

A Review of Various Small Books and Then a Review of One More Small Book

written by Joseph Houlihan | July 30, 2015



Various Small Books: Referencing Various Small Books by Ed Ruscha
Ed. By Jeff Brouws, Wendy Burton, and Hermann Zschiegner
MIT Press, 2013
288 pages – [MIT Press](#) / [Amazon](#)

Suite Vénitienne by Sophie Calle
2015, Siglio Press (originally 1979)
96 pages – [Siglio](#) / [Amazon](#)

Various Small Books

“Fifty years ago, in 1962 Edward Ruscha published *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, the first of a series of photobooks the artist made throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Consisting of black and white photographs of twenty-six filling stations situated along route 66 between Los Angeles and Oklahoma, this deceptively simple book, much like Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917), irrevocably altered our understanding of art” (*Various Small Books*). Emerging from the Ferus Gallery and nascent art scene of Los Angeles in the early 1960s, Ed Ruscha’s *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* came to define the constraint-based photo series, and with it the wider world of conceptual art. He didn’t photograph the gas stations because they were novel, he said: “They are like trees because they are there. They were not chosen because they were pop-like...They were just there, so they were not in any visual focus because they were supposed to be social nerve endings.”



Mirroring the French Oulipo, Ruscha simply identified a constraint, every gasoline station between Los Angeles and Oklahoma, and pursued this constraint to a logical end. After the success of this project, more exercises would follow: *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, *Various Small Fires*. “In *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966), photos of all the buildings on a mile and a half of the Sunset Strip are laid out in an accordion binding, stretching out to twenty-five feet. Another well-known work, *Various Small Fires and Milk* (1964), features fifteen photographs of small fires, such as a lighter and a cigarette smoked by a young woman, followed by an image of a glass of milk.” (CAA Reviews). And with these simple, almost documentarian photo essays, Ruscha expanded the language of photography and conceptual art.



Various Small Books charts the ripple effect of this project through the last

fifty years, cataloguing the artists explicitly and implicitly indebted to Ruscha's book, and exhibiting these works as installments in the same conversation. The collection spans languages, continents, and media, although each piece is a visible heir to Ruscha.



Twentynine Palms by Jeff Brouws

Raymond Queneau famously called Oulipo home to "Rats who build the labyrinth from which they will try to escape." In the case of *Various Small Books*, Ruscha built the labyrinth, and editors Jeff Brouws, Wendy Burton, and Hermann Zschiegner have identified the rats. The books in homage to Ruscha include: "*Thirtyfour Parking Lots, Forty Years Later*. Some offer a humorous variation: *Various Unbaked Cookies* (which concludes, as did Ruscha's *Various Small Fires*, with a glass of milk), *Twentynine Palms* (twenty-nine photographs of palm-readers' signs). Some say something different: *None of the Buildings on Sunset Strip*. Some reach for a connection with Ruscha himself: *17 Parked Cars in Various Parking Lots Along Pacific Coast Highway Between My House and Ed Ruscha's*." (*Various Small Books*) We see *36 Fire Stations*, and with *Getting to Know the Neighbors* all of the potentially hazardous brown sites in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, in 2004.



Jennifer Dalton's *Getting to Know the Neighbors*

The paradox here seems to be the way a formal constraint allows the artist freedom. More than anything, this collection highlights the persistent humor and charm of the list, the exaggerated boundary and criteria. Just as John Cage devised new music games to engage the world with each of his compositions, Ruscha's formula consistently recasts the familiar world. This is potential literature, what Queneau called: "the search for new forms and structures that may be used by writers in any way they see fit." And like the games and exercises of the Oulipo, Ruscha's structure gives him freedom. The intentional collisions with the reality of social discourse, allow for idealism in negativity, putting forth an ongoing series of interpretations. Rather than ignore the pretend no rules govern social discourse, artistic constraints allow the acknowledgement of certain preexisting systems, while simultaneously offering the capacity to subvert those systems.

By formally adopting this constraint, the artist is able to encounter what Ammiel Alcalay calls "the grammar of culture." A poem, or art series, that comes up against this grammar exposes the structures of that grammar, and can thereby expand the potentialities of that language.

Suite Vénitienne

“For months I followed strangers on the street. For the pleasure of following them, not because they particularly interested me. I photographed them without their know-ledge, took note of their movements, then finally lost sight of them and forgot them.

At the end of January 1980, on the streets of Paris, I followed a man whom I lost sight of a few minutes later in the crowd. That very evening, quite by chance, he was introduced to me at an opening. During the course of our conversation, he told me he was planning an imminent trip to Venice. I decided to follow him.”

Framed as a photo-essay and journal, *Suite Venitienne* document's Calle's 1980 trip. After arriving in Venice, Calle sets herself up in a hotel, with a fresh wig and a map of the city, and she begins her search. One of the most charming aspects of *Suite Venitienne*, published for the first time in 1983, but long out of print, is the way Calle behaves in the manner of a classic Private Eye. Wearing her blonde wig and dark sunglasses, she begins to haunt tourist sites, searching for the elusive Henri B (the man she has followed to Venice from France). She wanders. She retraces her steps. She begins to call all of the hotels in Venice searching for her target.



from *Suite Vénitienne* by Sophie Calle, published by Siglio, 2015. Images and text copyrighted and provided courtesy of the artist.

Suite Venitienne interrogates the public sphere, challenging assumptions around privacy and gendered space. As far as constraints go, this is as classical as they come. And the ludic spirit of the project again reflects the Oulipo, Cage, and even Wittgenstein describing language games.

The project falls within a clear lineage of urban games as well. It absolutely evokes the *dérive*, as articulated by the Situationist International. Defined by Guy Debord in 1958 as “a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances. *Dérives* involve playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychogeographical effects, and are thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll.” This is the intentional Situationist drift, a project to expose the invisible fault lines of the modernist city. The constraint most often applied in *derive* is some rule of contingency. (For example, one might hop on buses of an odd number at five-minute intervals; or intervals corresponding to a random number generator) And like the serialism of *Various Small Books*, this element of contingency introduces a rule of law that makes the formal cultural grammar it encounters foreign. It is the modernist, de-automatization of perception, in practice. Like the happening, or art event, the drift involves a stepping outside of everyday life.

Calle's drift is playful, insightful, and irresistible; in short it's essential.

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