

# Allen Ruppertsberg

SANTA MONICA MUSEUM OF ART

Catherine Taft

**BUY ONE TONIGHT, READ IT FOREVER; THE BEST IN WORDS AND PICTURES; YOU ARE THE STORY:** With that earnest air of hucksterism indigenous to an earlier time in American history, Allen Ruppertsberg spins new narratives from old ones in his bright, sizable 1985 collage *Cover Art (Wonder Series)*—a pristine composite of pasted-up texts like the above (whether in adlike tag lines rendered with vintage label-maker tape or via disconnected words and numbers torn from paper) and mostly midcentury print images (including a depiction of the pope, one of a monkey wearing a lab coat, and several nature scenes). Hanging near the entrance to “You and Me or the Art of Give and Take,” the work not only served as a fitting introduction to this selection of drawing, collage, and installation from 1985 through 2009—the first United States survey of Ruppertsberg’s prodigious output in twenty-five years—but also eased viewers into the artist’s sensibility, speaking volumes about his relationship to reading, writing, consuming, and collecting. For although Ruppertsberg specifically adopts the voice of his fictional orator/author/alter ego Al Reed in *Cover Art*, his whole practice might well be described as a “cover”: both an alternate rendition and a faithful facsimile of ordinary life, transforming the everyday into a thing of wonder while wondering at the banality of the everyday.

Perusing the works on view in Santa Monica, one saw that Ruppertsberg has continually built structures for a flux of popular relics, middle-class tastes, anonymous localities, and personal and shared memories through literal acts of copying—using high-res Xerox machines, making photorealist drawings of books, reissuing folk songs, referencing earlier artworks, and orchestrating recorded recitations of recipes like spoken-word poems. Throughout his work, then, the artist amasses those postcards, obituaries, books, albums, manuals, posters, and snapshots that are so many signs and markers of such larger cultural abstractions. But in his hands, these artifacts aggregate as raw material for time-capsule-like assemblages, conveying layered stories about places once thought scenic, people who once existed, and knowledge passed on or, as likely, forgotten. Significantly, while much of this material may at first seem campy, Ruppertsberg treats it with a sincerity that undermines any sense of irony. For example, *The Gift and the Inheritance (Tick Tock Tales)*, 1989, depicts asinine cartoon figures from the cover of a late-1940s comic book—but these are rendered with a sophisticated hand that seems to denote an authentic appreciation and fascination. Similarly, his diptych *Twins*, 1989, humorously depicts two pulp prison novels—one about San Quentin, the other by a Patrick Quentin—and yet these are drawn with the same gravity and authority as nearby sketches of *Les Fleurs du mal* and *Shakespeare’s Works*. A highlight of the exhibition, this conceptual drawing was annotated with the “reading time” and “drawing time” Ruppertsberg spent on each book, effectively underscoring the ways in which a book can give materiality to time. However, in replicating and cross-referencing Baudelaire, Shakespeare, and Quentin, Ruppertsberg heroically intertwines the high and the low, and the literary and the literal, suggesting that each is equally subject to time’s relentless movement as well.

In fact, it is by way of surface as seen through such a temporal prism that Ruppertsberg regularly taps into complex cultural psyches—through a devoted attention,

in other words, to the specifically anachronistic quality and look of these collected images and objects. Take *News from Nowhere (Mystery of Faith)*, 1986, a four-panel collage that was prominently featured in the museum’s hangarlike space. (This rarely seen work, like the five other collages included in the show, is in surprisingly immaculate condition—though in terms of style, the collages are not aging quite so well as the artist’s early drawings.) Read left to right, the work relates a story (again, Al Reed’s) of self-doubt and redemption. In the first panel, images of a child, animals, and landscapes, a cheesecake photo, and still lifes are overlaid with text bubbles woefully editorializing I’VE HAD IT; EVERYTHING IS OVER; THE AUTHOR IS DEAD. The mostly black second panel simply states LATER, and the third panel presents benign images alongside one of the pope, all set against more upbeat texts like HALF FULL NOT HALF EMPTY and

**Ruppertsberg’s whole practice might well be described as a “cover”: both an alternate rendition and a faithful facsimile of ordinary life.**

STORYTELLING IS BACK. In the final panel, the top of which reads MEANWHILE . . . , Jesus and a quizzical duck hunter have a mundane exchange about the date. Beneath are the words CONTINUED NEXT WEEK. As a cliff-hanger story, this temporally progressing work juxtaposes a mixed-up inner monologue with a status-quo facade, a typical case of Catholic guilt with the constant hope of deliverance. But it’s hard not to imagine that *News from Nowhere* is also reflecting on its own mid-’80s milieu, making light of the prevalent theoretical discourse (for art) of its day—that is, Continental philosophy, post-modernism, and the Frankfurt School. In this regard, CONTINUED NEXT WEEK reminds the viewer that there will always be something coming “after” (after the death of the author, the demise of the book, the collapse of





modernity). The “to be continued” of the Catholic is matched by the artist in all his faith.

It is all the more important, then, to consider this piece alongside Ruppertsberg's newest installations, which were at the core of this exhibition, since they are as much concerned with historical documents as they are with the artist's ongoing impulse to build on his existing body of work. Situated on either side of a towering diagonal wall cutting across the museum's open gallery space, these interactive works used vernacular and commercial languages to reveal parallels between contemporary times and the past. Entering the space, viewers first encountered *The Sound and the Story/The Hugo Ball Award for 20th Century Graphics*, 2009, a silk-screened Peg-Board wall on which hung colorful laminated Xeroxes of sheet music from the '20s and '30s; color copies of 45s, 78s, and LPs; and copied fliers for '80s and '90s bands and singers, including Glenn Branca, X, Black Flag, Patti Smith, and Bad Brains. Viewers were invited to participate in this mash-up (or cutup) by rearranging the two-sided sheets on the Peg-Board to create new color and text combinations—an intervention that Ruppertsberg also performed (occasionally adding new images) twice during the show's run. Such audience participation, which has long been central to the artist's practice, prompts the viewer to consider these relics from the vantage of the present while allowing the work to act as a “score” that—partly by virtue of being continually played anew—calls attention to a recent past that is always becoming history. Of course, the constant shifting of fragmented text and resituated references allows nonsensical, elegiac, and boisterous meanings to surface, as in a Dadaist sound poem in which many voices intonate at once. But what inevitably becomes clear is that present taste will always become outdated—just as so many antiquated flavors have faded from the popular consciousness.

Ruppertsberg's second installation, *The Never Ending Book Part 2/Art, and Therefore, Ourselves: Songs, Recipes, and the Old People, Echoes of the Past Vol. 2, Wave*

*Goodbye to Grandma*, 2009, similarly asked viewers to complete the work. In the piece, cardboard boxes resting on brightly painted, proplike furniture—generic pedestals the artist designed some seven years ago, inspired by a 1942 manual titled *Here's How! A Guide to Economy in Stagecraft*—were filled with more than twenty thousand Xeroxes and blown-up reproductions of early-twentieth-century family snapshots, leaves from old photo albums, pictures of gravestones, and handwritten letters from his personal collection of anonymous remnants. (The work took a shape similar to those of earlier pieces not on view here, like *These Fragments . . . 1968–2003*, 2005, and *CIRCLES: Allan Kaprow's WORDS, 1962*, by Allen Ruppertsberg, 2008.) On the wall, Ruppertsberg placed a didactic poster with the work's title, along with an instructional poster reading FREE! FREE! CHOOSE SOME PAGES! . . . SELECT CAREFULLY AND TAKE NO MORE THAN 6 . . . Accordingly, audiences would find unbound pages hung on the wall by previous viewers in what was a convincing illustration of the vicissitudes of memory and the transitory nature of life and its amusements. Even so, many of the images that the viewer might select—particularly those depicting grave markers from eras past—drove home the human drive to memorialize even as we mourn. Indeed, the work's five midsize light boxes set up between its pedestals had a gravestonelike presence in the space. While each illuminates a seemingly random photo—an urban skyline, a sidecar, a hoopskirted woman at a Fourth of July parade, an old lady, a man lying in bed—they isolate otherwise passing sights for contemplation. Like Ruppertsberg's 1968 aquarium boxes, which transported ready-made locations into the gallery, these light boxes seem to transpose common American moments, sites, and realities into the museum, lest we forget them.

But the popular aspect of this idea was punctuated best by two massive 1930s circus posters flanking the gallery space on opposite walls (advertising the forgotten Cole Brothers Circus) and by a banner on the diagonal wall reading WAVE GOODBYE TO GRANDMA, which

Ruppertsberg made as part of an eponymous action piece in 1970. These elements suggest the memorialization of fleeting experiences and, in turn, the curious ways that such moments and locations are framed in mementos. Certainly, Ruppertsberg's collecting of these commemorative trinkets, postcards, snapshots, and posters echoes the human desire to connect nostalgically to individual and collective pasts, and in fact, the flea-market-cum-archive aesthetic that resonates in so much of Ruppertsberg's artwork seems to stem from the idea that the pulse and energy of the *folk* might serve as a talisman against death and forgetting. By reaching back in time through images, objects, texts, and noise, Ruppertsberg channels the individual folk histories that texture more general American ethnologies. For this survey, the artist also produced a limited-edition vinyl twelve-inch, *Art, and Therefore, Ourselves: Songs, Recipes, and the Old People—A Soundtrack for the Never Ending Book Part 2*, 2009, which aurally resurrected a few Depression-era pastimes: Dylan Thomas reading Yeats, the recipe for “Economy Pudding” delivered by Bill Berkson, anthems sung by the Boston University Glee Club, and tunes hammered out by the Salty Dog Four—all yarns and songs no less germane to today's Depression era. (Sadly, this delightful sound track for a never-ending book was presented only on a small boom box with some sad headphones in one corner of the gallery. For such spirited songs and sounds, begging to be heard out loud once more, this presentation was a failure. However, Ruppertsberg periodically traded copies of the record for photos brought in by the public, adding a deeper dimension to an encounter with this work.) With its “old weird” tinge, the album effectively embodied what it means to “cover” a milieu that has passed—that is, to celebrate the past while making it new. And though the milieu of Conceptual art may be getting on in years, Ruppertsberg is keeping the faith, maintaining its weight, humor, and vitality. □

CATHERINE TAFT IS A LOS ANGELES-BASED CRITIC AND A CURATORIAL ASSOCIATE AT THE GETTY RESEARCH INSTITUTE.

Opposite page, clockwise from left: Allen Ruppertsberg, *Cover Art (Wonder Series)*, 1985, mixed-media collage, 40 x 60". Allen Ruppertsberg, *The Gift and the Inheritance (Tick Tock Tales)*, 1989, pencil on paper, 22 1/2 x 28 1/2". Allen Ruppertsberg, *The Gift and the Inheritance (Shakespeare's Works)* (detail), 1989, pencil on paper, 22 1/2 x 25 1/2". This page: Allen Ruppertsberg, *The Never Ending Book Part Two/Art, and Therefore, Ourselves* (detail), 2009, mixed media, dimensions variable. Allen Ruppertsberg, *The Never Ending Book Part Two/Art and Therefore Ourselves*, 2009, mixed media. Installation view, Santa Monica Museum of Art. Photo: Bruce Morr.

