

Call for Papers: Parasitism
Clark Art Institute
April 5, 2024
Submissions due November 12, 2023

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The Research and Academic Program (RAP) at the Clark Art Institute is pleased to invite papers from graduate students for a one-day symposium around the theme of “Parasitism.” Held in person in Williamstown, Massachusetts, on Friday, April 5th, this convening extends the flexible metaphor of the parasite to the discipline of art history. Despite its contemporary biological connotations, the term originates in Greco-Roman life and stagecraft, where classical parasites were human subjects who performed obeisance, flattered, and otherwise affirmed the power of dinner hosts, in order to be *para* (next to) the *sitos* (grain). The term shifted focus to the sciences through the proliferation of taxonomy in the of the Enlightenment era, as the classical metaphor gained came to describe newfound botanical relationships between vines and trees. However, by the nineteenth century, it became reapplied to culture via the elision of science and society, in part through the rise of fields like epidemiology. In its modern metaphorical usage, “parasite” is equally applied to capitalist tycoons and labor unions, despots and the dispossessed, but no matter the target, the term implies a unique conception of relations, wherein the parasite ambivalently acknowledges the power and status of its host.

We welcome papers that probe these idiosyncratic structural relationships, building upon recent scholarship in political theory, media studies, and contemporary art criticism to consider the implications of the literal, representational, or symbolic pests within disciplinary systems. Additionally, we encourage interventions that go beyond the metaphorical usage of the term, which take aim at the political and aesthetic work of something belonging where it should not be, or, alternatively, supplying a hidden payload of disease.

Without prescribing an ethic or morality to the parasite, this symposium aims to apply interdisciplinary methods to better understand a changing field of study, bringing together MA, MFA, ABD students in the fields of art history, studio art, anthropology, film and media studies, architecture, performance studies, comparative literature, and adjacent disciplines. Through these broad conceptions of the parasite, we hope to identify points of articulation within art history, considering what theoretical, practical, and tactical interpretations of the “parasite” may bring to visual analysis, circulation of artworks, and transmission of meaning.

Convened by Nat Sorscher (Williams Graduate Program in the History of Art, '24) and organized by RAP, this semi-private symposium will be organized around two-person panels with 20-minute papers and will prioritize time for discussion. The event will close on Friday evening with a public keynote lecture delivered by Dr. Anna Watkins Fisher (Associate Professor of American Culture, University of Michigan).

The following topics are meant to be prompts for thoughts, invocations for projects, or launchpads for discussion, but do not proscribe the entire scope of this convening:

- Representations of parasitism, disease, or the vampiric
- Ambivalent relationships to sites of power (studios, galleries, schools, patrons, museums)
- Semiotic disruption/hijacking (as suggested in Michel Serres' *The Parasite*)
- Parasitic relationships between artmakers and the academy
- History of piracy, plagiarism, forgery, or copyright
- Comparisons of parasitism to similar structural relationships or subjectivities (e.g. the worker, the slave, the captive maternal, *Homo sacer*)

Interested participants are invited to submit an abstract of no more than 350 words along with a CV to parasitism2024@gmail.com by 12 November 2023. Accepted speakers will be notified by late December. The Clark will provide and arrange travel, accommodation (Thursday and Friday nights), and hospitality at the event.