

Honors 209E: Attending the Blockbuster: Understanding the Cultural Impact of Temporary Exhibitions  
Course Syllabus

Meeting place & times: Art/Sociology Building (3207 and 4213A): 2-3:15 pm Monday/Wednesday

Instructor: Quint Gregory

Office Hours: By Appointment (*I am mostly around my office five days a week. Feel free to drop in though there is always a chance in the afternoon that I am off to think/walk*)

Office: 4213D Art/Sociology Building (Department of Art History & Archaeology (4<sup>th</sup> Floor))

Phone: x53183

e-mail: quint5art@gmail.com, quint@umd.edu

## **I. Course Description**

This course, first offered in the Spring of 2002, then and for many semesters thereafter framed the issues to be covered with the following description:

Next time you go to a big show at the National Gallery of Art, Smithsonian, or elsewhere, ask yourself: Do museums just show, or do they shape? Are you seeing unvarnished objectivity (read: Truth), or have certain assumptions influenced the presentation of what you see? Does it matter?

The temporary exhibition is arguably a museum's best means for attracting new visitors. It is a powerful vehicle for illuminating historical moments or exploring themes in art of profound spirit and beauty. The exhibition is also a form that, increasingly, is the *raison d'être* of many museums. Powerful tensions between scholarship and mass appeal constantly threaten the integrity of the exhibition concept.

But not always. In the late Fall 1995 a small group of paintings by the then relatively unknown Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer opened for a 3 month viewing at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Though eagerly anticipated for some time by a small but passionate group of art lovers, the show quickly became a must-attend event for hundreds of thousands, with enthusiasts of all stripes and spots clamoring for tickets. A well-oiled publicity apparatus, a receptive media and a government shutdown of federal buildings coalesced to intensify the already fever-pitched interest in this "once in several lifetimes event." During that winter lines wrapping around the museum's building were as regular a feature of the Washington landscape as the small mountains of plowed snow from unusually heavy blizzards.

How diametrically opposed was the earlier experience of curators at the Air and Space Museum just across the Mall from the National Gallery of Art when their plans for an exhibition of the Enola Gay and its legacy as the plane to have dropped the first hydrogen bomb in wartime encountered not an eager public but fiercely determined opposition from a few well-organized groups. Skillfully employing the press and congressional committees, these groups succeeded in carving up the script, reducing the exhibition's scope before it opened. That the exhibition went on to be, in the words of one group's web site, "one of the most popular in the museum's history" masks the fact that this near record-setting crowd missed important facets, and facts, of the Enola Gay's story. In this case the long-term interest in historical accuracy succumbed to the short-term intense political pressure to avoid a morally complex and politically delicate moment in the United States' history.

The goals of this course are to understand the exhibition as a form of communication and to be aware of the forces that shape it and, at the same time, the visitor's experience. It is hoped that by critically considering selected historical examples and contemporary reviews and/or criticisms of them, by visiting current exhibitions and hearing from those in the field, students in this course will become discerning consumers of this peculiar mode of communication, understanding it as a dynamic that can drive cultural change and advance lofty ideals but also one that is malleable to external pressures that can distort its "pure" goal.

Over the seventeen semesters that I have taught this course, I have kept the same description, more or less. While this description still pertains to much that we will cover and discuss this semester and much that remains central and vital to any consideration of the museum world, I am struck with how changed is the terrain of the museum world today. Four summers ago, a [NPR-All Things Considered report](#) on the arrival in Houston of the bones of the early hominid “Lucy” was for me a “eureka” moment, one in which I observed the completeness of the tectonic shift in the museum landscape. This landscape is one in which the ideas and ideals contended with in other semesters seem more historical than active.

As another example, one of even more and increasing importance, three years ago Google Earth announced, proudly, the latest of their many endeavors, this one with the Prado Museum in Madrid, Spain: fourteen of that museum’s great, and most famous, paintings, had been made available as ultra-high density images on Google Earth. These images could and can be scrutinized on a level not possible even in the museum itself. Is this development promise or peril for the museum world? This question is all the more imperative in the wake last year of Google unveiling their Art Project, which replicates the partnership of the Prado Museum in Google Earth on a vast – and constantly growing! – scale.

In answering these questions, or at least attempting to do so, we will embark on an unfolding intellectual adventure, one in which we will all share and to which we will all contribute as we consider the issues adduced above, which are framed in an internet-saturated, culture-as-commodity world. The goals enumerated in the above description are still ones that we will hold in focus, but it is my expectation that we will also spend more than the usual amount of time thinking about the role of the museum in today’s (and tomorrow’s) society. Indeed, a recent series on NPR’s – All Things Considered – “[The Museum in the 21st Century](#)” – underscores the fact that the terrain of the museum world continues to shift, with multiple approaches contemplated and effected to define the relevance of the museum in today’s world. This course seeks to stimulate good questions and frame intelligent discussion of these manifold issues.

This course satisfies the requirements for CORE - History or Theory of the Arts.

## **II. Readings**

Because of the broad reach of this course’s subject, there is no one comprehensive textbook. Instead articles and essays are available in e-journals or online via a website for this course (<http://www.arthistory.umd.edu/VRC/Courses/course.html>) The Reading List will note where you might most easily find each reading. You will find a particularly wonderful tool in Lexis-Nexis, a database of both the congressional record and newspaper articles that will hopefully allow you to experience the rollicking context of some of the exhibitions studied in our course. All readings are listed, according to topic, the title of which serves as a key on the course outline. Some of the reading is informative in nature; the remaining introduces ideas with which we will wrestle in class. Thus, in the interest of a dynamic classroom experience (class participation is essential to this type of class – see below), you should complete the reading ahead of time.

## **III. Assignments**

In this course you will explore the dynamic of the temporary exhibition from a couple of different perspectives. One is that of the critic, the informed, educated outsider who assesses the exhibition in its final form and serves as a bridge to the larger public, sparking their interest or dampening any nascent enthusiasm based on their review of the material. Each of you will have an opportunity to review a show currently on exhibit in the Baltimore/Washington area. Your review will be written as if for a major newspaper such as the Washington Post or New York Times (3-4 pages or 800- 1000 words). In the hopes that your review sparks a thoughtful examination of that show’s merits, you will distribute copies to a select number of your colleagues in class (a peer group) who will also have visited the show and can thus offer informed criticism of your review.

The second major project entails a shift in approach. You will assume the role of a museum curator, a scholar with an idea for a show that will have both appeal to and impact on the broader public. Thus you must develop an exhibition proposal, one hopefully on a topic in which you have a particular interest and knowledge. The presentation of this proposal will be ten to twelve minutes in length and will occur in the last weeks of the semester. The entire class will provide critical commentary on your presentation, probing weak and strong points in an effort to improve the idea. Based on the comments you receive from class members and me, you will revise your concept and submit it to me as a written proposal, one that may be varied in format to suit your needs (*see examples on course website under readings*) but which should be approximately 10-12 pages in length.

In addition to these major assignments you will be responsible for short writing assignments based on readings (responses to articles, probably no more than two pages each), questions posed in class or by e-mail (*an option that I hold in reserve and often deploy*), as well as serving as a discussant of a critical reading in one of the classes (*a list to be generated in the first weeks of the semester*).

#### **IV. Final Exam**

The take-home final (*submitted via e-mail to introduce a timed element*) will feature essay questions that will draw on your knowledge of the issues *discussed in class*. While these questions are essentially rhetorical, so that multiple answers are possible, how well they are argued and draw on ideas/cases discussed during the semester will determine the grade received. I will discuss the final exam in detail later in the semester, but will offer an outline on the first day of class.

#### **V. Class Participation**

We will come to know many exhibitions in the course of this one semester. In order to best steer you all through what may be unfamiliar territory, I will occasionally lecture so as to give you vital information in encapsulated form. This state of affairs will be most true in the first few weeks of the semester, when I expect you will know very little. However, apart from these short, introductory overviews, I expect active participation in class. Thus, you should complete and digest assigned readings before each class and be prepared to discuss not only the points raised in them, but offer your own perspective. I will often, almost without fail, prompt your thoughts with questions, observations and statements e-mailed to you a day or two before class.

Active participation is distinguished both by discussion in class and work within small groups in which key propositions and questions are mooted and brought before the larger class. Your critical faculties are vital to making this course a success, so do let your voice be heard (even if echoed by a group leader!).

#### **VI. Grading**

Always a difficult estimation of your efforts! Your projects, presentations, the final and class participation will count for the lion's share of your grade in this course.

Attendance – Not graded but an essential component of success in this class (trust me!)

Short, article responses or essay responses, the timing of which will be determined at my discretion (3) – 20% total

Written review – 20%

Critique of colleagues' reviews – 5%

Oral presentation of exhibition proposal – 15%

Written exhibition proposal – 10%

Take home final essay exam – 15%

Class participation – 15%

Your grade on each assignment will reflect how well you met the stated goals of that assignment. Though I will discuss the particulars of each assignment in class, the following gives a general idea of each assignment's purpose.

The written review should convey essential information about the exhibition in an articulate manner as well as offer a cogent analysis of an exhibition's purpose and the extent to which it met its stated (or unstated) goals.

The presentation of your exhibition proposal should be clearly organized and confidently delivered, with supporting visual and didactic material to illustrate key components of your exhibition concept. You should also include an installation solution. Your mastery of the subject should be evident, both in your initial presentation and in follow-up questioning by your peers.

The written proposal should incorporate suggestions and corrections offered by your peers. In case you decide that a serious suggestion will not improve your proposal you should indicate why, either in your text or in a note.

In all of your written work you should strive to be both well-organized and clear. An economy of words usually is the best way to convey your ideas. Use proper grammar and correct spelling. Both are essential in the two writing forms you will undertake in this course, and sloppiness in either area will result in a lowered grade. **Late work: All assignments will be marked off 5 points for every class day you fail to hand in the work.**

*And now for some standard, and important, institutional verbiage...*

### **Academic integrity**

The University of Maryland, College Park has a nationally recognized Code of Academic Integrity, administered by the Student Honor Council. This Code sets standards for academic integrity at Maryland for all undergraduate and graduate students. As a student you are responsible for upholding these standards for this course. It is very important for you to be aware of the consequences of cheating, fabrication, facilitation, and plagiarism. For more information on the Code of Academic Integrity visit the Student Honor Council web site: <http://www.shc.umd.edu>.

To further exhibit your commitment to academic integrity, remember to sign the Honor Pledge on all examinations and assignments: "I pledge on my honor that I have not given or received any unauthorized assistance on this examination (assignment)."

### **Academic Accommodations for Students with Disabilities**

If a student has a documented disability and wishes to discuss academic accommodations, please contact the professor as soon as possible. The rules for eligibility and the types of accommodations a student may request can be reviewed on the Disability Support Services web site: [http://www.counseling.umd.edu/DSS/avail\\_services.html](http://www.counseling.umd.edu/DSS/avail_services.html).

Disability Support Services requires that students request an Accommodation Form each semester. It is the student's responsibility to present the form to the professor as proof of eligibility for accommodations.

### **Religious Observances**

The University System of Maryland policy states that students should not be penalized in any way for participation in religious observances. Students shall be allowed, whenever practicable, to make up academic assignments that are missed due to such absences. It is the student's responsibility to contact the professor, and make arrangements for make-up work or examinations. The student is responsible for providing written notification to the professor within the first two weeks of the semester. The notification must identify the religious holiday(s) and date(s). For additional information, please visit the University of Maryland Policies and Procedures at <http://www.president.umd.edu/policies/iii510a.html>.

### **CourseEvalUM:**

Your participation in the evaluation of courses through CourseEvalUM is a responsibility you hold as a student member of our academic community. Your feedback is confidential and important to the improvement of teaching and learning at the University as well as to the tenure and promotion process. CourseEvalUM will be open for you to complete your evaluations for fall semester courses between Tuesday, November 29 and Wednesday, December 14. You can go directly to the website ([www.courseevalum.umd.edu](http://www.courseevalum.umd.edu)) to complete your evaluations starting November 29. By completing all of your evaluations each semester, you will have the privilege of accessing the summary reports for thousands of courses online at Testudo.

Fall 2011: Submissions open Tuesday, November 29th — Wednesday, December 14th