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Interview

Allen Ruppertsberg, Frédéric Paul

Frédéric Paul: Let's start at the very beginning: your choice of California.

Allen Ruppertsberg: This is a very simple story. I was introduced to California for the first time when I was eleven. We were on a family vacation. I had already decided that I was going to be an animator for Walt Disney Studios and one of the reasons for the trip out West was to visit Disneyland, which had just recently opened. I wanted to go to the Animators Corner to buy all the things I needed to make the cartoon I was intent on making, and to take in this new world I had seen on TV every Sunday night. I remember I bought an animator's light table with all the supplies and books on how to draw Disney animated cartoons. I still have them. We also toured Hollywood and Los Angeles and visited relatives in San Francisco. After that trip, there was never a question in my mind that I was going to California as soon as I was able. I knew I wanted to be an artist by the time I was 8 or 9 years old. At about that age, I took drawing lessons at the Cleveland Art Museum every Saturday morning. Later on, during high school, I took classes at other Cleveland art schools. At this point, the only way I knew to be an artist was to be a commercial one, so I studied figure drawing, illustration, advertising design, etc. I didn't know anything about fine art. During my final year of high school I applied to two art schools in California, the San Francisco Art Institute and The Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles. Luckily, I was accepted into Chouinard first because I had already decided that I was going to L.A. whether I got into school or not. The school had both commercial and fine art departments, and for the first two years you took general courses which were a mixture of all manner of preparatory classes. After that, if you passed the evaluation, you could choose which course of study you wanted to focus on for the final two years. I was thinking of being an illustrator at this point and one of the classes I had to take was a landscape painting class. Almost from the first day of that class, I knew something was different. I was with different students, and it was as if I had been dropped into a different school. I had been feeling uncomfortable for some time with the growing prospects of being a commercial artist, but I didn't really know anything else. During that class I realized I had found my place without really ever knowing what it was.

FP: It was the beginning of the end?

AR: Yes, it definitely was the beginning of the end. I had been exposed to the Fine Art department through the work I saw in the exhibitions that were held in the school gallery. You had to walk through the gallery every time you entered the building. I would see these things and think to myself, 'What is this stuff?' I really didn't know what it was. Turns out it was work by Doug Wheeler and Bill Pettit. They both went on to become well known after leaving school. Then I started regularly going over to the

Fine Art department to look around and to try and see what they were doing. I had art history classes of course, but I didn't make any connections to what I was seeing in the gallery. It wasn't until I actively began to paint and became acquainted with these new people and ideas that I began to imagine what might be going on in the work I was seeing. I had spent two years exclusively with advertising people and realized I didn't like them, their ideas, or what they represented. Now, I found myself with people I did like and it made all the difference to me.

FP: You mean that liking people was more important than what was being done in the department?

AR: Not exactly because I was also fascinated by what I saw them doing and the world that existed around them... It was the mid-60s in L.A., and I couldn't have dreamed of a better place to be.

FP: This brings to mind *Al's Café*, 1969, and *Al's Grand Hotel*, 1971, which are about people?

AR: Very true, there is no question. I suppose you could say that my introduction to the world of artists had influence later on. *Al's Café* and *Al's Grand Hotel* were on one level a meeting place for artists. Chouinard at the time was a meeting place for artists, and many people you have heard of passed through there in one way or another as students, teachers or visiting artists. Man Ray came to give a lecture on the patio one-day. This aspect of the meeting place continued when Chouinard became Cal-Arts, and the first generation of artists who came out of there wound up putting L.A. on the map in a way it hadn't been before.

FP: What was your work when you left the school?

AR: At the time, art school taught you to be either a painter or sculptor. I started off painting, then did some sculpture, then did some combinations of both, but when I left school I was committed to painting. I had some savings bonds to live on after I graduated from school, so I started painting full time and concentrated on getting a body of work together.

FP: What sort of painting?

AR: They were poured and stained minimal abstractions. They were enormous works made out of multiple canvases with bits of color poured here and there. Color field painting, which was hot at the time, probably influenced me, but also Robert Irwin who I had studied with in night classes at Chouinard. Robert Irwin's views of what was important in a painting and what was not were very influential. He taught you how to think.

FP: Did you show these paintings?

AR: Yes, in some group shows. When I thought I had a sufficient body of work together I went to see the dealer Nicholas Wilder who had just opened his gallery on La Cienega

Boulevard. His gallery became an integral part of L.A. history and he, as a personality, was very important.

FP: You mean a type of center?

AR: No, L.A. never has had one center. But as a place for new art and particularly new painting, the Wilder Gallery in the 70s was always at the center. So in a way, Nick was the center himself. He gave Bruce Nauman his first show (after seeing his work in graduate school, or so the story goes) and I saw his work for the first time at Nick's gallery. When I went to Nick with my slides he was only a few years older than I was. It made it easy for us to become friends. He was very enthusiastic and came to my studio the next day. He liked the work and got on my phone immediately and started to call people. Even though we never did a show together I feel I was introduced to the art world through him. That early support was crucial to my sense of what I was doing. Nick remained supportive even after he closed the gallery and I would see him in New York. He died some years ago.

It was during this period that I went to see Frank Stella's show of the new protractor series at the Pasadena Art Museum. I had just started to do some shaped canvases after the panel paintings and I was curious. When I saw Stella's paintings I was stunned. I was completely overwhelmed by their scale, power, sophistication, intelligence -- everything. I looked at these paintings and realized I knew nothing about what I was doing. I thought that here was someone who knows exactly what he wants, and that it surely belonged to him and not me. It was a history that he knew and was using better than anyone. I went home knowing I had to start all over.

FP: It must have been very hard for you.

AR: I was wiped out. My post- art school euphoria was over, and I knew that now I had to find out what I would make. You can come out of art school with ideas about what you're supposed to do, and in some cases it works. This time it did not. I had to forget about all that and start with just myself. That's when I began to develop ideas that would eventually lead to the early conceptual works.

FP: What were these early works?

AR: The earliest works were a kind of double found object, I suppose, combining commercially produced objects with naturally found things. I bought standard tropical fish aquariums that had a built-in light source on top and then assembled collections of objects inside. They were nice chrome and glass boxes that looked a little like Larry Bell's glass cubes. Aquariums were quite common to most people, but in another context. I had started to use L.A. as a subject and these became ready-made repositories for the things that I found. The objects usually represented something about Los Angeles or Southern California. I began bringing back to the gallery "locations" I had found outside of it. These aquariums were like a miniature stage set: a self-contained, well-lighted world with an audience peering into it. Each one represented a different location and these works directly led to my first book, *23 Pieces* (1968),

where photography was also first introduced; I just substituted photos for the objects.

FP: Did you know Edward Ruscha's books?

AR: Yes, of course, but the books were never separate from the paintings, drawings, or prints, and this was something I liked. One of the ideas I was involved with at the time was the search for a more democratic kind of art object. When I began to do the books, it was so that I could actually sell them in bookstores as well as galleries. I was aware of other artists' books on the West Coast, Ruscha's and a little later, Baldessari's.

FP: Did you know what Huebler was doing at the time?

AR: Yes, I was beginning to. I believe it was late 1968 when I first met Seth Siegelau, Lawrence Wiener, Robert Barry and others from the East Coast. They all began to come to L.A. about this time and for a short while made L.A. a very vital place. We all seemed to participate in the same exhibitions, Seth Siegelau's 1969 Catalog exhibition and Lucy Lippard's Seattle show. I went to New York for the first time in 1970. I became friends with Joseph Kosuth and Dan Graham, among others, and stayed for three or four months. This, I see now, began my bi-coastal lifestyle.

FP: Where were you showing your work at that time?

AR: I had my first show at the Eugenia Butler Gallery in January 1969. She began by showing not only L.A. artists like John Baldessari and William Leavitt, but also the new artists from San Francisco, New York, and Europe. For the few years she was open it was a great program and thoroughly integrated with what was going on in the rest of the world. People still remember her Dieter Roth show. Also at this time I was included in *When Attitudes Become Form* and other conceptual shows of the period. In the fall of 1969 I opened *Al's Café*.

FP: What did you show at Bern in *When Attitudes Become Form*?

AR: I showed a new *Travel* piece, which was a continuation of the *Location* series. It was basically a documentation of a bus trip across the U.S. using a collection of newspapers displayed on a card table. Since it didn't require any special installation, I didn't travel to the show and now, of course in retrospect, I see what an opportunity I missed. But I was busy in L.A. with preparations for the café and I had never been to Europe anyway. I had just turned twenty-five and I was only beginning to get involved, so it probably seemed too new and too far away.

FP: Could you tell me more about the context of the *Café* and the *Hotel*?

AR: First of all, these works were an extension of my *Location* pieces. They pushed further with the ideas of location and place in the context of L.A. and Southern California. It was the period of post-studio work and I, like others, was interested in getting away from an obsession with the studio and works that were only seen in galleries and museums. At the time, I prided myself with the idea that my shows could be carried around in a briefcase. I was attempting to introduce an audience to a social

reality rather than the context of the gallery, switching contexts without anyone knowing it. Galleries were after all, at least in L.A., just storefronts sitting next to other storefronts selling something else. Another reality in L.A. was the lack of meeting places for artists. New York had always had meeting places or, in the 50s, clubs for artists, along with all the bars and events where people met and talked. L.A. was so disconnected, except for a few years at *Barney's Beanery* which Ed Keinholz immortalized. A part of the reason for the existence of *Al's Café* was to try and create a place to connect for others and myself. I like to know the artist whose work I'm looking at, and during the course of these two pieces I met many people for the first time. Both projects were very successful. At the café I began to meet the older generation of artists I admired so much like Bob Rauschenberg and Allan Kaprow.

FP: How did you advertise the *Café*?

AR: Just word of mouth.

FP: How long did the *Café* last?

AR: About three months. It was open only on Thursdays until 2 A.M.

FP: And where was it?

AR: In a seedy area close to downtown L.A., not too far from my old Chouinard neighborhood where I could rent a storefront cheap and there was a large group of artists living close by.

FP: So opening the *Café* was really a way of getting to know people?

AR: Not entirely. The impetus was to first make a work of art, and secondly to provide a common place for the community.

FP: Like a non profit-making association?

AR: Absolutely not! I did this for profit. How real is a café that doesn't need money to keep it open? I was trying to support myself as an artist and I thought this should help do it. Warhol's Factory certainly supported him, and this is the tactic I took. I found out later about Claes Oldenburg's store in New York.

FP: Did the *Café* really work as a business?

AR: Yes, definitely. It was as real a business as I cared to make it. I served beer and coffee with the 'dinners.' Waitresses took the orders, and I was the counterman who took the money home at night.

FP: And the artist?

AR: I was everything. At the time, I was making these dinner/objects that people really wanted to have. They were the same price as a hamburger so they were selling like

mad. I was having a great time. Friends would bring Hollywood people like Joni Mitchell. It was very L.A. how these worlds mixed. It was the same with the *Hotel*, Dennis Hopper was there along with all the hip Hollywood crowd. The *Café* stayed open until 2:00 A.M. like a real café, and the *Hotel* was like a real hotel where you could spend the night. As much as I could make them, they were real. That was the point: they had to be real to escape being looked at like art.

FP: How quickly did success come?

AR: The café became so successful so quickly that I didn't know how to stop it. I knew in the back of my mind that as a work/performance it would have to have an ending, but I was so busy with it on a day to day basis that I couldn't conceive of how to do it. I was selling so many dinners, which I would make on the spot, that it took all week to prepare to be open one night. The place was becoming completely overcrowded every week, the waitresses couldn't do their job, and the original experience was getting lost. The closing took care of itself, but that's another story.

FP: Who were your peers in L.A.?

AR: It's hard to say in a way because L.A. has always had different groups or camps formed around different disciplines, histories, friends, etc. From Chouinard I had certain friends like Jack Goldstein, Terry Allen, and Bill Leavitt. Later there were the artists who gathered around the Butler Gallery. Eventually, my immediate friends were Bill Wegman, Ger Van Elk, Bas Jan Ader, Bob Cummings, Bill Leavitt, Guy de Cointet, and others you may not know. Bruce Nauman was around, as were Barry La Va, Michael Asher, and Chris Burden. Allan McCollum became a close friend at this time. There were many artists and it was an exciting time in L.A.

FP: For instance, what faction did someone like Robert Irwin belong to?

AR: He was one of my teachers at school, and a full generation older than I was. He represented the oldest generation of artists in L.A. that I knew at the time.

FP: So he was like a guru to you?

AR: Mentor would be a better word, later friend and colleague.

FP: In what way was he your mentor?

AR: Mostly his manner of being. He was a teacher in the best sense. I don't mean in an academic way, but rather a 60's idea of a teacher, maybe a guru as Beuys was a guru.

FP: I remember this wonderful piece by Bas Jan Ader entitled *In Search of the Miraculous (One Night In Los Angeles)*, 1973. Do you know this piece?

AR: Yes, I know the piece.

FP: Did you ever discuss with Bas Jan the mythology of the city in this piece?

AR: It belongs within a context of other works being done in L.A. at the time. Most of the artists who were there were also from someplace else originally. As with most transplants to L.A., there is an initial fascination with the place itself. With my close friends, most of our conversations about art took place within the context of talking about L.A. Both Ger Van Elk's and Bas Jan Ader's work juxtaposed L.A. with their native Holland. Bill Leavitt uses the look of L.A. in his work. Hollywood plays a role in the early work of Jack Goldstein. Bas Jan certainly participated in these discussions, both individually and as part of the group.

FP: Did Los Angeles revolt you in any way?

AR: No, I loved it. I wanted to know everything about it. I lived in the Wilshire District, downtown, Hollywood, Topanga Canyon, Venice, as many places as I could think of. I figure I moved around fifty times between my arrival in 1962 and my move to New York in 1985. L.A. was cheap and it was mobile. You could step off a plane at LAX in the morning, buy a car in the afternoon, find an apartment, furnish it, and be sitting in a bar in Hollywood by evening. You could have a new life, and then do it again the next month or the next week. This was a very attractive part of L.A.

FP: Is this still true?

AR: I don't think so. That was thirty years ago. Maybe until the late '70s it was possible.

FP: And you really lived your life this way?

AR: More or less, yes. One week I would decide to move or my friends would say, "Hey there's a little house available in Topanga Canyon," and I would pack everything in my car and be gone by that afternoon. Or you'd meet a girl at a party and she lived in Hollywood and you could decide to go live there and you did. I can remember putting paintings on top of my car... It was all very easy to do because it cost nothing then. When I arrived in the 60s, it was still essentially the atmosphere of the 50s.

Downtown L.A. in the mid-sixties was a small town, like any mid-western city. It only began changing in the seventies. Randy Newman sings about the atmosphere of L.A. at the time. It was a new world to explore, especially for artists who came here. Ruscha came from Oklahoma. His books, like *Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles*, were explorations of L.A. He came with the same curiosity from a small place to this wonderland, so I think there are comparisons between what Ed did in his books and my work: it's the effect of Los Angeles.

FP: What did you gain in artistic terms from your experience of *Al's Café* and *Al's Grand Hotel*? What new ideas did these experiences generate?

AR: The main thing I felt was that I didn't need to do this kind of work any more. The works had been very successful and people were beginning to ask me what I was going to do next -- *Al's Supermarket* or *Al's Department Store*? I felt I had said what I had

wanted to say. I had never wanted to be pinned down as an artist; when I was expected to do another piece like the previous ones, it was time to move on to something else. These works were so thoroughly understood that there was nothing else to say. I felt the ideas had been put out there and I needed to go back to a more private form. The *Hotel* had taken almost a year of my life and I wanted to work through things faster now. I began to concentrate on the photo works and the world of fiction.

FP: You had a one-person exhibition at the Pasadena Museum of Art in 1970. Is this a moment when your career became established? Only a few years before, Marcel Duchamp had his first retrospective at the Pasadena Museum. You said you had seen very important shows there that influenced you. What work did you show?

AR: First, a little L.A. history. Duchamp's show was in the old Pasadena Museum, which had an illustrious history. My show was in the new Pasadena Museum of Modern Art, which had only recently opened. It also hosted great shows in its short time. I showed all recent works 1969-70. I included new sculptures made out of used cardboard boxes from the supermarket, assemblage works from the *Location* period, and new photo works. The photo works were beginning to use narrative and the sculptures incorporated words into their structure. There was a large installation work using the alphabet and addresses from across L.A. written out on hundreds of sheets of paper and a few other works I don't remember. The photo works continued with ideas of location and transpositions, one location placed on top of another, or objects introduced into the location. Sort of the reverse of bringing objects into the gallery, a constant switching of context and place and object. *Trading Places*, as a movie title once called it.

FP: How did the photo works evolve?

AR: They came directly out of *23 and 24 Pieces*. I liked the camera. I was very influenced by the anonymous quality of postcard photographs, having collected thousands of them. The immediacy and commonness of photography also appealed to me. The attraction to subverting fine art photography also played a role.

FP: Was there any connection at this point with literature?

AR: Not at this point. I had published these little books, but they weren't literature. I can tell you the way that it started to come into my work. At the time, artists were beginning to use a lot of text. The more text work I saw, the more I thought that most of it was not interesting. The writing in most of the work was so bad, as though you could put any kind of stupid words up on a wall and it was magically going to be good. I thought that if you are going to write, if you are going to use words in your work, then you better know how to use them. For instance, Lawrence Wiener is a poet, as is Vito Acconci. They know what words are and what to do with them. So I thought that I'd better look into this and I became interested in writing which, of course, led to books and literature. I said I would not use words until I knew something about them. So I tried to teach myself.

FP: How did you teach yourself to write?

AR: I began to take classes at UCLA, first at night school and then auditing classes during the day. After all, going to art school at the time was essentially like going to a trade school, so I didn't have much background in any of this. I learned writing techniques and thought of using them as an artist, not as a writer. I don't consider myself a writer at all.

FP: So, what was the connection to literature in your first photo works?

AR: First, I began with the idea of a narrator: myself usually, the artist, or correctly, the artist playing a fictional role. I also tried to incorporate the layering technique of stories and novels. *Between the Scenes*, 1972, was one of the first pieces where I tried to use narrative techniques. I also started to use words in the photographs combined with a page of text. I think *Between the Scenes* is one of the best of these works.

FP: So the first works related to text begin in 1971-72. Which ones are most significant to you?

AR: *Between the Scenes* worked, I thought, and *Greetings from L.A.* is a novel I like. I also did my first video at this time, *A Lecture on Houdini*, 1972. This work also balances text and image. *W.B. Yeats* is a favorite piece from that time, as is *100 MPH* and *To Tell the Truth*. Sometimes I think I did a lot of work, and sometimes I think I didn't do very much at all, so the significance of different works changes. *Where's AI* remains the signature work from this time.

FP: Despite the blank pages, *Greetings from L.A.* looks like a book of literature. There are a lot of pages with text you've written.

AR: Yes, that's true but also it's the beginning of thinking about the book as an object. The blank pages make it into more of an object. They are purely visual, a physical space if you will. The whole project became sculptural with the combination of real space and descriptions of locations around L.A.

FP: Are you saying that for you *23 Pieces* was not a book but an object?

AR: No, *23* and *24 Pieces* were definitely books. As I said, I wanted to sell them in bookstores along with all the other books. When I came to doing *Greetings from L.A.* I was more conscious of the form of the book itself. I thought of its physical qualities, like an object. Objects with a story inside, yes, but also related to some of the other works where the words were combined with other things.

FP: What do you mean by "the book as an object?"

AR: I guess if you consider all of its parts. It has pages of a certain size, it usually has numbered pages, it has a binding. It has physical qualities outside of the story. It has an outside and an inside, and that's something I'm always interested in.

FP: So when did you really begin to think about books in your art?

AR: I think it would probably be *Greetings from California*. By painting a book, obviously I was starting to think about the book as a subject.

FP: There are in fact two works: a painting, *Greetings from California*, and a book, *Greetings from L.A.* Which came first?

AR: I think I did the painting first and then the book, but I was working on them both at the same time. It's not that one was patterned after the other. I didn't make the book because it was in the painting, and I didn't make the painting because I was thinking of the book. They were being worked on simultaneously. So that was when I started thinking about books as subjects, or beginning to think about what a book could do and a painting or an art object couldn't do.

FP: That's a very particular attitude, writing a novel and at the same time building a monument to it, i.e., a painting of what a book could be. Your writing of the text was not solely a literary experience and your painting was not just to create a picture. You were somehow mixing these activities. Didn't you feel as if you were divided into two people, author and artist?

AR: No, and I still don't. I am an artist, and as an artist I can do anything. In 1972-73 I did my video, *A Lecture on Houdini*. This is all part of escaping from the studio and art history. The artist does not have to do just one thing. An artist can write, paint, make a video, a sculpture. I did all of them and that's what I do and I think that's important. The use of multiple disciplines is what makes things interesting. *Greetings from California* is a way of beginning to think of things like that, and then it goes on into drawing.

FP: When we describe an artwork as literary, we usually mean it is boring.

AR: When you say a work is literary, you usually mean its bad because you are usually talking about painting. R.B. Kitaj was said to be literary. At the same time, when a book is said to be too literary this is also considered a criticism. It's like saying it's too *arty*.

FP: Do you think your work is literary?

AR: No, because I never think of myself as an author, only an artist.

FP: At the same time, you use artist's books in a literary way, unlike any other artist I know.

AR: I hate artist's books.

FP: What was the reaction of fellow artists to your books and other work? Did they react to you putting words in the work?

AR: It was never an issue, it was just part of the world we walked into. So rather than discussing whether it was a good thing or a bad thing, I remember just going to readings where people were all involved with the same thing.

FP: How did you feel after *Greetings*?

AR: I don't know. There were so many works that were made and were a part of one another in that period that I don't really know how to answer. When I look back, I see important works following shortly after *Greetings*, so I guess I was on the right track. *Where's Al?* was a short story. I rewrote *Walden* in 1973 and copied *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in 1974. I was also doing other works that incorporated stories and dialogue and different uses of photo and text. It's hard to separate these works because I thought I was doing the same thing. There is a break between the works which deal with L.A. as their subject and the book and photo-text pieces, which came after this transition. The latter led my thinking into areas of language, pictures, books and other subjects. They are, I see now, two distinct bodies of work.

FP: Did the drawings come very soon after *Greetings*?

AR: Well, it was three or four years.

FP: And in between?

AR: This was the period in the art world we called *photo-narrative sequence art* and I did my share of it as I became more and more interested in narrative itself. But what I think is most relevant to the work at this time (and which led to the book drawings later) is my move directly into the act of copying something as a work of art, both as a creative act and a way of working in itself. Even though it had been hanging around in my brain for sometime, it became real in 1973 when I rewrote Thoreau's *Walden*. The exact title was *Henry David Thoreau's Walden by Allen Ruppersberg*. I then spent about a year thinking about doing *Dorian Gray* before I did it in 1974. The copying/drawing of the images of books came out of this period of work.

FP: It's very easy to see that you were working as a conceptual artist but yet you intended to consider the book as a material object. In a way, it's the opposite of dematerialization of the art works. You take the book as an object and you make a drawing with the same title, so it's a very special position to say: "I don't want any more painting or any more objects. I want to work on books, but the books will be objects."

AR: And there's another part to that too, which is a connection between the dematerialization of the object in my work and living in both California and New York. I've always had to be in both places. Yet art is made in different ways in California and New York. New York conceptual work is very different from California conceptual work. So after being exposed to the New York school, I wanted to put more of an emotional and psychological spin on things rather than adhere to the more rigid and formal line I found there. I wanted to continue putting other things into the work and I found that I was getting what I wanted from books, novels and stories. These were the kind of ideas you could talk about in novels but were not found in visual work very often. So it was an attempt to bring these two worlds together. The book drawings began to do that. They use an object, a book, through which I could explore in visual terms subjects that were the domain of novels and books. With an addition of a line of text, sort of like advertising copy, I thought I could have the best of both worlds.

FP: You mention you had one foot in New York and one in L.A.

AR: Literally and figuratively. I went back and forth between the two cities, rarely staying more than six months in either place, so I was involved with the ideas and the artists who lived in both places. I got my first loft in New York in 1975. I did the first drawings there.

FP: Is there a large difference between the pieces which are on the subject of the book or literature, and the pieces you have done in the last few years which look like more sociological works concerned with the space in the town where you were invited to do them, places like Münster, Basel, and Arnhem? These two kinds of works seem separate to me.

AR: It's more like the book pieces expanded and became more ambitious. When you consider that books are at the core of both the Münster piece and the work for *Sonsbeek '93* in Arnhem, the difference is not so great. They are both certainly concerned with the site of the city, but within the city there is a certain piece of literary history that becomes the center of the work. The *Sonsbeek* piece was a recreation of a piece of lost literary history, and the Münster work reintroduced a famous literary character back into a structure determined by a found history within the city. The social character of the work actually reminds me more of my work in L.A. with *Al's Café* and *Al's Grand Hotel*.

FP: Because they are installations?

AR: Partially. The *Travel Office* in Münster could be another room at *Al's Grand Hotel*. They both looked as accurate as I could make them, and they both fooled some of the unsuspecting public into thinking they were real. The same energy went into each one of them. But also there was the social aspect you mentioned: these works were first of all about the community in which they were situated. Somehow by placing myself in the position of wanting to understand these histories well enough to pass them on made these works particularly engaging for others. The community response to these projects was far greater than I had expected, as it had been in L.A. People are interested in things that they sense are on the verge of disappearing (or have disappeared without them knowing it), and I think I can tap into this sometimes because of my own interests as an artist. Whether or not the viewer understands a work as art is not as important as the connection to it. I think one of the reasons these pieces succeed is that I have brought all the previous work into these large ambitious work, something I wouldn't have thought of doing until the early 90s.

FP: You quote a variety of sources in your work: Roussel, Voltaire, Proust, Oscar Wilde, Yeats, as well as pulp fiction. How do you evaluate these different materials?

AR: I look at or value them equally. They are different, of course, but it's their relationship to each other that interests me. How to substitute one for the other. I like all of these different works, but I'm basically a *pulp* artist. As popular culture grows and at times threatens to overwhelm everything, I think any artist is aware of his relationship

to it. At the same time, I also believe art is not popular culture or entertainment. Pop Culture has so many faces these days that I find the ongoing dialogue about it still interesting. Obviously, as it grows so the dialogue changes and artists continue to find ways to use it. There's always a new spin.

FP: The surrealists often quoted authors like Roussel and Proust.

AR: My main influences come from European Surrealism and then the French New Realists with American Pop Art thrown in. So I guess my work begins where Surrealism meets American culture in the mid-west in the 1950s.

FP: Did you discover surrealism in high school?

AR: No, during high school I had never heard the word. This comes from art school. I was taught about Surrealism by the faculty at Chouinard. Half the professors were American Abstract Expressionists and the other half were ex-animators from Disney Studios brought in to teach us drawing. So I guess cartoons got mixed up with American Surrealism and that's what I learned. In fact, some of the best cartoons from that period are indeed that combination. When I left Cleveland, Ohio, I couldn't have planned it better.

FP: William Copley had a strong connection to the surrealists in California both as a collector and as a painter. When did you meet him?

AR: I didn't meet Bill Copley until the early 70s. I was friends with his son Billy from art school, and later met his sister Claire who lived in L.A. while Billy lived in New York. I met Bill through them. He had all the work I wanted to see in his apartment in New York and the stories of all the artists to go with it. I learned a lot from him. I have always felt that there was a strong similarity between his Los Angeles gallery in the late 40s and Claire's L.A. gallery in the 70s. They were both in touch with the artists of their time, and both galleries were very short lived. Maybe I should mention the *Beat* influence at this point.

FP: In what way?

AR: Because I associate artists of the *Beat* period with aspects of surrealism that I responded to in California. I became aware of them more or less simultaneously. The post-war period combined them for me. This was the time of Copley's Gallery and the beginning of the *Beats* in L.A. Their interest in literature and poetry along with an anti-art attitude made them just what I was looking for.

FP: Was there a connection to the *Beat Generation*?

AR: For me, yes. Through the artists Wallace Berman, George Herms, Bruce Connor, and most of the California assemblage school that existed between L.A. and San Francisco. The atmosphere of the *Beat* culture seemed almost tangible in the early 1960s despite the fact that most of the original places were already gone. I arrived just at the time it was going away, but my connection to the older generation of artists and collectors was

my introduction to it. Wallace Berman was the first artist I admired and I introduced myself to him at a party. He was kind and generous and I felt honored to know him from that first meeting.

FP: Why did you decide to draw books and not photograph them?

AR: In the drawings I wanted the opposite of the anonymity I was able to cultivate in my photo works by not taking or printing the pictures. The drawings are made from photographs but the natural intimacy of the artist's hand was what I was after in these works. A contrast in approaches to making something that I could show side by side. My drawing style comes from my training as an illustrator and I liked the idea of using these skills. I wanted to push my skills as a commercial artist and pass illustrations off as art.

FP: So you began to introduce popular art into your work when you began to make drawings?

AR: Maybe it became more direct, but my interest was always there. I really left the idea of high art when I stopped painting. That's when I began to think about the relationship between what I went to school to become, a commercial artist, and what I came out being, an artist. The play between these two worlds has always been part of my work and it's something I enjoy in other artists' work as well..

FP: Was it new for you to use your commercial skills in this way?

AR: In the case of the drawings, yes.

FP: And it was very new because you had not produced objects in this way before. In many ways it marked a new phase in your work. What made you take this step? In a way, it was the end of conceptual art for you.

AR: Maybe not the end, only a mutation. I had not used my hand before so, yes, that was new. I had used commercial techniques before; producing the little books is one example. I wanted to make the drawings as a way of extending conceptual ideas into other areas. I had tried this with installation, performance, and video. I agree these forms seemed more appropriate to conceptualism at the time, but I wanted to combine these ideas with something more foreign to the style of the time. In a way, the drawings were not that much different than the little books: they were meant to be illustrations. Just as the photos were meant to document something, the drawings were meant to express a another proposition. They weren't meant to be fine art drawings any more than the drawings of Gilbert and George were meant to be works of fine art, although of course they were. They looked like they were made in art school.

FP: What's the difference for you?

AR: I learned to draw in two different ways. One was Art and the other was not, it was illustration and cartoon sketching. Chouinard graduates were highly sought after by the

commercial world because they could draw like Fine Artists. I have always thought that the best art doesn't look like art at all. So, my commercial training comes in handy.

FP: Did you include the element of time as a process in your first drawings?

AR: No, not the first ones but I started shortly after.

FP: Do you care whether or not there is a visual identity in your work?

AR: No, I don't care about that. I like things to look a certain way, but it's not about establishing a visual identity. Quite the opposite actually. When I had a survey show at MOCA in Los Angeles, spanning fifteen years of my work, somebody pointed out that the show was almost entirely black and white. I had never even noticed.

FP: So all of your work is about ideas?

AR: I would say so. The subtitle of *When Attitude Becomes Form* is *Live in Your Head*. I don't think I can give you a better description of how I make art to this day than that proposition put out thirty years ago. So yes, it's about ideas and art and all the ways that they can exist together. The work is confusing to people because it looks different all the time. I have never tried for a signature style. There are certain things that I choose to look at but they get wrapped up in the ideas about them. It's not really how the thing appears that counts, it's still conceptual.

FP: You are a conceptual artist, but at the same time you are someone interested in objects and making collections of objects.

AR: Yes, but I don't see that as contradictory. I collect all these things because I think I'm going to use them in a work. They do sometimes become collections in themselves, but I don't think I fetishize them as collections. I like them and I like having them but who knows the motivation behind it. This has become a subject for new work, collections and collecting.

FP: In what way will this become new work?

AR: I've never looked at my own history in quite this way before. I'm going back to my old photo pieces and reusing them. Not the actual vintage works, but reprints of certain images combined in such a way that they become backdrops for new pieces. I am taking elements and visual motifs and placing them into a new fictional context.

FP: When you collect books or films are you thinking of making something out of them?

AR: Not with the books and films. A film or book collection is a great thing to have and to use. I would still add to it whether I thought the book or film had any immediate use or not. It represents my interests. The other stuff I don't collect in quite the same way anymore. I have enough to last the rest of my life.

FP: Don't all these objects encumber you? Don't they stop you from moving freely?

AR: I've found a way to move freely and keep them at the same time; its called storage. Even though I move around a lot, I usually remember where I have something and since I have a lot of things in different places, I can usually find what I need wherever I am. Other times, I plan ahead and bring things with me or ship them to wherever I'm going. It's all like a library, when I want a certain book I usually know where it is. My collections are the same.

FP: In your work, you use found objects, objects made by others, and yet you will spend a lot of time making your own objects, for example drawing pictures. Do you distinguish between these two approaches?

AR: No, the idea never occurred to me that there was a difference. Actually that's not entirely true because the difference is built into the piece. How the piece is made is determined outside of any hierarchies of art making and is really a part of the idea of the work. I think artists now do not differentiate one way of working from another. That's something I like in younger artists' work. Perhaps, it's also what they like in my work. I don't see any hierarchies in my own work, and I have always shown different types of work together. I do invest a lot of time in the drawings, but then I'm just as happy to have the next work done by someone else. I tried to hire someone else to do the book drawings for me at one point, but it didn't work. It was an artist who did super-realist work. I thought she would be able to *copy* for me. Of course, what came out was her drawing, not mine. She was intent on copying my style but it was way too personal. The drawings take so much time and concentration and are filled with so many decisions that I can only do them for a limited amount of time. I have to be in a rather quiet period of my life to even begin. That's why I have to have many different ways of working. In some respects, this probably accounts for the variety of work and for its many different appearances. The intensely solitary and private work is balanced by the more public pieces or by the work that's made by someone else where I am more or less the producer or director of the piece. In thinking out my plans for *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, I included a secondary or private exercise for myself as a sort of incentive to do it. I had read somewhere that a way to learn about writing is to copy someone else's work. The same as copying old masters. At any rate, the idea of concentrating so specifically on each word, on moving from one word to the next, looking closely at each sentence, appealed to me. But it is the solitariness of the act which continually shows up in the work. Drawing images of books is the same experience, only shorter.

FP: What's the difference between this work and *Henry David Thoreau's Walden* by Allen Ruppersberg, which came first in 1973?

AR: First of all they are two very different kinds of objects. *Walden* became a manuscript again and *Dorian Gray* became a painting. After you acknowledge the act of copying as an idea or as a way of making something, they are two definitely different experiences. *Walden* is an act of re-engagement with Thoreau's original solitary experiment and dialogue on living alone in the woods. I sat, alone, for three months writing this dissertation on the solitary life, a private dialogue with Thoreau and his book. In a way, I mimicked his own experiment and what resulted was a copy of his result, a manuscript. I copied his experience as I had experienced it through the book I had read

as a teenager. This was a way to see what I thought of it as an adult. The *Dorian Gray* piece could only have come after *Walden*. After seeing the film, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and its spectacular color ending to the black and white film, I went back to the novel excited about the possibilities of working with it. As I said before, I was also engaged in ideas about writing so this story of a painting in Oscar Wilde's prose style made for a different approach from *Walden*. I had different reasons going into the project and of course a different experience coming out. What is important to remember about these two works is also their similarities. In each case, the original book exists side by side with the new object made out of it. Anyone can stand in the gallery and read Oscar Wilde's entire novel in my handwriting if they choose. Any viewer can sit in the gallery and read Thoreau's *Walden* in manuscript form if they have the time. The perceived passing of time by the viewer is common in both works. My experience can be a mirror to theirs. Maybe I'm an abstract expressionist after all.

FP: So these works are each a discussion about a book?

AR: Yes, exactly. Like an homage to the thing itself.

FP: You say you are particularly interested in popular culture. It strikes me that the figures and features you use are all drawn from past popular culture and not from the contemporary world.

AR: Not entirely. All of the newspaper drawings from the 1980s are from contemporary sources as are the obituary drawings from the 90s. The series of poster works I began in 1983 and continue to this day are also a part of the contemporary culture. Present day reality is where I begin, but the idea of the past itself is something that continually reoccurs in the work. I occasionally say in lectures about my work that an overarching theme found throughout my career is the simple passing of time, if not an outright attempt to stop it entirely. Just as the collecting of things is always cited as being a hedge against death, death is probably connected to the work in the same way. All the things in my collections are basically different forms of words and pictures: films, books, magazines, and comics. Some of it is from a personal past, but I would say the majority of it is from the vast contemporary cultural past which surrounds me. It also could be seen as a history of graphic design up to and including the present day. One of my collections is of club posters from the *Punk* era of the late 70s and early 80s when bands began to use the Xerox machine to advertise their shows. It was the cheapest technology at the time and there is a graphic quality and consistency which is still fresh today. Technology of the cheap and common informs all of my collections and can also be seen in my work. *Reminders: Novel, Sculpture, Film* (1991) is on one hand a cultural history of 20th Century America and on the other, a history of book jacket design. When I set out to work on it I had my own collection of books from the 20s onward as reference material. When I searched for more information, I discovered there was not a book on the specific history of this subject. Finding and filling in a missing history connects not only disparate works, but also my collections and work.

FP: A lot of your recent work is like a memorial, solid as a statue that defies time, very far removed from your earlier works which were hardly objects at all. How do you feel about this solidity?

AR: Yes they are memorials, but they are not necessarily solid. Most of them I consider to be active in that they have change built into them. For instance, the books from the Arnhem project are constantly changing hands and becoming a part of the world again. The bookstore I created for them now sits in the Arnhem library or travels to other exhibitions. The Münster piece, *The Best of All Possible Worlds*, employed actors, street signs, as well as a guidebook which is still for sale. The work for the 50th anniversary of the United Nations was almost entirely ephemeral except for the videotapes. Even the bronze I'm working on now is only one part of a three-part piece placed in different locations, leaving it to the viewer to reassemble. However, I do like the idea of doing a solid bronze casting, which is figurative, that sits in one location forever.

FP: There are a lot of interesting artists at the moment particularly concerned with the idea of memorial. I am thinking of Mike Kelley and Chris Burden, for example.

AR: There has been an overly extreme use of irony in art recently, but I think that's changing. Certainly there is no room for outright cynicism anymore. That came out of the 80s and is now very much out of touch. Nobody wants that anymore. Your common everyday irony is also wearing thin. Pure irony is not enough. Memorials by nature are not cynical or ironic. I hope to do more.

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