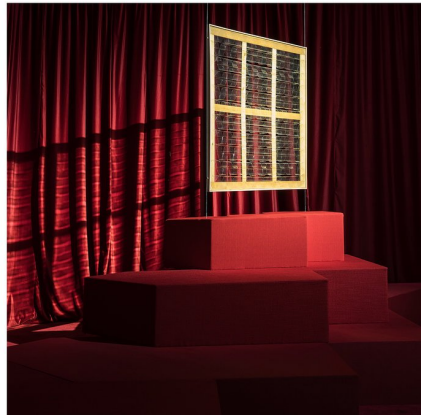


# The New York Times

## The Best Art of 2017

By ROBERTA SMITH, HOLLAND COTTER and JASON FARAGO

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The most gripping and engaging art of the year included wild actions, unusual wearables and unexpected materials (like chocolate). Credit Clockwise from top left: 2017 Estate of Ad Reinhardt/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York/London; Ryan McNamara; Joshua Bright for The New York Times; Delfino Sisto Legnani and Marco Cappelletti, Fondazione Prada; Mark Wickens for The New York Times; Estate of Belkis Ayón, via Landau Traveling Exhibitions

*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.*

## 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.

Credit 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.

Credit 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.

Credit 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. Baqsami’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. Credit 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.