Philosophy of Art

PROFESSOR:
Chris Latiolais, Chair
Philosophy Department
Kalamazoo College
Humphrey House, Office 201
Telephone: 337-7076
Offices Hours:
  • Thursday: 10:30-11:30 AM
  • Tuesday: 10:30 - 11:30 AM
  • By Appointment

TEACHING ASSISTANT:
Kira Sandiford
Art Major & Philosophy Minor
Kira.Sandiford11@kzoo.edu
Office Hours: The Book Club
  • Wednesday Evening: 7:30 – 10:00 PM

COURSE GOALS:
This course introduces students to a subfield of philosophy known as “Aesthetics” – the study of the experience of beauty and the sublime – and to its associated field known as the “philosophy of art” – the study of human artifice in the fine arts and their successors artifacts on the contemporary art scene. This course neither presents a comprehensive survey of what philosophers have said about art, nor a historical survey of theories or “schools” of artistic interpretation, nor even a history of different styles and genres of art in the Western tradition. Instead, the course focuses upon basic conceptual issues of how artworks are distinguished from other types of things and how different types of experience and involvement are required to gain access to artworks and natural beauty. Moreover, we will focus on one key question – i.e. Do artworks raise claims to truth? – by examining Lambert Zuidervaart’s defense of artistic truth and Seel’s hermeneutic alternative to the idea that artworks raise claims to truth.

We begin with a chapter of Author C. Danto’s work The Transfiguration of the Commonplace, “Interpretation and Identification,” which raises a number of perplexing issues about the ontology of artworks – i.e. what an artwork is – in contrast to both real things and to things used as sign systems. Danto famously argues for a “post-aesthetic” ontology of the artwork, one in which what distinguishes the artwork from other types of things is simply not a visually available property. His thesis about the “post-aesthetic” nature of art – i.e. its fundamentally conceptual (theoretical) rather than sensual (visual) nature – is central to contemporary theorists such as Cynthia Freeland, who offers us a Potpourri of contemporary contentious debates about what counts as art after the revolutionary advances of the Avant Garde. These contentious debates focus our attention upon the historical nature of artistic production and its critical reception, which requires that we probe even more deeply into the complex relationship between artworks and their attendant modes of perception, conception, reception, interpretation, and canonization.
After Freeland’s informal assortment of historical and critical issues regarding whether something is or is not an artwork, we turn to the systematic analysis of art on offer in Nelson Goodman’s *The Languages of Art* (1968). Goodman offers a semiotic approach to how we gain access to artworks: that is, an approach that highlights the symbolic and referential nature of artworks. Access to artworks, Goodman argues, demands that we understand them as sign systems, which have their own syntactic integrity, that symbolize or refer to something beyond themselves, which constitute their semantic scope. Goodman articulates a far-reaching and now classic account of artworks as symbol systems that both require semiotic interpretation and establish a variety of different modes of symbolization. More specifically, his account of how artworks often possess the very qualities that they refer to—a form of symbolization he calls “exemplification”—is a powerful tool in art reception and criticism. Despite considerable difficulties with Goodman’s account, it is generally accepted that artworks do indeed require the type of semiotic interpretation Goodman proposes: we read, so to speak, pictures.

One of the central questions in the philosophy of art is whether artworks raise a claim to a distinctive type of truth—different, of course, from scientific truth or moral rightness—but a form of rational validity nevertheless. Martin Seel, a prominent contemporary German philosopher, argues that only linguistically articulated acts such as assertions, which have a propositional or sentential structure, can literally be said to be true or false and, moreover, that, because artworks cannot be cashed out as a set of such propositions, they cannot be assessed in terms of truth or falsity. Lambert Zuidervaart, a prominent U.S. critical social theorist, contends that artworks do indeed raise rationally evaluable truth claims and, furthermore, that such claims—e.g. to authenticity, integrity, and significance—play an important role in critiquing social practices and institutions.

We explore this debate by first turning to Martin Seel’s well-received book, *The Aesthetics of Appearing*, which provides a provocative account of aesthetic experience, in general, and of the distinctive type of aesthetic experience required for gaining access to artworks, in particular. While Seel rejects the idea that artworks literally raise truth claims, he, like Zuidervaart, adamantly maintains that aesthetic experiences provide a distinctive type of crucial reorientation to, or recalibration of, our worldly involvements. Aesthetic experiences, he argues, give us an increased sensitivity to how we make sense of ourselves and the world by loosening the grip of our often routine, regimented, and automatic modes of involvement. Aesthetic experiences redirect our attention from determinate and determinable states of affairs as objects of theoretical knowledge and pragmatic control to their open-ended, indeterminate, and variable modes of appearing. In this way, aesthetic experience allows us to become more attentive to our ongoing ways of making sense of ourselves and the world and to potentially alter them. Seel argues that aesthetic experiences are distinctive in being “for their own sake”—the “goal” of aesthetic experience is the experience itself, not something else—and, in both earlier and later publications, he connects such self-directed experiences to human happiness and wellbeing (*Wohlergehen*). Artworks do not, he insists, provide us with truth claims; instead, they are dynamic, self-directed, indeterminate experiential processes that widen the optic and auditorium of our world-engagements. More than any other philosopher, Seel links aesthetic experience and philosophical theorizing together in the shared enterprise of increasing the passion and depth of our involvements in world.

Finally, we will examine Zuidervaart’s detailed and complex defense of artistic truth and explore how the enterprise of art—i.e. its practices and institutionalizations—functions as a critical leverage *vis-a-vis* society, culture, and politics. According to Zuidervaart, artworks are
“true with respect to” to the artist (authenticity), to the art-receptive public (significance), and to the artistic medium (integrity). Artworks function as imaginative explorations of the artist, imaginative interpretations by a public, and imaginative presentations within the artistic medium/media. Zuidervaart’s account of the creation, reception, and historical development of art focuses upon art as a complex, social, and cultural mode of communication that is distinct from, but connected with, other ways of attaining truths about ourselves and the world in which we live.

Despite the instructor’s choice not to present a systematic history of aesthetics or theories of art – which would require a year-long engagement – there are several key issues about the fundamentally historical nature of art that we will address. First and foremost, the very terms “art” and “aesthetics” as we have come to use them are terms of contrast: art versus craft, artist versus artisan or craftsman, aesthetic form versus utilitarian function, aesthetic “higher” pleasure versus ordinary pleasure, aesthetic contemplation versus mundane management or religious ritual. It’s helpful – and highly contentious – to speak about the modern “invention of art” in the 18th Century, as many philosophers and art critics do. The noun phrase – the “invention of art” – is contentious for many reasons. First, defenders of modernity contend that the essence of art as a social practice was discovered, not invented, and it’s from the perspective of autonomous art that we can speak of an increase in aesthetic rationality – that is, an increase in a distinctive type of reasoning about the advances of art. Second, any such “bourgeois” claim immediately draws fire from those who discern class, gender, ethnicity, and race antagonisms within the modern, European institution of art – the so-called “art world.” To the point, art as a term of contrast arose in the context of North-Atlantic modernization and rationalization, the legacy of the European Enlightenment, and it’s precisely this institutionalization that is itself perhaps the central “issue” addressed in the production and reception of contemporary art. The question of what art is or should be is itself an artistic matter.

It’s important, then, to appreciate how art as a term of contrast arose. In the early 18th Century, the German rationalist philosophy Baumgarten identified a form of knowledge defined by its sensuous character: a sensory knowledge. “Aesthesis” is the Greek term for sensations or sensibility, which Baumgarten contrasts with intellect, understanding, and reason. Subsequently, Kant systematizes such sensory experience by distinguishing among three distinctive types of reason: pure (scientific), practical (moral), and aesthetic (imaginative). While scientific knowledge of the world demands that the understanding conceptualize sensory content according to categories in determinate judgments, and while moral interaction demands that the sensible nature of needs and desires be incorporated under moral laws, our experience of natural beauty and human artworks demands a form of experience that is neither determinate nor action-oriented. In his third critique, the Critique of Judgment Power, Kant analyzes the structure of aesthetic experience in terms of its indeterminate or merely “reflective” nature, a type of experience within which the imagination is freed from – i.e. “dis-interested” in – the imperatives of knowing and acting, free to imaginatively play with sensory forms. Kant’s Critique of Judgment Power initiates our modern conception and institution of art as “autonomous,” of “art for art’s sake” (art pour le art), distinct from true knowledge, on the one hand, and right action, on the other. Kant “invented” then the category of art, of art for art’s sake, and his autonomy-of-art thesis – the idea that art serves neither epistemic nor moral purposes – is certainly the point of contention for many subsequent debates in the philosophy of art.

Critics of autonomous art decry its “melancholic” separation from the spheres of knowledge and action. Avant Guardists call for a reintegration of art into everyday life, left-wing political activists cast art in the role of political encounter, and Neo-Aristotelian philosophers demand a reintegration of morality and aesthetic sensibility. The traditional Museum has been decried as so elitist, exclusionary, and nostalgic that it no longer houses artworks that are alive today. Moreover, New-Historicist and Cultural critics decry the ethnocentrism of autonomous art
because it so hygienically sequesters art from the social, cultural, and religious practices and institutions of traditional ethnic worldviews into which it is inextricably intertwined. Many postmodernist philosophers and art critics link representational art – art that represent identifiable objects – to the “modernist” illusion of an “autonomous ego,” calling for abstract, conceptual, and non-representational art as disclosing the fuller compass of human existence. Many of these debates hinge on the normative assessment of whether something is a good or bad piece of art, while others hinge on a philosophical definition of what counts as art as such and how it functions. No one has told a history of these issues convincing to all parties precisely because the very idea of a developmental or “perfectionist” history is what postmodernist reject. The contemporary art scene is, then, “in crisis” precisely because it is so virulently self-conscious and self-critical about could count as art in contemporary circumstances. Perhaps the handiest way to frame these issues is to simply allude to the unwieldy, vociferous, and cross-purposed debate about “modernity” versus “post-modernity,” a wide-ranging cross-disciplinary free-for-all that nevertheless locates the clash between a history of art and history of philosophy, each vying to make pronouncements about the legacy of the European Enlightenment, with its scientific, industrial, and political revolutions.

In my estimation, Martin Seel’s *Aesthetics of Appearing* and Lambert Zuidervaart’s *Artistic Truth* represent the most sophisticated positions on the current debate about the role of art in the contemporary world. While they appear to be at loggerheads – the disagree about whether artworks can be said to true or false – they in fact share a common sense of the importance of art for human happiness and thriving.

**EVALUATION:**

Students will be evaluated on the basis of class participation, vocabulary quizzes, midterm examinations and a final paper.

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<tr>
<th>Breakdown of Points of Evaluation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Participation:</td>
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<td><strong>Responses</strong></td>
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<td>(The purpose of a response paper is to hold us accountable to our reading. In the paper, identify core concepts from the readings and clarify, present, and explain them via artistic examples, personal experiences or other tangible material. 1-3 pages in length, double spaced)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Midterm Papers</td>
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<td>Final Paper</td>
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POLICIES:

Students are expected to follow the reading schedule and to come to class prepared to actively discuss the texts they have read. More specifically, students must bring their texts to class with marginal notes, highlighted or underlined passages of particular importance, and pages marked where they have encountered difficulties in understanding the material. Quizzes offer students the opportunity to identify and to clarify central terms and concepts. The midterm assignments allow students to write essays on key philosophical issues and arguments, and the final paper offers students the opportunity to respond in depth to a single topic. The final paper is due on the day scheduled for the final examination. The following are basic policies:

- 3 unexcused absences will result in a full course grade reduction (exceptions allowed only with proper documentation).
- Late papers are marked down a half grade per day (exceptions allowed only with proper documentation)
- No active electronic devices such as computers, mobile phones, Blackberries, Blueberries, or any other electronic fruits and vegetables are permitted in the classroom, although tape recorders are permitted.
- All documented disabilities will happily be accommodated upon the student’s request.
- An act of plagiarism result in a failing grade for the specific assignment. A second act will result in an F course grade.
- During seminar discussions, students must attend to the person holding the floor, responding to his or her contribution. In other words, no one-on-one lateral comments, which divert attention from the ongoing discussion.
- 3 unexcused absences will result in a full grade reduction.
- Late papers will be marked down a half grade for the first day and a full grade for the second day. All work must be turned in at the end of term, unless alternative assignments have been given by the instructor.

REQUIRED TEXTS:


RECOMMENDED TEXTS:


**GERMAN ACROSS THE CURRICULUM COMPONENT:** Selected texts may be read in the German original. GAC students will be given alternative assignments and weekly tutorials.

**BRIDGE READING COMPONENT:** Students interested in linking course material to their major course of study will be given special readings and assignments. Tutorial meetings are required, and the final paper must be completed in consultation with professor in home department.

**READING SCHEDULE**

**INTRODUCTION TO AESTHETICS, THE PHILOSOPHY OF ART, AND ART HISTORY:**

- **Week One:**
  - Tuesday: Student Survey
    - Introductory Lecture: *What is Aesthetic Perception and What Is Art?*

**THE DEMISE OF AESTHETICS IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF ART: AUTHOR C. DANTO’S ARGUMENT:**

- Thursday:
  - Author C. Danto, “Interpretation and Identification,” from *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* [Handout]
  - Seel, “Danto Objection,” (pp. 119-122)
  - Assignment for Response #1 (On Danto)

**CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN ART CRITICISM: BUT IS IT ART?**

- **Week Two:**
  - Tuesday:
    - Response #1 Due
    - Freeland: Introduction.
    - Freeland: “Blood and Beauty”
    - Freeland: “Paradigms and Purposes”
  - Thursday:
    - Freeland: “Cultural Crossings”
    - Freeland: “Money, Markets, and Museums”
    - Freeland: “Gender, Genius, and Guerrilla Girls”
- Assignment for Response #2 (On Freeland)

- **Week Three**:
  - **Tuesday**:
    - Freeland: “Cognition, Creation, and Comprehension”
    - Freeland: “Digitilizing and Disseminating”
    - Freeland: Conclusion

**NELSON GOODMAN’S SEMILOGICAL APPROACH TO ARTISTIC REFERENCE: SYMBOL SYSTEMS AS WAYS OF MAKING A WORLD.**

- **Thursday**:
  - Response #2 Due
  - Goodman: “Words, Works, and Worlds”
  - Goodman: “The Status of Style”

- **Week Four**:
  - **Tuesday**:
    - Goodman: “Some Questions Concerning Quotation”
    - Goodman: “When is Art”
    - Goodman: “A Puzzle about Perception”
    - Response #3 Assigned (On Goodman)
  - **Thursday**:
    - Goodman: “The Fabrication of Facts”
    - Goodman: “On Rightness of Rendering”
    - Response #3 Due

**DO ARTWORKS RAISE CLAIMS TO TRUTH?: SEEL’S ACCOUNT OF AESTHETIC AND ARTISTIC APPEARING:**

- **Week Five**:
  - **Tuesday**:
    - Seel: “A Rough History of Modern Aesthetics”
    - Seel: “Thirteen Propositions about Pictures”
  - **Thursday**:
    - Seel:
      - “Aesthetics of Appearing” (pp. 19-24)
      - “What is Appearing” (pp. 24-37)
    - Assignment #4

- **Week Six**:
  - **Tuesday**:
• Seel: “Aesthetics of Appearing” (pp. 37-69)
  • “Being-so and Appearing”
  • “Appearing and Semblance”
• Response #4 Due (On Seel)
  o Thursday:
    • Seel: “Aesthetics of Appearing” (pp. 69-105)
      • “Appearing and Imagination”
      • “Situations of Appearing”
    • Assignment #5

• Week Seven:
  o Tuesday:
    • Seel: “Aesthetics of Appearing” (pp. 105-139)
      • “Constellations of Art”
      • “A Play of Presence”
    • Response #5 Due
  o Thursday:
    • Seel:
      • “Flickering and Resonating: Borderline Experiences Outside and Inside Art” (139-159)

DO ARTWORKS RAISE CLAIMS TO TRUTH?: ZUIDERVAART’S CRITICAL SOCIAL THEORY OF ARTISTIC TRUTH:

• Week Eight:
  o Tuesday:
    • Zuidervaart: Introduction
    • Zuidervaart: “Kant Revisited”
    • Response #4 Assigned (On Zuidervaart and Seel)
  o Thursday:
    • Zuidervaart: Introduction
    • Zuidervaart: “Kant Revisited”
    • Assignment #6

• Week Nine:
  o Tuesday:
    • Zuidervaart: “Truth as Disclosure”
    • Response #4 Due
  o Thursday:
• Zuidervaart: “Imaginative Disclosure”

• **Week Ten:**
  0 **Tuesday:**
  • Zuidervaart: “Artistic Truth”
  0 **Thursday:**
  • Zuidervaart: “Aesthetic Transformations”