

25 Works of Art That Define the Contemporary Age, **T Magazine**, July 14, print and online

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.



Photo illustration by Scott J. Ross

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 painter **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.

20. A.K. Burns and A.L. Steiner, "Community Action Center," 2010



A clip from the 69-minute-long video piece, which the artists describe as "socio-sexual."
Courtesy of the artists

“Community Action Center,” a 69-minute erotic romp through the imaginations of artists [A.K. Burns](#) (b. Capitola, Calif., 1975) and [A.L. Steiner](#) (b. Miami, 1967) and their community of friends, is a celebration of queer sexuality as playful as it is political. We watch as a diverse, multigenerational cast engage in joyfully hedonistic acts of private and shared pleasure involving paint, egg yolks, carwashes and corn on the cob. Although the video opens with the cabaret star [Justin Vivian Bond](#) reading lines from Jack Smith’s experimental film “[Normal Love](#),” there is otherwise little dialogue. Instead, the focus is on the dreamlike visuals — captured with an offhand intimacy on rented and borrowed cameras — and the visceral sensations they evoke. “Community Action Center” is the rare ribald work that doesn’t refer to male desire or gratification, which is partly why Steiner and Burns, who are activists as well as artists, describe it as “socio-sexual.” Radical politics needn’t come at the cost of sensuality, however. The piece is meant to titillate.

KT: It’s a really important work, too.

TLF: I haven’t seen it.

KT: They spearheaded this project to essentially make porn, but it’s much more than that, with all kinds of people from their queer community. It includes so many artists that we know and that are making work now, and very visible, but it was all about figuring out how to show their body, show their sexuality, share their body, share their sexuality, make light of it, make it serious, collaborate with musicians. It’s a crazy document of a moment that opened up a conversation.