

Art

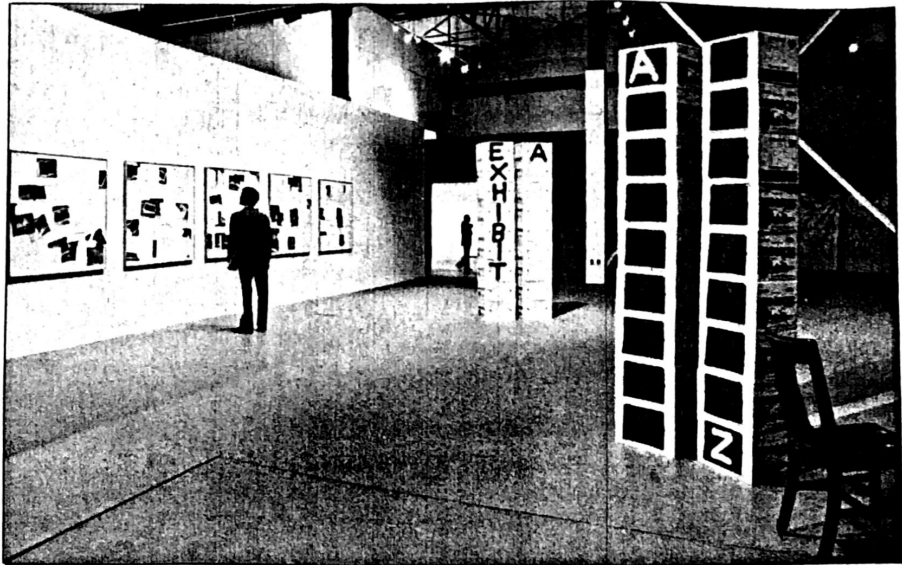
"Good morning. Today's talk concerns a man whose name has been a household word for almost three-quarters of a century. However, it will not dwell on the details of an incredible life, most of which are readily available to any diligent student, but instead will direct itself to exploration of the heroic belief that carried and sustained him for almost 40 years."

This passage is from a videotaped lecture about Harry Houdini, and is delivered by Allen Ruppersberg, wearing a straitjacket. But Ruppersberg could just as well be talking about himself. He is an escape artist from the shackles of late Modernism. Traditionally and historically, artists have been attracted to magic, to acts of legerdemain. Artists often demonstrate a faith in the mystical, the alchemical — wishful thinking that lead can be transformed into gold. Ruppersberg, on the other hand, is less concerned with pulling rabbits from hats than with rescuing himself from a series of complicated cultural and intellectual maneuvers. He acts as both magician and viewer, playing tricks and then explaining his accomplishments to the audience.

His current exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, "The Secret of Life and Death," shows him to be a master of suspense, but one who wants us to know that the butler did it, to read the last page before starting the mystery. Ruppersberg wants it both ways, which makes his art deliciously complex, gratifyingly lighthearted, and manifestly intelligent. Even the exhibition catalogue is a carefully considered work of irony and Socratic speculation: Howard Singerman's thorough essay is bound by a cheery red, yellow and blue cover illustrating a small-time carnival where, in the foreground, a smiling, bulb-nosed clown glances surreptitiously up the fly-away skirts of a young woman.

Ruppersberg is part of a movement that could be called California Conceptual: John Baldessari, Terry Allen, Ed Ruscha, even Bruce Nauman and William Wegman. Inspired by the move in the early 1970s away from gallery-bound painting and sculpture, these artists incorporated texts into photographs, video and painting. But their odd, appealing narrative edge eluded much of the Conceptual work to come out of the East Coast. Here, they were less "pure," more vaudeville, and they filtered art history through the most banal aspects of L.A. life and landscape.

In the entrance to Ruppersberg's show, there is a Ruscha-like painting of an enormous orange book floating against a dusky sunset. The title is scrawled: "Greetings from California." The painting dates from 1973, and establishes Ruppersberg's dual concern with the dichotomy of literal and visual representation. On one wall, a series of Polaroids shows the artist seated on a patio behind a card table on which objects accumulate sequentially. Beneath each photograph are captions typed on index cards, but the descriptions do not coincide with the visuals. For example, "A cold, outdoor patio of a large home somewhere in Montana" is clearly set in a warm, verdant clime, and a bottle of ketchup is defined as "a pitcher of water." The absurd contradictions mount until the artist, wearing a mask, picks up a revolver captioned "a sawed-off shotgun," holds it to



"The Secret of Life and Death" installation, by Allen Ruppersberg, currently on display at MOCA.

Allen Ruppersberg: Escape Artist

by Hunter Drohojowska

his head and pulls off the mask — "an argument" — and collapses on the table, "a murder." However, the only death here is that of "truth," in the title *To Tell the Truth*. It established contradictions which later became the leitmotif of the artist's oeuvre.

Artists, like magicians, are forever asking us to believe that their statements are "true." But belief requires faith, which Ruppersberg requests even while knowing that his art is about obvious discrepancies and falsehoods. Truth in Ruppersberg's world is metastatic and contextual, subject to interpretation, a coincidence of timing.

If truth is located in the self — "To thine own self be true" — Ruppersberg has dislocated even the place to look for it.

"Where's Al" consists of an entire wall full of Polaroids of friends on vacation. A series of index cards with Q-and-A's asks the whereabouts of Al.

He: Where's Al?

She: Probably sitting in some coffee shop on Hollywood Boulevard.

He: Wouldn't surprise me.

She: Not at all.

We learn a lot about Al during the course of these queries, about his trip to Europe, his tendency toward reclusion, his reading habits and so forth. All,

theoretically, in his absence. Of course, Al was actually present, taking the snapshots. He is invisible in his art, like Houdini. In fact, we always see the "true" Ruppersberg as a shadow, or a trace, like footprints in snow. One of his 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.

Ruppersberg "appropriated" when it was considerably less fashionable than

running vertically up the side. "View this work with vanity and disgust." The books in Ruppersberg's drawings range from detective novels and popular culture items to tomes from Melville, Poe and Hemingway, but more often than not the volumes embody a particular brand of American morality.

We see this in Ruppersberg's installation, *Andre Bracon, Ponce de Leon, and the Fountain of Youth*. A motorized zoetrope spins to reveal an animated geyser spurting water: the fountain of youth. It is surrounded by gift boxes containing desk blotters soaked in the so-called miraculous waters of Florida. In this pop-culture context we are confronted with the ageless questions of mortality, transience, and faith. They are issues that remind us of Midwestern hucksters and prairie preachers, even of Houdini — all of those who would show us the "truth," and demand our faith.

Ruppersberg's exhibition is Socratic, asking us to question our most fundamental inclinations as Americans, to challenge the magician. There is the recurring image of one book: Surrealist author Raymond Roussel's *Impressions of Africa*, which he wrote in 1910 without ever getting off the boat to visit the country. It could not be a more apt metaphor for a common cultural condition that demands our faith, a condition Ruppersberg has left the boat to explore.

"The Secret of Life and Death" is at MOCA through May 26. ■

now. *Henry David Thoreau's Walden* by Allen Ruppersberg (1973) was followed by *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, written long-hand in its entirety on several panels of canvas. With this, Ruppersberg 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 still life. The drawing of a pillar of books from the artist's library, *Reading and Drawing* (1975), is captioned with script