

Ed Ruscha's Streets of Los Angeles

ARTIST IMAGE ARCHIVE CITY

Edited by Andrew Perchuk, Emily Pugh, and Zanna Gilbert,
with Tracy Stuber and Isabel Frampton Wade

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GETTY RESEARCH INSTITUTE, LOS ANGELES

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PROJECT

Zanna Gilbert

Emily Pugh

When Ed Ruscha's Streets of Los Angeles (SoLA) Archive arrived at the Getty Research Institute in 2012, its unique nature—its enormous size, vast scale, and material form—was such that Getty's archival and technical teams had to employ innovative computational approaches to process it and make it accessible to researchers. The archive, a historic photographic record of L.A. from 1965 until 2010, continues to grow as Ruscha and his team photograph the city's streets in an ongoing campaign to document the physical and cultural evolution of Los Angeles.

This section features a detailed narrative history of Ruscha's project; an examination of Getty's technological approaches to digitization and information management; and original data visualizations (see "You Are Here: Locating the SoLA Archive," "Description as Data: What the Tags See in the SoLA Archive," "Place as Data: What Geolocation Can Tell Us," and "The Limits of Data: 10 Banks, a Few Rivers, and Some Snow," this volume [online edition only]). By viewing the Streets of Los Angeles Archive in its full scope, these essays offer meaningful context for the publication's four key themes: Artist, Image, Archive, and City.

PROJECT

1

Introduction

Andrew Perchuk

Zanna Gilbert

Emily Pugh

“To Ed: Sunset will never be the same again.”

The above dedication was taken from a message written in the margin of a contact sheet from Ed Ruscha’s Streets of Los Angeles (SoLA) project, which has amassed over 900,000 photographs of major Los Angeles thoroughfares since it began in 1965.¹ The majority of these images—around 740,000²—are now housed at the Getty Research Institute (GRI) as the Streets of Los Angeles Archive.³ Appearing in the context of Ruscha’s expansive photography project that initially produced his well-known book *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966), the message reminds us of the fundamental duality of city streets, representing both permanence and impermanence as well as the role photography can play in freezing a moment in time.

Written in 1966, the margin note foretells the mythic status Ruscha’s book would eventually take on. However, this is just one of the many sets of contradictions that are provoked by Ruscha’s SoLA Archive: It is vast, but in its focus on mostly the west side of Los Angeles, it is not comprehensive.⁴ It is a trove of information that resists easy or straightforward translation into knowledge. It is, in archivists’ terms, both a *collection* and an *archive*,⁵ since it represents the vision of a particular artist and, due to the methodical, documentary-like approach that

produced it, provides access to broader histories of Los Angeles and its built environment. With *Ed Ruscha’s Streets of Los Angeles: Artist, Image, Archive, City*, we seek to both expose and explore these contradictions. Rather than offering a definitive statement on the SoLA Archive, the texts in this volume begin to reveal its complexities and suggest the ambiguities its existence presents for understanding the entire oeuvre of Ruscha as well as the postwar history of Los Angeles.

That Ruscha had amassed an archive focused on the streets of Los Angeles was little known before the GRI’s acquisition of it in 2011; thus, the project and the photographs have barely been accounted for in Ruscha scholarship.⁶ One notable exception in this regard is the work of Jennifer Quick. She discusses the SoLA project in her article “Pasteup Pictures: Ed Ruscha’s *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*,” and she insightfully uses the existence of Ruscha’s notebooks and materials related to the project’s production (all of which are contained in the archive) to reevaluate Ruscha’s practice from this perspective.⁷ Quick’s research notwithstanding, *Ed Ruscha’s Streets of Los Angeles* presents an excellent opportunity to reassess Ruscha’s oeuvre in the light of the SoLA Archive.

While Ruscha’s relationship to Los Angeles has been explored by other authors (most notably, Ken

D. Allan, Alexandra Schwartz, and Cécile Whiting),⁸ this publication goes further by presenting a multifaceted approach to the topic. Specifically, the essays in this volume investigate the intersecting points between Ruscha, photography, architecture, information theory, and urban planning in the postwar period that emerge only through an interdisciplinary excavation of the archive. It should be noted that Ruscha is, of course, not the only artist to have documented Los Angeles extensively.⁹ Thus, while this book is in many ways centered on Ruscha, its authors seek to place him in the wider network of practice, thought, and representation.

Ruscha's project nevertheless remains distinct from most of his twentieth-century contemporaries precisely because of the motorization and semiautomation of the photography process.¹⁰ Embedded in Ruscha's images are multiple versions of Los Angeles, offering numerous avenues of inquiry. Thus, this publication has two fundamental aims: first, to account for the size and scope of what this archive documents and the insights it could offer to multiple fields while acknowledging it as the work of a single artist; and second, to consider the influence the computational approaches used to process the archive will inevitably have on the research and scholarship produced from it. To confront these challenges, we seek to position Ruscha's SoLA Archive as being at once *a product of* and *about* technologies of information assembly, management, reproduction, and distribution, using the format of a digital publication to do so.

The scholarship presented in this publication was facilitated by a research project that has been active at Getty for the last several years. In 2017, we issued a call for proposals inviting expressions of interest in working with the SoLA Archive from a wide range of fields, including but not limited to digital humanities, cultural geography, architecture, art history, photography, and visual culture.¹¹ We were able to organize several workshops for the selected international participants, many of whom have now produced scholarship for this book.¹² While the essays have their own distinct viewpoints and arguments to make, they are also interconnected, reflecting in part the dialogue that was encouraged by the multiyear research project the books' contributors collaborated on together.

The publication is structured into five parts: "Project," "Artist," "Image," "Archive," and "City." Throughout these sections, the contributors examine the work of Ruscha and the SoLA Archive as he created it as well as the myriad information workflows and processes that the archive both thematizes and was subjected to upon its arrival at Getty in 2012. Such an approach is, we argue, vitally important. Ruscha's impressive undertaking has far-reaching consequences for how scholars think about artistic projects and photographic archives in the information age and about the relationships between structures of, for example, economic and political power and the systems and institutions that produce and manage information related to art, architectural history, and cultural heritage.

Given the publication's themes, along with the size and scale of the SoLA Archive, the format of a digital publication seemed an ideal way to present our contributors' arguments. Furthermore, our publishing methodology is focused on connecting the format of the publication with its content; in other words, our goal is to develop a publication that is in dialogue with the innovative digital technologies used to create it. Using this approach, we argue, is a means of engaging critically with the various technologies we are using, as opposed to using them as mere tools. While there are considerable challenges to publishing scholarly monographs in digital formats, *Ed Ruscha's Streets of Los Angeles* is a prime example of why such challenges are worth contending with. The digital format provides ways to convey the breadth of the archive and the scholarship assessing it that are more engaging and effective than print alone would be. Publishing a book in Quire, Getty's digital publication framework, offered us yet another way to assess how digital and material forms of information are shaping and reshaping histories of art.

Recently, Ruscha's team has produced a digital video of what was Chavez Ravine, the historically Mexican neighborhood that was violently displaced in the 1950s to build Dodger Stadium. Ruscha's interest in this landmark may stem from the social upheaval created by its construction and the complete transformation of this part of Los Angeles. Indeed, over the last sixty years, Ruscha has documented the city and the human impact on its land, providing a record of

continuity, disruption, revision, and accumulation. The expanding timeframe of his project, as well as the broader purview of its geographic scope, help bring the history of the American West into clearer focus, drawing attention to the longer history of L.A., which stretches back to the founding of El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Ángeles de Porciúncula on the land also known as Tovaangar, the home of the Gabrieleño/Tongva people.

The future of Los Angeles was dramatically changed in January 2025, when several areas were destroyed by major fires, including the portion of Sunset Boulevard that runs through Pacific Palisades. The epigraph has taken on a new meaning. Now, Sunset can never be the same again. Ruscha's project, however, will continue as a resource for what was lost and what Sunset will eventually become.

NOTES

Epigraph: Text in margin of contact sheet signed "Gina and Stu," contact sheet 7-G, box 2*, Edward Ruscha Photographs of Sunset Boulevard and Hollywood Boulevard, 1965–2010, 2012.M.1, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

1. Ruscha's studio team is still photographing the city's streets, so the project's total number of images continues to grow. The number of images (negatives, contact strips, etc.) in the archive is estimated—one has done a physical count of them. The occasional fluctuation of the figures over time on Getty's website is symptomatic of the scale of the archive. The artist has promised to donate all SoLA material to Getty. For more discussion in this publication on the archive's scale, see the "Archive" section and "You Are Here: Locating the SoLA Archive" (online edition only).
2. Of the approximately 740,000 images, almost 130,000 have been digitized.
3. Ruscha's *project* should be distinguished from the *archive* as accessioned in 2012 by the GRI. Ruscha's photographs are contained in two archives based on the streets they document, but for the purposes of this volume, they are collectively referred to as the Streets of Los Angeles Archive: see Edward Ruscha Photographs of Sunset Boulevard and Hollywood Boulevard, 1965–2010, 2012.M.1, <https://www.getty.edu/research/collections/collection/100001>; and Edward Ruscha Photographs of Los Angeles Streets, 1974–2010, 2012.M.2, <https://www.getty.edu/research/collections/collection/100071>.
4. Ruscha's project encompasses not only Los Angeles proper but also the cities of Malibu, West Hollywood, and Beverly Hills. For the purposes of this book, "Los Angeles" is inclusive of these cities. For more on where Ruscha did and didn't photograph, see the "City" section of this volume and "You Are Here."
5. For the definitions of *archive* and *collection*, see the website of the Society of American Archivists: <https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/archive.html> and <https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/collection.html>.
6. Scholarship on Ruscha's photographs has mostly focused on his photobooks. See Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (Winter 1990): 105–43; Thomas Crow, *The Long March of Pop: Art, Music, and Design, 1930–1995* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); Jaleh Mansoor, "Ed Ruscha's 'One-Way Street,'" *October* 111 (Winter 2005): 127–42; and Sylvia Wolf, *Ed Ruscha and Photography*, exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2004).
7. Jennifer Quick, "Pasteup Pictures: Ed Ruscha's *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*," *Art Bulletin* 100, no. 2 (2018): 125–52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043079.2018.1393327>.
8. See, in addition, Ken Allan, "Ed Ruscha, Pop Art, and Spectatorship in 1960s Los Angeles," *Art Bulletin* 92, no. 3 (2010): 231–49; Alexandra Schwartz, *Ed Ruscha's Los Angeles* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010); and Cécile Whiting, *Pop L.A.: Art and the City in the 1960s*, rev. ed. (2006; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).
9. Julius Shulman, Robert Flick, Harry Drinkwater, Camilo José Vergara, Anthony Hernandez, Judy Fiskin, Alan Sekula, and Guadalupe Rosales are just a few artists that Ruscha's work resonates with. There are several commercial photography archives containing significant documentation of Los Angeles, its architecture, and its streets throughout the twentieth century, including the Dick Whittington Studio Collection of Negatives and Photographs, held at the Huntington Library, and the Julius Shulman Photography Archive, 1935–2009, held at the GRI (<http://hdl.handle.net/10020/cifa2004r10>). However, these are archives of commissioned assignments, not photographic campaigns to represent the city as part archival and part artistic project, as Ruscha's is.
10. See Zanna Gilbert and Jennifer Quick, "Ed Ruscha's Streets of Los Angeles: A Narrative History," this volume, for more information on the technological aspects of the project.
11. See Getty Research Institute, "Call for Proposals," https://www.getty.edu/research/scholars/digital_art_history/pdfs/gri_ruscha_proposals.pdf.
12. The workshops took place in January 2019, January 2020, August 2020, October 2020, and February 2021. The January 2020 workshop, funded by the Terra Foundation, allowed us to explore the possibilities of a digital publication for this project.

Ed Ruscha's Streets of Los Angeles: A Narrative History

Zanna Gilbert

Jennifer Quick

This essay describes the origins and contours of Ed Ruscha's Streets of Los Angeles (SoLA) project, from Ruscha's earliest forays into photography and the ambitious publication project of *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* to the contemporary excursions Ruscha and his team still take to photograph streets, parklands, and deserts using similar methods to those they employed in the 1960s. It is not clear exactly when the pithy six-word phrase "every building on the Sunset Strip" first occurred to Ruscha—probably in late 1964 or early 1965. Whatever the case, it eventually led to the SoLA photographic project, which has now spanned six decades, far superseding the original scope of the notorious 1.6-mile commercial strip on Sunset Boulevard.

This is a project of unwieldy statistics and information: there have been over one hundred photographic shoots in Los Angeles County to date.¹ Each shoot has generated around 4,000 to 8,000 images, resulting in upward of 900,000 images.² From this total, about 740,000 are housed in Ed Ruscha's SoLA Archive at the Getty Research Institute (GRI),³ which contains documentation of major Los Angeles streets, from 1965 until 2010. The archive is mostly constituted by contact prints, negatives stored on film reels (figs. 2.1, 2.2), and the production archives for *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966) and the Steidl publication *THEN & NOW: Hollywood*

Boulevard, 1973–2004 (2005). In the 1990s, Ruscha's images were used to create a portfolio of images published by Patrick Painter (fig. 2.3) and the above-mentioned *THEN & NOW* (fig. 2.4). But aside from *Every Building* and *THEN & NOW*, the photos were mostly gathered with no specific project in mind. Ruscha himself refers to it as a kind of "study" or "program."⁴ In what follows, we detail the emergence of the project in the mid-1960s and its development over the next six decades to the present day. We describe the early innovative setup of what Ruscha called his "motorized photographs" (fig. 2.5), the different projects that drew upon the photographic archive, and the ways in which the scope of the project changed over time (see "You Are Here: Locating the SoLA Archive," this volume [online edition only]).

BEFORE SUNSET: PHOTOGRAPHING URBAN LANDSCAPES

Ruscha had been photographing cityscapes since at least 1961, when he took a trip to Europe with his brother, Paul, and mother, Dorothy. These cityscapes had previously seemed quite different from the images published in Ruscha's photography books, but the SoLA Archive has



Figure 2.1 Ed Ruscha, Contact sheet no. 6-c, Sunset Boulevard, 1966, gelatin silver print, 16 × 20 in. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.



Figure 2.2 Photographic negatives of Sunset Boulevard and Hollywood Boulevard spooled onto film reels. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1.



Figure 2.3 Ed Ruscha, *Schwab's Pharmacy*, from the *Sunset Strip* series, 1966 (printed 1995), gelatin silver print from altered negative, 20 1/8 × 29 9/16 in. Publisher: Patrick Painter, Vancouver, BC. Edition of 25. Los Angeles, private collection. © Ed Ruscha.

shed new light on Ruscha's lengthy engagement with photography as more than a medium to fill his books with images. After his family returned to the US, Ruscha remained in Paris for about a

month and then stopped in New York on his way home to Los Angeles. With his twin-reflex Yashica camera, Ruscha took more than three hundred



Figure 2.4 Ed Ruscha, *THEN & NOW: Hollywood Boulevard, 1973–2004* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2005). Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1.

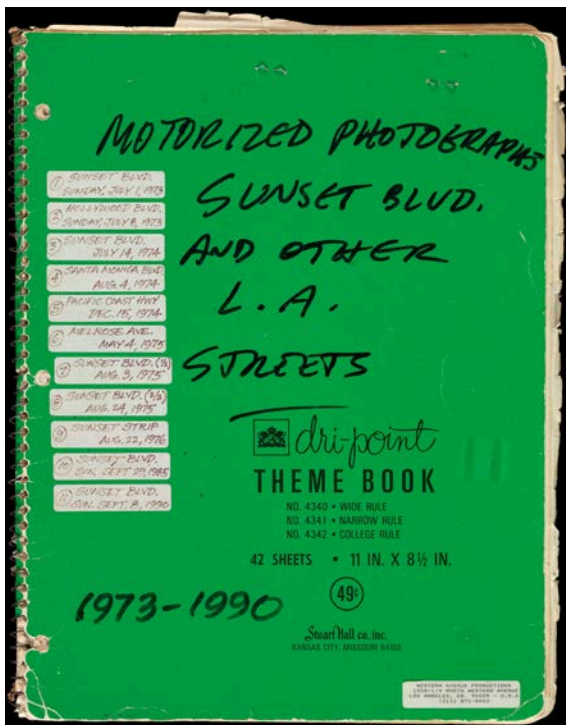


Figure 2.5 Ed Ruscha, “Motorized Photographs Sunset Blvd and Other L.A. Streets, 1973–1990,” production notebook. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.

photographs during his trip (see figs. 7.7, 7.8, 7.9, 7.10).⁵ The black-and-white images, featuring subjects such as store windows, rooftops, roads, and street signs, read like a mini history of twentieth-century photography, full as they are of the subjects that fascinated many photographers of that time, including Henri Cartier-Bresson, Aleksandr Rodchenko, Eugène Atget, Walker Evans, and Robert Frank. Many of Ruscha’s

encounters with these photographers happened within the pages of printed materials. Ruscha first saw Frank’s *The Americans* in 1959, in a bookstore where his friend Joe Goode worked.⁶ “It was like opening a book laced with dynamite. No one ever told the story of America that way,” Ruscha recalled.⁷

Ruscha has characterized his early pictures as “naive” and has insisted that he had “no real strategy” when taking them, a statement that elides the degree to which he did in fact have an understanding of modernist photography, broadly defined.⁸ His photographs, both in subject matter and style, exhibit at least a general knowledge of various twentieth-century photographic modernisms. One can imagine Ruscha, freshly graduated from L.A.’s Chouinard Art Institute, wandering the streets of Europe, snapping shots of a gas-station sign on a building, a group of women strolling through a town square, and the awning of an optician’s shop. Ruscha’s photograph of a shop window in Vienna, with the reflection of a street sign at the top (fig. 2.6), recalls Atget’s many photographs of Parisian shop windows. A shot of a woman walking down a city street in Rome recalls Frank’s photographs from *The Americans*, especially in Ruscha’s use of cropping (fig. 2.7). The woman’s body exceeds the frame at the right while the car is cut off at the left. In another photograph, Ruscha captures a view from above of a crowd gathering outside a building in Venice (fig. 2.8), evoking Rodchenko’s notion of casting off photographs taken “from the belly button.”⁹ The photographs, as a whole, suggest that Ruscha was experimenting with different modes of modernist photography. His European journey offered an opportunity to experiment freely with the medium outside the classroom, rather than in the context of creating advertisements, as he did at Chouinard.

After Ruscha returned to Los Angeles, he continued to use the Yashica to photograph the urban landscape. He took a job with Carson/Roberts advertising agency as a layout artist. During his lunch breaks, Ruscha brought his Yashica to the building’s rooftop and photographed the neighborhood around it, the Melrose/Beverly Grove area of the city. In these photographs, Ruscha began to focus more on the built environment and less on the human interactions with that environment. (This contrasts with the Europe photographs, where



Figure 2.6 Ed Ruscha, *Vienna, Austria*, 1961, gelatin silver print, 3 1/2 × 3 1/2 in. New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, 2004.57. Digital image © Whitney Museum of American Art / Licensed by Scala / Art Resource, NY. Gift of the artist; courtesy Gagosian Gallery. © Ed Ruscha.



Figure 2.8 Ed Ruscha, *Venice, Italy*, 1961, gelatin silver print, 3 5/8 × 3 1/2 in. New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, 2004.288. Digital image © Whitney Museum of American Art / Licensed by Scala / Art Resource, NY. Gift of the artist; courtesy Gagosian Gallery. © Ed Ruscha.



Figure 2.7 Ed Ruscha, *Rome, Italy*, 1961, gelatin silver print, 3 9/16 × 3 9/16 in. New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, 2004.274. Digital image © Whitney Museum of American Art / Licensed by Scala / Art Resource, NY. Gift of the artist; courtesy Gagosian Gallery. © Ed Ruscha.

people appear frequently.) By dint of his position on the building, Ruscha captured aerial views that show billboards (including the agency's own), rooftops, and vehicles (fig. 2.9).

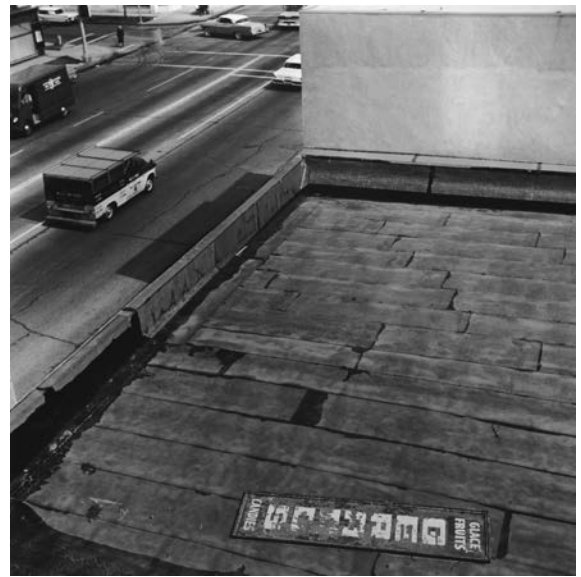
While Ruscha used the Carson/Roberts building as a platform for photographing Los Angeles, he

also began to take photographs that mirrored the kind of advertising work occurring inside the walls of his agency. For example, in his *Product Still Lives* series, from 1961, ordinary commodities such as Oxydol detergent and Spam appear brightly lit against a stark white background (fig. 2.10). With their high-contrast aesthetic, these images evoke a visual language of advertising photography, which Ruscha would have become acquainted with through not only his work at Carson/Roberts but also in his photography courses at Chouinard.

At the same time, Ruscha was turning his camera to other parts of the American landscape. He routinely made the trip between Los Angeles and Oklahoma City, where he grew up, to visit his family. Along the way, Ruscha began photographing the filling stations on Route 66 in California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and Oklahoma (see fig. 7.11). Eventually, he published a number of these photographs in his first book, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963). For some of the pictures, Ruscha photographed the stations from across the road, leaving visible a strip of asphalt in the foreground. For others, he took a closer shot of a station's signage and gas pumps. Three photographs show stations at night, as beacons of bright floodlights in the middle of the desert darkness (fig. 2.11). In Ruscha's view of the United States, people leave traces (in one



Residential (no. 1)



Rooftop (no. 2)



Leggett's (no. 3)



Hancock (no. 4)

Figure 2.9 Ed Ruscha, *Rooftops* series, 1961 (printed 2004), gelatin silver prints, each 30 5/8 × 30 5/8 in. ARTIST ROOMS, Tate and National Galleries of Scotland, AL00235–AL00238. Lent by Artist Rooms Foundation 2011. © Ed Ruscha.

photograph, there is even a shadow visible), but no actual humans are pictured.

Ruscha published *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* under his own imprint, National Excelsior (a name found on a journal that was also featured in his *Product Still Lives* series). Using commercial printing methods for the book, Ruscha chose a simple white cover with the title printed in bold and red serif letters on the front (see fig. 5.5). He would employ similar methods for the other books he published in the 1960s, including *Various Small Fires and Milk* (1964), *Some Los Angeles*

Apartments (1965), and *Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles* (1967) (see figs. 6.2, 13.1). Sometime during this period, Ruscha changed the name from National Excelsior to Heavy Industry Publications, playing on the idea that in his publishing practice he wanted to be the “Henry Ford of bookmaking.”¹⁰

Perhaps to engage this newly industrialized model of bookmaking, Ruscha shifted from taking his own photographs to hiring others to take them for his book *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*. The move from making European-style modernist



Figure 2.10 Ed Ruscha, *SPAM*, from the *Product Still Lives* series, 1961, gelatin silver print, 14 × 9 15/16 in. Edition of possibly 2. New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, 2004.564. Digital image © Whitney Museum of American Art / Licensed by Scala / Art Resource, NY. Purchase, with funds from The Leonard and Evelyn Lauder Foundation, and Diane and Thomas Tuft. © Ed Ruscha.



Figure 2.11 Ed Ruscha, *Fina, Tucumcari, New Mexico*, from the *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* series, 1962, gelatin silver print, 4 15/16 × 6 15/16 in. New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, 2004.488. Digital image © Whitney Museum of American Art / Licensed by Scala / Art Resource, NY. Purchase, with funds from The Leonard and Evelyn Lauder Foundation, and Diane and Thomas Tuft. © Ed Ruscha.

photographs to informational ones could already be seen in Ruscha's photographic books, beginning with the abovementioned *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*. And then, for *Every Building*, Ruscha began outsourcing the labor of making the images, first by contracting his friend Jerry McMillan to take the photos and later by mechanizing and semiautomating the process. The use of a collaborative model of artistic work more similar to the design methodology of an advertising agency—with Ruscha as art director—also happened to align Ruscha with conceptual art. Additionally, although the project had some resonances with the genre of street photography, Ruscha effectively shed any association with photographic tradition when he decided to automate the process.

***A BLVD. CALLED SUNSET*¹¹**

In early 1965, while still in production for his book *Some Los Angeles Apartments*, Ruscha approached his friend Jerry McMillan about a project to photograph each and every building on the Sunset Strip.¹² “He didn’t have a little drawing or any kind of plan that he showed me. He just had this idea,” McMillan recently recalled of his assignment to take test photographs for Ruscha’s book. In early 1965, McMillan made the first attempt at photographing the boulevard. “I went up and started shooting, we talked about it and how difficult it was,” said McMillan.¹³ His photos were shot on a Mamiya 2 1/4 camera in square format, which was, remembers Ruscha, “clumsy and the format was not suitable”; also, they “didn’t have a way of mechanizing a 2 1/4 inch camera”¹⁴ (fig. 2.12). Indeed, photographing the street on foot was incredibly time-consuming: the Mamiya only had the capacity to hold 12-exposure film, and the film was advanced by winding the film manually.

McMillan’s images were too irregular for the desired outcome: buildings were shot from varying angles and with inconsistent perspectives. In fact, as Isabel Frampton Wade observes in her essay in this volume, McMillan’s original attempt at photographing the Strip resembles the type of architectural photography employed in *Some Los Angeles Apartments*.¹⁵ Ruscha deemed the results of the first shoot “a fiasco.”¹⁶ McMillan’s photographs did, however, enable Ruscha to figure out the format for *Every Building*; the images were



Figure 2.12 Jerry McMillan, Contact sheet from the Sunset Boulevard test shoot commissioned by Ed Ruscha, 1965, gelatin silver print, approx. 10 × 8 in. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.

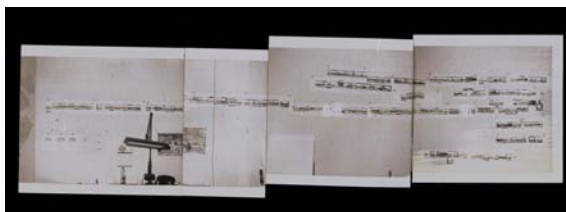


Figure 2.13 Ed Ruscha, *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* mock-up on Ruscha's studio wall, May 1966, gelatin silver print, approx. 3 3/4 × 12 1/2 in. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.

used to create a mock-up for the book that was later pictured on the wall of Ruscha's studio at Vestal Avenue (fig. 2.13).¹⁷

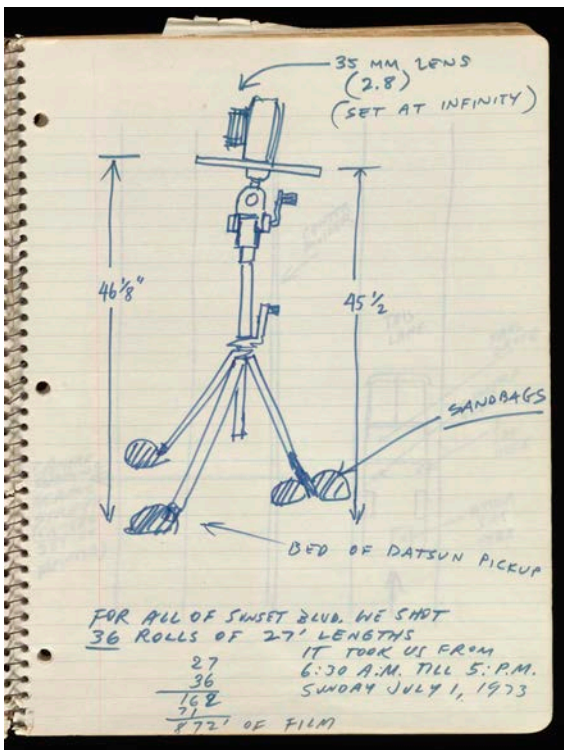
Ruscha was a meticulous notetaker: besides recording the project's expenses in his studio journal under the heading "original fiasco costs"¹⁸—the total was \$138.83, including the cost of lunch each day for the crew (fig. 2.14)—he diagrammed the camera setup, including the height, the lens, and the f-stop, as well as the intersections and cross streets (fig. 2.15). Over the years, Ruscha's team would tighten up the methods for keeping track of film rolls, and their corresponding cross streets would usually be

COSTS		3
JAN. FEB. MARCH 1966		
#138.83 TOTAL PAYMENT BEFORE ABANDONING FIRST PROJECT ATTEMPT.		
#138.83 ORIGINAL FIASCO COSTS		1966
32.00 BIRNS/SAWYER RENTAL		JUNE 11
6.19 FREESTYLE 20X24 CONTACT PAPER	50 SHEETS	15
59.80 VOORZANGER PROCESSING		16
7.65 SCHAFFER'S 16X20 PAPER ENLARG.	FOR	21
20.00 PAUL (DARKROOM HELP)		30
8.50 JOHN MANSON TYPOGRAPHY		JULY 5
20.00 LUNCHES - MAC - WALLY PHONE, ETC.		AUG 10
20.00 MAC - FOR PASTEUR		8
49.14 STRIPPING COSTS (ADVANCE REPRO.)		
.51 CLIPBOARD		SEPT. 1
1.98 POSTAGE FOR ADVANCE COPY (WITT) N.Y.		6
PHONE CALL TO WITTENBERG		6
3.62 3 BOTTLES GLUE		6
165.96 ZELLERBACH (CHIPBOARD, CHROME)		9
30.00 MAC - FOR PASTEUR (FINAL)		13
16.00 DIANE BROWN (COLLATING)		13
7.00 NOTARIZATION - COPYRIGHT FEES		16
90.00 LEW BROWN (COLLATING)		19
10.40 PICKWICK'S MAILING ENVELOPES	CHIPBOARD	20
12.00 HOLLYWOOD BINDERY (CUTTING)		24
4.49 MEL WHITSON 2 SIDE TAPE		30
1.76 THIS BOOK		
705.83	FORWARD	

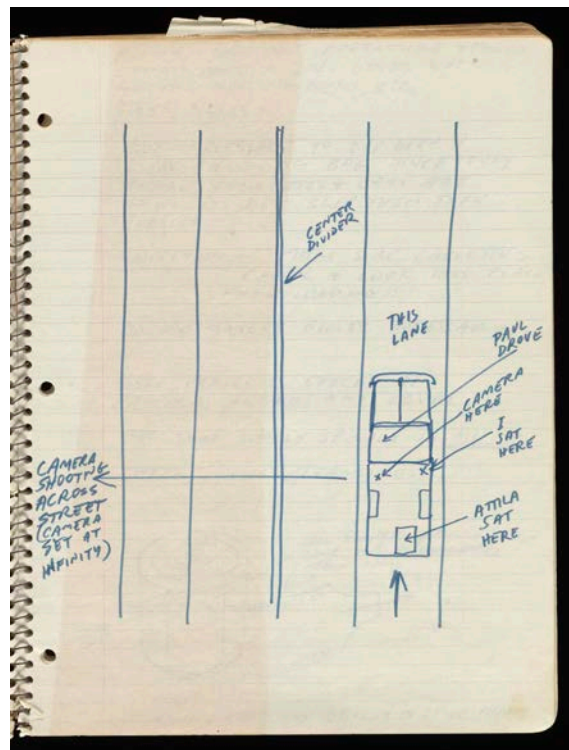
Figure 2.14 Page from production notebook showing the details of total shoot costs from the "fiasco shoot," January–March 1966. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.

noted with a numerical system. However, in the earliest days of the project, Ruscha himself wrote down landmarks and favorite haunts (see fig. 2.15, sheet 3); instead of cross streets and addresses, he recorded the icons of his own everyday experience as part of the "lifeblood" of L.A.'s urban fabric.¹⁹

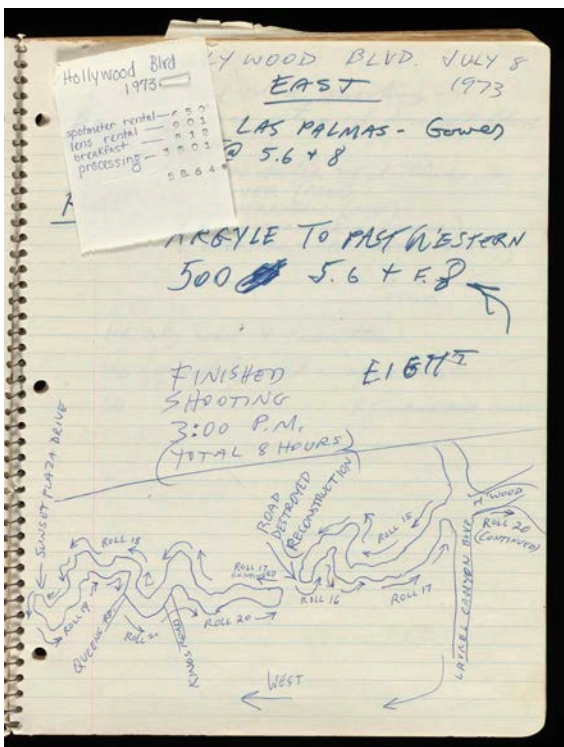
After the "fiasco" of the May 1965 shoot, Ruscha's team devised a way to "motorize" a 35mm Nikon film camera: by driving along the street with the camera pointing out the window. According to Ruscha, "It just made complete sense to snap off pictures as you moved along rather than to move, stop, photograph, move, stop, photograph."²⁰ The motorized photos were also made possible by two different photographic technologies. The first was the use of a motorized drive that would automatically advance the camera film.²¹ This initially made the capture faster, but the process was still hampered by the use of regular film with 36 exposures, requiring



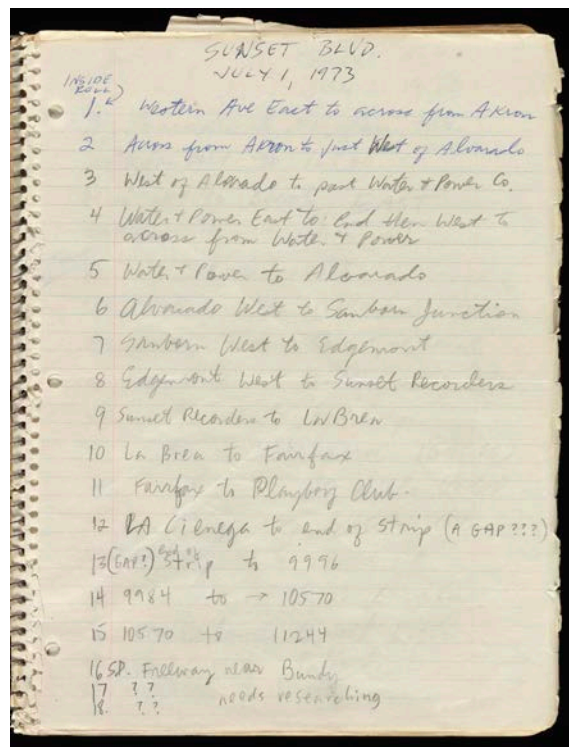
Camera (sheet 10)



Aerial (sheet 11)



Hollywood (sheet 19)



Sunset (sheet 3)

Figure 2.15 Ed Ruscha, Pages from production notebook, 1973–90, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.

the film rolls to be changed too frequently.²² The second, added in 1973, was the use of an MF-4 250-exposure bulk magazine adaption to the

camera that could accommodate the extra-long, 27-foot film stock (fig. 2.16).²³ This allowed the team to capture a continuous reel of images from



Figure 2.16 Paul Ruscha, Nikon F with 250-exposure magazine camera back, 1975, gelatin silver print, 7 15/16 × 10 in. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Paul Ruscha.



Figure 2.18 Ed Ruscha, Test prints for Ruscha's *Sunset Strip* portfolio, 1966/76 (printed 1995), gelatin silver prints, detail of 15 7/8 × 20 in. sheet. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.



Figure 2.17 Danny Kwan (in truck), Ed Ruscha, and Bryan Heath in Ruscha's Datsun pickup truck, 1973, gelatin silver print, 8 × 9 15/16 in. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.

a moving truck without the frequent and time-consuming changing of the film roll (fig. 2.17). That said, the process wasn't flawless, as camera-changing bags were still a necessary part of the equipment. But overall, the innovation was a success. In late spring 1966, Ruscha and his team carried out a test that produced the photos that were finally deemed suitable for *Every Building*.²⁴ By June 1966, he and his team were able to photograph both sides of the Strip over the course of one Sunday (fig. 2.18). Finally, the method of taking motorized photos had been perfected.

The embrace of semiautomated motorization would standardize images to achieve consistent perspective, depth of field, and framing. The photographs could then be almost seamlessly

pasted together for *Every Building*, in which Ruscha built upon the concept of the book as a container for photographs. Instead of single pages printed with individual photographs, however, the book contains a long accordion-fold page that measures approximately twenty-seven feet when fully opened. Ruscha printed the photographs in a continuous strip, which he made from individual photographs mounted together with the techniques of pasteup layout, a process common in print advertising (and one that Ruscha had been trained to use at Chouinard). This cut-and-paste process also allowed Ruscha to selectively shape his picture of the Strip, both by choosing which photographs would be in the final image strip and, in some cases, by retouching the photographs to emphasize or deemphasize part of a building. This "pasteup picture" became a means to capture, or at least attempt to capture, every building along the section of the Strip that Ruscha had decided to photograph.²⁵ After he completed the pasteups, Ruscha sent boards to a shop to be made into offset prints. The book's first print run, in September 1966, numbered one thousand copies (see figs. 5.6, 8.1). In 1971, Ruscha printed an additional four thousand copies. Ruscha tracked the book's printings and travels in his notebooks, which document its circulation in different networks and contexts, from the Sunset Strip Chamber of Commerce to the renowned Wittenborn and Company bookstore in New York.

BEYOND SUNSET

In 1973, eight years after the first shoot of *Sunset Boulevard*, Ruscha revisited the street once again. For this shoot, which took place on Sunday, 1 July, in Ruscha's Datsun pickup, a definitive setup was sketched out in the project notebook: the camera lens was set at a height of 46 1/8 inches (at a slight tilt), the camera's viewfinder height was 45 1/2 inches, and the 35mm lens was set at infinity.²⁶ Ruscha and a team that included his brother, the photographer Paul Ruscha, set off at Sunset's intersection with Western Avenue, close to Ruscha's studio at 1024 3/4 North Western Avenue in Hollywood.²⁷ A brief note records the details of both the length of time and the length of film required for the endeavor: "For all of Sunset Blvd, we shot 36 rolls of 27' lengths. It took us from 6:30am til 5pm." Under that note there is a quick calculation of the total length of film: 872 feet. Each shoot required three or four people to manage tasks such as driving, checking the camera, or changing the film. The 35mm Nikon camera's focus was set to infinity to create a sharp image at a distance and to automatize the focus so that it didn't need to be adjusted when looking through the lens on the truck. The notes also state that the car was always positioned in the furthestmost right lane, shooting across the street (see fig. 2.15).²⁸

The 1973 shoot and its fine-tuning of the system of motorized photos precipitated a burst of activity: a week after shooting *Sunset*, Ruscha and his team expanded beyond the iconic street for the first time to document Hollywood Boulevard (8 July 1973). Almost exactly a year later, on 14 July 1974, they photographed *Sunset Boulevard* again, and then a few weeks later, on 4 August 1974, they expanded to Santa Monica Boulevard. Around this time, members of the team started referring to the shoots as the "Streets" shoots: "The streets project name came into usage when Ruscha expanded to streets other than *Sunset* and *Hollywood Blvds*."²⁹ Later that year, on 15 December 1974, they documented the Pacific Coast Highway (fig. 2.19). On 4 May 1975, they shot Melrose Avenue, followed the next month by *Sunset Boulevard* (3 and 24 August 1975), which they shot again the following year on 22 August 1976. According to the archive, there were no shoots between 1976 and 1985. The project began again in 1985, with the team

photographing *Sunset* every few years: in 1990, 1995, 1997, 1998, 2000, and 2001. The 1995 and 1997 shoots are well documented in notebooks.³⁰ In 1995, the photographer Gary Regester became involved in the production of the *Streets* shoots, including doing research, organizing van and equipment rentals, and keeping digital records of the photographic campaigns, such as 4K video.

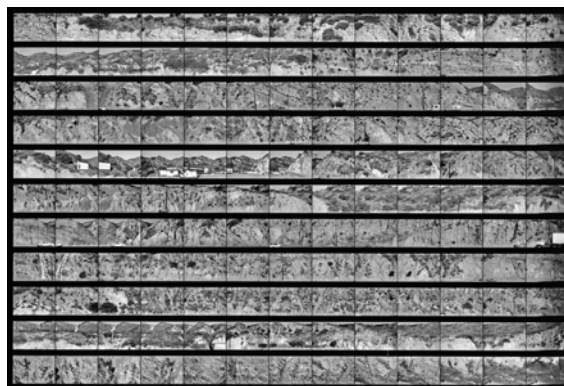


Figure 2.19 Digital contact sheet comprising photographs taken by Ed Ruscha of the Pacific Coast Highway in 1974, 2019. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.2. © Ed Ruscha.

THE SUNSET STRIP REVISITED

In 1995, Ruscha revisited the 1966 and 1976 *Sunset* shoots to create a portfolio of six photographic prints—titled *Sunset Strip*—that was produced with the gallerist Patrick Painter in an edition of twenty-five. Images featuring several iconic landmarks of Los Angeles' lively nightlife, celebrity, and music scenes were selected for the portfolio: Filthy McNasty's, Ah Fong's Cantonese Foods, Greenblatt's Deli, Schwab's Pharmacy, the Whisky a Go Go, Liquor Locker, and Gazzarri's Supper Club (fig. 2.20; see also figs. 16.13, 2.3). New negatives were produced for the images selected, and these were scratched and painted on to give the appearance of distressed film. The additions of the striations and feedback were characteristic of other works Ruscha made in the 1990s, most notably the painting *The End* (1991), which directly appropriates the closing credits of an old movie. This link to cinema once again connects the *Sunset Strip* photos to moving images.³¹ The images also intentionally play with the time lapse between when the images were originally shot and the portfolio production some

thirty years later, as the interventions in the negatives make palpable the distance in time between the 1966/76 images and their reproduction in 1995. It was perhaps this portfolio that shifted the SoLA project from rephotography (the implicitly temporal act of photographing the street changing over time) toward before-and-after photography, a more explicit effort at *comparing* the same street at two different moments. This approach would be seen the following decade in the portfolio and book project *THEN & NOW: Hollywood Boulevard, 1973–2004*.³²



Figure 2.20 Ed Ruscha, Test prints for Ruscha's *Sunset Strip* portfolio, 1966/76 (printed 1995), gelatin silver prints, 8 × 10 in. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.

THEN & NOW: THE SKY WAS ALSO A DILEMMA

In 2005, the German publisher Gerhard Steidl released *THEN & NOW* as a limited-edition portfolio of 142 photographic prints (fig. 2.21) and as a trade book, both recording the changes that had taken place over three decades. Ruscha had proposed the idea to Steidl in 2002, and planning began in late 2003.³³ In the portfolio, Ruscha's 1973 images of the north and south sides of Hollywood Boulevard were printed parallel to the 2004 images (fig. 2.22). *THEN & NOW* relies on a formula similar to that of *Every Building*, with the familiar white space between the pasted-together images of the street; however, *THEN & NOW* has four, rather than two, strips of images. The sets of images of the boulevard's north side run along the printed page at the top, and those of the south side run inverted along the bottom. But rather

than using a single accordion-folded page, or strip, the trade book used a traditional format, while the portfolio was produced as individual large-format prints (27 1/2 × 39 3/8 inches) housed in a heavy wooden encasement. The massive size of the portfolio pages is an almost comical postscript, a self-rejoinder, to Ruscha's earlier insistently portable and distributable books.



Figure 2.21 Ed Ruscha, *THEN & NOW: Hollywood Boulevard, 1973–2004*, 2005, 142 gelatin silver prints in a wood box, 27 1/2 × 39 3/8 in. Publisher: Steidl, Göttingen. Edition of 10. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.



Figure 2.22 Ed Ruscha, Print from *THEN & NOW: Hollywood Boulevard, 1973–2004*, 2005, gelatin silver print, 27 1/2 × 39 3/8 in. Publisher: Steidl, Göttingen. Edition of 10. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.

The entirety of Hollywood Boulevard was not a "strip" like *Sunset* but a complex topography of hilly, green embankments perhaps not quite so seamlessly transferred to the printed page. Unlike its predecessor, *Every Building*, where cars and pedestrians are frequently chopped off and facades unmatched as if one is moving along the

street too fast to capture the wholeness of any one object, the images in *THEN & NOW* are seamlessly matched and retouched as needed. The archival documentation addresses the issues surrounding the difficulties of producing this image justification. The 2004 shoot, for example, took many more days than the original 1973 shoot. The production files contain an excess of information about Ruscha and the Steidl team's conception of his project. Revisiting Hollywood Boulevard brought up the "then and now" not only of the street but also of digital technology and the newfound possibilities for image justification in Photoshop. For instance, whereas in 1966, Ruscha used pasteup to create a continuous but still jarring and jumpy record of Sunset, in 2004 his team and the Steidl team worked together to create a smoothly pasted-together paper route through Hollywood Boulevard. Indeed, in 2004, the updated photographic technology—such as the use of color photography, Photoshop, and digitization of images—was a central part of the production process.

The 2004 team's notes reveal the difficulties in capturing the images needed due to the twists and turns of the narrow, hilly streets. Whereas the 1966 Sunset photographs had been contiguous with a long strip of paper, Hollywood Boulevard produced a pile. Ruscha's team went to great lengths to capture the required images, perhaps due to the addition of Jonas Wettre, a member of Steidl's company, whose approach made this shoot notably more computerized and digitized than any previous projects or shoots. Notes prepared for the shoot, which took place over six days, say to "make sure that it is always an overlap that is identical data" and mention that "we have to make adjustments and retouching to make it look natural . . . cars that appear over each other, here we have to move cars and/or trees to make it natural. So it's not meant to look like reality, that's impossible. It's just meant to look good."³⁴ Wettre complained that the job was made difficult because the black-and-white images from the 1970s were "surfing up and down," and then, in the recent color images, "the street is changing color all the time" and therefore "the sky was also a dilemma."³⁵

As well as being an ambitious photographic endeavor, the *THEN & NOW* project (and the SoLA photography in general) was a feat of archival organization, administration, and storage. A green

spiral-bound notebook contains many details of the 1973 Hollywood shoot, such as a checklist of an astonishing array of equipment that included film-changing bags, extra batteries, a spot meter, and sandbags for weighing down the camera tripod equipment. With the slate board that was used to write roll numbers and shoot details, the list of equipment resembles a movie operation. A note from the 1973 shoot says to "scratch roll number on end of film"—just one method for keeping track of the many rolls of film. Ensuring that the photographs were standardized was important ("Always call out aperture and focus changes to each other . . . when shooting rolls #s etc."), as was quality control ("make periodic checks of camera angle and level").³⁶

THEN & NOW seems to have caused a shift in Ruscha's thinking and work about Los Angeles' urban environment. In 2005, when Ruscha represented the United States at the Venice Biennale, the "then" and "now" frame that he had been exploring for the past several years in his photographs of L.A.'s streets was applied to the paintings in his *Course of Empire* series, which explored images of Los Angeles sites from the 1990s and then again in the 2000s.

FURTHER EXPANSION: STREETS AS LANDSCAPES

In 2007, Sunset Boulevard, Melrose Avenue, and Santa Monica Boulevard were rephotographed, but it was not until 2008 that a new phase of the SoLA project began that saw an expansion of the territory being photographed and filmed, including new streets and areas of Los Angeles, as well as the use of a variety of methods. The newly added streets in 2008 included Western Avenue and Olympic, Wilshire, Beverly, Pico, and Venice Boulevards. In 2009 the team photographed Ventura Boulevard, Third Street, Fountain Avenue, Franklin Avenue, Sepulveda Boulevard, Figueroa Street, and La Cienega Boulevard. In 2010, what the team termed *suites* of streets in Chinatown, Culver/Fermin, La Brea, and Silver Lake were added, along with several smaller streets. The team has continued to add new streets, such as Crenshaw Boulevard in 2017.³⁷

While over time the team explored both digital photography and video capture, they deemed the original analog setup preferable for image quality and consistency. However, the demands of the



Figure 2.23 One of the Ruscha Studio's fourteen Nikon F3 cameras, 2012. © Ed Ruscha.

SoLA shoots far exceed the planned use of the cameras, resulting in the Nikon F3 bodies needing constant repair and prompting their accelerated obsolescence (fig. 2.23). The team currently has fourteen cameras in rotation, which, just as in some of the earliest shoots in the 1960s, are fitted with a 250-exposure, motor-drive back. A fifteen-passenger Ford van was at the time of writing the vehicle of choice. The van is rented for each project, and the vehicle is temporarily modified by removing seats and side windows to accommodate the camera equipment. "Since the Steidl shoot in 2004," Gary Regester notes, "the team has used Kodak 5207 color negative cine film in rolls varying from 400 to 1,000 feet. A prep day is spent in the darkroom, rolling the film into cassettes holding 33-foot lengths. A 1,000-foot reel yields 30 cassettes of film (8,000 exposures total). Each cassette covers approximately one-and-a-half miles with the van driven at 20 mph. Most shoots are horizontal format, and for these, we use a 35mm perspective-control lens."³⁸ On several occasions, "Ruscha himself has appeared in Streets of L.A. frames in 'Hitchcock-style' cameos, notably in front of his Echo Park Avenue studio in 2010, on San Fernando Road in 2011, and in front of his current studio in 2012. Gerhard Steidl also made a cameo appearance in the *THEN & NOW* shoot in 2004."³⁹

In more recent years, Ruscha and his team have expanded their focus beyond Los Angeles into the desert, which they still consider part of the SoLA project. These shoots not only record the new subject matter but also mediate some of the themes present in Ruscha's earliest works. From 28–31 May 2013, the team photographed Las Vegas Boulevard, best known for its own quintessential strip. Photographing the desert city

in turn precipitated a shift to documenting other sites in the Mojave and Colorado Deserts. (Throughout, the team also continued to document Los Angeles' city streets.) On 14 October 2014, they took video of Bombay Beach (a former resort turned ghost town that has repopulated in recent years) from a van and in the following months produced a video that contained the footage as well as still video shots of the ecological wasteland of Salton Sea Beach. This video was overlaid in postproduction with textual information that labeled streets as well as unusual sights, such as an abandoned piano, on the debris-strewn route. Another video, made from a shoot on 15–16 August 2015 and titled *Along US 66, Amboy, Needles & Cadiz California*, takes the historic Route 66 (the highway from Oklahoma to California that Ruscha frequently drove as a young man). The video stops off at sites along the way, such as the Mojave Desert's Amboy Crater, with video notations of Google architecture and signage, motels, impromptu art installations (hundreds of shoes on a tree branch, for example, and a misplaced Asian stellae), and an abandoned building that could have been one of the twenty-six gas stations Ruscha documented in the early 1960s. Indeed, in Ruscha's video, this once-thriving route, removed from the official US highway system in 1985, still bears the skeletal frameworks of abandoned gas-station structures that marked its heyday. The patterns created by rows of trees in satellite images recall the aerial photographs contained in the book *Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles*. The camera further shows us railway crossings, an abandoned building covered in graffiti, single shots of desert trash, and a huge sign for "GAS." In these videos, when major roads are recorded, the team shoots straight out of the front window to document the journey, without attempting to record every detail of the streets. In the expanse of the desert, a different approach is required that forgoes the need to record everything, as the cultural impact on the landscape here is intermittently recorded.

Ruscha has commented on his discomfort with fixing a subject in time through photography, apparently concerned about the nostalgia that can be created by this fixity. In 2004, he observed that "even if you go out and take a picture of a gasoline station that is freshly built today, ten years from now, it won't look so old, but twenty

and thirty years from now it will. Everything becomes nostalgia after a while. That's sort of unfortunate because it's as though the thing, itself, becomes a victim of history."⁴⁰ In 2008, he remarked, "That's the one thing I regret about any photograph: that eventually it becomes historical, nostalgic, out of date. It begins to look like the age it came from."⁴¹ Straining against this inevitable nostalgia, the Streets of Los Angeles Archive never gives in to fixity, instead opting for a living, fluid image in motion, one that is mutable and organic rather than nostalgic. The archive provides us with a portrait of an artist who has a complex and multidimensional relationship to photography. It challenges the idea of Ruscha's photographs as deskilled or one-offs, or just something to fill the books. The Streets of Los Angeles project is ambiguous: it both stores photographic records in an "image morgue" and remains active and vital to Ruscha's practice—a central, though previously almost invisible, visual store.

NOTES

1. The Los Angeles County cities in Ruscha's project include not only Los Angeles proper but also Malibu, West Hollywood, and Beverly Hills. For the purposes of this book, "Los Angeles" is inclusive of these cities.
2. The numbers of images in the SoLA Archive are estimates. The estimated number of photographs taken during each shoot is based on a base ratio: length of film to miles of road. This ratio was established both by Ruscha's team and by the efforts of the Getty digitization team.
3. Ed Ruscha's photographs were acquired by the GRI in 2011 and are contained in two archives: Edward Ruscha Photographs of Sunset Boulevard and Hollywood Boulevard, 1965–2010, 2012.M.1, and Edward Ruscha Photographs of Los Angeles Streets, 1974–2010, 2012.M.2. Together, these are jointly referred to as the Streets of Los Angeles (SoLA) Archive. The figure we have for the number of images in the archive is estimated. See Emily Pugh, "Some Los Angeles Streets: Ed Ruscha in the Library and Archive," this volume.
4. Ed Ruscha, interview by James Cuno, "Ed Ruscha's Los Angeles," *Getty Art + Ideas* podcast, 3 August 2022, <https://blogs.getty.edu/iris/podcast-ed-ruscha-los-angeles>.
5. These are now in the collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art. For reproductions, see Sylvia Wolf, ed., *Ed Ruscha and Photography*, exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2004). See also Alyce Mahon, "'Almost Too Hot to Handle': Ed Ruscha's *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*," this volume.
6. Goode and Ruscha were Chouinard students at the time. Goode, like Ruscha, showed his work in the 1962 exhibition *New Painting of Common Objects*, held at the Pasadena Museum of Art. Featuring artists such as Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein, the exhibition helped to launch Ruscha's and Goode's fine art careers. For an early review of the exhibition, see John Coplans, "The New Paintings of Common Objects," *Artforum* 1, no. 6 (1962): 26–29.
7. Ed Ruscha, quoted in Alex Greenberger, "He Rebelled against All Constraints of Society: Ed Ruscha, Danny Lyon, Dawoud Bey and More Remember Robert Frank," *Artnews*, 23 September 2019, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/robert-frank-remembrances-13235/>.
8. Scott Rothkopf, "Ed Ruscha: Grand Tourist," *Artforum* 42, no. 10 (2004): 229.
9. Alexander Rodchenko, "Downright Ignorance or a Mean Trick?," in *Photography in the Modern Era*, ed. Christopher Phillips (New York: Aperture, 1989), 246.
10. Ed Ruscha, quoted in Douglas M. Davis, "From Common Scenes, Mr. Ruscha Evokes Art," reprinted in Edward Ruscha, *Leave Any Information at the Signal: Writings, Interviews, Bits, Pages*, ed. Alexandra Schwartz (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 28.
11. This is the title of a 1975 painting by Ruscha. He has commented elsewhere that he chose *Sunset* in part because "he always liked the name of it." Ruscha and Cuno, "Ed Ruscha's Los Angeles."
12. Ruscha's records indicate that he paid McMillan one hundred dollars for the first attempt at the photography of the *Sunset Strip*; Record book, 1966–1972, box 17, folder 6, Edward Ruscha Photographs of Sunset Boulevard and Hollywood Boulevard, 1965–2010, 2012.M.1, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (hereafter SoLA Archive).
13. Susan Haller, email to Zanna Gilbert, 27 July 2022.
14. Both McMillan quotations are from Jerry McMillan, interview by Zanna Gilbert, January 2020. "He wanted to do a book on every building on the *Sunset Strip*, and so he asked me if I would be interested in helping him and what have you. So, I said ok. And so it's hard to remember all this, but I went up and started shooting, and we talked about it and how difficult it was, the way I was able to do it. And then he met somebody or knew somebody, I don't know exactly, except he told me something about doing this other thing and using a motorized 35mm camera. And Ed had a small pickup truck, and they put it in the back of the truck, and I think it was a Sunday, and they drove up and down *Sunset* all the way from one end of *Sunset* to the other, and photographed it, and by far it came out better than what I was doing, and they did it in one day. They probably did more than one day. They used my darkroom. Had it on a tripod. 3–5 days' walk from one place to the other to find a place I could be in. I was shooting one side of the street and then planning on coming back the other way. I didn't make it back. He didn't have a little drawing or any kind of plan that he showed me. He just had this idea. I didn't have a picture of what he wanted. I might have done some other things if I had a better idea." Note: Ruscha did not start using a pickup truck until 1973; he used a car in 1966. Zanna Gilbert, in conversation with Ed Ruscha, 27 January 2025.
15. See Isabel Frampton Wade, "'The Tyranny of the Glossy': Commercial Architectural Photography and Ruscha's Streets," this volume.
16. Record book, 1966–1972, box 17, folder 6, 2012.M.1, SoLA Archive.
17. The partial mock-up and a diazotype copy of this initial attempt can be found in box 14*, folder 1, 2012.M.1, SoLA Archive. The four-part, joined panorama of the mock-up displayed on Ruscha's studio wall is in box 17, folder 3, 2012.M.1, SoLA Archive.
18. Record book, 1966–1972.
19. Ruscha and Cuno, "Ed Ruscha's Los Angeles."
20. Deborah Vankin, "65,000 Photos of Sunset Boulevard: Take the Ultimate Road Trip with Ed Ruscha," *Los Angeles Times*, 7 October 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2020-10-07/ed-ruscha-sunset-boulevard-getty-database>.
21. McMillan, interview.
22. Jennifer Quick, "Pasteup Pictures: Ed Ruscha's *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*," *Art Bulletin* 100, no. 2 (2018): 132, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043079.2018.1393327>.
23. According to Gary Regester, the original rolls were one hundred feet in length. Haller, email.
24. To identify the date of this shoot, Isabel Frampton Wade looked for evidence within the photographs featuring billboard advertisements, etc., and surmised that these images were taken in April or May 1966. For example, the following URLs are taken as evidence of the dates: Icecapades billboard at L.A. sports arena lists date for May (see <https://www.getty.edu/research/collections/object/1036VK>); and a

- Hollywood Palladium show identifies "Spring Promenade [sic] '66" (see <https://www.getty.edu/research/collections/object/100Z6A>).
25. Jennifer Quick uses this term in *Back to the Drawing Board: Ed Ruscha, Art, and Design in the 1960s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022).
 26. Green spiral-bound notebook containing notes written by Ed Ruscha, Paul Ruscha, Susan Haller, Bryan Heath, and Eddie Ruscha, 1973, box 7, folder 13, 2012.M.1, SoLA Archive.
 27. Ruscha kept a studio at this address from 1965 to 1985.
 28. Notebook pages, box 39, folder 1, 2012.M.1, SoLA Archive.
 29. Haller, email.
 30. Red spiral-bound notebook, box 7, folder 8, 2012.M.1, SoLA Archive. Written on front cover: "Sunset Blvd. (and other streets) photography notebook / Sunday, Aug. 1995 and Monday, Aug. 21, 1995. Blue spiral-bound notebook. On Sept 14, 1997, a team comprised of 'Shane Guffogg (driver), Gary Regester (photographer), Paul Ruscha (film changer), Eddie Ruscha (I.D.ographer)' set off at 6:40am from the intersection of Sunset & Crescent Heights Blvd, heading West."
 31. See Mark Shiel, "Ed Ruscha's Street Photos and the Cinematic Sequence Shot," this volume.
 32. For more on before-and-after photography, see Kate Albers and Jordan Bear, eds., *Before-and-After Photography: Histories and Contexts* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).
 33. Haller, email. "In 2002, . . . Steidl was in production with the first volume of Ruscha's first Catalog Raisonné of Paintings. He expressed an interest in working on another project with Ruscha, so later that year Ruscha proposed a re-shoot of his 1973 shoot of Hollywood Boulevard. Planning for this project eventually began in late 2003. Ruscha and Steidl assembled a team to produce the shoot, which took place between June 5-10, 2004."
 34. "How to Handle Images in Photoshop," document, 2004, Then + Now Production Data, box 39, folder 11, 2012.M.1, SoLA Archive.
 35. Jonas Wettre (Steidl) to Ed and Paul Ruscha about filling in gaps, 2004, Then + Now Production Data, box 39, folder 11, 2012.M.1, SoLA Archive.
 36. Green spiral-bound notebook, 1973.
 37. An inventory of "Streets" shoots from 1965 to 2023 is available at https://www.getty.edu/publications/ruscha/_assets/downloads/ruscha-work-list.pdf.
 38. Haller, email: "For the few shoots that are vertical format, we use a 28mm PC lens. Vertical format shoots include a Larchmont Blvd test, Las Vegas Blvd (Las Vegas, NV), and one Figueroa Street (Temple to Pico) shoot. Concurrent with the motor-drive stills, we began shooting video in 2004 with the Hollywood Blvd *THEN & NOW* Steidl shoot. The footage serves as backup and has occasionally been used to fill in for skipped or missing frames."
 39. Haller, email.
 40. Sylvia Wolf and Ed Ruscha, "Nostalgia and New Editions," in Wolf, *Ed Ruscha and Photography*, 273.
 41. Leo Benedictus, "Ed Ruscha's Best Shot," *The Guardian*, 28 May 2008, 29.

3

Archiving the Archive: Processing the Streets of Los Angeles Photographs

Beth Ann Guynn

David Newbury

Lily Pregill

Technological innovation has always been an integral part of Ed Ruscha's Streets of Los Angeles (SoLA) photographs, now held at the Getty Research Institute (GRI). These photographs are now contained in two archives created by the artist according to the streets they record (for the purposes of this book, they are referred to collectively as the SoLA Archive).¹ As discussed in Zanna Gilbert and Jennifer Quick's contribution to this volume, Ruscha's approach to systematically photographing Sunset Boulevard and other major thoroughfares—which began in earnest in 1966 and continues today—has consistently relied on technology to respond to the evolving needs of his project.² The ambitious scope inherent in programmatically capturing the streetscapes of the Los Angeles area meant Ruscha had to quickly move beyond the standard manual-photography shooting processes to literally cover a lot of ground as efficiently as possible. Ruscha's technological innovations included using a moving pickup truck to serve as the platform for taking pictures, employing a motorized drive to advance the film, and installing a mechanized camera back capable of holding very long lengths of film, reducing the need for frequent reloading. Ruscha transformed his art practice by evolving his process to match his ambition. It is thus fitting that the SoLA Archive has similarly stimulated a

need for Getty to meet necessity and ambition with innovation.

Getty's mission is to "share art, knowledge, and resources with the public."³ Facilitating the discovery of and access to our collection materials is one way that we strive to fulfill that mission. We are fortunate to provide an institutional home to culturally significant archives; however, the scale of many of these collections makes it impossible to create adequate metadata for every piece of documentation they contain.⁴ Metadata is the infrastructure and interface for accessing digital resources.⁵ Descriptive metadata⁶ drives the ability to *find*; it enables researchers to discover, identify, and select materials for study. In today's online environment, users increasingly expect the existence of information, whether contained in an image, document, or another format, to be found through keyword searching. The belief that something doesn't exist if it isn't found in a Google search extends to archival material for general users. That said, the ability to make every item in a collection discoverable online is hampered by the herculean task of manually creating descriptive metadata.⁷ Getty is not unique in this situation. Current archival practice does not typically assign descriptive metadata to every item in a collection. Rather, the collection is described as a whole, and then strategic decisions

are made on how best to describe its components at the container level (that is, boxes, folders, and so on). Since descriptive metadata is assigned to groups of material rather than to items within a group, the burden is placed on users to sift—either physically or digitally—through at times massive volumes of material. For example, the photographs in the SoLA Archive are organized by the shoot date for each street, but the individual images resulting from each shoot are not described.

Ruscha's immense trove of images is a perfect example of this usability challenge, forcing and focusing an interrogation of our traditional processes for making collections available. We had many questions: How could we provide more generous inroads to this collection to enable finding a needle in a haystack? Users might want to pinpoint images of famous locations such as the Whisky a Go Go, Schwab's Pharmacy, or the Cinerama Dome, and to chart changes to them over time. How could we facilitate that without item-level metadata and a legion of archivists to do that work? How were we going to drive people—people who may not know the artist Ed Ruscha—to this amazing content documenting our city? How could we exploit the collection to provide useful and engaging interfaces to both the nostalgic general public and to scholarly audiences? To borrow a phrase from Ruscha, what were the "vivid possibilities"?⁸

The questions that the SoLA project prompted formed in tandem with the growth of Getty's ambitions in three areas: to improve our ability to work at scale, to provide more granular access to our archival collections, and to better leverage our collections to reach new audiences outside of traditional library and archival interfaces. This essay describes how the Getty team approached archiving the SoLA materials by innovating our capture, metadata generation, and presentation methods to exponentially increase access to this collection of images while also evolving our own technical infrastructure and practice along the way.⁹

COLLECTION BACKGROUND

In 2011, the GRI acquired Ruscha's long-running photographic projects documenting the streets of Los Angeles. The first archive, Edward Ruscha Photographs of Sunset Boulevard and Hollywood

Boulevard, 1965–2010, comprises material Ruscha produced during twelve shoots chronicling the nearly twenty-five-mile length of Sunset Boulevard and four shoots documenting twelve miles of Hollywood Boulevard. The second archive, Edward Ruscha Photographs of Los Angeles Streets, 1974–2010, includes Ruscha's shoots of three streets in the mid-1970s: Santa Monica Boulevard, the Pacific Coast Highway, and Melrose Avenue, as well as the shoots he has made since 2007 of over forty additional streets. These later shoots represent more than twenty-five major thoroughfares such as Sepulveda, Pico, Olympic, Wilshire, La Cienega, and Beverly Boulevards, as well as "suites" of streets in areas such as Chinatown, La Brea, and Silver Lake.

Taken together, the materials in these two archives demonstrate Ruscha's sustained interest in producing visual records of some of the city's main thoroughfares with a concentration on those running through Los Angeles' Westside. The variety of raw materials present—including negatives, contact sheets, videotapes, and film reels—reflects the evolution of Ruscha's documentation processes from still to moving film. Also found in the SoLA Archive are the production materials for Ruscha's book *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966) and two projects produced with the art dealer and gallerist Patrick Painter: Ruscha's portfolio *Sunset Strip* (printed 1995) and his book *THEN & NOW: Hollywood Boulevard, 1973–2004* (2005).

PROCESSING

Processing is a fundamental step in the stewardship of an archival collection. The term *processing* is used in the field as a shortcut to mean gaining physical and intellectual control over the materials contained within a collection. *Physical control* refers to safeguarding the materials and accurately recording where materials are stored. *Intellectual control* includes descriptive work to assist with identifying and locating items of interest. Archival processing comprises several steps: surveying the materials to gain a sense of the scope and content of the collection; housing the materials in containers best suited to their physical needs; arranging the materials to confirm the creator's original order; determining a logical order for them in the absence of any obvious original order; providing a

framework for how the materials relate to each other and to make them searchable and retrievable by researchers; and describing the materials at the collection level (a general overview) and at the container level (or, rarely, item level) to indicate where the materials can be found within the collection and to provide a more nuanced sense of its contents. Simple preservation activities as well as more complex conservation treatments may also be performed on materials deemed at risk or to facilitate safer handling of the materials by researchers.

Both Ruscha collections were processed in 2012 by Special Collections archivist Beth Ann Guynn and volunteer Linda Kleiger. They housed the materials in appropriate containers before describing them in the finding aid. While most of the rehousing was routine, the thirteen-frame negative strips were more than double the size of standard archival negative-holder sheets, necessitating a search for custom housing. Continuous-roll negative holders that could be cut to the desired length were the solution.

Description is often an iterative activity that relies on the ability to visually access and assess the materials. Initial description that provided a more accurate and robust level of metadata initially concentrated on the still negatives, contact prints, and project documentation materials that could be viewed by the naked eye without mechanical intervention. As is the case with all original audiovisual material, the contents of the film reels (negatives and positives) could not be fully verified until they were reformatted as copies, which allows them to be safely viewed without running the risk of damaging and potentially losing the material. For the initial descriptive data, Guynn used labels and annotations on the film canisters and film leaders, cue and footage sheets, and invoices from the processing lab where the positive films were created from the negative film rolls. While this would seem to provide a significant amount of information, elements such as footage and dates vary among the different sources.

Data caught after reformatting allows the archivist to determine the most accurate information. In 2017 and 2019, digital image files on CDs were converted to JPEG format for access; they were then described in more depth in the finding aid to include the number of image files they contained, be they full contact sheets or

individual frames from the film reels. The descriptive metadata generated in this processing phase not only provided the critical framework for understanding and accessing the collections but also developed the structure for the iterative metadata work that would follow.

CAPTURE

While digitizing¹⁰ our collections supports Getty's mission to make them accessible to a global audience, with the Ruscha collection, digitizing was crucial because the majority of the images were contained on 35mm-negative film reels. This format enabled Ruscha's programmatic photography project to scale up but limited access to the collection; in fact, Ruscha himself has never seen most of the images in the SoLA Archive, due to the mediation needed by the format. On a practical level, the reel format made the images impossible to present to researchers within our reading rooms. Digitization was the only way to provide and ensure intellectual access to the Ruscha materials and circumvent the limitations posed by the physical format.

Selection is a key activity in the digitization process. Generally speaking, a number of criteria are taken into consideration when selecting collections or subsets of collections to be digitized, including copyright, contribution to the cultural heritage record, potential to advance scholarship, preservation of the materials, improving understanding of the materials, and potential for added functionality.¹¹ While Ruscha's vast SoLA Archive consists of approximately 740,000 photographs, only a subset of the collection was selected for digitization by the project team. To activate scholarly and public interest, and to free the images from the 35mm-negative reel format, about 130,000 photographs were chosen as the most comprehensive subset of Ruscha's documentation of some of Los Angeles' main streets between 1965 and 2010. This subset represents approximately 17 percent of the collection, including twenty-five shoots. Along with the images, select notebooks from the shoots were also digitized, providing additional context. Image formats included photographic negatives and contact sheets, but the majority were negatives spooled onto film reels.

Getty's Digital Imaging Department typically captures works on paper or objects. Working with

the format and scale of the reels presented a unique challenge and an opportunity to see how much of the process could be automated. To work efficiently and ergonomically on this project, innovation was required. Chris Edwards, Getty's former imaging architect, and lead photographer John Kiffe developed a custom imaging station in partnership with a digitization vendor. This setup included several camera enhancements needed to produce a high-resolution image¹² and the replacement of a glass carrier with a metal one to gently advance the film while minimizing the potential for dust, which could distort the image made from the negative. To produce a higher rate of accuracy and reduce the postproduction handwork necessary, a device called an *intervalometer*, which fires the camera shutter, was connected to a trigger that took a digital photograph about every five seconds. This provided time for imaging technician Tavo Olmos to move the film into position after it was advanced automatically, resulting in more accurate cropping. Moreover, the intervalometer method could be used from a seated or standing position, making it more ergonomic than using a foot pedal or a hand trigger. It is important to note that while automation assisted in the image capture, there was still a significant amount of handwork involved to oversee and intervene in the automated process.

Innovating the capture process took an unexpected turn when about a third of the way into the project, an overwhelmingly pungent smell emanated from some reels. This was a distinct sign of *vinegar syndrome*, the process of chemical degradation when film gives off acetic acid as it decomposes, a potential health risk. Laura Sokolosky, from the imaging team, tested reels thought to be affected and isolated those with vinegar syndrome into cold storage to slow the decay process. Working with Linda Somerville from our risk management office, we were able to construct ventilation hoods that hovered just above each reel in the imaging studio to draw in the fumes. The resulting modification produced a steampunk-looking workstation that enabled Olmos to safely work with the reels throughout the duration of the project (fig. 3.1). While we encountered a couple of hurdles along the way, imaging ran very efficiently with a capture rate of approximately 1200 frames a day.

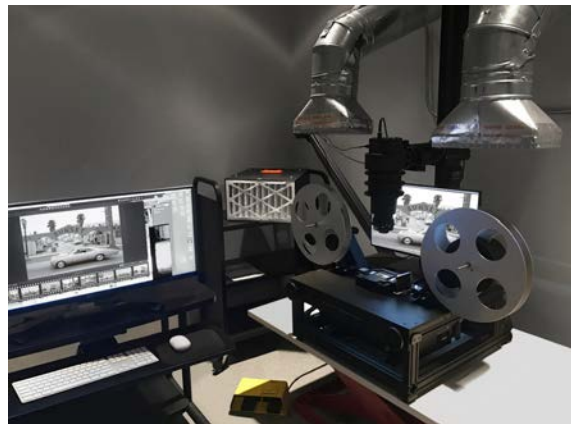


Figure 3.1 Custom-built machine that images Ed Ruscha's film reels, 2019. Note the ventilation hoods to address vinegar syndrome off-gassing. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute. Photograph by Teresa Soleau.

Following imaging, digital object files were deposited into our digital preservation system¹³ with descriptive, administrative, and structural metadata. Ruscha's digital archive contains over four hundred thousand files, which include master images and two derivatives, and it comprises 27 percent of Getty's total storage space in the preservation system. This archive's still-image digital footprint is sixty-three terabytes, Getty's largest to date.

ITEM-LEVEL METADATA

Typically, our processing ends with the deposit of digitized content into our digital preservation system and the creation of a collection finding aid, but as mentioned earlier, we were interested in how we could use computational methods to further enrich the discoverability of this material by a broad audience. While archival processing yielded street names and shoot dates for each of Ruscha's photography sessions (for example, "Sunset Boulevard, 2007–2010, Shoot took place from June 9 to June 13, 2007; 24.6 miles"), a typical shoot could yield between approximately four thousand and eight thousand images for researchers to sift through. More granular metadata was needed to make this collection usable, but manually describing every item contained within the collection was not feasible. However, the geospatial nature of these materials, combined with Ruscha's mechanized process and his methodical note-taking practices, provided the opportunity for us to explore generating descriptive metadata for every image. Through

working with an extended project team—which included Stace Maples, assistant director of Geospatial Collections and Services at Stanford University Libraries, and an external vendor—we were able to realize this vision of providing descriptive metadata for every frame of the project.

Ruscha's own documentation was key. It provided us with the start and stop locations of each photo shoot as well as the exact height of the camera and the trigger speed used. With this information, our vendor developed a mapping tool that placed the images from the beginning and end of a particular shoot at specific points on the map, allowing for the interpolation of all the street views in between (fig. 3.2). The tool leveraged existing publicly available datasets to provide building outlines and the routes used for interpolation.¹⁴ While lining up images between two points on a street was an automated process, there was a significant amount of manual placement to adjust the interpolation and a manual review to verify the accuracy of the automated process. The review included a technician inspecting the thumbnail and finding an easily identifiable landmark, such as a street sign or address number. With a landmark noted, Google Maps was used to compare the nonchanging landmark using Street View technology. If the image was not at the correct point on the map, the error was identified by human eyes and manually moved into the correct location by the technician. The realignment would then cascade through the set of interpolated images. This computer-assisted method produced latitude and longitude coordinates for each of the 130,000 images with an accuracy rate within ten feet. The coordinates were then cross-referenced with the tax data from the L.A. County Office of the Assessor to connect the human-readable address data and Assessor Identification Number (AIN) for the property to the dataset.

Beyond generating the geolocations and connecting the addresses and AINs, the images were processed using Google's Cloud Vision application programming interface (API). An API is a piece of software that allows for two or more applications to communicate with each other for various services. In this case, the Cloud Vision API was used to "read" the images. Using the API's optical character recognition (OCR) service, words found in the Ruscha images (e.g., on street signs,

billboards, marquees, and shop signs) were transcribed into text; and using the computer vision service labels, or tags (e.g., *car*, *tree*, and *dog*), identifying objects in the images were created. Both services created additional metadata that could be used to enhance the search functionality to locate specific images containing keywords.

This project was our first use of computer vision on collection materials. These services are not a panacea. We had issues with unintelligible text due to image angles, generic labels (the top five being *tree*, *black and white*, *sky*, *residential area*, and *monochrome*), and bizarre object identifications (*snow* in Los Angeles!).¹⁵ While the computer vision output lacked specificity, analysis on a small subset of the labels suggested an 80 percent accuracy rate. These methods proved to be useful for generating additional pathways into the collection (see "Description as Data: What the Tags See in the SoLA Archive," this volume [online edition only]).

As with the image capture, item-level metadata generation was a semiautomated and somewhat laborious manual process. While the algorithm used to interpolate the images significantly advanced this work, the human component was essential for the accuracy of the image placement and to connect each image to the correct address. Processing an archival collection in this manner is unusual. Bespoke application development to generate item-level metadata for a specific collection is not typically done, given the resources that are required, both human and fiscal. What made this project possible were the specific geospatial affordances of Ruscha's work, his detailed shoot documentation, and Getty's ambition to experiment with new methods to amplify the SoLA Archive.

Artificial intelligence (AI)—which the Google Cloud Vision API is based on—or, more specifically, computer vision (a subset of AI), has emerged as an effective tool for processing at scale. Since we executed this project, AI tools have continued to advance exponentially across industries, including libraries and archives.¹⁶ The takeaway with this AI project, which was executed in 2018–19, still applies today: using AI is not a silver bullet and underscores the need for interrogation and analysis. Automation can only get you so far, and human labor is required if



Figure 3.2 Screenshot of the mapping tool used to place Ed Ruscha's images on top of a Los Angeles street map to produce geospatial metadata, 2019.

accuracy and quality are desirable outcomes. This combination of technology, innovation, and the human touch produced a rich set of metadata that allows researchers deeper access into the collection, and by connecting to external datasets, a network of research opportunities was built.¹⁷

SYSTEMS

As discussed, descriptive metadata is the foundation on which our collections are discovered. That metadata must reside in Getty's systems of record for management and be made available on public-facing interfaces. Libraries and archives are governed by community standards and systems for specific use cases: bibliographic, archival, preservation, and access. There is no single system that can solve the complex data management needs of a twenty-first-century cultural heritage and research institution. In our ecosystem of systems and standards,¹⁸ traditionally created metadata has a home, but none of the systems or data models could accommodate the nonstandard, item-level metadata we were generating, such as transcriptions, addresses, coordinates, and camera bearing.

Additionally, we knew that our current platform for providing public access to both our finding aids and our digital collections would be inadequate for the level of discoverability and

direct access imagined for the SoLA Archive. Our Collection Inventories and Finding Aids interface was running on outdated technology and needed replacement. Furthermore, our digital preservation system was used to give access to the GRI's digital collections. This required users to navigate the collection based on how the files were deposited into the system, which, as mentioned earlier, is a less-than-ideal user experience. In this instance, it would require browsing through a reel's worth of images that numbered in the thousands to locate specific items of interest.

This project dovetailed with Getty Digital's initiative to advance our data and technical infrastructure, with a goal of moving linked data into production using the Arches data management platform. Arches, built by the Getty Conservation Institute and the World Monuments Fund, is a flexible, linked data-aware system built on community standards. The platform is ontology-agnostic, meaning it doesn't come prebuilt with a database schema. This allowed us to build a data model specific to the metadata we needed to store that followed a cultural heritage standard.¹⁹ Arches filled an important gap in our data-management ecosystem. As the inaugural production instance of the platform at Getty, Arches was implemented to manage the metadata generated from the SoLA Archive.

With a standards-based, item-level data model and unique identifiers for each image in the

collection that were cross-referenced to metadata across the ecosystem,²⁰ we were poised to deliver a new discovery experience and change the paradigm for how Getty delivers our digitized archival content.

IMAGE DELIVERY

Beyond metadata, there was also the need to provide on-demand digital access to the hundreds of thousands of photographs; to support close looking via deep zoom; to supply thumbnails for search results and other summary displays; and to enable reuse of this collection across multiple platforms. To do all this, we decided to utilize the International Image Interoperability Framework (IIIF), a set of standards developed within the cultural heritage community to provide consistent patterns for the access to and presentation of digitized images.²¹ This standard allows projects to take advantage of existing software applications²² with interfaces that allow for complex behavior such as deep zoom, image comparison, and annotation—enabling the Ruscha images to be used with tools scholars already had access to and were potentially comfortable with. It also allows metadata to be associated with an individual image and with sequences of images, providing a mechanism beyond archival description or filename conventions to order and display images within the context of the negative strips and film reels that hold the physical photos.

ACCESS: DIGITAL ARCHIVE NAVIGATION APPLICATION (DANA)

These tools and standards built a foundation for access to images, image sequences, and metadata. What remained was to put in place a mechanism for human access and discovery. Initially, we had hoped to use a software application developed by Getty for the Harald Szeemann Papers at the GRI.²³ The Digital Archive Navigation Application (DANA) used the sequence information provided by IIIF to create an access interface for the archival finding aids. On initial review, this seemed an adequate and simple solution: the structure provided by the standard was sufficiently rich to capture the archival hierarchy, display metadata, and provide access to

the digitized images. However, we quickly realized that the level of interactivity we wanted would be difficult to achieve. IIIF is a brilliant presentation mechanism for sequencing images, but the SoLA Archive was not *just* a sequence of images—the images depicted places with their own data. The complex semantic relationships among images, places, and times captured through the metadata enhancement process would not fit within the IIIF framework without custom extensions, which would minimize the benefit of using the standard.

ACCESS: RESEARCH COLLECTIONS VIEWER + LINKED OPEN DATA

Instead, we designed a system capable of integrating information across three different systems, each designed to meet specific disciplinary needs: Our digital preservation system represented the images as information objects worthy of long-term preservation, but it did not contain the descriptive details of each image. The archival information management application held the finding aid, but it considered the data as a digital proxy for the physical archive of boxes and reels. And Arches, our item-level metadata repository, held complex computer-generated information about individual negatives, but it lacked context for how this data might be interrelated.

We considered a custom interface and API for the SoLA Archive but rejected that solution due to concerns about sustainability—Ruscha's archive is only one of hundreds of rich archival collections at the GRI, each with their own context and specific concerns, and while we had the capacity to build such a system, we knew we couldn't sustain the software-engineering resources needed to maintain it while also building what was needed for the next archive.²⁴ Instead, we developed a generic archival viewing solution with support for item-level metadata, IIIF images, and the ability to provide contextual enhancements for specific types of metadata.

To meet this need, we identified a single data model that was capable, alongside IIIF, of bridging our three systems of record—one built on top of an existing standard and community. Though several had been considered,²⁵ we chose Linked.Art, a Linked Open Data (LOD) profile of the CIDOC CRM.²⁶ This standard was sufficiently



Figure 3.3 Screenshot of the Research Collections Viewer showing Ed Ruscha's photograph of Schwab's Pharmacy (1976), 2020.

flexible to support both item-level metadata and archival hierarchy, and it used the same technology as our IIIF infrastructure, providing efficiencies for the engineering team. Once an approach was identified and the data across the three systems was transformed into this standard, we developed a software interface named the Research Collections Viewer (RCV) (figs. 3.3, 3.4).²⁷ This interface was intended to be used by scholars and professionals familiar with archival research and finding aids; our user research²⁸ showed that this audience was primarily interested in searching and browsing the material within an archival context. This meant the interface used the physical arrangement as the primary organizing principle for the data, with full-text and keyword search as a secondary access mechanism. It was not Ruscha-specific, but it did allow for surfacing geospatial data via map displays, and it supported discovery through surfacing contextual relationships such as physical proximity.

ACCESS: "12 SUNSETS"

There were opportunities presented by the SoLA Archive, however, that would not be taken advantage of in this framework—for example, the correspondence between space and time across photos would be difficult for users to understand. We also knew that while an archival presentation was often confusing or off-putting to nonscholarly audiences, the archive could appeal beyond the

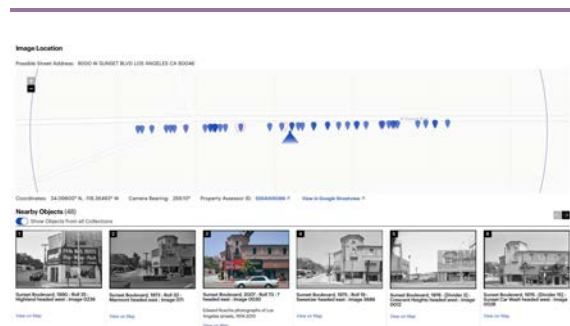


Figure 3.4 Screenshot of the Research Collections Viewer's map display, 2020.

scholarly community if only there was a way to make people aware of it.

To meet these needs, Getty worked with Stamen Design to build a web application called "12 Sunsets: Exploring Ed Ruscha's Archive"²⁹ that took advantage of the unique characteristics of the collection and pulled design cues from the history contained in the SoLA Archive, such as Thomas Guide street maps, *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, and even Ruscha's truck (fig. 3.5). The interface allows a user to "drive" a digital representation of Ruscha's truck up and down Sunset Boulevard, seeing the photos on either side of the road. Users can also select photos from a specific year, or even compare multiple years by stacking them, a feature inspired by the display in Ruscha's *THEN & NOW* (2005) (see fig. 2.22).

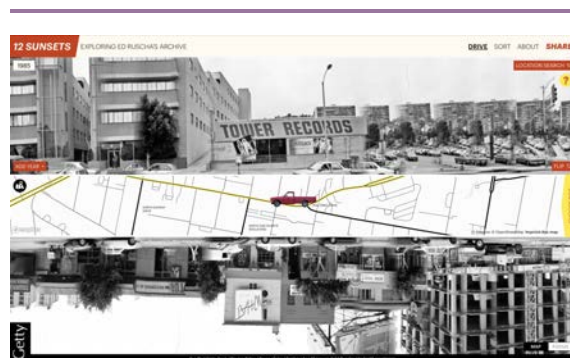


Figure 3.5 Screenshot of "12 Sunsets: Exploring Ed Ruscha's Archive," Getty's interactive website of Ed Ruscha's Sunset Boulevard photographs, 2020.

By taking advantage of OCR and image tagging, searching for words or objects within photos is possible. This capability, expressed in an innovative "mad-lib" structure, lets users

recontextualize the collection and discover unexpected connections between images, despite the idiosyncratic nature of the computationally generated metadata.

While “12 Sunsets” uses the same metadata and image services, it was designed within a different sustainability paradigm, with a two-year expected duration. By allowing the site to have a known end date, it provided freedom to explore the possibilities of technology without fear of the long-term implications of maintenance that were prohibitive in the case of a custom archival viewing environment.

CONCLUSION

The digitization of the SoLA Archive has opened the door to many possibilities already, and more remain untapped in this rich trove of information. Throughout the process, Getty has done its best to ensure that the collection is designed for use—through digital technology as data, intellectual access as archival material, and discovery points targeted at a variety of audiences. Ruscha’s archive challenged Getty to rethink our data infrastructure and discovery platform, propelling us to embrace new methods and technologies that now undergird our work. Throughout the rest of this volume, we hope that our efforts have enabled others to discover new stories through Ed Ruscha’s lens.

NOTES

- For the collections’ finding aids and to access digitized photographs, see Edward Ruscha Photographs of Sunset Boulevard and Hollywood Boulevard, 1965–2010, 2012.M.1, <https://www.getty.edu/research/collections/collection/100001>; and Edward Ruscha Photographs of Los Angeles Streets, 1974–2010, 2012.M.2, <https://www.getty.edu/research/collections/collection/100071>.
- Zanna Gilbert and Jennier Quick, “Ed Ruscha’s Streets of Los Angeles: A Narrative History,” this volume.
- “About,” Getty, <https://web.archive.org/web/20240101015409/https://www.getty.edu/about/>.
- As a point of comparison, the J. Paul Getty Museum’s object collection contains about 130,000 objects with a corresponding catalog record for each object. At the time of publication, the GRI’s total archival footprint extends over approximately 80,000 linear feet, or 228 football fields, containing millions of items.
- Jennifer Schaffner, “The Metadata Is the Interface: Better Description for Better Discovery of Archives and Special Collections, Synthesized from User Studies,” (Dublin, OH: OCLC Research, 2009), <https://doi.org/10.25333/dp1k-3348>.
- Metadata is data about data. Descriptive metadata provides information about the content and context of data. Examples of metadata elements include title, creator, date, address, and keywords.
- Schaffner, “Metadata,” 9.
- Getty, “On Ruscha’s Streets of Los Angeles Archive,” 12 September 2019, educational video, 4:09, <https://web.archive.org/web/20230415181411/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MH063-eAF6w>.
- This essay is written for a general academic audience. The endnotes provide more technical details for specialists in this area of work.
- The term *digitizing* in this context is the process of capturing an image, but it also involves a series of activities for each image: selection, preparation, creating technical and descriptive metadata, digital conversion, and using systems of record for management and preservation.
- Dan Hazan, Jeffrey Horrell, and Jan Merrill-Oldham, *Selecting Research Collections for Digitization—Full Report* (Alexandria, VA: Council on Library and Information Resources, 1998), <https://web.archive.org/web/20240126185546/https://www.clir.org/pubs/reports/hazen/pub74/>.
- A 9000-pixel file on the long side.
- Getty uses Rosetta, the Ex Libris digital preservation system.
- LARIAC5 Data provided building outlines for the various L.A. streets, while the routes used for the interpolation are based on the TIGER/Line Shapefiles dataset. “LARIAC5 Documents & Data,” Los Angeles Region Imagery Acquisition Consortium, <https://lariac-lacounty.hub.arcgis.com/pages/lariac5-documents-data>; and “Tiger/Line Shapefiles,” United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/geographies/mapping-files/time-series/geo/tiger-line-file.html>.
- Nathaniel Deines, “Does It Snow in LA?,” Getty Iris, 7 October 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20221128204236/https://blogs.getty.edu/iris/does-it-snow-in-la/>.
- “Librarian of Congress and Others Testify on Use of Artificial Intelligence,” C-SPAN video, 1:01, 24 January 2024, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?533151-1/librarian-congress-testify-artificial-intelligence#>.
- The set of metadata from these processes was output as GeoJSON and included the following: coordinates, camera bearing, Google Maps URL, tags, OCR, color metadata, AIN, depicted address, among other ancillary data, such as confidence scores and vertices, provided by the services.
- Getty creates Encoded Archival Description (EAD)–compliant finding aids in ArchivesSpace; MARC collection-level bibliographic records are submitted to WorldCat and ingested into Alma, our library services platform; bibliographic records and our finding aids are indexed and made available via our Library Catalog, which is a Primo implementation.
- The data model used is based on Linked.Art (<https://linked.art/>), a profile of the CIDOC CRM.
- A bespoke application called the ID Manager was built to manage data references across the ecosystem to marry metadata for an individual item from different platforms.
- IIIF, described at <https://iiif.io>, includes two relevant APIs: the Image API, which provides a pattern for requesting specific sizes or crops of the images; and the Presentation API, which allows images to be placed in a hierarchical structure, with display metadata associated with each image or the hierarchy as a whole. Together, these make up an “IIIF manifest,” which is a machine-readable file at a specific URL that can be imported into one of many viewers that support the framework.
- Throughout the course of the project, we used Leaflet.js (<https://leafletjs.com/>), OpenSeadragon (<https://openseadragon.github.io/>), the Mirador Viewer (<https://projectmirador.org/>), and IIPIImage (<https://iipimage.sourceforge.io/>), among other tools to manage image delivery and display. Without these open-source, community-supported tools this project would have been cost prohibitive.
- See the collection finding aid: Harald Szeemann Papers, 1800–2011, bulk 1949–2005, 1949–2005, 2000.7, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, <https://www.getty.edu/research/collections/collection/113YKH>.

24. A significant portion of the cost of a software application is in the maintenance, particularly when the impact of that application will be realized over many years. A standard estimate in the field is that software has a three-year lifespan before needing significant upgrades and improvements. See the Socio-Technical Sustainability Roadmap (<https://sites.haa.pitt.edu/sustainabilityroadmap/>) for a detailed description of how and why such sustainability needs might be actuated.
25. In our review of existing standards, we determined that the Records in Context–Ontology (RiC-O) was not yet complete, the Europeana Data Model (EDM) and Schema.org were insufficiently granular, and Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records (FRBR) was overly complex.
26. CIDOC CRM, available at <https://www.cidoc-crm.org/>, is an international conceptual reference model used for information integration in the field of cultural heritage.
27. To access the RCV for Ruscha's photographs, see <https://www.getty.edu/research/collections/collection/100001> and <https://www.getty.edu/research/collections/collection/100071>.
28. We conducted multiple interviews with internal stakeholders, external users, students, and participants in the Ruscha research, as well as an environmental scan of comparable projects, such as the Paul Mellon Centre's Photo Archive and the Archives of American Art.
29. "12 Sunsets: Exploring Ed Ruscha's Archive," Getty, <https://12sunsets.getty.edu>. Always intended to be a limited term application, the website for "12 Sunsets" will not be maintained. A video capturing some of its capabilities can be found here: <https://vimeo.com/946364401/ba0b654c0d>.

4

Seeing the System: Data Visualization as Critical Practice

Emily Pugh

Eric Rodenbeck

Ed Ruscha's Streets of Los Angeles (SoLA) Archive is confounding. Attempting to encapsulate and convey what this archive is, what it is about, and what it contains is a considerable challenge because of its immense size and the many contradictions and ironies it embodies. The archive is exhaustive but not comprehensive; it includes incredible local detail but traces a broad swath of time; it is represented through both physical materials (e.g., negatives, notebooks, and pasteups) and a significant number of digital components (e.g., collections data, geospatial data, and digital images). The SoLA Archive is *full* of information. What this information signifies, however, is not always clear. Yet this lack of clarity can show up in ways that offer interesting insights into the nature of archives, art making, and digital scholarship.

As Beth Ann Gwynn, David Newbury, and Lily Pregill detail in their essay, the SoLA Archive required novel approaches to archive processing and digitization.¹ It also thwarts conventional research approaches, perhaps more than most archives. The researcher is immediately challenged by the difficulty of transforming information into knowledge, which is not only a practical concern but also, in many ways, the subject of Ruscha's overall project: How does *anyone* make sense of information, especially when there is a superabundance of it? What are

the systems, digital or otherwise, through which we process information, and in what ways do these systems succeed and fail?

Transforming aspects of the SoLA Archive into data was a critical step in making sense of it and in making the archive findable and browsable so it can serve as a resource for research and knowledge production. This data—that is, the digital images, geospatial information, descriptive tags, and machine-readable versions of the text that appears in the images—was used by Stamen Design to build “12 Sunsets: Exploring Ed Ruscha's Archive,” a web-based interface that provides a visualization of the twelve digitized shoots of Sunset Boulevard, spanning 1965 to 2007.² And for this digital publication, data visualization seemed like an effective way to communicate what this archive is and what it encompasses (see “You Are Here: Locating the SoLA Archive,” “Description as Data: What the Tags See in the SoLA Archive,” “Place as Data: What Geolocation Can Tell Us,” and “The Limits of Data: 10 Banks, a Few Rivers, and Some Snow,” this volume [online edition only]).

Put simply, data visualization refers to the practice of creating images to represent information. Charts, graphs, and diagrams are all examples of data visualizations. This concept is, of course, not a new one; maps are one kind of data visualization that humans have been making

and using for as long as we have been able to draw. The advent of modern computing has meant the availability of more quantitative information, or data, and a greater variety of tools and formats for representing this data as images.

Using data visualization techniques, we sought to represent a macro view of the SoLA Archive: the time span, what is digitized and what remains as negatives, and the geography covered (and not covered) by the photographs. However, we did not regard data visualization as a tool for capturing any kind of direct or objective truth about the SoLA Archive; nor did we seek to make any definitive arguments about what it contains. Rather, in addition to clarifying what the SoLA Archive is and is not, we deployed data visualization as a critical method and as part of a process of discovery and invention. Like Ruscha's artistic practice, we used data visualization to measure the distance between image and descriptor, to make sense *and* nonsense, and to locate and identify the outlier, the mistake, and the unexpected within a mass of information.

Before we turn to specific examples of how data visualization can be deployed as critical practice in relation to the SoLA Archive, there are some caveats to keep in mind. Data visualization is a process with several steps and variables, each of which can affect and shift the outcome. For example, using a dataset of descriptive tags generated for each of the digital images in the SoLA Archive, it is possible to create visualizations based on one such tag: *palm tree*. By looking at where this tag appears in different shoots across various years, you can track the growth of individual palm trees over time, explore the relation of different palm tree species to demographic trends, and so on. However, some factors will influence the accuracy of the resulting visualizations.

Consider, for example, the two maps from "12 Sunsets" of the 55 images tagged *palm tree* in the black-and-white shoot of Sunset Boulevard from 1998, and the 361 images tagged *palm tree* in the color shoot of 2007 (figs. 4.1, 4.2). Either 306 palm trees were planted along Sunset Boulevard between 1998 and 2007 or, more likely, the algorithm used to generate the descriptive tags for these images works significantly better on color images than it does on black and white. Thus, what seems at first like a neutral and fairly well-understood process of image analysis turns

out to be highly contingent, subject to limitations, and often a source of surprise. Understanding and working within these contingencies and limitations—in the data, in the processes of analyses and data management, and in the design of the resulting image—is a critical part of creating data visualizations.

Another part of this exploration is identifying proxies—that is, information that can be a reliable indicator for some other kind of information. For example, the tag *palm tree* (or any comparable terms, such as *woody plant*, *nature*, *arecales*, or *date palm*) can indicate where a palm tree is located. In addition, a preponderance of palm trees, or vegetation more generally, indicates areas with lower-density development and higher property values. Thus, once other factors like those described above are taken into account, the term *palm tree* can serve as a proxy for affluence.³ As this example demonstrates, data visualization is a process through which one can explore the possibilities and limitations of a dataset, what that dataset can (or cannot) tell you about that data, and the slice of the world that data describes or represents, along with the processes by which it is doing so.

Within the processes of producing data visualizations, it can be the mistakes, the gaps, or the idiosyncrasies that are as revealing as the expected or typical results. The pages that follow use three examples to illustrate how the various activities that compose data visualization—from the formation of data to the creation of images that represent it—should be framed as open-ended operations that not only provide answers but also present questions, often ones that would be difficult to ask without visualizing the data.

VISION CARE

Over the past several years, computer algorithms that can transform images into quantitative, machine-readable data have opened new possibilities for data visualization. For the Ruscha project, Getty used Google's Cloud Vision application programming interface (API) to generate text-based tags describing what is in the images. *Palm tree* is one example; another is *vision care*. While the computer is decent at recognizing palm trees, it was less effective at understanding what was in the images tagged *vision care*, as they clearly do not illustrate the

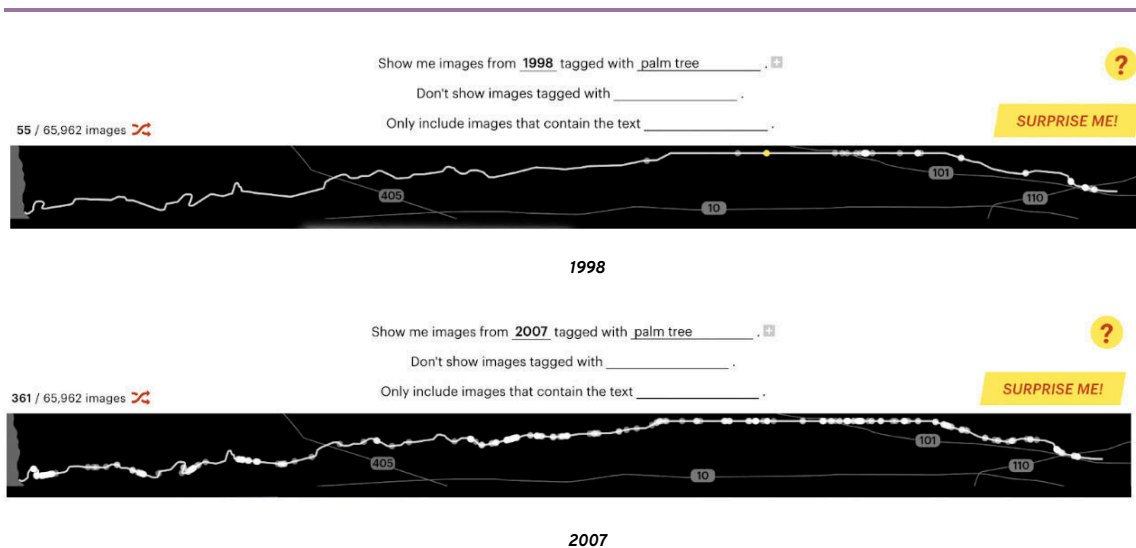


Figure 4.1 Screenshots of Stamen Design's map showing results of searches for 1998 and 2007 that are tagged *palm tree*, from "12 Sunsets: Exploring Ed Ruscha's Archive," 2020. Logan Williams, Stamen Design.



Figure 4.2 Photographs by Ed Ruscha from 2007 that are tagged *palm tree*, from "12 Sunsets: Exploring Ed Ruscha's Archive," 2020. Logan Williams, Stamen Design. © Ed Ruscha.

term in any real sense (there are no ophthalmologist offices or eyeglass retailers depicted) (fig. 4.3). Rather than dismiss this as a mistake or accident, we can consider what this tag *does* show.

When the team stopped driving periodically to load new reels onto the camera mounted in the back of the pickup truck, they marked the beginnings and ends of the reels using cards depicting the reel number. It is these images that computer vision labeled *vision care*.⁴ It is unclear why the computer associated these images with vision care, but it probably has something to do with the presence of sunglasses and possibly the numbered card, which is evocative of an eye chart. These images end up revealing a different type of information: the locations along each

street where the crew stopped to change film rolls. The *vision care* tag becomes a possible proxy for the length of a reel. Moreover, in its attempt to describe the image, the computer generates the kinds of word-image associations that Ruscha himself is so famous for. A face with sunglasses generates tags including *snapshot*, *facial expression*, and *stock photography* along with *vision care* (fig. 4.4). Thus, sending an archive of photographs through a computer-vision tagging algorithm can generate thousands of unique text-image associations, some of which, like *vision care*, are technically inaccurate but revelatory. The generation of data from photographs is a process that, like Ruscha's work, asks us to question the text, the image, and the relationship between them.



Figure 4.3 Photograph by Ed Ruscha tagged *vision care*, from “12 Sunsets: Exploring Ed Ruscha’s Archive,” 2020. Logan Williams, Stamen Design. © Ed Ruscha.



Figure 4.4 Ed Ruscha, Photograph from the Streets of Los Angeles Archive, 1966, digital positive from negative. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.

By turning machine-readable information into images, data visualization asks us to consider how data relates to the thing it represents. When it doesn’t, our attention is drawn to the underlying processes of data generation by which qualitative information is transformed into elements of data, including tags like *vision care* as well as location information. As the SoLA Archive illustrates, this process of “datafication” is not always neat or simple; it can contain errors, glitches, unexpected juxtapositions, gaps, and surprises. Such idiosyncrasies should not be dismissed as signs of a broken system; rather, they should be seen as providing specific and targeted opportunities for us to see, and thus to critique and question that system.

THE THE

In addition to tagging, Getty used optical character recognition (OCR) to translate images of text into machine-readable text. As a result, it is now very easy to, for example, identify every image that contains the word *the* in “12 Sunsets” (such a search returns 1,523 images). You can view all of them or look at individual years. For example, there are 112 images that include *the* in the 1966 shoot, and 27 in 1995. The query was initially proposed by one of the research project’s scholars, Eva Ehninger, who was interested in a particular image from Ruscha’s 1966 book *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, taken during the shoot that same year (see fig. 12.1).⁵ On the long, white wall of a building, there is a single word: *The*. Questions arose: Was this image retouched in the book to show only *The* and no other words? Was this an intentional erasure by Ruscha to highlight the humble, direct article *the*? When we look at the individual photographs in the archive that make up the montage, it becomes clear that Ruscha used the photo as it was taken (fig. 4.5). So, what was happening here? Jumping forward to the next shoot, in 1973, the same wall is now a little different (fig. 4.6). We can see the full title of the business, The Classic Cat, a famous nightclub on Sunset Boulevard. The “Classic Cat” part of the sign was added between the 1966 and 1973 shoots. It appears that the 1966 shoot took place on one of the days the sign was being installed. By 1976, ivy had grown over the letters, to the point that OCR could no longer find the word *The* (see fig. 12.7).

This example demonstrates a key characteristic of both Ruscha’s archive and data visualization: how specific data points from a SoLA Archive reel relate to the dataset overall. Central to Ruscha’s project was the compilation of thousands and thousands of images; similarly, data visualization relies on lots and lots of data. While the whole is critically important in each case, the part is also incredibly relevant. Regarding the word *the*, images with the word by itself make clear that the 1966 photo shoot happened at a very specific time in the history of The Classic Cat building on Sunset Boulevard. Data visualization can provide insight into a mass of information by abstracting it and extrapolating the general from the whole, but in this example, extracting only the 1966 photo would obscure the



a. 8844



b. 8844



c. 8844



d. 8844

Figure 4.5 Ed Ruscha, 8844 Sunset Boulevard, 1966, digital positives from negatives. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1 (a, b, c, d). © Ed Ruscha.

aberration of the lone *the*. At the same time, because the image was processed using OCR, the existence of a searchable data point—the *the* tag—means that the trace of the appearance and then disappearance of a word is nonetheless recoverable.

The story of the *the* suggests another kind of visualization possibility: a map of urban change over time based on tags. In our data visualizations for this publication, for example, we used the tags *tree* and *the* to explore trends in urban development along Sunset Boulevard (see “Description as Data,” this volume [online edition only]).

DONT

As the examples of *vision care* and *the* demonstrate, gaps or inconsistencies in a dataset can often lead to insights or new questions. At other times, the *consistency* of the data across the archive leads to insights. For example, there are 426 images for which the OCR process

captured *DONT* (as in *don’t*). Of these 426 images, *DONT* appears more often on the east side of Sunset than on the west side, which you can observe because each image is geotagged with its location. *Don’t* seems a curious word to be so widespread; ads and signs with words on them typically *want* you to do or buy something, not discourage you from it (fig. 4.7). Looking more closely, you find that almost all of them contain a pedestrian crossing and a streetlight. Zooming in a bit further reveals something else: “DONT WALK” signs (fig. 4.8). This, of course, makes sense. If Ruscha’s team had photographed a lit “WALK” sign while driving past, they would have been running a red light. Thus, all the crosswalks that Ruscha’s team drove through were lit with “DONT,” and by mapping the word *DONT*, you get a map of all the crosswalks too.

Ruscha’s team, aided by Getty, has mapped all the crosswalks with stop lights on Sunset Boulevard without explicitly setting out to do so. This is the serendipitous outcome of keeping the cameras rolling. It makes possible visualizations that may not have been sought out or anticipated.



Figure 4.6 Ed Ruscha, 8844 Sunset Boulevard, 1973, digital positives from negatives. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1 (a, b, c, d). © Ed Ruscha.



Figure 4.7 Screenshot of "12 Sunsets: Exploring Ed Ruscha's Archive," showing images and locations of the word *DONT* along Sunset Boulevard, 2020. © Ed Ruscha.

Furthermore, it prompts the question: What else from this dataset could be mapped, or, better yet, inferred? Vacancy rates using real estate-agent signs hanging in empty storefronts? Pharmacies across time? Strip clubs versus country clubs?

These three examples, along with those in the data visualization section, illustrate some of the possibilities for exploration and visualization that the SoLA Archive, in its format as data, affords. Certainly, there is much that one can research or know about the archive or about Los Angeles

more broadly from visualizing data elements like tags, OCR text, or location information. However, there are also moments when data elements express something inaccurate, unexpected, absurd, or even uncanny. Indeed, delight is an important part of exploring archives with data visualizations, and in the case of Ruscha's archive, it seems entirely fitting, and perhaps no accident, that its dataset suggests approaches to mapping that befit the artist's particular sense of humor.

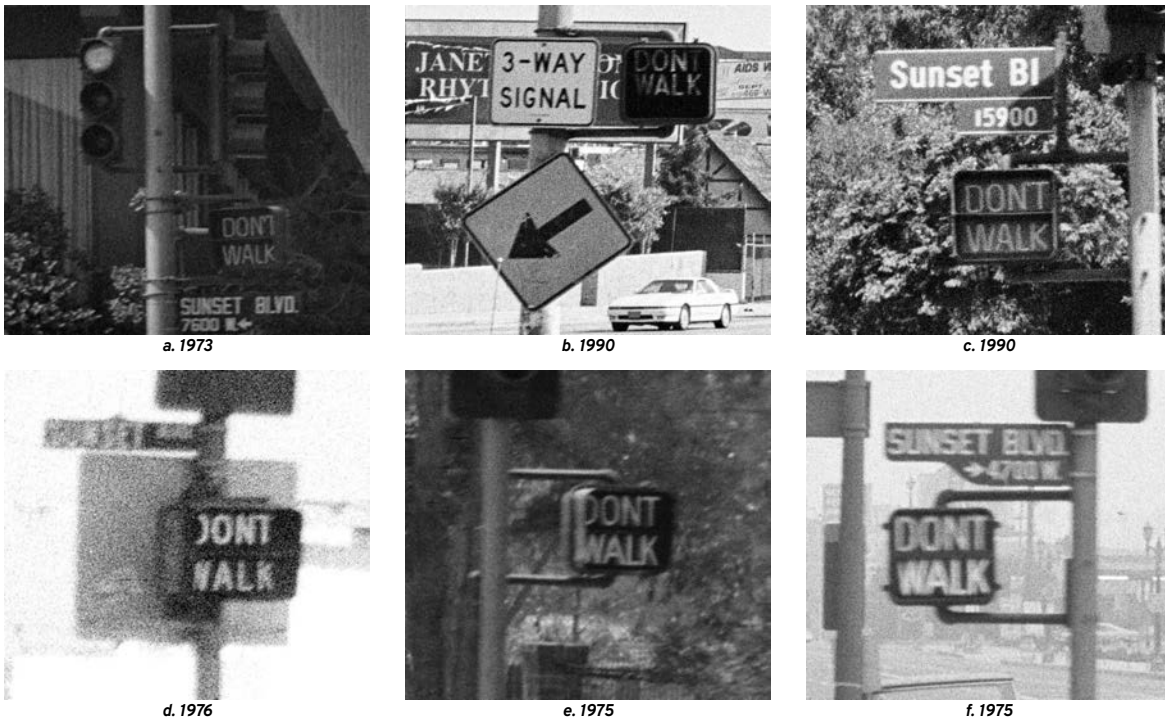


Figure 4.8 Ed Ruscha, “DONT WALK” signs near Sunset Boulevard, 1973–1990, details of digital positives from negatives. a. 7655 Sunset Blvd.; b. 7100 Sunset Blvd.; c. Sunset and El Medio Ave.; d. 8866 Sunset Blvd.; e. Sunset and Cliffwood Ave.; f. 1515 North Vermont Ave. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.

NOTES

1. See Beth Ann Gwynn, David Newbury, and Lily Pregill, “Archiving the Archive: Processing the Streets of Los Angeles Photographs,” this volume.
2. “12 Sunsets: Exploring Ed Ruscha’s Archive,” Getty, <https://12sunsets.getty.edu>. Always intended to be a limited-term application, the website for “12 Sunsets” will not be maintained. A video capturing some of its capabilities can be found here: <https://vimeo.com/946364401/ba0b654c0d>.
3. Tim Arango, “‘Turn Off the Sunshine’: Why Shade Is a Mark of Privilege in Los Angeles,” *Los Angeles Times*, 1 December 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/01/us/los-angeles-shade-climate-change.html>.
4. For more on the use of reels in the project, see Zanna Gilbert and Jennifer Quick, “Ed Ruscha’s Streets of Los Angeles: A Narrative History,” this volume.
5. See Eva Ehninger, “Nightmare of Information: Ed Ruscha’s Image Critique,” this volume.

ARTIST

Zanna Gilbert

The Streets of Los Angeles (SoLA) project is a decades-long part of Ed Ruscha's artistic practice and process. In 1965, Ruscha began a photographic campaign for his artist book *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*. Almost a decade later, in 1973, Ruscha began documenting the L.A. area again, transforming the discrete project of *Every Building* into an ongoing activity that continues to this day. The resulting photographic archive has since become the backbone of Ruscha's engagement with L.A.'s urban fabric and its socio-urban developments. Though Ruscha doesn't consider the archive an artwork, it provides source material for many of his celebrated works: *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966), the *Course of Empire* series (2005), and the *Metro Plots* series (late 1990s), to name just a few. The majority of the photographic archive, however, remains unused—what Jennifer Quick calls an “image morgue”—raising questions about the archive's latency, utility, and status: a major theme in the “Artist” section of this book.

These essays explore how new knowledge about the SoLA Archive both challenges and redefines the understanding of Ruscha's career and oeuvre. The artist's relationship to design, photography, information—and to the city of Los Angeles—is newly interrogated. Quick examines how the artist's technical knowledge and training in graphic design resulted in his unique “no design” aesthetic. Margaret Iversen pushes back against the characterization of Ruscha's work as “deadpan” to reveal the darker modes of criticality in his books and photodocumentation. Andrew Perchuk focuses on the seemingly unlimited information available among the “noise” of the SoLA photographs and the potential meanings and messages yet to be discovered. And Alyce Mahon highlights the tension between art and documentation in *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*. All the authors take singular positions on Ruscha's engagement with information and communication, but they each draw out the excessive, nonrational, and obsessive nature of Ruscha's work in relation to the SoLA Archive.

No Design: The Streets Photographs and Ruscha's Books

Jennifer Quick

Ed Ruscha's roots in 1950s and '60s commercial design have earned him equal amounts of praise and derision. It was Ruscha's deployment of midcentury design's tools, methods, and images that initially helped to secure his place in the pop art movement in the early moments of his career. Yet many critics came to see Ruscha's art as banal and unserious, either because of his status as a Los Angeles artist, as Alexandra Schwartz has argued, or because of his associations with the commercial rather than the fine arts.¹ At Chouinard Art Institute, where Ruscha studied advertising design, professor of painting Emerson Woelffer declared that in his fine arts classes, Ruscha did nothing but simply import design techniques and tools into his work. Speaking of Ruscha's art assignments Woelffer declared, "He had to do it [art] on the illustration board . . . he drew the illustration."² For Woelffer, design's methods and techniques had no place in the world of fine art—a sphere in which painting still reigned as the supreme medium. It was precisely at this moment, however, in movements such as pop art, that the lines between art and design were becoming murkier, as artists such as Ruscha moved fluidly between design-based training and careers and identities as professional artists. As I argue in my book *Back to the Drawing Board: Ed Ruscha, Art and Design in the 1960s* (2022), Ruscha's relationship to design is one of

productive ambivalence, in that he both embraced and subverted its tenets.³ One of the ways Ruscha repurposed design, and pushed it to its limits, was to create works that appeared minimally designed, as if there was little or even no governing aesthetic program. Similar to what Benjamin Buchloh referred to as an "aesthetic of administration" in Ruscha's books, the idea of "no design" also equates closely to what the artist himself called "no style," or a "severe" look.⁴ By understanding how the ideas of "the aesthetic of administration," "no style," or visual severity relate to the world of midcentury design, we can locate Ruscha's art more precisely in its economic and social contexts. In this essay, I focus on his books: the minimal covers, sparse captioning, and black-and-white photographs of unremarkable landmarks embody the notion of "no design" most clearly. While Ruscha cultivated this aesthetic in books, the Streets of Los Angeles (SoLA) Archive has also showed us the flip side of this coin: behind the books exists an expansive collection of images almost absurd in its scope which, in the end, proved to exceed and overwhelm the capacities of printed design.

LOS ANGELES AND MODERN DESIGN

From the moment he arrived in Los Angeles, Ruscha became immersed in the city's bustling design economy. By the 1950s, the Los Angeles area boasted excellent art and design schools, including Chouinard, Otis Art Institute, Scripps College, and the Art Center School. Many of the faculty at these institutions participated in federal arts programs established by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1930s.⁵ At Scripps, for example, the California architect and painter Millard Sheets developed a curriculum designed to prepare students for careers in the commercial arts and design. (Sheets also served as director of the Federal Art Project in Southern California).⁶ Art and design students had a choice of many different careers in growing industries such as aerospace, film, and fashion. L.A. art schools trained students to become producers in these industries, and they often had direct connections with specific firms or companies that would hire their students. Chouinard, for example, had since the 1940s been a training ground for Walt Disney's animators. Eventually, when the school began to experience financial troubles in the 1950s and 1960s, Disney stepped in as an official supporter and guided the school to a merger with the Los Angeles Conservatory of Music in 1961 (though his company had long contributed to scholarships at Chouinard).⁷

Advertising design was thriving in the 1950s, partially due to the growth of the European immigrant community in Southern California. As artists and designers worked with and transformed modernism's legacies, architecture, graphic design, and automobile design flourished. For many artists and designers, L.A. offered an environment less bound to tradition and more open to experimental ideas.⁸ Saul Bass, Louis Danziger, Charles and Ray Eames, and Elaine and Alvin Lustig were among the designers who became known for their experimental work in print design.

The Lustigs, who had each studied at Southern California institutions (Elaine at the University of Southern California and Alvin at the ArtCenter School in Pasadena), became known in the 1950s for their innovative book designs and album covers (the two had married in 1948). They also took on commissions for business documents

such as letterheads and business cards. Fascinated by surrealism and the Bauhaus, especially the work of the designer Jan Tschichold, the Lustigs sought to create a modern design language for print publications, such as the Meridian Books series published by Noonday Press. Between 1955 and 1961, the Lustigs designed twenty-six covers for the press, including the cover for Leonard Feather's *The Book of Jazz* (fig. 5.1). With intersecting purple and crimson J shapes and alternating areas of negative space, the cover embodies the dynamic structure of jazz music. Elaine later reflected that when they first began working on this series, "there were few quality paperbacks. He [Alvin] saw it as a series that could be seen together. In fact, we used to go around to bookstores and line them up."⁹ At the time, Alvin, as she remembered, was interested in nineteenth-century typography. Their work stands as an example of the type of print design that Ruscha would have become well acquainted with at Chouinard, especially given the Lustigs' notoriety in the Los Angeles area (while they never taught at Chouinard, Alvin was an instructor at other local arts institutions, including ArtCenter, where Danziger would take his classes).

Ruscha's plans in 1956 for an unrealized magazine called *Arquitecto* demonstrates the degree to which he had internalized the lessons of that decade's modernist print design (figs. 5.2, 5.3). He had become acquainted with Mexican modernist design through the architecture-student boyfriend of his sister, Shelby, who was living in Mexico City.¹⁰ For a class assignment, he drafted two different covers for *Arquitecto*. In one design, the magazine's letters are etched out in white on a black background, with the *q* in *Arquitecto* curling like a whimsical tail. To the right, a stack of irregular shapes, two of which are roughly filled in with red, is piled into a rough pyramid. One of the shapes, containing the number 13, resembles a sideways flag. For the other cover design, Ruscha featured a compass rendered in patchy gray. The sharp, pencil-drawn point connects to a red line that splits into two arcs capped by circles at one end. The title, in black and red sans serif type, is written twice, stacked, and slightly staggered, with "numero catorce" in alternating red and black serif letters. Ruscha's use of bold contrasts, repetition, different typographies, and geometric shapes

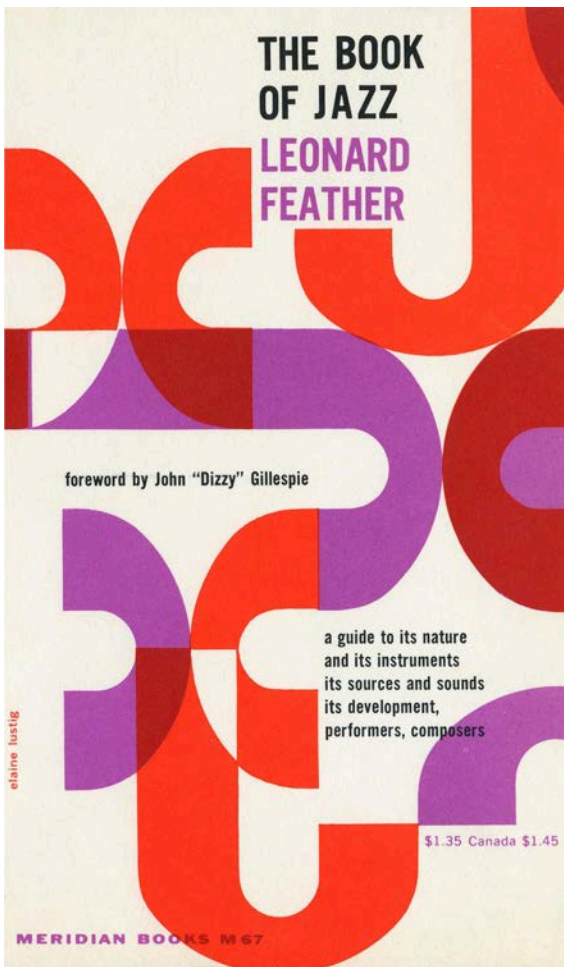


Figure 5.1 Elaine Lustig Cohen, Cover of Leonard Feather's *The Book of Jazz* (New York: Meridian, 1958). Courtesy of the Estate of Elaine Lustig Cohen.

shows he had learned the lessons of modernist design well. In other student-era assignments, Ruscha began to incorporate photography into his designs, as seen in his record cover for a Boston Pops performance of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* (fig. 5.4). Ruscha divided photographic images into five shapes, leaving slices of white space between each photograph. By staggering images across the page, he created a rhythmic composition that adds a sense of dynamism to the staid black-and-white headshot of the conductor Arthur Fielder. In this context, geometricized photo pieces contribute to the overall concept of the poster, which communicates a sense of dynamism evocative of the Pops' lively music.



Figure 5.2 Ed Ruscha, Cover of "Arquitecto 13," 1956, ink and tempera on illustration board, 11 3/4 × 9 1/4 in. Los Angeles, private collection. © Ed Ruscha.

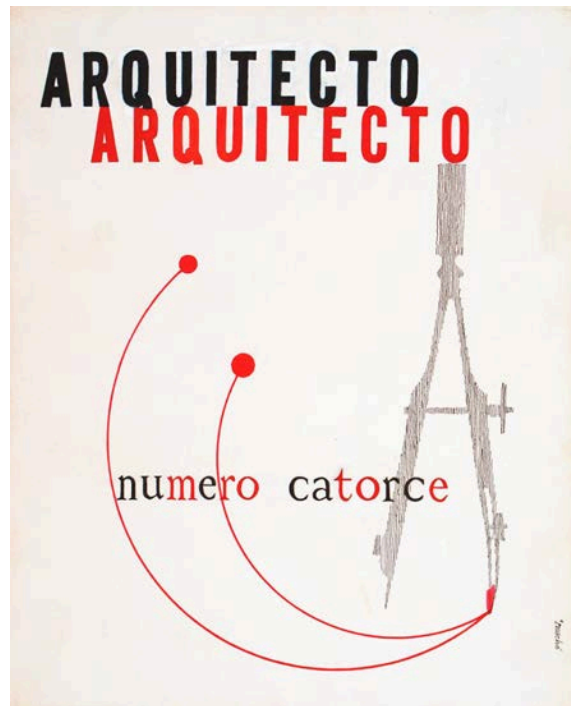


Figure 5.3 Ed Ruscha, Cover of "Arquitecto 14," 1956, ink and tempera on illustration board, 11 3/4 × 9 1/4 in. Los Angeles, private collection. © Ed Ruscha.

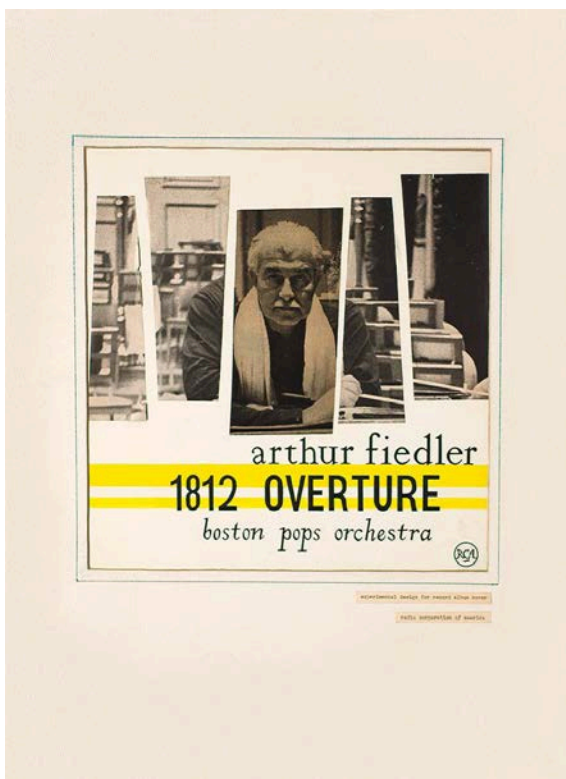


Figure 5.4 Ed Ruscha, Record album design for the Boston Pops Orchestra, 1955, mixed media, 22 × 15 3/4 in. Los Angeles, private collection. © Ed Ruscha.

RUSCHA'S BOOKS AND CONTEMPORARY DESIGN

Ruscha brought this toolbox of modernist ideas and concepts to bear on his artistic practice, even though, as he made clear in the early 1960s, he wanted to leave the world of professional design to pursue a fine art career. He spent six months as a layout artist at the Carson/Roberts advertising agency before leaving in 1961 (the same year that he took a trip to Europe with his brother, Paul, and mother, Dorothy). During those months working at Carson/Roberts, Ruscha realized that he no longer wanted to be in advertising because there was “no substance” to it, and that he disliked having to work collaboratively on client-driven projects.¹¹ Perhaps making his own books appealed to Ruscha at least partly because he could marshal L.A.’s thriving collaborative design culture for his own projects while casting aside or subverting other aspects of design and design culture.

Print design offered a natural sphere of experimentation for Ruscha. As he began his

bookmaking in the early 1960s, Ruscha developed a visual formula: white covers with titles printed in serif typefaces.¹² Tapping into the networks he was familiar with already, he worked with local typographers, including Vernon Simpson Typographers, on Melrose Avenue, and Anderson, Ritchie & Simon, on Riverside Drive.¹³ Usually he chose black ink for the letters, but in the case of *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, his first published photobook, he chose a red ink that recalls the color scheme used in the *Arquitecto* covers (fig. 5.5). Subsequently, he would use gray or black inks for his cover designs. Gone from the book covers, however, are the geometric shapes and renderings of drawing tools; only the words remain. For *Various Small Fires and Milk* (1964) and *Some Los Angeles Apartments* (1965), Ruscha scaled up the words “Various” and “Some,” suggesting that the publications contain a rather casually selected handful of photos, ostensibly from a larger group of images. The cover for *Every Building* is even more sparse, with “The Sunset Strip” printed in gray serif type on the front of the book (though the shiny silver slipcase exudes a kind of cheap glamour) (fig. 5.6).¹⁴ For the title page, Ruscha also used graduated scaling, increasing the size of the words from top to bottom. There are no visuals on the book covers to signal the content. Only the words indicate what is inside.

Ruscha acquired a deep understanding of print design and typography from his Chouinard classes and his jobs—including his work with the printer Saul Marks at Plantin Press—which he used to design books that bucked standards for engaging, innovative design and contemporary trends in the field. While designers such as Alvin Lustig and Saul Bass employed graphic eloquence and bold forms to communicate a publication’s content, Ruscha’s minimal covers and straightforward titles reveal exactly what is inside the books without any flourish or fanfare. Compared to Ruscha’s *Arquitecto* designs, these photobook covers have stripped-down designs—one could even venture to call them boring. Ruscha has verbally reinforced this idea of his books as unaesthetic objects by declaring that he put them together without a “strategy or game plan.”¹⁵ It is precisely this purported lack of design, however, that becomes the design of the books. As David Platzker has observed, Ruscha’s choice of the typeface Beton, a slab-serif typeface, for his

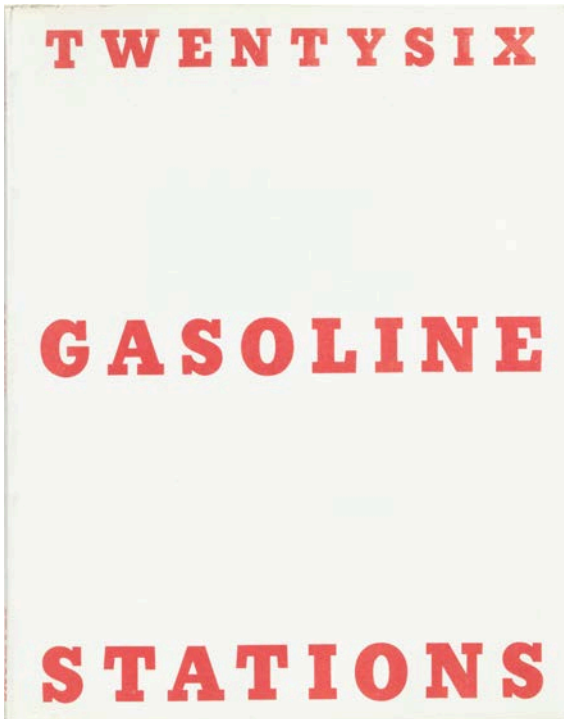


Figure 5.5 Ed Ruscha, Cover of *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, 1963, reprinted 1969, offset lithograph, 7 1/16 × 5 9/16 × 3/16 in. Publisher: Ed Ruscha. Edition of 3,000. New York, Museum of Modern Art, 706.2011. Partial gift of the Daled Collection and partial purchase through the generosity of Maja Oeri and Hans Bodenmann, Sue and Edgar Wachenheim III, Agnes Gund, Marlene Hess and James D. Zirin, Marie-Josée and Henry R. Kravis, and Jerry I. Speyer and Katherine G. Farley. Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY. © Ed Ruscha.

1960s books “could be connoted as a wink to making his book look like a bulletin with the full weight of government authority behind it,” given that another almost identical typeface (Stymie Extra Bold) was used by the United States Government Printing Office on the covers of many publications in the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁶ A focus on “utilitarian” typography, as Ruth Blacksell has noted, became important in the conceptual art practices that would emerge around the time *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* was published.¹⁷ Moreover, the idea of a stripped-down “aesthetic of information” (similar to Buchloh’s “aesthetic of administration”) has often been cited as a characteristic of conceptual art practices.¹⁸

Moving away from the formal plentitude of modernism, Ruscha established a design approach that, in its bareness, pretends to have no design at all. In contrast to the trend of the modernist book cover, in which text and image were part of a tightly conceived visual program, Ruscha’s covers are bluntly banal, almost absurdly legible. As Andrew Perchuk notes in this volume, Ruscha had also encountered ideas about legibility in design via Gestalt theories his instructors taught him at Chouinard.¹⁹ In the context of advertising, a “good” Gestalt was immediately perceptible both visually and conceptually. Ruscha’s books take that idea to its logical conclusion: they are very legible, almost ironically so, as if to push the idea of immediate perceptibility as far as possible. In *Every Building*, for example, he presented a whittled-down

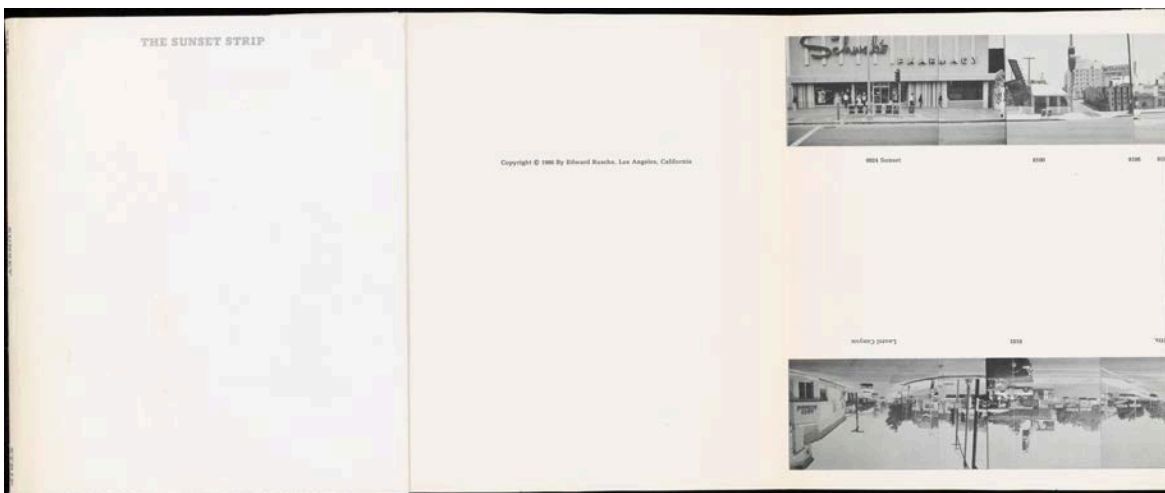


Figure 5.6 Ed Ruscha, Cover of *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, 1966, offset lithograph, 7 1/8 × 5 11/16 in. Publisher: Ed Ruscha. Edition of 1,000. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.

selection from his continually expanding collection of photographs in a way that subverts, through humor and reduction, the tenets of modernist-influenced print design (see fig. 5.6).

Ruscha's books became the opposite of an important trend in contemporary design: the dressed-up corporate report or business document. In a 1953 assessment of printing on the West Coast, the artist Eugene M. Ettenberg wrote that "experimental designers in the West have won over such adherents of traditional conservatism as the producers of insurance policies and annual reports of utilities and aircraft companies."²⁰ He described these fields of design as having traditionally been "frozen" into "set typographic patterns." On the West Coast, designers were less bound to predetermined templates, leaving more room for design interventions in even the blandest business documents. This was the case with Advertising Designers, a firm founded by Lou Frimkess and Edd Smith in 1950; Ken Parkhurst, who had previously worked with Lustig, later joined the company. While Advertising Designers took on a variety of projects, it became best known for its approach to corporate annual reports. As Danziger put it, "Prior to Ken [Parkhurst], almost all annual reports were designed by in-house printers, and were pretty dry, traditional, and boring."²¹ Parkhurst and his colleagues at Advertising Designers made annual reports a collaborative design production involving designers, writers, accountants, and printers. While the designer, or designers, for the 1960 Boeing corporate annual report are unknown, the report presents a good example of the ways designers jazzed up business documents (fig. 5.7). The designers opted for clean, hexagonal shapes (a prime example of a "good" Gestalt), which acted as containers for photographs of Boeing aircraft. The use of geometry and photographs frames a publication full of numbers and data as directly tied to the company's innovative, modern designs.

Ruscha would have been familiar with these trends from his education at Chouinard. Frimkess and Smith, and many other practicing designers, taught courses at the school. Whereas Advertising Designers presented dull business documents in an aesthetically appealing fashion, Ruscha presented places (often potentially interesting ones, such as Sunset Boulevard) as a compressed strip of black-and-white photos at a scale that



Figure 5.7 Boeing annual report, 1960. Seattle, University of Washington Special Collections.

lends itself to scanning rather than absorptive attention. Picturing a long run of boulevard in a scaled-down photo strip, Ruscha reduced an expansive urban landscape—a place that would soon become a notorious hub of late 1960s and early 1970s counterculture—into a single accordion-fold page.²² Ruscha's reflections on the Strip note the changes that took place in the 1960s: "I liked the plastic glamour of the place. . . . But suddenly there was this changeover to the hippie thing. What I remember most is that you could stand anywhere on the Sunset Strip and see cars going down very slowly, always with someone in the backseat tapping on a tambourine—going *tap, tap, tap*."²³ His photographs—taken during quieter moments when fewer people were out and about—transform the busy, mid-1960s Strip into a compressed, grayscale picture. Color technology, though available in the 1960s, was not in wide use, but even after the invention of new color technologies, Ruscha continued to use black-and-white film to photograph the boulevard through 1998. Spliced together by hand and smoothed with the offset printing process, the image strip in *Every Building* enhances his idea of "plastic

glamour” by drawing attention to the surfaces of buildings as well as the signs, storefronts, and billboards.²⁴ Ruscha’s books were designed to be eminently readable, so much so that they might bewilder someone reading for a deeper or more sophisticated meaning. As Platzker noted in a lecture, Ruscha’s unassuming style meant that both text and graphics “could be rapidly absorbed—or read—by viewers.”²⁵ Platzker quoted Ruscha to point out the artist’s focus on audience reaction: “If I [Ruscha] showed it to somebody who worked in a gas station, they’d say ‘Ah, great,’ but if you showed it to a poet or intellectual they’d say ‘Are you putting me on?’” Ruscha’s comments suggest that he purposely positioned these books to appear not only as undesigned but also as straightforward and easily understood. They are the inverse of the slickly designed corporate reports produced by firms such as Advertising Designers.²⁶

While Ruscha subverted the design trends embodied in corporate annual reports, he capitalized upon other developments in the world of design, such as the growth of collaborative practices. Ruscha’s work on the broadsheet-style journal *Orb*, published by the student-run Society of Graphic Designers, offers a good example of how students learned to work collaboratively, and how they drew upon local networks and producers (fig. 5.8). Ruscha served as the editor of several issues of *Orb*, working alongside Jerry McMillan, Patrick Blackwell, and other students. A mashup of student contributions, cartoons, and announcements, the publication is like an index of the different design techniques students were learning in the classroom. These techniques are used in especially playful and creative ways in *Orb*’s student-designed advertisements, which cited local producers and shops, such as Howard Krebs, Central Typesetting, General Printing Co., Leslie’s Art Supplies, and places that either supported or assisted with the journal or that students patronized. Ruscha’s approach to taking the Sunset Strip photographs (and later the SoLA photographs), and to organizing and distributing them, recalls the workings of a collective such as Advertising Designers as well as the collaborative work of *Orb*. From the beginning, Ruscha involved McMillan in the photography of Sunset Boulevard. Ruscha’s brother, Paul, began assisting him with the project in the 1970s; later, in the 1990s, Gary Regester joined the endeavor as a photographer;

he continues to work on it. Susan Haller helped with the distributional system for the books, including responding to orders from newspaper ads and managing the post office box that received checks for book purchases.



Figure 5.8 Ed Ruscha, Cover of *Orb* 1, no. 2 (1959). Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2925-311. © Ed Ruscha.

Ruscha’s distributional apparatus is one of the most impressive and important aspects of his bookmaking. Books were purchased via mail order (he took out ads in newspapers), given to artists and collectors, and sold in places such as the Sunset Strip tourism board and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art store.²⁷ Ruscha noted the details of each purchase in his green notebook, in which he also kept track of the number of copies he had left in each edition of the book. Ruscha’s system helped to circulate his books early on, and it also reinforced the idea that these were ordinary books, just one of many printed publications existing in the world. With a carefully cultivated undesigned aesthetic, the books could blend right in with the mountains of printed material produced every day.

FROM IMAGE MORGUE TO OBSESSIVE ARCHIVE

While Ruscha began his photography of Los Angeles-area streets right around the same time that he began making his books, the photographs continued to accumulate even after he moved on to other artistic ventures (many of his most well-known books were made in the 1960s). Later books that expanded on the model seen in



Figure 5.9 Ed Ruscha and Billy Al Bengston, *Business Cards*, 1968, offset lithograph, 8 3/4 × 5 5/8 × 3/8 in. Publisher: Heavy Industry Publications. Edition of 1,000. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 89-B22756. © Ed Ruscha.

Twentysix Gasoline Stations and, to an extent, *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, continued to riff on print culture, tools, and the world of professional art and design. In *Business Cards* (1968), Ruscha and Billy Al Bengston exchange business cards they had designed for each other over a dinner at a local bistro (fig. 5.9). Dressed in suits and solemnly shaking hands, the artists drily poke fun at the professionalization of the artist. In *Royal Road Test* (1967), Ruscha, Blackwell, and Mason Williams document the aftermath of a Royal typewriter being thrown out the window of a car speeding through the Nevada desert. Here, one of the instruments of the printed page—the machine that literally prints words—is destroyed in a carefully documented, playful-yet-serious performance.

Photographs converge with performance in these books; they are objects made specifically for these publications. The SoLA photographs, however, continued to accumulate well beyond

the bounds of the printed container of the book. Though these photographs began adjacent to Ruscha's publishing work, they turned into, as many commentators in this volume note, a self-generating photographic machine that over time was less of an image morgue and more of an obsessive record of Los Angeles' changing streetscapes. As Perchuk puts it, this overwhelmingly large collection of images became, at least until its recent excavation via processing and cataloging, an "unmined informational substrate." In the decision to continue the image morgue's expansion, Ruscha moved it away from the territory of print design and into a more nebulous space, where the collection's reason for existence is disconnected from his art. It is almost as if the image morgue has been taken to its logical conclusion; here is a collection so replete with potential that it has become overwhelming in scope. Perhaps this potential can only be mined collaboratively, in a way that has been undertaken by the contributors to this volume. If early on the Sunset Strip photographs were aligned with Ruscha's publishing, in that they provided a reservoir of images to print in a book, his photographs quickly took on a life of their own, far exceeding the bounds of the world of print-based design that shaped their inception. In this way, the SoLA Archive now aligns with our current experience of the world, one in which there are floods of images that we ourselves create and store on our own digital devices. We can all now act as designers using our own image morgues to document and shape our experience of the world.

NOTES

1. Alexandra Schwartz, "Second City: Ed Ruscha and the Reception of Los Angeles Pop," *October* 111 (Winter 2005): 23–43. Many critics also levied similar criticisms at other pop artists. For more on early critiques of pop, see Peter Selz et al., "A Symposium on Pop Art," *Arts* 37, no. 7 (1963): 35–45.
2. Emerson Woelffer, quoted in Paul Karlstrom, "Oral History Interview with Emerson Woelffer, 1999 March 26," Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-emerson-woelffer-11975>. Woelffer thought Ruscha's approach coincided perfectly with the emergence of pop art. For more on Ruscha's relationship to pop art and his long engagement with design, see my book *Back to the Drawing Board: Ed Ruscha, Art and Design in the 1960s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022).
3. See Andrew Perchuk, "Information Man," this volume, for an examination of how Ruscha's work dialogues with information theory and cybernetics. See also Margaret Iversen, "Disruption and Recursion: On Ruscha's Criticality," this volume.

4. Ruscha has used the term *no style* frequently. See, for example, Henri Man Barendse, "Ruscha: An Interview," in Edward Ruscha, *Leave Any Information at the Signal: Writings, Interviews, Bits, Pages*, ed. Alexandra Schwartz (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 217; originally published in *Afterimage* 8 (February 1981): 8–10. Ruscha used the word *severe* in Douglas M. Davis, "From Common Scenes, Mr. Ruscha Evokes Art," in Ruscha, *Leave Any Information*, 28; originally published in the *National Observer*, 28 July 1969, 1. "The aesthetics of administration" is from Benjamin Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962–69: From the Aesthetic of Information to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 102 (Winter 1990): 105–43.
5. Roosevelt's New Deal art programs served to employ artists and provide Americans broader access to the arts. The Index of American Design, which was established to collect and document American design, is a notable example. For more on the New Deal and the arts, see Anne Prentice Wagner, *1934: A New Deal for Artists* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2009).
6. Wendy Kaplan, ed., *California Design, 1930–1965: Living in a Modern Way*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2011), 35.
7. "Chouinard Art Institute," California Institute of the Arts, <https://calarts.edu/history>.
8. Wendy Kaplan explores this experimental design culture in her introduction to *California Design, 1930–1965*, 27–60.
9. Patricia Belen and Greg D'Onofrio, "Elaine Lustig Cohen: The Art of Modern Graphics," *Shelf*, no. 2 (2012): 96–97, 102–3.
10. Susan Haller, emails to the author, 20 June 2022 and 31 October 2022.
11. See more about this transition in Ruscha's career in my book *Back to the Drawing Board*, 46–49.
12. He often used Beton for his book covers.
13. Green spiral-bound notebook containing notes written by Ed Ruscha, Paul Ruscha, Susan Haller, Bryan Heath, and Eddie Ruscha, box 7, folder 13, Edward Ruscha Photographs of Sunset Boulevard and Hollywood Boulevard, 1965–2010, 2012.M.1, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.
14. The silver slipcover recalls Andy Warhol's Mylar *Silver Clouds*, also made in 1966. Alyce Mahon's essay in this volume explores the nature of this reflective cover, which, by dint of showing the viewer's own reflection, invites a kind of performative engagement with the book as an object.
15. Ruscha has mentioned this lack of game plan not infrequently when discussing his books. See Rachel Cooke, "Ed Ruscha: There's Room for Saying Things in Bright Shiny Colours," *The Guardian*, 11 September 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/sep/12/ed-ruscha-obama-pop-art>.
16. David Platzker, "Old Pine and a Few Signs" (lecture, "The Streets of L.A. & Ruscha's Practice," online workshop organized by the Getty Research Institute, 17–19 August 2020).
17. Ruth Blacksell discusses utilitarian typography in conceptual art in "From Looking to Reading: Text-Based Conceptual Art and Typographic Discourse," *Design Issues* 29 (Spring 2013): 60–81.
18. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962–69."
19. See Perchuk, "Information Man."
20. Jeremy Aynsley, "Developing a Language of Vision: Graphic Design in California," in Kaplan, *California Design 1930–1965*, 264.
21. Louis Danziger, quoted in Louise Sandhaus, *Earthquakes, Mudslides, Fires, and Riots: California Graphic Design 1936–1986* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2014), 76. Danziger said this about Parkhurst in an email correspondence with the author of this book, June 2013.
22. Many of the clubs that had thrived in the earlier part of the twentieth century had closed in the 1950s, which made more venues available at a lower cost. The Whisky a Go Go, at 8901 Sunset Boulevard, became L.A.'s first discotheque, with female DJs clad in tall white boots commanding the floor. (They were later called *go go dancers*). Ciro's reopened in 1965 as a similar type of venue and became known as a place to see the Byrds, whose album *Mr. Tambourine Man* was released that same year and was in frequent rotation at the club. Other clubs sprang up on the Strip, including Gazzarri's, London Fog, and the Trip. As the Strip drew larger and larger crowds, tensions grew between the partiers, city officials, and residents who wanted to develop the area into a financial district. Eventually, city officials put a ten p.m. curfew in place, which led to the infamous curfew riots of November 1966. See also Josh Kun, "Songs for Every Address: The Music of Ed Ruscha's Photographs," this volume.
23. Ed Ruscha, quoted in David Kamp, "Live at the Whisky," *Vanity Fair*, 10 November 2000, <https://archive.vanityfair.com/article/2000/11/live-at-the-whisky>.
24. Hadley Meares, "Rebellion and Rock 'n' Roll: The Sunset Strip in the '60s," *Curbed Los Angeles*, 7 March 2019, <https://la.curbed.com/2019/3/7/18244871/sunset-strip-whisky-riots-bars>. For more on the photographs as capturing and representing information, see Eva Ehninger, "Nightmare of Information: Ed Ruscha's Image Critique," this volume.
25. Platzker, "Old Pine."
26. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962–69."
27. Ruscha, Green spiral-bound notebook.

6

Information Man

Andrew Perchuk

The Information Man is someone who comes up to you and begins telling you stories and related facts about a particular subject in your life. He came up to me and said, "Of all the books of yours that are out in the public, only 171 are placed face up with nothing covering them; 2,026 are in vertical positions in libraries, and 2,715 are under books in stacks. The most weight on a single book is 68 pounds, and that is in the city of Cologne, Germany, in a bookstore. Fifty-eight have been lost; 14 have been totally destroyed by water or fire; 216 books could be considered badly worn. Three hundred and nineteen books are in positions between 40 and 50 degrees. Eighteen of the books have been deliberately thrown away or destroyed."

Now wouldn't it be nice to know these things?

—Ed Ruscha

Despite the fact that a significant part of Ed Ruscha's artistic practice included cataloging streets, swimming pools, and parking lots; using language as one of his primary media; and making paintings of the gridded structure of Los Angeles, the relationship between Ruscha and information theory has not received adequate attention. This is, after all, an artist who decided to title his collected writings *Leave Any Information at the*

Signal (2002) and whose most well-known literary contribution is titled "The Information Man" (1971). From one perspective, the Information Man is the purveyor of factoids, in this case pertaining to Ruscha's books: their spatial orientation, relation to other objects, physical condition, extraliterary functionality and use value, olfactory presence, states of stasis or mobility, and so on. However, the facts provided by the Information Man, while a thought-provoking compendium of data, do not directly address the objects as works of art or as books to be viewed or read. Instead, the Information Man delights in seemingly needless knowledge and an abundance of largely useless facts, in information for information's sake. Ruscha ends his passage about the Information Man with a question: "Now wouldn't it be nice to know these things?" The question, from the perspective of a reader who understands that the entire story is presented as a dream, can be rephrased to ask: What is the information quotient of the nonrational? Of datasets beyond human comprehension? Of things that are not and, perhaps, cannot be made instrumental? These are questions Ruscha was grappling with at the precise moment the United States and many other countries were moving from an industrial to an information-based society.

This essay analyzes the information dynamics at play in Ruscha's early paintings and

photobooks, the apotheosis of which is the Streets of Los Angeles (SoLA) Archive. This archive, constructed as if the Information Man was asked to describe an urban landscape, documents many of the major streets and boulevards west of the Los Angeles River and north of Venice Boulevard in photographs taken between 1965 and today. Ruscha's SoLA project has been, and in many ways continues to be, a difficult body of work to comprehend. For most of its existence, it has functioned as a largely latent archive. Now numbering almost one million images (with 740,000 currently at the Getty Research Institute), the archive remained largely untouched for decades, with over 90 percent of the negatives never printed but spooled around dozens of film reels and tucked away in the artist's studio.¹

Nevertheless, the artist has recently said of the archive, "It's all part of the big picture," indicating that it informs his Los Angeles-based artwork.² The archive is the source material for three Ruscha works: *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966), the Patrick Painter photo suite *Sunset Strip* (printed 1995), and the book *THEN & NOW: Hollywood Boulevard, 1973–2004* (2005). Despite Ruscha's comment, the SoLA project is more than just material for an artwork; at its core, it is a collection of urban data—one that, perhaps, could be described as a fever dream of documentary completeness, like a Borgesian map. Even now that digital technology (which Ruscha is deeply suspicious of) has caught up with him and a portion of the archive has been digitized and made accessible to the public, the informational quotient is overwhelming. In the following, the SoLA Archive will be seen to be many things: a visual palimpsest, a loop (both literal and figurative), and a core part of the artist's practice for over five decades—each of them connected to Ruscha's career-long interest in information.

"I'M A CHILD OF COMMUNICATIONS"³

Ruscha's engagement with information theory dates to his student days. As several of the authors in this publication discuss (most extensively, Jennifer Quick), Ruscha's art-school training was not in painting.⁴ Rather, in 1956 he enrolled in the advertising design program at the Chouinard Art Institute, and he soon joined its

Society of Graphic Designers. Bill Moore, a major figure in postwar design, was the lead instructor for this program, and his sensibility was clearly derived from the New Bauhaus in Chicago, where he had studied. In keeping with this background, Moore's dictum was "design is the logical arrangement of visual elements for order."⁵ Order, for Moore, was not simply a positive abstraction. Rather, the logical pattern of image, text, and color was intended to convey information clearly and concisely.

In the mid-twentieth century, graphic design and advertising were allied with the nascent fields of communication and information theory that would have such a radical impact on postwar life. One definition of advertising is, of course, a process of persuasive communication between a company and its intended audience; the language the field was using in the 1950s to describe its methods and goals was at times identical to that of the information sciences. Both fields relied heavily on behavioral psychology, and advertising—with its goal of stimulating desire, including by visual means—looked particularly at subfields concerned with perception. Gestalt psychology's emphasis on studies of mental filtering and clear, immediately perceptible shapes and concepts seemed to offer some especially pertinent lessons for the advertising professional. Advertisers believed that if they could get consumers to foreground their product and company logo and experience the rest of the visual field as background, the effectiveness of campaigns could be greatly improved. A well-designed advertisement was often said to possess a "good Gestalt," which was what Moore was after.⁶

Ruscha was both a strong student at Chouinard and something of a rebel. He frustrated Moore—in one instance, he created a Dadaist collage that the instructor tried to burn—and systematically turned away from establishment advertising teaching in the student journal he cofounded, *Orb* (fig. 6.1).⁷ This journal was inspired by the permeability of commercial and fine art that not only characterized the work of Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and the Independent Group but also fundamentally changed the advertising business. *Orb* arguably went even further than other important student magazines of the era, such as the Royal College of Art's protopop *Ark* (edited by David Hockney and

friends), in integrating the advertisements and the editorial, to the point that the two are often indistinguishable. The journal programmatically demonstrated that graphic design could be used in many ways that did not constitute “the logical arrangement of visual elements for order.” *Orb* was particularly notable for its typography, which was set upside down and sideways in addition to in a conventional orientation. For issue 2, a giant orange finger was superimposed over the entire text of the main page, causing large sections to be nearly illegible, and the text itself was set in three directions, making it impossible for any element to have a good Gestalt, or for that matter any Gestalt at all (see fig. 5.8). *Orb*’s exciting combination of disparate elements—references to Marcel Duchamp and to comics, poetic and corporate language, and a matter-of-fact irrationality—introduced parameters that Ruscha continues to employ.



Figure 6.1 Ed Ruscha, Cover of *Orb* 2, no. 1 (1959). Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2925-311. © Ed Ruscha.

This brief discussion of *Orb* foregrounds what would become a central element of Ruscha’s art practice: the translation of aesthetic or formal problems into information or communication issues. Indeed, in Ruscha’s first published

interview—printed in *Artforum* on the occasion of his second artist’s book, *Various Small Fires and Milk* (1964) (fig. 6.2)—John Coplans, who was most likely aware of Ruscha’s training in commercial art and experience in advertising, asks Ruscha if he knows the book *Nonverbal Communication* (1956) by Juergen Ruesch and Weldon Kees. This book sought to elicit people’s reactions to visual material and train them to read the nonverbal clues that evidence individuals’ inner states. It also contained an epigraph from Bell Telephone Laboratories’ Warren Weaver, one of the inventors of mid-twentieth-century information theory. Ruscha’s response demonstrates an awareness of both the book’s intellectual context and the types of arguments it puts forth. However, he immediately distances his own artist’s books from Ruesch and Kees’s publication: “Yes, it is a good book, but it has a text that explains the pictures. It has something to say on a rational level that my books evade. The material is not collated with the same intent at all.”⁸



Figure 6.2 Ed Ruscha, *Various Small Fires and Milk*, 1964, reprinted 1970, offset lithograph, 7 1/16 × 5 9/16 × 3/16 in. Publisher: Ed Ruscha. Edition of 3,000. New York, Museum of Modern Art, 707.2011. Partial gift of the Daled Collection and partial purchase through the generosity of Maja Oeri and Hans Bodenmann, Sue and Edgar Wachenheim III, Agnes Gund, Marlene Hess and James D. Zirin, Marie-Josée and Henry R. Kravis, and Jerry I. Speyer and Katherine G. Farley. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY. © Ed Ruscha.

What separates Ruscha from Ruesch and Kees is the artist's interest in the nonrational—the elements of communication that are neither logical nor quantifiable—and in one aspect of information theory—the phenomenon of noise, which Ruscha claims originates at the beginning of his career: “I guess the idea of noise, of visual noise, somehow meant something to me, and still means something to me.”⁹ The concept of noise within communications theory has a very specific referent: it is everything in a communication that is not part of the message. Noise frustrates communication: in Ruscha's day, it was the static that one heard over a telephone line, or, today, the ads that clutter one's search returns. The illegible typography in *Orb* and the failure to distinguish between advertisements and editorial promote communicative confusion, just as the undifferentiated enormity of the SoLA Archive never coheres into a clear project with measurable intent and outcomes.

Ruscha is explicit that his engagement with noise is rooted in his commercial-arts background: “My inspiration comes from mass communication rather than cerebral or historical things.”¹⁰ The concept of noise was first articulated by Weaver and his colleague Claude Shannon, and it had a definite pedigree within mid-twentieth-century advertising and commercial arts, but its broadest and most profound expression was developed in the 1950s by Norbert Wiener, a mathematics professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Wiener called his theory *cybernetics*, and its goal was to maximize information and eliminate noise, steering or controlling messages and keeping entropy at bay through *feedback*, a now-common term coined by Wiener to describe the cybernetic process of machine learning: the “control of a machine on the basis of its *actual* performance rather than its *expected* performance is known as *feedback*.”¹¹ In other words, a guided missile that corrects its course based on the changed position of its target is using feedback to achieve a desired result. That human beings could be controlled in a similar manner through cybernetic feedback was something that Wiener was acutely aware of, and when it was pointed out to him that there are numerous differences between a person and something like a guided missile, he chillingly replied that for cybernetics the differences do not matter.¹²

“A GIVEN SPACE IN WHICH TO MAKE NOISE”¹³

To understand Ruscha's emphasis on noise and the nonrational, it is crucial to remember his deep appreciation for surrealism, the movement that put the unconscious, the irrational, and the psychosexual at the center of Western art. Utilizing his commercial art training, Ruscha made his most significant contribution to *Artforum*, the magazine he art directed for several years, when he produced the cover for the surrealism issue in September 1966. *Surrealism Soaped and Scrubbed* is a three-dimensional rendering of the word *surrealism* cut out of balsa wood and floating in a bath of soap bubbles, which was then photographed and reproduced for the magazine (see fig. 7.14). Ruscha's use of an entirely commercial art process foregrounds his acknowledgment that surrealism had been thoroughly integrated into commercial culture by the early 1960s. For Ruscha, the liberatory potential of the unconscious and the psychosexual is no longer available—there are no melting clocks in Ruscha—and the irrational—things that look or read as manifestly off—can only be achieved materially and matter-of-factly.

Surrealism Soaped and Scrubbed combines humor—Is surrealism naughty and in need of scrubbing because of its sexual charge or commercial capitulation?—with the irrational—What does it mean to make a word a three-dimensional object and then clean it? Humor, the nonrational, and noise are also central to Ruscha's most specific engagement with information theory in what he has called his best painting: *Noise, Pencil, Broken Pencil, Cheap Western* (1963) (fig. 6.3).¹⁴ Ruscha has dispersed the oversized word *NOISE* and three objects to the four edges of the large, dark blue field, leaving the center of the canvas entirely blank. The deep-red sans-serif capitals of *NOISE* are rendered in perspective, receding from left to right, with white shading creating the look of a billboard thrust into the viewer's space. The two pencils and the pulp western are depicted veristically and at actual size, with the trompe l'oeil break in one pencil depicted as accurately as possible. If one were to draw a line between the four objects, it would form a circular loop. This figure is crucial because the feedback relationship, as conceived by Wiener, is not a simple unilateral relay but rather a circuit

of input and output that feed into each other. Relationships between *servo-mechanisms*—humans and “intelligent” machines who both send and receive messages in a process of continuous feedback and control—are not ones of cause and effect; rather, they are circular.



Figure 6.3 Ed Ruscha, *Noise, Pencil, Broken Pencil, Cheap Western*, 1963, oil and wax on canvas, 71 3/4 × 67 in. Richmond, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 85.439. Photograph by Travis Fullerton. Gift of Sydney and Frances Lewis. Digital image © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. © Ed Ruscha.

The cybernetic feedback loop controls noise, but in *Noise, Pencil, Broken Pencil, Cheap Western*, noise suffuses the painting—literally, linguistically, visually, and, even by inference, auditorily. The letters in *NOISE* are similar in form, color, and structure to the 20th Century Fox logo as it appears in Ruscha’s *Large Trademark with Eight Spotlights* (1962) (fig. 6.4). The adaptation of this immediately recognizable trademarked form for the word *NOISE* evokes the constant onslaught of signs and symbols by which the entertainment industry promotes itself and its wares—employing the tropes of commercial art to maximize noise. In this sense, Ruscha reveals another crucial concept in communications theory: noise is not only the product of a lack of information or of an unclear or fragmented message but also sometimes the result of an excess of information, of too many competing messages vying for attention, even if each features its own, clear, well-designed Gestalt. In this sense, the SoLA



Figure 6.4 Ed Ruscha, *Large Trademark with Eight Spotlights*, 1962, oil, house paint, ink, and graphite pencil on canvas, 66 15/16 × 133 1/8 in. New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, 85.41. Digital image © Whitney Museum of American Art / Licensed by Scala / Art Resource, NY. Purchased with funds from the Mrs. Percy Uris Purchase Fund. © Ed Ruscha.

Archive can be seen to contain a great deal of noise.

The pencil is the designer’s initial tool; it is in many ways the ur-writing instrument, the first one given to schoolchildren in their initiation to the practice, and it represents the baseline of writing’s ability to construct and store information or produce noise. The pencil snapped in half, now useless, evokes the noise of its demise. Ruscha’s cheap western is another artifact whose time has passed, through obsolescence, for the pulp western had completely died out as a genre during the mid-1950s, killed off by television. The magazine emits the faint, dated noise of the outmoded in popular culture. The specific issue Ruscha remakes is from October 1946 (fig. 6.5), and the seventeen years of distance challenges the view that pop art is concerned with the topical and that it buys into the capitalist myth of progress.¹⁵

On another level, the painting is a parody, a wry comment on the obsession of color-field painting in the 1960s, with the literal, rather than depicted, edges of the canvas as the site of artistic innovation. This corresponds to Ruscha’s inversion of surrealism into a form of irrationality that is literal and material. What does it mean to paint something actual size, countering the logic of representation? Or to depict the cybernetic loop as an actual loop? The Ruschaeen logic of *Noise, Pencil, Broken Pencil, Cheap Western* seems to be arguing that neither desire nor the unconscious—which surrealism tried—can subvert control, but perhaps matter-of-factness and a lack of affect can. Information theory controls noise to foreground the message, but the

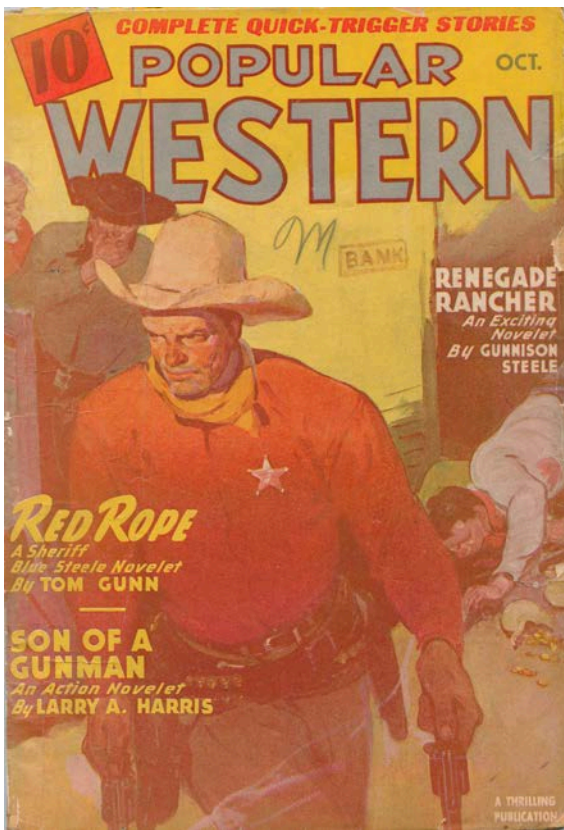


Figure 6.5 Popular Western, October 1946. Better Publications, Inc.

message of *Noise, Pencil, Broken Pencil, Cheap Western* is NOISE. This illogical logic (would steering or controlling noise make it even noisier?) is set against the consequences of a world managed successfully, as Wiener feared, by the feedback loop of cybernetics. In such a world, human beings are reconceived as patterns of information, studied by market research and seduced by advertisements to have their consent manipulated, not by steering them against their will but by holding out the promise that through feedback their deepest needs and desires can be fulfilled. Those of us living in an era defined by Amazon, Google, and Instagram know how effective control through algorithmic feedback has become.

“DEAD SERIOUS ABOUT BEING NONSENSICAL”¹⁶

Wiener was, of course, well aware that there is an inverse definition of feedback. The normative scientific meaning refers to the mode employed by cybernetics, in which output directed toward a

goal is reintroduced as input to control the object. Known more precisely as negative feedback, this is a restrictive loop, one that narrows the possible range of activity and focuses an object toward its goal. The other type of feedback is positive. It occurs when the output energy that reenters as input has the same sign as the original input, as in the case of an electric amplifier in which feedback distorts rather than controls.¹⁷ While growing up in Oklahoma, Ruscha had admired jazz and blues and, later, became enamored with the progressive rock of the 1960s; drawing on these musical forms, he employed their modes of feedback, dissonance, and static to challenge the normative process.¹⁸

Cybernetics, or any information system that seeks to control or persuade, needs vast amounts of data to function properly, but Ruscha’s work proposes that certain kinds of excess data are disruptive. This positive feedback is not difficult to spot in Ruscha’s photobooks and the SoLA Archive; it is, in fact, rooted in their production. *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, the book at the core of the SoLA Archive, contains a surfeit of extraneous information—or noise—that is literally and materially fed back into the system. Not only does the titular mandate of “every” building along the 1.6-mile Sunset Strip amount to around three hundred buildings photographed, but the book includes all manner of nonarchitectural information: parked cars, billboards, trees, bus benches, and passersby, among many other things. Even in his similarly L.A.-centric and deliberately enumerated *Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles* (1967), outlying lots and innumerable buildings creep into the frame to belie the specificity of the title. The first edition of the accordion-folded *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* has a 2 7/8-inch flap glued into the book that extends the Strip at 9176 and 9171 Sunset Boulevard (see fig. 7.1), while the final photograph in the codex format of *Thirtyfour Parking Lots*, captioned “Santa Monica Boulevard from Roxbury to Wilshire Blvd.,” is cropped so that the image is four times as wide as it is high (fig. 6.6). Ruscha runs the image across the spread, but rather than reduce it to fit the dimensions of the book, he continues the image onto a small flap glued to the right-hand page. These flaps had to be added to each copy by hand, and Ruscha admits that it required considerable effort and extra cost.¹⁹ When told that the part of the image on the flap

of *Thirtyfour Parking Lots* was nothing special, Ruscha replied, “I know! That’s why I like it.”²⁰ For Ruscha, the flap image is important and even desirable because it contains no worthwhile information and does not add to a comprehension of the city.

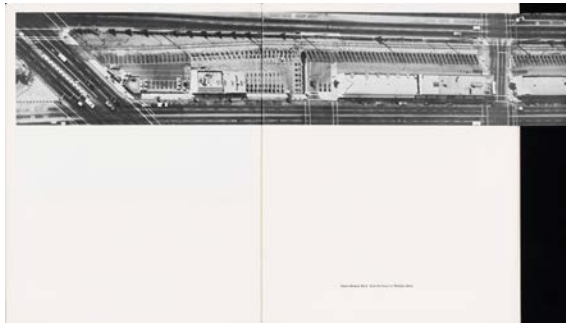


Figure 6.6 Ed Ruscha, *Spread from Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles* with glued-on flap, 1967, offset lithograph, 10 × 8 × 1/8 in. Publisher: Ed Ruscha. Edition of 2,413. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2016 -B391. © Ed Ruscha.

These flaps literally feed information, or data, of the same sign back into the system (book) in a manner that is not goal oriented and does not add to or improve the message. Much of Ruscha’s work exploits this antithesis to cybernetic control. In noisy, seemingly illogical and nonrational moves that no machine could make, Ruscha uses positive feedback and noise to create a communicative distortion that challenges the hypothesis that sees human beings as readable patterns, information as quantifiable, and all human output as transmissible in binary code. Ruscha has explained the type of relationship that he looks for in his art: “A yapping puppy running through a church full of people listening to a sermon is one thought—or it could be a priest walking quietly into a kennel of barking dogs. Unlike thoughts or objects inserted at the end or out-of-the-way from a main dominant theme. Often, when an idea is so overwhelming I use a small unlike item to ‘nag’ the theme.”²¹ There are no intentional “unlike items” in the SoLA Archive, in contrast to the pulp western in *Noise, Pencil, Broken Pencil, Cheap Western*, which makes a second appearance in *Standard Station, Ten Cent Western Being Torn in Half* (1964). Here it floats on a blue field at the extreme right edge of the canvas, unconnected to the majestic spread of the gas station along a diagonal from lower right

to upper left (fig. 6.7). Yet by including everything in the camera’s range, the SoLA Archive has all manner of unlike items no matter what theme the viewer is exploring. Most importantly, it contains no message about Los Angeles to be steered or controlled. Ruscha has said of himself, “I’m a real pessimist, especially about business and maybe the computer aspect of life.”²² By constantly producing varieties of visual noise, Ruscha acts as a fly in the ointment of a system that believes it can manage the taste of its consumers and the consent of its citizens through ever greater information processing.



Figure 6.7 Ed Ruscha, *Standard Station, Ten Cent Western Being Torn in Half*, 1964, oil on canvas, 65 × 121 1/2 in. Fort Worth, Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth (on loan from private collection). © Ed Ruscha.

“I’LL NEVER LEAVE LOS ANGELES”²³

While this approach might seem to place Ruscha’s project in the avant-garde tradition of critical negativity, his deep appreciation and respect for things that information theory would filter out demonstrates another valence for his work. It is particularly in his L.A. books and the SoLA project that this positive strategy emerges, often through the documentation of things easily overlooked, such as street signs, dingbat-style apartments, dollar stores, and palm trees. Far from random exemplars of urban noise, his photographic subjects are tied to a specific place: Los Angeles. Ruscha’s decision to focus in and around Los Angeles was crucial; its empty lots, gas stations, and cheap construction optimistically clamoring for differentiation in a sea of sameness typified the East Coast’s view of L.A. as the proverbial sound and fury.

The photographic mode Ruscha adopted for the photobooks centered on Los Angeles is very different from the way Los Angeles boosters like

David Hockney and Reyner Banham, and even most architectural historians, depict the city. Nowhere to be found are the pioneering architects and era-defining buildings of midcentury Los Angeles, or the strong topographical features—hills, beaches, and freeways—that for Hockney and Banham define the city and to which they tried to give cohesive and compelling identities. Instead, Ruscha defines certain typologies of urbanistic elements present throughout the Los Angeles region, and each of his Los Angeles photobooks is a serial presentation of a named object. However, seriality in Ruscha's work is quite complex, and the artist distinguishes different modes from the outset. The most common mode is a numerical limit to the series: *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963), *Thirtyfour Parking Lots*, and *Nine Swimming Pools and a Broken Glass* (1968). At the same time, there are delimited but unenumerated groupings: *Some Los Angeles Apartments* (1965) and *A Few Palm Trees* (1971); undelimited groups: *Streets of Los Angeles*, *Real Estate Opportunities* (1970), and *Records* (1971); and even comprehensive cataloging: *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*. Ruscha's practice suggests that with the impossibility (and perhaps undesirability) of a totalizing description of Los Angeles, the city could only be approached in a serial manner that emphasizes difference within sameness and sameness within difference—seeing with noise, rather than seeing through noise. *A Few Palm Trees*, a typological study of Southern California's most iconic flora, is far from a simple litany of likenesses. Flipping through the book, the viewer is presented with a panoply of palm trees, each photographed, cropped, and pasted into a startlingly blank pictorial field (fig. 6.8). Their isolation from any contextual information (save the attendant captions) forces focus on each tree's peculiarity: some are short and squat, another impossibly attenuated; some grow in little groupings, while others appear as a solitary silhouette.

If seriality and seeing with noise are crucial to Ruscha's L.A. photobooks, the SoLA Archive is in many ways both Ruscha's magnum opus and the summa of his information dynamics. The structure for photographing Los Angeles-area streets is an endless loop—Ruscha and his collaborators driving down one side of a street until it ends and then driving down the other side until they reach the beginning. Crucially, there is

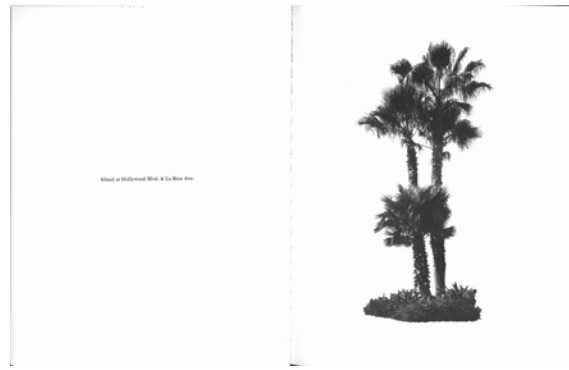


Figure 6.8 Ed Ruscha, *Island at Hollywood Blvd. & La Brea*, from *A Few Palm Trees*, 1971, offset lithograph, 7 × 5 1/2 × 3/16 in. Publisher: Heavy Industry Publications. Edition of 3,900. Los Angeles, private collection. © Ed Ruscha.

no selection or filtering in the process—everything along the drive is recorded—not only every building, architecturally significant or not, but also every object in the mechanized camera's field of view. Ruscha continuously returns to the same streets—he has photographed Sunset Boulevard more than twelve times, for example—creating a temporal as well as a geographic loop and a palimpsest of surplus information without hierarchy. In the “deadpan” documentary style for which he has been both celebrated and criticized, there is no sense of things getting better or worse. Instead, there is both stubborn sameness and continuous flux, all presented without any commentary on preservation or progress. Ruscha seems to be arguing that the process of selection and refinement that both Los Angeles' boosters and its detractors engage in must be avoided; seeing without selection—that is, apprehending the city in all its jumbled noisiness—is the alternative mode proposed by the SoLA project.

This surfeit of information extends to the production of the SoLA Archive itself. A third of every photograph duplicates the information in the previous photograph in the series, as if the streets were being photographed to be animated or for a movie that will probably never be made. This potential is in contrast to Ruscha's reluctance to make art out of the archive. Other than in *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, Ruscha has had to be convinced by others to turn the photographs into art: first by gallerist Patrick Painter to create the small portfolio of still photographs and next by Gerhard Steidl to make the book *THEN & NOW*. For Ruscha, it seems crucial that the archive remain in an unfinished

(he has hinted it will continue until his death) and mostly unused state, one of potential. Ruscha's information dynamics is ultimately an argument that any message can be controlled, repurposed, or used to feed the cybernetic system and its command structure. Therefore, the SoLA Archive is information without a message—information in a perpetual state of being written and rewritten.

The fact that Getty has made portions of the SoLA Archive accessible is not unproblematic. The employment of computer vision, algorithms, digital mapping—the twenty-first-century inheritors of cybernetics and twentieth-century information theory—will almost inevitably insert meaning into Ruscha's messageless information. Who controls that meaning and to what end the message is put will determine whether the archive should have been shared and used or whether it would have been wiser to leave it in a state of perpetual possibility.

NOTES

Epigraph: "The Information Man" is dated 2 October 1971; part of it was first published in A. D. Coleman, "My Books End Up in the Trash," *New York Times*, 27 August 1972, D21. For the full text, see Ed Ruscha, "The Information Man," *Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art Journal*, no. 6 (June–July 1975): 21.

1. See the Streets of Los Angeles Archive, which includes two collections: Edward Ruscha Photographs of Sunset Boulevard and Hollywood Boulevard, 1965–2010, 2012.M.1, <https://www.getty.edu/research/collections/collection/100001>; and Edward Ruscha Photographs of Los Angeles Streets, 1974–2010, 2012.M.2, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, <https://www.getty.edu/research/collections/collection/100071>.
2. Ed Ruscha, interviewed by Zanna Gilbert, 6 September 2022.
3. Ed Ruscha, quoted in Edward Ruscha, *Leave Any Information at the Signal: Writings, Interviews, Bits, Pages*, ed. Alexandra Schwartz (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 150. The quotation was taken from an interview by Paul Karlstrom, "Oral History Interview with Edward Ruscha, 1980 October 29–1981 October 2," California Oral History Project (COHP), Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-edward-ruscha-12887> (hereafter cited as "Karlstrom interview, COHP transcript"). This interview, conducted in several sessions over the course of a year, is the most extensive interview Ruscha has given. The interview was edited and first published in Ruscha, *Leave Any Information*, 92–209 (hereafter cited as "Karlstrom interview, *Leave Any Information*").
4. See Jennifer Quick, *Back to the Drawing Board: Ed Ruscha, Art, and Design in the 1960s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022). See also Jennifer Quick, "No Design: The Streets of Los Angeles Photographs and Ruscha's Books," this volume.
5. Bill Moore, quoted in Robert Perine, *Chouinard: An Art Vision Betrayed: The Story of the Chouinard Art Institute, 1921–1972* (Encinitas, CA: Artra, 1985), 181. Perine's book is an odd document: a very partisan history of Chouinard up until the Disney takeover and merger in 1972. Nevertheless, it provides by far the fullest account of Ruscha's student days (its narrative is told largely through interviews with former Chouinard students and teachers).

6. Regarding the use of Gestalt psychology in advertising, see Franco M. Nicosia, "Advertising Management and Its Search for Useful Images of Consumers," *Advertising and Consumer Psychology*, ed. Larry Percy and Arch G. Woodside (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1983), 25–56, esp. 35. Regarding the use of Gestalt psychology in techniques of advertising layouts, see Stephen Baker, *Visual Persuasion* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), esp. chap. 3, "For the Subconscious Only."
7. Jerry McMillan, quoted in Perine, *Chouinard*, 180. Moore lit one end of Ruscha's collage of cigarette butts on fire, causing deep division among students and faculty at the school.
8. Ed Ruscha, quoted in John Coplans, "Concerning 'Various Small Fires': Edward Ruscha Discusses His Perplexing Publications," *Artforum* 3, no. 5 (1965): 24. At the time of this interview, *Artforum* had recently relocated from San Francisco to Los Angeles in an office above Ferus Gallery, where Ruscha exhibited. Ruscha was the chief designer of *Artforum* during its Los Angeles years, so Coplans was undoubtedly aware of Ruscha's industrial-art pedigree.
9. Ed Ruscha, quoted in Bernard Blistène, "Conversation with Ed Ruscha," in *Edward Ruscha: Paintings = Schilderijen*, exh. cat. (Rotterdam: Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, 1990), 128. The centrality of the concept of visual noise to Ruscha's work was first elaborated in Yve-Alain Bois's remarkable essay "Thermometers Should Last Forever," in Bois, *Edward Ruscha: Romance with Liquids, Paintings 1966–1969* (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 1993), 8–38. Bois makes numerous insightful comments on Ruscha's treatment of "noise" and also connects Ruscha's interest in the subject with the communication theory of Claude Shannon, Warren Weaver, and Norbert Wiener. However, he quickly abandons US communication theory for an extended discussion based in linguistics and semiotics.
10. Ed Ruscha, quoted in Blistène, "Conversation with Ed Ruscha," 126.
11. Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1954), 24. Wiener's blend of terminology from the fields of biology and engineering—sensory and motor as well as *telltales* and *monitors*—is quite common in his writing and is, of course, fitting for a theory that treats human beings and certain machines under the same classification. A crucial distinction between older and more modern feedback mechanisms is that modern ones are able to correct behavior in process through continuous real-time measurement.
12. Wiener does not insist that there are *no* differences between human beings and machines; rather he asserts that cybernetic questions can only be answered through observable, quantifiable behavior. In a paper he coauthored with the physiologist Arturo Rosenblueth, they explain that the consequences of only basing one's findings on strictly behaviorist grounds is that any differences between humans and machines are rendered inconsequential:

The question of whether machines are or can be like men or the higher animals does not guide our choice. This question is on the main irrelevant for scientific objectives. We believe that men and other animals are like machines from the scientific standpoint because we believe that the only fruitful methods for the study of human and animal behavior are the methods applicable to the behavior of mechanical objects as well. Thus, our main reason for selecting the terms in question was to emphasize that, as objects of scientific enquiry, humans do not differ from machines.

See Arturo Rosenblueth and Norbert Wiener, "Purposeful and Non-Purposeful Behavior," *Philosophy of Science* 17, no. 4 (1950): 326.
13. Ed Ruscha, quoted in Blistène, "Conversation with Ed Ruscha," 126.
14. Ed Ruscha, quoted in Karlstrom interview, *Leave Any Information*, 207.
15. The cover, which is of course remade at actual size, is of *Popular Western*, October 1946.
16. Ed Ruscha, quoted in Patricia Failing, "Ed Ruscha, Young Artist: Dead Serious about Being Nonsensical," *ARTnews* 81, no. 4 (1982): 74–81; reprinted in Ruscha, *Leave Any Information*, 227.

17. Arturo Rosenblueth, Norbert Wiener, and Julian Bigelow, "Behavior, Purpose and Teleology," *Philosophy of Science* 10, no. 1 (1943): 19.
18. Ed Ruscha, quoted in Karlstrom interview, *Leave Any Information*, 167, 208. In the unedited typescript, Ruscha discusses the musicians—Spike Jones, Count Basie, and Billy Eckstine—who informed his thinking during his early years in Oklahoma. See Ed Ruscha, quoted in Karlstrom interview, COHP transcript, 11.
19. Ed Ruscha, quoted in David Bourdon, "Ruscha as Publisher (or All Booked Up)," *ARTnews* 71, no. 2 (1972): 32–36, 68–39; reprinted in Ruscha, *Leave Any Information*, 43.
20. Ed Ruscha, quoted in Clive Phillpot, "Sixteen Books and Then Some," in *Edward Ruscha: Editions, 1959–1999, Catalogue Raisonné*, ed. Siri Engberg and Clive Phillpot, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), 68.
21. Ed Ruscha, quoted in Barbara Radice, "Interview with Ed Ruscha," *Flash Art*, no. 54–55 (May 1975): 49.
22. Ed Ruscha, quoted in Karlstrom interview, COHP transcript, 6.
23. Ed Ruscha, quoted in Henri Man Barendse, "Ed Ruscha: An Interview," *Afterimage* 8, no. 7 (February 1981): 8–10; reprinted in Ruscha, *Leave Any Information*, 213.

“Almost Too Hot to Handle”: Ed Ruscha’s *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*

Alyce Mahon

My books were very hot items—it was hot art to me, almost too hot to handle. I liked the idea that my books would disorient . . . like a wolf in sheep’s clothing. I felt they were very powerful statements, maybe the most powerful things I’ve done. . . . My books were art objects to me, but a lot of people chose not to even accept them, and for this reason they have always been underground—and still are.

—Ed Ruscha

Ed Ruscha’s *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966) presents the everyday city space of Sunset Boulevard in West Hollywood in an art book that traces a panorama between Crescent Heights Boulevard and Doheny Drive. Produced at a time when the artist’s book was only just gaining ground as an art object proper, the endeavor spawned an exhaustive, if not obsessive, archival project of photographing Sunset and Hollywood Boulevards in Los Angeles, always at low traffic moments and with no stated purpose. The vast majority of these photographs remain as negatives, but they allowed Ruscha to then design his “pasteup” portraits of the Sunset Strip, fusing his commercial training with artistic innovation, as Jennifer Quick has documented.¹ As a work of art, *Every Building* sheds light on the history of and raises critical questions about photography in the 1960s, when the distinction between the

photograph as document (objective/indexical object) and the photograph as art (iconic/expressive object) was undergoing a vigorous reimagining by conceptual and pop artists. The artist’s book offered the perfect vehicle for this reimagining of the medium. In *Every Building*, Ruscha relies on the work of seriality and repetition to undermine the expectation that the photograph represent the world; instead, his work dialogues with what Roland Barthes would later term the “already made” image.² As a published photographic series selected and orchestrated from an archive of images, *Every Building* maps a particular locale with dingbat-style apartments, restaurants, and drugstores, along with well-known businesses such as Tower Records, interspersed with billboards, shop displays, signage, vehicles, and minute details that speak to the mid-1960s visual culture of California. As a performance, *Every Building* offers the trace of an orchestrated, motorized street view. As an art object, the three-dimensional book unfolds into a concertina of pasted-together pages that allows the viewer two continuous photographs of an iconic section of Sunset Boulevard. Ruscha’s art collaging of a selection of photographs from a larger archival work to craft an art book must be appreciated through a series of intertextual interlockings. He turns to photography as a medium for both mass reproduction and avant-

garde disruption, seizing the “underground” potential of the tension between both roles.

Every Building is immersive in form and aesthetic (fig. 7.1). It incorporates both an act and the photographic trace of an act in an accordion book of photographs that is twenty-seven-feet long when folded out to its full length. That is to say, it unfolds, literally, in the hands of the spectator-reader, and an urban panorama is reduced to an intimate handheld object. At the same time, given the book’s elastic form and epic subject matter, it is impossible to grasp or read that panorama in one view. In this way, *Every Building* mimics the very act of driving or cruising along the Strip and snapping details of the street with the mind’s eye, albeit on a much smaller scale. One moves across photographs through to the last, arriving at a white strip that seems to entice the imagination to continue cruising off the page. Ruscha identifies street numbers and the names of cross streets in the book, but he insisted on this design detail at the end, this “leap” into the white strip. When the first print run had an extra 2 7/8-inch flap of paper folded over behind the last page, he elected to retain this “error” rather than eliminate it.³



Figure 7.1 Ed Ruscha, *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* with flap extension visible, 1966, offset lithograph, folded and glued, 7 1/8 × 297 in. Publisher: Ed Ruscha. Edition of 1,000. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.

In this essay, I consider how Ruscha’s *Streets of Los Angeles Archive* and *Every Building* reveal a debt to the avant-garde—notably, the art of Eugène Atget and the surrealists—as well as an extension of their fascination with photography’s unique ability to expose the surreal within the real into the postmodern age. Drawing on Walter Benjamin’s concept of “the optical unconscious,” as articulated in his 1928 essay “Little History of Photography,” I argue that Ruscha’s obsessive use of the medium of photography needs to be

appreciated as a process of opening the “optical unconscious” in the real.⁴ Ostensibly, *Every Building* is a dispassionate document of built structures in a particular geographic location in Los Angeles, and yet it disorients. It is often described as “cool” in its aesthetic, in keeping with Ruscha’s role in the so-called Cool School around the Ferus Gallery from 1957 to 1966, and yet the artist insisted it was “hot.”⁵ Marshall McLuhan defines the “cool” media (speech, cartoons, the telephone, and television) as participatory, needing to be completed or “filled in” by the viewer/listener, and “hot” media (print, photographs, radio, and movies) as passive and a “high definition” media that is “well filled with data.”⁶ Ruscha turns to the art book to explore the interdependence of the cool and the hot, or the photograph as both artwork and document. In *Every Building*, we find high-definition photographs arranged in a handheld book that appeals to the viewer’s somatic register. It is for the viewer to enter the fiction of a mechanical document and then to discover the work’s sensorial interplay and complete it—to open up to what the camera records.

THE OPTICAL UNCONSCIOUS

The interpretation of any photograph is never fixed. Each viewer sees differently depending on their historical point in time. In his “Little History of Photography,” Benjamin states:

*No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it. For it is another nature which speaks to the camera rather than to the eye: “other” above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious.*⁷

Benjamin’s understanding of the photograph also speaks to motion, noting that the camera has the potential to capture, literally, what happens when a person moves or takes a step. This allows it to reveal “the existence of this optical

unconscious,” capturing the image before one consciously sees it.⁸

Every Building makes the familiar street view strange by slowing down the temporal experience of the visible and encouraging invisible imaginings. Ruscha positions the spectator before every building on the Sunset Strip from the perspective of the mechanized camera lens, rather than his naked eye, and from a set position on the back of a pickup truck. In his focus on the street (rather than its inhabitants), mechanized indifference (rather than emotive details), and a horizontal, nomadic perspective (rather than a vertical, cartographic one), Ruscha demands the viewer’s completion of the artwork. Indeed, he hopes it has the subversive potential to be “too hot to handle.”⁹

It is in hovering on the horizontal line that he ensures this “hot” quality, through the process of installing a camera in the vehicle, and the steady feeding through of 35mm film with a motorized cassette, and then in cutting and pasting images to form two continuous strips facing each other, as the opposite sides of the street. Together this ensured that Ruscha’s own view of Los Angeles as “a landscape line that is actually horizontal” was mirrored.¹⁰ By resolutely sticking to the horizontal line, Ruscha reveals the diverse buildings on the Strip—the Body Shop Burlesque (at 8250 Sunset Boulevard); the Sea Witch nightclub (8514 Sunset), with its sign stating “Age Limit 18–80” (fig. 7.2); the rental car business Travelers Rent a Car (8371 Sunset); and Cars from Europe (8373 Sunset).

Ruscha’s careful editing process ensured this horizontality was maintained—the eye could not move into the background, as evidenced by the next photograph showing part of the building beside the Sea Witch, Dino’s Lodge (8524), which he elected to cut from his final presentation of the Strip (see fig. 7.2). The laneway between the two buildings in the rejected photograph would have encouraged the eye to impose a horizon line on the Strip and view it from a vertical perspective, rather than pan across the radically different buildings, one looking like a tiki hut, the other a jazz club and diner owned by Dean Martin (and his business partner, Maury Samuels), as advertised by the huge neon sign of Martin’s face at the right of the composition.

As Eva Respini has observed, the road trip and car-bound view mainly emerges in American photography of this period as framed from the



a. 8514



b. 8514 and 8524



c. 8524

Figure 7.2 Ed Ruscha, 8514 to 8524 Sunset Boulevard (one with handwritten X), 1966, digital positives from negatives. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1 (a, b, c). © Ed Ruscha.

windshield or rearview mirror. This is witnessed in the contemporary photographs of Robert Frank, Lee Friedlander, Andrew J. Russell, and Stephen Shore—such as Shore’s color photograph *Beverly Boulevard, Los Angeles* (21 July 1975).¹¹ Ruscha’s *Every Building* is also car-bound in perspective, but he does not frame the Strip from the perspective of a car window or car mirror. Instead, he keeps the street-level facades on a horizontal grid and the perspective of a car passenger, not a driver. This perspective might be compared to

that of the flaneur, the “stroller” or observer, and the flaneur’s potential to offer a critical gaze on modern life, as defined by Charles Baudelaire’s model of the “painter of modern life.”¹² By employing the view from a car rather than a pathway, Ruscha takes flânerie in a new Beat direction. In this way, *Every Building* bridges European and American generational approaches to the urban environment, appreciating their common concern with the street, which was not to map territory as a form of conquest or control but to approach space as a means of self-knowledge.

In Ruscha’s terms, this meant mapping “hot” familiar details as a means of generating “cool” strange dynamics—enjoying how the distance between the passive and active makes space for chance, fear, or fantasy. Sigmund Freud’s explanation of the uncanny acknowledged the tension between the built environment, as homely and visible, and the psychic, as the unhomely and what is kept from sight.¹³ Avant-garde circles in Paris and New York enacted a form of defamiliarization in their art and writing that drew on this Freudian idea of the uncanny as a means to create a mesh of possibilities for the street, facade, or consumer object. The Situationist International group, formed in 1957 in Paris, expanded the subversive potential of flânerie in their concept of *dérive* (drifting), a term that denotes a shift in speed and spatial frame during aimless wandering. As Guy Debord explains, *dérive* was a “technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances” that involved “playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychogeographical effects.”¹⁴ To challenge the spectacle of the modern city with its advertisements, traffic, store windows, metros, and general one-directional speed of consumer communication, the group proposed a system of *détournement* in the city (the literal translation of *détournement* is “derailing,” but it denotes the sense of navigating the city space without any preconceived plan). Ruscha’s employment of technology—the camera, tripod, vehicle—to enact a form of poetic *disorder*, rather than order, on the streets of Los Angeles continued this praxis in again allowing the machine to record but not interfere with, or manipulate, the experience of the city as place. Further, the sheer excess of his photographic documentation of those same streets, as evidenced in his archive, embodies an act of

deflection or disobedience: it ensures the authentic photographic record metamorphoses into an excessive, installation-like artwork. Ruscha employs the mechanical language of photography to disrupt expectations and to explore the medium’s irrational potential, perfectly advancing the aesthetics of the interwar avant-garde into the 1960s.

THE SECRET LIFE OF THE CITY

The European avant-garde—notably, the Dada and surrealist movements—turned to the street as a subject and platform for their art. They adapted Baudelaire’s concept of flânerie for a more interactive engagement whereby the artist was encouraged to seek out a person, object, building, or street that might spark a creative idea or act. Aimless wandering was an improvisation process because it took “only a street-turning or a shop-window to inspire a fresh outpouring” and reveal “a kind of hidden life of the city,” as André Breton once described walking the streets of the city in the company of fellow surrealist Louis Aragon.¹⁵ Benjamin’s understanding of the optical unconscious was also indebted to an appreciation of the transgressive potential of the familiar to open up new creative outpourings and imaginings. He lauded the surrealists for astutely perceiving how “destitution—not only social but architectonic, the poverty of interiors, enslaved and enslaving objects—can suddenly be transformed into revolutionary nihilism.”¹⁶ Both Breton and Benjamin admired the work of the commercial photographer Eugène Atget, who documented Paris and its environs; they saw much greater illuminating potential in Atget’s work than his own modest description of it as “landscapes, animals, flowers and monuments for the use of artists.”¹⁷ The fact that some five thousand vintage prints and over one thousand glass-plate negatives were found in his studio after his death suggests he also hoped they might be considered as high art, or at least that his efforts went beyond the commercial commission.¹⁸ Atget’s oeuvre reminds us that photography is a deductive art wherein the photographer works from a given image rather than a blank canvas. While he never intended his archive to be institutionally housed or displayed, it has come to frame his individual projects, such

that the filing system and the negative are inseparable.

We might also see Ruscha's intertextual relations with Atget as extending those of American avant-garde photographers—notably, Berenice Abbott. She was instrumental in the promotion of Atget in practical terms as well as formal citation and to the publication of *Atget: Photographe de Paris* (1930), ensuring that his work was appreciated in the United States, and it was she who purchased the five thousand prints and negatives in his studio after his death, thus preserving his archive (as did MoMA, after acquiring the collection from Abbott). Put simply, Abbott played an important role in Atget becoming a canonical figure for European and American photography, or “canon fodder,” as Abigail Solomon-Godeau describes it. More importantly for this essay, Abbott also ensured that Atget's seemingly informational photography became newly appreciated as having something more profound, psychological, and poetic to it.¹⁹

Abbott wrote of Atget's work as harboring “a sudden flash of recognition—the shock of realism unadorned. The subjects were not sensational but were nevertheless shocking in their very familiarity. The real world, seen with wonderment and surprise, was mirrored in each print. Whatever means Atget used to project the image did not intrude between subject and observer.”²⁰ In her project *Changing New York*, supported by the Federal Art Project and shot between 1935 and 1939, Abbott's understanding of such “realism” is made visible.²¹ We find a clear homage to Atget in her formalist intrigue with the architecture and archaeology of the urban environment as cultural text, whether the photographer is in front of a commercial or privately owned building. She takes photography beyond camera work and yet eschews sentimentality. Abbott's *Changing New York* speaks to a Benjaminian understanding of the history of the city and photography's ability to archive it. She endows the medium with “a legitimating objective and a subversive energy,” as Sarah M. Miller has documented in her appraisal of the project (fig. 7.3).²²

It is this pursuit of an oneiric quality within the photograph as informational object that resonates with *Every Building* and Ruscha's archival turn. Atget shot multiples of a theme, such as the trades and professions documented in his *petits*

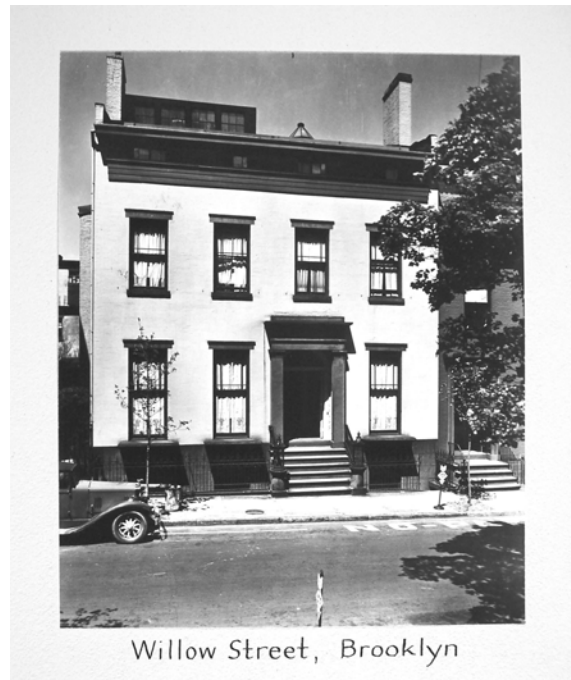


Figure 7.3 Berenice Abbott, *Willow Street, Brooklyn* (Willow Street, no. 70), 14 May 1936, gelatin silver print, 16 × 20 in. New York, New York State Museum, NYSM H-1940.7.35. Courtesy New York State Museum, Albany, NY.

métiers series (1898–1900), and photographs of vehicles, shop fronts, and interiors. Like Ruscha, Atget typically took his photographs in the early morning light, before shops opened to the public or boulevards were busy. Tasked with framing or embellishing reality for the spectator-consumer, he refused the romance of the artist as the master of the worldview. Through the camera of Atget, we discover the character, or “miseries and treasures,” of the city, as Abbott rightly noted, but always from what is unsaid or unseen.²³ His photographs of shop fronts—with their factual titles, such as *Boulevard de Strasbourg*, *Corsets* (1912) or *Brocanteur, rue des Anglais* (1926)—dialogue with the world of advertising and consumer culture, but they still unveil the lure of the unknown, or the facade, or the object of desire, as well as what the French call *faire du lèche-vitrines*, which literally means “to lick the windows” but translates as “window shopping.”

This sense of intimacy is augmented, somewhat paradoxically, by the fact that Atget's photos were resolutely devoid of the deliveryperson, shopkeeper, pedestrian, or consumer. Thus, while Atget wrote of his photographs in emphatically clinical terms—as

documents of a city—they are documents that might be read in a more subversive, corporeal way as the viewer is effectively encouraged to inhabit the scene presented. This, in turn, might be seen to reject the divide between Paris's boulevards and splendor and its back streets, illuminating sociohistorical moments and demanding we look at the overlooked. For example, in a photograph dated 1922 and titled *Cour, 7 rue de Valence*, we find a scene from the fifth arrondissement in Paris taken with a wooden camera and a glass negative on a heavy tripod (fig. 7.4). Atget frames a slice of everyday working life without its workers; it is the architecture (a courtyard) and automobile (a Renault car) that lend the image its invisible face and voice. His work was “immensely sensitive, stubbornly popular culture, alien and at the same time half-familiar, strange and desirable, *pensé* and *impensé*,” as Molly Nesbit has observed.²⁴ It is this dialectic between the familiar and strange, or between the thought of and unthought of, that finds a legacy in Ruscha's art.



Figure 7.4 Eugène Atget, *Cour, 7 rue de Valence*, 1922, matte albumen silver print, 7 × 8 15/16 in. New York, Museum of Modern Art, Abbott-Levy Collection, 1.1969.1963. Partial gift of Shirley C. Burden. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY.

THE FAMILIAR AND THE STRANGE

Every Building demands that the spectator engage in the familiar and search out the secrets the overlooked might hold. Ruscha's titles for his serialized works—*Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963), *Some Los Angeles Apartments* (1965), *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966), and *Thirtyfour*

Parking Lots in Los Angeles (1967)—echo those of Atget in their documentary-like practicality. Atget's influence can also be seen in Ruscha's formal use of long exposures, which flatten or bleach the sky. At the same time, Ruscha brings the aesthetic of the avant-garde into the postmodern era. Benjamin's reading of Atget's photographs of empty Parisian streets might be applied to Ruscha's deliberate focus on the Strip as facade: it stands before us “not lonely, merely without mood; the city in these pictures looks cleared out, like a lodging that has not yet found a new tenant.”²⁵ With *Every Building*, the spectator's eye searches the anonymous physiognomy of the Strip looking for clues, footprints, and meaning across an accordion of sewn-together photographs in which time, space, sound, and narrative are all curiously frozen. Cécile Whiting notes, “Ruscha's imagery repudiated both the booster's vision of Los Angeles as a modern city with a center and the doomsayer's outrage about untrammelled growth.”²⁶

Ruscha's decision to move to California was linked to its Hollywood image; he explained, “I seemed to be drawn by the most stereotyped concepts of Los Angeles, such as cars, suntans, palm trees, swimming pools, strips of celluloid with perforations; even the word sunset had glamor.”²⁷ However, he then disrupts those visual clichés by stripping the Strip of its sunset (his camera shoots north and south, not east or west); there is no ocean view as finale. The familiar book object becomes uncannily strange: one must turn the book upside down to view the opposite street. It is an interactive, kinetic, and playful artwork contained in the leaves of a book. The subversive potential of the black-and-white photo reproductions folded into an accordion is reinforced by the silver Mylar-covered slipcase (fig. 7.5). While this case might at first suggest the pop aesthetics of the L.A. “Cool School,” its mirrored surface reflects the hands and face of the spectator, signaling that they must complete the work of art they hold.

In this way, Ruscha offers a peculiarly Californian variation on an avant-garde approach to the book or luxury catalog as art object. The cover Marcel Duchamp designed for a 1947 surrealist exhibition catalog offers the perfect example: for *Prière de toucher* (Please touch), a New York-made “falsie,” or foam-rubber breast, was set against a piece of black velvet (fig. 7.6).



Figure 7.5 Ed Ruscha, *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, 1966, offset lithograph, folded and glued, with Mylar slipcase, 7 1/8 × 5 3/4 × 3/8 in. Publisher: Ed Ruscha. Edition of 1,000. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.

Duchamp's design ensured the reader touched art and "flesh" in holding the book, thus contradicting the typical instruction in society to not touch either.²⁸

In 1969 the architect Denise Scott Brown described Ruscha's art book as "deadpan."²⁹ In a recent essay, Aron Vinegar also argues that Ruscha's art book wallows in the "deadpan . . . defined as a flat or emotionless face, the word 'pan' being slang for face in nineteenth-century America. . . . It also suggests a kind of 'artless art' in its dry and direct mode of delivery."³⁰ A focus on the deadpan may comfortably situate Ruscha's work within a 1960s American art-historical frame, but it seems at odds with Ruscha's own description of the art book as "a wolf in sheep's clothing."³¹ With Duchamp's book aesthetic in mind, we might instead see *Every Building's* silver Mylar slipcover as enacting a sort of striptease that alludes to the Sunset Strip—seeing and being seen amid clubs such as the Whisky a Go Go—and a world that promised the glamour of fashion, music, mirrors, and lights. In *Eve's Hollywood* (2015), Eve Babitz writes of sitting with her friend Sally at "Pupi's, a place devoted to cake, overlooking the Strip" and how "just watching the fashionable traffic go back and forth on the Strip

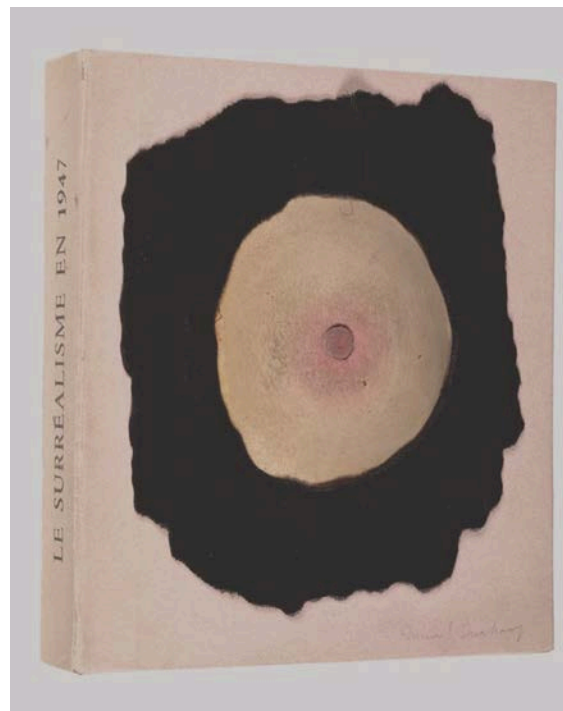


Figure 7.6 Marcel Duchamp and Enrico Donati, *Prière de toucher* (Please touch), cover of the special edition of Marcel Duchamp and André Breton, *Le surréalisme en 1947: Exposition internationale du surréalisme, exh. cat.* (Paris: Pierre à Feu, 1947). Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 88-B24115. © Association Marcel Duchamp / ADAGP, Paris / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, 2024.

for a while . . . felt fantastic."³² In this way the mirror-like surface of *Every Building's* slipcover immediately signals its "hot" performative ambitions, both nodding to its clubs and burlesque bars, such as the topless club The Classic Cat at 8844 Sunset Boulevard, and the broader culture of the consumer-voyeur who frequented such places and enjoyed "just watching."

We must look to Duchamp again to further appreciate the tension between the indifferent and the critical, the cool and the hot, that exists between the orchestration of the photographs in *Every Building*. Ruscha frequently mentions in interviews how his teachers at the Chouinard Art Institute had introduced him to Duchamp before he became part of the Ferus group in L.A., and how he felt "the spirit of [Duchamp's] work is stronger in my books than anything else."³³ Duchamp wreaked havoc on the art world in the first decades of the twentieth-century with his ready-made objects and his insistence that the modern artist had to remove aesthetic quality from art and reject "painting [that] is addressed to

the retina.”³⁴ As a young man and emerging artist, Ruscha came across Duchamp in the media and his art circles: Duchamp appeared in *Life* magazine on 28 April 1952; Grove Press published the English edition of Robert Lebel’s book-length study of Duchamp in 1959; and the Ferus Gallery (founded by the curator Walter Hopps and the artist Edward Kienholz in 1957) actively encouraged interest in Duchamp thanks to Hopps’s particular fascination with the French artist. By the time Ruscha was producing the canvases *Honk* (1962) and *OOF* (1962, reworked 1963) and drawing *Corn-Popped Ruscha* (1963), which played with text as sound and image alike, he was very aware of Duchamp’s challenge to younger artists to “approach something with an indifference, as if you had no aesthetic emotion.”³⁵ Indifference underpins *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, *Some Los Angeles Apartments*, and *Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles*, as Ruscha turned to the city as a readymade.

EUROPE AS A WONDERLAND

Ruscha’s appreciation of Duchampian indifference was also fortified by his seven-month tour of Europe in 1961. Traveling with his mother, Dorothy, and brother, Paul, and carrying his 2 1/4-inch, square-format Yashica camera, he toured some seventeen countries. He saw Europe as “a wonderland of things that you don’t see in America that made me want to take pictures . . . an odd mixture of architecture and angles and diminishing perspectives and nostalgia and foreign objects.”³⁶

The 342 black-and-white photographs that record that voyage, now housed at the Whitney Museum of American Art, are united by one key theme: the juxtaposition of architecture and sign, or image and text, at the expense of people and location, even when he stood in the most glamorous, iconic locations (figs. 7.7, 7.8, 7.9, 7.10). His eye sought out angles, nostalgia, and the unusual, but not tourist monuments. This is evident in a series of photographs simply titled *France*, for which his lens was trained on ads for consumer goods or gas (though they are always captured at odd angles to their architectural supports) and on three unnamed students in Paris, whose grouping forms an irregular, soft composition at odds with the linearity of the posters that are pasted to the wall directly behind



Figure 7.7 Ed Ruscha, *France*, 1961, gelatin silver print, 3 9/16 × 3 1/2 in. New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, 2004.96. Digital image © Whitney Museum of American Art / Licensed by Scala / Art Resource, NY. Gift of the artist; courtesy Gagosian Gallery. © Ed Ruscha.

them. Signage invariably dominates the compositions: for example, in a photograph titled *Cannes*, we note that pedestrians, cars, the beach and a palm tree are secondary to the juxtaposition of signage—movie posters and a flag. Photographing on the celebrated boulevard de la Croisette in Cannes, Ruscha succeeds in referencing the city’s association with the movie industry through an apparent indifference; the viewer is asked to look at the overlooked detail rather than gaze at the beaches and crowds of this popular Côte d’Azur location.

Ruscha once explained his focus on gas stations and roads in his photographs of the California landscape, stating, “I don’t have any Seine River like Monet. I just have U.S. 66 between Oklahoma and Los Angeles,” but even when journeying through a European “wonderland,” his camera aimed to reveal the uncanny, unfamiliar potential of the touristic, familiar location.³⁷

On returning to California, he continued to seek out the angle or everyday detail over the whole. For example, the photographs in *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* were taken while the artist was driving on Route 66 between Los Angeles and his hometown of Oklahoma City (fig. 7.11). The gas stations are documented as if they are pins on a map, from *Bob’s Service, Los Angeles, California* through to *Fina, Groom, Texas*.



Figure 7.8 Ed Ruscha, *France*, 1961, gelatin silver print, 3 1/2 × 3 1/2 in. New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, 2004.95. Digital image © Whitney Museum of American Art / Licensed by Scala / Art Resource, NY. Gift of the artist; courtesy Gagosian Gallery. © Ed Ruscha.



Figure 7.10 Ed Ruscha, *Cannes, France*, 1961, gelatin silver print, 3 9/16 × 3 1/2 in. New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, 2004.116. Digital image © Whitney Museum of American Art / Licensed by Scala / Art Resource, NY. Gift of the artist; courtesy Gagosian Gallery. © Ed Ruscha.



Figure 7.9 Ed Ruscha, *Paris, France*, 1961, gelatin silver print, 10 × 8 in. New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, 2004.140. Digital image © Whitney Museum of American Art / Licensed by Scala / Art Resource, NY. Gift of the artist; courtesy Gagosian Gallery. © Ed Ruscha.



Figure 7.11 Ed Ruscha, *Standard, Amarillo, Texas*, from the *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* series, 1962, gelatin silver print, 5 1/16 × 4 15/16 in. Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, 2011.54.9. © Ed Ruscha.

Ruscha adapted one photograph from the series for the screen print titled *Standard Station, Amarillo, Texas* (1963) (fig. 7.12). His use of flat

blocks of solid color and his emphatically geometrical composition with a shallow diagonal line reinforce a mechanical perspective in keeping with “low” commercial signage. The viewer is again denied any emotional engagement with the subject matter due to the absence of people, vegetation, or picturesque details. As with the photograph that begets the painting, the bizarre



Figure 7.12 Ed Ruscha, *Standard Station, Amarillo, Texas*, 1963, oil on canvas, 64 15/16 × 121 13/16 in. Hanover, New Hampshire, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, P.976.281. Gift of James Meeker, Class of 1958, in memory of Lee English, Class of 1958, scholar, poet, athlete and friend to all. © Ed Ruscha.

angle of the composition and black skyline disorientate the eye, despite the banality of the subject matter. It is the text—"Standard"—that dominates and becomes the image.

THE DUCHAMP EFFECT

Duchamp's ready-made artworks and text-as-image play were promoted by the Ferus Gallery circle through Hopps, who described himself as a "Duchamp addict" ever since he first met the French artist in Los Angeles in 1949.³⁸ Hopps curated a Duchamp show at the Ferus Gallery in 1962 (the same year he curated a show of Ruscha there), and then, when he moved and was appointed curator at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1963, he organized a major retrospective of Duchamp, the first in the United States, with a catalog titled *By or of Marcel Duchamp or Rose Sélavy*. Ruscha, Larry Bell, Dennis Hopper, Andy Warhol, and others from his circle all attended the stylish black-tie opening of the exhibition on 2 October 1963 and met the seventy-three-year-old Duchamp (fig. 7.13).

The retrospective demonstrated how avant-garde activity was burgeoning in Los Angeles; young local artists had the opportunity to view Duchamp's work "at first hand and in its diversity," as Dickran Tashjian has noted.³⁹ It also ensured that Ruscha and his Ferus Gallery circle cemented their interest in "Duchamp's readymade model."⁴⁰ In 2016 Ruscha recalled of Duchamp: "He proved to be a real guiding light. All of his works, they kind of went counter to what we learned in school. The fact that all of these works finally got together in this very unlikely little museum in Pasadena was a surprise and also a real jewel."⁴¹



Figure 7.13 Ed Ruscha and Patty Callahan at the opening reception for Marcel Duchamp's exhibition, Pasadena Art Museum, 2 October 1962. Los Angeles, Julian Wasser Estate. Photograph by Julian Wasser. Courtesy of Alexi Wasser.

Ruscha's cover design for the September 1966 edition of *Artforum*, titled *Surrealism Soaped and Scrubbed*, brought these avant-garde influences into play. With this cover, surrealism—which began as a literary movement in Paris in 1924 and spread from there to New York, thanks to central figures in its circle such as Duchamp—became a logo, or brand, standing in relief, to recall the Hollywood Sign that proudly overlooks the Los Angeles Basin. It complements Man Ray's oft-cited analysis of Hollywood after his time living there between 1940 and 1951: "There was more Surrealism rampant in Hollywood than all the Surrealists could invent in a lifetime."⁴² In 1965 Ruscha moved to a new studio at 1024 3/4 North Western Avenue in Hollywood, from where he could see the sign and where, he claimed, he could predict the day's weather based on its visibility from his windows. On the cover of *Artforum*, his surrealist signage is set against a golden, mirrored surface that gleams as if in the California sun, further "Hollywoodizing" it, to borrow his own terminology (fig. 7.14).⁴³ For Benjamin, the surrealists' power as an avant-garde lay in the strategy of "profane



Figure 7.14 Ed Ruscha, *Surrealism Soaped and Scrubbed*, cover for *Artforum* 5, no. 1, surrealism special issue (1966). © Ed Ruscha.

illumination”—that is, looking at the overlooked and outdated through an anthropological or dreamlike openness to the strange.⁴⁴ Ruscha’s title for the cover artwork and inclusion of the detail of steamy bubbles at the top right-hand side of the image translates this idea to the United States: text and image evoke the soaping and scrubbing of an automobile so that it gleams in the sun. In that issue of *Artforum*, Kurt von Meier’s essay, “Surrealism and Architecture,” reminds us of the transformation of surrealism in California as he explains the impact of the avant-garde movement on the geopolitics of the city:

*One of the greatest contributions of Surrealism to the history of architecture involves discovery, or rediscovery, rather than original creative efforts within the medium. . . . Simon Rodia’s Watts Towers afford a more recent example of visionary structure-sculpture in the Los Angeles area. . . . A more everyday example of Surrealist disorientation, although no less disquieting perhaps, is the freeway or turnpike experience. Who has not been confronted by the ambiguity of wanting to turn left, knowing he must go left, and yet following the signs and turning to the right?*⁴⁵

As Von Meier astutely observed, surrealism offers a means and a worldview to challenge the very experience of the city in all its “space-time architectural perceptions.”⁴⁶

ON THE STRIP

In Jack Kerouac’s Beat novel *On the Road* (1957), which the author once claimed to have manically written across twenty days of road trips in 1951, Los Angeles is presented as the “one and only golden town where all is said and done.”⁴⁷ Kerouac harnessed the city’s combination of glamour and despair as he documented the road trip of Sal Paradise (Kerouac), Dean Moriarty (Neal Cassady), and a Mexican woman he befriends named Terry on a continuous, 120-foot-long scroll of paper. The Sunset Strip is described in the novel as follows:

LA is the loneliest and most brutal of American cities. . . . LA is a jungle.

South Main Street, where Terry and I took strolls with hot dogs, was a fantastic carnival of lights and wildness. Booted cops frisked people on practically every corner. . . .

We went to Hollywood to try to work in the drugstore at Sunset and Vine. Now there was a corner! Great families off jalopies from the hinterlands stood around the sidewalk gaping for sight of some movie star, and the movie star never showed up. When a limousine passed, they rushed eagerly to the curb and ducked to look: some character in dark glasses sat inside with a bejewelled blonde. “Don Ameche! Don Ameche!” “No, George Murphy! George Murphy!” They milled around, looking at one another. Handsome queer boys who had come to Hollywood to be cowboys walked around, wetting their eyebrows with hincty fingertip. The most beautiful little gone gals in the world cut by in slacks; they came to be starlets; they ended up in drive-ins.”⁴⁸

Kerouac also sought out the unconscious through the artistic process, echoing the surrealists’ understanding of automatism in “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose,” where he advises to “write ‘without consciousness’ in semi-trance . . . allowing subconscious to admit in its own interesting necessary and so ‘modern’ language what conscious art would censor.”⁴⁹

Ruscha paid homage to Kerouac’s Beat aesthetic of free association with *Royal Road Test* in 1967, carried out on Sunday, 21 August 1966, at 5:07 p.m., on Route 91, with the help of Mason Williams (the “thrower”) and Patrick Blackwell (the “driver”). Moving at speed, Williams dropped

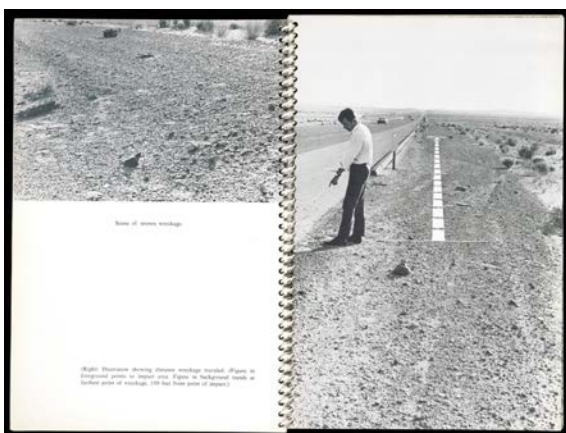


Figure 7.15 Ed Ruscha with Mason Williams and Patrick Blackwell, *Royal Road Test*, 1967, offset lithograph, 9 7/16 × 6 1/2 × 3/16 in. Publisher: Ed Ruscha. Edition of 1,000. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 89-B22186. © Ed Ruscha.



Figure 7.16 Ed Ruscha, *Car*, from Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* [1957], designed by Ruscha (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2009), 91. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2874-047. © Ed Ruscha.

a vintage typewriter, of the sort Kerouac used, from a speeding Buick and Ruscha then documented the broken, dirt-encrusted machine and the wreckage in a series of photographs subsequently published as an artist's book (fig. 7.15). The photographs are titled factually, but the book opens with the typed sentence, "It was too directly bound to its own anguish to be anything other than a cry of negation; carrying within itself, the seeds of its own destruction."

In 2009 Ruscha produced a leather-bound artist's book of 228 pages in which he again dialogued with *On the Road* through a selection of black-and-white photographs, cut-up details from photographs, and ink drawings that he arranged alongside the original text, echoing the scat rhythm of Beat art and writing in the seemingly improvisational conversation between text and image (fig. 7.16).

Ruscha emphasized the role of the car for the Beat aesthetic: "Sometimes they hitchhike and sometimes they drive cars. They steal cars and

just want to be on the road the whole time. I've always liked that notion."⁵⁰ With Kerouac's text in hand, *Every Building* seems to lure us to open up to that mood of being on the move. It gives form to Sal's Beat position: "California is white like wash lines and empty headed. . . . I had my own thoughts and held the car to the white line in the holy road."⁵¹

Ruscha once described streets as "like ribbons. They're like ribbons and they're dotted with facts. Fact ribbons I guess."⁵² *Ribbon* might suggest the idea of ribbon development in cities. Or "the long ribbon slips with itemized prices" that Sal writes about as he struggles to pay food bills. Or the ribbon of a typewriter. Or the ribbon of negatives that end up filed in an archive. For Ruscha, the medium of photography served as the perfect means to tease out the optical unconscious from the road—or, in this case, the Sunset Strip, and beyond it. Ruscha stated that "books are a medium for people in the street to enjoy"; they are democratic, accessible, and mass produced.⁵³ But he also stated that his art books reflect "the dark side of what I was up against and what I stood for—the toughest, meanest art I was making"; herein lay their potential to derail.⁵⁴ *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* revels in the tension between enjoyment and darkness, the familiar and the strange, the cool exterior of Los Angeles and its hot interior. The focus is on neither the beginning nor the end of the journey but on opening up to new experiences as one advances.

NOTES

Epigraph: Ed Ruscha in Bernard Blistène, "Conversation with Ed Ruscha," in *Edward Ruscha: Paintings = Schilderijen*, exh. cat. (Rotterdam: Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, 1990), 126–140 (134); reprinted in Edward Ruscha, *Leave Any Information at the Signal: Writings, Interviews, Bits, Pages*, ed. Alexandra Schwartz (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 300–308 (303).

1. See Jennifer Quick, "Pasteup Layout: Photographs and Books," in Quick, *Back to the Drawing Board: Ed Ruscha, Art, and Design in the 1960s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), 85–121.
2. Roland Barthes explains the "déjà-lu" (already made/already read) in Barthes, *S/Z: An Essay*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1974).
3. Ruscha also insisted that the second printing retain not only this error, or flap, but the words *first edition* at the front. See Willoughby Sharp, "'A Kind of a Huh'—An Interview with Edward Ruscha," *Avalanche* (Winter–Spring 1973): 30–39; reprinted in Ruscha, *Leave Any Information*, 69.
4. Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 2, pt. 2, 1931–1934, trans. Rodney Livingstone et

- al., ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1999), 507–30 (512).
5. Ruscha, *Leave Any Information*, 303.
6. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Berkeley: Ginko, 2013), 24.
7. Benjamin, “Little History,” 510.
8. Benjamin, “Little History,” 510.
9. Ruscha in Blistène, “Conversation with Ed Ruscha,” 134; reprinted in Ruscha, *Leave Any Information*, 303.
10. Paul Karlstrom, “Oral History Interview with Edward Ruscha, 1980 October 29–1981 October 2,” Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-edward-ruscha-12887>.
11. Eva Respini, *Into the Sunset: Photography's Image of the American West*, exh. cat. (New York: MoMA, 2009), 15.
12. Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life,” in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1995).
13. See Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin, 2013).
14. Guy Debord “Theory of the Dérive,” in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), 62–66 (62).
15. André Breton with André Parinaud, *Conversations: The Autobiography of Surrealism*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (New York: Paragon, 1993), 27.
16. Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: Verso, 1979), 229.
17. Atget's ad is in the February 1882 edition of the *Revue des Beaux-Arts*; cited in Suzanne Tise-Isoré, ed. *Atget: Paris in Detail*, trans. David Radzinowicz (Paris: Flammarion, 2002), 11.
18. This body of work was acquired by MoMA, New York, courtesy of the Abbott-Levy Collection, in 1968. See MoMA, Advance fact sheet for *The Work of Atget: Modern Times*, https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/6211/releases/MOMA_1985_0065_63.pdf.
19. See Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “Canon Fodder: Authoring Eugène Atget,” in Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 28–51.
20. Berenice Abbott, *The World of Atget* (New York: Horizon, 1964), viii.
21. Between 1935 and 1938, the Federal Art Project (FAP) provided her a \$145 monthly salary, a field assistant, research assistants, a secretary, and a car. When the funding was cut, she completed her project by creating two sets of 305 exhibition prints for the Museum of the City of New York and a partial set for the New York State Museum. These FAP works are documented for the first time in Bonnie Yochelson, *Berenice Abbott: Changing New York; The Museum of the City of New York* (New York: New Press, 1999).
22. See Sarah M. Miller, *Documentary in Dispute: The Original Manuscript of Changing New York by Berenice Abbott and Elizabeth McCausland* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020), 221.
23. Abbott, *World of Atget*, xi.
24. Molly Nesbit, *Atget's Seven Albums* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 5.
25. Benjamin, “Little History,” 519.
26. Cécile Whiting, *Pop L.A.: Art and the City in the 1960s* (Berkeley: University California Press, 2006), 63.
27. Robert Landau and John Pashdag, “A Conversation with Edward Ruscha,” in *Outrageous L.A.* (San Francisco: Chronicle, 1984); reprinted in Ruscha, *Leave Any Information*, 242.
28. See the detailed analysis of the 1947 surrealist catalog and exhibition in Paris in Alyce Mahon, *Surrealism and the Politics of Eros, 1938–1968* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005), 107–41.
29. Denise Scott Brown, “On Pop Art, Permissiveness, and Planning,” *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35, no. 3 (May 1969): 185.
30. Aron Vinegar, “Ed Ruscha, Heidegger, and Deadpan Photography,” in *Photography after Conceptual Art*, ed. Diarmuid Costello and Margaret Iversen (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 29–49 (31).
31. Ruscha in Blistène, “Conversation with Ed Ruscha,” 134; reprinted in Ruscha, *Leave Any Information*, 303.
32. Eve Babitz, *Eve's Hollywood* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2015), 157.
33. Elizabeth Armstrong, “Interviews with Ed Ruscha and Bruce Conner,” in “The Duchamp Effect,” *October* 70 (Fall 1994): 55–59 (55).
34. Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Viking, 1971), 43.
35. Cabanne, *Dialogues*, 48.
36. Sylvia Wolf, *Ed Ruscha and Photography* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2004), 260–61.
37. Edward Ruscha, “A Conversation between Walter Hopps and Ed Ruscha, September 1992,” in *Romance with Liquids: Paintings 1966–1969*, exh. cat. (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 1993), 100.
38. Hopps met Duchamp through Walter and Louise Arensberg, Duchamp's friends and patrons. See Dickran Tashjian, “Nothing Left to Chance: Duchamp's First Retrospective,” in *West Coast Duchamp*, ed. Bonnie Clearwater (Miami Beach: Grassfield, 1991), 83, 61.
39. Tashjian, “Nothing Left,” 77, 80, respectively.
40. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” *October* 55 (Winter 1990): 105–143 (138).
41. Jordan Riefe, “Ed Ruscha on Marcel Duchamp: ‘He was a guiding light,’” *The Guardian*, 14 March 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/mar/14/ed-ruscha-marcel-duchamp-retrospective-los-angeles>.
42. Janus, “Interview with Man Ray,” reproduced in Jean-Hubert Martin, ed., *Man Ray: Photographs* (1982; repr., New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 35.
43. In the *Mystic Fire* video, directed by Gary Conklin, 1981, Ruscha stated: “‘Hollywood’ is like a verb to me. It's something to any subject or any thing. You can take something in Grand Rapids and Hollywoodize it.” Transcript reprinted as “L.A. Suggested by the Art of Ed Ruscha,” in Ruscha, *Leave Any Information*, 220–224 (221).
44. Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 2, part 1, 1927–1930, trans. Rodney Livingstone et al., ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1999), 507–30 (512).
45. Kurt von Meier, “Surrealism and Architecture,” *Artforum* 5, no. 1 (1966), <https://www.artforum.com/print/196607/surrealism-andarchitecture-37743>.
46. Von Meier, “Surrealism.”
47. Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (New York: Viking, 1957), 81. For more on how he wrote it, see Andrea Shea, “Jack Kerouac's Famous Scroll, ‘On the Road’ Again,” *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, 5 July 2007, <https://www.npr.org/2007/07/05/11709924/jack-kerouacs-famous-scroll-on-the-road-again>.
48. Kerouac, *On the Road*, 86.
49. Jack Kerouac, “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose,” *Evergreen Review* (1958); quoted in John Tytell, *Naked Angels: Kerouac, Ginsberg, Burroughs* (New York: Grove, 1986), 142.
50. Gagosian Gallery London, “Ed Ruscha: *On the Road: An Artist Book of the Classic Novel by Jack Kerouac*,” press release, 22 September 2009, https://gagosian.com/media/exhibitions/2009/ed-ruscha-on-the-road-an-artist-book-of-the-classic-novel-by-jack-kerouac/Gagosian_Ed_Ruscha_On_The_Road_An_Artist_Book_Of_The_Classic_Novel_By_Jack_Kerouac_2009_Press_Releas.pdf.

51. Kerouac, *On the Road*, 79, 131–32, respectively.
52. Ruscha, *Leave Any Information*, 224.
53. Ruscha, in Diane Spodarek, “Feature Interview: Ed Ruscha,” *Detroit Artists Monthly* 2, no. 4 (1977): 1–5; reprinted in Ruscha, *Leave Any Information*, 73–81 (74).
54. Fred Fehlau, “Ed Ruscha,” *Flash Art*, no. 138 (January–February 1988): 70; reprinted in Ruscha, *Leave Any Information*, 262–68.

8

Disruption and Recursion: On Ruscha's Criticality

Margaret Iversen

Ed Ruscha's newly accessible Streets of Los Angeles (SoLA) Archive presents an opportunity to reconsider all aspects of his long history of photographically documenting the city. We now know, for example, that his famous artist's book, *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966), constitutes a tiny fraction of the numerous other streets, and the multiple iterations of the same street, that he documented over the course of his long career. As a long-term resident and acute observer of his adopted home, Ruscha has seen Los Angeles and its environs undergo significant changes, and not all for the better. One question raised by the SoLA Archive concerns the artist's attitude to the changes he witnessed. Does his project of repeatedly documenting the same streets imply a watchful, critical stance? The literature on Ruscha often comments on the artist's pose of indifference and the tonality of deadpan, especially evident in his series of books. Yet, since the late 1980s, this characterization has seemed inappropriate. Increasingly, observers have noticed a more critical posture and a more pessimistic tone. Hal Foster, for instance, observed a change in mood or "weather" in Ruscha's work.¹ Mention is made in this context of the *Course of Empire* series (2005), the noirish, air-brushed silhouette paintings he began in the late 1980s, and *Our Flag* (2017), his stunning depiction of a tattered American flag against a

black sky. Recent decades have undoubtedly witnessed the emergence of a darker Ruscha.

The critical posture evident in the later work should perhaps prompt us to reconsider the stance of neutrality or impersonal objectivity attributed to his early books and the cool detachment so often ascribed to the man. This essay identifies two types of criticality in Ruscha's work. The first, disruption, is mainly associated with his books, including *Every Building*. I argue that by adopting and playing against what the pioneering media theorist Vilém Flusser would later call the *apparatus* and *program* of graphic design,² Ruscha was able to demonstrate his resistance to its mechanistic and instrumental character. A portion of his work, including his photodocumentation of the streets of Los Angeles and adjacent cities, is, I think, a response to what he saw as the steady deterioration of the urban fabric of L.A. and the surrounding environment. His growing dismay demanded a different model of criticality: recursion, which involves time-lapsed, repeated documentation of the same site. I will consider each critical strategy in turn.



Figure 8.1 Ed Ruscha, *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, 1966, offset lithograph, folded and glued, 7 1/8 × 297 in. Publisher: Ed Ruscha. Edition of 1,000. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.

DISRUPTION, OR A SPANNER IN THE WORKS

In her recent book, *Back to the Drawing Board: Ed Ruscha, Art, and Design in the 1960s*, Jennifer Quick situates the artist's work in the context of his training in graphic and advertising design. In a chapter presenting painstaking and original research into the making of *Every Building*, Quick persuasively argues that Ruscha “tested the representational capacities, perceptual apparatuses, and communicative potential of pasteup layout, sometimes adhering to its rules and at other times breaking them.”³ The whole process—involving the systematic photographic documentation of the Strip, pasteup techniques, and commercial printing processes—effectively compressed both sides of the 1.6-mile-long boulevard onto a 27-foot foldout (fig. 8.1). The work on *Every Building* coincided with Ruscha's freelance job as layout designer for *Artforum* (1965–69). Given his training and professional experience, including working briefly for an advertising agency, it makes sense to consider how *Every Building* and Ruscha's other books both deploy and disrupt standard commercial applications of graphic design.⁴

Quick's research demonstrates the extent to which Ruscha's process is governed by the *apparatus* and *program* of graphic design—terms I borrow from Flusser's *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (2000). Flusser's influential book is

about the apparatus and program of the analog camera, but he makes it clear that the camera is one apparatus among many involved in the production and dissemination of information and, as such, it provides a useful model for reflecting on the production of Ruscha's books. For Flusser, photographers are restricted to mining the “possibilities contained within the program of the camera,” and so their images are largely predetermined by the camera.⁵ He declares that the effect of the camera and other apparatuses on lived experience leaves “no place for human freedom within the area of automated, programmed, and programming apparatuses.”⁶ However, Flusser thought that artists and experimental photographers have a role to play in resisting the program: “They know they are playing against the camera.” They bend or alter the program and attempt to “outwit the camera's rigidity.” They “force the camera to produce the unpredictable, the improbable, the informative.”⁷ In short, they endeavor to produce something that is not anticipated by the program and, in doing so, help to reverse the incremental domination by programmed and programming apparatuses.

What Quick refers to as “the total system of pasteup” seems analogous to Flusser's apparatus and program, and, indeed, many of Ruscha's statements encourage this comparison.⁸ He said, for instance, that after he had established the format of his first book, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963), the subsequent books came easily

because “each one could be plugged into the system I had.”⁹ In other words, the photographs served the book design, not the other way around. Similarly, in an interview with Christophe Cherix, Ruscha states that he wanted to make a book, and the series of swimming pool photographs “just kind of fell into my program.”¹⁰ His interest in the books was mainly focused on the production logic of the total system of pasteup, rather than on the content of the photographs. By adhering to this impersonal, methodical system, he distanced himself from the ethos of abstract expressionism, but, at the same time, he risked uncritically embracing the procedures of commercial media. This is exactly what Benjamin Buchloh claims in his influential essay “Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions” (1990). He argues that Ruscha’s books were part of a project of negating the transcendental aspirations of traditional art by miming “with bureaucratic rigor” the positivist and instrumentalist logic of late capitalism.¹¹ As a result, Ruscha and other artists succeeded in evading the self-deluded pursuit of a free, corporeal, expressive gesture, but they did so at the cost of submitting to capitalism’s coercive, techno-scientific systems of administration and control. My argument suggests that Buchloh failed to appreciate Ruscha’s critical strategy of both appropriating and undermining such systems.

Quick makes it clear that what Ruscha called his “consciousness of layout” does not imply that his work was wholly determined or limited by the program.¹² To avoid this implication, she draws attention to his use of “strategies of reversal or inversion that often countered design’s functionalism and communicative capacities” and notes how Ruscha “reveled in moments of mistranslation, ambiguity, and even failure, delighting in the comedy and confusion that resulted.”¹³ She cites moments of resistance in *Every Building*, such as its unconventional design, with its broad, blank band down the middle of the page and the nearly indecipherable small scale of the images; she also observes the unwieldiness of its extended foldout. While I agree with Quick’s thesis that Ruscha’s deployment of the techniques of graphic design is key to understanding his practice, I think it is equally important to emphasize the extent to which he also resisted succumbing to its logic. His response

to a query about his early experience working as a printer’s apprentice is telling: “My eyes would light up when I saw mistakes.”¹⁴ For Ruscha, methodical, technical procedures must be countered by the accidental or the unexpected. How, then, do his artist’s books subvert the techniques and protocols of graphic design?

In my view, Ruscha’s series of little books, including *Every Building*, were aimed at putting the program of graphic design under extreme pressure to produce something unanticipated by the program. The very project for a 27-foot-long, jack-in-the-box, foldout book is patently absurd, especially as it is housed in such a small volume (7 × 5 5/8 inches).¹⁵ The motorized automaticity of Ruscha’s photographic process is in stark contrast to the earlier examples using a similar layout. *Every Building* is a protoconceptual work in which the boulevard is treated as an architectural readymade just like the buildings in *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*. Quick’s research in the Getty Research Institute archive demonstrates that *Every Building* is a complex assemblage of images, yet the end product shrugs off its labor-intensive pasteup process. This disparity between process and appearance sets it apart from much conceptual art, which is a record of its own production. *Every Building*’s look of impersonal automaticity is central to its impact and significance as a work of art. Crucially, it was presented in an art context that came to appreciate its doubly motorized photographic technique, its vacant streets, and its deadpan neutrality and humor. These factors are what constitute its enduring art historical importance.

The instructions for display and some of the photographs that Ruscha had taken for *Every Building* accentuate its absurdity. In one photograph, the book poses as a freestanding, crinkle-crinkle sculpture that turns a sharp corner to fit the confines of the frame. On this evidence, the accordion fold can hardly be regarded as a functional solution to the design problem of making the work portable and manageable. The design of *Every Building* was aimed at subverting and stretching the techniques of graphic art. In this respect, Ruscha follows Marcel Duchamp’s example. Molly Nesbit has proposed that Duchamp aimed to subvert the authoritarian and utilitarian “common sense” of the new Third Republic in France. The republic’s “common sense” was inculcated by mandatory

training in technical drawing in primary and secondary schools, where “line and body were pitted against each other as if they were savagely opposite poles.”¹⁶ The aim was to discipline vision and channel drawing to serve the interests of industry and commerce instead of art. Many of Duchamp’s paintings and readymades appropriate the utilitarian objects illustrated in the drawing manuals, including coffee grinders and snow shovels. Yet he also contaminated the culture of dry mechanical drawing with eroticism, chance, blossoming, and splashing.¹⁷ By appropriating and subverting the techniques of technical drawing, he managed to evade both the prevailing conventions of fine art and the strictures of a rationalizing and utilitarian educational culture. If, as Nesbit argues, Duchamp interrogated the industrial common sense of his time, then I suggest that Ruscha did the same for graphic design’s common sense by both miming and undermining it. Ruscha’s books and paintings lightly discredit the techniques of graphic design and perspective construction with bubbles, fire, various fluids, stains, clouds, vivid colors, and signs of deterioration—all things, in other words, unassimilable to the ruler and the perspectival grid.¹⁸ For *Every Building*, he motorized the camera in emulation of a kind of machinelike vision. In the pasteup process, he ironed out the topographical irregularities of the actual Strip into two literal strips, which he then proceeded to fold and collapse.¹⁹ His *Book Covers* series (1970) includes a lithographic still life of *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (fig. 8.2), which shows the book’s bottom edge as a wet, wavy contour not unlike the curvaceous rulers Duchamp made in 1913–14 for *3 stoppages étalon* (*3 Standard Stoppages*). In both artists’ work, premeditated logic and technical procedures encounter the unexpected, the accidental, the bodily. Something formless or unruly disrupts the clear-cut design. The dry is contaminated by the wet.²⁰

This strategy of disruption extends to the other aspects of the design of Ruscha’s books. Several commentators have pointed out how their consistent serial structure is undercut by a head-scratching coda. The artist himself noted, for instance, that the journey implied in *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* reaches its assumed destination in Oklahoma, only to backtrack and end in Texas.²¹ *Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles* (1967) contains what the artist described as a “strange foldout” tab at the end of the book where a

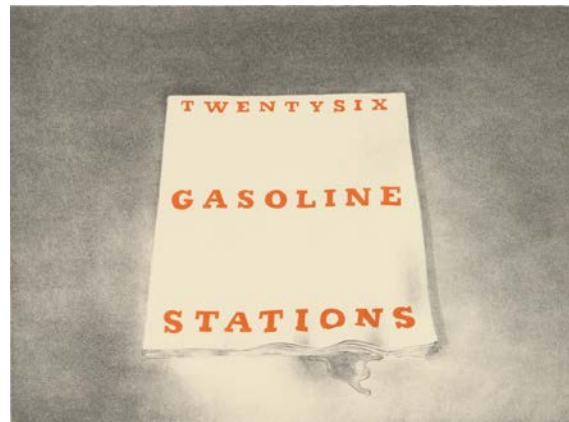


Figure 8.2 Ed Ruscha, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, from the *Book Covers* series, 1970, lithograph on Arches paper, 16 1/8 × 20 3/16 in. Publisher: Graphicstudio, University of South Florida, Tampa. Edition of 30. New York, Museum of Modern Art, 297.2004.2. John M. Shapiro Fund. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY. © Ed Ruscha.

tipped-in, 1 1/2-inch extension added a few more parking spaces to a long and narrow two-page photographic spread of them.²² *Nine Swimming Pools and a Broken Glass* (1968) features only ten color photographs and fifty-four blank pages. The tenth photograph is of a broken glass, which is as unexpected as the glass of milk at the end of *Various Small Fires and Milk* (1964). To my mind, this tension between the methodical and the unexpected is what animates Ruscha’s work.²³ He himself tends to stress the methodical character of his process, only rarely mentioning how this aspect is tied to the books’ subversive humor. Yet Ruscha is aware of their close connection: in conversation with Willoughby Sharp, he observes that “to have something come across as humor you have to be methodical about it.”²⁴ I suggest that the famous “deadpan” character of Ruscha’s books may have something to do with this methodical, repetitive, automatic, and mechanistic ground of humor.

It is generally agreed that Ruscha’s early work, including the series of books, was motivated by his antipathy to the fantasy of artistic authenticity, autonomy, and spontaneous gestural originality associated with abstract expressionism. Accordingly, much critical commentary, including my own earlier effort, has tended to accentuate Ruscha’s impersonal technique, his adherence to a self-assigned brief, and his attraction to what he once called the “inhuman aspect” of photography.²⁵ However, this emphasis has

resulted in an underappreciation of the extent to which he also aimed to sabotage the determining power of the apparatus and program of graphic design, which was closely associated with the burgeoning industries of commercial print advertising and product and package design. Although Ruscha certainly admired the books' "clear-cut machine finish,"²⁶ he cannot have been untouched by contemporary critiques of commercial art and advertising. As the Rolling Stones declared in 1965, advertising purveys information useless for the purpose of gaining satisfaction. In my view, Ruscha's books are finely balanced between, on the one hand, an astute acknowledgment of the actual conditions of art practice in a commercial and highly technical environment and, on the other, a provocative, playful, witty, critical, and disruptive resistance to those conditions.²⁷

RECURSION, OR THAT WAS THEN, THIS IS NOW

If Ruscha's books play against the apparatus and program of graphic design, the same cannot be said of his periodically repeated photodocumentation of L.A. streets. This major project clearly demands a very different model of analysis bearing on the subject matter of the photographs. We must inquire into why he returns again and again to rephotograph the Sunset Strip, Hollywood Boulevard, Santa Monica Boulevard, the Pacific Coast Highway, and La Cienega Boulevard. This project of recursive observation and documentation is in keeping with his "waste-retrieval method"—that is, his general practice of recycling and reworking motifs, like the Standard gas station and Hollywood Sign.²⁸ Yet his periodic inventory of L.A. streets has a specific motivation tied to the changing fabric of the city over the course of time.

THEN & NOW: Hollywood Boulevard, 1973–2004 is a large-format book published in 2005. It is a photodocumentation of both sides of Hollywood Boulevard that was first carried out in black and white in 1973 and then in color thirty years later.²⁹ The book has the same layout as *Every Building*, with continuous strips of photographs showing one side of the street at the top and the other, inverted, at the bottom of the page (see fig. 2.22). However, *THEN & NOW* is a conventionally bound book rather than a concertina foldout, and both

upper and lower registers are doubled. What fundamentally distinguishes *Every Building* from *THEN & NOW*, apart from their vastly different dimensions, is that the latter demands a detailed comparative study of the monochrome and color registers. Viewing is focused not on formal aspects of the layout but rather on the actual architecture and signage of the boulevard. Ruscha has said that his archive of photodocumentation of city streets is primarily of interest for its record of the changing face of the city over the course of several decades. As Amy Murphy put it in her contribution to this volume, while Ruscha's initial focus seemed to be on the horizontal or spatial dimension of the street, it clearly shifts to a vertical or temporal dimension.³⁰ He explicitly invites viewers to study the differences between the monochrome and color registers: "You can go back and compare: 'Oh, there's that tree or Mexican fan palm and look what size it is today.'"³¹ That *THEN & NOW* and the Streets of Los Angeles Archive provide the opportunity for such banal observations cannot explain the magnitude of the project, which has yielded about 900,000 photographs to date. In my view, Ruscha's ongoing documentation of L.A. streets is motivated by a deep concern about the city's continual process of decay, demolition, and development. During an interview in January 2020, he explained that he started his photodocumentation of L.A. because he "began to see the city decaying in negative ways. . . . Anything that was worth looking at seemed to be erased and something came along to replace it that was repulsive. That continues to be true today, too."³² His practice amounts to a time-lapse documentation that makes visible the optical unconscious of that gradual change.

Ruscha's worry about the changing character of the city and his critical strategy of recursive documentation and comparative viewing were unveiled in his celebrated series of paintings exhibited in the American Pavilion at the 51st Venice Biennale in 2005. In the Biennale catalog, Ruscha associates *Course of Empire* with a concurrent project, "a book of buildings on Hollywood Boulevard," so it is instructive to view *THEN & NOW* alongside the series of paintings.³³ For *Course of Empire*, Ruscha returned to the quasi-imaginary industrial buildings he painted in monochrome for the *Blue Collar* series (1992); he depicted them again, in color, just over a decade later.³⁴ In his review of the installation's inaugural

exhibition in Venice, Buchloh revisits his critical assessment of Ruscha's books and entire body of work. Upon viewing *Course of Empire*, he declares that Ruscha's dual series of five canvases depict "his country's culture at a moment of incessant deterioration of its liberal-democratic public sphere"—exemplified, for example, by the boarded-up windows and chain link fence in *The Old Trade School Building* (2005). He concludes that this had been "the focus of his artistic projects of the last forty years." The "corporate ordering of space" in Ruscha's paintings "was not the triumph of a technological culture over an obsolete artisanal one, but rather a melancholic and allegorical act of resistance within the totality of industrial sign systems."³⁵

Juxtaposed to the color series, the monochrome paintings acquire the connotation of a "that-has-been" industrial moment on the cusp of a postindustrial one. But the prospect of imminent change was already clearly marked in the *Blue Collar* series. Monochrome paint has an inherent bleakness and, in the early 1990s, it also alluded to the near obsolescence of black-and-white photography and film. In an interview, Ruscha revealed that *Blue Collar Tires* (1992) (fig. 8.3) was based on a building he often passed on his way to his retreat in the Mojave Desert. "It was so lonely and it seemed forgotten. . . . It didn't look like it was in business." As such, it assumed for him an "iconic" status. *Expansion of the Old Tires Building* (2005) appears to show a stalled redevelopment project (fig. 8.4).³⁶ The sense that the buildings in the *Blue Collar* series are abandoned, or nearly so, is particularly marked in the case of *Telephone*: in 1992, public telephones were already nearing redundancy, and this must be what motivated its inclusion in the series (apart from starting, like the other signage, with the letter T). In a conversation that same year with Walter Hopps, Ruscha described the *Blue Collar* series as "futuristic," by which I think he meant that it anticipated the transformations he was to depict in the second series.³⁷ In any case, *Course of Empire* does not describe a simple opposition. Rather, the *Blue Collar* paintings anticipate changes represented in the second set, which in turn prompt the viewer to cast a retrospective glance back at what has been lost.



Figure 8.3 Ed Ruscha, *Blue Collar Tires*, from the *Blue Collar* and *Course of Empire* series, 1992, acrylic on canvas, 54 × 120 in. Madrid, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía. Image courtesy of Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía. © Ed Ruscha.

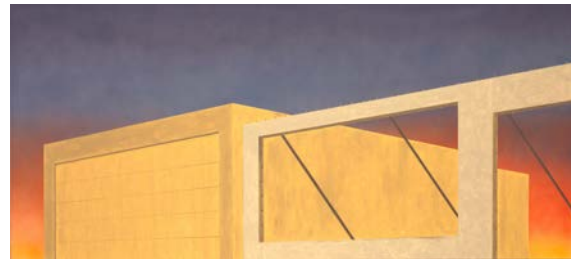


Figure 8.4 Ed Ruscha, *Expansion of the Old Tires Building*, from the *Course of Empire* series, 2005, acrylic on canvas, 54 × 120 in. New York, Collection of Donald B. Marron. © Ed Ruscha.

The temporality of *Course of Empire* is further complicated by its relation to Thomas Cole's *The Course of Empire* (1834–36), a cycle of five paintings envisaging the rise and fall of a great imperial city of classical antiquity but also prefiguring what Cole imagined was the possible destiny of the United States. Cole's paintings show millennia of historical transformations taking place in the same location. The last painting in the series, *Desolation* (1836), depicts a landscape at dusk with the ruins of classical buildings being reclaimed by wildlife. The landscape represents the desolate remains of a bloated and decadent empire, but it also indicates the possibility of renewal of the natural world. The calm and delicate pastel blue of the sky in Cole's painting resembles the tonality of Ruscha's penultimate painting—*Site of a Former Telephone Booth* (2005) (fig. 8.5). Here, too, a tree has sprung up—a species of tree native to California, the Western Sycamore—with one leaf just visible at the top right of the canvas. The only other feature, a cast concrete roadside sign or lamppost, corresponds to Cole's single standing classical column in the left foreground of

Desolation. Ruscha's painting—with its delicacy of color, pale light, stillness, and perfect geometry—suggests a glimmer of hope for future renewal.



Figure 8.5 Ed Ruscha, *Site of a Former Telephone Booth*, from the *Course of Empire* series, 2005, acrylic on canvas, 54 × 120 in. La Jolla, California, Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, Collection of Joan and Irwin Jacobs. Promised gift to the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego. © Ed Ruscha.

Course of Empire is evidence of Ruscha's growing interest in capturing complex temporalities and marking social and environmental change. Several statements confirm it: "I've been doing a lot of jumping in time. I'm not sure I learned anything from it, but the man that started this thinking was Thomas Cole. Somehow, I've picked up on this, repeated or extended it in different ways, tried to lasso it in or to have some discourse that emphasizes the passage of time."³⁸ Discussing his work following *Course of Empire*, Ruscha says he was still working from "a sense of LA as decay," yet, as we have seen, his project is more nuanced than that comment implies.³⁹ Of interest in this context are his *Metro Plots*, a series of monochrome paintings dating from the late 1990s showing bare Los Angeles street patterns and names in a manner midway between an oblique aerial view and a map. Ruscha remarks, "They almost look like what these streets might look like in the year 5000 or something."⁴⁰ In conversation with Margit Rowell, he describes the *Metro Plots* as an "archaeological vision" of L.A. and a "catastrophic, future vision." They are "patterns of streets that once existed."⁴¹ Ruscha compares the series to aerial photographs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki after they were bombed, "where the streets were all clearly seen with no buildings."⁴² The *Metro Plots* envisage future traces of an extinct civilization.

In a statement published in 1988, Ruscha laments the condition of L.A.'s urban sprawl and dwindling natural environment. He observes that

"it's all just rape of the land for profit these days. It's fairly sick. Southern California is all just one big city now."⁴³ Yet, in 1967, he was already photographically documenting that destruction from the vantage point of a helicopter. *Thirtyfour Parking Lots* reveals a vast acreage of land tarmacked and painted with grid patterns. The photograph of the Universal Studios lot is particularly telling in this respect: the site looks fresh and raw, having been recently bulldozed, steamrolled, paved, painted, and planted with spindly trees. It is perhaps only now that we can see these photographs as evidence of the despoliation of the natural environment, and perhaps also as traces of the displacement of local communities by developers. In a 2016 interview, Ruscha refers to the forced displacement in the 1950s of Mexican American residents of Chavez Ravine to clear the land where Dodger Stadium was to be built.⁴⁴ He doesn't mention his 1967 aerial view of the stadium in *Thirtyfour Parking Lots*, but his reference to these circumstances retroactively alters its significance.

Surveying *THEN & NOW*, one notices numerous changes that have occurred over the course of three decades. One critic remarked that "Hollywood Boulevard's sedate, old-style glamour of 1973 has a new facade of uniformity and tourist amnesia."⁴⁵ Studying the time-lapsed registers, one sees, for example, the disappearance of one of Ruscha's favorite "modernist" canopied gas stations; former vacant lots and real estate opportunities filled with large, bland office buildings; property developments block former vistas; and touches of humor, such as a monstrously overgrown hedge. Demolition and overdevelopment are documented without comment. Speaking in 1999, Ruscha continues to defend his practice of making art without imposing "value judgements."⁴⁶ Yet his insistence on the "nonjudgmental" documentation of the city should not be interpreted as indifference on the artist's part. Rather, it indicates his aversion to making art that carries an overt message. His practice of recursive documentation invites comparison and reflection. Ruscha is quoted in a 2008 Gagosian press release as saying, "If you give the viewer something to compare, you don't have to interpret."⁴⁷

In a 2015 interview with Jonathan Griffin, Ruscha remarks that every time he sees a single-

story bungalow demolished, he feels sad because he knows it will be replaced by a three-story apartment building. He saw population growth and demand for accommodation putting pressure on the fabric of the city.⁴⁸ He also says that when he first started driving to Joshua Tree, in the 1960s, much of the route—which is now developed—passed through countryside: “Believe it or not, there was actually scenery out there. There were horse farms and meadows and beautiful white picket fences and palm trees. Now all of that, every bit of it, is gone. . . . Now we have concrete loading docks and logistics centers.”⁴⁹ The spread of banal office blocks, residential buildings, and faceless distribution hubs is part of what constitutes, for him, “LA as decay.” Ruscha mourns the California he has personally lost, but we should also acknowledge losses of longer duration and much greater severity suffered by the area’s Indigenous population.⁵⁰ In a Tate interview about *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, Ruscha indicated his awareness that the land crossed by Route 66 is occupied land: “What used to belong to the Navajo and Apache Indians now belongs to the white man and he’s got gas stations out there. So, I started seeing [them] as cultural curiosities.”⁵¹ The phrase “cultural curiosities” has the effect of defamiliarizing the gas stations and turning them into poor roadside monuments of the white man’s civilization.

Discussing *Course of Empire*, Donna DeSalvo and Linda Norden remark, “It’s hard not to read a certain nostalgia, a sense of personal loss . . . lurking just below the surface of Ruscha’s cool remove.”⁵² There are also undercurrents of anger and frustration; these emotions surfaced in an episode of *The Art Angle* podcast recorded ahead of the US presidential election in 2020. Ruscha was in conversation with Jimmy Iovine, the music impresario who had commissioned *Our Flag* three years earlier. Ruscha explains that he had accepted the commission on condition that he could paint the flag in tatters. With unusual bluntness, he says that the painting represented his view that the Trump administration had brought “unrest and discord” to the nation and threatened it with “tyranny.”⁵³ With *Our Flag*, Ruscha extends his sense of L.A.’s decay to cover the state of the nation under its forty-fifth president. His sense of the dangerous fragmentation of the social fabric led him to

abandon his strict avoidance of explicit messages in his work or statements.

We have seen how two types of criticality inform Ruscha’s work. The first, based on a Duchampian model, is mainly associated with the books and his early career. By adopting and playing against or disrupting the apparatus and program of graphic design, Ruscha was able to demonstrate his resistance, not only to abstract expressionism but also to the professional automatisms of commercial art. In this way, he challenged what I believe he saw as a cultural shift leading to increasing commodification, standardization, and automatization of life and work. A large portion of his work is concerned with the impact of this cultural shift on the built environment and lived experience. Drawing attention to this impact demanded a different model of criticality. Although Ruscha began his practice of recursive documentation of the streets of L.A. in the early 1960s, the method was consolidated when he adopted the approach of Cole’s *The Course of Empire*. He then deployed a strategy of time-lapsed documentation of the same site and offered the viewer the opportunity to track changes by comparing then and now. With his ongoing project, Ruscha continues to document the changes that have affected the city and landscape and asks us to judge for ourselves.

NOTES

1. Throughout this essay, I will be citing various volumes of *Edward Ruscha: Catalogue Raisonné of the Paintings*, 7 vols. (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2003–16). For Foster’s observation of the change in “weather” in Ruscha’s work, see Hal Foster, “Evening in America,” in *Edward Ruscha*, vol. 5, 1993–1997, 8. See also Hal Foster, *The First Pop Age: Painting and Subjectivity in the Art of Hamilton, Lichtenstein, Warhol, Richter, and Ruscha* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 239; and Briony Fer, “Moth-Man: Ruscha’s Light and Dark,” in *Edward Ruscha*, vol. 4, 1988–1992, 5–12.
2. Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion, 2000), 26–27.
3. Jennifer Quick, *Back to the Drawing Board: Ed Ruscha, Art, and Design in the 1960s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), 88. See also Quick, “Pasteup Pictures: Ed Ruscha’s *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*,” *Art Bulletin* 100, no. 2 (2018): 125–52.
4. In 1960, Ruscha was employed as assistant layout artist at the Carson/Roberts advertising agency—an experience he described as “sheer hell.” Edward Ruscha, *Leave Any Information at the Signal: Writings, Interviews, Bits, Pages*, ed. Alexandra Schwartz (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 230.
5. Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy*, 26–27.
6. Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy*, 81–82.
7. Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy*, 81, 80.

8. Quick, *Back to the Drawing Board*, 93. The expression comes from the chapter titled "Pasteup—A Total System," in Walter B. Graham, *A Complete Guide to Pasteup* (Philadelphia: North American, 1975).
9. Ruscha, *Leave Any Information*, 212.
10. Ed Ruscha, interview by Christophe Cherix, 12 January 2012, audio transcript, p. 12, Museum of Modern Art Oral History Program, New York, https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/learn/archives/transcript_ruscha.pdf.
11. Benjamin Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (1990): 141.
12. Ruscha, *Leave Any Information*, 24.
13. Quick, *Back to the Drawing Board*, 117, 5.
14. Ruscha, *Leave Any Information*, 363.
15. *Every Building* was not altogether unprecedented. In fact, a very similar book was published in Japan in 1954 by Yoshikazu Suzuki and Shohachi Kimura: *Ginza Kaiwai / Ginza Haccho* is a two-volume boxed publication; the second volume is a 14-foot accordion foldout with a continuous panorama of both sides of Tokyo's Ginza Street. However, *Every Building* and *Ginza Haccho* are conceptually very different. While Suzuki and Kimura's book documented for posterity the architecture and street life of the Tokyo neighborhood circa 1954, the photographs in Ruscha's books are to be understood, in his own words, as "an extension of the readymade in photographic form." Ruscha, *Leave Any Information*, 215.
16. Molly Nesbit, "The Language of Industry," in *The Definitively Unfinished Marcel Duchamp* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 353.
17. Molly Nesbit, *Their Common Sense* (London: Black Dog, 2000), 26, 121, 186.
18. On the topic of the grid and what it excludes, see Rosalind Krauss, "The /Cloud/," in *Agnes Martin*, by Barbara Haskell et al., exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992), 159.
19. Studying the raw photographs on the Getty Research Institute's website reveals that Ruscha had to eliminate numerous redundant frames, particularly those showing oblique rather than *en face* views of buildings, to achieve what he called the simple "store-front plane." Ruscha, *Leave Any Information*, 43; and Edward Ruscha Photographs of Sunset Boulevard and Hollywood Boulevard, 1965–2010, 2012.M.1, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, <http://hdl.handle.net/10020/cifa2012m1>.
20. Yve-Alain Bois makes a related case arguing that the series of paintings often referred to as "liquid words," made in the late 1960s, is a way of "signaling the repressed materiality of an idealized code." Yve-Alain Bois, "Liquid Words," in *Formless: A Users Guide*, by Bois and Rosalind Krauss (New York: Zone, 1997), 127.
21. Ruscha, in conversation with Clive Phillpot, "Sixteen Books and Then Some," in *Edward Ruscha: Editions, 1959–1999; Catalogue Raisonné*, ed. Siri Engberg and Clive Phillpot, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), 63.
22. Ruscha, *Leave Any Information*, 43.
23. Ruscha supported this view when he said that he added a floating stuffed olive to the painting *Cheese Mold Standard with Olive* (1969) as "a way of antagonizing or disrupting the central idea." Ruscha, interview by Cherix, 47.
24. Ruscha, *Leave Any Information*, 65.
25. See Margaret Iversen, "Auto-maticity: Ruscha and Performative Photography," *Art History* 32, no. 5 (2009): 836–51; and Ruscha, *Leave Any Information*, 170.
26. Ruscha, *Leave Any Information*, 27.
27. Gabriel Orozco is another prominent contemporary artist whose work both mimics and subverts graphic design. See Margaret Iversen, "Desire and the Diagrammatic," *Oxford Art Journal* 39, no. 1 (2016): 1–17.
28. Ruscha, *Leave Any Information*, 251.
29. Edward Ruscha, *THEN & NOW: Hollywood Boulevard, 1973–2004* (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2005).
30. Amy Murphy, "Now Before Then: Ed Ruscha's Streets of Los Angeles Project and the Anticipation of an Archive," this volume. The vertical axis of Sunset Boulevard can be digitally accessed using Getty's interactive website "12 Sunsets: Exploring Ed Ruscha's Archive," <https://12sunsets.getty.edu>. Soon this website will no longer be supported; for a video capture, see http://hdl.handle.net/10020/12sunsets_archive.
31. Ruscha, interview by Deborah Vankin, "65,000 Photos of Sunset Boulevard: Take the Ultimate Road Trip with Ed Ruscha," *Los Angeles Times*, 7 October 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2020-10-07/ed-ruscha-sunset-boulevard-getty-database>.
32. M. H. Miller, "Ed Ruscha: He Up and Went Home," *New York Times*, 15 January 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/15/arts/design/ed-ruscha.html>.
33. Ed Ruscha, quoted in Donna DeSalvo et al., *Course of Empire: Paintings by Ed Ruscha* (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2005), n.p.
34. *Edward Ruscha*, vol. 4, 1988–1992, 382–93.
35. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "The Curse of Empire," *Artforum* 44, no. 1 (2005): 254–58, 324.
36. Ruscha, "Course of Empire," interview with Tom McCarthy and Elizabeth Kornhauser, *Gagosian Quarterly* (Fall 2018), <https://gagosian.com/quarterly/2019/02/11/interview-ed-ruscha-course-of-empire/>.
37. Ruscha, *Leave Any Information*, 327.
38. Ruscha, "Course of Empire."
39. Linda Norden, "Ed Ruscha's *Course of Empire*," *Edward Ruscha*, vol. 7, 2004–2011, 31, n1. Ruscha commented that Cole's series is "philosophically on the money as far as the way civilization is going." "In Conversation: Ed Ruscha and Joanne Northrup," *Gagosian Quarterly*, 4 December 2017, <https://gagosian.com/quarterly/2017/12/04/ed-ruscha-and-joanne-northrup/>.
40. Ruscha, *Leave Any Information*, 375.
41. Margit Rowell, *Cotton Puffs, Q-tips®, Smoke and Mirrors: The Drawing of Ed Ruscha*, exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, 2004), 23.
42. Kerry Brougher, "Living in Hollywood Backwards: An Interview with Ed Ruscha," in *Ed Ruscha and the Great American West*, ed. Karin Breuer (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 42.
43. Ruscha, *Leave Any Information*, 18.
44. Brougher, "Living," 41.
45. Karen Marta, "Then and Now," *Domus* 884 (September 2005): 1.
46. Ruscha, *Leave Any Information*, 375.
47. *Ed Ruscha: Paintings*, Gagosian, Britannia Street, London, February–March 2008, <https://gagosian.com/exhibitions/2008/ed-ruscha-paintings/>.
48. Amy Murphy argues that Ruscha preserves a largely imaginary "first" L.A. derived from his visits to the city as a teenager. As soon as he moved there in 1956, he experienced large-scale demolition and redevelopment projects, including the construction of the freeways. In any case, it's hardly an originary landscape to which he appeals. Murphy, "Now Before Then."
49. Ed Ruscha, quoted in Jonathan Griffin, "Ed Ruscha: L.A.'s Artist," *Financial Times*, 30 October 2015.
50. This point was highlighted by the Alaska-based Tlingit/Unangax artist Nicholas Galanin. His *Never Forget* was a giant, site-specific sign reading "INDIAN LAND" erected in the Coachella Valley of Southern California during the Desert X biennial in 2021. It mimicked the famous Hollywood Sign, much painted by Ruscha, which originally advertised the new, segregated housing development of Hollywoodland.
51. Ruscha, transcript of "Ed Ruscha's Photography Books, Artist Interview," *Tate Shots*, 12 September 2012, <https://youtu.be/0xboX5cvlw?feature=shared>.

52. DeSalvo et al., *Course of Empire*, n.p. See also Norden, "Ed Ruscha's *Course of Empire*," 27–31.
53. Ruscha, "The Art Angle Podcast: Ed Ruscha and Jimmy Iovine on How Art Can Help End the Trump Era," *Artnet News*, 29 October 2020, <https://news.artnet.com/multimedia/art-angle-podcast-jimmy-iovine-ed-ruscha-1919128>.

IMAGE

Isabel Frampton Wade

In *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (2003), a documentary about filmmaking in the city, the director, Thom Andersen, claims that Los Angeles is both the “most photographed city in the world” and the place where “the relation between reality and representation gets muddled.” Conjured through decades of experimentation in film, photography, and other media, the image of Los Angeles often oscillates between extremes: it is at once the United States’ best city—the place of sunshine, dreams, and Hollywood—and its worst—the site of endless urban sprawl, earthquakes, and gridlocked freeways. This section addresses Ed Ruscha’s complex relationship with the image of Los Angeles and its environs, and how he negotiates this relationship through photography. The essay authors highlight a diverse group of architects, urbanists, and artists who were studying L.A. during a period of major urban upheaval that included uprisings, school walkouts, and protests related to war and racial oppression.

Many critics have accused Ruscha of being disinterested in photography and have described his photographs as “deadpan” or sardonic; this section reveals the constellation of people, professions, and theories that Ruscha was in dialogue with. Britt Salvesen compares Ruscha to two of his contemporaries in urban studies, Denise Scott Brown and J. B. Jackson, and explores their shared working approach to documenting the urban landscape. In my essay, I turn our attention to the field of commercial architectural photography to show that artists and photographers, whose professional status and methodological approach may initially appear dissimilar, in fact used the medium to examine what it meant to create a portrait of the urban landscape. The trials and errors involved in Ruscha’s process of photographing Sunset Boulevard were quite similar to how both architectural photographers and filmmakers experimented with representing the city’s buildings and urban landscape during this period. Further expanding the contexts of the Streets of Los Angeles Archive, Mark Shiel brings Ruscha’s photography from the 1960s and 1970s into conversation with contemporaneous cinema, homing in on theories about the sequence shot to investigate how Ruscha used lesser-known cinematic methodologies to capture city streets.

While we learn much from how Ruscha’s work dialogues with parallel fields, his photography also gives a new perspective on how photographers, artists, and urbanists use images as information and rely on photography as a tool for knowledge production. Eva Ehninger broadens the scope of this section to show how Ruscha produced a timely critique of images as supposedly neutral transmitters of information. Throughout his career, Ruscha has questioned how art conveys meaning; he developed this practice, Ehninger argues, through photography. Each author interrogates the multiple meanings and media that the term *image* is attached to and shows how photography has been constitutive in both representing the myth of Los Angeles’ image and disclosing its realities.

IMAGE

9

Seeing the Strip: The Photographic Archives of J. B. Jackson, Ed Ruscha, and Denise Scott Brown

Britt Salvesen

I am not a photographer.

—Denise Scott Brown, 2018

I'm not a photographer at all.

—Ed Ruscha, 1972

Jackson was not a photographer per se.

—Jordi Ballesta and Camille Fallet, 2017

This essay considers the photographic archives of the cultural landscape theorist J. B. Jackson and the architect and urban theorist Denise Scott Brown alongside Ed Ruscha's *Streets of Los Angeles* Archive at the Getty Research Institute (GRI). None of them is a self-described photographer, but each recognized the camera's value as a tool for picturing and thinking. Their ways of seeing came to the fore in significant publications during the period 1956–77, establishing visual vocabularies for the built environment and automotive spectatorship that reverberate to this day. By attending to their biographical and professional positions and considering iconographic and formal affinities in their photographic archives, I suggest that their legacies encompass not only the work itself (depictions of everyday architecture) but also their way of working (cumulatively, archivally) and their way of looking ("deadpan").

Jackson, Ruscha, and Scott Brown shared some meaningful commonalities despite their different origins: Jackson was an American born in Dinard, France, and raised in a patrician manner; Ruscha was born in Omaha, Nebraska, and raised in Oklahoma City; and Scott Brown, a daughter of European Jewish immigrants, was born in Nkana, Zambia, and grew up in Johannesburg, South Africa.¹ All three had formative experiences as young adults traveling in Europe, where they noticed the specificities of urban life, design, and signage. In the United States, each took to the road and witnessed the 1956 Federal-Aid Highway Act's transformative effects on the landscape. With the automobile's ascendancy came such amenities as the commercial "strip," eye-catching signage and billboards, and parking lots (figs. 9.1, 9.2). These subjects were commonly considered ugly, but they attracted Jackson, Ruscha, and Scott Brown, impelling their image production over many years as well as key publications: Jackson's "Other-Directed Houses" (*Landscape*, 1956–57) and other articles on the American scene; Ruscha's *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966); and Scott Brown's *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972), coauthored with Robert Venturi and Steven Izenour. If Jackson first articulated a new perspective on the built environment in the 1950s, and Ruscha created a photographic/graphic



Figure 9.1 John Brinkerhoff Jackson, *Downtown, Las Vegas*, April 1970, scanned 35mm color slide. Albuquerque, University of New Mexico, University Libraries, Center for Southwest Research, Collection of J. B. Jackson Pictorial Materials from Various Sources, Series I: The Paul Groth Collection of J. B. Jackson American Slides, ZIM CSWR Pict Colls PICT 000-866.



Figure 9.2 Denise Scott Brown, *Santa Monica, Pico Boulevard*, 1966, scanned 35mm color slide, 8 7/8 × 13 3/4 in. Los Angeles, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, M.2019.165.8. Photograph courtesy of Denise Scott Brown.

means of representing it beginning in the mid-1960s, then Scott Brown put it all together in the early 1970s in one of the twentieth century's most compelling and generative manifestos.

Jackson, Ruscha, and Scott Brown were not invested in midcentury modes of fine art and architectural photography. By the late 1960s, the virtuosic landscapes of Ansel Adams and the meticulous architectural studies of Ezra Stoller, to name just two prominent figures in these respective categories, seemed overdetermined and out of step with Cold War anxiety, Vietnam War protests, the civil rights movement, and a general shattering of post-World War II optimism. Walker Evans, a photographer for the Resettlement Administration in the 1930s and at

Fortune from 1945 to 1965, provided a precedent sanctioned by the Museum of Modern Art for looking at ordinary structures in a direct, unemotional manner he referred to as “documentary style.”² Anonymous technical and commercial photographs—the kind seen in advertisements, manuals, and annual reports—were another resource for a new attitude of detachment.

Whereas pop art tended to stylize, isolate, and monumentalize mundane products (soup cans, for example), the camera encompassed the commercial present as it was: messy, precarious, and inescapable. In the photographic archives of Jackson, Ruscha, and Scott Brown, we can see a tendency to address the same kinds of subjects repeatedly in search of recurring features and symbolic content. This demonstrates their knowing use of typology (an analytic tool for categorization already prevalent in human geography, urban studies, and conceptual art) as a point of departure. What they added—and what challenged the orthodoxies of their respective fields—was an antinostalgic, antiestablishment attitude and a willingness to be provocative or perplexing. In their photographic typologies, categories never fully subsume individual specimens.

Although photographs by all three can look very similar, they ultimately functioned within different kinds of arguments. Take the idea of the commercial strip: for Jackson, the strip was a phenomenon encountered everywhere, a site for community activity and the expression of popular taste. He used color slides made in various locations to illustrate the story of its evolution and functions. Ruscha focused on West Hollywood's Sunset Strip in particular, attracted by its flatness, ready-made aspect, and synecdochic relationship to the Los Angeles area.³ His black-and-white photographic montages reinforce those ideas without offering any narrative or didactic message. For Scott Brown, the strip was both generic and specific to Los Angeles or Las Vegas. She used color slides in the classroom (like Jackson) and in publications (like Ruscha), alongside a welter of data and infographics, to mount a polemic in defense of “the ugly and ordinary.”⁴ Comparing the role of place for these figures, we can see Los Angeles serving as a laboratory for testing methodologies that could be applied elsewhere. Perhaps Ruscha

spoke for all of them when he said, “There was something beyond the simple pictures of capturing Sunset Boulevard. It was more like I was some professor studying what this is all about.”⁵ Looking more closely at these three individuals, where their paths crossed, and the role of photography in their thinking, we get a better sense of how their ideas about the built environment—visualized in a certain type of “deadpan” photography—gained traction across their disciplines and beyond. In its slang etymology, *deadpan* originated to describe acting styles that emerged in early narrative cinema (circa 1915–25) and came to generally connote an impassive facial expression, often assumed for comic effect. Jackson, Ruscha, and Scott Brown, alike in their love of language, effectively appropriated it as a term of art. Luring in viewers and readers with their amusingly deadpan pictures, they end up persuading us to adopt their nonjudgmental perspective.

Self-styled amateur geographer John Brinckerhoff Jackson (1909–96) was a founding figure of cultural landscape studies, a field that emerged in the mid-twentieth century and combined elements of human geography, architectural history, urban planning, and sociology. Jackson based his work on the firsthand observations he made on many road trips, during which he made drawings, notes, and (after about 1956) color slides. He first began to publish his thoughts on American vernacular architecture in *Landscape*, a journal he founded in 1951. In his role as editor, Jackson incorporated his own drawings as well as diagrams and photographs made by others, alongside articles and reviews.⁶ As a contributing author, he published such influential essays as “Other-Directed Houses” (1956–57), “The Stranger’s Path” (1957), and “The Abstract World of the Hot-Rodder” (1958–59), expressing his love of the view from the road and his early perception that the automobile was irreversibly altering landscapes and lives. Ultimately, for Jackson, landscape was not an idealized, pure state of nature; it was houses, utilitarian buildings, roads, and signage, among other things, in a geographical context. This vernacular landscape could be considered a quintessentially American work of art that Jackson spent his life interpreting.

After stepping down from *Landscape* in 1968, Jackson began a storied ten-year teaching career,

alternating between the University of California, Berkeley, and Harvard University. Regular drives between these two universities, his home in New Mexico, and various speaking destinations served as field work. Jackson’s photographic activity accelerated from this point onward.⁷ “Slide shows are popular in the classroom,” Jackson later observed, “and though my slides were poor in quality, they were of familiar, everyday objects and places, and that, I suspect, was the principal reason for the success of the course.”⁸ Typically, Jackson would speak for about forty-five minutes, activating the imaginations of his listeners, and then conclude with a selection of four to ten slides shown singly rather than in pairs.⁹

Gradually, Jackson became habituated to using slides as “visual notes, as sets of ideas that he stored away as he studied new landscape elements and prepared essays about them.”¹⁰ The macro purpose of Jackson’s slides was, according to Jordi Ballesta, “to structure his geographic experience” and facilitate its articulation in essays.¹¹ Ballesta further explains: “Because [the slide] can receive written annotations, I think it enabled the transition from image to text. It can easily be sorted, moved, arranged, removed and brought back, and so it is able to closely follow a developing typological thought, the phrasing of a question and the setting up of a narrative path.”¹² Unlike typical academics in his field, Jackson didn’t build arguments on the basis of maps, planning documents, demographic data, and so on.¹³ Whereas *Landscape* is amply illustrated, few images appear in Jackson’s many essay collections. His method consisted, quite simply, of looking, thinking, and writing. Photography served these primary activities without ever becoming an end in itself.

Jackson made some 5,500 color slides in total. Rather than filing them in lecture order, he stored them in binders according to more than ninety subject categories and subcategories that he also used for bibliography cards.¹⁴ For example, the binder he titled “The Strip” contains subcategories—such as travel, motels, gas stations, ships, harbors, airports, garages, hotels, vehicles, and bridges—that make it clear he considered transportation and commercial architecture to be wholly interconnected. Other large categories include roads and highways, domestic architecture, and churches and schools. Jackson usually annotated individual slide mounts

with place names and their category; dates were less important, although sometimes stamped on the mounts automatically when processed. He changed some slides' categories over time, moving them from the specific to the generic, in keeping with the wide-ranging nature of his lectures and later writings, which are seldom close studies of a single site. In figure 9.3, two handwritten notes indicate the subject is a "used car lot/Mission Blvd/Hayward," enough information to locate the same enterprise (Bridges Auto Center, 25711 Dollar Street, Hayward, California) today. At some later stage, he added the titles *Strip II* and *Street Decorations*.



Figure 9.3 John Brinkerhoff Jackson, *Used Car Lot, Mission Boulevard*, 1967, 35mm color slide. Albuquerque, University of New Mexico, University Libraries, Center for Southwest Research, Collection of J. B. Jackson Pictorial Materials from Various Sources, Series I: The Paul Groth Collection of J. B. Jackson American Slides, 000-866-3-F-11.

Jackson's slides gradually made their way to what is now their primary archive, the University of New Mexico's Center for Southwest Research & Special Collections.¹⁵ Among many copy slides from picture libraries and books is a page from Ruscha's *Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles* (1967). Jackson's own slides—all 35mm color, not cropped or masked, in plastic or cardboard mounts, some with glass—bear signs of fading and handling; many are out of focus, taken on the move, and not intended for publication. He called them "poor," and some commentators concurred that they are "artless" or "competent yet prosaic," while others described them as "excellent" and

"often arresting . . . riveting views."¹⁶ His evident position, often within or beside the car (see fig. 9.1), was not simply expedient but also illustrated how the automotive landscape was experienced in everyday life. It should be noted that many of Jackson's photographs include people, reinforcing the human aspect of cultural landscape studies and distinguishing them from Ruscha's depopulated architectural imagery. Out of the car and strolling around, Jackson used the camera as a means of engaging with residents to inquire about how they perceived and navigated their environments.¹⁷

Denise Scott Brown (b. 1931) was already using photography in connection with her research and teaching. She was well versed in the burgeoning literature around cultural landscape studies when she met Jackson in the mid-1960s, probably at the University of Pennsylvania (Penn). Their teaching posts overlapped at UC Berkeley's College of Environmental Design in 1965, and the two became friendly.¹⁸ In a recollection published in 2003, Scott Brown referred to the academic and social upheaval that affected her, Venturi, and Jackson at the time of their meeting. "Its relevance, for us as for Brinck, had to do with the physical environment, urban and rural, and how it could be understood as a work of art and technology of a multicultural community and society. These lines of thought led us to a critique of the latter-day Modern architecture and urbanism of the 1950s and 1960s and to a search for socially concerned, culturally tuned approaches to design."¹⁹ She quickly realized that western cities such as Los Angeles and Las Vegas were suitable testing grounds for her ideas. While the latter was the titular subject of her best-known book, her approach to it was determined by her time in Los Angeles.²⁰

Scott Brown took four trips to Las Vegas in 1965–66 before inviting Venturi to accompany her in November 1966. She had the training to analyze the city as an urban phenomenon and a contrarian's openness to nontraditional forms. Photography played a role in processing her ambivalence, and she continued a habit she had cultivated with her first husband, Robert Scott Brown (d. 1959), while they traveled in Africa and Europe. Together they became interested in "cultures not Culture—pop culture, counter-cultures, pop art, commercial architecture and signs—and photography itself as an art."²¹ She

admired the French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, and she once traveled through Spain with a group that included the photojournalist Leonard Freed. But she would later say of her own photographs, echoing Jackson and Ruscha, “If there’s art here it’s a byproduct.”²² Her subject matter always correlated with her research interests. Traveling with Venturi starting in the mid-1960s, she began looking even more carefully at “communication, streets, and the way store signs behave. So we began taking those photographs too.”²³

In Los Angeles and Las Vegas, Scott Brown turned her attention to the much-disparaged sprawl, commercial strips, everyday buildings, signage, parking lots, and so on. In the process, she began to discern specificities and patterns, and she modified her photographic perspectives accordingly. In Las Vegas, she “documented the ‘view from the road’ on foot and by car, and shot The Strip from a raised eye level through the front window of the early morning bus that took workers to the casinos.”²⁴ While getting to know Las Vegas, she was concurrently teaching urban planning in a newly established department at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)—notably, an ambitious studio course titled “Form, Forces and Function in Santa Monica.” Based on a structure she developed at Penn, the Santa Monica Studio addressed the city’s historical, cartographic, and sociological aspects through lectures, readings, guest speakers (Jackson among them), research, and production assignments. The syllabus of this 132-session course evolved into a book-length report comprising Scott Brown’s preparatory research, student projects, contributions from invited participants, and everyone’s critical dialogue with everyone else. The Santa Monica Studio likewise asked students to “experiment with techniques and methods of drawing and photography which give some feeling of the multiplicity and complexity of patterns of activities and structures” in Santa Monica and the broader scope of Los Angeles.²⁵

In addition to her impressive scholarly productivity, Scott Brown was “shooting like crazy” in L.A.²⁶ To understand Pico Boulevard, “a kind of everyday strip,” she walked with a camera, “building up my data by photographing what I loved” (see fig. 9.2).²⁷ She discovered Ruscha’s books in a bookstore on Santa Monica Boulevard in 1965 and was immediately “intrigued that he



Figure 9.4 Denise Scott Brown, “On Pop Art, Permissiveness, and Planning,” *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35, no. 3 (May 1969): 184, showing Art Alanis’s commissioned photograph of Good Year Tires, 6610 Laurel Canyon, North Hollywood, in Ed Ruscha, *Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles* (1967). Used by permission of Taylor & Francis Ltd.

was doing what I was doing.”²⁸ Three of Ruscha’s photographs (one each from *Thirtyfour Parking Lots*, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* [1963], and *Some Los Angeles Apartments* [1965]) illustrate her May 1969 article “On Pop Art, Permissiveness and Planning” (fig. 9.4), which opens with a reflection on the attitude of nonjudgment across various realms of cultural production and Scott Brown’s conviction that architects and urban designers ought to follow suit. *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966)—“Deadpan, it could be on the piazzas of Florence, but it suggests a new vision of the very imminent world around it”—exemplifies her call for a neutral but curious gaze on contemporary, nonmonumental reality.²⁹ From the vantage point of Ruscha’s Los Angeles, Scott Brown glances backward at Renaissance Italy and forward to a generic, postindustrial urban formation.

Ruscha’s unusual format further reminded her of a mass-culture prototype: “Seeing his photo-composite of the Sunset Strip, I felt he had

perhaps learned, as I had, from the traditional accordion-folded photo guides for tourists travelling down the Rhine. In 1952 I bought one of those for my Rhine trip and perhaps he did too.”³⁰ Both artist book and travel guide portray the built environment as seen by a mobilized gaze. How to present information to just such a gaze was the top priority of “Learning from Las Vegas, or Form Analysis as Design Research,” a third-year studio course taught by Scott Brown, Venturi, and Steven Izenour in fall 1968 at the Yale School of Architecture that used the Santa Monica Studio as a template.

Part road trip, part boot camp, and part think tank, the Las Vegas Studio took up the challenge of “evolving . . . a new graphics for urbanism” according to the provocative insights and propositions Scott Brown and Venturi had recently put forth in an *Architectural Forum* article, “A Significance for A&P Parking Lots, or Learning from Las Vegas.”³¹ Thirteen students—nine in architecture, two in urban planning, and two in graphic design—spent the first three weeks of the course preparing at Yale University and then stayed four days in Los Angeles before launching into ten days in Las Vegas.³² From the outset, Scott Brown, Venturi, and Izenour emphasized that conventional rendering techniques would not suffice. The students would have to augment the urban theorist’s typical array of maps, charts, and schedules with the media of popular culture and temporal flow—that is, photography and film. In this regard, Ruscha’s *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, *Some Los Angeles Apartments*, and *Thirtyfour Parking Lots* would be crucial.

Following the initial research phase at Yale, the group headed to Los Angeles in October 1968. They went to Disneyland to observe the architecture and signage and to UCLA to meet with the architectural critic Esther McCoy and others whom Scott Brown had invited to her course. She also arranged a studio visit with Ruscha at 1024 3/4 North Western Avenue.³³ What we know about that encounter comes from Scott Brown and the students; Ruscha is laconic on the subject. “I seem to remember studio visits from them [Venturi and Scott Brown] and not having exactly that much to exchange with one another except that we were just curious about each other,” he remarked in an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist.³⁴

At the time, Ruscha had completed four of his five books about the Los Angeles built environment and no doubt had materials related to their production ready to hand. (Already, perhaps, the *Streets of Los Angeles* project was serving as a research archive.) However, it is unlikely that he conducted a demonstration in any formal sense. “He and they [the students] got on well together,” Scott Brown recalled. “Back then he was hesitant to explain what he was doing, so they ended up drinking beer together.”³⁵ The group may have swapped impressions about Las Vegas, where Ruscha had been spending a fair amount of time, and discussed, at least in general terms, Ruscha’s *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, given their preoccupation with automobile-seeing and their assignment to produce a Ruscha-style elevation of the Las Vegas Strip. In essence, Ruscha’s L.A. books “provide an analysis of what is visible from the road—what there is to actually look at in moving through the city,”³⁶ which was the studio’s goal as well. (They also planned to capture aerial views of Las Vegas from a helicopter, so Ruscha’s experience hiring the aerial photographer Art Alanis for *Thirtyfour Parking Lots* could also have been of interest.)

The students worked in pairs and small teams on specific representational assignments, compiling slides and film footage of Las Vegas signs, particular building types, pedestrian activity, traffic patterns, and the Strip’s signage and architecture from all perspectives. In all, the students generated some five thousand color slides, three thousand meters (9,842 feet) of film, and myriad documents and sketches.³⁷ The field work was intense and round-the-clock. In addition to the time they spent on and around the Strip with cameras and notepads in hand, students talked with tourists, participated in meetings with local authorities, were interviewed by print and television journalists, visited the Young Electric Sign Company (YESCO), and attended the grand opening of the Circus Circus casino.

The studio’s prevailing tone, encouraged by the instructors, was a Ruscha-like “deadpan” stance devoid of judgment, whether critical or celebratory. It was, as Scott Brown put it, “a way to avoid being upstaged by our own subject matter,” to remember that patterns and commercial-cultural imperatives underpin the city’s flamboyantly embellished facades.³⁸ In this

spirit, they gave the title *Las Vegas Deadpan* (or *Three-Camera Deadpan*) to a film that ended up generating several illustrations in the book, the Ruscha elevation among them.³⁹ To produce this record of the Las Vegas Strip between Tropicana Avenue and the Sahara hotel, the students mounted a motor-equipped movie camera, loaded with color film, to the hood of a car (fig. 9.5), with two additional movie cameras, loaded with black-and-white film, in the side windows. Martino Stierli summarizes: “During the subsequent journey, the camera documented both sides of the street without interruption and without any human intervention. It was thus an attempt to obtain a ‘desubjectivized’ version of the cityscape.”⁴⁰ The total duration of *Las Vegas Deadpan* is around twenty-one minutes.



Figure 9.5 Preparations for the film *Las Vegas Deadpan*, 1968. Philadelphia, Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates. Photograph courtesy of Denise Scott Brown.

Douglas Southworth was the student who volunteered to make the Ruscha elevations, which in the final project report pertain to “pattern and order in the environment,” a rubric calling to mind both Jackson’s and Ruscha’s insights about the strip having a logic based on communication and movement.⁴¹ In the first edition of *Learning from Las Vegas*, the panorama took the form of eight paired bands across four pages (fig. 9.6), an amplitude in keeping with Ruscha’s long accordion fold. The debt to *Every Building* is explicitly stated in an accompanying caption, although in Southworth’s assembly, the facades are not continuous; nor are individual frames cropped to even out the upper and lower edges.⁴² Frames of unbuilt space indicate the distances between casinos and draw attention to the punctuating role of billboards and signage. Captions, very like

Ruscha’s in appearance and often redundant given the casinos’ massive signage, identify cross streets and important sites. Overall, facades are less legible here than in the Ruscha original, in part because the buildings along the Las Vegas Strip vary more in height and distance from the road than those along the Sunset Strip. In the composited photographs, as in a moving car, signage and text, not architecture or people, command attention.

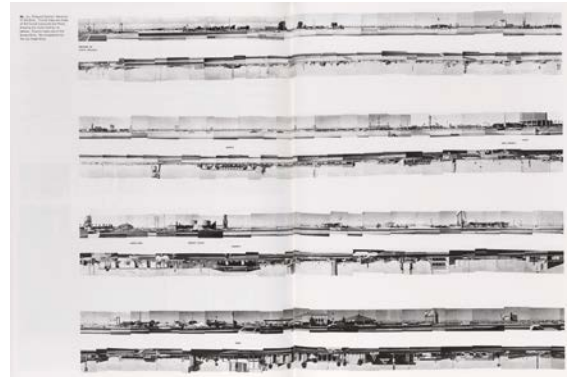


Figure 9.6 Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, Spread from *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972), 28–29. © 1972 Massachusetts Institute of Technology, by permission of The MIT Press.

While Southworth reassembled frames from the *Las Vegas Deadpan* footage for the Ruscha elevation, fellow student Ronald Filson scrutinized it for the “entire strip in words” diagram (see “Description as Data: What the Tags See in the SoLA Archive,” this volume [online edition only]).⁴³ “I can’t believe the number of hours that I spent slumped over a film-editing machine extracting from the documentary filming of the ‘Ed Ruscha’ strips. This was done with an old-fashioned lettering template, a relic even then. I tried to assemble the words in a way that revealed their importance.”⁴⁴

The reception of *Learning from Las Vegas*, starting with a final presentation at Yale on 10 January 1969 and accelerated by the 1972 release of the book by MIT Press, is too complex to be recapitulated here. Ruscha and Jackson are implicated only to a limited degree. Ruscha was possibly invited to the final presentation but did not attend, and Jackson wrote a now-obscure review of the book, published in the *Harvard Independent* on 30 November 1972.⁴⁵ Scott Brown was disappointed with Muriel Cooper’s design of

the book's first edition: a hardcover she considered too large (14 x 10 1/2 inches), lavish, full of white space and color illustrations, and modernist.⁴⁶ The 1977 edition has a much smaller trim size (9 x 6 inches) and black-and-white reproductions, feeling more like a handbook and akin to Ruscha's small publications. In the later edition's dense layout, the Ruscha elevation is reduced to a single segment (pages 32–33): the west side of Fremont Street from the Stardust to Circus Circus, placed along the lower edge of a spread, below a photograph looking down the street at night and a sidewalk view of tourists using slot machines (fig. 9.7). The three images collectively illustrate the point that “on Fremont Street the casinos are part of the sidewalk.”⁴⁷ Especially in this minimized version, the Ruscha elevation can only serve the project's larger contention that mobile vision requires experimentation with different representational techniques; its value as an analytical tool for urban design is not assessed in the text.

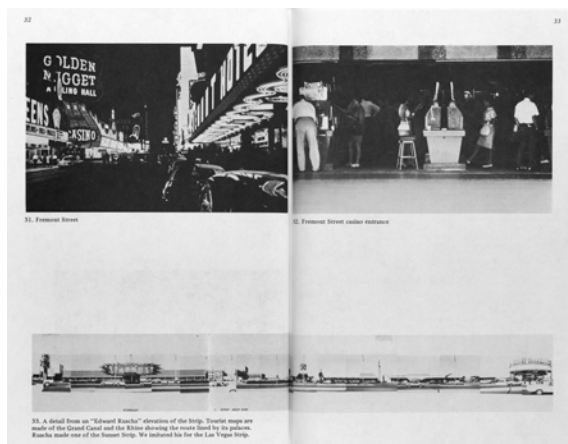


Figure 9.7 Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, Spread from *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977), 32–33. © 1977 Massachusetts Institute of Technology, by permission of The MIT Press.

In 1967 Scott Brown had become a principal in the firm eventually named Venturi, Scott Brown, and Associates; as her focus shifted to planning and design, her photographic activity diminished. She boxed up her slides—a total of eleven thousand made between 1956 and 1975—and stored them in a closet, where they remained untouched for some forty years, until exhibition opportunities brought them to light again.⁴⁸ Hilar

Stadler and Martino Stierli's exhibition *Las Vegas Studio: Images de l'archive de Robert Venturi et Denise Scott Brown* originated at the Museum im Bellpark, Kriens, Switzerland, in 2008 and toured to venues in Europe, the United States, and Australia. In 2016, Scott Brown showed her photography in the Venice Biennale and designed the installation herself—including a reprint of the Ruscha elevation of the Las Vegas Strip. Since then, her photographs have appeared in numerous galleries under the title *Wayward Eye*.⁴⁹

Jackson, Ruscha, and Scott Brown shared a conviction that the ordinary world and its elements deserve attention. They honed their own attentive capacities—and, ultimately, those of wider audiences—through photographic activity. Often, archives are formed and then remain within disciplinary and institutional boundaries. This is not the case with Jackson's, Ruscha's, and Scott Brown's. They knew each other (or each other's work), and their archives document biographical cross-connections. Moreover, photographs by all three now share space in the art world and, perhaps more importantly, in the digital realm.

Mining their archives, one can assemble many appealing triplets that are linked through iconography and attitude: commercial and handmade signage, parking lots and cars, highways, strips, houses, gas stations, or main streets. A term used at the time, *deadpan*, still works to describe the nonjudgmental curiosity, resistance to nostalgia, attention to communication, and willingness to learn evinced by all three archives. To observe that some of these images are effectively interchangeable isn't to deny Jackson, Ruscha, and Scott Brown their distinct creative positions as essayist, artist, and architect/urban theorist. J. B. Jackson's photography was solitary and idiosyncratic, akin to snap shooting. His slides were aide-mémoire, illustrations supplementary to storytelling in the form of essays and lectures. Ruscha, an artist with experience in graphic design, generated the photographic material now in the Streets of Los Angeles Archive at the GRI with the goal of making a visual statement in the form of an artist's book. Denise Scott Brown's slides, which combine aspects of Jackson's note-taking and Ruscha's conceptual self-awareness with her own flair for provocation, appeared variously in her manifesto-like lectures, publications, and exhibitions.

What can be learned by comparing these photographic archives? For all three, photography was a legible, minimally expressive means of discerning formal patterns and communicative intent within the apparent randomness of the commercial vernacular. But it is also more than that. If we personify the archives, Scott Brown plays the part of gracious host, introducing Ruscha and Jackson to each other by pointing out some common interests. Others join the conversation, which goes deeper and gets louder. Connections are made; perspectives change.

NOTES

Epigraphs: Anna Fixsen, "View-Master: The World, as Seen by Denise Scott Brown," *Architectural Record*, 22 July 2016, <https://www.architecturalrecord.com/articles/11824-view-master-the-world-as-seen-by-denise-scott-brown>; A. D. Coleman, "Photography: 'I'm Not Really a Photographer,'" *New York Times*, 10 September 1972; and Jordi Ballesta and Camille Fallet, "Vers une autre photographie documentaire: Quelques échanges autour de *Notes sur l'asphalte* = Towards Another Documentary Photography: Discussion about *Notes on Asphalt*," in *Notes sur l'asphalte: Une Amérique mobile et précaire, 1950-1990 = Notes on Asphalt: A Mobile and Precarious America, 1950-1990*, by Ballesta and Fallet, exh. cat. (Vanves, France: Hazan, 2017), 9.

1. Numerous biographical accounts exist for all three. Particularly useful in drafting this essay were the following: Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Traces of J. B. Jackson: The Man Who Taught Us to See Everyday America* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2020); Paul Groth and Chris Wilson, "The Polyphony of Cultural Landscape Study," in *Everyday America: Cultural Landscape Studies after J. B. Jackson*, ed. Chris Wilson and Paul Groth (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 1-22; Sylvia Lavin, "Positioning Denise Scott Brown: Los Angeles, 1965-1966," *e-flux* (March 2022); Jeremy Eric Tenenbaum et al., *Your Guide to Downtown Denise Scott Brown* (Zurich: Park, 2019); Paul Karlstrom, "Oral History Interview with Edward Ruscha, 1980 October 29-1981 October 2," Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-edward-ruscha-12887>; and Alexandra Schwartz, *Ed Ruscha's Los Angeles* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010). See also Isabel Frampton Wade, "The Tyranny of the Glossy: Commercial Architectural Photography and Ruscha's Streets," this volume.
2. On Walker Evans's relevance in the 1960s and 1970s, including his impact on Ruscha, see Britt Salvesen, *New Topographics* (Tucson: Center for Creative Photography, 2009), 14-18. Chris Wilson discusses Jackson's relative disinterest in Evans as an artist (although Jackson did make copy slides from Evans's books) in "J. B. Jackson, Photography and the Quickening of Cultural Landscape Studies," in *Photoscapes: The Nexus between Photography and Landscape Design*, ed. Frédéric Pousin (Basel, Switzerland: Birkhäuser, 2019), 57-58, 66.
3. On flat facades as indicators of superficiality, see Cécile Whiting, *Pop LA: Art and the City in the 1960s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 113; and Jesús Vassallo, "Inclusive Surfaces: Ed Ruscha and Venturi & Scott Brown," in *Epics in the Everyday: Photography, Architecture, and the Problem of Realism* (Zurich: Park, 2019), 159-60.
4. Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, "Ugly and Ordinary Architecture, or the Decorated Shed," part 1, *Architectural Forum*, November 1971, 64-67.
5. Ed Ruscha, interviewed by James Cuno, "Ed Ruscha's Los Angeles," 3 August 2022, in *Art + Ideas*, produced by Getty, podcast, 34:48, <https://blogs.getty.edu/iris/podcast-ed-ruscha-los-angeles/>. I am grateful to Isabel Frampton Wade for bringing this to my attention.
6. Bruno Notteboom, "Order and Ambiguity: The Urban Landscape in J. B. Jackson's Magazine *Landscape*," in Pousin, *Photoscapes*, 72-87.
7. Jordi Ballesta, "John Brinckerhoff Jackson, within Ordinary Landscapes: Field Research and Amateur Photographic Practices," *L'espace géographique* 45, no. 3 (2016): 211-44; and Peter Barberie, "Denise Scott Brown, Signs and Symbols for Living," *Aperture*, no. 238 (Spring 2020): 129. See Robert S. Nelson, "The Slide Lecture, or The Work of Art History in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Critical Inquiry* 26 (Spring 2000): 414-34; and Jennifer F. Eisenhauer, "Next Slide Please: The Magical, Scientific, and Corporate Discourses of Visual Projection Technologies," *Studies in Art Education* 47, no. 3 (2006): 198-214.
8. J. B. Jackson, *The Necessity for Ruins, and Other Topics* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), 113. See also Wilson, "J. B. Jackson," 52-71.
9. Wilson, "J. B. Jackson," 60. Other accounts of Jackson's teaching include the following: Paul Groth, in *J. B. Jackson and the Love of Everyday Places*, directed by Robert Calo (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica Educational Corp., 1988); Janet Mendelsohn and Bob Calo, "Shop Talk: A Conversation with the Filmmakers," in *Drawn to Landscape: The Pioneering Work of J. B. Jackson*, ed. Janet Mendelsohn and Chris Wilson (Staunton, VA: George F. Thompson, 2015), 170; and Marc Treib, "The Measure of Wisdom: John Brinckerhoff Jackson (1909-1996)," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 55, no. 4 (1996): 490.
10. Paul Groth, "J. B. Jackson's Slides," in Mendelsohn and Wilson, *Drawn*, 121.
11. Jordi Ballesta, "J. B. Jackson, Field Research and Amateur Photographic Practices," PhotoPaysage/Landscape Representation conference, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, 16 October 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bS2HaJFaOc&list=PLprNspBRvTtgkgGKntvf79Lee6QXKYlg&index=3>, at 34 min., 30 sec.
12. Ballesta and Fallet, "Vers une autre photographie," 14.
13. Ballesta, *L'espace géographique*, 4; and Groth, "J. B. Jackson's Slides," 121.
14. Groth, "J. B. Jackson's Slides," 126. See also Paul Groth, "Appendix B: Organization of J. B. Jackson's Teaching Slides," in Mendelsohn and Wilson, *Drawn*, 227-32.
15. The collection's finding aid is online: <https://nmarchives.unm.edu/repositories/22/resources/2580>. Photographs can be searched here: <https://econtent.unm.edu/digital/collection/Groth>. See Audra Bellmore, Claire-Lise Bénéaud, and Sever Bordeianu, "J. B. Jackson, Cultural Geographer: Evolution of an Archive," *Collection Building* 31, no. 3 (2012): 115-19.
16. For "poor," see Jackson, *Necessity for Ruins*, 113; for "artless," see Kenneth J. Helphand, review of *Figure in a Landscape: Conversations with J. B. Jackson*, directed by Claire Marino and Janet Mendelsohn, *Landscape* 9, no. 2 (1990): 146; for "competent," see Jonathan Crisman, review of *Drawn to Landscape: The Pioneering Work of J. B. Jackson*, by Janet Mendelsohn and Chris Wilson, *Architect's Newspaper*, 27 April 2016, <https://www.archpaper.com/2016/04/review-drawn-landscape-book-jb-jackson/>; for "excellent," see Laurie Olin, "J. B. Jackson and Landscape Architects," *Sitelines* 15, no. 11 (2020): 8; and for "arresting," see Groth, "J. B. Jackson's Slides," 123.
17. Jackson is seen doing this in two documentaries from the 1980s: Calo, *J. B. Jackson*; and *Figure in a Landscape: Conversations with J. B. Jackson*, directed by Claire Marino and Janet Mendelsohn (Cambridge, MA: Conservation Foundation and the Film Study Center, Harvard University, 1987). The two documentaries were released together under the title *J. B. Jackson and the American Landscape* (Watertown, MA: Documentary Educational Resources, 2015).
18. Denise Scott Brown, "Learning from Brinck," in Wilson and Groth, *Everyday America*, 49. Scott Brown published two book reviews in *Landscape* during Jackson's editorship: "Art or People: Which Do the Architects Serve?," review of *The People's Architects*, ed. Harry S.

- Ransom, *Landscape* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1967): 38; and "Mapping the City: Symbols and Systems," review of *Urban Atlas* by Joseph R. Passonneau and Richard S. Wurman, *Landscape* 17, no. 1 (1968): 22–25.
19. Scott Brown, "Learning from Brinck," 50–51.
 20. Lavin, "Positioning Denise Scott Brown."
 21. Luise Rellensmann, "Framed Views: Denise Scott Brown on Ed Ruscha, the Desert, and Bitter Old Men," *Uncube*, 25 July 2013, 12.
 22. Barberie, "Denise Scott Brown," 130. For art as a "byproduct," see Andrés F. Ramirez, ed., *Denise Scott Brown, Wayward Eye* (Berlin: Plane–Site, 2018), 6.
 23. Barberie, "Denise Scott Brown," 129. Venturi took the "serious" black-and-white photos; Scott Brown took the "fun" color ones. In a commentary about Scott Brown's photographs, Elizabeth Greenspan notes that "real designers sketched": Greenspan, "Denise Scott Brown's Wayward Eye," *Architect*, 7 September 2018, https://www.architectmagazine.com/design/denise-scott-browns-wayward-eye_o.
 24. Stephanie Salomon and Steve Kroeter, "Interviews: Still Learning from Denise Scott Brown," *Designers and Books*, 7 January 2014, <https://www.designersandbooks.com/blog/still-learning-from-denise-scott-brown>.
 25. Lavin, "Positioning Denise Scott Brown." Scott Brown explained the pedagogical logic of the studio structure in "Studio: Architecture's Offering to Academe," keynote address, Para-theses: Current Trajectories in Architectural Research symposium, Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Preservation and Planning, 4 February 2006; edited version available at <https://mascontext.com/observations/studio-architectures-offering-to-academe/>.
 26. Fixsen, "View-Master."
 27. Ramirez, *Denise Scott Brown*, 39–40. Venice Beach was also a strip of sorts. See Barberie, "Denise Scott Brown," 126.
 28. Rellensmann, "Framed Views," 11.
 29. Denise Scott Brown, "On Pop Art, Permissiveness and Urban Planning," *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35, no. 3 (May 1969): 186.
 30. Rellensmann, "Framed Views," 11.
 31. Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, "A Significance for A&P Parking Lots, or Learning from Las Vegas," *Architectural Forum* (March 1968): 37–43.
 32. For the syllabus, see Stephanie Salomon and Steve Kroeter, "The 1968 Learning from Las Vegas Studio Revisited," *Designers and Books*, 19 December 2013, <https://www.designersandbooks.com/blog/1968-learning-las-vegas-studio-revisited>.
 33. Adam Marcus, "Interview: Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi," *Museo* 2010, <http://www.museomagazine.com/SCOTT-BROWN-VENTURI>.
 34. Peter Fischli, Rem Koolhaas, and Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Flâneurs in Automobiles," in *Las Vegas Studio: Images from the Archive of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown*, ed. Hilar Stadler and Martino Stierli (Zurich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2015), 162.
 35. Rellensmann, "Framed Views," 11. See also Vassallo, "Inclusive Surfaces," 138: "Commenting on this visit, [Scott Brown] recounts feeling disappointed by the lack of explanation provided by Ruscha regarding his work, as the artist refused to engage her in serious conversation and in turn threw an impromptu party for the students."
 36. Mariana Moglievich, "Monuments and Mediocrity: Landmarking Los Angeles," *Future Anterior* 11, no. 1 (Summer 2014): 50.
 37. These statistics come from the summary-report excerpts reproduced by Salomon and Kroeter, "Interviews."
 38. Denise Scott Brown, "Remedial Housing for Architects Studio," in *Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates: On Houses and Housing* (London: Academy, 1992), 56; cited in Aron Vinegar, "The Melodrama of Expression and Inexpression in the Duck and Decorated Shed," in *Relearning from Las Vegas*, ed. Aron Vinegar and Michael J. Golec (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 181.
 39. Katherine Smith, "Mobilizing Vision: Representing the American Landscape," in Vinegar and Golec, *Relearning*, 111.
 40. Martino Stierli, "Las Vegas Studio," in Stadler and Stierli, *Las Vegas Studio*, 27.
 41. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977), 76; and Smith, "Mobilizing Vision," 125–26n41.
 42. Similar discontinuities occurred in Ruscha's attempt to paste together Jerry McMillan's initial photographs of the Sunset Strip.
 43. Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour, *Learning*, 30–31.
 44. Salomon and Kroeter, "1968 Learning from Las Vegas."
 45. It is certain that Ruscha did not attend the critique, although several secondary sources, including my own (*New Topographics*, 26), erroneously mention that he did. Stierli, "Las Vegas Studio," 15, states that he was invited, whereas Vassallo, "Inclusive Surfaces," 142n34, says Scott Brown told him in May 2013 that they "never contacted [Ruscha] again after their brief visit to his studio in Los Angeles."
 46. On the Cooper design, see Salomon and Kroeter, "Interviews"; Michael Golec, "'Doing It Deadpan': Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour's *Learning from Las Vegas*," *Visible Language* 37, no. 3 (2003): 266–87; Michael J. Golec, "Format and Layout in *Learning from Las Vegas*," in Vinegar and Golec, *Relearning*, 31–47; and Stierli, "Las Vegas Studio," 17.
 47. Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour, *Learning*, 77.
 48. Greenspan, "Denise Scott Brown's Wayward Eye." Scott Brown refers to twenty thousand slides in Salomon and Kroeter, "Interviews." In 1965, she gave duplicate teaching slides to the UC Berkeley Department of City & Regional Planning; see the online collection guide here: <https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/c81g0rth/admin/>.
 49. Ramirez, *Denise Scott Brown*. Betts Project, London, published a limited-edition portfolio of twelve prints. See Elizabeth Greenspan, "Star System," *Believer* 18, no. 4 (October/November 2021): 60–61. Once Scott Brown is no longer using her slides, they will join the Venturi, Scott Brown, and Associates (VSBA) Archive, established in 2006 at the University of Pennsylvania Architectural Archives.

IMAGE

10

“The Tyranny of the Glossy”: Commercial Architectural Photography and Ruscha’s Streets

Isabel Frampton Wade

Two photographs of the Lytton Savings bank on Sunset Boulevard appear similar. Both are shot from across the street and to the west of the building from oblique angles that highlight the building’s three dimensionality and signature zigzag roofline. The first photograph (fig. 10.1) has perfected certain formal deficiencies of the second (fig. 10.2): less road in the foreground places more focus on the architecture, a corrected exposure gives richer contrasts, and the roofline is made parallel to the photographic frame. Yet their similarities in representing Lytton Savings outweigh their differences.

The photographs were shot five years apart for two entirely different projects. Architectural photographer Julius Shulman shot the first in 1960, artist Jerry McMillan the second. McMillan was commissioned by his friend Ed Ruscha to complete a test shoot of Sunset Boulevard in 1965, marking the beginning of Ruscha’s methodical photography of every building on the Sunset Strip (and many other streets throughout the subsequent decades). His *Streets of Los Angeles* (SoLA) project proposed new ways of documenting and looking at the city and its environs. Though Ruscha has experimented with how photography can visualize the breadth and scope of Los Angeles-area streets, the artist has nonetheless resisted the notion that the medium of photography may have contributed to the city’s

depiction. “I don’t even look at it as photography; they’re just images to fill a book,” he remarked about his artist books, all illustrated with photography.¹ This essay, by contrast, asks what we learn about Ruscha’s SoLA project if we insist upon looking at it not only as photography but also as a practice embedded in adjacent discourses surrounding the photographic representation of architecture and Los Angeles.

It is unsurprising that Ruscha’s *motorized photographs*² (his term) have been associated with the movement, mobility, and fluidity of travel by car, and even as filmic montage.³ McMillan’s test shoot of Sunset Boulevard, however, was done on foot, unveiling a slower, less motorized history behind Ruscha’s multiheaded project. Revisiting McMillan’s test shoot gives insight into the various iterations of Ruscha’s project, including the photography done for *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966), the subsequent shoots of Los Angeles streets, the digitized negatives, and their presentation online. Most importantly, however, the McMillan test shoot reveals the ways that Ruscha and his team contended with the mechanism of photography, the medium’s limitations, and its effectiveness in representing the buildings and stories of Sunset Boulevard.

McMillan’s shoot, I argue, shares similarities in process, formal conventions, and theoretical approaches to contemporaneous commercial



Figure 10.1 Julius Shulman, Lytton Savings bank, 1960, gelatin silver print, 10 × 8 in. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2004.R.10.S4. © J. Paul Getty Trust.



Figure 10.2 Jerry McMillan, Lytton Savings bank, detail of contact sheet from the Sunset Boulevard test shoot commissioned by Ed Ruscha, 1965, gelatin silver print, detail of 7 3/16 × 3 1/16 in. sheet. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute. © Ed Ruscha.

architectural photography—such as Shulman’s shot of the Lytton Savings bank. Like Ruscha’s venture into photography, which is often understood only as “deadpan” and informational, commercial architectural photography has likewise suffered from myopic analyses of its purpose and its photographers’ approaches to their subjects. Frequently misunderstood as divergent from or antithetical to the aims of contemporaneous artists who used photography to explore the limits of representation, image, and subjectivity, commercial architectural photography

was decried even by some architects, who complained it was a poor substitute for the experience of a building itself, leading one architect to bemoan the “tyranny” that so-called glossy, glamorous photographs published in architectural magazines held over the public.⁴

Commercial architectural photographers, however, found themselves at the center of pressing debates around the role of urban representation in growing, changing cities. Los Angeles was transforming on both large and small scales through urban renewal, community displacement, and increased sprawl. Photographers used the city as an ongoing experiment, shooting individual architectures and situating their work within the contexts of L.A.’s continual evolution.

I consider contemporaneous writings about architectural photography by photographers and those in related fields to delineate how its practitioners established new paradigms for the genre that implicated urban architecture. If a preoccupation of photographers and theorists in the 1960s concerned questioning the modernist notion that photography could transparently convey truth about its subjects, commercial architectural photography did not resist such scrutiny; rather, it was a key site of its interrogation.⁵ This chapter helps to illuminate how Los Angeles became a testing ground for photographers of all backgrounds in the 1960s—and how, across professional fields, artists, architects, and urbanists used photography to assess how urban change affected visibility.

COMMERCIAL ARCHITECTURAL PHOTOGRAPHY: THE PROFESSION

Commercial architectural photography carries two general associations about its use. On the one hand, it connotes technical photographs commissioned by architecture or construction firms, whose primary purpose is to document, not to showcase photographic mastery. On the other hand, it brings to mind beautiful photographs featured in architecture, design, and shelter magazines, those which convey aspirational lifestyles over particular architectural or spatial features. Like many commercial practices,

architectural photography has also been siloed in scholarship from consideration alongside artists who photograph architecture. Andrew Higgott and Timothy Wray's estimation is an exemplar: commercial architectural photography, they argue, positions architecture as its "largely autonomous primary source," whereas art practices that represent architecture consider it in wider social and cultural contexts and take on "wide-ranging" subjects.⁶ Implicit in this split is the belief that artist-photographers adopt a creative approach toward architectural representation, whereas commercial practices have little room for experimentation and are instead bound, as Higgott and Wray put it, to a "defined discourse" because of the nature of their commissions and clients.

Commercial architectural photography, however, encompasses a more diverse field of photographs than most scholars consider, including representations of residences, commercial buildings, urban streetscapes, interior design, art objects, and exhibitions. Coinciding with new avenues of professionalization for architects in the United States, architectural photography grew in the 1940s as a distinct field within commercial photography. Established in 1947, the Architectural Photographers Association, for which Shulman was a vice president in the 1950s, aimed to make the profession known in various industries and to help settle payment disputes that often arose with architects and magazine editors who refused to pay appropriate wages to photographers, seeing the latter as replaceable labor. As the association's president Lionel Freedman remarked in 1956, "The idea that architectural photography has no appreciable intrinsic value except as a steppingstone to other more lucrative (and generally quite nebulous) fields is essentially ridiculous."⁷ In effect, Freedman and others argued that photographing architecture, design, and interior spaces required skills separate from those of other commercial photographic fields.

Joining a growing body of books at midcentury aimed at teaching the public about taking photos, the Los Angeles-based photographer Robert Cleveland published the manual *Architectural Photography of Houses: How to Take Good Pictures of Exteriors and Interiors* (1953), promoted as the first book of its kind.⁸ Geared toward both amateurs and aspiring professionals, the book included detailed information about camera

selection, angles, lens tilts, and requirements for particular rooms and exteriors. The book was heavily illustrated with photographs, often showing two photos of the same room side by side to demonstrate successful and unsuccessful approaches. Cleveland distinguished the pictures he took as "house portraiture," those which captured the mood and the character of architecture.⁹

While Cleveland's book created a bedrock of images that young architectural photographers could refer to while honing their skills, it wasn't until the publication of Shulman's *Photographing Architecture and Interiors* (1962) that a photographer deeply imbedded in the growing modern-architecture culture in the United States established the theoretical and ideological tenets of the profession. Part how-to manual and part treatise, Shulman's book begins by rehearsing the oft-repeated dual purposes of photography as both a fine art and a medium of communication. He cites architectural photography as primarily concerned with the latter purpose: "A photographer must remember that he is not doing a class exercise in artistic photography," Shulman advises, urging young photographers not to stray into the "siren regions of art photography."¹⁰ His words resonate with Ruscha's oft-remarked commentary on photography: "I think photography is dead as a fine art; its only place is in the commercial world, for technical or information purposes."¹¹ Diverging from Ruscha, however, Shulman proposes that, while its primary purpose is to "convey information about the design," architectural photography can "transcend mere physical recording," becoming a "work of art in its own right."¹² Shulman thus viewed the superior architectural photograph as that which could fuse the dual purposes of photography. Not all of the architectural photographs produced and circulated by figures like Shulman conveyed such artistry or, alternatively, what Alice Friedman has termed the "distinctive American glamour" cultivated through visual media of midcentury modernist buildings (fig. 10.3).¹³ While at least one distinctly glamorous shot would usually be included in a magazine spread, it would be supplemented by conventional photos that served to convey key information about a building, its site, and its surrounds. The genre's meaning and use, in other words, was far less determined or codified than subsequent histories have conveyed.



Figure 10.3 Julius Shulman, Case Study House 22 (designed by Pierre Koenig), Los Angeles, 1960, gelatin silver print, 10 × 8 in. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2004.R.10. © J. Paul Getty Trust.

ARCHITECTURAL PHOTOGRAPHY'S CRITICS

The profession did not go without critique. In 1948, Esther McCoy wrote a satirical short story about a client, a photographer, and a house. First published in the *New Yorker*, “The Important House” tells the story of a Mr. and Mrs. Blakeley who live in a recently completed modern home, presumably in Los Angeles, designed by an acclaimed fictitious architect named Mr. Aidan.¹⁴ The architect brings a photographer to shoot the house, an event highly anticipated by Mrs. Blakeley, who is lured with the promise of her “important” house being featured in a competition for a fictitious shelter magazine—*House and Garden*. An increasingly absurd performance unfolds through the act of staging a house for architectural photographs. Over the course of the afternoon, Mrs. Blakeley becomes progressively demoralized as the architect and photographer take over the house. She begins questioning her own taste and ownership of the house as the photographer transforms it into a comical assortment of plantings stolen from the

neighbor’s property, magazines taped to tables, and old outdoor furniture hauled into the house.

We are dragged, alongside Mrs. Blakeley, through the ordeal of being involved in a photography shoot, seeing another side to the innocuous objects in finished prints—McCoy intended to reveal more than the photograph ever would. As Mrs. Blakeley becomes overwhelmed by the men’s appropriation of her house, she asks why the photograph should not capture the house as it is in real life. Condescendingly, the architect responds, “I’m sorry I’m not able to explain to you the function of a photograph.”¹⁵ The story further cultivated the paradox between the unrelenting bravado in the production of a photograph and the inscrutability of the final product. McCoy’s piece implies that knowing the photograph is not the same as knowing the house, that there is no authentic way to “understand” the architecture through the photograph. While there is confidence in the ability of the architect and photographer to craft the perfect image of the house, a complete breakdown in communication occurs simultaneously, particularly with the one woman in the story. The final product, the photograph, exceeds the explanations by architects and photographers. Architectural photography, according to McCoy, had become a master at performing its own innocence, exceeding the need for explanation.

McCoy’s haughty but fictional photographer satirized larger concerns about architectural photography’s glamorization of its subjects, a glamour often regarded as far removed from reality. Shulman conceded that “a complaint occasionally heard about architectural photography is that it glamorizes the building; this need not be true.”¹⁶ On a similar note, Eric de Maré, in his *Photography and Architecture* (1961), included an extended quote by the architect Sir William Holford, who complained of architectural photography’s superficiality: “Ordinary folk have to look at these buildings through the lens and the filter, instead of moving in and through them, and becoming conscious of them, as it were, by absorption and use. The tyranny [*sic*] of the drawing-board, with its emphasis on two dimensions at a time, is superseded by the tyranny of the glossy photograph with its emphasis on pose.”¹⁷ De Maré, via Holford, traced the lineage of architectural photography to the drawing board, characterizing both mediums as

detrimental to the profession of architecture. To gain respect from the field of architecture and design as true professionals, figures such as Shulman and de Maré were thus often working against the so-called tyranny of the glossy, the glamorous, and what they both implied about the superficiality of the medium.

Ruscha developed his art practice while involved in related commercial spheres. Jennifer Quick positions Ruscha's connections to commercial advertising not merely as crucial contextual information—he worked as an assistant layout artist for the Carson/Roberts advertising agency in the early 1960s—but also as the key to understanding how the artist, through his books, interrogated larger representational paradigms, such as the “relation of content to form.”¹⁸ Building on Quick's arguments, I regard the SoLA project as exemplary of the continuities in representational problems between commercial photography, on the one hand, and artists who took photographs, on the other. Architectural photographers and Ruscha were both questioning paradigms of representation in ways that would prove relevant to a wide range of subsequent photographers. On a fundamental level, such questions concerned to what degree photography, in general, held control over its subject in determining photographic meaning.

THE TEST SHOOT

In 1965, as Ruscha and Jerry McMillan began shooting the Sunset Strip, architectural photography was at the height of its professional dominance in circles of modern architecture around Los Angeles. In the same period, urbanists, artists, and architects were scrutinizing L.A.'s relationship to its visual representation, frequently identifying its “image” as a major problem. The urban theorist Kevin Lynch assessed that residents carried a mental image of the city as disorienting and weary; the historian Robert Fogelson described it as fragmented.¹⁹ The watershed Watts uprising of August 1965 catalyzed a flood of aerial and street-level photographs of burning buildings and destroyed streets, provoking the simplistic analysis that the city had become “formless.”²⁰ This critical juncture in Los Angeles' representation concerned not just the city's visual appearance or its generically termed “image” but also the particular

media—namely, photography—used to represent it. In his acclaimed *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (1971), the British architectural historian Reyner Banham blames photography, in part, for newcomers' shock at the realities of Los Angeles: “The distant view, processed through morality and photography, erudition and ignorance, prepares us . . . for almost anything except what Los Angeles looks like in fact.”²¹

Every Building on the Sunset Strip was the culmination of two previous attempts on the part of Ruscha and his team to make sense photographically of the Sunset Strip. In March 1965, McMillan began photographing the Strip on foot with a Mamiya camera and 2 1/4-inch-square negatives. Ruscha had told McMillan to shoot the buildings straight on and to include curbs, some street, and portions of the sky, but the images did not always conform to these directions.²² McMillan's photographs were ultimately scrapped and deemed a “total fiasco” by Ruscha.²³ McMillan took approximately ninety-two photographs of the Sunset Strip, generally considered the 1.6 miles of West Hollywood that ends at Beverly Hills. In the archive, the photographs exist as contact sheets as well as book mock-ups pasted together on a board, where Ruscha and the team first tried to visualize the photos as a continuous strip.

Each frame of McMillan's shoot contains a single building as the main subject, framed either head-on or at an oblique angle. Especially instructive are McMillan's experimentations in photographing the few multistory buildings on Sunset. Tall buildings were outliers on Sunset, which was known, like the rest of Los Angeles, for its low-lying horizontal sprawl. Unsurprisingly, they proved challenging for McMillan's approach. At 9000 Sunset Boulevard, McMillan captured the tallest building on the Strip, then occupied by the First Security Bank (fig. 10.4). Built in 1963, the building rose sixteen stories. McMillan photographed it four times, taking a different approach in each frame. In the first, McMillan shot at a low angle, so that the building and the outlines of its thin white windows seem to tower above the photograph's viewer, perspectival lines converging toward each other dramatically to create a keystone effect when the image is not perpendicular to the camera lens. In the second frame, the building occupies the entire frame. McMillan shot head-on, so the building's vertical



Figure 10.4 Jerry McMillan, Contact sheet from the Sunset Boulevard test shoot commissioned by Ed Ruscha, 1965, gelatin silver print, 10 × 8 in. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.

lines are not distorted as in the first, but we have no sense of the building's true height. In the third, McMillan moved farther away, shooting catty-corner to the building. The result is an oblique shot, giving a sense of the building's spatiality as well as its length and its width, but its top is still truncated. Finally, in the fourth shot, the building no longer appears to be the primary object of focus, as it instead acts as a dark background to the diminutive two-story buildings next door. What seemed to be in question in taking these four shots was what part of the building needed to be visible to convey its identity and its relationship to the street. McMillan tried to fit the entirety of the building in the frame. But as *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* makes clear, Ruscha ultimately sacrificed this in favor of the mechanized shoot and the horizontality it afforded, which gave a truncated view of the bank. In the book, the first three stories become an expanse of gridded black and white, the building's true height not visible.

Another pair of photographs features a twelve-story building, which McMillan managed to fit in the frame (fig. 10.5). The bottom photograph, taken at a somewhat low angle, shows little of the



Figure 10.5 Jerry McMillan, Twelve-story building from two different angles, detail of contact sheet from the Sunset Boulevard test shoot commissioned by Ed Ruscha, 1965, gelatin silver print, detail of approx. 10 × 8 in. sheet. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.

street below, and the building's front vertical angle is slightly exaggerated in length, making the rest of the diagonals appear distorted in another keystone effect. By contrast, in the top photograph, the lens has been raised a bit, which reduces the building distortion. The street is visible, with blurred cars passing and framing the view. An orange *X* is placed over the shot, presumably indicating Ruscha's or his team's preference for it.

This extended comparison that draws out the minute differences between these shots might

seem a fastidious exercise in formal analysis. But it was this precision in composition that characterized the job of an architectural photographer. Practitioners such as Shulman ascribed meaning to architectural photographs through small changes in technical details. On page 54 (fig. 10.6) of *Photographing Architecture and Interiors*, Shulman argues that the top photograph is “sharp and formal, but leaves the viewer with a need for more information.” By contrast, the preferred bottom photograph adds dimensions, allowing the rectangular form of the building to be retained while making the roof “understandable”—conveying the information the top photo hadn’t. Subtle shifts in photographic composition thus became loaded with meaning.

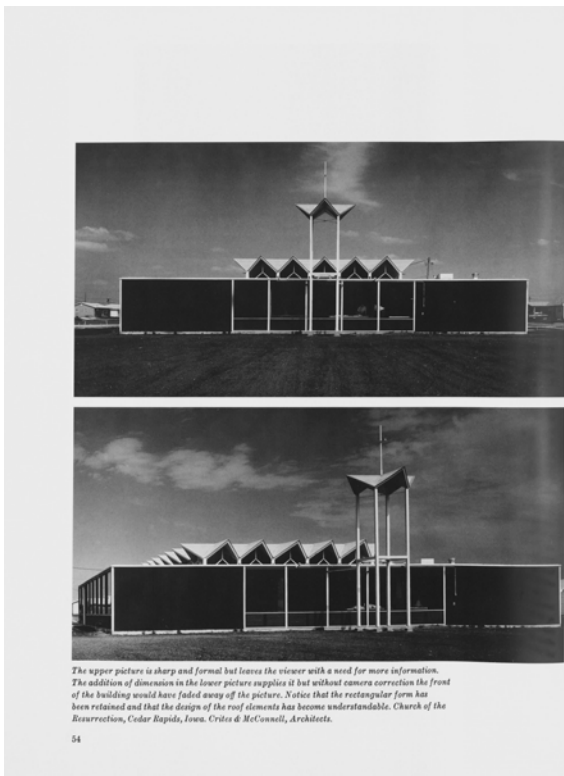


Figure 10.6 Julius Shulman, Two views of the Church of the Resurrection, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, from Shulman, *Photographing Architecture and Interiors* (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1962), 54.

For photographs of the Long Beach Water Department building, however, the more frontal and less oblique angle is preferred, according to Shulman, because it avoids an awkwardly large foreground (fig. 10.7). These two pages dramatize how Shulman and other architectural photographers publicized the way small changes

to photographic framing significantly can alter how a building appears to viewers.

SOME LOS ANGELES APARTMENTS

From one perspective, it is clear why McMillan’s shoot may have been unsatisfactory for Ruscha. McMillan’s test photographs were far from standardized: there are clear differences in angles, camera heights, and distances from the buildings. This would have made the process of pasting everything together challenging, as evidenced by the mock-up of the contact sheets in the archive. McMillan’s approach, moreover, seems at odds conceptually with Ruscha’s ultimate vision for *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*. “He didn’t have a little drawing or any kind of plan that he showed me,” McMillan remarked retrospectively about the lack of directives for the initial shoot, conceding that if Ruscha had given him more than an idea, McMillan might have “done some other things.”²⁴ The test shoot even resembles a different Ruscha project: the artist book *Some Los Angeles Apartments*, published the same year, in 1965. At first glance, *Some Los Angeles Apartments* seems to resonate with the field of commercial architectural photography: each page contains a photograph of a different apartment building and a caption with its address. The photographs vary in size and composition: some are shot head-on, others at oblique angles, and a number from extreme low angles, with only portions of the building visible. Scholars have homed in on this book as evidence of Ruscha’s de-skilling of the craft of photography (he got the film developed at a drug store, as the apocryphal story goes).²⁵ Virginia Heckert has argued that Ruscha’s decision to include significant portions of the roads in front of the buildings indicates his predilection for mimicking the observations of a “dispassionate” observer rather than, for instance, a trained professional photographer.²⁶ Instead, I consider it an important precedent to the SoLA project and in particular to *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* because it shows Ruscha’s experimentation with representing the urban landscape.

An apartment building shot by Ruscha and shown in *Some Los Angeles Apartments* draws out the congruences with McMillan’s test shoot, especially his photographs of high-rise buildings



More foreground



Less foreground

Figure 10.7 Julius Shulman, Two views of the Long Beach Water Department Building, from Julius Shulman, *Photographing Architecture and Interiors* (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1962), 28–29.

on Sunset Boulevard (fig. 10.8). The photograph, showing 10433 Wilshire Boulevard, is taken from across the street, in the context of the busy streetscape below. Shot from an oblique angle, the photograph appears neither distorted nor out of proportion, as often happens when photographing architectural structures, something Shulman often warned against. It especially resembles the twelve-story building in angle and position (see fig. 10.5). Both shots also recall published architectural photographs by Shulman. *Arts & Architecture* magazine featured a spread of photographs by Jay Connor and Tom Riggs of the Prudential Building, designed by the acclaimed modernist architect firm Wurdeman and Becket in May 1949 (fig. 10.9). While the drama and sharp precision of the night scene and the effervescence of the palm tree shadows sets the photograph apart, the oblique angle is quite similar, forging a resemblance between the three shots because they all show the building in the context of its street scene. The smaller images in the Prudential spread also bear striking resemblance to a shot of the Park La Brea apartment complex featured in *Some Los Angeles*

Apartments (fig. 10.10). Considered together, these photographs suggest an attempt to experiment with compositions that showcase their architecture as well as their relationships to the fabric of the urban landscape surrounding them. The variation in technique suggests a genuine attempt to consider how buildings change in appearance through different formal decisions, not just an attempt to produce casual snapshots. In a later book of 1977, Shulman wrote more expansively on the purpose of commercial architectural photography, arguing that there are infinite ways to view a building, and that “there are absolutely no rules of composition other than to make each photograph a strong graphic as well as architectural statement.”²⁷ He went further, relaxing his former rules of camera choice, for instance, opining that some of the best remembered architectural photography had been shot with less-than-ideal equipment, even handmade cameras.²⁸ Across his writing and practice, Shulman established the importance of shooting as many photographs as possible, testing and experimenting with one’s subject, and



Figure 10.8 Ed Ruscha, 10433 Sunset Boulevard, from *Some Los Angeles Apartments*, 1965, offset lithograph, 7 1/16 × 5 9/16 in. Publisher: Ed Ruscha. Edition of 3,000. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2861-034. © Ed Ruscha.

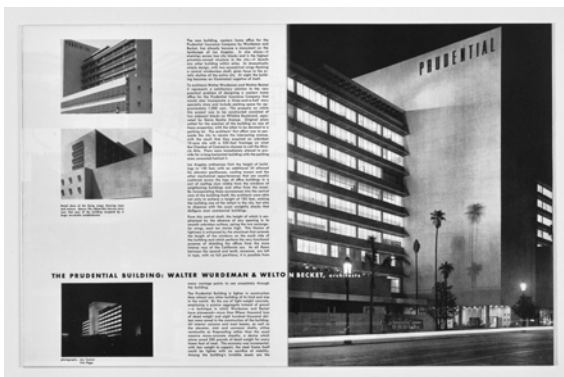


Figure 10.9 Jay Connor and Tom Riggs, Prudential Building (designed by Wurdeman and Becket), from *Arts & Architecture* 66, no. 5 (May 1949): 42. Copyright 2007–2024 © David F. Travers (assigned to Travers Family Trusts). Used with permission.

establishing transparency of one's process as key to working with photography.

McMillan's photographs were also not desirable to Ruscha, I suggest, for similar reasons they wouldn't be to a photographer such as Shulman. If we return to McMillan's attempt to photograph the First Security Bank, for instance, the vertiginous building posed several formal



Figure 10.10 Ed Ruscha, Park La Brea apartment complex, from *Some Los Angeles Apartments*, 1965, offset lithograph, 7 1/16 × 5 9/16 in. Publisher: Ed Ruscha. Edition of 3,000. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2861-034. © Ed Ruscha.

problems: its lines start to converge toward the top of the frame, and it was distorted by the lens, which lacked the tilt and wide angle necessary to capture its height (see fig. 10.4). Ruscha's settled-upon, motorized, and fixed-frame approach provides views of partial buildings; architectural photographers are candid in advocating that this, too, is ultimately all you get with architectural photography. As the architectural photographer Ezra Stoller remarked in 1963: "The building that can be shown completely in one picture is not worth bothering about."²⁹ If commercial architectural photography has suffered from too narrow a scholarly treatment and the SoLA project has remained relatively unstudied, subsumed by the much better known *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, the McMillan photographs illuminate that both can be better understood by looking at their processes, experiments, and test shoots.

DIGITIZATION AND MULTIPLICITY

In 2013, Ruscha remarked on the origins of his SoLA project: he wanted to make something that he "could study like an architect standing over a table and plotting a city."³⁰ Ironically, this retrospective consideration is the closest Ruscha ever got to conceding a certain use value of his photographs to architectural and urban fields. While it might seem as though he intended the comparison to evoke drawings rather than

photographs—the image of an architect standing over a table suggests the study of blueprints or elevation drawings—it nonetheless positions the medium of photography as a conduit to the profession of architecture. The digitization of the archive by the Getty Research Institute (GRI), which began in 2013, indelibly changed the photographic stakes of Ruscha's venture, bringing its utility closer to that of commercial architectural photography than in analog form.

The Getty websites for “12 Sunsets: Exploring Ed Ruscha's Archive” and the SoLA Archive display Ruscha's digitized negatives, allowing users to navigate the archive more accessibly: they are searchable thanks to optical character recognition, geolocation, and tagging, and one can easily compare different years of production.³¹ Additionally, more contextual information is available about the buildings' locations, the surrounding structures, the photographic shoot, and the photographs' locations in the finding aid. Ruscha's digitized negatives, as they exist in the Getty's virtual space, are both visual and extravisual, with textual data presented alongside the digitized negatives. The dissemination of Ruscha's photographs as such actively welcomes excavation of buildings, signage, and streetscapes, making each stage of the project's process as visible to viewers as Shulman did with his process and profession in his publications. The transparency of the digital archive is how, then, it becomes easier to isolate Ruscha's depictions of the Lytton Savings bank and compare them to Shulman's.

While the digitization initiative shows how Ruscha's negatives can be excavated for information in a way similar to traditional uses of architectural photography, the question remains as to how the later motorized shots, Ruscha's primary approach to photographing the streets, relate to the genre. Unlike McMillan's test shoots, they appear quite different from a commercial architectural photograph. When selecting individual digitized negatives from the SoLA digital archive (fig. 10.11), closely cropped views of the building and street tend to crowd the frame, which in the case of the Lytton Savings bank truncates its sign and leaves little room for the horizon to balance the composition. The motorized photographs lack the dynamic oblique angles and careful framing reminiscent of Shulman's and McMillan's shots (fig. 10.12);



Figure 10.11 Ed Ruscha, Lytton Savings bank, 1966, digital positive from negative. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.



Figure 10.12 Julius Shulman, Lytton Savings bank, 1964, gelatin silver print, 8 × 10 in. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2004.R.10.S4. © J. Paul Getty Trust.

instead, they are subject to the fixed framing of the mounted tripod camera, which led to building distortions that many architectural photographers would avoid through lens choice.

Every Building on the Sunset Strip likewise challenges comparisons to commercial architectural photography practices. It is difficult to isolate individual frames enough to discern concrete information about the building structures or the conventions of the photographs themselves. Yet there is one shared quality between the two that the digital archival presentation makes clear. While Ruscha's motorized approach meant that every building would appear at the same angle and general orientation, each building was also photographed three to four times.³² This multiplicity was not erased but preserved, both through the visible suture marks in *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*



Figure 10.13 Ed Ruscha, *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, 1966, offset lithograph, folded and glued, 7 1/8 × 297 in. Publisher: Ed Ruscha. Edition of 1,000. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.

and, most importantly, in the digital archive presentation. This exemplifies the paradox of the book as contained in its title: Ruscha sought to represent each individual building as well as the totality of the Strip.³³ Instead of using individual photographs to convey information about the architecture, the sutured-together photographs provoke a reflection on the necessity of multiple photographs and multiple failed attempts to capture a building (fig. 10.13). If in *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* Ruscha presents a multi-image, extended view of how buildings span the street, in the digital archival presentations we see the photographic labor that went into such a construction, a process inherent to commercial architectural photography. The archive shows every photograph taken of a particular building, including all the shots that were rejected for the final book and have since existed only in negative form. We see where framing led to lens flares, where the composition cut components off, and where the negatives have been marked for editing and selection; all are made visible on the website alongside the technically perfect and untouched negatives.³⁴

Bringing the multiple representations of the Lytton Savings bank—the test shoot, *Every*

Building on the Sunset Strip, and the digitized negatives—into conversation with Shulman's photographs of the bank shows what seemingly dissimilar photographic practices have in common, and how photographers achieve these similarities. All interrogate the purpose of photographs of urban architecture, albeit through different formal means. Ruscha and architectural photographers were working through the capacity and limitations of photography to convey details of the changing urban landscape, despite differences in composition and formal approach. Commercial architectural photography's influence on photographing Los Angeles was not only, then, its popularization of the single glossy shot. Instead, its legacy concerned the way photographers encouraged transparency of the photographic process and the need to experiment when representing a city as confounding as Los Angeles. Cleveland's and Shulman's books exemplify this, but so does Ruscha's overall approach to photographing the city.

The digitized negatives of Ruscha's archive have provoked an excitement about photographs reminiscent of urbanists' obsession with cities' imageability and the visuality of the 1960s. As Robert Venturi, Denise Scott-Brown, and Steven

Izenour included “movie sequence” shots taken from the car in a direct inspiration from Ruscha, so too has the architect Charles Waldheim’s urban-design studio at Harvard University used Ruscha’s archive to build models that imagine new ways of providing shade to the increasingly sunbaked city streets.³⁵ But embracing the potentials of this new digital format must require an equally rigorous interrogation of its exclusions: it shows a narrow portion of the vast, unruly city of Los Angeles, and it mostly excludes residents—ironically, two complaints also frequently waged at commercial architectural photography. Thinking comprehensively across photographic formats reveals the burdens that commercial and art practices shared in Los Angeles at the time: how to metabolize the particular, individual units of a city that was increasingly spread out and generic.

If we consider both practices—Ruscha’s SoLA project and commercial architectural photography—as far from resolute in their approaches to representation and, instead, as mutually invested in experimenting with ways to represent architecture in the city, then it becomes clear how Ruscha’s project extended specific formal and conceptual concerns affecting commercial architectural photography. Through photography, both Ruscha and architectural photographers proposed different solutions to common problems.

NOTES

1. A. D. Coleman, “I’m Not Really a Photographer,” in Edward Ruscha, *Leave Any Information at the Signal: Writings, Interviews, Bits, Pages*, ed. Alexandra Schwartz (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 8.
2. Matthew Miller, “Ed Ruscha—Motorized Photographs of Sunset Blvd. and Other L.A. Streets,” 10 December 2019, video, 2:26, <https://vimeo.com/378662791>.
3. Katherine Smith, “Mobilizing Visions: Representing the American Landscape,” in *Relearning from Las Vegas*, ed. Aron Vinegar and Michael J. Golec (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 122; and Jaleh Mansoor, “Ed Ruscha’s ‘One-Way Street,’” *October* 111 (Winter 2005): 131.
4. By “glossy,” the architect refers to the particular method of printing on high quality, glossy art paper, a choice that goes back to nineteenth-century British magazines. The term *glossy* often serves as a metonym for a magazine’s cultural status as serving wealthy, elite audiences. Quotation by Sir William Holford, excerpted in Eric de Maré, *Photography and Architecture* (London: Architectural Press, 1961), 18.
5. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” *October* 55 (Winter 1990): 105–43.
6. Andrew Higgot and Timothy Wray, introduction to *Camera Constructs: Photography, Architecture, and the Modern City*, ed. Andrew Higgot and Timothy Wray (London: Routledge, 2012), 12.
7. Lionel Freedman, “Minutes of the April 3, 1956 Meeting,” *Architectural Photographers Association Bulletin* 9, no. 5 (May 1956), 2, box 203, Office Records; Correspondence A–R, Maynard Parker Negatives, Photographs, and Other Material, Huntington Library, San Marino, California.
8. Dust jacket description, Robert Cleveland, *Architectural Photography of Houses: How to Take Good Pictures of Exteriors and Interiors* (New York: F. W. Dodge, 1953). European precedents to Cleveland’s book exist. See Claire Zimmerman, *Photographic Architecture in the Twentieth Century* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).
9. Cleveland, *Architectural Photography of Houses*, 8.
10. Julius Shulman, *Photographing Architecture and Interiors* (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1962), 2.
11. John Coplans, “Concerning Various Small Fires: Edward Ruscha Discusses His Perplexing Publications,” *Artforum* 5 (February 1965): 24; reprinted in Ruscha, *Leave Any Information*, 46.
12. Shulman, *Photographing Architecture and Interiors*, 2.
13. Alice Friedman, *American Glamour and the Evolution of Modern Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 5.
14. Esther McCoy, “The Important House,” *New Yorker*, 17 April 1948, 50.
15. This line is from a draft of the story but was cut from the published version. See folder 15, box 10, Esther McCoy Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
16. Shulman, *Photographing Architecture*, 47.
17. De Maré, *Photography and Architecture*, 18.
18. Jennifer Quick, “Pasteup Pictures: Ed Ruscha’s *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*,” *Art Bulletin* 100, no. 2 (2018): 149.
19. Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960); and Robert Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis: Los Angeles, 1850–1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).
20. California Governor’s Commission on the Los Angeles Riots, *Violence in the City—An End or a Beginning? A Report* (Los Angeles: The Commission, 1965).
21. Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (London: Allen Lane, 1971), 242.
22. Ed Ruscha via his studio manager, Susan Haller, email, 27 July 2022.
23. Copy of Ruscha studio notebook, n.d., box 7, folder 5, 2012.M.1, Edward Ruscha Photographs of Sunset Boulevard and Hollywood Boulevard, 1965–2010, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.
24. Jerry McMillan, interview by Zanna Gilbert, January 2020.
25. David Bourdon, “Ruscha as Publisher (or All Booked Up),” *ARTnews* 71, no. 2 (1972): 32–36; and Kevin Hatch, “‘Something Else’: Ed Ruscha’s Photographic Books,” *October* 111 (Winter 2005): 107–26. McMillan, however, said they used his darkroom to develop the photographs. McMillan, interview.
26. Virginia Heckert, *Ed Ruscha and “Some Los Angeles Apartments”* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2013), 10.
27. Julius Shulman, *The Photography of Architecture and Design: Photographing Buildings, Interiors, and the Visual Arts* (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1977), 14.
28. Shulman, *The Photography of Architecture and Design*, 14.
29. Ezra Stoller, “Photography and the Language of Architecture,” *Perspecta* 8 (1963): 44.
30. Calvin Tomkins, “Ed Ruscha’s L.A.,” *New Yorker*, 24 June 2013, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/07/01/ed-ruscha-l-a>.
31. “12 Sunsets: Exploring Ed Ruscha’s Archive,” Getty, <https://12sunsets.getty.edu>. Always intended to be a limited-term application, the website for “12 Sunsets” will not be maintained. A video capturing some of its capabilities can be found here: <https://vimeo.com/946364401/ba0b654c0d>. See also Edward Ruscha Photographs of Sunset Boulevard and Hollywood Boulevard, 1965–2010, 2012.M.1, <http://hdl.handle.net/10020/cifa2012m1>; and Edward Ruscha Photographs

of Los Angeles Streets, 1974–2010, 2012.M.2, <http://hdl.handle.net/10020/cifa2012m2>.

32. Ruscha devised a system whereby the camera was attached to a motor system with a button; someone riding inside the truck would press the button, and the film would advance automatically, allowing for multiple shots of a facade to be taken in quick succession.
33. The book's title was settled upon before the photographic approach; hence, the title acts as a problem to be solved.
34. Likewise, Julius Shulman's archive, also held at the GRI, contains several dozen photographs for each assignment, revealing the accumulative nature of commercial work that has resulted in an archive containing over 260,000 prints and negatives. Julius Shulman Photography Archive, 1935–2009, 2004.R.10, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, <http://hdl.handle.net/10020/cifa2004r10>.
35. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972); and Charles Shafaeih, "Shading Sunset: Charles Waldheim on Reimagining the Streets of Los Angeles for a Warmer Future," *News*, Harvard University Graduate School of Design, 19 April 2021, <https://www.gsd.harvard.edu/2021/04/shading-sunset-charles-waldheim-on-reimagining-the-streets-of-los-angeles-for-a-warmer-future/>.

Ed Ruscha's Street Photos and the Cinematic Sequence Shot

Mark Shiel

Ed Ruscha's street photos of Los Angeles demonstrate the rich artistic and technical capabilities of photography when it engages with specific places and their evolution over time. Since the late 1960s, his photos have helped shape Los Angeles' civic imaginary and metropolitan heritage while representing the *n*th degree of a sociocultural and engineering phenomenon—automobile-led urbanization—that formed and deformed cities and towns around the world in the twentieth century. In this essay, I compare Ruscha's photographic techniques with cinema to shed new light on the heightened spatiality of his work and its meaning in the early twenty-first century when, we now know, the kind of strip development Ruscha photographed became unsustainable.¹

Beginning with the photographic field work from which he selected images for his legendary book *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966), and in dozens of subsequent shoots through the 2010s, Ruscha took hundreds of thousands of pictures of Sunset Boulevard, Hollywood Boulevard, and other Los Angeles streets. In each shoot the artist worked for several hours or a whole day with one or two assistants, producing anywhere from 2,500 to 8,000 images with a semiautomated photographic system.² This consisted of a 35mm film still camera mounted on a tripod on a slow-moving vehicle and pointed

at the opposite side of the street perpendicular to the direction of travel of the vehicle. To minimize the disruption caused by changing the film in the camera on each shoot, Ruscha used multiple large rolls of film, each containing about 200 to 250 exposures and fed through the camera from an external motorized cassette (once, in 2001, he used a digital still camera but did not like the results).

While a lot of attention has been given to Ruscha's painting and the distinctive "Cool School" of L.A. pop art associated with the legendary Ferus Gallery in the early 1960s, his photos have usually been interpreted as a kind of serial photography of the built environment instrumental in the subsequent emergence of conceptual art.³ Accounts that relate Ruscha to conceptualism typically consider his photos alongside the work of contemporaries such as Eleanor Antin, Dan Graham, Martha Rosler, and Robert Smithson. In these interpretations, the studied repetitiveness of Ruscha's photography was part of a radical break with authenticity and uniqueness in representation even greater than that of pop art and akin to the first recognition of photography as art in Dada and surrealism in the 1920s.

However, the sheer number of photographs Ruscha has produced, and their insistently suburban typology (apartment buildings,

swimming pools, parking lots, gas stations, and street fronts), has led some commentators to relate them to the emergence of conceptions of postmodern urbanism and visual culture.⁴

Ruscha's serial photography of urban sprawl is a kind of encoded data that can be interpreted through systems theory, communications theory, and cognitive psychology, which were rapidly growing fields after World War II. This growth was evident in innovative urban-planning studies such as Donald Appleyard, Kevin Lynch, and John R. Myer's *The View from the Road* (1964) and Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour's *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972).⁵ Both of these presented carefully designed photo sequences of streets, highways, and buildings, many of them taken from behind the windshield of a vehicle moving forward.

A reformist urban agenda was also evident in Leonard Nadel's photographs of Los Angeles housing and "slum" conditions published in official reports by the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles in the late 1940s and 1950s.⁶ However, in contrast to Ruscha's work, maps, diagrams, and prose arguments in favor of practical improvements to cities accompanied Nadel's photos of streets and buildings in urban-planning publications. Ruscha's photos do not propose anything; nor do they aim to foreground beauty or excellence, unlike some of the iconic photos of modern architectural masterpieces by Julius Shulman, in which Los Angeles was a place of pleasing functionality, harmony, and comfort.⁷

Comparing other kinds of photography with Ruscha's in this manner highlights the tension that exists between singular and serial photos, qualitative and quantitative representations, and artistic and social-scientific approaches to visualizing the built environment. In the rest of this essay, however, I compare Ruscha's photos with contemporaneous innovations in cinema to shed new light on his work. Not only does cinema generally manifest seriality in extreme form (twenty-four frames per second), but the 1960s was an exceptionally experimentative era in which filmmakers often used cinematography and editing to accelerate or decelerate the viewing experience of the street.⁸

Alexandra Schwartz has remarked on the "numerous affinities and connections between Ruscha's art and filmmaking."⁹ Several of Ruscha's most well-known works foreground Hollywood

iconography—for example, his oil painting *Large Trademark with Eight Spotlights* (1962) (see fig. 6.4) and color screen print *Hollywood* (1968). These works seem simultaneously nostalgic for and ironically distant from the golden era of the Hollywood studios then coming to an end. Even their exceptional width—what Ruscha has called their "panoramic" or "widescreen format"—echoed Hollywood's grandeur.¹⁰ Ruscha trained in graphic design at the Chouinard Art Institute, which was financially supported by Walt Disney, and his photographic practice and book publishing often mimicked the commercial-art principles of his training. In 1961 he attended the Cannes Film Festival while touring Europe.¹¹ His studio was in Hollywood, and he was connected to the countercultural social scene of the so-called New Hollywood, especially through his friend Dennis Hopper, the accomplished actor, director, and photographer. When Ruscha was promoting *Every Building* by distributing it to friends and colleagues free of charge, he sent copies to Andy Warhol and the Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni.¹² He also made two short films of his own—*Premium* (1971) and *Miracle* (1975)—which were vignettes on the theme of metamorphosis filmed on interior sets. Interviews suggest that his taste lay in experimental film and independent features. He has called Warhol's films "profound" and admired Nicolas Roeg's *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976) and Robert Altman's *3 Women* (1977).¹³ He has explained that if he were ever to make his own feature film, it would also be about the desert, but he has admitted frustration with "the vulgarity of Hollywood and the cinema industry," and with the relatively complicated processes of film production and distribution.¹⁴ Hence, he has remained at one remove from the medium: "There is no doubt that my paintings, to a degree, feed on movies, and yet I have stayed a painter. I guess you could say I am interested in the possibilities that remain in a time which tends to favor the moving image."¹⁵

Schwartz has noted the cinematic qualities of Ruscha's street photography while David James has called *Every Building* "one of the best movies made in LA," comparing it to the work of contemporaneous artist-filmmakers such as John Baldessari, Wallace Berman, and Bruce Nauman.¹⁶ Matt Reynolds has analyzed what he calls the "paracinematic" aspects of Ruscha's photobooks—highly selective sequences of still

images printed on paper that resemble films and reflect not only Ruscha's long preoccupation with motion and stasis but also a wider tradition of urban panoramas that require the viewer to perform a kind of editing.¹⁷

Less well-known but striking are parallels between Ruscha's street photos and feature films around the same time. This was an era of intense technical and stylistic innovation in cinematography and editing in both European art cinema and the so-called New Hollywood. While handheld cameras, rapid zooming, and jump-cutting abounded, the visualization of automobility was also a consistent feature, especially in vehicle-mounted tracking shots. Crime films such as *Point Blank* (John Boorman, 1967), *Bullitt* (Peter Yates, 1968), and *The French Connection* (William Friedkin, 1971) rapidly intercut streetscapes with violent action to express urban crisis or psychosis, or both. Images of the street and the road were linked with hippie dissent and calls for social justice in *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969), *Medium Cool* (Haskell Wexler, 1969), and *Zabriskie Point* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1970). Many art films were set in L.A., including the relatively subdued and abstract *Smog* (Franco Rossi, 1962), *Model Shop* (Jacques Demy, 1969), and *Lions Love (And Lies . . .)* (Agnès Varda, 1969).¹⁸ All of these were indebted to the groundbreaking driving sequences of Jean-Luc Godard's *À bout de souffle* (1960; *Breathless*), *Pierrot le fou* (1965; *Pierrot the fool*), and *Week-end* (1967), which exaggeratedly sped up or slowed down the quotidian experience of the automobile with jump-cutting and long takes. They were also facilitated by technological trends toward more lightweight cameras and sound equipment that facilitated the representation of continuous movement.¹⁹

To appreciate the significance of these trends and Ruscha's relationship to them, consider this authoritative definition of the cinematic *sequence*: "Sequence. A series of related shots and scenes in a film, analogous to a book chapter, which constitutes a significant phase of action or a move in the plot. . . . Where an entire sequence is rendered in a single shot, this is known as a sequence shot. A sequence is at once autonomous—with its own beginning, middle, and end, and often concluding with a dramatic climax of some sort—and also a link in a causal narrative chain."²⁰

In *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, Ruscha pushed the principle of serial photography so that it took on some of the characteristics of the sequence shot in expressing a continuous, mobile point of view. The need to photograph in long sequences required him to improvise technically in a way that paralleled recent cinematic innovations. In their shoots of the 1970s, the bulk rolls of film that he and his assistants used were 55-foot (17-meter) lengths of Ilford FP3 or FP4 35mm still film, cut in half to fit their specially adapted camera.²¹ Godard and his cinematographer, Raoul Coutard, used an analogous technique to film *À bout de souffle*, joining together numerous 17-meter rolls of Ilford HPS 35mm still film for use in their Éclair Caméflex motion-picture camera.²²

In contrast to those films, however, Ruscha's images are strikingly lacking in affect because the camera aims for a rigorously lateral point of view, without authorial signatures, as if the result of an automated process (an approach Denise Scott Brown influentially called "deadpan").²³ Scanning the built environment and its facades, they rarely contain human bodies or faces, eschewing expression in favor of recording. The effect of this abstraction is enhanced by a 35mm or 28mm wide-angle "perspective control" lens: the short focal length of the lens makes any human figure accidentally photographed appear tiny in the streetscape, while the lens's engineering reduces or eliminates the distortion of perspective (or exaggerated convergence of vertical lines) that often occurs when the facade of a building is photographed from street level.

The homogenizing effect of the resulting photo sequences is compounded in *Every Building* by Ruscha's presentation of the north and south sides of Sunset Boulevard in two parallel strips separated by white space in the middle of the page, although he did not photograph both sides of the street simultaneously, but one after the other, proceeding from east to west or west to east before turning the vehicle around halfway through each shoot and driving back in the opposite direction. The relation of each photo to the next is characterized by a tension between cutting and continuity. Very few photos are seamlessly joined but the seams are often slight. Sometimes a short stretch of street is repeated from slightly different angles. Sometimes part of a car, lamppost, or billboard is missing because

Ruscha combines two shots of the same location taken at different times. Often a whole frame is presented adjacent to one that has been cropped, and so on. That Ruscha prepared his book by manually compositing his photos on paper, on a wall and table in his studio, using knives, rulers, and glue, bears out Jennifer Quick's contention that he was deeply indebted to the practices of the commercial art studio.²⁴ However, given the large, horizontal and elongated form of this project, his approach also resembled the cutting and splicing of film reels on a flatbed editor, and it anticipated today's digital, nonlinear editing of video timelines.

Ken D. Allan notes that Ruscha's sequences of street photographs may be perused slowly or rapidly depending on the viewer, who may also choose to scan them from left to right or vice versa to look closely at a detail on a given page, or to hold the book at arm's length for a wider view of several pages at once. This encourages an interactive spectatorship, which Ruscha has compared to that of the Happening or performance art.²⁵ On the other hand, Allan correctly observes that the editing and interactivity of *Every Building* are outweighed by its continuity, because the Strip is so uniform that the visual effect or meaning of the images changes little, no matter how they are viewed. Examination of the contact sheets and transparencies of the original, unedited photos in the Getty Research Institute archive backs this up: they show greater variations of weather and light during each shoot and between shoots, suggesting that such contingencies were evened out in Ruscha's selection and cutting of shots for publication. His rigorous management of his camera's position and angle also minimized topographical information in each image—although the Sunset Strip undulates considerably, the curbside is nearly always parallel to the bottom edge of the frame. This contrasts with the disjointed jump-cutting during driving sequences in *Easy Rider* and *Zabriskie Point*, where the editing makes rapid and striking adjustments in point of view and real time to express countercultural disgust with racism, war, or urban-industrial landscapes. Ruscha's street photography has more in common with the longer and more-continuous sequence shots of *Model Shop* and *Lions Love (And Lies . . .)*, which were also overshadowed by those problems but

presented multiple points of view from inside a vehicle looking out to convey melancholic beauty in the city (figs. 11.1, 11.2).

It is revealing here to relate Ruscha's street photography to André Bazin's analysis of "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema" (1960).²⁶ According to Dudley Andrew, that essay "can be said to anchor . . . the entire aesthetic of [French] New Wave criticism and filmmaking" that became so influential internationally.²⁷ Bazin describes the history of cinema in terms of "two broad and opposing trends: those directors who put their faith in the image and those who put their faith in reality."²⁸ By "the image," he meant *mise-en-scène* and montage, where montage was defined as "the creation of a sense or meaning not objectively contained in the images themselves but derived exclusively from their juxtaposition."²⁹ For example, he pointed to the epic dramas of the Soviet filmmakers Sergei Eisenstein and Lev Kuleshov, the latter having demonstrated in the experiment known as the "Kuleshov effect" that the audience of a film will interpret the meaning of an actor's facial expression differently depending on what the actor is shown, by montage, to be looking at—whether a dead child, a bowl of soup, or an attractive woman. But Bazin distrusted such contrivance. He also counterpointed it to the relatively "neutral" form of montage that accompanied the coming of sound and the institutionalization of "classical" cinemas in France and Hollywood in the 1930s.³⁰ Their editing rendered montage "invisible" by subordinating it to narrative, action, characterization, and dialogue—for example, in the films of John Ford—but still without "faith in reality."³¹ Apart from a few early examples, it was really only in the French poetic realism of Jean Renoir's *La règle du jeu* (1939; *The Rules of the Game*) and the Italian neorealism of Luchino Visconti's *La terra trema* (1948; *The Earth Trembles*) that cinema began to show proper "respect for the continuity of dramatic space and, of course, for its duration."³² Such films downplayed montage in favor of "depth of field" or "deep focus" cinematography, which Bazin called a "dialectical step forward in the history of film language."³³ They more closely approximated human perception of the real world, requiring an active and engaged spectator and leaving more room for ambiguity, and they relied on technological innovation—specifically, the



Figure 11.1 Frame enlargement of reverse tracking shot showing the Speedway at Venice Beach from the opening of *Model Shop*, dir. Jacques Demy, 1968. Courtesy Mark Shiel.



Figure 11.2 Frame enlargement of driving shot with forward-mounted camera showing La Cienega Boulevard and Wilshire Boulevard, from *Lions Love (And Lies ...)*, dir. Agnès Varda, 1969. Courtesy Mark Shiel.

development of faster “panchromatic” film stocks, which were more sensitive to light and therefore allowed cinematographers to use camera lenses with smaller apertures to achieve more depth of field.³⁴ This encouraged them to move the camera more freely left and right, forward and back, in studio or on location, handheld, on a dolly or a crane, whether representing pedestrian or automobile movement or other action.

Ruscha moves the camera quite freely, and, in a sense, he respects the continuity of dramatic space and duration, especially in his geographical accuracy. The numerous captions accompanying the photos in *Every Building* record the street address where each image was taken, while the original unedited photos and Ruscha’s production notes contain detailed handwritten information about location, distance, time, speed, and direction of travel. This echoes Bazin’s interest in mobile cinematography and continuous space and time, which Ludovic Cortade has convincingly related to Bazin’s training in geography in the

1930s and early 1940s, before he turned to film criticism, especially his interest in “the intersection of maps and cinema, since both offer an accurate and objective record of reality.”³⁵

However, contrary to Bazin, Ruscha’s dramatic space is almost entirely two-dimensional, showing depth only in the occasional side street that runs to a distant horizon. This contrasts with the frequent use of “rear projection” in Hollywood films of the studio era. As Vivian Sobchack has explained, it was standard practice to project second-unit or stock footage of landscapes or city streets—often in Los Angeles—on a screen behind the actors in the studio when representing vehicular movement, even though the technique was visually unconvincing.³⁶ In a film noir like Edgar Ulmer’s *Detour* (1945), the disjuncture between the protagonists’ forward motion and the constantly receding landscape, signifying the past, enhanced the fatalistic theme of murder and guilt. By contrast, a more exhilarating effect was achieved in sequence shots on location—for

example, in *Gun Crazy* (Joseph H. Lewis, 1950), where a bank robbery was filmed in one three-and-a-half-minute take by a camera pointing forward, while panning left and right, from the back seat of the getaway car.

Bazin wrote an entire book on Orson Welles, whom he admired for the sequence shots in *Citizen Kane* (1941), *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947), and *Touch of Evil* (1958).³⁷ In the last of these, in which the Los Angeles district of Venice posed as a Mexican border town, Welles devised two long sequence shots that exemplify different tendencies of the technique (fig. 11.3). In the famous opening sequence, which was three minutes and eighteen seconds long, Welles provides the spectator with an almost omniscient point of view by means of a virtuoso crane shot that tracks and floats above the protagonists, played by Charlton Heston and Janet Leigh, as they walk through the night just moments before the explosion of a time bomb in a nearby car. Unlike Ruscha, Welles gives his sequence temporal urgency because he lets the spectator see the ticking bomb, using the sequence shot to create suspense (something Alfred Hitchcock did as well).³⁸ In a second sequence later in the film, however, Welles more closely anticipates Ruscha by presenting Heston, the investigating detective, driving down a straight and narrow street at high speed, with the camera on the hood of the car pointing back at him and buildings whizzing by.



Figure 11.3 Frame enlargement of reverse tracking shot showing the Speedway at Venice Beach from *Touch of Evil*, dir. Orson Welles, 1958. Courtesy Mark Shiel.

Welles emphasized the difficulty of making a sequence shot in a film industry where crews were not trained or equipped for it and producers disliked the extra expense it entailed. Working artisanally, Ruscha achieves his sequence shot with considerable skill and a minimum of resources, but there is almost no narrative, action, or suspense; very few people; and no sound. Therefore, his photo series invite comparison to

experimental films such as Andy Warhol's *Empire* (1964) or Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967), although those filmed changes over time in architectural environments from stationary cameras—an eight-hour shot of the Empire State Building and a forty-five-minute, slow zoom shot of the interior of an apartment, respectively. Justin Remes has persuasively argued that these and other films challenge the long-established prejudice that cinema is defined by movement. Instead, he documents “the rich and variegated tradition that [he calls] the *cinema of stasis*”: “Static films offer radical challenges to conventional conceptions of cinema since they are ostensibly motion pictures without motion. In most films an impression of movement is provided either by the motion of the camera or the motion of elements within the *mise-en-scène*—usually both. In contrast, static films generally feature no camera movement and little or no movement within the frame. Instead, these films foreground stasis and consequently blur the lines between traditional visual art and motion pictures.”³⁹

Remes casts the history of film theory as a debate between those who see motion as cinema's essence (e.g., Siegfried Kracauer and Rudolf Arnheim) and those who emphasize its capacity for stillness (e.g., Noël Carroll and Laura Mulvey). As Remes points out, the earliest films by Auguste and Louis Lumière were projected as still images that suddenly moved, much to the excitement of spectators. Dynamic action subsequently became the medium's most prominent feature and a target of avant-garde critique. In this respect, Remes highlights Warhol's *Empire*, projected on the walls of The Factory as a kind of two-dimensional “furniture” to facilitate spontaneous interaction among audience members rather than passive entertainment.⁴⁰ Conversely, Ernie Gehr's *Serene Velocity* (1970) presented a twenty-three-minute sequence of rapidly alternating shots of an empty corridor taken from a fixed camera with lenses of different focal lengths. Remes's explanation of Gehr might equally apply to Ruscha: “In many ways, in fact, *Serene Velocity* feels more like a succession of still photographs than a film. Of course, in a sense cinema really *is* nothing more than a succession of photographs. . . . But while this fact is carefully concealed in traditional motion pictures, static films often foreground this

dimension of cinema's ontology."⁴¹ Gehr's experimental shorts, which sometimes feature streets and automobiles—for example, in *Transparency* (1969) and *Shift* (1974)—are often described as “meditative” or “hallucinatory.”⁴² They rely on montage, but sequence shots are often described in similar terms. For Bazin, a long, studio-bound sequence shot of domestic activity in Welles's *The Magnificent Ambersons* created a “heavy spell which forces us to participate intimately in the action.”⁴³ For Jean Rouch, making the ethnographic documentary *Tourou et Bitti: Les tambours d'avant* (1971; Tourou and Bitti: Drums of the past) on location in Niger, a ten-minute sequence shot of a ceremonial dance by village elders, filmed close-up with a handheld camera, sent him into an immersive “film-trance” analogous to the elders' possession by spirits.⁴⁴ The duration of the “trance” was dictated by the standard ten-minute running time of a reel of 16mm film.⁴⁵

In their content, form, and technique, however, Ruscha's street photos emphasize the urban-industrial too relentlessly to encourage metaphysical readings. At the end of the 1960s, when much film theory took a Marxist turn, Brian Henderson influentially argued that both Soviet montage and the Bazinian sequence shot had become “classical” and therefore redundant.⁴⁶ Henderson did not discuss photography or Los Angeles but called for a new “non-bourgeois camera style” that would emulate the slow, lateral tracking shots of Godard in *La Chinoise* (1967), *Week-end* (1967), *One Plus One* (1968), and *British Sounds* (1969). His description of these could encompass Ruscha's as well:

*Godard's tracking shot moves neither forward nor backward in space, nor in any diagonal or arc, nor at any angle but 90° to the scene it is shooting. That is, Godard's track lies exactly along the 0°/180° line. The scenes or subjects which these shots address lie also along a 0°/180° line, which, furthermore, is exactly parallel to the camera line. This extreme stylization, wherein a plane or planes of subject are paralleled exactly by the plane of art, is unusual in cinema and gives the shot very much the form of a planimetric painting.*⁴⁷

Henderson differentiates Godard's lateral tracking shots from earlier examples by F. W. Murnau, Max Ophuls, and Federico Fellini because

Godard does not move the camera in depth, follow characters in the frame, or arrange people or objects in the foreground, middle ground, or background. Henderson uses metaphors of flatness and elongation to evoke this: “A camera moves slowly, sideways to the scene it is filming. It tracks. But what is the result when its contents are projected on a screen? It is a band or ribbon of reality that slowly unfolds itself. It is a mural or scroll that unrolls before the viewer and rolls up after him.”⁴⁸

This use of the tracking shot, avoiding depth of field, makes Godard's sequence shots different from those praised by Bazin. Godard is not a realist; he seeks to engage the viewer intellectually rather than emotionally, and he is not interested in ambiguity but rather meaningful two-dimensionality. This is especially clear in *Week-end*: “The entire film aspires to the condition of this [tracking] shot” filmed in long shot. That film's exceptional “flatness” is the key to its “non-bourgeois style.” Both montage and composition in depth join multiple places (one by editing, the other by moving the camera in three dimensions), but Godard only shows one continuous plane.⁴⁹

Reading Henderson, the approaches of Godard and Ruscha seem remarkably similar until we recall that Godard was more politically engaged and further to the left. Ruscha occasionally expressed concern about social problems but generally declined to engage with them directly in his art, participating in the 1970 Venice Biennale when many other American artists boycotted the event in protest of the Vietnam War. Other pop artists, and even conceptual artists, became more politically engaged, and it is notable that Ruscha does not figure prominently in studies of art and politics in the 1960s.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, his photos were admired by analysts of architecture who visited L.A. briefly and assumed his so-called deadpan approach was a muted endorsement. Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour appreciated Ruscha's recognition of “the validity of the commercial vernacular,” while the architectural historian Reyner Banham praised Ruscha for providing “a view of the typical Angeleno building and environment ‘like it is.’”⁵¹ However, because none of their publications reflected on Ruscha's work in detail, Mariana Mogilevich is probably right to propose that they “learned from Ruscha but misread him.”⁵²

Situating *Every Building* and Ruscha's Streets of Los Angeles project in relation to the sequence shot is a useful counterpoint to their interpretation in the light of conceptual art and postmodern architecture, relating his work instead to a progressive international trend in cinema. In 1970, while telling *Artforum* that his art had "an objective attitude" with "no involvement in any [political] issue," Ruscha continued: "As an American citizen though, I have no trouble seeing how bad things are. And I don't think the American public necessarily needs to be alerted to how serious it is."⁵³ On the other hand, despite their number, his photos of the Sunset Strip circa 1966 include no images of the turbulent scenes that surrounded the Peace Tower built by the Artists Protest Committee or the large-scale confrontations between demonstrators and police that disrupted traffic on the Strip that year.

Today—at a time of increased anxiety and contestation of the city and calls for equality, diversity, and inclusion—such absences might be read as a sign that Ruscha lacked interest in social issues. Like much Hollywood cinema set in Los Angeles, his photos are geographically selective, emphasizing its relatively comfortable and photogenic Westside and thereby demonstrating the de facto segregation of much of the city. Ruscha is not *responsible* for that segregation, though a skeptic might ask if his photos do enough to comment on or condemn it. Ruscha commissioned the artist Jerry McMillan to take the first test photos of Sunset Boulevard, in 1965, the year of the traumatic Watts uprising; the busiest period of his street photography extended into the mid-1970s. This was one of the most violent eras of urban unrest in US history, and it led to very different tracking shots of the streets of South L.A.—for example, in TV news reporting such as "Watts: Riot or Revolt?" (CBS News, 1965) and in subsequent feature films on racism and poverty in Watts, such as *Bush Mama* (Haile Gerima, 1975).⁵⁴

Whether Ruscha's photobooks empower or disempower the viewer vis à vis urban space must therefore be partly a matter of opinion, though their prescience must be considered alongside their lacunae. With the benefit of hindsight, and comparison with cinema, we can see *Every Building* as an anticipation of digital, nonlinear editing and playback, their increased flexibility compared to earlier technologies allowing us to

appreciate Ruscha's photos for imagining a future scopic regime. By extension, the relation between Ruscha's photos and the streaming services of Amazon, Netflix, and Apple is similar to that posited by Beatriz Colomina between Charles and Ray Eames's Cold War, multiscreen, informational film *Glimpses of the U.S.A.* (1959) and the graphical user interface of computers today, with their multiple "windows."⁵⁵ Some recent scholarship has noted *Every Building* as an artistic forerunner of Google Street View, foreshadowing the smart city and its putative data-rich responsiveness.⁵⁶ That Google Street View can trace its lineage to the pioneering project known as the Aspen Movie Map, developed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the late 1970s, only strengthens the connection, as does the fact that the first public demonstration of that computerized navigation system took place at the influential International Design Conference in Aspen—a conference Ruscha attended earlier, while studying at Chouinard.⁵⁷ Such a technological interpretation implies that Ruscha's street photos constituted one of the most enthralling *urban-visualization* projects in history long before that term was widely used. Each of his photos and series contain extensive data on the dimensions of streets, buildings, lots, and city blocks as well as on land use, construction materials and methods, architectural styles, automobiles, signage, and even foliage, including their distribution—all of which has evolved over time in Ruscha's shoots.

Ruscha's preference for buildings over human figures might seem antithetical to humanist readings of his work. He has explained that he has never wanted to focus on people, seeing them as "extraneous elements," and his street photos are certainly less anthropocentric than feature films, whether Hollywood, neorealist, or Godardian.⁵⁸ Nonetheless, just as Remes has observed that static films "can offer a vast array of temporal experiences," so too can Ruscha's photos prompt us to reflect on the contingency of the passage of time and the finitude of human lives.⁵⁹ They recall the surrealistic ghostliness of earlier street photography by Eugène Atget and Brassai, and they share in what Steven Jacobs calls postwar cinema's "oscillation between movement and stillness . . . as a metaphor for the tension between life and death."⁶⁰ This most humanistic of themes formed the core of Bazin's famous

essay, “Ontology of the Photographic Image,” in which he traces the deep human need for resemblance—the making of human likenesses—from the embalming of the dead in the ancient world to sculpture, painting, photography, and cinema: “Viewed in this perspective, the cinema is objectivity in time. The film is no longer content to preserve the object, enshrouded as it were in an instant, as the bodies of insects are preserved intact, out of the distant past, in amber. The film delivers baroque art from its convulsive catalepsy. Now, for the first time, the image of things is likewise the image of their duration, change mummified as it were.”⁶¹

In Ruscha’s photos, the city is preserved and mummified while the relative absence of humans suggests their transience by comparison with buildings and streets. In 1966 and 1973, respectively, the local television shows *Ralph Story’s Los Angeles* and *Citywatchers* dedicated special episodes to Sunset Boulevard that recounted its foundational role with nostalgia and civic pride.⁶² Preservationism has grown in the city since, but in his reference to amber, Bazin is hinting at ecological deep time, not just human lifespans. Ruscha’s close engagement with movement, temporality, and the city raises environmental questions by encouraging the viewer to slow or stop the automobile.⁶³ It draws attention to the “creative destruction” of the urban landscape under capitalism and anticipates the recent tide of eco-cinema and its preference for “slow” temporality.⁶⁴ Most of his photos show buildings, but nature is there too—trees, lawns, palm trees, empty lots, and hillsides filled with scrub—especially in the original photos, which record increasing construction on green space over time. Ruscha has sometimes made light of L.A.’s transportation problems. He once mused that Banham did not drive when he visited from London but did bring a “little tiny bicycle with little wheels.”⁶⁵ On the other hand, he has also insisted, “I’m very aware of the desert. I go out there a lot. I have a house in the desert; it’s a special place for me.”⁶⁶ While his photos have been applauded for their urban-industrial modernity, they arguably contain alternative lessons today, in a time of greening and rewilding the city, combatting wildfires and homelessness, achieving densification and high-speed rail construction, and expanding the Los Angeles Metro. Considering these problems and

opportunities, Ruscha’s street photos, while beautiful, offer an ecological warning, a premonition of the emptied-out public space of pandemics, a flashback to the Anthropocene, or a counterpoint to energy crises. Moving and still, their relevance continues to endure.

NOTES

1. See Benjamin Ross, *Dead End: Suburban Sprawl and the Rebirth of American Urbanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); and Robert Gottlieb, *Reinventing Los Angeles: Nature and Community in the Global City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).
2. The lower number, 2,500, approximates to the total number of exposures (2,561) in Ruscha’s shoot on the Sunset Strip in 1966. The higher number, 7,000, reflects detailed handwritten notes kept by Ed and Paul Ruscha regarding their shoot on Sunset Boulevard on 1 July 1973. All the original photos and notebooks are preserved in box 2*, box 26*, and box 7, 2012.M.1, Edward Ruscha Photographs of Sunset Boulevard and Hollywood Boulevard, 1965–2010, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (hereafter SoLA Archive).
3. Nancy Foote, “The Anti-Photographers,” *Artforum* 15, no. 1 (1976): 46–54; Rosalind Krauss, “Reinventing the Medium,” *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 2 (1999): 289–305; and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” *October* 55 (Winter 1990): 105–43.
4. See, for example, Buchloh, “Conceptual Art,” 119; Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*, rev. ed. (1990; London: Verso, 2006), 69; and Cecile Whiting, *Pop L.A.: Art and the City in the 1960s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 14.
5. Donald Appleyard, Kevin Lynch, and John R. Myer, *The View from the Road* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1964); and Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972). Martino Stierli has explained that in 1968, Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour took their Yale University architecture students to visit Ruscha’s studio in L.A., where they learned about his “continuous motorized photos.” This directly influenced their subsequent fieldwork in Las Vegas, including the making of short films with vehicle-mounted cameras, such as *Las Vegas Deadpan* (or *Three-Camera Deadpan*) (1968). See Martino Stierli, *Las Vegas in the Rearview Mirror: The City in Theory, Photography, and Film* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2013), 149–89. See also Britt Salveson, “Seeing the Strip: The Photographic Archives of J. B. Jackson, Ed Ruscha, and Denise Scott Brown,” this volume.
6. See Nicole Krup Oest, *Photography and Modern Public Housing in Los Angeles* (Heidelberg: arthistoricum.net, 2022); and Sophie Spalding, “The Myth of the Classic Slum: Contradictory Perceptions of Boyle Heights Flats, 1900–1991,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 45, no. 2 (1992): 107–19.
7. See Mariana Mogilevich’s comparison of Ruscha and Shulman in Mariana Mogilevich, “Monuments and Mediocrity: Landmarking Los Angeles,” *Future Anterior: Journal of Historic Preservation, History, Theory, and Criticism* 11, no. 1 (2014): 35–52.
8. In examining temporality, narrative, and perception, some of the most progressive films of the era focused on the relation between cinema and photography in distinctive urban settings—for example, *La jetée* (Chris Marker, 1963), *Columbia Revolt* (Newsreel, 1968), and *Memories of Underdevelopment* (Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, 1968).
9. Alexandra Schwartz, *Ed Ruscha’s Los Angeles* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 68.
10. Ed Ruscha, interview by Bonnie Clearwater, “An Interview with Ed Ruscha,” 1989, reprinted in Edward Ruscha, *Leave Any Information at*

- the Signal: Writings, Interviews, Bits, Pages, ed. Alexandra Schwartz (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 288–95 (291).
11. Paul Karlstrom, “Oral History Interview with Edward Ruscha, 1980 October 29–1981 October 2,” California Oral History Project (COHP), Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-edward-ruscha-12887>.
 12. Record Book, 1966–1972, box 17, folder 6, 2012.M.1, SoLA Archive.
 13. Christopher Bollen, “An Interview with Ed Ruscha,” *Believer*, March 2006, 47–54 (50); and Diane Spodarek, “Feature Interview: Ed Ruscha (1977),” in Ruscha, *Leave Any Information*, 73–82.
 14. Spodarek, “Feature Interview,” 81.
 15. Bernard Blistène, “Conversation with Ed Ruscha (1990),” in Ruscha, *Leave Any Information*, 300–308 (307).
 16. David James, “Artists as Filmmakers in Los Angeles,” *October* 112 (Spring 2005): 111–27 (119).
 17. Matt Reynolds, “Ed Ruscha’s Moving Pictures,” in *Alternative Projections: Experimental Film in Los Angeles, 1945–1980*, ed. David E. James and Adam Hyman (New Barnet: John Libbey, 2015), 187–202.
 18. See Mark Shiel, “‘It’s a Big Garage: Cinematic Images of Los Angeles circa 1968,” in *Architectures of Revolt: The Cinematic City circa 1968*, ed. Mark Shiel (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2018), 164–88; and Mark Shiel, “Los Angeles and Hollywood in Film and French Theory: Agnès Varda’s *Lions Love* (1969) and Edgar Morin’s *California Journal* (1970),” in *Cinematic Urban Geographies*, ed. François Penz (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 245–68.
 19. Joshua Gleich and Lawrence Webb, eds., *Hollywood on Location: An Industry History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2019).
 20. Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwell, *A Dictionary of Film Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), s.v. “sequence.”
 21. These films were known for producing especially sharp images with rich tonality, even in low light. See “Ilford HP2 Plates and Films,” Photographic Memorabilia, last updated 21 March 2023, https://www.photomemorabilia.co.uk/Ilford/HP2_Films_Plates.html; and Robert J. Hercock and George A. Jones, *Silver by the Ton: The History of Ilford Limited, 1879–1979* (London: McGraw-Hill, 1979).
 22. See Michel Marie, *The French New Wave: An Artistic School*, trans. Richard Neupert (Malden: Blackwell, 2003), 90. Roberto Rossellini had done something similar when shooting scenes of wartime street life for *Rome, città aperta* (1945; *Rome, Open City*). See Mark Shiel, *Italian Neorealism: Rebuilding the Cinematic City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 47.
 23. See Stierli, *Las Vegas*, 156–57; and Aaron Vinegar, “Ed Ruscha, Heidegger, and Deadpan Photography,” *Art History* 32, no. 5 (2009): 852–74.
 24. Jennifer Quick, *Back to the Drawing Board: Ed Ruscha, Art, and Design in the 1960s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), 95.
 25. Ed Ruscha and Sylvia Wolf, “Nostalgia and New Editions: A Conversation with Ed Ruscha,” in *Ed Ruscha and Photography*, ed. Sylvia Wolf, exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2004), 275. Quoted in Ken D. Allan, “Ed Ruscha, Pop Art, and Spectatorship in 1960s Los Angeles,” *Art Bulletin* 92, no. 3 (2010): 231–49 (242).
 26. André Bazin, “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema,” in *What Is Cinema?*, ed. and trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 23–40.
 27. Dudley Andrew, *André Bazin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 162.
 28. Bazin, “Evolution,” 24.
 29. Bazin, “Evolution,” 25.
 30. Bazin, “Evolution,” 29.
 31. Bazin, “Evolution,” 24.
 32. Bazin, “Evolution,” 34.
 33. Bazin, “Evolution,” 35.
 34. Bazin, “Evolution,” 30.
 35. Ludovic Cortade, “Cinema across Fault Lines: Bazin and the French School of Geography,” in *Opening Bazin: Postwar Film Theory and Its Afterlife*, ed. Dudley Andrew and Herve Joubert-Laurencin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 13–31 (17).
 36. Vivian Sobchack, “Detour: Driving in a Back Projection, or Forestalled by Film Noir,” in *Kiss the Blood Off My Hands: On Classic Film Noir*, ed. Robert Miklitsch (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 113–29.
 37. André Bazin, *Orson Welles: A Critical View* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).
 38. John Belton, “The Space of *Rear Window*,” *Comparative Literature* 103, no. 5 (1988): 1121–38 (1134).
 39. Justin Remes, *Motionless Pictures: The Cinema of Stasis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 3.
 40. Remes, *Motionless Pictures*, 36–45.
 41. Remes, *Motionless Pictures*, 18.
 42. See, for example, Scott MacDonald, “Ernie Gehr: Camera Obscura/Lens/Filmstrip,” *Film Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (1990): 10–16; and Manohla Dargis, “No Blockbusters Here, Just Mind Expanders,” *New York Times*, 11 November 2010, 11.
 43. Bazin, *Orson Welles*, 73.
 44. Jean Rouch, “On the Vicissitudes of the Self: The Possessed Dancer, the Magician, the Sorcerer, the Filmmaker, and the Ethnographer,” in *Ciné-Ethnography*, ed. and trans. Steven Feld (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 87–101 (99).
 45. A similar limit was set by the standard 1,000-foot reel of 35mm motion-picture film.
 46. Brian Henderson, “Two Types of Film Theory,” *Film Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (1971): 33–42 (33).
 47. Brian Henderson, “Toward a Non-Bourgeois Camera Style,” *Film Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (1970–71): 2–14 (2).
 48. Henderson, “Toward a Non-Bourgeois Camera Style,” 4.
 49. Henderson, “Toward a Non-Bourgeois Camera Style,” 13–14.
 50. More politically engaged artists included Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, and Donald Judd in conceptualism, and Roy Lichtenstein, James Rosenquist, and Claes Oldenburg in pop art. See Matthew Israel, *Kill for Peace: American Artists against the Vietnam War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), 37–67; Peter Selz, *Art of Engagement: Visual Politics in California and Beyond* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); and Blake Stimson, “Conceptual Work and Conceptual Waste,” *Discourse* 24, no. 2 (2002): 121–51.
 51. Reynier Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of the Four Ecologies* (London: Allen Lane, 1971), 251; and Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, 6.
 52. Mariana Mogilevich, “Monuments and Mediocrity: Landmarking Los Angeles,” *Future Anterior: Journal of Historic Preservation, History, Theory, and Criticism* 11, no. 1 (2014): 35–52.
 53. Ed Ruscha in “The Artist and Politics: A Symposium,” *Artforum* 9, no. 1 (1970): 35–39 (38). Jennifer Quick aptly describes Ruscha’s art as “a space of subtle resistance” that is nonetheless “realistic about design’s role in a capitalist economy.” Quick, *Back to the Drawing Board*, 20.
 54. See CBS News, “Watts: Riot or Revolt?,” CBS Reports series, 6 December 1965, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?327579-1/reel-america-watts-riot-revolt-1965>. On *Bush Mama*, see Allyson Field, Jan-Christoph Horak, and Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, eds., *LA Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 119–55, 196–224. See also Eric Avila, “Streets of Another Los Angeles: Geographies of Exclusion and Difference,” this volume.
 55. Beatriz Colomina, “Enclosed by Images: The Eameses’ Multimedia Architecture,” *Grey Room*, no. 2 (Winter 2001): 5–29.

56. Andrew Higgott and Timothy Wray, eds., *Camera Constructs: Photography, Architecture and the Modern City* (London: Routledge, 2016).
57. See Martin Beck, *The Aspen Complex*, trans. Nicholas Grindell (Berlin: Sternberg, 2012).
58. Thomas Bellen, "Ed Ruscha," interview, *Splash*, February 1989, n.p., reprinted in Ruscha, *Leave Any Information*, 284.
59. Remes, *Motionless Pictures*, 143.
60. Steven Jacobs, *Framing Pictures: Film and the Visual Arts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 96.
61. André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," trans. Hugh Gray, *Film Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (1960): 4–9 (8); translated from "Ontologie de l'image photographique" in Bazin, *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1958). Bazin's essay was first published in Gaston Diehl, *Les problèmes de la peinture* (Lyon: Confluences, 1945).
62. *Los Angeles*, episode 205, "A Drive Down the Entire 25-Mile Length of Sunset Boulevard," directed by Ralph Story, aired on 22 September 1968, on KNXT; and *Citywatchers*, episode 211, "Sunset Boulevard as Seen by Art and Chuck from the Blimp," aired on 13 April 1975, on KCET/PBS.
63. A similar encouragement is also achieved, in a different way, by the interactive website recently developed to display Ruscha's street photos by the Getty Research Institute and the data visualization firm Stamen. See "12 Sunsets: Exploring Ed Ruscha's Archive," Getty, <https://12sunsets.getty.edu/>. Always intended to be a limited-term application, the website for "12 Sunsets" will not be maintained. A video capturing some of its capabilities can be found here: <https://vimeo.com/946364401/ba0b654c0d>.
64. On "creative destruction," see Sharon Zukin, *Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disney World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 5. On slow cinema and ecology, see Scott MacDonald, "Toward an Eco-Cinema," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 11, no. 2 (2004): 107–32.
65. Ed Ruscha and Ludovico Centis, "Where the City Meets the Desert," interview, *AA Files*, no. 77 (2020): 78–86 (80).
66. Ruscha and Centis, "Where the City Meets the Desert," 80.

IMAGE

12

Nightmare of Information: Ed Ruscha's Image Critique

Eva Ehninger

While carefully leafing through the foldout pages of Ed Ruscha's *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966) with gloved hands and a scrutinizing eye, I noticed a single, monumental *The* fashioned in bold, italic lettering emblazoning the windowless, single-story facade of street number 8844 (fig. 12.1). Judging from the double page in front of me, the lonely definitive article seemed to be the result of the artist's shortening of the facade in postproduction with an X-Acto knife and paste. A look at the newly visible, digitized archive of the original shoot reveals, however, that the store's logo had not yet been attached to the wall in full when Ruscha's image machine came driving by (see fig. 4.5). Its installation happened to coincide with the artist's first shoot.



Figure 12.1 Ed Ruscha, 8844 Sunset Boulevard, from *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, 1966, offset lithograph, folded and glued, 7 1/8 × 297 in. Publisher: Ed Ruscha. Edition of 1,000. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.

The resulting image gives pause. Breaking into the succession of tiny, unassuming storefronts running along the upper and lower edges of the foldout pages in hues of gray, the graphic presence of the black word on the bright white wall demands our attention but then falls short of delivering its message. The massive *The* doesn't do its grammatical job. It stands ready to define a missing noun while an expanse of wall space reminds us of the noun's irritating absence. It announces something that is not there. This happenstance detail illustrates the conceptual claim of the artist book *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, just as the book indicates the aim of the Streets of Los Angeles (SoLA) Archive, from which its photographic raw material was sourced. In all three cases—the single photograph, the foldout book, and the digital archive—photographic documentation suggests the seamless and complete transmission of visual information but then fails to deliver its message. In what follows, I discuss Ruscha's rejection of the functionality of images as carriers of information by situating his work in the context of 1960s information and communication theory.

Ruscha's photographic practice relates to concepts of the image that grew out of systems theory and communication science, as well as their applications in urban planning. Initiated by the architect and theorist Kevin Lynch and his

groundbreaking publication *The Image of the City* (1960), urban planning underwent a paradigm shift at the beginning of the 1960s.¹ “Orthodox” city planning, the critique went, had superimposed a social utopia of order, simplicity, clarity, and harmony upon the physical environment of the city and thereby neglected the actual intricate, multifaceted, and often chaotic workings of cities. This “anti-city” planning, as Lynch’s contemporary, the architectural critic and activist Jane Jacobs called it, was seen to be responsible for the decline of US cities.² In Jacobs’s view, the scattered formlessness, inaccessibility, social insularity, and absence of public space and public life was a result of abstract ideas developed on the drawing board that were put into practice without consideration of the reality of city life.³ In contrast, new planning was to be founded on the lived experience of the existing cityscape. The analysis of the inhabitants’ views and uses of their urban environment was regarded as the foundation for further planning and development. Los Angeles, the city that Ruscha began to document so excessively just a few years later, was at the heart of this paradigm shift in urban planning. Hailed by planners of the 1940s as the virtual realization of Ebenezer Howard’s Garden City ideal, Los Angeles served as the perfect punching bag for the detractors of this approach a decade later.⁴ It is no coincidence, then, that Los Angeles provided a regular case study for the development of novel concepts and methods of city planning. Now the greatest challenge for planners was the visual excess of the existing urban fabric. The perceived “chaos” of the contemporary city needed to be transformed into information that could be processed, interpreted, and acted upon.

In the following I first extrapolate the understanding of the image as it develops from such considerations of the contemporary urban environment—an increasingly complex system of visual communication. Contemporary theorists and planners placed great confidence in the potential for images to serve as carriers of information, which can be read if one has the right tools for the task. Even though Lynch and his contemporaries agreed that a city like Los Angeles came very close to incomprehensible chaos, they were also convinced that with the right architectural, perceptual, and technological tools, its “imageability” could be amplified and filtered

in such a way as to become useful information again. The term *image* was of threefold significance in this context. Lynch used it to describe the mental image that an inhabitant produces of their environment through daily experience; it also represented the visual structure of the city; and it referred to the output of new imaging techniques employed to document the existing urban environment. If planners succeeded in their analysis of the existing city and, based on their findings, enhanced the visual structure of the urban environment, this would have a positive, clarifying impact on the mental image of its inhabitants and ameliorate their life in the city. From this hopeful background, I subsequently tease out Ruscha’s critical reconsideration of the way images function. In his own prolonged analysis of L.A., Ruscha documents the visual information the cityscape presents but at the same time pinpoints how this information fails to deliver its message, draws a blank, and falls silent. Ruscha’s work against the image as information is most comprehensible in the intersections between his well-known works in different media and his previously invisible, long-term photography project—that is, the Streets of Los Angeles—which he built up in parallel.

CITIES AS COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS

Two aims overlap in the writings of architects and urbanists of the 1960s. The first task these authors set for themselves was to find methods for residents to orient themselves in an urban structure that was becoming increasingly complex, as its material layout and structure were determined by largely invisible networks of information exchange.⁵ For his study *The Image of the City*, Lynch held interviews with a group of test persons. They were asked to recount a map of the Los Angeles area based on their individual use of the urban environment. The respondents generally indicated the streets that determined their way from home to work, the places at which they shopped or spent their free time, and the landmarks they turned to for orientation. From these idiosyncratic mental images, Lynch synthesized a map that included the avenues, districts, architectures, and visual landmarks referred to by a majority of his test persons.

Lynch's method was informed by behaviorist research and system analysis, fields of inquiry that urban planners had begun to regularly turn to. In the late 1940s, the psychologist Edward C. Tolman had coined the term *cognitive map* for his research on the "place-learning" behavior of rats, which he had conducted by exposing the animals to complex mazes.⁶ Lynch accordingly describes the production of a selective mental map of the city environment as a process of "place-learning" that is driven by exposure and exploration. Applying cybernetic language to his description of the perception of the city environment, he writes: "Environmental images are the result of a two-way process between the observer and his environment. The environment suggests distinctions and relations, and the observer . . . selects, organizes, and endows with meaning what he sees. The image so developed now limits and emphasizes what is seen, while the image itself is being tested against the filtered perceptual input in a constant interacting process."⁷ Similar to a computer program, the cognitive map helps the individual filter the impressions of the environment to arrive at a more refined image of the city, which in turn serves as an increasingly fine-pored filter, and so forth. Los Angeles and its environs proved to be a specifically challenging image to produce. "When asked to describe or symbolize the city as a whole," Lynch notes, "the subjects used certain standard words: 'spread out,' 'spacious,' 'formless,' 'without centers.' Los Angeles seemed to be hard to envision or conceptualize as a whole."⁸

The second task urban researchers set for themselves was the development of innovative methods to visualize the complex relations between data, goods, and persons that made up the increasingly complex and largely invisible structure of the contemporary city. Information theorists, designers, and architects experimented with a range of media to provide adequate visualizations of the urban environment and its technologically determined makeup.⁹ Between 1954 and 1959, Lynch cooperated with the designer and educator György Kepes to produce a preliminary study for *The Image of the City*. It included almost two thousand photographs that documented sequences of the Boston cityscape as it was perceived while walking along the sidewalk.¹⁰ Though the photo archive did not make it into the later publication, it illustrates the

researchers' motivation to collect data for the analysis of the perceptual form of a given city. Lynch's approach prefigures Ruscha's own test shoot of 1965, for which the artist commissioned the photographer Jerry McMillan to walk along Sunset Boulevard and document the buildings he passed. Lynch also cooperated with the architects Donald Appleyard and John R. Myer on the picture-heavy publication *The View from the Road* (1964), which promoted the examination of the contemporary city from street level, in imitation of the lived experience of its inhabitants.¹¹ The authors put their innovative ideas into practice in a corresponding video documentation of a car ride through the cityscape of Chicago (fig. 12.2). Filmed with a static camera aimed at the front windshield, the recording captures the driver's limited perceptual access to the city's structural layout. It underscores the importance of colorful, large-scale markers or signs installed along the road, which can be processed from a distance and at high speed. The visual overload of the contemporary urban environment is reinforced by the time-lapse recording, which is sped up over the course of two minutes and fifty-nine seconds. Ruscha's photographic documentation of Sunset Boulevard is in close correspondence to these efforts. Not only does he visualize a specific, street-level perspective—neither from the sidewalk nor through the windshield but rather imitating the view from a passenger seat, looking out of the side window of a moving car—he also experiments with a combination of car and camera to produce an "image" of the city.

Initially, little effort was made to connect the challenge of visualization to the concurrent social and economic upheavals in the contemporary urban environment and their racial implications.¹² Lynch, for his part, acknowledges that his group of interviewees, consisting of white professionals who worked in downtown Los Angeles, produced a shared cognitive map that blocked out segregated neighborhoods, such as those in South Los Angeles, which was a predominantly Black community, and East Los Angeles, which was home to mostly Mexican, Mexican American, and Latin American residents.¹³ But he is not concerned with the discriminating impact of the formation of group identity on the basis of a shared visual memory. Lynch's focus is squarely on ways planning can help enable inhabitants to perceptually produce a "visual form" of the city.



<https://vimeo.com/1033248171/1b60992c63>

Figure 12.2 *View from the Road* 1958, dir. Kevin Lynch, from the *View from the Road* series, 1965. Cambridge, Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Used by permission of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Ruscha's focus is on subverting this dream of clarity and control.

VISUAL DESIGN: LEARNING PERCEPTION, ENABLING COMMUNICATION

Ruscha became an active participant in the discourse on visual communication during his studies in advertising design at the Chouinard Art Institute from 1956 to 1960.¹⁴ Since the beginning of the 1950s, design instruction had broadened from the teaching of industrial design toward an instruction in perception. This change in emphasis was to a large degree informed by the newly developed information theory, which had grown out of research in telecommunications that Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver conducted at Bell Telephone Laboratories and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Formulating their theory in the context of telecommunication, the mathematician Shannon and electrical engineer Weaver defined *information* as a transmission of a message from sender to receiver. They focused on the conditions for the successful transfer of the signal as well as on its possible disruptions and malfunctions, which might cause a loss of information. Aiming to solve what they understood to be first and foremost an “engineering problem,” they explicitly excluded “meaning” from their conceptualization of information.¹⁵ Shannon and Weaver’s

information theory quickly diffused into other contexts. It was used to describe not only data transmitted on wireless and fiber-optic networks or broadcast on media but also biological, chemical, physical, and social processes of address and response. Their rather narrow understanding of information was conferred on these diverse contexts as well.

Kepes was a colleague of Shannon’s at MIT. In close correspondence with the latter’s model of communication, Kepes understood design as a means to support and stabilize the transmission of signals. His pedagogical program was aimed at an “education of vision,” which would enable an unobstructed flow of information.¹⁶ In his publication and exhibition *The New Landscape of Art and Science* (1956), Kepes presents visual analogies between organic and inorganic, micro and macro, and natural and human-made structures to alert his audience to their formal similarities. He argues that learning to recognize such patterns provides the perceptual basis to find visual order in the vast and complex networks of contemporary society. Design accordingly needs to be based on a “dynamic iconography,” which considers “perception’s dependence on pattern seeing and latent visual knowledge, and its experiential nature.”¹⁷ Kepes was convinced that this new “language of vision” could ameliorate contemporary society’s difficulty with developing adequate channels of communication among highly diverse areas and agents. As an environment in which this communication crisis played out, the contemporary city was a crucial area of application for this work, as Lynch’s research for *The Image of the City*, codirected by Kepes, evinces. In 1959, as a student, Ruscha visited the International Design Conference in Aspen, (titled “Communication: The Image Speaks”); though Kepes did not attend, his paper was printed in the conference reader.¹⁸

Kepes and Lynch were invested in the importance of perception as a teachable skill that can ameliorate the disparate and opaque status quo of the contemporary world. In *Language of Vision* (1944), Kepes diagnoses a “formless age of transition, of chaos, incomparable to anything man has ever experienced before,” and Lynch specifically applies the term “formless” to Los Angeles.¹⁹ But information theory had taught them that formlessness is merely a result of

insufficient information.²⁰ Consequently, both authors introduce concepts, methods, and technological instruments that enhance information in order to adequately visualize the perceptual chaos of the contemporary urban environment. They believe that these efforts will ultimately make manifest new patterns and structures that can be used to organize one's life and scientifically analyze it for further improvement.

Despite his professional training, Ruscha's own take on images does not comply with the idealistic notions of "wholeness" and "visibility" that resonate in both Kepes's and Lynch's conceptualizations of image-making. Ruscha, I argue, bows out of these hopeful claims. For him, Los Angeles is not a complex system of communication. Its users do not need to be trained in perception and its researchers do not need to be provided with better visualizing tools to process the visual information at hand. For Ruscha, L.A. is rather the perfect example of an image that fails to act as a carrier of information. My following discussion of Ruscha's artworks against the background of his continued photographic documentation of Los Angeles clarifies that he seeks out and produces images that cannot be reduced to information. Their material makeup, their weight and body, continuously gets in the way of their message. The *The* on the facade of 8844 is a case in point. Because the heavy, black letters of the store's name have not yet been drilled into the pristine white wall, the lettering's meaning is announced, but not delivered. The materiality of information, and its adverse impact on information's functionality, moves to the foreground.²¹ Ruscha's handling of two visual qualities that Lynch ascribed to Los Angeles in order to pinpoint its challenging formlessness makes the artist's image critique manifest: L.A.'s low "imageability" and the necessarily procedural perception of its horizontal expanse.²² In the following, I will trace these qualities in Ruscha's own image-making. While Ruscha documents them quite literally in the SoLA Archive, they are also of fundamental importance for his artistic work in other media, which developed parallel to his continued engagement with a limited number of L.A. boulevards.

LOW IMAGEABILITY

Lynch defines the imageability of a topographical place as its quality to be perceived as a coherent pattern or entity—in other words, as an image. To be perceived as an image, the environment needs to possess a recognizable form and a spatial structure, which clarifies the position of the observer as well as that of the perceived objects. L.A. lacks this kind of form.²³ All efforts of visualization must be geared to the enhancement of its imageability.

Ruscha, on the other hand, embraces the low imageability of Los Angeles. Arguably, it becomes the most prominent motif within the SoLA Archive. Based on the conventional understanding of photography as a documentation of the real, Ruscha apparently captures everything that is visible on Sunset Boulevard. But despite the medium's claim of completeness and transparency, the informational value of the enormous resource of visual data that his camera-pickup-imaging machine has produced is questionable. Due to the ninety-degree angle of the camera installed on the vehicle, the resulting images lack spatial localization. They double the storefronts in front of the camera, while the social landscape behind these facades remains invisible. An image from Ruscha's test run from 1966, for example, shows a clinker-brick facade with storefronts of a pet shop, a real estate agency, and a dry-cleaning business (fig. 12.3). The road and sidewalk are deserted, no customers are visible, and the second-story windows are covered with screens. An alarming detail breaks into the eerie silence of the photograph: the storefront at the center is burned out. Its window is missing, and the door is barred haphazardly with narrow planks. Black soot traces the route the flames took, indexical evidence of the violent fire that blasted through the glass panels above, ready to consume the entire building. This was the year after the Watts uprising. In other neighborhoods of Los Angeles, burned-out storefronts were a familiar picture, signaling the brutal destruction of a city's social and economic fabric as a consequence of systemic racism (fig. 12.4).²⁴ Contemporary Angelenos and media consumers could not ignore this visual parallel; perception, as Kepes maintained, is based on latent visual knowledge. But the artist's commissioned camera just documents and moves



Figure 12.3 Ed Ruscha, 5105 Sunset Boulevard, 1966, digital positive from negative. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.



Figure 12.4 Building on fire, Los Angeles, 14 August 1965. Bettman / Getty Images.

on. Ruscha's photographic documentation of L.A. announces information but fails to deliver it.

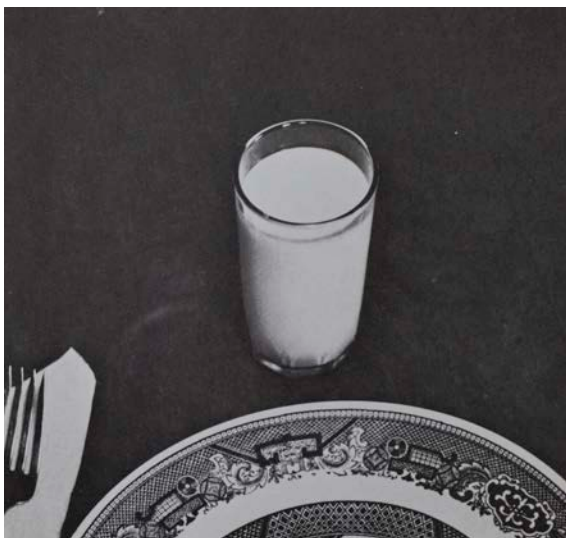
Ruscha's interest in images as agglomerations of informational data—which seem to lend themselves easily to configuration and processing while having a meaning that remains frustratingly opaque—is also the driving force of his artist book *Various Small Fires and Milk* (1964), realized a year before he began his documentation of Sunset Boulevard. The book contains fifteen photographs of various fire sources and, as the subtitle indicates, an image of a glass of milk. Significantly, the last five pages of the slim publication are left empty. In an interview with John Coplans for *Artforum*, Ruscha describes the photographs assembled in the book as “technical” or “informational” data. This prompts Coplans to ask Ruscha whether he is familiar with the publication *Nonverbal Communication* (1956) by the psychiatrist Jurgen Ruesch and the artist

Weldon Kees. In his answer, Ruscha emphasizes the difference between Ruesch and Kees's use of images and his own. Pointing out that the authors use image captions to designate the different use values of signs and images, he states that “[*Nonverbal Communication*] is for people who want to know about the psychology of images,” but “[*Various Small Fires*] IS the psychology of pictures. . . . *Nonverbal Communication* has a functional purpose, it is a book to learn things from. You don't necessarily learn anything from my books.”²⁵ This clarification is crucial in two ways: First, Ruscha is interested in the experiential field of images, in how they “behave” differently in various contexts. Second, he does not aim to break down this experiential field by explaining it or making sense of it. On the pages of his artist book, the “psychology” of images is not analyzed but rather acted out.

Let me substantiate this claim by taking a closer look at *Various Small Fires and Milk* (fig. 12.5). The medium of black-and-white photography arrests the lively flames in their movement. Their brightness overexposes the photographic film. Visually abstracted from their different sources—the matches, the lighter, the candle, or the stovetop—they become flattened, amorphous white blobs. In contrast, the glass of milk is perfectly reproducible in a black-and-white photograph. The opacity and stillness of the white liquid, enclosed in the translucent glass cylinder, assist its visualization. The juxtaposition of two elements—fire and liquid—and their divergent “imageability” in the medium of photography pinpoints Ruscha's interest in the materiality of media and the consequences of their material makeup for their functionality as carriers of information. This is also at play in the painting *City* (1968) (fig. 12.6). In imitation of a splash of water, the word *city* sits on a blue surface. The word's form is contained and “imageable” only due to the horizontal orientation of the depicted tableau, as its liquid materiality suggests. If the material base the lettering seems to sit on were tipped to a vertical position—the orientation of the actual painting on the wall—the word would lose its precarious form. Ruscha presents in his painting a city's form that is contingent on a volatile moment, when matter and medium come together in a very specific way. Just as the city of Los Angeles threatens to escape its permanent visualization, Ruscha's *City*



Matches



Glass of Milk

Figure 12.5 Ed Ruscha, *Various Small Fires and Milk*, 1964, offset lithograph, 7 1/6 × 5 1/2 × 3/16 in. Publisher: Ed Ruscha. Edition of 400. © Ed Ruscha.

is prone to dissolving into meaningless streaks of water, getting soaked up by its support or evaporating into thin air.

The majority of Ruscha's other artist books of the 1960s and 1970s feature elements of the city documented continuously in his SoLA Archive that point to the emptiness and illegibility of this assembled "image of the city"—for example, the nondescript and repetitive architecture of gas stations, the barren wasteland, or the empty parking lots. These elements contribute to the structural makeup of the networked city, which is based on the movement of persons, goods, capital, and information. They "image" increasingly



Figure 12.6 Ed Ruscha, *City*, 1968, oil on canvas, 55 × 48 in. Chicago, Art Institute of Chicago, 1969.722. Twentieth-Century Purchase Fund. © Ed Ruscha.

invisible networks and in turn contribute to the city's overall formlessness, its low imageability.

Ruscha is thus more interested in the structure and process of information than in its content. This seems to align with both Lynch's and Shannon and Weaver's aims. Accordingly, the digitization process of the SoLA Archive nurtured a latent hope among researchers and archivists: that by digitizing this massive visual resource, it would finally become accessible as information, and that it could be analyzed, read, and productively combined with other data. But Ruscha does not seek to perfect the image's "identity and structure," to have it function smoothly as a transmitter of information. Instead, he demonstrates how the materiality of information determines, changes, or obstructs its processing, and how it gets in the way of a city's imageability.²⁶

PROCEDURAL PERCEPTION

In *The Image of the City*, Lynch discusses the mental image that the inhabitant of a city can produce based on the necessarily partial, fragmentary, and processual visual experience of the urban environment. The "observer" plays an active and creative role in this exercise of

perception. Lynch describes the process of arriving at one's own image of the city as a feedback system. Like a computer program, the mental image helps filter the impressions of the environment to arrive at a more refined image of the city, which in turn serves to focus one's impressions and to see patterns more clearly.²⁷

Urban theorists regularly described the contemporary city as an agglomeration of visual data in need of processing by its users.²⁸ In turn, the city stands ready to explain electronic data processing to a broader audience. In the catalog for the exhibition *Software—Information Technology: Its New Meaning for Art*, held at the Jewish Museum in 1970, Theodor H. Nelson, the technological advisor for the show, discusses the relationship between hardware and software with reference to a city's infrastructure. Nelson describes software as "plans and procedures for actions, as distinct from the equipment that carries the action out. Thus in a transportation system the hardware consists of cars, highways, traffic lights and policemen, while the software consists of rules, such as drive on the right, stop at a red light, etc. . . . In computer-based systems we must distinguish between the hardware (computer and reading screen), software (computer and display program) and content (what is read)."²⁹

Ruscha's camera-pickup-imaging machine seems to be a veritable example of such a system. It photographs the "hardware" and simultaneously visualizes the "software" of the city. This can be seen in L.A.'s traffic-light system; it is mapped onto the archive by means of doubles, which the camera generates at a red light, or by gaps produced in the line-up of the facades when the truck speeds along the boulevard. The availability and use of public transportation is on display: on an early Sunday morning, bus stops are one of the few places where people are outside and immobile, ready to be documented by Ruscha's machine driving by. At the same time, this neat analog with a computer program is constantly undermined. The two datasets that Ruscha's analog machine produces of the city's "hardware" and "software" do not lead to any plausible content. Only by means of a laborious, analog editing process is the "raw data" produced by his machine assembled into a visual entity, which remains difficult to interpret.

What is more, in the interview with Coplans, Ruscha suggests an equally process-based manner of perception for the finished book, inviting viewers to start at any page and flip to any other. You can "edit them in your own mind as you move through the pages," says Ruscha.³⁰ Compare this to Lynch's description of the process to produce a mental image of the city: "On different occasions and for different people, the sequences are reversed, interrupted, abandoned, cut across. . . . At every instant, there is more than the eye can see. . . . Nothing is experienced by itself, but always in relation to its surroundings."³¹ Both the perception of the city and Ruscha's artworks involve an active process of visual editing in the attempt to produce content from a mass of visual data.

Already by the late 1960s, the task to adequately visualize the contemporary city came to be regarded as a highly charged political activity. Increasingly, the social implications of the city's physical makeup came into the focus of city planners. And by the early 1970s, urban planners faced broad criticism for their apparent ignorance regarding the social fractures and injustices that were integral to the city's structural layout—for example, the racial division of neighborhoods, the economically driven fight for highway accessibility, or the excessive lateral expansion and lack of public transportation.³² Ruscha, however, made clear that he did not choose Los Angeles as a subject because he wanted to make a social or political statement. To the contrary, in a survey conducted for *Artforum* in 1970, he argued against artists becoming involved in any political agenda: "I have excluded all political science from my program. . . . An objective attitude is one which makes all world events neither good nor bad but only so much data to play with. I isolate myself and my work continues smoothly with no involvement in any issue. . . . I don't think an artist can do much for any cause by using his art as a weapon."³³

Though Ruscha's project begins in 1966, the year after the Watts uprising, his SoLA Archive does not lend itself easily to the examination of the social dynamics of the city. His choice of streets stays clear of the underresourced neighborhoods in South and East Los Angeles, which were and still are mainly inhabited by Black and Latino populations and have, since the 1960s, been the site of notable, tumultuous protest

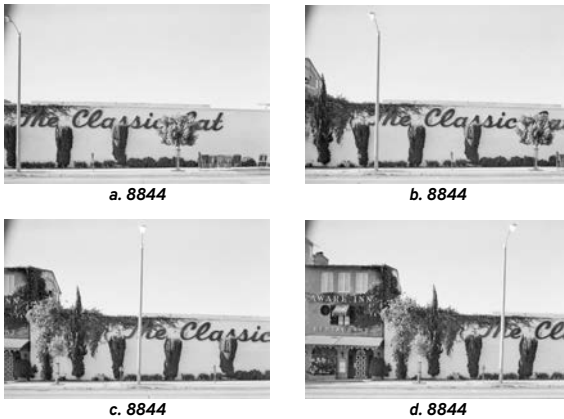


Figure 12.7 Ed Ruscha, 8844 Sunset Boulevard, 1976, digital positives from negatives. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1 (a, b, c, d). © Ed Ruscha.

against the structural injustices of urban living and police oppression.³⁴ He presents neither a dystopian view of the lamentable status quo of Los Angeles nor a utopian vision of its imagined future. No matter what issues the city has faced over time—the non- or misrepresentation of people of color, gentrification, rising rents, homelessness, and gun violence—Ruscha’s machine continues smoothly, producing a vast amount of visual data without providing the definitive tools or programs to interpret them. But the refusal to interpret receives its own expressive power through the informed intermedial confrontation with media and images of the present (e.g., the newsreel and the newspaper illustrations of the mid-1960s, or Google Maps in 2024), as well as the messages of objectivity and transparency they are conventionally understood to convey.

The loud announcement of visual information and the simultaneous and equally loud refusal to communicate is, as I have argued, at the heart of Ruscha’s image critique. The image with a lonely *The* is a case in point, but the entire archive functions in a similar way. We are provided with an excess of visual data, which upon closer scrutiny turn out to undermine their functionality as carriers of information. Getty’s own efforts to make Ruscha’s archive workable as a visual resource needs to be addressed in this context as well. Enormous amounts of financial and technological effort and labor have been allocated to the task of processing and editing the mass of

visual data that Ruscha has collected over the past sixty years to make it accessible to a growing user community as a source of information about both the artist and the city of Los Angeles. This effort is similar to the task that urban planners like Lynch set for themselves in the mid-1960s: to develop new methods for the visualization of the contemporary city.

As I have argued, Ruscha’s project was a critical riposte to these efforts, which were based on an understanding of the image as a functional carrier of information. Now, his archive’s extremely low imageability is itself approached with innovative technological tools, again with the underlying assumption that its content might turn into functional information.

The *The* at 8844 Sunset Boulevard is an illustrative example of how the archive refuses this functionalization and acts out Ruscha’s underlying image critique. To learn more about the fate of the lettering, I entered the term *The* into the search engine of the digital archive. The documentation of the shoot from 1973 solves the mystery of the noun that the lonely article had announced so vehemently: the address houses The Classic Cat, a restaurant and bar established in 1965 (see fig. 4.6). However, by 1976 the lettering does not show up in the result list anymore (fig. 12.7). The *The* has become invisible to the search engine for the simple reason that foliage has grown over the lettering. The dense ivy cropping up from the left makes impossible any clear differentiation of the black word from the white background. Its form, which would enable its being processed by the word-recognition software, is lost due to the material intervention of natural growth. In the 0-1-world of digital data processing, word merges with plant to become a meaningless blob, a nonfunctional image.

NOTES

I would like to thank the Streets of Los Angeles project team at the Getty Research Institute as well as my fellow collaborators for the opportunity to work on Ruscha’s archive in an unprecedented interdisciplinary and collaborative manner. A specific thank-you to Eric Rodenbeck, Stamen Design, for his enthusiastic help in tracing the fate of the *The*.

1. Andrew M. Shanken, “The Visual Culture of Planning,” *Journal of Planning History* 17, no. 4 (2018): 300–319. For a contextualization of Lynch’s work in the history of city planning and his role in the reframing of urban planning in the early 1960s, see Tridib Banerjee and Michael Southworth, eds., *City Sense and City Design: Writings and Projects of Kevin Lynch* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 1–29.
2. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 21.

3. Jacobs, *Death and Life*, 21.
4. Jacobs, *Death and Life*, 16–25. On Lynch's prolonged interest in L.A., see Tridib Banerjee and Meredith Drake Reitan, "Kevin Lynch in Los Angeles: Reflections on Planning, Politics, and Participation," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 84, no. 3–4 (2018): 217–29.
5. Lloyd Rodwin and Robert M. Hollister, *Cities of the Mind: Images and Themes of the City in the Social Sciences* (New York: Plenum, 1984); Melvin M. Webber, "The Roles of Intelligence Systems in Urban-Systems Planning," *AIP Journal* 31, no. 4 (1965): 289–96; and Melvin M. Webber, "Urbanization and Communication," in *Communications Technology and Social Policy: Understanding the New "Cultural Revolution"*, ed. George Gerbner (New York: Wiley, 1973), 293–304.
6. With the term, Tolman describes a selective mental map, a "broad" picture of the environment, which develops by environmental exploration. Edward C. Tolman, "Cognitive Maps in Rats and Men," *Psychological Review* 55, no. 4 (1948): 189–208. Since the late 1940s, the concept of the *mental map* plays a role in different fields, such as architecture, urban planning, psychology, anthropology, and sociology.
7. Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960), 6. For analogies between the work of city planners and that of systems analysts, see Jennifer S. Light, *From Warfare to Welfare: Defense Intellectuals and Urban Problems in Cold War America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 47.
8. Lynch, *Image of the City*, 40.
9. See, for example, Richard Meier, *Communications Theory of Urban Growth* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1962); Donald Foley, "An Approach to Metropolitan Spatial Structure," in *Explorations into Urban Structure*, ed. Melvin M. Webber (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964), 21–78; Thomas Paine, "The City as an Information Network," *IEEE International Convention Record* (New York: IEEE, March 1966); and Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972), 8.
10. Perceptual Form of the City, 1951–1960, 1, Kevin Lynch Papers, MC-0208, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Department of Distinctive Collections, Cambridge, MA. This is partially digitally accessible: <https://dome.mit.edu/handle/1721.3/33656>.
11. Donald Appleyard, Kevin Lynch, and John R. Myer, *View from the Road* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1964).
12. This apparent lack of a political dimension was criticized early on. See, for example, Michael Southworth and Susan Southworth, "Environmental Quality in Cities and Regions," *Town Planning Review* 44, no. 3 (1973): 231–53.
13. Lynch points out that Broadway was regarded by his test persons as a clear spatial marker, which delimited "their" Los Angeles from that of "ethnic minorities and lower-income groups." Lynch, *Image of the City*, 37–38.
14. See Jennifer Eileen Quick, "Back to the Drawing Board: Ed Ruscha 1956–68" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2015); and Jennifer Quick, "Pasteup Pictures: Ed Ruscha's *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*," *Art Bulletin* 100, no. 2 (2018): 125–52. Lisa Pasquariello discusses how Ruscha's use of language relates to his training in commercial design. Lisa Pasquariello, "Ed Ruscha and the Language That He Used," *October* 111 (January 2005): 81–106.
15. Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1949), 31. See also Mark C. Taylor, *The Moment of Complexity: Emerging Network Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 108–10.
16. At MIT, Kepes founded the art-and-science think tank Center for Advanced Visual Studies (CAVS) for this purpose. John R. Blakinger, *Gyorgy Kepes: Undreaming the Bauhaus* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2019), 95.
17. This conceptualization of perception is informed by behaviorist research as well. Gyorgy Kepes, *Language of Vision* (Chicago: P. Theobald, 1944), 200. See also Blakinger, *Gyorgy Kepes*.
18. In the reader, Kepes focused on the consequences that excessive growth and complexity had for systems (such as cities) and their functionality. See the conference reader for "Communication: The Image Speaks," 1959, International Design Conference in Aspen records, 1949–2006, box 5, folder 2, 2007.M.7, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles. Ruscha had visited the International Design Conference in Aspen for the first time in 1958 and attended again in 1960.
19. Kepes, *Language of Vision*, 202; and Lynch, *Image of the City*, 40.
20. Taylor, *Moment of Complexity*, 24.
21. On the materiality of information, see Taylor, *Moment of Complexity*, 106. For Ruscha's foregrounding of the physicality of words in his work, see Pasquariello, "Ed Ruscha."
22. Lynch, *Image of the City*, 1–13.
23. Lynch, *Image of the City*, 9–12. He refers directly to Kepes in this passage.
24. See David Ludwig, "Abseits des Sunset Strip," (Not Nearly) Every Picture—Annäherungen an Ed Ruschas Streets of Los Angeles-Archiv, <https://noteverypicture.de/abseits-des-sunset-strip>.
25. John Coplans, "An Interview with Ed Ruscha," *Artforum* 3, no. 5 (1965): 25. Ruesch and Kees reference Shannon and Weaver as well as Norbert Wiener's *Cybernetics; or, Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (New York: J. Wiley, 1949). See also Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1950).
26. Jack Burnham, "Alice's Head: Reflections on Conceptual Art," *Artforum* 8, no. 6 (1970): 37–43.
27. Lynch, *Image of the City*, 6.
28. John W. Cook and Heinrich Klotz, eds., *Conversations with Architects* (London: Lund Humphries, 1973), 247–66.
29. Theodor H. Nelson, quoted in Jack Burnham, "Notes on Art and Information Processing," in *Software—Information Technology: Its New Meaning for Art*, ed. Jack Burnham, exh. cat. (New York: Jewish Museum, 1970), 12. The analog between built architecture and computer networks is continued in the literature. See, for example, Taylor, *Moment of Complexity*.
30. Coplans, "Interview with Ed Ruscha," 25.
31. Lynch, *The Image of the City*, 1.
32. Following the Watts uprising in 1965, city planners were themselves embarrassed to admit that they did not have any data on South and East L.A., which would have helped them understand the causes of social unrest. They had, in a sense, collected the wrong data sets. This shift in interest is also palpable in the programming of the International Design Conference in Aspen. In 1972, the effects of building abandonment in disadvantaged neighborhoods were addressed under the conference's title "The Invisible City." Two years later, and under the impression of sustained social unrest, Melvin M. Webber demanded a critical readjustment of city planning. Melvin M. Webber, "The Post-City Age," in *Suburbanization Dynamics and the Future of the City*, ed. James W. Hughes (New Brunswick, NJ: Center for Urban Policy Research, 1974), 245–64.
33. Ruscha, "The Artist and Politics: A Symposium," *Artforum* 9, no. 1 (1970): 38.
34. See Mike Davis and Jon Wiener, *Set the Night on Fire: L.A. in the Sixties* (London: Verso, 2021).

ARCHIVE

Tracy Stuber

The starting point for Ruscha's *Streets of Los Angeles*, his 1966 book *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, is unique among his photographic books for its claim to comprehensiveness. Unlike *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963), *Some Los Angeles Apartments* (1965), or *A Few Palm Trees* (1971), *Every Building* declares to record just that: every building on the well-known stretch of Sunset Boulevard. Facetious or not, the title's documentary pretensions nonetheless color the longer *Streets of Los Angeles* endeavor. The systematic quality of Ruscha's car-meets-camera, the consistency and comparability of the resulting photographs, the massive *number* of photographs, and the project's decades-long duration all give it an archival aura that arguably precedes the photographs and the particular historical information they preserve.

The essays in the "Archive" section place the *Streets of Los Angeles* project at the center of issues that have preoccupied theorists, scholars, librarians, artists, and archivists for as many decades as Ruscha and his team have been photographing Los Angeles streets. At its core, the *Streets of Los Angeles* project activates what Allan Sekula described in his essay "The Body and the Archive" (1986) as "the fundamental problem of the archive," namely "the problem of volume." As soon as Ruscha drove his vehicle beyond the physical and temporal confines of the 1966 Sunset Strip, he ignited an accumulative endeavor that, lacking a logical endpoint, could theoretically burn on forever. But is the outcome of Ruscha's undertaking actually an archive and, if so, by what definition and on whose terms? Situating the *Streets of Los Angeles* within archival theory and practice, the authors in this section demonstrate how applying this terminology to Ruscha's project expands the interdisciplinary value of its images and prompts the rethinking of standard archival definitions and practices.

A main theme of this section is the role of digital technology in transforming Ruscha's reels of 35mm negatives into images that can be seen, sorted, and searched. The authors all examine how questions of information—its creation, storage, and retrieval—that are integral to Ruscha's artistic practice play out in the creation and digitization of the enormous *Streets of Los Angeles* corpus. Recognizing how the large scale of the project tests the underlying assumptions and limits of archival work, Emily Pugh and Susan Laxton offer divergent perspectives on how digitization either complements or contradicts Ruscha's artistic motivations. Zooming in on the details that photographic and digital technologies make visible, Kate Palmer Albers charts a path through Ruscha's *Streets* that explores how words become images and vice versa. The artist's long-standing interest in language provides the kernel of a critical investigation of contemporary computer vision algorithms and the presences and absence they encode. Connecting sight, language, knowledge, and memory, the "Archive" section suggests how, in our current era of mass digitization, the archive is becoming a technology of vision that shapes how we see the past in the present.

Some Los Angeles Streets: Ed Ruscha in the Library and Archive

Emily Pugh

Ed Ruscha's well-known fascination with information and facts is often discussed as thematic or metaphorical, evinced by his references to information theory or to the imaginary personage he dubbed the "Information Man."¹ Ruscha's work, however, reflects not only an engagement with the idea of information but also the systems that produce and maintain it. In his books and the ongoing Streets of Los Angeles (SoLA) project, Ruscha has explored how information systems can generate meaning from structured text and image—and then disrupt it.

The automation of information systems was arguably the driver of the information age, a period that began in the 1960s at virtually the same time Ruscha inaugurated the SoLA project. The first decades of the information age entailed developments in the aerospace and defense industries in response to the Cold War as well as the expansion of consumer media and communication outlets, such as mass-market paperbacks and magazines. Perhaps most relevant to a discussion of Ruscha, photography became accessible to more Americans through innovations like instant photography, the "point-and-shoot" camera, and fast photo processing. Ultimately, automated—and eventually digitized—information systems resulted in new communication technologies and new products and industries,

including television broadcasting, graphic design, and advertising.

The innovations of communication technologies were embedded within and extensions of existing information systems, including those at the center of archival and library work. Indeed, the library was to a large extent the engine of the information age. The standardization and automation of information creation, management, and access was at the core of postwar communication innovations, which precipitated cultural changes in how Americans thought about and interacted with information. The public's notions of how truth and objectivity were communicated and interpreted and their perceptions of authority and expertise—what constituted fact versus opinion—were all shaped and reshaped by the automation of communication.

In working with information systems, Ruscha takes on processes that are simultaneously at the center of library and archival work and of modern technological innovation. Ruscha's artist books and photographs in particular represent meditations on the intersections between the material, economic, and cultural dimensions of the automated information system. Following the SoLA Archive from Ruscha's studio to its acquisition and processing by Getty reminds us of how interconnected such systems are—whether

they are digitized or analog, commercial or academic, or in the domain of the artist or the archivist. Moreover, the SoLA Archive demonstrates that the ways in which collections are described, digitized, and made accessible (both on-site and via online interfaces) can have significant effects on how or whether scholarship is produced from them. This reality has profound implications for anyone studying artists of the 1960s and 1970s who, like Ruscha, were interested in information and its related systems.

ED RUSCHA AND THE INFORMATION SYSTEM

To begin, let us define *information system*. The term does not imply the use of computing technology; the computer is merely the most recent tool in a long history of information systems that includes the telegraph, the printed book, and scientific notation formats, such as the periodic table of elements. In 1985, Robert M. Hayes, a librarian and early pioneer in the use of computers for library science, deemed the library itself “one of the most successful of society’s information systems, with a long and fruitful history.”²

The first key element of any information system is the mechanism by which the information is processed, such as pen and paper, the telegraph, the punch card, or computer hardware. The second component is the notation system that describes and organizes the information. For the telegraph, it is dots and dashes; for the periodic table, it is chemical notation (e.g., “H” for hydrogen, “Fe” for iron) as well as atomic number and weight. In the case of the print publication, it is the written language as well as the conventions for formatting it: the use of page numbers, paragraphs, footnotes or endnotes, and standards of bibliographic citation. The notation system enables the mechanism to process the information, which, in turn, enables users to make sense of its output.

The list (or table) is the most basic form of such a system. As the information specialists Seth van Hooland and Ruben Verborgh argue, “The list, as most people would call tabular data, can probably be considered as the oldest information technology.”³ It is this form that is most closely associated with Ruscha’s work. In fact, it was in a library that Ruscha seems to have first developed

his affinity for the list. In a 2015 oral history, he reported that for one of his first jobs, he was “parked at the city library” by his employer, an industrial-supply company in Oklahoma, and instructed to “go through books” and “make long lists of these lumber companies for the industrial supply.”⁴ The books he published from 1963 to 1971—*Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963), *Some Los Angeles Apartments* (1965), *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966), *Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles* (1967), *A Few Palm Trees* (1971), *Records* (1971), and *Dutch Details* (1971)—are, if nothing else, lists; or, more accurately, they are catalogs: groupings of items or types arranged according to a particular attribute or set of attributes.

The types of things Ruscha chooses to photograph (e.g., trees, gas stations, and parking lots) often seem arbitrary or mundane, and what he communicates about them is arguably inconsequential. In 1972, the art critic David Bourdon described this work as “a passive sort of photographic formalism,” stating that Ruscha’s “nonverbal books manage to avoid saying anything at all on a rational level.” Of *Every Building* specifically, Bourdon remarked on its “absence of useful information.”⁵ Yet, by placing these individual items within a list, Ruscha generates meaning while calling attention to the format itself. In any information system, the format or structure, such as spatial relationship, are part of how meaning is conveyed. For example, the position of a particular element in the periodic table indicates its atomic number, whether it is a gas or metal, or its degree of reactivity.⁶

In many of his photobooks, Ruscha likewise populates a repeating structure that establishes meaning through implicit equivalence. As can be seen in *Every Building* and *Some Los Angeles Apartments*, significance is created when the objects of attention are named in a titled list and, moreover, are in a mass-produced publication with attendant formatting conventions. Together these details convey a sense that *something* is being said, a *fact* is being stated. Ruscha has described his practice as an exploration of the aesthetics of facticity. He chose titles with specific numbers, he told Bourdon, “because it sounds so factual.” The font was selected because “it has that factual kind of army-navy data look to it that I like.”⁷

Ruscha is drawing attention to the list as a visual form and its ability to produce significance, even out of meaninglessness. Ruscha copied the look and format of a book but emptied it of meaning; at the same time, the look and format is precisely what generates any sense of meaning or significance (figs. 13.1, 13.2). His engagement with tabular data and facticity betrays a curiosity about the moment of transformation, when nonsense can cohere into significance but can also slip back into nonsense. His attempts to manipulate and often to undermine this process further evince his fascination with it—for example, by adding a single item/photo that subverts the typology, as in *Various Small Fires and Milk* (1964) and *Nine Swimming Pools and a Broken Glass* (1968). Ruscha explores what constitutes meaning but also the *idea* of meaning itself. As he remarked in reference to *A Rolling Historical Landscape* (1996), his commission for the Central Branch of the Denver Public Library: “I don’t paint horses and pioneers. I paint the idea of horses and the idea of pioneers. I’m the product of communications and propaganda.”⁸

Ruscha, in other words, is less interested in the content of communication than in the *mechanisms* through which information becomes (or does not become) knowledge and, moreover, in the contingency of facts. Consider his description of the “facts” about his books delivered to him by the imaginary Information Man: “Of the approximately 5,000 books of Ed Ruscha that have been purchased, only 32 have been used in a directly functional matter. Thirteen of these have been used as weights for paper or other small things, seven have been used as swatters to kill small insects such as flies and mosquitoes. . . . Three of the books have been in continual motion since their purchase.”⁹ Like most any fact or discrete bit of information, those cited by the Information Man are simultaneously meaningful and meaningless. In an analogous way, hydrogen’s atomic number (one) is at once entirely irrelevant and incredibly significant. Its degree of significance is contingent on the context in which it appears: when performing a chemical calculation, it may be very important to know hydrogen’s atomic number. However, this fact is not useful when trying to boil water.

What is the bare minimum of context or purpose that is required to transform irrelevance into significance or information into knowledge?



Figure 13.1 Ed Ruscha, Cover of *Some Los Angeles Apartments*, 1965, reprinted 1970, offset lithograph, 7 1/16 × 5 9/16 × 1/4 in. Publisher: Ed Ruscha. Edition of 3,000. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 86-B19485.c2. © Ed Ruscha.

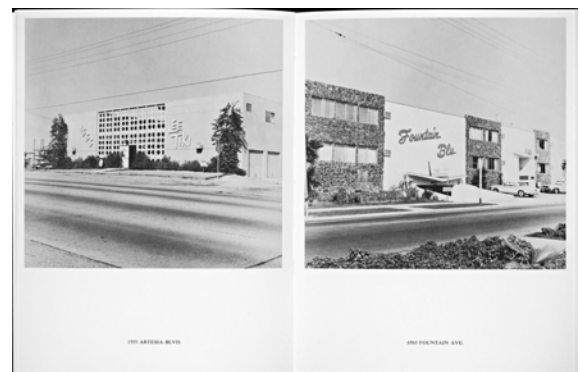


Figure 13.2 Ed Ruscha, Spread from *Some Los Angeles Apartments*, 1965, reprinted 1970, offset lithograph, 7 1/16 × 11 1/8 in. Publisher: Ed Ruscha. Edition of 3,000. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 86-B19485.c2. © Ed Ruscha.

Ruscha’s books can be interpreted as an investigation of this question. In them, he plays with the idea that simply by structuring information and preparing it in such a way to be processed by a particular system (in this case, the list), that is in and of itself enough. Moreover, his examination of information systems does not end with the books’ contents; it also includes the

larger information systems in which these books circulate. When the Library of Congress declined to accession *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, Ruscha famously invoked the incident in an advertisement for the book in *Artforum*.¹⁰ Yet as these books are about both the creation of information and its dissolution, his point arguably would have been made equally well if the Library of Congress had accepted his book of noninformation into its collection. Maybe he would have featured an acceptance letter in the *Artforum* ad instead.¹¹

Ruscha can be counted among the artists who in the 1960s and 1970s engaged with concepts of information compilation, organization, and dissemination. In her book *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (1973), the art critic Lucy Lippard remarks that in this era, “there was a fascination with huge numbers (Mario Merz’s pseudo-mathematical Fibonacci series, [Robert] Barry’s *One Billion Dots* (1969), [On] Kawara’s *One Million Years* (1969), and with dictionaries, thesauruses, libraries, the mechanical aspects of language, permutations (LeWitt and Darboven) the regular, and the minute (for example, Ian Murray’s 1971 *Twenty Waves In A Row*). Lists of words were equally popular.”¹² The *Information* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 1970 provides supporting evidence for Lippard’s claim (fig. 13.3). She herself had worked in the library at MoMA. Lippard also used the formats and standards borrowed from the library in her writing, including in *Six Years*, which she describes as a “bibliography,” and in her contribution to the *Information* exhibition catalog, a text titled “Absentee Information and or Criticism,” which consists of a set of library reference tasks.¹³

Artists’ “fascination,” to use Lippard’s word, with libraries, lists, and information in the 1960s and 1970s was in part a response to what was called the *information problem*, a term that referred to the inability of both individuals and institutions to consume the greater scales of information produced by postwar mass media and communication technologies. This problem was discussed in the context of commercial mass media and spurred on by, for example, the advent of television and mass-market publishing and photography as well as by the growth of fields like graphic design, public relations, and advertising. The information problem was also a concern within scientific and technical fields, where the

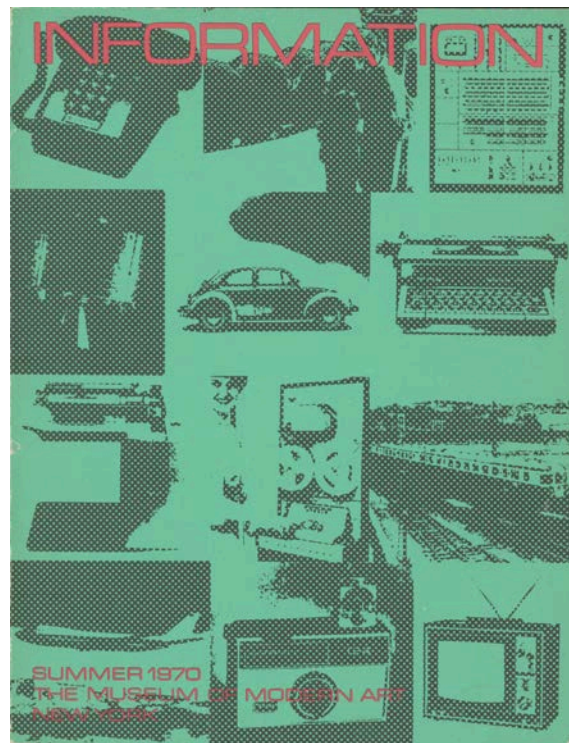


Figure 13.3 Cover of *Information*, ed. Kynaston McShine, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1970). New York, The Museum of Modern Art Library. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY.

management and exchange of research data and publications was viewed as a crucial aspect of waging the Cold War.¹⁴

These worlds were deeply intertwined in the 1960s and 1970s. Artists worked closely with companies and institutions like the RAND Corporation and the Jet Propulsion Laboratory at the California Institute of Technology;¹⁵ many, including Ruscha, worked in the field of graphic design and deployed new mass-media technologies such as video, television, and instant photography. Over fifty years later, the work of these artists is becoming increasingly subsumed into yet another set of information systems: archival collections. As a result, these artists’ works are being subjected to many of the same processes the artists were critiquing and thematizing in those works.

INFORMATION AT SCALE: THE STREETS OF LOS ANGELES ARCHIVE

The rise of mass communications and the information problem in the postwar United States was a product of the close connections between the realms of culture, government, advanced research, and industry. These connections were encouraged by a set of US government policies designed to encourage mass consumption, which was framed as a political and economic strategy that would support US engagement in the Cold War.¹⁶ As the central sites of information management, archives and libraries were key to this integration. The internet, for example, was initially developed by the Advanced Research Projects Agency at the Department of Defense, but it was modeled on the vision laid out by the psychologist and computer scientist J. C. R. Licklider in a report on “libraries of the future” commissioned by the Council on Library Resources in 1961.¹⁷ In this and many other ways, the efforts of librarians and archivists to automate information systems were a significant force that drove the development of computing technology from the 1960s on, both in terms of personal computing and military hardware.¹⁸

Scholars have explored how Lippard as well as artists like Vito Acconci, Siah Armajani, and Robert Morris critiqued the institutions and technologies that produced and sought to contend with the information problem. Such analyses explore artists’ efforts to resist or make apparent, for example, the use of information by corporations and the US government for surveillance, social control, and the deadening forces of “administrative discipline,” “information warfare,” and bureaucracy.¹⁹ Ruscha’s books are rather unusual in relation to these works in that they do not provide the same sense of dread or distrust for the institutions creating or disseminating information; nor do they overtly critique trends or concepts associated with the Cold War information age.²⁰ Ruscha does not, for example, associate the one-directional standardization of information with the loss of meaning or its antithesis; rather, he reveals the extent to which standardization is the switch that turns meaning on and off.

I would argue that Ruscha’s interest in the processes of information systems is unrelated to

an engagement with the machinations of the military-industrial complex or computing technology per se.²¹ Ruscha’s focus is on the underlying processes themselves, more so than their social or political consequences or contexts. Certainly, there is tension in these works, but this is the tension between nonsense and significance, and the ways that tension can be alternately resolved and aggravated by the messy business of translation from one to the other.

Ruscha built on many of the same themes and processes in the SoLA Archive, which, were it one of his books, could have been titled *Some Los Angeles Streets*. As in his books, Ruscha created an overarching conceptual structure based on a category—the street—and filled it with purposefully mundane images. Also like the books, the SoLA Archive represents a meticulously compiled set of “facts” that are simultaneously useful and meaningless: a pile of negatives, with supporting documentation that includes the name of the street depicted on the reel, the starting and ending intersections, what year it was shot, receipts documenting where the crew ate lunch on the day of a shoot, and how much they paid for gas. The difference between it and his books, of course, has to do with scale: there are 740,000 images.

While perhaps not thinking specifically of computers, Ruscha is analyzing and playing with the processes—the way information is compiled, managed, and accessed within a system—which are, of course, precisely those that a computer automates. Moreover, the computer is the quintessential information system precisely because it can process, store, retrieve, and exchange virtually any type of information (e.g., aural, textual, and visual) using the same mechanism and system of notation; moreover, it can do so at scale. By its sheer size, the SoLA Archive thematizes scale in a way books like *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* do not.

If Ruscha’s photobooks are metacommentaries that test the limits of what constitutes a list or a book (or what doesn’t, at least as far as the Library of Congress is concerned), the SoLA Archive is similarly a collection about collecting and a documentation project about the act of documentation. It is thus no surprise that this archive tests many of the underlying assumptions of archival work, both from the standpoint of the scholar and from that of the repository. For one,

SoLA arguably does not correspond to the definition of an archive within the field of archival science, where it means an “organically created” set of records. Documents that are the residue of a person’s work or daily life—such as correspondence, drafts of speeches, or photos—constitute an archive, in contrast to a collection, which is intentionally created.²²

Processing an archive entails a set of activities that can include the creation of a digital record of a collection for the library’s catalog or placing its contents in suitable long-term storage containers. Digitization is usually considered an additional step and is not done for every collection. In the case of the SoLA Archive, however, digitization was critical to making the collection accessible to researchers, in part because it comprises primarily undeveloped negatives. Processing the SoLA Archive meant subjecting it to the same processes of information compilation, description, and standardization that it enacts and thematizes. The activities of collections processing are thus, in this case, a continuation of the SoLA project, which transmutes it, in both an intellectual and material sense.

Archivists and librarians have long been aware of the power of their processes to shape archives’ interpretation and therefore the kinds of knowledge that are produced from them. As Hope A. Olson, a scholar of library and information science, has written, “Certainly libraries, like other institutions, reflect the marginalizations and exclusions of the society they serve,” noting in particular how the use of controlled vocabularies for library cataloging can impede access to information outside of mainstream categories.²³ While archive professionals once regarded digital records as insignificant surrogates for the objects they depict, archivists like Jasmine E. Burns and Paul Conway have more recently argued that digitization is always transformative in some way because it shapes the nature and meaning of both the physical and digital versions of archives.²⁴

The visual theorist and information specialist Johanna Drucker has similarly argued that “digitization is not representation but interpretation,” explaining further that “every choice made about transforming an analog image into a digital file . . . is part of a chain of decisions that constitutes the digital artifact as certainly as decisions about features like film stock, pigment, substrate, sizing, and/or printing techniques

determine the identity of an analog object.”²⁵ Digitization, to be clear, refers to not only photography but also the complex set of procedures by which images are associated with physical collections via collection metadata—that is, information about the collection.²⁶ This process, known as the “deposit,” also entails the creation of new sets of metadata—both visual and textual—about the digitized collection and the input of this data into systems of digital preservation and public access. The deposit process ensures that when a scholar searches the collections catalog for information about the SoLA Archive, the search results provide both digitized images and information about the physical collection. Thus, through photography and deposit, archival staff create representations of physical objects, including digital images and the metadata that is bound to them.

In some cases, the digitized archive corresponds relatively closely to its physical version. Most scholars would agree that a digitized letter, for example, is a reasonably faithful representation of the physical document; the relationship between the physical item and its digitized version is straightforward. In other cases, however, the digitized item can hardly be thought of as a mere copy or a surrogate of the physical object. With regard to the SoLA Archive, for example, the results of digitization are digital positives created from photo negatives.

As a result of archival processing, the SoLA Archive exists in two forms. There is the physical collection, which includes the reels of spooled film, cut strips of negatives, and spiral-bound notebooks full of handwritten project details (e.g., lunch and gas receipts) (fig. 13.4). It also includes the full production archive for the first printing of *Every Building* as well as production materials related to *THEN & NOW: Hollywood Boulevard, 1973–2004* (2005). The physical collection has very distinctive material qualities. The spools of negatives are large and heavy, and many betray the distinctive odor of decaying film stock afflicted with what is known as “vinegar syndrome.”²⁷ The production archive for *Every Building* includes Ruscha’s taped mockups for the book. *THEN & NOW* is oversized and stored in a large wooden case that takes two people to manage. Is the physical collection significant? Is it useful? Yes, of course; but it is also inherently limited in the information it can convey. The



Figure 13.4 Materials from Ed Ruscha's SoLA Archive, Workshop for the Streets of Los Angeles project, January 2020. Photograph by Peter Leonard.

specific material form of the collection—large, heavy, decaying, unprinted—is both a critical defining characteristic of the archive as well as a barrier to the comprehension of the information it contains.

A good portion of this materiality is lost in the digital form of the collection.²⁸ Information about the entire collection is accessible through an online catalog, although only a portion of it is available via digital images (fig. 13.5). What has been digitized is presented as a group of images, mostly positives that have been created from the undeveloped negatives. The digitized version privileges an understanding of the collection as images but also as a trove of visual and textual data that can be browsed, searched, and viewed in close detail (by zooming in to individual frames) or at a larger scale (e.g., through data visualizations). In addition, the interface was designed to provide ways for researchers to export the data and combine it with other datasets, such as tax-assessor records that indicate who owned particular lots, or their financial value at certain times.²⁹

Furthermore, the images are placed within a visual structure and information hierarchy that gives them order and meaning absent in the collection's physical form. For example, navigating to a single image in the online catalog reveals a map, with pins indicating the location where the selected photograph, and those related to it in the collection, were taken. The interface places these photos within the logic of a geospatial system of reference, foregrounding their significance as markers of physical space. The visual design and structure of the interface makes

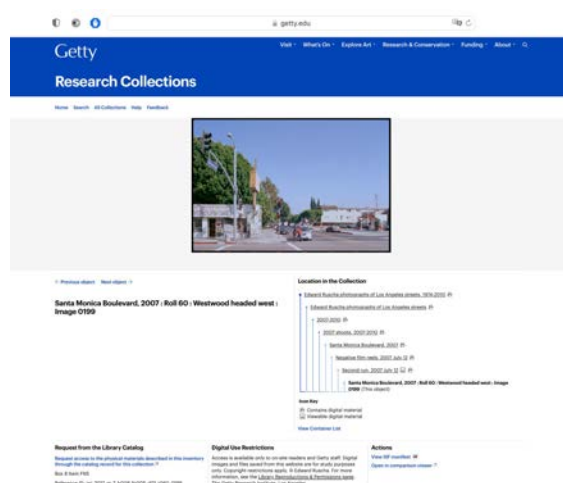


Figure 13.5 Screenshot of Ed Ruscha's Streets of Los Angeles collection, accessed through the Getty Research Institute's Research Collections Viewer (RCV), 2024.

the collection easier to browse; at the same time, this design and structure add a layer of interpretation on top of these images, influencing how they are presented to researchers, including what information they do or do not see. For example, while in the interface, researchers can easily browse thousands of images across multiple shoots, but they will not be able to see the images as negatives or inspect the film stock or the reels themselves. Just as the conventions of publishing shaped how the contents of Ruscha's books are interpreted by their readers, this interface inevitably shapes the researcher's interpretation of the archive.

What is particularly noteworthy about the SoLA Archive's physical and digital forms is that they rely on each other; neither version of the collection makes sense on its own. The material nature of the physical collection—much of which comprises 35mm negatives spooled onto film reels or cut into strips—makes in-person consultation of SoLA images exceedingly difficult. The online catalog, meanwhile, provides easier access to the images, but it represents only a partial representation of the collection. Compare this with the example of an archival letter; the digitized and physical versions are far more autonomous.

Indeed, the digitized version of SoLA should be regarded as an entirely distinct archival collection, one that contains its own intellectual and conceptual significance vis-à-vis the overall

project. In Ruscha's early photobooks, the format of the list and the conventions of publication produce meaning from apparent meaninglessness. Similarly, the online collections catalog generates meaning from these images by placing the hundreds of thousands of quotidian images of Los Angeles-area streets and their associated metadata into a user interface. In this way, the project can be read as an extension of Ruscha's exploration in his books of the tension between meaning and meaninglessness, with a particular emphasis on the disparity between our ability to mass-produce images in vast quantities and our ability to comprehend such vast quantities, much less produce knowledge from them.

Digitization can, in this case, be thought of as a further step in the evolution of the SoLA project, one entirely in keeping with Ruscha's vision for it and that of his artistic practice overall. Indeed, even as he and his studio assistants formed the vast collection of negatives, Ruscha never thought the collection would remain inaccessible indefinitely. When asked about Getty's acquisition of the collection in a 2015 oral-history interview, he responded, with a sense of relief: "I know that they're not dead storage because they can have possibilities, which I see beginning to happen." Wondering how others might find, disseminate, or exhibit the material, Ruscha explains that the collection was inherently unfinished: "I continue to explore that same technique of going out on streets and recording the streets. So, for that reason, it's a living organism and there's no cutoff date on it."³⁰ For him, browsing, searching, and seeing the images has become an important part of the project, as important as the act of creating them. This provides an explanation for why he insists that it not be called an artwork: the SoLA photographs were never intended to be a finished work communicating a fixed idea or theme.

The SoLA Archive both directly and indirectly raises questions related to increased scales of information management, and the practical and conceptual effects such increased scales have on the production of knowledge. Does this mass of information coalesce into something of significance? Upon looking at these 740,000 images, will we know more about Los Angeles, or Sunset Boulevard, or Hollywood Boulevard? One cannot help but recall Bourdon's comment about how Ruscha's "nonverbal" books "manage to say nothing at all on a rational level." Given that the

project was focused solely on the act of information compilation for its first fifty or so years, questions of both access and meaning were deferred.

The recognition that the SoLA Archive has been transformed through the effort to make it accessible is one that has profound implications for any artworks that engage directly with the processes of information compilation, cataloging, management, and storage, as Ruscha's SoLA Archive does. While works by Ruscha, Sol LeWitt, and Lippard are often framed (by the artists themselves and by scholars) as critiques of an external or imposed force, artists' own workflows and processes did not exist outside of—but rather were deeply embedded within—the systems and structures they were critiquing. Furthermore, as these works pass increasingly into archives, and as librarians, archivists, and curators process, catalog, and digitize collections from the advent of the so-called information age, the relationships between collections, their representation in archival systems, and the digital and physical forms of information that are a part of each, will likely become more complex and varied. Archives or artworks created even more recently, in the digital age, will likewise be transformed by their absorption into the interconnected systems of digital and physical information.

Ultimately, Ruscha's archive reminds us that contemporary technologies, like digital imaging, are an extension of analog ones like photography, and that these two forms of technology cannot be cleaved from one another. The digital version of his archive is not superfluous to the physical; rather, the two are intertwined in myriad ways. The SoLA Archive provides clear evidence of the importance of attending to how and when the virtual becomes the material (and vice versa) and the implications these translations will have on art historical practice, now and for the foreseeable future.

NOTES

1. "The Information Man" is dated 2 October 1971, and part of it was first published in A. D. Coleman, "My Books End Up in the Trash," *New York Times*, 27 August 1972, D21. For the full text, see Ed Ruscha, "The Information Man," *Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art Journal*, no. 6 (June–July 1975): 21. See also Andrew Perchuk, "Information Man," this volume. Evidence of Ruscha's fascination with information can also be found in the main title he chose for the 2002 book of his interviews and writings compiled by Alexandra Schwartz, borrowed from his answering-machine greeting: Edward Ruscha, *Leave Any Information at*

- the Signal: Writings, Interviews, Bits, Pages*, ed. Alexandra Schwartz (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), xvi.
2. Robert M. Hayes, "The History of Library and Information Science: A Commentary," *Journal of Library History* 20, no. 2 (1985): 173.
 3. Seth van Hooland and Ruben Verborgh, *Linked Data for Libraries, Archives and Museums: How to Clean, Link and Publish Your Metadata* (Chicago: Neal-Schuman, 2014), 18.
 4. While in the library making lists of lumber companies, Ruscha also perused the shelves full of books about artists like Joseph Cornell and Max Ernst, an activity he described as "mak[ing] my way through the history of art." Edward Ruscha, "Ed Ruscha: Artist," interview by Martin Meeker, Andrew Perchuk, and James Cuno, 2015, Oral History Center, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, https://digitalassets.lib.berkeley.edu/roho/ucb/text/zarchive_ruscha_edward_2016.pdf, 3. Ruscha has a long-standing connection to and affinity for libraries. Ruscha's first public commission was executed in 1985–86 for the Miami Dade Public Library. Ruscha hoped that the mural, which depicted a quote from William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* ("Words without thought never to heaven go"), would "make people think about where they were, about the purpose of a library and the function of language." Interview with Ed Ruscha, originally published in French as Bonnie Clearwater, "Edward Ruscha: Quand les mots deviennent forms," *Art Press*, no. 137 (June 1989): 20–25. Quoted in Ruscha, *Leave Any Information*, 294.
 5. David Bourdon, "Ruscha as Publisher (or All Booked Up)," *ARTnews* 71, no. 2 (1972): 32.
 6. Hooland and Verborgh, *Linked Data*, 28.
 7. Bourdon, "Ruscha as Publisher," 33.
 8. Mary Voelz Chandler, "Art Museum, Library to Feature 'Word' According to Ed Ruscha," *Denver Rocky Mountain News*, 10 September 1995, sec. F, 82A. Quoted in Ruscha, *Leave Any Information*, 339.
 9. Coleman, "My Books End Up in the Trash."
 10. Ed Ruscha advertisement, *Artforum* 2, no. 9 (1964): 55.
 11. The books' liminal quality suggests why scholars have had difficulty categorizing Ruscha's photobooks. See Kevin Hatch, "'Something Else': Ed Ruscha's Photographic Books," *October* 111 (Winter 2005): 107–26.
 12. Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), xvi.
 13. Lucy R. Lippard, "Absentee Information and or Criticism," in *Information*, ed. Kynaston McShine, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1970), 74–81.
 14. See for example, Francis Bello, "How We Cope with Information," *Fortune*, September 1960, 162–92; "Panel Cites Crisis Due to Growth of Science," *Los Angeles Times*, 17 February 1963; "Information Explosion Fought," *New York Times*, 8 March 1966; Irving S. Bengelsdorf, "New Revolution in Information on Way," *Los Angeles Times*, 12 February 1969; Walter Sullivan, "Physicists, Deluged by Data, Turn to Computers," *New York Times*, 25 December 1969; Carrol H. Quenzel, "Some Proposals for Handling the Information Problem—A Brief Bibliographical Essay," *American Documentation* 14, no. 2 (1963): 145–48; and Thomas Wilds, "Information Retrieval," *American Archivist* 24, no. 3 (1961): 269–82.
 15. See, for example, Stephanie Young, "'Would Your Answers Spoil My Questions?': Art and Technology at the RAND Corporation, 1968–71," in *Where Minds and Matters Meet: Technology in California and the West*, ed. Volker Janssen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 293–320.
 16. The historian Lizbeth Cohen coined the term *Consumers' Republic* to describe the result of such policies. Lizbeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2008).
 17. Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 98; and J. C. R. Licklider, *Libraries of the Future* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1965).
 18. See Hayes, "History of Library and Information Science," 175.
 19. Sven Spieker, *The Big Archive: Art from Bureaucracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 1; and Eve Meltzer, *Systems We Have Loved: Conceptual Art, Affect, and the Antihumanist Turn* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 35.
 20. See Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (Winter 1990): 105–43, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778941>; Meltzer, *Systems We Have Loved*; and Pamela M. Lee, *Think Tank Aesthetics: Midcentury Modernism, the Cold War, and the Neoliberal Present* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020).
 21. It is worth noting here that Ruscha famously eschews computers, remarking in a 1988 interview "I'm a dimwit about mechanics and computers." Bill Berkson, "Ed Ruscha," *Shift* 2, no. 4 (1988): 16.
 22. The website for the Society of American Archivists outlines several different understandings of the term *archives*, acknowledging that "the most central term to the field of archives is also the most fraught." See *SAA Dictionary of Archives Terminology*, s.v. "archives," <https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/archives.html>.
 23. See Hope A. Olson, "The Power to Name: Representation in Library Catalogs," *Signs* 26, no. 3 (2001): 639–68; and Emily Pugh, "Art History Now: Technology, Information, and Practice," *International Journal for Digital Art History*, no. 4 (2019): 3.47–3.59, <https://doi.org/10.11588/dah.2019.4.63448>.
 24. See Jasmine E. Burns, "The Aura of Materiality: Digital Surrogacy and the Preservation of Photographic Archives," *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 36, no. 1 (2017): 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.1086/691368>; and Paul Conway, "Digital Transformations and the Archival Nature of Surrogates," *Archival Science* 15, no. 1 (2014): 51–69, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-014-9219-z>.
 25. Johanna Drucker, "Is There a 'Digital' Art History?," *Visual Resources* 29, no. 1–2 (2013): 12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01973762.2013.761106>. (Italics in the original.)
 26. For more on these procedures, see Beth Ann Gwynn, David Newbury, and Lily Pregill, "Archiving the Archive: Processing the Streets of Los Angeles Photographs," this volume.
 27. "Vinegar syndrome" refers to the chemical deterioration of cellulose acetate film, a process that produces the byproduct acetic acid, the primary component of vinegar.
 28. The SoLA Archive is cataloged as Edward Ruscha Photographs of Sunset Boulevard and Hollywood Boulevard, 1965–2010, 2012.M.1, <https://www.getty.edu/research/collections/collection/100001>; and Edward Ruscha Photographs of Los Angeles Streets, 1974–2010, 2012.M.2, <https://www.getty.edu/research/collections/collection/100071>.
 29. See Francesca Russello Ammon, Brian D. Goldstein, and Garrett Dash Nelson, "Ed Ruscha's Street-Level View and the Postwar Redevelopment Vernacular," this volume, for information on how the Streets of Los Angeles Archive was processed and presented via the online collections catalog and how it facilitates access to other datasets.
 30. Ruscha, "Ed Ruscha," 70–71.

14

Mnemopolis

Susan Laxton

Within your skull you'll haunt Mnemopolis, a lonesome and obscure city. No streets no canals no paving being done in the area (the circumvolutions of your brain), but only traces that you'll try to catch hold of: these will be shreds of memories (or hallucinations) and sonorous debris that somehow reach you from without and most of the time evoke absolutely nothing; so many objects or fragments that patiently—and not without hesitation—you'll want to string together, give them meaning by connecting them.

—Maurice Roche, *Compact*

In 1966, within a year of the day Ed Ruscha first drove down Sunset Boulevard to produce the photographs that would become *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, Maurice Roche published his experimental novel *Compact*, an oddly structured narrative in which an unnamed protagonist, blinded and immobilized by illness, forsakes his body and, remanding all experience to memory, imagines that the convolutions of his brain take the image of a city he calls Mnemopolis, whose labyrinthine paths through the past are imprinted with images of things no longer accessible in the present. The stakes of this Mnemopolis are the preservation of knowledge itself: “I picked my brains,” reports Roche’s antihero, “THERE WAS ALMOST NOTHING LEFT. I was a sort of

archaeologist, a pocket speleologist. . . . The canning . . . of this preserved world being a question of taking a detailed inventory of its memory, before losing it forever.”¹ Given that the speaker is blind, it is the worn tracks on a wall map, traceable with his finger, that are the prompts driving memory through Roche’s streetscape, not photography’s handy visual directory. But the insistent diachrony of Ruscha’s Streets of Los Angeles (SoLA) Archive has the same propulsive force, the same serialized unspooling of recorded images, and the same evocation of repetition as inseparable from memory. Like the SoLA photographs, which repeatedly traverse a handful of streets, Roche’s Mnemopolis rises from steps retraced obsessively in an attempt to render memory indelible. “I feel the tape unwind and rewind within me,” claims the protagonist, “[the] voice of an old gramophone tirelessly turning in the same groove, repeating its same old song.”² It is difficult not to hear there the pace of the reels and reels of photographic negatives that have come to light since the inception of the SoLA project at the Getty Research Institute (GRI), and, considering their quantity and the long duration of their production, to understand them as having given form to Ruscha’s own version of a mnemopolis. Like the memory banks of *Compact*’s protagonist, Ruscha’s SoLA apparatus is stuck in a groove—it’s an

obsolescent recording system set into perpetual motion, designed to trundle forward absurdly on Los Angeles–area streets for another fifty years without updates to the system of production.

Both of these projects, located at the nexus of memory technology and the cityscape, demonstrate a will to retrieve that which seems to be constantly slipping away, and to do so through a certain distancing of the body not only from the space of lived experience but also from memory—a condition that was becoming acute by midcentury in Euro-American culture as it hovered on the brink of the information age.³ Yet they are instructive as well in their differences: Roche’s protagonist floats free of his immobilized body as he roams Mnemopolis—he addresses himself in the third person, as if he had shed the physiological limits of experience—but his memories are deeply personal, made ephemeral by his imminent death. Ruscha’s project, conversely, shows the artist’s conscious effort to depersonalize the mnemopolis, exploiting technology to render memory as a set of disembodied facts, first through the camera, and then, as if to underscore the effort, through the vehicle that bears it, clicking, through the streets of Los Angeles, “laying down the facts of what’s out there.”⁴ For Diana Taylor, a scholar whose work examines the hegemony of recorded knowledge, the difference between these two attitudes toward memory marks the difference between memory and archives, with *memory* defined as a “repertoire of embodied knowledge . . . acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge transferred from body to body,” and *archive* as amassments of “supposedly lasting, stable objects such as books, documents, bones, photographs, and so on that theoretically resist change over time.”⁵ The repertoire, she writes, “lives under the sign of erasure,” whereas “the archive [has] constructed and safeguarded a ‘knowable’ past that could be accessed over time.”⁶

Another way of describing this difference, in terms that acknowledge the spatial coordinates of the mnemopolis, is to draw on the historian Pierre Nora’s work on *lieux de mémoire*, the name he has given to the sites modern society developed in response to anxiety over memory loss in the face of a rising tide of alienation from the past.⁷ In fact, there are many indications that the SoLA collection was already functioning as one of these

sites—a private archive of sorts—before it left Ruscha’s studio: Ruscha claimed to choose “facts” over expression, as reflected in the impersonal “inventory style” he adopted for the photographs; the project is steered by an ethos of inclusion, both in its accumulation of images over time and in the unedited, “warts and all” form the photographs take; and Ruscha has given the impression that the photographs were preserved for their usefulness, providing a pool of imagery from which to draw future projects.⁸

Furthermore, photography itself could be understood in Nora’s terms as one of these sites. Nora claims that the dissolution of “living memory” is a modern phenomenon, along with urban development, arriving with the rise of three new cultural phenomena: *trace*, *mediation*, and *distance*—terms that map directly onto the process and effects of Ruscha’s project, reinforcing the sense that the SoLA Archive enacts a certain anxiety over the ever-accelerating slippage of the present into the past that initially brought the archive into being.⁹ Nevertheless, removing Ruscha’s archive from the artist’s studio to the GRI’s institutional context brings about notable changes to the project—most prominently, the categorical shift from memory motivated by individual will to what Nora describes as “the fundamentally historical sensibility” by which “our hopelessly forgetful modern societies, propelled by change, organize the past.”¹⁰ In that sense, with the move to the GRI, the photographs are no longer Ruscha’s mnemopolis but rather the mnemopolis-of-record, the authoritative Streets of Los Angeles Archive.

Complicating this change is a broad shift in technological substrate as our “sites of memory” take electronic form within the system of information management we call the *digital archive*. Taking into consideration the extraordinary scale of the project (nearly one million images, and growing), Ruscha’s SoLA photographs can be understood as a critical project that metastasizes the archive to the point of it being unusable; it tests the very limits of the archive as a construct, the GRI as its vessel, the digital means of storage and retrieval, and, by extension, the contemporary fixation with pursuing knowledge through the sheer amassment of information. Recast by the institutional context rising around it, the SoLA

project (and the GRI's willingness to take it on) effectively demonstrates the overarching implications of archivization, and particularly digital preservation, as it enters our current configurations of sociocultural memory.

A great deal of attention has been paid to the archive as a construct in recent years, much of it stemming from two poststructuralist texts that both position and critique archival authority in its relation to memory, power, and knowledge.¹¹ The first, Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), theorizes the archive as the very condition of knowledge in modernity, at once establishing its authority and destroying its innocence as a mere repository of accumulated material traces.¹² The second, Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever* (1995), distills Foucault's argument to a focus on the alignment of power and knowledge within the archive: "There is no political power without control of the archive," Derrida asserts flatly, "let alone memory."¹³ But Derrida (who first began thinking through the complex of memory, archive, and computational systems in 1966) deepened the analysis by positing archival structure as analogous to a specifically Freudian model of the mind: a set of memory traces stored subconsciously (which is to say, chaotically) and only retrievable through a consciously organized system of language-based association.¹⁴ Sigmund Freud's evocative visual metaphor for the mechanism of memory was the *Wunderblock*, a wax writing tablet covered with translucent layers of paper and celluloid on which one could write with a stylus.¹⁵ Once lifted from the wax block, the paper surface was erased, but its erstwhile marks were preserved in an undifferentiated tangle of impressions on the wax below, hidden from sight. What intrigued Derrida about the *Wunderblock* model was that the very material that makes writing visible in the system is the material that preserves it, and then, through sheer accumulation, ultimately disables it by rendering it illegible. The writing surface, in effect, "forgets" its contents even as it grows, relegating language to quasi-inoperability in the cluttered archive of oblivion. Here *Archive Fever* reaches beyond Foucault's description of the archive as collective memory distorted by power to recall Freud's late articulation of the "death drive": the compulsive malaise always already contained in the psychic apparatus that actively seeks to forget, rendering memory redundant.¹⁶

Several alignments with Ruscha's SoLA photographs make the Derrida/Freud/Foucault triad a powerful lens through which to examine the successive conversions the Ruscha images undergo with their move from artist's studio to institutional vault to digitized image.¹⁷ First, there is the evocation of memory trace in the operations of the mystic writing pad, and the association of photography with the same. Photographic archives invoke the old problematic of Oliver Wendell Holmes's "mirror with a memory" as well as photography's utopian promise, which for Holmes took the form of a vast archive that would displace the need for unmediated apprehension of the material world.¹⁸ Holmes's conflation of photography and archive, with its promise of photographic futures is, in part, the GRI's motivation for scanning Ruscha's SoLA Archive: the hope that, in keeping with Ruscha's own attitude toward the collection as raw material, it might be useful as sheer information to a wide range of cross-disciplinary artists and researchers.

But of course, photographs are not factual; they offer a subjective view in myriad ways, and following Foucault and Derrida, we recognize the archive in this dimension of photographs as well. Like the individual photographs of Ruscha's mnemopolis, the SoLA Archive offers so strong an impression of inclusion that we tend to overlook its exclusions. In part, this is due to certain systemic qualities of photography—for example, "forgetting" the highly mediated processing step between negative inscription and positive development (decisive in the case of the SoLA images, which came to the GRI for the most part as negatives, all but forcing their direct conversion to digital scans without an intermediary print stage), or ignoring the spatial possibilities that lie beyond the single-point perspective of the camera lens. The photographic fictions of transparency Ruscha attempted, quite elaborately, to guarantee through his process of inscription deepen as the SoLA images move further away from the artist's stewardship; with the transition from studio to institutional archive comes an elision of the art context from which the collection emerged.¹⁹

In fact, the idea of Ruscha's *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* as a cleverly edited collection of fragments that give the impression of completeness only became obvious when the full

extent of the archive Ruscha had amassed was revealed to those of us the GRI gathered to witness its processing. Just as the SoLA Archive's very existence changes the nature of *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, digital conversion changes the nature of the negatives, scanned or unscanned, inventing them as a new form: the material archive—much in the way the advent of digital photography “invented” analog photography and its historical obsolescence. The implications of this move go beyond the mere designation of a new category for the representation of physical archives. As Emily Pugh points out in her essay in this volume, the digital archive functions as a separate entity, “shap[ing] the nature and meaning of both the physical and digital versions of archives.”²⁰ This is to say that where once there was only “the archive,” we now have “the physical or material archive,” a new category of the extra-electronic “real” opened for photographic archives in general, with important consequences for research. Indeed, the physical SoLA Archive—long, spliced strips of negative film wound onto reels, cinema-style—will enter a hierarchy of visibility in relation to its “other,” the electronic archive, which, labeled and rearranged within the SoLA database, will begin to narrow the rhetorical possibilities afforded to the images, even as they offer the appearance of having opened up those very possibilities through the sheer process of becoming visible to researchers from outside the institution. For example, designating the digital scans as the publicly accessible archive and maintaining the negative film strips as private (which is to say protected and preserved), privileges purely visual, formal, and iconographic interpretation of the photographs, rather than forcing analysis of the material conditions of Ruscha's process: the tiny scale of the images and the difficulty of viewing them, the type of film Ruscha used and the quality of the original exposure, the tactility of film, and its scent of decay—all of these are meaning-bearing “content” in the same way that the subject matter and pictorial effects of the images are. The anachronistic, analog nature of the project and the subjugated role of the negative that long governed the history of photography both step back into the shadows, shielded from public perusal.²¹ Only a relative few of the GRI staff will be authorized to view and handle the original material, as witnessed by the fact that over the

long months that the advanced research team accessed an extraordinary array of GRI resources circulating around the SoLA Archive, we never saw the negative reels themselves. The omission constitutes a gaping hole at the center of the enterprise where its object should be, and it renders our project illustrative of the physical “real” gradually disappearing behind screen experience at large. Mnemopolis, Ruscha seems to claim, is no longer traceable on a wall map, as it was for Roche's protagonist. Memory in the information age will have to limit itself to other sensory prompts.

In fact, the transformation of the SoLA's archived artifacts into electronic data proves an excellent case study for conversions to digital “social frameworks of memory,” the structures of distribution that regulate shared knowledge and unify behaviors and attitudes.²² The gains are clear: preservation (the algorithm is forever, and the films are protected), use, and, importantly, the potential for wide and inclusive dissemination through open access—contributing to what Andreas Huyssen has called “public media memory.”²³ Since whatever is published online has the potential for global exposure, “public” is exponentially more public now than it ever was, and with this newly expanded audience come shifts in anticipated viewers, an effect felt both by the GRI and by Ruscha himself, who promises to have his team continue shooting the streets of Los Angeles and its environs, but now for posterity rather than personal use (he plans to eventually turn the remaining photos over to the GRI for archiving and scanning). With digitization in the offing, that means Ruscha and his team will be photographing for the “instantly everywhere” of the vast electronic archive. This could lead to greater possibilities for creative engagement, afforded by the dynamic network of media ecology, a relatively uncontrollable site of dispersal in which time shifts away from the static and historical to the active and atemporal.²⁴ This network, at scale, is an encompassing environment, and presence within its immersive milieu will have the effect of affirming the credibility of Ruscha's archive, in part because the internet presents itself as a universal archive, thereby cultivating, in its immensity, the impression that there is nothing outside its boundaries. To be scanned, these days, is to exist; to remain unscanned is to be

consigned to oblivion. For the SoLA Archive, this simple fact has compelling implications, since making its daunting quantity of material visible depends almost exclusively on scanning, which proceeds at a relatively slow pace. Yet the edited selection of searchable SoLA photographs, accessed through finding aids, is designed to give the impression of completeness: once live, the viewer will enter a search word, and all of the thematically related images will appear to come up, when actually only a small fraction of the whole has been searched. The vast majority of the SoLA images are currently invisible and will remain so for an indefinite period of time.

The unscanned archive haunting public media memory is perhaps the most readily quantifiable exclusion from the SoLA Archive, but it is by no means the only way, in Derrida's formulation, that the technical structure of the digital archive shapes the structure of archivable content.²⁵ In fact, the SoLA Archive's entry into this electronic nonsite (to be everywhere, like atmosphere, is to be nowhere in particular) poses a set of complex problems for communicating the historical and material conditions of its production. One issue emerges from the "multi-sited" aspect of the web, and its networked, rather than linear, structure.²⁶ As Taylor has pointed out, while the position of the conventional archive is locatable, online ecology is temporally discrete, comprising fragments of information that make interchange and creative memory possible. That is to say, the photographs become not only materially digital (if that makes sense) but also conceptually digital: digital in the affordances of their creative intellectual manipulation. A "teleporting" browse of the SoLA photographs becomes possible through thematically driven searches, conveying the impression that any given theme blankets all of Los Angeles, rather than the topography of a handful of streets. History itself is the tradeoff in this shift from the sequentially bounded material space of the film-wound reel to the atemporal fragmentation of the digital past-in-present.²⁷ The time-based structure of the original project, linear and repetitive, disappears, and with it, Ruscha's peculiar mode of facture—the truck, the camera, the slow crawl. This in turn suppresses a whole set of historically tied interpretive possibilities—for example, the uncanny effects of repetition, readable as the logic of the palimpsest, or the listlike, one-after-the-other form so evocative of

bureaucratic writing, a tongue-in-cheek exploration of "business art" that connects the archive to pop art. Context, site-specificity, and the structure of the street—which affirm the performative, temporally based dimension of the process—are shunted to the margins of analytic possibility in favor of associations based in quantified affinities that may or may not have historical significance. Paradoxically, the sheer compass of immersive, networked scale afforded by the internet tends to obscure important synoptic perspectives on Ruscha's intellectual project, pushing them down into the "unconscious" of the archive.

Abstraction is another structural change that conditions the path from artifact to data, given that remediation requires the conversion of the photographs to a set of calculable symbols, restricting formal and material possibilities to what is transmissible via quantifiable data.²⁸ The resulting knowledge is malleable: available to reconfiguration and infinite exchangeability. The model for this kind of calculability of value is the mature money system, theorized by Georg Simmel as early as 1900, and in our time extended to encompassing status.²⁹ Capitalism is the motivating force behind this kind of exchange, and the dematerialization of the SoLA material into data readies the archive for instrumentalizing whatever insights the GRI might be able to glean from the usage metrics made available by the software. Effectively, these are the structures of commerce reordering the structures of knowledge: Once abstracted, archival material is subjected to second-order calculation, also by machine. Interest in the images and, by democratic measure, their value can be calculated by quantity, according to how many views they've garnered, as opposed to the quality of knowledge that has been generated by the views. As archives are "pruned" to make room on servers for other images/information, it's important to remember that a machine will be advising—or even making—the decisions.³⁰ Abstraction of this kind participates in the economic determination of the social and the cultural automatically, whether or not the GRI elects to capitalize on the archive remediated as information, but it looms particularly large for the SoLA photographs, which are virtually inaccessible in their original negative forms.

Ironically, while at the processing level the SoLA images are rendered abstract as calculable information at the level of human access, once on the screen they are likely to be read only for their iconographic content. This is because archiving the SoLA negatives reduces the open-ended pictorial to a lexical form for ease of retrieval—that is, determining the metadata necessarily will entail selecting terms in anticipation of viewers’ needs, obscuring certain elements of the photographs (e.g., composition, lighting, or depth) in favor of readily described iconography. This remediation to language would not necessarily be uninteresting to Ruscha, whose work has notoriously mined the instability of language, especially in its relation to the pictorial as Kate Albers explores in her essay in this volume. In fact, the entire project of assigning descriptors to the massive number of images he has delivered to the GRI feels commensurate with a certain poetics of banality that has been one of the most interesting aspects of Ruscha’s intellectual project. Again, Mnemopolis comes to mind, and its invocation of “debris that somehow reaches you from without and most of the time evokes absolutely nothing; so many objects or fragments that patiently—and not without hesitation—you’ll want to string together, give them meaning by connecting them.”³¹ But a thematic organizational structure will always prioritize looking “through” photographs to what they represent, rather than the absurdity of the repeatedly boring image; indeed, it will limit the very definition of *content* itself, refracting the ways the images can be grasped by the viewer. Ultimately, despite the metadata’s intimacy with language, the remediation of the photographs entails the breakdown of rhetoric into data.³²

It is in this construction of identity for the images that the politics of metadata will be found and the ideology of the digital archive (if locatable) will be read. The “law of what can be said,” to speak in Foucault’s terms, has shifted from the artist’s to the institution’s purview, and it will ultimately be the GRI that has the right to determine what will be deemed legitimate and what will not.³³ Retrieval will always be partial and therefore biased: the rare or unusual will be labeled, but the common will be less likely to be, and some images may actively resist identification. How, for example, does one assign a search term for subjective categories like

“unspectacular,” “flat,” or “redundant” (fig. 14.1)? Subjected to a kind of banality cull, the exhaustive account promised by the archive’s name, the Streets of Los Angeles, is likely to fall short, carrying forward Ruscha’s blind spots (which mark it as Ruscha’s mnemopolis, and not, for example, one generated from the streets of South or East L.A.) and adding the GRI’s own.³⁴ To return to the metaphor of the *Wunderblock* and the ways the digital archive reshapes social memory, the tangled disorder of the archival unconscious will be preserved in the physical “wax tablet” but will only ever be accessible through the terms written on the translucent surface sheet. Confined to the digital interface, we will rarely be able to lift the cellophane and examine the chaotic traces below.

Failures of language and quantification join other sociocultural gaps that are incapable of being thought of by institutions aligned with dominant power structures, resulting in histories that have remained in the shadows and that demand major reconstructions of the foundations and constitution of knowledge to understand them. The scholars Tina Campt, Saidya Hartman, Marianne Hirsch, Jean Howard, and Laura Wexler have drawn attention to them from within the Engendering the Archive project at Columbia University, where they have led a group of thirty participants in an effort to expose the silences in archives that police the borders of social difference.³⁵ In light of their work, Ruscha’s SoLA Archive was already an oppressive “patriarchive” before it entered the GRI’s custodianship—we would be challenged, for example, to locate there the repercussions of the Watts uprising of 1965 (the year Ruscha commissioned Jerry McMillan to do a test shoot of the Sunset Strip), or evidence of the 1966 curfew riots on Sunset itself.³⁶ These invisible histories of the streets of Los Angeles, accessed only through an encompassing overview of what Ruscha did and didn’t photograph, form an immaterial counterarchive of absence that is also lost to view within the rhizomatic clickbait atmosphere of cultural memory’s new digital apparatus. Once identified, these gaps undermine the authority of the SoLA images, even when gathered under the GRI’s aegis. Electronic remediation can be understood literally in this context as remedial when the very uniformity and bureaucratic structures that subtend the SoLA Archive are understood as outgrowths of



Figure 14.1 Ed Ruscha, Contact sheet, Pacific Coast Highway, 1974, gelatin silver print, 13 × 19 in. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.2. © Ed Ruscha.

disciplinary culture that are exploded when one of their avatars is fragmented and dispersed into the immersive electronic interface. Yet again, history is sacrificed—this time, the history of the repressive context of the images' production. In such an amassment, the perspective necessary to find these social voids becomes daunting, both realistically and psychologically, and the possibility of encountering the previously unseen and unanticipated drops precipitously. The further the archive moves toward morcellation and diffusion the less likely we are to link the routes traced to the individual photographs accessed: searchability, which claims to be giving us access to the whole, comes at the expense of the broad view.

But ideological impairment in the SoLA Archive, already present when the images resided in the artist's studio, is further supported by the way the massive scale of the collection conditions its visibility.³⁷ In such a situation, the sheer size of the archive becomes the very force that inhibits its function, even in the interests of the power structures that have put it in place. Availability is so increased that the rhizomatic structure, full of

creative promise, now functions as a string of distractions in support of the attention economy. Thus, even as the credibility of the archive increases with the number of records in it (truth through quantity of evidence), so may its slide toward triviality. Another way of saying this is that as the archive increases in size, it weirdly becomes more limited, effectively estranging itself from itself.

These contradictions are the terms by which Derrida's "archive fever" is defined: the destabilizing force, implicated in the genesis of the archive itself, that resists and opposes the archival (the "conservation drive") is always threatening to displace knowledge and power from their positions of authority. For Derrida, the archive defines itself against oblivion: "There would indeed be no archive desire," he writes, "without the possibility of a forgetfulness."³⁸ Ironically, as we approach the point at which technological memory will map directly onto the world's vast stores of preserved knowledge, attempting to eliminate the possibility of forgetting as we might eliminate a virus, it is important to remember that in doing so, we

threaten to eliminate the need for the archive itself. Massification, by this logic, becomes the agent of the archive's undoing in the age of its digitization, through the technical, structural, social, and cognitive limitations that sweeping scale introduces.

The biggest issue lies not with the technology per se—while the GRI has had to increase server capacity to accommodate the collection, and parts of the collection have resisted automatic processing, the technology to manage large-scale image collections is available and customizable. But the conversion doesn't come cheap. Only an institution like the GRI can support the material and intellectual labor that now attends the SoLA Archive; developing the archive in Ruscha's studio was already a collaborative effort, but the institutional digitization has multiplied the labor pool and the cost many times over. Consider the numbers: scanning began in 2017 and ended in 2019, and in that period approximately 130,000 images were digitized and tagged—about 17 percent of the SoLA collection. Even if the GRI could scan continuously, it would be another six years before the remaining images in the archive could be searchable. More realistically, this number would at least double, since, five years after the start of digitization, the collection has yet to be made searchable by subject. During all that time, Ruscha's team would be out generating more images to add to the archive. In fact, given the projected scale of the collection of SoLA photographs, the challenge to archival preservation in general, and digitization in particular, are built into the project itself. The SoLA Archive was designed to increase in size—its horizon is always moving; the project is never complete. The immensity and open-endedness of the archive approaches the digital sublime, particularly if one takes into consideration the limits of human consciousness to grasp the project as a whole or isolate a group for interpretation. As such, the SoLA Archive's move to the GRI completes the project as an allegory of the futility of the kind of plenary knowledge sought by the information age through sheer scale—through “being counted” in every sense of the word. Ruscha, it could be said, is using quantification to resist itself.

With this in mind, we might consider the possibility that the Streets of Los Angeles project—launched, like Roche's Mnemopolis and

Derrida's first thoughts about mechanisms of memory, at the start of the information age—was conceived as a wry commentary on postwar expansion in the pursuit of accumulation and supersizing, a visual argument whose stakes for knowledge and experience (now ratcheted up to extreme proportions) invoke exhaustion and death. “You'll travel without moving,” Roche's antihero observes, “in the endless city in your head that is filled with every fatigue—just one more step, and another.”³⁹ And from Derrida: “The machine—and consequently representation—is death and finitude *within* the psyche.”⁴⁰ By metastasizing a photographic archive to its breaking point and consigning it to the GRI's stewardship, Ruscha the trickster effectively parodies the institutional mission to preserve and produce knowledge, generating a meta-archive that shapes the Streets of Los Angeles project as a folly and, paradoxically, renders Ruscha's mnemopolis the conceptual work of art it never was while in his studio.

NOTES

Epigraph: Maurice Roche, *Compact*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (Elmwood Park, IL: Dalkey Archive, 1988), 4. For the French edition, see Maurice Roche, *Compact: Roman* (Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 1966).

1. Roche, *Compact*, 59. The capitalized letters are in the original text, which experiments with typography and color, offering a fragmented and networked reading experience suggestively similar to web-based browsing.
2. Roche, *Compact*, 55, 70.
3. See Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 1–10. For the idea of photography and archives as forms of “artificial memory,” see Richard Terdiman, *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 30.
4. Edward Ruscha, *Leave Any Information at the Signal: Writings, Interviews, Bits, Pages*, ed. Alexandra Schwartz (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 41. See also Joshua Shannon, *The Recording Machine: Art and Fact during the Cold War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 1. Shannon links this “factualism” to a period tendency in US art: Shannon, *Recording Machine*, 5.
5. Diana Taylor, “Save As,” in “On the Subject of Archives,” ed. Marianne Hirsch and Diana Taylor, special issue, *Emisférica* 9, no. 1 (2012), <https://hemisphericinstitute.org/en/emisferica-9/1-1-essays/e91-essay-save-as.html>. See also her influential book, Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).
6. Taylor, “Save As,” 2.
7. Pierre Nora, ed., *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 1–3.
8. For the practical imperatives of Ruscha's style, see Jennifer Quick, “Pasteup Pictures: Ed Ruscha's *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*,” *Art Bulletin* 100, no. 2 (2018): 125–52. “Directory style,” may be the most appropriate characterization, given *Every Building on the Sunset Strip's*

- formal similarity to Japanese real estate directories. See, for example, the Leporello examples in the GRI and Huntington Library collections.
9. Nora, *Realms of Memory*, 2.
 10. Nora, *Realms of Memory*, 2.
 11. The scholarship on the archive is vast. For a recent overview, see Marlene Manoff, "Archive and Library," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Literary Theory*, ed. John Frow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.1017>. Important art historical accounts include Benjamin Buchloh, "Gerhard Richter's 'Atlas': The Anomic Archive," *October* 88 (Spring 1999): 117–45; Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October* 110 (Autumn 2004): 3–22; Sven Spieker, *The Big Archive: Art from Bureaucracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008); and Markus Miessen and Yann Chateigné, eds., *The Archive as a Productive Space of Conflict* (Berlin: Sternberg, 2016). For the materiality of photo archives, see the conference website hosted by the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence, <https://www.khi.fi.it/en/forschung/photothek/photo-archives.php>. A valuable resource on archival exclusions is the project Engendering the Archive, Columbia University, Center for the Study of Social Difference, <https://www.socialdifference.columbia.edu/projects-/engendering-the-archive>.
 12. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1972).
 13. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 4n1.
 14. See Jacques Derrida, "Freud and the Scene of Writing," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 227–28. See also Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 14.
 15. Sigmund Freud, "A Note upon the 'Mystic Writing-Pad,'" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, vol. 19 (London: Hogarth, 1961), 227–32.
 16. The translation of the title *Archive Fever* from its original French, *Mal d'archive*, is slightly misleading, as it deemphasizes the destructive dimension so important to Derrida, but it has the advantage of foregrounding, through the double connotations of the word *fever* in English, the compulsive aspect of the death drive.
 17. For important changes in reception and oversight of archives in general under the new electronic regime, see David M. Berry, "The Post-Archival Constellation: The Archive under the Technical Conditions of Computational Media," in *Memory in Motion: Archives, Technology, and the Social*, ed. Ina Blom, Eivind Røssaak, and Trond Lundemo (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 103–25.
 18. Oliver Wendell Holmes. "The Stereoscope and the Stereograph," *Atlantic Monthly* 3, no. 20 (1859): 748.
 19. Since it was the art context of the SoLA photographs that brought the project to the GRI's attention, the very phenomenon, in Derridean terms, that generated the institutional archive destroyed its "origins," its *arche*. Interesting as well is that the move from art to information is opposite to the aggrandizement museums usually perform on archival photographs—for example, the Museum of Modern Art's treatment of Eugène Atget's archive of Paris. See Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Canon Fodder: Authoring Eugène Atget," *Print Collector's Newsletter* 16, no. 6 (1986): 221–27.
 20. Emily Pugh, "Some Los Angeles Streets: Ed Ruscha in the Library and Archive," this volume.
 21. See Geoffrey Batchen, *Negative/Positive: A History of Photography* (New York: Routledge, 2021).
 22. Ina Blom, "Rethinking Social Memory: Archives, Technology, and the Social," in Blom, Røssaak, and Lundemo, *Memory in Motion*, 17.
 23. Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, 17. Even if the GRI reserves a portion of the digitized archive for authorized users, once scanned and posted the images will be impossible to keep out of broad circulation online.
 24. Blom, "Rethinking Social Memory," 17, 29.
 25. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 17. For an account that emphasizes that "the computer is the quintessential information system precisely because it can process, store, retrieve, and exchange virtually any type of information (e.g., aural, textual, and visual)," see Pugh, "Some Los Angeles Streets." I think it is important to acknowledge that the structural differences between organizational systems can be significant. Printed books shape their readers differently than electronic interfaces.
 26. Taylor, "Save As."
 27. As one scholar has pointed out, history (and art history) cedes to the priorities of media archaeology—namely, the performative effects of technology on knowledge—as soon as the work has been digitized. Wolfgang Ernst, *Digital Memory and the Archive* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 55–59.
 28. "To make something computable requires that it be abstracted twice over: it must be encoded in a symbolic system of digital abstractions and captured in a grammar of actions that can be prescribed back onto physical activity. Abstraction is thus a feature of functionality." Berry, "Post-Archival Constellation," 104.
 29. Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money* (New York: Routledge, 2011).
 30. For Berry, the stakes for machine-only readability are ultimately human intelligibility, as witnessed, for example, by the apparently chaotic organizational system of the Amazon warehouse, comprehensible only to the computer that masters it. Berry, "Post-Archival Constellation," 110.
 31. Roche, *Compact*, 14.
 32. Certainly, the reduction of images and objects to lexical identifiers is a standard archival practice that predates electronic databases. But most metadata, unlike keyword descriptors, are hidden as a condition of use. See Amelia Acker, "Metadata," in *Uncertain Archives: Critical Keywords for Big Data*, ed. Nanna Bonde Thylstrup et al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021), 321–29.
 33. Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 129.
 34. The research group Metadata Culture has published extensively on the care and consequences of data tagging for cultural heritage. See <http://metadataculture.se/>.
 35. See Engendering the Archive; and the resultant double issue of *Emisférica*: Hirsch and Taylor, "On the Subject of Archives," <https://hemisphericinstitute.org/en/emisferica-91.html>.
 36. Derrida uses the term *patriarchive* to characterize the elision of women's presence in the archive as described by Sonia Combe in her book *Archives interdites* (Paris: A. Michel, 1994). See Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 4n1.
 37. Ruscha himself has never laid eyes on most of the images, not even through the viewfinder; shortly after editing *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, he remanded his street-photo apparatus to a team of assistants, who have been tasked with sustaining the project.
 38. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 19.
 39. Roche, *Compact*, 13, 125.
 40. Derrida, "Freud," 228.

From Banks to Blanks: The Poetic Spaces of Automated Vision

Kate Palmer Albers

In a modest magazine photo essay published in 1971, Ed Ruscha offered a set of four words, accompanied by four sets of photographs, in his characteristic “deadpan” style: BANKS, TANKS, RANKS, and THANKS. One year later, he provocatively added a fifth word—unstated and undepicted—to this set of rhymes: BLANKS. As an artistic gesture within the space of an exhibition catalog, Ruscha’s word-image combinations brilliantly—and concisely—encapsulated a trajectory from objective description to poetic interpretation, poles of a spectrum that so frequently characterize the artist’s most appealing and enduring work.

As both a framework and a point of departure, BANKS, TANKS, RANKS, THANKS, and, ultimately, BLANKS suggest a relationship between sight and language that connects much of Ruscha’s practice to the automated modes of vision in the current iteration of the vastly more expansive Streets of Los Angeles (SoLA) Archive. The sequence establishes an early interest in investigating the complexities of verbally naming and describing photographic images. It does so from the perspective of a clearly human eye and mind. Through the sequence, Ruscha moves from visual simplicity (*banks*) through increasing complexity (*thanks*, *blanks*). That is to say, if the word *banks* easily aligns with a visual representation, a thing-in-the-world that can be photographed, the

concept of *thanks* is vastly more visually elusive. What does *thanks* look like? How is it photographed? Similarly, *blanks* evokes, most of all, visual absence; it is another challenging word to depict in a photographic image. Decades later, the computer vision programs that now sort Ruscha’s photographs in the SoLA Archive have a remarkably similar kind of challenge. How and when can words be applied to images by a computer vision program, and to what end? What visual content in a photograph can be easily labeled with an automated word, and what proves more difficult?

As we frequently see in his books, Ruscha’s human eye directs the viewer to gas stations, palm trees, parking lots, pools, and apartments in the urban spaces of the Los Angeles area. It is understandable that Ruscha sees these things; they are characteristic of Los Angeles, and, importantly, they are photographable. They are visible from the street, or, occasionally, the sky. Ruscha is also drawn to more evocative terms and phrases that invite a provocative space of possibility in both literal and conceptual responses. In the SoLA Archive, a machine eye is increasingly responsible for “seeing” Ruscha’s archive and “finding” ways to engage with it, both through text recognition and computer vision. Yet, even within this new realm of automated image recognition, we can look for, and insist on, a

Like gas stations, palm trees, parking lots, pools, and apartments, banks and tanks are also things in the world: they are easy to see, easy to represent, and easy to label photographically—even for a computer eye. This is borne out, with logical parameters, in a search of “12 Sunsets: Exploring Ed Ruscha’s Archive,” the publicly available interface for the Getty’s digitization of SoLA.¹ A visitor to the site can search for images that have been tagged with results generated by computer vision or that contain specific texts, such as words in commercial signs or the WALK display at a crosswalk. The distinction between these two modes of automated vision is worth dwelling on briefly: in a computer vision process, an algorithm has learned to recognize the shape or form of a thing or object in an image that can be described to a human with language. Typically, computer vision is trained on enormous sets of images to identify things like a car, dog, person, or tree. Other seemingly identifiable traits may also be recognizable; for instance, human emotion, age, and gender are common markers that computer vision programs may attempt to discern. Subjective and interpretive challenges in these realms are common and are clearly subject to preexisting human bias. Text recognition is different: this is a method of identifying text markers inside an image (e.g., words on a t-shirt, a street name on a sign, or the name of a business): all of these are letters that exist in the images and are legible to any viewer who speaks the language.

WORDS THAT BECOME IMAGES

Twentysix Gasoline Stations (1963). However, subjects of other Ruscha books, such as pools and parking lots, are mostly absent from the collection. Though both are rampant in Los Angeles, Ruscha knew that parking lots are best seen from above (not a street view), and pools are typically in private backyards, or, even if publicly accessible, are rarely viewable from the street.

Ruscha's list of words in the 1971 set—BANKS, TANKS, RANKS, and THANKS—all pose challenges for the image-recognition AI used in "12 Sunsets" and, to a large degree, the text-recognition search as well. Notably, none of these words became subjects of a book for Ruscha; perhaps because, in part, they are not visually legible enough. Where did these words come from? A notebook page from 1969 shows them as one set of rhymes among many, adjacent to sketches of (more easily visualized) palm trees (fig. 15.1). The artist's initial list here is longer: BANKS, TANKS, PRANKS, RANKS, SHANKS, CRANKS, PLANKS, SPANKS, YANKS, THANKS. These words were all written with a blue ballpoint pen; the terms Ruscha moved forward with also bear a penciled check mark.



Figure 15.1 Studio notebook, 1967–69, with preliminary notes and sketches for *A Few Palm Trees*, February 1969. Austin, Harry Ransom Center, Edward Ruscha Papers and Art Collection, 17.10. Image courtesy of Harry Ransom Center. © Ed Ruscha.

The next appearance of this shorter list was in a 1971 issue of *Rags*, in a four-page feature by the artist in the regular section devoted to photography, “Camera” (fig. 15.2). The short-lived but visually impactful magazine was launched in San Francisco in June 1970 by the former *Rolling Stone* photographer Baron Wolman and was dedicated to the era’s counterculture street style and fashion; the artist Barbara Kruger was a founding art director.² Ruscha’s photographs

appear in the twelfth (and second-to-last) issue, published in May 1971. The image-rich layout was typical of both the magazine as a whole and the “Camera” feature. The short text strikes the characteristically unimpressed tone Ruscha typically takes with his photographs: “Ed Ruscha is self-evident. These are his photographs. He has written some books. . . . Mr. Ruscha is a reporter. He just goes out and gets the facts, and he finds he tends to stick with an idea till it is finished. Mr. Ruscha loves working with his camera.”³ The text appears on the opening page, marked TANKS. A reader might first imagine military tanks, but Ruscha gives us photographs of three types of (it seems) water tanks. The buildings on the BANKS page generally follow the low-slung, midcentury style of commercial architecture common in Los Angeles. Even if the building types do not reveal themselves as banks based on this form, they are all labeled with their function: American Savings, Home Savings, and Bank of America. They can be recognized *because* they are labeled: we human viewers often rely on written cues, and most adult English speakers would recognize the word *savings* as synonymous with *bank*.

The subsequent RANKS page requires a different kind of recognition. Ranks do not exist visually in the world; there is nothing to see. As such, Ruscha can’t photograph a rank in the same way; all he can photograph is the representation of a rank in abstract or symbolic visual form. The photographs show several ways of recognizing military rank through symbolic regalia: a photograph of a newspaper image featuring a subject’s embellished lapel; two photographs of headless mannequins sporting military dress and rank regalia; and one close-up photograph of an eagle insignia patch indicating—whether or not Ruscha knew it—a US Navy petty officer third class specializing in personnel. That I had to look that up—and I could, because in 2024 these types of things are readily found through Google—shows already the layering of language, imagery, and symbolism that Ruscha is wading into with his so-called self-evident self and photographs. From a semiotic perspective, symbols always exist as abstractions from both language and the signs of the visual world that, as representations, correspond to their meanings. Though the distance between Ruscha’s claims and actions is always a factor, the fundamentally symbolic function of insignia as representation of the

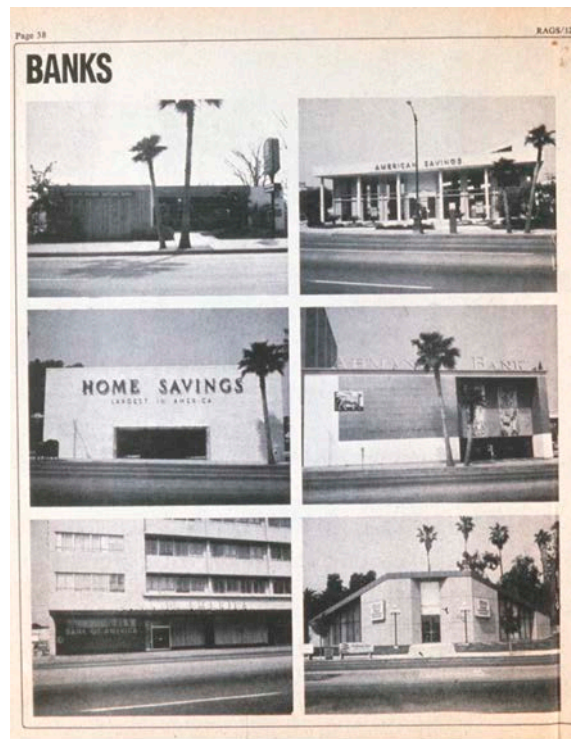
abstract idea of a military rank is, to this viewer, nearly as far from self-evident as possible. As with so much of his work, Ruscha’s humor thrives in these types of spaces that suggest an interpretive disconnect between what something shows and how it is described.

Ruscha drives the evident/not-at-all-evident point home with the fourth spread: THANKS. What does *thanks* look like? Like *ranks*, there is no clear object to turn to. From the vantage point of an emoji-saturated world, *thanks* might be conveyed by a cartoonish pair of palms pressed together (we imagine the accompanying humble bow). For those who prefer a more analog form, the greeting card aisle at a local drugstore might come to mind. Different graphic renditions convey the typographical and emotional range of this near-universal expression of gratitude, from deeply soulful cursive scripts to bright and cheerful block letters. Google Image search results for *thanks* include dozens of versions in myriad fonts, colors, and scales, each meant to communicate a different type of thanks.

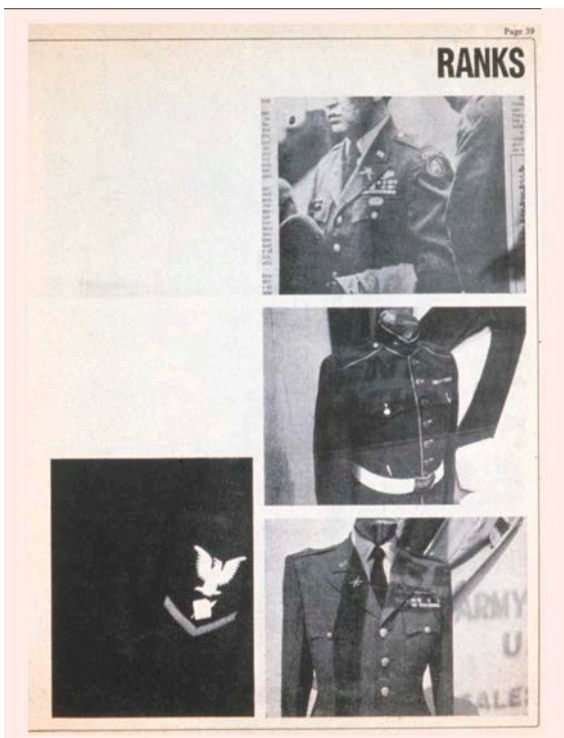
To the implicit prompt “What does *thanks* look like?” Ruscha, perhaps not surprisingly, offers a set of images that is both funny and cynical (and that predates both emojis and Google Image search results): his photographs offer a succinct visualization of the soullessness of gratitude as it emerges in preprinted capitalist exchange. The THANKS page of the layout includes photographs of “THANK YOU FOR YOUR PATRONAGE” printed on the thin paper wrapping of a plastic straw, the “THANK YOU” pressed into metal for every person who drops a quarter into a parking meter, and the cloying “YOU ARE ALWAYS WELCOME • THANK YOU • Come Again” on a book of matches, conjuring the image of a pile of matchbooks in a glass bowl at the register of any bar or restaurant. It’s worth noting that at least two of these “self-evident” expressions of transactional gratitude have gone by the wayside in Los Angeles: plastic straws are restricted, and smoking is widely banned (parking meters now operate primarily with credit cards; their thank-yous have, correspondingly, turned digital). The last photograph of a small notecard acknowledges a potentially more humanized transaction, though it just as easily could represent a company thank-you tucked into the packaging of a purchased good. To summarize: *tanks* look like water tanks, *banks* look like a lot of buildings but are helpfully labeled, *ranks* rely



TANKS



BANKS



RANKS



THANKS

Figure 15.2 Ed Ruscha, "Camera," *Rags*, no. 12 (May 1971): 37–40. © Ed Ruscha.

on coded symbolic insignia, and *thanks* look like the preprinted sentiment of cheap commerce.

BLANKS IN PRINT

Ruscha's photo essay appeared again, in a different context, the following year: as the conclusion to the blocky little artist book/exhibition catalog he designed for his 1972 show of works on paper at the Minneapolis Institute of Art (fig. 15.3). The unusual dimensions of the book immediately call attention to its presence as an object and to its unusual scale relative to Ruscha's other books. Notably, the small book's heft is the product of blank pages: they make up almost the entire second half of the book; the blank pages immediately follow *BANKS*, *TANKS*, *RANKS*, and *THANKS*.



Figure 15.3 Ed Ruscha, *Edward Ruscha (ED-WERD REW-SHAY) Young Artist, exh. cat.* (Minneapolis: Minneapolis Institute of Art, 1972). Minneapolis, Minneapolis Institute of Art, B.95.7. Gift of Sandra and Peter Butler. © Ed Ruscha.

In his review of the exhibition, published in the *Print Collector's Newsletter*, the artist Philip Larson remarks that the show included over one hundred prints and drawings by Ruscha, as well as all fifteen of his artist books, "the fifteenth being the catalog for the exhibition."⁴ This artist-book-as-catalog was published in an edition of two

thousand, with two business cards (one for the artist, one for the curator) inserted into each copy. Were these left as calling cards for readers? The book, overall, toggles back and forth between information and elusiveness. For instance, it opens with a biography that might seem to be a standard element of an artist's catalog, yet it is willfully short on information. The first image depicts a piece of shattered glass and appears without a caption or further context, and there are lists of words organized by year but with no other discernible order: though the contents oscillate between the expected and unexpected, the form of the book is utterly unlike any of Ruscha's other publications. Notably, Larson mentions that Ruscha designed the book "in imitation of the 'big little books' of the 1940s."⁵

The Western Printing & Lithographic Company published Big Little Books in Racine, Wisconsin, from 1932 to 1949. The books' blocky shape—measuring about 4 × 3 inches, with spines that were over 1 1/2 inches wide to accommodate more than four hundred pages—inspired the dimensions of Ruscha's book, as did their contents: Big Little Books had captioned images and text stories on every spread and featured popular children's characters and superheroes. In a pretelevision era, they kept kids entertained with illustrated stories of adventure and humor, often based on radio shows or comics: Mickey Mouse, Dick Tracy, Batman, Spider-Man, the Fantastic Four, and more. Importantly, they were cheap, costing just a dime, and were available at drugstores where kids could buy them independently. Their lowbrow populism, along with their prevalence of captioned images, was well-suited to Ruscha's sensibility. The visual amusement provided by images and the words that accompany them is at the heart of Ruscha's oeuvre.

But unlike Big Little Books, which were jam-packed with text and illustrations from cover to cover, Ruscha intentionally repeated hundreds of blank pages in a row. By 1972, it wasn't unusual for Ruscha to experiment with the creative value of blank space. In a 1999 essay, Clive Phillpot observes of Ruscha's second book, *Various Small Fires and Milk* (made in 1964, one year after *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*): "There were more blank spreads at the end of the book than one would have expected to find."⁶ This tendency *not* to fill the pages of a book occurs with some

regularity; Phillpot also refers us to Ruscha's *Nine Swimming Pools and a Broken Glass* (1968). A more fully explored incorporation of blankness, this sixty-four-page publication contains only ten photographs: blank pages appear interspersed with the lush blue pools, and the book concludes with a blank signature. Phillpot describes the effect of the white pages as approximating "architectural environments" for the blue swimming pools, noting that "the blue pools enhance the whiteness of the white pages so that they become a compelling element of the reading experience."⁷ Ruscha, for his part, has pointed out that in the case of *Nine Swimming Pools*, the extra pages give "body" to the book—a physical heft.⁸ This makes sense, as at only ten images, it would have felt more like a zine than a book with images alone.

Likewise, and even to a much greater degree, the presence of the blank pages in the Minneapolis catalog fundamentally contributes to the "body" of the book, making it possible for it to evoke, physically, the form of the Big Little Books that inspired it. And yet, as with the swimming pools, there is also an experiential effect for the reader (or viewer), though it is not the same as what Phillpot describes in terms of architectural environments. The "environment" of white pages (or blank pages, or empty pages: each adjective carries a different valence) in *Nine Swimming Pools* creates an approximation of modernist space that allows each image, banal as it may be, to take up a kind of aesthetic space. The effect is not unlike a sparsely and immaculately hung "white cube" gallery, just for the page. The blank pages after TANKS, BANKS, RANKS, and THANKS feel more like comedic effect, an excessiveness so thorough that it can't help but be a caricature of itself. So much nothing. Endless non-content. It is perhaps the ultimate of Ruscha's beloved "self-evident" expression.

Recently, the historian Susan A. Crane published a history of "nothing" and the rich terrain of the times that "nothing happened." Crane charts a range of provocations—aesthetic and literary, especially—around offerings of blankness and proposals of nothingness. Included among them is a spoof of an academic article published in the (real) *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis* in September 1974, just two years after Ruscha's blank pages in the Minneapolis exhibition catalog. The satirical article's title was "The

Unsuccessful Self-Treatment of a Case of 'Writer's Block.'" Fittingly, in the layout space the article would typically have occupied, the page is blank. But, as Crane is clear to point out, this is not "just" a conceptual provocation. She writes, "This is not a case of the emperor's clothes; these published pages really are mostly blank. But they are also not devoid of words. [The authors] have titled and credited their work. The journals added their banner titles, notes, and bibliographical information. All of this is standard practice. . . . But without these trappings of academic credibility—trappings we scholars take quite seriously—the published blank pages would not have been so provocative."⁹ In other words, the context of the blankness matters a lot. It's not literally nothing; rather, we as readers encounter "nothing" in a very particular setting, with a certain well-entrenched set of expectations and customs for format. Crane—musing further on the layered and often problematic meanings of the empty spaces in historic maps, where "nothing" represents the unknown, often-feared "other"—writes: "Empty spaces and blank pages can be seen as a threat to systems of knowledge in which everything must have a place."¹⁰ She asks, pointedly: "How do we study the history of what's not there, what's been forgotten, what no one wants to acknowledge? By acting as if, indeed, Nothing happens for a reason."¹¹

Within the context of the contemporary fine art world, experimentations with versions of "blankness" were well established by the early 1970s. In 1951, while studying at Black Mountain College, the artist Robert Rauschenberg made his *White Paintings*—sets of entirely white canvases—which the composer John Cage would, a decade later, famously describe as "airports for light, shadow and particles."¹² Cage, too, experimented with the fullness and productive qualities of seemingly empty space with his 1952 composition *4'33"*, likewise animated by the audience members' attentiveness to the nuances of ambient sound. These works share a spirit, creating space within the realms of art for the ongoing and everchanging external world, and for attentiveness. Experimenting further, Rauschenberg later introduced a very different kind of blankness with his *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953). Seen in relation to the earlier works, the artist's gesture of actively erasing an earlier artist's image and claiming it as one's own

developed another context—and another meaning—for *nothingness*.

COMPUTER VISIONS

Another way to look at nothing—as distinct from the realms of aesthetic, literary, and historical studies—is by way of a trajectory of visibility and meaning charted by the artist Trevor Paglen and the technologist Kate Crawford. Their work together relays the early and developmental groundwork for the computer vision that increasingly characterizes how images are seen and accessed today, including, of course, the Ruscha archive at hand. In 1966—just a few years after Ruscha had started making his photobooks—a group of professors and graduate students studying the emerging field of AI at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology realized that the ability to interpret images was a core feature of human intelligence. A team was hired to “spend the summer linking a camera to a computer and getting the computer to describe what it saw.”¹³ This became the Summer Vision Project. As Crawford and Paglen point out: “The project of getting computers to ‘see’ was much harder than anyone expected, and would take a lot longer than a single summer.”¹⁴ And, despite the friendly overtones of the project’s initial name, the now decades-long project to train computers to “see” objects in images is a deeply fraught enterprise subject to all of the biases of human beings yet disguised under the apparent promise of objectivity.

Ruscha’s project of categorizing and naming visual types is not too far off from the interests of the AI image-recognition researchers. Here, he is implicitly saying, are pools. Here are gas stations. These are palm trees. This is an apartment. This is another apartment; it looks a little different, but there are many similar visual characteristics. It is self-evident, or nearly so. It’s the “nearly so” that means something here, and Ruscha was far from convincing that it really was so easy, so straightforward. The TANKS, BANKS, RANKS, and THANKS image sequence—not to mention the blanks—shows us that by 1971, Ruscha was considering progressions of more complicated words than the simpler nouns he had focused on previously: gas stations, swimming pools, palm trees, parking lots . . . even fires and small objects. If images of tanks, banks, and thanks

begin to investigate the complexities of verbally naming and describing photographic images, the later addition of blanks only furthers those nuances.

Shifting this collection of Ruscha’s images into a digital realm in which they are routinely read both by people and computers for their visual content adds yet one more interpretive layer to the ongoing life of the images. For “12 Sunsets,” the computer vision tags are generated by a standard Google Cloud Vision application programming interface (API). In relation to the work carried out in the 1960s, the goals are the same in some fundamental ways, but the shift in computing power over the intervening decades is profound. The scale of image data sets used for training; the development of machine learning technologies; and the public and widespread availability of the tools all mark a system that, while perhaps similar in spirit and intent, is, at an operational level, totally changed. Given that, it is refreshingly challenging to locate the blanks in Ruscha’s archive. In terms of the physical material, the ends of most of the rolls of film record the blanks typical to the analog process of film. And yet, once digitized, accessing those images through a search function is intriguingly roundabout.

It is perhaps not surprising, but a good reminder nonetheless, that despite extraordinary developments in computer vision, recognizing an image as holding a quality of “blankness” is not in a standard image-training repertoire. It is easier, after all, to describe presence than absence—and easier to recognize, as well. One method is to search for the first frame on every reel, which is not the same as searching for the first image on every reel. As Ruscha and his collaborators switched out rolls, the analog technology dictated that the film advance, frame by frame, as it was loaded into the camera. As such, those first images invariably reveal the edges of the system. While the system itself was built to be comprehensive—photographing not just every building on the Sunset Strip but every building on Hollywood Boulevard, Sunset Boulevard, and many other streets, again and again over the decades—the edges are refreshingly unsystematic. Many of these first frames are informational: they record a person holding up a literal sign indicating the roll number, geographic location, time, and date (for instance, on Sunset Boulevard: “Roll #6 / west

from Hobart / Time: 9:42am / August 9, 98.”¹⁵
These images are, essentially, analog metadata.

But many other first-frame images record the process of getting rolling: there are light leaks, half frames, “mistakes” of multiple varieties, and entirely blank images. In a way, these images are among the most humanizing of the archive, not only because they often feature humans but because they depart from the system. That they are somewhat hidden within the archive—not intuitively searchable—seems to align, unintentionally of course, with a reading of playful possibility (fig. 15.4).



Figure 15.4 Ed Ruscha, *Sunset Boulevard at Brooktree Road*, 1990, digital positive from negative. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012 .M.1. © Ed Ruscha.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, I see the persistence of the blanks in Ruscha’s work as offering—even insisting upon—a productively open and generative space, a space that allows, and literally makes room for, a quality of indescribability. In the books, blank pages function on one level as a practical design feature. But the blanks aren’t just functional in this way: in the books, they also suggest a certain endlessness, a potential for further swimming pools, further gasoline stations, further things to point at—an inexhaustibility of subject matter that actually *describes* the subject matter. The form *is* the content. In the SoLA Archive, those blanks and the redundancies of image are both peripheral *and* central. They move us from the attraction to a literal, seen thing to a more metaphorical space of emptiness that also contains possibility. Those blanks can press the

question: How do we understand vision and visibility?

We can talk about the descriptive potential of Ruscha’s archive and instrumentalize the images to demonstrate a whole host of compelling histories. In many ways, the images in the Streets of Los Angeles Archive are so alluring and beguiling because they seem, on the one hand, to offer so much, and yet, on the other, they offer an invitingly blank slate upon which to project our own stories, narratives, and historical desires. These photographs, even in, and perhaps because of, their supposed objectivity, inevitably invite a kind of narrative overwriting.

NOTES

1. “12 Sunsets: Exploring Ed Ruscha’s Archive,” Getty, <https://12sunsets.getty.edu>. Always intended to be a limited-term application, the website for “12 Sunsets” will not be maintained. A video capturing some of its capabilities can be found here: <https://vimeo.com/946364401/ba0b654c0d>.
2. A complete run of the magazine was reissued in 2021 as a boxed set: *Rags: 50th Anniversary Archive, 1970–2020* (New York: Waverly, 2020). For a brief discussion of the magazine’s impact, written on the occasion of the Waverly Press edition, see Vanessa Friedman, “The Magazine That Invented Street Style,” *New York Times*, 21 April 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/21/style/rags-magazine-street-style.html>.
3. Ed Ruscha, “Camera,” *Rags*, no. 12 (May 1971): 37.
4. Philip Larson, “Ruscha in Minneapolis,” *Print Collector’s Newsletter* 3, no. 3 (1972): 52.
5. Larson, “Ruscha in Minneapolis,” 52.
6. Clive Phillpot, “Sixteen Books and Then Some,” in *Edward Ruscha: Editions, 1959–1999; Catalogue Raisonné*, ed. Siri Engberg and Clive Phillpot, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), 63.
7. Phillpot, “Sixteen Books,” 68.
8. Margit Rowell, *Ed Ruscha: Photographer*, exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2006), 30.
9. Susan A. Crane, *Nothing Happened: A History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020), 54–55.
10. Crane, *Nothing Happened*, 63.
11. Crane, *Nothing Happened*, 64.
12. See John Cage, “On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Work,” *Metro* 2 (May 1961): 50.
13. Kate Crawford and Trevor Paglen, “Excavating AI: The Politics of Images in Machine Learning Training Sets,” *Excavating AI*, 19 September 2019, <https://excavating.ai>.
14. Crawford and Paglen, “Excavating AI,” <https://excavating.ai>.
15. For examples of these images, see “Automated Vision,” in *LA Stories: Urbanism, Music, and AI in Ed Ruscha’s Archive*, 2023, by Getty Research Institute, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-RQekFyxgE>, at 4 min., 11 sec.

CITY

Emily Pugh

At its genesis in 1965, Ed Ruscha's *Streets of Los Angeles* (SoLA) project was very much of its moment. The photographs reflect the perspective of an artist living at the nexus of several intersecting trends—including the continuation of the city's postwar boom and the rapid expansion of mass media and communication technologies as well as their related industries—many of which had a significant presence in Los Angeles. The SoLA images now span six decades, exist in multiple formats, and document the continual evolution of streets throughout the metropolitan area. As Amy Murphy's essay effectively demonstrates, these images reveal the ways that the urban fabric of L.A. was shaped and reshaped by the same political, economic, and social forces that Ruscha's project thematizes.

Much of the urban, architectural, and cultural changes to L.A. since the 1960s are recorded in the SoLA photographs in both direct and indirect ways. Ultimately, however, this is *Ruscha's* Los Angeles. While many L.A. neighborhoods are included, numerous others are excluded, such as South Los Angeles, Boyle Heights, East Los Angeles, and the San Fernando Valley. Moreover, the images of placid streets in which relatively few people or cars appear (especially in the earlier shoots) provide a skewed picture of Los Angeles during a time of protest and tension in the city. Eric Avila and Josh Kun focus on the communities and geographies not captured by Ruscha's camera, reminding us that the SoLA project, despite being large in scope, is by no means comprehensive.

Acknowledging both its vastness and its limitations, several essays in the "City" section engage with the SoLA Archive as a document of not only urban form and change but also stasis. First Francesca Ammon, Brian Goldstein, and Garrett Dash Nelson, and then Gabrielle Esperdy, examine how these images and their related data sets can be used as a resource for investigating the growth and development of L.A. in terms of not only architecture and urban planning but also social, economic, and cultural change. These authors consider both the potential and the limitations of the archive, and they contend with what it means to use these photographs as documents and as data. These authors' essays respond to the question of how scholars might leverage the potential of over fifty years of photographic documentation of L.A. while recognizing that the SoLA Archive is the work of an artist with his own agenda and point of view. In doing so, these authors explore themes of objectivity versus subjectivity and how information is transformed into knowledge. They observe how these photographs provide insight into the use of urban space as a domain of cultural production and a site for staging resistance, communicating artistic expression, and building community. They also interrogate the nature of data: how it is created, used, and reused; how it circulates; what it represents, and to whom.

By using the SoLA Archive as a starting point for a reflection on Los Angeles and its development, the authors in this section articulate how the shifts that were just beginning in the mid-1960s have since played out in the city's urban environment, both inside and outside of Ruscha's frame.

Now Before Then: Ed Ruscha's Streets of Los Angeles Project and the Anticipation of an Archive

Amy Murphy

For most of its young history, Los Angeles has been a city of surface par excellence. While natural features determined the sites for many of the area's initial settlements, the modern city we know today emerged from an abstract order imposed after its incorporation in 1850. For nearly a decade afterward, surveyors laid out street grids like lace tablecloths upon the alluvial plain, transforming geology into geography and nature into property. A low-profile continuum of single-family houses and clusters of commercial lots slowly filled in the grid. The implicit promise of this landscape—access to home ownership, gainful employment, and even self-reinvention, all in a benign climate—hushed any outcries against the city's unconventional morphology.

With the automobile's arrival in the early twentieth century, planners accommodated further expansion by adding boulevards and, later, freeways. In 1971, Reyner Banham wrote, "A city seventy miles square but rarely seventy years deep . . . Los Angeles is instant architecture in an instant townscape. Most of its buildings are the first and only structures on their particular parcels of land."¹ Whatever the city lacked in the vertical dimension of accrued time, it made up for with its excess horizontal extensions of space—space, it seemed, for opportunity, drawing thousands of in-migrants each year.

By the mid-1970s, however, this unique imbalance between the city's spatial and temporal attributes underwent significant recalibration. Challenges to endless lateral growth started to surface. The time "before" gained currency: before Hollywood left Hollywood, before the freeways were no longer free, and before unrest, walkouts, and protests became the toll of the city's exclusions. Postmodernists had replaced the modernists, and new coalitions had formed between preservationists and community activists to protect sites from the wrecking balls of the now well-lubricated "growth machine."² New developments soon sat next to saved relics. Fragments of outmoded transportation provided visual evidence of a recent past that many had already begun to forget.³

This essay examines Ed Ruscha's Streets of Los Angeles (SoLA) project as one avenue for reading these shifts in the city's real and perceived morphology. The project's archive both documents the city's history and represents an artist's take on a much-mythologized city. Additionally, its development parallels major milestones in the urban planning of Los Angeles from 1965 to today. Ruscha photographed more than one hundred streets over nearly six decades, including Sunset Boulevard, Hollywood Boulevard, and Melrose Avenue, with an initial emphasis on their spatial horizontality; however, his repeat shoots would

come to expose their diachronic layers—an effect further amplified through an interactive website, “12 Sunsets: Exploring Ed Ruscha’s Archive,” created by Getty.⁴ At every stage of his career, Ruscha’s work writ large has operated with a both/and rather than an either/or sensibility, often balancing nostalgic warmth with a cooler sense of the factual here and now. This essay argues that the artist’s SoLA Archive likewise establishes a similar tension between space and time, or geography and history—ultimately reinforcing the laterally organized, car-oriented metropolis of early Los Angeles while subverting Banham’s myth of the city as an ever-renewable surface.

A CERTAIN SENSE OF BELATEDNESS

The Los Angeles that Ruscha first experienced was not the postwar consumer-oriented city with which he has often been linked, but a city rooted in a mythical time of “before.” From his first childhood visits in the late 1940s, Ruscha fondly recalls a city that “threw romance in my face.”⁵ The glamour, the sunsets, the cars, and even the boring buildings decked with dazzling signs fired an imagination already primed by movies, glossy advertisements, and colorful news stories from his Oklahoma boyhood.⁶ This was the city built before the freeways, one that grew from a central core developed near the Los Angeles River, surrounded by various unincorporated zones—including the Sunset Strip, a notorious refuge for gangsters and movie stars.

That early city already showed elements that would continue to fascinate Ruscha: streets dotted with new forms of vernacular architecture combining fantasy and convenience, such as the Mandarin Market (Henry L. Gogerty, 1929) (fig. 16.1).⁷ “Dotted,” in fact, accurately describes the punctuation effect of such buildings, given the discontinuities and gaps in the urban fabric. Despite the fact that the city used 5.8 percent of its land for commercial real estate during the late 1920s, 13.4 percent was zoned for it.⁸ At the time, the city did not need that much retail street frontage to serve its population (just as it doesn’t now). Yet speculators found they could make more money trading on the potential of that land through upzoning, rather than developing it with a particular function in mind.⁹ Large portions of the



Figure 16.1 Adelbert Bartlett, Mandarin Market, 1234–48 Vine Street, 1928/29, cellulose nitrate film, 4 × 5 in. Los Angeles, UCLA, Charles E. Young Research Library, Department of Special Collections, Adelbert Bartlett Papers.

boulevards would thus remain undeveloped for a good part of the century.

Eventually, certain prewar characteristics—the nostalgic glow of old Hollywood, the proliferation of perfunctory buildings with interesting signs, and scattered empty lots on major thoroughfares—would become central elements in Ruscha’s work. Together, they helped establish a visual vocabulary for an “authentic” Los Angeles, an idealized state before, as Douglas R. Suisman wrote, “firmness gave way to flow” with the arrival of freeways and everything that accompanied them.¹⁰

When Ruscha returned to attend college in 1956, the city had changed noticeably, with evidence of wholesale demolition littering every vista.¹¹ New highway construction took the highest toll, razing the residential areas surrounding a new civic center in downtown L.A., the historic districts of Hollywood, the working-class immigrant enclaves of Boyle Heights, and the affluent Black neighborhoods of West Adams’s Sugar Hill district. To appease complaints, officials urged Angelenos to see their city not as “a finished landscape, but an embryo of future greatness,” as David Lowenthal wrote; its stretches of wasteland and building detritus signaled a future perpetually under development (fig. 16.2).¹²

Ruscha has recalled a certain sense of “belatedness” while navigating the city during those initial years.¹³ In truth, the planning for this postwar Los Angeles had started long before.¹⁴ Significant milestones included the *Major Traffic*



Figure 16.2 Ed Ruscha, *Sunset Boulevard*, 1966, digital positive from negative. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.

Street Plan (1924) by Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., Harland Bartholomew, and Charles Henry Cheney; the Automobile Club of Southern California's *Traffic Survey* (1937); the completion of the Arroyo Seco Parkway (1939–40); the Collier-Burns Act (1947) to pay for new highway construction; the creation of the Community Redevelopment Agency (1947) to oversee property acquisition; and the Federal-Aid Highway Act (1956) that funded the interstate highway system.

With the arrival of freeways, everything moved outward from downtown, bringing about the construction of new shopping malls (Baldwin-Crenshaw Center, 1947), residential communities (Lakewood, 1954), and amusement parks (Disneyland, 1955). The effects were felt quickly. The population of downtown L.A. decreased by 20 percent between 1941 and 1955, and so did much of its relative property value.¹⁵ As traditional boulevards lost their patronage, the footprint of Pacific Electric, the city's long-standing railway system, shrank considerably. To combat these trends, downtown leaders invented new tax-increment financing to fund several urban renewal plans, and the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce, along with its Hollywood Improvement Association, created the Hollywood Walk of Fame in 1955 to increase tourism.¹⁶

A near two million people moved to the L.A. metropolitan area between the time Ruscha first visited the area as a child and the time he graduated from Chouinard Art Institute and started his career.¹⁷ Streets continued to fill with gas stations and supermarkets adorned with colorful signs, but other new kinds of buildings serving the expanding consumer economy also popped up. These included hundreds of dingbat-

style apartment buildings with names that evoked faraway places, such as the Tiki Tabu and the Algiers, and car-oriented food establishments, like Bob's Big Boy in Burbank (Wayne McAllister, 1949), the McDonald's hamburger stand in Downey (Stanley C. Meston, 1953), and Ships Coffee Shop in Westwood (Martin Stern Jr., 1958). Norms restaurant on La Cienega Boulevard (Louis Armet and Eldon Davis, 1957) would appear in Ruscha's painting *Norm's, La Cienega, on Fire* as early as 1964, and the Tiki Tabu and the Algiers were in his first L.A.-focused photography book, *Some Los Angeles Apartments* (1965) (fig. 16.3).



Figure 16.3 Ed Ruscha, *3505 Artesia Boulevard*, from the *Some Los Angeles Apartments* series, 1965, gelatin silver print, 4 1/2 × 4 1/2 in. Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, 2011.55.6. © Ed Ruscha.

IMAGE AS INFORMATION, CITY AS SIGN

In addition to *Some Los Angeles Apartments*, several other of his artist books produced between 1962 and 1978 would take on Los Angeles as their subject. These visual recordings of the city remain as noteworthy for what they omit as for what they include. To begin with, they capture a relatively limited geography—focusing mainly on the city's perfunctory buildings with interesting signs, empty plots of land, palm trees, swimming pools, and parking lots. Despite his love of automobiles, fascination with history, and interest in material Americana, Ruscha never focused on freeways, chose not to document the destruction of districts like that of Bunker Hill, and rarely sought to capture the spirit of the rapidly

expanding suburbs, as many other photographers did during this era.¹⁸ Instead, Ruscha's initial explorations during this time focused on the street level of urban thoroughfares, where commercial interests most directly shaped the city's ubiquitous spatial form. In several, pages would be left blank, contents randomly ordered, and titles based on phonic rhyme.¹⁹ While a few of his artist books would attend to craft, the L.A.-oriented books were, like the city, purposefully "industrial."²⁰

Pushing past traditional notions of authorship, he often had members of his studio take the actual photographs. This echoed the practices of paid-for-hire commercial photographers working around Los Angeles during the first half of the twentieth century. Companies such as the "Dick" Whittington Studio amassed thousands of images, and their clients included commercial entities like insurance companies, car manufacturers, and department stores.²¹ They did not aim to produce authored photographs but rather a field of reproducible images that would eventually appear downstream in calendars, postcards, accident reports, and newspapers, among other things.²² Like Whittington's studio, Ruscha and his team captured images that translated, as Dave Hickey has suggested, the "noise" of the city into information—images that could be easily circulated and that would provide fertile source material for artmaking (figs. 16.4, 16.5).²³

No street in Los Angeles during the 1960s better captured that fluid relationship between noise and information than the portion of Sunset Boulevard called the Sunset Strip. Located just up the street from Ferus Gallery (1957–66), this zone connecting Beverly Hills to Hollywood offered a cacophony of signage competing for attention. Once home to speakeasies, casinos, and nightclubs, the street now housed offbeat bookstores, bars, music venues, and health food stores, all part of L.A.'s growing counterculture. Ruscha's artist book *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966) inaugurated the SoLA project and established the core aesthetic principles for all its future shoots. Each sequence of frames helped organize information of the streetscape—such as numbers, lengths, heights, and details—into a single artifact, something between a surveyor's record and an autopsy report.

By focusing on a landscape defined by lowbrow commercial architecture, Ruscha inserted himself



Figure 16.4 Wayne "Dick" Whittington, Sinclair service station, image no. 4 from the *Service Stations, Southern California* series, 1935, 32.3 × 23 in. Los Angeles, USC Digital Library, "Dick" Whittington Photography Collection, 0250.



Figure 16.5 Ed Ruscha, 3531 Sunset Boulevard, 1973, digital positive from negative. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.

into a long-standing conversation about the potential aesthetic and even the ideological value of the American vernacular landscape. Such discussions had originated in the nineteenth century but had recently come back into currency, ranging from the critical Peter Blake to the affirming Robert Venturi; both deployed photographs of "ugly America" to highlight a landscape meriting deeper attention (fig. 16.6).²⁴ Less concerned with the aesthetics of what Venturi and Denise Scott Brown termed *ducks* or *decorated sheds*, the urban theorists Kevin Lynch and Jane Jacobs defended some visual aspects of prewar commercial vernacular architecture while criticizing how contemporary urban renewal had abandoned the traditional street.²⁵

In concert with these thinkers, Ruscha helped loosen the stranglehold of high corporate



Figure 16.6 Rondal Partridge, El Camino Real, Palo Alto, California, from Peter Blake, *God's Own Junkyard: The Planned Deterioration of America's Landscape* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1964), 134. © 2024 Rondal Partridge Archive.

modernism in contemporary architectural discourse.²⁶ Los Angeles in the early 1960s witnessed several large, high-profile civic projects, such as the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion (Welton Becket, 1962), the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA; William Pereira, 1965), and the Century City master plan (Becket, 1966–69). Rather than stitching these works into the city's street-and-boulevard system, the architects aimed to replace roads with multifunctional modernist plinths. For Ruscha, such developments paradoxically signaled not rejuvenation but eventual decay: "Anything that was worth looking at seemed to be erased, and something came along to replace it that was repulsive."²⁷

In this context, the data of the *Every Building* photographs acquire new importance, and the shoots seem to make a case for the street's historical value, a lowbrow, disorderly yet distinctly American morphology.²⁸ The flatness of the black-and-white format highlights the importance of signage in the architectural vernacular, echoed in hundreds of western townscapes. This type of both/and sensibility, advocated by postmodern architects such as Venturi, appeared as a means of muting the either/or ideology of modernism—art and architecture considered either old and outdated or new and modern.²⁹ As Jaleh Mansoor has argued, *Every Building* reveals a paradoxical tension in Ruscha's work between "an exuberant affirmation of and resistance to a new consumer culture."³⁰

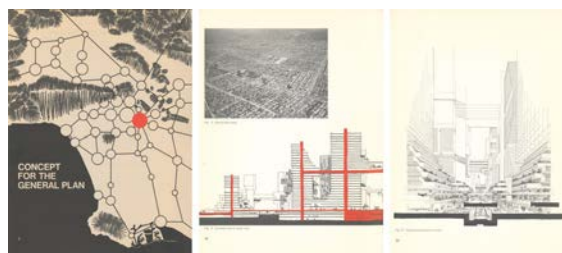


Figure 16.7 A page insert (left) and a rendering imagining future high-density transit centers (center and right), from *Concept Los Angeles: The Concept for the Los Angeles General Plan* (Los Angeles: Department of City Planning, 1970, approved 1972), 8, 16–17, 32.

This focus on the commercial strip as a space of cultural value should complicate the common perception of Ruscha's work as politically neutral—as often is the case with conceptual work of the period—or entirely disconnected from contemporary social conflict. The late 1960s and early 1970s witnessed unprecedented protests in the streets of Los Angeles, including the Watts uprising of 1965, demonstrations against a law-enforcement crackdown on the Strip in 1966, and the East L.A. walkouts led by Chicano high-school students in 1968. There is perhaps something radical in Ruscha's interrogation of the street at this juncture, a space at once under increasing surveillance and reclaimed in very public struggles.³¹

In addition to the plinth projects mentioned above, several major streets transitioned into pedestrian-only zones, such as the Third Street Promenade (1965) in Santa Monica and the Golden Mall (1967) in Burbank. Meanwhile, between 1964 and 1972, city planners developed L.A.'s first General Plan to manage future growth in population, traffic, and commercial development (fig. 16.7).³² Eventually from that effort, the Centers Concept strategy emerged, reimagining the city as a series of concentrated, fully interiorized retail centers connected through mass transit and surrounded by a sea of single-family homes.³³ This vision for new Los Angeles would reduce the street to an efficient transit corridor, one that would no longer accommodate casual public gatherings or, for that matter, defiant youth protests.

After the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, previously low immigration numbers increased, and existing fissures over resources between the suburbs and the cities, as well as between white communities and people of



Figure 16.8 Frames from “Twelve Sunsets: Exploring Ed Ruscha’s Archive” showing the corner mini-malls in the mid-1980s that had replaced gasoline stations present in Ruscha’s shoot of Sunset Boulevard in 1966. © J. Paul Getty Trust. All Images © Ed Ruscha.

color, generated even stronger forms of spatial division. As new freeways allowed suburbanites to avoid certain Los Angeles neighborhoods altogether, and new publicly approved legislation reversed progress toward desegregation (such as Article 34 and Proposition 14), any celebration of the urban street became legible as a subtle form of resistance.³⁴

In the decade following the release of *Every Building*, Ruscha and his team would go on to shoot Hollywood Boulevard, the Pacific Coast Highway, Santa Monica Boulevard, and Melrose Avenue. They would also conduct additional shoots of Sunset, gathering material for yet-to-be-defined projects and, perhaps most importantly for Ruscha, to “nail down and capture” the city before it disappeared.³⁵ If one compares the Sunset photographic footage from 1966 to that of 1976 (using the digital interface of “12 Sunsets”), one can now trace the loss of well-known venues from the 1960s, such as the nightclubs Pandora’s Box and Sea Witch, and see when other iconic establishments made their debut, such as Tower Records (1971) and the Roxy Theatre (1973). More subtly, one might discover that following the OPEC oil embargo of 1973, the number of gas stations along the Strip fell from ten to six—making room for mini-malls that began to populate the city in the next decade (fig. 16.8).³⁶

This constant turnover lured investors seeking a quick profit; it also attracted Banham, whose

model of the instant city would have such a strong influence on late-modernist discourse about Los Angeles. Banham appropriated works from several artists, photographers, and architects, but he saw special validation in Ruscha’s early images of L.A.’s car-centric geography. As the next section will show, however, Ruscha’s work ultimately proved less settled on the consequences of later twentieth-century urbanism than Banham had projected.³⁷ Just as urban developments in the succeeding decades would come to complicate the instant city thesis, so would the documentary shifts in Ruscha’s SoLA Archive.

AFTER SUNSET

In *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (1971) and the BBC-produced TV documentary “Reyner Banham Loves Los Angeles” (1972), Banham positions Ruscha as someone in tune with a new type of sensibility toward image, place, and meaning. His book includes many photographs by Ruscha of empty parking lots; in the film, he interviews the artist in the lot of one of the last Tiny Naylor’s drive-in restaurants, located just east of the Strip. Both book and film conclude by drawing on Ruscha’s sunset trope: the book uses his silk-screen print *Hollywood* (1968) as its final image, and the documentary ends with a drive down Sunset in the last light of day. This metaphor embodies all that fascinated Banham about Los Angeles: a constantly evolving and ephemeral architecture, and a city of instants and disappearances, where “the best of it doesn’t last long.”³⁸

Yet Banham’s assumed kinship with Ruscha appeared somewhat overdetermined even at the time. In the film interview, for instance, Ruscha gives somewhat circumspect answers and implies a continued sense of belatedness when faced with the relocation of favored midcentury landmarks.³⁹ For that matter, Banham’s take on Los Angeles seems more belated than prescient, corresponding more to what the city had been than to what it was becoming. Projects such as the Convention Center (Charles Luckman, 1971), Pacific Design Center (Cesar Pelli, 1975), Bonaventure Hotel (John Portman, 1976), and Beverly Center (Becket, 1982) appeared soon after the book’s publication, readying Los Angeles for a global age—one less dependent on filling stations

along intercontinental highways and more reliant on air travel from Los Angeles International Airport.

Starting in the early 1970s, new financial and political pressures began to inflect Banham's midcentury Los Angeles. In a historic election in 1973, Tom Bradley replaced the three-term mayor Sam Yorty.⁴⁰ Although annexation and suburbanization had left Los Angeles cash poor, it remained rich in land.⁴¹ After the financial crisis of 1973, mayors across the US, including Bradley, sought to attract new sources of capital by trading on the future value of the city's properties to pay for current growth (echoing decision-making from the 1920s). By the mid-1970s, "the whole of downtown Los Angeles was declared a redevelopment area," as Meredith Drake Reitan and Tridib Banerjee have noted.⁴² Fearing a negative impact on the downtown business core, the commercial elite resisted the dispersal of high-density developments across the L.A. basin, as the Center Concept had advocated. But they did believe that the plan's complete separation of pedestrians from the street would "enhance the convenience, safety, and pleasantness of the core."⁴³

No longer a city of traditional retail-oriented streets, this new L.A., according to Manuel Castells, generated a new typology of spaces and a hierarchical, dynamic network of "flows": "flows of capital, labor, elements of production, commodities, information, decisions, and signals."⁴⁴ Visionary plans to build elevated pedestrian walkways between high-rises to connect the fragmenting sectors of downtown L.A. did not come to pass, leaving pedestrians to negotiate the empty streets and even emptier passages from fortress to fortress.⁴⁵ Not only did signs on buildings become smaller and less interesting but the experience of the city shrank as well (fig. 16.9).

Yet amid this development push, the planned demolition of a significant L.A. landmark prompted a public outcry, in turn producing a tectonic shift in the collective understanding of the city's space and history. The proposed destruction of the Los Angeles Central Library (Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue, 1926) to make way for a large-scale office space in 1978 became the first real challenge to Banham's instant city. For city planners and eager developers, the library—a mere fifty years old—had been rendered



Figure 16.9 Ed Ruscha, 8490 Sunset Boulevard, 1976, digital positive from negative. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.

unnecessary following suburbanization and was now nothing more than an outdated firetrap. For others, it remained a major civic institution steeped in collective history that needed restoration, not destruction. The battle to save it gave birth to a full-fledged cultural-preservation movement, culminating in the creation of the Los Angeles Conservancy that same year.

The successful campaign to save the library sent a clear message: no more treatment of the city as a frictionless surface primed for continual redevelopment.⁴⁶ From then on, conservationists routinely organized to preserve other prewar buildings; they also protected the city's more ephemeral postwar infrastructure, including signage such as the Felix the Cat sign (Wayne E. Heath, 1958) that marked the city's oldest existing car dealership. Ruscha added his own ambiguous commentary with his *Back of Hollywood* (1977), a billboard painting showing a reverse image of the Hollywood Sign at sunset that was temporarily installed in a parking lot on Wilshire Boulevard across from LACMA (fig. 16.10). Coinciding with a star-studded campaign to restore the Hollywood Sign, the billboard indirectly addressed the forward- and backward-looking aspects of contemporary L.A. It also offered a playful reversal of his screen print *Hollywood* (1968), which portrays the front of the sign at dusk—the image that concludes Banham's book. Here, the sunset no longer serves as an object lesson of the instant city; instead, it cues the curtain call between dramatic acts.

By the end of the 1970s, postmodern sensibilities—mashing up past and present, near and far, high and low—entered the mainstream in



Figure 16.10 Ed Ruscha, *Back of Hollywood* billboard on Wilshire Boulevard, 1977. © Ed Ruscha. Robert Landau / Alamy Stock Photo.

architecture, art, and film in ways Banham would never endorse. Dolores Hayden challenged his claim that L.A. lacked any depth of history by retelling the stories of “invisible Angelenos” who had long resided in the basin.⁴⁷ Through major projects such as the Loyola Law School campus (1978–) and the Santa Monica Place shopping mall (1980), Frank Gehry brought the long-standing vernacular sensibilities of the city’s street architecture front and center. Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982), set in a futuristic Los Angeles, privileged a worn-out photograph as proof of “authentic” memory.⁴⁸ If many art practices during the midcentury had actively imagined the future, those of the 1980s worked to legitimize the past, however imperfectly remembered.⁴⁹

Just as the city began to reclaim its multiethnic history while hosting the Summer Olympics in 1984, the two most prominent streets in the SoLA Archive quickly gained vintage status: that same year the Sunset Strip shed its unincorporated status by joining the newly formed city of West Hollywood, while Hollywood Boulevard became a historic district in 1985.⁵⁰ The latter soon began a forty-year “revitalization” as part of the city’s multibillion-dollar Hollywood Redevelopment Project.⁵¹ As Hollywood readied for its expensive facelift, Ruscha left his nearby studio on Western Avenue, a space he had occupied since 1965, and moved to Venice to accommodate the production of bigger work. Interestingly, he also picked his camera up again after a hiatus in street shooting from 1976 to 1985, capturing Sunset at least eight more times over the next fifteen years (fig. 16.11).

In 1989, Ruscha began reprinting photos from the 1960s and 1970s as stand-alone silver gelatin

Figure 16.11 Ruscha Studio inventory of “Streets” shoots. For the full inventory, see https://www.getty.edu/publications/ruscha/_assets/downloads/ruscha-work-list.pdf. © Amy Murphy.



Figure 16.12 Ed Ruscha, *8852 Sunset Boulevard*, 1975, digital positive from negative. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.

prints.⁵² By this time, new photographers had emerged who were documenting many of the same landscapes; but when the city erupted during the Rodney King riots in 1992, Ruscha’s images offered one of the best measures of how much Los Angeles had changed and how much it remained the same, socially and spatially.⁵³ The act of reprinting images helped keep nostalgic impulses in check by destabilizing any sense of what might constitute the good old days. Starting in 1995, he went on to reprint other images from the SoLA Archive (figs. 16.12, 16.13).⁵⁴ His more legible surface manipulations in these images point to a new interest in what we might call the ontology of film emulsion in its ability to tell time.

All these reprintings, including the production of a second SoLA book, would mark a distinct shift in the evolution of the archive—one that permitted more (ac)cumulative, but not definitive, interpretations of the city’s contested spaces. This both/and aspect of the project, as well as its



Figure 16.13 Ed Ruscha, *Filthy McNasty's*, from the *Sunset Strip* series, 1976 (printed 1995), gelatin silver print from altered negative, 20 1/8 × 29 7/8 in. Publisher: Patrick Painter, Vancouver, BC. Edition of 25. Los Angeles, private collection. © Ed Ruscha.

open-ended quality, is critical for the archive's forthcoming digital assemblage.

ANTICIPATING THE ARCHIVE

In 2002, early in his catalogue raisonné project with the master printer Gerhard Steidl, Ruscha suggested rephotographing Hollywood Boulevard.⁵⁵ This resulted in his second SoLA book, *THEN & NOW: Hollywood Boulevard, 1973–2004* (2005), which pairs photos from his first shoot of the boulevard in 1973 with those taken some thirty years later.⁵⁶ In contrast to *Every Building*, this book more explicitly foregrounds the role of time relative to urban space and the city, placing the black-and-white images from the earlier shoot above the more recent color photos.

Any viewer familiar with Ruscha's earlier artist books might find the aesthetics of this new volume unnerving, almost uncharacteristic of Ruscha, as the first shoot's coolness overwhelms the second's vivid coloration. Beyond the overt differences, however, what becomes striking is how the new volume attains both a sense of the passage of time and a record of how much has stayed the same; it captures the same features of L.A. streets that Ruscha fell in love with in the early 1950s. Matt Reynolds has suggested that any initial melancholy gives way to an equally strong sense of eerie repetition. As with the multiple shoots of Sunset Boulevard, the particular character of Hollywood Boulevard emerges with reiterations and retentions from a time before now, despite decades of redevelopment.⁵⁷ In this



Figure 16.14 Aerial view of the Sixth Street Viaduct (designed by Michael Maltzan Architecture), Los Angeles, 2022. Courtesy of Michael Maltzan Architecture, Inc. / HNTB Corporation. Photograph by Iwan Baan.

sense, the contrast between the two sets of images ultimately pushes against the production of nostalgia and instead positions them as an indirect critique of the ways we (mistakenly) remember.

Following the completion of *THEN & NOW*, Ruscha and his team have continued to photograph the streets of Los Angeles at a pace far exceeding the first four decades of this project. In 2011, as Ruscha again moved his studio from Venice to a new facility in Culver City, the Getty Research Institute (GRI) acquired the SoLA Archive. Ruscha's team continues to shoot the city's thoroughfares, much as they did in 1966; Ruscha still stresses that his process remains purposefully egalitarian and unemotional: "Everything gets judiciously photographed, not just the interesting parts of it but everything."⁵⁸

This all-inclusive impulse is perhaps the most enduring legacy of the SoLA endeavor. Ruscha may have stopped making artist books from the SoLA material for now, but the city goes on developing horizontal sites, from the One Santa Fe apartment complex to the Sixth Street Viaduct. (fig. 16.14) As the artist has noted, the SoLA project's real value lies in capturing not what we already know as important but what we might encounter prosaically every day: "the curbs and the drainage channels and power poles and everything else—municipal concrete—that makes the whole study worthwhile."⁵⁹ In 1966, Ruscha saw Sunset Boulevard as "a 22-mile-long canvas, with an evolving history. . . . It had fluid motion, fluid stories, one long horizontal ribbon," all of it asking to be documented.⁶⁰

Despite the hundreds of thousands of Ruscha images now in the GRI's holdings, the archive can never reach "actual size" relative to the city itself.⁶¹ Ruscha has only captured a minute portion of Los Angeles, and Getty has only digitized a relatively small fraction of that. Meanwhile, new photographers from an even broader range of Los Angeles geographies will continue to grapple with the horizontal ribbons marking the landscape, bringing their own perspectives. It will become essential to make room for these alternative imaginaries, as Getty has already begun to do.⁶²

Ruscha once characterized the city of Los Angeles as a place where "everything hangs together; nothing fits."⁶³ This description matches the simultaneously incomplete and expansive realities of the city and archive. The brief overview here of Los Angeles' planning history during the creation of the archive should alert us to the disjunctions in both. To my mind, the empty pages and out-of-order images of Ruscha's books from the 1960s should help us anticipate the type of archive or database the SoLA project could become. Resembling Los Angeles' first streets with their purposefully empty spaces, laid out to spur engagement and development, the open-platform armature of this growing digital archive holds the promise of inclusivity, dialogue, and further expansion.

NOTES

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1. Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009 [1971]), 21.
2. Harvey Molotch, "The City as a Growth Machine: Toward a Political Economy of Place," *American Journal of Sociology* 82, no. 2 (1976): 309–32.
3. Norman Klein, *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* (London: Verso), 1997.
4. "12 Sunsets: Exploring Ed Ruscha's Archive," Getty, <https://12sunsets.getty.edu>. Always intended to be a limited-term application, the website for "12 Sunsets" will not be maintained. A video capturing some of its capabilities can be found here: <https://vimeo.com/946364401/ba0b654c0d>. Before 2019, Ruscha shot Sunset Boulevard at least twenty times; Hollywood Boulevard, roughly six; Melrose Avenue and Santa Monica Boulevard, four; Pacific Coast Highway, three; and Olympic Boulevard, Wilshire Boulevard, Beverly Boulevard, Pico Boulevard, Venice Boulevard, Fountain Avenue, and Franklin Avenue, twice.
5. Edward Ruscha, "Ed Ruscha Oral History Interview," interview by Rani Singh and Andrew Perchuk, 2011, video, 18:23:35, <http://hdl.handle.net/10020/2012ia115av>. See also Colleen Terry's selected chronology in Karin Breuer et al., *Ed Ruscha and the Great American West* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 193.
6. Ruscha, interview by Singh and Perchuk.
7. See Richard Longstreth, *The Drive-in, the Supermarket, and the Transformation of Commercial Space in Los Angeles, 1914–1941* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), xv, 3–10. By 1936, it became known as the Hollywood Ranch Market, which Ruscha remembers seeing during his trips to Los Angeles as a child. Ed Ruscha, personal communication with author, April 2022.
8. Andrew H. Whittemore, "Zoning Los Angeles: A Brief History of Four Regimes," *Planning Perspectives* 27, no. 3 (2012): 396.
9. Whittemore, "Zoning Los Angeles," 393–415. Whittemore suggests property values could increase as much as 300 percent on land upzoned to commercial use.
10. Douglas R. Suisman, *Los Angeles Boulevard: Eight X-Rays of the Body Public* (Novato: ORO, 2014 [1989]), 64.
11. Martin Gayford, "Ed Ruscha: Interview," *Telegraph*, 25 September 2009. Here Ruscha remembers his eyes stinging from the smog.
12. David Lowenthal, "The American Scene," *Geographical Review* 58, no. 1 (1968): 76.
13. Sebastian Smee, "Ed Ruscha's Stunning Sunset Strip Art Project Lets You Tour Its Full Length, East to West—and Back in Time," *Washington Post*, 9 January 2021, E.1, https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/ed-ruscha-sunset-strip-getty/2021/01/07/5c14e6ba-4f89-11eb-bda4-615aaefd0555_story.html.
14. This era parallels Ruscha's pre-Los Angeles life, as he was born in 1937 and arrived in L.A. in 1956.
15. William Fulton, *The Reluctant Metropolis: The Politics of Urban Growth in Los Angeles* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 136. See also Meredith Drake Reitan and Tridib Banerjee, "Kevin Lynch in Los Angeles: Reflections of Planning, Politics, and Participation," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 84, no. 3–4 (2018): 221–24.
16. In 1956, the historic height limit for new development in downtown Los Angeles was repealed, allowing structures to exceed the height of city hall.
17. See U.S. Bureau of the Census, *A Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 79th ed. (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1958), 15. In 1940, the total population of Los Angeles-Long Beach region was 2,916,403; in 1950, 4,367,911. See U.S. Bureau of the Census, *A Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 95th ed. (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1974), 22. In 1960, the total population of the same area was 6,039,000; in 1970, it was approximately 7,042,000 (rounded up to the one thousandth).
18. Images documenting these other L.A. landscapes might include Ansel Adams, *Interchange, Los Angeles Freeway* (1967); Arnold Hylen, *The Brousseau Mansion* (1960); and Harry Adams, *Street View, Los Angeles* (1968).
19. Examples of books composed with blank pages include: *Various Small Fires and Milk* (1964), *Real Estate Opportunities* (1970), and *A Few Palm Trees* (1971). See also Jaleh Mansoor, "Ed Ruscha's 'One-Way Street,'" *October* 111 (Winter 2005): 127–42. Mansoor briefly examines the aesthetic and cultural "value" of empty sites.
20. Ed Ruscha, quoted in Clive Phillpot, "Sixteen Books and Then Some," in *Edward Ruscha: Editions, 1959–1999; Catalogue Raisonné*, ed. Siri Engberg and Clive Phillpot, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), 59.
21. For a history of the studio, see Bill Bradley, *Commercial Los Angeles 1925–1947: Photographs from the "Dick" Whittington Studio* (Glendale: Interurban, 1981).
22. See Virginia Heckert, *Ed Ruscha and Some Los Angeles Apartments*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2013), 13–14. Ruscha states that he would have simply bought images to make his early books, but the ones he wanted did not exist, so he had to create them himself.

23. Dave Hickey, "Wacky Molière Lines: A Listener's Guide to Ed-werd Rew-shay," *Parkett* 18 (1988): 29.
24. Peter Blake, *God's Own Junkyard: The Planned Deterioration of America's Landscape* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1964); and Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966). See also Gabrielle Esperdy, "Ugly America," *Places Journal*, November 2014, <https://doi.org/10.22269/141120>.
25. Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960); and Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961). For more on ducks and decorated sheds, see Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001 [1977]), 87–90.
26. Just before the onset of this discourse around vernacular architecture, historian Esther McCoy published *Five California Architects* (New York: Reinhold, 1960), acting as a type of capstone celebration of the purer modernist tradition in Los Angeles architecture.
27. M. H. Miller, "Ed Ruscha: He Up and Went Home," *New York Times*, 15 January 2020, sec. AR, 16.
28. J. B. Jackson, "The American Public Space," *National Affairs: The Public Interest* 74 (1984): 52–65.
29. Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction*, 16.
30. Mansoor, "Ed Ruscha's 'One-Way Street,'" 133.
31. See also Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (1990): 105–43.
32. See *Concept Los Angeles: The Concept for the Los Angeles General Plan* (Los Angeles: Department of City Planning, 1970, approved 1972).
33. In 1967, the Department of City Planning, under the leadership of Calvin Hamilton, sought public input on the future direction of urban development, framing the choices around four alternative concepts: centers, dispersion, corridors, and low density. A Los Angeles that was multicentered and dispersed was the most popular. The Centers Concept was officially adopted as part of the General Plan in 1974.
34. Article 34 (1950) gave taxpayers the right to reject low-income housing projects in their communities, while Proposition 14 (1964) sought to nullify the recently federally approved Rumford Fair Housing Act (1963), which outlawed racial discrimination in the selling or renting of real estate. A majority of voters initially approved both provisions. Proposition 14 was ruled unconstitutional in 1966, while Article 34 remains in place today.
35. For the source of Ruscha's "nail down and capture" quote, see Miller, "Ed Ruscha," <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/15/arts/design/ed-ruscha.html>. For a discussion of Ruscha's impulse to record the disappearing city, see Miller, "Ed Ruscha," 16.
36. Following the OPEC oil embargo, the number of gas stations in Los Angeles County dropped by 46 percent. See Mary Melton, "A Brief History of the Mini-Mall," *Los Angeles Times*, 16 November 1997, 26. The number of banks decreased as well. See Deborah Vankin, "65,000 Photos of Sunset Boulevard: Take the Ultimate Road Trip with Ed Ruscha," *Los Angeles Times*, 7 October 2020.
37. Some architectural historians attributed Banham's early technomodernist influences as complicating any appreciation of early postmodernism. See Anthony Vidler, "Aformal Affinities," *Artforum* 39, no. 10 (2001): 141–49. Vidler suggests Banham similarly categorized Frank Gehry within the (optimistic) history of California modernism.
38. See Cécile Whiting, *Pop L.A.: Art and the City in the 1960s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 10–15. Whiting starts to tease out some distinctions in Ruscha's influence on others such as Banham and Venturi.
39. For instance, Tiny Naylor's was closed in 1984 and demolished a year later.
40. Fulton, *Reluctant Metropolis*, 135.
41. Fulton, *Reluctant Metropolis*, 235.
42. Reitan and Banerjee, "Kevin Lynch," 218.
43. From *Concept Los Angeles*, 14.
44. Manuel Castells, *The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 314, as cited in Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 42. Regarding what was called the "Haagenization" of public space, see Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Random House, 1990), 223–25.
45. This system of elevated walkways was known as the Calvin S. Hamilton Pedway, and portions of it were built until the plan was ultimately abandoned. See the original report on this walkway, also known as the Los Angeles Downtown People Mover, which planned to connect the Convention Center to the Bonaventure and other downtown locations: "Los Angeles Downtown People Mover: Executive Summary," April 1980, http://libraryarchives.metro.net/DPGTL/ladowntownpeoplemover/1980_ladpm_executive_summary.pdf.
46. David Gebhard and Robert Winter published the first edition of their *Guide to Architecture in Southern California* in 1965 with LACMA. The authors reissued an expanded second edition in 1977 (Peregrine Smith), followed by editions in 1985, 1994, 2003 (Gibbs Smith), and 2018 (Angel City Press).
47. She arrived in 1979. See Hayden, *The Power of Place*, 83–96. Hayden notes that only 2 percent of historical markers designated the history of 60 percent of the population, with the remaining 98 percent commemorating white American culture since the city's settlement.
48. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origin of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 312.
49. I am thinking here of Roland Barthes's influential book, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1981).
50. The Olympic Arts Festival coincided with the summer games and was followed three years later by the biennial Los Angeles Festival (1987–91).
51. Matt Reynolds, "Landscape in Motion: Nostalgia and Urban Redevelopment in Ed Ruscha's *Then & Now: Hollywood Boulevard, 1973–2004*," *Journal of Urban History* 41, no. 6 (2015): 1052–72.
52. For discussion of what Ruscha calls his "waste-and-retrieval" method of making art, see Sylvia Wolf, *Ed Ruscha and Photography*, exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2004), 220.
53. These photos arguably form a dialogue with those of other photographers from this era. See the following works: Catherine Opie, *Untitled #2 (Mini-Malls)* (1997); and Robbert Flick, *LD SV970121 Alameda B* (1997).
54. Wolf, *Ed Ruscha and Photography*, 216.
55. Engberg and Phillpot, *Edward Ruscha: Editions, 1959–1999; Catalogue Raisonné*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999).
56. Wolf, *Ed Ruscha and Photography*, 261; and Ed Ruscha, *THEN & NOW: Hollywood Boulevard, 1973–2004* (Göttingen: Stiedl, 2005). With regard to *THEN & NOW*'s presentation of one site at two different moments, Ruscha recalls how, during a postcollege visit to Toledo, Spain, he became fascinated with El Greco's paintings of the city and began taking photographs from similar spots; he returned to this idea in the 1970s after discovering James Rodney Hastings and Raymond M. Turner's study *The Changing Mile: An Ecological Study of the Vegetation of Change with Time in the Lower Mile of an Arid and Semiarid Region* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1965). Ruscha, personal communication with author, April 2022.
57. Reynolds, "Landscape in Motion," 1063.
58. Wolf, *Ed Ruscha and Photography*, 251. See also Jonathan Griffin, "From Ruscha with Love," *Apollo* 174, no. 591 (2011): 64–65.
59. Vankin, "65,000 Photos of Sunset Boulevard."
60. Vankin, "65,000 Photos of Sunset Boulevard."
61. Ken D. Allan, "Ed Ruscha, Pop Art, and Spectatorship in 1960s Los Angeles," *Art Bulletin* 92, no. 3 (2010): 232–36. Throughout his career,

Ruscha has played with the idea of scale, starting with his early painting *Actual Size* (1962).

62. See, for instance, Guadalupe Rosales's more personal photograph of the new Sixth Street Viaduct taken from East Los Angeles, included in the Whitney Biennial of 2022. The GRI has begun to address this relationship between the Ruscha collection and contemporary artists in their Imaginaries of L.A. conversation series: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLdcw4RhcvX8uQuYLoCn8HkA1pCCRQjkAo>.
63. Hickey, "Wacky Molière Lines," 29.

Streets of Another Los Angeles: Geographies of Exclusion and Difference

Eric Avila

Among those whom [Reyner] Banham thanks in the prologue are . . . a collection of people whose in-city trips east of Main Street or south of Olympic could be counted on Mickey Mouse's fingers.

—Peter Plagens

What the world knows as Sunset Boulevard used to be a dirt trail along the foothills of the Santa Monica Mountains that supported cultural exchange between the Chumash and Tongva peoples of pre-Hispanic California for thousands of years. Under Spanish colonization after 1781, that trail provided access to the Pacific Ocean for soldiers and missionaries. And during Mexico's brief claim to the land, the route connected the sprawling ranchos of Los Feliz, San Vicente and Santa Monica, La Brea, and Las Cienegas. In those days, more livestock than people treaded that path.

Forty years after the US conquest of Mexico in the Mexican-American War (1846–48), that path became Sunset Boulevard; it was parceled according to the ideology of private property ownership and segmented for residential, commercial, and industrial uses. Beginning in the 1890s, Sunset was paved by local governments and adapted to successive patterns of transportation. Roughly between 1910 and 1950, streetcars ran along the eastern portions of the

boulevard, through the communities of Hollywood, Silver Lake, and Echo Park. But they did not reach its western portions—Beverly Hills, Bel Air, Brentwood, and Pacific Palisades, where automobile ownership precluded the need or desire for accessible public transit.

The twentieth century enlarged the commercial portions of Sunset to serve the voracious appetite of the expanding film, radio, television, and recording industries. It supported a low-rise, automobile-friendly landscape of entertainment studios in addition to the many businesses and services that catered to the workers in these areas, such as restaurants, bars, hotels, parking lots, car washes, gas stations, and the like. A star of film and popular music, Sunset Boulevard earned renowned stature as the manufacturing center of fame and glamour. By 1960, it rivaled New York's Madison Avenue as the seat of the US culture industry.

It is therefore not surprising that Sunset Boulevard is where Ed Ruscha began one aspect of his celebrated career as a Los Angeles artist, assembling vast and precise photo archives of select L.A. streets. Where else would a starstruck Midwesterner go upon arriving in Los Angeles of the 1960s? Sunset Boulevard made sense for a young sojourner steeped in a long-standing affection for Hollywood film, someone who had treaded the westward path of the Dust Bowl

migration and embraced the mobility and freedom afforded by the city's car culture. Thus, in 1965, Ruscha drove east on Sunset from the Pacific Coast Highway, took lots of pictures, and made a book. The rest is legend: his prolific output of paintings, prints, collages, drawings, photographs, books, films, and other media; his associations with pop and postpop art; and the ubiquitous presence of his work in the world's most eminent galleries and museums. While many visual artists have made their name in Los Angeles, few have commanded the prestige, celebrity, and wealth that Ruscha has amassed since the 1960s.

In a moment of social upheaval and political ferment, Ruscha became well known in the burgeoning L.A. art world through his prodigious output, status, and influence. It seems that in the late 1960s, Ruscha's center of gravity, inspiration, or opportunity was at the vital corner of La Cienega and Sunset Boulevards, where Hollywood's movers and shakers rubbed elbows with a new art cognoscenti that opened a hip strip of white-wall galleries. Pursuing these social connections while sporting good looks and some macho swagger, Ruscha produced art that was welcomed by cultural elites eager to assert their city as a new New York, a center of creative innovation bolstered by hot real estate and cool art.

His photobooks in particular, like *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966), resonated within an intellectual revolution underway by the late 1960s. Ruscha's photos fueled a revision of the car-oriented strip urbanism modeled by Los Angeles and Las Vegas and analyzed by the likes of Reyner Banham, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour, and others, who validated consumer culture and its shaping of western landscapes.¹ Their work is profiled elsewhere in this volume, but these scholars credited Ruscha for many of their insights. Banham, for example, borrowed some of Ruscha's photographs to bolster his argument in *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (1971) and saluted the artist as the "local talent" who portrayed gas stations as monuments in their own right.² Ruscha's photographs of L.A.'s built environment also drew praise from Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour, who authored the influential study of strip architecture, *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972). Scott Brown in particular was a huge fan of Ruscha and frequently cited his work. She lauded

the "deadpan" nature of his photographs (a since-frequent descriptor of Ruscha's work) and argued that the "nonjudgmental" character of these images should be emulated by future generations of architects and planners. She appreciated the apparent neutrality of his visual compilation and the image's ability to "speak for itself."³

But the key question is whether Ruscha's work can fairly be called "nonjudgmental." Can one create a neutral, deadpan, or nonjudgmental portrait of a landscape shaped by bias, judgment, and prejudice over time? Sunset Boulevard, like all L.A. streets, follows a clear geography of racial and class disparities that took shape through public policy and private practice over the course of the twentieth century. In the 1910s and 1920s, the plotting of communities like Beverly Hills followed strict measures of racial exclusion through policies like zoning and through the efforts of white homeowners who formed associations and inserted clauses into property deeds to maintain the whiteness of their Sunset-adjacent neighborhoods.⁴

These efforts were undergirded by federal policies during the 1930s. Through the creation of the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) in 1933, a federal agency charged with restructuring the housing mortgage market during the slump of the Great Depression, the federal government enforced Sunset Boulevard as a boundary that demarcated race, wealth, and property on L.A.'s Westside. Through its extensive appraisals of urban neighborhoods between 1933 and 1940, HOLC established color-coded maps that identified the safest and riskiest areas for property investment. The four colors—green, blue, yellow, and red—corresponded primarily to the social composition of urban neighborhoods as well as to the uses and condition of buildings in the area. Green areas were generally wealthy—"homogenous" and "protected" by deed restrictions and safest for investment—while blue areas were considered less so, but still safe. Yellow areas were risky, but not as much as red or "redlined" areas, where "slum conditions" prevailed and where "negroes" were present. The area identified as Sunset Plaza, A-35 on the HOLC map (located between La Cienega Boulevard and Doheny Drive), is typical of many portions of Sunset Boulevard, characterized by the federal agency as "in demand," where "deed restrictions protect against subversive racial influence."⁵ In

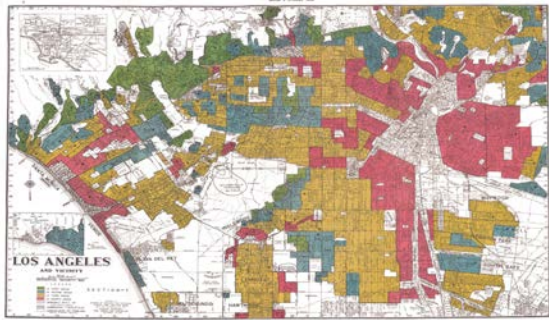


Figure 17.1 Home Owners' Loan Corporation, *Los Angeles and Vicinity*, 1939. Courtesy of Mapping Inequality.

fact, from Hollywood west to Pacific Palisades, Sunset Boulevard lines a stretch of green neighborhoods, ones that were generally off-limits to African Americans and other racial groups (fig. 17.1).⁶

The postmodernist's plea to learn from Las Vegas and Los Angeles—to accept their commercial strips *nonjudgmentally*, as a necessary break from the elitist orthodoxy of modernist urban design—requires one's judgment to ignore the histories of redlining, zoning and deed restrictions, and property and homeowners' associations. The combined forces of these acts built walls around much of Sunset, keeping white communities within its bounds while formally or informally excluding people of color. For instance, the Beverly Hills Hotel excluded Black guests for much of its history, including Paul R. Williams who designed the building; the original Warner Brothers studio would not hire any African American workers during the studio era of film production; and the city of West Hollywood denied the first application to open a Black nightclub on the Sunset Strip in 1985. These are just a few known examples of how Southern California's legacy of white racism has structured the meaning and experience of Ruscha's Sunset Boulevard.

Between the Pacific Ocean and downtown Los Angeles, Sunset crosses mostly green and blue neighborhoods on the HOLC map, and then it veers into yellow, even a little red, on its eastern flank. Further east, however, beyond the corner of Alameda Street and Sunset, where Ruscha took a U-turn to head back to the Westside, we venture into the red zone—a deep red zone “literally honeycombed with diverse and subversive racial elements.”⁷ Such was how the HOLC officially

characterized the neighborhood of Boyle Heights.

Boyle Heights is absent from visual records and scholarly accounts of significant architecture in post-World War II Los Angeles. Banham ignored the area, as did Ruscha, David Hockney, Esther McCoy, David Gebhard, and Robert Winter for that matter; even Julius Shulman, who grew up in that neighborhood, moved to Laurel Canyon.⁸ Until only very recently, the area has been terra incognita for those who claim to have learned the lessons of urbanization in L.A., even though it is one of the oldest residential settlements in the city's history, dating back to the nineteenth century. Before there was Beverly Hills, there was Boyle Heights.⁹

In significant ways, the HOLC created a blueprint for the upheaval unleashed on Boyle Heights in the mid-twentieth century. While the myth of midcentury Los Angeles—read the Westside—took shape through the praise heaped upon monumental gas stations, dingbats, Googie coffee shops, and Case Study Houses, the social profile of Boyle Heights underwent profound changes. What began as a racially and ethnically diverse working-class neighborhood in the early twentieth century had transitioned to a more monolithic concentration of Mexican American poverty saddled with toxic infrastructure and depleted by white flight. Through these forces, the barrio was born in L.A., becoming the nation's largest by the 1970s.¹⁰

If Boyle Heights was the heart of East Los Angeles, Whittier Boulevard was its spine. A street roughly as old as Sunset, Whittier Boulevard similarly crosses city and county boundaries that produce uneven patterns of development along commercial and residential lines. Unlike Sunset, whose proximity to the entertainment industry brought affluence to the area, Whittier Boulevard did not enjoy this kind of wealth. In the middle-class communities of Montebello and Whittier, however, the boulevard exhibited some of the commercial vitality and architectural exuberance that captivated the mandarins of pop and modernism in L.A., but nothing compared to the glamorous glow of Sunset Boulevard.

Whittier Boulevard has anchored Latino Los Angeles for a long time, dating back a century, if not longer. Because of racial restrictions in many areas of L.A., along with a host of other factors,

Mexicans have concentrated in East Los Angeles since the early twentieth century (and way before that as well), and Whittier Boulevard has been a main thoroughfare in the area. The street not only provided a focus for commercial and residential life but it also supported a vibrant public life that was pedestrian-friendly and allowed for socializing in markets, restaurants, theaters, burger stands, car washes, laundromats, sidewalks, and other commercial venues. This public life took shape against the odds of redlining and its consequences, including white flight, highway construction, racial segregation, and inferior public services.

Unlike Sunset, Whittier Boulevard has been truncated by the intersection of several major freeways, which converge along the western segment. Between the Los Angeles River and Soto Street, Whittier Boulevard tangles with the East Los Angeles interchange, where the 10, 60, 101, and 5 Freeways converge. Farther east, the boulevard bisects the 710 Freeway as it winds its way south toward the Port of Los Angeles. The communities aligned along the western portion of Whittier Boulevard were described as evidence of “slum conditions” in East Los Angeles by the HOLC survey form, which also included a prescription for “rehabilitation.” Because “slum conditions prevail,” the HOLC official noted that “the federal government . . . in conjunction with the city government [is] undertaking a slum clearance project . . . in the area.”¹¹

That last sentence portended ominous consequences for the fate of Boyle Heights. During the postwar period, state and federal highway agencies worked in tandem with slum clearance efforts in cities throughout the nation. In many instances, alternative housing accommodations were not provided for families who were dislodged from what were deemed slums. Highway construction decimated about one-tenth of the housing stock in Boyle Heights alone, putting additional strain on the remaining housing supply.¹² Like other redlined areas in US cities, Boyle Heights and the neighborhoods of East Los Angeles languished from lack of investment, accommodating the further influx of poor, working-class people of color, even as bulldozers and wrecking balls tore the land asunder. Between 1950 and 1970, three massive freeway interchanges were constructed where six

major freeways converge in the area, defining the heart of the L.A. freeway system.

While the culture and landscape of the city’s Westside commanded the attention of artists, journalists, film directors, and rock stars, the material conditions of East Los Angeles neighborhoods fell further into disrepair and neglect. Nonetheless, the area supported a culturally vibrant public life based on family networks and workplace connections as well as on the bonds formed in schools, churches, restaurants, and markets. As immigration from Mexico surged in the latter decades of the twentieth century, Mexican immigrants joined preexisting generations of Mexican Americans, enhancing the vitality of Boyle Heights as a binational, bilingual cultural zone. By the late 1960s, this new community had replaced an ethnically, racially, linguistically, and religiously diverse working-class community, what once had been recognized as late as the mid-1950s as a “U.N. in Microcosm.”¹³

The diminished diversity of East Los Angeles and the expanding population of residents of Mexican descent made the area a frequent target for local law enforcement, whether by L.A. police officers or L.A. County sheriffs. As far back as 1943, for example, Chicano youth became suspect during the infamous so-called Zoot Suit riots. The Sixth Street Bridge across the L.A. River, where Whittier Boulevard begins to the west, became a stage for the unprovoked racial attacks on Chicano zoot-suiters by white servicemen. In the violent confrontation, law enforcement sided with the attackers, fixated on the zoot suit as evidence of criminality, and blamed the victims of a citywide racial assault. In the 1950s and 1960s, Whittier Boulevard became a popular strip for Chicano hot-rodders and drag racing, spurring confrontations with county sheriffs and L.A. police officers who patrolled the street and often closed it to discourage this activity.¹⁴

During the 1960s, a new generation of Mexican American activists—the Chicano generation—marched down Whittier Boulevard to protest the many forms of injustice that beleaguered their community. In the spring of 1968, thousands of students from multiple public high schools in East Los Angeles walked out of their classrooms to protest the prevalence of overcrowded classrooms, high dropout rates, and the lack of teachers and counselors of Mexican descent. The

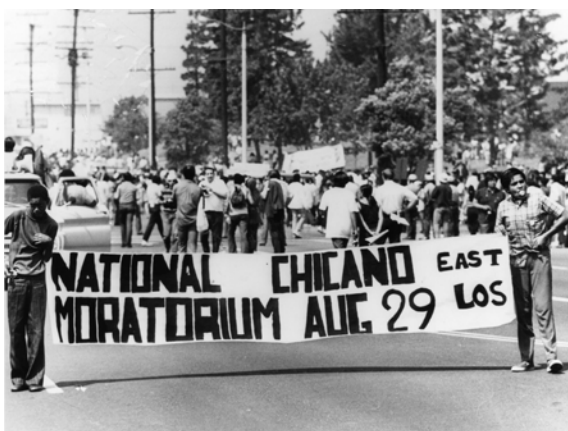


Figure 17.2 Sal Castro, National Chicano Moratorium march, 1970, copy print, 8 × 10 in. Los Angeles, Los Angeles Public Library, Security Pacific National Bank Collection.

protesters marched along Whittier Boulevard to demonstrate that they were fed up with the segregated and inferior conditions of their public education, making the East L.A. walkouts the first battle cry of a politicized Chicano community.¹⁵

Whittier Boulevard was also the site of the National Chicano Moratorium in 1970, when twenty to twenty-five thousand people, mostly local families and children, took to the boulevard to peacefully protest the Vietnam War and the disproportionate number of Chicano youth killed in combat (fig. 17.2). With signs declaring “Chicano Power” and “Raza Si, Guerra No!,” protesters converged upon Laguna Park, which was under the county jurisdiction of Sheriff Peter J. Pitchess, who was convinced that Chicano activists in East L.A. were tied to communist Russia and advocated a hard line against Eastside protesters. Despite the peaceful nature of the protest, scores and eventually hundreds of cops and deputies in riot gear stormed into the park with batons to break up the crowds, beating people who intimidated any signs of resistance. Chicano organizers who monitored the day’s events to ensure public safety and discourage nonpeaceful outbursts were beaten and arrested. Bystanders were attacked, as were local residents, including older men and women. Tear gas flooded a three-mile stretch of Whittier Boulevard, which essentially became a war zone.

Four people died at the hands of sheriffs during the melee, including Ruben Salazar, a *Los Angeles Times* journalist who investigated racism and corruption within local law enforcement

agencies. Salazar died while seated at the Silver Dollar, a bar on Whittier Boulevard near Laguna Park. A sheriff, acting on unverified reports that two men with guns entered the bar, fired a tear gas canister into the Silver Dollar from the street. The projectile entered Salazar’s head from the left and came out on the right, killing him instantly. Hours before his death, Salazar confided to his associates that he believed he was a police target for his reporting, and that federal investigators had colluded with local law enforcement to infiltrate the Moratorium and create disruptions that justified severe police repression. Salazar’s warnings were ignored in official investigations of his death, but community members remain convinced of his assassination.

Other contemporary East Los Angeles artists contributed to the broader development of a street-based art that exposed the crisis of a barrio under siege. After the chaos of the walkouts and Moratorium, for example, Whittier Boulevard became a stage for the theatrical antics of the Chicano conceptual art group Asco, which is Spanish for “nausea.” Harry Gamboa Jr., Patssi Valdez, and Willie Herrón III—three Garfield High School students who participated in the walkouts—met in their senior year and soon joined Gronk (Glugio Nicandro) to forge Asco out of their common experiences as kids from the barrio. During the height of the Chicano movement, Asco created performance-based art rooted in humor and satire, staging tactical interventions and guerrilla practices that bore resemblance to Fluxus and Dada as well as Mexican art groups of the 1970s and 1980s called *grupos* and Mexican street performances known as *merolicos*. Asco used the familiar tactics of Chicano activism—street protests, graffiti, and leaflets—to articulate a political critique through performative art, grounded in public spaces like Whittier Boulevard.¹⁶

In its formative years during the early 1970s, Asco dedicated much of its work to reclaiming Whittier Boulevard in a moment of intense police repression. For months after the Moratorium, East L.A. had been under unofficial martial law, with parking bans, street closures, and police sweeps after 6 p.m. In the immediate aftermath of a curfew, Asco performed *First Supper (After a Major Riot)* (1974), in which they wore elaborate

costumes and makeup to stage a formal dinner party on a traffic median of Whittier Boulevard at rush hour (fig. 17.3). Arousing curiosity from drivers passing by, this absurdist spectacle underscored Asco's political claims to the boulevard. As Gronk recalled in a recent interview, "We all had ten cents in our pocket in case we had to make that phone call from jail."¹⁷ Asco had begun its run on Whittier Boulevard in 1971 with what they called "walking murals" such as *Stations of the Cross*. In this performance, Gronk dressed as Pontius Pilate, blessing onlookers with popcorn, while Herrón led a procession down Whittier Boulevard as a *calavera* (skeleton)/Christ figure carrying a large cardboard cross. When the procession reached the entrance to a US Marines recruiting center, Gronk performed a ritual blessing and Herrón left the cross at the doorstep. This was followed by five minutes of silence to remember the Chicano lives lost in the Vietnam War. The following year, in response to the county's cancellation of the annual Christmas parade along Whittier Boulevard, Asco reasserted its presence with *Walking Mural*—a "nonparade," in the words of Gronk.¹⁸ With Valdez dressed as the "Virgin of Guadalupe in black," Asco staged a silent procession with friends walking in solidarity.



Figure 17.3 Asco, *First Supper (After a Major Riot)*, 1974 (printed 2011), chromogenic print, 16 × 20 in. Edition 2/10. New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, 2014.45. Purchase, with funds from the Photography Committee. Whitney Museum of American Art / Licensed by Scala / Art Resource, NY. © 1974, Harry Gamboa Jr.

Asco's grounding in the streets of East L.A. marked a sharp contrast to the roving camera of Ruscha. The members of Asco put their bodies on the street, documented their presence, created spectacle, sparked attention, and used local

signage, storefronts, and sidewalks as backdrops for their staged performances. In doing so, they boldly staked a claim on their local landscape to assert the beauty, dignity, and glamour of the Chicano barrio. Ruscha, by contrast, used an automobile to help him depict the fluidity of the L.A. street space, leaving out any traces of people and their place within it. Asco's determination to reclaim East L.A. through street-based performance art reflected a willingness to take sides in the larger struggle between the law-and-order thrust of racist urban policies and the community-based aspirations of self-empowerment and self-determination. That struggle is wholly absent from Ruscha's work, as it is largely absent from the streets of West Los Angeles, which remained untouched by the discriminatory impact of redlining, police surveillance, and highway construction.

The ephemeral nature of Asco's street performances demanded a permanent visual record through film and photography. As a founding member, Gamboa brought his camera to Asco's guerilla performances, documenting the group's work with an archivist's sense of dutiful preservation. Other barrio-bound Chicano photographers also captured Asco's work, with an eye toward the urban context of Whittier Boulevard and its built environment. Elsa Flores, for instance, focused on the outpouring of creative work in East L.A., photographing Asco's conceptual performances as well the work of other East L.A. Chicano artists like Frank Romero and Carlos Almaraz. After learning photography in the military while stationed in Japan, Oscar Castillo came back to East L.A. to create a visual record of Chicano culture and politics. His iconic images of Mexican Americans marching down Whittier Boulevard during the Chicano Moratorium have shaped the public's memory of the event and solidified the stature of the boulevard as the cradle of the Chicano movement. Unlike Ruscha's photographs of Sunset, however, Castillo's portraits of Whittier Boulevard are packed with Mexican Americans of all ages who fashioned a distinctive Chicano identity in a time of urban upheaval and political unrest. Also, unlike Ruscha, Castillo, like his contemporaries in East L.A., did not win mainstream recognition for his work until only recently.

In addition to photography and performance art, East L.A. also sustained a growing corps of

painters and muralists, who, like the members of Asco, fully immersed themselves in the politicized climate of the 1960s and 1970s. They also similarly pursued art making as a collaborative endeavor, forming art collectives that defied the traditional Euro-American emphasis on singular artistic genius (of straight white men). Ruscha was a collaborator, too; indeed, his *Streets of Los Angeles* project was more of a team effort than a one-man show. But, the general reception of his work—and the artistic milieu of West Los Angeles—emphasized the singular talent of an individual artist, not the efforts of artistic teams working collectively to help solve a community's problems. East Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s cultivated a different art culture. Through student networks in art schools, county job-training programs, political groups dedicated to racial justice, and informal associations, Chicano and Chicana artists forged collectives as a deliberate strategy to resist the individualistic ethos of white Western society and bolster the shared ties of a community under siege.

Throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, several of these collectives took shape on the Eastside, including the Mechicano Art Center and the East Los Streetscapers. During its nine-year history, for example, Mechicano dedicated itself to the search for an art that heals the wounds inflicted by police repression and social injustice. Its founder, Victor Franco, was a community activist with significant ties to other community-based organizations. Although Mechicano initially debuted in a small storefront space on La Cienega Boulevard, high rents in the area forced Franco to relocate his gallery to the Eastside, where Chicano art was flourishing. With funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, he secured a space at 4030 Whittier Boulevard—an abandoned laundromat—to create a dynamic art center in East L.A. dedicated to promoting Chicano artists and their work. The East Los Streetscapers was formed by East L.A. natives David Botello and Wayne Healy in 1975. And like Mechicano, they brought Mexican muralism, which emphasized the history of Mexico's pre-Hispanic civilizations, to the streets of East Los Angeles. For these artists who pioneered the Chicano mural movement, murals beautified a neighborhood decimated by highway construction and police brutality, and taught residents about their own history and community.¹⁹

Another pioneer of the Chicano mural movement was Judy Baca, born and raised in Pacoima, which became a satellite barrio in the San Fernando Valley by the 1970s. Straddling the Chicano and feminist movements of the early 1970s, Baca trained as a muralist under the tutelage of the renowned Mexican artist David Alfaro Siqueiros. Beginning around 1973, Baca began work on an ambitious project to paint a lengthy mural that would become known as *The Great Wall of Los Angeles*. This mural stretches more than half a mile across a concrete channel in the San Fernando Valley known as the Tujunga Wash, which replaced the Tujunga River when the US Army Corps of Engineers channelized the L.A. River and its tributaries as a means of flood control in the 1930s and 1940s. Such foreboding spaces present a challenge but also an opportunity for barrio artists like Judy Baca, who described *The Great Wall* as a tattoo on the scar of what used to be the L.A. River.²⁰

In the tradition of Mexican muralism, *The Great Wall* brings vitality to the lifeless expanses of concrete shaped by modernist interventions in the twentieth-century urban landscape. It documents an alternative people's history of Los Angeles and California, with scenes that emphasize the experiences and perspectives of marginal social groups, including Indigenous peoples, women, immigrants, workers, Black Americans, and LGBTQ communities. Specifically, the mural conveys how Mexican American communities in East L.A. bore the brunt of highway construction in the 1950s and 1960s as well as the communal residue of suspicion and mistrust toward large-scale state interventions.²¹ In one panel portraying post-World War II L.A., a writhing, almost serpentine, freeway separates a Mexican American family and crashes upon the barrio landscape below. This scene is situated alongside the portrait of the Chavez Ravine, where Dodger Stadium collides into the remains of a Mexican American neighborhood amid great public controversy and community indignation (fig. 17.4).

Like Baca, many Chicano artists had a score to settle with L.A.'s freeways. These artists witnessed the encroachment of freeway infrastructure upon their neighborhoods and turned to art to make sense of the upheaval in their midst. In their search for an art that recognized the Mexican



Figure 17.4 Judy Baca, "Division of the Barrios & Chavez Ravine," a detail from the 1950s section of *The Great Wall of Los Angeles*, 1983. Image courtesy of the SPARC Archives SPARCinLA.org.



Figure 17.5 David Botello, *Wedding Photos-Hollenbeck Park*, 1990, oil on canvas, 47 1/2 × 35 1/4 in. Riverside, California, The Cheech Marin Center for Chicano Art and Culture, Riverside Art Museum. © 1990 David Botello.

American barrio as a landscape of beauty, vitality, violence, and injustice, these artists looked at freeways head on to capture this inherent paradox. For instance, the freeway figures prominently in canvas paintings by Botello, who, after his involvement in the East Los Streetscapers, returned to his original training as a painter to depict scenes of everyday life in the East L.A. barrio. In *Wedding Photos-Hollenbeck Park* (2004), the freeway lurks in the background of a wedding held at a public park, casting a long shadow over the neighborhood landscape (fig. 17.5).

When the art collective Los Four disbanded in 1983, after the heyday of the Chicano movement, two of its founding members, Frank Romero and Carlos Almaraz, retreated to their studios to focus their attention on the dominant features of East



Figure 17.6 Frank Romero, *Pink Landscape*, 1984, oil on canvas, 60 1/4 × 36 in. Riverside, California, The Cheech Marin Center for Chicano Art and Culture, Riverside Art Museum. © Frank Romero.

L.A.'s landscape. Born in Boyle Heights in 1941, Romero relied on streetcars in his youth, but the invasion of freeways in his neighborhood in the 1950s and 1960s changed his perspective. In his studio, Romero began painting scenes of the East L.A. barrio, and the freeway figured prominently in his vision, as it did in the scenery of his community. That representational correspondence took a turn in the 1980s, when Romero began painting more abstract images of L.A. freeways and their sinuous forms. Such abstractions, as shown in his painting *Pink Landscape* (1984), however, were rooted in the massive concrete forms that dominate Boyle Heights today (fig. 17.6).

Almaraz earned acclaim for his paintings on canvas toward the end of his stint with Los Four, especially after his death from an AIDS-related illness in 1989. Among his last and most famous accomplishments were his car crash paintings. These paintings, including *Crash in Phthalto Green* (1984), convey explosive disasters on freeways, one driving catastrophe after another in abstract eruptions of fire, motion, and brilliant color (fig. 17.7). Almaraz's studio was located on the southern edge of Echo Park Lake (a blank space on Ruscha's mapping project of Sunset Boulevard), just north of the 101 Freeway. There, the artist found inspiration from the unique predicament of living between a "very serene lake" and "the Hollywood Freeway, which literally has crashes going on every few hours. . . . I used to wake up to the sound of metal crunching."²²

Though there are many buildings on Ruscha's Sunset Strip, there are no freeways. In fact, if California's Division of Highways had had its way, a freeway would have imposed itself directly into

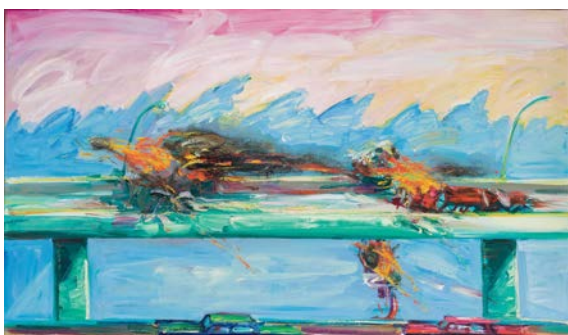


Figure 17.7 Carlos Almaraz, *Crash in Phthalo Green*, 1984, oil on canvas, 42 × 72 in. Los Angeles, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, AC1992.136.1. Gift of the 1992 Collectors Committee. Digital Image © 2025 Museum Associates / LACMA. Licensed by Art Resource, NY.

Ruscha's line of sight. This would have been the Beverly Hills Freeway, or the 2, running from its northern terminus in La Cañada Flintridge, continuing through Glendale and into Echo Park, and finally sweeping westward across the Los Angeles Basin along Santa Monica Boulevard. The residents of Beverly Hills, however, said no to this plan. They organized powerful political opposition to this proposal, which was officially canceled in 1970. This is why the State Route 2 stops abruptly in Echo Park. The Beverly Hills Freeway was among several freeway plans for L.A.'s Westside, such as the expansion into freeways of Mulholland Drive, Malibu Canyon Road, and Topanga Canyon Road, all scrapped by hillside NIMBY forces.

These freeways would have made their way into Ruscha's photographs or at the very least would have cast shadows on the landscapes he photographed. Opposition from wealthy, white Westside communities like Beverly Hills ensured their privilege to live in a freeway-free environment. The residents of Boyle Heights were not afforded such privilege, even though they, too, organized community opposition against highway construction. This points to another structural disparity that conditioned the production of art in L.A. during the 1960s. Like redlining, highway construction had drastically varying consequences for different neighborhoods within the same city, and it was all contingent on the social coordinates of race and class.

The streets of Los Angeles traverse diverse neighborhoods structured by broader disparities

that took vivid shape in US cities throughout the decades following World War II. In the many concentrations of racial poverty in urban America—specifically, in disadvantaged neighborhoods wrought by private prejudice and discriminatory public policy—these disparities came to violent fruition in the mid-1960s, especially in L.A., where the deadliest, most destructive racial uprising exploded over the course of five days in early August 1965. Triggered by another outburst of white police abuse toward unarmed Black residents, upset onlookers set the streets of South Los Angeles—including Slauson Avenue, Manchester Avenue, Central Avenue, Crenshaw Boulevard, and Alameda Street, among others—on fire, leaving a wake of thirty-four people dead and hundreds of millions of dollars in property damage. The Watts uprising stunned the world and shattered the postwar myth of midcentury modernism authored by Banham, Ruscha, and others; it did not, however, extinguish the creative spark that ignited a flourishing of Black art in L.A. during the late 1960s and beyond. In the aftermath of the Watts uprising, a new corps of Black L.A. artists made beauty in the wake of destruction. Like Asco in creating *First Supper (After a Major Riot)*, David Hammons, Senga Nengudi, John Outterbridge, Noah Purifoy, Betye Saar, Charles White, and other Black L.A. artists staked their creative claims upon the southern streets of a western city. They forged a new art that directly confronted the problems and possibilities of Black life in urban America and challenged the authority of an artistic status quo that elevated the work of white male artists in the apathetic age of pop.²³

Unlike Sunset Boulevard, the streets of East and South Los Angeles cultivated very different communities of artistic expression, and they were just as focused as Ruscha on the immediate built environment. A key difference, however, was the degree of engagement with that landscape. While Ruscha labored to produce a dispassionate, distant, and “deadpan” portrait of every building on Westside streets, Black and Chicano artists immersed themselves in the streets of their L.A.: they got dirty sifting through the wreckage of urban unrest, they inhaled the exhaust of surrounding traffic, they lay their bodies on sidewalks and bus benches, they posed beneath freeways, they painted on buildings, and they took the occasional risk of arrest in their creative

pursuits. Their immersion in the landscapes of the barrio and the ghetto was a brash but necessary political choice, an act of solidarity with community-based politics of liberatory justice that inspired a new generation of civic leadership. Thus, while Ed Ruscha burnished the myth of a star-studded street, these artists looked through clouds of smoke, tear gas, and smog to make art from their own streets, which were worlds apart but just miles away.

In L.A. during the 1960s and 1970s, the disparities among the city's distinct art worlds came into sharp relief. In general, Black and Chicano artists created art not for art's sake but for their communities' demands for justice and empowerment. That doesn't make their work any less artistic or less creative than the backslapping fraternity of La Cienega's Gallery Row who indulged its aesthetic inclinations, unburdened by community expectations and political demands. In contrast to the work of Asco, Baca, Los Four, Purifoy, and Saar, for example, Ruscha's Streets of Los Angeles photos convey a very western sense of freedom, akin to Frederick Jackson Turner's ode to the democratizing spirit of the frontier, or Jack Kerouac's restless urge in *On the Road* (1957). Getty's digital assemblage of Ruscha's photographs in "12 Sunsets: Exploring Ed Ruscha's Archive" underscores this sense of freedom—the freedom to move, to roam, to drive, and to venture headlong into the glitzy mess of western streetscapes like Sunset Boulevard. In Ruscha's photographs, viewers find a fluid urban landscape that glides seamlessly across the city's Westside, a landscape with no barricades, no freeways, no curfews, and few shadows. Only against the backdrop of East and South Los Angeles can we understand this work as a function of racial, class, and gender privilege.

What would it look like to have created a similar photo-assembly of Whittier Boulevard or Central Avenue in the late 1960s? The linear expanse of storefront architecture and street signage would be interrupted by the expansive concrete walls of imposing freeways or the darkness of their shadows. There would be substantial voids of empty dead space in the ashen remnants of burned-down buildings, or abandoned storefronts that signaled the lack of commercial vitality. There would probably be signs of a greater police presence, an absence of banks and supermarkets, a greater frequency of liquor

stores and check-cashing centers, and a dearth of billboards and restaurants. This was not Ruscha's or Banham's Los Angeles, but it was still Los Angeles, an unequal and undemocratic city whose portrait has been there all along for those paying attention.

NOTES

Epigraph: Peter Plagens, "Los Angeles: The Ecology of Evil," review of *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, by Reyner Banham, *Artforum* 11, no. 4 (1972): 70.

1. Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971). While on the streets of East L.A., Ruscha no doubt passed or was passed by Banham, the British professor and architectural historian who relished L.A.'s car culture and sped across his favorite parts of the city in a convertible Mustang. With *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, Banham inserted Los Angeles into a revolutionary reappraisal of US urban life in the 1960s, accepting—some would say celebrating—Los Angeles as the paragon of a car-oriented consumer culture and strip-landscape design that relied on storefront signage to communicate the popular values of mobility, speed, convenience, and choice.
2. Banham starred in a video companion piece to *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, in which he interviews Ruscha for his take on L.A. as a center of design innovations. See *One Pair of Eyes*, season 1, episode 57, "Reyner Banham Loves Los Angeles," directed by Julian Cooper, aired on 11 March 1972.
3. Denise Scott-Brown, "On Pop Art, Permissiveness, and Planning," *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35, no. 3 (May 1969): 184–85. See also Alexandra Schwartz, *Ed Ruscha's Los Angeles* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010).
4. Robert Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis: Los Angeles, 1850–1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); and Marc A. Weiss, *The Rise of the Community Builders: The American Real Estate Industry and Urban Land Planning* (Washington, DC: Beard, 2002).
5. Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC), Los Angeles City survey files, Record Group 195, 2 February 1939, Records of the Home Owners' Loan Corporation, National Archives, Washington DC.
6. Richard Rothstein, *The Color of the Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York: Liverlight, 2018); Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Liverlight, 2016); and Kenneth Jackson, "Race, Ethnicity, and Real Estate Appraisal: The Home Owners' Loan Corporation and the Federal Housing Administration," *Journal of Urban History* 6, no. 4 (1980): 419–52.
7. HOLC, Los Angeles City survey files, Boyle Heights, 19 April 1939, Records of the Home Owners' Loan Corporation, National Archives, Washington, DC.
8. As a writer and scholar of architectural history, Ester McCoy singularly put Los Angeles on the map of American architecture as early as 1960 with the publication of *Five California Architects* (New York: Reinhold, 1960), the first work to bring attention to the designs of pioneer California modernists. She wrote frequently for the influential design magazine *Arts & Architecture* and authored subsequent books about Richard Neutra, Craig Ellwood, and Case Study Houses. Originally published in 1965, David Gebhard and Robert Winter, eds., *An Architectural Guidebook to Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: Angel City, 2018), is now in its sixth edition.
9. Mariana Moglievich, "Monuments and Mediocrity: Landmarking Los Angeles," *Future Anterior* 11, no. 1 (2014): 34–52.

10. Ricardo Romo, *East Los Angeles: History of a Barrio* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983).
11. HOLC, Los Angeles City survey files, Boyle Heights, 19 April 1939.
12. Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 55.
13. Ralph Friedman, "U.N. in Microcosm: Boyle Heights; An Example of Democratic Progress," *Frontier: The Voice of the New West* 6-7 (1955): 11-14.
14. Luis Alvarez, *The Power of the Zoot: Youth Culture and Resistance during World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); and Anthony Macias, *Mexican American Mojo: Popular Music, Dance and Urban Culture in Los Angeles, 1935-1968* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).
15. Andrea Muñoz, "Blowout! The Testimony of Mita Cuarón and the 1968 East Los Angeles Walkouts," in *Rewriting the Chicano Movement: New Histories of Mexican American Activism in the Civil Rights Era*, ed. Ellen McCracken and Mario T. Garcia (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2021), 195.
16. Rita Gonzales, Howard N. Fox, and Chon Noriega, *Phantom Sightings: Art after the Chicano Movement*, exh. cat. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 114-19. See also Rebecca Lowry, "Art against the World: Collaborative Antagonism in 1970s Los Angeles," in *Conflict, Identity, and Protest in American Art*, ed. Miguel de Baca and Makeda Best (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2015), 121-40.
17. Andrea K. Scott, "The Glam Politics of a Chicano Collective from East L.A.," *New Yorker*, 16 September 2017, 36.
18. Scott, "Glam Politics," 39.
19. Reina Alejandra Prado-Saldivar, "On Both Sides of the Los Angeles River: Mechicano Art Center," in *L.A. Xicano*, ed. Chon A. Noriega, Terezita Romo, and Pilar Tompkins-Rivas (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2011), 42.
20. Judy Baca, "Painting in the River of Angels," 11 March 2021, <https://www.mellon.org/voices/painting-in-the-river-of-angels>.
21. In 1983, in preparation for the Summer Olympics the following year, the Los Angeles Olympics Organizing Committee commissioned Baca to take over a stretch of the 110 Freeway to paint *Hitting the Wall: Women in the Marathon* (1984). Baca painted this mural on the surface wall of the 3rd Street underpass of the 110 Freeway, the central corridor of L.A.'s sprawling freeway system. Working with at-risk youth from underprivileged neighborhoods, Baca painted a female marathon runner in the throes of victory as she breaks the tape of the finish line, lunging toward the viewer with her arms outstretched in triumph as sunlight floods the background scenery. As the runner crosses the finish line, she breaks through the wall, which crumbles into rubble at the foot of the mural. The mural therefore celebrates the victory of women (and the first Olympics that included women in the marathon event) at the same time that it disputes the sturdiness of the freeway.
22. Eric Avila, *The Folklore of the Freeway: Race and Revolt in the Modernist City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).
23. Kellie Jones, ed., *Now Dig This! Art & Black Los Angeles, 1960-1980*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, 2011); and Kelli Jones, *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

Ed Ruscha's Street-Level View and the Postwar Redevelopment Vernacular

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In photographing and rephotographing Sunset Boulevard—and other iconic Los Angeles streets—Ed Ruscha was both documenting and making an argument about the transformation of urban space. “It . . . has changed quite a bit in the last five years,” he told an interviewer about the Sunset Strip in 1979.¹ Indeed, the built environment of the Strip, like the entire boulevard as well as twentieth-century American cities writ large, was highly dynamic. And the changing facades in Ruscha’s photographs indexed the deeper social, political, and cultural forces that swirled behind and around them, driving urban change on Sunset and well beyond.

Ruscha’s street-level photographs tell a story of late twentieth-century urban development that has been surprisingly elusive to historians. Accounts have focused on the large-scale state-funded projects that transformed dense urban fabric into housing developments, office buildings, civic and commercial centers, and stadia in the midcentury era. Observers have likewise directed their attention to the big projects, now private-sector led, that followed in the wake of urban renewal after the policy’s decline in the late 1960s.² L.A. has played a central role across such narratives, with studies focusing on the redevelopment of Bunker Hill and Chavez Ravine as well as on the construction of interstate highways and, later, the Staples Center.³ Yet while

megaprojects and the prominent individuals who led them rightly attract interest, large-scale redevelopment only accounted for a fraction of the physical changes that took place in late twentieth-century American cities. As we argue in this essay, far more ubiquitous and transformative were the thousands of small alterations that remade L.A.’s urban fabric through modest demolition, new construction, rehabilitation, modification, and reuse at the property level.⁴

Scholars have overlooked such changes in part because there are only scattered traces of them in formal archives, in contrast to the extensive plans, correspondence, hearing transcripts, and newspaper coverage describing big projects. Vernacular interventions—such as the change of a restaurant’s sign from English to Spanish or the temporary vacancy of a site between uses—offer important historical evidence about larger stories unfolding beyond the buildings’ facades. Ruscha’s photographs, in fact, offer a route into these fine-grained stories, making them visible. They tell a more expansive history of redevelopment that was reliant less on top-down visions of officials and developers and more on the many modest choices of grassroots actors like shopkeepers, restaurateurs, property owners, and gardeners—in other words, a “redevelopment vernacular.” We ask what alternative histories of the American city, and of the late twentieth century more

broadly, can be told by prioritizing the street-level view captured in Ruscha's photos over the dominant bird's-eye view of postwar modernism, with its emphasis on vast maps and abstract plans.

One way of answering this question is to focus on the iconic street Ruscha photographed most frequently. From 1966 to 2007, he visited Sunset Boulevard a dozen times, driving its length from the Pacific Ocean to downtown L.A. with a motorized camera mounted first in a car and then on the bed of his pickup truck. While this represented an aesthetic project of unusual duration, our interest is in what the resulting photographs reveal as documentary evidence of urban history unfolding. Across these decades, massive forces shook the American metropolis: the private market became the dominant driver of urban change; suburbanization emptied cities of residents, businesses, and tax dollars; immigration transformed populations; and climate collapse became a growing threat. Meanwhile, Ruscha kept photographing. "Mainly the idea is to get them down on film," Ruscha said in 2003. "I do the comparing later when I have got more time."⁵ Though "do[ing] the comparing later" offers a prospect with infinite bounds, a beginning of such comparisons here proves revelatory on small and large scales.

This essay explores five of Ruscha's Sunset Boulevard shoots—1966, 1973, 1985, 1995, and 2007—focusing on the ten continuous miles of primarily commercial blocks from West Hollywood to downtown L.A.⁶ In comparing them critically using the website we built, *Sunset Over Sunset*, we reveal the causes of urban change through microhistories that illuminate broader stories.⁷ We focus on four typologies—gas stations, banks, restaurants, and palm trees—each of whose local history helps explain US urban transformation in this era. While others, including Ruscha himself, have plumbed these same iconic features of L.A.'s landscape, we explore them as windows into the history of urban development.⁸ The tale of Sunset they tell does not match that of every L.A. street, nor of every L.A. community. Similarly, L.A. is not Anytown, USA. Yet Sunset saw the kinds of incremental alterations that many streets share, and the diversity along its expansive length offers an exemplary urban cross section. Comparing its panoramas through juxtaposition, close reading,

and historical contextualization offers an often-surprising history.

The results of this analysis turn expectations about the late twentieth-century city on their head. Massive structural forces with far-reaching consequences—like immigration, oil dependency, economic globalization, and climate change—would seemingly suggest immense, rapid changes in the built environment as well. Instead, we find that these changes often unfolded slowly and the historical agents behind them extended well beyond boldface names to include everyday, often-unknown builders, business owners, landlords, laborers, and tenants. In other words, we argue that the effects of overwhelming global transformation were physically marked on the city's built environment in deceptively gradual and often subtle ways. Still, the changes—and even moments of stasis—revealed in Ruscha's photos tell significant, unexpected, and largely untold stories about the grassroots nature of much redevelopment in these decades.

GAS STATIONS AND THE CHANGING GEOGRAPHY OF ENERGY

One microhistory that Ruscha's photos reveal is the changing geography of everyday energy landscapes, both along and off Sunset Boulevard. Specifically, the photos show the gradual disappearance of gas stations as they shifted away from the postwar commercial boulevard to more suburban and highway-oriented locations over the late twentieth century. The images also document how former gas-station sites were gradually repurposed for alternative uses, unveiling the many life cycles of commercial land. Rather than offering a strict before-and-after story, they record a frequently multistage redevelopment process that unfolded slowly amid continuing and rapid metropolitan growth.

In 1969, the United States had 236,000 filling stations; today, about 60 percent of that number exists.⁹ Sunset saw an intensification of that same trajectory, but on a smaller scale. In 1973, along the ten-mile study area, Ruscha photographed approximately forty-five gas stations; by contrast, his drive from 2007 would find that number diminished by more than two thirds.¹⁰ In terms of location, most postwar gas stations were located on corner parcels, affording

drivers multiple means of entry and exit. In fact, of all the gas stations Ruscha photographed on this ten-mile stretch, only one—8543 Sunset—was located midblock. Gas stations also commonly clustered near one another, even on adjacent properties. At 5007 and 5025 Sunset, for example, two stations occupied the entire northern stretch of the boulevard between North Mariposa and North Alexandria Avenues. Although Ruscha had not photographed this area during his drive in 1966, city directories identify gas stations at these sites since at least 1965; those uses continued through his photo shoot in 2007.¹¹

When a gas station survived for an extended period at the same site, it tended to remain consistently in corporate hands, even if an individual franchise owner changed over time.¹² Chevron, successor to the Standard Oil Company of California, dominated the late twentieth-century Sunset Boulevard petroleum landscape. Texaco was close behind, and the two companies eventually merged in 2000. Other prevalent companies included ARCO, Shell, Gulf Oil, Mobil, and Union 76. Ruscha's photographs demonstrate how the gas-station sites that endured experienced changes in signage and architecture, if not ownership. At 8101 Sunset, for example, Chevron dropped "Standard" from its signage sometime between Ruscha's drives in 1966 and 1973. Additionally, the shape of the building's canopy extending out from its oblong garage morphed from flat to gabled, and this form continues through today. Despite these physical changes, however, the Chevron name has remained constant.

More typical than the endurance of individual gas stations was their replacement with other buildings that had different uses entirely. All along Sunset Boulevard, Ruscha's photographs reveal the processes of demolition and new construction that remade numerous parcels. Common reuses of gas-station sites included fast-food restaurants or parking lots for strip malls. For example, 6750 Sunset illustrates the constancy of change as a Union 76 gave way to a Rally's drive-in and then a Carl's Jr. (fig. 18.1). The typical corner location of most gas stations suited these alternative uses that likewise prioritized automobile access. Paving over such sites was also an economical means to attract development to land containing toxic soil.



a. 1973



b. 1995



c. 2007

Figure 18.1 Ed Ruscha, 6750 Sunset Boulevard, 1973 (a), 1995 (b), and 2007 (c), digital positives from negatives. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1 (a, b, c). © Ed Ruscha.

Former gas-station sites stand out for the periods of vacancy that they frequently experienced before construction began to transform the lots for new uses. Ruscha's photographs are uniquely valuable for capturing these interim moments of delay and absence. The images expose the often-slow pace and process of redevelopment, rather than just the outcomes. In 1973, for example, 7980 Sunset was the site of a Shell station; by 1985, the pumps were gone and only the station's auto repair service remained;

and by 1995, Gaucho Grill operated at the site. Similarly, at 8873 Sunset, property owners demolished the entire Shell station while awaiting a new occupant. The gas station had appeared in photographs from 1966 through 1985, but Ruscha's image from 1995 captures an empty lot. His photograph from 2007 shows a reawakened property, with construction in progress. Shortly after, a Japanese restaurant opened on the site. In another instance, 6407 Sunset was home to a Texaco when Ruscha first photographed it in 1973. By 1985, the lot had been cleared but remained vacant. A Jack in the Box was in operation there by 1995 (fig. 18.2).

While the contamination of land on gas-station sites partially explains patterns of interim vacancy, many of the demolitions came as a result of the changing gasoline economy. In October 1973, the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries imposed an embargo on the United States, yielding gasoline shortages, limits on consumer fuel purchases, and a dramatic increase in gas prices where the product was still available. In response to this evolving global market, US gasoline companies shifted their strategies from dominating market share to profitability.¹³ They closed many former retail outlets as a result. One owner of an ARCO on Sunset attributed the gas station closures and rent increases to greed, but the company's regional manager described it as "simple economics." He explained, "If a station does a minimal volume of gas, its best use is not as a gas station."¹⁴ At such moments, those sites sat vacant, awaiting remediation and future occupants.

Changing gasoline retail trends further hastened the closure of postwar gas stations along landscapes like Sunset Boulevard. Many stations depicted in these photographs adjoined automobile garages. But improvements in automobile technology gradually reduced demand for these garages' services. Meanwhile, after having banned self-service gas stations in 1948, Los Angeles legalized them in 1973. Self-service stations tended to have more pumps and paired well with convenience stores rather than auto repair shops, as occupants of the sites' secondary buildings. Economics favored these revised uses as well.¹⁵ Thus, by the 1980s, the space needs of gas stations were expanding, and earlier properties were becoming outdated.¹⁶ While drivers in the early 2000s could still refuel their



a. 1973



b. 1985



c. 1995

Figure 18.2 Ed Ruscha, 6407 Sunset Boulevard, 1973 (a), 1985 (b), 1995 (c), digital positives from negatives. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1 (a, b, c). © Ed Ruscha.

tanks along Sunset, Ruscha's photographs depict an era in which the bulk of gas stations were located in higher-trafficked areas outside the dense city that were more profitable.

This geographic move was indicative of a larger urban shift that included highway construction and the suburbanization of housing, shopping, and industry. Gas stations, therefore, weren't the only establishments moving away from the postwar city to outlying metropolitan areas. Southern California experienced these processes acutely

following wartime growth.¹⁷ The population of Los Angeles nearly doubled between 1950 and 2000; during that same period, however, the number of suburbanites in Southern California more than quadrupled.¹⁸ Moreover, L.A. had the nation's highest rate of automobile ownership.¹⁹ With drivers increasingly located on and around L.A.'s expanding suburban highway network, gas stations followed their market, leaving Sunset Boulevard behind.

BANKING ON SUNSET

Retail banking represented another ubiquitous and essential type of commercial land use on Sunset. As with gas stations, the landscape of bank branches changed dramatically in this period. Where twenty-six branches stood along these ten miles in 1973, only fourteen remained by 2007. The number of corporate choices thinned out too. By 2007, just seven different banks remained, a dramatic drop from the seventeen that were available three decades earlier. Sunset's bank buildings recorded larger trends in US capitalism and corporate organization. The 1980s and 1990s saw the consolidation of financial institutions, both nationally and internationally, at a pace and scale exceeding that of any previous era. With a disruptive banking crisis and statutory changes enabling banks to freely expand across state and regional lines, big banks got even bigger. Others disappeared amid a flurry of mergers and acquisitions. The inequality of banking grew, too, as the fewer branches that remained gravitated toward more affluent customers.²⁰

The built landscape of banking on Sunset broadly reflects such changes, but a closer look suggests a range of more nuanced development stories within this transformative period in the history of capitalism. Banks occupied a variety of building types on Sunset, from modernist jewel boxes to adapted storefronts. When companies departed, they left behind physical traces, such as unused deposit boxes or customized structures requiring adaptation; in some cases, they left behind nothing at all. Some bank buildings—those of the consolidators, not the consolidated—endured and went effectively unchanged for four decades. Considering the redevelopment vernacular along Sunset through banks reveals a story of consistency amid underlying churn, persistent presence, and telling absence.

Capitalism's roiling waves wrought surprisingly subtle changes on this boulevard.

Indeed, what Ruscha's photos *don't* depict tells as important a story as what they do. The images evince a notable disparity in banking access on Sunset between the five miles west and five miles east of Vermont Avenue. The former included twenty banks in 1973, while the latter held just six; in 2007, those numbers dropped to ten and four. Residents across this extent were broadly similar according to the census measure of family income, but the westernmost miles were closer to the affluent Beverly Hills and Hollywood Hills. Census data regarding the miles east of Vermont between 1970 and 2000 shows a population less likely to self-identify as white and more likely to be born outside the United States.²¹ Access to banking has long correlated directly with race and income in the US, and Ruscha's photographs record the local version of this national inequity.²²

Where banks were present, the midcentury era saw a dramatic change in their architectural forms, with the rise of modernist pavilions and skyscrapers. Pavilions shed the architectural revival styles of their predecessors, conveying forward-looking financial stability and an updated customer experience across Sunset. As with earlier banks, such architectural statements proved more aspirational than realistic amid broader corporate turnover. Four structures in particular (2134, 7014, 7700, and 7919 Sunset) saw tenants constantly in flux, yet their symmetrical, austere exteriors changed little. New signage registered frequent tenant changes most prominently. Take 7919 Sunset, for example (fig. 18.3), with an extensive glass facade, window lettering, and a sign at the corner that denoted the presence of State Mutual Savings and Loan (1973), followed by Far West Savings and Loan (1985), and then, by 1995, American Savings Bank, which gained facade signage too. Washington Mutual purchased American Savings Bank in 1996 and closed this branch, ending the building's run as a bank. As its new signage showcased, the building's subdivided interior became home to a restaurant (Baja Fresh) and coffee shop (Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf) by 2007, its surrounding platform ideal for outdoor seating.

Nearby, yet another site, 8150 Sunset Boulevard, offered an especially creative example of the pavilion form. Constructed in 1960, its transparent base supported a visually massive



a, b. 1973



c, d. 2007

Figure 18.3 Ed Ruscha, 7919 Sunset Boulevard, 1973 (a, b) and 2007 (c, d), digital positives from negatives. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1 (a, b, c, d). © Ed Ruscha.

second level, surmounted by a thin roof resembling folded paper. Designed by Hagman & Meyer for Lytton Savings, it emblemized the modernism that would arrive across Sunset and symbolized the values that midcentury banks espoused: honesty, innovation, and optimism (see fig. 10.1). The building remained largely intact despite frequent tenant changes that culminated in the occupancy by Washington Mutual in 2007 and later Chase Bank, following Washington Mutual's collapse during the financial crisis of 2008.²³ Developers soon eyed the site for a new mixed-use project designed by Frank Gehry. Despite determined preservationists, the building succumbed to demolition in 2021, though the site's fate remained undecided. Two years later, the cleared lot was again on the market.

The modernist form of the Lytton Savings building carried over to the skyscraper towers that rose as examples of a new building type on Sunset shortly before Ruscha's arrival. Often taller than anything previously built on the boulevard—with glass curtain walls, thin supporting columns, and retail bases—they offered prime office space to commercial tenants. Banks, eager for modern locations and new customers, were a natural fit. They occupied spaces that were less tailor-made than the functionalist pavilions elsewhere on the street, and their presence proved more fleeting. The buildings at 1910, 6430, 6565, 8490, 8730, and 9000 Sunset all had a ground-floor bank tenant by the time Ruscha first photographed them, and each lost that initial tenant in succeeding years.

Only two of these locations had bank branches by 2007.

Most of these structures experienced similar physical transformation, with relatively modest alterations driven by a competitive market and changing fashions, not corporate directives from the banks themselves. The building at 9000 Sunset typified this pattern. Security First National Bank (later Security Pacific Bank) maintained tenancy in the eastern storefront at this address throughout Ruscha's shoots in 1966, 1973, and 1985, departing after its 1992 acquisition by Bank of America—then the largest merger in US banking history.²⁴ The tower remained bankless until Wells Fargo occupied the western storefront in the 2000s. Bank signs in a variety of forms and fonts surfaced around the building over the decades. By the time one landed on the tower itself, the property owner had added a slim decorative strip with the building's address. Such changes to a building's facade proved a common strategy on Sunset for towers and the few shopping strips where banks were located. These subtle alterations belied frequent tenant transition amid mergers and acquisitions.

Where the “winners” of the bank-consolidation era were present on Sunset, a different story unfolded at their branches. Banks that were robust enough to acquire rivals exhibited remarkable continuity; a stable, built environment indexed their growing corporate strength. This could be seen vividly at the crossroads of Sunset and Vine Street, where multiple redevelopment vernaculars unfolded simultaneously. Around this intersection stood the following: two skyscrapers, 6255 and 6290 Sunset (the latter was L.A.'s tallest upon its completion in 1964), with constantly changing bank tenants; two modernist pavilions, 6320 and 6300 Sunset, each housing a single bank; and another single-occupant structure, originally built for Home Savings and Loan (1500 Vine Street).²⁵ This last one, completed in 1968, is perhaps Sunset's most renowned bank building, featuring Millard Sheets-designed exterior mosaic murals that depict movie stars. The exceptional facade remained largely untouched as it transitioned from Home Savings to Washington Mutual in the 1990s, and then, in 2009, to Chase Bank.

The two modernist pavilions that anchored this intersection's southwest corner were less architecturally engaging but nevertheless

powerfully symbolic of the consolidators' economic might. In 1973, Wells Fargo was located at 6320 Sunset while, next door, 6300 Sunset housed its competitor, Bank of America. Remarkably, amid the many changes along Sunset, Wells Fargo and Bank of America were still the tenants of these buildings in 2007. Though both banks were founded in California, they had gained increasingly national profiles during the intervening decades. The stability of occupancy at each site translated to minimal changes in each building's appearance, with ATMs and updated corporate signage representing the only variations. They stood steadfast while the banking industry experienced great turbulence on the street, in the state, and across the nation.

Only two other banks, both branches of Bank of America, endured similarly, remaining unchanged in both form and occupancy during this period. The older of the two, 1572 Sunset—originally built in 1908—has been home to Bank of America since 1930.²⁶ Its later counterpart, a modest and modern building at 9021 Sunset, rose in the 1950s (fig. 18.4). This West Hollywood building was a Bank of America branch when Ruscha published *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* in 1966, and it remained so into 2021.²⁷ Its two stone walls and thin columns supported an overhanging concrete roof that spanned the facade and continued sloping down toward North Wetherly Drive until meeting the street, allowing for rooftop parking. Despite the passage of time, little of this car-friendly form changed over multiple decades, except for the varying fonts and logos that recorded Bank of America's gradual evolution in branding.

Since Bank of America was on the winning side of corporate consolidation, 9021 Sunset stood relatively unmarred by the most torrid period of bank mergers and acquisitions in US history. At the broader scale, however, banking on Sunset had changed dramatically for consumers, with less than half of the choices available in 2007 as in 1973. Banking on Sunset became more like banking on any major street in any major city, where one could visit Bank of America, Wells Fargo, Citibank, or Chase and little else.

Viewing Sunset Boulevard through its banks suggests a built environment whose churn was not nearly as dramatic as that of the banking corporations themselves. The street saw new signage on lasting structures, modest ground-



a, b. 1966



c, d. 1985



e, f. 2007

Figure 18.4 Ed Ruscha, 9021 Sunset Boulevard, 1966 (a, b), 1985 (c, d), and 2007 (e, f), digital positives from negatives. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1 (a, b, c, d, e, f). © Ed Ruscha.

floor renovations, reskinned facades, and, rarely, demolition. Yet even as banks competed and merged on national and global scales, with their headquarters located increasingly far from L.A., many of these visible changes derived from local contexts and choices. Physical alterations were rarely the result of sweeping directives mandated by distant corporations. Instead, they represented the sum total of many incremental decisions: the modification of buildings by property owners to appeal to new tenants, the reoccupation by new banks of spaces that had previously housed their predecessors, and small adjustments to the exteriors of existing banks to meet new design trends. Some banks—and many buildings—endured, while others left little behind.

IMMIGRANT ENTREPRENEURS, RESTAURANT REDEVELOPERS

When Ruscha first photographed 1525 Sunset in 1973, the small storefront—modern, with a gridded-tile and stacked-brick facade—beckoned its neighbors with a broad sign advertising “Cuban



a. 1973



b. 2007

Figure 18.5 Ed Ruscha, 1525 Sunset Boulevard, 1973 (a) and 2007 (b), digital positives from negatives. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1 (a, b). © Ed Ruscha.

Mexican Puerto Rican Foods” (fig. 18.5). Then called Toñita’s, the restaurant served an Echo Park population that included all those diasporic groups. As new residents arrived, the restaurant’s name, cuisines, and facade changed too. By 1995, its hand-lettered sign advertised Kuko’s Restaurante Mexicano, with a recently stuccoed front to welcome a nearby population that, while no longer the center of L.A.’s Mexican community, had maintained a Sunset Boulevard foothold. By 2007, Kuko’s had become La Fe Restaurante & Pupuseria, and that stuccoed front became the perfect surface for brightly colored hand-painted letters that promised menudo, mariscos, pupusas, and sopa de pata.

The selling of pupusas and sopa de pata indicated that, from the 1980s on, immigrants from El Salvador had made their way to L.A. and, specifically, Echo Park. They were one of the many growing immigrant communities that transformed Sunset as Ruscha photographed it. So did immigrants from Thailand, Armenia, Guatemala, and Colombia, among others, who joined existing

and new communities from Mexico, Cuba, China, and Japan. Ruscha’s transits along Sunset coincided with one of the most dynamic periods in US immigration history, which came as a result of foreign wars, US entanglements abroad, and the loosened restrictions of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. Los Angeles, long defined by its numerous racial, ethnic, and religious communities, became home to many more.²⁸

Examining one commercial building use—restaurants—reveals how long-standing residents and newly arrived immigrants, like the changing restaurateurs at 1525 Sunset, both asserted and solidified their presence in an increasingly cosmopolitan city. While one could search through phone books, newspapers, and business directories to identify the restaurants along Sunset, Ruscha’s photographs unveil a larger story. In addition to occupancy, they also show how owners changed the outward appearance of their businesses through the fonts and language they painted as ephemeral signage, the materials and ornament by which they renovated existing buildings, and their expansion into neighboring spaces over time. These efforts were not just a means to attract customers but also a form of accretive redevelopment that over decades reshaped one of Los Angeles’ most dynamic boulevards.

While the uneven distribution of banks recorded economic and racial inequality that structured Sunset’s landscape, restaurants dotted the street more evenly—though still in revealing concentrations—offering evidence of their crucial role as a longtime vehicle for immigrant entrepreneurship.²⁹ This becomes visible in a close look at a limited but important portion of Sunset’s restaurants: those that served cuisines from Latin America (including Mexico and Colombia) or Asia (especially China, Thailand, and Japan). In 1973, a total of about thirty Latin American and Asian restaurants were spread across the ten miles from downtown to Beverly Hills, one-third of those from the latter group. In contrast to the decline of both gas stations and banks, restaurants proliferated over time. By 2007, the combined number of Asian and Latin American restaurants had more than doubled to about seventy, with a relatively even split between these two cuisines. Gradually, most, but certainly not all, Latin American restaurants were concentrated east of Vermont (sixteen in 1973 and

twenty-four in 2007), while a majority of Asian restaurants were located west of Vermont (nine in 1973 and twenty-six in 2007).³⁰

These divergences mapped onto enclaves that the restaurants helped define: Latin American restaurants in Echo Park and Silver Lake; Thai and Armenian restaurants in Thai Town and Little Armenia; and restaurants from all of these cuisines in Hollywood and West Hollywood. Across these communities, restaurant owners transformed the everyday urban landscape through three common Sunset Boulevard building types: freestanding structures, strip malls and mini-malls, and storefronts along sidewalks (like 1525 Sunset). Each recorded a variety of forms of grassroots redevelopment, from signage to wholesale reconstruction.

As Sunset's characteristic and long-standing commercial building type, storefronts were already present, relatively affordable, and easy to modify when new immigrants arrived. They were also ready-made locations for existing groups seeking to assert their presence on Sunset, as was the case for some Mexican residents of Echo Park.³¹ Through restaurants, Mexican Angelenos could secure a foothold in the city and grow it with their success. For instance, Barragan's Cafe (1536–38 Sunset) was a Mexican restaurant started in 1961 by Ramón Barragan, who had worked as a cook at the nearby El Nayarit (1822 Sunset), and his wife, Grace Barragan. Over time, their venture expanded from a modest storefront to encompass several neighboring buildings (fig. 18.6). In 1973 the restaurant had a simple brick and wood-paneled facade, but by 1985 the Barragans had transformed adjacent shop fronts into a Spanish colonial revival addition, with a tile roof and prominent second story. By 1995 (not pictured), the original facade had gained a matching tan paint job and awnings with a stylized logo, a unified presence made vivid in Ruscha's color photographs from 2007. Like the owners of El Rodeo down the street (1721 Sunset), who remodeled a neighboring storefront to expand their space, the Barragans concretized their permanence in built form.³²

Storefronts also recorded shorter business tenures that nonetheless evinced larger histories of the arrival and reception of immigrant groups. Significantly, signage and facade alterations spoke to the cultural context many Chinese and Thai restaurateurs faced as they navigated both

customers unfamiliar with their cuisines and exoticizing stereotypes that greeted them (and which they sought to turn on their heads). Ah Fong's Cantonese Foods at 8005 Sunset predated Ruscha's photographs from 1966 and stood immediately east of his first Sunset Strip view. Images from 1973 and 1985 show an unchanging facade with stylized lettering—sometimes called the “chop suey font,” also visible in 1973 at 6530 Sunset (Mouling, a Chinese restaurant) and in 1995 at 5050 Sunset (Little Ongpin, a Filipino restaurant)—and similarly cartoonish architectural decorations. If ethnically reductive, such tropes also illustrated owners' efforts to draw the dollars of Hollywood-area customers who sought a stereotypical idea of “Chineseness” as they dined.³³ Many Thai restaurant owners, who were part of a wave of immigrants from Thailand that began in the 1970s, also sought to make their cuisine legible through signage. By 1985, Chamchun Restaurant's storefront (5936 Sunset) bore an awning promising “Thai-Chinese.” This was a common strategy among its peers as well, who joined one less-familiar Asian cuisine with a very different but more familiar one to appeal to prospective diners.³⁴

L.A. saw Thai restaurants reshape its dining and urban landscapes in the 1970s and 1980s; by 1987, there were at least two hundred.³⁵ Older storefronts housed many of these restaurants, but later strip malls and mini-malls became especially ideal locations for immigrant entrepreneurs. In these structures, Thai—as well as Central American and Armenian—immigrants found affordable rents and low overhead. Ruscha's photographs reveal low-slung strip malls where both long-lasting and short-lived restaurants tried their luck, a story typically told through changing signs and few other exterior alterations. At the shopping plaza at Sunset and North Benton Way in Silver Lake, for instance, which first appears in Ruscha's shoot from 1985, one could find fleeting signage for El Cochinito, a Mexican restaurant, and Restaurante Los Arrieros, a Colombian eatery. They were replaced a decade later by Tini Thai and a Colombian restaurant called Chibcha. By 2007, the strip mall had received a new awning, but Chibcha's sign remained, faded by the sun but testifying to the restaurant's endurance where others had failed.

The architecture and economics of such shopping centers made frequent changes



a. 1973



b, c. 1985



d-f. 2007

Figure 18.6 Ed Ruscha, 1536–38 Sunset Boulevard, 1973 (a), 1985 (b, c), and 2007 (d–f), digital positives from negatives. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1 (a, b, c, d, e, f). © Ed Ruscha.

relatively easy, but Ruscha's panoramas also depict strip-mall locations becoming durable beachheads for community formation. In the overlapping blocks of Thai Town and Little Armenia, retail plazas attained the role of neighborhood institutions. In 1973 the Thai restaurant Jitlada and a neighboring Thai market were located at 5233 Sunset, with brick shop fronts and a raked-metal mansard roof fronted by oval signs. As Ruscha revisited Sunset, Jitlada kept its place. By 1985, it had taken over the market to expand its dining room, and its Thai and English signs would remain the same thereafter. Its painted red-and-gray roof and green awning were the only things to draw the attention of passersby to what would become one of the most renowned Thai restaurants in the US.³⁶ A block east of Jitlada, a newer strip mall became home to Sahag's Basturma by 1995, its tiny, red block letters barely visible in Ruscha's photographs. Yet it, too, gained iconic prominence, as its Armenian sandwiches became nationally known.³⁷ Such

efforts, shop by shop, strip by strip, helped put communities on the map. This was a grassroots redevelopment no planner could claim as their own. Thai Town officially gained its name in 1999, even as many Thai Angelenos had moved to the suburbs. Little Armenia attained its moniker the following year.³⁸

On dense Sunset blocks, freestanding restaurants were relatively rare, yet they told equally important tales of the diverse communities that reshaped the city's built environment. At 4929 Sunset, a candy and ice cream store in 1973 had become Los Burritos by 1985 (the restaurant still stands in 2024) (fig. 18.7). Over time, paintbrushes transformed the sweets shop's metal-paneled facade into a billboard for Mexican cuisine. "Mexican Restaurant," proclaimed the painted front in prominent letters that only became bigger by 1995 (not pictured). Huge red type—still brightly visible in 2007—filled half of the storefront, stating the same message far larger than even the restaurant's name. By the



a, b. 1973



c, d. 1985



e, f. 2007

Figure 18.7 Ed Ruscha, 4929 Sunset Boulevard, 1973 (a, b), 1985 (c, d), and 2007 (e, f), digital positives from negatives. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1 (a, b, c, d, e, f). © Ed Ruscha.



a, b. 1966



c, d. 1985



e, f. 2007

Figure 18.8 Ed Ruscha, 8225 Sunset Boulevard, 1966 (a, b), 1985 (c, d), and 2007 (e, f), digital positives from negatives. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1 (a, b, c, d, e, f). © Ed Ruscha.

mid-2000s, Mexican cuisine was no longer seen as unusual or limited to certain neighborhoods. At Los Burritos and dozens of other restaurants along the boulevard through Hollywood, it had become part of the everyday landscape.

A West Hollywood site charted the rise of another cuisine that became part of L.A.'s daily life. When Ruscha photographed the Sunset Strip in 1966, 8225 Sunset, once the home of Preston Sturges's *Players Club*, stood as Imperial Gardens Suki-yaki (fig. 18.8). Transformed by the Japanese American architect Kazumi Adachi, the restaurant's elegant Japanese-modernist design matched its menu, both appealing to celebrities and affluent neighbors on Sunset's western reaches.³⁹ Sushi and sashimi were among the restaurant's offerings starting in 1966, making it the first sushi bar in L.A. outside Little Tokyo and one of the first in the nation.⁴⁰ Ruscha's repeated visits depicted Imperial Gardens's persistence into the late 1980s, when it became the famous Roxbury nightclub. In 2007, the structure housed Miyagi's, a Japanese-themed club that combined the building's previous lives. By then, the facade's minimalism had given way to a caricatured version of traditional Japanese architecture, and the sushi sold inside, once rare, had become commonplace.

By the end of these four decades, Asian and Latin American restaurants had become less tied to immigrant enclaves and more a part of the daily life of dining across Los Angeles. That sushi, burritos, pad thai, and pupusas grew increasingly common, however, did not indicate their seamless absorption into the streetscape. Rather, the restaurateurs and proprietors who ran such businesses communicated and secured their presence in both modest and more extensive actions at the building scale. Taken together, their grassroots redevelopment efforts added up on Sunset—an index of the growing size and influence of the many diasporic communities who had come to make L.A. their home.

CONSTRUCTING URBAN NATURE WITH PALM TREES

Ruscha's lens did not focus exclusively on the built environment; his artistic work contains voluminous records of the "natural" world as well. Trees, hedges, lawns, and flowerbeds left little written trace, unlike the evolution of structures documented in building permits or the social histories of building ownership and occupancy logged in census records and city directories. But

photographs capture the evolution of planted landscapes, marking the particular significance of Ruscha's photographic archive. They reveal nature as constructed, often planted to accompany new development—but only in certain places and times. Exploring the changing visual transcript of palm trees along Sunset Boulevard illuminates the often gradual ways in which public and private forces, in conjunction with climate itself, redeveloped the city through its natural landscape. In turn, that natural landscape continuously effected its own streetside transformations.

While palm trees are not native to California, they have populated the missions and estates of the state's southern reaches since the nineteenth century. It was only in the twentieth century that the tree became a regional icon. Depression-era labor and the anticipation of the Olympic Games of 1932 spurred Los Angeles to plant roughly forty thousand Mexican fan palms along its boulevards.⁴¹ A generation or so later, some of those same trees appear in Ruscha's images. An occasional glance down side streets intersecting perpendicularly with Sunset captures the trees' scale, rhythm, and street-facing position; more common in Ruscha's photographs, however, is the full or partial depiction of one or two trees in a single frame.

Even as much of the built environment held relatively constant over time, the natural landscape continued to grow and evolve, and Ruscha's photos reveal this otherwise undocumented facet of urban change. The structure at 5751 Sunset is typical of this story unfolding (fig. 18.9). By 1985, palm trees were planted in front of a Denny's after the restaurant replaced a Chevron gas station on the site. The trees subsequently grew dramatically, their presence shifting from framing and fronting the diner to ultimately towering over the structure. By 2007, they were utility pole-like stalks that extended beyond the photographic frame.

That fate told a representative tale of the Mexican fan palm. A common Sunset Boulevard varietal, the trees grow up to six feet per year, with mature trees reaching over one hundred feet in total height.⁴² The palm tree's limited lateral footprint, however, is both a virtue and a vice. Palm trees have relatively narrow, dense root balls that project straight down. This makes them apt for planting in strips and keeps their roots from

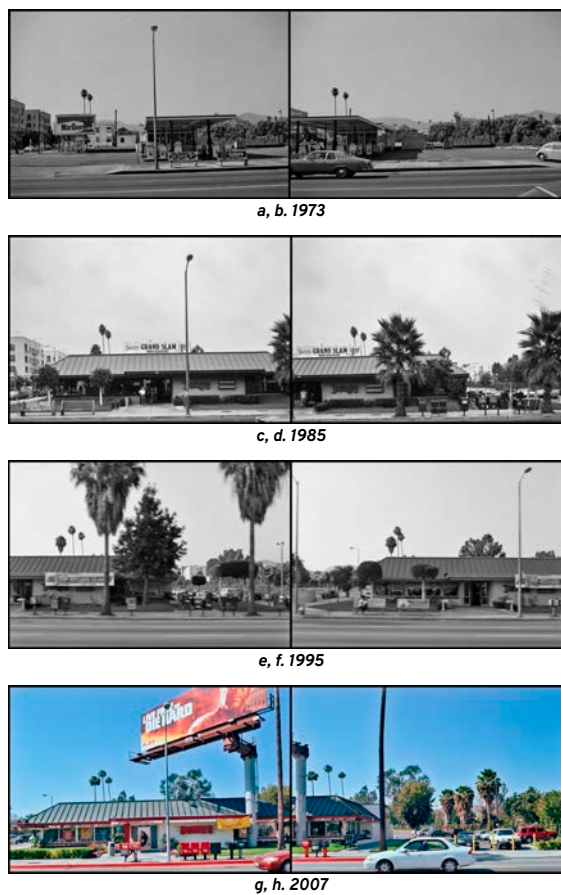


Figure 18.9 Ed Ruscha, 5751 Sunset Boulevard, 1973 (a, b), 1985 (c, d), 1995 (e, f), and 2007 (g, h), digital positives from negatives. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1 (a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h). © Ed Ruscha.

buckling concrete or breaking pipes.⁴³ Their narrow trunks also barely impede a driver's view when passing by. But palm trees do little to cleanse or cool the air or to block traffic noise. Additionally, their compact plumage provides limited shade—as color photographs in particular reveal—diminishing their beneficial effects on the urban heat island.⁴⁴ As historian Jared Farmer notes, “Palms have been planted here for what they mean, not what they do. Or rather, what they mean *is* what they do.”⁴⁵ And so, their impact is often more aesthetic than environmental, even as their visual real estate in Ruscha's photographs diminishes as they age.

While palm trees have come to symbolize the entire city and region, their presence is geographically uneven, including along this one boulevard. California's Street Tree Planting Act of 1915 provided that special assessments could fund municipal tree planting or removal. Over a decade later, Los Angeles took up this policy.⁴⁶ In

1927, the actor Mary Pickford was one of several citizens who advocated to the city council's Public Works Committee in favor of widening Sunset Boulevard and planting streetside palm trees between Normandie and Fairfax Avenues, comprising most of Hollywood. Replacing dispersed clumps of pepper trees with more evenly distributed palms would help create what Pickford called "Los Angeles Beautiful."⁴⁷ The paired planting effort and expansion of Sunset Boulevard's width—despite causing the loss of four hundred trees—could promote both new growth and environmental repair.⁴⁸ While some criticized a disconnect between the business functions of the boulevard and the ambience of the proposed trees, the eventual plantings would associate the area and its burgeoning film industry with a distinct brand of L.A. glamour.

Ruscha's images track the enduring concentration of palm trees in Hollywood and West Hollywood during the postwar decades, as well as a broader story of urban inequity.⁴⁹ The trees' numbers on this western stretch increased over time, from an average of one hundred trees per mile in 1966 to one hundred and fifty trees per mile by 2007. Put differently, one palm tree sprouted every twelve to seventeen yards between Vermont Avenue and the start of the Sunset Strip. In contrast, the five miles to the east of Vermont featured a much sparser collection of trees, averaging one tree every one hundred yards in 1973 and increasing to one tree every fifty yards by 2007. Thus, palm trees grew across the boulevard, but it was in Hollywood and its surroundings where they most densely took root. The presence or absence of the trees in particular neighborhoods in part reflects broader historical patterns of uneven resource distribution that extended well beyond investments in natural landscapes alone.

After the mass public planting campaign of the 1930s, subsequent private plantings tended to accompany shifts in the built environment, from the construction or alteration of structures to changes in their occupancy or use.⁵⁰ Across the four decades in which Ruscha captured this ten-mile expanse of Sunset, the greatest increase in palms can be seen in the photos from 1985. New trees sprouted in front of buildings like 6525 Sunset, which, by 1995, housed the Hollywood Athletic Club. No palm trees existed there in 1973, when the property was home to the University of

Judaism. By 1985, however, a new owner had restored the facade and planted a lengthy row of trees in front, likely as an attempt to attract commercial tenants.⁵¹ Additionally, two younger plantings replaced the one palm tree to the building's east. Like the paint job that transformed 4929 Sunset from a candy and ice cream shop to Los Burritos, the new landscaping at 6525 Sunset registered the existing structure's new function, in this case as an athletic club. Another example can be seen in the Children's Hospital of Los Angeles (CHLA) at 4661 Sunset, which Ruscha first photographed in 1973 (fig. 18.10). By 1985, new construction was in progress there. Photos from 2007 show the Saban Research Institute, CHLA's research wing that was built following a gift by the Saban family in 2003, with numerous palm trees sprouting beside it. In the cases of 6525 and 4661 Sunset, new building usage or construction inspired new palms to appear, revealing the direct relationship between the development of the city's natural and built environments.⁵²

The portions of Sunset located east of Vermont have their own tree canopies, of which the palm is a contributing, but not typically dominant, part. Instead, sophoras, acacias, and other species abound. This is a vestige of pre-palm vegetation on Sunset Boulevard as well as a function of less direct municipal investment, varying topography, and physical distance from the glamorous image of Hollywood. In general, where development is older and largely unchanged, new and more recent plantings of palm trees are also less common. Where trees other than palms grow, they often stand closer to buildings, or to the sides and backs of structures, rather than distinctively abutting the street. At 2201–15 Sunset, for example, a couple of palm trees consistently peeked out from behind the relatively unchanging buildings between 1973 and 2007, while surrounding flora of a range of types increased in number and variety over time (fig. 18.11).

There are exceptions to this east/west dichotomy, such as the large outcropping of palm trees in front of the modern building complex at 1111–1115 Sunset in Echo Park. Designed by architect William Pereira in 1961 and constructed between 1963 and 1973,⁵³ the headquarters of the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, which featured a low-rise component and an

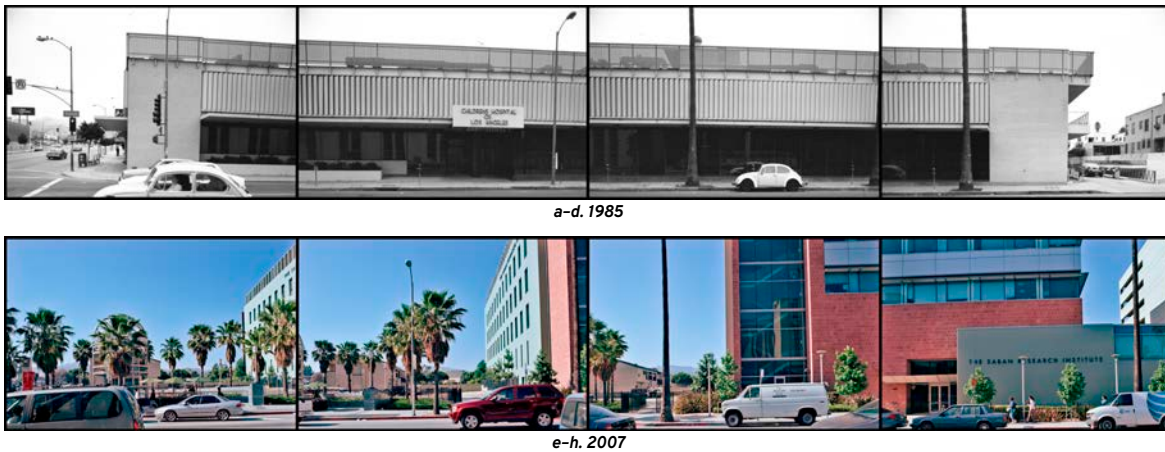


Figure 18.10 Ed Ruscha, 4661 Sunset Boulevard, 1985 (a–d) and 2007 (e–h), digital positives from negatives. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1 (a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h). © Ed Ruscha.



Figure 18.11 Ed Ruscha, 2201–15 Sunset Boulevard, 1973 (a–d) and 2007 (e–g), digital positives from negatives. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1 (a, b, c, d, e, f, g). © Ed Ruscha.

eight-story high-rise, was accompanied from the outset by dozens of new Canary Island date palms and Mexican fan palms. In the complex's more recent incarnations as the Holy Hill Community Church (1994–2015) and Elysian apartment building (2014–), palm trees remain. The unusual appearance of so many palm trees in this eastern locale attests to both the building's more recent construction and its original municipal use. Another property highly populated with palms along Sunset Boulevard is Hollywood High School (located at the intersection with Highland Avenue and closest to 6767 Sunset), another public site.

In their arrival and disappearance, palms demonstrate the fragility and ongoing maintenance that urban nature requires. Most

palm trees last only one hundred years, but threats like fungus and weevils can fell them even sooner. Consequently, the number of palm trees in Los Angeles today has likely decreased since the last citywide census in 1990, which counted roughly seventy-five thousand. While Article 6 of the city's municipal code identifies four tree and two shrub species for protection, palm trees are not among them.⁵⁴ Palms are only protected in six specific locations due to their historic significance; one of those locations is along Sunset, at Hollywood High School. Aside from these few spots, the city does not plan to replace palm trees as they die. Climate change has prompted public investment in trees that need less water and provide greater shade. Any palm

replacement will fall to individual homeowners and developers.⁵⁵ Although Ruscha's photographs show only diminishing growth rates among Sunset's palm trees rather than an absolute decline, any future surveys should register the loss. The artist's lasting documentation of otherwise ephemeral growth shows how forces of nature helped transform and redevelop the city, only becoming visible when we examine its landscape at a fine grain.

Tree planting on Sunset represented a different sort of redevelopment from the construction and reconstruction of its buildings. Yet, as a close examination of the boulevard's palms reveals, the tale of its treescape is no less a history of gradual, additive, and subtractive changes that unfolded slowly enough to elude the eye but not Ruscha's camera. The photographs remind us that much of Sunset lacks the iconic trees, evincing variations in development patterns and socioeconomic geographies alike. Where palm trees do appear, their planting, growth, and decline tell a broader story of Sunset hidden in plain sight: its form ever-changing, reshaped inexorably by the persistent, transformative, and constructed nature of landscape.

REDEVELOPMENT AT THE STREET LEVEL

Looking at postwar urban history through the small, subtle changes happening at the street level is more than just a metaphorical shift in perspective. Crucially, Ruscha's photographic project records social and material aspects of the urban landscape that few, if any, other sources have documented. What historical traces have palm trees and hand-painted restaurant signs, for example, left in the archive? Even where relevant records do exist—like those that document the built form, ownership, and occupancy of banks and gas stations—photographs add new texture. They illuminate moments of absence, stasis, and incremental change—the very opposite of more traditional recordkeeping practices. In these ways, Ruscha's photographs capture a more complete and nuanced record of the urban landscape as well as of the actors and actions that changed it over time.

Not just any photographic perspective would enable such views. The more schematic and prevalent bird's-eye view of the midcentury era

obscures as much as it reveals, erasing the agency and impact of individual property owners, proprietors, residents, and municipal workers on the ground. By contrast, privileging these actors and their typically more modest urban interventions paints the late twentieth-century city as one that was shaped, but not controlled, by sweeping structural forces such as oil dependency, economic globalization, immigration, and climate change. A street-view perspective shows how individual actors contended with such forces by remaking the built environment.

In the process, they became redevelopers too, but not in the typical sense. They did not lead the often-disruptive large-scale projects that have attracted much attention yet constituted only a minority of urban change. Instead, they defined a redevelopment vernacular through their myriad alterations of individual properties. Those gradual, small-scale actions contrasted notably with the scale of transformation that caused them; however, over space and time, they added up. They reveal the history of the late twentieth-century city not as the work of invisible hands but of real ones that planted trees, repainted buildings, tore them down, and built them up.

A few geographically comprehensive collections of street-level photographs exist for other cities, including New York City's tax photographs of the 1940s and 1980s. But the fact that one of the most important artistic commentators on twentieth-century urban America created—and frequently recreated—Sunset makes them particularly provocative for considering the charged relationship between evidence and narrative. Paradoxically, the impossible totality promised by Ruscha's photography—"every building," as his famous title reads—makes the case for both slowing down and scaling down in the effort to track the history of urban change in all its specificity and fine detail.

Ruscha seemingly had that very prospect in mind. Why else return to Sunset over and over so that each incremental change could be etched in film and stored away for future comparison? Sunset Boulevard's stories are limited by the path the roadway carved through the city, which encompasses only certain racial, ethnic, and class bounds. But its miles contain a multitude of varied layers and people behind its facades. Ruscha offered a path for seeing them and the revelatory traces they left behind, not just here

but along any route. One need only slow down and look, property by property, year over year, just as Ruscha's camera did.

NOTES

1. Trina Mitchum, "A Conversation with Ed Ruscha," in *Leave Any Information at the Signal: Writings, Interviews, Bits, Pages*, ed. Alexandra Schwartz (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 85 (originally published in *Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art Journal*, no. 21 [Jan.–Feb. 1979]: 21–24).
2. Accounts emphasizing large-scale mid-to-late-twentieth-century urban redevelopment projects include Robert Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Knopf, 1974); Susan S. Fainstein, *The City Builders: Property Development in New York and London, 1980–2000*, 2nd ed. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001); Alan A. Altshuler and David E. Luberoff, *Mega-Projects: The Changing Politics of Urban Public Investment* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2004); Samuel Zipp, *Manhattan Projects: The Rise and Fall of Urban Renewal in Cold War New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Francesca Russello Ammon, *Bulldozer: Demolition and Clearance of the Postwar Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); Sean Dinces, *Bulls Markets: Chicago's Basketball Business and the New Inequality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); and Lizabeth Cohen, *Saving America's Cities: Ed Logue and the Struggle to Renew Urban America in the Suburban Age* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2019).
3. See Dana Cuff, *The Provisional City: Los Angeles Stories of Architecture and Urbanism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000); Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); and Bunker Hill Refrain, <https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/arutkows/bunker-hill-refrain/>.
4. Efforts to chronicle such small, street-level changes include works by Ruscha's contemporaries: Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971); and Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972). They also include studies by more recent scholars: Suleiman Osman, *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn: Gentrification and the Search for Authenticity in Postwar New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Eric Avila, *The Folklore of the Freeway: Race and Revolt in the Modernist City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); and Brian D. Goldstein, *The Roots of Urban Renaissance: Gentrification and the Struggle over Harlem* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).
5. Doris Berger, "Every Building on the Sunset Strip: Interview with Ed Ruscha by Doris Berger," in *Within, Alongside, and Between Spaces* (Frankfurt: Revolver, 2003), 45.
6. These ten miles span Doheny Road to the west and Alameda Street to the east, where Ruscha stopped photographing. Ruscha's photographs from 1966 include only the Sunset Strip.
7. For Sunset Over Sunset, see <http://www.sunsetoversunset.org/>.
8. Banks appear in "Tanks, Banks, Ranks, Thanks," Ruscha's photo essay in "Camera," *Rags*, no. 12 (May 1971): 37–40. Gas stations are featured in his artist book *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* (1963) and in prints and paintings that followed. Restaurants are the subject of paintings like *Norm's, La Cienega, on Fire* (1964) and his film *L.A. Restaurants* (2019). Palm trees can be found in his artist book *A Few Palm Trees* (1971). See also Kate Palmer Albers, "From Banks to Blanks: The Poetic Spaces of Automated Vision," this volume.
9. Estimates of numbers of gas stations vary, but all sources point to a dramatic decline during this period. John A. Jakle and Keith A. Sculle, *The Gas Station in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 131; and "Service Station FAQs," American Petroleum Institute, <https://www.api.org/oil-and-natural-gas/consumer-information/consumer-resources/service-station-faqs>.
10. Throughout this chapter, we derive counts of building and landscape features from the manual study of Ruscha's photographs alongside city directories and other secondary sources; in particular, we utilize our digital project Sunset Over Sunset. We thank research assistants Dorothy-Rui Corrigan, Anna Fruman, Juliette Morfin, Calvin Nguyen, and Julian Valgora for their painstaking attention in completing this work and their thoughtful analytical contributions.
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12. John A. Jakle, "The American Gasoline Station, 1920 to 1970," *Journal of American Culture* 1, no. 3 (Fall 1978): 521.
13. Jakle and Sculle, *The Gas Station in America*, 79–80.
14. Rick Kushman, "Government, Costs, Oil Firms Hurt," *Los Angeles Times*, 10 August 1980, WS1.
15. Robert L. Bradley Jr., *Oil, Gas and Government: The U.S. Experience* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996).
16. Jakle and Sculle, *The Gas Station in America*, 79–81.
17. Greg Hise, *Magnetic Los Angeles: Planning the Twentieth-Century Metropolis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).
18. The combined statistical area includes Los Angeles County, Orange County, Riverside County, San Bernardino County, and Ventura County. Wendell Cox, "The Evolving Urban Form: Los Angeles," *New Geography*, 8 August 2011, <https://www.newgeography.com/content/002372-the-evolving-urban-form-los-angeles>.
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20. Stephen A. Rhoades, *Bank Mergers and Industrywide Structure, 1980–94* (Washington, DC: Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, 1996), 1–4.
21. This data is based on an analysis of the following categories from census tract numbers 1908, 1913, and 1958 (for the year 1970) and census tract numbers 1908, 1913, and 1958.01 (for the year 2000) for Los Angeles County, California: race, foreign born, and average family income. Social Explorer (based on data from US Census Bureau), <https://www.socialexplorer.com/us-census-data>.
22. See Mehrsa Baradaran, *How the Other Half Banks: Exclusion, Exploitation, and the Threat to Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017); and Mathieu Despard and Terri Friedline, *Do Metropolitan Areas Have Equal Access to Banking? A Geographic Investigation of Financial Services Availability* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas, Center on Assets, Education, & Inclusion, 2017).
23. On Lytton Savings, see City of Los Angeles, "Section 4.C.2.: Historical Resources," in *8150 Sunset Boulevard Mixed Use: Draft Environmental Impact Report*, November 2014, 4.C.2–1 to 4.C.2–30, https://planning.lacity.org/eir/8150Sunset/deir/DEIR/4.C.2_Historical_Resources.pdf.
24. Combined, the two banks represented 6.4 percent of total US banking assets. Rhoades, *Bank Mergers and Industrywide Structure*, 5–8.
25. See "Historical Data" note on "Sunset Vine Tower," *TESSA: Digital Collections of the Los Angeles Public Library*, <https://tessa.lapl.org/cdm/ref/collection/photos/id/124247>.
26. Los Angeles Department of City Planning, *Recommendation Report: Historic-Cultural Monument Application for the Bank of America-Echo Park Branch*, 28 August 2008, <https://planning.lacity.gov/StaffRpt/CHC/1-15-09/CHC-2008-4394.pdf>.
27. Paulo Murillo, "Bank of America Sunset-Wetherly Is Second Branch to Close in WeHo," *WeHo Times*, 9 September 2021, <https://wehetimes.com/bank-of-america-sunset-wetherly-is-second-branch-to-close-in-weho/>.
28. East Los Angeles was a popular destination for Mexican immigrants in the mid- to late twentieth century, yet many settled along Sunset—

- especially its eastern portion, in and around Echo Park—during this time as well. In the neighborhoods between Hollywood and downtown, populations of Cubans, Guatemalans, and Salvadorans were notably larger compared to other L.A. areas by the century's end; Hondurans, Nicaraguans, and other Central American communities concentrated in Hollywood north of Beverly Boulevard. By the 1990s, Sunset's eastern extent included notable populations of Chinese and Vietnamese immigrants (both near Chinatown) as well as Japanese and Filipino immigrants. Thai immigrants, concentrated in East Hollywood, represented the boulevard's most significant population from East Asia. See James Paul Allen and Eugene Turner, *The Ethnic Quilt: Population Diversity in Southern California* (Northridge: California State University, Northridge, Center for Geographical Studies, 1997), 34–40, 92–166; and Mark Padoongpatt, *Flavors of Empire: Food and the Making of Thai America* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 58–64.
29. On immigrant restaurant entrepreneurs, see Krishnendu Ray, *The Ethnic Restaurateur* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).
 30. Inevitably, our manual counts may have missed some of the few restaurants with obscured signage or those with remaining signage that have gone out of business.
 31. Natalia Molina, "The Importance of Place and Place-Makers in the Life of a Los Angeles Community: What Gentrification Erases from Echo Park," *Southern California Quarterly* 97, no. 1 (2015): 74–83.
 32. Molina, "Importance," 95–97. On El Nayarit, see Natalia Molina, *A Place at the Nayarit: How a Mexican Restaurant Nourished a Community* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022).
 33. These observations benefited from the research assistance and insight of Dorothy-Rui Corrigan.
 34. Padoongpatt, *Flavors of Empire*, 97–101.
 35. Padoongpatt, *Flavors of Empire*, 92.
 36. As *Bon Appetit* declared, Jitlada was "definitely the best Thai food in L.A., and likely the whole country." "Jitlada," *Bon Appetit*, <https://www.bonappetit.com/city-guides/los-angeles/venue/jitlada>.
 37. See the interview from 2018 with Sahag's Basturma owner Harout Tashjian: "Sahag's Basturma in Little Armenia," Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, 17 July 2018, YouTube video, 4:46, https://www.si.edu/es/object/yt_CigNV2J3RDg.
 38. Padoongpatt, *Flavors of Empire*, 147.
 39. See "Imperial Gardens Sukiyaki, Menu," menu #41–440, Bruce P. Jeffer Menu Collection, Conrad N. Hilton Library, Culinary Institute of America, Hyde Park, NY, <http://ciadigitalcollections.culinary.edu/digital/collection/p16940coll1/id/13322>; and "Vintage Postcards Then & Now," *Adsausage*, <https://www.adsausage.com/vintage-los-angeles-postcards-saharan-winona>.
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 41. Jared Farmer, *Trees in Paradise: A California History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013), 382–83; and Nathan Masters, "A Brief History of Palm Trees in Southern California," *KCET*, 7 December 2011, <https://www.kcet.org/shows/lost-la/a-brief-history-of-palm-trees-in-southern-california>.
 42. Dave Gardetta, "Architect of Paradise," *Los Angeles Times*, 1 October 1995, SM20.
 43. Farmer, *Trees in Paradise*, 382.
 44. David Larsen, "Costly Care: L.A. Palms—A Frond in Need," *Los Angeles Times*, 13 February 1975, A1.
 45. Farmer, *Trees in Paradise*, 337.
 46. Farmer, *Trees in Paradise*, 374–75.
 47. "O Council, Plant Those Trees," *Los Angeles Times*, 2 November 1927.
 48. "Chamber Fights for Trees," *Los Angeles Times*, 18 November 1927.
 49. This concentrated area of palm trees is located roughly between 4500 and 8200 Sunset Boulevard.
 50. By the early twentieth century, Los Angeles managed about one fifth of the city's roughly ten million trees, of which 700,000 were street trees. Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris and Renia Ehrenfeucht, *Sidewalks: Conflict and Negotiation over Urban Space* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 197.
 51. Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Company, *Los Angeles Street Address Directory*, July 1965, 1973, and 1987.
 52. These observations, and others related to palm tree growth, benefited from the insights and research assistance of Julian Valgora.
 53. The low-rise portion of the complex was completed in 1963, while the eight-story high-rise was built in 1973.
 54. Municipal Code of the City of Los Angeles, Article 6: Preservation of Protected Trees, section 46.01, 2023, https://codelibrary.amlegal.com/codes/los_angeles/latest/lamc/0-0-0-132254.
 55. Ally J. Levine, "L.A.'s Palm Trees are Dying and It's Changing the City's Famous Skyline," *Los Angeles Times*, 22 September 2017, <https://www.latimes.com/projects/la-me-palm-trees-dying-skyline-los-angeles/>; and Rory Carroll, "Los Angeles' Legendary Palm Trees are Dying—and Few Will Be Replaced," *The Guardian*, 29 September 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/sep/29/los-angeles-palm-trees-dying>.

An Urban Grammar for the Streets of Los Angeles Archive: Types and Town Watching in the Arterial Datascape

Gabrielle Esperdy, with contributions by Damon Crockett

PREMISE

Damon Crockett and I—a data scientist and an architectural historian, respectively—set out to explore the Streets of Los Angeles (SoLA) Archive with a typology of commercial architecture developed by the historian and preservationist Richard Longstreth. Our goal was to use Ed Ruscha’s images as evidence of what Longstreth described as “the multifaceted nature of commercial change since World War II,” tracing how patterns of commercial space established in the 1920s and the 1930s, and extended in the 1940s and 1950s, evolved in the 1960s, 1970s, and beyond.¹ By applying Longstreth’s typology to Ruscha’s photographic archive, we hoped to understand how, in effect, Los Angeles became Los Angeles, a place defined by the horizontal urbanism of its arterial landscapes. Our approach was based on two assumptions: that pattern recognition is what computers do best and that a photography archive can be reverse engineered into a data set. Neither was entirely correct. Join us as we travel through Ruscha’s Los Angeles townscape on a journey of data discovery.

PRELUDE: 1972

In an interview from 1972, Ruscha sheepishly demurred that he was “not really a photographer,”

even though he had self-published fourteen books of photographs. Ruscha meant that his photographs were not the point: for him “photography had become a basic tool of conceptual art,” and his books “hinged on something other than the images themselves.”² By then, the images were significant themselves, but *not* as art, because they had been appropriated by the distinct cultural sphere of architecture. Loosely related to postmodernism, architecture’s appropriation of Ruscha’s work was connected to an intellectual interest in rejecting the canonical and high style in favor of the vernacular and everyday—like the buildings captured in the SoLA photographs.

In “Reyner Banham Loves Los Angeles” (1972), the British architectural historian converses with Ruscha in a Cadillac convertible at Tiny Naylor’s drive-in (7101 Sunset), discussing L.A.’s changing urban scene. Ruscha comments that it takes longer to tear down an old building than it takes to put up a new one. Banham swears he has seen the same standardized building in nine hundred different places. Ruscha agrees, quipping, “You’re not sure it’ll still be in the same location when you come back again.”³ Tiny Naylor’s was there when Ruscha photographed the 7100 block of Sunset Boulevard in 1973 and 1974, but in 1985 it was gone (fig. 19.1). All Ruscha could do, he explained decades later, was “record a street in a



Figure 19.1 Ed Ruscha, 7101 Sunset Boulevard, 1973, digital positive from negative. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.

very faithful way,” regardless of what happened to it year to year.⁴

In 1972, the designers and theorists Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour published *Learning from Las Vegas*, a book on architectural form, scale, and symbolism. Inspired by *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966), their book included “Ed Ruscha elevations” that they made by pasting together photographs of casinos, motels, and billboards shot from a vehicle cruising the Las Vegas Strip.⁵ For Scott Brown, who encountered Ruscha’s work when she joined the urban planning faculty at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), in 1965, the artist’s apparently nonjudgmental and inclusive attitude toward the commercial vernacular was essential.⁶ *Every Building* was almost “a scholarly monograph,” offering an expansive urban vision that took in “the whole hard face of the metropolis.” At UCLA, she encouraged students to “learn from the existing landscape” and taught them techniques of what she called *town watching*, using photography, diagramming, and description to comprehend the city’s “form, forces and functions.”⁷ Town watching became the basis for the analytical approach used in *Learning from Las Vegas*, as can be seen in the Ruscha elevations. Importantly, that book was “a study of method, not content,” intended for applications beyond Las Vegas and certainly appropriate for a car-oriented metropolitan agglomeration like Los Angeles.⁸

In 1972, when Longstreth was a PhD student at the University of California, Berkeley, and already grappling with Scott Brown’s admonitions about the vernacular landscape, he purchased several of Ruscha’s artist books at the university’s art

museum. Like Ruscha, Longstreth had been taking pictures of Los Angeles buildings since 1966, when he returned to the city (he was born in Pasadena) for a summer job in the office of the architect Richard Neutra. Unlike Ruscha, his L.A. project was documentary from the beginning; it became a key component of the fieldwork that supported his scholarship, including two volumes on Los Angeles. By the time Longstreth completed *City Center to Regional Mall* (1997) and *The Drive-In, the Supermarket, and the Transformation of Commercial Space in Los Angeles* (2000), he had driven some five thousand miles in the L.A. Basin.⁹ In contrast to Ruscha but much like Scott Brown, Longstreth kept getting out of the car, examining individual buildings, isolating formal and functional types, and identifying patterns in the modern city.

TYPOLOGY

In the 1970s, scholars turned to typological studies to make sense of the specialized buildings that proliferated with modernity and industrialization beginning in the 1800s. Nikolaus Pevsner’s *A History of Building Types* (1976) focused on nineteenth-century civic buildings, but he also examined some commercial and twentieth-century types, including supermarkets, shopping malls, and other “innovations in selling . . . caused by the motor car.”¹⁰ Chester Liebs picked up these developments in *Main Street to Miracle Mile* (1985), looking at specific roadside types of the gas, food, and lodging variety.¹¹ In the 1980s, Longstreth used their work as the starting point for a study of generic commercial buildings, producing not a typological history but an actual typology: a classification scheme based on his field observations and photodocumentation of eighty thousand buildings from coast to coast. Longstreth argued that the typology was applicable nationally because commercial architecture was a “common language” across the country. Put another way, “even if architectural dialects were different, the underlying grammar was much the same.”¹²

Longstreth was looking for patterns in the built environment, for the rules of an urban grammar in effect in downtowns and on Main Streets, but also in the *arterial landscape*, a term identifying major surface roads carrying a heavy flow of local traffic.¹³ Despite an automotive orientation,

arterials were generally thoroughfares whose growth outward from urban centers were related to transportation predating the combustion engine. In Los Angeles, these are the avenues that extend out from the city's original plazas, their development spurred in the 1890s by the far-flung lines of streetcars and interurban railways. Long before the car overwhelmed the trolley, arterials like Sunset Boulevard were characterized equally by their commercial character and their urban attenuation.

Lined with mainly low-rise buildings whose architecture was as changeable as the retail occupancy, these commercial corridors were "fashioned to attract the eye and oftentimes to stimulate the senses."¹⁴ At the same time, they were generally ordinary and utilitarian; frequently, they were taxpayer buildings erected where land values were low and rents were cheap, generating a modest income until eventual redevelopment. Unlike central business districts dotted with skyscrapers and civic monuments, arterial landscapes rarely symbolized their cities. Indeed, Longstreth observed that for much of the twentieth century, arterials were not even regarded as properly urban because they were dominated by automobiles. Los Angeles, he initially conceded, was "hard to accept as a real city" because of its largely unremarkable arterials; but thanks to Scott Brown's theories and his own observations, Longstreth had learned to set aside those presumptions and to view arterials like Sunset Boulevard as the foundation of a new urban order.¹⁵

As in Ruscha's *Every Building*, Longstreth's commercial typology privileged elevation over other architectural attributes. He declared floor plans irrelevant because commercial buildings designed circa 1900 often featured open interiors to provide retail flexibility. While acknowledging that socioeconomic factors always informed commercial development, and recognizing that three-dimensional form offered important insights, Longstreth settled on the street front as best suited to "broad categorical divisions." Because US commercial landscapes were born of the land platting and gridirons that became standard by 1850, parcels for commercial development were typically deep and narrow. This produced abutting buildings whose sides and rears were inconsequential but whose street frontage was key. Longstreth concluded, the

facade gives the building "most of its identity."¹⁶

He grouped facades into standard forms with variations: one-part and two-part horizontal blocks, enframed and arcaded blocks, two-part and three-part vertical blocks, and temple fronts and vaults (fig. 19.2).¹⁷ These eight types are abstractions based on careful observation of buildings erected between 1850 and 1950. After 1950 the automobile's spatial logic produced commercial forms that stressed three-dimensional volumes over plan and elevation. These new spaces possessed a variety of drive-in features, many originating in the earliest automotive accommodations of the 1920s; for instance, freestanding buildings were constructed on larger parcels of land with expanded off-street parking. While the fixed facades of storefronts became less important, the standard forms remain partially legible. Though setbacks and parking lots complicate perception of the street front, horizontal blocks are discernable, both multipart and combined with vertical units. Longstreth's analysis jibed with what Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour discerned in Las Vegas: despite the variety of the Strip's signage superstructure, its buildings possessed a notable sameness, their forms literally following function and context. Casinos downtown required "foot frontage" because they were oriented toward pedestrians on the sidewalks of a preautomotive street grid. Casinos on the Strip were oriented toward drivers on a multilane arterial; the need for comprehension from fast-moving cars produced the long and low buildings they called "decorated sheds."¹⁸

For Longstreth, specifying compositional types as an underlying formal structure was essential because one of the most striking aspects of commercial space was its "inherent impermanence." He noted that in arterial landscapes "change is endemic" because commercial corridors register socioeconomic and cultural shifts with a greater frequency than more permanent architectural forms.¹⁹ In storefront modernization, for example, the basic type remains comprehensible despite incremental change. This kind of "change and permanence" was a key finding of *Learning from Las Vegas*, too, in which the authors observed how competition across retail types produced an ongoing process of rebuilding, a "succession of facelifts," with the original boxlike structures left intact.²⁰ In typical

DATA DRIVEN

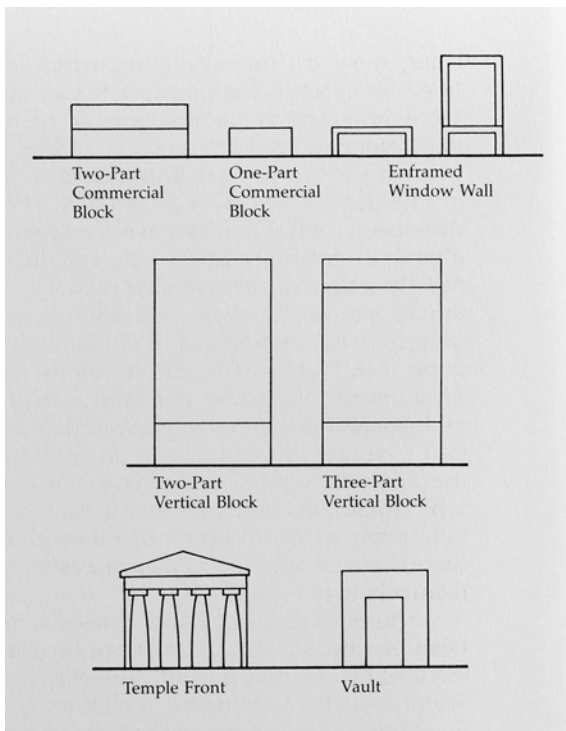


Figure 19.2 Richard Longstreth, Diagrammatic representation of commercial building compositional types, 1986. Drawing by Sherwin Greene. Used courtesy of Richard Longstreth.

commercial environments, change was prompted not by physical disrepair but by the visual aesthetics of signage and facades.

While Longstreth's typology was historically focused, he believed that urban analysis based on photodocumentation of arterial landscapes had contemporary value. Even if decades-old photographs are "far removed from the present," the conditions they reveal bring "the contemporary metropolitan order" into focus. As he explained, "The particulars have changed more than have the basic patterns."²¹ This was true even in Los Angeles: it may have been a "pop city," as Scott Brown called it, emphasizing its fickle ephemerality, but a thoughtful town watcher would find "pattern in sprawl, order in chaos."²² This is what Longstreth discovered when deploying his typology in Los Angeles to track the development of its retail forms. Since he studied the same arterial landscapes that Ruscha captured in his photographs, and since he intended his typology as "an instrument for further research," his typology was an obvious starting point for us as we attempted to adapt Longstreth's analog methods to the digital age.²³

"Did Ed Ruscha invent Google Street View?"²⁴ The technologist Rob Walker posed this question in 2011, but he wasn't the first person to make the connection. Within weeks of the launch of Google Street View (GSV) in May 2007, an Australian web developer noticed a resemblance between Ruscha's motorized vision and Google's new mapping feature. After Getty digitized Ruscha's Sunset Boulevard images, and especially after it launched the "12 Sunsets: Exploring Ed Ruscha's Archive" website enabling viewers to virtually drive along the boulevard's nearly twenty-five-mile length between 1965 and 2007, the SoLA project really seemed like GSV *avant la lettre*.²⁵ Moving through time and across the city is a thrilling virtual experience, as buildings, billboards, and palm trees accumulate into a detailed portrait of a particular urban place—similar to how people first experienced the now-ubiquitous GSV.

For Los Angeles, GSV picks up where "12 Sunsets" ends: Ruscha's Sunset Boulevard photos from 2007 coincide with Google's earliest images; since then, Google has recorded Sunset more than once per year. Twelve Ruscha Sunsets and twenty Google Sunsets offer an opportunity to explore the transformation of one of Los Angeles' most famous streets over six decades, and it is easy to get lost in this virtual urban *dérive*. If, however, the goal is an analysis of urban form rather than an observation of urban incident, the volume of images overwhelms the endeavor. When town watching in search of type forms, anecdotal exploration must give way to organized inspection, which entails marshaling the capabilities of computation, machine-vision technology, and object recognition. Deploy any of these tools to scrutinize Sunset's built fabric, and the actual differences between SoLA and GSV images stand out more than their perceived similarities.

Within Google Maps, the street view presents 360-degree panoramas from original images shot with high-definition digital cameras mounted atop a moving car, capturing multiple views from multiple vantage points. GSV cars are equipped with light-detection and ranging sensors that measure distance and dimensions with laser beams, wheel-mounted sensors that capture speed and direction, and GPS that pinpoints location. After more than a dozen images for

every location and position are collected, they are aligned properly, corrected for tilt and distortions, adjusted for color and contrast, and stitched into composites by smoothing seams and minimizing transitions.²⁶ These steps create the continuous photographs that seem to reproduce how we visually perceive our surroundings when moving through a given street. As viewers zoom and pan through Google Maps, most are oblivious to the gigabytes of geospatial metadata embedded in every GSV image.

That metadata makes GSV valuable to researchers, like those at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Media Lab who used it in their Streetchange project (2015–19) to measure urban change by using a computer algorithm to inspect 1.5 million street blocks in five US cities (not L.A.). Researchers extracted image cutouts from GSV panoramas from 2007 and 2014 by precisely matching latitude, longitude, and left-right and up-down rotation. Then, the computer, via machine vision, analyzed the cutouts, inspecting object shape and pixel texture to distinguish ground, buildings, sky, and trees. Next, they deployed an automation algorithm to compare the same-place/same-point-of-view cutouts and calculate a metric of change, coding it qualitatively as improvement or decline based on perceptions of safety in urban environments.²⁷ Streetchange's automated inspection succeeded in detecting change because GSV is a data-collection project we mostly experience as a photographic one.

In contrast, the SoLA Archive is a photographic collection easily mistaken for a data-driven project. Once digitization began, with artificial intelligence generating geospatial and semantic tags for every scanned image, the SoLA project seemed like big data, a misreading that intensified with each comparison to GSV. While the pasteup techniques Ruscha used to make *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* may be an analog precedent to GSV's digital alignment and stitching, Ruscha's shooting logs are hardly equivalent to GSV's structured spatial data. For instance, the log for Ruscha's Sunset Boulevard shoot from 1973 reads: "Roll 1. Western Ave. East to across from Akron. Roll 2. Across from Akron to just West of Alvarado. Roll 3. West of Alvarado to past Water & Power Co." Street number ranges are sometimes included in the logs—"Roll 14. 9984 to 10570"—as are key intersections and boundaries—"Sanborn



Figure 19.3 Ed Ruscha, 4400 Sunset Boulevard, 1973, digital positive from negative. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.



Figure 19.4 Ed Ruscha, 8560 Sunset Boulevard, 1973, digital positive from negative. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.

Junction" and "end of Strip."²⁸ Cross streets, building numbers, and local monuments are forms of inchoate metadata that help place the images on Sunset, but only if one knows that Akron was the name of a home decor store at 4400 Sunset; that Water & Power Co. is short for the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, whose headquarters were at 1111 Sunset; and that the address of the Playboy Club referenced on roll 11 was 8560 Sunset (figs. 19.3, 19.4).²⁹ While the shooting logs seem like careful in-the-field notations, the information is as casual and informal as Ruscha's trademark laid-back cool attitude.

The street numbers visible in the photos are valuable for identifying specific buildings, but an address, however useful as a data point, is not a geospatial location; and in contrast to the postproduction involved in GSV images, Ruscha

simply developed the film without correcting misalignments caused by shifting zoom or the camera's position. Ruscha's in-the-field process is clear: working out of a pickup truck, the team drove slowly, shooting each building in the center of the frame. Because the camera was on a tripod fixed in the flatbed, the photographs seem to have visual consistency and continuity, block by block, year by year—or so it appears to a human scanning the digitized images. When a machine scans the collection, critical differences emerge.

Sunset Boulevard has two traffic lanes in both directions, and, per Ruscha's production notebook, the truck traveled in the right lane with the camera pointed perpendicularly at buildings on the driver's side.³⁰ The team generally shot across three lanes of traffic, which is confirmed by images with cars in the passing lane that cut in front of the camera (figs. 19.5, 19.6). When shoots from different years are compared, however, there is a noticeable variation in the amount of asphalt visible in the foreground. Sometimes the sidewalk appears in the lower edge of the frame; sometimes the lane closest to the sidewalk is visible; and sometimes pavement markings and the adjacent lanes are also visible. Either the truck changed lanes, or someone adjusted the camera's focal length; whatever the reason, the selected zoom varied between ten and twenty feet relative to the building wall. In elevation, that is equivalent to an additional story or more. Compare these inconsistencies to the GPS coordinates captured in real time and embedded into every GSV photograph, precisely plotting the location and position of each image. The implications of the imprecise data garnered from Ruscha's photos are obvious: any data point selected for analysis to gauge comparative change is unreliable.

When Crockett and I trained a computer to inspect the open space above the building line of Sunset Boulevard's street-facing elevations, we hoped this "Sky-o-Meter" would measure shifts in building heights and density by identifying the percentages of sky and non-sky in each frame, compared across shoots.³¹ The irregularities of Ruscha's nondata-driven practice made image comparisons across years a frustrating exercise, one further undermined by a final photographic difference between SoLA and GSV images: Google's images are not art, or even artistic, but each one is processed to correct color balance,



Figure 19.5 Ed Ruscha, 8300 Sunset Boulevard, 1973, digital positive from negative. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.



Figure 19.6 Ed Ruscha, 8400 Sunset Boulevard, 1973, digital positive from negative. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.

boost contrast, and minimize the effects of light and shadow. This enhances their utility for machine-visioning tasks like semantic segmentation, which categorizes pixels into different classes to identify specific object types. In contrast, Ruscha's images are characterized by their artlessness. He was famously unconcerned with tonal range, depth of field, or visual nuances. His photos are intentionally flat, making it difficult to discern changing details, like stucco cladding in the 1960s that was replaced by Dryvit in the 1980s, or the use of common brick in the 1970s versus that of face brick in the 1990s. This flatness added to the challenges we faced when trying to leverage the SoLA project as a historical equivalent of GSV.

Training a computer vision algorithm to recognize buildings in a photograph is more difficult than training one to recognize objects like

cars, trash cans, palm trees, and signs. These objects have discernable formal patterns the machine can learn to detect. The more images the computer is fed, the more accurate its object-recognition results, at least with respect to urban equipment, be it street furniture or stoplights. The discrete forms of the individual buildings in Ruscha's photos are more difficult for the computer to comprehend as recognizable and repeated patterns, much less ones that could be matched to Longstreth's compositional types. Partly, this has to do with defining edges, where one building ends and another begins. On arterials like Sunset Boulevard—with its contiguous, if not always continuous facades—a party wall, a bulkhead, or an alley might define the boundary between buildings; but in Ruscha's black-and-white, tonally flat pictures, these boundaries are not easily read by a machine.

Consider the property at 9009 Sunset, built as a food market in the 1930s and home to a burlesque club when it appears in *Every Building* thirty years later. In Longstreth's typology, this is a two-part commercial block, one with a hipped roof and mod elements evocative of Paul R. Williams's Hollywood Regency style. It sat at the street line, with two driveways and curbside parking spaces on either side. When Ruscha returned in 1973, it was the Roxy Theatre and had become a two-story building with a faux-deco pylon and marquee; subsequent photographs record changes in windows, signage, and paint colors, but the driveways interrupting the street wall remained constant until at least 2019 (fig. 19.7).³² The two buildings west of the Roxy—a restaurant at 9015 Sunset from the 1920s and Bank of America at 9021 Sunset from the 1950s—are clearly distinct, though separated by only a few inches. Because of the steep-pitched roof of the restaurant, there is visible space in the sky between it and the bank. Other contrasts abound: the restaurant facade is partially brick in contrast to the bank's stone veneer; and while the restaurant is overwhelmed by a signage superstructure, the bank has an oversized parapet that shields rooftop parking. While a computer might detect varied surface patterns, the buildings' proliferating planes and angles obscure the figure-to-ground relationship, and these buildings-as-objects are hard to define. A computer, even one well trained on streetscapes, struggles to distinguish one structure from



Figure 19.7 Ed Ruscha, 9009 Sunset Boulevard, 1973, digital positive from negative. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.

another, or where a building ends and the sky, street, or sidewalk starts.

This is further complicated by the robust signage and advertising superstructure that defines L.A.'s arterials, something Banham had already observed in the 1970s. In *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (1971), Banham noted that the supposed "chaos" of the city's commercial vernacular possessed logic and syntax—though not in ways that would make sense to a computer.³³ A machine looking at images of 7070 Sunset (at La Brea Avenue) between the years 1973 and 1990 correctly identified a freestanding and nearly triple-height signpost as non-sky; meanwhile, a human looking at those same images can grasp how it changed. In 1973, the signpost advertised a Safeway supermarket occupying a building set back from Sunset to accommodate surface parking (fig. 19.8). Between 1985 and 1990, a retro-deco diner was built just behind the sign, which was reframed and clad with square tiles, probably to match the new building (fig. 19.9). Because of the change in focal distance in this shot, the top of the sign is out of the frame, and it is impossible to know what was advertised in 1990. While the non-sky became increasingly dense, the Sky-o-Meter failed to register the change over time because all the elements in the visual field—the big-box store, surface parking, knee wall, diner, and sign itself—have been compositionally part of the built fabric since 1973.



Figure 19.8 Ed Ruscha, 7070 Sunset Boulevard, 1973, digital positive from negative. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.



Figure 19.9 Ed Ruscha, 7070 Sunset Boulevard, 1990, digital positive from negative. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.

Despite the limitations of machine analysis and treatment of Ruscha's photographs as data in a computational sense, Crockett successfully deployed automation to generate a *data product* from the archive to be analyzed offline: a set of composite SoLA photographs documenting the nine-mile stretch of Sunset Boulevard between Phyllis Street, which separates West Hollywood and Beverly Hills, and the 110 Freeway in downtown L.A. The composites contain around 250 images drawn from seven Sunset shoots (1973–2007) and Google Street View images from 2022.³⁴ Each set depicts a specific range of buildings on the north or south side of Sunset with the horizontal strips and vertical stacks aligned as much as possible using automation rather than laborious manual correction (fig. 19.10). The remaining nonalignments are due to differences in the shoots already discussed, and

the final composites are an easy-on-the-eye compromise between alignment and legibility. These composite photographs resemble nothing so much as analog contact sheets. As with contact sheets, they are useful for a quick overview scan and a detailed frame-by-frame scrutiny. By replacing the photographer's loupe with the ability to digitally zoom and scroll, fifty years of stasis and change come into focus, as does Ruscha's early insistence that his pictures are "simply a collection of 'facts.'"³⁵

DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

As facts, Ruscha's pictures are data in an informational sense, documentation of and about Los Angeles, regardless of his motives in making them. This is how Banham regarded them in *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*—the earliest transformation of Ruscha's art into historical evidence—using them to substantiate an argument that "drive-in installations" were making serious contributions to architecture. Banham also referenced Ruscha's "picture books" in the "Drive-In Bibliography," taking them literally as compilations of eponymous building types.³⁶ Importantly, his bibliography also included Anton Wagner's *Los Angeles: Werden, Leben und Gestalt der Zweimillionstadt in Südkalifornien* (1935), which for Banham was the beginning of a "literature of explication" of L.A.'s distinctive urbanism.³⁷ Banham and Wagner parted ways in their methods of exploration. The German geographer walked as he photographed L.A., whereas Banham famously "learned to drive in order to read Los Angeles in the original." Before that, Banham's earliest "encounter with Sunset Boulevard"³⁸ was about experiencing the city for the first time from a mobilized point of view, hence his ready embrace of Ruscha's drive-by documentation.³⁹

The evidentiary aspect of Ruscha's work was also the starting point for Scott Brown and Venturi when analyzing change and permanence in Las Vegas. They moved in reverse chronological order from the Strip's built reality circa 1972, comparing the content of their Ruscha elevations to postcards, maps, and brochures distributed by casino operators, hotel developers, and chambers of commerce. Combined with regular coverage of the Strip in local media outlets, this data created an instant archive for the architects to mine for

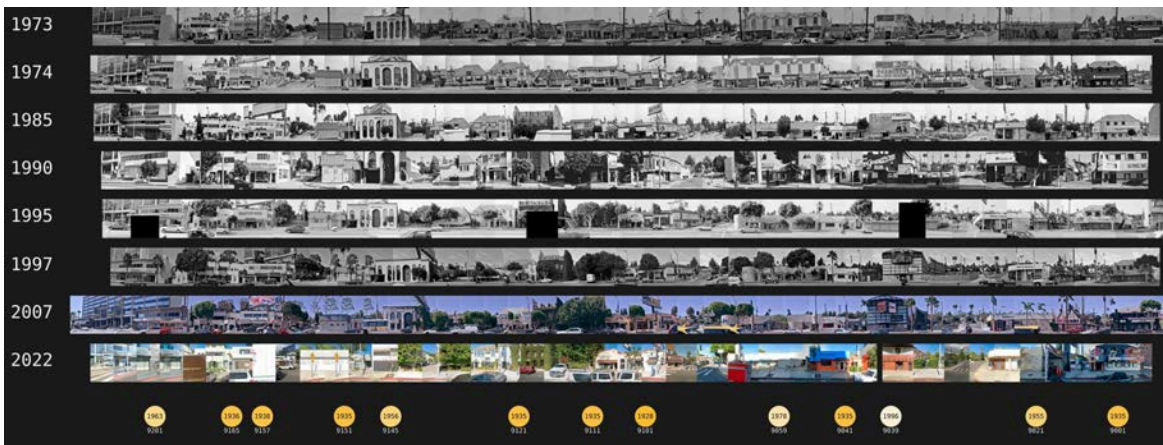


Figure 19.10 Gabrielle Esperdy and Damon Crockett, Composite image sample, 2020. © Gabrielle Esperdy.

evidence of change over time. Los Angeles lacked this sort of comparative material because its commercial establishments were rarely documented with the boosterism and fanfare of those in Las Vegas. This was true even of the Sunset Strip, with its nightclubs, restaurants, and diverse retail establishments. By the time Ruscha shot the photographs for *Every Building*, the swank and glamour that characterized Sunset between Crescent Heights Boulevard and Doheny Drive from the 1920s to the 1950s had given way to youth culture and rock and roll. Pandora's Box and the Whisky a Go Go might turn up in the background of news coverage of Sunset's curfew riots and other so-called hippie events of the 1960s, but not with regularity or comprehensiveness.

L.A.'s urban fabric was not entirely unrecorded: in addition to Wagner's photodocumentation of the city, the studio of Dick Whittington, L.A.'s largest commercial photography practice from the 1920s to the 1980s, produced an archive of 700,000 negatives capturing the explosive metropolitan growth of these decades (which is why Longstreth used them in his studies of L.A.'s commercial space). Julius Shulman's more specialized architectural photography studio did the same, but more selectively. The buildings Whittington photographed were those that were prominent because of their size or status—like the hotels, office buildings, and department stores on Wilshire Boulevard's Miracle Mile—but his clients also included small-scale developers and retailers. In the 1930s, Whittington photographed a tire store at 5563 Sunset, a service station at 6450 Sunset, and a wine store

at 7529 Sunset, documenting them when they were new. That moment in the spotlight was usually brief, and most structures of this sort quickly became the backdrop for workaday commercial activity.⁴⁰ Over ninety years, these low-rise Spanish colonial revival and art deco buildings did change, but so gradually as to be almost unnoticeable—except in the SoLA Archive and the composite photographs extracted from it.

OBSERVATIONS BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

Leveraging machine and human expertise when examining these composites enables a greater scope of visual analysis than a purely analog investigation would; the composites also allow for seemingly limitless historical and contemporary inquiry about the formal dimensions of Sunset Boulevard as a commercial landscape. Even though analysis is ongoing, some preliminary conclusions are possible. What town watching in SoLA photographs reveals with great specificity is that Sunset Boulevard, like all arterial landscapes, embodies cycles of retail competitiveness that reflect larger economic and social shifts. These shifts are evident in facelifts, additions, demolitions, and new construction—all of them already on display in Ruscha's initial shoot from 1966 and the first image in *Every Building*.

Schwab's Pharmacy had been at 8024 Sunset since 1935, occupying a small corner storefront in the west wing of a commercial block (Norstrom & Anderson, 1931) that extended east across an archway leading to off-street parking. When



Figure 19.11 Ed Ruscha, 8024 Sunset Boulevard, 1973, digital positive from negative. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.



Figure 19.12 Ed Ruscha, 8100 Sunset Boulevard, 1973, digital positive from negative. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.

Schwab's expanded into an adjacent space, the châteauxque details and picturesque massing of the original two-part composition were stripped away, replaced by a veneer in the style of Victor Gruen (Armet & Davis, 1956). This new veneer featured vertical mosaic stripes and vertical fins as well as an oversized, backlit signboard surmounted by another sign set perpendicularly to increase its visibility for drivers traveling east or west on Sunset (fig. 19.11). These *au courant* updates, which also embraced the structure's east wing, as evident in images from 1973, may well have been prompted by the completion of Googie's restaurant (John Lautner, 1949) at 8100 Sunset. Googie's was immediately west of Schwab's and stood as a one-story building with asymmetrical, cantilevered forms and bold colors and stripes that lent its name to an entire commercial style. Despite its architectural pyrotechnics, as a compositional type, Googie's was a simple one-part commercial block—a form that remained legible even after it was renovated before 1966 with copious amounts of Permastone and perforated concrete blocks, first as Gee Gee's and then as Steak 'n Stein (fig. 19.12).

In subsequent photographs, 8024 and 8100 Sunset can both be seen suffering the vagaries of commercial decline; in SoLA images from 1999, both buildings are gone, along with the Suncrest Shopping Center (Armet & Davis, ca. 1955) that sat next door to 8100 Sunset (fig. 19.13). In 1966, a driveway connected to a rear parking lot separated this single-story strip featuring ten retail spaces from its neighbor; however, by 1973 a taxpayer building had taken its place. This strengthened the street wall, but because it

diverted parking access to Crescent Heights Boulevard, it also meant that driving patrons would use Suncrest's rear entrances. By 1995, the densifying development called 8000 Sunset Strip (Albert Group, 1994) was complete, a postmodern pastiche consisting of a semicircular three-story block that surrounded an open-air shopping court, 175,000 square feet of leasable space, and an underground garage (fig. 19.14). A grand staircase at the intersection of Sunset and Crescent Heights valorizes pedestrians entering from the sidewalk, while the tripartite composition defined by stringcourses, arches, oculi, and columns follows a comprehensible urban grammar. This shopping mall exemplifies change over time, but its form gives the building a familiarity, despite its scale.



Figure 19.13 Ed Ruscha, 8024-8100 Sunset Boulevard, 1990, digital positive from negative. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.



Figure 19.14 Ed Ruscha, 8000 Sunset Boulevard, 1995, digital positive from negative. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.

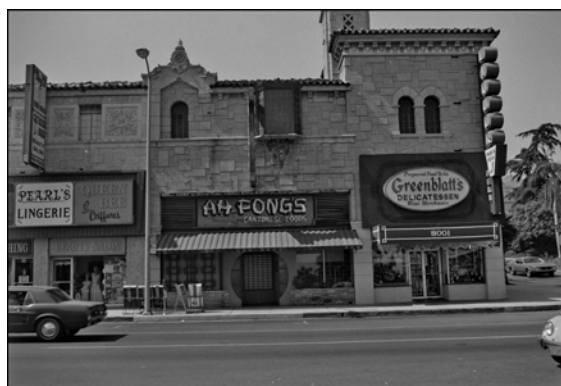


Figure 19.15 Ed Ruscha, 8001 Sunset Boulevard, 1973, digital positive from negative. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.

Across the street at 8001 Sunset, a Spanish colonial revival commercial complex (Norstrom & Anderson, 1930) exemplifies stasis and permanence in the arterial landscape, despite the obvious changes on the building's facade. A two-part commercial block, elaborated with distinct corner towers, this structure originally contained nine retail spaces, with parking in the rear and a signage superstructure that was present from the beginning. As street-level occupancy changed, the signs became more elaborate and so did the storefront cladding. By 1973, the modernizations obscured the original decorative grilles as longtime tenants like Greenblatt's Deli (ca. 1939) and Ah Fong's Cantonese Foods (1950) asserted commercial individuality (fig. 19.15).

Modernizations continued in 1979, when Greenblatt's moved two doors down, adding brick, wood, and stained glass to an already variegated facade, and the Laugh Factory moved in to anchor the corner. By 1990, the latter had expanded into Ah Fong's storefront, eventually painting over the moon-gate entrance and installing the Laugh Factory's logo in its place (fig. 19.16). Doctrinaire preservationists might scoff at the facade's haphazard eclecticism, but 8001 Sunset remains formally intact, suggesting the continuing viability of this straightforward compositional type.

This, perhaps, is the most striking observation to emerge from a close examination of SoLA photos: the persistence into the twenty-first century of a commercial fabric defined principally by low-rise buildings (mostly one- and two-story structures), representing many of Longstreth's basic types. Even today, mid- and high-rise edifices are rare on Sunset, accounting for four



Figure 19.16 Ed Ruscha, 8001 Sunset Boulevard, 1990, digital positive from negative. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.

dozen buildings on the boulevard's most intensely developed nine-mile stretch captured in the composites. The fifteen-story building (Sheldon L. Pollack & Associates, 1963) at 9000 Sunset remains the tallest on the Sunset Strip (fig. 19.17); at eighteen stories, the skyscraper (Honold & Rex, 1963) at 6290 Sunset is one of the tallest on the entire boulevard—and the first constructed after the repeal in 1958 of the height limit that was in effect in Los Angeles beginning in 1904 (fig. 19.18). If Sunset has not become significantly taller since 1966, it has certainly become denser.

As evident in SoLA photos, Sunset's increasing density is the result of a simple reality: over the past half century its parcels have been more intensively developed, but not in ways that generally violate the unwritten rules of its commercial grammar. In 1966, there were still empty lots on the Sunset Strip, and by the time



Figure 19.17 Ed Ruscha, 9000 Sunset Boulevard, 1985, digital positive from negative. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.



Figure 19.19 Ed Ruscha, 8477-95 Sunset Boulevard, 1973, digital positive from negative. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.



Figure 19.18 Ed Ruscha, 6290 Sunset Boulevard, 1973, digital positive from negative. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.



Figure 19.20 Ed Ruscha, 6106-24 Sunset Boulevard, 1990, digital positive from negative. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.

these were developed, they followed existing patterns—even if their types were car-oriented variations on one-part blocks. At 8477-95 Sunset, for example, a single-story strip mall was erected in 1971 on a 35,000-square-foot trapezoidal lot snuggled against a rocky protrusion at the base of the foothills (fig. 19.19). It is set back far enough to allow for perpendicular parking and a driving lane in front, and it also has a rear parking lot. The same was true of empty lots away from the Strip: though 6106-24 Sunset in Hollywood was set further back from the roadway with parking in front, its type form was legible in relation to the boulevard and was likely enhanced by the Wild West theme of its decorated sheds (fig. 19.20). In a nod to the Westerns once produced in nearby movie studios, the Gower Gulch shopping plaza, completed in 1976, included oversized false fronts, wooden clapboards, “cowboys-and-Indians” visual

motifs, and even a traveling medicine-show wagon on display out front— seemingly family-friendly visuals intended to counter the area’s sleazy reputation as the capital of the porn industry.

Another dimension of Sunset’s densification confirmed in SoLA images is the evolution of open space surrounding freestanding buildings. If the original structures challenged Longstreth’s prewar urban grammar, development during the last fifty years has pushed them toward conventional patterns. Other than the changing names of the movies on its marquee, the Cinerama Dome (Welton Becket & Associates, 1963) at 6360 Sunset seems like a static presence in SoLA photos, the earliest from 1973 (fig. 19.21). Images from subsequent years showing buildings adjacent to the dome, however, trace an arc of turn-of-the-century densification; for instance, between 2000



Figure 19.21 Ed Ruscha, 6360 Sunset Boulevard, 1973, digital positive from negative. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.



Figure 19.23 Ed Ruscha, 8150 Sunset Boulevard, 1973, digital positive from negative. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.



Figure 19.22 Ed Ruscha, 6360 Sunset Boulevard, 2007, digital positive from negative. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.



Figure 19.24 Ed Ruscha, 8150 Sunset Boulevard, 2007, digital positive from negative. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.

and 2002, Pacific Theatres renovated the dome and expanded into a neighboring parking lot to create a new retail and entertainment complex (with a seven-level parking garage). Part of this new complex, a low-rise glass-fronted block, wraps around the dome and stands at one story in order to align with the Cinerama Dome's freestanding marquee, respecting Sunset's street wall and gesturing to the surrounding context (fig. 19.22).

The Lytton Savings bank (Kurt Meyer, 1960) at 8150 Sunset did something similar. As is clear in images from 1966 on, this dynamic modernist variation of a two-part commercial block beckoned the attention of pedestrians and drivers alike (fig. 19.23). It had a concrete folded-plate roof producing a zigzagging silhouette that was balanced by a street-level glass facade with travertine cladding on top. The area around the

bank was further developed to include a landscaped sidewalk apron, parking lot islands, outdoor sculpture, and a pedestrian plaza, transforming the building into an urban amenity along Sunset. The exterior remained intact as different banks moved in, the new signage and corporate color schemes recorded in SoLA photos. More emphatic change came to the site with the construction of a two-story mini-mall, completed by 1995, and set far back from Sunset, south and east of the bank building (fig. 19.24). When the pedestrian plaza was removed for additional parking, it made the bank appear even more strikingly monumental against a backdrop of mundane commercial space. In 2015, developers announced plans for a mixed-height, mix-used project designed by Frank Gehry to take the bank's place, triggering a protracted preservation battle. That Gehry's plans for the space embodied

a dramatic intensification of Sunset's density added to the swirling controversy until the project was canceled in 2023. But it was too late to save the building: the bank was demolished in 2021, and the entire site was cleared. Empty today, 8150 Sunset will undoubtedly be redeveloped. There is no sure way to predict what rules of urban grammar might apply to Sunset Boulevard in the future, but the past gives us a pretty good idea; and until then, as a historian, I will continue to town watch in the datascape, having learned from Scott Brown, Longstreth, and, of course, Ruscha about how to mine the SoLA Archive for evidence of stasis and change in arterial landscapes.

NOTES

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14. Longstreth, *City Center to Regional Mall*, xvii.
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16. Richard Longstreth, "Compositional Types in American Commercial Architecture," *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 2 (1986): 15.
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19. Longstreth, "Forgotten Arterial Landscape," 438.
20. Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, 34–35.
21. Longstreth, "Forgotten Arterial Landscape," 455.
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30. Ruscha, Production notebook, sheet 11.
31. Light-blue squares identified whole or partial sky, while pale-yellow squares indicated non-sky.
32. Per GSV, picnic tables and umbrellas replaced the parking spaces sometime after May 2019, likely in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
33. Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (New York: Penguin, 1971), 118.
34. The Sunset Boulevard shoots are from 1973, 1974, 1985, 1990, 1995, 1997, and 2007. Because *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* is limited to the 1.6 miles of the Sunset Strip, these images from 1966 are not included in the composite photographs.
35. John Coplans, "Concerning Various Small Fires: An Interview with Edward Ruscha," *Artforum* 3, no. 5 (1965): 25.
36. For examples of Banham using Ruscha's photos as evidence, see Banham, *Architecture of Four Ecologies*, 58, 85, 118, 251.
37. Banham, *Architecture of Four Ecologies*, 236. See also the English translation of Anton Wagner, *Los Angeles: The Development, Life, and Structure of the City of Two Million in Southern California*, ed. Edward Dimendberg, trans. Timothy Grundy (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2022).
38. Reyner Banham, "Encounter with Sunset Boulevard," *Listener* 80 (22 August 1968), 235–36.
39. Banham, *Architecture of Four Ecologies*, 247, 23.
40. The bulk of the Whittington's photos and documents are held in the Dick Whittington Photography Collection, 1924–1987, at the University of Southern California. Only a small portion of the images and inventories have been digitized. See <https://digitalibrary.usc.edu/archive/Dick-Whittington-Photography-Collection--1924-1987-2A3BF1NOTQ.html>.

Songs for Every Address: The Music of Ed Ruscha's Photographs

Josh Kun

When Ed Ruscha left Oklahoma for Los Angeles in 1956, the city's music scene was in a noisy state of flux. DJ Dick "Huggy Boy" Hugg was still pumping R&B hits over the KRKD airwaves from the front window of Dolphin's of Hollywood, the legendary South Central record store, but the heyday of Central Avenue as L.A.'s beating heart of jazz and R&B was no more. The Black music scene had dispersed across the city. The Hollywood Bowl hosted its first recorded jazz concert with established names familiar to local club crowds, such as Ella Fitzgerald and Art Tatum, while L.A.-groomed upstarts like Ornette Coleman, Chico Hamilton, and Eric Dolphy were woodshedding a new language of jazz—what the title of Coleman's debut album described as *Something Else!!!* (1958). (Coleman developed the album while working as a freight-elevator operator in a downtown L.A. department store.) Stan Kenton was busy leading a parallel march toward orchestrated jazz coolness: he released *Cuban Fire!* in 1956 on Capitol Records, which had just moved into its iconic circular digs on Hollywood Boulevard.

In the same period, Little Richard played the Wrigley Field ballpark in South Central; the Platters brought the L.A. vocal group movement (which included artists like the Coasters, the Jaguars, and the Penguins) to the number-one slot on the pop charts with "The Great Pretender"

(1955); and new independent labels like Crown Records and Challenge Records were prepping for launch.¹ On the Eastside, Mexican American artists like Don Tosti and Eddie Cano were under the heavy influence of Black music, fusing Latin American styles with new R&B and jazz hybrids that packed steak houses and bars up and down Atlantic Boulevard and all over downtown. Farther east, the radio trailblazer Art Laboe was hosting R&B and rock 'n' roll concerts at the El Monte Legion Stadium.² If, as Kenneth Marcus has argued, the dominant forces that made L.A. into a "musical metropolis" between 1880 and 1940 were "diversity and decentralization," the same could certainly be said of L.A. in 1956: it was a city flush with diverse music scenes and experiments that stretched from the ocean to the canyons to the Eastside to the valleys, reaching any avenue and boulevard with enough creative guts, and enough real estate, to host a new sound.³

WHAT'S THAT SOUND? RUSCHA ON SUNSET

While the musical Los Angeles Ruscha encountered was decentralized, it had reliable main arteries, none more iconic than the one Ruscha would spend over five decades photographing: Sunset Boulevard. Of all the

musical streets in Los Angeles, and there are many, Sunset is the most musical.⁴ As the former *Los Angeles Times* music critic Randall Roberts put it, Sunset is “a kind of metaphorical artery pumping rhythms across the city and around the world.”⁵ Across various decades, the boulevard has consistently shaped the city’s sonic identities in many ways. No other street has been the site of as many live recordings—from Eddie Cano and Jack Costanzo’s *Dancing on the Sunset Strip* (1960) to Otis Redding’s *In Person at the Whisky a Go Go* (1968)—or as many tribute songs, whether Wes Montgomery’s “Bumpin’ on Sunset” (1966), Love’s “Maybe the People Would Be the Times or Between Clark and Hilldale” (1967), Donna Summer’s “Sunset People” (1979), Don Henley’s “Sunset Grill” (1984), or 2Pac’s “To Live & Die in L.A.” (1996), to name just a few.

The Sunset Strip, the iconic 1.6 miles that stretch across West Hollywood, undoubtedly has helped cement Sunset Boulevard’s world-famous reputation, but it’s only one part of the story. Ever since Sunset’s future was laid on Tongva land by chain-gang laborers in the early 1900s, it has been home to various musical cultures and industries, aided by the presence of instrument shops, sheet-music and record stores, recording and TV studios, theaters, nightclubs, and record labels.⁶ Sunset may be most synonymous with the Strip’s golden age of psychedelic rock and hair metal of the late 1960s and 1980s—scenes and lifestyles typically associated with white youth—but the street also tells key musical histories of trailblazing racial integration; the expanded influence of Latin American and Chicano music; the West Coast outposts of Motown; the boom of disco; the cross-cultural evolution of L.A. punk; and the long revolutionary arc of underground queer culture. It’s been a street where musical capitalism runs amok—with subcultural rebels ending up in the boardrooms of major labels—and where policed and oppressed communities demand justice.

Sunset Boulevard’s nightlife began as a release valve after the end of Prohibition. By the 1940s, clubs on the Strip—like Ciro’s (later known as Ciro’s Le Disc), the Mocambo, and Preston Sturges’s Players Club—made the boulevard into a minted leather booth Hollywood playground. By the 1950s, though, the Strip’s Hollywood sheen had worn off and the boulevard was in transition, leaving room for venues like Club Renaissance,

the Sea Witch, the Crescendo, and Pandora’s Box to become reliable jazz destinations. Off the Strip, Sunset was birthing new scenes altogether. After midnight, teenagers cruising down Sunset would end up at Scrivner’s Drive-In (at Cahuenga Boulevard) for burgers and see Laboe broadcast his KPOP radio show. Nearby, the Hollywood Palladium had started throwing “Latin Holidays,” which included mambo and cha-cha dance parties curated and hosted by Chico Sesma, another influential local radio DJ. And even farther east on Sunset, at Club Havana—co-owned by the respected bandleader, saxophonist, and regular Sunset headliner René Bloch—there were thrilling mambo dance-offs and packed battle-of-the-bands nights that pitted Bloch’s elite house orchestra against visiting stars like Tito Puente.⁷

But by the time Ruscha began photographing Sunset in 1966, the street had transformed into a whole other world: the national capital of teenage rock rebellion and hippie dissent. In the words of the *Los Angeles Free Press* journalist Paul Jay Robbins, Sunset had become synonymous with “the total collective consciousness of a new breed of people. The Strip, so long a tinsel turkey, had become a flaming phoenix and its light was seen around the world.”⁸ During the 1960s, the clubs Whisky a Go Go, Hullabaloo, and Ciro’s Le Disc hosted bands at the center of the rock revolution, including the Byrds, the Doors, and the Mothers of Invention. Newspapers and magazines, such as the *Los Angeles Free Press* and *West*, documented the rise of L.A. counterculture, and teen music and dance shows inspired by Sunset, like *Shindig!* and *Where the Action Is*, gave it a national media platform.

It was this nighttime (and daytime) world that Ruscha had come to know well. A regular at jazz clubs in the 1950s, Ruscha lived in Hollywood in the 1960s and saw the Byrds play at Ciro’s Le Disc. He had a front-row seat for the Strip’s countercultural metamorphosis; he called it “an abruptness, a cultural jump.” As Ruscha told the journalist David Kamp, “Suddenly there was this changeover to the hippie thing. What I remember most is you could stand anywhere on the Sunset Strip and see cars going down very slowly, always with someone in the backseat tapping on a tambourine—going tap, tap, tap.”⁹ In fact, it was Sunset’s music scene that helped inspire Ruscha to photograph the street. Standing outside the

Whisky a Go Go after seeing the Doors play, Ruscha marveled at Sunset's visual signage and decided then and there to photograph the entire boulevard. "It just had a wavy, windy sort of look to it that I like," he recalled. "And I just said, 'Well, I'll start here.'"¹⁰

Ruscha's connection to the visual-art changeovers of Ferus Gallery—located close to the Strip, down La Cienega Boulevard—also linked his emerging solo art practice with Sunset's transformations. He once compared the gallery to a jazz catalog that has "a lot of different voices under the same record label";¹¹ however, the vibe of Ferus Gallery was more rock adjacent. In 1966, artist Billy Al Bengston was photographed for *West* in front of the Whisky a Go Go, and that same year Ruscha published *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*. Many of Sunset's key music venues ended up in Ruscha's contact sheets from 1966. He photographed the Sea Witch (fig. 20.1)—the first club on the Strip to feature self-identified rock bands—during a two-night run by the local blues group Canned Heat. The club proudly declared its solidarity with older teens, as evidenced by its door banner that proclaimed, "Age Limit 18 to 80." Ruscha also captured one day in the two-year tenure of the "teener" rock club It's Boss (fig. 20.2), which operated in the former space of Ciro's, the posh celebrity haunt of the 1940s and 1950s (the club's original logo could still be seen on its street-side wall). An early ad for It's Boss declared, "For the first time in L.A., a night club for young adults 15 years of age & over! Continuous dancing to LIVE music seven nights a week from 7pm."¹² Ruscha also photographed Pandora's Box (fig. 20.3), another haven of teenage nightlife, right when it was the epicenter of the Sunset Strip riots (1966) in which teens from across L.A. repeatedly clashed with police enforcing restrictive club curfews (the night of Ruscha's photograph, "two continuous bands," World War III and Everybody's Children, played). The riots gave Sunset's musical rebellions a ground-level reality and positioned the boulevard's nightclubs as part of a larger "struggle of teenagers of all colors during the 1960s and 1970s to create their own realm of freedom and carnivalesque sociality within the Southern California night."¹³



Figure 20.1 Ed Ruscha, 8514 Sunset Boulevard, 1966, digital positive from negative. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.



Figure 20.2 Ed Ruscha, 8433 Sunset Boulevard, 1966, digital positive from negative. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.



Figure 20.3 Ed Ruscha, 8118 Sunset Boulevard, 1966, digital positive from negative. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.

Jennifer Quick has argued that *Every Building* is a book-length “pasteup picture” that extends the pasteup layout techniques Ruscha knew from his work in commercial advertising.¹⁴ In their own way, the music worlds of *Sunset* were also a series of pasteup sounds, a collection of different songs and musical experiments strung together down the spine of an urban boulevard. Thus, Ruscha’s visual treatment of *Sunset*—a pasteup, a series of fragments in a layout—is also how the boulevard was, and still is, heard: not through a single sound or even a single cord of seamless transitions but an auditory pasteup of musical fragments. Like Ruscha’s project, the boulevard jumps from space to space, club to club, sound to sound, and song to song.

Ruscha’s *Streets of Los Angeles Archive* is without a doubt an extraordinary visual resource. It provides a new archive of Los Angeles’ visual history, allowing a rare opportunity to see how the streets of L.A. changed over time and to analyze urban transformation through a larger set of aesthetic, social, political, and economic inquiries. According to Getty, the collection contributes to a wider understanding of “modern art, architecture, and the changing physical, social, and cultural landscapes of Los Angeles.”¹⁵

This is all true; however, these hundreds of thousands of images not only add to our visual knowledge of the city; they add to our auditory knowledge of it as well. They help us hear Los Angeles differently. When Ruscha photographed *Sunset*, it was usually on Sundays or early in the morning when the boulevard was quiet.¹⁶ But when you look at his photographs, it’s impossible not to hear the streets come alive in sound: the music of its cultural jumps. After all, Ruscha is a visual artist with deep connections to live and recorded music, and his word paintings often draw from sonic vocabularies. The words *radio* and *music* are featured in his paintings as early as 1963, two years before he began photographing *Sunset*; *music* even makes frequent appearances in the titles of his works, including *Music* (1969), *Hawaiian Music* (1974), *Music* (1975), *Music from the Balconies* (1984), *Music* (2009), and *Music* (2014), the last example a commission to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Los Angeles Music Center. In 1969, Ruscha also used “music” as the textual centerpiece in an album cover he designed for his longtime friend, the musician Mason Williams. Numerous album covers

followed, including the art for 12-inch albums by Van Dyke Parks, Soon, Marc Matter and Stefan Römer, Nels Cline, Talking Heads, and Paul McCartney. Five years after publishing *Every Building*, Ruscha made *Records* (1971), a book that compiled gray-scale offset photographs of thirty record albums from his personal collection (now estimated to contain almost two thousand jazz, country, and R&B records, mostly from the 1930s, ’40s, and ’50s). Most recently, he created his first work connected to hip-hop culture, *2Pac—All Eyez on Me*, a giclée-printed album cover fixed to a linen-wrapped vinyl jacket that was part of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art’s exhibition *Artists Inspired by Music: Interscope Reimagined* (2021) to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of Interscope Records.

“For me, jazz is the music of Los Angeles,” Ruscha said in an interview from 1988 about his musical tastes. “Perhaps because that’s the music I was into when I first came here. Of the music that’s associated with this city—the Byrds, the Doors, the Eagles—the Byrds are the only ones that do it for me. I used to go see them at *Ciro’s* on the Strip in the ’60s, but I wasn’t into most of that music. I guess I was sort of square.”¹⁷ In an appearance as a guest DJ on the Santa Monica public radio station KCRW in 2011, Ruscha opened his set with Jesse Belvin’s slow-burning “Goodnight My Love” (1956):

*[The song] represents everything I felt about California when I first came out here. . . . There was a rich kind of thing happening right in central L.A. which is Hollywood and Los Angeles proper, not so much the suburbs. Also Central Avenue, I mean all the great musicians were playing there. And seeing that and just kind of building this structure of thoughts about music and how it jived with art. I was studying art at that time at Chouinard Art Institute and this kind of represented that romantic aspect of coming to California.*¹⁸

PHONOGRAPHIC RETURNS AND PHOTOGRAPHIC LISTENINGS

Ruscha’s history as a listener, and his continued proximity to music throughout his career, only increase the demand that his images make to be heard. They force us to ask larger questions about

the relationship between image and sound, between photography (from the Greek *photo*, “light” plus *graph*, “something written”) and phonography (from the Greek *phono*, “voice, sound” plus *graph*, “something written”). Where does phono reside in photo? Where is the sound within the light? In looking at Ruscha’s photographs of Sunset Boulevard, how can we not also listen to them?

In her recent work on photography of the Black diaspora, Tina Campt has suggested “listening to images” as a method of hearing what is unsaid, unspoken, and silenced in photographs.¹⁹ For Campt, vernacular photographs of Black subjects register what she calls *felt sound*, or “sound that, like a hum, resonates in and as a vibration.” She listens for “the sonic frequencies of photographs.” Ruscha’s images of L.A. streets have their own version of sonic frequencies and felt sounds that resonate as vibrations within and beyond their status as photographs. As Nicolas Poussin once said of paintings, photographs are not “mute things”;²⁰ they resonate and vibrate with worlds shaped by sound and music. Photographs hold music. They contain the sound of the scene being photographed. When a photographic image is produced, its acoustic life is not erased. There is sound in the light that is written.

“Is there a way to portray Los Angeles that hasn’t already been seen?” Ruscha recently asked. “There is always another view.”²¹ He’s right, but maybe that other view is not always visual. There is always another sound as well, another musical portrayal that hasn’t already been heard, another way of listening to the city seen through the lens of a camera mounted to the back of a pickup truck.

Arguably the most famous urban ecological take on Los Angeles as a built environment belongs to Reyner Banham’s landmark *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (1971).²² These four ecologies—surfurberia, foothills, plains of ID, and autopia—which have become part of local critical parlance, were missing music entirely. They, too, were mute things. Banham drove through the city with his eyes glued to the windshield and rearview mirror, focusing on L.A. urbanism as a purely visual language. But his ecologies all have their own musical alter egos. Their soundscapes shape and define them as much as any building code, design aesthetic, or parade of architectural quirks. Ruscha’s images

offer inroads into the music of these urban ecologies.²³ They are indispensable additions to the archive of sonic Los Angeles, and indispensable tools for developing an “L.A. acoustemology,” an acoustic way of knowing Los Angeles.²⁴

In the decades since Ruscha began photographing L.A. streets, scholars and sound artists have continued to develop theories of musical urbanism and sonic ecologies, whereby cities are analyzed through their relationship to auditory experience, design, and history. For instance, Michael Bull has studied the “auditory nature of everyday experience in urban and cultural studies,”²⁵ while Rowland Atkinson has theorized the “ambient envelope of urban life,” in which sound and music shape and define understandings of place and space.²⁶ Ruscha’s photographs allow an engagement with this ever-changing sonic ecology of L.A.: “a permeable, modulating, fleeting and occasionally persistent soundscape within and across different social and physical sectors of the city.”²⁷ They help us study L.A. not only as a neoliberal “music city” (in which music scenes are resources for privatized capitalist expansion and urban development) but also as a “musical city,” a city shaped by the music that is made on and off its streets.²⁸ The musician Vijay Iyer argues that this is, in fact, one way to define a city, as a musical organism:

*Cities are music. Cities exist because we—that is, “humankind”—are able to build things together, and music was among the first things we ever built together. The capacities to coordinate and synchronize our actions, to incorporate each other’s rhythms, to make choices together in real time—to groove and to improvise—these are human skills, not merely musical skills. . . . This thing we call “music” is essentially the sound of ourselves—the joyful noise of people doing things together, the art of unsilent interaction.*²⁹

The musical city of Los Angeles—with all its soundscapes, musical ecologies, and acoustic territories—is of course defined by the same imbalances of power and rigid social and racial inequities that characterize the city’s broader history. As a result, music has played a key role in waging what Gaye Theresa Johnson has called *spatial entitlements*, cultural claims to and reimaginings of urban space by communities of

color marginalized from the public sphere and rendered precarious by urban development campaigns.³⁰ When we listen to Ruscha's photographs, then, we can hear the histories of not only the city's sonic ecologies and musical territories but also of how sound and music have been instrumental in waging battles for visibility, recognition, and sustainability among minoritized populations. Listening to images of L.A. streets and buildings can foster an attunement to histories of loss, displacement, and erasure. Like the houses in J. G. Ballard's short story "The Sound-Sweep" (1960) that have sounds from the past living within their walls, all built environments are sonic haunted houses.³¹ They contain the ghosts of music past. By listening for the musical ghosts in Ruscha's photographed buildings—residing in walls and floorboards, hanging out on street corners and parking lots—we can hear the sound of neighborhoods change, sonic traces of erased and displaced communities, the sound of what is no longer there. In her examination of how the past is made present in photographs, Shawn Michelle Smith argues that intrusions of the past are intrinsic to the photograph itself. She writes, "The photograph is emblematic of the way a past continues to inhabit and punctuate the present, and also one of the central vehicles through which that temporal collision takes place."³² She names these collisions *photographic returns*: fragments of the past that create ruptures in the present, all captured in a photographic image. If photographs can be listened to, then photographic returns are also simultaneously *phonographic returns*; the past inhabits the present through returning sounds, interrupting the temporal fixity of the image through a musical refrain. They provide opportunities for what we might call, in a light remix of Camp, *photographic listenings*.

THE TRIP AND EL CLUB CONTINENTAL

Co-owned by Elmer Valentine, who also opened the Whisky a Go Go, the Trip (8572 Sunset Boulevard) is typically remembered as a cutting-edge rock venue where Barry McGuire, the Byrds, the Velvet Underground and Nico, and Andy Warhol's *Expanding Plastic Inevitable* show all held court. When Ruscha photographed the Trip in June 1966 (fig. 20.4), the New Jersey garage band



Figure 20.4 Ed Ruscha, 8572 Sunset Boulevard, 1966, digital positive from negative. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.

the Knickerbockers and Ted Neeley (the psychedelic folk-rocker and future lead of *Jesus Christ Superstar*) were on the marquee.

Yet the Trip's story is more complex. The club opened just weeks after the Watts rebellion in August 1965 when Black Angelenos protested chronic racial profiling, racist violence, and discriminatory policing by the Los Angeles Police Department. The uprisings in Watts reverberated throughout the city. And Sunset's nightclubs, which for decades were ruled by racial segregation, soon had their own racial awakenings. (When Duke Ellington performed at Ciro's in 1945, *Billboard* announced it as "the first time that any of the swank strip spots have gone in for a high-priced, big-name Negro band" and the club's management still warned Ellington: "We don't allow the help to socialize with the guests.")³³ At first, the Trip might have been a natural home for the white hippie set, but it, too, heard Watts's call to "Burn, baby, burn!" and soon featured some of the biggest names in Black popular music: Billy Stewart, Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder, the Temptations, Wilson Pickett, Billy Preston, and the Soul Brothers. Jackie Wilson also played a legendary ten-night run to an audience that included both Elvis Presley and James Brown.³⁴

Only three months after Watts went up in flames, Preston, sharing a bill with the Miracles, had a show at the Trip (they were the first Black artists to play the venue). The recording of Preston's set was released two years later on LP as *Club Meeting*, which included organ-blasted makeovers of Willie Dixon and George Gershwin compositions. That night he also played "This

Little Light of Mine,” the African American spiritual and gospel classic that by then was best known as a civil rights anthem—a defiant call for hope, struggle, and resilience in the face of state violence and systemic racism. At the Trip, Preston played it with big-band go-go energy: the horns vigorously punctuating his keyboard playing, the crowd clapping along with fever, shouting enough *hallelujahs* to turn the room into a church. And you can really hear the room, hot from the music, the drinks, and the dancing, but also hot from the Southern California night outside, the insurrectionist heat of a city still very much on fire.

Before it was the Trip, it was the Crescendo, the legendary jazz club opened in 1954 by the influential DJ and concert promoter Gene Norman. It’s there in Ruscha’s photograph as well: the club-before-the-club lingering like a ghost, invisible but still present in the frame. Norman recorded dozens of live albums at the Crescendo for his own label GNP Crescendo, showcasing a variety of artists and styles that cemented the venue’s reputation for openness and its embrace of Black and Latino musicians. Artists who cut records there included jazz greats like Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, and Art Tatum, as well as the Cuban bandleader Machito, the exotica pioneer Arthur Lyman, and the cabaret provocateur Frances Faye. Ella Fitzgerald’s performances there in 1961 and 1962 were also captured live, but they were recorded by her manager Norman Granz and released—first as *Ella in Hollywood* (1961) and later as *Twelve Nights in Hollywood* (2009)—on his label Verve Records (an affiliation she makes sure to mention before her rendition of “Witchcraft”).

Fitzgerald first played the Strip in 1955 at the Mocambo, right down the block from the Crescendo. As legend has it, the Mocambo’s owner was reluctant to book a serious jazz singer like Fitzgerald, so her friend Marilyn Monroe intervened to help her get the gig. Fitzgerald had told her press agent in the early 1950s: “I know I make a lot of money at the jazz clubs I play, but I sure wish I could play at one of those fancy places.”³⁵ When she did play the Crescendo, one of the songs she sang was “Take the ‘A’ Train.” Granz’s recording of it is an opportunity for *photographic listening*. Listen to her performance while trying to listen around it and through it. Listen to the song as it begins—Lou Levy’s piano

warming up through the applause—and listen to the final seconds after it finishes, the band in brief repose, the audience enraptured. We can hear the temperature in the room, the warmth of two hundred bodies. We can hear those bodies shuffle and move, tap a loafer or a heel, reach for a glass, light a cigarette, adjust a wristwatch. We can hear light and shadows, the density of air and smoke. We can hear the distance from the bandstand to the first row of bistro tables. We can hear the parquet of the dance floor. There is the song and then there is the room of the song; there is Ella and Levy and Herb Ellis on guitar, Wilfred Middlebrooks on double bass, and Gus Johnson on drums, and then there is the Crescendo, the building, the address, the block, the boulevard.

Ruscha only photographed the Crescendo from the exterior, but the image contains sonic frequencies and felt sound; the building still vibrates with sounds from Fitzgerald’s and Preston’s shows. By looking at the photograph, we can hear the room’s tone, the sonic identity unique to its physical space. In an essay on Rhona Bitner’s photographs of empty nightclubs and recording studios, the musician Iggy Pop describes the depicted locations as “ghost ships of American music.”³⁶ The clubs in Ruscha’s photographs are ghost ships of L.A. music, full of phantom musical, social, and cultural histories that continue to haunt his images, even after the buildings within the frame became parking lots and strip malls or were burned down in fires (fig. 20.5).



Figure 20.5 Ed Ruscha, 8570 Sunset Boulevard, 1966, digital positive from negative. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.

Which is what happened to El Club Continental (2905 Sunset Boulevard) in 1975 when a blaze ripped through its ballroom and restaurant, causing the building to be demolished. That year Ruscha photographed the remains: a single mound of charred wood, blasted cement, and crumbled drywall (fig. 20.6). Over the previous two years, though, he had caught the club in its prime as the nightlife capital of Latino Silver Lake (fig. 20.7). Located next to a Mexican appliance store advertising *estufas* and *secadoras* on its windows, the club was a music-driven “urban anchor,” to borrow Natalia Molina’s formulation, a community hub and reliable neighborhood stop for local Mexican and Central American residents who dressed up and sought after-work refuge in classic cumbias and salsa montunos.³⁷ Still a predominantly working- and middle-class Latino neighborhood, Silver Lake in the 1970s was also home to a growing gay and lesbian community, and, by the end of the decade, leather bars shared sidewalks with Mexican restaurants.



Figure 20.6 Ed Ruscha, 2905 Sunset Boulevard, 1975, digital positive from negative. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.

El Club Continental had a ton of real estate and solid bones. The music steeped in its walls—its phantom sounds, its ghost-ship scores, its phonographic returns—helps unravel the club’s illustrious backstory. In the 1940s, it was Club Zarape, a legendary, upscale dancehall that featured top Cuban and Puerto Rican bands, billing itself as “California’s most popular Latin American rendezvous.” Zarape promised an “original Spanish atmosphere” and delivered a menu that offered both a “Special Mexican Dinner” and a “Special American Dinner.”³⁸



Figure 20.7 Ed Ruscha, 2905 Sunset Boulevard, 1974, digital positive from negative. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1. © Ed Ruscha.

Among its acclaimed house bands was Esy Morales and His Latin-American Orchestra. Morales, a flautist and horn player from Puerto Rico who played in Xavier Cugat’s band, became an L.A. favorite when he and his glossy rumba “Jungle Fantasy” (1948) were featured in the Hollywood film *Criss Cross* (1949). Other Zarape residents included the esteemed likes of the Chicano music pioneer Lalo Guerrero, the Cuban singer Miguelito Valdés, and the Cuban pianist Nilo Menendez. Menendez was best known as the composer of the classic bolero “Aquellos ojos verdes” (1929), whose English translation, “Those Green Eyes,” became a hit for Jimmy Dorsey some ten years later. All these musicians did their time on studio back lots—Valdés shared the screen with Humphrey Bogart and Rita Hayworth in *You Were Never Lovelier* (1942)—which helped make Club Zarape into a certified haunt for Hollywood celebrities. “The place was full of stars and beautiful people,” the percussionist Puente recalled of a night at the club. “Everyone looked like a star to me.”³⁹

When Club Zarape later morphed into Club Havana—the hot spot of the 1960s—the address’ reputation for top-shelf Latin music skyrocketed. But by the end of the 1960s, Latin music was catering less and less to Hollywood tastes. Unlike previous eras when Sunset clubs were more segregated, and venues like the Mocambo and Café Trocadero allowed more Latinos on stage than on the dance floor, Club Havana’s patrons were more diverse than ever before. By the time El Club Continental took over the space in the early 1970s, the *El* in its title and the phrase “baile con música latina” (dance to Latin music) on its



a. 1985



b. 1990



c. 2007

Figure 20.8 Ed Ruscha, 2905 Sunset Boulevard, 1985 (a), 1990 (b), and 2007 (c), digital positives from negatives. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2012.M.1 (a, b, c). © Ed Ruscha.

signage were direct messages to the local Latino neighborhood that it belonged to them as much as anyone else (see fig. 20.7).

After the fire, the building was eventually replaced by a strip mall that included a dental office, pawn shop, immigration tax office, mom-and-pop mariscos restaurant, and Silversun Liquor. By 1990, the Mexican restaurant had become a Salvadoran pupuseria and the tax office was taken over by a bridal and tuxedo shop. As gentrification accelerated in the late 1990s, many

Latinos were gradually pushed out of the neighborhood. When Ruscha photographed the location again in 2007, the plaza was home to a dental office and teeth-whitening center, a nail salon, and a restaurant serving steak, seafood, and pasta (fig. 20.8). Silversun Liquor was still there and it gave the strip mall its new moniker: the Silversun Plaza. More importantly, when Ruscha photographed the plaza in 2007, *Silversun* had become a key word of music in L.A. thanks to the indie band the Silversun Pickups, who named themselves after the liquor store and were leading the charge of Silver Lake's new alt-rock scene.

By looking at Ruscha's photographs of a single block over the course of decades and tuning into their many phonographic returns, not only can we see changes in neighborhoods over time but we can also hear them. In the case of 2905 Sunset, mambos, cha cha chas, and salsa montunos fade out, slick and fuzzy indie rock fades in—one more address caught in Ruscha's lens, haunted by sound and shaped by music.

NOTES

Portions of this essay were previously published in my online essay series *10 Songs for 12 Sunsets*, *Getty Iris*, 2020, <https://blogs.getty.edu/iris/series/10-songs-for-12-sunsets/>, specifically "What Does Sunset Blvd. Sound Like?," 12 November 2020, <https://www.getty.edu/news/what-does-sunset-blvd-sound-like/>; and "Listen to the Room Where Ella Fitzgerald Sang," 3 December 2020, <https://www.getty.edu/news/listen-to-the-room-where-ella-fitzgerald-sang/>.

1. Crown Records was the budget spin-off of Modern Records, and its first release was *A Rock 'n' Roll Dance Party* (1957); meanwhile Challenge Records was founded by the singing cowboy Gene Autry, and its first release was *Christmastime with Gene Autry* (1957).
2. The summary of L.A.'s music life in the 1950s was culled from the following sources: Barney Hoskyns, *Waiting for the Sun: Strange Days, Weird Scenes, and the Sound of Los Angeles* (New York: St. Martin's, 1996); Domenic Priore, *Riot on Sunset Strip: Rock 'n' Roll's Last Stand in Hollywood* (London: Jawbone, 2007); Anthony Macias, *Mexican American Mojo: Popular Music, Dance, and Urban Culture in Los Angeles, 1935–1968* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); Clora Bryant, ed., *Central Avenue Sounds: Jazz in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); and Ted Gioia, *West Coast Jazz: Modern Jazz in California, 1945–1960* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).
3. Kenneth H. Marcus, *Musical Metropolis: Los Angeles and the Creation of a Music Culture, 1880–1940* (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 1–3.
4. Randall Roberts, "Mapping Sunset Boulevard's Musical History," *Los Angeles Times*, 28 August 2017.
5. Randall Roberts, "The Hollywood Palladium Stage Opens Up to Its Citizens: An L.A. Story," *Los Angeles Times*, 25 August 2017. See all of Roberts's *Los Angeles Times* series on the music of Sunset Boulevard in *Mapping Sunset Boulevard's Musical History*: <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/music/la-et-ms-sunset-blvd-updates-20170825-htmlstory.html>.
6. On the chain-gang history of Sunset, see Kelly Lytle Hernández, *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los*

- Angeles, 1771–1965 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 59.
7. Macias, *Mexican American Mojo*, 278. Club Havana also makes a brief appearance in Natalia Molina's important work on Mexican and Mexican American "place-makers" and "urban anchors" in the Echo Park and Silver Lake neighborhoods of Los Angeles. See Natalia Molina, "The Importance of Place and Place-Makers in the Life of a Los Angeles Community: What Gentrification Erases from Echo Park," *Southern California Quarterly* 97, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 69–111; and Natalia Molina, *A Place at the Nayarit: How a Mexican Restaurant Nourished a Community* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022).
 8. Priore, *Riot on Sunset Strip*, 21.
 9. David Kamp, "Live at the Whisky," *Vanity Fair*, 10 November 2000, <https://archive.vanityfair.com/article/2000/11/live-at-the-whisky>.
 10. Karen Breuer, ed., *Ed Ruscha and the Great American West*, exh. cat. (San Francisco: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 2016), 201.
 11. Barabara Isenberg, "An L.A. Art Story," *Los Angeles Times*, 22 September 2002.
 12. From the blog *Showbiz Imagery and Forgotten History*, <https://oldshowbiz.tumblr.com/post/182747897624/its-boss-was-a-sunset-strip-venue-that-lived-two>.
 13. Mike Davis, "Riot Nights on Sunset Strip," *Labour / Le Travail* 59 (2007): 202.
 14. Jennifer Quick, "Pasteup Pictures: Ed Ruscha's *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*," *Art Bulletin* 100, no. 2 (2018): 2.
 15. "Ed Ruscha's Streets of Los Angeles: Making Ed Ruscha's Photo Archive Accessible for the First Time," Getty Projects and Initiatives, Getty, <https://www.getty.edu/projects/ed-ruscha-streets-los-angeles/>.
 16. Quick, "Pasteup Pictures," 130.
 17. Kristine McKenna, "The Sentimental Musical Tastes of Ed Ruscha," *Los Angeles Times*, 19 June 1988.
 18. Liza Richardson, "Guest DJ Project: Ed Ruscha," KCRW, 5 January 2011, <https://www.kcrw.com/music/shows/guest-dj-project/ed-ruscha>.
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 22. Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).
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 26. Rowland Atkinson, "Ecology of Sound: The Sonic Order of Urban Space," *Urban Studies* 44, no. 10 (2007): 1905.
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 28. Atkinson, "Ecology of Sound," 1913. See also Peter A. Coates, "The Strange Stillness of the Past: Toward an Environmental History of Sound and Noise," *Environmental History* 10, no. 4 (2005): 636–65; and Brandon LaBelle, *Acoustic Territories: Sound Culture and Everyday Life* (New York: Continuum, 2010).
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 31. J. G. Ballard, "The Sound-Sweep," *Science Fantasy* 13, no. 39 (1960): 2–39.
 32. Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photographic Returns: Racial Justice and the Time of Photography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 4.
 33. "Ciro's, Hollyw'd, Books Ellington," *Billboard*, 3 February 1945. See also Terry Teachout, *Duke: A Life of Duke Ellington* (New York: Gotham, 2013), 249.
 34. "Burn, baby, burn!" began as the signature on-air slogan of Los Angeles R&B radio personality Magnificent Montague. During his music programs on KGfJ, he shouted the phrase during his favorite records, and it soon caught on as an off-air, street-level expression by Black youth across the city. Most famously, it was heard on the street during the Watts uprising of 1965, soon becoming the unofficial tagline of the rebellions.
 35. Tad Hershorn, *Norman Granz: The Man Who Used Jazz for Justice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 214.
 36. Rhona Bitner, *Listen: The Stages and Studios That Shaped American Music* (New York: Rizzoli, 2022), 7. Natalie Bell references Ruscha's Sunset photographs as operating differently than Bitner's because they do not make the viewer listen to the sites in the image. My contention is the opposite, that Bitner and Ruscha—one photographing interiors, the other photographing exteriors—share a photographic demand for phonographic listening. See Natalie Bell, "Unlimited Frequencies," in Bitner, *Listen*, 253–58.
 37. Molina, *A Place at the Nayarit*, 10.
 38. The use of *Spanish* to describe Mexican and Latin American cuisine and culture was part of a larger civic history of appealing to romantic myths of a colonial Spanish legacy in Southern California (and in turn erasing the Mexican present), what Carey McWilliams famously described as a "fantasy heritage." See Carey McWilliams, *North from Mexico: The Spanish-Speaking People of the United States* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1949), 15–26. References to the Zarape club are drawn from the venue's menus and other ephemera.
 39. Tito Puente, quoted in Josephine Powell, *Tito Puente: When the Drums Are Dreaming* (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2007), 109.

Acknowledgments

This project arose from a shared desire to understand Ed Ruscha's relationship to a wide range of thinkers invested in studying, representing, and making sense of cities, images, and information. We believed there was a new story to tell about Ruscha through his impressive Streets of Los Angeles (SoLA) Archive, but telling this story about an artist who has had a profound impact on contemporary art required rethinking much of what we knew about Ruscha, Los Angeles, photography, and archives. As such, this project would not have been possible, nor would its intellectual premises have been achieved, without generous collaboration across departments, institutions, and professional fields, both at Getty and beyond.

Our team has frequently joked that the Getty Research Institute (GRI) could have been temporarily renamed the Getty "Ruscha" Institute because so many of our colleagues were contributing to this project. We feel very fortunate to have had the support of these numerous colleagues while we navigated together the exciting opportunities and challenges of interdisciplinarity. We extend our thanks to our project's Executive Steering Committee, which included Mary Miller, David Newbury, Glenn Phillips, Lela Urquhart, Lily Pregill, Richard Fagen, and Anne Helmreich.

After acquiring the two Ruscha archives that compose what we refer to as the SoLA Archive, Getty processed, digitized, and generated additional metadata about the materials to facilitate research. Nathaniel Deines, alongside Teresa Soleau, led an inimitable team to execute this stage of the project. We extend our thanks to John Kiffe, Laura Sokolosky, Brendan Threadgill, Matt Moore, Linta Kunnathuparambil, and Tavo Olmos for making the SoLA Archive accessible for the first time and viewable in a form other than on motion-picture film stock. We also want to remember our dear colleague, Chris Edwards; his clever and innovative approach to digitizing Ruscha's archive was a testament to his skill and a tremendous asset to the project.

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The GRI’s SoLA project has always been about more than publishing a book. Indeed, it has acted as a think tank of sorts on research related to digital art history, art in the United States, urban studies, architectural history, and information studies. We believe

that the process of knowledge formation has been just as consequential as the final product. We began to host workshops to shape the scope of the book in 2018 after initiating a multidisciplinary call for projects (CFP) the previous year. We were aided by a generous grant from the Terra Foundation for American Art for a digital publication workshop in 2020. We were interested in investigating Ruscha from numerous perspectives. We are grateful for all those who answered the CFP as well as our fantastic group of contributors whose essays compose this book. We feel lucky many scholars participated in our workshops, and their perspectives on Ruscha helped us to define our stakes and our intervention in various fields. Thank you to Ed Dimendberg, Virginia Heckert, Juan De Lara, Jon Leaver, Shannon Mattern, Safiya Umoja Noble, David Platzker, Alexandra Schwartz, and Sally Stein. We feel lucky to have worked with such an incredible group of contributors to this project; their brilliant insights, sustained attention, generous collaborations, and friendships will be sorely missed.

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To gain novel insights into Ruscha's career, we wanted to involve a new generation of artists working in and thinking about Los Angeles. From 2021 to 2022, we hosted a series of public conversations titled "Imaginations of L.A." that brought artists in dialogue with curators and scholars to discuss Ruscha's legacy and the current challenges of making art in and about Los Angeles. Their perspectives on the city were unique and generative. The participants included Julian Myers-Szupinska, Edgar Arceneaux, Guadalupe Rosales, Pilar Tompkins Rivas, Umar Rashid (also known as Frohawk Two Feathers), Sandy Rodriguez, Laura Pulido, Michelle Caswell, and Kandis Williams. We thank Chelsea Anderson and the entire programming team at the GRI for supporting these events.

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—Andrew Perchuk, Zanna Gilbert, and Emily Pugh

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