

ICONS

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Changed The
Way We Think
About Art

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INVENTIONS**

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Art in America





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Ruscha portrait: Photo Taylor Hill/WireImage via Getty

THE RUSCHA EFFECT

Artists weigh in on
the impact of the
great Ed Ruscha.

Often it's artists who decide which of their peers will be remembered. Leaving a mark on others figures well in the history books.

To understand Ed Ruscha, an icon who has spent the better part of 60 years mining Los Angeles for iconography devoid of glitz and glamour, we spoke to artists whose work he influenced in advance of "ED RUSCHA / NOW THEN," a major survey now on view at the Museum of Modern Art in New York before it travels to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in the spring.

Some favored his photo book era, while others noted his sunset paintings and his text-based works, in which he rendered Los Angeles verbiage from the Hollywood sign to that ubiquitous onomatopoeia: honk. No matter the medium, Ruscha's trademark is a kind of deadpan humor. But his humor has had serious implications for the history of art: before Ruscha and other Pop artists, art was a space set apart for subjects considered important and transcendent. Ruscha made space for the everyday, vernacular, and banal.



OOOF

DENA YAGO

(BORN 1988)

Ed Ruscha's text paintings have definitely had a big impact on me. I tend to gravitate toward language that I encounter in the urban landscape. Sometimes a certain term will bubble up or feel really omnipresent and then start to rattle around in my brain, taking on significance. Language we encounter through ads and signs becomes this medium for understanding my relationship to the urban environment.

Ruscha doesn't shy away from talking about commercial vernacular, a subject I'm interested in because it governs our lives as the substrate of capitalism. A lot of artists want to position themselves outside of that, but I don't. This comes from my time as part of [the trend-forecasting artist collective] K-HOLE and also informs my own work. The tensions that arise from using commercial vernacular in artistic contexts are very interesting to me.

I learned about Ruscha's book projects first and was drawn to how invested he is in the vernacular of the city. He gets pigeonholed as this LA artist, but the material he's dealing seems more broadly American. Still, he has really left his mark on the city. I'd always hear things like, "Oh, did you know Ed Ruscha bought that building?" To be so present for that long in a single place, and to leave such a mark on a scene, that's aspirational. He feels like this cool dad.

When he started addressing everyday culture, though, he was living in a monoculture – the aesthetic vernacular was more top-down. Today, the "everyday" might mean some ultra-niche TikTok phenomenon that's completely illegible to many people. Still, his work feels as resonant today as it did in the '60s, which is impressive. He mixes the celebratory and playful and fun qualities of LA art with this deadpan seriousness. His work has a slow burn. It gives you immediate gratification, but it doesn't stop there.

Dena Yago, like Ruscha, borrows text found in the urban landscape. Below, *The Bins* (2021) reflects on the option to add either "value" or "time" to a subway-fare card, and *Capacity* (2023) makes an impact with just a lone bold word.

Left, Ruscha's *Oof* (1962).

