

Contesting the visual/visible: the image as critical and creative method

Darren Spirk

Cairo Institute of Liberal Arts and Sciences - Spring 2022

Mondays, 11:30-1:30



Course description: A growing number of contemporary theorists and artists ask us to question our understanding of art history and the material conditions of image-making by rejecting the singular narrative presented to us through western modernity. As an exploratory course that bridges critical readings on the image with a wide array of complementary artistic practices, this course asks the following questions: How do we acknowledge the violences of colonial expansion, global imperialism, and the mid-Atlantic slave trade as formative not only to the history of art but its ongoing circulation today? What changes might these perspectives bring to how we look at and study images, how we create and distribute them, and even how we might approach technologies such as the camera? Relatedly, what types of artistic projects have emerged from these sites of inquiry, and how might we reformulate affinitive conceptions of art and creativity in conjunction with a critical-theoretical and/or radical-political mindset? This course is ideal for both students who are visual artists themselves and those interested in studying visual culture, and it also culminates in a final creative project that offers students the opportunity to apply the course material in ways meaningful to them.

Syllabus

Week 1 - Introduction: rethinking art history

Readings: Azoulay, A. (2019), *Potential History* (ch. 1 and 2)

Visual materials: *Un-documented: unlearning imperial plunder*, a documentary by Ariella Azoulay

Week 2 - The coloniality of images: mental limits to the imagination

Readings: Vallega, A. (2011), “Displacements – beyond the coloniality of images”; “The coloniality of power” by the Youtube account *Trans Borderscapes* (13 mins)

Visual materials: selected works of Alfredo Jaar

Week 3 - Decolonial aestheSis: art that “re-links”

Readings: Mignolo, W. and Vazquez, R. (2013) “Decolonial aestheSis: colonial wounds/decolonial healings;” Gomez-Barris, M. (2017), *The Extractive zone: social ecologies and decolonial perspectives* (ch. 5)

Visual materials: *Land of Friends* (2014), a documentary by Carolina Caycedo

Week 4 - The imperial history of the camera: reapproaching the photograph

Readings: Cole, T. (2019), “When the camera was a weapon of imperialism. (And when it still is.);” Azoulay, A. (2012), “What is a photograph? What is photography?”

Visual materials: Four posts of historical photographs from Egypt by the Instagram account *Cairoobserver* ([1](#); [2](#); [3](#); [4](#))

Week 5 – Listening to images: frequency, pitch, and visual refusal

Readings: Campt, T. (2017), *Listening to images* (intro and ch. 1); Campt, T. (2019) “The visual frequency of black life: love, labor, and the practice of visual refusal

Visual materials: archival photographs of Black diaspora and video works of Arthur Jafa

Week 6 – The human pt. i: aesthetics and deciphering practices

Readings/visual materials: Wynter, S. (1992), “Rethinking aesthetics: notes on decipherment;” “Eyes and teeth: photographing Black bodies,” a video essay by the Youtube account *Vibration Cinema* (17 mins)

Week 7 - The human pt. ii: beyond “dehumanization”

Readings: Jackson, Z. (2020), *Becoming Human* (introduction and ch. 4)

Visual materials: “Histology of the Different Classes of Uterine Tumors” (2004-2005), a set of mixed-media works by Wangechi Mutu

Week 8 – *Visibility: “progress” and violence*

Readings: Gosset, R., Stanley, E., and Burton, J. (2017), *Trap door: trans cultural production and the politics of visibility* (introduction; pp. 57-90; 183-190; 191-200)

Visual materials: selected works of Robert Hamlin

Week 9 – *Opacity: unknowable images*

Readings: Glissant, E. (1990), *Poetics of relation* (pp. 1-44; 111-120; 189-194); Cruz, A. (2021), “Joiri Minaya unravels the fantasy of tourism”

Visual materials: the collage works of Joiri Minaya (2020-2021)

Week 10 – *Abstraction: postmodernist erasure, embedded knowledges*

Readings: Gikandi, S. (2003), “Picasso, Africa, and the schemata of difference;” Harris, W. (2000), “Aubrey Williams”

Visual materials: the paintings of Pablo Picasso and Aubrey Williams

Week 11 - *Workshopping for creative projects*

Week 12 - *Final presentations/final discussion*

Note: The final two weeks will also include screenings of a number of video works by Mona Hatoum, Maha Maamoun, and Sky Hopinka (depending on time)