

**The City College of New York
MFA in Digital & Interdisciplinary Art Practice**

Workshop: The Operative Image: approaches to the political in contemporary moving image practices

Course Description

What can an image do? How does the image represent? How does the image convey a historical narrative or event? This course will focus on viewing and discussing various contemporary moving image works that reflect on the political. We will investigate the complexity of media and consider the production and employment of images to reveal both its power and its highly malleable nature. Formal experimentation and innovation will be central to this course. The works presented in class will provide a broad view on political moving image-making considering experimental approaches to production, the performance and retelling of history, the personal perspective, witnessing, the forensic, postcolonialism, post-ethnography, representation, the Anthropocene, accelerated aesthetics among other topics. Artists and filmmakers covered include: Harun Farocki, William Greaves, Lucy Raven, Neil Beloufa, Akram Zaatari, Eric Baudelaire, Kevin Jerome Everson, Naeem Mohaiemen, Walid Raad, Deborah Stratman, Martine Syms, Arthur Jafa, Sky Hopinka, James N. Kienitz Wilkins, Steve Reinke, Ana Vaz, Rachel Rose, Ryan Trecartin, Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Filipa Cesar, Basma Alsharif, Eyal Weizman and Forensic Architecture. The theoretical foundation of the course draws from feminist, anti-racist, postcolonial discourses including texts by: Elizabeth Povinelli, Rosi Braidotti, Hito Steyerl, bell hooks, Thomas Keenan, Susan Sontag, Rebecca Solnit, Nicole Fleetwood, Donna Haraway, Irmgard Emmelhainz, Steven Shaviro, Eyal Weizman.

Course Learning Outcomes

- Gain a understanding of formal approaches artists are taking to political subject matter
- Develop ideas for how to create politically engaged work
- Develop critical skills in analysing and discussing contemporary moving image work, and become aware of the skills and strategies we employ to analyze media.
- Create moving image works that engage with the topics covered in the class
- Gain awareness of the political nature of formal and aesthetic decisions. We will explore the difference between overt and open political critiques.
- This course is dedicated to student-centered learning and will require the engaged participation of every student in the class. Your role is both as an artist and a critic who will generously engage with the films and videos presented in class and by your peers.

Teaching Methods & Approaches

- This course will be centered around viewing and discussing politically engaged moving image work.
- Topic-based readings are assigned for most weeks and the relationship to the visual material will be discussed in class.
- Students will sign up to present one reading over the semester. They will then lead the discussion in connecting the ideas to the in-class screenings.
- Students are assigned to create at least one moving image work that explores the concepts covered in class. The development of ideas for this final project will begin early in the semester. Feedback and dialogues during the process of production will take the form of a project proposal shared with the class on the blog (on which you will receive responses), and individual and group critiques.
- We will develop a “Moving image analysis toolkit” by using meta observations on our analysis to think more critically and deeply about how we analyze artworks. We will use the shared google doc and be adding to this throughout the semester.
- We will use “Exit Tickets” at the end of most classes. This is a brief exercise designed to encourage reflection on what you learned, what ideas were raised, and questions you still have about each topic. This will also be a great opportunity for meta reflection on what kind of analysing tools or skills you and your classmates used during the discussions. We will take 5 minutes at the end of many classes for this.
- The class blog will be a platform to share our written reflections on the reading and screening materials. It will serve as an opportunity to continue thinking and be in dialogue about these ideas outside of class.

Course Requirements

- **Final project:** Your project must show a strong engagement with the topics discussed in class in relation to “The Operative Image”.
- **Presentation:** Everyone will present one reading to the class. This will be a 5-10 minute talk that connects the readings to films/videos viewed in the class. Please sign up for a reading at the start of the semester.
- **Critiques:** Present your own work for class and individual critiques.
- **Blog postings:** Written assignments are assigned for certain classes. Check the syllabus and complete your posting by the indicated due date and time.
- **Discussions:** You are expected to engage in group discussions about the work and readings assigned for each class.
- Students are required to come to class prepared with work in progress and completed work, written responses, reading materials and texts, and notebooks. If the student is scheduled to show work and work isn't completed for scheduled date the student will receive a grade reduction for the work in progress critique.
- The attendance policy is such that if one class is missed the student will receive a grade reduction. If there is an extenuating circumstance the student must discuss it with the instructor prior to the absence.

Percentages of final grade:

Readings, blog postings, and participation in class discussion: 40%

Final project: 40%

Presentation: 20%

Academic Integrity

The CCNY policy on academic integrity will be followed in this course. The document can be found through the CCNY website by clicking on “Current Students” then “Academic Services” then “Policy on Academic Integrity.” All students must read the details regarding plagiarism and cheating in order to be familiar with the rules of the college. Cases where academic integrity is compromised will be prosecuted according to these rules. In addition, the Policy of Academic Integrity can be found in the Graduate Bulletin.

Course outline, assignments, and readings are subject to change, please consult the shared syllabus google doc for updated and detailed information.

	In Class	Assignment - due by indicated class
<p><i>Week 1</i> 08/30</p>	<p>Welcome Orientation and Introductions</p> <p>Image Production 1</p> <p>Oraib Toukan, When Things Occur, Jordan, 2016, 28 min (excerpt) Harun Farocki, Images of the World and the Inscription of War, Germany, 1989, 75 min Belit Sag, Ayhan and me, Turkey/Netherlands, 2016, 14 min</p>	<p><i>No readings -- first class.</i></p>
<p><i>Week 2</i> 09/06</p>	<p>Image Production 2</p> <p>William Greaves, Symbiopsychotaxiplasm, 1968, 75 min (excerpt) Ismail Bahri, Foyer, Algeria/France, 2016, 31 min Lucy Raven, Curtains, United States, 2014, 50 min (excerpt) Neil Beloufa, People's passion, lifestyle beautiful wine, gigantic glass towers, all surrounded by water, 2011, 11 min Akram Zaatari, Dance to the End of Love, 2011, 22 min (excerpt)</p>	<p><u>Godard, Jean Luc. What is to be done?, 1970</u></p> <p><u>Seth Price DISPERSION</u></p> <p><u>Steyerl, Hito. "In Defense of the Poor Image." E-flux Journal. E-flux, Nov. 2009.</u></p> <p>**Post to class blog with a response to the readings and/or films from the previous class by 9/06 at noon.</p>
<p><i>Week 3</i> 09/13</p>	<p>Performing History 1</p> <p>Kevin Everson & Claudrena Harold, Sugarcoated Arsenic, 2014, 20 min</p>	<p><u>Akram Zaatari, Photography as Apparatus</u></p> <p><u>bell hooks, The Oppositional Gaze, 1992</u></p>

	<p>Akram Zaatari, Letter to a Refusing Pilot, 2013, 34 min Naeem Mohaiemen, United Red Army, 2011, 70 min (excerpt) Salome Lamas, No Man's Land, 2012 (excerpt)</p>	
<p>Week 4 09/20</p>	<p>NO CLASS CUNY CALENDAR</p>	<p>NO CLASS</p>
<p>Week 5 09/27</p>	<p>Performing History 2</p> <p>Eric Baudelaire, The Anabasis, 2011, 66 min Deborah Stratman, The Illinois Parables, 2016, 60 min (excerpt) Walid Raad, Hostage: The Bachar tapes, 2001, 16 min</p>	<p>Rebecca Solnit, The Visibility Wars, Mass Effect. PDF</p> <p>Susan Sontag, Regarding the Pain of Others, 2003. Chapter 2</p> <p>**Post to class blog with a response to the readings and/or films from the previous class by 9/27 at noon.</p>
<p>Week 6 10/4-9</p>	<p>Attend the New York Film Festival's Projections section screenings</p>	<p>**Written response to work seen in Projections (500 words) due to the class blog by 10/10 at noon. Respond to someone else's post by 10/11 at class time.</p>
<p>Week 7 10/11</p>	<p>Questioning Representation</p> <p>Basma Alsharif, The Story of Milk and Honey, 2011, 10 min Sky Hopinka, Anti-Objects, 2017, 13 min Martine Syms, Notes On Gesture, 2015, 10 min Jayson Musson, Hennessy Youngman: Art Thoughtz, 2010-2012, selections</p>	<p>Arthur Jafa and Tina Campt, Love is the Message, The Plan is Death</p> <p>Martine Syms, Black Vernacular: Readings in New Media. PDF</p> <p>Rosi Braidotti, Four Theses on Posthuman Feminism, Anthropocene Feminism (Richard Grusin, Editor). PDF</p>

	Arthur Jafa, Love is the message, the message is Death, 2016, 7 min	
Week 8 10/18	Individual meetings No regular class meeting instead there are individual meetings to discuss project ideas.	**Written project proposals due to class blog by Monday 10/16 at noon. Please respond to at least one classmate's proposal by 10/18 at class time.
Week 9 10/25	The Personal is Political James N. Kienitz Wilkins, B-ROLL with Andre, 2016, 19 min Kevin Jerome Everson, Sound That, 2014, 12 min Kevin Jerome Everson, Fe26, 2014, 7 min Kevin Jerome Everson, Ears, Nose and Throat, 2016, 10 min Basma Alsharif, Home Movies Gaza, 2013, 25 min Steve Reinke, A Boy Needs a Friend, 2015, 22 min (excerpt) Steve Reinke, Hobbit Love is the Greatest Love, 2007, 14 min	 <u>Aily Nash, A Conversation with Basma Alsharif, Kevin Jerome Everson, and James N. Kienitz Wilkins, 2017 Whitney Biennial Catalogue. PDF</u> <u>Nicole Fleetwood, On Racial Icons, "I am Trayvon Martin"</u>
Week 10 11/01	Post-colonial / Post-Ethnographic narratives Ana Vaz, Occidente, 2015, 15 min Louis Henderson, All That Is Solid, 2014, 16 min Filipa Cesar, Spell Reel, 2017, (excerpt) Ephraim Asili, Many Thousands Gone, 2015, 9 min Karrabing Film Collective, 2012-2016 (excerpts)	 <u>Elizabeth A. Povinelli, The Three Figures of Geontology, Anthropocene Feminism (Richard Grusin, Editor) Text available here</u> <u>Aily Nash, NYFF Interview: Ana Vaz, Film Comment, 2015</u>
Week		

<p>11 11/08</p>	<p>Ecological Crisis and the Anthropocene</p> <p>Rachel Rose, A Minute Ago, 2014, 9 min Rachel Rose, Sitting Feeding Sleeping, 2013, 10 min Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Verena Paravel, Leviathan, 2014, (excerpt) Leslie Thornton and James Richards, Crossing, 2016, 19 min Jesse McLean, See a Dog Hear a Dog, 2016, 18 min Graeme Arnfield, Sitting in Darkness, 2015, 15 min</p>	<p><u>Donna Haraway: chapter 2, "Tentacular Thinking: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene," in Donna J. Haraway, Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene, Duke University Press, 2016.</u></p> <p><u>Irmgard Emmelhainz, Conditions of Visuality Under the Anthropocene and Images of the Anthropocene to Come</u></p>
<p>Week 12 11/15</p>	<p>One-on-one critiques</p> <p>No regular class meeting, instead there are individual meetings to discuss project ideas. Meet with the instructor and one classmate.</p>	<p>Advanced in-progress works will be presented to the instructor and peers in individual critique sessions. Have your work prepared and ready to share before class time. The overall scope of the project should be conceived and mostly produced even if still in draft form.</p>
<p>Week 13 11/22</p>	<p>Accelerated Aesthetics</p> <p>Hito Steyerl, How Not to be Seen. A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File, 2013, 16 min Jordan Wolfson, Raspberry Poser, 2012, 14 min Ryan Trecartin, K-CorealNC.K (section a), 2009, 33 min (excerpt) DIS, Watermarked I Fall 2012, 2012, 2 min</p>	<p><u>Steven Shaviro: Accelerationist Aesthetics: Necessary Inefficiency in Times of Real Subsumption</u></p>

<p>Week 14 11/29</p>	<p>Group Critique of final projects</p>	<p>Be prepared to share a near-final draft of the project with the class for a group critique.</p> <p>Conceive of three questions that you will ask the group that will help you identify whether your work is succeeding.</p>
<p>Week 15 12/06</p>	<p>Forensic / Witness</p> <p>Eyal Weizman and Forensic Architecture. -- excerpts from: forensic-architecture.org Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Rubber Coated Steel, 2017, 21 min Susan Schuppli, Material Witness, 2014, 33 min</p>	<p><u>Weizman, Eyal. "Violence at the Threshold of Detectability." E-flux Journal. E-flux, Apr. 2015. Web. 17 May 2016.</u></p> <p><u>Keenan, Thomas. "Counter-forensics and Photography." Grey Room 55 (2014): 58-77.</u></p>
<p>Week 16 12/13</p>	<p>LAST CLASS</p> <p>Due: Presentation of final completed project & written statement</p>	<p>In addition to the completion of the final moving image project you will need to hand in a written project statement (1000 word) that reflects on how your project is connected to the themes from the course.</p>

Syllabus Reflection

The Operative Image course is a survey in politically engaged contemporary moving image work. Drawing mostly from artist's moving image practice, rather than work conceived and produced for commercial distribution, the class focuses on critical artists practices that are not under market pressures to sell as art commodities or entertainment.

The focus of the course is on the viewing and discussion of moving image works that are screened each week. I'm incorporating many student-centered pedagogical approaches that were shared and discovered in the Race, Theory and Pedagogy course at the Graduate Center. In making the syllabus, I try to find a balance between bringing in these structured exercises and maintaining an open discussion-based classroom, considering it is for MFA students. I'd also like to pair the modules with readings but keeping it minimal, with an average of two shorter chapters or articles per week, rather than assigning whole books. The visual materials are the primary texts that the students will engage with. I've also incorporated techniques such as a "Moving Image analysis toolkit" which is a hybrid of Sara Ahmed's "Feminist toolkit" and Darren's useful exercise that reflected on our skills for analysis and meaning making. We will discuss how we analyze works throughout the semester and add to this toolkit which will be shared with the class as a google doc. We will also use Exit Tickets at the end of most classes.

This course will be taught in the fall of 2017 at CCNY in the Digital & Interdisciplinary Art Practice MFA program. I've never taught or attended a class there, but I've been told that the demographic is quite diverse in terms of race and economic backgrounds, as well as age. Most students are coming from a background in art in their undergraduate studies. This course is offered as a workshop elective to the MFA students, and serves as a thematic course that introduces the students to moving image material and theory that supplements their studio courses. In these workshops, students are encouraged to create artworks in relation to the topic as their assignments. Although this course is designed specifically for this MFA program, I think it could translate well as an advance class for BFA film/video students as well.

Besides the blog responses and reading presentation, we'll be focusing on one final creative project. Since they are MFA students I expect greater depth and precision from their final projects and feel that three months to develop a quality moving image work is an adequate amount of time. Rather than assigning multiple production assignments for which the quality of each work would suffer and result in more of a sketch rather than a completed piece, they will work on a single project over the course of the semester. I build in ample time and opportunity for feedback and critiques toward the second half of the semester because the final project should be incorporating and improving upon the the criticisms and ideas that are offered to each student. Should they choose against working on suggested areas of improvement covered in the multiple critiques, this decision should be clearly argued in their final written statement. This statement also serves as a format for their reflection on their entire production process.

The didactic language that connects the topics to the visual and textual materials are purposefully left off of the syllabus so that the creative thinking around these connections can be made by the students, and not the instructor (I had the same thought that Cathy articulated in her email!). Therefore, I will include my own reflections on these connections here.

We will begin the semester with the Image Production module which will bring students to an awareness of how images are produced and employed. This is a foundational concept for critical art that engages with politics. It will familiarize students with what it means to make work politically, rather than *about* politics-- explored through both form and content. Jean Luc Godard's text *What is to be done?* is useful for inspiring a dialogue about how art itself can be political. The text is a numbered list of how political filmmaking can be approached beginning with: "1. We must make political films. 2. We must make films politically. 3. 1 and 2 are antagonistic to each other and belong to two opposing conceptions of the world. 4. 1 belongs to the idealistic and metaphysical conception of the world. 5. 2 belongs to the Marxist and dialectical conception of the world." and so on...

The first screening will feature Farocki's seminal film *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* which lucidly reflects on the inextricable relationship between image production and ideology. Alongside Farocki, Toukan and Sag's contemporary videos consider the political and social constrictions and conditions around image-making. Sag's work is a reflection on the use of political figures in her art practice and the censorship imposed on her work by the Turkish government. While Toukan's video explores the backstory of war images through conversations with the Gaza-based war photographers who shot them.

The second week of Image Production weaves together several diverging practices to reflect on the multitude of ways artists expose the practice of image-making within the work itself. We begin with Greaves's self-reflexive hybrid documentary that meditates on the filmmaking process. Lucy Raven's *Curtains* employs a 3D imaging technique to view the outsourced sites of labour where 3D rendering takes place worldwide. Bahri's elegantly simple video documents Algerian pedestrians commenting on Bahri's practice as he films a sheet of white paper in front of his camera-- "The image is determined by the wind," he explains. Beloufa's genre-bending video uses ambiguity and abstraction of documentary approaches to make unclear the nature of the work-- is it documentary or found footage? is it earnestly or ironically intentioned? --raising questions that reveal insights into how works are intended vs. read. Zaatari's youtube mash-up of masculinity performed in the Arab world will be the case study for artists using pre-existing images and thinking through how meaning is made through selection and juxtaposition. Many contemporary practices draw on images and videos sourced from the internet; the aggregation and assemblage is the creative task. Seth Price's *DISPERSION* explores the history of the development of conceptual art that is concerned with the circulation of images and ideas. Steyerl's oft-cited text will also inform our understanding of the way "poor images" operate in today's networked, image-based culture.

The Performing History unit looks at works that reimagine how we tell histories. It is focused on developing a reflexivity about history, an acknowledgement of its construction, the subjective perspective from which it is told, and gaining agency through the act of telling. This is where hook's radical tools for how we see can be catalyzed to deepen the connection between seeing and telling in this unit. Solnit's essay reflects on the notion of making the invisible, visible-- to visually render that which we cannot see. This possibility of rendering is what allows us to have agency over the narratives, the way we understand what happened and what is happening. Everson and Harold's film performs a historical reenactment which is based on research on the history of African-American students at the University of Virginia. Zaatari takes an idiosyncratic visual approach to telling the story of an Israeli pilot who drops bombs intended for his primary school into the ocean, during the Israeli-Lebanese conflict. Baudelaire's is yet another look at the radical actions of the United Red Army, also explored in Mohaemen's film, yet this time through personal accounts rather than through the historical artifact of the recorded hostage negotiation tapes. Raad's *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes* takes as its starting point the The Western Hostage Crisis. While drawing on the well known figures of this conflict, Raad places at the center of the story a fictitious character who is credited as co-author of the work, not only blurring fiction vs nonfiction boundaries, Raad performs a radical re-writing of history.

The Questioning Representation module brings together myriad works that provoke new ways to conceive of identity. Intersectional theory and approaches are presented to explore how narratives and images of marginalized communities can be rendered through an active, formal engagement with *how* we represent. The Personal is Political unit carries over many of the ideas from the previous set of works while directly addressing how subjective narratives of lived experience, whether genuine or constructed, address the larger political issues at hand, be it racism, war or sexuality.

The Post-colonial/post-ethnographic module reflects on the all-too current conditions of coloniality in the so-called "post-colonial" worlds, and traces the effects of globalization, forced diaspora, and cultural-colonialism through the presented films. Ana Vaz, in discussing her film *Occidente*, locates the beginning of colonial exploration as the starting point of globalization, and therefore, of the Anthropocene. Through the concept of the Anthropocene, we will look at how artists make a political claim that we can no longer conceive of the world as divided between nature and culture, but must acknowledge the oneness of this planet. The "natural" world is at once cultural and political-- these works propose ways to see and experience this proximity, this oneness.

The Accelerated Aesthetics section considers works that push the capitalistic drive to the extreme, making critical assertions through satire, and serving as an acknowledgement of our complicity in these systems that we critique.

The final module, Forensic / Witness, draws primarily on the work of Forensic Architecture (FA), a research lab at Goldsmiths that utilizes the immense image making capabilities of contemporary technology to work with Human Rights organizations to visualize human rights violations, working forensically to construct evidence through media. This work circles back to the starting point of the course, Farocki's film, *Images of the World and the Inscription of War*, which is an influence on Weizman, the founder of FA, who discusses the film at length in his text *Violence at the Threshold of Detectability*.

The course is designed so that each of the module topics relate to every other one. Many of the works and readings could be considered through the lens of many of the other topic headings. The idea is to inspire the students to make these connections and as a group we will weave these topics and approaches together as we make our way through the materials over the semester. The intersection of these approaches should also be reflected in the final projects by the students.