The artist Tom Sowden has curated Follow-Ed, a travelling exhibition of books by artists who produce work in the style of, and in tribute to, the American artist Ed Ruscha. Ruscha’s seminal book works such as Twentysix Gasoline Stations (1963), first published under his own National Excelsior Press imprint in an edition of 400 copies, remain a major influence on artists’ books produced around the world today.

Sowden has been making artists’ books in the style of Ed Ruscha since 2003, with his first publication FortyNine Coach Seats produced with reference to Twentysix Gasoline Stations and inspired by Ruscha’s humour, simplicity, use of repetition and the universal accessibility of his visual narratives.

Sowden’s Ruscha-style books continued with Fiftytwo Shopping Trolleys in Parking Lots and Homeless People in 2004, Winter Gardens (2005), Sitting Room (2006), Postcards from America and Record (2007) and Some of the Buildings on The Sunset Strip (2008), for Ruscha’s Every Building on The Sunset Strip (1966), which records with humour the failure to produce an exact replica by photographing only a selection of buildings whilst driving the length of Sunset Boulevard. There is also a nod to Jonathan Monk’s None of the Buildings on the Sunset Strip (2002), which records only the intersections of side roads off it.

A Genre in its Own Right
Artists’ book tributes to Twentysix Gasoline Stations have appeared in many guises. The US artist Jeff Brouws produced Twentysix Abandoned Gasoline Stations in 1992; French artist Eric Tabuchi has produced two series of the same name, published by Florence Loewy, Paris; Yann Sérandour’s Thirty Fire Stations, one of the most faithful replicas of Ruscha’s original, documents all the operational fire stations in Montreal on one night (19 December 2001). In Argentina, Victoria Bianchetti’s tribute Veintiocho Casillas de Seguridad was inspired by observations on her daily commutes, noticing the security posts at every corner that have become part of the urban geography of Buenos Aires. Berlin-based poet and conceptual artist Michalis Pichler’s Twentysix Gasoline Stations (2009) contains an image of the same brand of station photographed over locations in Brandenburg, Thuringen, Sachsen-Anhalt and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. Pichler has published two other books in the style of Ed Ruscha to date: Sechundzwanzig Autobahn Flagggen (2006) and Some Fallen Umbrellas and Something Else (2008). Pichler’s essay, ‘Appropriation’ for Printed Matter’s Research Room discusses how ‘the paraphrasing of Ed Ruscha is now a genre in its own right’ and suggests that the production of books that refer to other artists’ books could be linked back to early 19th century Japan, with image-based chapbooks such as Hokusai’s Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji.

Why do so many artists make books in the style of Ed Ruscha? His influence over the past 48 years has been phenomenal, with artists mimicking his distinctive typographic covers, use of blank pages as visual pauses in his books, and his play with imagery and language. Various Small Fires and a Glass Of Milk (1964), contains 15 images of fire: matches, cigars, blowtorch, flare etc. and a single image of a glass of milk. Defying classification, yet paving the way for a particular conceptual approach to photographic art in the same manner as his Nine Swimming Pools and a Broken Glass (1968), which has inspired many contemporary artists’ interpretations such as Too Many Trees and a Tesco Bag (Lin Charleston, UK, 2008), and Seven Doorways and a Broken Bottle (Gandha Key, UK, 2008). Doro Boehme and Eric Baskauskas’ Various Blank Pages and Ink was produced in homage to the holdings of Ruscha’s original works in the Joan Flasch Artists’ Books Collection at SAIC, Chicago, USA, 2009. It adopts Ruscha’s iconic use of blank pages and contains prints of the total amount of blank pages from the Flasch collection of Ruscha’s Nine Swimming Pools, Colored People, A Few Palm Trees and Various Small Fires.

Sowden is currently working with the Performance Re-enactment Society group to produce a collaborative version of Ruscha’s Crackers for the Follow-Ed exhibition at Arnolfini. This is a contemporary take on Ruscha’s 1969 photo-narrative (which Ruscha based on Mason Williams’ text How to Derive the Maximum Enjoyment from Crackers), with the story re-photographed in a new set built at Arnolfini and published as a new artist’s book for this exhibition.

Follow-Ed is at Arnolfini, Bristol, UK, throughout April (www.arnolfini.org.uk) and will be touring until 2012. Tom Sowden’s artists’ books can be viewed at: www.tomcsowden.com

Notes
1. You can read Pichler’s essay online at http://printedmatter.org/researchroom/essays/appropriation.cfm

Images, clockwise from top left
Fortynine Coach Seats 2003 by Tom Sowden. Perfect bound book, digital print 180 x 140 mm
Twenty-six Gasoline Stations 2009 by Michalis Pichler. Perfect bound book offset litho, 180 x 140 mm
Some of the Buildings on The Sunset Strip (detail) 2008 by Tom Sowden. Concertina format book, digital print with screenprinted cover, 180 x 140 mm, extending to 4.5 m