Art History

Semester 6: European Art 1950–2025

This semester explores the world of contemporary art from the post-World War II reconstruction to the present day. It focuses on the survival of the avant-garde tradition, the emergence of conceptualism, performance and media art, and the rethinking of the social and political functions of art.

**Featured artists and works:**

Joseph Beuys: I Like America and America Likes Me

Orlan: Refiguration – plastic performances

Gerhard Richter: October 18, 1977

Anselm Kiefer: Seraphim

Sophie Calle: Suite vénitienne

Marina Abramović: Rhythm 0, The Artist is Present

Forensic Architecture: Saydnaya: Inside a Syrian Torture Prison

Refik Anadol: Machine Hallucinations

**Weekly breakdown (14 weeks)**

Week 1: Introduction: What is contemporary art?

The “contemporary” as an art historical category

The cultural situation of Europe after the Second World War

Art institutions, biennales, the curatorial role

How can one write an “art history” about what is still alive?

Week 2: European versions of abstract expressionism

Art Informel, Lyrical Abstraction

Georges Mathieu, Hans Hartung, Jean Fautrier

The primacy of material, gesture and expression

Art Informel as a language of trauma

Week 3: The legacy of surrealism and the new figuration

Francis Bacon (in a British context)

Lucian Freud, Antonio Saura, Cobra group

Existentialist figuration

Bacon’s body image and the anxiety of existence

Week 4: The beginnings of conceptual art

The non-objective work, language and thought

Yves Klein, Piero Manzoni, Joseph Kosuth (European connections)

The work as event, instruction, documentation

“Is the idea more important than the object?” – discussion on conceptualism

Week 5: Fluxus and performance art

Joseph Beuys, Wolf Vostell, Valie Export

Politics, pedagogy, use of the body

Art as social intervention

Beuys: “Every man is an artist” – utopia or strategy?

Week 6: Pop art and the critique of mass culture

Richard Hamilton, Eduardo Paolozzi, Gerhard Richter (early works)

Advertising, comics, media

Critical and ironic pop

Pop and politics: the new language of the image

Week 7: Minimalism, concept and photo-based art

Roman Opalka, Bernd & Hilla Becher, Hans Haacke

Systems, archive, series, time

The relationship between documentary and abstraction

The photograph as a work of art or evidence?

Week 8: New Painting and Postmodern Eclecticism (1970–90)

Anselm Kiefer, Markus Lüpertz, Jörg Immendorff

New Savages, New Expression

History, Trauma and Ironical Quotation

Can Painting Make a Comeback?

Week 9: Alternative Modernities of Central and Eastern Europe

Polish Poster Art, Hungarian Concept (Miklós Erdély, Tibor Hajas)

Czech Performance, Ex-Yugoslav Body Art (Marina Abramović)

The Visual Language of Samizdat and Alternative Culture

Art Outside the System: Resistance or Aesthetics?

Week 10: Feminist and gender-oriented art

Orlan, VALIE EXPORT, Sanja Iveković, Catherine Opie

Body, identity, subject criticism

Deconstructing the female body

The body as text – feminist art analysis strategies

Week 11: Installation, spatial art, land art

Christian Boltanski, Ilya Kabakov, Tania Mouraud

Space as a medium and a place of memory

Social installations and environmental interventions

The exhibition space as an experience machine

Week 12: Media and digital art

Video, sound, internet, interactive installations

Nam June Paik (in a European context), Rafael Lozano-Hemmer

Artificial intelligence, NFT and algorithmic art

“What does the machine do?” – the relationship between technology and the artist

Week 13: Contemporary themes: migration, memory, ecology

Postcolonial perspectives in Europe

The borderlands of activism and art

Forensic Architecture, Omer Fast, Doris Salcedo (connections)

The social responsibility of art – can it be activism?

Week 14: Summary: Art of the present and questions of the future

Institutions of contemporary art (Documenta, biennials, online platforms)

Problems of “global art”

Summary: what kind of art can come next?

“Contemporary art = anything?” – closing discussion

**Suggested reading:**

Terry Smith: What is Contemporary Art?

Claire Bishop: Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship

Boris Groys: Art Power

Uros Cvoro: Post-Yugoslav Art and Neoliberalism

For the Domestic Context: Contemporary Art – Studies and Interviews (Studio of Young Artists)

**Exam Questions (20)**

These questions cover post-World War II art movements, new media, social roles and aesthetic shifts, including current contemporary trends, chronologically and thematically.

Reconstruction, abstraction, expression (1950–1970)

1. European versions of abstract expressionism – Art Informel and Lyrical Abstraction: Mathieu, Hartung, Fautrier – gesture, material, post-war expression

2. Surviving surrealism and new figuration: Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud – distorted body, existentialism, metaphysics of flesh

3. The spiritual program of abstraction: Kandinsky’s legacy in Europe – Abstract form, music, transcendence

Concept, performance, interaction (1960–1980)

4. The beginnings and principles of conceptual art – The primacy of the idea, use of language, documentation

5. Joseph Beuys and the concept of social sculpture – Artist = teacher, activist, shaman – community-forming practice

6. The role of flux and performance art in the breakdown of borders: Vostell, Export, Paik – body, happening, media criticism

Painting and the return to the visual (1970–1990)

7. New painting: Anselm Kiefer and images of the German historical past – Ash, mythology, texture, destruction and memory

8. The toolbox of postmodern painting: quotation, irony, eclecticism: Markus Lüpertz, Jörg Immendorff, Francesco Clemente

9. The transavant-garde and new expressive aspirations in Europe – Destruction and reconstruction of form

Photography, technology, body, typography

10. The rise of photo-based art: Bernd and Hilla Becher, Boltanski, Sophie Calle – documentation, series, memory

11. The body as a medium: feminist art from the 70s: Orlan, VALIE EXPORT, Sanja Iveković – body politics, camera, control

12. The relationship between art and technology before the digital turn – Video art, typography, machine aesthetics

Space, memory, identity (1990–2010)

13. Installation as a general art medium: Boltanski, Kabakov, Whiteread – memory, site-specific thinking

14. Alternative modernities of Central and Eastern Europe: Miklós Erdély, Tibor Hajas, Marina Abramović – body, trauma, state power

15. Migration, identity, postcolonialism in contemporary art: Yinka Shonibare, Bouchra Khalili (European context), diaspora aesthetics

Contemporary art (2010–2025)

16. Contemporary European activist art and political intervention: Forensic Architecture, Peng! Collective, aesthetics of social justice

17. Digital and new media art: video, VR, AI, NFT – Interactive installations, artificial intelligence, post-digital aesthetics

18. Ecological and climate-conscious art: Olafur Eliasson, Joana Moll, ecocriticism, use of materials

Thematic items

19. The institutional system of contemporary art: museum, biennial, curator – Presentation, interpretation, transmission of art

20. What counts as art today? – borderlands, open media, visions of the future – Performance, activism, artificial artists, blurring of the boundary between viewer and work