



The 25 Works of Art That Define the Contemporary Age

Three artists and a pair of curators came together at The New York Times to attempt to make a list of the era's essential artworks. Here's their conversation.

By David Breslin, Martha Rosler, Kelly Taxter, Rirkrit Tiravanija and Torey Thorton (July 15, 2019)



The roundtable panelists, from left to right: the Whitney Museum of American Art's David Breslin, the artist Martha Rosler, the artist Torey Thorton, the Jewish Museum's Kelly Taxter and the artist Rirkrit Tiravanija. They were photographed in the New York Times newsroom on June 3, 2019. Photo by Sean Donnola.

On a recent afternoon in June, T Magazine assembled two curators and three artists — David Breslin, the director of the collection at the Whitney Museum of American Art; the American conceptual artist Martha Rosler; Kelly Taxter, a curator of contemporary art at the Jewish Museum; the Thai conceptual artist Rirkrit Tiravanija; and the American painter Torey Thorton — at the New York Times building to discuss what they considered to be the 25 works of art made after 1970 that define the contemporary age, by anyone, anywhere. The assignment was intentionally wide in its range: What qualifies as “contemporary”? Was this an artwork that had a personal significance, or was its meaning widely understood? Was its influence broadly recognized by critics? Or museums? Or other artists? Originally, each of the participants was asked to nominate 10 artworks — the idea being that everyone would then rank each list to generate a master list that would be debated upon meeting.

Unsurprisingly, the system fell apart. It was impossible, some argued, to rank art. It was also impossible to select just 10. (Rosler, in fact, objected to the whole premise, though she brought her own list to the discussion in the end.) And yet, to everyone's surprise, there was a significant amount of overlap: works by David Hammons, Dara Birnbaum, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Danh Vo, Cady Noland, Kara Walker, Mike Kelley, Barbara Kruger and Arthur Jafa were cited multiple times. Had the group, perhaps, stumbled upon some form of agreement? Did their selections reflect our values, priorities and a unified idea of what matters today? Did focusing on artworks, rather than artists, allow for a different framework?

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Naturally, when re-evaluating the canon of the last five decades, there were notable omissions. The group failed to name many artists who most certainly had an impact on how we view art today: Bigger names of recent Museum of Modern Art retrospectives, internationally acclaimed artists and high earners on the secondary market were largely excluded. Few paintings were singled out; land art was almost entirely absent, as were, to name just a few more categories, works on paper, sculpture, photography, fiber arts and outsider art.

It's important to emphasize that no consensus emerged from the meeting. Rather, this list of works is merely what has been culled from the conversation, each chosen because it appeared on a panelist's original submission of 10 (in two instances, two different works by the same artist were nominated, which were considered jointly). The below is not definitive, nor is it comprehensive. Had this meeting happened on a different day, with a different group, the results would have been different. Some pieces were debated heavily; others were fleetingly passed over, as if the group intuitively understood why they had been brought up; a few were spoken of with appreciation and wonder. What came out of the conversation was more of a sensibility than a declaration. This list — which is ordered chronologically, from oldest work to most recent — is who we circled around, who we defended, who we questioned, and who we, perhaps most of all, wish might be remembered. — *Thessaly La Force*

This conversation has been edited and condensed. The artwork summaries are by Zoë Lescaze.

1. Sturtevant, "Warhol Flowers," 1964-71

Known professionally by her surname, Elaine Sturtevant (b. Lakewood, Ohio, 1924; d. 2014) began "repeating" the works of other artists in 1964, more than a decade before Richard Prince photographed his first Marlboro ad and Sherrie Levine appropriated the images of Edward Weston. Her targets tended to be famous male painters (largely because the work of women was less broadly recognized). Over the course of her career, she imitated canvases by Frank Stella, James Rosenquist and Roy Lichtenstein, among others. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given his own puckish understanding of authorship and originality, Andy Warhol approved of Sturtevant's project and even lent her one of his "Flowers" screens. Other artists, including Claes Oldenburg, were unamused, and collectors largely shied away from purchasing the works. Gradually, however, the art world came around to understanding her conceptual reasons for copying canonical works: to skewer the grand modernist myths of creativity and the artist as lone genius. By focusing on Pop Art, itself a comment on mass production and the suspect nature of authenticity, Sturtevant was taking the genre to its full logical extension. Playful and subversive, somewhere between parody and homage, her efforts also echo the centuries-old tradition of young artists copying old masters.



Left: Marcel Broodthaers's "Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section Financière, à Vendre Pour Cause de Faillite" (1970-71).
 Right: "Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section des Figures" (1972) at Städtische Kunsthalle, Düsseldorf. Credit © Estate Marcel Broodthaers; photo by Maria Gilissen

2. Marcel Broodthaers, "Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles," 1968-72

In 1968, Marcel Broodthaers (b. Brussels, 1924; d. 1976) opened his nomadic museum, the "Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles," complete with a staff, wall labels, period rooms and slide carousels. His "Museum of Modern Art" existed in various locations, beginning with Broodthaers's Brussels home, where the artist filled the space with storage crates for people to use as seats and postcard reproductions of 19th-century paintings. He painted the words "musée" and "museum" on two windows facing the street. The museum, which gently mocked various curatorial and financial aspects of traditional institutions, grew from there, with sections identified as 17th century, folklore and cinema, among others. At one point, Broodthaers had a gold bar stamped with an eagle, which he intended to sell at twice its market value in order to raise money for the museum. Failing to find a buyer, he declared the museum bankrupt and put it up for sale. Nobody was interested enough to make a purchase, and in 1972, he erected a new section of his museum in an actual institution, the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf. There, he installed hundreds of works and everyday objects — from flags to beer bottles — depicting eagles, the symbol of his museum.

3. Hans Haacke, "MoMA Poll," 1970

In 1969, the Guerrilla Art Action Group, an art workers' coalition, called for the resignation of the Rockefellers from the board of the Museum of Modern Art, believing the family was involved in the manufacture of weapons (chemical gas and napalm) destined for Vietnam. A year later, Hans Haacke (b. Cologne, Germany, 1936) took the fight inside the museum. His seminal installation, "MoMA Poll," presented visitors with two transparent ballot boxes, a ballot and a sign that posed a question about the upcoming gubernatorial race: "Would the fact that Governor Rockefeller has not denounced President Nixon's Indochina Policy be a reason for you not to vote for him in November?" (By the time the exhibition closed, roughly twice as many participants had answered "yes" as "no.") MoMA did not censor the work, but not all institutions were as tolerant. In 1971, just three weeks before it was set to open, the Guggenheim Museum canceled what would have been the German artist's first major international solo show when he wouldn't remove three provocative works. The same year, Cologne's Wallraf-Richartz Museum refused to exhibit "Manet-Projekt '74," which examined the provenance of an Édouard Manet painting donated to that museum by a Nazi sympathizer.

Thessaly La Force: There's one work here that really looks at the institution of the museum. Rirkrit, you listed Marcel Broodthaers's piece.

Rirkrit Tiravanija: That's the beginning of breaking — at least for me — the institution. The beginning, for me, in Western art, to question that kind of accumulation of knowledge. I like the Hans Haacke that's also on this list. Definitely on my list, but I didn't put it down.

Martha Rosler: I put it down. Hans showed the audience that it was part of a system. By collecting their opinions and information about who they were, he was able to construct a picture. I thought that it was transformative and riveting for anyone who was interested in thinking about who the art world was. Also because it was totally data driven and it wasn't aesthetic. It was the revolutionary idea that the art world itself was not outside the question of: Who are we? It gave a lot of space for people to think systematically about things the art world had relentlessly refused to recognize were systematic issues.

4. Philip Guston, "Untitled (Poor Richard)," 1971

Richard Nixon was up for re-election in 1971 when Philip Guston (b. Montreal, 1913; d. 1980) created an astounding, little-known series of nearly 80 cartoons depicting the president's rise to office and destructive tenure. In Guston's spindly line drawings, we see Nixon, portrayed with a phallic nose and testicular cheeks, swimming on Key Biscayne and drafting foreign policy in China with caricatured politicians, including Henry Kissinger as a pair of glasses; the president's pet dog, Checkers, also makes cameos. Guston captures Nixon's bitterness and insincerity while crafting a poignant meditation on the abuse of power. Despite its enduring relevance, the series languished in Guston's studio for more than 20 years following the artist's death in 1980; it was finally exhibited and published in 2001. The drawings were shown most recently in 2017 at Hauser & Wirth in London.

TLF: Back to my larger question: What do we mean by "contemporary"? Does anyone want to take a stab at that?

RT: I think Philip Guston's series of Nixon drawings became completely contemporary because it's —

Torey Thornton: A mirror of sorts.

RT: It's like talking about what we're looking at today.

TLF: Well, that's a question I had, too. Do some works of art have the capacity to change over time? Do some get stuck in amber and remain a mirror of that particular moment? What you're describing is a current event changing the meaning of Guston's paintings and drawings.

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Kelly Taxter: I think that absolutely happens.

MR: It's all about the institution. When you mentioned the Guston piece, which is great, I was thinking, "Yeah, but there's at least two videotapes that were about the same exact thing." What about "Television Delivers People" [a 1973 short film by Richard Serra and Carlota Schoolman]? I'm also thinking of "Four More Years" [a documentary about the 1972 Republican

National Convention] by TVTV, which was about Nixon, and "The Eternal Frame" [a 1975 satirical re-creation of the John F. Kennedy assassination by Ant Farm and T.R. Uthco], about the Kennedys.

TLF: There aren't that many paintings on the lists.

KT: No. Wow. I didn't realize that until two days later. I love painting, it's just not here.

TLF: Is painting not — Torey, you're a painter — contemporary?

TT: It's old. I don't know. I tried to look at what types of painting happened and then see who started it.

RT: I put Guston on my list.

David Breslin: On my longer list, I had Gerhard Richter's Baader-Meinhof cycle [a series of paintings titled "October 18, 1977," made by Richter in 1988, based on photographs of members of the Red Army Faction, a German left-wing militant group that carried out bombings, kidnappings and assassinations throughout the 1970s]. It speaks to the history of countercultural formation. How, if one decides not to peaceably demonstrate, what the alternatives are. How, in many ways, some of those things could only be recorded or thought about a decade-plus later. So, how can certain moments of participatory action be thought about in their time, and then also in a deferred moment?

KT: I thought of all the women painters. I thought of Jacqueline Humphries, Charline von Heyl, Amy Sillman, Laura Owens. Women taking up the very difficult task of abstraction and bringing some meaning to it. That, to me, feels like important terrain women have staked out in a really serious way. Maybe one or two of those people deserve to be on this list, but somehow I didn't put them on.

DB: It's that problem of a body of work versus the individual.

KT: But am I going to pick one painting of Charline's? I can't. I just saw that show at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., and every painting in the last 10 years is good. Is one better than the other? It's this kind of practice and this discourse around abstraction — and what women are doing with it — that I think is the key.

5. Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro and the CalArts Feminist Art Program, “Womanhouse,” 1972

“Womanhouse” existed for just one month, and few material traces of the groundbreaking art project — room-size installations in a derelict Hollywood mansion — survive. The collaborative project, conceived by the art historian Paula Harper and led by Judy Chicago (b. Chicago, 1939) and Miriam Schapiro (b. Toronto, 1923; d. 2015), brought together students and artists who put on some of the earliest feminist performances and produced painting, craft and sculpture in one radical context. Working brutally long hours without running water or heat, the artists and

students renovated the dilapidated building to house numerous installations and showcase six performances. Chicago’s “Menstruation Bathroom” confronted visitors with a wastebasket overflowing with tampons painted to look as if soaked with blood. Faith Wilding crocheted a large weblike shelter for “Womb Room” — somewhere between a cocoon and a yurt — out of grasses, branches and weeds. Taken as a whole, the works created a new paradigm for female artists interested in women’s collective history and their relationships to domesticity, sex and gender.

TLF: I think what’s interesting is that everything here is strictly art. No one threw a curveball.

KT: Is “Womanhouse” strictly art? I don’t know.

MR: What is it, if not art?

KT: Well, in the way that it existed. It came out of an art school. It was ephemeral. It was a location that came and went.

MR: It was an exhibition space. It became a collective installation.

KT: But then it went away, and, until recently, there was very little documentation available ... I think it’s art. I put it there. It’s certainly institutionalized.

6. Lynda Benglis, Artforum advertisement, 1974

Lynda Benglis (b. Lake Charles, La., 1941) wanted the 1974 profile Artforum was writing about her to be accompanied by a nude self-portrait. John Coplans, the editor in chief at the time, refused. Undaunted, Benglis persuaded her New York dealer, Paula Cooper, to take out a two-page ad in the magazine (Benglis paid for it). Readers opened the November issue of Artforum and saw a sun-tanned Benglis striking a pose, hip cocked, staring down at the viewer through pointy, white-framed sunglasses. She wears nothing else and holds an enormous dildo between her legs. The image caused bedlam. Five editors — Rosalind Krauss, Max Kozloff, Lawrence Alloway, Joseph Masheck and Annette Michelson — wrote a scathing letter to the magazine condemning the ad as a “shabby mockery of the aims of [women’s liberation].” The critic Robert Rosenblum wrote a letter to the magazine congratulating Benglis for exposing the prudishness

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of people who considered themselves arbiters of avant-garde taste: “Let’s give three dildos and a Pandora’s Box to Ms. Benglis, who finally brought out of the closet the Sons and Daughters of the Founding Fathers of the Artforum Committee of Public Decency and Ladies Etiquette.” The ad became an iconic image of resistance to the sexism and double standards that continue to pervade the art world.

DB: I’m surprised no one included Cindy Sherman. [Between 1977 and 1980, Sherman made a series of black-and-white photographs of herself posing in various stereotypical female roles, titled “Untitled Film Stills.”]

KT: I had such a hard time with that. It was one of those things that I was like, “This is going to be on other peoples’ lists. It’s so obvious, I’m not going to put it down.”

TLF: No one did.

RT: Well, I have Lynda Benglis’s Artforum ad, which has a relation to photography later on.

MR: I thought that was really good.

KT: I wanted to put Sherrie Levine’s “After Walker Evans” [in 1981, Levine exhibited reproductions of Depression-era photographs by Walker Evans that she rephotographed, questioning the value of authenticity], but didn’t because ... I don’t why. I ran out of room in the ‘80s.

7. Gordon Matta-Clark, “Splitting,” 1974

Gordon Matta-Clark (b. New York City, 1943; d. 1978) trained as an architect at Cornell University. By the 1970s, he was working as an artist, cutting chunks out of vacant properties, documenting the voids and exhibiting the amputated bits of architecture. Abandoned buildings were easy to find at the time — New York City was economically depressed and crime-ridden. Matta-Clark was looking for a new site when the art dealer Holly Solomon offered him a house she owned in suburban New Jersey that was slated for demolition. “Splitting” (1974) was one of Matta-Clark’s first monumental works. With the help of the craftsman Manfred Hecht, among other assistants, Matta-Clark sliced the whole thing in two with a power saw, then jacked up one side of the structure while they beveled the cinder blocks beneath it before slowly lowering it back down. The house cleaved perfectly, leaving a slender central gap through which the sunlight could enter the rooms. The piece was demolished three months later to make way for new apartments. “It was always exciting working with Gordon,” Hecht once said. “There was always a good chance of getting killed.”

TLF: Why is there no land art?

RT: I have Gordon Matta-Clark.

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MR: Is that land art? “Spiral Jetty” [the giant coil of mud, salt and basalt constructed in 1970 at Rozel Point, Utah, by the American sculptor Robert Smithson] is land art.

TT: That’s crazy! The jetty 100 percent has to be on my list.

KT: “The Lightning Field” [a 1977 work by the American sculptor Walter De Maria comprising 400 stainless steel poles staked in the New Mexico desert], “Roden Crater” [the American light artist James Turrell’s still-in-progress naked-eye observatory in Northern Arizona].

TT: I thought, “Who can see it? What does ‘influence’ mean, what does it mean to be influenced through seeing something on a screen?” I was thinking, “Do I list what I’ve seen versus what I’ve obsessed over?” At that point, it’s all a reproduction or a sort of theatrical representation.

MR: Totally.

TT: I put Michael Asher’s show in the Santa Monica Museum [No. 19, see below] but with something like that — once it’s gone, it’s reproduction only. You can’t visit it, it doesn’t move somewhere else.

TLF: Are the questions that the land artists were asking — are they no longer questions we’re asking today?

TT: There’s no more land.

MR: It’s a really interesting question. It’s mainly that, because of the move to the cities, we’ve become urban-obsessed. The pastoral question — which also applies to the cities, though we’re not that aware of it — has receded. But am I wrong that the land-art stuff was also in Europe? There were Dutch artists and English artists.

RT: Yeah, there were. Still are.

MR: Land art was international in an interesting way, which coincided with the Blue Marble [an image taken of Earth in 1972 by the crew of Apollo 17].

TLF: The Whole Earth Catalog.

MR: Sure. The idea of the whole earth as an entity made up of actual stuff rather than a social space.

RT: Maybe it also has to do with this idea of property and wealth, too. The value of land and what it’s used for has changed. It used to be you could just go out in Montana and probably —

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MR: Bury some Cadillacs.

RT: — dig a big hole. I mean, Michael Heizer still does stuff, but it's only interior now. He's just doing big rocks inside a space. Then again, that's why Smithson is interesting, because it's almost like the non-site now [Smithson used the term "non-site" to describe works that were presented outside their original context, such as rocks from a New Jersey quarry exhibited in a gallery alongside photos or maps of the site where they came from].

TLF: Then why did you include Gordon Matta-Clark?

RT: There are many references for me, but I feel like "Splitting" hits all the other things that I'm thinking about. With "Splitting," it's like a comic ending. Also, the idea of the house divided and what's happening with domesticity — people aren't able to sit together at Thanksgiving anymore.

8. Jenny Holzer, "Truisms," 1977-79

Jenny Holzer (b. Gallipolis, Ohio, 1950) was 25 years old when she began compiling her "Truisms," more than 250 cryptic maxims, terse commands and shrewd observations. Culled from world literature and philosophy, some of the one-liners are judgmental ("Any surplus is immoral"), others bleak ("Ideals are replaced by conventional goals at a certain age"), and a few echo the half-baked platitudes found in fortune cookies ("You must have one grand passion"). The most resonant are the political ones, none more so than "Abuse of power comes as no surprise." After printing them as posters, which she pasted among real advertisements throughout downtown Manhattan, Holzer reproduced them on objects, including baseball caps, T-shirts and condoms. She projected them on the enormous Spectacolor LED board in Times Square in 1982, with smaller scrolling signs to evoke the digital clocks and screens through which we are continuously fed information (and told what to think) in urban environments. Holzer continues to use the "Truisms" today, incorporating them into electronic signs, benches, footstools and T-shirts.

DB: Thessaly, when you asked earlier if Trump was in the room, that's why I went to Jenny Holzer. In their original iterations, "Truisms" were these kind of street posters that people were marking up —

MR: But they were never not art-world things.

DB: I agree. They came out of the Whitney Independent Study Program. But I think this is where the work takes on such a different resonance now. The original intention behind them was that these codes are free-floating and, of course, unconscious. But I think now the idea that one is constantly assembling these truths, that it isn't a list of unconsciousness, is really alive in that work.

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MR: It's an interesting hypothesis. The reason I chose Barbara Kruger [No. 11, see below] instead was that I thought she did an interesting collision of fashion-world typography with this kind of punk street-postering. She actually enunciates things people might cleverly say but would never say in the art world: "Your gaze hits the side of my face." Or all kinds of feminist stuff: "You construct intricate rituals which allow you to touch the skin of other men." Who says stuff like that? Who expects to be rewarded by capitalism for saying things they don't want to hear? When Barbara joined a high-profile gallery, it was a change in strategy just when the market recaptured all that dissonant stuff that they had no idea what to do with. Finally the market figured it out. Just let the artist do it, and we'll say it's art and it's O.K.



A clip from the video piece, in which Birnbaum re-edited excerpts from the 1970s series "Wonder Woman." Credit/Credit/Courtesy of the artist, Electronic Arts Intermix, New York and Marian Goodman Gallery

9. Dara Birnbaum, "Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman," 1978-79

In an age of online piracy, supercuts, remixes, mash-ups and memes that flare up and fizzle in minutes, it is difficult to appreciate how radical it was to assemble art out of stolen TV clips 40 years ago. To create her early masterpiece "Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman," Dara Birnbaum (b. New York City, 1946) had to lay her hands on the reels of the 1970s show "Wonder Woman" and re-edit them to tell a different story. The piece opens with a looped explosion before we see the actor Lynda Carter twirl and transform from a meek secretary into a superhero. There is violence, Birnbaum suggests, in requiring women to be either demure office girls or scantily clad Amazons. Although Wonder Woman had been heralded as a feminist role model, Birnbaum didn't buy it. "I wouldn't call that liberation," she told ARTnews last year. "How dare you confront me with this supposedly super-powered image of a woman who is stronger than I am and can also save mankind? I can't do that, and I won't."

MR: Dara figured out how to get her work into the art world, as opposed to the video people I named earlier, who weren't interested in that. In the '70s, the dealer world couldn't figure out what to do with the heterogeneity of works.

10. David Hammons, "Bliz-aard Ball Sale," 1983; "How Ya Like Me Now?," 1988

David Hammons (b. Springfield, Ill., 1943) studied art in Los Angeles at Otis Art Institute (now Otis College of Art and Design) under Charles White, the painter acclaimed for his depictions of African-American life. Hammons absorbed White's sense of social justice but gravitated toward

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radical, unorthodox materials. Early on, he sought to challenge the institutionalization of art, often creating ephemeral installations, such as “Bliz-aard Ball Sale,” in which he sold snowballs of varying sizes alongside New York street vendors and the homeless to critique conspicuous consumption and hollow notions of value. (The ethos of the piece continues to inform his engagement with the art world; he works without exclusive gallery representation and rarely gives interviews.) In 1988, he painted the Rev. Jesse Jackson, the African-American civil rights activist who twice ran for the Democratic presidential nomination, as a blond-haired, blue-eyed white man, a comment on how skin color unfairly and arbitrarily determines opportunities. A group of young African-American men who happened to walk by as the work was being installed the following year in downtown Washington, D.C., perceived the painting as racist and smashed it with a sledgehammer. (Jackson understood the artist’s intentions.) The destruction — and the collective pain it represented — became part of the piece. Now, when Hammons exhibits the painting, he installs a semicircle of sledgehammers around it.

KT: The “Bliz-aard Ball Sale” was a performance documented with photographs. It falls into the legacy of performative ephemeral works that begins with Judson Dance Theater [a 1960s dance collective that included Robert Dunn, Yvonne Rainer and Trisha Brown, among many others] and the Happenings [a term coined by the artist Allan Kaprow to describe loosely defined performance art pieces or events that often involved the audience] of the 1960s. Why he stays relevant, to some extent, is because so much of his work happens somehow in secret — his studio is the street. You can talk around what he’s doing for a very long time without coming up with a finite answer. He does not follow a straight line and can be contradictory — he defies expectations.

DB: So much of the work begins from a place of opposition, whether materially or at the site in which it’s made or performed. I chose “How Ya Like Me Now?” mostly for the ability to misread so much about the work. In some ways, it’s a point of danger. The fact that a group of people took sledgehammers to it — why weren’t certain people taking Jackson seriously as a candidate? Confusing the boundaries between what’s expected and what isn’t makes Hammons always relevant.

MR: I think that work is really problematic, though. It defines why we’re talking about the art world. That work was offensive, and yet we understand how to read something against its apparent presentation. It speaks to us as educated people, and that’s one of the reasons we defend it. I love Hammons’s work. But I always felt really strange about that piece, because it didn’t take into consideration that the community might be offended. Or, he didn’t give a damn. Which, you know, he’s an artist. So it’s the art world speaking to the art world about this work. But I also wonder about its problematic appearance just at that moment when the public was turning against public art in general, and in particular mysterious public art, which usually meant abstract. But this was worse — it was not only laughing at the public, it was laughing at a specific public, even if that wasn’t his intention.

11. Barbara Kruger, “Untitled (When I Hear the Word Culture, I Take Out My Checkbook),” 1985; “Untitled (I Shop Therefore I Am),” 1987

Barbara Kruger (b. Newark, 1945) briefly studied at the Parsons School of Design in 1965, but her real education was in the world of magazines. She dropped out early on to work at *Mademoiselle* as an assistant to the art director, rapidly became head designer, and then switched to freelance, conceiving layouts for *House & Garden*, *Vogue* and *Aperture*, among other publications. Through these projects, Kruger learned how to command the viewer’s attention and manipulate desire. A close reader of Roland Barthes and other theorists focused on media, culture and the power of images, Kruger brought her professional life and philosophical leanings together in the early 1980s with her iconic works: agitprop images of terse, satirical slogans in white or black Futura Bold Oblique type on close-cropped images primarily from old magazines. They confront gender roles and sexuality, corporate greed and religion. Several of the most well-known indict consumerism, including 1985’s “Untitled (When I Hear the Word Culture, I Take Out My Checkbook),” in which the words slash across the face of a ventriloquist’s dummy, and “Untitled (I Shop Therefore I Am),” from 1987.



Left: Nan Goldin’s “C.Z. and Max on the Beach, Truro, Massachusetts” (1976), from “The Ballad of Sexual Dependency”.
 Right: a poster for “The Ballad of Sexual Dependency” in New York (1983).
 Credit© Nan Goldin, courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery

12. Nan Goldin, “The Ballad of Sexual Dependency,” 1985-86

When Nan Goldin (b. Washington, D.C., 1953) moved to New York City in 1979, she rented a loft on the Bowery and embarked on what would prove to be one of the most influential photographic series of the century. Her subjects were herself, her lovers and her friends — drag queens, fellow drug addicts, runaways and artists. We see them fight, make up, have sex, apply makeup, shoot up and nod off in the several hundred candid images comprising “The Ballad of Sexual Dependency.” Goldin first shared the pictures as slide shows in downtown clubs and bars, partly out of necessity (she lacked a darkroom to print but could get slides processed at a drugstore), partly because these haunts were part of the world of the photographs. Cult heroes and neighborhood stars, including Keith Haring, Andy Warhol and John Waters, appear in some frames, but the focus is on Goldin’s intimates, including her glowering boyfriend Brian, who beat her nearly blind one night: “Nan One Month After Being Battered” (1984) is one of the most haunting portraits in the series. Goldin edited and reconfigured the series repeatedly, eventually titling it after a song in Bertolt Brecht’s “Threepenny Opera” and setting it to a playlist that has

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included James Brown, the Velvet Underground, Dionne Warwick, opera, rock and blues. A version appeared in the 1985 Whitney Biennial and the Aperture Foundation published a selection of 127 images as a book in 1986, which includes some of Goldin's fiercely honest writing. A decade later, most of the people pictured in the book had died of AIDS or drug overdoses. In a recent exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art, Goldin concluded the sequence of nearly 700 photographs with a nod to these losses — a snapshot of two graffiti skeletons having sex.

KT: Nan Goldin continues to have a very prominent role in the discourse, whether that's about the art itself, like what she's making, or the problems that we're dealing with in the culture of the art world and beyond. That body of work made visible a whole realm, a whole social structure, a whole group of people who were invisible in a lot of ways. It talked about the AIDS crisis. It talked about queer culture. It talked about her abuse. It was like a confessional, laying bare things that are still really relevant issues.

MR: It has the word "sexual" in it. Do you want to talk about that a little bit?

KT: It has a lot to do with her relationship to sex and love, and her friends' relationships to sex and love, and the unraveling of it. There's a lot of dirt and degradation in it, and yet there is a lot of celebration in it, too, I think: being able to see what one might see as dirty or wrong as right. I saw it when I was a kid. Her prints are super gorgeous, but sometimes they are just snapshots in the freedom of the work itself, the freedom that she took with it.

13. Cady Noland, "Oozewald," 1989; "The Big Slide," 1989

The work of Cady Noland (b. Washington, D.C., 1956) probes the dark corners of American culture. Many of her installations, including "The Big Slide" (1989), involve rails or barriers — allusions to the limits on access, opportunity and freedom in this country. (To enter Noland's debut exhibition at New York's White Columns Gallery in 1988, visitors had to duck under a metal pole blocking the door.) "Oozewald" features a silk-screened version of the famed photograph of President John F. Kennedy's assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, as he's being shot and killed by the nightclub owner Jack Ruby. Eight oversize bullet holes perforate the surface — an American flag is wadded up inside one, where his mouth would be. Noland disappeared from the art world around 2000, a move that has become as much a part of her oeuvre as her work. While she can't stop galleries and museums from displaying old pieces, disclaimers noting the artist's lack of consent often appear on the exhibition walls. In recent years, Noland has disowned some works entirely, roiling the market. She has become known as the art world's boogeyman, but she might be its conscience.

TT: I started having this thing happen where years later, after thinking about an artist a lot, I started seeing how they've influenced other artists. I realized Cady Noland is so everywhere in a weird way. Particularly within installation art and sculpture. I've seen a lot of work recently that feels like it's really leaning on something she's made. Sometimes, something is made in a certain time and then it loops back, and it's relevant

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again. There's this overarching criticism or analysis of Americana in her work. Her name came back in, and it's around and around and around.

MR: Isn't that the way the art world always works? Everyone hated Warhol. Even after he was famous, the art world said, "No." It's why we got minimalism.

KT: I think Cady occupies a place of resistance, too. I think Cady's character — both her resistant character and approach to her work — is part of the mythmaking of her practice. She's an elusive Hammons-type figure. She's not speaking on the work. Everybody else is.

DB: So much of the work has to do with conspiracy and paranoia, which feels way too "right now." These things that have this immediate conjuring, like the Oswald figure being shot, or with Clinton and the Whitewater stuff that she does, with just the quick image of the figure and a line from a newspaper article. It's her ability to distill the information, to get to that paranoid tendency in American culture. To your point, Kelly, when she's come up, it's been through lawsuits.

MR: Really?

DB: Yeah, she's suing people for how her work is treated. This is a total guess on my part, but even if you think about that as being a mode of communication — that if she's going to function publicly, it's going to be through the legal system — you see, even now, I'm making a conspiracy out of it!

KT: You're paranoid!

DB: I think we all are.

14. Jeff Koons, "Ilona on Top (Rosa Background)," 1990

Jeff Koons (b. York, Pa., 1955) rose to prominence in the mid-1980s making conceptual sculpture from vacuum cleaners and basketballs. When the Whitney Museum of American Art invited him to create a billboard-size work for an exhibition called "Image World," the postmodern provocateur submitted a blown-up, grainy photograph, printed on canvas, of himself and Ilona Staller — the Hungarian-Italian porn star he would later marry — in campy coital ecstasy, advertising an unmade film. The series that followed, "Made in Heaven," shocked viewers when it debuted at the Venice Biennale in 1990. With descriptive titles such as "Ilona's Asshole" and "Dirty Ejaculation," the photo-realistic paintings portrayed the couple in every conceivable position. They appeared at a moment when the country was divided over propriety in art, with religious and conservative forces rallying against sexually explicit work. Koons has claimed it is an exploration of freedom, an examination of the origins of shame, a celebration of the act of procreation, even a vision of transcendence. "I'm not interested in pornography," he said in

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1990. "I'm interested in the spiritual." Koons destroyed portions of the series during a protracted custody battle with Staller for their son, Ludwig.

TLF: Money defines the art world, too. There are certain artists who reflect that but who no one named.

KT: I thought it was super interesting that we all didn't go to that. There are many different art worlds. The one you're referring to is one of them.

MR: What's your argument for keeping more commercial artists off the list?

KT: In my opinion, because art is so much more than that. The artists who are at that level are such a small percentage of the art being made. I didn't grow up revering that work.

TT: I think there are a lot of younger artists now who are subliminally or quietly trying to find a way in between, of being like, "Oh, I'm really interested in the production of this type of studio, but I also want to be more rigorous and hands-on with my practice." Or maybe they're secretly obsessed with Jeff Koons, but it's not something they would ever say for a New York Times interview. I'm not going to name any names, but I've heard it enough to where I'm like, "This is for real."

MR: Could you name one or two artists you're talking about?

TLF: Name names.

TT: Is Damien Hirst an example?

TLF: Damien Hirst, Takashi Murakami ...

KT: Yeah, we left off Jeff Koons. We left off Damien Hirst.

MR: We did.

TT: I brought Jeff.

KT: I think they're present. I would like the conversation to be about some other artists. I could have put in Damien.

MR: A more legitimate artist, in my opinion, than Jeff Koons. But that's just me, sorry.

TLF: Well, who would you want to talk about, then, if we could?

KT: I would have picked "Equilibrium" [a series of works in the mid-1980s that included basketballs suspended in tanks of distilled water], if it were Jeff Koons. If it were Damien

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Hirst, I would have put “The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living” [a 1991 piece consisting of a tiger shark preserved in formaldehyde in a vitrine]. I think it’s a really good piece that influenced artists on this list, as did “Equilibrium.” Maybe they should be on the list. Maybe we’re being disingenuous. I’m totally fine with that. They’re on my long list. I just took them off. I wanted to talk about some other people for a change, and some more women, frankly.

TT: I hear you. I agree with that.

15. Mike Kelley, “The Arenas,” 1990

After dabbling in Detroit’s music scene as a teenager, Mike Kelley (b. Wayne, Mich., 1954; d. 2012) moved to Los Angeles to attend CalArts. In each of the 11 works of “The Arenas,” originally exhibited at Metro Pictures gallery in 1990, stuffed animals and other toys sit alone or in eerie groups on dingy blankets. In one, a handcrafted bunny with a scraggly pompom tail is positioned on a crocheted afghan before an open thesaurus, appearing to be studying the entry on “volition,” as two cans of Raid threaten from a distance. In another, a stuffed leopard is splayed atop an ominous lump beneath a black-and-orange coverlet. The works summon up themes of perversion, shame, dread, vulnerability and pathos. Kelley used toys because he felt they revealed far more about how adults see children — or want to see them — than they do about kids. “The stuffed animal is a pseudo-child,” a “cutified, sexless being that represents the adult’s perfect model of a child — a neutered pet,” he once wrote. But the toys in Kelley’s arrangements are faded, soiled, grubby and worn in sordid ways.

KT: I think that a lot of Mike Kelley’s work is about class but also about abuse and other things that kids, at least when they’re teenagers, begin articulating and thinking about. That series of work was so abject. There are layers of revelation in it that were pivotal for me personally, and then as I got older, I realized it had a bigger impact. And I see it in the work of some of the younger artists today.

16. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.),” 1991

Felix Gonzalez-Torres (b. Cuba, 1957; d. 1996) came to New York City in 1979. When he created “Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)” in 1991, he was mourning the loss of his lover, Ross Laycock, who had died of AIDS-related illness that year. The installation ideally comprises 175 pounds of candies, wrapped in bright cellophane, an approximation of the body weight of a healthy adult male. Viewers are free to take pieces from the pile, and over the course of the exhibition, the work deteriorates, just as Laycock’s body did. The candies, however, may or may not be routinely replenished by the staff, evoking eternity and rebirth at the same time as they conjure mortality.

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DB: The work engages where we are today, this idea about the participatory and the experiential. Gonzalez-Torres also makes the point about responsibility, that an onus comes with this kind of taking. The idea, too, that it's referencing one person as the ideal body weight, that the participatory element is not just this generalized mass thing, that the referent is just one other person, I think is very profound.

RT: I was thinking about AIDS. I almost put the Act Up logo as an artifact. We should talk about works of art that are more than just art, addressing all those other conditions. I find it very beautiful in that way.

KT: That work, in a metaphorical sense, is a virus. It dissipates and goes into other people's bodies.

RT: I don't even know if the audience really understands. That's the thing. They are just taking candies.

TLF: I certainly just thought I was taking candies.

DB: There's also the idea of replenishment. He comes back the next day. The obligation to restore is so much different than the obligation to take. The person is surviving. The institution is refilling. You could go away one day and not know that this returns to its own form. This idea of who knows and who doesn't, I think, is important to it.

17. Catherine Opie, "Self-Portrait/Cutting," 1993

In her photograph "Self-Portrait/Cutting," Catherine Opie (b. Sandusky, Ohio, 1961) faces away from the viewer, confronting us with her bare back, on which a house — the kind a child might draw — and two stick figures in skirts have been carved. The figures hold hands, completing the idyllic domestic dream, which, at the time was just that — a dream — for lesbian couples. This work and others responded to the national firestorm surrounding "obscenity" in art. In 1989, Senators Alfonse D'Amato and Jesse Helms had denounced "Piss Christ," a photograph depicting a crucifix submerged in urine by Andres Serrano, which was part of a traveling exhibition that had received funding from the National Endowment for the Arts. A few weeks later, the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. opted to cancel a show featuring homoerotic and sadomasochistic photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe, whose exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania had also received federal funding. In 1990, the N.E.A. denied funding to four artists because of their explicit themes of frank sexuality, trauma or subjugation. (In 1998, the Supreme Court ruled that the N.E.A.'s statute was valid and did not result in discrimination against the artists, nor did it suppress their expression.) By creating and exhibiting these works when she did, Opie openly defied those looking to shame queer communities and censor their visibility in art. "She is an insider and an outsider," wrote the Times art critic Holland Cotter on the occasion of Opie's 2008 Guggenheim

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midcareer retrospective. “[Opie is] a documentarian and a provocateur; a classicist and a maverick; a trekker and a stay-at-home; a lesbian feminist mother who resists the gay mainstream; an American — birthplace: Sandusky, Ohio — who has serious arguments with her country and culture.”

DB: This question of intimacy — who’s trying to police what I do with my body and how I choose to constitute what a family is — all these issues are one, if we’re thinking about how some of these works resound now. These are still things that we are urgently dealing with. The presence of motherhood and parenting are profound in the work. The vulnerability of presenting oneself to one’s own camera like that, which I think is also incredible in Goldin’s work — the question of who is my world, and who do I want to be a part of it?

MR: In both their cases, it’s about *me and them*, which is a huge thing that women brought. With the AIDS crisis, there were a lot of works about “me” in the same way, but it was really a huge change for Cathy and Nan to be the subject.

KT: Also, with Nan, this idea of a community in some sense of collaboration. As opposed to a photographer taking a picture of you, you’re taking a picture *with* you.

18. Lutz Bacher, “Closed Circuit,” 1997-2000

Lutz Bacher (b. United States, 1943; d. 2019) is an anomaly in an age of easily searchable biographies and online profiles. The artist used a pseudonym, one that has obscured her original name. Few photos of her face exist. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that so many of Bacher’s works focus on questions of exposure, visibility and privacy. After Pat Hearn, the famed downtown art dealer who represented her, was diagnosed with liver cancer on January 22, 1997, Bacher installed a camera above Hearn’s desk, filming continuously for 10 months. We see Hearn sit, make phone calls, meet with artists; Hearn is featured in the frame less and less as her illness worsens. Bacher edited 1,200 hours of footage into 40 minutes of video stills upon the dealer’s death in 2000, forming an unusual window into the inner workings of a gallery, as well as an intimate record of an influential woman as she stares down death.

TLF: Here’s something that I’m wondering: Cady Noland, Lutz Bacher and Sturtevant are — elusive is one word, anonymous could be another — people. It’s interesting that they resonate in a time when there is so much celebrity.

KT: I don’t think Lutz was ever elusive.

MR: I don’t think so either.

TLF: Well, never really named.

MR: Pseudonymous.

KT: She had a name. It was Lutz.

TT: But there's only two images of her online versus a hundred of someone else. The pressure to be so present in order for the work to live properly is something I hear a lot.

MR: Look what happened when Jackson Pollock wound up in Life magazine. The Abstract Expressionists definitely didn't want to be turned into brands. More recently, curators started asking crazy things, like, "Put your picture up with your label." No thank you. The Times reporters now even have little pictures in their bios — everybody's been personalized because we don't remember that the work is supposed to stand for itself.

19. Michael Asher, "Michael Asher," Santa Monica Museum of Art, 2008

Michael Asher (b. Los Angeles, 1943; d. 2012) spent his career responding to each gallery or museum space with site-specific works that illuminated the architectural or abstract qualities of the venue. When the Santa Monica Museum of Art (now the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles) approached the conceptualist in 2001 to mount an exhibition, he tapped into the history of the institution, recreating the wood or metal skeletons of all of the temporary walls that had been built for the 38 previous exhibitions. The result was a labyrinth of studs that effectively collapsed time and space, bringing multiple chapters of the museum's history into the present. That work characterized his unique practice over more than 40 years: In 1970, Asher removed all the doors of an exhibition space at Pomona College in Claremont, Calif., to allow light, air and sound into the galleries, calling viewers' attention to the ways such places are usually closed off — both literally and metaphorically — from the outside world; for a 1991 show at Paris's Centre Pompidou, he searched all the books filed under "psychoanalysis" in the museum's library for abandoned paper fragments, including bookmarks; in 1999, he created a volume listing nearly all of the artworks that the Museum of Modern Art in New York had deaccessioned since its founding — privileged information rarely made public.

20. A.K. Burns and A.L. Steiner, "Community Action Center," 2010

"Community Action Center," a 69-minute erotic romp through the imaginations of artists A.K. Burns (b. Capitola, Calif., 1975) and A.L. Steiner (b. Miami, 1967) and their community of friends, is a celebration of queer sexuality as playful as it is political. We watch as a diverse, multigenerational cast engage in joyfully hedonistic acts of private and shared pleasure involving paint, egg yolks, carwashes and corn on the cob. Although the video opens with the cabaret star Justin Vivian Bond reading lines from Jack Smith's experimental film "Normal Love," there is otherwise little dialogue. Instead, the focus is on the dreamlike visuals — captured with an offhand intimacy on rented and borrowed cameras — and the visceral sensations they evoke. "Community Action Center" is the rare ribald work that doesn't refer to male desire or gratification, which is partly why Steiner and Burns, who are activists as well as artists, describe it as "socio-sexual." Radical politics needn't come at the cost of sensuality, however. The piece is meant to titillate.

KT: It's a really important work, too.

TLF: I haven't seen it.

KT: They spearheaded this project to essentially make porn, but it's much more than that, with all kinds of people from their queer community. It includes so many artists that we know and that are making work now, and very visible, but it was all about figuring out how to show their body, show their sexuality, share their body, share their sexuality, make light of it, make it serious, collaborate with musicians. It's a crazy document of a moment that opened up a conversation.



Danh Vo's "We the People" (detail) (2011-16).
CreditPhoto by Nils Klinger, taken at Kunsthalle Fridericianum in Kassel, Germany

21. Danh Vo, "We the People," 2010-14

Danh Vo (b. Vietnam, 1975) immigrated to Denmark with his family after the fall of Saigon in 1979. "We the People," a full-size copper replica of the Statue of Liberty, may be his most ambitious work. Fabricated in Shanghai, the colossal figure exists in roughly 250 pieces, dispersed throughout public and private collections around the world. It will never be assembled or exhibited as a whole. In its fragmented state, Vo's statue alludes to the hypocrisy and contradictions of Western foreign policy. A gift from France to the United States, dedicated in 1886, the original monument was billed as a celebration of freedom and democracy — values both nations proved willing to overlook when dealing with other countries. At the time of the dedication, France possessed colonies in Africa and Asia, including Vietnam, where a miniature version of the statue was installed on the roof of the Tháp Rùa temple (or Turtle Tower) in Hanoi. Later, the United States financially supported the French military in Vo's home country, waging war in the name of protecting democracy from Communism. By then, of course, the Statue of Liberty had welcomed millions of immigrants to the United States and had become a symbol of the American dream. In the wake of current violent crackdowns on immigration at the U.S.-Mexico border, Vo's fragmented icon has never felt more darkly apropos.

DB: I chose this because it totally takes away the masterpiece idea. It's the one statue, with many meanings embedded within it, but totally distributed. The sections are made in China, right?

RT: Yes.

DB: So it's also the idea that this object, which is synonymous with the United States, is now made in what will be the superpower of the future. It's signaling what other futures will be, and it gets back to this idea that "contemporary" is a total unknowingness. We don't know what the hell the "contemporary" is, and I think in some ways, these works affirm that that unknowingness is where we begin.

KT: That work had so much violence and anger in it. Anger is a big part of the work that's being made by artists now — everyone's feeling it — specifically the anger of a displaced person. This idea of what we've done as a country, all over the world.

22. Kara Walker, "A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby," 2014

Ever since 1994, when the 24-year-old Kara Walker (b. Stockton, Calif., 1969) first astounded audiences with cut-paper installations depicting plantation barbarism, she has plumbed this country's long history of racial violence. In 2014, Walker created "A Subtlety," a monumental polystyrene sphinx coated in white sugar. The piece dominated an enormous hall of the Domino Sugar refinery in Brooklyn, shortly before much of the factory was demolished for condominiums. In a reversal of her black-paper silhouettes of white slave owners, Walker gave the colossal white sculpture the features of a stereotypical black "mammy" in a kerchief, the sort of imagery used by molasses brands to market their product. Walker's sphinx also conjures up forced labor in ancient Egypt. "In my own life, in my own way of moving through the world, I have a hard time making a distinction between the past and the present," she has said. "Everything is kind of hitting me all at once."

MR: "A Subtlety" made lots of people furious because it was about the history of labor and sugar in a place that was already about to be gentrified. It was this gigantic, mammy-like, sphinxlike, female object, and then it had all these little melting children. "A Subtlety" is part of a very longstanding tradition that began in the Arab world that had to do with creating objects out of clay but also out of sugar. So it's the impacted value of extractive mining, but it's also the impacted value of the labor of slaves. And it's *also* on the site where wage slavery had occurred — sugar work was the worst. The Domino Sugar factory was once owned by the Havemeyers, and Henry Havemeyer was one of the main donors to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The sugar king was the art king. So it had all of these things — and then there's the idea of all these people taking selfies in front of it. It was extremely brilliant without having to say a thing.

TLF: Martha, you wrote to me in an email that you are against the idea of the game-changing masterpiece. I thought we should put that on the record.

MR: I'm happy to say that it makes no sense in a contemporary era to talk about a work in isolation, because as soon as a work is noticed, everybody then notices what the person did before or who was around them. Art is not made in isolation. This brings me

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to the “genius”: The masterwork and the genius go together. That was one of the first things women artists attacked. As much as we revere the work of Mike Kelley, he always

said that everything he did depended on what the feminists in L.A. had done before. What he meant by that, I believe, was that abjection and pain and abuse are things that are worth paying attention to in art. And that was something no man would have done at that point, except Paul McCarthy, maybe. The masterpiece idea is highly reductive.

KT: This brings up a good point about how there’s a responsibility to question this. Is that how it’s going to be?

TT: No, but listing a work that “defines the contemporary age” doesn’t necessarily mean it has to be a masterwork.

MR: Well, it could be a *bad* masterwork. You could say Dana Schutz [the painter of a controversial 2016 work based on a photograph of the mutilated body of Emmett Till, lynched, in his coffin]. But the questions of ownership go back to Sherrie Levine and the Walker Evans work. What’s ownership of an image? What’s reproduction of a photo? The culture wars of the ’80s all depended on photographs, whether it was “Piss Christ” or Robert Mapplethorpe’s work — and we’re still fighting these things. We don’t want to talk about them. Nobody here named Mapplethorpe — interesting.

KT: Thought about it.

MR: Nobody mentioned William Eggleston because we really hate photography in the art world. Nobody named Susan Meiselas. We always want photography to be something else, which is art, which is actually what you said about Cindy Sherman’s “Untitled Film Stills.” We know it’s not really photography. I’m always interested in the way art is always ready to kick photography out of the room unless called upon to say, “Yeah but this was really important for identity, formation or recognition.” It’s always thematic. It’s never formal.

23. Heji Shin, “Baby” (series), 2016

Birth is the subject of “Baby,” seven photographs by Heji Shin (b. Seoul, South Korea, 1976) that capture the moments after crowning. Shin illuminates some of the undeniably gory scenes with a scorching red light. Other pictures are barely lit at all, and the puckered faces of the almost-born emerge from menacing black shadows. While these photographs might remind us of our common humanity, they are hardly sentimental or celebratory — several are downright scary. This complexity is at the core of Shin’s practice, from pornographic photographs of chiseled men dressed as beefcake cops to colossal portraits of Kanye West that debuted shortly after the rapper’s inflammatory conversation with Donald Trump. (Two Kanye portraits and five of the “Babies” were in the 2019 Whitney Biennial.) At a time when political art is everywhere, with young artists telling predictably left-leaning audiences exactly what they want to hear, Shin is an outlier. Her photographs do not answer any questions. Instead, they ask a lot of their audiences.

TT: I was obsessed with the “Baby” photos. I mean, I wanted one myself. But then my partner was like, “Well what’s the ... ” Like, “I’ve seen pregnancy, what’s the difference?”

KT: “A kid could do that?”

TT: Or not quite that, but: I understand it aesthetically and I’m interested in the photo, but what’s it saying and what’s it doing?

KT: No one wants to look at that work. No one wants to look at that act. No one wants to talk about motherhood. No one wants to look at women like that. No one wants to see a vagina like that. No one wants to see a human being that looks like that. I think there’s something gross and revolting and very brave about that work.

24. Cameron Rowland, “New York State Unified Court System,” 2016

In a much-discussed 2016 exhibition titled “91020000” at the New York nonprofit Artists Space, Cameron Rowland (b. Philadelphia, 1988) exhibited furniture and other objects fabricated by inmates often working for less than a dollar an hour, as well as heavily footnoted research on the mechanics of mass incarceration. The New York State Department of Corrections sells these commodities under the brand name Corcraft to government agencies and nonprofit organizations. Artists Space was eligible to acquire the benches, manhole cover rings, firefighter uniforms, metal bars and other objects comprising the exhibition, which Rowland rents to collectors and museums instead of selling them. The spare installation recalled those of the Minimalist sculptor Donald Judd, while Rowland’s politically driven approach to Conceptualism and focus on racial injustice garnered comparisons to Kara Walker and the American light and text artist Glenn Ligon. The New Yorker traced Rowland’s artistic ancestry back to “Duchamp, by way of Angela Davis.”

TT: Cameron Rowland’s work is further out on the edges of what’s considered art. You apply to get a catalog in order to purchase prison goods. A lot of the work he makes, I don’t even understand how. I still have a lot of questions, and we’re friends. There’s this unraveling of a new sort of sideways information that I find really interesting and confusing at the same time.

25. Arthur Jafa, “Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death,” 2016

At a moment when the volume of images — from pictures of suffering to bathroom selfies — threatens to preclude empathy, Arthur Jafa’s seven-and-a-half-minute video, “Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death,” is a profoundly moving antidote to indifference. Through film clips, TV broadcasts, music videos and personal footage, Jafa (b. Tupelo, Miss., 1960) portrays

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the triumphs and terrors of black life in America. We see the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Miles Davis; Cam Newton racing to score a touchdown; a Texas police officer slamming a teenage girl onto the ground; Barack Obama singing “Amazing Grace” at the Charleston church where nine people were murdered by a white supremacist; and Jafa’s daughter on her wedding day. The film made its official art-world debut at Gavin Brown’s Enterprise in Harlem just days after Donald Trump won the presidential election in November 2016. Jafa set the images to Kanye West’s gospel-inflected anthem “Ultralight Beam.”

TLF: Jafa strikes me as more popular, in a sense, if I can use that word. He crosses over into other worlds.

TT: This goes back to David Hammons because — I threw away my [Adidas Yeezy] sneakers Kanye made. [West alienated many of his fans when he made a visit to the White House in October 2018, offering his verbal support of President Trump and wearing a Make America Great Again baseball cap.]

KT: How do you justify that work, then? You still put Arthur Jafa on the list, which is what I’m really curious about.

TT: Because it’s not *my* list. In my head, I thought, “This is contemporary.” And I think that a good artwork can be problematic. Art is one of the few things that can transcend or complicate a problem. “Love Is the Message” can still be a very good artwork and I can disagree with Arthur Jafa’s approach to it. No one else has done that. No one else in history has produced a video like that. It’s still moving things forward, even if they’re moving back a little bit.

DB: I think Arthur Jafa is coming out of a lineage of collage and photomontage artists — from Martha Rosler, sitting right here, to early artists coming out of the Russian avant-garde — this idea that you don’t have to agree or adhere to a singular point of view. Each image or piece of music doesn’t mean something on its own; it’s in the juxtaposition where meaning comes together. What’s so interesting about the piece is how seductive it can be, and also, in some ways, it begs for us to resist that seductive quality because of the violence of some of the imagery.