

Abstraction and the Problem of Visibility: Black, Transgender, and Queer Views

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Department of Art History, Theory, and Criticism
School of the Art Institute of Chicago
Spring 2019 undergraduate seminar

Wednesdays 1-4pm, MacLean 620
office hours: by appointment

Course description

Abstract art presents a conundrum for contemporary politics and art theory. On the one hand, it provides a zone of engagement that is ostensibly free from the protocols of cultural marking that categorize and limit individuals based on outward appearance. For this reason, Black artists, queer artists, and transgender artists have, for instance, explored abstraction as a mode of cultural production that circumvents surveillance and the limitations of visibility. On the other, however, abstraction also threatens to diffuse politics to the point of unrecognizability, leaving subjects with no positive site of identification. This course will talk about the allure and the danger of abstraction in American art of the last half century, with attention to the Black Arts Movement, Gay Liberation, transgender history, and their legacies in contemporary art that explore abstraction for both its politics and its ambivalence

Learning Goals

This graduate seminar aims to:

1. Provide students with a grounding in theoretical approaches to abstraction and its contemporary uses.
2. Enhance students' ability to engage with concepts and to articulate this engagement in both verbal and written communication.
3. Through writing assignments, develop students' ability to synthesize and to mobilize historical analysis.
4. Increase students' awareness of methodological options and importance of in-depth research.

Course structure

Each three-hour session will focus primarily on the discussion of assigned texts. Students will be evaluated on the basis of their preparation, attendance, and critical engagement with course readings and concepts. The majority of the required readings will be supplied as PDFs via the "Files" section of Canvas. The list of required readings may be adapted throughout the semester in response to class discussions. Any new readings will be made available to students at least five days before the day they will be discussed.

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Course Schedule:

Week One: January 30

INTRODUCTION

Required reading:

1. Charles Bernstein, "Disfiguring Abstraction," *Critical Inquiry* 39.3 (Spring 2013): 486-97.

<p>TUESDAY, February 5 REQUIRED OUT-OF-CLASS LECTURE: Elmgreen & Dragset 6pm Rubloff Auditorium, Art Institute of Chicago</p>

Week Two: February 6

THE STORY OF CANONICAL ABSTRACTION (1st half)

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Class visit by visiting artists ELMGREEN & DRAGSET (2nd half)

→ Lecture: "Canonical Abstraction" (Malevich, de Stijl, Stieglitz Circle, Brancusi, Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism)

Required reading:

1. Shannon Jackson, "Welfare Melancholia: Elmgreen & Dragset's Ambivalent Structures," in P. Weibel and A. Beitin, eds., *Elmgreen & Dragset: Trilogy* (London: Thames & Hudson with ZKM Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe, 2011), 332-49.

Week Three: February 13

BLUE

→ Screening of Derek Jarman's *Blue* (1993)

Required reading:

1. Tim Lawrence, "AIDS, the Problem of Representation, and Plurality in Derek Jarman's *Blue*," *Social Text* 52/32 (Winter 1997): 241-64.

For reference:

Derek Jarman, *Blue*, 1993 (1hr 16min) <https://vimeo.com/255954730>

Script for *Blue*, 1993 <http://www.queerculturalcenter.org/Pages/Jarman/JarmanBTx.html>

Further reading on the color blue by queer writers:

- John Addington Symonds, *In the Key of Blue and Other Prose Essays* (London: Elkin Mathews, 1893) online at <https://archive.org/details/inkeyofblueotheroosymouoft>
- Maggie Nelson, *Bluets* (Seattle and New York: Wave Books, 2009)

- Glenn Ligon, *Blue Black*, exh. cat. (St. Louis: The Pulitzer Foundation, 2017). Excerpt published online as Glenn Ligon, "Kinds of Blue Black," *New York Review of Books Daily* (30 September 2017). <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2017/09/30/kinds-of-blue-black/>
- Also see discussion in Amber Jamilla Musser, "Architectures of Blue: Race, Representation, and Black and Brown Abstraction," *Brooklyn Rail* (5 October 2017) <https://brooklyn-rail.org/2017/10/art/Architectures-of-Blue-Race-Representation-and-Black-and-Brown-Abstraction>

Week Four: February 20

WHICH ABSTRACTION?

Required reading:

1. Arthur Jafa, "My Black Death," in G. Tate, ed., *Everything But the Burden: What White People Are Taking From Black Culture* (New York: Harlem Moon, 2003), 244-57
2. Amy Sillman, "AbEx and Disco Balls: In Defence of Abstract Expressionism," [2011] in David Getsy, ed., *Queer*, Whitechapel Documents of Contemporary Art (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016), 56-61.
3. Harmony Hammond, "Feminist Abstract Art—A Political Viewpoint," *Heresies* 1 (January 1977): 66-70.
4. Kellie Jones "Charles White: A Feminist at Midcentury," *Charles White: A Retrospective* (New Haven: Yale University Press): 69-83.

Further reference

- Barbara Hammer, "The Politics of Abstraction" in M. Gever, J. Greyson, and P. Parmar, eds., *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 70-75
- David Getsy, "Queer Relations." *ASAP/Journal* 2.2 (May 2017): 254-57. https://www.academia.edu/34098492/Queer_Relations

Week Five: February 27

"VISIBILITY IS A TRAP"

- Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 1975

Presentation assignments given out

Required Readings

1. Toby Beauchamp, "Surveillance" *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1.1-2 (2014)
2. Herman Gray, "Subject(ed) to Recognition," *American Quarterly* 65.4 (December 2013): 771-98.
3. David Getsy, "Ten Theses on the Possibility of Queer Abstraction," in J. Ledesma, ed., *Queer Abstraction*, exh. cat. (Des Moines: Des Moines Art Center, 2019), 65-75. <http://tinyurl.com/Getsey-QueerAbstraction>
4. Sampada Aranke, "Material Matters," *e-flux* 79, February 2017. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/79/94433/material-matters-black-radical-aesthetics-and-the-limits-of-visibility/>

Further reference

- Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* [1975] (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977)
- Toby Beauchamp, *Going Stealth: Transgender Politics and U.S. Surveillance Practices* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019)

- Kobena Mercer, ed., *Discrepant Abstraction* (Cambridge: MIT Press and the Institute of International Visual Arts, 2006)
- David Getsy, "Appearing Differently: Abstraction's Transgender and Queer Capacities," interview by William Simmons, in C. Erharter, D. Schwärzler, R. Sicar, and H. Scheirl, eds., *Pink Labour on Golden Streets: Queer Art Practices* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015), 38-55. https://www.academia.edu/18871952/Appearing_Differently_Abstractions_Transgender_and_Queer_Capacities_interview_by_William_J._Simmons
- Steven Nelson, "Turning Green into Black or How I Learned to Live with the Canon," in *Making Art History: A Changing Discipline and its Institutions*, Elizabeth Mansfield, ed., (London: Routledge, 2007): 54-66.
- Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

Week Six: March 6

THE RESISTANCE OF THE OBJECT

Required reading:

1. Fred Moten, "The Resistance of the Object," *In The Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003): 1-24.
2. EXCERPT: Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in Diana Fuss, ed., *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp.18-20
3. Gordon Hall, "Reading Things: Gender, Sculpture, and Relearning How to See" *Sightlines: The Walker Art Center Online Magazine* (8 August 2016). Online at <https://walkerart.org/magazine/gordon-hall-transgender-hb2-bathroom-bill>
4. Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy, "Queer Formalisms," *Art Journal* 72.4 (Winter 2014): 58-71. <http://artjournal.collegeart.org/?p=4468>

Week Seven: March 13

HORTENSE SPILLERS

Required reading:

1. Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17.2 (Summer 1987): 65-81.

Week Eight: March 20

EVE KOSOFSKY SEDGWICK

Required reading:

1. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading: Or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is about You," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 123-51.

Week Nine: March 27

CRIT WEEK

Week Ten: April 3

ÉDOUARD GLISSANT

Required reading:

1. Édouard Glissant, "On Opacity" in *Poetics of Relation*, translated by Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).
2. Shaka McGlotten, "Black Data." In E. Patrick Johnson, ed., *No Tea, No Shade: New Writings in Black Queer Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 262-86.
3. David Getsy, "Seeing Commitments: Jonah Groeneboer's Ethics of Discernment," *Temporary Art Review* (8 March 2016). Online at <http://temporaryartreview.com/seeing-commitments-jonah-groeneboers-ethics-of-discernment/>

Further reference

- Zach Blas and Jacob Gaboury, "Biometrics and Opacity: A Conversation," *Camera Obscura* 31.2 (2016): 155-65
- Nicholas De Villiers, *Opacity and the Closet: Queer Tactics in Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012)

Week Eleven: April 10

STUDENT PRESENTATIONS ON ARTISTS:

- I: Howardena Pindell
- II: Harmony Hammond

Week Twelve: April 17

STUDENT PRESENTATIONS ON ARTISTS:

- I: Jack Whitten
- II: Coenties Slip abstraction (Agnes Martin & Ellsworth Kelly)

Week Thirteen: April 24

STUDENT PRESENTATIONS ON ARTISTS:

- I: Tom Burr
- II: Mark Bradford

Week Fourteen: May 1

INHABITING THE OBJECT

Required reading:

1. Fred Moten, "The Resistance of the Object," in *The Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003): 192-254.
2. Adrienne Edwards, "Blackness in Abstraction," *Art in America* 103.1 (January 2015): 62-69.

- Linda Besemer, "Abstraction: Politics and Possibilities," *XTRA: Contemporary Art Quarterly* Volume 7, Number 3 (Spring 2005). Online at: <https://www.x-traonline.org/article/abstraction-politics-and-possibilities/>

Week Fifteen: May 8

PASSING AND ANONYMITY

* Research Projects Due*

Required reading:

- C. Riley Snorton, "A New Hope: The Psychic Life of Passing" *Hypatia* 24.3 (Summer 2009): 78-92.
- Gayle Salamon, excerpts from *The Life and Death of Latisha King: A Critical Phenomenology of Transphobia* (New York: New York University Press, 2018): "Critical phenomenology" (15-19), "A Note on Names and Pronouns" (22-24), "Comportment" (25-61), "An Ending" (130-34)
- Henning Bech, *When Men Meet: Homosexuality and Modernity*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987/97): excerpts on "Wrong-ness" (92-94) and "Observedness" (99-102).
- Didier Eribon, "Subjectivity and Private Life," in *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self* [1999], trans. Michael Lucey (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 97-106.
- Nicole Archer, "Dynamic Status," in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, edited by Reina Gossett, Eric A Stanley, and Johanna Burton (Boston: MIT Press, 2017): 293-320.

Further reference:

- Nella Larson, *Passing*, 1929
- Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 1952
- Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues*, 1993
- Jesus Cisneros and Julia Gutierrez, "'What Does It Mean to Be Un-docuqueer?': Exploring (il)Legibility within the Intersection of Gender, Sexuality, and Immigration Status," *QED: A Journal of GLBTQ Worldmaking* 5.1 (Spring 2018).



VAP Schedule

(all talks will take place at The Art Institute of Chicago, Rubloff Auditorium, 230 S. Columbus Dr.)

Elmgreen & Dragset	Tuesday, February 5, 6:00 p.m.
Bouchra Khalili	Wednesday, February 20, 6:00 p.m.
Emory Douglas	Tuesday, March 5, 6:00 p.m.
Aaron Williamson	Tuesday, March 19, 6: 00 pm

Rodney McMillian: Distinguished Alumni Lecture Series	Wednesday, April 3, 6:00 pm
Newton Harrison	Tuesday, April 9, 6:00 p.m.
Martha Rosler	Tuesday, April 16, 6:00 p.m.

Evaluation

All assignments must be completed on time in order to receive course credit (CR). In addition, work on all criteria should meet the standards of the course as established by the professors. There are no “extra credit” options. Students will be evaluated according to the following four criteria:

1. **Attendance and participation (20%)**

All students are expected to attend class meetings prepared to discuss the required readings. This is a discussion-based class, and all students should regularly and productively contribute to class discussions. Participation is predicated on attendance, and the student will be evaluated on both. Mere attendance without participation is not considered adequate and does not warrant a passing grade for this criterion. Students should regularly, respectfully, and productively contribute to in-person class discussions.

Should individual students or the class as a whole be unprepared to discuss the readings in detail and thus unable to participate at the expected level, additional required reading and writing assignments may be given in class. Any such new assignments must be completed in addition to previously outlined requirements in order to receive credit for the class, regardless of percentage of grade.

Attendance at all class meetings is essential. Irrespective of the other evaluation criteria, more than two missed classes may be grounds for a “no credit”

2. **Reading respondent (10%)**

At least once during the semester, each student will be tasked with being one of two (to three) respondents to the assigned readings. This person will begin the discussion by offering a short response (1 page) to the day’s topic and readings.

3. **Artist presentations (20%)**

During the middle of the semester, all students will be assigned to a group tasked with leading a discussion on the topic of an artist assigned by the professors. Student groups should work together to provide (a) basic biographical and contextual information on the artist, (b) a selection of key works, and (c) questions for discussion.

For each presentation, students will be required to prepare a Powerpoint/Keynote document. Your image presentation must be fully-prepared and ready to go. The professionalism of your presentations will be considered as part of the evaluation of your work. Do not expect to just grab things off of Google Image at the last minute or in class.

Each student must individually submit a 500-1000 word report on the day of their presentation that includes an account of what elements of the presentation they prepared, how their view of the artist's work changed after researching, and a bibliography of at least five sources. Students in the same group may have identical bibliographies, but all other sections must be written separately

4. **Research Project (50%) — DUE IN CLASS MAY 8, 2019**

Graduate students in Art History, Visual & Critical Studies, Arts Administration, and New Arts Journalism; and Bachelor of Arts in Art History students:

Undertake a research topic of your choice that relates to the themes of the course. Students may use this assignment to work on aspects of their Master's thesis, providing that the work submitted is significantly different from papers submitted to other seminars. (Submitting the same paper — or one that significantly overlaps — to a different seminar falls under SAIC's definition of "Academic Misconduct."). Word count requirements: 4500-5000 words for graduate students, 3500 words for undergraduates.

Graduate students in MFA or MDes programs and BFA students:

You may choose the research paper option listed above or may prepare an annotated syllabus for an alternate seminar related to the topic for the course. This alternate syllabus must be organized for 14 sessions (12 if you are a BFA student). Students should provide an introduction to the course of 500-750 words, and organize the trajectory of course sessions and their required readings. For each session, the student should write a 150-250 word introduction that discusses the theme explored that day and provide a list of required readings. In addition to the introduction for the session, each reading assigned must be accompanied by a 2-3 sentence summary. These readings should be new, and no more than four individual texts total can be borrowed from our required seminar readings. The goal will be to outline an alternate approach to the field of queer studies than offered by our class. For the draft submission, students should provide, at minimum, a draft of the course introduction and a complete outline of session topics.

All research assignments should be standard, double-spaced typed pages. Word counts listed above are exclusive of bibliography, captions, and endnotes. Paper bibliographies must contain at least 20 items from valid sources. Acceptable sources are books, exhibition catalogues, and articles from scholarly journals only. A good place to start (with access to online journals and other texts) is the "Art History Research Guide" at <http://libraryguides.saic.edu/arthistory>. Websites, blogs, or encyclopedias (online or otherwise) are not acceptable sources (though they may be objects of interpretation). Overall, your research should evidence your use of the Flaxman Library, the Ryerson Library, and their vetted online resources (e.g., the full-text access to scholarly journals).

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities Registered with the DLRC

SAIC is committed to full compliance with all laws regarding equal opportunities for students with disabilities. Students with known or suspected disabilities, such as a Reading/Writing Disorder, ADD/ADHD, and/or a mental health condition who think they would benefit from assistance or accommodations should first contact the Disability and Learning Resource Center (DLRC) to schedule an appointment. DLRC staff will review your disability documentation and work with you to determine reasonable accommodations. They will then provide you with a letter outlining the approved accommodations for you to deliver to your instructors. This letter must be presented before any accommodations will be implemented. You should contact the DLRC as early in the semester as possible. The DLRC is located within the Wellness Center on the 13th floor of 116 S Michigan Ave. and can be reached via phone at 312.499.4278 or email at dlrc@saic.edu.

Plagiarism and Academic Misconduct

Any degree of plagiarism will result in "No Credit" for the course and additional institutional disciplinary action. Academic integrity is expected in all coursework, including online learning. It is assumed that the person receiving the credit for the course is the person completing the work. SAIC has processes in place that protect student privacy and uses LDAP authentication to verify student identity. The SAIC Student Handbook defines Academic Misconduct as follows: "Academic misconduct includes both plagiarism and cheating, and may consist of: the submission of the work of another as one's own; unauthorized assistance on a test or assignment; submission of the same work for more than one class without the knowledge and consent of all instructors; or the failure to properly cite texts or ideas from other sources. Academic misconduct extends to all spaces on campus, including satellite locations and online education."

Plagiarism is a form of intellectual theft. One plagiarizes when one presents another's work as one's own, even if one does not intend to. The penalty for plagiarizing may also result in some loss of some types of financial aid (for example, a No Credit in a course can lead to a loss of the financial aid, merit scholarships, etc.), and repeat offenses can lead to expulsion from the School. Specific procedures for faculty to follow in the case of academic misconduct are detailed in the Student Handbook. For more guidance see the Flaxman Library's Quick Guide "Avoid Plagiarism" at http://www.saic.edu/web-spaces/library/plagiarism_quickguide.pdf.