

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: Edward Ruscha (ER), Artist

INTERVIEWER: Christophe Cherix (CC), The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller
Chief Curator of Prints and Illustrated Books of The
Museum of Modern Art

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[CREW DISCUSSION]

CC: So today is January 24, 2012. We are in the Paper Study Center of the Museum of Modern Art, and I'm Christophe Cherix, the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Chief Curator of Prints and Illustrated Books of the Museum, and I have the great pleasure to be with Ed Ruscha today. Ed, how can I introduce you? Anything more appropriate than other...?

ER: Oh, well, I'm Ed Ruscha and I'm an artist who lives in Los Angeles, California. Today is January 24th, as you say, in the year 2012.

CC: Let's -- one of the reasons for me to ask this question is that your work has been defined by many people before me and before this conversation in very different ways. You've been doing prints, paintings, films, books. You work in very different medium from the very early '60s. One other thing which seems to be

paradoxical who is maybe primarily known today as a painter that in the '60s your work was, I would say, first internationally known or recognized for producing a number of small books that you started doing in 1962. And as we are in 2012, I thought this morning we are in the fiftieth anniversary of this small publication that you designed in '62, but that you released a thing in 1963. And those books became extremely influential, not only in the '60s but I would say up to today, despite their modest size, the fact that they are unlimited, or maybe very much because of that. And *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* [MoMA #706.2011] is the first of a series, and if you allow me, maybe we'll go through a few of them to discuss. Would you just bring us back to 1962 and how these books came into being? What suddenly drew you to make a book, to become your own publisher, and to make a book which doesn't really look like in 1962 as an art book?

ER I went to art school from -- I left Oklahoma City, where I grew up, and I came to California. I was making a choice as to whether to go to New York or Kansas City or Chicago or Los Angeles, and I knew I wanted to go to an art school somewhere, so finally Los Angeles sounded like a good place to go, not so much because it was a great art school, but I liked the notion of the weather and the natural habitat of California, and so that was an appeal to me. And over those years -- I went to art school for like three or four years, and I'd go back and forth between Oklahoma and California, oh, on the highway, on US 66. And sometimes driving, sometimes hitchhiking, and I began to see the highway as kind of a source, as source material, and I liked what I saw in the almost like nothingness, the quietude of traveling and the lack of busy metropolitan cities until you got to Los Angeles, and then it all changed. But even Los Angeles had its attraction to me, so I studied -- I thought I wanted to be a sign painter, and then I had an idea that I wanted to be a graphic, work in graphics somehow or advertising, and so I took advertising courses, and I sort of slipped sideways, went and took painting classes, and then I could see that fine arts had, was a more vital thing to me than when I started out. So I centered my studies in painting and drawing and printmaking, and then I worked for a book printer named Saul Marks, who had this press called Planton Press, and I learned how to set type, and I saw him make books, which was his main activity. And I worked for him on a part-time basis -- had other jobs, too, but I... I began to be

attracted to books, and bookstores, and then I just thought maybe there's some possibility here to, for my work. And it got going in that, in that way. [00:09:58]

CC: Were you looking to add...? One thing which, for me, was potentially one of the influences on you for those books were architecture books of the late '50s, you know, the number of books which try to show Los Angeles and this kind of like new form of architecture, which is spread out over the city. Is it something that you were looking at in particular or not?

ER: Well, I like the aggressive architectural activity that was happening in Los Angeles at that time, modern, sleek things, you know, with ski jump roofs and things like that were very jazzy to me, and I thought that that was like some kind of new music. And I loved seeing that.

CC: What do you mean by "new music"?

ER: It was like a completely different landscape than I grew up in, you know. I was in Oklahoma, where it was a very slow moving cultural place, and didn't have any of the jazz that Los Angeles had.

CC: Had, yeah.

ER: And so everything about California, even the nostalgic aspect of it, even the vegetation of it, and the ocean, and the sunsets, and the sunrises, and the desert, and those things began to appeal to me, and even things that were manmade. And so that includes the sort of crass commercial noise that happens in a big city. And I guess all that accumulated, and it's like putting it all in a Mixmaster. [Laughter]

CC: And I guess the car culture played a role. I mean, you say that you came to LA somewhere because of the architecture and custom cars, but you feel in order to see the architecture you need your car, like in order to see those gas stations you need to drive from one place to another.

ER: Well, I didn't see it with that form of logic, [Laughter] but I like the way that each one of these elements played off the next, and yes, the car culture was there, and that included like Chicano car styling, you know, Mexican-American, the way they would design their automobiles and lower them to the ground and all that, and custom cars, which was sort of a spin-off from the war years, and people -- all the soldiers came home, and there wasn't much to do. They were looking for jobs, and at the same time they had this urge to make their cars look different than the way Detroit made them. And so it's the total culture got to me, and somehow this, these books became that, evolved from that kind of thinking.

CC: And what was the reception of those books? Because when you published that first book, it's a little bit surprising for -- I mean, at last in the art world -- you know, it's not really clear what the public, what's the audience for such a book, because it's not really about the architecture of the gasoline station [referring to the book *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations* MoMA # 706.2011]; 1963], it's not really about the trip, because it's not said explicitly in the book itself, and in a way there is something which is the photographs are more commercial than artistic in some way. The printing is offset printing, so something which is, again, more related to advertisement. And the paper and everything, there is no text, or there is description or caption, you know, location of the gasoline station. But there is a lot of things which can be seen as quite unusual for that time.

ER: I suppose that I had -- I had some options when I was thinking about this book, and the oddity of it, the sort of left turn that it took is what finally motivated me, and I considered the idea of having somebody make comments or make an introduction. And then I just flatly rejected that, because it would've given some kind of tone to the book --

CC: Exactly.

ER: -- that I didn't want. And so finally just the bluntness of the pictures was the way to go with this.

CC: And there is something for the reader or the viewer -- I don't know how to call him or her -- but there's this relationship that we'll see again and again in your coming books between the title and the content. I mean, when you read the title, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* [MoMA 706.2011], that's all there is. [Laughing] You know, it gives a lot of the content. Is it the title came first? Is it something that...?

ER: Title came first.

CC: So twenty-six was this magic number, or something that you liked for... How did that come about?

ER: Someone pointed out saying that they read an interview by me that I explained how I hitchhiked when I was fourteen years old. I went from Oklahoma to Florida, to Miami. And I was with a friend, and we hitchhiked. And I recall that it took me twenty-six rides to get from Oklahoma to Florida, and then it took me twenty-six rides to get back. And that has always stuck in my mind, but I cannot say that that's the reason I did this. [Laughter] This came from a darker, or fuzzier place [Laughter] than that answer, and I never thought about that until somebody said, "Oh, twenty-six rides to get that, twenty-six... That's why you have that..." I don't think that's... That's not where it comes from, but I did have a notion to have the title first, and so the cover, to me, was extremely important, and the title was extremely important, and the pictures in some ways were not that important to me.

CC: You mean how they frame all...?

ER: Yes.

CC: OK.

ER: Yes. And so the collection of it and the bluntness of it became the issue with me. So doing these books was not... It was not a technique to make my future more successful, and there was no real way on paper that I could figure out making a

profit on these things, so I ended up just giving them away.

CC: And one thing which is interesting and I think for me the books evolve -- I mean, you know, every book brings something kind... It's very much a variation. I mean, there's very much one book, you know, is in direct relationship to the one which was done before, the one, I feel, which is done after. But one other thing which is unusual, I think, for the first two books, or at least for the first one, that you first publish it in a limited number edition. I think it's 400 copies, and they're numbered and sometimes signed, and that's something you're going to just very quickly not do anymore, as it seemed that, you know, by numbering them or signing them they became, they become more like an art object or a traditional book.

ER: Yeah, that's true, and so from that point on I saw them as being more unlimited, and I actually printed more copies of the following, of the following books.

CC: And you kept reprinting them.

ER: Yeah, I kept reprinting them, yes.

CC: Which is another unusual thing for an art book, which often function on insularity -- you know, you just do thirty of that, or you just...

ER: Yeah.

CC: And that seems beside the point.

ER: Yeah, so I just felt like having a pace with these things was the answer, and to not emphasize the importance of these books by limiting them and numbering them.

CC: But at the same time, you want those books to be recognized, because you have this very interesting advertisement that you put at some point in art form where it says "Rejected by the Library of Congress."

ER: Oh, yeah.

CC: Like it's almost like a title, a... Like it shows a little bit that this book had no -- you know, that's the same book here.

ER: Oh, yeah.

CC: Rejected by Library of Congress, October 2nd, 1963. And of course the Library of Congress supposedly is supposed to [Laughing] keep everything.

ER: That's what I thought, and then I... You know, Library of Congress, having a copyright, having -- it was all a mystery to me. And I didn't really know the mechanics of that world, and I thought, well maybe what I should do is -- I've printed this book and published it myself; maybe I should send them a copy of it and see if I can become made official by the, [Laughing] by the federal government. And I got a letter back quite soon saying that it does not wish to add this book to its collection, and --

CC: Does it give a reason for that?

ER: No.

CC: OK.

ER: No, there was no reason given, but I still have the original letter. And I believe that today the Library of Congress will accept anything in the form of a printed material, and maybe the laws have changed. I don't know. I didn't look that deeply into our national psyche.

CC: And did the ad create any reaction from the Library of Congress? [Laughing]

ER: Not really, no. No, not from the Library of Congress. I got no answer from them at all, but I guess people saw the ad, and I felt like maybe that was the right thing

to do at the time.

CC: The next book you publish, I think, is the following year in 1964. I think it's a very important book, as well, in your work, *Various Small Fires* [MoMA # 707.2011]. One of the reasons for that is that it adds almost like a second part of the title, *and Milk*, and that's something you're going to do often, the following books, is to generate a collection of images on the same subject here, like small domestic fires -- a lighter, oven, matches, and so on -- and at the end of it, you have an image which is kind of hard to reconcile with, [Laughing] with the first series of photographs here, just a glass of milk. Could you talk a bit about the function of this almost disruptive image at the end which suddenly make it harder to understand as a book?

ER: There's no -- there was no attempt to reach a higher plane of wisdom [Laughter] with this. At the same time, I wanted to make, I wanted to bring -- what do you say -- 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 text or the rest of the work. And so I felt like these images were kind of prosaic in a way, or very usual, things that you might see in the form of bad photographs, or pictures taken without much thought. And yet the thought comes together in these with the idea of fires. And I had been playing with other things, even within the realm of painting, where I might put something, add sometime to the main theme to somehow antagonize the main theme.

CC: There's this painting I think you do maybe the following year or the same year, of a bird looking at some kind of, what seems to be a glass of milk on the side, and the title, like "Is It Milk or Plaster?" or something. [Laughing]

ER: Yeah. Yeah, well, and I guess I saw a glass of milk as some kind of symbol of purity, without thinking too much about it. It became... Maybe I liked the physical characteristics of a glass, a clean glass filled with milk, and it had some connotations to it that I wanted to utilize. And so it came out of the sky, I guess you might say, and I, at the same time, didn't want to think too much about it, so I was not tortured over my creation here. I got onto a theme, and in a procedure

that wouldn't allow too much concentration or too much justification, [00:25:06] and so I wanted the thing to be spontaneous, and more or less official at the same time. Emphatic, I guess, is maybe what I want to say. And so that, I find, still goes through with all my work, no matter what I do, is have -- sometimes there's little oddities that I welcome. And then it just goes from the next, and then I'll do something like this and forget about it.

CC: But what's interesting, that if you are not tortured by it, a lot of people are for you; because that relationship between the glass of milk and the small fires, was a lot discussed in the last forty years, at least, and someone who thought a lot about it is someone who worked here for a very long time, was Head of the Library, Clive Philpott.

ER: Oh, yeah.

CC: And Clive had great love and interest for your books, and he's really one of the main scholars who made us understand how important they were, not only in relation to your work but to a broader scene, as well. And I talked to Clive last week, and I said, "Do you have any, any unanswered question from Ed, you know, that maybe I could ask him for you?" And he said, "Oh, in fact, one of the questions I have that" -- he saw your show at the Jeu de Paume, which has most of your photography show, and he said in that show you had photograph of *Various Small Fires* [MoMA #707.2011], and instead of putting a glass of milk on the sign you put, I think, a photograph of a potato.

ER: Oh.

CC: [Laughing] So how did that...?

ER: Yeah, the...

CC: Can the potato play the same role as the glass of milk, or is something that you thought at the time, or is it something that you...?

ER: Well, that choice, I think, maybe was the curator, Margit Rowell, and she may have decided to do that, and I liked it when it finally happened. But exhibits of books are different than the books themselves, and so the exhibit takes on more or less a life of its own, and things can change, so perhaps that potato that I took a photograph of could be thought of as a, almost like a metaphor for the milk.
[Laughing]

CC: For the milk, yeah.

ER: Yeah.

CC: Mm-hmm. This kind of relationship is, I think is very interesting. If we go further in the years, you published *Some Los Angeles Apartments, Real Estate Opportunities*, and there's one book that's always been one of my favorites of mine, *Nine Swimming Pools* [MoMA #711.2011], and that's a book where there is no disruptive element -- no, there is one; it's a broken glass.

ER: Mm-hmm, yeah.

CC: But in a way, the broken glass -- I mean, your photograph of swimming pool, the broken glass is a bit more in some way related to the subject, because it falls into the pool --

ER: That's right.

CC: -- or it seems to be falling into the water and to dissolve into that liquid. And one other thing which I think is very beautiful about that book are the, strangely are the white pages, because we're talking about music, about how those image creates something a little bit larger than themselves, or some kind of almost like a melody. I felt that white pages here have some kind of mysterious and important parts to play.

ER: Starting these books with the like 48 page format, you know, that has this number of pages, I liked it because of the, first of all, the paper itself and the thickness of the paper, the way it looked bound, and the thickness of the book. And I thought when this book came around that it should echo or be very much like this, these other books. Otherwise I would have eliminated those blank pages. But the blank pages had a -- they spoke for themselves. You know, they're not just blank pages, and somehow they became a part of the whole thing, especially when you look at the other issues, the other books.

CC: And there is something very interesting to photograph swimming pools empty, I mean without any people. You know, usually when you take a photograph of a swimming pool you have people swimming in them. What attracted you...? Is it part of any landscape, as well? It's almost like swimming pool at 5:00 in the morning or something like that when, when they are deserted. [00:30:00]

ER: Well, I think that's what the quietude of it, and I liked it for that, for that purpose. And I never really thought about no people. It didn't even occur to me that I was doing this, so... [Laughter]

CC: So here you hired a photographer to take those photographs?

ER: No, I took these pictures.

CC: You took those pictures.

ER: Yeah.

CC: But sometimes you do hire a photographer to do that.

ER: Yeah, mm-hmm. Yeah.

CC: And the swimming pools were swimming pools of France. Did you look for them for a specific aesthetic, or was it...? I mean, you said the gasoline stations were

kind of all interrelated because on the same road. Are the swimming pools have, do they share any connection?

ER: Not really. They were... I... I was on this tear, or I was on [Laughing] this idea to make this pools book, and I could have almost chosen any swimming pools, so I didn't have -- I faced no aesthetic torture over what kind of pool I was going to photograph. And it didn't -- they didn't have to be affluent looking pools. They didn't have to be special pools. And some were very small, and at motels, and some were in Las Vegas. There's a community pool in one of them, and having access, sort of quick access to swimming pools, enabled me to just like keep going and make this book. So I didn't -- I wasn't trying to grasp the entire subject of swimming pools and show that swimming pools can have great variety. That wasn't my aim. I was on this sort of forward motion to make the book, and those swimming pools just kind of fell into my program. And it's funny you say about, about people -- I remember when I first came to New York, I met Andy Warhol in 1962 or '3... Well, it was '63 because I gave him a copy of the gas stations, and he said, "Oh, I love it because there are no people in there." [CC Laughs] And I didn't even think of that. It was not even an issue to me. So there's a lot of subconscious results from...

CC: But your next people is *Colored People* [MoMA #716.2011], and there's no people in it. [Laughing]

ER: And no people in it, so...

CC: Even if the title, which, you know... [Laughing]

ER: Yeah. So it's maybe, you could say, a piece of poetry or... And I've today can't, am wondering why I made this a yellow cover, except that the pictures inside were color pictures, and it was important for me to have these pictures be outlined, you know, with no backgrounds.

CC: Sure, yeah, mm-hmm.

ER: And that'll also occur in this next book, too.

CC: Is this the idea of the sun being like this kind of sun which basically rays sometimes, you know, it's overexposed?

ER: Well, all these pictures were taken in Los Angeles, and then I remember actually painting out the backgrounds to all these pictures.

CC: Oh, you did, mm-hmm.

ER: And at that time I felt like it was an important thing to do. [Laughter]

CC: Could you do -- at that point you have like six books published, all of the same format. Could you talk a little bit about how you financed them? Because I'm sure it was quite expensive to do. I mean, they're all color photograph, and did the distribution play a role? Were you able to convince a few booksellers to attempt to sell some of them? You mentioned that you would give them to other artists, Andy Warhol, and I know a number of artists have still some of your books today. Could you tell a bit how, what the distribution meant for you?

ER: I guess, you know, when you make a work of art, no matter what it is, you -- especially early on in an artists' career, they have ideas to -- today [Laughing] might be different, [00:34:59] but there are ideas to gain the respect of other people that you respect, and so I think that a lot of the urge to make works of art are based on that accomplishment, or based on that, that you want to -- you want a respect for your creation from other people. And that's where it is.

CC: So who are the people you wanted to...?

[CREW DISCUSSION]

CC: Stacking them is a very pleasurable thing.

ER: What?

CC: Stacking them, your books.

ER: Oh, stacking them, yeah.

CC: It is! [Laughter] Because they just have the right size, and...

ER: Yeah. I --

CC: They have, as you say, ideally about the same thickness, you know, they just...
It's a nice feeling! [Laughing]

ER: Yeah. It all sort of just gave me trouble. [Laughter]

[CREW DISCUSSION]

CC: So who are the people that you wanted to, you said, gain respect, you know?

ER: Mostly artists, painters, and maybe musicians and other people involved in the arts. And so I think that the original, my original feelings about this did not involve understanding who my audience was, so I had -- there was no audience, you know. It was a... It was like a fish out of water, in a way. [CC Laughs] And I kind of liked that. I liked that idea, that it -- that there was no place for these, for these books to fit on the shelf, so to speak. And, you know, the oddness of them was, I felt like, their substance and their importance. So I could never really understand who I was getting to and who I was insulting and all of that. Like if I showed that gas station book to somebody who worked in the gas station, they -- which I did, on a couple of occasions -- and they said, "Oh, yeah, gas stations, yeah, that's right, it's good." And then other people, like maybe poets or some artists just looked at them with deep suspicion that maybe, "Are you trying to put me on?", you know, that sort of thing.

CC: Mm-hmm. I mean, it was, I guess, in your mind, consciously or not, an idea to break away from something. I mean, there is this idea to, not to make a

traditional book with the text and an image and a relationship, like a clear relationship between the two, and to use techniques usually not used for artworks.

ER: Yeah. Well, I liked the nontraditional aspect of it, and at the same time I like the idea that maybe this, one of these books would sit on a bookshelf in a bookstore and somebody might buy it, but...

CC: What a misunderstanding! [Laughter]

ER: But so I met this bookseller here in New York named George Wittenborn.

CC: Absolutely, great bookseller.

ER: And he had this great bookstore up on Madison Avenue, and considered maybe one of the best in New York, and he handled some of my books.

CC: So what did you say? So you just came by and said, "I made a" --

ER: Yeah, he just said... Yeah. I introduced to him and gave him a book, and he thought about it for a while, and then he wrote to me after I was in California and said, "Yeah, we'll have -- why don't you send us five copies of that book?"
[Laughter]

CC: Another person in New York who did a little bit of distribution for that is Seth Siegelau, because I found your books on his book list. I mean, Seth did all those kind of great conceptual books of the late '60s, the Xerox book and all those works, and -- but your works are, seems to be part of them or have been distributed with them.

ER: Yeah. There were some odd instances here and there where they might go to a bookstore in Europe, but I...

CC: Maybe someone like Walter Koenig distributed your book at the time.

ER: Walter Koenig did, yes, yes. That was later on after -- not in the beginning, but later on after I had four or five books, and then it began to look like maybe there was a forward motion to, [Laughing] to the series, that I was making a series, and that that's -- that makes the whole thing maybe more acceptable or interesting or whatever.

CC: But interesting that when it becomes a bit more known or interesting, you publish *Thirty-four Parking Lots* [MoMA #710.2011]. I mean, '67 you have done like three or four books with a different format.

ER: Yeah, I jumped out of the format here. I like the, again, the specific number --

CC: Thirty-four.

ER: -- thirty-four, like it's so deliberate, and --

CC: And again, it's empty place. You know, it's parking lots almost without cars. [Laughing]

ER: Yeah. And so these were all taken on a Sunday morning in about one hours' time it took to go all over Los Angeles, and there was -- I had an aerial photographer take these.

CC: So you were with him?

ER: No. I told --

CC: OK, you just gave him the locations.

ER: Yeah, I think it cost too much for me to go up with him. [Laughter] He had his own helicopter and service, and so I asked him to, any time he saw an empty parking lot to photograph it. And so he... This actually covers quite a maybe

forty or fifty mile radius of parking lots. I originally thought I could photograph these from an angle that would be up high, but then finally I know that the air was the only place to go with this book, is to go up in the air.

CC: And to show you something you have never seen in some way, you as the audience, because you can have an idea for that empty parking lot, you know, can be from the sky, but if, you know...

ER: Yeah.

CC: It's very much a mental. So what did you think? Did he take more photographs than that, or he took precisely thirty-four and you just published them all?

ER: No, I think that there are maybe a few that I rejected from this, because somehow they didn't fit with the flow of the book, or...

CC: And he took one photograph of each site? Again, he took a --

ER: Mm-hmm.

CC: OK.

ER: Yeah. Sometimes there might've been one or two more, or sometimes three photographs of a single site. I was concerned that people might look at this and think that I was pointing out the interesting lines for parking cars, and I didn't want it to be perceived as being an interesting book as such. So it's like the total overall idea of the parking lots, and the notion of a parking lot, and less about the lines that you see that make our modern world, you know what I mean?

CC: Mm-hmm.

ER: So it was just part of the excursion into these books, and -- but the reason this jumped to a higher, to a bigger format was that I couldn't -- I didn't like the idea that these fit into a smaller picture. I thought they needed to be bigger.

CC: Needed to be a little bit visually more present, something like...

ER: Yeah. Yeah.

CC: What's interesting -- and if we think of a gasoline station, which is really like a road trip from one place to another, you say swimming pools, you know, they were, again, taken like in a relatively short amount of time. Thirty-four parking lots, you know, done in one helicopter ride over the city. There is almost this kind of cinematic aspect in those books, documenting something, you know, from -- almost like a film would, except they are still photographs. And it's something which is very much present in a number of your books that you do in the late '60s, or in the '70s, which are *Hard Light* with Lawrence Weiner, *Royal Road Test* [MoMA #709.2011], or *Crackers* [MoMA #712.2011]. And here there is kind of photocinema aspect of the book. Can you speak a little bit about that, how film and books seems to interrelate at that point?

ER: Yeah.

CC: Like you want to give an idea of a narrative or something like that.

ER: I can see that these books here are a deviation from my original thinking, and that they became -- it became like an issue to me to make something that was, that I needed... I had to have an excuse to make a book, and this crazy story by a friend of mine, [Mason Williams](#) --

CC: Mm-hmm, who was a schoolmate of you--

ER: He was a schoolmate, and we grew up in Oklahoma together, and actually drove out to California together. And he was a writer and a musician, and he wrote this little short story. And it seemed like I was at a point where I wanted to make some, something that had a narrative to it and a kind of story, and make a book that would, without using words, would capture this story. So that was the

motivation for this. This book here was almost like a comic occurrence where I was in Las Vegas with Mason, and a friend --

CC: Mason Williams.

ER: -- [Mason Williams](#) and another friend, Patrick Blackwell, who I went to art school with. And we were in Las Vegas for something that Mason was doing, some kind of personal appearance. He was a musician then. And we had a broken typewriter --

CC: Here it is. [Laughing]

ER: -- in the car.

CC: So it was just there.

ER: It was there, and it seemed to me like there was no hope for this typewriter, but it was a good -- it was good, but the case was broken, and it was -- it threw it offline, and it -- and somehow it couldn't be repaired. There were typewriter repairers that would maybe try to restore something like this, but it was too costly to do. So we just had this very heavy typewriter, and driving along the highway south of Las Vegas, and had this thought to just throw the typewriter out the window, and did it, actually threw that typewriter out the window, and then continued driving and felt good about doing that, and on and on and on. And we drove maybe fifty miles or so, and then began to talk about it, and began to think that, well, maybe there is something, something here that we're missing, or something that we missed doing, which was to somehow record the --

CC: Impact, yeah.

ER: -- results of this, of many, many parts of this typewriter that exploded and blew up and, you know, fell by the wayside. And so we turned the car around. Patrick was a photographer, and he had plenty of film, and so we had this notion to go

back and record this, the results of this typewriter all over the landscape, almost like a crime scene.

CC: Yeah, it's very precisely documented. Every part is located and so on, yeah.

ER: Yeah, so... And then the three of us began talking about this, about this and about what we could make out of it. And so recording all the parts, and then we ended up -- I think we left the parts out there, but we... Oh no, no. We collected everything that we could find and put it into a box, and brought it back, and we wanted precise descriptions of each --

CC: Each piece.

ER: -- piece.

CC: What they were, yeah.

ER: And so we took it to a typewriter expert, and he looked at each one of these things, almost like the police might do something like that, and identified with the correct title of each one of these pieces. And that, at that time, seemed to be important to us, to have this thing recorded as it was.

CC: So in the book you say Mason Williams was the thrower. So who threw the...?

ER: He threw the...

CC: Oh, he threw it, OK. [Laughing]

ER: Yeah, he threw it out. Yeah.

CC: One book, one book which is -- again, these books seem all very related, but they, at the same time, they all each bring something different and is slightly something which become almost unexpected if you know well the earlier publication. One of them which is clearly even more sometimes to me, for a long

time it was more difficult to understand why you consider it as a book and not a portfolio, is [Stains \[MoMA #137.1970.1-76\]](#). *Stains* is always listed with the books in your catalogue, whereas in the list you see it really as a book, but in many ways *Stains* is not a book, in terms of an object. It's really like a case, and you have --

ER: Yeah.

CC: -- a series of loose pages, each -- I think seventy-five -- in each having a different "original" stain from a different material.

ER: Yeah.

CC: How do you see it as a book?

ER: If you called this a portfolio, I would say that's fine. If you called it a book, I might say, "Well, that's fine, too." It's just not bound. It doesn't have traditional binding. And that... So it almost does not need to be classified as anything, you know, except a pile of papers. But it is a publication in the sense that it's made in an edition.

CC: Exactly, of seventy.

ER: Yeah. And I think that I was maybe trying to explore materials, and so liquid materials seemed to be important to me at that time, and it sort of blended in with some paintings that I was doing, also. I was using some of these substances to make paintings, and they came about by the idea that staining, this notion of staining a support, whether it's a piece of paper or whatever it is, would be the issue that I wanted to explore, and that was -- that's the, I would say, the oversimplified description of this book, or this folio, however you like to call it.

CC: I think one other thing which interested you is a very random aspect of it, like every stain is different, you know, from one copy to another. I think that -- I don't know if it's a glue stain or something, but you won't have twice the same thing.

So this idea of integrating in your work something very much unexpected or impossible to predict, to -- I mean, formally not to be able to control.

ER: I think another thing about this is that I like the collection aspect of it, so that it was almost like a scientific collection, or a... It had some, another element to it besides the need to make something interesting. People might look at this and say, "Well gosh, yeah, stains, I mean, how interesting can that be?" But it's more like an official collection of phenomenon, rather than trying to make a narrative or a pile of interesting things.

CC: Mm-hmm. And what about the making of it, something extremely repetitive? I mean, you have seventy-five, I think, different stains, each done in seventy copies. If I multiply seventy -- it's a huge number! [Laughing]

ER: Yeah.

CC: It's something which is extremely labor intensive.

ER: Yeah, it is.

CC: There is something very casual about the idea, "I'm going to stain sheets of paper," but at the same time, when you look at it, it took a huge amount of time.

ER: Yeah. It wasn't done completely by me. I hired some art students, maybe six or seven people to --

CC: So it's a little factory. [Laughter]

ER: Yeah. Yeah, so, I mean, there was a certain problem involved in doing these, and... But it was not -- I didn't recall it being overwhelming.

CC: OK, mm-hmm.

ER: It was not that, not that difficult of a project. [00:55:00]

CC: And is it something which was distributed the same way as the other books, or did it appeal suddenly to a different kind of audience, or...?

ER: No, I don't know. Again, it's like I didn't know who my audience was, and I didn't know where to begin with that subject.

CC: And what gave you the idea to make seventy? You could have done that and, you know, it could have stayed as a unique project, in a way, like a series of drawings, but in a way, no, it had to be something which was multiplying.

ER: Yeah. You know, I liked the idea that it could be, you know, that I would have manufactured these special boxes to hold these things, and that I would make a number of them, and that they would be all numbered and made into something like that.

CC: Mm-hmm. Yeah, I think it's at least a very important part of the --

ER: Yeah.

CC: It maybe functioned a bit as a title page. I mean, it has a title cover, but at the same time the list is something you could read almost aloud without... [Laughing]

ER: Yeah, that's right.

CC: Almost a piece of poetry or something.

ER: Well, that's what I thought, and also this publication was more suited to an art gallery, maybe, than these other works that were fish out of water.

CC: Sure, yeah, mm-hmm. One thing I forgot to ask you before -- and after we'll move beyond the books, but -- you say, you mention about how a lot of those publications were done for artists, in order to show your work or pay some kind of respect to artists you felt were interesting, but at the same time there was a way

for you to exist in a community of artists working in the '60s. And someone who did one of those interviews, as well, a few days ago is [Bruce Nauman](#). And Bruce Nauman did something quite peculiar with one of your books, because he burned *Various Small Fires* [MoMA #707.2011]. So he basically took a copy of *Various Small Fires*, burned it, and made, made another publication out of it. Was it a joke between you? What -- because it's a beautiful object. I don't know if you see the object that he did, this big poster and --

ER: It fold outs.

CC: It folds out, and --

ER: It folds out. I mean, it's almost as big as this table.

CC: -- it's every page being burned, so it's this kind of literality with your work taken, you know, almost to another level. [Laughing]

ER: Yeah.

CC: And being burned itself. What was your...? Did you know about it? Did he talk to you about that work?

ER: Eventually I did, but I don't believe that he -- I barely knew him, and -- I mean, I know him much better today, but then he lived in Pasadena, and I forget when that happened, when I finally found that he had done that, and I was... My initial response was that I was flattered that another artist would take my book and do that to it. I liked that idea. I liked it very much. And then after that I think I ended up acquiring a couple of copies of that, I think. I've got two or three copies of that; I forget. But... And then I became friends with him, and I could see that he was, you know, he had a multidimensional approach to making art, and that he was doing all kinds of things. I mean, he did some, maybe some other publications, too, but --

CC: He did, yeah.

ER: -- but mostly his sculptural work. And that was something else.

CC: I mean, what's fascinating about that is that you see someone looking at this book and not turning it, you know, as a traditional book, saying, OK, you can use that book in very different ways and don't have to have the traditional approach to it, just to put it on a shelf and to, you know, to turn it into a precious object.

ER: Yeah.

CC: And there is something quite fascinating about someone being able to take a book... And I think one of the things you don't do with books usually is to destroy them. In a way, it's hard to do. You give them away [Laughing] --

ER: Yeah, yeah.

CC: -- something which usually stays with you all your life if you don't give it...

ER: That's right.

CC: But you really thought him well, you really thought he really burned them.

ER: It was something that was not, did not anger me at all. It was -- I had the total other reaction to it. I thought that it was amusing that, that somebody would do this, and also the method in which he used, which was to burn something with, that concerned the subject of burning, you know, fires and all that. [01:00:00]

CC: And at the same time for you, you did all those paintings, which was about burning things. I mean, LACMA On Fire, *La Cienega*, *On Fire*, which, you know, happened before the burning by Bruce Nauman of *Various Small Fires*. So burning was kind of part of your work, as well.

ER: Yeah.

CC: As a representation, not literally, but... Did you think about that relationship, or did something...?

ER: It was something that I felt was -- I liked the pictorial mechanics of a fire. I don't like fires particularly, and I don't like the destructive aspect of fires. You know, they're tragic, and they involve a lot of grief and destruction and things like that, and so I don't like that aspect of it. But as a physical thing itself, and the fact that it can be started with a match or with a magnifying glass or anything, [Laughter] and the pictorial part of the fire, which the way it goes and all that, is -- contains great beauty to me.

CC: Absolutely.

ER: And the fact that it can alter a subject -- and that's nothing new in the world of art; artists have always wanted to alter subjects in one way or another. It's like somebody... It's like a way of destroying something or altering the appearance of something, and that's a certified technique in the world of art.

CC: [Laughing] Will you call it like something like -- is it related to the idea of a readymade and to make an altered readymade, something, an object in the world --

ER: Yeah.

CC: -- that you're going to twist, change, modify?

ER: Yeah. It's a way of modifying something that is meant to be not modified. [Laughing]

CC: Absolutely, yeah. Absolutely. If we go back a second now to 1962 -- now we went like up to the '70s with the publication of all those books, and one thing I just wanted, I wanted to talk to you about is, you know, how at the same time other mediums start, play a part, you know, in your practice, and I think one place where we could start is a very influential show -- I mean, at least seen as such

today -- curated by Walter Hopps, *New Paintings of Common Objects*. That happened in 1962 at the Pasadena Art Museum. And before going into the show you, from what I read, you designed the poster for the show. And I read this, and maybe it's one of those things you read which are not true, that you just called a commercial printer and said, "Make it loud." Is it true? [Laughing]

ER: Yeah. Yeah, it is.

CC: Could you say a bit about the poster itself? Because it becomes this kind of almost legend, and this idea of, you know, that you telephone the work in some funny way.

ER: Yeah. Yeah I like that aspect of it. I was also dealing with somebody, Walter Hopps in particular, who I felt was a very progressive thinker and a philosopher, and somebody who really understood the underlying reason for all art. I had great respect for him, and I felt fortunate that he, being the director of this Pasadena Art Museum, he organized [Marcel Duchamp's](#) first retrospective exhibit, and --

CC: That you saw.

ER: Yeah. Yeah, I met Marcel Duchamp at this opening that he had. And then he also had this -- the notion that he found these artists and wanted to make this exhibit, I felt very good that I was included in this thing, and so somehow we were speaking of making a poster, and I knew of this one poster printer that would make like circus posters, and they used a wooden type, which they really don't have today, I don't think. I mean, private people might have them. But I had seen, and never really visited this press, but I knew that they made boxing posters, and they made circus posters, and you could sort of have anything printed, and you could have photographs printed, too, if you wanted to. But I think that we sat down, and he said, "Well, why don't you design this poster?" And so I got on the phone to the Majestic Poster Press and explained what we wanted, and I believe that we finally had to mail them something with all the information on it. There's no such thing as faxes.

CC: Where does the title come from? I think the title is amazing, because it's the idea of new painting of common objects. [Laughing]

ER: That was -- it was like really if you want to look at it, it was almost like the first pop art show. And Walter came up with this, with this term. He said, "I think I'll call this the *New Painting of Common Objects*." And I believe that the, at that time the word 'pop' didn't, didn't exist in our vocabulary then.

CC: Right.

ER: I mean, it existed in that -- what was the printer image that [Richard Hamilton](#) had done, or [Eduardo Paolozzi](#)?

CC: Sure, the late '50s.

ER: They, they explored that, and maybe that -- I believe that it was Lawrence Alloway, the critic at the time, had picked that word out of this image and decided to call this pop art, and somehow that stuck. But when we did this there was no - - people didn't know what 'pop art' meant. There was no -- nobody used that as a term. And so I liked Walter's --

CC: Title.

ER: -- title, his kind of cold way of picking a title. [Laughter] And so I could see that this, this had some good things going for it. So I just talked on the phone to the poster press, and I believe that was my, those were my words: "Make it loud."
[Laughter]

[01:07:26]

CC: And again, you say that, and you don't go there to, you know, after the poster, which is delivered. Is it something that you totally trusted the printer to...?

ER: Yeah.

CC: Is it, like it's a total delegation at some point.

ER: Yeah, yeah.

CC: Basically, it's how language starts to play such an important role in your work --

ER: Yeah.

CC: -- because "Make it loud" could almost be a painting. [Laughing]

ER: Yeah, I liked the idea that I would not poison the product with so-called aesthetic ideas, and the idea that it would be done almost mechanically by somebody who didn't think about aesthetics, they only thought about message making.

CC: Exactly, and how, basically, is it going to convince people almost from the street to come as they would come for a car sale or whatever.

ER: Yeah. Yeah.

CC: And one thing -- if we look at the list of the artists, what I think is interesting in that, that show -- which, of course, I haven't seen that -- people come from very diverse backgrounds. I mean, you have people from New York -- you have [Jim Dine](#), which at the time he's kind of more happening, related; [Roy Lichtenstein](#); [Andy Warhol](#) -- it's very kind of early for him, and he was going to do the show at the Ferus Gallery and then going to talk about that, I believe, the same year. You have two artists, I think, from Detroit, Robert Dowd and Phillip Hefferton, which --

ER: That's right.

CC: -- are less known today, and maybe were more related to abstract expressionism. And you have two school friends from LA, both from, coming from Oklahoma City, [Joe Goode](#) and yourself. So you have this kind of diversity

of, you know, of background and people coming with, I think, very different intents and ideas.

ER: Yeah.

CC: Did you feel that was a group? That was people you knew at the time, or...? I mean, I'm sure you maybe knew better the New York artists. I mean, how... Did you think that this first constellation, did it capture something, a natural relationship existing, or it was something more random?

ER: Well, as the art movement itself settled, the artist lineup changed quite a bit, and the phenomenon of pop art became truly a New York phenomenon.

CC: Yeah. And the following year -- you mentioned Lawrence Alloway; he does *Six Painters and the Objects*. And you have Dine, you have Lichtenstein, you have Warhol.

ER: There's no Rosenquist in there.

CC: But he adds [Jasper] [Johns](#), [Rauschenberg](#), and [Rosenquist](#) --

ER: Yeah.

CC: -- and doesn't show your work, or... [Laughing] You know, it becomes a very New York phenomenon.

ER: Yes.

CC: Now, how did you feel about that? Because I know there was this East/West Coast -- not war, but at least discussion going on.

ER: Yeah. There was a... In the art world there was a rivalry, I guess you could say, almost a rivalry between these centers of art, like New York and Los Angeles, and it seemed like all the publicity was easily made in the publicity center of the

world, which was New York. And so an artist that lived here had an advantage, in that respect, to be noticed, or be part of this thing. And so in the beginning I was not really, I was not part of that, because I didn't live here. And so it was an issue. Now, this curating of this was done strictly by Walter Hopps, kind of almost in advance of... It was in advance of the known movement of the time -- I mean, you had these artists that were using recognizable images and objects, like Rosenquist and several other artists. [Tom Wesselmann](#) was one. And there are other artists that are not included in this. And that was strictly from the curatorial decision of Walter Hopps. And I think he knew a lot about maybe a lot of these artists, and -- but, as I say, the pop art phenomenon had not hit the world when this was done.

CC: Walter Hopps will have a quite important role in your own career in the '60s, because Walter Hopps is one of the cofounders of the Ferus Gallery --

ER: Yeah.

CC: -- in '57, just one year after you move to Los Angeles. And he did that with [Ed] [Kienholz](#), who's going to step aside pretty quickly to concentrate on his own work, and being replaced by Irving Blum and Bob Alexander at the time. And the Ferus Gallery is your first gallery. They show your work in '63, '64, I think, and in '65. So it's every year, and it's really a gallery which shows a lot of LA artists -- I mean, from [Wallace Berman](#) to [Robert Irwin](#), who was teaching at Chouinard, the school you attended, and [Larry Bell](#), and so on. Could you just tell us a little bit about both your relationship to, relationship to Walter Hopps, and what was the Ferus Gallery back then in '63?

ER: Yeah.

CC: What did it represent, both in terms of space and in terms of for young artists to be able to show in a place which, you know, gave one of the first like solo shows, not as a commercial artist but Andy Warhol or something like that?

ER: Yeah. It was... Well yes, the Ferus did have the first Andy Warhol exhibit, but before that they were, like I say, progressive thinkers, and, and so they introduced Los Angeles to artists like [Giorgio Morandi](#), and [Kurt Schwitters](#), and Jasper Johns. And nobody really... The world didn't know about these artists. It's strange. I mean, Morandi was well known, but not to people in Los Angeles, and it was not popularized. But the artists knew about Kurt Schwitters, and they knew about Jasper Johns and Rauschenberg and people like that. But it was a very small world then. But Ferus Gallery had -- they had a collection, a stable of artists that involved [Billy Al Bengston](#) and John Altoon, [Ed Moses](#), Wallace Berman, [Craig Kauffman](#), Ed Moses, and Larry Bell, and a number -- [Llyn Foulkes](#). And they seemed to be like the tough, young roughnecks of the art world, [01:15:00] and they were perceived that way, too, and so there was... So there was always lots of fun at all the openings. And they had Monday evening openings. And the other galleries were stuffy by comparison, and so Ferus was the hot gallery, and everyone was really interested in what was happening at Ferus Gallery. Later on, there became -- it became a little more diverse. Nicholas Wilder opened the gallery, and he introduced everyone to Bruce Nauman and [Ron Davis](#) and [Agnes Martin](#) and various other artists. And so -- but Ferus was still sort of the leader. Now, all that didn't last very long; it maybe lasted eight or ten years or something like that.

CC: I think it -- yeah, I think it closed in '66 and started in '57, yeah.

ER: Yeah. But Walter...Irving Blum, who was sort of forward thinking about having choice exhibits by these artists, he came later, but Walter had the original thoughts about things, and he was the egghead, knowledgeable erudite of the art world, and that included lots of artists. And he had a very unique way of looking at things, and he was not only interested in famous artists. He was interested in very obscure artists. So he gave the same respect to somebody who chose not to even show their work, and he had great respect for these, these artists, which gained my respect of him. So he was especially important to my development.

CC: Mm-hmm. How did you meet him? Is it through [Bob Irwin](#), or it...? You know, how did it...?

ER: Bob Irwin was another artist that was a part of the Ferus.

CC: And he was teaching at the school you attended, as well.

ER: Yeah, he taught at Chouinard Art Institute, yeah. He taught watercolor and painting, and I think -- yeah, Irwin knew Walter Hopps. And I can't exactly say where I originally met Walter, but we always called him Chico, too. He had that nickname, Chico Hopps. And...

CC: Is it through him that maybe the, for you and other artists, that the role of Marcel Duchamp became clearer or took like another place in that moment of time?

ER: Yeah, he... We knew about Marcel Duchamp and knew there was something vital there in discovering this man's work, and Walter was a champion of his, and the fact that he was doing this... We also liked Duchamp's idea of quitting making art at age twenty-five or something. That was a great... It seemed like everyone respected him for that. And it was a very bold and radical thing to do, to say, "I'm not going to make art anymore and live my life a different way." And so he became like a hero to lots of artists, lots of artists everywhere in the world, maybe for that reason. [Laughing] But he also had these really strange investigations into the world and how it ticks.

CC: What do you mean, how it ticks?

ER: You know, almost like how a watch ticks, what makes a watch tick.

CC: Oh, OK, mm-hmm.

ER: And it seemed like Duchamp had an inside line on how this happens, and how vision is part of our lives, and so he was very important to me and a lot of my friends to find out how this Frenchman made his work and how he investigated

things. He was like a scientist almost, instead of just a painter with paint all over his pants. [Laughter]

CC: And there is something which is very connected, at least physically, to the Ferus Gallery is the magazine *Artforum*, [01:20:01] because when they moved from San Francisco to LA, if I read it correctly, they moved just about the Ferus Gallery, and that's a magazine which will play an important role for you. And again, here we are like in '65, but you're still working a little bit both on the more like more traditional art field, but at the same time still doing some commercial job, you know, working for an ad agency. And quickly you're going to become in charge of the layout of the magazine. Could you talk a little bit about that, about how suddenly you are in LA, you're doing your first show, and you become suddenly at the center of this very much New York based, even if it's not physically in New York, magazine, and being responsible to turn this object, which is to turn a magazine about art, something which is an artwork itself in some way.

ER: Yeah. I had reservations about the importance of this so-called art magazine called *Artforum*, but I looked at it, and it seemed to be -- it had a particular stance about how they believed in the world of art. And it, like you say, it originated in San Francisco. Some people think that I, mistakenly think that I designed the format of this thing, but I --

CC: Yeah, I've heard that a few times. [Laughing]

ER: -- I didn't, I didn't do that. It was designed by somebody in San Francisco, and the format and the typography and the approach to making these monthly publications were decided early on in San Francisco. And then when it moved to Los Angeles, I had been -- I had designed some books for other people as a, you know, way to make a living.

CC: Sure.

ER: I was doing sign painting, and also I worked with typography, so this... I knew Philip Leider, who was the --

CC: Who was one of the founding editors, or the founding editor.

ER: -- he was one of the founding people, yeah, and Charles Cowles actually was the publisher of this. I think he ended up buying them, the magazine. And so they worked side by side in this little office upstairs from Ferus Gallery, and they offered me this job to produce the book once a month. And so I would just take all the photographs and all the type, the galley proofs, and I would cut them up with scissors and I would paste them down. They don't do that today, but that was my job, and I could work maybe three, four days every month, and kind of more or less keep myself alive. [Laughter] So...

CC: But at the same time, you turn it into something quite creative, because you started like -- as we saw with the "Rejected by the Library of Congress" ad, you used it as a platform to insert something which is going to, may be called like an art intervention. I mean, one of them, which is one of the most famous, is *Ed Ruscha Says Goodbye to College Joys*¹. [Laughing]

ER: Oh, yeah.

CC: It's a full page!

ER: Yeah.

CC: I mean, today in *Artforum* a full page would be almost impossible for an artist to pay for. Could you say a little bit about how -- talk a little bit about how you used the magazine as a place where you could basically exist as an artist, as well, and specifically about that ad, too? Which I read different explanations, different interpretation of that.

¹ Art Forum Magazine, Vol. no. January 1967

ER: Yeah. I don't think I would have made this ad if I had not worked for Artforum, and I ended up trading Charlie Cowles a work of art for a page in his magazine. And that's how this --

CC: So today it's not a very good deal. [Laughter]

ER: Yeah, not a good deal by today's standards. And this was a way of announcing that I was getting married, and so that... This one girl here is Helene Winer. You know her?

CC: No, I don't.

ER: She has the Metro Pictures [Gallery].

CC: Oh, yes, I should know her. Yeah, she did shows and that sort of thing. Absolutely.

ER: Yeah. And so we just concocted this thing, and Jerry McMillan took the photographs. He documented a lot of the art world in the '60s. And so it just, it became like a new form of farce. [Laughing]

CC: Sure. And that, I think brings the idea of humor and fun that the work, you know, I mean, cultivated really from the start.

ER: Yeah.

CC: Like it's not really showing your work or promoting your work, [Laughing] but it's something first very private -- you're getting married -- but at the same time it related to the art world directly.

ER: Yeah.

CC: And then another thing that, which is something which was, I'm sure, more commissioned, but at the same time allowed you to suddenly have this time a

very big presence in the magazine is when you designed in 1966 in September the cover for an issue focused on surrealism². And so here it's the work, as it was made, was a photograph. Basically the word surrealism, like bathing or soap or something like that. [Laughing]

ER: Yeah, that's soap, and colored lights under there. And I photographed this with a 4x5 Graflex camera, and I still have these little letters. They're made out of balsa wood and painted, and --

CC: [Laughing] Oh. Which relate to the books and the, you know, typeface, and a number, number of things that is in your work at the same time. So why you for the cover of surrealism? And I'd like us to talk a little bit about that relationship, which in a way makes a lot of sense.

ER: Yeah. Well, now is this the issue -- I mean, is this the surrealism issue?

CC: Exactly, yeah.

ER: Yeah. Because I believe I did all of the layouts and everything like that for this entire issue. And they -- I believe they had just asked me if I wanted to do the cover for it, and I thought, "Well, that's great, I'll do that." And I had that, the freedom pretty much to do whatever I wanted to do. And that's how this came about.

CC: And could you talk a bit about your relationship to surrealism? I mean, it's really a movement in time which explores the relationship between text and image. I mean, a number of your works seems to play around ideas which have appeared sometimes in the '10s, '20s, and '30s, if you think of [Magritte](#), if you think of [Max Ernst](#), and is there something which was conscious there, or...? Even like the reunion of two objects which don't seem to just make sense together, [Laughing] like this kind of reunion of opposites.

² Art Forum Magazine, Vol. 5, no. 1, September 1966, "Surrealism, Soaped and Scrubbed"

ER: Yeah.

CC: Is it something that you are thinking about, or is it something...?

ER: It was something that I was thinking about, but I felt like I was not as aligned with this surrealism as I was with the dada artists. I felt more like there was more... I learned more from the dada artists than I did from surrealists, so I didn't have a great connection to these, to these artists, but I was very curious what they were up to. And Magritte, some people think that my work comes out of Magritte, and I don't, I, I disagree in lots of ways, but I always liked his work, but I don't feel like I was that influenced by him, you know. I feel like I was more influenced from somebody like Duchamp.

CC: Mm-hmm, or [Francis] [Picabia](#), people like --

ER: Or Picabia, or people like that. And -- or [Johannes Baargeld](#), who I... In 1961 I came here to the Museum and asked to see a work that he had done, and so they took me to the basement and gave me sort of a private view of this little watercolor ink drawing called [Beetles \[Untitled \(Beetles\); MoMA # 276.1937\]](#). I imagine that it's still in the collection.

CC: We should have brought it here today! [Laughter]

ER: Yeah, you should have brought it here today! Anyway, I felt very connected to that, more so than maybe the artists, you know, in the surrealist movement. But a lot of these artists were not hardcore to the movement. I think a lot of these artists sort of weave in and out and --

CC: Sure, absolutely.

ER: -- take their own routes, and --

CC: And Duchamp can be seen, or is seen by some as a surrealist himself --

ER: Yeah.

CC: -- even if he wasn't really part of the group itself, but he was really in and out of this group of artists.

ER: Yes.

[CREW DISCUSSION]

CC: So one thing I think which maybe reinforced that relationship between surrealism and your work is the fact that your first show in New York is at Alexander Iolas in '67. And Iolas is someone who was, I think, the exclusive representative of both Magritte and Ernst. So he had this very, you know, this kind of presence as someone who represented some of the key artists of the movement. Could you...? And that's, for me, a figure which always stayed quite mysterious to me. When you start showing with him in '67, and before joining Leo Castelli, I think in '73, you did a couple of shows with Iolas. Could you talk a little bit about him, the gallery, his relationship to your work? What did he find? What was the connection there?

ER: Well, I went through art school, and I -- and this was 1961 where I traveled to Europe, and -- for the first time -- and I took some paints with me, and so I made art while I was there, little, little works. And I was there for about maybe eight months, something like that, and I was more interested in the things that were happening in New York with the, I would say, Jasper Johns work and Rauschenberg, and the abstract expressionists, too.

CC: You mentioned somewhere that you saw like [Target with Four Faces](#) by Jasper Johns in a magazine, and that literally changed your life, decided to become --

ER: Yeah.

CC: -- [Laughing] not to become a commercial artist, but really to --

ER: Sure.

CC: -- to pursue like... What did you find in that image?

ER: It was something that was so shocking to me, that... And I suppose that I could say that it was beautiful, at the same time, that this very enigmatic image of a target with these faces, that it was a way of staging that had never been really presented to the public before. And you knew what easel painting was, and you knew what sketching was, and you knew what, you knew what so-called art was, but this thing that came along was like way out in left field. [Laughter] And so I was really struck by this thing. And it was a tiny little reproduction in a magazine, and I just felt like that, you know, I... I even went to my art teachers and said, "Hey, what about this guy?", you know, and they said, "No, you can't, you can't do a symmetrical picture like that. That's not, that's not art. You have to take it off. You have to twist it. You can't... That's nothing, that's just a gimmick." You know, that's the way they described it. And funny enough, these people that taught art in this way actually ended up imitating... [Laughing] You know, they took these elements that they supposedly hated and made use of them, but... And anyway, that's how that, that's how that came to me, and I just felt like this guy is a very forward thinking, an original artist, and --

CC: So did you meet Jasper at the time, or did you -- when you came -- you stayed in New York in '61?

ER: No, I didn't meet him then, but it was like maybe in the mid '60s, I think, I met him, when he worked at Gemini Publishers in Los Angeles. And, but I came back from Europe in maybe November or something, in October, November, '61, and I took my works over to Leo Castelli and showed him these little paintings that I had done.

CC: Which was Jasper Johns's gallery since 1958.

ER: Oh, Jasper's gallery. That's right, yeah, it was. And so he... You know, I sort of struck up a friendship with him, and he said, "Well, maybe someday we can do

something together,” and I, I liked that idea. And he showed me some other art -
- I didn't know about Andy Warhol or Roy Lichtenstein, and he showed me some
of their work, which was very surprising to me. And then I went back to
California, and worked out there for a while, [01:35:00] and I think it was through
Bill Copley, [William Copley](#), who early on I met. He came to California, and he
used to live there.

CC: He was a great friend of Duchamp, too.

[01:35:17]

ER: Yeah. And he actually had a gallery in California in the late 1940s. And I think
he's the first person that brought somebody like [Salvador Dali](#) and a lot of the
surrealists, and brought them to his gallery that he had in Beverly Hills. And so I
met Bill, and somehow he connected me with Alexander Iolas.

CC: Oh, that's where the connection between the surrealists... [Laughing]

ER: Yeah. Yeah. Bill's son was there last night, Billy Copley. And --

CC: I know the daughter, because he has a daughter, Claire Copley --

ER: Yes.

CC: -- with a gallery in Los Angeles.

ER: That's right. She had a gallery for years, and I'm not sure where she is today,
but...

CC: So how did you fit in Alexander Iolas's program? How did that...? Your first
show -- we have a drawing here which might have been included in that first
show in '67, if my memory's correct, as a gunpowder drawing. That's the first
show, I think, in '67. [[Wax, MoMA # 159.1978](#); [1984, MoMA #160.1978](#); [Self, MoMA #170.2004](#)]

ER: Yeah. Yeah, and I had done these drawings of words, mostly in a technique that suggested that they were, these words were like made out of ribbons or paper, tape. And so I was doing these --

CC: Using gunpowder, is that correct?

ER: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

CC: Yeah. So why did you use gunpowder? I mean, did the material have some kind of specific meaning, coming out of, you know, a gun or bullet, or is it purely something which allowed you to achieve something that you couldn't achieve with traditional materials?

ER: The latter [Laughter] of your description, yeah. I was using graphite, powdered graphite, and it was very smooth and velvety kind of --

CC: And I think [Smash](#) [MoMA # 119.2000] is done in graphite, mm-hmm.

ER: I think so, yeah. And that was very velvety and smooth, and difficult to work with. I had, for some reason, had a, had a little box of gunpowder, and, I mean, I knew that this was made with charcoal and sulfur and salt, and so I just thought, well, charcoal, I'm going to try this. And it was in little pellets, so I tried soaking it in water, and it dissolved the salts out, but it left a charcoal that had a kind of a warm tone to it, and it could be used in a way that was very easy to correct when you wanted to -- if you made a mistake you could correct it much easier than you could if you used graphite. And so it became a convenient material, and a material that I liked. It had a good surface to it. So pictorially, I liked working with it.

CC: And how -- you know, and you mentioned that it's really, as often in your work, it was a series of work that you made, and sometimes they're almost identical in size. They can very much look alike, because the way to represent them is similar, but the words change. And you know, we have, I think, three drawings --

you know, the “gunpowder” drawing in the collection, which is [Self \[MoMA # 170.2004\]](#), the one we have here, but we have [1984 \[MoMA #159.1978\]](#), and I think we have [Wax \[MoMA #159.1978\]](#). How does --

ER: Wax, uh huh.

CC: Am I correct? I hope I’m correct, but I think I am.

ER: Yeah.

CC: How do those words interrelate in a series? And that’s something I could ask you for, you know, a painting series, the interjection or something. You have all those words, which are -- and that you apply to them kind of the same treatment.

ER: Mm-hmm. You might say I was on a roll, or I was... I had a motion behind me that I liked making these things, and that I was investigating at the same time my attraction to words and how they became important to me. [01:40:04] And so these were like steps to that, to that eventual end, and I --

CC: So one word led to the other, or it’s something like you started with a list of words?

ER: Yeah, yeah, one led to the next, and I had no real procedure that I was following. There was no master plan, or there was no -- it was -- I was actually kind of directionless, you know, but I had certain attractions to these various words for whatever they meant, and also just for their -- you could say they’re for their beauty of what they look like when you make a graphic representation of them. So... And I had nervous hands, at the same time. [Laughter] So I felt like I had to make something, and it became habitual. You know, it became like a habit to me, that I would just sit and make these things. And I had, like I say, no master plan. I didn’t know where it was going to take me, but I knew that I had to keep doing them. [Laughing]

CC: One thing which related that process to -- you talked earlier about Jasper Johns, and one thing -- another artist, I think, which was very smart early on about Jasper Johns, [Bob Morris](#), Jasper really turned the image into an object, you know, whereas this kind of, you know... And in your work, sometimes you feel like the words become an image which become an object. There's this kind of constant play, you know, between those different dimensions. If I look at *Smash*, it's almost like a pattern or a painting which revolve. At first it's a word, "smash." *Smash* becomes an image, and that image becomes an object, and if you think even about the book covers that we have that you, those lithographs that you did in '69, and they just flowed. You know, to me the book becomes something else. Is there anything you want to say about that?

ER: Maybe it's just like a venture into how to be pictorial with a, with something I've already made, so it's a way of taking a subject that I've established for myself and doing something else with it.

CC: It's almost like layering, like this idea of like there's something which is, that you find, and you often say that you find it because it has no meaning or something, it has, you know -- it's almost empty, or it has this power of something which is not meaningful, which is very open, and it's... And after it just enter your work -- you know, if you think about the gasoline station, you did that book in '62, and maybe in '63 you make a large painting, you know, of the *Standard Station*, and --

ER: Yeah.

CC: -- in sixty-, I think, -six, if my memory's correct, you make that a print [[Standard Station, MoMA # 1386.1968](#); [Double Standard, MoMA # 295.2004](#); Mocha Standard, MoMA # 296.2004]. And what happened between the painting and the print is that the image stayed the same but the background changed.

ER: Yeah.

CC: You know, just kind of lights coming out of the painting, he has it more like, you know, sky, which is kind of [iris? 01:43:49] sky... So there's this kind of continuous process between technique and between the way of representing things.

ER: Yes. [Laughing] Uh...

CC: Could you maybe talk a little bit about maybe the relationship, you know, between that print and the painting? You know, you make this painting in '63, which kind of come out of that in some way, and a few years after you say, "Oh, I'm going to make a print." Where do you start? You have the same image, but what's the process in between?

ER: Whatever I happen to be interested in at the time is something that might come back and suggest something to me. So I began to look at these gas stations like boxes with signs on them, or any number of issues in my life as an artist. And so I -- [01:44:56] there was one particular gas station in here that was from Amarillo, Texas, that appealed to me, and I could see this as I began putting this together with things that I grew up with, like watching movies. And also watching the movie -- this is the one right here.

CC: Oh yeah, mm-hmm.

ER: And so --

CC: But that's a different shot.

ER: Yeah, different --

CC: So did you go back to the gasoline station to take another shot, or you--?

ER: No, no, but I, I began reflecting on this introduction in movies with the Twentieth Century Fox logo -- [[Trademark, MoMA #398.1999](#)]

- CC: Yes, the Trademark [*Trademark*, MoMA #398.1999], yeah, which is --
- ER: Yeah, the Trademark. [*Trademark*, MoMA #398.1999]
- CC: -- which is, you have the little collage [*Trademark*, MoMA #398.1999] , yeah.
- ER: Yeah. And that was also something that I remember as a kid watching movies, and I always loved that. And I also put that together with something else that came out of movies, which was that in a story where people move from, let's say, one city to another, they get on a train, and invariably the way to tell that cinematically is to have that train come from nowhere and go swoosh past you. And so that's what's happening here with this painting or this image, is that it's a draw back to those times when I watched movies, and I always liked that kind of cliché of a train coming from nowhere, lower right hand corner to upper left hand corner, where it -- and zooms in. And also the noise of the train itself comes from very quiet to very noisy on the left hand side, and then finally leaves the picture. So I felt like that was almost like a... That was kind of cosmic to me, and I felt like it was a... There was something sweet about it. It was a sweet spot in my thinking. And so I -- it was a matter of making it pictorial. And so I just charted it out on a canvas, and I reflected on that lower right hand to upper left hand format for several things that I did in my work. And that's one example of it, but the original one was a pretty good sized painting.
- CC: Absolutely. It's a large painting, yeah. And in '69 -- so you make that print in '66 [referring to [Standard Station, MoMA# 1386.1968](#)] -- you go back to that motif and you make, you know, other versions of that, and we have them just behind you. And here there are things, you know... First is you feel that the text standard play a different role, can be almost mute or louder, you know, and you have the [Double Standard \[MoMA # 295.2004\]](#) so the text become extremely big, and the image takes you almost in another meaning. And at the same time you have this olive in one of them, you know, like floating [[Cheese Mold Standard with Olive, MoMA #294.2004](#)]. [Laughing] So, you know, almost like, again, another layer in that image which almost belonged to you at that point, because

you've been playing with it or using it for now almost seven years, and almost integrate your work as part of -- just another part of your vocabulary.

ER: Yeah, and, you know, I attempt to understand this, and it's not meant to be understood, really. It's something that is... It's a selection of something that I had some personal connection to that I felt almost like a glass of milk and a stuffed olive, also. I like to --

CC: Oh, stuffed, you're right. I forgot. [Laughter]

ER: Had to be stuffed! And so it was a way of somehow antagonizing or disrupting the central idea, and putting it in there as a almost like an act of defiance, but also something that is realistic enough to be perceived and understood to be a stuffed olive. And -- but the -- it was important to emphatically put that thing in there.

CC: Could you speak a little bit about the process, the screen printing process?
[01:49:59] It's something you used a lot in your work. And of course it all started in a way -- I'm sure it didn't start actually there, but in the poster about the pop show we talked about, which is a screen print but you didn't print, but screen printing becomes something that you very much integrated into your practice. What was the attraction? Was it just kind of like the fact that this technique kind of belonged to a more, usually a more sometimes commercial field? Or is it like the making of screen print itself which interested you?

ER: Well, screen printing I picked up in school, and they had it in a fine arts class, so it wasn't... I mean, it was certainly in the world at large. It was a commercial, industrial technique of printing. But in school it was used as a way of -- you would take a silk screen and paint glue on it in various ways, and almost invariably we would make some kind of abstract image out of it. And it became a technique that was equally as good as etching or lithography, and it was an easy technique that was available to almost anyone. And so we started making these silk screen images, and then finally when I got around to this I decided that the

only way to do this was to be more precise about it and go to somebody who actually printed things like this. So I went to a man named Art Krebs --

CC: Who is the co-publisher of the image, too.

ER: Well, the publisher actually in this case was a woman named Sable.

CC: Oh, OK, I didn't know that.

ER: And she lived in Pennsylvania and had seen this image before, and she said, "Why don't you, why don't you make a print and I'll publish this?" Whatever publishing means. And so I went to a printer in Los Angeles that I knew, and he helped me break this thing down into different screen passes. And that's where it started. And I just felt like, well, this is a -- you know, you get something entirely different from a silk screen print than you would from an etching than you would from a lithograph. So I began to like that technique.

CC: And this image -- in fact, and I guess it's why it's so prominent here -- aside from the books, which entered, I think, the library of the Museum pretty quickly, that's the first work to enter the collection in 1968 [Standard Station, MoMA #1386.1968].

ER: Is that right?

CC: Yeah, this kind of thing. Did you know that at the time?

ER: I forgot. No, I wasn't really sure. I think I found out at one point or another.

CC: So it's really the founding piece of the collection that you have I know we're going to explore today. I think we should do a break now, because you should be hungry, and we have --

ER: OK.

CC: -- used all our time for this first session.

ER: OK.

[CREW DISCUSSION]

END AUDIO FILE Ruscha_T01

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[CREW DISCUSSION]

CC: So Ed, we are here with two paintings from the collection. [OOF](#) [\[MoMA#256.1988\]](#) is the first painting, acquired by the museum in 1988, and the painting was done around '62 sometime, '62, '63 according to the catalogue raisonné, and the painting behind me, [Tulsa Slut](#) [\[MoMA# 271.2002\]](#), is a painting from 2002. So fifty years between those two works, and I wanted to talk to you first --

ER: I don't see any progress. [Laughing]

CC: No progress? It's maybe no progress, but it's, it's a very different painting.

ER: Yeah.

CC: The technique is not the same. I mean, if you look at -- it's kind of striking that they have a lot in common, but at the same time they really move in... I mean, this painting is a move in a different direction. And the first thing which I think is very striking about [OOF](#) [\[MoMA#256.1988\]](#), that -- it's a very early painting by you. I mean, there are earlier paintings --there is *Boss* of 1961 -- but what I think impressed me is this kind of unfinished aspect of the painting. If you look at it, you see the paint mark.

ER: Mm-hmm.

CC: You see how this background, which is not really a background, you see the brushwork. It seems that the painting is in a stage of being realized, in many ways. Could you talk a little bit about that aspect of the very early painting that you, you made in the early '60s? Because this painting is, of course, not alone in that situation.

ER: I think if I had the option to make this color, these two -- let's, let's say there's two colors in this painting --

CC: Yes.

ER: -- if I had the option to make both of these colors absolutely flat and even and monotone, I wouldn't have wanted it that way. So the scrubbiness and all that, as, is, is really part of that picture. In a photograph of this painting, it might come close to making you think that, that the colors are solid and without any motion to it, but looking closer at this picture you can see that there's brushwork, and I prefer to have it that way.

CC: Could you talk a little bit about the series of, in which this painting take place, using like interjection, like those little words, and you have a number of paintings of about the same time which played on the same idea?

ER: I think with these, these paintings of this period here, I had, I had a notion to, that somehow they, they were integral with my, my books. And I felt like that my books had a -- my books certainly had a spine as, however thin that might be. And I -- and, and some of my paintings of this period also had that... I mean, they're, you know, say, that thick.

CC: Quite thick, yeah.

ER: And some of the paintings that I did of this period here, I continued the word, repeated the word around the side of the canvas. And, and so they were almost

like, like book covers. And maybe at the same time, whatever word I would use, like this, 'oof,' might be considered a title for a book. So I felt like I was in a world of possibly painting book titles.

CC: What will be the images in a book called *OOF*? [Laughter]

ER: That's good, that's good. I think I'd have to hire a writer to come up with something. [Laughter] But each one of these paintings that I did of this period here carried with it a little reminder that maybe I was, I was thinking of book, book titles and book covers, so... And that interchanged itself. So that was more or less...

CC: Could you talk a little bit about the scale? Because you talk about the book cover, turning the painting into an object, or the word into an object, to have this kind of very physical, you know, aspect of the work because of the brush and so on, but at the same time the scale is pretty large for the time, and even today.

ER: Yeah. Well, I mean, by today's standards I think this wouldn't be considered a, an extra large painting, but --

CC: It's still bigger than *Tulsa Slut* [MoMA #271.2002]. [Laughing]

ER: It's bigger than *Tulsa Slut* [MoMA #271.2002], yes. But I, I wanted something that had some heft to it, and, and at the same time I liked the idea of being able to handle that painting by myself, and reach around it --

CC: So it's [INAUDIBLE].

ER: -- and, and grab it. So that -- these paintings were mostly sized seventy-two inches high, sixty-seven inches wide, and I was able to move them around my studio like this without, without having to turn them around and handle from the back side. And, and so that kind of took me down a kind of way of arriving at a format, and, and it seems like I've done, I mean, most of my work, or very close

to being formatted where the proportion of the work would be almost constant and repeated. And so a lot of my paintings are this size like this, of this period.

CC: And what about the hanging of those works? I mean, when you see a work like that, as a curator, as such a graphic work in a way -- just like three letters on a blue background --

ER: Mm-hmm.

CC: -- you could think to show them pretty high, or should they... Or, but at the same time you mentioned how object-like they are. So, so is there a way to present them in the space which seemed to be better than, than another, at least from your perspective at the time? We have a tendency today to normalize a hanging and, you know...

ER: Yeah, I've, I've always felt like they're, these paintings are wall works. They're made to put on walls. And at the same time, they can be, they can be hung in various ways. I think that, you know, that this, this painting, or most of my paintings could even be hung way up in the air, and maybe even like tipped out from the wall like this.

CC: Well, like, like the old masters at the Louvre or, or, you know, when you see those giant paintings tipped down in order to better see them from there.

ER: Yeah. So I was never really against that, and... But, but painting the picture is, is one thing, and then finally then when it's finished it goes on a wall somewhere, and, and that's more or less up to the person who's hanging this work.
[00:10:00] So that's a world in itself.

CC: Absolutely. Could you talk a little bit about the word which was chosen? I mean, 'oof' is not really part of the, a traditional, you know, painting tradition. [Laughing] I'd say it's more something which come from cartoons, from where to mimic a sound.

ER: Yeah.

CC: So there is this- but at the same time it's an oil painting. It's very much a painting, and it's very much painted, and, you know, there, there is this kind of time, and there is this kind of -- that you feel in the work. So how do those two things collide, or...?

ER: I think I liked -- at that period I was, I liked words that were like monosyllabic, and they had almost a noise sound to them, which this definitely does. Now, this comes from when I was a kid and I would read cartoons, and getting punched in the stomach, you know. Somebody would always be punching someone else in the stomach, and the sound that came out was always 'oof.' And so that word was always... It was born to be captured in a painting, and, and the... The visual outlay of those letters and everything just made it perfect. And it also, to me it had a kind of motion to it with the -- the O's are like wheels in a way. And also I remember looking at this, studying this painting while I was doing it, is that I had a big mirror in my studio and I could spin that painting and it would make me dizzy, but fun to do. You know, I could spin it from the back, and [makes 'uhh' sound]! [Laughter] It had a motion to it that I liked.

CC: The font that you use, it's something that you came up by yourself, or it is something... I mean, if you look at the *F*, you talk about the *O*, which really look like a wheel, but the *F* is a, seems to be like -- you know, you see how it's built. It's --

ER: Yeah.

CC: -- very thick, it's very...

ER: It's almost like a non-font, or a very mechanically drawn thing. You draw it with a compass and straight lines, and, and I liked that aspect of it. I thought that that was a very pure occurrence to be able to have those three letters together that could be done very mechanically, and I liked it in this case.

CC: Words, language, seems to -- or sometimes title -- always play an important role in your paintings, I think really from the start up to, up to today. There's another painting that we have in the collection, which is not with us today, which was done a few years after *OOF* [MoMA #271.2002] in, I think, 1967 called [Rancho](#) [MoMA#367.2006].

ER: Oh, OK.

CC: And this one, it's, it's kind of a word painted, [Laughing] but in a very, very different way, because it's a liquid word.

ER: Yeah.

CC: And could you talk a little bit about how, what happened between those two things? Not that you haven't done that again afterward, but what the difference in how we perceive the work?

ER: I think every artist goes through a period of having, maybe being disenchanted or finished, or resolved with a certain kind of direction, and then finally something else takes over, and in this case I felt like maybe the commitment to a word could still be part of the picture, but it would be a different way of handling it. And I, I began to see liquids as maybe something to study and apply to the, to the same principles as, as these earlier paintings, except that they had a very irregular and sort of anamorphic or amorphic handling. And, and so I liked the idea of trying to illustrate that, and yet still have them be part of the same story.

CC: And how did you...? Because in a way -- how did you decide of a final shape to give to those words? Did you actually try to, to write the word, you know, with using like any like liquid, or any -- either like an experimental phase in those which led you to find the right way to represent those words in such a way?

ER: Yeah, you know, I used maple syrup.

CC: Oh, wow, which would be thicker than water.

ER: Because it was thicker than water. And I tried, you know, pouring this out into some shape, but with *Rancho* I think it -- I was thinking along that line, but eventually I ended up just kind of drawing it out so that I, I would let my mind wander and imagine what it would be like if the liquid would sort of go off on its own, its own little trail and create these, these words.

CC: What, what is in your mind when you actually paint those paintings? Does the word play a role? Is it like the word 'rancho,' 'oof' something that plays a role, let's say, when you paint, you know, two paintings in a similar way with two different words, you know.

ER: Well, yeah.

CC: How's it different for you?

ER: 'Oof' and 'rancho,' yeah, they're from two different worlds, like you say, and one is from this guttural, almost like a noise rather than a word, and the other one is, is not so much like a word as it is of some strange shape coming from another planet. [Laughing]

CC: The third painting we have with us was done a few years later, and it's much closer to us in many ways, *Tulsa Slut* [MoMA#256.1988], which was done in 2002 -- in fact, acquired by the museum in the same year. And again, it was part of this series of paintings. One thing which is different from *Rancho* [MoMA#367.2006] and *OOF* [MoMA#256.1988] is the technique, like suddenly it's acrylic paint and not oil paint. When did you make the transition, or is it something that you still go to at some point? What did you, you know, what was for you the moment when you felt oil painting, you know, could be replaced in certain situations by acrylic?

ER: Well first of all, I think that even work that I do right now today is somehow connected to this old stuff that, that initially came about and, and, and all these little factors that happen in a work that old still take place today, and they may not

look alike but they have some kind of little silver thread between the two. And, and so I'm not sure how different these things are from one another.

CC: And maybe they're not that different, but in a way they just exist in the space, not, not precisely in the same fashion. One of the things is like the word itself -- actually two words, *Tulsa Slut* [MoMA#367.2006]-- and it's a palindrome, so something you can read from both sides. And in a way that kind of relates to, you could say, to the liquid words, because both kind of relate to -- we talk about surrealism, you know, in a way is to basically engage the mind in a much more random or loose way, and *Tulsa Slut* [MoMA#367.2006] is one of those strange words where, you know, you just don't know exactly from which direction to read them. So what brought you to suddenly make a series of work on palindromes, which is much more like poetic, or something which is much more literary aspect of language than 'oof,' which, you know...

ER: Yeah, yeah. 'Oof' is almost like one dimensional, whereas these things have -- palindromes have another little story behind them. And they, they actually shouldn't have any story, because all they are is a bunch of letters that happen to transpose and read the same in either direction. So in one respect, palindromes are simply nonsense. You know, they don't mean anything except that they happen to be part of the English language, and they do make up parts of words or words reversed in the same, both directions.

CC: Did you invent that palindrome, or did you find it?

ER: No, it's an existing... I think -- and I'm sure that someone has, maybe with the aid of a computer, found every possible --

CC: Mm-hmm, palindrome.

ER: -- palindrome that exists, and I don't know, but... I've, I've come across a few that I, that I, that I think that I've never seen before, but then a lot of these are very, very well known, and I think this is one of them.

CC: And when did you start being interested in palindromes? It's something that you, even in the '60s where it was in your mind, it's something that allowed you to basically open your practice to a different...

ER: Maybe it was -- I sort of tripped across them, actually, and I, I felt like it was a, it was just another kind of word usage that seemed to have its, literally its own language, [Laughing] and that I could just see these as some, some kind of reflection on these things, and that they would have a more or less power of their own.

CC: Could you talk a little bit now about the relationship between the words and what seems to be, in that case, more of the background, which is this kind of mountain, which is itself presented almost in a mural-like image, absolutely symmetrical.

ER: Yeah.

CC: When those two things came together, and what was for you the -- what drew you to bring them together?

ER: I've always found that the drama and the glory of a mountain is so acceptable as a some kind of metaphor for glory, or beauty, or something. Anyway, it makes a fabulous kind of backdrop or stage setting for something else, and then this something else in this case happens to be these words here. And so I, I, I fixated on mountains because I felt like they had -- they brought some kind of musical flavor to the picture, and that you can almost hear trumpets blaring. They just happen to be -- they're hidden behind the mountains. And, or I've always liked an image or a symbol that you can depict or paint and then imagine bright lights behind them. And so the bright lights or the trumpets are something that are suggested in these images of mountains, and I'm not, not painting a mountain simply because it's there, but I'm painting an, like an idea of a mountain. So I'm not really painting mountains, I'm painting ideas of mountains. And those can, can come about through any number of sources. I mean, they can be cobbled together. They can be invented. They can be anything, so it's not, it's not really

that important. But then I began to look at the optics of portions of these mountains, and I like the mirror image of them, that they would make such an odd kind of, have an odd pictorial presence. And I think that's where pictures like this exist.

CC: And at the same time, when you say it's an odd presence, but it's a very sexualized representation, the mirroring -- the effect of the words on the background.

ER: Yeah, and -- well, they have a, they have a way of grabbing you, and then also being in the background at the same time. So they're both in foreground and background. They've got that kind of life, and that's why I've...

CC: For some paintings in that series, you use a stretcher which is not purely rectangular. It seemed that the sides are curved. Could you talk about...? Was it a way to reinforce that kind of optical illusion, or...? It's kind of unusual in your work to have a canvas which is not a square or a rectangle.

ER: Yeah. Well, I made a few pictures using a format that had bulging sides on them, so I like the idea of the thing like being overfed or overstuffed, and top and bottom are flat. This is not one of those paintings, but I did some that had slightly curved, where you would look at it and almost have to look twice or three times to notice that it is actually a curved side. And it's got -- I don't know, there's something tongue in cheek about it that says, "I've got more picture than you think I am." [Laughter]

CC: Could you talk a little bit about some other paintings of that series and how they relate? Are the palindromes part of the same group or, you know, how... Did, like in your books, did one painting lead to the other, or it was more like a definitive number of paintings that you decided to create?

ER: All these palindrome paintings have this split, split vision on this, that where the images like that... And so just experimenting with them, with either photographs or drawings, and watching what can happen, the funny things that happen, the

amusing things that happen when you make, when you open something up and present it like that, with a symmetrical view, and the idea of symmetry like that, and it's almost like in a sense it's comic symmetry. And each one is going to have its own personality is what I liked about it, that they're not simply repetitions, they're -- they all come, emerge from the same idea, but they've -- each one has its own kind of amusement. And for a good spell of time it kept me amused.

CC: And what is your relationship to language today? What amuses you in language? Because you move from very different forms of language that you use into your painting. Sometimes it's sentences, sometimes it's quotations, you know. You have over the years looked at really a very broad array of form of language as the material for your work.

ER: Yeah, I've done, I've done quotations before and, where I wanted to highlight something, but then finally it comes down to selecting things and being inspired by things that sometimes lead you down strange roads. Sometimes they're non sequiturs. Sometimes they're odd, odd versions, odd word combinations that have just something, some kind of strength to them before they even get thought about by me, or before they even think about getting illustrated by me they have to have some sort of power or some strangeness to them for me to get on board.
[Laughing]

CC: There is a series of work which, I think it was defined by you in different mediums -- prints, drawings, and paintings -- which basically look at maps and intersection of streets, mostly of Los Angeles, and you have like -- suddenly it's a way to have this kind of -- it's like you're looking at a map and you keep the names of the street or the boulevard and their intersection, and it's called, let's say, Sunset and I don't know what. Is it something which...? [[Sunset and Gardner, MoMA # 148.1999](#); [Vine/Melrose MoMA# 450.1991.1](#)] How did this painting come to be, that you're driving your car in Los Angeles and being at an intersection and saying that could -- a way of looking at those words in a different way?

- ER: Yeah, I call those paintings metro plots, and to me they were more like investigations of almost like being up in the air looking down, looking down on something, or looking at something on a tabletop, or taking an oblique view of something. I've always liked that angle.
- CC: This was going back to parking lots.
- ER: And it goes back to parking lots [*Thirty-four Parking Lots* MoMA # 710-2011], too. And a lot of those... You get an advantage of being able to look at something through eyes that don't necess[arily] - don't usually get that same view. I mean, you usually see things from something straight on, like this, and I like the idea of raising up, almost like a movie in some respects with, where the camera moves up and looks down onto something. And so the diminishing lines and the perspective of things, and then, and then when they remind me of streets in the city, especially Los Angeles, then I feel like maybe I'm tracing something that is almost medieval in a way. You know, it like... It reminds me at one time that... I mean, you could think about it in many different ways. You could think about it, "Well, where are the buildings in these pictures?"
- CC: Absolutely.
- ER: I see the street names, but where are the buildings? And... And they could almost be thought of as, well, after the holocaust or after [Laughing] -- somewhere down the line in our very deep future, we'll still have -- there'll still be a Sunset Boulevard, and there'll still be a Vine Street, and there'll still be these various streets that I'm very familiar with today because I live there, and so they, they kind of mark a, some kind of memory... They trigger something in me that makes me want to somehow glorify them or make them official.
- CC: Mm-hmm. And it is something which was already at play when you did this book which we didn't talk, in fact, about earlier, which is the *Sunset Strip* [[Every Building on the Sunset Strip, MoMA #708.2011](#)] that you did in '66, which was really a way to archive that street and to say, "Oh yeah, all the buildings on the Sunset, like if it would, it could disappear."

ER: Yeah. Well, when I, when I did this -- 1965 is when I first started working on that -- I think I published that in '66 --

CC: Sixty-six, yeah.

ER: -- and the book covers basically two and a half miles of that Sunset Boulevard, which is like twenty-seven miles long. And I photographed all twenty-seven miles, and I felt like it should be something that was recorded with no prejudice, and recorded with no agenda, and no moral or no principle. I mean, it's just like copying something for what it is, and everything along the way falls into place and is being systematically captured. So it's like capturing something that maybe hasn't been captured before, and there's an evolution to the city, which I, which I'm concerned about, that I... It becomes like food for thought, and at the same time something that must be recorded. So I've recorded -- I mean, actually I've photographed, again, Sunset Boulevard last year, so that was like fifty-something years later. I like the idea of seeing what something looked like back then, what it looks like today.

CC: And are you going to publish it in the same way, or...?

ER: I don't know. It is, actually, a work in progress, so...

[CREW DISCUSSION]

ER: Oh, yeah. So the Sunset Boulevard, like many streets in Los Angeles that I've photographed, are really -- it's all a work in progress, and I'm just doing the capture first, and sometimes -- you know, when I'm a hundred years old I'll do something with it. [Laughter]

CC: You mentioned earlier like for this painting or other works this kind of cinematic impulse or interest you have in many, many different ways, I think really from the start to today, and we have a painting in the collection which literally captured that, which is [The End \[MoMA # 109.2002\]](#), that we have with us today, as well.

That painting was done in between those two works, in the early '90s -- '91 if my memory is correct -- and, I mean, it's a painting which is different in many ways of all the work that you have done. One of them is that it combines different techniques: it's both a painting and a drawing, because it has this kind of graphite addition on them. So could you talk a little bit about how this painting was realized and how you kind of suddenly had to invent some kind of ways to make it like in between a painting and a drawing almost?

ER: This painting here that you're speaking of is, gets into the mechanics of filmmaking, and so what we have here is a peculiarity that people won't understand in future years, and I realize that today, and so I always think about these paintings as having, having scratches on the film. And, and watching film that has scratches on it, I always liked that. That's just a technique that -- it's actually a mistake, and, and people prefer not to have scratches on the film. They prefer not to have these little things that pop on the screen like that, but I always liked that. Even, even when you're watching a movie that has a story that you're following, is that -- and also you have that oddity sometimes where a film in the, in the gate of the projector will freeze or stagger, and you see the top part of one and the bottom part of another, and I like, I like illustrating that. I like repeating that, and telling it like it really is, but then at the same time I realize that people in the future will not understand what I was after. That's one example of something that's going to eventually -- they'll clean up things like that. There won't be such a thing as scratches on the film. There'll be a good part of the world that'll never understand what that is.

CC: And I think a lot of people won't understand -- I mean, it's rare today for a film to end with [The End](#) [MoMA # 109.2002].

ER: Mm-hmm.

CC: [Laughing] That's really something from the past, where you had to basically tell the audience that it was the end. [Laughter] That's something else which could be a little bit harder for people to understand, to focus on the end. Is it like something that... I think you did a series of those, always with the same words.

- ER: Mm-hmm, yeah. Sometimes they'd be done with different letter forms, but they would often be done like this with this like old English kind of tattoo writing, and it's -- it held some appeal to me that I just found myself using, and I liked it.
- CC: So every form here is invented, or is it something that you actually appropriated from a film that you saw?
- ER: Well, this is a font, you could call it, from -- you know, what do they call it, Old English or Cloister? Cloister writing? It comes from -- you know, the gesture of it comes from carving in stone or marble, and -- with a tool -- and so in history, this is one of the oldest letter forms. And it just -- I felt like maybe it makes the picture come alive. [00:39:58]
- CC: It's interesting how you work, always like kind of circle around the idea of film, and you made, in fact, very few films. You have this what you told me was an unfinished project called *Books*, where someone just -- Mason Williams just opened every book you had done at the time, *Premium* and *Miracle*. It is a medium that you'd like to re-explore at some point? You use it in a very short window of time, like a few years. What was for you the advantage and the disadvantage of the medium, or is it something which can still play a role in the future?
- ER: I don't know where that's going to take me, but I always felt like I wanted to make some kind of film just to do it, and then the question was always, well, what can I do it of, and where is it going to start? And I felt like I needed an excuse to make a film, so these stories came about in my, in my head, or I would borrow a story from my friend Mason Williams, and let that be the trigger to do something like this. And then the process of filmmaking is a tough one, in that sense, because it takes cooperation from so many people, and something that I'm not always willing to engage in. It'd be great if you could make a film by yourself, do everything, but unfortunately it doesn't work that way, and... But I always have a

thought in the back of my mind that maybe, maybe I will sometime in the future do another film.

CC: I think one of the interesting aspects of film today is that it became much more user friendly. I mean, film is not linked anymore to even like machine or a certain skill. Even the editing process is something which is, which was much more democratized over the years, a bit like a book, and that's something I wanted to ask you, too. Like you've been making quite a lot of books, and have been painting books and drawing books and using them as subjects and things that... Where do you see books going in the coming years? I mean, are we still printing books? What are their role in a world which becomes much more digital?

ER: Yeah, it causes you to speculate about the very thing that you're asking -- I mean, where is this going? And how about these paper leaves that you turn over like this?

CC: Exactly.

ER: I mean, is this going to be a form of education in the future? Is this going to be any form of anything, or will it just really become obsolete because there'll be too many novel ways to look at things on a digital screen or something that will eliminate people's desire to actually make a book? So I'm always pondering that, pondering the future in that way, that I'm not only pondering how a painting like *Scratches on The Film* will be a non-issue not too long from now, and that at the same time the idea of a book might be a little curiosity in fifty years. People will say, "Oh, you see, it just had these paper pages that turned like this."
[Laughter]

CC: Yeah, you'll need like a set of instruction in order for people to handle a book. I think your work did a great deal for people to still love books, and I can't for the, in the future year to see how you'll come up with new ideas and new ways to integrate books not only in art but in our daily life. So thank you so much for being with us.

ER: All right.

CC: Thank you.

[CREW DISCUSSION]

END AUDIO FILE Ruscha_T03

BEGIN AUDIO FILE Ruscha_T05

CC: We have one drawing in the collection, [Spread \[MoMA # 594.20006.a-b\]](#), that you made in 1972, and which was shown in the Documenta in Kassel that year, which relate in many ways to the paintings that you made both in terms of scale - it's a very large drawing -- and the fact that this is really a drawing almost as an object, because it's written spread front and back, and on the back it's written in reverse. So in a way it relates even to a work like *Tulsa Slut* [MoMA #271.2002]. Could you talk a little bit about that drawing, and its inscription in the Documenta of Kassel in '72?

ER: Yeah, that work was done on a large sheet of paper, maybe ten feet long and four and a half, five feet high, and it was done with chewing tobacco, so the chewing tobacco was actually rubbed onto the paper. And I liked the idea that it would suggest that this chewing tobacco would somehow bleach its way or migrate its way through this image and go on to the back side; you walk around the back side and you would see the word in reverse, except that it was done in reverse and done in the forward position, too. So I think it's the only work I've done where it's front and back, and...

CC: And how was it installed?

ER: It was installed at the Documenta, 1972, I believe, and it was suspended in the middle of a room, so you just had this single sheet of paper that was running down the middle of the room, or the space that I was in. And it had little grommet

holes along the top side, and the bottom side, too, and they were strung up with monofilament.

CC: So there was no glass, no glazing, no protection at all.

ER: No glazing, no glazing. And so there was a slight ripple to the paper. It was very thick paper.

CC: And how high was the drawing? It was like eyesight, or...?

ER: You looked up at it a little bit, and so almost the way you would, may hang a painting, but so this sheet of paper is like piercing the space, so to speak. And it - but it was suspended with this monofilament, nylon string, and it was from the bottom, too, to make it, to give it some kind of strength and flatness. And I felt it was a very odd thing, but a successful thing at the same time.

CC: And did you tell me that Ed Kienholz was part of the hanging of that drawing?

ER: Yeah, he was there at the, at the same time, and he did this work with automobiles, and it was a racially charged thing that is now at the LA County Museum, and he happened to be there at the time, and he said, "What are you doing?" And I said, "Well, I'm trying to hang this thing." He says, "Oh, I'll help you. I'll help you." So he pitched right in and helped me do this.

CC: And how was the work selected for the show? Is it something that you suggested, or is it something which was picked by the curators, or...?

ER: Maybe I was in a kind of naïve position in my life where I thought, "Well, I want to reflect what it's like to spread out a sheet of paper," and so maybe Spread [MoMA # 20006.a-b] was... I was aping the gesture of a piece of paper being spread, and I think that had some relevance to the work itself.

CC: Absolutely. And did you see the viewers interact with the piece, or was some...? Like, I mean, today we own this drawing, but I think it's going -- it's always a

touch decision to, you know, how you're going to show it; are you going to protect it or not? So you need to put it directly on view like that.

ER: Yeah. I think it can still be seen in the original way that could actually be suspended with these lines that go up to the ceiling, and that it could be actually viewed that way and walked around and seen front and back, and it could live on.

CC: And it is a work which was always shown that way, or was it shown as well simply framed on a wall?

ER: I think that I've only showed it once, yeah.

CC: You only showed it once, OK.

ER: Yeah, at the *Documenta*.

CC: Great. So maybe we can cut there, and I'll have another question just that we'll add to the -- when I talk about *OOF* [MoMA#256.1988], there is just one mention that I didn't mention.

[CREW DISCUSSION]

CC: So I noticed in the *OOF* [MoMA#256.1988] paintings the two little hole on the upper part of the painting, and it seems to come from an early damage. Can you tell me a little bit, what happened this painting?

ER: This painting had a kind of a life history, and it was, it was in my studio for a few years, and then I lent it to a friend, who put it on his all in his living room, and I guess maybe didn't really hang it in a professional manner. It was kind of like just hanging by its reputation. [Laughter] And in front of the painting on the floor was a coffee table, and on the coffee table was a chess set with the men, the chess men were very pointed tips. All of the, all the pieces on the chess set had pointed tips, and somehow, some, sometime this painting fell off of the wall and down onto the, onto the chess set. And I think what we have here is the

positioning of a queen and a king, maybe, or a bishop, and there's maybe two or three little repaired holes in this thing. If you look at it carefully enough you can see that, where it was. So it had a little disaster that it lived through.

CC: It seems like Marcel Duchamp couldn't have dreamt of a better [Laughing] --

ER: He would have done something different with it.

CC: -- better thing to happen to a painting. [Laughter] That's good.

[CREW DISCUSSION]

END OF INTERVIEW