

Domus
March 30, 2015

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

domus



Conceptual art and photography have absorbed the influence and graphic proficiency of this Master of Californian Pop Art and his seminal works. His vocabulary and use of the word in a rigorous, non-authoritarian practice fuelled by banal and anonymous images are still actively dipped into by a new and sizeable generation of young post-conceptuals with a thirst for appropriation.



Top: Ed Ruscha: Books and Co. **Above:** Ed Ruscha: Prints and Photographs. © Ed Ruscha. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery. Photo Zarko Vijatovic

No one more than Ruscha has since the 1970s been, openly and not, robbed, cited, scrutinised and imitated. A cold seriality that summons Duchamp and Warhol to the surface of his works has not only retraced, redesigned and archived the mental and physical American landscape, it has also successfully dodged all pop, minimal, narrative and land-art labels. His strength lies in his store of the banal and the epic, which is the primary drive behind Hollywood-like spectacular effects that permeate his panoramic visions and most intimate classifications.



Ed Ruscha: Books and Co. © Ed Ruscha. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery. Photo Zarko Vijatovic

Ruscha is one of the few artists capable of linguistic and visual acrobatics who are not afraid to continue constructing meaning with what are considered almost obsolete materials today: paper, ink, “documentary” photography and, most importantly, the book. With this latter medium he has left an indelible mark on contemporary-art imagery, helping to create the legend of precious minimalism and revive the concept of readymade.

Over the years, Ed Ruscha has applied this to various semantic fields, from architecture to a new and “perverse” perception of objects. He has done so via strict practice approaches which, starting from pure graphics, have constructed an infallible relational system of word, image and matter. So clean and sacred are some single-word works that they conjure up the intuition, mysticism and rules of Oriental art. Highly calculated images draw on films and American beat literature to complete the picture and success of the perfect shot.



Ed Ruscha, *Standard station, Amarillo, Texas*, 1962. Gelatin silver print, 10 x 12.4 cm. © Ed Ruscha. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery. Photo Robert McKeever

From the motion picture world, he takes its poetry and the credits system, from opening to closing ones, passing literally via The End and the panned format. His diagonals, changes in scale and a reckless sense of timelessness combined with a cold cut-up method make small masterpieces out of a single Ed Ruscha phrase and sometimes simply his treatment of the single word. Inverted meanings can stop onlookers in their tracks: *the ancients stole all our great ideas*.



Ed Ruscha: Prints and Photographs. © Ed Ruscha. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery. Photo Zarko Vijatovic

Ed Ruscha has always had an omnipresent and cynical irony, which has fuelled his legend. Eddie Russia signed the layouts of the *ARTFORUM* magazine in his Los Angeles period to pay for the advertising spaces for his books. He even inserted *Rejected* into his ad headline after the Library of Congress in Washington refused to take his recently published *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*. The titles of his books literally convey object and content. Think of *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, the aerial views in *Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles*, for which he asked a pilot to take photographs of car parks whenever he had the chance, the introspection of *Small Various Fires* and the total indifference of *Babycakes*, *Business Cards* and *Records*. So precise are these books that they have triggered dozens of theoretical responses, presented alongside the originals in the “Books & Co” section.



Ed Ruscha: Prints and Photographs. © Ed Ruscha. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery. Photo Zarko Vijatovic

Bruce Nauman actually burned *Small Various Fires*, giving it a new story, but the fresh documentation generated a new performance, a film of Jonathan Monk's *Small Fires Burning (After Ed Ruscha After Bruce Nauman After)* (2002). Jonathan Monk reiterates Nauman's action in a film 16mm that becomes *ad'après* and tribute to both artists.

This constant re-enactment can only prompt reflection on a work's value: the three dollar price at the start of the Ruscha era was then fuelled by assisted readymades and rose to 1600 dollars when it materialised in a facsimile of a poster with a Zippo lighter, page 4 in the original book.



Ed Ruscha, *Standard Station, Mocha Standard, Cheese Mold Standard with Olive, and Double Standard*, 1969. Four screenprints on wove paper, 65.4 x 127 cm. © Ed Ruscha. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery. Photo Robert McKeever

All this rich and exhaustive period documentation and new research throw up two divergent impressions of Ruscha. The first is that the *Standard* service station in Ed Ruscha's first book is still pumping fuel for endless journeys into the phantasmagorical aspects of the image; the second is that a director's cut of the Ruscha film continues to be a work in progress.