

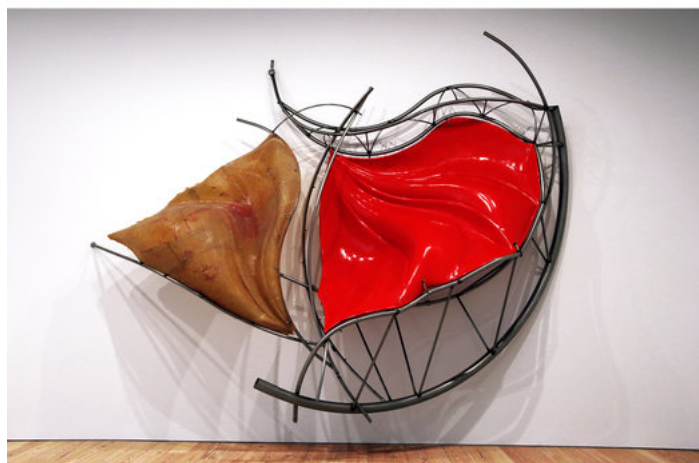
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# The Best in Art of 2015

By [HOLLAND COTTER](#) and [ROBERTA SMITH](#) DEC. 9, 2015

The co-chief art critics for The New York Times on the most notable themes of the year.

Photo



Credit Clockwise from top left: Stephanie Diani for The New York Times; 2015 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), Ike Edeani for The New York Times; Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times; 2015 Frank Stella/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

## Holland Cotter's Top 10

Some Gain and Pain, Move and Momentum

The years fly. As the art world grows larger, art can look smaller. But a few impressions from the past season remain strong.

Photo



The artist Duke Riley's ice skating rink along the Malecón, part of the 12th Havana Biennial. Credit Lisette Poole for The New York Times

## □ 2015 Havana Biennial

[This show](#) coincided with prospects of a rapprochement between Cuba and the United States, and mixed-signals politics played a role in the event itself. When it opened in June, the Cuban-born artist Tania Bruguera was under the equivalent of house arrest in Havana for trying to do a performance piece that invited people to speak freely at an open microphone in Revolution Square. During the Biennial itself, another Cuban-born artist, María Magdalena Campos-Pons, working with a group of her American students, quietly presented Cubans with a similar opportunity to express themselves by writing in notebooks on questions about current events, including whether art could contribute to cross-cultural conversations. The focused and passionate responses of the writers said yes. There was no government interference.

[Read the full review.](#)

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Photo





David Salle's "Splinter Man," on a background print of Donald Moffett's "He Kills Me," part of the first exhibition at the new home of the Whitney Museum of American Art. Credit Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

## 2 The Whitney

The opening of the Whitney Museum of American Art's new plant in the meatpacking district was the [local museum event of the year](#). Everyone cheered the Renzo Piano building; many had praise for the permanent-collection show, "America Is Hard to See." But with the confetti cleared, it's apparent that the Whitney is still pretty much what it has always been, apart from a few years in the 1980s and 1990s: an institution often flat-footed in its programming and compromised by its narrow definition of "American." It needs new thinking to match its new home.

[Read the review of the opening show.](#)

## 3 MoMA

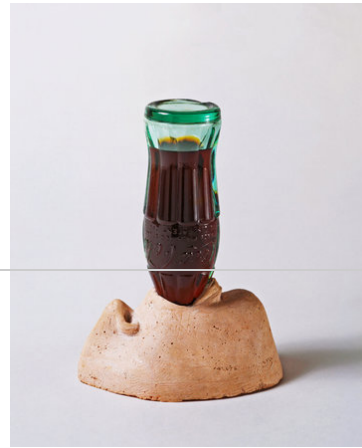
Photo

Though it still harps on its own peculiar version of Modernism, one that we know all too well, the Museum of Modern Art gave signs of expanding its scope. The exhibition "[Transmissions: Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America 1960-1980](#)" (through Jan. 3) brought little-seen work out of deep storage, examined it, and added to it. Much of the salvage operation was by in-house curators. In the fall, MoMA's International Curatorial Institute, joined by the Center for Curatorial



Leadership, hosted a conference of curators from museums in China, Greece, Nigeria, Palestine, Poland, Russia and Senegal. The visitors were in town to learn New York, but New York has everything to learn from them.

[Read the full review of "Transmissions."](#)



"Love" (1962) by Marisol (Marisol Escobar), is part of "Transmissions: Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 1960-1980" at the Museum of Modern Art. Credit Marisol

Photo



Noah Purifoy's Outdoor Desert Art Museum, an outdoor environment of sculptures and assemblages in Joshua Tree, Calif. Credit Stephanie Diani for The New York Times

## 📍 Los Angeles

The city's art scene continues to build, the promotional heat intensifying. The opening of [the Broad](#) in September was major West Coast news, though much of the collection is market boilerplate and East Coast-centric. More interesting was the city's continuing attention to its own neglected history in "[Noah Purifoy: Junk Dada](#)" at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (through Jan. 18), a retrospective of an African-American artist who was a founder of the Watts Tower Art Center and established an outdoor museum in the Mojave Desert.

[Read the review of the Broad's opening exhibition.](#)

Photo



“Bus,” one of the works in “One-Way Ticket: Jacob Lawrence’s Migration Series and Other Visions of the Great Movement North” at the Museum of Modern Art. Credit 2015 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence Foundation, Seattle/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, Collection of George Wein, Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY.

## 5 Outstanding Solos

The grave retrospective of the Colombian artist [Doris Salcedo at the Guggenheim](#) in New York presented an important political artist at maximum intensity. “[One-Way Ticket: Jacob Lawrence’s Migration Series](#) and Other Visions of the Great Movement North” [at MoMA](#) provided Lawrence’s great cycle of history paintings with a cultural context for his time and ours. “[Martin Wong: Human Instamatic](#),” Bronx Museum of the Arts, brought home a wonderful American artist, who did his best work in 1980s New York (through Feb. 14).

Photo





Male power figures, called Mangaaka, in the exhibition “Kongo: Power and Majesty” at the Metropolitan Museum. Credit Richard Perry/The New York Times

## 6. Outstanding Group Shows

The Bronx Museum had a strong year. It organized, with El Museo del Barrio and Loisaida, “[iPresente! The Young Lords in New York](#),” an atmospheric three-site survey of an essential piece of the city’s Latino past. A fresh Triennial at the New Museum, “[Surround Audience](#),” took the pulse of international trends. “[Kongo: Power and Majesty](#)” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (through Jan. 3) turned a corner on traditional approaches to African material by explicitly presenting so-called classical African sculpture as a response to the traumas of colonialism.

Photo



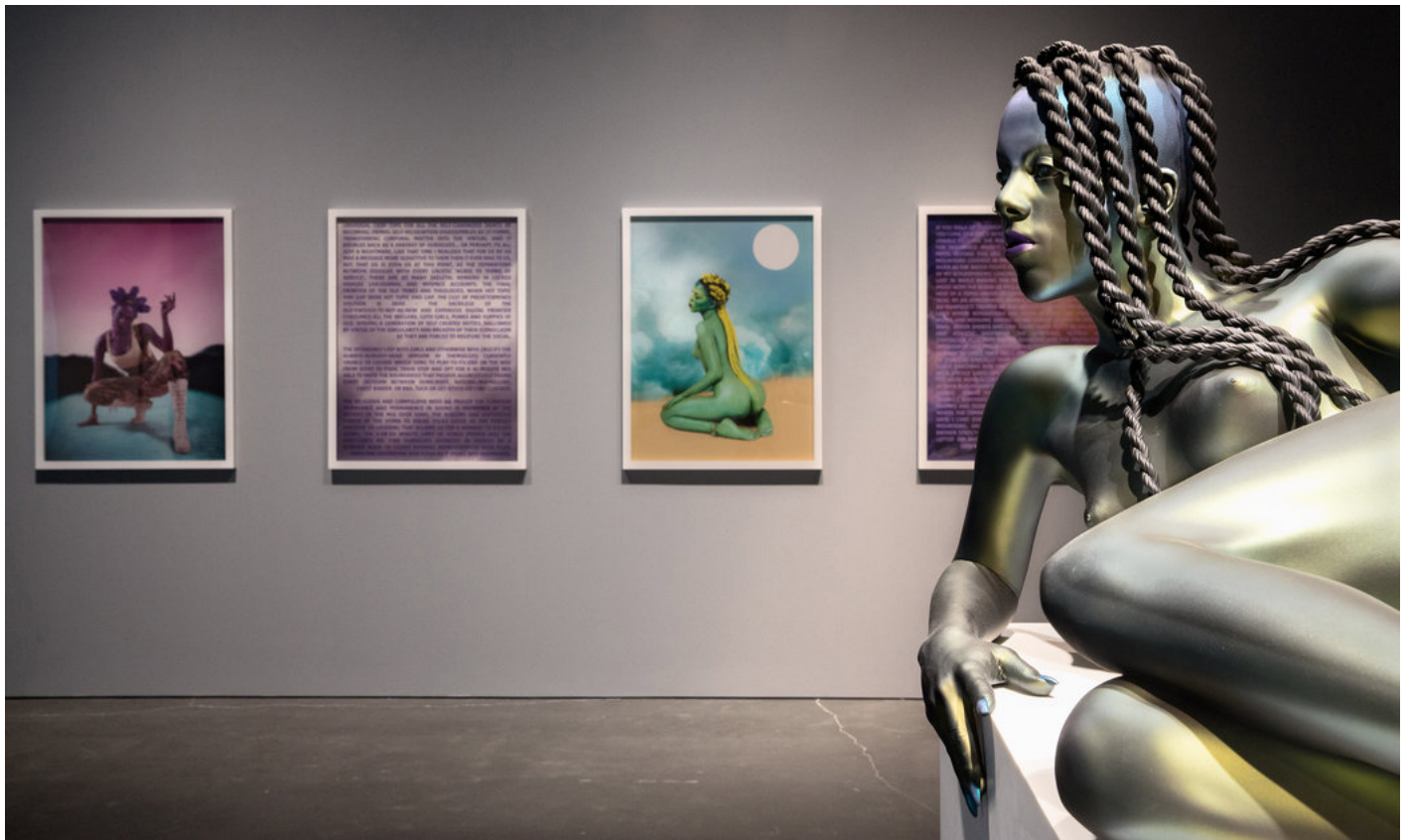
Iraqi workers cleaning a statue of a winged bull at Nimrud in 2001. The country's Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities said Thursday that Islamic State militants had damaged the archaeological site with heavy vehicles. Credit Karim Sahib/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

## Loss

For many, certainly for art historians, some of the most emotional art experiences this year were watching things disappear. Architectural and sculptural remains of some of the oldest known monuments in Iraq and Syria — [Nimrud](#), Nineveh, Palmyra — were damaged or destroyed by Islamic State sledgehammers and explosives. History is riddled with useless ironies and paradoxes. The Islamic State espouses a supposedly pure version of Islam. Islam is a “religion of the book,” the Quran. Yet the group has tried to obliterate all traces of the ancient cultures that invented books and writing.

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Photo



The New Museum's triennial, "Surround Audience," took the pulse of international trends. On display here, Frank Benson's "Juliana, 2015" in the foreground, and works by Juliana Huxtable on the wall. Credit Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

## 8| Gains

Anne Pasternak, Brooklyn Museum's new director; [Mia Locks and Christopher Y. Lew](#), named curators of the 2017 Whitney Biennial; Thomas J. Lax's contribution as the youngest curator of "[Greater New York](#)" at P.S. 1 (the others were Douglas Crimp, Peter Eleey and Ms. Locks; through March 7); savvy art writing by Johanna Fateman and Mostafa Heddaya and Felix Bernstein's blistering cultural commentary. And the strengthening presence of activist collectives like Not an Alternative, Occupy Museums and Interference Archive, who say yes by saying no.

Photo





The installation “Sonic Blossom,” by Lee Mingwei at the Met, had singers (at left, the soprano Margaret Newcomb) performing Schubert in a contemporary gallery. Credit Julieta Cervantes for The New York Times

## 9. Music to My Eyes

In conjunction with Asia Contemporary Art Week, the Met presented “[Sonic Blossom](#),” an interactive piece conceived by Lee Mingwei, which had vocalists from the Manhattan School of Music singing Schubert lieder in the galleries. Heaven.

[Read a review.](#)

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Photo



Vaginal Davis, who wrote the libretto for this staging of “The Magic Flute.” Credit Evan Sung for The New York Times

## 10. ‘The Magic Flute’

At New York University’s Steinhardt School of Culture, 80WSE Gallery and the Cheap Kollektiv of Berlin staged a revamped version of Mozart’s “The Magic Flute,” minus Mozart but packed with magic. With [a libretto by Vaginal Davis, direction by Susanne Sachsse](#), music by Jamie Stewart of Xiu Xiu, and design by students led by Jonathan Berger and Jesse Bransford, this was theater for mind and senses. A film of the piece by Michel Auder will play this summer at 80WSE Gallery (June 8-Aug. 13), now confirmed as one of the city’s most inventive alternative spaces. Remember those dates.

## Roberta Smith’s Top 10

Amid Rising Rent, Vision Flourished

There’s always much to complain about in the New York art world: the insane circus of auctions and shop-alike collectors; the Guggenheim Museum’s expansionism; the Museum of Modern Art’s infamous overcrowding; and the effect of surging Manhattan rents on the art scene’s lifeblood: artists and galleries. But then there is the art, which is what we’re all here for. In that regard, 2015 was a banner year for New York, so much that to my chagrin I barely went elsewhere. Here are a few high points.



Photo



Michelle Obama at the opening of the Whitney's new home in the spring. Credit Michael Appleton for The New York Times

## 1. The Whitney

The year's outstanding art event — a real shot in New York's cultural arm — was the inauguration of the Whitney Museum's new downtown home. The Renzo Piano building is brilliant beyond hope and, in the opening show, the permanent collection had so much more room that it, too, felt new.

[Read Michael Kimmelman's feature on the new Whitney.](#)

## 2. 'Picasso Sculpture'

Photo

The Modern's latest Picasso survey (through Feb. 7) is one of its greatest, devoted to his second life in sculpture, showing him blazing through sundry materials and styles, mostly figurative, often implicitly Cubist.

[Read the full review.](#)

Photo



Credit 2015 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS); Ike Edeani for The New York Times



"Plegaria Muda," which includes blades of grass rising through wooden tables, by Doris Salcedo. Credit Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

### 3. The Guggenheim

The Guggenheim continued to perfect the use of its signature spiral rotunda with an impeccable retrospective of On Kawara's time-based paintings, postcards and telegrams that made it a kind of mortal coil. And the sculptures of Doris Salcedo turned the museum's unwieldy tower galleries into a progression of hauntingly beautiful meditations on humanity's inhumanity.

Read full reviews of the [On Kawara](#) and [Doris Salcedo](#) shows.



Photo



"Harran II" (1967). Credit 2015 Frank Stella/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

## 4. 'Frank Stella: A Retrospective'

Frank Stella's exuberant retrospective at the Whitney (through Feb. 7) is a show that the museum could never have pulled off in its old building. The abstractionist's six-decade up-from-Minimalism, out-of-painting story should renew appreciation for that inescapable aspect of art called form.

[Read the full review.](#)

Photo



A pair of shows at the Metropolitan Museum of Art devoted to the artist Piotr Uklanski. Credit Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

## 5. The Met

At the Metropolitan, the strongest major loan shows were [“The Plains Indians: Artists of Earth and Sky”](#) and [“Kongo: Majesty and Power”](#) (through Jan. 3), which together illuminated the achievements of two cultures swept aside by European encroachment. In terms of small, there was [an exquisite show](#) drawn from the museum’s collection by Piotr Uklanski alongside an exhibition of his photographs — an excellent two-fer.

[See a close look at one work from the Kongo show.](#)

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Photo





Two of Vahan Poladian's ensembles at the American Folk Art Museum. Credit Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

## 6. Folk Art

The American Folk Art Museum continued to thrive in reduced circumstances, most visibly in "[When the Curtain Never Comes Down](#)," which examined aspects of performance with the work of both European and American 20th-century outsider artists.

[Read a full review.](#)

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Photo



A view of the James (Son Ford) Thomas exhibition. Credit Philip Greenberg for The New York Times

## 7. Alternative Spaces

In the city's busy alternative spaces, art history continued to expand. Artists Space [immersed us in the achievement of Tom of Finland](#), the Ingres of 20th-century homoerotic art, and his bounty of popular-culture source materials. [White Column's](#) latest excursion into exhibition as archive/open storage (through Dec. 19) pays homage to Bob Nickas, one of New York's most intrepid independent curators. Participant Inc. mounted an extraordinary survey of the trans artist, East Village denizen and doll maker extraordinaire [Greer Lankton](#). And 80WSE, New York University's experimental exhibition space, vibrated with the music, life and small, gnarly portrait busts of [the blues singer and guitarist James \(Son Ford\) Thomas](#).

Read [the full review of the Thomas show](#).

Photo





Jannis Kounellis's "Untitled (12 Horses)," recreated in New York. Credit Byron Smith for The New York Times

## 8. An Eye for History

Commercial galleries did their bit to excavate the past. The superb biomorphic paintings of [Flora Crockett](#) (1891-1979), a forgotten American abstractionist, surfaced at Meredith Ward Fine Art. Andrea Rosen reintroduced Stan VanDerBeek's 1960s forays into abstract film and language. Luxembourg & Dayan's look at the rambunctious art of the Italian [Enrico Baj](#) still fills its dinky uptown townhouse (through Jan. 30). And last summer, in a coup, Gavin Brown's Enterprise bid farewell to Greenwich Street by [restaging Jannis Kounellis's legendary Arte Povera installation](#) centering on a herd of cooperative horses.

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Photo



“Stanley Whitney,” an exhibition at the Karma gallery. Credit Courtesy the artist and Karma, New York

## 9. Solo Shows

Living artists of all ages shone in solo gallery shows: Richard Serra’s not-quite cubes of solid steel formed a spiritual union with surrounding space at David Zwirner. [Cecily Brown](#) presented the best paintings of her career at Maccarone. Karma attended splendidly to [Stanley Whitney](#)’s paintings and drawings. Dona Nelson continued to attack painting front and back with vehement color at Thomas Erben. Jamie Isentein’s performing sculptures returned at Andrew Kreps. In his debut at Simon Preston Gallery, Clement Siatous turned the painterly political in 13 sunlit beach scenes that revisited life on an island in the Indian Ocean before the United States Navy took over. And in an outstanding sophomore appearance, on view until Dec. 20, [Lucy Dodd](#) cultivates her unusual fusion of Color Field painting, sewing, cooking, music and hanging out in a mutating show at David Lewis.

Photo





“The Rain Dogs” (2015), by Brian Adam Douglas, was among a number of murals in a group show at the Andrew Edlin Gallery’s Chelsea location. Credit Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York

## 10. Resilient Galleries

And despite the economic pressures, New York galleries continue to prove their hardiness. With Chelsea breaking out in apartment towers, relocations to TriBeCa, Chinatown and the Lower East Side were achieved or announced by [Andrew Edlin](#), Foxy Production, [Derek Eller](#) and Alexander and Bonin. More power to them and their kind.

## The Best in Culture 2015

More highlights from the year, as chosen by our critics:

[Movies](#), [Television](#), [Pop Music](#), [Classical Music](#), [Classical Albums](#), [Dance](#), [Theater](#), [Books](#) and [Performances](#)

### Correction: December 20, 2015

An article last Sunday about the year in art misstated the name of the gallery where Clement Siatous showed paintings of an island in the Indian Ocean. It is the Simon Preston Gallery, not Simon Present.

- [Email](#)