

Colpitt, Frances. "Allen Ruppertsberg at ArtPace." *Art in America* 3 (March 2001), p. 140.

SAN ANTONIO

Allen Ruppertsberg at ArtPace

In its current form, Allen Ruppertsberg's installation *The Novel That Writes Itself* is neither a novel nor is it written. The project, which the artist began in 1978 and first exhibited 19 years later, in 1997, consists mainly of 800 placard-size posters. For the show at ArtPace, Ruppertsberg also included a new set of 20 drawings, neatly framed and hung at eye level, directly on top of the posters, which completely covered the gallery's walls from floor to ceiling.

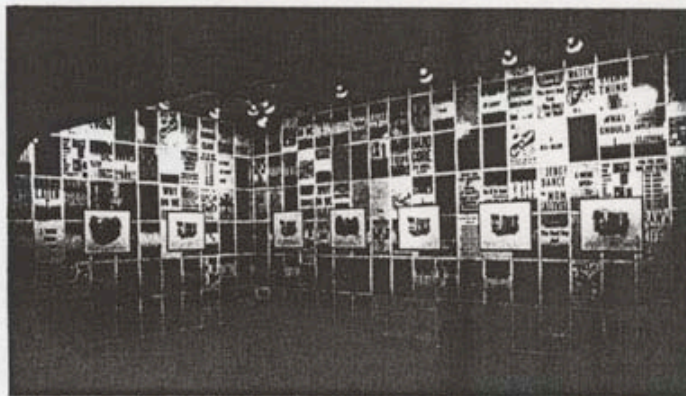
A brief text accompanying the exhibition explains the work's origins. With a rough idea of an autobiographical novel about the adventures of an artist, Ruppertsberg sold parts in his unrealized text. The roles of leading and major characters were purchased for \$300 and \$100, respectively. Minor character roles went for \$50 but were available only to people the artist did not know. Participants include well-known art-world figures, such as Dave Hickey, Rosamund Felsen, Fredericka Hunter and Terry Allen, along with several named minor characters. The glamour factor of starring in a novel (almost as prestigious as a

movie) has obvious Hollywood overtones, pervasive in southern California, where Ruppertsberg lived until 1985. Although the work was originally envisioned as a series of drawings and paintings to be shown in Texas and L.A. (the "story" was to begin and end, appropriately, in Texas), along the way Ruppertsberg's fascination with brightly colored posters advertising dances, wrestling matches and revivals took over and eventually supplanted any narrative or literary intentions the artist may have originally harbored. Printed by a poster company in Los Angeles, the placards do identify the imaginary novel's characters and preachily inquire, among other things, "Why do we fail?" and "Is one thing better than another?" in bold black letters.

The new drawings (all dated 2000) are each based on a gray, screen-printed line drawing of an upscale living room, conservatively furnished. Over each print are differently colored washes and scribbles. Scrawled beneath the image are captions beginning, "Honey, I rearranged the collection . . ." and ending with a sarcastically clever justification, such as "to prove that Conceptual Art began with Magritte" or "to show that we are nice people." Punctuated by a few poignant moments—a reference to the late, legendary dealer Nick Wilder, for instance—the overall comic sensibility accrues to the series through repetition. Contrast, too, informs the meaning of these high-class interiors, juxtaposed as they are to posters, which evoke the cheap, mass-produced advertisements that characterize the visual culture of the real world.

And visual this exhibition was. The grid of bright pinks, blues, yellows, oranges, rainbow runs and other colors typical of the screen-print poster industry made this an upbeat, snappy pleasure for the eye. Unburdened by subtext or political critique, *The Novel That Writes Itself* embraced all forms of expression with a merry sense of humor.

—Frances Colpitt



Allen Ruppertsberg: Installation view of *The Novel That Writes Itself*, 2000; at ArtPace.