The Philosophy of Art

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Lecture-seminars: Thursdays 9.00 – 10.50 a.m., room A0.17.
Reflection-writing workshops: Thursdays 11.15 a.m. – 12.00 p.m., room A0.17.

This is an introduction to the philosophy of art; no prior knowledge of philosophy is assumed. Philosophy is a subject which looks at the big ideas that shape our lives – like truth, existence, meaning, right and wrong, good and bad – and at the way we think. In this study group, we study some of the big ideas that shape our understanding of art, including: the definition of art; the contrast between representation and expression; the nature of technology, and its importance for feminism. We also read extracts from some of the key thinkers in the history of western philosophy, work out why some viewpoints are stronger than others, and reflect on the reasons we have for holding certain views.

The four main themes of the option are:

1. Key theories and debates in the philosophy of art from ancient thought to the present;
2. Thorough grounding in key philosophical concepts and the nature of philosophical discussion;
3. Application of debate to your studio practice;
4. Guidance on academic study and essay writing skills.

Sessions will mainly take the form of seminars. There will be some lecture delivery, explaining key ideas and debates, but the emphasis will be on group discussion, and group responses to questions, illustrations and texts.

Preparatory study or reading is required for each seminar, so that you come to the seminar equipped with ideas and questions to stimulate discussion. You must bring a hard copy or screen copy of the week’s set reading with you to each session.
Schedule

The following schedule lists topics and the study skills to be addressed each week.

Session 1  What is philosophy? What is learning?
Study skill: Summarising
An introduction to philosophy, and to the nature of learning, with a focus on one of the most original and counter-intuitive texts in the history of philosophy.
Reading:

Session 2  What is art?
Study skill: Recognizing and forming arguments
Since the advent of the ready-made, from 1917, and conceptual art, from the 1960s, art can now in principle be any kind of thing. How should we come to terms with this situation?
Reading:

Session 3  Truth and representation
Study skill: Investigation and finding sources
A study of the foundational texts of the philosophy of art, and how they give us two very different theories of the relation between art and truth.
Reading:

Session 4  Metaphysics and the death of art
Study skills: Engagement with academic sources; learning journal writing
How the nineteenth-century idealist G.W.F. Hegel seeks to overcome the millennia-old divide between appearance and reality, but it means art has to die.
Reading:

Session 5
The difference between representation and expression

Study skills: Analysis of a case study; explore theoretical concepts or debates through specific examples of visual or material culture.

Art does more than represent. It can also express. But what is expression? We consider two theories.

Reading:

Session 6
Kindling the creation of enquiry

Study skills: How to write an essay

The Greek-Roman essayist Plutarch suggests that teaching is not a matter of filling a vessel but of lighting a fire. We look at what is needed to start the metaphorical fire, and how it can take the form of an essay.

Reading:

Session 7
Feminism and technology, and why they are related

Study skills: Engagement with academic sources; paraphrase

An introduction to the philosophy of technology. We focus on the capacity of technology to transform the world around us, and the possibilities that creates, including the possibilities of our going beyond human being to become cyborgs.

Reading:
Session 8  Philosophy in the studio
We look at how the concepts and debates from the Philosophy study option can inform and challenge your thinking in relation to your studio practice.
Three seminars – 9.00, 10.00 and 11.00 a.m. – in subject studios to be arranged in consultation with subject leaders, and locations announced via Moodle.
**Preparation:** select one of the themes from this Philosophy study option and consider how it might apply to your studio practice. If possible, identify relevant concepts and quotations (bring the quotations with you).

Final weeks  Independent study and tutorials.

Date TBC  Essay and learning journal entry submission via Moodle.

Suggestions for further reading are given in the *Seminar Handbook* on the Philosophy page on Moodle.

**Suggested essay titles**
You might like to base your coursework on one of the following questions, but you are also free to devise your own. If you decide to create your own, please discuss it with me beforehand, to ensure that it is appropriate to the option, and that it is the kind of question that will encourage a successful essay.

1. ‘To be is to be perceived’. Is Berkeley right?
2. Art can now be anything. Discuss, and consider how the claim might affect the artwork produced by a contemporary artist.
3. Design is knowledge, but art is deception. Why does Plato think this? Is he right?
4. What is *mimesis*? Consider with reference to Plato and Aristotle, and reflect on how it might apply to a contemporary art form of your choosing.
5. We find in a work what the artist has put there. Appraise Collingwood’s ‘total imaginative experience’.
6. How can an artwork or an artefact be expressive?
7. What is technology? Are you in charge? Is it in charge? Or is the situation more complex? If so, explain and assess the complexity.
8. ‘I am a cyborg’. Discuss.