



Contemporary Issues in the Visual Arts *(and beyond)*

Wednesdays, 4:30-7:50 PM in Klapper 403.

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Go to the online syllabus with pdf readings embedded here:
<http://www.sholetteseminars.com/contemporary-i...sual-arts-2015/>

Why would someone make an all black painting? Who cares if the Nike *swoosh* or the Google logo is more recognizable to most Americans than a map of the Middle East? Must everyone in a democracy have an equal right to his or her own cultural expression? Just how can the artist relate to contemporary society with its rapidly accelerating technology, crowd-sourced imagery and click-happy attention deficit disorder? This research seminar examines these issues as well as questions of ethics, beauty, cultural inclusion, and critical resistance among other topics including the transformation of art into a global marketplace where a few artists command huge sums of money, and the vast majority are ignored, and yet still expected to help maintain the existing art system as is, no questions asked.

Tailored to the needs of working artists as well as curators and historians this seminar is structured around weekly readings and lectures. Students are responsible to read, enter into discussion, engage in their own research and present their insights in the form of a presentation followed by a ten-page, footnoted paper at the graduate level. (An additional, optional project will involve the production of a podcast based on your original research.) We will begin with some foundational texts from the past – though always with an eye to the present- before moving to discussions about Cultural Politics, Relational Aesthetics, Queer Theory, "Art Incorporated," Cyber-Feminism, Necro-Politics, Art and Gentrification, the New Abstract Painting, Activist Art, Tactical Media, The Anthropocene, Post-Humanism and Speculative Materialism among other topics.

THIS SEMINAR HAS THREE MAIN OBJECTIVES:

1. To provide students with an introductory overview about critical theory as it relates to contemporary art.
2. To do this within a context that takes into consideration material, social and historical factors.
3. And to help students establish a robust methodological framework for their individual research, critical thinking, and artistic practices.

REQUIREMENTS & RULES OF CONDUCT

Your participation in all class discussions is essential. Always have at least one specific question ready about each week's readings linked to a specific paragraph in the assigned text.

A 12-minute oral presentation is to be made on your research topic. The focus of your research will be determined in consultation with the instructor. (A list of possible topics is below.)

A ten-page, fully footnoted research paper produced incorporating feedback received from your oral presentation is required by the end of the semester.

(The production of a pod-cast program based on your research is an option for added grade value. Early presenters will be given a preference.)

More than three unexcused absences will result in a grade point loss.

No more than three unexcused lateness allowed without penalties

Eating, cell phone use and emailing are not permitted during class time.

GRADE COMPOSITION

- Attendance 20%
- Assignments 40%
- Participation 40%

THE SYLLABUS

For our first class please read the following short essays:

- Theodore Adorno, “Black as an Ideal.” PDF: [AdornoBlackIdeal](#)
- Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting.” PDF: [Greenberg.Modernism](#)

Video: "Crack Up," (with commentary): <https://vimeo.com/19954876>

1. 9/2 Introductions/ Why Critical Theory?/Whither Artistic Autonomy?

“What good is “art,” and what is “critical theory” and why study it? Our first discussion will set the stage for later readings and debates by examining the notion of artistic autonomy from Kant to Adorno to Greenberg as outlined in our first readings (see below). Questions to consider: Why do these writers try so hard to separate art from “everyday” life? Why do they oppose art not only to kitsch and popular culture, but also to the instrumentality of technology and science? How do these ideas regarding the special status of art, and aesthetics, relate to our current social circumstances in the early 21st Century? Adorno and Greenberg strongly defend the notion that art is a form of heightened human perception and perhaps even a type of mental cognition, but in a post-modern world of data-visualization and crowd-sourced imagery what aspects of their ideas still hold up, if any? And which aspects of their argument need to be challenged or require modification? We will also look at the 1946 film noir “Crack Up,” in order to reflect on the “image” of art and the artist as represented in the type of pop culture scorned by Adorno and Greenberg.

NOTE: 9/9 CLASS CANCELLED. MAKE UP INFORMATION TO FOLLOW.

2. 9/16 Artist as Public Enemy?

One would think a scholar dead many hundred years would have little to offer contemporary culture, but think again. Socrates, according to Plato, wanted to ban artists from his ideal notion of the Republic and we want to know today, is there any kind of culture that should perhaps be excluded from society or civilization? In a world where extremists of one culture dynamite the archeological remains of past civilizations in the name of religious pieties, where occupying armies claiming to represent the most advanced political nations stand by as museums and libraries in a conquered country are ransacked, and where past and present symbols of racism and nationalism and misogyny are defended as cultural rights perhaps Plato and Socrates were on to something? Who or what were they seeking to protect from whom? The class will divide into two debate teams. One team will defend and the other will critique culture as a sacrosanct realm of human activity using specific examples drawn from contemporary art. Please come to class with at least one such “case” ready to debate. (Examples of possible cases can be found here: [CLICK: EVIDENCE](#))

Reading: Plato, “Book X” of The Republic. (380 BC).

3. 9/23 Ideology Critique

Once again, we can not move to the present without some help from the past. Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx go to war with idealist German philosophers in the mid 19th Century, turning popular interpretations of Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel upside down by asserting a revolutionary materialist interpretation of the world, of history, of human institutions and thought. Some forty years later in *Das Kapital* Marx perceives the legacy of idealist philosophy embodied in everyday commodities, manifestations of human production that are nonetheless veiled in an aura of mystery that is difficult to penetrate. The impact of this "commodity fetish" thesis has since had profound effects on the history of contemporary art and art history. Questions for debate: What does it mean for Marx and Engels to turn Hegel "on his head"? How might the concept of commodity fetishism apply to the production of art if at all? What strengths and limitations do you see in these methods for interpreting art and culture?

- Friedrich Engels & Karl Marx, "The German Ideology" (1846 excerpts).
- Karl Marx, "Fetishism of the Commodities" Chapter 1 *Das Kapital* (1887).

4. 9/30 Lets Talk About the Debt Due.

In order to understand the place of the artist in a society dominated by global markets we will have to look at what Julian Stallabrass acerbically describes as Art Inc. "The art world is bound to the economy," writes Stallabrass, "as tightly as Ahab to the white whale." This metaphor is especially apt today following the global financial meltdown of 2007/2008 that is still impacting the "neoliberal" world we have all come to live in. That is to say, a world of hyper-deregulated markets and privatized public resources where the very idea of the public sphere has all but vanished. Questions to consider: What is the nature of artistic production today? Can the idea of artistic autonomy have any meaning in such a world? And at a still broader level, what will become of "us," including our bodies and our minds, when everything in the world is monetized and data mined? This challenge includes not only a call to consider the economization of public space and art, but also of our genetic materials, inner emotions, private desires and even our dreams.

Readings (mostly very short news articles):

- "When is a Day Job a Work of Art?," Juri Lynn Keyser, 2006.
- "Art Advisors," Mia Fineman, *The New York Times*, 2006.
- "Looks Brilliant on Paper..." M. Fineman, *NYTimes*, 2006.
- "Summary: A portrait of the arts..." Rand Corp., 2005.
- G. Sholette, "Lets Talk About the Debt Due..." 2015
- "Dream Tech" article 2015

5. 10/7 Art and Activism in the Age of "Bare Life"

The philosopher Gerogio Agamben describes humankind's current status in the world as that of "bare life," when a person is reduced to a purely biological "thing," absent rights of any kind and therefor subject to torture or extermination (think of people in Nazi death camps). Adorno famously charged that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric." And yet, despite the pessimism of Agamben and Adorno or for that matter Socrates or Plato, we must go on, writing poetry, making art and engaging in social criticism. Right? But how? We will look at some successful and failed options past and present from Art Workers' Coalition, PAD/D, REPOhistory to Occupy Wall Street and Gulf Labor Coalition in an attempt to answer this question.

Readings:

- Lucy R. Lippard, "Art Workers Coalition: Not a History," 1970.
- Lovink & Garcia, "The ABC of Tactical Media," 1997.
- G. Sholette, "State of the Union," Artforum, 2008.
- G. Sholette, "Occupology...." Art Journal online, 2011.

6. 10/14 Gentrification and the City of Disorder

The opening scenes of the little known 1981 low budget film *Wolfen* set up a story of a city literally eating itself from within. Shot on location in the then crumbling South Bronx *Wolfen* managed to point a claw at several interlocking aspects of displacement and gentrification from the angry resentment of local tenants being forced out of their homes to the ruin-porn of urban decay, as well as something else. Let's call it the "thingness" of forces human beings may have initiated, but can no longer manage or control. We will examine the often alien process of urban privatization and destruction as it appears in horror cinema, but also as it plays itself out in the work of artists over the past several decades.

Readings:

- Matt Bolton, "Is Art to Blame for Gentrification?," The Guardian, 2015.
- Toscano and Kinkle, "Neoliberalism as Horror..." 2010
- Craig Owens, "The Problem with Puerilism," 1984.

Videos:

Wolfen opening scene: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jHjDgm4_d5U

The *Wolfen*'s alien vision: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u4gbV2-lmLo>

They're NOT wolves!: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=weYGiULosmE>

7. 10/21 Abstract Expressionism Redux?

In the past ten or so years a bevy of younger artists have seemingly returned to the act of making abstract paintings. Splashes, quadrangles and spots of color and line adorn canvases in ways that appear to ignore the fact that such abstract expressionist gestures came and went about sixty years ago (Jackson Pollock died in 1956 fyi). Not only did minimalism, conceptual art, installation and social practice all made attempts at burying painterly painting through more theoretically-driven paradigms, but so did the more down-to-earth pop artists and East Village figurative artists distance themselves from abstraction. So here we are faced with a curious repetition, all the more strange in so far as this return to expressionist painting is taking place in the age of ice-cold digital technology, virtual imagery and mass data visualization. Why?

Readings:

- Jan Verwoert, "Why Are Conceptual Artists Painting...?" Afterall, 2005.
- G. Sholette, "Occupy and Abstraction," eFlux, 2011.
- Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Cezanne's Doubt, 1945.
- Please read over the debate between David Geers in the book *Golden Age*, and painter Peter Rostovsky in the pdf entitled "Dear David," from Bomb.

8. 10/27 Vibrant Matter, the Anthropocene, Object Oriented Ontology

Is there such a phenomenon as "thing agency"? Are human beings only one type of being in the world, no more or less valuable, no more important and no more destined to exist than any other being? Is there such a phenomenon as "thing agency"? Can we begin to relate to the world as made up of objects that sometimes have an effect on us, or we on them, but objects that also relate to each other completely outside the sphere of human language, knowledge and experience? How might we begin to reject the anthropocentric transformation of earth – an epochal mutation that is sometimes referred to as the age of the *anthropocene* – and begin to adopt an ecological politics of things?

Readings:

- Jane Bennett, "The Force of Things..." 2004.
- Bruno Latour, "From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik ..." 2005.
- Graham Harman, "Art Without Relations," 2014.

Video: Artistry and Agency in a World of Vibrant Matter | The New School, 2013:

9. 11/3 *i-Robot*

Some believe research into Artificial Intelligence (AI) is poised to enact a leap in human evolution by producing the first self-aware, constructed beings made up out of electrical circuitry and mathematical algorithms. Whether this actually takes place or it does not, what we do know is that thanks to advances in robotics, cognitive mapping, and shrinking microprocessors, AI has already emerged as one of the primary metaphors for contemporary life in the 21st Century. The line between living and non-living, human and machine, object and subject are becoming as blurred in real life, just as fiction and document have become interchangeable in the world of contemporary art, cinema and literature. What is the connection between these various "things in the world," including those that exist autonomously and those that we imagine might become autonomous any day now, both for better or for worse?

Readings:

- Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 1983.
- Richard Moss, "Creative AI: The Robots that would be Painters," 2004.
- Isaac Asimov, "I, Robot," 1940-1950.

10. 11/11 Blackness, Whiteness, Intolerance and Cultural Politics

White artist Joe Scanlan created a fictitious black, female artist named Donelle Woolford presented as a video in the 2014 Whitney Biennial, over thirty-five years earlier another white artist notoriously described his 1979 solo exhibition at Artists Space as "The Nigger Drawings," after he was covered in black charcoal from their production. What are the appropriate responses to such incidents? Should art be an arena without censorship even if it hurts? Or do we need to take a new look at the unexamined imagery of race, especially in light of the appalling murders of Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin and the shooting of black church goers at Emanuel African Methodist in S. Carolina?

Readings:

- A.M.Weaver on artist Dread Scott, 2015.
- "Is Art Installation Exhibit B Racist?" The Guardian, 2014.
- Richard Dyer, "The Matter of Whiteness," 1997.
- J. Henry, "Sources of Harm: Notes on the Alternative Artworld," 2014.

11. 11/18 Cruising Critical Theory

What would it mean for critical theory to take a walk on the wild side? Queer theorists insist that we are constantly performing various narratives of male-ness, female-ness, straight-ness, normal-ness, and so forth. Does the ontological uncertainty this prevarication brings about at the level of gender also have a fundamental impact on how we interpret art, culture, politics and society? Is our knowledge of the world gendered? Can it be

"queered"? How does queerness differ from more familiar and increasingly less marginal notions of gay, lesbianism or the LGBT politics of sexuality?

Readings:

- Jack Halberstam, "Charming for the Revolution: A Gaga Manifesto, 2012.
- José Esteban Muñoz, "Feeling Utopia," intro to *Cruising Utopia*, 2009.
- Interview with Harry Hay, founder of Gal Lib, unknown date.

12. 12/2 Social Practice Art

The term social practice has come to stand for a bundle of fairly recent art activities including activist art, dialogical art, new genre public art and to some degree relational aesthetics. And yet no one has so far succeeded in defining what "it" is to any degree of satisfaction. Still it is a thriving phenomenon in the contemporary art world. Rather than ask what social practice is, we will investigate how it functions both within the institution of high culture and society more broadly? Why for instance, is socially engaged art advancing within the art world at a moment when society and its institutions have been all but bankrupted by neoliberal capitalism? The answer to this question may in turn solve our first challenge: what on earth is social practice art anyway?

Readings: Social Practice Archive

- G. Sholette, "Delirium and Resistance after the Social Turn," Filed, 2015.
- B. Davis, "A critique of social practice art...," International Socialist, 2013.
- N. Bourriaud, "From Relational Aesthetics," 1998.
- S. Wright, *Toward a Lexicon of Usership*, 2015.

Also see: <http://www.veralistcenter.org/art-and-social-justice/>

13. 12/9 Necro-Politics

According to post-colonial theorist Achille Mbembe, contemporary "technologies of destruction have become more tactile, more anatomical and sensorial, in a context in which the choice is between life and death." His term for the emergence of death as a central form of political and social control is necropolitics, a dark "spin" on Michel Foucault's well-known concept of bio-power. Applying Mbembe's concept to high culture, Marina Gržinić argues that contemporary art is become, along with the global economy, and the political sphere, part and parcel of an intricate system of scrutiny and control in which the possibility of any utopian future has been hollowed-out by a forensically-driven, aesthetics of lifelessness.

Readings: Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 2003. [Mbembe necropolitics](#)

Video: Marina Gržinić presents the book *Necropolitics*: <https://vimeo.com/117370806>

The final classes are reserved for student presentations.