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## Expository Writing 20: The Art of Shock

### Course Overview

The conceptual artist Marcel Duchamp once said, “a painting that doesn’t shock isn’t worth painting.” It was an unsurprising claim from the man who famously placed a urinal in a museum and called it *Fountain* (1917). But many artists throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries – from the surrealist Salvador Dali through to the contemporary installation artist Kara Walker – have articulated the idea that art should challenge its viewers, confront them with alarming images, and put them in a state of unease. In this course we will explore the various motivations behind making art that is difficult or shocking to look at. We will discuss the different ways in which art can be transgressive – politically, morally, aesthetically – and ask what these distinct forms of rule-breaking tell us about the role that art and artists play in culture. We will also take note of “shock” as a distinctly 20<sup>th</sup> century emotion (and question whether it is still relevant today) and consider what conditions may be behind our appetite for art that causes us agitation rather than delight.

**Unit 1** will examine artworks that were enormously controversial in their time, but which have since been welcomed into the canon of art history. We will focus on Édouard Manet’s *Olympia* (1865), and Charles Baudelaire’s “A Carcass” from *Les Fleurs du Mal* (republished in 1868 after a lengthy censorship saga). As we look at these works we will ask, what makes an artwork obscene or shocking? Is it located in the artwork itself or in the norms and values of its audience? Does the very experience of shock form a part of the work’s meaning? Or conversely, does it distract us from the work’s real message? Throughout this unit we will practice close reading poems and analyzing paintings. Your first essay will give you the opportunity to employ some of the most essential skills in academic writing: posing an analytical question and engaging in careful formal analysis to argue for an answer.

**Unit 2** will skip ahead in time to some artists who placed “shock” at the center of their aesthetic vision. We will begin by exploring art that has drawn accusations of blasphemy, including Francis Bacon’s *Three Studies for a Crucifixion* (1962), Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ* (1987). Next, we will delve into the intersection between shock and identity politics by looking at Tracey Emin’s notorious installation, *My Bed* (1998), and some of Kara Walker’s racially provocative silhouettes, and consider why shock art has been particularly championed by women, black, and queer artists. We will supplement these explorations with readings by theorists who suggest the relationship between art and disobedience may be more fundamental than we typically assume. Essay 2 asks students to look at one of the above artworks through the “lens” of one of the assigned theories. You will then make an argument about what you can observe by putting artwork and theory together that you couldn’t otherwise see.

In **Unit 3** we will think about the role that institutions — like universities and museums — play in promoting and endorsing controversial art works. We will consider the museum as a transformative space capable of elevating and canonizing transgressive artworks, and as an institution that has responsibilities to its community (and to taxpayers!). This convergence of values has sometimes produced dispute and discord. How should a museum navigate its conflicting duties when faced with a challenging artist or artwork? What role does a museum occupy in our culture? Is it meant to be culturally edifying or boundary crossing? And how have artists themselves engaged museum space as a subject for their work? We will use articles and texts related to these questions to unpack the research process together in class, allowing students to then apply these skills to their own projects. Essay 3 asks students to write an independent research paper on a selected artwork drawn from a list. Here you will develop your own analytic question that requires outside research to answer, learn how to find the sources necessary to address your question, and enter into a scholarly conversation with multiple sources.

### **Major Deadlines:**

Below are the draft and revision deadlines for each paper. After you submit a draft, we will then have a one-on-one “conference” the following to discuss the paper and your plans for revision. **Note:** In addition to these major unit deadlines, you will also have smaller response papers and exercises to complete. Those due dates will be made available unit by unit.

Essay #1 Draft due **Friday, February 14th at 5PM** on Canvas

Essay #1 Revision due **Friday, February 28th at 5PM** on Canvas

Essay #2 Draft due **Friday, March 13th at 5PM** on Canvas

Essay #2 Revision due **Friday, April 3rd at 5PM** on Canvas

Essay #3 Draft due **Friday, April 24th at 5PM** on Canvas

Essay # 3 Revision due **Friday, May 8th at 5PM** on Canvas

### **Writing Goals**

The most important thing you will work on this semester is your own writing. Our three units will build on each other in their content and in the writing skills you will develop. In addition to the unit papers which you will submit in draft and in revised form, you will also be asked to submit a set of shorter “response papers” throughout the semester. These response papers are designed to get you started on the writing process early, and to let you practice new skills that will help you with your papers. We will occasionally take up these response papers in class, but they are primarily for your own benefit.

Our course is based on three premises:

1. Learning to write is learning to think. In this course we don't believe in great ideas that can't be expressed or put into words. Writing clearly and cogently is how we distill our thoughts and develop our ideas. This also means you should expect your thinking to deepen, grow, and even change course as you engage with the writing process – plan your time accordingly!
2. Writing is a conversation. As we'll see from the materials we read in our course, we live in a world where people engage each other in written arguments. When you produce your essays, you will also write to an audience – whether it's your peers, your preceptor, or even other critics. And your peers and your preceptor will engage you in a written conversation, in the form of feedback for revisions.
3. Writing is an ongoing process. From freshman students up to tenured faculty, every writer at Harvard is constantly drafting, revising, redrafting and revising further. This continued process is the primary work of this class, and is the main way your writing grows stronger. In this course, we will also ask you to reflect on this process by writing cover letters for each essay where you carefully consider your aspirations for your paper and describe any difficulties you're encountering so far.

## **General Course Information**

### **Accessing Materials**

Nearly all of the artworks we will look at in this class are available on “ArtStor,” which you can access through the Hollis “Databases” search engine (and then log in with your Harvard Key). These images are generally of high quality, and using a common database guarantees that we are all looking at the same photographic copy of a painting or sculpture. Additional readings (like the Baudelaire poems for Unit 1, and the critical materials for units 2 and 3) will be copied and made available online or circulated in class. **NB: You do not need to purchase any texts for this course.** But you will on occasion need to print materials for this class, so please plan and budget accordingly.

On many class days, some of the texts we turn to will be your own writing: your response papers, drafts and revised essays will be part of what we read and discuss. All writing you do for this class is public – in other words, it may be chosen as one of the examples for us to consider. If there is ever a particular piece you don't want others to see, please just let me know by email at the time of submission.

### **Additional Course Materials:**

- *Harvard Guide to Using Sources*, available online at <http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu>
- *Exposé*, the magazine of student writing (available online or as handouts in class)
- You may also wish to have some writing handbook to consult when questions of grammar, mechanics or style arise.

## **Official Course Policies**

### **Laptop Policy**

Ordinarily I will ask that you not use laptops in class. There may be a few days when they are necessary, and I will let you know about them ahead of time. In general, you should expect to print any materials that I send you or post on the course website and bring those with you to class. If you have a tablet you may also use this to consult articles or secondary materials in lieu of printing.

### **Communication**

The course works best when we treat it as a semester-long conversation about your writing. To make that conversation possible, there are a few important things to remember:

- Conferences: We will have three conferences throughout the semester, in between the first draft and final version of each essay. These conferences are our chance to work closely on your writing and to focus your work in revision. They are most worthwhile when you are the one to guide them. Please come to each conference prepared – having reviewed your essay and my comments, considered your questions, and begun to think about revision possibilities and strategies. You should plan on taking notes during our discussions. Since the schedule during conference days is so tight, be sure to arrive on time. Missed conferences may not be rescheduled.
- Meetings: In addition to our formal conferences, you are of course free to come see me about your developing ideas. If you can't make my office hours, please email me to set up a time.
- E-mail: Rather than take up our class time with announcements and administrative arrangements (and there will be many of them), I use e-mail to communicate most of that information. As part of your participation in the course, I ask that you check your Harvard e-mail account daily; you are responsible for the information I post there. Likewise, I make sure to check mine once every weekday for questions from you. I can answer most questions within 24 hours, except over the weekend.

### **Class Participation**

One of the benefits of Expos is its small class size. That benefit is best realized when every student participates fully in the class; as in any seminar, you learn much more from formulating, articulating, and questioning your own thoughts than from simply listening to what others have to say. Our time together is largely devoted to discussion and small-group work. Therefore, you are responsible for being in class, prepared and on time, each time we meet. "Being prepared" means that you have given careful thought to the reading and writing assigned for the day, and that you are ready to offer ideas and questions to open our discussion.

## **Grades**

The majority of your grade comes from your three essays, according to the following breakdown: Essay 1 = 20%; Essay 2 = 30%; Essay 3 = 40%. The standard for each essay also becomes more demanding as we progress (since you are building on certain fundamental skills and techniques with each essay). At the end of the course your final Cover Letter will ask you to assess your own progress over the semester (so save all your work!). The remaining 10% of your grade represents a serious measure of your effortful completion of all response papers and all cover letters, your continuous and constructive participation in class discussion and conferences, and the care with which you respond to fellow students' work on peer review exercises (showing up to class and making the occasional comment is not sufficient grounds for an A in participation). Additionally, unexcused absences from class will also negatively impact your participation grade (see attendance policy below).

## **Harvard College Writing Program Policy on Attendance**

Because Expos has a shorter semester and fewer class hours than other courses, and because instruction in Expos proceeds by sequential writing activities, your consistent attendance is essential. *If you are absent without medical excuse **more than twice**, you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and given a failing grade.* On the occasion of your second unexcused absence, you will receive a letter warning you of your situation. This letter will also be sent to your Resident Dean, so the College can give you whatever supervision and support you need to complete the course.

Apart from religious holidays, only medical absences can be excused. In the case of a medical problem, you should contact your preceptor before the class to explain, but in any event within 24 hours: otherwise you will be required to provide a note from UHS or another medical official, or your Resident Dean. *Absences because of special events such as athletic meets, debates, conferences, and concerts are **not** excusable absences.* If such an event is very important to you, you may decide to take one of your two allowable unexcused absences; but again, you are expected to contact your preceptor beforehand if you will miss a class, or at least within 24 hours. If you wish to attend an event that will put you over the two-absence limit, you should contact your Resident Dean and you must directly petition the Expository Writing Senior Preceptor, who will grant such petitions only in extraordinary circumstances and only when your work in the class has been exemplary.

Class begins promptly at seven minutes past the hour. Three late arrivals of more than ten minutes will be counted as an absence.

## **Submitting Essays**

You will turn in drafts and revisions to the assignment page on Canvas. Please be sure to check the unit syllabus for details on when things are due and pay careful attention to the general guidelines about format, etc. explained at the end of this syllabus.

When you are uploading documents to Canvas, *you are responsible for submitting versions that I can open*. This means the document must either be in Microsoft Word or be easily compatible; your file should end in .doc or .docx. It is also your responsibility to ensure that the file you are sending is not corrupted or damaged. If I cannot open or read the file you have sent, the essay will be subject to a late penalty.

All work you submit to the course is for public readership – in other words, we will use essays and excerpts from the writers in the class (possibly yours!) as some of our texts this semester. If at any point you submit a draft or revision that you would prefer other students not read, please let me know that – but please don’t make that request about everything you turn in this semester.

### **Deadlines**

For many class meetings, you will have been asked to complete a response paper or some other reading or writing exercise to help you develop the essay for that unit. Our work together in class will also often be based on those assignments. For those reasons, it is imperative that you turn your work in on time. Of course, even in the most carefully organized semesters, unexpected circumstances can arise – therefore each student in this section is allowed *ONE 24-hour extension on a response paper, draft or revision during the semester*. To use that 24-hour extension without penalty, you must: contact me before that deadline; submit the late work to Canvas; and be on time with any other work that may be due on that day as well. Otherwise, the work will be counted as late. And beware: taking that one-day extension can mean that you’re crunched for time at the beginning of the next unit.

Other than that “wild card” extension, all deadlines in the course are firm. Except in the case of a documented medical or family emergency, I do not grant further extensions. Essay drafts or revisions turned in after the deadline will be penalized *a third of a letter-grade on the final essay for each day they are late*. If you cannot meet a deadline due to a medical emergency, you must contact me right away, and may be required to produce a note from UHS; in the event of a family emergency, you must contact me right away, and may be required to ask your dean to contact me by e-mail or phone. In addition, please contact me as soon as possible so we can work out an alternative schedule.

### **Revisions**

Because of the emphasis this course places on revision, the schedule is designed to allow you as much revision time per essay as possible – always at least a week after the draft is due, and usually at least five days after your draft conference. Since you’ll have a significant span of days in which to revise, the expectations for this aspect of your work in the course are high.

### **Completion of Work**

Because your Expos course is a planned sequence of writing, you must write all of the assigned essays to pass the course, and you must write them within the schedule of the course — not in the last few days of the semester after you have fallen behind. You will receive a letter reminding you of these requirements, therefore, if you fail to submit at

least a substantial draft of an essay by the final due date in that essay unit. The letter will also specify the new date by which you must submit the late work, and be copied to your Resident Dean. *If you fail to submit at least a substantial draft of the essay by this new date, and you have not documented a medical problem, you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and given a failing grade.*

### **Policy on Collaboration**

The following kinds of collaboration are permitted in this course: developing or refining ideas in conversation with other students or through peer review of written work (including feedback from Writing Center tutors). If you would like to acknowledge the impact someone had on your essay, it is customary to do this in a footnote at the beginning of the paper. As stated in the *Student Handbook*, “Students need not acknowledge discussion with others of general approaches to the assignment or assistance with proofreading.” However, all work submitted for this course must be your own: in other words, writing response papers, drafts or revisions with other students is expressly forbidden.

### **Academic Honesty**

Throughout the semester we’ll work on the proper use of sources, including how to cite and how to avoid plagiarism. You should always feel free to ask me questions about this material. *All the work that you submit for this course must be your own, and that work should not make use of outside sources unless that is explicitly part of the assignment.* Any student submitting plagiarized work is eligible to fail the course and to be subject to disciplinary action by the Honor Council.

### **Writing Center**

At any stage of the writing process – brainstorming ideas, drafting or revising – you may want some extra attention on your essays. The Writing Center (located on the garden level of the Barker Center) offers hour-long appointments with trained tutors. I can't stress strongly enough the benefit of the service they provide; regardless of the "strength" or "weakness" of the essay, any piece of writing benefits from further review and a fresh perspective. Visit the Writing Center's web site at <https://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/> to make an appointment. Tutors also hold drop-in office hours at other campus locations; see the Writing Center website for details.

### **Submitting Essays**

Following the guidelines below will ensure that I can focus on your ideas and your prose when I read your essays, rather than devoting time to issues of formatting, pagination, etc. The guidelines apply both to essay drafts and revisions. Forgetting to check your essays for these matters can result in a lower grade for the essay.

All essays should adhere to the standard format:

- Double-space in a reasonable font, with one-inch margins

- Number all pages *and paragraphs* (a simple integer in parentheses beside the first sentence of the paragraph is fine)
- Include your name, the course title, my name, the date, the essay number and your essay title on the first page (don't use a title page)
- Include your name on each subsequent page
- Proofread thoroughly for typographical, grammatical, and punctuation errors. Consistent errors will lower the grades on your essays.
- Use the MLA in-text citation method to document your sources, and include a correctly formatted list of Works Cited. Consult the *Harvard Guide to Using Sources* for the appropriate citation information.

**Last word of advice:**

*Keep a copy of all your work* and be sure to avoid computer disaster: you should both regularly save your work and periodically print working drafts as you write (in other words, you should never be in the position of having "finished" an essay or revision with nothing to show for it if your computer crashes).