

Critical Theory in Contemporary Art Practice

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Course Description

This course maps the theories and discourses that inform the production and reception of contemporary art, providing a supportive environment to develop your practice and articulate your ideas on the production, exhibition and interpretation of art.

Through lectures, seminars, tutorials and gallery visits the course will familiarise you with key concepts and historical transformations that underpin contemporary art production and reception. We will look at the impact of key philosophical, cultural and political discourses on art practice, and examine different theoretical perspectives and critical debates. You will extend and develop your ability to discuss, write about and judge contemporary art. You will be supported in contextualising your practice with extensive feedback in tutorials and workshops. You will also develop your skills in writing artist's statements, critical reviews and/or exhibition proposals.

What kind of knowledge and skills do contemporary artists need? Who is art for? How do we recognise art? What distinguishes art from other forms of cultural production? How does the global economy affect the production and circulation of art? Is art a commodity? What is the social role of art? Can art bring about social change? Can art be critical? Are artists expected to push social boundaries? What is critical art, critical of? What is aesthetic autonomy? These are some of the questions we will address as we explore the historical and critical contexts in which contemporary art is made, circulated, viewed and understood.

Course Outcomes

By the end of the course you will have a good grasp of the historical underpinnings and current debates in contemporary art. You will develop, articulate and contextualise your practice. You will develop your writing and research skills and formulate research questions to guide your practice and research. You will be able to critically evaluate your own work, as well as that of others. You'll be able to critically discuss and evaluate contemporary art.

Who Should Attend

The course is open to everyone regardless of experience but it is particularly suited to those who have a background and experience in art and wish to develop their practice and extend their knowledge of contemporary art practices and discourses. The course will suit those wishing to develop their practice and research, prepare a portfolio, apply for a postgraduate degree in art or pursue a career in the arts. The course will benefit painters, sculptors, print-makers, installation artists, performance artists, video and media artists, designers, sound artists, musicians, curators, writers and researchers.

Course Materials

Please bring the following materials with you:

- Notebook and Pen
- Examples of your work in portable or digital form
- A USB stick
- Money for travel and exhibition entry

You will also need access to a computer, laptop or iPad and internet access for assignments, research and preparation for your final project presentation.

Upcoming Course Dates

1-5 August 2022, Mon-Fri 10:00-16:00 for 5 days @Chelsea College of Arts UAL

Runs **Monday to Friday, every day from 10am to 4pm** for one week at [Chelsea College of Arts UAL](#).

From	To	Time	Duration	Location	Fee	Actions
Monday, 1 Aug 2022	Friday, 5 Aug 2022	10:00–16:00	1 week (25 hours)	Chelsea College of Arts UAL 16 John Islip Street, London SW1P 4JU	£ 655	BOOK

12 Jan – 16 Mar 2023, Thursdays 18:00-20:30 @Chelsea College of Arts UAL

This course runs every **Thursday from 6pm to 8:30pm** for 10 weeks at [Chelsea College of Arts UAL](#).

From	To	Time	Duration	Location	Fee	Actions
Thursday, 12 Jan 2023	Thursday, 16 Mar 2023	18:00–20:30	10 weeks (25 hours)	Chelsea College of Arts UAL 16 John Islip Street, London SW1P 4JU	£ 655	BOOK

If you have any questions please email sophia@videomole.tv or the [UAL Short Course Team](#).

Course Schedule

This sample timetable will give you a sense of the course content and pace, but the schedule may change. You will receive a detailed timetable on the first day of the course. Please allow time for research out of class in preparation for your project presentation on the final day.

DAY 1	18:00-18:45	Introductions, overview of course components and guidelines.
	19:00-20:00	DISCUSSION: What is the critical role of art?
	20:00-20:30	Project brief.
DAY 2	18:00-19:15	LECTURE 1: The Critical Function of Art.
	19:30-20:30	GROUP TUTORIALS
DAY 3	18:00-19:15	LECTURE 2: Politics & the Institution of Art.
	19:30-20:30	READING SEMINAR
DAY 4	18:00-20:30	GALLERY VISITS
DAY 5	18:00-19:15	LECTURE 3: Spectacle & the Everyday.
	19:30-20:30	READING SEMINAR
DAY 6	18:00-19:15	WRITING WORKSHOP
	19:30-20:30	GROUP TUTORIALS
DAY 7	18:00-19:15	LECTURE 4: The Abject, Identity & Process.
	19:30-20:30	READING SEMINAR
DAY 8	18:00-20:30	GROUP TUTORIALS
DAY 9	18:00-19:15	LECTURE 5: Participation, Dialogue & the Gift Economy.
	19:30-20:30	READING SEMINAR
DAY 10	18:00-20:30	PROJECT PRESENTATIONS; 8min each, with 12min for feedback.

Lecture Outlines

The lecture and seminar programme examines the historical and critical contexts in which art is produced, circulated, viewed and understood. Each lecture is a sustained argument followed through with summaries of philosophical, theoretical and aesthetic concepts, art practices, origins and definitions. The lectures introduce controversial ideas and follow their historical or theoretical vicissitudes and transformations through various artistic and philosophical perspectives to their contemporary manifestations. The lectures are discursive and participatory. You will be provided with handouts containing a summary and bibliographic information at the beginning of each lecture.

1. THE CRITICAL FUNCTION OF ART

Since the emergence of the avant-garde in the 19th century, art is considered to be in critical confrontation with society. We will consider the opinions of writers such as the Critical Theorist Theodor Adorno and the critics Clement Greenberg and Benjamin Buchloh to discuss the avant-garde in modernist and post-modernist critical contexts. These writers suggest that art should be more than entertainment or decoration; that it should not simply reflect and perpetuate the values of society, but that it should engage critically with the dominant social, cultural and aesthetic values of its time. Some of the questions that we engage with in this lecture include: Who is art for? What is the relationship between art and entertainment? How do we understand art as a critical practice? What distinguishes art from other forms of cultural production? What is the value of art? What is the critical function of art? What is “critical art”? Why does art have to be critical? What makes a work of art critical? Is it defined by subject-matter, medium or context? What is critical art, critical of? What is critical theory? What is critique? What is the autonomy of art? When is art not critical? How can art be critical within pluralism? Can artistic practices play a critical role in a society?

2. POLITICS & THE INSTITUTION OF ART

In this lecture we explore the political role of art as an institution. According to the Marxist tradition, the political theorist Chantal Mouffe and artists Martha Rosler and Hans Haacke, art appears either as a politically embedded and thus conservative practice, or as part of a critical or revolutionary process which effects change. On the other hand, for Clement Greenberg and Theodor Adorno art must maintain its autonomy to achieve its political aims. The critical theorists Herbert Marcuse and Walter Benjamin, and the philosopher Jacques Ranciere adopt more complex positions between the two camps. Some of the questions that we engage with in this lecture include: What is the social role of art? Do artists have political obligations? Is art an effective tool for effecting or resisting political change? Is there a tension between the values of *art* and *political* values? How is art linked to politics and political or cultural struggle? How do we recognise art? What is art, who gets to decide? What constitutes the ‘artworld’? What is the institution of art? What is Institutional Critique?

3. SPECTACLE & THE EVERYDAY

Since its entry into the representational arts in the mid 19th century, the everyday has increasingly become a common concern in artists’ practice. Far from wishing to represent the everyday in art, the *avant-garde* wanted to abolish the separation of art and life altogether. Contemporary art has inherited these two opposing and contradictory projects. This lecture explores the critique of everyday life through the work of Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau and Georges Perec. We consider the avant-gardist ambition to integrate art and life via the artistic strategies of Aleksandr Rodchenko, Allan Kaprow, Dan Graham and the Situationist International, and we consider Peter Burger’s claim that the culture industry of the late 20th century fused art and life. We also look at

critiques of space, time, consumption and practices of appropriation in post-modern art. Some of the questions that we engage with in this lecture include: What is the everyday? How can it be investigated and represented? How can we bring routine, the ordinary and the unremarkable into visibility? What strategies have artists used to reveal the everyday or to integrate art and life?

4. THE OBJECT, IDENTITY & PROCESS

This lecture considers materiality and the body in art practice and discourse, and specifically the themes that emerge from Julia Kristeva's concept of the *abject*. We trace the origins of Kristeva's concept to consider theories of identity and desire in Lacanian psychoanalysis, group identity and oppression in the work of Georges Bataille and concepts of pollution and taboo in the work of Mary Douglas. We explore feminism and the female artist in the work of Carolee Schneemann and Cindy Sherman. We look at performativity in art through the work of Judith Butler, John Austin and Pierre Bourdieu. The lecture explores Minimalism and Process art (Post-Minimalism) through the work of Robert Morris, Eva Hesse and Richard Serra. Some of the questions that we engage with in this lecture include: Why are certain things considered clean and others dirty? Why is food appealing in some contexts and repulsive in others? Why are we disturbed by ambiguity? What is the difference between the sacred and the unclean? What is a taboo? Why are we fascinated by images that provoke horror? How do materials respond to manipulation? How does our physical engagement with art change the way we understand and respond to artworks?

5. PARTICIPATION, DIALOGUE & THE GIFT ECONOMY

This lecture explores a broad range of art practices since the 1960s that appropriate social formats, in order to collapse the distinction between art and everyday life and emphasise participation, community, collaboration and collectivity. We consider a broad range of critical theories on participation, social engagement, community and dialogue, including Suzanne Lacy's *New Genre Public Art*, Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*, Claire Bishop's *Participation*, Grant Kester's *Dialogical Aesthetics*, Jacques Ranciere's *Emancipated Spectator*, Homi Bhabha's *Conversational Art* and Mikhail Bakhtin's *Dialogic Imagination*. We examine the Gift Economy in the work of Marcel Mauss and commodity fetishism in the work of Karl Marx. Some of the questions that we engage with in this lecture include: Why are artists worried about alienation, lack of participation and broken bonds in the social fabric? How does capitalism create alienation? Why do we feel compelled to return a favour? Where is the work of art in relational art? Is it the outcome, the process, or the idea? How do these practices redefine aesthetic experience? How do they challenge our expectations of art? By what criteria do we judge participatory art? What happens to the role of art when it is put to the service of society? What happens to the role of the artist when the division between art and non-art breaks down? What happens to the autonomy of art?

Reader

You will receive a copy of the reader on the first day of the course. Please allow one hour to familiarise yourself with each text in preparation for the corresponding reading seminar. This list is provided here as an example from previous courses and the texts may change.

1. THE CRITICAL FUNCTION OF ART

Mouffe, Chantal (2008). Art and Democracy: Art as an Agonistic Intervention in Public Space. *Open* No. 14, Art and the Public Domain. Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, SKOR, pp. 6-15.

2. POLITICS & THE INSTITUTION OF ART

Fraser, Andrea (2005). From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique. *Artforum* 44/1, Sep 2005, pp. 278–283.

3. SPECTACLE & THE EVERYDAY

Debord, Guy (1967). The Culmination of Separation. In *Society of the Spectacle*. New York: Zone Books, pp. 6-17.

Lefebvre, Henri (1987). The Everyday and Everydayness. *Yale French Studies* No. 73, pp. 7-11.

4. THE OBJECT, IDENTITY & PROCESS

Douglas, Mary (1966). *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge, excerpts pp. 1-7, 44-50, 149-150.

Kristeva, Julia (1982). *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, extract pp. 1-6.

5. PARTICIPATION, DIALOGUE & THE GIFT ECONOMY

Bourriaud, Nicolas (2002). *Relational aesthetics*. Dijon: Les presses du reel, pp. 7-24.

Kester, Grant. (2005). Conversation Pieces: The Role of Dialogue in Socially-Engaged Art. In *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985*, Zoya Kucor and Simon Leung ed. Malden, MA: Blackwell, pp. 76-88.

Tutor

Sophia Kosmaoglou is an artist, curator and tutor. Her current practice blurs the boundaries between art, activism and education to question the ontology of art and its social and institutional functions. She has a practice-based PhD in Fine Art from Goldsmiths and her research interests include institutional critique and the relationship between art and politics, institutions and independent organisations and collective practices. She has previously taught Critical Studies and Studio Practice on BA Fine Art Practice and Joint Honours courses at Goldsmiths and is currently a Visiting Tutor at Chelsea College of Arts. She is a founding member of the Radical Pedagogy Research Group and a former member of [ART&CRITIQUE], Exploding Cinema, The Field, Deptford Cinema and other collectives. For more information please see <https://videomole.tv>

Reviews

This course offers a great opportunity to spend significant time and thought on aspects of your practice in a stimulating group environment. I would like to thank Sophia for her commitment to the students beyond what I expected- providing us with a wealth of information, reading lists etc and regular, detailed personalised feedback, which made such a difference. —Anon

I've been looking for a long time to find a course like this, it is a unique opportunity, no other place provides this course. Sophia is a brilliant tutor and I am so glad I participated. I look forward to the next course. —Anon

There is a lot of material in this course. It could easily form the basis of a degree course either under or post graduate.—Anon

What an enormous pleasure and fascinating process this week has been, so open and yet demanding. I'm in my studio as I write. It feels like the place to be to think it through, and in my case 'get on with it'. I have a stack of questions, and some answers now, about how to go forward. It's

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exciting! Thank you Sophia for this fantastic course, for your teaching, feedback and whole approach. It is so helpful to receive your perceptive and knowledgeable feedback to shake things up, reflect and begin to put more focused ideas into practice. You set the bar high for all of us with astonishing commitment. —Anon

The ideas learnt are indispensable and will stick with me for life. I will use it towards a Master's course and during my own personal study. It has inspired me to get back in education with more direction and confidence. —Anon