

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Thessaly La Force, "The 25 Works of Art That Define the Contemporary Age," *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*, July, 2019



## 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.

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 Thornton** — 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?

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

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The roundtable panelists, from left to right: the Whitney Museum of American Art's David Breslin, the artist Martha Rosler, the artist Torey Thornton, 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

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.*

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.

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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.

**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.

**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.

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.

**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.

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**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.

**TLF:** Why is there no land art?

**RT:** I have Gordon Matta-Clark.

**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].

**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 —

**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.