**Thresholds of Art and Activism**  
Department of Art and Art History, FAH 092/0192-02

Spring 2014, Mondays and Wednesdays, 4:30—5:45PM  
Aidekman Arts Center, Room 012, 40 Talbot Avenue

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This course investigates transformations in artistic production and discourse since the 1960s by navigating the contested boundaries between art and activism. In the context of war and social upheaval, artists turned to the street, intervened in the public sphere, and made change thinkable through techniques of collaboration, performance, defamiliarization, and the counterfactual. Exploding familiar protocols of agitprop, they advanced a politics of representation as much as a representation of politics, rethinking both the forms of art and the channels of its distribution.

Setting anchors in philosophical texts (Adorno, Benjamin, Debord, Rancière) and recent debates in art historical scholarship (Bishop, Bryan-Wilson, Enwezor, Kester, Lambert-Beatty), we will consider contexts as diverse as the social movements of the 1960s, postcolonial struggles, queer liberation, and Occupy Wall Street, with case studies ranging from the Art Workers Coalition, the Situationist International, and Emory Douglas to Gran Fury, the Yes Men, and Women on Waves. Whether flying under the banner “art” or not quite, these activities and their historical sources provoke our questions: Where is the line between art and activism today? What agency or value might that line continue to hold for us now, and why? How must we evaluate the efficacy, ethics, and aesthetics of such practices? And what conditions have made them timely for artists?

The course coincides with *Living as Form (The Nomadic Version)*, an exhibition and series of public programs at Harvard’s Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts (CCVA) surveying socially engaged art from around the world, with a focus on Boston-area artists. Note that in addition to regular M/W class sessions, at least one *Living as Form* event is required for this course (an artist talk on February 20th, 6:30pm). It is possible to enroll in the class if you cannot attend this talk, but please see me within the first two weeks of class to arrange an alternative assignment. For more information about the exhibition and programs, visit: www.ves.fas.harvard.edu/ccva.html

**REQUIREMENTS:**

**Preparation, Participation, and Attendance**  
Assigned readings are available digitally via Trunk on the course website. All students are expected to read and be prepared to discuss each text in advance of the corresponding session listed on the Schedule of Classes below. In addition, Monday and Wednesday Focus Groups will be established in class on January 22nd. Beginning January 27th and every subsequent class meeting (with a couple of exceptions), each Focus Group member will prepare a written Text Lever (TL) for that day’s assigned reading. Different from a traditional response paper, TLs should primarily serve both your comprehension and engagement with the reading and your participation in class discussion. TLs should consist of 1–2 pages of (preferably typewritten) bullet points, notes, diagrams, etc. that may:

- Synthesize the text’s central arguments, contributions, and/or guiding questions
- Identify assumptions left unaddressed by the author
- Pose questions related to core ideas or historical material brought forward in the text
- Connect the text to other readings, artists, or projects studied in (or outside) the class
- Take a position relative to the text by proposing counter-claims or alternative arguments
- Bring our attention to specific passages and page numbers

Print two copies of your TL each week, one to turn in at the beginning of class, and one to keep with you for discussion.

**Short Papers** [not required for FAH-192]
Two 2-page response papers will be due at the beginning of class on March 5th and April 9th respectively. Both papers provide an opportunity to test concepts developed in the class by responding to a public event linked to *Living as Form* (and/or an in-class screening). Both papers should engage deeply with the content of the corresponding CCVA event, and should place it in conversation with one or more specific readings or discussions from class. Both papers should make an argument, or series of arguments, and/or pose an inquiry about what you heard and saw.

**Paper 1, due March 5th:** A letter addressed to Doug Ashford in response to his Artist Talk (2/20/2014, 6:30pm, CCVA). Papers will be graded and returned, and clean copies will be sent the artist. (Anyone wishing **not** to have his/her letter sent to the artist, or wishing to revise and rewrite beforehand, may of course reserve these rights. Second drafts will be reviewed for a grade averaged with the first.)

**Paper 2, due April 9th:** A response to one of the following: in-class screening of *The Yes Men Fix the World* (3/26/2014); Carpenter Center Lecture by Nato Thompson (3/27/2014, 6pm, CCVA); “Performing Feminisms” panel (3/28/2014, 7pm, CCVA).

**Final Paper**
A 7-8 page interpretive essay about any one work relevant to the class will be due May 9th (18-20 pages for FAH-192). Successful essays will be structured around a specific, clearly articulated argument about the work of art you’ve selected, drawing on key questions and concepts addressed in the class. Support your analysis with carefully selected evidence drawn from the artwork (its physical properties, sensory details, etc.) and from outside research appropriate for your topic. Readings assigned for the course may be helpful in scaffolding the theoretical terms of your analysis, and for comparative purposes. Additional comparisons with related works by the same or another artist are encouraged where they help flesh out your argument. A list of potential topics will be provided. Students are encouraged to make use of office hours to discuss paper topics well in advance.

**All papers:** 12pt Times New Roman, 1-inch margins. Cite sources with consistent adherence to either MLA or Chicago guidelines. Submit electronically via email, preferably in Word or Pages.

**Research Presentation**
The last class meeting (with an extended session TBA) will be devoted to student presentations. Your assignment is to teach your classmates (and professor) about the artist, group, or phenomenon you have been researching, and to test the argument of your Final Paper. The goal is to give a polished 5-minute presentation that introduces your topic, provides necessary context, illuminates comparisons, and makes clear what important questions your topic raises. PowerPoint or Keynote is recommended (images will be helpful); send the file by midnight on 4/27/14 so that it can be incorporated into the showcase.

**Grading:** Weekly TLs 20%; Participation 20%; Short Papers 20%; Presentation 15%; Final Paper 25%
SCHEDULE OF CLASSES:

Week 1 / Introduction
Wednesday 1/15

Week 2 / What Is Political Art?
Monday 1/20 No class (Martin Luther King Day)
   Wednesday 1/22

Week 3 / Debates in Theory
Monday 1/27
   Wednesday 1/29

Week 4 / Public Spheres and Counter-Publicity / Black Arts Movement
Monday 2/3
   Wednesday 2/5

Week 4 / War
Monday 2/10
      • Francis Frascina, Art, Politics, and Dissent: Aspects of the Art Left in Sixties America (St. Martin’s Press, 1999), pp. 15-34, 66-87.
   Wednesday 2/12

Week 5 / Work
Monday 2/17 No class (President’s Day No Class)
Wednesday 2/19
All students participate in Wednesday Focus Group

Thursday 2/20* Attend talk by Doug Ashford, Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, 24 Quincy Street, Cambridge, Room B-04, 6:30pm. (No class at the regular meeting time.)
• Doug Ashford, “Maria Lind Talks with Doug Ashford,” and “Abstraction and Empathy,” in Writings and Conversations (Mousse, 2013), 11-22; 25-37. [no Focus Group]
(*substitute Monday’s schedule)

Week 6 / Feminisms, then and now
Monday 2/24

Wednesday 2/26
• Lisa Darms, The Riot Grrrl Collection (Feminist Press, 2013), selections TBD.

Week 7 / Flashback, Illuminate
Monday 3/3
• Augusto Boal, “Invisible Theater” reproduced in Art and Social Change

Wednesday 3/5 Guest Lecture, Ruth Erickson, on Paris, May ’68

First paper due March 5th at the beginning of class

Week 8 / ACT UP
Monday 3/10
  http://www.tacticalmediafiles.net/article.jsp?objectnumber=52661

Wednesday 3/12
• Richard Meyer “This is to Enrage You: Gran Fury and the Graphics of AIDS Activism,” in But is it Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism (1995), pp. 51-82.

Week 9
SPRING BREAK

Week 10 / Culture Jamming, Tactical Media, and Neo-Situationist Practices
Monday 3/24 Transversal Reading Exchange
NB: All students participate (no Focus Group this week)
• 1) Mark Dery, Culture Jamming: Hacking, Slashing and Sniping in the Empire of Signs, 1993 http://markdery.com/?page_id=154

Wednesday 3/26
• In class screening: The Yes Men Fix the World, 2010

Thursday 3/27: Optional talk by Nato Thompson, Lecture Hall, Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, 24 Quincy Street, 6pm

Friday 3/28: Optional performance and discussion, “Performing Feminisms,” by artists of the Dirt Palace, A.L. Steiner, and Emma Hedditch, Sert Seminar Space, Third Floor, Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, 24 Quincy Street, 7pm

Week 11 / War, Parafiction
Monday 3/31

Wednesday 4/2

Week 12 / Collaboration and the Social Turn
Monday 4/7

Wednesday 4/9

Second paper due April 9th at the beginning of class

Week 13 / Eco-Criticism, Counter-Cartography
Monday 4/14

Wednesday 4/16: Content

**Week 14 / Occupation**  
**Monday 4/21** No class (Patriot’s Day)

**Wednesday 4/23**  
NB: All students participate in Wednesday Focus Group  

**Week 15 / Student Presentations**  
**Monday 4/28**

*Final Paper Due Friday May 9th*