

NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY

COURSE CODE: HR2010
COURSE TITLE: INTRODUCTION TO MUSEUM STUDIES
INSTRUCTOR: Louis Ho
UNITS: 3AU
CONTACT HOURS: 39
YEAR/SEM: AY 2026-2027, Semester 1 (Aug 2026)
DAY/TIME: Mondays, 1330 – 1620
ROOM: LHS-TR +45

DESCRIPTION

This course serves to introduce students to the field of museum studies. It examines the discourses and realities of museums, offering a look at the work that underpins their existence. In the first half of the semester, we will examine the core dimensions and underlying logic of the museum as an institution. These modules will cover aspects of the institution such as exhibition-making and collections-building, as well as engaging with theoretical ideas informing critical museology. The second half of the semester will involve close reflection on issues and challenges confronting museums in the twenty-first century, such as the politics of representation, the turn towards spectacle and populism, and the discourses of art history. If, according to Andrew McClellan, the field of museum studies has emerged in recent decades as a “model of interdisciplinarity and intellectual vitality”, HR2010 is premised on the notion of the museum as a contested site where structures of power are at play in ever shifting dynamics. The fundamental insight that museums are deeply political spaces, shaped by forces such as nationalism, memory, socio-cultural hegemony and, in recent years, social justice movements, lies at the heart of this exercise. Class formats include lectures, field trips and guest engagements by industry professionals.

INTENDED LEARNING OUTCOMES

1. To understand the complex and shifting field of museum studies and be able critically engage this field through group discussion.
2. To critically analyze, challenge, and lead debate on theoretical texts and contemporary literature related to museum studies.
3. To succinctly and compellingly present understanding of museum studies via various assignments, including presentations, based on both subject-specific research and broad knowledge of the discipline.
4. To synthesize practical and theoretical knowledge in identifying a critical issue in museum studies along with key primary and secondary texts and writing a conceptually innovative and academically rigorous individual research essay supported by those texts.

REQUIREMENTS

(1) **Readings.** Readings are to be completed prior to the class meeting or field trip in question. All readings will be provided in a shared drive online.

(2) **Active participation in class assignments/discussion.** You will be graded on your participation. (Refer to the GRADING section on this page.) Pls. refrain from using devices such as laptops, tablets, cell phones etc. during class unless asked to.

(3) **Regular attendance and punctuality.** Absence from class requires official documentation of some form. Each unexplained absence results in the loss of a third of a grade, counted against your final one: an A- will become a B+, a B+ will drop to a B etc. If you are late or not around when your name is called, it is your responsibility to speak to the instructor after the end of the class. Being more than 20 mins late, or leaving without permission before class is dismissed, will be acknowledged as an absence. Please speak to me if you miss a field trip due to unforeseen circumstances or scheduling issues. We will discuss options for you to make up the absence with an additional assignment.

(4) **6 graded assignments**, details of which are included in the ASSIGNMENTS section of this syllabus (on p. 9).

(5) Passing the course means **fulfilling all requirements and graded components**. You are expected to receive passing scores in all graded components to receive an overall passing grade for this course. (Refer to the section below, GRADING.) Should you fail to complete an assignment, a failing grade is the eventuality, no matter how well you may have performed in other areas.

GRADING

Requirement/Assignment	Format	% of Total Grade	ILOs (Intended Learning Outcomes)
Participation	Solo	20 %	All
Case study presentation	Group	15 %	All
Mid-term exhibition review	Solo	20 %	All
In-class mini-assignments (3)	Group	15 %	All
Final project	Group	30 %	All
TOTAL		100 %	

CONTACT

Pls. reach me at **ho.h.louis@gmail.com**. All communication outside of class hours will/should be conducted over e-mail. Grades and feedback for assignments will also be distributed via e-mail. Should there be any issues that occur on days when field trips are scheduled – e.g. last-minute emergencies preventing your attendance – pls. call me or reach out on WhatsApp at **(65) 90407282**.

ETHICS

Your passing of the course depends on ethical behaviour. In matters of proven plagiarism, an immediate failing grade will be awarded. It is important that you recognize your responsibilities in understanding and applying the principles of academic integrity in your work. **Claims of ignorance do not excuse dishonesty.** If you are uncertain of parameters and expectations here, please consult the NTU website on academic integrity:

<<https://www.ntu.edu.sg/wkwsci/admissions/useful-links/undergraduate/academic-integrity>>

While NTU maintains certain policies on the use of AI, please note that, **for the purposes of this course, students are not permitted the use of generative AI programs either in preparation for oral presentations, or in submitted work.** The humanistic disciplines still largely rely on the synthesis of a broad range of research and creative thinking, and ultimately premised on abstract ideas and individual insight. A program like ChatGPT, for instance, at the present stage of its development, seems unlikely to produce the sort of in-depth creative thinking, academic analysis and deeply engaged writing that is required of upper-level undergraduates. ChatGPT is also known to fabricate facts, from names to events to even legal case studies. For these reasons, the use of AI tools in a course of this nature is both counter-productive, and disallowed. As in the case of proven plagiarism, the use of AI in work of any sort for this course, if discovered, results in an immediate failing grade.

SCHEDULE

Week one	10/8	<i>No class; replacement public holiday for Natl. Day</i>
Week one	17/8	Introduction / Institutions: Histories Lecture and class discussion
Week two	24/8	Institutions: Objects and Spaces Lecture and class discussion
Week three	31/8	Institutions: Collections In-class screening of <i>My National Gallery</i> (2024; dirs. Phil Grabsky and Ali Ray)
Week four	7/9	Institutions: Exhibitions I Field trip: National Museum of Singapore
Week five	14/9	Institutions: Exhibitions II Lecture and class discussion
Week six	21/9	Institutions: Exhibition Design Guest lecture and class discussion
Week seven	N.A.	Visit one of three exhibitions during the mid-term break, on your own, to complete a review. (Refer to ASSIGNMENTS section on p. 10 for details.)
MIDTERM RECESS (28/9 – 2/10)		
Week eight	5/10	Issues: The Politics of Representation Lecture and class discussion, with an in-class assignment
Week nine	12/10	Issues: Beyond the Museum I, or the Social History of Art Lecture and class discussion, with an in-class assignment
Week ten	19/10	Issues: Beyond the Museum II, or Public Art Lecture and class discussion, with an in-class assignment
Week eleven	26/10	Issues: Populism and Spectacle In-class screening and class discussion
Week twelve	2/11	Conclusion I Final project presentations
Week thirteen	9/11	<i>No class; replacement public holiday for Deepavali</i>
Week thirteen	16/11	Conclusion II (make-up class) Final project presentations

CLASS DESCRIPTIONS AND READINGS

All assigned readings are available in a shared drive online. Documents have been converted from various formats, and several are unpaginated.

Week 1 Introduction / Institutions: Histories

We begin with an introduction to the aims, outlines, deliverables and administrative details of HR2010. A short lecture that follows will briefly survey the evolution of museums, examining institutions of note in Europe and America, as well as those that emerged from colonial expansionism.

Readings:

- Andrew McClellan, *The Art Museum from Boullée to Bilbao* (2008), chap. 1, “Ideals and Mission”
- Rhiannon Mason et al, *Museum and Gallery Studies: The Basics* (2018), chap. 1, “First principles”

Week 2 Institutions: Objects and Spaces

This class examines one of the core activities of a museum: the display and interpretation of objects. How do the framework and space of an institutional setting determine the reception and understanding of an object?

Readings:

- Rhiannon Mason et al, *Museum and Gallery Studies: The Basics* (2018), chap. 5, “Display, interpretation and learning”
- Laura Raicovich, *Culture Strike: Art and Museums in an Age of Protest* (2021), chap. 2, “Art and Context”

Case study presentation:

The Nazi “Entartete Kunst” exhibition

Week 3 Institutions: Collections

My National Gallery (2024; dirs. Phil Grabsky and Ali Ray) is a documentary film exploring personal connections to artworks at the National Gallery of London. It features insights from staff, visitors, and celebrities on their favorite pieces, including Michael Palin and Princess Eugenie of the U.K. These stories are used as a lens through which to explore the museum’s history.

Readings:

- Rhiannon Mason et al, *Museum and Gallery Studies: The Basics* (2018), chap. 2, “Collecting and collections”
- David Carrier, *Museum Skepticism: A History of the Display of Art in Public Galleries* (2006), chap. 3, “Museum Skepticism”

Case study presentation:

The repatriation of the Benin Bronzes

Week 4 Institutions: Exhibitions I *

[Field trip] A guided tour of “Once Upon a Tide” at the National Museum Singapore, an exhibition that aims to tell the Singapore story through maritime tropes, serves to introduce us to the work of public museums that preserve, interpret and narrate state histories.

Readings:

- Simon Knell, “National museums and the national imagination” in Knell et al (eds), *National Museums: New Studies from around the World* (2011)
- Martha Ward, “What’s Important about the History of Modern Art Exhibitions?” in Greenberg et al (eds), *Thinking About Exhibitions* (1996)
- Michaela Giebelhausen, “Museum Architecture: A Brief History” in Macdonald (ed), *A Companion to Museum Studies* (2006)

Week 5 Institutions: Exhibitions II

Using our previous visit to the National Museum as a basis, we examine how exhibitions reflect institutional prerogatives and blind spots. We will explore how to critique institutional shows in cogent, relevant ways, and also reflect on the field of critical museum studies today, or what has been termed the “new museology”.

Readings:

- Carol Duncan, “Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship” in Lavine and Karp (eds), *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (1991)
- Janet Marstine, “What is New Museum Theory?” in Marstine (ed), *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction* (2006)
- Philip Fisher, “The Future’s Past,” *New Literary History* (1975)

Case study presentation:

MoMA’s “Primitivism” in 20th Century Art” exhibition

Week 6 Institutions: Exhibition Design

A guest lecture will introduce us to the basic practices and considerations of exhibition design, particularly in museums. We will explore how curatorial concepts are translated into spatial experiences, critically and creatively shaping the presentation of objects.

Readings:

- Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (1976), chaps. 1 and 3, “Notes on the Gallery Space” and “Context as Content”
- Charlotte Klonk, *Spaces of Experience: Art Gallery Interiors from 1800 to 2000* (2009), chap. 5, “The Dilemma of the Modern Art Museum”

Case study presentation:

The so-called Bilbao effect

Week 7 (Visit one of three assigned exhibitions on your own time to write a review)

N.A.

Week 8 Issues: The politics of representation

Museums today are perceived as battlegrounds for memory, identity, hegemony and ownership, a fact laid bare by activist groups and movements. Here, we reflect on the museum and its significance for critical notions of otherness and plurality, through the lenses of race, gender and orientation. This session includes an in-class mini-assignment.

Readings:

- Laura Raicovich, *Culture Strike: Art and Museums in an Age of Protest* (2021), chap. 4, “Unlearning, Undoing, Remaking”
- Elke Krasny, “Curating without Borders: Transnational Feminist and Queer Feminist Practices for the Twenty-first Century” in Buckley and Conomos (eds), *A Companion to Curation* (2020)

Case study presentation:

The cancellation of Robert Mapplethorpe’s “The Perfect Moment” exhibition in 1989

Week 9 Issues: Beyond the Museum I, or the Social History of Art

In the first of a two-part module on art beyond institutional sites and discourses, we turn to art history to acquaint ourselves with what has been dubbed the “social history of art”: what are its priorities, and how it is practiced by art historians? This session includes an in-class mini-assignment.

Readings:

- Elizabeth Mansfield, “Social Art History in Retrospect” in Grudin and Slifkin (eds), *The Present Prospects of Social Art History* (2021)
- Joshua Shannon, “The Role of Form in the Social History of Art” in Grudin and Slifkin (eds), *The Present Prospects of Social Art History* (2021)

Case study presentation:

Sam Durant’s *Scaffold* at the Walker Art Center

Week 10 Issues: Beyond the Museum II, or Public Art

In the second class of the module, we examine what it means to stage art beyond the confines of the institutional white cube. We focus on a variety of public art forms: state-sponsored monuments; site-specific works and interventionist installations in public space; land art; so-called ‘new genre public art’. We will consider ideas of counter- and anti-monumental practices. This session includes an in-class mini-assignment.

Readings:

- Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity* (2002), chap. 3, “Sittings of Public Art: Integration Versus Intervention”
- Quentin Stevens et al, “Counter-monuments: the anti-monumental and the dialogic”, *The Journal of Architecture* 17:6 (2012)

Case study presentation:

The case of the ‘Samsui woman mural’ in Singapore

Week 11 Issues: Populism and Spectacle

An in-class screening of *The First Monday in May* (2016; dir. Andrew Rossi), a documentary film centered on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 2015 blockbuster fashion exhibition, "China: Through the Looking Glass", and the accompanying Met Gala event, is followed by a discussion on the increasingly dominant role of spectacle, capital and populist appeal.

Readings:

- Andrew McClellan, *The Art Museum from Boullée to Bilbao* (2008), chap. 5, "Commercialism"
- Nizan Shaked, *Museums and Wealth: The Politics of Contemporary Art Collections* (2022), chap. 1, "The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Economic Inequality: Art and Imperialism"

Case study presentation:

The 2026 edition of the Met Gala

Week 12 Conclusion I

Final project presentations. No readings or assignments.

Week 13 Conclusion II

Final project presentations. No readings or assignments.

ASSIGNMENTS

Several assignments are group efforts; your group members should remain the same across all such assignments.

- (1) **Assignment:** *Case study presentation (group)*
Weightage: 15%

(A) **Outline:** Each group is asked to make a presentation on a case study comprising an occurrence, exhibition or development pertinent to the class topic that week. Your presentation should include a summary of the issues; various sides of the debate; contextualization of said debate within similar developments or broader movements.

For instance, the case of the Benin Bronzes should be bracketed by a discussion of increasing demands for repatriation of looted cultural property from offending institutions. Similarly, the notorious “Entartete Kunst” exhibition in Germany in 1937 may be premised on examining the paradigms of modern art within the framework of the Nazi party’s genocidal ideologies.

There is no need for extended introductions of the institution(s) or individual(s) involved, unless there are details pertinent to the matter at hand (e.g. everyone knows what the Nazis stood for, there is no need for explanation beyond a quick overview). This exercise is intended to focus on the critical *issues* surrounding these debates.

(B) **Parameters:** Your presentation should last no more than 15 mins (and no more than 15 slides), with 10 mins after for questions.

(C) **Topics for individual classes:** Topics are listed below, with a link provided in each instance to help get you started on your research.

Week 2

The 1937 “Entartete Kunst” exhibition organized by the Nazi party.

<<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/degenerate-art-show-lessons-2696741>>

Week 3

The repatriation of the Benin Bronzes and the debate around cultural theft.

<<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/04/arts/design/benin-bronzes-nigeria-ownership.html>>

Week 5

The controversy around MoMA’s “Primitivism” in 20th Century Art” exhibition (1984).

<<https://brooklynrail.org/2013/05/criticspage/art-criticism-that-made-a-difference/>>

Week 6

The so-called Bilbao effect.

<<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/oct/01/bilbao-effect-frank-gehry-guggenheim-global-craze>>

Week 8

The cancellation of Robert Mapplethorpe’s “The Perfect Moment” exhibition in 1989.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Perfect_Moment>

Week 9

The debate over Sam Durant's installation, *Scaffold* (2012), at the Walker Art Center in 2017.
<<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/13/arts/design/walker-art-center-scaffold.html>>

Week 10

The case of the 'Samsui woman mural' in Singapore's Chinatown (2024).
<<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/samsui-woman-mural-chinatown-cigarette-smoking-prostitute-art-culture-4434931>>

Week 11

The furor over the 2026 edition of the Met Gala.
<<https://www.nytimes.com/2026/05/08/style/why-everyone-was-so-mad-about-the-met-gala.html>>

- (2) **Assignment:** *Mid-term exhibition review (solo)*
 Weightage: **20%**

Outline: You are asked to review *one* of the following exhibitions:

- (A) "Singapore Stories: Pathways and Detours in Art" at the National Gallery Singapore OR
(B) "Radio Malaya" at the National University of Singapore Museum OR
(C) "From Region to Home | Dari Rantau Ke Rumah" at the Malay Heritage Centre

Do not review all three shows. Pls. visit your exhibition of choice during the mid-term break – or whenever is convenient for you – which would count as a class. Your exhibition review should run from 1,500 to 1,800 words.

Deadline: Reviews are due via e-mail to ho.h.louis@gmail.com by **midnight on Sat, Oct 3.**

- (3) **Assignment:** *3 in-class mini-assignments (group)*
 Weightage: **15%**

Outline: Students are asked to complete a mini-assignment, as a group, in class.

Deadline: The assignments will happen **in class during weeks eight, nine and ten.**

- (4) **Assignment:** *Final project (group)*
 Weightage: **30%**

(A) **Outline:** The final project, a group effort, requires you to evaluate a museum exhibition using various frameworks. You may select an exhibition that you have personally visited at one of the following museums in Singapore:

- National Gallery Singapore
- Asian Civilisations Museum
- Singapore Art Museum
- ArtScience Museum
- Any heritage center

Your assignment requires you to answer the following questions, with the help of scholarly references and images. You may not include material from other assignments you have completed for this course. (Remember to include the title of exhibition, name of institution, and names of group members.)

(A1) Pls. evaluate the exhibition critically. If the exhibition includes a catalogue, it may be wise to refer to the curatorial essay. Length: 1,500 – 2,000 words.

(A2) Pls. discuss the organizing/hosting institution in terms of its organization, history and physical space and relate these aspects to the exhibition in question. Elements to consider: the institution's founding; its primary stakeholders (the government? corporate sponsors?); its architecture, interior, history etc. Length: 1,500 – 2,000 words.

(A3) Pls. identify *no more* than three critical issues that may frame the exhibition and its themes, and discuss these. You may wish to discuss issues separate from the works and the exhibition itself, focusing on matters that deal with the institution or with broader social, cultural and/or political dimensions. You should make reference to texts and ideas that we have discussed this semester, or other theoretical notions relevant to the field of museum studies. Length: 1,500 – 2,000 words.

(B) Deadlines:

Nov 2 and 16, Mon: You are expected to make a presentation on your topic during one of our two last class meetings of the semester. (Dates will be decided on after the midterm break.) Your presentation should last no more than 20 mins, with 10 mins after for discussion, and should include visuals.

Nov 30, Mon: Your paper is due via e-mail by **midnight**.

As usual, submissions are to be made via e-mail to ho.h.louis@gmail.com. Include all text and images within a single document, and please do *not* double-space your text; single-spaced is the desired format.