Allen Ruppersberg

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File Note #35 Allen Ruppersberg
I'd like to begin, by way of illustration and preamble, with a poem by W. H. Auden, *Their Lonely Betters* written in 1950:

> As I listened from a beach-chair in the shade
> To all the noises that my garden made,
> It seemed to me only proper that words
> Should be withheld from vegetables and birds.

> A robin of no Christian name ran through
> The Robin-Anthem which was all it knew,
> And rustling flowers for some third party waited
> To say which pairs, if any, should get mated.

> Not one of them was capable of lying,
> There was not one which knew that it was dying
> Or could have with a rhythm or a rhyme
> Assumed responsibility for time.

> Let them leave language to their lonely betters
> Who count some days and long for certain letters;
> We, too, make noises when we laugh or weep:
> Words are for those with promises to keep.
Or better still, tell the tale of when Thoreau — who one day at Walden removes all the furniture from his cabin to clean both — discovers his possessions look better outside than they ever had in their proper place. My first and perhaps best thought was to start with Allen Ruppersberg's signal piece Where's Al? from 1972. I'd show the piece here, but its 121 typed index cards and 150 Polaroid prints are nearly impossible to reproduce properly. The question, Where's Al?, is answered serially in the form of a He/She dialogue running through a cycle of permutations: 'She: Where's Al? He: Maybe he stayed home to read. She: What's he been reading? He: Things on Houdini.' Al has forgotten. He's in New York. He's likely at home watching a good movie on TV. Still in Europe. Probably sitting in some coffee shop on Hollywood Blvd. I think he went back to Cleveland. Al is everywhere and nowhere; decidedly absent from each prosaic snapshot but wholly present in the text. The piece is personal and yet social, a portrait of a community of friends and their location in culture as much as that of the young artist.

Allen Ruppersberg is a collector and memorialist. Ruppersberg is a reader. Al is a translator. He's a storyteller and a copyist. His art is autobiographical, and yet never unfamiliar. Its generosity is lodged in the open citation of vernacular forms of culture which structure all that is common and particular to each and our everyday. And yet, Al's work is multi-layered and mysterious. It is of our world, and, at the same time, wondrously otherworldly — almost effortlessly so. His art is gentle and organic as it re-enters the world bearing only the slightest of necessary adjustments. As with some of the best art, it often doesn't look like art at all.

Ruppersberg's practice is writerly in its solitude and communion with materials, though Al lays no claim to being a writer. That said, he has written a novel of his own — Greetings from California (1972) — and in 1974, he translated Oscar Wilde's novella about a painting, The Picture of Dorian Gray, into a painting that is as much about reading as writing a novel about a painting. Between these acts, in 1973, he returned Thoreau's Walden to its original manuscript form in his own hand. In each case, the activity serves as a measure of the immersion in and passage of time — equal parts reading time, narrative time, creative time and real time.

Raymond Roussel is an important writer for Al. Much loved and cited
by the Surrealists, Roussel developed his own procédé, or set of compositional techniques grounded in the duplicity of language and upon forms of punning. Roussel defined the procédé as essentially a poetic method analogous to rhythm and rhyme: linkages between words would be established to produce something new from the given; or assonantly related words could be harvested from the breakdown of haphazardly chosen scraps of language, just as one might develop images while devising a rebus. As with both words and pictures, what separates one from the other is intimately linked in import to that which connects. Or, as Allen Ginsberg another poet of sound and image was fond of saying: ‘Things are symbols of themselves.’

The most instructive piece of writing on Al’s work is still his own Fifty Helpful Hints on the Art of the Everyday from 1984. Here is a small selection: ‘Art should make use of common methods and materials so there is little difference between the talk and the talked about. The historical and the scholarly can be ends in themselves. Art should be familiar and enigmatic, as are human beings. Each work is an essay on a different subject with interchangeable methods and means. Use everything.’ It’s all material. Ruppersberg visited southern California as a young boy on a family holiday from his native Cleveland, Ohio. He found there a different kind of never-never-land though one still related to that aired on Sunday evenings created by Walt Disney. Some years later he enrols as a student at Chouinard—long a training ground for the cartoonists who introduced surrealism to middle America and its common culture. Allen Ruppersberg is not an itinerant artist; he’s more a traveller across and in culture and time. He has long remained bi-coastal and enmeshed in the sociality of New York as well as that of Los Angeles. Drawing, like reading, is a reciprocal act. With its intensity, immersion, humour and silence, it remains a fundamental point of entry into Al’s practice. So too is the fact that Ruppersberg’s take on conceptualism is as much a part of that which came out of a very cinematic though often analytically black and white New York as the more emotive, if not indeed melodramatic West Coast variety. Art is a social practice. This is true for both maker and receiver.

Rupperrberg’s heightened sense of location—be it of culture or place—is stated early in his photographic chapbooks 23 Pieces (1969) and 24 Pieces (1970), which surveyed the magically banal material landscapes of Los Angeles, along with the iconic pieces like Al’s Café in 1969 and Al’s Grand Hotel of 1971. These latter two projects, encompassing in turns the mythic structures of Hollywood and middle America, were about communities of people—specifically, that which brings them together and shapes their conversations and experiences. Each demonstrated a recurrent model involving a set of intricate actual and conceptual armatures, erected as a support for a slightly adjusted vernacular image drawn from culture showing, through the interaction of participants, the real as a site of the fictional, and in turn, fiction’s ability to animate reality.

Shortly after graduating from Chouinard, Ruppersberg introduced himself to Wallace Berman at a party. The elder artist was a kind and generous conduit to the Beats with his own method of making art that resonates as both personal and collective. In the early 1990s, I was lucky

A short reading list combining some works by Allen Ruppersberg with his own exhibition catalogues and other books

Books / poems by others that have appeared in his work

- Voltaire Candide (1759)
- Henry David Thoreau Walden (1854)
- Oscar Wilde The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891)
- Raymond Roussel Locus Solus (1914)
- Allen Ginsberg Howl (1956)

Books by Allen Ruppersberg

- Greetings from LA: A Novel (1972)
- The Best of all Possible Worlds: A Tourguide Skulptur Projektkte in Münster (1997)

Exhibition catalogues

- Letter to a Friend Portikus, Frankfurt am Main (1998)
- Books Inc FRAC Limousin, Limoges (1999)

enough to visit Al’s office / collection / studio in the old Cable Building on Broadway gone but now preserved in the memoir / novel / index that is The New Five Foot Shelf. It is fitting that Berman’s work is nearby to Al’s just as the building and space you find yourself in was once a public library and home for books. Triangulations such as these are a means for locating ourselves and a method for art. An important recent piece, Circles: Allen Kaprow’s Words, 1962 by Allen Ruppersberg, 2008, encapsulates acts of reanimation, homage and return to that which has passed. Words, Kaprow’s 1962 installation/happening is activated but so too are his writings on escaping the traps of art and life and thus Ruppersberg’s immersion in Harry Houdini and his own allegorical video/lecture/performance of 1973. Circles revolve like an old song re-sung; albums play and words go round to look back from where they came. Places, spaces, people, collections and practices are constantly experiencing processes that are not and never have been static. At stake in our moment and movements is the something out of the ordinary that connects and brings hybrid elements together, or sometimes too sets things apart that is both Al’s art and the stuff from which it is made.

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'Collect, accumulate, gather, preserve, examine, catalogue, read, look, study, research, change, organise, file, cross-reference, number, assemble, categorise, classify and conserve the ephemeral'

—Allen Ruppersberg: Fifty Helpful Hints on the Art of the Everyday, 1985

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