McCollum, Allan. *Allen Ruppersberg: Books, Inc.* Exhibition catalogue. Limoges, France: Le Fonds Régional d'Art Contemporain, 1999.

Allen Ruppersberg:

What One Loves About Life Are the Things That Fade

ALLAN McCOLLUM

> *I would like to write you so simply, so simply, so simply. Without having anything ever catch the eye, excepting yours alone, and what is more by erasing all the traits, even the most apparent ones, the ones that mark the tone, or the belonging to a genre (the letter for example, or the post card), so that above all the language remains self-evidently secret, as if it were being invented at every step, and as if it were burning immediately, as soon as any third party would set eyes on it . . . . It is somewhat in order that we "banalize" the cipher of the unique tragedy that I prefer cards, one hundred cards or reproductions in the same envelope, rather than a single "true" letter.*
>
> — Jacques Derrida, The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond, 1987

In thinking about Allen Ruppersberg's work today, after following it for thirty years, I find it impossible not to be influenced by the first time I actually saw him. That was in the spring of 1969 in Los Angeles (where both of us were living at the time), at the city's premier performance of the Living Theatre's best-known production, Paradise Now.[1] At a certain important point in the evening—the moment when all the players (and many of the audience!) tear off all their clothes—a long rope that had been fixed to the ceiling was hurled down from the balcony, with great fanfare, and the first audience member to jump (to fly!) through the air to slide down the rope was—Allen Ruppersberg. He was already one of the most well-known and admired young artists in L.A., and cheers arose from everyone in the theater, as many others rushed to follow his leap.

During that year Al and I became good friends, and perhaps this Yves Kleinian image might have faded from my mind but for the fact that since those days all my experiences of him and his work have resonated absolutely within the personal symbolism I gave to that particular moment—that Allen Ruppersberg is often the first to leap.

It was later in that same year that Ruppersberg produced one of his best-known projects from those early days, Al's Cafe. I am interested in writing about this project right now specifically because he is doing his very best work at this exact moment, and because the themes he developed in Al's Cafe offer so much to an understanding of his current public projects. Those

projects in turn have brought his earlier work into a new clarity for me, and I am beginning to see his life's work more as an integrated whole, and to recognize how the work of his early twenties presages and underwrites the work he is doing today, in his (our) mid-fifties. So, although this essay will focus on Ruppersberg's work of the late 1960s and 1970s (the work I am most familiar with), it will end with some notes on his work of the 1990s. [2]

FOSSILES ARE EXTRA ON ALL MEALS.[3]

You might say that a certain "tradition" was in the process of forming in the late 1960s, a tradition of recognizing the work of art as existing not only in some rarefied aesthetic system but also within an economic system (a system of buying and selling), and answering to an overarching structure of outside political interests. In 1961, for instance, Claes Oldenburg had created his famous "store," which functioned with complete credibility as a viable site of economic exchange without the intervention of a museum or art gallery. Robert Filliou and George Brecht had a shop together near Nice in the late 1960s, while the San Francisco Diggers' influential "Free Store" experiments (a radical
and theatrical questioning of economic exchange, mediated through what Digger Peter Coyote would later describe as "store-ness")[4] were well-known on both coasts among our generation. And these experiments resonated with such public interventions as those performed by the BMPT in Paris, the Provos in Amsterdam, and others who used direct action and street performance to challenge the hidden economic and political interests that historically have been mediated through the legitimation of works of art by systems of power and privilege. The spirit of this tradition would speak later, in 1972, through Gordon Matta-Clark's Food, a performance work that turned into an actual New York restaurant. There are no contemporary artists exploring the artwork as an economic "object-on-display-and-for-sale" who do not pay homage to this history.

An addition to this context must be mentioned: assemblage artist Ed Kienholz's The Beanery, of 1965. No single artwork created a stronger impression on the young artists of mid-'60s Los Angeles than this famous piece, a life-size, freestanding narrative tableau that eerily re-created Barney's Beanery, an actual West Hollywood bar (a bar, in fact, frequented by Chouinard Art Institute students, including Ruppersberg). This surreal and squalid depiction was effectively permeated with the smells of burnt cooking oil and beer, and with the prerecorded, tinny sounds of the perpetual empty conversations of wasted, faceless patrons—patrons distinguished by filthy, smelly, polyester-resin-soaked clothes, and by their communal preoccupation with "closing time" (each person's face being replaced by a clock set at 2 A.M.). Barney himself, the owner of the actual bar, is depicted staring blankly at a newspaper with the headline "Children Kill Children in Viet Nam."

I remember this history here in an attempt to create some feeling for the context of Al's Cafe.

ART SHOULD BE FAMILIAR AND ENIGMATIC, JUST AS HUMAN BEINGS THEMSELVES.[5]

The Cafe was intended to be a limited-run restaurant, staged once a week—Thursday nights from eight to eleven—in a rented location in downtown Los Angeles. It was to function socially as a meeting place for friends, members of the art world, and anyone else who wanted to drop by. In direct opposition to what one might have expected from a young artist at the time, the decor was familiar to the point of strangeness: hyperfamiliar, you might say today. The look was as crafted as a movie set, true to the period, though the period could have been anywhere from 1925 to 1969. Against all Minimalist, Post-Minimalist, and Conceptualist expectations, this cafe was not an idea as an idea as an idea; it was sumptuously filled with romantic detail, suggesting a cafe that had existed for a lifetime of years and was filled with Middle American memorabilia—posters, nature calendars, fishing paraphernalia, pinups, picture postcards, and autographed photos of movie stars and sports heroes. The patterns of the tablecloths were everyday plaid, the counter and the tables and chairs were traditional. Odd bits of advertising novelties were everywhere, souvenirs of past events abounded, and the waitresses were beautiful. This was Al's Cafe, the American cafe of all American cafes, looking as if it had been nurtured for forty years by a caring cafe-owner, filled with memories to be shared with generations of patrons. It was a place where any American would have felt at home. It was exorbitantly familiar.

But once one recognized this, and once one was comfortable, a strangeness was invited to the table. The menu supplied by the beautiful waitress was on the outside perfectly normal-looking—but the "dishes" were rather odd. The first offering ("FROM THE BROILER") was TOAST AND LEAVES. The second offering was DESERT PLATE AND PURPLE GLASS. The third offering was SIMULATED BURNED PINE NEEDLES A LA JOHNNY CASH, SERVED WITH A LIVE FERN. And so on. From salad to desert, Al's Cafe mediated nature into sculpture, brought the forest and the desert to your table. And it was not, as I thought for a moment, a joke. When a person ordered a "plate," the waitress brought the order to the "kitchen" behind the counter, the "cook"
(Ruppersberg) put together the dish (rather quickly, as I remember), and the order was delivered to the table—perhaps a SMALL DISH OF PINE CONES AND COOKIE ($1.50), or maybe THREE ROCKS WITH CRUMPLED WAD ($1.75).

ART SHOULD MAKE USE OF COMMON METHODS AND MATERIALS SO THERE IS VERY LITTLE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE TALK AND THE TALKED ABOUT.

I would like to explain a little of why this piece was so significant in L.A. in 1969. "Site" works and "performance" pieces were proliferating at the time; in 1970, for instance, Richard Serra would create an outdoors-brought-indoors
installation at the Pasadena Art Museum, in which three immense California redwood logs were leant upon a fourth, and their cantilevered ends were sawn off and allowed to crash to the floor. The aftermath of this action created an
enormously dramatic display, and the project was much talked about. Elsewhere, a number of artists of these years were crowding into their cars and heading out to the deserts to work with natural processes, the results of which were

often brought back from such alternative, poststudio locales to wind up in the same clean white gallery spaces that the artists seemed to have abandoned so pointedly. Robert Smithson had worked to point out the dialectical relations between the "nonsites" of the urban galleries and the peripheral "sites" of marginalized geographic territories: slag heaps, rock piles, dry lakes, landfills. He and others who followed took to the Midwestern plains and the Western deserts, executing projects in the middle of nowhere, and bringing back aerial photographs, sketches, documentation, and truckloads of residues and samples from these relatively exotic, empty regions of the American map to display in
the populated cities. A new vocabulary was building, and an exploration of how our culture's richness and complexity have always been framed and defined by our fantasies of the sophistication of our urban centers, and the purity of their showplaces and shrines, in relation to nature's marginalized and boundless emptiness.

A dilemma was beautifully revealed by these pioneering artists—and clearly spelled out for the younger artists—and the question ("naturally") arose: isn't our idea of nature just another idea? Another concept? Another cultural artifact? Does moving out of our urban habitats to make art really accomplish anything beyond promoting a further alienation, a further fiction, another kind of imperialism, a new imaginary idea of purity? It was within this growing discourse that Al's Cafe offered to sell a "JOHN MUIR SALAD (BOTANY SPECIAL)," or "GRASS PATCH WITH FIVE ROCK VARIETIES SERVED WITH SEED PACKETS ON THE SIDE." In Al's Cafe, Ruppersberg answered the growing mannerisms of Earth art with a slyly symbolic display of nature as always mediated, always already determined by the culture that processes it—both literally and figuratively—for its own use. He presented nature as a commodity for consumption, without the pretense of any pure "natural" vision.

In those days this was a telling critique, for the language of site work and performance art was already becoming rife with all kinds of fanciful, romantic, and exotic "natural" primitivisms. Seeking meaning that transcended the historical moment, many "poststudio" artists had begun to dwell on the drama of prehistoric cultural practices, and to speak of solstice worship, the Nazca lines, primitive "making," and so on; sculptors meanwhile were trading the processed, industrial materials of Minimalism for prima materia, the raw, unprocessed ("unmediated") materials of nature. Many urban art performances developed into carnivalesque displays of earthy, sexualized, transgressive activity, and some feminists began to embrace mythic essentialisms, goddess cults, fertility rites, and the like. It was as if, at a time when modern-day Western attitudes to nature were becoming widely distrusted, artists were drawn to the ritualistic nature worship of the past, or to creating new rituals based on that worship.

Thus 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. In Al's Cafe he absolutely dismissed the idea that a people could radically ignore their own culture. To the contrary, he was determined to emphasize culture at every turn, to demonstrate that we are wholly defined by it in every act of transgression, in every act of self-redefinition—indeed, in every act of representation of any kind; and he seemed to believe that this was just as it should be. In my memory, it was Al who reminded our troubled generation that simple, normal, everyday rituals of

human commerce (horrors!) contained a significant complement of decency and joy that needed to be recognized and appreciated—not in spite of, but along with whatever else might have been wrong with the world in those especially uneasy years.

HOW DO YOU PRESENT A REAL THING?

It was Ruppersberg's seemingly passive use of common everyday ritual as a "material" to work with that truly separated him out, very early on, from the many radical mannerisms of the late '60s and early '70s. But it was the cultural narratives that lie behind the rituals of everyday life that began to preoccupy him as his work continued. During the period before and after Al's Cafe, Ruppersberg developed an appreciation for a specific kind of photograph: the kind of "neutral" picture one finds on a postcard, on a calendar, or in a stock photo. He was fascinated by the stillness, emptiness, and virtual absence of authorial subjectivity in these images, which, for him, were taken for anybody by nobody. Postcards in particular often depicted empty landscapes, empty motel lobbies, empty restaurants, empty streets, or isolated, immobile monuments. In Ruppersberg's view they were pregnant with something about to appear, like the shots routinely taken by location scouts in the movie business—sites where stories are about to happen.

THE ORDINARINESS OF THINGS BEARS WITNESS TO THEIR PARTICULIAR IMPORTANCE, THEIR CAPACITY TO ENTER INTO THE ORDER OF LIFE, TO GROW AS ONE WITH THE QUALITIES OF HUMAN BEINGS TO THE POINT THAT THEY BECOME A FIXED AND MEANINGFUL PART OF
HUMAN EXISTENCE—ALL OF THIS IS DENIED TO THINGS WHICH ARE "EXTRA-ORDINARY." [6]

In 1968, 1970, and 1971, Ruppersberg published three books [7] of such empty photographs. These were often shots of hotel rooms, but many revealed small changes that seemed to be clues to an unknown event: an unopened newspaper left on a perfectly made bed, a stone placed on an otherwise undisturbed desk, a picture removed from a wall. In a related, contemporaneous series, Ruppersberg produced what he simply called "Drawings," a title that might suggest the intimacy of an artist's touch—but he created these "drawings" by placing three found postcards together in a simple horizontal row, and framing them. It was an uncanny demonstration that any sequence of images would be read as a story, with a logic all its own—or, perhaps, that a logic could be projected onto any sequence of images by their viewer. These works suggested that nothing would make any sense whatsoever to any of us without a socially agreed-upon narrative structure to hold all events together.[8]

During this period Ruppersberg did many works that followed a certain mysterious story-telling logic. One well-known work, The Travel Piece (1969), suggested a mysteriously minimal story

in a typically simple Ruppersbergian manner. A single folding chair was set at a single folding table with a single tablecloth, and on the table were placed four daily newspapers, all dated within the same two days, but from different cities. Ruppersberg concocted this "story" by taking a bus trip from L.A. to his hometown of Cleveland, Ohio, and buying a paper at each bus station along the way.

In 1971, at the Pasadena Art Museum, Ruppersberg produced a one-person exhibit that included sequences of images and sequences of texts in many different forms, all suggesting the possible presence of a narrative. One work, The Campfire, was a circle of folding chairs, set up to suggest a gathering of small children being told a story. On each chair was an object, often something a little spooky, including (as I remember) an owl's wing, a large flat stone, and a bundle of sticks. The arrangement suggested a scary story—both the story itself and the telling of it at the same time. A related story-telling piece, Lee Baliantz, was made up of 234 small rectangular pieces of paper, each bearing a handwritten address for a location in the Los Angeles area and all of them pinned to the wall in a large grid, alphabetically, the way detectives might arrange lists of clues on a wall to try to make sense of them. [9]

LOOK FOR NARRATIVE OF ANY KIND. ANTI-NARRATIVE, NON-NARRATIVE, PARA-NARRATIVE, SEMI-NARRATIVE, QUASI-NARRATIVE, POST-NARRATIVE, BAD NARRATIVE.

All cities, towns, neighborhoods, families, and individuals determine narratives for themselves, and are conditioned by the myths they perpetually create and re-create for themselves. Hollywood, a city of mythmakers, is certainly no different. When Ruppersberg chose to move to Los Angeles and to go to Chouinard, in 1962, he was planning to become a commercial artist, and his evolution into a fine artist in a big city was a period of great change for him. He later described his arrival like this: "L.A. was like a dream come true for a Midwestern boy—it was the land of dreams then. It was the best."[10] I myself recall him telling me back then that he often thought of the moment when he stepped off the bus from Ohio to L.A. and momentarily froze with anticipation and excitement, as if he were opening a brand-new book that would change his life forever. It was the feeling of that moment, he explained, imprinted forever in his memory, that he dreamed he might one day be able to reproduce in a work of art. So moving to Los Angeles, becoming a fine artist, and growing into adulthood in the dreamy glow of the motion-picture industry was a developing romantic tale that held high value and interest for him—and he was certainly not the one to ignore the mythic atmosphere in which he and most people in the city lived. In his work in the early 1970s, and his constant meditation on the mythic armature of Hollywood, he was ruminating on the story of his own life as it unfolded.

Al's Cafe—a common site in which a community could meet and share experience—seemed to develop into something a lot more cinematic in Al's Grand Hotel, of 1971. Located in a rented building on Hollywood's Sunset Boulevard, the work took its name from that of the 1932 MGM movie classic starring Greta Garbo, John Barrymore, Lionel Barrymore, Joan Crawford, Lewis Stone, Wallace Beery, and Jean Hersholt, and telling the story of the briefly crisscrossing lives of the guests in Berlin's ritzy, opulent, Art Deco Grand Hotel. In designing his own functioning

seven-room hotel (open for three months, weekends only) [11] Ruppersberg reiterated his appreciation of the role everyday ritual plays in the ongoing course of human events and culture. In addition, however, by creating the hotel in the image of a Hollywood film he infused it with a mythic dimension derived from the surrounding city. Furthermore, by designing most of its rooms as artist's installations that in one way or another referred to his own personal history—ripe with suggestiveness and symbolism—he invited his overnight guests to share a part of their own developing personal histories with the epic tale he was creating in reference to his own life. This epic was intended to include the imaginings of the other guests, the spectacle of the hotel itself, the drama of a famous, many-storied film, and the grand myth of Hollywood, all at once.[12]

The Hotel was telling us that it is only through the intermingling of popular and personal myths, public and private exchanges and moments, that we can even begin to guess at what is real and what is art, and that this kaleidoscopic condensation of orientations is itself in a constant state of radical transformation. We are all the products of stories within stories within stories, yet our stories always escape our understanding as we try to follow their twists and turns. Above the reception desk, Ruppersberg placed a sign that repeated a line from the movie Grand Hotel: "Same thing every day. People come. People go . . . nothing ever happens."[13]

THE TEXT STANDS MUTE WHEN WE INQUIRE OF THE MEANING OF THE TEXT. THAT IS FUNDAMENTALLY WHAT IS WRONG WITH IT. SECONDARILY WHAT IS WRONG WITH THIS PROCESS, AND THE PROCESS OF WRITING IN GENERAL, IS THAT SOCRATES SAYS WRITING HAS CAUSED US TO NOW FORGET. IT IS NOT AN AID TO MEMORY, IT IS ACTUALLY A VEHICLE FOR OUR COLLECTIVE FORGETTING. SO, THE TEXTS DON'T TALK BACK AND WE FORGET. THE FORGETTING IS NOT A KIND OF PASSIVE UNKNOWING DUE TO THE FACT THAT THE TEXT IS MUTE; THE FORGETTING IS A VERY ACTIVE ASSAULT ON THE ACT OF REMEMBERING.[14]

In Ruppersberg's mind, individual experience is clearly inseparable from the culture in which it is constituted. This truth is in fact at the root of the most beautiful mysteries of life. Thus, in our intermediations, we can share with one another an immensely rich history of experience and reflection. Yet as individuals, at the same time, we may run the risk of losing a sense of personal identity, and growing blank in the processÑlike the postcard photographer's gaze as he captures his empty images.

There is a dark side, then, to existing within culture: language and myth often disguise the truth, or leave the bad parts out; stories are not always true to life.

In 1972, Ruppersberg made many photographic works in which a series of images were set side-by-side in sequence, suggesting stories. These works often dramatize the differences between a reader's or writer's misrepresentation of
events and the confusions that can occur between what we normally describe as "reality" and "fiction." In the three-panel photo series for instance, a simple story of a person play-acting a fiction with two toy cars is concluded in the final panel with a collision that seems to set the storyteller himself—Ruppersberg—on fire, perhaps fatally.

In another of these photo series, To Tell the Truth, Ruppersberg plays himself as a blindfolded man wearing a sleeping mask (significantly) and sitting at a table. In each new image, a different object appears before him on the table, and below the image a verbal narrative progresses—but the viewer comes to recognize that each object is being described incorrectly, as if some deadly slippage between the imagery and the text were developing further in each frame. When a bottle of ketchup appears on the table, for instance, the caption reads, "A pitcher of water." A handgun appears along with the caption "A sawed-off shotgun." When the man lifts his blindfold and raises the handgun to his head, the caption reads "An Argument," and in the final frame, as the man kills himself, the caption reads, "A Murder."

THE ORIGINAL IS UNFAITHFUL TO THE TRANSLATION.[15]

Of course Ruppersberg's preoccupations with narratives led him to think a lot about books. Books participate in our culture's mythologies, as well as help shape and create them. They are publicly produced but privately read (and written). They gather and save the memories of a culture, but also—perhaps more frequently—they help dictate what is forgotten. The writer can mean one thing and the reading public can find thousands of other meanings. I believe Ruppersberg feels there is something paradoxical and otherworldly about our relationships with books.

In this light I should mention two very interesting books that Ruppersberg wrote himself: Walden and The Picture of Dorian Gray. In 1973, for an exhibit at the Galerie Yvon Lambert, Paris, Ruppersberg copied the entire text of Thoreau's Walden for a piece called Henry David Thoreau's Walden by Allen Ruppersberg. The copying was done in longhand (Ruppersberg's) onto a few hundred sheets of typewriter paper, which then were placed in a custom-made leather portfolio box that itself looked much like a book. In 1974, for an exhibit at Claire Copley's gallery in Los Angeles, Ruppersberg hand-copied (with a pen) the entire Oscar Wilde novel The Picture of Dorian Gray onto twenty stretched canvases, each seventy-two by seventy-two inches. In an interview in 1992, Ruppersberg retrospectively described some of his intentions:

> One aspect of copying The Picture of Dorian Gray was to teach myself how to write. The original premise was to conflate two forms of 'reading' and 'writing.' One involves narrative and the other is a form of 'visual' art that is read instantly. Its presence is read all at once. I'm a visual artist: I like the experience of seeing a work of art all at once . . . reading time and drawing time are balanced half and half . . . [16]

But who is doing the seeing and who is doing the reading and who is doing the writing? Who is the author of this work? In a strategy similar to that of Sherrie Levine in the 1980s, when she began making photographic copies of other artists' photographs, Ruppersberg was able to convey himself through a text written by another—inviting the viewer to see the other's work through Ruppersberg's eyes, the eyes of a copyist. In this way he dramatically illustrated the conflation of viewpoints that can bear on any act of perception, mixing his own longing with the longings of Thoreau, Wilde, their readers, and his own viewers. Indeed Ruppersberg made his feelings about the reader's expressiveness even clearer when, in 1984 and 1991, he produced drawings titled Self-Portrait (as Hurd Hatfield as Dorian Gray), in which he drew portraits of the actor who played Dorian Gray in the 1945 MGM movie version of the book.

Ruppersberg similarly asked in what way he might constitute what he sees when, in 1974, he made the works on paper Self-Portrait Making a Face like Barney Bear and Self Portrait as Bugs Bunny, both drawings of well-known American cartoon characters. Here he suggested the implausibility of truly telling one's own story in a world steeped in authorless texts and ready-made images. Related strategies emerged toward the end of the 1970s in the paintings of David Salle, and later in the work of Levine (both of whom lived in California during the early '70s), as they further articulated the pleasures of imaginary domination, and of imaginary surrender, that can be "mediated" through acts of copying pictures. (The reader may decide which of these two artists articulated which pleasure!)

In titling his self-portrait Making a Face like Barney Bear, Ruppersberg created a paradox. The drawing was simply a hand drawing of Barney Bear. Did the title describe the artist's literal activity of "drawing" (making) a face that "looked like" the face of Barney Bear, or was he demonstrating that by "making a face" (as in crossing his eyes, or sticking out his tongue) he could imagine himself as a comic book character as easily as he could imagine himself as a specific human being named Allen Ruppersberg? He showed us not only that personal identity is a collage or collection of many different identifications—with one's parents, with local heroes in one's community, with Bugs Bunny—but also that an act of "drawing" is not only a "making" and a "seeing" but also a "being made" and a "being seen." Again, Ruppersberg repeatedly reminds us that we all remain, as social beings, collections.

WHILE THE POINT OF THE SOUVENIR MAY BE REMEMBERING, OR AT LEAST THE INVENTION OF MEMORY, THE POINT OF THE COLLECTION IS FORGETTING—STARTING AGAIN IN SUCH A WAY THAT A FINITE NUMBER OF ELEMENTS CREATE, BY VIRTUE OF THEIR COMBINATION,
AN INFINITE REVERIE.[17]

After knowing something about Ruppersberg's work, one might not be surprised to discover that in his personal life he always has been a determined collector of printed memorabilia. By his telling, he owns around 20,000 postcards, 2,000 educational films, every issue of Life magazine from 1938 into the 1950s, thousands of slide collections, and hundreds upon hundreds of books, film strips, posters, calendars, comics, and so on. Many times he has used items from his

collection in his own work; and many other times he has used his familiarity with these forms to produce printed items of his own. For Ruppersberg, out of this kind of reciprocal discourse between the makers and the consumers of culture, a model of the world can emerge.

Yet like most of us, Ruppersberg has wildly ambivalent feelings about mass culture. Once, while we both were sitting on a panel for the U.S. National Endowment for the Arts, I listened to him loudly proclaim popular mass media to be a "stench"—yet at other times I've watched him pore over a Scrooge McDuck comic book as if it were the Book of Life itself.

As we find ourselves in books, we lose ourselves in them as well. One always writes as one reads, and reads as one writes—and as we learn, we also forget. That which is impressed is always expressed through its translation into a new round of symbols, be it through a series of children's stories or a set of repeating neurotic symptoms. It is this perpetually looping feedback system that creates a cumulative communal culture. A living culture—and by this I mean a continuously growing collection of presumptions, beliefs, objects, symbols, and so forth—that continually reproduces itself throughout a shared community. And there is no better example of this than the writing, reading, and
exchanging of our books.

A COLLECTION OF SHEETS OF PAPER OR OTHER SUBSTANCE, BLANK, WRITTEN OR PRINTED, FASTENED TOGETHER AS TO FORM A MATERIAL WHOLE.[18]

In 1956, the famous American cartoonist Jules Feiffer depicted in ten frames a nine-year-old schoolboy delivering a scholarly critique of a children's book. This bespectacled child begins by describing the book's publisher, the number of its pages, and so on, then proceeds to comments on its content—the book concerns "fist fights" and "bandits," and "lots of bad guys get killed"—and to a churlish response to what he calls the book's "love stuff," which he critiques as "a docile surrender to popular taste!" In the final frames of the cartoon, the child finally recommends the book because "the pages come out easily, so you can have a lot of fun around the house." [19]

As in this child's critique, a book can be described in many ways, and can play many different roles. Books tell stories, entertain, educate, win prizes, have weight and mass, and change history. They can be bought, sold, collected, mythologized. In 1971, in addition to making visual narratives and to producing his own books, Ruppersberg began to make images of books—books he had read, books he might write, books others might have read, books on shelves, books in stacks, books floating in pictorial fields, archival manuscripts of books, letters by well-known writers of books, and so on.

That year, Ruppersberg wrote a book called Greetings from L.A. This book (the title obviously derived from a tourist postcard) took the form of a mystery novel, in the genre of Los Angeles thrillers like those of Raymond Chandler and Ross MacDonald, and yet—to the reader's surprise—it contained only three, small, dispersed fragments of text; the rest of the pages, though numbered, were otherwise blank. The texts, stylishly written by Ruppersberg himself, depicted minor plot activity in different parts of Los Angeles, actions that might or might not be smaller

parts of a larger mystery. The following year Ruppersberg made an oil painting of a very similar book titled Greetings from California, which, however, was never written—perhaps was never meant to be written.

Like Feiffer's schoolboy, Ruppersberg could also look at a book with a queerly prosaic eye. In 1973 he began a series of drawings of books called "Reading Time," with each drawing including a single handwritten caption stating how long it might take to actually read the book in question.

. . . A BOOK IS MORE THAN A VERBAL STRUCTURE, OR A SERIES OF VERBAL STRUCTURES; A BOOK IS THE DIALOGUE WITH THE READER, AND THE PECULIAR ACCENT IT IMPOSES UPON HIS VOICE, AND THE CHANGING AND DURABLE IMAGES IT LEAVES IN HIS MEMORY. THAT DIALOGUE IS INFINITE. . . A BOOK IS NOT AN ISOLATED BEING: IT IS A NARRATIVE, AN AXIS OF INNUMERABLE NARRATIVES[20]

Using "books" to represent the mythologies and beliefs that define the culture that values them, Ruppersberg sometimes seems to imagine that we are our books—as if we all become books, since our identities and our memories are constructed as mixtures of organized fictions and truths, all in the form of a collection of narratives. I believe it is with this perception that Ruppersberg has often represented "collections" of books—as drawings, photographs, objects, or actual collections of books he himself has printed—as if to present a kind of picture of a consciousness in and of itself. In his 1977 sequence of pencil drawings The Meditation, for instance, he depicts a toppled stack of books, running like dominoes from left to right along five long horizontal panels; by reading the books' titles the viewer gets a portraitlike sense of the person who might read or acquire (or draw) them. Yet running above the line of toppled books, another, unrelated (?) narrative—incompletely decipherable due to the overlappings of the drawings—is provided by a handwritten collection of a notes (perhaps written by the collector of the books) that appear to tell an entirely different story from the books themselves, re-creating the uneasy slippage between reader and writer (or between language and meaning) that Ruppersberg similarly depicted in To Tell the Truth.

Since the late '60s and early '70s, it seems clear, Ruppersberg has been creating his own self-portrait—as well as a portrait of his age—as he depicts his collections of the narratives we carry and are carried by.

WHEN YOU VISIT A NEW PLACE FOR A WEEK YOU COME HOME AND WRITE A BOOK. WHEN YOU VISIT FOR A MONTH YOU COME HOME AND WRITE AN ARTICLE. WHEN YOU VISIT FOR A YEAR YOU COME HOME AND HAVE NOTHING TO SAY.[21]

In 1980, with his project André Breton, Ponce de León and the Fountain of Youth, Ruppersberg went way beyond the mythologies and narratives of his personal experience, so evident in his earlier work, and turned to mythologies and narratives of a cultural geography with which he was

less familiar. During a ten-week visiting-artist appointment in Leon County, in the panhandle region of Florida, he began to explore the history and mythology surrounding the journey of the famous Spanish explorer Ponce de León on a quest for a fountain of youth. Somewhat as he had in his earlier exploration of Los Angeles mythology—done while he himself lived and worked in Los Angeles—Ruppersberg approached the legends of Ponce de León as if they formed a Surrealist continuum with all of history, where dreams of eternal youth guide all imaginings. When the project was first shown, at the Clocktower, New York, in 1981, its centerpiece was a large (seventy-two inches diameter) motorized model of a zoetrope, a nineteenth-century parlor curio that made it possible, before the invention of cinema, to view a form of animation through the use of a sequence of still photographs or drawings. The drawings visible through the windows of Ruppersberg's zoetrope formed an animated picture of the fountain of youth as León might obsessively have imagined it: a natural bubbling geyser spurting youth-giving water (looking strangely like an ejaculation of spermatozoa), repeating itself indefinitely as long as the zoetrope continued to spin. [22]

Ruppersberg recognizes that myth and story are not shared only through speech or writing, but also through the creation and exchange of ideas, pictures, objects, and the enactment of rituals that determine the meanings of the myths. While a story might seem located in a specific book, it is also located within the system of a shared, cumulative culture that embraces the story that gives it its legitimacy, its value, and its force.

The themes Ruppersberg developed in the late 1960s and 1970s continued in force during the 1980s, when he mined the vocabularies of public languages and popular media in new ways, exploring the narrative form as it reproduces itself through all forms of everyday human activity. He also developed many works on the themes of life and death, a preoccupation that became more and more evident with the increasingly frequent appearance of the topic of mourning. In the early 1990s, his work made another leap: he began to think about the consumers of culture's representations as well as about the representations themselves; he began to worry about the differences between personal experience of events and public, "official" descriptions of them; and, interestingly, he began to study war.

WE KEPT THE DEAD ALIVE WITH STORIES.[23]

The place of the story in the space of events is poignantly explored in Ruppersberg's 1993 public memorial Siste Viator (Stop Traveler), a project for the Dutch city of Arnhem, revisiting the tragic World War II battle in the area that claimed the lives of eight thousand soldiers in nine days of September 1944. The project consisted of republishing twenty popular books of the time, five from the best-seller list of each of the four countries most involved in the battle: Britain, the Netherlands, Poland, and Germany. It was Ruppersberg's hope to represent some part of the interior lives of the soldiers who fell. I doubt if anyone could portray his intention more beautifully than he himself
did in his proposal for the project:

> " This work is a collection of narratives. It is about the telling of stories both fact and fiction. A memorial to individual memories and the reading of books of the private imagination combined with the public, political history. A link is established between the private experience and public memory. As this era of World War II recedes from the realm of immediate experience, I propose to create in the public mind a new personal memory that is not just another replaceable image. Dignity in a memorial is usually associated with stone and statue, with pose and gesture and with the body. I propose a similar attitude with words, as was once done with an epitaph. A comparison of words, a collision of worlds, nationalities, ideas, ideals, and kinds of literature. This work then is a reconstruction and an exhibition of history in free association to create a continuity between various narrative acts which give shape to the random acts of history." [24]

All through his life as an artist, Ruppersberg has pictured the way our relationships with popular media create internal meaning within each of us, a process as profoundly personal as any more ostensibly private experience. He felt that the popular fictions read by the soldiers in the battle of Arnhem were just as much a part of the "things they carried"[25] as their equipment, their uniforms, their training, their fears, and their other motives and memories. While the fictions survived, each soldier's death took with it an individual and personal relationship with these popular stories—a loss of a memory as unique as any memory of home, family, friend, or event. Ruppersberg dramatized this view by creating a unique war memorial through the use of printed memorabilia. In a romantic nineteenth-century cemetery near the outskirts of Arnhem, he set a prewar wooden workman's trailer of a kind common in Holland; here he displayed the republished books. The effect was of a little bookstore, though a closed one—the trailer was locked, but passersby could view the display through the windows. The books inside were organized in retail racks and stacked on tables; in addition there were World War II memorabilia referencing the battle of Arnhem, some old books on the topic, and even a poster from A Bridge Too Far, a Hollywood movie, from 1977, about the battle. Ruppersberg also made use of a second site, a prominent bookstore in the center of town, where the republished books were displayed in large stacks„the style of today's bookstores—and offered for sale. In this memorial project, a collection of retired popular narratives was made anew, and something of the inaccessible and forgotten interior worlds of the lost soldiers was recollected and shared in a new way. Siste Viator (Stop Traveler) offered a vivid representation of the grief one feels when one remembers that the memories of the dead—even their shared memories of common cultural narratives—can never be recovered.

*THE LANDMARKS OF ANY CITY SHADOW WHAT IS MISSING. MISSING BUILDINGS, MISSING SPACES, AND MISSING PEOPLE GIVE A CITY ITS UNIQUE SENSE OF POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE, PUBLIC AND PRIVATE AND PAST AND PRESENT CONTRIBUTE TO SENSE OF PLACE FOUND
THERE . . .[26]*

For the citywide exhibition Sculpture Projects in Münster 1997, Ruppersberg produced another touching yet spectacular project that reworked many of the ideas explored in his previous work. In a brilliant and deft combination of disparate public and private narratives, literary and political

history, objects, imagery, theater, reading, and writing, he created an elegant and epic production, The Best of All Possible Worlds.

In this work Ruppersberg extended the story of the central character in Voltaire's novel Candide, of 1759, by imagining that Candide had returned to Westphalia, his homeland, after an absence of 238 years. In the novel, Candide travels around the world seeking the best of all worlds—a popular idea at the time. But what he finds is an accumulation of catastrophes and evils, which eventually lead him to the philosophical conclusion that he should just cultivate his own garden. In Ruppersberg's version, Candide had come home to open a travel agency, named "The Best of All Possible Worlds," which organized tours of the present-day city of Münster. In accordance with Voltaire's conclusion, these tours took visitors to sites that were not politically, publicly, or grandly important or historic, as they might be on a typical city tour, but instead were chosen by a process the artist described as "a collaboration between himself and the citizens of Münster":

> The locations selected for the tour come from the memories of the citizens themselves and become a way to look past the stone facades and take individual experiences into account. The tour becomes a search for memories in the first person in a city that was virtually destroyed by World War II. What are the consoling memories with which people live? How many memories are rooted in historical event? The tour spirals out of the museum to the private space of the personal memory.[27]

For the occasion Ruppersberg wrote and published a book (what else?), a "Tourguide" containing a text about the project, maps and photos of eleven local sites, and eleven stories of personal reminiscence written by local citizens from all sections of the community who lived or had lived nearby. These stories were specifically written for the project by people who were interested in participating, and Ruppersberg selected for the tour certain sites described in their stories. The eleven sites were physically marked by large, circular, vacuformed plastic signs, to help "our hero, the viewer"[28] locate them.

When an artist dedicates his life to honoring memory, and "the things that fade,"[29] a deep poignancy can begin to develop when his work itself grows distant in one's own memory. As I was taking Al's Münster tour, having followed his work for so many years, I became aware of a faint feeling that between the 1969 Al's Cafe and the 1997 The Best of All Possible Worlds, a full circle was somehow being drawn. In Al's Cafe, a fictitious social space and a real social space were consolidated into an event that lived just long enough to plant seeds of meaning in a selection of everyday objects—leaves, wads of paper, bubble gum, photographs. Common, public things were consumed and transmuted into things of special and private meaning, repositories for future memories of the event itself. "A thing can be domesticated by man even if it rolls out of the factory on the most impersonal and technologically advanced conveyers, since it nonetheless ends up in someone's house, where a person assimilates it into his private way of life, endowing it with numerous general, practical, conscious and unconscious meanings," Mikhail Epstein has written. Thus the brief and short-lived Cafe was—like nearly all of Ruppersberg's work—a love letter to the ephemeral and to memory, a valorization of the things that are destined to disappear.

Yet the Münster tour turned some of the logic of the Cafe on its head. Here personal and private memories were invited out into the public realm and shared with others. Here a generosity of story-telling from everyday people overtook the history and the souvenirs of the official record maintained by the academics and the politicians, and remapped an entire region according to the memories of its individual citizens. Instead of merely consuming history, and allowing it to shame their memories of events, the storytellers produced history for themselves, and invited others to compare it with their own hidden histories. With the aid of Ruppersberg's scheme, the "tendential supplanting of individual memory and introspection by collective technologies of storage and screening[31] was reversed, if just for one small section of territory for one brief period; and at this same point in time, Ruppersberg created for himself a proactive model for enriching private and public memory, exceeding a passive identification with the proclamations of those who would establish a fictional common history where none can truly exist.

Did I mention that nearly all the stories turned out to be reminiscences of World War II? Here is a story from The Best of All Possible Worlds, telling of a restaurant that starts off sounding a bit like Al's Cafe, but with no aesthetic distance to soften its disappearance:

> *MARIA SCHÜRMANN, KLEMENSTRASSE FASSADE GALERIA-KAUFHOF*
>
> The restaurant "Alte Gästte Schürmann" in Klemensstraße was one of the oldest and most popular restaurants with a long-standing tradition in Münster. It was founded in 1817 and, before the Second World War, was run by Heinrich Schürmann, his son Hermann, and his son's wife Maria. Hermann and Maria Schürmann had two children.
>
> Because of its furnishings and its rarities, it was considered a little museum of local istory and culture and was well-known for its Westphalian dishes.
>
> On the 10th of October, 1943, during the first bomb raid in daylight here in Münster the old house fell prey to the bombs. When Maria Schürmann came home late that afternoon, she found a heap of ruins. Five members of the family had died, among them her two little children. Within 15 minutes the attainments of many generations had been wiped out. Hermann Schürmann could be rescued injured but alive from the ruins of the completely destroyed house after six hours. He died in Russia a prisoner of war in 1946.
>
> In 1948, Maria Schürmann applied for a building permit to rebuild the family home in 34 Klemensstraße.
>
> In 1949 the family business temporarily into the house next door. In 1954, the Schürmann house was one of the first representative new buildings in town which had been reconstructed leaning upon the old architecture and was reopened by Maria Schürmann.
>
> In 1980, the house had to make room for the extension of the Horten department store and was demolished, in spite of many protests of the population.[32]

This is not a fictional story, this is a tragic and true story. It does not resonate well with the "cultivation of one's garden" that Voltaire seems to advise in Candide; in fact it sounds rather like one of the fictional nightmares he describes in the miserable world outside Westphalia. In his introduction to the "Tourguide," Ruppersberg writes, "In a city which is continually referred to by its residents in an air of cheerful pride, as if everything, they feel, has gone well, and where there are an abundance of beautiful historical landmarks to confirm this, I thought it a good opportunity to introduce Voltaire's fictional world, the best of all possible worlds, to the historical reality of Münster."[33] Quoting from Voltaire's book, he recounts the question of the story's old woman who, referring to the tortures of Candide's travels, asks him,

> "I would be glad to know which is worst, to be ravished a hundred times by Negro pirates, to have one buttock cut off, to run the gauntlet among the Bulgarians, to be whipped and hanged at an auto-da-fe, to be dissected, to be chained to an oar in a galley; and, in short, to experience all the miseries through which every one of us hath passed, or to remain here doing nothing?"
>
> "This," said Candide, "is a grand question."[34]

In this single operatic work, Ruppersberg has painted the dilemmas of art and urban life with a brush so broad and thorough that it is able to take into account popular beliefs and fictions of the eighteenth century forward through the unspeakable horrors of World War II and on into the era of today's often mawkish and sterile global tourism. He dramatizes the disappearance of personal histories and suggests their possible recovery through an art which recognizes that it has as much potential for damaging the truth as for protecting it; and he shapes a possible way to repair some of the damages done in the past. In all of Ruppersberg's recent public work, a new model for making history is developing, as well as a new role for the artist: where a monopolistic public view begins to erode the common truths of the everyday, the artist can be instrumental in restoring the balance; and if we and our civilization evolve like a vast, ever-growing, labyrinthine collection of books and stories, it is a collection that an artist can always learn to arrange more beautifully.

Notes:

[1.] This particular production of Paradise Now, Directed by Julian Beck and Judith Molina, was staged at The Bovard Auditorium, University of Southern California.

[2.] The truth is I have loved Al's work for more than thirty years. It is a part of my life and memory, and I tend to be a bit sentimental about it. More than that, I have been deeply influenced by it both personally and professionally—not only in my youth, but during all the time between then and now, and even at this very moment. And while we are virtually the same age, I have always regarded him as a mentor, light-years ahead of me in thought and practice,

and I have always felt privileged when he has had the time to share a visit. I can, after all these years, with all lucidity imagine that this will be the case for another thirty years.

[3.] Ruppersberg, Allen. From the "Menu" at Al's Cafe, 1969. [Other Al's Cafes: here]

[4.] Peter Coyote, interviewed by Etan Ben-Ami, Mill Valley, California, January 12, 1989. Found in The Digger Oral History Project at http://www.diggers.org/oralhistory/peter_interview.html. The full quote reads, "With the clarity of one's early twenties, I decided that theater was no longer an adequate vehicle for change, because the fact of paying at the door told you that it was a business. When you bought a ticket, you knew in your deepest culturally resonant center that this was a business and that while you may not like the message of the play, you knew that it was just like going into a store and not liking the merchandise. You turn around and you walk out. You're not questioning 'store-ness.' We wanted to question 'store-ness': What is the nature of business? You can't do that from within a business. So from that perspective, Free was simply the appropriate, efficacious tool for the kind of investigations that were going on. When it wasn't a business and people were doing something just because they felt like it, it threw the whole subject of coercion into the light. It forced you to take responsibility for being coerced or remaining
coerced if you didn't like what you were doing."

[5.] Ruppersberg, "Fifty Helpful Hints on the Art of the Everyday," in The Secret of Life and Death, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, and Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1985), pp. 11Ü14. All unattributed quotations used as section headings in the present essay are from this text.

[6.] Mikhail Epstein, After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture, trans. Anesa Miller-Pogacar (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1995).

[7.] 23 Pieces (1968), 24 Pieces (1970), and 25 Pieces (1971).

[8.] . It's difficult for me to think back to these early works of Al's without being reminded of Sophie Calle's beautiful and poignant 1983 series L'Hôtel, in which she took a job for a few days as a chambermaid in a Paris hotel and secretly photographed the possessions of guests while they were absent from their rooms. The photographs, while ostensibly taken in an attempt to learn truths about the objects' owners, only underscored the impossibility and the loneliness of such a quest.

[9.] It was easy for me to guess that some of these addresses were taken from Ruppersberg's own address book, because, to my surprise, my own address appeared there.

[10.] Ruppersberg, quoted in Kristine McKenna, "Stuff Is His Middle Name," Los Angeles Times, Calendar Section, November 21, 1993.

[11] For an artist to raise the money to run a seven-room hotel may sound odd; I should make clear that the hotel was not a hugely expensive project. Nearly everything was produced on a shoestring, with thrift-shop items, beds rented from Budget Furniture Rentals, Inc., and various objects from Ruppersberg's own growing collection of ephemera and memorabilia.

[12.] As an example, my own experience at Al's Grand Hotel became a permanent part of my memory—not just because I slept beneath a fifteen-foot Christian cross that Al had somehow managed to stuff into the room (oddly challenging my own religious upbringing), nor simply because it was a particularly romantic evening, but also because of a personal exchange between Al and myself: he paid off a $30 loan I'd made him by giving me the room at no charge. At the time, Al often borrowed money from his friends and later appeared at their doorsteps with an artwork as repayment—his way of expressing friendship and gratitude, as well as his own particular style of entrepreneurship.

[13.] This remark is made by the Lewis Stone character, who also says, "What do you do in the Grand Hotel? 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." Screenplay by William A. Drake, based on the 1932 play Grand Hotel, by Vicki Baum.

[14.] Paul Schroeder, Writing Places Out of History, from a draft transcript of a talk given at the American Society for Cybernetics International Workshop: "Design, Planning and Human Understanding," in Santa Cruz, California, on April 3, 1998.

[15.] Jorge Luis Borges, "About William Beckford's Vathek," 1943, in Other Inquisitions, 1937-1952 (New York: Clarion/Simon & Schuster, 1964), p. 140.

[16.] Ruppersberg, quoted in Daniel Levine, "Allen Ruppersberg," Journal of Contemporary Art 5, no. 2 (Fall 1992): 68-77.

[17.] Susan Stewart, On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection, 1984 (reprint ed. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 151.

[18.] A definition of "book" in The Oxford English Dictionary.

[19.] Jules Feiffer, Sick, Sick, Sick: A Guide to Non-Confident Living (New York: McGraw Hill, 1956), pp. 42-43.

[20.] Borges, "For Bernard Shaw," 1951, in Other Inquisitions, pp. 163-64.

[21.] French saying.

[22.] Along with the oversized zoetrope, Al also offered a series of "gift boxes," each containing a desk blotter that had been "soaked in the waters of the fountain of youth." I remember that I myself somehow became caught up in the Surrealist continuum of this story: I was visiting Al in

Los Angeles while he was working on these blotters, vacationing in a camper tent we erected in his girlfriend's back yard. One day, oddly, I began thinking that true fame might be won by writing a bathroom-wall poem that the entire population would come to memorize, and I spent the afternoon trying to write such a simple, elegant scatological masterpiece—with some success, I believe. When Al came over after his working day, he told me that he'd been writing phrases and drawing pictures on his blotters, and that he'd been wracking his brain trying to remember a good bathroom-wall poem. When I confessed that I'd spent the whole afternoon trying to write one, we both marveled at the mystical confluence of our subconscious minds, and the next day he used my best poem to finish one of the blotters.

[23.] Tim O'Brien, "The Lives of the Dead," in The Things They Carried (Boston: Houghton Mifflin/Seymour Lawrence, 1990), p. 267.

[24.] Ruppersberg, in a brochure written to accompany his Siste Viator (Stop Traveler) project.

[25.] I quote, again, O'Brien, and the title of his book The Things They Carried.

[26.] Ruppersberg, "Notes and Acknowledgements," The Best of All Possible Worlds. Klauss Bu*mann/Kaspar Ksnig/Florian Matzner, 1997), p. 7.

[27.] ibid.

[28.] Ruppersberg's original proposal for the project used this wonderful phrase to describe its participant visitors.

[29.] My title for the present essay, "What One Loves about Life Are the Things That Fade," is taken from a Ruppersberg piece. Reading the New York Times one day, Al came across a page that was entirely black except for this phrase, printed in bold white. The page was part of an ad for the film Heaven's Gate. Al was so moved by the phrase that he cut out the entire newspaper page and framed it just as it was. The framed page was shown in an exhibition at the Christine Burgin Gallery, New York, in 1988.

[30.] Epstein, After the Future.

[31.] Brian Massumi, "Everywhere You Want to Be: Introduction to Fear," in Massumi, ed.,The Politics of Everyday Fear (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

[32.] Ruppersberg, The Best of All Possible Worlds, p. 21. Look here for some very brief synopses of the other stories.

[33.] ibid., p.7.

[34.] ibid.