



FINA*6551 Seminar in Art Theory and Criticism I

Winter 2021

Section(s): C01

School of Fine Art and Music

Credit Weight: 0.50

Version 2.00 - November 11, 2020

1 Course Details

1.1 Calendar Description

Selected topics in art theory and criticism with particular relevance to studio practice.

Restrictions: Restricted to MFA Studio Art students.

1.2 Course Description

This is the fourth seminar on the theme of "Extrapolations" which from its inception has taken direction from a line by the New York-based, SPA-winning Canadian photographer and writer, Moyra Davey, who says that her desire is, "to make some photographs but I want them to take seed in words". This notion, with changes in mediums and practice, will be our operative principle in reading the texts that are an integral part of every seminar.

The course is structured through the intimate relationship that exists between images and words, with the understanding that they are equivalents, where neither assumes any degree of privilege over the other. Our seminar is egalitarian in its appreciations. In The Theatre and Its Double published in 1938, Antonin Artaud suggests that, "If confusion is the sign of the times, I see at the root of this confusion a rupture between things and words". We will be working to heal the rupture and, in the process, minimize the confusion.

Some of the artists we are looking at have also written about their own and the work of others, including Moyra Davey and Amy Sillman, (these two artists are first pairing in seminar 3) as well as Adrian Piper and Stan Douglas. For each of them, there are texts that can be used as reflections on and embodiments of their practice, as well as perspectives on other artists. Sillman is especially satisfying in this regard; her new book of selected writings (and drawings) called Faux Pas includes astute observations on artists as different as Carroll

Dunham, John Chamberlain, Rachel Harrison and Eugène Delacroix. As part of your workshop responsibility, each seminar will include writings that you will choose for us to read. You will be expected to talk about what prompted you to make those choices.

In your seminar presentations we will need images and videos as reference points to support the texts we are reading. I see your paired presentations as points of departure, as sources of visual information that will give us some idea about what the writers we're looking at are writing about. I can imagine you would show the works being written about in the texts, but it is equally possible and acceptable were you to choose images that are not mentioned. In this reading, your imaging can take the form of a counter-argument to the supplied texts, a form of visual contra-diction against what has been said. Harold Bloom, the American cultural and literary critic, sees criticism as a "map of misreading" and we should be open to the creative possibilities of a screwed-up, writerly cartography. Think of the famous lines from Samuel Beckett's 1983 story, Worstward Ho: "Try. Fail again. Fail better". (Pace, Antonin Artaud).

You can divide the seminar in whatever way you want – one of you can present the image portion and the other the text portion, but who does what is your determination. The conventional order would have the visual presentations go first, but you may have a different strategy in mind. However it is done, we can decide whether the texts we are considering are verbal equivalents, embodiments, variations, or outright contradictions of what we are seeing. As extrapolations, they may be suspect and dubious, even contaminated. (Ibid, Harold Bloom).

Words are the material of the art of writing in the same way that paint is the material of painting and body the material of performance. As a result, we will be looking closely at diction. This is a form of textual analysis and we should be aware of the dangers of "murdering to dissect", to borrow a phrase from the English poet William Wordsworth. In a poem called The Tables Turned, he warns that, "our meddling intellect/ misshapes the beauteous form of things". So we should be cognizant that our close attention can kill the attended to.

It's a caution that works the other way as well. Let's use the Romantic poet again (this time from The Preface to the Lyrical Ballads), and note that writing isn't only evidence of "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings"; it is also a product of that same meddling and murderous intellect. I want to alter a line from Socrates who tells us "the unexamined life is not worth living" (it's in Plato's Apology). My adaptation says that, "the unexamined sentence is not worth writing". Allen Ginsberg, the American poet, may be *right* when he pronounces, "first thought, best thought" but he may not be *write*. Sentences should be re-considered once written. Some writing is slow, like carving in marble; at other times, the

words can flow as easily as poured paint. Our muses are wayward. They can embrace us or they can abandon us.

We should keep in mind Wayne Koestenbaum's affirmation that writing presents "opportunities for attentiveness". Here is an example where we can see that attentiveness operating full on. In Faux Pas, Amy Sillman reviews Into Words: The Selected Writings of Carroll Dunham, and her piece does double duty as insightful criticism and personal revelation. Her review is raucous and raunchy and maybe even a bit inciteful: "He rubs language against art, and vice versa, to see what sticks after the frottage, and blows cross-pollinated seeds into the wrong holes. This dirty process is also a thrilling form of magic, desacralized and generative, which contaminates the teleological, fucks up the categorical imperative, and scumbles the idea of art as illustrations in an art-history story". The tone is classic Sillman and the language reflects both the writer's practice and the practice of the artist she is writing about. "Scumbling" is a painter-to-painter word and it's an apposite choice and individual choice.

One issue that repeatedly comes up in writing is the question of intentionality. I always keep in mind Alfred Lord Tennyson's recognition from In Memoriam, that "language half reveals and half conceals the soul within". Mel Bochner, writing from another country and in another century puts it more simply: "Language is not transparent". But Tennyson goes on to comment on the value of trying to control the ambiguous ways that language conveys meaning. For the "unquiet heart and brain", and that's all of us in the art world (and maybe the world in general), "a use in measured language lies". Don't get me wrong on this: Tennyson's oscillation between revelation and concealment can be both premeditated and accidental, conscious and unconscious, strategic and serendipitous. What interests me most at this juncture is language that is considered and aware of its own operations. We can let the accidents fall as they may, which they will do anyway.

Writing asks us to pay attention to a complicated triangulation: language, the written about, and the reader. Our excursion into language in this seminar will wholly involve that trinity. Let me reprise Wayne Koestenbaum. There is a section in My 80s and Other Essays, where he enumerates his subjects: "...the interdependence of fragments, the weight of incidents, subordination and insubordination, hierarchy, demonstration and denotation, shadow and palimpsest, argumentation and allusion, name-dropping and citation, causality and the aleatory". For Koestenbaum these are subjects, but for us they can be much more. I see them as writing perspectives, as points of view, as ways of thinking about how language can function.

For Amy Sillman, making language is a polemical act. "Artists (and other weirdos, witches, gumshoes, alchemists, provocateurs, and poets) must take the power of language into their

own hands, with love and antagonism.” That last phrase, prepositional and propositional, is the key. Fighting and loving language is exactly what writing is, and why it engages us. Make no mistake, though, in underestimating the challenges language presents. In a CBC radio interview, John Banville, Ireland’s greatest living novelist (he has just published his most recent novel, called Snow) perfectly expressed this engaging quandary. “Language is the angel we wrestle with every day, and the best we can hope for is a draw.” You’ll excuse the pun when I say that I’m looking forward to seeing your versions of that condition of ‘drawing’.

The other important component of the seminar concentrates on the thesis support papers being written by those of you in your final year. This piece of writing is a critical part of the degree program and is invariably paid serious attention to during the oral defense. So we, too, will want to give them close (but not murderous) attention in their various stages of completion. In the process, the second years will have the benefit of getting input from the first years, while the latter will be able to take advantage of what is essentially a writing workshop, which will help in their writing for the course.

1.3 Timetable

Timetable is subject to change. Please see WebAdvisor for the latest information.

1.4 Final Exam

Exam time and location is subject to change. Please see WebAdvisor for the latest information.

2 Instructional Support

2.1 Instructional Support Team

Instructor: Robert Enright
Email: renright@uoguelph.ca
Telephone: +1-519-824-4120 x53012
Office: ZAV 309
 Alternate email: renright@mymts.net

Phone: 204 793-1832 (cell) or 204 956-2520 (Winnipeg studio number)

3 Learning Resources

4 Learning Outcomes

4.1 Course Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course, you should be able to:

1. By the end of the seminar you will be looking, reading and writing better.
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5 Teaching and Learning Activities

Seminar Presentations

There are 12 seminars in this semester and the responsibility for giving them is shared among you. A necessary part of your presence in the seminar asks that you be enthusiastic participants in the conversations, whether as presenters or responders. We will have to be patient in dealing with the limitations of online delivery but I am confident that we can engage in meaningful and inclusive conversations.

You will lead seven of the seminars, in pairs. We will work out who will present on which seminar artists. The first two seminars on “The Review” and “The Long-form Essay” will be an open discussion led by me but driven by your comments on the reviews you have read in the newest Border Crossings, vol. 39, number. 3, issue no. 155, on the theme of “The Matter of Black Lives”. I will be sending them to the SOFAM office and you should have them by the third week in November. In the second seminar I would like each of the second year MFAs to provide a single essay for discussion in the seminar on the long-form essay. They can be essays on any subject. The only thing I would ask is that they not be essays that have been assigned and discussed in other classes. Our encounter with them should be a surprise.

For your seminars I expect you to choose two pieces of writing on each of the artists that we will all read and discuss after, or during, your visual presentations. These readings would be a natural part of the research you’ve conducted in preparing for your seminar presentation. They can be in any genre and they can be any length (I am reminded of a famous review by Dorothy Parker in the New Yorker magazine in 1934 about a theatrical performance by Katherine Hepburn during which Parker wrote, the actress “ran the gamut of emotions from A to B”. As far as wit is concerned, it is brilliant but measured by word count it falls a little on the short side). But whatever they are, the texts you choose for reading should be sent to us all electronically on the Friday before the Wednesday seminar so that we will have time to carefully read and make notes on them. The earlier they are received, the better.

Written Assignments

The written assignments differ depending on your year in the program. The second year MFAs will only be responsible for work on your Thesis Support Papers. The first year MFAs will be writing two pieces in this semester, a review and a long-form essay. The review will be a 1000 word-long consideration of an exhibition, a film, a book of criticism, or an installation of your choosing. I am open about the subject of your review but I would prefer that you clear it with me prior to writing. Once completed, it should be sent to me at either of my email addresses as a Word document.

The review is due on February 22nd.

The long-form essay can be on a subject of your choice. It should be at least 3000 words but it may go beyond that length. You may want to write about one of the artists we are looking at in the seminar (and particularly one on which you have presented), although I am open to other artists and other subjects. Again, please clear it with me before beginning to write.

The long-form essay is due on April 8th.

6 Assessments

6.1 Marking Schemes & Distributions

Evaluation

i. Review 20%

ii. Essay 30%

iii. Seminar presentation 25%

iv. Seminar participation 25%

6.2 Artists Schedule

1. The Review (Jan. 13)
2. The Essay (Jan. 20)
3. Amy Sillman and Moyra Davey (Jan. 27)
4. Dana Claxton and Sonny Assu (Feb. 3)
5. Toba Khedoori and Julie Mehretu (Feb. 10)
6. Adrian Piper and Kara Walker (Feb. 24)
7. Nicola Tyson and Tala Madani (March 3)
8. Mark Bradford and Theaster Gates (March 10)
9. Philip Guston (March 17)
10. Stan Douglas (March 24)
11. Writing workshop (March 31)
12. Writing workshop (April 7)

7 University Statements

7.1 Email Communication

As per university regulations, all students are required to check their e-mail account regularly: e-mail is the official route of communication between the University and its students.

7.2 When You Cannot Meet a Course Requirement

When you find yourself unable to meet an in-course requirement because of illness or compassionate reasons please advise the course instructor (or designated person, such as a teaching assistant) in writing, with your name, id#, and e-mail contact. The grounds for Academic Consideration are detailed in the Undergraduate and Graduate Calendars.

Undergraduate Calendar - Academic Consideration and Appeals

<https://www.uoguelph.ca/registrar/calendars/undergraduate/current/c08/c08-ac.shtml>

Graduate Calendar - Grounds for Academic Consideration

<https://www.uoguelph.ca/registrar/calendars/graduate/current/genreg/index.shtml>

Associate Diploma Calendar - Academic Consideration, Appeals and Petitions

<https://www.uoguelph.ca/registrar/calendars/diploma/current/index.shtml>

7.3 Drop Date

Students will have until the last day of classes to drop courses without academic penalty. The deadline to drop two-semester courses will be the last day of classes in the second semester. This applies to all students (undergraduate, graduate and diploma) except for Doctor of Veterinary Medicine and Associate Diploma in Veterinary Technology (conventional and alternative delivery) students. The regulations and procedures for course registration are available in their respective Academic Calendars.

Undergraduate Calendar - Dropping Courses

<https://www.uoguelph.ca/registrar/calendars/undergraduate/current/c08/c08-drop.shtml>

Graduate Calendar - Registration Changes

<https://www.uoguelph.ca/registrar/calendars/graduate/current/genreg/genreg-reg-regchg.shtml>

Associate Diploma Calendar - Dropping Courses

<https://www.uoguelph.ca/registrar/calendars/diploma/current/c08/c08-drop.shtml>

7.4 Copies of Out-of-class Assignments

Keep paper and/or other reliable back-up copies of all out-of-class assignments: you may be asked to resubmit work at any time.

7.5 Accessibility

The University promotes the full participation of students who experience disabilities in their academic programs. To that end, the provision of academic accommodation is a shared responsibility between the University and the student.

When accommodations are needed, the student is required to first register with Student Accessibility Services (SAS). Documentation to substantiate the existence of a disability is required; however, interim accommodations may be possible while that process is underway.

Accommodations are available for both permanent and temporary disabilities. It should be noted that common illnesses such as a cold or the flu do not constitute a disability.

Use of the SAS Exam Centre requires students to book their exams at least 7 days in advance and not later than the 40th Class Day.

For Guelph students, information can be found on the SAS website

<https://www.uoguelph.ca/sas>

For Ridgetown students, information can be found on the Ridgetown SAS website

<https://www.ridgetownc.com/services/accessibilityservices.cfm>

7.6 Academic Integrity

The University of Guelph is committed to upholding the highest standards of academic integrity, and it is the responsibility of all members of the University community-faculty, staff, and students-to be aware of what constitutes academic misconduct and to do as much as possible to prevent academic offences from occurring. University of Guelph students have the responsibility of abiding by the University's policy on academic misconduct regardless of their location of study; faculty, staff, and students have the responsibility of supporting an environment that encourages academic integrity. Students need to remain aware that instructors have access to and the right to use electronic and other means of detection.

Please note: Whether or not a student intended to commit academic misconduct is not relevant for a finding of guilt. Hurried or careless submission of assignments does not excuse students from responsibility for verifying the academic integrity of their work before submitting it. Students who are in any doubt as to whether an action on their part could be construed as an academic offence should consult with a faculty member or faculty advisor.

Undergraduate Calendar - Academic Misconduct

<https://www.uoguelph.ca/registrar/calendars/undergraduate/current/c08/c08-amisconduct.shtml>

Graduate Calendar - Academic Misconduct

<https://www.uoguelph.ca/registrar/calendars/graduate/current/genreg/index.shtml>

7.7 Recording of Materials

Presentations that are made in relation to course work - including lectures - cannot be recorded or copied without the permission of the presenter, whether the instructor, a student, or guest lecturer. Material recorded with permission is restricted to use for that course unless further permission is granted.

7.8 Resources

The Academic Calendars are the source of information about the University of Guelph's procedures, policies, and regulations that apply to undergraduate, graduate, and diploma programs.

Academic Calendars

<https://www.uoguelph.ca/academics/calendars>

7.9 Disclaimer

Please note that the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic may necessitate a revision of the format of course offerings and academic schedules. Any such changes will be announced via CourseLink and/or class email. All University-wide decisions will be posted on the COVID-19 website (<https://news.uoguelph.ca/2019-novel-coronavirus-information/>) and circulated by email.

7.10 Illness

The University will not normally require verification of illness (doctor's notes) for fall 2020 or winter 2021 semester courses. However, requests for Academic Consideration may still require medical documentation as appropriate.
