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Review of *Ed Ruscha* By Neal Benezra and Kerry Brougher, with a contribution by Phyllis Rosenzweig

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Ed Ruscha. By Neal Benezra and Kerry Brougher, with a contribution by Phyllis Rosenzweig. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 2000. Black-and-white illustrations, black-and-white and color photographs, notes, biography, bibliography, checklist. 206 pp. \$45.00.

This book, intended to accompany an international traveling retrospective exhibition, is a welcome contribution to understanding Ed Ruscha's important but underappreciated role in the complex and diverse history of post-war American art. Although he has long been regarded as one of the "important" contemporary artists who came to aesthetic maturity in the mid-1960s, why he is important has not been sufficiently demonstrated. This publication points the way.

The number and quality of reproductions of Ruscha's work are the book's most important contribution. The images alone demonstrate the sheer diversity and energy of Ruscha's

aesthetic vocabulary, a vocabulary that is demonstrably more than simply derivative from the West Coast Pop art movement, as his work is often interpreted. The book also includes a comprehensive bibliography, chronology, and checklist of the exhibition's works as well as three short essays that offer perspectives on the significance of Ruscha's achievement.

Although limited in depth, each essay highlights several issues that reveal Ruscha to be a far more influential and relevant figure in the history of contemporary art in the US than is generally supposed. Each essayist assumes this results from the many aesthetic and cultural tensions Ruscha experienced and manifested through his work, tensions that not only animated his aesthetic production but have consequently made it difficult for him to be "catagorized" or "assimilated" conveniently into an art historical movement. Perhaps more so than most artists at the time, Ruscha felt the tensions between commercial and fine art; between low and high culture; and between the possibilities and limitations of visual imagery and language. He has said that "When I first became attracted to the idea of being an artist, painting was the last method, it was an almost obsolete, archaic form of communication. . . . I felt newspapers, magazines, books, words, to be more meaningful than what some damn oil painter was doing."

From where does such a unique aesthetic perspective come? Although not rigorously explored in depth, each of the three essayists implies that Ruscha's experience on the Plains (he was born in Omaha and raised in Oklahoma City) was definitive. First, his aesthetic sense was not nourished on a heavy diet of high art found in museums, but on the more diverse and less defined sphere of an emerging and dynamic visual culture that included commercial art, graphic design, typography, and other less traditional forms of artistic expression that saturated the world outside art museums and galleries. For Ruscha, the traditional boundaries between "high" and "popular" art, between the art of museums and that of billboards and posters, between words and

images, were much more blurry than others. His experience on the Plains, it appears, contributed to this unique perspective.

Second, Ruscha's move west from Oklahoma City to Los Angeles via Route 66 made manifest a common Plains or Prairie world view that opportunity lay on the western frontier, particularly in California. Although his experience of Route 66 corresponded to those romantic journeys of Jack Kerouac, Robert Frank, and other "Beat" artists who used their travels west as the organizing mythos of their (high art) artistic radicalism, it was fundamentally different. His aesthetic was nourished in and through his Plains experience. That his aesthetic activities have been difficult to define in the traditional "isms" of art history is a testament to the powerful force of the Plains experience in postwar American art.

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