

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

# ARTFORUM

BREGENZ, AUSTRIA

Ed Ruscha

KUNSTHAUS BREGENZ

The German word for “letter,” *Buchstabe*, incorporates the word *Buch*, “book,” as if to remind us that books are the natural place of residence for letters and signs in general, like an animal’s burrow. Ed Ruscha is an artist who has a unique relationship to letters, both as signs and as inhabitants of books. For the exhibition “Reading Ed Ruscha,” the artist gave a lecture in which he spoke with admiration and melancholy about the bookworm, and noted with sadness its impending extinction with the looming end of the printed book. Ruscha describes the bookworm as an artist—he sees the inhabitation of a world, the building of corridors, tunnels, retreats, and escape routes in a material structure as an artistic practice. In this way, Ruscha himself has long inhabited the “materiality of the signifier”: Symbols become iconic signs; writing becomes image. Cities become texts; streets and architecture become layout. But this is merely the easily exhibitable surface of a life of semi-otic tunneling.

This exhibition, “Reading Ed Ruscha,” brought together works spanning a long period, from 1966 to the present, works that vary widely yet speak to one another. This relationship consists primarily of the fact that they trace, in every conceivable direction, the idea that signs have an appearance, dimensions, and architecture, that they are subject to the forces of gravity and can be geometrically determined: What one sees here is just as much a research project as an exhibition. The artist has often caricatured both this research and its subject. *Royal Road Test*, 1967, for example, consists of an experiment, documented in this artist’s book in the style of forensic photography: A machine made for the fabrication of signifiers—a Royal brand typewriter, to be exact—is tossed from a moving car and the subsequent distribution of its scrap metal across the desert landscape is observed.

Ruscha himself has brought together pieces that sometimes come from widely disparate groups of work: for example, *Cup of Gold* and *Of Mice and Men*, both 2008, the naturalistically painted spines of two John Steinbeck novels; *Books*, 1996, a painting of its own title; and *History*, 2008, a single long brushstroke across a canvas, which resembles the spine of a book. Such idiosyncratically selective reconstructions of particular areas of interest were impressively juxtaposed with a complete archive of all of Ruscha’s artist’s books, displayed in cases and available for visitors to leaf through on tablet screens. These are syntheses of nonchalant humor and sharp, unerring conception, and have long since achieved the status of major works. They have been widely



View of “Ed Ruscha,”  
2012. From left:  
*In God We Trust*,  
1994; *You Dirty  
Rotten Bitch*, 1997.

“covered”—by Jonathan Monk, Stan Douglas, and Cosima von Bonin, among others.

The Bregenz exhibition used the three floors of the Peter Zumthor-designed Kunsthau building for a dramaturgically clever presentation that amplified and condensed the works’ effect. After leafing through books or following the double row of sample pages from Ruscha’s 2009 version of Kerouac’s *On the Road* on the ground floor, one stood on the next floor amid a concentration of paintings. Here were the “City Scapes,” 1994–2001, among others, a nearly endless series of pictures with rectangular bars laid over them. The layout of bars follows and thereby cancels out sentences from threatening letters, from whose text the titles of the works are taken. On the top floor, wide spaces surrounded large paintings (mostly of books, of course) whose toying with an aesthetics of the sublime is so convincing precisely because they seem to be making fun of that very concept—as in *Yardstick*, 1987, in which a yardstick extends into cosmic endlessness in the black-and-white gradient of a lunette-shaped canvas.

—*Diedrich Diederichsen*

*Translated from German by Anne Posten.*