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Embodied knowledges: Material inquiries into nonhuman sensory systems

Level: Introductory sculpture and installation

Length: 10-13 weeks depending on institution | Registration: 20 | Prerequisites: none

Course Description

Perceptual and sensory systems are the scaffold of experience for all beings: without these systems there would be no understanding of space, time, movement, objects, self, or other, no substrate for knowledge. This course explores intersections between human and more-than-human sensory systems to deepen our understanding of ourselves, our creative processes, our environment(s), and our relations to one another, inclusive of nonhuman kin. Utilizing embodied play and material experimentation, we will develop objects—sculptures, performances, environments—that think and feel, through and with, more-than-human sensory systems as a form of knowledge production and engagement with science, critical theory, and social justice. Our research sources will include primary data and secondary literature, field trips to laboratories and galleries, and visits with guest scientists, somatic practitioners, and performance artists. At its core, this course asks what happens to research and knowledge production when our practices stem from unprescribed ways of engaging, experiencing, and being in the world?

Course Philosophy

Activist and scholarly calls to decolonize knowledge force us to rethink the relationships between technoscientific knowledge production, political power, and our ideas about the “natural” world. As a result, our research sources will be broadly interdisciplinary and together we will assess the content of these sources, seeking to understand them and the information they provide in their global contexts. This course will also emphasize process over product; you will be expected to provide evidence of failures alongside successes. We will work together to build a brave learning environment so that we can engage potentially challenging topics with grace and care.

Key Learning Orientations

- To deepen curiosity and knowledge of interdisciplinary and intermedia research across the natural sciences and physical arts.
- To explore possibilities and pathways of translation across more-than-human sensory systems and knowledges. This will require:
 - Development of processes of experimentation and iteration around a question or curiosity related to a more-than-human sensory system or knowledge.
 - Analysis of human sensation, perception, and knowledge construction in order to develop interfaces with more-than-human sensory systems and knowledges.
 - Analysis of markers of difference between human and more-than-human systems as

parallel to historical markers of difference amongst humans such as race, gender, class, and location.

- To further understanding of your own processes of knowledge construction in the context of your embodied experiences, your communities, your values, and your sociopolitical context. This will require:
 - Paying attention to glimmers and triggers in yourself. These will lead you to your questions and curiosities, will aid in the creation of rubrics for assessment of your own work, and will guide you in the feedback you offer your peers.
 - Self-reflection on your sociopolitical context, communities, and inherited values, and how these influence the work you create practically, theoretically, critically, and creatively.
 - Adoption of responsibilities associated with independent learning and creative action.
- To activate a process of making as a way of knowing and creating new or revealing unseen meaning(s). This will require:
 - Investigation of the broad and deep, traversing back-and-forth along the continuum between intuition and intellect.
 - Experimentation with spatial and temporal phenomena in multiple media.
 - Documentation of processes of play, reflection, iteration, and deepening.
- To engage in participatory learning and exchange with your studio peers. This will require that students work, engage, mobilize, and innovate collaboratively.

Assignments

Assignments in this class are purposefully designed to offer many opportunities for participation, assessment, and feedback from myself and your peers. Self-assessments of your own work, utilizing rubrics you create, will be included in the assessment of your three critiqued assignments—play, emergence, and the spatiotemporal.

Group presentation: In pairs, you will research an organism(s) of your choice and present what you learn to the class during week 2. These presentations can be informal and should utilize teaching and learning tools relevant to the organism and sensory/knowledge system of your choice. This could mean demonstrations, performances, interactive engagements, activities, etc. depending on how your organism interacts with and processes the world. Assessment will be partially dependent on how your peers are able to understand your organism's sensory/knowledge system after your presentation is complete.

Leading a discussion session: After your group presentations, you and your partner will lead the class in a discussion around your research organism. Come prepared with questions to ask your peers (and yourselves) that will help you think/feel through that sensory/knowledge system and what it might be like to move through and understand the environment as that organism. Be open to allowing the discussion to go in unexpected directions.

Leading a play session: After the initial presentation and discussion during week 2, you and your partner will take what you've learned thus far and engage in material-based play with your peers. In week 3, you and your partner will lead the class in a play session that expands your

thinking/feeling with your organism. Come prepared with materials you think will be relevant for this play and I will also provide potentially relevant materials. Your play session can make use of any media (cardboard, foam, clay, wood, fabric, etc.) or form (object, installation, performance, etc.), but you should keep in mind in-class time limitations to make the best use of your time with your peers.

Rubric creation and development: For each critique, you will develop a rubric to assess your own work based on your ideas and goals around the exploration of your organism and the development of objects to think/feel with. A rubric—including goals, how you will assess if you have achieved your goals, and weightings for each goal—will be due before the critique. After the critique, you will use your own rubric to assess your work, integrating your self-reflection and feedback from your peers. You will update your rubric with new goals and assessments before each of the 3 critiques and assess your work with the rubric after each of the 3 critiques.

Reflective questionnaires: After each of the 3 critiques, you will fill out a reflective questionnaire about your experience creating the artwork and participating in discussions around the artwork. These questionnaires are designed to get you thinking about your own creative processes and the reciprocal process of giving and receiving feedback. You will also have the option to offer me feedback about the class and what you need from me to be successful—this portion is voluntary and anonymous.

Readings: There will be 7 assigned readings across the course. “Readings” might take the form of a text, video, podcast, exhibition, or artist/scientist/organism to explore. Content from readings will be incorporated into lectures, in-class discussions, rubrics, and so on. You are expected to have engaged with the assigned reading in time for the following class in order to participate fully in discussions and activities.

Offer a reading: In week 7, you will offer a reading, video, podcast, or exhibition/artist/scientist of interest that is relevant to the class. Two of the readings offered by students will be assigned for the last two readings of the class (weeks 10 and 11).

One-on-one meetings: There will be three mandatory one-on-one meetings with me, one before each critique session. You will be expected to bring your rubric for the upcoming critique to the meeting for us to review together. You will also be expected to share your progress, challenges you’ve encountered, and ideas for future directions. These meetings are an opportunity to share anything about your process that may not have come up in class discussions or that you do not feel comfortable sharing in front of the class.

Participation: Studio courses require engagement with your peers in order to build a supportive learning community. You will be expected to participate fully in presentations, discussions, play sessions, and critiques. Participation can take many forms from speaking up in class, to sharing comments in writing, to engaging in activities and creative sessions, to trading readings and viewings, and so on. While I will strive to offer you many ways to participate, I will also encourage you to practice speaking openly with one another during class. A significant amount of your overall class participation grade will come from offering feedback to your peers during

critiques.

Critiques Play, Emergence, and the Spatiotemporal: Overall, each critique will be functionally similar: they are opportunities to give and receive feedback about the objects you are creating throughout the course. In one respect, they are cumulative in that the research, discussions, and objects from one will inform decisions related to the next. In another, they are entirely independent in that each will have its own goals and assessment strategies, which will be shared in advance of the feedback session. You are expected to build upon what you've learned in previous critiques and the increased weighting of each assignment towards your final grade is reflective of this growth process. ***Participation in these critiques, both in offering feedback to your peers and sharing your work with the class, is extremely important for your success in this course.*** If you anticipate missing a critique for any reason, please notify me as early in the course as possible.

Assessment

Many assignments are simply a check for completion. These activities are meant to be low stakes while still offering important feedback and reflection. "Check" assignments in total make up 20% of your final grade. Everyone gets one free pass on a check assignment; just let me know when you would like to use your free pass to still get the check without completing the assignment. The following are "check" assignments:

Assigned readings: one check each for a total of seven checks

Rubric development before crit #1, crit #2, crit #3: one check each for a total of three checks

Rubric use after crit #1, crit #2, crit #3: one check each for a total of three checks

Reflective questionnaire after crit #1, crit #2, crit #3: one check each for a total of three checks

Offer a reading: one check

One-on-one meetings: one check each for a total of three checks

Total possible checks: 20/20

The group work in the first three weeks and the three critiques will each have their own detailed rubrics for assessment, which will be distributed in advance of those assignments.

Weighting of assignments towards your final grade:

Group presentation	5%
Group leading discussion	5%
Group leading play session	5%
Checks	20%
Critique #1: Play	10%
Critique #2: Emergence	15%
Critique #3: Spatiotemporal	20%
Overall participation	20%
<i>Final Total</i>	100%

Schedule

	From me	From you	For next week
Week 1	Syllabus review Overview lecture on more-than-human systems	Introductions Form groups and choose organisms Begin research	Group presentation Prep to lead discussion <i>Reading #1</i>
Week 2	On play Introductory play session	<i>Group presentations</i> <i>Lead class discussion</i>	Prep for play session Bring materials for play <i>Reading #2</i>
Week 3	On critical animal studies	<i>Lead class play session</i>	Develop personal goals <i>Reading #3</i>
Week 4	On Reflectivity and rubrics	Independently develop play objects <i>one-on-one goal review</i>	Develop play objects/performances/environments
Week 5	<i>Critique #1: Play</i>	Present all research and play materials	<i>Reflective questionnaire #1</i>
Week 6	On materiality	Reflect on Play Change media, adjust rubric	<i>Reading #4</i>
Week 7	On iteration	Iterate! do something 100x	<i>Prep rubric & "reading"</i> <i>Reading #5</i>
Week 8	On emergence	Deepen! pick a few, go deep <i>one-on-one meeting</i>	Develop emergent objects/performances/environments
Week 9	<i>Critique #2: Emergence</i>	Present all work completed since crit #1	<i>Reflective questionnaire #2</i>
Week 10	On time	Reflect on Emergence Add time, adjust rubric	<i>Reading #6: TBD by students</i>
Week 11	Lecture TBD by students	Iterate! elaborate, experiment, repeat	<i>Prep rubric for meeting</i> <i>Reading #7: TBD by students</i>
Week 12	Lecture TBD by students	Deepen! develop, intensify, amplify <i>one-on-one meeting</i>	Develop spatiotemporal objects/performances/environments
Week 13	<i>Critique #3: Spatio-temporal</i>	Present all work completed since crit #2	<i>Refelctive questionnaire #3</i>

Each of the three key assignments/critiques in *Embodied Knowledges* builds off the previous, utilizing what students learned in earlier weeks and layering on new challenges. After an initial round of research with primary and secondary sources, students collaboratively engage in discussions and materials-based play to develop embodied understandings of a more-than-human sensory system for their first key assignment/critique. Reflecting on what they learned in the first third, students are then asked to shift to an “opposite” media or form, translating their materials-based play into a new medium. Working in the new medium, students will iterate and experiment, then select a few variants to deeply evolve. They will then be asked to listen to these evolved variants, practicing asking the work and the organism what they require to be in dialogue, allowing something unexpected to emerge for their second key assignment/critique. The rubrics for each assignment grow as additional challenges are layered on, giving less weight to concepts that were the focus of a previous assignment, while still expecting integration. Simultaneous to these material-based practices, students will receive lectures each week on practical, theoretical, critical, and creative topics relevant to course objectives, which they will synthesize with the works they create. By the final key assignment/critique, students will also be proficient in developing their own rubrics to guide their work towards their personal goals. As a result, their self-assessments will make up an increasing portion of their grade for each of the three major assignments. In addition to synthesizing much of what students have learned and practiced throughout the term, the spatiotemporal assignment is conceptually the most aligned with the mission of the spatial dynamics division, requiring students to work with physical and time-based media through research and experimentation. This assignment also encompasses nearly all of the course objectives. As students gain confidence in their materials and methods, they will simultaneously develop a deep understanding of their organism’s sensory and knowledge system.

Pedagogically, the cumulative nature of this final assignment means it serves as an example of many of my personal teaching commitments. While I will provide introductory scaffolding throughout the course in the form of presentations of relevant material, students and I co-create knowledge about organismal sensory and knowledge systems through class activities. The course is centered on student interests as they select the sensory systems they wish to explore, teach one another (and me) about that system, and experiment with the system through material-based play. The course is focused on process, requiring students share both failures and successes during critiques, as well as all forms of iteration they engage in as opposed to a single “finished” product. The large list of assignments provides mostly low-stakes opportunities for feedback and self-assessment so that students have room to take risks and make mistakes without the anxiety of adverse impacts on their final grade. Repetitive rubric development and reflective questionnaires encourage students to practice setting goals and assessing their results: ultimately students will be able to define and manifest success on their own terms in their future endeavors. As with all of my peer review-based classes, this class will emphasize feedback as a valuable gift we offer one another, acknowledging the challenges inherent in giving and receiving critique.

Critique #3: The spatiotemporal (20% of final grade)

By the end of this assignment, you will be able to:

- demonstrate proficiency in a time-based medium
- develop a deep understanding of your organism's sensory/knowledge system
- experiment with processes of making through play and iteration
- activate a deep dive into the particularities of a medium/form
- negotiate a process of making by listening to the work itself
- synthesize previous work with a time-based component
- choose an appropriate medium/form that enhances your understanding of time
- evaluate your own work with respect to your personal goals and rubric
- compare possible trajectories of risk and safety in decision making

Time is relevant to all organismal sensory/knowledge systems but potentially in radically different ways. Sensation and perception always have a time component; how might that time component differ for a 100yr old tree or an insect with a 24hr lifespan? What impact might an organism's experience of time have on its perception of motion, its understanding of space, its movement, or its decision-making? How can we relate our experience of time and space to that of a mycorrhizal network or a giant squid? Add a time component to your thinking/feeling practice that is relevant to your organism. What new questions and curiosities arise when you explicitly consider the role of time in your organism's sensory/knowledge system? What forms and media might you utilize to best manifest an experience or understanding of time that is relevant to your organism's sensory/knowledge system? Play with these ideas by iterating, elaborating, and experimenting with those forms and media, especially with respect to time. Develop, intensify, and amplify your experiments to push your understanding of time even further. As with the play and emergence critiques, bring documentation or actual objects from these reflective, iterative, and intensive practices, as well as a "final" object for consideration.

Rubric

Category	Assessment	% of total
Technical	Demonstrated proficiency with time-based media	14
Conceptual	Justified relevance of work to organism sensory/knowledge system	14
Iterate	Experimented with process/medium/form through play and iteration	7
Deepen	Activated a deep dive into the particularities of medium/form	7
Emergence	Negotiated with the work itself	7
Spatiotemporal	Synthesized previous work and integrated a time-based component	14
Manifest	Chose an appropriate medium/form that amplifies time	14
Personal	Evaluation of their own work with their rubric	18
Risk-taking	Took risks or remained safe	5