

GREENE NAFTALI

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Allen Ruppersberg *The Novel That Writes Itself*

September 7th – October 21st, 2017
8th Floor

A pioneer of West Coast conceptualism since the 1960s, Allen Ruppersberg mines the aesthetics and ephemera of popular culture and mass media, reorganizing the substance of collective memory to conjure a uniquely personal narrative. Reanimating various forms of printed matter and the written word, he engages language both as formal element and social artifact. On view at Greene Naftali are three distinct bodies of work: *The Novel That Writes Itself* (1978-2014), *Three San Francisco Poets* (2017), and *LIFE* (2017).

Installed across the gallery's longest wall is *The Novel That Writes Itself* (1978-2014), a large-scale installation that coalesces a lifetime project. With this work, the artist collects the entire body of posters he produced over the course of a four-decades-long collaboration with Colby Poster Printing Company. The project, when originally conceived in 1978, took the form of a literal novel, its plot centering on the life of Ruppersberg as a young artist. Ruppersberg invited friends and supporters to buy a role in the story—the size of their contribution would mirror their narrative weight. A “leading character” was \$300, “major character” \$150, and “minor character” just \$50. Ruppersberg's Colby posters, distinct in their use of bright gradients and bold block lettering, were initially presented to those who had supported the book.

Over time, Ruppersberg's project transformed from a strictly literary one to the installation presented here: an assembly of posters that constitutes a narrative of the artist's life. Ruppersberg's tentative display system, in which the laminated posters are simply hung from hooks, suggests a narrative that is permutable rather than fixed, ongoing rather than complete. The Colby posters themselves range from collected advertisements—for rock concerts, carnivals, and protests—to the artist's own opaque appeals in trademark lettering. “Why do we fail?”, one poster reads. Also incorporated into *The Novel That Writes Itself* (1978-2014) are a series of posters phonetically transcribing an excerpt from Allen Ginsberg's poem “Howl.”

Also on view in the main gallery is Ruppersberg's new series, *Three San Francisco Poets* (2017). The works in the series are devoted, respectively, to celebrated postwar artist Bruce Conner (1933 – 2008); painter and collage artist Jess Collins, better known as Jess (1923 – 2004); and the poet and art critic Bill Berkson (1939 – 2016). Together, the series traces a narrative of the California poetry scene in which the three commemorated figures were all intimately involved. Ruppersberg reproduces verbatim obituaries from the *New York Times*, abstracting the text into a visual pattern that obscures the lexical content. Letters and numbers sourced from old anagram games and Bingo sets are organized into a mazelike game board, each constituent part coiling to a center. As in poetic traditions, language carries form as much as substance. In *Three San Francisco Poets* (2017), Ruppersberg reevaluates death by way of visual reorganization.

LIFE (2017) consumes the wall space of the front gallery with wheat-pasted panels, each containing an obituary for an artist, musician, or other formative figure of 20th century culture—many of them seminal members of the avant-garde. Each panel is built through an analogue process of repeated photocopying, such that images both accumulate and degrade, always foregrounded with a crisply printed obituary, clipped from the pages of newspapers and preserved in Ruppersberg's personal archive. Collectively, *LIFE* (2017) establishes a personally inflected and celebratory canon. Technicolor fields punctuate the swathes of black and white newsprint, and selected panels repeat the phrases “HOW TO REMEMBER” and “INHERITANCE OF OUR PAST”—conveying legacy above loss.