

No Style Los Santos

Heterotopias [003]

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There is perhaps no place more defined by its ‘non-architecture’ than Los Angeles, a city full of all those buildings that support daily life, seemingly without any pretension to significance as pieces of design. These are the minimarts, the malls, gas stations and drive-throughs. In fact, the history of Los Angeles as a city of architectural importance owes a lot to those writers and artists who have reframed these buildings as significant structures. When British architectural historian Reyner Banham wrote his seminal book *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* in 1971 he argued that Los Angeles could not be judged under the architectural criteria of historical European cities, instead it was a landscape where ‘mobility outweighs monumentality.’ Given these non-architectures facilitated the mobility of citizens, he argued for an alternative city system where the bright signage of the drive-thru burger bar replaced the static and statuesque spaces of antiquity. He might well have been thinking of Los Santos, the deviant facsimile of L.A. that underpins *Grand Theft Auto V*, a place so given over to mobility that the sequence of actions involved in carjacking a vehicle is abstracted down into a single button press to aid the fluid movement of the player.

In the 1972 BBC documentary *Reyner Banham Loves Los Angeles*, we see Banham enjoy an ice cream sundae in the rear seat of an open top car sat behind American artist Ed Ruscha. This encounter in a cabriolet was more than a chance meeting, Ruscha himself had been reframing the landscapes of Los Angeles since 1963 through his small artist’s books which began with *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, naturally enough a serialised set of 26 photographs of 26 gas stations. In his deadpan depiction of everyday structures, Ruscha suggested that what he called ‘no style’ photography could reveal the reality of a city.

Of course, we could not speak about Los Angeles without a reference to the innumerable films in which its non-architectures have starred (many captured brilliantly in Thom Andersen’s *Los Angeles Plays Itself*). For most people, Los Angeles is encountered primarily through such reframing, and indeed its ‘validity’ as an architectural city is built on top of these ideas. Given their ability to draw people into new worlds, games offer the ability to dynamically reframe a place through participation within its systems. The latest iteration of Los Santos appeared some 40 years post *Four Ecologies* but retains much of its spirit. Even if Rockstar frame the city as cynical and transgressive throughout the story and mechanics of the game, the visual fidelity and beauty in its depiction of Los Angeles belies the type of enthusiasm for the Angeleno landscape that possessed Banham and Ruscha.

So, what if we regarded not Los Angeles, but Los Santos, as a city in a similar light? Viewed in the spirit of Ruscha, removing the surface context and recording Los Santos as a city using ‘no style’ screenshots allows for the degree of separation required to reveal the truth of its virtual landscapes. Rather than the full-on satire of the game, it might be possible to find something more nuanced within Los Santos through these recordings. In this spirit, I have produced a series of Ruscha style publications, called *Small Books of Los Santos*, that use screenshots and their subsequent compilation into physical soft bound books as a way of detaching us from the transgressive city and peering beyond.

While Ruscha's photographs purported to show the city 'as-is' – we should not forget that he went to great lengths to achieve the deadpan. He built a custom rig on the back of a pickup truck to record *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966) and hired a helicopter to hover above L.A. and obtain the aerial views for his *Thirtyfour Parking Lots* book of 1967. Although far easier to facilitate in a virtual world, my screenshots were composed through a combination of in-game play, shots taken from *GTA V*'s 'Content Creator' mode along with several different mods to switch gravity off and so on. Many of Ruscha's earlier Los Angeles photographs were also monochrome, bringing them into what Czech philosopher Vilém Flusser calls the 'conceptual universe' of photography. The artifice of black and white detaches it from reality and reinforces the photograph with the logic of photography. Hence Flusser argues that 'many photographers therefore also prefer black-and-white photographs to colour photographs because they more clearly reveal the actual significance of the photograph.' Ironically, given that the vast majority of screenshots are full colour, seeing Los Santos through black and white makes it somehow more real, like the type of actual city one would want to desaturate in order to reveal truths.

My first books reveal the contingency of Los Santos by comparing it to Ruscha's Los Angeles by means of direct editorial recreation. My version of *Thirtyfour Parking Lots* captures a series of tarmac expanses as Ruscha did from a helicopter. It is paginated exactly as Ruscha's original book, with several blank pages framing the imagery. If Ruscha's photography of lots was a deadpan recording of the logics of Los Angeles – the carpark (which American architect Robert Venturi would later term a spatial 'megatexture') – then the megatextures of Los Santos with their slight but perceptible slippages in resolution remind us that this is still a facsimile city. Being produced from the original Xbox 360 version of the game, textures pop in and out as I hover and frame the shot while painted markings and vehicles disappear depending on the proximity of the camera. From a certain distance, the car that is utterly central to the game is utterly lost.

My second book, a recreation of *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, was directly drawn from Ruscha's recording of gas stations on a journey from Los Angeles to Oklahoma. In Ruscha's case this is a linear and important journey, the route back to visit his parents. Such a journey is impossible in Los Santos given that it is an isolated island. If Ruscha's journey represented a form of pilgrimage, my journey might symbolise the futility of videogame space. On a practical level, cars in *GTA* do not require fuel. The presence of these non-architectures is purely to serve the American iconography. While some gas station can be robbed, others stare back blankly as textured boxes. They are seemingly unimportant. But what would a virtual L.A. be without them?

The third book in the series, *Nine Swimming Pools (And a Broken Windshield)* follows Ruscha's recording of L.A.'s pools but switches a 'Broken Glass' of his original book for a windshield. Ruscha contrasted photographs of the immaculate blue carpets of Angelino pools to the violent impulses of the city. My screenshots evoke a similar tension. Using my avatar to climb over hedges and fences, I explore the back yards of Los Santos, cataloguing the swimming pools that dot the landscape. They look startlingly realistic. But they are signs of residence without any real residents. One might encounter a virtual pool party, but startled homeowners will run out into the city rather than their own house – because it is merely a shell. The pool is a precise marker of Angeleno urbanity, but at the same time a point where Los Santos betrays itself. Return some hours later and you are likely to find the

virtual inhabitants reassembled around the water as if nothing happened. Transgress again by climbing into their garden and the situation repeats itself. While Ruscha ends his book using a broken glass as a metaphor for violence, in my small book it becomes the windshield. This is, after all, a city where (nearly) any car can be stolen and a player may smash thousands of windows on their way through the game.

Moving on, I apply Ruscha's methods to new books which further expose the contingencies of Los Santos. *Cars on Hills* is a book comprising a series of deadpan screenshots showing supercars perched on hills in Los Santos. Hopefully two things should occur to the viewer, causing a double take. One, that this world is incredibly visually realistic. And two, that there is no possible way those cars could be there in reality unless by means of a crane or helicopter. Anyone who has played *GTA V* knows that driving up hills is an incredibly efficient way of losing the police, and this is facilitated by the cartoonish physics of the game. Supercars that have trouble negotiating the kerb outside a parking lot in reality, barrel up hills with abandon. Framed in these no style images, the cartoon caricature of the city becomes matter-of-fact. We get a sense of the tension in both how close, and how far, Los Santos is from reality.

My final book in the series, *Many Mission Markers*, shows Los Santos at its most 'gamey' through no style screenshots documenting a series of mission markers in *GTA Online*. Although I turn the whole GUI off for this screenshot work, the markers still appear hovering in space as one approaches them, a reminder that for all its realism, Los Santos is still a game world. They also remind us that Los Santos is at least to some degree a social space, each marker gives us information on how many players to expect, and the metrics of how much others have enjoyed it. Flicking through page after page of these luminous rings one gets the sense of the irrepressible drive towards objectives. In my experience - given the images are contained within what I term a 'photographic book' - to those unfamiliar with the game the interplay between the super graphic and the strikingly realistic immediately draws the conclusion that this is some form of augmented reality overlay onto a physical city.

Ruscha's deadpan photographic techniques applied to screenshot methods are a tool to withdraw from the game itself and start regarding space as a supporting infrastructure to the videogame experience. Although the happy-go-lucky Reyner Banham may not have appreciated the unremitting cynicism of *GTA V*'s world, he would have admired its dedication to movement across an Angelino landscape. Ruscha himself would surely have appreciated the irony of all the gas stations in a world without gas. As critic Aron Vinegar has pointed out: 'the deadpan attitude exemplified by Ruscha refuses to allow us to be too hasty in our categorization of good, bad, best, or worst objects or people in the world.' These small books are designed to offer an insight through subtle details rather than tearing the artifice of the game world apart, to reform Los Santos into a new place.

This place is No Style Los Santos. The kind of place where a historian from Norfolk might meet an artist from Nebraska over frozen dairy products while enthusing over the architecture of a particularly fine drive-in burger joint, before slipping on their balaclavas and speeding off into the sunset chased by a supersonic jet fighter piloted by a 15-year-old kid from Nuneaton.