



AH33220

Abstraction: Practice, Theory and History, 1913 to the Present

Module Coordinator: John Harvey

Description

The module argues for the development of abstraction out of a figurative tradition under the impetus of two fundamentally opposing worldviews: religion and materialism. The theme provides the conceptual spine to a chronological discussion of the main tributaries of abstract art (their divergence, confluence, and parallel operation). The module also deals with abstraction as a technical, a stylistic, and an imaginative process, a repository of value-systems or ideology, and as the subject of issue and debate. The focus of the historical inquiry is the period from 1913 to the present. In particular, it examines the growth abstraction in Europe and Russia within the framework of Modernism, and its transplantation in America after the Armory Show. The module also seeks to address abstraction to other forms of cultural expression, and to the philosophical and political climate of the period. In particular, the lectures and seminars will discuss the bifurcation of art culture around the 1950s, consequent to the development of Pop Art on the one hand and various modes of subjectivist and empirical forms of abstraction on the other, and the abstraction of abstraction itself to the condition of art-as-idea in the late 1970s. Finally, the module endeavours to map and explain the re-emergence of abstraction (as a practice and historical/theoretical concern) at the close of the Postmodern period -- in which figurative and neo-conceptual art had been predominant -- and to question whether abstraction is a spent force or able to chart new territories for its operations.

Aims

The module will:

- a) discuss, describe, exemplify abstract art within the frameworks of religious and materialistic thought, social and broader cultural contexts, and in conflict with figurative modes of representation;
- b) examine the commonalities, distinctives, and relationship of various forms of abstraction in terms of their essence, methodologies, theories, aesthetics, historical trajectories, and modes of discourse;
- c) study the technical and stylistic practices related to the making, presentation, and installation of abstract art;
- d) debate the continued relevance or otherwise and future of abstract practices

Outcomes

On completion of this module the student should be able to:

1. understand the historical development of abstraction from 17th century to the present day, including specific case studies and examples;
2. understand a broad range of interrelationships between various abstract practices, methodologies, and ideologies, and of some of the fundamental theoretical and historical apparatus required to comprehend them;
3. comprehend and articulate the issues and practicalities related to textual critiques of, and manifestos on, abstraction;
4. comprehend the emergence and pursuit of abstraction within the contrary environments of religion and materialism.
5. articulate visual responses to abstract art in a concise, reasoned, and informed manner.
6. articulate an understanding of the rationale or thesis governing the curation of an exhibition or display context of abstract art.

Syllabus

A. The Roots of Abstraction: 17th to Early 20th Century Perspectives

- 1 Lecture: The Delimitation of Subject: Austerity and Simplicity in the Calvinist Netherlands **(28 Sep.)**
- 2 Lecture: Towards Contentless Form: From Whistler and Late Monet to Cézanne **(1 Oct.)**
- 3 Lecture: Sight and Vision: Cubism and Orphism **(5 Oct.)**
- 4 Lecture: Communism and Transcendentalism: the Russian Avant-garde and Malevich **(8 Oct.)**
- 5 Lecture: New Religion; New Form: Theosophy, Kandinsky, and Mondrian **(12 Oct.)**
- 6 Seminar: Section A – Consolidation **(15 Oct.)**

B. The Rise of American Modernism

- 7 Lecture: Modernism, Abstraction, and Theory: Preliminary Considerations **(19 Oct.)**
- 8 Lecture: Modernism and History: Political Interpretations of Abstraction During the Cold War Years **(22 Oct.)**
- 9 Lecture: Modernism and Tradition: Form as Content **(26 Oct.)**
- 10 Lecture: Modernism in America: the Roots of Abstraction from the Armory Show to the Late 1930s. **(29 Oct.)**
- 11 Lecture: Action as Content: Jackson Pollock and Abstract Expressionism **(2 Nov.)**

- 12 Lecture: The Existential Sublime: Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman **(5 Nov.)**
- 13 Lecture: Bridging the Divide: Pop Art v Abstraction **(9 Nov.)**
- 14 Lecture: The Seduction of Reduction: From Post-Painterly Abstraction to Minimalism **(12 Nov.)**
- 15 Lecture: Abstraction to Idea: Conceptualism and the Dematerialisation of Form **(16 Nov.)**
- 16 Seminar: Section B – Consolidation & Essay Preparation **(19 Nov.)**

C. Abstraction and Landscape: USA and UK Perspectives

- 17 *Lecture*: Landscape and Abstraction: Richard Diebenkorn's 'Ocean Park' Series **(23 Nov.)**

D. Postmodernism and Recent Abstraction

- 18 Lecture: Beyond the Crisis in Late Modernism: Abstraction v Figuration **(26 Nov.)**
- 19 Lecture: 'Off the Wall': Neo-Minimalist and New-Conceptualist Sculptural Abstractions **(30 Nov.)**
- 20 Lecture: The New-Modernism: Abstract Painting Since 1970s **(3 Dec.)**
- 21 Seminar: Sections C & D – Consolidation **(7 Nov.)**

Assessment

Essay (3,500 word text)	60%
Exhibition Report (2,500 word text)	40%

Indicative Bibliography

Essential Reading:

Bob Nickas, *Painting Abstraction: New Elements in Abstract Painting*, London: Phaidon, 2009.

Jean Martin, *Art, Religion, Politics*, Five Continents Edn, 2005.

Maria Lind (ed.) *Abstraction (Documents of Contemporary Art)* London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2013

Further Reading:

Sam Hunter and John Jacobus, *American Art in the Twentieth Century*, New York: Prentice Hall and Abrams, 1973.

Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds) *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992.

Gregory Battock (ed.), *The New Art: A Critical Anthology*, 1966 New York: Dutton, revised edition, 1973.

Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticisms*, 2 vols, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986.

John A. Walker, *Art in an Age of Mass Media*, London: Pluto Press, 1983.

Richard Hertz, *Theories of Contemporary Art*, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1985.

Edward Lucie-Smith et al, *The New British Painting*, Oxford: Phaidon, 1985.

Tony Godfrey, *The New Image: Painting in the 1980s*, Oxford: Phaidon, 1986

Corinne Robins, *The Pluralist Era*, Icon Editions, New York: Harper and Row, 1984.