

In memory of Willard Rosenquist

University of California: In Memoriam, 1994
Willard Rosenquist, Landscape Architecture: Berkeley

1908-1994
Professor Emeritus

Willard Rosenquist died on August 8, 1994, in Berkeley. He was 86.

Joining the Berkeley faculty in 1946, he became a member of the faculty of the Department of Decorative Art in the College of Letters & Science. Subsequently, in 1965, the department became a part of the College of Environmental Design and the name was changed to the Department of Design, joining Architecture, Landscape Architecture, and City and Regional Planning. Rosenquist became a professor in the Department of Landscape Architecture in 1974, when design was phased out. He retired in 1975.

A beloved, creative, and innovative teacher, he attracted many graduate and undergraduate students, who felt privileged and honored to be able to work with him.

A man who was before his time, Willard was first and foremost a dedicated artist with a comprehensive and inquisitive sense of design. He was a fine critic who gave straightforward, helpful, and constructive assistance to his students. In his studios, Willard enlivened his critiques with touches of humor; his colleagues take pleasure in recalling Willard's laugh. His early courses, before the advent of television, made use of conventional graphics and media, but the world of light and movement was always his special territory of interest. As television and video developed, he had a pioneering start on the creative work for which he became most renowned.

In his teaching, Rosenquist inspired spontaneity, encouraging students to experiment freely and indulge in wild flights of imagination, and these qualities surfaced in his experimental television. At the same time he instilled awareness of order and control.

Probably because of his own early struggles, Rosenquist seemed to feel a deep comradeship with his students, especially those with a strong dedication to their work. With his students he expressed his unpredictable sense of humor, and a sense of the ridiculous aspects of the University. Very often he joked that the emperor wore no clothes.

His principal early interest was in hard metals and enamels as materials for design and sculpture. In this field he produced a variety of pieces of great beauty and originality. These works ranged from delicate jewelry to substantial church furniture. His metal and enamel work is represented in many private collections. In the sixties his fascination with form and color led him into the field of light as a medium of design and television as an artistic tool. It was in the field of experimental video that Willard Rosenquist made his great contributions and established an international reputation. It was remarkable to see his color concepts translate from enameled metal to light and motion. From this change his development grew in scope and innovation, culminating in his being named Video Visionary by the Pacific Film Archive.

He taught courses in light as a medium in design for design undergraduates and advanced courses in visual communication. His work with students in light and motion as an aesthetic and environmental medium was the basis for a grant from the University of California Institute of Creative Arts for a television piece. The work dealt with miniaturization, innovative use of projections and low level lighting, and abstract expression by means of poetry, dance, and electronic music. His sensitivity to music made him insist that as much attention be paid to accompanying sound as to the visual aspect of his pieces. He was always able to interest composers in collaborating and composing for his specific pieces. Two noted musicians who were involved were Richard Felciano of the University's music department and Warner Jepson, an independent musician.

Rosenquist participated in and conducted many seminars and workshops, including an Asilomar seminar on television, experimental video at the University of Southern Illinois in Edwardsville and at the University of Washington in Seattle, and the Electric Campus at US Berkeley. He also spoke at seminars sponsored by the Canadian Film Board, the Middle Tennessee State University; and UC Davis.

He was best known for his significant abstract work with the National Center for Experiments in Television and KQED, starting in the early seventies. It was here he met and worked with Rudolph Arnheim, Brice Howard, Paul Kaufman, Stephen Beck, William Roarty, Don Hallock, Ann Turner and others involved in the field. He was the center's consulting artist and became a leader in video art. His work was shown in museum video exhibits and broadcast internationally.

Although the video medium was his principal interest and expression, he also developed huge, room-sized or larger, elements that he called "tension structures." Made of white stretchable nylon, tied at various junctures, these pieces were suspended to float in mid-air, most often over room full of fascinated and delighted

people. Inside they were designed to break the “square” room form. Used outside, they most often floated overhead as a visual cover. One such installation was that for the Wurster Hall dedication; another became a delta-wing symbol over the outdoor speaker's rostrum at the dedication of the Space Sciences Laboratory at Berkeley; yet another was used as a background for the National Experiments in Color Television Lab at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, from 1972 to 1974. One of these forms remained in place until 1994 in the classroom where Rosenquist used to teach.

Rosenquist was the recipient of many grants and awards: in 1969 he received an Institute of Creative Arts grant for video production; in 1971 the West Coast Broadcast Industry Award for Light and Motion; in 1973 a Northern California Emmy Award with a Special Citation for Innovative Use of Television for his extraordinary and unusual work in the video piece *Lostine*; and in 1977 a National Endowment for the Arts grant for production of a video piece entitled *28:46* which was broadcast over PBS on October 18, 1978.

By far the most often exhibited piece of Rosenquist's was *Lostine*. Among other places, it was also nationally shown on the *Video Visionaries* series on PBS in 1974; at the Video Concert at the University Art Museum, Berkeley, June 1973; and at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in March 1973.

Rosenquist was an art consultant in 1971 for *Heimskringla*, a 90-minute video drama with La Mamma Repertory Company, which was broadcast nationally on PBS. He was also a design consultant for the National Experiments in Television, SF, and a color consultant for the master plan of the University of California Radiation Laboratory in Livermore.

Additional installations and commissions include a digital laser animation for Stephen Beck Co., Claremont Hotel, Berkeley, 1983; a deltawing sculptural form as a tension structure for the dedication ceremony at the Space Science Laboratory, Berkeley, 1974; a unified design of cross, altar, altar rail, and baptismal font for St. Patrick's Episcopal Church, El Cerrito, 1961.

Willard was part of a program funded by the New York State Council on the Arts and the Mobil Foundation. He was a guest artist at the *Meet the Makers Video 1983* series, featuring *Strange Occurrences*. In 1985 he produced *Light Gestures* at the University of California Media Services with Tom Hudson, Margaret Dhaemers, Phil Freihofner, and others

Rosenquist was the youngest son of Swedish immigrants. He was born and raised on

a dairy farm in the Skagit Valley near Mt. Vernon, Washington. He often spoke of the rigorous rural life, the frontier condition that he found so arduous and dispiriting. When he broke away from the farm he felt a great sense of wonder, particularly being surrounded by the books in the University of Washington library.

In 1935 he received a B.F.A. in painting and design at the University of Washington and in 1935 an M.F.A. in Fine Arts from Columbia University in New York City. He studied with two noted artists: Amedee Ozenfant, the French painter and aesthetician, and Lionel Feininger, the American painter whose work featured subtlety, restraint, and moodiness.

Prior to joining the Berkeley faculty, Rosenquist served in the U.S. Army Signal Corp Electronic Training Program and was a junior naval architect, 1942-1946.

For years Willard was a faithful late-day swimmer at the Harmon Gym pool. There he would relax and share some of his good humor--and perhaps some pointed observations on life and times--with colleagues who thoroughly enjoyed his fellowship.

Although Rosenquist was a practicing artist in the visual arts, his ongoing passion was for music, especially contemporary and experimental music. His wife was an accomplished pianist.

Rosenquist was a complex man who was dedicated to the visual arts, and yet in many ways, he sacrificed these concerns to his concerns for family and community. He had liberal political beliefs and deep concerns for human rights.

Willard Rosenquist is survived by his son, Elan Rosenquist of San Francisco; a step-son, Philip Gerrard, of Oakland; and a step-daughter, Alice Gerrard, of North Carolina.

A memorial service was held on January 14, 1995, in the First Unitarian Church of Oakland, California.