

Frances Stark

For nobody knows himself, if he is only himself and not also another one at the same time. On Allen Ruppersberg//2005

For nobody knows himself, if he is only himself and not also another one at the same time. – Henry Miller quotes Novalis in 'Creation' (Sexus)

At the time the question was posed as to whether or not I would like to contribute a text about Al Ruppersberg, I was full of promises to myself to turn down any request for writing that came my way. Presumably, saying 'no' to others might constitute saying 'yes' to oneself, or rather, I may have been thinking it might be best to dedicate myself to writing something that stemmed from my own requirements, not something that was somebody else's idea. Perhaps what lies at the bottom of such selfishness – and, incidentally, at the forefront of any discussion of Al I have the luxury of initiating – is the assumption that the aim of life is self-development. To come under the influence of someone else is to become an actor in a part that has not been written for him – an assumption adorned and articulated courtesy of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Let me first explain how I was introduced to the work of Al Ruppersberg. I was in my studio with an advisor, both provided for me by the art college I was attending at the time, and we were looking at a piece I had just made. The advisor asked: 'Have you ever seen the work of Al Ruppersberg?' And I answered 'No'. Now, the reason they asked, the reason anyone asks 'Have you ever heard of X' of any aspiring young artist, is generally because the young person, in this case me, has apparently attempted to do what X, in this case Al Ruppersberg, has already done. Now, certainly just being asked the question is not the same as some referee blowing a whistle and calling a foul. It doesn't necessarily imply you are hopelessly delusional regarding your own potential for originality. It could mean something as simple and helpful as 'Why don't you look into the similarities and see where that takes you.' Either way one hears it, the question practically forces a confrontation with the most basic problem of how to navigate one's own influences. This is especially tricky when you have to account for being influenced by something you never knew existed. What I had done was to make a copy of a book that I held in high esteem, Henry Miller's *Sexus*. What Al Ruppersberg had done was, to put it simply, transcribe Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. What I had inadvertently copied was not his actual art but the part of his art that involved transcribing literature. Now, without delving into the implications of the layers of copying at work here, I'd like to get into the actual literature at hand. You know, just proceed as if the politics

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of appropriation had nothing to do with it and Miller and Thoreau and Wilde had everything to do with it. I want to put contemporary art in a small potato category momentarily if only to broach the subject of shadows cast by potatoes of grander scale. There's a perfect phrase for this grand scale shadow casting, coined by a literary critic who's still lecturing at Yale. The perfect phrase in question is 'the anxiety of influence', and the eponymous text it derives from is best summed up by one of its author's contemporaries, the late Paul de Man: '[Harold] Bloom's essay has much to say on the encounter between latecomer and precursor as a displaced version of the paradigmatic encounter between reader and text'.¹

Now, if Al sat for months in his studio rewriting, word for word, Thoreau's *Walden*, I have to see this as a direct engagement with every single thought and idea Thoreau put into that particular work, which was in itself an experiment in living. It's an embrace of the notion that practice is key in philosophy, even while it avoids reliving what that practice describes, namely, the critical out-of-doors/self-reliance element. I guess a lot of hippies were copying that part of *Walden* already. A writer asks a reader, 'read me', not 'be me'. Now this level of involvement in a work executed by someone else doesn't necessarily smack of anxiety, probably because it doesn't set out to contest, compete or rewrite but to just re-read. It requires utter submission to the author, leaving the readers' contestations and questions unspoken, unarticulated. It's like one huge speed-freaky underline of someone else's efforts, yet of course it is more than just a generic 'hooray for Walden'. There's a story involving anxiety and influence about Al that I have to recount. Before he began working in a conceptual vein he had been doing some shaped canvases, which led him to pay a visit to a Frank Stella exhibition. He told an interviewer: 'When I saw Stella's paintings I was stunned ... I looked at these paintings and realized I knew nothing about what I was doing. I thought that here was someone who knows exactly what he wants, and that it surely belonged to him and not me. It was a history that he knew and was using better than anyone. I went home knowing I had to start all over.' I think it's interesting to consider this remark in the light of the work that would come shortly after. Wouldn't Thoreau or Oscar Wilde count as someone 'who knows exactly what he wants'? Why don't *Walden* or *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 'belong' to Thoreau or Wilde the same way a painting 'belongs' to an alive guy who might just be older and more experienced than you? Does a Stella painting really mean to say 'only I do this' the way *Walden* might be saying 'perhaps you too should try this?' It's like the Stella-induced anxiety forced Al to consider a sphere of influence of a different circumference, and so his starting over was really a starting over from total scratch.

It's funny how I so easily keep referring to him as Al, even though I have only spoken with him on a few occasions. It's a layover of the familiarity he established early on in works like *Al's Cafe*, *Al's Hotel*, *Where's Al?* This casualness, this easy

familiarity, represents the quotidian concerns of his practice. I am tempted to interpret the commonplace as a foil for the literary and philosophical themes embedded in the two copied books but, that would be wrong because both texts seem to argue for a stronger role for 'real life' in art and philosophy. In *Walden*, Thoreau writes: 'There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers ... Yet it is admirable to profess because it was once admirable to live'. The critic Stanley Cavell, who wrote an entire book on the subject of *Walden*, though the following is not from it, suggests that Thoreau is a threat and an embarrassment to philosophy, that philosophy considers him an amateur, and, out of self-interest, represses him. 'This would imply that [Thoreau] propose[s] and embod[ies], a mode of thinking, a mode of conceptual accuracy, as thorough as anything imagined within established philosophy, but invisible to that philosophy because based on an idea of rigour foreign to its establishment.' This is from a book called *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism*. In it there's an essay called 'The Philosopher in American Life' and as I set out to read it I started thinking that maybe there is something of the ordinary in Al's work that is too ordinary even to be deemed pop and – just given the *Walden* reference alone (not exactly a small nod) – suggests that a transcendentalist tradition is worth considering. I read Cavell:

the sense of the ordinary that my work derives from the practice of the later Wittgenstein and from J.L. Austin, in their attention to the language of ordinary or everyday life, is underwritten by Emerson and Thoreau in their devotion to the thing they call the common, the familiar, the near, the low. The connection means that I see both developments – ordinary language philosophy and American transcendentalism – as responses to skepticism, to that anxiety about our human capacities as knowers that can be taken to open modern philosophy in Descartes, interpreted by that philosophy as our human subjection to doubt ... But look for a moment ... at the magnitude of the claim in wishing to make the incidents of common life interesting.²

I encountered this book in a friend of mine's office. While he was out of the country, I used his desk and books while my boyfriend watered his tomato plants. My friend went to Yale where he studied with Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* guy, and I'm guessing he studied with Stanley Cavell as well. When I was a visiting artist at Yale for a couple of weeks last year, I thought it would be nice to sit in on one of Bloom's lectures. Some students told me I could probably just call him up and go visit him at his home, insisting he was the kind of character who wouldn't mind accommodating an inquisitive stranger if it meant he could provide ample talk to a good listener. Foolishly I did not pursue the adventure.

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During that same visit back east, I also opted out of a one-on-one with a tough poet and author of a great book on one of my heroes, Emily Dickinson. That author is my friend's mother. So as I sat in his chair and tried to think about how to write about Al, I had to ask myself *what is your problem?* because not only did I miss out on meeting her and Harold Bloom, I did the same thing by avoiding a conversation with Al Ruppersberg as preparation for this writing. Heck, I could've interviewed Al and spared myself the agony of lonely rumination; we could've gotten down to brass tacks. But, really, I knew from the beginning that this had to be a one-sided affair if I wanted to probe the more awkward aspects of what de Man called the encounter between latecomer and precursor, between reader and text. I got the de Man quote from my friend's office too. I was sitting there, looking at an intimate little Lawrence Weiner piece casually collecting dust on the windowsill, thinking about how the hell could I really bring Bloom into all this – and maybe even the dusty Weiner at some point too, because I couldn't even pretend to have a grasp of whom Bloom was actually referring to (the Strong Romantic Poets), so I glanced over on the shelf, thinking my friend's sure to have some of their works, and I just turned my head and the first thing I saw was *The Anxiety of Influence* itself. So I was thinking how to borrow the notion and apply it to this idea of dealing with influence in the formative years of art making à la Al's encounter with Stella, and my encounter with Al. I also knew I just couldn't leave it at that, but probably needed cautiously to determine the link to the spirit of what Al does – you know, first with his insistence on the everyday and on into the almost anthropological circles he draws around certain presumably shared human experiences. The hopeful grope for a link either put a damper on my thoughts or just unluckily coincided with a major drop in my blood sugar and, flatlined, I had no choice but just to pick up a book and start reading. Jackpot! I started copying the following text into my notebook:

There always is a strange fascination about the bad verse that great poets write in their youth. They often seem more receptive than any to mannerisms and clichés of their age, particularly to those that their later work will reject most forcefully. Their early work, therefore, is often a very good place to discover the conventions of a certain period and to meet its problems from the inside, as they appeared to these writers themselves.

Every generation writes its own kind of bad poetry, but many young poets of today are bad in an intricate and involved way that defies description. Freer and more conscious than any of their predecessors, they seem unable to surmount passivity, which is the very opposite of freedom and awareness. They can be highly formalized, but without any real sense of decorum, extravagantly free, without enjoying their daring; minutely precious, without any true taste for

language. At best, they turn around as in a cage, all their myths exploded one by one, and keep making up the inventory of the failures they have inherited. At worst, they strike poses and mistake imitation for mask, talking endlessly and uninterestingly about themselves in elaborately borrowed references. In each case there is the feeling of being trapped, accompanied by a vague premonition that poetry alone could end the oppression, provided one could find access again to true words ...³

I copied on and on for several pages but that'll do for our purposes, but I should at least admit to omitting the final sentence of that particular paragraph on account of it ending on a down note and I wanted it to end on the hopeful one. OK, forget it, it ended like this: 'Meanwhile, the flow of language hardly covers up the sterile silence underneath'.

- 1 Paul de Man, *Blindness & Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983) 273.
- 2 Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1988) 4–7.
- 3 Paul de Man, 'The Inward Generation' (1955), in *Critical Writings 1953–1978* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989) 12.

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