

Media Theory
(Medium Theory: Artist as Media Theorist)
VMS 328/ISS 214/LIT 317
Fall Semester, 2019
Duke University

Instructor

Max Symuleski (max.symuleski@duke.edu)

Course Description

This course starts from key questions at the core of media theory and examines how artists have grappled in various ways with the concept of mediation through artwork and writing. Students will be introduced to key concepts in media theory, for example: mediation, representation, image, symbol, sense, embodiment, and information; alongside discussions in art history and theory that take up these concepts. We will begin the course by first defining the terms media, medium, and mediation, and then consider two key questions: *What are media?* and *What does art do?*—looking at texts that pose them explicitly. Our open-ended answers to both of these questions will ground our investigation over the course of the semester.

Throughout the semester we will read canonical texts in media theory and related disciplines including cultural studies, philosophy, and anthropology, alongside writings by artists, art historians, and critics. Students will be expected to critically engage with and analyze texts and artworks in short weekly written responses and in class discussion. We will look not simply at the media through which artworks are produced—paint, photography, film, text, sound—but also how artworks engage the question of mediation itself: that is, how information (or content) is affected by its means of conveyance (or form). We will also discuss how artworks relate questions of mediation to other social, political, and cultural concerns.

Though we will be contextualizing the artwork we look at historically, and in particular with respect to the history of media, this course is meant to introduce students to the discipline of media studies and is not designed as an art-historical survey. However, students will be introduced to important texts and discussions in art history and criticism, and will learn basic methods for engaging with, critiquing, and writing about art.

Course Expectations and Workload

This is a reading-based course and we will also be engaging with artworks in various audio/visual media. The reading load will be manageable, but some texts may be challenging. You will be expected to read texts closely, take notes, and reflect, both in class and in your written responses to the readings, on what you find interesting or confusing. You will be expected to come to class prepared to engage in critical discussion of the readings, and to be thoughtful and conversant spectators of the artwork we encounter together in class.

Weekly Responses

A short, 1-page, double-spaced, written response (250-words max.) to the weekly reading will be due 24 hours before each class.¹ These responses will serve as a way to prepare for discussion: a place to think critically about the readings, analyze artwork, and to pose questions. These short responses should also be an exercise to for developing analytical writing skills by engaging with complex ideas in clear, concise prose.

¹ Please note: this means you cannot complete the reading the night before class.

Midterm: Key Terms

For the midterm project students will produce a 5-word glossary (6-8 pages) of media theory terms of their choosing. (see, for example: <https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/>)

Final Paper/Project (10-12 pages, double-spaced)

For the final paper students will develop an analysis of 1-2 of the media terms in their midterm glossary (if multiple, the terms should be closely related), that incorporates close reading of a series of artworks (2-4) and/or objects. Students may also produce and submit a creative work that responds to one or more media theory terms. Students wishing to submit creative work will also be expected to submit a short piece of writing (3-5 pages) analyzing in detail how the piece addresses the terms. A brief abstract of your project (450 words max.) will be due later in the semester in lieu of one of the weekly written responses.

Final Paper/Project Presentation (5-8 min)

In the final class, students will present their final paper or project, briefly discussing the works and artists that they engaged with in their written work, or presenting their creative work. These will be formal presentations, and students will be expected to prepare accompanying media (slide presentation and/or audio-visual examples) for their talks.

Text Resources (no required purchase)

Sylvan Barnet, *A Short Guide to Writing About Art*, 11th ed. (London: Pearson, 1981, 2014) *highly recommended for purchase and general reference

Mark Hansen and W.J.T. Mitchell, eds. *Critical Terms for Media Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010)

Laurie Ouellette and Jonathan Gray, eds. *Keywords for Media Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), online: <https://search.library.duke.edu/search?id=DUKE007805884>

Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, eds. *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012)

Online Resources – Great for “keywords” research and general reference

The Chicago School of Media Theory: Keywords
<https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/>

Media-Studies.ca <https://www.media-studies.ca>

Course Schedule

*All readings available as PDFs on Sakai

August 28: Introduction

Introductory Reading – short, please read before class and come prepared to discuss:
Michel Foucault, Las Meninas, *The Order of Things* (1966, 2002)

Course overview and expectations, introductions, discussion

Tentative: In class screening of John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, Episode 1

September 4: What are media? // What is a medium? // What does art do?

W.J.T. Mitchell and Mark B.N. Hansen, "Introduction" in *Critical Terms for Media Studies* (2010): vii-xxii.

Johanna Drucker, "Art" in *Critical Terms for Media Studies* (2010): 3-18

Raymond Williams, "Media" and "Medium" in *Keywords* (1976, 2013)

Marshall McLuhan, "The Medium is the Message," in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964, 2003), "Art as Anti-Environment"

September 11: Light (enlightenment, light as medium, mediation, and metaphor)

Plato, Analogy of the Sun and the Allegory of the Cave, *Republic*, Book 6, 508b-520a.

Sean Cubitt, 'Introduction' in *The Practice of Light* (2014)

James Turrell, "Mapping Spaces" (selection, 1987)

Artists and Movements: Caravaggio (1571-1610), Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675), Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669), Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Constructivism (Russian), Kasimir Malevich, Dan Flavin, Robert Irwin, James Turrell, Olafur Eliaison

Terms: Chiaroscuro

September 18: Vision // Optics // Perspective (mimesis, perspective, visuality)

Jonathan Crary, "The Camera Obscura and Its Subject" in *Techniques of the Observer* (1992): 1-66.

Panofsky, Erwin. *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (selections) (1927)

Albrecht Durer, *The Painter's Manual* (selections) (1525)

Artists and Works: Fillipo Brunelleschi (1377-1446), Raphael (School of Athens, c. 1510-11), Piero della Francesca, Johannes Vermeer

Objects: Camera Obscura, Stereoscope

September 25: Sign (sign and index in art, gestural abstraction)

Chicago School of Media Theory Keywords, "Sign" and "Symbol, Index, Icon" (c. 2014)

Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index, Part I, II" (1970)

Mary Anne Doane, "Indexicality: Trace and Sign: Introduction" *Differences Journal* (2007)

Margaret Iverson, "Index, Diagram, Graphic Trace" *Tate Papers* (2012)

Artists/Works/Exhibitions: Jackson Pollock, Joan Snyder (Stroke Paintings), Gestural Abstraction, Marcel Duchamp (Three Standard Stoppages, Network of Stoppages), Stanley Brouwn (This way Brouwn), Surrealism (Automatic Writing), Man Ray, Robert Morris (espc. Box for Standing, I Box)

+It may be helpful to google image search the works mentioned in the readings

October 2: Image (mass media and spectacle)

Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility" (2nd version, 1936, 2008)

W.J.T. Mitchell, "Image" in *Critical Terms for Media Studies* (2010)

Douglas Crimp, "Pictures" (1979)

Guy Debord, "Separation Perfected" in *Society of the Spectacle* (1967) (espc. 1-6, 10-12, 18, 23-28)

Pick ONE of the Following from the Selection from Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art:

- David Wojnarowicz, "Postcards from America, X Rays from Hell" (selection) (1988)
- Barbara Kruger, "Pictures and Words interview with Jeanne Siegel" (1987)
- Sherrie Levine, "Five Comments" (1980-85)

Artists: Andy Warhol, Ed Ruscha, David Wojnarowicz, Sherrie Levine, Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, Hannah Hoch (dada collage), John Heartfield (dada collage), Situationist International

Movements: Pop Art, Photorealism, dada, situationism

October 9: Technological Reproduction, II (The Camera, Visual Prosthetics, War and Cinema)

Paul Virilio, "Cinema Isn't 'I See' it's 'I Fly'" and "Preface" in *War and Cinema* (1989)

Christy Lange, "Blurred Visions" (2013)

Harun Farocki, "Phantom Images" (2001)

Trevor Paglen, "Pictures from Nowhere: Three Moments" *Art Journal* (2007)

Artists/Movements/Works: Alexander Rodchenko (photography), Sergei Eisenstein (film), Russian Constructivism, Harun Farocki, Trevor Paglen, Omer Fast's "5,000 feet is the Best"

*Midterm glossary due

October 16: Time-Based Media I: Sound (noise)

Douglas Kahn, "Introduction" in *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (1999)

Jacques Attali, "Noise: The Political Economy of Music" in Jonathan Sterne, ed. *The Sound Studies Reader* (2012)

Bill Viola, "Writings: 1976-85" in *Sound, Whitechapel Documents in Contemporary Art* (2011)

Watch: Bill Viola, *The Tone of Being* (Vimeo, 6:02): <https://channel.louisiana.dk/video/bill-viola-tone-being>

Artists and Movements: dada and Surrealism, Italian Futurism, John Cage, Fluxus, Yoko Ono, Nam June Paik, Ryoji Ikeda, Bill Viola

October 23: Time-Based Media II: Performance (body as medium)

Judith Butler, "Critically Queer" (1993)

Erving Goffman, "Introduction" and "Performances" in *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (1956)

-Read ALL of the Intro, and especially "Belief in the Part One is Playing" and "Front"

Valie Export, "Women's Art: A Manifesto" (1972) in Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, eds.

Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art, 2nd ed. (2012)

Adrian Piper, "Ideology, Confrontation, and Political Self-Awareness" (1981) in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*

Artists and Movements: Carolee Schneemann, Ana Mendieta, Valie Export, Yoko Ono, (Feminist) Performance Art, Fluxus, Allan Kaprow, Adrian Piper, Vito Acconci

October 30: System

Jack Burnham, "The Aesthetics of Intelligent Systems" (Lecture, 1969)

Audio of the lecture (for your interest): <https://www.guggenheim.org/audio/track/the-aesthetics-of-intelligent-systems-by-j-w-burnham-1969>

Caroline Jones, "On Jack Burnham's 'Systems Esthetics'" *Artforum* (2012)

Edward A. Shanken, "Introduction: Systems Thinking/Systems Art" in *Systems: Whitechapel Documents in Contemporary Art* (2015)

Nam June Paik, "Cyberneted Art" (1966) & Roy Ascott "The Cybernetic Stance: My Process and Purpose" in *Systems* (2015)

Artists: Nam June Paik, Hans Haacke, Douglas Heubler, Dennis Oppenheim, Pilsa, Juan Downey, Lee Lozano, Les Levine, Dan Graham, Annes Denes, Mierle Laderman Ukeles

Key Exhibitions and Curators: Jack Burnham, *Software* (Jewish Museum, 1970), Billy Klüver (9 Evenings, EAT – Experiments in Art and Technology), *Information Exhibition*

(MoMA 1970), Lucy Lippard (*Numbers shows, Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object*)

November 6: Information (& entropy)

Bruce Clarke, "Information" in *Keywords for Media Studies*

Luciano Floridi (2009) "Philosophical Conceptions of Information," *Formal Theories of Information*. Ed. G. Sommaruga. Berlin: Springer Verlag. Pp. 13-53

*Skim

Sol Lewitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" (1967)

Kynaston McShine, Press Release for the Information Show:

https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_press-release_326692.pdf

Artists: Joseph Kosuth, Sol Lewitt, Roy Ascott, John Cage, Robert Barry, Conceptual Art (general)

*Project Description due

November 13 Infrastructure (the built environment)

Brian Larkin, "The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure" *Annu. Rev. Anthropol.* 2013. 42:327–43

Lisa Parks, "Infrastructure" in *Keywords for Media Studies* (2017)

Alan Sekula, "Fish Story" & "Loaves and Fishes" in *Fish Story* (1995)

Mierle Laderman Ukeles, "Manifesto for a Maintenance Art, 1969: Proposal for an Exhibition, *Care*" (1969)

Artists /Organizations: Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Alan Sekula, Rachel Whiteread, Gordon Matta Clark, Robert Smithson, Percent for Art (NY Public Arts organization), Claire Pentecost, Theaster Gates, Ashley Hunt, Pablo Helguera

Movements: Post-minimalism, Land Art, Institutional Critique, Social Engagement, Relational Aesthetics

November 20 Environmental Media // Environment as Medium (planetary media)

Nicholas Mirzoeff, "Visualizing the Anthropocene"

Raymond Williams, "Ideas of Nature" in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (1980)

Robert Smithson, "A tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey" (1969)

Lightthroughmcluhan.org, "Anti-Environment" entry

Artists: Dennis Oppenheim, Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, Richard Long, Alan Sonfist (Time Landscape 1965/78-Present), Agnes Denes ("Wheatfield—A Confrontation" 1982)

December 3: In-Class Presentation of Draft Final Papers / Projects, Final Discussion