

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

**WALL STREET
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Ed Ruscha Books & Co.

By Peter Plagens

As a very young man, the eminent Los Angeles Pop artist Ed Ruscha (b. 1937) took a trip to Europe and was taken with the unpretentious little books sold by street vendors. In 1962, he put out one of his own, "Twentysix Gasoline Stations," with photographs of fill-'er-up places along Route 66. The slim volume was rejected by the Library of Congress as being unorthodox and uninformative. But the art world snapped it up, and Mr. Ruscha followed up with "Some Los Angeles Apartments" (1965), "Nine Swimming Pools and a Broken Glass" (1968) and "Real Estate Opportunities" (1970)—my particular favorite, its photos of barren lots in the boondocks cutting to the quick of Southern California's endemic boosterism.

But a funny thing happened to Mr. Ruscha's books on the way to the pantheon. Not only did other artists take the cue and make their own, very similar books, but, like Led Zeppelin tribute bands playing college towns, they openly reveled in the imitation. Architects Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi did Ed-like books; so did Stan Douglas, one of Canada's most prominent artists; and so has Edgar Arceneaux, one of Los Angeles's rising art stars. Photographer Charles Johnstone shot his own 26 gas stations...in Cuba. And Elisabeth Tonnard, a Dutch artist, blew up one of Mr. Ruscha's swimming pools into 3,000 pages that can be detached and laid out to form a life-size image of the pool. All 100 artists here pay cheerful homage to Mr. Ruscha's bright idea—with the exception of Bruce Nauman, who back in 1968 set fire to Mr. Ruscha's 1964 "Various Small Fires and Milk" and pointedly called his own book "Burning Small Fires."

What's on view here is not so much a collection of artifacts (the show consists of display case after display case and scads of books, for perusal, hanging by strings), but the phenomenon of a whole lot of artists happy to be groupies.