

B. ANXIOUS TIMES: ART & POLITICS IN THE 20TH AND 21ST CENTURIES

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Tuesdays, 1:00 - 2:30 p.m. Norris University Center

Mar. 31 Painting Power

Painters have painted power for centuries. We examine and discuss examples of representations of power. We discuss not only the iconography of power, but how the painter uses his or her skill to mobilize line and color to convey power visually.

Apr. 7 Re-Enchanting a Decadent World

The end of the nineteenth century brought radical change to Europe. Industrialization, urbanization, nation-building, mass politics, and revolution all metamorphized western European society. Unaccountable forces – often likened to a “machine” – overturned customary values and expectations. Inherited values and expectations had fallen into decay. Critics complained of disenchantment. Artists sought to “re-enchant” this world by revolutionizing the purpose of art and by developing radically new techniques. We focus on fauvism, German expressionism, cubism, and suprematism.

Apr. 14 War, Revolution, and Nihilism

War, revolution, political polarization, and the multiplication of authoritarian and fascist states channeled art in new directions and endowed it with greater philosophical self-awareness. We focus on Dada and surrealism.

Apr. 21 Making Art Relevant to the Masses

The interwar period witnessed efforts to “bring art to the masses,” as demanded by a more urbanized, industrialized society, now highly mobilized by the trauma of world war and revolution. We focus on Bauhaus, *de stijl*, and socialist realism.

Apr. 28 Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction

We focus on Walter Benjamin’s influential 1935 article. Industrial technology can reproduce art, display it outside the museum on the pages of magazines. Mechanical reproduction can therefore democratize the experience of art but can also be used to manipulate the image for political purposes.

May 5 An Anxious Peace

After World War II European Union brought lasting peace to western Europe. But the task of rebuilding Europe caused avant-garde art to migrate from Paris to New York City. The American homeland had suffered no material damages from the war, but the anxieties of the interwar period persisted, both in the form of fear of nuclear war and in the form of the “machine” of modern technological life, and finally in the form of political revolution. Those anxieties affected American art as they did the art of the previous generation in Europe. We focus on abstract expressionism, pop art, and minimalism.

May 12 Politically Engaged Art as Capitalist Asset

One of the riddles of avant-garde “anti-bourgeois” art is the fascination it elicits among the “bourgeoisie,” to the point that it has become an object of capitalist speculation. We examine the “cultural foundations of power.”

May 19 Conceptual Art

In the 1960s and 1970s, a new kind of art – conceptual art – emerged as a new medium through which to express and explore the anxieties and fears of the age. It was made possible by the appearance of new actors on the art scene: foundations and universities. We focus on eco art, the attempt to use art to alert the public to the perils of climate change.

May 26 Art, Populism, and the Modern “Bourgeois” Elite

Today’s “bourgeois,” university-educated elite has embraced avant-garde art despite (or in rare cases because of) its revolutionary pretensions. Its artistic tastes drive a wedge – one among many – between this educated elite and the “rest” of the population that finds avant-garde art weird and ugly. That wedge has contributed to the rise of modern-day “populism.” We examine two ways to think about this aesthetic division of our society and how to address it. We explore this issue through the writings of two modern philosophers, Jacques Derrida and Jacques Rancière.