Los Angeles

ALLEN RUPPERSBERG

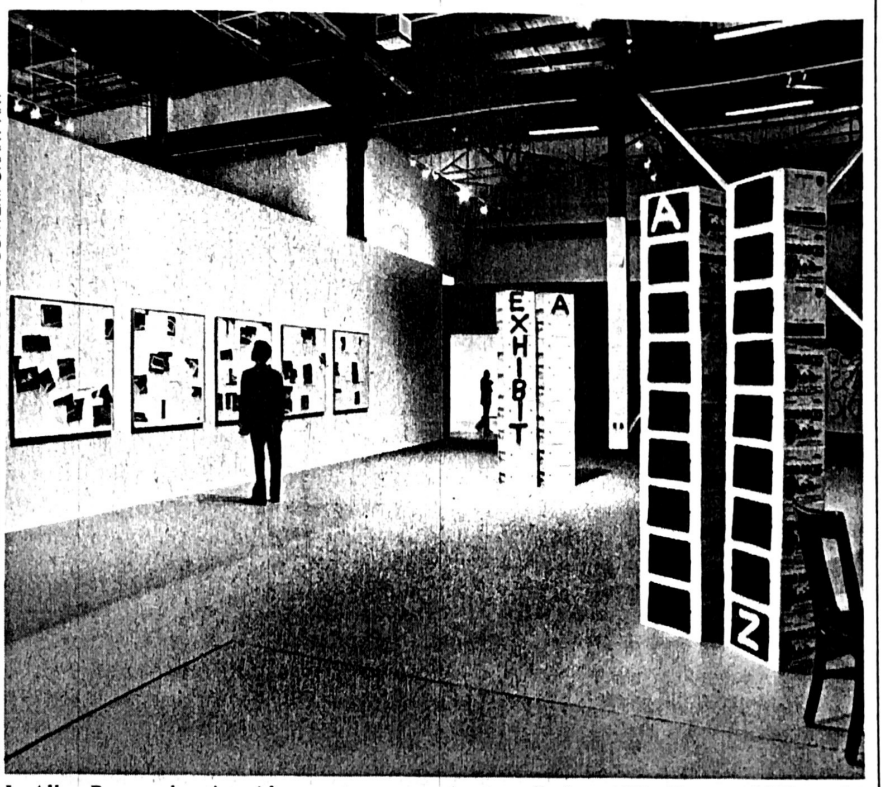
Museum of Contemporary Art

BOUND in a straitjacket, Ruppersberg sits in a chair reading his lecture on the life of Harry Houdini. The talk, states Ruppersberg, "will direct itself to explorations of heroic belief that carried and sustained him for almost 40 years." As the black-and-white videotape drones on, you realize that the artist could just as well be talking about himself. As an escape artist from the confines of late modernism, Ruppersberg uses Houdini as metaphor. The artist is a magician, but in Ruppersberg's world he is not of the shaman variety but rather an entertainer who simultaneously plays the role of spectator. He performs his acts of legerdemain only to pull up his sleeve and reveal the hidden deck of cards.

Ruppersberg's mid-career retrospective revealed an artist consistently walking the tightrope between fact and fantasy, the real and the unreal. The walls of the installation were littered with graffiti questions of the sort usually addressed to carnival fortune-tellers, such as "Does my dream portend good luck or misfortunes?" The very title of the exhibition—"The Secret of Life and Death"—was presented by Ruppersberg with the knowledge that no such thing exists.

Ruppersberg is a member of a nonexistent movement that might be called California Conceptual, including John Baldessari, Terry Allen, Douglas Huebler, Ed Ruscha, Bruce Nauman and William Wegman, all of whom demonstrate similar sympathies with witty and disjunctive narrative that has eluded most of the "purer" forms of East Coast Conceptual art. For Ruppersberg and the others, the source material of art history is often mixed with vaudeville and movies, popular novels and philosophical clichés.

The exhibition opened with a painting, from 1973, of an orange book floating like the sun against a dusky sunset, with a cursive title that reads: "Greetings from California." On one wall a series of Polaroids showed the artist seated behind a card table on a patio. Beneath the photographs were descriptive captions, typed on index cards, that did not coincide with the visuals. For example, "A cold outdoor patio of a large home somewhere in Montana" was obviously set in a warm, verdant clime. A bottle of ketchup was described as "a pitcher of water." The absurd contradictions mounted until the artist, wearing a Lone Ranger-type mask, picked up a revolver, held it to his head, pulled off the mask and collapsed on the table. Although the piece was captioned "A murder," the only death here was that of "truth," as in the title, *To Tell the Truth*. The contradictions celebrated in this piece become the leitmotiv of Ruppersberg's work.



SQUIDDS AND NUNNS/COURTESY LOS ANGELES MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

In Allen Ruppersberg's mid-career retrospective installation, "The Secret of Life and Death," the artist walks the tightrope between fact and fantasy.

Like magicians, artists ask their audience to suspend disbelief, to have faith that their statements are "true." Ruppersberg requests such faith, knowing that his art is about obvious discrepancies and falsehoods. Truth in Ruppersberg's sphere is subject to interpretation and a coincidence of timing.

Where's Al? consisted of an entire wall of Polaroids of friends on vacation, whose conversations about Al are recorded as questions and answers on index cards. During the course of these mundane inquiries we learned a lot about Al, all theoretically in his absence. But, of course, Al was actually present, taking the snapshots. He is invisible in his art, like Houdini. The "true" Ruppersberg is seen as a shadow or trace, like footprints in the snow.

One of Ruppersberg's clearest statements about autobiographical art is a piece called *Personal Art* (1973), a silhouette of the artist's profile die-cut from a sheet of cardboard. There are also self-portraits as Bugs Bunny and Barney Bear. If truth is located in the self, Ruppersberg has dislocated even the place to look for it.

Much of the exhibition was devoted to books, drawings of them or texts from them. *Henry David Thoreau's Walden by Allen Ruppersberg* (1973) was followed by *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, written longhand in its entirety on several canvas panels. Here Ruppersberg has re-created one text about a return to nature and all that is "pure" and another, seemingly contradictory, based on all that is artificial. However, both warn against vanity as clearly as any 17th-century Dutch vanitas still life.

The installation *André Breton, Ponce de León, and the Fountain of Youth* included a motorized zoetrope that spun to reveal an animated geyser spurting water: the fountain of youth. It was surrounded by gift boxes containing blotters soaked in the so-called miraculous waters of Florida. In this pop-culture context, the viewer is confronted with ageless questions of mortality, transience and faith, issues reminiscent of midwestern hucksters and prairie preachers, even of Houdini—all those who would show us the "truth" and demand our faith.

Ruppersberg's exhibition was Socratic, asking us to question our most fundamental yearnings for answers, to challenge the magician. **—Hunter Drohojowska**

MICHAEL LEVINE

Karl Bornstein

THE BRUSHSTROKES are aggressive, the color is raw, and at first glance these paintings look like the latest issue from the