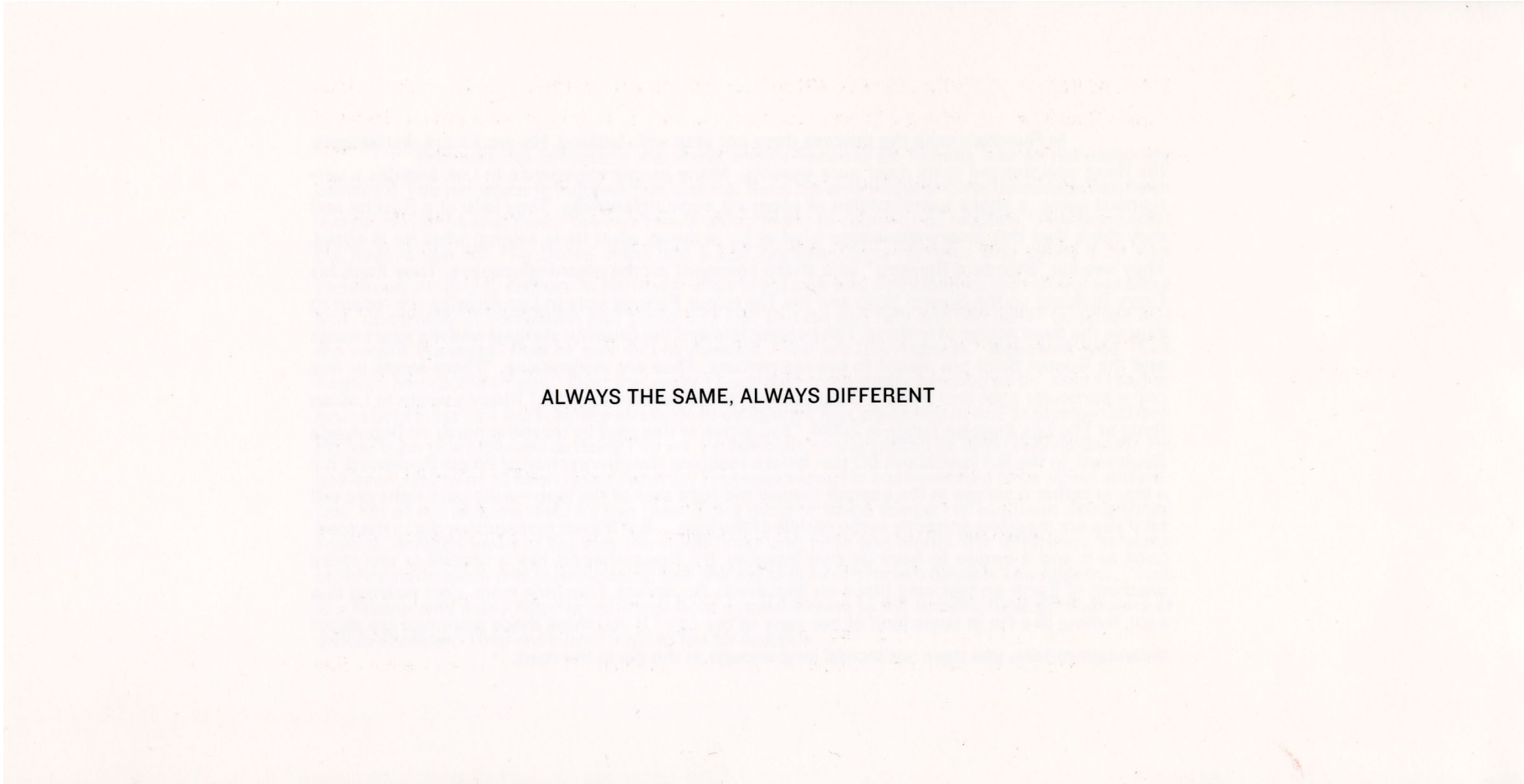


COURSE OF EMPIRE

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ALWAYS THE SAME, ALWAYS DIFFERENT

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FRANCES STARK

I'M HEADING WEST FROM CHINATOWN so I turn right onto Cesar Chavez, which is also, in fact, Sunset Boulevard. I'm driving a Volkswagen Vanagon instead of my customary wagon because the station wagon's the car with the baby seat. Right now I'm alone, free to cruise up Sunset Boulevard to check myself into The Argyle hotel. The only hotel I've been in on Sunset Boulevard was the Tropicana, which is now a parking lot. I never spent the night there, I only—for lack of a more dignified term—“partied” there a few times in the early eighties as a kind of fourth-rate punk rock groupie, and not even with any bands worth remembering. But now I'm going to this landmark Art Deco hotel to celebrate my having been asked to contribute a text in honor of Ed Ruscha, one of the most consistently inspiring, solid, and profound artists of contemporary American art. I'm not going to celebrate with a glass of champagne, but by corralling my notes and whittling my sentences in a room with a view of all of L.A. Between the driver's seat and the empty passenger's seat I've thrown down my laptop computer and my not-exactly-portable inkjet printer. The printer's an awkward drag, but I still rely on hard copies. When making an imperfect stop or fast turn I extend my arm out to ensure my writing hardware doesn't fly forward or tumble back, and this protective maneuver reminds me of riding between the two front seats of our '65 Ford Econoline van, occasionally flying into the back at intersections. My printer and computer suddenly seem more fragile and helpless than a kid who loves the thrill of a nicely managed tumble. Imagining the potential damage makes me think of Ruscha's 1967 book, Royal Road Test, in which a manual typewriter gets thrown from a moving vehicle. The Royal was a memory-free

machine, a handsome tool unable to store incomplete thoughts next to the best completed ones, unable to hold a person's artwork or photos of that artwork and/or photos that inspired that artwork on top of photos of that person's baby turning into a kid.

Right before I left Chinatown to drive to Hollywood, I took my laptop downstairs to The Great Wall bookstore to find out what, if anything, the signs on Ruscha's The Old Tool & Die Building said. I could make out only two familiar Chinese characters. I wasn't supposed to show anybody, but I figured this was entirely out of context, and besides, how else could I be sure what I was looking at? I mean, never before had I been unable to decipher the text on a Ruscha painting, so despite my thrill at the shock of utter illegibility I still felt I had to at least investigate. The man in the bookstore looked puzzled, and between strained Chinese utterances he said, "It is not right, it is not right." "What is that?" his colleague asked. "It's a painting," I answered. They were somehow taken aback by my answer and then subsequently flabbergasted as they stuttered to make anything out. "Well that's a Chinese character and that's one on its side, but nothing's really right," they said. I thanked them heartily while indicating with my face, "As I suspected." They looked so proud, as if they had helped discover an act of deception before it was too late. I went away smiling and even laughing a bit as I pulled out of the Mandarin Plaza parking lot.

The radio was stolen out of the van so I have to listen to the soundtrack of the percussive VW engine but I also have a song in my head, called "Ed's Babe," by The Fall. It came up when the word "offspring" leaped out at me from the cover of a catalogue of a lesser-known body of Ed's Ruscha's work, Birds, Fish and Offspring. I had been wondering about whether it

might be productive to give Ed's actual offspring, Eddie, a call and see if he couldn't come over and talk. Last time I saw him his father's new paintings were still so top secret I didn't even know what they were and he wouldn't tell me despite my wanting to get to the bottom of the intense enthusiasm on his face. It wouldn't have mattered anyway, because we were with our two toddlers who were basically just crashing into walls and making any developed conversation pretty much impossible. Eddie probably knows "Ed's Babe," The Fall's lamentation of a life changed by a baby. A friend told me that the late British DJ John Peel often described The Fall as being "always the same, always different." "Surely there is no better description of Ed Ruscha's work," said my friend. "And surely no better example than the revised tool or die." He meant the tool and die, though that "or" is too good to ignore. And so you see, I also secretly told him about the painting on account of being positively unable to contain myself upon seeing it.

On Sunset, right when you hit the 99-cent store the Hollywood sign comes into view. Hollywood isn't even a real city and I can't believe my dad hadn't bothered to tell me that until relatively recently. The Southern California roadside landscape has always caused factual minutiae to spew endlessly out of my father's mouth. Whether driving cautiously down skid row in a station wagon, cruising brazenly down the strip in a Corvette, or in a pick-up tangled in freeway traffic and news radio, he would always keep me in tune with whatever he knew about whatever he saw. The impossibility of being able to assess each increment of change became especially clear whenever driving through Watts, the neighborhood where my great-grandparents settled in California in 1921—their house is now a gas station. My father would always give quasi-Marxist

explanations for why buildings and companies were where they were and did what they did and who owned what and how that might have mattered: TRW, IBM, Hughes Aircraft, Fluor Corp., and any number of other unassuming corporate headquarters inside of which our culture was perpetually and invisibly being transformed. In contrast, Ruscha's Blue Collar Tool & Die tells it like it is: Inside they're a tool and die outfit, they make things for making things. We tool and die. Not such a bad life for a lot of people, depending on the wages. In any case, that structure looks just like all those light industrial concrete tilt-ups I grew up amidst, and also just like this building my dad pointed out once on Olympic Boulevard, the Papermate pen factory where he worked the graveyard shift while attending city college. I called him to ask about the pen factory and told him what I was up to and he said, Ed who Venice what Joan who? But I told him about the drawing Will 100 Artists Please Draw a 1950 Ford from Memory? and about the Standard signs and the tool and die. Before long he started calling me to share insights about what the paintings were making him think about, instead of just calling to report in monologue form about traffic jams or who's misusing their leaf blowers or overwatering their lawns. While skimming through Guacamole Airlines and Other Drawings with my dad on the line, I came across one of my favorite anomalous Ruscha drawings, called Just an Average Guy. I teared up as I sat there experiencing Ruscha's "average guy-ness" touching an actual average guy.

Oops, I'm not paying attention and forgot to veer left on Sunset which leaves me on Hollywood, a lucky mistake, because I need to pay a visit to the Hollywood branch of Washington

Mutual, formerly Home Savings of America, formerly Coast Savings—whatever. As soon as I turn back onto Sunset I encounter the following massive LED message: YOU'LL SEE WHY, JUST READ IT! I scrawl it into a notebook lodged between lap and steering wheel, and two seconds later on the other side of the street—you'll see why, just read it—there stands EMPIRE BUILDING, an innocent enough storefront saying everything without even meaning to.

As much as that would be the perfect ending, there's still quite a few blocks before I hit the strip and land in my hotel. I can see a big CNN logo up ahead, which reminds me I have to confess to sharing The Old Tool & Die Building with one more person, an artist whom I've admired since the early nineties. We finally met during the 2004 presidential campaign so our conversations revolved solely around the news coverage of the war and the election, and regrettably not each other's art. More recently I visited his studio with a head full of Ed Ruscha instead of CNN, and it became obvious that he was indebted in the best possible way to Ruscha. This artist's insistence on being a comedian reinforced for me the importance of Ruscha's sense of humor, highlighting that certain economical audacity required to be equally funny and serious at the same time. I wanted to get into it with him, drive down a road from Ruscha to him to me, making perfect sense of my own particular place and perspective art historically. But I was relaxed and happy enough in the passenger's seat. A bit delirious still from having just seen Ruscha's newest paintings, again I couldn't help myself, and so I finally said, "There's this Ed Ruscha painting I am positively dying to tell you about."