

Article

# Exploring Appropriation as a Creative Practice

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**Abstract:** During the 1960s and 1970s, Ed Ruscha produced a series of 16 small, self-published books that became a catalyst for how artists could approach the book form. This reputation has grown through the subsequent decades, and his influence on book artists remains strong to this day to the extent that his books have been, and continue to be, appropriated across the world by successive generations of artists. Writing from a practitioner perspective, I will begin by looking at how Ruscha has become so influential to generations of book artists. I will look at what influenced him, and how he may possibly have appropriated the work of others. I will then focus in on the community of book artists who reference Ruscha's books in their practice. The research of Ruscha's books is embodied in each of these individual outcomes, but I will show that it is through the collective act and the bringing together of all of these books, through the community, that the work/s gain currency, strengthening both the Ruscha books and those that have come after.

**Keywords:** artists; books; book; art; arts; Ruscha; appropriation; print: book arts; artists books

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## 1. Introduction

During the 1960s and 1970s, the American artist Ed Ruscha produced a series of 16 small, self-published books that became a catalyst for how artists could approach the book form. While he was not the only artist of the time to consider the potential of books for dissemination via mass production and portability, his reputation has been cemented as a revolutionary in this new approach to artists' books.

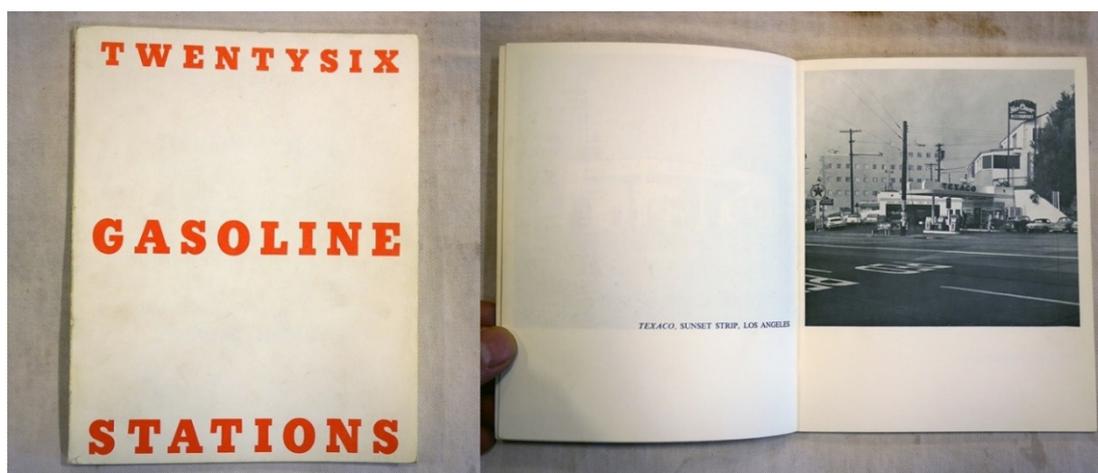
This reputation has grown through the subsequent decades, and his influence on book artists remains strong to this day to the extent that his books have been, and continue to be, appropriated across the world by successive generations of artists. Sometimes this appropriation is explicit and sometimes a little more obscure, with a direct reference or a knowing nod. Using his books as a "score" to be followed. Sometimes only done once, or for others the backbone of their output and a constant reference throughout their career, becoming part of their creative practice.

Through this essay I will begin by looking look at how Ruscha has become so influential to generations of book artists. I will look at what influenced him, and how he may possibly have appropriated the work of others. I will then focus in on the community of book artists who make with reference to Ruscha's books. Since Bruce Nauman produced *Burning Small Fires* in reference to Ruscha's *Various Small Fires*, these appropriated works have grown in number to the hundreds and have been represented in large exhibitions such as "Ed Ruscha Books & Co" at Gagosian, in publications such as *Various Small Books*, and through the "Follow-ed (after hokusai)" exhibitions I curated with Michalis Pichler.

Although all made with a similar reference point, these appropriated books are often made without the full knowledge of others who are doing the same. The research of Ruscha's books is embodied in each of these individual outcomes, but I will show that it is through the collective act and the bringing together of all of these books, through the community, that the work/s gain currency, strengthening both Ruscha's books and those that have come after.

## 2. Discussion

Ruscha produced his first booklet *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* in 1963 (see Figure 1) and it is from this point on that the nature of artists publishing changed. An unassuming publication that received a mixed reception, it was produced in a numbered edition of 400 and documents the journey from Los Angeles to Oklahoma City (where Ruscha grew up) on what was then Route 66. However, not quite in correct geographical sequence. In an interview with John Coplans in 1965 Ruscha claimed that in conceiving this book “the title came before I even thought about the pictures. I like the word ‘gasoline’ and I like specific quantity of ‘twenty-six’” (Coplans 1965). As Clive Phillpot has suggested, twenty-six like the “letters of a personal alphabet that are structured by the form of the book” (Lauf and Phillpot 1998, p. 33).



**Figure 1.** Edward Ruscha, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, 1963. Courtesy of Arnolfini and Bristol Archives.

This was perhaps the first non-literary book in which images did not simply enhance a text. It was cheap to buy at \$3.50 and has subsequently been republished in two further unnumbered editions. Initially, the book was rejected by the Library of Congress for its “unorthodox form and supposed lack of information”. “However, over time it acquired cult status, and by the 1980s it was hailed as one of the first truly modern artist’s books”.<sup>1</sup>

The influence of *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* cannot be underestimated. Although other artists had been working with the book format before and around the same time that it was produced, Ruscha’s book “established the paradigm for a new concept of the cheap multiple booklet as art. It is an artwork, not documentation, not theory, not a literary work. It is not a book of reproductions of artworks. The work is dependent upon the book structure; it would not be effective flattened out on a wall” (Phillpot 2013). It is a work that sets itself completely apart from the *livres d’artiste* and *livres de luxe*, the luxury books produced by galleries with an artist from their stable illustrating the words of an often long-dead poet. It is not an illustrated book or visual poetry. It is an artwork in its own right, presented in book form.

The book stood out within an art context because Ruscha had utilised cheap commercial production and distribution systems that were prevalent at the time. This gave the book a mass produced feeling, kept down the per copy production costs and allowed him to distribute it to a different audience. The one mistake he has acknowledged he made in producing the first run of this book, was numbering the edition. As he stated near the time “The final product has a very commercial, professional feel to it.

<sup>1</sup> <https://gagosian.com/exhibitions/2016/ed-ruscha-books-co/> accessed on 15 September 2019.

I am not in sympathy with the whole area of hand-printed publications, however sincere. One mistake I made in *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* was in numbering the books" (Coplans 1965).

However, after selling out the first edition, he negated this concern by subsequently producing two more editions of the book. "In 1967 [ ... ] he reprinted *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* in an edition of five hundred copies. This last gesture confirmed the idea of the replicability of an artwork in book form, for there was virtually no difference between the first printing and the reprint" (Lauf and Phillpot 1998, p. 34). This was a gesture that was all the more significant and in line with his desire to mass-produce and distribute a book, specifically because he had numbered it in the first printing.

Clive Phillpot has researched and written about Ruscha's books extensively, and can find little precedent for Ruscha's approach to using the book, but can clearly observe the influence they had after. "Being so concerned with establishing the origins of the bookwork, and with reiterating Ed Ruscha's intentions in publishing *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* [ ... ] is to re-emphasise the emergence of this movement towards the multiplication and distribution of art in the form of the cheap booklet. I find it difficult to underestimate the significance of the hijacking of the book form for the dissemination of primary art to a wide audience" (Phillpot 2013). This hijacking continued with the artists associated with Minimalism and Conceptualism in particular, who by taking a cue from Ruscha, sought to use the book form to interact with a new audience through a dematerialised object. Artists such as Sol LeWitt, Lawrence Weiner, and Richard Long.

Ed Ruscha continued to use the book form as an output between 1963 and 1978. Ruscha's second book, *Various Small Fires and Milk* from 1964 (see Figure 2), in a similar format to *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, shows 15 small fires that are predominantly domestic in nature, candles, lighters, gas rings, cigarettes etc. The final image is of a glass of milk, the relief from all that burning? Ruscha has cited various influences on his work. "At the age of 12, Ruscha worked as a gofer for the Spike Jones Band. 'I was running for things like a dozen eggs which Spike would then grab and throw at his musicians'. Ruscha noted that the madcap style of Jones was the musical equivalent of his own burgeoning interest in art, particularly cartooning. Such humour—tantamount to a Dadaist sensibility—left its mark on Ruscha's later style, for example when a foreign object would intrude on an established subject such as [ ... ] the glass of milk at the end of the book".<sup>2</sup> It is also evident that Marcel Duchamp has been an influence on Ruscha, particularly in relation to the subject matter, content, and form of his books. As he stated "he discovered common objects and showed you could make art out of them".<sup>3</sup>

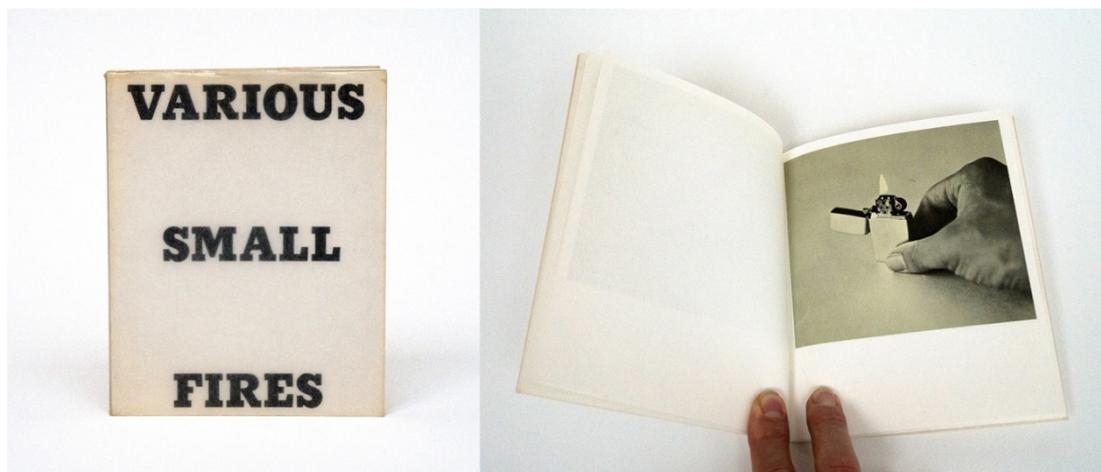
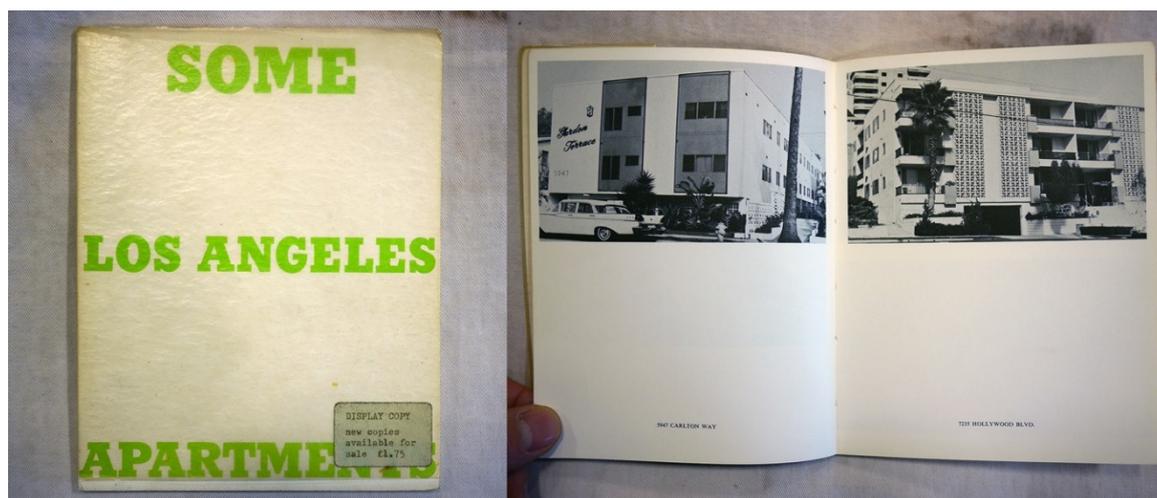


Figure 2. Edward Ruscha, *Various Small Fires and Milk*, 1964.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.jacobsongallery.com/index.php?nav=artistsbio&ArtistID=54> accessed on 11 May 2018.

<sup>3</sup> See: (Armstrong et al. 1994)—taken from (Phillpot 2013).

Ruscha's third book from 1965 was *Some Los Angeles Apartments* (see Figure 3), a book depicting 38 photographs of various apartment blocks in Los Angeles that typify the architecture from the 1960s. Ruscha is, and was defined very much as a west coast artist, with much of the content for his books being derived from the Los Angeles environment. The architecture, the car, the palm trees, and the cactus depict his place, his environment, and the aspirations and developments of the time. "It is thanks to Ruscha's having recorded these structures in 1965—and in many cases having provided the inspiration for others to photograph similar subjects—that we find ourselves today more observant and appreciative of the architecture that so unassumingly but definitively influences our experiences of the city".<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 3.** Edward Ruscha, *Some Los Angeles Apartments*, 1965. Courtesy of Arnolfini and Bristol Archives.

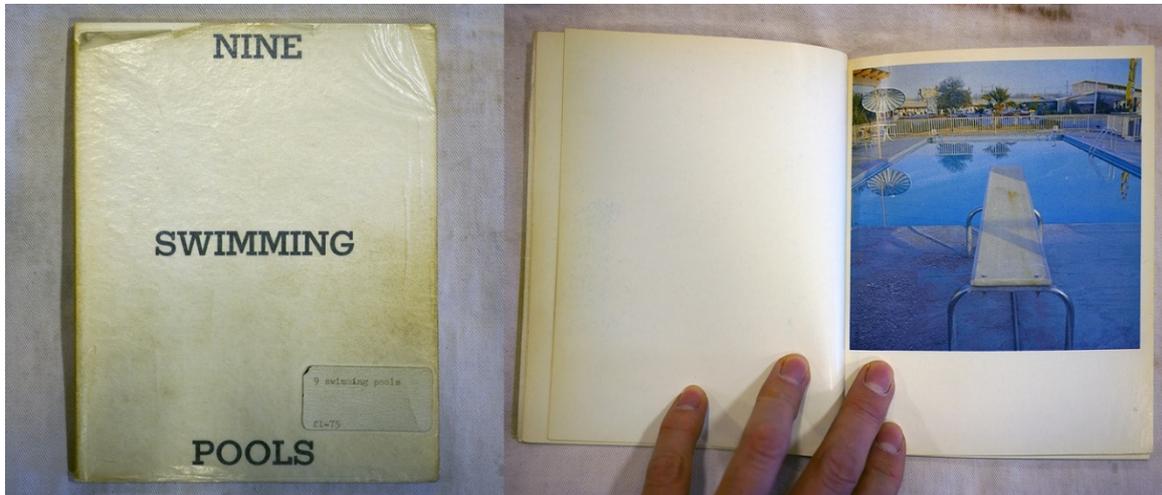
Ruscha's ability to present the factual as an artistic statement is again shown in his book *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* from 1966. This is deadpan photography that depicts exactly as the title suggests in a long concertina book, one side of the street at the top of the page, the other side at the bottom. He reportedly first tried to photograph all the buildings on foot without much success. He then adopted a mechanised system that fit to the back of a car, allowing him to drive up and down the street photographing all the buildings which had then been spliced together in the book to form the continuous stream of buildings. This book is notable for its construction also. This is not a book that wholeheartedly embraces the commercial printing and binding techniques that have characterised the earlier books. A 15-foot concertina requires a much more involved production process and is far less common in general book production. It also comes wrapped in a silver slipcase that I believe starts to set this volume out as a little more precious.

For his 1967 book *Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles* Ruscha commissioned a professional aerial photographer, Art Alanis, to take to the skies over Los Angeles and photograph a series of predominantly empty parking lots from above. It was unimportant to Ruscha who took the photographs; Alanis knew how to get the pictures that Ruscha desired, showing parking lots large and small. Evidence of use is there, the lines to retain order, and the oil stains on the ground increase with proximity to the buildings. After all, who wants to walk too far?

*Nine Swimming Pools and a Broken Glass* from 1968 (see Figure 4) marks another small departure from Ruscha's previous works which had been predominantly printed in black and white, and was printed in colour. As the title suggests, it presents us with nine photographs of swimming pools, and

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.npr.org/sections/pictureshow/2013/04/17/177685918/revisiting-some-los-angeles-apartments?t=1549703065693> accessed 15 September 2019.

many empty pages between, with a broken glass to conclude. There is no figure present in the images, as is often the case in Ruscha's books, but there is evidence of someone having been there. Ripples in the water and wet footprints on the side allude to a hidden narrative. Ending with the broken glass "leaves a feeling of rupture after the pools—glass being the last thing you would want to find under your feet when going for a swim" (Richards 2008).



**Figure 4.** Edward Ruscha, *Nine Swimming Pools and a Broken Glass*, 1968. Courtesy of Arnolfini and Bristol Archives.

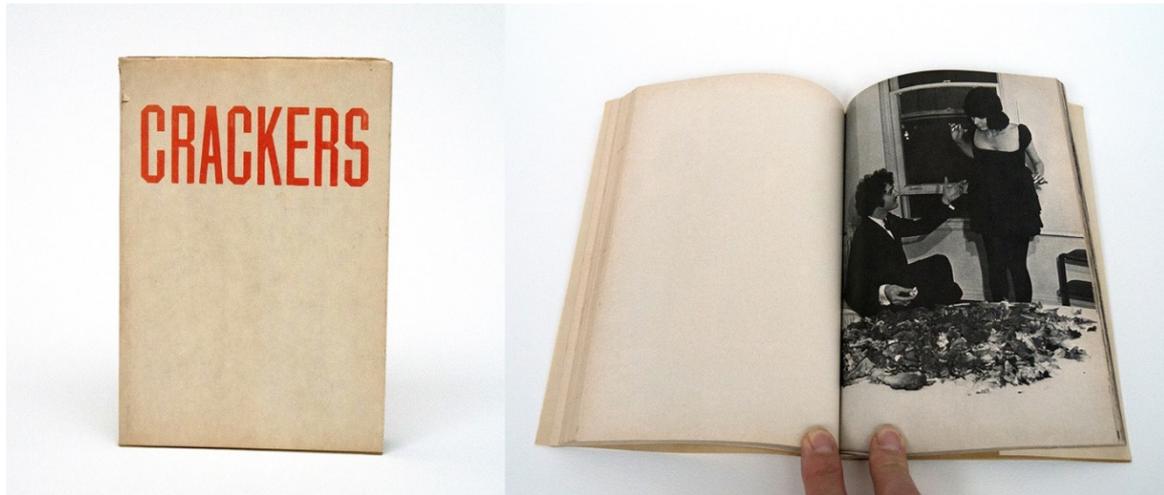
Most of Ruscha's book are notable for the absence of people in the images, although their presence is felt, they are rarely seen. However within the 16 books there are books that are collaborative efforts, and in these there often exists a much clearer narrative structure that places people at the centre. *Royal Road Test* from 1967 (see Figure 5) is a book produced in conjunction with Mason Williams and Patrick Blackwell, and presents the forensic documentation of the process and aftermath of dropping a Royal typewriter from a Buick in the Nevada desert. Ruscha, Williams, and Blackwell are ever present as the protagonists in this playful parody of the Beat Generation writers.



**Figure 5.** Mason Williams, Edward Ruscha, Patrick Blackwell, *Royal Road Test*, 1967.

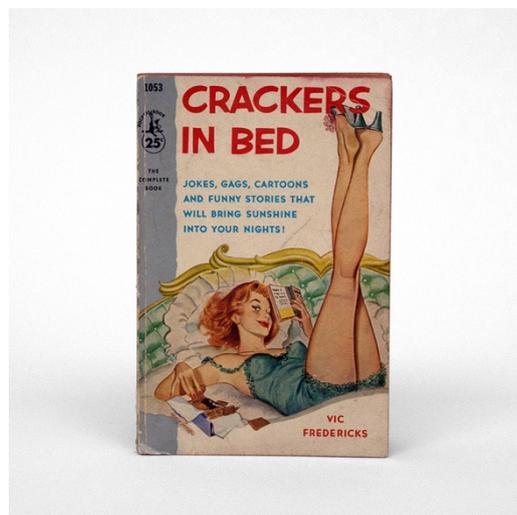
In *Crackers* from 1969 (see Figure 6) Ruscha collaborates with Mason Williams again. Williams is a writer and musician, and schoolfriend of Ruscha's from Oklahoma City who moved with him to Los Angeles in the 1950s. *Crackers* includes a short text on the flyleaf written by Williams that describes a

man seducing a woman to eventually lie on a bed covered with salad leaves in a downmarket hotel, covering her in salad dressing, before declaring he has forgotten the crackers. At which point he leaves to go and eat crackers on his own in an upmarket hotel. The rest of the book is filled with photographs on the recto that illustrates this text. This is much in the style of photo stories found in magazines, particularly those aimed at teenage girls. In *Hard Light* from 1978 that was produced in collaboration with Lawrence Weiner, a photo story narrative has been used again, but this time without accompanying text. Reading the book, a viewer derived narrative can be formed from the images, but this exists in the mind as the images only lead so far.



**Figure 6.** Edward Ruscha, *Crackers*, 1968.

When you start to delve deeper into Ruscha's books, it also becomes apparent that he may be appropriating the work of others. Dada and Duchamp are obvious influences and he cites them as so, but there are other references that he is less explicit about, and at times the similarities are too close to be ignored. As in the case of *Crackers*, there is a 1954 book called *Crackers in Bed* (see Figure 7). This is not an artist's book, rather a joke book (with dubious jokes), but the title and image bear such a resemblance to Ruscha and Williams's book that it is difficult to see how it could not have been some influence.



**Figure 7.** Vic Fredericks, *Crackers in Bed*, 1954.

Another two volume edition that bears a striking resemblance to one of Ruscha's books is *Ginza Kaiwai/Ginza Haccho* produced by Shohachi Kimura and Yoshikazu Suzuki in Japan in 1954. The *Ginza Haccho* volume is a long concertina book that depicts all the buildings on a street in Ginza, spliced together in a continuous line with one side of the street at the top of the page, and the other at the bottom. It is remarkably similar to Ruscha's *Sunset Strip*, yet precedes it by 12 years. Ruscha has not confirmed that this or other books were or were not an influence on his work. However, "given the significant congruencies between the two publications, it is natural to speculate [ . . . but] linking *Ginza Haccho* to Ruscha risks either anachronism or attributing influence where perhaps none existed" (Brouws et al. 2013).

That said, it appears that further traditions from Japan could have been a big influence on Ruscha. Again he is not explicit about the reference, but in looking at some of the printed work from 19th century Japan, and in particular Hokusai and Hiroshige, there are strong similarities. In works such as *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji* by Hokusai, produced c. 1830–1832, we are presented with a themed numbered collection of prints, that is a documentation of the landscape and environment in which Hokusai was living and working. Similarly *The Fifty-Three Stations of the Tōkaidō* from 1833 to 1834 by Hiroshige also presents a numbered collection of woodcut prints that are a record of landscape, but this is also the document of journey when Hiroshige travelled along the Tōkaidō road in 1832. The stations were rest areas along the Tōkaidō road, which was a major coastal route that ran between Edo and Kyoto. Rest areas, much like the gasoline stations from Ruscha's drive between Los Angeles and Oklahoma City.

It also seems as though Ruscha could have adopted standard civic recording techniques as his method to produce *Sunset Strip* in particular. A book entitled *Magdalen Street, Norwich: An Experiment in Civic Design 1958–59* (see Figure 8) contains a pull-out concertina that depicts Magdalen Street in Norwich just before the Civic Trust, in conjunction with Norwich City Council, improved the design and appearance of the street and installed a new flyover. A book that was presented as a blueprint for how to regenerate further high streets. The street was photographed by Philip Armes who was employed by the council as a photographer. In much the same way that Ruscha presented *Sunset Strip* years later, these are many photographs taken along the street of the buildings and spliced together. One side of the street on the top of the page and the other at the bottom. Philip Armes took the images from an elevated viewpoint and was responsible for collaging them all together. This panoramic view was cited as being key to most of the subsequent work and could have been an approach replicated as it also explains "such a survey will be found essential in any similar scheme" (Anonymous 1959).



**Figure 8.** Civic Trust, Magdalen Street, Norwich: An Experiment in Civic Design 1958–59, 1959. Photography Philip Armes.

In turn, Ruscha's books have had a huge impact on a long succession of artists interested in the book as artwork. I believe his books really are seen as a composition to be enacted, much as sheet music or a script. The enigmatic quality of the books inspires many to investigate the content further, to interrogate our surroundings and influence many of us working in the book format. Or as Ruscha would say, "Artists Who Do Books".

Beginning with *Burning Small Fires* by Bruce Nauman in 1968, it was inevitable that as Ruscha's works gained prominence they would be parodied or appropriated. Nauman's book is a photographic record of the act of him burning Ruscha's book pages. Produced as a single sheet that folds map like, it was in turn reproduced as a limited edition book that performs the act, the promise, of the Ruscha title. Although not appropriation per se, this was the start of a long and continuing succession of artists who have used Ruscha's books as inspiration, direction and template. With *Various Small Fires* being one which has been returned to often.

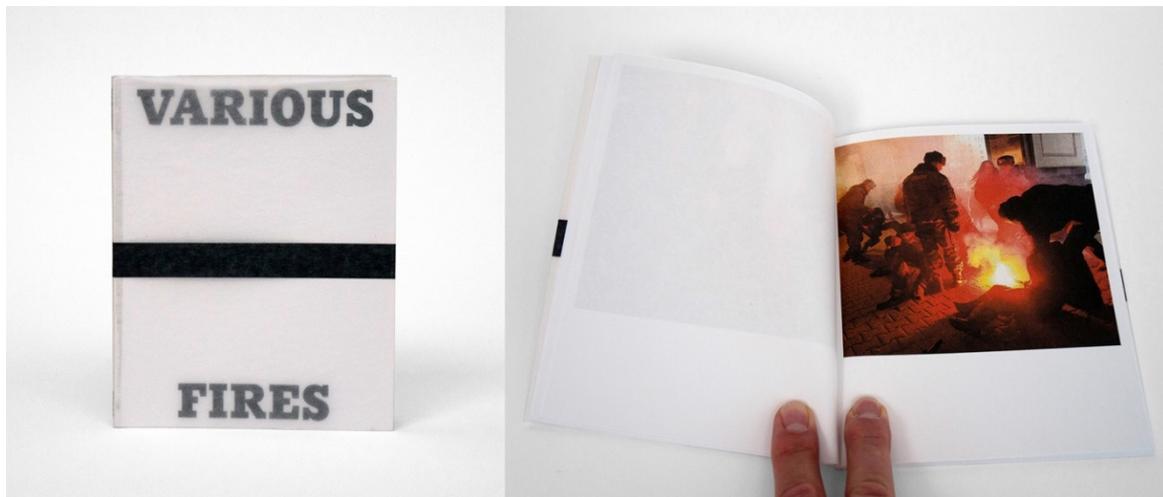
Yann Sérandour's *Thirtysix Fire Stations* from 2004 (see Figure 9) is an appropriation and a reference to two of Ruscha's books, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* interpolated with *Various Small Fires*. The same size, format and title font as Ruscha's, it documents all the fire stations in operation in Montreal on one day, 9 December 2001. There are actually only 33 stations depicted, as he was using information on the stations gathered in 1999 and three had relocated or closed down since, with blank pages and only titles for the missing stations. Blank pages which are typical of Ruscha's books. Possibly as breathing spaces, areas for projection or reflection. *Thirtysix Fire Stations* also shows the passing of a day through the photographs, from early morning through to the night, as seen in *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*.



Figure 9. Yann Sérandour, *Thirtysix Fire Stations*, 2004.

In *Various Fires and Four Running Boys* by Thomas Galler from 2009 (see Figure 10), the "small" from Ruscha's book has now been lost. Literally through the black strip on the cover that replaces the middle section of the title page, and in the images inside. These are images from the media that depict riots, terrorist attacks, forest fires, and natural disasters. These are no longer domestic fires, but those on a much larger and catastrophic scale. This is destruction not warmth. The four running boys appear to be escaping, running away from the fire in a shower of debris. "Thomas Galler's work revolves around issues of media representation, authorship and the transfer of meaning of found materials and reflects with a socio-critical attitude the products and phenomena of mass culture. An important group of images within the collection of newspaper images and magazine illustrations compiled by

the artist since 1999 are the Fires, photographs of fires from political reporting. These represent trouble spots and conflict situations whose events have changed the global, social fabric".<sup>5</sup>



**Figure 10.** Thomas Galler, *Various Fires and Four Running Boys*, 2009.

Ruscha's *Various Small Fires* was produced in 1964; in August 1965 the Watts riots occurred in Los Angeles and lasted for 6 days. Images from these riots are shown in *Various Fires and MLK* by Scott McCarney, 2010 (see Figure 11). It also depicts fires that were burning during Los Angeles riots in 1992, after Rodney King (born in 1965) was beaten by police. In addition there are images from protests in the MacArthur Park neighbourhood of Los Angeles in 2010 after the shooting of Manuel Jaminez. MacArthur Park is an area heavily populated with immigrants from Central America. The final image is of Martin Luther King.



**Figure 11.** Scott McCarney, *Various Fires and MLK*, 2010.

Still influenced by *Various Small Fires*, Marcella Hackbardt's *Various Unbaked Cookies* from 2010, brings it back to the domestic environment and plays on the milk image from the end of Ruscha's book. Here, unbaked dough balls are presented through the pages of the book that creates a sense of

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.editionfink.ch/php/katalog/detail.php?bestelle=152&buchid=152&parentid=&navid=5> accessed on 15 September 2019.

anticipation. The fire is absent, but it is needed. Required to turn the dough into the edible cookies to enjoy with milk. Simon Goode also plays with the cookie idea in *Various Small Cookies* from 2011 (see Figure 12). Produced without any knowledge of Hackbardt's earlier book, this time Goode presents the cookies having had the fire or heat applied to them. They are cookies and the anticipation has gone. Goode also presents the cookies to us printed on the page with all background removed. Here he is adopting another Ruscha signature as was used in his books *A Few Palm Trees* from 1971 and *Colored People* from 1972. In Goode's books the cookies are presented along with the ingredients and recipes, a document of and instruction for the performative act, presented through the artist's book, a performative object.



Figure 12. Simon Goode, *Various Small Cookies*, 2011.

Of course, being Ruscha's first and perhaps most iconic book, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* has become a book that has inspired many appropriated books since. One of the first produced was Jeff Brouws's *Twentysix Abandoned Gasoline Stations* from 1992 (see Figure 13). Produced in a style that mimics Ruscha's book, Brouws's "images employ a deadpan, neutral gaze similar to Ruscha".<sup>6</sup> "In the early 1990s many stations were being abandoned due to the implementation of new, tougher EPA requirements mandating that aging underground tanks had to be replaced, which required a huge capital outlay. Independent gas station owners were unable to bear this cost, while larger, better-funded multi-national corporations could".<sup>7</sup>

The abandoned stations have become a popular theme, as in *Twenty-Four Former Filling Stations* by Frank Eye in 2005 (see Figure 14), which depicts former filling stations in the UK. It was not just US legislation that caused many stations to close, it has been happening all over Europe as well. These beautiful (rotting) structures have been photographed in the same Ruscha style, and it seems natural that artists/photographers have referenced Ruscha in presenting this work in the book format. Eric Tabuchi, also produced a publication called *Twentysix Abandoned Gasoline Stations* in 2009 (see Figure 15). Images of the abandoned shells of recently and long closed stations are this time not presented in a standard codex book, but on a series of postcards collected in a slipcase. These are no longer relevant buildings for route planning, so the individual postcards and the changing order of these as they are interacted with, makes sense. There is no formal journey that needs to happen between them, so they can be arrived at in any order or happened across by accident. The non-linear structure of this book allows for a viewer-controlled journey.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.jeffbrouws.com/books/main.html> accessed 15 September 2019.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*



the differences have completely disappeared and we are presented with the homogeneity of almost identical Total stations on the Autobahn in Germany. All were photographed from a similar viewpoint. As with Brouws, the small independents are no longer there, not necessarily because of regulations, but large motorways have become the predominant journey route in the car for longer distances, rather than the smaller roads. The motorways are now populated by larger multi-national companies that have the networks sewn up. The architecture is incredibly similar and perhaps ubiquitous across Europe and beyond. They really could be anywhere.



**Figure 16.** Michalis Pichler, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, 2009.

Increasingly the internet is a source of images and material for the appropriated books, as in the book *Twentysix Gasolines Stations 2.0* by Michael Maranda from 2010 (see Figure 17). Here Maranda has recreated Ruscha's book, using the same images in the same sequence and format, but by using images wholly taken from the Internet. As Maranda says at the back of this book "absolutely no effort has been made to secure permission for use of any images reproduced within this book". Joachim Schmid is another artist who has used the Internet as a means to generate images for a Ruscha appropriated book. His 2009 book *Twentysix Gasoline Stations, Every Building on the Sunset Strip, Thirtyfour Parking Lots, Nine Swimming Pools, A Few Palm Trees, No Small Fires* (see Figure 18) manages to combine the titles of six of Ruscha's books and again uses images taken from Google Maps/Earth that show everything described in the comprehensive title. As Schmid says, "unlike the original books it relates to, this work was made entirely at my Berlin studio. I didn't visit Los Angeles to make the book and I didn't use a camera either. The camera is out there".<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.lumpenfotografie.de/2013/07/21/twentysix-gasoline-stations/> accessed on 15 September 2019.



Figure 17. Michael Maranda, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations 2.0*, 2010.



Figure 18. Joachim Schmid, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations, Every Building on the Sunset Strip, Thirtyfour Parking Lots, Nine Swimming Pools, A Few Palm Trees, No Small Fires*, 2009.

*Thirtyfour Parking Lots* in particular is a book that demands to be remade using Internet sourced images. Thanks to Google and others, the Internet is awash with aerial images of almost every inch of the planet, including many Los Angeles parking lots. In his 2006 book *Thirtyfour Parking Lots on Google Earth* (see Figure 19), Hermann Zschiegner has searched for and found all but one of the original parking lots from the Ruscha book and presented them back in colour in a recreated book that uses a very low res cover image of Ruscha's cover, all sourced from the Internet. Susan Porteous has also made a book in a near identical fashion in her *Thirtyfour Parking Lots Forty Years Later* from 2007 (see Figure 20). A version that is smaller and presents us with black and white images similar to Ruscha, again taken from Google. Finally, Travis Shaffer completed a very similar book in 2008 with *Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles ... via Google Maps* (see Figure 21). In a landscape format, unlike Ruscha, this book presents us with the most polished images of the three. Reproduced in colour, these are images from slightly further away and more in focus. Like Alanis's photos for Ruscha. Interestingly, it seems as though none of these artists were aware of what the other were doing when they produced their appropriated volumes. If the Ruscha books are only a score to be played, the multiple versions and similarities between were inevitable once Google had provided the source material.

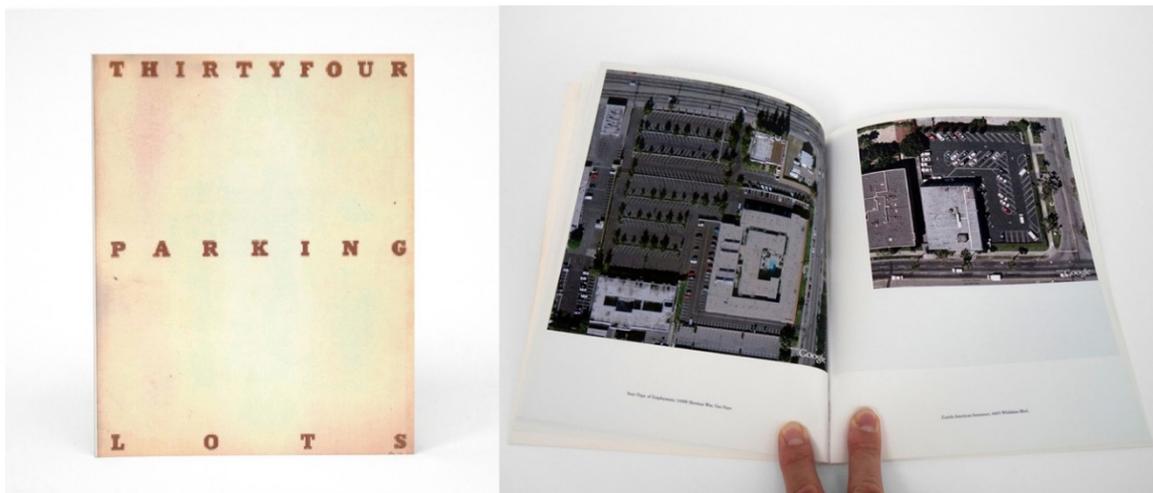


Figure 19. Hermann Zschiegner, *Thirtyfour Parking Lots on Google Earth*, 2006.



Figure 20. Susan Porteaus, *Thirtyfour Parking Lots Forty Years Later*, 2007.

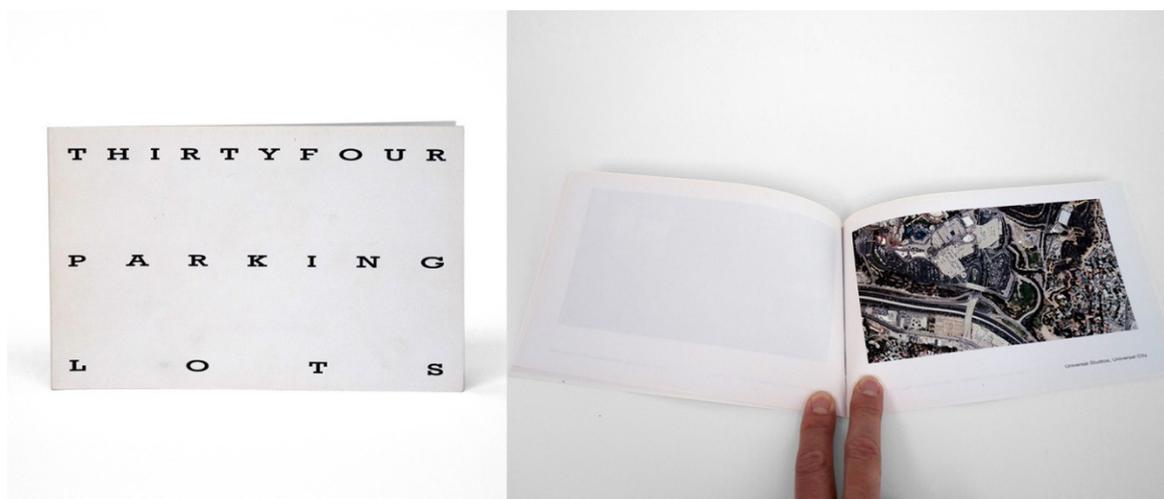


Figure 21. Travis Shaffer, *Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles ... via Google Maps*, 2008.

This is not to say all imagery is derived remotely from the Internet, sometimes artists visit the same places used by Ruscha. In the book *More Los Angeles Apartments: And Twenty Three Min Photo*

from 1998 (see Figure 22), the Canadian artist, writer, and curator John O’Brian has photographed apartment blocks on South Normandie in Los Angeles, showing one side of the street and then the other through the book. This is a play on Ruscha’s *Some Los Angeles Apartments*, but also *Sunset Strip*, with the in-depth study on one street, rather than an observation across the city. This is also a street that is featured in *Some Los Angeles Apartments* and includes “a reference to a building represented in Ruscha’s book: The Capri, 118 N. Normandie”.<sup>9</sup> O’Brian’s book also features photographs of the Twenty Three Min Photo shop, a Ruscha style name indeed, and also where O’Brian’s photographs were developed.



**Figure 22.** John O’Brian, *More Los Angeles Apartments: And Twenty Three Min Photo*, 1998.

Eric Doeringer is another artist who has gone back to the places first photographed by Ruscha. In describing his book *Some Los Angeles Apartments* from 2009 (see Figure 23), Doeringer states, “Ed Ruscha’s 1965 book *Some Los Angeles Apartments* features photographs of apartment buildings in Los Angeles. Ruscha was inspired by the ‘artless’ photography featured in real estate listings. For my version, I visited the locations Ruscha had photographed and took photographs from the same vantage points. Most of the buildings still exist, some with cosmetic alterations, others remain virtually unchanged. The book’s format mimics Ruscha’s, but substitutes my photographs of the apartments”.<sup>10</sup> Doeringer is a serial copier of Ruscha and has also appropriated and recreated many famous works including those from Damien Hirst, Andy Warhol, Richard Prince, Lawrence Weiner, On Kawara, and Sol Lewitt.

Doeringer also recreated *Real Estate Opportunities* in 2009 (see Figure 24). Ruscha’s book features photographs of vacant building plots around Los Angeles, a book of possibilities and anticipation. Again Doeringer returned to the same locations and photographed from the same vantage point. “In 2009, few of the lots remained vacant—they have been replaced by strip malls, Christian centers, restaurants, etc”.<sup>11</sup> As well as presenting the same locations, in look and feel, Doeringer’s books are almost identical to the Ruscha books. The same can be said for *Records* from 2011 (see Figure 25), another book Doeringer has published, using the same title and almost indistinguishable from Ruscha’s. “*Records* [ . . . ] contains photographs of 30 records from Ruscha’s collection. The left page of each spread shows an album cover, with a photograph of the corresponding vinyl LP on the right. To create my version, I collected copies of all of the records pictured in Ruscha’s book. Photographs of my records appear in the same sequence as the albums in Ruscha’s book. However, the two books are not

<sup>9</sup> <https://thepolygon.ca/product/more-los-angeles-apartments/> accessed on 15 September 2019.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.ericdoeringer.com/ConArtRec/Ruscha/Ruscha-SomeLAApts.html> accessed on 15 September 2019.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.ericdoeringer.com/ConArtRec/Ruscha/Ruscha-RealEstateOpts.html> accessed on 15 September 2019.

identical—the record covers in my book show different patterns of wear, price tags, and doodles and there is some variation in the record labels (mono/stereo versions, reissues, etc.)”<sup>12</sup>

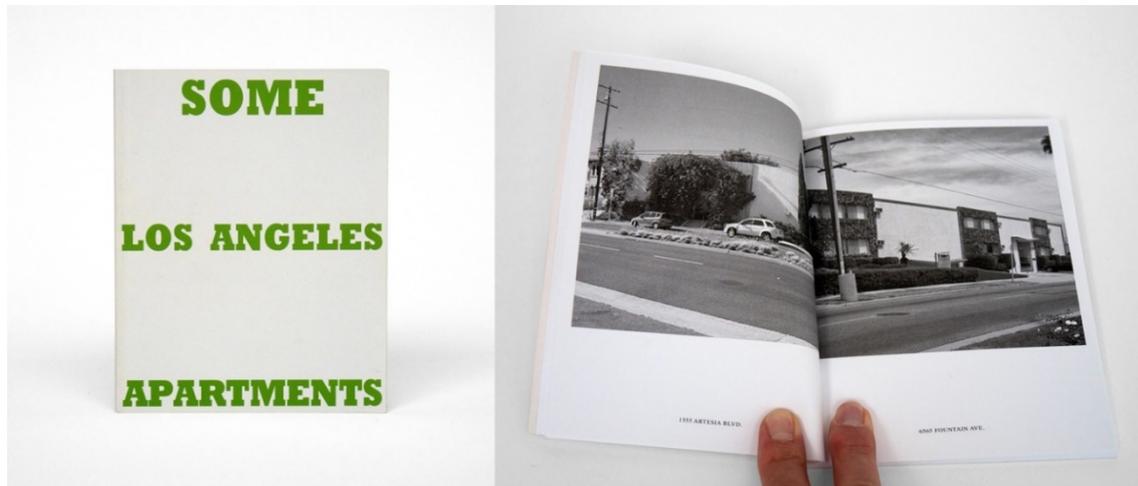


Figure 23. Eric Doeringer, *Some Los Angeles Apartments*, 2009.



Figure 24. Eric Doeringer, *Real Estate Opportunities*, 2009.

As Doeringer has stated: “I am particularly interested in works of Conceptual Art from the 60’s and 70’s where the artists were challenging traditional ideas of authorship, but I have also recreated more recent works that address similar concerns like Richard Prince’s Cowboy photographs and Damien Hirst’s spot paintings. The artists attempted to remove traces of their ‘hand’ from these works (indeed, many were not fabricated by the artists and/or vary in appearance each time they are installed), so there is often little difference between the ‘authentic’ works and my reproductions”<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.ericdoeringer.com/ConArtRec/Ruscha/Ruscha-Records.html> accessed 15 September 2019.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.ericdoeringer.com/ConArtRec.html> accessed 15 September 2019.



Figure 25. Eric Doeringer, *Records*, 2011.

There are, of course, many other ways in which Ruscha's books have been used as source material and/or inspiration. *Various Blank Pages* was produced by Doro Boehme and Eric Baskauskas in 2009 (see Figure 26). Both Boehme and Baskauskas worked at the Joan Flasch Artists' Book Collection at School of the Arts Institute in Chicago which "gives us the privilege of access to some of Ruscha's most famous and rare book works such as *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* and *Nine Swimming Pools*, as well as insight to the glut of knock-offs and homages that the scene produces".<sup>14</sup> They decided to produce their own homage based on Ruscha's love of empty space within his books. *Various Blank Pages* consists of reproductions of the blank pages from Ruscha's iconic books. The pages have been scanned directly from the books and produced in a design that mimics a Ruscha book, they also state that the "best part about this book is its alternate function as a notebook should the novelty of the piece ever fade".<sup>15</sup>



Figure 26. Doro Boehme and Eric Baskauskas, *Various Blank Pages*, 2009.

A personal favourite of mine from the myriad of Ruscha homages is *Fifteen Pornography Companies* by Louisa Van Leer from 2006 (see Figure 27). This book pays homage to Ed Ruscha in much the same way he did through many of his books, a recording of the architecture that could be said to be typical of that found in Los Angeles. Van Leer's book acts as an update to this collection of Californian architecture by presenting the more contemporary buildings used by pornographic

<sup>14</sup> <https://ericbaskauskas.bigcartel.com/product/various-blank-pages> accessed on 15 September 2019.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

production companies across the city. As Van Leer states, “the photographs reveal the mundane, nearly invisible side of an otherwise sensationalized industry that permeates the Los Angeles landscape”.<sup>16</sup> These buildings are not just invisible in the landscape, but the acts of the companies housed there also remain invisible to the outside world. The lewd material being produced inside cannot be seen when the buildings are predominantly windowless.

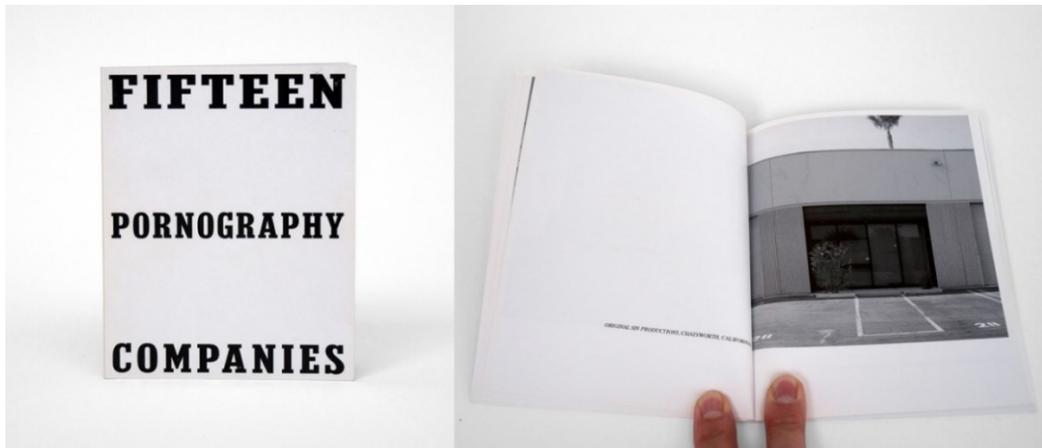


Figure 27. Louisa Van Leer, *Fifteen Pornography Companies*, 2006.

Returning to the speculation on whether *Ginza Kaiwai/Ginza Haccho* by Shohachi Kimura and Yoshikazu Suzuki was an influence on Ruscha, Michalis Pichler has played with this in his 2018 book *Ginza Haccho/Every Building On The Ginza Strip* (see Figure 28). Appropriating both their works, outwardly this book has a striking resemblance to Ruscha’s *Sunset Strip* complete with silver slipcase. However inside, the quality of the splicing together of the images reminds the viewer of the attention to detail that is evident in the photography from *Ginza Haccho*. Pichler acknowledges that although Ruscha’s books have gained international recognition, *Ginza Haccho* remains largely unknown. Similarly to Doeringer, Pichler is returning to the same subject matter after a period of time has elapsed, only from Kimura rather than Ruscha in this instance, depicting an updated presentation of the shop fronts in Tokyo, whose “facades are dominated by glamorous high-end global fashion and luxury brands mixed with local heavyweights”.<sup>17</sup>



Figure 28. Michalis Pichler, *Ginza Haccho/Every Building On The Ginza Strip*, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.louisavanleer.com/projects/15pornco.php> accessed on 15 September 2019.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.buypichler.com/books/ginza-haccho-every-building-ginza-strip> accessed on 15 September 2019.

Again playing with the possible Japanese influence on Ruscha, Lucy May Schofield has produced two books that reference Ruscha and Hokusai. Both *Nineteen Fuji Views* from 2015 and *Seventeen Fuji Views* from 2019 (see Figure 29), depict snatched and clear glimpses of the imposing peak of Mount Fuji. Schofield has spent considerable time in Japan and these photographs often show the mundane and ordinary Japanese landscape in the foreground, in relation to this dominating mountain. Rural scenes, homes, supermarkets, and telegraph wires stand in front of the majesty of the snow-covered peak. Much as Ruscha documented everyday scenes, in Schofield's photographs, as with Hokusai, the same is true but the eye is constantly drawn up through her affection for, and the supremacy of Mount Fuji.



**Figure 29.** Lucy May Schofield, *Seventeen Fuji Views*, 2019.

Ruscha has inspired my work as well. In an attempt to give some explanation for the appeal and longevity of Ruscha's books, I will document my own journey in appropriating Ruscha and discovering the collective who do the same. I am a part of this Ruscha rip-off genre, and through mass engagement it has become a genre. I have a fascination with the conceptual artists, for who Ruscha is sometimes associated. These artists who sought to remove the trace of their hand from their work. Their work is often instructional, to be enacted, or not. Imagined in the mind or produced. The physical manifestation is of lesser importance than the intention. I feel that by appropriating the style and look of another, I too am attempting in some part, to remove the trace of my hand.

My fascination for Ruscha's books began while I was studying for an MA in Book Arts at Camberwell College of Arts. I was able to access the complete collection of 16 books in the library at Chelsea College of Arts, handling them, reading them, and digesting them. At first, I was a little underwhelmed as they had been talked up to be such important books, their diminutive size and understated humour took a little while to comprehend but they gnawed away at my consciousness, much as was experienced by Marica Reed. "Speaking from experience, the first time I encountered Ed Ruscha's books, I flipped through them and was (suitably) not impressed. But I thought about them, and I didn't forget them" (Reed et al. 2010). However, as soon as I had spent a little more time with them, I was hooked. I could not help to be influenced, to need to return to them time and again, deriving new meanings, pleasure, and beginning to see them as a score to be re-enacted.

At the time I was also heavily influenced by anthropologist Marc Augé's book, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. I was living in Bristol and travelling to London to study. I was spending a lot of time in a coach on the motorway and I became interested in this "non-place". A space which has little relation to history or an identity, and through which we are only really expected to pass and not linger. An exploration of the coach environment on a motorway was followed with enquiry of other non-places that were of importance to me and commonplace in British society. In my books *Fiftytwo Shopping Trolleys in Parking Lots* (see Figure 30) and *Homeless People* (see Figure 31), both from 2004, I was investigating the supermarket.



Figure 30. Tom Sowden, *Fiftytwo Shopping Trolleys in Parking Lots*, 2004.



Figure 31. Tom Sowden, *Homeless People*, 2004.

In *Fiftytwo Shopping Trolleys* I was fascinated by the shopping trolleys that had been abandoned and strewn across the supermarket car park. The vessels that briefly contain a snapshot of our personalities, lying empty and yet full of promise. I photographed them in situ and removed them almost entirely from their surroundings, save from a snapshot through the basket of that architectural environment that defines a supermarket. Presented in varying quantities and arrangements across the pages, with blank pages as well, I felt that these trolleys took on their own personality and appeared to dance across the page. The focus on the mundane and the architectural reference meant that presenting this as a book in a Ruscha style, was a natural progression for me. I was also aware that I was very much grounded in my environment, not Los Angeles, so I wanted a title that was definitely British, but with a nod to America. Hence the “trolleys in parking lots”.

As I became aware of the trolley in the supermarket environment, so I became all too aware of the trolleys that had been removed from this non-place and found themselves in place. Trolleys that had been stolen, and often abused, away from the supermarket in and around my home of south Bristol. So I started to photograph these as they were found, which eventually become the content for *Homeless People*, the sister publication to *Fiftytwo Shopping Trolleys*. *Homeless People*, as these were homeless trolleys, but also at the time I had many American colleagues on the MA course and they often associated the trolley away from the supermarket with homeless people in the United States,

who use them as vehicles to contain all their possessions. Again produced in a Ruscha style, this time I consciously mimicked the style of Ruscha's *Colored People*.

In 2008 I was lucky enough to find myself in Los Angeles, which gave me the opportunity to produce another Ruscha appropriated work, in the home of Ruscha himself. With a spare few hours I planned an homage to *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (see Figure 32), with a version called *Some of the Buildings on Sunset Strip*. I was also inspired by Jonathan Monk's appropriated work *None of the Buildings on the Sunset Strip* from 2002 (see Figure 33). I set a process to follow to produce the images. As a passenger in a car, I would drive up and down the road, photographing any building that attracted my attention. One shot, regardless of how it came out, and no deletions. However in my ignorance, I made a mistake. I had not realised that Sunset Strip is actually only a small section of Sunset Boulevard, and I photographed buildings on the full Boulevard. A mistake that I embraced. Reproduced in an almost identical size and format to Ruscha's long concertina, the buildings are spread across the pages leaving gaps that correspond in some way to the gaps of the missing buildings.



Figure 32. Tom Sowden, *Some of the Buildings on Sunset Strip*, 2008.



Figure 33. Jonathan Monk, *None of the Buildings on the Sunset Strip*, 2002.

I have also collaborated with others to produce appropriated work. In 2011 The Performance Re-enactment Society and myself were invited by Arnolfini gallery in Bristol to respond to Ed Ruscha and Mason Williams's book *Crackers* from 1969. *Crackers* became the script, score, instruction, and inspiration for us to produce a new performative bookwork and conclude the final chapter with a

performance in Arnolfini. For our version *Salad Dressing* (see Figure 34) we tried to faithfully recreate most of the images from the original book, using a set constructed at Arnolfini, but to alter the ending. The misogynistic tale of seduction did not end with abandonment, rather our lead woman gets bored with the man and instead has the idea to use the salad leaves to construct a dress. The final live performance saw the protagonist, played by Samantha Sweeting, enter the gallery wearing a dress of salad leaves, which audience members were invited to remove from her dress, dip into a selection of salad dressings being carried by the male lead, Tom Marshman, and eat.



Figure 34. The Performance Re-enactment Society and Tom Sowden, *Salad Dressing*, 2011.

As a fan of Ruscha, and as I began to make appropriated work based on his books, I also became aware of others who were doing the same and so began to collect these books when I found them. Through the act of looking and collecting it became clear that there was in fact a large and growing community of people who made Ruscha-appropriated works. In particular I began to converse with Michalis Pichler about our shared interest. In turn this led to us collaborating together, building up our own collections we then combined to organise and curate a series of exhibitions of these appropriated books under the title “Follow-ed (after hokusai)”. A title that implies the work is referencing Ruscha, but also of the traditions that Ruscha has adopted from artists such as Hokusai.

It is not just Michalis and myself who have exhibited these books, or who collect them. Many of the artists who have made books in reference to Ruscha will also have a collection of others once they become aware. There have been a number of exhibitions of these books, with the largest being organised and curated by Gagosian gallery. Ed Ruscha’s gallery. With a network of Gagosian galleries around the world, this exhibition has travelled to New York, Los Angeles, Munich, and Paris. Through the discourse around these books, these appropriated works have become a genre in their own right. The most successful book written about these appropriated works is called *Various Small Books*, by Jeff Brouws, Wendy Burton, and Hermann Zschiegner, published by The MIT Press. It contains essays, acknowledgements, detailed lists, and descriptions of these books, and was launched at the first Gagosian exhibition. It is a book that collects together the collection of books. As Michalis Pichler has said in an essay for *Printed Matter*, “appropriation is practiced everywhere and all the time, also by people who never have heard the word. As someone said before, no author has his complete meaning alone”.<sup>18</sup> But this mass all dedicated to one author creates something else, it has new meaning.

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.printedmatter.org/catalog/tables/130> accessed on 15 September 2019.

### 3. Conclusions

Through the act of building and exhibiting these collections that all appropriate the work of one artist, and specifically his books, some sense begins to form. Brought together and viewed en masse, it is apparent that a community of knowledge is displayed in these books. The research of Ruscha's books is embodied in each of the appropriated outcomes, which strengthens through the collective act. Both the Ruscha's and those that come after. This community and collective has often not been aware of the other members until after the individual acts of appropriation. Much like the "collection" content of Ruscha's books, it is through the collection that it gains currency.

This is not to say it does not have its detractors. Anne Moeglin-Delcroix, herself an early exhibitor of Ruscha inspired books, believes "the difficulty with such a superabundance is that it entails numbing, even anesthetizing, and a dumbing down. This affects all the books in the series [ . . . ] What is most serious to my mind, is that this has a negative impact on Ruscha's books: they are the first victims of this trivialisation" (Moeglin-Delcroix 2015). I disagree. As I have stated, I do not believe in most cases that those appropriating are aware of the community before embarking on their first book, they are not produced merely for "self promotion and self legitimization" (Ibid.), they are produced in response to Ruscha, using his books as the instructions, the score. Through admiration they are riffing on an existing work, or remixing it to understand the original and present it to a new or different audience. Much as has happened for decades in music, and in particular dance music. Mixing together, adding new lyrics, or MC'ing over the top. Creating something new that directly references its origins, but does not trivialise it. They co-exist and the new never diminishes the old. And after all, as Ruscha stated in conversation recently "somebody said all art comes from other art"<sup>19</sup>

Ruscha has achieved a great many things as an individual, but his books caused such a schism in people's thinking that they became a model that allowed artists to do things differently. When looking at art as a collective activity rather than as an individual pursuit, this superabundance does not diminish Ruscha's books, but reinforces their greatness and shows their importance. As Pavel Büchler has stated, "culture is a collective activity; it's not an individual activity [ . . . ] The collective role of artists in forming the conditions of art is not really understood because we have a culture of individual accountability, measurement, detailed evaluation and categorization of everything we do from the moment we enter school until the moment we die. You can say that one way of looking at it is that the measure of an artist is what he or she enables others to do. So, Lucio Fontana is a very great artist. What matters is not if he advanced a certain idiom of painting but that he enabled an awful lot of people to do extraordinary sorts of things. It is a different perspective" (Reeve 2005).

Despite numerous interviews Ruscha says very little, or gives away very little, about his books. They retain an enigma which I think makes them attractive, and to understand them, you need to engage with them. And engaging with them too deeply, risks seeing them as a score to be performed again. For some it is just the look. Or the numbered naming system of a (photographic) collection. For others it is the systems. Or the subject matter. Or it is just a direct copy. With my collection, in some cases I have made the connection, being a little unsure if the artist is intentionally referencing Ruscha.

I have only presented here a selection of some of the books from my collection and the broader Ruscha rip-off genre. Print on demand publishing has facilitated an explosion in these books, as it is now so easy and cheap to produce a mass produced Ruscha knock-off book. Much like the adoption of existing book production and distribution techniques that Ruscha employed to circumnavigate the gallery system, with print on demand it has become even easier. Encompassed in a complete package of design, production, and distribution, artists no longer have the outlay expense of producing several hundred books to keep costs low. Print on demand allows the artist to self-publish with no gatekeeper and no initial outlay at all. The only time money is exchanged is when a copy is ordered, and it can

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<sup>19</sup> Ruscha, Ed. Artist's Talk: Ed Ruscha. In *Conversation with Frances Morris*. London: Tate Modern, July 25.

just be one copy. An artist need not pay anything, rather use the online shop connected to the print on demand website to allow others to pay when they order a copy.

Consequently, these books keep coming and are often made without knowledge of wider environment and community of others. This collective body of knowledge keeps growing and gathering strength, and the collection is key to understanding this work. The collection of books, based on a collection of books, that explore collections. It truly makes sense when they are all viewed together. As Ruscha said of his own books: “When you go through the whole collection it begins to make some sense; it shows more about the attitude behind them than one of them does. One of them will kind of almost knock you on your ass” (Sharp 1973).

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