

**Department of Philosophy**  
**Philosophy 436B Aesthetics II Winter 2015**

**Instructor: Prof. David Davies**  
**Time: TTh 16:05-17:25**  
**Location: Leacock 210**  
**Office: 912 Leacock Office Hours: TBA**

**Topic for 2014/15: Issues in the Philosophy of the Visual Arts**

**Course description**

In this course, we shall explore some general questions about the nature and the appreciation of artworks as these questions present themselves in the context of attempts to make sense of the legacy of modernism in the visual arts. The last 100 years have witnessed a dizzying succession of 'movements' in the fine arts. This in turn has led to deep puzzlement on the part of those familiar with the historical artistic tradition who seek to appreciate late modern works. The spectator who feels quite at home when placed before a painting by Rembrandt, Cezanne or Picasso, or when admiring a sculpture by Rodin or Henry Moore, may experience considerable unease when she confronts, within the confines of the same gallery, a Duchamp "Readymade", a minimalist canvas by Stella, the documentation for a conceptual piece by Robert Barry, a video installation of a performance piece by Vito Acconci, a 'wall drawing' by Sol LeWitt, and the Chapman Brothers' decorated version of Goya's *Disasters of War*. One question that such works raise is whether there is any real *continuity*, other than a historical one, between traditional painting, both representational and abstract, and the sorts of things characteristic of works in the fine arts in the late modern period. If there is, in what does this continuity consist?

In this course, we shall examine a number of ways in which philosophers have responded to the challenge of 'modernism' in the fine arts. We shall begin with Tom Wolfe's polemical attack on late modern visual art, and also look at some more recent developments in the tradition criticised by Wolfe. Wolfe sees a radical *discontinuity* between late modern visual art and the tradition out of which it develops. We shall look at the sort of conception of art, and of the nature of artistic appreciation, that underlies Wolfe's account, and at various objections that have been raised against such a conception. We shall also examine various kinds of 'institutional' theories of art, which maintain that what is continuous in the development of the fine arts, and what is crucial to anything's being or becoming an artwork, is a certain kind of institutional framework, often termed an 'Artworld'. The lesson of modernism, for such theories, is that all sorts of things other than traditional paintings and sculptures can be 'certified' as works of fine art within the Artworld. As we shall see, some 'institutional' theories are seriously flawed while others, in focussing on the significance of the artistic context in which artworks come into being, promise to help us resolve our puzzlement about modern art. In investigating these issues, we shall also address the role of narrative in the appreciation of visual artworks and the artistic status of 'Outsider Art' and tribal art. In the final part of the course, we shall look more closely at the idea that artworks - traditional and modern - are in their very nature culturally contextualised entities

whose appreciation requires what Richard Wollheim terms a process of 'retrieval'. In this context we shall look at Michael Baxandall's model of the kind of interpretive endeavour that such 'retrieval' would require of us.

### **Required Texts**

Tom Wolfe, *The Painted Word*, available in *Paragraph* bookstore.

Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, currently out of print and reproduced in the coursepack,

Course-pack, available in McGill bookstore.

Additional readings will be made available either on MyCourses or on reserve in the McClennan-Redpath library.

### **Course Requirements**

Students will be required to write two papers for this course. The first, due by Spring Break, will be a short paper (approx. 6 pages) on one of a couple of suggested topics to be distributed in class early in the semester (30% of total grade). The second, due at the end of classes, will be a longer paper (12-15 pages) on a topic selected by the student in consultation with me (60% of total grade). In addition, students are expected to attend lectures and be familiar with the readings so that they can contribute to classroom discussion (10% of total grade).

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see [www.mcgill.ca/integrity](http://www.mcgill.ca/integrity) for more information).

In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.