

Some Marched Their Own Way

Holland Cotter's Favorite 2013 Art Events



Agaton Strom for The New York Times

Holland Cotter's Best Art of 2013: A look at works by Jane Alexander, Paul McCarthy and others.

By [HOLLAND COTTER](#)
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"Scenes of Provincial Life" would be an apt title for an account of the 2013 New York art world, a white-bread band going about its practiced rounds. Galleries pushed painting: schooled, skilled, dull. Marquee items that went on view in museums only mildly thrilled or chilled.

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The Metropolitan Museum of Art's peak moment was a decorating job: [reinstalled European painting galleries](#) that had a slow-burning splendor. MoMA clung to West-is-best in an [abstraction survey](#) that didn't budge beyond Euro-America — North America, that is. The Guggenheim's rotunda, with back-to-back James Turrell and Christopher Wool solos, has felt more or less empty since June.

Like all insular communities, the art world is a consensus culture. Week after week, the same people say the same things about the same shows. All surprises are in reality predictable. In 2013 the auction houses did what they are programmed to do: get ever more cash for ever-crummier art. (Francis Bacon paints Lucian Freud. There's a dreary duo.) And the rest of us played our scripted part — gasping, cheering, jeering — to keep business

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strong.

Still, there were memorable breaks in the flow of events. A dozen follow.

'Paul McCarthy, WS' Installed in the drill hall of the Park Avenue Armory, this [ambitious Dante-esque gross-out](#) consisted of seven hours of film surrounding a full-size sculptural ranch house and a sequoia forest. Blood, excrement, alcohol and M & Ms flew through the air as Mr. McCarthy took down targets ranging from Walt Disney ("WS" stands for Snow White backward), himself (the ranch house was a replica of his childhood home) and America's lust for bigness and waste. Some Armory visitors fled from the scene. Others, like me, stayed around.

Ninth Shanghai Biennale This [show](#), which opened in October 2012 and ran well into 2013, was big, set in a former power plant. When it was over, the building was turned into a permanent museum of contemporary art, joining several new private museums in town. Still more have popped up since. In China these days, art equals power in ways we barely grasp. To watch that power accumulated before your eyes and museumized overnight is like seeing the New York art world reflected, at fast-forward speed, in a fun-house mirror.

'Medieval Treasures from Hildesheim' Small, but this [exhibition](#) (through Jan. 5) automatically makes the Met one of the most potent spiritual-power spots in the city. The objects — religious sculptures, liturgical vessels, a bronze baptismal font — are, aesthetically, among the great surviving treasures of Northern European Christendom. More than that, they are soaked in the sanctity of centuries of devotional use. You can feel their heat from here.

'Steve McQueen' One of the year's strongest museum solo shows, although it made it just by a squeak, closing in early January at the Art Institute of Chicago before heading to Europe. (That it didn't stop in New York seems nuts.) A retrospective for a brilliant British artist at midcareer (and the director of "12 Years a Slave"), the work is visually rich and politically goading. And if you ever wondered how films could be turned into objects for gallery display, here's your answer.

'Dancing Around the Bride: Cage, Cunningham, Johns, Rauschenberg and Duchamp' This [exhibition](#) at the Philadelphia Museum of Art offered a curatorial object lesson of another kind: how to bring art, music and dance together, just as the figures listed in the title did more than half a century ago. The mix worked. Enchantment.

'The Encyclopedic Palace' This [presentation](#), organized by Massimiliano Gioni of the New Museum in New York, was the centerpiece of the 55th Venice Biennale. It was carefully thought out, masterfully paced, often moving, but flawed. It paid homage to the recently intensified fetishism surrounding "outsider art," which has always been the mainstream art world's acceptable version of identity art. "Outsider" is a complicated label; it can easily lead to the exoticizing and primitivizing of art and its makers. It did in this show.

'Blues for Smoke' Coming to the Whitney Museum of American Art from Los Angeles, [this show](#) might have gone the route of the Venice centerpiece, but didn't. It took a potentially "racial" theme — blues as music — and flexed and stretched it to include artists of various ethnicities, sexualities, generations, dispositions and disciplines to define a state of mind. The expansion worked subtly, beyond category, and for that reason, grippingly.

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