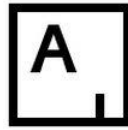


GAGOSIAN



The Most Influential Living Artists of 2016



Ed Ruscha, November 8, 2003, West Hollywood, California. Portrait by Jason Schmidt.

There would be no art world without artists. It's nearly impossible to whittle down the many thousands if not millions around the world who have dedicated their lives in some way to an art practice; even in the art world, influence is ever more global and diffuse. But through combining the insight of Artsy's editors with data from UBS's art news app [Planet Art](#) and other sources, some trends do emerge for 2016. The artists who most captured the public's—and the media's—attention were primarily dealing with key issues of our time: political persecution, racism, sexism, and climate change. And they were privileging and engaging vast audiences with content, not flash. If this is any indication of the direction that the art world itself is headed in, then art is poised to be more relevant and powerful than ever. Below, in no particular order, are the most influential living artists of 2016.

ED RUSCHA

B. 1937, OMAHA, NEBRASKA • LIVES AND WORKS IN LOS ANGELES

There are few artists who have captured American culture with as much ingenuity and deadpan humor as Ruscha. As early as 1962, when Abstract Expressionism was still in vogue, the 25-year-old artist (a recent graduate of CalArts) broke away from painterly conventions and rendered the word “OOF” in big, block yellow letters on a blue backdrop. The painting—a graphic composition, borrowed from the era’s advertising aesthetics—was the epitome of Pop Art, a movement which Ruscha would go on to pioneer, along with Warhol, his East Coast foil. “You get punched in the stomach, and that’s ‘Oof,’” the now 78-year-old artist subsequently said of the work. “It was so obvious, and so much a part of my growing up in the U.S.A. I felt like it was almost a patriotic word.” The painting now hangs permanently on MoMA’s walls as a testament to Ruscha’s unique, gut-punching ability to pack cultural commentary into a single word.

This year, Ruscha’s trailblazing oeuvre was celebrated in a 99-work, career-spanning exhibition at San Francisco’s de Young Museum. The show, titled “Ed Ruscha and the Great American West,” foregrounded the artist’s ability to capture the imperfections and desires of Americans through paintings and photographs of the roadside billboards, gas stations, swimming pools, and palm trees that surrounded him in Los Angeles, where he’s lived since 1956. “His work represents contemporary history and landscape painting at its best, but also presents an entirely personal narrative, which is fascinating,” explains Max Hollein, the de Young’s director. “He interprets, preserves, and challenges our understanding of American culture and the condition of the individual. This seems to be utterly relevant.” Indeed, Ruscha has not only suspended America’s past in his striking and at times deeply, darkly funny paintings, but continues to incorporate the country’s characteristics (both the good and the ugly) into his work.