

NYU Steinhardt
Department of Media, Culture, and Communication
Spring 2012
Instructor: Olga Kopenkina

MCC-GE 2400.001 POLITICS OF VISUAL DISPLAY AND REPRESENTATION

Departing from the exhibition and museum site as an object of study, this course examines the modern history of visual display. The artistic avant-garde radically altered the way we look at visual display by eliminating the separation between image and audience. Nevertheless, this visual “rupture” has been echoed in the contemporary discussion about public art and the role of cultural institutions. Since the 1920s, political regimes in Russia and Europe intervened in exhibition techniques connecting avant-garde with totalitarian art – a fact that reinforced the ideological function of the museum. How do museums and contemporary art institutions use the ideological function of the museum display now? How do they create the ideology, which as Guy Debord, theorist of the spectacle noted, conceals the truth of the society that produces it? Does the notion “public art” adequately express the avant-garde desire for the full integration of viewers in the process of exhibiting the artwork? Is there a space for resistance to the ideology of “spectacle” and corporate economy around art inside the modern art exhibition?

REQUIREMENTS:

One presentation in class based on the assignments (see below), a short paper (3 pages), final long paper (7-10 pages). **35%** of your grade is from the presentations and short paper, **25%** - from class participation, **40%** - from the final project (see the assignment for Week 13-14.) More than three unexcused absences will result in a grade loss, more than five will result in an **F**.

Required books:

The Museum as Arena. Artists on Institutional Critique. Ed. Kravagna. Kunsthaus Breganz. Koln, Germany.

Thinking About Exhibitions. Edited by Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne. Routledge, London/New York. 1996, 1999, and other editions.

Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond.* Trans. Charles Rougle (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

Dream Factory Communism: The Visual Culture of Stalin Period. Catalogue of the exhibition at Shirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt. By Oksana Bulgakova, Katya Djogot, Boris Groys and Hans Gunther.

Karen Fiss, *Grand Illusion.* The University of Chicago Press. 2009.

Commodify Your Dissent. By Thomas Frank and Matt Weiland.

The Greenroom: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art #1. CCS Bard. Sternberg Press. 2009

Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics.* 1998. Alternatively: collection of Nicolas Bourriaud’s essays published in *Participation*, ed. Clair Bishop for “Documents of Contemporary Art”, Whitechapel, London and MIT Press. 2006. P. 160-171.

Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War.* The University of Chicago Press. 1983.

If You Lived Here. A project by Martha Rosler. Ed. by Brian Wallis. Dia Art Foundation. 1988.

Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture*

Corporate Mentality: An Archive Documenting the Emergence of Recent Practices Within the Cultural Sphere Occupied by Business and Art. Ed. Alexandra Mir.

Five Days That Shook the World: Seattle and Beyond. By Alan Sekula, Alexander Cockburn, Jeffrey St. Clair

Participation. Ed. Claire Bishop, for Documents of Contemporary Art. Whitechapel, London and MIT Press. 2006.

What Keeps Mankind Alive? The guide of the 11th Istanbul Biennale. 2009.

Taryn Simon. An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar. Whitney Museum of American Art, 2007

Additional reading:

El Lissitzky: Beyond the Abstract Cabinet. Ed. Margarita Tupitsyn. Yale University Press. 1999.

Dada Performance. Edited by Mel Gordon. PAJ Publications, NY. 1987.

Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926–1956.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.

Articles both in pdf and online will be available for each class.

Introduction: An Ideal Modern Art Museum

Week One. Between 1919 and 1926, the early Soviet state established the first modern art museum (The Museum of Artistic Culture), in which the leading artists of Russian vanguard were in charge for acquisitions of the artworks and collection display. In the 60s and 70s, various ideas of a modern art museum were formulated by the artists struggling for democratization of museums in Europe and US. For instance, Joseph Beuys suggested the transformation of museum into a university, pointing out the interdisciplinary nature of modern art and his concept of creativity. It echoed Allan Kaprow's and Robert Smithson's call to turn museums into a site for action. Art Workers' Coalition issued the Statement of Demands, calling for immediate changes in museums' cultural and gender profiling, functions and staffing. Where does the discussion on modern art museum stand now?

Reading:

Aleksandr Rodchenko: "Declaration of the Museum Management" (1919), "Thesis of Rodchenko's Report on the "Museum of Artistic Culture;" Vasily Kandinsky: "The Museum of the Culture of Painting" (1920). In: *The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect.*
Art Workers' Coalition: "Statement of Demands;" Guerrilla Art Action Group, "A Call for the Immediate Resignation of All the Rockefellers from the Board of Trustees of the Museum of Modern Art." 1969. Allan Kaprow and Robert Smithson: "What Is a Museum? A Dialogue."
Joseph Beuys: "Museum. The modern art museum at issue." Interview, December 17, 1975. In: *Museum as Arena.*

Boris Groys, "Politics of Installation". <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/31>

Part 1. Early Avant-garde Projects of Display

Week Two. “Dissenting Spaces”. El Lissitzky’s Proun Space installation at the Great Berlin Art Exhibition of 1923, and “Demonstration Room” in Hannover and Dresden of 1926, is a new concept of space, which is an “interchange station between painting and architecture... to treat canvas and wooden board as building site.” As Judith Barry noted, Lissitzky’s approach to exhibition design sought to problematize the role of the spectator, to create “by means of design” an active participation rather than a passive viewing. Vanguard art was later reintroduced as means of focusing attention on both “architecture” and the study of social relations. We will look at El Lissitzky’s design for Russian Pavilions for Expo and discuss how his installation ideas have been later used in exhibitions of modernist art.

Reading:

Benjamin Buchloh, “From Faktura to Factorgraphy”, In: *October*, Vol 30. (Autumn, 1984). P. 82-119 (on El Lissitzky's *Abstract Cabinet*: P. 92-93.)

Judith Barry: “Dissenting Spaces;” Daniel Buren: “Function of Architecture: notes of work in connection with the places where it is installed taken between 1967 and 1975, some of which are specially summarized here”. In: *Thinking about Exhibition*: P. 307-319.

Allan Kaprow: “Notes on the Elimination of the Audience”. 1966. In: *Participation*. P. 102-04.

Week Three. “Total art” and Dreams of the Total Museum.

Dadaists’ idea of the total theater, which incorporated painting, poetry, music, and dance; Eisenstein’s idea of cinema as totalizing medium and Dziga Vertov’s film montage technique introduced the new aesthetic vision that not only transformed art, but also the site of visual display so that it was no longer separated from auditory experience and the display of bodies and representation. We will discuss the early modernists’ vision of artwork as a spiritual, theatrical, and ultimately, social event, and how this “aesthetic relationality” has been pursued in arts these days.

Reading:

“Dada’s Event: Paris, 1921” by T. J. Demos, in: *Communities of Sense. Rethinking Aesthetics and Politics*. Ed. by Beth Hinderliter, William Kaizen and others (Duke University Press, 2009). P. 135-152.

“The Wings of Hypothesis. On Montage and the Theory of Interval,” by Annette Michelson, in *Montage and Modern Life 1919-1942*, ed. Matthew Teitelbaum (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992).

Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*.

Additional reading: *Dada Performance*. Edited by Mel Gordon. PAJ Publications, NY. 1987.

Assignment 1: Read about the Dadaists experiments with language and other nonsense-generating techniques. How did they undermine the notion of “autonomy of art” and create “spaces of sociability”? How does the recent term “relational aesthetics” suggested by Nicholas Bourriaud evoke the Dadaists activities?

Assignment 2: Watch Eisenstein’s film “The Battleship Potemkin” and “Russian Ark” by contemporary Russian director Alexander Sokurov. How do both films, while being so opposed to each other, correspond in the discussion on film as a totalizing medium?

Part 2. Ideological Function of Art Display

Week Four. Museum in Totalitarian Culture: 1920-1950.

In Nazi Germany was forbidden to exhibit works of modern art (Nazis called modern art Entartete Kunst – deviant, or degenerate art). Government in the Soviet Union (precisely Stalin's politics) changed the attitude towards modern and avant guard art that was actively involved in the Revolution, suppressed it and established dogmatic Socialist Realism as the dominant style for the arts of the Soviet Union. How has the transition from the avant-garde practice of mass-produced works to Soviet mass culture happened? How was Stalinist art in Soviet Union engaged in construction of the Communist dream through appeal to the masses?

Reading:

Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*. Trans. Charles Rougle (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

Clement Greenberg, «Avant-garde and kitsch». Essay, 1939.

<http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/kitsch.html>

Dream Factory Communism: The Visual Culture of Stalin Period. Catalogue of the exhibition at Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt. By Oksana Bulgakova, Katya Djogot, Boris Groys and Hans Gunther. 2003.

Assignment: Look through the catalogue of show *Dream Factory Communism: The Visual Culture of the Stalin Era* curated by Boris Groys in Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt, Germany, 2003-04. How do we approach Socialist Realism now in the 21st c.? How do we assess aesthetic and cultural value of such works today? *Additional reading:* Articles and reviews on *Dream Factory Communism* by Reuben Fowkes (<http://www.artmargins.com>), Joanne Garold (Art on the Line, 2004) and others.

We will watch film *A Portrait of a Woman with Mustache* by Lene Berg.

Week Five. “Competing Bodies”

Exhibition “The Degenerate Art” and Berlin Olympiad were political demonstration during the Nazi: The Olympiad, in the minds of the organizers, was honoring the values that the “degenerate” artists were held to have desecrated. How did two competing regimes of the body (the body of the Olympic athlete versus the expressionist body) determine both representations exhibited in it and the ideology of the exhibition itself? What historical lesson could one take from those shows?

Assignment: Watch Leni Riefenstahl’s films “Olympia” and “Triumph of the Will”. Compare the image of massed bodily movement with body representations of Expressionists lampooned by Nazis in *The Degenerate Art*.

Reading:

Neil Levi, “Judge for Yourselves!” – The “Degenerate Art” Exhibition as Political Spectacle.” *October*. Vol. 85 (Summer, 1998). pp. 41-64. (pdf)

Karen Fiss, *Grand Illusions*. Chapter 5 «The Visual Pleasure of Mass Ornament» (on Leni Riefenstahl's film *Triumph of the Will*: «The Privileging of Vision», «Witnessing Nuremberg») P. 165-180.

Week Six. 20th c. US’ cultural hegemony and exhibitions at MoMA.

We will examine the political and cultural implications of the international success of the post-war American avant-garde that, according to many researchers, was used as a cultural weapon during the Cold War. We will discuss the conflicting points of view (like those of Eva Cockcroft and Michael Kimmelman) on American hegemony in the XX c. and analyze exhibitions and permanent displays of the collections of MoMA’s and other American art museums that played an important role in advancing cultural hegemony of USA in the 20th c.

Reading:

Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*. Chapter “The Creation of American Avant-garde, 1945-1947.” P. 101-163.
Eva Cockroft: «Abstract Expressionism, A Weapon of the Cold War» (essay, pdf)
Michael Kimmelman: ‘Revisiting the Revisionists: The Modern, Its Critics, and the Cold War’, in John Elderfield (ed.), *The Museum of Modern Art at Mid-Century. At Home and Abroad, Studies in Modern Art*, no. 4 (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1994)

The field trip to MoMA or Whitney Museum is required part of the seminar. Using the online catalogues, find social realist paintings in the collections of MoMA and Whitney Museum of American Art. How many of them (if any) are exhibited in the permanent exhibitions? Why are realist paintings scarcely presented in (and sometimes excluded from) many permanent displays of the collections of modern art in American museums? Additional reading: Andrew Hemingway: *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926–1956*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.

Part 3. Visual Display in Modern Democracies. What is public in public art?

Week Seven. White Cube and Transformation of the Public Space. In the 60s, Jurgen Habermas referred to public space with the term “bourgeois public sphere.” In the 80s and increasingly in the 90s, a shift from a bourgeois to a corporative concept of the public sphere was evident. The new concept of the public sphere is dominated by demographic marketing systems and private entrepreneurship, thus transforming state institutions including schools and some museums into virtual extensions of the corporate economic sector. How do we define the transformation of gallery and museum space in ideological site of late capitalism?

Reading:

Jurgen Habermas: “The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia article” 1964. (pdf)
Brian O’Doherty, “The Gallery as a Gesture” (essay). In: *Thinking about Exhibitions*. P. 321-340.
Negt/Kluge “The Public Sphere and Experience: Selections.” (pdf)

Assignment 1. Look into the controversy around the Hans Haacke’s work *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings as of May 1, 1971* at the Guggenheim Museum in 1970, which has revealed the corporate nature of a museum of modern art, and read his essay “Museum Managers of Consciousness”. How does Haacke construct his own counter-system to respond to the dominant “systems of art”, or what he calls the “art industry”?

Assignment 2: Look into Fred Wilson’s exhibition *Mining the Museum* at the Maryland Historical Society in Baltimore, 1992. How does the artist confront, with the means of spectacle, the ideologically conservative environment of the museum?

Reading:

Hans Haacke, “Museum Managers of Consciousness”. *Art in America*, no. 72 (February 1984), pp. 9-17. In: *Museum as Arena*. P.113-122.
Documentation of Hans Haacke’s work *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971* at the Guggenheim Museum.
Ivan Karp and Fred Wilson. “Constructing the Spectacle of Culture in Museums.” In: *Thinking about Exhibitions*. PP. 251-266.

Week Eight. Display in the Age of Enterprise Culture

With corporatization of the public space, art has been linked to urban image, which presents the city as a social and political field, not merely a formation of architectonic or transportation engineering. Art practice integrated in architecture and corporate ideology is in fact based on nothing but a corporate engulfing and annexing of the private impulses. The employees working in such a company environment filled with artworks are supposed to identify themselves with the corporate image. This construction always consists of uniformly conceived aesthetics, i.e. aesthetics defined conceptually and carefully realized. How does the ever-increasing representation of the city and of corporations as media images affect artistic practice? How does it affect the exhibition space?

Reading:

Theodor Adorno, "Culture Industry Reconsidered." (pdf)
Commodify Your Dissent by Thomas Frank, Matt Weiland. Chapters: "The New Gilded Age." P.23-28; "Why Johnny Can't Dissent". P. 31-45.
Christine Harold, *OurSpace: Resisting the Corporate control of Culture*. University of Minnesota Press. 2007. Chapter: "Anti-Logos. Sabotaging the Brand Through Parody." P. 27-69.
Corporate Mentality: An Archive Documenting the Emergence of Recent Practices Within the Cultural Sphere Occupied by Business and Art. Ed. Alexandra Mir.

Watch:

Film *Children of Men* directed by Alfonso Cuaron. The film produced a tension between the scenes of the collapsing world, which seems to be deprived of any historical dimension, and classical art presented in sterility of a "white cube" in a politician's home. What meaning (if any) does the presence of classical art works bear in this film?

Assignment: Look through the book *Corporate Mentality: An Archive Documenting the Emergence of Recent Practices Within the Cultural Sphere Occupied by Business and Art* by Alexandra Mir (ed.) Select the works that use art mimicry to understand "corporate mentality." How do they correspond to what Baudrillard defines as "a culture of simulation and of fascination, and not always one of production and meaning"? Additional reading: Jean Baudrillard, "Beaubourg-Effect: Implosion and Deterrence" (pdf)

Week Nine. Labor on display in the age of deregulation of work process. Creative Industries.

Art as a part of corporate identity – or dehierarchization of the bourgeois art ideology that was an intention of the avant-garde of the XX c – stands for the concept of art that keeps up with neo-liberal and 'new labor' trends. Since Diego Rivera pictured himself at work on a scaffold surrounded by his assistants, artists-laborers, at San Francisco's mural "The Making of a Fresco" (1931), working with the creativity of others, putting work and issues of labor on display has become a frequently used artistic method. How do artists address the issues of precarious labor (Lazzarato, Haidu)? What kind of "factory," according to Hito Steyerl, does the museum become?

Reading:

Anthony Lee: 'Diego Rivera's "The Making of a Fresco and its San Francisco Public"'. Oxford Art Journal, Vol. 19, No. 2 (1996), pp. 72-82. (pdf)
Maurizio Lazzarato: "Immaterial Labor". In: *Radical Thought in Italy*. Ed. by Michael Hardt (pdf)
Rachel Haidu: "Precarite, Autorite, Autonomie" in book: *Communities of Sense: Rethinking Aesthetics and Politics*. P. 215-137.
Hito Steyerl, "Is a Museum a Factory?" <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/71> (pdf)
Harun Farocki, «Workers Leaving the Factory»: http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2002/21/farocki_workers/

4. Space for Resistance?

Week Ten. Exhibitions in NYC and production of space.

We will closely examine artists' collaborative projects, which emphasize the collective struggle to counter alienation from the urban environment, economics and politics in New York City. How do such projects implement the tasks of public art? We will look into "Real Estate Show" (1980), REPOhistory, and Martha Rosler's project "If you lived here" at Dia Art Foundation (1989). How do displays and exhibitions produce a space for the public debates on important social issues, such as homelessness and gentrification in NYC? How does the practice of "repossessing history" ("REPOhistory" project) contribute to the production of social space in a gentrified city such as NYC?

Special guest: Gregory Sholette.

Reading:

"The Fine Art of Gentrification" by Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan. At: http://www.abcnorio.org/about/history/fine_art.html (Alternatively: Rosalyn Deutsche, "Alternative Space" in *If You Lived Here...*)
If You Lived Here. A project by Martha Rosler. Ed. by Brian Wallis. Dia Art Foundation. 1991.
Recommended essays: Martha Rosler's "Fragments of Metropolitan Viewpoint" and Rosalyn Deutsche's "Alternative Space." P. 15-66.
Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture*, Chapter 3: "History that Disturbs the Present." P. 71-93. Pluto Press, 2011.

Assignment. Read the documentation of Martha Rosler's show "If you lived here" at Dia Art Foundation (1989). How does the artist, through visualizing the homelessness, counter the imbalance in the relationship between social status and right to the urban space? How's, in Mike Davis' view, current movement "Occupy Wall Street" echo the 70s and 80s anti-gentrification movement?

Additional reading: Nina Mortmann: "(Under)Privileged Spaces: On Martha Rosler's "If You Lived here..." <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/89>; Mike Davis, "No More Bubble Gum". *Los Angeles Review of Books*. October 21, 2011 <http://lareviewofbooks.org/post/11725867619/no-more-bubble-gum>

Week Eleven. From Representation to Documentation.

Since the popular protests in Seattle in 1999 – which received simultaneous broadcasting by independent media and artists – contemporary documentary practices have no longer been considered as "documenting." Rather, they contribute to the event, "they are constitutive of reality, not of its representation" (Maurizio Lazzarato). We will discuss documentary projects that work with the variety of media – from photography to video to television – along with the issues such as "objectiveness", "first-hand access to an event", relationship between ethics, aesthetics and politics in artistic practice.

Reading:

The Green Room. Reconsidering the documentary and contemporary art. Ed. Maria Lind, Hito Steyerl. Sternberg Press. 2009. Recommended essays: "Documentary/Verite", by Okwui Enwezor: P. 63-102; "Life Full of Holes" by T.J. Demos (on Yto Barrado's and Emily Jacir's works P. 105-120); "Negatives of Europe, Video Essays and Collective Pedagogies" by Carles Guerra" P.144-165; "Struggle, Event, Media" by Maurizio Lazzarato: P. 213-222; "A Language of Practice" by Hito Steyerl: 225-231.
Five Days That Shook the World: Seattle and Beyond. By Alan Sekula, Alexander Cockburn, Jeffrey St. Clair.

Watch:

Film *Videograms of a Revolution* by Harun Farocki, Andrei Ujica, assembled from independent and official state footages of Romanian Revolution in 1989. How do the authors use montage from official and independent broadcasts to reveal the course of history?

Field Trip to Fales Archive's gallery (at Bobst Library) to see the anniversary exhibition of Paper Tiger Television.

Week Twelve: Display of Information: Artists and Curators as Activists.

Artists and curators often attempt to channel the information, which is hidden, or inaccessible for a larger public. Is visualization of hidden information (like, for example, distribution of 2009 Istanbul Biennale's funds in the exhibition display made by Biennale's curators WHW collective) a political gesture, or pure entertainment fulfilling the public desire for access to unknown and improbable? Perhaps the WikiLeaks and Julian Assange's career, who digs into the dark side of the world politics, can be viewed as a form of artistic gesture (Obrist, *In Conversation with Julian Assange*). How do artists practice (such as Taryn Simon and Trevor Paglen) parallel Julian Assange's rule «publish or perish»? Can visual arts become another tool - like television, tweets, or HTML - to empower the public in its struggle for a more complete democracy from below?

Reading:

Commodify Your Dissent by Thomas Frank, Matt Weiland, Chapters: The Killer App; Wired Magazine, Voice of the Corporate Revolution. P. 46-56. (pdf)

Pamela Lee: "Open Secret," *Artforum*, May 2011:

<http://www.artforum.com/inprint/issue=201105&id=28060>

What Keeps Mankind Alive? The Guide of the 11th Istanbul Biennale. 2009.

Hans-Ulrich Obrist: *In Conversation with Julian Assange*. E-flux: <http://e-flux.com/journal/view/232>

Taryn Simon. *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*. Whitney Museum of American Art, 2007

On Trevor Paglen's works: <http://www.paglen.com/>

Assignment: Analyze political implication of data visualization in media works presented at MoMA exhibition *Talk to Me: Design and Communication between People and Objects*. 2011 (focus on works *TrashTrack* by SENSEble City Lab, *US Federal Contract Spendings 2009* by Pitch Interactive, *VoteEasy* by Perisopic, *Homeless City Guide* by Read and Hsu):

<http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2011/talktome/objects/#category=all&tag=all>

Weeks Thirteen and Fourteen. Presentations of final research papers:

Describe one museum exhibition in terms of urban economy, production of social space and its meaning for the future.

