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10 San Francisco art events that mattered in 2015

By Charles Desmarais



Photo: JKA Photography



IMAGE 4 OF 10
Gallery 308

Longtime critics often say — and they are right — that Top 10 lists are unfair, unnuanced and, too often, uninteresting. The *New Yorker*'s Emily Nussbaum once wrote, “I object to any system that makes me feel like a store clerk in ‘High Fidelity.’”

But I'm new to this gig, so I'm thrilled to indulge my inner nerd and what Nussbaum would call my “false authority.” Not that I think there could be only 10 significant exhibitions and events in an art scene as rich as San Francisco's; I'm just saying that these are 10 of real consequence. The reader can argue, and I hope you will: Send me your additions and emendations via e-mail, or post them in the comments. If you convince me, I'll say so in print in *The Chronicle*.

Here are 10 events in the past year that made a difference to San Francisco, and to me:

1. The death of gallerist Paule Anglim, who supported artists she believed in, with little regard for whether anyone would actually buy their work. Over some 40 years, her gallery became the gathering place for the most committed and the most intellectually challenging people engaged in art in the Bay Area.

2. Trevor Paglen's show last spring at Altman Siegel, his participation in the San Jose Museum of Art's terrific “Covert Operations” (through Jan. 10) and his work on “Citizenfour,” winner of the 2015 Academy Award for documentary film. With unerring visual instincts and a doctorate in geography, Paglen has employed art to build an eye-opening dossier on the most insidious of secret government involvement in our lives.

3. “Jewel City: Art From San Francisco’s Panama-Pacific International Exposition,” at the de Young Museum through Jan. 10. Modern art in the West arguably started with its introduction at the 1915 fair, and this exhibition is a fine representation of what amounted to a vast world’s fair of design and art.

4. Janet Cardiff’s “The Forty Part Motet” at Fort Mason Center for Arts and Culture through Jan. 18. A deeply affecting work, treating of personal intimacy and spiritual longing; a surprisingly heart-touching feat of (ordinarily cerebral) engineering.

5. SFMOMA on the Go. The Cardiff piece is too good to bury in a longer list, but it is only the last of a three-year series of unprecedented collaborations between the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and arts institutions across the Bay Area. Among the best in 2015: “Fertile Ground: Art and Community in California” at Oakland Museum of California; “Doug Hall: The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described” at San Francisco Art Institute; and “Portraits and Other Likenesses From SFMOMA” at Museum of the African Diaspora.

6. “J.M.W. Turner: Painting Set Free” at the de Young this summer. A virtuoso demonstration of the native urge toward expressionism, even before there was a word for it.

7. McMurtry Building for the department of art and art history, Stanford University, which opened this fall. A bracingly complex yet entirely rational design by Diller Scofidio + Renfro brings together practice and theory at one of our great resources of higher education. Along with the venerable Cantor Arts Center and the 2014 Anderson Collection, as well as performing arts venues and programs, Stanford is making a welcome bid to reinforce its reputation in engineering and business with distinction in the arts.

8. “@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz.” The popular success of this sophisticated conceptual art, presented on a grand scale by the For-Site Foundation, was a big enough deal to be a Top 10 choice for 2014, when it opened, and for 2015, when it closed in the spring. Ai Weiwei is certainly the world’s most famous artist who doesn’t act like a bad TV version of what that’s supposed to mean.

9. “High Style: The Brooklyn Museum Costume Collection,” at the Legion of Honor last spring and summer, is an exhibition in which I was administratively (but not curatorially) involved as deputy director for art at Brooklyn several years ago. But the importance of the collection — fragile greats of American design preserved nowhere else, and now permanently in the care of the Metropolitan Museum of Art — and the social significance of the stories told by the objects are unarguable.

10. “The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter: Curated by Katy Grannan” at Fraenkel Gallery last summer. The best part of this exhibition was the free rein the gallery gave to the artist — one of their mid-career star photographers — and that she allowed herself. Choices that might have seemed quirky on their own came together as a heart-tugging whole, sentimental in the best way.

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