

**Department of Sociology
Faculty of Social Sciences
South Asian University**

**Visual Arts and the Politics Social Transformation
in South Asia**

(Optional Course for MA)

Total Credits: 04

Objectives of the course

Visual art, whether it is painting, sculpture, installation, performance art, film or any other form of creative expression, is not a simple matter of aesthetics, beauty or generating pleasure. It is also a domain of politics that is historically and temporally embedded with meaning, and can be read sociologically. But in general, contemporary art is not a major concern for sociology in South Asia and elsewhere. This course will explore the political potential of visual arts in South Asia with a focus on painting, sculpture, installation and performance art that go beyond the issue of aesthetics, and engage in very specific forms of politics. In the context of a theoretical discussion on aesthetics, beauty, understandings of tradition and contemporaneity and taste, the course will attempt to explore how art become a method of politics in specific locations. It will particularly pay attention to arts' social transformational and mobilizational attributes by focusing on how art might work as repositories of memory, nationalism, violence etc within a larger discourse of politics in specific locations. The course will specifically focus on contemporary art and their embedded politics in four South Asian locations where an established tradition of political art has been established since the 1980s. These places are Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The course will involve a one-day visit to a number of galleries in New Delhi to view and review on-going exhibitions and to understand their politics as well as a number of guest lectures.

Unit 1: Towards an Understanding of Arts

Unit one will attempt to place the overall course in context by focusing on a number of key themes, which includes the following:

- A. Forms of creative expression in visual arts.
- B. Art in 'tradition' and the advent to modernity and postmodernity.
- C. Multiple ways of understanding visual arts: representation, taste, aesthetics and the politics of beauty.
- D. Art and local discourses of 'authenticity' and 'nationalism.'

Readings:

1. Wheale, Nigel. 'Modernism and Its Consequences: Continuity or Break'. In, Nigel Wheale, *The Postmodern Arts*. London, Routledge, 1995.
2. Wheale, Nigel. 'Postmodernism: From Elite to Mass Culture.' In, Nigel Wheale, *The Postmodern Arts*. London, Routledge, 1995.
4. Bourdieu, Pierre. 'Metamorphosis of Taste'. *Sociology in Question*. London: Sage. 1993
5. Papastergiadis, Nikos. 'Everything that Surrounds: Art, Politics and the Theories of the Everyday'. In, Nikos Papastergiadis, *Spatial Aesthetics: At, Place and the Everyday*. London: River Oram Press, 2006.
6. Mukerjee, Radhakamal. 'The Meaning and Evolution of Art in Society,' pp. 496-503. In, *American Sociological Review* 10 (4), 1945.
7. Coomaraswamy, Ananda. *Art and Swadeshi*. Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 2001.

Unit 2: Art 'in' Sociology and its 'Absence' from Sociology

Unit 2 will focus on the intellectual relationship visual arts has maintained with sociology and social anthropology over time. It will pose the question why conventional social anthropology once entertained an interest in what was referred to as 'primitive' art, and why that interest has not become part of contemporary practices of sociology/anthropology when it comes to forms of more recent artistic expressions. It will further discuss the emergence of visual sociology and possible themes and intersections of sociology's interactions with art and art history by focusing on the following themes:

- A. Sociology and its relationships with artistic practices.
- B. Visual sociology and the exit of art from mainstream sociology.
- C. Possible themes for research on art in sociology.
- D. Sociology and its intersections with art history.

Readings:

1. Perera, Sasanka and Dev Nath Pathak. 'Intersections and Implications: When Anthropology, Art Practice, and Art History Converge,' pp. 1-46. In, Sasanka Perera and Dev Nath Pathak Eds., *Intersections of Contemporary Art, Anthropology and Art History in South Asia*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019.
2. Dave Mukherji, Parul. 'Mimicking Anthropologists: Re-Membering a Photo Archive via Pata Paintings, Performative Mimesis, and Photo Performance', pp. 49-72. In, Sasanka Perera and Dev Nath Pathak Eds., *Intersections of Contemporary Art, Anthropology and Art History in South Asia*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019.
3. Foster, Hal. 'The Artist as Ethnographer?', pp. 302-309. In, G. Marcus and F. Myers eds., *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

Unit 3: Art as a Form of Politics

Unit 3 will place art more squarely in the context of politics by exploring its implication in violence, memory, nationalism and dissent. Further, the discussion will also focus on the politics of seeing and exhibiting as forms of politics as well the impact of art movements and groups in political dynamics. It will focus on the following themes:

- A. Art and the 'possibilities' of social transformation, mobilization and memory.
- B. Politics of exhibitions: what is shown and what is not shown.
- C. Dynamics of movements and groups
- D. Memorializing death and other signs of politics.

Readings:

1. Selz, Peter 'Prologue: A Personal View of the Interaction of Politics and Art', pp. 25-28; 'Introduction: Paths to Engagement', pp. 29-34. *Art of Engagement: Visual Politics in California and Beyond*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.
2. Turner, Caroline. 'Art and Social Change' by, pp. 1-13. In, Caroline Turner ed., *Art and Social Change: Contemporary Art in Asia and the Pacific*. Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2005.
3. Barclay, Glen St. J. 'Geopolitical Changes in Asia and the Pacific' by, pp. 13-29. In, Caroline Turner ed., *Art and Social Change: Contemporary Art in Asia and the Pacific*. Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2005.
4. Luke, Timothy W. *Museum Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.
5. Pathak, Dev Nath and Sasanka Perera, 'Introduction: Towards an Inconclusive Scheme of Performative Communication,' pp. 1-26. In, Dev Nath Pathak and Sasanka Perera eds., *Culture and Politics in South Asia: Performative Communication*. London and New Delhi: Routledge, 2018.
6. Perera, Anoli. 'Collectivism in the Contemporary Sri Lankan Art: The History of an Unusual Case of Artists,' pp. 271-296. In, Sasanka Perera and Dev Nath Pathak Eds., *Intersections of Contemporary Art*,

Unit 4: Contemporary Indian and Bangladeshi Art and their Politics

Unit 4 will attempt to place in context the landscape of political art in contemporary India and Bangladesh as two South Asian locations where a very clear genre of political art has emerged. In the context of Indian art, the focus would be to understand contemporary Indian art practices with an emphasis on works that have attempted to grapple with environmental issues. With regard Bangladeshi art, the attempt is to explore the major themes of Bangladeshi art practice with a focus on political violence and issues of gender identity as well as Bangladeshi's art's interactions and anxieties with tradition and modernity via the following themes:

- A. Understanding Indian art: continuities and ruptures.
- B. Art of environmentalism.
- C. Concerns over violence and gender in contemporary Bangladeshi art.
- D. Bangladeshi art and its interactions with tradition and modernity.

Readings:

1. Kapoor, Geeta. 'A Stake in Modernity: A Brief History of Modern Indian Art, pp. 146- 163. In, Caroline Turner ed., *Art and Social Change: Contemporary Art in Asia and the Pacific*. Canberra: Pandanus Books. 2005.
2. Singha, Gayatri. 'Introduction,' In Gayatri Singha ed., *Art and Visual culture in India, 1857-2007*. Mumbai: Marg Publications, 2009 (and selected chapters)
3. Selim, Lala Rukh, Art of Bangladesh: The Changing Role of Tradition, Search for Identity and Globalization, 2-19. In, *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*, 9 (2014).
4. Islam, Syed Mansoorul. 'Remaking Traditions: Fine Arts, Crafts and Artistry of Bangladesh.' In, *Mapping Art South Asia: A Visual and Cultural Dialogue between Britain and South Asia*. London: Shisha, 2006
5. Selim, Lala Rukh, 'Globalisation and Local Anxieties in the Art of Bangladesh: The Interface of History and the Contemporary', 117-138. In, Sasanka Perera and Dev Nath Pathak Eds., *Intersections of Contemporary Art, Anthropology and Art History in South Asia*. New York: Palgrave macMillan, 2019.

Unit 5: Contemporary Pakistani and Sri Lankan Art and their Politics

Unit 5 will focus on post 1980s art in Pakistan and Sri Lanka. In doing so, with regard to Pakistan, the discussion will emphasize the ways in which Pakistani art has addressed issues of violence, religion and gender identity. In the case of Sri Lanka art, the focus will be on the politics of violence, memory and issues of gender identity that are major preoccupations in Sri Lankan art. The discussion will be guided by the following themes:

- A. Violence in the art of Pakistan.
- B. Dealing with religion and faith in Pakistani art.
- C. 'Women' as a theme and force in Pakistani art.
- D. Violence and memory in Sri Lankan art.
- E. Sexual identity in Sri Lankan art of the 1990s.

Readings

1. Dadi, Ifthikar. 'Emergence of the Public Self', 177-216. In, Ifthikar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010.
2. Hashmi, Salima. 'Introduction', '1977-1987: Calling Their Bluff: Women Under Martial Law' and '1987-1997: Towards the Millennium and Beyond.' In, Salima Hashmi, *Unveiling the Visible: Lives and Works of Women Artists of Pakistan*. Islamabad: Action Aid.

3. Farrukh, Niilofur, 'Imposed, Interrupted and Other Identities: Rupture as Opportunity in the Art History of Pakistan,' pp. 205-219. In, Sasanka Perera and Dev Nath Pathak Eds., *Intersections of Contemporary Art, Anthropology and Art History in South Asia*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019.
4. Weerasinghe, Jagath. 'Contemporary Art in Sri Lanka' by, pp. 164-180-195. In, Caroline Turner ed., *Art and Social Change: Contemporary Art in Asia and the Pacific*. Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2005.
5. Perera, Sasanka. *Artists Remember; Artists Narrate: Memory and Representation in Sri Lankan Visual Arts*. Colombo: Theerta International Artists' Collective and Colombo Institute, 2012.

Mode of evaluation during pandemic-impacted semesters (this may change based on university or department decisions)

- a) Midterm assignment - 40%
- b) Final assignment - 60%