

# Overview



*Desert Gravure*, 2006. Photogravure. Paper size: 21-1/4 x 24-3/4"; image size: 15-1/2 x 19-3/4". Edition 30. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

## ED RUSCHA: SIGNS + STREETS + STREETS + SIGNS

As the story goes, in April of 1961, at the age of 24, Los Angeles artist Ed Ruscha embarked on a transatlantic voyage from New York to France with his mother Dorothy and brother Paul. They picked up a small blue Citroen (purchased in advance) and began a road trip that covered seventeen countries in seven months. They didn't travel together during the entire trip: Ruscha's brother stayed for two months and his mother for four. Traveling alone for three months, Ruscha often took snapshots from the road and had them developed along the way.

Why was this trip significant? In my opinion, some 45 years later, the experiences and the photos Ruscha amassed during his extensive road trip, provide a reading into the artist's later work. I was lucky this summer and caught the show of these photos at the Kunsthau in Zurich. When I examined the photos, I noticed all Ruscha's themes, concepts, and wit are there: A – Z, the entire alphabet of his visual language.

Driving has been an enjoyable and important mode of transportation for Ruscha since 1956 when he drove from Oklahoma City to Los

Angeles, where he has lived ever since. He made that road trip several times a year to visit his family, paying close attention to the signs and markers of American life as he motored along the highways.

In an interview included in the book, *Leave any Information after the Signal: Writings, Interviews, Bits, Pages*, 1981, Ruscha explains the benefits of seeing L.A. from a car: "Well, you get the motion behind it. If you're walking, it's more contemplative. If you're driving, you have less time to think and so things are automatic. ... Things go by so fast that they seem to have a power to them."

Shooting photos in Europe gave Ruscha a medium with which to chronicle the foreign land his American eye was savoring for the first time. His photographs were not of the typical tourist attractions; instead, he captured visual impressions of the culture, both rural and urban. Shot quickly and directly, these no-nonsense pictures observe daily life, recording architecture, landscapes, road signs, shop windows, advertising, and occasionally people. If Ruscha saw something that tickled his graphic



*Your Space Gravure*, 2006. Photogravure with color aquatint and hard ground etching on gampi paper chine collé. Paper size: 28-3/4 x 21"; image size: 22-3/4 x 15-3/4". Edition 30. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

sensibility, he photographed it. Looking back, he observed, "I didn't delay myself much in shooting these pictures. I saw something that seemed to have vitality to it at the time and just snapped it." The photos were shot from a distance, framed close-in, or from a high vantage point. He always approached his subject without sentiment—in a factual, straightforward manner. This strategy prefigured a signature look in future drawings, paintings and prints. The understated drama of Ruscha's photographs reminds me of a line made famous by Raymond Chandler's Detective Phillip Marlowe: "Just the facts, ma'am."

Photographs as visual documents satisfy our curiosity about the past and the present. For Ruscha, they provide a means to an end—a tool. "I began to shoot pictures while I was in school, but not on a serious basis. I like the idea that it could capture the here and now, an immediate reality that could then be appraised and then put back into my painting." In 2004, the Whitney Museum of American Art recognized the importance of this body of work and purchased Ruscha's archive of 456 photographs and related material. That same year, the archive became the subject of an exhibition at the Whitney titled *Ed Ruscha and Photography*. A second show of photographs, *Ed Ruscha, Photographer*, organized by the Whitney in 2006 was curated by Margit Rowell for European audiences.

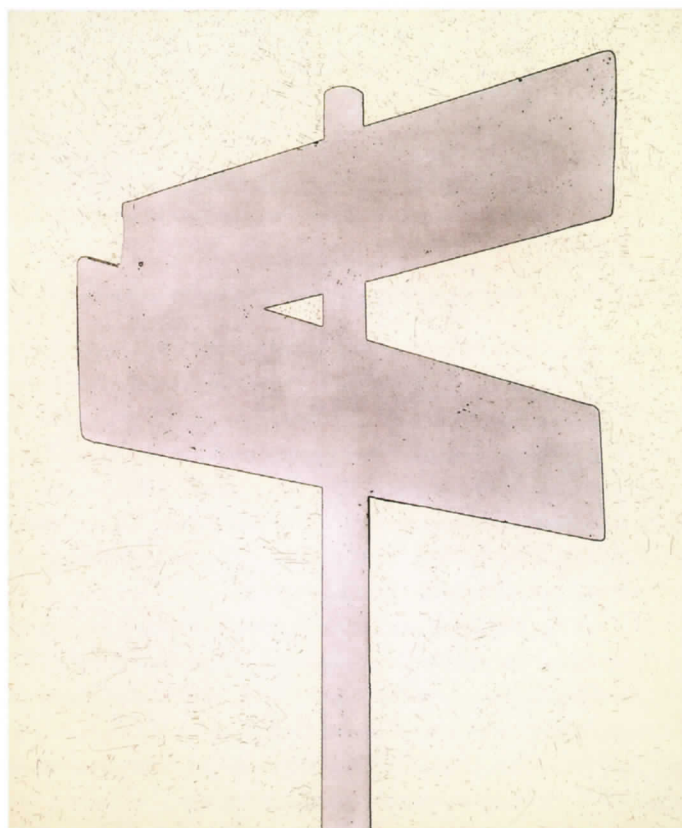
In April of 2006, Ruscha traveled to San Francisco to do an etching project at Crown Point Press. His sixth visit to our studio happened to coincide with the centennial of the great San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906. Several San Francisco museums were holding photography exhibitions that documented the most devastating disaster to strike an American city in the twentieth century. I knew Ruscha would be interested in seeing them.

Crown Point Press is located near many downtown museums. The nearby California Historical Society, in particular, had a terrific show of text and photos from the scrapbooks of the renowned San Francisco writer Jack London. Looking at the dramatic and tragic photos, we could see that the city had practically burned to the ground. We peered into the photos at the signs and storefronts, comparing sites as they appeared in 1906 to what they look like now. We were amazed at the ability of the city to rebuild itself after such destruction. By the 1900s, the availability of cheap cameras and film turned many folks into amateur photographers. As a result, the San Francisco earthquake and fire were amply recorded.

Anticipating his project in the Crown Point studio, Ruscha had sent ahead a negative of a photo he took during one of his many road trips driving from L.A. to the California desert. The desert is a magical and historically significant place to the artist, who has kept a studio in the Mojave for many years.

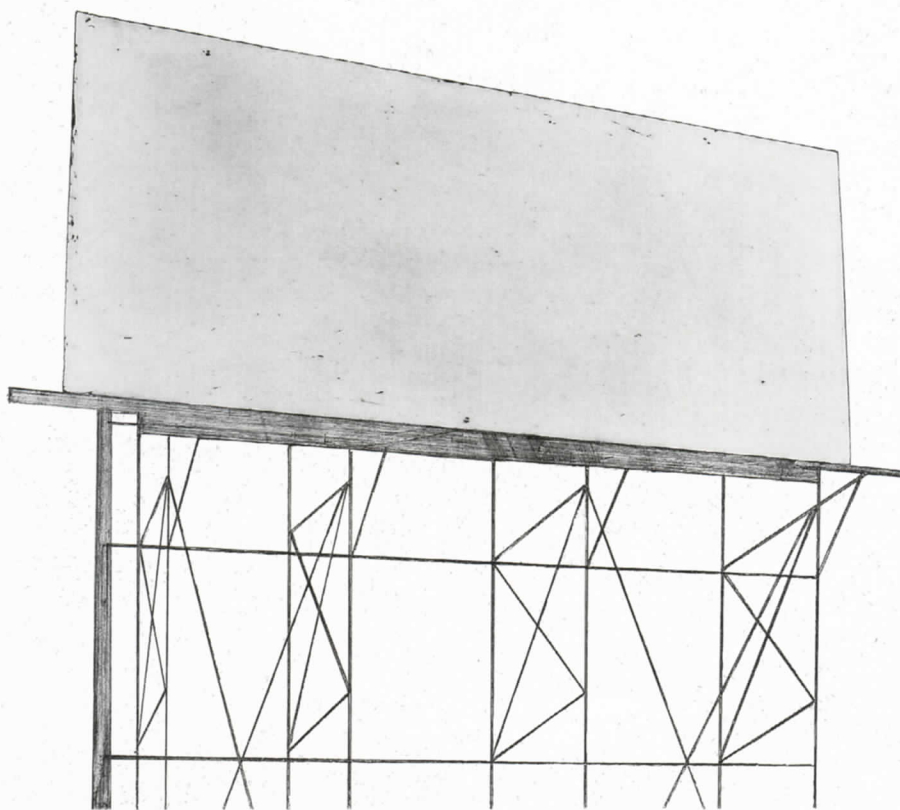
Master printer Dena Schuckit, who was leading the project, took his negative and developed a photogravure plate from it in our darkroom. The image Ruscha sent her was a classic black and white desert scene, complete with windblown shrubs, sagebrush, and a faint shadow of a mountain rising up in the far distance. One wouldn't want to spend much time lost in this beautiful yet remote landscape, so a sign, with directions, would be a most welcome sight. But how about a sign with the information crossed out? What then?

In *Desert Gravure*, Ruscha used a tool to scratch directly on the negative, rendering the information on the sign illegible. Ruscha has talked about blocked-out words, which have appeared in some of his other



*City Space*, 2006. Color aquatint with sugar lift flat bite and hard ground etching. Paper size: 29-3/4 x 25"; image size: 23-3/4 x 19-3/4". Edition 30. Printed by Dena Schuckit.





*Your Space #1*, 2006. Sugar lift flat bite with hard ground etching. Paper size: 25-3/4 x 29"; image size: 19-3/4 x 23-3/4". Edition 30. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

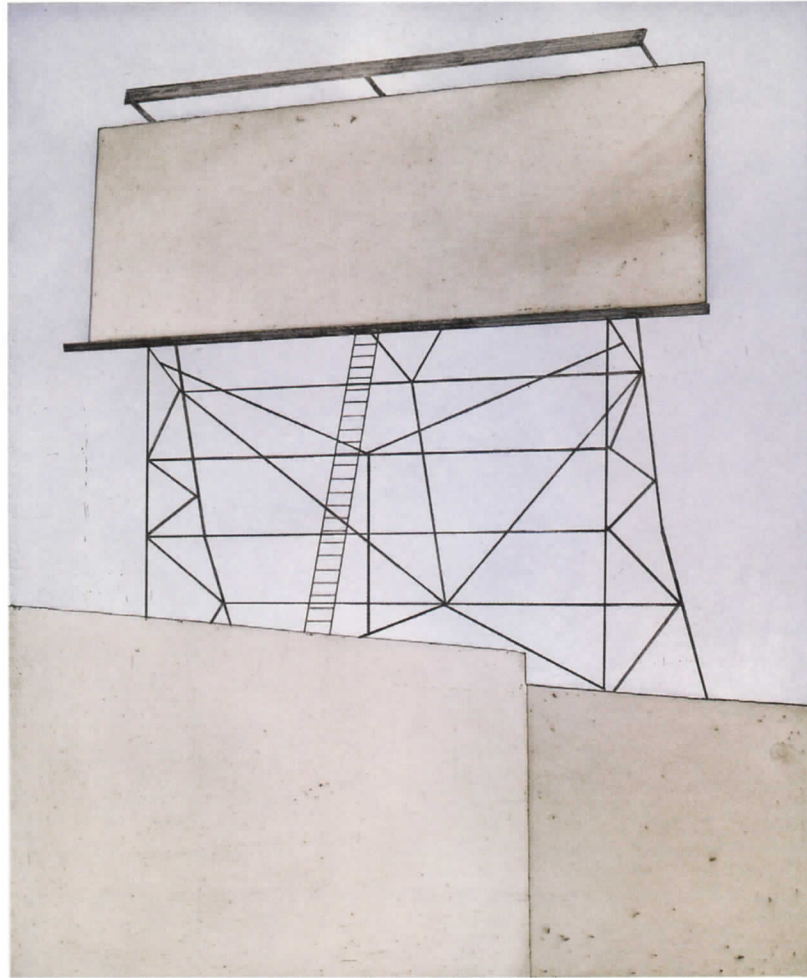
work, as possibly meaning a censorship of a thought that has already been expressed, or suggesting that the message the words are meant to convey isn't that important, after all. Since you can't read the language in this gravure image, you are compelled to read the sign as an object.

Perhaps Ruscha's interest in altering the meaning of an object stems from early exposure to the work of Marcel Duchamp. Ruscha saw Duchamp's work in books as early as high school and remembers being attracted to the artist's use of common objects, or "readymades." In 1963, Ruscha was able to see more of the French artist's work when Duchamp had his first show in America at the Pasadena Museum of Art. The exhibition had a profound affect on many of the L.A. artists of Ruscha's generation who were stimulated by Duchamp's unconventional use of materials and interest in blurring the distinction between art and life. Ruscha's approach to artmaking shares Duchamp's deadpan humor, emphasis on ideas, and use of objects from everyday life.

*Desert Gravure*, the desert scene with scratches on the negative, is not the first photogravure Ruscha has done with Crown Point. In 1995 we published a portfolio with five artists titled *Gravure Group*. Ruscha's contribution, titled *Section 22*, is a black and white desert scene with scratched vertical lines spread across a hilly terrain. The lines suggest the static interference of the kind you might see on an old black and white TV screen, or flaws in the film of an old movie. In Sylvia Wolf's essay for

the catalogue *Ed Ruscha and Photography*, 2004, she quotes Ruscha to remind us that those suggested meanings may soon be lost. "People look at those and they realize, 'that looks like scratches on the film' and yet in the future, when there is no more film, people will say, 'what's that?'" This bemused awareness of the present as a fleeting moment in our collective memory is a repeated theme that underscores much of Ruscha's work.

Ruscha cites *Desert Gravure* as the major inspiration that drove him through the rest of his 2006 print project at Crown Point. A second inspiration was a recent trip to Mexico City. As a major contemporary artist, Ruscha has had important shows all over the world, including his representation of the United States at the 51<sup>st</sup> Venice Biennale in 2005. Shortly before coming to San Francisco, he went to Mexico for the opening of an exhibition at the Museo Tamayo in Mexico City. Ever the keen observer of graphics, Ruscha was impressed by Mexico City's graffiti and street signs, as well as the signage found near the ancient temple ruins. He turned a photograph of a blank sheet of weathered metal into the second photogravure, *Your Space Gravure*. The metal plate is attached to a hand-drawn wood support, transforming it into a sign. Ruscha achieved the grain of the wooden post by ruling lines through a hard ground with a pair of bamboo chopsticks that had been roughly sharpened. As in *Desert Gravure*, this "sign" offers only visual information; its purpose is to be both subject and object. Although the weathered surface of the



*Your Space on Building*, 2006. Color aquatint with sugar lift flat bite and hard ground etching. Paper size: 29-3/4 x 25"; image size: 24 x 20". Edition 30. Printed by Dena Shuckit.

aluminum with its indentations and scratches tells a story—maybe once there were words or directional symbols on it, or maybe not—the mystery about what was once there provides us with endless inspiration. In a film produced by Michael Blackwood in 2005, Ruscha tells curator Margit Rowell about “the dreams and fantasies that are triggered by something you see and hear—you hope the work evolves into some kind of food for other people.”

Five of the seven etchings Ruscha completed during his residency at Crown Point Press are drawings of outdoor billboards. I asked him about the origin of these images. “The sign shapes are a combination of all the signs I have ever seen or observed in my lifetime,” he replied. That would be a lot of signs. Los Angeles is known for having one of the highest densities of large-scale commercial signage in the world. Its billboards and neon signs are designed for the quick read by the passing motorist. They are assertive, ubiquitous, and not without wit. Their texts are crafted to catch the attention of drivers in the fastest and most psychologically penetrating way possible.

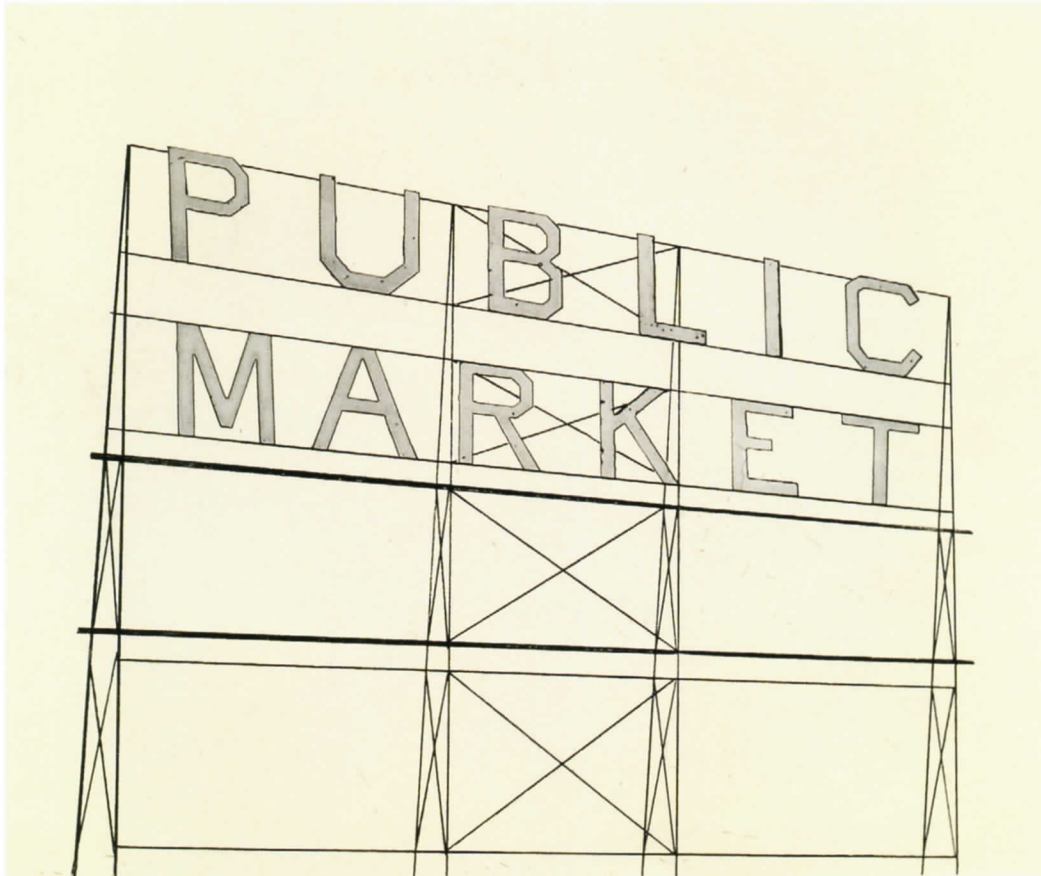
Titles are important to artists. Where do they come from? When a commercial billboard company wants to entice your advertising, they beckon with the phrase “Your Message Here.” And in the cosmic air is the popular networking website MySpace.com, which also beckons for a

message.

*Your Space #1*, *Your Space #2*, *Your Space on Building* are etchings of blank billboards. The armature or “rigging” supporting each sign was inspired by what Ruscha saw in Mexico City. The drawings of these support structures remind me of examples you might find in an engineering manual—minimal and simple, but sturdy. Two of the signs rise up from the bottom of the picture plane and are angled to the left or right, while the third sits on top of a building. The blank spaces on all three project their silent message against a modulated pale blue or gray background. “What is it about a blank sign that attracts you?” I asked Ruscha during a video interview (which can be seen on our website, [www.Magical-Secrets.com](http://www.Magical-Secrets.com)). He thought for a moment and responded: “It’s like a stage play without the play. Or more like a Post-it without a message. ... I like the latitude of that, and the sign itself, which is like some kind of notice that’s put up with an armature of some kind, either a post or more complicated, iron kind of structure. It’s all architectural landscape to me and it’s part of the city.”

The solid planes of the street signs, billboards, and buildings in the prints have irregular surfaces, achieved through the technique of flat bite etching. When Ruscha came to the studio he had the idea to use flat bite as a means of creating tone. Dena Shuckit, who doesn’t often use this



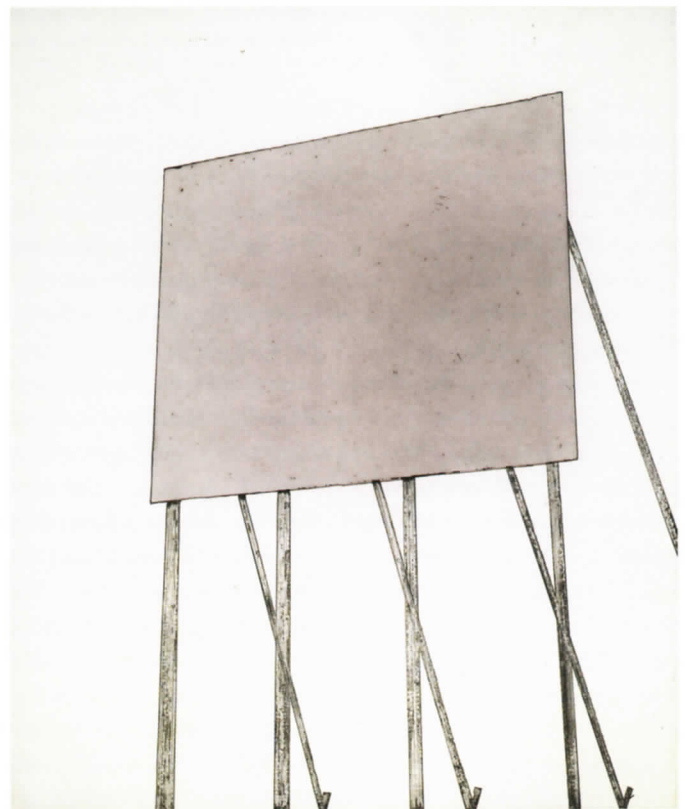


*Public Market*, 2006. Sugar lift flat bite with hard ground etching on gampi paper chine collé. Paper size: 25-3/4 x 29"; image size: 19-3/4 x 23-3/4". Edition 30. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

approach, was curious how it would work. She trusted the artist's instinct and embraced the technique, exploring with Ruscha as they went along. The most common way to get an even tone is to dust the plate with rosin, fuse it to the plate, and then etch that prepared surface. A flat bite has no rosin coating. The printer simply puts the bare plate in acid and allows it to etch, sometimes for over an hour. The acid bites deeply, creating a lower shelf in the surface of the plate. It also bites around any miscellaneous marks. When the plate is inked and wiped, there is no tooth to hold the ink, and ink tends to wipe out of all the flat areas. This makes printing the image a tricky and unpredictable process. But the accidental or spontaneous effects created by this technique were exactly what drew Ruscha to it in the first place. In the print *City Space*, two overlapping blank street signs loom on top of their post against a cream-colored background. The background plate is animated with marks that were drawn or sandpapered by the artist creating the effect of white noise. The tone of the flat bitten areas is slightly uneven, creating some atmospheric flaws. Ruscha was very pleased with this outcome, because the process takes on its own life within the print.

Although the signs in these prints are without words or street names, they are still commanding, suggesting that it is the set-up that we respond to as much as the subject it frames. In Ruscha's sly way, he has turned a simple street sign or billboard into the "strong, silent type."

Part of the attraction Ruscha has to signs is his interest in observing and recycling "what is out there in the world." In addition to taking



*Your Space #2*, 2006. Color aquatint with sugar lift flat bite and hard ground etching. Paper size: 29-3/4 x 25"; image size: 24 x 20". Edition 30. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

commercial photography classes at Chouinard Art Institute, where he received a degree in 1959, Ruscha also took graphic design classes and even worked as a typesetter for a professional printer. Typefaces and advertisements have become tools in his work, just like photography. He likes all kinds of typefaces but has often said that he prefers neutral or non-styled lettering. A favored example is what he describes as "Boy Scout utility modern."

Ruscha is famous for his drawings, paintings and prints of words. He has said he snatches them out of the air, capturing fragments of the everyday, overheard conversations, radio programs, or public signs. The last print he made at Crown Point this spring, titled *Public Market*, is the only word image in the group. The drawing is again minimal and direct. A warm creamy background of *chine collé* softens the austerity of the image, in which pale gray words meld with the delicate armature of the sign.

One day near the end of his stay, we made a visit to the California Palace of the Legion of Honor that has an unsurpassed panoramic view of the city, the bay and the Golden Gate Bridge. As we made our way to another earthquake show talking casually of this and that, Ruscha turned suddenly to look out the passenger-side window. I slowed the car down in the middle of traffic and craned my neck to see what had caught his attention. Cars darted around us honking as he exclaimed, "Hey, would you look at that! I hope I have my camera." He did. As he shot right through the window, I finally located the object of his pleasure. There, on top of a tall, red brick building was a dark orange sign that read "STORAGE." He took a few more shots and we eased back into traffic continuing along on our road trip across the city.

—Valerie Wade

**In the Crown Point Gallery:**

**ED RUSCHA: SIGNS + STREETS + STREETS + SIGNS**

September 22 – November 4, 2006

**At the de Young Museum:**

***Since 2001: Recent Prints by Ed Ruscha***

In 2000, the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco acquired the complete graphic archive of Ed Ruscha. This is the second exhibit displaying the works in the archive; there will be 25 prints on view, including the most recent additions to the Edward Ruscha Graphic Arts Archive. A selection of prints made at Crown Point is part of the show.

September 16, 2006 - March 4, 2007

**In New York and Ohio:**

***Tom Marioni: Beer, Art and Philosophy (The Exhibition), 1968-2006***

**The Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati**

A survey of more than 35 years of actions, sculptures, drawings and installations by Bay Area conceptual artist Tom Marioni.

through October 29

***Tom Marioni: Lucky Strike — Drawings***

**Margarete Roeder Gallery, New York**

September 15 - October 21

Layout and Design: Sasha Baguskas © Crown Point Press 2006

20 Hawthorne Street  
San Francisco, CA 94105  
415. 974.6273  
FAX 415.495.4220  
www.crownpoint.com

PRESORTED  
FIRST-CLASS MAIL  
U.S. POSTAGE PAID  
SAN FRANCISCO, CA  
PERMIT NO. 13929

*Crown Point Press*