

AH162: Modernism in the Visual Arts: Experiment, Conflict, and Crisis

Seminar Leader: Prof. Dr. Aya Soika
Email: a.soika[at]berlin.bard.edu
Office Hours: by appointment

Course Description

This class looks at the key works, movements and debates emerging from modernism and modern movements in the visual and plastic arts. Our survey addresses controversies that took place at the time when new works and techniques were first introduced, as well as later (post)modern criticisms. We will consider the ‘grand narratives’ and alternative explanatory tools that seek to understand and theorize modernist artistic practice, such as, for example, Marxist theory, and also (a considerable contrast) formalist approaches. An important theme in our journey will be the modernist artists’ entanglement with colonialism, where the freedom they claimed for their own creative adventures was often barred to their subjects and absent from the contexts in which they sought new inspiration. Modernist artists and movements also have a complex relationship to the phenomenon of totalitarian regimes, with some embracing and some resisting the pull of dictatorship. Modernism was the moment in which the distinction between ‘high’ and ‘popular’ or ‘mass’ culture first appeared, and we will look at the meaning of this fissure for modern art movements. Finally, we examine the role of new media—the revolutionary advent of film and photography—in modernist art production. Our case studies include the formative movements of the early 20th century, such as Expressionism, Dada, Bauhaus and Surrealism. The class ends with what we might call the “nervous breakdown” of modernism in the 1960s, when we witness the end of reigning concepts such as ‘originality’ and ‘authenticity’, and encounter the rise of postmodernism. Throughout the seminar we will make use of Berlin’s wide-ranging and diverse modernist art collections.

Requirements

Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and expects students to adhere to these standards at all times. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

Accommodations

Bard College Berlin is committed to inclusion and providing equal access to all students; we uphold and maintain all aspects of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and the ADA Amendments Act of 2008, and Section 3 of the German Disability Equality Act of April 27, 2002 (Federal Law Gazette I p. 1468). If you have a disability, or think you may have a disability, please contact the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, Atticus Kleen, (accommodations@berlin.bard.edu) to request an official accommodation.

Requests for accommodations should be made as early as possible to ensure adequate time for coordination and planning. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and may require advance notice to implement.

If you have already been approved for accommodations with the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, please arrange to meet with me outside of class so that we can develop an implementation plan.

Students may face extenuating circumstances related to various personal or external factors, which impact their academic performance. While these circumstances often do not fall within the legal framework of Disability Accommodations, Bard College Berlin is committed to supporting students experiencing such circumstances. A student needing a short extension or a replacement assignment because of an extenuating circumstance is encouraged to make arrangements directly with instructors if possible. If further support is needed, please visit the [Bard College Berlin Accessibility page](#). Questions about this process can be directed to James Harker (j.harker@berlin.bard.edu) or Maria Anderson-Long (m.andersonlong@berlin.bard.edu).

Attendance

Attendance at all classes is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. To account for minor circumstances, one absence should not affect the participation grade or require documentation. Please inform Aya beforehand should you not be able to attend class. Unexcused absences will affect the participation grade. Bard College Berlin may not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

Punctuality

Punctuality is essential. Turning up late will also affect the participation grade. Since many of our visits will take place in different locations in the city, please make sure you depart early, before the beginning of class and make sure you join the class group chat so that we can share our location with you.

Class Etiquette

In the case of unavoidable absences, a short notification via email sent before the beginning of class is appreciated. Please keep your bathroom breaks to a minimum. When visiting museums, you should stay with the group while the conversation is still going on. Please do

your best to stay focused: This includes listening to students' presentations and to any of our seminar guests. If you take notes in class (recommended) please make sure you only use a pencil in museums.

Weekly Readings & Weekly Emails

Weekly readings and other specific assignments will be confirmed by email well in advance to the next class, and all materials are uploaded on our class drive or via links on the padlet. Please check your BCB emails regularly and make sure you can access the padlet. Should you not have received an email by Monday morning before our Wednesday class, please get in touch with Aya as there might have been a glitch.

Assessment

The course assessment includes the overall seminar work (response papers, regular class participation, short presentations) and the final essay. See also "Grade Breakdown." Students are asked to submit **weekly responses** of 200 words each to be uploaded on the class padlet by Tuesday evening, 19:00. **Grading Criteria:** Punctuality of submission (!), structure, relevance to the prompt, readings and depth of analysis; awareness of context and key debates, originality of thought. You may refer to your classmates' uploads or present your own line of argument, ideally your responses can help pave the way to a lively classroom discussion.

Regarding your class **presentations** – which feed into the 25% participation grade – the **grading criteria** are: Offer critical analysis of the work's meanings and functions; Provide relevant and well-researched information, e. g. on a work's aesthetics & materiality, meanings, contexts of origin and its provenance, the artist, their life and career and artistic & political intentions; Draw links to our readings and class themes (where applicable); Ensure a clear and logical structure, think carefully about terminology; Answer questions competently

Preparing your Final Essays

In addition to the above, there is one more extensive writing assignment for the course: your final essay. Prompts and further instructions will be provided in advance. Your essay's structure, sources, contents and arguments can be discussed in individual meetings beforehand. Format: Your essay should be of circa 3.500 words of length (+- 10%), including captions, annotations and bibliography. The referencing style should be consistently applied, the format should be double-spaced with 12-point font. Please include page numbers, a title, captions, annotations, at least four carefully selected illustrations with captions, and a bibliography.

A short preliminary outline of your final essay is due one week prior to submission. Your final, written-up piece is due on 15 December (Tuesday) at midnight (please note: if you are a graduating student your final essay is due earlier). Final essays are to be shared directly with Aya, or emailed.

Here are some basic points you should bear in mind:

Title and Topic: How does the title of your work as well as your introduction reflect your objectives? What is the aim of your essay? Be as clear as possible about aims and objectives.

Background Research: How can you include references to some of the required readings from our course in a meaningful way? Have you researched your topic sufficiently? What kinds of sources have you found and where else could you try to find out more about your topic?

Facts and contextual information: Have you acquired sufficient foundational knowledge - e. g. are you aware of the relevant historical contexts and theoretical debates? Have you been able to acquire a sense of the relevant cultural and political debates or issues related to your project's topic?

Interpretations, comparisons and/or overview of scholarship: What kinds of approaches to your topic have you encountered so far? How would you distinguish them in terms of the questions they ask and the methods they apply? How does your own approach relate to them? Don't be afraid to engage with quotes and other references. These should be accompanied by an annotation providing the source reference.

Grading Criteria:

- Line of argument with regard to the question (organization, coherence and execution of the argument);
- Awareness of context and existing literature/scholarship on the topic including our class readings;
- Structure, quality of writing and format (consistent use of annotations, bibliography & list of illustrations).

Policy on Late Submission of Papers

Essays that are up to 24 hours late can be downgraded up to one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where a professor agrees to accept a late assignment, it should be submitted by the new deadline agreed upon by both parties. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment. Grades and comments will be returned to students in a timely fashion. Students are also entitled to make an appointment to discuss essay assignments and feedback during instructors' office hours.

Students will receive feedback for their course work during and at the end of the semester. Students are entitled to make an appointment with an instructor to discuss seminar participation, or may be asked to meet with the instructor at any stage in the semester regarding class progress.

Grade Breakdown

Participation (preparation tasks, short presentations, questions and comments, attendance, punctuality): 30 %

Padlet Responses, uploaded throughout the semester: 30 %

Final Essay: 40 %

Schedule

Scheduled class times will be available online under the relevant course heading:

[BCB Fall Semester 2026 Course Search Page](#)

Week 1

02.09.2011, Wednesday, 14:00
BCB Classroom

Introduction: Experiment, Conflict, Crisis

Definitions and Debates: "Art": Modernism and Postmodernism

Narratives of Modernism, Notions of Difference, Art & Politics, Experiments and Techniques

Readings:

Please read the syllabus carefully and familiarize yourself with the padlet

Marshall Berman, "Introduction. Modernity – Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow". In: *All That Is Solid Melts into the Air* (1982), pp. 15-36;

Watch Robert Hughes, "The Shock of the New. Mechanical Paradise" (Episode 1 of 1980 BBC documentary): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=US6utUdtx48>

Regular Task for all Class Participants:

Add a response to the padlet and be prepared to give a short presentation in class

Week 2

09.09.2026, Wednesday, 14:00 – 17:15

Neue Nationalgalerie. Potsdamer Platz and Gemäldegalerie

Exhibition Visit: "Ruin and Rush"

Themes: Bodies & Portraits, Cityscapes & Landscapes

Reading:

Clement Greenberg, *Modernist Painting* (1961). First published in: *Art and Literature*, 4, 1965;

Briony Fer, "Introduction", In: *Modernity and Modernism. French Painting in the Nineteenth Century*, 1993, pp. 2-49

Week 3

16.09.2026, Wednesday, 14:00 – 17:15

Alte Nationalgalerie, Museum Island

A Crisis in Representation?

Exhibition Visit: Paul Cassirer: The Breakthrough of Impressionism

Meet in front of the Old National Gallery on Museum Island

Readings:

Griselda Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity". In: *Vision and Difference. Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art*, 1988, pp. 50-90;

Additional: Michael Fried, "Introduction". In: *Manet's Modernism*, 1996, 1-24;

Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life" (1863), extracts

Week 4

23.09.2026, Wednesday, 14:00 – 17:15

Museum Barberini, Potsdam

Exhibition Visit: Impressionism: Hasso Plattner Collection; Symphony of Colours: Paul Signac and Neo-Impressionism

Readings:

Stephen F. Eisenman, "The Intransigent Artist or How the Impressionists got their Name." Chapter 19 in *Art in Modern Culture: An Anthology of Critical Texts*, (first published in 1986), pp. 189-197;
T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (1984), excerpts ("Olympia's Choice");
Selected 'letters and documents from *Art in Theory* Anthology

Week 5

30.10.2026, Wednesday, 14:00 – 17:15

BCB Classroom: Review of Weeks 2-4

The Crisis of Modernity: Utopia or Despair

Escaping Modernity? Gauguin, Picasso, Modersohn-Becker, Kirchner et al

Readings:

Peter Bürger, "Introduction". In: *The Theory of the Avantgarde* (first published in 1974);
Hal Foster, "The 'primitive' Unconscious of modern Art." In: *October*, 34, Fall 1985, pp. 45-70;
Gill Perry, "Primitivism and the Modern". In: *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction. The Early Twentieth Century* (1993), pp. 3-85

Week 6

07.10.2026, Wednesday, 14:00 – 17:15

Berlinische Galerie, Alte Jakobstrasse

Exhibition Visit: "Art in Berlin. 1880-1980"

Expressionism, Dada, Constructivism, New Objectivity...

Reading:

Paul Wood, The Revolutionary Avantgardes: Dada, Constructivism and Surrealism. In: Paul Wood (ed.), *The Challenge of the Avant-Garde* (1999), pp. 226-256 (part on Dada, Constructivism and Surrealism)

Week 7

14.10.2026, Wednesday, 14:00 – 17:15

BCB Classroom

Avantgarde, Politics and New Media

Surrealism, Dada; Art, Photography & Film (Walter Benjamin)

Readings:

Marcel Duchamp, The Richard Mutt Case (1917). In: *Art in Theory, 1900-2000* (IIIb/2);
Walter Benjamin, The Art Work in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction (1935) - excerpts

FALL BREAK (19-25 October)

Week 8

28.10.2026, Wednesday, 14:00 – 17:15

Museum Scharf-Gerstenberg, Charlottenburg

Exhibition Visit: "Surreal Worlds"

TBC: Modernist Design: The Bröhan Museum
TBC: Käthe Kollwitz Museum, Charlottenburg

Readings:

Briony Fer, "Surrealism, Myth and Psychoanalysis". In: *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism. Art between the Wars* (1993), pp. 170-203;
David Batchelor, "Dada / From Littérature to La Révolution Surréaliste". In: *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism. Art between the Wars* (1993), pp. 30-61;
Rosalind Krauss, "The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism". In: *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (1985)

Week 9

04.11.2026, Wednesday, 14:00 – 17:15

BCB Classroom

Kitsch, Propaganda and Totalitarianism

Paris World Fair 1937, "Degenerate Art" Show, Reactionary Modernism

TBC: Schloss Schönhausen, Pankow (Exhibition Visit: "Layers of Time")

Readings:

Clement Greenberg: "Avantgarde and Kitsch" (1939). Reprinted in: *Art in Theory, 1900-2000* (IVD/10);
Susan Sonntag, "Fascinating Fascism". In: *New York Review of Books*, vol. 22, no 1 (Feb 6 1975);
Paul Wood, "Conclusion: for and against the avant-garde". In: Paul Wood et al (ed.), *The Challenge of the Avant-Garde* (1999), pp. 257-271

Week 10

11.11.2026, Wednesday, 14:00 – 17:15

Kunsthau Dahlem / Brücke Museum (Meet at Kunsthau Dahlem)

Talk with Dr. Dorothea Schöne

Brücke Museum Exhibition Visit: "Swedish Modernism"

Readings:

TBC

Week 11

18.11.2026, Wednesday, 14:00 – 17:15

Neue Nationalgalerie (near Potsdamer Platz, meet in foyer)

Exhibition visit: "Extreme Tension. Art between Politics and Society"

Readings:

Arthur Danto, "Pop Art and Past Futures". In: Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art* (1997), pp. 116-133;
Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" (1967), excerpts

Week 12

25.11.2026, Wednesday, 14:00 – 17:15

BCB Classroom: Arthur Danto: *After the End of Art*

Readings:

Arthur Danto, "Introduction: Modern, Postmodern, and Contemporary" (Chapter One). In: A. Danto, *After the End of Art*, pp. 2-19;
Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth Century Art* (1972), excerpts;
Joseph Kosuth, "Art after Philosophy" (1969). In: *Art in Theory. 1900-2000* (VII a/10)

Week 13

02.12.2026, Wednesday, 14:00 – 17:15

"Kreuzberg" – Group Exhibition (Working Title) at Martin Gropius Bau
Modernism and Migration

Reading (TBC):

Gregor Langfeld and Tessel M. Bauduin, "Editorial. Modernism in Migration: Relocating Artists, Objects, and Ideas, 1910-1970). In: *Stedelijk Studies*. Access via:

<https://stedelijkstudies.com/journal/modernism-in-migration-editorial/>

Week 14

09.12.2026, Wednesday, 14:00 – 17:15

Conclusion: Modernism and its institutional framing(s)

Reading:

Douglas Crimp, "On the Museums' Ruins". In: *October*, vol. 13, pp. 41-57

Essay and other Deadlines

Weekly Padlet uploads: Tuesdays, 19:00

Final Essay Outline: Tuesday, 8 December, 19:00

Final Essay: Tuesday, 15 December 2026

Library and Book Purchase Policies

All readings are provided digitally.

Additional literature and hard copies of most of the books on the syllabus can be borrowed from the BCB library.