Ruscha based this painting on a previous work of his, a 1959 collage of found materials on view in the vitrine at the center of the gallery. In the painting Ruscha magnifies and flattens his source material, meticulously representing its wooden elements and the torn and folded edges of the inserted *Little Orphan Annie* comic strip in oil paint. The work's title—a reference to a city in Georgia that the artist hitchhiked through as a teenager—appears at the bottom, like the caption for an illustration in a book.

In 1961 Ruscha left his job as a layout artist at an advertising agency to embark on a road trip across Europe with his mother and younger brother, visiting seventeen countries over seven months. Along the way, he took more than three hundred photographs. Many of these images anticipate key features of his later work, such as an interest in overhead views, keen attention to commercial signage, and a tendency to photograph things in a serial manner (as evidenced by a group of photos of posters advertising films at the Cannes Film Festival).

Like many of the smaller works on paper that depict words Ruscha encountered during his trip to Europe—such as *Hotel*, *Metropolitain*, and *España* (all 1961), on view nearby—this painting, executed soon after his return to the United States, isolates a single word within a monochromatic field of color. Ruscha emphasized the curved forms of the letters by building up thick layers of black oil paint, giving the monosyllabic titular word, which he had seen on a clothing label, an almost sculptural quality.

The electric yellow letters of *smash* illuminate this painting, stretching horizontally across the canvas from edge to edge. Ruscha amplifies the impact of this onomatopoeia—more commonly found in the pages of comic books than on canvas—by rendering it at a large scale and in bold typography. The repetition of the word in small white letters at the bottom of the canvas and on its left and right edges, where it resembles the title on a book spine, transforms *Smash* from a two-dimensional image into a three-dimensional object, inviting viewers to consider the painting from multiple vantage points.

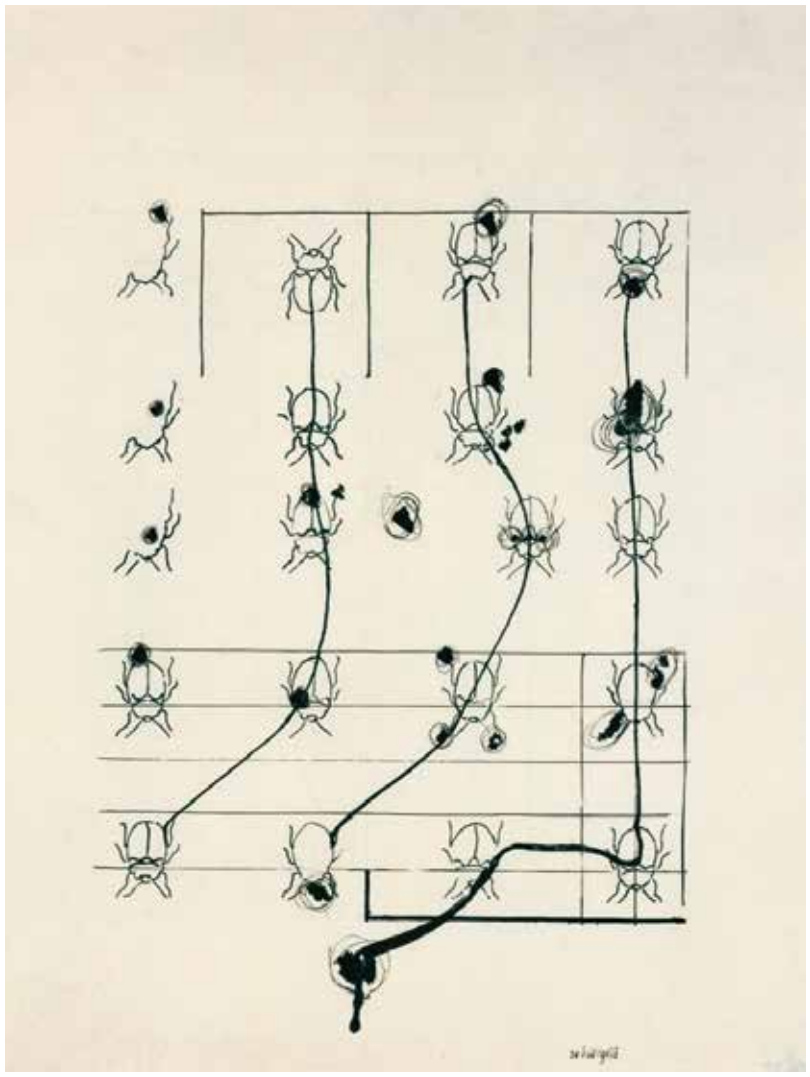
Unfolding to nearly twenty-five feet, this accordion-format book comprises a photocollage that captures both sides of a mile-and-a-half stretch of Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles. To achieve this continuous image, Ruscha and his team mounted a motorized camera on the bed of his pickup truck. “All I was after was that store-front plane . . . It’s like a Western town in a way,” he later reflected. “A store-front plane of a Western town is just paper, and everything behind it is just nothing.” After producing this book, Ruscha was inspired to document other streets in LA, a practice he continued for more than fifty years.

For his third book, Ruscha compiled black-and-white photographs he had taken of various apartment buildings in Los Angeles, captioning each with its address. He later developed some of these photographs into powdery graphite drawings. Evidencing how the artist developed his ideas and motifs across different mediums, these drawings show him at times closely following his source images, at others altering, cropping, or stretching them to fit the format of his composition. The artist took the greatest liberty in *Barrington Avenue*, transforming the building’s facade into a curling sheet of paper.

Ruscha began this painting shortly after the Los Angeles County Museum of Art opened its sleek new campus in 1965, which cemented LA as a national center for the arts. Developing the oblique aerial perspective from photographs he took of the building from a helicopter (which he further explored in related drawings), the artist pictures the museum's leftmost building consumed in flames and smoke. When later questioned about this provocation, Ruscha offered that "the fire is really like an after-statement—like a coda, as in a coda to music."

From 1965 to 1969, Ruscha put his design skills to use as a layout editor for *Artforum* magazine under the pseudonym Eddie Russia. He produced the cover art for the September 1966 special issue on Surrealism at a time when his paintings of floating words and objects evoked the dreamlike imagery characteristic of the twentieth-century art movement.
His design work during this period also included album covers, such as this example for his friend and fellow Oklahoman Mason Williams. With its evenly spaced serif text and subtle gradated ground, it closely recalls the composition of *Chemical* (1966), on view nearby.

On his way back from Europe in 1961, Ruscha made a stop in New York. While there, he visited MoMA to see a 1920 drawing by the German artist Johannes Theodor Baargeld, *Untitled (Beetles)*, currently on view on the fifth floor, in Gallery 508. Ruscha had previously encountered the drawing as a textbook reproduction, remarking that it reminded him of a “parking diagram.” Back in car-centric Los Angeles, the artist reimagined the work on canvas, replacing the insects with rows of automobiles.



Johannes Theodor Baargeld (Alfred Emanuel Ferdinand Gruenwald). *Untitled (Beetles)*. 1920. Ink and pencil on tissue, 11 ½ × 9 ⅛" (29.2 × 23.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase. Department of Imaging and Visual Resources, MoMA. Photo: Kate Keller

Recalling Ruscha's commercial art training, this painting features the basic components of an advertisement: brand name and product image. The work's subject is a familiar supermarket item in the United States—the canned pork product Spam—rendered speeding across the canvas at "actual size." While the artist preferred to depict small objects in their precise dimensions, the product's enlarged, booming logo demonstrates the variable scale of language. As Ruscha explained, "There are certain subjects that have no size—which is the area I really moved into—and that was words. I mean, what size is a word, after all?"

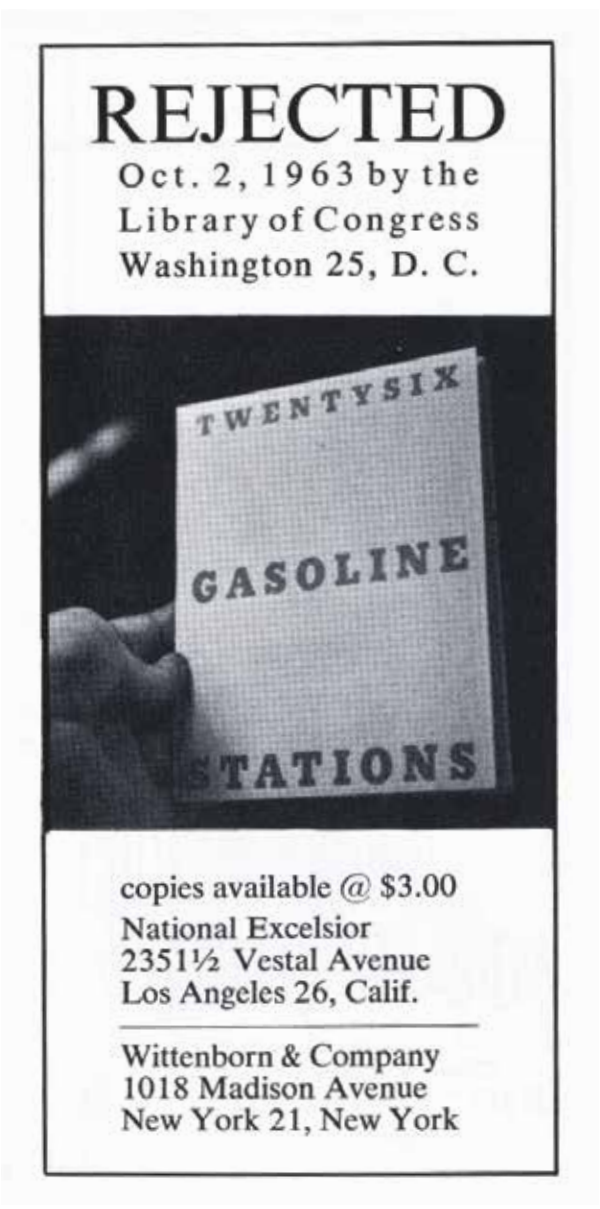
Ruscha's many references to mass media and consumer culture, such as comic strips and Spam cans, led to his participation in several landmark Pop art exhibitions, including *New Painting of Common Objects* at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1962, widely considered the first museum survey of American Pop art. In conjunction with the show, its curator Walter Hopps commissioned a print portfolio featuring a mimeograph from each participating artist. Most submissions featured a "common object" like Ruscha's car or Goode's milk bottles—demonstrating the close attention these artists paid to everyday commodities. Warhol's contribution, which arrived after the deadline, was not included in the portfolio.

Whereas Ruscha built up previous compositions from thick layers of paint, leaving visible brush and knife strokes, he painted this work's background using a mix of wax and oils to produce a velvety matte finish. At the top of the canvas, the word *noise* appears to project into space, demonstrating how the artist began using perspective to create the illusion of three-dimensionality. The magazine *Popular Western*, which will resurface in later paintings, appears at bottom, carefully reproduced from an issue in Ruscha's studio. Lastly, two pencils—one whole, the other broken—point toward the edges of the picture plane.

In the mid-1960s Ruscha continued to explore new compositions for his word paintings. The letters in *Won't*, for instance, become windows looking out onto cloud-filled skies. The artist had experimented with the same motif in earlier drawings—in one work, the sky is implied through a mottled blue backdrop, in another the word obscures a tube of lipstick.

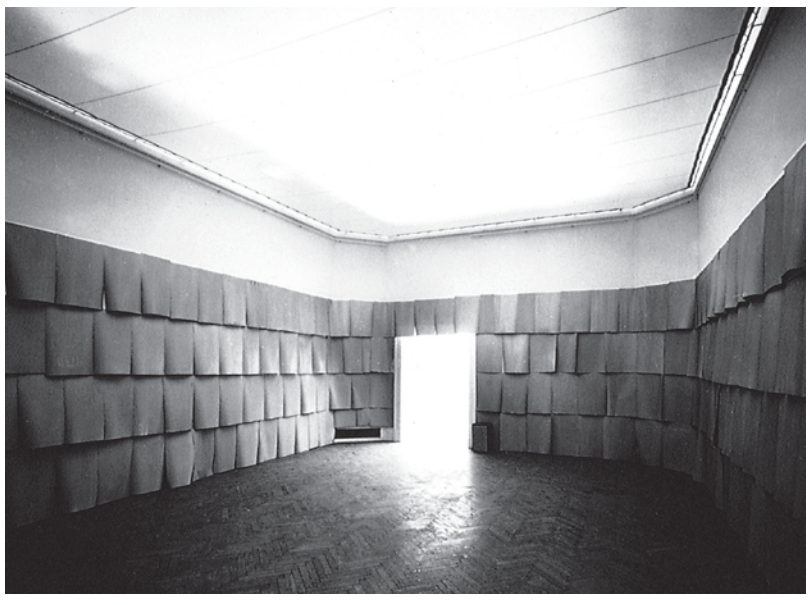
When Ruscha painted *Annie* in 1962 (on view in the first gallery), he replicated the primary color palette and flat surface of his source, Harold Gray's comic strip *Little Orphan Annie.* Revisiting the motif four years later, he recreated the word's plump contours as if filled with a thick puddle of maple syrup. The result of careful study, this work's illusionistic accuracy convincingly captures the pancake-topper's sticky texture on canvas.

Inspired in part by the “sound of the number ‘26,’” Ruscha gathered twenty-six images of gasoline stations to populate his first artist’s book. He shot the photographs on the road between Los Angeles and Oklahoma City and captioned them plainly, lending the book a “factual kind of army-navy data look.” When the Library of Congress declined this perplexing publication in 1964, Ruscha took out an ad in *Artforum* magazine proudly announcing its rejection. The artist continued to catalogue everyday subjects—small fires, swimming pools, parking lots—in subsequent books, while a service station in Amarillo, Texas, became a recurring motif in his work across media.



Advertisement designed by Ed Ruscha for *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963), *Artforum* 2, no. 9 (March 1964). Department of Imaging and Visual Resources, MoMA. Photo: Robert Gerhardt

In 1970 Ruscha produced *Chocolate Room*, his first and only single-room installation, in the United States Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Building on his recent experimentation with organic and unconventional materials for the print portfolio *News, Mews, Pews, Brews, Stews & Dues* (1970, on view in this gallery), he used the provided print workshop to screenprint locally sourced chocolate paste onto hundreds of sheets of paper. Tiled from floor to ceiling like shingles, the sheets surrounded viewers with the rich color and sweet scent of chocolate. Because of the fragile and ephemeral nature of its materials, the installation is refabricated on site each time it is shown.



Ed Ruscha, *Chocolate Room*, 1970. Installation view, US Pavilion, 35th Venice Biennale. Courtesy Gagosian

"I liked the ring and sound of the names, and they had some link with what I was interested in at the time, which was travel," Ruscha explained of works like this one. Its title refers to a city in Mississippi through which the artist had once hitchhiked. To make this work on paper, Ruscha drew on the various skills he gained while attending art school in Los Angeles: the neatly letterpressed text recalls his time learning to hand-set metal type at a local printing press, while the blue splotches, in the artist's words, "elaborate on the beauty of splashing paint."

Following an invitation to participate in Documenta 5—an art exhibition that occurs every five years in Kassel, Germany—Ruscha chose to display a selection of his artist's books, as well as a monumental drawing produced for the occasion. To make the work, he patiently rubbed chewing tobacco onto a large rectangular sheet of paper, spelling out the word *spread* before rendering it in reverse on the work's back side. The drawing is hung from the ceiling so that its double-sided composition can be fully appreciated, floating like the hovering sheets and objects that Ruscha depicted in drawings of the period.

Created using airbrushing, this painting's sooty texture and velvety finish lend the image an air of mystery. While it depicts a hulking elephant as it climbs uphill, the hazy silhouette reminded Ruscha of his black 1939 Ford sedan struggling up steep roads. When asked about this and related works, the artist seemed to refer back to the formal concerns of his early diagonal compositions, asking, "Aren't hills just some sort of metaphor for an abstract line that goes from lower right to upper left?"

Among the dark, monochromatic imagery that dominated Ruscha's work in the mid-1980s, *Mother's Boys* stands out with its bright palette and sharply delineated forms. The painting's composition was based on a color photograph from which the artist had cut a rectangular notch. For Ruscha, the empty space "represented an aspect of canceling out people's voice," prefiguring the blank rectangles that occur in other works throughout this gallery. His choice to represent the flag of the United States, on the other hand, came from "respect for the design."

"If I looked at the world's flags, I would say the American flag is a dynamic winner in terms of design, not what it represents," he explained.

Asked in an interview about the unusually long and skinny format of paintings like this one from the late 1970s, Ruscha remarked, "I'm a victim of the horizontal line and the landscape."

"I guess maybe I'm trying to put more time and mileage between one end and the other," he added. In this example the artist depicts the kind of luminous sunset he encountered during his cross-country road trips between Los Angeles and Oklahoma City. Barely visible within the panoramic vista is the painting's evocative title, its diminutive scale seemingly at odds with its weighty subject.

This drawing of the word *satin* was made on a sheet that Ruscha stained with rose petals, which he rubbed into the paper in a circular motion. Over the years, the overlapping whorls of color have faded from vibrant pink to golden yellow, in response to light and other environmental factors. Ruscha considers the transformation of his materials an integral part of his work, stating, “Seeing things age is a form of beauty.”

For this picture, Ruscha used his own blood to stain the word *evil* into the crimson satin support. His choice of materials and subject relate to his Catholic upbringing—an influence Ruscha reflected on a few years after making *Evil*.

“There is a connection with my work and my experience with religious icons: the stations of the cross and the Church,” he said. “I liked the ritual. I liked the priest’s vestments—there was a deep mysterious thing that affected me.”

Whether as an avid reader or self-publisher, Ruscha has always had a special attachment to books. In the 1990s he began using secondhand books as supports for his paintings, rendering the letter *o* in various typefaces on their covers. By using bleach to create an image through the absence of color, the artist mimicked the effects of extensive light exposure on clothbound volumes. In one example Ruscha drew the letter *o* in charcoal and colored pencil onto the book’s substantial fore edge. His attention to the various surfaces and dimensions of these objects recalls his approach to his own artist’s books as “bits of sculpture.”

In 1976 Ruscha received a commission for a billboard project on Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles. Intrigued by the idea that drivers in passing cars would see the billboard in their rearview mirrors, he depicted the Hollywood sign in reverse. Ruscha returned to the same motif months later to make this painting, separating the familiar landmark from its usual context. Pictured from behind and silhouetted by a fiery orange sunset, the letters are positioned on a vacant, mountainous landscape.

Ed Ruscha. *The Back of Hollywood*. 1976–77.
Billboard, acrylic on canvas, 16 × 50' (40.64 × 127 cm).
No longer extant. Photo: Paul Ruscha

The phrase immortalized on this canvas refers to an American cultural trope in which a father leaves for cigarettes and never returns, abandoning his family. The implicit sense of tension and mystery is heightened by the nighttime scene behind the text, which pictures an anonymous urban expanse illuminated by a grid of lights. This background, which Ruscha repeated in a series of paintings made around the same time, features the kind of oblique aerial view that he has gravitated toward in his work since the mid-1960s.

Ruscha commissioned the artist Nancy Reese to paint the background of this work. “I wanted to divorce myself from the actual execution of the thing,” he said. Describing his vision for the painting as a “spoken word transmission,” the artist entrusted Reese to develop the composition on her own, later overlaying her bucolic scene with an excerpt from the 1975 dystopian novel *High-Rise* by J. G. Ballard, a writer Ruscha much admires. The pairing of the unsettling quote, which describes a cacophony of music and violence, and the serene landscape exemplifies the internal contradiction characteristic of many of Ruscha’s other works.

At first glance an abstract composition, this painting and the two works on either side of it feature sequences of opaque rectangles that correspond in size, placement, and number to the words in their titles. This example excerpts a death threat sent to Jackie Robinson, one of Ruscha’s favorite baseball players and the first Black athlete to compete in the major leagues. The representation of this note, even in redacted form, draws attention to the virulent racism and threats of violence that this celebrated player endured throughout his career.

While documenting Los Angeles streets, Ruscha amassed an extensive archive that details the project's costs, materials used, and streets photographed. Notebooks from 1973, 1995, and 1997 record the locations and times Ruscha and his team started and stopped shooting. To maintain continuity of lighting and street conditions, they photographed early in the morning, when there was less traffic and fewer people. Ruscha also used the notebooks to detail his process for creating what he described as "motorized photographs." A sketch showing his setup—a camera mounted on a tripod, which is grounded by sandbags—includes instructions for how to shoot from the bed of his Datsun pickup truck.

Ruscha does not represent real-life peaks in a series of mountain paintings he began in 1997, although his meticulous rendering of their crags and sun-dappled slopes might suggest otherwise. "They're ideas of mountains picturing some sort of unobtainable bliss or glory," he has explained. In this example Ruscha superimposes text that reads like the inscription on a headstone, including a humorously specific epitaph, over the vista. The deceased—like Ruscha's dramatic backdrop—is imagined: a fictional character named Clarence Jones. Similarly, the signature at bottom right is an imitation of American cartoonist Robert L. Williams's.

The crude phrase at the bottom of this painting forms a kind of palindrome—a word, verse, or sentence that reads the same backward as forward. Ruscha began exploring the concept of the palindrome in his work in 2002, a palindromic year. Emphasizing the objectness of the phrase as a thing that can be manipulated and inverted in space, Ruscha pictures the words against a Rorschach-like mirrored image of a rugged mountain, further underlining the symmetry of the composition.

Taking inspiration from roadside debris, Ruscha pictures a broken lamp, an open book, and what appears to be an overturned canvas, among other objects, strewn across a diagonal horizon line. Closer inspection reveals a faded American flag and, at the bottom of the heap, an issue of *Popular Western*, which he first depicted in a painting from 1963. Signaling the passage of time through the accumulation and decay of these cast-off objects, Ruscha seems to also consider the long arc of his artistic career by depicting motifs previously explored in his work.

These two works are from a series of word paintings made on vellum drum heads, which Ruscha began collecting more than fifty years ago. Featuring grammatically incorrect phrases and double negatives, these works reference the vernacular of the artist's native Oklahoma. Spaced around the circular supports like the hours on a clockface, the text is stuck in a loop, repeating over and over like a mantra or drumbeat.

This friezelike pair of monumental paintings was inspired by a roadside mural that Ruscha encountered in 2006 while driving to Teotihuacán, the ancient Mesoamerican archeological site near Mexico City. *Azteca* faithfully replicates the mural down to the graffiti on one of its three fanlike forms. *Azteca in Decline* imagines the mural crumpled and falling off the wall, the graffiti curiously remaining behind. A meditation on the rise and fall of civilization, the paintings represent, Ruscha has explained, “how things go from robust to desolate.”

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Although straightforward in appearance, these uniformly sized pastel drawings required much planning on the artist's part. After affixing low-tack tape over penciled words, Ruscha used an X-Acto knife to cut out each letter form, producing a "reverse stencil" over which he worked his ground medium into the backdrop using rags, cotton puffs, and sponges, before finally peeling off the adhesive. Organized in even rows, the resulting phrases speak to the artist's idiosyncratic and often humorous use of language.

Ruscha has stated that this work and others from the series are "more imaginary than documentary." The warehouse is the same one depicted in *Blue Collar Tool & Die* (1992), installed across the gallery. Now pictured against a noxious green sky, the building has had other updates that signal a jump forward in time. Colorful signage written in made-up languages that caricature Chinese, Japanese, and Korean has replaced the building's former name, and graffiti, including two swastikas, adorns its side. Although the artist seldom offers interpretations of his work, this painting provides multiple possible lenses—economic, environmental, racial—through which to view the transformation of urban space.

In 1967 Ruscha adopted a new approach to drawing. He swapped his usual graphite for a fine powder made from gunpowder pellets, which he rubbed into the paper with cotton swabs, Q-tips, and various other implements. "Mistakes were easier to cover up with gunpowder, so I used it . . . It was a more fluid and a faster medium than charcoal or graphite," the artist later explained. He produced a large series of gunpowder drawings featuring single words or short phrases composed as if formed from bent, coiled, or folded paper ribbon. These words are occasionally combined with incongruous elements, such as a flat, zigzagging pencil or puddle of liquid.

In this painting Ruscha depicts the flag of the United States in tatters, meticulously rendering each wild, fluttering scrap. Produced one year into President Donald Trump's term, it suggests the artist's feelings about the state of the country at the time. "I don't try to have my work be instructional," Ruscha recently noted. "They're pictures and they don't have to have true meanings, especially political meanings, but this one was a little different." With its large, panoramic format, the work recalls earlier paintings like *Standard Station, Ten-Cent Western Being Torn in Half* (1964), also on view. If you scan the composition from left to right, the flag appears to disintegrate in front of your eyes, creating the impression of motion and passing time.

In 1965 Ruscha asked his friend Jerry McMillan to photograph every building on the Sunset Strip. Capturing the street on foot proved difficult, so, after some trial and error, Ruscha devised a way to "motorize" a 35mm Nikon film camera. He modified the camera with a motorized drive and custom back for extra-long film, then placed it on a tripod in the bed of a pickup truck. The resulting photographs were published in the artist's book *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966). Ruscha continued to use this method to extensively document Los Angeles over six decades, compiling an archive of more than 130 shoots that the artist has described as a "living organism."

Over the past decade, more than 60,000 negatives out of the more than 750,000 images have been digitized by the Getty Research Institute. An accompanying research project has brought together art and architectural historians, urbanists, and musicologists to explore this archive, which occupies a unique position as both an artist's work and a repository of information on Los Angeles.

Watch a video produced by the Getty Research Institute on Ed Ruscha's Streets of Los Angeles archive. Scan the QR code or visit gty.art/ruschastreetsofla.

While at the Chouinard Art Institute, Ruscha contributed to several issues of *Orb*, a bimonthly student publication founded by the Society of Graphic Designers. It featured school announcements, poems, essays, and advertisements in a playful format marked by multidirectional text and layered imagery. Ruscha's "poem-collage-exposé," visible near the center of the broadsheet, combines images of various commodities—a milk bottle, tomatoes, a dry cell battery—with a photograph of Shirley Temple and a fragment of a fictional letter from a student to his mother. In it, the student feigns hunger to secure money for art supplies.