



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

**Oral history interview with Edward Ruscha, 1980  
October 29-1981 October 2**

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Edward Ruscha on Oct. 29, 1980, March 25, July 16, and Oct. 2, 1981. The interview was conducted by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose. This is a rough transcription that may include typographical errors.

## Interview

### October 29, 1980

PAUL KARLSTROM: I should mention one thing as an introduction to give some feeling for place and context. We're in your studio, which is on Western in the Hollywood area. I don't know if it's actually visible from your studio, but up there on the hill is the big Hollywood sign. I don't know if you get the credit for making it famous, but certainly your images of that sign are extremely well known. So it seems appropriate that we're doing this interview right here. You were born in 1937 in Omaha, Nebraska. I would like you to give us some idea of your family background, where you come from. I don't know how far you want to go back.

EDWARD RUSCHA: As far back as I can remember. Let's see, my father was born in 1891 in Billings, Missouri, and his father was born also in Missouri, I think about thirty years before that, somewhere in Missouri or Illinois. I'm not sure where my grandfather was born. I think maybe my grandfather, who had a different name, I think it was Rusiska at one time.

MR. KARLSTROM: What nationality is that?

MR. RUSCHA: It's Bohemian/German extraction.

MR KARLSTROM: So that's your ethnic background.

MR RUSCHA: Yes, that's my father's background. My name was changed. I think my great-grandfather changed the name to Ruscha at some point.

MR. KARLSTROM: Probably because it was easier.

MR RUSCHA: Yes, and as I understand, it was changed to rhyme with the town, Chickasha, Oklahoma, where I guess someone was at that time. That's an Indian name, maybe Seminole Indian. So that's as much as I know about the origin of my father. Now my mother was born in Chicago in 1907 and her name was Dorothy Driscoll. Her father was Patrick James Driscoll, and he

was born, I believe, in Washington.

MR. KARLSTROM: Washington, DC?

MR. RUSCHA: Washington, DC I think so. I could stand corrected on that. Anyway I knew Pat Driscoll. I knew my grandfather. And his father, which would be my great-grandfather, came from County Cork, Ireland, and their name could possibly have been O'Driscoll at one time and then shortened to Driscoll. So my mother grew up there and my mother and father met about 1935.

My father was in the First World War in Camp Polk in Arkansas, and he had a desk job, I guess, so he didn't have to go into combat. He was almost twenty-eight years old, I guess. Then he had some odd jobs from time to time, and he eventually got a job with the Hartford Insurance Company. He was an insurance auditor for about twenty-five years.

MR. KARLSTROM: That's how he came to Nebraska, I suppose.

MR. RUSCHA: Right, and then he settled in Nebraska. I think he met my mother in Illinois somewhere. He was in Danville, Illinois, he also worked for Hartford in Danville, I remember that, around 1918, and after he got out of the war-1920. There were twelve children in his family and they lived in Springfield, Missouri on Robinson Street. The house still stands, I believe. Anyway, it's in the downtown old section, and I have a lot of photographs of them. My dad always said that they were towheads. All the kids had white hair.

MR. KARLSTROM: I used to be a towhead once.

MR. RUSCHA: Did you? I never was, my brother was, though. And my son used to be, he had real white hair. So they had something like three daughters and the rest of them were all sons. He was the oldest, my father, Edward, and he was like Edward II -- I'm the IV, my son is the V.

MR. KARLSTROM: So there's some nobility in your family.

MR. RUSCHA: There's a little nobility. So he was more or less the breadwinner, the oldest of the family, I think the oldest surviving one now might be in his sixties or so. He was born in 1891.

MR. KARLSTROM: Your father's dead now.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, he died in 1959 in Oklahoma. My mother's still alive.

MR KARLSTROM: Living where?

MR RUSCHA: In Oklahoma City, the same house that we bought in 1941. She was just here last week; she's pretty healthy. She's seventy-three now. But my father was burdened with this responsibility of raising his brothers and sisters. My grandfather and his wife were real hard working, Teutonic class, I guess. Maybe his wife was born in Germany, but I'm not really sure. Her name was Dürer. Either she or her father was born in Germany.

They had a real tough life. My grandfather had a grocery store in Springfield, and also in Billings at the time, so they stuck pretty close to home and they were real strict Catholics. They were all raised

that way and naturally I got this legacy of Catholicism that I eventually had to get smart and back away from.

MR. KARLSTROM: You've been fighting it ever since.

MR. RUSCHA: I fought it until I was about eighteen. But anyway I remember seeing -- I have a lot of pictures that he'd taken back in Missouri, family pictures. And it was always real funny because the kids were all lined up, you know, going to mass. And then my uncle Paul, who died of leukemia around 1900 or so, was a *Saturday Evening Post* delivery boy. Anyway, there's a lot of rich old tradition.

MR. KARLSTROM: Real Middle America.

MR. RUSCHA: Real Middle America, at the same time, not Protestant Middle America; it was definitely Catholic, but from farm stock and all that. My mother had one brother who lives in Florida now, he's still alive, George Driscoll, and she had a little harder time from Pat, their father. He was always pretty hard on her, so she had a rather rough childhood when she grew up.

My father had his own type of rough childhood. He had to constantly be scrubbing cabbage, they were making this German stuff all the time. I've even got photos of them. One of them is of this cabbage machine. They were always doing that.

MR. KARLSTROM: Cabbage machine?

MR. RUSCHA: It was a wooden setup like this and you'd just take the cabbage and rake it across like this; it's got a blade on it, and it makes all this cabbage.

MR. KARLSTROM: Was he doing this just for the family?

MR. RUSCHA: Oh yes; for the family. Or they were making soap, doing these archaic, traditional things, you know, to save money; someone's over in the corner darning socks. From the photos I've got, they're pretty amusing.

MR. KARLSTROM: You were mentioning your mother's difficult childhood and family situation.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes. My uncle George Driscoll was a boxer; he was real interested in boxing. He'd get my mother in the ring, put gloves on her, and before she could even get her gloves on -- POP!

MR. KARLSTROM: That's terrible!

MR. RUSCHA: And so my grandfather Pat would just sit back and laugh. And grandmother was real reserved and stoic, she'd mind her business -- traditional turn-of-the-century life style for a mother at that time. But my mother had somewhat of an interest in art, not a mercenary interest in life. My father was more rigid in his thinking, much more rigid.

MR. KARLSTROM: A strong Catholic.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, right. And also he was thinking business and figures and so he had no time, really, for his children to go off and study anthropology like my sister did. I have a sister, Shelby,

who is a year older, and a brother, Paul, who is five years younger than me.

MR. KARLSTROM: He lives here.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes. He lives right upstairs from me. So my sister went off to college in Mexico. She went on a trip down there and liked it so much she went to Mexico City College. My father was behind her the whole time, but he still wondered why she was taking anthropology and art and all this. He thought maybe she should take some classes that would help her get a job. So he was profession-oriented and strict in his ways.

I always remember his being strict. And he wasn't really that "touchy" with us -- I mean he was not emotional, not demonstrative. Rarely I'd go to a baseball game with him or something. But I loved him as a father and I felt close to him. He was not around the house a lot. He would travel. He'd be gone three or four days out of the week, and so a lot of the time was spent with my mother. Dad would come back and then we'd do things but, I guess, it was not a real close relationship.

MR. KARLSTROM: But I gather with your mother, quite close.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, real close. And so the family did stay together and we took trips. My father made very little money, but he had a modest expense account and a company car, so we took this car once a year and would travel. I got to see the Grand Canyon and I got to come to California. I never went East.

MR. KARLSTROM: When, by the way, did you first come to California?

MR. RUSCHA: I would say it was around 1949.

MR. KARLSTROM: You did the standard tourist things, I suppose? The ocean, the Redwood trees -  
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MR. RUSCHA: Oh yes. The ocean, the trees -- at that time the Driscolls, my grandparents, were living up in Boulder Creek which is near Santa Cruz. And I loved it up there, so we would go up there every summer and visit them. Sometimes my sister and brother and sometimes the whole family would make these trips. They were all pretty good. But we couldn't do things like kids do today, you know, go into a toy shop. There was not much chance of that.

MR. KARLSTROM: Now you're better off.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes. Well, I feel like I got raised, shall we say, properly, despite all the psycho this and that involved in growing up with being healthy-minded. I think that I got distorted feelings about morality, maybe, and things that were put on me by the Catholic Church.

MR. KARLSTROM: Most of us, though, whether Catholic or Protestant or whatever, were molded, especially at that time, by these values. Especially in smaller communities, I would imagine. I doubt that your experience was unique. It matches mine pretty well.

MR. RUSCHA: Does it? So there was only one thing to do and that was to go to Catholic school. They didn't have kindergarten then; kindergarten was in public schools. There were no particular

religious delineations between people that I noticed. Catholics were, I guess, considered mackerel snappers.

MR. KARLSTROM: You didn't encounter any discrimination in the community?

MR. RUSCHA: No, there was no discrimination.

MR. KARLSTROM: By that time, Ed, had you moved to Oklahoma? You said that your family bought a house in 1941.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, 1941-42.

MR. KARLSTROM: You were born in 1937, so you only spent the first few years in Nebraska.

MR. RUSCHA: Right, I spent the first few years there.

MR. KARLSTROM: Your father was transferred, I suppose.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes. He was in Danville, Illinois and then he was in Omaha and then he got transferred to Oklahoma by the company which, I guess, just because of my background, developed a certain hatred for insurance companies and all their policies.

MR. KARLSTROM: Don't tell me you don't carry any insurance.

MR. RUSCHA: No, I'm covered, but I somehow developed a sort of a feeling that, you know, he worked for a company that was so large and powerful and inhuman in many ways. He was a figure, a number, like anybody who would work for a company like that.

MR. KARLSTROM: Do you think that this determined your attitude towards the business world in general?

MR RUSCHA: It could have.

MR. KARLSTROM: I don't even know what your attitudes are, but --

MR. RUSCHA: Pessimistic, pessimistic at best. I'm a real pessimist, especially about business and may be the computer aspect of life. It doesn't frighten me because I know it's all to the better, but --

MR. KARLSTROM: Or inevitable, at least.

MR. RUSCHA: Inevitable, yes. So I went to St. Francis School first. As a matter of fact, Joe Goode was also at St. Francis.

MR. KARLSTROM: At the same time.

MR. RUSCHA: At the same time. He was in the second grade and I was in the first grade.

MR. KARLSTROM: So he was a big boy.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, and he was also an altar boy.

MR. KARLSTROM: And you were an altar boy as well?

MR. RUSCHA: No, I wanted to be an altar boy, but I didn't hang around that long.

MR. KARLSTROM: How so?

MR. RUSCHA: I was in St. Francis for one year and there were a couple of events that happened. Life was miserable there because of the nuns, and especially Sister Daniella, I remember her. Sister Daniella, I repeat, if she is somewhere today. But she somehow made life miserable for me because of her rigidity and her -- she was just awful.

MR. KARLSTROM: You lived at home; this wasn't a boarding school?

MR. RUSCHA: No, I lived at home, walked to school.

MR. KARLSTROM: But just in the classroom during the day -- you felt singled out by her?

MR. RUSCHA: Things like not doing catechism or something, and she'd beat my fingers with a pencil. I remember those kinds of things.

MR. KARLSTROM: That's illegal.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, it is. But then it wasn't. Ironically enough, when you say the Smithsonian Institution, I always conjure up the idea of the old building in Washington, the old Smithsonian --

MR. KARLSTROM: The Castle.

MR. RUSCHA: Well, this school looked like that. It was built around 1898 or something, so I associate it --

MR. KARLSTROM: How unfortunate. Well, the Archives are not located in the Castle.

MR. RUSCHA: Anyway, it was the architecture of 1898, so you can get a feeling of an old school marm and especially a nun in her habit, which I don't think they wear anymore.

MR. KARLSTROM: Did you associate the architecture perhaps with prisons?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, the penal system also used that and they still do. Folsom Prison has architecture like that. So it doesn't bring up anything necessarily unpleasant to me except that association that I'm able to laugh at now. But it is a style of architecture and a kind of style of life that affected me, my feelings, later on.

As it turned out, anyway, in the first grade I had a little pocket knife like this, about this big -- a little baby pocket knife -- and I showed it to this girl, Anne Burke, I remember. Somehow I opened it up and you know, "Oh, he's got a knife, he's got a knife." She goes to Sister Daniella and tells her, and then the story comes out that I've pulled a knife on this little girl, see.

MR. KARLSTROM: And for the record, you did.

MR. RUSCHA: For the record, I did pull it out. But it was in all pure kid innocence. And so I remember life was miserable for me there for a few months. And I remember telling my mother, I would come back and say, "I don't want to go to school," and she'd say, "Why not?" and I'd say, "I vomited in the street and I'm real sick," and she'd say, "Well, you just show me that vomit, you just show me that," and I'd say, "Well, actually, I vomited in the sewer line and you can't see it because it's —" Anyway, they could tell that I was real unhappy there and didn't want to go back, and so I didn't. From then on I went to public schools.

MR. KARLSTROM: Do you remember what your public school was?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, it was Hawthorne School.

MR. KARLSTROM: Elementary?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, it was elementary. I went from second grade through sixth there and then I went to junior high school, William Howard Taft Junior High School, seventh through ninth grade, and then I went to high school which was tenth through twelfth, and that was Classen High School. Then there was a new school that they built and it was called Northwest Classen.

MR. KARLSTROM: Let's backtrack a little bit. I'm certainly getting a feeling for your early years. What interests me very much is your remark early on about your mother, how somehow she developed an interest in art and cultural things. It seems a little unlikely from the way you describe her own background. How do you account for that, because I gather that this had some influence upon you?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes. I think my mother was a type of woman who would stand behind her man, no matter how her man is, and so many women are like that. Not so much today, but back

then they were. And so she was always secondary, she was the frail woman in the scene and the father always had the last word, of course, and that's definitely the way my father was. But my mother would be the one who would have the bust of Shakespeare on the mantelpiece.

My dad would just forget it was there. He would be off reading the paper or something else -- actually, doing his auditing and all that. He had an office in the house and he'd do his work there and my mother would be passive but responsible to her children. She always encouraged us; she had a good sense of humor. My father had somewhat of a sense of humor, maybe not as eccentric as my mother.

If you'd met her for five minutes you'd see exactly what I meant. She's a real character, a real character. People like her. She's got a lot of friends and she's still quite well, after surviving a heart attack about a year ago. But she did encourage us, you know. I guess I was not really interested in art until I was about ten or twelve years old, but I definitely got approval from her, whereas I got a blank from my father.

MR. KARLSTROM: How did this interest come about? You said you were about ten years old.

MR. RUSCHA: I got exposed to it by a friend of mine who lived about two doors down. His name was Bob Bonaparte. I think his father was a grandnephew of Napoleon Bonaparte. He was



interested in baseball and football and also he was able to draw very well, and he drew cartoons and he introduced me to the first factor in my life with art, which was India ink, Higgins India ink. I remember seeing Higgins spill out on a piece of paper, and you could watch it dry up and crack. I had a real tactile sensation for that ink; it's one of the strongest things that has affected me as far as my interest in art. And so India ink and Speedball pens had a real -- they were real tools for beginning my interest in art.

MR. KARLSTROM: Did you then run out and buy some for yourself?

MR. RUSCHA: Oh yes. And I used to even spill it out on a piece of paper so I could watch it crack. It was really interesting.

MR. KARLSTROM: You didn't care about drawing, you'd rather watch it --

MR. RUSCHA: No, I liked to draw also. I was trying to emulate him, I guess. Also he did his drawings on two-ply kid finish paper which was real strong paper, a Strathmore paper, and I remember just that tactile sensation of the whole thing. It was almost beyond the whole cartoons that were drawn on them. He'd emulate styles of Dick Tracy. He'd use to save Dick Tracy cartoons, cut them out of the paper and put them in a little cheese box. I remember he had a whole stack of them. The history of Dick Tracy.

MR. KARLSTROM: Why did he do this? Just his interest in the materials, but reproducing things that interested him?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, comics had a profound influence on me. I collected comics, but not to any great degree.

MR. KARLSTROM: Did you also cut them out from the Sunday paper?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, I did things like that. Then I'd throw them away and cut them out again, throw away. There was a constant shuffling of things which I found really interesting. I had no interest in painting whatsoever.

MR. KARLSTROM: Were you aware at that stage that it existed? Were there any articles in your house?

MR. RUSCHA: Didn't even exist. Maybe, you know, a bust of Shakespeare? Hardly any books on art at all. Maybe a book on Rembrandt.

MR. KARLSTROM: Maybe religious pictures by the old masters or something like that.

MR. RUSCHA: Something like that, maybe, yes. My interest didn't even go into it. There were of course some religious icons. I do have a -- there is a connection with my work and my experience with religious icons, the Stations of the Cross and the Church. I guess I have a flavor, from that end, and some of the flavors that come over, like incense used in the Church, benediction, and all that which gives me a feeling, the only feeling that I felt was worthwhile in the Catholic Church--the trappings of the Catholic Church. Of course, they're now no longer--or they've been streamlined, or "disco-ized" or something.

MR. KARLSTROM: In other words, you responded to the ritual.

MR. RUSCHA: I liked the ritual; I liked the incense. I liked the priest's vestments, all the vestments; there was a deep mysterious thing that affected me.

MR. KARLSTROM: All these sensory and esthetic aspects.

MR. RUSCHA: All the esthetic does -- it is, it's esthetic, and yet all the other aspects of it are quite simple in their own way; they're in some ways immoral. I can't attack the Church exactly that way.

MR. KARLSTROM: But you felt them repressive. On the one hand, maybe esthetically.

MR. RUSCHA: So hypocritical, the Church was so hypocritical. Then I learned more about the Church and it became more hypocritical, to the point where I just had to say "adios."

MR. KARLSTROM: But as you grew up, I imagine you were still required to attend mass.

MR. RUSCHA: Oh yes, and all the holy days. Every Saturday morning I'd have to go to catechism. "Who made the world? God made the world." I remember the first thing in the catechism was a picture of the world. The first question was: "Who made the world? God made the world." I had to take catechism because I didn't go to Catholic school.

MR. KARLSTROM: So you were deficient in instruction.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes. And also I couldn't be an altar boy. I couldn't be in the Holy Name Society and my father was also a divorcee. This was one sin that he had on his mind when he was growing up. He was married in 1920, and he had a real bad marriage and he has a daughter also, who lives in Kansas, who is a scientist today at Kansas University. My father had a misgiving about being -- in a sense, he was excommunicated because he was divorced. This happened around 1922. So a divorced person was no longer a Catholic, according to the true ritual.

MR. KARLSTROM: In the eyes of the Church your father and mother were not married.

MR. RUSCHA: So my father took that by rote and tradition.

MR. KARLSTROM: And so you were a bastard.

MR. RUSCHA: In the eyes of the Catholic Church he was in a sense excommunicated, so he never went to Communion, but he would go to every holy day, he'd go to every mass and never miss a day. He lived a very Catholic life.

MR. KARLSTROM: This must have been a tremendous sadness for him.

MR. RUSCHA: I think it was. He was deeply pulled back by it. And at his death, of course, he was not in line for extreme unction because he was in a sense excommunicated. He was excommunicated by himself. I think today all you have to do is talk to a priest or pay them some money or do something -- it's so modern that in today's humanity it has no meaning. As it turned out, mother made a phone call to the priest. Father Monahan came over and gave him extreme unction and also gave him a last rites mass. So he was actually buried within the ritual of the

Church.

MR. KARLSTROM: In hallowed ground.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes. So it was ironic that after all these years, he never partook in the sacraments, never went to Communion, and was considered actually excommunicated, but he had the final sacrament in the end, at his death.

MR. KARLSTROM: Did this contribute to your view of the Church?

MR. RUSCHA: Absolutely.

MR. KARLSTROM: Your father was suffering as a human being, and a devout Catholic, suffering simply because of breaking one of the --

MR. RUSCHA: Right, one of the sacraments, matrimony. But he was devout. He remained devout throughout, and he wanted us to be that. He even said, "Probably when I die you'll not even be in the Church anymore."

MR. KARLSTROM: I hope you lied to him.

MR. RUSCHA: I was fortunate to have some friends who were somewhat eccentric in their own ways. My close friend today, Mason Williams -- I grew up with him and he was a neighbor of mine.

MR. KARLSTROM: Oh, the composer, musician.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes. We went to school together, and we ended up being the class, artists doing murals. I remember we spent practically a whole year doing a mural of the Oklahoma Land Run, with the horses and all.

MR. KARLSTROM: This was for school?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, we'd take this butcher paper, stretch it out on the blackboard, and then he and I would work mostly on that mural for a whole year. We became known as the class artists at Hawthorne Grade School.

MR. KARLSTROM: Let's clarify this in terms of your early activity in art, your early interest. You had art books available, and exposure to fine arts as such. I don't suppose there were museums to visit.

MR. RUSCHA: Oh no. There were no museums. The only thing that I saw was religious.

MR. KARLSTROM: Or popularized.

MR. RUSCHA: Or popularized, like the *Mona Lisa* [1503-1519], *The Thinker* [1902]--I knew what *The Thinker* was but didn't have the idea of the levity of it or the depth.

MR. KARLSTROM: And you didn't distinguish, perhaps, between fine art and low art--art was

representation.

MR. RUSCHA: No, there was no distinction. There was only the interest I had in things, and that was comic books because they were entertaining. It was a good form of entertainment. So the Sunday paper came. Sometimes Dad would read us the cartoons, but when I got the Sunday paper, that was the first thing. I'd pull that right off and I went right through the funny papers.

And also, my Dad had a -- his job was downtown. He worked in an office on the twelfth floor of this building and I would go down every so often with him at night.

It was fun to go downtown. I got a feeling of big city, you know, in this more or less "country-ized" environment. I remember going through the trash cans because I liked to look at the stamps on the mail and somehow I got a real feeling for envelopes, stamps on envelopes, cancellations, postmarks, typewritten type--anything that had to do with clerical, typographical stationery items I got interested in. I got interested in twine--things that were in the trash cans in his office. I really liked those things. Then that shot off into--I developed an interest in collecting stamps. So I collected stamps a lot, and that was my geography lesson.

I know a lot of countries. I'm sure those countries aren't British anymore. I remember a lot of countries. When you'd see a country like Seychelles -- King Edward's on that stamp. So my connection with the outside world came through my stamp collection. Also, I guess it was the miniaturized aspect of the stamp that it would have that much control over you, that you'd be more interested in something like that. I became interested in the actual printing of the stamp.

I have a cousin who is German, and his father was in the German army during the war. He was killed over in Russia, but he was in the German army and so I remember writing back and forth with Herbert Buehler, and he'd send me stamps, Hitler stamps. And it was "Gosh!" I'd get these Hitler stamps, and they were great. I was really interested in that, so it developed during the war that I got this real sense of army. It didn't have that much effect on me because I didn't want to go off into the army to be a little soldier or anything, but through all this I developed this interest in stamp collecting. And I think it still affected my art--the idea that American stamps were all engraved, and you could feel the top of them, feel the printing. And if the stamp came from other countries, some South American countries would have stamps that were just flat offset lithography.

MR. KARLSTROM: So you were sensitive to the difference in quality.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes.

MR. KARLSTROM: Were you aware of scale, the fact that these were small?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, they were small. It seemed to --my whole world was, you know--these little scenes always from these foreign countries. They seemed to have a broadening effect on my outlook, I guess. For hours I'd study these stamps and then I'd get off on some section on French stamps, maybe, that had standing Liberty. There'd be like ten stamps, and they'd be slightly different colors. It would be great. I'd just study those things.

MR. KARLSTROM: Serial imagery.

MR. RUSCHA: Could be, could be. It is.

MR. KARLSTROM: What about your schooling? Certainly in grade school, and junior high, you were interested in art. I don't know if at that point you saw it as a possible career. Were there classes available and instruction in your school?

MR. RUSCHA: When I was in the sixth or seventh grade I took a painting class. My mother thought it would be good for me to go to a painting class. My dad reluctantly agreed. So I went down to this guy's studio--Richard Getz, who I think is still operating in Oklahoma City. But he painted pictures of old people, funky old portraits. His was the most traditional approach to art. We'd look out the window and draw pictures of the houses across the street and all that. Really, I did have a leaning towards that, but my mind was off somewhere else, it was actually in comics. That was where the real vitality was, in the comic drawings. I was constantly drawing cartoons.

But I remember one thing, another tactile --no, olfactory sensation that came to me the first day I walked into that painting class. I smelled turpentine and oil paint and linseed oil. Boy, that really struck me right there and stayed with me ever since.

MR. KARLSTROM: It's a great smell

MR. RUSCHA: It's a great smell. Also, India ink has a great smell.

MR. KARLSTROM: Besides, it spreads out and cracks.

MR. RUSCHA: But my real interest was into cartooning, I guess.

MR. KARLSTROM: So even that exposure or introduction to the fine arts medium, oil paint, turpentine and all that--

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, it was foreign to me.

MR. KARLSTROM: It didn't have an impact where you thought, "Ah, this is for me," that there was something special or elevated about it. You didn't feel that?

MR. RUSCHA: No, I didn't have a reverence for it, I wasn't in awe of the teacher necessarily--I sort of dumbly followed his instructions. So I lasted about three months.

MR. KARLSTROM: Back in school, though, I gather there really were no courses.

MR. RUSCHA: Not courses as such, but there would be someone like Mrs. Laird, in the fourth grade. They called her "the art teacher." She pointed her whole teaching towards art. She was always developing kids who were interested in drawing and painting. But there were no real courses where you would come in and sit down and do that until later on.

MR. KARLSTROM: You felt that she at least reinforced your interest.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes. She gave me the time and materials, you know, so I never really--my involvement with finger painting and all that kind of stuff in grade school was sort of minimal. I was never really that interested in it.

MR. KARLSTROM: What about junior high or high school? I gather that you had more opportunity in high school to indulge in your interests.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes. Well, I guess that was more like a springboard for my puberty. I took the interests that I had in grade school and developed them a little further. I was drawing cartoons and I was real imitative. I'd draw cartoons of people that I was interested in.

I was interested in this one artist named Munro Leaf. They might publish a book of his, a little blue book like this, and they'd be in the library and they'd have these funny drawings in them. So I got curious about his drawings. His drawing style itself didn't influence me, but more or less his attitude. It was like *Getting Up in the Morning*--that was the title of the book. You'd open the book and *Getting Up in the Morning*--the guy would be brushing his teeth and putting on his shoes and all that. And it was all basic stupidity, stupid thinking. It was childlike silliness, you know, that I somehow connected with. So I always liked the guy, Munro Leaf.

By the time I was in the fifth grade if you would say, "Who is your favorite artist?" I might say, "Norman Rockwell," because he was definitely there, and also, my father, and the *Saturday Evening Post* covers. Norman Rockwell is my father, in a way. God, it was all connected. My father would read the *Saturday Evening Post*. That was his favorite magazine. It would arrive every week. He'd start reading it and, of course, the cover had Norman Rockwell on it. So Norman played a part there.

MR. KARLSTROM: Were you attracted to the great facility that one finds in Rockwell, the ability to reproduce so accurately?

MR. RUSCHA: I guess. But I didn't have a curiosity in that so much as I did in his statements about things. How he drew his figures and all that was not a mystery to me. I also didn't see any abstract qualities in his work that I liked. I think his color was just the color that it had to be. His stories were the thing. He took juxtapositions--and his facility as an artist, and his drawing ability and his delineating ability were not even factors. I thought he was like a whimsical American storyteller.

MR. KARLSTROM: So the anecdote appealed to you. I gather also, with Munro Leaf and comics, these were some things that you appreciated.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes. And there was another guy named Basil Wolverton, and he drew a cartoon strip called *Powerhouse Pepper* [Timely Comics, 1942-1948] which I thought was real funny. He would draw grotesqueness. He had a grotesqueness to his drawing style that I really appreciated; I loved his drawings. And I think that R. Crumb, of Robert Crumb's style, is very much like Wolverton's. I've forgiven Robert Crumb for that because I think he has a lot to say. I think he's great. I like Robert Crumb a lot, but I think he really was influenced by Wolverton.

MR. KARLSTROM: He ripped off Wolverton.

MR. RUSCHA: Well, so to speak--in his drawing style. But he added the true meaning behind the thing; he gave it the statement, see. That's what Norman Rockwell had-- the statement--the storytelling aspect that Basil Wolverton just sort of had, sort of silly comics. But his drawings were good.

MR. KARLSTROM: What were your most favorite comics?

MR. RUSCHA: I think *Dick Tracy* was one of my favorites and *Blondie* is another. I saw a little bit of *Felix the Cat*, and some of the older ones like that. Also the movies had a strong--Walt Disney movies. I remember seeing the *Three Musketeers*, or the *Three Caballeros*, *Tres Caballeros*. Movies had a pretty strong influence on me.

MR. KARLSTROM: Did you understand how they were made, and that commercial artists actually worked at Walt Disney Studio?

MR. RUSCHA: I guess I did. Somehow, as it developed, I left Oklahoma City and came to California to the Chouinard Art Institute.

That was the one factor that my father agreed to, and was actually happy for me to do, because the school was supported by Walt Disney. A lot of the artists who went to that school eventually got jobs in the Disney studio. My dad really liked that idea.

MR. KARLSTROM: He could really relate to that.

MR. RUSCHA: He could relate to that because Walt Disney was the great American, as Norman Rockwell was. So Rockwell and Disney were two strong father influences, father approvals. Disney did influence me enough. I liked his movies, and the cartoons in the movies I really liked. So that connected with the cartoons in the newspapers for me.

MR. KARLSTROM: Did you ever create your own comic strips, or illustrated stories?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes.

MR. KARLSTROM: What kinds of things?

MR. RUSCHA: Like I'd hear a joke. Some guy would be on the street and would say---this guy's running and he would say, "What are you doing, training for a race?" And he'd say, "No, racing for a train." So I'd run home, break this down into three blocks, a little three-part cartoon strip, and make that cartoon. I'd have the guy running by there, and the little talk bubble. So I did cartoons like that. Also, wherever I worked or whenever I was at school I tried to get my cartoons into the school paper or the cartoons in the newspaper carriers' newspaper, I'd do cartoons for that. I got to be known as somewhat of an artist, I guess.

MR. KARLSTROM: Were you a delivery boy then?

MR. RUSCHA: I think that also had something to do with--it had an influence on my --oh, north, south, east, west, somehow it had to do with my feelings about surveying. It had something to do with my interest in diagrams, you know, the rigid street patterns. I even planned at one point to make, out of paper, a three-dimensional little town with all the little houses that were on my paper route. I was always going to do that, always had that in the back of my mind--never did it--started it, but never finished it.

MR. RUSCHA: A little model--

MR. RUSCHA: A little model. I liked the scale of models, because I never really got into it that much, but I always liked scale models. A friend of mine up the street in Oklahoma City made a scale model of Williamsburg, Virginia out of paper. I was impressed.

MR. KARLSTROM: Were you ever interested in being an architect?

MR. RUSCHA: I sort of thought I might be, but then no, I just never was, never did. I thought about that at one time. My sister went to school in Mexico City and she started going out with this architect from the school. He was a student at the University of Mexico. I remember going to Mexico City in 1955, I guess, when I was in the eleventh grade. I went with my parents to see my sister, and she took us with her boyfriend to this place in Mexico City called the Pedregal. It was like crazy modern buildings, you know. I'd never seen anything like that in my life.

MR. KARLSTROM: You visited Mexico City when you were in high school.

MR. RUSCHA: It was my first touch with a cosmopolitan city.

MR. KARLSTROM: Certainly your first time out of the country.

MR. RUSCHA: First time out of the country, absolutely, and I was just floored. Modern architecture affected me there. Not in the sense that I'd want to become an architect, but I was just--just the imagery of it, the bizarreness. And they were doing all kinds of things--this was 1955. Oh boy, it was just wow, mixed with all the ancient things they had there. And so that really had an effect on me. It was like modern, wow! In high school I was thinking of modern things, and so I wore these crazy shirts, you know.

MR. KARLSTROM: Were you ever into the pink and charcoal grey?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, pegged pants. Well, those more or less came from California. I love that California style. That's why I came here.

MR. KARLSTROM: That is one of the things I was leading up to. You actually moved here in 1956. That's an historical event, because of all the artists who come to my mind, you perhaps most identify with Hollywood and Los Angeles specifically. You've drawn your imagery from the actual physical look of the places as well as, I think, the spirit. Perhaps one of the few other artists that I can think of in the same position in America is David Hockney.

MR. RUSCHA: I was going to say, David Hockney.

MR. KARLSTROM: The two of you pretty well have the territory wrapped up. So your decision to come here is, I think, extremely important, although at that point you couldn't have known what was going to come in the future. Why did you move here, and what attracted you specifically to Los Angeles?

MR. RUSCHA: Well, I visited here a few times before. And, oh, I guess I went through a graduation trauma of some sort, not knowing where I was going to school. I wanted to go to an art school. I knew that was it by the time I was eighteen years old. I'll back up a little bit and say that I became friends with Jerry McMillan who lives right upstairs here, an artist from Oklahoma City, and Joe



Goode. They were also in art school --no not in art school, in a class in high school. We had classes, like an hour of art, and we'd always make posters, so the poster idea--I went from cartoons to posters.

And then I became interested in printing and typography, and all that. That became more so than the traditional fine arts. And also I became aware of the Dada movement by reading about this in Oklahoma. I stumbled on it in a library one day, and I was just awakened by this sort of thing that happened. And then I'd go back to school and I'd see Joe Goode and Jerry McMillan cutting up in art class, and doing cut up things in art class, making these stupid sculptures and lighting them on fire. It all linked in with the idea of having madcap fun. That was also a factor, I guess, in the feelings I had about things.

But then, in the last year of school, high school, I knew I didn't want a--I couldn't hack the Bible Belt. I wanted to get away from that. I wanted something more metropolitan. It was all too--okay, do you want gum-popping girls forever? You just can't do it anymore. So I knew I had to leave. I knew that there were only a few places to go, one was art school in New York, maybe Pratt or Cooper Union, and the other one was the Kansas City Art Institute, or the Chicago Art Institute, and then there was California! I'd been here before and the East--I mean, that's just too old world for me. I had no interest in going to New York because all I could see were these oppressive buildings and concrete, and it just had sort of a feeling that I couldn't connect with. So I knew I wanted to go to California that was the only place. So I got my car--Mason Williams and I came out to California together.

MR. KARLSTROM: This was in 1956. Did you come with a career objective in mind? Did you know you were going to enroll in Chouinard? Obviously you had planned before you came.

MR. RUSCHA: Well, I didn't plan that much. I wanted to go to Art Center School because I wanted to be--

MR. KARLSTROM: It's a good school.

MR. RUSCHA: Anyway, some feelings might change after that, too. As I came out to California, I knew that I had to have some of my artwork, so I packed up a portfolio and I tried to get into Art Center because that was commercial art to me, and that was the thing I wanted to be. I wanted to be a commercial artist. And they were the strongest school in commercial art. Also, in the *Saturday Evening Post*, there was a story about Art Center School which my dad read, so he encouraged me to go to that school for that reason. I got out here and found out I couldn't get in, you know, there's no opening. So I went to Chouinard and started to go to school there. Now that was the Bohemian school.

MR. KARLSTROM: How did you find out about Chouinard?

MR. RUSCHA: Well, I wrote in advance. I got a little brochure from them and I also got one from Art Center. But as it turned out, I ended up at Chouinard, and that was beards and sandals and fine arts. They did have commercial art courses which I was interested in, but Art Center was no beards and no sandals, nothing like that. You wore clothes to school, and Chouinard was just the opposite. It was Bohemianism on the march. But still Walt Disney had a part in the whole thing, and they had animation. They had all these courses and I just more or less cut off from-- I didn't listen to Elvis

Presley anymore. I became a serious person. I stopped going to church. The move to California was the big change. Oh, another aspect that I didn't cover was hotrods and custom cars, which I began to tune in on in Oklahoma.

MR. KARLSTROM: And you came to the right place.

MR. RUSCHA: That was another attraction of this place, the idea of custom cars.

MR. KARLSTROM: Had you been interested in car culture in high school? Did you have a--

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, I had a 1950 Ford that I had lowered and put Smitty mufflers on.

MR. KARLSTROM: That's what I had, a 1950 Ford club coupe.

MR. RUSCHA: You did? I've always loved that style. The 1949 Ford's real good too, and the French headlights that they would put on those cars.

MR. KARLSTROM: I even took mine down to PJ for the full tuck and roll, blue and white designed by myself. I identify with what you're saying.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, well, that had a strong attraction to me.

MR. KARLSTROM: Did you drive your Ford from Oklahoma City?

MR. RUSCHA: You bet. Burned thirteen quarts of oil. Kept it out here for a while, ended up selling it back in Oklahoma. Then I was sort of carless for a few years there, and it didn't bother me. I just didn't even think about cars.

MR. KARLSTROM: Where did you live? To be carless in Los Angeles means you have to live close to what you're--

MR. RUSCHA: Yes. Well, Mason and I found a place on Sunset Place, which is off of Lafayette Park, down near Westlake Park. I lived around that neighborhood for a few years.

MR. KARLSTROM: That was within walking distance to Chouinard.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes. And then I met somebody at Chouinard, a guy from Oklahoma, named Pat Blackwell, who was a few years older than me, and he also was very much a Californian, sort of Oklahoma-Californian. With some other friends of mine, Jerry McMillan, Joe Goode, all these people, we lived all together. We rented this house up near Barnsdall Park.

MR. KARLSTROM: You were the first one to come, you were followed by Goode and McMillan? And they probably came partly because you came.

MR. RUSCHA: Well, it made it easier, anyway. But they were frustrated and wanted to get out, and they wanted to be serious, for lack of a better explanation. They wanted to be serious, you know. So we're back here, living in California. I lived at 1818 North New Hampshire Avenue with the five of us, all from Oklahoma. We were all more or less seriously dedicated in school with mostly commercial art.

MR. KARLSTROM: You were really pursuing commercial art.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes. But we all did painting courses, we all did fine arts courses, and all of us began to move over toward fine arts.

MR. KARLSTROM: Who were the instructors who were influential in this respect?

MR. RUSCHA: Robert Irwin, Don Graham, who was a teacher of drawing there, Emerson Woelffer.

MR. KARLSTROM: Emerson's teaching at Otis now.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, right, he's at Otis. Marvin Rubin, who taught commercial art courses, advertising. But he had an influence on me. There was another man named Bud Coleman who also influenced me. I think those people, mostly Woelffer and Irwin, I would say, had the strongest influence --Herbert Jepson was there.

MR. KARLSTROM: Didn't he used to have his own school?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, the Jepson Art School, which was, I think, part of Otis.

MR. KARLSTROM: And Rico Lebrun taught there.

MR. RUSCHA: Maybe so, yes.

MR. KARLSTROM: That's a little earlier.

MR. RUSCHA: I think his teaching--I was on the periphery of Jepson's teaching. But I liked the idea that he would like to teach, and not even look at your drawings. It would be like, how are you responding to the drawing, rather than what does your drawing look like, and how to change that line and make it fatter or something. It was like he was saying the real problem was not the drawing, it was in you, and you act out yourself in the drawing somehow. You know, that attitude.

MR. KARLSTROM: What did he teach?

MR. RUSCHA: He taught drawing.

MR. KARLSTROM: Life drawing?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes. But he wouldn't come and say, "That leg's too fat." Nothing like that. He was more subliminal, more cerebral about it. Whereas someone like Don Graham would be like push and pull, dark line over other shapes so you would begin to get form, so he would be like drawing the more immediate aspects of the drawing. And then Irwin was, I guess, really cerebral about it.

MR. KARLSTROM: What is Irwin like as a teacher? If you had to describe him, and therefore the basis of his influence on you--

MR. RUSCHA: Well, his impact came in that he was a strong--his physical appearance was-- I think he used to weigh a lot. I remember him as being a fat man. But just the same, he had a real presence-- he was youthful. That was a strong identity with all of us. He was an extremely youthful

person, and he embodied all the aspects of a Herculean Californian, sunshine, energy, surfing, football player. He had all these things about him that you identified with, and he made his point very clear. Plus he was a non-stop talker, just non-stop. It became like art was a frantic involvement with what you were doing. It was also a deep respect for materials that he taught us, and so we'd prepare all our canvases. I actually took a watercolor class from him--I didn't take painting classes.

But Richards Rubin is another teacher there that I liked. I don't think he had as strong an effect as Irwin--he was a little more distant than Irwin. Irwin was the Californian, and so he didn't have--he would talk about things at hand, and not about ancient art. So when he would work on a watercolor, or have a watercolor class, he would be furious. There was this kind of fury that went on--the fury of involvement with materials and subject matter that Irwin got across to us.

MR. KARLSTROM: With any of these teachers, was it their work itself that influenced you or attracted you? I assume you saw examples.

MR. RUSCHA: We'd see examples of their work, but I was surprised that it wasn't more of that. Because the work they did was not as important as what they said, with the exception of Irwin, because Irwin did have a painting style all to himself, and he had an aura, a definite aura--probably the strongest aura of any teacher that I was around--and I wasn't even around him that much. He was closer to these other guys--Joe and Jerry, and all the other people.

MR. KARLSTROM: What were the ideas specifically? I gather Irwin was for many a primary influence or role model. Are you able to specifically say what the ideas were that appealed to you, seemed right to you, or was it more of a general--

MR. RUSCHA: The ingredients were a collection of all the things that happened in going to an art school, and all the people that you'd meet. The instructors were almost in one way not as important as the students were, because being surrounded by students who were really aggressive and inventive and full of life, this had more of an influence on me than the teachers themselves. On the other hand, the influence of the teachers was not by their work, but more or less by the aura that they created about the whole thing. It was not just me and the teacher like this, it was not that. It was like me, the teacher, this guy, that guy, back to the teacher, back to me--it was all these things. It was a collection of, I guess, the group and the interaction of those people.

MR. KARLSTROM: Who were your fellow classmates at Chouinard who were important? You mentioned your friends from Oklahoma, but was Bengston there?

MR. RUSCHA: Bengston taught one class.

MR. KARLSTROM: He was teaching already.

MR. RUSCHA: I didn't study under Bengston. But he also had a strong aura about him. He was a friend of Irwin's. He came up there one time and taught a class that I missed. Joe told me about this. It was very funny, and I was extremely impressed by him because he came into a class and had these students stretch this paper all the way around the room and tack it up. Then every person would just get in there and start painting on this thing. They'd mix up, and one guy would cross over on somebody and go down this way, and then he'd just go off and have lunch all day or hang out all

day. Then he'd come back at the end of the day, "Okay, I guess that's about it. Wrap it up. Tear it down and throw it away." It was the idea of just get in and do the work, and don't think that you're doing a finished painting that you'll sign your name to and put on the wall. It's just the act of doing it. So that became part of it.

I guess the biggest thing that I learned in art school, really, was that I had to unlearn everything that I'd learned before --I mean since my birth literally. So I unlearned. I got out of Catholicism, I got out of all these old ideals that I had, without relinquishing my family, my family ties. I began to realize that I was living a hypocritical life, and was so glad that I had gotten away from the Bible Belt and all those people. Because there was just no room for poetry, there was no room for a poet there, or an artist would starve to death there.

MR. KARLSTROM: Art was possibly received by you as a means to escape what you considered oppressive things in your background.

MR. RUSCHA: I guess so, but it was more out of--I wouldn't say it was an escape. It was just something I was doing at that time, I guess a step to higher education which I knew I had to go through. Everything began to unfold for me, because I began to be interested in other things like architecture and music. I got interested in symphonic music and then I became aware of Frank Lloyd Wright and the imagery of all that. It was a connection of all those things. Then I got interested in book printing and books, so it began to grow out of a general interest in all of this that going to school seemed to help out.

I was in school with Larry Bell and Joe Goode, Jerry McMillan--let's see, who else was going to school at that time--a guy named Leo Monahan who also had some good ideas. He's a cop now, but he's like an artist and a part-time cop. I can't believe it, I just can't believe it. It seems like such a dichotomy.

MR. KARLSTROM: It sounds like something that maybe Ed Kienholz could have done.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes. He actually has a squad car and he operates out of a sheriff's station, you know, he's with the sheriff's --

MR. KARLSTROM: Do you ever see him driving around?

MR. RUSCHA: I saw him one time, yes. And he's a real funny guy. He's got a great sense of humor. And he does magazine covers for *West Ways* magazine, and he's got a commercial art business. He does really good work.

MR. KARLSTROM: But he still is a cop.

MR. RUSCHA: He's a cop. Can you believe it? I just scratch my head, and he's friends with the old guys who went to school there.

MR. KARLSTROM: Who else, among the students?

MR. RUSCHA: Aaron Cohen was another guy who was a friend of Larry Bell's. He was my first real

introduction to a Bohemian. I mean this guy had long hair, a beard, wore sandals and patchy jeans. He rode a bike to school, lived a real Bohemian life. He actually took a bike across country, went from Los Angeles to New York and back, that thing. He'd do these paintings where he'd get down on the ground and scrub the paint into the canvas, and everybody's walking into class and looking at him aghast. Now I think he works for the Mattell Company, as an executive or something. I don't know where Aaron Cohen is now, but he was one of the true characters in art school. He also worked at this restaurant called "The Patio" with Joe and Jerry and I. We had jobs there.

MR. KARLSTROM: Oh yes? What were you, a waiter?

MR. RUSCHA: No, they were all waiters. I worked and made coffee and fetched cans of tuna.

MR. KARLSTROM: How long did you do that?

MR. RUSCHA: Oh, three years, I guess.

MR. KARLSTROM: Most of the time you were in art school.

MR. RUSCHA: Lunch hour. That was all we had for our meals. We'd just wolf down.

MR. KARLSTROM: So that's how you supported yourself. Your family wasn't in a position to provide.

MR. RUSCHA: No, I got a little money from home. They paid for my schooling. And then I got a scholarship and sort of had to supplement that with some money. So I worked there and

I also worked at a furniture store. Then I got a job with a printer here at a place called the Plantin Press, which is a fine arts press.

MR. KARLSTROM: It's well known.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, and a man there named Saul Marks who was--

MR. KARLSTROM: I know him.

MR. RUSCHA: He died a few years ago, but I think they still have the Plantin Press. It was like a fine arts press. He handset type and I sort of learned how to do that.

MR. KARLSTROM: How long were you there?

MR. RUSCHA: Oh, about six months, I guess. I was back to the smell of ink. I really liked ink.

MR. KARLSTROM: Were you like an apprentice?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, printer's devil, whatever you call it. I did that for a while. But it was mostly because I was curious, real curious about book printing. I was getting a respect for pages, and this tactile sensation. I worked for the Patio restaurant there, where we all worked for a while. Then we'd break our painting and wash up with paint thinner and go over there and work for a couple of hours and go back to our class. It was sort of a routine that I really liked. It was really casual and relaxed.

There was no real vocation--it didn't have that much--it didn't have any goals. We were at a confused point in our education, but the main thing was that we had a real vital life style in school. And that was all because of all these people--Bengston, Irwin. And then we began shifting and I saw that I couldn't handle commercial art anymore, I couldn't see it.

MR. KARLSTROM: Did you ever work as a commercial artist?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes. I worked at a couple of places. I worked at an advertising agency here, and I did layouts and just menial tasks, doing pasteup and things like that. I worked for about a year doing that, and I could see that--

MR. KARLSTROM: This is while you were still a student?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, partly a student and then a little bit after I got out of school.

MR. KARLSTROM: You were really trying it out to see if it was something you could take on.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, I was trying it out. I thought there might be some future for me there. But then I got highly supported by Jerry McMillan and Joe Goode. They were there. Joe was going to be nothing but an artist. He was a painter all the way through. In high school, I remember, he was rather lazy and directionless. You'd go over to his house at eleven o'clock in the morning and he'd be sleeping. Sleep, sleep, sleep. He even did a lot of that in art school, too, but there was no way out for Joe except through the fine arts, whereas I thought there were alternatives.

I thought I had some options. I guess I did at the time, but they were--I would not have been able to exercise any options except fine arts unless there was a sacrifice. I couldn't have been an ad man, I just couldn't have done that. There was no substance to it because, you know, it meant working with other people on an idea. So that just became a falsehood after a while, and I saw that it just couldn't last any longer. So I did a few things off and on, like book design and I did showcard lettering jobs and things like that.

MR. KARLSTROM: You did that on a free-lance basis? Were you credited on any of the book designs? Are those some of the earliest Ruscha?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, I think I did get credit on them.

MR. KARLSTROM: Do you have any of these things left? Did you save copies?

MR. RUSCHA: I have, yes. I designed a catalog for Billy for the L.A. County Museum which probably is my best work along that line.

MR. KARLSTROM: What year was that?

MR. RUSCHA: That was 1968, I believe. They did a show of Billy's, and I did a catalog that had sandpaper on the cover.

MR. KARLSTROM: By that time you had your own reputation. You weren't doing it out of the necessity of commercial activity.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, it was something more out of joy and also out of great freedom. They just said do what you want. I thought that was great, I just thought that was great.

MR. KARLSTROM: Let's backtrack just a minute. You were saying at some point you realized that the commercial art activity was not for you and at that same time, moment of crisis, or moment of decision or whatever, you were very much supported by your friends to commit yourself to fine art. Was it a dramatic decision, or just quite natural?

MR. RUSCHA: No, it was natural. It was slow and natural. See, I was in art school for four years. So I was in there for a good period of time.

MR. KARLSTROM: 1956 to 1960.

MR. RUSCHA: Right. I had an opportunity to make a transition, and it just happened by the way. It was nothing planned, I just gradually began to lean over to the hot side of life, the stuff that really was happening, like the fine arts and the painters, being aware of galleries and the sort of things that were happening in galleries. That art could be made out of sort of flimsy fun, and that there was a lot of style involved in it, so it was very appealing. Then we heard about Kienholz and all these people, and there began to be a definite scene that we saw ourselves becoming a part of.

MR. KARLSTROM: That's something, of course, that I want to pursue in depth now.

MR. RUSCHA: It's sort of another subject almost.

MR. KARLSTROM: But it's an important one as we're getting a feeling for just what was happening at the moment. The Ferus Gallery had actually opened by that time.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, it had opened by that time.

MR. KARLSTROM: Just a few years, of course. What I would like to ask first, I'm fascinated by your experience, the total experience of art school. Clearly that's what gave you your direction--less so the instruction, I think, than the contact with individual students, and with the faculty and some of their ideas, more perhaps the possibility that this is something to pursue. Had you and your colleagues come in contact with developments elsewhere, in other words, the great world of contemporary art, American art, international art? At that time certainly New York was the center for the Abstract Expressionists and other developments. We're talking about the period when AE really held the field and there were these important people like Mr. de Kooning and so forth.

MR. RUSCHA: Oh yes, this was a strong influence on us.

MR. KARLSTROM: This is what I wanted to ask. How aware were you and your colleagues and other younger Los Angeles artists of what was happening in New York, or for that matter, simultaneously, in a different way, around the Art Institute in San Francisco? Was there any contact?

MR. RUSCHA: Not necessarily that--I mean, people from San Francisco--it was San Francisco, you know. It had -- at that time Beatniks were in, and that life all seemed appealing to us all.



MR. KARLSTROM: The lifestyle.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, the lifestyle, the life of Beatniks and the poets and all that. It did have a strong-- Jack Kerouac--had a strong effect on all of us. But I wouldn't say that much more than, say, Elvis Presley or some people in the other arts.

MR. KARLSTROM: Certainly not, then, the visual arts.

MR. RUSCHA: No, the visual arts -- San Francisco was just another town and we knew that there was a good art school up there, but that's about it. And we knew that it was considered more of a fine arts town than Los Angeles. It was definitely, you know, there was stuff that came back and forth. And we knew that San Francisco was an option. I mean you could go up there and go to art school, or you could meet the artists from up there. There were artists making their name up there.

MR. KARLSTROM: Did you know about any of them? Were there any figures who were viewed as serious from this distance?

MR. RUSCHA: Wally Berman and George Herms.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, Wally was actually from here, and they both ended up there. That's interesting because you mentioned two people who represent a very definite side of it, and not the San Francisco Art Institute fine arts activities underground, the publishing of *Semina* [Wallace Berman; CA, Venice: 1958-1964] and so forth. The connection was more with the poets, with the North Beach scene rather than the legacy of Abstract Expressionism, Clyfford Still--

MR. RUSCHA: We had more of the legacy of Abstract Expressionism than we did from anything that happened in San Francisco. We got mainstream ideas from New York, from de Kooning and Franz Kline.

MR. KARLSTROM: But not via San Francisco. Because there was, of course--Still was teaching at the Institute, and a lot of students were emulating, more after the war.

MR. RUSCHA: Clyfford Still was, I think--did he live in New York?

MR. KARLSTROM: Yes, but he taught for five years in San Francisco, and Still of course is associated with the New York--

MR. RUSCHA: There were some interconnections there somewhere. Kenneth Price was also an artist who influenced a lot of us. But we really didn't know about Kenny until the last year of school maybe. Billy Al went to school in San Francisco. He went to Berkeley, I believe, or one of those schools up there. Peter Voulkos was known to a lot of us, John Altoon. John Altoon, I would say, was another one of the most important people in the school scene, although I had never taken a class from him.

MR. KARLSTROM: Oh, was he teaching?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, he taught drawing classes. I think he was there at night, and I was going there during the day. I took a couple of night classes, but somehow missed John the whole time I was

there.

MR. KARLSTROM: Did you know him then?

MR. RUSCHA: No, I didn't know him then. Later I got to be good friends with him. I even did some art with him, I did lettering on his drawings.

MR. KARLSTROM: When was that?

MR. RUSCHA: Oh, this was about 1964 or something like that--1965.

MR. KARLSTROM: Wonderful artist, though.

MR. RUSCHA: Oh, he's great. And a fantastic human being, larger than life, no doubt. Did you meet him?

MR. KARLSTROM: I never did.

MR. RUSCHA: He just walks into a room and kids would laugh. Everybody just goes, "Hoo." He's one of those guys who can walk into a room and he's just got this presence. He was real muscular, and had a big handlebar mustache and sort of had this potential for violence. He had giant hands, but yet he was a deep, deep thinker and poet, and a red hot artist at the time. He was doing real good work, and of course he had a story that went along with it too. Everybody knew all about Altoon and all his capers.

MR. KARLSTROM: So he was a romantic figure.

MR. RUSCHA: Oh yes, definitely. One of the most romantic of all the artists of that period.

MR. KARLSTROM: You mentioned him as an influential figure. Was it again lifestyle he represented rather than the work?

MR. RUSCHA: It was the romantic aspect rather than our study of his work. Like I went to a show at the Ferus to see a bunch of his drawings and I sort of skimmed through them. I think John was more important than his work. I saw two guys in there who were--would-be critics, I guess--dissecting, verbally dissecting his work. I remember being repulsed by this for some reason. Maybe I didn't even give it an opportunity to sink in--I was over in the corner, listening to them talk about the John Altoon drawings and about this and that, push and pull.

But John was a real force in school. It was life blood, sort of an indefinable life blood. I never heard him say one thing about--I never took a class from him, never did anything. But all you had to do was have a cup of coffee with him, and right away you'd get this--ohhh, boy. That was more than any artist could say or what any teacher could say to a student, how they related as a human being.

MR. KARLSTROM: What you say is very interesting. I'm beginning to get the feeling that the art and school experience in Los Angeles, the education, consisted less of the traditional methods of criticism, which go way back, the way teaching was done--the students would paint and work from the model and the instructor would walk around and criticize. In other words, the students would

look for the truth from the instructor in this criticism. I gather from what you're saying that this was relatively unimportant for your generation of Los Angeles artists. It was much more the vitality of, in some cases, slightly older artists.

MR. RUSCHA: It had a lot to do with just pure commitment to the thing.

MR. KARLSTROM: The idea of making art.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, the idea of making art, and also we were concerned about another artist's product, and the instructor and what he would do, we were interested in that, but it was more the vitality that we got from these people than their actual art.

MR. KARLSTROM: Did you ever, even informally, discuss specific art issues with teachers or your fellow students, whether it was over coffee or a beer?

MR. RUSCHA: Oh yes.

MR. KARLSTROM: I mean this more analytical, intellectual--

MR. RUSCHA: But you see, it became a visual thing rather than a verbal thing, because it was almost like-- you'd see something, and Joe would look over at something and say, "Hehehe." That would mean much more than any number of words, you see. It would be like a notation of loving something, like there's something hot there, let's talk about it. Or let's not even talk about it, let's just say, "Yes, it's hot." That's the communication right there.

MR. KARLSTROM: You would know that you were probably on the right track.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes. Oh, I'll say that one time something struck me. I became aware of Marcel Duchamp's work. It was something-- it was like a mysterious side track in my education which just took purely on the visual work. Its strength to me was because it was so visual.

MR. KARLSTROM: Just through a book, or magazine?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, it was through a book, and then I'd seen other books, and then I think there was another book about his work. But even then he had never had a one-man show when I was in school.

MR. KARLSTROM: Of course, there was the Pasadena show, but that was later.

MR. RUSCHA: That was later; that was 1964 or something like that. But I began to see his work, and I liked the work of Man Ray, and so I think those two artists had a strong effect on me. Then I saw a reproduction in some obscure magazine of Jasper Johns's target and Rauschenberg's painting, the combine painting with the chicken. That just sent me. I knew from then on that I was going to be an artist, a fine artist. In a sense it was like a little kid running to his instructor and saying, "Tell me about this, tell me about this!" and showing him the work, you know, and he's just responded by saying, "That's not art. Get it out of here."

MR. KARLSTROM: Who was that, do you remember?

MR. RUSCHA: Richards Rubin. So I could see right there, there was sort of a hopeless barrier, I guess, between me and this instructor, so I just sort of sat in on some more of his classes and tried to get along with it. But my heart was back there with these other guys making this art.

MR. KARLSTROM: You should have gone to a different teacher, probably, and you would have gotten a different response -- perhaps from Irwin.

MR. RUSCHA: I'm sure that in another point in life it would have been-- maybe if I would see somebody customize a certain kind of car in a certain way, that would have put you right over the edge. That's what put me over the edge, was seeing that, in conjunction with a few other artists' work, like Duchamp.

MR. KARLSTROM: What was it about their work that was so exciting to you? Are you able to put that into words?

MR. RUSCHA: I guess it was a voice from nowhere, it was a voice that I guess I needed. I needed to hear this and see this work, and it came to me, oddly enough, through the medium of reproduction. And so it was a printed page I was responding to, and not the work itself. That's why I've always thought that abstractions from originals -- I've never found that to be, in front of the awe inspiring original work of art, important to me. I've had more influence through black and white reproductions of painting, and this was--in this case a black and white reproduction of a painting.

But I guess the kind of odd vocabulary they used that--it was like music that you've never heard before, so mysterious and sweet, and I just dreamed about it at night. I mean it was so powerful in me that I was just wondering, "What are these guys, who are these people, what are they doing?" I began looking more for their work and finally, I guess, a little bit later when they became more well known. And you know, each successive thing I saw by these men were just great works of art to me. I couldn't judge, say, it means more to me--well it did, it meant more to me than anything else. These new voices I was hearing transplanted the temporary excitement I had from Abstract Expressionism, which was the only thing at the time, and we were all more or less piddling with paint in the same way.

MR. KARLSTROM: So you actually at one stage as a student were working in an Abstract Expressionist manner.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, it was like the idea--you have the blank canvas, and you have all these paints in front of you, and then you attack it and see what you can do and see how you can manipulate the colors, and then manipulate the shapes and the paint strokes and all this. It was a solid way of thinking, it was great.

MR. KARLSTROM: Who were your heroes then, your role models?

MR. RUSCHA: Well, I guess maybe de Kooning was, and Franz Kline. Franz Kline had a lot to say at that particular time, and so they were more or less the passwords. You just emulated them, almost automatically. And then if you couldn't emulate them you weren't really on the right track, and I still think that. The people who were off doing these crazy other things, they were grasping for

the right voices of communication or something. But this other work marked a departure for me.

The work of Johns and Rauschenberg marked a departure in the sense that their work was premeditated, see, and Abstract Expressionism was not. You had to stand in front of the blank canvas, you couldn't know in advance that there was going to be a yellow shape over there. You couldn't know in advance that there were going to be two giant black brushstrokes over here. You couldn't know that, that had to happen out of your involvement with the painting at the moment.

MR. KARLSTROM: And you didn't feel comfortable for yourself.

MR. RUSCHA: And I didn't really feel comfortable that way. I was able to swing a few paint strokes and all that. It was not really that way. I didn't really feel comfortable. I felt like something else had to come in there.

MR. KARLSTROM: Was that the message you received from these mysterious voices, that there had to be an alternative to--

MR. RUSCHA: Right, a definite alternative. It was like a new world to me to get into somehow. I knew there was room for operation there for my ideas, so when I saw this target, especially the fact that it was symmetrical, which was just absolutely taboo in art school--you didn't make anything symmetrical, symmetrical art was out to lunch. And it was Modernism, it was asymmetry, it was giant brush strokes, it was colors splashing, it was all these other things that were gestural rather than cerebral. So I began to move towards things that had more of premeditation, so all of my art has been premeditation.

MR. KARLSTROM: Did you view these artists as anti-artists? You said that in Oklahoma you had encountered Dadaism. I thought perhaps you may have run into Marcel Duchamp at that time. It would have been pretty hard to have not.

MR. RUSCHA: I saw them as rebels in a way. Certainly they were rebels in the same sense as a lot of people who are rebelling against the standard of the way things are done. Johns and Rauschenberg certainly did that. I guess Johns even more so, because his things were just so quietly powerful. Oh boy, I just couldn't believe it. Even when I was in New York, I just wondered where I could see his work. It was my first trip to New York. Let's see, he first became known around 1958 or 1959.

MR. KARLSTROM: That sounds about right.

MR. RUSCHA: And each thing that I saw of his was staggering. That American flag he painted, he did it with encaustic.

MR. KARLSTROM: When did you go to New York?

MR. RUSCHA: 1961.

MR. KARLSTROM: So you were out of school. Why did you go back, what were the circumstances?

MR. RUSCHA: I traveled to Europe and I traveled over there for about ten months in 1961, after I got out of art school.

MR. KARLSTROM: It was your first visit to New York.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes. And I also saw the Johns painting in Paris which they wanted seventy-five dollars for, I think. It was a painting of a little target. It was at a little bitty gallery, like half the size of this room right here, and they had his work there. It was like a little painting like this of a target. That was the only thing that I saw in Europe at all. Art in Europe was just out, I mean, there was no art in Europe except ancient art, and I had no interest in it.

MR. KARLSTROM: Did you go to the museums, though?

MR. RUSCHA: Oh yes. But it was not there for me, it was just not there. I could get more involved with the graffiti on the walls, and a brick that might be over on the side of the road, or something and other curiosities, rather than the established notions of what art is like and what art is, and the grandiose history of art and painting.

MR. KARLSTROM: Where did you go in Europe?

MR. RUSCHA: I went to Paris, which I really liked. I liked Paris a lot.

MR. KARLSTROM: Not the Louvre, but Paris.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, Paris. I love that lifestyle. Then I went to Spain. I got a real good flavor of Spain. I saw people there and I took a lot of photographs. I went to Italy.

MR. KARLSTROM: Were you by yourself?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes. I was with my brother for part of the time, my mother even came there for part of the time, but I was by myself for most of the time.

MR. KARLSTROM: You went to Italy?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, I went to Italy for a while. Then I went to Greece, all the way through Yugoslavia, to Austria, to Vienna, and then came back through Germany and met up with my cousin.

MR. KARLSTROM: Right, the stamp guy.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, I met up with Herbie.

MR. KARLSTROM: Did you know people to visit along the way, or were you pretty much on your own?

MR. RUSCHA: No, I didn't. We just traveled along. I saw some high night life, went to the Cannes Film Festival, saw that, and just sort of made it along on very little money.

MR. KARLSTROM: Sort of like the Grand Tour, the education of the young artist. Did you do it,

though, as an art pilgrimage or a life experience?

MR. RUSCHA: It was a life experience that I definitely was ready for. I knew that I wanted to go to Europe because that was an important factor in my life. I had no interest in any sort of archival aspect or scholarly interest in art whatsoever. As a matter of fact, I just turned away from that. I had some curiosities along the way--you can't escape it, it's just everywhere. I saw these wood carvings--I think his name was Riemenschneider. He's a woodcarver, and he carved all the figures in this church in Germany. That was a "whew!" Boy, I walked out of there. The only thing I could think was, "carving wood-- how can I use that? Can I carve some wood? No, I can't carve any wood--forget that!"

MR. KARLSTROM: Was there anything that did really impress you among the great monuments of Europe, from an artistic standpoint?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, only one thing, and that was the British War Museum. I saw this sculpture by an artist named Bertelli. He's a modern sculptor and he did this head. As a matter of fact, I've got a photograph of it. Let me show it to you. It was at the most unlikely place, the British War Museum. And they had like little miniatures of ambulances, and then you could go upstairs in the files and you'd see all guns and airplanes. They had British airplanes there, and you'd go upstairs and you could go through a file of all these war pictures, a photographic library of war pictures.

Anyway, there was this little sculpture right there, a bust of Mussolini. It was about eighteen inches high and it was as if you would take a piece of black clay and put it on a potter's wheel, and just take your finger and go "zzzzzzzt" to make this man's profile. So you've got a totally round thing, like this and his nose would go all around his chin would go all around, and you saw perfect two profiles like this --

MR. KARLSTROM: --from any point of view.

MR. RUSCHA: From any point of view you've got a profile. I was just stunned by that work of art, and it just happened by accident. I got a photograph of it and everything. I guess I described it well enough. It was black in color and shiny, about eighteen or twenty inches high. That had more effect on me than almost anything.

MR. KARLSTROM: That's interesting. Well, what about the early modernism you saw in Europe, Picasso --

MR. RUSCHA: I guess I read some Apollinaire poems, and some of the things Picasso did. I wasn't as interested in Picasso as I was in Apollinaire and maybe Francis Picabia, Duchamp, Man Ray. When I was in Paris I got this feeling of what it would be like to live there in the twenties. The total art production that came from this period was overwhelming. I'd run into some of that in galleries. I went to a lot of galleries in Paris, and I'd occasionally run into some new work that I liked, but mainly it was like dipping back into history. That was my history lesson--not back to the Renaissance, not back to ages of old, it was more like recent history, the twentieth century. I was more curious about that. Every so often I'd run across a Jasper Johns painting there, which was stunning. Also I saw a Rauschenberg show.

MR. KARLSTROM: In Paris?

MR. RUSCHA: "Combines" [combine-paintings] at a gallery in Paris. I guess in 1961 he was already on his way, making shows and doing this. That was the only art to me. The Europeans weren't doing anything, there was no art in Germany, no art in Italy. There was no art anywhere except in America. It was all happening in New York and Los Angeles.

MR. KARLSTROM: What about in England? By that time British Pop Art had emerged. At least historically the seeds of that had been clearly sown and the first flowers appeared already in the late fifties with—

MR. RUSCHA: Hamilton?

MR. KARLSTROM: Exactly. Did you have the opportunity--I don't know if this was possible in England-- to see any of their work?

MR. RUSCHA: Never knew their work, I didn't know their work at all. When I was in England it was such a cold place. I was disappointed because it was not like Charles Dickens.

MR. KARLSTROM: That's what you were looking for.

MR. RUSCHA: That's what I was looking for. I went all over England, Scotland and Ireland. Ireland was funny. I got to see the little town where my mother's folks came from.

MR. KARLSTROM: No contact with the--

MR. RUSCHA: None whatsoever. I'll tell you. When I was in England I was cold, and I was really low on money and all I could think about was getting back to France. I was going back to France, and I was going to stay there for a couple of weeks and then go back to America. So I couldn't wait to get out of the country, out of England, and get over to France. The second I hit that soil I just felt like I was at home, I really felt like I was at home. I didn't speak French, didn't speak any language except English. I found out right away that you don't have to. It's helpful to know a few words like numbers. The food was so good, and it just seemed like there was a source of--there was something there that just made life easy, they took life easy. In England it was all cold, grey and all that. Now it's totally different. I feel just the opposite.

MR. KARLSTROM: It grows on one.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes. I got to like England better. Now I know a lot of people in England and most of the artists in England are friends, so I began to see how American they are. They're more American than we are.

MR. KARLSTROM: In fact we can talk about that later; it's a very interesting subject. Let me ask you about one more artist you probably saw in France, Ferdinand Leger. Was there any interest there at all?

MR. RUSCHA: No. Well, historically now I can go back and look at his work and I see that there's a real trademark--there is a mark of history in his work. I appreciate it more than I am excited about it.



I would be more excited maybe about Stuart Davis, who has some of the same blendings, I guess, as Leger does. I liked what he looked like better than his paintings. You know what he looks like? Have you got a picture in your office?

MR. KARLSTROM: Yes, stocky and blue collar--

MR. RUSCHA: Have you seen him [Leger] with these round glasses, dark glasses?

MR. KARLSTROM: --a workman's shirt. Okay, well that's that for your first trip abroad to Europe. What about New York? We can't ignore that. Tell me about your visit to New York.

MR. RUSCHA: Oh boy, my first visit to New York was a total shock. I was thrown back by the coldness of it, and I was curious also that I didn't know anybody, I didn't know anybody there.

MR. KARLSTROM: You didn't know anybody?

MR. RUSCHA: No.

MR. KARLSTROM: That, of course, has changed.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes. I remember I was just overwhelmed because of the number of people there and the impersonality of the whole place. I didn't like it very much.

MR. KARLSTROM: How long did you stay?

MR. RUSCHA: Oh, a couple of weeks.

MR. KARLSTROM: Did you spend time coming and going, on your way to Europe, and then back again?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes. Let's see, coming back I was there for just a short while, but I stayed with some people I knew from Oklahoma, so that was like nine months later. So I got a better feeling for it then. Actually, I met Leo Castelli then and showed him some work that I had done in Europe--this was in 1961. He was really interested, and then I met Ivan Karp.

MR. KARLSTROM: You just went and introduced yourself?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes. I took my things in. I had some little things on paper that I did.

MR. KARLSTROM: These were done in Europe? I didn't realize that you had actually done work.

MR. RUSCHA: I actually painted some and I did some work over there. Not very much.

MR. KARLSTROM: What kinds of things?

MR. RUSCHA: I painted some little pictures of--sort of impasto oil painting on paper, that I soaked in linseed oil, so that they looked semi-translucent, except where the paint is. And they were paintings of words and--

MR. KARLSTROM: Those would be some of the earliest--

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, some of the earliest of what I consider my work after I got to be a serious artist.

MR. KARLSTROM: Had you been doing any of that before you left?

MR. RUSCHA: I started before I left, yes. I'd done some things like that before I left. And in school I'd done some things. I did a few homages to Jasper Johns, some things with the American flag--well, no, wait a minute--did I do an American flag? No, I never did an American flag--I did a map on a canvas, where I stretched a map across the canvas and then painted the bottom half blue. I did some things like that which shocked me. I wanted to do some art that shocked me. So then it developed into a sort of little personal travel kit which I took along with me.

MR. KARLSTROM: Not related to your experience in Europe, I expect.

MR. RUSCHA: No, I wouldn't say that completely, because some of the things in Europe became--some of the street iconography, like a round sign and then a bicycle, the motif of a bicycle on it, meaning bicycle path. That was "whew!" So I painted a picture of that. Some of the other things, I guess, I would combine some photographs that I had taken, maybe in Spain, and do a collage. I'd develop these photographs over there, and then I did a collage of that. I'd put an envelope with it or something, so I was into the syntax of doing collage and oil paint and ink and little things that were about this size, 11 inches by 14 inches or 8 inches by 10 inches, something like that. So I had a whole stack of those and I worked there. I guess in Paris was when I did most of those things. I did about ten of those.

MR. KARLSTROM: You just set up in a hotel.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, and was quite into what I was doing. I'd wander around during the day, and walk, walk, walk. Boy, I did more walking than I ever did in my life.

MR. KARLSTROM: Did you get lonesome?

MR. RUSCHA: No, never got lonesome.

MR. KARLSTROM: Did you meet people at all?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, I met people who are still friends of mine. A guy in San Francisco named Ed Zak whom you might meet sooner or later. He's got a studio up there. I met him and a few other people. But he's the only one I still stay in contact with. It was a real rich time in my life. I was in Paris for about two months. And then, coming back, I went to see Leo and I made a point of going to all the galleries. I was really intrigued by the whole thing.

MR. KARLSTROM: And Leo Castelli showed a real interest in your work. Did he promise to take anything?

MR. RUSCHA: No, he just said, "I really like your work." From then on he knew my work and we didn't actually do anything until about ten years later, in 1970. But then I met Ivan, and Ivan was a real funny character, a real joker. He said, "Hey, come on back in the back room. Let me show you this stuff I've got back here." I went back and there was a Roy Lichtenstein painting of a tennis shoe, and it just floored me. I mean, I just--that was my first knowledge of, I guess, what was the

beginning of Pop Art.

MR. KARLSTROM: You were impressed.

MR. RUSCHA: I was very impressed with his things. It was something that he was like holding back in the closet, and didn't want to show too many people this work. But he thought I'd get a kick out of it, which I did. It was completely aggravating and inspirational.

MR. KARLSTROM: All at the same time.

MR. RUSCHA: At the same time, yes.

MR. KARLSTROM: So that was a work that you remember best from your time in New York.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, tennis shoes with the big blast marks behind it. That was powerful.

MR. KARLSTROM: Did you go to the Museum of Modern Art or the Metropolitan?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, that's exactly what I did, filling in.

MR. KARLSTROM: What about the Museum of Modern Art?

MR. RUSCHA: I guess I was in awe of that because it had more of a direct relation to me and my feelings about things than, say, the Whitney did. Actually, the Whitney was right next door.

MR. KARLSTROM: To where you were staying?

MR. RUSCHA: No, to the Modern.

MR. KARLSTROM: Oh, right, that was the old Whitney.

MR. RUSCHA: How old are you?

MR. KARLSTROM: Thirty-nine.

MR. RUSCHA: You are. So did you travel there?

MR. KARLSTROM: I never went to the Whitney before its new building, actually.

MR. RUSCHA: I was not as connected to the Whitney, I guess, because they were more interested in traditional painters like John Sloan and maybe Wyeth and Winslow Homer. They showed those kind of artists and they had no--Charles Sheeler--I didn't find him interesting at all. I found Walker Evans interesting, Walker Evans was great.

MR. KARLSTROM: Sheeler doesn't interest you?

MR. RUSCHA: People say, "Well, Hopper, he didn't influence you?" and I say, "No, Hopper has no influence on me whatsoever." I've almost always stood back and asked myself that question, well why didn't they have an influence on me? But they didn't. Obviously everybody's going to have an influence on you, everything you see has an influence on you, but I was not repulsed. I was left flat

by their work, actually. If I'm really repulsed by someone I might be influenced by him.

MR. KARLSTROM: Do you still feel that way, or over the years have you got a new way of looking at, let's say, Hopper?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, I went to Hopper's opening. Yes, I was still a bit flat with him. But I could see that there was some connection there. I could see his whole lifestyle and then I compared that to the Picasso show and found him very serious and very straight and very firm in his way of being an artist, and almost unwavering all the way down the line. There's nothing crazy about him at all, nothing eccentric or—

MR. KARLSTROM: He had a strong position.

MR. RUSCHA: Oh yes, he had a strong position. It's just that I guess I never spoke his language. There's some kind of growth language that you have to speak, and somehow I didn't follow that with Hopper. But some of his paintings are really nice. I remember one thing, another artist who influenced me considerably with one work of art--I've only been associated with--I don't know of any other work he's done--his name is Johannes [sic] Baargeld [Alfred Grunewald]. He operated back in the twenties, and I don't know whether he was European or American.

I don't know his history, except that the Museum of Modern Art owned a drawing of his which I saw once in reproduction, in a book. It was called *Beetles* [*Untitled (Beetles)*, 1920], I think. It was a pen and ink drawing -- it looked like a diagram from the air, an aerial view, almost like a parking diagram, and it had five or six beetles. It looked like it was taken from the air, and the beetles were walking along a line that was delineated, almost like a racecourse. One of them was veering off to the side, and there were some little ink splotches. I'll show you a picture of it sometime.

MR. KARLSTROM: It reminds me of ants.

MR. RUSCHA: Well, it could be, it could be somehow. It was like an aerial view, walking like this. I went to see it in the basement where they had it stored.

MR. KARLSTROM: You knew about it from a reproduction.

MR. RUSCHA: I just went and inquired about it at the desk. They took me down there and showed me that drawing. I was impressed. That was another thing that I was after when I went to New York, I wanted to see that particular work.

MR. KARLSTROM: How interesting, *Beetles*.

MR. RUSCHA: I think the work was done around 1920 or so. I think he was associated with the Dadaists.

MR. KARLSTROM: Where did you run into the reproduction?

MR. RUSCHA: In a book somewhere.

MR. KARLSTROM: Obviously it really impressed you if you went then to New York, one of the

reasons being --

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, I wanted to see that work. That's one of the reasons I went to the Modern.

MR. KARLSTROM: It's amazing. Well at least you were satisfied. Were you let down when you saw the work?

MR. RUSCHA: No, no, I loved seeing it in the raw. There was something about the personal, the personal aspect of seeing something, actually holding it in your hands, so to speak.

MR. KARLSTROM: So there you were, having had a young man's grand tour in Europe and visiting the big city, the art center. Apparently your experience in New York wasn't such that you felt it necessary to relocate there, which, of course, has happened increasingly so with California artists.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, it's like a standard move.

MR. KARLSTROM: Why was that then, do you suppose? It seems that you felt you could very successfully and satisfactorily carry on your career right here.

MR. RUSCHA: I thought so, and I didn't look at it on a vocational level, as to whether I could, say, get a gallery and make a better living there. Well, I'm sure that I could have, but also I would have been chewed up by the whole machine.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, it worked out all right.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, I'd say so, in the sense that I was able to look at it as an onlooker and see New York that way, and I consequently made a lot of friends of artists back there. I've been lucky enough to maintain myself out here. That's what I'm after, a long shelf life.

MR. KARLSTROM: Do you feel it's more possible now to pursue a satisfactory career as an artist on the West Coast than it was, say, ten or twelve years ago? Do you see changes?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, probably because there seems to be more public support for art than there was when I was here. But--where's a Walter Hopps? I don't see him anywhere. But I don't see

people--there are some people that are operating along those lines, but I don't really see any new upheavals as far as possibilities for artists to show their work. It's there, there's more public support, but it seems like it was more vital there. It was on a much smaller scale then, but certain figures are missing from the scenario, who I don't feel are around now. We're a metropolis now and we weren't then.

MR. KARLSTROM: It's the biggest city in the country now. The latest census has Los Angeles now larger than Chicago. What about, though, the new plans for a museum of contemporary art. You say that you don't feel there's anything important or new that might change the situation here. What about Pontus Hulten?

MR. RUSCHA: Pontus Hulten is a "cosmo" character in the whole picture. I think that his appearance here, and his involvement is going to be--might even be monumental. It's going to open

up a different frontier. It's just so--it's hard to say--I don't know what those people have in mind. But by the looks of things, I think that Pontus's arrival here is going to multiply things, or double things, at least, because what's going to happen there, probably, will be twice as much as what's happening everywhere else in Los Angeles. The new museum is definitely dedicated to modern art-

MR. KARLSTROM: --to contemporary art.

MR. RUSCHA: --to contemporary art, and in areas where I see it lacking in other institutions. So I think it's a real growth step.

MR. KARLSTROM: Is this something that causes a certain amount of excitement among the artists, or among your friends? Is it something you talk about at all?

MR. RUSCHA: Well, DeWain Valentine was spearheading the thing almost. Actually, he spearheaded a complaint against the L.A. County Museum about two years ago, which a lot of artists got fairly indignant about. The fact that the L.A. County Museum was really not representative of contemporary local artists on any level, and I think that this new museum is dedicated to it--it seems like it will be.

MR. KARLSTROM: That conceivably could have a positive influence on the programs. Number one, to take some of the pressure off the L.A. County Museum, which has a broader area of responsibility, and also then may serve as the competition encouragement.

MR. RUSCHA: It could be the reincarnation of the original Pasadena Art Museum.

MR. KARLSTROM: That's interesting. I guess what I'm trying to get at is if you as a Los Angeles artist, somebody based here, working here, feels that there are some changes--this is

something we should talk about on a later tape. I gather your response is, some changes, yes, but not as much as some people who are very excited about it now.

MR. RUSCHA: Oh no, I'm as excited as anybody. I think that the new museum has got everything going for it. I just think that Los Angeles may not be the best place to begin an art career. I don't know where the best place is. I think it's all a struggle, myself.

MR. KARLSTROM: Do you think it's possible that, with some of this new activity, there will be a spinoff, if they really do create what they are now billing as the most important museum of contemporary art in the world, do you think it's possible that the whole support system might spring up, some galleries that might want to be in the shadow that's cast by this institution? Perhaps then more artists will be attracted to the area. It seems conceivable to me that everything could multiply. Is it something you look forward to?

MR. RUSCHA: Oh yes, I look forward to it. It makes my growing up scene seem medieval.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, we'll see what happens. Anyway, getting back--we have you in New York, and what started this little digression was my question about your visiting New York and obviously not feeling that it was necessary for you to move back there. What was the attraction for you to

come back to Los Angeles from New York? You apparently then viewed that as your working place.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, I did. I developed a real closeness to the place. Somehow it has to do with the movies, it has to do with palm trees, it has to do with those old-- a collage in your mind of what this place is all about. So I developed roots here that I couldn't resist coming back to. And also there was a definite art community here that I was becoming a part of, and so I was just drawn back here. It was not like I was a destitute person and had to find some new roots, I had roots here. I'm sure that's the reason I came back.

Maybe a couple of times I was tempted to move off and go back to New York because of the big apple side of it, which is definitely there, but I have a suspicion that my work would have been chewed up and spit out. You see, the paintings I was doing at the time were being overlooked by the people in power all centered in New York, they were being overlooked by those people in favor of other artists who were being included. So I wasn't really even a Pop artist, I wasn't really even a Conceptual artist. I was nothing until gradually later, later, later. I mean, as it developed, I'm real surprised that I've been able to keep this thing up this long, I'll tell you.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, so you did come back then in 1961.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, I came back in 1961.

MR. KARLSTROM: Did you then find new digs?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, I came here and I found a place over in Highland Park, and I kept in close contact with Joe Goode and Jerry McMillan, and my other friends, Pat Blackwell, that I had here. We were all painting, we were all in a limbo land between school and what are we going to do. And Joe was more in the guts a fine artist than I was. I mean, I had some other alternatives. I didn't know whether I wanted to be an artist, you know. But I knew at the same time that I had these urgings that had to be satisfied, so I knew that I had to get some paint and canvas and all that stuff, and I had to set myself up. So it was sort of there. But Joe was on the scene before I was. When I was traveling in Europe, Henry Hopkins was having the "War Baby" show ["War Babies, " at the Huysman Gallery in Los Angeles, CA. 1961], and that consisted of Ronny Miyashiro who was a student at Chouinard at the time, Larry Bell, and Eddie Bereal and Joe Goode. Do you remember the "War Babies" poster?

MR. KARLSTROM: I've seen it, I think.

MR. RUSCHA: There were four guys sitting around a table. Ronny Miyashiro, Oriental, was eating rice with chopsticks. Joe was Catholic--he was eating fish. Larry Bell was Jewish, he was eating a bagel. Eddie Bereal was Black, he was eating watermelon. It's a great picture, and it was a milestone in what was going on at that time.

MR. KARLSTROM: Was that show on when you came back?

MR. RUSCHA: They just took it down when I came back. But I saw a lot of the work. I knew what they had put in it.

MR. KARLSTROM: Was that at Ferus?

MR. RUSCHA: No, it was at a place called the Huysman Gallery. It was right across the street from Ferus on La Cienega, and I think they were paying \$100 a month rent, and they were almost going out of business it was so expensive.

MR. KARLSTROM: This was at a time when Henry Hopkins and Walter Hopps were so actively trying to generate interest and educate the community, and I guess Henry, especially, was teaching classes and seminars on the subject. Did you know Walter and Henry at that time?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes. Actually I knew Henry before. I met Henry through Joe because Joe was right on the scene. He was really involved with it. So Henry ended up buying some work from Joe, and buying some work from me on time, and we used to go down to the L.A. County Museum in Exposition Park. Henry would buy us lunch and give us a check for ten dollars and then we'd come back a month later and do the same thing, another lunch, another ten dollars.

MR. KARLSTROM: You came out ahead--you had all those lunches.

MR. RUSCHA: Right. So we had a good time and Henry was deeply involved with everything that was going on. At the same time he was not a part of it--the same way with Walter. Well, Walter was maybe more buddies with the artists, I guess. Henry was a scholar, but he knew exactly what was happening and gave due respect to everybody who was operating at that time. He knew everybody and knew everything that was going on.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, here you were, back again, and you settled in Highland Park.

MR. RUSCHA: So I lived in Highland Park. And then Joe introduced me at that time. I don't think I met Henry until after I got back. And then he said, "Hey, come on down. We had this show and Henry Hopkins, I want you to meet him, and he's real interested in all our work, he wants to see your work." So I was kind of known before I left in this new generation of artists that was springing out, Larry Bell, Ronnie Miyashiro was another one, Eddie Bereal, who's still right there. Do you know his work?

MR. KARLSTROM: I don't.

MR. RUSCHA: He teaches at Irvine; and myself and Joe. So then he brought Walter over--he called him "Chico" at that time. So he brought Chico over to my studio one time, and then Chico brought Irving Blum over, and Irving brought Henry Geldzahler over and he bought something of mine--I sold him a painting for fifty dollars.

MR. KARLSTROM: This is probably 1962?

MR. RUSCHA: This is 1961-62, 1962 probably. Walter had this show at the Pasadena Museum called "New Painting of Common Objects." [Pasadena Art Museum, 1962]

MR. KARLSTROM: That's right. That was in September, 1962.

MR. RUSCHA: Was it? September, 1962. So that was the first show of Pop Art.

MR. KARLSTROM: This was a very important time right then. The Ferus Gallery was in full swing,



and you said that even as a student you had gone to some of the exhibitions there. So you were familiar with the Ferus Gallery and were beginning to meet some of the Ferus people. What about Kienholz, when did you--

MR. RUSCHA: I never really knew Kienholz. He seemed to be like a peripheral figure, but he was the father of the whole thing, exactly, you know.

MR. KARLSTROM: You didn't go to Barney's Beanery and hang out with him?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, but I mainly met Billy Al and Bob Irwin and Kenny Price and John Altoon. Those were the people that I really knew. I didn't know Kienholz until a few years later, eight or ten years later. I never saw Kienholz, he was always gone somewhere--down in Idaho --so I didn't see him too much. But I guess my main connections were Billy Al, Larry Bell, Bob Irwin. Craig Kauffman was there, peripherally, Ed Moses came in there, John Altoon and people who I knew mostly from openings, and then we'd all hang out at Barney's, so that got to be a regular scene.

MR. KARLSTROM: It sounds like fun. I'm sorry I missed that.

MR. RUSCHA: Oh it was, it definitely was. It was like lifeblood. It was great.

MR. KARLSTROM: So all the talk about Los Angeles having no sense of community and no meeting place-- at least at that time--

MR. RUSCHA: That's false. No, there was definitely that. And Barney's was the only place we really met, a beer drinking place. And then we'd have parties and Irving was right in there too, he was part of it.

MR. KARLSTROM: That was really your first developing contact with the Ferus group, after you returned from Europe. In 1963 you had your first solo exhibition and that made you officially part of the Ferus group. I interrupted you when you mentioned Walter's show in 1962, "New Painting of Common Objects". That was before, actually, you were officially involved with Ferus Gallery. What happened during that time? Pop Art obviously had been introduced out here. Earlier that year in 1962 at the Ferus Gallery--I guess Irving Blum gets the credit for this, the Warhol show.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, Irving had the first Warhol show in 1962. He was selling these paintings for fifty dollars apiece. I remember definitely liking him and I felt a great kinship with Andy and Roy Lichtenstein at the time because it was like a logical departure from the kind of painting that was happening at the time. This is outside of the characters themselves and the personalities themselves, but the work was a real departure, a logical departure from Abstract Expressionism, if there is such a thing as a style cycle, and I believe there is. Yes, Walter had my painting in the "New Common Objects", and Irving came along and sold one of the paintings in it, and that was my first painting that I sold. That was a great feeling.

MR. KARLSTROM: Except for Henry.

MR. RUSCHA: Well, Henry's painting. Well, he bought this painting that I did in school. It was called *Sweetwater* [1959]. I've got a photograph of it someplace, but it was a real ambitious Abstract Expressionist painting on the top half, and on the bottom half it said *Sweetwater* in old traditional

letters.

MR. KARLSTROM: That's an historical piece. Is that going to be in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art show?

MR. RUSCHA: No, unfortunately, that painting met its demise.

MR. KARLSTROM: How?

MR. RUSCHA: Well, Henry taught art history at UCL.A., and he took the painting and stuffed it back in the racks there somewhere, and a student --one of the teachers there gave the painting to a student. I think it was Jan Stussy--gave that painting to a student and said, "Go ahead and use that for a canvas, paint on it." He just gave it to some student. Henry didn't tell me about that.

MR. KARLSTROM: Wasn't that vicious on Jan's part?

MR. RUSCHA: Oh God, I don't know, I don't really know. I don't know the details on that, see. I wanted to get to the bottom of it, just like I want to get to the bottom of this attack on my painting. A couple of other things happened like that--and I've met a lot of those people who've taught at UCL.A.. They were down on my art, down on Joe's art, but now they've learned to respect us and even imitate us in a lot of instances.

MR. KARLSTROM: You taught at UCL.A. for one session.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, 1969-70.

MR. KARLSTROM: Because I was still a student there in graduate school in art history when you were—I wasn't much in residence then, but I was just finishing up my M.A. at that point. So obviously whatever antagonism existed earlier was softening.

MR. RUSCHA: Oh yes. My teaching up there--I just kept wishing I was back in my studio working. I felt like I didn't have enough to say to students.

MR. KARLSTROM: You don't think of yourself, then, really as a teacher.

MR. RUSCHA: No, I don't. But I do believe some people are. Some people have good teaching leanings, but not me. I really don't know what to tell people. I think there's too much of a gap between what they think you are, as you're telling them, and what the actual message is that you're to get over to them. Anyway, so Henry didn't tell me about this painting until a few years later. I said, "Well, God, are you sure you can't get somebody to clean it off?" He said, "No."

MR. KARLSTROM: Henry must have been just devastated.

MR. RUSCHA: Well, yes. He was upset. I've got a black and white photo of it someplace.

MR. KARLSTROM: That will go in the catalog. And that should go in your papers too.

MR. RUSCHA: I'll be better organized when you come back. Are you going to do these other

interviews? I hope so.

MR. KARLSTROM: Oh yes, absolutely. So you were in the Pasadena show in 1962, and a painting was sold from them. Would you really mark that, along with the Warhol show, as an introduction of what was called "Pop" at the time, but what became known as Pop Art?

MR. RUSCHA: Well, yes, historically it is. Walter's was the first of any organized show of that kind of work. Walter just chose to call it "New Painting of Common Objects". I even like the way he said it, just his words coming out of his mouth. He had a way of nailing a subject down, and I thought that was really good, the way he defined it as the "New Painting of Common Objects."

MR. KARLSTROM: The next year, it's interesting, there was a show at the L.A. County Museum that Lawrence Alloway put together called "Six Painters and the Object," that was in London. Then when the show came here, he had a section called "Six More", and you were included in that. So quite clearly by that time you were considered part of that phenomenon.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, I guess at that time. As maybe a second wave or something, I don't know what they thought about it. Who was in that show? Was Billy in that show? I think he was.

MR. KARLSTROM: I forget who.

MR. RUSCHA: I think he was. And that was at the old L.A. County Museum. I remember having four or five good sized paintings in there. I was really happy with that show.

MR. KARLSTROM: I think Wayne Thiebaud was in that show.

MR. RUSCHA: Mel might have been in there and maybe Phillip Hefferton.

MR. KARLSTROM: So there was already then--at least in the eyes of one or two critics --a Pop school out on the West Coast, and you were --

MR. RUSCHA: Yes. And Billy was sort of marginally considered a Pop artist because he did things Billy did some great paintings earlier. He did these motorcycle paintings. I remember seeing an exhibit of that, and people were coming out of there saying, "God, I just think they're bad illustrations." Of course, that ended up being their strength. He was doing that imagery literally before the Pop artists, or at the same time, but oblivious and quite separate from the other Pop artists. But he was, sure, they gave him the label of Pop Art too, just like they did Joe. Joe had milk bottles in his work, so he was a Pop artist. It was an easy term to fling around.

MR. KARLSTROM: I'm getting some feeling for what's happening at this time.

### **March 25, 1981**

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, Ed, it's been a few months since we last talked. We talked last time largely about a biography in a chronological way. We moved up into the early sixties, and what I would like to do today is address directly an important issue which we touched on, sort of danced around, and that is the whole issue of Pop art and Pop imagery and your relationship to the Pop phenomenon. What I would like to do to get started is read just a brief statement that Lawrence Alloway made in

connection with the activities of the independent group in England, part of the Institute of Contemporary Art, which is credited for first focusing on attitudes that then became defined as Pop.

Alloway writes here in Lucy Lippard's book on Pop Art [*Pop Art* Thames & Hudson: 1966] "We," meaning the Smithsons, Hamilton, and people like that, "we discovered that we had in common a vernacular culture that persisted beyond any special interest or skills in art, architecture, design or art criticism that any of us might possess. The area of contact was mass produced urban culture, movies, advertising, science fiction, pop music. We felt none of the dislike of commercial culture standard among most intellectuals, but accepted it as a fact, discussed it in detail and consumed it enthusiastically.

One result of our discussions was to take pop culture out of the realm of escapism, sheer entertainment, relaxation, and to treat it with the seriousness of art. These interests put us in opposition, both to the supporters of indigenous folk art and to anti-American opinion in Britain. Hollywood, Detroit, and Madison Avenue were, in terms of our interests, producing the best popular culture. Thus, expendable art was proposed as no less serious than permanent art." This represents an important idea or attitudes that underlie what was to come afterwards, and what indeed became identified with Pop Art, and I suppose one could say--this was in the fifties--the articulation of these ideas here by Alloway really anticipate what developed in New York and certainly here.

How would you describe yourself and your own attitudes in relationship to what Alloway said then, and at what point, if at all, were you aware of these attitudes and ideas as described?

MR. RUSCHA: Where? Of the phenomenon of Pop Art?

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, I'm speaking particularly of the attitudes themselves. There's a description here of attitudes that then made possible what we call Pop Art, dealing with Pop culture as a legitimate art alternative. Do you feel what he said there reflects your own view?

MR. RUSCHA: I've always felt that there have always been Pop artists in all ages. The term Pop Art made me nervous and ambivalent, and not understanding my position in this new so-called movement which was defined by, who knows--maybe, was it Richard Hamilton?

MR. KARLSTROM: I think Alloway gets credit for the term.

MR. RUSCHA: It could be. I originally did not know about this word Pop Art in the art phenomenon sense of it until later, but I guess it was Walter Hopps who first made a definition of the kind of art that was being produced at that time. He used the term, "new painting of common objects," when we see it actually goes beyond painting. It was culture, and it was so many other modes of making art that I guess I first responded to this term "common objects." The use of common objects, and so the word "Pop Art" was only a popularized public catchword which was used and misunderstood by many people. Anybody's use of Pop Art is okay with me, it always was. And if you speak of Pop Art meaning artists, the artists who are producing paintings, drawings that had to do with common objects, that's one thing.

But on a public level, I think that Pop Art was never truly understood. It was meant to encompass

movies, it was meant to encompass the car culture, it was meant to include all these things that had nothing to do with the museum type of art. So there was a broad usage of it, and there was a defined, more refined usage of it, too. I never truly understood whether I was a member of this movement or not. On the surface I was, because I used popular imagery. I used imagery from commercial sources, and imagery that was not usually associated, or was not usually meant to be cloudy and poetic and sensitive, and I used subjects that came from a less thoughtful side of life, a more decadent side of life, something that was not born out of a true poetic background.

MR. KARLSTROM: Would you say then that your notion--let's just use the word "Pop," although we realize that it has different meanings for different individuals and indeed has changed--that your notion of Pop is really an openness to life experience, to the environment in all of its manifestations, and really just responding to, or even to selecting those things which somehow catch your interest, which somehow then seem appropriate to be brought into-- let's face it--into a fine arts context.

MR. RUSCHA: Well, you're saying that I'm using a general term, which is true, I'm using it very generally. I think that maybe the so-called concept artists are also Pop artists in a way. A Pop artist can be anyone who has thrown over a recent set of values, and I think that Pop artists, and I speak of the painting, drawing, sculpture--that mode of thinking--I wouldn't call filmmakers Pop artists, no matter what kind of films they make, with the exception of some artists who have also made films, like Warhol, that you could say came under this category, but commercial films don't. But it's a throwing over of anything that is considered establishment, I guess, and so I see new Pop artists every so often emerge. I think that concept art and the whole movement and emotion of concept art is really another form of Pop Art. The next thing that comes around will also be the same thing.

But like I say, I've always been confused by the term and always wondering whether I belonged to that movement or not. If it simply means to derive your sources from popular culture, then I belong there. But if it's someone who makes custom cars, and does not necessarily feel about their custom cars as I do about my painting, see, I mean it's a different source. There's a broad way of looking at it, and then a more refined way of looking at it, or a tighter way of saying Pop artists are painters, sculptors and people like that. When this term Pop Art first came around I was not really included. So I didn't participate in those things, only because I was tucked away in a different part of the country I think.

MR. KARLSTROM: But very early on, somebody like Billy Al Bengston or Wayne Thiebaud, strangely enough, in a sense, and Mel Ramos, were all considered Pop artists, and it seems to me that the term is a confusing one. Many artists whose work has some element that can be connected with, let's say, advertising, let's say with common objects in their lives, are included as Pop artists. One could debate whether Wayne Thiebaud was ever a Pop artist, and I don't know that he would describe himself as such.

MR. RUSCHA: He responded to the call within it to explore subjects which were not commonly explored. That made him a Pop artist.

MR. KARLSTROM: Okay, but then it's subject matter--this is what I'm getting at --

MR. RUSCHA: It's simple subject matter.

MR. KARLSTROM: So subject matter is really fundamental to this notion of Pop Art. I mean obviously style, or I won't say obviously, do you feel that style is an aspect of Pop Art?

MR. RUSCHA: It's a superficial, first contact reaction, yes, I mean if something does look like the grill of a 1958 Buick, then you could say, yes, that's Pop Art. That would be the simple way of approaching the subject. But there have been Pop artists throughout history. Maybe Picasso was for invading a taboo subject. I'm sure all along in his career he's picked subjects that were known to be taboo for subject matter and, believe it or not, it will always exist, I'm sure, that there are certain established ways to do things, and artists get in a swirl of feeling about their work, and they get trapped into ways of seeing, and someone else will come along and explore a subject that is unheard of and so I think the Pop artists have been probably labeled for that reason, that they picked taboo subject matter.

MR. KARLSTROM: To explore what I think is a pretty fruitful line of discussion here, within your definition of Pop Art, and your allowing that it in one way or another has existed probably throughout history in different forms with different artists, could we then include, say, John Sloane and the Eight Group, the so-called ashcan painters in New York in the beginning of this century who turned to the city streets for subject matter?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, absolutely, they're Pop artists.

MR. KARLSTROM: Okay. What about the abstract--

MR. RUSCHA: Popular culture. It is a popular thing; all the trash in the streets was part of the popular culture. I don't think we're stretching the meaning of the word, do you?

MR. KARLSTROM: No, I hadn't thought of it quite that way.

MR. RUSCHA: See, there are other aspects of being an artist that I felt were more Pop artists. I felt there were artists whose imagery--who would never be considered Pop artists, who really approached their imagery like a Pop artist. They worked in series, which I found to be a foreign confrontation as I first approached it, and then I began to envy artists who could work in series. It seemed like the original Pop artists were able to do that.

Also, a lot of abstract painters did the same thing, they used the techniques and methods of their production, and were more "Pop" than my imagery was. I felt like they were able to take ten canvases and zip them off, and they may have no physical relation, no visual relation to anything in the popular culture, they may be total abstract paintings. They may look sort of foreboding, and reaction to them might be holy or something, but their method of production had to do with the method of production that we use in our popular culture, like manufacturing cars.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, then you mean the notion of mass production.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes. The notion of mass production was used by more people than just Pop artists, and yet I consider that a popular approach to producing things.

MR. KARLSTROM: Under that definition of serial imagery, or let's say, mass production, you would have to include Claude Monet with the series of haystacks, with the series of Rouen Cathedral

facade, or, I guess, would you agree with that?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes.

MR. KARLSTROM: Or are we stressing it too much?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, it's a tool of producing art that is inherent, it seems to be inherent, or only touched on by Pop Art. It seems like that is a technique, the technique of producing things in serial imagery is more in tune with Pop Art than it is for other artists, the non-Pop artists, and yet non-Pop artists, in a certain way, become more Pop than ones who use popular imagery as their subject matter.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, Ed, does this have something to do with the notion of continuum, in fact, life is not composed of isolated moments, it's change and is always moving, there's a continuity, a continuum, and in fact serial imagery then comes closer to reflecting in art the way we actually live and experience life? Going back to Impressionism and Mr. Monet, when he observed the haystacks under different light conditions, what he was interested in was producing a record that more closely--rather than freezing that image in one artificial moment, it's to provide more of a continuity, more a record of the way we actually, over a period of time in our lives, if we are observing, would see these things. Does that relate --

MR. RUSCHA: Maybe you mean that Monet gave each of his pictures within this serial imagery tender loving care, whereas you might say Pop artists do not do that, there is a colder, more artificial, mechanical approach to the way the work is done.

MR. KARLSTROM: Whose, Monet's?

MR. RUSCHA: No, the Pop artists are more mechanical. He may be more, say, individually caring about each one of those things, even though they both experience serial imagery.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, actually I'm not so sure that's true. What I was getting at--is there an awareness of art reflecting life experience, or coming close. Whether it's in the subject matter itself, commonplace objects, cars, shall we say, utensils and that sort of thing, whether it's in that, these things that are part of our lives, or the way we actually perceive and experience reality, our environment--Monet seemed interested in that. Do you feel that this capturing of attention to the realities of the way we live is a Pop attitude, whether the objects or the way we see things, not in isolation, whichever it may be, that this is an important aspect of the Pop attitude. I don't know if I'm making myself very clear. Tell me if I'm not.

MR. RUSCHA: I don't know what the Pop attitude is. I don't know whether it's meant to be mechanical about things, or whether it's meant to be thoughtful about things. Like I say, I almost don't understand what Pop artists mean. I don't know who made this up and why it ever got to be. Because I feel that all artists throughout history have basically been stumbling over the same problems all along, and there has been nothing new, and this idea of Pop Art on a grander scale and more historic scale, really, there's nothing new said about it except for the moment, the frustrations that happen at the particular time. That's why I felt like these artists that have emerged, that have begun to use popular imagery, only did it because of certain frustrations that were

hanging on at the time, like maybe in the realm of painting.

Probably Abstract Expressionism gave reason to the birth of Pop Art for its stagnation possibly, and Pop Art maybe began to fizzle in its own direction, which gave forth to God knows what, Minimalism, Conceptualism, and a number of other isms which keep moving. I think that there is no real strain of belief in anyone who is considered a Pop artist. I mean there's maybe a surface generality about them that might be defined, or seen, but I think that all those artists are first of all sincere, as sincere as the artists who created non-objective imagery, and why has non-objective imagery been so holy for so many years, how it ever got to be that way is beyond me, except as an historian, looking at it historically, you can understand why it did, because there was so much, the revolution of the camera, and the revolution of everything that happened at the turn of the century, the way we thought for so long which gave birth to a need of this kind of thing.

MR. KARLSTROM: I gather you feel that indeed Pop Art in part is a response to an earlier revolution, shall we call it, which was Abstract Expressionism, because obviously the Abstract Expressionists felt they were throwing over an old order, creating something new. They felt this was necessary, but then in short order they became no longer the revolutionaries that they were, and indeed what they had produced became sacrosanct, became sacred. It was a new academy almost, it took the position of academic art, and I gather you feel that in part the Pop artists, whoever they may be, were responding or reacting against that, beyond any involvement with life and commonplace objects, these being tools or whatever they may be, that in fact they were responding within a fine arts context to what was then being held up as the way, the correct way to do something.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, I think the tendency is to look at it as though--soldier-like--these soldiers suddenly marched in, later to be called Pop artists, and laid waste these old ideas done by the men who now have grey hair, and the style cycle continues and continues. And yet it will be this way, there will be other forms of art which keep coming along and the style cycle will keep moving on.

But if you backtrack for a moment, and think about the paintings that were done in the 1950s, I find them overwhelming, and I find them nothing but quality. I think the Abstract Expressionists, and all the paintings that came out of that period were great paintings, and I still think they are. When you go back and look at some of the things that happened in the late forties and early fifties, it was a very powerful time in art. I could see that had they not been said then, they would have to be said now, and at some point they would have to be said, they just seemed so absolutely natural for those things to come forth.

MR. KARLSTROM: You said that in the very beginning, or early on, you yourself were not viewed as a Pop artist, you weren't even at that point included, despite the fact that a few others from California were being included in the surveys and shows, except for the shows here in the early sixties which Walter Hopps put together, and Henry, and so forth. We've talked about some of those specifically, as a matter of fact. In 1963 Lawrence Alloway himself got involved in the scene, and you were included in a show called, "Six Painters and the Object" at the L.A. County Museum. I gather Alloway was selected then. So indeed you, at about that time, came to the attention--came to national and perhaps international attention, I gather, within the framework of Pop Art. So I would guess at that point, perhaps—



MR. RUSCHA: --that it was a visual--

MR. KARLSTROM: Right, all of a sudden you became a Pop artist. Does that fit the facts?

MR. RUSCHA: That could be. I think that there was originally a large Pop Art show in New York, and that was the title. What was that title you read?

MR. KARLSTROM: There was a show in July 1963 at the L.A. County Museum called, "Six Painters and the Object".

MR. RUSCHA: I believe I was in a show curated by Lawrence Alloway that was called, "Six More". The original six artists were artists in New York, if I'm not mistaken.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, maybe so, I think I have this wrong.

MR. RUSCHA: We can clear that up.

MR. KARLSTROM: Then in September--

MR. RUSCHA: At that point I didn't sigh with relief that I was finally accepted into the realm of being a Pop artist, it was not that important.

MR. KARLSTROM: Did you even think about it, "Oh, gee, here I am in a show, I don't know if they used the pop word then." As a matter of fact, John Coplans made a show at the Oakland Museum in September 1963, called, *Pop Art USA*, and you were in that. Certainly then, by 1963, you were being viewed as a participant in--

MR. RUSCHA: I was in that show, you mean in Oakland.

MR. KARLSTROM: Yes, exactly. Did you feel, did you even give it a thought that all of a sudden you were a Pop artist?

MR. RUSCHA: Well, I was probably confused by it, because I didn't know whether I even needed to be accepted in that particular club. I mean that making a name as an artist is a secondary part of the whole game, I think.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, or do you mean making a name within a particular movement?

MR. RUSCHA: Within a movement.

Mr. KARLSTROM: I would expect that any artist would be eager--

MR. RUSCHA: It's the first coffin nail, isn't it?

MR. KARLSTROM: I suppose, because then all of a sudden, eventually, you're old hat, right?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, let's move on to something that's very much related and bring it a little closer to home. We discussed before how you were attracted to Southern California when you were

starting out to go to art school and even after you had traveled in Europe. We talked about that and your time spent in New York. You returned here and you really did feel that you had, as you said, roots in Los Angeles, and this, I think, leads quite naturally to the next question. Do you see Los Angeles as a peculiarly, or even uniquely, Pop environment, Pop city? Do you feel that your imagery and your work was conditioned by your environment, by Los Angeles?

MR. RUSCHA: Without any question, it has been. And I felt like Los Angeles even, I guess it always will, offer things to people through just the multitude of industry that happens here, that another city could never offer, I don't think it could offer. Just the fact of physically being in this place, traveling around on the streets, and living in this community right here, makes the difference, and I don't think living in another community could do the same thing. I felt like I could almost have lived anywhere, I mean, to produce art--but the inspiration came right from this city. I don't think that I could have lived--drawn inspiration from another town, and had it reflect in my work--

MR. KARLSTROM: --as directly.

MR. RUSCHA: --as directly.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, this was actually what I was going to ask you--which was the importance of this environment to your art, your imagery, which indeed, and I suppose your attitudes as well, seem to grow quite naturally from this environment. I wonder if Pop elsewhere isn't more a reaction against something than an acknowledgment of what in fact exists. I'm thinking of Pop Art in England. What about the possibility that Pop Art had emerged first in England, I believe, and then New York.

It certainly became very prominent with its manifestations out here. In these other places, in these less Pop culture cities, if we want to view them that way, they had perhaps more of, in fact a fine art artificiality than the experience here in California, where life is Pop culture to a large extent, especially in Los Angeles. And so it's less of a jump, it seems to me, from this kind of experience here in Southern California, to using Pop as fine art. It's perhaps a more natural response to one's environment. What do you think about that?

MR. RUSCHA: Well, now you've historically pointed out that, you say that England and the English artists, and maybe that Pop Art could have possibly manifested itself first there. I can't argue with that. New York, possibly second, and other cities following. I think no matter at any point along this line, I say, if the English artists were the first to, say push forth this idea, their ideas came directly from Hollywood and Vine, and other spots of interest in this city of Los Angeles, and also the product of Los Angeles--

MR. KARLSTROM: Movies?

MR. RUSCHA: --have greatly influenced all of those people, the movies and music primarily, not art, I mean there was no history of art out here, there hasn't been. There might be a handful of people who have pushed themselves along as artists, but they had never become identified with the city, or the city has never become identified with them, at any rate. But the efforts and culture that came out of this Los Angeles, California is what has basically affected the first people who did this, and as you say, it might be the English artists, it's true. If not Los Angeles, the culture of New York City,

and all the ramifications of Madison Avenue and all that have shown to the people of the world what this culture is about.

MR. KARLSTROM: In the passage I read from Lawrence Alloway when we started out, it was very interesting, he pointed directly, cited directly, Hollywood, Detroit, meaning the automobiles, certainly, but maybe Motown music, but he meant the automobile, and then Madison Avenue, not so much the life of New York City, but advertising, and so these apparently at a very early stage-- this will backup what you were saying--these American elements were those things which attracted this group in England, so in a sense they were responding to a foreign influence.

MR. RUSCHA: They knew more about the culture than we did.

MR. KARLSTROM: This leads me to another question. I remember you made an interesting comment in our last session, talking about your time in England and the friendships that you came to develop there and the fond feeling for England. You made the remark, and I've got it here, in the last interview you said, "Yes, I got to like England better. Now I know a lot of people in England and most of the artists in England are friends, so I began to see how American they are. They're more American than we are."

MR. RUSCHA: It's a fact. The artists there are more aware of the happenings in America, I think than we are, and probably because they view it as strangers, and they see the kind of life that they don't have, and see maybe the potential of that life. So I think that those artists seized the potential they saw, and consequently were affected by the things that went on over here, not necessarily from a cultural standpoint. The English painters were not particularly influenced by American painters and paintings, as much as they were by the overall cultural push. I found all of those artists to be more engaged by anything American, soap, TV, autos, any subject that was screamed about over here, those people seemed to know more about it than we did.

MR. KARLSTROM: Is that because it was so commonplace for us, part of our lives, that we didn't focus on it that way. You don't often think about those things that are, that you participate in. The car culture itself, why think of it as an art form, or at least involving attitudes that might be tied in with fine arts? Certainly I think it's true that the English were the first to find that interesting. My question is this, though. There seems to be a fundamental, and I think profound, difference between British interest in American Pop culture, whether it's the export form, movies, cars, or whatever, or through the experience of living here and even, perhaps, New York's actual life experience. That's a special case. The difference between those and the way Southern Californians actually relate to this phenomenon.

MR. RUSCHA: We may just be blasé about it. I think that there is one fundamental thing, and that is that artists are attracted to glamour, you see. The American way of life possesses a certain siren voice of some kind, which is glamorous to almost any society, and maybe it's because the English happened to be English-speaking, and they could see our culture much better, they saw it as an ideo-social revolution beyond their style of life, and God knows, they're so socially conscious in England anyway, no matter what strata of life they're from, they're so socially conscious, to the point of being boring, that they're naturally going to feel this appeal of our glamorous American culture. Because it offers an absolute form of escape from those social values that they suffer from and keep telling us about.

MR. KARLSTROM: I've been told that Los Angeles is something of a mecca for the British, that there is really a large British community in this city, that they're attracted perhaps more than any other foreign group. Obviously we can think of one well -- known English artist who is very much in residence now, but has been visiting and spending time for years, and that's David Hockney. I guess what I'm wondering here is if it isn't an element of the exotic, a romantic notion that attracts these people. Of course, we're talking primarily about the artists, but the interest is finally on the part of the--say the British--the interest is indeed a romantic interest, rather than a reflection of life experience, a longing for something else.

MR. RUSCHA: The English are so refined, despite all their class troubles and maybe because of all their class troubles, that they have a particularly refined take on the sleazy side of life they find here in California, and the decadent side of life, so it takes a particular mentality for those people to come here, and especially another kind of mentality and talent to reflect on it.

Like David Hockney, I think, has maybe said some very poignant things about the style of life that is here in Los Angeles, and his work becomes non-national, it becomes a statement from an artist, rather than an artist who happens to come from England to live in Los Angeles. And so I think his work speaks as an international person, but it definitely speaks from someone who has lived a certain style of life here in California. So when people talk to me about David Hockney's work, I don't necessarily see David's style coming necessarily because he's English and transposed to Los Angeles. I see him as someone who just sees the life here. I don't see him as an Englishman, I see him as an artist. But it is true about English artists, that they see that particular curious sort of destruction of life, they see the--oh, maybe the almost biblical frustrations that exist here in Los Angeles, more so than a lot of American artists.

MR. KARLSTROM: I don't want to, if you'll excuse the expression, put you in bed with David Hockney.

You're two very different artists, there's no question about that, but I think, as we may have observed earlier on, that really you and he in many respects are the two figures often most associated with the community through your imagery and so forth. Aside from style, how would you separate yourself from David, perhaps more in your take on Los Angeles?

MR. RUSCHA: Well, let me back up for just a second. We've spoken about the English, and how their feelings are when they come to America. We've established that they generally do crave this idea of the popular culture, and especially what goes on here in L.A., and so when they come as artists, they come steamrolling here, see, because it's something that they've grown up with and seen, especially through movies, less with art and other forms, but in movies and music they've come to know the culture, they've come to know the city from afar, and they become hungry for this place. So when they come here, they come steamrolling in a sense, and we gradually get accustomed to the idea of living here, just like I did, I came from Oklahoma, but it was so much like Los Angeles that it couldn't be compared.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, you feel in a sense, although you were attracted to a California--

MR. RUSCHA: The germ was always there--

MR. KARLSTROM: Right.

MR. RUSCHA: --because I'm an American and I--

MR. KARLSTROM: And in a sense then Oklahoma City, or wherever it may be in this country, one still participates more directly in this kind of popular culture, a freedom in mobility than perhaps somebody coming out of England.

MR. RUSCHA: Maybe, you might say, better suited? I'm not so sure.

MR. KARLSTROM: But do you feel--let me pose another general but very much related question. We were talking--I used this term romanticism which again is a broad term, but a term that includes sometimes a nostalgia, a longing, a hunger for something that is basically foreign, something that's often-- romantic artists were often in the nineteenth century attracted to the exotic, they would travel elsewhere to record something that was exotic, stimulating, and enticing in that respect.

So let's pose the possibility that within Pop Art, incorporating related imagery and perhaps attitudes, and all that, that there may be two strains. One being this romantic seeking stimulation in the exotic, and the other being, shall we say, a Pop realism, which is simply looking around you and recording what you see, within Pop, pretty much the common object, the everyday reality of what's around us, whether a billboard sign, whether it's advertising, whether it's highways and cars. Do you buy that?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, I see it as a romantic streak, the thing that makes you crave, doing, creating something, or sidling up next to something that you can't have, or that you don't ordinarily have. And so artists feel it, and people who go out of curiosity feel it. It's felt in so many ways by all kinds of people, not just the artists, but it's a sense of grasping for something you can't have, but you have a notion about. You can't have it, yet you do have a notion about it.

MR. KARLSTROM: That certainly would not apply to you, though, and this is what I'm getting at. Indeed, you already, quite naturally, were participating and living this experience, these contacts, whereas --

MR. RUSCHA: Los Angeles is my way of doing that.

MR. KARLSTROM: Yes, but it became, it was your life finally, so would you feel that--what separates you and your work in that Pop manifestation from somebody like David Hockney? Is your work, do you feel it's possible that your work, and that of perhaps other artists who grew up within this type of culture, was more authentic? In other words, you were painting your world, recording your world, whereas the outsider is attracted, may participate in it, but is finally painting something more. Will you buy that?

MR. RUSCHA: No, because my statements about this place called Los Angeles are never self-consciously attendant on the idea of making it specifically Los Angeles. My work can almost come from the sources, while on the inside of me, right from this city here, the imagery can come from almost anywhere in America, you know, it's American. We can both agree that the pictorial goings on in my work are almost always from American sources, and American in subject matter, American

in feeling. My work has less to say specifically about this city of Los Angeles, but it's the city that gave all this to me on the inside, and not necessarily on the outside manifestation.

MR. KARLSTROM: What about that? If, as you say, you don't feel that your work is in the outside manifestation tied that specifically to place, what is it that the work is about, beyond the specificity of a Hollywood sign, something that is physically located here? You obviously feel that there are broader issues that come out in your work. Can you explain the difference between the external manifestation and your inner?

MR. RUSCHA: First of all, I find it curious that people have so quickly identified me with the city of Los Angeles, saying that I possibly have so much to say about this city. I am frankly puzzled by that. See, I don't think that, I'm not overtly attempting to describe what goes on in this city and I'm not being -- there are many other artists who do that. There are many other artists that take their pads and pencils and draw pictures of buildings here in Los Angeles, and in a sense are more local than I am. I think maybe that people feel like I'm local because I've been here so long, and operated as an artist for so long and survived.

MR. KARLSTROM: But I think there's more to it than that. I know in a way it's always a difficult question to answer, to be forced to finally say what your concerns really are in your work. It's a big question, but I guess that's finally what I'm getting at. We've agreed that it's not to record or immortalize or illustrate elements you run into in Los Angeles. I mean these are the images that you use perhaps randomly. You use them to do what?

MR. RUSCHA: Well, sure as we speak, the subject will always go back to things so incredibly, stupidly simple--

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, that's good--sunset.

MR. RUSCHA: --like the idea of sunset, not only just the sunset, but the word "sunset." I find that the pictorial look of something almost always stays close to the word that represents it, such as "sunset," "desert," "beach," and then you can keep moving on and on. Pretty soon you've pretty well described Los Angeles.

MR. KARLSTROM: You've really moved on to something that I think is extremely important, and that is the matter of words as images in your work, because ever since I first saw an Ed Ruscha, which may be back in 1964-65, as a matter of fact, perhaps a little earlier, you were beginning to use words. I think perhaps, if I remember, in Europe, in 1961, I don't know whether you started at that point, but you produced little works, little paintings, most of which incorporated words as images. Obviously this interest has continued almost without break up to this time. You started already to answer the obvious question, how do you see words as images? What are the relationships beyond what you've just said?

MR. RUSCHA: I guess I'm a child of communications, and I have always felt attracted to anything that had to do with that phenomenon of people speaking to each other, and so maybe that itself becomes synonymous with popular culture in that newspapers, magazines, printing, specifically, have had the most dramatic effect on me. Printing was it, to me. And the printed page and books began--I began to see not so much the content of it, but the curiosity of the thing itself.

So I looked at--so I visually took that on as material, as I guess inspiration, and so I wasn't--when I first became attracted to the idea of being an artist, painting was the last method, it was almost an obsolete, archaic form of communication. I found painting to be the least interesting of all those forms of communication. I felt newspapers, magazines, books, words, to be more meaningful than what some damn oil painter was doing. So I suppose it developed itself from that, into the idea of questioning the printed word, and then in questioning I began to see the printed word, and it took off from there.

MR. KARLSTROM: But you really do feel that, for you at any rate, there is an equivalency, in some way, between a word and what the word denotes. You mentioned "sunset." Not everybody would agree that--this is an interesting problem--that sunset indeed in sound, or in appearance, connotes other than our language which teaches us there's a connection, an actual sunset. You obviously feel that's so.

MR. RUSCHA: Well, isn't it curious that those little squiggles, the way they come about, and the way they form and follow one another and precede one another, go to make up that funny word? If you isolate a word for just a moment and repeat it ten, fifteen times, you can easily drive the meaning from the word and from the sound of the word, and I do that a lot with the printed word. And yet my mode of speaking would be tools, you know, with words and letter forms and all this--I find it curious that I've never wanted to misspell a word.

MR. KARLSTROM: You've never wanted to misspell one?

MR. RUSCHA: I've never wanted to misspell one.

MR. KARLSTROM: Haven't you ever? I've looked at lots of your--

MR. RUSCHA: I haven't misspelled one word.

MR. KARLSTROM: On purpose or accidentally?

MR. RUSCHA: Accidentally, I did a drawing called, *Chilly Draft* [1974], and I spelled "Chilly" c-h-i-l-i.

MR. KARLSTROM: Oh, good. That's pretty good, but that's punning, that's an out and out pun.

MR. RUSCHA: I'm sorry, I spelled the word--I probably meant the word "chilly," but I spelled it c-h-i-l-i.

MR. KARLSTROM: Oh. But your intention can be described in no other way as a pun on the word "chilly," in combination with "draft," which we're feeling through your door right now, there's a wind coming up. Are you interested in the device of punning, do you enjoy word games using words as puns, and in this case, of course, one might say you were creating visual puns?

MR. RUSCHA: Puns are, I think, a form of humor which is limiting.

MR. KARLSTROM: You're not seeking that.

MR. RUSCHA: No, if I was, then I would be restricted by a set of rules that I couldn't possibly

answer to for more than two days time as an artist. And if I was attempting to, say, form my ideas that have--say, if I did the word "sunset," then logically I would have a set of rules to make sunset like colors and sunset like shapes in spelling this word out. But my concentration is not there, it's in the word itself, and I'm not trying to divorce what the word means from what I use it as visually. I'd rather the word be, say, off by itself, and yet at the same time, knowing it means that thing out at the beach that you last see, the beautiful colors. But as a, like a little warrior, or a little thing to use, it becomes a subject unto itself, and doesn't necessarily have to represent that thing at the beach.

MR. KARLSTROM: But this hasn't always been the case with you. Let's think of a specific example, what about "frijoles," which of course are beans in Spanish which, unless my memory does not serve me well, you painted a work--

MR. RUSCHA: *Adios*. [1967]

MR. KARLSTROM: Aha. My memory doesn't serve me that well, but I seem to remember at one time you used the word "frijoles" made out of beans.

MR. RUSCHA: No, the word "adios," and the implication is easy to see, but believe me, unintentional.

MR. KARLSTROM: Really.

MR. RUSCHA: Unintentional. I've seen other words come back to me like this. People will say, "Oh, you do that because of this," and it's not always that absolute. Yes, the references are unintentional to me. I'm recalling this statement that Dave Hickey made about a *Standard Station* [series of paintings 1963-1968] painting that I made, and then another painting that I did called *Norm's* [1964], which was a restaurant on La Cienega. I did a painting which now has a story called *Norm's, LaCienega, on Fire*. He saw those two paintings as maybe making the same sort of statement, like *Standard* is also a--*Norm's*, normal, coming from normal, coming from drive-in, and the strain of that is totally unintentional to me but, nevertheless, it makes me wonder about my intentions at the time, that maybe there was some inexplicable invisible strain which goes through me which makes me put things down as I do. And my attraction to them, obviously I had little or no intention of, say, glorifying the Standard Oil Company when I painted a picture of a gas station. I had nothing further from my mind.

To go back to that question I think that the artist doesn't always know what he intends to be saying. I know myself that I work on a system of rough impressions of things and incomplete sputterings and some of my work, whether it's considered finished or not, it might be actually sputterings and incomplete, although maybe coherent. It might be incomplete thoughts about a particular thing, and that the artist has to open his work to the interpretation of the public, and the public is part of the work of art, the public's reaction is part of the work of art. Although I don't feel as though I'm trying to say use the word "standard" in my *Standard Station* painting to describe something that is ordinary and standard, the implication is still there, and I didn't see it until the painting was completed.

MR. KARLSTROM: I never thought of that.



MR. RUSCHA: It was just a--could have been "Mobil," could have been "Shell," but no, it was "Standard," and I guess that there's some deep-rooted reason for that, for my choice of that, a reason I don't even care to investigate, you see, it's just immediate subject usage for me, it's like snipping and being able to use subject matter as a way of making art. So I think the interpretation by the public also has an effect on the longevity and response from the public.

MR. KARLSTROM: This I think is most interesting, because Standard Station, for me, the image never connoted "standard," "normal," "standardized." I don't know that I really thought a great deal about what it actually meant.

MR. RUSCHA: But the implication is there.

MR. KARLSTROM: For me, at least, it didn't move along those lines, because I saw it much more as really a pure Pop image in terms of being drawn from an important element or aspect of American life and, that's for sure, American highway life, which is just about as important and essential to our mobility and our life patterns as anything else-- you have to stop and fill up with gas. That's not moving into the graphic element. The way you chose to reduce it, there's a tremendous element of formalism, I think, in that painting. A very eccentric foreshortening in perspective, and all that moves into direct concerns.

MR. RUSCHA: It's so simple, it's embarrassing.

MR. KARLSTROM: I took the liberty of mentioning Standard Station in this article that I wrote for the *Archives of American Art Journal* on cars. Now I'm going to set myself up and let you respond to what I wrote about it. I say, "Ruscha's variations on the *Standard Station* rank as a definitive statement of America's automobile culture. More so, in my opinion, than any representations of actual cars by the Photorealists. In form and content, *Standard Station, Amarillo, Texas* [1963] is truly an American icon." What I've done here as an art historian is really cast that work as an "icon." How do you feel about that?

MR. RUSCHA: It has to be called an icon, that's the main thing about that painting. There is an implication in the thing that it has to be that way, and it sort of aggrandizes itself before your eyes like that, and that was the intention of it, although the origins were comic. First of all, I had quite a bit of fun doing the painting.

MR. KARLSTROM: Oh really?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, and then making, say, two or three variations on that painting, which more or less completed the cycle I went through with that image, and rest in peace as it is. I felt there was absolutely nothing more that I could do with that image, and so I saw it through as a gargantuan approach to a big canvas, the biggest canvas I've done. It became a motif for me to explore in other ways too. I saw it as a loaf of bread, I saw it as several other things.

MR. KARLSTROM: How do you mean?

MR. RUSCHA: I saw it as a trademark. In the painting I did a large trademark with eight spotlights depicting the 20th Century Fox logo. I saw it as a Standard station and I saw it as comic comment

on the idea of speed and motion in a picture, and also just the physical doing of the thing was important. If I was only interested in simply the image that it created, I could have made it simpler by working on a smaller scale, but I wanted to work on a large scale, I wanted it to be a large painting.

MR. KARLSTROM: Most of your work up to that point, if I'm not mistaken, was generally on a smaller scale, in fact, much of your work is actually done on quite a small scale.

MR. RUSCHA: On a smaller and a different scale. Yes, I arrived at more or less of a formula for making paintings, and it seemed to me that the canvases came out seventy-two inches high by sixty-seven inches wide. In the sixty-seven, it was a matter of buying six-foot lumber and cutting it to the shape. Sixty-seven inches wide was a canvas that I could handle by myself, by extending my arms and moving physically across the room, and stacking and being able to manipulate the picture. If it had been, say, seven feet across, I couldn't get into this habit of handling my work as easily as if it had been sixty-seven inches wide.

It seemed perfect to the idea of moving these things around. I painted maybe fifteen or twenty pictures that I kept around my studio for two or three years and I was continually moving them, and I was walking straight up to them and grabbing the sides and physically moving them from one place to another. They seemed like friendly characters to me. The *Standard Station* was the only painting that went beyond this. It was almost like a diptych, without it being in two canvases.

MR. KARLSTROM: That's 121 inches wide. That may be the first, but that's not the only large scale painting you've done.

MR. RUSCHA: No, I've done a lot of large scale paintings since, but it seemed to be a perfect format for the kind of idea I had.

MR. KARLSTROM: What about *20th Century Fox*? [*Large Trademark with Eight Spotlights* 1962]

MR. RUSCHA: Well, that was the first painting I did. It was just a--

MR. KARLSTROM: That was the first painting you did?

MR. RUSCHA: No, the first painting like that that I did, it had the same format, about 120 inches, and it maybe was a little bigger than the *Standard Station*, slightly bigger. But it contained that horizontal thrust.

MR. KARLSTROM: Was *20th Century Fox*, I'm confused--did that come before *Standard Station*?

MR. RUSCHA: Before.

MR. KARLSTROM: Oh, I see.

MR. RUSCHA: That came before.

MR. KARLSTROM: So *Standard Station* in part is a refinement, or further investigation, of your ideas in the *20th Century Fox*.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, and it was a--I needed a simple answer to delineating a canvas, I suppose. So

it came out that I used a lower right-hand to upper left-hand corner diagonal across the canvas, and sliced it in half. Then it was a matter of filling one half of that canvas with some sort of idea that I had. So I could see that a lot of subjects could possibly work their way into this format in this way of--it was like broadcasting something from a tiny point to expanding beyond the limits of things that was the basis behind it.

MR. KARLSTROM: How did you decide, though, that that larger scale was needed? This interests me because, again, that maybe it's the--

MR. RUSCHA: I was being a painter, I think.

MR. KARLSTROM: I mean achieving something along the--you used it as a challenge, you felt I gather, that you really needed to attack, or try, a larger scale.

MR. RUSCHA: Oh yes, otherwise it would be parlor games. If I had set up a little drawing table, I obviously could have made the same image, but it was the overwhelming size that I had to have.

MR. KARLSTROM: Very Abstract Expressionist --

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, and even at that, by Abstract Expressionist standards, by Pop Art standards, they're small paintings, or medium- sized paintings, they're not even that big. To me they were big. See, I live slow, I keep living slowly, slowly, slowly. How many artists have done paintings over fifteen feet wide? Lots.

MR. KARLSTROM: God, Rosenquist, what's that huge airplane thing? It seems that the really large scale, whether it's Abstract Expressionist or Pop we're thinking of, grew up in a New York situation.

MR. RUSCHA: I think the size of Pop Art came out of Abstract Expressionism. The size of those paintings done by the Pop artists.

MR. KARLSTROM: But nobody here, it seems to me, has ever felt the need. Maybe there's a simple reason for it, although I know plenty of artists have the studio space here to work on a very large scale. But when you think of--well, at least the Pop people, I think of most of Bengston's images, not so much recent ones, some are getting bigger again, but the Pop things are generally rather modest in scale and format.

MR. RUSCHA: Oh yes. I mean it's one of the oldest dance steps in the history of art, this idea of doing something that will either hang on a wall or sit in the middle of a courtyard and somehow, cosmically overwhelm you, just by its size, see. And the imagery is almost secondary to that physical fact of hugeness. That's always been there.

MR. KARLSTROM: You obviously did not feel the need, though, to continue meeting the challenge of a grand scale. Again, I'll have to wait to see your retrospective which is coming up, but I have a feeling that most of the works are going to be no bigger than whatever this arm span dimension was, except for some of those longer ones.

You said something interesting earlier, that within the last few years you seemed committed somehow to this very wide format, those canvases that--I don't know how wide they are, but they're

certainly not very high, so you have these long, skinny things. How come?

MR. RUSCHA: Oh, just a natural progression of extensions of syntax.

MR. KARLSTROM: What does that mean? Does it have something--is it related to *Standard Station*, *20th Century Fox*?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, it is.

MR. KARLSTROM: And the diagonal--

MR. RUSCHA: It is. It's the idea of things running horizontally and trying to take off. It's almost like an airstrip in a way. The fact that you could--well, my newer paintings have all smaller words, very small in some cases, a quarter of an inch high.

MR. KARLSTROM: Yes, you can hardly see it. One hardly knows that it's a Ruscha.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, and consequently they make terrible reproductions, it's impossible to reproduce them or show them in any--it's impossible to make posters out of them. But I suppose that I'm working through this period of paintings now because I feel like there's some kind of a mechanical motion behind it, there's some robot motion behind it that asks you to walk from one side of the canvas to the other, to read what was on it. I suppose that's what is really attracting me to those things now. I feel like I haven't actually rounded out my statement with them yet. But they do relate to that motion which is implied in the *Standard Station* painting, and some of those other paintings like that. So possibly it all goes back to abstract art, you know, just the--

MR. KARLSTROM: Scale and the motion and energy --

MR. RUSCHA: The scale and the motion, all take part in it.

MR. KARLSTROM: Not energy, that wouldn't--

MR. RUSCHA: You see, it's not so much subject matter I'm painting, I'm a combination of so many things. I feel like abstract art has really affected me, and I think it's affected anybody who even paints in a realistic manner.

MR. KARLSTROM: Let me go out on a limb, may I? You mentioned movement and mobility, in connection with the emphasis on the diagonal with these long horizontal formats where you, I assume, actually forced the viewer to move in front of the canvas from one little word to another. I won't hold you to that, but this is what came across to a certain extent. What about the idea of mobility in your work as a possible reflection of one aspect of American culture, gas stations, the automobile and car culture, the importance of mobility in our life. I suspect that maybe not very much of this is conscious, but are you willing to acknowledge that it plays a role at all? Does this have anything to do with it?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, it does, it sure does. I used to have a 1939 Ford. I'm more interested in the function of getting around than I am in the stylistic happenings of cars. I don't think there's today, in 1981, that much of an emphasis on style as there was in the old days. You might agree with me on

that. The styles of cars don't represent the kind of people who drive them around, and they don't represent the frustrations that the people have who are driving them around. There's no particular style of car that represents teenagers today, there's no style of car that represents anybody. You can find a banker who drives the same kind of car a bank robber might drive.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, the bank robber who is successful will drive something like it.

MR. RUSCHA: The only thing that people do use is possibly the success symbolism of an automobile. That seems to still be there. I guess that people who have more money drive Mercedes Benzes, Cadillacs and all that. That seems to be the only strain of truth behind cars anymore and so the stylistic visuals of cars have been more or less reduced over the past fifteen or twenty years, and have less effect on us than they did before.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, I never actually thought of cars as such, in terms of stylistic considerations and as manifestations of segments of culture in your work. A really more fundamental issue that they also represent is mobility. This is the single thing that I'm trying to flush out at this moment because, as I say, I went out on a limb, I may be stretching it, but you mentioned the word "mobility" in connection with these paintings, whether it's the diagonal which creates that kind of thing, and then the composition, the perspective and so forth, you're talking about creating movement like a broadcast, that's motion in itself, there's a moving or a spreading out. Is this a concern in your work?

MR. RUSCHA: It's not a concern of mine, but there is an underlying fact of the way the pieces fall together in the story of how the imagery gets to be like it is. In a sense, the manifestation might be implying that it is backed up by the beauty of the speeding automobile. I mean, it does have that, it almost says that too, and it's something that I'm not trying to make paramount in my statement about that, it's just that it goes without saying that I like a car as a cultural symbol, as a cultural implement, and yet I'm not glorifying it at any point, I'm not glorifying the idea of the car. The car's probably soon to be a dinosaur the way things are. Motion is certainly always going to be around. We'd all fizzle up if we had to face life and not move around.

MR. KARLSTROM: Without putting too fine a point on it, mobility is particularly important, and in the form of the automobile, in your town, in this community, it would seem to me that one could possibly, whether it's conscious or not, in responding to your environment--I think we've well established earlier on in discussing Pop Art--that this might be an element. In other words, Ed Ruscha, to do anything, has to get in a car to do things at different places, to get in a car and move around.

MR. RUSCHA: Isn't it funny how the word "streaking" has had to do with the whole subject. And taking your clothes off and running down the street somehow is connected with the chrome strips on cars, and the motion in my painting, possibly, and also to sex, and--

MR. KARLSTROM: What about sex?

MR. RUSCHA: Well see, it's there, it's there in streaking in that you're exposing your body before people, and it's there in automobiles because of motion, motion is always a metaphor or a fact of sex. The two are just so blatantly obvious that I always felt like it was discourse for subject material.

MR. KARLSTROM: And streakers, I never thought of that. There's another element that comes into play here, ties in with mobility and indeed perhaps Southern California life style, or at least how it's perceived by many, that is the notion of freedom. Taking off one's clothes is a very definite pronounced statement of freedom, run wherever you want. Does that fit in with your thinking at all?

MR. RUSCHA: Oh, I guess it does, that implies it does. The idea of throwing off the old is a matter of almost throwing off your old clothes and running out in the street.

MR. KARLSTROM: God, there's a book, or at least an article on this subject, don't you think?

MR. RUSCHA: Oh yes, I think that some psychologists have worked that over pretty well.

MR. KARLSTROM: I have never really thought of that. Okay, now we've determined that *Standard Station* has --

MR. RUSCHA: --streaking a girl's hair, you know, putting a blond streak in your hair.

MR. KARLSTROM: It sounds to me like you've got another painting.

MR. RUSCHA: I've got a definite fixation.

MR. KARLSTROM: Let's see. Before we break, I would like to, if possible, dispatch a couple more questions that occurred to me in connection again with you, with where you are. L.A. is blessed--it depends upon your point of view whether blessed or cursed--with a great deal of public commercial art. I'm thinking of the billboards, for instance, which spring up almost everywhere. You go down Sunset, Santa Monica Boulevard so much, you hardly see billboards. In addition to that, there are many examples of the really eccentric architecture, Pop architecture, if you will, well known through books now because many of them have been destroyed, where you have a hamburger stand that's shaped like a hamburger, the Brown Derby and whatever. There's a new book out called, "California Crazy," which of course celebrates these, and most of the examples are from right around here. It's really the Southern California phenomenon.

Then, more recently, there are the wall paintings which have sprung up, not just in the barrio, the Mexican mural movement, but the mural movement itself, with Terry Schoonhoven and Vic Henderson, the L.A. Fine Arts Squad and Twitchell. An entirely public expression, taking fine art, and fine art methods and so forth, and just broadcasting them on a large scale on the wall, so that when you're driving around, you're confronted with these things. It makes a real, what shall we say, a cornucopia of Pop visual stimulation. Do you feel personally, in your own work, a special relationship to this aspect of mural art?

MR. RUSCHA: No, I don't.

MR. KARLSTROM: You don't. Does it interest you?

MR. RUSCHA: Well, I see stylistic tendencies. There's something probably animal and organic about graffiti-ing on walls. I'm sure there's some basic human thrust and frustration, convulsive outpouring of human spirit that comes out of throwing yourself into "graffiti-izing" some wall. I see that as a viable means of expression for human beings. But my work is not that affected by it. It only

happens to be that there are some similarities, even though graffiti is not considered art, I mean, billboards are, but graffiti is not.

There are other forms of art like the stylistic statements of Chicano automobiles. They are some of the strongest statements of the twentieth century, if you think about it, as far as the car culture --it's the only car style part of our culture in the last ten or fifteen years. No one else is making automobiles like they are, or customizing their automobiles on a personal level, on a personal basis. There's almost no example of that in our gringo, white man's world.

MR. KARLSTROM: No, I guess not. But what about--

MR. RUSCHA: Billboards is back to communication.

MR. KARLSTROM: I was going to ask you about billboards.

MR. RUSCHA: And communication is what I've always been interested in. They become images on the billboard and they become, I guess, functional images in that they sell products, and mine don't, but it's still paint on a lifted up surface. People see it and it's on a grand scale. I'm curious, I'm interested in it from that standpoint, but it has nothing to offer me beyond that. I don't want to go out and paint billboards, I don't think that my work on a billboard is going to mean anything more, probably less, than someone who's making an out and out functional thing. I mean it should be accepted for exactly what it is.

Occasionally I'll see a billboard that I think is better than another. There are some ingenious billboards, even billboards with three-dimensional objects, and the ones done up on Sunset Strip have this sort of gilt-edged rock world touch to them. But as far as them having any direct relation-- they only make a collage for us to respond on a general level, and that general level has touched me, but not in a specific way. I would never want to paint a billboard.

MR. KARLSTROM: Too bad. Well, I guess we pretty well dispatched billboards and such, relegated them to the position where they belong in terms of your work. I gather you feel in some way that cars, and car culture, and what it represents has more relevance to your interests, and perhaps to your art than some of these other things. All of these things we've mentioned, or most of them, seem to involve somehow an idea of style. I mean, what's interesting about them in a sense may be style, whether it's life style or whatever.

There are those who have said that style is very important, and is almost a hallmark of some Los Angeles art, to the extent that you can group it together, and that indeed many artists, and I'm thinking particularly of the Venice group, not all of them live in Venice, or ever did, but as a group, they were particularly interested in style, and life style. I'm not talking about technique or style in the art, perhaps even a sense of style in the way you live as an art expression. How do you feel about that?

MR. RUSCHA: Well, it's true, there's no doubt about it, and everybody is affected by style. To be not affected by it is to be stylish, in a sense, to have another certain type of style.

MR. KARLSTROM: In other words, you can't escape it.

MR. RUSCHA: There's no possible way to escape it in any way. It's simply the way a person is, and the way a person acts and style has a lot to do with choices. Choosing one thing over another, almost like choosing a shirt and putting it on is the whole motion of going through style all over again.

MR. KARLSTROM: Let's see if we can't think of some specifics. Now, recently in *The L. A. Times* you and Billy Al Bengston and Chuck Arnoldi, and I think Jim Corcoran appeared on a fashion sheet, the best-dressed artists. I don't know who took the vote, again, I don't say that this is peculiar to here, but I've observed over the years that much of the art could move quite comfortably and perhaps with a sense of humor and irony in the world of style and fashion. This was a few months ago I think that you--you saw that, I'm sure. What was your feeling about that? Does it mean anything, or is it almost a lark?

MR. RUSCHA: Well, I feel first of all that artists have somehow been made to struggle for their position in things, and that an artist is almost obliged to be humble about himself. Now I don't know where that comes from, but I feel that it does arise. It's hard enough to make a living as an artist as it is, and to commit yourself totally to being someone who just goes off and creates his own images without having someone telling you how it should look and what it should say. The extension is simply that if you feel adamant, and if you have the strength about your own position as being an artist, being someone who makes his own choices, then naturally you've got to do it in other forms of the way you live, like what you drive--

MR. KARLSTROM: Yes, what you drive, that's most important.

MR. RUSCHA: Least important, actually, is what you drive. But I guess clothes are another form or manifestation of this blatant positioning of yourself in the whole picture of things, and so whether you wear a blue shirt or a black shirt or a red shirt is beyond the point. I guess it has a lot to do with just the fact that it feels comfortable. A lot of people are not stylish because they don't feel comfortable, and the style goes back into the position they have in life, and not so much about the choice of their clothing.

So I've always felt that the first thing to have strength about is your position, your calling, and if you have a more or less definite feeling about that, then your idea of style will be definite. That is the same with the art itself. The visual appearance of your work and whatever curlicues fall in which direction also has to do with the way you put clothes on your body. Other than that, most artists dress very drab, myself included.

MR. KARLSTROM: What about the quite natural connection here to Los Angeles, or let's use the term, Hollywood, a mere relationship between the visual artists, by that I mean painters and so forth, and the film community, the celebrities, movie stars and all that? I know that at parties and so forth they come together. I think it's unusual in this town, there's a glamour side of it here, that perhaps, well, obviously it's in New York, but almost in a different way. There's a superstar phenomenon, where the artists have moved into the position of superstar and I suppose they're sought after for fashionable parties. I have a feeling a lot of it's uptown, as a matter of fact.

MR. RUSCHA: It's really in a minority, I think. Artists are not really considered that important. There's a token artist now and then--



MR. KARLSTROM: You mean here now?

MR. RUSCHA: The conception of an artist representing something that is, oh, chic, is almost like a token, because most artists-- well, actors, first of all, actors, and people in the entertainment business I find to be narcissistically flamboyant. And artists are not, they're just not. Artists may be a little more uncertain of their position in things, but that is despite the fact that actors probably tend to have more neurosis than artists do because of their appearance, because of their need to have direct communication with the public. Artists don't have to have--

MR. KARLSTROM: Their voices, their faces, their bodies --

MR. RUSCHA: Exactly, all those things are right there. And so they tend to be people who, even if they falsely do it, tend to come on more flamboyant. They might have insecurities about it, but they do tend to be flashier than artists are. And so that's the main difference between artists and people in the entertainment world.

MR. KARLSTROM: But don't you feel, is it not true that because of the peculiar industry, as they call it here in Los Angeles or Hollywood, that there is an added element which perhaps one wouldn't encounter so much in another community, let's say San Francisco or somewhere else. The people who work in the industry here are involved in creative activity, many of them, in the media and communication, something that interests you. And obviously many artists are involved in photography and film, sometimes there's even collaboration. So don't you feel that to an unusual extent here, our fine artists have this contact with entertainment people, is there not perhaps then some sort of an effect from that contact, maybe only in life style, I don't know, maybe not?

MR. RUSCHA: If you do compare the two worlds of thought, the entertainment industry and the artists, there's less understanding on the part of the entertainment industry towards artists than there is vice versa. Artists have more respect for their craft than I believe they have for ours.

MR. KARLSTROM: Really?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, I believe so. They don't quite understand --

MR. KARLSTROM: How do you guys get invited to their parties then?

MR. RUSCHA: God knows. But there's less of an understanding, witness all the movie stars who buy clown paintings and go off to make their own clown paintings. They have less tolerance for us and for the limits of our craft. Yet we share similar problems. The artists in the industry anyway, which are the actors and the directors and the people who are directly concerned with the creative side of the business, are less in touch with us than we are with them. We see their respective craft and their products more than they do us. It's just a cold fact.

MR. KARLSTROM: Isn't that probably though a result of what we've been talking about almost all along, the importance of life experience and popular culture, something we all can't avoid. It's more difficult--it's impossible to avoid that in which they are more participating, the glamour aspect of it, the silver screen and all, which has formed many of our values as we've grown up. It's impossible for you to avoid that. On the other hand, it seems fortunately much easier for those involved with

that aspect to be involved with, or appreciative of, or even to come much in contact with what you're doing.

MR. RUSCHA: See, I think it's easier for us to understand because we're naturally drawn into, say, a story about some man who's gone off and had his own struggles, and the story becomes part of the movie. We sympathize with this, but, how, on the other hand, can they sympathize with us when we go off and paint a picture of a square and say, "This is my art." They don't see it, see, they don't see our side of things. We see their side of things because what they produce is something that the world can enjoy. We don't do things that the world can enjoy. We only do things that a certain very minor group of people respond to. And so ours is very eclectic and very elitist in a sense, small scale, but every bit as honest as what they do. But I don't feel that there's a general sharing.

MR. KARLSTROM; Isn't it strange, though, what with this contact, to what degree it exists I don't know, direct personal contact between you and your colleagues and certain people in the entertainment industry, that there isn't an opportunity for greater appreciation on their part, a greater understanding of the fine arts than apparently is the case. I wonder why that hasn't come about. Perhaps it's a matter of continuing education. I mean, have you ever thought about this, found it sort of peculiar?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, I do, because on one hand, they're artists, but they're doing an entirely different kind of art. They're doing stories that are intended to appeal to the intelligence of people, and not necessarily--the stories don't deal with deep innuendos that maybe we might be involved in. We might be involved in something that we truly believe, in the notion that we don't know what it is we're trying to set up by putting one color next to the other. We're presenting things as problems to people and not explaining them as stories, which is what they do.

MR. KARLSTROM: They're experimenting, basically.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes. Now, I think musicians are the same way. We can listen to their tunes and see their tunes and yet they can't necessarily come back and see our art.

MR. KARLSTROM: Really?

MR. RUSCHA: They don't see it, yes.

MR. KARLSTROM: That's strange.

MR. RUSCHA: It is strange, it is strange.

MR. KARLSTROM: Obviously there are exceptions to this.

MR. RUSCHA: See, we don't have a tune to keep, we don't have a rhythm to keep up and the tune, it's got to sound right or the tune is off. We deal in combinations of things that don't have the tunes being right, and we might work deliberately out of rhythm, that might be our subject, to work out of rhythm. But theirs is definitely locked in by rules of rhythm and rules of making sounds and tones working right, making stories work right, making motion across the screen, the movie screen, so that the action properly works together. They're interested in the logical side of things and we're interested in the things that clash, or are inexplicable.

MR. KARLSTROM: On the other hand, there's a whole branch of music, most of it's not popular music, or certainly movie music, which addresses itself to some of these very issues and goals you're describing in painting. As a matter of fact, some of these composers, a great example, John Cage, naturally, are extremely close to some of the painters in New York. Johns, I guess, Rauschenberg, I'm not sure who his friends are, but it's almost as if they're dealing with exactly the same problems in different media. I'll bet you there's a community like that around here. I don't know who they are. What I gather is that there hasn't been, at least in your experience, a coming together. What about your friend Mason Williams, who I believe is involved in music?

MR. RUSCHA: He is, he's interested in symphonic music at this time. He's gone through many changes, and always loved being a comedian and has always brought that--. We share a certain black humor in our reaction to things, and found our spirit to be much in common and consequently we've produced a lot of things together; we've made some books together.

MR. KARLSTROM: Right, which I want to discuss.

MR. RUSCHA: We made "Royal Road Test" [1967] together.

MR. KARLSTROM: But do you feel that he has an understanding of what you're doing?

MR. RUSCHA: I think he does.

MR. KARLSTROM: Or is he supportive just as a friend? It's hard to say.

MR. RUSCHA: He's both, but I think he sees some of the things that I've been doing long enough that he begins to see it. That's another thing I've discovered along the way. If you do something enough times, the message begins to change direction and take on a more serious note. If you do one silly thing a hundred times, and a hundred different variations, people begin to see the perseverance in it, first of all, and begin to see it as they--somehow it makes a stronger statement.

MR. KARLSTROM: What about your books? This is a last thing that I'd like to at least get started on. You have created I don't know how many, but a fair number of really interesting little booklets. I don't know what the first was, and I don't know the exact progression; I'm certainly familiar with some of them, "Various Small Fires" [1964], and then "L.A. Apartments" ["Some Los Angeles Apartments," 1965], Buildings along the Sunset Strip ["Every Building on the Sunset Strip," 1966], "Gas Stations" ["Twenty six Gasoline Stations," 1962], "Palm Trees" ["A Few Palm Trees," 1971], and the one that I can think of--I mean I can think of a number of them, but the one that I'd like to kick it off with, if you don't mind is "Crackers," [1969] which you did with -- when was that?

MR. RUSCHA: 1969, I believe.

MR. KARLSTROM: And that was a collaboration with Larry Bell? At least he was in it.

MR. RUSCHA: See, it was a movie best of all, but first it was a book. It was a book that was a movie fallen short. I didn't realize I was going to make a movie, but I wanted to make one and had no funds to, so I made the book first, and then came the movie. The book was from the short story by Mason Williams, called "How to Derive the Maximum Enjoyment from Crackers" [*Boneless Roast*. Los Angeles, CA; Mason Williams: 1967]. The story literally follows his story, and it possessed

some of the shaggy dog techniques that he and I responded to in everyday living situations. He got the story down, and I saw it as a potential story, and I wanted to investigate this telling of the story in some way. I couldn't do it with a painting; it wouldn't work. I couldn't make a drawing of it, I couldn't write a song because I'm not a song writer. So it came to pass as a book. But as books, I could see that this was my least favorite. It had less to do with my orientation with my art—

MR. KARLSTROM: "Crackers," you mean.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, the book "Crackers" had less to do with me as an artist. I felt it was possibly, for that reason, one of the weakest things I've ever done.

MR. KARLSTROM: It was fun, though.

MR. RUSCHA: It was fun, but the important thing about it was that I saw it--I stopped for a moment and saw a story, the telling of a story. It was an option to being a sort of visual raconteur. But even at that I felt like the book was not the proper way to do it, even though I had, unfortunately, seen that after it was finished. But the thing that was good for me about it was that I was able to make a film out of it, and that--

MR. KARLSTROM: Was that the first film?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, the first film I did, and I subsequently called it *Premium* [1971, 24 min.], because of *Premium Crackers*. The idea of making a movie was like a whirlwind project. I had gotten a Guggenheim grant for \$13,000 and literally spent the money in five days making the movie. I couldn't write checks fast enough, and I immediately saw immense problems in putting together a movie project. So I taught myself an expensive lesson.

MR. KARLSTROM: Luckily it was at the Guggenheim's expense.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, luckily it was at their expense and not mine. But I had gotten the Guggenheim grant from the work I had done with books, which I've always felt to be one of the private sides of me that is particularly strong. I felt like my books had been in a sense, oh, unique, or kissed by angels, they have not had to endure criticism. They don't ask to be criticized because the types of books I was involved with--I wanted something that was on a non-critical platform. That sat out on a platform, they were things that were just curiosities unto themselves, and I wanted a sense of--I didn't want people to look at them and say, "Oh, well."

They look at a painting and a painting has a direct function, hang it on a wall. It has--besides several thousands of years of history and weight behind it, if you look at it that way, the books didn't. The books represented an excursion off onto some side issue that was even puzzling to me, and yet offered me a platform for speaking, in a sense. The first book I did was "26 Gasoline Stations." It gave birth to the painting, too, of the *Standard Station*.

MR. KARLSTROM: Which, just for the record, was pointed out to me, are gas stations only from between Los Angeles and Amarillo, Texas, is that right?

MR. RUSCHA: No. The one that I picked, I did the painting using studies from snapshots I'd taken. The one that I picked was situated in Amarillo, Texas.

MR. KARLSTROM: But in the book itself, is it true that those gas stations are along the way on that particular journey?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, they're on US 66, between Oklahoma City and Los Angeles.

MR. KARLSTROM: But they're not from all over the country.

MR. RUSCHA: No. They're on US 66, the old US 66, between Los Angeles and Oklahoma City.

MR. KARLSTROM: Route 66.

MR. RUSCHA: Route 66, yes.

MR. KARLSTROM: That was the first one.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, which was my--you know, Route 66, I've had a great affection for that road because of its connection between the places I've been and worked. It was like a continuous ribbon, it was like a real magical formula for keeping my life going. I thought it was great.

MR. KARLSTROM: Now it's Interstate 10.

MR. RUSCHA: It's Interstate 10 now. Not much to say about that.

MR. KARLSTROM: Now let's go back even a little further. You obviously had experience, you had worked at Plantin Press for, I don't know, a while. You obviously had experience. I don't know if you were typesetting or what you were doing.

MR. RUSCHA: Plantin Press --Saul Marks was a book printer, a fine art book printer. He believed in letterpress. It's probably obsolete now, I'm sure it is. It's been totally replaced by other forms of printing.

MR. KARLSTROM: There are a few left.

MR. RUSCHA: I've become lost from the whole medium myself. But he had a lot of type there, a lot of lead type that he set by hand. I learned to do that, and I learned to operate the offset press, but his real love was book printing and letterpress printing. So I got a flavor of things from him and from that place, the smell of ink, etc., that I got under my fingernails and never got out. But it made me aware of the techniques of things. If that man had seen my paintings, I think he would have been repulsed, confused and repulsed.

MR. KARLSTROM: I don't know. You can't ever tell. Clearly that experience prepared you for--

MR. RUSCHA: --for the next step along the line. Yes. So it did, it influenced me a lot toward doing books, and also it moved me into an area of exploring with premeditated imagery. See, I guess, in school we were taught to face a blank canvas, and have it out with the blank canvas. I found it difficult to do, and so I thought my way was to preconceive the things that went on, contrive them, what have you, have a notion of the end and not the means to the end. The means to the end has always been secondary in my art, and I've seen beyond the means, and so the fun of working in it is not always that much fun. It's the end product that I'm after.

MR. KARLSTROM: You're certainly not a process artist.

MR. RUSCHA: No, I'm not a process artist.

MR. KARLSTROM: You know what you're not.

MR. RUSCHA: --find out what I am. But with the books I was able to see that there was some magic in dreaming up something that may not even have come to pass yet. So I came up with not only the pictures in my mind, not just the places, not just these specific gas stations or anything like that, but I saw a book out there full of photographs of gas stations, full of twenty-six gas stations, if you will.

MR. KARLSTROM: How did you decide twenty-six, arbitrarily?

MR. RUSCHA: I pondered--it was arbitrary--but I pondered it and somehow it had the right sound, the right feeling, it was the right thing at the right time.

MR. KARLSTROM: Twenty-six.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes. I had a subject, and I had a specific, and I had a qualitative -- quantitative thing about it.

### **July 16, 1981**

MR. KARLSTROM: Most of the little books I've seen are, I guess, privately published, generally incorporating photographs often in a serial way. You said something that interested me very much. You described the books as your favorite, for some reason, I guess in a personal way, favorite expression and body of work. What did you mean by that? Why do you feel that way about the books?

MR. RUSCHA: Well, first of all, it amuses me when people say "little books," but I think I know what they really mean, in that the books are privately published and very unaggressive as books go. But I guess they're my favorite--they were my favorite--I say were because I haven't done a book for a few years now--but it was a very private thing that I had with myself, in the expression I had in those books, because of their uniqueness. There were no rules to be written and no rules to be followed in the same sense that there are in painting and sculpture and other forms of art. So in a sense they had no--there was no school of thought, and I felt at that time that it was unexplored. That's one reason it attracted me.

MR. KARLSTROM: I'm familiar with some of the books, of course, and I think the ones that come to mind-- we talked about "Crackers" a little bit last time, we went into that. That seemed to be a special case, because if I remember correctly that was almost like a project for a film, I believe that's what you said. You felt that was a little different from what you really mean by the most successful ones.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, "Crackers" was a narrative, and it was lighthearted and not as stoic or as--oh, maybe not as severe as the other books. For that reason, it's my least favorite. But it was a book nonetheless first of all, and then came a movie. If I could go back and restructure and re-plan, redo,

it would be first a movie and I would never make a book. It was like a little flip picture book in a sense. You remember those old books that were made years ago, you just flip through? It's almost like that. They were like photographs, a photograph on each page of an event that just took place and in that order without the movement.

MR. KARLSTROM: It's interesting that you mention the little flip books. Actually, they worked as manual animation, if I remember correctly. You flipped through and the little characters would--do you see any relationship between those and--you mentioned in fact in "Crackers"--do you see a relationship there? What about the others that incorporated what I call serial imagery or series, where you would show not the same image, but related images throughout, sometimes page after page, whether they're apartments or palm trees or fires, Sunset Boulevard or gas stations. It seems they share this interest in repeating similar images. But do you think that--do you see any connection between the little flip books and these and yours?

MR. RUSCHA: Well, of course, the art form of the flip book is one facet of making books, one of many facets of making books. I mean, I never employed that use of the flip--manual operation--I've never used that. I wouldn't say "Crackers" was that, it was not that at all. You're speaking of the technique of up in the corner of each book where the thumb is flipped, and you actually see the motion going across. No, I've never used that, and I don't think that could apply to my books at all.

MR. KARLSTROM: What I'm interested in is not so much the flip book--let's forget that. One doesn't want to make too much of that at all, but the use of repetition. Now it's not creating animation, but, when you line up a series of images, especially of Sunset Strip, where you have--it's a foldout-- and you have photographs of all these buildings as one would drive by them on Sunset Strip. What you have is if not animation in the flip technique, you have the implication of movement and--

MR. RUSCHA: Choppy movement.

MR. KARLSTROM: Choppy movement, it's true. What interests me, and maybe it applies even to the more conventional format where you just turn the pages and you see different gas stations or apartments or building, whatever they may be, for me there's an implication of motion, of traveling, very much so, I think, in "Sunset." ["Every Building on the Sunset Strip," 1971]

MR. RUSCHA: It's implied anyway. It's implied in a lot of the books. So many of the books are architectural in nature, like the gas stations and the apartments, and a few of the other books. So they all possess a ground line, a landscape line, that is actually horizontal, and so it suggests itself all the way through the book that there is a ground line. You're standing at person height, looking at these things, and each page is this way, so it continues, it is.

MR. KARLSTROM: It seems to me anyway--there's implied movement, and moving from one place to another takes time. Were you at all conscious ever, or interested in this idea of time, the element of time, passing time, as you, say, leaf through a book or survey the Sunset Strip. Whether it's intentional or not, it seems to me that you get both motion and time. I was wondering if that's one of the elements.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, time is one of the things. In none of the books did I actually explore that technique of time. But I had worked on a book that was never produced, called--and I did have a

title for it at that time--*Standard Station at Various Times of Day*. It was a book that was never done because the concept was too simple, I guess.

MR. KARLSTROM: What do you mean?

MR. RUSCHA: In other words, I experienced the study of time with this thing. So the expression of it, or the book afterwards, was almost unnecessary.

MR. KARLSTROM: I see.

MR. RUSCHA: It was unnecessary, so I just never made the book. I photographed this gas station as the sun rose and fell throughout the day, and I was going to repeat that. I just felt it was a subject that had been maybe explored by other artists, and it was something that had just--had already been answered. It had already been answered. So my contribution in that sense was unnecessary. So I shelved the project. It was unnecessary.

MR. KARLSTROM: But you actually made photographs.

MR. RUSCHA: You do know now that I was involved with that, I was concerned with the concept of time.

MR. KARLSTROM: But you actually went to the point, process, where you photographed, you took the photographs, and so I assume you have a series of negatives or proof sheets on that.

MR. RUSCHA: Somewhere, yes.

MR. KARLSTROM: That's interesting, and of course, you're right, the theme has been explored. Of course, the great example that comes to mind is Monet himself, with his haystacks or Rouen Cathedral, showing them, the same view, but at different times of day. Exploring how light, the effect of light on a facade, or on the haystacks—

MR. RUSCHA: His study was light, and mine was almost being behind a camera and letting the light fall as it did.

MR. KARLSTROM: But there are similarities. The basic interest is there, in Monet, certainly, the overriding interest in the effects of light and perception. Of how it dissolves matter, depending on the conditions. How light actually changes matter, solid objects, which I gather wasn't particularly your concern. But the time element obviously also was in the Monet series, and that, I gather, was what--

MR. RUSCHA: I was more involved with the inhuman aspect of it, the mechanical aspect of it, of simply recording time as it was, and not so much the study of light on a particular subject. I was more interested in the process. I didn't care how it came out, I didn't care how it changed. It would have been as good at night as it was during the day. There was no qualitative judgment. I was just being--I was recording something.

MR. KARLSTROM: Does that relate in any way to some of Warhol's films?



MR. RUSCHA: Probably. It could easily.

MR. KARLSTROM: Where the camera is set up and allowed to run, whether it's the Empire State Building for god knows how many hours--

MR. RUSCHA: He turns the camera on and walks away. Yes.

MR. KARLSTROM: I mean that would be closer to what you were interested in with the Standard Station at different times of the day and night.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, right. Rather than the study of light falling on a particular subject, studying the esthetics of that.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, after all, Mr. Monet already did explore that subject.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, he did, didn't he, pretty well.

MR. KARLSTROM: While we're talking about this, I was looking at the very long horizontal painting that's hanging here in your studio, which is probably called *Ancient Dogs Barking*, or *Dogs Barking* [*Ancient Dogs Barking - Modern Dogs Barking* 1980]. Anyway, it's described for the benefit of the tape recorder. As is the case with much of your recent work, it's a fairly long horizontal format, rather narrow, and the vertical—what would you say that measures? What are the dimensions?

MR. RUSCHA: Thirteen feet by twenty inches; one hundred and fifty-nine inches by twenty inches.

MR. KARLSTROM: It's a very atmospheric landscape, again with a ground line. You mentioned horizontal in the books, for instance. This constant that seems to be established, and I would even suggest that very often throughout your work one runs into this. Certainly with the recent things I've seen. The point is that in little tiny white lettering on the left side it says "Ancient Dogs Barking". Then you have to travel. Of course, we read in Western society, as far as I know, without exception, from left to right. So as your eyes go over this long canvas and get to the right corner, it says, "Modern Dogs Barking" --

MR. RUSCHA: --suggesting maybe there's centuries in between--

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, exactly, that's, of course, how I read it. I just wondered if that comes at all close to what you had in mind.

MR. RUSCHA: The reason I'm happy with these pictures is because I think that for myself I've been able to, with the canvas that is--I guess by painting standards-- larger in size, because it's thirteen feet. But even with the width of the canvas, I'm able to miniaturize things so that I look at the horizon line and myself, I picture myself in that picture, and there's almost thousands of miles between the left side of the canvas and the right side of the canvas. So when that happens in one of those pictures I feel it succeeds. The lettering also brings you down to the miniature aspect of it. That's why the letters are not larger than they are.

MR. KARLSTROM: By that I gather you mean you're opposing then, or giving a clue to a sense of scale. Okay, well let me suggest this. This will be my interpretation and then you can respond to it.

But I feel in a way that the picture represents a journey for the observer, maybe for the artist. You said you imagined yourself in that space. There is a landscape upon which one presumably could walk, and you read from left to right. You start out on the left and you have this long journey. You can't avoid the fact that it's a very long journey because you've walked from ancient--you've traveled from ancient dogs barking around you, to the modern dogs.

What interests me here--I'm interested in your response -- is again these two elements I suggested in connection with the books, the element of motion, traveling, covering space, a journey, and then the time that it takes to move. That's just my response.

MR. RUSCHA: Well, horizontal movement, I guess. Maybe it has to do with the fact that our eyes run in a horizontal line, or something. I don't know what it is, but there is a big difference between vertical movement and horizontal movement. I seem to be on horizontal movement, and I've been there for a few years. Since I've started painting, actually. Most of my work has that--has been affected by that.

MR. KARLSTROM: Do you have any vertical format paintings?

MR. RUSCHA: I have a few, but they're odd shaped. Not exactly vertical, they're not dramatically vertical. Like this is dramatically horizontal, but this has to be dramatically horizontal, I guess, in order to work off it. I don't know what I could say about that painting.

MR. KARLSTROM: You don't have to say anything.

MR. RUSCHA: I have to mention something. Something mildly amusing about it in that it reminds me of ancient civilization, or winds blowing. The color of it has to do with sand blowing in the air or something. It has something to do with time with me.

MR. KARLSTROM: It reminds me almost of here we're performing a critique on your painting, but it reminds me almost of perhaps a Martian landscape. There's something extra-terrestrial about it. Do you feel that my reading of the painting, which I admit isn't carefully thought out, it's an initial response to that work and then unfamiliarity with some of your other things. Does my reading strike you as off the mark? Do you have any quarrels with it?

MR. RUSCHA: No, I don't, because I think the suggestions I put in that painting you've responded to. I'm not saying that's a floor in the desert, or that it's anything like that. It implies a landscape of sorts.

MR. KARLSTROM: It's interesting. If you took just one section of the painting, one could almost see--or it recalls, with the lettering, with the suggestion of a mountain or ground plain or whatever, or sky, say, the Hollywood Plain. I'm not suggesting that you haven't advanced or changed from that, but perhaps it is the incorporation of the letters to the surface. But I see the similarities. What I'm getting at is I see a remarkable consistency, from what I know about your work, from the earlier days right up to now, which--it has to do again with the emphasis on the horizontal.

Perhaps it's just one thing, the incorporation of letters, you don't always do that, but certainly what I can think of incorporates the letters. It's true that in some works, in a number of works, there are

images, whether a Standard station, or a museum on fire. But generally, there's this consistency in the direction in your work. What it seems to suggest is that you've carved out this area of concern and interest, which is very much Ed Ruscha land in painting, and that you don't feel you've exhausted it, and that it remains--

MR. RUSCHA: Well, it's not only in paintings. I mean I'm more involved in painting now than I ever have been, but the movie I did, *Miracle* [1975, 28 min.], was a--oh, in a sense, a shaggy dog story about a guy who works on a Mustang, a 1965 Mustang, repairing the carburetor. It goes from the beginning, where he's a crude mechanic, and a transformation between this crude mechanic to a lab technician. So his overalls get lighter and lighter and lighter throughout the movie. In a sense, that was like a blending to me, and even the ideas were a blending. It had crude language in the beginning, and in the end he spoke like a lab technician or scientist. So there is this--

MR. KARLSTROM: --a cultivated lab technician.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, so the movie itself is like a horizontal blending that I begin to see in a lot of my works, and one is through the painting. I don't know why they connect, but they do. I see that tendency in other forms of my work, too, and not just in these paintings.

MR. KARLSTROM: It's interesting though, that I've never seen that movie, *Miracle*. I'd like to some day. When was it done?

MR. RUSCHA: 1975.

MR. KARLSTROM: So it's relatively recent, as the years go by. Was it distributed at all, or was it something--

MR. RUSCHA: It was strictly--I paid for this. My first movie was *Premium*. It was a thirty-minute movie.

MR. KARLSTROM: What was its name?

MR. RUSCHA: *Premium*, which was the movie's name for "Crackers." So *Premium* is the book "Crackers" in a movie form. It negated the book. It made the book useless.

MR. KARLSTROM: Forget the book. Of course, I've got the book, and the book actually is quite well known, that's the ironic thing. It's accessible and all, so a lot of people have "Crackers." I guess you would say, "too bad," you would prefer they all see the movie.

MR. RUSCHA: I wish they would.

MR. KARLSTROM: When was the movie done?

MR. RUSCHA: 1970.

MR. KARLSTROM: That was your first one?

MR. RUSCHA: First one, and I think it became a movie because I got a Guggenheim grant.

MR. KARLSTROM: I think you told me about that. Did Larry Bell work on that with you at all or was he just the--

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, oh yes.

MR. KARLSTROM: Did he also act in the movie, just like in the book?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes.

MR. KARLSTROM: Same cast of characters?

MR. RUSCHA: Basically, yes. I believe all the characters are the same. My memory's fading.

MR. KARLSTROM: No, no, we can't let your memory fade, not yet. We have to finish interviewing. To bring this together, you see this consistency, or this continuity of concern, running throughout your work in various aspects, whether in, I would expect, the books, the films, certainly the paintings, I would suppose the drawings as well. You find it obviously still satisfying, still challenging. But it's something you haven't exhausted, really. Would you put it that way yourself?

MR. RUSCHA: Exhausted in the sense of making a movie?

MR. KARLSTROM: No, I mean this interest in horizontality. I forgot the term you used in connection with--

MR. RUSCHA: Ground horizontals, maybe?

MR. KARLSTROM: Yes, well in connection with *Miracle*, the blending. Did you say horizontal blending? No, I mean that concern, whatever the medium may be, is still fertile.

MR. RUSCHA: It runs throughout my work, and I can't seem to shake it. But it's always there to feed me something, so I keep working with it.

MR. KARLSTROM: That's what I mean.

MR. RUSCHA: Because it seems to offer me new things all the time.

MR. KARLSTROM: I don't want to suggest that's what your work is all about, of course, don't misunderstand me.

MR. RUSCHA: No, it's not.

MR. KARLSTROM: But it is descriptive, and there seems to be one reason why--there seems to be some reason why this continues to guide you, I suppose. What about-- we've somehow ended up talking about your recent work. I don't know if we want to go into that too much right now. Do you want to save that until later, and perhaps move back to the chronological development, the biographical areas you haven't filled in? Would that make sense?

MR. RUSCHA: Sure.

MR. KARLSTROM: Okay. Now, of course, comes the hard part, to figure out exactly where we left your own journey through life. We certainly had you in Europe, we did that some time ago. I think maybe even on the first tape.

MR. RUSCHA: I think so.

MR. KARLSTROM: Your trip to Europe, your time in New York and all, and your return here. And then some early-- the Ferus involvement came after your trip abroad.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes. The Ferus came afterwards.

MR. KARLSTROM: Right. Then the sort of ascendancy of what became known as Pop Art and your inclusion one way or another as a Pop figure in exhibitions. It's a little difficult to focus on exactly where we left the personal side of your life, but I guess we were around the Ferus Group time. We did talk about that. One could arbitrarily take a time that seems pivotal and then just try to fill in what's happened to you since.

MR. RUSCHA: I think that mostly I learned from the people I was directly friends with, the artists that I was surrounded by. Joe Goode notably, because I've known him the longest. I watched Joe in his own trials and tribulations and learned quite a bit from him as he was doing the same thing I was. He was beginning to show his work and so was I. So Joe and I were real tight throughout the whole period of our professional work. Artists who don't have other artists are in trouble in a sense, because there's no spirit there unless you do have a friend who's an artist.

MR. KARLSTROM: You said earlier on that--we did talk about some of this before the art school days and all--that Joe was a good friend and had a much more focused career objective in terms of making art and being an artist, perhaps, than you did. You were, perhaps, more feeling your way, and that it was Joe and perhaps your other friends who pointed a direction for you. Is that right?

MR. RUSCHA: I think so. Joe, in the beginning, had more troubles than I did. He was married and had a kid and a lot of miserable stuff.

MR. KARLSTROM: When was this?

MR. RUSCHA: This was like 1962-63. And Joe developed a lot of disgust for a certain faction of the art world whom he felt were not on his side. I was always inspired by this for some crazy reason. I watched him just be vindictive in many instances. So Joe adopted a very salty attitude towards the art world. I began to admire him for this.

MR. KARLSTROM: Oh, really?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes.

MR. KARLSTROM: It doesn't exactly sound in character from what I know of you.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, but I did see Joe's side of things. He would, because of his nature, either hate someone or love someone.

MR. KARLSTROM: Would these be dealers or other artists?

MR. RUSCHA: It could be dealers, artists, museum curators, a few shall go unnamed. But I watched Joe have certain troubles with the art world which I suppose I got inspired by. Maybe I didn't have as many problems as Joe did in coming along in the art world, but Joe, in the early years there was--

MR. KARLSTROM: We were talking about your friendship with Joe Goode in the early sixties, and you were saying how Joe had a certain influence, applied a certain example to you, I think.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, he was an example to me all the way through, and I've known Joe for a long time. Like I say, I knew him in Catholic school, in first grade--

MR. KARLSTROM: --in Catholic discipline.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, in Catholic discipline. Joe has always been the perennial altar boy with the black eye. It's gotten into all of his work, and the way he does things. It was a renegade stance that Joe took which inspired me. Not in the colors he used, not in the way he put things on the canvas, but besides his own personal vision and the way he makes his art is almost separate from him as a character. As a character he really inspired me to deal with the art world.

MR. KARLSTROM: How do you mean?

MR. RUSCHA: For instance, if he's wronged by someone, I'd know about it right away because we'd have this chat. We'd always have chit chat together. We were always very candid with one another about what's going on in the art world, and injustices here and injustices there, and good things that happened. And so we always talked about this. His stance on things made me stronger. He was always indignant about the way things happened. If he was wronged, he let the person know it. He was a fairly vocal person. I guess lifestyle is what it comes down to. His lifestyle was-- he conducted himself as an artist.

MR. KARLSTROM: In other words, he then provided an example to you of how to relate to the art world.

MR. RUSCHA: The establishment and the art world, yes.

MR. KARLSTROM: And which, I gather, was adopting a fairly tough position.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes.

MR. KARLSTROM: And how did this then in practice affect your behavior, or your relationships?

MR. RUSCHA: Well, I guess, it gave me more sense of responsibility--not so much responsibility, but a sense of pride. And I guess through Joe's eyes, I saw that we as artists, and along with a lot of other people, Billy Al Bengston and Larry Bell and Ken Price and Moses, all the people that I grew up with, but of course I knew Joe longer, and so he was the closest person to me, he helped me see that we're almost in a minority, as artists, and we're in a sense a lower class of people, and looked upon as a lower class of people.

MR. KARLSTROM: Really? Did you guys perceive it that way at the time?

MR. RUSCHA: It seemed like we had our opposition. It wasn't only just from the general public, who we didn't care that much about, but it was in the art world itself. It was in gallery dealers, it was in museum people-- not that we had hard knocks, because we had a lot of advantages, too.

MR. KARLSTROM: But you felt that in a way, in this community, at least, the artist was treated like a second class citizen.

MR. RUSCHA: In many senses.

MR. KARLSTROM: Do you mean socially, or--

MR. RUSCHA: The protection of our work when it comes to people using our work, and compensating us for it. Artists have always been forced to represent themselves in cases like this. We don't have ASCAP, we don't have union --we're really not protected. So if we do get into some contractual sort of thing, luckily we have a few attorneys around town who are eager to help artists in their curious positions.

PK: There's one attorney--who is it--who has worked so closely with the artists.

MR. RUSCHA: Well, Jack Quinn might be one, but Monroe Price has taken it on as a cause. The artists' compensation for their work, and royalty payments, and just those concepts have been--

MR. KARLSTROM: Professionalism.

MR. RUSCHA: Right.

MR. KARLSTROM: And were any of these--did you have access to this kind of legal advice and so forth in those years?

MR. RUSCHA: I did, but it was sketchy, it was so sketchy. We were all interested in making our art, and not how we could possibly get ripped off by it.

MR. KARLSTROM: What about the dealers in town? Of course, we're still talking about the Ferus years. I think specifically, we're in the early sixties now, and of course there weren't that many galleries. It wasn't the same situation--there wasn't a great commercial establishment here as one would find in New York.

MR. RUSCHA: No, but it was definitely the beginning. There were certain people around who made touch between the artist and the people who buy work, and they did it in good style. There were several people around.

MR. KARLSTROM: Who were the ones you remember who were really supportive?

MR. RUSCHA: Well, Walter Hopps and Henry Hopkins, and you have to name several people who began the galleries, like Ed Kienholz and Walter Hopps and Irving Blum and Nick Wilder and Rolf Nelson. Maybe you can insert a few names there, if my memory escapes me again, and people with the museum staff that really helped us out.

MR. KARLSTROM: When did Riko Mizuno come on the scene?

MR. RUSCHA: Later, I think.

MR. KARLSTROM: Because I've always understood that she was enormously supportive of other artists.

MR. RUSCHA: Oh, yes.

MR. KARLSTROM: Basically you don't have strong complaints about the way you and your friends and other artists were handled by these several dealers in town.

MR. RUSCHA: Oh, we had rows.

MR. KARLSTROM: I suppose that's inevitable. But you basically felt that you were fighting the same good fight. That they were interested in the same things, and that they did basically have your interests in mind. So where is the great problem? Was it more with the museums?

MR. RUSCHA: One of the problems with me was that I was never a businessman. But then, in a second sense, I was always very careful about the work that I sent out of my studio. Some artists were not, and for that reason they created their own trouble. In other words, a dealer would come by and take twenty works, and the artist would say, "Take twenty works," various sizes, and all this stuff. Then a year later the artist is running to punch the guy in the face because there's no money for it and the works are gone. Well, I mean, you have to sit down and sign a piece of paper.

MR. KARLSTROM: Did Ferus operate that way? That was pretty hang loose.

MR. RUSCHA: Oh, there were some hang loose--it was very loose.

MR. KARLSTROM: Because I know, for instance, Jay De Feo had some problems in that respect I think with Ferus. Of course, she was in the Bay Area. I'm not suggesting that any of them were trying to rip off the artist, but it just appears that perhaps the records weren't kept very well.

MR. RUSCHA: Oh, there were some mild or minor misunderstandings, but occasionally there would be an outburst of indignancy between artists. Joe got into several things with dealers.

MR. KARLSTROM: I guess this was what you were talking about when you were saying Joe adopted a very strong position, a tough position in relationship to those with whom he had to deal, demanding, I suppose, respect and professional treatment by the so-called support system. I guess that would mean the collectors, the dealers and the museum.

MR. RUSCHA: I think Joe probably had a basic distrust for the support system. Now I have some of that myself.

MR. KARLSTROM: Still?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, absolutely. There's some basic idea about museums that possibly I wonder what they're doing with my work. I'm trying to understand the real purpose for a museum from time to time. So I adopt a wait-and-see attitude about institutions who are going to talk about art. I'm not



saying that I know the answer for anything, about where art should end up. But Joe might chew the head off some collector who had just bought a painting of his because he didn't think that the person put his work in the right spot.

MR. KARLSTROM: Really?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes.

MR. KARLSTROM: That's interesting. Yes, he does take a pretty tough position. Well, do you feel, when you're talking about museums having certain reservations about the way they deal with work, does it have to do with works that go into permanent collections or exhibitions, or both? Is the concern about whether or not it's hanging all the time, or if there are proper conservation measures, or how is it interpreted, like in a special exhibition. Those are two different things, how it's taken care of, but also how it's put within context, how it's interpreted within a museum. People go to see the things, and it makes a difference where it's displayed in combination with one or all of those things.

MR. RUSCHA: For instance, the exhibit down at the L.A. County Museum. I was given priority, I mean I really selected my own work, discussing this thing with the director, so I guess they gave me that respect.

MR. KARLSTROM: That seems pretty decent.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes. But as an artist, who lives by himself and produces by himself, the institution that finally sanctions that work of art for the public and makes it okay to the public, I'm sort of quizzed by. I don't really understand what it's all about. I'm wondering what the whole system is about. So I can't really believe in the whole system unless I understand what the whole system is about, and sometimes I don't. So I have reservations about institutions showing art, you see.

MR. KARLSTROM: Do you suspect they have ulterior motives?

MR. RUSCHA: There couldn't be any. All they want to do is put the show on. They want to have a circus and everybody to come to it, which in a sense should be my part too, you see. But I guess I don't; I never really understood where the work of art should finally end up. I mean I want my work to be handled properly. The museums attempt to have an archival preservation aspect to everything they do with works of art. And I think they do, even though there is damage here and there. The primary concern is that I want my work to be kept in primary condition.

MR. KARLSTROM: That's what museums historically are for. Really, the business of special exhibitions that travel, the temporary exhibitions, that's a relatively new concept. The major responsibility of the museum really always has been first of all the care and preservation of the work of art, whether it's an old master or contemporary. I mean, that's it, that's number one, and then of course number two, increasingly so, to show important examples of important art.

That's where a decision process, a curatorial process comes into play, because somebody has to make that decision, which are the important artists worthy of showing in a particular museum. It seems to me that's an area where we all can call them to task or question performance of a museum--which artist is collected, and which works, assuming they have that option which, of

course, they don't always have. They want an example, and then get what's given to them, what's available. That's what I mean by interpretation, establishing priorities. Who is included, and is this something that concerns you?

MR. RUSCHA: Well, yes. I suppose that the L.A. County Museum of Art seems to fall asleep about art that was being done right under its own nose for several years, so they had that problem. So now it appears as though they've worked themselves out of that, and they're back in the community spirit thing. No matter what the institution is, or the museum, the gallery, what have you, they're always faced with those problems.

MR. KARLSTROM: Here I am slipping slightly off the subject, but I think it's okay because it follows. I don't think either of us want to get into a detailed discussion of the whole situation of the Pasadena Art Museum, now the Norton Simon Museum, formerly the Pasadena Museum of Modern Art. That's pretty well documented and in a way part of history now. There's one aspect of all of that which is extremely relevant in connection with what we're discussing now and that is an institution that solicits gifts from artists. In some cases things go on long-term loan, but in other cases as out and out gifts. In other words, the artists are making a contribution to the institution because they believe that the institution is solid, will last, and has a commitment to showing this type of art. As we all know, without going into details, that unfortunately didn't pan out quite that way at the Pasadena Art Museum.

MR. RUSCHA: The agreement was broken.

MR. KARLSTROM: Yes, and apparently Norton Simon, most apparently, was not sensitive, didn't appear to be sensitive, to the spirit, maybe more than the spirit, maybe to the letter of an agreement, the contractual agreement between artists and some collectors in that institution. Does that make you wary? I don't know if you gave a piece to the Pasadena Art Museum.

MR. RUSCHA: Well, one of my works ended up there, yes. It was subsequently put up for sale.

MR. KARLSTROM: But did that come from you? There's a difference.

MR. RUSCHA: I didn't donate that work.

MR. KARLSTROM: A collector, I suppose, or somebody like that.

MR. RUSCHA: They acquired that work through the Men's Committee of the Pasadena Art Museum.

MR. KARLSTROM: That was how it was acquired. Well, in that case, of course, there's not much the artist can do about it because, at least under the present arrangements--I was thinking of a few cases where artists actually donated works, believing in the purpose of the institution.

MR. RUSCHA: Those artists have more of a cause for concern and repulsion than maybe me, because my work was actually purchased and given to the museum. But nonetheless, my painting is also a part of that collection and should be treated with the same respect as all the other work.

MR. KARLSTROM: In other words, what you're saying is that you are very concerned about what

happens with the work as it takes its journey from hand to hand, institution to individual--

MR. RUSCHA: Exactly.

MR. KARLSTROM: Even though you don't obviously own it any more, you would like to know just what the hell's happening to it.

MR. RUSCHA: This man Simon, who is treating his works as commodities, and is probably, surprised That they command the prices they do, is treating them just like he would a bottle of his catsup, supply and demand. On the one hand he's probably surprised that the works can get that much money from the market. On the other hand, he's saying that they're not art, or it's degenerate. There's some of that spirit behind him, I think, that he feels like the work of the twentieth century--he just doesn't like it.

MR. KARLSTROM: Which is okay, of course, every man's entitled to his opinion. On the other hand, he has the responsibility for a body of works.

MR. RUSCHA: So anyway, that work of mine that was embraced by this institution of higher learning, this museum, which now changed hands, that work of mine now is put back on the marketplace. And it hurt me that the work is gone from that position, from a museum, back onto an open market.

MR. KARLSTROM: Especially, I would imagine you were pleased when it went to Pasadena, given the situation there, with the idea that this was a collection in the area where people could go see good examples of local artists as well as artists from elsewhere.

MR. RUSCHA: DeWain Valentine has a perfectly good reason for bringing suit against those people. And Bob Irwin and a few other artists who donated those works out of the spirit of donating to a museum because we knew that was a great museum. But from now on we've learned from those little scratches, that we get that, next time something happens along those lines that artists are going to have to have representation. The artist had no representation there.

MR. KARLSTROM: What about the situation at the new museum. Richard Koshalek was here yesterday talking with you. And of course there, I think, it's quite a different situation than the Pasadena Art Museum. The fact that the Pasadena Art Museum never was. There seems to be more resources, at the moment it seems to be the case. But obviously one of their goals--they describe themselves as a museum, an international museum of contemporary art, but in their order of priorities, their first intention for completeness in the collection will be this area, Los Angeles. And obviously they're going to be soliciting major examples, and this must, especially having been burnt by the Pasadena situation, I would imagine that this would make artists wary.

On the one hand, there's a lot of enthusiasm and, I think, perhaps more trust in what they're trying to do. And obviously everybody here would like to see their really superb collection of California art available to be seen by visitors and everybody else. But on the other hand, one says, "Wait a minute, look what happened to the Pasadena Art Museum." How do you feel about that? Do you feel much more wary now?

MR. RUSCHA: No, no. It's just that I think that if artists are going to donate works to a collection, they should be properly, classically represented by some form of contract which says that if anything ever happens to the museum that the work reverts back to the artist. Why should it go out on the open market somewhere, and be sold through an auction house?

MR. KARLSTROM: And when an artist gives a work of art anyway, there's no tax attached.

MR. RUSCHA: It's just like when they come to bomb, you know, they're bombing L.A., and there'll be some guy down there at MOCHA saying, "You want this painting? You'd better get it out the back door. Go ahead, take it, before the next bomb hits!"

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, I'll be lined up at the back door at that point. Well, let's leave this I think very interesting subject, which has certain political and economic overtones—

MR. RUSCHA: I think the people at the new museum are not going to want anything like that to ever happen, and have learned through this Pasadena Art Museum escapade. They are not going to make the same mistake.

MR. RUSCHA: Well, I certainly hope not.

MR. KARLSTROM: There'll be larger areas for mistakes, I'm sure, since it's starting off so big. Let's jump back again and try to fill in your own biography, starting, say, in the early

sixties. I think in the earlier tapes we did get to that point, art school, traveling and so forth, then returning to Los Angeles and involvement with the Ferus. Could you kind of sketch in what happened to you from that time? You own movements in this community and elsewhere?

MR. RUSCHA: Well, I was introduced to Walter Hopps and Irving Blum and Henry Hopkins. I met those people through Joe Goode. He had already been--all the time I was in Europe, for about nine months or so, he was actively engaged in painting, and had become a part of the community here. So I began to meet those people. That began to open my work to public showing. And so the Pasadena Art Museum is where I really had my first exposure. It meant a lot to me, and I could see that that was a real jewel of a place.

It had its own private interest--even artists as far away as Europe, you know, artists from Europe, artists from New York, everybody knew that the Pasadena Art Museum was a hot thing. It really was. It's only as good as its directors, they're the people behind it. They always made the best decisions and consequently had the most vital shows there. So I began to perceive that. Then the L.A. County Museum was down in Exposition Park, and they seemed to show some interest in contemporary art. Mainly I just worked. I had a studio that was about 500 square feet that I lived and worked in.

MR. KARLSTROM: Where was that?

MR. RUSCHA: Echo Park. Well, no, actually--Glassell Park.

MR. KARLSTROM: Towards downtown.

MR. RUSCHA: Between Glendale and Silver Lake, that's where it was.

MR. KARLSTROM: You were living alone at that time?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes.

MR. RUSCHA: It was your own studio, you weren't sharing a studio?

MR. RUSCHA: And Joe was living in Pasadena at that time in Walter Hopps's house. He had his studio there. There was one period when I moved to Pasadena. I had a studio at 60 West Colorado Boulevard that was about 20,000 square feet.

MR. KARLSTROM: When was that? Do you remember which years?

MR. RUSCHA: 1962—63. I was there for one month. I couldn't take it, the room was too big for me. My paintings looked like postage stamps. They were so tiny. I couldn't believe it, it just disoriented me completely.

MR. KARLSTROM: You must have been doing fairly well at that point to afford that space.

MR. RUSCHA: No, it was fifty dollars a month. For 20,000 square feet that's not bad. But I had to move out. The idea was that I had to move out immediately. Also, from Christmas to the sixth of January I had to give up the studio because people would use it as a viewing point for the Rose Parade.

MR. KARLSTROM: No wonder the rent was so cheap. Where did you go from there?

MR. RUSCHA: From there I went to Echo Park. I had a studio there for probably a year or two. Then I went back to Eagle Rock. There was a little community out there. Eagle Rock. I had a studio out there for about two years.

MR. KARLSTROM: Were there other artists in the area? There must have been reasons for transferring.

MR. RUSCHA: Jerry McMillan had a studio not too far from me in Eagle Rock. But no artist lived around me in Echo Park. Mason Williams, my friend, came and lived over there for a while in Echo Park. Then in 1965 I moved into this place here.

MR. KARLSTROM: So you've been here since 1965. Let's see if I have this right. Do you own this complex?

MR. RUSCHA: I'm just a part owner here, but I pay rent.

MR. KARLSTROM: But it's the whole complex.

MR. RUSCHA: I don't take over the--I don't have the whole thing. I have about a third of it maybe.

MR. KARLSTROM: But I mean the whole complex is owned by you and your partners. So the little shops are rented out.

MR. RUSCHA: This is as of a year ago, so I've paid rent here for all this time.

MR. KARLSTROM: So you've been here since 1965. Now when were you--let's talk about your family life a little bit, if you don't mind --when were you married?

MR. RUSCHA: I got married in 1967.

MR. KARLSTROM: Shortly after you moved here.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, I got married in 1967, I had a son in 1968, and lived in Echo Park and Laurel Canyon, mostly Laurel Canyon.

MR. KARLSTROM: Keeping this space as your studio.

MR. RUSCHA: Oh, yes, I always had this place as my studio. I did all my work here, and didn't really work at home. Only on a few occasions was I able to. I couldn't mix the domestic life and the free form life, I just couldn't. They're sort of difficult to mix. I just couldn't work, I can't work with a kid over me. Sometimes I think I can. I like to have my boy come over here, and he sits down and draws and I encourage him to do that. But it seems like, no matter what, you just owe your attention to a child if he's going to be around. If you think you're not giving him attention, you still are, your mind is preoccupied with it. So when he's around me, I can't really get that much work done.

MR. KARLSTROM: How old is he now?

MR. RUSCHA: Twelve.

MR. KARLSTROM: You mentioned just now that you found it difficult to mix domestic life and I suppose, obviously, the responsibilities that go along with professional life, or as you said, the free form life of an artist, which means you work irregular hours and all this. Did you find that was a significant difficulty in maintaining that balance?

MR. RUSCHA: I didn't find much disorder in my family life, as opposed to my working in the studio. I've always liked--I always did like the idea of being single. I am single now, really, legally, I'm single. But I'm not the kind of artist who can have a family setup, and then a little shop in the back room. I'm really unable to do that. So for that reason --

MR. KARLSTROM: We were talking about the difficulty, or importance, I guess, for an artist or, at least to talk about you, of keeping separation between domestic life, personal life in that sense which involves other people in an intimate way, and one's working space, if I can use that term.

MR. RUSCHA: Well, the domestic is almost like practical life. Studio life is almost like the impossible fantasy. So you want to keep the impossible fantasy going and have less of the practical side of things. That's the way I feel. I've always tried to minimize the practical side of life, and the practical has been the domestic.

MR. KARLSTROM: Do you find that attitude puts a strain on your relationship? I mean, you did get separated or divorced.

MR. RUSCHA: Oh, gosh yes. It does, it sure does.

MR. KARLSTROM: I mean, in other words, in your experience, it was extremely difficult to maintain both.

MR. RUSCHA: My domestic life has been real sweet at times. It's been through periods of upheaval, deep problems and all this. But I still maintain it, I guess. I mean, I keep my studio open. And it remains mostly untouched by the problems of my domestic life. It gets back to the old question of art is life is art is life. They all, I guess, feed off one or another.

MR. KARLSTROM: Do you find though that it is something--I don't want to say unique, I don't mean that -- but to a certain type of personality involved with making art, an individual involved in making art, that it seems difficult to remain active as an artist with a certain freedom-- I guess, that implies, and I suppose there's even a certain aspect of social freedom that's an extension of professional or creative freedom--that it's more difficult for certain individuals than others who seem to have almost a perfect resolution between married life, domestic life, a kind of traditional lifestyle and the responsibilities and also making art.

I mean, there are certain examples of couples or families where one or the other, usually the man, is an artist. And as you say, it could even be with a studio adjoining the house, a very middle class type existence. At the same time, like he walks through that house, he steps into the studio and produces good art. Do you think that this is a personality thing? Do you see what I'm getting at?

MR. RUSCHA: I guess it is. Some artists are very four-square responsible, and they hold their family in high esteem, and hold their art in high esteem. Somehow they are able to manage and juggle this set of circumstances together and do it very well.

MR. KARLSTROM: Show up for dinner on time and all that.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, show up for dinner on time and do all that. Some of those artists, unfortunately, run scared, in that they have to--in order to, I guess, the real backbone to them is maybe the family life, so they have to use this, which is the creative life, to go off and feed this, which is family life. I never, never like to hear an artist say, "Well, I've got mouths to feed." I mean, I understand what that means. I know what that means, that they have to do that, but if the artist is going to be affected by it, by the free spirit of the mind, then it's taxing their creative side. And then the domestic becomes primary.

MR. KARLSTROM: I suppose one could extend that by saying the requirements and responsibilities of the domestic life of a family have to affect finally the work of art, that one isn't free, totally free, or as free as one could be to do what one wants.

MR. RUSCHA: Maybe some artist would really need to put a grapefruit in their old lady's face and walk out. Some of the best work has been done that way, under those extraneous circumstances. That's been proven too many times.

MR. KARLSTROM: Do you find your personal life has any direct effect on your ability to work? Let's say a crisis.

MR. RUSCHA: God, yes. Without being psychoanalytical about it, it's true. All my personal life does have a great effect on what I do. Something will happen in my personal life which will just really be useless over here. And I can't function; I'm strictly at the mercy of this other thing that's happened. It's happened, it's happened before many times. It's like made of very sensitive chemistry or something. The things that happen on the personal side of life actually do affect me. It's true, it does happen.

MR. KARLSTROM: Are there any instances where--certain events in your personal life, a crisis, or maybe something positive-- something important that has an effect emotionally on you. Do you ever feel, or are you able to perceive any instance in your work where that then determines imagery? I don't mean that you illustrate it, but that there's a carryover. You mentioned not being able to work at all under some circumstances, or you're too preoccupied. But what I'm asking, under some cases, where life experiences then have determined a certain direction in your work, certain choices you make--can you think of any examples?

MR. RUSCHA: Oh, yes. I would say those movies I did, maybe. Those were examples of me sort of taking from life and realizing how people act. I'm trying to think of specific examples.

MR. KARLSTROM: Let me give a case while you're thinking. A friend of mine, who's a very sensitive young artist, and I suppose somewhat temperamental, recently went through a divorce. Most divorces are fairly messy and this was no exception. He's not the type of person who can build a wall or a protection, he has no shield to protect him from what is happening in his life, and he continues to work.

So what happens is that quite dramatically in his work you could see a body of paintings that were done at a certain time, when the divorce was particularly messy, which we now laughingly call the "divorce period." I'm not suggesting that there's anything perhaps that dramatic in your work, but it's that kind of thing I had in mind, either a negative or a positive, something important.

MR. RUSCHA: I lived with a girl for a couple of years, Candy Clark. Her birthday was rolling around, and I felt like, "God, I wish I could give you the world." So I painted a picture of the world for her, a painting called, *It's a Small World* [1980].

MR. KARLSTROM: Like in Disneyland. They've got that rhyme.

MR. RUSCHA: I've never been to Disneyland.

MR. KARLSTROM: I can't believe that. We'll talk about that later.

MR. RUSCHA: But there are examples. I did a painting for Joe once that --well, speaking of that, I did a drawing called *Bengstonland*, like Disneyland. I did something like that.

MR. KARLSTROM: With motorcycles in it?

MR. RUSCHA: No, just the word "Bengstonland." I did a painting for Joe called, *Joe*. It had a spark plug in it like a collage out of the newspaper. Because Joe in high school once painted a picture of a spark plug. There are examples, a lot of examples, of things that I have done, I've gone directly from my experiences and put that into my work.



MR. KARLSTROM: These sound like things that have very much to do with close personal relationships, and trying to express something very personal that basically has meaning on a one-to-one basis. I gather that was your intention. I don't mean like they're souvenirs or greeting cards or anything like that but that--

MR. RUSCHA: No, the experience went directly back into the art.

MR. KARLSTROM: Let's see, what else along these lines. Some of the other people you've known who may have directed you into a certain activity at a certain time, like maybe involving you in photography. I know that you did--in fact, some of these were published, photographs of Lauren Hutton. Was the photography the result of a friendship with her?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes.

MR. KARLSTROM: Because what happened --most people take snapshots and that's it, they're souvenirs. But in this case, some were--I don't know what magazine published the series that you did--

MR. RUSCHA: *Esquire*.

MR. KARLSTROM: Yes, I saw that a few years ago. My question is this. I guess maybe you've already answered it, but those photographs grew out of a relationship, a response to an individual, rather than continuing to make photographs--

MR. RUSCHA: It was not part of my art work, it was a lark. It was a lark, and I was not on an assignment necessarily. It was just having fun with a camera.

MR. KARLSTROM: And so you wouldn't even actually consider that as--

MR. RUSCHA: No, I wouldn't consider that as a work of mine. I wouldn't at all.

MR. KARLSTROM: So they, indeed, for you are snapshots.

MR. RUSCHA: I'm actually exercising the right of an artist to be, say, selected to just experiment, or just to knock off something, or just to have fun with the camera.

MR. KARLSTROM: That's true. There's no reason why everything you do has to be an exhibition piece.

MR. RUSCHA: Right, so it's not made for exhibition. That thing is not. It's just pure fun time, it's down time. It was not meant in any art way, or I would have changed the entire concept, which I wasn't up to doing. It was not that serious a thing. It was fun and games.

MR. KARLSTROM: At least you didn't think you were doing fashion photography. What a loss, with due respect to fashion photography.

MR. RUSCHA: No, I'd need my seamless paper here, wouldn't I?

MR. KARLSTROM: It reminds me of *Blowup* [1966, 111 min.]. Did you ever see that movie, by the way?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes. That was very good. I liked that movie. All of Antonioni's movies were-- that's funny, because Antonioni came to my studio one time, when I had that room, about 1967 or something like that, and I remember him really responding to *Standard Station*. I guess he saw maybe his work there, or I saw his work there, and some guy came out there, but--

MR. KARLSTROM: That's interesting. Have you been or are you attracted to the phenomenon, let's say the high fashion world as represented in *Blowup*, as an example? In this case, of course, it's a photographer, and so forth, and there's a murder story as well, but the lifestyle, sort of freewheeling, exciting, chic, high fashion lifestyle. Has that held any interest for you?

MR. RUSCHA: Well, not specifically as an artist. The character from *Blowup* definitely was in his own world, wasn't he? But as far as the fashion aspect of it, I don't know, maybe--

I liked the character in that movie. I don't think it meant anything beyond the character. He was sort of a free agent, wasn't he?

MR. KARLSTROM: Basically amoral, and somewhat confused but--

MR. RUSCHA: Yes. But the life of a fashion photographer, I think, would be a morbid life to live. I think so.

MR. KARLSTROM: Of course, it has an amazing power in our society in forming and creating images which have impact on our lives. I can't think of anything else except maybe the movies. Certainly art doesn't do this the same way, of creating expectations, ideals, larger than life, things to aspire to. This of course is what the fashion industry is largely about, basically to sell things.

MR. RUSCHA: Well, in a sense--are we speaking about fashion photography?

MR. KARLSTROM: Yes, kind of. Or the whole phenomenon.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, because in a sense they're cousins to painters in some strange way. They're making images too, but they're more bound by the commercial world than we are, but depending on the photographer. There are some good fashion photographers, aren't there?

MR. KARLSTROM: Oh yes. Some of them are viewed as artists; they make exhibitions of their work, Avedon--

MR. RUSCHA: But they become instantly obsolete in the sense that they have to show the world what clothes are that have been already made. They're almost behind the times in a sense. It's just constantly changing, and they're part of the style cycle. We are too, but our cycle goes around much slower than theirs; theirs is faster.

MR. KARLSTROM: It seems to me, again, off the top of the head, that let's say the fine artist is working to somehow affect our perceptions of the world. This is part of making art, to help us see in a different way. It's extremely simplified, but maybe it's true, and the fashion photographer, just as

an example, is trying to affect our idea of what we must have. It seems to me there's that similarity. In both cases, one is trying to change the direct viewer, but in the one case with fashion photography, they're trying to--it's almost brainwashing, telling people what they should be, and what they're not.

MR. RUSCHA: You make it sound like a conspiracy, though.

MR. KARLSTROM: No, I don't mean that, but in effect, it works that way. It's insidious. It's advertising. Advertising works exactly that way, plays on that type of thing. It doesn't mean that it's necessarily bad, but it seems to me there's a fundamental shared quality between making art as you do and fashion photography, and it has to do with the perception of directing a viewer. But then there's a fundamental, very, very important difference which you suggested.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, because our work is more or less purposeless, isolated and purposeless. It doesn't have the function that advertising does.

MR. KARLSTROM: Don't you think that your work ultimately, down the line, can fundamentally change perception? At least this is one--

MR. RUSCHA: It only sort of aggravates the theme of the style changing constantly. So everyone who works as an artist eventually contributes to that whole thing. It's like a bandwagon that continually moves. So every artist that does it, even mediocre artists, even bad artists affect it somehow.

MR. KARLSTROM: That's true. And maybe commercial artists and photographers are participating in the same phenomenon in a less important way.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, so you can broaden the concept and include musicians and writers and anybody who is involved in communications at all. Painters are on maybe the outside of communication because the word "to communicate" is a little sketchier by definition for an artist than it is for, say, someone who is a fashion photographer, or a writer, or a musician or a filmmaker, because those people are called on to actually reach the public. And artists are exempt of that.

MR. KARLSTROM: That's right.

MR. RUSCHA: By and large, artists stand behind their own fifth amendment which is artistic license.

MR. KARLSTROM: That's right, where you don't have to meet the requirements of a client for the layout of a magazine or something like that.

MR. RUSCHA: In some funny way, it's a cop out. But I like the idea that an artist should never be questioned about what he does, because he actually deserves this right of artistic license.

MR. KARLSTROM: So really it's--correct me if I'm wrong--that part of what originally attracted you to this strange activity of making art, and what still attracts you, is the ideal of complete freedom to do what you want in terms of making things, and that you're not beholden to anybody.

MR. RUSCHA: I'm not an artist for that reason, though. No, I'm not. I'm not an artist for that reason.

But it is important, it's real important to have the freedom, because otherwise there are rules to follow, and I've always felt like the number one rule is that there are no rules.

MR. KARLSTROM: So it's simply that you just feel this is an essential ingredient to making art. It's not a goal in itself for you. That would be one way to put it, I suppose.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, it's such a strange activity, once you think about it.

MR. KARLSTROM: It is very strange, and I suppose everybody comes to it for slightly different reasons. You've been talking about, from the very beginning, an attraction to a Bohemian notion, a Bohemian ideal, which probably in the beginning was a fairly romantic idea.

MR. RUSCHA: Well, it involved a gut passion, I suppose, that everything is secondary to making this thing, the goal of making things.

MR. KARLSTROM: On biography, can you think of anything else that you would like to mention that was important to you in your life and that we should get here as part of the overall picture? Any special events, special relationships, special friendships, trips?

MR. RUSCHA: Trips? Well, I guess one trip that I'm on--I felt like lately that I'm rearranging and repackaging my old works. I almost felt like that in the beginning, that we're always a variation on a theme, and eventually the things that we are doing twenty years after we started are so basically connected with the things that we were originally interested in. So I'm not much further along in my game than I was when I started. And I find that-- and so in a sense, I guess, that's grown older. But the things that really moved me twenty years ago are the same things that are moving me now.

MR. KARLSTROM: But maybe they didn't so much in between? Is this what you're suggesting?

MR. RUSCHA: Well, I just sort of played around it as thematic substance like food, food for thought, food for art. They were ideas which I established in my mind long ago. So actually the newer things that I might like are not as important as the older things.

MR. KARLSTROM: What about food for thought, food for art? This is something--thanks for reminding me--that I wanted to ask you about. Maybe this isn't what you're talking about, but the series of drawings, like some that are reproduced in *Guacamole Airlines* [*Guacamole Airlines and Other Drawings*. New York, Harry N. Abrams, Inc.: 1980], where you use these peculiar materials in the drawings, like spinach, literally, I believe, Pepto Bismal, of course, gunpowder--

MR. RUSCHA: The first work that I did involving vegetable matter and organic materials came out of a frustration of materials. I wanted to expand in a sense my ideas about materials and the value they have. I suppose that I was concerned with the concept of staining something rather than applying a film or coat or skin of paint on a canvas. I started looking at ideas as though they were stains, rather than skin. So stains, to me--I had to open my eyes to all kinds of stains. So, if you look around you logically, it falls into categories of vegetable things, vegetable matter, liquids that come from them and get somehow put onto paper.

So *Stains* [Hollywood, Heavy Industry Publications: 1969]--it was the first book I did. It was a folio of various kinds of stains. One on each sheet, and then from there it spun off into a series of

silkscreen prints, called *News, Mews, Pews, Brews, Stews, Dues* [1970], which was a series of six silkscreen prints, each image having one of those words. They were my ideas about England, because I was in London at the time when I produced them. The words "news," "mews," "pews," "brews," "stews," "dues," were all real English. The "newspapers" and "mews" were the little alleyways, "pews" was Westminster Cathedral, the Church of England, "brews" was English stout, beer, ales, "stews" was good old English stews, and "dues" was Robin Hood, unfair taxation. Consequently, the ideas of England didn't have anything to do with using organic materials as such, but the project just came out that way. Then I did a series of paintings using fragments of thoughts, incomplete sentences. Like I did a painting called, *Various Cruelties* [1974]. Where it came from, who knows, just a spark that came to me in one way or another.

MR. KARLSTROM: This is a stain again?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes. I used backgrounds of taffeta and silk, rayon, and those kinds of materials and just painted these materials on. Actually with a brush; just painted them.

MR. KARLSTROM: How do you get the medium?

MR. RUSCHA: Oh, just by crushing them up with a mortar and pestle.

MR. KARLSTROM: Like you're making pesto or something.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, the very same thing. My concern was not with the--there was no scholarly concern with it about, say, last- ability or preservation--it was not my concern. Of course, I want it to last, but if they don't it will be a product of my ignorance.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, you wouldn't be the first artist that has experimented with materials like that.

MR. RUSCHA: They'll throw me in jail for vice, inherent vice.

MR. KARLSTROM: You ought to do something called, "Inherent Vice". Probably you already have. So that's the origin. So there's no--

MR. RUSCHA: I was not mystically directed by any great spirit from up above to move in that direction. Except that I felt it was a short term playground for me to investigate, and that's simply it.

MR. KARLSTROM: What did you learn?

MR. RUSCHA: Well, besides working with the materials I learned a lot just working with the

materials. I learned that certain things wouldn't work. I mean, I didn't want things to chip and fall off, or bleed and do other things. I had a loose set of rules for myself when I used those materials. They also made rather beautiful pictures sometimes. I liked the way all of the stuff would sweep together, and the lettuce would end up drying out, and leave little flakes behind it. Each material had its own peculiarities that I began to like. I gradually just grew away from it, so there's no more room out there for me to do it.

MR. KARLSTROM: What years were you working on these?

MR. RUSCHA: It started in 1969. All the way up through last year.

MR. KARLSTROM: Really?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, but not exclusively. I had to break my time to do other things.

MR. KARLSTROM: What about the gunpowder thing? I remember seeing a show somewhere, I guess quite a few years ago, and I wondered what is Ed Ruscha up to? It sounds to me like it's part of the same interest.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes.

MR. KARLSTROM: --or some symbolic--

MR. RUSCHA: No, I had misgivings about that afterwards because people expected a performance stunt or something that these works on the wall would somehow catch on fire or deteriorate or something. That was not the gist behind it at all. I soaked some gunpowder in water once, and I saw it separated all the salt out of it. And I just did it as an experiment because the gunpowder itself is in granules. I could see it would make a good choice of materials. It could actually impregnate on paper. You could use it almost like charcoal, which it is, it's part charcoal. So I'd use graphite.

MR. KARLSTROM: It has sulfur? Sodium.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, and it's got sulfur and [inaudible] of charcoal. So then actually what I do is I'm removing the salt from it. It became a material that I could correct, so mistakes could be corrected. The imagery is pretty much the same as with charcoal. I can't look at charcoal and tell the difference between gunpowder--I don't think.

MR. KARLSTROM: How do you apply it, with a brush?

MR. RUSCHA: No, just with a sponge; rub-it-up style with a piece of cotton. So charcoal and graphite were --mistakes were easier to cover up with gunpowder, so I used it. It was a more fluid and a faster medium than charcoal or graphite. Graphite was much more laborious, but it has a different feel altogether, it has a different appearance. It has a smoother appearance than either gunpowder or charcoal. And much more difficult and time consuming to produce things with graphite, because it's so slimy and so apt to make mistakes and streaks and things that I didn't want in the drawings. So gunpowder was simple, it was easy to get going. It became a fluid medium for that reason.

MR. KARLSTROM: Have you ever heard of anybody else doing that? I haven't.

MR. RUSCHA: I'm sure someone has done it somewhere, somehow. Natural dyes for centuries have been used for various tintings and dyeings. So any material that will make a mark on paper has probably been thought of or used in some form or another throughout history.

MR. KARLSTROM: So that really was the nature of your interest, though.

MR. RUSCHA: The nature of my interest wasn't in broadening horizons of artists' materials, that was secondary. I was more interested in the curiosity of all of those things coming together. I painted a number of pictures with egg yolk and egg white--they've been traditional artist materials. And yet I kind of like the impossibility of a word I might--or a selection of words I might use, applied with egg yolk. It just sort of completed a whole cycle of my work.

MR. KARLSTROM: I'm trying to think now. I wish I had brought my *Guacamole Airlines* with me, but in some cases the actual words that identify the materials you use that appear in the drawing, I think--is that right--for instance, well, maybe you can think of one. I'm thinking of Pepto Bismol. What are the words there?

MR. RUSCHA: "Pepto Bismol, Made in U.S.A."

MR. KARLSTROM: Okay, so maybe I'm wrong, maybe this is just a--

MR. RUSCHA: There was no outward intention. There's no pun or suggestion that Pepto Bismol has anything to do with the United States, or that it is--if there is an amusing side issue that people would want to create, then that's in the viewer's eyes, it's not in mine, really. Because as I was doing those drawings, I was doing them in a series, and it just seemed like the material would go with any idea I had. So I was working this way and pouring the stuff into this general soup that I was mixing and stirring. So the materials were not necessarily, not in any way, selected to represent the words that were there. They were not embellishing the words, and there was no pun intended.

MR. KARLSTROM: In fact, you've told me before that this is invariably the case with your works of the earlier word paintings, like--well, I made a mistake which I think is a very telling one, or interesting one. I seemed to remember a painting--I remembered it as carrying the word "frijoles," or something like that, beans, and that it had beans on it. Then you corrected me and said that's not what it said at all, it said "Adios," which, of course, is still--there's a connection there. But what I'm saying is that for some reason, obviously it's not part of your intention, many of us who see your work in memory, tend to think of the image that you create. If it involves something that looks like orange juice, "Made in California," that maybe--

MR. RUSCHA: Someone said after the orange juice, "Orange juice. Oh, I see what you mean." The intention was that clear.

MR. KARLSTROM: That helps. I mean, there were beans.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes.

MR. KARLSTROM: And so, of course, I've managed somehow to carry that around in my mind as the word saying "frijoles," beans. I think it's important maybe to reiterate that. As we talk I see that this seems never to be consciously your intention.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, although some of the things do imply that--some of these things are actually done by me unconsciously. And then other people have come along and pointed out various things that have surprised me, but then they maybe are really a part of my whole working habit.

MR. KARLSTROM: What can you do? There it is. Because the connections are sometimes--

MR. RUSCHA: See, I also did a painting called, *Eye* [1969], e-y-e, using kidney beans. The same thing I did with *Adios*. Now, *Eye*? The connection's not there in the same sense. It might be in another case, like *Adios*.

MR. KARLSTROM: That's peculiar. I mean, it interests me a great deal because so often the conjunction is just perfect in ways that perhaps you hadn't even anticipated which nonetheless become part of the work of art in the way it's perceived.

MR. RUSCHA: Part of what I call my romance with liquids.

MR. KARLSTROM: Romance with liquids?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes. It was like a--I guess, I painted an illusionistic liquid, like *Adios* and *Rancho* [1968] and *Western* [*Western, with Two Marbles*, 1969] and many of the different paintings I did like that: *Mint* [*Mint (green)* or *Mint (red)*, both 1968], *Eye*, *Steel* [1969]. There were a lot of paintings I did like that. But some of them were more or less anonymous liquids. They were just liquids, and they didn't mean anything. They didn't have any--

MR. KARLSTROM: All the dripping letters. Aren't these the very words that really led you to prominence? Is that right? Do you associate them with a big jump in your career in terms of visibility?

MR. RUSCHA: I would say that the *Standard Station* painting was the most popularly known, and maybe the *Hollywood* [*The Back of Hollywood*, 1977] painting is most known.

MR. KARLSTROM: Now these came, of course, before the romance with liquids.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, they did. *Hollywood* came about the same time. But the *Standard Station* was the most popularly known, and a few of the earlier works, like *Spam* [*Spam Study*, 1962] or *Smash* [1963]. Some of those earlier word paintings are the ones that are most known.

MR. KARLSTROM: Meaning most reproduced.

MR. RUSCHA: Most reproduced and most identified with my work.

MR. KARLSTROM: That's interesting because although, of course, I know those well, I came to associate you with the liquid letters, which have a peculiar impact for lots of reasons that I haven't analyzed, some of which we've talked about. There's a paradox involved in some cases where something looks like the word shouldn't be dripping, and that in itself is arresting. Well, it's hard to explain. It just engages--it grabs your interest. You say, "Wait a second." What about the one called, *Steel*, and it's dripping. Molten, molten steel. You don't associate steel with liquid.

MR. RUSCHA: No, and there's no intention on my part to take a word for its context and say, pull a switch on you so that I'm making something hard seem soft. There's no intention in mind at all like that. It's just free form and that's the way it came out.

MR. KARLSTROM: Fair enough. It doesn't mean that it's always perceived that way. But then that's



where it goes beyond the artist's control, really.

MR. RUSCHA: But the viewer definitely has a say in the whole matter.

MR. KARLSTROM: How are the recent works being received? You had a show--you had some shows recently.

MR. RUSCHA: I don't know. I still don't know how they are, but--

MR. KARLSTROM: You had a show in New York not too long ago.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes. It was a mild reception. I didn't sell them all. But I never sell any of my work until it's about three or four years old.

MR. KARLSTROM: Really?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes. Very seldom do I sell something. Most of my shows go unsold.

MR. KARLSTROM: Really? I'm surprised.

MR. RUSCHA: Only later do they sell.

MR. KARLSTROM: Why do you suppose that's so?

MR. RUSCHA: I don't know. Every artist I know has always said, "Hey, I had an opening last night and sold everything." It's never happened to me.

MR. KARLSTROM: But you don't worry about it.

MR. RUSCHA: No.

MR. KARLSTROM: I'm surprised, because --

MR. RUSCHA: No.

MR. KARLSTROM: I'm surprised because you certainly--you're known internationally, and you're collected internationally, as far as I know. Are there certain periods of your work that are in demand, perhaps now, maybe for historical reasons. Or is there any way for you to know that?

MR. RUSCHA: The only response I get from that is usually from auction houses. It seems like my work does go for fairly high prices at auctions. But mostly the older works. And so for one reason or another, the newer things don't show up at auction, because they're either bought by people who have not owned them long enough to resell them, so I guess older work generally gets sold at auctions.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well sure, and many of them have gone into museums, they're less available, and that's a fairly standard way it works in the auction field. They become more desirable, historical. L. A. art of the sixties.

MR. RUSCHA: Right. Well, I think my best painting is in that show, which is *Noise, Pencil, Broken*

*Pencil, Cheap Western* [1963]. I still feel like that's my best painting.

MR. KARLSTROM: That's owned --

MR. RUSCHA: I don't know who owns it.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, I'll have to see it, I hope this afternoon. Before we wrap up, is there anything at this point--we'll have a chance to do a real wrap-up sometime. Is there anything else that you can think of that maybe today we skipped over or maybe on the last time, were there any glaring omissions, or something that just occurred to you that should be part of the-- or should we just wait until--

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, I'm sure there are many things left unsaid.

MR. KARLSTROM: There always are.

### **October 2, 1981**

MR. KARLSTROM: We covered most of the ground that I had planned to in the last three sessions. That's not to say that all the ground has been covered. Today I think it's an opportunity to discuss the points you feel are missing and to fill in gaps as they come to mind. So you should feel free to do that. What I'd like is to try to wrap up this particular series of interviews, and I've prepared a few questions based on rereading the earlier interviews and thinking more about you and your work, several general questions that are of interest to me.

One of the things I'd like to do first off is look again at the 1960s in light of the current exhibition at the L.A. County Museum. The important part in this regard being the seventeen artists from the sixties, that core exhibition, part of the total bicentennial project at the L.A. County Museum. First of all, I want to ask if you feel that the exhibition accurately reflects the period. I understand that you actually haven't had a chance to fully walk through and study it, but you know the artists that are represented and you have certainly seen some of the components of the show. Do you candidly think that this, according to your recollection, having gone through it, represents in a fair way those years?

MR. RUSCHA: Basically the exhibit has a--no mistake about it--it has a flavor of the sixties because the works selected were actually created then. There are some glaring omissions--John Altoon, to name one--I can't pretend to have a better idea for what an exhibit like this would be. It's up to the director, or up to the curator to select the works. I could possibly have seen a show with maybe forty artists or sixty artists from the sixties, and not necessarily as in depth, but maybe a larger show with more works by more artists. There are lots of ways to look at it, and I don't think the exhibit can be taken to fully represent the sixties. I mean it's a very selective and yet encompassing show. It is being selective, but I think there were some artists who worked then that are missing, they're really missing, namely John Altoon.

MR. KARLSTROM: Mainly John Altoon.

MR. RUSCHA: Mainly John Altoon. I think that if the intention of the exhibit was to, say, refine the selection to the most important artists, then I think John Altoon is definitely missing. And I also don't

feel, like a lot of people feel, that David Hockney doesn't really belong in the group because he's English. I think even though he came to Los Angeles in the late sixties that he probably brought as much, or said as much as any of the artists in the show.

MR. KARLSTROM: So you have run into comments to the effect that why is David Hockney in the show. He had nothing to do with L.A. artists.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, but I don't feel that way. First of all he's a good artist, and secondly he did make a contribution in the actual sixties.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, what about Alton? This raises an important question. Almost everybody would agree with you no matter how they feel about this somewhat controversial exhibition, that Alton is a glaring omission and basically it compromises the integrity of the exhibition.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, it's like having a Robin Hood film festival and leaving Errol Flynn out of it, it's that glaring.

MR. KARLSTROM: Or having no Maid Marion or Friar Tuck. What was Alton's importance? Is it simply the special vision, the quality of the work that was produced?

MR. RUSCHA: And particularly his style of life that touched everyone he was around. He had a way of living, simple and direct and from the gut, so to speak, and he was constantly making mistakes and constantly putting his foot in his mouth, so that people actually learned from him. The fact that he just--well, he was just dynamic, he was a dynamic character, as well as a great artist. And I think probably that makes me wonder why he's omitted.

MR. KARLSTROM: So you feel that he really was influential, certainly as a role model.

MR. RUSCHA: He was really a--if you could take one artist who was a swashbuckler of the artists of that period, I would say it was John Alton without a doubt. Just for that alone, he deserved to be reckoned as a character and as an artist, or as an artist and a character.

MR. KARLSTROM: Do you imagine that most of the other artists who are included in the exhibition would have that same feeling?

MR. RUSCHA: I think so. I think every artist in that exhibit wonders what happened to John.

MR. KARLSTROM: What happened to John? Are there any other omissions that might come close to that?

MR. RUSCHA: I think George Hermes was an artist who was definitely in this and working with a great deal of momentum in Los Angeles at that time. He's also missing. But then the line becomes sketchier as you try to determine what the focus of the exhibit is. If you rethink the whole exhibit, then, as I say, why not have sixty artists or seventy artists with fewer works, why not make a giant show? I mean, that's arguable.

MR. KARLSTROM: What about DeWain Valentine?

MR. RUSCHA: DeWain Valentine was certainly there, and DeWain is missing, possibly Vija Celmins is missing. She was a marginal character, I'm sure she'd agree, at that period. But the big question here is who is finally left off, and the show is refined to so few people that, like I say, the one person, the inexcusable person is John Altoon.

MR. KARLSTROM: What do you think the purpose of this show was? I agree with you that every exhibition has to be limited. We all agree that it's better this exhibition happened than not. Certainly, that is, recognizing these particular years as important ones here, with some very important work being done. What do you suppose was Maurice Tuchman's goal and guidelines finally in putting that show together? Would you care to second guess that?

MR. RUSCHA: I'm a little unsettled about the subject just as a--from the very fact that I'm included in it, and so I must look and introspect on whether I think I belong in it. I do think I belong in it with the guidelines as they're drawn up. But I feel also, like it's a little--I wonder--I'm a little in awe of the whole thing because it seems like it's a problem of retrospect-- it's something that I wonder--I didn't feel like that period was so long ago until I see an exhibit like this.

MR. KARLSTROM: In other words, it's clear now that we're looking at art history, not contemporary art anymore. It's old master, to L.A., that's old master.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, it's drawn up as a piece of history, and so we're forced to look at it that way. I personally don't even see it that way; I don't think of the sixties as being that long ago.

MR. KARLSTROM: Of course, you and I are getting a little older.

MR. RUSCHA: It could be. It takes an exhibit like this to prove it.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, I think one of the points of the exhibition, at least in my understanding in conversations early on with Maurice and with Rusty, was to try to give a fresh look at that period, starting out from the premise that this was a vital period--the Ferus Gallery and all these things we've discussed--a vital period in the history of art in this area. Starting with that premise, but then recognizing that perhaps a mythology had built up around the Ferus group, that perhaps then didn't, in terms of historical accuracy, represent what was going on, or all of what was going on.

It was my understanding that this particular exhibition, bringing in some younger writers, not the same ones who have been writing about the subject for years, would give then a fresh perspective, poking some holes in the myth as it's come to exist. Do you feel that this has been accomplished, though, because frankly to me, it seems that almost every inclusion there is predictable, safely predictable. I'm just wondering if you feel any new insight is provided by that.

MR. RUSCHA: Just the exhibit itself forces us to see this group of artists as a very close knit group of artists which I can't believe is true. I don't think I've ever met John McLaughlin, I had very little to do with Richard Diebenkorn, having met him once or twice. It's not a seafaring group of artists who are all under the same banner, it's just not that way. These artists lived in different places in Southern California, and while we'd all more or less come together at certain points, we were not a close knit--I don't think the exhibit even says that, really. The exhibit says that the artists are of a particular club, unless you view it from the study of it being, say, the history of the Ferus Gallery,

which all the artists were a part of.

MR. KARLSTROM: Most of them.

MR. RUSCHA: Then again, I mean, with the guidelines of the show as it is, I can't, I just can't force myself to see it in depth without seeing John Altoon. You see, it goes back to that subject. But at the same time, I don't take exhibits that seriously either, or I would have been there very carefully scrutinizing all of my paintings, which I'm going to do this afternoon--to check for damage.

MR. KARLSTROM: I saw the show, as I mentioned to you, yesterday afternoon. All your works seemed to be in good condition. I didn't see any damage there.

MR. RUSCHA: I did.

MR. KARLSTROM: Oh, you did, really?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, here and there, little scratches and things. It disturbs me.

MR. KARLSTROM: At any rate, it is an interesting grouping of pictures from the sixties. I think the earliest--I'm talking about your work--that you made probably is *Boss* [1961]. Is that the earliest one?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes.

MR. KARLSTROM: And what struck me, just as an observation at this point, the impasto, the painterly buildup of paint of that particular work, which I don't associate with your work.

MR. RUSCHA: Oh, yes. That's because it's early. It represented an escape from painting a flat surface which I was terrified of doing, see. So what does a person do when he can't paint a flat surface--you paint impasto. That's an old artistic trick.

MR. KARLSTROM: It's interesting because there's a quality, a painterly quality in the texture, pigment and all, that brings to mind artists like--well, a number of Bay Area artists of that time--I'm thinking perhaps of Wayne Thiebaud, I'm thinking of Mel Ramos. For some reason, Mel came to mind.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, and Thiebaud does too, and I guess there are some of the same characteristics-- obviously the same characteristics in pushing a glob of paint up and making its own realistic dividing line, making the edge of the subject with the paint, with three-dimensional paint, pushing it into its--paint by number so to speak.

MR. KARLSTROM: It's almost like sculpture.

MR. RUSCHA: Well, it is.

MR. KARLSTROM: Because it takes on this three-dimensional quality which, as I remarked, certainly doesn't have much to do, in my experience, with an idea of Ed Ruscha's work, which for the most part is--became flat, carefully drawn, laid out--the first thing you see is the *Standard Station*. As you walk into your section of the show, and then you turn the corner and you see *Boss*. I think, frankly, this is one of the exciting things about this show, to have these few works developing.

MR. RUSCHA: I didn't argue that much about the selection of my work, although I vetoed one or two things. But my inclusion in it encompasses several different facets of my work, and one is faithful rendering of an object unto its own size, like the comic book and the pencils. And the other is a kind of altruistic or visionary approach which is something that is as realistic, but not unto its same size, like the *Standard Station* is not the same size as a gas station. The other is the impasto effect, which becomes a game in itself. So I've got several things going in that show, as you can see.

MR. KARLSTROM: That's for sure. One does learn a little bit more about you. Not as much as one, I presume, will learn from the big retrospective exhibition.

MR. RUSCHA: Well, I learned from it myself by looking back at that *Boss* painting. I think even when I painted that picture that this was going out; this impasto business was not going to be used much longer by me.

MR. KARLSTROM: Do you feel that was a natural reflection of things that had been going on which had to do with Abstract Expressionism, action painting?

MR. RUSCHA: Probably, action painting, yes, it could have something to do with that, because I did some paintings that incorporated the same things. I was so profoundly moved by Jasper Johns's work when I first saw it, that it really motivated me, it was the sole motivating factor in my becoming an artist. My mind was a clash of these two different things, and I began painting words, and then I would just fill the space with abstract jabber. And so I had two ideologies coming together when I first started painting. I had Abstract Expressionist modes, and also I was beginning to see the possibility of using non-subjects for subject matter, like words and certain objects.

MR. KARLSTROM: That's something I would like to explore a little further in a moment. Getting back to the exhibition which actually is closing on Sunday, the L.A. County Museum show. There's been a tremendous amount of controversy on that show rising from these very matters of omissions primarily, and some point of view, and perhaps historical misrepresentation. I'm sure that you know something about that; there've been things in the paper, particularly about feminist groups, those representing minority interests, whatever --

MR. RUSCHA: Pure distraction--the feminists were a pure distraction. They had no basis in fact on the whole exhibit.

MR. KARLSTROM: How did you feel about that? Do you feel that there was any case? This is more of a personal political thing we're talking about than purely an artistic or even an historical consideration, but I think it's worth addressing. Do you feel that legitimately certain minority artists, or women--well, you mentioned Celmins as one who could have legitimately gone in the core exhibition. But do you feel that it was an important, that there were important omissions of artists who were neglected, perhaps even on purpose, because they were black?

MR. RUSCHA: No, I don't think there were any minority omissions there. First of all, it was not established as being a particularly democratic choice. You can't really have the exhibit and try to be democratic towards everyone. Otherwise you would find yourself making an exhibit by taking a map of Los Angeles and quartering sections up at each little point there and finding an artist with little red

pins and picking one artist from each section of town to make an exhibit. That's one way of making an exhibit. That would be artists of the sixties, wouldn't it. How could you argue with it?

But the point is that the curator decided that the show should be about what we call the art scene, I guess, of people committed to the particular art scene at the time, and there were no minorities, there were really no minorities. There were no black artists in the sixties--I mean, I can think of one, Eddie Bereal, whose work I really like and he was active all the time, but he was a hermit of his own choosing. So he was really not part of the sixties, viewed in that sense. But he was the same age as me; I went through school with him.

MR. KARLSTROM: So if you were organizing the show then, despite the fact that you know Bereal, you think then probably you would not necessarily include him.

MR. RUSCHA: I would probably include him if I had made a show about the sixties, but then my thing would be entirely different than Maurice Tuchman's, you see. I don't think Maurice Tuchman's exhibit is misrepresenting the sixties, I don't believe it is.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, that finally is the question.

MR. RUSCHA: You see, if I had made a show of the sixties, I would have picked different artists.

MR. KARLSTROM: Really?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes.

MR. KARLSTROM: Who would some of them be?

MR. RUSCHA: Well, I might have picked some artists who were more obscure. I would have gone for the flavor of the exhibit, rather than the historical piece that he's trying to make, you see, so I would include artists that you may never have heard of, but who may have been peripherally connected to the art scene. We would have seen an entirely different kind of exhibit had Walter Hopps been the curator of an exhibit like this. So you can't attack Maurice Tuchman because of the style of his show. He did it, he picked it.

MR. KARLSTROM: A curatorial prerogative.

MR. RUSCHA: With one mistake, the omission of John Altoon, because John Altoon was missing in the context of Maurice's show, see. But if I had made an exhibit like that, I would have expanded the territory, the physical space of the gallery and maybe included more artists.

MR. KARLSTROM: Who would be some of the Ruscha additions?

MR. RUSCHA: Well, I would say Eddie Bereal for one, and some people that I--I would say that Jerry McMillan would be another and some of the younger artists even, who were youngsters, real youngsters, like Chuck Arnoldi, Laddie John Dill and people like that--they were definitely there in the sixties, but their thrust was not heard until later on.

MR. KARLSTROM: They're associated more with the seventies, as a younger --

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, but I may have picked some artists, like Martial Raysse from France, who was in Los Angeles and did work in Los Angeles at this time during the sixties, and he showed his work at the Dwan Gallery. He didn't contribute that much, but he was definitely here. I'd really have to do some homework on this, but I would pick artists like--George Herms. The omission of DeWain [Valentine] was a mistake. I would have expanded the whole thing.

MR. KARLSTROM: What about Peter Alexander?

MR. RUSCHA: Then we're wondering--sure, Peter Alexander. I would certainly have Peter in there. The fact that DeWain and Peter were working on the same kind of course at this time, and that was in the sixties. So why shouldn't those--it's just a matter of rethinking the whole show. I would have done an entirely different show.

MR. KARLSTROM: But basically, don't fault Maurice, give him his right to--

MR. RUSCHA: Right, it's his style of show, he did it, it's his show--how can you attack that? The only thing, I think that he's sort of made his own rules, he's established his own rules for the selection of artists and with that given, he made a mistake in leaving John Altoon out.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, Edward, we seem to agree on that, that's for sure. Susan Larsen, who was one of the contributors to the catalog of the exhibition, writing on abstraction in Los Angeles, makes an interesting observation, which goes something like this, that the sixties L.A. look was cool, esthetic, well crafted, and is represented by artists such as Bell, Irwin, McCracken, Kauffman and then for our purposes, special interest, Ruscha.

But then she goes on to say that there were really more differences than similarities between these artists, the point being that they tended to, all of you, and mostly Ferus people, tended to be viewed as expressing an L.A. look, whatever that may be, from the sixties, and so you were viewed as participating in the same sensibility. Her point is that now, we look at these as really quite different and probably there are those who recognize that very fact, I assume the artists at the time. Do you agree with her statement and her perception? Well, that's the first question. More differences than similarities --

MR. RUSCHA: More differences than similarities--I always felt that. I thought it was all so amazing that artists could be friends with one another and not somehow have their ideas go--their ideas visually don't look alike, but the similarities are definitely there. So there's no school of thought amongst the friends themselves, see, because all of those artists are friends, amongst themselves, or there was a camaraderie between all the artists and yet the ideas, the visual, the last little thing along the line which is the final thing that they do, the look of their work, didn't really go from one to another. It was more like a spirit that went from one to another rather than the visual look of the work. So you don't see a lot of close relationships of influence from one artist to another.

MR. KARLSTROM: Everybody's been writing about L.A. art, certainly of that period, and using certain descriptive terms that they seem to apply to the art of the area: finish, of course, a high polish, this sort of thing, these adjectives, even the finish fetish, whichever way it goes--that term is used over and over again, as if somehow that explains the look of the art of the time. Do you feel that's true, do you feel that that's accurate, just thinking of some of the pieces?



MR. RUSCHA: Well, I know what they mean when they say "finish fetish," and I really wasn't included in that because my work didn't have that extra machine craftedness to it, that extra final polish to it that made it fly free.

MR. KARLSTROM: The custom car look?

MR. RUSCHA: The custom car look, yes. See, well that's not so far off. The custom car look had, I think--it was part of the fiber of the whole business of being an artist out here. I think that it made a transition into visual artists, so custom cars are not far off.

MR. KARLSTROM: So you do agree with that, because that's cited all the time.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, but I don't think it's necessarily geographically correct. The fact that these artists happened to live in L.A., and do consider this so-called final appearance of their work as being rather mechanical or finely finished and polished, you can obviously find artists in New York who do work in the same way.

MR. KARLSTROM: But one would probably acknowledge that these qualities were especially associated with these artists working in Los Angeles. It was called an L.A. look. I suppose you're perfectly right, there are New York artists that maybe were--had some of the same concern with craftsmanship and finish and all that, but in fact it's not called a New York look, it was a term used to distinguish L.A. art of the period from other art elsewhere. And what you're saying is that indeed you feel it is appropriate, it is descriptive enough to be legitimately used in connection with really these other artists, not so much with you. And so how do you feel--how would you place yourself and your work in relationship to this finished L.A. look and the work now and McCracken--

MR. RUSCHA: I was definitely affected by it. To see that people made art which was not brush-stroke made an impression on me. But I was less influenced than other artists. I suddenly came out of art school and I found artists that were working--like one artist was building a dust-free chamber, and I thought that was strange but real curious at the same time. It had a new inroad into the manufacture of art that impressed me.

MR. KARLSTROM: Who was that, Bell?

MR. RUSCHA: Well, Larry Bell, I think, and then there's another artist named Norman Zammitt, whose work I don't--I'm not that in favor of his work, I don't respond that much, but his approach to the work could be definitely considered part of this finish fetish, because he made a dust-free chamber to paint in, to spray paint in. He took over a studio of mine at one time. Larry Bell's work, Craig Kauffman's work, those big bubbles, those hotdog bubbles that he was making that had a workshop created feeling to them, so it was a complete reverse from the easel painting concept which I grew to feel conservatively connected to somehow, so I was jolted by these other people.

Ron Davis was making cast polyester works then. I began to see that it was also part of this manufacturing of art that I thought was a new direction that could open up possibilities. But personally I never got into it myself. I still remain a conservative easel painter. My contribution to the whole thing, if you could put my work in anywhere closely resembling that, would be in the manufacture of my books. Somehow the word "manufacture" comes into this concept of the finish

fetish. It's a negating of the easel painting concept.

MR. KARLSTROM: Yet for some reason you remained attached to that procedure and I, strangely enough, haven't really thought of that--well, Ed Moses, of course, did-- does, I suppose-- most of the L.A. artists seemed to move into relief, and into vacuum produced things, using plastic, or into three-dimensional sculpture, including Irwin, certainly--ditched the painting and the easels.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, DeWain, who's working that way, with cast works, Peter Alexander--

MR. KARLSTROM: But that really does seem to separate you, now that I think about it, from the others.

MR. RUSCHA: There were quite a few artists out here who were working independently in those directions. They didn't seem to--I can't see that Ron Davis's work didn't influence Craig Kauffman, to any degree that I can see, or vice versa. But they were working in the same sort of manufacturing procedures, in that direction of a more mechanical way to make art.

MR. KARLSTROM: Just sort of as an aside here, do you feel that particular preoccupation or direction is being maintained as you look around now in this area?

MR. RUSCHA: It's really funny, but the original thrust of that kind of art seemed to crest, and now I don't find it to be that way. Most of those artists are going back to traditional ways of making pictures --Kauffman, Davis--I mean they mostly are. Billy Al is back to painting with brushes. There's less of an emphasis on glass, there's less of an emphasis on plastic--I'm talking from the top of my head about the work you see produced today. You would see more kinetic works back then. So they were getting into mechanics, which was a departure from easel painting, and there seemed to be a movement at that time.

Also, in my sixties show, if we shall imagine such a show, I might include some kinetic artists in there. I don't know who, but there were some works done by artists involved in kinetics. H. C. Westerman was actually working in Los Angeles at the time, and he made an impression on people, made a real impression on people.

MR. KARLSTROM: Those are interesting observations on the fact that these qualities, these interests produced a so-called school of the period, but seem to have been abandoned by most of the important practitioners--some exceptions, like Valentine working with glass. He seems more closely involved with that, although there seems to be more light, which of course is a whole other subject, those artists who became preoccupied with light and perception. I guess that came into play with most of them as a matter of fact, certainly Irwin's directions were completely that way. I don't know if that's something we need to get into right now.

I'd like to move on, if you don't mind, to a topic that interests me very much which is in the broadest sense of realism--that it's a difficult word to define. We talked about realism in earlier sessions when you mentioned Hopper. I think I remember your response was that you never felt any connection with the tradition of Edward Hopper, although some people might see some connection in terms, perhaps, of--

MR. RUSCHA: Lonely gas stations?

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, mood perhaps. Subject matter is too superficial to say just that. In any event, if I remember correctly, you tended to deny any strong connection.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, he was absent from my art history, he was absent.

MR. KARLSTROM: With Hopper or what Hopper represented, I mean, I'm just thinking of him. But I would like to bring up the issue of realism once again and particularly in connection with Christopher Knight's catalog essay, again in the L.A. County Museum exhibition catalog. His essay is called, "The Word Made Flesh; L.A. Pop Redefined", which of course is a section which deals with you and those who are supposedly closest to you who were working at the time.

As we were discussing earlier, Knight's main point seems to be that L.A. Pop comes out of an American realist tradition, or has connections with it--whether it came out of it or not isn't the point. Specifically, the nineteenth century landscape school, which has been dubbed "luminism," which involved a preoccupation with things, sometimes humble objects, more often landscape elements, things in nature, carefully controlled and constructed, assembled in a way that might suggest even "manufacturing,"--this kind of care--I throw that word in with quotes. I think you see what I'm getting at. We discussed earlier some of the qualities of luminism, and that's the term that we're stuck with right here, as I mentioned, with Christopher Knight's essay. There are a lot of ramifications, and a lot of things involved. First of all, dealing with reality in representational style, the things are recognizable, in fact, in luminism, in the American realist tradition, they were very recognizable, it's a very sharply delineated--

MR. RUSCHA: --faithful.

MR. KARLSTROM: --very faithful slice of reality, but they're constructed and arranged, pictured generally, with ends in mind. I mentioned some of the characteristics, this locking of objects into planes and into space, this control. You reviewed the essay and I'm wondering what your response is. If you can see any legitimacy in this particular interpretation or effort to place L.A. Pop, and therefore your work within a realist tradition. It's a difficult one.

MR. RUSCHA: It's seen through his eyes as--the particular artist he's talking about--to come together in this so-called realist business, I'm not sure. One point he makes in there is--this may be a little more encompassing than what we're really talking about, but I felt like Los Angeles was--there was no cultural tradition in L.A. so far as painting goes. So gradually in this period, we found people, artists, selecting subject matter to examine as subject matter that could only be dealt with through the rendering of these things realistically.

I can only speak for myself--my work is--when I choose an object, generally a small object, I can't render this object unless it is somehow faithful. I even go to the extent of measuring the object, and measuring the canvas almost. I have almost a duty to myself to represent that thing as closely as possible. In a sense, I'm taking all kinds of liberties without it, but if I, in my own mind know that the ashtray is five inches across, then if I make that somehow five inches across on the canvas, I have fulfilled one of those duties to the picture itself. So I may miss in other areas, or I may not exactly be right, or the angle may not be--well, of course the shifting of the subject in the picture and all that

is different.

But I give myself to a set of restrictions that I call my duty to express, and so most of the objects that I make are objects that are actual size, even to the point of using that in a title of the picture. Like the *Spam* picture is actually called actual size, and so I felt I was-- somehow in this whole subject, I was using a vast plane, a vast open area that was the limits of my canvas. And that this subject I selected was even more dramatized by the fact that it was made actual size than if it had been made four times that size. That's one of the differences between me and most of the other Pop artists, they were able to expand the sizes of their images, of the objects, and I didn't really do that. I wasn't able to do that. The only time I would be able to change something like that is if I were to go off into a fantasy world and make something smaller than what it is, like a gas station, or the L.A. County Museum on fire. Then there are certain subjects that have no size, which is the area I really moved into, and that was words. I mean, what size is a word, after all?

MR. KARLSTROM: What is a word, if we're going to get on to that.

MR. RUSCHA: Is it six-point, is it twelve-point, or is it as big as the wall?

MR. KARLSTROM: I think what you've said is very interesting, and actually ties in with this notion, or some of the concerns of certain nineteenth-century American realists, including the Luminists. It's the idea of measure. Not that they painted their landscapes the same size, of course, as the actual landscape. It has to do with this emphasis on being able to measure within the picture, and it has to do with control, it has to do with honesty, I believe. It may be coincidental, but it seems to me that you share some of those same interests that these artists have.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, my intentions were not to expand the faithfulness of the subject of, say, a Spam can. When I did that I may have even traced it right off of a can and placed that on the canvas, and that was my duty as an artist, to get as faithful, within those guidelines. I mean there are ways--you can say, "Well, look at that, I mean there's one little thing--." There are all kinds of ways of looking at the picture but I think it's the selection, first of all, of the object which is more important than anything. It's almost like the idea is more important than the actual physical presence of it. And then once you pick the object and reproduce this faithfully, then it has to have some kind of a--you want the thing to somehow glimmer, or you want it to have inner power. You want to instill a thing with some earth shaking religious feeling, you want to hear this organ music.

MR. KARLSTROM: That sounds very much like some of the interests of the nineteenth-century Luminists.

MR. RUSCHA: It could be. In another sense like those artists would paint a still life, and they may not measure the objects, but they would somehow be people size in their paintings. But then when they'd go out and paint the Grand Tetons, they can paint the Grand Tetons in 36 inches by 40 inches.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, what can you do? Well, you know that's --

MR. RUSCHA: So I share some of the same problems with my work as probably some of those artists did.

MR. KARLSTROM: Because fundamental to this, or at least so it appears to us, was a reverence for matter, for objects, not necessarily for their own sakes --. In other words, the things themselves as physical objects, that wasn't the subject matter, that wasn't the content that they were really after. That somehow through these things something else might be revealed, I suppose is the way to put it, and unless I misinterpret what you've been saying, there's some of that possibility, perhaps, in what you do, but it takes on greater significance than you're fixing a particular object, putting it onto the canvas and the steps involved--finally the result is something more than can be apprehended from, say, looking at that tape recorder if you should do the tape recorder sitting there, or even its appearance on canvas, its representation, the same size, color and all that. But within that particular object, and this process of bringing it on, making it a part of a work of art, something is revealed that becomes more important. Do you agree with that?

MR. RUSCHA: Well, yes. If I did choose to paint a picture of a tape recorder, then I would be in a sense endorsing its value as a possibly obsolete item, because it's topical only to today, whereas if I painted a picture of an orange, that would be universal. And an apple would be universal. But the minute you paint something that is stylized unto itself, then it's open to becoming obsolete.

MR. KARLSTROM: It dates the work.

MR. RUSCHA: It dates the work. I mean, people a hundred years from now, will say, "What is this little thing that says "Spam" on it? What's Spam?"

MR. KARLSTROM: Already they may be saying that. A lot of kids don't know what Spam is, so it's already happening. Do you like that? Is that part of your artistic intention?

MR. RUSCHA: No, it's the immediacy that's really important and I'm not going to go around painting things that are universal just for that. Like an apple's timeless. But it's the immediacy that takes over and makes you not even think about whether something could be ever out of date.

MR. KARLSTROM: Do you have a special attachment, as Christopher Knight suggests, to such things? Do you feel you're more interested in gathering things about you, accumulating things and incorporating them into books and paintings? Looking at your work, one would expect that maybe that's the case, but what do you have to say about it?

MR. RUSCHA: Well, I think I have a--I carry with me an imaginary scrapbook of ideas. I'm constantly seeing shapes and things that I--I mean my mind doesn't work like, say, maybe Claes Oldenburg, who is constantly looking at objects and making distortions, idea distortions on those objects and using objects in that sense.

I'm not like that. I guess when I do pick an object, I want to pick it with a certain amount of reverence and I want it to be --it's got to be sort of a clean contact between me and the object and what I intend to make out of that. Sometimes an object would never be good subject matter for a painting, but I may just want to look at it in some other way. Maybe it would kick off an idea rather than an object. Gas stations might be a point there in that I made a book out of gas stations, and I also made a picture of gas stations. I look at all my influence as being material, more like maybe a songwriter or a filmmaker or a poet maybe.

I look at all of these things as material. That's why I say I have a scrapbook of potential ideas, of properties that can be used in one way or another. There's no logical order to it, there's no logical reason why I might make a painting of, say, a Spam can on one hand, or whether I might want to take a photograph of it and put it in a book. It's a constant shifting of material, using material, taking it out of context and putting it back in context, glorifying it in one way, and putting it in the background in another way.

MR. KARLSTROM: Does this scrapbook actually exist?

MR. RUSCHA: I do have notebooks that I write ideas down in and sometimes if I--the words "gas station" may actually appear there, but I've never actually done a painting that says "gas station." I've done a word that says "gas."

MR. KARLSTROM: But do you refer to these things?

MR. RUSCHA: I refer to them, and they're food for the entire business.

MR. KARLSTROM: It's like a novelist, a writer of fiction. Generally they carry notebooks and as ideas come or situations appear--they might even be at a party-- sometimes, a famous author sitting down taking notes. Then one would presume he goes back and reviews this, and actually lifts things that seem appropriate into a novel. I gather you work somewhat that way yourself.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, in that I am not uniformly directed to make paintings, oil paintings on canvas. Throughout my work these ideas have come out of different media. It may appear in a movie in one respect, and then it may come back and appear in a lithograph in another. Then it may be a drawing in another and a painting in another.

MR. KARLSTROM: You just said that you wanted to approach the objects that you used with a certain reverence. What do you mean by that? It seems important to you, and why is that so, what does that really mean?

MR. RUSCHA: It means something very simple. It means like --well, when I say reverence I mean that I have to bring something to it, and so I have to treat it right. I want to, in a sense, put some breathing life into it. Whatever subject I choose to make a picture of, I've got to somehow singularize this object so that it becomes-- in other words, breathe life into it, realize that it has the-- it has a certain amount of potential in itself. Once it's selected as a subject matter, then it's my job to bring the thing alive.

MR. KARLSTROM: What do you think that potential is, though? How would you describe specifically that which you sense is trapped inside this object, and through the act of selection and incorporation into your work is released--you hope it is--or is it too--something too nebulous to describe, this life inside the object? How does it manifest itself, if it is indeed released?

MR. RUSCHA: Sometimes it has no meaning. If the pencil--if I paint a picture of a pencil, it may not have as much meaning as a utilitarian object as it does take on a particular shape in space that might attract me, so while the idea of a pencil being an object to make marks with, or to write with, to draw with, may be the secondary strength, and the primary strength at the time I paint it might

just be that it's a flat thing. That it's a long, skinny object in the painting. So it becomes almost abstract.

MR. KARLSTROM: That's --you mentioned the word and that's one of the next things I really wanted to ask you. From what you're saying, your concern at that point, the value of the pencil, is really formal, it plays a formal role, it's a formal value, certainly not iconographic in the sense that there's some meaning or symbolism of a pencil itself. I wanted to ask you about that. Are you more interested in abstract formalist art theory than symbolic--

MR. RUSCHA: --pictorial or symbolic, yes--

MR. KARLSTROM: --yes, realistic?

MR. RUSCHA: Neither necessarily, or maybe both at the same time. It's a kind of drama that I'm after, so in a sense, maybe long, skinny things interest me, like every building on the Sunset Strip or a painting that's 20 inches high and 159 inches long. Or maybe even a pencil, see, so it's a drama, I guess, that I'm after rather than--it's almost an abstract drama I'm after, rather than any kind of, say, story-telling device.

MR. KARLSTROM: So it doesn't matter that they're necessarily gas stations or strung out-- I mean, they're buildings on the Sunset Strip or long pencils, that indeed some other similar object at that moment could perform the same function.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes.

MR. KARLSTROM: That sounds to me as if it's largely then a formalist, compositional consideration rather than anything else, or let's say primarily that.

MR. RUSCHA: That puts me back on square one, doesn't it?

MR. KARLSTROM: I'm not sure. It seems that--well nothing simple, and obviously in every case, the emphasis can change. But assuming that there are basically two ways to go, admitting that that's a huge oversimplification, there is an emphasis on abstract formalist qualities, and then on the other hand, more narrative, this tying in with realism and so forth, but within realist painting you can have an emphasis on one or the other as well--anecdote, narrative, story-telling-- nothing wrong with that --or, as many realists claim for their work, like the Photorealists, a preoccupation with formal, abstract qualities within a realist framework. I think what I'm trying to learn is which do you feel is more important to your own work? Are you leaning towards one way or the other?

MR. RUSCHA: I'll lean either way.

MR. KARLSTROM: A short answer to a long question.

MR. RUSCHA: My work is loaded with all kinds of prejudices. I do find myself--I don't know why--ultimately kind of sum myself up by saying I'm conservative. I don't know exactly why I feel that way, but I do. When you speak of realism, and you mentioned Photorealism, I think Photorealists are more dedicated to the camera and photographs than they are to faithfully rendering subjects, because their work is described by the photograph. You can look at Photorealist paintings and

almost tell what kind of lens the camera took.

MR. KARLSTROM: Which obviously doesn't interest you at all. We've learned that that isn't part of your--

MR. RUSCHA: It doesn't interest me at all.

MR. KARLSTROM: --process of working. Let's try it another way. Do you think of yourself as a Realist painter in light of the fact that last month's Art in America announces that Realism is okay again, Realism is back, it's all right. But if you were to describe yourself--

MR. RUSCHA: I would never describe myself as a Realist. Do they mean Realism by faithful rendering of subjects?

MR. KARLSTROM: That's part of it.

MR. RUSCHA: So that they appear as though they are? Because I'm not, I don't believe in that. I'm only a Realist in the sense that, like I say, I might measure the ashtray and it becomes five inches, and if it's five inches I might tend to want to make it five inches on the canvas. Now if that's being a Realist, it is, but there's so much surrounding it, like the surrounding canvas.

MR. KARLSTROM: So you would not describe yourself, at least at this moment, as a Realist painter.

MR. RUSCHA: No, I don't think by their terminology, I don't believe that I would be.

MR. KARLSTROM: Of course, Realism, I think, is being redefined in its broadest application it has to do with recognizable subject matter. You would agree that in much of your work there is some recognizable--

MR. RUSCHA: Well, I learned--I mean it was just sort of a quick lesson that I taught myself at one point--I saw a painting of the Battle of Dunkirk, painted by I don't know who, English,

back in the thirties. When was the Battle of Dunkirk? Anyway, there's a painting--. Since we haven't really defined what Realism is about, but it's such a broad word that Realism can be looked at by many people in many different ways, and one lesson that I got from this that might apply is a reproduction of a painting I saw once called *The Battle of Dunkirk*.

MR. KARLSTROM: Who was the artist, do you remember?

MR. RUSCHA: I'm not sure. I think the artist was English and it was painted as--it was the most bucolic, restful image I could imagine. It was a large aerial view of the harbor of Dunkirk, with the ships in flames and the battle actually going on at the time. I couldn't imagine any picture being more sedate and more charming and tranquil--

MR. KARLSTROM: --tranquil, peaceful, and here a war is being depicted.

MR. RUSCHA: --and here a war is going on. That picture, say, compared with the *Guernica*, [1937] the jagged lines and explosions going there and people's arms cut off, gestures toward the



sky of life giving, necessity and just the drama behind that, and yet it was less literal but more emotional, more realistic in a sense--more abstract yet more realistic than the picture of the Battle of Dunkirk. I mean, what says war more, the *Guernica* or this other painting? I don't have particularly one choice over the other, but it is a primer or lesson about what a picture can evoke.

MR. KARLSTROM: That's true, and of course that's why artists through the ages, especially at least modern artists, have chosen styles or devices that they feel more adequately express a point of view, something they're trying to get at. Think of German Expressionism, which is, I

suppose, in the broadest definition of Realism, is Realist painting because you can recognize that these are figures in a Kirchner painting, perhaps, that they are human beings, say, in a landscape. They're often so distorted that you can say, "Well, this is not very realistic." That of course is one use of the term. But basically what we've come to, I think, in this conversation is that you at least are not prepared at this point--

MR. RUSCHA: --to be labeled a Realist.

MR. KARLSTROM: --to take a position within the Realist camp, whatever that may be. Although you would acknowledge that in terms of certain stylistic considerations, which have to do with the faithful rendering of objects--

MR. RUSCHA: There's an academic faithfulness that I give to an object.

MR. KARLSTROM: Let me ask you a couple more questions related to this. Are you yourself interested in the philosophical questions concerning the nature of reality, a reality composed of objects that surround us, questions that perhaps have to do with notions of things reflecting the ideal, basic principles pertaining to space, the real and the ideal, the specific and the general?

MR. RUSCHA: We're talking beyond pictures, we're talking beyond painting, we're talking beyond art in a sense, and we're talking about space. The notion certainly occurs to me, and I like any kind of notion that people don't--I mean, I like attention given to something that doesn't require attention. For that, I may be philosophical in a sense. I like to give

--I like to embellish a subject that doesn't need embellishment. Maybe that's what you're thinking of. The reason for and what about the hereafter and questions like that, I am curious about that. I don't study philosophy as such, but I like attention and time given to a subject that doesn't need attention and time.

MR. KARLSTROM: Why do you like that?

MR. RUSCHA: I guess maybe it's the--maybe a little bit of the showman in me or something. Maybe I have to say that there is really more to a subject than there is ever given by anyone else. Because, after all, it's an artist's job to do that despite the fact that you have to use tricks and devices in order to put that idea across. So I like to give attention to the lonely paintbrush or make a tribute to something that is humble, or something that does not require explanation. So some objects to me are stupid for that reason, tools and fastening devices.

There are things that I'm constantly looking at that I feel should be elevated to greater status,

almost to philosophical status or to a religious status. That's why taking things out of context is a useful tool to an artist, I mean--and used in many different ways. It's just the concept of taking something that's not subject matter and making it subject matter.

MR. KARLSTROM: Especially if they're trivial objects.

MR. RUSCHA: Trivial objects usually have that, but sometimes even objects that are important can also have the same effect. It might be in the way of dealing with it, or in the context it's placed.

MR. KARLSTROM: This, of course, is one of the qualities attributed to Pop Art, or at least a similar interest, to take routine, everyday objects--we've already talked about this, of course--and somehow elevate them to fine art status. This, I gather, is close to your interest.

MR. RUSCHA: Well, it's not necessarily elevating it to fine art status, but elevating it to a seeable status, calling attention to something. The idea of making it fine art is a euphemistic way of elevating it from its low status to something of recognizable status. In other words, it deserves to be recognized.

MR. KARLSTROM: You force people to look at these things, I mean, it's assuming they go and look at your art. Then they are obliged to see these things. But do you suppose this has something to do with your own basic attitudes toward reality, and that the ordinary hierarchy of what's important or unimportant in the things that surround us is unacceptable to you, that you're--

MR. RUSCHA: I guess it is, and it means that there's a certain frustration that I'm suffering and that most artists suffer just by being artists. They don't have-- there's some strange way of looking at the world, and jumbling it and coming up with their own statement.

MR. KARLSTROM: But do you feel that there is implicit here a commentary on your part on the nature of reality? In other words, one that you really have thought out or that occurs to you as you're working.

MR. RUSCHA: One thing I don't have, I don't have a need to tell things like they are. Now that's implicit in Realism in a way. But my ideas are never, have never been crystallized to the point where things are rolling along, and I'm telling things exactly like they should be told. Because my Realism is only part Realism. If I choose to make a subject, the context in which I make that possible distorts the Realism of the subject itself.

Back to the Spam can and the Spam can's falling through space. What's the space, what does it mean? It's only space on a canvas, but the faithfulness of it, the Realism facet of it, is all by itself, it's kind of like frozen in a sense. So I like the ideas to be frozen in their environment in that respect. So it's not total Realism, it's not total explanation. Total Realism is like telling it like it is, and I'm not that kind of artist.

MR. KARLSTROM: That doesn't interest you.

MR. RUSCHA: No. Come to think of it, who does?

MR. KARLSTROM: I don't know. Related to this and, I think, central to the issue of Realism, at least

in terms of representing something, I think, certainly central to your work is an interest in words. One could say that your subject matter in a lot of the paintings, and not just the paintings--books as well--words--the drawings--you're very much associated with words as subject matter. You, for some reason, have chosen these things, they continue, apparently to serve as useful elements within your painting. Do you view your words in terms of Realism or abstraction, and this is one of my word questions. Are these perhaps formal elements that you just happened to like on one level, words, that go into the arrangement of the picture, help to determine the structure and formal quality of a painting?

MR. RUSCHA: Well, first of all, the English language is the hottest language to hit the USA. I use the English language and each word I use has its own definition. Immediately upon seeing the word, you're dealt with the impression or the possible--me leading a person into what the definition of that word is. A lot of times the words are unimportant, their definitions are unimportant. They become almost abstract objects, not really.

When I first started painting it became an exercise in using, oh, like guttural utterings, monosyllabic explorations of words like "smash," "boss," "won't"--I'm thinking about those paintings in the exhibit over there--and so I seemed to--I noticed that when I look back on my work that most of my early works were, had less of a fascination with the English language than they did with just trying to imitate monosyllabic words like "smash," "oof." They all were power words like that, rather than words which represented the lighter side of life. They were words that represented things being broken or smashed, damaged. I wonder really what my fascination with that was, except that they seemed to be words with less subject matter than, say, if I had painted the word "patience," or words that were of a lighter nature. So I think that I possibly could have been involved in painting an environment for what the word sounded like, and looked like at the same time.

MR. KARLSTROM: It seems to me that the words could be used in your paintings, or could be viewed in your paintings, on three possible levels or in three possible ways --perhaps more, but let's just try out these three. First of all, is the formal level, the abstract level. These are simply elements, compositional elements, in a painting to help determine the structure of the work of art, nothing beyond that. A second way would be that the words are there, but without specific signification or meaning other than perhaps a general referring to language, to sound and noise. Which is what you seem to be suggesting in terms of these harsh words. A third possibility is that, indeed, the words have suggestive connotations, they connote specific things or sensations. Even "Annie," that's a girl's name. So immediately it's loaded--we've probably talked about this before--and that is there, that's immediately part of the work whether you like it or not, no matter what you want. Or, if it's "steal," it means something. At any rate, given those three levels--

MR. RUSCHA: Now what was the second one?

MR. KARLSTROM: The second one was that words, that they're acknowledged as words without specific signification or meaning, isn't important, at least in terms of your goals, that they signify something more general, like language itself or sounds from the English language which have different qualities, and you seem to have at one stage chosen certain types of things. So it moves from pure abstraction to generalization, having to do with noise and sounds and language to specific meanings.

MR. RUSCHA: I can see from these three that I'm not really a purist in any one particular facet of these ideas you have here, because sometimes I don't care about the definition of the word. Sometimes they are just a simple excursion, start stop unto itself, and not meant for any dictionary definition interpretation. Then other times I, like you say, I can't escape the fact that, say, the word, "Annie," would mean many things to many people. It's a name of a woman and possibly it goes beyond and suggests something else, so I'm a victim of whatever it happens to be.

MR. KARLSTROM: Does that interest you, though, that fact that--let's take "Annie" as an example. It's that cartoon lettering, Little Orphan Annie, right? So that immediately is brought to mind only to those people who are familiar with that strip. Another possibility--well, clearly, it refers to a female, but then, depending upon the viewer, it's very--my wife's name is Ann. I don't call her "Annie," but then just think of the enormous personal connotations that could arise from that. And you, without knowing who's going to be looking at the work, have then sparked that. That's what words are all about. Think of the enormous emotions that could possibly be stimulated through "Annie." Maybe--let's think of something sad--somebody happens to be viewing this work and his wife, girlfriend or something, died in a car accident. Here I am laughing, but then that whole thing comes from the outside into the work. I know you have no control over it, but does that interest you?

MR. RUSCHA: Not really, not beyond its factual connotation. It's parlor talk--did you feel that?

MR. KARLSTROM: Was that an earthquake?

MR. RUSCHA: Earthquake? It sounded like it, didn't it? It sure did.

MR. KARLSTROM: See how blasé we are in California about earthquakes. Well, okay. I thought I'd just try that on for size. But that doesn't then interest you obviously.

MR. RUSCHA: No, I've never been able to look at my work as though, say, the words I use can be used for anything more than what I've done with them. In other words, I'm not combining words to make word gestures. I'm not opening people's eyes to combinations of things that I'm attempting to say, because mostly it's what it appears to be. Each word is an excursion unto itself.

MR. KARLSTROM: Do you hope that people, perhaps to themselves or even aloud, pronounce the words?

MR. RUSCHA: No.

MR. KARLSTROM: What about the harsh words?

MR. RUSCHA: Well, pronounced in their minds maybe. Maybe "smash," for instance.

MR. KARLSTROM: "Smash."

MR. RUSCHA: I want them to be simple, monosyllabic--I don't think you even have to pronounce them in the back of your throat. They've made a test with instruments in people's throats and in their mouths with their tongues, as to the pronunciation of words when they read. I guess everyone tends to move their tongue slightly towards the back of their head when they're reading softly to themselves, when they're not reading aloud. There's a tendency painting will not pronounce it out

loud, and get this kind of throat motion, you know. It's almost like a non-movement in the back of your throat that pronounces the word and gets it out. So the monosyllabic words have that—

MR. KARLSTROM: "Boss?"

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, "boss" is another one.

MR. KARLSTROM: "Noise?"

MR. RUSCHA: Yes.

MR. KARLSTROM: That's interesting. It's true, when children are learning how to read they find it very difficult to read without pronouncing the words. Then perhaps a little later--first they do it out loud. It seems they can't read without voicing each word. Then they get to a stage where they move their lips.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, they move their lips, and sometimes it's the back of their throat.

MR. KARLSTROM: Finally, at least I presume that most of us literate types do it all in the mind. Okay, do you have anything more to say about words?

MR. RUSCHA: No more words.

MR. KARLSTROM: No more words, let's forget the words, word paintings. I wanted to ask you a general question) but I think perhaps we've already dispatched it in this session, and that had to do with the philosophy of art as reflected in your work. I asked you if you had philosophical interest or questions about things, and I guess that in our discussion it turned out that perhaps indeed there was something of a philosophical relation or relationship to these objects and therefore if you deal with them in your work there must be a connection. But in a more general sense, do you have a philosophy of art that could explain what you're doing and why you're doing it?

The next question would be what direction do you see your work taking now, looking at where it's come from. Can you make those connections? Do you think about it?

MR. RUSCHA: I think the unknown is one facet of being an artist that has the most to offer for myself. Not knowing what's done in the future. I've always felt that way. I've always wondered what direction I will take at some point in the future, or how will my future unfold itself? Possibly that's one thing that I'm baffled by, but I'm also committed to. So I have really no direction, I have no plans. I can't write my future. I can't write my own history. I'm most fascinated by that one idea of the things that are undone now, will be done in five years time.

MR. KARLSTROM: In other words, you're interested in seeing what will happen.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, I'm interested in what is interesting. So the future, and less about what I happened to be involved in right now which is always really mundane by comparison to maybe other people's lives. Because it is a kind of curious individual enterprise. It all depends on me and not somebody else and I can't get fired from the job--but I've felt like it, I've felt like firing myself, but I know I'm helpless.

MR. KARLSTROM: Who would you hire to replace yourself? You said that it's not necessarily--what you're doing right now is not, or often not, terribly exciting. If I understood you correctly, the greater excitement is wondering what will come next. But obviously when you get to that next stage--

MR. RUSCHA: I'm going to still feel like that.

MR. KARLSTROM: Then you'll say, oh, well this is okay. This is what I do, for better or for worse, but gee, I wonder what's going to happen next. So it's perpetually moving in that way. That's obviously what keeps you going. I would expect, though, that you get very excited by new ideas, things that occur to you which you can put into your work. I would think that would be part of what keeps you going. And that's done in the present. Or are you saying this, that that idea, the concept is exciting, but when it comes to the execution it is more routine.

MR. RUSCHA: Basically I'm the kind of artist who wants a product. That's very difficult to explain. But since my work is contrived in the sense that I have an idea of what this end result is going to be like, then the means to the end becomes a chore in many ways. So I'm involved daily in the chore of getting to the end result. I'm really less interested in the means to the end, and more interested in the final result. Sometimes I surprise myself as to what direction I'm going to take. So going backwards is hearsay. It's all things that have happened. Some of the past things are hard to explain and the future's even harder.

MR. KARLSTROM: But it's always open. So one can imagine that everything will come together that didn't perhaps in the past. So when you say you're thinking of firing yourself, what you mean is you want to fire yourself as the executor of your own ideas. That it would be nice to have like a robot that would have the same facility as Ed Ruscha and the same skills in making something.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes. And as quaint as that sounds, it's still a possibility, literally. I'm not one who subscribes to the idea that the artist has to actually with his own hand produce his own works. I'm not that enthusiastic about that subject to go off and look for someone to do my own work or find the robot. But I'm just saying there are no real answers to the way of getting art work done. But I do find myself, I don't have a lot of helpers around here, you can see, and so--

MR. KARLSTROM: I don't see any. I sometimes wonder how you find time to do your work. I ask that for one reason. Every once in a while I come down and take up several hours talking into a tape recorder--I know damn well I'm not the only one that puts demands on your time, some of them serious demands and in other cases perhaps more of a nuisance than anything else. I notice we sit here and that phone rings constantly. You've got that device now which records the messages, and then you also go out to the desert and work at your place. How do you find time for this execution, because you still--the way you work now--are tied to that, executing.

MR. RUSCHA: I do find time for it. I just do, and while I don't produce a prodigious amount of work like some artists do, I still find time for it. I guess I spend less time running around the city than a lot of people do. I spend a lot of time in the studio.

MR. KARLSTROM: Obviously you find time to execute your work. But it does seem that there are plenty of distractions. For one thing you're working and spending a lot of time on the retrospective exhibition being organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art which is opening--

MR. RUSCHA: March, 1982.

MR. KARLSTROM: I know that's taken a lot of your time.

MR. RUSCHA: Indeed it has.

MR. KARLSTROM: How do you feel about that? There are a lot of implications that arise from that.

MR. RUSCHA: I'm forced to be academic about it. So we get into a lot of questions about was this 7-1/8 inch or was it 7-3/16 inch, and questions I'm really not interested in. It's such a self --involved project that it becomes too much reflection back upon myself and I can't look forward. I can only look back with a situation like that. So I'm at battle with myself, wondering whether this should all happen or not. I'd rather have it quiet in another sense. And so working on the show has been so time consuming that it really affected the work I'm doing now.

MR. KARLSTROM: In what way?

MR. RUSCHA: Just the pure consumption of time to do something like that. So I want to keep the future open to myself. So I find myself doing less and less projects on the outside and more and more time spent in my studio.

MR. KARLSTROM: You said working on this retrospective affected the work. But I'm wondering if it's possible that having to deal with that particular subject, take stock of your career with the retrospective, if that process and contemplating where you've come from, and what you've done and what you are up to this point affects the direction of your work.

MR. RUSCHA: No.

MR. KARLSTROM: No effects at all.

MR. RUSCHA: No.

MR. KARLSTROM: This sense of art history of you doesn't then impinge upon it?

MR. RUSCHA: No. While it has to do so much with the self, and I'm responsible to myself for representing myself and being faithful to what has happened in the past, I still don't find that it's going to have that much affect upon what I do in the future. It just hasn't.

MR. KARLSTROM: That's interesting.

MR. RUSCHA: Because I don't know what the future has to offer.

MR. KARLSTROM: That's true. Maybe you will find that this exercise of working on a retrospective, maybe even without your knowing it, pushes you in a certain direction.

MR. RUSCHA: It could easily.

MR. KARLSTROM: It's a pointless conversation because you don't know what the reason is. Are

you pleased with the way--of course, the show hasn't opened yet, and you've been working-- you've designed the catalog.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, I oversaw the making of the catalog. I felt I was lucky to be able to control that. I could show the pictures I wanted to show. The one hope I have is that when all this work is assembled, that the condition of the work is better than what I think it's going to be. Because paintings, especially paintings, get damaged.

MR. KARLSTROM: Every time they move around.

MR. RUSCHA: I'm hoping there's going to be some standard of excellence that comes out in it.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, I'm sure that the--knowing the cast of characters, you'd agree they'll be careful on that. You are obviously concerned about that, which may tie in with your acknowledged interest in product. You want to have a cherry product, if we may use the term. You're less interested in creating the product, the mechanical, the execution. It's the idea that it has to be made well.

MR. RUSCHA: There are some artists and some curators and some directors and people that would rather see a good catalog made than a good exhibit made. I feel less about that than I used to. I used to think a catalog meant quite a bit to an exhibit. I feel differently now that it's my own work, and I'm really concerned that those pictures are in good condition.

MR. KARLSTROM: On the other hand, a catalog is a document. It will live on. One is the experience of seeing the actual works, and then it's gone. So the whole thing lives on in a different form than the catalog. Doesn't that interest you? Do you see value?

MR. RUSCHA: Oh, I suppose so. I'm fairly well in my history committed to the book form, and so in a sense this is a book, it's not my work but it's about my work. It's about my work rather than my work, as far as my books go. So I'd like to personally see the whole thing behind me. It's so self-indulgent that there's got to be some more air coming in from someplace.

MR. KARLSTROM: Does the whole concept of a retrospective at this stage bother you in any way? Clearly it's moving to art history.

MR. RUSCHA: People are quick to say retrospective. It's a semantic discussion as to what retrospective really means. I think that me, forty-three years old today, Ed Ruscha, living in Los Angeles, working here, has a few more things to say that will not be covered in that so-called retrospective. So a real retrospective is someone who has gone through all the periods of his creative endeavor. But this is a retrospective up to a point. It has not really encompassed all of the moves I know I'm going to go through. It's like a view, a survey, of my work. So I've denied calling it a retrospective. But then I've given in to the semantic aspect of it, and not been so critical of it, sensitive towards it.

MR. KARLSTROM: But does it make you feel as if you've become an institution?

MR. RUSCHA: No, because I'm not. It represents everything that I've done and everything I represent in the last twenty years. There's enough discord and enough dissatisfaction in things as



they are, and I've got the proper negative environment to live and keep producing. So I'm not satisfied. I'm just never really satisfied. So it's not writing, it's not putting the cap on the whole situation.

MR. KARLSTROM: Do you think the exhibition will reveal that the whole thing is still in process. It's a progress report.

MR. RUSCHA: I think so. I know the show will.

MR. KARLSTROM: What's the latest work that's going to be shown?

MR. RUSCHA: The latest works will be the bamboo pole I painted. 20 inches x 159 inches.

MR. KARLSTROM: Like *Ancient Dogs Barking*.

MR. RUSCHA: Very much like that. Almost the same background. Actually it's more like the upper background. Then there's a bamboo pole, there's the subject for it, right there. Speaking of artists and models, there's my model.

MR. KARLSTROM: That's right, a fishing pole.

MR. RUSCHA: So that work will be in the show. That is the latest work. I had this dream that I would like to work right up to the very end of the exhibit, and then maybe put some very brand new things in there. As it goes, I could see you couldn't make a catalog and be correct with the archives if a work was left out of the catalog.

MR. KARLSTROM: Why not?

MR. RUSCHA: I don't know why.

MR. KARLSTROM: It sounds to me like you've been convinced.

MR. RUSCHA: I'll have another art show on the street in front of the museum.

MR. KARLSTROM: Here's what we should do, make a show at the deYoung Museum of up-to-the-minute, like four things, under the auspices of the Archives of American Art.

MR. RUSCHA: I'd love it.

MR. KARLSTROM: Why not? It's not impossible. I do have the years of some of the--

MR. RUSCHA: I actually may have a show at the Weinberg Gallery.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, that might take care of it.

MR. RUSCHA: There are going to be some works that are back in New York and maybe a few new things.

MR. KARLSTROM: That would be good because then that could possibly accomplish what I think you'd like to see, which is this continued process. It isn't stopped.

MR. RUSCHA: I think most people will know that. It's implied in the whole process. We all know that's sketchy out there, and we don't know what's out there.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, let me ask you just one more question. The well has run dry. Everybody knows that an interview can keep going and going. It would be nice if it could, but at least, like a retrospective, this has got to serve up to this point. I was looking at your record collection, which is a pretty good one, pretty interesting, pretty eclectic. You have obviously an interest in popular music, you even have some Disneyland records--I don't know if they're for you or your son--but you also have--. There's a whole catalog of Frank Zappa, and you've got some Captain Beef heart, rock-n-roll jazz, some new wave things.

MR. RUSCHA: Country and western songs. I like country and western.

MR. KARLSTROM: Do you see any connection between that interest and music?

MR. RUSCHA: Absolutely, absolutely, yes. Because there are thought patterns that people put into their--in their sense, it's music and it's also words. Words I might say I'm involved in, and I guess they're artists on the same plane as I am, but in some funny way they're very distant from me, but so close to me that I'm intrigued by it, and I'm also influenced by it. I find that some of the musicians are making a more cohesive statement to me than many artists do. Even artists whom I admire, I think that some of the musicians are bridging many gaps that I'd like to see myself bridge. For that reason that music interests me.

MR. KARLSTROM: It's interesting that you are drawn to Zappa, especially to Captain Beefheart. A somewhat esoteric figure who happens to be a self-proclaimed artist as well and lives out in the Mohave Desert, not too close to where your place is in Joshua. At any rate, the Beefheart really is a cult figure. His music, for anybody who has listened to it, is difficult, unusual, as to the sets. They're usually very short pieces with a lot of talking and strange images. Words are extremely important; it's almost a free-form poetry. As a matter of fact, Zappa has produced at least some of Beef heart's--

MR. RUSCHA: They've even sung on each other's albums.

MR. KARLSTROM: Picking up on one thing you said, the importance of words in popular music, that there's much more to it, that this seems to fit perhaps with your own interests, in particular Captain Beefheart, there's maybe a very natural affinity between--. It strikes me as possible.

MR. RUSCHA: As artists, they're less fearful of parts of history and making contemporary thoughts out of it. Frank Zappa will use some Tin Pan Alley music for seven seconds to make a certain statement. Whereas I don't go back and borrow things from the past like that and bring it up here like this. I'm more involved in my own style.

Yet music, and especially these musicians we've just talked about, are constantly using music as their whole power. They go back and use all kinds of things through history to make their statement cohesive. They borrow from one another more easily than I, say, borrow from artists.

MR. KARLSTROM: Are you interested at all in Gertrude Stein's poetry, and the use of language or

of word that evolve into concrete poetry. They're poems but they're set up in ways that have a visual effect that's finally almost divorced from the significance of the words themselves.

MR. RUSCHA: Was Apollinaire and—

MR. KARLSTROM: Yes, well, some of the Surrealists, the Dadaists. Does that attract you?

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, it really does.

MR. KARLSTROM: Sometimes it's nonsense, or seems to be.

MR. RUSCHA: I would be attracted to it because it was nonsense. I like the idea of someone making a statement about something that you don't make statements about. That really attracts me. And when musicians do that, I see that maybe their statement is not far off from what mine might be.

MR. KARLSTROM: What about Punk Rock? I was thinking of one aspect of some Punk groups, where noise and volume seem to be the goal as much as their lyrics. It's almost impossible at a performance to understand what they are saying.

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, which is unimportant. Punk's basic statements are alienation, the frustration theme. They use that in almost everything they do. So you don't even have to listen to their words. They're just talking about how they hate mommy and would like to slit her throat. Words to me have never been that--it's not that implicit which is then strange because people would expect an artist, a painter, they would expect to be able to read a word of mine if I make a word so you can't really read it. I'd be more under fire, say, than a musician. Musicians get away with murder. They've got the widest extended set of artistic licenses than anybody. That's what I like about it.

MR. KARLSTROM: All I need is that back beat, the sound, which apparently—

MR. RUSCHA: Yes, and so it's a drone that they're able to do. I really like that about music, you don't have to understand the lyrics.

MR. KARLSTROM: But then they become something else. Lyrics were so important to popular music for so long. Then with rock and roll they became simple, usually about love, maybe about sex, but very simplistic. Now we look back and they're almost embarrassing, da-da-da. It's moved to the point where the words themselves don't even have to be understood in a performance. If you listen to X, for instance, especially some of the L.A. groups, they're singing English, but you can't understand what they're singing. You've got to read the subtitles. And there are words, and they tell stories.

MR. RUSCHA: That's why I like to get a libretto, on lead sheets along with the dust jackets. Because it really makes a curious connection when you can listen to them sing and then you can read their words.

MR. KARLSTROM: It's like a whole different experience for an art form. I hadn't thought about that before. It would seem possible that this would be of interest to you. Do you have anything else that you'd like to--

MR. RUSCHA: I'm sure I have a thousand things to say. End of discussion.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, I think that we've certainly put in the time on this over a period of maybe a year, I'm not sure. I think we started last--I'm not positive when, but it's been about a year.

MR. RUSCHA: See, I've gotten no work done in the last year. I've been thinking too much about this interview.

MR. KARLSTROM: I know, I'm feeling terribly guilty. The only encouraging thing I can say is that at least for this phase, pretty soon it'll be all over. But I want to thank you for participating in the "California Oral History Project."

MR. RUSCHA: I'm touched.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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