

The University of British Columbia
Department of Art History, Visual Art and Theory

MFA seminar 2008-9

Art for change, art about art, art as strategy, art as commodity, art as (in the name of) folly...

Instructor: Marina Roy

In our present moment—call it the age of Empire, of late (transnational) capitalism, or of apocalyptic “third nature” (Gene Ray)—what is the current face of art? At times one might think of it as a mutating multi-headed hydra spreading its homogenizing influence of stock neo-avant-garde art strategies locally and internationally. In an age of global markets and an increasingly globalized culture, the phenomenon of art fairs, biennales, and manifestas seems to make a lot of sense. But one comes to realize that art often ends up acting as little more than a signpost for serving up local flavour (in lieu of addressing socio-political issues or identity politics), a kind of local branding for the international art market. Whither art with a social conscience, art for social change, art which resists the logic of the global market? How can one hope to hold up a critical practice, or even a practice with something new to say, under our current conditions? Or is it more that the pace of cooptation by the market is just too difficult to resist?

For some time now, artists have taken to setting up pockets of microutopias, oases of idealized notions of a participatory public, but which in essence do very little to change the backbone of our social, political and economic situation(s). Others continue to make objects and images, static and moving, providing critical views of the world. When we compare the optical contemplation of an object or image versus the work of art as “social form,” as productive of interactive “positive” human relationships, we come to realize there are multiple, often conflicting, roles for art. What are these roles and who are the publics?

We are the makers of the present culture. Why do we make art the way we do? What impact do we want to have on the world around us? What are our influences and why, what road is laid out for us now, and what are the alternatives in the present and for future? What alternate histories and approaches are ignored because of the sanctioned canon of the avant-garde?

Other topics:

- feminism (in conjunction with the WACK! Exhibition and Mary Kelly’s visit)
- the role of humour (and jokes as innovative action) in art
- the present conditions and expectations around the MFA and a professionalized art practice (and the growing presence of PhDs in visual arts)
- artists’ writings
- environmental issues and community economics

Besides discussions and readings, there will be weekly critiques of student artwork.

VISITING ARTISTS

Mary Kelly (seminar and critique)

Bik van der Pol (seminar and critique)

READINGS

Secret Publicity by Sven Luttiken

October Journal; # 123: Winter 2008 - *In what ways have artists, academics, and cultural institutions responded to the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq?*

Signals in the dark: Art in the shadow of war

Bruno Latour & Peter Weibel (editors), *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*

Mary Kelly, *Imaging Desire*

Alexander Alberro (ed.), *Two-way mirror power: selected writings by Dan Graham*

Bik Van der Pol—with love from the kitchen

Hardt and Negri, *Multitude & Empire*

Democracy Unrealized (Documenta11_Platform1)

Howard Singerman, *Art Subjects*

Scheduled studio visits

Dieter Roelstraete

David Claerbout

Dan Graham

Presentations of readings in class; also suggestions for readings

We will also be asking: What is the structure and aim of an MFA? What are the implicit expectations/demands of the instructor, student, and institution? How is this constructive, how is it productive of certain patterns of thinking and making, what kind of knowledge are we producing? How does it succeed or not in potentially feeding the established social system and economy of art? How could it change it? What alternate pedagogical models would be more constructive for teaching art? This will be useful to think about in light of the gradual establishment of PhDs in visual arts.