POSTMODERN TOPOGRAPHY: A NEW READING OF ED RUSCHA’S
TWENTYSIX GASOLINE STATIONS AND EVERY BUILDING ON THE SUNSET STRIP

by

Alexa Burzinski
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“If there is any facet of my work that I feel was kissed by angels, I’d say it was my books. I’ve never followed tradition in my books...my work, at that point, [was] a can opener that got into something else.”

Ed Ruscha’s photo books are among some of the most puzzling art objects produced in America during the 1960s and 70s. These “bookworks,” a term coined by Clive Phillpot, almost always accommodate exactly what their titles suggest. Each title reads like a set of instructions, usually consisting of a quantity (whether an exact number or a quantitative adjective) followed by a tangible, countable subject, which, in Ruscha’s case, ranges from gas stations to crackers to artificial plants. To some, the content of these books, low-quality photographs of landmarks, architecture or objects that correspond to the book’s title, is unsettlingly literal; however, the conceptual motives behind them are, as Ruscha once noted, “wol[ves] in sheep’s clothing.” Though they appear to conform to the standard conventions of bound paperback volumes, and are nearly indistinguishable from any other book one might find on a bookshelf, Ruscha’s books are indeed deceptive, as Kevin Hatch writes, “complex and refractory objects that have confounded repeated attempts at categorization.”

3 The instructive quality of Ruscha’s book titles will be considered later in this introduction. The ideas of instruction and performativity as they relate to Ruscha’s books are discussed in Margaret Iversen’s essay, “Automaticity: Ruscha and Performative Photography,” in Photography after Conceptual Art, ed. Diarmuid Costello and Margaret Iversen (Malden, MA: Wiley–Blackwell, 2010),13–27.
4 Ruscha in “Conversation with Ed Ruscha,” 303.
After graduating from high school in Omaha, Nebraska in the early 1950s, Ruscha relocated to Los Angeles to attend Chouinard Art Institute (now California Institute of the Arts), soon settling there permanently. Ruscha had previously expressed marked interest in the city, reminiscing in a 2010 interview, “I’d read about Los Angeles and this fact stuck in my mind: that the city gained 1,000 new people every day. In 1956! A thousand people every day! I felt: I want to be part of that.”

Ruscha had longstanding interest in becoming an artist, stating that he had been sure of his career trajectory since age twelve. When asked what persuaded him to pursue art in Los Angeles as opposed to New York, Ruscha further expressed his undeniable attraction to the epicenter of the West Coast art world:

I was attracted to going either east or west [from Oklahoma]. At this time, and pretty much today, the East Coast was starched clothing at heating oil, while the West Coast was flexing biceps and health. This made the choice relatively easy. Didn’t all Okies with mattresses on their cars go west anyway? Beyond that, I seemed to be drawn to by the most stereotyped concepts of Los Angeles, such as cars, suntans, palm trees, swimming pools, strips of celluloid with perforations; even the word “sunset” had glamor. East was cold. West was hot. This was new life. The city simply had a good story for itself, that’s all.

These stereotypes permeated quickly into Ruscha’s early work, most notably that of the Hollywood film industry. In a career that thus far spans nearly five decades, Ruscha has

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developed his love affair with Los Angeles, incorporating the vernacular of the city and
greater Southern California landscapes into various media, whether print, painting, film,
or book.

Ruscha’s book projects of the 60s and 70s have come to be recognized as central
to photography's development, encouraging new conceptual approaches to the medium
and heightening interest in analyzing the built landscape. Six of Ruscha’s sixteen books
incorporate the topography of the artist’s adopted city: Twentysix Gasoline Stations
(published in 1963), Some Los Angeles Apartments (published in 1965), Every Building
on the Sunset Strip (published in 1966), Thirtyfour Parking Lots (published in 1967),
Nine Swimming Pools and a Broken Glass (published in 1968) and Real Estate
Opportunities (published in 1970) (Figure 0.1). As per Ruscha’s model for titling his
books, each of these publications feature uninteresting photographs of exterior views of
the landmarks to which they refer. This thesis focuses on two of Ruscha’s earliest books,
his first, Twentysix Gasoline Stations, and his third, Every Building on the Sunset Strip,
both arguably the artist’s most well known, as well as the most frequently addressed in
the literature on Ruscha.

Twentysix Gasoline Stations’ forty-eight pages depict twenty-six black and white
offset photographs of service stations scattered along a 1,400-mile stretch of United
States Route 66 (Figure 0.2). The progression of photographs follows their geographic
location as Ruscha travels east by car from Los Angeles to his hometown of Omaha,
Nebraska. Every Building on the Sunset Strip, on the other hand, represents Ruscha’s
more exhaustive effort to document his adopted city (Figure 0.3). It is a near literal
record, also consisting of black and white offset photographs, of the book’s namesake,
the name given to the one and a half mile long stretch of the twenty-four mile long Sunset Boulevard that passes through West Hollywood in Los Angeles. The images are compressed into one twenty-five foot long page and accordion-folded to fit between the book’s paperback covers. Referred to by the artist as “collections of facts,” both Twentysix Gasoline Stations and Every Building on the Sunset Strip capture the architectural fabric of Los Angeles, but due to the lack of distinctive marks of authorship, text and human activity (or any activity at all for that matter) in their photographs, they do not seem to tell a story.\textsuperscript{10}

With these books, seemingly artless and without an obvious message, Ruscha wanted to downplay the “photographic” nature of his practice, instead stressing their snapshot aesthetic and dismissing them as having no status as art. “I realized for the first time [these books had] an inexplicable thing I was looking for,” Ruscha commented, “And that was a kind of a ‘Huh?’ That’s what I’ve always worked around.”\textsuperscript{11} Despite Ruscha’s claims, as well as their enduring popularity among the public and art historians alike, they nevertheless make fruitful case studies for addressing what has been, more or less, an overlooked question: what reading of 1960s greater Los Angeles do Ruscha’s photo books actually perform? What is this “inexplicable thing?”

Ruscha produced sixteen photo books between 1963 and 1978 in large editions of several hundred or thousand using high-speed professional presses, all available for a


relatively nominal price. Ruscha published fifteen of these books over the course of a
decade between 1963 and 1972, sometimes producing two in one year, and released his
final book, a collaborative project with fellow artist Lawrence Weiner, several years later
in 1978. Form was incredibly important to Ruscha, and the design and layout for his first
publication, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, would provide Ruscha with a template for both
the presentation and content of his subsequent works. Most of the books feature snapshot-
like photographs that he made with his 2¼-inch-format Yashica A camera and are
sequenced in straightforward layouts. A cover that bears a simple, descriptive title in
capital letters against a monochromatic background often provides the narrative content
for each book (see fig 0.1). Each book ranges from forty-eight to sixty-four pages in
length, depending on their production cost. As Margaret Iversen explains, “there are
aesthetic and practical reasons for this: Ruscha once remarked that he wanted *Nine
Swimming Pools* (1968) [the only book Ruscha ever produced with color photographs] to
have a certain weight and thickness and the cheapest layout for ten color plates over
sixty-four pages is what dictated the rhythm of photographs and blank pages. He also said
he could have added a few more photographs at no extra expense, but he liked the
number nine.”12 Similar to Ruscha’s motives for printing his books in large, cheap
editions, the blank pages ultimately reinforce viewers’ awareness of the book as a
physical object, not just a vehicle for photographs and text. *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*
and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* are the only two of Ruscha’s books that do not
contain blank pages. The books also contain minimal text; often the only words appearing
are phrases that indicate addresses, cross streets or building/landmark names, in addition

12 Iversen, Margaret. “Auto–Maticity: Ruscha and Performative Photography.” *Photography After
Conceptual Art* edited by Diarmuid Costello and Margaret Iversen (Malden: Wiley–Blackwell, 2010), 20.
to the information revealed on the books’ covers and title pages. “I have eliminated all
text from my books,” Ruscha commented, “[because] I want absolutely neutral
material.” Neutralizing his subject matter would also become a motif across this body
of the artist’s work.

Between their simple binding, candid cover, and average print quality, *Twentysix
Gasoline Stations* and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* have the appearance and
classic of cheap mass commodities and, at $1 per copy production costs, they were. An advertisement for *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* that announced the book’s rejection by the Library of Congress appeared in *Artforum* in March 1964, advertising first edition copies for $3.00 (Figure 0.4). Originally printed in a numbered edition of four hundred copies, a second edition of five hundred appeared in 1967, and a third of three thousand in 1969. The first edition of *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* was numbered and occasionally signed, which Ruscha soon admitted had been a “mistake.” Neither of the subsequent editions were numbered as Ruscha had expressed concern that indicating their availability would unwittingly transform his books from mass-produced objects to collectibles.

*Every Building on the Sunset Strip* was comparably priced at $3.50, and released in a first edition of one thousand unnumbered copies and a second printing, released in 1971, of five thousand unnumbered copies. The second printing of *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* is nearly identical to the first, lacking a two-inch rear flap-fold at the end of

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16 Richards, 37.
the page. With their industrial appearance and rather amateurish photographs, Ruscha’s books turned the once prevailing tradition of the refined, and generally costly, artist’s book on its head. “I want to be the Henry Ford of book making,” exclaimed Ruscha, a desire that projected itself onto his first book, as well as those that followed.17

Ruscha’s photo books are now recognized as among his most influential works, but these publications were not his primary output during this time; he was also a prolific painter and printmaker, garnering more fame for his works on paper than his curious “side projects,” which were in fact met with more criticism than acclaim at the time of their release, bewildering critics and consumers alike. After all, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* was rejected from the Library of Congress in 1963 for its “unorthodox form and supposed lack of information” (see Figure 0.4).18 Critical reception approached the same work with equal confusion, as Philip Leider memorably stated in *Artforum* “the book is so curious, and so doomed to oblivion that there is an obligation, of sorts, to document its existence, record its having been there.”19 Jeff Wall would later echo in his 1995 essay *Marks of Indifference*, “Only an idiot would take pictures of nothing but the filling stations, and the existence of a book of just those pictures is a kind of proof of the existence of such a person.”20

While the Library of Congress has yet to acquire a copy of *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, it and those books that followed have since been recast as crucial contributions

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to the development of art practices in the 1960s and 70s. Their initially poor reception therefore begs several questions: why did Ruscha continue producing books if, as the artist once said, “they end[ed] up in the trash?”

Why produce books in the first place?

ED-WERD REW-SHAY: YOUNG ARTIST

In order to trace the origins of Ruscha’s books, we must examine what informed the artist’s work at the time of their conception. While in school, Ruscha primarily practiced painting. Despite his initial aspiration to become a cartoonist, Chouinard’s studio classes emphasized Abstract Expressionism. In these classes, the instructors advised Ruscha to “let his painting[s] create themselves,” but he struggled to adopt the style’s highly personal, spontaneous approach to the medium, its heroic individualism and aggressive brushwork. In search for an alternative, Ruscha turned to Marcel Duchamp and Jasper Johns, both of whom appealed to him for their transgression of the codes of conventional painting.

While Duchamp’s emphasis on ideas and manipulation of language, as well as his deadpan humor and use of common objects intrigued Ruscha, Johns, whom Ruscha had discovered through a black and white reproduction of Target with Four Faces published in a 1957 issue of Print magazine, had the effect on him of an “atomic bomb” (Figure 0.5). Johns, drawing on many of Duchamp’s artistic principles, including the

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22 The section head here refers to one of Ruscha’s early business cards, which included the correct phonetic pronunciation of his name as many mispronounced his last name “Russ-kah.”

23 Richards, 12.

readymade, focused on frontality and serial repetition, which also contributed to Ruscha’s departure from Chouinard’s curriculum.\textsuperscript{25} Johns’ works depicting everyday signs such as targets, flags, letters and numbers, rendered in encaustic on layers of newspaper and fabric, were impersonal and ambiguous, offering no clues about the intentions of the artist to viewers.\textsuperscript{26} According to Johns, the canvas could be seen as a flat surface “like a table top or printer’s block,” a radical break from picture serving as a window on to the world, on which objects could be “collected, scattered or imprinted.”\textsuperscript{27} Ruscha has long expressed interest in Duchamp’s readymades, describing his books as sorts of readymades themselves.\textsuperscript{28} Ruscha’s 1960 multimedia work \textit{Three Standard Envelopes} can be seen as a synthesis of these early influences and demonstrate a marked interest in the readymade (Figure 0.6). The work, its title referencing Duchamp’s \textit{Three Standard Stoppages}, consists of six envelopes, three closed and three open and spilling multicolored oil paint, collaged onto a page of an unknown German newspaper. The work, as Mary Richards notes, is significant for its use of the word “standard” in its title, which would later appear in his gas station works (both painted and photographic), and also become critical in the manufacturing of his books.\textsuperscript{29} 

During this time, Ruscha practiced photography on the side, though not seriously, admitting, “I began to shoot pictures while in school, but not on a serious basis. I liked the idea that [photography] could capture the here and now, an immediate reality that could then be appraised and put back into a painting.”\textsuperscript{30} In 1956, Ruscha purchased a 2 1/4

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{25} Richards, 11.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Richards, 11–12.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Ruscha in “Concerning Various Small Fires: Edward Ruscha Discusses His Perplexing Publications,” 24–25.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Richards, 12.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Suzanne Muchnic, “Ruscha’s Kodak Moments,” \textit{Los Angeles Times}, March 30, 2003, Calendar, E48.
\end{itemize}
format Yashica A twin-lens reflex handheld camera, which he would use for many years, notably to produce the photographs featured in his early photo books.\textsuperscript{31} Ruscha graduated from Choinard in 1960, and immediately began work for an advertising agency; however, despite his early interest in commercial art, he quit after a year, later recalling that he found the experience to be “sheer hell.”\textsuperscript{32} After working as a printer’s devil and freelance layout designer for several publications, Ruscha left Los Angeles in early 1961 to embark on a nearly year long tour of Europe with his brother and mother. He stopped briefly in New York beforehand where he took photographs that appear to be derivative of photographers he knew and admired, such as Eugene Atget, Walker Evans and Berenice Abbott.\textsuperscript{33} Once Ruscha arrived in Europe, however, his influences soon faded in response to the landscape and cultures so different from his own.\textsuperscript{34}

After ten months of travelling, Ruscha returned to Los Angeles in the fall of 1961. Within two years, Ruscha published \textit{Twentysix Gasoline Stations}. When asked what inspired Ruscha to begin (quite literally) manufacturing his photo books, he responded that he “had been looking for an excuse to make [them].”\textsuperscript{35} Despite Ruscha’s nonchalance, these works are in fact well situated within the artist’s early output. Much of Ruscha’s early painting consists of words or phrases that float against solid color backgrounds, which resemble book covers bearing their titles. Ruscha’s 1963 painting \textit{Noise}, completed the same year as \textit{Twentysix Gasoline Stations}, displays its namesake across the width of the seventy-two by sixty-seven inch canvas in capital yellow square-

\textsuperscript{31} Richards, 12.
\textsuperscript{33} Richards, 14.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{35} Ed Ruscha, “Street Talk with Ed Ruscha An Interview with Michael Aупing” interview with Michael Aупing in \textit{Ed Ruscha: Road Tested} (Fort Worth, TX: Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, 2011), #:.
serif letters against a blue background. The work’s frontal composition resembles the format of his book covers, all of which display their titles, emblazoned across the width of the book in a similar typeface against a solid color. Not only does the frontal composition of *Noise* serve as a potential antecedent for Ruscha’s cover designs, but the left edge is also painted blue and bears the word “NOISE,” much like a book’s spine (Figure 0.7).

Ruscha’s early paintings are not the only examples that shed light onto his foray into books. Other works from this early period, and well beyond it, demonstrate an interest not only in the formal operations of bound books, but also in the subject matter of the two books under consideration here. Though Ruscha has often dismissed photography as his “secondary medium,” he practiced photography alongside painting and a large portion of his early work consists of photographs of architecture and commercial signage, motifs similar to those that appear in his books.³⁶ Ruscha took hundreds of photographs while in Europe, whose “landscape presented a wealth of idiosyncrasies: shop window displays of dog leashes, severed pig heads, and an open, stocked refrigerator; the lettering on memorials...[and] commercial signs; architecture; antiquated vehicles; shrines and cemeteries.”³⁷

Of some four hundred and fifty snapshots that record Ruscha’s journey through seventeen countries, several motifs, both technical and conceptual, become apparent. Most of the images focus on ordinary scenes, of which Ruscha rarely took more than one shot. The photographs are nearly devoid of human incident. In most cases, their subject matter is random vernacular, and unspecific in terms of place. Many images are closely

focused and tightly framed, virtually blocking out any environmental detail; if not for the aid of a particular language, or Ruscha’s penciled captions on the verso of each snapshot, it is difficult to determine the country, much less the city, in which the photographs were taken. These formal decisions create a lack of context within each photograph, which is further augmented by Ruscha’s indifference towards creating groups of documents centered on a given theme.\footnote{Rowell, 15.} An image Ruscha titles \textit{France, 1961} displays an advertisement for Total brand gasoline painted onto the wall of desolate strip-mall like structure that recedes into space (Figure 0.8). Another, \textit{Paris, France, 1961}, captures a sign indicating the entrance of Paris Metro station. Centered in the frame, the sign, attached to a gate, simply boasts the word “Metropolitain” in semi-italicized capital letters, and would become the subject of a 1961 pencil drawing, entitled \textit{Metropolitain Study}, which features its typography, less the physical sign and its context (Figure 0.9).

This is just one of many examples of Ruscha photographing signs that he encountered on his journey, which he would later draw or paint. Regardless of the exact subject matter of each image, their resulting anonymity confirms that Ruscha did not intend for the images to serve as a record of his journey, but as a way to capture details and impressions for their inherent graphic appeal.\footnote{Rowell, 14.} Such attention to these details and choice of subject would become apparent in several of the images appearing in \textit{Twentysix Gasoline Stations}, as well as later bookworks.

After returning from Europe and before publishing \textit{Twentysix Gasoline Stations} and \textit{Every Building on the Sunset Strip}, Ruscha had already begun to photograph the streets and buildings of Los Angeles. Though “not a cohesive book idea,” \textit{Rooftops}, a set
of four gelatin silver prints shot in 1961, may be seen as another precursor to his books.\textsuperscript{40} For the series, he photographed his subject a 360-degree view from a single spot on the roof of his office building (an advertising agency located at the intersection of North Flores Street and Beverly Boulevard) in a similarly systematic manner (Figure 0.10). Simultaneously snapshot-esque and meticulously composed, “they capture the most banal aspects of the Los Angeles cityscape with unusual attentiveness.”\textsuperscript{41} Each of the four photographs captures the surrounding houses, apartment buildings, neon signs, abandoned rooftops, slivers of streets, zipping cars, parked cars and billboards. The photographs reveal Ruscha’s early preoccupation with the texture of Los Angeles and invite viewers to examine Los Angeles’ urban environment. With the exception of the set’s final image, entitled “Hancock,” in which a woman crosses a busy street, Ruscha does not photograph any people (see Figure 0.10). Overall, these photographs, both those shot in Europe and from the \textit{Rooftops} series, both of which were little known until the early 2000s, represent an important prologue to the approach to the medium in Ruscha’s photo books.\textsuperscript{42} Ruscha’s interest in vernacular, its visual appeal and its presentation within the photographic frame would become central to his bookworks and his commentary of them.

“\textit{SOMETHING ELSE…}”

Both \textit{Twentysix Gasoline Stations} and \textit{Every Building on the Sunset Strip} fit into traditions ascribed to Pop, photo-documentary and conceptual art practices, but uncomfortably so in each case. That these works evade categorization within the art

\textsuperscript{40} Ruscha in Schwartz, 125.
\textsuperscript{41} Schwartz, 130.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
historical canon has been central to scholarship on Ruscha, as well as an enduring source of their appeal. If, in 1963, anyone had wanted to define *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, it would have been as a work of Pop art; after all it was the latest movement in American art at the time, connecting east and west coast art practices. Familiar with Ruscha’s paintings, Philip Leider stated rather bluntly in a 1963 review of *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* in *Artforum*, “*Twentysix Gasoline Stations* is a pop-art book.” Later, in the fall of 1963 Pop icon Andy Warhol travelled to Los Angeles for the first exhibition of his thirty-two Campbell’s Soup Cans at the Ferus Gallery. In his book *POPism*, he recalled the trip: “The further West we drove [towards California], the more Pop everything became … Once you “got” Pop, you could never see a sign the same way again. And once you thought Pop, you could never see America the same way again.” That an emblem of Pop art would also connect Ruscha’s work, which features California, the westernmost destination on Warhol’s journey, with the movement further solidified this reading.

Also in 1963, Ruscha himself emphasized a possible Pop reading of his first photo book when he based one of the most iconic and precisionist of his early paintings on the photograph of a Standard gas station in Amarillo, Texas featured in *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*. In its new guise, “the Standard Station became a sort of heroic, ideal gas station, a ‘standard’ station by definition.” Lucy Lippard illustrated *Standard Station, Amarillo, Texas* in her 1966 anthology *Pop Art*, and the image was accompanied by a caption

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43 Leider, 57.
45 Ibid.
referring to the painting’s source in *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (Figure 0.11). Three paintings by Ruscha had recently been included, along with Pop vanguards Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, Jim Dine, and Wayne Thiebaud, among others, in the groundbreaking 1962 exhibition “New Painting of Common Objects,” curated by Walter Hopps at the Pasadena Art Museum, and historically considered the first Pop art exhibitions in America. Among these three works was *Actual Size*, an oil painting measuring seventy-two by sixty-seven inches, which features the word “Spam” rendered massively in the yellow bubble letters found on the packaging of a can of the precooked luncheon meat (Figure 0.12). Underneath, he replicates the can of Spam at actual size, flying down the length of the canvas as if it were a comet. The outrageous scale and marketing wordplay are echoed and mirrored here. In *Actual Size*, Ruscha similarly does for Spam what Andy Warhol did for the Campbell’s Soup can, appropriating decontextualizing commercial imagery. However, as time passed, the books’ connection to Pop art appeared more convenient (that they coincided with the birth and peak of West Coast Pop art) than compelling.

As Ruscha continued releasing books, they were later linked to the tradition of American photo-documentary, in particular to Walker Evans’ photographs of American architecture and Robert Frank’s forthright images of postwar American life. Phyllis Rosenszweig and Sylvia Wolf both allude to this reading in their respective texts, stating Ruscha has demonstrated interest in Walker Evans’s work tracing back to his youth in Oklahoma, where he probably came across it as a social document of the American South, especially as Evans’s classic book *American Photographs* was republished in

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48 Schwartz, 36–37.
In the late 1950s Ruscha encountered Robert Frank’s *The Americans*, later purchasing a print of Frank’s picture of a gas station in Santa Fe, one that resembles Ruscha’s own photographs of a similar subject. However, it was not so much the style that interested him; rather, Ruscha’s photo books seem to adapt and extend the idea of travelling the land, as he traversed Los Angeles, snapping photographs of its thoroughfares.

Ruscha’s books have been lumped together with other moments in the history of photography, notably *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*, an exhibition curated by William Jenkins, and presented in 1975 at the International Museum of Photography at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York. Jenkins selected eight then-emerging American photographers: Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Joe Deal, Frank Gohlke, Nicholas Nixon, John Schott, Stephen Shore, and Henry Wessel, Jr., as well as established German photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher. *New Topographics* signaled a radical shift away from traditional depictions of landscape: “pictures of transcendent natural vistas gave way to unromanticized views of stark industrial landscapes, suburban sprawl, and everyday scenes not usually given a second glance.”

In his introduction to the catalogue, Jenkins defined the common denominator of the show as “stylistic anonymity,” an alleged absence of style, and mentioned Ruscha's books, including *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* and *Thirtyfour Parking Lots*, as inspirations for the exhibition and the photographers it featured. Jenkins later admitted to having

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50 Wolf, pages 21, 71, 178.
52 Ibid.
wished that he had contacted Ruscha to be featured in the show, as well. However, this connection between Ruscha and these photographers (with the exception of the Bechers) has not been pursued further in literature on the artist.

The *New Topographics* exhibition described Ruscha’s books, more specifically those that incorporate the vernacular architecture and landscape of Los Angeles, as “topographic” for their unromantic portrayal of the built environment; however, this label has often exclusively referred to their subject matter. Surely there can be stylistic comparisons drawn between certain works featured in the exhibition and that of Ruscha. While all of the artists in question adopted a detached, almost scientific approach to subject matter, those artists featured in *New Topographics* were photographers by trade; Ruscha was not. Ruscha employed photography as a means to illustrate his books, which were intended to be mass-produced objects, rather than displayed in a gallery or museum setting, and in this sense in particular, the comparison is limited, at best.

However, documentary photography is premised on the idea of photography’s indexical, transparent access to social experience, something Ruscha’s photo books seem to question with their elimination of cars and people from their images. Ruscha’s books are not explicit documents of Los Angeles, and his preoccupation with the book form and conceptions of their titles attests to this. As Margaret Iversen writes, “it is because [Ruscha’s books] have a rule-governed, performative, character that comparisons with

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54 Benjamin Buchloh highlights a similarity between Ruscha’s photographs and those of Bernd and Hilla Becher in that they both use photography to systematically capture urban and suburban typologies; however, as previously mentioned, Ruscha’s choice to publish his photographs in book form continues to separate him from artists photographing similar subjects (Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” *October* 55 [Winter 1990]: 120).
Evans, Robert Frank and other photographers of American vernacular scenes are so unilluminating. This “rule-governed, performative character” to which Iversen alludes would prove critical to a reading of Ruscha’s books that connects them with proto-Conceptual art practices.

More recently, Benjamin Buchloh, Margaret Iverson and Liz Kotz have argued that the strategies Ruscha employed in his books mark them as antecedents to Conceptual art. This argument is not entirely new, as Every Building on the Sunset Strip was one of several works chosen by Sol LeWitt to illustrate his essay “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” published in the summer 1967 issue of Artforum. LeWitt writes, “When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.” Ruscha conceived his books initially as plays on words that he believed were both aurally pleasing and would look visually appealing on the printed page. Deciding the books’ titles first, Ruscha would then work on the typography and design for their covers before taking the photographs. He confirms, “I did have a notion to have the title first, and so the cover, to me, was extremely important, and the title was extremely important, and the pictures in some ways were not that important to me.” Ruscha emphasized the fact that is the idea, rather than his authorship or the artistic qualities of his photographs, is paramount to his books, a parallel to LeWitt’s definition of Conceptual art.

Buchloh’s groundbreaking 1990 essay Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the

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55 Iversen, 17.
Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions develops this reading by identifying Ruscha’s books with key elements of 1960s Conceptualism. The wide variety of objects that emerged in this context—in the work of artists such as Robert Morris, Sol LeWitt, Dan Graham and others—reflected critically on the commodity status of the work of art and the construction of authorship and spectatorship. Crucial to this work was the role of photographic de-skilling and the development of distributed modes of reception (including mail art and printed multiples), which allowed art to circulate outside museum and gallery contexts. Buchloh confirms: “among the key strategies of future Conceptual art that were initiated by Ed Ruscha in 1963 were the following: to chose the vernacular (e.g. architecture) as referent; to deploy photography systematically as the representational medium; and to develop a new form of distribution (e.g. the commercially produced book as opposed to the traditionally crafted livre d’artiste).”

Lisa Pasquariello has recently developed Buchloh’s ideas in her 2004 dissertation Good Reading: The Works of Ed Ruscha, 1958–1970, writing that Ruscha’s books “thought to augur several of the terms that would define conceptualism—the primacy of “the idea,” dematerialization, seriality, informational language, “deskilled” photography—instead confound the oppositions on which those categories depend; their insistent physicality undercuts the notion that the conceptual work's primary significance resided in its ontological and institutional status.” She stresses the materiality of Ruscha’s books as total objects, as opposed to cheap repositories for his photographs, a theme that will prove relevant in this thesis.

Both Liz Kotz and Margaret Iversen stress the performative quality of Ruscha’s book works, further aligning them with definitions of Conceptual art. Kotz’s 2005 essay *Language Between Performance and Photography* fosters the connection between conceptual art and earlier performance-based pieces, which were governed by a notational system or “score,” as in Fluxus. While Kotz only mentions Ruscha peripherally, grouping him with a number of other artists who engage in this practice, she stresses that conceptual art has its roots in a verbal score or set of instructions. When this strategy is annexed to photography, she writes, “The work of art has been re-configured as a specific realization of a general proposition.”60 Iversen builds on Kotz’s work, applying it more specifically to Ruscha’s photographic practices in the context of his bookmaking. As she emphasizes, Ruscha conceived of the title of *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, and those books as followed, before embarking to photograph them; Iversen writes, “given the title’s priority, it can readily be understood as a contracted form of an instruction: record twenty-six gasoline stations along Route 66.”61

Ruscha’s books can be sorted and studied in a variety of ways, but three themes stand out as evidence for their place within the history of Conceptual art: all of the books utilize photographs as source material to support an idea, and approach the medium as a form of mapmaking or topography, as seen in *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, or sometimes as a means to document actions or performances staged for the camera. Every book, with the exceptions of *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, consists of forty-eight to sixty-four pages, regardless of the number of images it contains, so to keep its cost minimal. They are also modestly sized, most of

61 Iversen, 16.
them measuring five and a half by seven inches closed, give or take several tenths of an inch. Regardless of these slight variations, each of the books is nevertheless portable, easily movable at the owner’s discretion.

Each of these interpretations is valid in one way or another: Ruscha’s photo books can be described in terms of Pop because they appropriate commercial culture and signage; they are photo-documentary because their photographs, in their frontal framing especially, resemble Walker Evans’ and Robert Frank’s photographs; they are proto-conceptual because Ruscha conceived the titles of the books before ever leaving his studio to photograph the subjects of them and advocated an alternative distribution method for art. None of these readings, however, adequately address *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* in terms of their relationship to their subject matter: the built environment of and surrounding Los Angeles in the 1960s. Therefore, rather than describe them as Pop books, or as homages to Evans’ and Frank’s projects, and rather than limit our understanding of these works as crucial developments in the history of 1960s Conceptualism, as Buchloh argues, I propose a new reading of these two books, one that investigates them in the context of theories on postmodern architecture and the urban experience. I offer a new term to describe them: postmodern topography.

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62 The only one of Ruscha’s books of a notable size difference is *Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles*, measuring ten by eight inches closed.
POSTMODERN TOPOGRAPHY

“The last few years have been marked by an inverted millenarianism, in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive have been replaced by senses of the end of this or that (the end of ideology, art..., etc., etc.): taken together, all of these perhaps constitute what is increasingly called postmodernism. The case for its existence depends on the hypothesis of some radical break or coupure, generally traced back to the end of the 1950s or the early 1960s.”63

So writes Fredric Jameson in the opening sentences of Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism. He continues, “As the word itself suggests, this break is most often related to notions of the waning or extinction of the hundred-year-old modern movement...The enumeration of what follows then at once becomes empirical, chaotic, and heterogeneous.”64 This idea of breakage, which Jameson proposes, is in fact central to discourse on Ruscha’s Twentysix Gasoline Stations and Every Building on the Sunset Strip. At the time of their production, the fact that there was seemingly nowhere for these books within the existing system of classification was, and continues to be, an index of their radicalism with respect to established modes of art historical thought. For they have escaped the categories through which modernism is understood just as they have escaped the art museum, which, as Douglas Crimp comments, “arose simultaneously with modernism and came to be its inevitable resting place.”65

The term I have proposed for Ruscha’s books, “postmodern topography,” is a contradictory one. On the one hand, postmodern theory expresses concern that, at the time Jameson describes, culture had become rigorously two-dimensional; on the other, topography, by definition, refers to “a detailed description or representation on a map of

63 Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 53.
64 Jameson 53-54.
the natural and artificial features of an area,” often referring to representations that are volumetric, or at least three-dimensional delineations on a two-dimensional surface. Ruscha renders his subject matter as two-dimensionally as possible, both in terms of form and narrative. After all, Los Angeles, and in particular, the tacky architecture that Ruscha photographs, is often associated with cultural flatness. Mark Rawlinson writes:

The easy and literal, even clichéd evocation of Los Angeles as pure surface, a place lacking depth, is somewhat disturbed by the discontinuities, failed connections [in Ruscha’s books]. Moreover its extreme flatness helps cast off clichéd thought to reveal a series of perceptual complexities that questions photographic vision and the medium of photography as deployed in mass culture.

However, Ruscha’s decision to adopt the book form, mass-producible and portable, introduces depth to his otherwise surface-oriented representation of Los Angeles. When considering the tactility of Twentysix Gasoline Stations and Every Building on the Sunset Strip, independent of the photographs contained within them, they may be considered (volumetric) architectural objects themselves. Moreover, as viewers will find, Ruscha withholds information; the twenty-six gasoline stations he photographs were not the only ones that could be found along Route 66 at the time, and Every Building on the Sunset Strip’s photographs are fraught with ruptures that ultimately violate the title’s promise. My project centers on the contradictions embedded in these works, arguing that Ruscha’s books serve as mediators of conflicting postmodern cultural and architectural theories.

Using this definition and the writings of Fredric Jameson, Jean Baudrillard, Reyner Banham and Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, Ruscha’s Twentysix  

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Gasoline Stations and Every Building on the Sunset Strip theorize his term I have proposed. In his 1971 text Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies, Banham mixes traditional architectural history with impressionistic reports on Los Angeles’ freeway system and car culture. In his text, Banham “drift[s] carelessly from one highway interchange to another or to explore the “four ecologies” of the book’s subtitle:” the flatlands (which Banham labeled the “Pains of Id”), the beach cities (“Surfurbia”), the freeways (“Autopia”) and the foothills.68 Banham also celebrated the freeway system itself as the zenith of civil architecture, calling it “one of the greater works of Man,”69 and denoting special praise to the interchange linking the 10 and 405 freeways, which he thought to be “a work of art.”70 The freeway and car are central to Ruscha’s work, as most of the photographs contained within Twentysix Gasoline Stations and Every Building on the Sunset Strip were shot in motion, from the comfort of Ruscha’s own car.

In their seminal 1972 text Learning from Las Vegas Venturi and Scott Brown cite Ruscha as an influence for their study of larger trends in postmodern architecture. Acknowledging the rapid evolution of modern architecture in a brief forty year span, from Le Corbusier’s villas of the 1920s to the roadside motels designed by “anonymous” architects of the 1950s and 60s, Venturi and Scott Brown reasoned back through the history of style and symbolism and forward to the recognition of a new kind of building, consistent with the emerging culture of Los Angeles-style urbanism, that responded directly to speed, mobility, the superhighway and changing lifestyles of the time they

69 Banham, 70–71.
70 Banham, 71.
inhabited. They pay special attention to the evolution of commercial architecture, which “is compressed into years rather than decades, reflecting the quicker tempo of our times.”

Causing controversy upon its appearance in 1972, the book, written by architects advocating for a particular style, called for architects to be more receptive to the tastes and values of “common” people and less immodest in their erections of “heroic, self-aggrandizing monuments.” They take Las Vegas as a case study of architectural communication; the “Strip” is architecture of communication over space. Communication is achieved through flat signs, a unique condition they differentiate from the “enclosed space” that architects are more familiar with. Symbolism and allusion are crucial to this type of architecture, which considers vast space and speed. Ultimately, Learning from Las Vegas is a case study in the triumph of symbolic-space over forms-in-space.

Ruscha photographs frontally, emphasizing the ornamented facades of his subjects; based on Ruscha’s design choices, as well as his method for photographing his subjects, both Twentysix Gasoline Stations and Every Building on Sunset The Strip articulate a reading of architectural form that resonates with the analysis developed by Venturi and Scott Brown. Ruscha scholars, including Aron Vinegar and Alexandra Schwartz, have conducted research connecting Ruscha’s books with those theories proposed by Venturi and Scott Brown, arguing that his work serves as antecedents and

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74 Venturi and Scott Brown, 7–8.
inspirations for their project. While this is true, as will be discussed in chapter two of this thesis, I will use Learning from Las Vegas as a means to argue that Ruscha’s books seem to anticipate Venturi and Scott Brown’s theories and situate them in the context of other discourse on postmodern architecture.

Both Frederic Jameson and Jean Baudrillard propose ideas about postmodernism that relate to the type of mapping Ruscha’s books perform; however, they arrive at a more grim prognosis regarding the state of culture than Venturi and Scott Brown. Discussing postmodernism, as well as mapping, Jean Baudrillard’s 1981 essay The Procession of the Simulacra examines the relationship between reality, signs and society. According to Baudrillard, writing several years before Jameson, what has happened in postmodern culture is that society has become so reliant on models and maps that it has lost all contact with the real world that preceded the map. Reality itself merely imitates the model, which now precedes and determines the real world: “The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory—precession of simulacra—that engenders the territory.” He continues, “It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real.” Baudrillard does not merely suggest that postmodern culture is artificial, because the concept of artificiality still requires some sense of reality as a means to recognize what is artifice. Rather, society has lost all ability to make sense of the distinction between nature and artifice. In the order of

75 Venturi and Scott Brown, 53.
78 Ibid.
79 Dino Felluga, “Modules on Baudrillard: On Postmodernity.”
simulacra associated with the postmodern age, we are confronted with a precession of simulacra; that is, the representation precedes and determines the real.\textsuperscript{80} There is no longer any distinction between reality and its representation. There is only the simulacrum.

For Jameson, writing \textit{The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism} in 1984, postmodernism functions as a “cultural dominant” which must be periodized; to situate postmodernism historically is to define it as far more than a “style” or a “moment.” Like Baudrillard, whose concept of the simulacrum he adopts, Jameson is highly critical of our current historical situation, painting a grim picture of the present, which he associates, in particular, with a loss of our connection to history. According to Jameson, postmodernity has transformed the historical past into a series of emptied-out stylizations, which Jameson terms pastiche, that can then be consumed.\textsuperscript{81} Jameson identifies a number of symptoms that he associates with the postmodern condition: the weakening of historicity (which he says resembles a schizophrenic position), a breakdown of “high” and “low” culture, a new depthlessness, the waning of affect and the rapid evolution of new technology.\textsuperscript{82} Several of these conditions will be discussed as they pertain to Ruscha’s work later in this thesis.

This project is divided into three chapters; the first of which provides a detailed analysis of the formal qualities of \textit{Twentysix Gasoline Stations} and \textit{Every Building Sunset}

\textsuperscript{80} Baudrillard divides simulacra into three orders, the third of which pertains to postmodernism and is discussed here. First and second order simulacra, the former of which is associated with the pre-modern period and the latter the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century, are not relevant in the context of this project (Jean Baudrillard, “Simulacra and Simulation,” in \textit{Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation}, ed. Brian Wallis [New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984]).


\textsuperscript{82} Ibid.
Despite the wealth of scholarship concerning Ruscha’s photo books, I have yet to encounter a study of either *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* or *Every Building Sunset Strip* that conducts an extensive formal analysis of both the books themselves and the photographs contained within them. Attention to craft is an integral aspect of Ruscha’s artistic production, and, as scholars and the artist himself have noted, everything is scrupulously executed. This is not to say that I will be providing a detailed written description of every plate in both books; however, as form in these books relates so intimately to content, both must be discussed within the context of this new terminology. Moreover, with the emphasis placed on surface in many accounts of postmodernism (including in the texts considered here by Venturi and Scott Brown, Baudrillard and Jameson), it is especially important to elucidate on the material tactility of Ruscha’s books.

However, in order to understand the term I have proposed, “postmodern topography,” as a means for interpreting *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, it is crucial to examine their contents beyond the formal qualities of the photographs contained within them. On a superficial level, Ruscha photographed vernacular architecture in Los Angeles and, in the case of the former the American West; however, Ruscha’s choice of subject matter speaks not only to the artist’s interest in depicting the banal, but also to his city’s unique brand of urbanism. The moment Ruscha began making his architectural books coincided with the birth of a spate of “Los Angeles studies” that analyzed the history, structure and societal impact of the postwar, highway-based city.\(^{83}\) Chapter two therefore focuses on Ruscha’s choice of subject matter in the context of Venturi and Scott Brown’s 1972 text *Learning from Las Vegas*, as well as

\(^{83}\) Schwartz, 123.
excerpts from Reyner Banham’s 1971 text *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* and writings by other Los Angeles studies scholars, all of whom discuss Los Angeles architecture and urbanism with a specific emphasis on cars and highways. By using these contemporaneous sources, I examine Ruscha’s choice of subject matter within the conditions of the time.

Chapter three synthesizes the information presented in chapters one and two in order to theorize the books in the context of Jean Baudrillard and Frederic Jameson’s theories on the postmodern experience. Using varied examples, both theorists are interested in postmodernism as an experience of the surface, in which society has been reduced to horizontal plane where you cannot get your bearings, and everything has been equalized. Ruscha also concerns himself with surfaces, as evidenced by the designs for his book covers, as well as his decision to photograph architecture frontally and in harsh light. The formal qualities of *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* in many ways read the city as a surface-oriented culture that cannot be penetrated. And yet Ruscha seems to imply the possibility of a more subjective reading of surface, as evidenced by several of the decisions he imposes on his bookmaking process, as well as his depictions of his books and their photographs in other media.

Ultimately, this new reading of *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* has lead me to question to what extent each of Ruscha’s books can be used as maps of postmodern experience of Los Angeles. In other words, what does the book form do to illuminate Ruscha’s chosen subject matter and vise versa? Moreover, I will examine what it means to take a city such as Los Angeles and consider it in a
reproducible, portable object that can be allied with a type of map or travel guide, or even an architectural object itself.
CHAPTER ONE:
SOME LOS ANGELES PHOTO BOOKS

TWENTYSIX GASOLINE STATIONS

Ed Ruscha’s inaugural photo book Twentysix Gasoline Stations contains exactly what the book’s title states, its forty-eight pages depicting twenty-six black and white photographs of service stations scattered along a 1,400 mile stretch of United States Route 66. Ruscha published the book in April 1963 at age twenty-six in a run of four hundred numbered copies (that Ruscha was twenty-six years old at the time of its release is one of many theories that attempt to explain the methodology behind the book’s titling). Released the same year as Ruscha’s first solo exhibition at the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles, though not in conjunction with it, the book did not initially receive a warm reception.84

Ruscha’s conception of Twentysix Gasoline Stations did not arise from any particular interest in photographing gas stations. Rather, Ruscha simply conjured the phrase “twenty-six gasoline stations” because it was aesthetically and audibly pleasing to him and resolved to produce a work of art that supported the theme.85 The photographs that would later accompany these euphonious and visually pleasing words were unsurprisingly inspired by the physical manifestation of gasoline stations themselves:

I wanted to make a book of some kind. And at the same time, my whole attitude about everything came out in this one phrase that I made up for myself, which was ‘twenty-

84 Schwartz, 90.
six gasoline stations.’ I worked on that in my mind for a long time and I knew that the title before the book had even come about. And then, paradoxically, the idea of the photographs of the gas stations came around, so it’s an idea first – and then I kind of worked it down.  

As it is known, the book intimately relates to Ruscha’s own autobiography, with the artist once noting: “I just had a personal connection to that span of mileage between Oklahoma and California...It just, it kind of spoke to me.” Ruscha drove back and forth from Los Angeles to his hometown in Oklahoma City to visit his mother annually. On these often solo-excursions, Ruscha noted the “wasteland,” more specifically the service stations, that served as the backdrop to his 1,400 mile, interstate road trips. With the desire to “bring the news” of these hallmarks of the American West back to Los Angeles, Ruscha had solved his problem as to what images he would use to support his idea. Given its mode of inexpensive, mass-market distribution and its anonymous, nonart look, Twentysix Gasoline Stations, “wore on its sleeve both its own reproducibility and the exchangeability of the images it contained.” With Twentysix Gasoline Stations, Ruscha intended to create art that existed outside of the walls of a gallery; a book, portable and cost-efficient, appeared to him an ideal outlet for doing so. He believed that the nominal cost of the book would transform its status to that of a mass commodity; he wanted “everybody to own a copy.”

Dated 1962 and dedicated to Patty Callahan (a little known photographer and friend of Ruscha’s who often photographed him for magazine articles and press releases),

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86 Ibid.
89 Hatch, 109.
90 Richards, 35.
the volume is modestly sized at seven by five and one half inches. In keeping with its physical smallness, the book’s cover is minimal and unassuming, its completely neutral exterior disarming the viewer upon first glance. A white cover displays the book’s title, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, printed on three separate lines that occupy the width of the book cover in red square-serif type (Figure 1.1). A protective semi-transparent glassine dust jacket mutes the stark brightness of the red on white cover design. The book’s spine also boasts its title in the same red square-serif font, with each word spaced equally along its length, much like Ruscha’s early word paintings (see Figure 0.7). The artist’s name, publication year, and any other possible indicator of the book’s history and/or content are absent from the cover. The back cover is blank. These qualities lend the work’s exterior a sense of professional polish, a clear-cut industrial finish. The size, cover design and page count for *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* would provide a standard format that Ruscha would use for several of his later topographic photo books, including *Some Los Angeles Apartments, Nine Swimming Pools and a Broken Glass* and *Real Estate Opportunities* (see Figure 0.1). That *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* does not follow this standard will be discussed later in this chapter.

Upon opening *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, the viewer is confronted by a title page that is as impersonal as its cover. A matte off-white page displays the book’s title in three separate lines in the same capitalized typeface as its cover, this time in black, in a rectangular justified text block that floats centered in the upper third of the page (Figure 1.2). Each word that comprises the title is variably sized so that each line is the same width. However, unlike the cover, the viewer is afforded more information regarding the book’s origins: “Edward Ruscha” appears a few inches below the title, and the

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publication date, 1962, roughly an inch below that, again all sized and spaced to match the width of the title printed above. The following page reveals the book’s edition and copyright information, and on the facing page its dedication (Figure 1.3). On this page, the typeface, whose capital italicized non-bolded letters are reminiscent of those found in newspaper and magazine articles, strays from that of the book’s cover and colophon, offering a transition to that found in the remainder of the book.

All of the gasoline stations featured in *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* are on Route 66, a road that had already been mythologized in popular culture by the TV series *Route 66* and in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, in which the protagonist Joad family meets California migrants travelling east (much like Ruscha). Route 66 later appeared as a motif in Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider*. Ruscha selected twenty-six photographs from, what he claims to be, the “sixty or seventy” he had captured throughout his tour, editing the number of images partly by eliminating those that appeared to him “too interesting.”

Rather than approach his subject, the gasoline station, traditionally and capture each image from multiple vantage points and exposures, Ruscha used his camera as a scribe, choosing to take only one photograph for each of the gas stations he encountered. In other words, Ruscha was not seeking an artful, perfect shot. In each image, a strip of road is present between the station and the photographer, announcing Ruscha’s physical distance from his subject. Each gas station is crowned by a stretch of clear sky, which is

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94 Ruscha and Hopper were relatively close friends, having met at the Ferus Gallery, which represented them both, in the early 1960s. Hopper’s iconic 1961 photograph of two Standard Oil signs seen through an automobile windshield at the intersection of Santa Monica Boulevard, Melrose Avenue, and North Doheny Drive on historic Route 66 in Los Angeles, *Double Standard*, was reproduced on the invitation for Ed Ruscha’s second solo exhibition at Ferus Gallery in 1964. Despite the related subject matter, these stations that Hopper photographed are not featured in *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (Schwartz, 89-91).

95 Richards, 35.
sometimes inhabited by mountains and trees or, in the case of the more urban settings, other buildings.

Ruscha begins with *Bob’s Service* in Los Angeles, California, followed by a *Texaco* station, also located in Los Angeles on the Sunset Strip (Figures 1.4 and 1.5, respectively). Both stations are constructed in predominantly white stucco with high billboards perched beside them, advertising their respective brands of petrol to approaching drivers. As Ruscha exits the city, moving onto *Union* in the desert town of Needles, California, the stations’ backdrops transform dramatically (Figure 1.6). Asphalt roads with white-painted traffic lines, as well as curbs that dictate station from street, give way to dirt entryways that are indistinguishable from the surrounding desert. The stations blend less with their surroundings, as they had in Los Angeles, and appear like oases amongst brush and cacti.

In the city, gasoline stations are, as Ruscha commented, part of a “dense fabric,” but along the road “they’re islands on a flat plain and take on a completely different personality.”96 *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* demonstrates Ruscha’s observation. While a line of cars can be seen waiting for service at the Los Angeles stations, few cars are present at Union Station in Needles and many of those that follow. It is as if each station were, as Ruscha continued, “like a one or two person Western town.”97

Only when Ruscha reaches Oklahoma City do the stations appear to be a part of an urban setting once more. The second to last image, *Knox Less, Oklahoma City*, *Oklahoma*, announces itself as independent from its urban surroundings with signs of various sizes and heights that encourage passersby to “stop and save” (Figure 1.7). Above

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96 Ed Ruscha, “Street Talk with Ed Ruscha An Interview with Michael Auping.”
97 Ibid.
the pumps, strings of flags flutter in the wind, as if the station is celebrating its grand opening or a sale. This image also advertises the price of the gasoline three times on numerous signs, which coincidentally is twenty-six cents. Self Service, Milan, New Mexico, also features a sign that also advertises regular gas for twenty-six cents (Figure 1.8). Despite these visual puns, it appears as though Ruscha did not pursue the motif any further; elsewhere, gasoline costs twenty-nine cents, thirty cents, thirty-three cents, thirty-four cents and so on.

The text that accompanies each image only notes each station’s location (city and state) and chosen brand of gasoline in an all-capital serif-type. “I have eliminated all text from my books,” Ruscha later commented, “[because] I want[ed] absolutely neutral material.”98 While Ruscha created the typeface featured on the book’s cover, spine and title page, the one used for the remainder was not the artist’s creation; it is not deliberately “artistic” looking, it is instead reminiscent of the same type found in newspapers or books. Other than explanatory captions, there is no other added text, thus nearly stripping the book form of one of its defining qualities as such.

The photographs are clearly cropped, oscillating between square and rectangular-format, and never occupy full pages, always leaving a variably sized white border above, below and to the left and right. In Knox Less, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, a single photograph spread across two pages, Ruscha eliminates excess sky and street to give the image horizontal sweep, and to make the decorative flags seem busier. A similar crop of Rimmy Jim’s Chevron, Rimmy Jim’s Arizona emphasizes the building’s flat façade, and gives it the look of a Hollywood Western movie set, recalling Ruscha’s reference of a

Western town (Figure 1.9). Despite their clear cropping and variable dimensions, each image follows a standard tripartite composition: an upper register occupied by sky (sometimes buildings, trees or mountains, depending on the station); a middle ground featuring the gas station, with either a station pump or sign exactly in the image’s center; and a foreground marked by a strip of highway, pavement or dirt road.

The white space of each page lends the photographs a contained quality. The layout, in most cases, consists of two-page spreads with the photograph placed on the right page and the corresponding text on the left. On these pages, the text aligns with the bottom left corner of the photograph. In these cases, if one follows the standard left-to-right conventions of reading (in English), the text appears before its corresponding image. Some of the page layouts depart from this format. In some cases a single photograph spreads across two pages while in others two photographs placed next to one another comprise a two-page spread. In the former of these page layouts, the text aligns with the bottom right corner of the photograph. In the latter, the text aligns with the bottom right corner of each photograph, as well with that on the opposite page. In these images, at least part of the photograph is “read” before the text, therefore playing with the convention Ruscha appears to advocate in other photographs. The pages are not numbered, indicating that perhaps the stations need not be followed in a particular order.

For the most part, the progression of the photographs appears to be in keeping with their geographic location as Ruscha travels east, but lacks an apparent narrative; it is the gas stations, and only the gas stations, that mark time and space on Ruscha’s journey, “1500 miles and sixty hours of life,” as fellow artist, and fellow documenter of Los
Angeles, Eleanor Antin commented. Ruscha travels through California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas, finally arriving in Oklahoma, Beginning in Los Angeles and “ending” in Oklahoma City. The order in which the stations appear is nearly identical to their position travelling from west to east, with five stations moved out of order. If *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* were to follow the geographic order of the gas stations Ruscha encountered travelling west to east as they would appear on a map, *Union, Needles, California* would be the fifth stop on Ruscha’s journey, but is placed third in the book; *Phillips 66, Flagstaff, Arizona* is ninth, but is placed sixth; *Flying A, Kingsman, Arizona* is sixth, but is placed twelfth; *Standard, Amarillo, Texas* is twentieth, but is placed nineteenth; *Texaco, Vega, Texas* is twenty-third, but is placed twenty-first and, *Fina, Groom, Texas* is twenty-second, but is placed twenty-sixth. Again, Ruscha appears to be playing with the conventions of the book form. Whereas books generally follow a narrative with a prescribed beginning, middle and end, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* tricks its readers, switching and substituting points along the journey, but seemingly for no apparent reason.

The final image of a Fina Station in *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* is the most noticeably out-of-order in terms of the progression of relevant states (Figure 1.10). As the book is technically supposed to end in Oklahoma, it is not only placed in the “wrong” location in the trajectory, but in the wrong state altogether. It is also noticeably smaller than the other photographs, and the text aligns with the top left corner of the image rather than the bottom left or right. On the left of the image is a shed-like structure with pumps

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99 Antin, 64.
100 If each station is assigned a number that corresponds with its location on a map of Route 66, the order in which they appear in Ruscha’s book is 1;2;5;3;4;9;7;8;10;11;12;6;13;14;15;16;17;18;20;21;23;24;25;26;22 (Ed Ruscha, Twentysix Gasoline Stations [Alhambra, CA: National Excelsior Press, 1963]).
and on the right, a billboard, cut in in the same height and shape as the shed, bearing the word FINA in bold capital letters. Both structures are punctuated by telephone poles, and a large stretch of sidewalk asphalt road separates the photographer from the station. As Ruscha renders most of the images in the book completely flat through his frontal framing, this is the only image in Twentysix Gasoline Stations that provides the viewer with longitudinal, perspectival access to the gasoline station. The billboard and the station itself turn into one another at a modest angle, and the lines that separate traffic on the road sweep up towards the left, drawing the viewer towards the FINA sign, thus making the billboard the immediate focal point of the image. Perhaps Ruscha has placed this photograph out-of-sequence as the first documentation of his return to Los Angeles. Or, perhaps Ruscha chose it to signal the “end” of the journey, with the word “Fina” serving as a Duchampian pun on “fin,” used to mark endings.

The print quality of each photograph is unremarkable, reminiscent of commercial post-World War II prints seen in widely circulated periodicals such as Life Magazine. Most of the photographs are taken in daylight at an indeterminate hour. The source of the lighting within each of the daytime photographs appears to be behind or to the side of the photographer, its bright, harsh qualities helping the viewer, as Ruscha stated, to “see [each station] for what it is.” Three images are taken at night, including one of a filling station in Tucumcari, New Mexico, its blurriness suggesting that the photograph had been taken from a moving car (Figure 1.11). In addition, there are no people or cars present, with a few exceptions – three people walking across the forecourt on the Sunset Strip in

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Los Angeles, California, a man leaving his car at Flagstaff, Arizona, and a man looking under his hood at Lipton, Arizona (see Figure 1.5 and Figure 1.12, respectively).

The photographer himself is present in two images. In *Beeline Gas, Holbrook, Arizona*, Ruscha’s nearly full body shadow is cast onto the road that separates him from the gas station, creeping into the bottom of the frame (Figure 1.13). He appears hunched over, caught in the act of looking into his camera’s viewfinder. In *Conoco, Albuquerque, New Mexico*, Ruscha’s shadow appears again, this time in the bottom right corner of the image, cast onto a sign advertising the services available at the station’s garage (Figure 1.14). Perhaps these appearances are incidental in the larger scheme of the book; however, if Ruscha had in fact gone to such great lengths to eliminate individuals from his photographs, why did he simply not orient himself to escape the frame? Taken together, these two images allude to how two different aspects of photography, anonymous reproducibility, and its obverse, the utterly personal stake in “having-been-there,” as Roland Barthes would later put it in his seminal text *Camera Lucida*, may always coexist in a single photograph.¹⁰³ After all, a shadow functions as an indexical sign, much like a photograph (regardless of whether or not its author is physically present in it). These breaks from *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*’ impersonal character will be discussed in relationship to this idea and that of postmodern topography in a later chapter.

Despite the formal differences of the gasoline stations themselves, all twenty-six photographs possess a repetitive and serial quality. After all, all of the stations have the same components, dictated by the structure’s basic functions: a garage, a store, gas tanks sheltered by an overhang and signage bearing a trade name or logo. Ruscha’s virtually identical, systematic treatment of each station, their frontal framing, attention to the rule

of thirds, harsh lighting and so on, points to their similarities and differences, reveals his interest in the formal patterns of functional architecture. Ruscha initially considered the project a kind of reportage, stating in a 1972 interview (after having produced fifteen books over the course of a decade): “[Twentysix Gasoline Stations] was just a simple, straightforward way of getting the news and bringing it back…it’s one of the best ways of just laying down the facts of what’s out there…it’s nothing more than a training manual for people who want to know about things like that.” Ultimately, Margit Rowell writes of the photographs’ mug-shot like qualities, noting that the imperfect resolution of certain photographs, the unattended foregrounds, the stereotypical architecture and presence of tacky commercial signage, and general absence of human activity suggest an “amateur photographer on a road trip, clicking the shutter and moving on.”

**EVERY BUILDING ON THE SUNSET STRIP**

Dated 1966, *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* is Ruscha’s fourth self-published photo book, and his third topographic photo book following *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963) and *Some Los Angeles Apartments* (1965). The volume is sized at a modest seven and a half by five inches (closed) and contains a “cut and pasted” collection of images of the north and south sides of the Sunset Strip in Los Angeles, California, arranged in order. The Sunset Strip is the name given to the one and a half mile long stretch of the twenty-four mile long Sunset Boulevard. Now a part of West Hollywood, the Strip then lay in an unincorporated part of Los Angeles County. By the mid-1960s, its nightclubs,

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104 Ed Ruscha, “Ruscha as Publisher (Or All Booked Up)” interview with David Bourdon
105 Rowell, 18.
including the then iconic Whisky a Go Go, were regularly featuring (what were then) up-and-coming bands such as the Byrds and the Doors.\textsuperscript{106} However, these landmarks are not always indicated by the artist’s addition of text, but instead by their signage and billboards in the images. In presenting a “virtual cruise down the Strip,” as Ruscha once called it, the artist pays homage to a popular Los Angeles hangout and its commercial culture.

Of all of Ruscha’s photo books, \textit{Every Building on the Sunset Strip} is perhaps the most formally unique. It is not a forty-eight page paperback volume per Ruscha’s usual bookmaking standard; instead, upon opening it, the viewer is confronted with the task of unfurling a twenty-five foot long accordion panorama of the street, presented as two parallel ribbons of images separated by a white band, that constitutes its namesake (Figure 1.15). In \textit{Every Building on the Sunset Strip}, the subjective agency of the artist becomes entirely voided in a way it does not in Ruscha’s other books.\textsuperscript{107} Whereas Ruscha more or less gave himself the freedom to choose his twenty-six gasoline stations for his first project, his “instruction” for this volume offers considerably less. In other words, Ruscha could not exclude any building from the Sunset Strip if his instruction demanded “every.”

Ruscha created the twenty-five-foot-long double view by photographing both sides of the street with a 35mm handheld Nikon camera mounted to a slow-moving automobile. Ruscha had first attempted to photograph the strip on foot, but parked cars had intervened in his attempts to frame the storefronts, arguably the central focus of the photographs. He then attached his camera to the back of his 1933 Ford pickup truck,
attached a motor drive (a device that advances the film automatically to allow for rapid-fire exposures), and shot a continuous strip of black-and-white motion picture film, which accommodated roughly two hundred fifty frames per side of the Strip.

Much like *Twenty six Gasoline Stations*, in which Ruscha eliminated nearly all text and skewed his journey’s narrative, Ruscha plays with the viewer’s preconceived notion of the book form. Jaleh Mansoor notes that the book, “a bandlike stretch structurally homologous with the extension of the Strip itself, positions our point of view as from the car’s passenger side.”¹⁰⁸ The accordion format of the book suggests a temporal unfurling, mimicking the sense of passage implicit in a drive; as the car travels the length of the Strip, it produces a stream of horizontally aligned, contiguous images.

By displaying his work on one continuous page, rather than on pages that can be turned, Ruscha provides his viewer with a condensed version of his drive down the Sunset Strip. Given the length of the foldout, however, the viewer can only move forward along the strip, losing and gaining sight of the images as they progress, almost as if they too are driving. The viewer can only revisit certain images by turning around and walking in the opposite direction, much like a car would have to maneuver to turn, park, or change directions. The book may be read as an accordion (unfolded and scrunched), but many of the images are effectively hidden from the viewer as a result.

In the final publication, the south side of the street is strung along the top and the north side is rendered upside down along the bottom, “as if the long strip of pictures had been standing upright and fallen back onto the page.”¹⁰⁹ After Ruscha photographed, Ruscha’s then-girlfriend Danna Knego walked down the Strip, contact sheets in hand,

¹⁰⁸ Mansoor, 131.
¹⁰⁹ Wolf, 140.
taking note of the addresses for each featured building, as well as the locations of cross streets. Because the book was designed as an accordion foldout, the mock-up involved the labor-intensive process of cutting out the photographs, hand pasting them on a board, and carefully positioning the street numbers under the appropriate façades. The final product consists of minimal, but informative, text: individual buildings are indicated by their number addresses, and cross streets are labeled. Because the buildings in question vary in size, the visual presentation of the addresses on the page seems erratic; the placement of text is dictated by its corresponding image. No information is given as to each building’s function; instead, the viewer must determine each building’s purpose by combing the images for explanatory signage, décor, window displays, and so on.

However, the accordion foldout is not the only quality that distinguishes *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* from Ruscha’s other works. While Ruscha followed similar standards for nearly all of his books’ covers, *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*’s is even more reductivist than those that preceded and followed. Each copy of the book was sold in a silver cardboard slipcase that bears no information about it whatsoever, except for the opening where the book’s spine is revealed, which divulges an abbreviated title, “The Sunset Strip,” in gray, in Ruscha’s signature square-serif font, with each word spaced equally along its length (Figure 1.16). The glossy slipcase is well crafted, smooth with no exposed edges; however, though reflective, it is not a mirror, only providing traces of a mirror image when looked at, revealing nothing about the world around it (Figure 1.17). None of Ruscha’s other books were sold with such an accessory.

When removed, the closed book’s cover reveals the abbreviated title once more, in the same light gray square-serif font as the book’s spine. “The Sunset Strip” is printed
small, in a single line, and centered on the very top of the cover. Given the color and size of the words on the cover, they are noticeably less graphic than those appearing on Ruscha’s first book. Every Building on the Sunset Strip’s title page, however, is formally similar to that of Twentysix Gasoline Stations. The volume’s back cover is blank. A matte off-white page displays the book’s full title in three separate lines in the same capitalized typeface as its cover, in black, in a rectangular justified text block that floats centered in the upper third of the page. “Edward Ruscha” appears a few inches below the title, and the publication date, 1966, roughly an inch below that (Figure 1.18). Each word on the cover page is once again variably sized so that each line is the same width. The following page, which needs to be unfolded, reveals the book’s edition and copyright information (1966, Ed Ruscha, Los Angeles, California), and there is no dedication. 110 The next page marks the beginning of the document, with Schwab’s Pharmacy at 8024 Sunset Boulevard on the north end of the street, and Laurel Canyon on the south. 111 The remainder of the foldout follows Ruscha’s drive down the Strip until its end, marked by a Jaguar car dealership located on the north end at 9176 Sunset Boulevard and an unidentifiable store with a dome-shaped awning on the south end at 9176 Sunset Boulevard. 112

As he had with the subjects of Twentysix Gasoline Stations, Ruscha photographed the Sunset Strip at high noon. As a result, the buildings appear flat, with few shadows to provide dimension. The passage of time as Ruscha photographs is, however, apparent. As it is known, Ruscha photographed the north side of the Strip, followed by the south. While the buildings on the south side of the Strip still appear flat by merit of their frontal

111 Ibid.
112 Ibid.
framing, the images are overall considerably darker than those that comprise the north side, as they are cast in shadow due to the later afternoon light. Moreover, the decision to present each side of the street’s throughfare separated into two thin bands divided by a band of white that appears to simulate the road between, voids any sense of perspective that the buildings exist in three-dimensional space. *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* fixes the exterior space as parallel to the car, in contrast to a concept of the car penetrating the space through which it moves. It therefore suggests a nontraversable block between the viewer and the external flow of urban landscape. Anything outside of the car is inaccessible; its “movement only ever skims over their surface, never accessing spatial depth to reach them.”

Despite Ruscha’s meticulous assembly of the book, its images do not align perfectly with one another. As Ruscha had to collage, cut and paste images to create the foldout, the imperfections of matching the facades are cracks along Ruscha’s drive, marked by faint lines where the photographs are pasted together. With cars split in two, and mismatched facades we become aware of the passage of time. Sometimes a sign, a billboard, or a car simply breaks off. Between 8400 Sunset Boulevard and Olive, for example, Ruscha photographs eight cars, all of which are either halved or disjointed (Figure 1.19). Within this stretch, two images are pasted together so that the front tires of a car parked in front of a car rental shop, located at 8418 Sunset, are completely misaligned with the remainder of the car (see Figure 1.19). Other times, the attempted elimination of a car is more apparent. At 8776 Sunset, a house’s end aligns with the back

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113 Mansoor, 132.
114 Mansoor, 131.
115 Here we recall Ruscha’s statement: “I have eliminated all text from my books,” Ruscha commented, “[because] I want absolutely neutral material” (see footnote 13).
half of a car (Figure 1.20). In instances such as these, the cars are variably eliminated or reduced based on their location relative to a building. In this example, the car is halved because it aligns with the farthest left part of the house behind it. This is not the only instance of a car’s elimination being dictated by the placement of a sign on a particular building. At 8370 Sunset, a relatively large apartment building, named Continental Bane is completely warped except for the sign that bears its name (Figure 1.21). Around it cars are, again, discontinuous.

On the other hand, several stretches of the Strip are pieced together rather seamlessly, and are, not surprisingly, naturally free of both cars and people. On the south end, between 8355 and 8373 Sunset, Ruscha pieces together a number of cramped-together buildings: a car dealership, a storefront advertising car rentals and a drive-in restaurant, as well as a number of trees and houses situated behind them (Figure 1.22). Further down the Strip, another seamless stretch of buildings appear, between 8631 and 8669 Sunset on the south side (Figure 1.23). Moreover, while Ruscha apparently omits cars and people, he does not cut empty or undeveloped lots; for example, the space on the north side of the Strip between 8300 Sunset, an apartment block with an indistinguishable sign, and 8358 Sunset, another apartment building, is void of buildings, the subject of the book, and consists only of trees and lamp posts (Figure 1.24).

Similar to the effects created by the images’ lighting and frontal framing, these tiny ruptures between photographic units seem to insist on absolute flatness, and also speak to Ruscha’s presence. However, his presence is not marked by a body or shadow as it is in Twentysix Gasoline Stations. The lines between snapshots refuse to conjoin properly in many instances, leaving the trace of Ruscha’s own process of connecting the
photos together. The stitches between snapshots create inevitable imperfections on a clean seamless surface.\textsuperscript{116} In some places, the photographs do not even align with one another on the same page. Moreover, several black bars and white spaces punctuate each band of photographs. The black bars vary in distance from one another, as well as in thickness, and do not seem to result in the end of a roll of film, nor do they seem to indicate places where images are pasted together. On the north end of the Strip, they can be seen between 8024 and 8100 Sunset, between 8240 Sunset and Harper Boulevard, at the intersection of Sunset and Alta Loma, between 8456 and 8462 Sunset, between 8710 and 8130 Sunset, between 8828 and 8844 Sunset, between 8970 Sunset and Hammond Boulevard, at 9122½ Sunset (Figure 1.25). On the south side, there are black bars located at 8101 Sunset, between 8341 and 8351 Sunset, near the intersection of Sunset and Queens Boulevard, between Londonern Boulevard and 8555 Sunset, at 8961 Sunset and between 9121 and 9131 Sunset (Figure 1.26). Due to this, it seems as though these black bars, never before researched, have been inserted at the discretion of the artist. In between Clark Boulevard and 8900 Sunset, a discernable white gap marks the accordion fold; nothing like it appears again throughout the book (Figure 1.27). Because this is the only instance of such a gap, it is difficult to determine whether this is the result of a printing error, or if Ruscha had intentionally left a gap between images. However, given the presence of the black bars, I will assume the latter.

At times, any coherent perspectival rendering of space, as when a street that bisects the Strip draws away in a diagonal line to signify recession, “buckles in on itself through a fault line.”\textsuperscript{117} Such is the case at Sweetzer Street, where “two snapshots are

\textsuperscript{116} Mansoor, 132.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.
grafted side by side to continue the horizontal extension” (Figure 1.28). This flatness is augmented by its situation on one of the foldout’s creases. However, this is not consistent throughout the book. The intersection of Doheny Drive and the Strip offers perspectival access to the dividing street, with cars, both parked and in motion, clearly receding into space (Figure 1.29).

*Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, with its floating bands, is cut away from a starting point and end point, and suggests nothing about the surrounding environment beyond it. It appears to take place in a zone void of any external orientation, any ground, with a format defined by motion that follows the logic of a car’s movement. This generates, as Jaleh Mansoor argues, “generates a horizontal band structure suspended in a tension between pictorial spatiality and temporality.” Moreover, as Ruscha appears to advocate for flatness in his images, the three-dimensionality of the book itself begins to challenge this, especially since the artist’s hand is unmistakably present. This tension becomes central in both my discussion of postmodern topography.

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118 Ibid.
119 Mansoor, 137.
CHAPTER TWO:
LEARNING FROM LOS ANGELES

INTRODUCTION

Ruscha has never identified himself as a Conceptual or Pop artist, or even a photographer for that matter, having historically, and somewhat famously, shunned such labels.\(^{120}\) That he has always expressed interest in how his books were, and continue to be, received by their audiences, suggests that his projects may, in some ways, best be understood by taking them at face value, and perhaps even better understood by art world “outsiders.” Following their publication, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, among others, soon found a receptive audience among architectural theorists. The architectural and urban theorists who interpreted Ruscha’s books uncovered a crucial layer of their meaning, zeroing in on their depiction of Los Angeles’ cityscape and what problems and pleasures it entailed.\(^ {121}\)

As Alexandra Schwartz writes: “Each of [Ruscha’s] architectural books could also be construed as a study of vernacular, and distinctively Angelino, building types: gas stations, parking lots, apartment buildings, swimming pools.”\(^ {122}\) However, many of the themes touched upon in these studies were not unique to Los Angeles, with later studies focusing on these “Angelino” building types attempting to explain pervasive trends in American architecture during this time. This chapter will therefore be divided into two parts: part one, “Cars and Highways,” will attend to the foremost discourse on Los

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\(^{120}\) Rawlinson, 16.

\(^{121}\) Schwartz, 123.

\(^{122}\) Ibid.
Angeles architecture and urban experience at the time Ruscha began producing his bookworks, and suggests how these writings may influence our reading of Ruscha’s books. Perhaps the most key study of Los Angeles’ urban architecture of this period was Reyner Banham’s *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, published in 1971. The second part, “Signs and Signage,” will examine the building types in Ruscha’s books as they relate to Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown’s theories on Postmodern architecture from their seminal 1972 text, *Learning from Las Vegas*, published just months after *The Architecture of Four Ecologies*. By elaborating on what Ruscha’s books mean to these theories, this chapter will examine aspects of the new terminology I have offered to define *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*.

Upending traditional urban surveys, Banham considered Los Angeles as a total landscape: an architectural object in itself, much like Ruscha would consider his books small-scale works of architecture. Banham was born in Norwich, England and did not travel to Los Angeles until the late 1960s, only a few years before publishing his manifesto celebrating his newly adopted city. His innovative study proposes Los Angeles as an integrated urban system composed of “four ecologies,” examining the ways in which Angelenos relate to the city’s beaches, freeways, flatlands and foothills. Each of these ecologies is equally important for Banham, and ultimately it is the freeway system that links them. Banham identified the mobile city of Los Angeles and as exemplary of the not-so-distant (posturban) future.

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123 Schwartz, 288.
124 Schwartz, 130 – 131.
Jaleh Mansoor’s essay, *Ed Ruscha: One Way Street*, published in 2005, considers “the car as the mediating structure of Ruscha’s photo books,… a specific communicative solution at a particular juncture.”

While Mansoor’s writing falls more into the realm of art historical theory than urban/architectural theory, her work also establishes a complicated dialogue between cars and highways, both prominent, but silent, motifs in Ruscha’s *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip.*

That Venturi and Scott Brown’s text is about “learning” from Las Vegas and not the city itself is central to its message, as Scott Brown writes in the text’s preface, “Las Vegas is not the subject of our book. The symbolism of architectural form is.” They analyze Las Vegas as a phenomenon of architectural communication; the ‘Strip’ is architecture of communication over space, achieved through signs, a unique condition in comparison to “enclosed space,” which is “the easiest to handle.”

The value of symbolism and allusion in architecture of vast space and speed are evidenced through the Strip. Ultimately, *Learning from Las Vegas* is a case study in the victory of symbolism-space over forms-in-space. The architects emphasize the role of the car in this realm of architecture, much like Banham stresses the car as central to one’s experience of Los Angeles, which helps individuals interpret the otherwise chaotic amalgam of signs that comprise the city.

*The Architecture of Four Ecologies* and *Learning from Las Vegas* were groundbreaking in their presentation of the city as a new model of late-twentieth century

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125 Mansoor, 129.
126 Venturi and Scott Brown, xv.
127 Venturi and Scott Brow, 7–8.
urbanism distinct from that of centralized Europe and East Coast America.\textsuperscript{128} Both texts cite Ruscha as a direct influence on their vision of “postmodern urbanism,” with Banham listing Ruscha’s name in his book’s introduction,\textsuperscript{129} and Venturi and Scott Brown thanking “the Pop artists (particularly Edward Ruscha)” in theirs.\textsuperscript{130} Moreover, in Learning from Las Vegas there are two illustrations that bear Ruscha’s name: “An Edward Ruscha elevation of the Strip” and a “Piece of South Street, ‘Ruscha,’” which represent the Las Vegas Strip and the architects’ plan for the Philadelphia Crosstown Community, respectively (Figures 2.1 and 2.2, respectively).\textsuperscript{131}

Both texts are clearly indebted to Ruscha, and though they touch upon similar themes, they also draw disparate, yet not completely unrelated, conclusions. On one hand Banham asserts the necessity of the freeway system to a city like Los Angeles, while Venturi and Scott Brown’s discussion of the built environment as a system of signs anticipates an emerging information age. They nevertheless articulate two important themes of the Los Angeles experience: the city’s freeway system and flattened, often disposable architecture and signage. They both rely on cars, both are used for the circulation of goods and both help circulate the sign the way Venturi and Scott Brown describe. However, these parallels are also fraught with tension, as they, similarly to Ruscha examine the dialectical relationship between motion and stasis in terms of this type of architecture. By placing these readings parallel, Ruscha’s books indicate that there is a historical and mutually productive relationship between the freeway system and an emerging sign culture.

\textsuperscript{128} Aron Vinegar, Michael J. Golec, et. al., Relearning from Las Vegas (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008, 107.
\textsuperscript{129} Banham, xxxix.
\textsuperscript{130} Venturi and Scott Brown, 28–29.
\textsuperscript{131} Venturi and Scott Brown, 126.
CARs AND HIGHWAYS

Kevin Lynch’s 1960 book *The Image of the City* was at the forefront of discourse on the Los Angeles freeway system. Although, as Lynch comments, car culture had figured largely into the Angelino’s lifestyle since the 1920s, the city’s freeway plan was relatively new at the time he wrote, and certainly would have been foreign to Ruscha, who had then just relocated from the rural Midwest. Lynch writes of Los Angeles: “Automobile traffic and the highway system [are] the daily experience—sometimes exciting, usually tense and exhausting…There were frequent references to…the kinesthetic sensations of dropping, turning, climbing.” Lynch’s marks one of the first widely disseminated studies to examine the importance of driving to both the infrastructure of Los Angeles, as well as one’s experience of it, and the resulting literature was largely celebratory in tone.

Some commentaries, however, were not as wholeheartedly positive, and four years later, Peter Blake published *God’s Own Junkyard: The Planned Deterioration of America’s Landscape*. As the book’s title suggests, the author, a Berlin-born advocate and practitioner of International Modernist-style architecture, viewed Los Angeles’ highway system as a corruptive force. According to Blake, the automobile's promise of pleasure and liberation would impel the dismemberment of the city, defile nature and exacerbate chaos due to perpetual highway congestion. Around the same time Blake delivered his grim prognosis of Los Angeles’ developing urban and suburban spaces,

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writing “despair, inertia, apathy, seething frustration and latent turbulence...this is the image of our ‘alabaster cities’ today.”

Regardless of their stances, both Lynch and Blake establish that Los Angeles is a city of cars and freeways, a point that was later developed and revolutionized by Banham, whose musings seem to align with the tone of Ruscha’s books. Physical movement is implied throughout *Twentysix Gasoline Stations and Every Building on the Sunset Strip*. In the former, Ruscha carries his readers along a Route 66 roadtrip, and in the latter, a leisurely afternoon drive down Sunset Boulevard. The locations featured in both books depend on being accessed by car. This is especially true of *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* as filling stations are the lifeblood of a car’s operation. This sense of movement is achieved by Ruscha’s decision to adopt the book form, as well as the layouts of the photographs contained within them. However, this sense of movement is violated by Ruscha’s rendering of the roads on which he drives, or lack thereof. Again, Ruscha’s books pose a contradiction: one that both accepts and rejects driving and car culture as central to the Los Angeles experience.

Banham’s central thesis asserts that Los Angeles architecture and urbanism was, at the time, distinguished by three main characteristics: mobility, speed and newness. From there he offers lengthy considerations of Los Angeles’ vernacular building types (among them, he notes gas stations, parking lots, apartment buildings, and the stores and theatres common to “the Strip”); its civic and transportation infrastructure (freeways, train lines and airports); and its popular culture as mythologized in movies and advertising. These factors suggest the multi-faceted character of Los Angeles, its easy

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134 Ibid.
mobility and its essential informality.\(^{135}\) "Simply to go from the oldest monument to the newest could well prove a short, boring and uninstructive journey," Banham writes in the opening chapter, "because the point about this giant city, which has grown almost simultaneously all over, is that all its parts are equal and equally accessible from all other parts at once."\(^{136}\)

Ultimately Banham looked at the four ecologies he describes as simultaneous products and producers of Los Angeles’ infrastructure, which were ultimately the foundational element of the city, which in turn made it worthy of architectural analysis. It is not a sprawling city composed of incidental small towns and neighborhoods, but instead a total, complex entity; “a megastructure (if you will) analogous to a medieval hill town that seemed to erupt from its site and had now taken on a life of its own.”\(^{137}\) Despite the scattered, sprawled, seemingly incoherent character of Los Angeles’ communities (“sometimes geographic, other times social”), or ecologies, the city’s infrastructure unites them and creates the foundation upon which the city is built.\(^{138}\)

Though *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* preceded Banham’s treatise, the former two books nevertheless touch upon similar themes of mobility, serving as pictorial manifestations of Banham’s written word. The detail with which Ruscha documented Los Angeles testifies to his fascination with the city and its ever-changing infrastructure. While Ruscha avoids depicting cars in his books, the images produced for them depended on being accessible by car. Los Angeles,


\(^{137}\) Ibid.

\(^{138}\) Schwartz, 131–132.
as well as its distance from Omaha, Nebraska, is “geographically extremely spread out,” requiring its residents and travellers to rely on automobiles and highways.¹³⁹ Physical movement has therefore come to define the experience of Los Angeles, and, to briefly return to Banham: “the language of design, architecture and urbanism in Los Angeles is the language of mobility…and the city will never be fully understood by those who cannot move fluently through its diffuse urban texture, cannot go with the flow of its unprecedented life.”¹⁴⁰ The highway, though never present beyond the strip of road separating Ruscha from the gas stations he photographs, plays a crucial role in *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*.

One element under consideration in defining postmodern topography is therefore how these books relate to specific parts of the city, as well as the highway system and car culture that defined them in unprecedented ways at the time of their production. All of the photographs in *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* were snapped “on the go,” the former serving as traces of pit stops along the highway, and the latter actually in transit. As Ruscha carries his viewers along Route 66 and the Sunset Strip, Ruscha underscores the idea that the types of architecture he photographs are experienced as moving streams of images. There is one image of an Shell Station in Tucumcari, New Mexico in *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* that seems to capture actual movement (see Figure 1.11). The station, shot at night, appears as a conglomeration lights and fuzzy shapes, their blurriness implying that it may have been photographed from a moving car. Physical movement is an essential part of how both books came into fruition, just as it is to the experience of Los Angeles itself.

¹³⁹ Schwartz, 132.
¹⁴⁰ Banham, 5.
Ruscha’s books mimic the process of driving along a strip or highway and taking in its sights while offering commentary on the nature of Los Angeles urbanism, which relies on vernacular building styles, popular culture and, most importantly, experience through physical movement. Not surprisingly, then, do the white bars of paper underneath the images in *Twentysix Gasoline Station*, as well as the white bar that separates the north and south ends of the Sunset Strip in *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* simulate the presence of a road or highway. However, the road or highway is always present *only* in its absence, and viewers only catch glimpses of it through Ruscha’s cropping of images. Throughout *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, the highway often appears in the foreground of each image as an abstracted black shape and, while they are sometimes parked at the gasoline stations, the cars that ordinarily would occupy it are absent (in other words, cars are never seen in motion). Similarly, in *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, the width of Sunset Boulevard is reduced to a sliver that runs parallel to the Strip’s north and south sidewalks, and the images that stitch the cross-streets together often buckle in on one another, also reducing them abstract geometric shapes that do not always resemble a road. Moreover, Ruscha attempts to eliminate cars in motion, much like he does in *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*. While he is not entirely successful, many of the cars in motion appear as fractions or fragments of whole cars (see Figure 1.19), and are therefore not “actually” cars driving up and down Sunset Boulevard. By refusing this sense of the road/highway, Ruscha disrupts sense of ongoing circulation for which Banham advocates.

Nevertheless, the act of “reading” both books implies experiences through physical movement, which Banham stresses as fundamental to understanding Los
Angeles as a city. Turning the pages in *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* mimics the monotonous quality of a long road trip; page after page, the viewer encounters the same roadside fare before arriving at their destination. Similarly, in *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, Ruscha provides his viewer with a condensed version of his own drive down the Sunset Strip. Given the length of the foldout, however, the viewer can only move forward along the strip, losing and gaining sight of the images as they walk, almost as if they too is driving. If the reader is privileged to the entire foldout, they can only revisit certain images by turning around and walking in the opposite direction, much like a car would have to maneuver to turn, park, or change directions. Or consider Jerry McMillan’s photograph of his friend Ruscha opening *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, which reveals an unfolded stretch of the book, indistinguishable due to the camera’s focus on Ruscha, angled at forty-five degrees and held comfortably within his partially outstretched arms (Figure 2.3). McMillan’s photograph marks another way in which viewers can physically engage with the work that is actually quite unlike driving. However, Ruscha’s allusions to both car culture and driving as they pertain to the books’ formal elements cannot be interpreted exclusively on such obvious levels, as certain other characteristics help raise questions about the ways in which viewers can physically engage with *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, as well as the ways in which Ruscha denied or complicated such an engagement.

Jaleh Mansoor views *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* as a recorded visual trace of a drive. The length of the book, created by its accordion format, mimics the sense of

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142 Ibid.
143 Mansoor, 130.
passage implicit in driving. As the car rolls down the length of the street, it produces a series of images of horizontally aligned, contiguous spaces.\(^{144}\) The decision to present each side of the road in this format (separated into two thin bands divided by a wide band of white) voids any sense of perspective, of buildings that exist in three-dimensional space. Having fixed the exterior space as parallel to a car, in contrast to a concept of the car penetrating the space through which it moves, both *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* suggest an impenetrable barrier between the viewer and exterior urban landscape.\(^{145}\) The buildings are inaccessible; the car’s movement only ever skims over their surface, rarely accessing spatial depth to reach them, and the flatness of the exterior world presses viewers up against the car window.

Banham’s celebration of Los Angeles was not met without criticism. Perhaps the most noteworthy critique came from Peter Plagens, who released a scathing review of the book entitled “Los Angeles: The Ecology of Evil” in the December 1972 issue of *Artforum*. Plagens, also a Los Angeles non-native, lambasted the entire current of Los Angeles studies, perceiving them as elitist for overlooking “the guts of L.A.”\(^{146}\) In doing so, Plagens argues that Banham and his disciples skirt over the majority of the “everyday” Los Angeles experience, writing: architectural literature on most cities ignores the daily grind…in favor of the few immediate features which apparently distinguish them from other cities.”\(^{147}\) As a result of these omissions, “the millionfold smalltime commercial transactions, the lives of the workers and shopkeepers, police and

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144 Mansoor, 131.
145 This is not entirely true, and the tension between total flatness and access to a three-dimensional spatial interior in *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* will be addressed further in chapter three.
147 Ibid.
criminals, housewives and teachers, and unemployed and elderly,” Plagens believes that many of his contemporaries neglected many of Los Angeles’ dire social and environmental problems. Considering Plagens’ argument, Ruscha, too, disregards these issues in both *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*.

Ruscha in fact omits the exact group of people Plagens feels to deserve a place in the Los Angeles studies, especially in the latter of these examples. However, Ruscha advocated for his books’ neutrality, going to great lengths to exclude text from his works, as well as cars and people from the images contained within them, inherently making no apologies about a formal decision Plagens would have criticized. The intentional inclusion of people would therefore certainly lend each of Ruscha’s books a political charge. Mark Rawlinson writes of this:

> Ruscha’s photographs fail to reveal the structures of oppression and antagonism, the ideologies which traps us within the “iron cage” of contemporary capitalism, because his work…mimes the operating logic of late capitalism, choosing to replicate rather than transfigure those self-same systems of power. In effect, neutering the power of art [and] photography.  

Rawlinson’s comment that connects Ruscha’s books with late capitalism is the first of its kind, and though Rawlinson makes no additional references to late capitalism, this statement is critical in negotiating Plagens silent criticism of Ruscha’s books, as well as the books’ tensions that will be discussed in chapter three.

Ultimately, Banham not only examined the “high” architectural monuments of Los Angeles, but also considered at length the proliferating everyday architecture of the city, such as fast food restaurants, movie theaters and gasoline stations that had been previously ignored in architectural theory because of their ephemeral, temporary

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148 Rawlinson, 18.
qualities. In fact, it was the “throw-away” quality of much of the landscape of Los Angeles that fascinated Banham most and what he felt underpinned the city at large: “its plug-in quality—the ability to erase and replace architecture over and over as the time and need required.” In the introduction to the 2001 edition of The Architecture of Four Ecologies, Anthony Vidler echoes Banham, describing Los Angeles in “as an active and ever-changing palimpsest of the new global metropolis.” For Banham, Los Angeles’ infrastructure, its freeways, aqueducts, and other systems the city deployed to colonize the land, ultimately accommodated the city’s bright, colorful, and casual architecture.

This architecture, which Banham rejoices, was representative of an authentic response to the California landscape, the objects of contemporary mass production (cars, surfboards, movies), and the loss of historic precedent (in this case, Modernism) as an agent for progress.

Interestingly Vidler’s commentary resonates with a comment Ruscha once made to Banham that appeared in Banham’s pseudo-documentary film entitled Reyner Banham Loves Los Angeles, which was produced for the BBC series One Pair of Eyes in 1972, the same year Four Ecologies was published. The film, written by Banham, is presented as a gleeful road trip throughout Los Angeles, with Banham cruising through the city at the discretion of a (facetious) audio guidebook, which he calls “Baede-Kar,” that plays out of his rental car’s radio. After touring a diverse array of sites that celebrates the eclecticism of the Los Angeles cityscape, he somewhat grimly announces that Los Angeles “is a town that has no public monuments worth visiting,” implying that the Los Angeles

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149 Warren Techentin, “Banham’s Four Ecologies Revisited.”
151 Warren Techentin, “Banham’s Four Ecologies Revisited.”
experience is defined by the act of driving through the city. He detours to Tiny Naylor’s drive-in restaurant on Sunset Boulevard to ask “one of the local talent,” Ed Ruscha, “what sort of public commercial buildings” he would recommend to visitors of Los Angeles. Not surprisingly, Ruscha responds: “Gas stations,” which leads to the following exchange:

Banham: What are the particular virtues of these buildings?
Ruscha: Well, the fact that they can be put together in about three days or less. Sometimes it takes longer to tear [one] down than it does to put up a new one. And they’re streamlined. That’s what I like about them.
Banham: And is the standardization a virtue?
Ruscha: Oh yeah, definitely, definitely. I like the fact that they can just put something up and get right into business…
Banham: Yeah, but from the observant visitor’s point of view it means that you can visit the same building in 900 different locations.
Ruscha: Yeah, but you’re not sure it will be in the same location when you come back again next year!153

Certainly Vidler’s vision of Los Angeles as “an active and ever-changing palimpsest” is not new, and Ruscha himself was a firm believer in it, as well. Moreover, the comparisons that can be drawn between Ruscha’s comments here and his sentiments concerning his books are almost too convenient: Ruscha’s mention of gas stations, their meeting at a tacky diner on the Sunset Strip, and his general appearance in the film that makes apparent his work’s influence on Banham’s thinking about Los Angeles. The city has no landmarks, not because it is culturally flat, but because its meant to be seen in constant circulation.

Ruscha’s emphasis on the impact of Los Angeles’ car culture on its architecture and urban landscape is consistent with his own books, as is his statement concerning the

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152 Reyner Banham Loves Los Angeles, directed by Julian Cooper (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1972), DVD.
153 Ibid.
increasing standardization of building practices, for his books are, each unsigned, unnumbered and printed and bound using industrial practices, with their uniform format, “standardized.” As Ruscha once humorously noted when asked about their production, “It is almost worth the money to have the thrill of 400 exactly identical books stacked in front of you.” Moreover, Ruscha’s praise of the impermanent and disposable nature of gas station attests to his belief that his books are also disposable due to their cheapness, portability and curious subject matter. Much like the disposability of the gas stations Ruscha describes, as well as his books, Banham’s sense of the Los Angeles freeway experience accommodates architecture being erased and replaced.

Ultimately the car functions as a frame for everything we see in Ruscha’s books, mediating our perceptual field, and often arriving at a flattening result. However, this flatness was not achieved purely through Ruscha’s chosen vantage point; in fact many of the buildings Ruscha photographed emphasized an architectural flatness themselves, which are enriched not by the suggestion of interior space, but by exterior signage. According to Venturi and Scott Brown, this type of architecture is most receptive to mobility, thus producing sign culture, though sometimes in dialectical terms.

**SIGNS AND SIGNAGE**

“The sign is more important than the architecture. This is reflected in the proprietor’s budget. The sign at the front is a vulgar extravaganza, the building at the back, a modest necessity. Sometimes the building is the sign.”

Both architects, architectural theorist and professors, as well as later founding partners of Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates in Philadelphia, Robert Venturi and

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155 Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, 13.
Denise Scott Brown have come to be known as vanguard yet controversial critics of corporate Modernist architecture, which they simply believed to be boring. They taught a series of studios at the Yale School of Architecture in the mid-1960s, the most famous of these was in 1968 in which Venturi and Scott Brown, together with Steven Izenour, led a team of students to document and analyze the Las Vegas Strip, an unlikely subject for a serious research project (much like Ruscha’s own unlikely muses for his “serious” art). In 1972, they published their findings as *A Significance for A&P Parking Lots, or Learning from Las Vegas* later revising it in 1977 as *Learning from Las Vegas: the Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, both vitriolic rebuttals of orthodox modernism and elite architectural tastes.

Scott Brown had actually discovered Ruscha’s photo books in the mid-1960s while teaching at the University of California in Los Angeles and creating her own photographic archive of the city’s vernacular architecture. Her first written statements about Ruscha’s art and his instructive approach to contemporary urban forms first appeared in her 1969 article for *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* entitled “On Pop Art, Permissiveness, and Planning.” In the short, three-page opinion piece, Scott Brown devotes considerable attention to Ruscha’s photography, reproducing three single photographs, including one from *Twentysix Gasoline Stations (El Paso, Winslow, Arizona)*.

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156 Vinegar, Golec, et. al., 107.
Scott Brown’s early comments on Ruscha draw attention to the artist’s subjects and style as well as the ways the resulting images might serve to produce information about vernacular architecture expressed through seemingly objective vision. She notes that the framing of Ruscha’s subjects, captured as black and white photographs with few textual interruptions, offers little distinction between representation and reality (though viewers will find that Ruscha challenges this, as will be discussed in chapter three), which she later believed could support her and her collaborators’ research goals in *Learning from Las Vegas*. Scott Brown would later write in *Learning from Las Vegas*: “We should aim to dead-pan the material so it speaks for itself. Ruscha has pioneered this treatment in his monographs. It is a way to avoid being upstaged by our own subject matter. It can lead too, toward the methodological rigor, which will be required of architectural formal analysis once it is recognized as a legitimate activity.”158 As Scott Brown indicates, Ruscha’s straightforward documentation of vernacular architecture in his books provided them with a way, as she says in *Learning from Las Vegas*, “of looking nonjudgmentally at the environment.”159

Ruscha’s influence on Venturi and Scott Brown’s work is apparent in several images that appear in *Learning from Las Vegas*. Their “Edward Ruscha elevation of the Strip” displays an uncanny resemblance to the format of *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, consisting of two two-page spreads (instead of an accordion foldout) and includes, as per Ruscha’s example, photographs of both sides of the Strip separated by a white band and marked only with intermittent names identifying cross streets. The captions of both illustrations make clear their appropriation of Ruscha’s art, and the compositions

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158 Venturi and Scott Brown, xvii.
159 Ibid.
were made by attaching movie cameras to the hood of a car to “capture the forward-moving view.”\(^{160}\) Another camera was placed in the side windows of the car “to document the roadside from a complementary angle.”\(^{161}\) Scott Brown has since identified this technique as “three-camera deadpan,” a term that also connects their method with an earlier description to Ruscha’s approach, which they also describe as deadpan.\(^{162}\)

Much like Reyner Banham (and Ruscha, for that matter), Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown approached a city, Las Vegas, through a car windshield. In a 2010 interview at the Yale School of Architecture, Venturi commented that he and his partner had actually considered studying Los Angeles before Las Vegas.\(^{163}\) However, they did not choose the former as their subject, once commenting that Los Angeles was not a “pure” enough distillation of what they were after: “a philosophy of design that reflected the speed and messiness of life as it was coming to be lived.”\(^{164}\) They wanted something “more concentrated and easier to study.”\(^{165}\) Despite their disparate choice of subjects, Ruscha and Venturi, and Scott Brown share an approach to a spare rendering of previously unnoticed elements of the urban experience.

In addition to their groundbreaking discussion of architectural communication in an urban setting, the project coined the terms “Duck” and “Decorated Shed,” descriptions of the two predominant ways of embodying iconography in buildings, the former of which will be helpful here. *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* both focus on building facades in a way that anticipates the term “decorated shed”

\(^{160}\) Vinegar, Golec, et. al., 111.
\(^{161}\) Ibid.
\(^{162}\) Ibid.
\(^{164}\) Ibid.
\(^{165}\) Ibid.
and symbolic communication through buildings and signage more generally. As Ruscha has commented on *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, “All I was after was that store-front plane…It’s like a Western town in a way. A store-front plane of a Western town is just paper, and everything behind it is just nothing.” Ruscha’s concentration on facades in strip and gasoline station architecture especially demonstrates a shared perception of and interest in the symbolic nature of building fronts, which, as the architects suggest, exist as the foundation of American architecture.

Considering his background in commercial advertising and the contents of *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, Ruscha sympathized most with the signage that adorned otherwise uninteresting buildings, the “decorated sheds,” as they would come to be known by the architects. Venturi and Scott Brown define “Decorated Shed,” as well as “duck” (another term coined by them):

> We shall emphasize the image – image over process or form – in asserting that architecture depends in its perception and creation on past experience and emotional association and these symbolic and representational elements may often be contradictory to the form, structure, and program with which they combine in the same building. We shall survey this contradiction in its two manifestations:

1. Where the architectural systems of space, structure and program are submerged and distorted by an overall symbolic form. This kind of building-becoming-sculpture we call the *duck* in honor of the duck-shaped drive-in, “The Long Island Duckling,” illustrated in *God’s Own Junkyard* by Peter Blake.

2. Where systems of space and structure are directly at the service of the program, and ornament is applied independently of them. This we call the *decorated shed*.

The Duck therefore describes buildings that are sculptural objects, not only including fast-food kiosks in the shape of doughnuts and motels with concrete teepees as rooms,

166 Venturi and Scott Brown, 87.
which the architects mention, but also almost all modernist architecture, designed as an abstract object in relation to the local context. The decorated shed, on the other hand, is a low-cost “box” ornamented with a sign, or signs, that indicates its purpose. According to Venturi and Scott Brown, Decorated Sheds are explicitly symbolic, denotative and familiar and can be enriched through their layers of meaning. Their theory of the Decorated Shed is characterized by the separation of a building’s interior space and exterior sign, the latter of which attempted to combat the monotony of certain building types (such as gas stations). With the Decorated Shed, as Alex Kitnick comments “there is not so much a split between inside and out as there is a voiding of interiority and a valorization of exteriority.”\footnote{167} That the Decorated Shed finds “public symbolism” necessary is significant because it suggests that the exterior is the only place where identity exists now that the interior has been rendered less important. The architects state that connotative architecture is dry, irresponsible and irrelevant in a time when architecture should embrace iconography and mixed media in a world of fast pace and commercialism.

Venturi and Scott Brown propose that Las Vegas is a heightened example of architectural persuasion with a combination of forms and styles, both in architecture and landscape. When discussing this architecture of persuasion, “antspatial,” non-three dimensional, or flat, signs and symbols that emphasize communication over space, Venturi and Scott Brown pay particular attention to the role of mobility in billboard advertisements and other large-scale signage: “The commercial persuasion of roadside eclecticism provokes bold impact in the vast and complex setting of a new landscape of

\footnote{167 Alex Kitnick, "What’s Your Type?" in Dan Graham, ed. by Alex Kitnick, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011), 205.}
big spaces, high speeds and complex programs. Styles and signs make connections among many elements, far apart and seen fast. The message is basically commercial; the context is basically new.”¹⁶⁸ Venturi and Scott Brown continuously emphasize the role of the car in this realm of architecture. Some thirty years prior, they explain, the driver of a car could maintain a sense of orientation in space; “at the simple crossroad a little sign with an arrow confirmed what was obvious.”¹⁶⁹

Today, however, a deluge of large buildings and billboard advertisements confronts and frustrates the driver, who is either passing Las Vegas on the highway or treating it as their destination. The views through a car’s windshield represent the automobile’s forward motion through the sequential shifts in roadside signage. As the architects specify: “The emerging order of the Strip is a complex order…It is not an order dominated by the expert and made easy for the eye. The moving eye in the moving body must work to pick out and interpret a variety of changing, juxtaposed orders, like the shifting configurations of a Victor Vasarely painting.”¹⁷⁰ Vasarley’s paintings, (usually) consist of black and white grids containing circles, ovals or squares that give the impression of movement, or alternatively, of swelling or warping.¹⁷¹ Similarly, buildings and roadways offer consistent geometric elements, and the viewer must “work to pick out” any pattern through a study of their subtle differences. While driving, individuals need to be able to read billboards and signage quickly, thus accounting for billboards’ soaring heights, large-scale text and vibrant colors. The freeway culture therefore

¹⁶⁸ Venturi and Scott Brown, 9.
¹⁶⁹ Ibid.
¹⁷⁰ Venturi and Scott Brown, 53.
¹⁷¹ Vinegar and Golec, 113.
produces sign culture, accounting for the circulation of people and capital, as well as for the circulation of signs.

Ruscha’s book covers read like billboards or advertisements, and may also be interpreted as Decorated Sheds. Both *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*’ and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*’s covers bear their simple, descriptive titles in capital letters against a monochromatic background. The off-white, medium-weight paperback covers are “adorned” with titles that are graphic in comparison, much like a plain building would be decorated with signs that declare its purpose. Moreover, Ruscha’s covers, though unassuming, advertise the books’ contents. The covers, more or less, provide readers with a promise of what is inside, much like a billboard would display the merits of a product. The photographs contained within the books may read like advertisements, as well. On a superficial level, the images themselves are flattened due to Ruscha’s framing of them. However, there are many additional advertisements embedded within each image.

Every image in *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* features a caption that indicates the station’s chosen brand of gasoline, as well as its location, which signals to the reader where they may be able to find it. Moreover, most of the images depict signs that advertise the exact price per gallon of gasoline at said station, as well as what other products and services may be available. For example, two stations, *Knox Less, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma* and *Self Service, Milan, New Mexico*, rather humorously advertise gasoline for twenty-six cents. (see Figures 1.7 and 1.8). Elsewhere, gasoline costs twenty-nine cents, thirty cents, thirty-three cents, thirty-four cents and so on. Some stations advertise the availability of food and cigarettes, as well as Rimmy Jim’s Chevron, located in Rimmy Jim’s, Arizona, which, according to a sign painted onto the building, sells
Navajo-style rugs (Figure 1.9). Similarly, the storefronts that line Sunset Boulevard in *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* serve as meta-advertisements, as well. Gasoline stations, car rental companies, boutiques, restaurants and nightclubs punctuate the length of the Strip, and each building comes with a sign advertising its wares and services. Like these advertisements, the books themselves, printed in large editions and sold for a relatively nominal cost, also circulate. The book medium is therefore a sort of vehicle in its own right.

With Venturi and Scott Brown’s musings on both the decorated shed and billboard’s relationship to the driver in mind, we see that Ruscha captures things that are often seen while moving. In the case of *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, it is unlikely that anyone else would ever stop driving to see a gasoline station simply for its architectural merits. Gasoline stations serve a very specific purpose for the driver; they are not roadside attractions. Venturi and Scott Brown devote considerable discussion to gasoline station architecture specifically, writing:

> Service stations…conform in general to this system of inflection toward the highway through the position and form of their elements. Regardless of the front, the back of the building is styleless, because the whole is turned toward the front and no one sees the back. The gasoline stations parade their universality. The aim is to demonstrate their similarity to the one at home – your friendly neighborhood gas station.\(^{172}\)

We recall here what Ruscha finds so intriguing about gas stations, as told to Reyner Banham in *Reyner Banham Loves Los Angeles*. His statement concerning the increasing standardization of building practices is congruent with the standardized format of both *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*. To return to an

\(^{172}\) Venturi and Scott Brown, 35.
earlier point, the contents of *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* were snapped “on the go.” As Ruscha carries his viewers along Route 66, Ruscha underscores the idea that the types of architecture he photographs are in fact experienced as moving streams of images. Similarly, in the case of *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, the buildings featured are generally observed quickly, either from a car window or at street level.

*Twentysix Gasoline Stations* and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* ultimately employ the mobility of the car, as Rayner Banham would have it, to help viewers sort through the many signs found in Los Angeles. According to Venturi and Scott Brown, the view from the car flattens architectural space, thus accounting for the already flat decorated sheds and billboards that line streets and highways. Similarly, Ruscha flattens images as he drives, illustrating his relationship to the car, and, in turn, this type of architecture. The photographs contained within *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* themselves therefore pose a similar tension between motion and stasis. Ultimately, according to Venturi and Scott Brown, the car, a vehicle in motion, helps to circulate the sign, a static entity—an effect Ruscha elicits in his books. Yet as is typical with Ruscha, his celebration of the freeway system and signage is fraught with contradiction. His books suggest movement like the freeway, but initiate a block by not showing it. Though Ruscha presents facades in the way Venturi and Scott Brown celebrate, the fluidity of the car in relationship to them is interrupted by the absence of the road in both *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*. 
“Los Angeles to me is like a series of store-front planes that are all vertical from the street, and there’s almost like nothing behind the facades. It’s all facades here – that’s what intrigues me about the whole city of Los Angeles – the façade-ness of the whole thing.”

As Ruscha indicates above, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* seems to place emphasis on architectural facades at the expense of their interior. What he suggests here is central not only to the postmodern condition of the urban built environment according to Venturi and Scott Brown (as discussed in the previous chapter) but also to the postmodern condition in a more general sense as described by its key theorists including Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson.

In both *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, Ruscha appears to adhere to a superficial, surface-oriented reading of his books’ namesakes, made apparent by the artist’s decision to photograph his subjects frontally and in harsh light that flattens perspective. The designs for their covers, simultaneously graphic and plain, read like billboards or storefronts themselves. Moreover, the books’ nominal costs and relative availability (at least at the time of their production) establishes their relationship to consumer culture, which Baudrillard and Jameson consider integral to the postmodern condition, as well. Here I will focus on the formal elements of these books that help us arrive at such a reading, but also those that clearly violate it. Both books in other works traffic in contradiction; they simultaneously propose and deny the

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flattened—or in Baudrillard’s terms *simulacral*—reading of postmodern experience. Structural to both works at the level of form, this paradox lies at the heart of the topographic postmodernism they invoke.

Baudrillard identifies a number of phenomena to theorize this loss, or substitution of distinctions between “reality” and the simulacrum. Of the phenomena Baudrillard describes, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* appears to anticipate his discussions of media culture, exchange-value, urbanization and language and ideology. According to Baudrillard:

> It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself; that is, an operation to deter every real process by its operational double, a metastable, programmatic, perfect descriptive machine, which provides all the signs of the real and short-circuits, all its vicissitudes.\(^{174}\)

Ruscha’s books, as total objects, relate to two orders of Baudrillard’s simulacra: the second and third, each identified with a historical period. In second order simulacra, associated with the modernity of the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, distinctions between representation and reality break down due to the proliferation of mass-reproducible copies of commodity items.\(^{175}\) The commodity's ability to imitate reality threatens to replace the authority of the original version, because the copy is just as “real” as its prototype.\(^{176}\) Such production misrepresents and masks an underlying reality by imitating it so well, thus threatening to replace it, as in photography;

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\(^{174}\) Baudrillard, 254.

\(^{175}\) Baudrillard, 257.

\(^{176}\) Ibid.
however, Baudrillard believes, through critique or effective political action, one can still access the hidden fact of the real.\textsuperscript{177}

Third order simulacra, following second order and associated with the postmodern age, finds the simulacrum preceding the original, as well as the blurring, and eventual vanishing, of any measurable distinction between representation and reality.\textsuperscript{178} In the postmodern age, there is only the simulacrum, and any conception of originality becomes meaningless. Baudrillard cites a fable derived from Jorge Luis Borges’s \textit{On Exactitude in Science}, in which a great Empire created a map that was so detailed it became as large as the Empire itself.\textsuperscript{179} The map fluctuated between expansion and destruction as the Empire conquered or lost territories, and, when the Empire crumbled, all that was left was the map.\textsuperscript{180} In Baudrillard’s rendition, it is the map that individuals inhabit, the simulation of reality where they spend their lives, ensuring their place in the representation is properly circumscribed and detailed by the mapmakers.\textsuperscript{181} He concludes that in postmodern society, “It is the map that precedes the territory – precession of simulacra – it is the map that engenders the territory and if we were to revive the fable today, it would be the territory whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges subsist here and there.”\textsuperscript{182}

Ruscha’s books, produced at the turning point of the two periods that Baudrillard describes, embody elements of both of these orders. Jameson would later acknowledge that this period marked the transition from modernism to postmodernism, or, as

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{177} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{178} Baudrillard, 265. \\
\textsuperscript{179} Baudrillard, 253–254. \\
\textsuperscript{180} Dino Felluga, “Modules on Baudrillard: On Postmodernity.” \\
\textsuperscript{181} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{182} Baudrillard, 253.
\end{flushright}
Baudrillard would perhaps phrase it, the transition from second to third order simulacra. Ruscha’s choice to deploy photography as a vehicle for conveying the ideas behind his book titles also anticipates Baudrillard’s conception of simulacra, as well as Jameson’s idea of depthlessness.

Sympathizing with Walter Benjamin’s musings on the mirror image, Baudrillard finds that the relationship between counterfeit and reproduction produce anxiety, an uneasiness before the photograph and more generally before any technical apparatus of reproduction. In his 1936 essay The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, Benjamin theorizes the concept of authenticity in the work of art, particularly in application to (photographic) reproduction: “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.” Notions of time and space will prove useful to readings of Twentysix Gasoline Stations and Every Building on the Sunset Strip in terms of Baudrillard and Jameson.

Arguing that the “sphere of authenticity is outside the technical,” Benjamin catalogues “the decline of autonomous aesthetic experience due to the rise of film and photography, introducing the idea of the “aura” of a work and its absence in a reproduction.” In Ruscha’s case, a photograph of a filling station strips it of its aura, transforming the role of participant, one stopping at a Standard Station (or Conoco, or

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183 Jameson, 53.
186 Benjamin, 214–218.
Texaco, and so on) to fill up their car with gas, into that of a spectator or possibly a detached commentator, one who simply observes the gas station without actually using it. In both *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, Ruscha’s photographs assume the latter.

Benjamin defines aura in terms of natural phenomena: “[it is] the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be. If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon…you experience the aura of those mountains.”¹⁸⁸ Benjamin’s skepticism towards “aura” in the a world ever more mediated by photo-mechanically reproduced images suggests changing social conditions in which all previously unique and sacred institutions have become equal, an idea that would become central to both Baudrillard and Jameson’s respective theories.¹⁸⁹ Those willing to accept a reproduction in place of its original also signifies their unwillingness to participate in the ritualistic aesthetics and politics of earlier times, anticipate Jameson’s notion of breakage, as well as Baudrillard’s transition from second to third order simulacra.

According to Baudrillard, society has replaced all reality and meaning with symbols and signs, which ultimately hide the realities crucial to the understanding of our lives. Labeling this phenomenon as “the precession of the simulacra,” Baudrillard believes that society has become so saturated with these simulacra that all meaning has been rendered meaningless.¹⁹⁰ Of Simulacra in images, Baudrillard writes:

*These would be the successive phases of the image:
1 It is the reflection of a basic reality.
2 It masks and perverts a basic reality.*

¹⁸⁸ Benjamin, 221.
¹⁸⁹ Ibid.
¹⁹⁰ Baudrillard, 264.
3 It masks the absence of a basic reality.
4 It bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum.\(^{191}\)

Ruscha’s photographs seem to embody this succession. As mentioned in chapter one, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* attempts to present Route 66’s physical extension through “the connect-the-dots-like points of flat gas station signboards;” it fails, however, and the terrain between stations, “implicit from stop to stop, is never presented to view.”\(^{192}\)

Moreover, on one hand, Ruscha fulfills *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*’ contract, providing viewers with exactly what the title bespeaks. On the other hand, despite its seemingly literal title, *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* violates its promise, as Ruscha cuts out chunks of buildings and flattens streets to eliminate various incidental appearances of cars and people. Each work begins as a series of basic images that appear to reflect the reality of the locations in question, but as Ruscha changes and withholds information, his books’ relationships to concrete reality become skewed.

Baudrillard and Jameson would certainly contest Venturi and Scott Brown’s celebratory claims for architectural symbolism. Jameson views this type of architecture as depthless, manifested through literal flatness (two dimensional screens, billboards, neon lights, and so on). In theory, it manifests itself through the postmodern rejection of the belief that one can ever fully move beyond the surface appearances of ideology or “false consciousness” to access their deeper truth, and are left instead with “multiple surfaces.”

He cites four “depth models” that have catalyzed this surface-oriented reading of society, the fourth of which is relevant here: “Most recently, the great semiotic opposition between signifier and signified, which was itself rapidly unraveled and deconstructed

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\(^{191}\) Baudrillard, 256.
\(^{192}\) Mansoor, 127.
during its brief heyday in the 1960s and 1970s.”\textsuperscript{193} What replaces these various depth models is for the most part “a conception of practices, discourses, and textual play,” whose new “syntagmatic structures” arrive at these multiple surfaces.\textsuperscript{194} In result “our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time, as in the preceding period of high modernism.”\textsuperscript{195}

Ruscha has repeatedly deemphasized that the images, inherently flat due to the nature of the photographic medium, are the focal points of \textit{Twentysix Gasoline Stations} and \textit{Every Building on the Sunset Strip}, and instead invites his readers to consume his books as total objects, rather than explicit vehicles for displaying photographs. It is in part this contradiction that helps to define postmodern topography. The book’s status as a tactile object serves as a form of resistance against the façade; at the same time, however, encoded within the object are the terms of surface that Jameson and Baudrillard describe. However, the book form lends the subject three-dimensionality, and can be likened to an architectural object itself. Postmodern topography in Ruscha’s books is neither a bona fide representation of an area, as Banham and Venturi and Scott Brown would understand it, nor does it wholly adhere to a grammar of surface. As Eleanor Antin, fellow artist and admirer of Ruscha would write of this body of work, “his structure is deliberately sparse and filled with holes, and it is here that actual experience resides. Suggestions are offered by the material he does give and spaces are left for us to enter.”\textsuperscript{196} While Ruscha photographs his subject in the most banal, flattening way possible, the images sometimes

\textsuperscript{193} Jameson, 62.
\textsuperscript{194} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{195} Jameson, 64.
\textsuperscript{196} Eleanor Antin, “Reading Ruscha,” \textit{Art in America 61}, no. 6 (November–December 1973): 64–71.
leave readers with physical spaces to enter, as well as spaces where they may situate them inside and outside of Baudrillard’s and Jameson’s terms.

In this chapter, I will continue to theorize postmodern topography in terms of Ed Ruscha’s *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* as they relate to ideas proposed by Jameson and Baudrillard regarding the postmodern experience.

**TOPOGRAPHIC POSTMODERNISM IN *TWENTYSIX GASOLINE STATIONS***:

As Benjamin Buchloh argues, Ruscha’s books can be aligned with a genre of map or travel guide, with *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* providing viewers with a condensed drive along Route 66.197 While to some extent this may be true, and Venturi and Scott Brown would certainly agree, the book also offers little information, leading viewers to question how reliable a map it may be.

While Venturi and Scott Brown advocate for the chaotic nature of postmodern architecture, asserting that it is receptive to the needs of the “common” individual, Jameson insists that it “randomly and without principle but with gusto cannibalizes all the architectural styles of the past and combines them in overstimulating ensembles.”198 He sees in postmodern architecture a “new depthlessness,” “which finds its prolongation in a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum.”199 This depthlessness is, of course, supported by examples of postmodernist architecture that Venturi and Scott Brown describe, such as neon signs and soaring billboard advertisements, endemic to cities such

197 Buchloh.
198 Jameson, 66.
199 Dino Felluga, “Modules on Jameson: On Postmodernity.”
as Las Vegas and Los Angeles. It manifests itself through literal flatness (two dimensional screens and signage, flat skyscrapers full of reflecting windows, which Jameson refers to as “glass skins”).

Throughout *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, viewers are confronted by seemingly impenetrable spaces, made so by Ruscha’s framing of his subjects. Viewers are immediately confronted by this sense of flatness before they even open the book. Its cover is minimal and unassuming, white with the book’s title emblazoned across it in red square-serif type (see Figure 1.1), and the back cover is completely blank. The book’s exterior appears like a billboard, the front cover advertising its contents and the back seemingly representing the nothingness behind the billboard. Its lack of additional information leaves viewers curious, tempted to open it and investigate.

While flatness is a critical motif in *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, it is even more apparent in several of the images contained within it. *Rimmy Jim’s Chevron, Rimmy Jim’s, Arizona* is a paragon of Ruscha’s attempt at total flatness (see Figure 1.9). The sky, completely empty with the exception of a telephone pole positioned behind the building, suggests no perspectival access into the surrounding landscape and the road runs across the image as a horizontal black bar. The station itself appears a cement rectangle floating in space, and its function and wares are plainly stated by painted capital block letters. The pumps stand upright and parallel to the station, with no illusion of depth, as if they are paper or cardboard cutouts. This image is consistent with the majority of images in *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, which Ruscha’s frontal framing renders completely flat and without dimension.
However, the very last image in the sequence interrupts this frontal framing. This image, of a Fina station in Groom, Texas provides significant longitudinal, perspectival access to the gasoline station (see Figure 1.10). The billboard, advertising Fina brand gasoline, and the station itself turn in toward one another at a modest angle, and the lines that separate traffic on the road sweep up towards the left, suggesting a graphic recession of space that is absent in the other images. Whereas the other twenty-five images affirm Ruscha’s interest in capturing “store-front planes that are all vertical from the street,” the viewer sees the back of the station, and is provided with an opportunity to “enter,” to cite Antin’s terms. The suggestion of a spatial interior in this image places a spatial wrinkle, an opening, in the depthless veneer Jameson ascribed to the postmodern condition.

Ruscha’s painting *Standard Station, Amarillo, Texas*, inspired by a photograph of the same name in *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, also serves postmodern topography’s tension between flatness and access to a spatial interior (Figure 3.1). The photograph follows Ruscha’s model for framing his subjects, but is captured at a slight angle to reveal the station’s accompanying billboard, which is positioned off the road at an angle (Figure 3.2). As a result, the station is not a mere façade, but recedes, albeit minimally, into space. The painting, included in Ruscha’s second solo exhibition at the Ferus Gallery in 1964, presents a generic, or, to play on words, a “standard,” example of roadside architecture with an emphatically frontal treatment.\(^{200}\) Reducing both the gasoline station and its surrounding landscape to basic geometric forms, the source image is monumentalized by its translation to oil on canvas, especially by the artist’s addition of

the three beams of light, reminiscent of Hollywood Klieg lights.\textsuperscript{201} A plunging diagonal line divides the canvas, receding to its lower right-hand corner almost as if Ruscha were offering an elementary illustration of how to render one-point perspective. On one hand, the station is rendered unmistakably flat, its black background suggesting that it only exists within the two-dimensionality of the canvas. The station’s windows are in-filled with gray, creating a space that the viewer is seemingly unable to enter. Moreover, as it recedes into space, the station fades to white, as if unfinished, further augmenting its impenetrable character. However, the painting’s exaggerated perspective nevertheless reveals that the Standard Station, meant perhaps to represent all twenty-six stations featured in the book, is not simply a façade, but a three-dimensional space that serves a specific purpose. This is also revealed by Ruscha’s portrayal of the station’s pumps, which are rendered in impeccable detail, with his attention to the pumps’ rubber hoses, the station’s logo, and relatively normal proportions. Again, Ruscha recognizes the functionality of the gas station beyond its role as an example of flat, postmodern architecture, yet also acknowledges the stations’ flat character.

Another allusion to three-dimensionality that contests Jameson and Baudrillard’s conception of total flatness in postmodern experience is the appearance of Ruscha’s shadow in two images in the sequence. In \textit{Beeline Gas, Holbrook, Arizona}, Ruscha’s full body, hunched over and seemingly caught in the act of peering into his camera’s viewfinder, is cast in shadow onto the road that separates him from the Beeline Gas station, and creeps into the bottom of the frame (see Figure 1.13). Ruscha’s shadow appears again later in \textit{Conoco, Albuquerque, New Mexico}, this time in the bottom right corner of the image, cast onto a sign advertising the services available at the station’s

\textsuperscript{201} Ibid.
garage (see Figure 1.14). While both stations are otherwise shot frontally, the suggestion of a figure in these images implies that they too may be entered by a figure already existing in the same space, even if they appear flat upon first glance.

Moreover, due to the technical aspects of the photographic medium, the shadows that appear in both of these images further problematize a purely simulacral reading of Twentysix Gasoline Stations. Photography is an indexical technology with photographic images arising from the material transcription of light on photosensitive paper. This technological condition poses something of a challenge to the simulacral reading of photographic images (from Benjamin to Baudrillard) in which there is no clear link between the image and what it depicts. A shadow is, like photographic technology, an indexical system of mark making. Though temporary, a shadow nonetheless makes a record of a physical thing (in this case Ruscha’s body) transcribed by light. The shadow is tenuous and slippery like a simulacrum, but also material and anchored in the “real.” Again, the shadows assert the “realness” of the gasoline stations by suggesting that they are spaces that may be physically occupied.

The order of the photographs contained within Twentysix Gasoline Stations seems to offer a programmatic map with a starting point and an endpoint; however, Ruscha switches and substitutes points along the journey, seemingly for no reason, arriving at a disorienting landscape. “As a result of cultural flattening, we now focus on issues of place and space, as if the world were a timeless collection of juxtaposed places.”

202 Claire Grace, ARHA410 tutorial meeting, April 8, 2015.
203 Ibid.
204 Ibid.
book were to follow the geographic order of the gas stations as Ruscha travelled from west to east, *Union, Needles, California* would be the fifth stop on Ruscha’s journey, but is placed third in the sequence; *Phillips 66, Flagstaff, Arizona* is ninth, but is placed sixth; *Flying A, Kingsman, Arizona* is sixth, but is placed twelfth; *Standard, Amarillo, Texas* is twentieth, but is placed nineteenth; *Texaco, Vega, Texas* is twenty-third, but is placed twenty-first and *Fina, Groom, Texas* is twenty-second, but is placed twenty-sixth, the most noticeably out-of-order station in the entire sequence.²⁰⁶ It also varies from Ruscha’s otherwise systematic arrangement of images. Whereas the other twenty-five photos are all identically sized and cropped, *Fina, Groom, Texas* is considerably smaller, and the text signifying the station and location is positioned differently. The image is not only out of place in terms of location, but it is visually out of place, as well; these elements signal to viewers that this station is different from the others.

The sense of simulated movement in *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* is in fact not as fluid as the simple act of turning a page, as alluded to in chapter two; Ruscha disregards parts of his journeys, simply by selecting a certain number of examples to illustrate his book title. There are certainly more than twenty-six gasoline stations scattered along Route 66, and of those chosen, as the captious viewer will find, some are arranged out of their directional order, albeit subtly. While the drive itself is technically linear, starting from the west and heading east, the route in the book strays at intervals from such a linear destination-driven order. To some extent, the work lacks directionality, only listing the ordered, geographic state-by-state progression. Furthermore, the book’s pages are not numbered, and the stations’ locations are indicated by minimal text. Ruscha therefore

²⁰⁶ To reiterate chapter one, if each station is assigned a number that corresponds with its location on a map of Route 66, the order in which they appear in Ruscha’s book is 1;2;5;3;4;9;7;8;10;11;12;6;13;14;15;16;17;18;20;21;23;24;25;26;22.
dictates Route 66, withholding its totality from our visual access by physically occupying it himself. The means of translating the experience of the road to view effectively obscures the road. These elements confirm a simulacral reading of *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, as geographic space seems to float free of location/referent, especially as Ruscha crops roads and highways out of his images. Recalling Reyner Banham and Ruscha’s conversation about the interchangeable stage-set-like character of Los Angeles buildings, Ruscha seems to say that any one of the gas stations may have a near identical counterpart somewhere else.  

The implied interchangeability of the stations is relevant for Jameson, as well: he suggests that postmodern spatiality has produced a schizophrenic condition in which it is not longer possible to link signifiers in a coherent chain. Jameson pinpoints a weakening of history “both in our relationship to public History and in the new forms of our private temporality, whose ‘schizophrenic’ structure (following Lacan) will determine new types of syntax or syntagmatic relationships in the more temporal arts.” As Jameson explains, the schizophrenic suffers from a “breakdown of the signifying chain” in their use of language until “the schizophrenic is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers, or, in other words, a series of pure and unrelated presents in time.” Jameson’s discussion of the present echoes Ruscha’s withholding of a definitive beginning, middle or end in *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*. Ruscha’s inclusion of text indicating each station’s location initially signals to viewers that perhaps the artist is travelling in a linear direction, and thus presenting his readers with a linear narrative. While readers initially think they are following a journey through a logical progression of

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207 See note 142 in chapter two, page 63.
208 Jameson, 58.
209 Dino Fegulla, “Introduction to Fredric Jameson, Module on Postmodernity.”
states, they arrive at a false ending in Texas, further west than Ruscha’s promised final destination: Oklahoma City, with misplaced stops along the way.

This breakdown of the signifying chain is further augmented by the photographs’ lack of a clear tether to their real environment. They are clearly cropped, and in each image Ruscha follows the compositional rule of thirds in which the top third of the image is devoted to depicting the sky and sometimes the surrounding landscape, the middle to the gasoline station and the bottom the road, which separates the photographer from his subject. The white space of each page lends the photographs a contained quality, leaving each photograph detached and decontextualized from the original environment. Jameson continues his discussion of the schizophrenic, “The ideal schizophrenic's experience is still one of time…What one means by evoking its spatialization is rather the will to use and to subject time to the service of space, if that is now the right word for it.”210 By rearranging the correct order of stations, Ruscha withholds time, or at least its logical progression, which is central to Jameson’s description of the postmodern condition.

Moreover, Ruscha’s inclusion of images shot at different times of day seems to confirm this reading of Jameson’s “ideal schizophrenic.” Ruscha includes three images of gas stations that were photographed at night: a Shell Station in Daggett, California, an Enco Station in Tucumcari, New Mexico and a Hudson Station in Amarillo, Texas (see Figure 1.11). The latter two stations, the seventeenth and eighteenth, are located in their correct places within the logical sequence, suggesting that they may have been taken in the same night. The Enco Station, however, appears as a blur of lights and shapes, a far cry from Ruscha’s otherwise focused and frontal framing, suggesting that it may have been photographed from a moving car. However, the Shell Station, which should be third

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210 Jameson, 79.
in the sequence, occupies the fourth stop on Ruscha’s journey due to his placement of the Union Station in Needles, California, which precedes it in the book. While Ruscha’s decision to photograph gas stations during both day and nighttime hours seems to imply a more fluid passage of time, Ruscha’s misplacement of the Shell Station nullifies it.

While many of *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*’ features may suggest a preoccupation with surface, the form that Ruscha adopts to display his architectural snapshots is inescapably an object, as seen not only in the book’s own tactility as a handheld and manipulable thing, but also in several drawings and photographs of it Ruscha produced following its publication. In his 1964 graphite triptych entitled *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, Ruscha draws the book from three angles, rotating it in space (Figure 3.3). The drawings represent the book floating against an anonymous black background. Each drawing is rendered with Ruscha’s signature precision, and the three book covers appear nearly identical in terms of the typography. However, each is also signed, E. Ruscha, and dated 1964 in their bottom right corners, connecting the artist to the work in ways that he does not in the physical books themselves, which are void of handwritten or other clear marks of the hand of the artist. Measuring a total thirty-two and a half by twenty-six inches, the entire triptych is much larger than the dimensions of the book; however each of the three books is rendered roughly life-sized.

From left to right, the first drawing in the triptych renders *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* frontally, in keeping with the cover’s allusion of a billboard-like surface. The second illustrates the book at roughly a seventy-degree angle; the cover is still visible from this angle, but the book’s pages jut out towards the viewer, perhaps inviting the reader to open it. Similarly, the third drawing also reveals the book’s pages, and is drawn
at roughly a forty-five degree angle, with the cover visible. These latter two drawings encourage readers to open the book, perhaps read it, or use it as something else, such as a dinner plate, as would Ruscha joke in a later photographic print (Figure 3.4). Regardless, this invitation reframes *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* not simply as a small-scale billboard, a two-dimensional entity with a symbol on the front and no back, as its cover would suggest. Nor are its photographs simply flattened delineations of gas stations; they are the object’s spatial interior that may be accessed by opening and reading the book. Again, Ruscha initially suggests a condition that aligns with Jameson’s prescriptions of postmodernism in *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* that is later violated.

Another image that places the dialectical relationship between surface and spatial interior in *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* is Ruscha’s *Diminishing Gas Station Books*, a pencil drawing completed in late 1963.\footnote{Unfortunately, the only place where this image is available is in Ruscha’s catalogue raisonné of works on paper. The image may not be reproduced under any circumstances without express permission from the artist. Given the time constraints of this project, I was unable to seek permission to do so. However, it may be found in Ed Ruscha, Lisa Turvey and Harry Cooper, eds., *Edward Ruscha: Catalogue Raisonné of the Works on Paper, Volume 1: 1956–1976* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 130, figure D1963.62.} The relatively small ten and a half by eight inch drawing illustrates features two sketches of book-like objects warping in space. Neither of these sketches have titles sketched onto their covers. Above these, Ruscha draws a rectangle whose dimensions seem to be proportional to those of *Standard Station, Amarillo Texas* (the painting). Inside the rectangle, Ruscha renders the cover of *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* at an angle so that the book juts out to the viewer’s left. Behind it, Ruscha draws another book, positioned at the same angle, pressed up against the back of the first, and another, and so on, until there are four hundred books.\footnote{Ed Ruscha, Lisa Turvey and Harry Cooper, eds., *Edward Ruscha: Catalogue Raisonné of the Works on Paper, Volume 1: 1956–1976* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 130, figure D1963.62.} The books, stacked against one another recede, or “diminish,” into space similar to the
dramatic recession of the Standard Station in *Standard Station, Amarillo Texas*. Ruscha again confirms an architectural reading of the books themselves, as they, like buildings,

Ruscha also demonstrates this reverence in a 1964 pencil line drawing entitled *Flipping* that depicts an uncredited hand flipping through *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, whose cover typeface is rendered in red colored pencil, against a plain background.\(^{213}\) Not only do this drawing reinforce the themes present in Ruscha’s drawings of his work, the anonymity of the hand that holds the book also underpins the artist’s desire for his books to be available to all. In other words, any hand could hold his work.\(^{214}\) Ultimately, these supplemental works shed little light on a conceptual process; rather, through his celebration of it in various mediums, Ruscha affirms that *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* is not merely a collection of “multiple surfaces,” but irrevocably an object.

**TOPOGRAPHIC POSTMODERNISM IN EVERY BUILDING ON THE SUNSET STRIP:**

Similar to *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*’s presentation and formal elements anticipate and complicate Jameson and Baudrillard’s commentaries on postmodern experience.

Throughout *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, Ruscha seems to insist on total flatness, as per Jameson’s interpretation, offering his viewers nothing beyond the storefronts he photographs. Like *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, the book’s cover reads like

\(^{213}\) Unfortunately, the only place where this image is available is in Ruscha’s catalogue raisonné of works on paper. The image may not be reproduced under any circumstances without express permission from the artist. Given the time constraints of this project, I was unable to seek permission to do so. However, it may be found in Ed Ruscha, Lisa Turvey and Harry Cooper, eds., *Edward Ruscha: Catalogue Raisonné of the Works on Paper, Volume 1: 1956–1976* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 130, figure D1963.62.

\(^{214}\) Marshall, 68-69.
a mini-billboard: on the front, the book advertises “The Sunset Strip,” and the back cover is blank. Ruscha photographed the Strip around noon, in harsh afternoon light, and as a result the buildings appear flat, with few shadows to provide dimension. In addition, Ruscha’s decision to present each side of the street’s throughfare separated into two thin bands divided by a band of white that simulates the road between voids any sense of perspective that the buildings exist in three-dimensional space (see Figure 1.28). Having fixed the exterior space as parallel to a car, in contrast to a concept of the car penetrating the space through which it moves, the buildings become inaccessible; the car’s movement only ever skims over their surface, rarely accessing spatial depth to reach them.

However the book does not always insist on this total flatness, as Ruscha’s assembly of the book is present throughout. Many snapshots refuse to conjoin properly with contiguous images, leaving the trace of Ruscha’s own process of connecting the photos together. As, as Ruscha appears to advocate for flatness in his images, the three-dimensionality of the book itself, both its totality as an object and its foldout, begins to challenge this. The book itself is three-dimensional, even more so than *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, by merit of Ruscha’s presentation of it as a twenty-five foot long page and accordion-folded to fit between the book’s paperback covers. In some places, the photographs do not even align with one another on the same page. As a result, parts of cars and buildings are sometimes split, fragmented or misaligned. For example, at 8418 Sunset, a car rental dealership’s façade is misaligned, as well as a car parked outside of it, causing one image to be placed a few millimeters higher than the other (Figure 3.6).

These subtle breaks accentuate the road’s topography, as well. Buildings seem to rise and fall within their flat, rectangular frame, as if Ruscha is driving up or down a hill,
or has encountered a bend in the road. This occurs between 8490 Sunset, the address of a Bank of America, and La Cienega Boulevard (see Figure 1.23). Within these three stitched-together images, the Bank of America Building sweeps out and upward at a slight angle, as if Ruscha were photographing mid-turn. The stretch of sidewalk outside of the building curves, as well, seeming to indicate a curve in the road. Though the buildings’ façades appear flat, the swelling and warping of the buildings and sidewalks in the images make viewers aware of the topography of the Strip, its curves, bends, slopes and inclines. While the buildings seem inaccessible, with the car’s movement only ever skimming their surface, viewers are provided with these subtle variations, which allude to the three-dimensionality of the world outside of the car window. Moreover, the accordion-foldout is topographic itself, its folded pages reminiscent of peaks and valleys.

Moreover, several black bars and white spaces that punctuate both the north and south sides of the Strip interrupt the images’ hyper-two-dimensionality. Fourteen of these black bars appear in Every Building on the Sunset Strip: eight of which appear on the north end of the Strip, and six on the south end (see Figures 1.24 and 1.25 for instances of these black bars on the north and south ends of the Strip, respectively). The black bars are vertically oriented, sometimes rendered at a slight diagonal, and vary in distance from one another, as well as in thickness. Because of these variations, they do not seem to result in the end of a roll of film, nor do they seem to indicate places where images are pasted together. Because of these features, I argue that they were Additionally, in between Clark Boulevard and 8900 Sunset, a discernable white gap marks the accordion fold; nothing like it appears again throughout the book. Because this is the only instance of such a gap, it is unlikely that this marks the end of a roll of film. Nonetheless it is
difficult to determine whether the white gap is the result of a printing error, or if Ruscha had intentionally left a gap between images; however, given the presence of Ruscha’s hand in other instances (the misaligned images and black bars), it is not unlikely that this white gap was inserted at Ruscha’s discretion.

The silver slipcase that accompanies *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* also anticipates Jameson’s criticism of postmodern architecture, and confirms his reading in this case (see Figure 1.17). Jameson cites the Westin Bonaventure Hotel, located in Los Angeles at 404 South Figueroa Street, as an example of the postmodern architectural tendencies that he critiques (Figure 3.7). The Bonaventure, which Jameson describes as a “popular building, visited with enthusiasm by locals and tourists alike,” was designed by John C. Portman, Jr. in the mid 1970s and is the largest hotel in the city, measuring thirty-five stories. Like Ruscha’s books, the hotel, built nearly a decade after *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*’s publication, seems to mimic the sprawling, highway-oriented character of Los Angeles. There are three entrances to the Bonaventure, one from Figueroa and the other two by way of elevated gardens on the other side of the hotel, which is built into the remaining slope of the former Bunker Hill. The two “back-door” entryways of the Bonaventure are located in the hotel’s back gardens, and admit patrons to the sixth floor of the towers. From there they must walk down one flight of stairs to find the elevator by which they may gain access to the lobby. Meanwhile, what one is tempted to think of as the Bonaventure’s front entrance, on

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215 Jameson, 81.
216 Ibid.
217 Ibid.
218 Ibid.
Figueroa Street, admits patrons onto its shopping balcony, located on the hotel’s second floor, from which you must take an escalator down to the main registration desk.\textsuperscript{219}

Though the entryway is always what links the building to the surrounding city, the Bonaventure Hotel’s deceptive entryways appear, above all, to govern the interior space of the hotel. Jameson writes, “the Bonaventure aspires to being a total space, a complete world, a kind of miniature city; to this new total space, meanwhile, corresponds a new collective practice, a new mode in which individuals move and congregate.”\textsuperscript{220} In this sense, the “minicity” created by Portman's Bonaventure does not need entrances altogether, for it does not wish to be a part of the city but rather its equivalent and replacement or substitute.\textsuperscript{221} This diagnosis is confirmed by what Jameson calls “the great reflective glass skin of the Bonaventure,” which repels the city outside; individuals inside of the hotel may look out the windows and see the surrounding city, but city dwellers cannot see inside.\textsuperscript{222} The glass skin also dissociates the Bonaventure from its surrounding neighborhood: “it is not even an exterior, inasmuch as when you seek to look at the hotel’s outer walls you cannot see the hotel itself but only the distorted images of everything that surrounds it.”\textsuperscript{223}

In his book \textit{Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory} (1989), Edward Soja develops Jameson’s conclusion, describing the Bonaventure Hotel as a concentrated representation of Los Angeles’ fragmented and incomprehensible character. Soja writes, “Everything imaginable appears to be available in this micro-urb but real places are difficult to find,...Entry by land is forbidding to those who carelessly

\textsuperscript{219} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{220} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{221} Jameson, 81–82.
\textsuperscript{222} Jameson, 82.
\textsuperscript{223} Ibid.
walk but entrance is nevertheless encouraged at many different levels…Once inside, however, it becomes daunting to get out again without bureaucratic assistance.”

In these ways, the Bonaventure’s architecture recapitulates and reflects the sprawling manufactured spaces of Los Angeles. Jameson, touches upon this, as well, adding, “the Bonaventure, however, is content to “let the fallen city fabric continue to be in its being” (to parody Heidegger); no further effects, no larger protopolitical Utopian transformation, is either expected or desired.”

The silver slipcase that accompanies Every Building on the Sunset Strip acts as the book’s own “glass skin,” and serves a similar purpose as that which shrouds the Bonaventure Hotel, albeit smaller in scale. Each copy of the book was sold in a silver cardboard slipcase, which is unique to this body of Ruscha’s work as none of his other books were sold with such an accessory (or any accessory at all, for that matter). The slipcase bears no information about the volume whatsoever, except for the opening where the book’s spine is revealed, divulging an abbreviated title, “The Sunset Strip.” The glossy slipcase is smooth and cleanly crafted, and like the exterior of the Bonaventure’s glass skin, it is reflective, but not a mirror, only providing traces of a mirror image when looked at, revealing nothing concrete about the world around it. The slipcase initially withholds the book’s interior, as would a glass skin; however, the opening in the slipcase which reveals the book’s spine signals that there is in fact and interior and invites readers to investigate. The architecture is in fact located inside the glass skin, as the book assumes an architectural character due to its accordion-foldout. The slipcase therefore confirms and denies Jameson’s reading of the glass skin; while interiors are initially

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225 Jameson, 81.
withheld in postmodern topography, there is often an opportunity to enter a building’s seemingly impenetrable surface and uncover its exterior.

_Every Building on the Sunset Strip_, with its floating bands, is cut away from a “starting point, or an origin, that would explain it and lend it a sense of proper cause, and likewise lacks an end that would provide closure.” It appears to take place in a zone void of any external orientation, any ground, with a format defined by motion that follows the logic of a car’s movement. As Jameson writes, “The new spatial logic of the simulacrum can now be expected to have a momentous effect on what used to be historical time.” In this case, the spatial and temporal logic of _Every Building on the Sunset Strip_, though “fluid” and continuous due to the book’s form, the Strip is nevertheless cut away from its surrounding environment, severing it from the “historical time” Jameson describes. Here, _Every Building on the Sunset Strip_’s format, independent of its topographic aspect, supports Jameson’s conceptions of time and space in the postmodern age.

Ruscha did not document _Every Building on Sunset Strip_ in the same way as _Twentysix Gasoline Stations_, producing no (known) drawings of the volume. However, Ruscha later produced the _Sunset Strip Portfolio_, which consists of a set of six photographs taken in 1966 for _Every Building on the Sunset Strip_, and printed in 1995. In the series Ruscha places the focus on the now legendary places captured, such as the

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226 Mansoor, 137.
227 Mansoor, 137.
228 Jameson, 66.
229 I use the word fluid here to describe the sense of time passing in the book, not to comment on the alignment of the images, which is not fluid.
230 Ruscha, however, has produced a number of prints entitled _A Boulevard Called Sunset_ since publishing _Every Building on the Sunset Strip_. Prints with this title began to appear in the mid-1970s and Ruscha continues to produce works with the same title today. Each of these is a word piece in which the titles are the words that appear in the work; however, the word Boulevard is abbreviated to “Blvd.,” seeming to connect the words that appear in the works to street signs.
famous Whiskey A-Go-Go, a rock ‘n’ roll joint which hosted musicians including Janis Joplin and Led Zeppelin and Gazzarri’s Supper Club, now known for having featured many popular American bands, including The Doors (Figures 3.8 and 3.9, respectively). In these images, which appear in the book, Ruscha distorts the negatives with razor blades and sandpaper, alluding to the passing of time and the decay signaled by traditional photographic processes. These photographs, further removed from the Strip than Every Building on the Sunset Strip, with its floating bands that are cut away from clear start or end points, appear as vestiges of the book, perhaps cut out and saved. They seem to violate Jameson’s conception of postmodern time, as well as his related concept of the weakening of historicity. The photographs in the Sunset Strip Portfolio illustrate that Every Building on the Sunset Strip is not completely cut away from time and space, and ultimately does succumb to time, and ages. Another way in which Ruscha’s book is defined by tension and contradiction and invokes postmodern photography.

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“I felt when I got going on the books that it was really the red meat of my work. It was the choice bit. Although I was painting pictures at that time, I felt that the books were more advanced as a concept than the individual paintings I had been doing.”

So Ruscha said of his photo books in 2008, nearly fifty years after the release of *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*. It is quite a claim for objects that were so seemingly simple. Since their publication in the 1960s and 70s, the art historical canonization and purpose of Ed Ruscha’s topographic photo books have been the source of debate amongst scholars of Contemporary art and architecture. Following the appearance of *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* in 1963, it and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, among others, have been ascribed to Pop, photo-documentary and proto-Conceptual practices, never venturing too far beyond the prescriptions of each movement. Even Reyner Banham and Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, architectural theorists who ventured outside of the strictures of art historical categorization and wrote about Ruscha, only addressed his books on a superficial level, citing him as an inspiration for their own commentaries on the postmodern urban experience. They never offered a unique reading of the two books under consideration here, whether in the context of their own theories or otherwise. Only recently have scholars begun to address Ruscha’s bookworks beyond the aforementioned. These writings tend to touch upon themes of temporality in Ruscha’s books, as well as their tactility as consumer objects, both of which have proven crucial to theorizing postmodern topography.

Despite the wealth of scholarship on Ruscha, none of these prior readings of his books adequately address *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*.

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Strip in terms of their relationship to their subject matter: the built environment of and surrounding Los Angeles in the 1960s. Considering their inability to fit within existing terminology, Ruscha’s books are defined by contradiction, embodying a sort of “both/and” quality that both embraces and rejects the postmodern urban experience, more specifically that posed by Los Angeles. The term I have proposed, postmodern topography, may initially seem oxymoronic, but it embodies these books’ proclivity for tension and contradiction. Seeing that the phrase is contradictory itself, it is only fitting that a curious term is used to define these equally curious publications.

In the case of postmodern topography: Twenty Six Gasoline Stations and Every Building on the Sunset Strip appear to celebrate Los Angeles’s freeway system, yet Ruscha withholds the visual representation of roads and cars from his readers. They seem to anticipate Venturi and Scott Brown’s conception of sign culture because they feature images of commercial architecture, and the book form implies the mobility that accommodates it. However, the absence of cars and highways in the books’ photographs again seems to void this. While they seem to confirm Baudrillard and Jameson’s dystopic views of postmodern society, they also pose formal qualities that do not solely adhere to their grammar of flatness and surface, and, at times, viewers are provided with spaces to enter and use. While the photographs contained within the books are flattened, as well, the books themselves assume an architectural, and therefore topographic, character that challenges this conception.

Ruscha’s work has been copied, mimicked, appropriated and played upon by other artists, each adopting the cheap, mass-produced book/pamphlet form and conceiving titles and banal subject matter that seem to follow Ruscha’s model. in the
same way as their predecessor, even those that contain architectural snapshots. As early as 1969 did American artist Bruce Nauman produce *Burning Small Fire*, a folded broadsheet showing his page-by-page burning of Ruscha’s *Various Small Fires and a Glass of Milk* (1964).\(^{233}\) This trend has continued, with many artists either re-photographing Ruscha’s original subjects, including *Thirtyfour Parking Lots, Forty Years Later* (Susan Porteus, 2007) or offering more humorous variations, such as *Various Unbaked Cookies and Milk* (Marcella Hackbardt, 2010), which concludes, as did Ruscha's *Various Small Fires*, with a glass of milk, or Jeff Brouws’s 1991 book *Twentynine Palms*, a play on the city of Twentynine Plams, California, which consists of twenty-nine photographs of palm-readers' signs (Figure E-1).\(^{234}\) Some are more tongue in cheek, including Jonathan Monk’s *None of the Buildings on Sunset Strip* (1998). Some even reach for a connection with Ruscha himself, such as in Mark Wyse’s *17 Parked Cars in Various Parking Lots Along Pacific Coast Highway Between My House and Ed Ruscha’s* (2000).\(^{235}\) Other recent appropriations include: *Twenty-Four Former Filling Stations* (2007) by Frank Eye, *Thirtysix Fire Stations* (2004) by Yann Sérandour, *Eleven French Publishers* (2011) by John McDowall and *Fortynine Coach Seats Travelling Along the M4* (2003) by Tom Sowden, among many, many others.\(^{236}\) While many of these books contain images that employ Ruscha’s signature deadpan style, none of them seem to comment on their subjects

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\(^{234}\) Ibid.

\(^{235}\) Ibid.

Ruscha continues to document Los Angeles in a variety of ways, producing prints, paintings and photographs that appropriate Los Angeles vernacular architecture, street names and landmarks. In addition to the *Sunset Strip Portfolio* mentioned in chapter three, in the 1970s, Ruscha photographed US 1, known by California natives as the Pacific Coast Highway, later presenting it as a contact sheet of continuous, horizontally aligned images, similar to *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (Figure E-2). More recently, Ruscha has returned to the theme of signs and signage in his 2004 series of prints entitled *Blank Signs*, which illustrates white silhouettes of signs against a black and white desert-like background, and his 2006 series of prints entitled *Your Space*, which presents empty billboards, perched on scaffolding and floating against grainy off-white backgrounds (Figure E-3). The prints in both of these series focus on street signs and billboards, both ubiquitous feature of Los Angeles and its surrounding freeways. Connected to themes explored in Ruscha’s books, including long road trips across monotonous highways, what should be garish, bright signs loaded with information are instead wiped clean, and are left as a series of white geometric shapes.

In 2005, Ruscha produced *THEN & NOW*, a set of one hundred and forty-two photographic prints that document Los Angeles’ Hollywood Boulevard. 1973, Ruscha followed the same procedure as he did for *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, producing two continuous panoramic views of the north and south sides of Hollywood Boulevard. These 35mm black and white negatives remained undeveloped for three decades until

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2004 when the artist re-shot Hollywood Boulevard using the same camera equipment, but instead printed the images on 35mm color-negative film (Figure E-4). In the final product, the original 1973 images run parallel to their 2004 versions, documenting the changes that have occurred over thirty years. Within Ruscha’s exhaustive list of works that document Los Angeles, this project resembles that of his books the most; however, the images have not been published in book form, nor are they as imperfectly stitched together as in Every Building on the Sunset Strip. In THEN & NOW, cars are very much in tact and building façades are properly aligned, which seems to distance this project from its predecessor. Nevertheless, that Ruscha continues to document Los Angeles confirms, as reporter Carolina Miranda once joked, “As long as Ed Ruscha is around, LA will get its picture taken.”

Despite his seemingly perpetual fascination with his adopted city, Ruscha has not returned to bookmaking since the late 1970s, and has not produced a topographic photo book since 1970 when he published Real Estate Opportunities. That Ruscha has not produced books since a time defined by transition, or breakage as Jameson would have it, does seem to suggest that Twentysix Gasoline Stations and Every Building on the Sunset Strip comment on a particular moment, and the tactility and availability of the books certainly separate them from the rest of Ruscha’s prolific body of work. They are, as Ruscha would say, “red meat,” “inexplicable things,” “can openers,” “something else,” and now, postmodern topography.

240 Ibid.  
Figure 0.1.
Ed Ruscha’s topographic photo books (cover details)
These images are not to scale, with *Thirtyfour Parking Lots* measuring approximately 10 x 8 in. as opposed to the rest, each of which measures roughly 7 x 5 in.
Figure 0.2.

Figure 0.3.
Figure 0.4.
Ed Ruscha, Advertisement for *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* in *Artforum* 2, no. 9 (March 1964): 55.
Figure 0.5.
Jasper Johns, *Target with Four Faces*, 1955, Encaustic on newspaper and cloth over canvas surmounted by four tinted-plaster faces in wood box with hinged front, overall dimensions (with box open): 33.63 x 26 x 3 in.
Figure 0.6.

Figure 0.7.
Left/Middle: Ed Ruscha, *Noise*, oil on canvas, 1963, 71.5 x 67 in.
These images are not to scale.
Figure 0.8.
Ed Ruscha, *France*, 1961, Gelatin silver print, 3.5 x 3.5 in.
Figure 0.9.
Figure 0.10.
Clockwise from top left:
Ed Ruscha, Roof Top View #1 (Residential), 1961/2004, Gelatin silver print, 10x10 in.
Ed Ruscha, Roof Top View #2 (Rooftop), 1961/2004, Gelatin silver print, 10x10 in.
Ed Ruscha, Roof Top View #3 (Legget’s), 1961/2004, Gelatin silver print, 10x10 in.
Ed Ruscha, Roof Top View #4 (Hancock), 1961/2004, Gelatin silver print, 10x10 in.

In Alexandra Schwartz, Ed Ruscha’s Los Angeles (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2010), 126–129 (one image on each page corresponding with the order above).
Figure 0.11.
Reproduction of Ed Ruscha’s Standard Station, Amarillo, Texas (1963, oil on canvas, 64.5 x 121.75 in) with caption referencing source image from Twentysix Gasoline Stations in Lucy Lippard, Pop Art. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 151.
Figure 0.12.
Ed Ruscha, *Actual Size*, oil on canvas, 67 x 72 in.
From: “Actual Size,” *LACMA*, accessed April 8, 2015,
http://collections.lacma.org/node/233756.
Figure 1.1.
Figure 1.2.
Figure 1.3.
Copyright information (left) and dedication (right) for Ed Ruscha, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, 1963.
Figure 1.4.  

Figure 1.5.
Figure 1.6.

Figure 1.7.
Figure 1.8.
Figure 1.9.
Figure 1.10.
Figure 1.11.
Figure 1.12.
Figure 1.13.
Figure 1.15.
Figure 1.16.
Image courtesy of Wesleyan University Special Collections and Archives (Middletown, CT).
Figure 1.18.
Image courtesy of Wesleyan University Special Collections and Archives (Middletown, CT).


Figure 1.23.
Image courtesy of Wesleyan University Special Collections and Archives (Middletown, CT).

Figure 1.24.
Image courtesy of Wesleyan University Special Collections and Archives (Middletown, CT).
Figure 1.25.
Examples of black bars.
Image courtesy of Wesleyan University Special Collections and Archives (Middletown, CT).
Figure 1.26.
Examples of black bars.
From top left: on the south end of the Strip, black bars can be seen at 8101 Sunset, 8225 Sunset, between 8341 and 8351 Sunset, near the intersection of Sunset and Queens Boulevard, between Londonderry Boulevard and 8555 Sunset, at 8831 Sunset at 8961 Sunset and between 9121 and 9131 Sunset in Ed Ruscha, *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (Alhambra, CA: National Excelsior Press), offset lithograph, 1966 (second printing 1971).
Image courtesy of Wesleyan University Special Collections and Archives (Middletown, CT).
Figure 1.27. White gap in between Clark Boulevard and 8900 Sunset in Ed Ruscha, *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (Alhambra, CA: National Excelsior Press), offset lithograph, 1966 (second printing 1971). Image courtesy of Wesleyan University Special Collections and Archives (Middletown, CT).

Figure 1.29.
Image courtesy of Wesleyan University Special Collections and Archives (Middletown, CT).
Figure 2.1.

Figure 2.2.
Figure 2.3
Figure 3.1.
Ed Ruscha, *Standard Station, Amarillo, Texas*, Oil on canvas, 1963, 64.5 x 121.75 in.

Figure 3.2.
Figure 3.3.

Figure 3.4.

Figure 3.5.
Image courtesy of Wesleyan University Special Collections and Archives (Middletown, CT).
Figure 3.6.
The Westin Bonaventure Hotel, designed by John C. Portman, Jr.
From: “Los Angeles Hotels,” Drip Magazine, accessed April 10, 2015,
Figure 3.7.
Ed Ruscha, *Whiskey A-Go-Go* from *Sunset Strip Portfolio*, Black and white photograph from altered negative on paper, 1995, 20 x 30 in.

Figure E-1.
Examples of appropriations of Ed Ruscha’s book covers.
Figure E-2.
Figure E-3.
These images are not to scale.
Figure E-4.
Detail of Ed Ruscha, *THEN & NOW*, Gelatin silver and color prints, 27.5 x 39.38 in.


