

Art, Politics and New Media

Syllabus - Summer, 2003
Johns Hopkins University
Communications in Contemporary Society

Mon/Wed, 5:10 PM - 7:00 PM

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Course Description

"The term 'tactical media' refers to a critical usage and theorization of media practices that draw on all forms of old and new, both lucid and sophisticated media, for achieving a variety of noncommercial goals and pushing all kinds of potentially subversive political issues." – Critical Art Ensemble

Art, Politics and New Media overviews the ideas, strategies, and work of the artist as a critical lens on the changing landscape of cultural and political conditions in an increasingly technological and globalized world. It brings the artist's role into focus by examining the historical avant-garde, whose aspirations were to bring about social and political transformation through aesthetic means. Included will be a broad survey of 20th century artistic movements including: Futurism, Dada, Surrealism, Constructivism, Situationists, and Fluxus. Critical to this investigation will be artistic mediations that voice radical social change and utopian ideology through such forms as site-specific installation, performance art, street theater, artist books, manifestoes, journals, etc.

The course will also explore a wide range of work that incorporates new artistic strategies that take into account the evolving forms of new media, virtual reality, digital video, and the Internet. Specific artists and art collectives to be examined will include RTMark, Critical Art Ensemble, Electronic Disturbance Theater, RSG (Radical Software Group), and others who are using new media to stage projects that critique contemporary social and political issues through parody, simulation, activist and "hactivist" strategies. The course will conclude with an analysis of the instructor's recent project, The US Department of Art & Technology, a virtual government agency that provides a forum for artistic critique of the political process. Students will be assigned weekly written assignments that summarize historical and contemporary trends in the convergence of art, society, new media and politics. A final project will be a prospectus or artwork that explores artistic intervention, site-specific installation or performance, and appropriation in the nation's capital.

Week 1 - Introduction: Artist Utopias (June 2, 4)

Review of course objectives, assignments, and projects.

Introduction to concepts and trends related to the role of the artist in society – aspirations, ideologies, and tactics. A broad historical overview of concepts, avant-garde movements, and examples of artistic mediation.

[Questions](#) on the role of the artist in society. US DAT [Presentational Video](#).

Examples of [acts of artistic mediation](#):

- Jean Tinguely, "[Homage to New York](#)"
- Ant Farm, "[Media Burn](#)"
- Judy Chicago, "[The Dinner Party](#)"
- Jenny Holzer, "[Protect Me From What I Want](#)"
- Lynn Hersman, "[Tillie the Telerobotic Doll](#)"
- Randall Packer, "[US Department of Art & Technology](#)"

Reading:

- Randall Packer, "[Utopianism, Technology, & the Avant-Garde: The Artist Shaping the Social Condition](#)," Link: A Critical Journal on the Arts, Baltimore, MD (2001)
- Victor Margolin, "The Struggle for Utopia," University of Chicago Press (1997)
- Marshall McLuhan, "Understanding Media," MIT Press, Boston, MA (1964)
- Stewart Home, "The Assault on Culture," AK Press, Stirling, England (1991)

[Notes for discussion](#) based on the reading.

Assignments:

- 250 word response to one of the unanswered questions on the role of the artist in society (6/4). Email to rpacker@zakros.com
- class discussion of readings (6/4).
- next week's readings for 6/9, questions for discussion.

Special Discussion Topic:

[Corporate Control of Media](#) - The FCC is voting today (6/2) on a controversial ruling to ease regulation on media ownership. This new ruling has broad impact on first amendment rights and the ability of corporate owners to increase their control over information disseminated through the media.

Week 2 - Manifesto & the Historical Avant-Garde (June 9, 11)

The manifesto has been used as a text-based medium to express extreme ideologies and a call-to-action. We will look at the manifestoes of Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism to analyze how these statements incorporate tactics of theater, surprise, fantasy, and shock, as well as how they articulate the artistic methodologies and aspirations of each movement.

6/11 - The instructor will give a performance of "[Speech for the End of Time](#)." We will be joined by students from the Cornell Summer Program. Everyone will participate in the event. The event will be held in LL7.

Reading:

- F.T. Marinetti, "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism," Documents of 20th Century Art, Viking Press, NY (1970)
- Richard Huelsenbeck, "Dadaist Manifesto," Dada Art and Anti-art, Hans Richter,

Thames and Hudson, London, England (1964)

- André Bréton, "Manifesto of Surrealism (1924)," Ann Arbor Book, Michigan, 1970
- Randall M. Packer, "Secretary Delivers '[Speech for the End of Time](#),'" US Department of Art & Technology (2003)

[Notes for discussion](#) based on the reading.

Assignments:

- Prepare one question for the Speech Wednesday evening, which critiques the artist's attempt to confront the political conditions of war by borrowing from (appropriating) one of the manifestoes of the historical avant-garde. Weave the manifesto quote into your question. (6/11)

For example: Since "art and its execution and direction is dependent on the time in which it lives, and artists are creatures of their epoch," what form of expression might today's artist use in confronting such questionable policies as the war on terror. (from the Dada Manifesto by Richard Huelsenbeck)

Week 3 - Social Transformations (June 16, 18)

The second wave avant-garde artists, including the Situationists, John Cage, Fluxus, and Joseph Beuys, were influential in the activation of the social and political revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, extending the tactics of the historical avant-garde through the exploration of experimental forms of film, theater, performance, happenings, installation, and site-specific art.

[Notes for discussion](#) based on the reading of the Guy Debord essay.

[Notes for discussion](#) based on the reading of the Joseph Beuys essays.

Reading:

- Guy Debord, "Report on the Construction of Situations and on the Terms of Organization and Action of the International Situationist Tendency (1957)," Guy Debord and the Situationist International (edited by Tom McDonough), MIT Press, October Book, Cambridge, Massachusetts (2002)
- Dick Higgins, "Intermedia," (1966), *Multimedia: From Wagner to Virtual Reality* (Edited by Randall Packer and Ken Jordan), Norton, New York (2001)
- John Cage, "Diary: Audience," (1966), *Multimedia: From Wagner to Virtual Reality* (Edited by Randall Packer and Ken Jordan), Norton, New York (2001)
- Joseph Beuys, "Introduction (1979)," *Joseph Beuys in America* (Compiled by Carin Kuoni), Four Walls Eight Windows, New York (1990)
- Joseph Beuys, "I am Searching for Field Character," (1973) *Joseph Beuys in America* (Compiled by Carin Kuoni), Four Walls Eight Windows, New York (1990)

Assignment:

- As a midterm assignment, write an approx. 1500 word essay (based on the writings with references/examples) describing **artistic activity** as a force for social and political transformation. As we have seen, artistic activity can take many forms, have various intentions, be produced by various individuals. Consider the following questions in your analysis:
 - Define artistic activity (as specifically or generally as you like)?
 - What form does this activity take?
 - How does this activity interact with the social realm?
 - Who carries out this activity?

- Where does this activity take place?
 - What results from this activity?
 - How does this activity relate to the larger culture, particular mass media?
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Week 4 - Cultural Intervention & Tactical Media (June 23, 25)

In the 1980s and 1990s, artists (no longer under the banner of the avant-garde), influenced by post-modernist strategies of cultural appropriation, popular forms and new media, explored new methods of inserting the artist statement into the public sphere through a wide range of tactics and electronic technologies.

We will hold class on Monday, June 23rd at the Vietnam Memorial in the National Mall to critique Maya Lin's work.

[Notes for discussion](#) based on the reading of the Maya Lin interviews.

[Notes for discussion](#) based on the reading of Jenny Holzer and Critical Art Ensemble.

Reading:

- Maya Lin, "Untitled Statements," (1983, 1993, 1995), Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art (Edited by Kristine Stiles), UC Berkeley Press (1996)
 - Jenny Holzer, "Language Games: Interview with Jeanne Siegel," (1985), Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art (Edited by Kristine Stiles), UC Berkeley Press (1996)
 - Guillermo Gómez-Pena, "The Virtual Barrio @ the Frontier," Clicking In (Edited by Lynn Hershman), Bay Press, Seattle, WA (1996)
 - Critical Art Ensemble, "Recombinant Theater and Digital Resistance," Digital Resistance: Explorations in Tactical Media, Autonomedia, Brooklyn, New York (2001)
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Week 5 - Net Strategies (June 30, July 2)

In the mid 1990s, the Internet transformed communications, opening up new access for artists to stage socio-political projects in broadly distributed public space. The medium also enabled artists to extend the possibilities for cultural intervention through "hactivist" strategies, as well as enabling many-to-many forms of collective agency.

[Notes for discussion](#) based on the reading of Ricardo Domingues and RTMARK.

[Notes for discussion](#) based on the reading of Natalie Bookchin and Peter Weibel.

Reading:

- Ricardo Domingues, "Electronic Disturbance: An Interview," Cultural Resistance Reader (Edited by Stephen Duncombe), Verso, London (2002)
 - Natalie Bookchin, "Introduction to net.art (1994-1999)"
 - Peter Weibel, "Art/Politics in the Online Universe," Net_Condition, ZKM, Karlsruhe, Germany (1999)
 - Heath Bunting, "Interview with Heath Bunting: Street Artist, Political Net Artist or Playful Trickster," (Interviewed by Josephine Bosma), Telepolis (1997)
 - RTMARK, "Etoys Finally Drops Lawsuit," RTMARK (2000)
 - Alex Galloway (RSG), "How we Made our own 'Carnivore,'" (2002)
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Week 6 - The Artist as Mediator (July 7, 9)

[Notes for discussion](#) based on the reading of Alex Galloway and US DAT.

The US Department of Art & Technology is a virtual government agency created by the instructor. The class will review the project's website, analyzing its content constructed through appropriation and implantation of government systems, and how it inserts itself into the political process and a critique and a construction of a utopian model for artist-driven government.

On the last day, the class will present and critique final projects.

Assignments and Grading

Readings, Discussion, and Summaries (50%)

Attendance (on time) is mandatory and will be incorporated into the grade. Each student is required to participate in class discussion focusing on readings and lectures, as well as write weekly summaries.

Final Project (50%)

A final project will involve staging an "event" or "situation" in Washington, DC, which critiques the political process from the artist's perspective. The event may be staged conceptually (on paper), or it may be physically placed in a location as a site-specific project, or it may be virtually placed on the internet. The instructor's Department of Art & Technology and Experimental Party projects provide examples, but other forms may involve a new monument for the National Mall, introducing a fictitious bill in Congress that supports the arts and culture, an artist-driven lobbyist organization, transforming the Pentagon into a contemporary arts museum, town hall meetings in the White House open to the public, etc.

Miscellaneous

Required Reading

Course Reader, available 6/11.

Internet Access

Everyone is required to hand in weekly written assignments via email.
