

northwestern university  
DEPARTMENT OF ART HISTORY

Quarter/Year	Course Number	Day/Time	Instructor
Spring 2020	ART-HIST 395	W 1:00-4:00PM	Feldman-Ronkko-Toftness
Course Title			Degree/Distro Fulfillment
Collecting/Critique: Art, Museums, and Thinking About History			390/395



Across the country, and indeed across the world, curators, directors, and museum board members are rethinking what it means to collect and display works of art in an era increasingly recognized as global and in societies that aspire to be integrated and equitable to all their members. Last year, for example, a group called “Decolonize this Place” protested at the Whitney Museum of American Art, challenging both the financial affiliations of a prominent board member and the diversity of artists collected by a museum meant to represent American art, broadly speaking. While groups like “Decolonize this Place” participate in a long history of cultural practice called “institutional critique” and engage in extra-muros activist strategies, curators and other museum employees are now also engaged in this self-critical project. Indeed, these concerns are forefront in the Block Museum of Art’s plans for an exhibition of contemporary art drawn from its own permanent collection and tentatively titled “Thinking about History.” Focused on artists who shape, present, and represent the past in their work, the exhibition also aspires to present a self-critical analysis of its own strategies for shaping its collection and promoting a set of social values in an educational context. This seminar will take up similar concerns. Looking at a history of critical museum studies and art associated with “institutional critique,” the course asks questions about the politics of museum finances; the ideological underpinnings of inclusion and exclusion; canon formation; boycotts; and what it means to “decolonize” the museum in relationship both to the history it presents and the futures it maps. The course culminates in the extraordinary opportunity for students to decide upon the purchase of a work of contemporary art for the Block’s permanent collection that the group selects from local galleries and justifies to museum staff, arguing for the merits of the work, its relevance to the Block’s teaching mission, and its relationship to “Thinking about History.” Students are required to attend one Saturday class visit to contemporary art galleries in the Chicago area, and some seminar sessions will be held off campus visiting museums and private collections. Interested students should write a formal letter of application to Prof. Feldman at [h-feldman@northwestern.edu](mailto:h-feldman@northwestern.edu) by February 15, outlining their intellectual reasons for wanting to take the course; the courses they have taken that have prepared them for this study of museum practices and contemporary art/history; their Saturday availability throughout the quarter; and, a brief reflection on what they think the museum brings to the construction of social values and understandings of the past, present, and future.

Required Textbooks	Assessments
Readings will be on canvas as pdfs and as a reader to be purchased at Quartet copies.	Assessments include: several short form writing assignments which may take the form of reading responses, wall labels, or catalogue entries; individual and collective presentations; regular seminar participation.