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:

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:


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:

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:


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


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

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