

# AVT 307-001: AESTHETICS

Instructor: Roxana Geffen

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Hours: Wednesdays, 1:30–4:30 PM

Location: Art + Design Building, 1005

Office Hours: After class, by appointment, location TBD

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## 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? 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.

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 beyond the production of artworks to involve the artist's disciplined efforts to observe, engage, and interpret the processes of living.

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## REQUIRED TEXTS

- Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses*. NY: Vintage, 1990.
- Lawrence Weschler, *Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees: A Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin*. U of California Press. (Any edition.)

(Other reading assignments to be posted on Blackboard.)

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## COURSE REQUIREMENTS

- **All internet devices must be OFF during class. NO exceptions.**
  - **Cell phones must be OFF in class.** This means no calling, texting, checking email/game scores/social media during class. If you think you might need to take a call/text during class—ie. in a family emergency—please let me know ahead of time.
  - Please get paper copies of the reading materials so you can refer to them in class without being on your laptop. This means printing out articles. If you are unable to do this, let me know. If you must use digital versions of the readings, please bring your laptop to class, rather than reading it on your phone.
  - **Class attendance is essential** as material will be presented that cannot be replicated outside of class.
  - **Completion of assigned readings and videos, and participation in class discussion** indicating familiarity with these materials.
  - Completion of written assignments. Longer assignments must be submitted via Blackboard.
  - Off-campus museum visits and response as indicated in MUSEUM VISITS section of the syllabus. Document your visits with photos OR gather museum publications [pamphlets and 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 Blackboard, and for letting me know.
  - I will post information about the class on Blackboard and will send out class-wide Announcements regarding assignments or scheduling changes. You must check Blackboard regularly. You are welcome to email me at [rgeffen@gmu.edu](mailto:rgeffen@gmu.edu). 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.
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## GRADING

Participation:	15%
Presentations on the reading:	15%
Short writing assignments #1-#6:	30% (5% each)
Turning in assignments on time:	5%
Note: this grade will start at 100 and will go down by 10 points with each missed assignment.	
Long Paper #1:	15%
Final Paper:	20%

- 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:** Class participation and completion of assignments are the **minimum** requirements for a satisfactory (i.e., C) grade.

## CLASS SCHEDULE:

You may notice that many of the reading assignments are still TBD. This is because, as a seminar, I would like to get a sense of how the class is responding to the material before setting the assignments. However, all the long-term assignments are listed, and I will fill in the rest of readings/materials within two weeks of the beginning of the semester.

### WEEK 1 (1/24/18)

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#### In Class:

- Introduction
- Video: What is Art For?
- Videos: Sarah Sze and Nick Cave
- Discuss

#### HW: Due 1/31/18

#### Read/Watch/Listen:

- Peter Schjeldahl's article on Alma Thomas
- TED talk: My Stroke of Insight

#### Write:

Assignment #1: Prepare 3 questions from HW materials to be asked and discussed in class. These need to be written down/printed and brought to class. I will collect them at the beginning of the next class.

### WEEK 2 (1/31/18)

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#### In Class:

- Assignment #1 due
- Presentations on Thomas and TED talk
- Q&A

#### HW: Due 2/7/18

#### Read/Watch/Listen:

- Jeannette Winterson "Art Objects"
- Diane Ackerman, "Introduction" (xv-xix) and "Smell" (3-63)

**Write:**

Assignment #2: Describe the room that you are in without naming it. Describe all the sensory details you are experiencing in this room: what does it look, smell, sound, feel like? What materials is it made of? How big is it? What are the colors and patterns like? Is the room full? Is it hot? Cold? Is the air still or is there a breeze? What is the lighting like? How do you feel in this space, physically + emotionally. Try to evoke the space so fully that the reader can guess where you are.

**WEEK 3 (2/7/18)**

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**In Class:**

- Assignment #2 due
- Presentations on Winterson and Ackerman
- Ilse Crawford documentary
- Q&A

**HW: Due 2/14/18****Read/Watch/Listen:**

- Read Eric R. Kandel's "Reductionism in Art and Brain Science: Bridging the Two Cultures / Chapter 5"

**Write:**Assignment #3:

- Of these three artists that Kandel mentions in Chapter 5—Turner, Monet and Kandinsky—pick the one whose work you know the **least** well.
- Spend at least 20 minutes looking at that artist's work on-line (websites listed on BB under Course Content/ Web Links.)
- Write about one art work that you find compelling. Try to talk about why you think it's compelling to you. (1/2 to 1 page)
- Write or print this out to be handed in in class, on 2/7/18. At the top of the page, please list:
  - the painter
  - painting title
  - medium
  - date
  - and the website you saw it on.

## WEEK 4 (2/14/18)

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### In Class:

- Assignment #3 Due
- Presentation on Kandel, Turner, Monet and Kandinsky
- Q & A

### HW: Due 2/21/18

#### Read/Watch/Listen:

- Read Eric Kandel, "Chapter 8: How the Brain Processes and Perceives Abstract Images" pp. 109-122
- Watch TED talk: Billy Collins [https://www.ted.com/talks/billy\\_collins\\_everyday\\_moments\\_caught\\_in\\_time](https://www.ted.com/talks/billy_collins_everyday_moments_caught_in_time) (15 minutes)

#### Write:

Decide on possible topics for your first long writing assignment: Long Paper #1.

(See the Assignments page in the syllabus and the Assignment on Blackboard for more details.)

Please think of 3-5 possible topics relating to the materials we have been reading/watching/discussing so far.

Some examples:

**A Deep Dive:** An in-depth or alternative look at artists, ideas or artworks we have touched on.

Make sure you are bringing fresh information and ideas to any topic we have covered in class.

**Compare/Contrast:** A comparison between two artists, or between you and another artist, or between your work. Ideally one of the artists would be someone we have discussed/looked at and the other wouldn't. If you choose this type of paper, remember that you need to compare AND contrast: show similarities and differences.

**I Relate To This:** A discussion of how one or more ideas we have covered relates to your work. This type of paper sounds like the easiest choice, but it can be tough to write clearly about one's own work. You will need to be very clear and specific about your work. You will also need to include images in your paper.

#### Or, come up with your own topics.

The paper will be 5 pages long, so make sure your topic is interesting enough to write about for that long.

## WEEK 5 (2/21/18)

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### **In Class:**

#### **HW: Due 2/28/18**

#### **Read/Watch/Listen:**

- Kandel "Chapter 9: From Figuration to Color Abstraction"
- Watch first half of Gerhard Richter Painting documentary
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#### **Write:**

Begin Long Paper #1 (Due 3/21/18)

## WEEK 6 (2/28/18)

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### **In Class:**

- Presentations on Kandel Ch. 8 and 9, and Billy Collins TED talk
- Q & A
- Discuss paper topics

#### **HW: Due 3/7/18**

#### **Read/Watch/Listen:**

- Read Kandel Ch. 13 and 14 (178-189)
- Read Diane Ackerman "Touch" (65-123)
- Read Anni Albers on "Jewelry" and look at images of her work

#### **Write:**

- Work on Long Paper #1 (Due 3/21/18)

## WEEK 7 (3/7/18)

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### In Class:

- Presentations on Kandel, Ackerman and Albers
- Finish watching and discuss Richter documentary

### HW:

#### Read/Watch/Listen:

– Go to the Art21 website and watch 3 segments of your choice. Write down the Art21 segments you watched, and **SUBMIT THE LIST VIA BB THE DAY BEFORE CLASS, ie. 3/20/18**

### Write:

- Work on Long Paper #1 (due 3/21/18)

## WEEK 8 (3/14/18) NO CLASS

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### SPRING BREAK

## WEEK 9 (3/21/18)

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### In class:

- Long Paper #1 Due
- Discuss Art21 artists

### HW: Due 4/04/18

#### Read/Watch/Listen:

- Read Ellen Dissayanake "Art as a Human Behavior: Toward an Ethological View of Art"
- Read Alice Walker "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens"
- Watch Basquiat documentary

### Write:

Writing Assignment #4: Write 2 discussion questions for each essay and film, (6 total) to be discussed in class on 4/04/18. Hand in in class.

## WEEK 10 (3/28/18) NO CLASS

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### MUSEUM VISIT (for details see "Assignments")

**HW: Due 4/4/18**

**Read/Watch/Listen:**

- Article on Museum neutrality
- Peter Schjeldahl, "Notes on Beauty"

**Write:**

- Writing Assignment #5: Museum Experience Paper

## WEEK 11 (4/4/18)

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**In class:**

- Discuss Museum Visits, readings
- Writing Assignment #4 Due
- Writing Assignment #5 Due

**HW: Due 4/11/18**

**Read/Watch/Listen:**

- Art and Difficulty: Foucault's Nightmare
- Nick Hornby, "Nipple Jesus"
- Weschler, Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees, Introduction and chapters 1-4

**Write:**

- No writing assignment this week

## WEEK 12 (4/11/18)

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### In class:

- Presentations on readings
- Q+A

### HW: Due 4/18/18

#### Read/Watch/Listen:

- Weschler, chapter 8-19
- Kandel, chapter 11: A Focus on Light (155-161)

#### Write:

- Writing Assignment #6

## WEEK 13 (4/18/18)

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### In class:

- Presentations on Weschler and Kandel
- Q+A

### HW: Due 4/25/18

#### Read/Watch/Listen:

- Read bell hooks
- Interview with Mabel O. Wilson
- Documentary TBD

#### Write:

- Begin Final Paper (due 5/9/18)

## WEEK 14: (4/25/18)

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### In Class:

- Presentations on readings, video

- Q+A

**HW:**

**Read/Watch/Listen:**

**Watch**

- Rivers and Tides: Andy Goldsworthy Working with Time (Directed by Thomas Riedelsheimer, 2000)

**Write:**

- Work on Final Paper (due 5/9/18)

## **WEEK 15: (5/2/18) LAST CLASS**

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**In Class:**

TBD

**HW: FINAL PAPER DUE 5/9/18**

# ASSIGNMENTS:

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## PRESENTATIONS:

Everyone has to present at least one reading in class:

Each class, I will assign presenters for each part of that week's HW. The presenter will then present the assignment to the class the following week and field questions about it. The presentation will be graded, so everyone will be required to present at least once. If you know in advance that you are interested in presenting a specific reading, let me know.

As presenter, you will be responsible for the following:

- Reading/watching/listening to the assigned reading/video/podcast CAREFULLY and THOROUGHLY
- Introducing the reading in class: you should know its name, author, source and be able to give a brief synopsis
- Prepare some points that you would like to make about the reading, such as:
  - How does the reading connect with the overall themes of the course?
  - How does it compare to other readings/videos we have covered?
  - What are the implications of the ideas in the material to the world in general?
  - What are the implications for your own work?
  - Did it shift your ideas about the topic or offer any insights?
- Be prepared to answer questions from the other students about the material

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## WRITING ASSIGNMENTS:

### Writing Assignments 1-6:

- These assignments are intended to deepen your experience of the reading. When I grade them I will be looking for evidence that you read/watched/listened to the entirety of the material AND that you made a real effort to understand and consider the material.
- In general, these will be short. I may give you two or three questions to answer about the material, or ask you come up with questions/discussion points to be raised in class.
- Specific assignments will vary from class to class. I will post each week's assignment on Blackboard, as well as discussing it in class. If you are absent, please check BB before emailing me for the assignment.
- These assignments must be printed/written out on a PIECE OF PAPER and brought with you to class. I will collect them at the beginning of class, grade them and return them the following week. I will not accept

emailed versions, because I would like you to have them on-hand for class discussion. If I have asked you prepare questions, make a copy of them for yourself to refer to during class.

- Because these assignments are designed to inform specific class discussions, you must hand them in on time. Papers handed in after the class in which they are due will go down by one grade. I will not accept any short writing assignment that is not turned in within a week of the due date and you will receive a 0 for that assignment. If you know you will be absent from class ahead of time and cannot turn in your paper, you must email me ahead of time to discuss.

### **Longer Writing Assignments:**

Long Paper #1 and Final Paper:

These papers will be longer, more formal written assignments than the response papers, and should follow these guidelines:

- 5 pages, 12 pt. typeface, 1.5 spacing, normal margins. No creative spacing/layout please.
- Careful editing is crucial. You must read your work carefully for spelling, punctuation and grammar errors before you turn it in. If you have questions about your writing, you are welcome to come and discuss a rough draft with me BEFORE the due date.

I urge you to aim for clarity in your writing above all else. Don't feel that you need to sound like an academic: short, clear sentences are often more effective than complex ones and the same goes for word choices. Do be sure that your ideas are well-organized and well-laid-out.

### **RESEARCH:**

- Research MUST be documented.
- In general, do not use direct quotes (passages taken directly from the source material) longer than 1-2 lines unless the original phrasing is crucial to your argument. If you do use direct quotations, you must make it clear that they are not your words (either place them in quotation marks/italics or off-set them in a separate paragraph) AND provide source information, either at the bottom of the page or in a separate citations page/ bibliography.
- Please use the MLA guidelines for the specific details of citing your sources.
- If you have any questions about making sure you have correctly documented your sources, come and check with me.
- See the University's Guidelines for Academic Integrity for more information.

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## MUSEUM VISITS

The week of 3/28/18 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 4/4, when the museum response (Writing Assignment #5) 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 (<http://shuttle.gmu.edu/masontometro.html>).
- At the Vienna Metro, take the Orange Line: The Smithsonian stop is closest to the Sackler and African Art. One stop beyond, L'Enfant Plaza, takes you closer to the Hirshhorn. The African American Museum is equi-distant to the Smithsonian and Federal Triangle stops.

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

- Freer Gallery of Art, Jefferson Drive at 12<sup>th</sup> Street, SW (<https://www.freersackler.si.edu/>)
- Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, 1050 Independence Avenue SW
- National Museum of African Art, 950 Independence Avenue SW (<https://africa.si.edu/>)
- National Museum of African American History and Culture 1400 Constitution Ave, NW (<https://nmaahc.si.edu/>) This museum requires passes to get in. These are FREE but you must plan ahead. Check out their website for details.
- Hirshhorn Museum, Independence Avenue at 7th Street SW (<http://hirshhorn.si.edu>)

Write a response to the museum exhibitions (details to come.) 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 4.

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## 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 15% 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.
- When making 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.

The university is a place of critical inquiry and the exploration of ideas. In any classroom, you might feel uncomfortable at times when encountering unfamiliar ideas or narratives. But please keep in mind that free expression, curiosity, and open inquiry is at the heart of a university education.