



Allen Ruppersberg

Camden Arts Centre / September — November 2008
File Note #35 Allen Ruppersberg

John Slyce

Something Out of the Ordinary

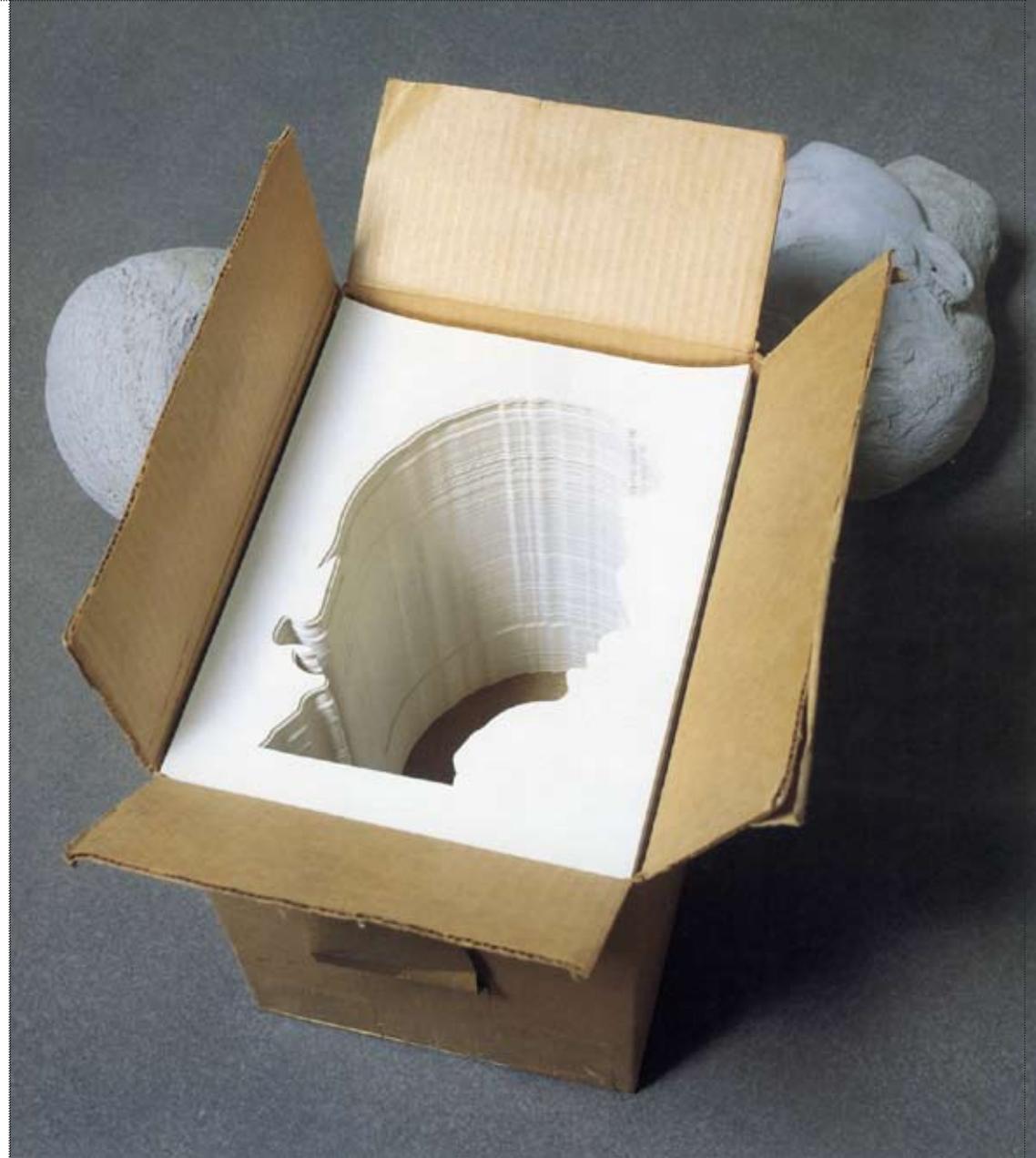
I'd like to begin, by way of illustration and preamble, with a poem by
W. H. Auden, *Their Lonely Betters* written in 1950:

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.



Selfportrait and Sculpture 1974 & *32 Cement Heads* 1983
Cardboard box with die cut paper / Cast cement heads

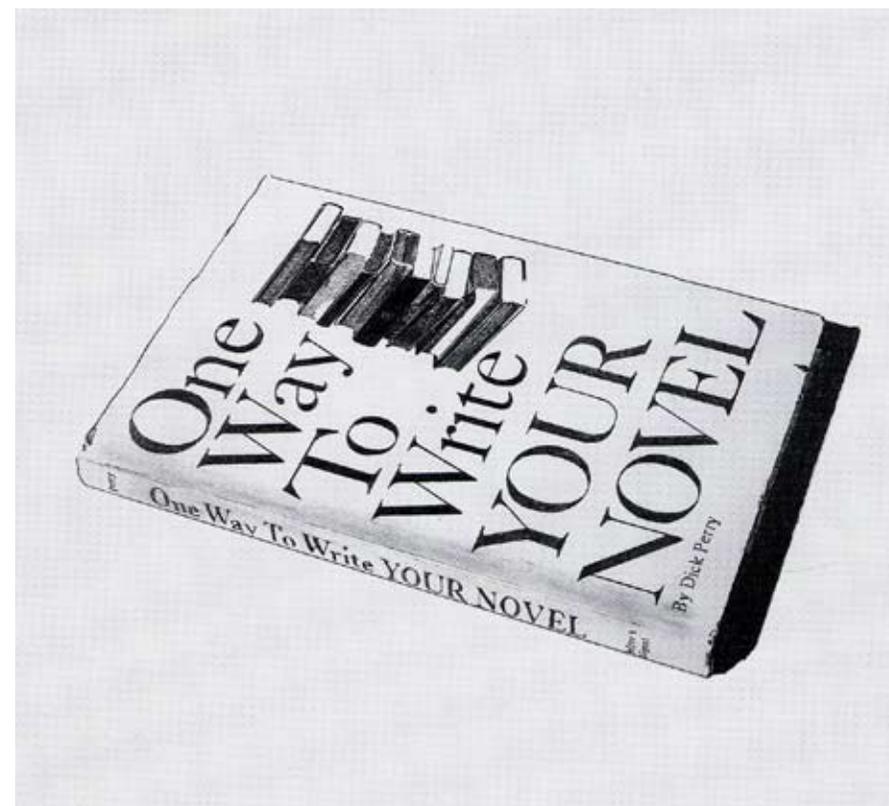
Or better still, tell the tale of when Thoreau—who one day at Walden removes all the furniture from his cabin to clean both—discovers his possessions look better outside than they ever had in their proper place. My first and perhaps best thought was to start with Allen Ruppertsberg's signal piece *Where's 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 Ruppertsberg is a collector and memorialist. Ruppertsberg is a reader. Al is a translator. He's a storyteller and a copyist. His art is

W. B. Yeats 1972
Black & white photographs; edition of 3
5 parts, 26 X 22 inches each



The Gift and the Inheritance (One Way to Write your Novel), 1989
Pencil on paper / Collection FNAC Ministère de la Culture



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.

Ruppertsberg'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. Ruppertsberg visited southern California as a young boy on a family holiday from his native Cleveland, Ohio. He found there a different

CIRCLES: Allan Kaprow's *Words 1962* 2008 / 8,000 colour and black and white photocopies, silkscreened cardboard boxes, vintage typewriters and record players, CD players with original CD's, motion sensors, circuit boards and letterpress posters / Photo: Brian Forrest

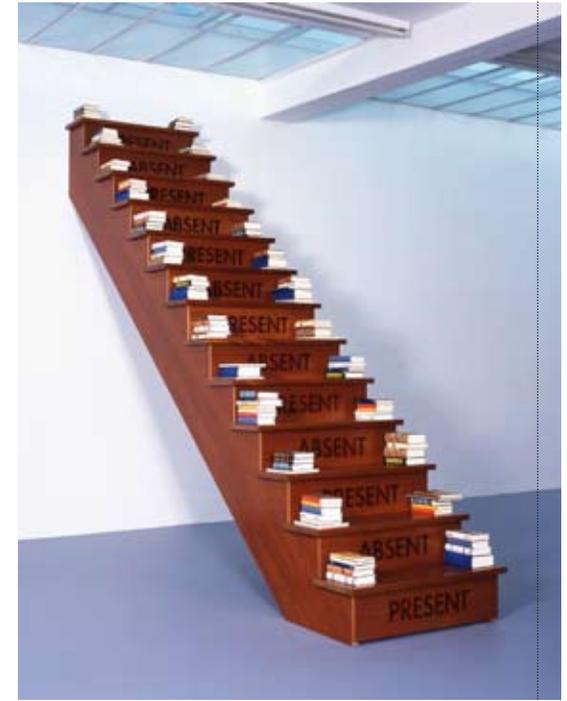
Low to High 1994 - 1996
Private Collection

kind of never-never-land though one still related to that aired on Sunday evenings created by Walt Disney. Some years later he enrolls as a student at Chouinard—long a training ground for the cartoonists who introduced surrealism to middle America and its common culture. Allen Ruppertsberg 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 Ruppertsberg'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.

Ruppertsberg'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, Ruppertsberg 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



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 Ruppertsberg, 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 Ruppertsberg'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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Camden Arts Centre, Gallery 3, c1949

Design: James Goggin, Sara De Bondt
& Maki Miura / Practise
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Allen Ruppertsberg was born in Cleveland, Ohio in 1944 and currently lives and works between Los Angeles and New York. He graduated from Chouinard Institute (Cal Arts), LA in 1967. He has had numerous solo exhibitions including 'Alterations, Galerie Micheline Szwajcer', Antwerp, Belgium (2007); 'One of Many – Origins and Variants', Institut d'Art Contemporain, Villeurbanne, France; Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporaneo, Sevilla, Spain; Dundee Contemporary Arts, Dundee, Scotland; Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, Düsseldorf, Germany (2006–2005); 'Free / Trade Art and Poetry', greengrassi, London (2005); 'The Singing Posters Parts II & III', Jürgen Becker Gallery, Karin Guenther Galerie, Hamburg, Germany (2005); 'The New Five Foot Shelf', De Hallen, Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem, The Netherlands (2004); 'The Singing Posters', Studio Guenzani, Milan, Italy; Gorney Bravin + Lee, New York, NY; Art & Public, Geneva (2003). Significant group exhibitions include 'Los Angeles 1955–1985', Musee National d'Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou, Paris (2006); 8 Biennale d'art contemporain de Lyon (2005) and 'The Last Picture Show: Artists using Photography', Walker Art Centre, Minneapolis, USA (2003).

A short reading list combining some works by Allen Ruppertsberg 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 Ruppertsberg

- *23, 24 & 25 Pieces* JRP Ringier (1971 / 2000)
- *Greetings from LA: A Novel* (1972)
- *The Best of all Possible Worlds: A Tourguide* Skulptur Projekte in Münster (1997)
- *The New Five Foot Shelf of Books* ed. by Editions M. Szwajcer & M. Didier, Brussels and International Centre of Graphic Arts, Ljubljana (2003)

Exhibition catalogues

- *The Secret of Life and Death, Volume 1 (1969/1984)* Black Sparrow Press (1985)
- *Where's Al?* MAGASIN Centre National d'Art Contemporain de Grenoble (1996)
- *Letter to a Friend* Portikus, Frankfurt am Main (1998)
- *Books Inc* FRAC Limousin, Limoges (1999)
- *One of Many: Origins and Variants* Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König (2006)

‘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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All images © the artist

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Cover: *The New Five Foot Shelf* 2001 (detail)
50 books and 44 photo posters / Edition of 10
Courtesy Michèle Didier, Brussels