

CONTEMPORARY ART AT THE VENICE BIENNALE

Instructor: Alexander Alberro

Summer Intensive 2017

AHIS tba

Location: tba

Seminar meetings: Tues. 8:30-11:30am, and 12:30-2:30pm; Thurs. 8:30-11:30am

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This course introduces the relationship between contemporary artistic practices and this year's Venice Biennale. In addition to classroom meetings with PowerPoint presentations and seminar-style discussion, students will visit exhibition spaces located in the historical pavilions of the *giardini* (fair gardens), the *arsenale* (a sixteenth-century warehouse space now used to host sections of this contemporary art installations), and other temporary venues located throughout the city as we investigate not only the art but also the unique spaces in which we encounter it. Through this exciting event, we will explore connections between art and nationalism, as well as the changing character and shape of this event *over time*, taking into account political and aesthetic shifts in Italy and beyond. We will consider the history of various countries' presence (and absence) at the Venice Biennale with a view toward how this biennale compares to other international contemporary art fairs such as those now held in São Paulo, Istanbul, Havana, New York, and this year's events at Münster (Skulptur Projekte Münster 2017), and Kassel and Athens (Documenta 14).

Beyond a focus on the history of the Venice Biennale, the course will introduce some of the key concepts of contemporary art as they have been developed in the past three or so decades. We will seek to come to an understanding of the complexity of the contemporary art world, a network based on local customs and productions but defined by global art fairs, exhibitions, markets and magazines. Instead of the modernist assumption that art has a geographic center, usually located in Europe or the United States, we will explore the Biennial's attempt to present a more decentralized vision of contemporary art's communicative potential. Diverse nations and cultures, their images and their issues, will be described and analyzed so that the multiplicity of today's international discourses can be assessed. This will entail a consideration of contemporary art's relation to theories of modernism and postmodernism, the historical development of the project of globalization, and the expansion of the art world to a much greater geographical region than ever before. The increased significance of photography, site and context specific installations, performance art and dance, moving image installations, and other techniques of media in artistic production will provide the framework for an examination of various characteristics of contemporary art.

Requirements

1. Attend all class meetings, take the two exams, make several class presentations, and write a 1500-word term paper. Satisfactory completion of all assignments and examinations is

necessary to pass the course.

2. Each class meeting one or two members of the class will be asked to present a 10-minute PowerPoint Case Study presentation. Each Case Study will feature one artwork exhibited at or alongside this year's Venice Biennale that encompasses some of the issues central to the class readings. You do not need to construct an argument or thesis about the artwork in question for this short presentation.
3. The exams will encompass material covered in lectures and readings. The format of exams will consist of compare-contrast essay questions. The questions will specify that you cite some of the readings in your answers. Your exam essays must be written in full sentences--point form answers are not acceptable. Given the nature of the exams, there will not be a scheduled makeup exam, nor can they be taken early.
4. During seminar sessions, you will be expected to come to class having read the assigned texts, and prepared to speak about them. Lively, informed discussion is our goal, and you are asked to contribute your own unique perspective to our conversations. How effectively you intervene in class discussion will be part of your grade. Class attendance is mandatory, as are all reading assignments, class presentations, and the final paper.
5. The class will be divided into groups, each of which will take turns leading class discussion during seminar meetings. This will include preparing brief oral presentations about the readings, offering questions to stimulate discussion, and, if necessary, bringing in images that serve as a focal point for analysis. Presentations should explicate the most important issues raised in the readings, and include information on how the approaches articulated depart from those of previously studied authors.
6. Each student will write a 1500-word paper focusing on a particular artwork included in the Biennial, reading the formal dimensions of the work carefully and placing the artwork in its historical framework in terms of the genre in which it operates, the debates that it takes part in, the issues that it seeks to communicate, and context from which it originates. The paper will be due on the final day of class.
7. In general, a grade of "C" indicates adequate mastery of the material and merely competent written and oral presentation; a "B" shows additional effort, with full understanding of the data and concepts, clear and well-produced written work and regular class participation; an "A" is reserved for those students producing superior work, which includes a full comprehension of materials accompanied by thoughtful, well-written papers that go beyond the assignment and exceptional class participation.
8. Qualified students with disabilities needing appropriate academic adjustments should contact me as soon as possible to ensure your needs are met in a timely manner.

Learning Outcomes

Students taking this course will be able to recognize the key components of a Biennial exhibition, as well as the relationship between this type of international exhibition and the contemporary phenomenon that is commonly referred to as globalization. Students will also learn the ways in which art shapes ethics and values in a global context, and come to an understanding of the elements of those values that continue to be operative. Students who successfully complete the course will be able to discuss cultural concerns relevant to the analysis of the relationship between art and society, as well as cultural concerns relevant to the analysis of contemporary art more generally, including changing notions of artistic subjectivity, the nature of the art object, the profound impact of technology on cultural and social practices, the ways in which artists respond to the dramatically changing notions of space, time and dimension, and evolving perspectives on the role and subjectivity of the spectator. The accounts of the readings that are a course requirement will teach students how to read closely and articulate the central theses of a text. The final paper will teach students how to analyze form, conduct research in primary and secondary sources, and construct an argument using art historical forms of evidence, in particular visual information.

Course Materials

All but one of the readings (see below) will be distributed via Courseworks prior to the beginning of the course, and will remain on Courseworks for the duration. There will be some additional readings to be determined as we move through this year's biennale since the catalogue and early press are not yet available.

Schedule and Value of Tests and Paper

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| 1. Midterm exam, June 29 | 10% of grade |
| 3. Paper, due July 20 | 30% of grade |
| 4. Final exam, July 20 | 30% of grade |
| 5. Class participation and presentations | 30% of grade |

Required Texts:

- 1) Néstor García Canclini, *Art Beyond Itself: Anthropology for a Society Without A Story Line* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014)

Lecture/Seminar Schedule and Readings

(The schedule of lectures is provisional and subject to revision.)

Tuesday, June 13, 8:30-11:30am: "The Local and the Global in Contemporary Art"

Tuesday, June 13, 12:30-2:30pm: site visit to the Giardini

Thursday, June 15, 8:30-11:30am: “National/International: The Periphery at the Giardini”

- 1) Joel Robinson, “Folkloric Modernism: Venice’s Giardini Della Biennale and the Geopolitics of Architecture”
- 2) Rafael Niemojewski, “Venice or Havana: A Polemic on the Genesis of the Contemporary Biennial,” *The Biennial Reader*, eds. Elena Filipovic, et al. (Hatje Cantz, 2010), 88-103
- 3) Caroline Jones, “Biennial Culture: A Longer History,” *The Biennial Reader*, 66-87
- 4) Lawrence Alloway, “The Biennale in 1968,” *The Biennial Reader*, 136-149

Case study:

Reading presentations:

Tuesday, June 20, 8:30-11:30am: “Art Beyond Itself”

Néstor García Canclini, *Art Beyond Itself: Anthropology for a Society Without A Story Line* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014)

Case study:

Reading presentation:

Tuesday, June 20, 12:30-2:30pm: site visit to the Arsenale

Thursday, June 22, 8:30-11:30am: “Globalization, Cosmopolitanism and Urban Expansion”

- 1) Elena Filipovic, et al., “Biennialology,” *The Biennial Reader*, 12-29
- 2) Simon Sheikh, “Marks of Distinction, Vectors of Possibility: Questions for the Biennial,” *The Biennial Reader*, 150-163
- 3) Carlos Basualdo, “The Unstable Institution,” *The Biennial Reader*, 124-135
- 4) Brian O’Doherty, “Notes on the Gallery Space,” in *Inside the White Cube. The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986)
- 5) Tony Bennett, “The Exhibitionary Complex,” in Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago, eds., *Grasping the World: the Idea of the Museum* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 413-441

Case study:

Reading presentation:

Tuesday, June 27, 8:30-11:30am: “The Artist and the Frame”

- 1) Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed., Donald F. Bouchard (Cornell University Press, 1977), 113-138.
- 2) Craig Owens, “From Work to Frame, or, Is There Life After the Death of the Author?” *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 122-139.

Case study:

Reading presentation:

Tuesday, June 27, 12:30-2:30pm: site visits to Biennale off sites/national pavilions

Thursday, June 29, 8:30-11:30am: Midterm Exam

Case study:

Reading presentation:

Tuesday, July 4, 8:30-11:30am: "The Spectator"

- 1) Marcel Duchamp, "The Creative Act--How Style Evolves in the Creative Mind" (1957), in Pontus Hulten, et al., eds., *Marcel Duchamp Work and Life / Ephemerides on and about Marcel Duchamp and Rose Sélavy 1887-1968* (MIT Press, 1993), n.p.
- 2) Michail Bakhtin, "Art and Answerability" (1919), *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays by M.M. Bakhtin* (University of Texas Press, 1990), 1-3.
- 3) Jacques Ranciere, *The Emancipated Spectator* (Verso, 2009), 1-23.

Case study:

Reading presentation:

Tuesday, July 4, 12:30-2:30pm: "The Role of Culture"

- 1) Michael Peter Smith, "The Global City: Whose Social Construct is it Anyway?"
- 2) Pamela Lee, "Boundary Issues: The Art World Under the Sign of Globalism"
- 3) Emma Barker, "Exhibiting the Canon: the Blockbuster Show," in *Contemporary Cultures of Display*
- 4) Jan Verwoert, "The Curious Case of Biennial Art," *The Biennial Reader*, 184-208

Case study:

Reading presentation:

Thursday, July 6, 8:30-11:30am: "Diasporic, Counter and Public Spheres"

- 1) Geraldo Mosquera, "The Marco Polo Syndrome: Some Problems around Art and Eurocentrism," *The Biennial Reader*, 416-425
- 2) Okwui Enwezor, "Mega-Exhibitions and the Antinomies of a Transnational Global Form," *The Biennial Reader*, 426-445
- 3) George Baker, "The Globalization of the False: A Response to Okwui Enwezor," *The Biennial Reader*, 446-453
- 4) Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History"

Case study:

Reading presentation:

Tuesday, July 11, 8:30-11:30am: "Cultural Techniques"

- 1) Walter Benjamin. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Hannah Arendt, ed., *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 217-251.
- 2) Bernhard Siegert, "Cultural Techniques: Or the End of the Intellectual Postwar Era in German Media Theory," *Theory, Culture & Society*, 30:6 (2013), 48-65.

Case study:

Reading presentation:

Tuesday, July 11, 12:30-2:30pm: "Images and the Experiential Turn"

- 1) Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," *e-flux journal*, 10 (November 2009), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>.
- 2) Dorothea Von Hantelman, "The Experiential Turn—On Performativity"
- 3) Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, "The Experience Economy"
- 4) Edward W. Said. "Introduction," *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 1-28.

Case study:

Reading presentation:

Thursday, July 13, 8:30-11:30am: "Reconsidering the Biennial and Globalism"

- 1) Reading: Roundtable "Global Tendencies. Globalism and the Large-Scale Exhibition," organized by Tim Griffin and including James Meyer, Catherine David, Martha Rosler, Okwui Enwezor, Francesco Bonami, Hans-Ulrich Obrist and Yinka Shonibare, *Art Forum* (November 2003)
- 2) Stefano Tonchi, "The Other Biennale. Punta della Dogana." *New York Times* (May 18, 2009)
- 3) John Miller, "The Show You Love to Hate. A psychology of the mega-exhibition," in *Thinking about Exhibitions*, eds. Bruce Ferguson, et al.

Case study:

Reading presentation:

Tuesday, July 18, 8:30-11:30am: "Archives and Apparati"

- 1) Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October*, 110 (Fall 2004), 3-22
- 2) David Joselit, "Painting Beside Itself," *October*, 130 (Fall 2009), 125-134
- 3) Giorgio Agamben, "What Is an Apparatus?" in *What Is an Apparatus? And Other Essays* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009) 1-24, 55.

Case study:

Reading presentation:

Tuesday, July 18, 12:30-2:30pm: "Locality, Publicness and Site"

- 1) Raqs Media Collective, "Light from a Distant Star: A Mediation on Art, Agency, and Politics"
- 2) Mark Augé, "From Places to Non-Places"
- 3) Arjun Appadurai, "The Production of Locality"

Case study:

Reading presentation:

Thursday, July 20, 8:30-11:30am: final exam