



Rationale for Critical Art Studies

Problem Statement

The creation of “great art” and the standards of expression it requires have long excluded and minimized the expressions and subjugated knowledge of people of marginalized groups. In the 1940s, art critic Clement Greenberg described Indigenous and Mexican artist Rufino Tamayo’s work as too emotionally charged to be considered in the “superior” style of modern art (Bloom, 1999:29). While the explicit expectations of modern art have been largely retired, hooks points out that the “cultural marketplace”, which includes the selling of art, museums, art critics and historians, and everyday aesthetics, has continued to uphold standards that exclude artists like Tamayo from being considered valuable (1995:138).

As hooks puts it, the cultural marketplace mirrors “institutionalized systems of domination”, meaning social structures existing within identities such as class and race, originally implemented by colonialism (1995:138). This cultural marketplace functions under a sociological understanding of modernity, which uses these hierarchies to prioritize progress for the betterment of a capitalist society (Lugones, 2010).

Viewing art through the lens of the cultural marketplace has been accepted as objective necessity. Through my independently designed major, Critical Art Studies, I problematize this lens, working to analyze the cultural marketplace itself, and understand how it affects the ways

art is understood. With this critical awareness, I will study how art has been used as a tool of both resistance and oppression. My focus will shift from dominant views that center on great art to exploring art as an ethnographic tool for documenting and understanding those whose stories have been largely erased.

Description of the Inter-Discipline Connected to the Major

While widespread lack of interdisciplinary support and strict divisions between disciplines keep critical art studies from being regarded at many institutions, its importance has been recognized by a large number of renowned scholars and confirmed by the lived experiences of marginalized thinkers and artists. Escaping the rules of importance dictated by western culture by investing in this discipline has proved necessary for a more aware and healthy culture.

Bell hooks initially brought critiques of the art world to the academic sphere through her book of essays, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*, published in 1995. She succinctly explained the difference between studying art history and critically understanding art and its relations to society by providing examples of how she and other artists were affected by the cultural marketplace in their quest for self and community identification. In 1999, Lisa Bloom published *With Other Eyes: Looking at Race and Gender in Visual Culture*, continuing to pad this discipline with documentation of relations to art throughout time, and examples of artists of the 1990s who subverted hegemonic ideals.

While these cultural critics were among the first to make the connection between sociology and art clear in the academic sphere, the power of visual culture to both empower and disempower has been long understood, specifically by indigenous artists. Sharon Fortney, an Indigenous art curator at the Museum of Vancouver, speaks of the complexities in honoring the

spirit of art, especially in the presence of misunderstanding or violent gazes, exemplifying the long history of knowledge recently acknowledged by academia (Marc Johnson Youtube, 2019).

With this growing academic recognition, colleges have begun to offer majors like Critical and Visual Studies, available at Pratt Institute. The major allows students to expand on the traditional definition of art history by examining visual culture and its role throughout history, just as I will do within this IDM (Pratt). Pratt Institute stresses the importance of “competency in social theory” in art studies so students become informed critics who think intersectionally (Pratt).

This program mirrors Visual and Critical Studies, a masters program at California College of the Arts which teaches students to understand the “interplay between social and expressive systems” (CCA). Dr. Jacqueline Francis, the chair of the department, exemplifies applications of the discipline my IDM and these programs address in her other work (CCA). She cofounded the Association for Critical Race Art History, which works to “reveal how concepts of race are manifest in visual representation and expose the construction of visual power” by sharing academic resources and providing connection for similarly minded scholars (ACRAH). Francis also edits *Third Text*, an academic journal which encourages critical analysis of contemporary art across the globe. As described in its mission statement, the journal challenges “Eurocentric and ethnocentric notions of aesthetic criteria that marginalize – and at times continue to neglect – the work of culturally diverse practitioners” (Third Text, 2014). Scholars from around the world submit to this journal, partaking in precisely the type of questioning my IDM will allow me to do.

Studying art history without the prominence of sociological understanding will confine me to understanding art without significant critique of the cultural marketplace, and studying

only sociology will disallow me from focusing on art and visual culture. The classes I will take in southwest studies, feminist and gender studies, and art studio will allow me to continue understanding necessary theories from interdisciplinary stances, and provide interdisciplinary focus on specific aspects of the cultural marketplace and societal relations to them.

Description of the Specific Questions I will Pursue

Firstly, I will expand my understanding of the cultural marketplace by asking which groups social structures and ways of thinking such as capitalism and modernity benefit. From this sociological point of reference, I ask how art can benefit these projects and therefore heighten either liberation and oppression for people with specific identities. How do the qualifications required of “great art” work to make art a divisive tool? Additionally, whose art is most likely to be accepted as great, and how might this privilege allow creation of dominant narratives? I will also ask how this process is solidified by art's presence in the public sphere, such as in museums and under the gaze of art critics and historians.

Inversely, I hope to understand the power of self narrative building for marginalized groups through art. How can art, as bell hooks describes it has the power of doing, “reveal, recall, and record” our lives (hooks, 1995:51)? I ask about art's function as an ethnographic tool outside of dominant studies. How can art tell us about the lives of people who have been purposefully erased and how can art serve as practice of documentation that is safe in cultures that dictate cultures of white supremacy and gender violence? I return here to my questions about the public sphere to analyze how art used as a tool for resistance might be challenged by outside aspects of the cultural marketplace.

Sketch of a Possible Thesis or Capstone Project

For my thesis, I will write an analysis of a specific cultural instance and analyze the ways in which art has functioned throughout time to encourage dominant narratives around it. I am interested in studying how these narratives create expectations of roles people fulfill based on their identities. I will also analyze artworks of people of specific identities to recognize contrasting narratives and use my knowledge of art history and the cultural marketplace to understand which interpretations are taken seriously by the majority of the western world.

Sources

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Plan of Study for Critical Art Studies

At a Glance

Academic year	Course number	Course Title	Units
Freshman	SW273	Art, Power, and Resistance	1
Freshman	SO101	Inequality in the U.S.	1
Sophomore	AS210	Figure Drawing from an African Perspective	1
Sophomore	SO290	Visual Ethnography	1
Sophomore	SO228	Social Theory	1
Sophomore	AH261	Theories, Methods, and Practices in Art	1
Sophomore	SO314	Sociology of Culture	1
Sophomore	AS110	Afrofuturism	1
Junior	AH150	Representations and Realities: Art and History in Europe: Ancient to Modern Art & Culture	1
Junior	AH243	The Birth of Modernism	1
Junior	FG212	Critical Media Studies	1
Junior	SW307	Museums and Presentations of the Southwest	1
Senior	SW310	Archives of Power	1
Senior	GS400	Thesis	1

Course Justifications

Core Guiding Courses

Course: SW273: Art, Power, and Resistance

Prerequisites: None

Justification: This class allowed me to understand the power artists wield to subvert hegemonic functions of art culture. Through hearing directly from a range of artists working to express themselves and their communities, I became versed in the complexities artists experience in expression and perception by the public.

Course: SO290: Visual Ethnography

Prerequisites: Any 100 level sociology course

Justification: This course aided me in understanding how art can be used by the masses to track history in a way that is inclusive and exposes violent dominant structures hidden by ideals of “great art”.

Course: AH150: Representations and Realities: Art and History in Europe: Ancient to Modern

Art & Culture

Prerequisites: None

Justification: This course will allow me to understand the disconnect between representations of art through a Western lens and the truth in those creations, laying a groundwork for my critiques of narratives created by art.

Course: FG212: Critical Media Studies

Prerequisites: None

Justification: This course will strengthen my tools of critical analysis and give me experience in analyzing visual culture specifically through an intersectional lens.

Theory/Background Knowledge

Course: SO101: Inequality in the U.S.

Prerequisites: None

Justification: This class provided a groundwork for understanding social issues and systems of power. This knowledge will guide me in my critiques of culture that are vital for critical art studies.

Course: SO228: Social Theory

Prerequisites: Any two sociology courses

Justification: This course provided the essential theory for understanding sociological concepts that furthered my understanding of the world art exists within and how people have relate to that world.

Course: AH216: Theories, Methods and Practices in Art

Prerequisites: Consent of instructor

Justification: This course is necessary to understanding the theories that guide art history, and will help me to see the influences of the cultural marketplace on art and how it is ingrained into theoretical understandings of it.

Course: AH243: The Birth of Modernism

Prerequisites: None

Justification: Learning about modernism in art will provide me with a clear understanding of a point of high exclusion in art, and will guide me toward understanding its effects today and its lasting impact as a cultural concept. It will allow me to draw necessary comparisons between sociological modernity that outlines the cultural marketplace and art modernity.

Course: SO314: Sociology of Culture

Prerequisites: Consent of instructor

Justification: This class will provide an understanding of how the masses both create and are influenced by multiple aspects of culture, including art. It will also discuss culture as a site of power through examining the intricacies of high culture and popular culture, aiding me in comprehending the ways art both upholds and challenges social structures.

Applications of the Interdiscipline

Course: AS210: Figure Drawing from an African Perspective

Prerequisites: Consent of department

Justification: This class taught me interpretations of physical bodies outside of dominant Western ideals. It gave me the skills to analyze these Western ideals through the kinesthetic practice of producing my own art riddled of this mindset. With this knowledge, I understand the limiting nature of “great” art and understand the importance of expression without expectation.

Course: AS110: Afrofuturism

Prerequisites: None

Justification: This class will allow me to understand a specific example of art as a tool of reimagining and narrative reclaiming by a marginalized group. I will also benefit from practicing art in this style to be fully immersed in this application.

Course: SW307: Museums and Presentations of the Southwest

Prerequisites: Consent of Instructor

Justification: This course will ensure my ability to understand the influence of the public sphere on art, especially on the art of marginalized artists.

Course: SW310: Archives of Power

Prerequisites: Any 200 level Southwest Studies of History Course

Justification: This class will give me the tools to question the archival process which is viewed as objective but is in fact biased and holds up problematic relations to art that create false and harmful narratives. This class will give me specific experience in understanding and critiquing one nuanced aspect of the cultural marketplace.