

Contemporary Art Issues: The Cooper Union School of Art

Fall Semester, 2007 – 2008: Gregory Sholette instructor

2:30-5:30 in 515E

EXHIBITION STUDIES FOR ARTISTS

The Italian Futurists proposed *diverting the canals to flood the museums!*; the Russian Avant -Garde called for the transformation of “art into life” and attempted to leave painting and sculpture behind for the factories, streets, and new society of the new USSR. The neo-avant garde of the 21st century has inherited the rhetoric (if not always the politics) of these ideas in such practices as institutional critique. Yet while contemporary artists continue to wage a low-grade version of cultural war in the name of the avant-garde, the institutions of high culture have devised their own strategies for surviving and even capitalizing on their offensive. This course is geared to artists who want to create a topographical reading of this theater as they prepare to go into the post-graduation battlefield, AKA the art world. It focuses on the actual and ideal museum as well as art galleries, alternative spaces, biennials, art collectives, but also the not so visible skirmishes, hidden economies, and the complex ways artists interact with institutional power. Writings by a variety of cultural theorists and historians, site visits, guest speakers, experiments, and always much classroom discussion are on the agenda.

REQUIREMENTS

Three short papers (3 – 5 pages), and a final project in the form of a paper, presentation, website, video, installation or other in-depth manifestation of the course material. **15 %** of your grade is from the three papers and **40 % from** class participation, **45 %** from the final project. More than three unexcused absences will result in a grade loss, more than five will result in an **F**.

RESOURCES

Reading materials will be in the art department officer or library and online at the instructor’s educational site: <http://darkmatterarchives.org> In addition several speakers and class trips will be added to the syllabus below TBA.

THE SYLLABUS

(Note: substitutions of scheduled readings, speakers, or presentations may occur.)

I. SPACE

Week 1: Haunted Spaces: The Museum and popular imagination

The instructor introduces himself, the course requirements and his general expectations of the class. Students will also identify themselves, their expectations and particular interests. We will then sample a few cinematic representations of art institutions to get a reading of how these spaces inhabit the popular imagination. Why is the museum often presented as a space of mystery, fear, passion, intrigue and what do these representations tell us about the art world?

Reading: Sigmund Freud: *The Uncanny*

Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach: *The Universal Survey Museum*.

Possible excerpted film scenes include: *Betty Boop’s Museum*, *Crack-Up* (46), *House of Wax* (53), *Dressed to Kill* (80), *The Relic*, *The Thomas Crown Affair* (99), and *La Jetée*.

Week 2: Vertiginous Spaces: Deconstructing the Museum

The Museum appears to be a solid enough structure yet somehow something is not quite right... Wigley argues that the foundation the Museum is not what it appears to be while Baudrillard sees the museum as a huge cultural processing machine. Both project backwards from a specific boundary or superstructure to an imaginary solid ground that lies beneath. What happens when this ground is shaken up or shown to be a ghost or desire?

Readings: Mark Wigley: *Throwing Up Architecture* (introduction)

Jean Baudrillard: *The Beaubourg-Effect: Implosion and Deterrence*

Andreas Huyssen: *Escape from Amnesia: The Museum, as Mass Medium*

Week 3: Gendered Spaces: Sexing the Museum

Is space itself gendered? (What does that mean?) Are there rituals of power that inform and structure our experience of the museum? What happens when artists, historians and critics of both sexes devise ways of addressing and undermining these structures? We will look at the Women House, Andrea Zittle and other examples of artists reworking live work spaces.

Readings: Carol Duncan: *The Art Museum as Ritual*

Walter Kendrick: *The Secret Museum*

Beatriz Colomina: *Sexuality & Space* (excerpt)

FIRST ASSIGNMENT: a three to five page essay on a question TBA.

Week 4: Alternative Spaces: Conflict or Complement?

A close look at the history of the New Museum and ABC No Rio in NYC raises questions about what is an “alternative” space or museum is, how has it actually functioned in the real art world, and if some sort of an alternative art space is still necessary today?

Readings: Julie Ault: *Alternative Art New York, 1965-1985* (introduction)

Alan Moore: *Artists' Collectives Mostly in New York*

Gregory Sholette: *How To Best Serve The New Global Contemporary Art Matrix*

Week 5: Halucinating Spaces: The Cybernetic Museum?

With digital technology and the Internet many artists now perceive a means to finally go “beyond” the museum, yet how have these new media supplemented or in some cases substituted for the museum experience? Most major institutions have websites (many can be found at <http://www.coudal.com/moom/>), and the recent Richard Serra retrospective at MoMA was accompanied by a seductive website that seemed to mimic the spatial effect of the sculptors' work. A host of amateur built cyber museums has cropped up in the mean time, meanwhile artists are increasingly using such digital platforms as re-title.org and the art market has sites like the-artists.org, but there are also many personal artist's pages including on eBay that help lead to direct sales. Likewise, auction houses are now using the Internet not only as preview but also for auctions. What is the effect of this new digital sphere on museum aesthetics as well as art production and the art market?

Readings: Slavoj Zizek, *Cyberspace, Or, The Unbearable Closure of Being*

Howard Becker: *Art Worlds* (excerpt)

Chris Anderson: *The Long Tail* (excerpt)

SECOND ASSIGNMENT: a three to five page essay on a question TBA

II. ARTISTS

Week 6: Revisiting Institutional Critique

Contemporary artists have sometimes aggressively challenged the perceived cultural authority of the art industry including the role of the museum in that market. Beginning in the early 1970s a few artists developed a critical practice around the economic and spatial-politics of museums and galleries. However, it seems that such “institutional critiques” have become a part of the museum discourse in recent years. Under what circumstances do these and other critical interventions succeed in challenging, or even changing the museum? Or have they now become just one more artistic genre?

Readings: Hans Haacke: *Museums, Managers of Consciousness*
Andrea Fraser: (excerpts from her book of collected writings TBA)
Alex Albero: from the book *Institutional Critique and After*

Week 7: Storming the Ramparts

The critique of the museum’s interior spaces was joined by more action-oriented offensives. The apparently limited success of direct action and the institutional critique in the battle to re-take and re-define the museum leads many artists to look elsewhere for a critically engaged cultural practice. Examples of current and past of activist art will be used to open a discussion about the very possibility of going *beyond the museum*!

Readings: Lucy R. Lippard: The Art Workers’ Coalition: Not a History
Lippard: Charitable Visits by the AWC to MOMA and Met
Richard Meyer: This Is to Enrage You: Gran Fury...Graphics of AIDS Activism

Week 8: the Biennale Experience

A conversation with Saskia Bos, Dean of the Art School of The Cooper Union who has worked as a curator for the Venice Biennale among other international art venues, as well as written extensively about contemporary art.

Readings: TBA

Week 9: The Artist as Curator?

From Joseph Kosuth, Hans Haacke, Julie Ault, Fred Wilson, and John Baldessari a post-1990s phenomenon has emerged in which artists curate exhibitions for museums and art galleries. What do artists bring to curating that is different from a trained art historian or connoisseur? We will look at this shift in exhibition practice critically, but also attempt a curatorial mini-project of our own in the process.

Readings: Jennifer Gonzalez on Fred Wilson
Julie Ault from *Curating Subjects* (ed. Paul O’Neill, de Appel)

Week 10: The Curator as Activist?

Nina Felshin and Nato Thompson will visit the class and discuss their exhibitions which have sought to push the political limitations of museums and art galleries. Still, can any exhibition engage activism and confront social injustice? Is that even the “job” of the museum worker?

Readings: Nina Felshin: But Is It Art? (introduction)
Nato Thompson: The Interventionists (introduction)

THIRD AND FINAL PAPER: a three to five page essay on a topic TBA

III. MARKETS

Week 11: Art by the numbers

Since its inception the art market has functioned as a means of enrichment for a few careful investors, as well as a medium of manipulation by others. We will look at a few studies of the historical and contemporary art market and discuss what artists need to know about its actual operations.

Readings: Pierre-Michel Menger *Artistic Labor Markets and Careers*

Olav Velthuis: *Talking Prices: Symbolic Meanings of Prices...* Contemporary Art (excerpts)

Martha Rosler: *Lookers, Buyers, Dealers, and Makers: Thoughts on Audience.*

Week 12: The Museum Donors And Cultural Capital

Art historian Carol Duncan writes that, "Advocates of art museums almost always argue one of two ideals: the educational museum or the aesthetic museum. In the educational model works of art are framed as historical or art-historical objects, while in the aesthetic model, their unique and transcendent qualities are primary and the museum space is expected to provide a sanctuary for their contemplation." Meanwhile, the concept of cultural capital advanced by the late sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has passed into common usage by art critics and scholars interested in the particular form of value that art represents and we will examine what the interests are behind the marketing and collecting of art: is it wealth and power? Or is it public service?

Readings: Carol Duncan, *Introduction: Civilizing Rituals; Public Spaces, Private Interests*

Pierre Bourdieu, *The Love of Art*

Week 13: Summary: the museum reconsidered?

In the final scene of Mel Brook's film *The Producers* there is a chorus line of incarcerated men in striped shirts and high hats singing "blue skies above, prisoners of love." Therefore, the topic of this evening's discussion is freedom, pleasure, and the management of bodies and spaces. As we return our collective gaze back to the museum, we will examine the kind of traps and openings that might be constructed there, or that may have been there all along. Should we think of the museum as a necessary social fiction, not unlike that of the ideal public sphere or the nation? That is to say, a space within which critical issues and cultural dissent can be expressed, discussed and evaluated by the public without fear of reprisal? Should artistic expression be free from the limitations of cultural morals and community standards? Is the museum the best place for encountering such freedoms or is it perhaps simply the last place such liberties are still permitted? How might the recently passed Patriot Act have an affect on artistic practice especially creative work that seeks to challenge and provoke social norms?

Week 14: presentations of research

Week 15: Final presentations of research