

ARTH 577

**THE POLITICS OF MATERIALITY AND MATTERS OF THE BIO-POLITICAL**

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“The Politics of Materiality” in the title refers to the recent material turn in cultural and visual studies. For Martin Heidegger, an object is something we reflect upon, that we observe and explain, a process that distances us and conceals its thingness. Instead of objects, he urges us to see how things come into being, how they stand apart, how they impinge upon us, and how they gather people together. More recently, interest in how the material world assembles the social has been fostered by Bruno Latour who has shifted the focus away from the study of people (anthropology) and objects (science) to the processes through which objects become things that matter. This dialectical process is not one of consensus. On the contrary, the thing “has for many centuries meant the issue that brings people together *because* it divides them” (Latour, in Latour and Weibel). History is therefore crucial, since it is there, at the intersections between the social and material, that the political stakes emerge.

“Matters of the Bio-political,” on the other hand, investigate the role media, performativity, and psychoanalysis play in reconfiguring the manner in which the self and other biological forms are socially constructed, phantasmatically imagined, and physically represented. These methods of understanding the bio-political shed light on the mechanisms of the Law and the “return of the repressed.” Thus, as a complement to our focus on materiality and “thing theory,” we will be looking at something closer to the Thing as conceptualized by Lacan. In Žižek’s words:

“Lacan defines art itself with regard to the Thing: ... art as such is always organized around the central Void of the impossible-real Thing - a statement which, perhaps, should be read as a variation on Rilke's old thesis that ‘Beauty is the last veil that covers the Horrible’ .... This notion of Thing as an Id-Machine, [is] a mechanism that directly materializes our unacknowledged fantasies.”

This realm of the Thing will be approached via reconceptualizations of the sublime, the animation of the undead, the horror genre, the fetish, etc.—the field of the visible as it relates to a structural and “impossible” Void. By extension, psychoanalysis will be used to unmask the repressions of ideology, as they relate to oppressive social structures.

Exploring artwork, technology, objects, artifacts, sounds, texts, and media and how they solicit our engagement with them, offer ways of exploring the agency of things and also a glimpse at the manifestation of the Thing: mark-making, film and photography, writing, modes of seeing, animals, everyday objects, collections, the fetish. On one side, the course shifts the focus away from concerns with artistic intentions, the context, and discourse toward questions about why and how objects, broadly defined, become things that matter: how their ritual uses, unpredictable forms, and untranslatable vocabularies demand a response; how things, in Lorraine Daston’s words, “make us talk.” On the other side, we will look at how new aesthetic, psychoanalytic and philosophical perspectives reveal the underside of things (and the social relations that constitute them): the Symbolic realm obscuring the Real, and our phantasmatic relation to things and beings that masks the nature of the Thing as it relates to the Void. Engaging with materiality, media, and

ideology prompts a reconsideration of concepts such as mediation, migration, appropriation, sublimation, resistance, repression, translation, and publics.

This seminar builds on the Joan Carlisle Irving and the Distinguished Artist Lecture Series and thus extends over both the winter and spring terms. Course content will include lectures and seminars by visiting scholars and artists and also regular meetings (about 40 hours over the two terms) that will be clustered around these visits. Student work will be published on a class website and there will be a blog intended to encourage participation from the wider AHVA community.

The course is designed for graduate students from all three programs: Art History, Visual Arts and Critical Curatorial Studies. PhD students are encouraged to take the course, but the three credits will not go toward their degree.

## **EVALUATION**

### **35% Participation in blog, class discussion, and presentation of readings in class**

#### **Discussion of readings**

Two people will be responsible for presenting each reading. These should be short presentations (not summaries and 10 minutes max per reading) that focus on an issue with questions designed to prompt discussion.

#### **Blog**

For each visitor, three students will initiate a discussion on the course blog. This might take the form of a discussion, it could be co-authored, or each person could write a paragraph (on a question, term, category, etc.) The blog will also serve as a more informal forum for discussion and questions during and after reading texts, and in preparation for and after the lectures and seminars.

### **30% Journal**

Six journal entries, with each one due the day of the six speaker's seminar (to facilitate discussion); approx. 3 pages each, or 750 words.

### **20% Review**

This is a critical response to a book or exhibition (approx. 6 pages, or 1500 words). Potential exhibits include Claerbout, WACK, Jeff Wall, Kai Althoff, Marianne Nicolson, and Stan Douglas. Appropriate books include Kelly's *Imaging Desire*, Lippit's *Atomic Light*, or *Electric Animal*, Santner's *On Creaturely Life*, Latour's *Reassembling the Social*, Zizek's *Plague of Fantasies*, Mulvey's *Death 24xsecond*; Agamben's *The Open*, Deleuze/Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*. Exhibitions must be thoroughly researched using available texts on the artists/ideas in questions.

### **15% Presentations** (dates to be determined, but some time in March, April, or May)

This assignment is intended to bring forward the relation between the readings and visual imagery around one of the themes of the course. Students in groups of 2-4 will explore two or more of the readings that are in addition to those taken up in class. These will be drawn from the bibliography, and available on reserve in the library. Presentations should build on the course as a whole and thus compare and contrast approaches to the themes. You should include images in your presentation (slides or digital).

Themes: the fetish and/or collections; the everyday object/the socialist object; the Thing, the animal; horror/undead

**SPEAKERS (all talks at 5:30 in Lasserre 102)**

**September 22                    Eric Santner**  
**“Reflections on the Somatic Sublime”**  
Department of German Studies, University of Chicago  
[http://humanities.uchicago.edu/depts/german/07\\_faculty/faculty.html](http://humanities.uchicago.edu/depts/german/07_faculty/faculty.html)

**October 6                        Mary Kelly**  
**Professor, Interdisciplinary Studio, UCLA**  
**Title TBA:**  
<http://www.art.ucla.edu/faculty/kelly.html>

**October 14                      Akira Lippit**  
**"Spectral Life: Derrida, Autobiography, Experimental Film."**  
Professor, Comparative Literature and East Asian Languages and Cultures  
Professor, Critical Studies, School of Cinematic Arts, University of Southern California  
<http://college.usc.edu/faculty/faculty1008195.html>

**January 12                      Michael Gaudio**  
**“The Sound of the Image: Picturing a Native American Dance, 1592/1894”**  
Associate Professor, Department of Art History, University of Minnesota  
[http://www.arthist.umn.edu/faculty/gaudio\\_m.htm](http://www.arthist.umn.edu/faculty/gaudio_m.htm)

**February 23                    Laura Mulvey lecture**  
**“Between Film Theory and Film History:**  
**The young modern woman and the 'flapper film' of the 1920's”**  
School of History of Art, Film and Visual Media  
Birkbeck College, University of London  
Visiting Professor at Wellesley College, 2008-2009  
<http://www.bbk.ac.uk/hafvm/staff/staff/staffMembers/MulveyLaura>

**May 4                            Webb Keane**  
**"On Spirit Writing: Materiality, Words, and their Magic"**  
Professor, Anthropology, University of Michigan  
<http://sitemaker.umich.edu/webbkeane/home>

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