

GRAPH-2312

Critical Issues Studio

Tues 8am–1pm

DC 404



Thomas Alleman, *The American Apparel*, 2014; sexy corporate advertising amidst late capitalist urban decay.

In this combined seminar/studio course we will survey and engage some of the critical conversations that shape graphic design thinking and practice today. Through a diet of reading, discussion, and writing, we'll unpack and question the critical lenses and conventions that shape contemporary design discourse, confront graphic design's relationship to structures of power, and explore some of the ways designers and thinkers have proposed rethinking design's position. We'll explore all this through a series of studio projects that interpret and extend ideas from our discussions, and publish our work through a class Instagram, exhibition, and collaborative publication. Taken together, our activities will model a design practice that engages its context in informed and intentional ways.

Outcomes

- Explore the ways that GD is enmeshed in its social and political contexts.
- Explore conversations designers and thinkers are having about these enmeshments.
- Develop personal opinions/positions informed by these conversations.
- Practice making work that reflects your opinions.
- Employ reading and writing as tools of a critical graphic design practice.

Class Activities

Critical Issues Studio is a 3-credit course that will hold in-person meetings during a 5 hour period each Tuesday. Class meetings will be split between seminar discussion and studio activities (critiques, peer reviews of writing, in-class work, etc), with a 'coffee break' in between. All reading, research, and other homework detailed on the course [Calendar](#) must be completed in advance of meetings. Expect to spend 4–8 hours a week on work for this course outside of meetings.

Attendance

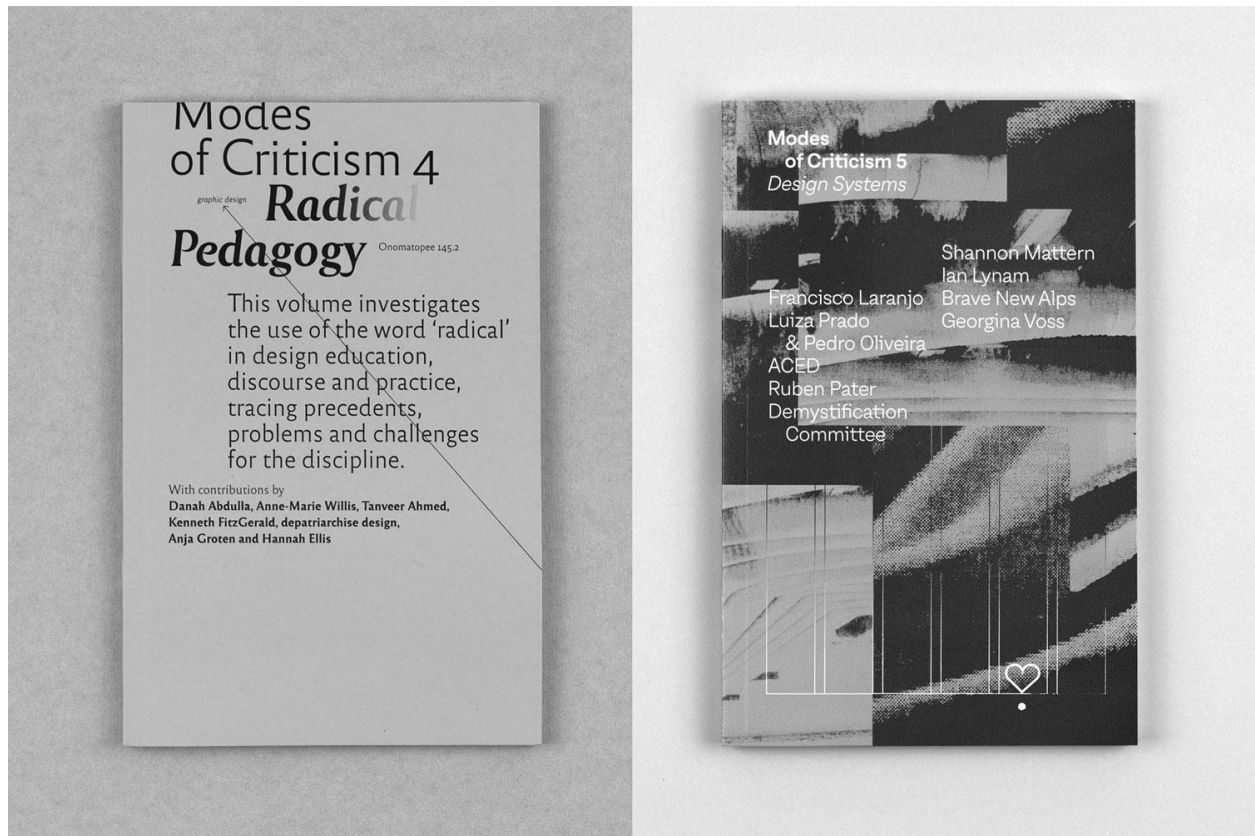
It's really important that you are present, active, and prepared for every meeting of this class. If you really need to miss a meeting, or schedule elements of your participation at another time, please notify me at least one day before the start of class so that I can adjust plans to accommodate.

I will be adhering to the following (fairly standard) attendance policy:

- 2 unexcused absences = automatic letter grade drop (A → B, etc.)
- 3 partial absences = 1 unexcused absence
- 3 unexcused absences = automatic incomplete

Books & Supplies

All readings for this course are provided as google documents, linked from the [Reading/Viewing](#) page.



Modes of Criticism, one of only a few contemporary moderated platforms for critical writing on graphic design.

Readings & Discussions

Reading and seminar discussions are an important part of our activities in this course. You will be asked to read around 5,000–10,000 words a week, to contribute written comments to the reading docs, and to participate in in-person discussions. You'll

also be occasionally tasked with preparing annotations to the texts, which will involve research and additional reading. You'll work with a 'reading partner' throughout the semester, and co-facilitate discussions with them on two occasions.

The reading list, annotations brief, and other requirements can be found on the [Reading/Viewing](#) page.

Projects

You will complete 3 projects over the course of the semester: a critical review of a piece of contemporary graphic design, a type-only 'statement poster' that will form part of a class show, and an open-format speculative design piece that will be published in a collaborative print publication. All projects will include both written and visual elements.

All project briefs can be found on the [Projects](#) page.

Public Outcomes

This course aims to actively engage contemporary conversations about graphic design; towards this end, all project outcomes will be shared publicly. This sharing will happen through a [course Instagram](#), a class poster show, and a final class print publication.

Contact

Feel free to reach out to me by email (akiley01@risd.edu) at any time with any questions or concerns regarding this course. I'm also happy to schedule 1-on-1 Zoom or in person meetings during my office hours, Weds 2–5pm.



The Pruitt-Igoe housing complex in St. Louis, built in 1954 and demolished in 1976, widely seen as symbolic of the failings of modernism.

Evaluation

Your grade for this course will have 2 components:

- 50% readings & discussions: engagement, etiquette (see Discussion Code of Conduct), quality of offerings (comments, annotations)
- 50% Projects (15% each for Graphic Design Review and Statement Poster, 20% for Speculative Artifact project): ideas, development, final writing & presentation

- A Always 100% prepared, consistently makes perceptive and sensitive contributions to class discussions (written and/or in-person); demonstrates rigorous and productive working process; makes substantial weekly progress in projects; works and reworks outcomes to bring them to a high level of refinement; seeks out feedback; engages ideas with depth and commitment.
- B Almost always prepared, present and active in discussions (in writing and/or in-person); respects discussion etiquette; demonstrates productive working process; consistently makes progress in projects; completes assignments on time and satisfies briefs; responds well to feedback.
- C Usually prepared, present in discussions but often inactive (in both writing and in person); has a solid but underproductive working process; makes inconsistent progress in projects; completes work only to the minimum requirements of the brief; responds to feedback inconsistently or begrudgingly.
- D Participates minimally in discussions and crits; has an unproductive working progress; makes little progress with projects; completes assignments only partially; does not respond to feedback.
- F (Any or all of these:) misses more than 3 sessions without making arrangements with instructor; consistently fails to complete reading and/or projects; produces work that does not engage the subject matter of the course and/or ignores project requirements; does not respect discussion and critique etiquette.

Equity

My hope is to make this class a space in which all aspects of personal identity—gender, sexual orientation, ability, age, socioeconomic circumstances, ethnicity, race, and culture—are accepted, valued, and allowed to shape the work, opinions, language, and learning styles of every student. I have worked, and am working, to build a reading list that reflects a diversity of voices and engages urgent contemporary issues; to structure learning activities so as to allow for a variety of modes of engagement and participation; and to encourage a class culture of respect. These efforts are always ongoing, and I sincerely welcome any suggestions you might have as I continue to work on them.

Please understand that the readings assigned in this course present subjective opinions, not all of which represent my own, and none of which are official positions of the program. The reading list is by nature incomplete and unbalanced, and will likely evolve with the changing course of discussion.

Disabilities

If you are a student with a disability that may require accommodations to complete the requirements of this class, I encourage you to discuss your learning needs with me during the first week of the term. Once an approval letter from the Office of Disability Support Services is submitted, accommodations will be provided. For more information on how to receive accommodations, please contact [Disability Support Services](#).

Land acknowledgement

I want to acknowledge that RISD, myself, and most of us here, are currently occupying the historic homelands of the Narragansett and Wampanoag peoples. Our claim to be here—studying and thinking about design, in English, within a dominant western European academic lineage—is legitimized and still enforced by a colonial power structure violently imposed on this land and its original

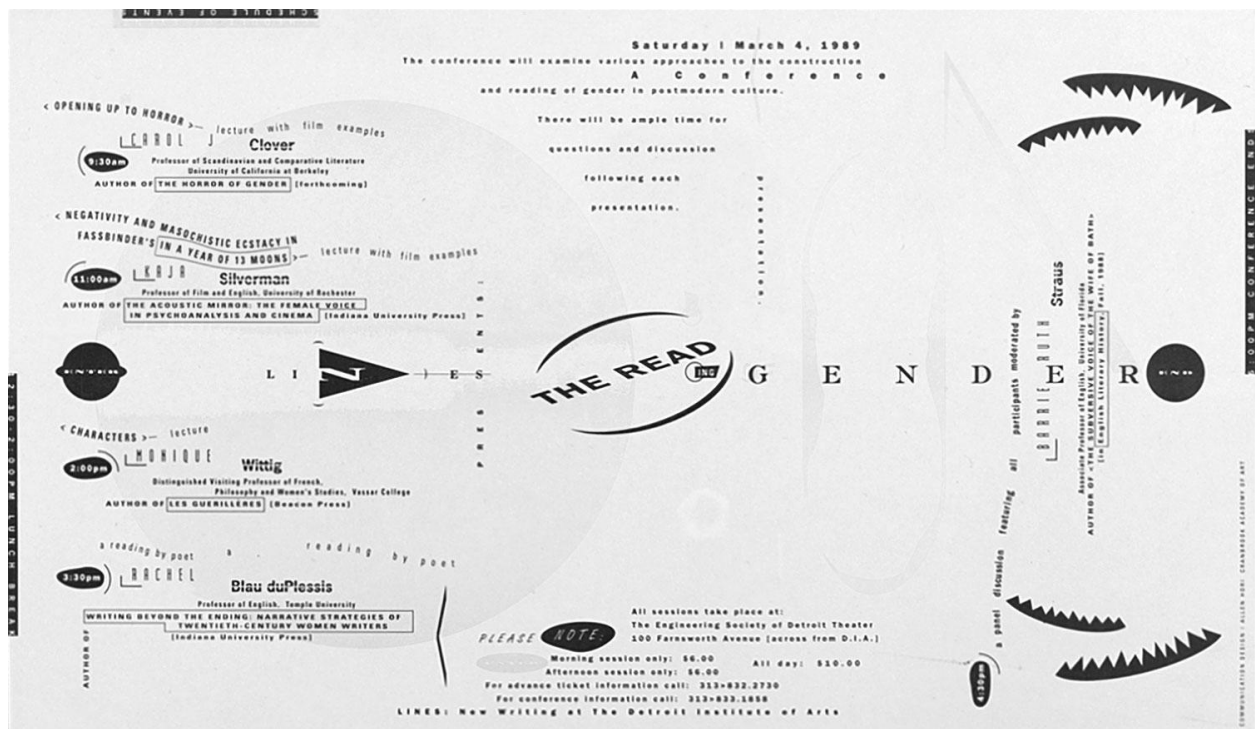
inhabitants, and responsible for many other violences, both past and ongoing. What this means for us as graphic designers and as people, and what we should do about it, is something I intend to actively engage in this course.

Course materials

Calendar

Reading/Viewing

Projects



Allen Hori, *Reading Gender*, 1989; complex ideas 'deconstructed' through diagrammatic typographic treatments.