

HAA 2008: Constellations of Art History

Agency and the Practice of Art History

Mondays 2:30-5:15, 104FFA

Prof. Kirk Savage

Rationale and goals: The study of agency – very roughly, the capacity to act, to have effect in the world – is inescapable in the humanities and social sciences, and has become increasingly visible in art history. Art historians have always confronted the problem, even if only tacitly. Do 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)?

A major rationale for the course is to open up this can of worms called “practice.” Typically graduate education in the humanities skirts the subject and focuses on content, what you need to read and to know. There are good reasons for this. Whatever your field, oceans of material surge up; one of the educator’s basic jobs is to decide where to dip the bucket (to use a metaphor from Lytton Strachey, writing long before the information explosion of the late 20th century). Inevitably though you become ever more aware of the ocean of stuff you haven’t read and don’t know, and you might even start to think you can’t do anything significant until you dip the bucket again, and again, and again... But no matter how many buckets of knowledge you

acquire there remains a huge gap between knowing things and doing things. Reading a lot about x doesn't mean you can talk about x or write about x or teach x or advance research and knowledge in x. In this course we will dive into that gap between knowing and doing, with the attitude that it's never too early and never too late to try.

The overarching goal of this course, therefore, 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 very few approaches, so that we can examine those few in some depth. 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.

Assignments and evaluation: The end product of the course will be a research paper, with a twist. Since there isn't time to start a research project from scratch, my idea is to take a research paper you have already written and revise it through the lens of agency, or through an approach you encounter in our reading. 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 paper. By data I don't mean bibliography. I mean 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. (If you want to pursue an alternative paper, you should talk to me asap, but I will stress in advance that one way or another you will need to work with a data set.)

To reach this 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. At mid-semester you will take something from one or the other notebook that you find particularly interesting, post it on our Tumblr site, discuss it, then write a more extended blog post about it; this is an opportunity to take a kernel of your study and expand your thinking a

bit. 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 you turn in at the end of the semester will be draft # 3. We will devote significant portions of class time not only to the paper drafts but also to the various protocols leading up to the first draft.

Summary of due dates:

- Sep 14: One-page description of paper topic
- Oct 12: Notebook post
- Nov 2: Blog post
- Nov 16: Rough draft of paper (draft #1)
- Nov 30: Revised draft of paper (draft #2)
- Dec 14: Final draft of paper (draft #3)

A note on evaluation. In this course, the classroom and the Tumblr site are “judgment-free zones.” I’m borrowing the term from gym-speak. Everyone comes into the gym at their own starting point and with their own goals. Some people want more strength, some want more stamina, some want to lose weight, some want to gain weight; some arrive young and fit, some with great physical challenges. The point is not to compare yourself with others or to judge others’ efforts, but simply to improve, to gain in physical fitness and confidence. Similarly, in this class, some of you will be new to the program, some will be old hands; some will have more background in the subject matter, others less; each of you will have unique goals. I will not be judging you against some academic ideal of intellectual fitness. You are not here to flaunt your intelligence for me or your peers but to learn and practice. I ask only that you embrace the work and engage fully in the course.

That principle of “judgment free” goes for you as well. You may disagree with your colleagues, you may see problems in a piece of writing, you may identify areas of improvement. 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 mastery 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 class we will talk in some detail about protocols to help make this practice habitual.

So, then, what about grading? As every teacher knows, grading stinks, but we’re stuck with it. 60% of the course grade will be in participation. 50% of that 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 will 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. Again this concerns process, not product. Accordingly I will give you a midterm report on your participation so you can make adjustments if needed.

The more difficult grading task is the final paper. None of the writing exercises and practices leading up to the paper drafts will be given letter grades. I will put a provisional grade on draft #2 and a final grade on draft #3 counting for 40% of your course grade. This grade will be relational not absolute – 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, as long as you understand that improvement comes 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.

Tumblr site: The class will share a tumblr blog, haa2008.tumblr.com (password: followtheactors). Be sure to register with Tumblr and I will invite you to join the group. 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. From past experience, the tumblr site can also function as a presentation tool during class. I’ll stress again that the site 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...Use the site in that spirit and make of it what you will. Your blog post (due Nov 2) 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.

Calendar

Aug 26 Introduction

Reading: Go Dog Go! (my little parable on agency, see end of this document)

Discussion: putting agency into practice in the classroom and grad education

Sept 2 No class: Labor Day

Homework: Identify your paper topic. Please email me if you are having difficulty.

Sept 9 Actor-network theory, or “follow the actors”
Reading: last three chapters from *Power, Action & Belief* on scallops, Portuguese navigation, and the “translation” of power; selections from Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*

Sept 14 One-page description of paper topic due electronically by 11:59PM

Sept 16 Wrap-up of ANT; discussion of paper topics & writing protocols

Note: We will form affinity groups and begin discussion there.

Sept 23 No class (instructor in Berlin!)

Homework: work on notebooks!

Sept 30 Anti-ANT?

Reading: Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*

Oct 7 Excursus: how vibrant is matter?

Reading: Baxandall, *Limewood Sculptors*, chap 2 (“Material”); Bennett, “The Agency of Assemblages and the North American Blackout”; Knappett, *Thinking through Material Culture*, chap 2 (“Animacy, Agency, and Personhood”)

Oct 12 Notebook post due by 11:59PM

Note: This is an item from one or the other of your notebooks that you find particularly interesting, which you will develop into a more extended blog post for Nov 2.

Oct 15 (Tuesday) Discussion of notebook posts & research/writing protocols

Oct 21 Art and agency: an anthropological framework

Reading: Gell, *Art and Agency*, chaps 1-6

Oct 28 Distributed persons and objects

Gell, *Art and Agency*, chaps 7 & 9

Nov 2 Blog posts due by 11:59PM

Note: Instructions to come!

Nov 4 Discussion of blog posts

Nov 11 No class: meet with affinity groups as needed and work on rough drafts

Nov 16 Rough drafts due electronically by 11:59PM

Nov 18 Workshop for rough drafts; discussion of revision protocols

Nov 25 No class: Thanksgiving week

Note: I will hold individual office hours during Monday class hours as needed.

Nov 30 Revised drafts due electronically by 11:59PM

Dec 2 Workshop for revised drafts

Dec 9 Final discussions on practice; takeaways

Dec 14 Papers due electronically by 1AM (*Note: The deadline is effectively Friday night, but since that falls on the 13th I extended it an extra hour for good luck.*)

Go Dog Go: A Parable about Agency

Here is an unremarkable little story about agency, with (by my count) at least five actors. In the narrative some actions seem to “trigger” reactions; other actions seem to occur independently but still intervene in the outcome. How should one interpret the agency of these various actors? Are some passive, others active? Do some actors guide the process, while others merely execute it or interfere with it? Do some have will or intention, while others lack these? Do any of these distinctions hold? If we downplay or abolish distinctions such as human/nonhuman, animate/inanimate, active/passive, voluntary/involuntary, what concepts should we put in their place?

Irene is in the park with her dog Bandit to play a game of fetch. She looks for a stick that is the right size and shape, finds one, and then rears back to toss it across the field. Just as she lets go, a huge gust of wind blows directly at her, and the stick drops to the ground about half as far from her as she had wanted. “Damn Venti,” she says, invoking the Roman wind gods, for Irene is a classicist, “they’re against me today.”

A moment earlier, after catching sight of the stick in the air, Bandit is off like a shot to retrieve it. As it hits the ground it splits into two. Bandit hesitates for a moment, then runs to the larger piece and puts it in his mouth. But as soon as he clamps on with his teeth, the stick breaks again, this time into three or four pieces. He bites the largest of them and that piece in turn breaks, as if the stick were evading capture. Irene shouts, “Come on Bandit, bring me something back!” Bandit sinks to the ground, mouths a little shard of rotten wood, and whimpers as it dissolves in his mouth. Irene laughs and runs up to join him, saying, “I guess I picked the wrong stick!”