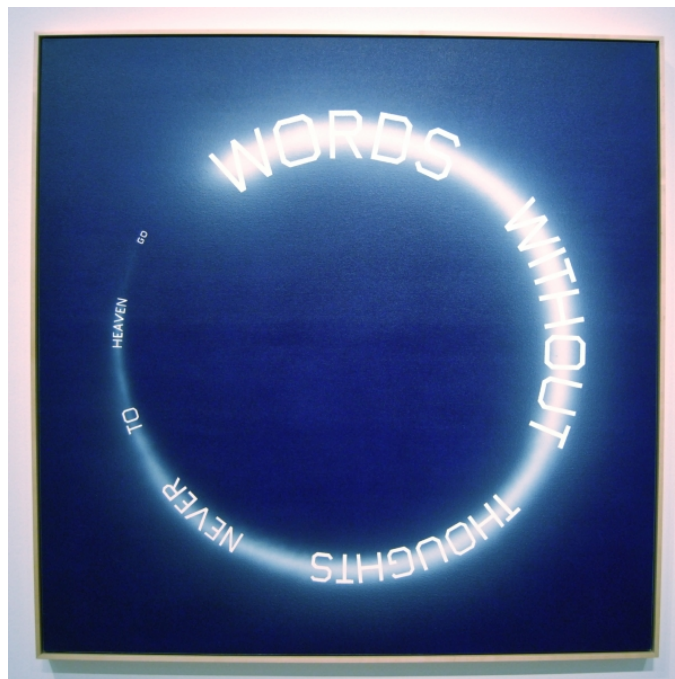


# Ed Ruscha

## Words As Images

By Renato Osoy

The very essence of art, its way of displaying itself and its purposes of representation have always been and still up to today in a constant questioning. Artists, innovative artists that is, are in a constant pursuit to challenge the establishment and the consumers of art in order to constantly maintain a sense of fluctuation on the audience's pre-conceptions of what art is. This almost aimless endeavor of innovation and questioning that some artists undertake doesn't necessarily always reach its aspiring goal of creating a mass transformation of beliefs, because in some cases the borderline of what is and what is not becomes so thin, that one has no clue where one is standing.



Considering that idea we might actually come to view or maybe experience the work of Ed Ruscha in a complete different light. Ruscha is a world known artist and his work belongs in great collections worldwide, today without a question we know that his work forms part of art's archival heritage that is consumed through the multiple exhibition venues that the art world produces. To some Ruscha is painter, to others he is a photographer, to others a

typographer, but in a general consent people would plainly agree that he is just an artist that dwells in the multiplicity of these mediums to create and reproduce his work.

### **Ed Ruscha, The Artist**

When we think of artists going about their own enquires to seek inspiration for their artistic production, we tend to think they might go and dwell in art history, philosophy, world history, anthropology, politics and so on, we wouldn't normally think of something that is average or immediate, but in the case of Ruscha's, were his image research could be seen as something like "is all about the artist's fascination with driving. Since Ruscha's first road trip from Oklahoma City to Los Angeles in 1956, the artist has incorporated into his work the images he has encountered along the highways and streets of the West and southern California."<sup>71</sup> Although this might seem to some, as something plainly too banal, Ruscha's work has inspired quite a number of artists, and it is precisely the simplicity of his themes and the audacity that he uses to imprint them, that make his art very unique.



His topic is just out there, hanging on billboards, advertisements and anything that is popular culture. His mediums have varied from photography, to painting to lithography, to collage; his no non-sense approach gives him a lot of freedom to go back and forth in mediums as his concepts demand it. Mistakes are often sources of inspiration for Ruscha's work and although he doesn't address to a standard way of operating, or say a systematic concretization of his works, he continuously dwells on irony to bring the pieces to life. Not necessarily in a pseudo-intellectual manner but more from the gut, for this matter it becomes very difficult to pinpoint aspects from his methodology of work since he states that he doesn't address to a 'strict master plan', but

rather to a more convulsive action of producing.<sup>ii</sup> A good way to dig deeper into this artist methodological approach could be looking into one of his latest books “Leave Any Information at the Signal: Writings, Interviews, Bits, Pages”, published by MIT Press, where we can find statements, letters, and other writings, interviews, some of which have never before been published, and sketchbook pages, word groupings, and other notes that chart how Ruscha develops ideas and solves artistic problems.

Approaching Ruscha’s work purely on a formal level, dissecting all its elements in order to understand its impact can destroy the astute and cynical character that they are charged with. Watching a video of Ruscha being interviewed brings us to notice how the works are an evident self-portrait of his persona and the artistic concerns that characterize him. As Dushko Petrovich points out in his article: “Ruscha’s best work is not just flat and removed—it’s also confrontational and deep. “I don’t want no retro-spective,” makes fun of the art world, but not before implicating Ruscha himself.”<sup>iii</sup>



The mystery that sprawls from his texts on the choice of words, phrases, sentences and the almost metaphysical tones that his palette produce, go beyond the canvas and expand themselves in unexpected directions: “Isolating his textual ready-mades against an empty horizon line, Ruscha exposes the strangeness of his words and forces a semantic re-examination

of their meaning. It is this spirit of Duchampian intellectual inquiry which is the hallmark of his best work and which distinguishes him from the pop tendencies of his peers.”<sup>iv</sup> Although this statement might be loaded with certain truth, we can’t stop to consider Ruscha’s own statement: "When I began painting, all my paintings were of words which were guttural utterances like Smash, Boss, Eat. Those words were like flowers in a vase; I just happened to paint words like someone else paints flowers. It wasn't until later that I was interested in combinations of words and making thoughts, sentences, and things like that. ”<sup>v</sup> This sort of unfinished and ambiguous posture that Ruscha reflects and describes when talking about his work, are central considerations that one could maintain when considering the action of contemplation of his work as an intellectual experience; rather than just standing blankly in front of the canvas waiting for the spectacle to take place in front of one’s eyes. The same could be said about his choice of topics, careless about the grand issues that concern the world, more average than normal, reflecting the mundane and the casual, but at the same time some of his work makes us elevate ourselves into the ethereal and spiritual auras of our materialistic lives.



But maybe it is “in the space in between” of this antagonism (intellect-emotion), that the most favorable posture to grasp Ruscha’s work lies. It is in the fact that we might not necessarily need to tap into a sort of mega intellectual knowledge to gain something from his work, or maybe we do, but when we imagine ourselves staring carelessly in front of “D A R E”, we really cant stop ourselves on the thought that someone is daring us to do something, the word dare and the action that it implies pulls us into this

gradation of colors into a sort of hypnotic trance. It is a frame, for letters and some color, what is so artistically powerful about this? Do we even need to answer this question or can we just take the banality of our self-experience on this artwork to be enough to validate the piece as art, can we just dare to do that? Is it still Ruscha daring himself to make this painting, or is it us now trying to dare ourselves to call this painting or say, our experience about it art?

Ruscha himself has the best words to un-riddle his own works, not necessarily by being descriptive about it, but more in the sense that he always throws random metaphors that shed light on his creations, without actually describing anything about them, saying something that sounds like nothing can mean more than what is intended to: "Learning how to set type, that had a big effect on me," he says. "But I also liked, in LA, all the misspelled words on signs and the homemade signs, like 'watermelon' [for sale]. I thought of it as a kind of folk art. Getting them down, painting them, is like making them official, glorifying them, putting them on stage. I guess that's what poets want to do: put ideas on stage. I settle for a single word."<sup>vi</sup>

### **Ruscha, Words as images**

Images as words, words as images, image words or word images? It becomes quite impossible for me to pinpoint the exact location of where I might nurture my work on Ruscha's practice, that is essentially because I am not digging for inspiration into Ruscha's work to find the structures of his formal strategies, but I am looking more to get an insight into his conceptual intention. Be it that this intention is partly intellectual and partly intuitive, and in most cases it feels like there is no separation between the two of them, just like his work shows it self: words as images or images as words, or something in between. It is like you don't know if the picture is made for the text or the other way around, or if they are the same thing, the line between text and image is so thin, it is in the most cases impossible to delineate who serves who. When reflecting on his work as an intellectual enquire, I couldn't help but to feel that my brain was walking on the tight rope, and that the only way to get to the other side was to not look down or up, or to the sides, but to just look straight ahead, blankly into the horizon, and if an artist can achieve that with such an essential approach, that I would say, is to be simply genius.



When does a word become an image, can words look just like images? I will consider this crucial question to be the main quest that I have embarked myself to enquire on my artistic practice, while following this recent course. It was when this concept came to the open that I really started to think of words and images as something very different, I guess it partly struck me because when I started to realize the implications that this idea encapsulated, it felt like a whole new venue was opening up for me. My main study is photography, I am used to working with images and normally I relate the idea of images to all those things that somehow make a pictorial or indexical representation of the world purely in what is graphical or illustrative. Words also fit in that category, but we hardly think of words as images, we normally tend to see words to belong to a whole other realm of representation. Maybe that is because words alone also possess a meaning, a code, which can only be decoded by certain conventions, for example in language: tree in English, arbol in Spanish, but anyone seeing a drawing or photograph of a pine won't need to know any codes for understanding the conventions, a picture can be just a picture and be read like it is.



For that reason, the idea to go from text to image and in a way decontextualize the conventions that retain words or letters, in order to transform them into something else, becomes quite intriguing when one has been thought to see words for words and images for images. At some point in class a concept came up: 'Visual people don't read text, they look at it', I felt this idea was quite powerful because in essence visual people are always looking to communicate with others as much as they can through the means of the image, and it is when all resources become exhausted that words appear. But the reality is that there is no need to consider these matters with such an antagonistic perspective; when images are images and words are also images, graphic forms or pictures of meaning, one can possess those letters and subordinate all their codified meanings and conventions, to simply create new ways to look at them, for example a word as a picture. Why should words always be on a line, if they are not meant to tell a story or give an indexical meaning, can letters divorce themselves from words, and can words be just babbling, can a group of words be there, on a canvas or a paper just because they look pretty and not necessarily because they mean anything?

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Jack A. Atkinson, ArtsnFood, “Ed Ruscha & Richard Diebenkorn Shine at The Modern in Fort Worth + Sweet Tea”, <http://artsnfood.blogspot.com/2011/08/ed-ruscha-richard-diebenkorn-shine-at.html>

<sup>ii</sup> On Ed Ruscha, “Conversations: Ed Ruscha with Dave Hickey” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k9WE7csaT3o>

<sup>iii</sup> Dushko Petrovich, Gunpowder Empire Ed Ruscha Symposium, Part III. December 2005, N+1 Magazine. USA

<sup>iv</sup> Sothebys, “Ed Ruscha's Iconic Work Highlights Sotheby's Sale of Contemporary Art”. 2008, <http://www.artknowledgenews.com/Ed-Ruscha.html>

<sup>v</sup> Crown Point Press, quoting on Ed Ruscha’s at profile page <http://www.crownpoint.com/artists/ruscha>

<sup>vi</sup> Ed Ruscha: 'There's room for saying things in bright shiny colours', The Guardian by Rachel Cooke, September 12, 2012. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2010/sep/12/ed-ruscha-obama-pop-art>