

Knight, Christopher. "You could think of it as America's attic." *Los Angeles Times* (Calendar), 17 September 2009, p. D12-13.

Art review: 'Allen Ruppertsberg: You and Me or the Art of Give and Take' at SMMoA



No, the big vinyl banner that says "Wave Goodbye to Grandma" in the middle of the new exhibition at the Santa Monica Museum of Art is not a healthcare debating fiction uttered by Sen. Charles E. Grassley (R-Iowa). Instead, it's Conceptual artist Allen Ruppertsberg's way of marking an epochal transition.

Using the span of human lifetimes, including his own, Ruppertsberg compiles printed matter of many different but familiar kinds to quietly escalate an elemental awareness of impermanence and change. Keyed to vernacular objects and mechanically reproduced images — books, records, newspaper clippings, family photo albums, postcards, snapshots, magazines and more — his work is like a mountainous archive of half-remembered, shared events from the not-too-distant past, temporarily sorted in the midst of slipping into inevitable decay. Wave goodbye to Grandma.

"[You and Me and the Art of Give and Take](#)," as the surprisingly poignant exhibition is called, includes two new large-scale installations and a selection of 10 drawings and collages made between 1985 and 1989. Among those drawings is an exquisite set that clarifies Ruppertsberg's objective.

Titled "The Gift and the Inheritance," each is a pencil rendering that shows a single book from Ruppertsberg's extensive library — Shakespeare, Baudelaire, Horatio Alger Jr. and even a "Tick Tock Tales" comic. The books are rendered diagonally on the page, in careful perspective as if glimpsed resting on a tabletop; but, in fact, the images are adrift in the blank white space of the sheet. The result is an uncanny sense of materiality given to an illusion — of drawing as both an activity in time and a physical object in space.

Ruppertsberg's use of soft, dark graphite emphasizes inescapable relationships between drawing and writing, as well as their considerable differences. According to a wall text, each of these drawings comes with a pledge that, in the future, the actual book Ruppertsberg drew will be sent to the drawing's owner as a bequest from the artist.

An unexpected sense of yearning begins to surround the work — a longing to know the past recorded in the historical publication, as well as for the promised inheritance that will arrive at an unknowable moment in the future. Like Proust's madeleines, the drawings are their own strange brand of tick-tock tales. One is left with the luminous experience of perception, in search of lost time.



The exhibition's two new installations depend on a tall, wide wall that cuts across the museum's main gallery. One side is covered in peg-board.

More than 350 sheets of graphic imagery hang from the peg-board on hooks. Laminated in plastic, the graphics are divided in two primary groups: pre-World War II sheet music, material from a time when playing instruments or singing at home was participatory entertainment; and fliers and handbills for late-1970s punk performances, another do-it-yourself form of musical entertainment, albeit played out in public rather than private.

Like flies in aspic, these laminated representations of auditory sounds can be rearranged on the wall at will. The sheet music incorporates pictures and lyrics of decorous romance and period racism, the punk posters indecorous tantrums and bleak despair. On the wall, they merge to create a gigantic Dada nonsense-poem. You are invited to rearrange it at will.

That poem — dedicated to Hugo Ball, author of the 1916 Dada Manifesto, a shriek against the insanity of modern warfare — partakes of both the private and the public entertainments represented in the materials. Like Phil Spector's rock 'n' roll era separating the two moments that Ruppertsberg italicizes, it makes a literal "wall of sound." And like Ball, who fled the mindless brutality of World War I, it is a visual-noise-jamming art that stands against the cruelty of our own time.



The second installation is on the other side of the wall, where the “Wave Goodbye to Grandma” banner is displayed on a wall papered over with photocopies. Ruppertsberg has filled specially made cardboard boxes with thousands of copies of pictures from his archives — book pages, photo albums, clippings, sheet music, food-section recipes (Rabbit pie, potato doughnuts, etc.) and more — all free for the taking. Visitors are invited to riffle through the boxes and make selections, participating in a collaborative effort to produce “The Never Ending Book Part 2/Art and Therefore Ourselves.”

The boxes, plus some light-boxes affixed with color transparencies of old photographs, are arranged on top of tables, chairs, stairways and other furniture adapted from theatrical stage-designs of the 1940s — the decade of the artist’s birth. Painted in solid colors of the rainbow, the furniture makes all the world a child-like stage. We are players in it.

Ruppertsberg, 65, has been working in an interactive mode for 40 years, ever since he arrived in Los Angeles from Ohio to attend the old Chouinard Art Institute (now Cal Arts). Much of his work has required the construction of a social environment in which art’s meanings emerge from clarified networks of human relationships.

He famously cooked for weekly visitors to “Al’s Cafe” in 1969, although the food was not necessarily edible in the

usual way. (A Ruppertsberg “Patti Melt,” for example, was a photograph of singer Patti Page, slathered in toasted marshmallows.) In 1971 he offered stays in specially designed rooms at “Al’s Hotel.” These projects anticipated by a generation the work of Rirkrit Tiravanija, Carsten Höller and other 1990s purveyors of so-called “relational aesthetics.”

One of the most appealing aspects of the two new installations in the Santa Monica show, smartly organized by guest curator Constance Lewallen, is the bracket formed by the material. On one side is the time between the two World Wars, which created the experience into which Ruppertsberg, a child of World War II, was born. The other loosely encompasses the period between Vietnam and Iraq, the decades of his adulthood. From the Great Depression to the Great Recession, Ruppertsberg has erected a marvelous clarifying lens for where American culture stands today.

— Christopher Knight

Photos: from "Allen Ruppertsberg: You and Me or the Art of Give and Take"; credit: Christopher Knight/Los Angeles Times