

Relationality in American Art
Speaker Abstracts

Jennifer Doyle, Professor, Department of English, University of California, Riverside
“Marxism for Artists: Life in the Iron Mills/Death of the Artist”

For several months last year, Jennifer Doyle led a reading group with this talk’s title. This reading group was intended to create a space for artists and art workers to read and discuss Marx together, and to do that through a shared primary text — “Life in the Iron Mills,” an 1861 short story centered on an iron worker with the soul of an artist.

Published in the April 1861 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, this short story centers on Hugh Wolfe, an iron mill worker with the soul of an artist, and a sculpture he produces from “korf,” a form of industrial waste produced in iron milling. Davis’s story pivots around a scene in which the factory owner leads bourgeois men on a tour of the factory floor. They encounter Hugh’s sculpture, stand around it and discuss not only its meaning, but the obligations of the capitalist to his workers. This triggers a set of events that lead to Hugh’s incarceration and suicide. It is a grim tale. In this lecture, Doyle will map some of the networks of relation that hold this story — including the story’s historical and geopolitical location (in a border region marking the space between free states, written in the year preceding the outbreak of the U.S. Civil War). The story demands a Black feminist Marxist reading — meaning, a mode of working towards understanding the ways that racial capitalism structures our relationships to each other, as well as our sense of value.

People are encouraged to read this story in advance. This is not essential, however, for enjoying this lecture. Below are three different ways to access Davis’s story, including an annotated google doc produced by participants in “Marxism for Artists.”

Marxism for Artists document: [Life in the Iron Mills as an annotated google doc](#)
Rebecca Harding Davis, ["Life in the Iron Mills" gutenbergetext](#)
Free audiobook via Librivox: ["Life in the Iron Mills" read by Elizabeth Klett](#)

“Intimate Relations: Touch and Gaze Across Media in the Collaborative Portraits of Laura Gilpin and Brenda Putnam”

**Louise Siddons, Fulbright Fellow, Eccles Centre for American Studies at the British Library;
Associate Professor, Oklahoma State University**

‘I’m working away quite feverishly on you’, was sculptor Brenda Putnam’s opening gambit in a 1932 letter to her model, friend and former lover Laura Gilpin. I used to have a girlfriend who was really hard to get off, too. She demanded precise technique, and it still took hours—so when I read Putnam’s complaint that her hands were ‘getting quite rheumatic working in wet clay all day!’, I didn’t just empathize—I had a phenomenological reaction, à la Vivian Sobchack watching the opening scene of *The Piano*. In this paper, I consider how a series of photographs made by Gilpin of the sculpted portraits Putnam made of her queer our definitions of (self-)portraiture and lesbian affect(ion). The two women constructed concentric and overlapping relations: Gilpin looks at Putnam sculpting a portrait of Gilpin for which she had modeled while the two women looked directly at each other—and now we look, too. Centering my own response as a lesbian viewer, I propose that Gilpin and Putnam conspired to index and even overdetermine their lesbian relation to their practice through their self-conscious interplay of touch and gaze. In so doing, they suggest a relational erotics of artmaking that emphatically centers lesbian subjectivity—and invites us, as critics and historians, to do likewise.

“Joan Mitchell: Cultivating our Perceptual Nature”

Helen Fielding, Professor, Department of Philosophy/Gender, Sexuality and Women’s Studies,
University of Western Ontario

Joan Mitchell’s abstract expressionist paintings resist the imposition of concepts, revealing the way nature opens up to her and to her paintings’ viewers with its influxes, interflows, crosscurrents, mixtures and interpenetrations. In this paper, drawing on Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenological approach to perception I encounter *Un Jardin pour Audrey* (1975), a large diptych oil on canvas that solicits my gaze with its riot of oranges, greens, yellows and pinks. The painting’s colors pose to my body a kind of questioning, an “existential rhythm,” that attracts or repels. My “gaze pairs off” with the colors in a chiasmic “exchange” between the sensing and the sensible, with neither one nor the other dominating the relation. As a sensible work that is on the verge of being sensed it poses the question of how to look at it as a “sort of confused problem.” My body must adjust itself, gear into the work and find the “attitude” that will allow it to come into being for me as “the response to a poorly formulated question.” Mitchell’s paintings enact ethics by cultivating embodied phenomenal perception to be open to alterity, to that which alters us. The paintings work in me without me. They draw on colors and lines that beckon to bodies to respond. Whereas Cézanne brought the logic of corporeal perception into appearance, Mitchell transposes other corporeal metabolisms onto the visual plane. Her works reveal the expansiveness of perception to the possibilities of these alternate and invisible metabolisms for opening up our relations to nature. They reveal how she bends into the lines of nature, and how nature opens her up to new and generative forms of expression. It is not just a way of seeing; it is a relational practice that resists the imposition of forms. This is the meaning of nature in its Greek sense of *physis* as generativity.

“Dirty Looks: Kelvin Burzon’s and Xandra Ibarra’s Relational Performances of the Rorschach”
stefan torralba, PhD Candidate, Department of English, University of California, Riverside

This talk examines contemporary aesthetic practices by U.S.-based queer artists of color who appropriate the famous psychoanalytic exercise, the Rorschach test (or “the inkblot test”), which became prominent in American popular culture starting in the 1960s. This talk centers two aesthetic practices in particular: the visual and interactive Internet-based multimedia project, *She’s on the Rag* (2013), by queer Chicana artist, Xandra Ibarra; and the video performance piece, *Rorschach: Dream Sequence* (2015) by gay Filipino American artist, Kelvin Burzon. I argue that, as rehearsals of the Rorschach test, *She’s on the Rag* and *Rorschach: Dream Sequence*, employ the artists’ body as aesthetic materials to critique the racializing processes that structure hegemonic visual regimes. Simultaneously, these projects also critique visual technologies like photography and video that have historically attempted to render queer, racial subjects as knowable objects through a white, male colonial gaze. Through this dual schema, I further argue that Ibarra’s and Burzon’s aesthetic practices disrupt hegemonic visual economies in order to unsettle the relational logics between viewing subject and viewed object that demand knowability. By enacting this rupture, *She’s on the Rag* and *Rorschach: Dream Sequence* open the possibility for imagining more ethical, reparative modalities of relationality that are premised on illegibility and difference. Such reparative relationalities point toward novel pathways for transformative and collective healing that allow queers of color to confront and work through the trauma, melancholia, and debasement of queer, racial life under regimes of colonial, imperial, cisheterosexual white supremacy.

“Mitákuye Oyás’ij: Relations between Buffalo, People, and Place in Plains Painting”
Ramey Mize, University of Pennsylvania, PhD Candidate, History of Art; Douglass Foundation
Fellow in American Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art

“The buffalo is the chief of all the animals and represents the earth, the totality of all that is.”
—Heháka Sápa (Black Elk) (Oglála Lakǰóta, 1863–1950)

Scholars often remark on a “lack” of landscape representation in buffalo hide paintings by Indigenous artists of the North American Great Plains. Though Euro-American pictorial conventions like horizon lines and linear perspective are generally absent, this paper locates an alternate, vital site of landscape in the tanned surface of buffalo hide itself. Emerging as an essential provider of both physical and spiritual sustenance for Plains people in the late 1600s, buffalo formed the basis for a collective sense of place—one that has continued despite the species’ near extinction at the turn of the twentieth century.

The worldviews of Lakǰótas, Kiowas, Mandans, and other Plains nations reflect a relational structure of kinship between humans and non-human beings. In accordance with the Lakǰóta phrase, *Mitákuye Oyás’ij* (“all are related”), buffalo constitute relatives. Living on the buffalo, living on the land—these experiences were inextricable for Plains peoples. Buffalo thus embody an indelible part for the whole, and skins signify far more than blank, inanimate ground.

Prioritizing Indigenous epistemologies and pursuing an anti-colonial art history, I argue that it is possible to see the Plains landscape, metonymically and materially, in the flesh of hide paintings. I also explore how this elision of land and material persists, even as Native artists replaced hide with other media in the twentieth century. In Salish artist Jaune Quick-to-See Smith’s 1977 *Ronan Robes* series, for instance, she applies the hide-tanning process to cotton canvas. Just as nineteenth-century buffalo hide paintings called forth the landscape, the *Ronan Robes* call it back. Following *Mitákuye Oyás’ij* as methodology, this paper proposes the buffalo as an ongoing source of place-based relations in Plains art.

“Poetics of Relation: Édouard Glissant and Wifredo Lam’s *Livres des artistes*”

Kate Keohane, Associate Lecturer, History of Art, University of St Andrews

Towards the end of his life, the key theorist of relation, Édouard Glissant developed plans for a ‘Martinican Museum for the Arts of the Americas’. Following Glissant’s death in 2011, a number of curatorial initiatives have sought to utilise the forms of Glissant’s unrealised museum through systems of ‘archipelagic curation’ that adopt a particular form of relationality that risks eliding the social and political motivations of the original project. Through analysis of Wifredo Lam’s previously under-examined *Livres des artistes*, this paper recontextualises and re-interrogates the significance of Glissant’s approach to relationality for the reading of visual art.

Glissant’s philosophy of relation was inspired by Lam, and Lam was one of the key artists to feature within Glissant’s museum. Following a journey to the Americas in 1941 with artists and writers fleeing Nazism, Lam developed a printmaking practice to illustrate the work of contemporaries including Antonin Artaud, Aimé Césaire, and André Breton. In 1955 Lam illustrated one of Glissant’s early poems, *La terre inquiète*, with three lithographs. Emphasising difference, semiotics, and a predisposition towards the idea of the landscape as sign/poem: the reading together of these works offers an alternative way of interpreting Glissant’s understanding of both the arts of the Americas, and his definition of relationality more broadly. Foregrounding ruptures and chaotic experiences of landscape and language, both Glissant and Lam’s works leave space for the viewer to relate and reimagine through awareness of individualised processes of encounter and both lived and fantastical interconnectivity.

“Embodiment, De/Industrialization, and Environmental Justice in LaToya Ruby Frazier’s *On the Making of Steel Genesis: Sandra Gould Ford*”

Siobhan Angus, Banting Postdoctoral Fellow in the History of Art, Yale University

Through a case study of LaToya Ruby Frazier’s cyanotype photographs of the steel industry in America’s rust belt, I theorize relationality from the perspective of the environmental humanities. I argue that Frazier’s photographs make a clear link between materiality and meaning as they use iron as a light-sensitive material to create prints that illuminate histories of steel—an alloy of iron—communities. As an element, iron is present in human bodies, photographic prints, and infrastructure. Iron is a mineral necessary for human health, but industrial processes introduce industrial toxins and mineral imbalances into bodies, causing disease. However, as her practice reveals, the same chemicals that cause harm can be used in as light-sensitive materials to document these practices and processes. Frazier’s embodied portraits materialize the porous boundaries between bodies, industry, and elements, revealing the unstable boundaries between nature and culture, providing an entry point to undo one of art histories most enduring binaries. I position relationality against extraction, which I read in a threefold way: as a material process, as a worldview, and as a way of engaging. I argue that an emphasis on relationality decenters extractive processes, introducing an ethics of care which confronts the extractive gaze of neoliberal austerity that renders lives, landscapes, and histories disposable.

“Relationality in Viktor Lowenfeld’s ‘Social Haptics’”

Rachel Stratton, Postdoctoral Fellow at the Paul Mellon Centre, London

While teaching at the Hampton Institute, VA, in the Jim Crow South of the 1940s, the art educator, psychologist and Jewish refugee Viktor Lowenfeld sought to instill ‘haptic creativity’ in his African American students. In contrast to visual creativity, which took cues from the observed world, Lowenfeld claimed the haptic centered emotion, intuition and the fleshly body, and was a vital means for the African American artist to circumvent the traditions of a predominantly white art establishment, reconnect with their African heritage and had the potential to facilitate societal healing across racial divides.

Lowenfeld’s impact on black activist artists including John T. Biggers and Samella Sanders Lewis is well documented, but the link he made between haptic creativity and racial justice remains elusive. This paper explores Lowenfeld’s ‘social haptic’ (Anneke Prins Simons, 1972) using phenomenological ideas about the interrelatedness of subject/object and self/world to unpack Lowenfeld’s relational understanding of African American artistic subjectivity, which held that the ‘minority status and restrictions’ placed on this group necessitated placement of ‘the self in value relationship to his environment’ (Lowenfeld, 1945).

Focusing on the 1943 exhibition ‘Young Negro Art’ at MoMA, which showcased work by Lowenfeld’s students, the paper draws on Michel Henry’s poles between ‘life’ and ‘representation’ to consider artworks such as Biggers’ *Dying Soldier* (1942), not as representations of African American life, but as ‘intensifications of life’ (Henry, 1996). It suggests that Lowenfeld regarded these artworks as sites of phenomenological consciousness-building that established dialogic relationality between the African American artist and MoMA’s majority white, middle-class audiences, and disrupted MoMA’s institutional construction of Modernism.

“Re-Thinking and Re-Grouping: On the Politics of Phenomenology and Touch in Late 1960s America”

Kristen Carter, Assistant Professor, Department of Art History, Florida Southern College

By the late 1960s and early 1970s a new generation of artists began reevaluating the phenomenological thought of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose *Phenomenology of Perception* had become a touchstone for Minimalist artists in the U.S. If the latter had made use of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of perception’s necessary embodiment to contest Modernist “opticality,” this paper suggests that—for a new generation of artists invested in touch—it was the insistence on the intersubjectivity of consciousness that provided both theoretical and political foundations for new, relational work.

Nowhere is this insistence more clearly recognized than in the work of Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica, who in 1969 travelled together to Los Angeles to participate in the first ever International Tactile Sculpture Symposium. By situating both artists’ work and writings in the context of 1960s counterculture and socio-political unrest, and the symposium’s own interests in touch and phenomenological experience, I ask how Clark and Oiticica’s participation in the symposium exposes mounting debates regarding the socialized body and the political viability of collective experience in late 1960s America. Crucial to this analysis is an unpublished essay penned by Oiticica for the purposes of the symposium, in which he recasts his own understandings of touch and intersubjectivity with renewed political force. When taken together, I argue this little-known symposium reveals an important, and much wider history of relational art practices as they developed in the U.S., and alongside new conceptions of personal freedom and collective agency.

“Black Unrest”

Kimberly Bain, John Holmes Assistant Professor in the Humanities, Department of English, Tufts University

What forms of undoneness emerge at the sites of Black unrest? Black unrest, here, reflects the histories and practices of Black rage and protest in the face of an anti-Black world; it also illumines and attends to the impossibility of Black persons being at and finding rest. It is this latter aspect that defines the contours of this paper. Namely, I sojourn with Black unrest at two sites of Black ecstatic rage: the Washington D.C. 2021 memorial for Breonna Taylor and the 2017 piece, “Dance Card, or How to Say Anger When You Lose Control,” by Jibade-Khalil Huffman.

Both texts—social and visual—theorize a practice of Black unrest through footwork. As I argue, the ambulatory gestures of the feet (Huffman’s palimpsestic and layered footprint imagery, as well as the swaying, hugging, bouncing bodies at the memorial) map the cartographies of the individual subject becoming overwhelmed and undone. This undoneness necessarily emerges from the practice and at the site of unrest via a gestural simultaneity that escape capture by systems of commensuration like the law, capital, or white bourgeois sociality.

By undoing the individual subject, both texts summon the absent-yet-present Black dead and articulate the fugitive movements of the Black living as a means of putting the Black self (which is always necessarily multiple) to rest. In short: it is precisely through the ecstatic loss of control (undoneness) in both texts that the singular Black body is unmade and emptied; in this emptying, the capacity to rest emerges.