SOAN 250

SEMINAR IN ART & CULTURE

Instructor: Prof. Kirsten Scheid
Meetings: W, 11-3-5:30, EXCEPT 9/25 & 11/20: to be replaced by field trips
Office: 102 Jesup, ext. 4368
Office Hours: T-R, 1-2:30 ks28@aub.edu.lb

Course Description:

This is NOT an art history course. You will NOT be required to memorize images. You WILL be required to think analytically, critically, and creatively. You WILL be required to do original research in the “field,” library, and by interviewing. What this course is, is an anthropological exploration of why we tend to believe in “Art” as a human capacity, and why we hold passionately onto this notion of universality, especially when we want to find humanity in other peoples. By corollary, the course explores how and why, when we want to condemn peoples as less than human, one of the first things we question is their ability to appreciate art.

This course provides a cross-cultural exploration of art as an idea, an object, and a way of interacting with the world. Building on the quest to interpret art across cultures, the course stimulates thought about what cultural work occurs as we search for and find art across cultures. Must we do this? Should we do this? What are the benefits and gains of declaring every culture a maker of (universal) art, especially in today’s political system? Thus, this course is particularly concerned with reaching a discussion of the current infatuation worldwide with “emerging, critical, contemporary Arab art.”

Most of the course focuses on African, Melanesian, and North American indigenous art, because that is where anthropologists did most of their work on that topic. However, Lebanese and Palestinian art, very “hot” today but much under-studied, offer an excellent and accessible opportunity to study first-hand issues typical to East-West, metropole-periphery, modernity-tradition encounters; therefore, particular attention will be paid to local resources and archives. Beyond a basic understanding of art historical and anthropological concepts and methods, you will gain from the course a historically and anthropologically informed awareness of the role of representations in identity-construction and a sense of the possibilities for social critique and intervention.
Required Texts (available in AUB Bookstore): You MUST bring the texts with you. Not having the proper text will lead to your dismissal from class and being counted as absent. You do not need to bring all texts for each class, only the text containing the reading to be discussed. Some of the texts may be found in other versions or online. I ask that you NOT use these, for sake of reference to passages during class.

• Howard Morphy & Morgan Perkins, Anthropology of Art: Reader, Berkeley: University of California, 2006


• Additional readings will be at Jafet Library Reserve in hard copy or on e-reserve. Please get the course code and password from Dr. Scheid.

Course Objectives:

At the end of this course students will have acquired the skills to:

• demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of anthropological approaches to art and research methodologies

• critically engage in current theoretical debates about art from a historically informed perspective

• design and execute a preliminary ethnographic study of art-making

• discuss contemporary Arab art in its local and international settings

• communicate complex perspectives on art-making in socially useful ways

Course Requirements & Grade Weights:

1) Because it is a seminar, this class mandates participation. Missing a single session is equivalent to missing three sessions of your regular classes, and missing more than two by Nov. 6 will lead to your being dropped from the class. There grade percentage for participation is 30%, and it will be calculated as a function of how much you draw on reading and research to offer your comments on the readings and to contribute to class learning, and how consistently and constructively you do the various smaller assignments (see below). “Heki fadi” or “taq hanak” will be looked upon severely.

2) Various assignments, of a casual nature, will be given during each component of the course. These may include paragraph-long responses or data discoveries. Each student will make one presentation in the course of the semester. You may sign up on the calendar that will be distributed in the first session. The presentation will constitute 20% of your grade.
3) The Mid-Term Exam will be a take-home essay designed to demonstrate your grasp and articulation of the course concepts. It will constitute 20% of your grade.

4) The Final Paper, which you must start after the Mid-Term, will allow you to apply the course concepts and readings to an art issue that you can study using local resources: texts, artist’ œuvres, interviews, and fieldwork, for example. You MUST discuss your topic, planned research methods, and planned bibliography with me by Nov. 30, though I strongly encourage you to start thinking about these issue much earlier, even now. It is due Dec. 18. It will constitute 30% of your grade.

Course Units:

1) Art as an Idea: Why do people look for art and how do they see it? The notion of art’s expressiveness, for many a defining feature, has encouraged many an anthropologist to treat art as a reflection of deeper cultural processes just as many lay-people treat art objects as expressions of deeper levels of human reality: emotions, psyches, thought. This component of the course reviews anthropological approaches to art—which developed from an anti-racist campaign to unify humanity—and puts them in their own cultural context.

2) Art an Interaction: What do art objects make possible, socially speaking? Here we look at how art practices structure social encounters, specifically in colonial and post-colonial situations. How has thinking of art as an object played a role in the objectification of other peoples? What alternative models might indicate different ways of explaining the value and role of art in society? In this section we read about networks, trade routes, class snobbery, AND

3) Art as an Object: This section moves from Anthropology into areas traditionally associated with Art History, but it asks: beyond placing artworks in chronological order and categorizing their features (i.e. conventional art history), what other ways do artworks demand we relate to them? What powers reside in their material and sensual features? How might these powers (or agencies) relate to our notions of being human?

Readings:

You cannot develop a critical take on common notions and current theories of art unless you read their articulation carefully, considering the data used to support the arguments and the ideas deliberately absented from the text. Regular reading is essential to your ability to participate in this seminar.

Give yourself advance time to find the texts, and PLAN FOR PROBLEMS: Inform me immediately so that you still have time to complete the assignment. Not finding the text at the last minute will NOT be an acceptable excuse for failing to do the work.
Assignments: Always keep a copy of your assignments!

In order to acquire skills applying anthropological thinking to your own life, you will be given various assignments. Some assignments may require bringing material to a specific class session. Do not expect to be able to bring the material to another session; you will be considered unprepared for class and marked as absent!

Any written assignment you are asked to submit should be submitted through the Moodle assignment box. It is your duty to ensure that your assignment uploads before the deadline.

Please note that Moodle is sometimes slow; if you postpone submitting to the last minute you take a great risk that may affect your grade. Late submissions will be deducted 5% per day late.

Academic Integrity:

Formulating your own response to ideas presented in texts or class is a fundamental component of the learning process. It also provides the main medium by which your instructor can evaluate your skills acquisition and intervene where necessary to ensure your success. Therefore, your resorting to copying others’ words or thoughts demonstrates a breakdown in the learning process.

AUB offers an on-line tutorial that explains exactly what plagiarism involves and how to avoid committing it. You are required to take this tutorial and pass its test. Once you have taken it you will be held responsible for your commitment to academic integrity. I may be use a program to verify the integrity of your work. I will deal with plagiarism severely.