



## Back to the Drawing Board: Ed Ruscha 1956 – 68

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Back to the Drawing Board: Ed Ruscha 1956 – 68

A dissertation presented

by

Jennifer Eileen Quick

to

The Department of History of Art and Architecture

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the subject of

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Back to the Drawing Board: Ed Ruscha 1956 – 68

Abstract

This dissertation considers Ed Ruscha's work through the theoretical lens of tacit knowledge, thereby making the argument that the commercial artist's drawing board, and the world that it embodies, constitutes the material and conceptual framework of his 1960s art. Educated at Los Angeles's Chouinard Art Institute, where he studied advertising design from 1956–60, Ruscha received extensive instruction in all aspects of two-dimensional design, from layout to typography. As he began to pursue a fine art career, the mechanics and methods of drawing board production became a model for art making as reflective upon and transformative of the designed world. It was through his drawing board methods that Ruscha addressed foundational concerns of post World War II art, such as the nature of the picture plane, art's relationship to consumer culture, the workings of vision and perception, and the mechanics of printed matter. Alongside histories of the avant-garde and mass culture, the dissertation proposes a new narrative of Ruscha's art, from the point of view of practice and in regard to the technical skills and conceptual operations of mid-century design. The dissertation concludes with a reflection on the history lessons and contemporary relevance of Ruscha's work.



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Figure 4.41 *Study #2 for Los Angeles County Museum on Fire*, 1968, gunpowder wash and pencil on paper, 7 5/8 x 14 9/16 in. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1981, 81.38

Figure 4.42 Photograph of gala even for opening of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1968, reproduced in “A Wondrous Temple of Art in L.A.,” *LIFE*, April 9, 1965

Figure 4.43 Installation of a mammoth sculpture, La Brea Tar Pits, Los Angeles, 1968. Howard Ball, sculptor. Photo © 2013 Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, Museum Archives

Figure 4.44 Thomas Eakins, isometric drawing, from Thomas Eakins, *A Drawing Manual*, 1880s

Figure 4.45 *Barrington Avenue*, 1965, graphite and pencil on paper, 14 1/2 x 22 5/8 in. Private collection, Los Angeles

## List of Frequently Cited Sources

AAA – Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C.

GRI – Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, California

LAI – Ruscha, Edward. *Leave Any Information at the Signal: Writings, Interviews, Bits, Pages*. Edited by Alexandra Schwartz. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002

LT – Lisa Turvey, ed. *Edward Ruscha: Catalogue Raisonné of the Works on Paper*. Volume 1: 1956–1976. New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2014

PP – Poncy, Pat, ed. *Edward Ruscha: Catalogue Raisonné of the Paintings*. Volume 1: 1958 – 70. New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2003

RS – Ruscha Studio, Culver City, California



## Introduction: Back to the Drawing Board

A quick Google News search of the phrase “back to the drawing board” returns a host of headlines on a wide range of subjects, from sports to policing to politics: “It’s back to the drawing board for Techsters [basketball team] in 2016;” “Investigators searching for missing Malaysian plane may go ‘back to the drawing board;”” “Christiana back to the drawing board on tax hike.”<sup>1</sup> These headlines demonstrate the continuing relevance and manifold applications of this idiom. While the phrase evokes the world of design, its meaning has expanded to encompass the cycles of trial and error involved in any problem-solving endeavor, from proposing a tax hike to mapping out sports strategy. To go back to the drawing board means to return to one’s original plan or to an earlier stage of work, in the interest of revising or even scrapping an idea that is unsatisfactory, flawed, or failed. It connotes a fresh beginning, a new start, a clean slate. The origins of phrase are conventionally traced to the work of *New Yorker* cartoonist Peter Arno. His 1941 cartoon, now a legend in the world of illustration, depicts a group of soldiers beginning to rush towards a plane that has crashed (Figure I.1).<sup>2</sup> Presumably, they had been observing a test

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<sup>1</sup> Sean Isabella, “It’s back to the drawing board for Techsters in 2016,” *Monroe News Star*, March 12, 2015, <http://www.thenewsstar.com/story/sports/college/louisiana-tech/2015/03/13/back-drawing-board-techsters/70295698/>; Dan Martin, “Investigators searching for missing Malaysian plane may go ‘back to the drawing board;”” *Business Insider*, March 7, 2015; <http://www.businessinsider.com/afp-back-to-drawing-board-if-mh370-search-fails-malaysia-says-2015-3>; Matthew Albright, “Christiana back to the drawing board on tax hike,” *Delaware Online: The News Journal*, February 26, 2015, <http://www.delawareonline.com/story/news/education/2015/02/25/christina-officials-reconsider-options/24001597/>.

<sup>2</sup> Cartoonists often refer to Arno’s “back to the old drawing board,” published on March 1, 1941, as the “perfect cartoon.” In a recent issue of the *New Yorker*, cartoonist Paul Karasik explained how the sequencing and rhythmic interplay between the plane, soldiers, and the engineer directs the reader from plane to crowd to engineer to caption. The engineer’s foot, which breaks the frame, is especially crucial in this visual sequencing. Karasik also paints a fascinating picture of Arno’s working process: “The story goes that Arno had a drawing board that ran the length of his posh penthouse studio. After his sketch was approved and he was preparing to move on to creating the finished art, he lined the drawing board with twenty sheets of Bristol board, all with the same lightly penciled drawing, each with slight variations. Then he would go down the line with his loaded brush and tackle each board until he achieved just the right degree of unspontaneous spontaneity.” See Robert Mankoff, “The Perfect Cartoon: Part Two,” *The New Yorker*, June 11, 2014.

run of the plane when something went awry. Black smoke billows upwards from the wreck, while farther away, a man on a parachute, ejected from the plane, floats to safety. At the right, an ambulance rushes forward to provide aid. While most of the soldiers are in the process of moving towards the plane, as is evident by the lean of their bodies, one man steps forward, his right foot breaking the cartoon's frame. Judging by the rolled drawings under his arm and his civilian dress, this is the engineer who designed the now-defunct plane. Hands clasped and face calm, even with a trace of a smile, his turning away from the scene of destruction elicits a glance from the soldier to his right. Instead of addressing the crash, as would seem appropriate, the engineer seems all too pleased to resume his work. Already putting the failure of the first design behind him, he is moving onto the next version, an impulse verbalized in the caption, "Well, back to the old drawing board." Perhaps, the cartoon implies, it is the process of design, rather than the end goal, that is the source of engineer's pleasure in his work, as well as the force that drives him to get back behind the drawing board.

Arno's cartoon captures the richly layered symbolism and historical import of the drawing board. Published in March of 1941, less than a year before Pearl Harbor, it pictures the postwar technocracy and innovation culture that would lead to the buildup of the military-industrial complex. Though dealing directly with engineering, the cartoon also encapsulates the cycles of revision and failure characteristic of any type of design, from architecture to fashion. In citing the drawing board in his caption, Arno tapped into its broader cultural usage as a tool that metonymized the material and conceptual work of postwar design.

In this dissertation, I argue that the drawing board, broadly construed along these lines, embodies the technical and historical world that formed the basis of Ed Ruscha's 1960s art. Trained as a commercial artist at Los Angeles's Chouinard Art Institute in the 1950s, Ruscha acquired a specific skill set that became the basis for the art career that began to flourish around 1962, the moment that Pop art burst onto the scene. Born in 1937, Ruscha was educated in drawing board methods that would soon begin to fall by the wayside, as digital tools and computer programs began to become more and more integral to the work of design. The drawing board world that Arno's cartoon so vividly evokes was also Ruscha's world, and the technological and material conditions of this mode of production deeply imprint his art. Not only did Ruscha regularly use drawing boards, including a standing board and a flat one, but he also photographed and sketched, with surprising frequency, works in progress on the drawing board. He also frequently deployed procedures executed on the drawing board, including layout, projection drawing, and type design, as well as commercial art techniques of replication, scaling, and paste-up layout. Ruscha used and reinvented these commercial art's methods to stake out his place in the world of postwar art.

There is more to the story, however, than simply the fact that Ruscha used the skills and tools of 1950s commercial art. The conceptual dimensions of design – its sense of pre-meditation, temporal rhythms, uses of scale, archival basis, collaborative nature, and modes of perception – structured Ruscha's art and offered a framework to shape his own notions of what art could be and what it could represent. In regard to the first, commercial art's techniques were characterized by "pre-meditation," as Ruscha called it, which he saw as a welcome antidote to the gestural painting that seemed worn-out by the time he was an art

student.<sup>3</sup> What appealed to him was a more “cerebral” process, not only because he saw that as the opposite of Abstract Expressionism, but because there was a resonance between pre-mediated processes and the subject matter of mass culture, which formed the basis of his art.<sup>4</sup> In other words, it was not only the content of mass culture that appealed to Ruscha, but its underlying forms and modes of production, in which he was well-versed from his Chouinard training. On an even more basic level, Ruscha’s own style and approach to his work is methodical and precise, even from his days as a very young artist studying cartooning and illustration via correspondence courses. A pre-meditated approach, then, appealed to his personal predilections, his need to find an alternative to Abstract Expressionism, and his attraction to the stuff of consumer culture.

Arno’s cartoon also captures the temporal rhythms of 1950s commercial art. Design is defined by cyclical temporality, as it involves a testing and re-testing of ideas that continues until the end goal is accomplished. Repetition and revision are built into the design process. Ruscha absorbed these durational qualities of design and made them constitutive of his art. Unlike the engineer laboring over the plane, however, Ruscha embraced moments of failure or collapse, and lingered in repetition rather than striving for closure. Even as he saw the pre-meditated aspects of design as a way to reinvent the act of art making, he also seized upon moments of mistranslation, confusion, ambiguity, and comedy – moments when perception is confounded, or meaning is scrambled, or legibility begins to fray. His work is rife with signs of his process and indicators of conceptualization, from lines of drawing left bare in paintings to the seams of pasted-together photographs. Throughout his career Ruscha has consistently returned to certain motifs – the Hollywood sign, the 20<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>3</sup> Ed Ruscha, quoted in *Oral history interview with Edward Ruscha, 1980 October 29-1981 October 2*, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (hereafter AAA).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Fox logo, the everyday yellow pencil – in order to tweak and revise them, almost obsessively at times. For Ruscha, an art object was never complete or finished, but always in process, and always open to reinvention.

Scale runs like a thread throughout Ruscha’s work. His dealings with this design concept run the gamut from a refusal to subject his work to the effects of scale, as when he rendered objects at actual size, to an embrace of the distortions derived from abrupt shifts in scale, especially evident in his representations of architecture. Moreover, Ruscha conceived of his own work as subject to the operations of scale, whether in regard to how he assembled his photography books to how he arranged his paintings in the studio. Conceptually, the relational quality of scale – the sense in which it is determined by context – appealed to Ruscha, as both an aesthetic principal and theorization of how art functions. He conceived of his subject matter along these contextual lines, in that he appropriated and borrowed imagery that he subjected to scaling and replication processes. In his own representations of his work, such as drawings of books and photographs of his paintings in the studio, Ruscha experimented with the effects of scale, thus rendering his own work as so much imagery to be appropriated and recycled and recontextualized.

Design’s anchoring in an archival way of thinking and research-based processes also defines Ruscha’s art practice. For any designer, as Ruscha would have learned in his training, work begins with mapping out ideas and taking notes, and gathering research both verbal and visual. In the terminology of 1950s layout, this archive of materials was referred to as the “image morgue.”<sup>5</sup> Full of texts, photographs, magazine clippings, and type samples, the morgue stood at the beginning of every printed design. Ruscha used this concept as a model for accumulating ideas for his work, as his notebooks, photographs, and drawings attest, but

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<sup>5</sup> I borrow the definition from Charles Felten, *Layout: The Practical Application of Principles of Design to Advertising and Printing*. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1947)

he also conceived of his own work as an image morgue. His photographs and drawings especially constituted a malleable archive of ideas and images, a fluid collection of visual material always open to re-definition and re-conceptualization. In some cases, he also created his own archive of working materials, as is the case with his photography books, which were based on large collections of images assembled by Ruscha and his collaborators. In other cases, such as in the paintings, Ruscha dipped into his image morgue to borrow a mass produced object, such as a magazine, which he then filtered through multiple processes of reproduction before transferring it into a work of art. As if to further insert the object into his image morgue, Ruscha would often photograph the finished work that included the image, then use that photograph to produce other works of art. This aspect of Ruscha's practice is also closely intertwined with its pre-meditated and temporal nature, in that the archive provides the basis for a segmented and cyclical way of working. Archival practices are leitmotif of modern art, especially in regard to photography. In some cases, for example, the archive drove the aesthetic and conceptual program of documentary photographers, as Robin Kelsey has argued in his book *Archive Style: Photographs and Illustrations for U.S. Surveys, 1850–1890*.<sup>6</sup> Closer to Ruscha's moment, many artists, such as Robert Rauschenberg and Vija Celmins, used archives of printed ephemera, culled from newspapers and magazines, for paintings and prints that represent the perceptual experience of a postwar consumer society. Ruscha's deployment of the archive – specifically the designer's archive – troubles the notion of the singular art object as well as the idea that there is one way of perceiving reality.

Though the foundation of his methods of creating art, the archive slips in and out of view.

At times it is absorbed, as his object paintings, and in other cases its presence is eminently visible, as in *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*. In this regard, his art evokes the flood of images

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<sup>6</sup> Robin Kelsey, *Archive Style: Photographs and Illustrations for U.S. Surveys, 1850–1890* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

that are culled and selected to become integrated into printed matter as well as the kind of research-based and segmented way of working that produces this printed matter.

Since the early moments of his career, Ruscha's practice has been collaborative. The significance of this fact is often overlooked, despite postmodern theory's problematization of the concept of the author. Whether he sent his photographs out to local workshops to print, as he did with all of his photos, or engaged in screen printing with studios such as Tamarind and Gemini, Ruscha's practice was (and continues to be) entrenched in the network of designers and artists he had known since his student years. This collaborative focus sprang from his training in commercial art, which emphasized the collective and communicative nature of design. Every printed design was a product of many hands, from illustrators and paste-up men to art directors and printers, and of course, always, the client. Clear communication was crucial, so each party had to have basic knowledge of each aspect of the design process, in order to be able to discuss it with the others involved. No one contributor was considered the author, and in any case that was not the central issue. The most important thing was to produce a successful design, such as an ad that would increase the client's sales. Ruscha operated according to a collaborative model of authorship, yet he maintained oversight by situating himself in the role of the client, or the "majordomo," as he once called it, or the one who was the ultimate determiner of the final work.<sup>7</sup> The tension between carefully and precisely executing and coordinating his art and turning it over to the hands over others defined Ruscha's career in the 60s and up until now (in fact, many of his long-time collaborators, including Susan Haller and Gary Regester, continue to work with him). Rather than a tension between control and chance, Ruscha's work is characterized by a

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<sup>7</sup> Ruscha, quoted in David Bourdon, "Ruscha as Publisher [or All Booked Up]," *Art News* 71 (April 1972): 32 – 36, 68 – 69, reprinted in Alexandra Schwartz, ed., *Leave Any Information at the Signal: Writings, Interviews, Bits, Pages* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 40-45 (hereafter *LAI*).

back and forth between one who oversees and orchestrates the work and the multiple hands and skill sets required to produce it.

Finally, Ruscha consistently engages the mechanics of visual perception in his art, primarily through his investigations of the camera's construction of vision and the nature of perspective in design-based drawing. His manipulation of the camera, use of oblique and from-above viewpoints, and deployment of axonometric and other non-linear forms of perspective proposes a model of disembodied vision, which gestures to the formal qualities and conceptual space of design. In his work, he explores the nature of perception as it is produced and shaped through the world of two-dimensional printed matter, with advertising as his chief point of reference and perspective as the primary tool through which perception is filtered and investigated. Perspective appears both a proscribed system of representation, bound by a set of rules, and a destabilizing force, which can throw off our visual apprehension of objects and places. Just as he played with scale in humorous ways, Ruscha often used perspective in a comedic or confusing manner, so as to counter perspective's functioning in ad design. In some cases, as in Los Angeles County Museum of art works, perspective subtly pushed the boundaries of critique, by serving as an aesthetically and even culturally subversive device.

In its attention to process, materials, and pedagogy, this dissertation takes its methodological cues from materialist strains of philosophy and the recent turn towards object-based histories in the humanities. Michael Polanyi's theories of tacit knowledge are foundational in these conversations. In his 1966 book *The Tacit Dimension*, Polanyi, a scientist and philosopher, formulated a model for theorizing the type of knowledge acquired through physical experiences accumulated over time and through repetition. This form of knowledge



is often referred to as technical skill, and since Aristotle has been considered the counter point to intellectual work (*techné* as practical knowing v. *epistēmē* as intellectual knowing). Polanyi's emphasis is on the nature of technical skill as concerns its role in the production of scientific knowledge.<sup>8</sup> While technical skill involves both intellectual and practical knowledge, described by the German terms *wissen* and *können* (knowing facts and “know how”), Polanyi is most concerned to theorize the difficult-to-articulate learning executed in and accumulated through bodily actions. As he writes, we learn skills by interiorizing them, often by studying the physical movements of another who is performing a particular action. Consider teaching someone how to make bread dough or drive a stick shift. Words quickly reach their limits; we often resort to language of feeling and intuition, terms that acknowledge the bodily learning involved in acquiring these types of skills. To progress in learning the student must take on the task on their own, and practice until they internalize the movements necessary to performing these actions – before they know how the dough feels when the kneading is finished, or how to shift from neutral to first gear. This is knowledge accrued through repetition, based in the body, and impossible to fully articulate in the verbal register.

Because of his emphasis on a tactile and embodied knowledge, Polanyi's ideas offer a useful framework for thinking about art, specifically ways in which to derive meaning in making and to connect process and materiality with history and theory.<sup>9</sup> The idea of tacit knowledge has proven to be productive in discussions of early modern art, especially in regard to the relationship between art and science. Historian Pamela Smith's *The Body of the*

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), 6- 30.

<sup>9</sup> Related to the rise of studies of tacit and artisanal knowledge is the recent prominence of what has been called “thing theory,” exemplified in the work of scholars Bill Brown and Bruno LaTour.

*Artisan* is a notable example. In her wide-ranging study of art, craft, and science in the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries, Smith argues for the deep connections and reciprocal relationship between the production of knowledge and production of objects. By looking closely at the writings and technical manuals of artisans, on subjects from gold making to bronze casting, Smith maps out the parameters of the tacit knowledge involved in such procedures and their intersection with the emergence of new philosophical and scientific approaches to the natural world.

In studies of twentieth century art, applications of theories of tacit knowledge, and related concepts such as process, pedagogy, and materiality, take on a different cast. For many scholars, this methodological approach has opened up new ways of understanding artists' engagements with mass media culture. In his book *Image Duplicator: Roy Lichtenstein and the Emergence of Pop Art*, Michael Lobel argues that Roy Lichtenstein's education at the University of Rochester, especially his encounters with Professor Hoyt Sherman and his Flash Lab, provided the artist with a model for understanding vision and perception in the modern age. Lichtenstein drew upon these lessons in his art, in which he examined the individual's formation of identity in a technocratic consumer society.<sup>10</sup> Blake Stimson, in *Citizen Warhol*, argues that the Andy Warhol's time at the Carnegie Institute of Technology, as it was then called, encompassed an education in an "industrial-age theory of art," which shaped his orientation to the consumer culture that he represented in his work.<sup>11</sup> Other scholars have examined questions of tacit knowledge as a way to complicate received understandings of mechanically reproduced media, such as print making, and examine the

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Lobel, *Image Duplicator: Roy Lichtenstein and the Emergence of Pop Art*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Blake Stimson, *Citizen Warhol* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014).

role of the body in the production of art.<sup>12</sup> These scholars have opened up rich avenues of inquiry for more deeply understanding art's engagements with consumer culture, technocracy, and subjectivity in the post World War II era.

Building on these examples, this dissertation takes Polanyi's concept of tacit knowledge as the basis for its methodological orientation. As a trained commercial artist, Ruscha's technical and material know-how derives from a white-collar set of design skills, rather than artisanal knowledge (as is the case for the material Smith considers). His education and early formation took shape within a framework of modern art, with its attendant concepts of the autonomous art object, authorship, and self-reflexivity, and modern design, with its legacies of functionalism, mechanisms of distribution, and communicative strategies. Though the concept of tacit knowledge implies some degree of sub-conscious action, in that it emphasizes bodily and internalized forms of knowledge (things that we know but cannot fully articulate), saying that Ruscha's work draws upon tacit knowledge does not negate the fact that he consciously chose to utilize commercial art processes and techniques. Instead, I am committed to mapping out the deeper structures, assumptions, and forms of knowing that govern the mid-century world of commercial art, and that formed his approach to art making. One example concerns Ruscha's use of design-based systems of drawing. His work is rife with evidence that he not only used design drawing, for example, but that he *thought* in its forms. A skill accumulated over many years of cultivation and usage, design-based drawing became Ruscha's language for note taking, conceptualizing his objects of study, and planning out his work. Ruscha chose to use those systems, but the act of making that choice also represents his deployment of absorbed skills,

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<sup>12</sup> For example, see Jennifer Roberts, *Jasper Johns / In Press: The Crosshatch Works and the Logic of Print* (Cambridge: Harvard Art Museums, 2012).

habit, and modes of perception, the textures and implications of which can be articulated by delving into the pedagogy and practice of mid-century design drawing. This represents a way in which this dissertation puts Ruscha's work in conversation with broader horizons of commercial art's technical knowledge, in order to argue that his art represents and reinvents the parameters of that knowledge in the form of art objects. Those objects, in turn, make propositions about art's function in an age of consumer culture, the mechanics of perception and vision, and the nature of the designed world in which we live. To be clear, my argument is not that the dissertation presents Ruscha's articulated theory of his art. Rather, I advance my own theorization of his work, built from close studies of objects and process, drawn from extant literature, and merged with a piecing together of the historical processes and technical world that his work represents, crystallizes, and reinvents.

Throughout the dissertation, I make the argument that attention to technical details, process, and materials gives new insight into established scholarship on Ruscha's career as well as into 1960s art more broadly. Already in the above discussion I have alluded to the ways that a process-based methodology can sharpen and broaden received art-historical narratives of postwar art. The six key themes I cited above – pre-meditation, cyclical temporal rhythms, uses of scale, archival processes, collaboration, and investigation of perception – are all familiar points of discussion in the scholarship on 60s art and modern art more broadly. In my dissertation, I examine how these concepts are expressed and emerge in process and how they are formulated within a specific moment in the history of design and in the development of postwar media culture. For example, the discussions of scale in Chapter 2 reframe the conversation on Ruscha's painting practice and his role in the emergence of Pop art around 1962. As such, the chapter also argues for a longer historical view of Ruscha's art, in relation to the development of commercial art education and

practice over time. Another example concerns Ruscha's engagement with perspective. This claim calls to mind a broader theme in the history of modernism: the investigation of the nature of vision and the dynamics of perception, embodied in what Lázsló Moholy-Nagy famously called "the new vision."<sup>13</sup> For Ruscha, the production of vision takes shape within the systems of design, from axonometric drawing to photography to paste-up layout, as practiced in commercial art in the 50s. Taking these systems as his foundation, Ruscha made the representation, destabilization, and reconstitution of them one of the projects of his art. While for other artists the idea of the new vision had political and social ramifications – for example, countering an idealist view of reality and picturing a new form of subjectivity, as in certain strains of Russian Constructivist photography – for Ruscha the stakes are more subtle and ambivalent. In his *Los Angeles County Museum of Art* works, for example, Ruscha veers away from the messy politics surrounding the institution, as well as from full-force institutional critique, instead representing building in the conceptual space of design. While it hints at public discontent with the museum, as well as at the site's history, the painting also sublimates some of those tensions within a model-like structure, a paper product locked into an irreconcilable web of perspectives and located in an un-real painted picture plane.

In putting tacit knowledge at the forefront of art historical inquiry, the dissertation addresses two broader theoretical constructs in the study of postwar art. First, the concept of tacit knowledge and a process-based approach reframes the dialogue of deskilling and reskilling, a familiar pairing in certain histories of 20<sup>th</sup> century art. Deskilling, generally defined as the withdrawal from established conceptions of artistic skill, subjectivity, and manual dexterity, is a foundational concept in the work of scholars such as Benjamin

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<sup>13</sup> Lázsló Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision: Fundamentals of Design, Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1928).

Buchloh, Helen Molesworth, and John Roberts.<sup>14</sup> Duchamp's readymades stand at the center of these accounts. As Roberts argues in *The Intangibilities of Form*, the readymades collapsed the labor of art making into the selection of an industrially-produced objects, which were then attached to the name of the artist – removing the hand from the process of production – and then socially, linguistically, and institutionally coded as art. The implications of this shift meant that artists searched for new methods, by looking to the realm of “general social technique,” as Roberts calls it, by which he means skills not traditionally identified with the making of fine art. However, it is not enough to point to this shift or even to name the skills artists employed. We must also aim to understand the technical and material worlds in which these skill sets are anchored and look at how they emerge in artistic practice – work that is the territory of tacit knowledge. Alongside considerations of the social, linguistic, and institutional coding, the theory of tacit knowledge argues for the centrality of material and bodily systems of knowing and activity in the making and conceptualization of art. As such, this methodological approach provides a way to define what “reskilling” looked like in specific moments and contexts as well as a basis for broadening definitions of artistic skill.

Second, when considering art as a means of concretizing tacit knowledge, we can look to the wider horizons of meaning that govern the production of art objects. In this way, the concept of tacit knowledge complicates one-dimensional notions of artistic intention, because it provides a way of charting meaning beyond what an artist says or writes about their work. Instead, it locates meaning in the hard-to-verbalize and unruly processes of making, a different register of knowledge that that involved in verbal expression, which is

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<sup>14</sup> Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions.” *October* 55 (Winter 1990): 105-43; Jeff Wall, “‘Marks of Indifference:’ Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art,” in *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography 1960 -1982*, ed. Douglas Fogle (Minneapolis, Walker Art Museum, 2003), 32 – 44; Helen Molesworth, “Work Avoidance: The Everyday Life of Marcel Duchamp’s Readymades,” *Art Journal* 57 (Winter 1998): 50 – 61); John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Deskillling and Reskillling in Art after the Readymade* (London: Verso, 2007).

the basis for conceiving of the art object as akin to a text to be read. Rather than a glorification of the studio and of manual processes, it instead acknowledges that what brings art into being is not only ideas that are articulated and verbalized, but which occur in and through process, bodily movements, and internalized habits. Furthermore, it aims to recapture some of the durational aspects of art making, the things that occur before the object is completed or viewed in museums. Welding together conceptual and material processes, the concept of tacit knowledge, moreover, adds a new dimension to deskilling's stated ramifications in Conceptual, performance, and body art. Because so many of these practices locate their meaning in ephemeral objects, physical bodies, or short-lived performances, considering the modes of tacit knowledge they reference and deploy may open up new ways of theorizing and historicizing art in the later 1960s and beyond.

In regard to extant scholarship on Ruscha, the dissertation offers a new narrative alongside the three established interpretations of his work, all of which have contributed to how I understand Ruscha's work and how I have formulated this project. These interpretations can be briefly summarized as Ruscha avant-garde innovator in Pop and Conceptual practices, Ruscha as linguist, and Ruscha as the prototypical Los Angeles artist. The first interpretation is represented in the work of scholars such as Hal Foster and Benjamin Buchloh. In his *The First Pop Age: Painting and Subjectivity in the Art of Lichtenstein, Warhol, Richter, and Ruscha*, Foster argues that these four artists restage the painting of modern life for the postwar era.<sup>15</sup> He traces the ways that Ruscha addresses conditions of commodification by reframing the Duchampian readymade and through developing what

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<sup>15</sup> Hal Foster, *The First Pop Age: Painting and Subjectivity in the Art of Hamilton, Lichtenstein, Warhol, Richter, and Ruscha* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

Foster calls “the deadpan image.” Specifically, Foster argues that Ruscha’s paintings address product branding, reification of words, abstraction of place, and artificiality of color. Notably, he connects Ruscha’s ways of working to his design training, though he does not delve into what this training entailed or the specifics of design’s labor. In regard to Conceptual art, Benjamin Buchloh has argued that Ruscha’s books represent a key iteration of the postwar reception of the readymade and the Duchampian and John Cage-ian “aesthetic of indifference.”<sup>16</sup> As he sees it, the books are pivotal in the giving way of Pop’s focus on industrial production to Conceptual art’s representation of the aesthetics of capitalist administration. Ruscha achieves this through three key strategies: a focus on vernacular architecture, systematic and direct deployment of photography, and use of commercial methods of distribution. Buchloh sees it as especially significant that Ruscha focuses on public architecture, because it makes visible the absence of that subject within the context of American formalism.

The second framework related closely to the first in that it places Ruscha within an established history of the avant-garde. Yve-Alain Bois and Lisa Turvey have produced some of the most important work on the subject of Ruscha’s uses of language. Bois has made a convincing case for his representation of language as form of “waste retrieval.”<sup>17</sup> Tracing Ruscha’s work as an engagement with the lineage of Stéphane Mallarmé and the Russian Formalists, Bois writes that Ruscha registers “the thickness and shallowness” of the world of signs by capturing what is lost in this world, and representing it as the entropic residues of communication. Turvey, who sees Ruscha’s art as a form of semiotic analysis, argues that he

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<sup>16</sup> Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962 – 1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions.” *October* 55 (Winter 1990): 105 – 143.

<sup>17</sup> Yve-Alain Bois, “Thermometers Should Last Forever,” in *Edward Ruscha: Romance with Liquids, Paintings 1966-1969* (New York: Rizzoli/Gagosian Gallery, 1993), 8- 38.



represents and examines the material nature of signs, in a way that counters conventional notions about the functioning of signs in Pop art.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, the notion of Ruscha as the prototypical Los Angeles artist is represented in the work of scholars such as Alexandra Schwartz and Cécile Whiting. Schwartz has traced Ruscha's formation of his artistic identity as a dialogue with the image and reputation of the city. In her well-researched study, she identifies issues of masculinity, the culture of Hollywood, and the formation of the L.A. art world as the context for Ruscha's work.<sup>19</sup> Whiting's writing on Ruscha is part of larger project on L.A. Pop, in which she considers how artists represented L.A.'s urban environment, including its traffic, architecture, and spatiality.<sup>20</sup> Along with this scholarship, broader institutional trends, namely the Getty Foundation's Pacific Standard Time, have contributed to the literature on Ruscha's connections with Los Angeles. Founded in 2002, the wide-ranging initiative aims to document and disseminate histories of art in postwar southern California.<sup>21</sup> Through this initiative, much important work done on a wide range of California-based art and design practices from 1945–1980, from Chicano art to modern architecture.

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<sup>18</sup> Lisa Pasquariello, "Ed Ruscha and the Language That He Used." *October* 111 (Winter 2005): 81 – 106; see also "Good Reading:" The Work of Ed Ruscha, 1958 – 1970" (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2004). In 2015, as I was completing this dissertation, Turvey published the first volume of the catalogue raisonné of Ruscha's works on paper. Many of the works reproduced therein play a key role in my writing. Before Turvey's volume, these works were accessible only in Ruscha's studio, with a few of them having been previously exhibited. Her detailed, exhaustive documentation of his extensive repository of drawings provides fertile ground for continued scholarship.

<sup>19</sup> Alexandra Schwartz, *Ed Ruscha's Los Angeles* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010). Related to this book, based on her dissertation, Schwartz also produced the invaluable volume *Leave Any Information at the Signal: Writings, Interviews, Bits, Pages* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> Cécile Whiting, *Pop L.A.: Art and the City in the 1960s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

<sup>21</sup> For more on the project, see Rebecca Peabody, ed., *Pacific Standard Time: Los Angeles Art, 1945 – 1980* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute and the J. Paul Getty Museum, 2011).

This overview of the rich body of literature on Ruscha also serves to illustrate a significant point about the status of the artist himself: he is one of those considered equally noteworthy by scholars who identify as modernists and as scholars who identify as Americanists, as those subfields are defined within the field of art history. The first two approaches exemplify modernist art history's deployment of theories of commodification, mass culture, structuralism and post-structuralism, and subjectivity, and thus place Ruscha's art as revelatory and critical of these broader historical currents. Whiting and Schwartz take what is conventionally considered a more Americanist approach, by situating Ruscha's work as representing and responding to a certain cultural context (i.e., a cultural history approach). The distinction between modernist and Americanist methodologies must be drawn with caution; to be sure, the differences are often not so clear-cut and many scholars, myself included, position themselves as drawing from both schools of thought. I outline them here schematically to emphasize my own positioning, and also to emphasize that I see the tacit knowledge approach as a way to specify what I see to be overly broad "modernist" accounts of Ruscha's work without losing the historical specificity and focus on detail of accounts such as Whiting and Schwartz's.<sup>22</sup> For example, in regard to Foster's important argument regarding Ruscha's painting and design, I ask: Why does design operate according to these principles of labor, and what about this way of working appealed to Ruscha? How does it manifest in different works of art? While the readymade may have been a referent from Ruscha, might there have been even more pressing and relevant models already present in design, which in turn corresponded to what he saw in the Duchamp's work? Does Ruscha's

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<sup>22</sup> I borrow some of my language here from Joshua Shannon and Jason Weems, "A Conversation Missed: Toward a Historical Understanding of Americanist/Modernist Divide," in John Davis, Jennifer A. Greenhill, and Jason D. LaFountain, eds., *A Companion to American Art* (Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 17-33. Other instructive essays on similar topics in this same volume include Jennifer L. Roberts, "Response: Setting the Roundtable, or, Prospects for Dialogue Between Americanists and Modernists," 34 – 48, and Robin Kelsey, "Our Cause is What?" 85 – 94.

painting constitute a postwar version of the painting of modern life, or is there another, or additional, model at work? Such questions offer new insights, as I argue in the second chapter, into how we understand Ruscha's contributions to Pop and the theorization of Pop's relationship to consumer culture.

Given Ruscha's long and productive career, it was tempting to consider a longer time span in this dissertation, but I have anchored it in the late 50s and 1960s in order to be able to be as specific as possible about his historical formation. As this project progressed, it became apparent that while Ruscha is its subject, part of the historical work of the dissertation also lies in illuminating the teaching and methods of 1950s commercial art practice, a history that I found to be rather scattershot and vague, not because of a dearth of information on the topic, but due to a lack of distillation of it in concise accounts. In this regard I follow the example of David Deitcher and Michael Lobel, who have both delved into New York art education in the postwar era.<sup>23</sup> Though more attention has been given to the postwar West Coast art scene in recent years, most accounts limit discussions of art education to the relationship between Chouinard and the Ferus Gallery.<sup>24</sup> The first chapter aims to fill these gaps by providing a detailed history of Chouinard Art Institute between 1956 and 1960, when Ruscha studied there. It focuses especially closely on the teaching of paste-up layout and projection drawing, foundational skills for the mid-century commercial artist. Drawing on previously unpublished archival material, such as Ruscha's notebooks

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<sup>23</sup> David Deitcher, "Unsentimental Education: The Professionalization of the American Artist," in *Hand-Painted Pop: American Art in Transition, 1955 – 62*, ed. Russell Ferguson (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art / New York: Rizzoli, 1992), 95-118. An abridged version is reprinted in *Roy Lichtenstein*, ed. Graham Bader (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 73-102. On Roy Lichtenstein's training see Lobel, *Image Duplicator: Roy Lichtenstein and the Emergence of Pop Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Alexandra Schwartz, *Ed Ruscha's Los Angeles* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010); Cécile Whiting, *Pop L.A.: Art and the City in the 1960s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

from his student years, I detail the courses that he took, skills that he learned, and the type of work that he produced while at Chouinard. To date, this is the most comprehensive history of Ruscha's student years. The chapter also provides a history of the school's founding, curriculum, and faculty, as well as its relationship to Los Angeles's 1950s design culture and commercial art world. Finally, it contextualizes Chouinard's role in the broader landscape of post-World War II higher education, when art and design programs, rapidly expanding to accommodate an influx of students, trained those who would go on to define the landscape of art and design in the 1960s.

This chapter also sets the foundation for my use of the terms "design" and "commercial art." Throughout the dissertation, "design" refers broadly to the process of conceiving and executing plans or patterns for the production of objects, whether buildings, clothing, furniture, or newspaper. The American professional association for design (AIGA) defines it as "the art and practice of planning and projecting ideas and experiences with visual and textual content."<sup>25</sup> When speaking of Ruscha's training, however, I use the term "commercial art" to make a point about a specific moment in the history of design. Though Ruscha is often compared to a graphic designer, it is more historically accurate to discuss his formation in terms of commercial art. As design historian Steven Heller notes, it was during the postwar years that "graphic design" came to be a more widely used term, a way to set apart the individual, well-known designer from the work-for-hire layout or illustration man.<sup>26</sup> A distinct figure from the well-known individual graphic designer of the time, such as Milton Glaser, the typical commercial artist was generally an anonymous worker, one who produced

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<sup>25</sup> Juliette Cezzar, "What is Graphic Design?" AIGA, <http://www.aiga.org/guide-whatisgraphicdesign/> (accessed March 14, 2015).

<sup>26</sup> Steven Heller, "Advertising: Mother of Graphic Design," in Michael Beirut, ed., *Looking Closer 2: Critical Writings on Graphic Design* (New York: Allworth Press, 112 – 119).

layouts, typography, and illustrations for mass-market printed material. This is the type of work that Ruscha evokes in his art practice. Though I see Ruscha's career as a constant navigation between design and art, this is not to suggest that the two are distinct; if anything, as his work shows so well, the boundaries are porous and malleable. Ruscha has always conceived of himself as a fine artist, but his work is infused with the language of design, and it is this language that he deploys and transmutes in his art. Even the way Ruscha talked about his practice recalls the lexicon of design, such as his stated desire to make art with "no style."<sup>27</sup> More than a declaration of his pushing of the bounds of fine art or an embrace of deskilling, this statement implies that Ruscha took his cues not from a fine art model of individual style, but the designer's goal of *not* having a style in favor of a focus on utilitarian concerns. Designers of many stripes have long asserted that the essence of design is problem-solving, not creating a distinctive style. Louis Sullivan's maxim "form follows function," Ivan Chermayeff's declaration that he never wanted to have a style, and Charles and Ray Eames's notion that style signifies lack of good problem-solving are all variations on this idea.<sup>28</sup> In his work Ruscha often flouted both the aesthetic conventions of art (fine art photography, painting, and printmaking specifically) and design's emphasis on functionality (as is especially true in his books). In his experience with and appropriation of design, Ruscha's work also evokes a longer history of art's utilization of and engagement with design

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<sup>27</sup> Ed Ruscha, quoted in Henri Man Barendse, "Ed Ruscha: An Interview," *Afterimage* 8 (February 1981): 8 – 10; reprinted in *Leave Any Information at the Signal: Writings, Interviews, Bits, Pages*, ed. Alexandra Schwartz (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 210 – 219 (hereafter *LAI*).

<sup>28</sup> These ideas, of course, are not without their contradictions. After all, the work of all three quoted here is highly recognizable as a kind of "style." Louis Sullivan's quote (Frank Lloyd Wright attributed the idea to Dankmar Adler) was originally stated in "the Tall Office Building Artistically Considered," *Lippincott's Magazine* 57 (March 1869): 403 – 409. Ivan Chermayeff is quoted in Andy Grundberg's review "Graphic Design; If It's Commercial, Is it Really Art?" *New York Times*, February 23, 1990. The Eames quotes, attributed to Charles, can be found in Kyle Normadin, "Charles and Ray Eames: Modern Living in a Postwar Era," *Designing Modern Life* 26 (2011/2012): 22 – 27.

and commercial art, a history to which this dissertation contributes. The historical textures of that moment are the concern of this first chapter, and provide the foundation for the remainder of the dissertation.

The subsequent chapters, each focused on a small group of related objects, examine the ways in which drawing board processes and commercial art techniques permeate Ruscha's 60s work. In Chapter 2, I consider painting and scale, chapter 3 photography and paste-up layout, and chapter 4 the *Standard* works and projection drawing. Though loosely chronological, the chapters do sometimes consider works out of strict sequential order, a necessity given the fact that Ruscha tended to focus several years on one subject or work. Following Chapter 1's history of Chouinard and commercial art pedagogy, in the second chapter I turn to Ruscha's painting practice in 1960 – 63. I argue for a new understanding two of his early paintings: *Actual Size* (1962), a work that put him on the map as a Pop artist, and *Noise, Pencil, Broken Pencil, Cheap Western* (1963), which he has long considered one of his best works. In these works Ruscha combines representations of actual-size objects with typography and flattened spaces of color, to produce a model of painting as without scale. The chapter offers a fresh take on Ruscha's contributions to Pop and postwar painting as well as on Pop's engagement with scale and its modes of producing images.

In chapter 3, I take a close look at *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966), Ruscha's most labor-intensive book and a landmark work in the theorization of Conceptual art. Consisting of a single accordion-fold page, printed on one side with two long photographic strips, the book pictures both sides of a mile-and-a half section of Hollywood's Sunset Boulevard. In his methods for producing *Every Building*, from his extensive documentation of Sunset to his montaging of the images to the printing of the long page, Ruscha drew upon the tools of paste-up layout, which he incorporated into the production of all of his books.

During this time, Ruscha was also using these tools in another setting, in his work as a layout designer for the journal *Artforum*. In his photography publications, he combined the tools and labor of layout with his pursuit of a model of photography as grounded in a disembodied view of the world. Building on the close of analysis of *Every Building*, I also advance a re-reading of Ruscha's book in regard to emerging theorization of Conceptual art in the mid 60s, as well as its reception in the sphere of architecture and design.

Chapter 4 considers Ruscha's deployment of linear perspective and projection drawing. It focuses specifically on his *Standard Station* (1962 – 69) and *Los Angeles County Museum of Art* (1965 – 68) works, in which Ruscha used perspective to represent architectural structures. Deploying linear and paraline projection techniques, Ruscha depicted buildings as models of things, ideas rendered on two-dimensional surfaces, imagined and plotted out in the projective space of design. In some cases, as with the *Standard Stations*, Ruscha made multiple versions of the same structure, as a means of dissecting and rebuilding forms and testing the boundaries between abstraction and representation. In other instances, despite Ruscha's use of strategies of abstraction, the building's notoriety prevents a slide into generalization. This is the case with the Los Angeles County Museum works, in which Ruscha represents the museum as a paper model, caught in the realm of two dimensions, even as he also references the museum's controversial status and the strangeness of its urban site. Ending with an analysis of his painting of the museum, the dissertation then concludes with ruminations on the history lessons and contemporary relevance of Ruscha's work.

## Chapter 1 “Draw the Idea:” Chouinard Art Institute, 1956 – 60

“Today’s greatest Art Patrons are Business and Industry. Nothing is produced until something happens on a drawing board.”

-Art Center College of Art and Design Course Catalogue, 1956 – 57<sup>1</sup>

In the 1940s and 50s, as the United States entered a period of unprecedented economic prosperity, soldiers returning from the war flocked to art and design schools. Supported by the G.I. Bill to pursue the education they had deferred or interrupted for military service, many found that the rapidly expanding design field offered ample career opportunities. Coupled with the expansion of the mass media and a burgeoning culture of consumption, the professionalization of art and design produced and participated in a new model of artistic production and patronage. One of the nation’s top art and design schools, the Art Center College in Pasadena, California, succinctly summed up this model in its 1956 – 57 course catalogue, a selection from which is quoted above. The first sentence identifies an historical shift in the patronage of the arts: it is “Business” and “Industry” who supply the capital needed to make art. The second sentence pinpoints the centrality of drawing, and the tool of the drawing board, in this landscape. As the catalogue reminded its prospective students, “No matter how much a man knows about the theory of art, he must start by way of a blank sheet of paper. Drawing is to the artist, what scales are to a musician. It is his fundamental equipment!” Every designed object, from cars to clothing, began on the drawing board, the surface on which designers translated their ideas into visual form.

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<sup>1</sup> Art Center College, General catalogue, 1956-57, Art Center Institutional Archives, Pasadena, CA.



Drawing was the foundation and substance of this activity, the conceptual framework of design and its basic language.

Born in 1937, nine years before the beginning of the baby boom, Ed Ruscha began his career at the tail end of what we might call this drawing board moment. Shortly after he completed his studies of commercial art in 1960, schools began to experiment with digital methods of drawing, though it would take at least a decade until such methods were widely used. In the early 1960s, as the art world embraced Pop (though gestural painting continued to flourish), many fine arts programs began to gravitate towards Conceptual art practices as well as video and performance art. By then, Ruscha was well-established as a Pop artist, largely on the basis of his paintings, and in Conceptual art, for which his self-published books were considered an important precursor.

While many art-historical accounts have considered the 1950s as a precursor to his Pop and Conceptual work, I see the late 50s as a foundational moment for Ruscha, much more than a precursor to a later moment in his career. Ruscha's studies of commercial art at Chouinard furnished him with a foundation of his working methods and visual language, a network of collaborators and workshops, and a conceptual model for understanding the act of art making and the nature of art objects. In what follows, I provide a detailed account of the mid-late 1950s at Chouinard. Pieced together from Chouinard's archival materials, catalogues, and Ruscha's own notes, as well as on period manuals and textbooks, this is the most detailed history to date of Ruscha's training. The chapter focuses especially closely on the status of the drawing board and two key procedures executed on it: layout design and projection drawing, both of which Ruscha would deploy and reinvent throughout the course of his career. In this way, the chapter establishes the parameters of the body of tacit knowledge, the toolbox of methods and processes from which Ruscha would build a mode

of art making. Furthermore, the chapter offers a view from the ground up, so to speak, of his early time in Los Angeles, a history that unfolds alongside and in dialogue with his involvement in the tight-knit avant-garde art world then beginning to emerge in the city. It paints a picture of L.A.'s commercial art world, of the printers, typographers, and photographers that Ruscha came to know while at Chouinard and with whom he would work with throughout his career. This was the network of producers who ran the city's screen printing workshops, commercial presses, and typography studios, which formed the foundation of the city's economy of cultural production. Understanding Ruscha's involvement in this world not only tells us a great deal about how he worked; it also is a more nuanced way of conceptualizing Ruscha's relationship to L.A. beyond his representations of its qualities and landmarks.

This history of Chouinard, and of postwar art education more broadly, details the analog cultures of making, the drawing-board operations, that provided such a rich foundation for Ruscha's art, a framework for producing objects that simultaneously represented and reconstituted the designed world. In this regard, the chapter also has implications beyond the scope of this dissertation, in that it contributes to recent art-historical scholarship on the training and education of Pop artists, such as Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein. This literature has complicated established narratives of Pop by nuancing historical accounts of complex and ambivalent exchanges between art and consumer culture in the postwar United States.<sup>2</sup> By taking stock of Ruscha's education and formation in the

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Lobel's work is exemplary in this regard. See his *Image Duplicator: Roy Lichtenstein and the Emergence of Pop Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002) and *James Rosenquist: Pop Art, Politics, and History in the 1960s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009). On the subject of the commercial art production of Pop artists, see also Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Andy Warhol's One-Dimensional Art," in Kynaston McShine, ed., *Andy Warhol: A Retrospective* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1989), 63-76. As I was writing this dissertation Thomas Crow's important book on Pop and design was published. Crow's nuanced consideration of Warhol's involvement in a "collective mode of creative practice" characteristic of the design world is especially notable in

late 50s, this chapter sheds light on the conditions and stakes of Ruscha's practice as a trained producer of consumer culture, and thus well-positioned to represent and reinvent it.

### **Chouinard Art Institute: A Brief History**

Ruscha began his design education at an early age. As a child, he took art lessons and studied animation, and in high school he frequently designed posters, even occasionally winning prizes for his entries in local contests.<sup>3</sup> One of the posters commemorates the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the printing industry (Figure 1.1). Ruscha designed the poster as an abstracted rendition of offset printing, with the cylinders represented by circles and the printed matter a zigzagging yellow line running between them. The words “saluting the printing industry” follow the line at the left, before branching off to meet the bright red circle at the far right. Even at this early age, it was clear that Ruscha had absorbed important lessons of 20<sup>th</sup> century art and design. His rendering of the printing press as geometric forms, for example, recalls Francis Picabia's machine works.<sup>4</sup> Ruscha's teacher sent many posters like this one to local design contests, in which he often took first or second prize. He also took correspondence courses in cartooning, and so was able to have his assignments graded and sent back to him via mail.<sup>5</sup> The comments on his drawings emphasize key points of cartooning, including the rendering of facial expressions, use of text, and economy of line.

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regard to understanding the broader context of Pop. See *The Long March of Pop: Art, Music, and Design 1930-1995* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> For example, he won first prize in graphic design from the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce. See archival photograph reproduced in Pat Poncey, ed., *Edward Ruscha: Catalogue Raisonné of the Paintings*. Volume 1: 1958 – 70 (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2003) 343 (hereafter PP).

<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Benjamin Buchloh for pointing out this important connection.

<sup>5</sup> Ruscha's archives contain the cartoons he made in these courses, along with other supplemental materials. Ruscha studio, Culver City, California (hereafter RS).

Even at this early point he was beginning to acquire basic design skills, as well as the language of modernist abstraction that permeated postwar design in the U.S. Deciding that he wanted to pursue a career in the arts, Ruscha applied to Los Angeles's Art Center College of Design, a commercial arts institution that emphasized industrial and in particular automobile design. When that school did admit him, he instead enrolled in Chouinard Art Institute.

Nelbert (Nelly) Chouinard, an artist who studied at the Pratt Institute with Arthur Wesley Dow, established the school that bore her name in 1921, after a brief stint at the Otis College of Art and Design.<sup>6</sup> By 1930s, the institution had established a reputation as a leader in arts education. A professional art school rather than a college, Chouinard trained students to work in California's burgeoning commercial arts and design industries. Though the school taught both the fine and commercial arts – everything from ceramics to architecture – it focused primarily on fashion, advertising, film design, and animation. Chouinard's brochures touted its ability to place graduates in positions such as designers for the toy company Mattel, based in Hawthorne, California, and Carson/Roberts, the advertising firm where Ruscha would work for a short time. In a 1937–38 school brochure, Edward Northridge, head of the Chouinard School of Advertising Illustration, stated that since about 95% of graduates worked in the Pacific Coast area, Chouinard gave “much consideration is given to the problems confronting the western market.”<sup>7</sup> A high percentage of students, he emphasized, found and maintained jobs post-graduation, something that the school

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<sup>6</sup> Little is known about the specifics of Nelly Chouinard's education. As Robert Perine points out in his history of the school, however, Chouinard would have been familiar with the principles Dow set forth in *Composition and Theory and Practice of Teaching Art* (1899). An illustration of Dow's pedagogy, the book examines the compositional elements of line, color, and *notan*, a Japanese term referring to the balance of dark and light. See Arthur Wesley Dow, *Composition and Theory and Practice of Teaching Art* (Baker and Taylor: New York, 1913).

<sup>7</sup> Chouinard Art Institute brochure, 1937 – 1938, Robert Perine, “Research Material on the Chouinard Art Institute, 1931 – 84,” AAA.

facilitated with its job placement services. While the school's official publications underscore its professional nature, it had a reputation for being "bohemian," as Ruscha has described it, with students sporting beards and sandals. The school's culture contrasted distinctly with that of the Art Center, where students had a more formal dress code.<sup>8</sup>

At Chouinard, faculty stressed the centrality of learning the basics before progressing in one's studies. Nelly Chouinard maintained that professional success depended upon tradition and training in the fundamentals of drawing, perspective, composition, and color.<sup>9</sup> The brochures clearly state this philosophy, noting that "even though the talents and ambitions of individuals vary greatly, the same intellectual and spiritual development is necessary to the portrait painter and commercial illustrator alike."<sup>10</sup> Drawing constituted the foundational skill for all artistic endeavors. As a 1938 brochure proclaimed, "success in any field of art can usually be measured by the ability to draw, and for this reason Chouinard has always emphasized good draftsmanship."<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, the school employed a diverse faculty, with diverse backgrounds and pedagogical approaches. Nelly Chouinard allowed these instructors a considerable degree of autonomy. While many had been educated at the school, Nelly Chouinard also made a point to invite artists from outside of the West Coast. Alexander Archipenko, Hans Hofmann, and David Alfaro Siqueiros, among others, taught

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<sup>8</sup> Ed Ruscha, Conversation with the author, September 11, 2013. Ruscha has used this description of Chouinard frequently in interview; see, for example, *Oral history interview with Edward Ruscha, 1980 October 29-1981 October 2*, AAA; Alexandra Schwartz includes Ruscha's quote in *Ed Ruscha's Los Angeles* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 14.

<sup>9</sup> Nelly Chouinard, quoted in Chouinard Art Institute Brochure, 1937 – 38, Robert Perine, "Research Material on the Chouinard Art Institute, 1931 - 84," AAA.

<sup>10</sup> Chouinard Art Institute, <http://calarts.edu/about/history/chouinard>, accessed October 23, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Chouinard brochure, 1937 – 38, AAA.

at Chouinard.<sup>12</sup> In the mid to late 50s, the faculty included painters Emerson Woelffer and Robert Irwin, draftsmen Herb Jepson, and designers Marvin Rubin and Bill Moore. Eminent guest speakers, such as Charles and Ray Eames and George Nelson, visited the school.<sup>13</sup>

In 1955, a year before Ruscha enrolled, the school earned its accreditation from the National Association of Schools of Art and Design (NASAD), founded in 1944.<sup>14</sup> Like peer institutions the Cranbrook Academy of Art, Parsons School of Design, and the Rhode Island School of Design, Chouinard recognized the importance of standardizing its program, both so that it could attract more students and be able to issue teaching certificates. With the surge of enrollees, a substantial portion of which were soldiers on the G.I. Bill, schools needed expand and diversify their course offerings. Chouinard's transformation is indicative of broader trends in postwar art education. As David Deitcher has discussed, in these years U.S. art schools began to position the work of artists as a form of professional labor.<sup>15</sup> In accordance with NASAD standards, Chouinard restructured its curriculum to include liberal arts courses, such as art history, English literature, and the history of American civilization. The school continued to attract more students. In a 1953 profile of art and design schools,

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<sup>12</sup> While at Chouinard in the 1930s, Siqueiros painted two murals in downtown Los Angeles, one on a building on Olvera Street and one at Chouinard, the located on Grand View Street. The Olvera Street mural, whitewashed over due to a controversy over its Communist imagery, was restored in 2012 and is open to public view. See Suzanne Muchnic, "David Alfaro Siqueiros's 'America Tropical' awaits new unveiling," *Los Angeles Times*, September 29, 2012, <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/sep/29/entertainment/la-et-cm-siqueiros-unveiling-20120930>.

<sup>13</sup> The Eames, who had been in California since the 1940s, were by then well-known for their 1949 Case Study House in Pacific Palisades and their work with *Arts & Architecture Magazine*. Nelson, an industrial designer who collaborated with the Eames, was another key presence in postwar design. In the 50s, Nelson was working in his eponymous New-York based studio, where he collaborated with designers such as Herman Miller. In 1960 Nelson went on to supervise the Herman Miller Research Corporation, based in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Perine discusses the accreditation in his book *Chouinard: An Art Vision Betrayed: The Story of the Chouinard Art Institute 1921 – 1972* (Encinitas, CA: 1985), 139 – 141.

<sup>15</sup> David Deitcher, "Unsentimental Education: The Professionalization of the American Artist," in *Hand-Painted Pop: American Art in Transition, 1955 – 62*, ed. Russell Ferguson (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art / New York: Rizzoli, 1992), 95-118. An abridged version is reprinted in *Roy Lichtenstein*, ed. Graham Bader (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 73-102.

*Fortune* magazine cited Chouinard as one of the top ten institutions in the country, alongside the Art Center, Parsons, and the Chicago Institute of Design.<sup>16</sup>

Though its star was on the rise, financial troubles continually plagued Chouinard. Scholarship funds, always dispensed generously by Nelly Chouinard, continued to flow freely without necessary replenishment of the school's coffers. As a part of its academic and administrative overhaul, the school became almost entirely dependent on Walt Disney for funding. Chouinard's affiliation with the animation mogul began around 1929, when Disney, desiring more control over how his animators were trained, sent his staff to Chouinard to teach courses.<sup>17</sup> Disney Studios hired many of these students after they graduated, thereby reinforcing the connection between Chouinard and the growing Disney empire. In 1956, Disney joined the board and supplied a majority of Chouinard's funding. By 1960 he functioned as the *de facto* head of the school. In 1961, he and his brother Roy spearheaded Chouinard's merger with the Los Angeles Conservatory, to form the California Institute of the Arts.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> The other schools were the Chicago Institute of Design, Cranbrook Academy of Art, Minneapolis School of Art, Philadelphia Museum School of Art, Pratt Institute, University of Cincinnati – College of Applied Arts, and Yale University (Department of Design). See Leo Lionni, "Design Without Clients," *Fortune*, May 1953, 132 – 137. For an in-depth history of American art education and the development of modernism, see Howard Singerman, *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

<sup>17</sup> Disney was, not surprisingly, vocal about what he wanted to see in the animation courses. A 1935 memo, to instructor Don Graham, outlines his thoughts on a series of courses that would teach the following skills: "Good draughtsmanship; Knowledge of caricature, of action as well as features; Knowledge and appreciation of acting; Ability to think up gags and put over gags; Knowledge of story construction and audience values; Knowledge and understanding of all the mechanical and detailed routine involved in his work, in order that he may be able to apply his other abilities without becoming tied up in a knot by lack of technique along these lines." Walt Disney, Inter-office communication, to Don Graham, December 23, 1935. The letter has been widely reproduced and cited in magazines and on animation websites and blogs. See, for example, *Time*, June 10, 2010, <http://techland.time.com/2010/06/15/walt-disney-explains-how-to-train-animators/>; Nikki Finke, "Walt Disney on 'How to Train an Animator,'" *Deadline*, November 5, 2010, <http://deadline.com/2010/11/walt-disney-on-how-to-train-an-Animator-81688/>. The letter is reprinted on the website "Letters of Note," <http://www.lettersofnote.com/2010/06/how-to-train-Animator-by-walt-disney.html>, accessed January 7, 2015.

<sup>18</sup> The merger, completed by 1961, realized Disney's vision for a large arts institution, which would unite under one roof different arts fields and serve the entire Southern California region. The new institution, which would

While these administrative and financial troubles caused turmoil in the 50s, the school's curriculum remained relatively consistent up through 1960s, before the merger. Chouinard's 1960 brochure lists seven BFA degrees: advertising design, animation, ceramics, design (encompassing interior design, industrial design, and allied fields), drawing and painting, fashion and costume design, and film arts (Figure 1.2).<sup>19</sup> Every student began with the same courses, which constituted Chouinard's "Basic Year." This first-year curriculum focused on teaching the principles of design, line, color, and form, which provided a shared experience for incoming students. The curriculum's design, furthermore, reinforced the pedagogical philosophy that basics and familiarity with materials came first. In courses such as Material and Methods I, for example, students acquainted themselves with the qualities of different sculptural media. As part of the Basic Year and in concordance with NASAD standards, students also took courses in History of Art I, English Communication, and History of Civilization. By requiring liberal arts courses, the school aimed to ensure that the student's "growth as an artist-designer is supported and reinforced by his studies in the field of history and literature."<sup>20</sup>

Chouinard's Basic Year indicates its debt, one shared with schools across the United States, to the Bauhaus's educational philosophy, specifically to the idea that the first step in arts and design education entails gaining an intimate familiarity with materials and a

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eventually move to Valencia, was named California Institute of Arts. See Chouinard Art Institute, <http://calarts.edu/about/history/chouinard>, accessed October 23, 2013.

<sup>19</sup> The course offers appear to remain generally the same from year to year throughout the 50s and up until 1960, as evinced by the course catalogues in the Archives of American Art and the institutional archive of the California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, CA.

<sup>20</sup> Chouinard Art Institute, Catalogue for 1960 – 61, AAA.



knowledge of the basics.<sup>21</sup> The school's brochure described design education as encompassing two phases: first, learning the fundamentals of line, form, texture, colors, value – “the aim being to produce pleasing and attractive visual effects so important to successful merchandising as well as harmonious living” – and second applying these principles to “definite functional purpose – implying the study of the technical requirements of a given profession, such as textile or package design.”<sup>22</sup> Several instructors, such as Bill Moore, hewed especially close to the Bauhaus model. Head of Design Department and one of the more influential instructors, Moore taught that good design was “the logical arrangement of visual elements for order.” Students who studied under Moore recall that he often lectured on Josef Albers's approach to the study of color.<sup>23</sup> After their Basic Year, students then chose a concentration. Other than a few electives, their remaining semesters would be fairly structured, as they proceeded to complete the required courses and professional practice seminars. For Advertising Design students, these courses focused especially closely on two procedures: layout and projection drawing.

### **The Drawing Board and Commercial Art**

The drawing board is at the heart of mid-century advertising design. In addition to its function as the main surface of design – the tool on which printed matter began – it also

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<sup>21</sup> By the 1950s, Bauhaus ideas were widespread in the art schools of the United States. Nelly Chouinard, in addition to her experience at Pratt, also traveled regularly to other institutions, such as the Art Institute of Chicago, and was surely familiar with the Bauhaus legacy. For an excellent overview of the dissemination of Bauhaus concepts and theories in the United States, see Stephanie Barron, *Exiles + Emigrés: The Flight of European Artists From Hitler* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1997).

<sup>22</sup> Chouinard Art Institute, Catalogue for 1939 - 40, AAA.

<sup>23</sup> Andrew Perchuk discusses Moore and his color theories in his dissertation “From Otis to Ferus: Robert Irwin, Ed Ruscha, and Peter Voulkos, 1954 – 1975” (Ph.D diss., Yale University, 2006).

symbolized the work of the commercial artist.<sup>24</sup> Just as Chouinard students began their training with a Basic Year, focused on the fundamentals, manuals for commercial art began with the essential tools of the trade, or “layout kit.”<sup>25</sup> Boards for smaller-scale drawing, such as packaging design and animation, were lightweight and portable, scaled to the span of the arms. Beginners often used these smaller and more inexpensive boards. As they progressed in their layout work, they could then begin to use a larger, more elaborate standing apparatus. In addition to providing a space to attach paper or pads, these types of boards came equipped with clips, used to secure the pads of paper as well as ephemera such as notes, photographs, or type designs.<sup>26</sup>

The drawing board was a fundamental tool of commercial art, the apparatus on which all work began. Manuals counseled students on the importance of choosing a board that suited their body type and skill level. The ideal board would suit one’s individual posture

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<sup>24</sup> In my research on commercial art and drawing, I have drawn upon a range of texts and archival materials, as well as Ruscha’s own memories, notebooks, and works. Drawing texts which have proved to be formative in my analysis here include James D. Bethune, *Essentials of Drafting*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall Press, 1987); Francis D.K. Ching, *Architecture: Form, Space, and Order* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1996); C. Leslie Martin, *Design Graphics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: MacMillan, 1962). On layout, I have consulted Charles J. Felten, *Layout: The Practical Application of Principles of Design to Advertising and Printing*. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1947); Tom Cardamone, *Advertising Agency and Studio Skills: a Guide to the Reproduction of art and mechanicals for reproduction* (New York: Watson-Guptill, 1959); Stephen Baker, *Advertising Layout and Art Direction* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1959); Hugh G. Wales, Dwight L. Gentry, and Max Wales, *Advertising: Copy, Layout, and Typography* (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1958).

<sup>25</sup> Charles J. Felten, *Layout*, 27 – 28.

<sup>26</sup> The terms “typeface,” “typography,” “lettering,” and “font” are often confused, even in the graphic design community. In this dissertation I adhere to Allan Haley’s helpful definitions in his article “They’re Not Fonts!” (AIGA, October 21, 2002, <http://www.aiga.org/theyre-not-fonts/>, accessed March 20, 2015) and also Joseph Alessio’s “Understanding the Different Between Type and Lettering” (*Smashing Magazine*, January 17, 2013, <http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2013/01/17/understanding-difference-between-type-and-lettering/>, accessed March 20, 2015). Haley explains that type designers create typefaces, generally today with software programs, but sometimes also by hand (then scan them into a program). Type foundries product fonts, the physical manifestation of the type. Alessio notes that typography is distinct from lettering in that it adheres to pre-fabricated characteristics. It denotes a repeatable system of lettering. The term “lettering,” on the other hand, is “the art of drawing letters.” In his work, Ruscha referenced pre-established typefaces in his work, but also designed his own lettering, most notably “Boy Scout Utility Modern,” used in many of his word paintings. Designers have drawn inspiration from Ruscha’s work, the most notable example being the type “Tapeworm,” widely available as a free file download.

and preferred drawing position. When propped at an angle, the board should provide a comfortable resting surface for the arm during long periods of drawing. Portable boards, the type often used by beginners, were meant to move with the artist, who could rest the board on a desk, lay it flat on a table, or hold it in the lap. Manuals usually advised beginners to acquire a medium-sized, non-warping drawing board. A photograph from the Chouinard brochure shows a student, at work in an animation class, employing one of these beginner's boards (Figure 1.3). With a portable board, he could sit on the floor and observe up close his subject, another student modeling facial contortions. With its portable dimensions and suitability to the user's posture and work habits, the apparatus became an extension of the body.

The larger boards acquired by professionals, on the other hand, resembled an architect's drafting desk. These boards, though anchored in one place, could be adjusted, tilted up to accommodate an artist who was sitting, or made horizontal for a standing drawing position. A 1958 advertisement for CBS radio shows an artist at work on one of these professional drawing boards (Figure 1.4).<sup>27</sup> Inverting the conventional dynamics of advertising (it was printed in an art directors' magazine), the ad makes designers the audience, in an effort to recruit top talent for the company, visually represented in the radio resting on the cabinet at the right. While it shows the setup of the drawing board, the ad also illustrates the other tools that were used in conjunction with it, such as pens, tape, rubber cement, brushes, and drawing leads. In addition to recommending the use of these tools, layout manuals also emphasized the importance of other tools, such as drawing leads, which allowed for precise draftsmanship, erasing shields, which blocked out areas to ensure careful

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<sup>27</sup> *Annual of Advertising Editorial Art and Design*, Art Directors Club of New York (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy Inc., 1956), 327.

removal of unwanted marks and helped to avoid excessive re-drawing, and stencils, used to draw shapes and letters. Instructional images demonstrated how to correctly use these implements.<sup>28</sup> One illustration, for example, shows several different ways to hold the lead, depending on the others tools being used and the type of line desired (Figure 1.5). This grip and posture allowed for full control of the lead.

Such lessons taught the cultivation of technical skill not only for its own sake, but in order to facilitate the efficient production of designs, the primary goal of commercial art practice. This message runs throughout these texts as well as Chouinard's brochures. Though the commercial artist was considered a creative worker, his creativity (the majority of these artists, to be sure, were male) had to be channeled and managed in the service of the client. Working on tight timetables and striving to please many different parties, commercial artists occupied a position between the creative artist and the businessman. A photograph of Leonard A. Wheeler, who taught packaging design at Chouinard, pictures the dual nature of the commercial artist's identity (Figure 1.6). Sporting a dress shirt and vest, hair slicked back, Wheeler sits in his studio, at work on his drawing board. While the materials epitomize creative work, Wheeler's dress is businesslike, suitable for an office environment. Arm resting on paper and pencil in hand, he embodies the commercial artist's double role as creative producer and businessman.

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<sup>28</sup> Instructions on proper use of the board and the bodily posture it required are a consistency of drawing manuals from different periods. In *Graphics*, for example, Rembrandt Peale writes that the board should be placed so that the paper appears approximately at a right angle to the eye, and "so low as to allow the elbow and hand to move without constraint in any direction." As the student progressed they could use other surfaces, such as an easel, in order to move the arm with greater freedom. Rembrandt Peale, *Graphics: A Manual of Drawing and Writing* (Philadelphia: E.C. & J Biddle, 1866) 11.

## Layout: The Blueprint of Design

After learning how to handle the drawing board and related tools, students could begin to put these lessons to use. One of the main ways they did so was in the production of layouts. So important was layout for commercial artists that it was considered the “blueprint of design,” terminology frequently cited in instructional manuals.<sup>29</sup> Today, layout is a digital process, executed with computer keyboards, digital photography, and illustration software. During the years that Ruscha studied layout, however, designers worked at drawing boards and in composing rooms. They constructed layouts step-by-step, from sketches, cut-and-paste montages, and stenciled text. These designs, made on the drawing board, were then sent to a printing workshop for reproduction (usually as an offset lithograph). While layouts were collaborative by nature, designers had to be well versed in all of the processes involved, from illustration to printing, in order to be able to effectively communicate their ideas to all parties involved.

Layout constituted the cornerstone of Chouinard’s advertising design curriculum. Advertising design, like other Chouinard programs, had an impressive faculty roster, including established layout designers and typographers Bill Moore, Marvin Rubin, Norman Gollin, and Edd Smith.<sup>30</sup> With their impressive resumes and extensive connections in the industry – they worked at companies such as Twentieth Century Fox, Mobil Gas, and Paramount Pictures – the faculty frequently helped students procure jobs in the industry.<sup>31</sup> As in other Chouinard programs, advertising design students progressed through an

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<sup>29</sup> See Felten, *Layout*; Cardamone, *Advertising Agency*; Baker, *Advertising Layout*; Wales, Gentry, and Wales, *Advertising*; the term is used throughout these manuals.

<sup>30</sup> Examples of these designers’ work can be found in the digital archives of the American Professional Association for Design (AIGA; formerly known as Society of American Graphic Designers) <http://designarchives.aiga.org/#/home> (accessed January 9, 2014).

<sup>31</sup> Chouinard Art Institute, Catalogue for 1960 – 61, AAA.

established sequence of courses. First on the list was Lettering and Layout, in which they would focus on “application of drawn and indicated letter forms to layout problems, such as ads, packages, album covers, and posters, with a consideration of the logic of space, copy, and the idea behind the message.” Students learned how to use guidelines to draft letters in different styles and to scale lettering to specific constraints. They would have also studied precedents for typefaces, collated in sources such as the *Adtype Workbook*, described in a 1959 issue of the student-run journal *Orb* as a “975 lb. tomb” [sic] with “specimens of every imaginable face and size.”<sup>32</sup> The second course on the list, Advertising Design I, taught “the basic principles of communication as applied to advertising,” as well as layout procedures and “thought and idea analysis,” “methods of visualization,” and basic processes of reproduction. The description indicates an investment in the material elements of ad design, such as layout procedures and tools, as well as its conceptual labor, exemplified in the notions of visualization and idea analysis.

While layout is far from an exact science, in the 50s it was governed by a fairly well established system of methods and procedures, which formed the basis of Chouinard’s courses. In general aspiring ad designers learned layout in this way, by studying under practicing designers from whom they learned the tools of the trade. Classrooms attempted to re-create the feel of busy ad agencies, so that students might understand what it was like to work under tight deadlines. Courses also emphasized the collaborative nature of layout. Depending on the size of the firm, the making of layouts might be divided amongst the head art director, assistant art director, artists who occupied the “bullpen,” and who executed the design, copy writers, and the paste-up men, usually apprentices who executed the tedious

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<sup>32</sup> *Orb* vol. 1, no. 1 (Society of Graphic Designers, 1959–1906), Getty Research Institute (hereafter GRI).

work of manually cutting and pasting the elements of a layout.<sup>33</sup> While the skills of layout were ultimately acquired on the job, some practitioners, seeing the need for codifying this knowledge, published instructional manuals. These author-practitioners always qualified their how-to books with the caution that skill in layout was cultivated over time, as designers produced more and more designs, met with clients, and worked with typographers, copywriters, and printers. Nonetheless, manuals could help beginners understand the basic tools of the trade.

Just as Chouinard's curriculum was predicated upon knowledge of materials as the basis for artistic skill, layout manuals always opened by citing the tools of the trade. Knowing how to use tools properly would not necessarily make one a successful layout artist, but any good designer certainly had a command of his tools. Charles J. Felten whose text was frequently reprinted in the 1940s and 50s, noted, "white it is true that layouts are evolved in the mind, the physical process of rendering them can be facilitated immeasurably with the aid of proper instruments and equipment."<sup>34</sup> Felten opened his book (all editions of it) with

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<sup>33</sup> There is an especially good explanation of different roles related to the production of layout in Tom Cardamone, *Advertising Agency and Studio Skills: a Guide to the Reproduction of art and mechanicals for reproduction*, New York: Watson-Guptill, 1959. In the world of contemporary fiction, the procedures of commercial design are visualized in the AMC show *Mad Men*. Set in the 1960s, a good portion of the show takes place in the offices of Sterling Cooper (later on in the series Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce), a fictional advertising agency located in Madison Avenue. The "bullpen," the location of which shifts throughout the course of the show, figure prominently into the narrative. While much attention has been given to *Mad Men*'s dedication to historical accuracy, less has been said about how well the show demonstrates the actual work of layout, illustration, and design, from the use of drawings boards and tissue paper for transferring roughs, which can be seen on corkboards and pinned up on walls to the way it illustrates the chain of labor involved in layout, as the creative team collaborates to bring creative director Don Draper's ideas into being. Stan Rizzo, the art director and most skilled member of the creative team, embodies what Ruscha would have been if he had continued as an ad man – not the famed graphic designer, such as Paul Rand or Milton Glaser, but the artist whose work is anonymous, only part of a picture of ad design (for more on Glaser's involvement see Randy Kennedy, "The Trippy '60s, Courtesy of a Master: *Mad Men* Enlists the Graphics Guru Milton Glaser," *The New York Times*, March 6, 2014). All members of the creative team, however, demonstrate knowledge of ad design skills, even Don, who often sketches his designs in perspective (for example, in the Season 4 episode "The Suitcase," Don draws, in perspective, a rough for a Samsonite ad campaign).

<sup>34</sup> Charles J. Felten, *Layout: The Practical Application of Principles of Design to Advertising and Printing* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1947), 27.

a primer on the tools of the trade. He provided a long lists of tools indispensable to the beginner, including a drawing board, pens, pencils, and other drawing utensils, T-square, various types of straight edges, rubber cement, shears, reducing and enlarging glasses, type gauge, and pads of tracing paper. Texts nearly always included a photograph of these tools neatly displayed, as, for example, in an illustration from another manual, by layout artist Stephen Baker. The photograph shows a drawing board with tools spread across it, from a French curve and paints to pencils and rubber cement (Figure 1.7).<sup>35</sup> Such illustrations were a common strategy for displaying, labeling, and explaining the tools of layout.

Nineteen-fifties layout texts also closely outlined the procedures involved in producing layouts, from the initial client conversations to drafting designs to the preparation of mechanicals for printing. While the terms were a bit fluid, as methods varied from artist to artist and new tools became available, the general procedures were relatively consistent and followed a segmented chain of production. The process began with conversation with the client, followed by extensive research and drafting of ideas. To facilitate this process, Felten counseled that designers compile what he called a “morgue,” or clipping library, a collection of ephemera, including photographs, drawings, and type, for the generation of ideas. This type of archive, Felten emphasized, served the designer well when working on a tight timetable.<sup>36</sup>

After the research phase, designers moved onto thumbnail sketches, in which they worked out the elements of design. After sectioning the page, with each section scaled according to the constraints of the final product, the designer mapped out the basic elements

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<sup>35</sup> Illustrations with drawing boards and tools are also included in Hugh G. Wales, Dwight L. Gentry, and Max Wales, *Advertising: Copy, Layout, and Typography* (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1958), 16-17.

<sup>36</sup> Layout manuals continue to advise this practice. See, for example, Kristen Cullen, *Layout Workbook* (Beverly, MA: Rockport Publishers, 2007), 9.



of the design, from drawings to photographic images to text (Figure. 1.8). Thumbnails, as Felten wrote, functioned to “arrest basic layout ideas as they crystallize in the mind.” After engaging in back-and-forth with the client on their designs, the artist produced roughs, more detailed versions of the layout, in which type and images were more clearly rendered.

Secondary text was indicated by lines or strips, which functioned as placeholders for the ad copy. Typographers, copy writers, printers, artists, and other producers involved in crafting the layout would then examine the designs and give feedback, scrawling notes, crossing things out, or adding sketches.

In moving from rough sketches to more polished versions of their designs, often referred to as comprehensives, or “comps,” layout artists drew upon an arsenal of techniques for reproducing and transferring imagery. Whether copying a sketch or importing a printed image from the image morgue, designers had to choose the most effective and fitting means of replicating images, a process that also involved knowing how to enlarge or reduce them. Many manuals recommended the use of the grid, which involves overlaying the image to be copied with evenly spaced squares. The artist then transfers the image, square by square, to a proportionally scaled grid on another working surface. A teaching video produced by the Art Center College, entitled “How a Poster Is Made,” (1951) shows a student using the grid to enlarge an image, while others observe the technique in action (Figure. 1.9).<sup>37</sup> This method has a long history in art and particularly in the teaching of basic drawing skills. It tied to the development of perspective and naturalism in art as well as to the historical practice of cultivating artistic skill through imitation. In *Graphics*, one of the key early texts in U.S. art

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<sup>37</sup> “How A Poster is Made,” video transferred from 16 mm, Art Center Institutional Archives, Pasadena, CA, 1951. Video can be viewed at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PGYdXIUzNvY&index=1&list=PL1yAX9KJCY2fyDdTZTA95\\_hR254\\_ujv954](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PGYdXIUzNvY&index=1&list=PL1yAX9KJCY2fyDdTZTA95_hR254_ujv954) (published April 10, 2015).

education, Rembrandt Peale instructs students in the use of the process, which he called “copying by squares.”<sup>38</sup> Including in the section on drawing well-known objects, Peale recommended this method only after the student had learned to draw by observation. In advertising design, the procedure was most useful for transferring and enlarging different visual components of the design and for facilitating the scaling up of a two-dimensional design from the rough to the finished layout. Felten likewise referred to this manual process of reproduction as the “square” method (Figure 1.10).<sup>39</sup> Tissue paper was the material of choice for this process, and indeed for every step of the layout production, as it allowed the designer to transfer and edit the design as he worked. Another technique of reproduction, the diagonal method, facilitated the proportional enlargement or reduction of an image to fit it to specific constraints – always a central concern for the layout designer. To reduce an image, for example, the artist draws a diagonal line across the entire image, then a horizontal line of the desired length (Figure 1.11). This produces a triangle, which when doubled and made into a rectangle, provides a space for the image, scaled to the proper constraints.<sup>40</sup> Along with these manual tools, students, as Ruscha has recalled when recounting his student years, also used devices such as the opaque projector and the light board.<sup>41</sup>

After the completion of the extensive editing process, the layout artist constructed a final version, or “dummy,” to send to the printer. This dummy, produced at the actual size of the final object (print ad, poster, etc.) was thoroughly marked with instructions on how to print the layout, from type of ink and paper to specific measurements for reproductions of

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<sup>38</sup> Peale, *Graphics*, 77.

<sup>39</sup> Felten, *Layout*, 33.

<sup>40</sup> This technique is recommended in most manuals. See, for example, Felten, *Layout*, 32; Cardamone, *Advertising Agency*, 97.

<sup>41</sup> Ruscha still had a light board from the 60s in his studio. Conversation with the author, September 5, 2013.

artwork (Figure 1.12). It was common practice to use a tissue overlay to write out detailed instructions and record details about artwork reproduction, such as the use of Ben Day areas and color separations. Layout artists used specific devices when they marked up the design, such as a “frisket,” or masking, to protect areas not being printed from being inked. They also translated their measurements into picas and points, the common industry standards of measurement shared.<sup>42</sup> Felten counseled the importance of clarity and detail for the dummy, instructing his readers, “it is unwise to rely on verbal instructions...the more specific and understandable reproductions instructions are, the more craftmanslike will be the interpretation.”<sup>43</sup> Always a translation from manual design to reproduction, the layout went through many stages before attaining its final form, in which the polished design was sent to a commercial workshop, made into a photographic plate, and printed with the offset process.

Ruscha’s Chouinard materials document his studies the procedures outlined in 1950s layouts manuals. His archive contains many spiral-bound notebooks, crammed with notes, ideas for designs, and roughs, such as this one for an automobile ad (Figure. 1.13). After acquiring a familiarity with these fundamentals, students progressed to second-level Lettering and Advertising Design. These courses descriptions stressed the continued cultivation of basic skills and preparation for post-graduate work, while also encouraging individual approaches to design. As they progressed in their courses, students learned the theories of layout as well as its technical aspects, and practiced synthesizing the two in classrooms that

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<sup>42</sup> Picas correspond to 1/72 of a foot or 1/6 of an inch. Each pica contains 12 point units. A subdivision of a pica, a point is used to measure fonts. In the era of letterpress a point varied between .18 and .4 mm. For a basic overview of the construction of typography and an explanation of picas and points, see Ellen Lupton, *Thinking With Type: A Critical Guide for Designers, Writers, Editors & Students* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

<sup>43</sup> Felten, *Layout*, 124.

mimicked the pace and feel of the professional ad agency. Advertising Design II, for example, cultivated “original, creative expression” as applied to work on assigned projects that mimicked “the restrictions and requirements of professional practice.”<sup>44</sup> Joe Goode, who had known Ruscha in Oklahoma and also elected to study at Chouinard, recalled that Marvin Rubin, a freelance designer and Chouinard instructor, assigned students to design corporate logos.<sup>45</sup> Rubin then invited design professionals critique the logos in regard to costs, design flaws, or use of text. Students then continued to revise their designs until all parties were satisfied.

Rubin’s assignments, as Andrew Perchuk has noted, are indicative of broader trends in postwar design.<sup>46</sup> Ruscha’s own careful notes from his school days document the texts that students read, such as Ralph Evans’s *An Introduction to Color*, Kurt Koffka’s *Principals of Gestalt Psychology*, and James J. Gibson’s text on visual perception.<sup>47</sup> *Orb*, the student publication, also gives a sense of what students were reading in the 50s. Scattered throughout its pages are references to an eclectic body of literature, from Susanne Langer’s *Problems of Art and Philosophy in a New Key* (noted as available in the school library), Brewster Ghiselin’s volume *The Creative Process*, and Gardner Murphy’s *Personality: A Biosocial Approach to Origins and Structure*. References to Freudian and Jungian theory, as well as Gestalt psychology, appear through the journal. These readings are indicative of the wide dissemination of Gestalt theory in postwar advertising and design. As corporations focused more intently on creating identification between their brand and the consumers, they moved away from

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<sup>44</sup> Chouinard Art Institute, Catalogue for 1960 – 61, AAA.

<sup>45</sup> Goode does not specify which companies served as the basis for the assignments. *Oral history interview with Joe Goode, 1999 Jan. 5-2001 Apr. 12*, AAA.

<sup>46</sup> Andrew Perchuk, “From Otis to Ferus.”

<sup>47</sup> Ruscha, student notebooks, RS.

narrative advertisements, with a great deal of images and text, and instead focused their designs around legible logos, characterized by geometricized forms and bold planes of contrasting colors.<sup>48</sup> In addition to these theories, Chouinard students were well aware of the Bauhaus legacy. *Orb* editors (Ruscha was among them) recommended that students read the writings of Herbert Bayer and Walter Gropius.<sup>49</sup>

During their third and fourth years, students focused even more intently on professional practice. In Advertising Design III, they produced portfolios and were pushed to perform their work speedily and efficiently, in preparation for the fast-paced nature of their future careers. They were also required to take Creative Photography, Drawing, and Science courses. In the final year, they had their choice of electives, including courses in illustration, photography, and typography. While the third and fourth years concentrated heavily on cultivating professionalism, students had opportunities to engage in industry networking throughout their time at Chouinard. The school was known for sending both students and faculty to the International Design Conference in Aspen, a well-established gathering in the field.<sup>50</sup> Chouinard actively encouraged participation in the event, even

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<sup>48</sup> The body of theory that has shaped the visual language of advertising includes Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954) and Max Wertheimer, *Gestalt Theory* (New York [s.n.]: 1944; first published in Germany in 1925 as *Über Gestaltheorie*). For more on how this trend fits into the broader history of advertising see Maud Lavin, *Clean New World: Culture, Politics, and Graphic Design* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 76 – 79.

<sup>49</sup> *Orb*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Society of Graphic Designers, 1959 –1906), GRI.

<sup>50</sup> Chicago industrialist Walter Paepcke founded the conference, which in its first iteration in 1949 was called the Goethe Bicentennial. In 1951, Paepcke reformatted it as the International Design Conference in Aspen, which he envisioned it as a forum for dialogue between artists, designers businessman, architects, and engineers. The conference's title in that year was "Design as a Function of Management." See "Aspen Design Summit," AIGA, <http://www.aiga.org/aspen-design-summit/>, accessed January 15, 2014. For more on Paepcke see the Walter P. Paepcke Papers, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library. From 1950 – 1975, the CCA ran an ad campaign entitled "Great Ideas of Western Man." Run by Herbert Bayer, then Art Director of CAA, commissioned artists to design the ads. The posters are collected in the Special Collections of the Otis College of Art and Design, Los Angeles, CA.

offering to excuse students from their courses and still allow them full credit, as long as they made up their work.<sup>51</sup>

While they produced corporate logos in their courses and worked to procure jobs in the industry, Chouinard design students also sought out spaces to make design for “art’s sake,” not for their professors or for clients. Throughout the history of the school, students published small, experimental journals, in which they could freely experiment with the principles of design, disseminate school news, and advertise local exhibitions and job opportunities.<sup>52</sup> While Ruscha was at Chouinard, he and a group of fellow students, part of the Chouinard Society of Graphic Designers, founded *Orb*. The first issue gave the origins of the journal’s name: “1. The eye; eyeball; 2) A collective whole; 3) A sphere of action; 4) A spherical body.”<sup>53</sup> Ruscha served as editor during *Orb*’s short run of seven issues.<sup>54</sup> The desktop-sized publication, a hybrid of school newsletter and experimental design magazine, featured contributions from students and faculty, from poems and essays to class reading lists and exhibition announcements (Figure 1.14). For students, *Orb* presented a forum to play with the processes of layout, to bend and break the rules they had learned in their courses. Experimental lettering, splashed across its pages, competes for attention with small cartoons, cut-and-paste montages, and typewritten articles. The pages read like a jumbled visual history of avant-garde art and design. Ruscha, well aware of this history by that point, recalled that when producing the journal the students would “just jumble these things, Dada

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<sup>51</sup> Chouinard Art Institute, Catalogue for 1960 – 61, AAA.

<sup>52</sup> According to Robert Perine, other Chouinard journals included *The Chouinard Gazette*, *Labyrinth*, and *The Bridge*. See Robert Perine, *Chouinard*, 177.

<sup>53</sup> *Orb* vol. 1, no. 1, (Society of Graphic Designers, 1959), GRI.

<sup>54</sup> Patrick Blackwell, who also worked on *Orb*, remembers that Ruscha was a key impetus for the project. Blackwell, quoted in Sylvia Wolf, *Ed Ruscha and Photography* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2004), 25.

style, upside down, right-side up, sideways.”<sup>55</sup> Even the ads in *Orb* became space for design experimentation. An advertisement in one issue, imploring their readers for contributions of \$25, tempts them with the promise of seeing their name “glorified in print by A REAL ADVERTISING DESIGN STUDENT!” Executed in looping lettering placed at different angles, the ad has a distinctly hand-rendered quality. In smaller letters, between “real” and “student,” the phrase “or business” hovers like an afterthought, or a sotto-voce suggestion. At the bottom, in larger scratchy letters, the text shouts “BUY YOUR WAY TO IMMORTALITY!” An ink splat between “your” and “way” introduces a pause in the phrase, presenting a visual stumbling block for the reader.

Along with evincing students’ familiarity with experimental design, the journal also demonstrates the cross-pollination between the fine and commercial art courses. In *Orb*, students merged one of the main styles they were taught in painting courses – gestural painting – with the aesthetics of layout. References to noted Abstract Expressionists artists appear throughout the newsletter. One issue, for example, features a de-Kooning-like drawing, photocopied in black and white and extending across the entirety of the page.<sup>56</sup> In other issues, students produced a photomechanical collage of Abstract Expressionist forms, including Pollock’s drips, Rothko’s squares, and Gottlieb’s pictographs (Figure 1.15). Around the edge of the montage, the signatures function as a linguistic frame, in which the sign of singular style becomes a mechanically reproduced framing device. The collage presents the techniques as catalogue of styles, available for selection and recombination.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Ruscha, quoted in *Ed Ruscha and Photography*, 25.

<sup>56</sup> *Orb* vol. 1 no. 3 (Society of Graphic Designers, 1959 – 1960), GRI.

<sup>57</sup> *Orb* vol. 1 no. 4 (Society of Graphic Designers, 1959 – 1960), GRI.

In other instances in *Orb*, writers also theorized how this type of painting related to the work of design. In a guest column, Thomas M. Folds, a Northwestern University professor, noted that Abstract Expressionism still contained imagery, albeit of a different type than Figureural painting. The work of the graphic artist, he proposed, is essentially Figureural, “because he often must manipulate images which are already more or less established in the public mind.”<sup>58</sup> The phrase resonates with Ruscha’s own growing interest in pre-meditated subject matter, evinced in his early paintings, such as *Sweetwater* (1959) (now destroyed) and *E. Ruscha* (1959), in which he combined gestural painting with typography. The paintings were, as Ruscha noted in the case of *Sweetwater*, a sincere attempt at producing “a real ambitious Abstract Expressionist painting.”<sup>59</sup> Clearly, however, Ruscha had already decided that his paintings would also deal with pre-established images, or things already held in the mind, as Folds described the subject matter of the graphic arts. Already in Ruscha’s work there is an imperative that art deal with the matter of design, in this case the construction of lettering through processes of typography, which he was then learning in his courses. Folds’s statement, however, could apply equally to art that was then making a splash in New York and beyond, namely that of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. It is not a coincidence that his phrasing calls to mind Johns’s declaration that his art represented “things the mind already knows.”<sup>60</sup> A year before making these paintings, Ruscha had seen Johns’s work in *Print* magazine, a fact which he has long cited as definitive of his early

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<sup>58</sup> Thomas M. Folds, editorial, *Orb* vol. 2 no. 1, (Society of Graphic Designers, 1959 – 1960), GRI.

<sup>59</sup> Ruscha, quoted in *Oral history interview with Edward Ruscha, 1980 October 29-1981 October 2, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*.

<sup>60</sup> Jasper Johns, quoted in “His Heart Belongs to Dada,” (*Time* 73: May 4, 1979): 58, reprinted in Kirk Varnedoe, ed., *Jasper Johns: Writings, Sketchbook Notes, Interviews* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1996).



formation.<sup>61</sup> The statement from Folds helps to clarify exactly what Johns's work presented to Ruscha: a model of merging the imperative of the graphic artist with painting, the medium then most emblematic of fine art. Whereas Folds considered that type of imagery as the province of design, Ruscha began to see it as the condition of art. Others in the L.A. art world took note of Ruscha's early paintings and the strong resemblance his work bore to Johns's. Curator and gallerist Henry Hopkins, then running the Huysman Gallery on La Cienega Boulevard, was immediately taken with *Sweetwater*: "...I had never seen anything like it. It suggested an awareness of Jasper Johns and Willem de Kooning, but it wasn't an East Coast painting." Though Ruscha was not yet actively selling his work as a professional fine artist, Hopkins persuaded him to part with the painting for \$200, a not inconsiderable sum at the time.

The work Ruscha published in *Orb* indicates another strategy he was developing in regard to pre-conceived imagery: photo montage. While he served as editor of the journal and so was responsible for overseeing the content in general, he also contributed a few named submissions, such a photomontage that he labeled "an Orb poemcollage exposé" (Figure 1.16). Composed of haphazardly joined scraps, the collage includes a images of a milk bottle, a photograph of Shirley Temple, can of fluid igniter for a dry cell battery, and bunch of tomatoes. Ruscha placed Temple's image, turned sideways, on top of what appears to be a photomechanical reproduction of paint strokes. A looping line, suggestive of a cord or wire, connects the paint swath, igniter fluid, and tomatoes, linking the objects together. He also inserted a drawn screw-on top, borrowed from the fluid can, on the tomatoes and the swath of paint. As a result of these alterations, the roughly cut images appear as parts in a mechanical network, joined by the wire. At the top, he penned a note to his mother, in

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<sup>61</sup> Ruscha, quoted in Henry Hopkins, *Fifty West Coast Artists*, 112-113.

which he pled for money for food. Below the collage, as an aside, he encouraged his fellow students to employ similar devices as a means of securing funds not for food, but “paint, pencils, paper and various other tools necessary to an art student!!!!”<sup>62</sup> At the upper right, he reproduced quote from George Bernard Shaw: “PROOF that ‘the true artist will let his mother drudge for his living at seventy, sooner than work at anything but his art.”<sup>63</sup> Freed momentarily from the demands of professors and unencumbered by clients, in *Orb* Ruscha and his fellow students could bend, and break, the rules of design.

### **Projection Drawing: The Language of Design**

While layout constituted the blueprint of design, drawing provided its visual language. All commercial artists in the 1950s had to have a command of design-based drawing. The quote from the Art Center brochure, at the opening of this chapter, reinforces the centrality of drawing in mid-century design.<sup>64</sup> Chouinard offered an introductory course in drawing, required for all students, as well as courses in life drawing, architectural drafting, projection drawing, and lettering (a drawing-based course). These courses, while taken by students from different programs, can be divided into two main categories: fine art drawing and design-based drawing. Projection drawing, though required for all students, was especially essential for aspiring designers. As catalogue states, Chouinard’s course covered

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<sup>62</sup> *Orb* vol. 2, no. 1 (Society of Graphic Designers, 1959 – 1960). The full quote reads: “The true artist will let his wife starve, his children go barefoot, his mother drudge for his living at seventy, sooner than work at anything but his art,” from Shaw’s *Man and Superman*, a drama he wrote in 1903. See *Man and Superman* (New York: Wm. H Wise & Company, 1930).

<sup>63</sup> The subject of paste-up and modernist art is an intriguing one and bears further exploration. Ad Reinhardt worked for the magazines *P.M.* and *The New Masses* for which he did illustrations, cartoons, and paste-up layout (including collages of Hitler). He also experimented with paste-ups of 19<sup>th</sup> century drawings. For more Reinhardt’s recollections about paste-up, see *Oral history interview with Ad Reinhardt, circa 1964, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*. For more on Reinhardt’s illustrations and cartoons, see Prudence Peiffer, “Routine Extremism: Ad Reinhardt and Modern Art” (Ph.D diss., Harvard University, 2010).

<sup>64</sup> Course catalogue, 1930 -31, Art Center Institutional Archives. Though earlier than Ruscha’s school years this saying captures the centrality of drawing in design, which still remained true while Ruscha was at Chouinard.

the principles of two- and three-point perspective as well as planograph, orthograph, and isometric projection.<sup>65</sup>

Before I delve into the course, it is necessary to take a brief detour into the complicated vocabulary of projection drawing. Broadly defined, the term “projection drawing” broadly applies to any drawing system concerned with representing a three-dimensional object on a two-dimensional surface.<sup>66</sup> It is so named because of its use of projectors, which signify the transferal of points on the subject to a location on the picture plane. Projection drawing entails three subcategories: perspective, orthographic, and oblique. The first subcategory, perspective, is predicated on the notion that straight lines extend from the still observer – fixed on one spot – through to the object. In one-point perspective, two sets of projectors remain parallel to the picture plane, and one set converges to a single vanishing point. In two-point perspective, only one set of lines is parallel to the plane, while the other two converge at two vanishing points. Finally, in three-point, all three sets of projectors converge at separate vanishing points.

The latter types of projection covered in the course – planograph, orthograph, and isometric – would have been understood to have the most direct applications for designers

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<sup>65</sup> Chouinard Art Institute, Catalogue for 1960 – 61, AAA.

<sup>66</sup> In my research, I have drawn upon a range of technical drawing books, generally broad instructional texts used for foundations-type courses. Texts that I consulted especially closely include James D. Bethune, *Essentials of Drafting*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall Press, 1987); Francis D.K. Ching, *Architecture: Form, Space, and Order* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1996), and C. Leslie Martin, *Design Graphics* (New York: MacMillan, 1962). The layout texts to which I refer in the first section also include lessons on design drawing. On the history and theory of projection drawing, I have found two texts especially useful: Patrick Maynard, *Drawing Distinctions: The Varieties of Graphic Expression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005) and Robin Evans, *The Projective Cast: Architecture and its Three Geometries* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995). On the history of teaching technical drawing, among texts I have consulted are Peale, *Graphics*; Kathleen Foster, ed., *Thomas Eakins: A Drawing Manual* (Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2005); Ann Bermingham’s work, though focused on the British tradition, has also served as a helpful source. See her *Learning to Draw: Studies in the Cultural History of a Polite and Useful Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000). I have also gleaned information on Chouinard’s drawing courses from its archives and conversations with Ruscha. This research has demonstrated that although technical drawing and its cultural meanings have changed over time, many of its techniques have remained remarkably consistent.

rather than fine artists. This is not to say, of course, that these categories are not fluid in practice. Designers frequently use linear perspective in their work, and artists often use axonometric or other types of projections.<sup>67</sup> The pressing question for my purposes is to define the system of design drawing, as it would have been taught to commercial art students in the 1950s, and to elucidate its techniques, uses, and underlying conceptual framework. In what follows, I will examine the types of projection as they were taught in drawing manuals meant for designers, which give a window into the lessons Ruscha would have learned at Chouinard. These primers provided foundational skills for drawing that belongs to the broad category of technical drawing, or drawing for information. Design drawing is a subset of technical drawing, related to but also distinct from architectural or engineering drafting. Given Ruscha's reliance upon the tools of design drawing, in this remainder of this dissertation I borrow parlance of design and refer to linear perspective simply as "perspective," and parallel perspectives are "projections."<sup>68</sup> The following discussion defines these terms, which I will return to in later chapters as I examine Ruscha's deployment of design drawing and perspective.

Chouinard's description provides a basic idea of what students learned in the projection drawing course. Though second in the description, in the lessons of technical drawing, as outlined in texts on the subject, orthographic projection usually came first, because it provided the foundational structure for other types of projections. Orthographic projections show three sides of an object in two dimensions (Figure. 1.17). In these types of drawings, projectors are parallel to each other and perpendicular to the picture plane. Texts

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<sup>67</sup> There is an especially rich history of axonometric projections in avant-garde art. El Lissitzky's work is one notable example. For more on Lissitzky's use of axonometric projection, see Yve-Alain Bois, "El Lissitzky: Radical Reversibility," *Art in America* 76 (April 1988): 160 – 181.

<sup>68</sup> Patrick Maynard explains this well in *Drawing Distinctions: The Varieties of Graphic Expression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

often describe the orthographic projection as representing an object as seen through a glass box. As described in the parlance of design drawing, that an orthographic view is not a picture with shading and dimensionality, but a “two-dimensional representation which, for the sake of technical accuracy, has given up perspective.”<sup>69</sup> Because any one orthographic projection can only show two dimensions, multiple drawings are required to represent all three dimensions of an object. In technical drawing convention, it is customary to illustrate the front, top, and right side of an object (in architectural terms, elevation, section, and plan), although the object can be shown from other views as well. This is why orthographic projection is also referred to as a multiview drawing. Orthographic drawings possess an ambiguity of depth, because the third dimension is flattened and recession is not a factor. Reading orthographic drawings requires the capacity to mentally assemble the drawings into a whole, a conceptual gymnastics that entails translating an object into the drawing and vice versa.

The terms “planographic” and “isometric” denote different forms of paraline drawing (or graphical projection, as it is sometimes called). Paraline drawings, in contrast to orthographic projections, represent an object’s three-dimensional form in a single view. Because projectors remain parallel, rather than converging as in linear perspective, the draftsmen can quickly and easily render the projectors with lines of the same angle. As opposed to linear perspective, paralines do not aim to mimic the distorting effects of vision; rather, they represent artificial views of objects that retain consistency in scale.<sup>70</sup> Because of this non-distortion of scale, paralines are a useful tool in fields such as architecture and

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<sup>69</sup> James D. Bethune, *Essentials of Drafting*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall Press, 1987), 82 – 84.

<sup>70</sup> Francis Ching, *Architecture*, 85 - 100. Ching lays out the qualities of paraline drawings very clearly in his text. See also Patrick Maynard, *Drawing Distinctions*, 2005.

engineering, given that measurements can be taken directly from the drawing and applied to the objects being constructed.

Paraline projections are further subdivided based on the angle of the object to the orthogonals (Figure 1.18). The definition of axonometric, literally, “measurable along the axes,” conveys the angles of the projectors in this type of drawing. An axonometric rendering shows three axes corresponding to width, depth, and height. Each line is drawn at exact scale, to represent the actual size of the object. The types of axonometric projection are named according to degree to which the axes are foreshortened. Isometric projection, the third type mentioned in the Chouinard course description, is a subset of axonometric. In isometric drawings all three principal axes make equal angles with the picture plane and are equally foreshortened. As a consequence, isometric projections can show only one view of an object, though the axes can be tilted in different directions.<sup>71</sup> In his drawing manual, Thomas Eakins, an artist who used all of these types of perspective and studied them closely, characterized isometric drawing’s advantages by noting it has “somewhat of the appearance of perspective” but also a “very simple measuring scale.”<sup>72</sup> Planometric drawings, often used for architectural renderings, are similar to isometrics, but allow the viewer to see the object as from above. In this case the draftsman begins with the plans, then projects the lines up from that basis. This term is not often used now, but was part of the lexicon in Ruscha’s student years.

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<sup>71</sup> As Ching explains well, this type of projection is often confused with oblique projection which, though not mentioned in the Chouinard description, was likely covered in the course, given its importance as a type of paraleine drawing. Oblique drawings are distinct from isometrics in that one face of the object always remains parallel to the picture plane. A classic example of the difference between the two involves a rectangular box. In the pictorial version, which uses two-point perspective, the back part of the box is smaller, which shows that the box is receding into space. By contrast, the back corner of the box in an isometric drawing appears just as large as its front. The visual distortions in the isometric drawing derive from the fact that in this system, the axes do not taper as they approach infinity. See Ching, *Architecture*, 85 – 100.

<sup>72</sup> Eakins, *A Drawing Manual*, 77.

Chouinard's course provided aspiring designers with the beginnings of a systemized framework, a graphical language, for design work. Their lessons cultivated a specific language of drawing, characterized by an internalized sense of scale and an acute spatial imaginary vital for designers. But how were these skills useful for commercial artists, many of whom would work with two-dimensional surfaces rather than create drawings that would be used to produce objects? What were the applications of projection drawing for the pages of magazines or book covers? One way to understand these questions is to take a look at 1950s food advertising. When producing illustrations of food products, an artist had to have knowledge of different systems of projection in order to choose the one that best communicated the message to the consumer. Should the project be shown from an aerial view, as with oblique perspective? Or should it be closer to the eye level of the consumer, as with an isometric drawing? Drawing manuals illustrated how to use various perspectival constructions, as in this example of ways to render a cracker box (Figure. 1.19). At the top, three different views of the box appear as solid geometric forms, embedded in hand-drawn projectors. Below, a parade of roughs shows how various perspectives and views of the box could be situated within a page's layout. A 1956 Sunshine cracker shows these strategies at work (Figure 1.20). For this ad, the artist chose to use isometric perspective to represent the Sunshine cracker box, which a cowboy lassoes with his rope. The box is pushed to the front of the picture plane, a view which allows its logo to be fully visible. While the largest picture in the ad, the box is roped by the smaller Figureure, an image that reinforces the slogan "Krispy flavor can't escape" as well as the appealing notion that the crackers will "come home to you." The scale and perspective of the box, which seems to loom over the ad space, visually reinforce the tag line. In the bottom register, the Sunshine baker pulls along wagons loaded with three different products, which tower over his relatively diminutive form.

Parading across the page, they are a running subtext, reminding the reader of the other products that can also “come home” to them.” Drawn in linear perspective, a view corresponding to the way the eye sees, the boxes possess an architectonic solidity.

These examples evince the uses and efficacy of design drawing in advertising. In ads, every element functions in relation to the constraints of the page. The designer must make the most of that single page (or part of the page, depending on the ad), especially because the ad is only one component on a page, and moreover only occupies a small percentage the available space in any given publication. Readers scan and flip pages quickly, so the design must be eye-catching and engaging enough to make one pause and look more closely. Often designers manipulated scale to achieve this goal. In the 1956 Saltines ad, for example, the box takes on comically large proportions impossible in the real world. Within the space of projection, scale could be easily changed, especially because the paraline systems used consistent measurements. Designers could also employ tools to scale images, such as the grid, diagonal system, projector, and lightboard, all of which, as we have seen, populated their tool kits.

Along with these tools, designers had to cultivate the mental capacity for visualization, a skill reinforced in their projection drawing lessons. Textbooks recommended exercises to sharpen these skills, such as building three-dimensional models or the technique of surface coloring, in which the designer marks one same surface of an object with a particular color, so that the surface can be tracked from drawing to drawing. With these tools, designers cultivated the skills of imagining objects in different perspectives, in order to translate those conceptual pictures into drawing. This way of imagining and representing objects is embodied in the idea of projection as viewing objects through glass boxes. While perspective drawings propose viewing objects through a transparent glass plane, a metaphor



that goes back to the Renaissance, projections are conceptualized as things existing in non-receding boxes, which can be rotated and flipped. The crackers illustration and ad demonstrate this type of thinking, in that they show the same box in multiple views. In this way, projection lets loose objects in fictive space of ads, where they are placed relationship to the viewer in ways not always possible when confronting objects in the real world.

Visualization also had another meaning in 1950s commercial art parlance. In layout manuals and in design classrooms, the term was used to describe the skill of producing coherent and eye-catching designs. A 1958 manual, quoting noted designer Otto Kleppner, described visualization as follows: “to visualize an idea is to crystallize it and to present it in its physical form or to evolve a vivid manner of picturing a concrete statement by other means than words.”<sup>73</sup> This idea operates according to the same principles as projection drawing, in that it entails translating a mental picture of a design into material form. Working backwards, the designer must, as Kleppner put it, “crystallize” the idea, a term that Felten also used to describe the work of layout. At Chouinard, instructors tailored visualization techniques to the training of commercial artists, whose final products would not be paintings and buildings, but cartoons and costumes. In an animation course, instructor Frank Campbell, who went by the name T. Hee, instructed students to hold an unknown object under the table and render its appearance and size as accurately as possible.<sup>74</sup> Only after months of practicing with the object could they look at what they were drawing. Ruscha was

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<sup>73</sup> Hugh G. Wales, Dwight L. Gentry, and Max Wales, *Advertising: Copy, Layout, and Typography* (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1958), 106. The quote is from Kleppner’s well-known text *Advertising Procedure*, first published in 1925. Born in Vienna, Kleppner studied at the School of Commerce in the 1920s and went on to found Kleppner Company, Inc. *Advertising Procedure* has been reprinted many times over the years and is still in use today.

<sup>74</sup> T. Hee taught in Chouinard’s department of Film Arts. His biography in the 1960 brochure reads: “Extensive work with Walt Disney Studio as artist, writer, and director. Cartoonist for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and Paramount Pictures publicity campaigns. Writer production designer and for United Productions of America.” Chouinard Art Institute, Catalogue for 1960 – 61, AAA.

assigned to draw spark plug.<sup>75</sup> Internalized on the level of touch, scale becomes a link with the object, a way to know it and to represent its forms. This pedagogical exercise demonstrates the link between bodily knowledge, mental capacity, and technical education that constituted the skill set of design drawing. To “draw the idea” one needed not only technical skill or even just creativity, but also an alignment of bodily knowledge and mental acuity. The drawing board stood at the center of this cooperative orchestration of the hand, tools, and mind. It was on that surface that ideas were translated into representation.

### **Conclusion: Postwar Art and Commercial Culture**

In 1960, as Ruscha completed his studies at Chouinard, advertising design occupied an uncertain space between the autonomy of the artist’s studio and the hectic composing rooms of ad agencies. While artists have been designing advertisements since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, during the 1950s there was unprecedented growth in the demand for ad designers who possessed technical skills, creative flair, and business acumen. What kind of labor, then, did such work constitute? Was it creative and spontaneous, or technical and pre-meditated? Was the ad designer an artist who marshaled his creativity in his work, or closer to what William Whyte famously deemed the organization man, the middle-level white-collar worker participating in the collectivization of culture?<sup>76</sup>

Manuals and textbooks acknowledged (often uncomfortably) the conflicting models of labor involved in commercial art work. In his manual, Felten vacillates between layout as creative labor, as applied art, and finally as an industrialized form of labor. Each layout, he wrote, must be crafted according to specific requirements, not in a standardized manner as

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<sup>75</sup> Conversation with the author, September 6, 2013. The spark plug also appears in Ruscha’s object-portrait of Joe Goode, an oil and collage work entitled *Joe* (1961).

<sup>76</sup> William Whyte, *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster), 1956.

with “stock-shelf commodities.”<sup>77</sup> To develop one’s facility with tools, Felten further advised emulating the “successful experiences of fellow craftsmen,” as a creative endeavor such as layout could not be encapsulated in hard and fast rules – though his manual was, of course, full of such rules. In his text on layout and art direction, Stephen Baker wrote that the “modern art director must be two persons,” both technician and creative.<sup>78</sup> He must be a skilled craftsman who could produce successful designs, but also a business executive, who could juggle the requirements of clients, execute convincing pitches, and manage agency budgets.

Drawing manuals were similarly conflicted over the status of design drawing. Often authors emphasized that skill was learned through practice and study, rather than due any special creative gifting. After all, legibility, which depended on a systematized drawing language, was the goal, not the originality or mimeticism. The designer must be able to translate ideas into compelling, communicative designs. At the same time, though legibility was always paramount, manuals advised that drawings should “appear as expressive and attractive as possible.”<sup>79</sup> Authors sometimes employed expressive and subjective language, such as “anemic,” “brutal,” or “refined,” to describe different styles of drawing. Many texts also pointed out the ways in which the fine arts drew from design techniques. C. Leslie Martin, in his text *Design Graphics*, cited Piet Mondrian and Josef Albers as examples of artists

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<sup>77</sup> Felten, *Layout*, 11. Though women were also being trained in ad design at the time, it is worth pointing out that Felten always speaks of the “ad man,” a term that indicates the male-dominated nature of commercial art and advertising. Women who did work in the field faced an incredibly challenging office environment. For more on this subject, see Sean Nixon, *Advertising Cultures: Gender, Commerce, Creativity* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2003).

<sup>78</sup> Baker, *Advertising*, 1.

<sup>79</sup> Martin, *Design Graphics*, 20- 21.

who employed drafting techniques in their work.<sup>80</sup> Yet Martin, and other writers, always returned to the fact that the designer was subject to a bottom line. For the commercial artist, what counted the most was how closely the final product corresponded with the concept, and how well that concept, conveyed in the design, led to better sales.

While their design courses pushed students to cultivate professionalism, the fine arts courses encouraged creative expression, whether in the form of gestural painting, naturalism, or abstraction. Robert Irwin, for example, who studied at Chouinard from 1952–54 and taught there 1957–58, was at that time producing abstract paintings with rigorously hand-painted lines and dots. In addition to studying the work of New York artists, Chouinard students were also familiar with West Coast Abstract Expressionists outside of Chouinard’s orbit, such as Sam Francis and Hassel Smith. As Joe Goode, Ruscha’s friend and fellow transplant from Oklahoma, recalled, “everybody was doing Pollocks and de Koonings in our art school – in the painting classes.”<sup>81</sup> Chouinard was a small place, and Ruscha was equally immersed in the art side of the school. He and Goode shared a house with fellow Okie Jerry McMillan and Patrick Blackwell, who also worked with Ruscha on *Orb*.

This climate indelibly formed Ruscha’s experience at Chouinard, and also left him at a crossroads upon graduation. Educated in the skills of layout production and design drawing, he was well positioned to acquire a job in Southern California’s burgeoning arts and design industries. Allan Scott has characterized this economy as the “multisectoral image-producing complex,” because of its focus on churning out cultural products, defined as things that depend for their success on the commercialization of objects and services that

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Joe Goode, quoted in *Oral history interview with Joe Goode, 1999 Jan. 5-2001 Apr. 12*, AAA.

transmit social and cultural messages.<sup>82</sup> Scott notes that producers in these industries typically operate according to a model of flexible specialization, a type of production characterized by small batches, rapid output, and a focus on niche markets. Designed to satisfy shifting desires and cultural trends – even more, to manufacture these desires – cultural products are not manufactured in large quantities. Instead, industries output small batches, fine-tuned by product differentiation and high levels of customization. Design industries tend to rely heavily on technically skilled white-collar workers, exactly the type of workers that graduated from Chouinard.

Even before finishing school, Ruscha was entrenched in L.A.'s image-producing economy. Pages from his student notebooks contain lists of printers and local advertising agencies, individuals and workshops he had become aware of while at Chouinard. He also held a series of part-time jobs that familiarized him with the design community, including as a painter in a gift shop, where he personalized small items, and in a Danish modern design and furniture store. In 1958, Ruscha served as a printer's devil at Plantin Press (one of the firms written down in his notebook), run by Saul Marks. Upon leaving Chouinard in 1960, Ruscha went to work as a layout artist for the advertising firm Carson/Roberts (another that had appeared on his list), where he worked on campaigns for Baskin-Robbins and the Rosemary Reid line of women's bathing suits.<sup>83</sup> At the same time, as he pursued jobs in the design world, he became more involved in L.A.'s small gallery scene, more drawn to becoming an artist. He had been frequenting Ferus and Dwan Gallery since 1959, and at the

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<sup>82</sup> Allan J. Scott, "The Craft, Fashion, and Cultural-Products Industries: Competitive Dynamics and Policy Dilemmas in a Multisectoral Image-Producing Complex," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 86, no. 2 (June 1996): 306 – 323.

<sup>83</sup> Ruscha, in conversation with the author, March 3, 2015. The Baskin-Robbins website notes the role of Carson/Roberts (which merged in Ogilvy & Mather in 1971) in designing its logo and branding. See "Our History," <https://www.baskinrobbins.com/content/baskinrobbins/en/aboutus/history.html>, accessed March 2, 2015.

time began to make collages, a practice he continued while traveling to Europe in 1961.<sup>84</sup> In 1960, he had already begun exhibiting, and would have his first solo show at Ferus in 1963.<sup>85</sup> As he recounts it, he also quickly developed a distaste for commercial art, realizing that he no longer desired to be an “ad man,” because “there was no substance to it because, you know, it meant working with other people on an idea. So that just became a falsehood after a while, and I saw that it just couldn't last any longer.”<sup>86</sup> Like many of his classmates, not to mention other young artists training in commercial arts, Ruscha felt that working in advertising was ultimately not an appealing option. But what might it mean for Ruscha to shift his career towards the world of the fine arts? How was that kind of work different from his commercial art work, other than the clear distinction that he would not be working at the service of clients?

Part of the answer came, as noted above, in the art of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. Ruscha’s confrontation with Johns’s work, via *Print* magazine in 1958, is oft-cited as a key moment for the artist – as Ruscha himself has put it, that moment was like “an atomic bomb” in his life and training.<sup>87</sup> Johns’s work also made Abstract Expressionism, one of the modes that stood for fine art at Chouinard, seem overly serious and hackneyed, though Ruscha’s early paintings indicate his experimentation with gestural paintings. These early works evince Ruscha’s sifting through of questions he grappled with as he prepared to

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<sup>84</sup> These fascinating collage works, though outside the scope of this chapter, invite further inquiry, especially in regard to Ruscha’s early engagement with materiality and appropriated imagery and his knowledge and transformation of avant-garde strategies.

<sup>85</sup> An ad in *Orb* issue makes note of an exhibition with Joe Goode, Patrick Blackwell, and Jerry McMillan, at the Colorado Springs Fine Art Center. See *Orb*, vol. 2, no. 1 (Society of Graphic Designers, 1959–1906), GRI.

<sup>86</sup> Ruscha recounted this to Paul Karlstrom when remembering how he viewed his career when graduating. See *Oral history interview with Edward Ruscha, 1980 October 29–1981 October 2*, AAA.

<sup>87</sup> Ruscha, quoted in Henry Hopkins, *Fifty West Coast Artists: A Critical Selection of Painters and Sculptors Working in California*, ed. Douglas Bullis (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1977), 112-113, reprinted in *LAI*, 10 – 11.

complete his studies at Chouinard. Both modernist painting and commercial art – or the roles of the Ab Ex artist and ad man – seemed unappealing. At this crossroads in his career, Ruscha was searching for a new model of art making.

Ruscha's situation in 1960 is indicative of wider shifts in the role of the artist in postwar society. At schools such as Carnegie Tech (where Warhol began his studies in 1945) and Ohio State University (where Lichtenstein studied from 1940-42, then again from 1946 to 1950), professors trained students to study, sift through, and manage the growing flood of mass-cultural images.<sup>88</sup> Hoyt Sherman's Flash Lab, at Ohio State, embodies the merging of a modernist faith in technological progress with the desire for artistic expression in an age of increasing consumerism. As Michael Lobel has argued, Sherman's ideas became foundational for Lichtenstein's engagement with mechanical reproducibility, vision, and technology.<sup>89</sup> Warhol's training as a commercial artist, as he himself (rather archly) noted, constituted the basis for a fine art career: "business art is the step that comes after Art. I started as a commercial artist, and I want to finish as a business artist...I wanted to be an Art Businessman, or a Business Artist. Being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art."<sup>90</sup> His education at Carnegie, predicated upon the school's "industrial-age theory of art," deeply formed Warhol's approach his own practice.<sup>91</sup>

Born in the 1930s, rather than in the 20s, as were Warhol and Lichtenstein, Ruscha's education was specific not only to that decade, but to the program of Chouinard and the

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<sup>88</sup> The chronology of the Roy Lichtenstein Foundation website indicates that Lichtenstein entered Ohio State in 1940 and continued through 1942, was inducted into the army in 1943, then returned to the university in 1946, after time spend in the U.S. and in Europe during the war. See "Chronology," Roy Lichtenstein Foundation, <http://www.lichtensteinfoundation.org/lfchron1.htm>, accessed January 6, 2015.

<sup>89</sup> Lobel, *Image Duplicator*.

<sup>90</sup> Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol* (New York: Harcourt, 1975), 92.

<sup>91</sup> Blake Stimson, *Citizen Warhol*.

image-producing complex of Los Angeles. In many ways, his experience and training converged with that of these slightly older artists, especially Warhol's. Chouinard's commercial art curriculum was predicated on the model of artistic subjectivity that Warhol articulates: that of the artist as professional, efficient, laborer, a key producer in the postwar economy. By running its classrooms like design studios and ad agencies, instructors aimed to train students in the types of skills needed in the working world. The program description for Advertising Illustration and Design epitomizes this perspective:

At one time artists were thought of as eccentric individuals but today they are accepted as part of the business world with a definite purpose as an attorney or architect. Their services are demanded in a widely diversified field, reaping financial returns in the same income bracket as the highest paid executives in the country. The fundamental aim of this Art Advertising Course is to give the individual a training in art with a definite purpose of making his work useful to the business world.<sup>92</sup>

Warhol's Carnegie education and Lichtenstein's contact with Sherman and his Flash Lab provided foundational experiences for how they understood and made art, and how they opened up new avenues for it by incorporating the techniques, methods, and modes of perception characteristic of commercial culture. The drawing board, after all, was the surface on which the stuff of mass culture came into being. Tied to specific techniques of production, especially layout and projection drawing, and emblematic of the commercial artist, the drawing board was the beginning for everything from food advertisements to airplanes. It was this tool that would become central – indeed, already was central – to the way Ruscha worked.

In the following chapters, I look at how the operations of the drawing board permeate Ruscha's 1960s work, and detail how he turned those operations in a model of

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<sup>92</sup> Chouinard Art Institute, Catalogue for 1960 – 61, AAA.



making art, one that both borrowed from and inverted the language of commercial design. As both a tool of production and a conceptual model, the space and systems bound to the drawing board organized Ruscha's practice, and gave him a framework to deploy and to reinvent. By beginning with the drawing board, this narrative presents a different story of Ruscha's work, one that begins with his deep knowledge of commercial art practice and which works alongside histories of Pop and Conceptual art (and expands how we understand those histories). Long since absorbed into digital technologies, Ruscha's methods evoke a moment when design was anchored in pencil and paper.

## Chapter 2 Painting Without Scale

### Introduction: *Drawingboard Drawing*

One day in 1963, in his Echo Park studio, Ed Ruscha paused in the midst of making art to draw his working setup (Figure 2.1). The sketch shows a standing drawing board, on which rests a paper of paper, open to a fresh page and secured with a T-square. The sheet is blank except for a rectangular shape – a drawn outline, or perhaps a piece of tracing paper– which waits to be filled with imagery. A pencil, resting next to the board, is ready for use. The only other object in the sketch, a jar of freshly sharpened pencils, hovers in empty space at the right. No doubt Ruscha made this drawing quickly, as he did with the many drawings he made and photographs he took of his studio and works-in-process over the years. Nonetheless, *Drawingboard Drawing*, as Ruscha titled the work, has much to tell us about his 1960s practice. On one hand, it documents his working methods, specifically his preference for using the board and its attendant instruments in his work. Though he made *Drawingboard Drawing* in 1963, Ruscha had been using the board since his time at Chouinard. During these four years, he focused on two-dimensional layout design, such as posters, leaflets, and advertisements, and became intimately acquainted with the techniques and tools of the trade. As the working surface of design, the board occupied a pivotal role in his training. Ruscha's engagement with the drawing board, however, reaches even farther back, to his childhood years in Oklahoma. Demonstrating a proclivity for art from a young age, Ruscha took correspondence courses in animation and studied design in high school. At the age of eleven,

Ruscha's parents gifted him with a drawing board. This same board, which traveled with Ruscha to Los Angeles in 1956, is the one he sketched in *Drawingboard Drawing*.<sup>1</sup>

Beyond documenting Ruscha's working process, this drawing hints at the conceptual mechanisms of his art. First, by rendering both its surface and the pad that rests upon it as commensurate with the picture plane, the sketch implies a correspondence between process and object. Second, the drawing suggests qualities of Ruscha's conception of pictorial space. On one hand, he hints at the dimensionality of objects, as indicated by the edges on the pad, T-square, board, and legs. The jar, however, seems stuck to or resting on some invisible surface. Third, in the drawing Ruscha also plays with perspective. The board appears to be more rotated than seems possible, as if we are seeing more of it than we should be when looking at it from above, the viewpoint that the drawing implies. This spatial oddness derives from the fact that Ruscha rendered the board as an axonometric projection, meaning that its parallel lines remain infinitely parallel. The effect is subtle, because the board is pressed up towards us, upper left edge touching the borders of the paper, but significant, because Ruscha's use of projection drawing points to the spatial imaginary and visual language of design. Finally, the drawing announces that his art operates according to the pre-established systems of commercial art. Replacing the brushes and paint of Abstract Expressionism with a jar of pencils and a T-square, the drawing declares that mark-making is guided by a straight edge, and carefully planned rather than spontaneous. At Chouinard, the model was art as expression; Ruscha instead wanted to make "cerebral" art, a quality that characterized the

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Ruscha remembers that his brother received the board as a gift from their parents. Susan Haller, who has long worked with Ed Ruscha, recalls that he still had board while he was in his Western Avenue studio, into the 1970s. Susan Haller, Email conversation with the author, September 17, 2014.

commercial art side of the school's curriculum and that he also saw in the work of artists he admired, such as Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg.<sup>2</sup>

This discussion of *Drawingboard Drawing* sets the terms for this chapter, which argues the drawing board and its processes are the foundation upon which Ruscha's paintings are built – and they were indeed built, step by step, piece by piece, with studies, drawings, tracings, projected images, from objects studied and measured and arranged in the studio. Beginning with *Noise, Pencil, Broken Pencil, Cheap Western* (1963), this chapter examines three devices that characterize Ruscha's model of painting: the rendering of actual-size objects, construction of shallow pictorial space, and reference to or use of linear and axonometric perspective. He conceived his paintings on the drawing board, and imagined them as things that could be re-absorbed in that surface of design. His techniques result in a model of painting as without scale – as fundamentally scale-less – which destabilizes the dynamics of scale in abstract painting and in design, Ruscha's two main referents in his early painting practice. By situating his work as a dialogue with 1950s commercial art practice and looking closely at the production of his paintings, this chapter is able to ask new questions of the works that put Ruscha on the map as a Pop artist around 1962.

### **c. 1962: The Emergence of Pop**

Chapter 1 concluded with the familiar story of Ruscha's graduation from Chouinard in 1960, when he went to work as a layout artist for Carson/Roberts Advertising Agency. After six months of working there, Ruscha decided to leave the job to focus on his art career. His 1960 paintings, such as *Three Standard Envelopes*, materialize his working in between these worlds (Figure 2.2). Ruscha made this assemblage painting with three open envelopes pasted

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<sup>2</sup> Ruscha, quoted in *Oral history interview with Edward Ruscha, 1980 October 29-1981 October 2*, AAA.

slightly askew a sheet of newspaper. Three viscous smears of paint – black, deep blue, and a garish yellow and green – spill out of the envelopes, the thick globs obscuring the newspaper’s text. At the top, three closed envelopes, also turned upside down, sit in a neat line slightly above the newspaper’s edge.

Even before 1960, Ruscha had become a part of L.A.’s small and tight-knit avant-garde art world, as he befriended Walter Hopps, co-founder of the Ferus Gallery and by 1962 curator at the Pasadena Museum of Art; Ed Kienholz, artist and co-founder with Hopps of Ferus; actor and collector Dennis Hopper, curator Henry Hopkins; and curator and dealer Irving Blum, who took over Kienholz’s role at Ferus in 1958, as well as artists Billy Al Bengston, Ken Price, and Ed Moses. As has been well documented, many of the artists who attended Chouinard, including Joe Goode and Robert Irwin, were key figures in the scene that formed around Ferus.<sup>3</sup> At that gallery and at other local venues, such as Everett Ellin, Ruscha saw the work of avant-garde artists such as Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Frank Stella, and Kurt Schwitters. With most of the L.A. art world, he also attended Marcel Duchamp’s first American retrospective, organized by Hopps and staged at the Pasadena Museum in 1963. Ruscha’s *Three Standard Envelopes* is surely a nod to Duchamp’s *Three Standard Stoppages*, one of the works on view in the retrospective. Ruscha’s use of a standardized form – the everyday envelope – echoes Duchamp’s production of straight edges in his work (though Duchamp relies on chance and problematizes the pre-established straight edge, whereas Ruscha’s seems to stage chance through the slightly skewed envelopes). Even more importantly, both Duchamp and Ruscha produced art that

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<sup>3</sup> Alexandra Schwartz chronicles Ruscha’s involvement in Ferus in *Ed Ruscha’s Los Angeles* (Cambridge: MIT, 2010). See also Kristine McKenna, *The Ferus Gallery: A Place to Begin* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2009).

referenced the toolbox of the commercial draftsman. In the Pasadena display, Duchamp's templates were displayed on a drafting table.<sup>4</sup>

By 1962, Ruscha was an important figure in the emergence of Pop art. Instrumental to this early reception was his inclusion in Hopps's exhibition *New Painting of Common Objects*, held at the Pasadena Museum of Art in 1962. The exhibition also featured the work of Joe Goode, Andy Warhol, Jim Dine, Robert Dowd, Phillip Hefferton, Roy Lichtenstein, and Wayne Thiebaud.<sup>5</sup> Hopps saw these artists as exemplifying a distinctly American form of realism, or what he called "imagist art," loosely defined as an investment in the representation of real objects.<sup>6</sup> Works in the exhibition ranged from Roy Lichtenstein's *Roto Broil* to Andy Warhol's *Green Stamps* to Robert Dowd's painted currency.<sup>7</sup> Ruscha, at Hopps's request, also made the poster for the exhibition (Figure 2.3).<sup>8</sup> Electing to outsource the

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<sup>4</sup> This display can be seen in photograph taken by Frank J. Thomas, and reproduced in Robin Kelsey, "Hazardous Into the Blue: John Baldessari and Photography in the 1970s," in Matthew S. Witkovsky, ed., *Light Years: Conceptual Art and the Photograph 1964 – 1977* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 2011), 134. Kelsey explains the display in detail in his essay.

<sup>5</sup> On the way back Europe via New York, in 1961, Ruscha stopped at the Castelli Gallery, where Irving Sandler showed him Lichtenstein's work (a painting of a single tennis shoe, which "floored" him. Quoted in *Oral history interview with Edward Ruscha, 1980 October 29-1981 October 2*, AAA. Ruscha wrote an earnest letter to Castelli in 1962, mentioning the New York visit and Castelli's interest in his small paintings, which included word paintings such as *Metropolitain*, and perhaps some of the early collages, and inviting Castelli to his studio. Though Castelli was aware of Ruscha's work during the 60s, it was not until 1970 that Ruscha showed there. Ed Ruscha to Leo Castelli, January 31, 1962, Leo Castelli Gallery records, circa 1880-2000, bulk 1957-1999, AAA.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Hopps, "Ruscha and I," in PP, 4. Hopps saw Joseph Cornell and assemblage art as important examples of imagist art, and considered Man Ray, Jasper Johns, and Georgia O'Keeffe the greatest imagist artists.

<sup>7</sup> To my knowledge there are no extant catalogues for the exhibition, but Coplans's review reproduces some of the works included. See John Coplans, Review of *New Painting of Common Objects*, *Artforum* (November 1962): 26-29.

<sup>8</sup> Ruscha, quoted in conversation "Modern Art in Los Angeles: Okies Go West," Tuesday, January 23, 2007, GRI. Claes Oldenburg uses the same techniques for his poster for *The Store* (1961), for which he worked with Manhattan Press. With the black and red text on a white background, Oldenburg's poster, as Benjamin Buchloh pointed out to me, looks very similar to the one for *New Painting*. The connection suggests similarities in the processes and capacities of commercial printing shops in the 1960s as well as artists' collaboration with such printing shops.

project, Ruscha contacted a local workshop, Majestic Poster Press, known for printing advertisements for circuses, car races, and boxing matches. After relaying the basic information to the press, he left the design up to them. His only request was to make it “loud.”<sup>9</sup>

In addition to overseeing the making of the poster, Ruscha contributed three paintings to the show: *Falling but Frozen (Fisk)* (1961), *Box Smashed Flat* (1961), and *Actual Size* (1962) (figs. 2.4, 2.5, and 2.6). These works exemplify what was becoming Ruscha’s formula for making paintings: canvases scaled to about the proportions of the human body, featuring large words borrowed from printed imagery, such as advertisements, and floating or flattened consumer products, all on fields of color, sometimes with splatters of paint scattered around the objects. I will return to these paintings throughout this chapter, but for now, suffice to say that these works coincided with Richard Hamilton’s oft-quoted description of Pop: “Popular (designed for a mass audience); Transient (short term solution); Expendable (easily forgotten); Low Cost; Mass Produced; Young (aimed at Youth); Witty; Sexy; Gimmicky; Glamorous; and Big Business.”<sup>10</sup> Ruscha gravitated especially towards widely available commodities, the products that stocked grocery store shelves and were scattered around auto shops. A 1962 scrap from his archives, a page of notes and reflections, indicates his engagement with these types of consumer goods (Figure 2.7). On a piece of tracing paper, Ruscha glued several fragments cut from newspaper and magazines: an advertisement for meat, a Campbell’s soup can, an illustration of an open refrigerator stocked with food, and a rack displaying popular magazines. Dispersed amongst these

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<sup>9</sup> Ruscha, Conversation with the author, September 11, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Hamilton, quoted in *Richard Hamilton, Collected Words 1953 – 1983* (London: Thames and Hudson), 28.

fragments, Ruscha neatly wrote out his thoughts on finding one's own style and the difficulty of unlearning things he wanted to cast aside. Remembering the pinball machines he had seen in Paris, during a 1961 trip to Europe, he wrote, "I am like an impatient, restless subject, waiting for a leader, or master. Only the master (idea) is sometimes a big letterform or a box of raisins or an old automobile or pinball machine." The collage also inevitably brings to mind Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Cans* paintings, which Ruscha would also see in 1962, at the Ferus Gallery.

Curators continued to select Ruscha's paintings for exhibitions of Pop (while Hopps had deliberately avoided the term, his exhibition nonetheless became known as a Pop show).<sup>11</sup> His work was featured in Lawrence Alloway's *Six More* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the companion exhibition to *Six Painters and the Object*, as well as John Coplans's *Pop Art USA* at the Oakland Museum of Art. In 1963, Ruscha also had his first solo exhibition at Ferus, to be followed by another in 1964. While at that time he was working in other media – in 1962 he began his first book, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* – it was the paintings that garnered the most attention that year, and those works that marked his emergence in the Pop scene.

Though seen as an important contribution to Pop art, Ruscha's work was nearly always considered a West Coast version of Pop, even more so because many of his paintings feature typically California subjects, such as the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox logo and the Hollywood sign. Scholars have also argued that Ruscha's common objects paintings, such as those exhibited in *New Painting*, have a specifically L.A. flavor. Ken Allan, for example, while situating Ruscha's work within critical dialogue on the objecthood of painting, the picture

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<sup>11</sup> This story is recounted in many sources; one is Thomas Crow, "November 1962," *Artforum* 41:3 (November 2002): 72.



plane, and Pop's engagement with consumer goods, argues that the mode of looking elicited in these early paintings represents the spatial character and urban landscape of L.A.<sup>12</sup> In addition to the view that Ruscha's paintings are specific to L.A. experience, his work has also been understood as exemplifying a broader tendency in postwar art: the merging of gestural painting with subjects drawn from mass culture.<sup>13</sup> Russell Ferguson has aptly described this type of work as "hand-painted Pop." As discussed earlier, Ruscha also noted the importance of a key figure in this history – Jasper Johns – in his work. The scholarship on *Actual Size* provides a representative example of this interpretation of Ruscha's work (Figure 2.6). Lisa Pasquariello has remarked that the blue splatters in *Actual Size* seem rather formulaic, even constrained, perhaps hinting that by the early 60s Abstract Expressionism has become "shopworn and stylized – indeed packaged and packable."<sup>14</sup> Like Roy Lichtenstein's screen-printed brushstrokes, Ruscha's painted comet tail implies that Abstract Expressionism had become as regulated and widespread as a tin of Spam. As is common in the Pop literature, scholars often deliberate over the iconography of Ruscha's subject matter: are his common objects imbued with symbolic meaning, or represented as banal material objects? *Actual Size*, based on a product with such cultural significance, is particularly ripe for these kinds of debates.<sup>15</sup> As histories of the quirky product attest, Spam, invented in 1937, has had a long

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<sup>12</sup> Ken Allan, "Ed Ruscha, Pop Art, and Spectatorship in 1960s Los Angeles," *Art Bulletin* 92 (September 2010): 231 – 249.

<sup>13</sup> Russell Ferguson, ed., *Hand-Painted Pop: American Art in Transition 1955 – 62* (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art/Rizzoli, 1992).

<sup>14</sup> Lisa Pasquariello, "Ed Ruscha and the Language That He Used," *October* 111 (Winter 2005): 81 – 106; see also "Good Reading: The Work of Ed Ruscha, 1958 – 1970" (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Pasquariello, "Ed Ruscha and the Language That He Used;" Hal Foster, *The First Pop Age: Painting and Subjectivity in the Art of Hamilton, Lichtenstein, Warhol, Richter, and Ruscha* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 211 - 224.

and colorful life in the American food industry and in the broader cultural imagination.<sup>16</sup> With its projectile Spam tin, the painting, as Hal Foster has noted, also brings to mind the word's usage in descriptions of the hazards of early space travel (if it did not go well, as pilot Chuck Yeager famously said, astronauts would end up like "span in a can)."<sup>17</sup> Pictured traveling through the blue-flecked background, the mobile can does indeed resemble an orbiting object, or as Ruscha himself observed, a projectile, "arcing across the sky like a shooting star."<sup>18</sup> It is in paintings such as *Actual Size* that Ruscha, as Hal Foster has put it, registers the "convergence between abstract painting and commercial design," by producing a "collision that defamiliarizes both."<sup>19</sup> In his paintings, Foster argues, Ruscha crafts an imagery of common culture that exists somewhere between "folk" and "Pop."

Foster raises important questions, still unanswered, about the relationship between design and painting in Ruscha's work. What exactly about "commercial design" filters into these early paintings? How did design's segmented labor organize Ruscha's methods of making paintings, and why was this model compelling for him at that moment? These

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<sup>16</sup> "History of the SPAM Brand / the SPAM Story," SPAM official website, <http://www.spam.com/spam-101/history-of-spam>, accessed September 10, 2014. See also Carolyn Wyman, *Spam: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1999).

<sup>17</sup> See Hal Foster, "At the Hayward," *London Review of Books* 31 (November 2009): 32. Yeager notes that he and other pilots commonly used this phrase in the early years of space travel. The phrase was also used in the 1983 film *The Right Stuff* (1983), based on Tom Wolfe's 1979 novel on Navy, Air Force, and Marine pilots (including Yeager, played by Sam Shepard) involved in research at California's Edwards Air Base. The real Chuck Yeager advised and made an appearance in the film. For Yeager's reflections on the film, see Jack Houvouras, HQ&A: An Interview with Chuck Yeager, *Huntington Quarterly* 77 (Spring 2012), [http://www.huntingtonquarterly.com/articles/issue77/chuck\\_yeager.php](http://www.huntingtonquarterly.com/articles/issue77/chuck_yeager.php), accessed September 19, 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Ruscha, quoted in PP, 66. Wyman also includes this quote, alongside a reproduction of *Actual Size*, in *Spam: A Biography*, 98. Hal Foster has also discussed the connections between *Actual Size* and space travel. See Hal Foster, "At the Hayward," *London Review of Books* 31 (November 2009): 32, as well as his assessment of the painting in *The First Pop Age*, 220. Lisa Pasquariello has articulated how Ruscha's works relate to Abstract Expressionism and contemporary discourse on modernist painting. See also Pasquariello, "Ed Ruscha and the Language That He Used," and Pasquariello's "Good Reading:" The Work of Ed Ruscha, 1958 – 1970" (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> Foster, *The First Pop Age*, 220.

questions can be unpacked by understanding Ruscha's paintings as primarily about and representative of drawing-board design. This line of inquiry bears investigation not only because signs of commercial art processes permeate Ruscha's work, but also because even at that early moment his art – and Pop more broadly – was understood to be synonymous with the drawing board. For many observers, such as Ruscha's painting professor Emerson Woelffer, Pop was the same as commercial art, virtually indistinguishable from ads and layouts. Woelffer equated commercial art with the drawing board, as demonstrated in his comments on his student's work:

He [Ruscha] just was doing what he was going to school for, to do advertising art. And he just hit it at the time of pop art. And there was probably an -- he didn't think of it as that way -- it's probably an accidental thing because I used to look at his work at school and he had to do it on the illustration board. He drew the illustration.<sup>20</sup>

Though Woelffer saw Ruscha's fame as a product of happenstance and clearly did not think much of his art (or of Pop, for that matter), the two got on well. Woelffer always supported Ruscha, even in instances when he was at odds with the other faculty, such as when Chouinard professor Bill Moore, infuriated that such an object would be displayed as art, burned Ruscha's cigarette-butt collage.<sup>21</sup> For Woelffer, Ruscha's use of the drawing board, as opposed, presumably, to drawing freehand, placed his work squarely in the realm of ad design. As his observations indicate, however, this was also the direction in which many artists were moving – this was how Pop, after all, was defined. Ruscha's place in that movement begins with the drawing board.

### *Noise, Pencil, Broken Pencil, Cheap Western*

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<sup>20</sup> Emerson Woelffer, quoted in *Oral history interview with Emerson Woelffer, 1999 Mar. 26*, AAA.

<sup>21</sup> Perchuk relates this story in "From Otis to Ferus."

The relationship between Ruscha's Pop work and commercial art seemed clear to Woelffer, but it takes some closer looking to determine first, how the drawing board worked itself into Ruscha's work and second, what it offered him in regard to developing a model of painting. Before returning to the paintings discussed above, such as *Actual Size*, I want to move forward a year, to a work that crystallizes the model of painting that Ruscha developed in the early 60s. Ruscha first showed *Noise, Pencil, Broken Pencil, Cheap Western*, which he worked on from 1961- 63, in his inaugural solo exhibition at Ferus (Figure 2.8). The title is essentially an inventory of the painting's subject matter. At the top right, the cherry-red sans serif type, spelling out the word "noise," is supported by a triangle of white that follows the word's one-point perspectival construction. Slices of black paint underneath, suggestive of shadows, makes the letters seem both flat and three-dimensional. Two canary-yellow pencils, horizontally oriented, point towards the edges of the painting. They hover in the middle of the canvas, their edges almost, but not quite, touching the sides. The pencil at the right, snapped in half, sheds bright yellow shards across the blue background. At the bottom, floating in midair, the colorful Western magazine almost grazes the picture's frame. The surface of the canvas is a solid blue, rendered unrelenting and opaque through the mixing of wax with pigments. All the objects in the painting seem to be pulled to the edges by some centrifugal force, with hardened blue surface constituting the painting's center.

Out of all of these early paintings, Ruscha considered *Noise* to be his best. In a sketchbook page dated April 22, 1963, he wrote "This is by far the most exciting painting I have done to date – As I thought, it seems to have invalidated all my other paintings" (Figure 2.9)<sup>22</sup> After completing the work Ruscha sketched it in his notebook, where he also jotted down the blend of blue paints he used for its background. Over the years, Ruscha has

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<sup>22</sup> Ruscha, sketchbook note, April 22, 1963, *LAI*, 387.

frequently stated that he wished he had kept the painting, which now resides in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. In a 1984 letter to museum curators, Ruscha outlined three reasons for his attachment to the painting: it embodies issues that exist in works done since; it was a technical success because of the use of wax mixed into pigments; and, “in completing the painting I recall being completely awestruck and overwhelmed.”<sup>23</sup> Ruscha’s unequivocal comments invite further inquiry. In what follows, I outline the three key strategies and devices at work this painting – the representation of actual-size objects, construction of shallow pictorial space, and reference to or use of linear and axonometric perspective – and how Ruscha used these strategies to construct his scale-less paintings. Along the way I reflect on Ruscha’s engagement with Pop art and the ways that his work dialogues with a longer history of technical drawing in modern art.

### **Part I: Actual Size: Drawing Common Objects**

One of the most curious things about *Noise* is Ruscha’s insertion of actual size objects: two pencils, of the most ordinary kind, and the “cheap western.” These objects, which seem small in comparison to the canvas’s dimensions, are painted in an illusionistic manner, in a way that conveys their physical qualities. Capped by red-stripped brass rings and bubblegum pink erasers at one end and the wood and pointed lead tip at the other, the pencils have long horizontal highlight down the middle, which suggests their beveled form. Even the brass rings and erasers have shiny highlights, rendered with tiny dots and strokes of oil paint. Ruscha painted flurry of shards with blobs of yellow painting, which stand out against the solid blue background.

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<sup>23</sup> Ruscha, letter to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, October 22, 1984, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts curatorial files.

Before he painted them on the canvas, Ruscha studied the pencils carefully, beginning by photographing them in his studio (Figure 2.10). In two of the photographs, Ruscha has laid on the pencil on sheet of paper. Though similar, the photos are cropped differently, with one showing almost the entire pencil, though the eraser appears to extend just beyond the border, and the other cutting off the pencil at its edge. The black and white images emphasize the contours of the writing device and the thin silver of cast shadow, which lays ribbon-like along the side.<sup>24</sup> While the photos necessarily distort the actual size of the pencil, Ruscha seems to have recaptured its dimensions, as in the finished painting the pencil is approximately the same size as an actual yellow pencil. He likely achieved this by holding up the object itself to the canvas, as he often did when painting smaller objects.<sup>25</sup> For the magazine, Ruscha made an indexical image – a transcription of its actual size – by replicating the magazine’s cover on a piece of tracing paper, with the aid of a projector or light board (Figure 2.11). He then placed these drawings on tables and desktops and photographed these object-arrangements. In one photograph, taken from above, a piece of tracing paper, the drawing of the magazine, and the magazine itself rest on a white sheet of paper. A pencil, turned diagonally, sits atop the magazine tracing. Other objects, such as a pack of cigarettes, which edges onto the white paper, and a Granco Radio, are visible in the photograph (Figure 2.12). This protracted process of studying, photographing, tracing, and arranging exemplifies Ruscha’s approach to his early 60s paintings.

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<sup>24</sup> Ruscha also did a set of oil, pencil and gouache studies, *Pencil Broken Pencil*, labeled as a diptych in the catalogue raisonne of works on paper, as well as another broken pencil work in the same media, entitled *Broken Pencil*. The work is reproduced in Lisa Turvey, ed. *Edward Ruscha: Catalogue Raisonné of the Works on Paper*. Volume 1: 1956 – 1976. New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2014), 114 (hereafter LT).

<sup>25</sup> Ruscha, Conversation with the author, September 11, 2013.

Ruscha built up the painting from this group of object-studies. With photography and other tools, such as the projector, Ruscha drew the composition first, before filling in the lines and forms with pigments and adding color to the objects, generally by copying the color scheme straight from the object as it sat on his working table. Another photograph, pictures this method (Figure 2.13). The magazine is at the right, while tubes of paint and splotches on the tray indicate Ruscha's working out of the colors. The strategies Ruscha used in *Noise*, such as the replication of common objects and use of indexical media and strategies, recall the working methods of other Pop artists, many of whom examined the nature and implications of scale in print media. Early on, critics pinpointed the scaling of images as one of Pop's key formal strategies. In the catalogue for *Six Painters and the Object*, Alloway noted that "giantism – the enlargement of objects and images" – characterized Rosenquist, Dine, and Lichtenstein's work.<sup>26</sup> Sometimes the inflation became so dramatic that the images pushed at the boundaries of abstraction. In Rosenquist's *F-111* (1964 – 65), for example, tire treads, piles of spaghetti, and atomic mushroom clouds sit side-by-side in a mural-size painting that takes on the quality of a mosaic. The manipulation of scale presented one way of translating the stuff of commercial culture into painting. In his 1980 essay "That Old Thing, Art," Roland Barthes wrote that images in Pop are either made dramatically larger, at the scale of the billboard, or significantly reduced, as when something is examined under the jeweler's loupe.<sup>27</sup> This strategy, as Barthes saw it, was part of Pop's art-art-not art fugue, its ambivalent movement between the low culture of commercial art and the space of high art.

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<sup>26</sup> Michael Lobel has examined issues of scale in his work on both Roy Lichtenstein and James Rosenquist. See his *Image Duplicator: Roy Lichtenstein and the Emergence of Pop Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), and *James Rosenquist: Pop Art, Politics, and History in the 1960s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009). For Alloway on Pop's "giantism" see Lawrence Alloway, *Six Painters and the Object* (New York: Guggenheim, 1963), 12.

<sup>27</sup> Roland Barthes, "That Old Thing, Art," in *Pop Art: The Critical Dialogue*, ed. Carol Ann Mahsun (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 236 – 238.

In his paintings, however, Ruscha often worked against distortions of scale, by rendering objects such as the pencils as close as possible to their actual sizes. This is a key difference between his model of Pop painting and the others Barthes referenced, including James Rosenquist and Roy Lichtenstein. Ruscha's fixation with showing things are refusing scale, or at or near their actual sizes is not limited to *Noise*; it is expressed even more explicitly in the title of the 1962 Spam painting, in which a flying tin, hurtling downwards towards the bottom right of the canvas, appears to be precisely the same size as the portable product. As he did with *Noise*, Ruscha constructed *Actual Size* from numerous drawings, tracings, and photographs. He had been studying Spam and other consumer products since 1961, when he undertook the series *Product Still Lifes*. In these photographs, brightly lit commodities – Spam, Sun Maid raisins, Oxydol detergent, Campbell's soup, Sherwin-Williams turpentine – rest on a piece of blank white paper, a set-up which Ruscha also used when photographing the pencils for *Noise*.<sup>28</sup> He shot the Spam tin several times, both frontally and cut in half, lying on its side with its jagged edges exposed (figs. 2.14 and 2.15). The photographs picture the product as clearly as possible, so that labels, package designs, and brand names are legible. Ruscha's photographic aesthetic– high contrast, emphasis on a single object, white background – indicate his familiarity with the standards of commercial advertising photography, a required area of knowledge for ad designers and one he would have learned at Chouinard. For the *Product Shots*, moreover, Ruscha used a Yashica camera, a relatively low-cost option that he had also worked with in his commercial art courses.

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<sup>28</sup> Ruscha took photographs of the setup, without any products, which show how he set a piece of white paper on the table and folded it against the wall to create a clean backdrop. The photograph, which is in a private collection, is reprinted in Margit Rowell, *Ed Ruscha, Photographer* (New York/Göttingen: Whitney Museum of American Art/Steidl, 2006), 15.



Using his photographs of the tin as well its measurements, Ruscha made a drawing of the product (Figure 2.16). While in the drawing the can is shown from the front, which flattens out its dimensionality, silver strips of paint at the edges suggest its curved metal lip. Ruscha reproduced the label, including the pink ham, in fairly precise detail, though the image is lightly painted, with jagged areas of unpainted canvas standing in for text. He also made a separate drawing, *Spam Grid* (1962), to map out what he called the “sausage-shaped letters” of the brand name (Figure 2.17). These drawings became tools to transfer the image to the canvas, which Ruscha again did with the aid of tracing paper and a projector.<sup>29</sup> After establishing the outlines in graphite, he applied paint, including white for plate and label text, in opaque layers. The tin, while still shown frontally, possesses a greater sense of dimensionality, and is now tilted, with the golden yellow tail extending from the left side. Protruding over the label, the metal edges gleam with white highlights. Stuck on a white background with flecks of blue paint, the can appears to be frozen, similar to the suspended tire in *Fallen but Frozen (Fisk)* (Figure 2.4). While these flecks and the painterly quality of the upper register loosely mimic gestural painting techniques, Ruscha countered any hint of spontaneity by leaving bare pencil lines throughout the work. The horizontal graphite line bisecting the blue and white sections of the canvas, for example, is clearly visible, with the blue paint shakily following its course. In the tail of the can, Ruscha penciled in the words “ACTUAL SIZE,” another insistence on the fact that the painting reproduces the object’s dimensions (Figure 2.18).

What is behind this insistence on representing objects at or around actual size – a quality that does not fit with Pop’s penchant for shrinking or inflating its subject matter? In

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<sup>29</sup> Ruscha has said that he either traced the drawing or drew the can based on the drawings and photographs, or that he may have used a combination of both. Ruscha, Conversation with the author, March 3, 2014.

an interview with Paul Karlstrom, Ruscha reflected on his conception of actual size. His answer, which sheds light on his methods, is worth quoting at length:

...when I choose an object, generally a small object, I can't render this object unless it is somehow faithful. I even go to the extent of measuring the object, and measuring the canvas almost. I have almost a duty to myself to represent that thing as closely as possible. In a sense, I'm taking all kinds of liberties without it, but if I, in my own mind know that the ashtray is five inches across, then if I make that somehow five inches across on the canvas, I have fulfilled one of those duties to the picture itself. ...the *Spam* picture is actually called actual size, and so I felt I was-- somehow in this whole subject, I was using a vast plane, a vast open area that was the limits of my canvas. And that this subject I selected was even more dramatized by the fact that it was made actual size than if it had been made four times that size. That's one of the differences between me and most of the other Pop artists, they were able to expand the sizes of their images, of the objects, and I didn't really do that. I wasn't able to do that.<sup>30</sup>

Ruscha's detailed description highlights the importance of actual size in his work and the lengths to which he went to represent it, even measuring objects in order to determine their dimensions on the canvas, or holding them up to the canvas to gauge their measurements against his representations.<sup>31</sup> While his work often began with appropriated images, often from newspapers and magazines, he frequently worked with objects as well. Why, then, this insistence on actual size? To begin to answer that question, I turn now to a longer history of design drawing, which offers a compelling model for articulating the conceptual dimensions of Ruscha's common objects paintings.

### **“Writing Forms of Objects:” Size, Scale, and Design Drawing**

In his paintings, Ruscha examined the intertwined concepts of size and scale, through drawing techniques that artists had used for many years (one example, as I discussed

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<sup>30</sup> Ruscha, quoted in *Oral history interview with Edward Ruscha, 1980 October 29-1981 October 2, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.*

<sup>31</sup> In other instance, he insisted that when working with portable objects, “I get out the ruler.” Ed Ruscha, quoted in Margit Rowell, *Cotton Puffs, Q-Tips, Smoke, and Mirrors: The Drawings of Ed Ruscha* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2004), 16.

in chapter 1, was the grid method, or “copying by squares”). Many of these techniques were far from new, and in fact had been a staple of design education since at least the 19<sup>th</sup> century. What does it mean that Ruscha continued to use similar strategies (though, of course, for very different purposes)? One way to approach this question is to look at how earlier artists, trained in commercial or non-fine art forms, used these systems in their art making, specifically in order to cultivate new models of modern painting. In this regard, Thomas Eakins offers an instructive point of comparison. Both Ruscha and Eakins were trained in technical forms of drawing, and both used the systems that they learned in their respective educational settings in their art practice, to address subjects such as the dynamics of vision, the mechanics of perspective, and the nature of the picture plane. While placing the two artists side-by-side is anachronistic, it is also a useful exercise to track changes over time in drawing pedagogy and practice, and in particular to pinpoint moments in which artists have used systems of technical and design drawing to propose new models of painting. Moreover, while comparing Ruscha to other Pop artists is a crucial task, it is by looking to Eakins that I have been able to productively think through Ruscha’s fixations with actual size and his conceptualization of scale.

Eakins, as has been well established in the literature, had extensive training in drawing. Between 1820 and 1860, drawing came to be seen as an instrumental skill not just for artists, but for all citizens of the United States. The “art crusade,” as Peter Marzio has called it, was driven by the belief in the edifying and democratizing properties of drawing instruction, epitomized in manuals such as Peale’s *Graphics*.<sup>32</sup> This training, as many scholars have noted, would prove to be crucial for Eakins’s art, as would his exposure to the practice

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<sup>32</sup> Peter Marzio, *The Art Crusade: An Analysis of American Drawing Manuals, 1820 – 1860* (Washington, D.C., Smithsonian Institution Press, 1976).

of writing through his father, a drawing master.<sup>33</sup> Over the years Eakins developed a precise system of drawing, which became the basis for how he represented objects, architecture, and the human figure. His drawings of a round-top table, an object that reappears throughout his manual, show how he employed multiple modes of drawing, from sketches to linear perspective, in his efforts to accurately capture his subject matter. In his detailed instructions, Eakins directed that the table should first be sketched, freehand, with its dimensions measured out and written on the drawing. He advised that the draftsmen must keep the object's specific qualities in mind: "the sketch you make of anything to be put in perspective should always be figured by measures of the principal parts, and to choose the principal parts we must follow the mind of the cabinet maker who constructed it."<sup>34</sup> After this step, the draftsmen should then produce a ground plan of the table, which he would then translate, square by scaled square, into a gridded picture plane.<sup>35</sup> Eakins's manual included illustrations of each step, from the first sketch to the mapping out of the circular top within a box, rotated at an oblique angle to the picture plane (Figure 2.19). Using the object's measurements, and following Eakins's rule of scaling ("twice as far off, half as big"), the draftsmen would transfer each part of the table, raised to its correct height, to the upright picture plane, thus ensuring, as much as possible, an accurate representation of the object.

As Michael Fried has persuasively argued, Eakins's dedication to accuracy defines his model of realism. His work, and his drawing manual, evinces his efforts to reconcile the

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<sup>33</sup> Eakins's manual is reproduced in Kathleen A. Foster, ed., *A Drawing Manual, by Thomas Eakins* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2005). See Kathleen A. Foster, "The Tools of Art: The Drawing Manual of Thomas Eakins," 9-26, and Amy B. Werbel, "Thomas Eakins: Last of the Art Crusaders," 27-44, both in this volume. On the theoretical underpinnings of Eakins's drawing, see Michael Fried's seminal work "Realism, Writing, and Disfiguration in Thomas Eakins's *Gross Clinic*, with a Postscript on Stephen Crane's Upturned Faces." *Representations* 9 (Winter 1985): 33 – 104.

<sup>34</sup> Eakins, *A Drawing Manual*, 62.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 64 – 65.

adjustments and distortions involved in translating the three-dimensional world into two-dimensional pictures. Ruminating on Eakins's rowing images, Fried writes:

We are made aware of surface of water as image-bearing horizontal plane; and inasmuch as that structure belongs to a complex of practices that at once posits and articulates such a plane, it is tempting to see in the finished paintings images of that condition of their own production – specifically, of their origins in writing/drawing; and what is more, of their insistence on these origins, their refusal to allow the horizontality of the sheet of paper to be wholly superseded by the verticality of the stretched canvas.<sup>36</sup>

Fried sees the distortions and pictorial irregularities in Eakins's work as embodying his this constant movement between the systems of writing and drawing, in what remained a futile quest to achieve flawless perspectival realism.

Ruscha's work is similarly infused with and reflexive upon his adherence to a specific system of drawing. Like Eakins, he found that technical drawing – in his case the commercial artist's toolbox – could be used to build a painting. Ruscha's drawing system, as we see in his early paintings, is deeply imprinted the commercial artist's conception of scale, as a tool (a scaling device, for example) but also as a concept, which governs the entire design process. When a commercial artist went from a thumbnail to a rough, for example, they had to adjust the scale of their images and text accordingly. In his manual, Felten described the scaling-down that occurred in thumbnails by calling them “small fundamental sketches....from which the actual-size layout will evolve.”<sup>37</sup> Because they worked in scaled-down form, in other words, designers had to project their ideas forward, to think ahead to how their designs would appear in print. Were they creating layouts for pages that would be skimmed by readers? Or crafting imagery for elevated billboards? These questions determined how designers worked, as they moved from rough to final mock-up.

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<sup>36</sup> Fried, “Realism, Writing, Disfiguration.”

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

As discussed in the first chapter, Ruscha learned to design images and lay out type for two-dimensional, human-scaled surfaces, such as magazine pages and brochures, with the aid of a variety of tools and devices.<sup>38</sup> To reiterate briefly here, the first process involves superimposing a grid of squares over the image to be copied. By breaking the image down into squares, it becomes more easily transferrable and scale-able. Other processes, such as the diagonal method, assisted with scaling pre-established images, whether hand drawings or printed images, to fit within specific constraints (Figure 1.11). Along with practicing these manual methods, Ruscha also learned how to use devices, such as projectors, as a quicker way to reduce and enlarge images, and to use tracing paper to transfer and edit during the course of the design process (Figure 2.20).<sup>39</sup> This kind of scaling, facilitated by mechanical devices, made the transferal and replication process more efficient. Another implement available to the designer was a circular scaling device made especially for graphics production (Figure 2.21). With this tool, a designer could quickly compute the proper dimensions for an enlargement or a reduction, and also calculate the percentages at which each image was to be enlarged or reduced.

Ruscha's methods of replication indicate that, like Eakins, he used the systems in which he had been trained to achieve, or at least aim for, a fidelity to objects. Through photographing objects, arranging them in different set-ups, tracing them, and drawing them again – a circuitous practice of drawing and re-drawing – Ruscha represented the same objects in different forms, almost as if trying to get as close as possible to thing itself, to

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<sup>38</sup> Ruscha, Conversation with the author, September 11, 2013.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

know it better, as Eakins attempted to do by drawing out the table.<sup>40</sup> Along with measuring the Spam tin, he documented it in different media, from black and white photographs to the small painted sketch. Certain objects, such as the pencil, the western, and the Spam tin, reappear especially frequently in Ruscha's work, and in different media. With the Spam tin, for example, Ruscha photographed it frontally but also on its side, with the bottom sliced off and the empty interior exposed (see figs. 2.14 and 2.15). While the photograph brings to mind descriptions of Pop as invested in the simulacral – Barthes's idea of empty containers, with nothing behind them – Ruscha re-asserts the tin's objecthood in his drawings and paintings of it, by emphasizing its rounded edges and gleaming metal lip. Filtered through the mechanisms of scaling, the tin ends up refusing the transformations of scale; instead, it remains stubbornly actual size.

While Ruscha and Eakins employed a similar framework of "writing forms of objects," the place of those objects in his paintings is very different than, for example, the way in which Eakins would use his drawings of a table in a composition. In Ruscha's paintings, actual size objects destabilize pictorial space. While the can appears to resist distortions in scale, the looming letters are dramatically scaled up, thus making the can seem utterly small. Stuck matter-of-factly on the white canvas, in the midst of flecks of paint, the tin's mute materiality refuses the distortions of scale exemplified in the looming yellow bubble letters, which take on the elasticity of printed space. Ultimately Ruscha's painting has an uncertain scale, a kind of scaleless-ness that occurs through the collision of different systems of scale within a single painting. Ruscha's use of abstract painting in the background reinforces the sense that things are un-hinged from the constraints of scale. In *Noise*, for

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<sup>40</sup> Both Eakins and Ruscha also used photography as a tool in their work, a point of connection that merits further exploration, as does their uses of perspective and other tools of mechanical drawing.

example, the objects seem stuck to an opaque blue surface that has no shading or contours; it is a plane of solid color.

In other cases, Ruscha uses tools particular to the mechanics of 1950s commercial art, especially tracing and tracing paper. For Peale, skill in drawing was gained through what he called “progressive conception of principles.” He cautioned that in drawing lessons, students should always be made to copy larger than the image that they were required to reproduce, to “guard against the temptation to measure or trace.”<sup>41</sup> In Ruscha’s work, this dynamic is reversed. While Ruscha utilized many of the same tools that Peale taught and Eakins employed, his gravitation towards actual size is a borrowing of commercial’s art focus on replication and reproduction in a quick, efficient manner. Ruscha went back to the beginning of this cycle, in a sense, by beginning with an object and running it through these processes. His *Product Still Lives* echo this procedure in commercial art: one first creates a clear image of the product, then transfers the image into a design. Ruscha’s adherence to tracing and frequent use of tracing paper is another indication of his absorption and use of commercial art’s mechanism for reproducing images (see Figure 2.20). Ruscha recalled that he made his images with any device available, and that tracing appealed to him because it veered towards automaticity, a kind of working without thinking.<sup>42</sup> This strategy, however, also indicates his persistent pursuit of a way to represent objects at their actual size.

There is another important point here, one that I will further explore in later chapters. Like Eakins’s work, Ruscha’s paintings also make evident the relationship between writing as drawing and representation as “writing forms of objects,” as Peale called it. This is how Peale outlined the relationship between writing and drawing in *Graphics*, and, as Fried

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<sup>41</sup> Peale, *Graphics*, 23.

<sup>42</sup> Ruscha, Conversation with the author, September 11, 2013.



argues, the way that writing and drawing were conceptualized in Eakins's work. For Ruscha, however, the surface of production is the drawing board, and the act of drawing and writing inscribed within the systems of design-based drawing and typography. Ruscha always drew the type that he integrated into his paintings, as was the case with *Actual Size*, in which he mapped out the word "Spam" with spacers employed in the laying out of type (see Figure 2.17). The study brings to mind typography lessons included in layout manuals (Figure 2.22). He used the drawing to scale the letters up, as they appear in the top register of the 1962 painting. For Ruscha, text was always type, measured and spaced to fit within specific constraints and drawn from a pre-established system of typefaces. He indicated the systematization of type in his tracing of the magazine, in which he inserted guidelines, not seen on the magazine itself, into his drawing (see Figure 2.11). This does not mean, however, that type is restricted to the realm of two dimensions. While the type used in the Spam logo appears adamantly flat and one-dimensional, colored in with opaque yellow, in *Noise* Ruscha injects dimensionality into the letters, by suggesting that they cast shadows and have the potential to rotate in space. This representation of type alludes to its composition as cast metal forms in the linotype process. Ruscha only suggests this, however; in most cases his words inhabit the realm of type design before printing, the moment when the designer decides on and spaces the type on the page.

Ruscha's understanding of type is also inflected by his conception of scale. It would appear that words, unlike a Spam tin, are not measurable, but are able to be scaled up and down infinitely. He suggested as much in the interview cited above, when he queried, "what size is a word after all?...Is it ten point, twelve point, or as big as the wall?"<sup>43</sup> Yet Ruscha knew well that words – that is to say, commercial typography, like the Spam brand – *do* have

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<sup>43</sup> Ruscha, quoted in *Oral history interview with Edward Ruscha, 1980 October 29-1981 October 2*, AAA.

an actual size: their actual size in print, a size indicated in the preparatory design drawings for all printed matter. Since every design was eventually translated into print, layout artists had to conceive of scale in terms translatable to commercial printers, just as architectural drawings must communicate to construction workers, engineers, and electricians. When designers mocked up designs into the final template for printing, they carefully indicated the desired style and size of the type that the printers should employ. This is why designers used the units of points and picas, absolute measurements which printers used to set type (in the 50s and 60s, usually with a linotype machine).<sup>44</sup> In his drawing for the lettering, Ruscha did not use picas and points, but he did employ a measured-out grid to map out the text and make it easily translatable and scale-able. Dramatically enlarging the letters when transferring them to the canvas, Ruscha set up a contrast between the actual, concrete, measured size of the Spam tin and the gridded, drawn, enlarged typography of the brand name. Ruscha's words are always to the design of letters on the drawing board, where they are converted into reproducible systems, and moreover where they can be scaled infinitely. In this way, his text gestures towards the very concrete referent: typography. This offers a different take on Yve-Alain Bois's notion that Ruscha represents visual "noise."<sup>45</sup> Bois sees Ruscha's words as "vomited utterances," "spat and spewed," plucked from their circuits of meaning – and, I would add, from their circuits of scaling.

Ruscha's paintings gesture to the drawing board but also scramble its methods of representation. His work suggests that scale distortions underlie all advertising and design spaces, precisely because his objects refuse scaling and remain at or near their actual sizes. In

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<sup>44</sup> Felten discusses the pica and its importance in *Layout*, 113 – 114. See also Jim Felici, *The Complete Manual of Typography: A Guide to Setting Type, Second Edition* (Peachpit: Berkeley, CA, 2012), 22-27.

<sup>45</sup> See Yve-Alain Bois, "Thermometers Should Last Forever." In *Edward Ruscha: Romance with Liquids, Paintings 1966-1969* (New York: Rizzoli/Gagosian Gallery, 1993). Lisa Pasquariello also discusses Ruscha's engagements with language in "Ed Ruscha and the Language that He Used."

nineteen fifties Spam ads, a common strategy was to juxtapose the tin with large illustrations (later photographs) of meals made with Spam: plates of Spam and eggs, Spam-wiches, Spam 'n' banana fritters (Figure 2.23). With this juxtaposition of images and text comes the merging of different perspectives: in the fritters ad, for example, the plate is pictured from above, appearing to tilt upwards towards the reader, so to as better showcase its entirety. The comparatively smaller Spam tin interjects at the right, rendered as an axonometric projection. In a sandwich ad, the can is rotated upside down, its top open, with pink slices of Spam spilling out and downwards into the next block, in which the sandwich is pictured.

Organized in a flowing zigzag of pink Spam and red tomato slices, the flow leads the reader's eye down the page to the ad copy. In many ads the typography was used on its own, apart from the label, as a means to reinforce the brand identity. Ruscha's paintings pick up on and heighten these effects: the tin is rotated, and given a tail; the typography is paired with an image of the product, but is so large that the product appears comically small. In *Actual Size*, Ruscha combines the objects and type with paint splatters, and also divides them into two registers, a construction that suggests both abstract painting and the production of layout, in which everything is slotted into boxes. In *Noise*, however, Ruscha dispensed with this residue of gestural painting, placing just four objects – two pencils, a magazine, and rotated words – in the picture. The blue surface instead suggests the abstract monochrome, particularly Yves-Klein's blue paintings. Ruscha's adherence to the actual size of banal objects, however, counters the visuality of abstract painting and anchors it in the world of banal consumer products. Objects counter the opticality of the monochrome with their actual-size presence, which seems to press on the surface of the painting. Broken pencils, a magazine, and words all seem frozen and stuck on the blue paint, which makes it read as surface rather than as window, or as absorptive color field. The actual dimensions of the canvas – it is almost six

feet tall – reinforce Ruscha’s adherence to human-scaled things. The canvas relates to the body, just as the things that populate it are portable objects, familiar things that many viewers will inherently know are shown at about actual size, because they have held them in their own hands. Even as we can intuit the size of the objects, however, our perception of scale in the painting is destabilized by the words, whose only “true” size is as they are represented.

These actual size objects defeat the effects of scaling at work in drawing board design, in which multiple images and texts come together as a cohesive whole, made seamless by the smoothing effects of offset printing. In this way, Ruscha’s paintings highlight just how much shifts in scale can elicit befuddling and humorous effects and moreover, how these shifts can disrupt our perception of images.<sup>46</sup> A comically small object, the Spam can is like a humorous hiccup, a leftover from the moments before applying tools to shift scale and alter images. Attached to a painted tail, the can draws our scrutiny as well as our laughter, as Ruscha transforms it into a Spam comet that insists on its actual size. In this way, Ruscha worked out a mode of painting that responded to contemporary models of abstract painting, namely gestural abstraction and the monochrome, and to Pop’s focus on consumer products. For him, the navigation of these models occurred through his deployment of design tools, especially scale, which was a way to think through how painting could represent such banal things as cans, pencils, and tires.

Like other artists identified with Pop, Ruscha deployed scale as part of what Barthes called Pop art’s art-non art fugue, its constant wavering between something being art and

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<sup>46</sup> In this regard Ruscha’s model of painting evinces a conflict between different system of seeing and knowing, as Michael Leja argues is the case for Eakins. Leja argues that Eakins developed a model of realism that attempted to overcome the limits of realism, specially the limitations of vision, appearances, and mimesis. See Leja, “Eakins and Icons,” *Art Bulletin* 83 (September 2001): 479 – 497.

something being stubborn material fact.<sup>47</sup> Ruscha, who was not included in Barthes's assessment, offers another take on the dynamics of scale in Pop. For Barthes, Pop's radical shifting of scale (shrinking or enlarging), as well as strategies of repetition, and conformity to its subject matter, transformed images into fact, or pure signifier. In this sense Pop reversed the traditional metaphorical dynamics of art, in which fact becomes image. In Ruscha's paintings, it is both the refusal of scale and the injection of humor that punctures the metaphorical project of painting as a transferal of the real world into image. For Ruscha that transferal occurred through the mechanics of design, and it was especially scaling tools that governed the transferal of objects into images. Scaling operations, in other words, were his language of representation and translation, the system through which he filtered the objects that he sought to make the subject of his paintings. Ruscha's confrontation with the facts of things came in the form of his studying of them in the studio, but he then always filtered their objecthood through multiple transferals and representations, as if this work was required to flatten and compress them into images. Ruscha's pencils, cans, and tins, however, refuse one of the most important properties of images: their scale-ability. In his early painting, as he navigated his own movement into the art world, Ruscha evoked commercial's art systems for representation and reproduction, only to invert the scaling capacities of design through the persistence of rotated, frozen, and broken actual size objects, which trouble pictorial coherence, spatiality, and opticality. Beyond asking if these objects are or are not art, or if they can become it, Ruscha takes on the question of how scaling impacts everything how we see and perceive printed matter. By becoming scale-less, his paintings take stock of these conditions, in a manner both analytical and humorous.

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<sup>47</sup> Barthes, "That Old Thing, Art."

## The Picture Plane in Postwar Art

The discussion of objects, surface, and scale in Ruscha's paintings evokes a crucial discussion in the nature of postwar painting, namely the conversations on the picture plane. His object paintings, borrowing the techniques and conceptual apparatuses of design, posit a pictorial order grounded not in illusionistic representation or in the modernist monochrome, but in the mechanics of the drawing board world. This places Ruscha's work within a longer history of modernist painting as a self-reflexive enterprise, concerned to examine operations of representation and the constitution of reality as a system of signs. For Ruscha, however, that question was embedded within the framework of the drawing board, the epistemic thing through which he worked out these questions.

The critical literature on the picture plane is well-trodden territory, and I will recapitulate it only briefly here in order to establish the ways in which my analysis of Ruscha's paintings can help us to see this concept anew. I begin my discussion with Clement Greenberg's 1960 *Voices of America* pamphlet, which laid out the criteria for what would become his immensely influential view of modernist painting. Greenberg saw modernist painting as a Kantian project of self-criticism, in that its chief concern was in pursuing and establishing the limiting conditions of painting as such. Modernism, as he wrote, "has found that these limits can be pushed back indefinitely before a picture stops being a picture and turns into an arbitrary object; but it has also found that the further back these limits are pushed the more explicitly they have to be observed and indicated."<sup>48</sup> Whereas the "Old Masters" strove to create the illusion of three-dimensional space, modernist painters emphasized the flatness of the picture plane, so that "one sees a Modernist picture as a

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<sup>48</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," reprinted in Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism Vol. 4, Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957 – 69*, John O'Brien, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 89- 90.

picture first.” In this way, modernist painting reversed the traditional dynamics of pictorial space.

While many critics borrowed and extended Greenberg’s conception of modernist painting, many disputed it, giving rise to a series of debates that have become a cornerstone of scholarship on postwar American art. One of the most compelling exchanges between Greenberg and his critics occurred when Leo Steinberg, trained as an historian of Renaissance art, took issue with Greenberg’s conception of the Old Masters. Rather than seeing modernist painting as reversing the dynamics of pictorial space, Steinberg argued that painting, from the Renaissance to the work of Jackson Pollock and Morris Louis, was bound together by the conception of the picture plane as a vertically oriented surface, a space corresponding to the upright human body. In Johns and Rauschenberg’s work, Steinberg saw a radical shift in the orientation of painting, a move from the vertical, the world of perspectival illusionism and picture-as-window, to the horizontal, the space of reading, the world of data transmission and the tabulation of information. It was not only the look of the work that was different; its very mode of address had shifted as well. This flatbed picture plane, as he called it, corresponded to the experience of the urban city dweller, who perceived the world through the lens of images, surfaces, data, and information. In this way, the flatbed constituted a seismic transformation in twentieth century art, solving what had become a pressing problem – how to make the painting “a firsthand reality” – by shifting the subject matter from nature to culture.<sup>49</sup> For Steinberg, this shift indicated no less than a transition from modernist to post-modernist art.

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<sup>49</sup> Leo Steinberg, “Other Criteria,” in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth Century Art* (London/New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 28.

As Steinberg wrote, one of the chief strategies of transferring the real into the space of painting was the inclusion of pre-established subject matter. He cited Johns's representation of objects such as a wire coat hanger, numbers and letters, and a cheap flashlight as a primary example. All of these objects, Steinberg noted, were pre-made things, and moreover utterly banal things, which "nobody buys or selects." In an oft-cited conversation, Steinberg pressed Johns on why he chose his subject matter:

Steinberg: You nearly always use the same type. Any particular reason?

Johns: That's how the stencils come.

Steinberg: But if you preferred another typeface, would you think it improper to cut your own stencils

Johns: Of course not.

Steinberg: Then you really do like these best?

Johns: Yes.

Steinberg: Do you use these letter types because you like them or because that's how the stencils come?

Johns: But that's what I like about them, that they come that way.<sup>50</sup>

Stencils offered pre-made templates for representing letters and numbers just as for Ruscha, typefaces constituted pre-established forms for words. Moreover, the size of the letters (or in the terminology of commercial printing, their point) was already established with the stencils. In the case of objects, Johns gravitated towards "things which are seen and not looked at, not examined, and they both have clearly defined areas which could be measured and

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<sup>50</sup> Steinberg, *Other Criteria*, 32. As he later acknowledged, Steinberg composed the interview for his essay based on previous conversations with Johns, rather than transcribed dialogue. Nonetheless, as Amy K. Hamlin has argued, Steinberg's critical stance suggests a model of approaching Johns's art, a posture of exploring rather than explaining it. As Hamlin notes, many interviewers of Johns have found it more productive to discuss process rather than interpretation with Johns. Kirk Varnedoe, for example, noted that Johns "talks in terms of making rather than meaning," in Kirk Varnedoe, *Jasper Johns: Writing, Sketchbook Notes, Interviews*: New York (Museum of Modern Art, 1996), 259. See Amy K. Hamlin, "A heuristic event...the Johnsonian conversation," *Journal of Art Historiography* 7 (December 2012): 1-17.



transferred to canvas.”<sup>51</sup> The wire coat hanger, another consummate Johnsian object, likewise fulfills the criteria of accessibility, ordinariness, and easy measurability.<sup>52</sup> Johns repeated the coat hanger in different media, such as lithography, drawing, and painting (Figure 2.24). It appeared, in object form, in the 1964 painting *According to What*, among other works (Figure 2.25). In each iteration, whether sketched on paper, drawn on the stone, or stuck on the canvas, the object remains resolutely, stubbornly the same size, seeming to resist any kind of illusionistic slight-of-hand that could insert it into deep space or into an ordered composition. Evoking the worlds of printed things, data, and information, the flatbed embodied an aesthetic of collection and assemblage, on which things were adhered, stuck or pressed – a receptor surface, as Steinberg put it – rather than organized into a deep-space window-on-the-world picture plane. In Johns’s work, the preservation of actual size imprints the work with the materiality of objects.

Many scholars, among them Ken Allan, Hal Foster, Lisa Pasquariello, and Alexandra Schwartz, have mapped out Ruscha’s interest in common and actual-sized objects as stemming from his engagement with Johns. Foster also sees Ruscha’s actual-size objects as similar to folk art, in which things are often shown at actual size (traditionally regarded as a mark of the artist’s naïveté).<sup>53</sup> Early reviews of Ruscha’s work placed it within the context of trompe l’oeil, another connection to Johns, and Ruscha himself suggested a materialist

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<sup>51</sup> Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, <http://www.pafa.org/museum/Exhibitions/Past-Exhibitions/Jasper-Johns-Flag/798/>

<sup>52</sup> Johns and Ruscha also both worked fluidly across media. Johns represented the wire coat hanger in drawings, paintings, and prints, an important consideration in the discussion of these works. For more on Johns’s representations of coat hangers, see Jennifer Roberts, *Jasper Johns / In Press: The Crosshatch Works and the Logic of Print*. Cambridge: Harvard Art Museums/Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2012); Nan Rosenthal and Ruth Fine, *The Drawings of Jasper Johns* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1990). It is also notable that Steinberg discusses the coat hanger at length in “Jasper Johns: The First Seven Years of His Art,” in *Other Criteria*, 28-29, 54.

<sup>53</sup> Foster, *The First Pop Age*, 220.

dedication to objects over their symbolic content.<sup>54</sup> As these scholars have noted, many of Ruscha's 60s paintings evince his penchant for rendering objects at actual size. Other examples, in addition to *Actual Size* and *Noise*, include *Talk About Space* (1963), with a single pencil touching the edge of the frame and pointing upwards, again gesturing towards the photographs he had taken in the studio (Figure 2.23); *Hurting the Word Radio #2* (1964) with its shadow-casting words and clamps; *Standard Station with Ten-Cent Western Being Torn in Half* (1964), with a painted newspaper; and *Flash, L.A. Times* (1963), with a curving, folded newspaper (figs 2.26, 2.27, and 2.28). In the case of the last painting, Ruscha's sketchbooks indicate, he thoroughly studied the folds and forms of the newspaper, as it lay folded in half on a table. For the magazine – another reappearance of the cheap western – Ruscha used Domar varnish, noting approvingly in his sketchbook “it looks good that way – looks more 3-d (Figure 2.29)”<sup>55</sup> His studies evince his efforts to make the newspaper appear three-dimensional. As is the case with these other works, Ruscha mapped out the object on pencil and paper before transferring it to the canvas.

Rooted as they are in the scaling dynamics of design, Ruscha's paintings offer a new way to think about the orientation of pictures and the nature of the picture plane. The primary surface Ruscha evokes in his painting does not fit neatly into Steinberg's binary of the horizontal and the vertical, a pairing often invoked when discussing modernist painting.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Don Factor, “Reviews: ‘Six Painters and the Object,’ and ‘Six More,’” *Artforum* 2 (September 1963): 13. In his review Factor, commenting on the 1963 work *Talk About Space*, another work with a yellow pencil, wrote “Attention to the spatial continuity of the entire picture space is called...by various fool-the-eye objects such as the pencil...” Factor's review is typical of the reception of Ruscha's work at the time, especially those strains which attempted to emphasize its Americanness. Johnanna Drucker was an early voice in complicating received views of 19<sup>th</sup> century American trompe l'oeil; see her essay “Harnett, Haberle, and Peto: Visuality and Artifice among the Proto-Modern Americans,” *Art Bulletin* 74 (March 1992): 37-50.

<sup>55</sup> Sketchbook page reproduced in PP, 124 – 125.

<sup>56</sup> The horizontal/vertical is a set of terms that reappears with particular frequency in literature on modern art (and beyond). Scholars have inflected the terms in different ways, but the fundamental tension rests in the difference between how we encounter printed materials – things made on the printing press, and read on desks

His paintings have a different spatial construction, as they are imprinted with the way space is represented on the drawing board. In the next section, I will examine this spatial mode in regard to his design training and way of thinking, and further discuss how he employs it in his paintings. Finally, I return to the flatbed conversation in order to bring full circle my discussion of Ruscha's model of painting.

## **Part II. The Space of Painting**

In Ruscha's painting, each object exists in its own shallow space, as if each is caught in a box in which it can be partially rotated. The cheap western magazine in *Noise* presents an especially salient example of this shallow space into which Ruscha places his objects.

Hovering just above the edge of the frame, it seems to be caught in mid-air, and poised right above the bottom of the frame. The top curves outwards from the binding, with a slice of yellow paint, embedded with faint black lines, representing the magazine's pages. Behind the pages, a slice of white indicates the interior of the back cover. The three-dimensionality – a tentative three-dimensionality, because it is so subtle – becomes more legible from a certain viewpoint, as we move around to the side of the painting and view it obliquely. The effect, only visible when viewing the painting is person, is strangely similar to that of famous anamorphic skull in Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors* (1553).

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and tables – and how perceive pictures – objects hung on walls and vertically oriented. As discussed earlier, Fried articulated the tension, as seen in Eakins's work, as between writing/drawing and painting. To cite another notable example, Yve-Bois and Rosaline Krauss, borrowing from Georges Bataille, have invoked the concept of the informe, that of the horizontal and the debased, as a challenge to modernist painting. See Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997). Bois and Krauss borrow also from Walter Benjamin's discussions of the longitudinal and the transversal. Kerry Brougher writes on the vertical and horizontal in Ruscha's work in "Words as Landscape," in Neal Benezra, *Ed Ruscha* (Washington, D.C.: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2000), 161-162.

The idea that objects exist in boxes appears in many of Ruscha's early paintings. Eakins's table top illustration exemplifies this technique (see Figure 2.19). At times Ruscha also evokes another method of design drawing: the breaking down of an object into a ground plan, a technique that he referenced in his drawing *Box Smashed Flat*, in which the rectangular packaging is flattened into geometric shapes (see Figure 2.33). This mode of conceptualizing objects, rooted in the mechanics of design drawing, would also be important in his work in other media, as I will discuss in the forthcoming chapters. Ruscha's strategies for representing objects in space, and his broader construction of space in his paintings has two important implications for understanding his model of painting. First, it reveals another quality Ruscha borrows from design drawing, which relates to the historical status of design drawing vis-à-vis consumer culture. Second, the spatiality of Ruscha's paintings troubles the oppositions between vertical and horizontal, and instead proposes a different space, one governed by operations of the drawing board.

### **Drawing Mass Culture**

The Spam tins, magazines, tires, and pencils that populate the spaces of Ruscha's paintings are one of the most "Pop" qualities of his work. While Ruscha professed a fidelity to the dimensions of objects, his conception of their symbolic or iconographic content is far more oblique. At times, he has suggested a very specific meaning for an object, such as his notion that the Spam tin evokes space travel. In other cases, he indicated that he engaged with objects on a purely formal level, as with the pencil, which simply presented a long skinny form that he wanted to add into a painting. Ruscha also has spoken more generally of his gravitation towards objects of common culture, as expressed vividly in the 1962 collage in which he dreamed of a pinball machine as a "master idea." The idea that seems to best

capture Ruscha's way of viewing objects, however, is his notion of "an imaginary scrapbook of ideas."<sup>57</sup> This scrapbook, as we have seen, is not only a conceptual device. It also takes the form of notebooks, loose pages, sketches here and there, and object photos that I have discussed in this chapter.

The question of content is a way to get at the fact that for Ruscha, content is in the presentation – the presentation of things as things of design, drawings as blueprints of objects. To put it another way, the message is the medium. With the tools of design drawing and layout, Ruscha had a means to not only represent consumer objects, but also to examine their construction and origins. In his work, these objects are present first as designs, not as finished things. Under every magazine or Spam tin is a drawing, which shows that object in scale and from different views, so that it is pictured in its totality. The spaces of these designs, as suggested in this illustration, is also something Ruscha's work borrows; that is, the positioning of objects in shallow spaces in which they can be rotated and in which each side of the object is shown (Figure 2.30) Producing these views would have been a key lesson in Chouinard's projection drawing course. Ruscha's positioning of objects brings this mode of drawing to mind: sometimes flat and frontal, like the pencils or the Spam tin, other times, disassembled into plans, as with the raisin box. In other cases he represented objects turned and in on oblique view, as it the case with the *Fisk* tire. Ruscha's drawings also demonstrate that he conceived of objects in geometrical shapes and as projections – in the language of design. In the works *Can* and *Cans*, Ruscha switches between a paste-up of the cans (layout) and a sketch of them (projection drawing) (Figure 2.31 and 2.32). The sketch mirrors a page from Felten, in which a collection of roughs shows a can in different position.

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<sup>57</sup> Ruscha, quoted in *Oral history interview with Edward Ruscha, 1980 October 29-1981 October 2, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.*

The illustration is for a lesson on how to “activate” the object most effectively for the given context.<sup>58</sup> In these drawings, which bring to mind Warhol’s serial presentation of his *Campbell’s Soup Cans* at Ferus, Ruscha repeats the can nine times, with each drawing situated within a box in a 3x3 grid.<sup>59</sup> While Warhol’s organization evokes store shelves, Ruscha’s drawing references the mechanics of picturing the commodity in advertisements, pointing back to the kind of working out of roughs Felten explains in his manual. Ruscha’s working drawings for *Box Smashed Flat* represents another instance of his examination of the design of consumer goods. For this drawing, Ruscha disassembled the raisin box, flattened it, then traced it with an opaque projector (Figure 2.33). The outlines and schematic form suggest the forms of package design, an entire field of study at Chouinard. In this drawing Ruscha again manipulated scale, by first scaling the box up, then down again when he transferred the image to a painting (see Figure 2.5).

While in *Box Smashed Flat* Ruscha altered the object itself, in other paintings, such as *Fisk*, he worked with appropriated printed images, replicated via projection and tracing. In this painting, it is as if the drawing blueprint is all that is left, with painting only a residue. Ruscha uses one color and applies it lightly to the background, which suggest the look of watercolor wash. The only object in the painting, the floating tire, is from a long-running campaign of the United Rubber Company, which featured a young boy holding a tire over his arm (Figure 2.34). Ruscha traced the tire directly his printed source, but eliminated the figure, with the result that the tire appears to float. The gesture emphasizes the negative space at the tire’s center and its oblique positioning. At the top of the canvas, the brand

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<sup>58</sup> Felten, *Layout*, 62.

<sup>59</sup> For more on Warhol’s *Soup Cans* at Ferus see David McCarthy, “Andy Warhol’s *Silver Elvises*: Meaning Through Context at the Ferus Gallery,” *The Art Bulletin* 88 (June 2006): 354 – 372.

name's serif typeface, also traced from the ad, echoes the white negative space of the tire. With its minimal surface, the work seems to be under construction: graphite lines, like the skeleton of the ad's design, remain visible, while the thin paint encircling the letters exposes bare patches of canvas. The framework of drawing remains intact, thus calling to mind drafted designs for the tire, in which different views are shown and treads and interior are exposed. In this framework, the oblique angling of the tire functions to show its qualities and appearance as an object, something crucial in design drawings (so that the object can be properly manufactured) and in ads (so that the consumer can get the fullest and most imaginative picture of the object).<sup>60</sup> This technique, as we saw in the first chapter, was taught to designers as "visualization" – the ability to imagine and draw objects in all their dimensions.<sup>61</sup>

In Ruscha's work, mass cultural objects are filtered through the design drawing and layout techniques of commercial art, the same methods by which these objects – magazines, Spam tins, etc. – are produced. Ruscha's drawing framework of objects – the framework that facilitated his research on objects, his reproductions of them, and his representations of them in painting – is indicative of a significant way that he engages the Duchampian readymade. Ruscha's work has often been theorized as part of the wave of Duchampian reception in the United States, a moment spurred by the 1958 publication of his biography in English and the 1963 exhibition at the Pasadena Museum. However, even before Ruscha saw this show, the "readymade" was present for him, in the illustrations he learned to design for ads, the photography of commercial products, the designing of typography. Every letter,

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<sup>60</sup> Tires appear often in Pop – in the work of Richard Hamilton and James Rosenquist, to name a few examples, as well as in Robert Rauschenberg and John Cage's *Tire Print* (1953). I will explore the especially close connections between Hamilton and Ruscha's depictions of tires in the final chapter of the dissertation.

<sup>61</sup> Significantly, patents for tires require this type of drawing, which shows the tire in several views.

every image, every page of a magazine had its origins in design drawing. Ruscha's conception of ready made things, even at the moment when he saw the retrospective, already had a great deal in common with the way Duchamp's readymade. As Molly Nesbit argued, Duchamp also understood mass cultural objects in relation to their origins in design drawing.<sup>62</sup> Nesbit connects his model of non-retinal art to his education in the French school system, in which all children were taught a specific system of mechanical drawing. In mechanical drawing, the aim is not to replicate human perception of objects, but to capture their actual size and dimensions, so that they can be accurately manufactured. For Nesbit, Duchamp's references to mechanical drawing indicated his investment in a conceptual over a visual model of art, in that mechanical drawing pointed to what was underneath the commodity, rather than its surface appearance. By referencing the system of commodity production and the foundation of its repetition as mass objects (designs that were reproduced *en masse*), Duchamp, for a moment, attempted to seize the means of production, to make art that allowed him to "escape the tyranny of the shop window."

Ruscha's work, in contrast to the readymades, wavers between seamlessly replicating objects and maintaining distinctions between the object and the representation. With the cheap western magazine in *Noise*, for example, while Ruscha took carefully copied the cover, he inserted one small detail that differentiates the painted image from the source material (Figure 2.35). On the cover of the magazine, a small black X and "C- 7 26" above the cowboy's shoulder. These markings do not appear on the magazine itself, which remains in Ruscha's archive (Figure 2.36). As mentioned above, in the black and white magazine tracing Ruscha sketched in guidelines, not seen in the actual magazine, for the text. In the painting, these lines disappear, just as they do in the printed magazine. Ruscha also imbues this

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<sup>62</sup> Molly Nesbit, "Ready-Made Originals: The Duchamp Model," *October* 37 (Summer 1986): 53- 64.



printed object with a sense of rotational spatiality, akin to the position of the tire in *Fisk*. Pivoted just slightly and tipped a little forward, the magazine's spine and interior are visible. This positioning evokes the picturing of sides and interiors in design drawings, in which all views of an object must be represented. Neither flat nor entirely illusionistic, the object occupies an interstitial spatial dimension. Almost seeming to project from the canvas, the magazine remains contained within the two-dimensional realm, and anchored in the design systems that give it its form and orientation.

### **Reorienting the Flatbed**

Ruscha's paintings absorb and reconfigure the spaces and systems of drawing board production. His canvases also suggest its temporality, nowhere more than in *Noise, Pencil, Broken Pencil, Cheap Western*. With its two pencils, magazine, and perspectively-constructed type, *Noise* hints at the segmented nature of Ruscha's process, the breaking down of picture-making into stages.<sup>63</sup> Pieced together from photographs and drawings, projected and traced, and carefully painted, the work declares its pre-meditation. This is a picture of design-in-process, a painting that internalizes the "writing forms of objects" that underlies Ruscha's practice. In fact, Ruscha's paintings absorb the moveable, flexible nature of the board – the literal tilting of it, but also its conceptual textures and physical movements. The drawing board moves between the table and the wall; it can act as a table on which to work, but it can also be carried and tilted. The designs worked out on it can be horizontally and vertically oriented. These designs become things carried and mailed and pinned up on walls, things

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<sup>63</sup> Foster suggests this idea as well (without exploring how this breaking down occurs) in *The First Pop Age*, 210.

that move and migrate and are viewed from different directions, and folded, carried, and placed in laps. Pictures, illustrations, and type scraps are adhered to it, moved and traced and incorporated into an integrated design.

Drawing and photography were the primary means by which Ruscha navigated between these different media and sources, which, as we have seen, filled his studio. At times he used devices to focus on specific parts of these sources, as seen in studio photographs that show how he engaged with his scrapbook of materials. In one, a photograph sits atop a frame, another frame sits on top of newspaper, an empty frame is propped against the wall, and a study for *Radio* hangs on the wall (Figure 2.37). *LIFE*, seen here, appears in many forms in Ruscha's work, as a source, something pinned on the wall, or otherwise present in the studio. Another group of working photographs, relating to a project with John Altoon, indicates how Ruscha's studio was a collaborative environment. The first work, a spoof *LIFE* magazine cover, combines an image of Lee Harvey Oswald and Tarzan, with Altoon's visage. Ruscha designed the lettering, which he made by framing and tracing those from the magazine, also a technique he used for his own drawing of a *LIFE* cover. In the second, a tube of Colgate toothpaste extrudes the white paste, which curves into the mouth of an alligator.

Ruscha's photographs are conceptualizations of the way that he worked and the way that he conceived of art making, and at that moment, painting. He would commonly set up the paintings in his studio space and work between canvases, mobbing between tables full of objects, rubber cement and drawings, scraps of printed matter and photographs. There was something about this environment – packed full of visual material – that Ruscha found appealing and productive. When he tried to work in a larger studio, he felt that his paintings

looked like “postage stamps,” an effect he found disconcerting.<sup>64</sup> But in the smaller scale studio space, painting such as *1964*, at 30 x 28 inches, seemed to fit right in with a *LIFE* cover, photograph for an *Artforum* ad for one of his shows, a calendar, and numerous other scraps of paper (Figure 2.38). On the desk rests Ruscha’s usual spread of tools, including a jar of pencils and leads. The ubiquitous pencil appears again in the painting. This time a bright red, its lead points out to the left, almost touching the top of the frame.

This photograph encapsulates the setup in which Ruscha executed his paintings, and the space in which his model of painting took shape. This model comes to its culmination in *Noise*. In this painting, banal objects and a word invade this painted space, anchoring it in the world of consumer culture as filtered through Ruscha’s transferal and replication techniques (the very mechanisms of that culture). Against the hard blue background, two systems of signifying three-dimensionality and space – the illusionistic chiaroscuro of the pencils and magazine and the linear perspective that organizes the text – seem all the more incongruous, and the actual-size objects all too small in the blue space. The painting embodies drawing board-production in process, before each image made on the board is organized into a coherent layout, when things are still scattered. It is a picture plane that is as much about the making of design, self-conscious as to process of production, as it is about reorganizing the space of painting. Ruscha’s consistent use of the pencil is perhaps his most self-reflexive gesture in this regard. Like Johns’s coat hanger, the pencil is of the most ordinary kind – the yellow No. 2 pencil with the bubblegum pink eraser. The pencil, like the hanger, anchors Ruscha’s work in a world of actual-size, portable objects, one of the “reachable-thinkable

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<sup>64</sup> Ruscha, quoted in *Oral history interview with Edward Ruscha, 1980 October 29-1981 October 2*, AAA.

things” and ubiquitous things that most viewers have held and used.<sup>65</sup> For Ruscha everything “reachable thinkable” came from the studio environment, in which every space was covered with ephemera and tools, and every surface utilized for working.

The spaces and structure of Ruscha’s paintings, as well as the way he worked, is governed by the drawing board’s function as a pivot between the vertical space of painting and the horizontal spaces of writing, drawing, and printed matter. The liminality of the apparatus board, in other words, is woven into Ruscha’s paintings.<sup>66</sup> For Steinberg, the flatbed evoked a number of surfaces, from a canceled plate to an aerial view, “any flat documentary surface that tabulates information is a relevant analogue of his picture plane – radically different from the transparent projection plane with its optical correspondence to man’s visual field.”<sup>67</sup> While all of the forms Steinberg cited traffic in the delivery of information, they achieve this delivery through very different means. Ruscha’s drawing-board picture plane represents one iteration of the flatbed, one with origins in the pedagogy and processes of 1950s commercial art. Rooted in one very specific mode of information delivery, Ruscha’s work plumbs the space between that mode and the space of pictures. His paintings are, to paraphrase Steinberg, for the brain of the man immersed in a designed world.

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<sup>65</sup> Kevin Hatch has suggested that the pencil functions like a ruler in scientific photographs. However, this scaling function is destabilized, because there is nothing that the pencil is supposed measured. Instead, the pencils hover in strange places and confuse our perception of scale. Kevin Hatch, “‘Something Else?’ Ed Ruscha’s Photographic Books,” *October* 111 (Winter 2005): 107-126.

<sup>66</sup> This spatial mode characterizes Ruscha’s word paintings and drawings, which, by dint of their subject matter may seem at first more adamantly about horizontality. His ribbon words, curled as if standing on surfaces, seem more stuck to some drawing board than on a flat, horizontal surface, as they often seem to be projecting outwards or sideways, and traffic in illusionism in the way that the painted Spam can seem rounded at some points, only to retreat into flatness. *Annie Poured from Maple Syrup* is another good example. Ruscha’s studies for this work indicate that he was fixated on the look of liquids on surfaces. For more on Ruscha’s liquid word paintings see Bois, “Thermometers Last Forever.”

<sup>67</sup> Steinberg, “Other Criteria,” 88.

The drawing board model extends to Ruscha's sizing of his canvases, which, while larger than a standard drawing board, seem constrained to its scale. Neither overwhelmingly large nor exceptionally diminutive, paintings such as *Fisk* and *Actual Size* were just large enough to correspond roughly to the human body, and small enough to be carried around the studio. As discussed above, the scale of Ruscha's canvases figures prominently into his model of painting as a scale-less space, something different than both the space of design and of modernist painting. His description of his paintings resonates with physically and materially evocative language that sheds light on how he conceived of the dimensions of his canvases:

...by extending my arms and moving physically across the room, and stacking and being able to manipulate the picture. If it had been, say, seven feet across, I couldn't get into this habit of handling my work as easily as if it had been sixty-seven inches wide. It seemed perfect to the idea of moving these things around. I painted maybe fifteen or twenty pictures that I kept around my studio for two or three years and I was continually moving them, and I was walking straight up to them and grabbing the sides and physically moving them from one place to another. They seemed like friendly characters to me.<sup>68</sup>

Like the objects Ruscha arranged on his studio tables and the papers he attached to his drawing board, the canvases could be shuffled, re-arranged, stacked, turned, layered, and scaled, especially through photography. In one photograph, for example, *Flash, L.A Times* (1963) is propped against the larger, horizontally-oriented painting *Large Trademark with Eight Spotlights* (1962), itself resting on top of wooden crates (Figure 2.39). Drawings were even more portable: they could be pinned up, shuffled, and quickly moved from the board to the walls and juxtaposed with printed materials, such as newspaper (see Figure 2.40).

Returning to *Drawingboard Drawing*, we can see that the orientation of the drawing board is also embedded in this work. Rather than receding, as in linear perspective, the board's lines are parallel, which indicates that Ruscha drew the board as an axonometric

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<sup>68</sup> Ruscha, quoted in *Oral history interview with Edward Ruscha, 1980 October 29-1981 October 2*, AAA.

projection, a type of perspective in which scale is retained and which does not recreate the visual experience of depth recession. Ruscha's use of perspective, the third key strategy of *Noise*, will be the subject of the next two chapters. For now, suffice to say that Ruscha's drawing of the board as an axonometric projection takes it out of illusionistic pictorial space and places it in the space of design, in which this type of perspective is most commonly used, as a means to picture the actual size of objects, anchored in concrete measurements. Instead of seeing things through a plane of glass, a window on the world, Ruscha saw things as made on paper.

### **Conclusion: Design Drawing in the Digital Age**

One way of understanding Pop art is to map out the different positions of labor that artists occupied, as they navigated the exchange between art and design, visual culture, and mass media. Warhol likened himself to a machine and also to a business artist. Rosenquist borrowed the tools and processes of the billboard painting. For Ruscha, the primary referent was the commercial art man. This subject position is not equivalent to that of the famous designer, such as Paul Rand or Milton Glaser. Instead, Ruscha gestures to the role of the anonymous producer of paste-ups, ad designs, and illustrations. Ruscha referenced the world of commercial art in many ways in his work, one of the most obvious being his inclusion of pencils in many of his paintings – perhaps a suggestion that now, the labor of design has become the province of art. Hovering, snapped in half, or hugging the edge of the frame, this object refers back to the beginnings of the paintings in the drawing board world. Always represented at actual size, the pencils in Ruscha's works also embody his model of painting as scale-less. Even today, the pencil remains an embodiment of the process of design, despite the fact that so much of design is executed digitally. Even the company that

epitomizes high-tech design, Apple, frequently used the pencil in its ads, as in this 2013 ad campaign for the iPad Air (Figure 2.41). The video version of the ad opens with a yellow pencil resting on a white table. As the camera moves closer, the voiceover intones, “It’s an extremely simple tool but also extremely powerful.” Focusing closely on the pencil, the ad moves through a variety of scenes: a designer’s studio, a science lab, a living room. Through all of these scenes, the pencil remains in the same position, though the surfaces under it change, as the voiceover reflects on the different places the pencil has been and the roles that it has occupied. At the end, a hand reaches into the screen and pulls out an iPad air from behind the pencil. The reveal, made powerful by the viewer’s presumed knowledge of the scale of a pencil, positions the iPad as an elemental tool, as important as the pencil, and also serves to highlight its thinness, by hiding it behind the pencil until the end. Even in an age of digital writing, the pencil remains the most familiar of writing utensils, a visual marker of scale and an embodiment of design and its work.

### Chapter 3

#### Paste-up Pictures: *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*

No matter the medium he was using at the moment, a camera was never far from Ruscha's side. Photography, as discussed in the previous chapter, was an integral part of his painting process. Ruscha used photographs to study portable objects, such as pencils and magazines, and to approximate their actual size before drawing them on his canvases (see figs. 2.10–2.13). In addition to photographing objects, Ruscha also frequently turned his camera to his working set-up and his studio space. Some of these photographs picture his studio from oblique or bird's eye perspectives, such the photograph taken during the making of *Noise*. Shot from above, the photograph shows a long wooden table, covered with a palette, brushes, pencils, and the western magazine (Figure 2.13). Other photographs materialize Ruscha's continual movement between the working surface of the table, where he made tracings and painted, and the wall, where he pinned up and juxtaposed different works (Figure 2.40). Still others evince Ruscha's penchant for shuffling, stacking, and re-arranging his paintings, which seem to continually migrate around the studio space (Figure 2.41).

These examples illustrate the multifaceted nature of Ruscha's uses of photography, which he used as a tool of documentation and spatialization. Always taking pictures, Ruscha assembled and stores these images in archives, to which he continually for source material for new works. This chapter argues the model of the designer's photographic archive, along with the tools of paste-up layout, drive Ruscha's production of his books. His mode of assembling his publications can be understood in regard to a specific tool of layout: the



image morgue, or commercial artist's archive of ephemeral materials.<sup>1</sup> In his manual, Charles Felten provides a representative definition of the tool:

a 'morgue,' or clipping library, is an inspirational source for ideas when layouts are hurriedly demanded. In it may be filed samples of interesting layout styles, type arrangements, color treatments, initial letters, unusual photoengraving and offset techniques and other interesting artistic specimens. It should contain, likewise, a wide assortment of pictorial reproductions rendered in various artistic mediums, which may often be adapted to layouts by tracing or copying, with necessary modifications or elaborations.

Included in the beginning of the book, with the list of other important drawing implements, the image morgue constituted a significant tool for commercial artist. Rather than occupying a stable physical location, such as file drawers or cabinets, the image morgue migrates around the studio: pictures pinned to a board, type pasted onto a design, drawings traced and enlarged on tracing paper.<sup>2</sup> It could take the form of ephemera pinned up on walls, over the artist's drawing board, where it could be easily viewed and accessed, pulled down, traced, and spread across tables, as seen in this photograph of cartoonist Peter Arno at work (Figure 3.1). The morgue was a fluid collection, a shifting stack of materials continually re-built and re-constituted according to the designer's current assignment.

The image morgue was the way in which Ruscha organized the production of his books, which he filled with imagery built from his own collaboratively produced photographic archive. The idea of the archive, therefore, goes hand in hand with the image morgue, as it became absorbed into the morgue and combined with the other materials contained within that repository, such as type and book cover designs. This framework provided the basis for Ruscha's book making between the years 1963, when he released his

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<sup>1</sup> Felten, *Layout*, 28. Contemporary layout manuals likewise use this term to describe the designer's library of images. See, for example, Kristen Cullen, *Layout Workbook* (Beverly, MA: Rockport Publishers, 2007), 9.

<sup>2</sup> The term also describes photo archives for newspapers, and is still used today for digital archives for commercial artists. See, for example, the Library of Congress the newspaper image morgue collections, <http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/resource/newsmorgues.html>.

first book, *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* and 1968, when he published *Nine Swimming Pools*. While Ruscha produced other books after 1968, this first group, including such well-known works as *Some Los Angeles Apartments* and *Thirty-four Parking Lots*, represent the project at the heart of Heavy Industry, the name he gave to his publishing company (a few were under another label he created, National Excelsior). In what follows I will briefly touch upon these other books before focusing on *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966), which most clearly crystallizes Ruscha's image-morgue model of working and most vividly demonstrates the implications of his use of an archival model of photography (Figure 3.2). The 27-foot long accordion fold page, printed with two long photographic strips, shows a mile-long section of Sunset Boulevard. Drawing on the archive of materials Ruscha used to make the books, I detail the process of the *Every Building*'s production, from inception to printing to distribution, and demonstrate how the image morgue and the photographic archive drives the book's conception, content, and distribution. I also examine Ruscha's contemporaneous work making paste-ups for *Artforum*, and argue that this task seeps into *Every Building* in material ways, such as in the photo strip's visible seams, as well as conceptually, in the way that the book's spatial orientation oscillates between the horizontal and the vertical, and between far away and up-close modes of looking. Finally, the chapter proposes a re-reading of Ruscha's book, in regard to its reception as a proto-Conceptual work and as well as its status as a touchstone for architecture and design theory.

In the same way that Ruscha used the tools of scale and type design to create drawing-board paintings, he borrowed from the image morgue to make reproducible art objects that also functioned as a way to print and distribute a slice of his photographic archives. In this regard, the book materializes the broader conceptual orbit of drawing board, driven as it is by segmented production, collaborative labor, and archival basis (with the

archive conceived of as the assemblage of material for design). One of Ruscha's working photographs vividly pictures the connection between his uses of photography, his work in other two-dimensional media, and the drawing board apparatus (Figure 3.3). In the photo, a drawing from the work *Twentysix Gasoline Stations, Three Views* (1963) rests on a pad of paper, which in turn rest on a drawing board, itself laid flat on a table. In the drawing, the book pivots outwards, its spine towards the back of the picture plane. It casts a dark shadow to the right, across the background of smudged graphite. Taken from above, like so many of Ruscha's studio photographs, it shows tools and materials – erasers, X-Acto knife, tin of graphite powder, and of course, the ubiquitous pencil – scattered across the table, alongside an ashtray and scraps of napkins or some sort of cloth. The photograph, along with evoking an image-morgue working process, constitutes a workaday version of the layout manual illustration, present in virtually every text, in which the tools are presented on the working surface (Figure 3.4). This example, from a 1958 text, epitomizes the style of these types of illustrations: taken from above, so as to showcase the full range of materials; tools neatly organized in an attractive manner; working surface blank, ready to be used. Ruscha's use of a similar from-above perspective to photograph his work-in-progress is like an "after" of illustrations in manuals: here are these procedures at work, in the process of art making. In this photograph, drawing board and image morgue align, with the art object at the center.

### **Heavy Industry Publications**

Ruscha's book production began with *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, which he published in 1963 (Figure 3.5). At the same time that he was working on paintings such as *Actual Size* and *Noise*, Ruscha was consistently taking and compiling photographic archives, full of images of gasoline stations, apartment buildings, and any number of ordinary objects. He began to photograph gasoline stations in 1962, during the long drive between Los Angeles

and his hometown of Oklahoma City. *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, published in 1963, contains a selection of these photographs. The book was a new venture for Ruscha and his first thoroughly collaborative endeavor. While he drew upon his knowledge of layout, type design, and photography for the book, he also solicited the assistance of local printmakers, typographers, and film developers as well as studio assistants and friends. Each component of *Twentysix* was assembled separately: the cover sketched out, the type ordered from typographers, then the entire mock-up sent to and printed by commercial printers.<sup>3</sup> In this way, Ruscha's work had more in common with technical literature or brochures than with the limited edition *livre d'artiste*.

Upon its publication, the book was met with an uncertain and generally bemused reception. Audrey Sabol, an early collector of Ruscha's work, recalled that especially in the wake of Abstract Expressionism, the books seemed a radical departure from anything she knew, so adamantly *not* art. Susan Haller, who has worked with Ruscha for years and whose father was the creative director at Carson/Roberts, remembers having a similar reaction when she first saw the books.<sup>4</sup> The first review of *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, written by Phillip Leider, echoes these sentiments: "The book is so curious, and so doomed to oblivion, that there is an obligation, of sorts, to document its existence..."<sup>5</sup> Leider considered *Twentysix* a "Pop art" book, "at least as complex as the puns and issues raised by Duchamp's urinal." Duchamp was the subject of much discussion in 1963, the year of his first U.S. retrospective at the Pasadena museum. Ruscha, along with the rest of the L.A. art

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<sup>3</sup> There is a long and important history in modern art of book production and marketing of one's work through the book format. Before photography was displayed in gallery contexts, the book format was its main distribution form. In avant-garde practice, the self-published and commercially printed book played a crucial role in the work of artist such as El Lissitzky.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Haller, Conversation with the author, March 5, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Phillip Leider, "Books Received: *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*," *Artforum* 2 (September 1963): 57.

community, attended the show. Reflecting on the impact of Duchamp on his own work, Ruscha has said, “I felt that the spirit of his work is the strongest in my books than in anything else. But I don’t use him as a reference; he’s just so much a part of my history and my art – as he is for so many artists.”<sup>6</sup> Scholars have since frequently historicized Ruscha’s books as part of the post-World War II reception of the readymade.<sup>7</sup> In his important assessment of Ruscha’s books, Benjamin Buchloh has argued that *Twentysix*, and Ruscha’s other publications, functioned as pivot between Pop’s representation of industrial production and Conceptual art’s absorption of the capitalist aesthetics of administration.<sup>8</sup> Not only did Ruscha book picture public experience as defined within a consumer culture, but he also deployed that culture’s forms of distribution by utilizing systems of mass commercial printing. Directly deploying the camera as the producer of the images (rather than, as in Pop, painting images), Ruscha also uses an organizational principle of aleatory selection. As such, Buchloh argues, the book appears as a container for a random sampling of 26 banal buildings, with no apparent rhyme or reason as to the inclusion of each image nor any justification for the number Ruscha chooses.

Between 1963 and 1968, Ruscha published seven more books: *Various Small Fires and Milk* (1964), *Some Los Angeles Apartments* (1965), *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966), *Thirtyfour Parking Lots* (1967), *Royal Road Test*, a collaboration with Mason Williams and Patrick Blackwell (1967), *Business Cards*, a collaboration with Billy Al Bengston (1968), and *Nine Swimming Pools and a Broken Glass* (1968). Most of these books (the collaborative projects,

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<sup>6</sup> Ruscha, quoted in Elizabeth Armstrong, “Interviews with Ed Ruscha and Bruce Connor,” *October* 70 (Fall 1994): 55-56, reprinted in Martha Buskirk and Mignon Nixon, eds., *The Duchamp Effect* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 55- 56.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Margaret Iverson, “Auto-maticity: Ruscha and Performative Photography,” *Art History* 32 (December 2009): 836 – 851.

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962 – 1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” *October* 55 (Winter 1990): 105 – 143;

*Business Cards* and *Royal Road Test* being the exceptions) echo the design and layout of *Twentysix*: a small-scale, handheld commercially printed publications, with simple covers, titled printed in serif block letters, and interiors printed with photographs, sometimes with short descriptive captions. To publicize the books, Ruscha placed short notices in newspapers (Figure 3.6). This ad, for example, announces that Heavy Industry Productions in Hollywood (at that time, essentially Ruscha, Susan Haller, and a P.O. Box) was offering “a clutch of noncoffee table books by artist Edward Ruscha.” The titles, all written out as numbers rather than in words (presumably to save space) include “26 Gasoline Stations” and “34 Parking Lots.” *Every Building*, at that point called simply “On the Sunset Strip,” is described as “a 27-ft accordion fold that contains ‘motorized photos’ depicting every building on the Sunset Strip.” Ruscha also designed and printed brochures for the 8 books (Figure 3.7). A portable fold-out, this ad features photographs of the books, shot from above and resting on gray backgrounds. With only their covers visible, the books appear as images rather than objects (other than *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, which is partially expanded). The perspective of the photos recalls the spatiality Ruscha’s from-above studio photographs of tabletops and drawing boards, covered with tools and materials. Once again, Ruscha’s mode of picturing objects, whether in photographs or in drawings, evokes their coming into being in the studio. While the name of his publishing label evokes large metal machines and smokestacks, the books always point back to the world of the drawing board. By delving into this world, a more complex picture of the books, and their organizational and conceptual structures, emerges.

### **Compiling an Archive: Photographing Sunset Boulevard**

*Every Building*, as the Heavy Industry brochure reveals, stands out in Ruscha’s book production as the only book with the accordion fold. In the brochure, the book is pictured

from above, with its accordion fold partially expanded and its shiny silver slipcase at the side. The finished product, however, belies the long and protracted process of its making. Ruscha began photographing Sunset Boulevard, an east-west thoroughfare that stretches from downtown L.A. to the Pacific Ocean, in 1965. Between 1965 and 2001, Ruscha documented Sunset in twelve separate shooting trips, each of which covered 25 miles and both sides of Sunset. With a rotating team of collaborators, some of whom have assisted with the project since the beginning, he continues to photograph the area today. For most of the duration of the project, the archive has been stored in Ruscha's studio, until the Getty Research Institute acquired it in 2012.<sup>9</sup> It contains a wealth of materials – notebooks, notes, receipts, contact sheets, diagrams – related to both projects. Only a small slice of the archive has appeared in publication or as editioned photographs.<sup>10</sup> Like Ruscha's other photographic projects, such as his shoots of the Pacific Coast Highway, Sepulveda, and Hollywood Boulevards, the Sunset images are a collective photographic document of a notable street in the city. Most of these photographs, as Ruscha noted, remain in storage: "I just put them in a lab and salt them away. I just feel like sometime in the future I'll be able to do something with them, but I don't know."<sup>11</sup> This captures Ruscha's archival approach to his work, and the sense in which all of his images became a part of his image morgue.

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<sup>9</sup> The Streets of Los Angeles archive is comprised of the Sunset Boulevard and Hollywood Boulevard documentation. The archive is in the collection of the Getty Research Institute (GRI), Los Angeles, California. The information in this chapter regarding process is drawn from this archive, especially from Ruscha's notebooks, and corroborated by interviews with Ruscha and Susan Haller.

<sup>10</sup> In 1995 Ruscha collaborated with gallerist Patrick Painter to produce an edition of 6 gelatin silver prints selected from the Sunset archive. Working with 4x5 negatives, Ruscha scratched and painted the images; when printed, they appeared worn and faded. Materials for this project are also stored in the Streets of Los Angeles archive, GRI.

<sup>11</sup> Ruscha, quoted in Siri Engberg, "The Weather of Prints': An Interview with Edward Ruscha, July 16, 1998," *LAI*, 369.

It took many months, and years, of work, as well as a team of collaborators, to compile this extensive collection of photographs. For his first documented photographing of the Strip, Ruscha collaborated with Jerry McMillan. A friend who came from Oklahoma to Chouinard with Ruscha, McMillan systematically documented Sunset and printed contact sheets. The contact sheets demonstrate that – unlike the 1966 book – McMillan’s photographs in fact do show everything on Sunset. Buildings and objects overlap from one frame to the next, ensuring that every section is captured by the camera’s lens. Notes on the back of the prints document McMillan’s speed, f-stop used, lens numbers, and blocks traveled. Marks on the sheets indicate perceived flaws, such as blurry areas or missing parts of buildings. For this shoot, McMillan manually advanced the camera while someone else drove the car (Figure 3.8).

However, this approach apparently dissatisfied Ruscha, and perhaps the others involved, because he referred to this attempt as a “fiasco” (and added it into his calculations of the final cost of the project). For the second attempt, Ruscha devised a system involving a motorized Nikon, mounted on a tripod in the back of his pick-up truck, to snap the pictures at a pre-determined interval (Figure 3.9). A diagram from Ruscha’s record book shows the apparatus, fitted specifically for truck, with the Nikon affixed to a tripod, weighted down with sandbags (Figure 3.10). Slightly tilted upwards, the camera stood at a height of 45-1/2” at the back and 46-1/8” at the front (where the lens was situated). Ruscha’s notes indicate that the lens was to be set at infinity, meaning that everything in sight of camera, no matter how close, would be in equal focus. When a lens is set an infinity, the camera perceives light rays as parallel rather than as diverging. This technique adjusts the camera’s construction of perspective and puts everything in the field in a similar focus, thus flattening out forms and suppressing uneven depth of field. As Ruscha noted, this technique also meant that the



operator of the camera, whether McMillan, Paul Ruscha, or himself, would not have to adjust the focus, as McMillan had done on the first photo session.

Once the apparatus was in place, the team began the hours-long process of shooting. They developed a precise and efficient system in which one person drove, one took the photographs, and another, seated next to the camera in the truck bed, was responsible for loading the film into camera. The driver moved the truck slowly down one side of the road, while someone sat in the back ready to load more film into the camera. By using 35-mm film, precut, labeled, and loaded into cassettes, the shooting could be continuous (Figure 3.11). In order to be ready for the trips, the film had to be prepared ahead of time. Ruscha and his team purchased it in bulk and hand-wound it into the cassettes.<sup>12</sup> Each cassette of prepared film held 33 feet, about 250 shots when exposed. In this way the team could work for hours, and also have neatly packaged rolls of film for development.

The wealth of documents and photographs evince the protracted and laborious nature of shooting the Strip, something which Ruscha did many times. For some of the shoots, the team was out all day, carefully photographing and recording the locations and times of shooting. Diagrams in the archive indicate the trajectory of the truck, the times of day the shooting took place (often early morning), and weather conditions (Figure 3.12). For each trip, the team always noted which roll of film corresponded to specific sections of street. The organization and scope of the sessions evokes film production, a resemblance also suggested in Ruscha's description of these sessions as "shoots."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Susan Haller, email conversation with the author, April 15, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> For more on Ruscha's work in relation to the medium of film, see Bettina Henry Riccio, "Lights, Camera, Art: John Baldessari, Ed Ruscha, and Hollywood Film," unpublished Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 2006.

These lists, diagrams, and measurements provided road maps for future shoots and ensured as much uniformity as possible in the aesthetic of the photos. Ruscha's records are full of detailed instructions to this end, from a checklist of materials – prepared film, camera, Minolta spot meter, number cards held up for each section – to an illustration of how to cut the film to load it easily into the camera. As the notebooks indicate, however, photos varied due to time of day, weather, and other factors, the effects of which Ruscha or the other always noted. Ruscha was also meticulous about recording all costs involved, from camera rental to lunches eaten while working.

In his orchestration of the shoots and his photography techniques, Ruscha drew upon what he had learned in Chouinard photography courses. The school's curriculum, divided between fine art and commercial photography courses, indicates the clear boundaries that demarcated the use of photography in art versus design. During Ruscha's time at the school, Alexander Hovsepian served as the main instructor in commercial photography.<sup>14</sup> Advertising design students at Chouinard began studies of photography in their second year, after completing the basic year and a second year of ad design, composition, typography, and other drawing-based courses. In the third and fourth years, they took courses specifically targeted towards advertising, focused on the "creative use" of the medium in advertising design with an emphasis on learning different techniques.<sup>15</sup> Another upper-level course, Creative Photography, was distinct from the Advertising Photography course by virtue of its focus on developing the ability "to produce imaginative and creative images rather than

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<sup>14</sup> There is not much documentation on Hovsepian, other than in the Chouinard program, which states that he studied at UCLA and the Art Center and owned a photography studio. Chouinard Brochure, 1960-61, AAA.

<sup>15</sup> Chouinard Art Institute, Catalogue for 1960 – 61, AAA.

photographic recording.” Like the other commercial arts courses at Chouinard, these descriptions stress the role of creativity in the designer’s practice.

Ruscha explored different modes of photography while at Chouinard and also in his early practice. In chapter 2, I discussed Ruscha’s use of photographs as a means of documenting, studying, and transferring objects, such as the Spam tin, pencils, and magazine. Often, but not always, these photographs became the basis for works in other media, mainly drawings and paintings, such as *Actual Size* (1962) and *Noise, Pencil, Broken Pencil, Cheap Western* (1963). For many of these as well as his *Product Still Lifes* (1961), Ruscha used a Yashica D 2-1/4, a twin-lens reflex, medium format camera. Relatively inexpensive and portable, it was a useful tool for achieving the clear, high-contrast images that he desired for this series.<sup>16</sup> Held at waist level, the camera has two lenses, one of which shows an inverted image. Other early photographs show his knowledge of avant-garde photography, from Walker Evans and Eugène Atget, whose work he studied in school, to Robert Frank, from whom he professed an admiration. Ruscha experimented with styles of these photographers during his 1960 Europe trip.<sup>17</sup> The collection he compiled, of more than 500 images, documents his wanderings across Europe, when he visited countries such as Belgium, France, and Austria.<sup>18</sup> The photographs evince his interest in quotidian subjects, from storefront windows to street signs, and his experimentation with tropes of avant-garde photography, such as oblique angles and on-the-go shots taken while walking through the streets.

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<sup>16</sup> Sylvia Wolf notes that Ruscha uses the Yashica for the *Product Shots* in *Ed Ruscha and Photography* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2004), 4.

<sup>17</sup> Sylvia Wolf, *Ed Ruscha and Photography*; Margit Rowell, *Ed Ruscha, Photographer* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art 2006), Ed Ruscha, quoted in Margit Rowell, *Cotton Puffs, Q-Tips, Smoke, and Mirrors: The Drawings of Ed Ruscha* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2004), 16.

<sup>18</sup> Ruscha’s Europe photographs reside at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. A selection is published in Sylvia Wolf, *Ed Ruscha and Photography*.

In the Sunset photos, on the other hand, Ruscha's approach similar to the one he had used for his *Product Still Lifes*, which show single products on white sheets of paper. While *Product Still Lifes* exemplify advertising photography's high-contrast aesthetic, the Sunset photos are mostly printed with low contrast, with shadows and highlights rendered as middling grays (figs. 3.13. – 3.15). Unlike the busy streets seen in some of Ruscha's Europe photographs, in these images Sunset Boulevard is quiet, as it would have appeared on the Sunday mornings when Ruscha often scheduled his shooting trips. Lined up in the image strip, the gray photos blend together, unifying the street into a long strip of low buildings, one after the other. In front of the buildings, the profile of the road is a continuous gray stripe, interrupted by an occasional car. Rather than a focusing on one point of interest or employing dramatic angle, Ruscha draws the viewer's attention along the architectural features of the Strip, which blend and merge especially because the photographs are printed so small. The form mirrors the medium used to shoot the Strip: the long strips of prepared film, advanced with the motor. Taken at different moments, separated only by seconds, each image becomes part of a montage that represents the Strip as if seeing it all at once, in one moment in time. Rather than a distilled moment of time – a kind of temporal crystallization – the strip seems of a flat duration, a stretched out kind of time begun and ended only by the beginning and end of the photo strips. Far from Henri Cartier-Bresson's "decisive moment" or Robert Frank's "things easily found, not easily interpreted," the Sunset photos show the Strip as a continual, though slightly broken up, façade of gray buildings, etched against a bleached-out sky.<sup>19</sup> In the book, one of the most lively places in L.A. becomes rather banal.

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<sup>19</sup> Henri Cartier-Bresson, *The Decisive Moment* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972); Robert Frank, Application for the Guggenheim Fellowship, in Sarah Greenough, *Looking In: Robert Frank's The Americans* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2009), 362.

## Machine Work: Conceptual Art and *Every Building*

As I have already hinted at in the analysis above, a survey of Ruscha's methods for *Every Building* complicates the notion of his photography as entirely governed by a chance aesthetic and the books as constructed from random principles of selection. While I am focusing on this work because it most clearly crystallizes Ruscha's model of book production, he used similar systems for his other books, though these did not involve the use of the Nikon with a motor drive. Paradoxically, the tension between mechanized photography and drawn-out labor is strongest in *Every Building*, rather than in the books in which Ruscha deploys other photographic methods. In other words, the book for which Ruscha displaced the work of photography into an automatically advancing camera also took the most work to complete. Mechanization is an organizational principle of the book, to be sure, but clearly there are other principles at work. What is to be made of the tensions that characterize Ruscha work, and from what do these tensions emerge?

To begin, it is important to understand the roots of the reception of Ruscha's book as mechanized form of photography. Already in 1967, *Every Building* was seen as a bridge between Pop's focus on the vernacular and the art-as-idea model of Conceptual art. That year, Sol LeWitt published his "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" in *Artforum* (Figure 3.16).<sup>20</sup> A section of the photographic strips appear on the same page as untitled sculpture by Robert Morris, an Eva Hesse line drawing, a geometricized drawing by Jane Klein, Paul Morgenson's woodcut *Copperopolis*, and one of LeWitt's own enamel cube constructions.<sup>21</sup> Notably, Ruscha's are the only photographs printed with the article. The juxtaposition

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<sup>20</sup> Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," *Artforum* 5 (June 1967): 79- 83.

<sup>21</sup> Klein and Morgenson are rarely mentioned in histories of Conceptual art. Morgenson's print especially invites further inquiry regarding the status of printmaking in Conceptual art, even more so because the work is a woodcut, a type of printing rife with rich historical associations.

suggests that Ruscha's montages, the narrow bands of which were further compressed to fit the journal's page, exemplify the permutational aesthetic characteristic of these other works. The following oft-quoted section encapsulates LeWitt's ideas, as expressed in the article, about Conceptual art:

In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes the machine that makes the art. This kind of art is not theoretical or illustrative of theories; it is intuitive, it is involved with all types of mental processes and it is purposeless. It is usually free from the dependence on the skill of the artist as craftsman.

Ruscha's own comments on his books have reinforced the notion that his photography exemplifies the aesthetic of deskilling central to the theorization of Conceptual art. He often referred to his photographs as merely "technical data" or "simply reproductions of photos." Photography, as he told John Coplans in a 1965 interview, is "dead as a fine art...its only place is in the commercial world."<sup>22</sup> Many scholars, as I have already discussed, have developed this line of thinking in their writing on Ruscha's relationship to Conceptual art, which has become the prevailing reading of his photography. Jeff Wall, for example, cites Ruscha's books embodying the "marks of indifference" of photoconceptualism. Wall argues that Ruscha takes on a deliberately amateurized stance, resulting in photographs that counter the aesthetic of modernist photography and the pictorial device of the tableau. The gasoline station photos, for Wall, exemplify this deliberate amateurization, as "only an idiot would take pictures of a filling station."<sup>23</sup> In this way, photograph takes on the self-critical nature of the readymade and pushes the photograph's mimetic capacity to its logical conclusion, thus

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<sup>22</sup> Ruscha, in John Coplans, "Concerning Various Small Fires: Edward Ruscha Discusses His Perplexing Publications," *Artforum* 5 (February 1965): 24 – 24; reprinted in *LAI*, 23-27.

<sup>23</sup> Jeff Wall, "Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art," in Ann Goldstein and Ann Rorimer, *Reconsidering the Object of Art, 1965 – 75* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 247 – 267, reprinted in Douglas Fogle, ed., *Artists Using Photography 1960 -1982* (Minneapolis, Walker Art Museum, 2003), 32-44.

engaging in an “endgame” that necessitates the restoration of the picture post-Conceptual art.

While these arguments pinpoint some of the most important qualities of Ruscha’s books, they also leave many questions unanswered. It is true that Ruscha developed a calculated, automatized approach to his project, one that shows in the resulting strip of photographs. Yet, as I have already suggested, there is more to the project than an indifferent and random gathering of images. Even a survey of just the first stage in Ruscha’s process, which I have explained so far, complicates the idea that his work embodies an aesthetic of deskilling and indifference and prompts us to more closely pinpoint the origins and implications of his methods and to more precisely define his model of photography and book making. In the following sections I continue to recount Ruscha’s working process, in order to argue for a different way of understanding his work. This is not a matter of simply showing that Ruscha’s photos are skillful rather than deskilled, but to argue that the skill set involved is rooted in historically and aesthetically specific ways of representing and perceiving the world. In Ruscha’s image of the Strip, the perceptual and temporal modes of commercial art are the lens through which the city is represented.

### **Imaging the Strip: Paste-up as a Picture-Making Tool**

The first step in making *Every Building*, the photo shoots, was akin to the commercial artist’s research phase, the gathering of materials for the design. Now, with piles of photographs before him, Ruscha began the process of deciding what to do with the images, specifically how to translate into printable material. From the beginning, Ruscha had in mind the form of photographic strip, constructed with a photomontage technique. McMillan and Ruscha began to experiment with this method, working with the 2-1/4” contact sheets McMillan had printed. They made two horizontal montages, one for the north and south

sides of the boulevard, by selecting individual frames from the contact sheets and arranging them on stiff paper board (Figure 3.17). Cut in different sizes and placed unevenly side-by-side, sometimes overlapping and with spaces between, the trimmed images form a haphazard, broken image of the Strip. The choppy quality is especially evident in the upper strip, which shows the undulating façade of the “Googie” style Standard hotel. Individual photos also vary noticeably in shade and contrast, which indicates that they were taken from image sets produced on different dates. Already, then, the strip was synthetic, including as it did photographs from separate shoots. Ruscha and McMillan made 15 photo strips for the north side of the strip and 12 for the south side, with each section of the montage measuring about 25 inches in length. When all of the strips were taped together, the resulting montage was quite long, with the north side section measuring about 31 feet and the south side about 25 feet. These strips mark Ruscha’s first usage of the doubled form that he used for the final book, in which one strip corresponds to the north side of the boulevard and one to the south side.

Panoramic in scope, these first-draft montages depict the Strip as frontal and horizontal, with a perspective slightly from above, so that our eye level generally falls approximately at the center of buildings. Yet there are also views from the side, subtle oblique perspectives indicative of the lag that occurs even with the automatic, quick shutter speed, between the camera’s shooting and the truck’s trajectory. While the strip has the wide aspect ratio and extended perspective of a panorama, its lower point of view and closer focus set it apart from 19<sup>th</sup> century city panoramas (Eadwaerd Muybridge’s 360 view of San Francisco, which he made in 1878, comes to mind).<sup>24</sup> Because of the mobile camera,

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<sup>24</sup> Not all panoramas, of course, have this particular perspective, but in regard to the history of urban photography works such as Muybridge’s are an important point of comparison. For more on Muybridge’s panorama see Marta Braun, *Eadwaerd Muybridge* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010). The book also vividly evokes



Ruscha's image strip also had to compensate for the effects of speed. The images had to be edited to remove overlapping parts, and then joined together so that the photographs would correspond, but this was an inexact science; there were always some misalignments and gaps. It seems that Ruscha taped the images together with an eye to keeping much of the street visible and completely piecing together the buildings, although the mix-and-match procedure of using different photos from different shoots results corners being slightly truncated or cars chopped in half. Secured with single pieces of tape, the photographs were easily moved and switched, a technique that allowed for ample experimentation. As he shuffled the photos, Ruscha made notes directly on the montages, in which he indicates areas to paint around a roofline (presumably to define it a bit better) or seams that need to be smoothed over and edited. Several empty spaces indicate a need for redo, while layered photos of the same section of the boulevard evince Ruscha's experimentation with which images to place in each slot. The choppy nature of the Strip evokes the haphazard, Dada-style montage Ruscha had played with in *Orb*, though the project is driven by a much tighter organization (see figs. 1.13 – 1.16).

The construction of the montage suggest the movements involved in producing it – not only the process of trimming contact sheets with scissors and pasting them with rubber cement, but also actually moving the strip around as he arranged and re-arranged the montage. Ruscha spread out photographs across tables and taped them on walls so as to see the total image all at once, as shown in this studio photograph (Figure 3.18). One long configuration of the strips runs across the entire wall, while individual strips, placed in rows, cover the right side. Also pinned to the wall are bird's eye photographs of the Los Angeles

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other instances of the city compressed into a photo panorama, most notably a 1954 Japanese book *Ginzo Kaimai/Ginzo Haccho*, by Yoshikazu Suzuki, which pictures the famous district in Tokyo. While there is on evidence that Ruscha knew the work the connections between the two are striking.

County Museum of Art, a calendar, and mock-ups of the book covers, including *Some Los Angeles Apartments* (1964) and *Various Small Fires and Milk* (1964). The photograph shows how Ruscha used all surfaces in his studio as he worked, such that the space became an all-encompassing image morgue. This montage within a montage vividly evokes physical nature of working in such an environment, of shuffling and sorting photographs on tables, and pinning them on the wall, next to type designs, book covers, and other ephemera. Moreover, the montage evokes the bodily and temporal nature of Ruscha's working process, his constant shifting between close looking and tactile engagement (sorting and trimming photos on tables and desks) and a more distanced kind of observation (looking at the images strips on the wall). Like *Drawingboard Drawing*, the photomontage crystallizes the nature of Ruscha's practice and his thinking.

Ruscha made the montage around the same time he was working as layout designer for *Artforum*, a job he began in 1965. Upon moving from San Francisco to Los Angeles, the journal found offices directly above the Ferus Gallery. Editor Philip Leider hired Ruscha to do the layouts, which he produced under the pseudonym Eddie Russia. Scholars have argued for the importance of Ruscha's *Artforum* work in relation to his self-fashioning of an artistic identity. Cecile Whiting has noted that Ruscha strategically used the journal to place ads that promoted his work, cultivated a carefree, masculine, California cool personality, and poked fun at the seriousness of the art world.<sup>25</sup> Ruscha's 1964 ad featuring *Twenty-six Gasoline*

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<sup>25</sup> Other ads include a 1964 announcement for a Ferus exhibition, in which a stunning model, gazing directly at the camera, holds a matchbook in the deep neck of her dress. The details of the show are printed in small type on the matchbook. In 1967, the year he married Dana Knego, Ruscha also took out an ad proclaiming, "Ed Ruscha says goodbye to joys." It featured a photograph of the artist lying in bed, between two women, one of whom, as Ruscha recounted, was Helene Winer. For more on these ads, the cultivation of artistic persona, and the culture of Ferus, see Cécile Whiting, *Pop L.A.*, 66-71; also Alexandra Schwartz, *Ed Ruscha's Los Angeles*, 163-234. Schwartz notes that Ruscha attributes the 1964 ad with the model to Irving Blum. For Ruscha's discussion of the ad, and his recollection of trading a work of art to *Artforum* founder Charles Cowles for the ad space as well as his mention of Winer, see Christophe Cherix, *Interview with Ed Ruscha*, Museum of Modern Art Oral

*Stations*, for example, announced that the book had been “REJECTED!” when he tried to donate it to the Library of Congress.<sup>26</sup> Noting the exact date of the rejection – October 2, 1963 – the ad also informs reads that they can acquire copies for \$3.00 a piece, through National Excelsior on Vestal Ave in Los Angeles, or through Wittenborn and Company, the New York-based bookseller. Ruscha’s ad capitalizes upon the rejection for advertising purposes, with the letter proving its inversion of established categorization of books. At the same time, by citing his efforts to send the work to a library, Ruscha signals that this is also not a traditional art object.

Less remarked upon, however, is how the processes of layout shaped all art and design work Ruscha was producing at the time. While his use of the name Eddie Russia, a play on the common mispronunciation of his name, suggests a desire to keep those spheres separate, the boundaries between them were permeable, conceptually as well as spatially (he worked right under the *Artforum* offices, after all). Each week he would receive the pile of printed materials, which he would use to assemble paste-ups for printing.<sup>27</sup> He designed ads as well, such as a 1966 notice for a Josef Albers Gemini G.E.L. print portfolio.<sup>28</sup> While Ruscha’s 1966 Surrealism cover is his most well-known *Artforum* design—indeed, it has taken on a status as an art work in its own right – this quotidian labor of paste-up is equally important in historicizing and understanding Ruscha’s working methods. In other words,

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History Program, 36 – 37 (Accessible online at [http://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/learn/archives/transcript\\_ruscha.pdf](http://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/learn/archives/transcript_ruscha.pdf).)

<sup>26</sup> The ad was placed in *Artforum* 2 (March 1964), 55.

<sup>27</sup> Ruscha, Conversation with the author, September 2013.

<sup>28</sup> See *Artforum* 5 (September 1966): 97. Sidney Felsen, co-founder of Gemini, recalled this in “Modern Art in Los Angeles 40+ Years Gemini: A Conversation with Andrew Perchuk, Sidney Felsen, Stanley Grinstein, John Baldessari, Ed Ruscha,” Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, May 27, 2009; see transcript in the GRI archives.

what was inside this issue is just as important to consider as the famed cover. Not only was Ruscha literally piecing together one of the most important art journals of the time, and thus staying abreast of art-world developments, but he was also cultivating a set of working methods, based in the cut and paste processes of layout. In a 2012 statement in *Artforum*, Ruscha reflected on his experience: “I would work a long weekend about once a month, pasting the magazine together with rubber cement and scissors and all that. That was the analog world I lived in.”<sup>29</sup> A photograph from 1966, of Ruscha and Joe Goode in the Western Avenue studio, evokes the temporal simultaneity and conceptual convergence of this “analog world,” defined by crossovers between Ruscha’s layout work and fine art work, all of which occurred in the same space (Figure 3.19). With the phone pressed to his ear, Ruscha appears to be in mid-conversation, perhaps ordering sheets of type or photographs from a local studio. Goode, seated in the front and wearing a striped shirt, gazes up at the camera. Paper, pens, rubber cements, and sketches cover the tables. Calendars and pinned-up pictures adorn the walls; a ruler is propped against the desk. Behind Ruscha, at the left, are the wooden letters spelling out “surrealism,” which he would photograph on glass with soap bubbles for the 1966 *Artforum* cover.<sup>30</sup>

This studio photograph, while admittedly playfully performative, also vividly pictures the site of layout – the packed studio, with materials on every surface – as well as the communication-oriented nature of design. The image of Ruscha on the phone brings to mind one of his more well-known, earlier design projects: the 1962 *New Painting of Common Objects* poster, which he remembered ordering over the phone (see Figure 2.3). Ruscha’s

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<sup>29</sup> Ruscha, “Headnote: Media Study,” *Artforum* 51 (September 2012): 190.

<sup>30</sup> Ruscha created the cover by photographing the carved balsa wood letters on glass, backlit with colored lights, and covered with soap bubbles. Like a carved version of *Noise*, in the 1963 painting, the letters become translated from objects into image, bright orange block letters seemingly protruding out of the picture plane and rising off the shiny bubbly glass. Ed Ruscha, Conversation with the author, September 11, 2013.

working surfaces also evoke the illustrative spreads of layout manuals, in which the tools of the trade are spread across a drawing board, in a cleaner, before-work version of the layout artist's tools, as in the image from the Gentry and Wales manual (see Figure 3.3). In this photograph, a clean white board, angled upwards towards the picture plane, is spread with a collection of essential layout tools: Scotch tape, paints, scissors, rubber cement, a French curve, and an ashtray and cigarette. These implements, the authors acknowledge, "while not essential, do seem to help."<sup>31</sup> These instruments, and the drawing board setup, metonymize the layout artist's labor.

It is this process of layout, a process based on shaping photographic archives and image morgue into content and finally into a printable and reproducible production, that governed Ruscha's book making. With his books, Ruscha took on multiples roles and tasks that were involved in the production of layouts. He also outsourced some of these tasks, such the actual photography of the Strip, which was done by McMillan, Paul Ruscha, and Gary Regester, among others. Each of the book projects, but this one the most, because of its scope, was collaborative in the way that layout itself was a collaborative venture. The role that most closely coincides with Ruscha's working model is that of the art director. As design Stephen Baker put it, the "modern art director must be two persons," a skilled craftsman who can draw and design layouts and translate those designs from the sketch page to the printed page (or televisions screen) and secondly, a business executive, with a broader view of the work and awareness of all the business considerations at play.<sup>32</sup> In an interview with David Bourdon, Ruscha noted that what he liked about making his own books was that he

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<sup>31</sup> Hugh G. Wales, Dwight L. Gentry, and Max Wales, *Advertising: Copy, Layout, and Typography* (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1958), 16-17.

<sup>32</sup> Baker, *Advertising Layout and Art Direction* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1959), 3.

could act in his role, as the “majordomo,” the one who orchestrated the books from beginning to end.<sup>33</sup> Unlike the art director, Ruscha’s work was at his own whims rather than those of the client. In that space, working on his own timetable, Ruscha could conduct protracted experiments with his pictures. With the almost limitless potential of the image morgue, the process could have continued indefinitely – and indeed it has, as even today Ruscha and his collaborators continue to photograph the area. Now shot and stored digitally, the images add to the ever-accumulating Sunset image morgue.<sup>34</sup> These images may never be used in another production, or printed as photographs. But the project continues, and the image morgue grows, always full of potential to be made into something else.

### **From Paste-up to Printed Page**

After making this first-draft mock-up, Ruscha continued to experiment with the photographic archive. In 1966 Ruscha made another large mock-up using the same cut-and-paste technique (Figure 3.20). For this version, he painstakingly glued the photographs, image by trimmed image, to a sturdy thin cardboard. Now, as he got closer to the final form of the strip, he used longer-lasting rubber cement, another consummate tool in the ad

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<sup>33</sup> Ruscha, quoted in David Bourdon, “Ruscha as Publisher [or All Booked Up],” *Art News* 71 (April 1972): 32 – 36, 68 – 69, reprinted in *LAI*, 40-45.

<sup>34</sup> Ruscha’s photographs of Hollywood Boulevard and another collection of photographs of Los Angeles streets (1974 – 2000), both in the collection of the GRI, are other examples of his use of the image morgue as a tool of documentary, archival, and picture-making. Ruscha began photographing Hollywood Boulevard in 1973, and later went on, as he did for the Sunset project, to produce both still and moving images of the area. In 2005, with Steidl, Ruscha published a large book entitled *Then & Now*, which included photographs from both 1970s and 2000s shooting trips. Using similar techniques that he employed for *Every Building*, Ruscha made two photo-strips, this time stacking the two on top of one other. The temporal differences between the two are highlighted in the title, as well as visually, with the vintage strip in black and white and the more contemporary one in color. Because this archive and the Sunset collection have only become available recently, there is much work to be done on these fascinating repositories of materials, especially in regard to the films. The full title for the Hollywood book is *Then & Now: Photographs of Hollywood Boulevard, 1973 – 2004* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2005). With the latter archive, however, though Ruscha used similar strategies of production, he did not publish these photos in book format or print them as larger images. The areas he photographed stretch across the city, and include Silver Lake, Venice Boulevard, La Cienega Boulevard, the Pacific Coast Highway, and Sepulveda Boulevard.

designer's kit, to hold the photos together and bind them to the boards (see Figure 3.3).<sup>35</sup> As in the 1965 mock-up, strips are trimmed to different sizes, resulting in a slightly choppy montage of photographs of slightly different sizes. The cuts between images remain visible, as do the edges of the 35 mm film. Ruscha also flipped the strip representing the south side, so that the street portions of the images face inward, with a white gap between the two strips in the middle of the page.

With the image strips, Ruscha navigated the assemblage of the photos through tools of scaling and compression, which allowed him to translate the mile-and-a-half portion of road into an almost 30-foot long foldout page. Though Ruscha has been documenting urban and architectural subjects since the late 50s, this was the first project in which he considered how one might represent the whole of a section of urban space. As he recounts it, Ruscha began the Sunset project with the aim of capturing the actual size of the streets, its length measured in miles.<sup>36</sup> His title change for the project, from *On The Sunset Strip*, as it was called in the newspaper ad, to *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, conveys his desire for a totalizing representation, in which literally every building on the street would be represented. Yet the length of the area Ruscha photographed and the large accumulation of images that he producing while doing so made this goal impossible in practice. Instead of making a strip that corresponded directly to the measurements of street, he went in the other direction, by scaling and compressing the photographs, first using the size of the contact sheets, then the film strips, as his constraints. While in his paintings he used scaling tools to represent small,

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<sup>35</sup> Entire sections of layout manuals are dedicated to the proper use of rubber cement. See, for example, Tom Cardamone, *Advertising Agency and Studio Skills: A Guide to the Reproduction of Art and Mechanicals for Reproduction* (New York: Watson-Guptill, 1959), 21-22 especially. Page 22 includes diagrams on how to use rubber cement to paste on flimsy and delicate materials.

<sup>36</sup> Ruscha, quoted in *Art Voices* 5 (Fall 1966): 61, 68; reprinted in *LAI*, 3.

portable objects, here he dealt with the question of how to construct an image that represented, rather than replicated, the strip's size.

Now with the strip assembled, the next step entailed translating the montaged photographs into material that could be transferred to a page. First, the montage needed to be printed, which Ruscha outsourced to a local printing shop. As he was preparing the montages for this printing, Ruscha elected to reduce the photographs again, to the 1-3/4" height strips that would be printed in the book. These compressed photographic strips require a closer mode of viewing, akin to the close looking of someone cutting and pasting together scraps of photographs as they cut, pasted, and carefully joined together the images. This along-the-way decision indicates that even as Ruscha began with a pre-established concept, the project was altered by how the work played out on a material level, as the images were shuffled and pasted together.

The resulting printed strip, which is the one seen in the book, suggests a dual concept of actual size. On one hand, the strip metaphorically gestures to the idea of actual size, through the notion of capturing "every building" and through the very long page which, while no where near the length of the portion of *Sunset* it represents, is awkwardly long for a book (one needs a large table to spread it out fully). The strip also suggests the actual size of medium used to take the photographs, because the printed montage's dimensions are very close to that of the 35 mm film. Ruscha's materials and techniques, therefore, becomes determining factors in assembling the pictorial content of the book.

With the printed image strips in hand, Ruscha next produced a rough mock-up, or dummy, of the book's layout (figs. 3.21 and 3.22) (for the other books, with the more conventional page format, Ruscha made small roughs which show his experimentation with



different layouts).<sup>37</sup> To plot out the accordion fold page, he put together an assemblage of the title page, copyright page, and image strips. Because of restrictions in printing size, Ruscha had to arrange the strips in three stacks, each of which would become one section of the book's long page. All of the material had to be configured so that when the mock-up was printed on a single sheet, it could be cut, folded, and joined together to produce the continuous accordion-fold page. For each section, the top strip was oriented right-side up, while the bottom strip was rotated 180 degrees, so that the lower part of each strip (where the road is located) faces inwards towards a large white blank space in the middle.

Along with the photos, Ruscha also cut and pasted printed text onto the mock-up. The two main textual components were the title page and the addresses underneath the image strips. For the title page, inserted at the beginning of the mock-ups, Ruscha first mapped out the design on his own, working out the spacing and drawing the typeface. While this was a task that could have been delegated to a printing workshop (he could have simply written out the words and told them which typeface to use), Ruscha preferred to "chart" these designs out on paper, another example of his acting as "majordomo." Drawing upon his knowledge of typefaces, he chose Beton, a well-established serif typeface, for the book covers.<sup>38</sup> Ruscha's designs, as mentioned earlier, can be seen hanging on the wall in the studio photo (see Figure 3.18). As the studio photo demonstrates, Ruscha was working simultaneously on *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, *Various Small Fires and Milk*, *Some Los Angeles Apartments*, and *On the Sunset Strip* (as it was called at that point). These acted as Ruscha's process drawings, to work out the spacing and font, as well as the template for the printers.

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<sup>37</sup> The two sketches book layouts, related to *Some Los Angeles Apartments*, is a good example of Ruscha's use of roughs to design his books. See LT, 165.

<sup>38</sup> Ruscha, Conversation with the author, March 3, 2013.

Next he ordered the text from a local workshop (even this is recorded in his notebooks – he used Vernon Simpson Typographers on Melrose Avenue). The company sent him sheets of type with the words “Every Building on the Sunset Strip,” as well as “South Side” and “North Side,” directional indicators that Ruscha elected not to include in the final version (Figure 3.23). Ruscha also elected to label the addresses and the names of intersecting streets, by pasting numbers and names in the corresponding areas beneath the photographic strips (Figure 3.24). He used another local shop, Andersen, Ritchie, & Simon on Riverside Drive, near the Toluca Park neighborhood, for this type, which he had printed very small.

Ruscha labored extensively over the mock-ups. Beyond the work of putting them together, he also had to communicate his instructions to the printing workshop. He liberally marked the paper around the image strips with notes, such as “1 board to here,” indicating where the printer should continue the images on the next line, and marking where folds would occur (Figure 3.25). Small number 2’s penciled into the bottom strip appear to denote its status as the second half of the image pairing, the section that represented the south side. Covered with measurements, notes, and asterisks, Ruscha’s mock-ups constituted a template for offset printing. On this template Ruscha mapped out the information necessary for turning the paste-ups onto a long page, which would then be cut and folded to fit into the book. The dimensions of the final product, as Ruscha has noted, came about in conversation with the printer, who gave him a ballpark idea of a size that could work and the spoilage, or waste product, which would result. Based on that information, Ruscha determined the final dimensions.<sup>39</sup> In the mock-ups the book appears as diagram, each piece flat, bounded by square graphite outlines. Ruscha’s detailed instructions show how the two-dimensional

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<sup>39</sup> Ruscha, quoted in Henri Man Barendse, “Ruscha: An Interview,” *Afterimage* 8 (February 1981): 8-10, reprinted in *LAI*, 216.

diagram would become a three-dimensional book, through a series of cuts and folds. These instructions provided the basis for the printers to translate Ruscha's flat page into the sections for the accordion fold page. As is the case for a marked-up layout executed in an ad firm, every decision was accounted for and explained, and nothing left to chance.

Ruscha also directly worked into the photographs on the mock-up, frequently re-touching them by hand. Using gray paint, he painted around rooflines so that they would appear more defined, more etched against the washed-out sky (Figure 3.26). In other places he made notes meant for the printers, instructing them, for example, to smooth the seams of the montaged photographs. The shop first prepared press pulls of the mock-ups, test pages for Ruscha to approve before the full set was printed (Figure 3.27). Ruscha again marked these pages up with notes and correction before sending it off for a final printing.

Ruscha's segmented process – from draft photomontages to more finished mock-ups to press pulls – follows the established process of preparing commercial publications, the step-by-step system that was then used for translating an image morgue into a design and then into print. As mentioned above, in the making of *Every Building* Ruscha absorbed multiple roles of those involved in the making of printed designs, both on the production and receiving end of the supply chain. As the one who orchestrated the project and oversaw a team, Ruscha acted as the art director. Like an art director, he hired many to work with him, beginning with those who helped with the shooting of the Strip, including McMillan, Paul Ruscha, and Susan Haller, and who executed other organizational and preparatory tasks. Ruscha and his team also took on the role of paste-up men, who executed the tedious labor required to make dummies. Also referred to as the “paste-up mechanical” or more simply

“mechanical,”<sup>40</sup> these objects served as the templates for printing. It acted as the “printer’s blueprint” for the design.<sup>41</sup> The organizational model of Heavy Industry, Ruscha’s publishing company, mirrors the workings of an ad agency or design firm. Though its name evokes an assembly line in a factory, the actual model of labor borrows from a small scale design company, entrenched in and dependent upon the work of free lancers and local workshops. Labor is dispersed into the hands of many, even as Ruscha himself re-consolidated decision-making power in his determinations of final object. While Ruscha’s company may not have worked much like one of Ford’s factories, his work does evoke the root of that type of industrial production: the printing press, the first kind of mass production.

Preparing the page, however, was only one step in the process of making the book. The next stage involved assembling the books, by gluing the printed pages together and adhering them to the covers. Ruscha, and those who worked with him, also had to paste the type on the covers, which were then again sent off, this time to be printed and cut (Figure 3.29). Like the book’s title page, the covers have a sparse design, with small, silver letters at the top reading “The Sunset Strip.” The covers and printed, folded pages returned to his studio ready to assemble. There Ruscha and his team jointed the white fold over, at the beginning of the page, to the cover with a durable type of paste. Only the back of the left side had to be joined; this was what held the page inside the book and allowed it to be extended. On the last section of the foldout, the image strips were truncated to different lengths, with the top strip shorter than the bottom.

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<sup>40</sup> Cardamone, *Advertising Agency and Studio Skills*, 15 – 18. The entire book gives a good sense of the paste-up processes at use in the 50s.

<sup>41</sup> Wales, Gentry, and Wales, *Advertising: Copy, Layout, and Typography*, 273.

Ruscha also documented this process in his notebooks, by recording the cost of each unit, the time spent, and assistants involved, and how much he paid each of them for their work. The approach also facilitated fairly simple re-printing of the books, which was important for Ruscha because it signified the books' non-art quality and increased their accessibility, two qualities that he found desirable about the commercial book format. Even so, he continued to oversee the production of *Every Building*, in order to ensure that it was printed exactly as he wished. In an interview with Willoughby Sharp, Ruscha recalled his frustrations, noting that he had "practically a cardiac arrest" over one of the printings of *Every Building*, when the workshop cut and folded it incorrectly. Ruscha insisted that they do it again.<sup>42</sup>

The mock-ups and press pulls, invaluable glimpses into Ruscha's process, reveal a great deal about the material and conceptual dynamics of his model of book making. First, this look into his process demonstrates the multiple transferals entailed in moving from piles of photographs to montages to printed page. After the montage had been produced, Ruscha slotted into a layout, with the images arranged as stacked rows of photo strips. This work involved a conceptual kind of gymnastics, a plotting out of the page according to how it had to be printed and an imagining of how those printed pages would be cut and put together, to form the final accordion-fold page. Along with the organization of the page, the mock-ups also indicate the importance of white space in the design. In leaving most of the page unmarked by printed images or text, Ruscha inverted one of the most important rules of layout: to use white space effectively and purposefully (Figure 3.28). In his layout manual, Felten devoted a section to "the allotment of white space." He writes:

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<sup>42</sup> Ruscha, in Willoughby Sharp, "A Kind of Huh," *Avalanche* 7 (Winter-Spring 1973): 30-39, reprinted in *LAI*, 67.

...white space is medium through which relief and freedom are imparted to a layout; through which it gets interesting “breathing space...white space, when correctly applied, prevents monotony, helps direct attention, contrasts or emphasizes elements, and assists in stimulating optical rhythm. The influence that white space exerts on layouts may be likened to the introduction of open spaces for sunlight, ventilation, and recreational areas in the plan of a community.

In *Every Building*, Ruscha pushes these principles by making most of the page white space, too much white space, by Felten’s standards. The architecture of the page, which Felten likens to a modernist vision of hygienic, clean design, becomes sparse, a horizontal composition with two long, compressed strips of pictures, overwhelmed by vast amounts of white space. One wonders why the picture are not larger. Ruscha also used abundant white space in other books, such as *Nine Swimming Pools*, which is full of blank pages at the end. In other interviews, when discussing these pages, he emphasizes how important it was for him to have them there, so crucial that he recalled paying extra for their inclusion. As disruptive devices, the white space and blank pages seem vacant and purposeless, as if we are being given too much “breathing space” around the images, too much “relief and freedom,” too much empty space. Moreover, the white space in the book counters Felten’s idea that a layout should have an attractive optical rhythm. The run of white space, instead, is monotonous and visually uninteresting. On one hand, then, the swaths of white reinforce the horizontality and façade-like quality of the photos, which echoes Ruscha’s statement that the Strip is like a Western storefront, just paper with nothing behind it.<sup>43</sup> But “paper” here can also refer to process: this is a design worked out and printed on paper, and the white space points back to those origins, the reams of paper involved in constructing a project such as this one (and perhaps also the “spoilage,” the paper wasted). Scholars have also argued that the white gap correlates with the driver’s or pedestrian’s experience of the Strip,

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<sup>43</sup> Ruscha, quoted in David Bourdon, “Ruscha as Publisher [or All Booked Up]”, reprinted in *LAI*, 42.

and that it represents the road – the in between space bordered by the two views Ruscha pictures. However, the fact that the perspective of the photographs does not equate with either of these views suggests that this space has a different function, one that both references and contradicts the codes of layout design.<sup>44</sup> The abrupt cutting off of the bottom strip, which is just a little shorter than the top, reinforces this sense of disruption of layout standards and unorthodox use of white space. In fact, the unevenness of the strips, now a celebrated and highly valued featured of the first edition (the strips were evened out in subsequent editions) was likely unintentional, as Ruscha asked the print shop to do another run, this time with the strips cutting off a little earlier and flush with the end of the page.<sup>45</sup> However, he liked the abrupt quality of the first run and the extra flap created when the page was folded under at the end, so that the over run would exceed the dimensions of the book's cover. The flap makes the book seem even a little more strange and inscrutable; the extra space and cut off disrupts the run of images and provides an unexpected ending. The unevenness of the strips – the top is a little longer – also suggests the inexact science of manually piecing together the photos from the unruly image archive.

In addition to printing the image strips on the page, Ruscha had to find a way to contain the folded page and to make the book portable, given that he desired to circulate it widely. The cover would be the casing for the page, with the far left end of the page adhered with strong adhesive to the inside, while the box would be the packaging for the object, something to protect the cover. Using similar methods to the strategies he had used for the

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<sup>44</sup> See, for example, Cécile Whiting, *Pop L.A.: Art and the City in the 1960s*, 94- 95; Jaleh Mansoor, "Ed Ruscha's One-Way Street." *October* 111 (Winter 2005): 127 – 142).

<sup>45</sup> This version has become valued for its extra flap, which was actually a mistake in the printing process. In the next edition Ruscha corrected this extra lengthening of the page. An undated letter to Ruscha, from a collector, reveals how this first edition became increasingly sought after over time. The Streets of Los Angeles archive, GRI.

mock-up, Ruscha sketched out diagrams complete with precise measurements and illustrations plotting out the method of assemblage (Figure 3.30). In these sketches, Ruscha drew the boxes as axonometric projections, which made it possible to see the front, back inside, and edge. In this system of drawing, all axes are equally foreshortened, ensuring uniform proportionality and thus the ability to take measurements directly from the sketch, as it is translated from a drawing to an object. For the workshop producing the covers, such drawings therefore constituted vital information – again, blueprints – for the design. Ruscha annotated these drawings with other important notes, such as the thickness of the chipboard he wanted the shop to use and his calculations regarding how many boxes and covers could be printed per sheet. Using a similar design method, Ruscha also created a shiny Mylar slipcase for the book.<sup>46</sup>

Ruscha's cover designs function as a packaging for his book, a container in which the content – a folded accordion page – could be compressed and made portable. While his projection drawings for the covers have the immediate functional purpose of communicating with workshops, they also imply a deeper connection between Ruscha's books and mass-produced packaged products, of the sort that he represented in his common objects paintings. Ruscha conceived of books covers and food packaging as projections that could be translated into three-dimensional objects, as was the case for the *Every Building* covers. This dynamic, however, could also be reversed; that is, objects could be plotted in the projective space of design drawing. In the drawing for *Box Smashed Flat*, for example, Ruscha pictured the Sun-Maid packaging as disassembled, a diagram of lines (see Figure 2.33). The drawing suggests the beginnings of food packaging as a drawn-out design, in this case an orthographic-type projection, like a ground plan of a box. Ruscha's drawings also evoke the

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<sup>46</sup> He also designed a black slipcase for *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations*.



projective, shallow space of product design, as seen in the 1962 drawing *Lemon Drops* (Figure 3.31). After tracing the box from a print source, almost surely an advertisement for the candy, Ruscha placed a grid of squares over the outline, which he used as the basis for a painting (see Figure 4.27). In the drawing, the box, like the tire in *Fisk* or the Spam tin, appears to be suspended in space, with several lozenge-shaped candies spilling out of its open lid. The cover for *Every Building*, a basic construction of chipboard, allowed for a similar containing and release of the content, the accordion-fold page. Though the page remained anchored firmly in the cover, it grew increasingly unwieldy as unfolded to the full length of 27 feet. This length also disrupts the functionality and practicality Felten emphasized in layout.

Ruscha's distribution of *Every Building*, as much a part of the work as the object itself, also suggests a framework of book-as-product. The first print run, produced in September of 1966, numbered 1,000 copies. Ruscha tracked all the receipts and calculated the unit cost for the first run: \$1.35 per book. The book was reprinted in 1971 in a run of 5,000.<sup>47</sup> Ruscha's records for the first and second runs of *Every Building* reveals the extent of its initial circulation. From the beginning, Ruscha systematically distributed his books to stores, including Wittenborn in New York (a renowned avant-garde bookstore and gathering space), curators, fellow artists, and friends. He also offered the books for sale through mail order advertisements – people could send a check for a few dollars and receive a book in the mail. He had Joe Goode take some abroad, and he gave one to curator Kasper König. Bruce Nauman, Andy Warhol, and Michelangelo Antonioni received copies. Betty Asher had them available at an exhibition. He sent some to art institutions, including the LACMA library and bookstore, and to civic organizations, such as the Sunset Strip Chamber of Commerce. Most

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<sup>47</sup> This information comes from Ruscha's records books, held in The Streets of Los Angeles archive, GRI.

of this distribution occurred before his first exhibition of the books, which took place in 1970 at the Heiner Friedrich Gallery in Munich.<sup>48</sup> By 1971, in a period of seven years, he had distributed a total of 1,177 books through various channels, including Wittenborn, galleries, and simply giving or selling the books personally. While a small number compared to the distribution of commercial publishing houses, Ruscha's small-scale system facilitated an impressive circulation of the book, both in United States and in Europe. With this system of distribution, Ruscha brought full circle his desire to be the Henry Ford of book making, a desire expressed in the "Heavy Industry" label. Ruscha's use of the commercial book form active marketing, and evocation of industry evokes a longer history of avant-garde book production, such as El Lissitzky's production of technical literature, to name only one example. The publishing label declares that this is not a discrete art object, but a mass printed book, produced in thousands of identical copies.

While Ruscha's Heavy Industry label and method of assembling and distributing the books does suggest a factory assembly line, the project also emerged out of a different world, the decidedly slower world of design and commercial printing. As mentioned above, the model of labor corresponds to the small-scale firm entrenched in a local design economy. However, Ruscha's process even further decelerated the supply chain of commercial publishing, because of his obsessive attention to detail, as well as its efficiency, given the fact that his print runs were quite small for commercial workshops.<sup>49</sup> Produced amongst the tasks of assembling *Artforum* layouts, *Every Building* slows down, extends, and scrambles the

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<sup>48</sup> Phyllis Rosenzweig mentions this in her essay "Sixteen (And Counting): Ed Ruscha's Books," in Neal Benezra and Kerry Brougher, *Ed Ruscha* (Washington, DC: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, 2000), 184. The reception of Ruscha's books in Europe is an important history, and one that needs to be more fully explored and documented, especially given that the first show of the books was in Germany.

<sup>49</sup> Susan Haller recalls that the workshops were somewhat surprised by Ruscha's print-run numbers, given the high volume of their typical output. Conversation with the author, March 6, 2015.

processes of layout design. In the book Ruscha bends the tools of paste-up to his own ends, and uses it in a pictorial and documentary manner, rather than for communicative purposes. At times, he does gesture to the communicative function of layout and its modes of delivering information. The text he inserts, for example, plays an informational role: it identifies addresses and intersecting streets, in small type positioned directly below the strips. This is not a map, however, or a guidebook of the Strip, but a painstakingly systematic picture of it. Captions signal the underlying system of the book's assemblage; for example, they hint at the tedious labor of producing the paste-ups, which involved matching numbers as images from different shoots were used. *Every Building* is concept-driven (a crucial point in LeWitt's "Paragraphs,"), but a concept that was shaped along the way as materials were assembled, pasted, and printed, a concept that evolved in the making of the book. In *Every Building*, Ruscha pictures a place synonymous with Los Angeles – perhaps its most famous section of real estate – with a mode of production emblematic of the city's image-producing complex. The book melds together subject matter and form, in that it packages the picture of the Strip as a commercially printed fold out book. With its hilly terrain leveled out in an image strip, crafted with paste-up and smoothed together with offset, Ruscha's image morgue of Sunset becomes a halting stream of pictures, packaged into a portable and reproducible format.

### **Between Cut-Out and Picture: Photography and Perspective**

By taking stock of Ruscha's process, we can understand a great deal about the conceptual framework of *Every Building*. Yet there is still the question of what the book has

to say about its subject matter. If the driving goal of Ruscha's project remained the essentially impossible task of representing "every building," or as the earlier titles indicates, at least represent something about being "on the Sunset Strip," what in fact does the book actually tell us about the place itself? Most often, scholars have characterized *Every Building* as a "deadpan" representation of the Strip, in which the glitzy locale appears as flat and empty. Lawrence Alloway, for example, wrote in 1970 that Ruscha used photography as a tool, not a medium of art, and that his books represent "a concordance of decisions, unmistakably aesthetic, for all their deadpan candor."<sup>50</sup> Written for the portfolio *Artists and Photographs*, Alloway's notion of photography as a "tool," something to "use," became common terminology in discussions of Conceptual art. While Alloway was discussing Ruscha's books as a whole, the horizontality and length of *Every Building's* pictorial content especially resonates with his description. A long strip of black and white buildings, billboards, and slices of streets, the photographs take on the façade quality of the Strip itself, with its low-slung buildings seeming to almost blend together. Ruscha has expressed his interest in representing this flat transversality: "All I was after was that store-front plane...it's like a Western town in a way. A storefront plane of a Western town is just paper, and everything behind it is just nothing."<sup>51</sup> In other instances, he characterized L.A. as "the ultimate cardboard cut-out town."<sup>52</sup> As Ruscha's working notes demonstrate, in some cases he enhanced this effect by retouching photos, such as painting around the rooflines, which made the buildings read even more as cut-outs pressed against the sky. The other dominant

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<sup>50</sup> Lawrence Alloway, "Artists and Photographs" (1970), reprinted in Douglas Fogle, ed., *The Last Picture Show*, 20. For more on the notion of Ruscha's photographs as "deadpan," see also Aron Vinegar, "Ed Ruscha, Heidegger, and Deadpan Photography," *Art History* 32 (November 2009): 852 – 873.

<sup>51</sup> Ruscha, quoted in David Bourdon, "Ruscha as Publisher [or All Booked Up]", reprinted in *LAI*, 42.

<sup>52</sup> Ruscha, quoted in Robert Landau and John Pashdag, "A Conversation with Ed Ruscha," in *Outrageous L.A.* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1984), 8-9, reprinted in *LAI*, 242.

reading of *Every Building* argues that the book embodies the driver's, or pedestrian's, experience of the Strip. Cecile Whiting's evaluation represents this point of view. In the section on *Every Building* in *Pop L.A.*, she writes, "the book highlights the consistency of the driver's visual and spatial experience of the built environment by running photographs together in two unbroken bands."<sup>53</sup> Even the breaks in the photo strips, because they are subtle, ask the viewer to adopt Ruscha's "keenly observing mobile eye," which in turn makes the viewer more aware of the process of perception (something the book certainly does do, but to a different effect, as I argue below). By photographing the fronts of the buildings and showing both sides of the street, so the argument goes, Ruscha represents the experience of driving along Sunset.

Other historians have understood Ruscha's work as both a representation of a specific and deeply symbolic area of Los Angeles and an embodiment of late capitalism's homogenizing effects (especially evident in this particular city). For Hal Foster, the way in which Ruscha shows the Strip as "real estate *tout court*," or as all abstracted property, stems from his "deadpan" style of photography, which suggests a matter-of-factness both funny and desolate.<sup>54</sup> Yve-Alain Bois, likewise, sees Ruscha's photography books as representing the industrial seriality of late capitalism, either in the form of the sameness of the landscape, as in *Every Building*, or as leftovers, as in Ruscha's book *Real Estate Opportunities* (1970), a compilation of photographs of run-down properties.<sup>55</sup> Bois sees the concept of the leftover,

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<sup>53</sup> Whiting, *Pop L.A.: Art and the City in the 1960s*, 94-95.

<sup>54</sup> Hal Foster, "Ed Ruscha and the Deadpan Image," in *The First Pop Age: Painting and Subjectivity in the Art of Hamilton, Lichtenstein, Warhol, Richter, and Ruscha* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 211.

<sup>55</sup> Yve-Alain Bois, "Thermometers Should Last Forever," in *Edward Ruscha: Romance with Liquids, Paintings 1966-1969* (New York: Rizzoli/Gagosian Gallery, 1993), 8-38.

conceived of as the gaps and missed signals in processes of communication, as the governing idea of Ruscha's books.

The arguments concerning the book's deadpan nature and its representation of capitalist homogeneity have contributed a great deal to our understanding of Ruscha's work. However, like Conceptual art readings, in which the term "deadpan" also frequently occurs, such interpretations miss the implications of Ruscha's precise construction of the image-strip and his borrowing of the language of design (a very specific mode of representation). Beginning from my analysis of Ruscha's process, I want to add to the conversation two qualities that these readings do not take into account: the oscillation between flatness and depth and the peculiar perspective of the photographs. My readings are meant to complicate the notions of ironic detachment, facticity or coolness associated with Ruscha's books, by more precisely pinpointing the discourse from which his processes emerge and by situating his work within a design-based model of photography, itself entrenched with the image-producing complex in which Ruscha was working.

First, regarding the spatiality of the books, while Ruscha's image strip does convey a sense of urban landscape as facade, it is continually punctured by injections of spatial depth. The image strip is anything but flat. While the infinity focus levels out the depth of field, dimensionality and irruptions appear in other ways. For one, as some scholars have noted, the plane is broken up by the seams of the pasted-together montage.<sup>56</sup> Trimmed unevenly and joined imperfectly, cutting off cars and buildings, the strip's flatness is consistently interrupted by these stops and starts (Figure 3.32). Sometimes the seams get lost in middling gray of the photos, but in some cases, as with the cars, they have a jarring effect. For some scholars this suggests a mode of perception characteristic of car travel. Jaleh Mansoor, for

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<sup>56</sup> See, for example, Cécile Whiting, *Pop L.A.: Art and the City in the 1960s*, 94- 95.

example, has argued that Ruscha's internally-riven horizontal configuration of the road imagines it as a space of subjective perception, in which perspective breaks down and the discontinuities – of perception by car and by photography – become apparent.<sup>57</sup> However, even with the seams embodying the temporal blips in the photography process, Ruscha's strip nonetheless maintains a steady perspective, with the horizon line, located a little lower than halfway down the montage, remaining relatively continuous. The point of view is elevated— not a bird's eye and not from below, but rather right about at the top of the first story of many of the buildings. Because the Nikon is almost four feet above the camera bed (with the height of the truck making it even higher) and tilted up, and also shooting the opposite side of the street, the intersecting roads appear to be extending backwards. The photographs, therefore, reveal more of the intersecting streets than would be seen from street level. The viewer is not situated on the road or on the sidewalk, but above street level, as vividly demonstrated in the white painted street lines, which appear to recede (Figure 3.33). Cross streets span up and away from the road, into the distance, towards the Hollywood hills and the scrubby vegetation that lines them. In other places, all that is visible is the bleached-out sky; in those sections, the storefront reads as flattened façade, etched against the flattened background. In the next frame, billboards appear at an angle, sides of buildings are visible, and streets recess into the distance. This sequencing of flatness and depth continues throughout the entire photo strip.

Such close readings are admittedly a product of the kind of viewing the book makes difficult, because of the compressed strips and long page. Nonetheless, these observations indicate a significant fact about this picture of the Strip: that is, it oscillates between frontal flatness and perspectival recession, between a façade look and a sense of the Strip's

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<sup>57</sup> Jaleh Mansoor, "Ed Ruscha's One-Way Street." *October* 111 (Winter 2005): 127 – 142.

dimensionality, and thus between the transversality of cut-out printed material and the deeper space of vertically-oriented pictures. The oscillation embodies the temporal lag involved in photographing the street from the truck bed, the inevitable overlap that occurs when the camera shoots at short, pre-determined intervals from the apparatus placed in the back of a slow-moving vehicle. In some cases, for instance, buildings seem to be tilted sideways: for example, at the address 8969, a stucco structure with Tudor styling is considerably sloped downwards to the left, its latticed balcony and triangular roof seemingly weighted down on the left, as if it is sinking (Figure 3.34). These side views, which also show the buildings as three-dimensional rather than as flattened façades, also indicate the truck's placement to the side rather than from straight on, a view precipitated by the vehicle's slow but steady movement (usually about 25 miles per hour).

Ruscha's use of double photo strips also injects a sense of space into the work, because the flipped bottom strip suggests the act of physically rotating the photograph in space around a hinge, embodied in the white space. The perspective of the photos, moreover, is not one of a driver on the Strip (at least anyone in an ordinary car), or a pedestrian, but an elevated view that does not mimic any kind of spatial experience one would have in everyday life. Rather, we are given a kind of impossible or unachievable view, as if hanging in the air slightly above the road – a road that is, given the high population density of the area, relatively unpopulated. In this way, we are inclined to see the urban landscape as in parts and pieces, locked together in a designed assemblage. Reinforcing the fact that this is not an embodied experience of the Strip is the fact that when driving on this portion of Sunset, a driver must consistently turn the car, to follow the road's vertiginous course. Ruscha's photomontage smooths and evens out the curving boulevard, which clings to the sides of the hills, while still showing glances of the steeply ascending and descending



cross streets. The fact that the photomontage is not a driver's view becomes even clearer when comparing earlier versions of the Strip photos, especially the "fiasco version," with photographs shot out of the window and even some showing the driver at the wheel. Contemporaneous works, such as Jeff Wall's *Landscape Manual* (1969) or Vija Celmins's *Freeway* paintings and photographs (1966), serve as a useful point of comparison (Figure 3.35). In both of these cases, the camera is located inside the car, operated by a driver or passenger, with the photographs representing that particular perceptual experience. Wall's photographs especially resemble the first iteration of the Sunset project, for which McMillan shot the street through the window. As Ruscha's notebooks indicate, it was this type of embodied view that he wanted to avoid. Instead, he raises the camera above the strip, which creates a view of the Strip as three planes: road, building, and sky. Trees and signs slice through these planes, sometimes going beyond the frame of the strip. In some areas buildings, situated on hillsides, also extend beyond the frame. The photographs picture the Strip from this one steady camera view, thereby compressing long rolls of film into one printed image.

The photographs also do not represent the street from the point of view of the pedestrian (notice how the people who do appear in the book, scattered few and far between, seem to be pictured from farther away, certainly from above). Ruscha did picture pedestrian experience in another book, *Dutch Details*, a project commissioned by Sonsbeek '71, an international arts exhibition at the Groninger Museum (Figure 3.36). The book contains Ruscha's black and white photographs of Groningen's buildings, storefronts, and canals. Each long, rectangular page has a foldout, with photographs printed on the inside. When extended, the full page shows twelve photographs, each bounded by white frames of the page. While the work mirrors *Every Building* in its horizontality and focus on architecture and

city streets, it represents a different point of view, the embodied experience of walking through urban space. For this project, Ruscha also used a handheld camera to take photographs. This ground-anchored perspective is evident in the closeness of photographs to store windows, from-below views of buildings, and shots of people standing next to bicycles or buildings. Unlike the photos in *Every Building*, each photo in *Dutch Details* shifts its viewpoint. The perspective range from a view across the canal from a building to a close-up shot of a storefront window. Ruscha's photographs of Sunset, on the other hand, have the effect of distancing the viewer from the urban landscape and elevating them above it, allowing for an all-at-once view (but also one interrupted by the seams, just as the *Dutch Details* photos are bounded by white frames). The road appears as plane in the foreground, a strip of asphalt at the front of the photos. The viewpoint is closer to an omniscient perspective, in other words, rather than anchored in the body. Installed 46" above the truck bed, with its lens tilted upwards and set at infinite focus, the camera captured a view of the Strip from above, a view which puts the eye level of the picture plane in line with the division between the first and second stories in buildings. Because the street is relatively quiet, there is even more of a sense that the viewer is not immersed in the urban environment, but somewhat distanced from it, observing rather than experiencing it.

The carefully crafted view of the Strip recalls Ruscha's approach to everyday objects in his early 60s paintings, especially his penchant for picturing them from above or for positioning them within the shallow rotational space of projection drawing. In these works he used photographs, such as the *Product Still Lives*, as a tool to study the forms of things, to approximate their actual size, and to insert images into the picture plane. Urban space, however, presented a different challenge, that of how to represent an entire section of street, and how to compress it into portable, printable form. In this task, Ruscha used a tool that he

also made use of in his paintings: the from-above photographic viewpoint. Elevating the Nikon above street level, Ruscha gives a view that presents the Strip as a picture, which shifts between flat frontality and deep space. The perspective evokes Ruscha's methods of rendering objects such as the magazine in *Noise*. In this painting, the magazine is rotated, so that the front and the sides can be seen. Another example is Ruscha's drawing of the newspaper in *Flash*, which he sketched from an elevated and oblique perspective (see figs. 2.8 and 2.29). Like these objects, the Strip seems to be inserted in a shallow design space, one with some depth, but only some areas of recession (always limited by the bleached-out, one dimensional sky). In his photographic strip buildings seem both like objects and outlines, both as three-dimensional structures and cut-out images.

Ruscha frequently experimented with the camera as a tool of perspective, as is evident in his photographs for the book *Nine Swimming Pools*. The title clearly communicates the content: the book contains 9 color photographs of backyard and hotel swimming pools around Los Angeles (Figure 3.36). Ruscha also shot these from above, close to the pools but pulled back enough to capture most, if not all, of their surface, along with surrounding background details such as diving boards and concrete pavement. The angle is not dramatic, given that Ruscha shot these from a standing position. Nonetheless, the perspective makes it seem as if the Technicolor aqua pools tilt up, like oblique blue ovals. In other instances, notably in the book *Thirtyfour Parking Lots* (1967), Ruscha pictured the city from a bird's eye perspective. These photographs, shot by aerial photographer Art Alanis, show L.A.'s parking lots from the point of view a helicopter.<sup>58</sup> In these photographs the equation between

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<sup>58</sup> For more on *Thirtyfour Parking Lots*, see Susanna Newbury, "Thirtyfour Parking Lots in the Fragmented Metropolis," in *Everything Loose Will Land: 1970s Art and Architecture in Los Angeles*, eds. Sylvia Lanvin and Kimberli Meyer (Los Angeles: Mak Center, 2013) 50-55. Newbury argues that the book embodies a kind of postmodernist geography avant-la-lettre, and contextualizes the work in regard to concurrent developments in urban design and architecture, from Reyner Banham to Frank Gehry to Venturi and Brown.

subject and picture plane comes full circle, as the parking lots, when viewed from above, become the pictorial surface, an abstracted arrangements of lines. A similar perspective is evident in another photograph pinned to the wall in the montage of the earlier mock-ups, which shows the LA County Museum photographed from the sky (though not from as high as the *Thirtyfour Photographs*) (Figure 3.18).

Ruscha often referred to this kind of perspective as “tabletop,” which evokes the sense of looking down on objects arranged on his studio tables and desks. But it also vividly brings to mind the way of looking at things and designing them on the drawing board, a surface in which multiples and conflicting perspectives can coexist, and which objects live in the shallow space of design, a space plotted out and constructed on paper. While Ruscha often referenced the pencil in his paintings, his photographs and books often evoke paper. In *Nine Swimming Pools*, in which the pools became almost tilted up to meet with the picture plane, Ruscha inserted a number of white pages, many more than there are images in the book. He placed these blank pages, moreover, between the photographs, a layout that intersperses the pictures of pool with the surface on which they are printed. In *Every Building*, similarly, much more paper is blank than is printed with photos.

In *Every Building* Ruscha experimented with crafting this type of space with selected photographs from a large archive. He squeezed a mile and a half stretch of street into doubled image strips, which is further compressed by means of the expandable page. Rather than replicating an embodied view, the book represents the Strip as alternatively paper-like façade and recessive space, both cut-out and picture. The labor and temporality of the project seeps through, in the seams, the unwieldy length of the page, and in the doubled pages, which indicates the dimensional nature of street but also the durational nature of

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picturing the Strip (both sides need to be photographed, which takes twice as long). This designer's-eye view represents the area as a layered and stacked configuration of street, building, and sky, three parts aligned next to each other. Etched against the sky, the buildings resemble the cut-out forms, the individual photographic units, that Ruscha used for the montage. The systematic one-after-the other aesthetic, however, is continually interrupted by seams, the residue of the layout process, and hints of deeper space, which suggests a pictorial mode of viewing, or the idea of picture-as-window. Manipulating the perspective of the camera, so that the Strip can be seen from above, Ruscha pictures it as constructed through a laborious assemblage of images, which produce a view that cannot be achieved in a single image, or even printed on a single page. The book implies that such a view is impossible to achieve other than through the careful construction of the image via the paste-up method, which allows for the making of a picture not able to be seen in a single image or with the human eye alone.

Through the synthetic processes of paste-up, Ruscha gets close to showing every building, even as the image strip proclaims its own losses and ruptures and necessary distortions. Material signs of Ruscha's process, these areas also point to the image morgue that underlies the project, the piles and piles of images culled to make the final product. The book takes on and displays the durational and conceptual processes of layout, the curated process that underlies the construction of all printed images. In his earlier photographs, Ruscha had represented cities in details: a shot of the street from a roof, a shop window, a road sign. In *Every Building*, with the motorized camera and the compression and scaling of paste-up, he synthesizes parts of the city into a whole. The book, really more of a fold-out brochure, gives one long view of the boulevard, as if viewed from above and all at once, with both sides pictured simultaneously on one page. Ruscha's montaged photo imagines a view

of the city as seen all at once. In the photographic strip, assembled image by image, snapshots of the city are compressed into an all at once view. Scaled down and printed in black and white, the streets evokes a model of a space, with little buildings placed side-by-side and tiny cars dotting the street. So small that we have to bring the book closer to discern details, the book gives an all at once view that is, contradictorily enough, hard to see.

### **Between Elevation and Perspective: *Every Building* and *Learning from Las Vegas***

While Ruscha borrows the tools of layout and commercial printing, his photographs also evoke another visual language: the conventions of architectural representation. Given *Every Building's* anchoring in the language of design, it is not surprising that architects and designers, especially in the field of urban studies, widely read and studied the book (and indeed continue to do so today). Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steve Izenour's *Learning from Las Vegas*, first published in 1972, exemplifies the reception of Ruscha's book in the architecture and design world.<sup>59</sup> In 1968, shortly after *Every Building's* publication, the architects led a Yale-based studio seminar focused on the Las Vegas Strip. *Learning from Las Vegas*, which grew out of this course, advocated for the pop-culture, communicative architectural form of the "decorated shed," low-slung structures dominated by large signage, over the modernist "duck," in which symbol and structure merge into one.<sup>60</sup> The Las Vegas

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<sup>59</sup> Cécile Whiting discusses the Venturi and Brown connections; see *Pop L.A.: Art and the City in the 1960s*, 102 – 105 especially. See also Hal Foster, *The First Pop Age*, 317. Foster argues that whereas Venturi and Brown naturalize the ugly and ordinary, whereas Ruscha "de-automatizes it," he reclaims the common from the commercial rather than presenting the commercial as the common. See also Foster's article "Image-Building," *Artforum* 23 (October 2004): 270-272; 310- 311.

<sup>60</sup> Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge/London, The MIT Press, 1972). In her article "On Pop, Permissiveness, and Planning," Scott Brown uses some of Ruscha's photographs to illustrate her points. See Denise Scott Brown, "On Pop, Permissiveness, and Planning," *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* (May 1969), 18 – 20. Venturi and Brown also engaged in debate with Kenneth Frampton regarding Ruscha's books, which Frampton saw as cold and deadpan, corresponding to the "brutality" of Madison Avenue. See Kenneth Frampton, "America 1960 – 1970: Notes on Urban Images and Theory," *Casabella* 36 (December 1971): 36; Denise Scott Brown,

Strip, with its vernacular buildings and plethora of commercial signs, epitomized this mode of architecture. The book described these qualities in language that since become a part of the lexicon of architecture and design:

The false front of Western stores were bigger and taller than the interiors they fronted to communicate the store's importance and to enhance the quality and unity of the street. But false fronts are of the order and scale of Main Street. From the desert town on the highway in the West of today, we can learn new and vivid lessons about an architecture of communication.

The Strip embodied a new architectural order, one designed with the motorist in mind and dominated by language, in the form of tall billboards and large signs visible from the car. Brown and Venturi, who celebrated Pop art's focus on the vernacular, saw in Ruscha's project a similar interest in the representation of commercial landscapes and signage. To illustrate the order of the Vegas Strip, Venturi and Brown borrowed Ruscha's photo-strip format (Figure 3.39). Labeled an "Edward Ruscha style elevation," the montage nods to *Every Building*, which in and of itself resembles a type of picturing common in architectural representation.<sup>61</sup> While Ruscha's strip may have seemed unusual in the tradition of the *livre d'artiste*, the form he used was a common one in architectural representation. Resembling the kind of montage that architects use as a form of site research – the type of paste-up that every architecture student has made, even still today, when Photoshop is the quickest way to assemble a panorama of a site – both Brown and Venturi's and Ruscha's photo strips give a

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"Pop Off: Reply to Kenneth Frampton," in *A View from Campidoglio: Selected Essays 1953 – 84*, ed. Peter Arnell, Ted Bickford, and Catherine Bergart (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 34, 37.

<sup>61</sup> It is important to note that for Brown and Venturi, this was only one amongst many of their illustrations of the Strip. They looked to many different formats – diagrams, photographs, maps, etc. – to capture all levels of the area. This is another way that Ruscha's book departs from this design course and its information purposes.

totalized elevated view of urban space.<sup>62</sup> Like the *Every Building* photo strip, the *Learning from Las Vegas* strip has visible seams.

Even with these similarities, Ruscha's picture of Sunset also differs from Venturi and Brown's conception of the city as well as architectural representation more broadly. For one, on the level of content alone, *Every Building* represents a different urban economy than that pictured in *Learning from Las Vegas*. The scale of Sunset's buildings, according to Venturi and Brown's typologies, mixes the order of Main Street – especially evident in the lower slung buildings and store front windows – and the Vegas Strip – characterized by tall billboards seen from the car. Sunset is, after all, a boulevard rather than highway; its billboards were much lower, and its signage stuck on and integrated with the architecture rather than towering above it. In the Strip photos signs are legible, but often blend in, as many are pressed near the sides of buildings or framed by trees. Though we do see them as from below, and thus as subject to spatial recession, they are generally a story or two above the buildings. The signs Venturi and Brown discuss, on the other hand, tower over the highway, in order to be seen from far away while driving.

More than the difference in content, however, is Ruscha's alterations of the established form of the architectural elevation, which he combines with other modes of representing urban space. For one, as I discussed above, Ruscha injects the planarity of the elevation with areas of implied spatial depth, as in the section that shows the addresses 8512 – 8524 (Figure 3.40). At the address 8514, The Sea Witch, the building at that location, is seen in elevation – it is without linear perspective and on par with the viewer's eye level. The

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<sup>62</sup> Related to this reading, other scholars have written how Ruscha's book corresponds with the property structure of capitalism. With numbers corresponding to address and names of intersections, the book seems to present the Strip as "real estate *tout court*," an urban landscape divided into properties and numbered by zip codes. See Hal Foster, "Survey," 37.



Tudor-style structure at the right, separated by an abrupt seam, is likewise a frontal façade. At the far left, however, the building at 8512, positioned to the side of the camera and two stories tall, recedes back behind the Sea Witch, thus injecting a slice of space into the image. The “Edward Ruscha style” illustration in *Learning From Las Vegas*, by contrast, has more in common with an elevation. Though both Sunset and Las Vegas photos employ the montage form, the Vegas Strip, shot from a lower viewpoint and surrounded by desert, resembles more closely a drawn elevation, defined mainly by the lines of the buildings. Ruscha’s photograph, on the other hand, moves between flat facades and the sides of buildings. Because it is longer, it also inevitably pictures interesting streets as they stretch up and away, or down the hill, from Sunset. Ruscha’s photographic strip also has a pronounced durational quality, in that it extends a long area, one which took quite some time to photograph, into two strips. Moreover, the strips also required a drawn-out kind of viewing: to see the bottom strip right-side up, the entire book must be flipped, or we must physically walk around it, to view it from that perspective.<sup>63</sup> Ruscha’s book renders the Strip not merely as a series of facades, but as an extended picture, with foreground, middleground, and background, with alternating flattened and recessive spaces.

These descriptions, admittedly, can only be gleaned by looking closely at the photographs, as the images are scaled down to a height of less than two inches. When looking at the fully expanded foldout page, the images are simply too small and long to see

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<sup>63</sup> As Katherine Smith has noted, Scott Brown and Venturi further explored the nature of mobility in the American vernacular landscape in the 1976 exhibition *Signs of Life: Symbols in the American City*, held at the Smithsonian Institution’s Renwick Gallery. Here they displayed their research for a larger audience, by creating 3D representations of three environments: the private home, the suburban Strip, and the main street. In their plans for the installation of the Strip, the architects imagined that two large screens with activated, moving images of the urban landscape. Venturi conceived of these moving images as using Ruscha’s image-making method to incorporate “visceral experience and animation” into the installation. See Katherine Smith, “Mobilizing Visions: Representing the American Landscape,” in *Relearning from Las Vegas*, Aron Vinegar and Michael J. Golec, eds., (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 116-123.

these details. Yet when we fold the page, we tend to bring the book closer, so that more of these details become apparent. Ruscha's display instructions for *Every Building* take this into account, and also hint at the book's in-between spatiality, its vacillation between the informational space of the transversal, suggested in the forms of layout and the cut-and-paste activities of montage, and the space of the wall, embodied in the deeper space areas of the photographs and the single-sided printing of the page. In 1973, Ruscha began to exhibit at Leo Castelli, where he sold his books throughout the 1970s.<sup>64</sup> At that time, the publications ranged between \$10, for *Business Cards*, and \$2.50 for *Records* and *Royal Road Test*. *Every Building*, still then referred to as *On the Sunset Strip*, cost \$8.00.<sup>65</sup> Included with the shipments Ruscha sent to Castelli were instructions for the display of the books (Figure 3.41). Most of the books had a small hole drilled in the upper left, in order that they could be hung from the ceiling (at roughly shoulder height) and paged through by viewers, but not taken from the gallery. However, Ruscha had devised a different display strategy for *Every Building*. In a letter to Castelli, Haller included a diagram illustrating how the book was to be hung at the gallery. Her instructions are as follows: the book, which required about 15-1/2 feet of wall space, was to be mounted to the wall, at a height of 5-1/2 feet, with tiny straight pins, which were to be placed between the joints of the folded page. The silver slipcase would be hung at the beginning and the cover inserted inside. As noted on the diagram, the end should be unsecured and left hanging loose.

This mode of display corresponded to way the book was printed, with photos on only one side of the page (another difference from the mass produced printed matter it

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<sup>64</sup> The documents about the books are in the Leo Castelli Gallery records, circa 1880-2000, bulk 1957-1999, AAA.

<sup>65</sup> Currently (in 2015) the price of the book ranges from mid-1,000s to a second print of the book to 9,000 for a first edition.

references). It also imparts with book with a three-dimensional presence, as the page would be arranged in an accordion fashion so that it protruded from the wall in undulating v shapes. The practical aspects of the display are clear: the entire page could be shown and the book would take on a dynamic presence, without a case to interfere with viewing. Conceptually, the plan also indicates a wavering embedded in the work itself, namely the oscillation between horizontal and vertical orientation. In this regard, the display raises the question of whether this is a book or a picture, something to hold and read or hang and view. Partially expanded, the accordion construction ventures into real space, but the object remains affixed to the wall. Ruscha also displayed the work in this way in the studio. Just as he had used the wall as a surface for working out the cut and paste montages, the wall also became a space to hang the final product. In a 1970 shot of the artist working in his Western Avenue studio, the book again crosses the boundaries of painting and sculptural object (Figure 3.42). Spanning a corner, the printed page is pinned on two adjoining walls, with the extra sections hanging loose at the beginning and end. In this instance it seems as if the book cannot be contained to the wall, but breaks and spills down towards the floor.<sup>66</sup>

Employing the image morgue mode of assembling pictorial content, and marshaling commercial art's tools of book production, Ruscha produced a hybrid object, a book with mostly pictures and minimal text, just enough to pinpoint where we are on the Strip, but not to tell us any more than that. The text serves to ground the project in a specific place and to corroborate the aim, also captured by the title, of picturing every section of a certain portion of the street – not the most interesting buildings or slices of the boulevard, but everything the camera recorded and, crucially, everything the assemblers included in their montages.

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<sup>66</sup> The spatial dynamics of the book, as hung across a corner, bring to mind Vladimir Tatlin's *Corner Counter-Reliefs* from 1914-15. This is not to suggest a direct influence but the comparison is provocative and bears further inquiry.

The pictorial content, the content which gives the book its form, exists in a space between the horizontal, embodied in the idea of the Western storefront plane, and the vertical, represented in the recessive spaces characteristic of the window-on-the world picture plane. These orientations also embody ways of working, the process of layout design as moving between the table, the drawing board, and the wall, the multiple sites on which design activities occur.

For Brown and Venturi, the photographic elevation represented one way – albeit a very useful way – of picturing the spatiality of the city and documenting a specific architectural order. In architecture and urban design, however, other forms are always necessary, as the goal is to provide as much information as possible about the spaces being produced, or in the case of *Learning from Las Vegas*, studied and mapped. Their book is full of other forms of illustration, such as diagrams and symbol charts, and accompanying text, in which they explain the new architectural order embodied in the Las Vegas Strip. All of these forms are necessary for their argument and their assessment of the Vegas Strip. Ruscha's photographs do show the vernacular and eclectic styles that constitute the Strip's architecture, but the book is not a map, guide book, or theorization of the area's landscape. In and of itself, it does not provide information about the place (such as, for example, its enlivening through human activity, or its recent curfew riots) other than noting the addresses and intersecting streets, enough to identify the location of each section of the photo strip.<sup>67</sup> Compressed into an image, the area appears as a series of interlocked systems and planes: first the road, a concrete stripe rather than a winding surface; then the building fronts, sometimes planar and sometimes receding; fringes of hills and trees; and finally the sky,

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<sup>67</sup> Alexandra Schwartz discusses the curfew riots in *Ed Ruscha's Los Angeles*, pp. 6, 80, 253.

which becomes almost like the background of one of Ruscha's paintings, a monochromatic surface that throws everything else into relief.

### **Conclusion: The Contemporary Image Morgue**

When speaking of his books, Ruscha has often noted that he thought of himself as a reporter, bringing back information about specific places and sites. *Every Building* is the fullest statement of what it meant for him to execute that project, a project that at its heart is about representing places. Rather than showing an embodied experience or an informational chart or map of the Strip, however, Ruscha compressed it into a montaged, scaleable, portable picture, the forms of which merge with its mode of delivery as a foldable paste-up, smoothed by offset and reproduced via commercial printing techniques. The book presents, however, only a slice of what the image morgue contains. In this way, it hints at the accumulation of pictures which stands behind every layout and which eventually become printed matter. As a producer of this type of printed matter, Ruscha knew its processes and mechanics well, and he marshaled this tool kit as a way to cull, manage, and present his laborious, almost obsessively exhaustive document of the boulevard. It is the morgue, the underlying material and fuels and gives form to this picture of Sunset. In this sense, the morgue is, to paraphrase LeWitt, the idea that is the machine that makes the art. But this idea unfolds through the messy material processes of layout, the back and forth and editing and cutting and pasting and montaging through which the image strip, and the packaging which contained it, took its form. Ruscha's books propose that in art making, the conceptual and the perceptual, to borrow LeWitt's pairing, are intertwined and dependent upon one another. Using his photo archive and the tools of paste-up layout, Ruscha assembles a very specific picture built around the concept of the photo montaged strip. The resulting image is

an extended picture of Sunset from above, in which it becomes a patchwork of buildings and streets juxtaposed like the cut-outs that form the photographic montage itself. For Ruscha the language of layout provided a structure for representing the world and for organizing the archive he had compiled of it, an archive, judging by his continual adding to it, would never be complete or finished. With layout providing the tools and the commercial book the container, the photos could be packaged, printed, and distributed.

The durational, cut-and-paste process Ruscha employed in *Every Building* is a relic of mid-century commercial art and design practices. Today, photos are primarily stored digitally, and the work of layout happens on the screen. The processes of layout, continually evoked in the terminology of digital interfaces (“cut and paste”), are now absorbed into the computer and executed with keyboard, with the screen as the surface of design. But it is not only designers who can create and use image morgues; now, anyone with online access can search a seemingly infinite image archives. Anyone can now be the curator, layout artist, and printer of images; if they do not generate their own, with any of the digital technologies available, they can access any of the millions of stock photographs accessed through and stored in the morgue. Michael Connors, who created the database Morguefile in 1996, summed up the purpose of his site as providing “free image reference material for use in all creative pursuits. This is the world wide web's morguefile.”<sup>68</sup> In Connors’s formulation, the stock photograph constitutes the basis of creative activity. Now designers, or anyone who wants to access these online image morgues, can download and cut and paste images with a few keystrokes. While now a digital activity executed on the screen, these types of commands – cut and paste, columns, clipboard – reveal their origins as paste-up terms. Today the moveable assemblage of paste-up has extended far beyond design – in a sense, it

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<sup>68</sup> Michael Connors, Morguefile, accessed April 15, 2015.

has become the preferred mode of archiving, curating, and displaying images. From Facebook walls to Pinterest boards, paste-up and its processes have become absorbed into digital technologies.

Ruscha's book evokes an earlier moment in the history of art and design, when layout was the blueprint of printed matter, and the image morgue and physical photo archive its materials. As the flip side of his work-for-hire design, the books sit in this intersection between the communicative purposes of mass-produced printed matter and the aesthetic and conceptual questions that drove his making of art objects – questions about actual size and scale, perception, and pictorial space. While he was assembling layouts for *Artforum*, Ruscha was also designing his unusual little book, in which paste-up provided the form and substance to produce a picture of Sunset.

## Chapter 4

### Projective Space: Architecture and Perspective

“It has been nonverbal thinking, by and large, that has fixed the outlines and filled in the details of our material surroundings.”

-Eugene Ferguson, *Engineering and the Mind's Eye*<sup>1</sup>

#### Architecture as Model

As a young child, Ruscha had a job delivering newspapers, a fact that he has often noted in interviews. In one instance, he described his memories of the scenery along his paper routes: “In Oklahoma City, I delivered newspapers riding along on my bicycle with my dog. I dreamed about making a model of all the houses on that route, a tiny but detailed model that I could study like an architect standing over a table and plotting a city.”<sup>2</sup> Like so many of Ruscha’s words, the statement invites inquiry not only into his biography, but also into the conceptual dimensions of his work. What would it mean for Ruscha, an artist, to act like an architect, and create an image of a city? In *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, Ruscha explored one way of answering this question. Using the commercial art image morgue and his photographic archive, he borrowed from the process of layout to create a work that depicts the Strip as “tiny but detailed model.” In the book the Strip is compressed into offset printed photomontages, further reduced when folded and encased in a book cover. Pressed

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene S. Ferguson, *Engineering and the Mind's Eye* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 5,9. Maynard quotes this in *Drawing Distinctions*, 7. Ferguson’s book examines the nonverbal foundations of engineering and how engineering drawings function to show how an object is to be constructed and how it functions. As he notes, this process thus has parallels the interaction of artisan and object: both begin with conceptions in the mind, then those conceptions are translated into graphic expressions.

<sup>2</sup> Ruscha, quoted in Siri Engberg, *Edward Ruscha, Editions, 1959 – 1999* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), 67.



against a bleached-out sky and mostly emptied of its usual traffic, the Strip appears at times like a flattened cut-out and at other moments as a three-dimensional space. Ruscha also used an elevated or from-above viewpoint in his other photographs of urban subjects, from swimming pools to parking lots. In the former case, the pools tilt up towards the picture plane; in the latter, the city, photographed from high above in a helicopter, slips into abstraction, with the lots resembling diagrams painted on the asphalt.

All of these works suggest that Ruscha conceived of and represented urban subjects through the conceptual dynamics of architectural representation. Though Ruscha's "models" never venture into the realm of the three-dimensional they consistently reference it, whether through implied space or actual space (in *Every Building*, for example, the representations of recessive space as well as the foldout's projections into real space when hung on a wall). Ruscha drew and photographed his subjects as if they were models, ideas or plans of buildings, thus projecting three-dimensional structures into architecture's systems of representation (in *Every Building*, the elevation). In his common objects paintings Ruscha also referenced these systems, through representing products as orthographic projections akin to a ground plan of their packaging. These examples suggest important conceptual connections between Ruscha's renderings of consumer products and his representations of architecture. In both cases, moreover, he used a from-above or oblique perspective to represent his subjects, whether by photographing the Strip from an elevated Nikon or drawing his paintings from side views. He also pictured his own art in a similar manner, by photographing works-in-progress from above or drawing objects as resting on surfaces, visible or otherwise. This strategy is evident in the Heavy Industry brochure, printed with photographs of his books seen from above and to the side (see Figure 3.6). It also appears in his many photographs of the drawing board (see Figure 3.3).

Ruscha often used the term “tabletop” to describe his fascination with these from above or oblique points of view, a phrase that indicates his penchant for conceiving of objects as things to be arranged or represented on a working surface.<sup>3</sup> In this chapter, focused on Ruscha’s representations of buildings, I argue that the tabletop view can be understood in regard to design’s systems of perspective and the language of architectural representation. Making use of both linear and paraline projection techniques, Ruscha represented a wide range of structures, from a small roadside gas station to the sprawling new Los Angeles County Museum, as models of things, ideas rendered on two-dimensional surfaces. His works suggest the spatial imaginary of architecture, but are not plans from which to build. Nor do they offer many contextual clues, if any, about their locations. Plotting out architectural structures with the tools of perspective and detaching them from their real-world contexts, Ruscha reverses the dynamics of his common objects paintings. Instead of resisting the effects of scaling and compression, the buildings succumb to the powers of scale. They appear as greatly reduced, drawn designs that exist in the infinitely scalable projective space of the drawing board, and often scale-less, as if they have no actual size, no concrete measurements. Beginning with an examination of perspective in Ruscha’s *Standard Stations*, I then proceed to look at his representations of the L.A. County museum, which sum up his conception of pictorial space. This analysis builds upon my arguments in previous chapters, regarding Ruscha’s uses of scale and his reinvention of the modernist picture plane. It also offers a new way of thinking about Ruscha’s representation of the dynamics of perception and the nature of vision. Along the way, the chapter also reflects on the longer histories of perspective, L.A.’s design culture, and the cultural politics surrounding

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<sup>3</sup> Conversation with the author, September 11, 2013.

the opening of the new museum. In his painting of the art institution, Ruscha most closely approaches the tradition of history painting, though in the end his rendering of the building leaves it caught in the conceptual space of the drawing board.

## **Part I: The *Standard Stations***

### **Photographing Gasoline Stations**

Contemporaneous with the making of works such as *Actual Size* and *Noise*, Ruscha was consistently taking and archiving photographs architectural subjects, such as Sunset Boulevard. In the early 60s, Ruscha began to photograph roadside gasoline stations, while making the long drive between Los Angeles and his hometown of Oklahoma City. Ruscha would select a handful of these photographs for his first book, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, which he published in 1963 (see Figure 3.4). Like *Every Building*, *Twentysix* reproduced a slice of Ruscha's image morgue.

One photograph that he included in the book, *Standard Station, Amarillo, Texas*, became the basis for what would be Ruscha's long engagement with the American gasoline station (Figure 4.1). Ruscha shot the station from across the road, as indicated by the viewpoint as well as the shadow cast on the asphalt in the lower right foreground. The building possesses typical qualities of the American roadside gasoline stations, qualities that still govern their construction today. It is a one-story structure, split between an office and a garage, with pumps out front, under an awning. Advertisements and interior shelving are visible through the glass windows of the office, but the contents of the shelf are not visible from this distance. In front of the pumps, a sandwich board advertises tune-ups and break service. Above the main building portion, a waving string of pennant flags grazes part of the roof, while a clump of trees frames the station at the back. The most commanding visual

element is the station's sign, mounted on a pole that rises above the building's flat roof. White sans serif type, which spells out the word "Standard," identifies the building as one of the many purveyors of that brand of gasoline. Behind the building, telephone lines stretch across the sky. Quiet and still, the photograph lacks signs of traffic and human presence, except for the cast shadow in the foreground.

Ruscha's use of perspective in *Standard Station, Amarillo, Texas* is subtler than the active shaping of viewpoint in his Sunset or parking lots photographs. For that reason, it is even easier to see the gasoline station images as deskilled, clinical, or mechanized, and to gloss over the ways that even in these photographs Ruscha used perspective as a visual device. In *Amarillo*, Ruscha's positioning across the street and to the side results in a very specific view of the building: rather than a façade, it exists as a three dimensional structure, receding into the background. With the eye level about equivalent the upper mullion on the windows, the recession is not dramatic, but is nonetheless an important element of the composition. The sign, by virtue of its elevation above the building, has a more angled line of recession. Both the sides and fronts of the awnings are visible, so that their recession, too, is prominent. The design of the awnings - white stripes sandwiching a darker color - enhances the sense that these structures project outwards and backwards.

The viewpoint of the photograph brings to mind certain section of the Sunset photos, the in-between shots that show the sides of structures and convey their three-dimensionality. In other gasoline station photographs, however, Ruscha employed a frontal view, which flattens out the low buildings and their surroundings and thus renders them as façade (or closer to architectural elevation, as was the case with other sections of *Every Building*). The photograph of Rimmy Jim's Chevron, in which the horizontality of the building mirrors the stripes on the road, is an especially salient example (Figure 4.2). Shot

from across the road, the photograph is divided between road and station, with about 2/3 roads and 1/3 building. Two painted stripes, cutting across the road, mirror the building's horizontality. In some cases signage obscures the buildings, as in photograph of the Conoco station in Albuquerque (Figure 4.3). Ruscha also shifted his position for the photos, sometimes standing much farther away from his subjects, as in the photograph of the Whiting Brothers service station near Ludlow, California (Figure 4.4). In case the road, receding into the distance, consumes most of the picture plane, while the station sits in the background, surrounded by telephone poles. When viewed in succession in the book, the play of perspectives and spatial modes becomes even more apparent. Ruscha's carefully designed layout, like the seams and folds of *Every Building*, interrupts the scanning mode that the seemingly straightforward images encourage. Many of the images are printed on the right side, with the left page blank (another instance of Ruscha's disruptive uses of white space). In some cases, however, photographs are printed on both pages, as in the section with the Texas Enco and Mobil stations, both photographed frontally (Figure 4.5). At times Ruscha printed the photograph across the fold, as exemplified in the pages with the Flying A station (Figure 4.6). Shown from the side, the building's horizontality, extended by the awning, stretches across the pages and behind them together. Like the *Every Building* photos, these images, though not pasted together in a strip, nonetheless hint the design and organizational decisions behind the work. As he had done in the *Every Building* project, in these photos Ruscha used the camera as both recorder and perspectival tool. In contrast to that project, however, Ruscha snapped the photos of the gas stations, instead of using a motor-driven device. For this reason, even with banal aesthetic, traces of the body behind the camera remain, if only in traces and residues.

## From Photograph to Drawing: Designing the Standard Station

While he re-printed the other photographs from *Twentysix*, it was the Amarillo image that would linger in Ruscha's mind. Between 1962 and 1969, Ruscha would make many drawings, several prints, and two paintings based on this photograph. Along with this group of works, many of which were referred to by the title *Standard Station* (or some variation thereof), Ruscha made other works that riff on their format. The *Standards*, perhaps more so than any others, clearly evince Ruscha's cyclical working model and his exhaustive attention to single motifs. These works also embody the segmented and drawn-out processes he employed, which involved working and re-working subjects over time.

Ruscha's initial versions of the station were pencil or pen drawings, such as this 1962 sketch on tracing paper (Figure 4.7). In this drawing, Ruscha altered the viewpoint, placing the viewer below the station, so that it seems to recede more dramatically and so that the awning is seen from below. As a result, the building has a steeper tilt, which Ruscha created through the use of linear perspective. The sign, too, is more angled, which reduces the distance between the building and the Standard sign. As a result of this alteration, the left side of the sign appears to touch the roof of the building, with the right side extending out beyond the awning. Ruscha also eliminated details of the building's architecture and simplified certain forms, including the lines of the glass windows and the pumps, which he drew as configurations of rectangles and circles. He also removed the station from its surrounding landscape and eliminated other details, such as the pennant flags. For parts of the building, such as the pumps, he made small studies, such a painted carbon transfer depicting the pump's side panel, with white negative spaces and red ground and black and

gray details (Figure 4.8). In this work Ruscha left the nozzle unpainted, but marked the drawing with notes as to the paint color he would use.

During that same year Ruscha continued to make others drawing of the station. He eventually completing seven drawings, including a “shadow study” of the station and one rendered entirely with pen outlines.<sup>4</sup> Some of these works are in black and white while others are in color, such as this graphite and colored pencil sketch (4.9). In this drawing the windows are blank, with nothing shown inside the station. Notably, Ruscha has flipped the building, as if rotating it 180 degree across the picture plane. This change shifted the cardinal diagonal line of the roof from a left to right to a right to left orientation. Here everything is represented in the play between figure and ground, between negative space and geometricized forms. The station appears as a box of blank rectangular windows, which are crossed by lines for window frames and surrounded by a red band at the bottom. Six yellow trapezoidal shapes behind the station replace the trees and pennant flag. Ruscha rendered the background with thick, crisscrossing lines of blue and black, which he applied especially heavily at the left, behind the yellow lights, and the center.

As he made more versions of the station, Ruscha continued to use the configuration of the red, gray and white building against a blue background and yellow shapes (Figure 4.10 and 4.11). *Standard Study #1* has a very similar format to the colored pencil work, but in this case, Ruscha filled in colors with coats of smooth tempera paint. The sign’s type is even more reduced in this drawing, as Ruscha rendered it with only with white negative space, but no shadows, as in earlier versions. His painting style, unmarked by brushstrokes, enhances

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<sup>4</sup> These drawings are all documented in LT, 100- 103. The *Standard/Shadow Study*, reproduced on p. 102, is shows the station as it is oriented in the photo, with the diagonal right to left. While in all of these drawings Ruscha foregrounds the lines of projection, here they extend out quite long, consuming more than half of the page. The study also indicates Ruscha’s interest in reversibility, which often shows up in his word paintings and many other drawings.

the sense that the station is all blocks of color and line. In *Standard Study #2*, Ruscha continued what had become a process of abstracting the station's forms. Here there are only a few areas of read: the edge of the roof, gas pumps, bottom of the building, and the front of the sign. The letters are gone, and the front of the station and underside of the roof are blank white surfaces, with the grey shadowing removed. Even the low horizontal platform for the pumps, defined in *Standard Study #1* by a black line, is all negative space.

Ruscha's transformations, executed with drawing, alter the building significantly. The original photograph, with its middling tones of grey, bleached out sky, and details – sandwich board sign, pennant flags, equipment piled inside the garage – is reduced in these drawings to planes of color, lines, and negative space. Detached from the landscape background, the station is identifiable by a few basic elements: the Standard brand name, the gas pumps, and the construction of the low building and awning. The station remains grounded in a landscape-like space, signified by the sky behind it, but it now seems towering and almost monumental. Moreover, Ruscha's steep tilting of the diagonal and the leftover projectors, which appear at the lower right and continue all the way back to the corner, suggest both that the station recedes infinitely and that it is a product of a drawing system, a system that creates a sense of spatiality. With no contextual clues, there is also no way to discern the scale of the building. It is worth pointing out that this mode is the opposite of what Ruscha called the "faithful rendering of an object unto its own size," a strategy that he used to represent small portable objects.<sup>5</sup> Though he used similar strategies, such as studying photographs and tracing, the buildings seem to have no actual size, no measurability.

This group of works exemplifies Ruscha's use of drawing as a process of reproduction, plotting, and abstraction. Ruscha worked out his ideas through drawing, and

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<sup>5</sup> Ruscha, quoted in *Oral history interview with Edward Ruscha*, AAA.



often focused concertedly on one subject, as he did with the station. This is why Ruscha's drawings are not simply preparatory works or studies for paintings, though they did serve that function as well. In fact, he made drawings of the station while and after he completed the painting.<sup>6</sup> Rather, they are all a part of the long and segmented process of making and re-making the Standard station image. The drawings also imply that for Ruscha, translation from building to photo to image functioned on a sliding scale of representation and abstraction, a moving back and forth between detail and generalization. His 1963 painting of the same subject is part of this trajectory, rather than the culmination of it, as Ruscha adds more detail back into this work. At 10 x 5 feet, *Standard Station, Amarillo, Texas* was Ruscha's largest painting to date (Figure 4.12). In this work, the station appears similar to its construction in the colored pencil drawing, though now the sky is solid black, with only three yellow shapes, reminiscent of spotlights, behind the station. As in the drawings, he rendered the station with a limited palette of colors, using only white, gray, navy, and red. Beginning at the bottom right corner of the canvas, the station projects forward, with its front pressed close to the front of the picture plane, and the left side receding into space and out of the frame. The sign, poles, pumps, and bottom of the station, bright cherry red, boldly contrast with white, grey, and black. Though the sharp diagonal suggests recession, the image of the building reads as adamantly flat, and the space it occupies as airless and lacking depth.

How does Ruscha picture the station? What does it become in these works? For one, Ruscha identifies and highlights definitive features of its architecture style. The upper left to lower right diagonal emphasized features he saw as already inherent in roadside gasoline

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<sup>6</sup> For example, *Standard Study* (1963), a tempera and work, with a painterly soft blue and yellow sky. See LT, 131.

stations, specifically what he saw as the “zoom quality” of these buildings, their projection into space. He describes this quality as follows:

The signs for the stations were lifted up in the air and they really caught your eye, and the gas station was a sleek metal box sitting under it. I loved that roof overhang of a gas station. In those days, it was connected to the office and garage of the station. The way they swept off the building was like a huge wing. It's a very modern, almost abstract image.<sup>7</sup>

Ruscha's drawings dramatize the elements he names here: the overhang, the high sign, and the projection of the station out and into space. While Ruscha may have seen abstract forms, what he identified as “modern,” latent in the station, his drawing pushes these forms farther, muddling the line between gas station architecture and modernist abstraction. The windows of the station, for example, are rendered as white rectangles of negative space, bisected by cross bars. Unlike the transparent windows in the photograph, crossed by shadows and revealing the shop behind it, these windows are completely opaque, almost like abstract canvases slotted into the station's architecture. In their evocation of modernist paintings, the forms of the window bring to mind Ruscha's reference to the monochrome in works such as *Noise*. While everyday objects, in that painting, anchored the monochrome in everyday life, here the modernist canvases become integrated into a banal structure, by playing the role of the station's windows. Ruscha also dramatizes the zoom quality by representing the image from below, thereby creating a lower viewing angle and tilting the diagonal present in the *Amarillo* photograph. Beginning with a specific photograph, Ruscha worked and re-worked the station until he arrived at an image distilled into planes of color and defined by linearity.

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<sup>7</sup> Ruscha, quoted in Cory Reynolds, “Street Talk with Ed Ruscha: An Interview with Michael Auping,” Artbook, April 12, 2011, <http://www.artbook.com/blog-excerpt-ed-ruscha-road-tested.html>.

Ruscha has also connected the “zoom quality” to the idea that the Standards borrow from the language of film, and as such embody his concept of “cinematic reality:”

... It seemed like all movies would have a train in them. Invariably, they had the camera down on the tracks and shot this train so it appeared as though it was coming from nowhere, from a little point in the distance, to suddenly zooming in and filling your total range of vision. In a sense, that’s what the *Standard* gas station is doing. It’s super drama.<sup>8</sup>

The yellow trapezoids, which Ruscha added to some versions of the station, reinforce the filmic resonances, as they appear similar to the spotlights roving above a drive-in, or the conical emanation of light emitted from a projector. In his writing on Ruscha’s paintings, Hal Foster develops this line of thinking, by arguing that Ruscha’s paintings fuse cinematic space with the form of the panorama.<sup>9</sup> As he writes, the paintings “oscillate between deep, airy spaces and flat, word-inscribed screens – as though they were projected as much as painted.”<sup>10</sup> His description of Ruscha’s color palette as possessing a “celluloid gloss” further reinforces the connection he makes between the paintings and the aesthetic of film, as well as the surface glamour of Hollywood. Foster’s reading emphasizes the regional specificity of Ruscha’s work as well as its broader implications for Pop’s engagement with mass media.

Other historians have placed the *Standards* in the context of American landscape painting. Like his book *Twenty Six Gasoline Stations*, the stations epitomize the travel experience and vernacular architecture of Route 66. Others have suggested that Ruscha’s painting puns on the Standard oil brand name. Both in subject matter – common architecture – and process – repetition of the same image – the prints play on the word

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<sup>8</sup> Ruscha, quoted in Sylvia Wolf, *Ed Ruscha and Photography* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2004), 264 – 265.

<sup>9</sup> Foster, “Survey,” in Mark Francis, ed., *Pop* (New York: Phaidon, 2005), 37.

<sup>10</sup> Hal Foster, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, Volume 2 (London: Thames and Hudson), 485.

“standard,” implying the standardization of the American landscape and the ubiquity of commercial culture.<sup>11</sup> A contemporary version of landscape, the *Standards* crystallize the architecture of the roadside station into iconic images, which has taken on a nostalgic cast as those stations have disappeared, and as Route 66 has been replaced by large highways. Ruscha, likewise, has noted that the *Standards*, like much of his work, take on the formal conditions of landscape as an organizational framework: “In a sense I approach all my work as if it’s a landscape, in that there’s a background, foreground, and usually some other nonsense going on...the background-foreground thing is an ever-present issue for artists, and this is my response to it.”<sup>12</sup> In the *Standards*, this pictorial segmentation seems to almost disappear, as the building becomes a function of interlocking planes of color and geometric shapes.

What is so curious about these works, however, and moreover little discussed, is Ruscha’s use of linear perspective, a traditional system of representing space and depth. On one hand, perspective seems to become a formal device in the *Standards*, a way to produce “super drama.” Angled steeply and cutting cleanly across the picture plane, the projectors appear to merge with the image, rather than doing the work of producing a sense of recession (instead, they are like an architectural feature). However, because linear perspective is by its very nature a system of representing depth, we still tend to read it in that way in the *Standards*. In other words, even though linear perspective appears to become pure formal device, there is still some suggestion of the building as existing in space, albeit a space shallow and airless. The double spatiality of the *Standards* brings to mind the photographic

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<sup>11</sup> Pasquariello, “Ed Ruscha and the Language That He Used.” *October* 111 (Winter 2005): 81 – 106.

<sup>12</sup> Ruscha, quoted in Kristine McKenna, “Lightening Up the Getty,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 24, 1998, reprinted in *LAI*, 352.

strip of *Every Building*, and its oscillation between paper-like façade and deep space.

Somewhere between picture as window and as surface, the *Standards* suggest pictorial depth even as they push against it.

### **Linear Perspective and the *Standard Stations***

Signs of Ruscha's use of linear perspective are everywhere in the *Standard* works. In *Standard Study #1* and *Standard Study #2*, for example, bare paper, surrounding the projection lines, enhances the sense of perspective as a procedure enacted on paper, executed with paper and pencil, rather than as a naturalized condition of seeing (figs. 4.10 and 4.11). In the painting, though the planning lines of the sketch are gone, the device of perspective merges with the image of the station. The roofline, in other words, is not only drawn with a projector; it is a projector, as are the top and bottom of the gas pumps, the Standard sign, and the windows of the building. The only elements that do not fit into this perspectival construction are the bright yellow forms at the left. Even these shapes, however, correspond to their own system, with vanishing lines located at different points behind the building. Perspective, in these works, is not just one tool that creates the picture – it is the tool from which the image is generated and the structure in which the image it is suspended.

Ruscha's use of perspective in the *Standards* is far from an anomaly. In fact, linear perspective appears throughout 1960s work, especially in representations of architecture, but also in renderings of common objects and food products. In his 1962 painting *Large Trademark with Eight Spotlights*, for example, Ruscha represents the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox logo, removed from its surrounding architecture and closely cropped, as a half-drafted design,

crafted with the use of perspective (Figure 4.13).<sup>13</sup> As with the *Standards*, Ruscha began this work with multiple drawings, one of which he transferred to a large canvas with a grid. He translated the bronzed, stacked letters into lines and planes of color, and the lights into yellow trapezoidal forms, very similar to the ones in the *Standard* painting. The moving image is stilled and solidified into a picture; the logo renamed generically as “large trademark.” The image becomes more complete as it projects forward. The red letters, a color change Ruscha makes from the source image, rotate outwards to the left, seeming to strain towards the edge of the frame. The entire logo rests on a scaffolding of pencil lines, which support the letters underneath and project back to the lower right corner. While in the source image the logo has a terminus – since it is a solid sculptural object, resting on top of a building – here its lines continue backwards, so that it seems to emerge out of the blank white space. Moreover, the pencil lines do not quite meet the apex of the white triangle. Unlike its sculptural precedent, the logo does not seem to have material weight, but to be tethered to the picture plane by pencil lines. Comprised of words and letters, the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox sign brings to mind the perspectively constructed words in *Noise*, *Pencil*, *Broken Pencil*, *Cheap Western* (see Figure 2.8). In that painting, the word “noise” likewise seems to project into the top half of the canvas, only it projects down to the right instead of up and to the left. Ruscha’s 1963 study for *Noise* show how he plotted out the letters and rendered them in perspective (Figure 4.15). The type possesses an ambiguous spatiality, in which figure and ground seem to switch and waver, to be both solid form and negative space. The drawing, of which there are many other examples in Ruscha’s oeuvre, implies a conceptual connection between the type design and the rendering of architecture.

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<sup>13</sup> While the *Standard* painting was completed in 1963 Ruscha began his *Standard* drawings in 1962, meaning that the production of the *Standards* and *Large Trademark* overlapped.

As he studied and re-worked the station image, Ruscha also continued to employ photography as a perspectival tool. For instance, he photographed the *Standard and Large Trademark* paintings in his studio, propped against walls and juxtaposed with other works. In a 1964 photograph, taken from above, the paintings seems to project at a similar angle to the building in the painting (Figure 4.16). A wooden railing, bordering the area on which Ruscha was standing, likewise mirrors the angle of the bottom projecting light in the background of the painting, and the ceiling beam the roofline. In another photograph Ruscha shot *Large Trademark* leaning against the wall (Figure 4.17). By positioning himself far to the side, Ruscha produced an extreme side view. The logo, already in dramatic linear perspective in the painting, is further skewed and compressed. On the wall to the side hangs Ruscha's painting *Parking Lines* (1962), a from-above diagrammatic representation of a parking lot with perfectly aligned automobiles. In these photographs Ruscha creates pictures in which his own works are subject to the rules of perspective. With the camera, he represented the works from different viewpoints, and picturing them as objects that can rotate and move, just as he rotated and moved drawings on paper.

Ruscha also used these photographs as a basis for subsequent works, engaging in an interchange between photo, drawing, and painted image, all bound together by experimentation with perspective. Stored in his archive are three trimmed photos of *Large Trademark*, each showing it from a different perspective (Figure 4.18). Ruscha used the cutouts to make a triptych entitled *View of the Big Picture* (Figure 4.19). The three drawings show the logo rotating successively in space. Their positioning suggests Ruscha's movement around the painting itself, as he made the three photographs of it. Ruscha often used a tripartite scheme in his renderings of his paintings and books. In many cases he represented objects at three specific positions: rotated approximately 20 degrees, then close to 45 degrees,

then to around 80 degrees. This idea of objects turning in shallow spaces brings to mind his contemporaneous work on the painting *Noise*, especially the rotated positions of the magazine and the text. It is another case of Ruscha imagining objects in the space of design, where they can be infinitely moved and re-positioned.

Ultimately, Ruscha returned the image to its point of origin: the sketchbook (Figure 4.20). On this page he sketched the painting turned at the oblique angle, with another work, *Motor*, at the right, oriented upside down on an easel (the painting is visible in another studio photograph). The wooden blocks on the floor, perhaps to prop up the painting, are also visible in the drawing, scatted in front of the canvas. The page also contains scattershot notes, about the receipt of funds from someone named Nancy and also noted that he broke it off with a girlfriend, Joy. Re-inserted into the sketchbooks, the painting becomes part of an ongoing documentation and replication of his work. It is, in other words, reabsorbed into the image morgue. Along with his paintings, Ruscha also frequently pictured his books in perspective, such as in the drawings *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations, Three View*, in which he again used the triptych form he used to depict the Fox logo (Figure 4.21).<sup>14</sup> This was one of the works that he photographed from above, as it rested on his portable drawing board (see Figure 3.2).

All of this suggests that perspective is a crucial tool in Ruscha's drawing board toolbox. These works evince Ruscha's abiding interest in linear perspective, as a system of conceptualization, representation, and replication, and, as regards architectural structures, a means of plotting out buildings on paper. Given Ruscha's interest in complicating the constitution of pictorial space, the question becomes: why use linear perspective, with its

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<sup>14</sup> The works on paper catalogue raisonné documents the many drawings Ruscha of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox logo. As he did with the Standard, he drew the logo often, in different media and color schemes and from different perspective. See pp. 89-95.



connotations of deep spatiality and traditional pictures, and its weighted history in the practice of fine art? How did his use of the tool relate to his design training, and how did it coincide with interest in architecture? Finally, how do we understand Ruscha's use of linear perspective along with his use of other types of perspective? To answer these questions, I first provide a condensed overview of perspective as taught in art education, especially in commercial art schools in the 50s. With this history in mind, we can then return to the Standards and understand how perspective shaped Ruscha's thinking and his methods.

### **Commercial Art and Perspective**

As long as perspective has existed, so has theorization of it. Linear perspective, in particular, has occupied a key place in the history of Western art. From Leon Battista Alberti's 1435 treatise to Erwin Panofsky's *Perspective as Symbolic Form* to Jacques Lacan's discussion of the gaze, perspective has been theorized and re-theorized, constructed and deconstructed. In its most basic dictionary definition, perspective is the "technique or process of representing on a plane or curved surface the spatial relation of objects as they might appear to the eye; specifically: representation in a drawing or painting of parallel lines as converging in order to give the illusion of depth and distance."<sup>15</sup> The structures of linear and aerial perspective in particular – the idea of picture as window, the concept of things receding, the stability of the viewer – are intertwined with ideas concerning representation, perception, and vision in Western art.

While I want to acknowledge this long and deeply complex history of perspective, my concern here is less with its uses and roles in fine art practice and more with its status in 1950s design education and commercial art. It is these design-based perspectival systems on

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<sup>15</sup> *Merriam Webster Online*, s.v. "perspective," accessed March 20, 2015.

which Ruscha's work depends. In my discussion, I will use "perspective" as shorthand for linear perspectives (as is common in the language of technical drawing) and "projection" for paraline projections (orthographic views, encompassing principal views and the different iteration of axonometric perspective).<sup>16</sup> As I have outlined in chapter 1, each of these perspectival systems featured prominently in Chouinard's class on projection drawing, which covered the basics of two- and three-point perspective as well as planograph, orthograph, and isometric projection.<sup>17</sup> All students were required to take projection drawing. It is worth taking time to briefly review each of these terms, which I outlined briefly in the first chapter in regard to Chouinard's course structure (see figs. 1.17 – 1.19 for illustrations of different types of projection drawing).

Orthographic projection function as a means of showing three sides of an object in two dimensions. The term is used differently depending on the context, but in general orthographic projections, in technical drawing, are understood as drawings that keep the projectors at right angles ("ortho-") to the picture plane. Drafting texts emphasize that an orthographic view is not a picture with shading and dimensionality, but a "two-dimensional representation which, for the sake of technical accuracy, has given up perspective."<sup>18</sup> Because any single orthographic picture can only show two dimensions, multiple drawings are required to represent all three dimensions of an object. Orthographic drawings also possess an ambiguity of depth, because the third dimension is flattened into the picture plane.

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<sup>16</sup> For more on the language and philosophy of drawing, and in particular the language of perspective and projection, see Patrick Maynard, *Drawing Distinctions: The Varieties of Graphic Expression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

<sup>17</sup> Chouinard Art Institute course catalogue, 1960 – 61, AAA.

<sup>18</sup> James D. Bethune, *Essentials of Drafting*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall Press, 1987), 82 – 84.

When the projectors are rotated in regard to the picture plane, the projection is referred to broadly as oblique. This type of projection shows an object with projectors parallel to each other and oblique to the picture plane, in such a way that its three principal axes are foreshortened. An axonometric is a type of oblique projection (the rotation of a plan upwards 45 degrees or 60-30 from the horizontal results in an axonometric drawing). Isometric projection, mentioned in Chouinard's description, is a special type of axonometric projection, in which the three principal axes make equal angles with the picture plane and are equally foreshortened. The visual distortions of oblique projections derive from the fact that in these drawings the axes do not taper as they approach infinity. Isometric drawings, in particular, have played an important role in technical drawing. Notably, in his drawing manual, Eakins dedicated a section to isometric drawings, which he thought were "ugly, inasmuch as it looks like bad perspective, but it is useful."<sup>19</sup> Unlike an ordinary mechanical drawing an isometric, he wrote, shows all three important faces of a rectangular thing and retains consistent measurements.

In the system of linear perspectival projection, points mapped onto a plane converge towards one or more vanishing points. This geometrical construction creates the sense that objects are receding into space. Like orthographics and obliques, it shows true lengths and true angles for all features parallel to the projection plane. However, foreshortening in linear perspective is not fixed, but dependent on the viewer's distance from the plane of projection, which is represented as existing between object and viewer, and often theorized as a glass panel or window. In design drawing, linear perspective plays an important role along with projections. For architects, for example, linear perspectives allow for a picturing of buildings in their context, and thus work well for presentations. In 1950s ad design, as discussed in the

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<sup>19</sup> Eakins, *A Drawing Manual*, 78.

first chapter, illustrators often employed linear perspective to represent food products. For any designer, knowledge of both systems was indispensable. Practiced over time and used in many different contexts, perspective was another crucial part of the designer's tool kit.

### **Projective Space**

In his work Ruscha used both linear and paraline perspective, sometimes within the same picture, and sometimes in conflicting ways. While each system allowed Ruscha to accomplish different goals, his overall conception of perspective is best described as means of producing projective space, suggestive of the spatial modes of design-based systems of drawing. A textbook illustration, from around the time Ruscha was a student, illustrates how a commercial artist might use different types of perspective to draw products – in this case, Krispy crackers (see Figure 1.19). In the top part of the illustration, a diagram shows the space between two vanishing points and the projectors as cut into boxes, with the outermost boxes (technically prisms) defined and labeled as Y, X, and Z. Box Y and Z are in one-point linear perspective, as their projectors are anchored in points A and B respectively. Box X, on the other hand, is a two-point perspective rendering. The other, less finished boxes emerge out of the interesting projectors, which intersect at different angles. The bottom of the illustration demonstrates how a commercial artist might use different perspectival possibilities, by showing them in roughs of a Krispy crackers ad. Each illustration shows the box from various angles and sizes. By moving around the type and placing the brand name in different positions, the textbook demonstrates how commercial artists would work through numerous possibilities to arrive at the final design.

While the illustration demonstrates the perspectival construction of food products, this 1960s Wonder Bread ad shows the finished product derived from these types of

exercises and sketches (Figure 4.22). In this print ad, the packaged loaf of bread, seen from below, dominates a solid red background. Angled so as to display its logo and dot pattern, the front of the bread package projects out towards the left side of the ad space, its upper right corner almost touching the frame. The bottom of the package has been flattened out, as if the loaf is resting on some invisible surface. Beneath the bread, on a navy background in white type, runs the Wonder Bread slogan, “Builds Strong Bodies 8 Ways!”<sup>20</sup> With the viewpoint dropped below the loaf, the bread appears as a towering object. The two vanishing points are somewhere outside of the picture plane, approximately in line with the loaf’s bottom corners. The linear perspective Wonder Bread loaf was ubiquitous in 50s and 60s advertising campaigns. A powerful, solid gestalt, the loaf took on a monumental presence when rendered with the dramatic diagonal.

The perspectival construction of the *Standards* closely mirrors this architectonic packaged bread, especially in the use of the low viewpoint, upper left to lower right diagonal, and flattened-out bottom. Ruscha, who noted that he saw the *Standard* as a loaf of bread, among other things, made this comparison explicit in his drawing *Wonder Bread*, a work that was traced from a printed ad, though the angle suggests that he made alterations (Figure 4.23).<sup>21</sup> In the drawing, the bread occupies the same left-right orientation. Similar to the

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<sup>20</sup> In the 60s the slogan shifted from “8 ways” to building strong bodies to 12, because of the continuing addition of vitamins to Wonder Bread. For a concise history of Wonder Bread, see “Good Bread,” Episode 137, *99% Invisible* (podcast), <http://99percentinvisible.org/episode/good-bread/> (accessed March 10, 2015). Wonder Bread, a symbol of postwar food culture, appeared in the work of Ruscha’s contemporaries as well. Corita Kent’s 1965 print *Wonder Bread* is an especially striking example of how artists engaged the iconic food product. A nun at Immaculate Heart Convent in the 60s, Kent was a prolific printmaker and teacher, whose silk screen prints mapped and challenged the ideologies of consumer culture. For Kent, bread had a richly layered symbolism, as it occupied the central place in the Eucharist ritual. In her print, based on the colorful primary stripes of the Wonder Bread logo, Kent raised questions concerning plenitude and want in a culture of abundance but also deep poverty. For more on Kent’s work, see Susan Dackerman, ed., *Corita Kent and the Language of Pop* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

<sup>21</sup> Ed Ruscha, quoted in Sienna Brown, “Ed Ruscha and the Standard Gas Station,” *Unframed*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, September 20, 2012, <http://unframed.lacma.org/2012/09/20/ed-ruscha-and-the-standard-gas-station/> (accessed March 10, 2015).

*Standard* works, the projectors visible, and surrounded by bare white paper. Ruscha drew the square on the front of the package, as well as the letters, polka dots, and background, with thick graphite strokes; the rest of the drawing is blank paper. In the case of the *Standards*, Wonder Bread drawing, and advertisement, the low viewpoint functions to monumentalize these subjects, and they seem to tower over their (relatively empty) backgrounds. Both utilize the visually commanding diagonal, though Ruscha's is more angled. The orientation begs the question: why left to right, over right to left? After all, this was the orientation of the building in Ruscha's photograph, meaning that he was situated to the left of the station. The reversal of the station places the viewer to the right. It also affects the type on the sign; now it runs from left to right, with the "S" farthest out, while in the photograph, the S is above the roof. The flipping implies that we are now seeing the other side of a double-sided sign, a necessity if it were to be visible by drivers coming from both directions. Ruscha's reversal, coupled with the example of the Wonder Bread ad, suggest that this perspective is a more visually engaging one, perhaps because it follows the orientation of reading letters in English. Our eye hits the large S and move back over the station, ending at the vanishing point lower in the corner. The same visually attractive quality applies to the Wonder Bread loaf. Consider if the loaf were reversed, in the opposite angulation of the right to left reading directionality of English. This would break up the space of the page, and counter the gestalt quality, the all-at-onceness, characteristic of successful ads. Finally, both the station and the bread loaf have a flattened out bottom. On one hand the product of dropping the viewpoint low – essentially at the same height as the bottom of the subjects – this also has the effect of anchoring the station and loaf solidly in the pictorial space, as if they are cut-out images, heavily outlined and placed in a background. In the *Standards*, the horizontal bottom also has

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the effect of placing the pumps on the same plane as the building. While the stacking of planes of color implies that the platform, delineated by the gray bar, is in front of the building, and moreover that the two pumps are in front of the three, the sense of depth is confused by the pressing of forms together, as if we are seeing everything up close but at the same time from far away. Ruscha implies depth with darker hues of color – for example, warm and cool reds – but the colors are so flatly applied that shadow slides into pattern, abstracted blocks of color rather than chiaroscuro.

In his work Ruscha combines the visual dynamics of the ad with the mapping out of perspective in the illustrations. In the *Standards*, as well as in *Large Trademark* and *Wonder Bread*, Ruscha leaves bare the pictorial construction, in the white triangle of space at the right – the space from which the projectors emerge. The yellow wedges behind the building each follow their own perspectives, each based on a different vanishing point. *Large Trademark* reveals its origins even more than the *Standard* painting, with the penciled-in projectors running across the white wedge out of which the letters emerge. In the *Wonder Bread* drawing, a similar white wedge of space abuts the bread, with a weave of pencil lines – evoking the solid black of the painting, perhaps the origins of that solid black – constituting the background.

The use of linear perspective, in particular the low viewpoint, upper left to lower right diagonal, and flattened-out bottom have the effect of creating a picture plane that suggests depth even as it pushes against it. Everything is compressed, with the composition seeming to fit tightly within the parameters of the frame. Additionally, scale is distorted, because even though the buildings and objects read as monumental and fluid there are no definitive indicators of their actual sizes. While in Ruscha's paintings actual size objects often refuse the distortions of scale characteristic of printed matter, here the use of

linear perspective produces and embodies the compressions involve in producing pictorial space. Perspective becomes unhinged from its role in scaling and its function of situating objects and figures and buildings in relation to each other, and to helping the viewer to get a read on their size. Gas station, bread, and Fox logo are all rendered with linear perspective, located indeterminate pictorial spaces, with only the barest suggestions (or no suggestions) of landscape. In the *Standard* painting, the gas station, with its steeply angled projectors, seems to loom large, as if towering over the landscape. At the same time, the pressing up of the building against the picture plane works against the sense of its being located in a landscape. In a previous iteration of station, *Standard Study #3* (1962), Ruscha includes a swath of foreground, rendered in thick black pencil. This foreground disappears in other versions, which has the effect of compressing the space between the building and the viewer and the front of the picture plane.

While each of these works represents things that have very different dimensions, their representation in linear perspective flattens out these size disparities. Bread seems like it could be the same size as the logo (which really has no absolute size) and the building (which has an absolute size, but which we cannot discern here). Ruscha's pictures suggest what Yve-Alain Bois calls "purely projective space," a term he used to describe the way scale works in design.<sup>22</sup> Designers, Bois notes, sketch things as if they have no actual size, which results in a leveling out of the things represented. Yet this is not to say that Ruscha's pictures hold together as cohesively as posters or ads. In these drawings, familiar things become strange, and comical too; Wonder Bread, something we hold and eat, seems as if it would tower above us, like an endless building. But we cannot really be sure, as there are no other objects

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<sup>22</sup> Bois uses this term in his writing on Henri Matisse's drawings, in order to argue that Matisse's work does not exemplify the projective space of design. The analysis is part of Bois's efforts to translate *dessin* into English. See Yve-Alain Bois "Matisse and Arche-Drawing," in *Painting as Model* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 6 – 63.



in this drawing to help us determine the bread's size. In this way, perspective is both something that seems to anchor and structure the image, and something that destabilizes, that simultaneously produces and counters legibility.

Ruscha's pictures embody projective space in regard to their scaling operations as well as in the way they are organized and placed on the surface. Bread bags and buildings seem projected *onto* the surface of the paper or the canvas, as if stuck there and frozen. In this regard, Ruscha's work recalls another use of the word "projection" to describe pictorial space: Leo Steinberg's notion of the "projection screen," a descriptor that listed in his definition of the flatbed. As he wrote, the flatbed,

...has to be whatever a billboard or dashboard is, and everything a projection screen is, with further affinities for anything that is flat and worked over – palimpsest, canceled plate, printer's proof, trial blank, chart, map, aerial view. Any flat documentary surface that tabulates information is a relevant analogue of his picture plane – radically different from the transparent projection plane with its optical correspondence to man's visual field.<sup>23</sup>

Ruscha's pictorial spaces are projective in the sense of Bois's use of the word – a projective space of design, with a flexible scale – as well as in Steinberg's definition of a space onto which images adhered. The flat colors, abstraction, and compression stifle a sense of deep space, and also work to block the visual immersion definitive of the transparent projection plane. In this way, Ruscha employs an historical pictorial technique, one that many of the artists Steinberg wrote of jettisoned, dismantled, or revised, to construct a pictorial space between the window and the projection screen. Ruscha's buildings occupy the fluidly scaled spaces of ads, in which linear perspective is a design device rather than signifier of deep space. There is no aerial perspective in Ruscha's *Standards*, though there are abstracted representations of shadow, as seen in the light gray coloring of *Standard Study [#2]* (see

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<sup>23</sup> Steinberg, "Other Criteria."

Figure 4.11). This is the space in which objects seem to both project out of spaces and seem contained within them, as in the 1956 Wonder Bread ad.

Ruscha also used projection drawing (non-linear perspective) for designing objects and for representing food products. In regard to the first, he employed used axonometric projections as working drawings, such as the designs for the book covers (see Figure 3.30). In this case, as discussed in chapter 3, axonometric drawings served a specific function: Ruscha used them to communicate design and absolute measurements to the printing workshops that made his covers. In other cases, he used projection drawings to sketch objects, such as the *L.A. Times* (fig 4.24). Though a freehand drawing (as opposed to the ruled lines of the *Standards*), the two drawings of the paper resemble an architectural plan oblique – a picture of the newspaper from the above and to the side – and section – a picture of its layers. In this instance projection drawing constituted a tool for conceptualizing the forms of an object, which he would then transfer into a painting, the 1963 work *Flash, L.A Times*. After painting the newspaper in color, he applied Domar varnish over the image. He noted in his sketchbook that he liked the effects of the varnish on the newspaper, as it made the image appear more three-dimensional.<sup>24</sup> A third way Ruscha used projection drawing, as we have seen, was to picture his own works of art, scattered in his studio or placed on table tops. In another drawing, the 1963 *Discarded Painting*, he represented a canvas as an oblique projection (Figure 4.25). The drawing shows the canvas stripped from the bars, as Ruscha's note indicates, torn in half and crumpled at the edges. Finally, projection also figured into Ruscha's work in a more secondary way, via his appropriation of borrowed and traced images clipped from newspaper and magazines. Two examples of products drawn as

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<sup>24</sup> Ed Ruscha, excerpt from notebook, quoted in Pat Poncy, ed., *Edward Ruscha: Catalogue Raisonné of the Paintings*. Volume 1: 1958 – 70 (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2003), 124 – 125.

axonometric projections appear in the 1962 *Lemon Drops* works and *Honk (Cracker Jack)* (Figure 4.26 and 4.27). In many cases, as in these two works, these boxes appear to be stilled mid-fall, as if they are frozen in space.

While Ruscha does seem to have been drawn to these types of projections and frequently referenced and deployed axonometrics especially, the appearance of them in his work also speaks to the way in which projection is woven into the conceptual work of design. In design drawing, axonometric projections are used to plot out objects from different perspectives, every perspective in which it is possible to see them. By imagining an object in a glass box, a translucent construction that can be turned, the designer can more easily map out the object in different positions in space. Axonometrics are working drawings, in the sense that they are about projecting things into the space of the drawing board. These projective views, in which the objects are drawn with parallel projectors, as if caught in a box, exemplify Ruscha's process of imagining objects in space and then putting those conceptions on paper. In other words, the drawings exemplify the process of moving from conception to representation. Each object is conceptualized and drawn discretely, as if situated in a box that can be plotted out and measured, and then from there be mapped onto the larger pictorial surface. Ruscha's drawings of parts of the gas stations, such as the rendering of the pump, suggest that he used this strategy as a means to break things up in concise parts, which could then be re-integrated into their context (see Figure 4.8). While by using linear perspective Ruscha signals some sense of recessive space, he also limits this sense of depth with his incorporation of projective space, which suggests the model of picture as surface, specifically as a surface on which drawings are designed, measured, and altered.

With his use of perspective, Ruscha created a picture plane with shallow rather than deep spaces. The diagonals became visual devices, signs of perspective rather than a tool

used to produce a sense of recessive space. In some cases, however, Ruscha inserted un-scaled, actual size objects into these works, which throws off their tightly constructed perspectival construction. In the 1964 painting, *Standard with Ten Cent Western Torn in Half*, Ruscha pictured the station against a vibrant blue background (see Figure 2.27). The western magazine from *Noise* returns, this time ripped down the middle and flipped horizontally. Almost entirely riven, the magazine seems stuck to the canvas itself, just below the right corner, pages visible at the edges and around the tear. Coated with varnish, a technique Ruscha also used in *Noise*, it seems to sit on the surface of the picture plane, rather than to be a part of its space. The actual-size object, in this case, seems to reinforce the sense that Ruscha's painting are scale-less, or that they refuse the

Ruscha's work evokes both Bois's idea of projective space and Steinberg's notion of the flatbed as a projection screen, but also exemplifies his own particular model of projective space. The *Standards* are pressed back into the world of the drawing board, into the space of conception that precedes building and actualization. Ruscha's pictorial space also evokes the temporality of design in two important ways. First, the *Standards* are further evidence that Ruscha's art absorbs the cyclical time of design, the "back to the drawing board" posture of consistently returning to and reworking one's visual production. This is not quite the same as the series, because every image is just a little different from the next. Second, the *Standards* suggest that the time of design is also somewhat endless, that it has no beginning or end. It is as if the weather of time does not touch the buildings, which seem like bright, shiny new objects situated in color field backgrounds. This model of pictorial space as cyclical and a-temporal would further congeal in Ruscha's prints of the stations, to which I turn in the next section.

### **Screen Printing the *Standards***

In 1966, Ruscha returned to the station, this time rendering the subject in the medium of screen printing (Figure 4.28). Like his books, the screen prints were a venture into self-publishing his work, producing multiples, and distributing them through commercial processes. He began the project at the behest of collector Audrey Sabol, who had seen the *Standard* painting and proposed that he make the work into a print. In exchange for a portion of the edition Sabol agreed to fund the project.<sup>25</sup>

By the time he embarked upon this project, Ruscha already had some experience with printmaking. At Chouinard, he had experimented with several different printmaking techniques, such as etching and woodcut. From his work on *Orb*, he was also well-acquainted with commercial printing. His earliest independent prints, a group of lithographs based on his images of common objects, were done with Joe Funk at Kanthos Press. The *Standard* prints, however, represented Ruscha's first use of screen printing in his art. For assistance with this new venture, Ruscha reached out to Art Krebs, a commercial screen printer whom he met through Jerry McMillan. Art's brother, Howard, had assisted with the printing of *Orb*. While based on the *Standard* drawings, the pattern was designed to be cut into the screen, and was not traced directly from those previous sketches. Instead Ruscha made a new drawing, based partially on several previous versions of the *Standards*, including a large black and white blow-up of a photograph of the painting as displayed at Ferus in 1963, and also by referencing magazine cut-outs of the work in reproduction.<sup>26</sup> From these sources, Ruscha made a drawing, or "pattern," as he called it, which was likely enlarged with a grid,

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<sup>25</sup> Ruscha described the collaboration as "very altruistic." He said of Sabol: "she wasn't a hustler. She wasn't a print dealer. She had her own ideas about what she wanted to do. She just left it completely up to me....I sometimes think I would never have done that print unless she or someone like her had come along." Ruscha, quoted in Siri Engberg, *Edward Ruscha, Editions, 1959 – 1999* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), 19.

<sup>26</sup> This is based on the file of ephemera related to the print, RA.

and transferred to the six separate screens Krebs used for the print (one for each color).<sup>27</sup> Krebs executed the printing of the first *Standard*, done in 1966, in his workshop.

In many ways, the station is the same as the one in the painting, with the red and white lettered sign, red details on the building, and blank white storefront. Also like the image in the painting, this station is geometricized, constructed from a play between negative and positive space. The materials related to the print demonstrate that Ruscha desired to maintain the similarity between the painted and drawn images and the printed one. In the print, however, Ruscha changed the placement of the station as well as the space in which it resides. He shifted the image in the picture plane; in this version the left side of the building now has a terminus, while the left side continues beyond the frame. For the inks, Ruscha selected a high-octane color scheme: orange, light blue, yellow, gray, bright red, darker red, and navy. Some of these inks are translucent, while other, such as the navy, are opaque. While the lines have a crisp look, there are occasionally slightly ragged edges, where ink slightly evaded the screen and the registration was just a little bit misaligned (Figure 4.29). The station now resides in a chromatic field reminiscent of a silkscreen poster as much as a color field painting. Even the lights behind the station, which in the painting impart some sense of its being anchored in a space, are gone. The image of the building seems to merge with its support, especially where the red station blends with a crimson patch of sky or where negative space of the paper becomes part of the structure. While still highly legible as a station, the image is even more abstracted: it becomes a system of interlocking colors, seeming to hover on the surface of the paper.

To create the blue to red fade of the background, Ruscha and Krebs used the split fountain technique, then a common process in commercial art.<sup>28</sup> Produced by laying pools of

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<sup>27</sup> Ed Ruscha, Email exchange with author via Ruscha Studio, December 4, 2014.

ink side by side and pulling the squeegee over them, the technique makes possible the rainbow range of colors. Technically the print is extremely well executed, with the colors remaining bright, almost impossibly perfect and pristine more than 40 years later. By using the split-fountain technique for his prints, Ruscha anchored them in the world of commercial printing, though he editioned and sold them like fine art prints. At that time, designers sought after the vibrant colors and flatness of screen-printing, but the technique was not used in the world of fine art. In commercial art, screen printing's was prized especially for its production of flat planes of color, as is evident in Howard Krebs's ad in *Orb* (which he was also, of course, printing at his shop). In the ad, Krebs emphasized screen printing's "wonderful flat colors," a quality he also showed by printing the ad itself with swath of smooth yellow (Figure 4.30). Ruscha's prints exemplify a moment in which the status of split fountain was beginning to shift. As design historian Steven Heller has written, in 1954 the technique experienced a moment of resurgence amongst the avant-garde, when French designer Robert Massin used a rainbow-hued split-fountain cover for Blaise Cendrars' novel *L'Or* (4.31).<sup>29</sup> Ruscha's print is an early example of the technique's use in fine art print production, at least amongst the postwar avant-garde in the U.S.

Ruscha continued to make lithographs and screen prints during the 1960s. In some cases, he produced prints on his own, such as the 1968 *Hollywood*, which has the same split-fountain sky as the 1966 *Standard*. In 1969, he undertook an invited residence at Tamarind

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<sup>28</sup> Norman Zammit, a contemporary of Ruscha's, was using a similar chromatic application, applied with an airbrush technique, in his paintings. Ruscha notes that he considered Zammit's work part of the finish fetish phenomenon, along with Larry Bell and Craig Kauffman. In the same interview Ruscha differentiates himself from that type of work because it overturned the idea of easel painting, which he himself "grew to feel conservatively connected to...I still remain a conservative easel painter." He also notes, however, that his "contribution to the whole thing would be in the manufacture of my books." Ed Ruscha, quoted in *Oral history interview with Edward Ruscha*, AAA.

<sup>29</sup> Steven Heller, "Evolution: Rainbow Roll," *Print*, May 15, 2013, 12.

Workshop. Also that year, Ruscha partnered with printer Jean Milant at Cirrus Editions. While there, he worked with Milant and printer Daniel Socha to print three other variations: *Mocha Standard*, rendered in chocolaty hues; *Cheese Mold Standard With Olive*, a turquoise and sea foam green station situated next to a buoyant cocktail olive; and *Double Standard*, in bold blues and browns. (figs. 4.32–4.34). This last print, the only version with two Standard signs, was a collaboration between Ruscha, Mason Williams, and William’s friend Bob Willis.<sup>30</sup>

Ruscha made his *Standards* during a moment of renewed interest in printmaking in the postwar years. In Los Angeles, home to Tamarind, Gemini G.E.L, and Cirrus, artists had ample opportunities to experiment with the medium. Ruscha spent time at all of these studios, where he mostly worked in screen printing and lithography. His first *Standard* print, in particular, was recognized in an article in LIFE Magazine, which chronicled the postwar “printmaking boom.” Entitled “Original Art, Hot off the Presses,” the article explored the handmade readymade nature of fine art prints, which fell somewhere “between unique drawing or painting and the mass-produced reproduction.” While in the 60s the split fountain skies of Ruscha’s print signified printmaking’s status as a mass produced medium, by the 1970s, as Riva Castleman has noted, the techniques became a “cliché of fine art printmaking.”<sup>31</sup> Along with Ruscha’s work (which then sold for \$250, as the article noted), the magazine also included reproductions of prints by Jasper Johns (also pictured at work at ULAE), Ellsworth Kelly, Ken Price, Yoshiharu Higa, Roy Lichtenstein, and Nicholas Krushenik. For many of these artists, printmaking was a new venture, and it was an ideal time to experiment. For one, studios such as Tamarind and Gemini offered spaces to work

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<sup>30</sup> Email correspondence with Ruscha Studio, December 4, 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Riva Castleman, quoted in Deborah Wye, *Artists and Prints: Masterworks from The Museum of Modern Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2004), 172.



and access to expert knowledge. These studios also actively sought out collaborations with artists, as was the case with Ruscha's residency at Tamarind. Additionally, as many artists acknowledge, the medium was also highly marketable. As Ruscha memorably phrased it, prints seemed to sell "like pancakes."<sup>32</sup> Like his books, Ruscha's prints packaged his work in portable and reproducible form. As he compressed his photographs into a strip for *Every Building*, Ruscha scaled his painting down to fit a screen for the *Standard* prints. Likewise, while in the books Ruscha reproduced his photographic archive, in the prints he found a means to make painting into multiples. In these works, the split fountain skies communicated Ruscha's borrowing from the world of commercial art, even as this technique also evoked the chromatic surfaces of abstract painting. Two years before Ruscha made the first *Standard*, Clement Greenberg's exhibition *Post Painterly Abstraction* opened at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Ruscha's prints seem to transform the paint-veiled surfaces of a Morris Louis canvas into squeegeed ink strokes, blended in the process of printing. Color field becomes split fountain, and pure opticality is countered by the image of the station, plunked down on the rainbow background. Flatness, moreover, is a product of the technique rather than manual application of paint. Still organized in a framework of linear perspective, the prints transfer the space of the *Standard* painting into the "wonderful flat colors" of screen printing. Even so, Ruscha punctures and troubles that flatness, nowhere more than in the hovering olive. Imbued with dimensionality and weighted down with a dark color palette, the olive refuses to let the print succumb to total flatness.

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<sup>32</sup> Ruscha, quoted in Howardena Pindell, "Words with Ruscha," *Print Collector's Newsletter* 3 (January- February 1973): 125 – 128; reprinted in *LAI*, 35. Ruscha also said, "It confuses me how quickly prints can be whipped around and turned over so quickly," nothing that prints were a "fantastically marketable item" but that it also produced some of the best results for making multiples. He included his books as a category of printmaking, since they were made with the offset process. When he gave the interview, Ruscha was, as he noted to Pindell, tired of printmaking, but he has since returned to the medium.

## The Space of Screen Printing

While Ruscha unabashedly acknowledged the salability of prints, the process also gave him access to new methods as well as new models for thinking about pictorial space and depth. In the *Standard* prints, though he continued to use an image similar to the one in his paintings and drawings, he experimented with the medium's techniques for printing colors as well as its layered, step-by-step processes. Translated into screen printing, linear perspective becomes even more a function of design and background/foreground relationships, and even less than a representational tool for suggesting deep space. While ostensibly one of the most straightforward types of printmaking, the process of creating imagery in screen printing can be complex, because of the figure-ground reversals involved in producing screens and printing imagery. Images emerge from an additive process, as each separate screen is printed. The printer – in this case Krebs, who had worked for Disney and had extensive experience – must make mental deletions and envision the final product, then to work backwards to produce it. Each plane of color has to be produced either through laying differently toned inks side by side, as in the shadow from the awning, or by cutting the screen and printing so shapes can overlap, as where the poles intersect the building.

Through this process, Ruscha was able to further cultivate the abstracted quality of the station. In this case, the figure/ground relationship is a product of removal, of cutting out parts of the “ground” – the screen – rather than leaving raw or white gessoed canvas, as in the painting. In the final print, however, the relationship between figure and ground changes, as the cut-out areas now read as ground (like the white space in painting) and the colored space as figure. The play between the two destabilizes the image, making it seem fragile, as if wavering. The wavering quality is especially apparent at the bottom right, where the station terminates just before the corner, as it does in the *Standard* painting. The red

wrap-around stripe that constitutes the bottom of the building merges with the deep red of the sky, which fades from blue to orange to red, the same red as the building and the sign. The convergence of colors makes the building appear as if floating, an image not quite affixed to the pictorial space, not unlike the Fox logo in the painting. Linear perspective becomes a function of drawing and again a tool of replication, with the diagonal device translated into pattern and cut into the screen. It reads as an arrangement of color, with the mechanics of the system translated into carefully aligned planes of colored ink.

In the prints Ruscha continued to explore the juxtaposition of linear perspective and illusionistic, actual-size objects which, as mentioned above, sit in tension with his cultivation of abstraction, as is the case in *Cheese Mold Standard* (Figure 4.32). While the title of the work elicits mental images of spoiled food covered with green growth, the cool hues have a calming effect. The background fades gradually from turquoise to palest green. Situated along the edge of the frame, horizontally in line with the “A” in “Standard,” the olive floats in the sea foam green infinitude, like specter of illusionism. Like the magazine and pencils in *Noise* and the torn Western in the *Standard* painting, the olive is rendered at actual size. Ruscha suggested the olive’s rounded form through layering and juxtaposing sections of color, rather than additive highlights or varnish application, techniques he used in his paintings. Inserted in the gradated split-fountain sky, the olive, like the actual size things in Ruscha’s paintings, seems to defy any transformation and translation between media. As he made more prints, Ruscha continued to insert actual size objects into his compositions. In his 1967 print *1984*, for example, a fly crawls near the edge of the print, on the gradated

background, below what he referred to as a “computer-age” typeface.<sup>33</sup> Against the negative-space letters, the fly seems heavy and obdurate, its shadow cast to the side.

Ruscha also played up the fluid scale of type in *Double Standard*, a collaboration that he did at Cirrus with Mason Williams and Bob Willis (Figure 4.35). In this iteration of the *Standard*, another sign, crossing behind the first sign to form an X, bears even larger white type. While it appears to not be elevated as high above the ground, as its bottom skims the top of the station, it is also much wider, as the frame truncates the sign at its right corner. Requiring a more complex layering of screens (8 total), the print is like another version of *Mocha Standard*, with an incongruous robin egg’s blue sign intruding into the space. Everything about the sign, in fact, seems out of place, including its scale: it is as big as the station itself. The doubled signs also insert two perspectives into the space: one from below, and the other from even farther below, as if we are seeing the architectural complex simultaneously from two viewpoints.<sup>34</sup> The perspectives cannot be reconciled or resolved, but exist in balanced tension. The shifting scales suggest that two points of view have been combined in one work, such that the typeface takes over and becomes architectonic, similar to the Fox logo in Ruscha’s painting.

The *Standards* represent some of Ruscha’s most important experiments with linear perspective, a device also connected to his investigations of pictorial space, multiplicity, and scale. In these works Ruscha uses perspective as a device of visual destabilization and ambiguity, something that both produces and counters legibility. With this tool he

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<sup>33</sup> Ed Ruscha, quoted in Engberg 19. Ruscha also explored illusionism in his paper-ribbon drawings and prints. For more on these works, see Margit Rowell, *Cotton Puffs, Q-Tips, Smoke, and Mirrors: The Drawings of Ed Ruscha* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2004).

<sup>34</sup> The work also brings to mind Dennis Hopper’s 1961 *Double Standard*, a photograph which Ruscha used in a poster for 1965 exhibition at Ferus. The poster also featured his own hand-lettering, made entirely from lines. A copy of the poster is in the archives of the GRI, Ferus Posters Collection.

disconnected perspective from vision and instead places it within the world of the drawing board, where it is subject to seemingly endless reconceptualization. Even within the fluidity of this space of design, however, real space returns, as a force both inevitable and comical.

## **Part II: *The Los Angeles County Museum on Fire***

In his Los Angeles County Museum works (1965-68) Ruscha borrows from another design discourse: the language of architectural drawing and modeling. In *Every Building*, a project he also began in 1965, Ruscha referenced architecture through its literal depiction as well as through a borrowing of the architectural elevation. As I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, that project also evokes the concept of building architectural models of places. In the *L.A. County* works, Ruscha most vividly imagines the building as an impossible architectural model, and representation as a durational and segmented process, enacted and constrained within the malleable projective space of the drawing board.

### **Painting the Museum**

At 53 1/2 x 133 1/2 inches, *The Los Angeles County Museum on Fire* is neither an exceptionally monumental nor especially small painting (4.35). The painting's main subject is the three buildings of the then newly-opened museum complex, which Ruscha situated in a goldenrod and muddied olive background. Instead of fading from one color to another, however, like split-fountain skies in the *Standard* prints, the background bleeds centripetally, with the yellow in the center fading to a dark, almost black color at the edges. The hue is sickly, even disconcerting, in comparison to the red-orange-blue or sea foam green of the *Standards*. While they appear white in reproduction, the buildings are more of an ivory, with a good deal of yellow pigment mixed in throughout. Flames lick the sides of the leftmost building, then shoot backwards and out of the frame. The fire's orientation roughly

corresponds to different perspectival systems than those of the buildings. The flames go out of the left side of the frame and stay roughly aligned with the building's left edge, though they skew a little more steeply to the left. Thinly painted smoke, emerging from the top square hole of the leftmost building, resembles dark gauze covering the white structure. Orange flames wind around the building's poles. Smoke pours out of the indented square in the middle of the roof. The flames seem strangely benign and highly aestheticized. No apparent damage has been inflicted on the building.

Ruscha first showed the painting in 1968 at the Irving Blum Gallery. Blum, who had recently begun his own venture apart from Ferus, designed a dramatic display for the work. He hung the painting behind velvet ropes and stanchions, and sent out an invitation in the form of a Western Union telegram, which read: "L.A. Fire Marshall says he will attend... See the most controversial painting to be shown in Los Angeles" (Figure 4.36).<sup>35</sup> The exhibition occurred just on the heels of the opening of the new museum, which the city has long awaited. A 1964 issue of *Artforum* captured the anticipation that characterized the year before the museum's opening at its new site. Along with Philip Leider's chronicle of the Ferus artists ("the Cool School") and John Coplans's review of the Post-Painterly Abstraction exhibition, the magazine included a sanguine article by Richard Brown, director of the new museum, which celebrated the growing art scene in Los Angeles and the movement of modern art from underground and small institutions to more grand civic spaces.<sup>36</sup> The magazine also featured aerial photographs of the museum under construction. A year later,

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<sup>35</sup> A photograph from the opening shows collector Betty Asher and curator Henry Hopkins posing in front of the painting. See the Getty's Pacific Standard Time, website <http://blogs.getty.edu/pacificstandardtime/explore-the-era/archives/i158/> (accessed October 2014). Ultimately Joseph Hirshhorn purchased the painting, along with a group of Ruscha's other works, while visiting Blum's gallery.

<sup>36</sup> Richard S. Brown, "The Los Angeles County Museum of Art," *Artforum* 2 (Summer 1964): 20-22.

the building opened to the public. At the time, LACMA consisted of three buildings: the Ahmanson Building (at the far left, as pictured in Ruscha's painting), the Bing Center, and the Lytton Gallery, all designed by the architect William Pereira.

In 1968, a few days after Ruscha's exhibition opened, the museum hosted a Culture Day for local artists (Figure 4.37).<sup>37</sup> Ruscha attended, along with Ed Kienholz, Frank Gehry, Judy Chicago, Larry Bell, Billy Al Bengston and others. He stands at the back, in front of *Actual Size*, a work that the museum had recently purchased. A similar photo was featured in a March 1968 issue of *Los Angeles Magazine*, where it accompanied an article entitled "Should We Set Fire to the Art Museum?" The article opened with one of Ruscha's sketches of the museum. Author S.J. Diamond noted the irony of the fact that the same group in attendance at the festival had also seen Ruscha's show, where they were "toasting the canvas holocaust" of the museum.<sup>38</sup> Diamond quoted a review of the painting from the *Times*: "Laughter falters into a sense of the ominous and returns as a pervasive giggle... Maybe this painting is shocking and gratifying because it shows the destruction of an awesome authority symbol." At the same time, he noted that Ruscha was noncommittal about the work's meaning, stating that the viewer could interpret the painting in any way that they wished. In another discussion of the painting, he evaded statements regarding the symbolic content of the work, and instead pointed out the importance of "oblique aerial perspective" the lower left to upper right corner – a formal device that Ruscha characterized as a "generality" in his work and, as I have argued, defines his projective pictorial space.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>The photograph is featured on the Getty Pacific Standard Time website, <http://blogs.getty.edu/pacificstandardtime/explore-the-era/archives/i125/> (accessed October 2014).

<sup>38</sup> S.J. Diamond, "Should We Set Fire to the Museum?" *Los Angeles Magazine* (March 1968): 31, 67- 70. Betty Asher Archives, GRI.

<sup>39</sup> Patricia Failing, "Ruscha, Young Artist," *LAI* 236 (1982). This article, written when Ruscha was in fact more like a mid-career artist, stands as a reminder of his belated reception. Although the interview coincided with an

Echoing Diamond's thinking, scholars have theorized Ruscha's painting as a statement on the museum's controversial status and a broader critique of museums. In the same interview in which he pointed out the perspective and diagonal in the work, Ruscha also seemed to confirm such a view when he stated,

...although I didn't have any particular gripe against the L.A. County Museum, I do have a basic suspicion of art institutions, period. You can engrave that in marble. But I actually feel like there's something classical and gentle about the painting.<sup>40</sup>

Others have suggested that the painting's flames allude to the Watts Riots, indelibly connected with visions of fire engulfing parts of the city.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, much of the country experience violent urban riots in 1968, the year that Ruscha exhibited the painting at Blum's gallery (though he had been working on it since 1965). Undoubtedly because it taps into this cultural context, the work has also been inserted into histories of art and destruction, as in a recent Hirshhorn exhibition on the subject or comparisons of Ruscha's work to other pictures of buildings in flames, such as J.M.W Turner's *The Burning of the House of Lords and Commons* (1835) and *The Burning of the Houses of Parliament* (1834-5).<sup>42</sup> Yet Ruscha's painting, significantly, hails from the space of imagination; the building never actually burned. Moreover, Ruscha alters the building significantly, so that it seems like a model of itself, residing in a chromatic background rather than in the middle of the city. What did it mean to

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important show at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Ruscha's work had yet to attain the status it has today.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 236.

<sup>41</sup> Cécile Whiting mentions this reading in *Pop L.A.: Art and the City in the 1960s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 76 – 77.

<sup>42</sup> See Kerry Brougher, *Damage Control: Art and Destruction Since 1950* (Washington D.C.: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2013).



represent the building as model, situated in a space far removed from the urban context, from the traffic of Wilshire Boulevard and the dinosaur sculptures of the La Brea Tar Pits?

### **Museum as Model**

While Ruscha's painting courts controversy, it is also decidedly ambiguous, both in terms of its design and its content. Does the work suggest that the museum should be destroyed? Does it allude to fires of Watts and the actual burning of Los Angeles? Is a more general institutional critique? These are possibilities for sure, but none of these is entirely convincing, especially, as Cécile Whiting has noted, in relation to Ruscha's painting of other buildings in flames, such as the famous diner Norm's.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, there is something unreal about Ruscha's rendering of the building, which suggests that this is not documentary or landscape. In his rendition, the museum resembles an architectural model, portable, scaled-down, and seen from above, as if resting on a studio table. The creamy hues of the museum, painted with smooth strokes, call to mind the surface of paper. Like sticks used to construct models, the pylons of the building seem thin and fragile. Windows are opaque and reveal nothing inside. Each unit of the building is well defined, like paper boxes carefully folded, joined together, stacked atop each other and side-by-side. This abstraction extends to the museum's surroundings. The smoothly painted pool suggests a sheet of smooth Plexiglas on which the entire structure rests. At the far right of the painting, under the Lytton Building, Ruscha rounded out the pool's edges, further reinforcing the sense that that is solid surface rather than water. Even the reflections of the white building, seen in the pool, are utterly still. Trees dotting the plaza look like fake plastic objects, perfectly rounded and stuck into the

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<sup>43</sup> Whiting, *Pop L.A.*, 76 – 77. Whiting also notes the model-like appearance of the museum. She goes on to argue that in paintings such as L.A. County, Ruscha's "aesthetic of the sign" recasts western landscape and effaces the opposition between nature and human artifice.

ground around the building. A white swath representing the sidewalk connects to the plaza with a fountain, but then extends inexplicably out of the frame. Its edges of it are bordered by a burnished, gauzy shadow that comes from nowhere and bleeds out right before it hits the edge of the pool. At this point, the swath begins to fade to a darker hue of brownish yellow.

The painting has a confounding, decidedly difficult to untangle perspective. As Irving Blum, writing in 1968, observed, at first the architectural rendering seems perfect, until one realizes that Ruscha subtly fused different perspective in a way that “twists apart the architectural drawing and breaks it apart...”<sup>44</sup> Indeed, there are multiple vanishing points, so many perspectives woven together, that it would be a thing impossible to build (Figure 4.38). Each building seems to occupy its own perspectival box. Ruscha employed linear perspective in this painting, the vanishing points are so far off, especially with the Lytton Center, that the building almost seems not to recede. While the entire complex seems to correspond to a vanishing point off to the right, the tops of the two left buildings and the bottom part (which reads like a road but is really a continuation of the creamy paint of the building) seems to be going to a different point. The backward recession of the rightmost and leftmost buildings is also different, which makes them look weirdly skewed and tilted. Moreover, the right and left buildings especially are angled differently, with the left building one at a less extreme angle. As for the entire complex, it seems to rest on a solid blue board, which represents museum’s pools. Yet it also seems as if this board has been tilted and pulled to the left, so that everything has slid in that direction. While in actuality a sprawling group of structures, here the buildings appear small, objects on which we look down from an elevated viewpoint.

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<sup>44</sup> Irving Blum, “The Antic Art of Ed Ruscha,” *Los Angeles Magazine* (March 1968), 32-33.

In Ruscha's rendition of the building, the museum resembles an architectural model, and perspective is destabilizing rather than anchoring. The model-like appearance and multiple perspectives of the building emerged during the process of making the painting. Characteristically, Ruscha made numerous studies and drawings of the museum, a subject on which he focused especially between 1965 and 1968. His first *L.A. County* works were photographs and drawings, executed with the aid of light boards and projectors and pinned upon the walls next to his book covers and the *Every Building* montage, as seen in the 1965 studio photo (see Figure 3.18). Two aerial photographs of the museum can be seen on the wall, to the right of the light. Art Alanis, the same photographer who did the parking lots, shot the sprawling museum complex from above from the vantage point of a helicopter. The images include the surrounding urban fabric of the building, from the stretch of Wilshire Boulevard in front to the La Brea Tar Pits and greenery at the back. Another photograph, from 1967, indicates that Ruscha continued to gather and archive images of the museum, as he had done with the Sunset photographs (Figure 4.39). The photographs also suggest published photographs of the museum, shot from a similar perspective, a fact that points to the ways in which the image of the building was becoming fixed in the public mind. *Artforum's* spread on the piece included aerial photos, and Pereira's office took similar shots as well.

With these photographs Ruscha continued to explore the bird's eye view of urban space, a perspective also exemplified in the contemporaneous parking lots project. Whereas the photographs of the parking lots, however, are generally very high up and almost directly overhead, in the museum photographs the viewpoint is oblique. In the photographs pinned on Ruscha's wall, Alanis is situated in the front of the complex, on the Wilshire Boulevard side. Notably, the museum remains under construction (notice that only two buildings exist,

with a gap between them). Alanis's positioning – presumably he was leaning out of the helicopter – makes visible both the tops and fronts of the buildings and the side of the Lytton Gallery. The right most building of the complex is slightly truncated. In the photograph, the complex is shown within its urban surroundings. Bordered by Wilshire Boulevard at the front and the green spaces of the La Brea Tar Pits at the back, the white modernist building is framed by the dark, curving spaces of the pools that were part of Pereira's original design.<sup>45</sup> No longer extant, the pools were removed because they had to be regularly drained, on account of the gas that seeped in from the tar pits.

While the perspective is similar to that of Alanis's 1967 photograph, Ruscha has dropped the viewpoint lower, so that even more of the facades are visible. He also appears to have extended the Lytton Building, which appears more prism-like than in the Alanis photo. Moreover, Ruscha removed the urban fabric, leaving only the building and a swath of sidewalk. Rather than representing the expansiveness of the complex, Ruscha makes something that one could construct and hold in the hand – a portable object. Ruscha also represented the museum as model in a group of drawings from around 1968, right around the time he was completing the painting or perhaps shortly after he had finished it (figs. 4.40 and 4.41). In these gunpowder and graphite works, Ruscha translated the building into interlocking planes of positive space, represented by the gunpowder's soft charcoal hues, rubbed and smoothed, and the stark white space of the paper. Two of the drawings show the museum from a different perspective, still from above but frontally, thus displaying more fully its façade. Echoing the viewpoint of photographs of his art displayed on the drawing board, these charcoal and gunpowder works suggest an equivalency between the portable

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<sup>45</sup> The museum exemplified the application of modernist principles to civic architecture, also seen in New York's Lincoln Center.

objects resting on the studio table and the large museum complex. Though in both of the drawings Ruscha abstracted the architecture, in the second drawing in particular the buildings resemble geometric formations of paper, delicately balanced on a dark surface. Here the building loses its poles, pylons, and other details, and becomes its most basic forms: rectangular masses, surrounding a fountain space indicated by a schematic circle. Instead of fire, Ruscha suggests the aftermath of it: smoke, hazily drifting above the greatly simplified Ahmanson Building, which is reduced to a fireplace.

The positive-negative construction of architectural forms resembles Ruscha's *Standard* images, especially the screen prints. In those works, the gas station is monumentalized, translated into gestalt forms that suggest it is both larger than it really is and also that it is de-scaled – that it exists in a flexible projective space, a space of conception over a space that represents the real world. In the *L.A. County* painting and drawings, there is a similar extraction of architecture from its surroundings, a rendering of it in a designed and scale-able drawing image delineated on and existing only within the world of pencil and paper. In fact, Ruscha did use paper to make the images, as he recounted to Ann Temkin when discussing the 1968 drawings. In their conversation, Ruscha recalled using stencils (derived from tracing the photos or other drawings) to block off the areas that he wanted to leave as white space. He worked around these areas with powdered graphite or gunpowder, then removed the stencils and continued to develop the images, often employing Q-tips to smudge and soften the marks.<sup>46</sup> Ruscha used these stencils (another nod to his commercial art training) to create images of the buildings. Forged from the negative space of the paper,

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<sup>46</sup> Ruscha, quoted in Ann Temkin, "Edward Ruscha," in *Contemporary Voices: Works from the UBS Art Collection* (New York: Museum of Modern Art), 97- 98.

they suggest both stencils and architectural models, which are in and of themselves a three-dimensional assemblage of stencils, or cutouts, put together to represent a building.

While in his *Standard* works Ruscha represented the gas station as a gestalt of line and color, in the *L.A. County* works he represents the ambiguity and awkwardness of the translation between architecture and the two-dimensional. Detached from its urban fabric yet highly specific, the building is a like something that does not yet exist – still a plan on the drawing board. Viewed from above, it seems both close and far away, like a model on a table, a thing one could pick up and handle, take apart and put back together. In the painting, the museum is a scale-able, portable model, a design made in preparation for a building a structure rather than that solid structure itself. A swath of white under the Ahmanson Building, which juts into the water but does not appear to belong to the building itself, reads like a relic of this process of plotting the museum on paper, tracing it and cutting in out in stencils. Ruscha's work goes back to the building's origins as a drawing-board design – a conception – rather than newly built structure in the middle of the city. Even more, it pulls apart and puts back together this design in a confounding collision of projectors and viewpoints. These mix and confuse our eyes, so that the building seems a little off, something of conception rather than a realistic rendering the museum in flames.

Ruscha's painting does seem to capture some of his own ambivalence about LACMA and museums in general. He clearly agreed, at least to some degree, with the many who felt that the museum did not make enough efforts to support local artists. An issue of *Los Angeles Magazine*, part of the same issue in which Blum wrote on Ruscha's work, captured the city's mixed feelings regarding the newly opened institution. The cover of the magazine stated "Whose Museum Is It Anyway?" a question that captured the feeling that the museum did not do enough to support the work of local artists. An article by S.J. Diamond (also

quoted above), entitled “Should We Set Fire to the Museum?” once again reinforced this sentiment with a question.<sup>47</sup> Framing that question was a reproduction of Ruscha’s painting. In the article Diamond interviewed Ruscha (who said his painting could be seen any way people wanted to see it) and Ed Kienholz, who had had a major and scandalous show at the museum in 1966. Diamond also detailed the controversy surrounding the invitation to curator Maurice Tuchman to serve as U.S. Commissioner for 1968 Venice Biennale. As Diamond reported, many believed that the board’s slow response and lack of support for contemporary art had been the main reason Tuchman’s rejection (Norman Geske, curator of the Sheldon Art Gallery in Nebraska, was selected instead).

These rumbles of discontent, both Ruscha’s own and those that Diamond documented, seem to be visualized in the flaming museum. The artist expressed as much in an interview with David Bourdon, in which he said, “I knew at the time that I started the picture that I was going to assault that building somehow...”<sup>48</sup> The flames, however, are only part of the story of Ruscha’s “assault” on the building, a term that suggests a violence that the painting itself does not reflect. Fire, in the painting, is glowing, and seems non-damaging, almost decorative, and frozen in mid-burn. It is, moreover, subject to the laws of perspective, as if substituting for the projectors Ruscha left visible in other works. The bright blaze gently envelops the side of the building, like an “afterthought,” as Ruscha put it – an insertion of creamy paint into the airless, slickly-painted composition. The building occupies a glowing, albeit slightly cloying, field of gold and green and brown; in the drawings, this is reduced to the blankness of white paper.

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<sup>47</sup> S.J. Diamond, “Should We Set Fire to the Museum?”

<sup>48</sup> Ruscha, quoted in David Bourdon, “Ruscha as Publisher [or All Booked Up],” *Art News* 71 (April 1972): 32 – 36, 68 – 69, reprinted in *LAI*, 40-45.

Despite the recentness of the subject, the painting's temporality seems stilled and in-between, neither of the past nor of the present. Instead, it counters both the celebrated modernity of the new complex and the prehistoric time embodied in the tar pits. In regard to the contemporaneity of the building, Ruscha's paintings evokes the elaborate opening gala that the museum held in 1965. The island-like quality of the building – the notion of it as something removed from the world and not quite real – and the glowing beauty of fire, the painting brings to mind the celebration of the new complex, a gala complete with fireworks. *LIFE* profiled the opening in an April 1965 issue, under the headline “A Wondrous Temple of Art in L.A.” A photograph accompanying the spread pictures the nighttime fête (Figure 4.42). In it the museum is incandescent, a beacon of light against the black sky. With the fountains rendered gold with light and the Lytton Center crowned with a shooting display of blue and white fireworks, Pereira's building did indeed appear as a modernist temple of art. At the same time, Ruscha's museum also subtly references, but exists outside of, the geological time embodied in the absent La Brea Tar Pits bordering the site. The warm greenish glow of the background calls to mind the bubbling gases of this primordial place, made into an amusement park-like simulation of the past. A 1968 photograph, which shows a helicopter lowering a mammoth sculpture into the park, captures the strange temporality of this prehistoric landmark in the heart of Los Angeles (Figure 4.43). Bell, who had also worked for Disney and in Hollywood, produced a number of sculptures for the Tar Pits in the 60s.<sup>49</sup> In 1969, researchers elected to re-open one of the pits, which had long been closed off, in order to excavate all fossils. Juxtaposed with Pereira's white modernist complex, this

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<sup>49</sup> For more on the history of the Tar Pits, the Rancho La Brea land grant, and the excavations, see Cathy McNassor, *Los Angeles's La Brea Tar Pits and Hancock Park* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2011).



Wilshire corridor site was like a jarring time warp, divided between up-to-the moment contemporaneity and the very ancient past.

The Los Angeles County works are the closest Ruscha gets, at least in the 60s, to the narrative tradition of history painting. Unlike many of his other paintings, the abstracting tendencies are balanced by an intense specificity, given the controversy and recentness of the museum building. The references that I suggest here are subtle, and certainly not ones that Ruscha has mentioned explicitly. There is no telling whether he was thinking of the magazine when he made his painting, though, knowing that he read and used *LIFE* for source material, he likely saw it. Either way, there is something absurdly appealing about the idea of imagining these fireworks as actual flames, and that solid structure as delicate paper. Far from direct institutional critique, Ruscha's *L.A. County* works counteract the notions of solemnity and solidity attributed to a "temple of art." Rendered as a paper construction, a thing with jumbled perspective that could never be built and that could go up in flames, in Ruscha's works the museum seems the most ephemeral of things, an imaginary model rather than a image of the thing itself.

Whether or not Ruscha was considering the dinosaur bones and tar pits on which the museum was, the painting suggests the strange tension at the heart of the urban site. History seems to seep into the work, as if the drawing board's conceptual space has been invaded by the reality of oozing tar pits pools and buried fossils, called to mind by the lush but sickly yellow-green background. This suggestion of the tar pits is subtle, but unavoidable, especially when comparing the background of this painting to the aestheticized chromatic fields of the *Standards*. It is if ancient history cannot be escaped, as if it surrounds at a building that, at the time of its construction, embodied modernist institutional architecture. Even today the primordial past is never far below the museum, quite literally so, as when the

museum uncovered fossils when building a parking garage in 2006.<sup>50</sup> One can never escape from the ancient past, it seems, even in the heart of the city.

### **Conclusion: The Drawing Board and Visuality**

The fusion of perspective drawing, paper, and architecture that pervades Ruscha's work recalls a longer tradition, one that we can again find in Eakins's drawing manual. In his explanation of isometric drawing, Eakins demonstrated how one could construct the drawing by turning the cube into a ground plan, with side and end elevations, then tilt the end elevation up to make the face of the cube, and transfer the remaining portion into the isometric drawing (Figure 4.43). A similar kind of thinking, in which perspective is metaphorized as architecture, underlies Ruscha's gas station and museum works. In his mid-60s drawings of apartment buildings, derived from his photos, there is an even more explicit representation of architecture's grounding in drawing. The 1965 drawing *Barrington Avenue*, in particular, vividly conceptualizes this connection by showing paper and graphite merging into architecture and architecture turning into paper and graphite, as the building's façade begins to wave and curve (Figure 4.44).<sup>51</sup> Ruscha's drawings are like Eakins's run amok, surfaces in which perspective and paper are actively being fused, plotted, and shaped into representation, and moving towards the realization of fully-drawn designs. In this case, as in much of Ruscha's work, photography is also caught up in this equation, a part of the process of translating from object to image. Photographs, too, are also not given and fixed representations, but malleable visual material to be shaped and altered, traced and edited. In

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<sup>50</sup> For more on this excavation, see Tony Pierce, "All Things Animal in Southern California and Beyond," *L.A. Times*, March 11, 2011.

<sup>51</sup> For more on these works, see Christian Müller, *Ed Ruscha: Los Angeles Apartments*. (Gottingen: Steidl, 2013).

Ruscha's work perspective proves to be not grounded in corporeal vision, but in the mechanics of the drawing board and its systems of representation. Visual representation, moreover, is not stable, absolute, or scientific, as the consistently changing image of the museum demonstrates, but slippery, contradictory, and ambiguous, and moreover always in flux.

It was around 1966 that Ruscha came to be known as a Conceptual artist, mostly on the reputation of his photography books. While painting, in the avant-garde landscape of the 60s, was often associated with a conservative turn, Ruscha's painting participates in a broader questioning of the stability and truthfulness of visual representation also characteristic of Conceptual practices, Minimalism, and other currents of 60s art. But Ruscha does so through the visual rather than through jettisoning of it, thus embracing the contingency of representation even as he pulls it apart. In his work, and in his process, the conceptual cannot be separated from the perceptual, for all thinking occurs through pencil and paper, cut and paste, production and re-production. Even the photography books, grounded in commercial art layout strategies and printed with deliberately non-aesthetic images, are primarily visual, not text-based. This is where Ruscha's conception of the visual world differs from the attitude ascribed to postmodernism, the notion of viewing of images with suspicion. Ruscha's work exhibits degrees of skepticism, but it also indicates that he understands the visual world as both absurd and profound, fragile and solid, as if to say that the truth of everything we know can only be as much as the truth of the way the world brought into being through design – through its modes of representing space, its construction of perception, its modes of coloring, its interplay of image and text. This truth is also grounded in a specific kind of temporality, one painstakingly assembled, whether in the carefully selected and pasted together Sunset images, taken on different days, or the

conflicting time present in the LA county painting. Rather than a transcendent temporality or a banal one, Ruscha's work suggests a synthetic, segmented time, produced in the interplay between observation of the world and the representation of it. Reality is processed in and through the drawing board's mechanisms and bounded by its constraints.

## Conclusion: Design Machines

In 1960, as Ruscha embarked on his career, he continually turned to the toolbox of his training to represent urban space, architecture, and common objects, all things of the designed world that he put at the center of his art practice. While Ruscha has experimented with other forms and media over the years, such as architectural installations and painting on books, his methods and techniques have remained remarkably consistent. Still prolific in 2015, his most recent projects range from die-cut word prints made with thick handmade paper (*Zoot Soot*, 2015, a collaboration with the L.A.-based Aardvark Press) to the *Psycho Spaghetti Western* paintings, in which roadside detritus, such as tires and boxes, floats in chromatic backgrounds reminiscent of the *Standards*.<sup>1</sup> No matter the work, Ruscha begins it with drawings and photographs and tracings and notes, which add to his ever-expanding image morgues. While Ruscha has begun to parcel out his working materials to research institutions and museums, much of it remains in the studio, in drawers where it can easily be accessed and used for new works and projects. These rich repositories of material promise many more insights into Ruscha's process and his career.

Ruscha's methods, as this dissertation has argued, are rooted in mid-century commercial art. Understanding that world, and its significance in his formation, also sheds light on the history lessons that his work offers. The time period that brackets my project saw a confrontation between manual and digital design skills, a confrontation that, in many ways, has been reversed in our moment. Like other moments in history marked by major technological change, such as the Industrial Revolution, rapid innovation has been

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<sup>1</sup> Today Aardvark Press remains one of only workshops in LA with full capacities for letter press printing, in contrast to the 50s and 60s, when many such shops existed. Formerly a typography shop founded by Luis Ocon, a trained linotype operator, Aardvark shifted to letter press in 1980, as it had become apparent that computer type setting was becoming the dominant printing mode. The shop is now a craft letter press, with a small specialty clientele consisting of artists, designers, and celebrities. For more, see "History," Aardvark Press, <http://www.aardvarkletterpress.com/history.htm>, accessed March 13, 2015.

accompanied by return to slower methods of production and a renewed interest in the handmade and the artisanal. Just as the Arts and Crafts movement looked back to traditional craftsmanship of the medieval era and vernacular aesthetics, many contemporary artists and designers are turning to manual techniques and craft skills, from handmade books to weaving to large format analog cameras. Many have powerfully leveraged the Internet's distributional possibilities and capacities to market and disseminate their work. As just one example, consider the rise of companies such as Etsy, which allow consumers to purchase craft products online. The year that Ruscha began at Chouinard, digital design began to be a topic of conversation in popular magazine as well as in research laboratories. In 1956, George R. Price published an article in *Fortune*, in which he imagined the design of the future. Entitled "How to Speed Up Invention," the article on the slow development of drafting skills in the U.S., a fact which Price saw as detrimental to innovation and speedy production. Draftsmen and machinists, he lamented, continued to utilize 19th-century tools:

A machinist from 1906 visiting a modern automobile or aircraft factory would find himself in a strange world of shell molding, centerless grinding, power metallurgy, and inert-gas welding, chemical milling and so forth, but in the experimental model shops he would observe principally techniques and tools (lathes, drill machines, milling machines) that were in use a century ago. And the draftsman of 1856, though bewildered by the strange mechanisms to be drawn, would quickly find himself at home with the drafting methods of 1956.<sup>2</sup>

Price saw the Design Machine as a timely solution to this lag in technology. A system rather than a single tool, the machine included a central computer (he suggested the Univac Scientific or IBM 704 as possibilities), control stations, automatized machine shops, and tape-output units to produce control tapes for automatized factory tools.

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<sup>2</sup> George R. Price, "How to Speed Up Invention," *Fortune* November 1956.

To use the design machine, the operator began with a very basic sketch which illustrated “how the part lies within an ‘image space’ having coordinates X, Y, and Z.” In order to increase the efficiency of communication between designers and engineers, Price suggested that employees should labor around the clock. Draftsmen would take the overnight shift, an ideal time to work in peace and quiet on their drawings. In the morning, the engineers would examine and tweak the drawings, and then hand them back to the draftsmen, and so on until the work was completed.

With the drawing in hand, the engineer would then input information into the machine, by selecting from a customized keyboard with keys designated for operations (construct, modify, superimpose, store) and categories (surface, plane, concentric, perpendicular). Relying on its internal archive of forms, the machine produced images of the object in different perspectival views. Even more, the machine could synthesize these images into a 3D digital model, which was projected as a stereoscopic image. The engineer edited the computer-made image in any way he saw necessary. He could also, with a tap of the reverse key, produce a mold or die cast. Transferred to automatic tape, the digital model provided factories a guide for the production of parts.

Though Price acknowledged that the design machine might seem like a sci-fi fantasy to his lay readers, he assured them that its realization was imminent. Drawing upon his experience working on the Manhattan Project and at Bell Telephone Laboratories, he argued that most of the necessary elements of the machine (automated tools, computers such as the Univac Scientific or IBM 704, memory picture tubes used in aircrafts) were already at hand. The remaining components could be developed in the next several years. For Price, the stakes were high: nothing less than the fate of the non-Communist world was bound up with

U.S. technological progress.<sup>3</sup> If the U.S. did not invest in innovation, the Soviets would surpass American technology, a terrifying thought during the Cold War era.

The Design Machine, and ideas like it, elicited enthusiasm but also considerable anxieties about the supplanting of human skill by machines. In the realm of science fiction, such anxieties provided fodder for engaging stories. Robert Heinlein, in his novel *The Door into Summer*, imagined a future in which such machines were responsible for drafting, among many other forms of labor. The novel begins in 1970, in the wake of a nuclear war that destroyed New York and Washington, D.C. Daniel Boone Davis, the novel's protagonist, is an engineer and inventor for the Hired Girl Inc., which manufactures robot vacuum cleaners. Davis pioneers an all-purpose robot called Flexible Frank, designed to perform menial household tasks. After being fleeced by his partner and fiancée, who steal and sell his idea, Davis elects to undergo a cold sleep procedure, with the hopes that he will wake up to a better life. When he emerges from the cold sleep in 2000, he sees that Flexible Frank is in use everywhere. He vows to seek revenge on those who have stolen his idea. Fortuitously, Davis meets Dr. Twichell, who had invented a time machine that can send him back to 1970. Through a series of maneuvers, he is reinstated at the company, and invents Drafting Dan, an automated drawing table based a model he had seen in the year 2002. Davis described the tool as “a powered semi-automatic drafting machines now....You could put straight lines or

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<sup>3</sup> In his biography of Price, Oren Harman notes that leading computer experts were highly skeptical of the Design Machine's feasibility. When questioned by one expert, Price quickly produced a 75-page memo outlining how the Design Machine could work with the extant IBM 704 and detailing its other operations. This could all be done for 5 million dollars, a small cost considering the fact that the Russians had just launched Sputnik II. Price's argument for the Design Machine was thus also founded upon the need for defense in the Cold War Era. As Harman writes, Price believed that if adopted on a national scale, the Design Machine would function as a repository for all design and engineering knowledge – a kind of library upon which more technological innovations could be built. See Oren Harman, *The Price of Altruism: George Price and the Search for the Origins of Kindness* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2001), 147 – 149.



curves anywhere on an easel just by punching keys.”<sup>4</sup> By destroying the plans that would be stolen, and producing the robot in another company, David undoes the past and creates a new future. Though the book registers postwar anxieties regarding the supplanting of human skills and labor, and of the human subject itself, by machines, Heinlein’s protagonist remains sanguine. Throughout the novel, Davis continually reassures the reader that such machines cannot replicate human emotion, judgment, and intuition:

Just what did I want Flexible Frank to do? Answer: any work a human being does around a house. He didn’t have to play cards, make love, eat or sleep, but he did have to clean up after the card game, cook, make beds, and tend babies – at least he had to keep track of a baby’s breathing and call someone if that changes.

Flexible Frank was meant for labor, not to replace living, breathing humans.

While in 1956 the design machine seemed fantastical, aspects of it would soon be realized with the development of computer-assisted design programs, which progressed rapidly during the 60s. In 1963, Ivan Sutherland, a doctoral student at MIT, published his program SKETCHPAD. Referred to as “Robot Draftsman,” it was the first program to utilize a complete graphical-user interface, x-y plotter display, and light pen. In an early video demonstration of SKETCHPAD, a reporter marvels that the machine virtually replicates the tools and lines of technical drawing.<sup>5</sup> The compass and the straight edge are internalized in the computer, so that the draftsmen may make rather “sloppy lines,” knowing that the

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Heinlein, *The Door Into Summer* (New York: New American Library, 1957).

<sup>5</sup> The Lincoln Lab, a federally funded research and development center of the U.S. Department of Defense, was founded in 1951 as a response to the knowledge that the Soviet Union possessed atomic bombs. The Lab took on the task of improving the air defense system, and eventually developed SAGE (Semi-Automatic Ground Environment) which became operational in 1963. Key innovations in digital computer technology, such as magnetic-core memory tubes, which were far more reliable and quicker than storage-tube memory. This innovation made possible the widespread use of computers in industrial applications, such as SKETCHPAD. IBM adopted the technology in the 50s, and put its 704 computer on the market in 1955. For a detailed history of the Lincoln Lab, see Alan A. Grometstein, ed., *MIT Lincoln Laboratory: Technology in Support of National Security* (MIT Lincoln Laboratory: Lexington, Mass., 2011), [https://www.ll.mit.edu/about/History/MIT\\_Lincoln\\_Laboratory\\_history\\_book.pdf](https://www.ll.mit.edu/about/History/MIT_Lincoln_Laboratory_history_book.pdf), (accessed February 25, 2014).

machine can clean them up and translate them into precise graphical language. As the reporter watches an engineer manipulate different perspectives of a single object, he marvels at the machine's abilities to surpass human abilities: to quickly make copies of drawings, fix mistakes, retain geometries, and make changes on all perspectives through altering a single mark. Sutherland's program was one of the innovations that spurred the flourishing of computer drafting and engineering in the automobile and aircraft industries, as well as in aeronautics, through the late 1960s and into the 70s. With the rise of personal computers, in the 1990s, these programs would become widely available outside of these major industries. The impact of technologies such as SKETCHPAD reverberates today, in specialized CAD software but also in the user interface of Apple devices and other touch screen applications.

Ruscha, trained from 1956–60, finished his training before the widespread proliferation of digital drawing which, though it came later to art schools.<sup>6</sup> The material, aesthetic, and technologies contours of his world are outlined in the very same issue of *Fortune* that carried Price's article. Entitled "Design Without Clients," the article, by *Fortune's* art director Leo Lionni, captures the nature of art education as Ruscha experienced it, as well as the broader status of the reception of modernist design legacies in the postwar U.S. Lionni observed that art education in the 50s was marked by excitement as well as disorganization, as schools tried to quickly develop the capacity and programming to meet the demands of their increasingly large student bodies.<sup>7</sup> Many schools, he lamented, had met this demand by over-emphasizing either theory or practice, instead of finding a viable way to do both. However, there were a number of institutions, such as Pratt, Yale, the

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<sup>6</sup> The first major textbook in CAD for architects, William J. Mitchell's *Computer Aided Design*, was published in 1977, but it would be well into the 1990s, with the rise of personal computers, that CAD was widespread. For a concise history of computer-aided design in architecture see Nick Dunn, *Digital Fabrication in Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Leo Lionni, "Design Without Clients," *Fortune* 47 (May 1953): 132 – 137.

Institute of Design in Chicago, and the Art Center College, where students were producing innovative work. Lionni described these environments as spaces of freedom from the demands of the business world, a place to practice “design without clients.” In these “ethereal circumstances,” he wrote, “students and teachers can choose their imaginary and angelic clients and shoot the moon.” This kind of experimental culture existed in some places at Chouinard, one of the schools cited in the article, especially in student-run ventures such as *Orb*. Even so, Lionni stated, students made use of familiar aesthetic “tricks” that a practiced eye would recognize. In looking at this student work, one began to recognize “an uncomfortable no man’s land between aesthetic freedom and the vulgarities of an art that, in the process of being practical, has lost all of its vigor and most of its meaning.” Always caught between aesthetic considerations and the forces of the market, the designer seemed to live eternally in this no-man’s land.

Lionni’s take on this moment is instructive for the historicization of Ruscha’s career and his art. Born in 1910, Lionni early on became affiliated with the Futurist movement in Italy (Marinetti called him “a great Futurist”). Deeply engaged with Bauhaus ideas, Lionni pursued the path of ad design and went on to work for *Domus* and *Casabella*, and in 1939 went to Philadelphia to work for N.W. Ayer (Andy Warhol was one of the young illustrators he hired for a Regal Shoes campaign). His tenure as *Fortune* art director began in 1948, and in 1955 he became co-editor of *Print*. That publication, of course, presented a young Ruscha with some of his most important artistic precedents, in the form of reproductions of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg’s work.

Ruscha, born twenty-seven years later than Lionni, absorbed the legacies of the Bauhaus and modernist design through his training at Chouinard, where they had become history and been disseminated through the U.S education system. Lionni’s article describes

the landscape of commercial art education in the mid 50s, when, as he noted, students were being taught techniques that an experienced designer such as himself would immediately recognize. Already having absorbed this history of design, Ruscha seemed to have seen a need to invigorate that language as much as he saw the need for something other than gestural painting. After all, Ruscha did not want to be an abstract painter as much as he did not want to be an ad man. Moreover, even if he had decided to work in advertising, the skills that he acquired in his training would have only served him for a set number of years, as the digital technologies Price described were, if only in small ways at first. Even in the 60s, then, Ruscha's work looked back to a moment quickly passing, to a time. Shortly after he finished his training, Chouinard merged with the Los Angeles Conservatory to form the California Institute of the Arts, a larger institution in which the bohemian culture Ruscha knew faded away. Art and design pedagogy also began to change, as many of the larger programs began to shift away from a Bauhaus model and towards a greater focus on Conceptual practices, video, and performance. In design fields, computers were becoming an ever-important tool (though paste-up lingered well past the 1970s).<sup>8</sup> The term "commercial art," too uncomfortably tinged with the language of the market, fell by the wayside in favor of "graphic design." Before long, the concept of Design Machine would become a reality, in the form of early iterations of computer-assisted design.

In the 60s, many artists, especially those associated with Pop and Conceptual art, theorized their labor in relation to world of machines. Sol LeWitt, in the same article that featured the reproduction of *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, compared the execution of art to machine work. Many patterned their studios after sites of industrial labor (Warhol's Factory remains the preeminent example). Ruscha's work operates according to a different

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<sup>8</sup> Paste-up continued to be an important method beyond the 1970s. A major landmark in the move to digital, however, occurred in 1973, when the *New York Times* began to use computers for layout.

model of labor, one in which the artist is part of a chain of making anchored in an image-producing economy of printing workshops, book producers, and type designers. In his art, Ruscha took into account the conditions that defined the world of printed consumer culture in the postwar period, not only its economic structures and systems of labor, but its ways of making and looking. This, his work implies, is what art must represent; this is what gives it its operations and forms. Though his work crystallizes the ethos of mid-century design, a primary reason that it continues to engage us today is that Ruscha also ventured outside of design's constraints and its purposes, and reveled in moments of inconsistency and humor, ambiguity and mistranslation, even in losses and failures. His work allows us to see the ways that commercial art operated, but it also destabilizes and deconstructs its assumptions and perceptual models in a way often disconcerting, baffling, and often deeply humorous. While the contemporary visual landscape is forged in pixels and bytes, the terminology of drawing-board production lingers in our lexicon. We use cut and paste commands on the computer, pin images on digital boards, and store files on our desktops. Ruscha's art, therefore, has as much to teach us about the postwar moment as it does about the way in which we create, perceive, and engage visual culture today.

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