

Collector's Paradise: Greil Marcus on Allen Ruppersberg's Rock 'n' Roll Chronology



A spread from Allen Ruppersberg's *Collector's Paradise*, 2012

From his frequent collaborations with recording artist Terry Allen to his ongoing El Segundo Record Club (a subscription service that delivers tracks from vintage 78s on CD or vinyl, inside jacket artworks created by the artist), music has played a vital role in Allen Ruppersberg's art. A keen observer of this thread in Ruppersberg's work is critic and music journalist Greil Marcus, the author of numerous books on American music, including *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the 20th Century* (1989) and *The History of Rock 'n' Roll in Ten Songs* (2014). Here, in a *Walker Reader* exclusive, Marcus zeroes in on Ruppersberg's passion through one project, *Collector's Paradise*, a 2012 book that traces rock history through some 1,500 recordings in the artist's collection, from hymns like Gipsy Smith's "Saved By Grace" (1909) to Al Green's "Full of Fire" (1975).

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FILED TO
Visual Arts

DATE
Jul 3, 2018

allen RUPPERSBERG
Intellectual Property
1968-2018

Anyone who has engaged with Allen Ruppersberg's work, whether *Al's Café* or his "Howl" poster series or *The Never Ending Book Part II*, has felt the elements that power it: play, obsession, and an eagerness to play the string

out as far as it goes, just like Uncle Scrooge and Flintheart Glomgold fighting over who's the richest duck on earth, which comes down to fighting over who has the biggest ball of string in the world, with Rupperberg both of them, because when one has purposefully entered into the obsessive's house of mirrors, the person who wants to quit is always being pulled back by the one who never will. Music has always been a backdrop, a kind of conscience, in Rupperberg's world, and music and obsession are linked together like melody and rhythm: one seems to call out to the other. A few years ago, Rupperberg brought it all into focus with a project—he called "No Time Left to Start Again."

Allen Rupperberg:
Intellectual Property 1968–2018

On view March 17–Jul 29, 2018.

Organized by the Walker, this exhibition travels to the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles February 10–May 12, 2019.

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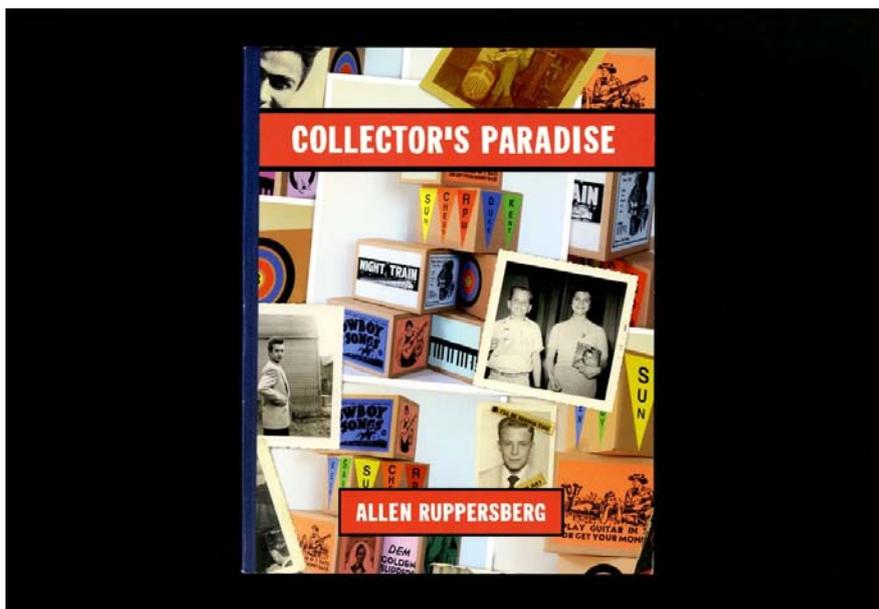
Installation views of Allen Rupperberg: *Intellectual Property 1968–2018*. Photo: Galen Fletcher for Walker Art Center

“In some cases, if you live long enough you begin to see endings of the things in which you saw the beginnings,” he writes at the start of his introductory essay for a book with the outside title *Collector's Paradise* and the inside title of *No Time Left to Start Again: The B(birth and D(death) of R'n'R*. It was 2012; right above Rupperberg's sentence were 1940s birth dates and 21st-century death dates for nine rock 'n' roll performers, from Levon Helm (1940–2012) to Warren Zevon (1947–2003). At the end of the essay, which chronicles Rupperberg's three-year odyssey through antique malls, church basements, yard sales, house clearance sales, flea markets, mostly in his native Ohio, searching for the remnants of a history of rock 'n' roll that would somehow counter, upend, distort, or dissolve the official, alienating history he'd seen on display at the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland, where Rupperberg (1944—) was born, he appends four more names—this time of people whose beginnings he was not, as with Helm or Zevon, around to share, and whose endings had yet to come—“Chuck Berry (1926—, Jerry Lee Lewis (1935—, Fats Domino (1928—, and Little Richard (1932—” —two of which time has since caught up with. You sit and stare at the names on the page, as if it's only the fact that your hands are holding it that, as I write on June 5, 2018, is keeping Little Richard and Jerry Lee Lewis alive.



Paging through *Collector's Gold*, which is 80-some pages but reads as if it were hundreds—because Ruppertsberg didn't stop with 78s and 45s, ranging from Vess L. Ossman's "The Darkies' Awakening," from 1906, to Al Green's "Full of Fire," from 1975, but swept up countless pieces of sheet music, promotional items, music magazines, period photographs, advertisements, and more—it seems like a miracle, or a trick, that Ruppertsberg would even try to boil it all down to two LPs compiled from his bottomless treasure chest, one collecting black performers from Sister Rosetta Tharpe to Lloyd Price, and one of white performers, from Uncle Dave Macon to Hank Williams. Familiar enough—you can find those names in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. But not, as on the second album, the Trinity Choir, here with "There is a Fountain Fill'd with Blood," from 1909, or, on the first, Rosetta Howard, with her "When I Been Drinking," from 1947.

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Van Morrison used to end his concerts with one big shout: "IT'S TOO LATE TO STOP NOW!" Ruppertsberg takes his title from "American Pie,"

Don McLean's 1971 eight-minute, 42 second history of rock 'n' roll, specifically the verse on the Rolling Stones 1969 performance at Altamont, which some thought even in the moment as the end of the story: "With," McLean says, "no time left to start again." Ruppertsberg presents his project as something with a beginning and an end, but I don't believe for a second he's not still looking.

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