

JUNE 2016

(UN) CENSORED: Ed Ruscha at Edward Tyler Nahem Gallery with Comments by Dieter Buchhart



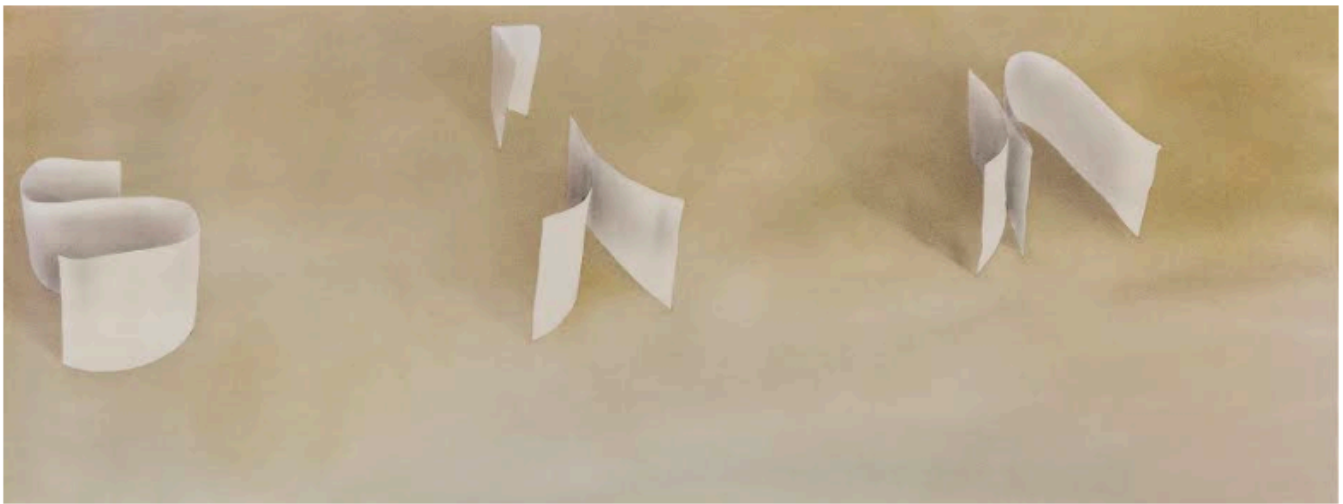
*Ed Ruscha, HOLLYWOOD, 1970. Gunpowder and pastel on paper, 23 x 29 in. (58.4 x 73.7cm)*

**By GWENDOLYN BECK, JUN. 2016**

*'I see words as objects. I am painting pictures of objects'*  
-Ed Ruscha

1970. Nixon is president. The airwaves, once saturated by the pop liverpudlian lilt of 'I want to hold your hand' now broadcast news of the disbanding of the Beatles. An international anti-nuclear proliferation treaty is signed by 190 countries, yet war rages on in Vietnam; thousands of long-haired young people continue resolute in protest, emboldened by the passage of the Civil Rights Act 1964, meanwhile dropping acid on the beach and experimenting with new forms of social organization—pinko reds that they are. By all accounts, the halcyon days of celebratory postwar Americana are on the wane and America feels betrays. But the city of Los Angeles holds fast to fantasy; on a hill high above the city, the once derelict 'Hollywood' sign, the emblem of kitsch writ large, which by 1969 had fallen into such disrepair it ruined appearance could only spell out 'HuLLYWO D', in 1970, appeared again in re-furbished glory.

The city of angels refused to let the dream die. And Ed Ruscha refused to let the irony go unnoticed. Indeed, it is in the same year that the artist composes one of nearly 40 of the artist's works on paper from 1966 to 1973, currently on display at the 57th street's Edward Tyler Nahem Gallery, in *Ribbon Words* curated by German art historian Dieter Buchhart. *Hollywood* (1970), composed in gunpowder against an abstract pastel yellow ground, presents the word itself as the center of a dramatic mis-en-scene, placing signification between the golden foreground and the receding or encroaching noir of the middle ground, and pointing towards words as 'common objects' in the landscape, in the context of an exhibition which presents the viewer with a landscape of words. For the gallerist, this body of Ruscha's work—in fact Ruscha's work *tout court*—reflects not only experiments in material, form, or a semiotic mediation, but mirrors, suggests, even literally indicates, according to Nahem, "episodes of the modern age itself". For Lisa Turvey, author of Ruscha's catalogue raisonné of works on paper, it is a question of the oft repeated theoretical query, "What is the relationship of word to image?" And for the viewer, at least this one, a third problematic arises: but what is the significance of this work beyond its isolated historical moment?



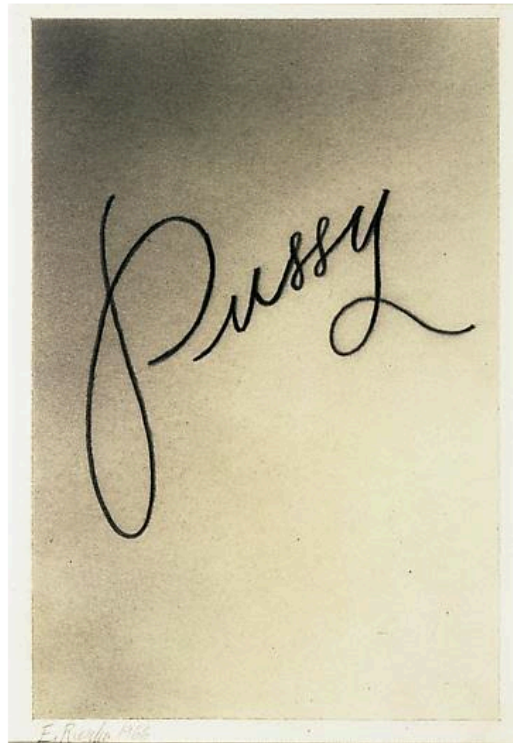
*Ed Ruscha, SIN, 1968. Pastel and pencil on paper, 10 1/2 x 27 3/4 in.  
(26.7 x 70.5 cm) Collection of Michèle Gerber Klein*

Born in the American steak-and-potatoes heartland—Omaha Nebraska—in 1937, before moving to Oklahoma City with his family, Edward Ruscha first migrated out to California to 1956 to attend what is now CalArts. Evidently the sunshine suited him, as Ruscha resisted the pull of Warhol's New York, becoming the cypher of West Coast artistic practice from the postwar to postmodern era, as well as a forerunner in the post-surrealist integration of text and image as constituent subjects in the recent history of art.

Considered a key figure in the birth of the pop art movement along with Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, and Wayne Theibaud all featured in Walter Hopp's groundbreaking 1962 exhibition at the Pasadena Museum of Art, *New Painting of Common Objects*, Ruscha presents, in *Ribbon Words*, a series of drawings predominantly displaying single signifiers on a vast neutral plane. The plane itself is a tabletop upon which the artist placed the 'ribbons', cut pieces of curved paper arranged as cursive in works such as *Cherry* (1967), *Quit* (1967), *Chop* (1967), and *Promise* (1967) or as individual lettering in *1984* (1967) and *Sin* (1968)—all rendered predominantly with gunpowder on paper. The effect is that of a semiotic still life, where the words, as such, serve as objects. Or as the curator states, "The sign becomes an object. Letters and words are attributed an autonomous aesthetic and artistic quality beyond their meaning, independent of their sign quality. In this way, the surfaces, curves, and overlapping of the letters become the actual subject."

Between *Pills* (1970) and *Pussy* (1966) however, between *Promises* (1967) and *Pee-Pee* (1967), a gulf appears. Nothing may be more common than the common object which is vernacular language, and in this way,

the *Ribbon Words* retain the stench of a historical moment. Alexandra Schwartz, writing for the exhibition catalogue, agrees with Nahem's thesis, mining the *Pop* culture in Ruscha's *Pop* art, stating, "Ruscha grew up during the birth of American teenager culture in the 1950s, when music, magazines, movies, as well as the brand new medium of television began catering to adolescents and to their wants, needs, and fantasies." She continues, "The notion of 'promises'—of love, fidelity, marriage, and so on—ran through the pop music of the time, in songs like The Drifters' 'Your Promise to Be Mine' ... while *Pills* (1970) conjures the drug culture of the time, when the recreational use of Quaaludes, barbiturates, and other pills was commonplace." For Schwartz, as for Nahem, Ruscha's *Ribbon Words* position him as a man 'of the time', a virtuoso of the historical 'commonplace', 'Hollywoodizing' the found object of language in a drama of words.



Ed Ruscha, *PUSSY*, 1966. Graphite and pencil on paper, 6 x 4 in. (15.2 x 10.2 cm)

And to some extent curator Dieter Buchhart would agree. In an interview concerning the exhibition (reproduced below), Buchhart recalls, "Ruscha would say 'I have background, foreground. It's so simple. And the backgrounds are of no particular character. They're just meant to support the drama.'" The curator enjoins, "Meaning the drama of the words!" Or, as the artist states in a 2014 interview with David Ebony on the occasion of the publication of the first volume of the catalogue raisonné of his works on paper: "Subject and ground are the elements of most of my thinking—or, you could say actor and stage, or car and road." Indeed, the documentary, quotidian banality of *Every Building on Sunset Strip* (1966) cannot help but accent the dramaturgy of the explosively evocative, *Sin with dripping liquid* (1967) or the inevitable double entendre of *Cherry* (1967). Yet there is nothing 'common' in the work of Ed Ruscha.



Ed Ruscha, *Installation Shot*, Edward Tyler Nahem Gallery.

Ed Ruscha's *Ribbon Words* do not *tell*, but *show*. The artist himself suggests: "Art making is a way to communicate only with myself and not necessarily with others. A work has to reach self-satisfaction then it enters into another, more ambiguous realm of presenting itself to an audience." Entering, the second floor space of the Edward Tyler Nahem Gallery, one finds three works, subtly placed, almost hidden, on the side walls of the first pristine, white-walled space. The first, to left of the entrance, a discrete signature: *Ed Ruscha* (1966), scrawled in elaborate handwriting (in no way similar to the artist's own signature). The second and third, the works, *Automatic* (1966) and *Pussy* (1966), present with the same flourish. These three works, unlike the body of nearly all of the rest of the works on view, are not still-lives and evince no relation to ribbons of paper nor to any landscape. Infinitely more direct in presentation, these works are also possibly more candid in gesturing towards the unconscious drive of the body of work as a whole. As Buchhart remarks, "In 1966, [Ruscha] created a group of small-scale drawings with wide handwritten pencil marks on a finely shaded graphite background, in which words like 'Automatic' or 'Pussy', but also 'Ed Ruscha', as kind of a self-portrait". Between these works, grandly positioned and confronting the viewer in the gallery, is an aggressive salon style mis-en-tableau of works including notably the grand *Tee-Tee* (1967) and *Pee-Pee* (1967), referencing infantile language and even a more repressed form of consciousness, not directly attributable to any referent or specific pop culture present tense. Rather taken as a group, these five works act like a key to the perceptual gestalt of the exhibition as a whole, allowing the significance of the body of works to exceed the discrete 'chapter' or 'episode' of history in which they were made.



Ed Ruscha, *CHERRY*, 1967, Gunpowder on paper 73/4 x 93/4 in. (19.7 x 24.8 cm) Private collection

If *Ribbon Words*, taken as a body of work, produces a scopophilic or sexual urge, though not historically confined, then it is also not art historically accidental. It was during a formative excursion through the European landscape from April to October of 1961 that Ruscha not only adopted an affection for Surrealist tactics of collage and ironic, nonsensical word combinations, which would later appear in works on view in this exhibition such as the suggestive but illogical *Screw and Eggs* (1967), but also, and by this operation, as Lisa Turvey notes, the artist sought to “synthesize the gestural, improvisory emphases of his Abstract Expressionist schooling with the symmetry and preconception he admired in John’s art.” In this way, it is a heritage of collage, and its explicit isolation of the *word* from its found context or syntax, allowing the possibility of new more ambiguous—and more material—condition of signification (the sign requires a material signifier and the immaterial ‘idea’ or signified, which do not *necessarily* coincide, nor have recourse to the real), which is the founding operation of Ruscha’s words—as works—on paper. Or as psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, from whom Dieter Buchhart takes his cue in his ultimate interpretation/presentation of Ruscha’s works would say, taking ‘the letter’ *à la lettre*—literally—as representations. However, also in this way, it is the influence of Kurt Schwitters’s graphic, Dadaist constructions crossed with Pollock’s ejaculatory privileging of the expressionist id-cum-ego (pun intended), submitted to a pop minimalist aesthetic and structuralist semiotic zeitgeist, which gave way to Ruscha’s 1966-73 ‘landscapes’ of object and word, *Pussy* and *Cherry*, *Pee-Pee* and *Tee-Tee*—even *Fireproofing a tiny box*. The drama of words is also a psychic drama.

Below is an excerpt of an email interview conducted with Dieter Buchhart on the occasion of the exhibition, exploring Ruscha’s exposition of the unconscious, a question of the sign, and/or the possible stakes of censorship. (Full disclosure: for some answers the curator chose to excerpt directly from his catalogue essay.

**Do you see Ruscha’s works as forms of expression (or expressionist), or forms of address?**

I’m not certain what you mean... yes, of course they are expressions.

**In your essay for the exhibition you note psychoanalyst Lacan’s essay the ‘Instance of the letter’ essay, in which he talks about taking language *à la lettre*—meaning literally, as he calls it an ‘enslaved’ substrate or support to the unconscious which precedes language—or precedes the unification of the signifier and signified in the sign. With words like *Automatic*, *Pussy*, *Pee-pee*, *Tee-tee*, *cherry*, and *sin* how do you think these words could be seen a metonymic of the unconscious drives? How can this be related to the idea of the self-nomination of *Ed Ruscha*—perhaps as a portrait of the id?**

Formally speaking, his “cut-tape” technique reveals similarities to signs in public space, as is legible in one of his photographs from 1965 where he creates a link between metonymy and deferral. This in the sense of Jacques Lacan, who seeks to interpret Sigmund Freud’s theory of the interpretation of dreams, whereas displacement only takes place “where the emphasis, interest, or intensity of one idea becomes detached from it and is passed to other ideas that are of little interest or intensity, but which are related to it by a chain of associations.” As one figure can represent several individuals in Freud’s interpretation of dreams, Ruscha’s words are both formally and thematically linked by way of a chain of associations to various things.

Accordingly, Ruscha’s ribbon drawings are metonymically linked both with paper ribbons, cut paper, *papier collé*, the visual support paper, and signs and neon advertising in public space, the city space, but also film and theater. The ribbon form itself opens a potential of associations that leads from the line, cursive handwriting, the endless boulevards of Los Angeles, Route 66, shoelaces, filmstrips, the Metro Goldwyn Mayer logo to his 1966 leporello *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*. Here, displacement is to be understood in the sense of “rearranging meaning” and metonymy is conceived in Freud’s sense as “the means of the unconscious that is best suited at avoiding censorship.” In this way, Ruscha’s letters and words literally penetrate our subconscious. Thus, the repeating ribbons of ee in *PeePee*, *TeeTee*, and *WeeWee* result in a visual and acoustic rhythm that makes reference to the sound of urinating and the quality of child language.

**Okay, if it is a question of censorship, what is at risk of being censored?**

(Emphatically) ‘Rearranging meaning’ and metonymy are conceived here in Freud’s sense as the means of the unconscious at **avoiding** censorship.

### **What is the role of surrealism? Dada? Constructivism (the ribbon as cut)?**

This results in word repetitions like *Pee Pee* or *Tee Tee* that beside their child-speak meaning of urination recall drawn sound poetry and evoke Dadaists such as Raoul Hausmann or Kurt Schwitters and his “Ursonate” in their visual or audible rhythm through the repetition of the vowel “E.” This poses the question of the meaning of concrete poetry for Ruscha’s drawings and his use of words. The objectification of words, the relation of content and form, seems to refer to Öyvind Fahlström’s 1953 “Manifesto for Concrete Poetry.”

Further the ribbon relates to cutting. The artist even emphasizes the relation to the torn paper ribbon of the closing swing of the “T” in *Cut Lip* or the seemingly provisional ribbon in the “c” in *Music*. With the reference to torn and cut paper, Ruscha evokes collage as an artistic technique. In his interviews, Ruscha refers especially to Kurt Schwitters, who “spent his life collecting subway tickets and trolley tokens.”

### **What is the support or substrate (literal and conceptual) of these works? How is it important? What is the subject?**

As pictorial subjects, the words generate the illusion of being made of the material paper. In the process, they possess a metonymic relationship to the paper as a material and the paper as support. The illusory reproduction of the paper ribbon objects refers to paper per se. Ruscha noted: “I see words as objects. I am painting pictures of objects.” He thus objectifies language’s symbolic system, which serves the purpose of communication. The sign becomes an object. Letters and words are attributed an autonomous aesthetic and artistic quality beyond their meaning, independent of their sign quality. In this way, the surfaces, curves, and overlappings of the letters become the actual subject.

### **But, if the ‘sign becomes object’, then where, in works like *Ed Ruscha* (1966), then do we locate the difference between the ‘subject’ and/or ‘object’ of the work?**

I don't see a contradiction here. He objectifies words and these objects are metonymic signifiers referring to a chain of associations.

### **How do these works relate to landscape?**

By means of the striking horizontal format already used in *Skytown* in 1967, that already with an aspect-ratio which approaches that of ultra Panavision 70 evokes the opening and closing credits of a film. The choice of the horizontal format as film is, of course, a historical landscape format. It brought the artist to drily comment that he is a “landscape painter,” and in so doing the artist avoided fixation and emphasizes the ambiguity of his works.

### **Do you consider landscapes to be ideological forms?**

Landscapes can be seen as ideological forms - a process by which identities can be formed. But I would not narrow this idea solemnly to the idea of landscape.

Thank you for the dispute. **WM**