

T The New York Times Style Magazine

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 artist **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?



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

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

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.

INTERLUDE: ON PAINTING



Left: Jacqueline Humphries's ":)green" (2016). Right: Charline von Heyl's "Poetry Machine #3" (2018).
Left: courtesy of the artist and Greene Naftali, N.Y. Right: courtesy of the artist and Petzel, N.Y.

TLF: There aren't that many paintings on the lists.

KT: No. Wow. I didn't realize that until two days later. I love painting, it's just not here.

TLF: Is painting not — Torey, you're a painter — contemporary?

TT: It's old. I don't know. I tried to look at what types of painting happened and then see who started it.

RT: I put Guston on my list.

David Breslin: On my longer list, I had Gerhard Richter's Baader-Meinhof cycle [a series of paintings titled "October 18, 1977," made by Richter in 1988, based on photographs of members of the Red Army Faction, a German left-wing militant group that carried out bombings, kidnappings and assassinations throughout the 1970s]. It speaks to the history of countercultural formation. How, if one decides not to peaceably demonstrate, what the alternatives are. How, in many ways, some of those things could only be recorded or thought about a decade-plus later. So, how can certain moments of participatory action be thought about in their time, and then also in a deferred moment?

KT: I thought of all the women painters. I thought of Jacqueline Humphries, Charline von Heyl, Amy Sillman, Laura Owens. Women taking up the very difficult task of abstraction and bringing some meaning to it. That, to me, feels like important terrain women have staked out in a really serious way. Maybe one or two of those people deserve to be on this list, but somehow I didn't put them on.

DB: It's that problem of a body of work versus the individual.

KT: But am I going to pick one painting of Charline's? I can't. I just saw that show at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., and every painting in the last 10 years is *good*. Is one better than the other? It's this kind of practice and this discourse around abstraction — and what women are doing with it — that I think is the key.