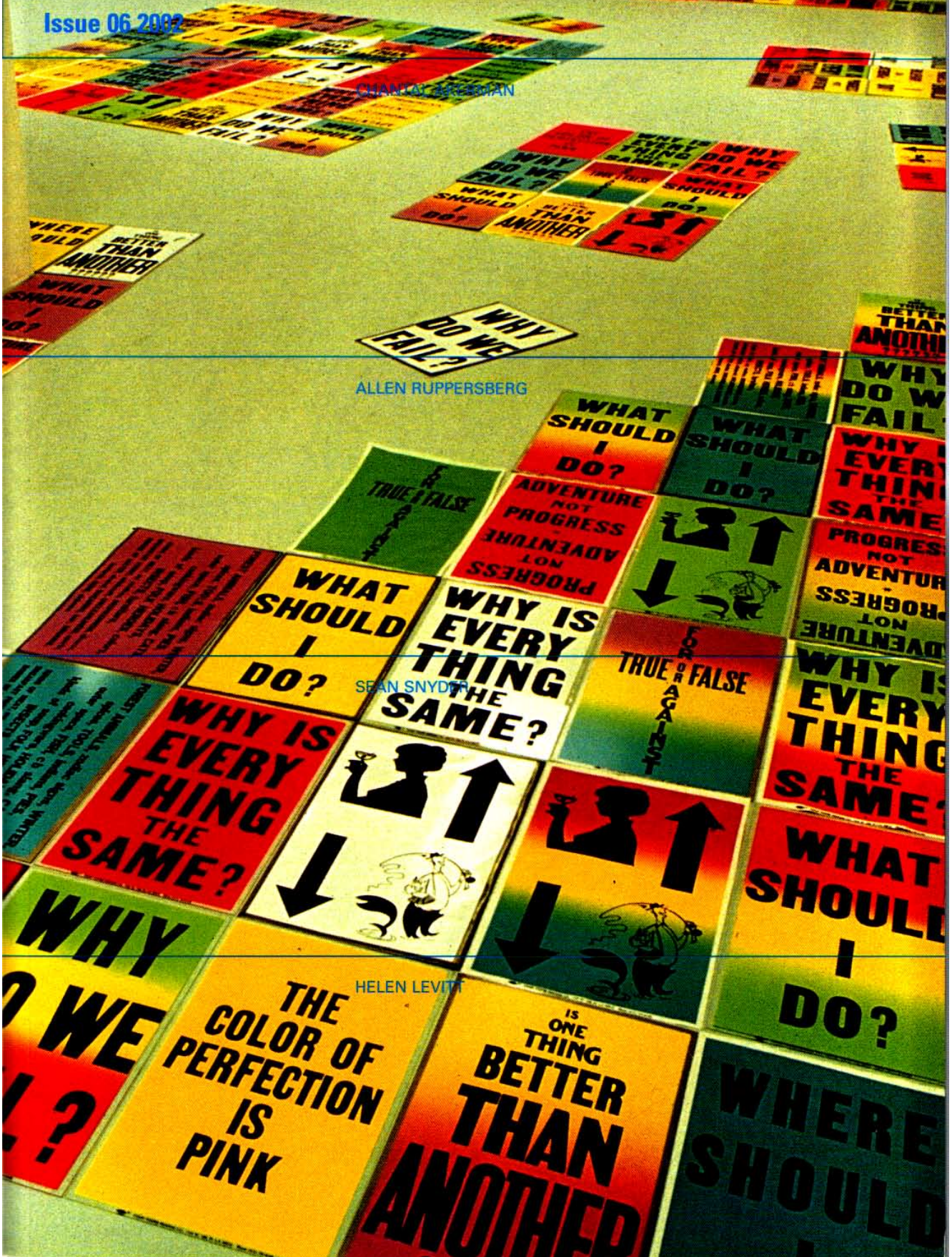


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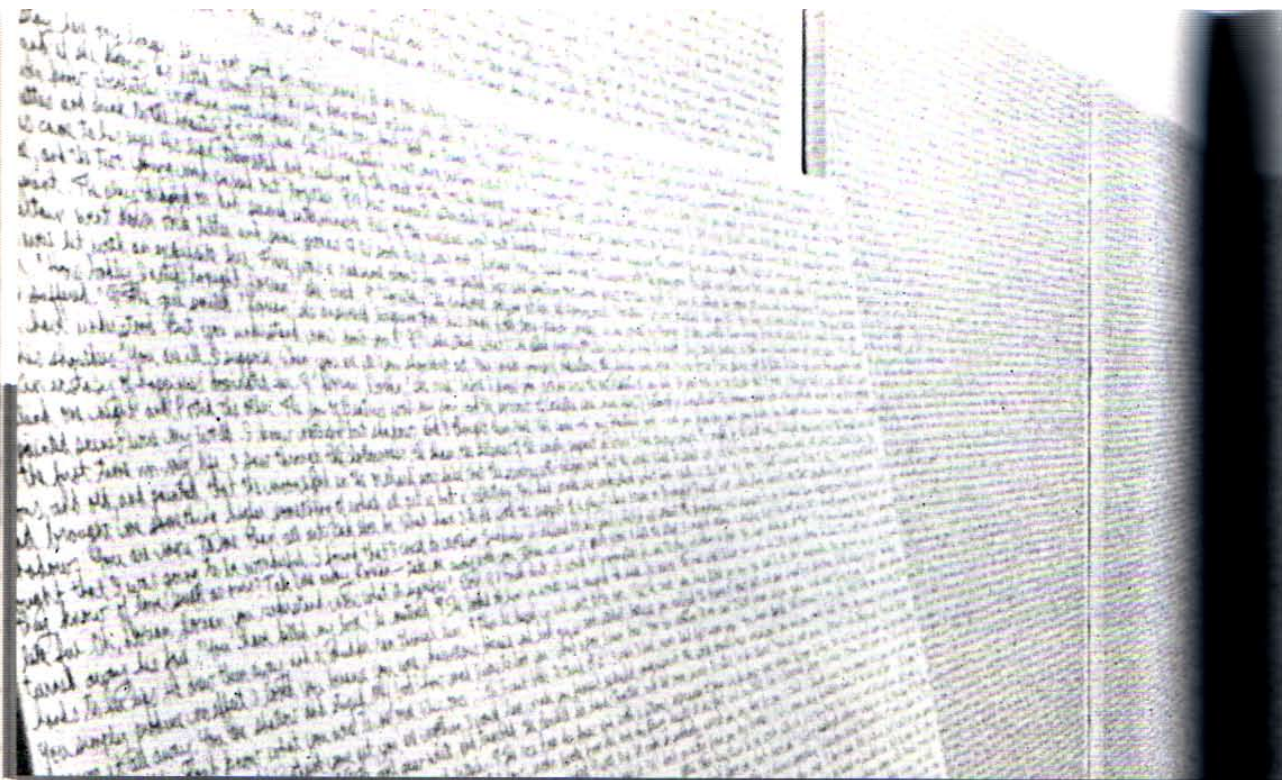


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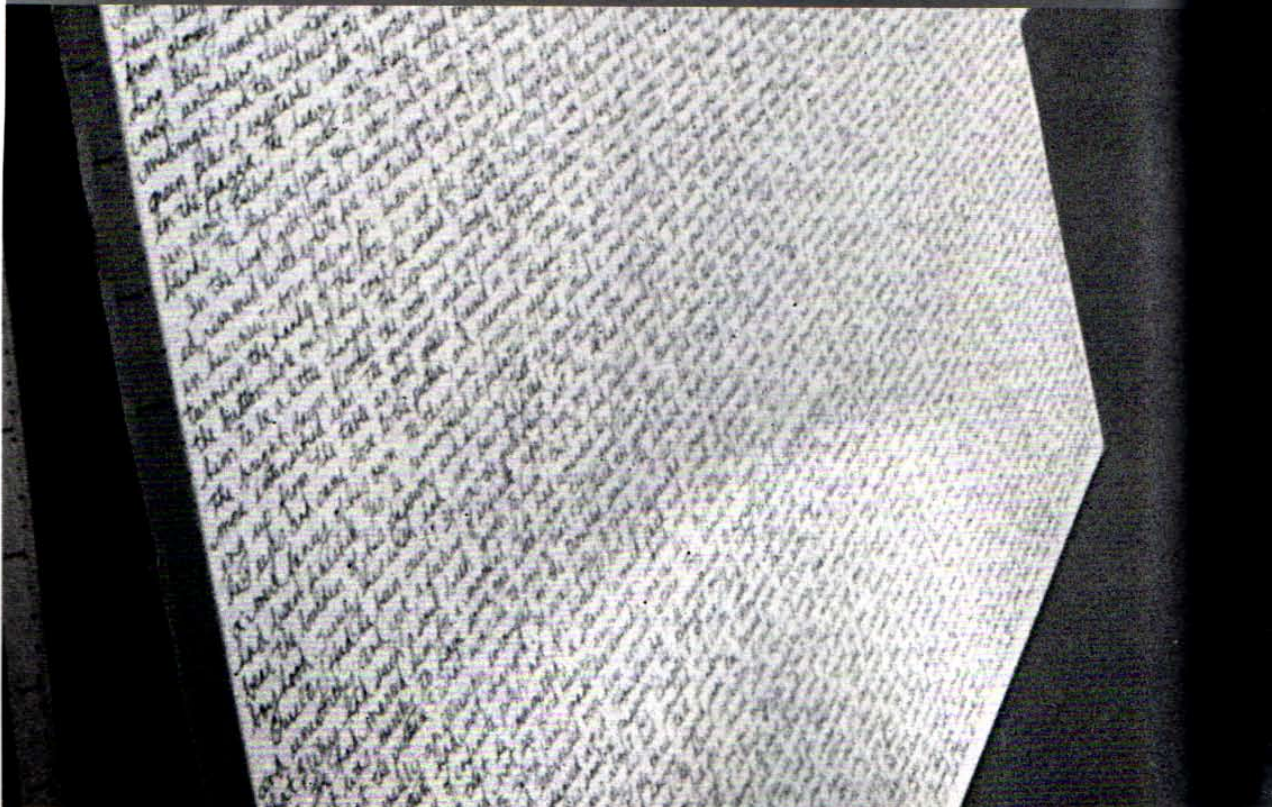
ALLEN RUPPERSBERG

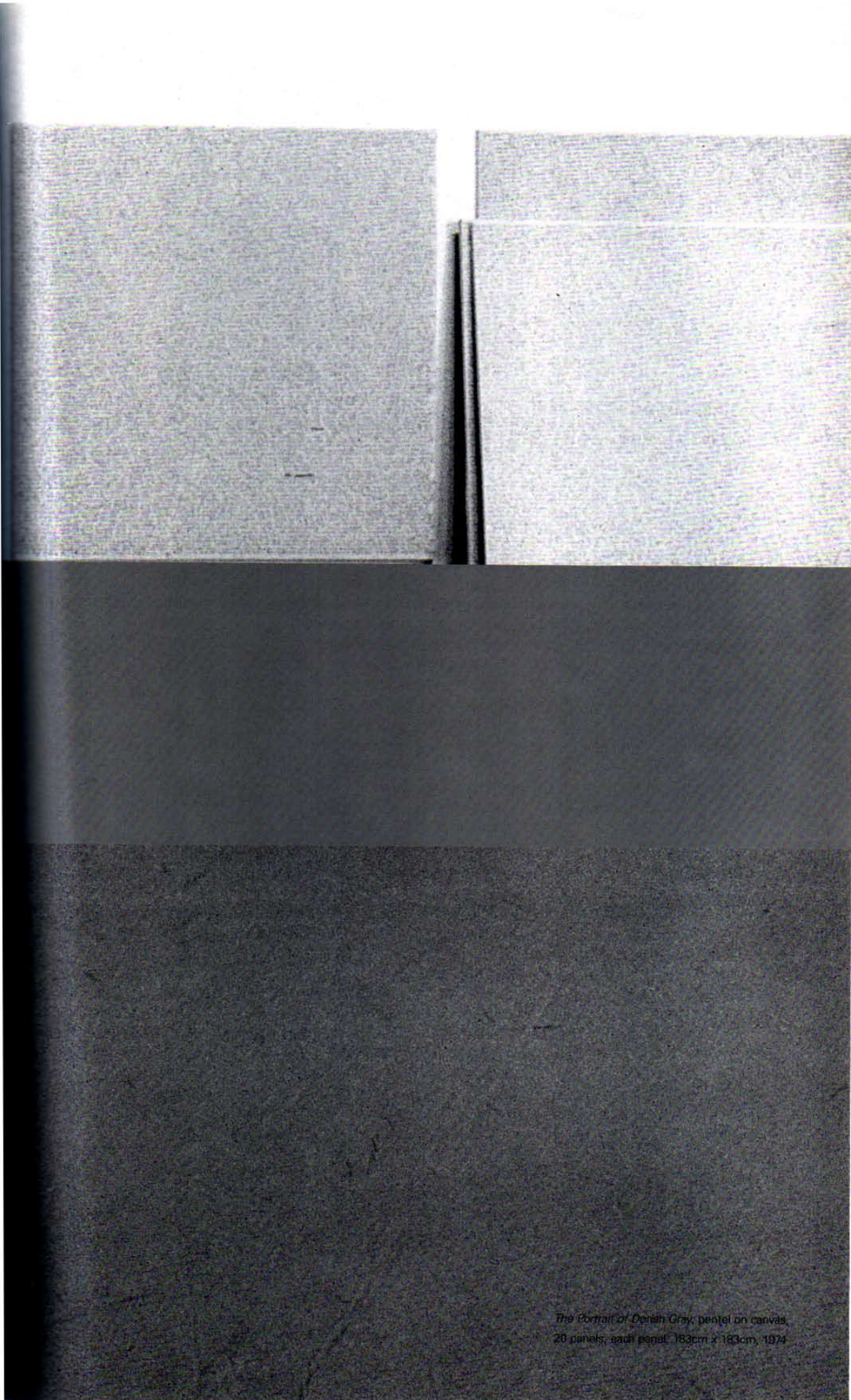
SEAN SNYDER

HELEN LEVITT



ALLEN RUPPERSBERG





*The Format of Denish Gray, pencil on canvas,
20 panels, each panel 183cm x 183cm, 1974*



ALLEN RUPPERSBERG

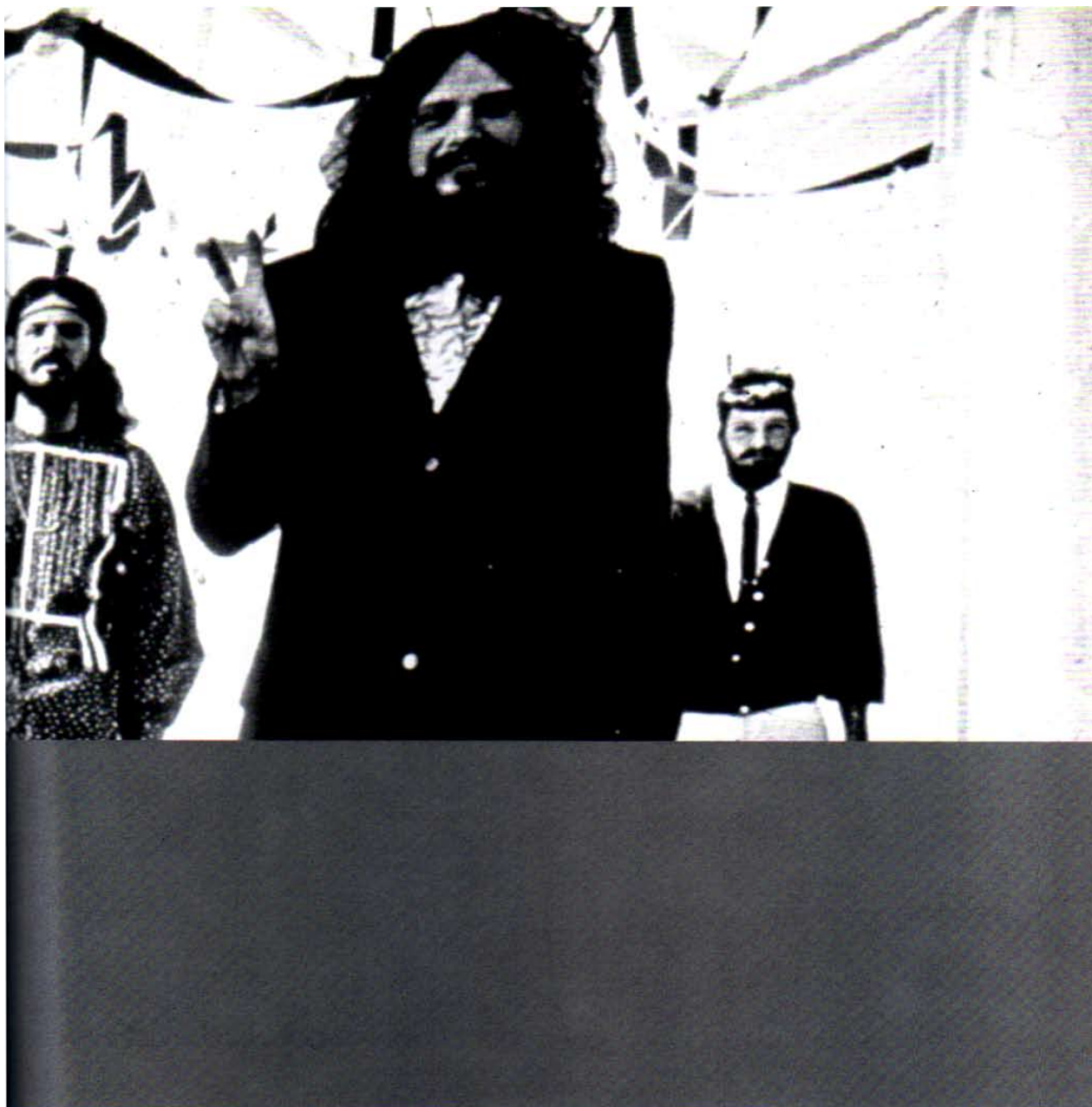
Susan Morgan

Allen Ruppertsberg:
Certain of His Books

Every good book is essentially a mystery. What secrets might be revealed between the covers? Whose story is it that is being told? Where are we going? How will it all end? Can we ever really understand? Why is so much so easily forgotten? What is it that we are longing to remember?

In the introductory notes to his university lectures on literature, Vladimir Nabokov described his course as a 'kind of detective investigation'. For Nabokov, the 'good reader' is an active reader, a 're-reader' endowed with an impersonal imagination, memory, a sense of artistic delight and a dictionary. 'In reading a book', he observed, 'we must have time to acquaint ourselves with it. We have no physical organ (as we have the eye in regard to a painting) that takes in the whole picture and then can enjoy its details. But at a second, or third, or fourth reading we do, in a sense, behave towards a book as we do towards a painting.'

There is a series of anecdotes that the visual artist and uncommonly good reader Allen Ruppertsberg has told various interviewers when quizzed about his beginnings and how he found his way into the captivating particularities of his own work. Born and raised in Cleveland, Ohio, Ruppertsberg was only eight when he decided that he wanted to be an artist. 'I have no idea where this idea came from', he admitted to one arts journalist. 'All I knew was that I needed to get out of where I was, and for some reason I had the feeling that art could be a way to do it.' His childhood afternoons were devoted to perusing the local library and



Al's Grand Hotel, 7175 Sunset Boulevard,
Hollywood, CA, 1971

drawing pictures. In 1962, Ruppertsberg moved to Los Angeles, enrolled in a commercial art course at Chouinard Art Institute (now CalArts), transferred to the fine arts programme and graduated in 1967. His story unfolds plainly. Time passes and one thing simply leads to another. But there are always turning points in a carefully considered story. In 1966 the Pasadena Museum of Art presented an exhibition of Frank Stella's *Protractor* paintings and Ruppertsberg was astonished. 'I was completely overwhelmed by their scale, power, sophistication, intelligence – everything', he recalled to a French curator. 'I realised I had learned painting in art school', Ruppertsberg told another journalist, 'but painting had nothing to do with whom I was as an artist and I began all over again.'

For Ruppertsberg and his close contemporaries – Terry Allen, William Leavitt and Jack Goldstein – making art was not a choice between sculpture and painting. For these artists – working with film, video, photography, installation, performance, music, audio recordings, multiples, publications, print-making, photography, paintings, drawings and sculpture — it was obvious that art must be made by any means necessary. Somewhere, among the interviews and profiles, I recall Ruppertsberg talking more specifically about his own early abstract paintings. I've searched for the quote where he states that when he looked at those paintings he wasn't able to see himself anywhere in the work. I want Ruppertsberg to say 'absent' for the record but I can't locate the exact source. I reshuffle my stack of xeroxes and catalogues tagged

Self Portrait and Sculpture, cardboard box
with die-cut paper, 32cm x 24cm x 33cm,
1974



with post-its but the precise line is lost. The notion of absence, however, is a constant presence in Ruppertsberg's work.

Ruppertsberg's 1969 installation *The Travel Piece* features a metal folding chair, a folding table set with a square white cloth and four folded newspapers. The daily papers are set at an angle, their mastheads fanned out like cards dealt in a losing hand: four different American cities, two consecutive days, no pairs. It's a barebones *mise-en-scene*, the skeletal structure of an undisclosed detective story. What is whispered between the lines? The implications are ominous and banal: a missing person, a fugitive on the run, a region-wide disaster, a bus ride back to Ohio from Los Angeles. Ruppertsberg's 1970 photographic piece, *Wave Goodbye to Grandma*, is an aerial view of a Southern California hillside. It's a late summer landscape, a pale-golden tinderbox of parched grasses and a scattering of brittlebushes. A single figure (a long-haired Ruppertsberg, dressed in jeans and a white T-shirt) has draped a hand-painted banner – 'WAVE GOODBYE TO GRANDMA' – across the ground and turns to look up toward the sky, the distance, the implied departing plane. The image is tense and wistful, a plaintive comedy of elusiveness and loss. Years later, in a 1988 exhibition at Christine Burgin Gallery, New York, Ruppertsberg presented a framed full-page advertisement from the *New York Times*. Plain white text on a black page, it was an advertisement for the film *Heaven's Gate*: 'What One Loves about Life are the Things that Fade'.

Afterall, 2002
6/19

During 1971 Ruppertsberg embarked on a major, ephemeral yet unforgettable, project: *Al's Grand Hotel*. From July through September (weekends only) Ruppertsberg, billed on 'Al's Grand Hotel' letterhead as 'President and Managing Director', operated a seven-room hotel. Located in a California Craftsman house on Hollywood's Sunset Boulevard, each guest room was a themed installation. A Jesus room featured a rough-hewn crucifix felled like a mighty oak and teetering on the edge of a neatly made double bed, a bridal suite was adorned with a bower of artificial flowers and a multi-tiered wedding cake and available for rent, 'linen changed daily and a full bathroom down the hall'. Above the registration desk, Ruppertsberg placed a sign with a hauntingly familiar phrase: 'Same thing every day. People come. People go. Nothing ever happens.' It's a line from German novelist/Hollywood exile Vicki Baum's *Grand Hotel*. Originally published as a book, successful as a play and later made into a Broadway musical, *Grand Hotel* is probably best remembered as the 1932 film in which the beautifully lugubrious Greta Garbo murmurs that she wants to be alone. *Grand Hotel* – ingenious, wryly humorous, short-lived and microcosmically attentive – was an ideal device for Ruppertsberg's ideas. In the popular film version, Lewis Stone plays Dr Otternschlaeg, a disfigured physician and hotel resident who pays little heed to the messages left for him at the desk and utters the memorable imperception: 'nothing ever happens.' Of course, in *Grand Hotel*, as in life itself, everything happens. The doctor's world-weary irony frames a story where everything is lost and found: love and hope, fame and fortune, life and death. 'What do you do in the Grand Hotel?', the Doctor asks. 'Eat. Sleep. Loaf around. Flirt a little. Dance a little. A hundred doors leading to one hall, and no one knows anything about the person next to them. And when you leave, someone occupies your room, lies in your bed, and that's the end.'

Ruppertsberg's work frequently considers life as a disappearing act. In his 1973 video *A Lecture on Houdini*, a strait-jacketed Ruppertsberg delivers a 33-minute talk on Harry Houdini, the famed conjurer and escape artist. Houdini, born Erich Weisz, took his professional name from Jean-Eugene Robert Houdin, a 19th-century French magician who is considered the father of modern conjuring. The original Houdini was the first magician to perform dressed in evening clothes. He eschewed the traditional wizard's costumes, debunked secrets of the supernatural and performed magic tricks with everyday objects. Houdini, too, was keen to expose the paranormal, revealing the tricks used by mediums and fortune-tellers. As Ruppertsberg informs us in his lecture, 'When asked to state his occupation he [Harry Houdini] replied: "I am an author; I am a psychic investigator for scientific magazines of the world; and then I am a mysterious entertainer."' Although Houdini was eager to expose 'mediumistic trickery', he held on to the hope that there might be communication with the dead. He repeatedly attempted and failed to contact his dead mother and, on his own deathbed, he gave his a wife a message ('Rosabelle, believe') that he intended to repeat from beyond the grave. She never heard from him again.

The magic cabinet was a standard prop in Houdini's theatrical performances: a large box that could be thoroughly examined and declared indisputably empty and then, suddenly – with the tap, tap of the magician's wand and an open-close-open of the door – a beautiful woman, a befuddled man, or a line of chorus girls would appear. *Grand Hotel* was Houdini's magic cabinet on a grand scale. In the film, an extraordinary sleight of fate occurs. Lionel Barrymore plays a downtrodden clerk from a provincial mill town. Diagnosed with a fatal disease, he goes to Berlin in order to spend the last days of life and all his careful savings on a luxurious stay at the Grand Hotel. The *debonair* John Barrymore plays an impoverished baron turned jewel thief. In the quick course of a few days, the baron falls in love, abandons the heist and is murdered. The meek clerk wins a small fortune, finds a new lease on life, and leaves for Paris with the incandescently young Joan Crawford, an unabashed gold digger. With a tap, tap of the magician's wand, one man enters to die and another man is carried off into the hearse. Someone is always missing.

Low to High, mixed media (mahogany w/padouk inlay steps, 100 books), 313cm x 98cm x 422cm, 1994 — 96



In Ruppertsberg's 1974 *Self Portrait and Sculpture*, an ordinary cardboard box is fitted out with a stack of paper, die-cut with the artist's profile. It's a negative silhouette, a stencil without features, an empty space stored in a container. Ruppertsberg's outstanding performance as a missing person occurs in the 1972 piece *Where's Al?*. Billed as a story written and photographed by Allen Ruppertsberg, *Where's Al?* comprises one-hundred-and-fifty Instamatic snapshots and one-hundred-and-twenty index cards. Thumbtacked to the wall in a neat grid of banal scenes, the images document a group of friends on a weekend holiday at the beach. They are interspersed with terse dialogue typed out on index cards, for instance: 'she: Where's Al?/ he: I think he went back to Cleveland'. Throughout the story, the lower cased 'he' and 'she' ask after Al, remark on his absence, and speculate on what he might be doing. Al, the only named character, could be at home, hibernating on Sunset, watching a movie, drinking in a dive bar or a legendary soda fountain, on his way to Europe or New York, sidetracked in a second-hand store, reading a book, or injured in a car crash. Al, of course, never arrives. But it's Al who has composed the story and Al who has supplied the eye and glimpses into the scene. One exchange – 'he: Where's Al?/ she: Maybe he stayed home to read. he: What's he been reading?/ she: Lautreamont' – is curiously paired with a single image of a nearly unrecognisable young man with long dark hair and a stripy T-shirt, manipulating his face into a hand-made monster mask. The old monster face is familiar: it's a fright-night favourite, ghoulishly dragging down the eye sockets (with two fingers) and pushing up the nose (with a thumb) for that nasty pig-snout effect. But isn't that Al? A man, well-steeped in the nightmarish tale of Maldaror, who probably knows that no portrait exists of the elusive author Lautreamont. Or am I reading too much into this?

'What's Al been reading?', he asks. 'Joan Didion.', she replies. In 1976, Joan Didion published an essay entitled 'Why I Write in the New York Times'. 'Of course I stole the title for this talk from George Orwell', writes Didion:

One reason was that I liked the sound of the words: Why I Write. There you have three short unambiguous words, they share a sound and the sound they share is this:

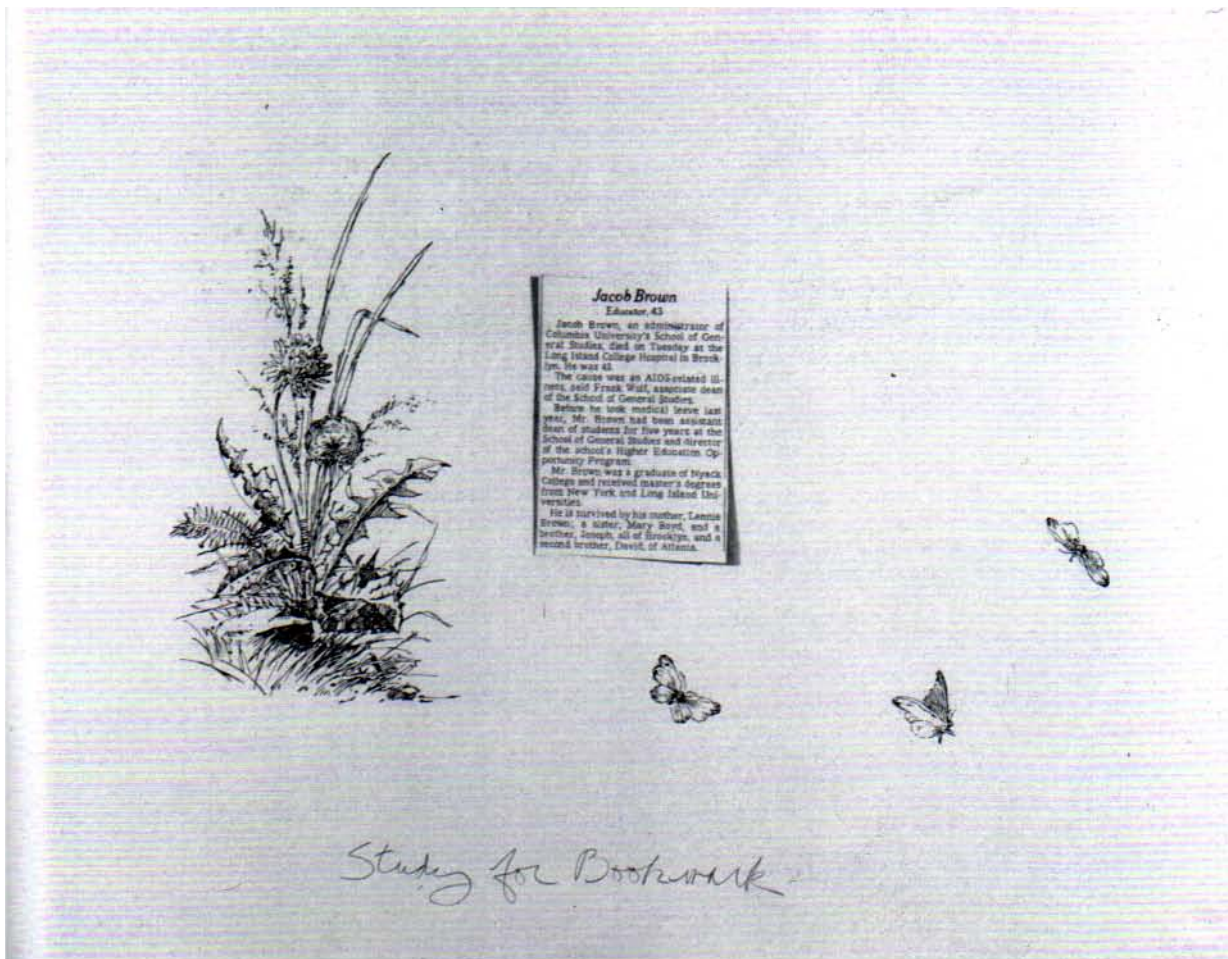
I
I
I

In many ways writing is the act of saying 'I', of imposing oneself upon the other – listen to me, see it my way, change your mind. Ruppertsberg has said that he wanted to teach himself to write. 'I had read somewhere that the way to learn about writing is to copy someone else's work', he explained, giving a sly misreading to some hoary advice. 'The same as copying old masters.' In 1974, Ruppertsberg copied out the entire text of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In this elliptical act of translation, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a story famously about a painting, was copied out, line by line, on to twenty stretched canvases. Each canvas – six feet square, a human scale, an arm's length, the height of man – conveys an inhabited presence, an ephemeral tale becomes an object in the world. Ruppertsberg has described each of Wilde's sentences with their free-standing aphoristic authority as 'an object'. Nabokov advised his students to plunge deeply into a book, to bathe themselves in it and never to simply wade through the text. Immersed in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Ruppertsberg spent solitary hours as a scribe, a scrivener, a copyist in a world seemingly without mechanical reproduction to produce a 'copy' of the book, a portrait of its substance without mimicking its style. Language is duplicitous, as the poet Mark Ford points out so wonderfully in his biography of Raymond Roussel. Like Roussel, Ruppertsberg chooses plain words that are capable of slithering between meanings.



Raymond Russel Falls to the Floor
(*Discovering Art, A Biography with Additional Notes*), 23 drawings, pencil on paper,
58cm x 74cm, each, 1979

Roussel, the author of *Impressions of Africa* and *Locus Solus*, was a wealthy French eccentric, a naïf who invented an entirely original method for creating narrative. His incomparable influence has been acknowledged



Study for Bookmarks, ink and graphite on paper, 58.5cm x 73.5cm, 1994

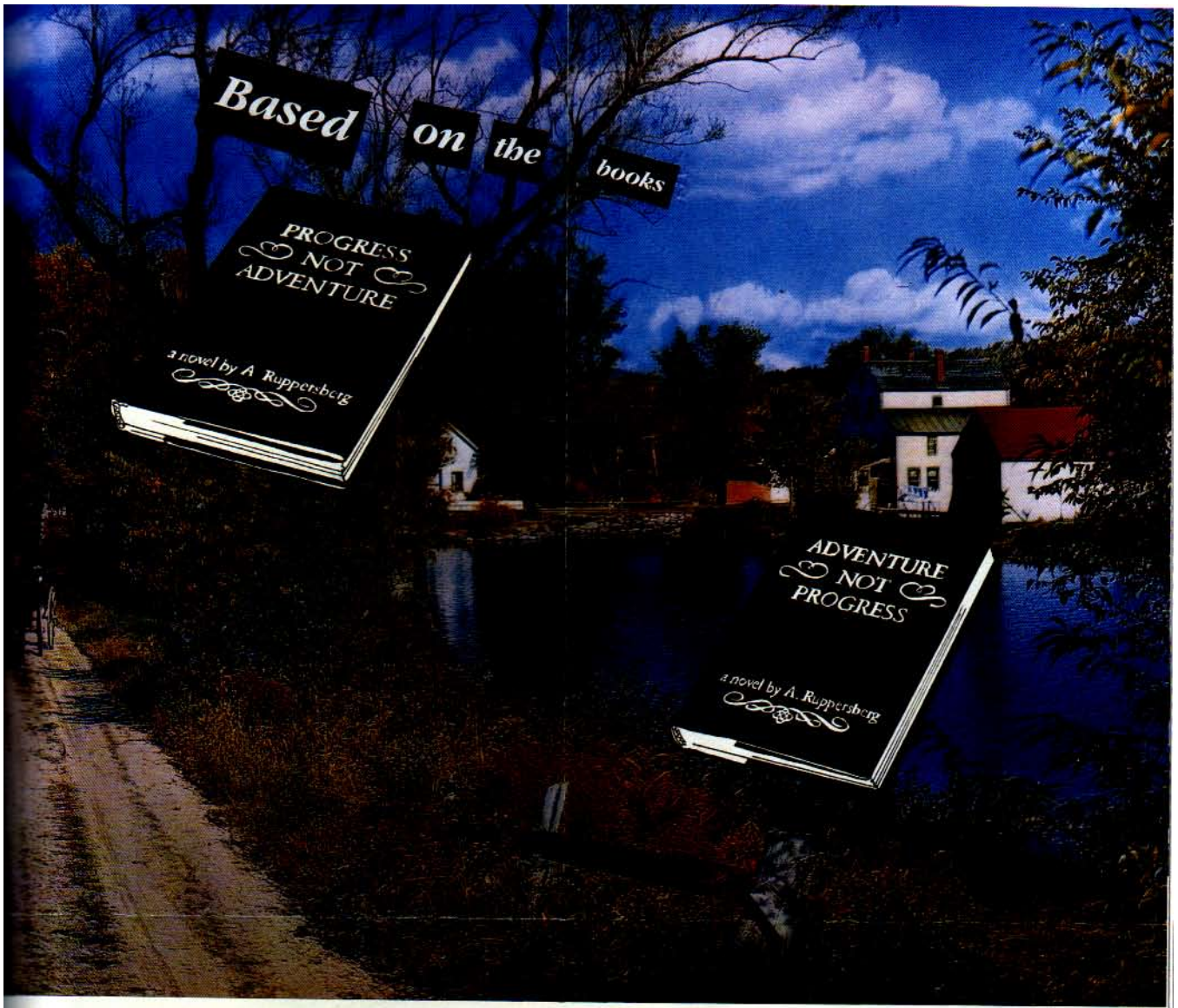
by artists such as Marcel Duchamp, André Breton, Harry Mathews and John Ashberry. Roussel, however, revered the popular novelists Pierre Loti and Jules Verne. Treasuring their books, Roussel was known to break apart single volumes and extract favourite sections – so no title page or cover could be seen by inquisitive or judgemental eyes. Alone with the removed pages, Roussel would pore over the text as his chauffered car circled the city without stopping. A book becomes an object in the world; a collection of frail words and weighty images go for an aimless spin in a deluxe automobile.

Following Roussel's suicide in 1933, Jean Cocteau published an appreciative and intrigued reminiscence of the writer. 'One day when I asked him for the "key" to *Impressions d'Afrique*, he replied, "I will explain it after my death."' Two years after Roussel's death, a slim volume – no larger than a brief guide of an instructional pamphlet — was published: *How I wrote Certain of My Books*. I remember a Manhattan Indian summer afternoon during the 1970s when I met a French artist, a translator of Roussel. The artist, seated at a large worktable in an East Village loft, was eating sardines directly from an opened tin. As he speared the oily little fish with a slender silver pickle fork, he explained the title of Roussel's posthumously published text. Roussel had wanted to explain the method that he had created to compose some (Fr: certain) of his books; but the author was also writing this book to express the assurance (Fr: certain) that his books would be read widely and, ultimately, live forever. His writing method was thorough-going, original and virtuosic in its renditions of doubt.

Drawn from Life, a title that recurs in Ruppertsberg's work, teases out a similar niggling doubt as to its intended meaning. Is it 'drawn from life'/ripped from the headlines or 'drawn from life'/ a pencil drawing of a posed subject or a still life? We are always operating from clues — assembling, questioning, sometimes disassembling and assembling again.

Ruppersberg's work is a transformative action of literature's classic concerns – the ephemerality of life, the inescapable passage of time, the doubts surrounding knowledge and the unacceptable certainty of death. In his *Studies for Bookmarks*, Ruppersberg makes precise pencil drawings of newspaper obituaries. These miniaturised biographies – of men who have died from the complications of AIDS – attempt to portray succinctly an entire life in a single newspaper column. Like a banner draped across a landscape, the narrow strips of newsprint have a distinct presence and a wispy sense of impermanence. Ruppersberg's handmade drawings are consciously infused with a sense of time passing, time spent. Rendered as bookmarks, the obituaries are intended to hold a place, indicate a pause and mark our presence in a continuing story. The bookmarks float at angles on the white page and pale drawings of flowers, wreaths and ribbons adorn the sheet of paper. These spare decorative flourishes share a quality common to the small wood engravings that often appear in 18th-century books. Those small grey images of the natural world that seem to quietly tether the abstract region of words to the earthly world of recognisable images and scenes invite the reader to linger a while on the page.

Ruppersberg's work constantly weighs the delicate balance between presence and absence, the passing of time, and the possibility of leaving an indelible mark on the world. He charts the fluctuating exchange rates in a visual economy: does a photograph command more time than a film still, a painting or a drawing more than a photograph, and a book even more than a painting? He engages in a kind of detective investigation, utilising clues – an elusive quote, a restructured scene, an item clipped from a tossed-away newspaper – to form an inquiry. Drawing from life and literature, he establishes a solid case for absence and leaves behind a haunting portrait of time.



COMING

**THE SKY ABOVE
THE MUD BELOW**

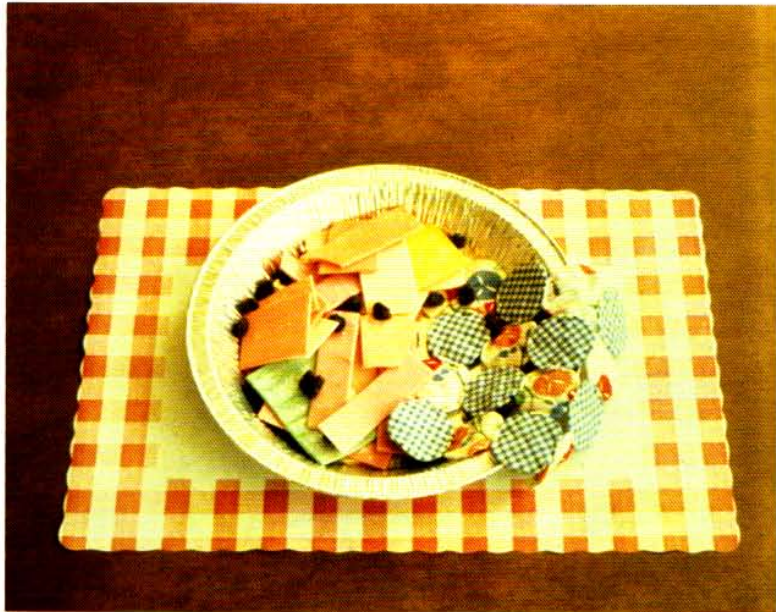
FROM
A. RUPPBERG
615 BROADWAY #704
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10012

FROM
A. RUPPBERG
615 BROADWAY #704
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10012

Or maybe later SOON!

The Sky Above, The Mud Below
(Progress/Adventure), collage on board,
92cm x 73cm, 1988

Al's Cafe, 1969/71
Dish#1: A Dish of Bubble Gum and Raisins



Al's Cafe, 1969/71
Dish#2: Johnny Cash Special



Al's Cafe, 1969/71
Dish#3: John Muir Salad





Al's Cafe, 1969/71/1996, slide projection,
photographs, neon tubes, clock; installation at
the Magazin, Centre National d'Art
Contemporain, Grenoble



ALLEN RUPPERSBERG

Frances Stark

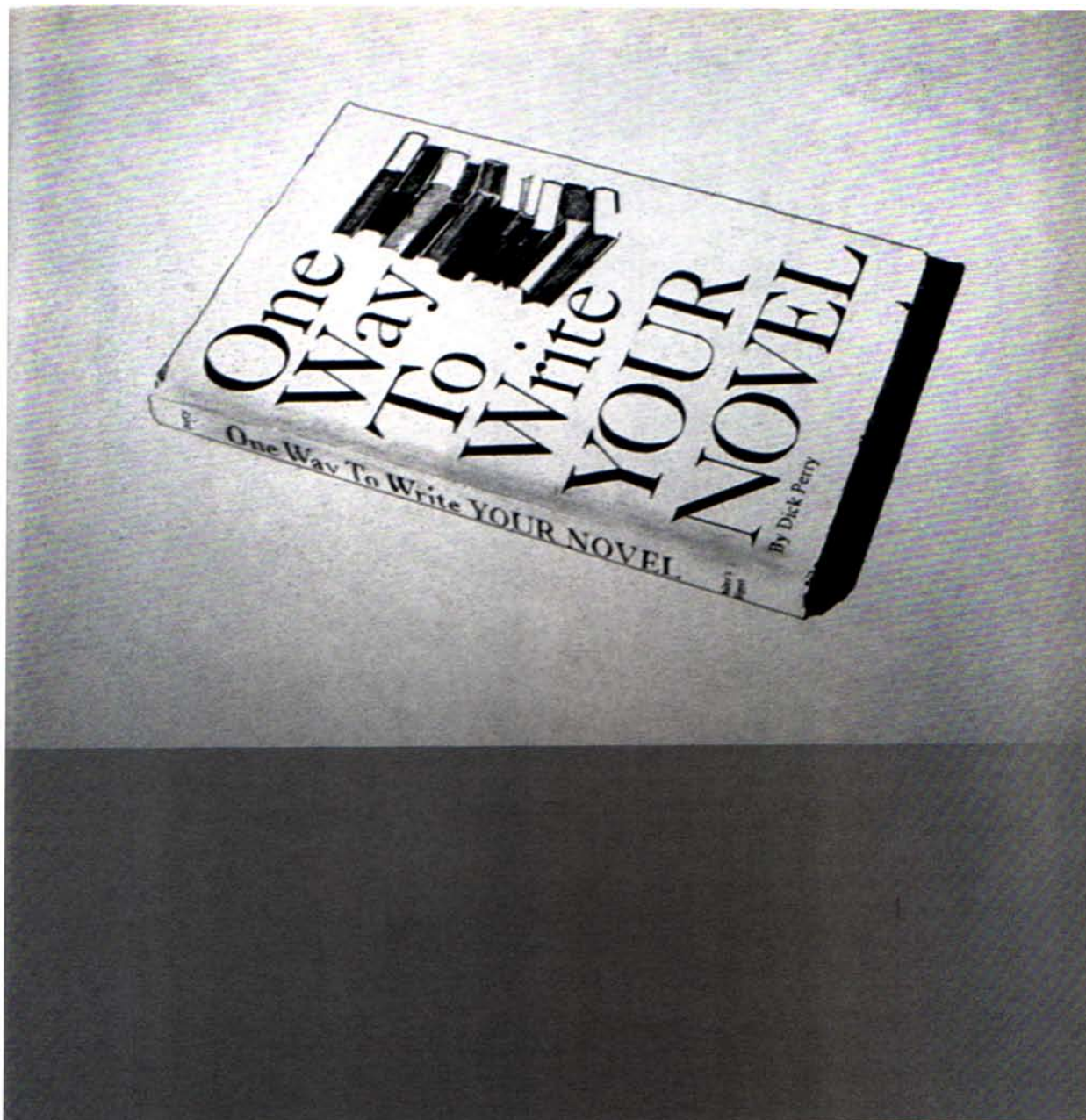
For nobody knows himself, if he is only himself and not also another one at the same time.

Henry Miller quoting Novalis in *Creation (Sexus)*

Thoreau's Walden, mixed media, dimensions variable, 1973

At the time the question was posed as to whether or not I would like to contribute a text about Al Ruppertsberg, I was full of promises to myself to turn down any request for writing that came my way. Presumably, saying 'no' to others might constitute saying 'yes' to myself or, rather, I may have been thinking that it might be best to dedicate myself to writing something that stemmed from my own requirements, not something that was somebody else's idea. Perhaps what lies at the bottom of such selfishness – and, incidentally, at the forefront of any discussion of AI I have the luxury of initiating – is the assumption that the aim of life is self-development. To come under the influence of someone else is to become an actor in a part that has not been written for him – an assumption adorned and articulated courtesy of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Let me first explain how I was introduced to the work of Al Ruppertsberg. I was in my studio with an advisor, both provided to me by the art college I was attending at the time, and we were looking at a piece I had just made. The advisor asked: 'Have you ever seen the work of Al Ruppertsberg?' And I answered 'no'. Now, the reason they asked, the reason anyone asks of any aspiring young artist 'have you ever heard of X', is generally because the young person, in this case me, has apparently attempted to do what X, in this case Al Ruppertsberg, has already done. Just being asked the question is not the same as some referee blowing a whistle and calling a foul. It doesn't necessarily imply you are hopelessly delusional regarding your own potential for originality. It could mean something as simple and



The Gift and the Inheritance (One Way to Write Your Novel), Graphite on Paper, 50cm x 66cm, 1989

helpful as 'why don't you look into the similarities and see where that takes you'. Either way one hears it, the question practically forces a confrontation with the most basic problem of how to navigate one's own influences. This is especially tricky when you have to account for being influenced by something you never knew existed. What I had done was to make a copy of a book that I held in high esteem, Henry Miller's *Sexus*. What Al Ruppertsberg had done, to put it simply, was transcribe Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. What I had inadvertently copied was not his actual art but the part of his art that involved transcribing literature. Without delving into the implications of the layers of copying at work here, I'd like to get into the actual literature at hand. You know, just proceed as if the politics of appropriation had nothing to do with it, and as if Miller and Thoreau and Wilde had everything to do with it. I want to put contemporary art momentarily in a small potato category, if only to broach the subject of shadows cast by potatoes of grander scales. There's a perfect phrase for this grand-scale shadow casting, coined by a literary critic who's still lecturing at Yale. The perfect phrase in question is 'the anxiety of influence', and the eponymous text it derives from is best summed up by one of its author's contemporaries, the late Paul de Man: '[Harold] Bloom's essay has much to say on the encounter between latecomer and precursor as a displaced version of the paradigmatic encounter between reader and text.'¹ Now, if Al sat for months in his studio rewriting, word for word, Thoreau's *Walden*, I have to see this as a direct engagement with every single

¹ Paul de Man, *Blindness & Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1983, p.273



Al's Grand Hotel, 7175 Sunset Boulevard,
Hollywood, CA, 1971

thought and idea Thoreau put into that particular work, which was in itself an experiment in living. It's an embrace of the notion that practice is key in philosophy, even while it avoids reliving what that practice describes, namely the critical out-of-doors/self-reliance element. I guess a lot of hippies were copying that part of *Walden* already. A writer asks a reader, 'read me', not 'be me'. This level of involvement with a work executed by someone else doesn't necessarily smack of anxiety, probably because it doesn't set out to contest, compete or rewrite, but to just reread. It requires utter submission to the author, leaving the readers' contestations and questions unspoken and unarticulated. It's like one huge speed freaky underline of someone else's efforts yet, of course, it is more than just a generic 'hooray for *Walden*'. There's a story involving anxiety and influence about Al that I have to recount.

Before he began working in a conceptual vein he had been doing some shaped canvases that led him to pay a visit to a Frank Stella exhibition. He told an interviewer:

When I saw Stella's paintings I was stunned ... I looked at these paintings and realised I knew nothing about what I was doing. I thought that here was someone who knows exactly what he wants, and that it surely belonged to him and not me. It was a history that he knew and was using better than anyone. I went home knowing I had to start all over.

I think it's interesting to consider this remark in light of the work that would come shortly after. Wouldn't Thoreau or Oscar Wilde count as someone 'who knows exactly what he wants'? Why don't *Walden* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 'belong' to Thoreau and Wilde the same way a painting 'belongs' to an alive guy who might just be older and more experienced than you? Does a Stella painting really mean to say 'only I do this' the way *Walden* might be saying 'perhaps you too should try'? It's like the Stella-induced anxiety forced AI to consider a sphere of influence of a different circumference, and so his starting over was really a starting over from total scratch.

It's funny how I so easily keep referring to him as AI, even though I have only spoken with him on a few occasions. It's a layover of the familiarity he established early on in works such as *AI's Cafe*, *AI's Hotel* and *Where's AI?*. This casualness, this easy familiarity, represents the quotidian concerns of his practice. I am tempted to interpret the commonplace as a foil for the literary and philosophical themes embedded in the two copied books but that would be wrong because both texts seem to argue for a stronger role for 'real life' in art and philosophy. In *Walden* Thoreau writes: 'There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers ... Yet it is admirable to profess because it was once admirable to live.' The critic Stanley Cavell, who wrote an entire book on the subject of *Walden* (though the following is not from it) suggests that Thoreau is a threat and an embarrassment to philosophy, that philosophy considers him an amateur and, out of self-interest, represses him. 'This would imply that [Thoreau] propose[s] and embod[ies] a mode of thinking, a mode of conceptual accuracy, as thorough as anything imagined within established philosophy, but invisible to that philosophy because based on an idea of rigour foreign to its establishment.' This quote is from a book called *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism*.² In it there's an essay called 'The Philosopher in American Life' and, as I set out to read it, I started thinking that maybe there is something of the ordinary in AI's work – something too ordinary even to be deemed pop – that, just given the *Walden* reference alone (not exactly a small nod), suggests a transcendentalist tradition is worth considering. I read Cavell:

the sense of the ordinary that my work derives from the practice of the latter Wittgenstein and from JL Austin in their attention to the language of ordinary or everyday life, is underwritten by Emerson and Thoreau in their devotion to the thing they call the common, the familiar, the near, the low. The connection means that I see both developments – ordinary language philosophy and American transcendentalism as responses to scepticism, to that anxiety about our human capacities as knowers that can be taken to open modern philosophy in Descartes, interpreted by that philosophy as our human subjection to doubt. [...] But look for a moment [...] at the magnitude of the claim in wishing to make the incidents of common life interesting.

I encountered this book in a friend of mine's office. While he was out of the country I spend an afternoon at his desk with his books while my boyfriend watered his tomato plants. My friend went to Yale where he studied with Harold Bloom, the *Anxiety of Influence* author, and I'm guessing he studied with Stanley Cavell as well. When I was a visiting artist at Yale for a couple of weeks last year, I thought it would be nice to sit in on one of Bloom's lectures. Some students told me I could probably just call him up and go visit him at his home, insisting he was the kind of character who wouldn't mind accommodating an inquisitive stranger if it meant he could provide ample talk to a good listener. Foolishly I did not pursue the adventure. During that same visit back east, I also opted out of a one-on-one with a poet and author of a great book on one of my heroes, Emily Dickinson. That author is my friend's mother. So as I sat in his chair and tried to think about how to write about AI, I had to ask myself 'what is your problem?' because not only did I miss out on meeting her and Harold

² Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1988, p.7.

Bloom, I did the same thing by avoiding a conversation with Al Ruppersberg in preparation for this writing. Heck, I could've interviewed Al and spared myself the agony of lonely rumination. We could've gotten down to brass tacks. But, really, I knew from the beginning that this had to be a one-sided affair if I wanted to probe the more awkward aspects of what de Man called the encounter between latecomer and precursor, between reader and text. I got the de Man quote from my friend's office too. I was sitting there, looking at an intimate little Lawrence Weiner piece casually collecting dust on the windowsill, thinking about how the hell could I really bring Bloom into all this, and maybe even the dusty Weiner at some point too because I couldn't even pretend to have a grasp on whom Bloom was actually referring to with respect to the Strong Romantic Poets. So I glanced over on the shelf thinking my friend was sure to have some of their works. I just turned my head and the first thing I saw was *The Anxiety of Influence* itself. I was thinking how to borrow the notion and apply it to this idea of dealing with influence in the formative years of art making à la Al's encounter with Stella and my own encounter with Al. I also knew I just couldn't leave it at that, but probably needed cautiously to determine the link to the spirit of what Al does – you know, first with his insistence on the everyday leading into the almost anthropological circles he draws around certain, presumably shared, human experiences. The hopeful grope for a link either put a damper on my thoughts or just unluckily coincided with a major drop in my blood sugar and, flatlined, I had no choice but to just pick up a book and start reading. Jackpot! I started copying the following text into my notebook:

There always is a strange fascination about the bad verse that great poets write in their youth. They often seem more receptive than any to mannerisms and clichés of their age, particularly to those that their later work will reject most forcefully. Their early work, therefore, is often a very good place to discover the conventions of a certain period and to meet its problems from the inside, as they appeared to these writers themselves. Every generation writes its own kind of bad poetry, but many young poets of today are bad in an intricate and involved way that defies description. Freer and more conscious than any of their predecessors, they seem unable to surmount passivity, which is the very opposite of freedom and awareness. They can be highly formalised, but without any real sense of decorum, extravagantly free, without enjoying their daring; minutely precious, without any true taste for language. At best, they turn around as in a cage, all their myths exploded one by one, and keep making up the inventory of the failures they have inherited. At worst, they strike poses and mistake imitation for mask, talking endlessly and uninterestingly about themselves in elaborately borrowed references. In each case there is the feeling of being trapped, accompanied by a vague premonition that poetry alone could end the oppression, provided one could find access again to true words ...

I copied on and on for several pages but that'll do for our purposes. However, I should at least admit to omitting the final sentence of that particular paragraph on account of it ending on a down note and I wanted it to end on the hopeful one. OK, forget it, it ended like this:

Meanwhile, the flow of language hardly covers up the sterile silence underneath.³

3 Paul de Man, 'The Inward Generation' (1955), in *Critical Writings 1953–1978*, Minnesota Press, 1989, p.12.

The Shoes, series of 5 drawings, pencil on paper, 57cm x 72cm, 1975

