



▼ 1984: Gallery Label - Current

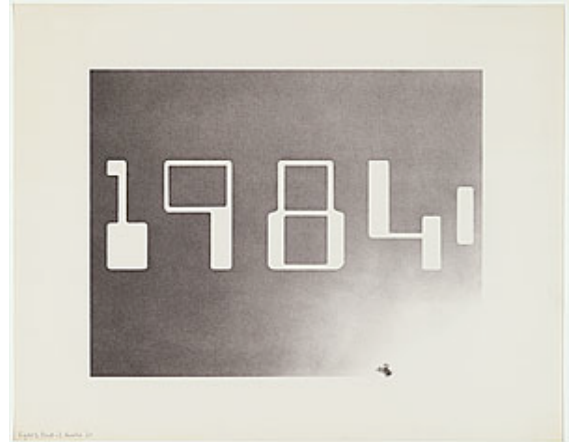
Ed Ruscha (pronounced *Rew-shay*) has always been fascinated with language. Inspired by Jasper Johns's austere numerals and targets, he set out to transform text and cultural icons into high art. In 1967, he began making his "paper ribbon" drawings, which characteristically feature isolated words as objects set in three-dimensional space. He portrayed his subjects in a precisely rendered trompe l'oeil manner, relying on various drawing mediums, cotton swabs, and the palm of his hand to draw the subtle tonal gradations needed to establish the highly illusionistic effects he desired. Ruscha maintained that he chose words for their appearance, sound, or spelling rather than for their meanings, or referential associations. In 1984, however, the unmistakable reference to George Orwell's futuristic novel stands at odds with the graceful line and elegant form of the ribbon. (Size: 11 1/2 x 29 1/8 in. (29.21 x 73.98 cm) Medium: Pastel (red, blue) and gunpowder drawn on paper ) (ArtsConnectEd, 1984, Edward Ruscha, 1970, 71.42)

Ed Ruscha's 1984 intrigues me so I hope it returns to the galleries before too long. Part of what puzzles me is the representation of a loaded "word," 1984. Synonymous with the dangers of totalitarianism and the manipulation of language to invert meaning and control thought, 1984 seems an odd choice for Ruscha. Yet his goal seems to be making us look at cliched, over-used, or taken-for-granted words "to focus on the shape and meaning of verbal language, made strange and significant by being rendered as visual language" (Fifty Years, p. 29). "His decision to focus much of his creative output on an exploration of the appearance of words and phrases is fundamentally related to their 'existential' nature: their existence beyond meaning and function" (Fifty Years, p. 46).

In the 1960's he was casting about for something to paint, something abstract that's not abstract expressionism; a subject that's not about other art like pop art; an object that's not a symbol. "One could say he liberates the word from its semantic and syntactical function..." and as he noted, "if you look at a word long enough, it begins to lose its meaning" (Fifty Years, p. 46). He explained that "words have abstract shapes, they live in a world of no size." Thus a word fixed or floating on a flat field has no apparent scale. It becomes not a "functional sign" but "a painted motif" (Fifty Years, p. 47).

Ruscha had already explored other ways of depicting 1984. Below are two 1967 renditions. One, also gunpowder on paper, creates the illusion of wide strips of paper folded to create the number viewed from a low angle, giving the number a floating motion. The other, a lithograph, features a 'checkbook' font, reminiscent of early business computer fonts, with a trompe l'oeil fly.

Edward Ruscha, 1984, U.S., 1970, 71.42



Ruscha's ribbon and folded paper versions of 1984 seem to divorce the Orwellian connotations from the number. The choice of gunpowder in creating the image works to explode our word associations and to remind us of words' ephemerality as they become archaic or change meaning over time. The checkbook font 1984 seems quite Orwellian to me, however, in today's computerized world with its so-called privacy terms, cookies, GPS systems, and electronic surveillance. (The witty incongruity of the fly --the fly in the ointment? --now brings to mind dreaded computer viruses but also the possibility of interference with Orwellian thought and behavior control.

Of course, in 1969, Ruscha was not grappling with a world so saturated with all forms of electronic communication and data collection. In a 2009 interview with Kristin McKenna, he said, "Computers irritate me and I don't have one.... I don't have an iPhone, and I rarely use a cell phone or watch TV. I don't know why, but I'm suspicious of where all this new technology is headed..." (*Fifty Years*, p. 59).

Chronology ( 1956 through MIA Exhibit in 1972) excerpted from <http://www.edruscha.com/site/chronology.cfm> and <http://www.artsconnected.org>, featuring 6 more works in the MIA collection)

1956 - 1960

After graduating from high school in Oklahoma City, he drives to California and studies at Chouinard Art Institute (now California Institute of the Arts), a fine arts school. His instructors teach painting in the prevalent abstract expressionist style of de Kooning and Kline. He sees Jasper Johns' Target and Four Faces and "quickly adopts the use of familiar yet neutral subjects" instead of abstract expressionism's avoidance of subject matter and planning. Like Johns, he starts "to use the commercial and popular vernacular as fine art..." "abandons the idea of becoming a commercial artist and commits himself to painting."

1960

Ruscha begins working full time as a layout artist at the Carson-Roberts Advertising Agency in Los Angeles. His understanding of typesetting, graphic design, and advertising techniques contributes to his artistic choices.

Edward Ruscha, 1984, U.S., 1970, 71.42



1961

Ruscha travels extensively throughout Great Britain and Europe. In Paris he sees more work of Johns and Rauschenberg confirming the connections he feels to them. Returning to the west coast he stops over in New York. At the Leo Castelli Gallery he is shown Roy Lichtenstein's painting Keds which greatly impresses him and is the first work of pop art he becomes aware of.

Box Smashed Flat (Vicksburg) is completed this year, the first instance in the artist's work when a familiar object has been represented pictorially as damaged or destroyed. He begins a number of large paintings such as Boss in which single words are isolated against monochromatic fields nuanced by impasto.

1962

In September, Walter Hopps, now at the Pasadena Art Museum, includes Ruscha along with Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Wayne Thiebaud and Joe Goode in the important survey "New Painting of Common Objects." It is the first exhibition of work soon to become known as "pop art."

Ruscha completes Large Trademark with Eight Spotlights,

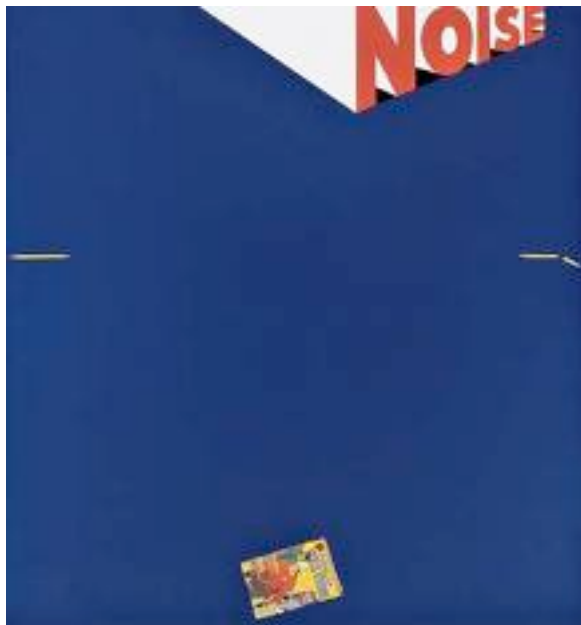


Edward Ruscha, 1984, U.S., 1970, 71.42

the first of an intended series of subjects with dramatic architectural perspective that he projects to include Standard Station and Wonder Bread.

1963

"In January, publishes the book Twentysix Gasoline Stations in an edition of 400 numbered copies. Using mass production printing techniques, it comprises 26 utilitarian black and white photographs of gas stations taken along Route 66 the year before." (ArtsConnectEd: Twentysix Gasoline Stations, 2nd Edition, B.97.6.1)



Completes the painting Noise, Pencil, Broken Pencil, Cheap Western, an eclectic inventory of images, action and semiotic depiction of sound, which he considers to be one of his best works.

On May 20th Ruscha's first one-man show opens at the Ferus Gallery.

Participates in two important museum shows in California. In October, Ruscha meets Marcel Duchamp whose works such as The Chocolate Grinder have a tremendous impact on his own art.



1964

Ruscha publishes his second book, Various Small Fires and Milk and designs the cover for Mason Williams' first book, Bicyclists Dismount.



He begins word drawings in graphite. The wry pictorial vandalism initiated in the 1961 painting Box Smashed Flat (Vicksburg) is continued in several paintings of this period which depict words in the process of being damaged or set on fire. Ruscha has noted that many of the words used in his early works "represented things being broken, smashed (or) damaged."

On October 20th Ruscha's second one-man



Edward Ruscha, 1984, U.S., 1970, 71.42

show opens at the Ferus Gallery. Among the works exhibited is Standard Station, Amarillo, Texas which is bought by Dennis Hopper, whose photograph Double Standard appears on the announcement. He receives his first significant national exposure from this show with a favorable review from Nancy Marmer in Artforum.

1965

On November 16, Ruscha's third one-man show opens at Ferus, consisting of a series of bird and fish paintings. These works depict *Field and Stream*-type subjects seen in bizarre transformational or comical situations.



"Publishes his third book, Some Los Angeles Apartments, one of his groundbreaking mass-produced artist's books, which documents the banality and standardization of the urban landscape of his adopted home of Los Angeles. In deadpan style, Ruscha presents an extended sequence of black and white photographs of the city's ubiquitous mid-century dingbat and low-rise apartment

block. For Ruscha, the array of variations within a formulaic architectural type reflected the unique culture of postwar Los Angeles, while revealing the dreariness of the modern American lifestyle. Ruscha captions each of the book's 34 photolithographs with the building's street address, which collectively serve as a roadmap of sorts for the city's sprawling residential neighborhoods." (ArtsConnectEd: Some Los Angeles Apartments, Edward Ruscha, 1965, B97.6.3)

1966

In January, Ruscha is included in Los Angeles Now at the Robert Fraser Gallery in London, his first European exhibition.

He creates his first "liquid word" painting, Annie, Poured from Maple Syrup, the beginning of a series that continues through 1969. Numerous graphic works of the period also incorporate similar liquid lettering.

Begins a series of handwriting drawings with graphite leading to his use of gunpowder as a medium in drawings the following year.



Edward Ruscha, 1984, U.S., 1970, 71.42

1967

Publishes Royal Road Test with Mason Williams and Patrick Blackwell which is cited as an influence by Robert Smithson, and Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles which Richard Kostelanetz calls a "reiterated, scathing critique of Los Angeles urban design and its bondage to the automobile."



"In 1967, he began making a series of "paper ribbon" drawings featuring isolated words as objects set in three-dimensional space.... In L'Amour, Ruscha presents a French word-object, whose meaning is well known to English-speaking viewers. Despite his statements to the contrary, the drawing's soft focus and lyrical expression reinforce the word's romantic associations." (ArtsConnectEd: L'Amour, Edward Ruscha, 1967, 72.50)



1968

Ruscha is part of a two-man show with Joe Goode at the Balboa Pavillion Gallery and has a solo show at the Irving Blum

Gallery in Los Angeles where the large painting Los Angeles County Museum of Art on Fire is purchased by Joseph Hirshhorn.



Edward Ruscha, 1984, U.S., 1970, 71.42

He produces the eponymous Hollywood, a silkscreen print that becomes one of his most recognizable images and is the first of several versions of the famous landmark executed as paintings, drawings and other editions.



1969

Ruscha is awarded a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and is a recipient of a two-month fellowship at the Tamarind Lithography Workshop in Los Angeles where he creates twenty-two separate editions of prints.

A one-man show of his graphics is subsequently held at the Irving Blum Gallery. He is included in the large survey exhibition, "Pop Art," held at the Hayward Gallery, London.

Produces Portfolio Box of Stains (P.71.169.77) with several organic and inorganic materials making the stains. "In the black buckram and silk clamshell box with blood of the artist on inside back cover" are sheets with stains such as egg, worcestershire sauce, apple juice, sulfuric acid, as well as oil paint.



ArtsConnectEd: Sulfuric Acid (Mallinckrodt), from Stains  
P.71.169.27



"Like many of Ruscha's works, Double Standard has a punning title. The Standard sign urges you to buy your gas here, but it has other connotations--'the model against which others should be measured,' for example, and 'mediocre or commonplace.' The title Double Standard--deriving from the crossed signs--suggests unfairness, especially in judging male and female behavior."

(ArtsConnectEd: Double Standard, Ed Ruscha, 1969, P.70.55)

1970

While in London Ruscha produces a portfolio of prints at Editions Alecto, News, Mews, Pews, Brews, Stews, and Dues, for which he employs unusual materials such as food, flowers and axle grease in place of standard screenprint inks. During the next year he will begin using food and other organic substances in lieu of paint.

One-man exhibitions of his liquid word paintings are held successively at the Alexander Iolas Gallery in New York and Paris. (ArtsConnectEd: Lisp, Ed Ruscha, 1970, P.71.131)





Ruscha creates Chocolate Room, an installation for the 35th Venice Biennale, again using an unconventional medium-Nestle's chocolate paste-silk screened onto 360 sheets of paper and installed like shingles on the gallery walls.

Chocolate Room is recreated in 1995 for conceptual art exhibition "Reconsidering the Object of Art" at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and again in 1999 for the exhibition "Edward Ruscha Editions 1959-1999" at the Walker Art Center. In 2003 the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, purchases the work.

Chocolate Room at the Walker Art Center, 1999

No paintings are made during 1970. Ruscha tells the critic David Bourdon: "I can't bring myself to put paint on canvas? I find no message there anymore."

1971

Ruscha produces only five paintings during this year confining his artistic activity primarily to books, a film, printmaking, and creating drawings with organic substances. Ruscha's series of punning photographs Tanks, Banks, Ranks, Thanks appears in the magazine Rags.

He begins shooting the 16mm color film Premium based on his photo-novel Crackers published in 1969. The film which features Larry Bell, Leon Bing, Rudi Gernreich, and Tommy Smothers, is completed with the assistance of a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship.

1972

"Edward Ruscha (Ed-werd Rew-shay) Young Artist," a major survey of drawings, prints, and books, is organized by Edward A. Foster at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minnesota. Ruscha designs the accompanying catalog to resemble a "Big Little Book," a popular pulp format of the thirties and forties.

2011

"Over the last few years Ed Ruscha has continued to explore his own fascination with the shifting emblems of American life by turning his keen aesthetic sensibility to Kerouac's classic novel. Having created his own limited edition artist book version of On the Road in 2009 published by Gagosian Gallery and Steidl, and illustrated with photographs that he took, commissioned, or found, Ruscha has created an entirely new body of paintings and drawings that take their inspiration from passages in Kerouac's novel.

This exhibition includes Ruscha's edition of Kerouac's legendary novel, six large paintings on canvas, and ten drawings on museum board, each taking its text from On the Road. Whether painted over snow-capped mountains in Ruscha's signature all-caps lettering or drawn atop delicately spattered abstract backgrounds, Kerouac's words provide the artist with a means to explore his own archetypal landscape." (Ed Ruscha: On the Road, Hammer Museum, [http://hammer.ucla.edu/exhibitions/detail/exhibition\\_id/201](http://hammer.ucla.edu/exhibitions/detail/exhibition_id/201))



Edward Ruscha, 1984, U.S., 1970, 71.42

## Influences

Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg

Ruscha was “drawn to their use of popular iconography and hard-edge techniques and the irreverence it showed to Abstract Impressionism, the way it ‘defaced’ the painting in general ... [and removed] the ‘atmosphere’ from the painting, the fictive space that the imagery occupies.... Johns and Rauschenberg would not attempt to remove imagery from painting but would confuse the imagery with the painting...making the image and the surface of the painting one and the same.” (Benezra, p. 160)

Marcel Duchamp

“Inspired by Marcel Duchamp’s ability to catch his audience off guard (they had met at Duchamp’s retrospective exhibition at the Pasadena Art Museum that same year), Ruscha decided to forego making a new painting and do something different... a book...the filling stations between Los Angeles and Oklahoma City... Although the repetitious pattern of Ruscha’s book connects it to the then emerging Pop art movement and to Andy Warhol’s interest in mass culture and serial imagery, in fact, with its snapshot documentary flavor, it is closer in character to the conceptual art movement yet to come.” (Benezra, p. 162-3)

American Precisionists

In Large Trademark with Eight Spotlights (1962, see above) and Standard Station (1964) Ruscha uses a “stylized version of one- and two-point perspective. This overtly graphic style relied on a ground level view of the world, with sharp diagonals converging on the horizon and the resultant sense of deep space countered by monochromatic planes. Derived from the sharp, oblique angles of skyscrapers, trains, automobiles and bridges seen in perspective, this style was used by both painters and graphic designers to celebrate the machine age, and, in the process, to bridge the worlds of industrial design and landscape painting. Having grown partly out of Cubism and its insistence on a multiplicity of perspectives, Precisionism managed to give a sense of the endless depth of the American landscape while simultaneously celebrating the flat streamlined industrial styles of designers.” (Benezra, p. 165)

Abstract Art

“My work is abstract in the sense that even recognizable objects become just shapes -- abstract shapes.” (Fifty Years, p. 56)

Possible Tours

1950’s to Contemporary Art  
Book Arts and Photography  
Made in America

YouTube Videos

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PHFyS4OxM-g>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J-gl7EL7ptk>  
<http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=7360884n>

Edward Ruscha, 1984, U.S., 1970, 71.42

### References

Benezra, Neal, and Kerry Brogher, Ed Ruscha. Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; and Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, 2000.

"Ed Ruscha Biography." Oxford University Press, 2009, <[http://www.moma.org/collection/browse\\_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A5086&page\\_number=&template\\_id=6&sort\\_order=1#bio](http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A5086&page_number=&template_id=6&sort_order=1#bio)>.

Ed Ruscha: Fifty Years of Painting. London : Hayward Publishing, 2009.

Ed Ruscha: On the Road, Hammer Museum, <[http://hammer.ucla.edu/exhibitions/detail/exhibition\\_id/201](http://hammer.ucla.edu/exhibitions/detail/exhibition_id/201)>.

"Ed Ruscha." Edward Ruscha Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings, <http://www.edruscha.com/default.cfm>