

Weird Art Writing: HR3010

Course Guide: Semester 1, AY 2023-24 (Aug-Nov 2023)

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Seminar classes on Thursdays, 9.30am to 12.30pm, The Hive, TR+45

Consultations by prior appointment on Thursdays, 3pm to 4pm, SHHK 03-55

Course Outline

Why write about art? What can writings by art historians and critics, as well as poets, novelists, and artists themselves tell us about artworks – and what can artworks tell us about these writings? What experimental and downright weird forms does art writing take, and why? In this course you will examine a diverse range of unconventional approaches to writing about art and develop skills to critically evaluate these in relation to artworks. Through close readings of selected texts and artworks, you will gain a deeper understanding of the relationships between art and writing, guiding you to a theoretically and historically rigorous appreciation for the motivations for writing about art, and the nature of Art History as a scholarly discipline and de facto literary genre. This course is designed for students who have already taken introductory courses in art history and are interested in the discipline's global turn, and its relationships to literary studies and other fields in the humanities. In this course, you will study texts and artworks from various contexts globally, including in Southeast Asia, other Asias, the Global South and the West. This course invites you to participate in key scholarly debates within the discipline of Art History that coincide with the growth of interest in global art histories and decolonising approaches to art-historical knowledge.

Intended learning outcomes

By the end of this course, you should be able to:

- Identify and discuss key approaches to experimental and unconventional art writing in selected global contexts.
- Identify and discuss theoretical understandings of the relationships between artworks and art writing.
- Demonstrate close reading skills and critically compare diverse approaches to writing about art in selected global contexts and discourses.
- Present your findings on topics relating to experimental and unconventional art writing with coherence, research and insight.
- Share your analyses and criticisms of experimental and unconventional art writing with your peers in a constructive manner.

Syllabus

Reading in preparation for class discussion is an important part of our learning in this course. The required readings must all be completed each week in preparation for class. PDF copies of all readings will be provided for you. You are encouraged to read closely, critically, carefully, and actively: as only one text is required for most weeks of the semester, please give it your full attention, and come to class with questions and comments to contribute to discussions.

Classes are held in The Hive, TR+15, except for the following:

- Week 5 (Thursday 14 September 2023): we will visit Singapore Art Museum, departing from The Hive at 9.30am
- Week 9: there is no class on Thursday 12 October 2023, and instead students are required to attend an online-only zoom public lecture by Prof Mieke Bal on Friday 20 October, 4.00—5.30pm

Part 1: Introductions and foundations

Week 1: Thursday 17 August 2023 (9.30am—12.30pm, The Hive, TR+15)

“What experimental and downright weird forms does art writing take, and why?” Introductions to each other and to the course, including key terms, concepts, and contexts.

- No reading for this week; instead, please study the syllabus and note any questions.

Week 2: Thursday 24 August 2023 (9.30am—12.30pm, The Hive, TR+15)

“The increasing worldwide uniformity of scholarly and critical writing on art.” Art History as a discipline and as a de facto literary genre; introduction to “global art histories.”

- James Elkins, “Introduction,” “Writing Itself,” and “Main Points” in *The End of Diversity in Art Historical Writing: North Atlantic Art History and its Alternatives* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2021), pp. 7-12, 205-207, and 209-214.

Week 3. Thursday 31 August 2023 (9.30am—12.30pm, The Hive, TR+15)

“Isn’t theory also in some sense always autobiography?” Between the personal and the art-historical; introduction to autotheory (in Latin America).

- María Gainza, “To Be a Rapper,” in *Optic Nerve*, trans. Thomas Bunstead (New York: Catapult, 2020), pp. 145-166.

Part 2: Art writing by artists

Week 4. Thursday 7 September 2023 (9.30am—12.30pm, The Hive, TR+15)

“Uh-oh, so why am I writing this?” Artists as art historians and critics (in Southeast Asia).

- Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, “Life in Nature, Nature in Art,” in *I Am An Artist (He Said)*, trans. Kong Rithdee (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2022), pp. 310-325.

Week 5. Thursday 14 September 2023 (Museum visit 9.30am—12.30pm, departing from The Hive)

“I couldn’t care less when someone ‘unfolds his ideas.’” Art writing, power and access in curatorial and exhibition contexts (in the “global contemporary” and in global Asias).

- *This week we will visit Singapore Art Museum to view Hito Steyerl’s “Factory of the Sun” exhibition. We will depart in a mini-bus from The Hive at 9.30am and return by 12.30pm.*
- Hito Steyerl, “International Disco Latin,” *e-flux journal* 45 (May 2013): 1-7.

Week 6. Thursday 21 September 2023 (9.30am—12.30pm, The Hive, TR+15)

“Painting that is writing that is gesture and shape.” Artists’ writings as artistic practice (in the “global contemporary” and in the global West).

- Amy Sillman, “On Color” and “Rejective Verse,” in *Faux Pas. Selected Writings and Drawings* (Paris: After 8 Books, 2020), pp. 46-75 and 152-155.

Part 3: Between art and writing

Week 7. Thursday 28 September 2023 (9.30am—12.30pm, The Hive, TR+15)

“A feat matched by no other artist in the Republic of Singapore.” Fictions of art (in Southeast Asia).

- *This week we will welcome guest speaker Daryl Qilin Yam.*
- Daryl Qilin Yam, chapters 5 and 24, in *Lovelier, Lonelier* (Singapore: Epigram Books, 2021), 52-64 and 336-343.

Recess week: no class on Thursday 5 October 2023

Week 8. Thursday 12 October 2023. (9.30am—12.30pm, The Hive, TR+15)

“Research in art history is in pursuit of something it can never catch.” Art writing, failure, and melancholy (in the Anglosphere).

- Michael Ann Holly, “Preface,” in *The Melancholy Art* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013), xi-xxii.

Week 9. Thursday 19 October 2023 (9.30am—12.30pm, The Hive, TR+15)

“To constellate these activisms as contestations of cohesion.” Artists’ manifestos (in Southeast Asia).

- Patrick D. Flores, “First Person Plural: Manifestos of the 1970s in Southeast Asia,” in *Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture*, ed. Hans Belting, Jacob Birken, Andrea Buddensieg, and Peter Weibel (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011), pp. 224-271.

Part 4: Subjectivities, positionalities, and other complexities

Week 10. Thursday 26 October 2023: No class. (Roger is away for a research trip.)

Instead, students are required to attend an online-only zoom public lecture by Prof Mieke Bal on **Friday 20 October, 4.00—5.30pm**. Lecture title: “Multi-Tentacled Time: Contemporaneity, Heterochrony, Anachronism for Preposterous History through Semiotic Thinking.”

- No reading for this week; instead, please visit the exhibition *The Unfaithful Octopus* at ADM Gallery, which features an art film by Mieke Bal.

Week 11. Thursday 2 November 2023 (9.30am—12.30pm, The Hive, TR+15)

“An unfortunate side effect of the noble goals of scholarship.” Art writing, ethics, and coloniality (in Pueblo villages and Hamburg).

- Christine Chávez, “The Origins, Afterlife, and Persistence of Symbolic Art” and selected image captions, in *Lightning Symbol and Snake Dance: Aby Warburg and Pueblo Art*, ed. Christine Chávez and Uwe Fleckner (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2022), pp. 68-77 and 80-95.

Week 12. Thursday 9 November 2023 (9.30am—12.30pm, The Hive, TR+15)

This week’s discussion is TBC, and will be advised in class. It may include revision, essay consultations, and preparation for student-led debate.

- Reading for this week is TBC, and will be advised in class.

Week 13. Thursday 16 November 2023 (9.30am—12.30pm, The Hive, TR+15)

Student-led debate: “Texts illuminate artworks more than artworks illuminate texts.”

- No reading for this week; instead, please reflect on issues discussed throughout the semester while working on your final research essay.

Suggestions for further reading

The following suggestions are intended to assist with research for your assignments. The following suggestions are completely optional, however; you are not required to draw on these texts and you are encouraged to research widely, including beyond the following suggestions.

Part 1: Introductions and foundations

- James Elkins, ed., *Is Art History Global?* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007).
- Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing and Criticism* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2021).
- María Gainza, *Optic Nerve*, trans. Thomas Bunstead (New York: Catapult, 2020).
- Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2016).

- Max Paddison, "Riddle-Character, Interpretation, and Dialectical Image: Adorno's Philosophy and the Case of Musical Performance," *New German Critique* 129 (November 2016): 139-154.

Part 2: Art writing by artists

- Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, *I Am An Artist (He Said)*, trans. Kong Ritthdee (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2022).
- Duncan Bass, "Non-Playable Citizens: Practicing Proxy Politics in Hito Steyerl's *Factory of the Sun*," *Singapore Art Museum*, 9 May 2023, <https://www.singaporeartmuseum.sg/about/our-collection/stories/non-playable-citizens> [accessed July 2023].
- Amy Sillman, *Faux Pas. Selected Writings and Drawings* (Paris: After 8 Books, 2020).
- Derek Jarman, *Chroma: A Book of Colour* (London: Vintage, 2000).
- Apinan Poshyananda, "The Future: Post-Cold War, Postmodernism, Postmarginalia (Playing with Slippery Lubricants)," in *Tradition and Change: Contemporary Art of Asia and the Pacific*, ed. Caroline Turner (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1993), 3-23.

Part 3: Between art and writing

- Daryl Qilin Yam, *Lovelier, Lonelier* (Singapore: Epigram Books, 2021).
- Catherine Lacey, *Biography of X* (London: Granta Books, 2023).
- Mieke Bal, *Image-Thinking: Artmaking as Cultural Analysis* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022).
- Michael Ann Holly, *The Melancholy Art* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013).
- Arthur Yap, *The Collected Poems of Arthur Yap*, ed. Irving Goh (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013).

Part 4: Subjectivities, positionalities, and other complexities

- Jessica Lack, *Why Are We 'Artists'? : 100 World Art Manifestos* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2017).
- Christine Chávez and Uwe Fleckner, eds., *Lightning Symbol and Snake Dance: Aby Warburg and Pueblo Art* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2022).
- Aby M. Warburg, *Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America*, trans. Michael P Steinberg (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).
- Clémentine Deliss, *The Metabolic Museum* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2020).

Assessment

This course combines oral and written assignments. If you have questions or concerns about any of the assessment exercises, please raise them early in advance, either by email or in class. You may also make an appointment for a discussion during office hours, i.e. Thursdays 3-4pm during semester.

Key points to note:

- Class attendance and active participation, including completing the required readings and contributing to the student-led debate (20%)
- Between Week 2 and Week 12: Class presentation (15 mins, 20%)
- Friday 29 September 2023: Close reading exercise due (1000 words, 20%)
- Friday 17 November 2023: Final research essay due (2500 words, 40%)

Feedback is central to this course. You will receive formative feedback through verbal and/or written responses to your class presentation, your close reading exercise, and your final research essay. You will also receive verbal feedback during in-class discussions and during the debate.

1. Class participation (20%)

As noted above, reading in preparation for class discussion is an important part of our learning in this course. The required readings must all be completed each week in preparation for class. PDF copies of all readings will be provided for you. You are encouraged to read closely, critically, carefully, and actively: as only one text is required for most weeks of the semester, please give it your full attention, and come to class with questions and comments to contribute to discussions.

Participation in the student-led debate, held during week 13, is also an important component of class participation. The debate serves to consolidate revision of different themes and topics discussed throughout the semester, while also encouraging you to develop your skills in argumentation and expression. Because a debate requires collaboration in a group, to do well on the team assessment, it is necessary for you to demonstrate positive interdependence and teamwork. In principle, you will receive the same marks as your team. However, your individual score may vary based on feedback about your contributions to the group project. We will have time in classes to prepare for the debate.

As well as enhancing your comprehension of the course, class participation will also help you to develop the skills necessary to do well in your written assignments.

2. Class presentation (20%) – 15 minutes, between Week 2 and Week 12

You will be required to make one oral presentation in class (between Week 2 and Week 12) and to co-lead a discussion about one of the weekly readings. This assessment exercise allows you to demonstrate your comprehension of the readings, your skills in textual analysis, and your ability to develop a critical perspective based on a close examination of the text. You will also be assessed for your ability to plan and co-lead a class discussion, including preparing questions and prompts for discussion.

Your oral presentation should be 15 minutes in length; you are also expected to submit your short notes and/or any slides for your presentation via email prior to class.

The oral presentation develops skills in close, critical reading of texts—including in relation to images or artworks, if relevant—and these skills will also help you to prepare for your written assignments.

3. Close reading exercise (20%) – 1000 words, due Friday 29 September 2023

The close reading exercise, which comprises a short written paper, allows you to demonstrate your ability to develop a critical perspective based on a close examination of observable evidence within one text and one image or artwork. This exercise provides you with an opportunity to hone your skills in literary analysis, visual analysis, and other techniques used for close reading in art history.

You may choose to write your close reading exercise on one of the required readings from this course, but not on the same reading that you discussed in your oral presentation.

Alternatively, you may choose to write your close reading exercise on another text of your choice, but your choice of text must be approved by the instructor in advance of the deadline.

You are allowed and encouraged to revise your writing done for your close reading exercise for use in your final research essay.

Short written papers of approximately 1000 words (ie within 10% of word limit, not including footnotes and references) should be submitted via Turnitin on NTULearn by 23:59 on Friday 29 September 2023.

4. Final research essay (40%) – 2500 words, due Friday 17 November 2023

The final research essay builds on the close reading exercise to construct a larger argument about issues covered during the course, in response to one of the essay questions that will be provided during the semester.

As noted above, you are allowed and encouraged to revise your writing done for your close reading exercise into your final research essay. When revising your writing, you should reflect on written feedback provided for your close reading exercise, as well as discussions throughout the semester.

The research essay is an exercise to develop and assess the following skills:

- Conducting art historical research;
- Creating a structured, coherent argument;
- Writing clearly and expressively;
- Visual analysis;
- Critically approaching research material from different sources.

Essays of approximately 2500 words (ie within 10% of word limit, not including footnotes and references) should be submitted via Turnitin on NTULearn by 23:59 on Friday 17 November 2023.

A list of essay questions will be provided during the semester. The essay questions will relate to concepts and case studies covered during the semester. You may choose any one of the essay questions.

Please ensure the following:

- Your work is original, and all quotations and ideas from other sources are properly referenced. The essays will be checked for plagiarism. Please use the notes-bibliography referencing system of the Chicago Manual of Style, see the following short guide: http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide/citation-guide-1.html. Use of generative AI tools is not permitted and will be considered cheating.
- Please conduct research beyond the required weekly readings. In general, your sources should be scholarly articles and books, not information from the internet.
- Notes, bibliography, and image captions will not be counted as part of the essay's word count.
- Your essay is accompanied by illustrations of the images you refer to. Please label each illustration with a caption in the following format: *Artist name, artwork title (in italics), artwork date, artwork medium, artwork size, collection where artwork is currently located.*
- Please submit a soft copy of your essay via Turnitin on NTULearn. Penalties will be applied for late submissions.

Course policies and student responsibilities

General: You are expected to complete all assigned pre-class readings and activities, attend all seminar classes punctually and take all scheduled assignments and tests by due dates. You are expected to take responsibility to follow up with course notes, assignments and course related announcements for seminar sessions they have missed. You are expected to participate in all seminar discussions and activities.

Absenteeism: Absence from class without a valid reason will affect your overall course grade. Valid reasons include falling sick supported by a medical certificate and participation in NTU's approved activities supported by an excuse letter from the relevant bodies. If you miss a class, you must inform the course instructor via email prior to the start of the class.

Academic Integrity: Good academic work depends on honesty and ethical behaviour. The quality of your work as a student relies on adhering to the principles of academic integrity and to the NTU Honour Code, a set of values shared by the whole university community. Truth, Trust and Justice are at the core of NTU's shared values.

As a student, it is important that you recognise your responsibilities in understanding and applying the principles of academic integrity in all the work you do at NTU. Not knowing what is involved in maintaining academic integrity does not excuse academic dishonesty. You need to actively equip yourself with strategies to avoid all forms of academic dishonesty, including plagiarism, academic fraud, collusion and cheating. If you are uncertain of the definitions of any of these terms, you should go to the academic integrity website for more information (<https://www.ntu.edu.sg/education/teaching-learning/learning-resources>). Consult your instructor if you need any clarification about the requirements of academic integrity in the course.

The use of generative AI to complete assignments is considered cheating. Students are permitted, however, to explore issues arising from this technology in relation to writing on art. Any use of generative AI is to be discussed with the instructor and explained in detailed citations.