

The 20 Biggest Art News Stories in 2015

In some ways, this year’s art news marched to a familiar, though by no means dull, rhythm: Auction house executives came and went, lawsuits were brought and settled, and all while the price of works at auction reached heretofore unimaginable heights. Yet, though it seems as though sometimes this beat is heard only by those inside the white cube, this year the art world had to contend with broader political and social issues from ISIS’s ongoing destruction of cultural heritage to free speech and labor relations. Here, we bring you the 20 key stories as they unfolded throughout the year.




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ISIS Continues Destruction of Cultural Heritage





Temple of Baal-Shamin in Palmyra, Syria courtesy Bernard Gagnon via Creative Commons.

ISIS continued its wanton destruction of cultural heritage. In grotesque acts that shocked even the most callous observer, the group wiped Palmyra's 2000-year-old Temple of Bel off the map, decapitated an archaeologist who heroically refused to disclose the location of valuable artifacts, and tied several prisoners to ancient columns before using explosives to demolish them. The selling of ancient artifacts is reportedly important to funding the group, which uses the proceeds to support future acts of terrorism.

Appropriation Artists Are Still Getting Sued

In **January**, artist Luc Tuymans was found guilty of plagiarism by a Belgian court after the artist used a photograph by Katrijn Van Giel as the source for one of his paintings. After Tuymans appealed the ruling, the pair came to a reportedly amicable but confidential out-of-court settlement in **October**. Appropriation artists continue to have a tough time, as Richard Prince and Gagosian can attest to. In February, Prince's instagram art, on view at the gallery, prompted cease-and-desist letters from photographer Donald Graham, whose image of a Rastafarian was uploaded to an Instagram account and subsequently appropriated by Prince. In **December**, photographer Mitchel Gray brought lawsuits against Jeff Koons, the auction house Phillips Auctioneers, and an unnamed former owner of Koons' work, alleging that the artist plagiarized his photograph in a 1986 work that was then sold at the auction house.

Alleged Fraud Rocks Art World

It takes some serious chutzpah to defraud a Russian oligarch, but that's exactly what Dmitry Rybolovlev claims Tania Rappo and Yves Bouvier did when they inflated the asking price of several works of art they sold him, pocketing the difference. In the legal battle between Rybolovlev and Bouvier, who was the largest investor in Luxembourg's "Le Freeport," a central question is whether Bouvier was acting as an art dealer (in which case he could increase the prices of the work by as much as he wanted) or an agent working on a set commission. Bouvier was arrested in Monaco on suspicion of fraud in **February**, before being released on bail. In a subsequent case, he was charged over the sale of Picasso works that were reportedly stolen.

Tad Smith was named CEO of Sotheby's, replacing William Ruprecht in March. The move was surprising considering that Smith had no experience in the auction industry before taking the helm of the 270-year-old auction house. Smith oversaw a doubling of profits in a six-month period during his time as chief executive of the Madison Square Garden Company, which is no doubt the kind of magic that the man behind the shakeup, activist-investor Dan Loeb, is hoping Smith brings to Sotheby's.

The World's New Most Expensive Artwork Is Christened



Picasso, *Les femmes d'Alger (Version 'O')*, 1955. Price Realized: \$179,365,000. Courtesy of Christie's Images Ltd. 2015.

price went up, up, and away (albeit slowly at times). Ultimately, the painting sold to an undisclosed buyer (rumored to be Hamad bin Jassim bin Jaber Al Thani of the Qatari royal family) for \$179 million, making it the most expensive artwork ever to sell at auction.

Christoph Büchel's Controversial Mosque at the Venice Biennale Is Shuttered



Christoph Büchel's mosque for the Icelandic Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale. Photos by Alex John Beck for Artsy.

As Iceland's representative at the Venice Biennale, artist Christoph Büchel transformed the city's Santa Maria della Misericordia, a former church, into a mosque. The challenging project raised questions about European xenophobia, the historical treatment of Muslims in Italy and Iceland, and whether "art" can extend to a fully functioning place of worship. Ultimately, such discussions were cut short. Authorities shuttered the project towards the end of May, citing various issues such as incorrect permits and overcapacity occupancy.

Gurlitt Hoard Begins to Head Home

Matisse's *Seated Woman* (1921) was returned to the heirs of Jewish art dealer Paul Rosenberg in May. The work was looted by the Nazis and was among more than 1,200 pieces discovered in 2012 in the Munich

collection, which was seized by Nazis during the Holocaust and subsequently reclaimed once the war ended, met mixed results when auctioned at two **November** sales at Sotheby's London. Meanwhile, away from the market, a report issued in **June** by the World Jewish Restitution Organization broadly criticized the seemingly hostile and highly litigious way museums handle restitution claims.

Tania Bruguera Tests Limits of Cuban Artistic Freedom



Tania Bruguera, Opening Session of the foundational process of the Hannah Arendt International Institute of Activism, 2015. Photo by Pablo León de la Barra, courtesy of Studio Bruguera and Yo Tambien Exijo Platform.

After repeatedly testing the limits of artistic freedom in Cuba, activist and artist Tania Bruguera was detained multiple times this year, including on New Year's Eve following a planned event in which members of the public were to be given access to a soapbox and a microphone in the city's Revolution Square. As part of the investigation stemming from the detention, Bruguera's passport was held by Cuban authorities for several months, barring her from leaving the country. In May, she was again detained for a performance in which she read aloud Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* to coincide with the opening of the Havana Biennial. Such incidents demonstrate that, even as diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Cuba thaw, the country's authorities remain wary of dissent.

Museums Become Sites of Political Protest



Protests in front of the Brooklyn Museum on Tuesday, Nov. 17, 2015. Photo by Isaac Kaplan for Artsy.

series of demonstrations against the poor conditions facing the workers constructing the Guggenheim's offshoot in Abu Dhabi. Gulf Labor and GULF also mounted protests at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice, with a goal of "highlighting 120 years of underpayment at the Venice Biennale." Back in New York, demonstrations led by separate groups were held outside of the Brooklyn Museum in **November** after a real estate developers conference—something many saw as a cause of gentrification—took place inside the institution's walls.

Art Basel Names Its First Director of the Americas

Art Basel named its first director of the Americas in **July**, tapping Noah Horowitz for the role. Horowitz had served as The Armory Show's executive director since 2011, having launched the online-only VIP Art Fair before that. He is credited with putting The Armory Show back on the art-world map by dramatically reducing the number of galleries participating and upping the quality of the fair's programming.

Two Storied Art Publications Merge

As digital media continues to impinge on traditional print publications, *Art in America* and *ARTnews* circled the wagons, merging in **July**. Collector and publisher Peter Brant, who still owns and operates *Interview Magazine*, sold *Art in America* as well as *The Magazine Antiques* and *Modern Magazine* to *ARTnews* SA for a 47.61% stake in the holding company. Founded in 1913 and 1902 respectively, *Art in America* and *ARTnews* rely predominantly on print advertising revenue, and have reportedly faced declining circulation in recent years.

Ai Weiwei's Passport Is Returned



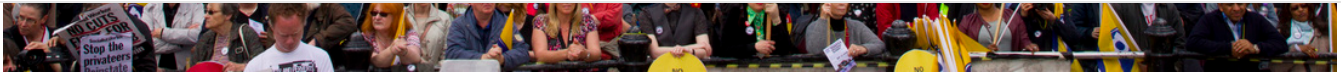


Photos via @aiww.

After four years sequestered in China, dissident artist Ai Weiwei received his passport back in **July**. Chinese authorities had kept it in their possession since Ai was detained upon trying to depart Beijing for Hong Kong in 2011. He proceeded to travel to Melbourne and London for exhibitions at the National Gallery of Victoria and Royal Academy, respectively. British authorities initially only granted him a 20-day visa—it took the personal intervention of Home Secretary Theresa May to bump it up to a full six months. He has spent much of the time since in Berlin, where he now serves as a guest professor at the Universität der Künste. Upon returning to Beijing, Ai claims to have found his apartment and studio freshly bugged by the authorities.

Labor Disputes and Strikes at MoMA and National Gallery





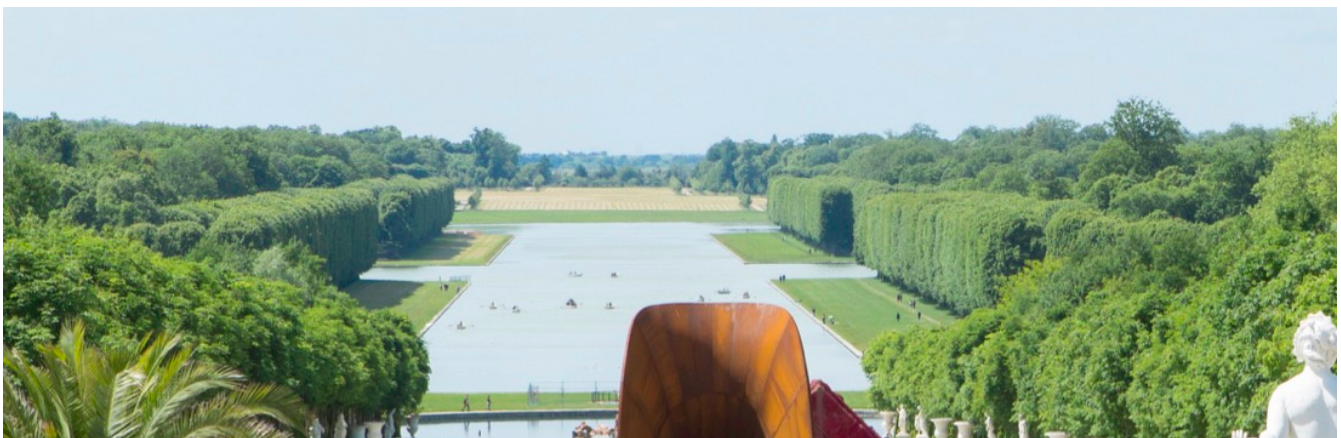
Strikers in Front of the National Gallery, London. Courtesy PCS Union.

Workers at MoMA in New York and the National Gallery in London took to the streets to protest compensation this year. At MoMA, curatorial, retail, and administrative staff locked horns with management, demonstrating outside the museum over wages and health care costs before the parties came to an agreement in **June**. In London, National Gallery staff went on an indefinite strike in **August** to protest privatization plans (which strikers in the museum's Trafalgar Square deem unnecessary) that would affect some 400 employee roles. In **October**, the strikers resumed work and reached an agreement that, while still allowing the privatization to continue, will make sure that the National Gallery's labor standards are not diminished by the move.

“Do Not Touch the Art” Is Tested

If you're having a bad day, just be grateful you're not the 12-year-old boy who accidentally punched a hole through a 350-year-old Paolo Porpora painting, worth around \$1.5 million. In the same week in **August**, a young girl knocked over a 2000-year-old vase at the Israel Museum—though subsequent repairs apparently left the object in better shape than ever. These follow another incident in May when two tourists broke an Italian sculpture when they tried to snap the perfect selfie (the Instagram likes aren't worth it, folks).

Vandals Spray Anish Kapoor Sculptures with Anti-Semitic Graffiti





Anish Kapoor, *Dirty Corner*, 2011-2015. © Seixas. "Anish Kapoor" at Château de Versailles, Versailles (2015).

In **September**, vandals snuck into the gardens of Versailles and defaced Anish Kapoor's massive outdoor sculpture with anti-Semitic graffiti. Never one to shy away from making a bold statement, Kapoor sought to leave the slogans intact in an effort to remind people of still-pervasive prejudice in France, but a court ruled against him and the words were covered over in gold foil. In a separate incident later in the year, Kapoor threatened legal action against Karamay, a Chinese city that unveiled *Big Oil Bubble*, a public sculpture that bears a remarkable resemblance to Kapoor's luminous *Cloud Gate* (2006).

Auction House Guarantees Muddy Art Market

Though 2015 brought a new world record for the most expensive artwork to sell at auction, art market pundits worried openly throughout the year that the secondary market may not be as strong as it outwardly appears. The majority of this concern centered around the use of guarantees by both Christie's and Sotheby's to secure major lots for their spring and fall evening sales, which some suggest could be inflating results. Christie's has arguably been more aggressive in its use of guarantees, likely due to its privately held structure. Sotheby's \$500 million guarantee of the Alfred Taubman Collection (the house's former chairman), disclosed in **September**, raised the most eyebrows.

Art Students Take Paintbrush to the Picket Line





Photo from December 8th rally supporting the occupation of the clock tower. Photo by Michael Fleshman.

As costs at higher-education institutions grow, student-artists have fought back against alleged mismanagement. At New York's Cooper Union, where undergraduates attended gratis until the fall of 2014, students earned a major victory after a court case brought by the New York Attorney General against the institution in **September** resulted in a consent decree that charts a path back to free. Across the coast, graduate students at the University of Southern California rebelled against the Art and Design program following major structural changes, with the entire first year class dropping out en masse.

Proposed German Export Law Provokes Art-World Backlash

Art dealers, collectors, auction houses, and major artists such as Gerhard Richter and Georg Baselitz spoke out strongly against the "German Cultural Property and Heritage Protection Law," which would require that any work valued at or above €300,000 and older than 70 years be granted an export license before leaving the country. If those terms sound onerous, they're actually a marked improvement over €150,000 and 50-year restrictions in the original draft. The revised draft of the law was approved by the German Cabinet in **November** and is due to be debated in parliament this coming spring.

Artist and poet Ashraf Fayadh was sentenced to death by a Saudi court after being convicted of apostasy in **November**. The verdict, which can be appealed, is just one in a string of recent harsh, draconian punishments doled out by the country (in another instance, a liberal blogger was sentenced to a public flogging). Human rights groups, intellectuals, and artists from around the globe are rallying around Fayadh, who is officially stateless, in a bid to have the sentence overturned.

Artists and Dealers Feud

Though most art-world disputes are handled behind closed doors, two made front pages this year—of the Arts section, at least. Stefan Simchowicz and Jonathan Ellis King sued Ibrahim Mahama in **August** after the artist declared hundreds of his jute-sack works, likely to be valued at around \$4.45 million, illegitimate. (Similar jute sacks were used in Mahama's installation at the Venice Biennale, creating a corridor outside the Arsenale.) Another dispute, between collector Bert Kreuk and artist Danh Võ, centered on a piece the latter allegedly agreed to make for an exhibition of Kreuk's collection at the Gemeentemuseum in the Hague in 2013. Vo and Kreuk finally buried the hatchet in **December**, with both parties agreeing to never have anything to do with each other ever again (and that neither art nor money would be trading hands in the future).

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