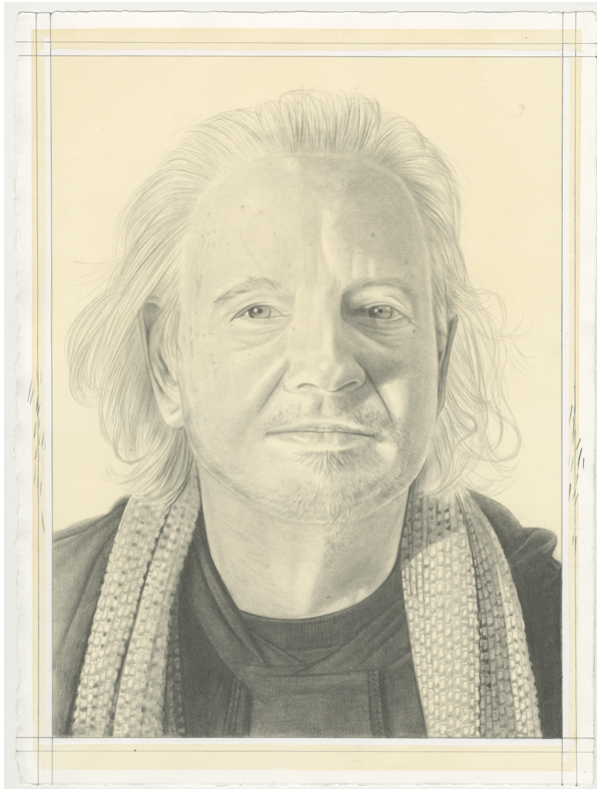


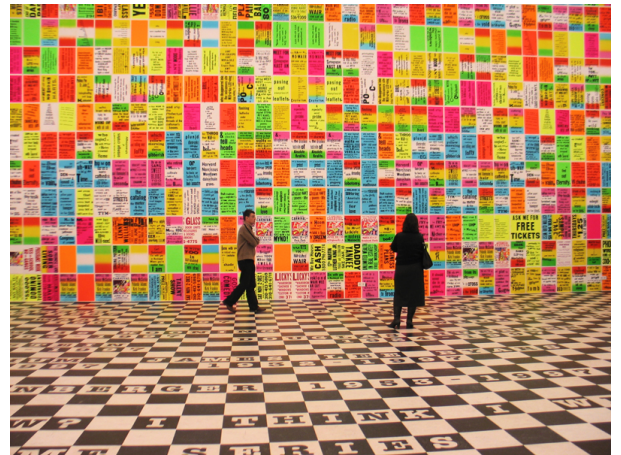
# ALLEN RUPPERSBERG with Constance Lewallen

WALKER ART CENTER | MARCH 17 – JULY 29, 2018

On the occasion of Allen Ruppersberg's retrospective exhibition, *Intellectual Property: 1968 – 2018*, Constance Lewallen and Allen Ruppersberg stopped into the *Rail* HQ to talk about the evolution of Ruppersberg's decades-long career, the conceptual through lines that can connect artworks, and how one defines "the periphery."



Portrait of Allen Ruppersberg, pencil on paper by Phong Bui.



Allen Ruppersberg, *The Singing Posters: Allen Ginsberg's Howl by Allen Ruppersberg (Part 1 & 2)*, 2003, installation view. Printed posters, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York.

**Constance Lewallen (Rail):** Since your retrospective at the Walker Arts Center opened recently I thought we could start by discussing the concept of a retrospective and what that means for an artist. Ed Ruscha named his 1982 mid-career survey *I Don't Want No Retrospective*. That was a joke, obviously, but it suggested how intimidating a retrospective can be. Your current exhibition is a true retrospective covering fifty years, the largest in the U.S. since *The Secret of Life and Death* at LA MOCA in 1985.

**Ruppersberg:** Yes. That was somewhat easier to do because it was a mid-career survey. I was forty or forty-one, and my work was mostly still in and around LA or very accessible. Additionally, I was kind of ready to close out that period and move on to the next one, so that had a different feel, entirely. I completely organized that myself. Not that there wasn't a curator—Julia Brown was the curator—but MOCA was brand new at the time, and the Geffen was functioning as a temporary contemporary—so MOCA was handed over to me to design with Julia's input, of course. But I remember I conceptually designed the whole show, where the walls would be and so on.

**Rail:** That show traveled to the New Museum in New York.

**Ruppersberg:** Right. In a somewhat lesser scale.

**Rail:** I'm sure it looked very different there than it did at the Geffen, which is a shed-like, flexible open space.

**Ruppersberg:** Right. I think it's something like 40,000 square feet, with very high ceilings, etc. In New York the show was in the former New Museum location on Broadway, which was smaller and very different, architecturally.

**Rail:** So, as we said, the Walker show is not a survey show but a full career retrospective, and, as you have suggested, that's quite another story... it's your whole life.

**Ruppersberg:** That's right.

**Rail:** We both have seen retrospectives that illuminated an artist's work and led to a better understanding of it, and we've seen other retrospectives—at least I have, and I'm sure you have—that don't do the artist a good service.

**Ruppersberg:** Yes, we've both seen examples of the latter.

**Rail:** And what do you think that's about? Is it that a less than successful retrospective reveals all the weak spots?

**Ruppersberg:** Well, obviously it depends on the curator, the museum, the space, the artist him or herself, or the story is not told well—it could be any one of those things. Who knows why?

**Rail:** Or the timing.

**Ruppersberg:** Or the timing. The timing is crucial. When I did the MOCA retrospective, the best thing to come out of that was not from my peers but what I learned later from the younger artists who saw it. Years later they would tell me, “Oh I saw that, it was this and this and this.” And then when I came to New York right after that, after the New Museum show, I met all these artists that were maybe a generation or so under me. They were working in the East Village and beginning to show. I was still young enough to start over again. So that’s what I did. I integrated into another generation and work that extended from mine. And in this case, at the Walker, you know, I’m considerably older, and fifty years worth of work is pretty overwhelming because you’re not gonna do it again.

**Rail:** No, but you did have a show that traveled in Europe—two shows, actually—in the ’90s?

**Ruppersberg:** In the ’90s and 2000s. *Where’s Al* was at Le Magasin [in France] in 1996. That didn’t travel.

**Rail:** In Grenoble.

**Ruppersberg:** The second one, *One of Many: Origins and Variants* opened at the Kunsthalle, Düsseldorf, in 2005, and organized by Ulrike Groos, who is a good curator. That show traveled Dundee Contemporary Arts, Scotland, IAC Centre Analuz de Arte Contemporáneo, Seville, Spain, and Institut d’art contemporain, Villeurbanne, France.

**Rail:** Quite a tour!

**Ruppersberg:** Beginning in the 1990s I’d been working a lot in Europe, so it made a lot of sense to have the shows there.

**Rail:** One thing a retrospective can do—and maybe should do—is show the through line or through lines that link work over time—not to say that the work doesn’t change and develop, which it does, obviously. The Walker catalogue is organized around certain issues, approaches, and thoughts that are consistent in your work from the beginning, and for me was really helpful in getting a grasp of the whole.

**Ruppersberg:** I think it’s the only time it’s been done.

**Rail:** I’m familiar with your work, but there was work there that I’d never seen.

**Ruppersberg:** Well that’s—everybody says that. Even people like Christine Burgin, who I have known since the 1980s and knows my work, and has shown it in her gallery, said she learned a tremendous amount from the Walker show.

**Rail:** I agree.

**Ruppersberg:** That was what Siri Engberg [curator of the Walker exhibition] set out to do. She

set out to do two things. One was to find a through line and to present the works in not exactly a chronological order but with some degree of chronology where this through line could emerge, and also to bring in works that were mostly done in Europe and that were never seen in the US. Therefore, even people who knew the work would not have seen some of these site-specific pieces that we recreated and some of the other projects that were mostly known in Europe.

**Rail:** When did you start working on the retrospective? Three or four years ago?

**Ruppersberg:** At least three years. I think we started in 2014—that’s when Siri first approached me. I traveled to the Walker and saw all this space and thought, “My god, how do we do this?” But I knew the history of the Walker, and some of my favorite, and I think best, catalogues came from the Walker, and so I knew I was in good company here. At one point I said to Siri something like, “How do you do this retrospective?” or “How do we do this?” I don’t know what I said exactly, and she replied, “Don’t worry. We know how to do this.”

**Rail:** And they do. By the way, I think the catalogue is really wonderful. It’s pretty much a straight catalogue. A lot of your previous catalogues have been more like artist books. This is a true catalogue.

**Ruppersberg:** Well that was definitely the intent—to make an official catalogue, but also it has an element of artist book in it, too.

**Rail:** Because you can’t help yourself. [*Laughs*]

**Ruppersberg:** Because that’s just what needs to be in there, you know. And I worked with their very good designers. It’s always a collaboration.

**Rail:** Well, some artists want to be more involved than others, but I think it’s very helpful when an artist does want to participate. You put a lot of effort into it.

**Ruppersberg:** Well, yes and no. I mean, yes, I gave it my all, of course, but when it came to the catalogue, it was a collaboration. I mean, the retrospective is a collaboration, too. The other large exhibitions I had I kind of did it myself, as I said, even though with Ulrike [Groos] that’s not entirely the case. But the others, like Le Magasin, I did completely myself. So, in this case, with fifty years worth of work I wanted to see what Siri would do, and I really wanted to have her idea represented in the catalogue too.

**Rail:** Given that there has to be some structure to this conversation, I thought we could use the various chapter headings in the catalogue to try to find those through lines, starting with the idea of location, for example.

**Ruppersberg:** I don’t know if I can follow—I mean, Siri created the through lines and they’re certainly there in the show. It’s harder for me to think about through lines because although I’ve tried to define them all my life, they change all the time.

**Rail:** Well let's just start with the idea of location in your early work, and I mean location in the very basic sense. You moved to Los Angeles from Ohio, to a completely new environment, which is very different from the LA of today, and you've said it was kind of thrilling to be at the Chouinard Art Institute. The impact of the city, as you have noted before, was as important as anything else.

**Ruppersberg:** Yeah, first of all Chouinard changed my life, but I'd had the desire to be in California from the time I was about eleven. To finally get there and be on my own in such an exotic place compared to Cleveland was really the best. I was eighteen, and the whole world was open there. LA was great to explore at that time in a way you can't anymore. I mean I suppose people do in their own way, but it was kind of a golden age of LA because the old LA was still there.

**Rail:** One of your first shows was at the Eugenia Butler Gallery in 1969, and it featured *Location Piece*. It was more "dislocation" you could say in that people who came to the gallery anticipating an exhibition in the space were instructed to go to another nearby space an office building, actually your studio, but that was not necessarily obvious to people. Once there, they encountered a room within a room in which natural elements were scattered including an antler...

**Ruppersberg:** Deer's head. Well, it's more than that because it's not—the room—it wasn't really a room within a room, but rather a Minimalist structure. As you saw in the recreation at the Walker it is an object that you can walk around. When it was in the office, you couldn't. It's made of plywood boxes covered with raw canvas. And then there's a huge piece of glass, and lights built into it, with objects from the desert, mountains, and the sea scattered through it. But it's primarily a big, Minimalist sculpture, a full-scale, walk-in environment, which evolved from earlier works.

**Rail:** Right, and you've noted that you were familiar with Allan Kaprow's work, which had some bearing on it?

**Ruppersberg:** Well not necessarily on this piece particularly. The influence of Kaprow comes a little but later. But this location piece was made three years out of school, and there's a trajectory from the work done in school to this kind of ultimate presentation here.

**Rail:** Some people have said this reminded them of Robert Smithson's Non-Sites.

**Ruppersberg:** Bullshit. Nothing to do with Smithson at all.

**Rail:** [Laughs] Okay.

**Ruppersberg:** I mean everybody was totally aware of what Smithson was doing; it was very specific to him.

**Rail:** Right. And you made the aquarium—aquariums—at around the same time.



**Ruppertsberg:** Just preceding *Location Piece*.

**Rail:** They also had to do with location. They were also Minimalist environments on a small scale.

**Ruppertsberg:** Aquariums at the time were glass boxes made out of polished aluminum or stainless steel, and they reminded me of Larry Bell boxes. But they were actual aquariums, which I selected for two reasons. One, I had grown up with aquariums and raising frogs and etcetera in aquariums, but secondly because of the look of them. They stopped making them a few years after that.

**Rail:** You could think of them in terms of [Joseph] Cornell boxes.

**Ruppertsberg:** Oh, sure.

**Rail:** Within them, you placed all manner of things. Here I'm looking at a picture in the catalogue at one related to *Al's Café*.

**Ruppertsberg:** Right they were made—those were made specifically for *Al's Café*. They were meant to be table lights like you find in most restaurants.

**Rail:** Well, staying for a moment with the idea of location, there's also one of your early artist books called *23 Pieces*, which contained photographs of anonymous locations in LA.

**Ruppertsberg:** They were identified at the end of the book with an address for each photo. They're the kind of locations you would see in LA and not know what they were.

**Rail:** There's also a location piece that's always identified with you called *Where's Al?* People who know you kind of chuckle at that because it continues to be true that no one is ever sure of where you are at any given time.

**Ruppertsberg:** Well, that's right.

**Rail:** Since you maintain several residences and move around a lot.

**Ruppertsberg:** That's true.



Street view of Allen Ruppertsberg's site-specific project *Al's Café*, 1969. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Gary Krueger.

**Rail:** *Where's Al?* was made in 1972.

**Ruppersberg:** Yeah, it was a very specific event also.

**Rail:** Which was?

**Ruppersberg:** Which was the tenth anniversary of my friends Terry Allen and his wife Jo Harvey. They have continued until now to celebrate anniversaries by choosing a place to go and inviting all their friends to come. This was the first time they did that. They picked Pismo Beach, and we all stayed in this funky old hotel.

**Rail:** Two works which you are always identified with are *Al's Café* and *Al's Grand Hotel*, which you're probably really tired of talking about those.

**Ruppersberg:** Totally.

**Rail:** [Laughs] But they also were about location.

**Ruppersberg:** They both follow a completely straight line from the early aquariums. You know, those were the first works that really are my own work, from the aquariums to the *Location Piece*, and there's lots of works in between that are not necessarily known. Then you move on from a café to a hotel.

**Rail:** Right. I didn't know until Jo Harvey told me that she was a waitress at *Al's Café*.

**Ruppersberg:** Well, I have a number of friends who were waitresses off and on.

**Rail:** People think of you as an LA artist identified with *Al's Café* and *Al's Grand Hotel*. This retrospective includes so much more work, and as we said, work that people had no opportunity to see even if they were following your work, if they hadn't been in Europe. You created a huge amount of work in Europe in the '90s.

**Ruppersberg:** Beginning in the late '80s, early '90s—all through the '90s.

**Rail:** Right, and for instance, and they had...

**Ruppersberg:** But I have to go back to that business about being an LA artist.

**Rail:** Okay, go ahead.

**Ruppersberg:** Because there is an equal amount of people—maybe not equal amount—but I run into people all the time who say, “Oh, I thought you were a New York artist,” because I have lived and worked in New York as much as I have in LA, and so because I move around all the time, people never know where I come from or what I do, and so, you know, yes, everything started in LA but then by 1970 was moving into New York.

**Rail:** Do you think that—well also, there was a sort of hiatus in terms of gallery exhibitions in New York. You didn't have an exhibition in a gallery in New York for a number of years, right?

**Ruppersberg:** Well, not necessarily. I mean, I didn't have a show in New York until, I don't know, the late '70s.

**Rail:** Right.

**Ruppersberg:** With Marian Goodman. And it didn't really work very well, anyway. It was a difficult transition from being in California to having shows in New York on 57th street where nobody really knew anything about the work. When the New Museum show was there, that kind of boosted it up, and that's when I began to show with Christine [Burgin] and in the East Village at Cash/Newhouse. So, there were always shows in New York mostly with—well, Christine and many group shows all the time, from the late '80s and all through the '90s and into the 2000s.



Allen Ruppersberg, *Cover Art (Space Adventures)*, 1985. Courtesy the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles.

**Rail:** And more recently you've joined Greene Naftali—you have had two or three shows there.

**Ruppersberg:** The recent one was the third. But after showing with Jay Gorney, who closed his gallery in 2005, it was eight years before I joined another gallery. I waited until I found what I thought was the right place, which was Carol Greene's gallery.

**Rail:** Yeah, which really worked out. Another aspect of your work is the memorial. Particularly in Europe you did several pieces that were idiosyncratic memorials, one being *Stop Traveler (Siste Viator)* in 1993, which was based on fallen soldiers in Arnhem.

**Ruppersberg:** *Siste Viator* means a "stopping place" where you stop and remember what has happened at that place in the past or some aspect of memory. That's what the title is about, and so in this case it's a memorial for the Battle of Arnhem.

**Rail:** I guess you could call it a temporary memorial.

**Ruppersberg:** It still exists. I mean, it was built as a site-specific piece and afterwards the city of Arnhem bought it and reconfigured it to be permanently installed in the Arnhem museum.

**Rail:** Right, but in its original incarnation it was spread around the city, yes?

**Ruppersberg:** Well, the show was. You know, an early version of what now is taken for granted—to situate a work all over the city—but mine was in the cemetery.



**Rail:** And in 1995 you did another memorial-type piece called *As Close As We Have Come* at the fifty-year anniversary of the United Nations in Geneva. You were given you free rein—now that would never happen.

**Ruppersberg:** To give an artist, an American artist, free rein to wander around the UN building, look at all the closets and rooms and hang out all day long, while no one was around—this would never happen. But it produced a very good work.

**Rail:** But that, of course, was temporary.

**Ruppersberg:** Totally temporary. And it was not even seen as a work of art by ninety percent of the people.

**Rail:** Were you able to know what the response was?

**Ruppersberg:** You know as much as you know from what people tell you at the opening and you hear stories afterwards, whatever information you got. I could tell from being there, when these people were in session, they would just walk by it and thought it was just part of the UN. You know, architecture, furnishings, whatever.

**Rail:** But in a way that was part of it, right?

**Ruppersberg:** Oh, it was totally part of it. Absolutely.

**Rail:** It's like taking something and manipulating it in such a way that it's not very obvious.

**Ruppersberg:** It's not like making art, but it's like making art.

**Rail:** Exactly, I think this gets us to the sort of melancholy that comes through your work, those works that we just cited, *Siste Viator* and *As Close As We Have Come*, enter that category.

**Ruppersberg:** Well, a good majority of the works that could be categorized as memorials, some more extensive than others. *The Best of All Possible Worlds* presented in Munster in 1997 was inspired by *Candide* and certainly is a memorial to the city and what happened there during World War II, just as Arnhem is about the famous battle of World War II. You know being in Europe and traveling around and seeing all the memorials and battle sites—an incredible history. I have always been fascinated with World World II, anyway, and have done many pieces related to it, which preceded these types of memorials. *Victory at Sea* and other documentary programs that aired on television when I was a kid always fascinated me.

**Rail:** Do you consider *The Singing Posters: Allen Ginsberg's Howl* (2003/2005), which is another well-known piece of yours consisting of posters that spell out the Allen Ginsberg poem phonetically, as a memorial?

**Ruppersberg:** Absolutely, correct.

**Rail:** Am I remembering accurately that you were inspired to do this piece when you were teaching and discovered that a lot of your students had no idea about the poem?

**Ruppersberg:** I guess the germ of it started there, you know, when you have a class of eighteen to twenty kids, whatever it was, and only two have heard of *Howl*, there's something wrong here, *Howl* is one of the touchstone poems of the late second half of the twentieth century and was a big influence on me. So, I started to use it in class, and somehow the piece developed out of that.

**Rail:** Well, I think that poetry went through your work as well. That's one obvious example. But I find it throughout. And in a way your work has never been autobiographical. People don't necessarily know you through your work.

**Ruppersberg:** They think they do.

**Rail:** They think they do. But you are always hiding. [Laughs].

**Ruppersberg:** They don't know where I live either.

**Rail:** In a way all your work is somewhat autobiographical.

**Ruppersberg:** I think all artist's work is autobiographical, even if it's not obvious.

**Rail:** There are portraits, most of them, like *Self-Portrait as Bugs Bunny*, 1975, are certainly not typical self-portraits.

**Ruppersberg:** Although they are called self-portraits.

**Rail:** Yes, they are called self-portraits, but still they don't depict you. However, you have used your profile, which is very distinctive and graces the cover of your catalogue. There is, then, one self-portrait that is a likeness.

**Ruppersberg:** And I am in my early Conceptual pieces—artists at that time tended to use themselves because it was the easiest ... you were always available. I appeared in a lot of these early photo pieces, but obviously it's not me. It's somebody standing there, but they don't know if it's me or not, unless they happen to know me then they would recognize me. But I stopped doing it after a while.



Allen Ruppersberg, *The Singing Posters: Allen Ginsberg's Howl by Allen Ruppersberg (Part 1 & 2)*, 2003, (detail). Printed posters, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York.

**Rail:** Similarly, Bruce Nauman's early performance and videos in which he performs various tasks are not about him. Even though he's the performer, the viewer doesn't learn anything about him, except what he looks like.

**Ruppersberg:** They were made more or less at the same time, too.

**Rail:** Right, late sixties, early seventies. Well, some people have talked about your work as straddling Pop and Conceptual. I think of you as a Conceptual artist, but you often use elements of popular culture as your subject matter.

**Ruppersberg:** You know, I have been influenced by Pop Art. For sure, in the mid-sixties, you saw Pop Art emerge, you saw Minimalism emerge, you saw all of this performance activity, etcetera—they are all tucked in there for sure, because I liked those forms.

**Rail:** You have made two pieces that consist of copying a text that is important to you. The first is Thoreau's *Walden* (1973), which you painstakingly wrote out in a volume and that was followed by the Oscar Wilde piece *The Picture of Dorian Grey* (1974) which you wrote out on many canvases. I don't know how you did that, how many canvases are there?

**Ruppersberg:** Twenty.

**Rail:** It was recently acquired by NY MoMA, but originally it was shown at Claire Copley Gallery in LA. Afterwards it must have been packed away for a long time.

**Ruppersberg:** Yeah, it was packed away. Stuart and Judy Spence bought it in the mid-1980s, but it was not shown publicly, and most of the time it was in storage. To make a comment about copying, I think it's not just copying, those are very specific formal exercises in copying, but I mean I copy everything. From day one, I have copied everything in one way or another.

**Rail:** With a Xerox machine?

**Ruppersberg:** Yes, and now I have the best copying machine one can buy, but even some of the early works are in some way copying things, or in finding things and presenting them, which is copying it in a way too.

**Rail:** Copying is also a way of learning. When you see an artist setting up an easel at the Louvre, for example, he or she is copying a painting as a way to learn to paint. In your instance, let's say with the *Dorian Gray* project, you really learned that work.

**Ruppersberg:** That was exactly part of the program, kept me interested doing it month after month.

**Rail:** How long did it take you?

**Ruppersberg:** I don't know, a couple of months at least, if not a bit more. Eight, nine, ten

weeks—something like that.

**Rail:** That's quite a commitment.

**Ruppersberg:** You know, working six days a week on it, you couldn't do that with some other writers. With Oscar Wilde every combination of words is something new, it kept me interested.

**Rail:** It has been said many times, you are copying a book about painting. Making a painting of a book that's about a painting. So, it's not arbitrary what you are copying.

**Ruppersberg:** It wasn't arbitrary to copy *Walden* either.

**Rail:** I am sure not. What attracted you to *Walden*?

**Ruppersberg:** Well, it's a philosophical discussion. I'd read it in high school or whatever, I just went back to have this discussion with Thoreau, by sitting there all summer long. Rewriting the book, you are having a dialogue with Thoreau himself in a way, so that's what it was about. And, again, it's turning the book into an object, an art object.

**Rail:** Where is that object now?

**Ruppersberg:** It belongs to Yves Lambert.

**Rail:** When did MoMA show *Dorian Grey*?

**Ruppersberg:** Last year.

**Rail:** There were certain things that I either read in the catalogue, or heard you say in Minneapolis that I was unaware of. For instance, you mentioned that you had seen Max Ernst's retrospective, speaking of retrospectives, at the Guggenheim, and made an impression on you.

**Ruppersberg:** Well, because I never told that story before [*Laughs*].

**Rail:** What was important to you about that experience?

**Ruppersberg:** We were talking about retrospectives, or I was thinking of retrospectives, because Surrealism was one of my main influences early on. To be there and see Max Ernst in person when he was in his seventies or something, just thinking what it must be like—I was twenty-five, or twenty-six at the time—to look at fifty years of life as an artist. I couldn't imagine what that was like, but thought a lot about what it meant to him. Now it's reversed, I am in that position. Now I know what he was thinking.

**Rail:** A lot of your work has to do with recapturing aspects of the past. And I also find it interesting that you trace some of your melancholy to your own family. Your family was one of the founding families of Brecksville, the town you grew up in, which now has been incorporated

into Cleveland, but was its own small city. Your mother was a Daughter of the American Revolution. It seems that family history was important.

**Ruppersberg:** Over the years there have been family heirlooms and other items handed down to me, and now I am the last to have all these things.

**Rail:** And then of course you have avidly collected all manner of postcards, calendars, photographs, albums, and so on mostly from the mid-twentieth century America. As I understand, most are housed in Cleveland, but also there are some in your studio in El Segundo. Are you still collecting?

**Ruppersberg:** I only look for objects when I think I have a use for them. I have more than enough stuff to make work for the rest of my life—I don't need anymore—but if I come across something to fill out a work, I acquire it.

**Rail:** You amassed your collections by scouring swap meets, outdoor markets, and second-hand shops. You made a point of not searching online.

**Ruppersberg:** No, I don't search online. In the period when I was gathering all these things, they were affordable. So, yes, it's a mid-twentieth century collection and it also cost nothing. And which comes first? The chicken or the egg? You can't buy anymore, it's too expensive. And going online has changed the whole nature of being able to find stuff.

**Rail:** I think it's worth noting that even though your source material consists of ephemera from your collection, you also use your skills as a draftsman in many works. It's a testament to your early training.

**Ruppersberg:** Yes, because when I went to Chouinard drawing was something that you had to do, and if you didn't do it well, you were encouraged to either drop out or take more classes, and do it again. And at that time in LA in that school, drawing was extremely important. I was going to be a commercial artist, an illustrator, and that's where I learnt to draw.

**Rail:** Did you draw as a child?

**Ruppersberg:** Oh, sure.

**Rail:** You had the innate interest and talent in drawing?

**Ruppersberg:** In drawing, yes. For sure. But the idea was to return to drawing, to use the skills and ideas from commercial art and transpose them into fine art. I knew I wanted to translate those ideas.



Allen Ruppersberg, *A to Z*, 1972. Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali Gallery, New York.



**Rail:** For most of the Conceptual artists of your generation, drawing wasn't a part of their work.

**Ruppersberg:** That's another reason I started doing it. I think Ed Ruscha is the same. He studied commercial art at Chouinard too, and always used commercial ideas in his work—you just turn it around. That's what I started doing in the mid-1970s, so I wouldn't be categorized as one kind of an artist.

**Rail:** One thing that I find interesting is that unlike many of your peers, you never seem very interested in video, I mean you made one, *A Lecture on Houdini (for Terry Allen)* in 1973. You didn't do performance, either.

**Ruppersberg:** Well, the *Houdini* video is a performance, but it was only done once—I guess I did it twice—but it was done to be performed in front of a camera in order to see what making a video was about. After I made that I thought, "Wow, that's pretty good. I don't have any reason to do it anymore." [*Laughs*]

**Rail:** That was that.

**Ruppersberg:** That was that. It seemed to sum it all up, right there. I mean, I have used video ever since but not in that kind of performative way, it's using archival film, or some such thing. It's not performing in front of the camera.

**Rail:** Or performing and then you didn't perform in public, in a live performance?

**Ruppersberg:** No, I never did perform in public.

**Rail:** Somewhere I read, maybe it was in the catalogue, something about you wanting to remain on the periphery, I am not sure that's really true, but your primary studio is in El Segundo, on the periphery of LA, which feels like it was lost in time. Maybe that's changing, I don't know?

**Ruppersberg:** Slowly.

**Rail:** There is a main street, and there is a fire station, and low-rise buildings. It's quiet.

**Ruppersberg:** In fact, it's not like most of LA. It's so anonymous.

**Rail:** And you like that?

**Ruppersberg:** It depends on what you call periphery, but being anonymous, I think, is



Allen Ruppersberg, *Greetings from California*, 1972.  
Courtesy the Whitney Museum of American Art.

important. And as you said before, I am behind the works, I am not up front.

**Rail:** And it suits that studio in that town? I mean, I have been there many times and I am always surprised at how organized it all is with your collections. But I wouldn't say you want to stay on the periphery in terms of your career.

**Ruppersberg:** That's why I said that it depends on how you define career. I have no desire to be Julian Schnabel or Jeff Koons. I prefer the periphery in that sense. But that doesn't mean I don't want my work seen and to participate in the art world.

**Rail:** The most recent show that you had at Greene Naftali was based on obituaries. Again, this whole idea of memorials and reclaiming or not letting go of the past just seems to permeate even now.

**Ruppersberg:** I think you could make a case that it's all about that. You fit a lot of works into that category, but that's more a front maybe, using this collection of obituaries that I have been saving since the mid-nineties, artists, writers, poets, filmmakers—who I admire or have learned from, or didn't know about and learnt from the obituary.

**Rail:** It's like an homage.

**Ruppersberg:** It's definitely so.

**Rail:** In the retrospective this amazing piece based on the obituary of Robert Rauschenberg is just incredible.

**Ruppersberg:** Well, it's also because it's the most incredible op-ed that I have ever seen. It's the largest, most articulate, and fascinating obit that Michael Kimmelman wrote for the New York Times.

**Rail:** He deserved it, I mean, Rauschenberg.

**Ruppersberg:** Yes, one of my heroes, for sure. He came to the café. We knew each other and saw each other at different shows. I went his studio once in a while.

**Rail:** Another thing that I want to touch upon is this idea of how you relate to your audience. You have made works that directly involve the visitor to the museum or the show. Like the show we did at the Santa Monica Museum in 2009 where visitors were able to rearrange the laminated pictures you hung on pegboards. I don't know if they did or they didn't.

**Ruppersberg:** The idea was there, but most people don't.

**Rail:** They are conditioned not to touch the art.

**Ruppersberg:** And that's fine, because that's when people really start to mess it up and we put a stop to that. It's basically for the owner of the work to participate in the work. I mean, it's fine for the general public to do some of it, and a piece I did at LA MOCA that was part of *Allan Kaprow—Art as Life* in 2008 where people could type on typewriters. Their typing set off a motion detector in the old record players which emitted poetry. That really was designed for people to participate and experience what it's like to sit at a typewriter.

**Rail:** Maybe the ultimate piece in that regard is *The Gift & the Inheritance: Strive to Succeed* (1989) in which people could purchase a work—you describe it.

**Ruppersberg:** Well, it was a show at Christine Burgin which consisted of drawings of books from my library. The idea was that if the collector bought the drawing of the book, it would go into my will, and if they lived longer than me, they would inherit the original book. That was the premise of the show, but we never actually follow through—but the idea was there at the beginning.

**Rail:** Works that are based on an exchange between the artist and the recipient is something you were already dabbling with way before the “movement” of Relational Aesthetics appeared in the 1990s.

**Ruppersberg:** That's why I was included in shows with those artists.

**Rail:** In the interview in the current *Art in America* Leah Ollman notes that you have “cultivated a neutral tone and dispassionate visual style, the work abounds in droll humor.”

**Ruppersberg:** Well, that's pretty accurate. Every work of art has a sense of humor I think.

**Rail:** And she also notes that you turn “banality inside out, mining the heady mystery of the obvious.” That also seemed to me a pretty apt observation. You once told me that all your work is a hedge against death.

**Ruppersberg:** I think I am certainly not alone in that. I think that artists are conscious of that in general.

**Rail:** Artists in the broader sense.

**Ruppersberg:** Writers, musicians, whatever. It is kind of a hedge against death and, as one gets older, even more so, right?

**Rail:** I think that this retrospective is going to be extremely interesting for people. It's going to travel to the Hammer Museum next year.

**Ruppersberg:** Yes, it will be somewhat smaller, and the space is a little different. So, it will kind of be the same as when the earlier show went from MOCA to the New Museum.

**Rail:** Slightly shrinking.

**Ruppersberg:** A totally different space.

**Rail:** Any time a show travels it changes, there is no way around it.

**Ruppersberg:** And there is only one Walker.

**Rail:** Are you going to go back to the Walker during the show?

**Ruppersberg:** I don't have any reason to. There are no public things going on.

**Rail:** Are there any last words we want to say here?

**Ruppersberg:** Well, I don't know. Go see the Walker.

**Rail:** You are happy with the show, I know that.

**Ruppersberg:** It's a terrific show.

**Rail:** Do you think you are going to make new work right away, or are you taking a little rest?

**Ruppersberg:** well, I don't rest too well, so when I am back in LA in a few weeks I think I will go back and start doing stuff. That's the best thing to do, go back to work.