This is a course on the arts of subversion and textual counterpublics. On cadres. Coteries. The avant-garde. The peculiar edges and experimental outsiders of art and literature. We’ll investigate how creativity is used to circulate texts in unexpected ways and create performances in unlikely spaces. I’ll argue that this sort of subversive art, put out in the world untamed, is a significant way of deploying social power, a compelling political gesture.

Through case studies, theoretical readings, and research projects, we’ll discover the work of the imagination in creating alternative audiences and political solidarity in marginalized contexts. We’ll encounter guerrilla theater, subvertising, spoken word, street art, culture jamming, zines, and other shapeshifting forms for the cultural imagination in a stance of resistance or cultural provocation.

Our guiding concepts for considering the potentially subversive relation between art and public spheres will include the carnivalesque; the circulation of affect, that is, social structures of emotion and the social life of emotion; aesthetic estrangement from routine perception and the defamiliarization of the familiar; parody, as serious play; and subculture, as both stylistic and political formation. These various concepts gather around the idea of counterculture, which we will approach as a worldly aesthetic project.

Our work will move between analysis and creative design, research and invention, theory and practice. There will be a workshop component to the course, in which we’ll help one another develop ideas for engaging new audiences with writing, performance, or visual art.

This is a four-credit course. I expect students to spend at least nine hours a week preparing for class sessions and completing assignments.

**Learning Goals**

In this course, you will:

- research and use public sphere theory, as this field addresses the role of literature and art in publics and counterpublics
- learn to analyze the role of media technologies for circulating literary texts to create publics and counterpublics
- study the history of modernist avant-garde movements and their contemporary legacies
- research and use theories of cultural subversion, including culture jamming and guerrilla aesthetics, as these involve art, literature, public sphere theory, affect theory, and counterpublics
- develop research skills to interpret a specific artist or group that engages questions of aesthetic subversion and the public sphere
- develop original ideas for expressive practices in different forms and media for engaging a public; ability to play with guerrilla art techniques and related counterpublic-oriented creative expression
Rules and Requirements

- Laptops may be used in class only for accessing relevant course materials on LATTE. If you use a laptop for other purposes (email, web browsing), you will be asked to leave the class and be considered absent for the day. Bring other materials (e.g., paper, pens) for taking notes. No ebooks.
- Use of cell phones in class for talking, texting or reading/writing email is prohibited. If you wish to leave your cell phone on in silent mode because of an ongoing emergency situation that you may need to respond to, please speak to me at the start of class to let me know.
- Three unexcused absences lowers the final course grade by one plus/minus, and each additional absence by another plus/minus.
- If you are a student with a documented disability on record at Brandeis University and wish to have a reasonable accommodation made for you in this class, please see me immediately.
- You are expected to be honest in all of your academic work. Please consult Brandeis University Rights and Responsibilities for all policies and procedures related to academic integrity. Students may be required to submit work to TurnItIn.com software to verify originality. Allegations of alleged academic dishonesty will be forwarded to the Director of Academic Integrity. Sanctions for academic dishonesty can include failing grades and/or suspension from the university. Citation and research assistance can be found at LTS - Library guides.

Grades, Assignments, and Projects

Reading Responses: 5 discussions of assigned readings, in response to specific questions. Credit/No credit. 5% each.
Creative Assignment: design a proposal for a literary or artistic project that engages publics in creative ways. 5-10 pages. 20%
Critical Conversation: A comparative analysis of several theoretical texts engaged in a common question or problem. 5-7 pages. 20%
Class Presentation: 15 minute presentation on independent research project. Credit / No credit. 10%
Final Research Project: based on research of a specific artist or group involved in the course themes. 12-15 pages. 45%

Schedule

Weeks 1-3
Unit 1: What Is a Public?
Jürgen Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere
Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy”
Michael Warner, Publics and Counterpublics
Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass
Linton Kwesi Johnson, selected poetry

Weeks 4-5
Unit 2: Ideas of the Avant-Garde
Janet Lyon, *Manifestos: Provocations of the Modern*
Selected readings by Futurists, Vorticists, Imagists, Surrealists, Dadaists, and others

Weeks 6-11
Unit 3: The Poetics of Subversion

*Carnival*
Caryl Churchill, *Cloud 9*
Bread and Puppets Theater
Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*

*Re-Troping the Familiar*
Tyehimba Jess, *Olio*
Childish Gambino, “This Is America”
Marjorie Perloff, *Radical Artifice* and *Unoriginal Genius*

*The Lady of Situations*
Bertolt Brecht, various
Guy Debord, *Report on the Construction of Situations*

*Guerrilla Performance*
ABC No Rio, New York City
The Neo-Futurist Theater, Chicago
Inua Ellums et al, *The Midnight Run*
Banksy, stencils and installations
Gregory Sholette, *Delirium and Resistance*
Andrew Boyd, ed., *Beautiful Trouble*

*Culture Jamming*
Adbusters
Andrew Boyd, ed., *Beautiful Trouble*

*Understanding Counterpublics*
Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*
Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*

Weeks 12-13
Unit 4: Research Workshop