

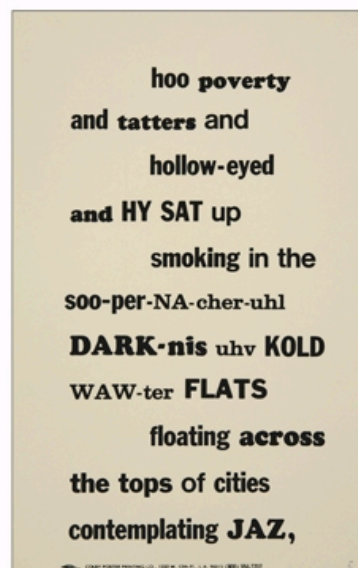
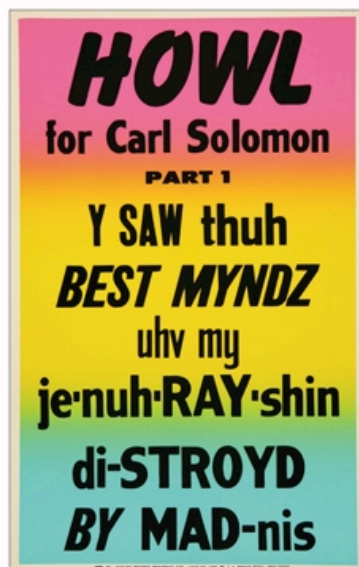
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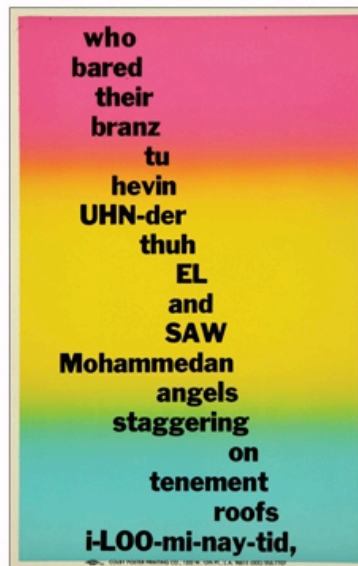
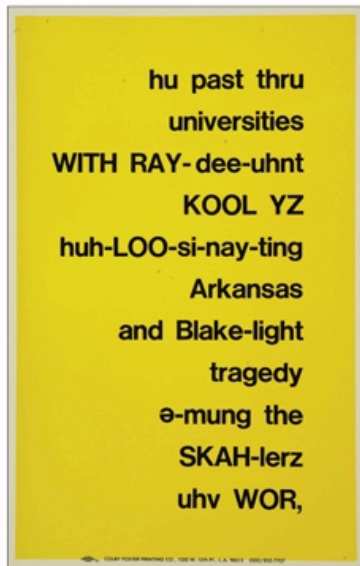
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Allen Ruppersberg
by Cheryl Donegan
BOMB 109/Fall 2009, ART



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Seven posters from *The Singing Posters: Allen Ginsberg's Howl* by Allen Ruppersberg (*Part I*), 2003, 14 × 22 inches. All images courtesy of the artist.

Al Ruppersberg is my favorite young artist. This might be an absurd way to describe someone whose exhibition record extends from the '60s to today, yet that's how I think of both him and his work: fresh, perennial, and maybe a bit underexposed. Maybe it's the surprise of encountering his work, comprised of drawings, posters, collages, texts, books, and photographs—all alone or in rotating combinations, their colors vivid, their organization crisp. Yet for all their variety and arrangement, a familiar feeling creeps up on you, reminiscent of that used bookstore you used to haunt, that swap meet where you rifled through cartons of old magazines, that restaurant that time forgot.

Ruppersberg reintroduces you to the experience of a less uniform time, a more textured reality, a personal history. It's a strangely precise feeling teetering on the edge of the ordinary, the meaningful, and the forgettable. It's real life, but as it's lived on the printed page: collected, rearranged, retold. Slogans appear in Ruppersberg's works; not exactly slogans as in ad copy, but more like set phrases rendered strange. They could be quotes from famous artists, or blurbs from *Life* magazine circa 1957—all familiar, yet somehow not memorable. "The sky above, the mud below." "Coming soon! Or maybe later." Do they come from a Hollywood movie poster or *Poor Richard's Almanac*? Did he write them? Where's Al? He quotes, "Sometimes a man is lost and shows that he is lost." Sage or teenager? Al Ruppersberg is my favorite young artist.

CHERYL DONEGAN Looking at your *The New Five-Foot Shelf of Books*, I was thinking about "The Three Marcells" section. The obvious thing that came to mind was Marcel Proust's famous questionnaire—

ALLEN RUPPERSBERG Oh, right.

CD There are also the great Pierre Cabanne interviews with Marcel Duchamp; and there must be some great interviews with Marcel Broodthaers. I thought I'd cull questions from interviews with the three Marcells and then feed them all to you. But my husband, Kenny [Goldsmith], was like, "That is so conceptual." So I'm not doing that. It sucks! (*laughter*) When I was reading about how you developed this project of curating the library—

AR Yeah, for the Belgian curator Moritz Kung, who asked artists, architects, poets, etcetera, to select a number of books for the library of an arts space in Antwerp. I was supposed to generate a list of books that he could start acquiring.

CD I noticed your response to him was incredibly honest: "I don't even like to assign students what to read. I don't even want to give them a syllabus." It seems that you do make lists in your work. I'm thinking about *Letter to a Friend*, the list of people whom you were struck by who'd passed away in 1997: James Lee Byars, Martin Kippenberger, Allen Ginsberg ... You made an elegiac list of these artists.

AR Well, I wasn't making a list; I was making a work.

CD What might be the difference between a list and a work? I was thinking of Homer, who sings the praises and tells the exploits of heroes and gods. That's the archaic idea of a poet—someone who is communicating stories so they won't be forgotten.

AR That's definitely on my mind, but the work, like Homer's, is not just a list, it's also telling a story. Like any other work, it has X number of pieces that go in to make the whole. It happens to be a coincidence that within the year in which I formulated and produced the work, all these artists and writers and poets whom I either knew or respected or was influenced by were gone. If you read the text of the letter that I wrote with tiles on the floor along with these artists' names, you'll see I ask myself, What do I do now? These were my heroes and friends, now there's a huge loss that I have to fill up. The rest of the piece is about this filling up.

CD Would you say, then, that the piece is a collection? Or is it an interaction, an experience?

AR All of the above. Each work has a different origin, and might have a different focus. One might be on some experience; another one about a collection; or yet another one might be about making the past live again through viewer interaction, like my remake of Allan Kaprow's *Words*, a 1962 environment, for MOCA in 2008. Each work starts with a different frame of reference, and is developed from there.

CD One of the first pieces I knew by you was *Where's Al?*. It's an early work with snapshots of people hanging out, eating, on the beach, etcetera, alternating with dialogue on index cards in which people wonder if you'll show up soon. So many artists make their own personality very present in their work, but in your work there's sometimes a kind of disappearing.

AR Yeah, I'm in there but I'm very distanced, both consciously and unconsciously. That distanced quality shows up in obvious ways in *Where's Al?* and also in other works, such as *Letter to a Friend*, in which I talk about disappearance. In *Where's Al?* I'm there in words but not pictures. In other early works such as *Al's Café* and *Al's Grand Hotel*, I'm literally there in person. In some of the photo pieces from the early '70s, I'm wearing a mask. Then there's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Thoreau's *Walden*, for which I copied Wilde's and Thoreau's works by hand: I'm present but absent there. To go back to the distancing, it began to occur in the early '70s with the photo pieces. In those days artists tended to use themselves as objects in a formalized way, or as a way of talking about something more personal. We physically appeared in a lot of our own work. Then there came a point sometime in the mid-'70s when I didn't want my own image to be present in the art—I began to draw again, and made works like *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. I wanted myself out of them for a number of reasons ... maybe it was the one work where I had myself tied up in various ways—strangled, being gassed in an oven, or drowned in the

bathtub. I forgot the title for good reason, I guess.

After that, the works became different, more methodical. There's always a distanced approach, though it's not as conscious. That makes it hard for some people. If they can't figure out how to enter them formally, and they don't find an emotional core, then they don't know how to enter the works. But that's just the way I work.

CD Yeah. I've witnessed exactly what you're talking about, when at Gorney Bravin & Lee you showed *The Singing Posters*. It was right at the beginning of the Iraq war. I remember being stunned, because though the look of the posters was really familiar, the text in them was, at first, absolutely indecipherable. Then, all of a sudden, I literally started to sound it out, and realized it was the phoneticization of "Howl." I found it intense to be uttering the words almost like a baby, and became aware that *this* was the way into the work: to actually expose yourself to not knowing what you're saying, and have this awkward experience of sounding it out, like you're learning a foreign language. Your posters repoliticized that poem which had become so aestheticized; they spoke of how much we'd forgotten and of the need to relearn how to speak this language of outrage and protest. I got really excited because I'd *gotten* it, and I remember standing there with somebody who said, "Ugh! It's old Ginsberg. Who cares?"

AR Ha!

CD I was like, Oh no! We can't talk anymore because I'm going to get really mad. I had this fantasy about having a bunch of people doing this public performance, about making them say it aloud, literally almost like a re-education camp.
(*laughter*)

AR That's exactly what I set up for people to do: they had to be in there speaking that poem out loud. I didn't directly connect it to the Iraq war, but I do think of it as a political poem that has to be listened to again. It's great poetry; surprisingly, young people don't know it, even though it might be the most famous poem of the post-World War II era—

CD Probably, yeah.

AR A couple of years prior to making the work, I asked my students if they knew this poem "Howl," by Allen Ginsberg. One of them had *kind of* heard of it in his English class, and another was a little more familiar with it, but the majority of them didn't know it at all. I actually then used "Howl" as a project in the class; later I decided to take the project out into the world. And you're right, the posters are very familiar; they're a public-address system, in LA anyway, or they used to be—they're something else that's disappearing.

When you drive around LA you see these posters on telephone poles advertising public events. It's a form that I can empty out and fill up again. I took the form—the colored posters—and then rewrote the poem using phonetic dictionaries and combining three different phonetical pronunciation forms. There is also the giant scale of this thing, so that when you come into the gallery you're compelled to start reading out loud.

CD You hear Ginsberg reading his poem and it's incantatory, like a chant. We're back to really old forms, to the aural, to ...

AR Oral history.

CD Communicating through telling stories. Or, what you're saying about these posters. Every time I go into the supermarket in the country and I see one of those posters for, say, a church carnival, I go, "Oh look! One of Al's posters." (*laughter*)

AR See, I never set myself up to have a signature work, but this has become an unconscious signature, which is fine. Since the early '80s I've used this same company. I let them design the posters, for the most part, because that's what they know how to do and they do them well. I've kept having ideas for posters, so over the years that work has become more familiar.

I want to go back to "Howl" because one of my inspirations was an original LP that came out in 1959, I think, of Ginsberg reading that and other poems. The recording took place only a couple of years after his first reading of it in San Francisco. His reading is so fantastic. He wrote the poem following his own breath, and so when

he's reading it, he's reading it the way he wrote it. So when *you're* reading it, you're doing the same thing. It brings it back into an oral tradition, which is where it comes from originally.



Installation view of *The New Five-Foot Shelf of Books*, 2001, Galerie Micheline Szwajcer, Belgium.

CD This reminds me of one of my really big questions for you in terms of your signature, and work that falls between the cracks. Your *New Five-Foot Shelf of Books* is very spatial, and sculptural, but I was moved by it as a work of literature. I can spend a long time with it in terms of its structure, its content, the different ways it can be read. I'm convinced that it's a profound poem—it felt like reading Gertrude Stein. You can flip around in it, which I always like in a book; you don't have to read it in one direction.

AR Raymond Roussel said that when you read *Locus Solus*—or is it *Impressions of Africa*?—you should start in the middle. He thought it made more sense if you read from the middle on, and then back to the beginning. I always remember that. The book has so much information; so much to read on so many different levels. It's like an autobiography. What you have is the softcover version of *The New Five-Foot Shelf of Books*, which is part of a bigger, physical work consisting of a 50-volume set of hardcover books and a set of 40 life-size color photos, each about 40 by 60 inches. The books reproduce exactly—from the covers, to the paper, to typestyle—the original *Five-Foot Shelf* from 1909. This was literally a small library compiled by Harvard University's president then, Charles W. Eliot, who claimed that if you read these books you'd have the equivalent of a Harvard education.

The second half of the original work is a to-scale photo documentation of my old studio in the Cable Building on Broadway and Houston in New York. When the photos are hung, they again become the studio. My *New Five-Foot Shelf* is not the reproduction of the Harvard classics, but a record of the ideas that were generated in the studio pictured in the photos.

We produced the softcover book that you have for the Biennial of Graphic Arts in Ljubljana, Slovenia, curated by Christophe Cherix in 2003. One aspect of the piece in the biennial was a performance: I would go, for instance, to a flea market in Ljubljana, where I had a table and would give copies of the book away.

CD That's like Duchamp at the trade fair, giving away the *Rotoreliefs*.

AR Right. There was a small advertisement in the museum that said that I'd be there at such-and-such time and place and you could have the book.

CD Were you giving them away as free samples or based on some criteria?

AR No, they were strictly free. I *wanted* to give the book away. It's only an edition of 1,000, and it states in the colophon that it's not for sale. On a practical level, it's because the publisher could have been sued a million times over if people wanted to

track down the attributed and non-attributed quotes in there—they could get into a legal jungle.

CD I see the five sections of the book almost like a crawl—they seem to move forward since they're all in separate lines. You could read them down the page in a traditional way, but you could also read them like musical bars going forward.

AR You could take the first section and read it—

CD —All the way through 1,000 pages.

AR Or when you turn the pages you can mix them up. But if you wanted to read only the "Honey, I Rearranged the Collection" section, for instance, you could read that straight through by only reading the first line of every page.

CD But that section, in terms of copyright, is original.

AR All of the 350 or so entries are original works of mine, yes.

CD Also the last part, the "Letters from Ohio": a personal narrative from correspondence. Then there are the notes in "When in Doubt Go to the Movies," that you've made over the years—

AR It's all my notes about my own works over the years. But the same section of notes also includes quotes I've collected out of 15 years worth of notebooks—quotes that probably are copyrighted. And then there is the "Three Marcells" section, which contains lines from or about Proust, Duchamp, and Broodthaers. There's a lot of stuff there copied straight out of books that connects these three Marcells—they happen to all be my favorite artists, and I may have taken from them the most in the beginning. A copyright lawyer would freak out, so we had a certain number of copies of the book to be given away during the exhibition. Unfortunately, they gave away too many and now they're showing up on the Internet, which pisses me off.

CD Now someone who was given a gift is turning a profit. It defies the gift economy.

AR There are going to be very few of those performances from now on. The idea was that you could only get the book by my giving it to you.

CD My sister is a historian of early American colonies. She told me this story about the clash between Native Americans of the Chesapeake Bay and the English. It strikes me also as a clash between a gift-giving economy and a mercantile economy. The natives and the English wanted to trade, but the natives had this ritual of gift-giving first. The English wouldn't reciprocate because they didn't understand what the heck was going on. So they'd take all the gifts and they'd be like, "When are we going to get to the trading?" But the natives would think, "You don't know how to be polite; you're not giving us any gifts, so we'll save face for you by taking this silver cup as a token." Then the English would assume, "They're thieves! They've stolen our silver cup! We must retaliate!" The next day the English would burn the native village. The native people thought they were actually sparing the English of the embarrassment of their barbarism!

AR It's a good story.

CD I thought you'd like it since there's this idea of sharing, storytelling, and perpetuating what otherwise would be forgotten because culture doesn't have the proper values to honor what you're determined to keep alive. I'm stuck on this idea that there's this archaic quality to the work; archaic in the poetic sense.

AR That's definitely 90 percent of the work.

CD Kenny was asking how come you were not in *The Pictures Generation* show at The Met; I thought that it was because the work is not about the media, but actually, in a funny way, about the absolute opposite. Media is about built-in obsolescence.

AR *The Pictures Generation* issue is complicated but, certainly, the work has never been exclusively about media. An element of my work uses mass culture and popular culture—that's always been there, particularly in California, where I went to

school and got started. I mean, it's Hollywood!

CD What's interesting about the pop-cultural tropes you've chosen is that, like the posters, they're rather authorless.

AR That's a good point.

CD Like plastic bags that say "Thank You." Who designs those? Who picks the typeface for the bag that says "Thank You for Shopping Here"? I love their authorlessness and their ubiquity. When *you* take an object from pop culture, it's almost the most humble, like these mass-produced posters.

AR I gravitate to those kinds of things. They are straightforward and simple—there's a lot of that kind of *look* that I appropriate and use. Graphic design plays a big role in what I choose to work with.

CD I'm thinking about the project for Utrecht ... those illuminated signs.

AR The show was called *Nightlines*, and my piece, *Evening Time Is Reading Time*, is now a permanent installation. The city of Utrecht bought it after the show, and it's been well taken care of because the people there really like it. Scale-wise and form-wise, the signs were taken from beer signs—what's the most well-known Dutch-Belgian beer from there?

CD Heineken?

AR I think so. Anyway, it's a ubiquitous form that I could empty out and fill up again with my own subject matter: in this case, reading and looking. In a way it's the same as appropriating the posters from LA. The illuminated signs have a specific scale; they're two-sided and they stick out perpendicular to the wall. *Nightlines* is a site-specific work in that the signs are installed on one street in Utrecht where we interviewed the people living there to find out their occupations. Then I designed signs that related to this information. In the old days, a sign of an image of eyeglasses meant that it was an eyeglass store. This is similar. Up and down the street there are X number of double-sided signs which, on one side, have images relating to people's jobs. I did these using a salesman's book of matchbook-cover designs from the '30s or '40s. They were categorized; a barber, for instance, would pick the barber matchbook cover. Same for waitresses, or whatever. I appropriated those images, mixed them up, and remade them into logos for each occupation. The idea came from the old Gotham Book Mart on 47th Street in Manhattan. It had a great handmade sign of a boat with a man fishing, and a logo that said, "Wise Men Fish Here."

CD Wow!

AR I went for that kind of poetic image/text. The other side shows a blind being pulled down. As you go down the street, the blind comes a bit further down on each sign, and written on the blind is the text, "Evening time is reading time." So, as you walk one way down the street, you see the blind coming down. If you turn around and come back the other way, you see the images of people's occupations. That's how it works.

CD Daytime is for work and nighttime is for reading.

AR The title and theme of the exhibition is a Utrecht tradition: they have an annual all-night poetry reading.



Installation view of *Circles*, Allan Kaprow's *Words*, 1962, by Allen Ruppertsberg, 2008, in *Art as Life*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

CD Here's a funny question based on some of the things that we've been talking about, and some we didn't talk about, like *AI's Café* and *AI's Grand Hotel*. So much has been made about relational aesthetics—I wonder how frequently your work is mentioned in the development of those practices? Your work also tends to encourage ways of living and models of action suggesting a more playful, thoughtful way to be in the world.

AR I'm definitely *related* to *relational* aesthetics because of my *relationship* to the artists whose work generated the development of this idea. It begins in '90 or '91, when Eric Troncy and Nicolas Bourriaud curated a show called *No Man's Time* at the Ville Arson in Nice with the curator/director there, Christian Bernard. It has become a well-known historical show because it included the artists who would then go on to be associated with relational aesthetics: Philippe Parreno ...

CD And Rirkrit Tiravanija—

AR He wasn't in it. Felix González-Torres was in it; Dominique Gonzales-Foerster ...

and some Americans like me. After all, I come from the original relational aesthetics of Allan Kaprow and '60s experimentalism, with cross-disciplinary ideas and so on. Basically, the art-life continuum is a large part of my position as an artist and, as I see it, relational aesthetics is just a step away from that. The dispersal of objects as in scatter art, the uses of time and coincidence in both the public and private space of the gallery, and what used to be called post-studio art, are all involved in their work and mine. They might disagree, but I very much identify with this group of artists. I've been in other shows with them over the years and we've become friends in the process.

CD Back to Ginsberg, if you think about it, his readings must have been like happenings. Your work may be heir to happenings and poetry at the same time, or maybe it's something completely new, yet familiar in that it's resuscitating something we've missed back to life.

AR I do try to find things that are on the verge of disappearing so I can resuscitate them, use them so that they are present again. One of my favorite works of this kind was for Sonsbeek 93 in Arnhem, Holland. I made a memorial for the Battle of Arnhem of 1944, the event by which the town is best known. I researched the most popular books of the period in the four countries involved in the battle: Germany, Holland, Poland, and the United Kingdom. I then found original copies of as many of these books as possible, and chose five from each country to have reprinted. One hundred copies of each were printed: half were shown in a restored trailer made to look like a closed bookstore, and the other half were sold as new books in the local bookstore in the center of town.

CD Resuscitation is a good word because it's not sentimental or nostalgic. It's almost like someone performing CPR.

AR I always liked the movie *Re-Animator*. It's a horror film from the early '80s. I like the title and the idea of reanimating.

CD I'm attracted to things that have an undercurrent of violence that's somewhat seductive: CPR, where there's this horrible struggle going on, and it's almost like the violence of birth or the violence of sex. It's supercharged, which totally separates it from nostalgia or even museology. Which brings me to that book out on the table, with Walter Benjamin's essay "Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book Collecting." He talks about how the library is not a waxwork, but this living thing. You can really make a picture in your mind when Benjamin talks about the books all spread out, and the mess and the chaos—

AR It's one of my favorites, for sure. It's about having the past be present. In *The New Five-Foot Shelf* there are lots of quotes about bringing the past forward, like this one by William Faulkner: "There is no such thing as was. To me no man is himself, he is the sum of his past. There is no such thing really as was, because the past is. It is part of every man, every woman, and every moment."

CD Well, not to trivialize that, but having worn vintage clothes all my life, I certainly know what he means! So, when you talk about your projects with their multiple origins and variants, do they exist on the Internet? You've expressed an interest in giving things away ...

AR Dia invited me to do a Web project, and it turned out that *The New Five-Foot Shelf* worked really well as one. For the online version, all of the volumes of my books appear at the bottom of the page: you can click on each of the books and they will open up so you can read them. You can look at an image in the photos and you can also go to the books and find texts that relate to those things you might see on the shelves or walls of the studio. It's all there; you just go to the "Artists' Web Projects" on the Dia website.

CD Someone scanned all the books and photos?

AR Yes, it took them a year to do it. I also did a soundtrack for it, which most people don't know is there.

CD And what about your film collection?

AR My collection of films is for me to make artworks out of. For a work like *Reminders, 1991*, for example, I used my collections of books, movie posters,

vintage greeting cards, etcetera, to make a work without any found objects in it; it's completely original.

CD It's known that you're a collector, but the works you make from the collection are the works, and the collection is the collection.

AR I collect not as a collector, but as an artist who finds things to use. It's not that I want to collect something that's going to be this or that in the future; it's because I think I can use it. Though it might take 20 years for me to—

CD To figure out where it goes.

AR In some cases it *has* taken 20 years to figure out where something goes. The only real question is where to store what I collect so I can use it later on. As of now I'm doing a new work that is based on an old Uncle Scrooge comic-book story. I used it once in 1969, but now it seems new again and will become a sculpture.

CD I think of a collector as somebody who's very stationary, who needs to be around all of their things, but you're really peripatetic. How does that work?

AR That's what everybody wants to know.

CD Good! It's part of the interview, so everyone now will know.

AR I can't tell you exactly how it works, except for the fact that each of my locations feeds me in a different way. There's the practical aspect of it: I can only afford to keep my stuff in certain places because I only have so much money. There are a number of reasons for having the majority of it in Ohio.

CD Space is cheaper.

AR It also happens to be where I'm from, and I like to go there. I do certain things there, and out in LA I have other stuff that I use, or in my apartment in New York ... the stuff moves around as I move around, if I need it.

CD Maybe people need to get a different idea of what being a collector is: it's not being around objects, but having the memory of objects—that's part of the way in which collections turn into works.

AR Exactly. I might start a project based on something that I have and want to use, but then as the work develops, something new comes out of it that later, in turn, starts a new collection. Eventually that new collection might work itself back into new pieces. It's not that there's a set kind of thing to be collected or kept: that is always evolving out of the work. Now I'm interested in finding things that I hadn't thought of before. I wish I had, because they would have been a hell of a lot cheaper! But you don't know until you get there.

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