

# The Top 10 Living Artists of 2015

In conducting our annual review, we pulled from a wealth of data sources\* and our editors' insight to determine which living artists wielded the greatest influence in 2015. Several are the mainstays of such rankings you might expect. But the list's new additions ring in exciting advancements for the art world and beyond—from a forebear of this year's biggest trend in painting to a figurehead for free expression and a Chicagoan serving as a catalyst for social change.

ARTSY EDITORIAL  
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## Ai Weiwei

B. 1957 IN BEIJING, CHINA. LIVES AND WORKS IN BERLIN, GERMANY AND BEIJING, CHINA.





*Illustration of Ai Weiwei by Rebecca Strickson for Artsy, based on a photograph by Matthew Niederhauser.*

This year marked the end of a four-year-long struggle for Ai Weiwei. On July 22nd, the dissident artist received his passport back from the Chinese authorities, who had kept it in their possession since Ai was detained upon trying to depart Beijing for Hong Kong in 2011. The artist's detention stretched on for 81 days and led to an international campaign from art world and civil rights leaders for his release. Known for conceptual works, which unpack the underpinnings of cultural value and political ideology, Ai advised on the so-called "Bird's Nest" National Stadium that served as a hallmark of the major soft-power push that was the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. However, his work became increasingly critical of the regime following an earthquake that same year in Sichuan Province, which resulted in the death of over 5,000 children. Ai announced the receipt of his passport via Instagram—appropriate considering the artist's use of social media over recent years as a platform for resistance. The artist left almost immediately for Berlin, where, for several years, a studio has been waiting for him, along with an invitation to join the faculty at the city's Universität der Künste; he now serves as a guest professor there.

Ai has been the subject of numerous major museum exhibitions in recent years, beginning with his 2009 show at Munich's Haus der Kunst and including his traveling retrospective "According to What?" which touched down at the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo, the Pérez Art Museum Miami, and the Brooklyn Museum, among others. He repped Germany at the Venice Biennale in 2013 and had his largest-ever exhibition at Berlin's Martin-Gropius-Bau last year. Topping Ai's CV in 2015 is a major survey of his work from the past 20 years, which closed December 13th at London's Royal Academy of Arts. "Andy Warhol | Ai Weiwei" which recently opened at Melbourne's National Gallery of Victoria, will travel to Pittsburgh's Andy Warhol Museum next year. Both were among the first opportunities Ai was afforded to see his work on public view in four years, the first being his exhibition at Beijing's Galleria Continua and Tang Contemporary Art, which authorities approved to open on June 6th in what was seen as a positive indicator of the eventual return of Ai's passport.

## Jeff Koons

**B. 1955 IN YORK, PENNSYLVANIA. LIVES AND WORKS IN NEW YORK, NEW YORK.**



Illustration of Jeff Koons by Rebecca Strickson for Artsy, based on photograph by Angela Pham/[BFA.com](#).

While milestones are a mainstay for Koons, 2015 saw a major one for the most expensive living American artist: 60 years of age. For Koons, age is nothing but another increasing value (at Christie's in May, the artist beat his record for a painting at auction). While this year was perhaps not as headline-heavy as the last, his unprecedented 2014 Whitney retrospective went on to show at the Centre Pompidou and then to star as a summer blockbuster at the Guggenheim Bilbao. The show spanned the artist's rollercoaster career since the 1980s, from suggestive vacuum cleaners in lit vitrines, kitschy polychromes including the infamous *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* (1988), and finished off with the lavish "Celebration" series and one obligatory balloon dog. Covering his trajectory from ingénue to pariah to indelible blue chip artist, the retrospective offered the artist's keen ability to elevate signifiers of mundane, middle-class life into glossy, acclaimed artworks.

The artist continued to cement his ties with the art historical canon this year, something made impeccably clear during this fall alone. In September, the gleaming yellow *Pluto and Proserpina* (2010-13) was erected outside Palazzo Vecchio in Florence, near the famous replica of Michelangelo's *David* (1501-04), while inside *Gazing Ball* (*Barberini Faun*) (2013) lounged alongside Donatello's *Judith and Holofernes* (c. 1457-64). And as Vienna's Natural History Museum unveiled a new wing to house the 29,500-year-old *Venus of Willendorf* in October, Koons's giant *Balloon Venus* (*Orange*) (2008-12) garnered a share of the spotlight. To top it off, November saw the debut of "Gazing Ball

Koons's unflappable aptitude for success appears as lasting as his sprightly sexagenarian form.

## Yayoi Kusama

B. 1929, MATSUMOTO, JAPAN. LIVES AND WORKS IN TOKYO, JAPAN.



*Illustration of Yayoi Kusama by Rebecca Strickson for Artsy, based on a photograph by Go Itame. Original photograph © Yayoi Kusama. Courtesy of KUSAMA Enterprise, Ota Fine Arts, Tokyo / Singapore and David Zwirner, New York.*

At 86 years old, the scarlet-haired Kusama is the kind of artist for which the art world lines up; If she were a rockstar, she'd be Mick Jagger, her fans pulling all-nighters in sleeping bags on city sidewalks to score front-row seats. This spring Kusama's *Obliteration Room* (2002-present) landed at David Zwirner's pair of 19th St. galleries, with visitors queuing up for hours in a testament to contemporary art's six-decade-in-the-making love affair with the Japanese artist. The show marked the U.S.

New York art world was suddenly covered in mysterious, multi-colored spots in the midst of Frieze Week, this was no art-fair-ailment they were stricken with.)


The artist's passion for polka dots is rivaled only by the market's demand for them. At the age of 10, Kusama painted spots to combat mental illness by visualizing her hallucinations. By the '60s, she was staging New York happenings among the city's avant-garde set (think: polka-dot painted orgies). And today, on occasional leave from the Tokyo sanitarium where she's lived by choice since 1977, she'll grace a charmed crowd with an appearance, clad head-to-toe in dots (not even her wheelchair is spared).

But despite worldwide acclaim, 2015 was a year of firsts for Kusama—her first major retrospective in Scandinavia, at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, as well as her first solo show in Russia to inaugurate the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art's stunning new space. "We've never had so many visitors!" says Kate Fowle, the museum's chief curator, who recalls lines around the building and visitors in the thousands waiting to see what she describes as Kusama's "mesmerizing, mirrored polka dot room," among other installations.

## Damien Hirst

B. 1965 IN BRISTOL, U.K. LIVES AND WORKS IN DEVON AND LONDON U.K.





*Illustration of Damien Hirst by Rebecca Strickson for Artsy, based on a photograph by Anton Corbijn.*

With the opening of his Newport Street Gallery in Vauxhall, South London, in October 2015, Young British Artist (YBA) Hirst has punctuated another sentence in his long and varied career. The respected architects Caruso St John designed the space, which opened with an exhibition focused on British abstract painter (and personal hero of Hirst) John Hoyland. Reviews of the new museum have been overwhelmingly positive, though critical reappraisal of Hoyland has been mixed. And by the measure of interest around the museum's opening, it might be enough for Hirst to bounce back from a bumpy few years for his market. After the high of the now-infamous 2008 Sotheby's auction where £111 million of Hirst's work sold, the artist's prices nosedived as the global economy tanked, and a 2012 show at London's White Cube was savaged by critics. At Newport Street, Hirst appears to be returning to his roots: he was notoriously the curator of the 1988 exhibition "Freeze," which launched the career of many of his fellow YBAs while they were still students at Goldsmiths College, and jump-started his own ascent.

## Yoko Ono

YOKO ONO B. 1933, TOKYO, JAPAN. LIVES AND WORKS IN NEW YORK.





*Illustration of Yoko Ono by Rebecca Strickson for Artsy, based on a photograph by Michael Lavine. Original photograph © Yoko Ono.*

In December 1969, Yoko Ono and John Lennon launched a viral, global campaign, plastering 10 cities with a simple, resounding message: “WAR IS OVER!” and in smaller letters, “IF YOU WANT IT.” At a salient moment this December, Ono revived the initiative, turning to social media and her website to once again propel peace. And while the artist’s actions for peace have been a persistent force since the death of her husband in 1980, Ono’s influence was especially palpable this year, be it through denouncing gun violence via Twitter, organizing thousands of people to form a giant peace sign in Central Park, or inspiring audiences through her art, which saw a much-deserved spotlight at MoMA this year. “Yoko Ono was so ahead of her time that only now—four or five decades after some of her seminal early pieces—her work seems finally contemporary in a sense that a larger audience can uncover its layers of meaning” explains Klaus Biesenbach, director of MoMA PS1 and chief curator at large at MoMA. “As a pioneer in conceptual, social and performance practices she is one of the most innovative and groundbreaking artists of our time.” “Yoko Ono: One Woman Show, 1960–1971” led us through the artist’s young career, with doses of painting, performance, video, photography, and text in equal measure, all the while enveloping visitors in a sequence of experiential, engaging moments.

The show, and the rich time period it drew from, rejected any doubts around Ono’s visionary practice and her role as an artist in her own right. Performances on view included a recreation of *Bag Piece* (1964), with a live performer stretching and squirming on a small stage in a black bag, and a screening of *Cut Piece* (1964), where Ono sat still, solemnly, as audience members took scissors to her outfit. At the center of the space a new commission, a tall, wobbly spiral staircase—much like one on view now at Beijing’s Fauschou Foundation—beckoned viewers to climb upwards, finding at the top a skylight and a moment of respite. The show unwound like a cathartic exercise, delighting as it unfolded, bolstered by the artist’s small instructional tome *Grapefruit* (1964), its pages lining the walls with contemplative reflections, like “Listen to the sound of the earth turning.” Similarly instructive is “THE RIVERBED,” Ono’s current two-part exhibition, which will evolve over its run at Andrea Rosen Gallery and Galerie Lelong in New York. Again the artist invites meditative experience, this time asking audiences to sit and think on simple terms like “remember” and “wish,” and to contribute their thoughts and actions to the installation’s final form.

## Theaster Gates

B. 1973, CHICAGO. LIVES AND WORKS IN CHICAGO.



*Illustration of Theaster Gates by Rebecca Strickson for Artsy, based on a photograph by korban karaoyal. Original photograph courtesy of the artist.*

With degrees in urban planning and ceramics under his belt, Chicago-based Gates elegantly balances commercial success with a practice that actively addresses—and interacts with—class struggle, urban growth, and community activism. Over the past five years, the artist's large sculptures, often built from repurposed materials found in blighted urban neighborhoods, have featured in a rash of major surveys that gather the world's most progressive work—2010's Whitney Biennial, 2013's DOCUMENTA, and 2015's Venice Biennale. At the Biennale, his room-sized installation, *Martyr Construction* (2015), breathed new life into tiles, statues, and a bell from a Chicago church that had been demolished.

This year, after a much-regaled solo show at blue-chip gallery White Cube, Gates opened a 17,000-square-foot nonprofit arts center, the



art practice, his urban planning concerns, and the financial viability of the neighborhood in which he lives is nothing short of revolutionary,” comments Michael Darling, chief curator at Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art. “Very few artists with interests in the social realm have found a way to be as directly effective as he has, and if they have, they probably have left truly innovative artmaking behind. Theaster hasn’t.”

## Frank Stella

B. 1936, MALDEN, MASSACHUSETTS. LIVES AND WORKS IN NEW YORK.



*Illustration of Frank Stella by Rebecca Strickson for Artsy, based on a photograph by Kristine Larsen.*

This fall, the Whitney dedicated the first major retrospective to grace its newly opened, Renzo Piano-designed home to none other than Frank Stella. In the late 1950s, Stella was one of the first painters to reign the

And his famous line, “What you see is what you see,” was crowned as the movement’s appropriately clear-cut rallying cry. The exhibition is one of Stella’s largest to date, spanning around 100 works and his entire career, from the “Black Paintings” that propelled him into the art historical canon, to his later works, controversially exuberant mash-ups of shapes, gestures, and styles. “There is a lot of discussion these days about abstract painting; its resurgence, relevance, and continued validity. This is not the first time in art history that abstraction has faced these challenges,” says the retrospective’s curator, Michael Auping. “Stella faced them in the late 1950s, following the high water mark of Abstract Expressionism. He answered them with his ‘Black Paintings,’ which became the Holy Grail of Minimalism. He has been answering challenges to abstraction for five decades since, revitalizing and retooling it with each new series. Other than Willem de Kooning, I can think of no other artist who has had such a sustained impact on his genre.”

## Tania Bruguera

B. 1968, HAVANA, CUBA. LIVES AND WORKS IN NEW YORK.

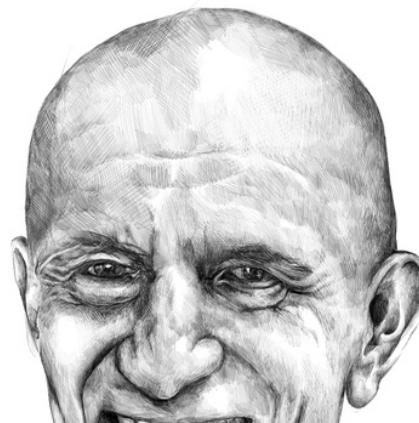


Cuban dissident performance and installation artist Tania Bruguera has been challenging and probing political systems—as well as the boundary between art and activism—and advocating for freedom of expression for over two decades. In one of her best-known works, Bruguera had policemen on horses ride around Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall, controlling crowds of unsettled museum-goers. Last year, she planned a provocative performance in Havana, in which she created a soapbox for individuals to voice their grievances about the communist Cuban government. However, the work first drew the attention of the authorities, who detained the artist and confiscated her passport, preventing it from taking place. She has since had her passport returned and is back on U.S. shores, where she’s currently in the midst of an artist residency with New York City Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs.

A sustained force for immigrant rights, Bruguera collaborated with the Queens Museum in 2011 to found Immigrant Movement International, a knowledge-sharing and support group for immigrants, and a think tank to imagine a more humane culture of international migration. MoMA acquired one of her radical performance and video works this year, confirming Bruguera’s status as one of the preeminent performance artists of our time. The world’s authority on performance art, RoseLee Goldberg, tells Artsy, “Tania Bruguera’s work remains as radical today as it was when I first encountered it in the mid-’90s, with a work entitled *What Belongs to Me*, a two-hour silent piece on censorship.”

## Alex Katz

B. 1927, BROOKLYN, NEW YORK. LIVES AND WORKS IN NEW YORK AND LINCOLNVILLE, MAINE.





*Illustration of Alex Katz by Rebecca Strickson for Artsy, based on a photograph by Vivien Bittencourt.*

In the 1950s, when Abstract Expressionism was still in vogue, Katz broke irreverently away from the wanton brushstrokes of Pollock and de Kooning to begin painting in his signature style—bold, stylized close-ups of elegant figures assembled from intersecting planes of saturated color. Now 88 years old, Katz has been hailed as the father of contemporary figurative painting, and his portraits and landscapes—both sprawling and small, intimate and brimming with cinematic drama—have headlined solo shows for decades.

This year, though, was an especially momentous one for the artist, with major exhibitions at the High Museum of Art, the Guggenheim Bilbao, the Colby College Museum of Art, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. “Alex Katz’s importance lies, certainly, in his experimentation with the form and structure of painting—his early experiments with shaped supports were revelatory and pioneering—but just as significant is his investigation into the mechanics of perception,” explains Kelly Baum, Curator of Postwar and Contemporary Art at the Met. “When it comes down to it, most, if not all, of his paintings are about how we see.”

In step with 2015’s figurative painting resurgence, young artists are taking note, and citing Katz as an inspiration left and right. “Alex’s work constantly renews itself. It is *always* contemporary because he studies what other artists, especially emerging artists, are doing, and he uses these observations to generate the questions and problems that motivate his practice,” says Diana Tuite, who curated his show at Colby. “Even at this stage in his career, after having arrived at a mature and established style, he approaches painting very much as its student.”

## Cindy Sherman

B. 1954 GLEN RIDGE, NEW JERSEY. LIVES AND WORKS IN NEW YORK, NEW YORK.





*Illustration of Cindy Sherman by Rebecca Strickson for Artsy, based on a photograph by Cindy Sherman. Original photograph courtesy of Cindy Sherman and Metro Pictures, New York.*

There are few photographers—let alone female photographers—who have enjoyed the longevity, dynamism, and influence of New-Jersey-born artist Cindy Sherman. In a career spanning five decades, she has transformed herself into countless fictional figures: movie stars, clowns, victims, ingénues, predating contemporary obsessions with self-representation. “Public discussion about the fluidity of identity has become so commonplace that it might be difficult for a younger audience to appreciate how original and startling Cindy Sherman’s work was,” says Marco Livingstone, co-curator of “Post Pop: East Meets West” at London’s Saatchi Gallery, which closed in March and featured Sherman’s work. “Her art, however, has since moved far beyond such circumscribed concerns about the self.”

Pieces from her “Untitled Film Stills” series, portraits inspired by movie stills shot in the late 1970s, first got her noticed and still draw crowds today—the work is currently on show at the Rubell Family Collection in Miami, as part of its female-only show “No Man’s Land.” “She was the proto-selfie practitioner extraordinaire,” says London-based writer, curator, and dealer Kenny Schachter, who has collected the artist. “From the very start of her career she really took the Warhol notion of everyone becoming a celebrity, and made herself one in so many different situations; she was so far ahead of the time.”

*artwork inquiries for over 50,000 artists) and data from UBS's art news app Planet Art (artists, exhibitions, and news mentioned among 146,000 articles).*

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