
ARTICLES

Best of 2016: Our Top 15 Exhibitions Around the World

Our picks for the best art shows in the world this year.

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(photo of Marrakech Biennial by Hrag Vartanian/Hyperallergic)

Shakespeare may have said “all the world is a stage,” but we know it’s also full of galleries, museums, and biennials. We asked Hyperallergic’s editors and critics to pick their favorites from a year that seemed to be full of surprises.

1. Marrakech Biennial (Marrakech)

Sam Gilliam’s installation at Marrakesh’s Bahia Palace (photo by Hrag Vartanian/Hyperallergic)

February 24–May 8

I was deeply moved by the 2016 Marrakech Biennial. Curator Reem Fadda gave us a sprawling show — with lots of historical materials — that eluded classification but still had some clear threads throughout (decolonization, materiality, modernism outside of the West, histories of power, and resistance to homogeneity). Important commissions by El Anatsui, Dineo Seshee Bopape, Haig Aivazian, and many others, felt sensitive to their surroundings and helped make this exhibition memorable. As I wrote in [my review](#) of this citywide exhibition (which is accompanied by a [Hyperallergic podcast](#)):

The future of biennials as multifaceted constellations rather than cohesive statements or declarations. The logic of neocolonialism, part of the power structures imposed by powerful nations on others, compels the forces of resistance to take diverse, sometimes amorphous forms. Even if the artist remains at the center of this struggle, the art can feel unsettling as their ideas worm through our brains to ignite new flames that may topple the forces of control and homogenization.

An added bonus, this was the first year the biennial was free. This was a show that mattered. —*Hrag Vartanian*

2. Theaster Gates: How to Build a House Museum at the Art Gallery of Ontario (Toronto)

July 21–October 30

Installation view of Theaster Gates's disco-inspired room at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto (photo Hrag Vartanian/Hyperallergic)

This was a [fantastic show](#) by an artist who is often associated with his ambitious real estate art projects in Chicago rather than

his gallery work — though his installation piece at last year's Venice Biennial ("Martyr Construction," 2015) was quite a showstopper. I didn't review this show because I felt like the performances, lectures, and events were too integral to the exhibition, and I just couldn't be in Toronto for any of them. But the show I saw was very excellent. Gates has been allowed to work with House music-founder Frankie Knuckles's archive and he built a little shrine to the vinyl LPs — one of which, he told me, included a small baggie of what appeared to be coke with a note from Madonna that said, "Stay hard." Overall, the exhibition explored representations of blackness in the US (via W.E.B. Dubois's infographics, for instance), the spiritual nature of house music, and the aesthetics of monuments and nightclubs. My favorite piece was the simple neon near the entrance of the show that glared, "Burn Baby Burn." It captured the intensity of the emotions we often associate with music but also the way meaning travels and changes from unlikely origins — the term was reputedly coined by R&B disc jockey [Magnificent Montague](#), became a rally cry during the 1964 Watts riots, was transformed into a [popular disco song](#) by The Trammps, and has had [many lives](#) since. Gates adds another layer by demonstrating how hard it is to fix the meaning of such a

mercurial phrase, which takes on a different meaning for each viewer based on their cultural knowledge. You can't stop good ideas from morphing into new things, Gates seems to say, just like you can't live forever in that moment in a nightclub when you realize the music, the crowd, and the stimulants are all in sync and you're having the best time of your life. Building monuments to the ephemeral and fleeting seems more important now than ever. —*HV*

3. *Beat Generation at the Centre Pompidou (Paris)*

June 22–October 3

Gregory Corso, "There is No More Street Corner ..." (1960) (© DR; photo © Archives Jean-Jacques Lebel) (click to enlarge)

This show was divided into three main sections (Paris, New York, California), with two smaller areas dedicated to Mexico and

Tangier — where the Beats developed a magically elated conception of the poetic. The entire airy layout of the Centre Pompidou's retrospective of the Beat Generation was flawless, delicately and luxuriously balancing the dim lighting requirements needed to show the mixing of texts, paintings, photography, collages, ephemera, historic documents, magazines, book publications, jazz music, spoken word recordings, and fantastic underground films. Its content was a hard rejection of American right-wing idealism, racism, and homophobia. —*Joseph Nechvatal*

4. *Sincerely Queer: Sébastien Lifshitz Collection at Les Rencontres d'Arles (Arles)*

July 4–September 25

A photo from Sincerely Queer: Sébastien Lifshitz Collection at Les Rencontres d'Arles (photo by Jillian Steinhauer/Hyperallergic)

This exhibition looked unassuming — room after room of mostly small, amateur, black-and-white photographs — but was vast,

telling an informal history of cross-dressing and other forms of gender-bending from the 19th century to the 1970s. Some of the stories on display were public — including that of Coccinelle, the first French person to have sexual reassignment surgery and one of the first openly trans performers — but the majority were purposely private, and viewers were given little information beyond the remarkable images they saw: a picture of male prisoners of war in a Nazi camp in frumpy

dresses and wigs, students at a women's college in the US drinking in oversize men's clothes. Societal debates still rage over whether gender is a construct; according to *Sincerely Queer*, it has been for a very long time. I'm not normally a fan of exhibitions that draw from just one person's collection, but film director Sébastien Lifshitz has amassed a truly remarkable trove. I hope it will be shown again. —*Jillian Steinhauer*

5. Ed Atkins, Harun Farocki, and Josh Kline at Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo (Torino)

September 27–January 29

Harun Farocki at Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo

For the fall season, Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo held three major simultaneous shows, drawing on

its collection while also addressing some of the dominant themes in contemporary art. The late [Harun Farocki's](#) large, multi-screen video installation “Parallel I-V” (2012–14), completed near the end of the artist's life, is a mesmerizing visual history of computer game graphics since the 1980s, focusing not only on technological progress but also on the evolution of symbols and how the video game configures in our new digital reality. Another artist interested in the digital, [Ed Atkins](#), presents his most recent work, “Safe Conduct,” a three-channel video installation, mapping out the contemporary anxieties of migration and the rapid disappearance of the public domain. Lastly, American artist [Josh Kline's](#) “Unemployment” explores the nature of contemporary labor in a crucial moment of historical and political transition worldwide, and addresses the transformation of the human condition, in an era of automation and transnational capital. The three shows operate independently, but as a whole they are at once remarkably analytical and poetic models of possible futures. —*Ari Akkermans*

6. André Masson: From Marseille to the American Exile at the Musée Cantini (Marseille)

November 13, 2015–July 24, 2016

Page from the collective drawings of the Surrealists (ca 1940–41) (photo Benjamin Sutton/Hyperallergic)

What made [this exhibition](#) so uniquely compelling — beyond the opportunity to delve into André Masson’s particular brand of Surrealism, which dwells heavily and viscerally on the trauma of modern warfare while prophetically incorporating psychedelia and flirting with abstraction — was the spread of exquisite corpse sketchbooks. These were collaborations by countless Surrealists, made while passing through Marseille as they fled the Nazis and sought safe passage to the Americas. —*Benjamin Sutton*

7. *The Thinking Machine, Ramon Llull and the “Ars Combinatoria”* at Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona (Barcelona)



davide_bau

Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona

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July 14–December 11

This quirky, ambitious exhibition marked the 700-year anniversary of the death of Catalan monk, missionary, and philosopher Ramon Llull, who is often known as the father of computation history through sometimes unlikely connections. [The exhibition](#) began with Berlin-based, South Korea-born artist Jeongmoon Choi’s immersive installation “Drawing in Space-Connections, Installation” (2015), a medley of colored thread illuminated under UV lighting. This was followed by a room of plasma screens playing lively animations of the 13th-century medieval comic illustrating his life. Other sections included everything from a copy of the late-17th-century mechanical calculator built by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and the work of John Cage. An expanded version of the exhibition opens next year at the Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe (ZKM) in Germany, where a codex including a symbol of Lull’s doctrine is kept. —*Alpesh Kantilal Patel*

8. *NSK: From Kapital to Capital* at the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art (Moscow)

September 30–December 9

Installation view of *NSK: From Kapital to Capital* at the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art (image courtesy the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art)

The first [major survey in Russia of the Slovenian art collective NSK](#), it was originally conceived at the Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana and curated by its director

Zdenka Badovinac in 2015. The show traces the key events of the four core groups that comprised NSK from 1980 until the dissolution of the collective in 1992, partly due to the breakup of Yugoslavia. The exhibition was cleverly set up as a series of important events in the chronology of the collective, and articulated the spirit of the period, a decade of swift but far-reaching transformations whose consequences we have begun to feel only now: The end of the utopian imagination of modernity, the collapse of national states, and a changing political rhetoric around colonialism and capitalism. Through a decade of shows, performances, concerts, theatre, and guerrilla actions, NSK, and other artist groups that grew out of it, began to pose one of the central questions of contemporary art today: How to live with a new global order? What kind of organizations and institutions are possible now? Revisiting this period and the work of NSK in particular enable us to look back and think for ourselves how to deal with the legacy of colonialism and totalitarianism. —AA

9. *Oswaldo Goeldi and Evandro Carlos Jardim: The Engraving and the Compass* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, University of São Paulo (São Paulo)

March 28, 2015–March 28, 2017

Evandro Carlos Jardim, “Interlagos XIV / Luz e Sombra” (1967) (image courtesy MAC USP Ibirapuera)

While this exhibition was only two modest rooms, each print revealed a rich world of its own. The curator Claudio Mubarac

mined MAC’s collection and found a beautiful pairing: Oswaldo Goeldi and Evandro Carlos Jardim. Focusing on Goeldi’s engravings from the 1950s in Rio de Janeiro and Jardim’s from the ‘60s in São Paulo, [The Engraving and the Compass](#) was a portrait of the two metropolitan cities and the life along their outskirts. White windows and street lamps crack through Goeldi’s dark landscapes of homes and

parks, which are inhabited by lone figures or one bright-red object, like a moon, umbrella, or dead fish. In Jardim's engravings, black defines the details on the white pages, revealing geometric forms of modernist buildings and an abstract field of birds. Both of these artists' works seem set in an early evening light, and evoke the quietness of the outskirts and the lonely urban city. These artists, better known at home than abroad, made me especially enthusiastic for a medium that is often set aside. —*Elisa Wouk Almino*

10. *Jill Magid: Ex-Voto* at LABOR (Mexico City)

July 23–September 3

Jill Magid, "The Proposal" (2016, detail), uncut, 2.02 carat, blue diamond with micro-laser inscription "I am wholeheartedly yours," silver ring, ring box, documents; setting design by Anndra Neen (photo by Stefan Jaeggi for Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen)

In a multiyear project that exploded beyond any one gallery space, New York-based artist Jill Magid reactivated the legacy of Mexican modernist architect Luis Barragán with her exhibitions at the Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen

in Switzerland, the San Francisco Art Institute, and [Mexico City's LABOR gallery](#). She wove a spellbinding web of documents, letters, sculptures, and near-copyright infringements for the project, which, when presented in [Mexico City, were installed across the street from the architect's home and personal archive](#). "A legacy has to be not only cared for, but continually engaged," Magid told me. "That can only happen through its accessibility." —*Devon Van Houten Maldonado*

11. *Mónica Mayer: Si tiene dudas ... pregunte* at the Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo (Mexico City)

February 6–July 31

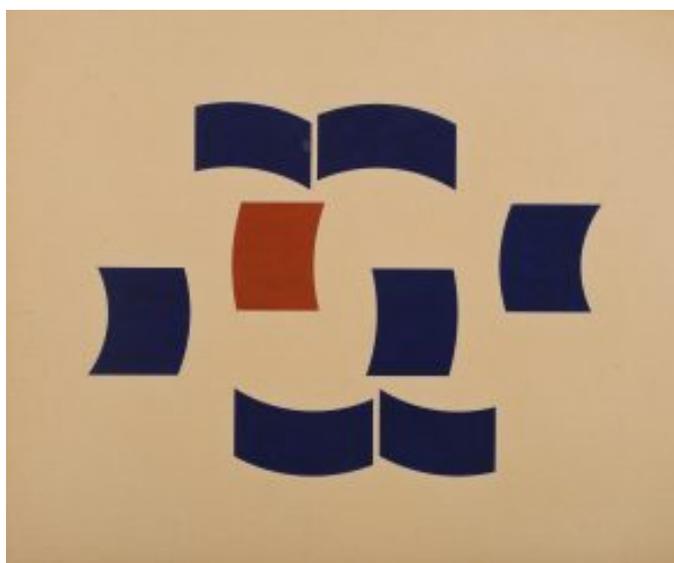
Si tiene dudas... pregunte. Una exposición retrocolectiva de Mónica Mayer. MUAC, 2016 (via muac.unam.mx)

At the entrance to MUAC's [Mónica Mayer retrospective](#), a wall plaque offers a "recipe for viewing a feminist art exhibition" with

the following suggestions: "Before going in, breathe deeply and arm yourself with a handful of questions ... Once inside, keep alert ... And, when in doubt ... ask." This provided a good introduction to her 40-year career, which is characterized by a constant questioning of social, political, and artistic conventions with an irreverent

and often humorous perspective. The exhibition — labeled a “retrocollective ... in reference to this integration of individual and collective, public and private” — included two- and three-dimensional works as well as video and photography, but the main focus was her social practice-based art activism. Along with Maris Bustamante, Mayer founded one of Mexico’s first feminist art collectives, Polvo de Gallina Negra, in 1983, which confronted the country’s sexism head-on with a series of performances and actions. Participation and interaction were encouraged at several points throughout the exhibition, including a disconcerting wall of pink Post-its onto which visitors could anonymously write about the first time they were harassed. At a time when art can seem disconnected from everyday life, *Si tiene dudas ...pregunte* showed the power that art still has to remain relevant and affect social change. —Matt Stromberg

12. Calder and Brazilian Art at Itaú Cultural (São Paulo)



Hélio Oiticica , “Metaesquema” (1957) (photo by Fabrizio Penteadó/Itaú Cultural via itaucultural.org.br)

The comparison now seems obvious: Alexander Calder and the Brazilian Neo-Concretists. But it had never occurred to me before [this exhibition at the Itaú Cultural in São Paulo](#). Calder came to Brazil on three occasions, mainly for the exhibition of his own work in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, and befriended a number of Brazilian artists, including [Lina Bo Bardi](#) and [Roberto Burle Marx](#). The exhibition seamlessly weaved Calder’s light wire mobiles with [Lygia Clark’s *bichos*](#), [Hélio Oiticica’s](#) dancing

geometries, and Abraham Palatnik’s moving sculptures. There was also the joy of seeing the video of Calder playing with his “Circus,” which has existed as a somewhat sad, immobile display at the Whitney Museum of Art. The show also included contemporary work, such as by [Cao Guimarães](#), whose video of a bubble moving through space echoed the nearby hanging shapes, alluding to the passage of time. —EWA

13. *Frank Stella and Synagogues of Historic Poland* at the Museum of the History of Polish Jews (Warsaw)



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February 19–June 20

In 1964, Stella famously declared of his paintings: “What you see is what you see.” However, even as soon as 1970, when he began his series *Polish Village*, he was already moving beyond this minimalist credo. The works in the series are assemblages based on drawings and photographs of wooden synagogues, all of which had been burned down by the Nazis. Stella’s economy of use of lines and shapes as well as sparing color ostensibly explores the complex, geometric interlocking of the synagogue architecture which he admired. However, installed for the first time in Poland and at a museum focused on history of Polish Jews in Warsaw, his works veer more towards elegy, the affective, and the ineffable. —AKP

14. *Farideh Lashai* at the Sharjah Art Foundation (Sharjah)

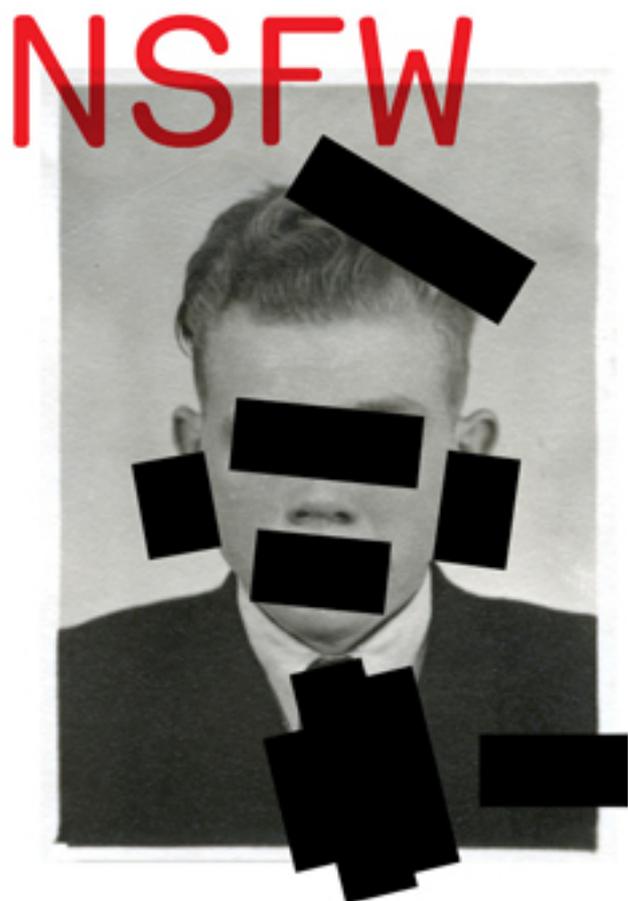
March 12–May 14

Farideh Lashai at the Sharjah Art Foundation
(image courtesy the Sharjah Art Foundation)

Until her untimely death in 2013, the work of Iranian painter Farideh Lashai had not been as widely exhibited as it should have, and no major museum exhibition had been held. The Faride Lashai Foundation recently changed that: after the artist’s first retrospective in 2015 at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, a second iteration opened for a broader public at the Sharjah Art Foundation. The exhibition comprised drawings and paintings, from her figurative trees and portraits to her most significant abstract works. It also featured an entire series of work Lashai developed during the last years of her life, which incorporates animation, music, and narration into paintings, depicting through subtle metaphors chapters of Iran’s turbulent history and delivering a

foreboding message about a violent future in the region, through a painterly engagement with Goya's "The Disasters of War." The exhibition placed for the first time the work of Lashai among modern masters (and is to be followed by a monograph and exhibitions at El Prado and the British Museum). Without being strictly monographic, the show provided enough context for an artist who was fluent in the Western tradition and educated in Vienna, but who chose to remain in Tehran, making work that is thoroughly imbued with the stylistic and narrative devices of the East. Her work opens a fresh chapter in the history of Iranian modernism that is still partially uncharted. —AA

15. *Jaanus Samma, Not Suitable For Work: A Chairman's Tale at the Museum of Occupations (Tallinn)*



From Jaanus Samma's "Not Suitable for Work, a Chairman's Tale" show (Design: Brit Pavelson, 2015)

April 15– October 9

The Museum of Occupations in Estonia chronicled the harrowing subjugation of the country by Soviets and Germans from 1940–91. In the basement, Jaanus Samma's three-part artwork focuses on the man known as the "Chairman," who, after enduring a long and degrading trial, was expelled from the Communist party for engaging in homosexual acts. The installation includes found objects, including forensic equipment similar to those used to poke and prod the Chairman, as well as a series of videos, one of which includes a watersporting scene between him and the prostitute who allegedly murdered him. This is somber stuff — but it is difficult not to get a chuckle

out of the fact that across the installation are the museum's restrooms, the entrance to which are permanently flanked by larger-than-life sculptures of former high-ranking Communist officials. —AKP

