

MoMA Audio

ED RUSCHA / NOW THEN

Final Transcripts

360 Annie. 1962

Artist, Ed Ruscha: I'm Ed Ruscha and I'm an artist who lives in Los Angeles, California.

I left Oklahoma City where I grew up and I came to California to go to art school. I thought I wanted to be a sign painter. And then I had an idea that I wanted to work in graphics somehow or advertising and then I centered my studies in painting and drawing and printmaking.

Curator, Ana Torok: My name is Ana Torok. I'm an Assistant Curator of Drawings and Prints at The Museum of Modern Art.

Ruscha's earliest exposure to art making was through a neighbor that introduced him to cartooning. Here he zooms in on the word "Annie" from the title of a comic strip, *Little Orphan Annie*.

Designer, Gail Anderson: My name is Gail Anderson and I am a designer.

The *Annie* type is a little bubbly, ooey-goey. It's red, it's got a big black outline, the dot on the I is playful. It makes you smile. That's the stuff that you're looking at as a young budding artist, looking at your comic books.

Curator, Ana Torok: *ED RUSCHA / NOW THEN* spans 65 years of Ruscha's practice.

He has experimented with so many different media: paintings, drawings, prints, artists books, and sometimes he'll use materials that are unexpected, like chocolate or gunpowder. I think the theme running through every gallery of this exhibition is the close attention that Ruscha pays to ordinary aspects of his surroundings. The beautiful thing is that because he draws so heavily from the world around him, there's always a way into the work.

361 OOF.1962

Curator, Ana Torok: In 1956, Ruscha drove from Oklahoma City to Los Angeles to study commercial art. Ruscha took design classes. He learned about typography. But he also was required to take painting classes. Ruscha completes his studies and he starts rendering these single outsized words on canvas.

Artist, Ed Ruscha: My first paintings were of words that were monosyllabic, guttural utterings, like “oof” and “smash.” Words that had some kind of vocal power to them and also had a social discord.

These words came out of sound investigation. It’s almost like you walk into a butcher store and ask for a pound of bacon and they take a pound of bacon and slam it down on the counter. It’s the slam that I was after.

Designer, Gail Anderson: I got to know Ruscha as a design student. I’d see this work and think, what is this? This isn’t painting in this traditional sense. This is something else. And, in particular, started to fall in love with *OOF*, because it was silly and beautifully done and was this gut punch, comic strip word that was done in this serious but winked way.

Architect, Frank Gehry: He’s very interested in the mundane and the stupid. A painting that says “OOF?” [laughs] It says everything about the place and time he was living in.

I’m Frank Gehry, I practice architecture, and I’m a friend of Ed Ruscha’s.

We always look to him for expressing the essence, in one word, of what we’re all thinking. That’s what’s beautiful about his work. He has a way of doing that that’s so powerful.

362 *Metropolitain*. 1961

Curator, Ana Torok: Ruscha completes his studies in 1960, and the following year he travels through Europe with his mother and brother. He took hundreds of photographs, but they're not the major landmarks you might expect from an American tourist in Europe. What he ends up photographing are often empty shop windows, or posters, or commercial signage.

Designer, Gail Anderson: That is what we do as designers. We get our cameras and we take pictures of the weirdest things. Like "Oh, look at that wrought iron. Ooh, look at that E." I love that graphic design is sort of lurking in the background.

Curator, Ana Torok: *Metropolitain* is a word he's seen on a Parisian subway sign. The work functions almost like a design exercise. You can imagine that Ruscha would've had to make these careful studies of words as he was learning typography. He's rendered the letters in this vibrant green against a red background. The brushwork around the letters echo the forms of this art nouveau lettering that he's attempting to copy here.

Designer, Gail Anderson: Graphic design is visual communication. It can point people in a direction that they don't even realize they're being pointed in sometimes. It's a thing that you find beauty in but you're not sure why. And you think, is this art? Is this something else? It can be really subtle.

363 **View of the Big Picture. 1963**

Artist, Ed Ruscha: I was so impressed by this perspective of this trademark of Fox Studios. I liked movies anyway, and the idea of a subject matter that came from movies appealed to me.

Designer, Gail Anderson: That logo, with big, connected shadows attached to it, just feels like this monolith. You've got the lights behind going in all directions and you've got the sky. You're looking at it from below and you start to see this logo sort of turning. I hear *dun-duh-duh-duh*, and the lights are down and the popcorn's out.

Artist, Ed Ruscha: I like the idea that there are implied trumpet sounds without seeing any trumpets. It was sort of a blasting, noisy image and represented the anxiety of the place I was living.

Coming to Hollywood from Oklahoma was a big jump. I was coming from some place that was rather placid and farm-like, to something that was loaded with some sort of neurotic anxiety.

Architect, Frank Gehry: If you lived here, you couldn't avoid it. I think Ed was making a commentary. Like hey, look at what this mess looks like behind.

Artists tend to build on the life they're in and so it was all about LA, Hollywood, movies. And as an artist, Ed, I think, found inspiration in that.

364 *Noise, Pencil, Broken Pencil, Cheap Western. 1963*

Artist, Ed Ruscha: *Noise, Pencil, Broken Pencil, Cheap Western* I consider one of my best paintings. I like it so much because the subjects of the painting—the objects—appear to be trying to escape the painting.

There's also something to the motion of an object doing something. In this case, it's a pencil snapping [pencil snapping sound]. That's a real sound, but it's implied in the painting.

When I was painting pictures of objects, I would actually measure something like the pencil or a magazine and faithfully put it on the canvas in its actual size. Then it would have some legitimate power. Doing it otherwise, making it larger or smaller, would sort of, like, reduce its importance.

The word "Noise" and all words to me, they have really no size at all. You can see it a hundred feet high, you can see it in four point type.

365 Standard Station, Ten-Cent Western Being Torn in Half. 1964

Artist, Ed Ruscha: I'd go back and forth between Oklahoma and California on the highway—on US 66—sometimes driving, sometimes hitchhiking. And I began to see the highway as source material. And I liked what I saw in the almost like nothingness, the quietude of traveling. And so, there was one particular gas station from Amarillo, Texas that appealed to me.

Curator, Ana Torok: *In Standard Station, Ten-Cent Western Being Torn in Half*, we see the service station from Amarillo, Texas. You're looking at the gas station almost from below. This strong diagonal composition elevates this humble roadside architecture into something monumental.

Ruscha would use the gas station motif again and again. Here, he adds a magazine onto the top right corner of the painting, disrupting any sense you might have gotten of illusionistic space. It's hanging there and you're not sure how.

Ed Ruscha: I wanted to bring unlike things together. And so it's no different than maybe a piece of music that might have a coda at the end, or some other element that is unlike the rest of the work. Or I might add something to somehow antagonize the main theme. And that goes through with all my work. Sometimes there's little oddities that I welcome.

366 *Every Building on the Sunset Strip. 1966*

Artist, Ed Ruscha: I worked for a book printer. And I learned how to set type and I began to be attracted to books and I just thought maybe there's some possibility here for my work.

I like the aggressive architectural activity that was happening in Los Angeles at that time.

Architect, Frank Gehry: LA is spread out. Mostly it's horizontal. When I got here, it was just postwar, so they were just building tons of tract houses all over the city. And then they started building freeways. So LA became a driving city.

Ed Ruscha: This book covers basically two and a half miles of Sunset Boulevard, and I felt like it should be recorded with no prejudice, with no agenda, and no moral. I mean, it's just like copying something for what it is.

Frank Gehry: The Sunset Strip is where all the action is. It goes from Fairfax to Beverly Hills, and there's a hotel, there's nightclubs. That was where all the movie stars hung out.

Ed's curiosity was to try to peek into it and document it. It was like the way Ed is. It's very cool the way he represented it. There was no emotion about what goes on there. It was just, look at the Sunset Strip. There it is. It's a bunch of stupid buildings. [Laughs]

367 Los Angeles County Museum of Art on Fire. 1965–68

Curator, Ana Torok: In 1965, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art opened its doors to the public, and that same year, Ruscha began work on a monumental painting showing the museum on fire. While working out the composition for this painting, Ruscha shot a series of photographs of the museum campus from a helicopter, capturing the aerial perspective here and also in related drawings nearby.

Artist, Ed Ruscha: About this time that I was painting this picture, I had some oh, maybe personal gripes about the art world in general. And I felt like the museums were not really doing their jobs as far as opening their doors to contemporary art.

I didn't have a hatred for museums, but maybe, like, I had a healthy distrust for museums. And so I guess part of this painting grew out of that. I didn't know how this painting would be perceived. The museum actually had a notion to possibly buy that painting, which really surprised me, and then didn't surprise me so much when they didn't.

368 *Self*. 1967

Curator, Ana Torok: In the 1960s, Ed is experimenting with new ways of rendering words on paper. He had some gunpowder pellets in his studio and he realized that after soaking and evaporating them, they produced this fine powder that he could use as a drawing material, allowing him to make these flawless surfaces.

Conservator, Laura Neufeld: You have what appears to be a ribbon that forms these cursive letters that spell out the word “self” in the smoky tones of the gunpowder.

I’m Laura Neufeld. I’m Associate Paper Conservator at the Museum of Modern Art.

He was typically using paper or strips of tape that he would cut with an X-acto knife to have those sinuous curves. And then he’s applying the gunpowder over that masking with cotton balls, rags. And then when he’s done, peeling it off.

If you look very closely, you might notice little slits in the paper from where he was cutting and manipulating the stencil. As a conservator, I love to see those tiny clues about how it was made, because these works particularly can feel so magical in their appearance, as though the ribbon is moving and rippling and has just for a moment formed this word before it changes and becomes something else.

369 **Chocolate Room. 1970–2004**

Curator, Ana Torok: Ruscha first produced *Chocolate Room* while in Venice, Italy in 1970. During this period, he had been exploring all sorts of unusual substances in his printmaking, and he scoured local supermarkets looking for new materials. He ends up seeing little metal tubes of Nestle chocolate paste that remind him of the metal tubes for his oil paints, and so he decides to use chocolate, screen printing that chocolate onto hundreds of sheets of paper and tiling those sheets across all four walls of a room.

The work must be remade every time it's presented. Here's one of the fabricators, Edan McPherson, from La Paloma Fine Arts.

Fabricator, Edan McPherson: Not many people have actually printed chocolate. It's different from ink in that it's sugary, so it's coarse, and it's thick. Chocolate melts at a really low temperature and it's soft, and so that makes it really challenging. We actually do the printing in the space, because if you were to print it somewhere else and send it, it wouldn't hold up. You can't even put your hand behind it, because it literally melts the chocolate.

Ana Torok: As an organic material, chocolate will inevitably change over time. And in past installations, the chocolate has actually bloomed, creating an effect that looks like white dust on the surface. Here is Harlem-based chocolatier, Jessica Spaulding.

Chocolatier, Jessica Spaulding: Blooming is the bane of every chocolate maker's existence. Bloom can be caused by a temperature change or humidity. So, at some point that chocolate piece may have melted a little bit or got too cold or it has been exposed to water.

You're in a room with panels made of chocolate, my first thought is how in the hell did they do that? Just think of the world of possibilities. Someone tiled an entire room in chocolate. What could you do?

370 Swarm of Red Ants from Insects. 1972

Curator, Ana Torok: In 1972, Ruscha produced the Insects Portfolio. Each print depicts a different insect. Sometimes it's a swarm of ants, sometimes it's a bunch of cockroaches.

Artist, Ed Ruscha: This work involved my indulgence into patterns, I guess. These works emerge from a foray that I've always had with little humble objects floating in space. In this case, it happened to be insects.

I basically feel like my work comes out of abstract art and that this work is really no exception. I keep thinking of a shotgun blast because most of these works appear to be that way. When you put them up on a wall and look at them, they kind of have that randomness that I appreciated, and I think that's where that came from.

Ana Torok: Ruscha creates this image of a seemingly random swarm of insects through this meticulous draftsmanship. They're each depicted at their actual size. And if you look closely, Ruscha has given each individual ant a tiny shadow.

It's interesting that Ruscha would have chosen insects as a subject in this particular moment. Just a couple of years earlier, Ruscha had produced the *Chocolate Room*, which you may have seen in a previous gallery. As Ruscha recalls, just as he was finishing up that installation and exiting the room, he saw a trail of ants on their way in, heading straight toward the chocolate.

371 Stains. 1969

Artist, Ed Ruscha: Stains is a boxed set of single sheets of paper, done in 1969, and it's like a little treasure chest of overlooked things. Stains have always been scorned, I guess. And staining something, letting a wet material sink down into the support, in this case paper, was my interest.

Curator, Ana Torok: This *Stains* portfolio includes 75 sheets stained with different materials and the 76th is a stain of the artist's own blood on the interior cover of the portfolio.

Conservator, Laura Neufeld: Some of the materials don't leave a mark at all, but are very specific. You get drops of California tap water, a drop of the Pacific Ocean, which is about the place where the artist is making this work in Los Angeles.

But then you get things that are more visible like grass or rose petals. The red of a Heinz ketchup, the brown of the Hershey syrup, the green of the Listerine mouthwash, the jewel tones of our everyday life. And some of them are volatile materials. He uses an acid that has totally eroded the paper. A milk stain has yellowed, and the rose petals have become more brown looking as the compounds have degraded over time.

372 *Spread*. 1972

Artist, Ed Ruscha: In the late 60s, I kind of reached a logjam in my work where I was tired of painting a skin of paint on a canvas. I began experimenting with organic substances like fruit juices and egg yolks. I had a certain thing I had to get out that involved a continuation of using words and also using unorthodox materials.

Conservator, Laura Neufeld: *Spread* is brown because it is actually tobacco leaves that have been rubbed onto the surface. He was using Beech-Nut Chewing Tobacco. It has a kind of sticky, resinous quality. Some of it is still stuck onto the surface, creating the kind of textural effect. I think it took a really long time to build up the darkness of color that you see on the sheet. It was labor-intensive.

Curator, Ana Torok: Ed takes drawing into this third dimension, blowing it up at this monumental scale. It's floating in the space and we almost approach it as we might approach a sculpture. You're really encountering the letter S, the letter P, at a scale that's almost human-sized. To me, it's this culmination of what Ed is trying to do with language.

373 Back of Hollywood. 1977

Curator, Ana Torok: Ruscha's working in a studio in Hollywood beginning in 1965, and he can see the Hollywood sign outside of his window. He said that if he could read the sign, he'd know it was safe to go outside. Otherwise, it was too smoggy and he should stay indoors.

Then in 1976, he is invited to create a billboard in Los Angeles, and he recreates the sign, but he reverses it, so that someone driving in their car past the billboard might glimpse it in their rearview mirror.

Architect, Frank Gehry: The Hollywood sign is still a major identity of LA. I always thought that was a weird way to represent the city: cut out letters on the hillside. Why are they desecrating this beautiful hillside with that crap? So I think that was Ed's commentary. He was saying, "Okay, if you like that goddamn shit, I'm going to make it art."

Designer, Gail Anderson: His Hollywood paintings—I saw those before I ever actually saw the Hollywood sign. And so in my head it was gonna be as majestic and cool as the paintings. When I finally got to see it, it was like, "That's what it is?"

The paintings are what's stuck with me more than the actual sign. It's all so in my head what California was before I got to see California.

374 *Thick Blocks of Musical Fudge. 1976*

Conservator, Laura Neufeld: Wordplay is one of my favorite parts of Ed's work. He said, "Words have temperatures to me, and when they reach a certain point and become hot words, then they appeal to me." And that's when he knows that he has to make a picture with those words.

"Thick blocks of musical fudge" is such a weird and evocative phrase. "Thick blocks," so I can imagine the block of fudge, but what's "musical" about fudge? It's so confounding to try to put those things together.

Curator, Ana Torok: There's a really beautiful rhythm to the words, and I think Ed is really attuned to how words sound. I think that's a big part of his choice.

Laura Neufeld: In the work, those letters are reserved paper, so that's where the sheet was masked. Then this chocolatey color of pastel has been rubbed into the background. And removing that masking, you get these perfect white letters. You almost expect, if you touched it, to have cocoa powder on your fingers. And the whole thing feels somehow both weightless and like this solid, dense, sticky block of fudge that the text evokes.

375 *The End*. 1991

Curator, Ana Torok: Ruscha remembers going to see black and white movies as a kid in Oklahoma City. In paintings from the early '90s, he takes an interest in the materiality of film itself, and makes a series of paintings where he depicts scratches on the film or little dust spots that have appeared on the celluloid surface. Here, in *The End*, we see the words in the title split horizontally, as if the film has malfunctioned in the projector.

Artist, Ed Ruscha: I think what motivated me was memories of the cinema. Watching movies and watching scratches on the film, and those little pops that come here and there, and those little, what they call, "hairs in the gate," always seemed real curious to me. I've always loved the way that the little zips go across the screen, but really it's like I'm pointing out the flaws of cinema. Movie producers want to keep those scratches out of there. But I like them for what they are.

"THE END," and all the implications that that brings along with it. I do think of this concept of finality, or the final curtain. But it doesn't construe doom to me, or anything like that. It's more like, "Hey, the movie is rolling to a stop."

387 *Note We Have Already Got Rid of Several Like You — One Was Found in River Just Recently.* 1996

Curator, Ana Torok: In the mid-1990s, Ruscha makes a series of paintings that feature blank rectangles but once you read the title, you realize that each mark corresponds to a word in the work's title, and that the title itself is a menacing message.

Artist, Ed Ruscha: I began seeing these blank spaces as a means of kind of escaping the words that I'd been putting in pictures for so long.

Some of these works come from things I've read. One of these paintings, the wording came verbatim from a threat letter sent by some anonymous racist to Branch Rickey, who was the owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers, when he hired the first Black baseball player in the major leagues, Jackie Robinson. And it said something like, "We've found people like you in the river. One was just found last week."

When you censor something like that, you've got this block and the block itself has a certain power to it.

388 **Blue Collar Tech-Chem. 1992**

Designer, Gail Anderson: These paintings are so much a slice of driving through America. These big, bland, stubby buildings with a giant sky behind them.

Curator, Ana Torok: In 1992, Ruscha began producing a series of black and white paintings of boxy industrial buildings. The work you're standing in front of now, *Blue Collar Tech-Chem*, is part of a before and after pairing. Across the gallery, you'll see a painting that Ruscha made in 2003, which revisits the site but reimagines the building as it might exist into the future. It's quite an ominous picture with these fiery red skies.

Gail Anderson: When I look at The Old Tech-Chem Building, I see some ghost type on the side of the building that I'm curious about, and you wonder, "Why is it gone now? Who worked there? What life was like. What was the community around this?"

Ana Torok: Ruscha focuses on the upper part of these buildings, where the signage is: "Tech Chem," "Tool and Die," "Trade School."

Gail Anderson: Vernacular signage is that piece of wherever you are in the world that might go away any minute now. They've got these amazing stories to tell in the way that looking at these paintings, you start to toss a story of your own into the mix of what could have gone on there. Pull over with your phone and snap a picture and create a story in your head, and save it because you're going to go back and it's going to be gone.

389 Metro, Petro, Neuro, Psycho. 2022

Curator, Ana Torok: This painting produced in 2022 is the most recent work in the exhibition. It exemplifies this compositional formula that you see in Ruscha's work, almost from the start of his career. He'll superimpose a word or phrase onto an unrelated backdrop. And in this case, it's this spot right outside his studio in Los Angeles.

He said that for him, backgrounds become simply, quote, "anonymous backdrops for the drama of words." When you start to read the words out loud, "metro," "petro," "neuro," "psycho," they start to form this kind of rhyming sequence—almost as if it could go on in a loop forever.

Ruscha borrows words and phrases from many different sources. A word might come from a book or from song lyrics. Words might be overheard in conversation or may be overheard on the radio while he's driving through LA. It's almost as if he's plucking words from here and there, letting them stew a little bit, and then they'll just pop up in these unexpected ways.

Artist, Ed Ruscha: And finally, it comes down to selecting things that sometimes lead you down strange roads, sometimes they're non-sequiturs, sometimes they're odd word combinations. But they have to have some sort of power or some strangeness to them for me to get on board.

390 *Bliss Bucket*. 2014

Curator, Ana Torok: The imagery in *Bliss Bucket* is divided into two zones. In the lower part of the canvas, you see this torn and tattered discarded mattress. In the upper part, we have this musical notation which he renders so that it's almost parallel to the mattress below it.

What Ruscha does so often is combine one thing that might be familiar with another that throws you off a little bit, destabilizes your expectations and you're left to figure out what to do with it.

Even the term "Bliss Bucket" captures the tension that's going on here in the painting. You have "bliss," this hopeful, joyous word. It's something intangible. And "bucket," something you might see in a storage closet. It's very much of this world.

This painting also makes me think about the role that sound plays in Ruscha's work. Usually that's through language, so you might see a word that you're encouraged to sound out, but here, instead, Ruscha indicates music through its own language, this musical notation, and lets you fill in what that might sound like.