

northwestern university
DEPARTMENT OF ART HISTORY

Quarter/Year

Spring 2017

Course Number

ART-HIST 460

Day/Time

W 2:00-5:00

Instructor

Feldman/Thompson

Course Title

Studies in Contemporary Art: Speculation and the Speculative



In an era now all too often referred to as post-truth, this seminar turns to speculation and the speculative, not as modes of deception or “falsehood,” but as positive opportunities to think about the constructions and layers of truth: historical, scientific, temporal, informational, aesthetic, scholarly and political. We aim to focus specifically on how speculation in artistic practice and art historical writing might yield new ideas about what is unknown or unarchived. Our interest takes root in the etymological roots of speculate: from the Latin *specere*, ‘to look,’ which evolved to *specula*, a watchtower and so came to mean a kind of looking organized from a

specific vantage point, which is where the 16th century sense of the word congealed, gaining later connotations as it travelled into the modern and contemporary moment. If looking is thereby attached to the kind of unknown guessing that is also at the heart of the speculative, what histories and art forms might a newly configured approach to speculation as practice and method render visible, legible or obscure? What kinds of temporalities, what sorts of possibilities, and what models of truth? What is risked, gained and lost, through using speculation or fiction as art historical methodology? Our approach exceeds recent investments in “fact” or “fiction” to consider multiple ways of knowing and seeing. Readings will draw from multiple disciplines and forms, and will address a wide range of practices across the 20th and 21st centuries, multiple geographic locations, and give special attention to how speculation might offer new insight into post-and decolonial, feminist, diasporic, queer, or ‘global’ art histories.

Walid Raad, *Scratching on things I could disavow: Walkthrough* (2015), Julieta Cervantes, © 2015 The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Textbooks May Include

Rachel Kusher, *The Flamethrowers*, Scribner, 2013; Siri Hustvedt, *The Blazing World*, Simon and Schuster, 2014. All other readings are available as PDF files via Canvas.

Assessments

Students will hand in weekly response papers and a final research paper or project.