

# **HyperAmerica**

## Landscape – Image – Reality

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Space01

Kunsthhaus Graz, Universalmuseum Joanneum

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This text is published on the occasion of the exhibition

### **HyperAmerica**

Landscape - Image - Reality

### **Kunsthaus Graz**

**Universalmuseum Joanneum**

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The 1970s saw the encounter of two art movements in the USA that both concentrated on the American landscape: on the one hand *Hyperrealism*, whose painters focus on photographic images as their source; on the other hand the *New Topographic* movement, which groups together photographers who often survey the landscape in the broadest sense by producing comprehensive series of works. This exhibition demonstrates the close links between some of their positions, while at the same time highlighting the differences that emerge between these two parallel movements.



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## HyperAmerica

During the 1970s, the depiction of reality—Realism—fuelled intense debates within art circles both in Europe and America. As had already been the case a hundred years previously, photography played a major role, the question being just how objective or subjective the view through the lens of a camera actually is. What is however certain is that, from the mid-19th century at the latest, photography changed painting. New perspectives or motion studies became possible and influenced vision in general, enabling the viewing of certain phenomena for the first time ever. Photographs made work between the painter and model easier, serving as a basis but also inspiring new painting techniques—for instance in Impressionism, in which the moods and impressions evoked by the visual were rendered in bold colours. This interplay between the photographic image and the selected view in painting continued into the 20th century. Starting with Pop Art and other art movements that encouraged the boom in the art scene in the USA, a new style of painting emerged,

perceived as *more real than reality itself*. Hyperrealism or Photo-realism are the terms used to describe this kind of painting, which, taking a photographic view, develops motifs of a specific reality. In the USA these are often images embedded within a characteristic landscape, evoking the ‘American Dream’ of freedom and independence, of endless expanses and boundless possibilities. Everything seems possible. In its sharpness, the portrayal of the hyperreal draws a clear dividing line from the given. At the same time, the high gloss of the painted images creates a distance, destabilising the optical experience as a source of recognition. Can we trust these images? The painted images of Hyperrealism are not simply copies of photos. We recognise codes of reality, symbols of an American way of life that is considered desirable. These are the statements of an age when the USA had not only achieved political domination in the Cold War, but also outshone old Europe with its comparatively young ideals. In 1975, the exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a*

*Man-altered Landscape* took place in Rochester, NY. Few people went to see it and its only documentation was a slim booklet. Despite this, it became one of the most influential exhibitions of the period. The question posed by curator William Jenkins asked whether natural landscapes have a greater aesthetic value than landscapes shaped by man. Under the title ‘New Topographics’ he gathered photographers who did not see themselves as a group, but whose exhibition nonetheless came to determine a new style in the history of photography. Their common interest lay in the motif of the American landscape during the 1970s. None of them sought simply to capture the ‘typical’ or the ‘beautiful’; instead, they examined how the significance of the American landscape was generated. Its distinctive elements are a supposedly objective approach to the subject, a documentary stance and the recording of situations in ‘neutral’ series. The definition of topography is the detailed delineation of a place, a specific location. In photography, the image produced by the camera—which depicts reality—becomes a document that

ignores the fact that the selected detail already holds an interpretation of the seen within itself. The camera creates a distance between the viewer and the landscape depicted. It becomes the pointing device. During the 19th century, when America was rapidly undergoing settlement from east to west, its lands being farmed and made economically productive, photographers were already documenting the wilderness, the untamed beauty of the nature over which the white pioneers were becoming the proverbial masters. During the 1970s, photographers once again referred very directly to this true image of reality in the age of the settlers and land surveyors. Their subject, however, was no longer unspoiled nature, but rather the icons of a civilisation that placed its faith in modern progress: industrial plants, cars, roads, housing developments. The documentary nature of the photographs generates meanings that, particularly in the case of the large-scale series, have a historical as well as an artistic value. Time and again, the focus lies on the *American Way of Life*, the

opportunities, illusions but also the disappointments held by the country, together with the narratives revealed to the traveller looking out of the car window. The story of the apparently boundless possibilities brought by simply climbing into your car and driving away, driving just to enjoy driving for its own sake, immersing oneself in the broad expanses of the land. This notion of freedom and independence shapes our image of America—a vision also constructed and codified via Hollywood's machinery of illusion. The perception of landscape is always pre-formed by prevailing ideas and beliefs, and since the 20th century Hollywood has played a very special role with regard to the American landscape.

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## Ed Ruscha

b. 1939 in Omaha, NE (US)

*The Back of Hollywood*, 1977  
Oil on canvas, 56 × 203 cm  
Musée d'art contemporain de Lyon

*The Back of Hollywood* by Ed Ruscha is both a text and a landscape. Ruscha's work featured this iconic sign repeatedly during the 1970s and 1980s. He explains that he could see the sign from his studio and used it as an indication of the smog levels in Los Angeles, since it was sometimes swallowed up by the city's blanket of dirty haze. Ed Ruscha had started off working in advertising, and later often chose catchy messages as his theme. In this picture, the 'Hollywood' lettering is seen from behind against a twilight background: a timeless frame for the magical fame that it emanates. With its strong horizontal format and its intense colours, the painting is evocative of classic CinemaScope movies, of their illusions, glamour and success.

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## Lewis Baltz

b. 1945 in Newport Beach, CA (US),  
† 2014 in Paris (FR)

*Nevada*, 1977/78  
Gelatin silver prints, 15 parts,  
16.2 × 24.2 cm each  
Niedersächsische Sparkassenstiftung,  
Hannover

During the 1970s, Lewis Baltz revolutionised landscape photography with subjects previously deemed unworthy of depiction: wastelands, industrial sites, suburbia. Within the context of the legendary 1975 exhibition, he became a co-founder of the *New Topographics* movement. Typical of his oeuvre are serial works. It is not the individual photo but rather the entire series and the correlations between the pictures that create the whole, as the artist himself pre-formulates precisely in his hanging scheme. With their formal rigour, the photos often depict the devastating effects of a high-tech, unashamedly profit-driven society that derives happiness from consumption. Abandoned areas and shabby architectures convey his pessimistic world view, their technical formulation referring to Minimal Art, but also demonstrating his conceptual approach. The *Nevada* series shows human traces, a

uniform style of architecture defined by prefab construction and cheap, timber-framed buildings. No human protagonists appear; the presentation of the barren landscape feels bleak, conveying loneliness and desolation. *Nevada* was first published as a book of photographs by Leo Castelli in 1978.

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## Ralph Goings

b. 1928 in Corning, CA (US)

*Airstream*, 1970  
Oil on molino, 152.3 × 213.5 cm  
museum moderner kunst stiftung  
ludwig wien  
On loan from the Collection Ludwig, Aachen  
since 1978

The trailer is a symbol of freedom, flexibility, closeness to nature and the spirit of adventure. It is the epitome of independent and individual leisure, and a popular way to leave behind—supposedly—the burdens of everyday life while on holiday. The *Airstream* is a US-American version of the spacious caravan, whose outside consisted entirely of unpainted aluminium. This made it extremely light, so that any car could tow one. Ralph Goings' consistently large-format pictures feature both caravans and vehi-

cles, often pick-ups or trucks, and depict highways or snack stands as the embodiment of American mobility. His paintings are executed with extreme precision using a photo as a model, the light rendered a dazzling element. The 'American Way of Life' becomes their central theme, its optimism and activity still seen as an ideal by many.

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### Richard McLean

b. 1934 in Hoquiam, WA (US)

*Rustler Charger*, 1971

Oil on blended fabric, 167 × 167 cm  
museum moderner kunst stiftung ludwig wien

On loan from the Austrian Ludwig Foundation since 1981

The cowboy sits securely in the saddle of a powerful horse. Hat, lasso, boots and a pair of classic American sunglasses confer on the rider in blue jeans and a shirt that same air of coolness that has surrounded his myth since the outset. For a long time—up until the 1930s—the cowboy was seen as masculine, tough and hardy enough to survive driving huge herds of wild cattle across the prairies of Texas. By 1971, this stereotypical image of the hero of many westerns had been reduced

to its use for rodeo shows, the horse as a pictorial subject retrieved from artistic oblivion by McLean. In his perfectly detailed painted image, the action departs from the photographic snapshot, which captures the ceremonial moment of the prize-giving.

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### Robert Cottingham

b. 1935 in New York, NY (US)

*Carl's*, 1975

Oil on canvas, 198 × 198 cm  
museum moderner kunst stiftung ludwig wien

On loan from the Austrian Ludwig Foundation since 1981

Although Robert Cottingham is among the first generation of photorealists, he understands his relationship with the photograph as model rather more loosely than many of his colleagues. He does not make a precisely detailed copy of a photo, but instead focuses on interesting picture sections. Cottingham plays with subjects drawn from advertising (where he, like several of his colleagues, once worked) and concentrates on lettering on signs that protrude into one another, obscuring the ground floor of the buildings behind them. The letters become an aesthetic pattern,

their messages sometimes bizarre. Cottingham's work also reveals that it is not only the lettering in the picture that serves as a communication, but that the architecture has also become a conveyor of messages and thus the city itself is also part of a complex urban system of communications.

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### Don Eddy

b. 1944 in Long Beach, CA (US)

*Untitled (Volkswagen)*, 1971

Acrylic on canvas, 122 × 152 cm  
museum moderner kunst stiftung ludwig wien

On loan from the Austrian Ludwig Foundation since 1991

For a long time, the VW Beetle or Bug was a leading German export to the USA, conquering the highways from the 1950s onwards. Originating in the USA, the moniker 'Beetle' spread back to its native Germany ('Käfer'), and the distinctive automobile met with rapid success. Up until 1972 the VW Beetle was the bestselling car of its time, with half a million already having sold in the USA around 1960: they were seen as cost-effective, fuel-efficient and practical. The car's success is also the key theme of *Untitled (Volks-*

*wagen)*, 1971. We encounter the Beetle at eye level, sparkling clean, confidently pushing the Pontiac out of the picture. Don Eddy used a grid to transfer the photo to the large canvas with fascinating perfection; reflections, sharp shadows and the unfocused elements in the background are indications of this photographic model.

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### John Baeder

b. 1938 in South Bend, IN (US)

*Prout's Diner*, 1974

Oil on canvas, 76 × 122 cm  
Morris Museum of Art, Augusta, Georgia

All along the sides of the highways, one finds simple restaurants that evolved from mobile snack stands at the end of the 19th century, and which have in the meantime been replaced by fast food chains in most places. Like gas stations or motels, diners are there to provide services for people travelling in cars. They offer refreshment and relaxation, just as motels offer the chance to sleep and rest. John Baeder himself has driven across America many times, knows the view of the landscape from the car and cannot conceal his fascination for

it. The precise photographic quality of his 1974 work *Prout's Diner* is not without a certain nostalgia. Baeder has addressed the theme of the diner in a number of his works, creating a monument to this approach to life as a whole.

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### John Salt

b. 1937 in Birmingham (UK)

*Albuquerque Wreck Yard (Sandia Auto Electric)*, 1972

Oil on canvas, 121.9 × 182.9 cm

Courtesy Louis K. Meisel Gallery, New York

There have been automotive vehicles ever since Carl Benz invented the combustion engine in 1886. After 1908 Henry Ford transformed the car into a mass-produced commodity, since when it has enjoyed an unstoppable ascent. Currently there are over a billion in the world used as transport across very different areas. The trend is still rising. From the 1950s onwards, the car experienced a huge surge in the USA as a status symbol—accompanied by an unrestrained culture of consumerism that then quickly extended across post-War Europe. John Salt's pictures show cars rusting away in American landscapes: smashed, crushed and

forgotten. Salt was fascinated with a book by Lee Friedlander in which he coined the term 'social landscape'. Friedlander asserts that landscape always carries human traces. For John Salt, the dream of individual mobility is over; the rushing speed of freedom has ground to a halt.

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### Joel Sternfeld

b. 1944 in New York, NY (US)

From the series *American Prospects*, 1978–87

C-prints, ca. 40.5 × 50.6 cm

Collection Fotomuseum Winterthur, gift of George Reinhart

During the 1970s, when Joel Sternfeld focused his attention on *American Prospects*, colour art photography was still in its infancy. Like Walker Evans 40 years previously, Sternfeld painted a picture of a country whose euphoric high gloss was now covered in scratches. Whereas Evans presented a candid portrayal of the human repercussions of the depression in the 1930s, Sternfeld confronts a world of new buildings: cold, hollow and devoid of meaning. Alone in his VW bus Sternfeld took extended trips across America, the longest lasting up to a whole

year. As he travelled he recorded suburban, rural and also agricultural settings. He concentrated on everyday life, on the scenes and details that usually go unnoticed. Many of his pictures were produced in typical American suburbia, purely residential areas that follow their own rules. In Sternfeld's work, the landscape of promise contains the prospect of wishes and yet at the same time quite plainly becomes the location of catastrophes. Comprehensive series such as these are created after in-depth research, which he usually publishes as a separate photo book.

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### Lee Friedlander

b. 1934 in Aberdeen, WA (US)

*The New Cars: 1964, 1963/2011*

Gelatin silver prints, 33 parts,

21.6 × 32.7 cm or 32.7 × 21.6 cm

Niedersächsische Sparkassenstiftung, Hannover

*Phoenix, Arizona*, 1974

*New York City*, 1974

*San Diego, California*, 1970

*Hillcrest, New York*, 1970

*Canada*, 1974

Gelatin silver prints, 18.8 × 28.1 cm each

Collection F. C. Gundlach, Hamburg

Lee Friedlander has travelled through nearly all 50 US states by car, taking photos through the

windscreen, from the side window or in the rearview mirror. The view from the perspective of the car has changed the landscape: much of what we see has been created specifically with this view in mind. Signposts and billboards shape the look of the landscape just as the road does itself. In 1964, Friedlander was commissioned by Harper's Bazaar to photograph the latest models produced by highly popular car makers Chrysler, Lincoln, Buick and Cadillac. These photos were however judged too bizarre to publish in the magazine, and never used. In the 33-part series *The New Cars: 1964*, we see the cars in various different situations, but never placed as the focus of the picture and rarely shown in their entirety. Our view of the vehicle is obstructed and partial. The car is demoted to a supporting role, yet still plays the lead in the everyday events that Friedlander constructs in a narrative around the image. The pictures could be stills from a film. They are details of the American 'social landscape' (1966) that Friedlander has been recording since 1948 in his humorous, perceptive and poignant work.

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## Walker Evans

b. 1903 in St. Louis, MI (US), † 1975 in New Haven, CT (US)

*Bergarbeiterhütten der Alabama Coal Area Company bei Montgomery*, 1936  
Gelatin silver print, 13.4 × 16.8 cm  
*Camp Woods Tabernade Settlement, Ossining, NY*, 1933  
Gelatin silver print, 16.1 × 11.2 cm  
ALBERTINA, Wien

*Houses and Billboards in Atlanta*, 1936/2002  
*Roadside Stand near Birmingham*, 1935/2002  
Digital pigment prints, 24.2 × 28.5 cm each  
*Negro Church, South Carolina*, 1936/2002  
Digital pigment print, 29.2 × 23.5 cm  
Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur, Cologne

*Bocksteinwand mit Plakat „The Roaring West“*, 1936  
Gelatin silver print, 18 × 24 cm  
Sammlung F. C. Gundlach, Hamburg

*Roadside Store, Vicinity Greensboro, Alabama*, 1936  
Gelatin silver print, 19 × 23.8 cm  
Neue Galerie Graz, Universalmuseum Joanneum

Walker Evans is one of the most influential photographers of the 20th century. His unemotional approach to his motifs became a model for the photographers of the *New Topographics*. He gained recognition due to his work during the American Depression of the 1930s, when he recorded rural life in the southern states. His objective view documented everyday

life, using the photograph's representational function to provide the observer with information. He shows roads, people, rows of houses and advertising in candid images as an antidote to the stereotypical idealised country of boundless possibilities. His portraits of both black and white families in their surroundings are unsentimental; he shows the rutted landscape, the images of their houses, churches or the small stores in villages and towns.

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## Robert Adams

b. 1937 in Orange, NJ (US)

*The New West*, 1968–71  
Gelatin silver prints, 56 parts, ca. 15.2 × 14.1 cm each  
Niedersächsische Sparkassenstiftung, Hannover

*The New West* was produced as a photo series between 1968 and 1971 and published three years later as a book. In 1975 Adams work was shown at the exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape*. The picturesque sections of the images demonstrate the discrepancy between romantic notions of the Mid-West and reality at that time. Adams considered the pro-

found changes to the city of Denver during the 1970s as one of the negative effects of civilisation. His photos point to the fact that the landscape is the location in which life evolves, continuously changing with it.

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## Richard Estes

b. 1932 in Kewanee, IL (US)

*Rappaport Pharmacy*, 1976  
Oil on canvas, 92 × 122 cm  
Peter and Irene Ludwig Stiftung, Aachen, on long-term loan at Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

*Downtown*, 1978  
Oil on canvas, 122 × 152 cm  
museum moderner kunst stiftung ludwig wien  
On loan from the Austrian Ludwig Foundation since 1991

Richard Estes is interested in urban landscape, which he reinvents freehand with his paintbrush, turning it into a fiction. This *Downtown* is located in New York and is also clearly recognisable as belonging to the city. He does not, however, copy any one particular photo but instead constructs a new motif, taking several views and perspectives of the same place in order to create the ideal image. In doing so Estes does not sugarcoat reality and the image of the city that he

immortalises is familiar from everyday life. What is uncanny is that it is deserted, the only indications of its inhabitants being the traces of garbage and grime. The apocalyptic stillness of the supposedly topographic image nonetheless reveals much about life in New York. The conquering pioneer life of the past had long since been displaced to the cities after the Second World War.

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## Art Sinsabaugh

b. 1924 in Irvington, NJ (US), † 1983 in Chicago, IL (US)

*Mark and Sherry #12*, 1969  
Gelatin silver print, 29.5 × 49.5 cm  
*Chicago Landscape #162*, 1964  
Gelatin silver print, 12.7 × 49.7 cm  
*Midwest Landscape #34*, 1961  
Gelatin silver print, 6.4 × 48.9 cm  
*Midwest Landscape #20*, 1961  
Gelatin silver print, 7.6 × 49.5 cm  
Collection F. C. Gundlach, Hamburg

In several respects, Art Sinsabaugh is an important forerunner to the *New Topographic* movement. His unusually wide picture formats create extraordinary panoramas of the American landscape highly evocative of its vast expanse—chiefly in his images of the Midwestern Plains, but also in his cityscapes. His pictures are cool and expertly composed, their

light conditions striking in their black and white contrasts. His objective documentary approach to the American landscape does not seek to hide its technological modernisation: Sinsabaugh had already recognised it as an integral part of the landscape at the beginning of the 1960s.

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### Rackstraw Downes

b. 1939 in Pembury (UK)

*Dragon Cement Plant, Thomaston; View from the North End of the Clinker Barn, 1985*

Oil on canvas, 54.4 × 196 cm  
Collection Ludwig, Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst, Aachen

British-born artist Rackstraw Downes began as an abstract painter then changed course to take the landscape as his subject, working en plein air to produce paintings directly in situ. In the early 1960s he had already begun to depict the ventilation towers in the heart of urban New York. Nonetheless, photography also represents for him—as for other hyperrealists—an important medium. Landfill sites, refineries, industrial complexes and—as depicted here—the Dragon cement plant are the locations of his artistic explorations, whose

extreme horizontal formats rarely include people. As a painter of the modern, man-made landscape, for a long time Downes only found an audience among other artists.

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### Stephen Shore

b. 1947 in New York, NY (US)

*July 6, 1973, 1973*

45.7 × 67.3 cm

*July 12, 1973, 1973*

44.5 × 151.8 cm

*August 9, 1973, 1973*

44.5 × 209.6 cm

From the series *The Roadtrip Journals, 1973*

Pigment print on rag paper

From the series *Uncommon Places, 1973–83*

C-prints, 50.8 × 61 cm each

Courtesy Sprüth Magers Berlin London and 303 Gallery, New York

Stephen Shore belongs to a younger generation of photographers who devoted themselves to Realism. He was just seventeen years old when he moved into Andy Warhol's Factory in 1964 and produced a photographic record of the life led by the artists and musicians there. During the 1970s he made a number of trips across the States, capturing typically American vistas: housing developments, roads and

stores, gas stations and intersections, in concentrated details or significant fragments. Various buildings and vehicles offer an insight into the man-altered landscape and the telling features of everyday smalltown life. Photography becomes an analytical process, his images formal studies.

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### William Eggleston

b. 1939 in Memphis, TN (US)

From the series *Los Alamos, 1965–74*

Dye transfer prints, 30.5 × 45.1 cm or 45.1 × 30.5 cm each

Museum Ludwig, Cologne

William Eggleston is famous for his colour photos, which—as with *Los Alamos*—he publishes in series. In 1965 he began to experiment with colour photos, so becoming the trailblazer for colour art photography. The images he produced between 1965 and 1974 were first published in a book as a selection from over 20,000 pictures. They show pictures he took during his roadtrips in the southern states of America. Resembling snapshots, the photos Eggleston produces depict everyday scenes in which hierarchies play no role, recording

instead strange tableaux and selected fragments of the American way of life. Their name comes from Los Alamos, Texas, since 1942 the location of the largest nuclear research centre in America.

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### Ben Schonzeit

b. 1942 in New York, NY (US)

*Sugar, 1972*

Acrylic on canvas, 244 × 305 cm  
Collection Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst

Ben Schonzeit's pictures focus on the hyperreal depiction of food. Due to the airbrush technique he employs, his still-lives bear no traces of brushstrokes, so that the characteristic style of the personal signature is missing from his incredibly large formats. Sugar sachets cover an idyllic scene, which merely defines the top and bottom of the picture. The landmarks shown on the sachets in *Sugar* (1972) appear to be set out at random, their edges unevenly clipped. They look as though they have been stuck onto the background and have an irritating effect, partly because they themselves appear solid, while at the same reducing the depth of

the background. Like Richard Estes, Richard McLean and Ralph Goings, Ben Schonzeit was one of the artists introduced to the European public as American photorealists by Harald Szeemann at documenta 5 in 1972, bringing them international fame.

movement. The photos are cool, emotionless, objectively documentary. The leporello provides a temporal quality of experience that also makes reference to the medium of film.

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## Ed Ruscha

b. 1939 in Omaha, NE (US)

*Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, 1966

Leporello photo book

17.8 × 14.3 cm (closed), 760.7 cm (open)

Neue Galerie Graz, Universalmuseum

Joanneum

*Vacant Lots*, 1970/2003

Gelatin silver prints, 54.6 × 54.6 cm

Sprüth Magers

Between 1963 and 1966, Ed Ruscha produced a series of art photography books that mainly appeared in fairly large editions of between 400 and 2,000 copies. The fanfolded *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966) shows the conceptual approach of his working method. One photo follows the next in the rigid design and creates a virtually unbroken 7.6-metre long panorama of both sides of the Sunset Strip. Works such as these, or the series *Vacant Lots*, made him the trailblazer of the *New Topographics*