Case Study I: Wreck-Ages

Royal Road Test, Edward Ruscha

Bomber, a chance unwinding, Lewis Koch
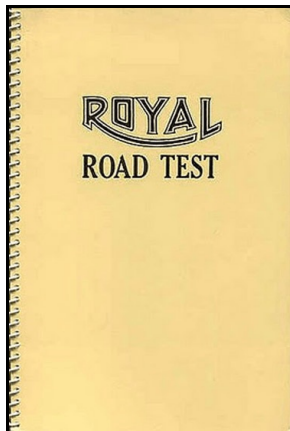

by

James R. Hugunin

Case Study I

Wreck-Ages: Edward Ruscha, Lewis Koch

wreck·age [rékij] noun

1. remains after destruction: the broken pieces left after something has been extremely badly damaged or destroyed

2. process of wrecking: the ruin or destruction of something (formal)

Cover

Royal Road Test (1967) Edward Ruscha

Cover

Bomber, a chance unwinding (2011) Lewis Koch

Sitting before me on my desk are two artist books, each filled with machine wreckage, from two ages: proto-postmodernism (Ruscha) and the post-conceptual years of a waning postmodernism (Koch). What might be gleaned from a comparison of these "bookends" to postmodernity? In what way are they similar? In what way are they different? What are their respective relationships to technology: the recording camera, the object recorded? What are their relationships to a key concept in postmodernism, "the fragment?" In what manner do they construct a form of knowledge?

Edward Ruscha's (left) left hand being examined by Mason Williams' (right) right hand over what's left of the typewriter.
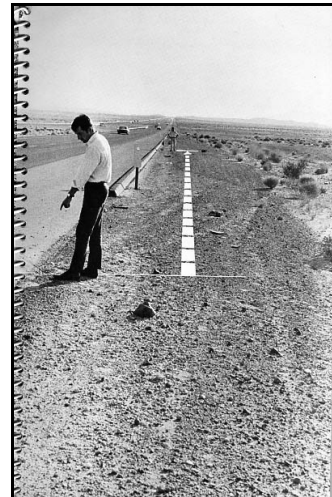
Royal Road Test, playful caption

Ed Ruscha's book exemplifies the second definition given above, "a process of wrecking: the ruin or destruction of something." In *Royal Road Test,* Mason Williams tosses an old Royal Model-X (circa mid-1920s) typewriter out the window of a Buick *Le Sabre* speeding along at 90 m.p.h. on August 21, 1966. Like an accident report, the wreckage is assessed photo-by-photo along its 189-foot crash-path on U.S. Highway 91. The weather ("Perfect") is recorded, other parameters of the event are,
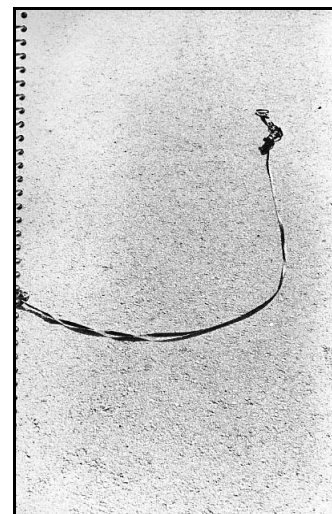
with tongue-in-cheek meticulousness, listed and diagramed. The straight-forward black-and-white photographs (most *not* shot by Ruscha) are captioned "dumb snapshots" *pointing* to the shards of the machine, visual data which, in a few shots, is a pointing that is humorously *doubled* in-frame by a conspicuously pointing index finger. The deadpan, monochromatic photos are bled off the pages in this offset, small edition book. Text is descriptive, yet can become playfully interactive with the photograph (see above image). The photographs depict a machine reduced to smashed parts, exemplifying that era's increasing interest in entropy: earlier, Jean Tinguely's preceding self-destructive machines, later Robert Smithson's earthworks and writings on the topic, Wynn Bullock's photographs, like *Typewriter* (1951), as well as J. G. Ballard's literary exploration of dissolution of organization and hierarchy into de-differentiation and terminal sameness.

Crash path of the typewriter

This book is one of several witty photobooks Ruscha produced during the 1960s: *Various Small Fires and Milk, Every Building on Sunset Strip* and *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations, Real Estate Opportunities, Thirty-Four Parking Lots in Los Angeles*, and so forth. Margaret Iverson discusses these little books as "cool in conception and as hotly subversive as Duchamp's Readymades."

The implications? Art can be fun and sell for $3.00 per copy. This deadpan mockumentary at the behest of the *seemingly* trivial (Rube Goldberg devices and Jean Tinguely's crazed machines mine such humor) *is* funny *and* yet profound. The trivial can be fascinating as curators John Szarkowski and Peter Galassi assert when they state that banal photo-graphic subjects can be raised to new heights of *formal coherence by*
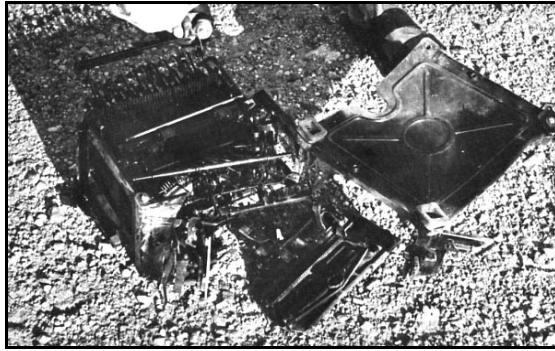

Left ribbon spool and ribbon

Typewriter (1951) Wynn Bullock

Royal Road Test (1967) Edward Ruscha, detail of smashed Royal typewriter
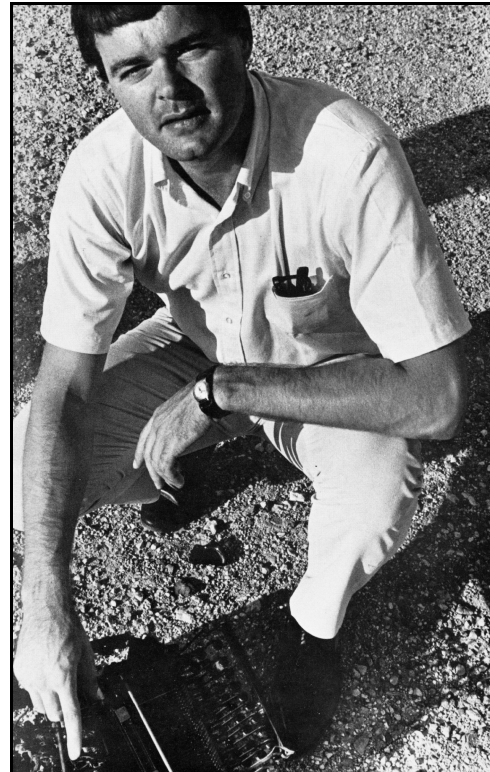

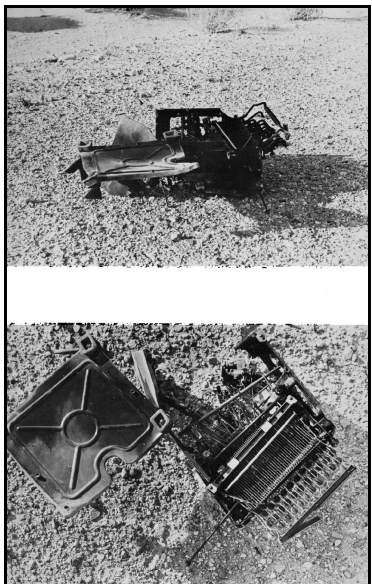*Royal Road Test*, 1963 Buick *Le Sabre*
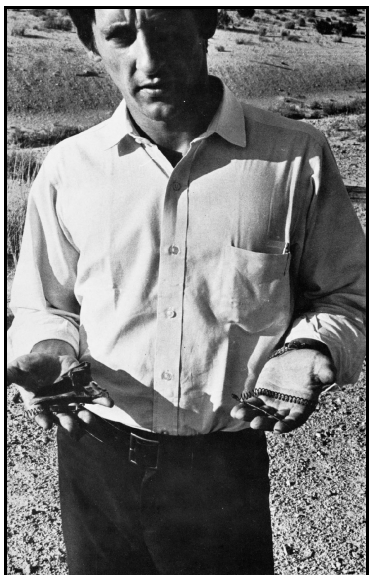

Royal Road Test, window from which test was made

Royal Road Test, Ed Ruscha and Mason William with debris

Royal Road Test, Mason Williams, index finger pointing to the typewriter debris

Hugunin/3

Royal Road Test, typewriter debris

Royal Road Test, deadpan expression

"the intelligent eye of the photographer." But Ruscha and his photographer, Patrick Blackwell, compose so as to *foil* such optical *haut cuisine.* In Ruscha's world, art can be *anything*. And photography? What do you know! It need not exhibit an Ansel Adams print fetishism, nor Szarkowskian formal astuteness, nor a romantic air as in Bullock. Traditional photo-connoisseurs reacted defensively: "It's art (maybe), but is it photography?" Ruscha's scripto-visual text counters traditional pictorial aesthetics with the "auto-maticity" (car, road, typewriter, toss, camera) of a controlled experiment, a crime-scene investigation.

In *Photography After Conceptual Art* (2010), Margaret Iversen and Aron Vinegar reassess Ruscha's bookworks. Iversen sees *Royal Road Test* "most obviously as an instance of instructional-performative photography," but where "the photographs are a trace of the act and do not necessarily document a performance," what Aron Vinegar understands as evoking a "pre-symbolic state." Iversen reads Ruscha's book as putting into practice instances of what will later be denominated as "systemic art," carrying out a predetermined set of instructions, a counter-expressionistic mode of working akin to the computational methods of punch-cards and computer programing.

Much has been made of Ruscha's "deadpan candor" in these photobooks, a nonjudgmental approach to their subject matter. Seemingly banal objects have been touted by Andre Breton and other Surrealists, and Iversen notes a surreal flavor to Ruscha's books. But she misses an opportunity to re-enforce that point when she overlooks the book's title, "Royal Road Test," as a play on Freud's famous dictum that the *dream* is the "royal road to the unconscious," probably because Ruscha's objects are most often the quotidian of our car culture (gasoline stations, pools, parking lots, cheap apartments, etc) and *not* the "old-fashioned, broken, useless, almost incomprehensive, even perverse," uncanny objects Breton found in the Saint-Ouen flea market. But Ruscha may have put forward his "road test," where an old-fashioned machine is smashed as obsolete, to introduce its old-fashioned remains as a pop-oriented, neutrally depicted object. *Royal Road Test* transforms a nostalgic, surreal, uncanny object into a pop/conceptual wrecked object via "indifference" and a nod to entropy, employing a neutrality of observation akin to Edmund Husserl's sober phenomenological reduction, bracketing the natural world and imposing an *eidetic* reduc-

Buster Keaton, *The Cameraman* (1928) publicity still

tion so as to reveal essences underlying variants. Speaking of sobriety, Vinegar reproduces a publicity still of Keaton, a collapsed machine (a camera no less) flattening him to the ground. The photo records the scene in deadpan, mimicking Keaton's expression and revealing his equanimity under stress, what Heidegger in *Being and Time* terms "*a disclosive submission to world out of which things that matter to us can be encountered*."

Like that philosopher's attending to a mode of deep receptiveness toward the facticity of the world (an approach consciously expressed as an aesthetic in photographer Edward Weston's essays and in his famous *Daybooks*), Ruscha also goes "to the things themselves," but he does so tongue-in-cheek, putting to the "road-test" Husserlian seriousness and Weston's modernist exemplification of Husserlian essences. (Having the same surname, did Ruscha see the wordplay potential in having the two "Eds" butt heads on the field of photographic contest?) While Weston took great care in selecting his subject matter and arranging it on his ground-glass (becoming the "ground" of the situation), Ruscha plays the role of the naive snapshooter (Jeff Wall affirms this in " 'Marks of Indifference': Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art," 1996) where one is thrown into a situation that is already there; in this case, *the situation* becomes "ground" upon which the photographer finds him/ herself. This ground, this situation, will become important in Aron Vinegar's take on this "dumb snapshot" aspect (evoking "happy accidents" or "fortuitous wrecks") as used in Ruscha's photobooks.

Calling attention to issues of random sampling and aleatory choice in Ruscha's work (the naive and quotidian), Benjamin Buchloh offers its source in Duchamp and Cage's legacy of an "aesthetic of indifference." But Vinegar critiques Buchloh's Adorno-inflected socially-oriented critique wherein Ruscha's work is viewed as in conformity with the dominant structures of our "administered" society, a stance that meshes well with Stanley Cavell's analysis of film actor Buster Keaton's poker face where, in "What becomes of things on film" (1988), he reads it as "acceptance of the external world and the things in it." Vinegar counters this by citing Jaleh Mansoor's article in *October,* "Ed Ruscha's one-way street" (Winter 2005) that reads Ruscha's practice as much more critical of mass culture than Buchloh and Cavell's positions offer. But Vinegar, attuned to the anti-Marxist trends these days, moves his discussion away from societal issues toward an understanding of Ruscha's existential *being-in-the-world* as exemplified in his photobooks.

Vinegar proceeds to take the Keaton-like rhetorical delivery of "deadpanness," the comic acknowledgment of the world remarked upon by so many about Ruscha's work, and rethink it as *not* ironic distancing, but a mode of *being-with-the-world*. He uses Martin Heidegger's existential spin on Husserlian Phenomenology to focus on the sense of our "attunement" to things that constitute our Life-World, our moods. According to Heidegger, our *Being-in-the-World* entails no "objective" that is not also accompanied by an interpretation; hence, no mood ever comes from merely "without" nor from just "within," but arises from our whole situation that discloses our mode of existence (note some similarities here to Systems Theory's emphasis on relation and reflexivity). Thus, for Heidegger "indifference" is not merely negative, but opens out into "equanimity," a calm and even vision of the possible situations of the *potentiality-of-being-as-a-whole*.

Vinegar expands on this point, summing up his argument by noting that Heidegger describes deadpan expression as "resolute raptness." He offers that this is the ability to remain open to the ordinary in the pursuit of some distanced and more "knowing" condition which, he says, explains why Los Angeles's "superficiality" (Ruscha's description) can be profound and funny and worth living for, as it makes one aware that everything is ephemeral when you look at it from the right angle. Ruscha's photobooks are read

as an expression of wonder (rather than critique) of our era, specifically, wonder evoked by Los Angeles's very mundaneness and captured in his books. Object (L. A.) and subject (Ruscha) seem fated to a perfect phenomenological pairing of world and self.

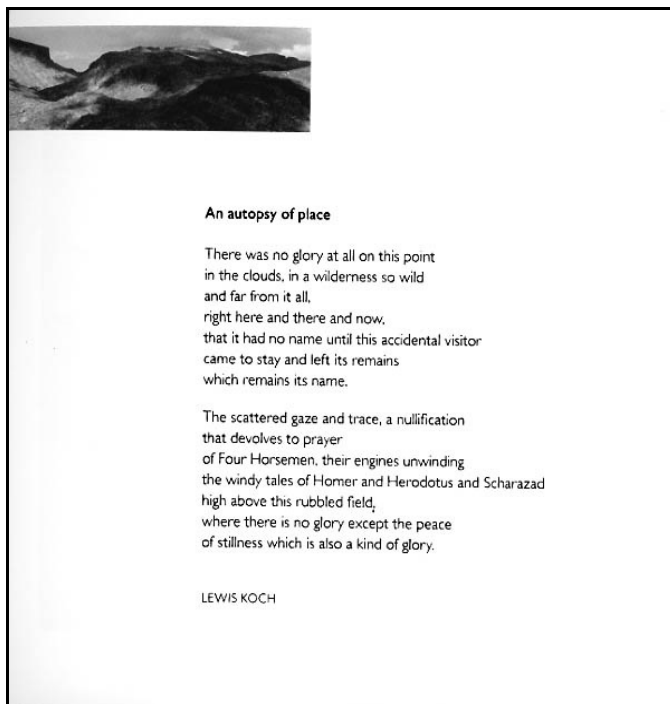B-17 debris, Bomber Mountain, Lewis Koch

Lewis Koch's book, *Bomber, a chance unwinding* (Madison, WI: Areness Press/Blurb. com, 2011) exemplifies the first definition of wreckage sketched above: the "remains after destruction: the broken pieces left after something has been extremely badly damaged or destroyed." Like Ruscha's book, the event recorded is tied to a specific date: June 28, 1943, when a B-17 Flying Fortress bomber on its way to join the air war over Germany, crashed in Wyoming's Big Horn Mountains, killing all the crew, scattering shards of the plane across what became known as "Bomber Mountain" (elevation 12,840 feet). Koch reverses the entropic direction of Ruscha's project, con-structing a new meaning from the imaged debris (non-rusting aluminum, so debris looks "new"), and sets up a comparison/contrast between geological time (the site) and human time (the historical event of the crash).
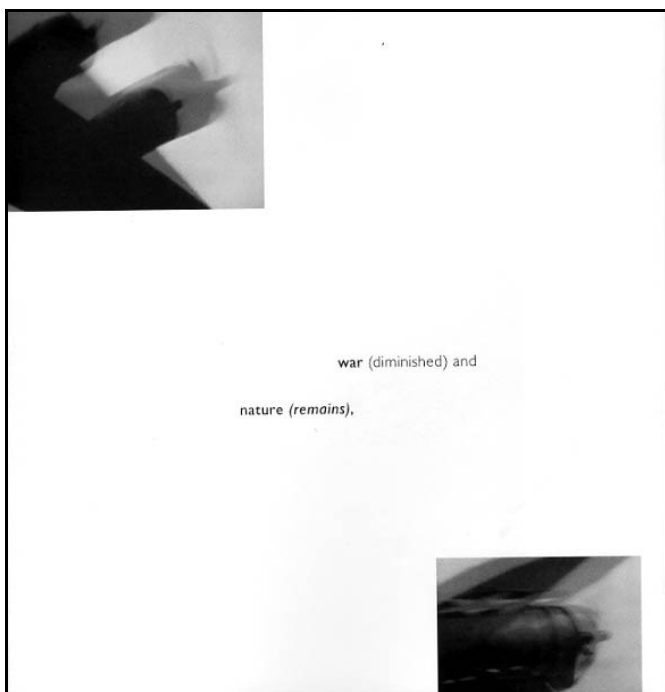
Unlike Ruscha, Koch gives us a scripto-visual autopsy of a site of an *actual* disaster. Deaths haunt the scene; no tongue-and-cheek here. A pathos pervades both the book (conceived in full-color with

Epilogue to the book and wall installation (2011) Lewis Koch

InDesign software and published via print-on-demand) and installation. In-stallation? Yes. Whereas Ruscha's book is a stand-alone object in a series of similar texts, Koch's was conceived as a supplementary chapbook (yet named one of twenty notable recent photobooks at PhotoIreland, Dublin) to accompany gallery installations of this project, such as at the James Watrous Gallery at the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters in Madison, Wisconsin (June 24 - August 7, 2011) where the artist used the walls and glass of the space like giant book pages that envelop the viewer, putting one *inside* the text.

Where Ruscha's photography is purposely casual, mocking the tenets of formalist fine art photography, Koch's is meticulous, considered. After all, he's

war (diminished) and

nature (remains).

Left page, freeze frames by Lewis Koch from WWII documentary footage

been working and defining himself as an art photographer for decades. And much of that work has been an exploration of the possibilities of the visual fragment and the importance of text in and outside the image. The traditional versus conceptual employment of photography (where language was to be purged on the one hand and foregrounded in the other) debate is now shopworn, inapplicable in our post-conceptual times.

These images (in the book and exhibition) are well-rendered, the text (both appropriated and written by Koch) is serious, poetic even. Important to Koch's efforts here is his use of screen-shots appropriated by unwinding arch-ival WWII black-and-white documentary film-footage of B-17s in action. We have the interlacing of two "data-bases" and two historical junctures — a THEN (our "good" war, World War II) and a NOW (our problematic war, Afghanistan) — realized via a monochrome-and-color contrast, each contrast is key to the aesthetics and ethos of the work. When Koch selected the screen-shot, often a double-image resulted, giving an illusion of motion, a dynamism which contrasts effectively against the very stable images of the scattered debris, aluminum debris that has rested in place for decades *without* showing the effects of time, of slow combustion, rusting (coding this as more a wreck than a ruin).

The word *unwinding* in the title of Koch's project obliquely refers to the unwinding of the archival

Right page, B-17 debris, Lewis Koch

footage and the considered deployment of film fragments from a war past, and the chance, sudden, brutal unwinding of the Boeing bomber's integrity as it smashed in the dark night across the boulder-strewn heights of a remote mountain. For a thousand and one nights these shards have been there to tell their story. This hints at another level of reference to *unwinding* in his project and it has to do with the airplane's nickname. It was customary for crews to name their "bird," usually with a female appellation. Pilot William Ronaghan and his crew chose "Scharazad," an alternate spelling for

Ehlers Caudill Gallery, Chicago, 1992 (left to right): *Slender Thread Totem* (7 prints, 106 x 19 in., 1991); and *Dream Portal: The Manifestations* (13 prints, 100 x 106 in., 1992) Lewis Koch

Scheherazade, the famous female protagonist holding death at bay (the *raison d'être* for it being chosen) in the frame tale of *One Thousand and One Nights.* The bomber's namesake is described in Sir Richard F. Burtons' translation: "She had perused the works of the poets and knew them by heart; she had studied philosophy and the sciences, arts and accomplishments; and she was pleasant and polite, wise and witty, well read and well bred." This was a *classy* war-bird.

Ironically, one night the tale turned tragic for "Scharazad's" crew The fragments of this final tale had a small audience until, camera-in-hand, Koch began to "decode" these "ruins" which, despite time, still sit gleaming incongruously in their mountainous setting. Gathering them up visually, he unwound them for our thoughtful reflection in a small book and across gallery walls.

Koch has always had an eye and penchant for wreckage and an attention to signs and slogans that mark our public space, as seen in *Manitowoc, Wisconsin* (1999). His mature *oeuvre* (starting with his "Totems" series) has involved the arrangement of such photographs into new wholes, a poetic riff on Russian Constructivist "factography" (where complete images are juxtaposed rather than shards of cut-up photos into collage). These earlier works put individual photographs into close proximity, forming distinctive shapes. However, these overall shapes retain within them the formal and semantic integrity of the single image (we can refer to them as "photemes"). These photemes (like morphemes, words),

Manitowoc, Wisconsin (1999) page 71, *Touchlesss Automatic Wonder,* Lewis Koch

are given a syntactical import that builds toward a "sentence," toward a fuller meaning that is more than the mere sum of the parts. In Ruscha, the closest one gets to this feeling of "language" is in unfolding his clever book, *Every Building on Sunset Strip*.

These photemes are the basic building blocks of Koch's aesthetic world which he combines to form

Every Building on Sunset Strip (1969) Edward Ruscha

a more complex poetic state of affairs. At times these photemes display a logical construct, like links in a chain, as in *Tar Pit Totem* (1994), where the figure's head grows from the tar pit/soil via interlocking vertical forms. Other times, the image linkages are more ideational than formal, as in

Koch's text-image installation of *OSAYCANYOUSEE* (Wright Museum of Art, Beloit College, Beloit, Wisconsin, 2008). *Bomber*, a *chance unwinding* is a development from such past work, but the gaps between images increase and text takes on a stronger purpose; the result is a complex dance between text-as-image and image-as-text. And between images and object: the installation includes rocks, simulating those at the crash-site, placed at the gallery entrance as less evidence, more rhetorical gesture.

In Ruscha's *Royal Road Test*, the imagery flows over the page edges and through the turned pages without gaps or interruption, the text is informational. The book has a stable frame of reference, reveal its subject unproblematically, *working* stereotypes of perception as a gauntlet tossed in the face of high modernism. Hence, it is an easily deciphered, what Roland Barthes called a "readerly text," giving as its Barthesian reward a comfortable reading (*plaisir*). In contradistinction, Koch's book and wall installation (where the prints are nailed, suggesting rivets, to the wall) are products of interconnections that make effective aesthetic use of carefully positioned gaps (both spatial and conceptual, as seen in the actual crash site) to create a dance between revelation and concealment, between found imagery and authored.

The result is a Barthesian polysemic, "writerly" text open to many interpretational constructs as the frame of reference is more complex due the ambiguous constellation of image-text; the codes regulating text-reader/viewer relationship are fragmented, requiring imaginative restructuring that invites deeper participation by the viewer. This demands more effort to bridge these gaps. Significantly, the gaps function as pivots on which the whole text-reader/viewer relationship revolves; they trigger and control the activity of decipherment.

Unlike Ruscha's book where the segments are marshaled into a graduated sequence, here elements are transformed into reciprocal reflectors. The blank as an empty space between segments enables them to be joined together into a referential field where the two reflecting positions relate to and influence each other. Thus, the 1943 crash date is paired with the 2006, 2008 dates when Koch made his photos *in situ*; monochrome images play off color; text off image; a past war resonates with a present conflict; a book reflects a wall installation, and so forth. Obviously, one must give sustained attention to these complexities, but one's effort is rewarded by what Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975) associates with a bliss accruing from the unsettledness and discomfort of aesthetic co-creation (*jouissance*).

The fragmented language, laconic phrases, and found/authored imagery dispersed within the book and running across the gallery walls, produce a charged, heightened expressiveness absent from Ruscha's book. In one double-page spread the poetic text on the left runs up and down the page: "a small punctuation *. . .* in the **everlasting** *. . .* of it all *...* **The everlasting** matter *. . .*," while a shot taken through a twisted flange bridges the book's gutter. That ruined flange, in turn, irregularly frames a shard

Tar Pit Totem (1994) (7 gelatin-silver prints, 106 in. X 19 in.) Lewis Koch

of mountain distance, turning the landscape itself into a fragment. *The past frames our present.* In contradistinction, in *Royal Road Test*, entropy triumphs, history for this abjected object ends.

a small punctuation
in the *everlasting*

of it all.

The everlasting *matter*

Double-page spread, *Bomber, a chance unwinding* (2011) Lewis Koch

The "dismembered" text/images in Koch's work are, nevertheless, given a conceptual order, a sort of visual postmortem (the images in the installation, ranging from 4 x 6 inches to 14 x 30 inches, are merely tacked up with small nails as in a crash investigation), creating a tension between the broken and chaotic and the ideational net thrown over the evidence of disaster. Koch's color images of a rugged topography strewn with debris, in approach and subject matter, recall the cool, detached gaze of the "New Topographics" photography of the "man-altered landscape" as featured in the influential 1975 exhibition (curated by William Jenkins) which included Frank Gohlke. Gohlke later documented a damaged Wichita Falls after a tornado hit and then came back a year later.


Wichita Falls Tornado (1979) Frank Gohlke

Common to New Topographics and Koch's project is a focus on the altered landscape, the antithesis of the sublime Ansel Adams type of landscape that had, by the mid-seventies, become moribund. But where Gohlke records destruction and then resto-ration, or Robert Adams and Joe Deal visually comment on tract-home sub-urban sprawl, Koch loosens an historical object (the B-17) from its celebrated historical continuum (intimated by the documentary WWII footage) to become part of the viewer/ reader's own present-day experience (Koch's image-text array). Koch's project generates an "afterlife" for this war machine in which a fragment of the past finds itself within, even framing, our present. This strategy asks us to uncomfortably revisit the theme of war and destruction, to recall the destruction wrought on cities and civilians during the Second World War and still to this day (my

Wall installation, bombsight photo, target map, *Bomber, a chance unwinding* (2011) Lewis Koch

the final sword, into this final rest,
and finally found
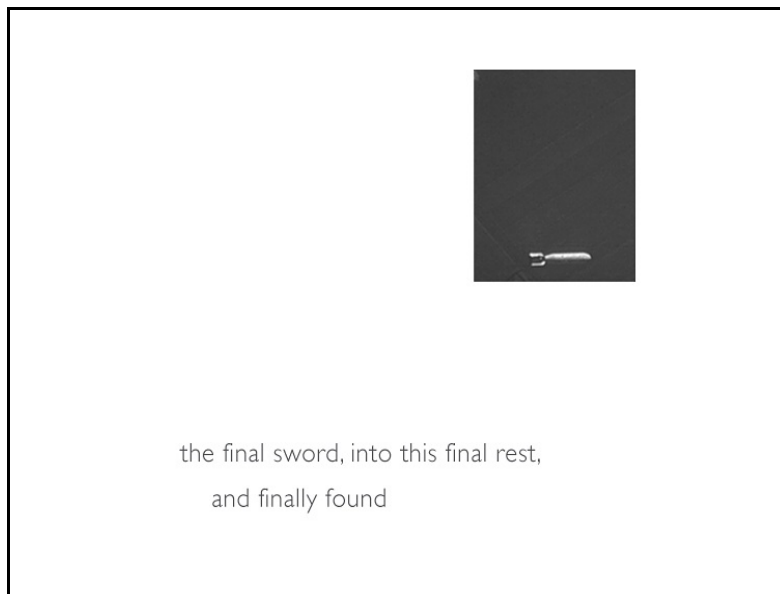
Wall image and text, *Bomber, a chance unwinding* (2011) Lewis Koch

own father was a B-17 bombardier who later had moral twinges about the "collateral damage" from his bombs). The inclusion in the wall installation of appropriated bombsight photos and target maps, bringing to mind the awful effects of aerial bombardment, as well as reminding us of the fact that now nothing utterly disappears, history enters the realm of the permanently present via photography.

Koch's pun in one section on "sword" and "words" and the phrase "final rest," juxtaposed to a single released bomb, further connects the act of bomb destruction with the plane's crash. His project brings back for our consideration a fatal moment when the destroyers were destroyed, the destructive machine itself destroyed, an unwilling Tinguely-like act. The plane *carried within itself the seeds of its own destruction.* This observation opens Ruscha's *Royal Road Test* where it humorously refers to the ill-fated typewriter; but Koch seems to suggest this existential fate is akin to Marx's notion of dialectical social contradictions, or even to "bad karma" (he's lived in India).

Koch's photo-poetic probing of wreckage (human remains removed in 1945) is more serious than Ruscha's and analogous to German critic Walter Benjamin's interest in the ruin, the corpse, the fragmenting of language, the captioning of photographs where images do not speak for themselves (found in both Ruscha and Koch's art), and the working of the past as something still uncompleted. Koch is Walter Benjamin's "angel of history": eyes backward as he flies forward.
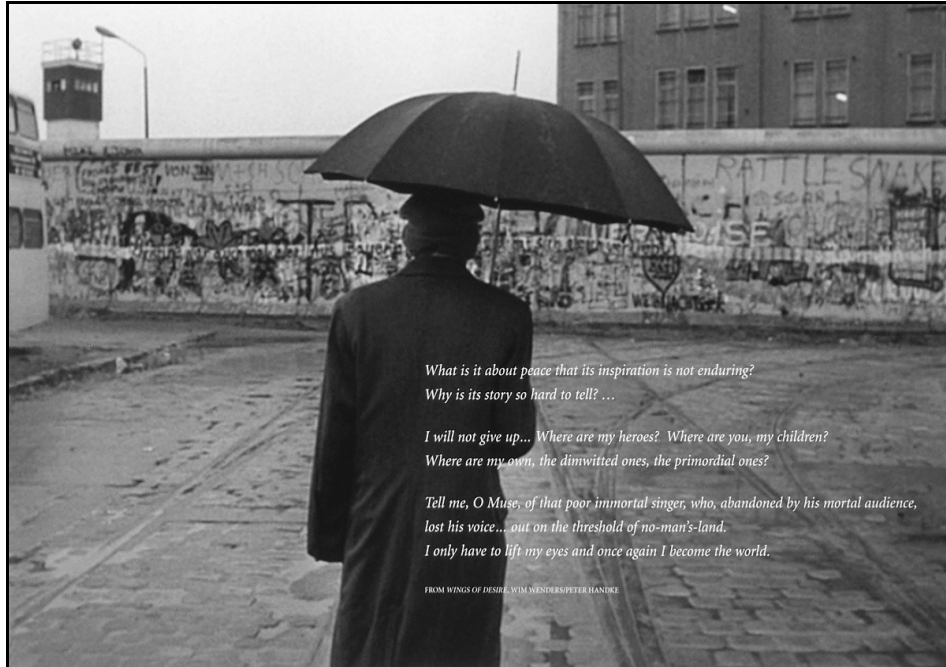
Appropriated image-text from Wim Wender's film *Wings of Desire* (1987), installation, *Bomber, a chance unwinding* (2011) Lewis Koch

Walter Benjamin's seminal study of allegory in seventeenth-century German *Trauerspiel* asserts, "Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things." For Benjamin, allegory is a mode of ruination for the sake of truth. Might we also say this is what Koch has given us for our contemplation? The ruins of a war-era event converted into a very mysterious set of scripto-visual "runes" we must decipher and come to grips with in our own destructive present. If the shards of wreckage in

Middle wall, *Bomber, a chance unwinding* (2011) installation, Lewis Koch

Ruscha's book speak to the issue of entropy and dis-interested seeing, Koch's be-gins with entropy as a *fait accompli*, taking pre-symbolic fragments of wreckage and re-assembling them into a Sym-bolic (text-image) that evokes indeterminancy and evokes the mood of trauma. Unlike Bernd and Hilla Becher's organized grid of serialized images, Koch places his images (in book and on wall) with large gaps between images and text, like a Scrabble Board incompletely filled.

As in real-life trauma (war and nature) Koch's ideational elements remain unreconciled. They refuse us a single harmonious perspective, providing an uncertain knowledge, a knowledge-in-process as suggested in an epigraph for his accordion-fold photobook, *Slender Tread Totem* (1993), where he cites John Muir: "When we try to pick out anything by itself we find it hitched to everything else in the universe." As such, Koch's project refuses a deadpan approach and dodges Aron Vinear's touting of the *wondrous* (a reading of Ruscha that deploys the original Enlightenment promise of an aesthetic ability to judge without interest) in favor of a disaster scenario that remains committed to an anti-war stance without being tendentious; in so doing, it remains ever open-ended, a scripto-visual *mise-en-abyme*.

Koch's coda to his gallery installation is a scene snatched from the ending of Wim Wenders film, *Wings of Desire* (1987), on which is over-printed the voice-over from the film (screenplay by Peter Handke). This is not reproduced in his chapbook. We are confronted by a melancholy image of the Berlin Wall (later to become a ruin) blocking any perspective, the back of a person, Homer, sheltering himself from rain, blocking our view of the wall as he seems to contemplate it in a mood that could range from deadpan acceptance to sorrowful loss. It's as if we share a prison yard with him. The voice-over, a verbal clue from Homer, reads in part:

> *What is it about peace that its inspiration is not enduring?*
> *Why is its story so hard to tell?*
> *I will not give up . . .*

Text on glass, *Bomber, a chance unwinding* installation view (2011) Lewis Koch

So does Koch give voice to his commitment, his struggle for peace, nor can we viewers give up constructing and reconstructing our readings of Koch's complex project.

Finally, as if asking us to take time to *reflect* upon his installation and our place within it, to suggest the interpretational *mise-en-abyme* he's evoked, Koch uses the reflective glass surrounding the gallery space to his benefit as a virtual wall that mirror-reverses shards of his poetic text (in this instance: "Only sun and stones, and soon") as you look up toward the sky, a sky from which that ill-fated B-17 plunged one dark night.

*   *   *

Installation view, *Bomber, a chance unwinding* showing a line of rocks suggesting the terrain of the crash-site
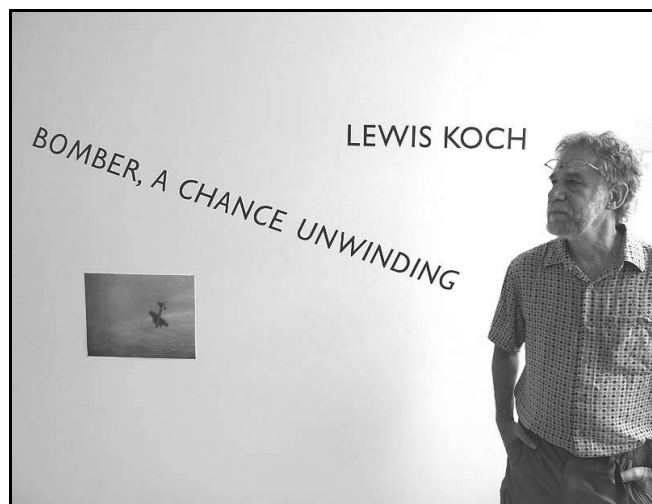

Bomber, a chance unwinding, chapbook double-spread, view of rock strewn crash site

Bomber, a chance unwinding, installation view with glass reflections

Patrick Blackwell, Photographer, *Royal Road Test* (1967) Edward Ruscha

Lewis Koch, Photographer, at the entry to his installation of *Bomber, a chance unwinding* (2011) James Hugunin