CONTEMPORARY ART THEORY

Contemporary Art Theory - Studio Art  
Instructor: Assistant Professor Christopher Meerdo (he/him)  
Meeting Time: Tu 5:00PM - 7:55PM  
2024 Spring Semester Jan 16 - May 10, 2024  
Classroom Meeting Place: CVAD Room 251  
Course Number: ASTU 5000-506 (13143)  
Contact: christopher.meerdo@unt.edu

UNT CATALOG DESCRIPTION

5000. Topics in Studio Art. 3 hours. This is a variable topics course designed to explore concepts and processes in art making that go beyond the normal curricular parameters of traditional studio disciplines. This course may be repeated for credit as topics vary. Prerequisite(s): Instructor approval.

Contemporary Art Theory. 3 hours. Critical theory survey course with variable contemporary art theory topics that explore theoretical literary concerns in art-making, history, and concepts.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This graduate theory seminar encourages a close reading of a selection of major texts that have influenced art since the 1960’s. As artists, we will critically analyze several thematic trajectories across multiple art theoretical perspectives and discuss their influence on major works of contemporary art.

The course addresses conversations that are happening presently in our contemporary moment and frames those discussions within a historical perspective. This seminar moves through several broader designations including, Vision and Power, Phenomenology, Structuralism, Semiotics, Postcolonialism, Neocolonialism, Intersectional Identity, and beyond. The course considers Art
Theories that move from Euro-centric conversations outward towards an inclusive and global perspective. Additional topics include Orientalism, Afro-diasporic studies, the Anthropocene, and Technology.

Participants in this course will read, lead discussion, synthesize text, and steer their practices in new directions through the canonical theories considered throughout the semester.

CLASS OBJECTIVE

A larger understanding of contemporary theory and practice will be considered and how your specific voice contributes to visual culture at large. This is a research oriented class in which graduate students will explore various historical and contemporary primary texts to enrich their intellectual pursuits. Your research should engage with historical precedents, challenge assumptions, and reflect the time period in which we live. Additionally, you will garner a new vocabulary and agency to speak about your practice, as well as the art world at large, through the rigor of looking into emerging and canonized philosophers, theoreticians, practitioners, and historians of art.

REQUIREMENTS

The course stresses close textual analysis of primary and contemporary texts. Students will reconstruct the argument of each text, locate its premises, reveal its inner contradictions if any, and identify its position. The instructor will help draw a larger context for the readings. Every week, students are expected to write a minimum one-page analysis on the readings, which will help generate class discussion. These weekly papers will be submitted in class each week. At the end of the term, students will present and write a final paper on the theoretical and methodological contributions of a contemporary book or artist in their field in relation to one primary topic covered in this course. (Students will choose this book or artist after a discussion with the instructor)

GRADING/REVIEWS

Being enrolled in this course is not a guarantee of a passing grade. You must attend all classes in entirety and complete all required work for the course. Late work is not accepted without verification of an Excused absence.

Your grade in the course is calculated based on the percentages below:

- Written Weekly Reading Analysis – 33%
- In-Class Discussion - 33%
- Final Paper and Presentation - 33%

Weekly reading analysis is assessed based on the completeness of the overview of the writing, the comprehension of the text, the ability to identify the writer’s position, the interpretation of the text, and the overall structure of the paper. Your writing is required to be presented in an academic manner. This includes not only having a close read of the entire texts, but also crafting a document that is thorough in terms of spelling, grammar and punctuation. All work in this class must demonstrate a high level of engagement. This course assumes you are an artist on a studio trajectory with an interest in making a unique contribution to your field. Your practice of reading, writing, and making must be in dialogue with your contemporaries on a national and international level.

COMMUNICATION

My Office Location: CVAD, 3rd Floor, Office Number 345H
In-Person Office Hours: Tue/Th 1:00 p.m. - 2:00 p.m. & by appointment
Virtual (Zoom) Office Hours: by appointment
Email: christophermeerdo@unt.edu

I am always available to be reached by email or office hours but I ask that you are respectful and professional in your communication. I typically read email between normal business hours 9-5 M-F.
with the exception of teaching times and personal studio times. Please do not expect a response over the weekend.

CLASSTH POLICIES

All students will adhere to rules of attendance and punctuality. Attendance and punctuality is strongly considered and counts towards your class standing. Attendance will be noted at the beginning and end of each class.

- 3 Unexcused Absences = Failure of the course
- 3 Times Tardy = 1 Absence.
- Leaving class early counts as an Unexcused Absence.
- Refrain from walking out of class in the middle of activities. We have a break in the middle of class - schedule yourself accordingly.

An unexcused absence is any missed class without a doctor’s note. Simply emailing if you are sick is not an excused absence. In the case of any type of emergency, I also require official documentation.

Class Participation Expectations

I expect you to attend every class. You are responsible for completing all of the required assignments. I expect all students to participate in class discussions, contributing ideas and perspectives on reading topics. Class participation is a third of your grade in the course.

REQUIRED READING:

You are required to print out each week’s readings or purchase the books that the readings are taken from. I would suggest printing the entire reader at the beginning of the semester so you aren’t tasked with printing each week. Printing is available in the Library for $0.05 for a double-sided page. This will cost around $2-3 a week. I encourage you to purchase any of the books that are interesting to you to keep for your library.

As there are no specific creative projects or technical demonstrations in this seminar, reading, writing, discussion, and presentation are the major components of the course. A course reader pdf will be made available which includes all of the required reading for the course.

Each reading will require a hand-written or typed and printed response and in-class discussion of the main conceptual points the author was evoking for each of the assigned readings for the week. Your weekly analysis is required for class discussion and grading to be turned in on the day of class in person.

Additionally, there are some watching and listening exercises that must be reflected on in your writing each week.

As graduate students, I have a very high level of expectation that you will complete the readings in entirety and will provide thoughtful insights into the material you engage with.

The course moves through twelve distinct topics:

1. Looking and Seeing
2. Phenomenology
3. Power and Vision
4. Semiotics and Structuralism
5. Modernism and Postmodernism
6. Post-colonialism
7. Neo-Colonialism
8. Intersectionality
9. Time and Space
10. Marxism and Late-Capitalism
11. Technology
12. The Anthropocene

Art Theory is an essential component of understanding our place as makers. It offers historical context, cardinal orientation, and emergent ideas that will incorporate into your overall practice as an artist. The readings have been specifically selected to provide a broad glimpse into the
dynamic field of Art Theory. Each reading section will have a corresponding discussion day in class, led by fellow classmates. Be prepared with your thoughts to contribute to these conversations in a meaningful way.

The readings have been selected to cover both canonized theoreticians and emerging voices in the field. This course places a high-level of value and emphasis on voices at the margins and a diverse range of authors are included as a result. Keep in mind that some older readings may not carry the same perspectives as today. Many writings from later in the semester are in critical dialog with those voices of the past.

Suggested supplemental texts include:
- The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism - Third Edition
- Art in Theory - 1900-2000

CLASS DISCUSSION

Each week readings will be discussed in class in a round-table setting. Each member of the class will be called on to discuss points in each text assigned. One or two members of the class will be responsible to lead the group in discussion, creating discussion questions that pertain to the ideas presented in the text. As we will be doing an intentionally close read of the work, discussion will follow two formats:
1. Identifying context for the writing - author biography, historical context, etc.
2. Identifying the contributions of the author. This includes rephrasing the work of the writer in your own words.
3. Synthesizing the theory and relating it to other readings, theories, works of contemporary art. This can offer rebuttals or criticism of the writing, but only through the lens of other contemporary theorists. Eg reading Cyborg Manifesto through the lens of Intersectional (4th wave) Feminism.

Everyone is required to discuss all aspects of the reading as it pertains to the work itself. The course is not designed for tangential stories, anecdotes, and misdirections. It is critical to our collective learning that we contribute a close textual analysis of each work assigned. In other words - stay on topic.

DISCUSSION LEADERS

Each week 1-2 students will be assigned to lead discussion on the week’s readings. For this task you will be creating at least 5 discussion prompts or questions for class discussion. These can be open-ended or specific down to the page number. A good example is:

-When the author proposes (X) idea - what does this mean in your own words?
-What does the concept of (X) relate to the theory of (Y) in the other reading from this week?
-How does the quote on page (Z) relate to the arguments in the introduction?

Please avoid questions such as:
-Did you like this reading?
-What was the point of this reading?

etc.

Remember to craft your questions and conversation about the readings with your ability to separate the author and the argument they are making. Take the theoretical claim they are making as a separate discursive space that can be refuted, expanded on, or subsumed.

CONTENT DISCLAIMER

Content in the arts can sometimes include works, situations, actions, and language that can be personally challenging or offensive to some students on the grounds, for example, of sexual explicitness, violence, or blasphemy. As the College of Visual Arts and Design is devoted to the principle of freedom of expression, artistic and otherwise, and it is not the college’s practice to censor these works or ideas on any of these grounds. Students who might feel unduly distressed or made uncomfortable by such expressions should withdraw at the start of the term and seek another course.
CANVAS

This course is integrated with UNT’s Canvas learning management system. It is your responsibility to check our class page regularly to keep an eye out for announcements, communicate with the professor and fellow students, and keep track of your overall class standing. As this course places an emphasis on hand-written responses, printed readings, and in-class discussion, Canvas will play a decidedly peripheral role.

GPT/AI

Although I am a researcher and advocate of Artificial Intelligence, the use of AI as a tool for plagiarism is not permitted in this course and will result in failure. This is usually made obvious by beautifully crafted summaries and an inability to discuss the nuances of the readings in an in-person class discussion. The challenge of this course is to gain a deep intellectual understanding of the material and grow your own intellectual pursuits as a researcher, thinker, and maker. Be honest with yourself and your classmates.

CLASS TIME COMMITMENT

This class will require a full intellectual and time commitment from you in order to pass with full marks. There are 3 class hours per week that you must schedule for yourself. You should expect to have a comparable amount of time outside this window to complete reading assignments (an additional 3-6 hours). Make sure you are mindful of this as you begin the semester so that you stay on track throughout and are successful in the end.

FINAL PAPER & PRESENTATION

The final in this course will consist of a typed and printed essay of 3000-5000 words and a separate keynote/powerpoint presentation with slides to present your final research in the form of a class presentation. This final paper will build off of one of the distinct topics from our semester to include a book of your own selection which relates to both your field of artistic research and the main weekly topic you select. It is important to identify which topic you may be interested in to start building your research throughout the semester. Your final paper must address and build on the arguments and assertions of the authors we have read and relate them directly to the author you have selected. The writing you select must be equal in academic rigor and relate directly to Art Theoretical discourse. This is an opportunity to research a contemporary theoretician that is in your field of research.
Academic Integrity
According to UNT Policy 18.116, Student Academic Integrity, academic dishonesty occurs when students engage in behaviors including, but not limited to cheating, fabrication, facilitating academic dishonesty, forgery, plagiarism, and sabotage. A finding of academic dishonesty may result in a range of academic penalties or sanctions ranging from admonition to expulsion from the University.

ADA Accommodation
UNT makes reasonable academic accommodation for students with disabilities. Students seeking accommodation must first register with the Office of Disability Accommodation (ODA) to verify their eligibility. If a disability is verified, the ODA will provide a student with an accommodation letter to be delivered to faculty to begin a private discussion regarding one’s specific course needs. Students may request accommodations at any time, however, ODA notices of accommodation should be provided as early as possible in the semester to avoid any delay in implementation. Note that students must obtain a new letter of accommodation for every semester and must meet with each faculty member prior to implementation in each class. For additional information see the ODA website at disability.unt.edu

Health and Safety Program
Students are required to follow the Department of Studio Art Health and Safety guidelines and are required to complete training for each studio course. The goal of the Studio Art Health and Safety Program is to protect the health and welfare of all faculty, staff, and students and to cooperate with the University of North Texas’ Office of Risk Management. Please visit the website for details and the departmental handbook: https://art.unt.edu/healthandsafety.

Acceptable Student Behavior
Student behavior that interferes with an instructor’s ability to conduct a class or other students’ opportunity to learn is unacceptable and disruptive and will not be tolerated in any instructional forum at UNT. Students engaging in unacceptable behavior will be directed to leave the classroom and the instructor may refer the student to the Dean of Students to consider whether the student’s conduct violated the Code of Student Conduct. The University’s expectations for student conduct apply to all instructional forums, including University and electronic classroom, labs, discussion groups, field trips, etc. The Code of Student Conduct can be found at deanofstudents.unt.edu/conduct.

Student Evaluation Administration Dates
Student feedback is important and an essential part of participation in this course. The student evaluation of instruction is a requirement for all organized classes at UNT. The survey will be made available during weeks 13 and 14 of the long semesters to provide students with an opportunity to evaluate how this course is taught. Students will receive an email from “UNT SPOT Course Evaluations via IASystem Notification” (no-reply@iasystem.org) with the survey link. Students should look for the email in their UNT email inbox. Simply click on the link and complete the survey. Once students complete the survey they will receive a confirmation email that the survey has been submitted. For additional information, please visit the spot website at www.spot.unt.edu or email spot@unt.edu.

Incomplete Grade
An Incomplete Grade (“I”) is a non-punitive grade given only during the last one-fourth of a term/semester and only if a student (1) is passing the course and (2) has a justifiable and documented reason, beyond the control of the student (such as serious illness or military service), for not completing the work on schedule. In consultation with the instructor, complete a request for an Incomplete Grade. This form can be found on the department website and must be turned into the department chair prior to the last day of classes (not the exam date). Note: A grade of Incomplete is not automatically assigned to students.

Sexual Discrimination, Harassment & Assault
UNT is committed to providing an environment free of all forms of discrimination and sexual harassment, including sexual assault, domestic violence, dating violence, and stalking. If you (or someone you know) has experienced or experiences any of these acts of aggression, please know that you are not alone. The federal Title IX law makes it clear that violence and harassment based on sex and gender are Civil Rights offenses. UNT has staff members trained to support you in navigating campus life, accessing health and counseling services, providing academic and housing accommodations, helping with legal protective orders, and more.
UNT’s Dean of Students’ website offers a range of on-campus and off-campus resources to help support survivors, depending on their unique needs: https://deanofstudents.unt.edu/resources_0. UNT’s Student Advocate she can be reached through e-mail at SurvivorAdvocate@unt.edu or by calling the Dean of Students’ office at 940-565-2648. You are not alone. We are here to help.