

PRACTICES OF OBSERVATION | Spring 2020

UTNS 5140 A/ CRN: 7357

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Office Hours by appointment

Friday 12.10 – 2.50pm

University Center, Room 601

COURSE DESCRIPTION

“But what sort of sense is constitutive of this everydayness? Surely this sense includes much that is not sense so much as sensuousness, and embodied and somewhat automatic ‘knowledge’ that functions like peripheral vision, not studied contemplation, a knowledge that is imageric and sensate rather than ideational; as such it not only challenges practically all critical practice across the board of academic disciplines but is a knowledge that lies as much in the objects and spaces of observation as in the body and mind of the observer”

Taussig [1992]

This course aims to provoke dialogue about practices of observation, and invent new ways of looking. What exactly does it mean to “observe”? Observation is neither neutral nor passive—the very process of looking can both shape the thing being observed and change the person who is doing the looking. This course will explore the ways that the very act of structured attention changes the perceiver(s) and by extension creates new experiences and understandings. We will investigate how past practices of observation have actually defined what we know about the world and how structured and documented observations might instigate change. Students will explore new ways of observing in order to deepen their existing research. Inspired by precedents—e.g. the archives of everyday life created by the British Mass Observation Movement; practices used by German polymath Alexander von Humboldt; current research of the Observational Practices Lab: objectamerica.org.—students will develop their own experimental ways to observe an object, from the rigorously structured to the playfully

absurd. These new practices of observation—including senses, specialized instruments, and speculation—will be developed, conducted and recorded in the conceptual framework of Fluxus event scores linking back to John Cage’s teaching at The New School during the 1950s. This collection of “Observation Event Scores”—brief verbal or visual notations—will inspire students to apply different ways of looking at their object of investigation.

Please note: This syllabus has a schedule that is in-process. You will find detailed information with assignments and expected preparations on the class website: <http://www.observationalpractices.org/category/spring20/>

COURSE SCHEDULE

The object of investigation (weeks 1-4)

Selecting an object of focus to deepen your existing research.

“My experience is what I agree to attend to. Only those items which I notice shape my mind...”

William James

To explore the very concept of observation you will apply diverse practices of observation to a single “object” over several weeks (this “object” could be a thing/ a site/ specific people/ a recurring situation, etc.). As a group, we will look into ways to identify a single object that will deepen your existing research or instigate new research questions that you are interested in exploring.

Week 1: 1/24 Introduction

- General class introduction and review of syllabus
- What is the Observational Practices Lab
- Observation exercise: What is an ice cube?
- Observation Scores & Scientific Atlases

For Next Week:

Deconstruct your creative process

Week 2: 1/31 *Objects of Observation*

- Research Topic Reprise (Chance Operations)
- Case Study Exchange
- Deconstructing the creative process: Observation/Visualization
- Identifying your working object(s)

For Next Week:

(3 objects/ 1 method) Choose three possible “objects” of study (concrete thing to be observed/ manifestation of your research interest). Spend 30 minutes observing each of these. Record what you observed. (Beginning of observation archive)

Week 3: 2/07 *Objects of Observation: senses*

- Object of Research/ Concrete Manifestation discussion:
How does the *act* of focus shift the *object* of research? How did you choose to record what you observed? How did the act of recording change the observation itself? Are there alternate, experimental methods that might yield different results (discuss and identify in order to apply them this week).

For Next Week:

(1 object/ 3 methods) Identify the “object” of study that seemed to have the most potential or that extends your current research in an interesting manner. Return to it and employ three experimental methods of observations. Translate each observation into instructions (Observation Scores) of less than 10 lines.

Week 4: 2/14 *Objects of Observation: tools and speculation*

- Discuss one object—three experimental methods. Exchange methods.
- Workshop group formation based on research interests and strategies: what can be learned for both hosts and participants in the workshop? How can the outcomes extend your research individually and as a group?

For Next Week:

Submit a proposal for your workshop before Wednesday:

1. Workshop logistics: Title of the “Observation Score” we will be participating in. Where is the workshop held? How is the furniture in the room set up? What is the lighting? Will there be sound? How many chairs? What props? Are you using specialized instruments? What do participants need to bring (try to keep this cheap and easy)?
2. Readings: How do the readings support / seed the workshop?
Parameters: 2 short readings; please keep the total pages to less than 12 (excerpts with contextual summary works well). Bring the reading to our individual meetings next week.

Week 5: 2/21 Workshop Preparation

Individual meetings to discuss the proposal for your workshop.

Practices of Observation Workshops (weeks 6-8)

Student-led Workshops to field test experimental observational methods

As a workshop-instructor, you will share a set of three readings a week in advance. These readings should come out of your existing research practices and there is no need to look for something completely new – just select articles or chapters of books that inspired you the most so far. You can also ask the group to bring in simple tools or instruments (like a measure tape, a mobile phone, paper, pen, a laptop). You will initiate your workshop with a short and simple “observational score” – take a look at the fluxus event score book for syntax/examples. You can stick to a single instruction (which will then take up to 30 min) or introduce a series of shorter micro-observations. After the observation, the class will discuss the experience and give feedback on how the initial observational score could be modified or extended. The collected instructions of all workshops will be “published” as the Observational Score Book I.

Week 6: 2/28 Experimental Observation Workshops

- Lab: test observational methodologies/ techniques in the world (Group One)

Readings and Resources for Next Week:

TBD defined by the host group/ posted on our class website

Week 7: 3/06 *Experimental Observation Workshops*

- Lab: test observational methodologies/ techniques in the world (Group Two)

Readings and Resources for Next Week:

TBD defined by the host group/ posted on our class website

Week 8: 3/13 *Experimental Observation Workshops*

- Lab: test observational methodologies/ techniques in the world (Group Three)

Readings and Resources for Next Week:

TBD defined by the host group/ posted on our class website

****Please note Spring Break March 16-March 22****

Practices of Observation Guest Research Workshops (weeks 9-11)

Week 9: 3/27 *Guest Researcher Conversations*

Readings and Resources for Next Week:

TBD defined by the guest researchers/ posted on our class website

Week 10: 4/03 *Guest Researcher Conversations*

Readings and Resources for Next Week:

TBD defined by the guest researchers/ posted on our class website

Week 11: 4/10 *Experimental Observation Workshops*

Readings and Resources for Next Week:

TBD defined by the guest researchers/ posted on our class website

Final Projects (weeks 12-15)

Outcomes of your observational inquiry – how will you shape your Observation Archive / Atlas?

Week 12: 04/17 *Circulating your Findings*

- Discussion and exchange—possible formats for circulating observations/observational outcomes

For Next Week:

Week 13: 4/24 *Interdisciplinary Feedback Session*

Week 14: 5/01 *Work Session*

Week 15: 5/08 Final Open Studio and Publication of Workshop Event Scores

Learning Outcomes

By the successful completion of this course, students will be able to:

Observational Practices:

1. Understand Observation as a crucial practice in creative and analytical processes and demonstrate the ability to apply selected methodologies to own work.

Collaboration:

2. Demonstrate a solid understanding of several methodologies for observing, documenting and circulating related to the challenges and opportunities put forward with an external partner. Collaborate effectively by practicing responsive, inclusive and engaged communication and design work with peers.

Iterative Process:

3. Design creative and effective prototypes related to the assignments, implement changes based on feedback and conversations.

Articulation & Presentation:

4. Articulate their own methodologies for collaborative research and creative design within their presentations, discussions and written responses.

Cross-Disciplinary Thinking

5. Exercising creativity as a practice through iterative problem solving; designing and implementing cross-disciplinary strategies content that addresses complex issues in individual, collaborative, and social contexts; taking risks; synthesizing ideas in innovative ways. (e.g., brainstorming, executing, risk taking, experimentation, inventing, transforming, destroying, flexibility, learning from failure, hacking, piloting, beta-testing, iterating, prototyping)

Working in Complex Systems

6. Situating oneself and communicating within broader contexts (historical, cultural, geographic, political); using the urban environment as a laboratory for navigating, engaging with, and affecting complex systems. (e.g., wayfinding, developing a point of view, networking, critical cartography)

Shared Capacities: Flexibility and Resiliency

7. Cultivating an awareness of one's own learning process; observing one's past, present, and future trajectory; articulating personal methods to set and reach goals; fostering the skills and agility to adapt to ever-changing circumstances and settings; envisioning oneself as a lifelong learner. (e.g., self-observation, planning, self-evaluating, articulating, clarifying)

Evaluation and Final Grade Calculation

Active Participation / Attendance	20 %
Workshop	20 %
Observation Scores	20 %
Final Project Proposal	10 %
Final Project	<u>30 %</u>
TOTAL	100%

Readings

Berger, John. (1972) *Ways of seeing* (Pages 7-33). London: British Broadcasting Corporation.

Cox, Geoff. (2016). Ways of Machine Seeing: An Introduction, APRJA Research Journal. Aarhus: DARC (Digital Aesthetics Research Centre), Aarhus University.

Crary, Jonathan. (1990). Modernity and the Problem of the Observer. In *Techniques of the Observer* (pp. 1-24). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Crary, Jonathan. (1990). Subjective Vision and the Separation of the Senses. In *Techniques of the Observer* (pp. 67-96). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Daston, L. (2011). The Empire of Observation 1600-1800. In *Histories of Scientific Observation* (Eds. Daston, L. and Lunbeck, E.). (Pages 81-116). Chicago and London: University of Chicago.

Highmore, B. (2011). Familiar Things. In *Ordinary Lives, Studies in the Everyday* (Pages 58-86). New York, NY: Routledge.

Jay, M. (2011). In the Realm of the Senses: An Introduction, *The American Historical Review*, Volume 116, Issue 2, 1 April 2011, Pages 307–315

Jutte, R. (2005). Approaching the Suprahistorical. In, *A History of the Senses: From Antiquity to Cyberspace*. (Pages 8-20). Malden, Mass: Polity.

Jutte, R. (2005). Psi Phenomena, or the Exploration of Extra-Sensory Perception (Pages 309-324). In, *A History of the Senses: From Antiquity to Cyberspace*. (Pages 8-20). Malden, Mass: Polity.

Kriss, Sam. (2017). You Think with the World, Not Just Your Brain, On the mystery and wonder of extended cognition, *The Atlantic* October 13

Norman, D. (1990). The Psychopathology of Everyday Things. (Pages 1-33). *The design of everyday things*. New York: Doubleday.

Norman, Donald A. (2005). Three Levels of Design: Visceral, Behavioral, and Reflective. (Pages 63-98). *Emotional Design: why we love (or hate) everyday things*. New York: Basic Books.

Park, K. (2011). Observation in the Margins, 500-1500. In *Histories of Scientific Observation* (Eds. Daston, L. and Lunbeck, E.). (Pages 16-44). Chicago and London: University of Chicago.

- Meli, D. (2011) The Color of Blood. In *Histories of Scientific Observation* (Eds. Daston, L. and Lunbeck, E.). (Pages 117-134). Chicago and London: University of Chicago.
- Mirzoeff, N. (2006). On Visuality, *journal of visual culture* London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi: SAGE Publications, Vol 5(1), Pages 53–79
- Sacks, O. (2005). The Mind's Eye, What the Blind See. In Howes. D. (Eds.), *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*. (Pages 59-69). Oxford, UK ; New York : Berg.
- Stewart, S. (2005). Remembering the Senses. In Howes. D. (Eds.), *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*. (Pages 59-69). Oxford, UK ; New York : Berg.
- Szendy, P. (2008). Listen : A History of Our Ears. US, US: Fordham University Press. ProQuest ebrary. Web. 20 September 2016.
- Woodward, S (2015) Object interviews, material imaginings and 'unsettling' methods: interdisciplinary approaches to understanding materials and material culture. *Qual. Res.* 2016; 16: 359–374

PRACTICUM/ On writing Instructions:

- Cortázar, Julio (1999) "Instructions Manual" (Selections) in *Cronopios and Famas* Translated by Paul Blackburn. NY: New Directions Classics
- See also: A visual essay based on Cortazar's "Instructions on How to Climb a Staircase" available at: <https://vimeo.com/96104610> (Links to an external site.)Links to an external site.
- Sennett, R. (2008). Expressive Instruction. In *The Craftsman* (Pages 179-193). New Haven & London: Yale University Press.
- Ono, Y. (2000). Excerpts in *Grapefruit*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Resources

The university provides many resources to help students achieve academic and artistic excellence. These resources include:

- The University (and associated) Libraries
- The University Learning Center
- University Disabilities Service

In keeping with the university's policy of providing equal access for students with disabilities, any student with a disability who needs academic accommodations is welcome to meet with me privately. All conversations will be kept confidential. Students requesting any accommodations will also need to contact Student Disability Service (SDS). SDS will conduct an intake and, if appropriate, the Director will provide an academic accommodation notification letter for you to bring to me. At that point, I will review the letter with you and discuss these accommodations in relation to this course.

Making Center

The Making Center is a constellation of shops, labs, and open workspaces that are situated across the New School to help students express their ideas in a variety of materials and methods. We have resources to help support woodworking, metalworking, ceramics and pottery work, photography and film, textiles, printmaking, 3D printing, manual and CNC machining, and more. A staff of technicians and student workers provide expertise and maintain the different shops and labs. Safety is a primary concern, so each area has policies for access, training, and etiquette with which students and faculty should be familiar. Many areas require specific orientations or trainings before access is granted. Detailed information about the resources available, as well as schedules, trainings, and policies can be found at resources.parsons.edu.

Grading Standards

- A Work of exceptional quality
- A- Work of high quality
- B+ Very good work

B Good work; satisfies course requirements

Satisfactory completion of a course is considered to be a grade of B or higher.

B- Below-average work

C+ Less than adequate work

C Well below average work

C- Poor work; lowest possible passing grade

F Failure

GM Grade missing for an individual

Grades of D are not used in graduate level courses.

Grade of W

The grade of W may be issued by the Office of the Registrar to a student who officially withdraws from a course within the applicable deadline. There is no academic penalty, but the grade will appear on the student transcript. A grade of W may also be issued by an instructor to a graduate student (except at Parsons and Mannes) who has not completed course requirements nor arranged for an Incomplete.

Grade of Z

The grade of Z is issued by an instructor to a student who has not attended or not completed all required work in a course but did not officially withdraw before the withdrawal deadline. It differs from an "F," which would indicate that the student technically completed requirements but that the level of work did not qualify for a passing grade.

Grades of Incomplete

The grade of I, or temporary incomplete, may be granted to a student under unusual and extenuating circumstances, such as when the student's academic life is interrupted by a medical or personal emergency. This mark is not given automatically but only upon the student's request and at the discretion of the instructor. A Request for

Incomplete form must be completed and signed by student and instructor. The time allowed for completion of the work and removal of the “I” mark will be set by the instructor with the following limitations:

Graduate students: Work must be completed no later than one year following the end of the class. Grades of “I” not revised in the prescribed time will be recorded as a final grade of “N” by the Registrar’s Office.

College, School, Program and Class Policies

You should include the following headings with the recommended text. Any policy specific to your class must also be clearly written in the syllabus. For example, many instructors create their own policies to cover a variety of classroom situations, such as late assignments, rewrites and extra credit; the use of cellphones, laptops, and other technology in the classroom; your expectations should you be delayed, or makeup exams/absence on exam days.

A comprehensive overview of policy may be found under [Policies: A to Z](#). Students are also encouraged to consult the [Academic Catalog for Parsons](#).

Canvas

Use of Canvas may be an important resource for this class. Students should check it for announcements before coming to class each week.

Electronic Devices

The use of electronic devices (phones, tablets, laptops, cameras, etc.) is permitted when the device is being used in relation to the course's work. All other uses are prohibited in the classroom and devices should be turned off before class starts.

Responsibility

Students are responsible for all assignments, even if they are absent. Late assignments, failure to complete the assignments for class discussion and/or critique, and lack of

preparedness for in-class discussions, presentations and/or critiques will jeopardize your successful completion of this course.

Active Participation and Attendance

Class participation is an essential part of class and includes: keeping up with reading, assignments, projects, contributing meaningfully to class discussions, active participation in group work, and coming to class regularly and on time.

Parsons' attendance guidelines were developed to encourage students' success in all aspects of their academic programs. Full participation is essential to the successful completion of coursework and enhances the quality of the educational experience for all, particularly in courses where group work is integral; thus, Parsons promotes high levels of attendance. Students are expected to attend classes regularly and promptly and in compliance with the standards stated in this course syllabus.

While attendance is just one aspect of active participation, absence from a significant portion of class time may prevent the successful attainment of course objectives. A significant portion of class time is generally defined as the equivalent of three weeks, or 20%, of class time. Lateness or early departure from class may be recorded as one full absence. Students may be asked to withdraw from a course if habitual absenteeism or tardiness has a negative impact on the class environment.

I will assess each student's performance against all of the assessment criteria in determining your final grade.

Academic Honesty and Integrity

Compromising your academic integrity may lead to serious consequences, including (but not limited to) one or more of the following: failure of the assignment, failure of the course, academic warning, disciplinary probation, suspension from the university, or dismissal from the university.

Students are responsible for understanding the University's policy on academic honesty and integrity and must make use of proper citations of sources for writing papers, creating, presenting, and performing their work, taking examinations, and doing research. It is the responsibility of students to learn the procedures specific to their discipline for correctly and appropriately differentiating their own work from that of others. The full text of the policy, including adjudication procedures, is found on the university website under [Policies: A to Z](#). Resources regarding what plagiarism is and how to avoid it can be found on the [Learning Center's website](#).

The New School views "academic honesty and integrity" as the duty of every member of an academic community to claim authorship for his or her own work and only for that work, and to recognize the contributions of others accurately and completely. This obligation is fundamental to the integrity of intellectual debate, and creative and academic pursuits. Academic honesty and integrity includes accurate use of quotations, as well as appropriate and explicit citation of sources in instances of paraphrasing and describing ideas, or reporting on research findings or any aspect of the work of others (including that of faculty members and other students). Academic dishonesty results from infractions of this "accurate use". The standards of academic honesty and integrity, and citation of sources, apply to all forms of academic work, including submissions of drafts of final papers or projects. All members of the University community are expected to conduct themselves in accord with the standards of academic honesty and integrity. Please see the complete policy in the Parsons Catalog.

Intellectual Property Rights

The New School (the "university") seeks to encourage creativity and invention among its faculty members and students. In doing so, the University affirms its traditional commitment to the personal ownership by its faculty members and students of Intellectual Property Rights in works they create. The complete policy governing Intellectual Property Rights may be seen on the [university website, on the Provost's page](#).

