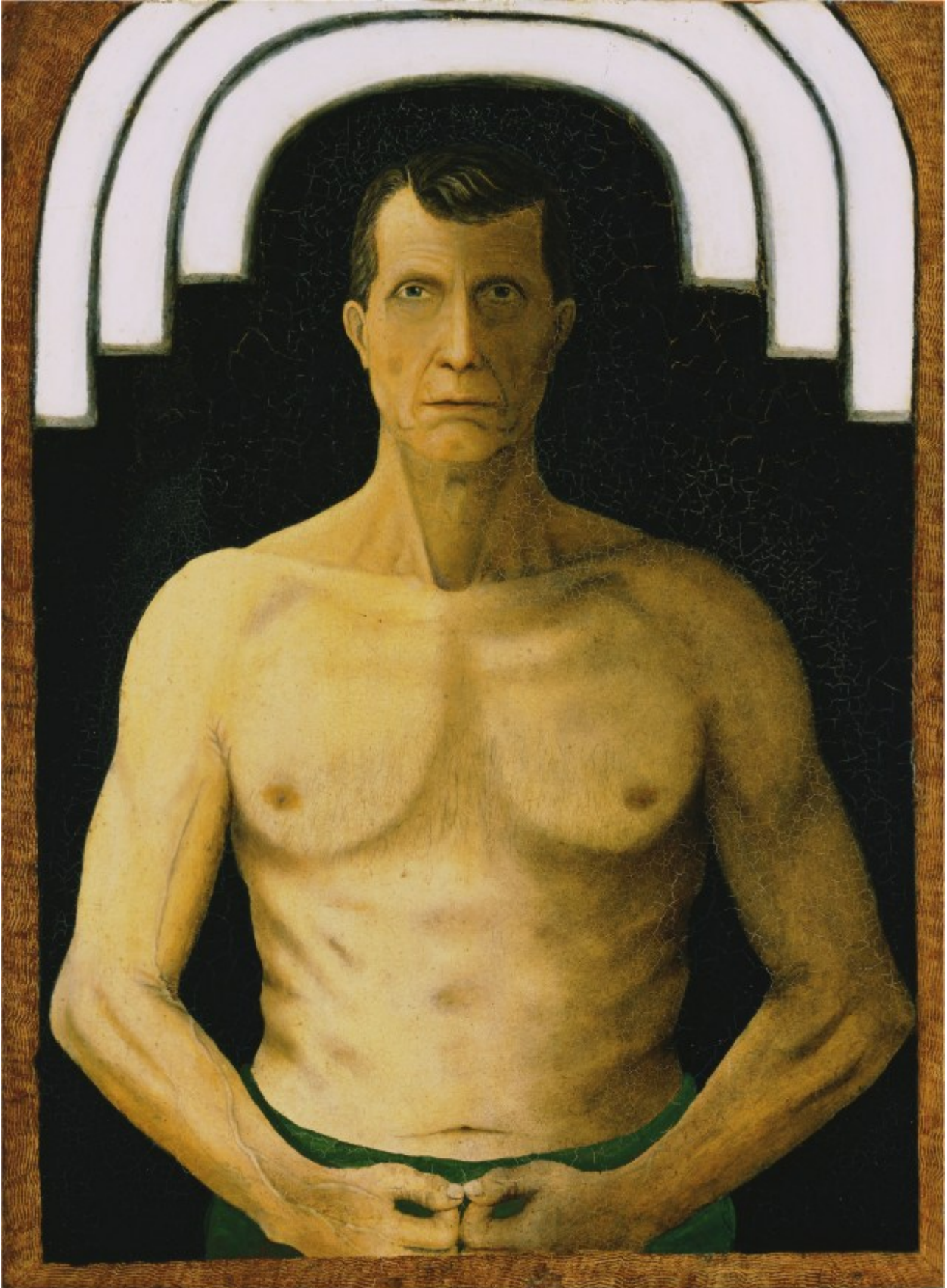


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Endangered Species

Why game-changing group shows have never been so rare

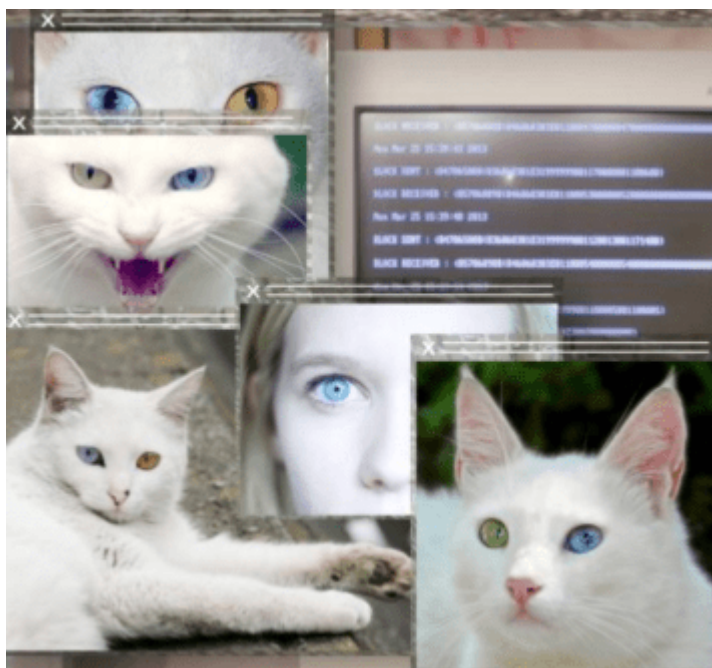


John Kane, *Self-Portrait* (1929). © The Museum of Modern Art/licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY

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The relocation of the [Whitney Museum of American Art](#) in 2015 to the meatpacking district in downtown Manhattan was one of the most anticipated art world events of the decade. Naturally its curators wanted to mount an ambitious inaugural show. “[America is Hard to See](#)” was a thematic survey of US art from 1900 to today, with 600 works by 400 artists in 23 surprising “chapters”. It was important to “not reconfirm the monolithic view of American art”, remembers Donna De Salvo, Chief Curator and Deputy Director for Programs at the Whitney. The show—which was both huge and intellectually demanding, filling most of the new 50,000 sq ft galleries—was widely praised: [Hyperallergic](#) critic Thomas Miccheli called it “a model for a new generation of curators”.



But scour the exhibition listings in *The Art Newspaper's* annual “[The Year Ahead](#)” survey and substantial thematic shows are thin on the ground. This month, there are around 100 loosely thematic group shows compared with 400 single-artist shows at significant museums and galleries around the world. Of these, only a few—such as “[Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power 1963-1983](#)” (at the [Broad](#), Los Angeles until 1 September) or “[Awakenings: Art in Society in Asia 1960s-1990s](#)” (at the [National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art](#), Gwacheon, Korea, until 6 May)—might qualify as landmarks.

These kinds of game-changing exhibitions “have never been common, but were not as rare as they are now,” says Lynne Cooke, Senior Curator, Special Projects in Modern Art, at the [National Gallery of Art](#), Washington DC. Her recent exhibition, “[Outliers and American Vanguard Art](#)” (which finished its tour at the [Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#) on 17 March) examined the under-researched impact of 80 self-taught artists on American modernism. *The New York Times'* Co-Chief Art Critic Roberta Smith [called it](#) “groundbreaking”. So why are museums shying away from such important shows, which might move the history of art forward?

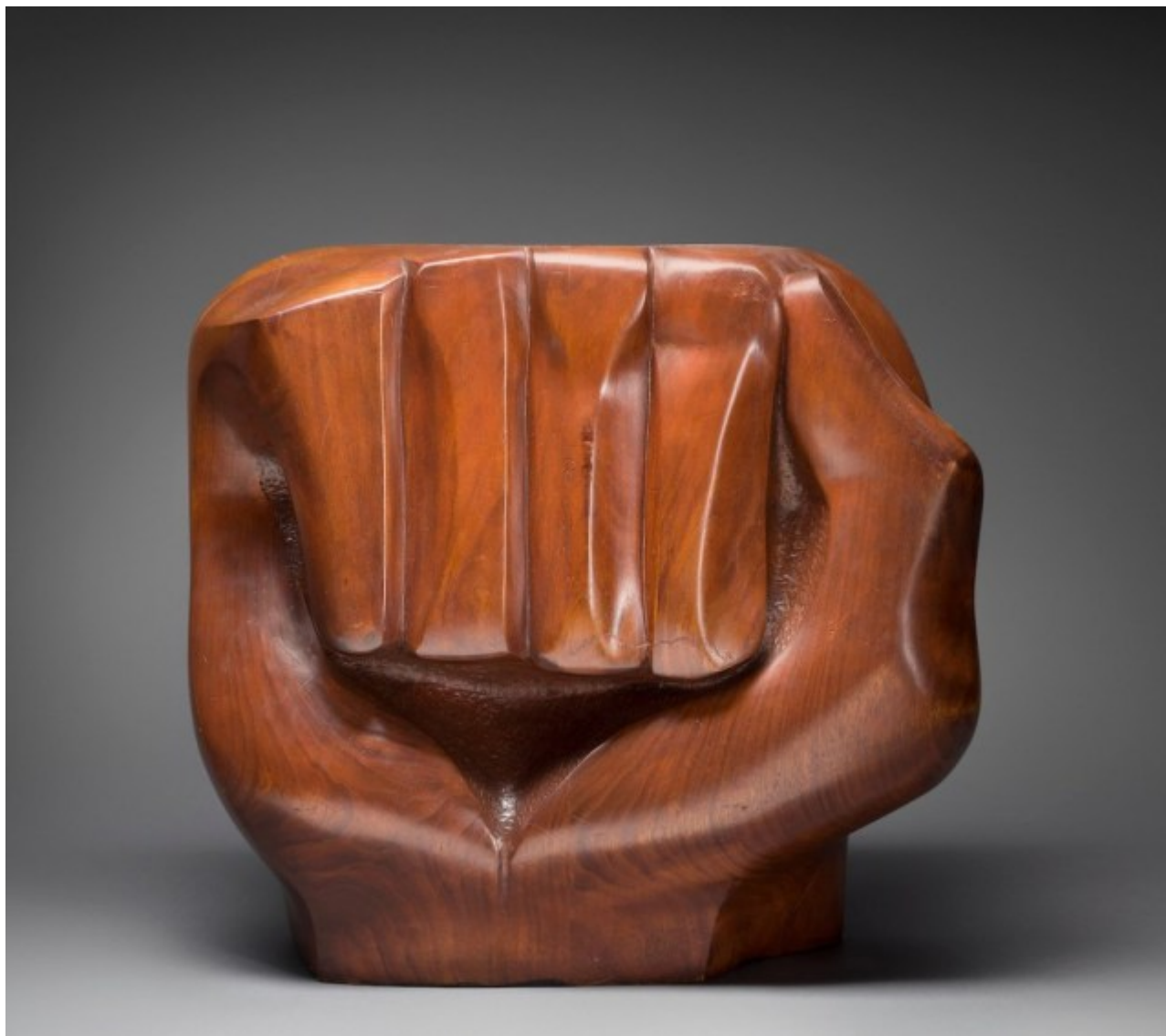
Game-changing group shows have never been so rare

The preponderance of single-artist shows is “boring”, says Andreas Blühm, director of the [Groninger Museum](#) in the Netherlands. “Comparing things is what makes our field so interesting. It is a lack of imagination or courage [that stops museums] escaping from the classical names again and again.” Blühm has curated shows on subjects such as the impact of scientific understanding of light on painting (“[Light!: the Industrial Age 1750 to 1900](#)”) and also co-curated 2017’s “[Romanticism in the North: From Friedrich to Turner](#)”, the first transnational show devoted to northern Romantic landscape painting.

Eva Respini, Chief Curator at the [ICA, Boston](#), mounted “[Art in the Age of the Internet, 1989 to Today](#)”, last year. “Solo shows are our bread and butter,” she says, “but what gives the program texture and ambition are ‘synthetic’ shows, idea shows. They are much harder, but they are necessary for the development of our field—and museums should be doing more of them.”

Part of the problem is that big exhibitions are expensive. Few museums disclose costs, but the former director of a leading

British museum says a major art show “can range in the £1.5m to £3m mark”, while others quote an average of £1m. Thematic exhibitions are not necessarily more expensive—insurance, shipping and fees for a blue-chip artist can far outstrip a group show—but they are more difficult to stage. “Art in the Age of the Internet”, for example, included work by 70 artists: “So, you are working on a much bigger scale in terms of loans, artist approvals, different [commercial] galleries, it’s more difficult to kind of wrangle all of that,” Respini says. “Plus, there is the conceptual challenge—making an argument in space.”



Of the more than 100 group shows listed in *The Art Newspaper's* 2019 edition of “The Year Ahead”, only a few—including “Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power 1963-1983”—can be considered landmarks. Elizabeth Catlett, *Black Unity* (1968). Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Ark. Photography by Edward C. Robison III. © Catlett Mora Family Trust/VAGA at ARS, NY

It is often harder to get loans, as Blühm found when curating “Light!”. “I needed three Monet haystacks to tell the story of daylight. It’s always hard to get an important Monet, but it’s much harder for a thematic show,” Blühm says. “Lenders say: ‘It’s illustrative, you don’t need our picture, you could borrow anyone’s’, which is true. But then the next museum says exactly the same thing: it’s frustrating.”

Securing corporate backing has become increasingly competitive, and sponsors prefer big-name shows. “The environment of corporate giving has remained the same as 15 years ago, but the costs and number of shows has gone up,” says Charles Saumarez Smith, former Secretary and Chief Executive of the Royal Academy in London and now Senior Director at [Blain Southern](#). Some museums look to commercial galleries to make up the gap—a 2016 report by Robin Pogrebin in *The New York Times* cited “donations” from \$10,000 to \$200,000 from New York’s leading dealers. Unsurprisingly, a solo show is a more attractive proposition for an artist’s gallery than a show in which (s)he is one among many. This also leads to suspicions that museums shows are becoming stacked in favor of artists with the most successful galleries. In 2015, *The Art Newspaper* found that [nearly one-third of solo shows](#) in major US museums between 2007 and 2013 were of artists represented by just five galleries: [David Zwirner](#), [Gagosian](#), [Pace](#), [Marian Goodman](#) and [Hauser & Wirth](#).

Curators have an expanded portfolio of tasks—more time is spent networking and less on research

The demands of the market have had an impact on museum shows in other ways, says Cooke. “Curators have an expanded portfolio of tasks—they spend far more time with donors, patrons and board members in a complex set of relations that have to do with gifts, acquisitions and support for the institution,” she says. “More time is spent networking and less on research.”

Though open to solo and group shows—the first two winners of the \$250,000 [Sotheby’s Prize](#) have been thematic shows. Selected by a leading group of curators, including De Salvo, the 2018 winner, “Regeneration: Black Cinema 1900-1970”, opens at the [Academy Museum of Motion Pictures in Los Angeles](#) in 2020. “This is precisely why we created the Sotheby’s Prize—to fund the potentially groundbreaking exhibitions that are essential to a healthy and evolving art ecosystem without which major museum exhibitions become more focused on reinforcing what we know and value,” says Allan Schwartzman, the co-founder of AAP and chairman of Sotheby’s who co-conceived the prize and is chair of the jury. “We hope to foster curatorial and philanthropic courage.”

A harder sell

In 2013 UK market researcher [Morris Hargreaves McIntyre](#) produced a report about temporary exhibitions in big London museums. It broke them down into five types, from “specialist” to “blockbuster”. Specialist shows were categorized as those attracting 50,000 to 95,000 visitors, with a potential market of just over 1.5m people. Blockbusters were in a range from 220,000 to 900,000 visitors, such as “[David Hockney: A Bigger Picture](#)” at the Royal Academy (601,000) and “[Leonardo: Painter at the Court of Milan](#)” at the [National Gallery](#) (323,000), with an estimated market of nearly 10m people. Thematic shows tended to appear in the lowest three categories.

The Art Newspaper’s 2019 attendance survey bears this out. With free exhibitions and Tokyo and Shanghai removed (their enormous populations and the huge size of their venues skew the figures), 20 of the top 30 paying shows in 2018 were of single artists. Only one, “[Art in China after 1989: Theater of the World](#)” at the [Guggenheim Bilbao](#) was thematically organized.



Only one of the top 30 paying shows in 2018, “[Art in China after 1989: Theater of the World](#)” at the [Guggenheim Bilbao](#), was thematically organized. (Ai Weiwei, *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995) was included in the show. Image courtesy Ai Weiwei Studio)

“The preponderance of single-artist shows happens because museums are concerned about visitor footfall,” says Alison Smith, Chief Curator of the [National Portrait Gallery](#) (NPG). She was previously Lead Curator of 19th Century British Art at Tate Britain, where she curated “[Artist and Empire: Facing Britain’s Imperial Past](#)”, and in October the NPG will stage “[Pre-Raphaelite Sisters](#)”, an exploration of women in the Victorian movement. “It’s exciting doing thematic shows, but they are difficult because they can seem too didactic. Aesthetically, thematic shows have a disparate range of material and it’s a challenge not to make them visually jarring.”

There are of course exceptions. The Royal Academy’s 2017 “[Abstract Expressionism](#)” and “[Revolution: Russian Art 1917-32](#)” both outperformed “[Jasper Johns: Something Resembling Truth](#)” (3,211; 3,168 and 1,463 visitors per day respectively). The NPG’s “[Michael Jackson: On the Wall](#)”—40 artists’ responses to issues of sexuality, gender and identity—achieved 82,500 (711 per day), fewer than “[Cézanne Portraits](#)”, but of a younger and more diverse demographic.

Risky business

Nevertheless, admiration in curatorial circles for thematic shows has grown. In 2013 Bruce Altshuler, Clinical Professor of Museum Studies at [New York University](#), published *Biennials and Beyond—The Exhibitions that Made Art History 1962-2002*. It examined 50 group shows significant “for how art was and would be produced, seen and understood”. A year later, curator Jens Hoffmann published his own *Show Time: The 50 Most Influential Exhibitions of Contemporary Art*. “Exhibitions have come to be understood as vehicles for intellectual, cultural, social and political investigation and expression,” he wrote.

Bringing artists from all over the world in a loosely argued show is a hostage to fortune

There have always been alternative points of view. In the catalogue for [Documenta 5](#) in 1972, artist [Daniel Buren](#) criticized the fact that “exhibitions tend no longer to be exhibitions of works of art, but rather to exhibit the exhibition as a work of art”. Tim Marlow, the Royal Academy’s Artistic Director, says it is all too easy to do bad group shows. “There are a lot of biennials with portentous or pointless overarching themes, and I set out in reaction to that. The idea that you bring artists from all over the world, some sort of globalized tendency, in a loosely argued show: it’s a hostage to fortune.” It may well be that this inherent riskiness of thematic shows explains their current dearth.

Such shows may be beloved by the contemporary curating courses but they are antithetical to the painstakingly detailed research of more traditional art history teaching. “In terms of old masters, there is a vast literature and increasing attention on technical research, which means we’re all getting more specialist,” says Emilie Gordenker, Director of the old master gallery, the [Mauritshuis](#), in The Hague. “If we all stay in our comfort zones we’ll just get ever-narrower shows. We want to be relevant for today’s audiences. But you can see the challenge, social issues—postcolonial or identity politics—are starting to play out in museums. It’s good that we are places for debate, but it’s a real adjustment if you were brought up on a diet of connoisseurship and close visual analysis.”



“Michael Jackson: On the Wall” drew a large and diverse audience but received mixed reviews, some notably hostile. Courtesy the National Portrait Gallery, London

Criticism, whether in the pages of [Artforum](#) or in national newspapers, can also be harsh. Shows such as “Artist and Empire” and “Michael Jackson: On the Wall” received wildly divergent reviews, some notably hostile. The removal of a bust of its founder Johan Maurits in 2018 from the Mauritshuis led to denunciations by conservatives in the Dutch parliament, making the museum’s forthcoming re-examination of his legacy a nail-biting affair (Maurits spent several years as governor of the

Dutch colonies in Brazil in the 17th century and actively participated in the slave trade). Such controversies are something many museums prefer to avoid.

Perhaps the biggest challenge is that thematic shows are research-intensive with no guarantee of the final success. "Your institution has to take a leap of faith, because you don't know where you're going," says De Salvo. "In the end, people may say: 'Wow, that was a landmark', but meanwhile you find yourself in a place that no one quite understands. Being ahead of the curve can be a lonely place to be."