

CAT 124- Documenting Subcultures

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Do subcultures still exist? Have you ever belonged to one? How can you tell? This practicum course will ask you to examine a specific subculture of your choosing, and engage in the creative process by documenting how it currently exists.

The practice of documenting and “collecting” the identity of a social group is problematic, whether you are conducting this process from within or outside of the group. Some central questions we will consider are: Does the act of documenting change what is occurring? Do you need to belong to a group to depict it accurately?

By the end of the course you will have a “documentary” in a format of your choice (written or visual publication, video, compilation etc.). It will showcase the following skills: collecting data and interviews from subjects, media production, constructing independent research methodologies, encountering ethical considerations and working in cooperation with communities. This course is open to all majors but is especially relevant to: Anthropology, Visual Arts/ ICAM, Communication, Critical Gender Studies, Ethnic Studies, Linguistics, Psychology, History and Sociology. We will be examining how artists research and respond to cultural groups by creating visual documentation, curating ephemera, examining sites/ territories, collecting histories and writing reflectively about your own experiences. You may use these practices as a model for your project or use methods from your own career field. This course is also potentially an opportunity to explore your own involvement in subcultural communities through the lens of both first-person experience and scholarly evaluation. You are not required to belong to the group that you investigate. You are also not required to have a creative practice/ artistic skills, but you must be interested in the idea of “making” and presenting a refined finished product to the public.

We will discuss ideas of infiltration, participation and gaining permission from subjects. We will take a look at appropriation of subcultural expression by artists and industries. We will read primary sources and compare them to sociological writing. Which paints a more accurate picture? How do you capture authenticity?

The students that excel in this course will possess a willingness to critically engage with the ethical and interpersonal dimensions of documenting a community. In other words, you must be willing to question your own assumptions.

Together, we will showcase your documentaries at an exhibition open to the public at the San Diego Art Institute or the Che Café. You will also be asked to create a small, distributable version of your documentation (examples: a zine or dvd) that can be given to the people that participated in your project.

Tentative reading list: (excerpts)

Dance of Days: Two Decades of Punk in the Nation's Capital
Mark Anderson and Mark Jenkins

“Black Hair/Style and Politics”: Kobena Mercer

Jeffrey Vallance: “Principles of Infiltration”

Subculture and the Meaning of Style
Dick Hebdige

“Third Culture Building”: William Starosta

Inter/Cultural Communication: Anastacia Kurylo et al
esp. “Ingroups and Outgroups” and “Co-Cultural Group Membership”

Witches in America
Alex Mar

The Subcultures Reader
Ken Gelder

Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo, Revolt of the Cockroach People
Oscar Zeta-Acosta

artists/ documentaries:

Nikki S Lee Wu
Tsang Cameron
Jamie Raymond
Pettibon
Genesis P-Orridge and Psychic TV
Black Power Mixtape
Heavy Metal Parking Lot
David Lachapelle
Children of the Stars- The Story of Unarius

topics/ tentative schedule:

Week 1:

- **Definitions and context:** what is a subculture? Updates in cultural theory: co-cultures, remixing, deviance vs. elective communities

personal reflections: telling your own stories about subculture, writing exercise and discussion

Week 2:

- selection of a group to work with: bring proposal to class. Proposal includes: description of group, personal connection to group (if any), feasibility of research/scope

Group discussion and examples: methods of investigation: visual documentation, investigating sites and territories

Week 3:

- refinement of proposal: what will you be collecting from the subculture? examples: interviews, ephemera, historical information, dance moves, clothing styles etc.
- What is the most appropriate mode of research/ documentation?

Group Discussion/ examples: Interviews: constructing and collecting, first hand narratives vs. gathering data: who is speaking? Invention, manipulation, self-doubt and belonging. Creating narratives from data or documentation: which story are you telling?

Week 4:

- independent gathering of documentation. Opportunity to discuss early obstacles/ refinement of documentation method

Group Discussion/ Examples: Artists and Appropriation of subcultural tropes, "remixing", artists and creating culture vs. commenting on culture: Jeffrey Vallance, Cameron Jamie, Raymond Pettibon, Nikki S. Lee

Week 5:

- bring sample of your documentation to class. How will you curate the documentation you are gathering into a final product?
- locate and read a text related to the lineage/ older iterations of the group you are investigating

Group Discussion/ Examples: Primary Sources vs. The Sociologist: what differences do you notice between texts that are written by those belonging to a subculture (as a means of story-telling) vs. those gathered as a study?

Week 6:

- continue independent research
- reflective writing: have you encountered any meaningful obstacles as a documentarian? Will you include or resolve these in your final project?

Group Discussion/ Examples: Documentaries and Story Arc: Editing returning to a discussion started week 3, we will examine how documentarians reorder information, edit or select “endings” to create a narrative. Is this in conflict with objective depiction of a group? What roles have you found yourself taking on as your project has developed? Is your project an attempt at objectivity, an artist expression or a testament to belonging? Are these categories exclusive?

Week 7:

- Peer small-group critiques: Bring “rough draft” of complete documentary project. Students will be paired off to give each other in depth feedback. How will you display your final project? Specific exhibition needs? Plan for display must be submitted by the end of class.

Week 8:

- classroom critique of final projects with time for final revisions before final event
- Event planning/ Curation for final exhibition: We will work together to design the exhibition, considering exhibition design and dividing work roles for installation.

Week 9:

Installation of Final Exhibition

Week 10:

- **Final exhibition**: Public exhibition and distribution of publications
- wrap-up discussion/ reflection: what processes will you take forward into other contexts: research, employment, or artistic practices? Are there ways you would change the way you investigated/ researched their group?