

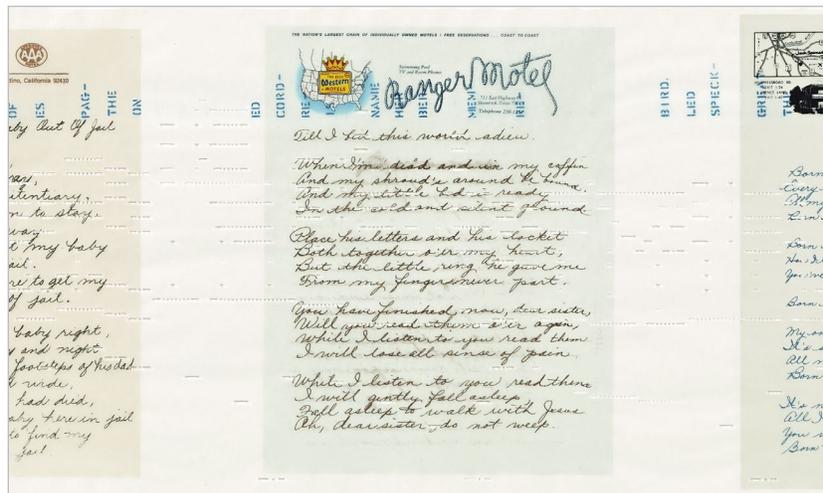
NEW EDITION

Allen Ruppersberg: *The Great Speckled Bird*

By Isabella Kendrick

The Great Speckled Bird (2013)

Screenprint on perforated player-piano roll, 11 1/4 x 240 1/2 inches. Edition of 12. Printed and published by Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles. \$22,000.



Allen Ruppersberg, detail of *The Great Speckled Bird* (2013). ©2013 Allen Ruppersberg and Gemini G.E.L. LLC.

Music is fluid. As songs pass from one person to another, names change, details are embellished and new lyrics are paired with old chords. In *The Great Speckled Bird*, Allen Ruppersberg presents distinct versions of myriad songs, marking their paths through human translation and expression.

Speckled Bird is printed on a player-piano roll that plays a Southern hymn of the same name. The roll itself is an immense 20-foot long; screenprinted along its length are sheets of hotel stationery on which lyrics and musical notation have been jotted down. (Collected hotel stationery has been a frequent component in Ruppersberg's work; in 1971 he even converted a two-story home into a fully functioning hotel for a month, with brochure and stationery.) The accuracy of reproduction is remarkable: at first one thinks that handwritten or typed notes have been collaged to the surface.

One might think that a machine, unlike a human, would perform a song identically each time. As it ages, though, a player-piano roll slowly deteriorates; the perforations can catch and tear, triggering wrong notes. These changes accumulate irregularly over time.

The songs selected by Ruppersberg have a homespun feel to them. Some are traditional American folk songs ("Down in My Old Cabin Home," "Cowboy Jack," "Old Apple Tree"); others are more recently penned creations. An online search for any one of them turns up a multitude of different lyrics, performers and venues where they were performed and recorded: "Old Shep," written by Red Foley and Arthur Willis in 1933, was made famous by Elvis Presley, who sang it in his first public performance, at the Mississippi-Alabama Fair and Dairy Show when he was ten years old.

More recent songs include "Cowboy Dreams," by British band Prefab Sprout,

from their 2001 American Wild West concept album, and "New Frontier," from Donald Fagen's 1982 rock album, *The Nightfly*. Despite their origins, these new songs aim to join the legacy of the others.

In conjunction with the road-trip hotel stationery they are printed on, the songs fabricate a picture of old-time America. At the same time they point to the ongoing dissemination and mutability of music.

Each performance of a song represents a link in a chain of personal narratives that slowly reshape the original. In the face of such slippage, Ruppersberg presents a single, fixed version, paired to a specific location (the location of the hotel on the letterhead) and attached to the artifact of a pointedly outdated technology. *The Great Speckled Bird* is frozen at a single moment in its infinite flight of variation and transformation. ■