

MELLON INITIATIVE FOR UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH IN THE HUMANITIES
Course-Embedded Research Proposal, Awarded for Fall 2013, Trinity University

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Course Number & Title: ARTH 3391 “TOPICS IN ART HISTORY: ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM”

My assignment mirrored the steps I undertake in my own research, and involved “reconstructing” the art critical discourse generated by the development of abstract painting in New York during the 1940s. The various assessments of early critics to the burgeoning “New York School” painters were often voiced in direct response to each other. In other words, the critics were having a conversation with each other about abstract art. Regular art reviews, and substantial essays on art and politics, appeared in just a handful of journals: *Magazine of Art*; *Partisan Review*; *The Nation*; *Horizon*; *Art News*; and *Art International*. Critics often wrote for one or more of these media outlets (and indeed served on multiple editorial boards). But the dynamics of their conversation--its motivations and its specific arguments--have been lost. By reassembling the material record of art criticism, students will be able to recreate and thus evaluate those dynamics. The assignment had three steps (geared to three skill sets noted in parentheses):

(1) Retrieving the material record

Student Learning Objectives: Practical research skills that help students in their “discovery of scholarship” and understand how knowledge is created through scholarship.

- Each student chose a particular journal.
- They located the physical volumes of the chosen journal in the Coates Library or through ILL/
- For a given timeframe (one full year), they scanned, as a PDF, the Contents pages of the journal.
- PDFs are circulated to the class.

(2) Collating the material record

Student Learning Objective: Methodological skills

The circulation of PDFs to the whole class allowed each student to assemble:

- (i.) a set of Contents pages of a single journal for a year: this amounted to a diachronic record of a particular journal’s art-critical stance over the course of a year. In addition, it indicated the broader context within which art criticism was published (i.e. against the background of developing concerns over a relatively long time-period).
- (ii.) a set of Contents pages of multiple journals collated by month: this amounted to a synchronic record of the art-critical topics and themes that were distributed across the total set of journals in any given month. This indicated the local context of art-critical exchange (i.e. its production against a background of signal concerns at a particular historical moment).

(3) Evaluating the material record

Student Learning Objectives: Analytic skills that facilitate “scholarly inquiry,” engage students in articulating scholarly questions.

With the collated sets of Contents pages in hand, the students were in a position to notice continuities or connections within one journal; between one journal and another; or arguments between one critic and another. In doing so, they were able to draw out significant parallels or oppositions that governed the writing of art criticism at a particular moment. The assignment encouraged the students to answer questions such as:

- (i.) What strategies were most useful in reconstructing the dialogue between the key critics of this period?
- (ii.) Could we identify and evaluate concrete instances of a dialogue between one or more critics writing for disparate (or even the same) media outlet?

(iii.) What effect did the editorial constituency of each journal or magazine have on its taking a “position” with regard to abstract art?

(iv.) Were there apparently “non-art-critical” concerns (essays on politics, for instance) to which art critics were implicitly responding?

The emphasis on **practical research skills** (locating and retrieving the material record), **methodology** (strategies for organizing the material record), and **analysis** (assessing and evaluating the significance of the material record) was entirely commensurate with the courses goals and its level of instruction, and provided the student with a meaningful introduction to advanced research in the humanities.

I consider the assignment at total succes and would do nothing differently in the future.