side*, curators Stephen Clay and Rodney Phillips noted the magazine's significance: "*United Artists* served to a great extent as a bridge between the generations."

Lewis Warsh's archive is rich in correspondence related to both the publication of *Angel Hair* and *United Artists*, though his close relationships with so many of the contributors can make it difficult to

distinguish between professional and personal letters. The archive is also filled with evidence of Warsh's later pursuits: teaching and creating artwork. Warsh began his academic teaching career in 1985 and eventually settled at Long Island University, where he founded the Master of Fine Arts program in creative writing.



Angel Hair (1966) and United Artists (1985), NYPL Berg Collection

In the last decades of his life, Warsh created a large number of drawings and collages, including a delightful "Alphabet" series composed solely of letters. He passed away in 2020 and was survived by his wife Katt Lissard; his children Marie, Sophia, and Max; and two grandchildren.

In a memorial essay, poet Brenda Coultas, wrote that she considered Warsh a mentor despite never being his student, and reflected that he "taught by example, by his dedication to making, distributing, and publishing within a community organized around poetry." Warsh's commitment to community cemented his lasting importance to American poets and poetry; his archive at The New York Public Library ensures that his work will continue to inspire poets today—and for countless years to come.

The Lewis Warsh papers are held by The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations, and are available for consultation to anyone with a research project and an NYPL library card.



"The Alphabet #6" (2007), NYPL Berg Collection

Please visit the New York Public Library website at nypl.org for more information about the Berg Collection, its history, and our policies for research appointments. For any questions about the items shown here, the Berg Collection, and/or to schedule a research appointment, please write to berg@nypl.org.