

In the Studio: Allen Ruppersberg

by Leah Ollman



A work by Allen Ruppersberg arises, invariably, from an act of retrospection. For his most recent New York show, in the fall of 2017, he papered two walls at Greene Naftali gallery with photocopied collages of newspaper obituaries exhumed from files he has kept for twenty years: tributes to his personal pantheon of artists, musicians, and poets. Interspersed among them were color photocopies declaiming how to remember. The phrase offers a description of the installation, titled *LIFE*, while also raising Ruppersberg's central, persistent question.

Born in the Cleveland suburb of Brecksville in 1944, Ruppersberg moved to Los Angeles in 1962 to attend the Chouinard Art Institute (now CalArts), intending at first to become an illustrator. In 1969, two years after earning his BFA, he staged his first solo show, a conceptual act of dislocation called *Location Piece*. Visitors expecting to find the artist's work at Eugenia Butler Gallery were redirected to a rented office at a separate address where he had installed an assemblage of pop culture miscellany. That same year, Ruppersberg was included in curator Harald

Szeemann's landmark convening of Conceptualists, "Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form," at the Kunsthalle Bern. Ruppersberg's work could be at once deeply personal and self-effacing. *Where's AI?* (1972) features snapshots of unidentified people, presumably his friends, paired with typed exchanges about his comings and goings, his reading, and his television watching. Though he never appears in the image/text piece, it offers an oblique self-portrait and establishes him as the perpetually absent yet inescapable subject of his own work.

From the start, Ruppersberg has turned banality inside out, mining the heady mystery of the obvious. His work has assumed myriad forms: books, posters, photo-narratives, drawings, installations, record albums, performative lectures, a jigsaw puzzle, and participatory projects that would now be called relational. Much of it derives from his extensive collections of old postcards, movie posters, pulp novels, instructional films, comics, magazines, and vinyl records. Ruppersberg re-presents and repurposes these vernacular artifacts, emptying them out, as he says, and filling them back up with new layers of meaning.

His decades-long engagement with the Colby Poster Printing Company in LA yielded *The Novel That Writes Itself* (1978–2014), a vibrant mosaic of four hundred letterpress posters. Some of them are actual advertisements for concerts, mud wrestling bouts, and church carnivals. Others are excerpts from his own projects and exhibitions, recombined to form an episodic catalogue of his career. These include a phonetic reinscription of Allen Ginsberg's "Howl;" random non sequiturs (no i've got something in my eye); and piercing existential queries (where should i go? what should i do? is one thing better than another?).

While Ruppertsberg has cultivated a neutral tone and dispassionate visual style, the work abounds in droll humor. He uses the anonymity of mass-produced culture as a vehicle for his personal memorializing mission, carrying it out with intellectual tang and emotional plangency. His pieces appear straightforward, but always entail some sort of perceptual, conceptual, or temporal slippage, as when, in conversation, he uses the phrase “original xerox copy” without wink or pause. This month, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis opens “Allen Ruppertsberg: Intellectual Property 1968–2018,” the artist’s first American retrospective in more than thirty years. Curated by Siri Engberg with Fabián Leyva-Barragán, the show takes up the challenge of ordering and summarizing a life’s work in which nonlinearity and incompleteness are core principles. It includes a new commission based on books from the Walker’s library and its archive of ephemera documenting the institution’s history of exhibitions and programs.

Ruppertsberg divides his time and his collections (his “supplies”) between LA and New York. Methodical abundance characterizes both work spaces. Books and sheet music are neatly stacked on tables, albums rest in crates beside his version of an entertainment center, which comprises a turntable, cassette deck, and CD player. He also keeps a condo in Brecksville, which he describes as “a giant live-in storage bin.” Ruppertsberg rocked in a squeaky old leather office chair as we spoke in his studio in El Segundo, just south of LAX. We followed up, side by side on a sofa, in Boerum Hill.

LEAH OLLMAN How do you move from a vast archive like the Walker’s to the specific requirements of a new installation? How do you focus?

ALLEN RUPPERSBERG Different subjects produce different series of works. You get ideas for works by just seeing and analyzing what you have. A history of the museum exists in that archival material—newspaper clippings, announcements, audio tapes, folders on artists they’ve worked with—that I just want to bring out somehow. I could stay there for years and copy this stuff. There will be about fifteen hundred original color xeroxes of this material wheat pasted on the wall like wallpaper. It will be visually overwhelming, but there will be boxes of xeroxes for people to take. If somebody sees something they like, they can rifle through these boxes and look for the xerox, and it will be there. It’s much the same process that I do—I rifle through all the museum’s stuff until I find something I like, or that I think is telling in one way or another.

OLLMAN Do you still actively collect?

RUPPERSBERG Not so much. At this point in my life, I have more stuff than I will ever get to use as art, or get to make into art. Over the years, I intuitively collected it, because I thought, oh, well, I could use that. Or it gave me some ideas. I’m not collecting stuff for the sake of collecting stuff. It’s more about saving material to work with. Obviously if I see something great, I might get it if I can. But I’ve gotten enough. I don’t need any more. There’s always stuff out there. But a lot of what I like is just too expensive now.

OLLMAN Have your collecting habits changed, now that there’s such a thing as eBay?

RUPPERSBERG I don’t do eBay. That would just be dangerous. I like to go and see things. But if I need something specific, I’ll have one of my assistants find it on eBay, which I do, occasionally, because that’s the only place I can get it, but it’s usually something I’ve already found anyway and I just want more of it. Basically, I would just wander flea markets, antique malls, thrift stores. Once you have a whole lot of categories, like me, you can usually find something. But I’m not working that way right now. Time is more important now than stuff.

OLLMAN Time is what I really want to talk to you about. What better occasion than a fifty-year retrospective?

RUPPERSBERG Right. It’s pretty shocking.

OLLMAN In making your work, you act as a curator of cultural history and of your own collections, and you don’t follow any clear progression. That would seem to make organizing your retrospective pretty tricky.

RUPPERSBERG There's such a variety of approaches in the work. That's what confuses people. What's important is the idea of what it's about. What is the germinating process? How it gets made is really beside the point. The basic subjects keep reappearing in all kinds of different ways. The idea of time is a preoccupation—how time is, how it works. Maybe it's the ultimate subject of mine. There are a lot of subjects I juggle around, but they all seem to involve time in some way. It's like the famous saying, that the past is not really past. It's a part of everything.

OLLMAN You identify strongly with materials and objects that you say are on the way out, like typewriters and vinyl. These objects evoke longing and loss, even though you claim a kind of visual neutrality. Does that elegiac quality ring true for you?

RUPPERSBERG I like things—films or whatever—that are about that. A lot of art has that in it. Maybe that's why I like to use photography, where it's built in. But a lot of it is simply saving things from disappearing. I've always appreciated things that are undervalued or overlooked—those kinds of things that disappear. So there's always going to be a melancholy aspect.

When you get out of art school, you don't start off thinking about those things. You start off making work, and then you begin to discover things in the work. You have to start by asking: Who am I? What should I make? What's important to make? Then you just start, and follow the trail. Subjects become more prominent, and you have to figure out what these subjects are.

I can probably trace some of the emotional, melancholy ideas back to family history. My family is one of the founding families of the town that I grew up in, so that has always been very important—the family history on my mother's side, going back to the early days of America. That's always been a big part of our family identity. My mother was a DAR [Daughter of the American Revolution]. I'm very conscious of that history and interested in saving it and presenting it.

There have been some very serious historical savers—my aunts and uncles saved everything, and now I'm the repository of all this stuff. I'm the last living link to it. I have the archive that these generations saved, and all the stuff that I saved over the years about my family and the history of the town, which interested me and my sister a lot. Now I've wound up with it. And I'm the dead end here. I guess as you get old enough, it becomes more important anyway, but I'm sure that it informs my work. It's one trail, anyway.

OLLMAN Do you use some of that family material?

RUPPERSBERG Yeah, it gets used once in a while, but it isn't something that I'm necessarily pointing to directly. My work isn't about the family history per se. If I'm going to do that, then I would really do it, but I've never gotten around to it. Whether it actually can be turned into art or not, I don't know. Little bits of it show up here and there, but nobody would know.

OLLMAN The retrospective will present ephemera and documentation from early performative work, such as *Al's Cafe* [1969], a diner with absurdist, inedible menu items, which you restaged—or “reheated,” as you put it—ten years later at Rosamund Felsen Gallery in LA. In 2014, *Al's Grand Hotel* [1971], a functioning hotel, with seven themed rooms, was reprised at the Frieze Art Fair on Randall's Island in New York. What were those experiences like? How did the passage of time and the change of context affect the work?

RUPPERSBERG I learned a lot from doing *Al's Cafe (reheated)*. I had never planned on redoing it, but everybody was always reminiscing about it, and the time gap wasn't so long. So we decided just to have a good time and remake things and put it in the gallery. But the minute that I put it up, I realized this was the wrong thing to do. It just didn't feel right. It was a point in time, it's over, it's done.

But there was a forty-year difference between the original *Al's Grand Hotel* and the Frieze thing, and for some reason I said OK. It was going to be entirely different because it was in the middle of an art fair. It's like a whole new thing. And I realized it's not me doing it over, it's me passing the ideas, the intellectual property on to a new generation, and we'll work on it together. Sure, it has a relationship to what took place in the past, but it's something completely different. And it worked out well.

OLLMAN Your primary tool now is the copier. The copy, you've said, is also the truth. What does originality mean to you?

RUPPERSBERG With the advent of the internet and appropriation, it means something now that maybe it didn't before. But copying things has always been part of my work, whether it's drawings of books, or works like *Dorian Gray* [*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 1974, the Oscar Wilde novel reinscribed across twenty canvas panels], or *Walden* [*Henry David Thoreau's Walden* by Allen Ruppersberg, 1973, the text written out in longhand and bound in leather]. The copy machine is only the most recent technological tool for me to use all this stuff that I collected but that I'm not going to make drawings of anymore. Calling it intellectual property is part of a current dialogue that has to do with the way work gets sold and passed on to a younger generation.

OLLMAN More than twenty years ago, in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, you said you felt Conceptualism had lost a lot of energy. What's its state of health now?

RUPPERSBERG I don't think it even exists. In the two generations after I started working, it still had some kind of validity. The ideas were still percolating, but after that, it became such a catch-all for any kind of work that it really lost any meaning. Any kind of foofball thing that anybody does, they're all of a sudden a Conceptual artist. Conceptualism always seemed to me to be the last international movement of the twentieth century. There's been nothing like it since. It influenced generation after generation, but it just spread out until it became virtually meaningless.

OLLMAN Let's talk about signature style, that constellation of ideas around authorship and distance—where you are in the work.

RUPPERSBERG Well, I have always consciously kept myself out of the picture. In the early Conceptual days, with some of the works, I am in the picture. But it's usually as a character. Even though it comes from personal experience, nobody would know that. But it does have autobiographical roots. *Where's AI?* is a kind of iconic example, because I ain't there. But of course, I am there.

A lot of body works that were going on in the 1970s were really about the person, about the artist. Mine is much more cerebral, kind of neutral. If you didn't know it was art, you might not know what it was. You wouldn't notice it. The best way to make art is to not make art—not with a capital A: to make things that don't draw attention to you as the artist, necessarily.

The drawing style I learned in art school, when I wanted to be an illustrator, has that kind of neutrality. It's not expressive drawing—I mean it is, of course, because there are thousands of decisions in every line you make, but it's a commercial style, so it has a neutral sheen to it. I'm behind it, not pointing fingers at me, the artist, or this, the artwork. That's what makes it interesting to me. It is art, because it can't be anything else, yet it's supposed to look like everything else. It's very difficult to explain, and that's why people don't know how to critique it. It kind of resists that. The use of no signature style does the same thing. With the early shows, people would say it looks like a group show, but it's all just me making different kinds of things. It's a way of confusing things. I like to use the most common things available. So I don't go to the art supply store very often; I go to the stationery store. That's a kind of signature, if you look for it. It uses the most common, unthought of materials and things. Because that's the inspiration, that's where it comes from anyway. You want to keep the artwork as close to the inspiration as possible.

OLLMAN That reminds me of one of my favorite quotes, by Robert Filliou: "Art is what makes life more interesting than art."

RUPPERSBERG That's right. I was very influenced by all those Fluxus people. If there hadn't been any Fluxus, there wouldn't be any Conceptualism.

OLLMAN I know you're also a fan of Walker Evans, and what you practice seems akin to what he described as "documentary style"—having the look of an objective document but being unavoidably inflected by the person making it. In your work, your intellectual signature is quite apparent, your personality is inevitably present everywhere, by virtue of all the decisions you've made.

RUPPERSBERG Well, it depends on the work. It depends on the piece. For instance, what I'm doing now involves taking photographs of the backs of billboards. My assistant, who is a very good photographer, shoots a bunch of them, and I'll say, let's use that one, and so the piece gets made. It's my decisions and my idea of what I want to make, but she can shoot it. It's more like being an art director. That's the way I prefer to work. I never knew how to run the camera anyway. When I would use it myself, it would be in a way that I didn't really make any decisions. When I did *Where's AI?* it was with an Instamatic, point and shoot. All I had to do was press the shutter.

OLLMAN You're still pointing. You're still deciding. You can't disappear entirely.

RUPPERSBERG I know, but I can try to smooth it out as much as possible by using nonart processes. Nobody's ever going to be able to take a Walker Evans picture again. Those are one of a kind, and an influence on so many people. Also, he was a postcard collector. With a friend of mine from Chouinard, who was also from Cleveland and became a commercial artist, I would go to postcard shows and try to find the postcards that were the most anonymous. That's a category unto itself. Anonymous photographers went around to shoot pictures of America. [The cards] are totally generic. I still have them all, they're just great. You see the photographer's car in there half the time. You find a number of postcards and go, hey look, there's the same car! The guy just got out of his car and took a picture and they made a postcard. That kind of photography was a big influence, that kind of approach. That infiltrates all the work, in a way.

OLLMAN It's a little bit of a bluff.

RUPPERSBERG Well, yeah, you could say that. I guess that's why people can't figure it out half the time.

OLLMAN They're looking for something you've intentionally hidden.

RUPPERSBERG Right. They're looking for a real, direct, aesthetic experience, rather than finding that postcard by an anonymous photographer who left his car in the picture. That's much more interesting. But all great art is interesting on that level. Who ever used pictures of car crashes before Warhol did? They're still the best thing you've ever seen. And there's somebody who really tried to be anonymous—but, of course, wasn't at all.

OLLMAN I guess this conversation goes back to what it is that people expect from art. Your generation redefined those expectations, even if the general audience has never caught up.

RUPPERSBERG That's really true. There was no reason to do what had already been done over again, or to continue those ideas. Life was more interesting.