A Case for Ruscha:
Conceptual Photography's Critical Dismantling of the Constructed Los Angeles

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The 1960s proved to be a tumultuous period of change in Los Angeles, as the glitz of golden age Hollywood faded and the grunge of Rock n' Roll emerged. Los Angeles, which had been considered a gleaming city on a hill by the public eye, began its societal descent into a wasteland of boomer angst and counter culture. This era of artistic turnover saw rise to many controversial art forms, few of which have maintained their controversy as much as the conceptual art movement. Conceptual art grew out of an idea that art should be assessed by the statement it makes, not the process which made it. As Sol Lewitt, a highly controversial conceptualist, puts it more colloquially, "in conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work … all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair."[1] Conceptualism was not a uniquely Los Angeles medium, but it found a home in a city ruled by disillusion. Sometimes called anti-humanist for its rejection of human expression being the precipice from which art emerged, conceptualism was critiqued for its lack of ideation, technical skill and meaning.[2] Antihumanist photography, specifically found a home in artistic rejection. German artists Bernd and Hilla Becher caused uproar with their 1957 series, *Wassertürme* which pictured a series of watertowers *(fig. 1)*.[3] The series offered nothing, except for bland, opinionless photos of watertowers. Although a great deal of conceptual photography raises questions of meaning or intention, Ed Ruscha's photographic works documenting Los Angeles deserve to be excluded from that particular critical dismissal. The label of anti-humanism and conceptualism have dampened the appreciation of Ruscha's commentary on Los Angeles. His documentary series are often wrongfully analyzed in a vacuum. The new Hollywood and changing perception of Los Angeles in the 60s proved to be a hub of conceptualism because the artistic response to the culture of the 50s required it. A city

[1] Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," Artforum 5, no. 10 (June 1967): 79.
[2] It was critiqued for endless other things, but brevity is an asset and I respect your time.
[3] Bernd Becher and Hilla Becher, *Water Towers (Wassertürme)* (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 1988).

defined by blockbuster movies and celebrity glamor could not be entirely critiqued by humanism. In Los Angeles, conceptualism was a response to the commercialization of art. As film and television became the most on-display example of humanist art, antihumanists challenged Hollywood's falsified artistic integrity with satirical demonstrations of reality. Conceptual photography is regularly brushed aside and sneered at by the art world for lacking the emotion and interpretive depth of expressionism. The value of antihumanist photography is often misconceived to be void of any profundity or artistic execution. Ed Ruscha's photographic work makes a case for the importance of banal, documentative photography. Ruscha's documentation and depiction of Los Angeles threatens the constructed image of Hollywood's mysticism and spectacle. There is an argument for the value of conceptual photography in the particular relationship between Ruscha and L.A., as only work as blunt and forward as his can effectively critique a city defined by the exploitation and commercialization of expressive art.

A key understanding when looking at conceptualist art is that it requires the viewer to assess it alongside its context. That is to say, humanist art can be understood from the art itself, whereas antihumanist art is often meant to be understood as an extension of what it comments on.[4] Conceptual art is often a comment on art itself, asking how we come to define something as art, and how we come to value it. Take for instance Marcel Duchamp's infamous *Fountain*, which questions the classification of art versus object *(fig. 2)*.[5] If we move beyond assessing conceptual photography for what it presents and how it presents it, and also consider the purpose of its existence and the context of its creation, its potential for artistic appreciation multiplies. Los Angeles conceptualism emerged in an upheaval of the city's preceding culture. As Katherine

[4] Julian Baggini, "Man and Other Beasts," New Humanist, Winter 2021, accessed December 18, 2025, https://newhumanist.org.uk/articles/2253/man-other-beasts

[5] Marcel Duchamp, Fountain (1917), readymade sculpture, photograph, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Doniak frames it, “Conceptual art emerged in the late 1960s in locations such as Los Angeles, California... drawing on state-specific aspects beyond the symbolic function of Hollywood. In these contexts, artists engaged with broader social, political, and cultural upheavals, aligning their work with the countercultural rejection of dominant art norms.”[6] With this understanding, the conceptual and anti-humanist photography of 1960s Los Angeles is not decidedly a reaction to 1950s Hollywood but rather an expansion on the emerging counter culture. How we choose to read images determines their interpreted meaning. To decide conceptual photography is purely documental and determine there is no significance to what it documents, shuts down interpretation, and reduces the genre to obsolete neutrality.

The argument that conceptual art, specifically documentative conceptual photography, is devalued by its neutrality is immediately negated by the impossibility of conceived neutrality. The sheer choice of the artist to document removes any objectivity of the subject. There is no shortage of this argument in discussion of Timothy O’Sullivans geological surveys *(fig. 3)*.[7] Despite his work being commissioned and documentative, O’Sullivan’s composition and interpretation of his subjects strips the work of any unopposable truth.[8] In the case of Ruscha, his distinction from O’Sullivan can be made in the nature of his documentation. O’Sullivan photographed in individual frames, where the subject or focal point of his work was always identifiable. In contrast, Ruscha’s photography had a lack of perspective (*Every Building on the Sunset Strip)* or an overwhelming literality (*Thirtyfour Parking Lots).* In his serial works like *Thirtyfour Parking Lots*, the bluntness of the work, which features, yes, thirty four parking lots,

[6] Doniak, Katherine M.
Feed Your Head: Conceptual Art and the American Counterculture. PhD diss., University of Nottingham, 2019.

[7] Timothy H. O’Sullivan, photographs from *Geological Exploration of the Fortieth Parallel*, led by Clarence King, 1867–1872, albumen silver prints, U.S. Geological Survey.

[8] Robin Earle Kelsey, Archive Style: Photographs and Illustrations for U.S. Surveys, 1850-1890 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007)

each one photographed with seemingly little thought or care about composition or aesthetic integrity, deterring those who prefer the oneness of each of O'Sullivan's photos. It is without question that O'Sullivan's documentations feel more like art than Ruscha's. But feeling alone cannot negate the lack of neutrality in Ruscha's series. The decisions Ruscha makes when creating these series: the *choice* of subject matter, breadth of survey, and the individual aesthetic qualities of each frame; create an opinion, regardless of whether the viewer understands it. Margaret Iverson notes in her paper "Disruption and Recursion: On Ruscha's Criticality," "the literature on Ruscha often comments on the artist's pose of indifference and the tonality of deadpan, especially evident in his series of books. Yet, since the late 1980s, this characterization has seemed inappropriate. Increasingly, observers have noticed a more critical posture and a more pessimistic tone."[9] Rarely can a case for neutrality be argued for anything categorized as art. Yet critics often assert this belief onto conceptual works. As Sarah Garland argues, "Ruscha's photobooks present the landscape in ways that make it difficult to locate clear affect– emphasizing distance and anti-subjectivity."[10] Ruscha documented profusely, and from his growing body of photographic work emerged an increasingly more defined opinion on his subjects. The recurring iconography in his photos– gas stations, parking lots, cars, signage, pools– build a narrative that refines as his collection grows, and as his persona becomes more associated with a Los Angeles sensibility. Despite the many years between the impetus of his work and mass critical celebration of it, the local Angeleno could likely understand the satire of his work at just a glance.

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[9] Margaret Iversen, "Disruption and Recursion: On Ruscha's Criticality," in Ed Ruscha's Streets of Los Angeles: Artist, Image, Archive, City, ed. Andrew Perchuk, Emily Pugh, and Zanna Gilbert, with Tracy Stuber and Isabel Frampton Wade (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2025), https://www.getty.edu/publications/ruscha/artist/8/

[10] Garland, Sarah. "Picturing Distance: Ed Ruscha's Los Angeles Photobooks." Journal of American Studies 52, no. 3 (2018): 681–702.

There is a vast dichotomy between the constructed image of Los Angeles and the local Los Angeles. A city constantly producing media, Los Angeles's image, broadly, has been reduced to mean Hollywood (and perhaps a strip of beach in Santa Monica). Ask the locals how they would define Los Angeles, and you might get some comments on the diversity and innovation of the city, perhaps the weather, but the average Angeleno will likely mention traffic.[11] Ruscha's recurring motifs highlighted the thesis of the locale: Los Angeles is a sprawling wasteland that breeds creativity. There are five serial works done by Ruscha that focus specifically on Los Angeles. Spanning four decades, the works include *Rooftop Series (fig. 4),*[12] *Some Los Angeles Apartments (fig. 5),*[13] *Every Building on the Sunset Strip (fig.6),*[14] *ThirtyFour Parking Lots in Los Angeles (fig. 7),*[15] and *Then and Now (fig. 8).*[16] Other photographic projects he did feature Los Angeles, but these are the only five he notes as explicit commentary on Southern California.[17] Each of these works highlights a similar aspect of Los Angeles. There is a behind-the-scenes element– they each tell a story of the mechanisms which make the miraculous and enigmatic "Hollywood" run. The haphazard feeling of his works– the quality which separates them from O'Sullivan's survey work, is a further reflection of the messy and unartistic quality that Los Angeles requires to produce its commercialized image.

A more recent and more apt illustration of this concept would be John Divola and Robert Cummings's 2024 exhibit at Gallery Luisotti entitled *Hollywood (fig. 9)*.[18] The exhibit featured a

[11] Richard T. Ford, Review of The Collapse of Los Angeles, by David Rieff and Mike Davis. Transition, no. 57 (1992): 72–86. https://doi.org/10.2307/2935156.

[12] Ed Ruscha, Rooftops (gelatin silver prints, 1961–2004).

[13] Ed Ruscha, *Some Los Angeles Apartments* (artist's book, second edition, Los Angeles: Edward Ruscha, 1970)

[14] Ed Ruscha, Every Building on the Sunset Strip (artist's book, Los Angeles: Edward Ruscha, 1966).

[15] Ed Ruscha, Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles (artist's book, Los Angeles: Edward Ruscha, 1967).

[16] Ed Ruscha, Then & Now: Hollywood Boulevard, 1973–2004 (photographic book, Göttingen: Steidl Verlag, 2005).

[17] His 1968 work, *Nine Swimming Pools (and a Broken Glass)* is commonly misconceived to be about Los Angeles. The photographed pools were exclusively from Los Vegas Motels.

[18] *HOLLYWOOD: John Divola and Robert Cumming*, exhibition page, Gallery Luisotti, February 24–May 11, 2024, accessed December 18, 2025, https://galleryluisotti.com/exhibitions/hollywood/

curated selection of “continuity photography” from the 60s and 70s. Continuity photographs are the photos taken of a movie set used for reference when resetting a shot. The collection contains plenty of seemingly unrelated images– jailhouses, table settings, half finished wigs that are united in their shared historical function. What is particularly striking about the collection is the variety in artistic quality. Some photos, usually the ones of complete sets, are aesthetically and compositionally appealing. The photos of a bookcase for instance, that would be used to reset each object on the shelf, are less artistic, often taken from odd angles to capture all necessary information.

Perhaps his most controversial project, *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* offers viewers exactly what it claims to have. Presented in a book which accordions out to twenty seven feet, the two mile stretch of Sunset Blvd. is splain out, with one side of the street occupying the top of the page, and the other side occupying the bottom. Ruscha describes how the continuous stretch of image was made, saying “pictures were taken, image by image, frame by frame, and they overlapped one another, and so consequently, when cars would go by and I would patch these pictures together, the cars sometimes might be cut in half or in quarters. So it gave the book a kind of, informal appearance, some of the filming was a little on the crude side"[19] Just with this description alone, you can’t make a case for *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*’s neutrality. It is not a singular image of The Strip, it is time based, and every car Ruscha sliced or did not slice creates an artistic assertion. Although contrary to Sol Lewitt’s claims on the disregard of process, process does tell a story, and the effect process yields is central to the interpretation of *Every Building*. Margaret Iverson, who argues vehemently for a humanist interpretation of Ruscha’s work, argues that “*Every Building* is a complex assemblage of images, yet the end product shrugs

[19] V&A Dundee, “Every Building on the Sunset Strip,” V&A Dundee, accessed December 18, 2025, https://www.vam.ac.uk/dundee/articles/ed-ruscha-every-building-on-the-sunset-strip

off its labor-intensive pasteup process… *Every Building*'s look of impersonal automaticity is central to its impact and significance as a work of art."[20] To keep evidence of human construction in the piece offers a brilliant and subtle irony. *Every Building* is a systematic documentation of the iconic Los Angeles landmark. But the reality of the Sunset Strip and the perceived reality of it are two entirely separate entities. When people say the Sunset Strip, all they mean is the small portion of a big city that is populated with lots of iconic places. To put it more blatantly, they mean those iconic places. The spaces between Whiskey a go go, The Trip, and Pandora's box is entirely insignificant. Ed Ruscha's constructed image of The Strip is not representative of the broadly constructed image of The Strip.

A comparison of a similar, but more contemporary type of art reinforces the power of *Every Building*. Larry Yust's *Hollywood Boulevard #3 (fig. 10)* uses the same ethos as *Every Building.*[21] Yust documents a few blocks of Hollywood Blvd., then laces the photos together so that they appear as one, long, continuous strip with no perspective. A symptom of the digital age, there are no indications of human creation in the piece. The lack of humanity in the piece, combined with the lack of an explicitly stated limit of the subject pushes it past the point of being anti-humanist. It is a-human, in direct opposition to the state of being human. Ironically, Yust despises the conceptual art movement.[22] That little anecdote begs the question of if he is even aware he made the piece

In his piece *Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles,* Ruscha once again brought attention to the in-between spaces of Los Angeles. Next to every spectacular Hollywood landmark is a

[20] Margaret Iversen, "Disruption and Recursion: On Ruscha's Criticality," in Ed Ruscha's Streets of Los Angeles: Artist, Image, Archive, City, ed. Andrew Perchuk, Emily Pugh, and Zanna Gilbert, with Tracy Stuber and Isabel Frampton Wade (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2025), https://www.getty.edu/publications/ruscha/artist/8/

[21] Larry Yust, *Hollywood Boulevard #3, LA*, photograph, n.d.

[22] I somewhat recently learned (through 23 and me) that Yust is my great uncle. Though not formally documented, he is relentless in his hatred of conceptual art and pop art.

large vacant parking lot with absolutely no aesthetic value.[23] Ruscha captured, in thirty four aerial shots, the backbone of Los Angeles. It is dull and mildly repelling. The collection of images shown together creates a large patchwork of midtone grays. The parking lot, as a feature of urban development, was increasing in frequency during the 60s. Susanna Newbury, in her analysis of the piece as it relates to the architecture of Los Angeles, argues that *ThirtyFour Parking Lots* "diagnosed both the history and future of urban development… marking Los Angeles as a geography of blank spots, waiting to be seen."[24] There is an argument for the significance of blankness in the piece. Like *Every Building*, it highlights the rarely-seen mundanity of Los Angeles. Ed Ruscha talked about the shifting landscape of the city saying "it's all just rape of the land for profit these days. It's fairly sick. Southern California is all just one big city now."[25] This offers a strong counterargument to Newbury's point: *Thirtyfour Parking Lots* may not be a critique of the former Los Angeles, but the developing one. Ruscha often avoids making statements about his work. The few things he has said contradict each other. This statement was a broad response to the question of what he wanted to convey with his work. While saying nothing about the art itself, he communicates a disdain for capitalism and a disillusionment with the city. Ultimately that is the most tangible thesis of his photographic recount of Los Angeles. Antihumanist photography is a display of disillusionment.

Ed Ruscha is able to distinguish himself within the conceptual movement because of his repeated subject matter. The body of work surrounding a specific location creates meaning– there is an inevitable opinion. The larger body of Ruscha's work reveals a fondness and protective attitude toward Los Angeles. Arguably enough so that he does not fully embody the

[23] Not next to *every* landmark. Usually you'll have to find street parking.

[24] Susanna Newbury, "*Thirtyfour Parking Lots in the Fragmented Metropolis*," in *Everything Loose Will Land: 1970s Art and Architecture in Los Angeles* (MAK Center)

[25] Edward Ruscha, *Leave Any Information at the Signal: Writings, Interviews, Bits, Pages*, ed. Alexandra Schwartz (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002)

classification of antihumanist. Los Angeles, and its shifting landscape in the 60s is a breeding ground for conceptual art because of conceptual art's ability to express disillusionment. Humanist art can absolutely project a feeling of disillusionment, but it does not quite compare to the disappointing, offputting feeling of looking at thirty four parking lots. In an era when Los Angeles was brimming with countercultural movements, conceptual art offered a rebellion in its low profile, uninteresting nature. Ed Ruscha's documentation of Los Angeles– its breadth and assertion, create a uniquely Angeleno art form– one that represents the banality, irony, and disillusionment that comes from living in a city defined by creative production.

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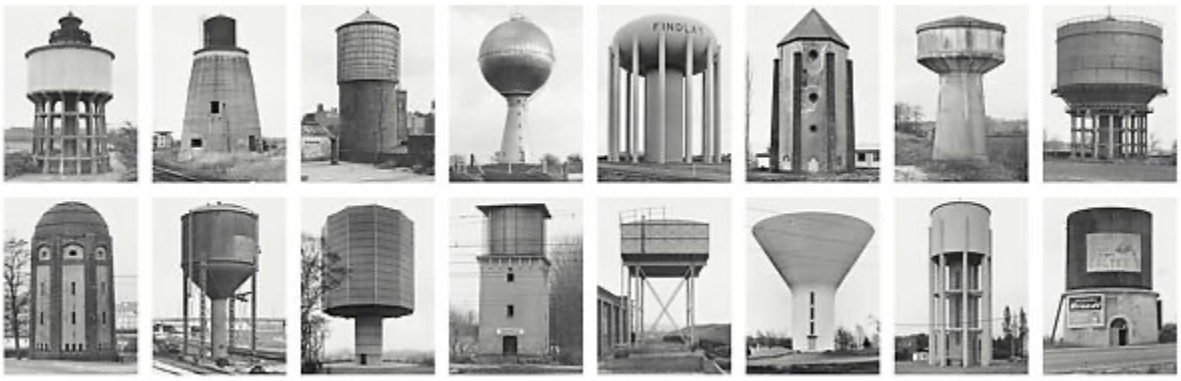

Fig. 1: Bernd Becher and Hilla Becher, *Water Towers (Wassertürme)* (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 1988)



Fig. 2: Marcel Duchamp, Fountain (1917), readymade sculpture, photograph, Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Fig. 3: A frame from Timothy H. O'Sullivan, photographs from *Geological Exploration of the Fortieth Parallel*, led by Clarence King, 1867–1872, albumen silver prints, U.S. Geological Survey.

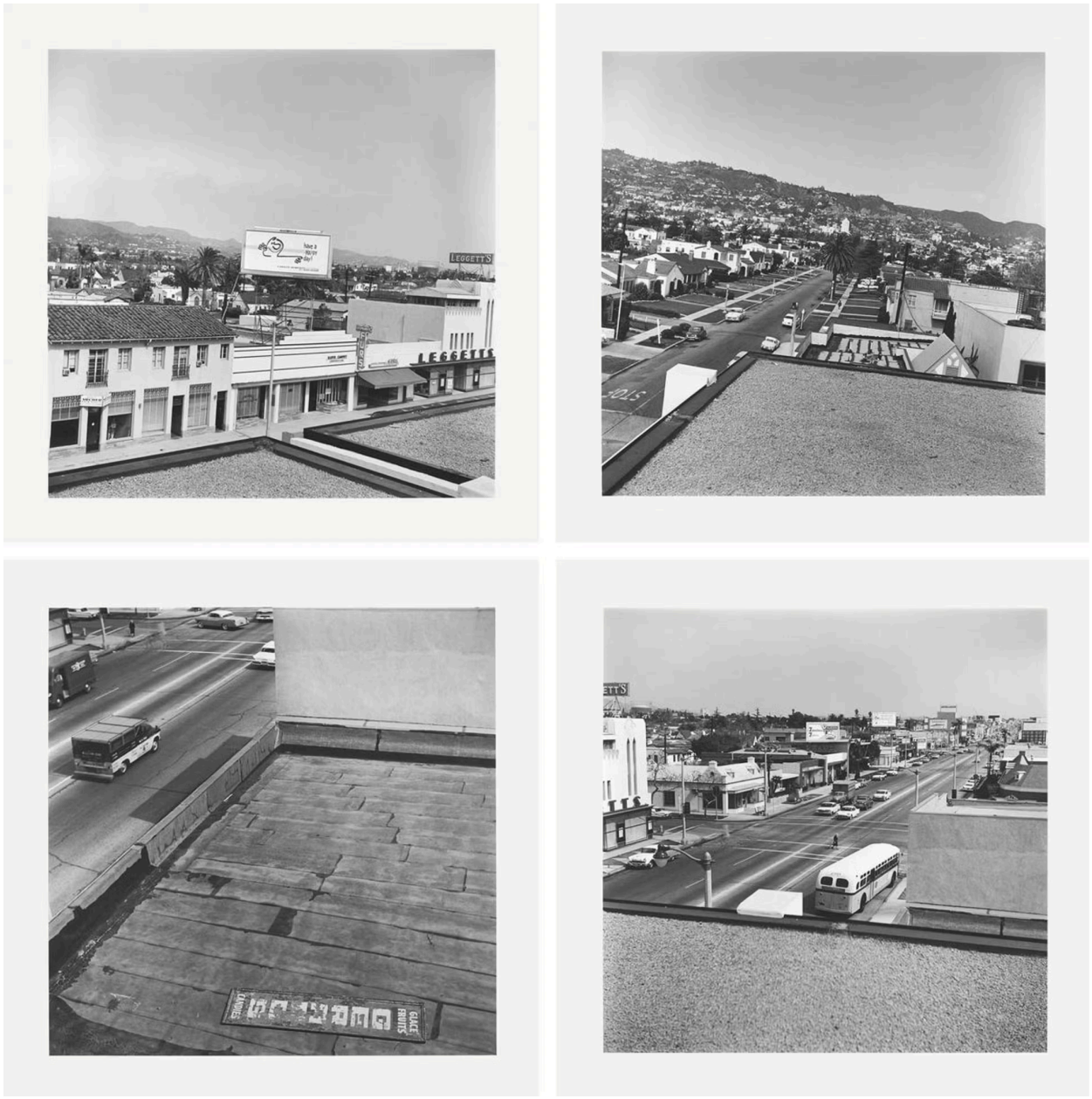

Fig. 4: Ed Ruscha, Rooftops (gelatin silver prints, 1961–2004).

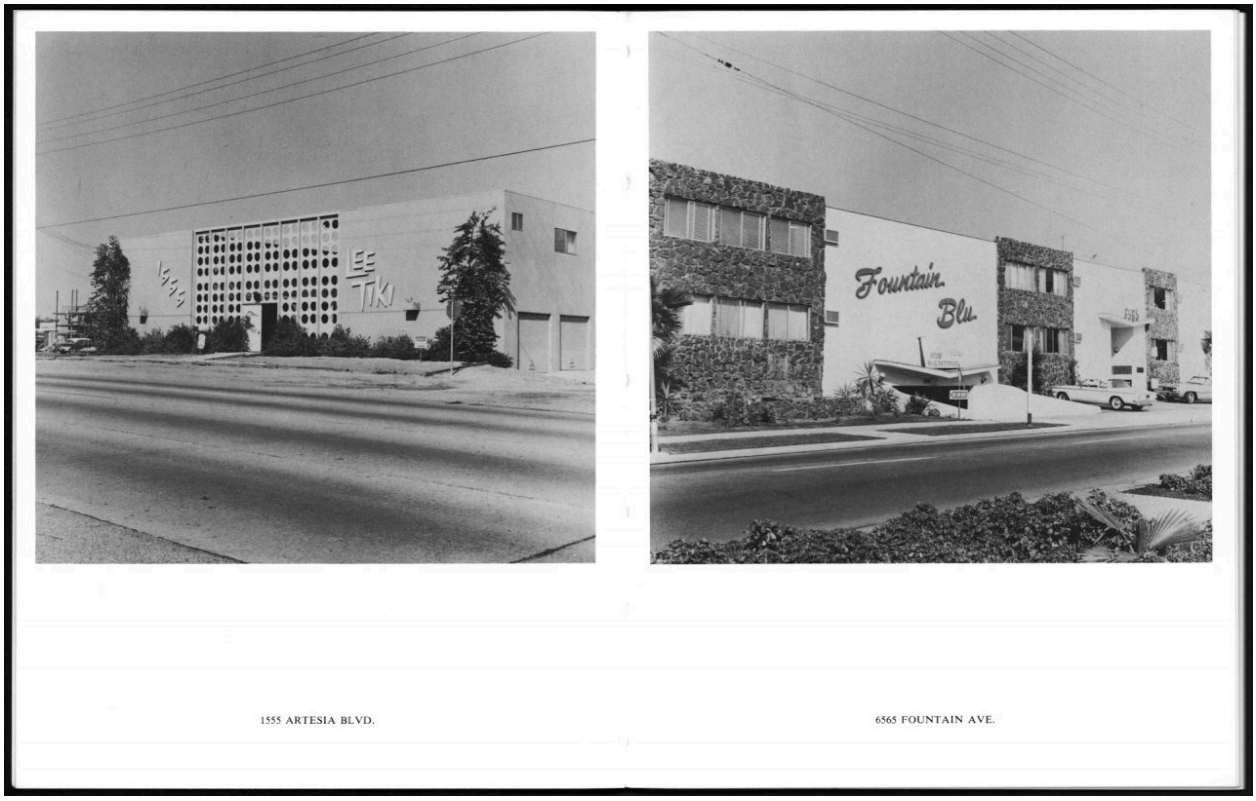

Fig. 5: Selected Frames from Ed Ruscha, *Some Los Angeles Apartments* (artist's book, second edition, Los Angeles: Edward Ruscha, 1970)



Fig. 6: Selected Frames from Ed Ruscha, Every Building on the Sunset Strip (artist's book, Los Angeles: Edward Ruscha, 1966).



Fig. 7: Selected frames from Ed Ruscha, Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles (artist's book, Los Angeles: Edward Ruscha, 1967).

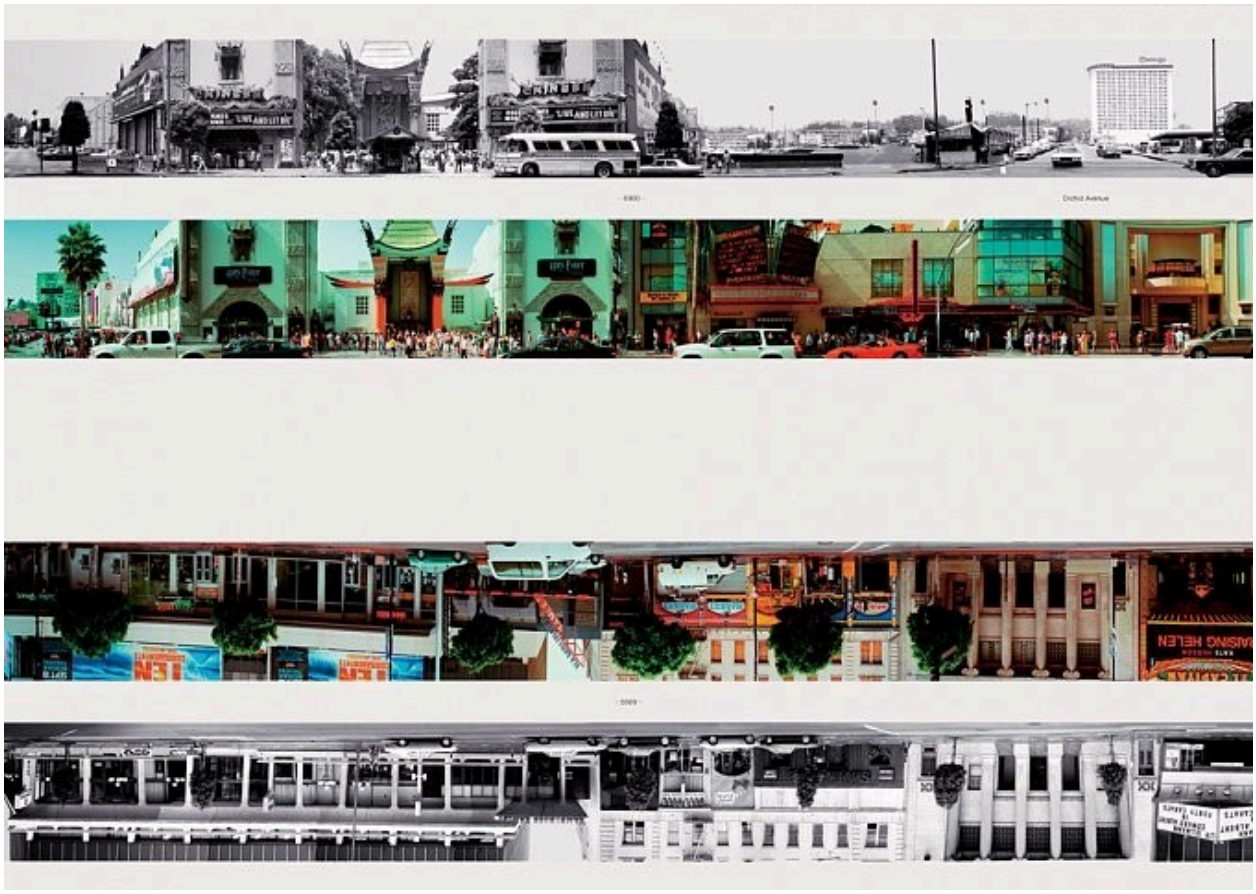

Fig. 8: Selected Frames from Ed Ruscha, Then & Now: Hollywood Boulevard, 1973–2004 (photographic book, Göttingen: Steidl Verlag, 2005).



Fig. 9: Selected Frames from *HOLLYWOOD: John Divola and Robert Cumming*, exhibition page, Gallery Luisotti, February 24–May 11, 2024



Larry Yust, *Hollywood Boulevard #3, LA*, photograph, n.d.