The Time of Art’s History

Course Description: This course addresses the question of art historical time. How has the time of the past been understood by its leading practitioners? Is there a standard or dominant time, or have art historians offered different accounts of time’s quality and meaning? We will also consider recent challenges to received notions of historical time in which chronology is relativized by heterochrony (many times) and anachrony (out of time). Can the multiple forms of time that characterize the world’s cultures be reduced to one universal time, or must the incommensurability of different times be recognized in historical writing? Alternatively, can a work of art be said to occupy only one temporal location when it has the power to intersect with audiences belonging to different periods? If ideas of time vary according to the moment and the location in which they are conceived, then presumably they also have a history. Finally, is contemporary art “beyond the pale of history” because it seems incapable of periodization, or is the moment of the “now” inevitably and necessarily marked by its own passage through time?

Requirements: The seminar is primarily a reading course dedicated to the discussion of assigned topics. Participants will be expected to come to each meeting well-prepared to take part in debates about the readings. Each week two members of the class will be asked to introduce the readings to the rest of the group. Presentations should be no longer than ten minutes in length. They should provide brief information on the authors, lay out their main arguments, and comment on them. Please conclude with a couple of questions you think worth discussing with the class as a whole. Your comments, which should be four or five pages long, should be turned in following the presentation.

Participants will be asked to write two short papers: 1. One of them is due at mid-term March 11. Relate the readings you find most relative to your thinking to an issue within the area of your own historical expertise (no re-runs of previous papers please!). The assignment asks you to think again about a subject with which you are familiar. The paper should be approximately eight pages. 2. The other is due April 29—the last day of class. You are free to write on a topic of your choice making use of those course readings that seems most useful to your purposes. Ten pages.

Course Schedule:

Jan 21 Introduction: Who’s who and what’s what? Aims of the course and how it works.

Jan 28 Art and Time I: What time is the image? Does it make its own time?

Feb 4 Art and Time II: How to write a history of art? We will look at early efforts to fit works of art into a historical scheme. How are works historical; what is their relation to time?


Feb 11 Art and Time III:


Feb 18 Interlude: Art and History: What is the relation between art history and history? Can they be distinguished? If so, to what purpose?


Feb 25 Time and History II: History without chronology? Chronology without teleology?


March 4 Time and the Other: What is the relation of local to global time? What forms of power dictate that one be considered dominant and the other subaltern? Can one be reconciled with the other?


March 11 Anachronic Time I: *What is the agency of the work of art? How does its potential “life” affect received notions of art historical time?*


March 25 Anachronic Time II: *What are the consequences of the recognition that images belong to more than one temporality? How might this affect the work of the art historian?*


April 1 Pseudo-morphosis: *If the shape of an image can belong to more than one time, does this shape carry meaning across time? If not, what does its appearance in different times tell us?*


Amy Knight Powell, “Introduction: The Suspended Figure,” *Depositions: Scenes from the Late Medieval Church and the Modern Museum* (New York: Zone Books, 2012), 21-42.

April 8 Periodizing Time: *What is the role of the “period” in the history of art? Can we do without it?*


April 15 Postmodernism’s Time: *Why has it been so difficult to define the history of art since modernism? What debates swirl around the idea of the “postmodern”?*


April 22 What is Contemporaneity?: *Can “the contemporary” be regarded as a period or have we come to the end of time? Is the current artistic moment eternal?*


April 29 What Time is Tomorrow? I: If “the contemporary” cannot be a period, what time is tomorrow?

