

MARGO LEAVIN GALLERY

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Tim Griffin on  
**Allen Ruppertsberg**

If ever there were an artist whose practice seemed premised on Jacques Rancière's idea of the spectator who "makes his poem with the poem that is performed in front of him," it is Allen Ruppertsberg. So much of his work takes the act of transposition as its substance, as when, for example, cinema provides a model for sculpture or literature the subject for drawing. In this way, the artist himself can seem a distanced viewer who creates parallel narratives for the works before him, ruminating openly on educational movies of the past or on the writings of Raymond Roussel—putting on display the kind of subsequent personal fiction that flourishes in the only place where art might actually meet life, in a viewing or reading subject's mind. But Rancière's notion is manifested most literally for audiences in *The Singing Posters, Parts I, II & III (Poetry Sound Collage Sculpture Book)*—Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* by Allen Ruppertsberg, 2003/2005, where the poet's bohemian psalm is rendered almost entirely in phonetic form. Here, Ruppertsberg's own recasting of language is foregrounded at the same time as the act of reading is activated—the poem placed in the viewer's body, in effect, as one inevitably must mouth the words in order to recompose and decipher them for oneself. Nearly as literal in its reenactment of firsthand experience is his landmark *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 1974, for which the artist wrote the entirety of the eponymous novella in felt-tip pen across twenty large canvases (thereby making a space for looking into a space for reading). A kind of anxious elegy to the task of painting, the work reflected its day's deep skepticism about the medium, but only with a sublime irony, re-presenting Wilde's testament to art's power to transform the world—a literary case made all the more compelling, or affecting, by the embodiment of the prose in Ruppertsberg's own hand. Setting aside the artist's related text-based works, one recalls an urban myth of literature: Hunter S. Thompson would write out entire Faulkner novels, it is said, hoping that the master's lyric consciousness would make an indelible impression upon his own creativity.

"A poem is not an overcoming of anxiety, but is that anxiety," Harold Bloom once famously asserted. Such an anxiety could be said to inhabit all of Ruppertsberg's work, as a kind of continuous play of misinterpretation that his art wears on its sleeve (like copy on a book's dust jacket). His recent traveling survey, "One of Many—Origins and Variants," conceived in part by the artist, clearly evidenced this principle of repetitions, returns, and rereadings in both its title and its organization, bookended as it was by Ruppertsberg's *Dorian Gray* and *Howl* pieces. Yet as variations on a theme and instances of ideas dispersed across myriad forms, these and other pieces (showing Ruppertsberg remaking the work of both others and himself since coming of age in '60s Los Angeles) underline their own suspended quality—their own "failure" to resolve into a finished, fixed language, if you will. Paradoxically, this provides audiences with interpretive possibilities, in turn. The encounter is a bit like looking at Marcel Broodthaers's final volume of poems, which Ruppertsberg mentions in the story he tells in the following pages, or like the isolated copy of Roussel's *Locus Solus* that Ruppertsberg renders in *Raymond Roussel Falls to the Floor (Discovering Art): A Biography (with Additional Notes)*, 1979. What is closed in one way opens in another—the very sense of distance created by Ruppertsberg's work allowing one to recast for oneself the experience of, and then the relationship between, art and life. □

TIM GRIFFIN IS EDITOR OF ARTFORUM.

Allen Ruppertsberg, *The Singing Posters, Part I* (detail), 2003, 133 screenprints on cardboard, each 22 x 14".