

HAA 2008: Constellations of Art History
Agency and the Practice of Art History
Fall 2018, Thursdays 2:30-5:15, 104FFA
Prof. Kirk Savage

1. Rationale and goals: Art historians have always had to confront the problem of agency, even if only tacitly. Who/what has the capacity or power or privilege to act in the world, through what mechanisms, to what effects? Should we give more causal weight or explanatory force to patrons, or artists, or critics, markets, publics, technologies, materials, texts, ideologies, and on and on through an endless list? Who or what is acting on or through works of art? Do the objects themselves have their own agency? As these questions suggest, agency is at the center of one of the most basic problems in art history – the relation of the object to its “social context.” Is “society” the ultimate agent, stamping its priorities and prejudices on art? Or does art transcend social factors? Or can we conceptualize alternatives to these binaries of art/society, object/context, internal/external histories?

These are some of the theoretical questions that arise when the concept of agency comes out of the closet and demands a seat at the table with the old boys like “meaning” and “interpretation.” If the Problem of Art is most typically “what does it mean?” the questions at the heart of this course are “what does it do?” and “what is done with it?” One of the goals of this course is to gather up these and related questions and begin to think through how various approaches to answering them might reshape the project of art history.

But there is another rationale for this course, which is less theoretical and more practical. Agency after all is about action, doing stuff, engaging in practice. As long as we are on this subject we owe it to ourselves to consider our own practice – the nitty gritty of how we get things done in our discipline.

When you start a research project, what research protocols do you follow? What data do you gather, what notes do you take, what files and folders do you create? What tools and technologies do you use, for what purposes? How do you talk about your work, consult with others, solicit feedback, collaborate? When you sit down to write, what do you do? What kinds of writing do you do, both for yourself and for others (exercises, assignments, syllabi, grant proposals, “publications,” emails, social media posts)?

The overarching goal of this course is to empower you in practice, to give you a greater sense of accomplishment and mastery no matter your starting point. The course makes no attempt to survey the ocean of agency studies, much less to parse the intricate philosophical debates surrounding the concept. The reading has been pared down to a minimum, with an emphasis on issues of power and resistance. By contrast the mechanics of the course – what, when, and how we go about our work inside and outside the classroom – take center stage here. Much of the mechanics focus on writing, both as a tool and a product. Writing itself is a mode of inquiry and thought, as well as a form of communication – as such it is inseparable from the research process and from social

networks and communities. Even as we focus on writing we open up the other dimensions of our practice too.

You will have lots of opportunities to work with your colleagues, in pairs and groups, face to face and online. I hope that these interactions will pay off in the immediate term but also help forge an intellectual community that endures beyond this particular semester, extending into the department's agency constellation and other networks as well.

2. *Assignments*: The end product of the course will be a research paper, or an alternative project with a strong written component. Alternatives might include a curatorial proposal, or a digital humanities project, or something else attuned to your specific goals. If you have an alternative in mind, please discuss with me in the first week of term.

Starting a research paper or other project from scratch is very difficult within the framework of a 15-week semester. Ideally, you will take a research paper you have already written, or a project you have already gotten underway, and revise it through the lens of agency, or through an approach you encounter in the course. The important point is to start with a data set you have already collected in a prior project, and to rethink that data, reshape your analysis, and revise your end product. By “data” I don’t mean bibliography. I mean facts and observations – about the object(s) you are studying, circumstances of production or circulation or reception, the various actors involved (human and nonhuman). The meat of your study, in other words, not the sauce of theory or interpretation.

To reach the end product we will engage in a variety of writing practices. These will include keeping a “data notebook” and an “idea notebook.” The notion springs from Latour (*Reassembling the Social*, p. 134ff). The data notebook is a place to register the important data from your study, sort and re-sort it, make notes on additional data you would want to collect if you had time and resources. (And yes, the data notebook might take a digital form, as simple as a spreadsheet or as complex as you want it to be.) The idea notebook is open-ended, a place to write down random insights, more extended reflections on your data, questions, puzzles, obstacles. In September and October you will make blog posts based on items from both notebooks. Eventually you will write a rough draft that will be read in advance and “workshopped” in class by a small group of your peers with similar concerns (an “affinity group”). Later a revision will be similarly workshopped. The paper or project you turn in at the end of the semester will be draft # 3. We will devote significant portions of class time not only to these drafts but also to the various protocols leading up to the first draft.

Summary of due dates:

- Sep 16: One-page description of paper topic
- Sep 30: Data post
- Oct 14: Idea post

- Nov 5: Rough draft of paper (draft #1)
- Nov 26: Revised draft of paper (draft #2)
- Dec 15: Final draft of paper (draft #3)

3. *Class participation*: As in all courses, each of you arrive here at your own starting point. Some of you will be new to the program, some will be old hands; some will have read more about agency, others less. Each of you will have unique goals. The point of class participation is not to exhibit your expertise or intelligence for me or your peers, but to listen, learn, and practice. Participation means embracing the work and engaging fully with it.

A key element of participation in this course is giving feedback. Feedback is *not* evaluation. You may disagree with your colleagues, you may see problems in a piece of writing, you may identify areas of improvement. None of these should imply an evaluation of anyone's moral or intellectual fitness. Useful feedback demands honesty, but in a constructive spirit, not to elevate your own ego at the expense of others. Conversely, don't judge yourself: your job is to gain skill in your own way, not to compare yourself with other students or faculty. I would like to extend the same professional courtesy to the authors we read; after all, they took a risk to put their thoughts on paper and they worked hard to do it. Visceral reactions and strong objections are fine, but these can be delivered without insult and in a constructive mood. Learning the art of listening and constructive dialogue is a practice I'd like to foster, and in this course we will talk about protocols to help make this practice more habitual.

4. *Grading*: 60% of the course grade will be about participation. Half of that participation grade will be a purely quantitative assessment based on meeting deadlines. It's important to get the posts and writing assignments done and submitted on time, because your colleagues in class will need to read and ponder them before the next class meets. You get an A for that 30% of the course simply by delivering your work on time. The rest of the participation grade is a more qualitative evaluation of your engagement – if you are fully engaged inside and outside the classroom, keeping up with the reading, doing your notebooks and other writing exercises, engaging constructively with your peers, you will get an A for that 30% of the course. This evaluation is about process, not product. I'll give you a midterm report on your participation so you can make adjustments as you wish.

None of the writing exercises and practices leading up to the paper drafts will be given letter grades, but I will put a provisional grade on draft #2 (due Nov 26) and a final grade on draft #3 (due Dec 15), counting for 40% of your course grade. This grade will be relational not absolute, meaning that the work is not measured against an absolute standard such as “publishability” but evaluated in relation to your own starting point. The issue is improvement, in other words. Improvement can come in different ways. Taking risks and failing is one form of improvement, which I will recognize and reward. As Latour points out, “textual accounts can fail like experiments often do.” If there is no real possibility of failure – if the procedure has an outcome that can be predicted in

advance – it’s probably not worth running the experiment in the first place. You may learn more from an interesting “failure” than from a safe “success.”

5. *Tumblr site*: The class will share a group blog in Tumblr.com: agencyfall2008.tumblr.com (password: decolonize). I will invite you to join the group, and you will need to register (free) if you haven’t already. You will be able to make posts and tag them, as well as comment on others’. Only class members can make posts, but we may allow other interested students and faculty within HAA to follow the site and contribute to the discussion, if you wish. From past experience, the Tumblr blog can also function as a presentation tool during class. The blog is a “judgment-free zone,” so your contributions and discussions will not be evaluated by me or by anyone else – the site is a tool for sharing thoughts, discussing problems, consulting, assisting, experimenting, collaborating, etc. Use the site in that spirit and make of it what you will. Your data and idea posts will go there, and from time to time I may ask for some additional posts to prepare for class, but otherwise the site will be driven by your own needs and motivations. I won’t keep score of your usage.

6. *Calendar*

Aug 30 Introduction

Reading: Mabel Wilson and Jessica Winegar, Monument Questionnaire, *October* 165

Discussion: Whose agency is recognized, silenced, resisted? How can we disrupt conventional accounts of agency and examine actors who have been overlooked or marginalized? How do we put these goals into practice in this particular classroom and more generally in graduate education?

Sept 6 Art and Agency

Reading: Gell, *Art and Agency* (12-36); Rawson, “The Agency of, and the Agency for the Wanli Emperor” (15 pages)

Discussion: Gell has been for years a “go-to” text on the subject. What issues does his approach prioritize, what issues are ignored or off the radar? Same question for Rawson’s case study and critique. Can we think of other possible actors and agencies that Rawson doesn’t account for?

Sept 13 [Start at 2PM?] ANT (Actor-Network Theory)

Reading: Law, “On the Methods of Long-Distance Control” (25 pages); Shaw & Anderson, “Ivory for Cotton” (10 pages); Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (21-30)

Cards on the table: In my view, ANT is not a theory but a stance and a method. If anything, it’s anti-theory. That’s one of the reasons I’m drawn to it – ANT is an elaborate justification, after the fact, of how I’ve always liked to work. I’ve given you a tiny

smidgeon on ANT from Latour – feel free to read deeper into the text, but you’ll begin to get the idea after ten pages. Otherwise I’ve chosen two case studies, the first by one of the original ANT practitioners and the second a much more recent study by a curator who probably doesn’t identify with ANT at all. Both have to do with imperialism and trade – broadly, the constellation Mobility and Exchange. The Latour excerpt engages more with the issue of group formation (constellation: Identity) and is quite relevant to the Pamela Patton lecture that immediately follows this short class.

Note: Class will end at 4pm to see lecture by Pamela Patton, “Skin and Servitude in Medieval Iberian Art.”

Sept 16 Post one-page description of paper topic to Tumblr by 11:59PM

Sept 20 Agency, Materials, and Environment

Reading: Dean, *A Culture of Stone: Inka Perspectives on Rock* (25-41, 65-102) & Tumblr posts

Discussion: How does an indigenous perspective on material and environment change your thinking about agency? About the role of non-human actors in human activity? How does Dean gain access to a perspective so different from Euro-American frameworks?

Note: In the second half of class we will discuss the Tumblr posts.

Sept 27 Agency, Materials, and Environment, continued

Reading: Baxandall, *Limewood Sculptors*, 27-48; Hill, *Weaving New Worlds: Southeastern Cherokee Women and Their Basketry* (35-62)

Discussion: What do you learn by putting these two distinct cases (different by gender, culture, academic field, and methodology) in dialogue with each other?

Sept 30 “Data post” due on Tumblr by 11:59PM

Oct 4 Discussion of data posts

Reading: Data posts on Tumblr.

Note: While I’m very open to other ideas, I’d like to start the discussion by searching for affinities among the posts. What types of data are you talking about, what sorts of questions and methods are suggested by these different types? How might we arrange these projects into three or four “affinity groups” – not by subject matter but by data and method? Ideally, we would work toward the formation of affinity groups that can meet together in the last half or third of the class session.

Oct 11 Agency, Museums, and Communities

Reading: Skerritt and Gilchrist, “Indigenizing the Museum,”; Diers & Fairbanks on *Scaffold*

Guest appearance: Annika Johnson will visit to discuss with us the conflict between Euro-American notions of artistic and curatorial “freedom” and agency, on the one hand, and indigenous efforts to reclaim control of their objects, practices, stories, and knowledge, on the other. What exactly does consultation with indigenous communities entail and demand? More broadly, how does the imperative to consult with marginalized communities change the way researchers, curators, and others should do their work?

Oct 14 “Idea post” due on Tumblr by 11:59PM

Oct 18 Discussion of idea posts

Reading: Idea posts on Tumblr.

Note: If the procedure for Oct 4 works out, then I suggest that we approach this discussion in a similar way and aim for creating new affinity groups, this time by “idea” rather than “data.” I would like to reserve the last third of the class for further discussion of method, based on the results of your data and idea posts.

Oct 25 Museums and action

Reading: TBA.

Note: The first half of class we will have a guest visit by Eric Dorfman, Director of the Carnegie Museum of Natural History. He will discuss with us the possibilities for museums to act in and change the world, around such issues as species extinction, climate change, and indigenous communities. The second half of class will be devoted to forming the final affinity groups that will collaborate for the remainder of term, and following up discussion from the previous week.

Nov 1 No class: individual meetings with me (15 minutes each) and group meetings as desired

Nov 5 Circulate rough drafts to me and the full class by 11:59pm

Nov 8 Workshop session: feedback on rough drafts, in groups and full class

Reading: Rough drafts by your group members, and any other drafts you have time to read.

- Nov 15** TBA: We will discuss how best to use this time
- Nov 22** Thanksgiving break
- Nov 26** Circulate revised drafts to me and the full class by 11:59pm
- Nov 29** Workshop session: feedback on revised drafts, in groups and full class
- Dec 6** TBA: We will discuss how best to use this time
- Dec 13** Conclusions
- Dec 15** Term projects due by 11:59pm.

Appendix: Required university policies

a) *Academic integrity policy*: Cheating or plagiarism on any assignment will not be tolerated. Simply put, plagiarism is using someone else's words as if they are your own. If you ever use someone else's text word for word in your own writing, you must enclose those words in quotation marks and cite the source; if you paraphrase from a source, you must cite it as well. If you try to pass off someone else's writing or research as your own in any exam or assignment, or otherwise cheat in the course, you will receive an F grade in the course and you will be reported to the dean's office for disciplinary action pursuant to the School's Academic Integrity Code (see <https://www.as.pitt.edu/faculty/policies-and-procedures/academic-integrity-code.>)

b) *Disability policy*: If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, you must contact me and the Office of Disability Resources and Services: <http://www.studentaffairs.pitt.edu/drswelcome> (140 William Pitt Union, 412-648-7890) within the first two to three weeks of the term. DRS will verify your disability and determine reasonable accommodations for this course.

c) *Email policy*: Each student is issued a University e-mail address (username@pitt.edu) upon admittance. This e-mail address will be used by the University for official communication with students. Students are expected to read e-mail sent to this account on a regular basis. Failure to read and react to University communications in a timely manner does not absolve the student from knowing and complying with the content of the communications. The University provides an e-mail forwarding service that allows

students to read their email via other service providers (e.g. gmail, Yahoo). Students that choose to forward their e-mail from their pitt.edu address to another address do so at their own risk. If e-mail is lost as a result of forwarding, it does not absolve the student from responding to official communications sent to their University e-mail address. To forward e-mail sent to your University account, go to <http://accounts.pitt.edu>, log into your account, click on Edit Forwarding Addresses, and follow the instructions on the page. Be sure to log out of your account when you have finished. (For the full E-mail Communication Policy, go to www.bc.pitt.edu/policies/policy/09/09-10-01.html.)

d) *Policy on recording classroom sessions:* To ensure the free and open discussion of ideas, students may not record classroom lectures, discussion and/or activities without the advance written permission of the instructor, and any such recording properly approved in advance can be used solely for the student's own private use.