

SOMEBODY SHOULD JUST GIVE HIM A
HAIRCUT

BY ELENA HARVEY COLLINS

D.A.
LEVY

I moved from the UK to Cleveland at 23 years old. I had a baby, my husband worked long hours, and I had no family support. I've always been a place person, my identity tied to surroundings and daily habits, and here I felt myself slipping. I had visited Cleveland twice before I moved, once in the dead of winter and once in the hyper-lush summer, and remembered certain traffic intersections and routes that we drove to the grocery store or the park or the cinema; small disjointed maps hanging in space. After moving, I couldn't find those precise routes again, although I have sometimes felt their edges. I spent a year and a half crisscrossing the city without a car, on a mission, overlaying South London affect atop of Cleveland reality. My son was always my companion, down for whatever, cheerios. I got lost and pushed his stroller for miles.

d.a. levy was a walker too,¹ and his poetry is full of maps.² When I first stumbled across his work, it was as if someone had captured the from-the-ground-up weirdness and visual stabs that Cleveland gives on a daily basis; he saw the city critically, as an outsider would. I was--am still--coming to terms with basic things; the inhumanity of the large-radius curb or the un-cleared sidewalk in winter, and his incredulity meant a lot to me. "Cleveland Undercovers" (1964-65) narrates a long, wandering walk through a necropolis in which much is hidden or muffled by ashes. Over its pages levy excavates the city's unowned histories and psychic pathways, stating, "i have a city to build." levy's city is built with words that become "sweaty brick-flesh images," a mash-up of neon boozeries, steamships, shopping

centers, hillbillies, magical names (WINDERMERE, MAGNOLIA, SEVERANCE), brawls, rain-washed pavements, casinos, dance halls, Lincoln Continentals, and ecstasy, crossing between present and past just to insult Moses Cleaveland (Mose-ass...) and visit the Seneca, Huron, Delaware, and Chippewa tribes who once lived in the region.³

For all of the thick, epic works like "Cleveland Undercovers" and "SUBURBAN MONASTERY DEATH POEM" (1968, from which the title of this exhibition is drawn), levy produced many shorter poems, which are often simple and romantic. "blues for life" (1960) is a bittersweet whisper of a poem, as if levy is standing outside of himself, foretelling his future:

i miss the cups of coffee
that we
were never without
i miss the wild topics
we used
to talk about
[...]
i miss the night life
and digging the sounds
i miss the lakefront drives
and making the midnight rounds

"REFRIGERATOR MANTRA / the sunlight shining thru my wife's paisley skirt" (1967) pairs two efficient poems. The first, a concrete poem in the form of a refrigerator, imagines its familiar, domestic whirr and hum as a meditation. The second evokes a moment of calm, everyday beauty; I am transported, can feel the raking sunlight slanting through the kitchen window and catching the translucent fabric of Dagmar's dress in the kitchen of the apartment they shared. Though they were never married, they had an intense three-year

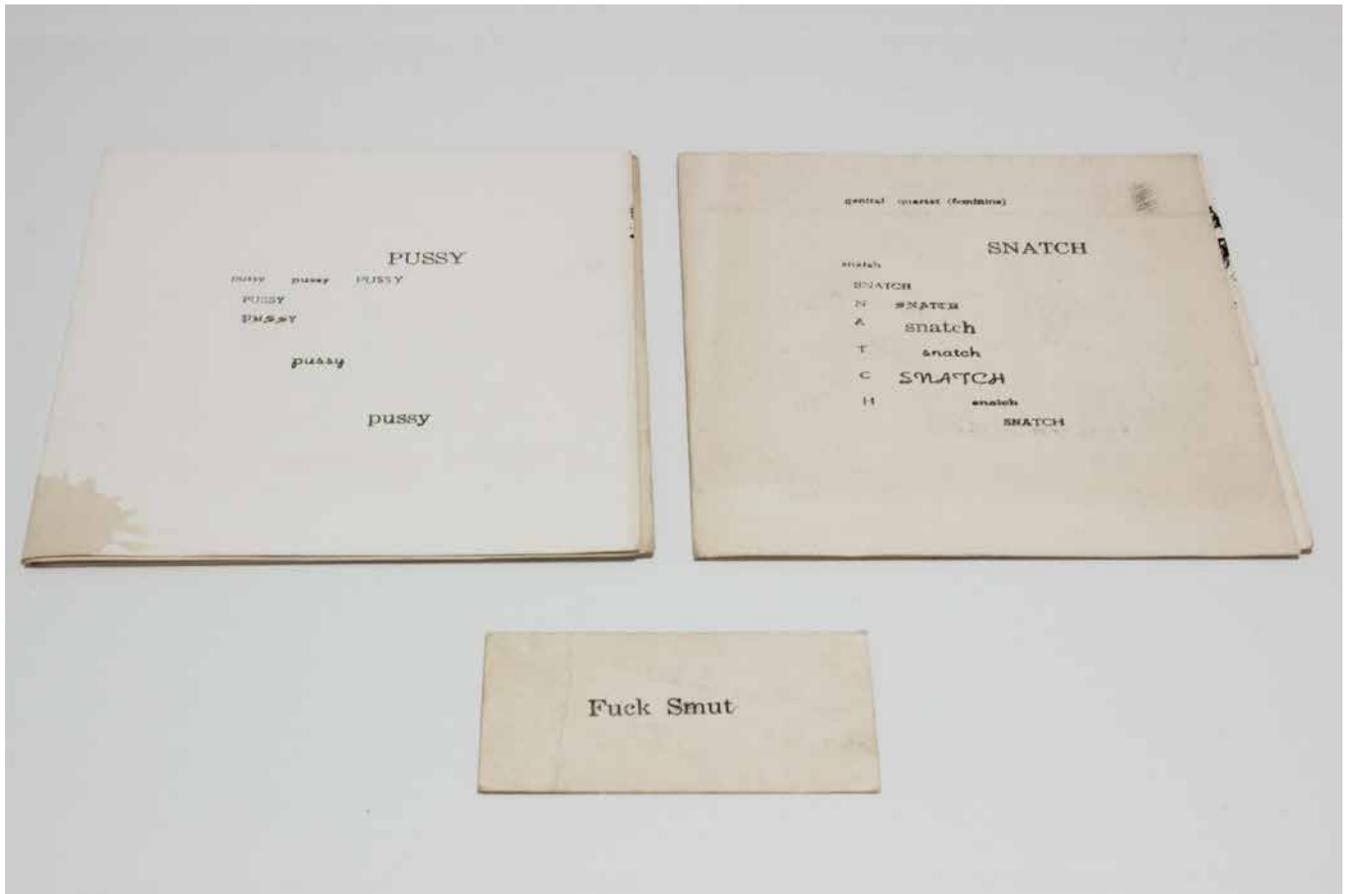
relationship, after moving in together partly out of convenience. levy had outstayed his welcome with friends in Shaker Heights. Dagmar, feeling her seventeen years, just wanted to be out, but the world felt big and she wanted "a body in the house."⁴ The University Circle/East Cleveland border, the area where MOCA Cleveland now sits, had an energy about it in the 1960s. levy and his friends--Tom Kryss, rjs, Russell Salamon, Kent Taylor, D.R. Wagner--and many more, haunted the establishments running the length of Euclid Avenue: the Trinity Cathedral basement; the Continental Theater; the Crystal Restaurant (\$1.90 dinners); the Asphodel bookstore, owned by his friend and supporter Jim Lowell.⁵ Allen Ginsberg came through. But for Dagmar, living with an increasingly paranoid and exhausted levy became "a mindfuck" as time went on.⁶ Firmly planted in the real world, Dagmar elicited levy's scorn, despite the fact that she worked full time to pay the rent, supporting his efforts and allowing him to maintain his oppositional stance as an uncompromised artist. She remembers this time as a short, intense period of her life; after his death she moved on and left the scene behind. But levy is frozen.

I extrapolate levy and thaw him out, imagine him hanging around East Cleveland, broke and complaining, or drunk off of 1/3 of a beer, holding threats of suicide over everybody's head and distributing the Buddhist 3rd Class Oracle on the corner, making his frenetic psychic mark on a slow city during fast times.⁷ I imagine his response to Cleveland today. An unapologetic, often juvenile provocateur, levy painstakingly typeset the words cunt, cock, and pussy (*Farewell the floating cunt*, 1964), and produced a calling card bearing only the words Fuck Smut, a smart-alec response to the obscenity charges brought by the city. In general, he acted the part of the cartoonish poster child for middle-American outrage (except with the grandmothers of Cleveland Heights, in whom he--thin, scruffy--reportedly elicited a motherly, hair tousling response). But the rage-powered invectives he

directed towards the city government, police, and any publication that refused to print his poetry found equal and opposite expression in his passionate advocacy for other poets and artists, tirelessly making a space for their voices. He railed against the complacency of city leaders and politicians but repped East Cleveland the same way rappers in the 1990's gave big-ups to Brooklyn and the Bronx; like it was a name that people should know. Knowing these things, I think his response to recent turns in Cleveland--the Orwellian-sounding "Opportunity Corridor" development; the police shooting death of 12-year-old Tamir Rice; the breakaway inequality and foreclosure crisis--would have been scathing. Or perhaps that's off the mark; maybe he'd have mellowed with age. Speculation on the future feelings of a dead man is impossible. But levy understood that when you really love something you are allowed to be angry at it for not being better. Right now, I think we could use some of his rage.

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1. levy owned very few possessions, and no car. It was both an ideological position and a function of his self-imposed poverty. Karl Young discusses his walking practice in his essay "At the Corner of Euclid Ave. and Blvd. St. Germaine: d.a.levy's Parables of Local Necessity and Universal Decentralism," *d.a.levy & the mimeo revolution*, edited by Larry Smith & Ingrid Swanberg, Huron, OH: Bottom Dog Press, 2007, page 155.
2. Ingrid Swanberg connects the geographic dots beautifully in her essay "clouds sun moon mountains water wind: the planetary vision of d.a.levy," *Renegade Flowers: The LevyFest 2014 Anthology*, edited by D.R. Wager & John Dorsey, published by Hydeout Press in coordination with the Kulchur Cooperative Print Workshop.
3. All words in this list excerpted from "Cleveland Undercovers," 1964-1965.
4. Dagmar Walter, interview with the author, June 2015
5. The Continental Theater showed many experimental films, including early works by Andy Warhol.
6. Walter, interview with the author.
7. levy's friend, Cleveland artist George Fitzpatrick, recalls how sensitive to alcohol levy was, and thus how ironic it was that he was held up as some kind of drug kingpin. Says Fitzpatrick, "I knew kingpins, and levy wasn't one of them!" Interview with the author, May 2015.



d.a. levy
TOP ROW:
pages from *Farewell the floating cunt*, 1967
Letterpress prints, 6 1/2 x 11 1/2 inches
BOTTOM ROW:
Fuck Smut, n.d.
Block print on card stock, 2 x 3 1/2 inches
All courtesy of the d.a. levy Collection,
Cleveland State University Library.

D.A. LEVY

D.A.LEVY: AWARENESS & ECLIPSE
BY INGRID SWANBERG

Cleveland poet, artist, editor, and publisher d.a.levy was a seminal figure in the underground press movement of the 1960s.¹ He was in touch with writers around the US, publishing both the famous and obscure as well as his own poetry and dozens of other Cleveland poets. He was always open to new voices.

levy felt it was necessary for the poet to speak out to bring about change in awareness and the transformation of the culture. He was "part of a movement trying to make this planet more civilized," as he said in a newspaper interview soon after he was jailed on trumped-up obscenity charges brought by city authorities trying to stifle his often scathing criticisms (strung with expletives) of government hypocrisy and corruption.² Complete freedom of speech was his poetic ethos, a freedom he expressed to the point that the powers-that-be were moved to silence him with arrest and persecution. Poet Douglas Blazek, levy's friend and contemporary, wrote:

levy criticized the media: "I think it would be better to have no paper than a propaganda sheet aimed at keeping people ignorant." He spoke out against the war in Vietnam, against the lethargic city officials, against unfair police tactics, against the cherished institutions and values of Middle-America. He helped friends avoid the draft.

He organized what were probably the first coffeehouse readings in the history of Cleveland at The Gate (E. 22nd & Euclid) in the basement of Trinity Cathedral, from which emerged four issues of *Poets at the Gate*.³

In August 1968, three months before his suicide, levy wrote "SUBURBAN MONASTERY DEATH POEM," decrying the appropriation and marginalization of the arts by industrial-consumerist society and the distractions of modern technological culture.

as a poet i try to learn
how to remain human
despite technology

SUBURBAN is levy's farewell to his expressed frustrations of being Cleveland's poet, "the nothingness of being a poet in America" (from "Jaywalking Blues," 1967). Over time levy's poetry had moved from claiming the "necropolis" of Cleveland as his own poetic ground:

i have a city to cover with lines
("Cleveland Undercovers," 1966)

to angry confrontation with it:

cleveland, i gave you
the poems that no one ever
wrote about you
and you gave me
NOTHING

("lettre to cleveland"
Kibbutz in the Sky, 1967)

to renouncing his role as Cleveland's poet and disavowing his project of bringing change:

im not advocating anything
("SUBURBAN MONASTERY
DEATH POEM," 1968)

In 1963 levy acquired a small letterhead hand press and type and proceeded to work with great energy and intensity, sometimes 16 hours a day, producing chapbooks under the imprint Renegade Press and his first periodical *The Silver Cesspool*. He lived in self-imposed poverty in order to devote himself to his poetry full-time. At times friends shared in the work. "We set type, printed & laid in each page by hand, pulled the handle, removed the page, collated, and even carved woodcuts using linoleum."⁴ Friends also shared in the distribution of the work, posting throughout Cleveland the stickers levy had produced in a satirically funny, proselytizing vein, with the moral imperative reading, "FUCK SMUT." In 1965 levy was given a small mimeograph and his output increased exponentially. In 1966 Renegade Press became 7 Flowers Press. In 1967 he began printing on newsprint (his mimeograph had been confiscated by the police), producing the *Buddhist Third Class Junkmail Oracle*, which presented a range of materials, including poetry, Concrete Poetry, editorials, articles on Buddhism, and levy's collages.

The collages are wonderfully rich, usually filling the entire frame with (often erotic) images from antiquity, history, current events juxtaposed with clippings of letters, words and phrases taken from magazines, newspapers, advertisements, comic books, and sometimes hand-lettering or overstrikes. The overall mood of the collages is generally ironic, evocative, and sometimes satiric.

Many of levy's paintings involve areas in which the paper or canvas is saturated with large swaths of

deep colors softly melding together, sometimes with the imposition of an image in another medium or vigorous over-strokes of paint or ink, drawing our attention to the richness of the medium itself, and the energy of its application. levy's paintings and prints are largely non-representative, yet they often bring forward a strong feeling for organic form. These are often playfully titled with Cleveland landmarks and place names, as in the two sets of *Cleveland Prints* (1964), i.e. "the angel of death rides the van aiken local" and "George Washington visits the cleveland zoo." In *5 Cleveland Prints* he applied block prints alongside inked condom impressions (an invention challenging the moral guardians with mocking humor); in *6 Cleveland Prints* he combined block prints and streams of freeform type, introducing elements of Concrete Poetry. "Lakefront at Night" presents a completely dark surface superimposed with a semi-transparent, textured, greenish horizontal swath interrupted with intermittent, small wiggling strokes, somehow at once suggestive of a living waterfront and the inability to see anything.

Blazek writes of levy's engagement with Concrete Poetry:

Though he was seldom given credit for it, levy was... one of the first to introduce Concrete Poetry to the American literary public. Since its conception in the early 1950s it had pretty much remained in Europe. Only a few people such as Aram Saroyan's *Lines* magazine or Dick Higgins' *Something Else Press* were in on this development. Many of levy's books and magazines were devoted to his own personal brand of concrete.⁵

levy's Concrete Poetry primarily involved mimeo printing and collage. Some of the Concrete poems present repeating rows of typed characters shaped to resonate thematically (and sardonically) with the poem's title,

and with the characters and symbols composing them. Examples from the exhibition include variations of "visualized prayer to the american god," in which repeated dollars and cents symbols form the shape of the American flag, a swastika, or just fields of dollar signs. A different example is "REFRIGERATOR MANTRA," in which the poem offers the sounds of a refrigerator as a meditation.

levy also approached Concrete by over-inking mimeo stencils and over-printing pages to create dense fields of obscuration in which words move in and out of decipherability. *Scarab Poems*, from the exhibition, is an excellent example. The sustained ellipses, sometimes denoted with blacked-out lines interposed with words and fragments of phrases, sometimes completely eclipsed, evoke the coming and going of thought in meditation and the coming and going of text before the eyes of the printer. The heavily saturated lines of obliterated text appearing below the intact poem titles are also suggestive of censorship, of silencing the poem. These poems strongly evoke levy's ambivalence about language as a means of communication. "Words scramble everything. The whole civilized communication system is all screwed up!"⁶ The representational, descriptive, interpretive aspects of language are in complete abeyance. We are invited to experience only what is there: ink on paper, "words... on a material level," silence and to notice ourselves being there.⁷

1. Note that levy's poetic signature appears as "d.a.levy" with no spaces, and I have chosen this formatting here.
2. Interview with Dick Feagler (*Cleveland Press*, March 31, 1967).
3. Douglas Blazek, untitled essay, *Zen Concrete & Etc.* (Madison, WI: Ghost Pony Press, 1991), 209.
4. Kent Taylor, "The Cleveland Underground Poetry Scene: A Personal Reminiscence," *Zen Concrete & Etc.*, 225.
5. Blazek, 210.
6. "Raging Against the Dying of the Light: Interview with d.a.levy," Andrew Curry, *Dust* 12, "d.a.levy Issue," Spring 1969, 17.
7. d.a.levy, "Introduction," *18th Dynasty Egyptian Automobile Turnon*, by D. R. Wagner, 2nd ed., (Glendale, CA: Poetry Est, 1967), unpaginated.

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blues for the life

i miss the morning stars
and the kisses
that tasted so sweet
i miss the quiet music
and the silken tresses
the color of wheat

i miss the silent eyes
that glowed
with inner life
i miss the little girl
who will someday
be my wife

i miss the cups of coffee
that we
were never without
i miss the wild topics
we used
to talk about

i miss the cool chic
that i held
in my arms
i miss my woman
with her thousand ~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~
secret charms

i miss the night life
and
digging the sounds
i miss the lakefront drives
and making
the midnight rounds

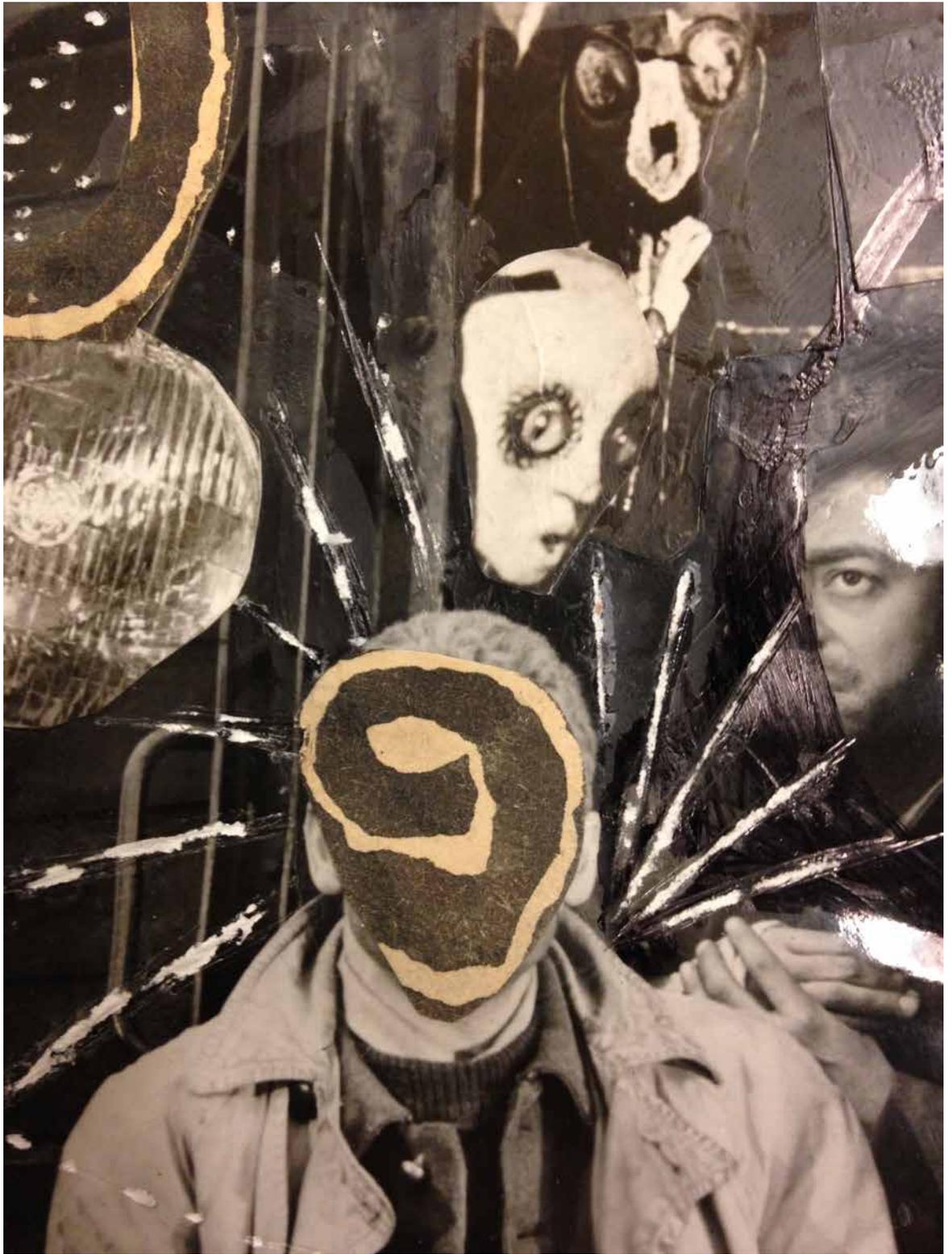
i miss it all deep inside
and its something
that i cant hide
i feel it when the breezes taunt me
and memories return
to constantly haunt me

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d.a. levy
blues for life, 1960
Manuscript, 11 x 8 1/2 inches
Courtesy of Kent State University
Department of Special Collections and Archives



d.a. levy
 Agent from Vega H.S., 1967
 Collage
 8 1/2 x 6 inches
 Courtesy of the d.a. levy Collection
 Cleveland State University Library



d.a. levy
Untitled, 1967 (detail)
Collage, 8 1/2 x 11 inches
Courtesy of Kent State University
Department of Special Collections and Archives