

The Best Art of 2017

By Roberta Smith, Holland Cotter and Jason Farago

Dec. 6, 2017

The art critics of *The New York Times* Roberta Smith, Holland Cotter and Jason Farago share their picks for the best art of the year.

Roberta Smith



An installation view of “Ad Reinhardt: Blue Paintings,” a standout show at the David Zwirner Gallery in New York. 2017 Estate of Ad Reinhardt/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York/London

1. BEST GALLERY SHOW I REGRETTABLY DID NOT REVIEW “Ad Reinhardt: Blue Paintings” at the David Zwirner Gallery, which brought together 28 luminous abstract paintings from this artist’s early-1950s “blue period” — the most ever. With blue fields layered with levitating blocks, or intersecting beams of contrasting blues and sometimes greens or purples, these immersive paintings evoked geometric versions of Monet’s “Water Lilies.” Their joyfulness stood in striking contrast to Reinhardt’s relatively daunting if better-known Black Paintings, which suddenly seem a little pretentious.



Florian Troebinger performing in the artist Rirkrit Tiravanija’s frame-by-frame re-creation of a Rainer Werner Fassbinder film, at Gavin Brown’s Enterprise. Gavin Brown’s Enterprise, New York/Rome

2. **ANOTHER ONE** At Gavin Brown's Enterprise in Harlem, Rirkrit Tiravanija continued his Johnsian devotion to inventing nothing with a masterpiece: a loving and infinitely touching frame-by-frame re-creation of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's 1974 film "Ali: Fear Eats the Soul." The story centers on Emmi, a widowed German cleaning woman, and Ali, a much younger Moroccan migrant worker, whose unlikely romance and marriage elicit every species of bigotry from those around them. The Tiravanija version has an exquisite corpse of a title: "skip the bruising of the eskimos to the exquisite words' vs. 'if I give you a penny you can give me a pair of scissors.'" It was an in-house job, shot in the gallery in four weeks with a cast consisting almost entirely of artists, friends and employees, on sets that then became part of the exhibition. The stiffness of the amateur acting gave the proceedings an odd clarity, and the random casting unsettled stereotypes, as did giving the leading female roles to men: The Swedish artist Karl Holmqvist played Emmi; Florian Troebinger, the film's only professional actor, portrayed Barbara, the blond Germanic bar owner and Ali's sometime lover. In keeping with Mr. Tiravanija's relational-aesthetics pieces involving the serving of free food, Mr. Troebinger tended the bar throughout the show. As Ali, Hamid Amini, who has worked with this artist on various projects, gave the remake its center of gravity as well as a touch of Hollywood dreamboat.

3. **BEST FIRST IMPRESSION** "War and Pieced: The Annette Gero Collection of Quilts From Military Fabric" at the American Folk Art Museum and its furnace blast of geometric patterns, predominantly in the reds, blacks and yellows of the military fabrics. On view through Jan. 7, it is some of the best abstract art you'll see this season.

4. **BEST SHOW ABOUT FASHION AS ART (AND EXHIBITION DESIGN AS ARCHITECTURE)** The ravishing "Rei Kawakubo/Comme des Garçons: Art of the In-Between," from the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute. It inhabited a small village of structures, with some 120 quasi-wearable sculptural ensembles in an array of colors and innovative textiles, disrupting notions of style and gender, past and present, and continually delivering fresh ideas about form, process and meaning.



Norma Kamali's "Sleeping Bag Coat" (1980-89), in the show "Items: Is Fashion Modern?" at the Museum of Modern Art. Mark Wickens for The New York Times

5. BEST SHOW ABOUT FASHION AS JUST GETTING DRESSED "Items: Is Fashion Modern?" at the Museum of Modern Art presented a kind of canon of global dress in the postwar period, ranging from biker jackets to burkinis, from little black dresses to saris. It is an eye-opening examination of practicality, religious belief, clubbishness and personal identity played out in mostly familiar garments from around the world.



India Salvor Menez in a reinvention of commedia dell'arte by Ryan McNamara and John Zorn, presented at the Guggenheim Museum. Ryan McNamara

6. MOST SITE-SPECIFIC PERFORMANCE The updated commedia dell'arte concocted by the artist-choreographer Ryan McNamara in collaboration with the composer John Zorn was part of the Works & Process series at the Guggenheim Museum. In five segments, starting with "Harlequin," eight dancers used all the available space and numerous design details of Frank Lloyd Wright's small, eccentric and circular (of course) auditorium. Whatever nooks and crannies they missed were usually occupied by the different groups of musicians, including a jazz trio and an a cappella quartet performing Mr. Zorn's compositions. The auditorium became a kind of theater in the round, whose every detail was dazzlingly articulated. The event also reflected Mr. McNamara's increasingly impressive transition from performance art to choreography.

7. SECOND-BIGGEST WASTE OF MONEY AFTER THE LEONARDO AUCTION "Hansel and Gretel," one of the year's more expensive works of installation art, involving the latest in high-tech surveillance technology reiterated as fun-house spectacle. It was cooked up by the Chinese activist artist Ai Weiwei and the architects Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron and staged at the Park Avenue Armory. They all should have known better.

8. BEST WHITNEY BIENNIAL IN RECENT MEMORY The 2017 version, for its diversity, its accessibility and even for the storms it ignited.

9. **SOME OF THE BEST RECENT SIGNS THAT THE FUTURE IS FEMALE** New York's museums had so many impressive monographic shows of the work of modern women, it's almost feeling normal: Florine Stettheimer at the Jewish Museum; Louise Lawler at the Museum of Modern Art; Marisa Merz and Lygia Pape at the Met Breuer; Carol Rama and Kaari Upson at the New Museum; Laura Owens at the Whitney Museum of American Art (through Feb. 4); Patty Chang at the Queens Museum (through Feb. 18); Judy Chicago at the Brooklyn Museum (through March 4); and Carolee Schneemann and Cathy Wilkes at MoMA/PSI (through March 11).

10. **BEST EXHIBITION SCHEDULE AT A MUSEUM IN UPHEAVAL** The Met's, which included shows of camera-phone images exchanged by 12 pairs of artists; the nearly abstract etchings of the 17th-century Dutch artist Hercules Segers; Marsden Hartley's Maine paintings; an astounding survey of Japanese bamboo art and basketry (through Feb. 4); and, of course, the recently opened shows of David Hockney's paintings (through Feb. 25) and Michelangelo's drawings. That last exhibition includes a veritable show-within-a-show of sheets by his teacher Domenico Ghirlandaio (through Feb. 12).

11. **GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN** Linda Nochlin, Glenn O'Brien, Jack Tilton, Magdalena Abakanowicz, Vito Acconci, A. R. Penck, Trisha Brown, James Rosenquist, Holly Block, George Braziller, Barkley L. Hendricks, Jannis Kounellis, Saloua Raouda Choucair, Dore Ashton, Ousmane Sow, Karl Katz, John Ashbery, Edit DeAk, Julian Stanczak, Beau Dick, James S. Ackerman, Richard Benson and Howard Hodgkin.

Holland Cotter

Bad-dream Washington politics. White nationalism. Sexual predation. Add the spectacle of a flatulent art market raking in endless cash, and 2017 feels like a good year to say goodbye to. But there were positive things. The following meant the most to me:



The Women's March in Washington on Jan. 21, a protest that was itself a form of political performance art. Nina Westervelt for The New York Times

1. **THE MARCH** If art can be defined as form shaped by the pressure of ideas, beliefs and emotions, the Women's March last Jan. 21, the day after the inauguration of President Trump, might be seen as the largest work of political performance art ever. Originating as a gesture of mass revulsion, it was deeply felt, smartly choreographed, memorably costumed ("pussy hats") and emphatically scripted ("Keep your hands off my body"). It continues today on social media (#MeToo), with no end to anger and energy in sight.



Martha Araújo in her piece "Hábito/Habitante (Habit/Inhabitant)," 1985, part of the show "Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985," at the Hammer Museum. Martha Araújo

2. **RADICALS** Not known for mounting the barricades, museums did so anyway with a handful of large but incisive group shows. As part of "Pacific Standard Time" in Los Angeles, the Hammer Museum has organized "Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985," in which every one of the 116 participants opens a picture window on an uncharted history (through Dec. 31).

3. **RADICALS II** At the Brooklyn Museum in April, a smaller exhibition, "We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-85," organized by the museum's Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, came with work by more than 40 artist-activists and a dynamite sourcebook-style catalog. (The show is now at the California African American Museum in Los Angeles, through Jan. 14.)

4. **BEING THERE** "Third Space," at the Birmingham Museum of Art in Alabama, is technically an installation of contemporary art from the collection. But it's more than that: It's at least partly a nuanced look at what it means to be black in America, and specifically in the South. Some of the artists (Kerry James Marshall, Lonnie Holley) are Birmingham natives. At least one work, Dawoud Bey's "Birmingham Project," from 2013, is directly related to the city: It commemorates the 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist church by white supremacists, in which four young girls were killed. The show would be moving in any setting, but nowhere else would it feel the way it does in this museum, just a few blocks away from where the church still stands.

5. **JUST SAY NO** There have been repeated calls for museums — beginning with the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis in 2016, and continuing with the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Walker Art Center and others this year — to censor, even destroy, offending works of contemporary art. In an interesting culture-wars shift, many of the calls have come from the political left. These calls should be weighed on a case-by-case basis. Bottom line: Protest is good, healthy; do it. Censorship of art, particularly in the form of destruction, is never good. Don't do it.

6. **DOCUMENTA** Ambitiously diffuse, the 2017 edition of this every-five-years art show was set in two very different places: Kassel, Germany — its traditional home — and Athens. It took off in more thematic directions than any one show could contain, and yet, in its overall thrust — anti-fascist and pro-immigrant — it was fully, and often affectingly, of its moment. The show drew scathing reviews from the German press for being too political, and was finally accused of gross overspending. Had Documenta 14 been lighter, brighter and righter, not to mention a box-office hit, would its budgetary overdraw have been grounds for disgrace? My guess is, no.



“La Cena” (“The Supper”), from 1991, one of the startling prints in El Museo del Barrio’s retrospective of the Cuban artist Belkis Ayón. Estate of Belkis Ayón, via Landau Traveling Exhibitions

7. BELKIS AYÓN The season had several outstanding solo shows. The unforgettable retrospective of the Cuban artist Belkis Ayón (1967-99) at El Museo del Barrio last summer was one. In her short career, Ms. Ayón developed a virtuoso style of monumental printmaking and took as her subject myths of the Afro-Cuban fraternal society called Abakuá. Her immersion in spiritual matter was complete. The prints, in shades of black, white and gray, look self-illuminated. They’re like lightning flashes in darkness.

8. THURAYA AL-BAQSAMI In the 1970s and ’80s, the paintings and prints of this Kuwaiti artist were dreamlike accounts of female experience in the post-colonial Middle East. In 1990, when Iraq invaded her homeland, the work became an anguished, diaristic record of the horrors unfolding under occupation. The arc of Ms. Baqsemi’s career is fully encompassed in a dizzying retrospective — organized by her daughter, the artist and filmmaker Monira al-Qadiri — that fills four floors of the remarkable Sharjah Art Museum in the United Arab Emirates (through Dec. 16).



A still from Barbara Hammer’s 1978 film “Double Strength,” part of “Evidentiary Bodies,” a show of her work at the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay & Lesbian Art. Barbara Hammer and KOW, Berlin

9. BARBARA HAMMER I’ve admired this trailblazing artist’s exultantly erotic “dyke tactic” films, as she calls them, for years, without knowing the rest of her output. A textured survey, “Barbara Hammer: Evidentiary Bodies,” at the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art in SoHo (through Jan. 28) finally fills in the blanks with drawings, paintings, photographs, sculptures and installations. Now 78, Ms. Hammer prefers the term “actionary” to “visionary” in describing the work of other queer artists she has documented and promoted over the decades. On the basis of this show, I’d say both terms apply to her.

10. LASTING IMPRESSIONS Here are three 2017 events still strong in my memory:

“Detroit After Dark,” at the Detroit Institute of Arts, a show of nocturnal photographs from the museum’s holdings, has stayed with me like a slow tune. The after-hours tour opened with a Robert Frank shot from the 1950s, when the city was still a powerhouse; wound through gradually dimming streets; stopped at jazz clubs; lingered in punk and hip-hop spots. A 2016 view by Dave Jordano of the hulking Michigan Train Depot, ablaze with brand-new, gentrifying lights, brought a moody song to an inconclusive end: not upbeat, not downbeat, something else.

At the Philadelphia Museum of Art last winter, the Mumbai-based artist Jitish Kallat had an extraordinary installation called “Covering Letter.” In it, a projected video image of a letter written by Mohandas Gandhi to Adolf Hitler just weeks before the start of World War II scrolled slowly down a screen made of billowing artificial fog. Gandhi, who believed in the political efficacy of offering friendship, tries to persuade the Nazi leader to change his destructive course. But aggression doesn’t listen; over and over we watched Gandhi’s words descend into oblivion.

In November, when “Pacific Standard Time” opened, I went on a press tour that the Chicana artist Judith F. Baca led of “The Great Wall of Los Angeles,” a huge mural that she initiated in 1976 with the help of 80 young people referred by the city’s criminal justice department. Done on the wall of a drainage canal, the painting illustrates the history of California as seen through immigrant eyes, with particular attention paid to civil rights advances and abuses. Over the decades, with money tight, progress on the mural has been sporadic; the history runs only through the 1950s, though painting is soon to begin again. Even incomplete, it’s a great American work. Walking it with Ms. Baca was one of the season’s peak moments. Because, in a year when the combination of “great” and “America” sounded incompatible and corrupt to me, it was a walk with a different history, and a history I feel I want to live.

Jason Farago

This was a year of outrage: outrage at injustices beyond the art world, but too often misdirected inward. Disputes over aesthetics and politics frequently devolved — thanks to the accelerant of social media — into shaming and outright censoriousness. Building a better future, together, is going to be arduous work that will require the intelligence, the ambition, and, above all, the seriousness shown by exhibitions like these.

1. **CERCLE D’ART DES TRAVAILLEURS DE PLANTATION CONGOLAISE** As matters of identity and inequality roiled so many American museums, the small, vital SculptureCenter in Queens mounted a resounding defense of both cross-cultural partnership and moral sincerity. The sculptors of this collective work on a rural Congolese cacao plantation; their solid, clever statues are 3-D-scanned by a Dutch team, cast in chocolate in Europe and then shown and sold in galleries they will never be able to see. The museum’s prestige helps these sculptures obtain high prices, which has made a concrete improvement to these artists’ lives, but the works’ true value, both economically and culturally, as chocolate and as art, depends on global disparities that no exhibition can remedy. This was the most challenging show of the year, and proudly “problematic,” but that was the point: You need to be fearless, and run right into the swamp of possible misunderstanding, to have any hope of making a difference.

2. **‘GAUGUIN: ARTIST AS ALCHEMIST’** The paintings were here and accounted for, but it was the ceramics, wobbly and wild, that stole the show in this profound rewriting of Post-Impressionism at the Art Institute of Chicago. This vibrant exhibition gave us a new Gauguin, more complicated and more omnivorous than the South Seas stereotype. It was also a paragon of how to engage with the work of great artists whose personal behaviors make us bridle: unflappably, with the sharpest tools.

3. **KAARI UPSON** At 45, this intrepid Californian is looking more and more like the most psychologically incisive artist of her generation. Her uncanny exhibition at the New Museum, replete with casts of mattresses and more than a hundred mannequins of her mother, arrayed on the shelves Costco uses, plunged deep into the intertwined American obsessions with self-improvement and home improvement. Ms. Upson also made one of the strongest contributions to this year’s Whitney Biennial: urethane casts of sectional sofas from Las Vegas tract houses, which appeared less like furniture than like misshaped human bodies.

4. **‘PACIFIC STANDARD TIME’: THE HISTORICAL SIDE** Contemporary art accounts for the bulk of the Latin American exhibitions now filling Los Angeles, but two showcases of older work dazzle. “Golden Kingdoms,” at the Getty Center through Jan. 28, is a bona fide blockbuster of pre-Columbian bling; “Painted in Mexico, 1700-1790: Pinxit Mexici,” at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art through March 18, assembles an exhilarating bounty of altarpieces and portraiture. Both tour to the Met next year.

5. **MILAN’S FERTILE FOUNDATIONS** This year’s Venice Biennale was a washout, but westward, two private museums scored winners. At the Fondazione Prada, the impish artist Francesco Vezzoli curated an ingenious history of Italian public television of the 1970s, mixing shimmying showgirls with footage of feminist protests and the murder of a prime minister. And the massive HangarBicocca presented a devastating exhibition of the Polish polymath Mirosław Balka, whose whirring fans, hallways slicked with soap, and pumps of coal-black water circled around, but never disclosed, the horrors of the Holocaust.

6. **PARIS: THE LIVING EARTH** While the climate accord signed in Paris was punctured this year, the city’s art world went green. At the Grand Palais, the lush exhibition “Jardins” gathered 500 years of garden designs, herbariums, landscaping tools and botanical art by Delacroix, Klee, Matisse and Gerhard Richter; the garden, it proposed, was the site where nature and culture marry. And at the Palais de Tokyo, Camille Henrot’s brilliantly assured midcareer retrospective, through Jan. 7, includes not just a landmark new film, shot partly in the island nation of Tonga, but also ikebana arrangements of dried flowers and scrap metal.

7. **‘FRÉDÉRIC BAZILLE AND THE BIRTH OF IMPRESSIONISM’** In a strong year for the National Gallery of Art, the standout show was this nearly complete summation of the life of a realist painter who shared a studio with Monet and was on his way to greatness when he died, at 28, in the Franco-Prussian War. Bazille brought a bracing objectivity to scenes of bathers, parties and his fellow artists, and it is wrenching to think of what he did not paint.

8. **‘ART AND CHINA AFTER 1989’** The disgraceful threats of violence that led to the censorship of Huang Yong Ping, Xu Bing, and the couple Sun Yuan and Peng Yu at the Guggenheim Museum further reaffirmed that the world’s two most powerful nations can barely make sense of each other. There is, though, no separating the United States and China going forward — and we need exhibitions as engaged as this one (through Jan. 7) to stake a claim for mutual recognition.

9. **'ANNE TERESA DE KEERSMAEKER: WORK/TRAVAIL/ARBEID'** This Belgian choreographer's five-day "exhibition" in the atrium of the Museum of Modern Art was a model of how to translate dance from the set format of a theater to the open spaces and schedules of a museum. It was also an unabashed showcase of practice and expertise — watch them stick every landing, in sync, hour after hour — in an art world not usually bothered about skill.
10. **'THE SQUARE'** In Ruben Östlund's Palme d'Or-winning satire — perhaps the first movie to depict the world of contemporary art with true insight — a Swedish curator imagines that an exhibition can improve society, and ends up making everything worse. The inane art-speak, the awkward fund-raisers, the drinking, the Teslas: This brutal indictment of the liberal culture sector ridiculed me and everyone I know, and it hurt so good.