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JOURNAL 55

VOLUME 55 / 2020

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This publication is made possible by a gift from Assunta Sommella Peluso, Ada Peluso, and Romano I. Peluso, in memory of Ignazio Peluso. Additional support is provided by The Peter Jay Sharp Foundation.

The *Metropolitan Museum Journal* is published annually by The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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Manuscripts submitted for the *Journal* and all correspondence concerning them should be sent to journalsubmissions@metmuseum.org. Guidelines for contributors are given on p. 6.

Published in association with the University of Chicago Press. Individual and institutional subscriptions are available worldwide. Please direct all subscription inquiries, back issue requests, and address changes to: University of Chicago Press, Journals Division, P.O. Box 37005, Chicago, IL 60637-0005, USA. Phone: (877) 705-1878 (U.S. and Canada) or (773) 753-3347 (international), fax: (877) 705-1879 (U.S. and Canada) or (773) 753-0811 (international), email: subscriptions@press.uchicago.edu, website: www.journals.uchicago.edu

ISBN 978-0-226-75393-5
(University of Chicago Press)
ISSN 0077-8958 (print)
ISSN 2169-3072 (online)

Library of Congress
Catalog Card Number 68-28799

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The authors are grateful to the peer reviewers of the *Metropolitan Museum Journal* for their suggestions and assistance.

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Typefaces: Calibre, Lyon, and Harriet
Printed on Creator Silk, 150 gsm
Separations by Professional Graphics, Inc., Rockford, Illinois
Printed by Brizzolis, Madrid, and bound by Ramos, Madrid
Printing and binding coordinated by Ediciones El Viso, Madrid

Front and back cover illustration: Edward Ruscha (American, b. 1937). *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, 1966. See fig. 9, p. 68.

Illustration on p. 2: John Haberle (American, 1856–1933). Detail of *A Bachelor's Drawer*, 1890–94. See fig. 1, pp. 44–45.

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MANUSCRIPT GUIDELINES FOR THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM JOURNAL

Founded in 1968, the *Metropolitan Museum Journal* is a blind, peer-reviewed scholarly journal published annually that features original research on the history, interpretation, conservation, and scientific examination of works of art in the Museum's collection. Its range encompasses the diversity of artistic practice from antiquity to the present day. The *Journal* encourages contributions offering critical and innovative approaches that will further our understanding of works of art.

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ABBREVIATIONS

MMA The Metropolitan Museum of Art
MMAB *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*
MMJ *Metropolitan Museum Journal*

Height precedes width and then depth in dimensions cited.

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“The Toughest, Meanest Art I Was Making”: Edward Ruscha’s Books

DOUG EKLUND

MAKE IT LOUD

In 1962, Edward Ruscha exhibited for the first time in what would subsequently be recognized as the first group exhibition devoted to Pop Art, the Pasadena Art Museum’s “New Painting of Common Objects.”¹ Shortly before the show’s opening, the exhibition’s curator, Walter Hopps, approached Ruscha to design the exhibition poster.² The artist responded by unknowingly echoing one of modernism’s great, if then subterranean, creation myths—László Moholy-Nagy’s use of a telephone to relay instructions for the production of a painting, a gesture that in the context of the 1920s announced the new integration of aesthetic production as inherently social.³ Ruscha reached for the Yellow Pages and dialed the Majestic Poster Company, and his sole directive to the

fig. 1 Edward Ruscha (American, b. 1937). *Box Smashed Flat*, 1960–61. Oil on canvas, 70 × 48 in. (177.8 × 121.9 cm). Private collection

fig. 2 Edward Ruscha. *Large Trademark with Eight Spotlights*, 1962. Oil, house paint, ink, and graphite pencil on canvas, 66¹⁵/₁₆ × 133³/₈ in. (170 × 338.1 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Purchase, with funds from the Mrs. Percy Urish Purchase Fund (85.41)



typesetter other than size and copy was “Make It Loud.” As Ruscha must have known, the poster came back perfect (“instant design”⁴), looking like a seedy, slightly out-of-date bill for a night of prizefights or a 1956 rock-and-roll concert—a readymade Ruscha.

One of the artist’s new paintings in the Pasadena exhibition, *Box Smashed Flat*, exemplifies his work of the previous year: horizontally divided fields of color that separate meticulously rendered product packaging above and enlarged single words below (fig. 1). In *Box Smashed Flat*, the slashing violence of Willem de Kooning’s gestural style has become the ineffectual spurt of raisin juice from a trompe l’oeil Sun-Maid box splattered like blood across the evocative Civil War-place-name rendered in “old American” letterpress-like typeface. (Vicksburg was one of the artist’s stops on a trip through the South a few years earlier, but in this context may also refer to the violence visited upon Civil Rights protesters at the time.) The bifurcation of the painting between the pictorial and the linguistic, the brushwork that seems to adhere to some blankly rote yet inscrutable system of execution, the self-reflexive enfold of surface into image and vice versa, are indebted to Jasper Johns, whose work made the greatest impression on the young painter.⁵

Throughout 1962 and into the following year, however, Ruscha’s work shed some of its more overt affinities with that of Johns, as the painted words gain increasingly singularized importance in an image, together with either localizing or removing altogether the presence of the individual brushstroke. In *Large Trademark with Eight Spotlights* (fig. 2), the artist further

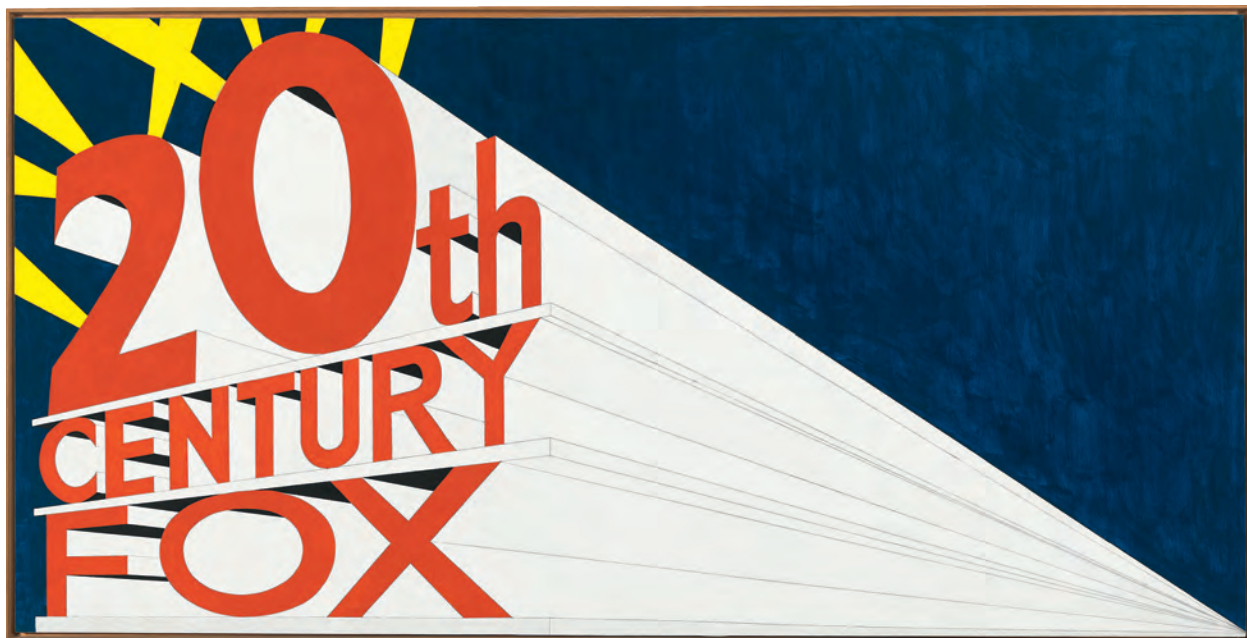


fig. 3 Edward Ruscha. *Annie*, 1962. Oil on canvas, 72 × 67 in. (182.9 × 170.2 cm). Private collection



abstracted the famous 20th-Century Fox logo so that it represented both interior (darkened movie house) and exterior (night sky) through a diagonal projection of light dividing the navy blue background and the perspectival spray of ruled lines culminating in the epically scaled red lettering before yellow floodlights—the opening credits of spectacle culture rendered in art-historically overloaded primary (techni)colors.

Also that year, Ruscha alluded to the modernist chromatic tabula rasa in *Annie* (fig. 3) by combining two visual structures from the same historical moment and opposite ends of the ideological spectrum. With his 1921 suite of monochrome canvases (*Pure Red Color*, *Pure Yellow Color*, and *Pure Blue Color*), Aleksandr Rodchenko heralded the artist's abandonment of painting via works that would serve as the backdrop for the construction of the new collective subject. Ruscha perversely conjoins this Productivist farewell to bourgeois art with the redheaded waif Little Orphan Annie (1924), the first true mass superstar of the funny papers and plucky ingenue (rescued and raised by the benevolent tycoon Daddy Warbucks), who was so famous in her day that even now the Goudy Heavyface typeface used in the strip's logo metonymically stands in for "The Twenties." With his typically bemused, poker-faced wit, Ruscha consigns the seemingly antithetical projects of modernity in their supposedly opposing guises—the Janus face of communism and comics—to the same fate.⁶

TWENTYSIX GASOLINE STATIONS

The first thing Andy [Warhol] said when he saw my book—I gave him *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*—was "How do you get all these pictures without people in them?"⁷

In 1962, Ruscha painted two words in yellow—WAR and SURPLUS—on a navy blue field, the first larger and centered, the second below, squeezed in and smaller, and rendered in a variant of the aggressively instrumentalized "Army-Navy" serif type that the artist also used for the cover of that first book, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, published in January 1963 in an edition of four hundred copies (figs. 4, 5).⁸ Judging from the cover, Ruscha's book looks more instructional manual than *livre d'artiste*, showing what it says it does in casually composed snapshots taken on the old Route 66 that the artist regularly drove from Los Angeles to his hometown of Oklahoma City.⁹ More than the other fifteen books that followed, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* seems to have often invited critical wrong turns over the last four decades. Perhaps the most persistent of these is its relationship to the tradition of the photographic book, particularly as it had developed since the 1930s. *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* did appear at a particularly significant moment in that history. Walker Evans's seminal *American Photographs* was republished by the Museum of Modern Art in 1960, and an expanded edition of James Agee's and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* also came out, both of which had enjoyed a semi-underground status since the Depression and were looked upon with renewed interest in the years of Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty." A year earlier, Robert Frank had published *The Americans*, which in the subject of its photographs and picture-to-a-page presentation referred back implicitly to *American Photographs*.

David Bourdon was the first to explicitly connect Ruscha's book to 1930s documentary photography, and others have linked *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* to *The Americans* as well.¹⁰ While Ruscha's deliberately spare design of right-hand-page photographs with facing page captions does in fact recall the layout of *American Photographs* (in its 1960 second edition), and Ruscha has expressed his admiration for both Evans and Frank, even a cursory look at Evans's and Frank's images of similar subjects reveals how deliberately composed they are compared to Ruscha's rigorously deskilled pictures of gas stations.¹¹ While Jeff Wall's assertion that "Ruscha's book ruins the genre of 'the book of photographs,' that classical form in which art-photography declares its independence"¹² is certainly true *Twentysix*

fig. 4 Edward Ruscha.
Cover of *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, 1963. Black offset printing, $7\frac{1}{16} \times 5\frac{1}{2} \times \frac{3}{16}$ in. ($17.9 \times 14 \times .5$ cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Stewart S. MacDermott Fund, 1970 (1970.590.6)

Gasoline Stations and the three others dealing with architecture and public space—*Some Los Angeles Apartments* (1965), *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966), and *Real Estate Opportunities* (1970)—represent far more than a travesty of outmoded genres. Designed deliberately to seem peripheral, marginal, even put-ons, Ruscha's books may have succeeded all too well in this regard. As important as the finest of his paintings, these four books in particular fuse his abiding interests in typography and graphic design, architecture and public space, advertising and publicity into singular expressions of the dwindling potential for artistic communication in a culture driven by commodities.

Ruscha himself commented on the relatively unnoticed status of his books to an interviewer in 1988; when asked if any of his work had been "lost in the shuffle," Ruscha replied: "Well, I think my books are the toughest part of my art. Yet, my notoriety or whatever it is not really based on that. I have misgivings about the fact that people didn't see my books as I wanted them to.

I always felt like that was the dark side of what I was up against and what I stood for—the toughest, meanest art I was making."¹³ The importance of the books lies, in fact, not in any one aspect (photographs, cover, captions) but in the cohesion that Ruscha modestly proposed for them in a 1965 interview with John Coplans ("I merely wanted a cohesive thing"¹⁴), in which each ingredient—type, layout, photograph, and subject—is perfectly blended for maximum effect. A book, of course, implies a different kind of interactivity than a painting, and making a work of art that masquerades as a book includes and implicates the reader, and by extension the broader public sphere. The circulation system (in which both commodities and individuals move as products of that system) is recruited to map a new space reflected in the pictures: the anti-monuments along Route 66 in *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, the stop-motion movement along the "store-front plane of a Western town"¹⁵ in *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, the desert stretch strewn with typewriter debris in his "visual caper"¹⁶ *Royal Road Test* (1967).

Twentysix Gasoline Stations appeared on the scene at the intersection of a diverse array of postwar artistic practices, from the emergence of designed linguistic statements as valid visual art in Fluxus to the hegemonic rise of design in a commodity-and-publicity-oriented consumer culture that left its mark on both Minimalism and Pop alike. But the animating spirit behind *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* is undoubtedly Andy Warhol, whose first solo exhibition was held at the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles in summer 1962 featuring the set of Campbell's Soup Can paintings (fig. 6). At that moment, Warhol was also making his first serially structured photo-silkscreens, which incorporated the most debased (celebrity/tabloid) and insidious (identity card/mug shot) forms of photography into the practice of painting. In his account of Warhol's 1962 Ferus Gallery show, Benjamin Buchloh emphasized how both Warhol's conception for the exhibition (in adhering strictly to the company array of product flavors) and his method of presentation (as store shelf displays), mirrored the logic of commodity production and distribution. The principles of quantification and serial progression that Warhol imported into his art, first with the Campbell's Soup Cans and just after with the silkscreen paintings, would provide the template for *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*.¹⁷ Warhol was working at the threshold of (without ever crossing over into) the new modes of production and distribution that Ruscha's book dives right into. Warhol's use of "blanks," for example—the extra monochrome panels that the artist

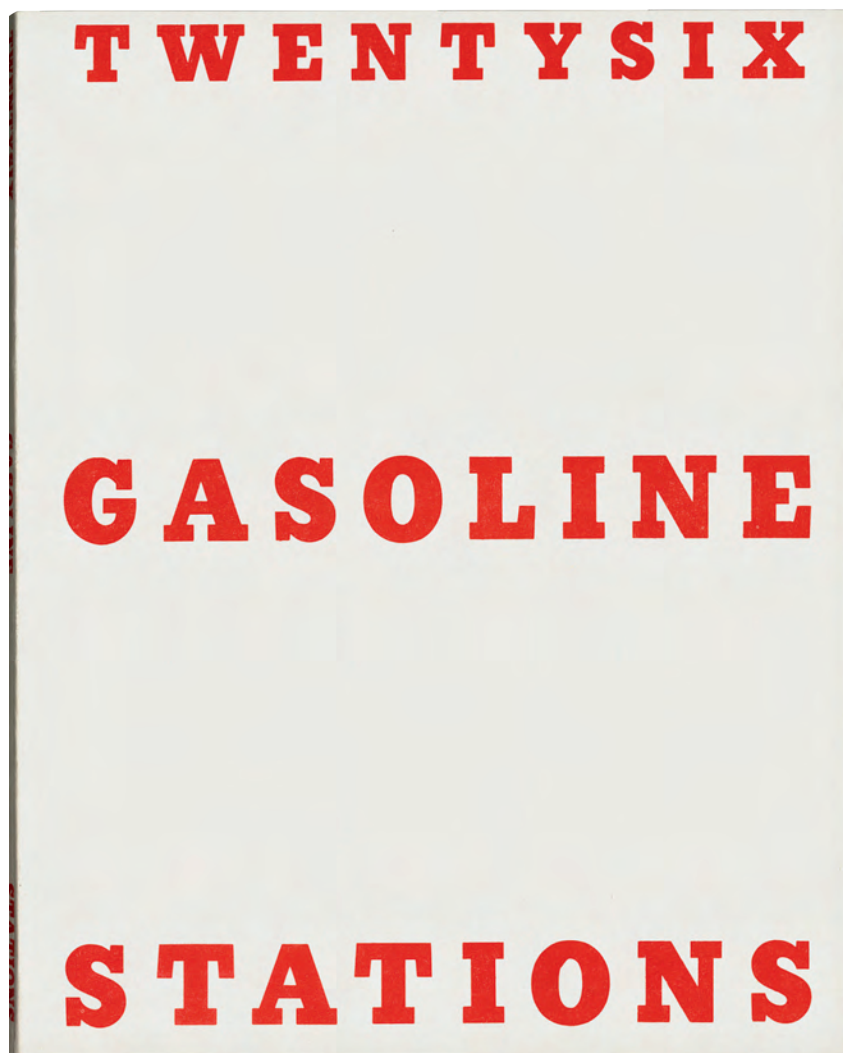


fig. 5 Two spreads from
Twentysix Gasoline Stations
(fig. 4)

STANDARD, AMARILLO, TEXAS



UNION, NEEDLES, CALIFORNIA



fig. 6 Installation view of Andy Warhol exhibition at Ferus Gallery, Los Angeles, 1962

fig. 7 George Brecht (American, 1926–2008). Designed and produced by George Maciunas. Published by Fluxus. *Word Event* from *Water Yam*, 1963. Offset card from cardboard box with offset label, containing sixty-nine offset cards, sheet $3\frac{3}{16} \times 2\frac{1}{8}$ in. (8.4 × 6.7 cm). Museum of Modern Art, New York, The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Gift (1988.2008.70)

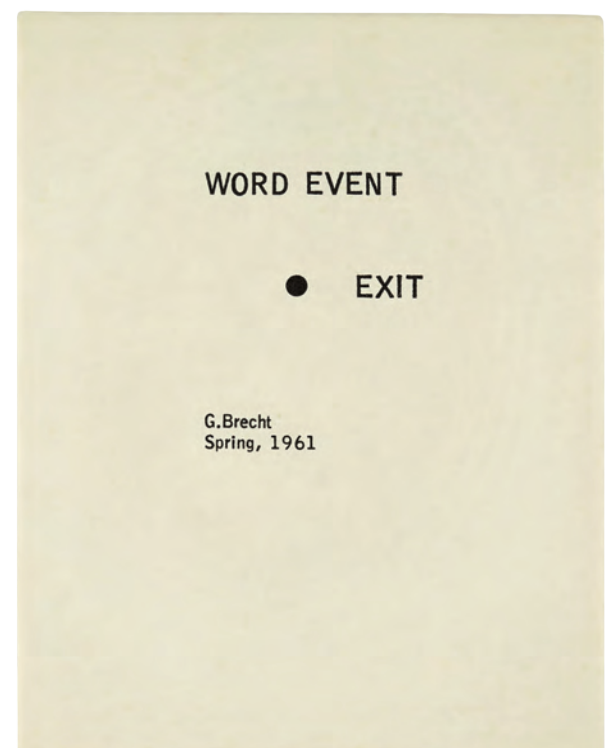
sometimes included to create diptychs out of his photo-silkscreens—finds its logical correlative in the blank pages with which Ruscha fills out his *Nine Swimming Pools and a Broken Glass* (1968) to give it the precise bulk and heft of a “real” book.

In interviews, Ruscha often relished the thought of total strangers picking up his books by accident. The title itself (Why gas stations? Why 26?) functions simultaneously as *a priori* linguistic act and speculative big business “high concept” that in turn generates the marketable content—a precise inversion of the prevailing Beat-era ethos of “finding oneself” and one’s subject on the road. Instead, it was “I saw a book out there full of photographs of gas stations, full of twenty-six gas stations, if you will”¹⁸ or “I had the title . . . even before I took the photographs. . . . then it was a simple matter of just going out and taking the pictures”¹⁹ or “my whole attitude came out in this one phrase that I made up for myself, which was ‘twenty-six gasoline stations.’”²⁰ Like Johns’s famous dream of himself painting an American flag, Ruscha’s description of the genesis of *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* emphasizes the enforced passivity of the translation from idea to object, in which the dirty work of execution has the feel of sleepwalking. What sounds at first like recourse to dream logic, however, can be more accurately described as a state of being guided by language, with the number 26 seemingly both random and enigmatically precise, subliminally registering with the reader as the number of letters in the alphabet. “The first book came out of a play with words.”²¹

To foreground the relationship of *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* to issues of language, design, and new modes of production and distribution that mimic the logic of the commodity is at the same time to downplay the photographs as independent works of art themselves, something that Ruscha did repeatedly in interviews regarding the books. Instead of being portable retrospectives of images made independently of the

publication, Ruscha’s books reverse the equation, with the scattershot images produced not for aesthetic contemplation but rather to reach the quota of the title. By masquerading as the final installment of an imaginary trilogy of canonical “American” photo-books (*American Photographs* . . . *The Americans* . . . *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations*), Ruscha’s book leads the reader/viewer into a cul-de-sac or blind alley of aesthetic puzzlement via images that seem to be overtly devoid of any formal or compositional intention, as opposed to the cleaned-up, if blankly uninflected, look of the volume that houses them.²²

In turning to the cover and title as the engine that drives the book, *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* shares an aesthetic affinity with Fluxus artist George Brecht’s “event scores” of 1960–61 (fig. 7). In her essay “Post-Cagean Aesthetics and the ‘Event’ Score,” Liz Kotz emphasized the portability of Brecht’s text pieces as one of their hallmarks, arguing that “their oddly condensed and enigmatic form may have facilitated their rapid circulation between performance, publication, and exhibition formats: small, strange, and belonging to no definable genre, they could go anywhere.” For Kotz, the event scores were essentially “linguistically-framed readymade[s],” where the very act of naming performs a barely visible “cut into the evanescent everyday.”²³ This subversive movement through the rigidly maintained hierarchies of the culture industry (signified by George Maciunas’s choice of the then



technologically advanced-looking, excessively instrumentalized IBM typewriter font) is in a sense the same pathway of production and distribution implied for *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, what Kotz describes as the cutting into the everyday that the scores effect.

What unites Brecht's event scores and Ruscha's books structurally is that they encapsulate a movement from formalist to linguistic self-reflexivity. Brecht's approach, however, could not be more different in tone; it is precisely the event score's repeatability that extends it to anyone, allowing its successful permeation of the everyday—the readymade extended and filtered through the participatory aesthetic of John Cage. Ruscha's "extension of the readymade in photographic form," however, proposes a more sinister prognosis for the reader, though like Brecht's cards they also reflect that postwar reception of Duchamp's readymade as both industrially produced and a linguistic act.²⁴

The artist described his formulation of the book's title in specifically these terms, as both "a play with words" and, to Coplans: "I like the word 'gasoline' and I like the specific quality of 'twentysix.'" At the end of that interview, Ruscha left the readers with an image: "It is almost worth the money to have the thrill of seeing 400 exactly identical books stacked in front of you."²⁵ In a witty drawing from 1964, the artist depicted his four hundred copies of *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* standing on edge, lit by spotlights and receding into the distance as if possessing the glitz and star power of the 20th-Century Fox logo.²⁶ It is the overarching and leveling principle of quantification that holds together the books as a whole, from the internal "subject" of the book (gas station) to its tautological subject, the book as specific object—a cohesive commodity whose machinery (weights, sizes, page layouts, typefaces) is as carefully calibrated as a Donald Judd sculpture—to its final destination, the fate of the individual subject through the figure of the reader. The success of *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* lies paradoxically in the brilliance of its custom-built frame of failure. If the metric of success for *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* was its pose of incomprehensibility, the book succeeded beyond the artist's wildest dreams. Nothing could fulfill its inability to communicate and circulate more than when the copy that the artist sent to the Library of Congress in 1963 was rejected by the institution (the library still does not have the book in its collection). In March 1964, Ruscha took out an ad in *Artforum* trumpeting this rejection as a selling point: "REJECTED Oct. 2 1963 by the Library of Congress Washington D.C. 25 copies available @ \$3.00."²⁷

Ruscha's lightbulb moment of a book called *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* resembles the creative spark in Duchamp's recipe for the readymade, where the insertion of language detours the serviceable commodity form from its normal route to a new meaning that is only completed in the bemused absorption of the viewer. In the context of a rapidly expanding postwar consumer culture, however, Ruscha's bolt-from-the-blue-turned-homeless-commodity is like a little parable of the Duchampian readymade tangled up in delivery systems and distribution forms run amok—think how highways and gas stations, books and works of art move people, liquid, words, and information from here to there. The result is not the work of art liberated from fixed, reified concepts of "work" or "art" that Marcel Duchamp achieved in his readymades.²⁸ Instead, Ruscha recasts the new work of art as a souped-up, vertically integrated accumulation of design variables and considerations—commercial prerogatives that infect and break down the formerly discrete categories of production, distribution, and reception. Ruscha's books are in their largest sense rest stop-like mirages that conjure the formerly intimate, reflective capacities of the bourgeois reader before they vanish into thin air.

When asked in 1981 what influence Duchamp had on his books, Ruscha answered that "the readymade was more or less a guiding light to me,"²⁹ yet had trouble locating precisely where this element resided in them: "I suppose it's an extension of a readymade in photographic form. Instead of going out and calling a gas station 'art,' I'm calling its photograph art. But the photograph isn't the art—the gas station might be. The photograph is just a surrogate gas station. The photograph by itself doesn't mean anything to me; it's the gas station that's the important thing."³⁰ This hesitation is a testament to the book's brilliantly achieved unity of effect, as an object with a designed surface, containing reproductions of a kind of architecture and space, all of which are inextricably bound to each other. While the photographs themselves exhibit some of the qualities of "amateurist mimesis" that Jeff Wall discerned in them, his conclusion that the sole reason for their existence as a subject is that "only an idiot would take pictures of nothing but the filling stations, and the existence of a book of just those pictures is a kind of proof of the existence of such a person,"³¹ mistakes the symptoms for the cause; in doing so, Wall brackets off Ruscha's photographs from the rest of the object as a whole. Most importantly, the images close the gap between photograph and reproduction—the aestheticized image and how it circulates—so that they become

fig. 8 Edward Ruscha.
6565 Fountain Ave. Detail,
from *Some Los Angeles
Apartments*, 1965. Black
offset printing, $7\frac{1}{8} \times 5\frac{5}{8} \times$
 $\frac{3}{16}$ in. (18.1 × 14.3 × .5 cm).
The Metropolitan Museum
of Art, Stewart S.
MacDermott Fund, 1970
(1970.590.4)

just another design variable in the overall production of the object.³²

In *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, photography functions as the indexical trace of an expansion of sculpture into the broader field of architecture and public space—a companion to the other postwar transformation of sculptural practice at the phenomenological level of the body as seen in slightly later photo-works by Vito Acconci and Bruce Nauman, for instance. In their seemingly total deferral of any aesthetic intention, the photographs become blank recordings, a hollow conduit juxtaposing two levels of articulated design: the forlorn gas stations, primitively decorated with chaotic, haphazard signage, and the tightly coiled, rampant professionalism of the book-object. At the center of the book’s mysteriously specific captions and its lexicon of page layouts are the gas stations themselves—prefab, boxy roadside structures with projecting eaves set alternately in urban forests of “visual noise”³³ or abandoned in the desert.³⁴ As such, each little filling station, adorned with its owner’s bespoke come-ons, represents the book the reader is holding *en abyme*, each one a distorted reflection of the book itself as all exterior, all constructed surface masking the sameness of the commodity beneath it.

In essence, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* reveals the dialectical link between the self-reflexive, tautological quality of, for example, Frank Stella’s Black Paintings (“what you see is what you see”) to the wider regime of commodity production, design, and distribution that dominates postwar cultural practice and the changed capacities of the reader/viewer under a dramatically expanded consumer culture and mass media.

The reader of *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* is, of course, the butt of the joke and the final stop in the tour that Ruscha takes us on, and the book’s largest statement is regarding the decimated potential for any communication uncontaminated by the total domination of product design and publicity. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, published in the same year as Warhol’s Ferus Gallery exhibition and while Ruscha was creating *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, Jürgen Habermas described this new condition in terms remarkably appropriate to the art itself: “for the laws of the market have already penetrated into the substance of the works themselves and have become inherent in them as formative laws. No longer limited to the distribution and selection, the presentation and furnishing of the works, the perspectives of sales strategy have come to guide their very production in the wide fields of a culture of consumers.”³⁵ Both Ruscha and the reader vanish into this evacuated public sphere, which makes Warhol’s faux-naïf question asking how he got so many pictures without people in them seem all the more prescient and vaguely sinister.

In “The Crux of Minimalism,” Hal Foster described the simultaneous emergence of Minimalism and Pop Art as “different responses to the same moment in the dialectic of modernism and mass culture.”³⁶ Whereas *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* predates slightly the interest in architecture and serial progression shared by the Minimalist artists, *Some Los Angeles Apartments* (fig. 8), published in September 1965, appears to make its case directly in relation to the contemporary vertical stacks of boxes by Donald Judd’s and Sol LeWitt’s programmatic presentations of painted wood cubes and open squares.³⁷ *Various Small Fires and Milk* (1964), by contrast, is wholly unconcerned with the issues of architecture and public space that characterize most of the 1960s books, instead being an idiosyncratic, hermetically sealed examination of the photographic image best appreciated as an uncanny visual analogue to Roland Barthes’s seminal essays on photography from the early 1960s.³⁸



As Richard Marshall has noted, *Some Los Angeles Apartments* is mostly devoted to the particularly Californian architectural trope known as the “dingbat.” First used (appropriately enough) as a purely nominal typographical symbol designating the beginning of a paragraph, the term came to describe plain cubic residential structures of wood construction with flat, blank planes of stuccoed wall over which was plastered garish signage or ornament to distinguish them from surrounding buildings.³⁹ In *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, Reyner Banham observed, “very large areas of Los Angeles are made out of just these kind of elementary cubes—they nestle among the foothills and line the straight avenues of the plains. They are economically, structurally, and—given the sunshine—architecturally, the local norm and vernacular . . . anyone who begins to understand Los Angeles visually has to accept, even celebrate, their normative standing.”⁴⁰ Banham’s tone throughout is deliberately nonjudgmental, if not affirmative, toward his subject as a way of attacking established cultural hierarchies (in keeping with his role as a key theorist in the postwar British “Independent Group” of artists such as Richard Hamilton and Eduardo Paolozzi).

Adorned with a loony array of relief elements (located somewhere between painting and sculpture) from anchors and diving dolphins to scales of justice or space-age reflective orbs that dangle over entrances, the Los Angeles apartment building facades are like the gas

station fronts. Each building seems to have had its makeshift identity plucked at random from an out-of-date typeface book by a down-market real estate speculator: the Polynesian-themed TIKI TABU, the IL POMPEII with its frieze of Arthur Murray ballroom dancers and tacked-on column, or the Duchampian FOUNTAIN BLU (fig. 8). In these sorry structures, Ruscha discerns a fundamental pollution and impurity at the heart of Minimalism’s quest to escape what Foster describes as the “historicity, conventionality [and] institutionality” of traditional forms.⁴¹ Unlike the industrial architecture photographed at the same moment by Bernd and Hilla Becher, in which the wildly divergent, unconsciously manifested specifics of each region or nation-state are wrapped around structures of equivalent function, Ruscha’s readymade apartment complexes are distinguished by the seemingly infinite ways in which historicity and conventionality are unsuccessfully, yet hilariously, thwarted and travestied—a kind of architectural slapstick reflecting the United States’ chronic historical amnesia. Minimalism and Pop are, in the end, revealed to be less diametrically opposed than twin engines of the same escape, as reflected in the vacant spaces (note all the vacancies) of the public sphere.

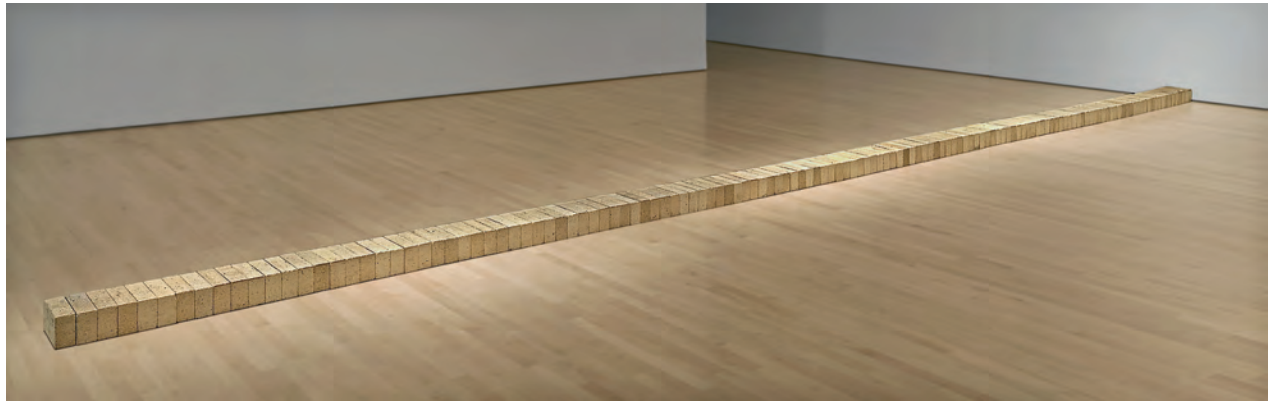
**EVERY BUILDING ON THE SUNSET STRIP OR,
ONE BUILDING AFTER ANOTHER**

When asked about the implication of motion in his books, Ruscha preferred to discuss instead their particular

fig. 9 Edward Ruscha. *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, 1966. Black offset printing, open 7 in. × 24 ft. 11½ in. (17.8 × 760.7 cm); closed 7 × 5½ × ¾ in. (17.8 × 14.3 × 1 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Stewart S. MacDermott Fund, 1970 (1970.590.7). Installation view from “Between Here and There: Passages in Contemporary Photography,” The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2010–11



fig. 10 Carl Andre
(American, b. 1935). *Lever*,
1966. 137 firebricks, installed
4½ in. × 8¾ in. × 29 feet
(11.4 × 22.5 × 883.9 cm).
National Gallery of Art,
Canada (15898.1-137)



orientation in relation to the reader: “So many of the books are architectural in nature, like the gas stations and the apartments, and a few of the other books. So they all possess a ground line, a landscape line, that is actually horizontal, and so it suggests itself all the way through the book that there is a ground line. You’re standing at person height, looking at these things, and each page is this way, so it continues, it is.”⁴² *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (fig. 9) represents the mapping and overlay of two horizontal surfaces that are inextricably locked to each other, those of mass communication as signified by the book and the public sphere as signified by the Strip, and the effect of this paradigmatic shift on the individual subject, the reader of the book “at person height.”⁴³

While primarily concerned with the bourgeois societies of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Habermas’s study of the public sphere is also of course an examination of the book’s own historical moment in the early 1960s, when as Frazer Ward has described it, “the commodification of the *content* of culture is central to the shift from an active, educated or trained culture-debating public to a passive, unenlightened culture-consuming public.”⁴⁴ As John Miller has correctly pointed out, the future of the book as an emblematic object of humanist, Enlightenment culture was already severely in doubt by Walter Benjamin’s time when as Miller says, he saw the book as “an obsolete form of knowledge-production, a cumbersome, even atavistic mediation of the transfer of ‘file cards’ from writer to reader.”⁴⁵ Whereas Benjamin foresaw a teleological, technological improvement in communications that would obliterate reified concepts such as aura, author, and masterpiece, Ruscha’s book depicts that decimated (rather than redeemed) space as the product of an all-encompassing consumer culture.

Just as *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* seemed to close a final door on the modernist struggle to subvert instrumentalized language—from Stéphane Mallarmé to what

Kristine Stiles has described as Fluxus’s linguistic/performative attempts to “engage the reader actively”⁴⁶—so Ruscha seems to address the reader to different effect through a critical engagement with Minimalism. The most obvious reflection of this encounter is the book’s ingenious format as a 25-foot “strange foldout,” in a way that demands the viewer’s physical negotiation both more and more awkwardly than another novel use of horizontality from the same year, Carl Andre’s *Lever*. That sculpture, like Ruscha’s book, eschews relational composition for serial ordering and an acknowledgment of phenomenological perception bound to the viewer, the object, and its institutional container (gallery space, foldout, etc.) (fig. 10). As in the sly comment that Warhol makes in his *Dance Diagram* paintings on the participatory aesthetic developed by Allan Kaprow from the implications of Jackson Pollock’s gestural style,⁴⁷ so too does Ruscha’s endless strip reveal an inherent suspicion of the potential for pure perception and a liberated reader/viewer outside of the embrace of mass cultural formations. And whereas *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* collapsed the vast stretch of Route 66 into the inadequate space of the book, *Sunset Strip* expands a single stretch of street to about 25 feet, infinitely beyond the reader’s normal range of legibility, like the pieced-together individual segments of film endlessly recombined over eight hours in Warhol’s durational film *Sleep* (1964).⁴⁸

While Lucy Lippard’s term “the dematerialization of the art object” has been handed down over the decades to describe Ruscha’s books as forerunners of Conceptualism, Tony Smith’s remarks on the New Jersey Turnpike come more readily to mind after spending some time with *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, that “the experience on the road was something mapped out but not socially recognized. I thought to myself, it ought to be clear that’s the end of art. Most painting looks pretty pictorial after that. There is no way you can frame it, you just have to experience it.”⁴⁹



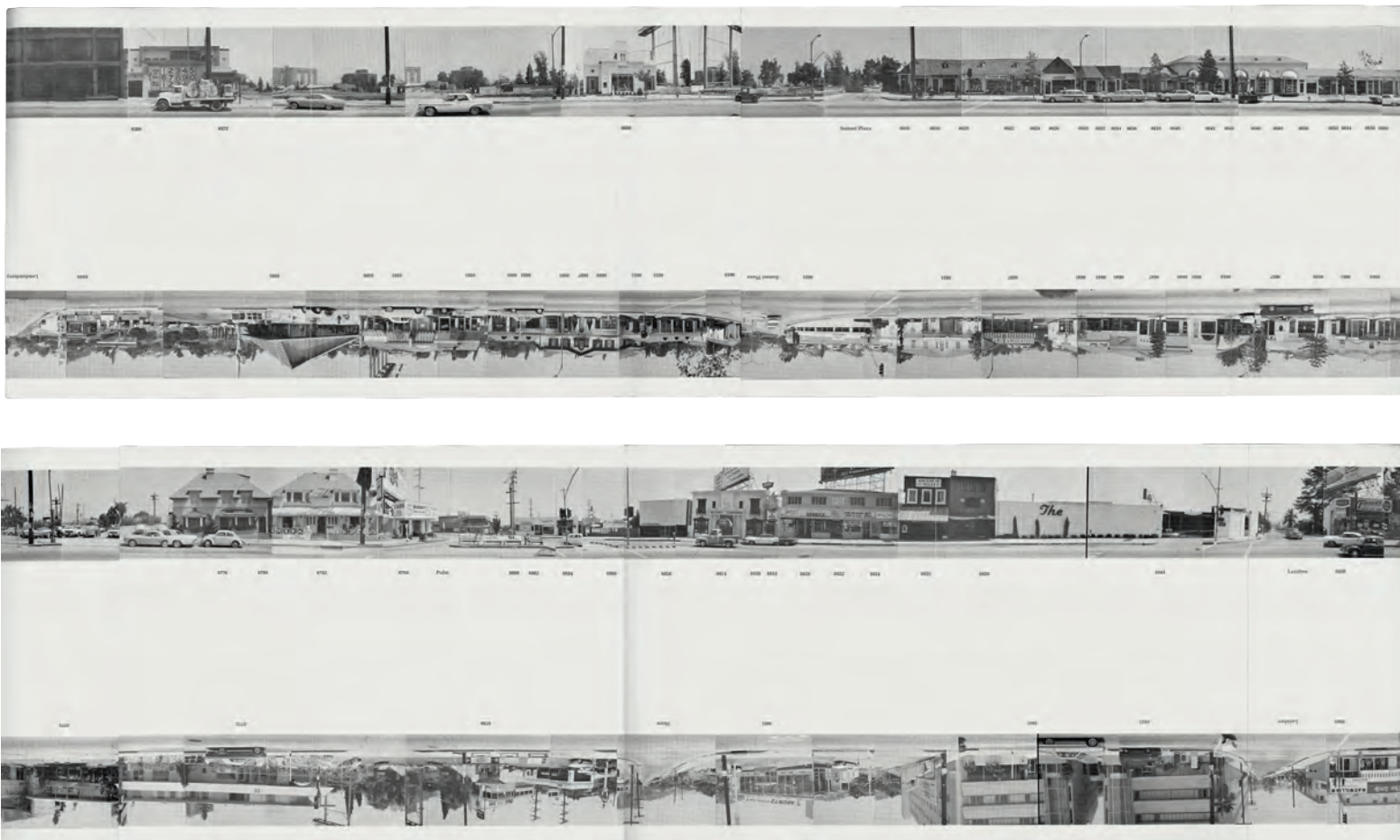
fig. 11 Edward Ruscha.
Details of *Every Building on
the Sunset Strip* (fig. 9)

Ruscha made the photographs by attaching a motorized camera to the flatbed of a pickup truck; only slightly larger than an eye-straining 35 mm contact print, each individual frame was then cut and pasted to form two continuous strips facing each other like opposite sides of the street. Close examination of the finished work in book form requires well over an hour—more like two—pressing one's face up against each tiny fragment, then stepping back to find the rest of the book crawling away across the room. Of all Ruscha's books, *Sunset Strip* is the most dramatically effective example of Ruscha's unique way of disorienting the reader/viewer. For instance, at 8250, there is the Body Shop Burlesque (cars and girls) (fig. 11); at 8524, a row of Becheresque framework houses called "Dean Martin's"; at 8572, a grid of painted numbers (1 2 3 4 5 // 6 7 8 9 10 // 1 2 3 4 5) stripped of the latest chart-toppers TOP 10 USA, TOP 5 ENGLAND; at 8844, the pure Duchampian nominalism of a curlicued "The" on a blank facade.⁵⁰

This journey down and back the Sunset Strip, then, involves both the body of the reader and a stretch of real time. The labor-intensive movement around the book is juxtaposed with two other sequences: the arrhythmic cuts into the continuous image effected by

individual photographic images, and the running list of noncontinuous street addresses that occurs at distances from each other according to where each falls, resulting in an obscure, seemingly infinite numeric string with more holes than numbers. It is the same stuttering tempo that Ruscha would employ a year later in the announcement in the form of a Western Union telegram for his exhibition of *Los Angeles County Museum on Fire*, with its violent reiteration of the word *stop* like the constant click of the camera shutter.

The subject-object relationship described in *Sunset Strip*, however, is quite different from that proposed by the Minimalist work that Ruscha's book engages. As Foster has noted, "the minimalist suppression of the anthropomorphic is . . . a 'death of the author' . . . that is at the same time a birth of the reader."⁵¹ In *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, Ruscha contests both the linguistic (Fluxus) and phenomenological (Minimalist) models of artistic desubjectivization that attempted to forestall the administered culture that the books describe. It is precisely the reader, Habermas's "active, educated or trained culture-debating public,"⁵² that is erased from the sphere that Ruscha depicts, from the intimate space of the book to the outermost reaches of public space.



CODA: "THE INFORMATION MAN" / REAL ESTATE OPPORTUNITIES

In 1971, Ruscha wrote a short piece describing an imaginary encounter with a character that he dubbed "The Information Man." In it, he tallies all the words Ruscha has ever spoken, and recites the previously invisible statistics surrounding every copy of every Ruscha book ever sold—from "most weight upon a single book" to the "3 that have been in continual motion since their purchase over two years ago, all of these being on a boat near Seattle, Washington."⁵³ When they are not thrown away or intentionally destroyed, the Information Man reveals, Ruscha's books have been used as flyswatters, doorstops, and twice in self-defense; 32 out of 5,000 have been used in a "directly functional" manner. The same obsessive design that applies to the books, each one a compendium of product specifications, the artist now imagines governing his entire publishing enterprise, filling in each available space in the grid until knowledge is complete.

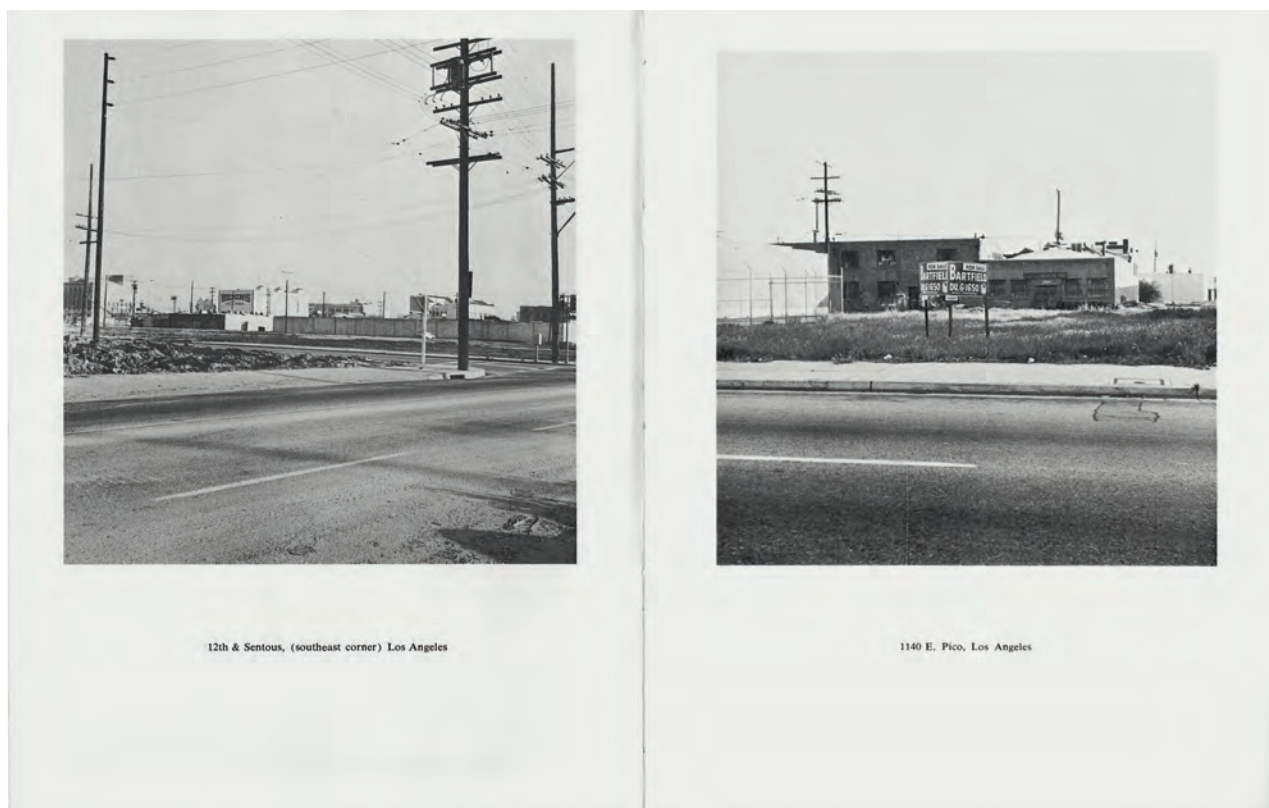
Ruscha's fantasy of a final accounting, scaled and styled like a fairy tale, mirrors the larger meaning of the books as a whole—"that dark side of what [the artist] was up against"⁵⁴—where commodities and their users,

books and their readers, change places. His story could in fact have been titled (not quite as felicitously) "The Rule of Complete Quantification" after Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's description from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*:

Marked differentiations such as those of A and B films, or of stories in magazines in different price ranges, depend not so much on subject matter as on classifying, organizing, and labeling consumers. Something is provided for all so that none may escape; the distinctions are emphasized and extended. The public is catered for with a hierarchical range of mass-produced products of varying quality, *thus advancing the rule of complete quantification* [emphasis added]. Everybody must behave (as if spontaneously) in accordance with his previously determined and indexed level, and choose the category of mass product turned out for his type. Consumers appear as statistics on research organization charts, and are divided by income groups into red, green, and blue areas; the technique is that used for any type of propaganda.⁵⁵

A year earlier, Ruscha published a sort of companion to "The Information Man" and coda to his suite of

fig. 12 Edward Ruscha. Two pages from *Real Estate Opportunities*, 1970. Black-and-white offset printing, $7\frac{1}{16} \times 5\frac{1}{2} \times \frac{3}{16}$ in. (17.9 × 14 × .5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Administrative Fund, transferred from the Joyce F. Menschel Photography Library, 2012 (2012.263)



books about architecture, public space, and by extension the books themselves and their position in the public sphere, called *Real Estate Opportunities*—twenty-five photographs of various vacant lots in the small down-scale towns surrounding Los Angeles (fig. 12). As Clive Phillpot has noted, it is in this book that Ruscha returned to the format of those earlier ones: three-word title, one to a line, under glassine wraps, and similar pocket-size.⁵⁶ In *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations*, Ruscha recorded primitive eruptions of signage that appear hours apart in the vast wasteland between Los Angeles and Oklahoma; *Real Estate Opportunities* is its mirror image, the unusable slivers of land remaining after those commercial interests have staked out and subdivided all available space. As such, the individual images highlight the inevitable remainder of quantification as much as Ruscha's books do in the larger realm of commodity production.

Gordon Matta-Clark performed a similar operation on “surplus land” for his 1974 work *Reality Properties: Fake Estates*, in which he purchased five such lots, the official documentation and deed (and the resultant transfer of ownership from artist to collector) of which would constitute the piece.⁵⁷ But while Matta-Clark's

transactional conceit does imbricate the work into the bureaucratic strictures of the everyday, Ruscha's books add layers of complexity that give them larger cultural meanings—in the way that he weaves together issues of commodification (book as salable object), communication (book as container for knowledge and memory), and circulation (book as an object that travels through culture). A book like *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* cannot help but stand in metonymically for all books⁵⁸—the possibilities of communication in toto—and its tragicomic inability to fulfill its place on the shelf of every book ever carries a tinge of sadness as it struggles valiantly against its own disappearance. From our present-day perspective of depopulated space, historical amnesia, communications systems run amok, and what feels at the moment like art's total dissolution into the forces of the market, Ruscha's books gain in pathos as they falter—as perhaps all art does now—against what the artist described as “the dark side of what I was up against.”⁵⁹

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NOTES

- 1 See Coplans 1963, p. 7. It was technically Ruscha's second group exhibition; he appeared in "Four Oklahoma Artists" at the Oklahoma City Art Center two years before. The Pasadena Art Museum became the Norton Simon Museum in 1975. I am grateful to Benjamin H.D. Buchloh and Lisa Pasquariello for their thoughtful comments on this article.
- 2 This account is from Walter Hopps's 1992 interview with the artist; see Hopps 1993, p. 98.
- 3 See for example, László Moholy-Nagy, *EM2 (Telephone Picture)*, 1923, in the Museum of Modern Art, New York. The online entry for this painting indicates that Moholy-Nagy only later related the telephone anecdote. See <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/78747>.
- 4 Hopps 1993, p. 99.
- 5 Hickey and Plagens 1982, p. 157. The artist credits seeing Rauschenberg's *Odalisk* and Johns's *Target with Four Faces* in a 1957 issue of *Print* magazine as his reason for becoming an artist. The other work that Ruscha publicly singled out as affecting his development was the black-and-white painting *Keds* by Roy Lichtenstein, shown to him by Ivan Karp sometime during his fall 1961 visit to New York.
- 6 These unconscious echoes in Ruscha's early career of two moments in the careers of Moholy-Nagy and Rodchenko are supported by only a passing mention of the Russian and Soviet avant-garde in the literature, where Ruscha says in an interview that he "got introduced early on to Walker Evans's work, Russian Constructivism and, of course, Abstract Expressionism." See Fehlau 1988, p. 70. Benjamin Buchloh has already noted the significance of the 1962 publication of Camilla Gray's *The Russian Experiment: Russian Art, 1863–1922* for a number of Ruscha's contemporaries, although it is not known if Ruscha knew of it. See Buchloh 1989b.
- 7 Sharp 1973, p. 32.
- 8 Plagens 1982, p. 38.
- 9 "To me, they are nothing more than snapshots." Ruscha in Coplans 1965, p. 25.
- 10 Bourdon 1972, p. 35. Phyllis Rosenzweig (2000, p. 180) attempted to relate *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* to *American Photographs* as well as *The Americans*. Rosenzweig is more correct in noting the similarity of format between Ruscha's book and *American Photographs* and *The Americans* than Kerry Brougner's narrow iconographic interpretation (2000, pp. 158–59) of "the road" as primary subject for all three books.
- 11 See interview with the artist conducted by Paul J. Karlstrom (1980–81, MS p. 39).
- 12 Wall 1995, p. 43.
- 13 Fehlau 1988, p. 70.
- 14 Coplans 1965, p. 24.
- 15 Uncited quotation in Bourdon 1972 (2002 ed., p. 43).
- 16 Coleman 1972, p. 35.
- 17 Warhol's early career is discussed in Buchloh 1989a (2000 ed., p. 475). Buchloh also first outlined in 1989 the primary aspects of Ruscha's books, and of Conceptual Art as a whole, including issues of language, the commodity form, architecture, and public space; see Buchloh 1989b (1999 ed., p. 521).
- 18 Karlstrom 1980–81, MS p. 81.
- 19 Bourdon 1972, p. 33 (2002 ed., p. 41).
- 20 Coleman 1972, p. 35.
- 21 Coplans 1965, p. 24.
- 22 It is a testament to Ruscha's paradoxical mastery of deskillling that for most of the book's existence, the individual images in *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* remained almost completely unassimilable to the tradition of art photography. Recently, the artist has expressed his affection for his gas station photographs by comparing them to amateur snapshots. This would seem to represent a shift away from his early dismissal of their aesthetic value as independent images, as when in 1981 he told interviewer Henri Barendse that in *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, "the photograph isn't the art. . . . The photograph by itself doesn't mean anything to me; it's the gas station that is the important thing"; Barendse 1981, p. 9 (2002 ed., p. 215). Although vernacular photography has had a certain place in the photographic canon since at least 1964, the year of John Szarkowski's Museum of Modern Art exhibition "The Photographer's Eye" (an accompanying book of which was published in 1966), the status of amateur snapshots has risen greatly over the last twenty years. For example, the Metropolitan Museum exhibition "Other Pictures: Vernacular Photographs from the Thomas Walther Collection," was held in summer 2000. For Ruscha's recent comments on the gasoline station photographs, see "Ed Ruscha: A Long Way from Oklahoma," video of an interview with Kasper Bech Dyg at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk, Denmark, June 2018, 04:55–05:35; <https://vimeo.com/279209813>.
- 23 Kotz 2001, pp. 60, 81, 87.
- 24 Ibid., p. 85 and n. 74.
- 25 Coplans 1965, p. 25.
- 26 Edward Ruscha, *Photo Riot*, 1963. Pencil, colored pencil, and ink on paper, 27.5 × 20.3 cm; <http://edruscha.com/works/photo-riot-400-books/>.
- 27 Laurence McGilvery noted that the book is still not in the Library of Congress. Ruscha's March 1964 advertisement for *Artforum* is reproduced as item M6 in Engberg and Phillpot 1999. See also Coplan's comments at <https://www.mcgilvery.com/pages/books/69003/john-coplans-edward-ed-ruscha/artforum-march-1964-volume-2-number-9-twentysix-gasoline-stations-with-facsimile-of-library-of>.
- 28 "Can one make works that are not works of 'art'?" Marcel Duchamp, 1913, quoted in Molesworth 1998, p. 57.
- 29 Barendse 1981, p. 9 (2002 ed., p. 215).
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Wall 1995, pp. 265–66.
- 32 Benjamin Buchloh described this conflation in relation to Dan Graham's 1966–67 *Homes for America* as "eliminat[ing] the difference between the artistic construct and its (photographic) reproduction." See Buchloh 1989b (1999 ed., p. 521).
- 33 See Wagner 1999; the phrase is that of the artist.
- 34 A general, if limited, connection can be made between Ruscha's gas stations and the dilapidated industrial behemoths of Bernd and Hilla Becher from the same moment. Both are taxonomies of vernacular structures (many of the gas stations seem to be of 1920s–50s vintage) that share a similar function (massive industrialization in the Bechers' mineheads and cooling towers, or Ruscha's commercial-laden gas stations), but manifest themselves in wildly different formal appearances.
- 35 Habermas 1991, p. 165. For a description of Habermas's conception of the public sphere, see Ward 1995, p. 73.
- 36 Foster 1986, p. 178.
- 37 A year prior to *Some Los Angeles Apartments*, there was an especially apt group exhibition at Dwan Gallery titled "Boxes," February 2–29, 1964, that included not only Larry Bell's mirrored cubes and Richard Artschwager's Formica-and-wood

- assemblages that straddle object and sign, but also prewar examples by Marcel Duchamp and Kurt Schwitters.
- 38 See Barthes 1961 and 1964.
- 39 Marshall 1990, p. 11. For a further discussion of the “dingbat” in Los Angeles architecture, and its depiction by Ruscha and later by the photographer Judy Fiskin, see Tumlr 2007, p. 118.
- 40 Banham 1971 (2001 ed., pp. 178–79).
- 41 Foster 1986, p. 171.
- 42 Karlstrom 1980–81, MS p. [66]. See also Mansoor 2005.
- 43 “But, above all I would say, my inspiration comes from mass communication rather than cerebral or historical things.” Blistène 1991, p. 126; also quoted in Gronert 1999, p. 13.
- 44 Ward 1995, p. 77.
- 45 Miller 1988, pp. 66–67.
- 46 Stiles 1993, p. 67.
- 47 Buchloh 1989a (2000 ed., pp. 482–87).
- 48 Christopher Finch (1967) noted a similarity between the book and Warhol’s films, but took a wrong turn when he discerned that they both “pushed to an extreme . . . a primary tendency of American art: the acceptance of the ironic poetry of the world as it is.”
- 49 Quotation from Wagstaff 1966. See also Foster 1986, p. 173.
- 50 In his interview with Ruscha, Walter Hopps describes a drawing of the word *the* as Duchamp’s first work incorporating language; Hopps 1993, p. 108.
- 51 Foster 1986, pp. 172–73. Eleanor Antin’s 1973 article “Reading Ruscha” is the prime example of “reader-response” theory applied to Ruscha’s books.
- 52 Ward 1995, p. 77.
- 53 Ruscha 1975, p. 21 (1999 ed., p. 55).
- 54 Fehlau 1988, p. 70.
- 55 Horkheimer and Adorno 1997, p. 123.
- 56 Phillpot 1999, p. 74.
- 57 See Lee 2000, pp. 98–104.
- 58 Crary 1978.
- 59 Fehlau 1988, p. 70.

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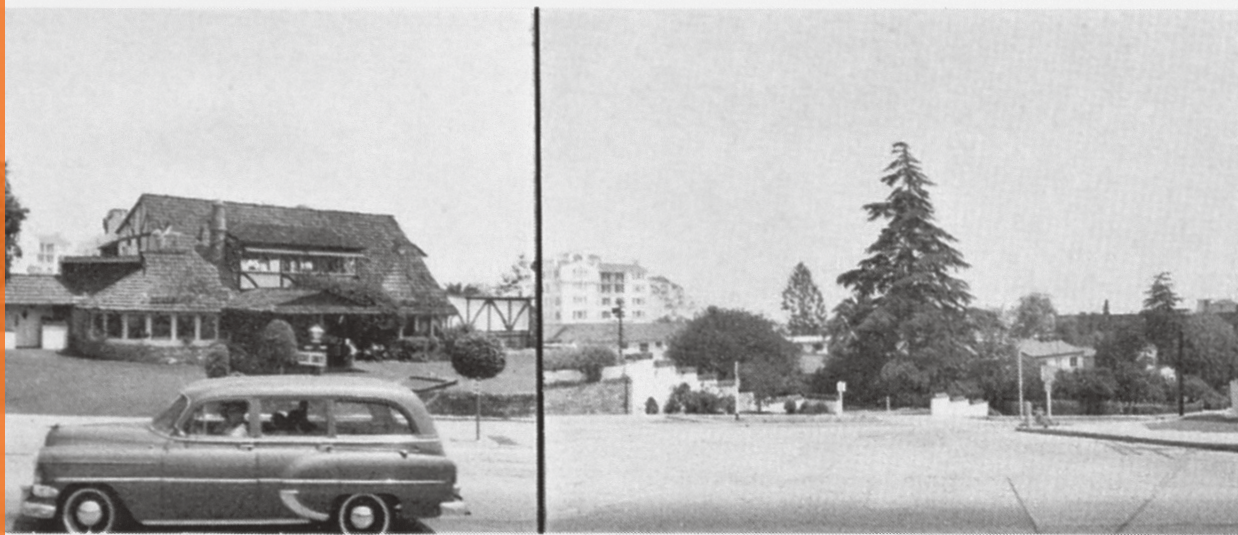
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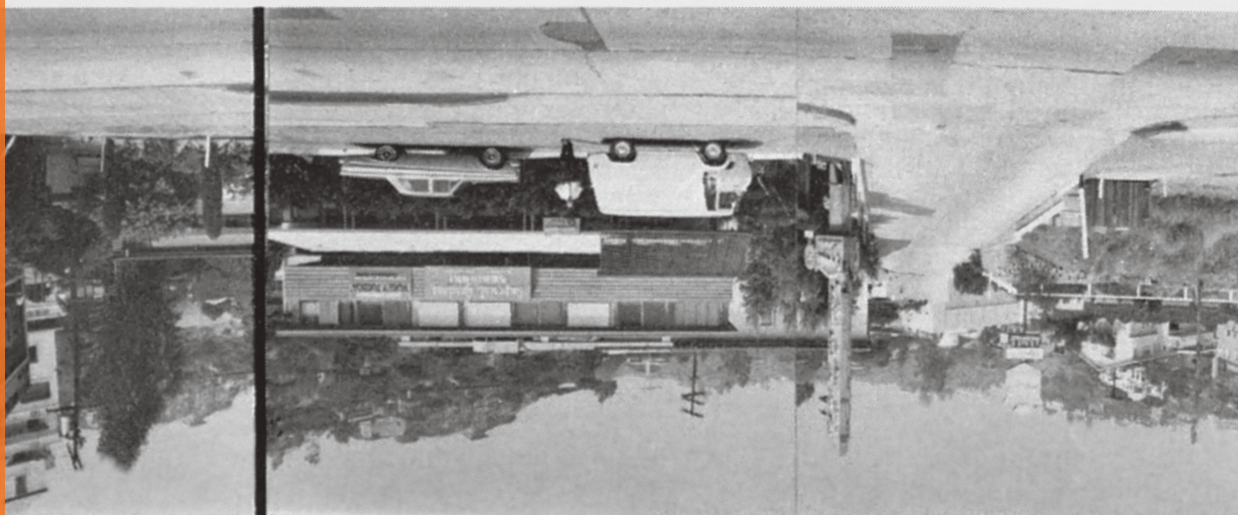
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