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GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Conceptual Inspiration, by the Book

By Carol Vogel



The artist Ed Ruscha at the Gagosian Gallery in Chelsea: "I love books, the physical objects of them." He paints and makes them.

The artist Ed Ruscha was standing in the middle of Gagosian's 24th Street gallery in Chelsea on a cool fall day, surrounded by paintings of books he has created over many decades. There were canvases that mimicked old tomes he found in flea markets and secondhand shops, and paintings of marbled endpapers. There were renderings of open books more than 10 feet long with blank sheets of paper, ravaged with wormholes and water stains. "They're a bit ominous," he said, perhaps because of what many believe is the inevitable end of the printed word.

Mr. Ruscha (pronounced roo-SHAY), 75, doesn't read on a Kindle or an iPad. "I don't even use a computer," he said unapologetically. "Every day I am reminded how far behind the

world of technology I am. I'm not a great reader, either, but I love books, the physical objects of them."

Mr. Ruscha also has a passion for road trips and the American landscape, as evinced not just in his paintings but in his landmark first book, "Twentysix Gasoline Stations," from 1962. It's a thin white volume of black-and-white photographs of gas stations in Arizona, California, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas, with no story, just captions identifying the stations and their locations.

Mr. Ruscha, who lives in Los Angeles, went on to produce scores of books, mostly about other everyday sights, like swimming pools, parking lots and palm trees. Shunning the elite notion of the "livre d'artiste" — those luxurious, limited-edition works that are collaborations between artists and private presses — he reinvented the genre as something inexpensive, accessible and easy to produce. Over the years these books have become a touchstone of Conceptual art and have inspired a new generation of artists who came of age with computers and Photoshop.

Some of their homages are now the subject of a show opening on Tuesday at the Gagosian Gallery's Madison Avenue space. Called "Books & Co.," it is named after the much-loved bookstore that was a fixture on the Upper East Side before closing in 1997. The exhibition includes volumes created by old hands like Bruce Nauman and the Philadelphia architects Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour and Robert Venturi, as well as those by younger artists like Dan Colen, Jonathan Monk and Tom Sachs. The subject matter touches on peanuts, cookies, trash, strip clubs, even erections. One book, by the Swedish-born artist Chris Svensson, is called "Various Studios and Homes Inhabited by Ed Ruscha."

"Some are very literal," said Bob Monk, a Gagosian Gallery director. "Others are more explorative, taking Ed's books as a template."

The show coincides with the recent publication of "Various Small Books: Referencing Various Small Books by Ed Ruscha" (M.I.T. Press), which charts the indelible effect of Mr. Ruscha's vision. "It's already gone into a second printing, which is highly unusual," said Roger Conover, an executive editor at M.I.T. Press.

Although the idea may seem antiquated now, 50 years ago Mr. Ruscha saw creating books as a cheap way to get his work in front of the public. Today there appears to be a kind of backlash against the digital universe, as artists are again embracing the notion of artist books despite the proliferation of electronic reading devices. "The quality of images on the Internet is deplorable," said Mr. Monk, a Briton who lives in Berlin and creates books. "And printing these days has actually gotten cheaper."

At the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y., the demand for artist books and even exhibition catalogs has not diminished despite the availability of art books that can be seen online. “The book is a more intimate engagement with the artist,” said Tom Eccles, director at the Center for Curatorial Studies. “We find that we’re getting more visitors to our library than to our exhibits, in part because libraries are social spaces. Books have a durational audience. People still want a material relationship with the real thing.”

“Books & Co.” comes after the exhibition “Ed Ruscha,” which took place in the fall at Gagosian’s Chelsea space and was devoted primarily to his paintings of and about books. It was a smaller version of “Ed Ruscha: Reading,” an exhibition held at the Kunshaus, Bregenz in Austria last year. As part of the new show the filmmaker and artist John Waters contributed a book with an unprintable title that includes found images of anuses and a dirty foot. The anuses, he explained, were easy to find: “I just went through porn.” But finding the perfect dirty foot? “That was much harder.”

“Ed certainly started a great genre,” Mr. Waters said, referring to Mr. Ruscha’s photographs as “deadpan and Warholian.”

“Look at ‘Every Building on the Sunset Strip,’ “ he went on. “The Sunset Strip is the celebrity.”

For that 1966 book Mr. Ruscha photographed both sides of the Los Angeles street early one morning when no one was about; he created the book as an accordion, with a folded sheet of images that can be pulled out to 27 feet. Originally priced at about \$4, a good copy can now bring as much as \$8,000.

Mr. Ruscha’s books were not always considered so precious. Mr. Monk remembers his days in the late ’80s as a student at the Glasgow School of Art when he was able to check “Every Building on the Sunset Strip” and books like it out of the library. “I’d take them home, and they got me thinking about this idea of publishing, how you could make something cheap,” he said. “It had a lot of potential.”

He began collecting artist books, “not seriously,” he said, but he does own examples by early practitioners like Sol LeWitt, who in 1976, along with the artists Carl Andre and Lucy Lippard, founded Printed Matter, the nonprofit organization dedicated to the promotion and dissemination of artist books. It is still going strong in Chelsea.

Mr. Monk has done tongue-in-cheek imitations of Mr. Ruscha’s books. “None of the Buildings on the Sunset Strip” (2002), which is in the Gagosian show, consists of photographs of intersections along Sunset Boulevard. He also became obsessed with

“Crackers,” Mr. Ruscha’s 1969 book based on “How to Derive the Maximum Enjoyment From Crackers,” a short story by Mason Williams. Mr. Ruscha’s work is a collection of film stills with tiny text on the back cover and a wax-paper-like dust jacket that resembles the wrapper inside a box of saltines. Mr. Monk has collected 33 copies of it. “I wanted to open a bookshop called Crackers that sold only that one title,” he said with a laugh, explaining that he’s fascinated by the endless permutations of a book, from different editions to the subtleties and imperfections of printing.

Mr. Monk isn’t the only artist who has fixated on “Crackers.” Two years ago Mr. Colen, a New Yorker, produced a book called “Peanuts,” a knowing rip-off of “Crackers.” “I took his format and inserted my own content,” Mr. Colen said. “It’s a tribute.” But inside he uses stills from his first film, about an artist wandering around the streets of Manhattan.

“Ed’s books are such a big thing,” Mr. Colen said. “To be able to hold something is very different than to experience it on a computer screen.”

Throughout his career Mr. Ruscha has seen his books as an extension of paintings, especially his signature canvases that feature a word like “Damage,” “Boss,” “Faith” or “Noise” floating in the middle of the composition. “They could just as well be the title of a book,” he said. Sometimes he repeated the word on the side of the canvas, like the title on a book spine.

Devilishly handsome and plain-spoken, Mr. Ruscha has come to epitomize what many over the years have described as a kind of Los Angeles, movie star cool. Yet in person he is quite modest when he talks about his work. Words have always fascinated him, he said.

After he graduated from high school in 1956, he left his home in Oklahoma City and headed west on Route 66 for Los Angeles. Around that time he attended the Chouinard Art Institute, which became part of California Institute of the Arts. There he studied, among other things, commercial design and typography. “I also worked for book printers and learned how to set type,” he recalled. “My interest was always in books and how to make them.”

But paintings were important too. And like Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, whose work he saw in Paris in the late ’50s, Mr. Ruscha turned his back on the Abstract Expressionists he grew up admiring and made his mark in a universe somewhere between Pop and Conceptual art.

His book ideas sometimes involved real-life adventures. In the late ’60s Mr. Ruscha and two friends drove into the desert and threw a Royal typewriter out the window of a speeding Buick. They then returned to photograph the wreckage and recorded the incident in the

“Royal Road Test,” which was published in 1967. The book, historians have noted, was a nod to the romantic notions of writers like Jack Kerouac and photographers like Robert Frank.

Mr. Sachs, a New York artist — who started producing zines when he was in high school because, he said, they were a way of “thinking through ideas and sharing, even trading, them with friends” — appropriated the cover of “Royal Road Test,” crossing out the word Royal and writing Nutsy’s above it. His book, from 2009, is about Nutsy’s, a 4,000-square-foot installation that is Mr. Sachs’s comment on Modernist architecture.

Mr. Sachs discovered Mr. Ruscha’s books by accident. Living in Hollywood in 1989 he came across some of them in the trash of his neighbor, who happened to be Eve Babitz, the artist and writer who is perhaps best known for having played chess naked with a fully clothed Marcel Duchamp. “I knew who Ed was, but I didn’t know who Eve was,” Mr. Sachs recalled. “I couldn’t understand why she was throwing those books out since they were inscribed to her, although they were water damaged.”

That was when he began learning about artist books in earnest, including those of LeWitt and Mr. Nauman. “Ed had the right combination of deadpan with a chili-pepper portion of creativity,” he said. “It was 1 percent of the idea. Take ‘Every Building on the Sunset Strip.’ He didn’t shoot La Cienega. It all boils down to choosing that right thing: that sense of style and magic and cool, that unknown 1 percent. You can’t learn that.”

One reason Mr. Sachs said he continues to produce zines and books is “the handmade aspect to them.” Computers, he added, are good for “shopping and pornography,” but “I continue to make books and sculptures by hand because I like the history and the evidence of the process.”

Many art fans value an intimate relationship with pages too. “The Internet still does not give us the capacity to connect with an original work of art and books by artists do,” said William M. Griswold, director of the Morgan Library & Museum. “They have long legs.”