E58.24xx Topics in Visual Culture and Cultural Studies: The Political History of Visual Display and Representation

This course is a political analysis of the modern history of visual display and exhibition, tracing it from the Russian avant-garde to issues of spectacle, the ideological function of the museum, and public art. How do museums and contemporary art institutions use the ideological function of the museum display now? 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 museum?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES
By the end of the course, students will:
- Gain an understanding of the modern history of visual display;
- Be familiar with the changing context of visual display in modern museums and contemporary art institutions;
- Formulate analyses about the ideological function of visual display;
- Articulate the conflict between resistance in art and the corporate economy of the modern museum.

REQUIREMENTS AND GRADE BREAKDOWN
- Short paper (3 – 5 pages) 15%
- Final long paper (7-10 pages) 45%
- Two presentations in class (based on assignments) 40%

More than three unexcused absences will result in a grade loss, more than five will result in an F.

EVALUATION CRITERIA
A = Excellent
This work demonstrates comprehensive and solid understanding of course material and presents thoughtful interpretations, well-focused and original insights and well-reasoned analysis. “A” work includes skillful use of source materials and illuminating examples and illustrations. “A” work is fluent, thorough and shows some creative flair.

B = Good
This work demonstrates a complete and accurate understanding of course material, presenting a reasonable degree of insight and broad level of analysis. Work reflects competence, but stays at a general or predictable level of understanding. Source material, along with examples and illustrations, are used appropriately. “B” work is reasonable, clear, appropriate and complete.
C = Adequate/Fair
This work demonstrates a basic understanding of course material but remains incomplete, superficial or expresses some important errors or weaknesses. Source material may be used inadequately or somewhat inappropriately. The work may lack concrete, specific examples and illustrations and may be hard to follow or vague.

D = Unsatisfactory
This work demonstrates a serious lack of understanding and fails to demonstrate the most rudimentary elements of the course assignment. Sources may be used inappropriately or not at all. The work may be inarticulate or extremely difficult to read.

F = Failed.
Work was not submitted or completed according to parameters (page length, topical focus, types of sources), or completely failed to express the most basic and elementary aspects of the course.

plus (+) or minus (-) grades indicate your range with the aforementioned grades.

Part 1. 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:

**Part 2. 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 and discuss how his installation ideas have been later used in exhibitions of modernist art.

**Reading:**


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 book: Thinking About Exhibitions. P. 313.

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

Cabaret Voltaire and Hugo Ball’s idea of the total theater, which incorporated painting, poetry, music, and dance; Eisenstein’s idea of cinema as totalizing medium; turn-of-the-century’s collaboration between Russian artists and Serge Diaghilev’s ballet; collaboration between Lege and Oskar Schlemmer’s Triadic Ballet – all 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.

**Reading:**


Assignment 1: Read the description of Cabaret Voltaire performances from book *Dada Performance*. How did the experiments with language and other nonsense-generating techniques help German Dadaists create the new form of a theater/performance?

Assignment 2: Watch famous Oskar Schlemmer’s “The Triadic Ballet”, a dance of the trinity. How’s, according to Schlemmer, dance fulfill the role of the most important medium of that time, totalizing the arts and transforming the site of visual display?

**Part 2. Ideological Function of 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, supressed 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?

Assignment 1: 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 21th c.? How do we assess aesthetic and cultural value of such works today?

**Reading:**


Assignment 2. 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 US museums? Note: The field trip to MoMA or Whitney Museum is a required part of the seminar.

We will also talk about Yevgeniy Fiks' project Communist Tour of MoMA and Lene Berg's video «A Portrait of a Woman with Mustache».
Reading:


**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. In the 40s, the USA began the campaign to promote Abstract Expressionism as a dominant art movement and ideological weapon in the Cold War. 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 1:_ 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”.

_Assignment 2:_ Look into the catalogue of exhibition “American Art in the Twentieth Century” (1999). How did the show reflect the dominance of American art in the XX c.?

_Assignment 3:_ Look into Fred Wilson’s exhibition *Mining the Museum* at the Maryland Historical Society in Baltimore, 1992. How did the artist confront the ideologically conservative environment of the museum using the spectacle?

Reading:

Ivan Karp and Fred Wilson. “Constructing the Spectacle of Culture in Museums.” In: *Thinking about Exhibitions.* PP. 251-266.

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

**Week Six. 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, Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space.
Negt/Kluge “The Public Sphere and Experience: Selections.”

Assignment. 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 revealed the high art’s corporate affiliations, 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”?

Reading:

Documentation of Hans Haake’s work Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971 at the Guggenheim Museum.

Week Seven. Art on Display in Urban Environment.
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:

Corporate Mentality: An Archive Documenting the Emergence of Recent Practices Within the Cultural Sphere Occupied by Business and Art.” Ed. Alexandra Mir.
Jean Baudrillard, “Beaubourg-Effect: Implosion and Deterrence” (pdf)
Assignment 1: Look through the book *Corporate Mentality*. 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”?

Assignment 2: 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?

**Part 4. Display in the age of deregulation of work process**

**Week Eight. Labor on display. Creative Industries.**
Art as a part of corporate identity – 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 neoliberal and ‘new labor’ trends. Working with the creativity of others, incorporating museum staff, or putting people at work on display has become a frequently used artistic method. We will talk about the projects by Tobias Rehberger, Maria Eichhorn, Daniel Knorr and Jens Haaning. How do they contribute to the current discourse of (art) creativity?

**Reading:**
- Theodor Adorno, “Culture Industry Reconsidered.” (pdf)

**Part 5. Space for resistance?**

**Weeks Nine. Institutional Critique.** We will look at the possibility for critical approaches in the exhibitions setting and what strategies of confrontations are possible. How do the practices of Institutional Critique reveal the museum’s real “debt” to the public?

**Reading:**
Week Ten and Eleven. Exhibitions in NYC. Production of Space.
Brian Wallis describes the alternative space movement in New York as: “neutral, nonjudgemental, nonauthenticating, openly experimental and sympathetic places to house new ideas, places unconcerned with traditional amenities like engraved invitations and plaques on the walls, or trustees with connections to IBM or Xerox.” We will closely examine these spaces as well as individual artists’ exhibitions and collaborative projects which emphasize the collective struggle of artists to counter alienation from the urban environment, economics and politics. How do such projects implement the tasks of public art?

Reading:

“The Fine Art of Gentrification” by Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan. At: http://www.abcnorio.org/about/history/fine_art.html
“Still Here: Interview with Martha Rosler and Anton Vidokle”. In: Art in America. 9/9/09. (pdf).

Assignment 1. Read the online material (“The Fine Art of Gentrification” by Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan, in particular) about the history of gallery “ABC No Rio” in Lower East Side. How was this space integrated into the city’s economy? How did their “Real Estate Show” implement the task of public art? (http://www.abcnorio.org/about/history/history.html)

Assignment 2: Look into the documentation of Martha Rosler’s project “If you lived here,” displayed at Dia Art Foundation (1989), and PAD/D archive discussed in the interview with Gregory Sholette (MoMA collection since 1989). They are examples of artists’ projects/exhibition involved in “social production of urban space.” How does an individual artist create a space for public debates on important social issues, such as homelessness and gentrification in NYC? What, according to Sholette, one of the creators of PAD/D archive, was a real function of the archive, initiated by artists and now stored at MoMA? What has become its actual outcome?

Week Twelve: Curator as an activist.
Today the piece of art is no longer the individual artifact, but the museum space in which art is installed. And so in a sense the curator has become an artist, and the artists’ identity determined not by what they make, but by what exhibitions they participate in. Museum architecture has become so important, because it defines this space in which installations of contemporary art take place.

**Reading:**


*Assignment 1.* H.-U. Obrist looks at the museum as a «site that satisfies a diversity of conditions», fluid and maleable – the qualities that can be explored and utilized by artists and curators. Compare this definition to the Institutional Critique introduced by such artists as Hans Haake and Andrea Fraser. Are these two approaches to the museum diametrically opposite?

*Assignment 2.* Look through the catalogue of 11th Istanbul Biennale. How do the curators (WHW collective from Zagreb) use the disclosed information about production cost and budget of the Bienalle in exhibition display? What's the meaning of this display?

**Weeks Thirteen and Fourteen. Presentations of final research paper:**
Describe one museum exhibition in terms of urban economy, production of social space and its meaning for the future.