

December 26, 2007

Contact:

Libby Garrison, 415.357.4177, lgarrison@sfmoma.org
Robyn Wise, 415.357.4176, rwise@sfmoma.org
Sandra Farish Sloan, 415.357.4174, ssloan@sfmoma.org

SFMOMA ACQUIRES IMPORTANT WORK BY ED RUSCHA

Ed Ruscha

Parts Per Trillion, 1987

Acrylic on canvas

50 in. x 120 in. (127 cm x 304.8 cm)

The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) is pleased to announce the acquisition of the painting *Parts Per Trillion*, 1987, by American artist Ed Ruscha. Purchased through the Phyllis C. Wattis Fund for Major Accessions, *Parts Per Trillion* joins more than 25 important Ruscha paintings, works on paper, and photographs already in SFMOMA's collection. Together these works tell the story of the rise of Ruscha's career from the 1960s to the present.



Ed Ruscha, *Parts Per Trillion*, 1987; Collection SFMOMA, purchased through the Phyllis C. Wattis Fund for Major Accessions

SFMOMA also recently acquired an important suite of photographs from Ruscha's cross-historical study of the landscape of Los Angeles (*Then and Now*, 1973/2006), as well as the rarest and most valuable of Ruscha's artist's books for the SFMOMA Library. These recent acquisitions have allowed SFMOMA to be one of very few museums in the world with an entire collection of Ruscha's historically significant books.

In the early 1980s Ruscha began exploring a new visual vocabulary with silhouette paintings that do not carry an overt intermingling of text and image, yet evoke a textual narrative. At this time the artist created his first ship paintings, a series of 11 works created between 1983 and 1988 that feature silhouetted ships in varying sizes and formats; for Ruscha, the ship is a symbol for adventure and exploration. *Parts Per Trillion*, the one work from this series that Ruscha opted to keep in his own collection, is one of the two largest and the most visually compelling. Across the surface of this painting, the artist breaks up the visual cohesiveness of the basic black-and-white picture plane with stark white rectangles reminiscent of censor bars that are laid across text. As such, these shapes become symbols for language itself, standing in as markers for places where language exists but is no longer visible. The spaces also can be interpreted as the potential for language—blank surfaces awaiting inscriptions, or invitations for viewers to contribute their own imagined sets of words or phrases.

more

To create this work, Ruscha turned to mechanisms of commercial production—which he has used throughout his career—spraying acrylic paint through an airbrush applicator across the surface of the canvas and using stencils to control the contours of the forms. As a result, the painting exists at a slight remove from the artist’s hand, though it remains highly personal in both its choice of imagery and the imaginary narrative it evokes.

Born and raised in the Midwest (first Omaha and later Oklahoma City), Ruscha took a Jack Kerouac–like trip westward in the mid-1950s and landed in Los Angeles, where he studied at the California Institute for the Arts and was trained as a commercial graphic artist. Upon graduation, he took a job as a sign designer for billboards and posters, immersing himself in the slick perfection of machine-made graphics and the language of advertisements that appeared along California highways. He forged his artistic vision amid a culture of bold production values and messaging that incorporated both text and imagery. He also discovered the work of Jasper Johns and developed a visual romance with Johns’s rich accumulations of found objects, collaged newsprint, and hand-painted letters and numbers. Additionally, Ruscha drew inspiration from the study of early modern movements like Cubism, which underscored his interest in text and advertisement, and Surrealism, which encouraged the unexpected mingling of images and ideas.

In the earliest days of his artistic practice in the 1960s Ruscha produced a number of extraordinary artist’s books, most often built from his photographic interactions with the Southern California landscape, both natural and constructed. Before he achieved great recognition for his paintings, his artistic identity was sustained entirely through these books, which, with their subtle play of pictures and language, have become icons of conceptual art. The exploration of language is perhaps the greatest constant in Ruscha’s varied practice, with the semantics of words and images constantly invoked, challenged, and upended in his books, photographs, drawings, and paintings. Words and images become discrete carriers of information whose meanings shift depending upon context and mode of presentation. His famous word paintings of the 1960s and ’70s center on basic words like *hey* and *slug* and images as mundane or unappealing as suburban gas stations. Using outsized, out-of-context phrases, Ruscha elevates both language and daily life to the level of high-art easel painting.

SFMOMA hosted Ruscha’s first major retrospective in 1982. His ever-burgeoning practice continually reveals an unparalleled ability to work cohesively across traditionally separate disciplines and media, and brilliantly evinces his own artistic digestion of an entire century’s worth of art-making. His work dramatically impacts and furthers the mid-century movements of Pop art and Conceptualism, and deftly forges icons from everyday sights in the late 20th century. His career has made him one of the most celebrated and important artists of our era.

* * *

Museum hours: Open daily (except Wednesdays): 11 a.m. to 5:45 p.m.; open late Thursdays, until 8:45 p.m. Summer hours (Memorial Day to Labor Day): Open at 10 a.m. Closed Wednesdays and the following public holidays: New Year’s Day, Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, Christmas. The museum is open the Wednesday between Christmas and New Year’s Day.

Koret Visitor Education Center: Open daily (except Wednesdays): 11 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.; open late Thursdays, until 8:30 p.m. Summer hours: Open at 10 a.m.

Admission prices: Adults \$12.50; seniors \$8; students \$7. SFMOMA members and children 12 and under are admitted free. Thursday evenings after 6 p.m. admission is half-price. The first Tuesday of each month admission is free.

SFMOMA is easily accessible by Muni, BART, Golden Gate Transit, SamTrans, and Caltrain. Hourly, daily, and monthly parking is available at the SFMOMA Garage at 147 Minna Street. For parking information, call 415.348.0971.

Visit our website at www.sfmoma.org or call 415.357.4000 for more information.

The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art is supported by a broad array of contributors who are committed to helping advance its mission as a dynamic center for modern and contemporary art. Major annual support is provided by Koret Foundation Funds, the Evelyn and Walter Haas Jr. Fund, and Grants for the Arts/San Francisco Hotel Tax Fund. KidstART free admission for children 12 and under is made possible by Charles Schwab & Co. Inc. Thursday evening half-price admission is sponsored by Banana Republic.

#