SYLLABUS

Gallatin School
New York University
Spring 2016

Art, Activism, and Beyond

ARTCR-UG 1644

Class Days: Monday, Wednesdays, 3:30-4:45 pm
Location: 7 E. 12
Room: 121SB

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Office Hours: Monday, 5-6 pm, 1 Wash Pl, Room 407, ext. 89152

I. COURSE DESCRIPTION

"The domain of the Strange, the Marvelous and the Fantastic, a domain scorned by people of certain inclinations. Here is the freed image, dazzling and beautiful, with a beauty that could not be more unexpected and overwhelming. Here are the poet, the painter, and the artist, presiding over the metamorphoses and the inversions of the world under the sign of hallucinations and madness."

~ Suzanne Cesaire, Tropique

This is an interdisciplinary class that will invite you to explore the role of art after Occupy Wall Street. Weaving in and out of Surrealism politics and poetics and Situationists cities, as we collectively consider what time is it on the clock of the world, and imagining what follows:

What if, when we speak of art after Occupy, we put “art” under erasure? What if we strike against art to liberate art from itself? Not to end art, but to unleash its powers of direct action and radical imagination. Art does not dissolve into so-called real life. It revitalizes real life by making it surreal. This surreal spirit is less that of Breton's European vanguardism than Suzanne Cesaire's freedom dream, informed as it is by the ongoing histories of slavery, imperialism, and debt. Art defamiliarizes life, asking us how do we live, and why do we live this way? Art challenges us to respond to this question through research, aesthetics and action, acknowledging that we ourselves are responsible for freedom, rather than any pre-existing institution, or ideology. And, what if, when we strike art, we imagine a refugee camp collaged into the symbolic heart of finance capital. We imagine a self-organized commons installed at the ground zero of empire, or imagine an empty minimalist plaza flooded with bodies and voices and
cameras, a de-occupation of New York City, and a never-ending process of experimentation, learning and undoing, resisting and building in the unexplored terrain of an historic rupture.

This class will seek to interrogate the categories of art and activism by looking closely at the anatomy of the following efforts: (i) Occupy Wall Street movement, (ii) Gulf Labor Coalition and Global Ultra Luxury Faction (G.U.L.F.), the direct action wing of Gulf Labor Coalition, and (iii) the Direct Action Front for Palestine-NYC and Black Lives Matter. These case studies seem to sketch the possibility of a practice in which artist’s work does not simply add an artistic flair to this or that campaign, but rather theory and research, action and aesthetics, debriefing and analysis — this entire dialectical process — is the art practice.

Close readings of texts and visual materials form the core of the class, which will potentially be supplemented with field trips, and special guests. A major component of the course is a collaborative work project that students engage in that combines research, aesthetics, and activism. Choice of practice and medium will be open to students. More details follow below.

II. LEARNING GOALS

A. Ask, as Grace Lee Boggs puts it, *What time is it on the clock of the world?* This should come to inform your art practice and what and how you produce art.

B. Understand the anatomy of the actual case studies explored that blur the lines between art and activism and, through a collective process of deduction during the course of the semester, you better understand the frames of “art” and “activism”, and how they function as useful analytical tools, but how they can also limit what art can be today.

C. Explore the theoretical propositions in practice during the semester, with the guidance of the instructor.

III. REQUIRED TEXTBOOKS

None.
PDF readings are available on the following Google Drive, titled Class Readings, [here](#).
Other readings available in a document on the same Google Drive, titled Online Readings, [here](#).

IV. COURSE REQUIREMENTS

A. **Attendance.** Students are expected to attend all sessions of the course. Three missed classes will lower final grade by one full letter grade. Students are encouraged to contact the faculty member to report the reason for an absence prior to or on the day of the missed class. This will account for **10% of your grade.**
B. **Readings.** Readings for each week are available as pdf files or url links in the referenced above Google Drive in Part III., and if the circumstances arise links will be sent out via email to view online as mandatory outside-class screenings/homework. This is a critical aspect of learning, and in terms of work in the class influences the quality of your participation, presentation, and journal entries detailed below. Students are to expect and manage their time to complete approximately 150 pages of assigned readings per week.

C. **Participation.** Equal emphasis will be placed on the relationship between theory, discussion and production. Students are expected to actively and thoughtfully participate in class during discussions. This is not possible without doing the required reading each week. Participation will account for **15% of your grade.**

D. **Presentation.** As part of class participation, each student will be expected to **volunteer** once during the course of the semester to summarize the reading and/or get the class started. 5-10 minutes each. This will account for **10% of your grade.**

E. **Journal.** Students are expected to keep a journal for reflection in order to process matters discussed in class or otherwise are raised by the readings and screenings, particularly pertaining to the evolving understanding of art, activism, and freedom throughout the semester. Journal will be handed in to the instructor at the end of the semester and will account for **15% of your grade.**

F. **Project.** Students are expected to create one final collaborative work in any media (or multimedia) of their choice for presentation during the course of this quarter. This project will account for **50% of your grade.** As part of this final project, students will be required to write a one page proposal, which will include an analysis of where their project fits into the world of art and activism, **due by the 5th week.** Included in this proposal will be a timeline of what it takes to create a project, whether it is a collaborative work or a solo work, what the elements will be that need to take place, a timeline of work flow, and a narrative about the value of their project not only to themselves but to the community, whether that is the Gallatin community, or a larger community.

(1) **Midterm Paper.** Relying on the readings in class and the discussions, students will be required to write a five-page double spaced critical essay that explores the question of whether or not we ourselves are responsible for freedom, rather than any pre-existing institution, or ideology, and why, and what are the implications if any on the artist’s practice.

(2) **Project Proposal.** Students will be required to write a proposal for a project to be completed at the end of the semester, which will include an analysis of where their project fits
into the world of art and activism. Included in this proposal will be a timeline of what it takes to create a project, whether it is a collaborative or solo work, what the elements will be that need to take place, a timeline of work flow, and a narrative about the value of their project not only to themselves but to the community (whether that is the NYU community, or a larger community).

(3) **Final Paper.** Students will be required to submit a ten page double spaced research that accompany their final project which the theory and analysis involved in the work being produced.

V. **GRADING**

All submitted assignments will receive feedback. You are encouraged to pay attention to the feedback as this will indicate suggestions and strategies for further development, and poses questions that will hopefully assist and encourage you in future assignments.

Final grades will be determined based on an overall assessment of your progress and efforts throughout the course as well as your final assignment grades, with close attention given to criteria above. If, at any time, you have any questions or concerns about your performance, I am happy to discuss with you.

VI. **COURSE DETAILS**

**Weeks 1. - 4.**
(Jan 25, Jan 27, Feb 1, Feb 3, Feb 8, Feb 10)

**Discussion**

Pre-Occupy: History, Media, Art and Activism, and Political Horizons

1. What Time is it on the Clock of the World?
2. Art and Activism, analytical categories
3. Slavery and White Supremacy, Class and Colonialism, and always Patriarchy
4. Struggle for Freedom and Liberation, and after the Arab Uprisings
5. On Militant Research as a method
6. On representation and media

Other viewings at home: ‘Crossing Brooklyn’ ArtTalks: Performance and Activism, Hyperallergic-Brooklyn Museum, NY @ http://bit.ly/1PLRgEh.

Weeks 5. - 8.
(No Class Feb 15, Holiday)
(Feb 17, Feb 22, Feb 24, Feb 29, March 2, March 7, March 9, March 21)

Discussion
Occupy Wall Street
1. Inequality, Race, Empire
2. Public Space and Legitimacy
3. Strike Debt and Rolling Jubilee
4. Anatomy of Action and role of the artist


There will also be class screenings of actions taken by OWS, Tidal, Occupy Sandy, Occupy Art, Occupy Museums, Strike Debt and Rolling Jubilee.

(Monday, March 14th - Sunday, March 20th)

(March 23, March 28, March 30, April 4, April 6, April 11)

Discussion
Gulf Labor and G.U.L.F.
1. Labor and Migration
2. Boycott as a tactic and strategy
3. Creative Actions as a Supplement
4. Cross-Class and Transnational Solidarity
5. Anatomy of the Actions and role of the artist

Readings: Select readings from OWS/Strike Debt, Resistors Operations Manual, Felshin, ed., But Is It Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism, Moten and Harney, The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study, McKee, Strike Art! Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupy Condition,

*Weeks 12. - 15.*
*(April 13, April 18, April 20, April 25, April 27, May 2, May 4, May 9)*

**Discussion**

Direct Action Front for Palestine and Black Lives Matter

1. Placing Palestine in the Expanded Field of Empire
2. Call to Boycott, Divest, and Sanction Israel (BDS)
3. 2014 Gaza War and NYC Mobilization
4. Coalition Building with Black Lives Matter
5. Anatomy of the Actions and the role of the artist

**Readings:** Select readings from Felshin, ed., *But Is It Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism*, McKee, *Strike Art! Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupy Condition*, and Robin Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, and the following readings:

as well as,
five reportings from the following Hyperallergic listing here, [http://bit.ly/1S460oD](http://bit.ly/1S460oD)

Screenings will include actions by Black Lives Matter and Direct Action Front for Palestine groups.

**V. CONCLUSION**

Much timely conversation is taking place in the art world today around art and activism. However, few people focus on the case studies mentioned above as a rupture that affects the role of the artist and art practice.

Art after Occupy embodies imagination with implications on the ground. When Occupy began, many artists carried cameras and notebooks to document things but ended up participating. The art they had imagined making for so long started to happen in real life. They did not have time to
agonize about representation. They made images, wrote texts, had conversations, and developed relationships out of necessity and urgency. Aesthetics, research, organizing—it was all coming together in the creation of a new public space in the heart of the empire.

After Occupy, the roles of the artist seem to include the artist as both organizer and activist. What is being produced is actually beyond art and beyond activism. It is about our lives now and it presses us to consider how we live and act with the contradictions in the art world and in our lives that can no longer be ignored.