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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 alluded 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)



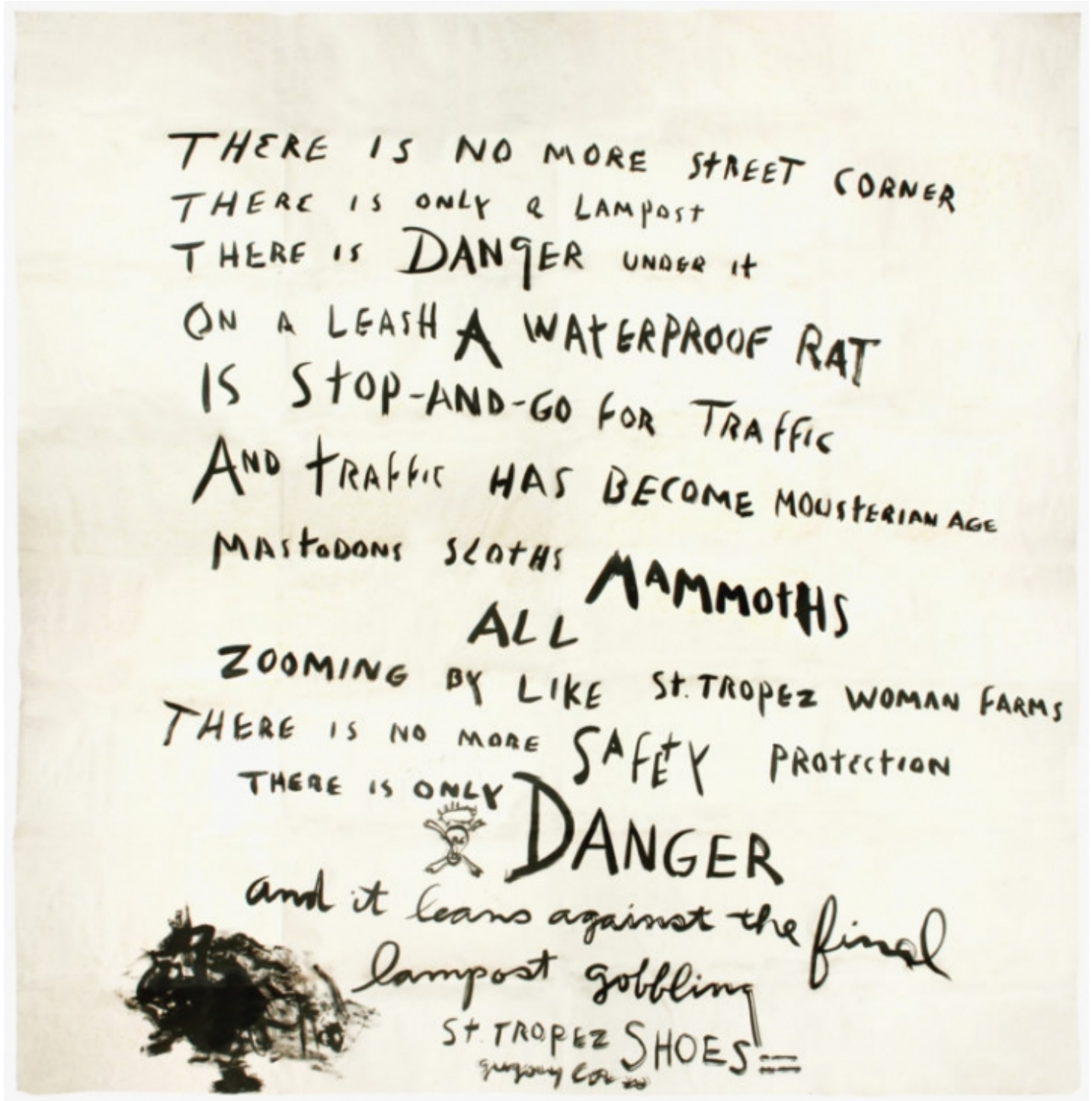
Installation view of Theaster Gates's disco-inspired room at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto (photo Hrag Vartanian/Hyperallergic)

July 21–October 30

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)



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

June 22–October 3

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 related 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)



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

July 4–September 25

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)



Harun Farocki at Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo

September 27–January 29

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)*



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

November 13, 2015–July 24, 2016

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

firting 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 • 2 weeks ago

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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)

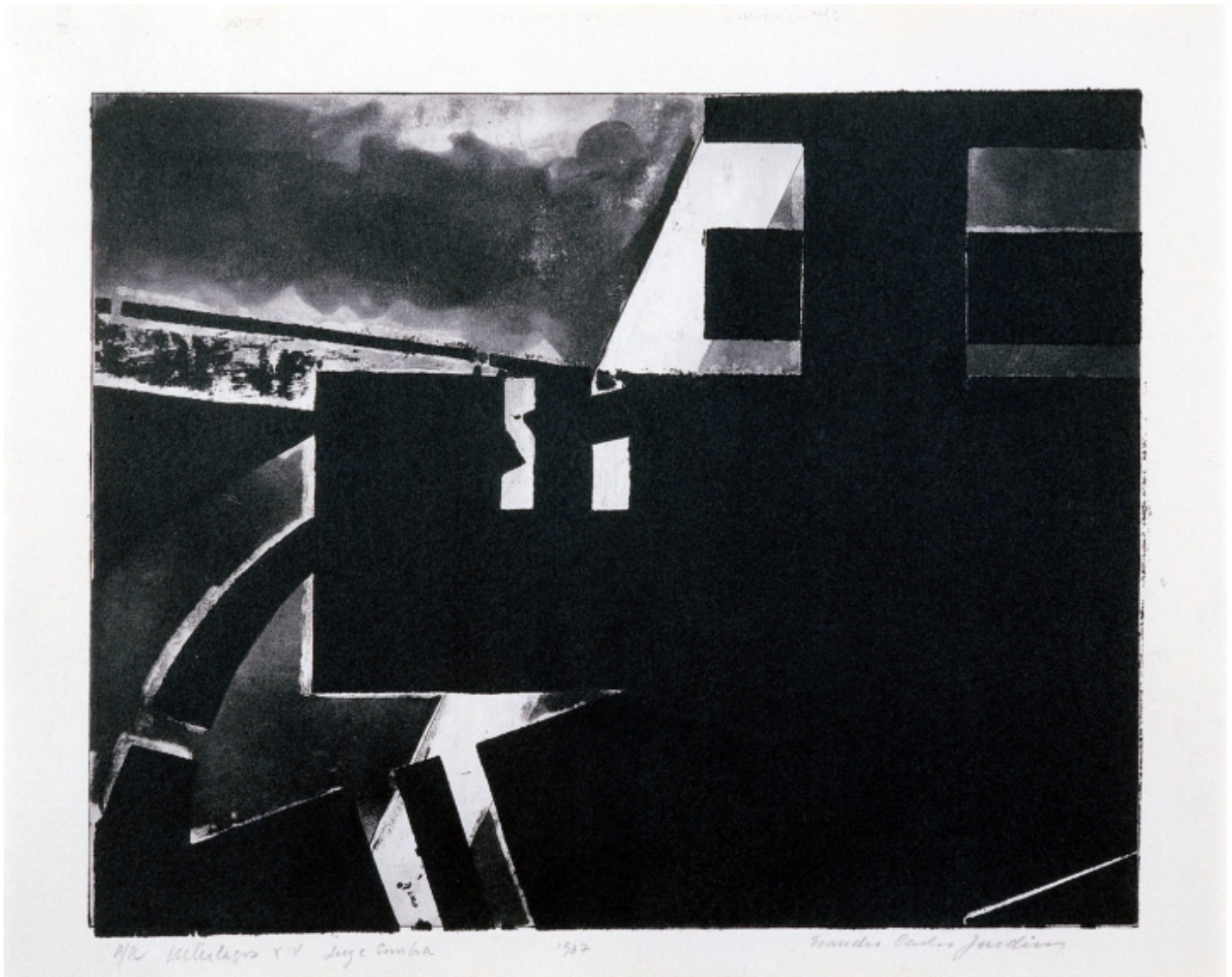


Installation view of *NSK: From Kapital to Capital* at the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art (image courtesy the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art)

September 30–December 9

The first major survey in Russia of the Slovenian art collective NSK, it was originally conceived at the Moderna Galerija in Ljubliana 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 Evandor Carlos Jardim: The Engraving and the Compass* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, University of São Paulo (São Paulo)



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

March 28, 2015–March 28, 2017

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 Evandor 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)



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)

July 23–September 3

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)



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

February 6–July 31

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