

AVT 307-001
George Mason University
Spring 2017 T 10:30-1:10
School of Art Building 1007

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COURSE SYLLABUS AESTHETICS

It is very difficult to choose something that is absolutely devoid of aesthetic pleasure.
—Marcel Duchamp

All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn't are not easy to specify.
—Erving Goffman

Aesthetics is more than philosophy or theory of art and beauty; it is a way of inhabiting space, a particular location, a way of looking and becoming.
—bell hooks

For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm.
—Vladimir Nabokov

*I look; morning to night I am never done with looking.
Looking I mean not just standing around, but standing around
as though with your arms open.*
—Mary Oliver

The Igbo people say, If you want to see it well, you must not stand in one place.
—Chinua Achebe

In order to catch even a fleeting glimpse of the world, we must break with our familiar acceptance of it.
—Zia Haider Rahman

The impulse of modern art is the desire to destroy beauty.
—Barnett Newman

Beauty is now underfoot wherever we take the trouble to look.
—John Cage

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course will address the complexity of the contemporary aesthetic experience through a related series of questions that drive the discourse in contemporary visual and performing arts: How do we open ourselves to what is unfamiliar in the arts and what is the purpose in doing so? Who decides what is of value in the arts and how are these determinations made? How does art respond to culture and how does it lead it? Whose voice is allowed access to speak through the arts? What is the place of beauty in the arts and how has that concept changed over time? Just what *is* art anyway? In this course we will look at how contemporary artists have presented us with answers to these questions that are sometimes startling and difficult, sometimes pleasurable and affirming, but always provocative and engaging.

The notion of the aesthetic will be examined as it pertains to experiences in nature, in the environment, in the senses, in social and cultural systems, conventions and institutions, and in works of art. Individuals' concepts of the aesthetic will be identified and analyzed, and the course will work at an expansion of the notion of the aesthetic to include conceptions that go beyond "beauty" and convention. Emphasis will be placed on examining a broad range of contemporary art and culture to engage an expansive, amplified, and subversive experience of the aesthetic. In addition, the current cultural wars being waged over the forms, content, and aims of contemporary art will be examined for their suggestions of a shift in the governing aesthetic paradigms. The student will become aware of how the contemporary practice of art moves beyond the production of artworks to involve the artist's disciplined efforts to observe, engage, and interpret the processes of living.

The course aims at the creation of heightened aesthetic perception. Emphasis will be placed on how the process of a refined aesthetic consciousness is grounded in the raw materials of human experience and daily life, as well as in art experiences. Through observation, contemplation, sensation, reading, writing, attendance at arts events, and heightened self-awareness, the student will engage as an aesthetic observer of and participant in the world.

REQUIRED TEXTS

- Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses*. NY: Vintage, 1990.
- Kakuzo Okakura, *The Book of Tea*. NY: Shambala Publications, 2001. (Or any edition; may also be available for free download.)
- Lawrence Weschler, *Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees: A Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin*. expanded ed. U of California Press, 2009. (Or any edition.)
- Other reading assignments as listed in the Course Outline.

REQUIRED VISUAL MATERIALS

Videos and DVDs assigned to be viewed outside of class are available in the Media Services area of the Johnson Center Library, as well as online or on rental services.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

- Class attendance is essential as material will be presented that cannot be replicated outside of class. Visual materials presented in class are *not* available in the library.
- Once the class starts, do not leave the classroom without permission of the instructor.
- Cell phones and pagers must be OFF in class.
- **This is a seminar class: All internet devices must be OFF during class. Computers can be used only to access assigned articles and notes. No exceptions.**
- Completion of assigned readings and videos, and participation in class discussion indicating familiarity with these materials.
- Completion of weekly responses to the assigned material. *See attached guidelines.*
- Off-campus museum visits and response as indicated on the Course Outline. Document your visits with photos. (Alternative to photos: Gather museum publications [pamphlets or brochures] that supply documentation of your attendance.)
- Should students have to miss class for any reason, they are expected to take initiative in obtaining notes, assignments, and handouts **from class partners**.
- Class communications will be sent via GMU email. You must activate, maintain, and regularly check your GMU email. You are responsible for notices sent via email.

EVALUATION

- 30% **PREPARED** participation in class
- 70% Weekly responses, including assigned museum visits

Grading Standards:

- A grade of **A** is given only for **superlative** work that demonstrates a profound commitment to the course material and demonstrates mastery of its content, and further, that goes on to employ this material as a springboard for independent thought and work.
- A grade of **B** is given for **exceptional** work that completely fulfills all the requirements of the course in a conscientious and dedicated manner, and further, that demonstrates mastery of the course content.
- A grade of **C** is given for work that fulfills all the requirements of the course in a **satisfactory** manner, but that falls short of demonstrating rigor and mastery. This is the average grade.
- A grade of **D** is given for work that **falls short of being satisfactory** in terms of completion and/or engagement.
- A grade of **F** is given for work that **fails** to fulfill the requirements of the course as listed above.

An Important Note about Grading: Requirements for this course are not graded numerically; rather I will adhere to the Grading Standards listed above, which assess rigor of thought and mastery of the course content, as demonstrated by your verbal and written work. Class participation and completion of assignments are the **minimum** requirements for a satisfactory (i.e., C) grade.

WEEKLY RESPONSES

Written responses to the class material will document the development of your thought over the course of the semester. These writings, *which must be typed and printed on paper*, are turned in each class for the readings/videos to be discussed that week. These responses will form the basis of class discussion. (**NOTE: Writing is NOT accepted by electronic transmission. No exceptions.**) These writings are as follows:

- 1) After completing the assigned readings and visual materials, record your reactions to the main **ideas** or themes. Examine what was intriguing, stimulating, provocative, or insightful about each assigned work. Record your insights and “ahas.” Do not make general statements; explain what you mean with detail, examples, and further thoughts. Cite relevant passages, events, and examples from the readings and videos, where appropriate.
- 2) More briefly, record your reactions to materials that were presented in the previous class, including discussion and any videos that were screened. Raise questions about the discussion and videos, and record your insights and “ahas.” Also use this opportunity to revisit your previous responses; did class discussion clarify things or change your ideas about what you had written previously?

At the top of the response, **list the number of the response as listed on the course outline**. The weekly response may treat each assigned subject separately, or you may choose to group the readings and videos into an essay that analyzes them comprehensively. Whichever way you decide to organize your response, **list the subjects of the writing in the response header to demarcate your organization (that is, use the headers to indicate what you are writing about)**.

NOTE: The subject of the response is the *ideas* in the readings/videos, not whether you liked or did not like the assigned work or artists.

All of these writings should not just address the assigned readings, videos, or museum experiences, but they should also make connections with other materials that you are reading, seeing, thinking about, etc. They may contain descriptions, observations, questions, etc. about aesthetic experiences; ruminations about materials presented in class; relevant quotations; thoughts about other arts experiences you are having; etc. You should be recording the development of your notions about aesthetic experience.

These writings should constitute a record of developments in your thinking that the course materials may invoke and provoke. Be open, responsive, creative, and thoughtful. Taken together, these responses should document the development of your intellectual development over the course of the semester.

More than half of your grade will be based on these written responses. They will be evaluated on the basis of the *thought and care* demonstrated, the completeness and

quality of presentation, the engagement with the *ideas* in the readings and videos, and evidence of intellectual development. I am interested in how thoughtful you are, as well as in the evident effort you display in grappling with the ideas in the articles and the visual materials.

Responses are graded on a relative scale of 1 (high) to 10 (low). Within this system, however, **allowance is made for growth over the course of the semester**. That is, emphasis is placed on where you end up at the conclusion of the semester rather than where you began.

One letter grade will be deducted for late responses. (The only exception is documented illness or emergency.)

MUSEUM VISITS

The week of March 21 has been set aside for museum visits on your own time (in lieu of classes). You may go to the museums at any time that is convenient for you before April 25, when the museum response is due. The museums are open every day from 10:00am-5:30pm; admission is free. The closest Metro stops are Smithsonian and L'Enfant Plaza.

The three museums are in walking distance from each other on the National Mall. It is easy to get to the museums from campus: Take the free Mason-to-Metro shuttle that leaves campus every half hour. At the Vienna Metro, take the Orange Line to the Mall. The Smithsonian stop is closest to the Sackler and African Art. One stop beyond, L'Enfant Plaza takes you closer to the Hirshhorn.

Please visit ALL of the following museums; you are free to choose the specific exhibitions at each of these museums that interest you:

- Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, 1050 Independence Avenue (www.asia.si.edu)
- National Museum of African Art, 950 Independence Avenue SW (<https://africa.si.edu/>)
- Hirshhorn Museum, Independence Avenue at 7th Street SW (<http://hirshhorn.si.edu>)

Write a response to the museum exhibitions that follows the general guidelines set forth in “Weekly Responses.” After visiting the required museums, record what you saw and experienced, as well as your responses to the art. **Document** your visits with photos. (Alternative to photos: Gather museum publications [pamphlets or brochures] that supply documentation of your attendance.) These responses can be submitted at any time up to April 24.

IMPORTANT NOTE: The Yayoi Kusama Exhibition at the Hirshhorn (February 23-May 8) requires Timed Passes. Advance Timed Passes will become available on **February 13**. To receive more information about obtaining Advance Timed Passes, you may [sign up for the Hirshhorn eNewsletter](#) or follow the Hirshhorn on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), or [Instagram](#). See: <http://hirshhorn.si.edu/kusama/passes/>

GUIDELINES FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

NOTE: There are varying comfort levels with speaking extemporaneously in a group. If you are reluctant to speak in class, please *challenge* yourself to offer oral commentary. *Your insights and questions are vital to our collective success.*

Class discussion will be structured around the idea of a seminar, i.e., each member of the class is responsible for contributing to discussion of the readings, films, and assignments. (Note: Participation is worth **30%** of your final grade.) Each class member is responsible for the success or failure of the discussion. The following guidelines will be followed in class discussion:

- You must bring assigned readings to class, as well as something to write with and on.
- You must come on time and come *prepared*.
- You must discuss carefully and be prepared to *listen* as well as to talk
- Discussion will be grounded in readings and videos, and will remain focused and structured.
- Respect for the opinions of other class members forms the basis of class discussion.
- If, for some reason, you have come to class unprepared, identify yourself as such and listen to the discussion.

Use the following guidelines for class preparation:

- Mark your books/articles when reading to note passages of interest or curiosity or confusion.
- Make a list of questions about the reading, noting relevant page numbers.
- Come to class prepared to discuss the reading and videos in detail, *focusing on specific passages from the texts and videos.*
- Come prepared with written assignments for each reading, video, or outside assignment.
- After each class, write again about the reading, video, or discussion. Note how the discussion has affected your thinking about the subject.

IMPORTANT NOTE: The grade for class discussion is cumulative, reflecting the **quality** of your discussion over the course of the semester.