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Allen Ruppertsberg Shows New York the Way

by Brian Boucher

Allen Ruppertsberg,
You & Me, 2013. Part
of HIGH LINE
BILLBOARD.
Installation view,
Edison ParkFast, West
18th Street at 10th
Avenue, New York.
Photo by Austin
Kennedy. Courtesy of
Friends of the High
Line.



Visitors this month to New York's West Chelsea neighborhood are treated to a new public work by pioneering Conceptualist Allen Ruppertsberg, who divides his time between New York, L.A., Amsterdam and his native Ohio.

Ruppertsberg's 25-by-75-foot billboard *You & Me* (2013) is part of a series of the artists' billboards commissioned for the High Line, an elevated park near the Hudson River in Manhattan. The sign stands adjacent to the High Line in a parking lot on Tenth Avenue at 18th Street. Past contributors have included John Baldessari, Maurizio Cattelan and Paola Pivi.

The billboard is arranged into 18 panels, each consisting of an image of one of Ruppertsberg's trademark multicolored posters, a format he has used for years. His poster works are based on flyers he finds stapled to telephone poles advertising local events like wrestling matches, carnivals and religious meetings. The text on the billboard forms a poem with various permutations of the pronouns "you" and "me."

"Me and me and you and you" reads the first, and "you and me and me and you," the second. The third simply says "or," and the fourth and fifth follow with "me or you and you or me" and "me plus you and you plus me." These texts play out against bright backgrounds of solid yellows or bands of varying colors.

For an artist who has long created works in widely varying formats that depend in some way on viewer interaction, the pronouns serve as a metaphor for the shifting relationship between artist and viewer.

On Saturday afternoon, amid Nemo's snowy aftermath, Ruppertsberg sat down for tea with *A.i.A.* in an office at his New York gallery, Greene Naftali, to talk about this latest project. He had just come from an apartment he keeps in Brooklyn, and he recalled living in Chelsea decades ago. "I lived in this area in 1980," he said, "and there was a hip-hop club, the Fun Club, that went all night on

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Ruppersberg professed satisfaction with the billboard project: "I've never seen these posters at this scale! They're normally just 14 by 22 inches, the scale I've worked with for over 30 years. But it looks great. Scale is the ticket."

A large Ruppersberg print hung in the staff's office at Greene Naftali, also featuring images of multiple posters, including such text as "It's not art (that matters now)," "Are you crying?," "What should I do?," "Nostalgia 24 hours a day."

More clearly visible in the office, each poster, at its bottom, bears the name of its printer, L.A.'s Colby Poster Printing Company, whose website boasts that it is family owned and operated since 1946. It shut its doors at the end of 2012.

"I'm sad about it, because I've worked with them since 1983," Ruppersberg said. "But the digital world has wiped them out. The last poster collection I did with them was for my recent show at the Art Institute of Chicago, **'No Time Left to Start Again: The B and D of R'n'R.'**" That show displayed thousands of scans of record covers, photographs, newspaper obituaries, maps and other ephemera relating to the development of rock 'n' roll music.

Collecting and popular music have long been among the artist's chief obsessions, and the project of amassing the materials on display in the Chicago exhibition has kept him busy for the last few years, he said.

You & Me is Ruppersberg's second work in billboard format. In 2010, he created one for the show "How Many Billboards?," organized by the MAK Center in Los Angeles (a city he described as "billboard heaven").

The new billboard relates to a group of public projects Ruppersberg has created over the years, including for the city of Utrecht, the Netherlands, in 1991, and the exhibition Sonsbeeck 93, in Arnhem, the Netherlands. "*Al's Café* and *Al's Grand Hotel* were public and participatory too," he said.

Al's Café (1969) was a functioning re-creation of a typical middle-America diner, with menu items such as "toast and leaves," "desert plate and purple glass" and "simulated burned pine needles à la Johnny Cash, served with a live fern." *Al's Grand Hotel* (1971) was a functioning hotel resembling the one in the 1932 film *Grand Hotel*, featuring Greta Garbo and John Barrymore.

The billboard's text also picks up on an earlier project, shown at Christine Burgin's New York gallery in 1990-91. "The black-and-white tiles on the floor said 'you,' 'and,' and 'me' on them," Ruppersberg recalled. "So the combinations formed, in that case, as you moved through the gallery."

In an essay on Ruppersberg published in 2001, artist Allan McCollum points out that with *Al's Café*, seen against the countercultural movement of the late '60s, "Al reminded our troubled generation that simple, normal, everyday rituals of human commerce (horrors!) contained a significant compliment of decency and joy."

Now that the pendulum has swung, over four decades later, to a hyper-capitalist society, what does the artist think of today's roaring art market?

"Bigger and more expensive doesn't necessarily make for better art," he said. "It's a bit much, the general trend toward enormous galleries. I don't want to be responsible for filling them up. For the most part, in settings like that, there's a lack of intimacy."

The runaway art market was one part of the inspiration, he said, for his 2010 show at Greene Naftali, which revisited a comic strip he used for a mail-art piece in 1969. It recounts the character Scrooge McDuck's competition with a rich potentate in a show of one-upmanship for the grandest reputation in Duckburg.

"But it is what it is," he said. "And it's not going to go back."