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The Photobooks of Ed Ruscha

Kim Stringfellow



"I am interested in what is interesting." - Ed Ruscha, 1971

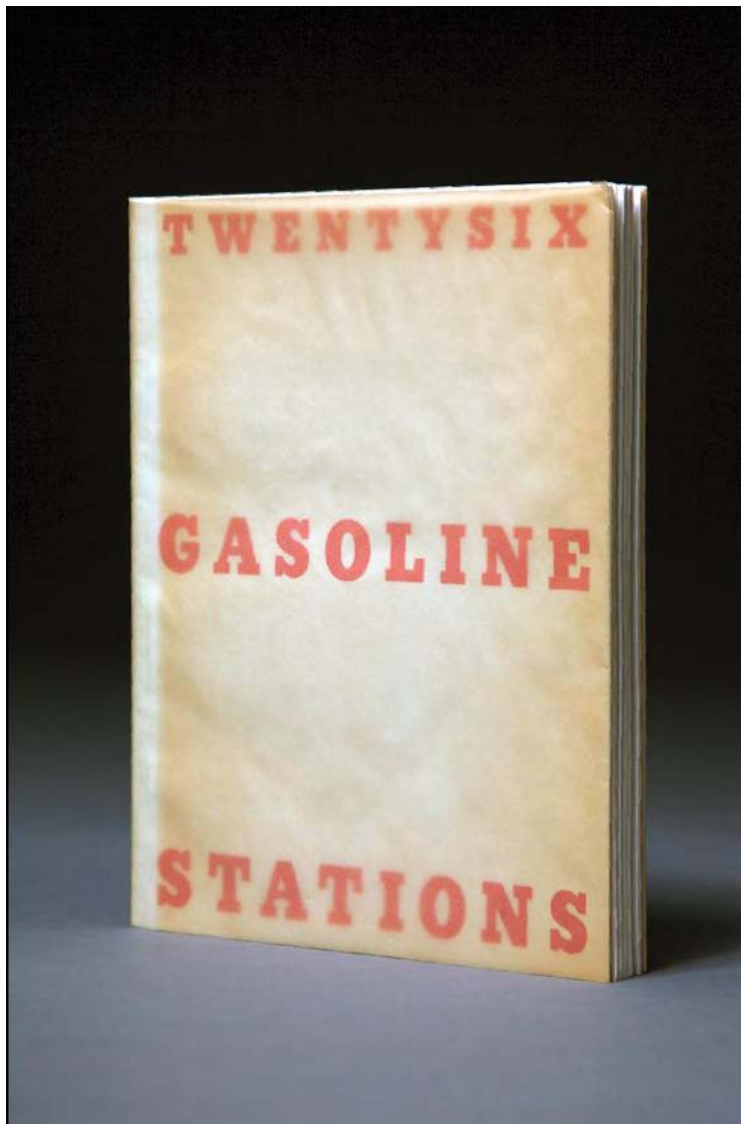
It has been 51 years since Ed Ruscha's seminal self-published photobook, "[Twentysix Gasoline Stations](#)" first appeared. At the time, Ruscha originally conceived of the book as a way to report back the "news" by way of his numerous road trips across the U.S. on Route 66 between Oklahoma City and Los Angeles where he was located at the time. Inspiration for the title originally arose from a play of words, which the artist's graphic paintings are distinctly known for; he simply dug the word 'gasoline' and 'twentysix' seemed like the perfect written number to accompany it. In a 1972 interview with David Bourdon, Ruscha commented:

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"I had this vision that I was being a great reporter when I did the gas stations. I drove back to Oklahoma all the time, five or six times a year. And I felt there was so much wasteland between L.A. and Oklahoma City that somebody had to bring in the news to the city...I think it's one of the best ways of just laying down facts of what is out there. I didn't want to be allegorical or mystical or anything like that." And so it was as simple as that. All he had to do was to photograph -- his chosen mode of representation for this project -- twenty six filling stations along the route, produce the commercially printed book edition and distribute it."



First edition copy of Ruscha's "Twentysix Gasoline Stations, (self-published)," 1962.

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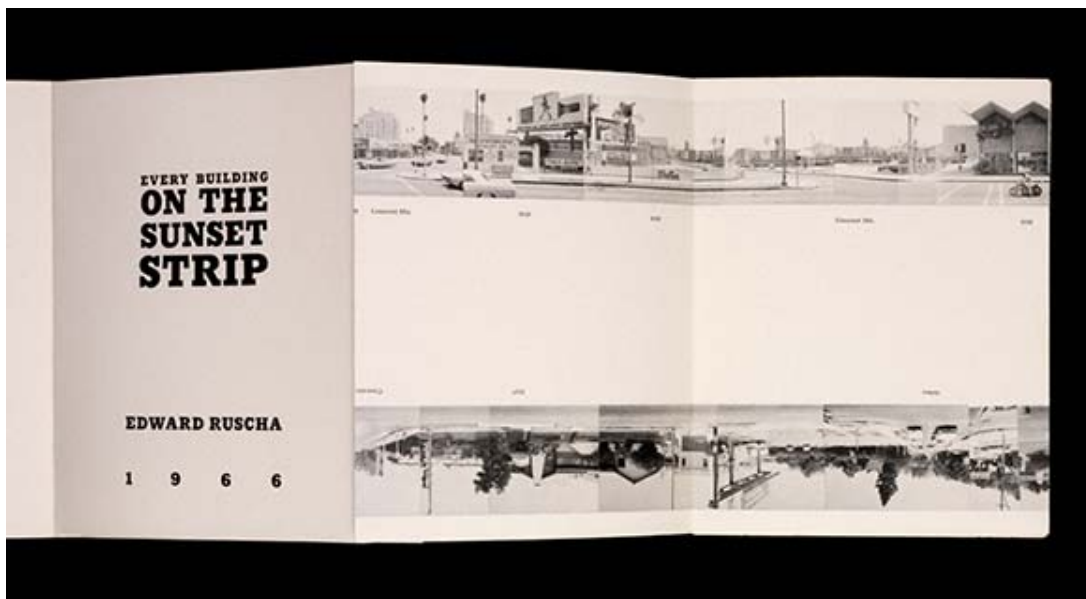
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"Twentysix Gasoline Stations" was dry, deadpan and pretty much boring. As Ruscha commented above there is no aesthetic glorification in the depiction of the imagery, just a poker-faced collection of unremarkable snapshots of roadside gas stations arranged in a visual photo-conceptual typology of sorts. The photographs therein were unprofessionally photographed and deliberately anti-aestheticized. Accordingly the book's cover title was typeset as three centered lines of capitalized type whose only extravagance was its bright red color appearing on a white ground. The presentation of this puzzling little book with its interior series of black and white photographs has certainly created a fuss over the years since it was first published in 1962 from both art critics and the art community.

Indeed, critical response to Ruscha's series of mass-produced, ubiquitous artist photobooks has been at times downright hostile, for instance consider conceptual photographer, [Jeff Wall's](#) commentary describing Ruscha's books; "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." ¹

On the other hand, artist and others involved in cultural production have responded quite positively to this particular book and the others Ruscha produced over the past years including the popular "[Every Building on the Sunset Strip](#)," which provided the reader with a continuous stitched panorama of straightforward black and white photographs picturing the south and north sides of Los Angeles' Sunset Boulevard. Arranged as a 27-foot accordion fold booklet, it showcases a continuous mile and a half view of the east/west thoroughfare starting from the train station downtown to the beach and back again.



Ruscha's "Every Building on the Sunset Strip," (self-published), 1966

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Artists first began appropriating Ruscha's photobook designs and content as inspiration or visual template as early as 1968. Ruscha's contemporary, [Bruce Nauman](#), first engaged the "Various Small Fires" and "Milk" motifs in his reactionary publication, "Burning Small Fires" where the artist documents the incineration of one of Ruscha's photobooks in a grid arrangement of images recording the event on a single piece of folded paper.



43. A schedule of Las Vegas Strip hotels: elements, continued

A page from "Learning from Las Vegas," (1972), MIT Press.

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A few years later in 1972, the landmark "Learning from Las Vegas" by husband and wife team, Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown with Steven Izenour was published exalting the vernacular highway-focused architecture of the burgeoning Las Vegas Strip. "Learning from Las Vegas" commends and incorporates Ruscha's graphic approach from "Every Building on the Sunset Strip" for its classic architectural design treatise. The book's authors actually list Ruscha as one of inspirations for their book along with such notables as J.B. Jackson and Reyner Banham. *No idiot here.*



A selection of artist books inspired by Ruscha from "Various Small Books," MIT Press, 2013.

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To archive and commemorate the long list of artist books riffing off Ruscha's, MIT Press last month published a survey titled, "Various Small Books: Referencing Various Small Books by Ed Ruscha" edited and compiled by Jeff Brouws, Wendy Burton, and Hermann Zschiegner with an opening essay by Mark Rawlinson and text by Phil Taylor. Artist photobooks directly referencing or inspired by Ruscha's are arranged by date. Each selection pictures the book's cover, a sample spread, and in some cases additional images. The original concept for the project came from Brouws and Burton's personal collection of books inspired by "Twentysix Gasoline Stations" and others by Ruscha. Brouws has made several photobooks referencing Ruscha's with his own photographs including "Twentynine Palms" (1991) that pictures twenty-nine color photographs of vintage roadside fortune teller/palm reader signs in an ode to Walker Evans and Ruscha both.



29 Palms Portfolio © Jeff Brouws. Courtesy Robert Mann Gallery, New York.

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Other notable books included are "None of the Buildings on the Sunset Strip" by Jonathan Monk (2002) that humorously shows only the intersections at Sunset along the route. My personal favorites are local Los Angeleno, Louisa Van Leer's "Fifteen Pornography Companies," a selection of nondescript banal facades of mostly San Fernando Valley-based porn offices and "Various Blank Pages" displaying empty unprinted pages from (Ruscha's?) published books in a trompe l'oeil presentation.



Sample page from "Various Small Books," MIT Press, 2013 (pictured is Jonathan Monk's 2002, "None of the Buildings on the Sunset Strip.")

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A new exhibit of Ed Ruscha's work at [Gagosian Madison Avenue](#) in NYC coincides with the MIT Press publication running from March 5 - April 27, 2013. Ed Ruscha Books & Co. includes ninety-one books by artists inspired by Ruscha's books.

¹ See Jeff Wall, "Marks of Indifference: Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art," (2003), in Douglas Fogle, "The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography 1960-1982," Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2003, pp. 43-4.

Top Image: Early portrait of Ed Ruscha with his books by Jerry McMillan.

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