

Edward Ruscha  
American, born 1937  
*Lisp*, 1968, oil on canvas  
59 1/8 x 54 3/4 inches  
Gift of the Collectors Committee  
2001.56.1

by Sally Shelburne

Edward Ruscha, one of the most compelling artists of the last forty years, is best known for paintings in which words and phrases play a central role. Born in Omaha, Nebraska, and raised in Oklahoma, Ruscha moved to Los Angeles in 1956 with the intention of becoming a commercial artist. Ruscha enrolled at Chouinard Art Institute, now Cal Arts, a school then known as a training ground for Disney illustrators and animators that offered a dual-track curriculum in both fine and commercial art. He worked as a printer's devil, setting type by hand, pulling proofs, and cleaning presses. He also worked in a mail-order house that personalized toys by enameling them with names. At the same time, Ruscha was trained to approach the canvas in the spontaneous manner of abstract expressionism, but he was quickly frustrated. "I liked painting that way," he said, "but there was no reason to push it any further...I began to see that the only thing to do would be a preconceived image..."<sup>1</sup>

The pioneering work of Jasper Johns was of particular importance to Ruscha in terms of showing him an alternative to abstract expressionism. Eschewing spontaneity, Johns selected ready-made imagery—initially targets, maps, numbers, and letters. Using the technique of encaustic, in which pigment is mixed with wax and applied to the surface while hot, Johns painted these "things the mind already knows." "I saw his work in reproduction first," Ruscha recalled. "It was *Target with Four Faces*, and it retained all of its power for me from early on..."<sup>2</sup>

By making his flat images coextensive with the surface of the canvas, Johns enhanced the "sign" quality of his "images" and, in this process, blurred distinctions between the object and its sign. This aspect of Johns' appropriation of media culture is particularly relevant to Ruscha's interests in words.

Commercial art, with its careful planning and precision, provided Ruscha with the means to extend the boundaries of painting by pressing it into a dialogue with diverse aspects of culture including linguistics. His vernacular images of Standard gas stations and other commercial logos brought him to prominence as a leader of West Coast pop art in the 1960s.

Ruscha was aligned with artists such as Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein. Rejecting the heavily worked surfaces and emphatic brushstroke of many abstract expressionist canvases, pop artists simulated the mechanical look of commercial reproduction. They found subjects in newspaper tabloids and comic books. Following the tightly organized structures of their sources, they created imagery that had immediate accessibility and dramatic impact.

Ruscha's work also has precedents in cubism and its use of letters, in Marcel Duchamp's readymades, and in the unexpected juxtapositions and evocation of sounds found in the surrealism of such artists as René Magritte.

Furthermore, the backgrounds of Ruscha's paintings call to mind the importance of landscape for American artists, while his immaculate finish and craftsmanship may be thought of in connection with American precisionists of the 1930s.

*Lisp*, 1968, draws together many of the artist's concerns from a particularly fertile period in his career. It exemplifies Ruscha's career-long interest in words not only for the images they conjure and the meanings they suggest, but also as representational imagery and subject matter. What appears to be a whitish paper ribbon casts its shadow against a background subtly gradated from light browns to pale greens. Gracefully twisting and folding against this ground, the ribbon spells the one word of the painting's title in cursive script.

At first seemingly simple, the work is nonetheless visually as well as intellectually complex, for the meticulously crafted letters behave in unexpected ways. They appear to be three-dimensional objects floating above a landscape, yet the "L" inserts itself into the green ground.

Illusionistic shifts in perspective make it difficult to determine the surface of the canvas; in some instances, the "ribbon" seems to lie on it while its edges, curving to form loops, project outwards or recede into the depth of the painting.

The lower-case "s" is made by inserting one edge into a simulated cut in another edge of the paper while the "i" is dotted by a gravity-defying v-shape that hovers off center above it.

Tiny drops of liquid, so exquisitely rendered that their moisture is palpable, punctuate the end of the ribbon text, a touch of black humor that both evokes the spray of an absent speaker and suspends the viewer between fascination and distaste.

*Lisp* is related stylistically to the ribbon-style words found in the gunpowder drawings that Ruscha began in 1967. Here he takes this mode of working to a larger scale; it is one of the only "ribbon" paintings the artist made. In 1968 Ruscha did use the word "lisp" in two "liquid" paintings, a series in which he used oil paint to simulate viscous substances such as syrup or jells. "Lisp" also appears in a contemporary print.

Ruscha's commitment to the written word as an integral part of the artistic experience initiates conceptual challenges. As viewers contemplate *Lisp*'s luscious pictorial qualities, they are simultaneously confronted by the meanings the word suggests. This competition between the visual and the verbal makes perception and interpretation particularly challenging. The artist invites additional conflict by using a word that is onomatopoeic: the final consonant pairing of "lisp" imitates the sound it designates.

Like Ruscha's other sound paintings (such as *Oof*, 1963), *Lisp* takes on the task of capturing the character of sound in visual terms. But at the same time, it highlights the difficulty, perhaps the impossibility, of doing so. *Lisp* carries no meaning in itself, but rather is what impedes speech. In this sense, it is related to Ruscha's interest in the things that affect communication in our world—for example, the effect of typography, the proliferation of connotations and acoustical play. In front of Ruscha's work, we must strain to focus our attention in much the same way that it takes extra effort to understand a speaker who lisps. Ultimately, it is impossible to deduce any single narrative or meaning from the painting despite its apparent realism.

Ed Ruscha's interest in words stems from his career-long fascination with the new, postwar media culture. He recalls that when he first became attracted to the idea of being an artist, he felt that painting was an "...almost obsolete, archaic form of communication...I felt newspapers, magazines, books, and words, to be more meaningful than what some damn oil painter was doing." 3

Despite his pioneering use of language and mass cultural icons, Ruscha's work is only tangentially related to pop art, and his diverse interests in books and films make any label problematic. Furthermore, like all creative artists, he carves out new terrain. As Yve-Alain Bois

has pointed out, Ruscha's unique use of words separates his art from that of pop artists and language oriented Conceptual artists such as Joseph Kosuth.

To understand Ruscha's contribution, Bois recalls the distinction the French poet, Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–1898), established between instrumental and poetic language. 4 Instrumental language is the language of straightforward communication; poetic language, on the other hand, is language open to a myriad of transformations. For Mallarmé, informational language was dull; it was the duty of the poet, and in this case, the artist, to replenish language by restoring its liveliness and allusiveness, which Ruscha clearly has done by taking lisp out context. Using his art to unsettle our perceptions, the artist challenges painting's traditional hierarchies between commercial and fine art, as well as our assumptions about the function of words. By incorporating the verbal and the visual, Ruscha forces us to examine our attitudes toward linguistics and aesthetics—structures that condition how we communicate and view the world around us.

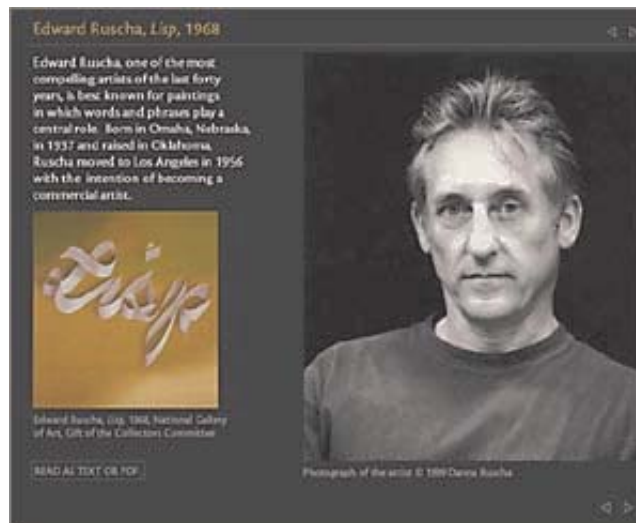
#### NOTES

1. Neal Benezra and Kerry Brougher, with contribution by Phyllis Rosenzweig. *Ed Ruscha* [exh. cat., Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden] (Washington, 2000), 144.
2. Benezra and Brougher 2000, 147.
3. Benezra and Brougher 2000, 145 and n. 1.
4. Yve-Alain Bois, *Edward Ruscha: Romance with Liquids, Paintings 1966-1969* [exh. cat., Gagosian Gallery] (New York, 1993), 15–16.

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