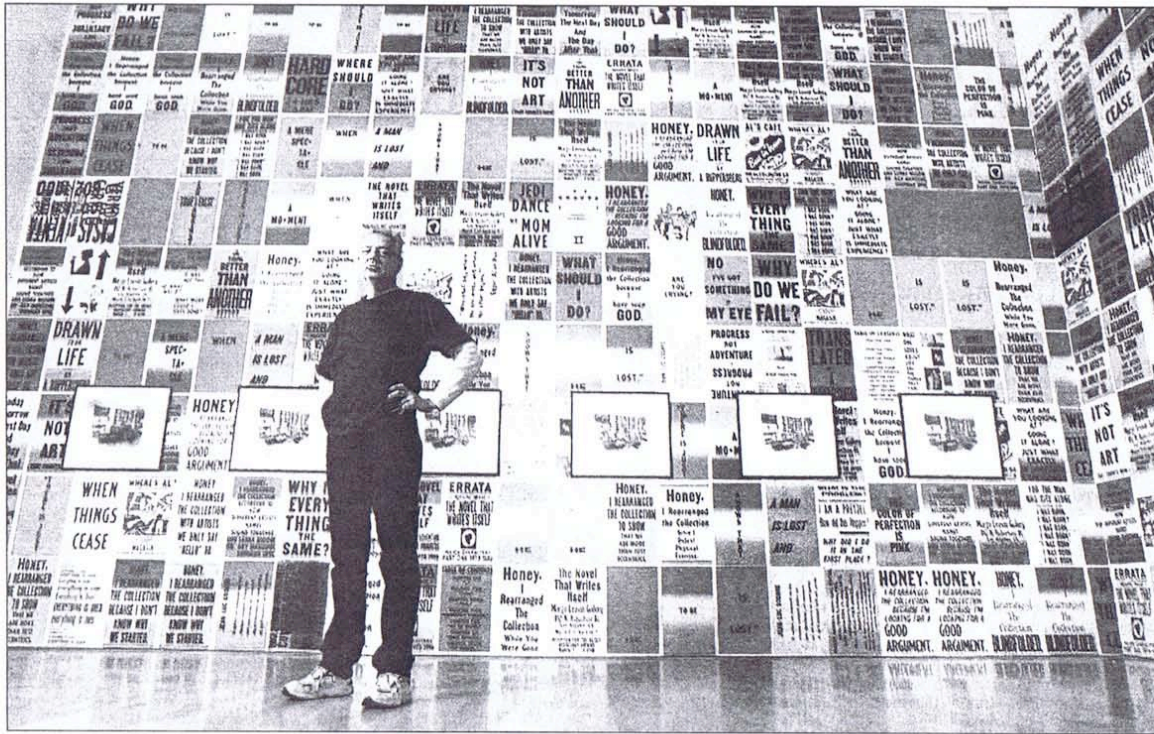


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ART



RICK MEYER / Los Angeles Times

"They are like New Yorker cartoons for the art world," Ruppberg says of his library images hung on top of his posters at the Margo Leavin Gallery.

HIS NEVER-ENDING STORY

Allen Ruppberg has been exhibiting "The Novel That Writes Itself" for more than a decade, and the final chapter isn't in sight.

By HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP

Gore Vidal once suggested that we don't need better writers, we need better readers. Allen Ruppberg is just such a reader. In fact, he has turned reading into an art. His art.

Among the first generation of Conceptual artists to employ language as the subject of his visual output, for three decades Ruppberg has turned to books, magazines, posters and films for both the content and form of his work. His latest installation consists of colorful posters with rhetorical texts, a long-term project known as "The Novel That Writes Itself." On top of these posters, he has hung 47 drawings depicting a library in a stately home with pithy captions, a series titled "Honey, I Rearranged the Collection."

The show opened this weekend at the Margo Leavin Gallery, where it runs through April 14.

After the show was installed last fall at nonprofit ArtPace in San Antonio, Frances Colpitt wrote in *Art in America* magazine, "Unburdened by subtext or political critique, 'The Novel That Writes Itself' embraced all forms of expression with a merry sense of humor."

Ruppberg, 57, is a true *éminence grise* these days, his hair turning gray and combed straight back. He retains the aura of cool, a laissez-faire hipness shared by colleagues Bruce Nauman, Terry Allen and Ed Ruscha. Black jeans, a little goatee patch on his chin, he still sports signs of the rebel with a cause. For 20 years, he has kept a rent-controlled apartment facing the ocean in Santa Monica. Tidy stacks of magazines and shelves of books dominate the small living room, along with a 1950s TV set that works and quirky, pop culture souvenirs like old Beatles dolls. Simultaneously, since 1985, he has lived part time in a SoHo loft, but due to soaring rents in Manhattan, he recently had to surrender it. He bought an apartment in Brooklyn but moved his studio to El Segundo.

"For most of my life, I have lived in both L.A. and New York," Ruppberg says, sitting in a canvas chair in his Santa Monica living room. "They are

both a part of me as an artist and as a person."

His art too has been affected by this nomadic routine, combining the droll surreality of West Coast Conceptual art with the relentless intellectual inquiry of its East Coast practitioners.

Ruppberg, who is single, gives a simple reason for three decades of bicoastal living: "I'm restless," he says.

Restlessness characterizes the fundamentals of "The Novel That Writes Itself." Basically, it is a piece about the inability to leave well enough alone, about an all-consuming obsession with arranging and rearranging. Its very history is a shaggy dog story.

In 1978, Ruppberg began thinking of creating an autobiographical "novel" about the adventures of an artist. Its major characters—his supporters—could purchase their way into the story for \$300 each (among the takers: collectors Elyse and Stanley Grinstein, Terry Allen and art critic Dave Hickey). To become a minor character cost only \$100, and ancillary figures could participate for \$50 but only if recommended by another higher-priced participant.

"It was based on E.M. Forster's 'Aspects of the Novel,'" Ruppberg explains. "His book is about fiction technique. The idea was my way of perpetuating the novel and a way of perpetuating the narrator.

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Ruppersberg: Making a Career Out of Restlessness

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which was me."

Although this idea incubated for more than a decade, it never really came to term. He occasionally sent one of the "characters" a drawing, but he could not visualize how the piece should be completed. Along the way, as a separate thing, he began having aphorisms and questions printed on multicolored cardboard in the manner of old-fashioned carnival posters. These posters proclaiming "Drawn From Life by A. Ruppersberg" or "What Should I Do?" started appearing in his exhibitions in the mid-'80s.

"In 1990, I realized that I had written 50 texts in the form of these posters and therefore that the novel had written itself," he says. "I just hadn't recognized it until that point. So I put the two things together, the texts from all these posters and the original idea for how the novel was to be."

Each time the "novel" is exhibited—it's been installed four times—Ruppersberg writes more texts, including 10 new additions that are in the Leavin show. The supporter-characters make appearances in various ways on the posters. For example, Allen and the Grinsteins show up in photographs, and names are listed as in



RICK MEYER / Los Angeles Times

"In 1990, I realized that I had written 50 texts in the form of these posters and therefore that the novel had written itself," Ruppersberg says.

a cast box. There are now some 800 of the posters, though many are duplicates because each time a poster is made, the L.A.-based printing company that makes them for Ruppersberg prints a minimum of 50.

At this point, the "novel" only exists as an installation, which means that it is in a constant state of flux. Ruppersberg hopes at some point to publish the posters together as a book. "I don't have the money to do it," he says, "and no one else has come forward to pay for it."

Ruppersberg arranges each installation of the posters differently, paying attention to how the questions and observations play off one another. Yet, he doesn't expect a viewer to stand in the room and simply read.

"Your eye takes it in as you walk around and read a little piece here and there," he says. He compares it to another of his pieces, a 1974 transcription of Oscar Wilde's entire "The Picture of Dorian Gray" onto canvas panels. In that seminal piece, he transformed a novel about a painting into a painting about a novel. When exhibited, people would not so much read the entire piece as take in various sentences and descriptive passages.

In the current exhibition, the "novel" has become a subtext for an additional layer of image and text in the form of the library drawings—actually silk-screens of drawings of a well-appointed library in a traditional home. Each is decorated or water-colored and captioned: "Honey, I've rearranged the collection to prove that Conceptual art began with Magritte" or "Honey, I've rearranged the collection to separate unhappy artists with problems from the rest. I couldn't do it. It's

the whole collection." Smiling, he explains, "They are like New Yorker cartoons for the art world." These observations have also crept onto the new background posters as in "Honey, I've rearranged the collection according to how different artists' names sound together like Serra Bloom or Ray Manzoni or Sherman Opie."

Reviewing the drawings at New York's Christine Burgin Gallery for Art on Paper magazine, Barry Schwabsky wrote, "It shows how little separates the collector from the Conceptual artist, if the cornerstone of artistic activity is indeed, as Duchamp urged, the act of selection."

Ruppersberg, however, is selecting from his own stockpile. "The traditional image is from a drawing I made in the '70s, probably from a movie still," he says. "It reinforces the way that I work, which is completely rearranging everything I do all the time. So, it's kind of like a text about how I work. It also refers to the fact that I am a collector—not of art, but of everything else."

Noting that he collects films, movie posters, books, magazines, and paper ephemera of all kinds, he says, "My work is like an archive that I use so the collections are in and out of storage when I need them. I am constantly rearranging my own collections so I know what a collector's mind is like."

With so much emphasis on the quality of language in the posters and drawings, one wonders, did Ruppersberg hope to be a writer?

His expression turns serious as he answers, "No, because I always knew that I wanted to be an artist. I was only interested in using language in my art. But if I have to use language, I think I should know about it and be able to do it on a certain level."

Ruppersberg was only 8 when he decided to become an artist. Growing up in a Cleveland suburb, he was encouraged to study art as a child. His father was an engineer who sold electrical supplies but was passionate about classical and swing music. His mother was a housewife and a voracious reader. Both were entirely supportive of his desire to be an artist. By high school, he was a dedicated library denizen, where he would read the New York Times' Arts and Leisure section rather than do homework. Also, he kept collections of books and magazines, which he rearranged regularly. "Looking back, you could see it as a sensibility developing," he admits.

After a visit to Disneyland at age 11, Ruppersberg decided to become an animator. At L.A.'s Chouinard Art Institute (now CalArts), he enrolled in commercial art in 1962. After two years of studying lettering and illustration, he switched to fine art but continued to like the look of commercial art. "I had no interest whatsoever in modern drawing, like Picasso," he says. He also had very little interest in sculpture, ceramics or painting. "I hated making things," he recalls.

Nonetheless, after graduating with a bachelor's degree in fine art in 1967, he pursued painting briefly and even showed at the now-defunct Nicholas Wilder Gallery. Seeing Frank Stella's protractor-shaped painting at the Pasadena Art Museum (now the Norton Simon Museum of Art) brought an end to that. As good as Stella might be, the paintings had no relevance for him. "After that, I realized I had learned painting in art school, but it had nothing to do with who I was as an artist," he says. "I began all over again."

Around that time, numerous L.A. artists, including Nauman and John Baldessari, were pursuing alternatives to traditional methods of making art. "It was a zeitgeist and it is hard to pinpoint where you get ideas," Ruppersberg recalls. "But a reaction to high formalist art and the theories of critic Clement Greenberg led the way."

"I'm on the cusp between Modernism and Postmodernism," he says. "There were many ideas leading up to what I did, what my group did. In developing my voice as an artist, my influences were Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol."

"Most of the artists I knew were rebels, and our heroes in pop culture were rebels—James Dean, Marlon Brando. You wanted to completely break from what had come before. Plus, there is no way to separate my generation from

the politics of the period. It was a period of saying no. 'No, I'm not going to Vietnam.' 'No, I'm not going to paint the same art.' So then you have to figure out what you are going to do."

In 1969, Ruppersberg staged "Al's Café" for three or four months in a storefront near MacArthur Park. Designed by the artist as a hangout for artists and friends in downtown L.A., the humble restaurant looked as though it had been transplanted from the heartland of America. But the menu featured offerings "From the Broiler" such as "simulated pine needles à la Johnny Cash, served with a live fern." A waitress took the order and Ruppersberg was the short-order cook who put it together. A little plate of "pine cones and cookie" cost \$1.50. Artist Allan McCollum, who attended the cafe, was impressed by how shocking this event seemed to be at the height of Minimal, Post-Minimal and Conceptual concerns. In a catalog for Ruppersberg's 1999 show at the Regional Foundation for Contemporary Art in Limoges, France, McCollum wrote, "For Ruppersberg to simply reproduce (or even embrace) America's banal traditional rituals (like having a meal at a local cafe) flew in the face of expectation during those contestatory times."

As a fledgling Conceptual artist, Ruppersberg went on to have a show of his photographs of empty rooms and postcards with texts at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1971. With his trajectory determined, he then moved to New York for the first time. "I stayed for six months, until I was broke, then moved back to L.A.," he recalls. "You could do that then."

Ruppersberg claims that his work continually cycles back to his original interests, whether they may manifest as collaged movie posters, installations of books or projections on movie screens.

"What I know about myself is that I am extremely restless, going back and forth for 30 years," he confesses. "And I am restless in the work. It changes constantly and confuses people because it always looks different. Restlessness in me the person, restlessness in the work. That seems to remain constant." □

• "The Novel That Writes Itself" and "Honey, I Rearranged the Collection," Margo Leavin Gallery, 812 N. Robertson Blvd., West Hollywood. (310) 273-0603. Gallery hours are 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Tuesday through Saturday. Free. Ends April 14.

Hunter Drohojowska-Philp is a frequent contributor to Sunday Calendar.