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Ed Ruscha, 2008
Photograph by Kate Simon. Courtesy of Ed Ruscha and Gagosian Gallery
Edward Ruscha is an American artist who has specialized in painting, drawing, photography, and books. Born in 1937, Ruscha moved to Los Angeles to attend school at Chouinard Art Institute in 1956. In the early 1960s, he contributed to the birth of “pop art” and his work was featured in the famed 1962 exhibition “New Painting of Common Objects.” In the 1960s, he painted canvases that have since become iconic, including Large Trademark with Eight Spotlights (1961), Standard Station (1963), and Los Angeles County Museum of Art on Fire (1965–68). A signature of his work has been the use of words and phrases, such as in the paintings Optics (1967), Brave Men Run In My Family (1988), and many more. Ruscha also produced an influential series of books based on his photography of the built landscape of Los Angeles, and his continues to document vernacular Los Angeles through photography to this day. He was represented by the Leo Castelli Gallery beginning in the 1970s and then moved to the Gagosian Gallery, which continues to show the artist today. In this interview, Ruscha discusses his art education and influences and his introduction to the burgeoning art world of 1960s Los Angeles. He reflects on the transformation of art after the 1960s with the rise of conceptual and political art and his continuing interest in painting during that era. Finally, Ruscha discusses changes in the art world in the 1980s and 1990s, retrospective exhibitions of his art, the transformation of Los Angeles, and how artists might think about their legacy.
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Today is Thursday, the 10 of September, 2015. This is Martin Meeker with Andrew Perchuk and James Cuno, both of the Getty, with Ed Ruscha at his studio in Culver City. And this is interview session number one. So, let’s get started. We’re not going to do a whole lot about family background and upbringing because I think a lot of that has been committed to interviews already. But we always do begin our interviews, just as a baseline, when and where you were born.

Okay. Yeah. So, it all started in Omaha, Nebraska. And I lived there for, maybe, four or five years before I moved to Oklahoma City. My father was an auditor for Hartford Insurance Company, and so he worked in Omaha there until he was reassigned to Oklahoma City.

I have very little memory of Omaha itself, but I do have some little snippets of thoughts. I remember, particularly when I was a kid, looking out the window in the middle of the night and there was an owl there. And that’s probably my most solid memory—solid earliest memory—that I had of anything was this owl in a tree. And I could see the silhouette shape of this owl and the noise it was making.

So, we moved to Oklahoma in—I think it was 1942. And my dad bought a house there. Paid $7,500 for this house. And he paid cash for it, which was sort of absurd at that time because the war was going on then. But he had a job. My dad was born in 1891 in Missouri, and so he was getting up there. Well, he was fifty-something years old during the war, at the start of the war. So, he didn’t have to serve. So, he was a civilian and we passed out the war right there in Oklahoma.

And had some experiences there, too. Like, we had a maid whose husband was stationed on the USS Oklahoma. That was sunk in the harbor at Pearl Harbor. And there was another friend we had who was on the USS Arizona that was also bombed there in Pearl Harbor. So, we had vivid memories of what was really becoming quite a war with the Japanese. So, we were ingrained with this prejudice towards Japanese, and saw that progress and finally come to an end. That was a relief for everybody.

I’ve had some initial interest in drawing and a little bit in painting, and my mother had this idea to send me to a painting instructor in the city there. This was my first introduction to a classroom full of people, standing at canvases, painting a portrait of someone, and smell of oil paint and all that. So, that was my introduction.

What age was that? Six or seven?
Ruscha: I was about eleven or twelve, something like that. But my real interest in anything connected to visual arts came through the newspaper, funny papers and comics. And that had more of an impact, and more power to me, than fine arts of any kind. I didn’t go to museums, although my mother pushed me to do that. Dad was a strict Catholic and he didn’t encourage me much to—he thought it was ridiculous to go away to California to go to an art school. He wanted me to do something more practical.

Meeker: At the time, comics were thought to have, maybe, nefarious influence on children. There were even a series of high-profile congressional investigations that happened, looking at comics. Was there any concern amongst your parents that you were, maybe, being led astray by this interest?

Ruscha: It never rang a danger bell at all that comics were anything negative to kids, although it was a kind of entertainment that people questioned. That it might be an inferior form of expression. Comics were considered kind of trashy, almost like fast food or too much sweets. That sort of thing. But Batman and Robin and Dick Tracy and all that, they represented things that were anti-evil and that had suggestions that you could live an honorable life and knock out terror and evil. And so it was an acceptable thing.

And then you had more benign forms of entertainment like Blondie and Dagwood and those kind of things. And just the idea of cartooning and that there were so many forms of expression within the world of cartooning that—and I remember that my mother was a friend of this man named George Lichty who was from Chicago. My mother was born in Chicago, and she always liked this guy, George Lichty, who had a single-panel cartoon in the newspapers. And those things began to add up. Then they got a little more refined, but I would doodle with the idea of maybe—I liked the idea of maybe growing up to be a cartoonist. Something like that.

I had a neighbor, two doors down, who lives out here now, named Bob Bonaparte who was really adept at drawing and cartooning. He used Higgins India Ink and it was a working material. India ink, the blackness of it and the purity of it. And Speedball pens and brushes with ink. Really had a sparkling form of expression.

And so I always loved that. That became some guiding light for me that’s probably sticking with me today. I don’t know.

Perchuk: Did you trace over existing comics, or did you mostly do your own?

Ruscha: Oh, I would more imitate other cartoonists’ works and draw pictures of Itchy or one of these bad characters out of Dick Tracy. And it was a matter of
thinking out loud. You do that with a form of doodling and copying other people’s cartoons. So, I had no concept that I was learning anything from it or that it was going to lead anywhere. But it formed some kind of abstract basis for my interest in the world.

So, as I stayed in school there in Oklahoma through high school. And I had a job for an industrial supply company that I basically got parked at the city library. I would go through books, and my chore was to find lumber companies and things like that and make long lists of these lumber companies for the industrial supply.

At the same time, I would check out books in the art section and make my way through the history of art. I didn’t do an extensive study, but it was whatever interested me at the time. I remember seeing the first examples of the work of Joseph Cornell and Max Ernst and Marcel Duchamp and these twentieth century figures in art. I thought there was some substance there for the future. And I had no agenda or necessary plans to use any of this information. I was just amused by all these things that artists had done in different parts of the world that began to shape my interest in things, and eventually got me towards thinking about going to some art school somewhere. And that was it. I felt like it was time to leave home.

Well, you responded more to twentieth century art rather than old masters when you were looking through the catalogs—

I did, yeah. And later on, I had more appreciation for the accomplishment of historical figures in the world of art. But at that time, it was just like candy to look at. You know, it was like visual eye candy. And I liked to leaf through these books. And most interesting to me were things that were done in the twentieth century. I mean, I could go back a bit, too. I liked James Ensor and I was fascinated by him because he did this crossover business that went against the prevailing history, where he would put in fantastical images and things like that into his characters and his thinking that really grabbed my eye. And I could see some sort of hope for mankind in observing this kind of art.

So, at that time, I think I needed to get out of town. And I had a friend named Mason Williams who became a songwriter and a writer for television, and he was my neighbor. We were real good friends and had the thought of going to California. I had the car and he had the time and we had a little bit of money, so we just headed to Los Angeles.

Did LA have an identity for you? Was there some magic about Los Angeles and you could’ve gone anywhere, or was it just that he was heading to Los Angeles? You may as well just go with him?
You know, it was all like a big kaleidoscope. Well, where am I going to go? Am I going to go to the east coast? And that, to me, represented cold, frigid winters. And there was something unfriendly about it, although I had no prejudice against it. I’d never been to the east coast. I’d made several trips with my family on vacations to places in the west. And I had grandparents who lived in northern California, in a place called Boulder Creek. So, we would go up there by Santa Cruz and go see them. And then we went to Glacier National Park. Various places, national parks, in New Mexico, Arizona, and we—a couple of times—came through Los Angeles.

And so I had a vision of Los Angeles and what it might be like. LA, to me, was an unknown place. I mean, I’d been there a few times as a kid, age nine or so. Something like that. But I viewed it as a place that was an accelerated culture and on the move. And also, it had a very glamorous connotation that the sun was always shining and the vegetation was exotic. It had trademark—the movie industry captured what the whole world was like. And as a kid, I would go to movies and then I don’t know where I got the connotation that New York is really like New York, but it came about through movies. And I never visited New York until I was about twenty-one, I think. When I got there, I just said, “This is exactly what the movies are like. They told us what New York was like, and they’re very accurate.”

In what way? Kind of a hard-boiled, “Naked City” sort of thing?

Yeah, yeah. Hard-boiled and also pictorially. The buildings and everything were well—not even documented—they were faked in lots around Los Angeles to look like New York. And they were very accurate. They made New York look like New York. And other places, too. So movies had a way of expanding the fantasy. So, I based a lot of my thinking on what movies were doing.

How often did you go to the movies in those days? A few times a week? Couple times a week? Or more?

Yeah, and I would go to these ten-cent western serial movies filled with cartoons and all, on a Saturday morning. I would do that. And then I would go to see mostly western movies. Seems like there was always a movie in there where people are traveling and they’re always traveling by train. And the train scenes were always pretty much the same. The train was way off and you could see a landscape, but you knew there were train tracks here. It was way off to a little point off to the right. And then zoom, the train would come through and make this diagonal zoom across the screen. And I thought, well,
that’s really something. I mean, that’s a painting that moves. And that’s got some education to it. It expands your vision.

So, I always held that open for movies. But then, at the same time, I was pretty committed to seeing art that was static, like painting, sculpture, that sort of thing. I somehow got into doing sign painting when I was in high school. I made a small supplemental living from it by painting signs for people, like, “Hamburgers for sale.” That sort of thing. And I thought, well, maybe this is going to go on from here. I’ll do sign painting. And I’ll go to art school and see where that takes me.

And so I’ve got something very primitive like the India ink—the black India ink—and you’ve got brushes and you’ve got this white paper and you paint signs with it or make cartoons or do something, but get out of here. Get out of Oklahoma. Go to California and see where it takes you.

And then somewhere along the way, I became aware of people who documented America, such as Walker Evans and Berenice Abbott. People who really got the heartbeat of America in the photographic process. And so photography, I could see possibilities of shoehorning that into my life somehow. Photography.

So I took a photography course in art school, then I took an advertising course, thinking that maybe this is a little bit like sign painting. But maybe the two can meet somewhere. And then I met people, students, who I met that were more involved in the world of fine arts. They were more interested in painting and drawing and design than they were in the world of advertising.

Meeker: Can I ask you a little bit about the sign painting?

Ruscha: Yes.

Meeker: Because, obviously, you’ve built an oeuvre around lettering and words. When was it that you first learned the skill of doing that? It requires a very steady hand and a good eye, and you have to learn how to measure, you have to learn font. Where does that first come in in your training?

Ruscha: I think probably came through cartooning and titles of cartoons, and the stylistic attitudes of cartooning in that the letter forms were always part of that, too. And even the thought bubbles and the dialogue bubbles and all that became part of the issue, too.
So, it was like scribbling and doodling and you’re doodling with your mind and you’re doodling it on paper, and somehow, these things crisscross and they come into play.

01-00:22:39
Cuno: What about the school itself? Did you come to Chouinard then? Is that your first school?

01-00:22:45
Ruscha: You know, I read something about the Art Center School when I was in high school. And that seemed like it had a certain kind of swanky offering to it. I mean that you could go there and you could learn how to design cars and industrial design. And all of that was beginning to be a new modern world that was coming out of World War II that was a rebirth of America, in a way. And so Art Center School seemed like, boy, that’s the place I want to go.

And then when I tried to go there, their quota was filled, so I couldn’t get into that school. And then I’d heard about Chouinard Art Institute and so I enrolled there and went to Chouinard.

01-00:23:55
Cuno: Was it the only alternative or was there something about the school that attracted you?

01-00:24:02
Ruscha: Well, actually, there was LA County Institute of Art, which was once called Otis before that, and then now it’s back to being called Otis again. And that was a school I really didn’t know very much about. And you know how when you’re eighteen years old and you’re fumbling along, you don’t make, always, the most rational kinds of decisions. But mine was more like, I visited the school and walked through the campus, which was a very tiny place. And began to see that, well, maybe there’s some possibility here. And so I thought, this is it. I’m going to check in here. And so I actually spent four years in this school.

And then I subsequently learned that the Art Center School, they had a dress code that you could not have facial hair, and you could not wear a beret to school, and you couldn’t wear sandals, and you couldn’t bring bongo drums to school.

01-00:25:13
Perchuk: Well, you see the pictures. All the guys are in shirts and ties, right?

01-00:25:18
Ruscha: That’s right. So it was much more serious. And then I realized, boy, there’s a contrast here. I’ve got the bohemian school that I’ve just enrolled in, and then I’ve got that other school over there. And my dad, of course, wanted me to go to Art Center School. And he was always dubious to begin with. But when he finally read about Walt Disney, that Walt Disney had supported Chouinard,
and was a good friend of Nelly [Nelbert] Chouinard, who started the school in 1920 or something. When he read about that, then he was all for it. He was sold on Walt Disney. So, he thought, well, maybe you’re in the right place.

Meeker: Was the bohemian atmosphere something you were attracted to at Chouinard?

Ruscha: Well, I became attracted to it, yeah. It was a loose lifestyle. And there were a bunch of people who were getting out of the Korean War, and they were there on the GI Bill, and they were sometimes older than me. They’d be, like, twenty-five to thirty years old, and they’d be in art school. And they’re going there on a GI Bill. And I was just trying to make my way. I got a partial scholarship there one year. So, I stayed in it like that. And all of these people, they seemed to have—well, there was one department there at Chouinard which was the animation department. And there were a lot of really interesting people in that school. They studied real hard and learned the art of animation. And then most of those people went to work for guess who? Walt Disney.

Meeker: Did you ever own a beret or a set of bongo drums? Was that something that you ever got into?

Ruscha: No, never got into that. Never got the trappings of all that, but I was fascinated by the world of the beatniks and poetry and jazz and poetry. And I had a kind of a period in my life when I was wide-awake with all those happenings. And the things that were going on in San Francisco and other places that were expressions of free and open thinking. So, I lost, probably, a cornerstone of conservatism meeting all these newer people. People that just had ideas about a free future.

Cuno: Where did the other students come from? The Chouinard students. Were they mostly Los Angeles students?

Ruscha: Mostly Los Angeles? Yeah. And everybody mostly lived around the school, which is around Westlake Park, or what’s called MacArthur Park today. And we lived over there. I mean, a lot of students lived between downtown and Hollywood. All that area in there is where most of the students lived.

Cuno: But was it rare that you were not from Los Angeles and went to that school? Were most of the students from Los Angeles?

Ruscha: Actually not so rare because I went to school with four friends that were from Oklahoma City. And two of them were very old friends of mine that I actually grew up with. Joe Goode was an altar boy in my church. And I knew him
from the second grade. Jerry McMillan, photographer. I went to high school with him.

We eventually rented a house in Hollywood that we all lived in together. There were five of us. Maybe six at one time. And so we were all from Oklahoma. And Patrick Blackwell, Don Moore. And we all lived in a house up by Barnsdall Park, up on New Hampshire Avenue. We lived in a house that was built in 1903. It was a prefab house. And it was a wreck of a house when we had it in the late fifties, but I remember it was $60 a month rent, so that was split five ways. Twelve dollars a month for rent. But it was a great time.

And one of us had an automobile. The rest of us didn’t have cars. This friend of ours, Don Moore, he had a pretty smart Chevy convertible, and we rode, every day, to school with him, to Chouinard. It made life a little easier. They did have streetcars then, and every so often, we’d get a streetcar.

Cuno: Were you aware of the beach then? Chouinard was way downtown, as it were. Downtown, way downtown.

Ruscha: At that time, we became—and myself included—really involved in the school itself and all the lessons and homework. And the vitality of school became a rather serious commitment and it didn’t allow us, too much, to go to the beach. I never did surfing or anything like that. None of us did, really. And very few people that were going to Chouinard actually lived out in Venice or any place like that. Although Venice, at that time, was almost a derelict community in the fifties and sixties. So, mostly, we just traveled around Hollywood or downtown LA and that. And that would be sort of our campus. We’d always eventually end up back there at the school. There were art stores around there, so we had plenty of supplies that we could go into. That was the way it came about.

Meeker: You had mentioned an influence that the beats had on you as a way of looking at the world. You think about the way in which Jack Kerouac described America, Allen Ginsberg described America, or the photographs of Robert Frank, for instance. You’ve mentioned him before. Some people see that vision of America as either a depressing vision or maybe even an insult to America. But other people see it as liberating in some ways, or full of possibility. Where did you fit on the spectrum when you would read On the Road or look at Robert Frank’s The Americans?

Ruscha: I would compare that to looking at the world of painting, let’s say, and seeing an idealized world. And most fine arts were posing a message to the world that it was an ideal kind of world. And the idea of beauty being something that you wouldn’t want to violate. And then I don’t know whether I’d say
“suddenly,” but eventually, people came along that were beginning to see another side to this idealized world, and especially in America. I think the early history of the twentieth century in American art there are so many artists who began to really look away from the idealist presentation of the world being so beautiful and perfect.

When Robert Frank came along, we were all in school at Chouinard. And I remember finding this book at a bookstore where Joe Goode worked, across from LA City College. And we got this book and it was just an amazing thing to come across this collection of photographs that this man had taken on a trip across America. And in itself, it was a liberating experience to be exposed to this vision brought by somebody who actually was not American. I mean, he was Swiss. And I could see that maybe that’s why this guy began to see America for what it was is because he didn’t live here. He had a hunger for America and the world of jazz and the progressive world, accelerated vision of America. And he began to take pictures, just very casual kind of pictures, that I’d never seen before. Berenice Abbott, Walker Evans, people like them were taking frozen historical pictures. Very good, informative visions of America. But here, this guy came along and began to see more active subjects that really participated in the photographs themselves. And they were not always pretty or ideal. They were shocking at that time, and especially, the entire collection was shocking. It reminded you of all the things you went through with relations to—like, racial relations. I grew up in Jim Crow America. Oklahoma was—man, I’ll tell you. “Blacks go to the back of the bus.” They had white drinking fountains and black drinking fountains. Colored people. Colored bathrooms. “Coloreds sit over there for the movies.”

And so back to Robert Frank. He hit that nerve with his observations, and it opened up a kind of way of seeing things that were both pictorial and cultural at the same time.

And you started taking pictures around that time. Do you think some of it has to do with the change from those heavy cameras that Walker Evans used on a tripod to the lightweight Rolleiflexes and Yashicas and things like that that people started using in the fifties?

Yeah. A lot of photographers—well, Timothy O’Sullivan or who else? Mathew Brady. All those people had giant cameras. They needed that apparatus to capture whatever they were doing. And sometimes their pictures were kind of static and stoic in lots of ways. But then photography just sort of reduced itself down to handheld things and quick—like, Walker Evans was able to take lots of photographs of people who never knew they were being photographed. And he, I think, would even, maybe hide a camera in here like this and open his shirt or something and take pictures of people on subways.
And I guess Robert Frank did a lot of—you can tell those photographs are taken mostly of people who didn’t know they were being photographed, and then every so often, there’s one in there that may be a reaction of being photographed where they’re not really looking in the camera, but they know they’ve been captured on film.

01-00:39:43
Cuno: I assume, at that time, the images taken from the camera were black and white images.

01-00:39:51
Ruscha: Yeah.

01-00:39:52
Cuno: That’s what came out. That’s what you had. So, that whole universe, for you, was black and white. How did that relate to how you were thinking of what you were making?

01-00:40:02
Ruscha: I always liked the way black and white looked, although I have a memory of what a colorful world could be in the form of expression. Like when you go back to the Wizard of Oz movie and then remember how vivid all those colors are and how optimal they are and how illustrative they are. They’re stylistic. They’ve got all that. So, Wizard of Oz may not have been so good in black and white. And then so many movies paralleled things that were going on in the world of photography, too.

We’re on to Robert Frank, there, and so you almost could say that he was a noir kind of person. But a lot of his thinking and a lot of his discoveries could still be used today. I mean, people are constantly trying to see the world in a different way. And those are tools that are still used. People are trying to find different ways of saying something. So, we still have that open canvas.

01-00:41:50
Meeker: With the Frank photography, and you might extend it to Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg as well, there is this suspicion of beauty. I’m wondering if you had that same suspicion of beauty in painting. And what your thought of the abstract expressionists were because in many ways, they were the ultimate of sublime. They were the ultimate of beauty in painting without context. Rothko and Pollock. Those are beautiful, sublime pieces. That is very different than the pop art movement where there’s some very specific engaging with mass culture, not to mention Kienholz, right?

01-00:42:45
Ruscha: You speak of abstract expressionist painting, and that’s certainly where the concentration in school, in the painting classes, was exactly that. So for all that, we made immediate heroes of people like Franz Kline and Hans Hofmann and Rothko and de Kooning and all the abstract expressionists just because of the approach to life and art that that presented. It presented a very
seductive kind of possibility into the world of art, and, boy, it was all inter-
connected. If we were lucky enough, we could see a film of Franz Kline,
maybe painting a picture. Or we certainly see that Jackson Pollock painting of
him painting that Hans Namuth filmed. All of these artists.

It seemed like smoking and painting were two things that you just did. How
was anybody going to paint a picture without smoking at the same time? So,
of course, we all smoked then, too. And it was a vital kind of anatomical
action that you put into creation of some image. And so, naturally, we were all
painting like Franz Kline or de Kooning, and so all of those people were
heroes. They were heroes. And that was the way that they taught school. The
squares could do what they wanted to and the people who were more
aggressive and wanted to find out more than just the ideal world would be
painting in this other abstract way. So, abstract painting was really where it’s
at.

01-00:45:13
Perchuk: Among teachers as well as students?

01-00:45:18
Ruscha: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Like Emerson Woelffer and Robert Irwin and Richards
Ruben. They were all instructors at Chouinard at the time.

01-00:45:40
Perchuk: And so it wasn’t a point of contention between student and teacher.

01-00:45:44
Ruscha: No, but there was lots of aggression and doubt and skepticism between
student and instructor. And so we had that, but then we also had a camaraderie
with those people, especially Irwin, who was well respected. He taught a
watercolor class. Even today, I don’t know how anybody could paint a
watercolor picture, especially a figurative watercolor picture. That’s one of the
hardest things, at all, for an artist to do, and he would teach this course, but he
was rigorous in the way he taught it.

He would have you get a piece of plywood, or a base of some sort, made out
of wood, and then he would put strips of tape around the outside edges, like
this, and another strip of tape, and another strip of tape until you build that
thing up to about like that. And then you put wet paper on it and you stretch it
out and you tape that down. So, what you basically have is a drum head. And
that is—you know, boing, you’ve got a drum head. I don’t know why it had to
be so involved, but he wanted it done that way and so we followed directions.

But then, the final moment, it’s, like, what do you do with this drum head? I
mean, you’re meant to be painting on it. And how do you go about doing that?
So, he eases you into many possibilities that you can do when you approach
something like this. Now, everybody is real nervous by this time, and I
could’ve painted the whole thing with India ink, I’m sure, and just made a
black surface. Well, that wasn’t the line of thinking then. It was more like how you manipulate smaller shapes and put them into some kind of abstract order or some kind of sensibility. Irwin was a great talker, and he was able to bring in the history of art and recall many names of many people who’ve done other things in the world of the plastic arts. And make you realize that. And at the same time, urge you on.

So, it was a difficult course, but he made you think at the same time that you’re also manipulating these colors together and trying to make something out of it.

Cuno: Were they figurative watercolors paintings with Irwin or were they non-figurative?

Ruscha: Well, he was more non-figurative. I think if you tried to put a figure in there, he would belittle you in some way or other. They may not use that technique today. They might let you do anything you want. But it was more consigned to the era of the 1950s, late fifties. And he was completely there in the world of abstract art. He was encouraging you to be, “Let’s talk about color and shape rather than what your mother looks like in a portrait.”

So, he was one person. Emerson Woelffer was another. He’d be constantly smoking throughout class. Everybody smoked in class. I don’t know how that ever happened, but he had a degree of latitude in the making of a picture. It almost tells you, pretend like you’re a carpenter or you’re a plumber and you’re putting your tools together to make something. And in this case, it’s making a picture. So, he’s reminding us there that there are many elemental levels to entering this world of making a picture, and we’ll talk about it later, that kind of thing.

And we would get things from the instructors, but we also got a great deal from students we were with. And it became, consequently, a competitive kind of atmosphere. We wanted to really turn in the best work and do the best thing, whether it was a painting or an animated cartoon or whatever it was. There was a competitive aspect to being in this school. So that was one of the values of it. Also, you learned a lot from these people who are right side-by-side with you. You’re not learning, necessarily, from the instructor. You’re learning from the people you are side-by-side with who are also students. And so before you know it, there’s some attitudes and some things that are picked up and used. You just march forward.

Meeker: Going back to what you were talking about with the abstract expressionists as the heroes when you were in art school, you look at a Pollock or a de Kooning or a Rothko, right? And those are very different aesthetically from a Duchamp or a Joseph Cornell. Did you understand, at the time, the differences and did
you feel like you had to take sides, aesthetically, with one kind of approach or another?

Ruscha:

That argument always came up. Your friends would be very opinionated by it, in my experience. So, everybody had their own attitudes about how you would follow this course that is so open-ended in many ways. It’s almost like the encouragement of teaching yourself. There are many, I’ve found, conservative, conventional thinkers that felt like, “Look the world is made up of our observations of the human body. Michelangelo taught us that. Da Vinci taught us that. Go back to the human body. That’s what you have to do.”

A lot of these forms of expression like Marcel Duchamp was discounted for that reason. So, they felt like he did not go through the human body. You could argue that forever. In other words, a lot of these people felt like figurative art is the only art and that abstract art is just a passing fad. It’ll have no substance.

And there were people like that, but some of those people would come around to more generous open thinking. So, there was a lot of that, but then there was also a point to remember that all these artists that you’ve mentioned, like Rothko, Kline, Hofmann, Adolph Gottlieb, all these people were painting, and they were all painting in their own way. They were not necessarily influenced by each other. I could almost take that back, but—

Cuno:

Where did you see their work? In magazines, or?

Ruscha:

Yeah, I’d see them in magazines, and then we started going to art exhibits. Like, the County Museum was beginning to have shows of contemporary art. Where else? Very little. Very little of that. But mostly in books and magazines, we’d see their work.

Perchuk:

Your friends, like Joe and Larry Bell, very early in their career, right after they got out of school, put together that War Babies exhibition. And I’ve heard that you were supposed to be in, so first, that. But more, did you feel yourself part of a different generation, post-abstract expressionist War Babies generation?

Ruscha:

That was beginning to appear in a lot of our work. And the idea that it’s time now to separate ourselves from this hero worship of these abstract expressionists. But the major form of thinking was that you keep your mind open because we’d also respect people like Josef Albers and artists that were painting these, more or less, severe kinds of pictures. And we had great respect for those people, too. So, it was a period of wide-open thinking, and healthy for that very reason.
But the War Babies was a good break from school. And it happened, basically, right after school. And it was a good—I don’t know whether I need to explain what the War Babies were about—but it was these individual artists. And they all had very differing kinds of artworks, but a lot of it was—there was some kind of silvery threads that went from one to the other. And so there was connections between—there were visual connections and attitude connections that went back and forth from these students. And they were just getting out of school at that time.

Henry Hopkins, who had the Huysman Gallery on La Cienega, had an open schedule gap. He was a friend of Joe Goode’s, and Joe presented this idea to him. I’m not sure exactly where the War Babies idea originated from. I could be corrected on that. All I know is that it happened, and it happened in the form of a now-classical poster of the four artists that were in this exhibit. One was Joe Goode, who represented the good Catholic kid. He was sitting at an American-flag draped table where these four young kids are sitting behind the table, engaging in their form of cuisine.

This was photographed by Jerry McMillan and, basically, concocted from him, with his ideas, too, that came out of, maybe, Robert Frank. And at the same time, artists were beginning to use the American flag as a possible source of inspiration and expression. Jasper Johns had already done that in an extremely dramatic way. And then there were other people who used it in sort of an antagonistic way, which is—it was considered a sacrilege to many people to take an American flag and cover your table with it and to eat something off of it. So, that was a bold thing.

The photograph expressed Joe Goode, Catholic kid, eating sardines, like you eat fish on Friday. Ronnie Miyashiro, Asian, is eating with chopsticks. Larry Bell, Jewish, was eating a bagel. Eddie Bereal, a black kid, was eating a watermelon. And so the outrage of that did not go unnoticed. And they had an exhibit which I don’t think I ever really saw because I was traveling in Europe and that happened while I was in Europe. But they actually had an exhibit there at the Huysman Gallery on La Cienega, and I think there were some threats of outrage over this expression on the poster that, I guess, maybe, threatened a lot of people. They didn’t appreciate the satire.

Meeker: I think the ironic sense of humor in that, it might have been easy to miss then, but it’s hard to miss today. You don’t find much of sense of humor in the abstract expressionists, at least I don’t. But I see it, definitely, throughout your entire work. Where did the sense of humor come from? When did it become okay to exhibit a sense of humor in your own work?

Ruscha: There was a definite streak of sensibility and seriousness in coming from the abstract expressionist. And almost a holy kind of—h-o-l-y—kind of spirit that
they took great pride in. But at the same time, those guys were totally American. They liked Cadillacs, and they liked dames. They liked the speed of life. So these guys that were doing, basically, radical art, also believed in the throbbing message of the American life, and so you had dichotomies there. The abstract expressionists were considered serious, but totally dedicated to their work. Even looking back on it today, seeing fifty, sixty, seventy years pass, still as every bit as strong as it was back then.

01-01:02:48
Cuno: Was there a sense, even then, of regional identity? That is, that there is something that bound you together called Los Angeles that gave you a distance from New York that gave you a sense of pride in that entity? Or was that just something that later, our historians posed on the scene?

01-01:03:10
Ruscha: Maybe there was some kind of rivalry or an imaginary rivalry between the idea that here, you happen to be respecting all these people and they all live in this tiny little island back east, in a different area code. But the idea of living in California was just another thing. It just happened to be that all these people that were notable in their fields—I mean in the field of painting and sculpture—they all just happened to live in Manhattan. And so it almost beckoned you to go live there. And a lot of people would pull up stakes and go live in New York because that was the center of things. Everybody understood that, too. That was something.

Most people just had mixed feelings about it and there was not much history in the Los Angeles or the California. There was not much art history. How far back can you go? There’s Stanton Macdonald-Wright, but many other people, of course, along the historical way. A lot happened here. And yet, we can look back fifty, sixty years and we can see that there is a great change and a great development. And people want to come here for many different reasons, and they actually will come here and some want to make art here. So, it’s something that provokes mixed thinking, mixed beliefs.

I considered the idea of going to New York, but it was prohibitively expensive and scary, to me, to begin with. I always thought of tough gangs. That was New York. Not today. It’s not that way at all. And I just had this built up idea that if you go to New York, well, you’d better watch because somebody’s going to stab you on the street or something. And you don’t have that here. You can walk around in thong sandals and not worry.

01-01:06:10
Perchuk: Did that sense of competitiveness continue, like in the Ferus [Gallery] years where Irving [Blum] would alternate a show of Frank Stella and then a show of Irwin and then a show of [Roy] Lichtenstein and then a show of you? Did you feel that sense of competitiveness with New York or—
Yes. There was a competitive contrast between artists from California and artists from New York. And, likewise, interscholastic. Like, all artists from California would be all competitive. And it just existed. Compared with today, there was no viable vocation in the world of painting. You could not make a living painting pictures and selling them. It didn’t exist. But nobody cared. And there was no future for us anyway. So, we believed in the idea of just doing it for sport, and future be damned. You wanted to impress your friends, who were also artists. But the idea of selling work, that was surprising.

We didn’t realize you could ever do that until we began hearing various little stories about how, well, somebody here out in Pasadena, this old lady, likes to collect contemporary art. We didn’t really realize that there was such a thing. We heard stories about Vincent Price. He’s an art collector. And Edward G. Robinson. He’s an art collector. There was a guy named Sterling Holloway who’s an actor. He was a collector, but he collected contemporary art, and these other guys didn’t. They collected impressionist paintings and [Pierre-Auguste] Renoirs and things like that. They were kind of like the old guard. And old fashioned. They didn’t acknowledge that there was such a thing as Marcel Duchamp. They would dismiss him. So, there was that rigid kind of thinking back then.

Could we back up for a second? How many years were there between your graduation and this first exhibition that Walter Hopps organized? Was it five, six years? Three or four?

A span of time. No, it was more like two years. Because I left art school in 1960 and then—

[New Painting of] Common Objects was ’62?

Common Objects exhibit was 1962. So, it was about a year and a half, two years, or something like that, after—. And we were all really fortunate to have crossed paths with this man named Walter Hopps. He was a stunningly astute erudite that we knew. He could go down to gang members and teach them art, and they’d be listening. He had that ability to talk. And he was a storehouse of knowledge, and he loved every bit of it. I think he picked up on it at an early age. He might’ve been ten years old and he already knew a lot about what was going on in the world of culture.

And very intrigued by the hoopla of everything and the activity of all artists. He had sort of an uncanny kind of knowledge of works coming from artists that were not really accepted or that were obscure. He had a great deal of respect for people who were obscure by choice, meaning someone who grew
up way out in the sticks, and they’ve always connected the vitality of art to a particular city, like New York.

Today, it’s a little different. You could throw LA into that. Chicago. Dallas, for that matter. I mean, all cities. Miami. The passage of time has shown that it’s a far different world today than it was back in 1950. But Walter always was reminding us of people who were making interesting art, but not trying to be on the cover of *Life* magazine. Not trying to be Jackson Pollock. They were quite happy to live up in Washington State or some obscure place and carry on their work.

01-01:12:32
Meeker: Do you recall the first time you visited Ferus Gallery?

01-01:12:35
Ruscha: Maybe around 1960, ’61. Something like that.

01-01:12:42
Meeker: So, this was when Hopps was still involved, before he went to Pasadena.

01-01:12:46
Ruscha: Yeah. Walter was a partner in the gallery.

01-01:12:51
Meeker: I always wondered. Upon coming on this gallery, did you feel like this was kind of like a gang that you wanted to join? All of these artists doing really interesting things?

01-01:13:08
Ruscha: Yes. It was a little bright spot and a shoehorn into the big world, for whatever that means. It was a very challenging kind of presentation of art. They had some really good ideas there. Walter Hopps and Irving Blum had a program going on there and they would mix young art with old art. They had, even, some primitive artists. Streeter Blair was one of their artists. They had Bay Area figurative painters. [Richard] Diebenkorn and Jay DeFeo had an exhibit there at the Ferus. John Altoon was one of their primary artists.

Then every so often, they would put up a collection of—like Kurt Schwitter’s collages, these little baby collages. That was almost revolutionary, to me. Everybody knew that Ferus was a beacon in the landscape. Then there was kind of a good old boys’ club that was happening at the time with Billy Al Bengston and Ed Moses and Craig Kauffman. Larry Bell, who I went to school with, was showing at that time.

Then they slipped in a very strange artist from Italy named Giorgio Morandi. That kind of shook people up. But you would go to see the show like that and you’d come away with some kind of renewed respect for somebody who lived his life like Morandi did. And I think he, maybe, had an influence on Robert Irwin and Philip Guston. I think his painting almost came out of Morandi a
little bit. I mean, these artists were really awakened to these other forms of expression.

So, you had all kinds of things happening. And the best stuff was happening from this gallery called Ferus.

01-01:16:13
Meeker: As a young artist, how did you seek to become part of that gang, that gallery?

01-01:16:19
Perchuk: Well, did you feel part of that boys’ club you described? You were a little bit younger than most of those artists. And I’ve heard, many times, people say you were one of the Ferus studs, but you weren’t.

01-01:16:38
Ruscha: No, no. all these guys would hang around together. I was not really part of them. I became friends with them later, but in the beginning, they were very separate. Each person was thinking in his own—had his own territory plotted out. Ken Price was doing these amazing sculptures that, really, just grabbed people. And he made two or three exhibits there at Ferus that were just knockout ceramics. The fact that ceramics was even considered an art form was another question, a dubious question.

But here you had this young kid, Ken Price, that would come along and make these wonderful sculptures out of ceramics and do it in such a powerful way. And yet they all meshed together in this kind of romance. You had almost like a rat pack of young guys, and all the women around—and there were quite a few women who were actually accepted into the whole thing. People constantly harp on this notion that the world of abstract expressionists and the New Yorkers and all those people were a boys’ club and women be damned. But that was not so. There were so many women artists that were also making waves, making their way in the world. And they were accepted, too. But that’s another issue. I mean, gender conflict. That’s another issue.

01-01:18:44
Perchuk: How were you making a living at this time?

01-01:18:47
Ruscha: Making a living.

01-01:18:48
Perchuk: And where were you living? Both making a living and where were you living?

01-01:18:52
Ruscha: Well, I lived over in Echo Park and I made my living, at that time, by lettering names on gift items at Christmastime. So, I would work in September, October, November, and part of December, at this place that was, maybe, three blocks away from here. It was a place called Sunset House, and it was a gift mail order—all the gifts were made in Japan. They imported all these
things and then they had a mail order catalog type of setup. People would buy these things that you would personalize. That was one of the features. And so you could personalize, doing this show card lettering, with a brush and paint on these objects, these things.

There was one object called a chopper hopper. It was a little ceramic thing with a lid. And inside of it, you put water or something. You put your false teeth in it. They’re called chopper hoppers. Ma and Pa chopper hoppers. [laughter] So, you could make five cents each by just lettering these things and pushing them down the line. I did that for about three or four years. And I made a living doing that. I could make about $400 or $500 in a couple of weeks’ time. And that was plenty to live on. And I could stretch it all the way into the next season, and then I’d start back working there.

I had other odd jobs, like, I would paint signs or I would, every so often, design a book, or do some kind of typographic thing for someone. And make signs. I worked in an advertising agency for, maybe, three or four months doing layouts and pasteups. Things like that. That didn’t suit me because I could see that the people in the advertising business were—if you pick that world to invade, you’ve got to give your whole life to them. You go in, “Be good if you were there at 8:00 in the morning, and if you want stay at 8:00 until night, that’s fine. We appreciate that if you do that.” Your whole life was tied into that and I didn’t like that at all. So, I parted ways with that.

But I had these graphic techniques. Things you could do with painting signs and doing things like that. I could pick up some spare living change by getting those things happening.

01-01:22:12 Meeker: But also a place to hone your own art, perhaps.

01-01:22:16 Ruscha: Well, when I was working at that advertising agency, I’d want to leave at 5:00 or 5:30. And then I would go back to my place and paint pictures until 1:00 in the morning, and that was fine with me. That’s what I wanted to do and I can see that that was living the high life of romance.

01-01:22:44 Meeker: How were you getting your oil paints. How were you getting them?

01-01:22:49 Ruscha: Getting my oil paints? Well, art supplies are not cheap, as we know. We would even pinch these things from an art store sometimes. I remember Joe Goode saying one time. He says, “Go for the cadmiums, man. They’re the expensive ones. Get those cadmiums.”

So, there are so many ways to go at it. There was no golden way to go at it, but you took your own avenue.
Perchuk: As Martin was saying, I know you draw a lot using things like cotton puffs and Q-tips and things like that. Did you learn that when you were at the advertising agency or did you learn that back when you were in school or did you pick it up on your own?

Ruscha: I think it’s more like discovering things that have already been discovered and, more or less, picking up techniques that, really, an artist 500 years ago was already discovered. And it’s just a matter of allowing yourself to go in that direction if that’s the kind of art you want to produce. So, there was no discovery. Sort of teaching yourself how to make your art is the only way to go.

Perchuk: Just as Joe said that you should pinch the cadmium, was there a lot of talking about technique and materials and sharing things and saying, “This is really good stuff. This is not so good.” Were you picking it up from friends?

Ruscha: Yes, and a lot of stuff went on in school. Just chatter. They would say, “Well, go down to this company on Alvarado and Olympic and there’s a paint company there called Nason’s Paint. You just buy their colors in little cans like this and you take baking soda or cornstarch and mix in with those colors. And you can double or triple your coverage if you do that.” And so we tried that a lot, too. Those were little handy tips that we’d be open to.

And so we would do things like that. How to cut corners with materials. People had their own ideas about that. Then when anyone was painting with, let’s say, a dark cadmium red or something and spread that out across the canvas, some of us would be saying, “Let’s see. There’s about $18 worth of paint there.”

Meeker: Speaking of the economics of paint, a lot of your early paintings have, apparently, relatively few colors in them. Was that a mother of necessity kind of thing, that you had fewer paints? Obviously, there would be mixing and stuff, but—

Ruscha: No. No, there was no direction there although I always thought that it was quite an achievement for somebody like Franz Kline to decide that he’s not going to use chromatic colors in his paintings. He did at occasions, but his main message in the arc of his life as a painter had a lot to do with just using black against white. The very fact of that made me feel like at some point in my history, I’m going to go through that period where I just want to work in black and white. So black and white always had a strong foundation to me, and I have done a lot of things with black and white, but it was not because I wanted to save having to get into chromatic colors. But it was a way.
Andrew, I know that in your previous interview, you talked about a lot of the specific works from the 1960s. Is there anything that you want to revisit before we move on from that era?

Wow there’s so much we could talk about. But I think one thing that has been talked about very little is the bird paintings that you did. And where that comes from and—

It’s an oddball period of time for my work, and when I did those things, I also felt that it’s a very easy thing for an artist to come along and take a subject and just paint a picture of a giant cup of coffee. It’s too easy of an answer and I didn’t like that. There were quite a few artists that were actually expanding, blowing up things, and enlarging simple subjects and doing that. There was something in the back of me that didn’t appreciate that. Or there was something too easy about it. It was too simple of a technique, or too simple of a choice to just take a subject and enlarge the actual size of it.

And so I was making an issue out of painting pictures that I considered actual size. I even titled some of my paintings Actual Size. And that was a can of Spam that I lived off of. That was a economical thing, eating Spam. I wouldn’t do that today, knowing what that stuff’s made of, but—I was riveted in many of my works to make things faithful to their actual size.

So something happened there where I did exactly the opposite of that. I was looking at photographs of birds and seeing the charm of their structure. Whatever appeal they had to me. I could see that there was real substance there in that I just, somehow, started painting these pictures of oversized birds. It was, maybe, a nod to some kind of idea of surrealism that the world went through in the 1930s or forties.

At the same time, they are puzzling to me and maybe they have to do with reflections back on childhood, except I doubt that. So I’m suspicious of my motives when I’m doing something like that. And yet, I made these pictures. They had a little bit of nod to classical painting, in a weird way, and then some sort of foot in the future that was, in some ways, unfounded or, you could say, critically weak. The platform of thinking for doing such a thing—I still don’t understand it. But there they were. I felt like I had to do them and I got through it somehow.

Some of my favorites are the ones where the birds have the pencils in their mouths.

Yeah, a blending of the issue of the birds and the pencils. Man. Yeah. I’m still trying to understand that.
There’s, obviously, in a broader social context, there’s a big transformation that’s happening in the late 1960s. Say, beginning in 1965 in Los Angeles with the Watts riots and then you have a florescence of the counterculture in Los Angeles from the Sunset Strip down to Venice and over into Griffith Park. So, there’s a context of change, but there’s also been a lot made of context of change in the art world where it seemed like there was a lot of promise in the late fifties and early to mid-sixties. And then *Artforum* leaves and Ferus closes and Irving Blum leaves and Walter Hopps goes, I guess, to DC, eventually.

It seems that your art changes during that period, too. You start, at some point, to focus on the books. You do a couple films. You’re moving away from oil painting and [start] working with non-traditional materials. How related was your new methods to all that was going on in the broader field?

I don’t feel like I’m that far apart from what was going on at the time. I was very much aware of all the social upheaval and the domestic problems we had here in LA with the riots and everything. And I felt like the love child, the love children, the love-ins, Beatnik culture, hippies—I never participated so much in that. I had friends who did who were protesting the Vietnam War. I hated the thought of that. I was anti-war. I did a little stint in the military, in the Navy reserves, for eight years. But I never had to serve in any kind of war or anything. So, I was lucky. I squeaked through there.

But I was acknowledging everything that was happening in the world at the time. And then I was consistent with seeing the way the city of LA was developing. Just the vibrancy of the place seemed to have a real message for me and playing off of that, I’m inspired by it and disgusted by it. I reject it and I accept other things. And so my work just fits in somehow. But the city has a definite role in my development. Does that answer your question? I don’t know.

Just following up on Martin’s question. When most people talk to you, they’re talking about the go-go years of Ferus and that. But what happens after that, when that all falls apart? Like when Betsy Baker comes and writes that article in 1970, ’71, about LA. She says, “I don’t recognize the place from the one that everybody was talking about with the parties on La Cienega and all that.” None of the artists are even showing in galleries in LA at that point. And it felt like that era had come to an end.

Well, you might be right. But there was a, more or less, scene happening that went beyond Ferus Gallery, but it was centered right on the street of La Cienega. And a number of galleries up and down the street, mostly galleries that didn’t have a message like Ferus did. But Monday nights, there was a
walk. People walked up and down La Cienega and went in and out of one gallery and into another. And they would always go by Ferus. And then people would generally migrate up to Barney’s Beanery. That was the local hangout for the art scene. It was the la Coupole of Los Angeles. And it completed the picture where you’ve got this cultural thing happening and then you can go drink some beer and get rowdy if you wish. And so it was an actual scene.

Then when the gallery closed, that posed a sad end to—there was no more clubhouse and all these unpredictable, crazy artists didn’t have a place to go. And they were still, also, making their way as artists. They were doing their own things and have kept it up for decades since that happened. So, it was an end of a particular era, but nonetheless, there was no spirit that was killed by the closing of Ferus Gallery or the Monday night walk.

So, slowly, things began to progress. Sooner or later, there were younger artists coming along and new voices. New this, new that. The Pasadena Art Museum was a critical locale, a critical venue, for open exploration and that was all led by Walter Hopps. He had this great idea and he didn’t—I don’t think he knew he had this great idea. But then he created that Marcel Duchamp retrospective which was, right there, a very valuable thing for any artist.

And I remember that there was even respect and wonderment about this guy, Duchamp. The very fact that he would announce that he’s not going to paint anymore. Somehow, we all thought, god, that’s great. That’s great. There’s a guy who ceremoniously says, “I’m not going to paint anymore. I’m going to play chess.” And, wow. We just thought, that’s the new thing. I don’t know. None of us tried to emulate him, but he brought us all into another circus.

And Walter Hopps was right there. He was as creative as any Marcel Duchamp. And the fact that those two got together, Duchamp and his work and Walter Hopps, that was a beautiful marriage. And that was also a very culturally rich period. The opening all the way down to the photo of Eve Babitz playing chess nude opposite Marcel Duchamp.

The Pasadena Art Museum and things were slow to go here compared to New York. New York was the center, the heartbeat, of the art world. But things were becoming more stable here and there were actually people who collected art. Some young people who had money at the time, like Dennis Hopper who—very unusual person to have undivided attention to what’s going on in the art world. Then, at the same time, he’s making a movie somewhere and then he wants to come back and make some paintings over here. Meanwhile, he’ll collect your art. Now, there’s somebody who is really going against the grain.
We had respect for actors and people making movies and yet, we didn’t feel like that world covered us. They were not really so interested or sold on us as being artists. You mention art to those people and they think, oh, Van Gogh. Yeah. Art world stops at Van Gogh. Dennis Hopper, fortunately, could see beyond that. And so, eventually, more people began doing that and changed the landscape out here.

Cuno: When and how were you able to leave your side jobs behind and dedicate yourself entirely to painting?

Ruscha: Well, you mean when?

Cuno: Yeah.

Ruscha: I would say, maybe, towards the end of the 1960s. Although in the sixties, I was always accepting little jobs. I even designed a catalog for Frank Stella. And I designed a catalog for Billy Al Bengston. So I would get, sometimes, book design offers. I got that one from Philip Leider, if you ever knew him.

Perchuk: Editor of Artforum.

Ruscha: Yes. Nobody seems to know where he is today, or whether he’s alive.

Cuno: He’s in Israel.

Ruscha: Oh, he finally—yeah, yeah. He would always threaten, I want to go home to Israel. [laughter] So, that’s where he’s living, huh?

Perchuk: Yeah.

Ruscha: I wonder if he still has his family or his wife. They lived in Berkeley for a long time. And he was a very astute person. Now, how did we get onto him?

Perchuk: You were talking about doing a book for him.

Ruscha: Well, I worked for Artforum magazine for a couple of years and it was right upstairs from Ferus Gallery, the offices, and Charles Coles was the publisher. His father, Gardner Coles, or his stepfather or someone, was the publisher of Look magazine. He liked the idea that Charlie, his adopted son, would go into
publishing. So I think he put a little money into the *Artforum* idea and they had Philip Leider as the editor. He had very strong ideas about what he believed in. And so they went through an era of Carl Andre and Robert Smithson and that era of land art that was talked about constantly in *Artforum*. Anyhow, Phil Leider knew that I would do these little jobs every so often. So, he gave me the job of doing the layout for *Artforum* and I would go in there—I didn’t design the—it was designed in San Francisco. But I would do the layout. And he would give me galley proofs. They used to do—I don’t think they use that term anymore, but they were printed out galley proofs and give me a pile of photographs and I would stage them and put them in this format and do the pasteup. And I could do that whole thing in a weekend. Once a month. And I’d get three hundred fifty, $400 a month to do that.

01-01:46:57  Meeker:  I think one of the things Jim was getting at was, was there a tipping point that you decided, gee, I sold this particular piece, or something like that, that you didn’t need to actively look for outside work. That you could focus on your art 100 percent of the time.

01-01:47:14  Ruscha:  I would say that that began to happen, maybe, in the late sixties, early seventies. And I was able to coast for a while. And I began to sell my work, actually, through Irving Blum—well, Ferus Gallery, every so often, sold something. But it was rare. And then I had an exhibit in New York. The first time was 1967, I think, at the Alexander Iolas Gallery. And I think they sold two or three things. And I could live on almost nothing then. But I would say, in the early to mid-seventies, I didn’t have to take on any freelance work.

01-01:48:17  Perchuk:  Did that coincide with joining Castelli, or was that happening even before that?

01-01:48:21  Ruscha:  That was about the time that—I first met Leo in 1961. And I was coming back from Europe and I showed him a bunch of little paintings I did on paper that were about that big. And some smaller. He said, “Come back sometime. We’ll do something.”

01-01:48:47  Cuno:  Was he easy to reach, to get a hold of? Could you just pick up the phone and call him or show up at the gallery?

01-01:48:52  Ruscha:  I just went right into the gallery and I asked them if I could meet him and he walked right out and said, “Oh, let me see what you have there.” And so he said, “Let’s do something sometime.” And I said, “Yeah, okay.” So, when I would go to New York, I’d stop off and see him. But nothing really happened there until about ten years later. Might’ve been in the early seventies, I think.
And so he put me on a stipend, which I had to learn how to spell. [laughter] So, I thought, well, that’s great.

I mean, here we have a system going here where his successful artists will actually pay for the less successful ones. And so I’m able to live off of that little gap of vapors in the art world. And I can actually make do and stay with my work and not have to worry so much. And here it’s all taking place in New York. And they’re just sending me this money once a month. And it wasn’t much, but it was enough to keep the doors open and I didn’t have to work at all. I would get something like $4,000 or $5,000 a month, and that was quite good.

Did he just take a picture and put it in the gallery with other paintings by other artists or did you have, once a year, a show of some kind? What was the routine?

Well, I think I was in a couple of group exhibits there at the gallery. But I forget what year. I think it was in the early seventies that I did my first exhibit at Castelli Gallery in New York. Yeah. So, that was maybe ’71, ’72. Something like that.

Did he put pressure on you to produce a certain amount?

Not at all. Every so often, he would come out to California and he’d drop by and say hello. And he was the least bombastic art dealer that I’d ever met. He was like an old world gentleman, a European—kind of patriarchic. He had an incredible observation of things. And the stories that followed him showed what kind of a pioneer he was in discovering talent or developing talent. He was able to spot an artist doing something that he considered valuable. And so he was very good. Almost like a father figure, in a way. And very gentle.

People could go into his gallery and say, “I have this gallery in Fargo, North Dakota. I’d love to show your artists.” And he’d say, “Sure. Okay.” [laughter] And he’d say, “Well, take this Jasper Johns and take these things here.” And he was very open to people whereas today, no. that’s a very closed, sinister, almost, power figures to outdo each other today. But Leo was just wide open to people. And in his very European way.

What was it like with your artist friends, now seeing you showing in New York. How did that transition work out for you?

Well, other artists were beginning to do the same thing. Larry Bell was connected to the Pace Gallery. And Robert Irwin, also, was at Pace Gallery.
Billy Al Bengston did an exhibit early on in I think it's Betty Parsons Gallery. And other artists were beginning to show their work in New York.

Perchuk: Larry was the first one who really started to make money. Is that right? That’s what I’ve heard.

Ruscha: That could be. And he didn’t have a high-stepping style or anything, but he was always—and still is—interested in tech things with cameras and machines. And then he began to coat glass with vapor colors. He had this giant machine that he invented—or expanded on somebody else’s idea; I don’t know. But he had this big machine that would color coat glass. And then began in this very new way of looking at things through glass.

Not many people had done that. I mean, yes, there are plenty of people who have done that. Look at Norman Zammitt. He did things where you’d look through transparencies and things. Many artists have been on that. Nothing’s new. And things can always go back to history. But Larry had a particularly new way of looking at things. And he did paintings. He did paintings with glass, and integrated glass into canvas, areas of the canvas. Then he just went to actual works of glass and making those cubes and became associated with Finish Fetish artists of California that used industrial paints and that sort of thing.

Perchuk: Could you talk a little bit about the period where you gave up painting, or at least oil painting, and started using the organic materials and concentrating on other things?

Ruscha: Well, I think that was about the late sixties. I was mostly doing drawings, but I was also painting at the same time. But somehow, I went through a stretch of doubt about what the whole thing’s all about. And what am I doing here? Then I just felt like maybe I don’t want to paint right now for a while, or something, and then I thought, well, no. It’s not paint. Paint’s not the issue. But maybe it is the issue. Maybe I want to make some kind of images, but I don’t want to use paint. Somehow, I felt like maybe paint I’m laying out a skin on a surface, and maybe I don’t want to do that now. Maybe I want to do something else—stain the surface or do something else.

And so there was a period—I forget what year it is—that I did no paintings.

Perchuk: Seventy-three, seventy-four.

Ruscha: I think it was 1960 or ’61 or something.
Meeker: I think I read somewhere 1970 was the year.

Ruscha: Oh, yeah. Nineteen seventy. Yeah, yeah. I’m sorry. Is it okay to be ten years off?

Meeker: Yes. [laughter]

Cuno: Painting becomes too easy for you? Was it something like that?

Ruscha: No. No, it’s not that. And it was a period of transition that I couldn’t understand. But I was asking myself, well, what am I doing here? And so it was in that odd stretch of time there where I just started doing things out of organic materials and staining and using natural dyes and animal things. Cream and all kinds of substances that I felt like, well, I’ll just make stained works. I did a number of things like that.

And I had a vision that maybe oil paint was so connected to the deep history of painting that maybe it’s the end of oil painting for me. And it turned out to be that way, that I introduced acrylics and started painting with acrylics and then that became a new thing for me. It was a stop on the highway, somehow.

Perchuk: Can you talk a little bit about the difference, about how it’s different to paint with acrylic versus painting with oil?

Ruscha: Well, I always liked to paint with oil in the sense that you could mix it together very easily. But you can also do that with acrylics. Neither one of them are, necessarily, mediums that were kissed by angels. It’s all a matter of what you do with them. But today, every so often, I’ll go back and do something with oil paint that I feel like I want to. But mainly, I use acrylics today.

Perchuk: But I mean, obviously, with oil, you’re thinning it down with turpentine and the acrylics tend to give you that very even coverage and—

Ruscha: You can do that, but you can also mix it. It depends on how you particularly use it. Acrylics, they dry instantly, and that’s kind of good sometimes. And oil paints sometimes takes months to dry. Really. Maybe a year or so to truly dry. And some people seem to think that it’s always living. It’s never dry.
Meeker: When you talk about this crisis or transformation that happened about 1970, are you talking about something that was primarily an aesthetic question you were dealing with? Or was there personal stuff going on as well that was making you think about your art in a different way?

Ruscha: I’ve always let the art question be the big question to me, and be the focus of my life. And so I’ve never really tampered with that too much, so I’ve never wanted to do anything, consequently, outside of that. I never thought about shifting gears and getting out of art and going into something else. My commitment to the whole subject doesn’t appear to have wavered over the years.

So, yeah, they’re aesthetic changes, and yet, sometimes you don’t want to feel like you don’t want to be too introspective or write your own history or be self-conscious about what you do. And so if you can keep your sense of humor about it and maintain a momentum, then the train keeps rolling.

Perchuk: Nineteen seventy was kind of the high point of conceptual art, probably. Did that have anything to do with what was going on with you?

Ruscha: Yes. I woke up to the notion that, suddenly, here comes a bunch of artists that say the physical object is not so important. Or the physical object doesn’t have room for discussion in this argument. And a lot of them carried it through that way. It was becoming very conceptual and very thought out and explained in the form of words rather than images. And so I just call that growing pains.

People are going to come along that do that, just like there are going to be people five or six years from now, maybe less, that feel like this art that we’re making today is passé. It doesn’t have a voice. It’s not addressing the question of living in this world. And so these things will always happen. I see the big question that it’s—it’s like a hamster wheel. The hamsters keep running, and yet, it’s full of stories and cycles. And so things get recycled and then they get forgotten. And, oddly enough, that’s the way the art world is. I think with the exception of a few people throughout history, a lot of artists have just been forgotten. Totally forgotten. That were once highly respected. You wouldn’t even know them today.

So you face that reality. And yet, the story keeps going on. But I think there was, maybe sometime—James, you would know more about this—that, let’s say, da Vinci. Well, no, he’s not a really good example, but maybe Michelangelo. There was, maybe a hundred years ago—or a hundred-year period—where he was almost forgotten and then revived again.

Cuno: [Johannes] Vermeer was forgotten for 200 years. Didn’t exist.
Ruscha: Yeah.

Perchuk: Well, then the artists who hated Raphael and—

Ruscha: Yeah. So, the question of these art movements. They thunder along. They come along in big ways. And they’ve got lots of proponents and lots of believers. And yet, they, somehow, become part of this constant motion where they become trivialized after a while. And you could say that’s a dark way to look at things, but it’s also a realistic way of looking at it because of the cycling of things. How did we get on that subject? [laughter]

Meeker: Well, I’m going to pursue that. Is it part of your approach to being an artist, trying to avoid being part of a movement or a school or something like that? Because then, once you become part of that, you’re, in many ways, stuck with it. Those are the artists, I think, that are forgotten, often times, are the ones that are really good examples of a particular school, not those artists that move beyond any particular school.

Ruscha: Being part of a movement has not hurt certain people. It’s not been so good for others. Being accepted by—it’s really hard to look at. It’s an ever-changing thing. And being identified with a certain art movement or a certain—oh, that’s the way you dance, huh? Okay. Well, how long are you going to keep dancing like that? It’s a question of what you are as an artist and as a person. But it’s also kind of a challenging one to an artist because we don’t know what’s going to happen.

And so the big open question mark out there is, actually, a vital one and a good one. So, since we don’t know what’s going to happen out there, I never lose my enthusiasm for the possibility of very ingenious developments happening in the world. There’s a lot of pessimistic people who just feel like everything’s been said. Everything’s been done in the art world. And I don’t know how they’re feeling that. I don’t really feel that way. I feel like there will always be really vital ways to relook at something, whether it’s painting or not. Who knows what that is? It could be in the world of photography. It could be carbon-fiber inventions of the future. I don’t know what they’re going to be, but somebody will come along and it’ll happen somehow.

Cuno: When did you have your first museum exhibition, retrospective, and did you find that to be a threatening thing as it was defining who Ed Ruscha was? Whereas when you showed in commercial galleries once a year, whatever, you could change your manner of art making, of materials. Once you’re in a museum and you’ve got an Ed Ruscha retrospective, that’s who Ed Ruscha is. Did it feel differently to you?
Ruscha: That could be a very touchy thing to have to realize that. I can’t say I don’t take it seriously because I do. Everything I do, I want to think is serious. But for some damned reason, that has not come to haunt me. And it could very easily haunt me because some people take that view. They feel like, oh, gosh. Once you’re established there in your own form of expression, that’s the end of that. They truly believe that. And I don’t believe that way. I could be nervous, but I’m not.

Perchuk: But for that first San Francisco show, first retrospective, you made that work I don’t want no retrospective.

Ruscha: Well, yeah. There’s, maybe, a natural kind of revolution towards, oh, don’t try to categorize me. Don’t try to define me and then leave me. Don’t leave me. That’s like the doorway to being left out in the cold. But I don’t find that was ever about to happen because somehow, I’ve been saved by a stance of stupidity or something. I don’t know. There’s always something I want to do beyond that and so I find myself—if I do anything like that in a retrospective aspect, I feel like I want to, oh, don’t stop it here. Let me add that one last little thing in there before we move on to the next step. So, it causes you to be self-examining, but also, my belief in the world and the temporary nature of things and all that makes me not worry too much about it.

Cuno: When was that show?

Perchuk: Eighty-two.

Cuno: Eighty-two. Wow.

Meeker: One more question about the seventies and one big development that happens in the early to mid-seventies is a very explicit politicization of many artists’ art. Maybe the most extreme example would be Judy Chicago’s feminist art, right? What did you think of this new, highly political art when it came along?

Ruscha: This happened in, like, the mid-seventies. Yeah. Women’s rights. Immediately, you understand where these people and their discomforts are coming from. You see that they feel like they’re being ignored or they’re not being taken seriously. And we understand that. It certainly has a place. And so I’m all for that to be socially concerned about any kind of injustice. And I see that everywhere. Most of us do. Forms of injustice.

So, you can count the ways and the times that people have made studies of exhibits that take place, let’s say, in the commercial art world or the galleries
or the museums and have done bean counting as to, well, how many women have been shown in these various shows? And how many men have been there? And then, of course, you have an imbalance. And people on this side over here want to see more of a balance. And yet you say, well, so, what should we do? Should we go out and find many more women to balance off this thing so that we have a numerical equivalent? I don’t think that’s really the answer.

And yet, at the same time, you have to admit that many women are out there making pretty damn important statements. And they’re every bit as important as men. They just happen to be in a minority. Most women do not take up art as a subject. Per capita, there are probably more women today than there were fifty years ago that would choose to be an artist, I think.

So, the women’s lib idea—well, that’s something else. But then women’s lib in the art world is also an issue you might be thinking about.

01-02:16:00
Meeker: Did you ever feel any compulsion or pressure to take up more explicit political themes in your work?

01-02:16:08
Ruscha: No, rarely does anything get me that I’d want to make any kind of political statement on. And I haven’t carried banners and I haven’t marched in marches, but I’m sympathetic with most of those people. I’m kind of a bleeding heart liberal that chooses not to get out there on the firing line. Actually, I don’t know how to do it. I don’t think I could make a, necessarily, political statement with my art.

I think one of the best political statements ever from an artist is from Andy Warhol who made that poster of the face of Richard Nixon. And what was it? He said, “Vote McGovern.” Or who was Nixon running against?

01-02:17:14
Perchuk: Kennedy, the first time.

01-02:17:15
Ruscha: Was it Kennedy?

01-02:17:15
Meeker: Well, that was in ’60.

01-02:17:17
Ruscha: Oh, that was in the sixties. Well, it might’ve been Kennedy but then—

01-02:17:20
Ruscha: McGovern! Yeah. I mean, that was a brilliant statement, to have a picture of Richard Nixon and then it says, “Vote McGovern.” [laughter] Because—here’s why.

Meeker: Yeah. That’s interesting.

Perchuk: I think we should give you a break. We’ve had you for almost three hours. Unless there’s something you want to close out on this first bit.

Meeker: We will get to stuff tomorrow that I think you’ve talked a lot less about on the record. More recent exhibitions. We want to talk about your work on your Catalogue Raisonne. We want to talk about establishing legacy. I want to hear more about your work with Steidl and Kerouac, On the Road book, which is fascinating to me. And about creating your archive and finding locations for it in order to make sure that it’s stored in good places. And I’m sure that Andrew and Jim both have agendas, too. If there’s anything else that you’d like to make sure that we talk about tomorrow—

Ruscha: Okay. Yeah. I’ve got these questions here, so I’ll—I don’t know where we left off, but that’s fine. I see this “Fagots—stay out,” which everybody knows about and remembers.

Meeker: It was in Life magazine.

Ruscha: It was in Life magazine, yeah. And it was misspelled like F-A-G-O-T-S. Yeah. And I think they, basically, meant that. And maybe there was an encroachment of homosexuals in that particular part of the West Hollywood. And so this is the hetero bar. And it seemed to stay that way, but I don’t think there was any—it’s definitely insensitive in today’s language. But back then, nah. You could say something like that. But Barney’s was always populated with men, guys, tough guys. Bekins Van and Storage was right next door and so you could go into that bar at any time during the day and you’d see about eight guys sitting on stools at the bar that had “Bekins” on their backs, on their white jumpsuits. Bekins.

Meeker: But it also becomes a location for artists to hang out, too, right?

Ruscha: Well, it always was, yeah. Barney’s was the end cycle of that trip up Monday night, mostly. But then artists would always: “Well, meet me at Barney’s.” There doesn’t appear to be a place today that even approximates Barney’s. I guess Barney’s was our Cedar Bar of—you know how the Cedar Bar was
always the New York place. And Barney’s was LA. Today, it might as well be a franchise. Doesn’t have much substance to it anymore. And I don’t think I would eat their chili, either. [laughter]

Meeker: But it’s also interesting because it sounds like you were able to move pretty easily between the Barney’s crowd and then going to dinner parties at Don Bachardy and Christopher Isherwood’s house.

Ruscha: Yeah. Well, okay. And so it didn’t matter. The issue of sexuality and all that was—some people might say, hell, art is a homosexual operation. I don’t know. You might say that. Actually, there’s a lot of alignment between the making of art and whatever’s opposite heterosexuality. But there were many homosexuals on the scene then that were never denigrated or anything. And it doesn’t seem to be an issue today in the art world that we know. Yeah. There’s lots of gay people in the art world.

Meeker: Was it just that art came first, maybe?

Ruscha: Well, maybe that’s it. Maybe that’s it. But, yes. The role of women and homosexuals in the scene. Women had a problem then, but at the same time, they were being listened to and not abused or denigrated. They got respect as a gender then, the way gay people do today. It’s just not truly an issue anymore, is it? Doesn’t really become part of anybody’s problems. And that’s good to see.

And probably this “Fagots Stay Out.” That’s an insensitive thing. It was funny then. I thought it was funny. But there was another angle of it that was, they mean what they say. Like, if you’re “a queer, stay out of here.” That’s really what they’re saying here. And it was kind of that way at Barney’s Beanery. And that also became an incident where I think the Major of West Hollywood marched in there one day and said, “That’s got to come down.” And they took the sign down. Yeah.

Meeker: Interesting. All right.
October 11, 2015
Interview #2: September 11, 2015

Meeker: Today is September 11, 2015. This is Martin Meeker and Andrew Perchuk interviewing Ed Ruscha for the Getty Trust. This is interview session number two and we are at Ed Ruscha’s studio library in Culver City. So, thank you again for joining us today, and thank you for all the time that you spent with us yesterday.

Do you have anything in the seventies that you wanted to get into?

Perchuk: I do. A few things.

Meeker: Why don’t we start there, before we get into that LACMA show from the earlier eighties?

Perchuk: The most dramatic thing about your late seventies paintings, I think, are extreme horizontal format. The twenty by eighty or the twenty-two by a hundred and fifty-nine. And I’m just wondering how those formats came about.

Ruscha: Most things happen from reactions off something else. In this case, you might say the marine format, throughout history, has been used by painters. And maybe it’s that I suffered some kind of fatigue from looking at this rectangular surface. And I wanted to stretch it out like a Panavistic format and get it to be extra wide. I just would think about our vision and how we’ve got two eyes set on a horizontal plane. And we look at things that way. It’s a way of injecting some kind of extra vision in a subject. And, in most cases, it’s a subject that involves a landscape or a quasi-landscape.

So, I started painting those pictures. And I seem to have two sizes, two formats. One was about eighty inches wide and then the other was, like, thirteen feet wide. Long, long and skinny. Multi-panavistic. And I look back on seeing kinescope in the movie theaters and those attempts to make a picture wider than it really is and have sound follow it. We’re able to see the infancy of such thinking in the movie business.

And then I guess I found myself working in a similar way with picture format. So having this extra wide surface that was not too high, that stretched like a rubber band, and worked out like that, seemed to be a way I was going. I did several paintings like that.

Perchuk: And one of the really interesting things is, before that, there’d been a lot of suggestion—at least to me—of landscape. Things that looked kind of like
sunsets and things like that. But in these, there really are landscapes. Do you see that as a change or do you think of the other ones as equally being landscapes?

02-00:04:00

Ruscha: I always got on this horizontal landscape when it comes to the use of techniques and tools that an artist might use. I almost approached it as though I were a robot, where I had this concept of, how do I get the paint on the canvas? I’ll use a side-to-side action with whatever tool I’m going to use. I’ve made etchings and meso-tints. Things like that that I’ve used with horizontal lines. And so the horizontal pays its respect to the concept of a landscape. Landscape would just creep into the thing. Has a lot to do with driving on the highway and paying my respect to what I see out there. Sky, land, water, whatever.

02-00:05:07

Perchuk: And that extended view when you’re driving, which is much broader than we normally, as pedestrians, see—

02-00:05:15

Ruscha: Yes.

02-00:05:19

Perchuk: Do you think that panavistic visions are all connected to this being the time when you were also making your movies?

02-00:05:29

Ruscha: The movies were done in a much different format. They were more conventional and academy-sized/shaped. The formats were similar to that. And maybe not even that wide. So, I wasn’t really thinking of a landscape when I made those movies. But it all creeps in there because vision is—you’ve got all these optical happenings and you’re infusing them, bringing them together in some pictorial format. And they all play off one another and in and out of my thinking and somehow make their way back into the picture.

02-00:06:22

Perchuk: Is there a big difference to you between these suggestions of a horizontal landscape, and then in late seventies when you start doing something like back of a Hollywood sign where you are in an actual, physical location? A recognizable place.

02-00:06:43

Ruscha: Yeah. Some of the landscape extreme format paintings I did are imaginary and some actually have a site in mind, such as what you say with the Hollywood sign. In the early seventies, I hiked up there. It was very easy to hike up there and go right up to these letters that were up there on the hills. Can’t do that today, I hear. And I hiked further up to Mount Lee and looked back down into the city and I got a very positive inspiration from it, seeing the city behind it.
And it gave me that idea to explore the back of the Hollywood sign instead of the front, and it has, also, somewhat of an imaginary—but at the same time, specific—locale in the Hollywood Hills.

02-00:07:57
Meeker: Right, because it looks like it’s on a ridgeline whereas it’s actually rather below the ridgeline.

02-00:08:02
Ruscha: If you did hike up there, you may not even be able to find that scene in your field of view. So, the imagination works its way in there. Or, shall I say, worms its way in there.

02-00:08:23
Meeker: Part of, I think, your imagination comes from this Route 66 trip from Oklahoma to California and back again a few times. That’s where you go through Amarillo and you get the Standard station. I guess you have a place out in Pioneertown which would be a bit off the original Route 66, but a similar desert landscape and everything.

In later years, when the old Route 66 starts to give way to the interstate, do you ever travel that? And what’d you think of the changing aesthetic experience of that?

02-00:09:04
Ruscha: I possibly fell asleep for ten years and then, suddenly, they’ve completed the interstate. I knew what was happening. I heard the story. And my experience on that roadway all the way to Chicago through Oklahoma City, certainly. I knew that highway, the original US 66.

Then I traveled the I-40 and, of course, 66 dovetails and goes back and wanders. And part of it’s closed; part of it’s open. I don’t know that you can travel the entire old US 66 all the way back. I don’t know. Probably not. There’s probably interruptions to it that would keep you from doing that. But it was alarming in one respect because I always want to hang onto things in my past. And when they’re gone, then what do you have to look forward to? A plastic future? And it looks like that’s where we’re at now.

Regardless, the land that it cuts through and the views are, in many ways, untouched. And not really raped over to that great of a degree. So, there’s still hope for America.

02-00:10:49
Meeker: Have you ever been inspired to go out to those landscapes and paint them in a more representational way?

02-00:10:59
Ruscha: No, no. the idea of setting up a canvas and looking out there, putting things here. No. I’ve never really had that. I had that when I first took painting class
and they wanted you to represent something. Look at something and then put it there on the canvas. Don’t wander too much from that.

But my activity as an artist is a studio-based exploration. So, I find that, like I say, imagination has a lot to do with the story I tell.

Meeker: Well, maybe we could use that segue to talk about your studio practice. I know that you’ve had several different studios. I think you started out with one, I guess, in Eagle Rock for a short period of time. And then you were at Western Avenue for almost two decades. Then you moved to Venice, and now you’re here. Where the studio practices—how shall I say this? Maybe we should talk about your first studio. And how did you get work done in that studio? Was it you alone or were you working with friends and accomplices in any way?

Ruscha: The actual first studio I had was a house that was really a one-room house that had a balcony that I slept in. And a friend of mine, Mason Williams, slept downstairs. But he was gone during the day because he was doing recordings and things like that. Played the guitar. Wrote music.

And I would use the room as a studio. It had a high ceiling and wooden floor. It was rustic by anybody’s standard. And then from there, I moved into a storefront. The storefront was my ideal studio situation. And there had been, in the 1920s, ’10s, 1920s, ’30s, they would build commercial property with—maybe one building with several long, skinny rooms. And they would be almost for mom and pop kind of enterprises where you have the front part of the building is an open area that you can make a business out of, a store out of, or whatever. Back side is a residence with a little kitchen and a bedroom and bathroom and all that. And so I aspired to live like that. That’s the way I wanted to live.

My first legitimate studio was that kind. And that was over in Glassell Park near Echo Park on Division Street. It’s a gang-infested area now.

Perchuk: You made some pieces with Division Street.

Ruscha: Yeah. I incorporated the address into a number of my works. I was there for, maybe, a year and a half or something. Whatever I wanted to move to was—well, I moved to Pasadena for about a month and a half. And I had a building on Colorado Boulevard. It’s a very sought-after area today. The building is now gone, but I was on the corner of—I think it was called De Lacey or something, and Colorado Boulevard.
It was a large building called, at one time, the Model Grocery Store. It was the premier, famous grocery store of Pasadena. Originated about 1880 or something. I had about 15,000 square feet of this building and it was $50 a month with one little condition, and that was that I had to move out immediately if anybody else rented the place. I had to give the space up for three days at New Years because it had a balcony and it overlooked Colorado Boulevard and the Rose Bowl Parade was right there, and they sold seats in the Rose Bowl. They made seats up there in what used to be my studio. So, I had to vacate then.

I found the place too oppressive and I couldn’t really get too much work done there. It was ghostly and it had a basement that was twice as big, and it was dark. It took me a week to sweep the place out. I was always wondering, what did I do this for? I just never really got into it.

And this was before Bruce Nauman and all those guys were—

Yeah. This was 1961, ’62. Yeah.

That was the seventies when all those guys were there.

I think so, yeah.

Sounds like bit off more than you could chew with that place.

Too much. Too much to swallow.

And so I moved out of there into Echo Park, Echo Park Avenue. What was it? Twenty-two fifteen, I think. Anyway, it was almost at the top of Echo Park Avenue. And it was a storefront with a little living condition in back. So, I had exactly what I wanted. Front studio, maybe 500 square feet or something, and a very small living quarters behind.

And then from there, I moved to Western Avenue.

So, in all of these places, it’s really you as a solo artist. You’re stretching your canvases. You’re gesso-ing them. You’re mixing your paints and doing everything.

Yes. Stretching my own canvas. Well, I got a temporary job for a while working for Sam Francis doing the same thing. I stretched his canvases. That
was a good experience. That was one of those, I'll work when I can to support myself. And that was good that that came along. So, I got to know him.

Perchuk: You made a painting for him once, didn’t you? Or a painting in the style of Sam Francis?

Ruscha: Yes. For a Swiss gallery that was doing a show regarding Sam Francis and artists who were inspired by him. Yeah.

Meeker: So, the Western Avenue. You’re there for nearly twenty years. What was it about the place that kept your interest and kept you going there for so long?

Ruscha: It was in a Spanish courtyard with little studios. And over the years, I had five or six different studios there. Towards the end, I had six or seven different studios, all connected together. But they were very small rooms. But it was fine because I loved living over in Hollywood. And at that time, I used the Hollywood sign as my weathervane. I could look up and see if it was going to be smoggy or not, if I could read that sign. And that suited me fine. There was a big tree down the middle, so it kind of gave a little bit of nature there, which was welcome.

Meeker: You said the rooms were small, but you were making some fairly sizable pieces. How were you accommodating your large work in small buildings?

Ruscha: I didn’t make big paintings like people make big paintings today. That’s for sure. But the works I had done in that period were not much bigger than six feet square.

Meeker: Just enough to get out the front door.

Ruscha: Basically. And I painted that LA County Museum on Fire painting there. That took, off and on, two or three years to complete. And I would cover it over and then return to it. But it was always hanging on that wall. And so I painted that picture there. And not many other larger paintings in that space that I can think of.

Perchuk: The LA County, where I looked at it really closely, you can see the pencil lines and that you were correcting or changing the perspective pretty frequently. Do you remember that?
Well, yeah. Those pencil lines don’t lie, do they? Yeah. I’m sure I did that. And I haven’t seen that picture for a while, so now that you mention it, I’ll give it a close examination.

It’s at the Hirshhorn? Is that right?

Hirshhorn, yeah.

Yeah.

Seems like there’s a lot of consternation that it’s not at LACMA [Los Angeles County Museum of Art]. [laughs]

There was a possibility that it could have gone there, but they didn’t feel like it was anything they wanted to get into at that time.

Maybe you’ll do a *Getty on Fire*. [laughs]

Don’t give me any ideas. [laughter]

Irving Blum always tells the story that Joe Hirshhorn bought a whole show, including that painting. Is that right?

Yeah. And I do believe that Hirshhorn went in to look at it because his daughter had seen it and she told her father about it. And so Joe went in and looked at it and Irving didn’t give him much of the time of day. And I’m sure that Irving knew who he was, but I think the price of the painting was around $1,500. And Joe was choking at that, I think. Finally, I forget what happened. But then he ended up buying the picture, which was quite surprising.

During these twenty years at the Western Avenue studio, I imagine you did, at some points in time, have people starting to work with you. I know that your brother’s been working with you, documenting your work through photography, and now doing some of the street documentation work as well. When did he come into the picture?

Well, he had jobs that he worked at, and he would help me out occasionally, maybe from the eighties on. And he started photographing my work. Susan Haller, up front here, who you met, she worked for me on Western Avenue,
and for several years. And then she left and went and worked for another company for twenty-five years. And five years ago, she happened to be available. I said, “Well, I’ve got some work you could help me with.”

So, some of these people have been in and around for a long time.

Meeker: When you were setting up your studio in Western, how do you go about that? When you’re moving in, do you have a vision of where things are going to go? Where you’re going to be painting? And where storage is going to be, for instance?

Ruscha: My studio ideas were very haphazard. You keep things in boxes until they find a place to be parked. And had some idea of shelving and drawers or what-have-you. And the idea of making order with my materials has always been a little on the rough side. I’ve never had precise living condition—living and working condition—with my art studios. They’ve just been ad hoc, and—“there’s an empty wall over there. I’ll start over there. I’ll use this box. Turn it upside-down.” Use it as a tabouret or a little supply station and work from there. So, it started primitive and it gets a little more refined, but there’s always that loose issue.

Perchuk: Did you live in the Western studio?

Ruscha: Yes, off and on for several years. I had an apartment in the back. It was a rough area for a while. And it was multi-ethnic origins. It was a Russian neighborhood with Russian restaurants. And then it sort of moved towards Cuban. A lot of Cuban people moved in. And now, in that area of the city, is all Korean. So, it’s evolved.

Perchuk: How far north up in Western were you?

Ruscha: It was at Santa Monica Boulevard.


Ruscha: Yeah.

Perchuk: So, I’ve heard people—and I don’t know if this is true—at least at one point of your life, you liked to work late into the night. Is that your working method or more daytime—
Ruscha: I can do that. And I mix it up with social things that would come up. But I didn’t have a specific work ethic where I exactly knew what the next day was going to be like. So, I would work, sometimes, at night. It was good to work at night because you’d have all this quietude. And that was good. During the day, it was a little more hectic and noisy on the street and all that. But every so often, I’ll work at night. It’s a good feeling.

I don’t have marathons where I work all night unless I’m really touched with something and need to do it. That rarely happens. So, I usually do it—I’m working during the day. Not too much at night, lately.

Meeker: You said that your brother, Paul, and Susan did some work for you over the years. Did you ever feel a desire to have a studio assistant come in and do some of the prep work? Along the lines of a Lichtenstein. Have them come in and do some painting after you’ve worked out what you wanted the painting to actually be.

Ruscha: That happened much later on. Yeah.

Meeker: So, maybe not until the time you were in Venice.

Ruscha: When I was in Venice, yes. That happened down in Venice, where I had a studio assistant that would be—my son helps me out. Usually one day a week nowadays. Where they would prepare canvases and all that. I do have that today because I don’t want to go through the ordeal of doing that other stuff.

Meeker: It’s a better use of your time just to focus on the painting, I would imagine.

Ruscha: Yeah.

Perchuk: I know sometimes, you use photographs—some of which you take, some of which you find—as inspiration. But can you talk about both that working method and then some of the other working methods you go—a lot of things begin as sketches in your notebooks, right? Or, I should say, I imagine they do. You tell me how it actually works.

Ruscha: Well, there are no rules written for how to approach using materials. And yes. Photography has definitely been a part of my working method, not always the same way. Sometimes it’s just a photograph by itself, or a photograph in a book, that I’ve made. And another time, it might be a guide to painting a picture of a thing that’s in the photograph. But rarely have I taken photographs
and manipulated the photographs and have them be part of the picture. But there’s always exceptions, so I can’t—there are too many approaches and it’s multiple possibilities that come out in the making of these pictures.

02-00:30:50
Perchuk: I know you’ve used a viewfinder camera. And when you look at that, it already, in a sense, creates a composition, a flattened thing on the viewfinder. Do you find that helpful in compositional process?

02-00:31:09
Ruscha: Haven’t done it for so long, but I did make a number of compositions, things that I used with a four by five camera, like bubbles and all kinds of things that I would use. Tabletop kinds of creations that I would use a four by five camera with, not wanting to transfer them to canvases or paintings or anything. They were just events unto themselves. But the camera and photography and photographs have always motivated me.

02-00:32:04
Perchuk: A lot of people say your pictures are always pictures of pictures and not pictures of the thing themselves. Do you think that’s accurate?

02-00:32:16
Ruscha: Well, I took a lot of pictures of gasoline stations. And a lot of people were amused that I either avoided or eliminated people in the photographs. So, the angle of human interest in my work is not too compelling and so you rarely see it. I don’t know whether that answers that question or not.

02-00:32:52
Perchuk: Well, I was just thinking, because also, we’re getting off into the later—but when you look at one of your mountain paintings, it looks more like the idea we have of a mountain, or the mountain in the Paramount thing, than it does that you went out and actually really wanted to capture a mountain vista.

02-00:33:19
Ruscha: Yes. In that respect, I compare myself to Albert Bierstadt where he would go out and set his canvas up in the great Yosemite Valley or wherever he might be, and actually paint that scene that he sees here. That was a necessary thing in his day and age. And in my day and age, I’ve seen examples of his work and examples of other people’s work that have been transferred to us via children’s books, ideas of raptures of nature, and things like that.

And so I knew that being on the scene to capture pictorial elements and transferring them to canvas was not a way that I felt like should represent me as an artist.

02-00:34:33
Meeker: Those mountain paintings, though. Where are you getting the mountains from?
Ruscha: Well, they’re from photographs of existing mountains. And they’ve been, in some cases, tampered with and embellished on and mirror imaged of. So, it’s like fodder. It’s like some kind of bringing up issues. Let’s see. Moby Dick. Herman Melville. What did he say about mountains? He said something like—oh, yeah. He called mountains egotistical. Mountains in general are egotistical. And I always loved that. It’s a perfect kind of thing to say about a mountain. And that they’re so stage set like. And they’re so immediately acceptable for their pictorial value. And easily encompassed when you look at it. I mean, well, that’s a mountain. And it softens you up. It puts you in this picture. And yet, it’s still a background for something else. Rarely have I done a picture of a mountain without something else in it. Namely, phrases and words.

Meeker: Mountains make you feel small.

Ruscha: They can do that. And they are so large that they’ve got their own power. And they can intimidate you, yes.

Meeker: What about the words?

Ruscha: Well, they just come out of anywhere. Nervous energy will make me want to capture something. And it recorded a little chiseling in stone, making it official. They make a thought of a word or multiple words official, to me. And it’s very settling for me to do something like that and then just leave it and forget it because the thought is out there and it’s another way to investigate the language.

Meeker: Being a historian, it’s a little hard to hear an explanation like that. I can understand it and believe it, but I also think each of those words has meaning, in a sense. Or even the phrases. There’s a story or there’s an inside joke behind it. There’s got to be something that you can tie it to in your life.

Ruscha: The selection of words are not autobiographical, necessarily. They are more things that I felt had particular power. And sometimes they individually have power, and then when you put that power together with another thing that’s got its own power, then you’ve got a bouillabaisse or something like that.

Perchuk: One of the things I notice happens in the early eighties in your work is that you move from single words—usually like the ribbons, liquid words—to phrases. Like, “brave men run in my family,” or “90 percent angel, 10 percent devil.” How did that switch come about? And what is it like different to work in semantic phrases rather than just isolated words?
Ruscha: I’d like to say they’re autobiographical. And in many ways, they are. But they’re simply selected to use as little soldiers in this story. And then they become characters in their own right. And some of the really simple ones, such as the word “the,” T-H-E. I’ve done that before. And I’ve selected that because it has a certain anonymity to it. You look at it for a while and then you really—if you look at it long enough, it really loses its meaning. And then you try to ask what that word really means and you’re lost on an island somewhere.

And so many words are like that, to me. They get used and abused and then re-used. And they’ve got their own storytelling qualities.

Perchuk: I really like the painting with “the” and then the mountain in the background. Was that the first, or one of the first, shaped canvases that—when did that happen?

Ruscha: Yeah. I think it was. No, I think the first one I did like that with a shaped canvas was called *Swollen Tune*. I always despised shaped canvases. Never liked that technique. Never liked that approach to making a picture. And yet, I’m sure that a lot of those people that have done that, shaped canvases, have done it because they’re frustrated with the rectangular format.

And when you examine the question of the rectangular format, then you really have to wonder. How did we get ourselves to be a society where you’ve got things that are always like this? It’s a rectangular format. Why isn’t it circular? Why isn’t it anamorphic or amorphic? And so I experimented with that and made a few paintings like that. And I felt like it was almost—it had an irony to it that possibly you were offering somebody a little bit wider view of something. A little bit more, instead of just a rigid, up and down. You bulged the canvas a little bit and it became like a fat picture.

Meeker: Have you ever thought about, why the rectangle?

Ruscha: It’s an examination of the naval. This rectangular. It’s easy to see how we finally ended up using it because it’s so easy to make things into right angles. Architecture’s that way. Some people are going beyond that. Frank Gehry. His buildings aren’t always right angles, are they? But the issue of that very classical, rectangular format—I’ve grown to accept it and take it for granted. And really take it so for granted that I forget that I’m even using it. So, I don’t think about, well, look at me. I’m making something on a rectangular format. No. I just do it and that’s it.
Meeker: Well, it also helps when you have a cinematic sense about things because then you’re actually not drawing from a false representation of nature. You’re drawing from film or how’d you say it? Panavinit? What was your word? Panavisionic?—version of life, right? Which, in fact, is rectangular.

Ruscha: Yeah. And then this rectangular format, well, it’s also like a container for elements. And containers end up being boxes. Everywhere you look. A book. Everything has got some sort of order to it and architectonic measurements. And the notion of that is a lively one. And it’s never looked at enough, as far as I’m concerned. Not too many people have investigated that. People have talked about it. “Why the rectangular format?” It’ll probably always be a question.

Meeker: There were a few pieces I actually just saw today of yours that weren’t strict rectangles. I went up to the Fred Weisman house [Frederick R. Weisman Art Foundation]. And there’s the screen, which is rectangle until it’s folded. And then, of course, there’s his jet, which is a really unique canvas. Did you do a lot of commissions like that? I imagine the jet was a commission. Was the screen a commission as well?

Ruscha: The screen was made in France, outside of Paris, by a group in New York that got—Roy Lichtenstein and myself made screens at this very old Asian technique of lacquered screen. And so we made these screens there. And I don’t think it went beyond that. I don’t think too many other artists made screens at that place. But it was just something new for me. And I thought, yeah. I’d be interested to do that.

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Perchuk: Staying with that, and thinking about work outside the studio, occasionally, you’ve done more installation. I’m thinking of the Chocolate Room or that big vanishing cream wall painting that you did for the ’76 Venice Biennale. Can you talk about those pieces, and working outside the studio that way?

Ruscha: At that time, many artists were making site-specific things. That’s in the early seventies. There were a lot of earthwork creations. [Robert] Smithson’s one. Michael Heizer. People like that were making—[Walter] De Maria. They were making site-specific things, thing that involved landscape. And then the biennale came about and I saw that as an opportunity to make a left turn and do something that was not actually made on a canvas that I stretched in my studio. So, it was something a little different. And it evolved. One thing gave off to another. And it just marches you down a different line.

So, the vanishing cream thing was done with Vaseline. It was applied to a wall. And I’m sorry today that I never photographed that. I think there’s only
one very bad photograph of that. I don’t know of anybody who ever shot a picture of it or anything. I didn’t. And left town, and then it was dismantled and discarded. So, I lost out there. I’m sorry I didn’t get a good picture of that.

The Chocolate Room was part of the Venice Biennale and the American Pavilion in 1970. It was given over to a group of people who had a print studio from the University of Wisconsin, I think it was. Henry Hopkins was the curator and he just said, “Why don’t you do something in this room?” and showed me the room. We had a silkscreen press set up in the pavilion. And I had worked with unconventional materials in London, just a month before. And so printing flat sheets of chocolate on paper. Then I began to run these things off and they began to remind me of shingles. And so the most logical thing to do would be to take the shingles and put them up on the walls. So, that’s how that came about.

Perchuk: Now, a lot of artists pulled out of that Venice Biennale as a protest to the Vietnam War.

Ruscha: That’s right.

Perchuk: I think I’ve seen a letter somewhere that says something like, “Your mother says that maybe you shouldn’t be here.”

Ruscha: Or, no. “Could you excuse my son from participating in this protest?” Or something like that. Yeah. It was some method of fun and games that we had at that time. And I didn’t feel like protesting. There were a lot of artists who did protest the Vietnam War. And I just felt like the opportunities here—why leave this place empty?

Meeker: Can we talk about that LACMA show from the early eighties, “Art in Los Angeles: seventeen artists in the sixties”? I know that you spoke a little bit about it with Paul Karlstrom when he talked to you back in the early eighties, so it’s been a couple decades. But looking back on it, would you consider it a successful first attempt at looking at the 1960s generation of artists in Los Angeles?

Ruscha: I’m trying to remember. Can you—

Meeker: I’d have to look up the seventeen artists. I do remember it was you. I think [Robert] Irwin. [Edward] Kienholz. [David] Hockney was in it, which I remember you objecting to because he wasn’t really a Los Angeles artist.
Ruscha: He was, by then. He was well established as an artist here.

Perchuk: You might remember it because Maurice Tuchman did it. And I think it was the first thing Stephanie Barron was his assistant on.

Ruscha: Okay. It’s called Seventeen Artists?

Perchuk: It was the show that they tried to look back at LA in the seventies.

Ruscha: Okay. I’m not even sure what works I contributed to that.

Meeker: Okay. I don’t have the program, so maybe we’ll just move on. [laughter]

Ruscha: Well, it was one of those shows.

Meeker: Right. I do remember you critiquing it because you, at that time, thought that John Altoon was somebody who had been overlooked, but a really central figure to that scene in the 1960s. And he was not included as one of the seventeen artists.

Ruscha: Ah. Oh. And he was not included in that?

Meeker: Correct.

Ruscha: Okay. Yeah. Well, he was part of the fiber of the scene of Los Angeles, so I don’t know why he wasn’t included. They may have had a different agenda in that exhibit. I can’t remember what it was all about.

Meeker: Well, let’s talk instead about the SFMOMA [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art] retrospective. I know we brought it up yesterday. But maybe you can give us your side of the account of how it came to be. I assume they would’ve approached you. And I imagine they had a vision for what they wanted to accomplish. How did you work your vision into what the museum wanted to do?

Ruscha: A woman named Anne Livet approached me about doing a show up there in San Francisco. She was a curator and in the art world in Fort Worth. And she was a friend of Henry Hopkins. And eventually, she moved to New York.
Meeker: Was Hopkins the museum director at that time?

Ruscha: Yes. If he wasn’t, he must’ve just recently left. Because then he went to Fort Worth to be the director there at the museum. But he was there at San Francisco, too. And she, more or less, curated this exhibit of my work that I felt like I should remove myself from the selection of things. But I ended up participating quite a bit. And I ended up helping on the design of the catalog. But it was a big effort and a big thing to do, to have that show, in the old San Francisco Museum on Van Ness Street.

I love that building. And it has some quirky little sides to it. If you were a musician and you wanted to be in the San Francisco Band, you’d have to go audition there in that building. They had audition studios. And then upstairs was the art museum. But it was a beautiful place and they had some fine exhibits there. So, that was a good move. I like the idea that my work made in Los Angeles would be shown in San Francisco.

Perchuk: In those days, retrospectives were much less common. And LA County wasn’t doing—they had done Kienholz and they gave Billy Al [Bengston] a show, but there weren’t many, unlike today where—

Ruscha: Every other exhibit’s a retrospective.

Meeker: Did it seem out of character? What did you think of it when they came to you? Was it, “oh, this is a great idea,” or “this is going to be a lot of work”—

Ruscha: No. I didn’t know—having apprehensions, sometimes, about my own work, I was wondering, “Gosh, can I come up to the mark on this?” Whatever they select and whatever I help them get, can I make this into an exhibit that I’m going to be happy with? And so I mulled it over for a while and didn’t want to lose the opportunity. It finally—they did it. And I was totally happy with the way it came out.

Meeker: I haven’t seen the catalog. Are there critical essays in it? Do you recall?

Ruscha: Let’s see. There’s a essay by Dave Hickey, and maybe one by Anne Livet.

Meeker: I imagine, for an artist, it must be a little weird having these critical essays written about your own work. Because I imagine there’s a lot in there that you would beg to differ with.
Observations get born and critics, writers, people that do this kind of work, quite often, uncover things that an artist never thinks of. And Dave Hickey brought me to the surface by writing something. He says, “Let’s see. He does the standard stations and he does the Norms La Cienega on Fire. Let’s see. He’s doing norms and standards.” And he’s posing it as though I possibly have—that’s some underlying message that I’m posing. And while it’s not true, it’s quite amusing. And maybe there’s some mysterious thread of truth behind it. Maybe that’s all I’m bringing to the table is norms and standards.

So, that’s interesting. I guess you just said it, in a sense of forcing a reckoning of, maybe, something that is going on psychologically that is not part of the agenda.

Yeah. I work independent. One day is different from the next. And so I don’t have an overall story to tell that things are, sometimes, abruptly smack into the next thing that’s being done. And those things don’t always jive or become part of a pretty picture.

You must’ve liked what—well, as you just said—what Dave had to say. Because he wrote a lot. He probably has written about you more than just about anybody else.

Oh, yeah. And he’s, to say the least, observant. Then he retreats to his own little lair and comes up with explosive things to say and we all love him for that. He’s able to do that and he does it.

There were a series of other exhibits and retrospectives that your work was included in. You were at the Pompidou in 1989. At the new Getty in—when did Getty open? Was it ’97?

Ninety-eight.

Ninety-eight. So, at the new Getty, an exhibition focused on your works on paper. So, not your paintings. The Walker Art Center, the Queen Sofia [Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia] in Madrid, on and on and on.

When a museum comes to you, what makes you notice? Is it the idea that they have in mind? Is it the kind of audience you think you might be able to speak to? What entices you when a cultural institution comes to you and wants to work with you?
Ruscha: First of all, I don’t have a mission in mind to reach any particular audience. Although I like people to see my work and I’d be wrong to say that I don’t care. Because it’s such a part of doing it that you do something and you want people to see it.

Museums are highly legitimate venues for the presentation of art. And they’re, in many ways, untouchable. And I’ve had very few negative experiences with museums at all. Museums provide what artists really need, and that is a care to put a stage up for ideas that you have. As harebrained as some of the things that I might be into, they eventually all come around to be part of the same picture. And so mostly, museums will present that picture. Sometimes it takes the participation of the artist. Sometimes not. Think of all the dead artists who have retrospectives. So, the presentation of art is a rolling thunder.

Perchuk: Do you have some favorites of the shows, whether it’s the Hayward [Gallery] show or the Walker show or some of those, where you think it really all came together?

Ruscha: The Hayward show was, I thought, really good. It was more recent than these others, the other focusing on things that were much older. But they were good for what they were, and the Hayward was something else because it opened up some new way to look at things myself. There’s something that makes me want to have an exhibit like that and then close my eyes for a while. Go off and forget it and continue on. What do I do next, kind of thing.

But the Hayward, I felt like they got some good works in. and they put it up in a way that was forceful and inventive. And Ralph Rugoff was the director and curator there. I had nothing but good experiences with him.

Perchuk: Do you remember him from when he was the LA Weekly critic?

Ruscha: Yes, I do. I knew him then. That was many years ago, maybe in the seventies. So, he is from LA, I believe, or at least California.

Meeker: You’ve always been involved in bookmaking. You worked as a printer’s assistant and then you created your own books beginning with the gasoline stations. And more recently, you did the On the Road with Steidl. That was also presented, I guess, at the Hammer Museum here in town. And then a bunch of retrospective books/catalogs. How do you approach that side of things? Are there particular concerns you have about translating your works to paper?
I’d seen artists’ books before, and artists making statements involving the comradeship of an author or another artist or something. And I’d aspired to do something like that. And so the On the Road book was a natural. I wanted to, somehow, address that. I had a little itching feeling that I wanted to do something with that.

I started thinking about it and I had to buy a license from the Viking people that I let expire after about five years, and then I had to renew it, to actually use his manuscript to make a presentation. So, then I started thinking that the way to do this book is to do it with photographs, black and white photographs.

So, limiting it to that focus made it much easier for me. And I was playing with these materials in my own slow fashion. I’d been working on for a couple of years. And then Gerhard Steidl came to my studio one day and saw this thing. And he said, “Hey, I’ll do this. I’ll do this. I’ll send you samples next week, and I’ll send you typesetting ideas.” I thought, “Oh man, yes, let’s do it.”

So, that book would not exist without the participation of Gerhard Steidl. And he offered to do this. It just motivated me and allowed me to think more about, how am I going to compose things, rather than, well, how am I going to get some samples of typography? How am I going to get paper samples? And what am I going to do? Think about binding ideas. Well, he just came back with all these things in three weeks’ time.

And then we put that in process. It’s a complex thing to make a book. And he made it happen. So, it was a good marriage there.

What do you think about the evolution of your books from these, I think, beautifully designed but very cheap—the original ones were about $1.50 or something—to these much more crafted things like the On the Road.

Yeah. I like the threadbare idea, and the idea of self-publishing. I’ve known many people who are writers or musicians or people like artists who would want to make a book of photographs. They say, “Well, how do you get a publisher?” And they would never make anything because they couldn’t find a publisher.

Well, I didn’t find that to be much of a problem, so I just decided to be my own publisher and consequences be damned. So, the whole process, the whole idea of making the book, designing it, having it printed, packaging it up, boxing them. Now you’ve got them in front of you. They’re stacked on the table. It’s all a cycle of fun, to me. So, it’s like a kid in the candy store. Somebody with an electric train set. It’s great fun to do things like that. And I was always motivated by that.
The eventual merchandising of them or—I gave half of them away and tried to sell some, and it’s a foolish venture. Not a money-making venture. But it was a lively one, a really lively venture. It’s all yours. You do it. And that’s it. That’s what makes it.

Perchuk: Why did you stop making books? I think *A Few Palm Trees* was the last of the first series. And then you didn’t—I may be wrong—but you didn’t go back to it for fifteen or twenty years or so.

Ruscha: I think, maybe, I cycled out of it. Or I felt that I liked the idea of making a book and then making another one and making a third and a fourth one that was beginning to tell its own story. You didn’t have to just rely on the first one or the second one by itself, but that these things, in order, began to make some sense. Almost like people paint pictures and they write poems and those poems, if you add them up and make pages out of them, you’ve got more than just what the individual pages are telling you. You’ve got the culmination of all these things and it’s making even a different picture. So, you make four or five books and you’ve got a different picture of the whole thing.

And I think I just eventually got busy in other things and felt like maybe that story should be put in the refrigerator. It should be looked back on. And so I didn’t really make anything for a while, but I’ve done a few books, now and then, since. And who knows what’s next?

Meeker: It might be worth collecting those all together into multi-volume. That would be really interesting to see, to see the cumulative effect, like you just said. The *Twenty-six Gas Stations* and the *Real Estate Opportunities*, etc. And I think you really would get an interesting picture of Los Angeles in a ten-year slot of time.

Ruscha: I had, in the beginning, a notion that I would craft these things so that they’d be part of a system. And that all the books—so I thought the second book has to be the same size as the first. And the third one has to be the same size. Well, that went on for a little while. And then I came to this one called *Thirty-four Parking Lots* and had the photographs. And I just felt like this is the time—and it’s talking to me—this is the time when these pictures have to be—they can’t be that size. They can’t be that small size. They have to be bigger because they asked to be bigger.

And so the book was bigger and I had four or five in succession here. And then you’ve got this big book. What’s going on here? And then I’ve dropped back to the small books later on. But that big book was important because those pictures of aerial photographs of parking lots had to be bigger. They just had to be bigger.
Perchuk: It’s also interesting how—now, everybody thinks—when they think of your books, they think of every building on the Sunset Strip. But at that time, Reyner Banham and all of these architects—it was the *Thirty-four Parking Lots* book that everybody was absolutely crazy about, right?

Ruscha: I guess. I don’t know. It was hard to get a temperature from people. I had some very funny reactions from people about those books. And especially after the *Gasoline Stations*. I’d given them to people from different walks of life. Somebody who worked in a gas station might be really amused by it whereas an intellectual person—intellectual people seemed to dislike what I was up to. They felt like it was either too sarcastic or—I don’t know what. There was something not genuine about it, which I would love to argue with them about. But they felt like maybe I was putting them on. That’s a feeling that I got from people. But so what? Art, throughout the ages, has been hallmarked by putting people on.

Perchuk: Well, Phil Leider seemed utterly confused when he tried to review the *Gas Station* book for *Artforum*—

Ruscha: Yeah. Well, he was an intellectual.

Meeker: What do you think of the transformation of vernacular architecture of Los Angeles?

Ruscha: The which?

Meeker: The everyday architecture of L.A. You’re doing these photographs in the 1960s. By the time you get to the late eighties and nineties, the dominant form is the mini-mall. And so many of them are god-awful. Hideous. And falling down and made of really bad materials.

You also have all of the business signage now that’s in every language under the sun. Are these transformations—are they interesting to you? Does it seem to make the city anew in a way that is appealing to you as it was in the 1960s?

Ruscha: I love this place and I hate this place. It’s given me so much, and yet, it’s also taken a lot away from me because I see those things, those old memory avenues, these streets that I’m so familiar with and I’m seeing them being erased now. I’m beginning to resent that the same way that I—in a way, I resented the way that people condemned all these properties from these very poor people in Chavez Ravine just to put up a Dodgers baseball stadium. But
that was a developer’s dream. It’s come to be accepted. But today, we’re right on the edge of approaching a new kind of Chavez Ravine with developers.

Over in Hollywood, I see entire blocks eradicated. They buy up all these sweet, little, old, single story homes and erase the neighborhood and then they put up sky malls, residential sky malls, without any thoughts about, well, how are these people going to be getting around? Each person in this apartment complex is going to be driving 1.3 automobiles. How are the roads going to be able to handle all of these people? Doesn’t seem to be a problem with development.

I was just up on Sunset Strip yesterday and I noticed what’s happening on the corner of La Cienega and Sunset. And I think there’s going to be a bridge going across these two enormous, bigger-than-aircraft-carrier buildings. Are people going to live in there? I guess so. But how are they going to get around? It’s going to be a madhouse, a madhouse.

I see this city. We did a study. Found out that 13,000 people a day come to live here. Where are they going to live? If they’re so happy to live here, how do they get around? Well, they get around by you waiting in lines in cars. It’s only going to get worse, but where is it going? And it’s distressing because I’ve got a certain respect for this city that I came to see years ago, and then seeing it gradually erode. You don’t see that in San Francisco, and really not in New York, either. There’s a lot of aggressive building there in almost any city, but here, it’s particularly alarming. We seem to be welcoming more and more people, trying to increase our tax rolls. But it’s got to be at the expense of sanity.

Meeker:

It’s interesting. You talked about one of the exciting things that you discovered when you first moved to Los Angeles. Or after the fact. But you looked back on it and said it was an exciting time. There were 1,000 people a day coming here in 1956. And now you say there’s 13,000 people a day coming here.

Cities do change, and they transform. Obviously, it’s happening in New York. It really is happening in San Francisco. There’s a lot of griping about it. That’s where I live. But it’s people coming to the place because the image of it, because of the opportunities they think are there. And it’s this cumulative snowball thing. It just gets bigger and bigger and bigger. I don’t know if I can turn this into a question, but—

Ruscha:

Well, I see the erosion of a once acceptable, placid kind of life. I drive to the desert a lot, and I used to go out on a highway called 60. Pomona Freeway. And they actually had scenery. They once had scenery out there where they had beautiful horse ranches with white picket fences and palm trees and
horses and beautiful ranches and meadows and valleys that you could see and
drive by. And now, I can’t even take that highway because it’s all gone. They
bulldozed it all. And they’ve got loading docks and conveyer belts and logistic
centers. They’ve just mechanized the entire region out there and killed it all.
It’s sad. But then even today, they’re trying to even make that bigger. And so
we’re soon to see skyscrapers out there. Where do we go? Who are our city
planners?

02-01:21:36
Perchuk: How do you feel about the connection of your work and architects? Because
early on, there’s just no question that Learning from Las Vegas comes a lot
from [Denise] Scott Brown and that course that she taught at UCLA and
looking at your work and meeting with you. And then later, Reyner Banham.
So, how do you feel about that? And what was the process? Did you work
directly with Denise Scott Brown when she was out here?

02-01:22:11
Ruscha: No, but they would come by and visit. This is the early sixties. And they
would come by. They were always with a man named Steven Eisenhower.
And he was part of their team, I guess. I don’t think he’s alive now, but they
are, I believe. I think they’re still alive. But I haven’t talked to them for a good
while. They were involved in some kind of pop culture architecture, a study of
the modern world as spoken to us by the feelings of Los Angeles and the
western part of the US. And where were they from? New Jersey or somewhere
like that.

02-01:22:58
Perchuk: Yeah.

02-01:22:58
Ruscha: Yeah. And so they saw a pop culture that came about through—and their ideas
of architecture also. The building is the sign. The sign of the building is the
building. And that sort of idea. They went on their way and they liked that Las
Vegas, as did Reyner Banham.

And he was more like a philosopher rather than—he didn’t design buildings.
But he was observing people who designed buildings at the same time as other
cultural things. He saw the desert here and he saw Los Angeles the way it
really should be seen. And he saw it as an Englishman, which it really—we
were talking about Robert Frank and how important it was for him to be Swiss
rather than American. And it takes somebody from a foreign country to come
here and see us like we are. That plays out in many ways. Foreigners have a
very vivid and vital way of looking at us. And they listen to us.

I went to England and went to some record stores back in the 1960s. And
man, they just knew everything about Elvis, Marilyn Monroe, Nat King Cole.
They knew. And they knew all of the obscure artists that are finally
recognized here in America, in England. All these young English people. We
didn’t know half of what they did, but they knew all of what our culture was about.

So, people from other areas—and I think Scott Brown and those people were east coast people and they looked towards Los Angeles for some kind of vitality or—they saw it as a new hope on the horizon. Some new way to look at things. And the acceleration of Los Angeles. That was a very colorful culture to them. And they started incorporating that into their work.

02-01:25:41
Perchuk: Were you happy with Banham using a bunch of your photographs in his famous LA book? Because it always seems strange to me to see your photographs divorced from the book you put them in.

02-01:25:58
Ruscha: Well, let’s see. I don’t know what he actually used of mine. I think, maybe, he used that image of the Hollywood sign.

02-01:26:08
Perchuk: He used some of the parking lot photographs.

02-01:26:09
Ruscha: Oh, did he? All right. Yeah. No, I had no gripe about that. And I respected him. I liked him a lot. He was a very astute person. And I didn’t feel like he was misusing my work.

02-01:26:33
Perchuk: A lot of artists didn’t like that book, though. They didn’t think that his pop art is LA—LA as giant work of pop art.

02-01:26:48
Ruscha: Well, so many people have looked at it that way, but pop art is—you might say it’s an American thing, but not necessarily a California thing. Everything that’s happened in America is popular culture.

02-01:27:14
Meeker: Maybe switch gears just a little bit. I’m interested in asking you about the transformation of the art market, particularly from the 1980s onward. I’m probably going to be doing a series of interviews around the Getty. And I know they don’t collect twentieth century paintings, but they do collect some of your photographs.

02-01:27:38

02-01:27:42
Perchuk: We collect artists’ papers. Things like that. But we don’t collect twentieth century paintings.
Ruscha: Paintings. Right, right.

Meeker: One of the things that happens when the Getty gets their huge bequest in the late seventies, early eighties, is, there’s this concern in the broader art world that there’s going to be a massive inflation on the cost of art work. And Getty doesn’t collect twentieth century, so they’re talking old masters, impressionists, et cetera. Because there’s going to be this new 800-pound gorilla in the room with the massive budget to be able to go off and buy artwork, and therefore, other museums are not going to be able to acquire it.

I don’t know if that played a role in the art inflation of the 1980s, but there were a lot of other factors as well. I mean, they increased in the stock market.

Perchuk: Japan.

Meeker: Japan. Right. So, there is an inflation of the art market in the 1980s. Did you notice this when it was happening? Did it impact you in any way?

Ruscha: Sure. It was maybe towards the late eighties and the beginning of the nineties was a sharp downturn in the art world, in almost every aspect of it. Not just who people buying art on the market, but it had to do with galleries and galleries were closing and couldn’t really make it because there was a general downturn. But it happened. And artists, I think across the board, suffered from it, myself included.

It didn’t bring a darkness to the scene because it was still lively thinking and inspired people making things constantly throughout this whole period. And I wouldn’t even call it that dark. It was just an economic downturn. And it sprung from Wall Street in general investments. The general economy. But the art world was alive and well throughout this whole thing.

Meeker: I suppose one of the good things about being a struggling artist like you were in the late fifties and throughout the sixties was that poor people, in many ways—I don’t know if there’s going to be some critique of this—when you’re struggling artist, you’re immune, in many ways, from the ups and downs of the larger economy. You’re still going to be struggling whether the economy’s good or not. What was it like then, come the eighties when you have the go, go—first part of the eighties—and then you have the recession in late eighties and early nineties. What was it like for you, as an artist, to no longer be isolated or insulated from broader economic transformations?
Ruscha: One of the perceptions at that time was that if the economy turns sour, people are still buying art. There might’ve been a bit of truth to that, but we also saw less people buying art. I don’t know why. But there was a thought that wealthy people are not going to be affected that much. It’s going to affect the middle class people and the poor people. That’s where an economy downturn is significant. That’s, maybe, an argument for an economics class.

The artists, like I say, we all—all the artists—felt that downturn and the sting of not too many people buying art. But there was still a great deal of trading of art, in big and small ways, in the auction market. That survived and thrived. And museums had their programs that were not particularly stifled by the downturn that I know of. And so the best thing about it is that there didn’t seem to be a lack of invention on the part of artists.

Perchuk: One thing that was really interesting to me is, you’re obviously right that—I really began my career in the eighties and so first thing I really remember is that big downturn. About one out of every three galleries in New York closed.

Ruscha: Is that right?

Perchuk: In the early nineties. And what’s so interesting to me is that this downturn, the recent recession we had, was so much worse for the average person, but it didn’t seem to have much of an impact on the art world at all unlike the eighties and nineties one which had a huge impact.

Ruscha: Yeah, I agree with you there. And that’s just from an observer’s standpoint. It’s true. This thing that happened before [Barack] Obama became president and we all knew there was a depression, but didn’t seem to affect the art world. And I don’t know why that is. What could it be? The hedge fund managers, maybe they were reaping profits, and maybe they were the people who were buying art so we didn’t experience this bubble popping.

Meeker: Do you pay much attention to who’s buying your art?

Ruscha: Oh. I’m made aware of it by the auction world and I hear things every so often that people will sell works. I like it when someone buys a work of mine and then doesn’t sell it. I think most artists would agree with me that that would be the ideal thing to happen, that you buy an art work because you like it. But art being a commodity, it’s part of the commodious world of commodities of the world. And it’s truly fair game when the idea is that you pay for something that is considered culturally established or culturally important and pay money for it and then see it resold or something, or deflate in value. And so I don’t
take it all too seriously. Money’s not going to bite you. It’s used for every purpose in the world, and the art world happens to be in that fabric of activity.

Perchuk: [Robert] Rauschenberg had that famous thing where he almost punched Robert Scull during that auction—and he said to me once, “I don’t mind if someone bought one of my works for $500 and is now selling it for $1,000,000, as long as they supported me as the career went along. So, they didn’t just buy the $500 work, but they also bought work when it was $10,000 or $15,000, as I was becoming more established.” Did you feel the same way?

Ruscha: I didn’t have an experience quite like Bob Rauschenberg. I remember when that happened. And I think his reaction was something like, “Well, what about that Cadillac you bought five years ago? What kind of shape is that thing in?” Somebody complained about there being a scratch on one of his paintings or something. And he always had an amusing take on just about anything.

But, yeah, the economic part of things. Sometimes, I would have reason to be insulted by somebody moving work of mine or flipping a work of mine—that’s happened before—and so that doesn’t make me so happy. But it’s all a part of some giant machine that allows me to keep being crazy.

Meeker: The Weisman house, it was interesting. The first painting you see when you walk in is that magnificent Clyfford Still. I don’t know. I like his stuff. And they have this story about how he was not eager to sell his paintings and he didn’t even say that he sold them. He exchanged them for money, or something like that. There was a splitting of hairs there. And it sounded like it took many years for the Weismans to build a relationship with Clyfford Still and his wife in order to be given the opportunity to get one of his paintings. And then it sounds like they ended up selling one of them and they were cut off. Like, no more.

Ruscha: Oh, I see. I see. Yeah. And everybody has their Clyfford Still stories. Like, I think someone might be allowed to visit his studio and he would leave one painting there in the studio and there would be a price on that painting. No discounts, no nothing. And you wouldn’t even get to meet Clyfford Still. He’d take his Lincoln Continental and take a drive [laughter] while someone was showing him this painting.

Meeker: One painting.

Ruscha: Yeah. So, I understand all that.
I want to get back to the eighties. We were talking about the city. And you started the City Lights paintings then, which was a different way of depicting the city in the mid-eighties. One thing I’ve heard people say, it’s both an aerial view of a city like Los Angeles or a city—but it also is kind of like looking at the night sky.

A little bit. And I like the night sky. And I had done some paintings of the Big Dipper and Little Dipper. And so they’re almost interchangeable pictorially. But I liked, also, looking at things at odd angles, like an oblique view of something. And so I think even those parking lot photographs, a lot of them were obliquely taken. Instead of straight down, they were, maybe, over at an angle. And that became important to me at the time.

They’re very much like mountains in that they don’t reflect particular avenues or streets necessarily, but they’re an idea of avenues and streets. And the sparkly nighttime.

And they also need words, right? To—

Generally, they do. Yeah. They need words. I don’t think I ever did one that didn’t have words. There might be some exception to that. Sometimes I think I’ve never done a certain thing but then it turns out I did. So, I don’t want to be caught in a fib here.

It’s interesting you say “need words.” Do your paintings need words?

Do they need them? Maybe they do. I think they do. That seems to be a central issue with me. One of the best things about it is that I’ve been doing it for so long that I actually forget why I’m doing it. So each one is down a different path. I feel I do need it because of the tangled imagery that supports linguistics and words and the way you play these things off of one another and then finally, make pictures out of them.

But then right around the same time, you started doing those censor strips, or—where it seems like there should be words, but they’re blocked out.

Yeah. There was a period of time when I did a number of paintings like that. They were dumb and blunt and they represented things that were threats and revenges and hostile thoughts brought in by—almost like ransom notes.
Perchuk: That’s what I was thinking. Because everybody just calls them censors, but I was—maybe ransom notes.

Ruscha: And so it’s intriguing, a ransom note. And usually how people will write them out or cut letters out of a magazine and paste them down. And they finally—ransom notes have been tracked back to suspects by the kind of glue they use and everything and so there’s a real life mystery to ransom notes. Somehow, that phenomenon came together with all these other things like censorship and “shut yourself up,” dumb blocks. Blocking yourself off, like this, with a rectangular image. It’s like a Alice in Wonderland pictorial wonderland. So, that’s where I was operating on.

Perchuk: And did you like the idea that you still got to lay it out like typography, but there are no words there?

Ruscha: Yes. And I would even count the letters in the words, and the size of the blocks would be relative to the length of the word. So, I liked that aspect, as though we were really trying to obliterate the word. And since it was seven letters, it had to have a bigger, wider strip than one that had three letters.

Meeker: You know what those strips also remind me of? They remind me of old, tabloid magazines from the fifties, like Confidential and On the Q.T., where you’ve got pictures of people doing bad things, and they always put the blocks over the eyes. It’s almost like that’s what you’re doing.

Ruscha: Yes. Today, we have digital obliteration, I guess. And new forms of technological airbrushing.

Meeker: So, you actually had words behind—specific words that were then blocked out. Or specific words that you had in mind for those paintings that were then erased, in a sense.

Ruscha: Well, I did a whole series of paintings using bleach. Bleach on fabric. So, if I used a magenta colored fabric, I would bleach out these blocks. So, I didn’t actually paint words on there and block them out. There were no words to begin with. But I imagine them being there. It’s like an imaginary voyage down an imaginary track of some kind.

Meeker: Should we talk a little bit about the legacy and the preserving of your work? Maybe start out by talking about the catalog raisonné? You’re one of the few
living artists who’s done one or is in the process of doing one. An art historian told me there’s, maybe, two or three others.

02-01:46:36
Perchuk: Well, it’s much more common now than it used to be, but it’s still relatively rare.

02-01:46:41
Ruscha: I think I would not have a catalog raisonné if I had not kept pretty good records of the works that I had done. I think if they had seen some sloppy recordkeeping, it would’ve been a hopeless case to try to track these things down. I don’t reflect back on these catalogues so much. I like the idea that it’s, somehow, made official. This is what I did. And that’s almost another aspect of being an artist. I’m also—gosh, I’m still alive. I’m still working. And what am I going to do tomorrow afternoon? What I do tomorrow afternoon is not down in one of these books yet. I feel that I was lucky to have this record of the history of my work.

02-01:48:03
Perchuk: And what about—you were saying that whatever you want to call it, an archival impulse—as someone who’s done some work in your archive, it’s amazing what good records you kept. Can you talk a little bit about that as part of your artistic practice?

02-01:48:22
Ruscha: As I would make things and work on things, I just had a ledger that I would write in. And I would write the titles. It’s part of the obsession cycle of being an artist and doing things and then trying, at the same time, to remember what you did. Because by the time you’ve done 150 things, it’s hard to go back and remember all those things. So, that was part of the process.

02-01:49:03
Meeker: How did you learn the archival practice?

02-01:49:12
Ruscha: Practice?

02-01:49:12
Meeker: Yeah. I mean, in essence, you’re an archivist as well. The recordkeeping and the preservation of the—

02-01:49:19
Ruscha: I’ve kept things, things that are inspiring to me. And almost all of it is. It's not like I don’t throw things out. I’m constantly throwing things out or giving them away. But recordkeeping, I guess, is a way of keeping a clean slate. I think, maybe, my dad passed that on to me. He was an insurance auditor.

02-01:50:00
Meeker: The catalog. How did it come about? Were you approached or was this something that you started of your own accord?
Ruscha: It might’ve come about through Gagosian Gallery. And people there knowing that I had kept all these good records. I think it started there. But the motivation behind it, I don’t know. Then they finally came back to me and said, “Why don’t we do this?” And so I said, “Okay. As long as I don’t have to get personally involved in it. If you keep track of things and find out the whereabouts—whatever you need to know about these works that I’ve done many years ago, then that’s fine.”

Meeker: When I went on this tour of the Weisman Gallery today, there was a painting. I think it was in the living room, right next to the [Willem] De Kooning. And I can’t remember the name of the artist, but it was—


Meeker: Not the Rothko. That was on the other side.

Ruscha: Or not Hans Hofmann—

Meeker: Yes, that one. Right. And so the idea was that he was commenting on the guy that wrote what became the German national anthem and then was adopted by the Nazis. And the docent said—in passing, but I thought it was kind of interesting—it was, like, “Well, you have to worry about your reputation even after your death.” Is the catalogue a way to try to influence the way that people work with and interpret your work when you’re no longer here?

Ruscha: Oh, I guess people will draw conclusions. But they will see things as they chronologically happen. And for me, that’s fine. It’s doing its job. There’s no room for misinterpretation. And if everything’s in that book, gosh, that’s everything I’ve done. It’s hard to believe. Frightening but true.

Perchuk: Occasionally—talking about legacy and history—you revisit your own history in your work. And I was thinking about the Course of Empire and the relationship to the Blue Collar paintings. One of the recent shows at Gagosian, some of the things, like the torn western reappeared. Can you talk about engaging with your own history that way?

Ruscha: I don’t systematically do that, but every so often, there’s a urge to go back and do something—. There might be some spark or urge to borrow something that I’ve done many years before. Usually not. I’m off on a different path. But the Course of Empire words, of course that comes from the Thomas Cole paintings that are in a New York historical society that I was greatly
impressed with. And I see that this man, he had this idea that now, in 150, 75 years later, is seeing again.

And so those paintings came about by, first of all, having these little studies of architectural imaginings. And then a few years later, going back and elaborating on those imaginings. Kind of like, well, here’s the update on this. And I see myself in the city. I see my life in the world as being a traveler here. And I go back and I see things progress, and I see not necessarily a beautiful picture of the world. But a more realistic picture of the world in many ways, like Thomas Cole, maybe, felt about his *Empire* series.

Perchuk: Well, that’s one thing that seems to be a duality in your work between decay in one sense and then mystery. Elevated things like the shaft of light through the windows or the mountains in another.

Ruscha: Well, those are universal ideas. And in many ways, I’m investigating universal ideas. One is that simple shaft of light that comes in the window and slams onto the floor. Pictorially, there’s nothing greater than a shaft of light coming in a window and hitting the floor. And so I’ve got to paint a picture of that. And also, the passage of time and, as you say, the decay of something that we have taken for granted and see turn into detritus or turn into slums, turn into what-have-you. The change of time is a pathway to making these paintings.

Perchuk: Do you see any mystery, the sublime, or religious impulse, in any of these works like the shaft of light or some of the skies and other things?

Ruscha: Well, I appreciate them for what I think they might represent. It might be reduced just to the simple idea of a bluntness and simplicity. And there you go with a shaft of light coming in from the ceiling or hitting on the floor. See that shaft of light as such a simple idea that it almost needs to be recorded. And so I felt like this has got to be done.

And then I could track it back to going to mass as a child and seeing the light come in the church. And suddenly—or not so suddenly; fifty years later—finding myself painting a picture of that very thing. So, it’s historical, but it’s hard to figure out.

Meeker: You’d mentioned Gagosian a few minutes ago. When did you leave [Leo] Castelli?

Ruscha: Oh, that was, maybe, in the late nineties, when Leo Castelli died. And the holdings of his gallery were fought over. And then temporarily closed. And
then I had—even when I was associated with Leo’s gallery—I had an exhibit
with Gagosian of historical paintings that I did from back in the sixties. And
so I knew Larry early on, from the 1960s actually. He lived out here. He was
from Los Angeles. And so it was a natural thing. And then I began having
exhibits with him. It’s been okay.

Meeker: You could’ve, at that point, gone with any gallery, probably, on the planet.

Ruscha: I don’t know why I would want to because I was at a point in my life not
feeling like I wanted to be manipulative or try to get the best deal of all
because I was being treated fairly in the marketplace of the art world by Larry
Gagosian, and also Leo Castelli. All these people were, I felt—every artist has
had their horror stories working with dealers. And I haven’t had so many bad
experiences, so I feel fortunate. It’s worked out.

Meeker: Gagosian’s original base in Los Angeles played a role, then?

Ruscha: He had a poster gallery in Westwood. And that’s how he started out. And then
went on from there. He had bigger and better designed ideas. So, then he
moved to New York and also had a gallery here in Los Angeles. And we’ve
seen that gallery grow to several galleries in the world. Yeah.

Meeker: How do you decide what’s going to be shown where?

Ruscha: Sometimes it starts with—we have a spot in next December. You want to do
something? And then it’s so open-ended and so ill-defined that you just feel
like saying, “Yes. Sure. I’d like to do that. I’d like to have an exhibit.” And
then it starts with that. Then as time passes, your focus is, maybe, a little more
rational and a little more controlled and thought out and then finally, you
realize what you’re doing and you’ve got to stay with it until that final
December date comes up. It can be terrifying. And I’ve wondered what it
would be like to have no deadlines or commitments. It would be a different
world.

Meeker: Would you ever get anything done? [laughs] I know from my own writing that
I have to have deadlines and commitments.

So, in most of these gallery showings, usually there’ll be a place or a wall or a
room that will be made available to you and then you’ll make the art to go into
that? As opposed to having pieces ready to go.
Ruscha: Today, they’re making galleries that are, ultimately, shiftable and changeable. They’ll take a wall down and move it three inches over to accommodate something and make a passageway. Or block off a wall. They do so many things today that, maybe, it was a little economically unfeasible to do fifty years ago with a gallery. Because the world was much slower then and it was much more restrained years ago. A simple gallery, generally, had its wall space all plotted out and it stayed that way. And the artists just made art that fit on those walls. Now, they do anything. They’ll cut a hole in the roof for you, which they do.

Meeker: Do you start a new series with an idea of where it’s going to go? Or do you start a new series just with the idea itself?

Ruscha: I never know, really, when a particular series starts. I might do something and think, well, this is, maybe, a one-off thing. And then maybe it’s not a one-off thing. It becomes a beginning of some idea. So, it’s mystifying and not so mystifying at the same time.

Meeker: You know the mattress paintings that are going to where those—Berlin, right?

Ruscha: Yeah.

Meeker: Was that exhibit established before you had the idea of what you wanted to accomplish for it?

Ruscha: No, I think that happened about the same time. I started doing these things and then the thought of doing a gallery show, I was offered that, and so I thought, well, maybe this possibly could be it for the—and then I worked towards that. So, that’s become the forward motion on it.

Meeker: But you’re right. Those bed paintings, I think, in some ways, grow out of the large tires that are decomposing and decaying.

Ruscha: Yes. So, I’m never really finished with anything. Individual works, yes. I’m finished on. But the little thread that runs through everything is going to pop up here and there. It’s all irregular.

Meeker: How has the emergence of the internet and new social media impacted you as an artist?
Well, the world of the internet and the web’s web and the worldwide this and that has left me completely in the dust. It’s been going on so long that it’s too late for me to get on it. I can’t pick up on it. I barely have a cell phone. And I’m not adept at—I don’t do social—I wonder why people do social—what do they call it?

Meeker: Media.

Ruscha: Media, social media. My assistant, they do that. They use emails and things like that, but I don’t personally do that. I couldn’t do it. I’ve never used a mouse in my life. I wouldn’t know what to do with it. And I don’t need to do it because I’m into pencils and paper. It’s too much of a gap, too much of a removal from this world that I’ve been involved in, to get away from it.

Well, David Hockney. He very smoothly went into the world of making with—

Perchuk: iPad.

Ruscha: iPad tablets. Making drawings with things like that. And they begin to have their own style. And he’s right up to speed. Other artists are up to speed with it, but no. I’m not. And I better be proud of it. [laughter]

Perchuk: Well, talking about the world that you’re in, obviously, you have a background in commercial art, but you kept the techniques of it largely out of your paintings. I think, really, until you started the Silhouette paintings, right? And then you’re starting to use the airbrush.


Perchuk: And those Silhouette paintings, they have a really, in my mind, iconic images. The coyote in the wilderness. The ghost ship. The suburban house. Is that something to do with a collective memory or anything like that?

Ruscha: Collective memory. Pretty good. Pretty good. Yeah. That’s a good way to describe it because it’s a built-up familiarity with images in the world as they’re presented to us, but there’ve been so many of those images that they begin to overlap. And then finally, when you get fifty of those things together,
they make up a silhouette. They make up something dark and silhouette like and smoky. So, that’s the road I took with that.

02-02:09:49
Meeker: We’ve talked about the catalog and I know that the Getty Research Institute has acquired a lot of your photographs as well as your street [photographs] archive. The [Harry] Ransom Center at UT Austin [University of Texas] has acquired a portion of your personal archive as well?

02-02:10:08
Ruscha: Yes, but mostly related to the books that I’ve done.

02-02:10:12
Meeker: Okay. What are you looking for in an institution when you’re thinking about the rest of your archive? What is it that you want to see an institution do with your collected materials?

02-02:10:37
Ruscha: There’s a certain feeling of relief knowing that the baggage that I’ve kept probably not so well over many years is actually respected and kept by an institution. The Getty is a great place on all levels. And so the idea that these street shoots and these avenues that I’ve done go there is quite an experience.

And at the same item, I know that they’re not dead storage because they can have possibilities, which I see beginning to happen. And so, in a sense, they’re unfinished works. And works in progress that have really interesting possibilities. So, I feel like an institution that has that degree of care and attention to all the details of an archive is the best thing to experience.

02-02:12:06
Meeker: When you say “possibilities,” are you talking about what the institution might do with it or what other artists might do with it?

02-02:12:12
Ruscha: Or other artists. People wanting to see what this material is like and what it presents. The ideas behind it. And also about possibly the dissemination, the exhibiting of the material, and the various methods behind that, and the ideas that take place there. It’s got steam behind it. It’s got very interesting possibilities.

02-02:12:51
Meeker: I think of the street photography. There’s a way in which those, in the hands of somebody a lot more technically adept than myself, could animate and compare and do layovers and all this kind of stuff. Is that next generation of work based on your raw materials something that you would—not endorse out of hand, but that you would be comfortable having happen?

02-02:13:19
Ruscha: Well, let me put it this way. The work that I have done that is now in that archive is not finished. And I continue to explore that same technique of going
out on streets and recording the streets. So, for that reason, it’s a living organism and there’s no cutoff date on it. So, it’s got very vivid possibilities.

Meeker: Is it designed to be never finished?

Ruscha: [laughs] Not designed that way, but it might be that way. [laughter]

Perchuk: Is there a relationship between the Metro Plot paintings and the streets project? Is there something about the grid of the city that keeps you—

Ruscha: Experiencing life and living in a city and moving around in it, and then the pictorial possibilities of the same thing. Like, the idea that there’s a street and most blocks are—they’re like this. Again. They’re rectangular or they’re sharp angles or they’re this or they’re that. There are so many ways to look at it. And I’ve never—I exhausted my interest in that, in viewing the thought of that. Even from an archeological standpoint where I might imagine that these metro plots would be, somehow—almost like after the streets are there but all the buildings are gone. And this could be some kind of vision into the future. The science fiction aspect of it and the possibility that it could represent that kind of picture is, ultimately, interesting.

Meeker: Do you see that as optimistic or dystopian?

Ruscha: Oh, yeah. Well, it’s both. It’s optimistic, pessimistic. It’s just a certain vision into the world of possibilities. And it’s not proclaiming anything. It’s not waving any kind of flag of any nation. It’s exploring ideas and living in that world of possibilities.

Perchuk: Going back and shooting the same streets over the years. Does that go all the way back to things that you thought about when you wrote the Information Man, that it’s just nice to know those things? Or is there more of an urban or other purpose to it?

Ruscha: It goes back to when I was, maybe, twelve years old and I had a newspaper route in Oklahoma City. And it involved, maybe, a mile and a half or so of streets, houses on both side of that street. My anticipation then was that I wanted to—I thought I wanted to do this, but I never got around to it. I wanted to make a little model of my paper route with all the houses on the street. Never got around to it. But I had that as a future vision. And I was going to make each house exactly like the way it looked, and moved it along several hundred houses. And it never came to be, but that’s always stayed in my mind.
And exploring a city grid and then making something of it, here I find I’m doing it seventy years later.

Meeker: When did you move into this studio here, the Culver City studio?

Ruscha: I moved here about five years ago.

Meeker: So, you’re moving into a grand new space at about the age of seventy.

Ruscha: It’s not a grander space. Actually had a bigger space. I had a thirty foot ceiling, which is the height of the painting at the Getty. And it was so tight that I couldn’t really paint that picture straight up and down. I had to turn it on its side and paint it on its side.

Perchuk: Did you use a forklift? I mean, a cherry picker to—

Ruscha: Yes. And different techniques.

Meeker: So, is this place downsizing?

Ruscha: No, it’s the same amount of square footage. It’s about 9,000 square feet. So, it’s the same square footage as that other place I had, but this is better laid out. And this is all on one floor. The other one had a balcony—two balconies.

Meeker: Why did you pick up—move camp?

Ruscha: I had a backyard that I used as an outdoor studio, with a canopy over it. And it was essential to what I was doing to work outside. And it didn’t belong to the owner of the building, so the city—it was actually on city property. And the city decided to build a parking lot on this area. And gave me notice. And I could’ve stayed there, but I didn’t want to give up the backyard. So, I moved out five years ago. So, five years have gone by and there’s still no parking lot there. [laughter] Shows you about bureaucracy.

Meeker: This might actually be the last question I have: speaking of parking lots and outdoor spaces, I’ve got to tell you. I was really taken by the citrus grove that you planted back in the back forty of your studio here. Because citrus groves may be the most iconic part of Los Angeles. That’s what was first planted here. That was what was first cultivated here. That was what the symbol was that drew people out here. These old citrus crates with the pictures of the
groves and the beautiful oranges going back east on the railroad. Why in the world would you plant a citrus grove? Is it just for the fruit?

Ruscha: Oh, sure.

Meeker: Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar?

Ruscha: Luckily, the way this property was that I couldn’t use all of that outdoor space back there. I had no use for all of the outdoor space. And it was all asphalt, all the way to the back fence. And so I thought, I’m just going to cut this in half and plant some trees here. And just the fun of going, buying all these trees and having them planted and hoping for their survival.

Now, there’s looming danger on the horizon with these insects that come in and bring greening disease. And if it ever gets on your tree, your tree’s dead. That’s threatening the citrus industry. It’s pretty rampant in Florida. The citrus trees in Florida are suffering now. And we have that insect out here, but it’s been either held under control or it just hasn’t traveled much. But there’s really nothing much you can do about keeping it away or anything, so I’m—

Meeker: Do you harvest the fruit?

Ruscha: Oh, yeah. Sure. And it’s all cyclical. It’ll probably be ready in about three months or something. Four months. Avocados will be ready in January.

Meeker: It’s such a pastoral hope. But down here in the middle of Culver City on the wash. [laughter]

Perchuk: When you read Thomas Mann, people came here in the thirties. They say that their first memory of Los Angeles was getting out at Union Station and the smell of the citrus groves. Was that still true in the fifties or had that gone by already?

Ruscha: Beginning to dwindle in the fifties, I think. Where vast orange groves, as an industry, the citrus industry has diminished greatly here from tract housing and that sort of thing. So, tract houses have replaced, basically, all of the citrus industry out here. There’s not much left.

And then further east, like out by Redlands or San Bernardino, there’s still a little bit of that out there, but most of that has succumbed to urban sprawl. And so you might ask yourself—and I do—where are you going to get citrus? Where is it going to be grown? Where do you get citrus, like when you go to
Europe? I guess it comes from Israel. Israel is a big citrus grower. And maybe Spain. And then Mexico here. We get a lot of produce from Mexico.

But if you read anything, central valley in California produces great amounts of other kinds of produce. Not so much citrus, but everything else.

02-02:25:08  Perchuk: I was just thinking. You’ve talked about your artistic project as a reclamation project. I was wondering if bringing citrus back to LA is part of that reclamation.

02-02:25:24  Ruscha: Well, I like the irony of it. It’s interesting to think that it could be done.

02-02:25:33  Meeker: Maybe that’s what will rise up when the streets no longer have buildings on them. [laughter] Do you have any more questions?

02-02:25:44  Perchuk: I don’t think anything we have to cover.

02-02:25:46  Meeker: Right. We could go on for hours more, but I think we’ll give Ed a pass here. Is there anything that we didn’t cover you feel like we’ve just skirted over that you feel should be committed to this record?

02-02:26:06  Ruscha: No, I don’t know. Oh, here’s something. This is a book that I found at a German bookstore in the mid-sixties or something. And it was printed in Germany in 1930-something. And it was the Nazi thing. It’s all about Nazis. And I was fishing through this book here and I bought it because it had this thing here. And this was—see this fold-out here? This gave me the idea to make that Sunset Strip book. Isn’t that kind of startling? I just came to this and I thought, my god. Man. Look at that. And so the accordion fold idea just came to me about how you could get from here to there with a camera. And I’ve studied it before and never really come up with a solid explanation of it. I don’t know what kind of camera was used for this thing.

But I did my Sunset Strip book about the same time that I found this thing. I thought, god. Look at this thing. Yeah.

02-02:27:52  Meeker: So, it’s unclear if it’s several photographs pasted together or—

02-02:27:56  Ruscha: That’s another thing, see. I don’t see any—well, let’s see. There looks like there’s a connection here, which is—maybe they couldn’t get the entire thing to be printed. And it’s adhesive back across there. But it’s one of those rallies, one of those Nazi rallies that are kind of scary. But, yeah.
Perchuk: One of the things I always—those first editions of the Sunset Strip where you glued the little extra piece at the end.

Ruscha: Yeah. And I think that happened because of just the—the mathematics of it created that. I think there was something about it that I had that extra little slice that needed to be—I’m going to have to figure that out. [laughter] There was an extra slice there that I needed to cover. And I also liked the way the end of the Sunset Strip curved like this and there was that one little building there was the end of it. It was almost like a coda. So, that’s what gave birth to that.

[End of Interview]