The Arts Issue

DEPARTURES

These Are the Faces of Art Activism Today
By the Editors
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These Are the Faces of Art Activism Today

Introducing America's most urgent creative movement—and the people behind it.

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A painting can change the way you see the world. But the 15 men and women shown here are betting that art can change the world itself.

Dustin Aksland

Trevor Paglen

Photographed at Manhattan's Metro Pictures Gallery, in the reflection of Paglen's work Color Study (San Quentin State Prison, San Quentin, CA)

Trevor Paglen grew up on U.S. Air Force bases, surrounded by secrecy. Now he turns what the military keeps hidden into art. An artist and author with a Ph.D. in geography from the University of California, Berkeley, Paglen fuses image-making, engineering, and investigative reporting to explore the murky ethics of mass surveillance. He's best known for his photographs of NSA eavesdropping centers, CIA black sites, and American spy satellites, which he takes from public lands using powerful lenses. For Paglen, the very act of documenting state secrecy is a statement. "When you're making images, you're exercising your right to make images," he says. "It's a corollary to freedom of speech."

Yet his photographs of military installations are intentionally blurry, like Impressionist landscapes; beautiful shots of killer drones in flight look like Rothko paintings, so zoomed out that the Predators are all but invisible. The object worth considering in Paglen's pictures isn't the base or the drone; it's the difficulty in finding it.

"It's about teaching people how to see and suggesting that certain things are important for society to look at." The haziness of his images underscores how hard it is to locate truth when governments—of both parties, Paglen insists—track their citizens but conceal their own actions. —*Gabriella Fuller*

Dustin Aksland

Dread Scott

Photographed at Nicholas Naquan Heyward Jr. Park in Brooklyn

When Dread Scott was 23 and still a student at the Art Institute of Chicago, his installation *What Is the Proper Way to Display a U.S. Flag* —which allowed audiences to step on the Stars and Stripes—prompted Congress to pass the Flag Protection Act of 1989. President George H. W. Bush declared the piece "disgraceful." Scott was encouraged.

A former punk-rock kid from Chicago who inscribed the country's foundational sin in his chosen name (a reference to the 1857 Supreme Court decision that upheld slavery), Scott repurposes American iconography into indictments of racism. He highlights the past's hold on the present, perhaps no more succinctly than in the piece *I Am Not a Man* .

The sandwich board, which Scott wore on the streets of Harlem, is a near replica of one used in the Memphis sanitation-workers strike of 1968. With one addition: the word *not* . "The performance," Scott has said, "evoked the humiliation that is visited on black people and the negation that defines our existence." —*GF*

Dustin Aksland

Cauleen Smith

Photographed at her studio in Chicago

"I'm not an activist," says filmmaker and multimedia artist Cauleen Smith. "But I don't understand how people can make art that isn't about the world around them." In lyrical, often emotionally brutal narratives, Smith probes the complexities of black representation, focusing on agency in the midst of oppression. For almost 20 years, she mostly worked "in complete obscurity," she says with a dry laugh. Yet "somewhere between the death of Trayvon Martin and the death of Michael Brown," her concerns and her work started attracting mainstream attention.

Lately, she's earned raves for "In the Wake," a powerful series of deceptively pretty banners that hung at the Whitney Biennial, hand-embroidered with milagro-like iconography of bleeding black organs and pencils, microphones, and guns, with phrases like "We were never meant to survive." The title, taken from the feminist scholar Christina Sharpe, has a triple meaning, referring to the metaphorical wake of the slave ships, the waking of consciousness, and the wakes we hold for the dead.

Having originally conceived of the banners only as disposable props for a filmed requiem, Smith decided to invest them with durability and beauty, and turned them into objects to be passed down and heeded across generations—an acknowledgment that their message of pain and resistance is persistent. —*GF*

Dustin Aksland

Latoya Ruby Frazier

Photographed in front of the Edgar Thomson steel plant in Braddock, Pennsylvania

MacArthur-grant-winning photographer LaToya Ruby Frazier has spent more than a decade documenting the aftereffects of deindustrialization on the black working class. Her raw, humanist work chronicles the implosion of American cities and the unevenly distributed benefits of Rust Belt revitalization. For her series entitled "The Notion of Family," Frazier spent 13 years recording life in Braddock, Pennsylvania (see "Back to the Burgh," page 150), the sidelined former steel town where she was raised. In haunting black-and-white portraits, she trained her lens primarily on her grandmother, her mother, and herself to explore the legacy of structural inequity across three generations.

"Flint Is Family" focuses on another group of women, to take stock of the water crisis's human cost. Yet Frazier locates resilience—and anger—in physical vulnerability. Her portraits, pained yet devoid of self-pity, display a hard-won strength and hold failed policies to account. Now Frazier is working on a project with coal miners in Belgium, because none of these factors are unique to Braddock or Flint. They operate in underfunded cities throughout the developed world. "My work," she says, "is a testament to the global consequences of institutional and structural racism, socioeconomic inequality, poor access to healthcare, and the degradation of the environment." —*GF*

Dustin Aksland

Zoe Buckman & Natalie Frank

Photographed at Frank's studio in Brooklyn

Zoe Buckman (left) and Natalie Frank had hoped their work would be largely irrelevant by now. In pieces like *Let Her Rave* (Buckman's bouquets of boxing gloves bound in wedding-dress fabric) and "The Brothers Grimm" (Frank's series of drawings reimagining fairy tales as centers of female power), the two friends marry the fiercely feminist and the stereotypically feminine to explode gender norms. "I thought having to explain the risibility of gender codes would be mostly behind us by now," Buckman says.

Last spring, the installation artist and the magical-realist painter teamed up for *We Hold These Truths to Be Self-Evident* , a 30-foot mural displaying quotes about rape, abortion, and women's looks, spoken by 37 politicians from both sides of the aisle. (The title is taken not from the Declaration of Independence but from suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton's Declaration of Sentiments, to remind viewers that it was less than a hundred years ago that women won the vote and started to become full citizens—a process the piece suggests is still incomplete.) The work is a testament to the persistence of misogyny and biological ignorance. The message is that words have real-world consequences. —*GF*

Dustin Aksland

Occupy Museums

Photographed on Manhattan's High Line, overlooking Hudson Yards

The five-member collective Occupy Museums was founded in the activist crucible of Zuccotti Park during Occupy Wall Street. The group of artists (from left: Noah Fischer, Tal Beery, Imani Jacqueline Brown, Kenneth Pietrobono, and Arthur Polendo) designs projects and actions that examine the ties between money and culture. The members believe that for many artists, who operate on the lower end of the pay scale but find they increasingly need a $100,000 MFA degree to get their foot in the door, the burden of student loans is onerous.

Their collective project Debtfair, which they launched in 2012, was one of the most prominent elements at the recent Whitney Biennial; it highlighted works by 30 artists strained by circumstances like Puerto Rico's financial crisis or payments for New York University graduate degrees. Occupy takes a holistic view of economic inequality, mining its intersection with racism, misogyny, and gentrification. "Shedding light on these extremes helps us raise important questions about the contradictions at the core of our society and economy," Fischer says. —*GF*

Dustin Aksland

Justin Brice Guariglia

For 20 years, Justin Brice Guariglia crisscrossed the globe as a documentarian and photojournalist for publications like *Smithsonian* and the *New York Times* . His sensibility as an artist draws on the planetary perspective he gained in those two decades. “My work is about trying to understand the interconnectedness of time, space, and objects,” he says, giving a tour of his Brooklyn studio, which is populated with dinosaurs, dolls, skulls, and meteorites.

Last spring, he created an app called After Ice, which allows people to take a picture anywhere in the world and see what the future water level will be in that very spot according to NASA’s projections of rising seas. Through January 7, Guariglia’s solo show “Earth Works: Mapping the Anthropocene” can be seen at the Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach, before it travels next fall to the Fisher Museum of Art at the University of Southern California. “I focused on the Anthropocene before I even knew the word,” he says with a laugh, musing on the scientific term for the current era, in which humans have had an impact on the earth’s surface and atmosphere.

Many of the show’s 22 multimedia works include images from the seven flights he flew with a NASA mission over Greenland to study melting glaciers, and from his photos revealing the scars left by agriculture and mining in Asia. “I hope to make felt on a visceral level the phenomena that operate on these temporal and spatial scales, which can seem so distant from us humans.” —*Laura van Straaten*

Dustin Aksland

Favianna Rodriguez

Photographed at her studio in Oakland

Favianna Rodriguez's art tackles climate change, reproductive rights, queer identity, and immigration. The East Oakland printmaker and founder of the artists collective Culture Strike sees the rise of populism worldwide as validation of art's vital necessity. "Art is not just cute; it's central to the way we organize our societies, and without art you're just not going to win." But it's not enough to oppose an agenda, according to Rodriguez. Artists must also offer human connection and alternative narratives to that worldview. "I'm having to travel to places like Iowa and Oregon and Texas that people would consider more rural and more conservative, but when I go to these places, what I often find is, people just need to hear the stories."

For example, Culture Strike pairs artists with undocumented migrants to create works with a visceral understanding of what it's like for a mother to be locked in a Texas detention center with her children. "Art is not about what's politically feasible; art is about a future that has not yet arrived but that we can taste and feel," Rodriguez insists. "Art moves faster than politics." —*John Lopez*

Dustin Aksland

Eric Gottesman & Hank Willis Thomas

Photographed at the Four Freedoms memorial, on New York's Roosevelt Island

On the wall of Hank Willis Thomas's Brooklyn studio, there is a pin-studded map of America, such as you might find in the headquarters of a political campaign. Each pin points to a new node—a gallery, a museum, an arts collective—in the cultural network he and Eric Gottesman (left) are building as the founders of For Freedoms, the world's first artist-run super PAC.

Established in 2016, For Freedoms is partly an artistic statement, a comment on the outsize role of money in both politics and the art world. But it's also a legitimate use of the super-PAC concept: an independent platform for action and advocacy in the name of a specific cause. The cause, in this case, is advancing the four freedoms Franklin D. Roosevelt listed in his famous wartime address of 1941: freedom from fear and from want; freedom of worship and of speech.

"The ACLU is a good comparison, but they're lawyers and we're artists," says Thomas, whose celebrated multidisciplinary work often co-opts the glossy idiom of advertising. "They're trained to follow logic, and we're trained to follow illogic." In the past year, the nonpartisan organization has plastered provocative works on billboards, buildings, and park benches, and mounted exhibitions involving many of the artists in the pages that follow. Its goal is to sponsor art that inspires viewers to engage in our democracy. "Art allows you to liberate your mind from existing structures," says Gottesman, a video artist and human rights activist. "How can that liberation make its way into an establishment?" — *Julian Sancton.*