Recurring Concepts in Art H79.2586.1

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FRI 3:30-6:00
Office hours by appointment

“In the end [interpretive approaches to new media] borrow from existing paradigms. They weren’t conceived with digital media in mind, and as a result they don’t exploit the special qualities that are unique to digital worlds. Yet it’s those unique qualities that will ultimately define entirely new languages of expression. And it’s those languages that will tap the potential of digital media as new vehicles of expression.” – Media Theorist Steven Holtzman (1997)

“Holtzman misses the point. He himself appeals to a comfortable, modernist rhetoric, in which digital media cannot be significant until they make a radical break with the past. However, like their precursors, digital media can never reach this state of transcendence, but will instead function in a constant dialectic with earlier media, precisely as each earlier medium functioned when it was introduced...” – Media Theorists Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999)

A question raised in the above exchange: does digital media transcend or dialogue with earlier media? This course, which examines relationships between new/digital media art and 20th-century art which preceded it, will shed light on this debate. For the purposes of the course, we will steer a position somewhere between those of Holtzman, and Bolter and Grusin. While observing how advancing technologies are producing new territories in the making of meaning and languages of interpretation in contemporary art, we will examine how artists working before the boom of technology utilized other media, techniques and approaches to effect formal, conceptual and experiential dynamics comparable to those being investigated by new media artists today. For example, the concept of interactivity, commonly observed as original and specific to the user-interaction component of technology-mediated works, was equally if differently specific to Minimalist sculpture and Environment art of the 1960s. The play between figuration and abstraction, today with vast applications via increasingly sophisticated computer software, has roots in the rejection of Academic imperatives in the late 19th century. Indeed the very concept of new media and the correlating implication of radically significant artistic development apply throughout history. In the second decade of the 20th century, the found object indelibly altered definitions of art - as well as the artist, artistic critique, concepts of value and the role of the institutional voice - the primary significance of the object being consumed by that of the concept (conceptual art) in the 1960s.

This course is organized thematically. Each class will focus on a concept central to new media/digital production, which will be examined in relation to 20th-century art outside of new media rubrics. Each class – except for the two introductory classes (explained further below) - will be introduced by a “lead artist” – a new/digital media artist.
representing the main concept(s) investigated during that class (lead artists are indicated in italics and parentheses in the class session blurbs).

The course will be conducted as a reading/lecture/discussion course. Please note that the reading and discussion components of the course are vital to its success; all students are expected to fully prepare all readings and participate in class discussions. Participation in discussion is 20% of the final grade and taken very seriously. If you have any concerns about your ability to fully engage with the reading and discussion, please let me know immediately.

Each week, students will be assigned to present the readings for the following week (one reading per student). The presentation should last no more than five minutes, reviewing main/important/interesting ideas and laying the ground for discussion.

We will be making a number of off-site visits. Critical theory will be incorporated into all aspects of the course but this is not strictly a theory course. The course has been conceptualized and designed to enhance perception of art through a variety of channels - from sustained, close looking at art/objects, to exploratory conversations, to more rigorous thinking and discussions informed by lectures, readings, projects and papers. The ultimate goal of the course is to expand students’ sense of artistic possibility in their own work through an expanded awareness and understanding of the tremendously rich history of artistic creativity.

**Disability statement/policy**

The ITP community extends itself to create a fully inclusive learning environment for all students. For students who have a physical, psychological, medical or learning disability that may impact their course work, please contact the Henry and Lucy Moses Center for Students with Disabilities at 719 Broadway, (212) 998-4980. They will work with students – or students and their professors if the student wishes such a collaboration - to determine what accommodations are necessary and appropriate. All information is confidential. If contacting the Center is a necessary option for a student, they should do so at the very beginning of the semester. I will not be able to be of any assistance to a student who informs me of a disability near the end of the semester.

**Attendance and credit**

Students are expected to attend all classes and arrive on time. Necessary absences require advanced notification. 2 unexcused absences – and 3 excused absences - will result in failure of the course. Chronic late arrivals will weigh on your final grade.

*Pass/Fail:* ITP switched from letter grades to pass/fail in 2008; students are encouraged to read about this decision at [http://itp.nyu.edu/help/Help/PassFail](http://itp.nyu.edu/help/Help/PassFail). In the previous, grade-based system, students were expected to maintain a B average in order to stay in the program. The same expectation exists within the new system. Earning a C grade in the previous system translates to failure in the new one. *The same holds for this course.*
Students are expected to demonstrate – and are graded on - continued effort and progress in all aspects of the course. From the ITP website page on pass/fail: “Because we encourage you to risk failure by stretching to make bridges outside your known interests and aptitudes we cannot, in general, hold you to any absolute level of achievement in any area. Instead you are graded on effort and progress in the quality of your work. There are some objective measures of your effort for instance missing more than two classes or being chronically late, missing two interim assignments or presentations or one large assignment like the final project or a complete lack of in class participation might be clear indicators of a failure in effort…Ultimately the progress in the quality of your efforts is usually a subjective judgment by the professor but students will be given notice when the quality of their work is marginal or failing.” (meetings with me, midterm grades).

Please note that all assignments must be submitted to pass this course. Assignments are to be submitted on time.

Format for all written assignments: 12-point font, Times New Roman, double-spaced, complete sentences.

1) Midterm project, 25%
2) Final 10-page paper, 25%
3) Three, 3-page response papers, 30%
4) Participation, 20%
   Participation: thorough preparation and discussion of weekly readings; verbally engaging in class discussions

Laptops: As the success of this course depends on collective observation and discussion, I strongly prefer that students do not use their laptops during class except for taking notes. Especially, please no e-mailing or surfing during class.

Outline (subject to change)
The first two classes are introductory in the sense that they focus on very broad topics foundational to the course and the work done at ITP: new media and technology. These classes provide a kind of grounding for the classes that follow.

Readings are available in handouts (which I bring to class), pdfs (on the class wiki) and on-line. The source of each reading is indicated in parentheses after the citation.

Week 1, 9/10: Introduction, syllabus, midterm project. Radical Shifts: New Media before “New Media” (the found object, popular culture, the concept, the body, the land, installation)
The concept of new media and the correlating implication of radically significant artistic development apply throughout history, for example in the development and use of oil paint in the 16th-century. In the second decade of the 20th century, the found object indelibly altered definitions of art - as well as the artist, artistic critique, concepts of value and the role of the institutional voice. The 1960s ushered in a particularly fertile
rejection of traditional media (and artistic goals) and an embrace of innovation. With the time we have left after the introduction to the course, we will look at some examples of these radical shifts.

**Week 2, 9/17:** Art and Technology: the Futurists, Dada, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy (Theo van Doesburg, El Lissitzky), E.A.T. (Experiments in Art and Technology) *Technology in art before the boom of new media.*

**Reading due this week:**

**Viewing in class:**

**Week 3, 9/24:** Sound: Christian Marclay. *(Kim Cascone, Oval, Carsten Nicolai, et al – “digital glitch”)*

*Sound as medium is of course prevalent in today’s digital (and non-digital) artistic landscapes. Early 20th-century artists such as Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, the Dadaists and the Futurists experimented with sound, as did later artists like John Cage, Nam June Paik, artists participating in E.A.T. and many others. Marclay began his career playing with non-digital sound, but now works both non-digitally and digitally. He was a pioneering turntablist, interested – among other things - in destruction as a source of sound.*

**Off-site visit to the Whitney Museum of American Art:** *Christian Marclay: Festival*
* Meet at the main entrance to the Whitney at 3:50pm
* The Whitney is located at 945 Madison Avenue at 75th Street
* Please bring your student ID

**Midterm project partner decisions due**
**Response paper #1 assigned**

**Reading due this week:**
Week 4, 10/1: Original/Copy: Reproduction/Re-Production (Mark Hansen and Ben Rubin)
The reuse of imagery, sounds, effects, etc. is a signature element of new media production. The doctrine of Fair Use regulates intellectual property rights within domains of electronic technologies, but the advancement of these technologies has made it so easy to appropriate and reuse materials that it is very often done without permission. There are also dense grey areas in Fair Use regulations regarding the degree to which appropriated materials are rearticulated by a user (discussed in Buskirk, assigned reading). The use of appropriated materials – and questions regarding “copies” as well as “originals” - can be traced to the beginning of the 20th century in the collages of Georges Braque and the readymades of Marcel Duchamp; interest in the “found object” (and in intellectual property rights) had a resurgence in the 1960s.

Response paper #1 due

Reading due this week:

Encouraged:
Go see the exhibition at MoMA, The Original Copy: Photography of Sculpture, 1839 to Today. Essays from the catalogue are provided. If you are not able to get into MoMA for free, tell me and I will put you on the guest list. I need a few days notice to do this.

Week 5, 10/8: The Society of the Spectacle, Guy Debord and the Situationists; Considerations for Contemporary Art and Society. (Pierre Huyghe)
As articulated by Best and Kellner (assigned reading), along with other critics of contemporary art (ie. Buchloh, referenced in Mark Godfrey, assigned reading), the advancement of new technologies has contributed to the increased spectacularization of our culture/society. Guy Debord’s The Society of the Spectacle (1967) and the Situationist International (formed in 1957) serve as roots for contemporary critical theory on the spectacularization of present-day culture and society. Theories on the society as spectacle date back to the 19th century (T.J. Clark).

Reading/Viewing due this week:

Volunteer to watch and present to the class
(The counter spectacle) Claire Bishop, “Spectacle and Participation,” from Rethinking Spectacle, a symposium at the Tate Modern, March 31, 2007 (26:45 minutes) http://www.tate.org.uk/onlineevents/webcasts/rethinking_spectacle/default.jsp (click on Claire Bishop, below the video image)
Week 6, 10/15:  Figuration and Abstraction. The Rejection of the Academy in the late 19th Century and its Repercussions (Yoichiro Kawaguchi, Joan Fontcuberta)

The play between figuration and abstraction, today with vast applications via sophisticated software, has its roots in the rejection of Academic imperatives in the late 19th century. The Impressionists – led by Edward Manet – laid solid ground for this rejection via not only a style that denied every element of Academic art (we will briefly discuss these elements in class), but also the radically resounding act of establishing independent exhibition spaces. What followed can be observed as main ingredients in the unfolding of 20th-century art: (literal) abstraction from naturalistic form, and (symbolic) abstraction from reality.

Midterm presentations next and the following week
Final paper assigned
No reading due this week

Week 7, 10/22: Midterm presentations

Week 8, 10/29: Midterm presentations
Response paper #2 assigned

Week 9, 11/5: The Body, Embodied Experience (Mathieu Briand, Janet Cardiff, Pipilotti Rist, Stelarc)

The role of the physical body and embodied experience are of key interest to artists and theorists working within realms of technology able to disrupt and reconfigure the experience of the physical body/embodiment. This class will examine examples of the body as rearticulated through technology, as well as the moment in the early 1970s when the body first emerged as medium.

Response paper #2 due

Reading due this week:
2) Yuko Hasegawa, “Mathieu Briand,” and Mathieu Briand, description of his Sensorium installation, Sensorium, pp. 51-55 (handout)
3) Marjory Jacobson, “Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller,” Sensorium, pp. 57-60
4) Jane Farver, “Bruce Nauman,” Sensorium, pp. 79-82 (handout)
5) Qian Zhijian, “Performing Bodies: Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, and Performance Art in China,” Art Journal, vol. 58, no. 2 (Summer 1999), pp. 60-81 (pdf)
Week 10, 11/12: The Senses, Perception, Apperception: James Turrell (Seiko Mikami)

This week’s section follows closely upon that of last week, when discussions of the body and technology inevitably led to an examination of the body as a construct of the senses. Virtual reality, augmented reality and mediated reality are other obvious examples of how digital technology has driven an interest in expanding and altering one’s sense of their relationship to the world through the play of the senses. Seiko Mikami’s work, “World, Membrane and the Dismembered Body” (1987) follows upon the researches of James Turrell as well as Robert Irwin and John Cage.

Off-site visit to P.S.1, James Turrell, Meeting, 1986

* Meet inside the main entrance to P.S.1 at 3:50pm
* P.S.1 is located at 22-25 Jackson Ave. at the intersection of 46th Ave. in Long Island City (travel directions on the website)
* Please bring your student ID
* Wear very warm clothing!

Response paper #2 due

Reading due this week:


Off-site visit to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

* Meet inside the 89th Street entrance to the museum at 3:50pm; the 89th Street entrance is just around the corner from the main entrance on 5th Avenue
* The Guggenheim is located at 1071 5th Avenue at 89th street

Response paper #3 assigned

No reading due this week

11/26 Thanksgiving holiday, no class

Week 12, 12/3: Interactivity: The Rise of Viewer Participation in Late Modern and Contemporary Art (Alan Dunning and Paul Woodrow)

The concept of interactivity, commonly observed as original and specific to the user-interaction component of technology-mediated works, has been equally if differently specific to a lot of art throughout history. Marcel Duchamp rather famously stated in 1957: “All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its
inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act.” This class will examine modes of interactivity in late modern and contemporary art.

Response paper #3 due
Reading due this week:

Week 13, 12/10:
TBD

Week 14, TUESDAY, 12/14: Papers due; extracts from papers presented
*Papers must be submitted on this day, in hard copy (no exceptions). Make sure you print out your papers at least one day before this class to have time to remedy potential glitches.