

# HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES THE COOPER UNION

## COURSE DESCRIPTIONS FALL 2025

### Core Curriculum

#### ***HSS-1 – The First-Year Seminar***

A literature course concentrating on poetry and drama. Selected texts from antiquity and the Renaissance are common to all sections, with works from other genres, periods and cultures chosen by individual instructors. The course develops aesthetic appreciation of literary texts and encourages a range of critical responses. Through close reading, and extended discussion, students learn to articulate their responses in written and spoken form.

*3 credits. Instructor Varies.*

#### ***HSS-3 – The Making of Modern Society***

A study of the key political, social and intellectual developments of modern Europe in a global context. This course is organized chronologically, beginning with the Industrial and French Revolutions. Students develop an understanding of the political grammar and material bases of the present day by exploring the social origins of conservatism, liberalism, feminism, imperialism and totalitarianism. In discussions and in lectures students learn to study and to respond critically in written and spoken form to a variety of historical documents and secondary texts. Students must register for HSS3 L1 as well as one HSS3 section. HSS3 L1 will take place in the Rose Auditorium.

*3 credits. Instructor Varies.*

### Humanities

#### ***HUM-105 – Fundamentals of Music***

The fundamentals of music are more than ingredients for composition. They are also concepts for thought. Rhythm, melody, harmony, and timbre; sound and silence; noise and order: this class takes each as a means not just to think about music, but to think musically. This begins by listening. From free jazz to Bach, from Bulgarian folk singing to microtonal motets, from John Cage to Arnold Schoenberg, and from drone to techno—we will listen in order to read. And we will read in order to turn the music we hear into a way of thinking. Through noise, for instance, we will think about revolution; through rhythm, language; through melody, memory; through timbre, gender; through tempo, colonialism; through harmony, economic exchange. Music, in other words, will be our prism; listening to it will allow us to think with it. And by way of its fundamentals, we will make music a mode of thought.

Authors include Nicolas Abraham, Theodor Adorno, Jacques Attali, Emile Benveniste, Ernst Bloch, Tina Campt, Anne Carson, Paul Gilroy, Edouard Glissant, Lydia Goehr, Fred Moten, Theodor Reik, and many more. No musical knowledge required.

*3 credits. Jacob Goldman.*

### ***HUM-318 – Creative Nonfiction Writing***

Creative nonfiction is a vast category that encompasses everything from the personal essay and memoir to literary journalism and travel writing. This course will provide students with an overview of its various forms while also encouraging more thorough examination of one area of their choosing. At the start of the semester, students will submit a proposal outlining the writing they intend to produce over the course of our 14 weeks together in addition to a list of model texts they will read to inform their own writing. (There will be dedicated time to research these texts and to incorporate feedback on the proposal and reading list.) Students will have many opportunities to share their findings and receive consistent feedback on their writing through workshops and 1-1 meetings. The class will provide students the necessary guidance and structure to help them realize their envisioned projects.

*3 credits. Theresa Lin.*

### ***HUM-325 – Puppet, Automaton, Robot***

They are us, and not us: puppets, automata, and robots are toys or machines that look like us (or parts of us). From antiquity to the present, we have imagined, and then invented, organic and inorganic versions of ourselves, sometimes for entertainment, sometimes to perform essential tasks. This course will draw upon an interdisciplinary range of materials –from philosophy, the history of science, anthropology, and psychoanalysis to literature, popular culture, and art. Instead of separating the “scientific” from the “poetic,” this course will introduce and explore ways in which we can think about what we want from our “artificial life,” and how the boundaries between the living and the non-living require constant rethinking.

*3 credits. Bill Germano.*

### ***HUM-327 – The History of the Cinema***

The course attends to what historian Antoine de Baecque calls “cinematographic forms of history”. From the 1890s until the present day, how has the moving image evolved as both the product and the author of technological inventions, historical events, national(ist) and international(ist) imaginaries, and aesthetic interventions? The course, structured around screenings and readings in historiography, philosophy, and film theory and criticism traces three main operations across a wide swath of experimental, narrative, and documentary filmmaking: periodization (instant, interval, decade, century); illumination (light and darkness, graphesis, markings); and inscription (word, voice).

*3 credits. Hicham Awad.*

### ***HUM-355 – Race & Gender in Literature***

Race is how class is lived; gender is how race is lived—an axiom of Cultural Studies. This course analyzes the matrix of power articulated through the means and methods of class justification by way of the racialization of populations through gendered distinctions. We will test the limits of this framework with respect to how we narrate, read, and embody the constitutive frameworks of our socio-cultural and political affairs. We will explore the work of many writers—from Angela Davis, Alexander Weheliye, and Adrian Piper to bell hooks, Audre Lorde, José Muñoz, and more.

*3 credits. Victor Peterson II.*

### ***HUM-361 – Modern Philosophy***

Modern philosophy, associated with the 17th and 18th centuries in England and Europe, begins with radical

inquiries into the nature of knowledge and mind. Various thinkers in this period set out to challenge religious dogmatism by rebuilding the very foundation of truth. Epistemological questions—such as where ideas come from, how the mind relates to the senses and the body, what methods best secure our understanding of physical reality, whether we can know anything with certainty, how we gain self-knowledge and knowledge of others, and above all, what we can learn through the power of reason—are established as the philosophical basis for science, economy, aesthetics, politics, and ethics. This revolution in intellectual life thus also inaugurates an era of tumultuous social change, encompassing struggles for freedom and equality as well as violent expansions of colonial exploitation, capital accumulation, and technological means of reorganizing nature.

This course introduces Western philosophical ideas and movements starting with the Early Modern Period and moving through various debates within and revolts against the tradition we now call the Enlightenment. We will read texts by Francis Bacon, René Descartes, Baruch Spinoza, John Locke, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant, among others. Throughout our reading, we will ask how science and systems of knowledge production relate to the material forces of world history. Particular attention will be given to historicizing and rethinking the authority of modern epistemology in relation to contemporary, critical, ecological and anti-colonial perspectives.

*3 credits. Matthew Bower.*

### ***HUM-373A-1 – Ovid's Metamorphoses***

The course focuses on the great Roman poet Ovid's magnum opus, the epic *Metamorphoses*, an entertaining, witty, and erudite compendium of endlessly fascinating stories about the Greek gods and heroes--their loves and their hatreds, their power and their foibles, their benevolence and their brutality, their crimes and their punishments--and many other topics of interest that arise and are pursued peripherally by the poet as the long trajectory of his narrative unfolds. Composed in dactylic hexameter, the meter of Homer, in the late first century BCE, the twilight of Augustan Rome, the intensely visual *Metamorphoses* has reigned unchallenged as the primary source of Greek (and Roman) mythology for all of the arts in the Western tradition and beyond. Its famous stories continue to be adapted and interpreted in multiple media well into our own day. The stories that Ovid chooses to tell, which constitute a rather idiosyncratic curation of the vast corpus of Greek myth loosely strung together in a complex, continuous narrative, have just one feature in common: they all conclude with some form of transformation. While Ovid will guide the direction of our syllabus, our reading of the *Metamorphoses* will be supplemented by additional literary, historical, and mythographical primary source materials, whether inspiring Ovid or influenced by him.

*3 credits. Mary Stieber.*

### ***HUM-373-D – Contemporary Culture and Critique: Happiness***

About thirty years ago, social theorists came to some conclusions about human life. More than expected numbers of people were living longer, materially richer, supported by stronger security networks and longer periods of peace than the dreadful predictions of the 20th c. had suggested. Yet, they asked, are we happier? How would we start to answer that question?

Since questions about human happiness go to the foundation of religion and ethics, inquiries began there. Philosophers noted a distinction: We seem to be thinking about two different things—our own psychological states

and our larger sense of well-being. See THE STANFORD ENCYCLOPIA OF PHILOSOPHY on-line entry on HAPPINESS, for an excellent overview.

In the last twenty years, brain research has amplified the search for the good life by sociologists, economists, urban planners and state theorists with some remarkable understanding of how our brains do have inner voices and that the brain is plastic. This has encouraged a shift towards “positive psychology,” that is, bringing our brains around to better serve us with new, therapeutic tools.

Still, we, as humanists, need to ask: in what capacities, for what goals, do we strengthen our minds/our lives? This course will have excellent (and pleasurable topics) that we will examine critically. We will start with two popular books, written about twenty years ago:

(1). Happiness: a guide to developing Life’s most important skills, by Matthieu Ricard, trans. Jesse Browner. NY: Little, Brown & Co. 2006.

(2). Happiness: lessons from the new science, by Richard Layard. NY: Penguin Press, 2005.

From this start, we will be reading some exciting thought pieces and scientific studies from the last few years. This is a seminar-structured, discussion course.

*3 credits. Sohnya Sayres.*

## **Social Sciences**

### ***SS-318-E – Anthropology of Ritual***

“Ritual” is a rich and slippery category in studies of human behavior. In this course, we take an open and wide-ranging approach to the concept as we study and practice ethnographic methods. “Ritual” calls attention to patterned forms of meaning-making: ways to mark and shape space, time, and human (and more-than-human) social bonds. We ground our exploration of ritual in classic texts by Emile Durkheim, Mary Douglas, Pierre Bourdieu, and Clifford Geertz, among others, while learning from contemporary anthropologists who investigate pattern and meaning in religion, performance, place, and the everyday. We will discuss the ethics and practice of participant-observation and ethnographic interviewing throughout the semester. Student-designed ethnographic projects are at the heart of the course, with broad scope for collaboration and creative presentations of findings.

*3 credits. Caroline Merrifield.*

### ***SS-323 – Politics and Collective Memory***

In this course we will explore the politics of history and memory by interrogating how narratives about the past are constructed and contested. By studying the creation, use, and destruction of memorials, monuments, and historical sites, students will learn how to interpret signals that these structures send; identify the political motivations behind memory sites; and understand how these sites affect political culture. Students will be introduced to texts that interrogate how collective memory is shaped within a transnational context of American empire in the twentieth century. Students will also be exposed to perspectives from public educators, archivists, and historical preservationists. The course will engage a range of texts in political theory, history, literature, performance studies, and critical geography. Together, we will read the works of Benedict Anderson, James Baldwin, Judith Butler, Jack Forbes, and Lauren Berlant.

*3 credits. Leila Ben Abdallah.*

### ***SS-347 – Macroeconomics***

Macroeconomics is the study of aggregate output, employment, prices, growth, cycles, and development. We begin by examining the nature and meaning of economic development, the theory of national income accounting and measures of human development. We then proceed to study the history of U.S. macroeconomic performance, with emphasis on the current crisis and its international dimensions. We then turn to competing theories of what drives macroeconomic activity in a capitalist economy. Topics covered include: Theories of economic growth, business cycle models, labor market dynamics, financial markets, foreign exchange rates and the impact of monetary and fiscal policy on the trajectory of the system.

*3 credits. John Sarich.*

### ***SS-351 – 20th Century History: “What are we talking about when we talk about Fascism?”***

This is a transnational history course that seeks to sharpen our thinking about definitions and resonances of fascism; it examines the past and asks, how such investigation might help us to act in the present when we confront situations that seem to be, or are quickly termed, “fascist.” Using theoretical and historical sources, we will study the European origins of fascism beginning with the dramatic upheavals of World War I and the interwar years through World War II, the Holocaust, and its aftermath, and then turn our attention to the development of a new global authoritarian populism and right-wing nationalist xenophobic leaders and regimes in the 21st century. We will examine historical roots and current appeal as well as efforts at resistance, in a variety of contexts from Britain, Western and Eastern Europe to Russia, India, the Middle East, and East Asia. All of our work will require close analysis of entangled categories and experiences of race, class, nation, and gender and reference to “current events” in the United States as well as globally.

*3 credits. Atina Grossmann.*

### ***SS-360 – American Intellectual History***

How have intellectuals understood settler expansion, the corporation, Jim Crow segregation, World War II, Cold War, 1960s social movements, and globalization? How should we understand the agency of historical actors, ideas, and ideologies? This course traces the history of the United States through its ideas. Introducing students to a method of approaching the past through the history of ideas and intellectuals, we’ll read some of the most influential texts in the American intellectual tradition by authors including William A. Dunning, W.E.B. Du Bois, Eugene Debs, John Dewey, Assata Shakur, Andrea Dworkin, James Baldwin, Leo Bersani, and June Jordan. Asking questions about the creation and influence of ideas, beliefs, and cultural sensibilities, we’ll explore imperialism, feminism, abolition, pragmatism, the rise of the corporation, cold war liberalism, urban sprawl, and post-9/11 politics. By semester’s end, students will have gained familiarity with major schools of thought in American intellectual history and critical thinking skills to dissect philosophical texts.

*3 credits. Leila Ben Abdallah.*

### ***SS-372 – Global Issues***

This course will examine current issues of global significance and their implications for policy and decision-making. Among the trends we will consider are the tensions between resource competition and authority, the emergence of a multipolar global economy, the environment and sustainable development, the emergence of new security issues, including societal and environmental stress, and demographic transitions: fertility and immigration.

*3 credits. Edner Bataille.*

### ***SS-374 – Contemporary Social Psychology***

Utilizing a variety of social psychological perspectives, general issues such as human nature, socialization, attitude formation and change, verbal and non-verbal language, interpersonal behavior and the art of persuasion will be explored with interest in cross-cultural comparisons. The core questions we will explore include: What does it mean to be human? How is the self defined and determined? What impact do social groups, culture and the (built) environment have on the development of the self and on our everyday behavior?

*3 credits. Gail Satler.*

## **History and Theory of Art | Core Curriculum**

### ***HTA-101 – Modern to Contemporary: An Introduction to Art History***

This two-semester art history core course, developed as part of the Foundation year for students in the School of Art but open to all students, is organized around a set of themes running through the history of modernity from the 18th century to the present. Within specific themes, significant works, figures and movements in art/design will be presented chronologically. Students will be able to identify and critically evaluate significant works, figures and movements in art/design in the modern period; be able to describe the main social and political contexts for the changes in art/design over the last two hundred years; and engage, in writing and class discussion, with theoretical perspectives on art/design production. The course will involve museum visits. Grading will be based on class participation, papers, and exams.

*3 credits. Lex Lancaster, Stéphanie Jeanjean.*

## **History and Theory of Art | Electives**

### ***HTA-221 – Buddhist Art: Origins to Modernity***

As a part of the ongoing discourse on the tripartite interrelation among art, religion and modernity, this class investigates "Buddhist art" from two angles: origins and modernity. Historically, Buddhist art designates the visual culture of one of the world religions, rooted in the premodern societies of India, Central, Southeast and East Asia and Tibet. We will trace Buddhism's geo-historical spread over 2,400 years by examining its distinctive material forms, religio-visual principles and ritual practices in relics, stupas/pagodas, icons, mandalas, gardens and "Zen art." On the other hand, the presence of Buddhist-related material/visual cultures has asserted an "updated" version of itself since the late nineteenth century through transnational exchanges and confrontations, particularly between Asia and the modern and contemporary West and elsewhere, corresponding to recent socio-economic, political and cultural landscapes around the globe, often manifested in non-religious forms, such as tourism, museum displays, commodification and appropriation by avant-garde artists. This course attempts to historicize this phenomenon by taking a macro approach to Buddhist art (without sacrificing specifics related to individual cases) by investigating two possible constituents of modern/contemporary Buddhist art: its core historical principles carried over from its origins, which have been considered "timeless," and its uniquely "timely" complication of, or deviation from, its original systems.

*2 credits. Yasuko Tsuchikane.*

### ***HTA-275 – 20th Century Art: Cosmopolitan Modernisms***

This course will reconsider 20th century modernism through the art practices forged in the entanglement of the historical and neo-avant-gardes on one hand, and cosmopolitan, non-Western artists, on the other hand. We will pressure the models of influence and affinity that have historically regulated access to the Euro-American canon of modernism as well as their recent critique by the paradigm shift toward inclusionism. How did cross-cultural encounters across different modernities generate new histories of modernism? In the class, we will build partial, tactical responses to this question by looking closely at work by artists such as Joaquin Torres-Garcia, Wilfredo Lam, Tarsila do Amaral, Lygia Clark, and Gego; Amrita-Sher Gil and Rabindranath Tagore; and Augusta Savage, Romare Bearden, and Alfonso Ossorio.

*2 credits. Melanie Marino.*

### ***HTA-300 – Single-Artist Seminar: Shigeko Kubota***

For Shigeko Kubota (1937–2015), the video signal was a vibrant, electronic, and living pulse. Over the course of fifty years, Kubota experimented with video—both single-channel and sculpture—as a component of, and an abode for, the everyday, community, and nature. In our course, we will trace the pulse behind Kubota's work. To do so, we will privilege first-hand encounters with her work through in-class screenings and archival research. In partnership with the Shigeko Kubota Video Art Foundation in Soho, we'll access Kubota's papers, sculptural works, original tapes, and equipment. We'll account for Kubota's early years in the 1960s Tokyo avant-garde, her engagement with Fluxus, and her work as a critic, organizer, and curator. Together, we'll build a complex and intimate understanding of the ways Kubota used video to fuse the technological and organic; the lyrical and the autobiographical; and artistic inheritance and irreverence.

*2 credits. Robin Simpson.*

### ***HTA-313A-1 – The Divine Self: Radical Embodiment in the Premodern World***

How did art convince people of their relationship to God? Medieval visual culture was so powerful that mystics believed they could survive by eating beauty and live without beating hearts. This transgressive embodiment destabilized the “fixed” categories of Male, Female, Human, or Saint. Our interdisciplinary seminar will explore how artists translated the incomprehensible divine into comprehensible images. We will place these images in conversation with writings by visionaries who describe their own miraculous experiences. We will hear from fourth-century Syriac nuns, Shiva devotees in south India, Celtic priestesses, and Italian aesthetes – all of whom connected their physical bodies to the divine through art. Questions of bodily authority, purity and filth will be explored. This seminar asks: can we, in 2025, understand early images of queered and saintly bodies as they were originally intended? Do these readings still hold up today?

*2 credits. Meagan Khoury.*

### ***HTA-313B-1 - How to Read Black Femme Avatars***

This course is an in-depth and engaged study of Uri McMillian's book *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance* (NYU Press, 2015). In it, McMillian presents a history of visual and performance artists like Ellen Craft, Lorraine O'Grady, Adrian Piper, Nicki Minaj, whose oeuvres can be understood through the lens of black feminist study and theory. Using the bibliography of black feminist texts and tracking the featured artists, we will use McMillian as a model to apply these concepts to the practices of contemporary artists not already mentioned like Vaginal Creme Davis, Juliana Huxtable, and Beyoncé.

*2 credits. troizel.*

### ***HTA-313C-1 – Black Visual Culture***

“Would you rather be unread or misread?”

– Kevin Young, *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness* (2012)

This course seeks to ask the question: How do we see blackness? How have we learned to see the thing we’re always surrounded by and have so many questions of? How do we know blackness through the visual and/as the racial? What if blackness uses the racial-visual to be known but refuses to be seen and represented so easily? What do we do then? Through close looking and reading of visual objects that represent Black folks in the U.S., our hope is to analyze the visual field for how it teaches us to engage Black people as living (and unliving) embodiments of a thing we call blackness. Mining the history of popular culture as buttressed by technological development, we will investigate where our popular ideas of Black representation originate, how they have transited through time, whether they are useful for us in the present day, and how Black visual artists intervene on this history.

*2 credits. troizel.*

### ***HTA-313-U1 – Contemporary Art and Performance***

This course examines the interplay of contemporary art and performance—an interplay that we will study under the rubric of theater as a medium that demands active complicity in a specific physical relation. That approach will lead us to engage with questions of embodiment and subjectification as expressions traversed by race, gender, and strong desire (sexuality). In that sense, performance will be investigated as a methodology anchored in the material conditions and objects from which it emerges, while also challenging reductive notions of “liveness” and “ephemerality” that have come to define it. We will study key events in dance, theater, and visual arts that allow us to situate effects of presence within political and historical contexts. At the same time, we will analyze how contemporary artistic and performance works function as a mode of critical inquiry. Likewise, we will explore our own interval as interpreters through close reading, description, and analysis of live and recorded works, navigating the space between observation and participation.

*2 credits. Blanca Ulloa.*

### ***HTA-313-V1 – Anonymous: Women’s Textile Labor Networks in Early Modern Italy***

This course examines the strategies of subversion women artists used to produce material culture in sixteenth-century Italy. Most female creatives were not celebrated artists but operated within anonymous collectives. Working in convents, conservatories, courts, and in the home, many women circumvented patriarchal control through the one artistic profession they were allowed: textiles.

This course uncovers the extensive threadwork done by women in Italy. What were the working conditions for those producing luxury silks, embroideries, and laces? How were women trained to raise silkworms? How did they use lace as secret code? Such objects have been marginalized as “women’s work” and have remained underexamined because they come to us without names, dates, or sites of origin. Week by week, we will recover anonymous artists and unconventional archives to reveal the artificial divide between Art and Craft, and between male artist and woman worker. Ultimately, we will turn to ecofeminism and ecologies-of-scale studies as reparative models to help us rehabilitate the lost world of early modern threadworks.

*2 credits. Meagan Khoury.*



### ***HTA-313-X1 – Abstraction and Politics***

Abstraction challenges our assumptions about the relationship between art and politics. While abstraction constitutes a shaping force in contemporary politically-driven art practices, scholarship, and theory--where the terms such as "queer abstraction" and "Black abstraction" now circulate--abstract art vexes our efforts to describe and interpret the political operations of this work. Abstraction offers crucial tools for minoritarian artists to refuse the demand that they transparently represent themselves in their work, sidestepping straightforward representation in favor of formal and material experimentation. Yet this work is often not taken seriously for its aesthetic invention or its political operations. This course introduces students to a range of scholarship and art historical precedents for understanding abstraction as a political force in contemporary art. Texts focus particularly on the queer, trans, feminist, critical race, and postcolonial contributions to the study of abstraction in art theory and practice, and students will develop their own approaches to the politics of abstraction in written and creative formats.

*2 credits. Lex Lancaster.*

### ***HTA-313-Y1 – Land/Landscape in Twentieth Century Art – Post-coloniality and Critical Perspectives***

This course investigates the contested status of the land and landscape during the twentieth century, evaluating how artists in the Americas expressed shifting relations between place and identity during a period of transformation marked by post-colonial revolutions, mass migration, forced exile, the consolidation and disintegration of nation-states, legacies of enslavement, ecological crisis. Bridging political theory, we will evaluate the longstanding implications of property relations, and entangled notions of acquisitive individuality, border ideologies, and claim-based expansion on aesthetic practice. Throughout, we will examine the formal, material, and conceptual strategies devised to unroot conventions of the landscape genre and its relation to systems of power, thereby displacing normative understandings of nationhood, nature, origins, and heritage with alternate epistemologies of space, belonging, relationality, disaffiliation, dispossession, and collectivity. Grappling with the discrepant relationships between bodies, objects, and geographies via discourses of feminism, queer studies, ecocriticism, and urban studies, this course focalizes Latinx, Black, and Indigenous viewpoints. A range of artists and thinkers under consideration include Tarsila do Amaral, Gertrude Bonnin/Zitkála-Šá, Emily Carr, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Norman Lewis, Alma Thomas, Alejo Carpentier, Édouard Glissant, Henri Lefebvre, Katherine McKittrick, W. J. T. Mitchell, Mabel O. Wilson, and more.

*2 credits. Megan Kincaid.*

### ***HTA-324 – Museum as Frame***

Through class meetings and museum visits we will investigate the idea of the museum, its history, cultural significance, meaning and societal influence. In particular, we will consider how the museum experience affects the attitudes and assumptions of museum visitors. We will explore the intellectual under-pinnings of the modern museum since the Enlightenment, with special attention to issues of nationalism and eurocentrism; the complexities of museum sponsorship (public, private, and corporate), and how they shape cultural presentation; and the emergence, since the 1960s, of community-oriented museums alongside the growing importance in society of multi-culturalism and ethnic identity. We will also consider standard art-historical issues of style and society as they relate to the various artworks we see.

*2 credits. Andrew Weinstein.*