

**HPSS 732-01 Witness Tree Project Seminar**  
**Fall 2012: Social Justice and the Great Depression**  
**[in conjunction with FURN 2451]**

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**Class:** M 9-12, CB 434

**Course Philosophy**

The Witness Tree Project is a curricular initiative involving Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) and the National Park Service (NPS). Witness trees are long-standing trees that have “witnessed” key events, trends, and people in American history. The Project arranges for a fallen witness tree to be shipped from a national historic site to RISD, where, in a joint history seminar and furniture studio, students interpret the history the tree witnessed and make relevant objects from the tree’s wood. In addition to classroom study, the Project variously involves field trips, guest lectures, exhibitions of students’ objects, and other events that highlight the significance of material culture, landscape, and design in learning about American history. Study in the seminar will be integral to work in the furniture studio and vice versa; assignments in both courses are intended to complement one another.

In this fourth year of the Witness Tree Project, we will work with historic trees from the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Sites and the Vanderbilt National Historic Site, all located in Hyde Park, NY. We will use study of the sites and their history to explore the Great Depression and its impact on issues of social justice in the 1930s and beyond. Topics will include the causes of the Great Depression; assessment of FDR's policies in the first and second New Deals; Eleanor Roosevelt's commitment to labor reform and humanitarian causes; race, gender, and class in the 1930s; the idea of the "common man" in 1930s art; and the legacy of the New Deal today.

**The Role of the Department of History, Philosophy, and Social Sciences at RISD**

This course is offered by the Department of History, Philosophy, and Social Sciences (HPSS) at RISD. HPSS is a multidisciplinary department whose faculty members teach and conduct research in a range of fields across the humanities and social sciences, including American studies, anthropology, history, philosophy, psychology, and sociology. The coming together of such disparate fields in one department represents the cutting-edge of scholarship and provides a unique and rich learning experience in which you may readily learn and compare traditional disciplinary approaches to understanding the world (anthropology, history, philosophy), as well as explore newer, interdisciplinary fields of knowledge (e.g. gender and sexuality, media studies, race and ethnicity). Studying in HPSS will enable you to develop your imagination and independence of thought, your ability to approach issues and problems from different viewpoints, and your communication skills --qualities integral to the creative work of any artist.

**The Role of Liberal Arts at RISD**

HPSS is one of three departments (alongside English and History of Art and Visual Culture) in RISD’s Division of Liberal Arts. At RISD, the liberal arts are integral to the process of becoming an accomplished artist or designer. Creativity depends on curiosity, empathy, and communication—a desire to explore and share an understanding about the world in which we live. In fact, the word “liberal” in liberal arts comes from the Latin *liber*, meaning “free,” and it is meant to convey that learning about

culture, history, and philosophy can liberate the mind and thus provide the foundation for truly imaginative and innovative work. Liberal Arts classes are intended to shape fundamental aspects of your vocation by instilling in you a lifelong curiosity about the world, enhancing your capacity to analyze situations and act on ideas with independence and confidence, and enabling you to communicate effectively in a variety of contexts.

## Course Requirements and Expectations

### Books

Available at the Brown Bookstore, Thayer Street:

Paul Buhle and Sabrina Jones, *FDR and the New Deal For Beginners* (For Beginners, 2010). ISBN 1934389501

Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression* (Vintage Books, 1983). ISBN 0394716280

Brigid O'Farrell, *She Was One of Us: Eleanor Roosevelt and the American Worker* (Cornell University Press, 2011). ISBN 0801478014

Lynd Ward, *Vertigo: A Novel in Woodcuts*. (Dover Publications, 2009 edition) ISBN 0486468895

### Online Resources:

New Deal Periodic Table: <http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/education/resources/periodictable.html>

The Living New Deal: <http://livingnewdeal.berkeley.edu/resources/websites/>

Library of Congress New Deal Resources Guide:

<http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/newdeal/otherlc.html>

The New Deal Network: <http://newdeal.feri.org/morefeat2.htm>

The Roosevelt Institute: <http://www.rooseveltinstitute.org/>

Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library: <http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/>

Eleanor Roosevelt Center at Val Kill: <http://www.ervk.org/>

Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project: <http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/>

### Evaluation

The following four factors will determine your final grade:

#### 1. Attendance and Participation 10%

You are required to attend all classes, no excuses. The course meets only once a week, which makes missing a class a significant gap in your learning. You may miss a class if you have to (due to illness, etc.), but it will count against you. The field trip, on October 1st, however, is essential; you are expected to travel with the class to Hyde Park and to be prepared for a full day (12-13 hours).

#### 2-4. Four analytical papers, 20% each

Papers will offer you an opportunity to assess readings, respond to fieldwork results, and synthesize your learning in the course. Descriptions will be handed out in class.

### Grading Policies

- Grades will be based on a traditional A-F scale, where “C” equals “meeting the basic requirements of the course.” Everyone starts with an assumed C and goes up or down from there as they complete the coursework. Since this is a collaborative class Dale Broholm and I will do the grading together.

- All assignments, exams, etc. not completed by the last day of class will receive an F and be factored into the final grade, unless you have made other arrangements with me.
- Plagiarism is a serious offence and will result in an automatic F for the assignment and may warrant further judicial action. Be sure that you understand what constitutes plagiarism before you begin an assignment.

### **Class Meeting Schedule**

NOTE: All class meetings will be in a seminar discussion format. It is understood, however, that all seminar content will function as an integral part of students' work in the studio and vice versa. Crossover discussion, mutual insight, and collaborative activity will enhance the topic outline presented here.

#### **I. The Crash and the Great Depression**

*Assignment: Using documentation from the field trip, create a personal map of your experience of Hyde Park (should include visual component, as well as a written explanation of 3-4 pages). Due Oct. 8.*

September 17 Introduction and Preparation

Paul Buhle and Sabrina Jones, *FDR and the New Deal For Beginners* - read over summer if possible

September 24 No Seminar Meeting in Morning (studio still on)

Read Roosevelt's "Fireside Chats" at  
<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ma02/volpe/newdeal/firesides.html>

October 1 Field Trip to Hyde Park

October 8 Assessing Hyde Park

Critique of personal maps  
**\*Seminar Assignment #1 due (personal map)**

#### **II. Deals and Reactions**

*Assignment: In his second inaugural speech, FDR called for a "morally better world." Assess the success or failure of ONE New Deal program toward that end (5-6 pages). Due Nov 5.*

October 15 Radicals, Left and Right

Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression*

October 22 Idealism and Reality

Franklin Roosevelt, "Second Inaugural Address."

[http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ma02/volpe/newdeal/second\\_inaugural\\_text.html](http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ma02/volpe/newdeal/second_inaugural_text.html)

Elaine S. Abelson, "Women Who Have No Men to Work for Them": Gender and Homelessness in the Great Depression, 1930-1934." *Feminist Studies* Vol. 29, No. 1 (Spring, 2003), pp. 104-127.

Calvin W. Gower, "The Struggle of Blacks for Leadership Positions in the Civilian Conservation Corps: 1933-1942." *Journal of Negro History* Vol. 61 No. 2 (April 1976): 123-135.

October 29 ER and Labor

Brigid O'Farrell, *She Was One of Us: Eleanor Roosevelt and the American Worker*

#### **III. Representations**

*Assignment: Analyze the concept of the "common man" in one form of cultural expression (design, visual art, music, literature, theater) during the 1930s (5-6 pages). Due Nov. 26.*

November 5 Grapes of Wrath

In-class viewing and discussion of John Ford, *Grapes of Wrath* (1940)

**\*Seminar Assignment #2 due (New Deal program assessment)**

November 12 Narrating the 1930s

Lynd Ward, *Vertigo*

excerpt, James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

November 19 Nostalgia and Critique in Depression-Era Arts

James S. Miller, "Inventing the 'Found' Object: Artifactuality, Folk History, and the Rise of Capitalist Ethnography in 1930s America." *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 17, No. 466 (Autumn, 2004): 373-393.

Victoria M. Grieve, "Work That Satisfies the Creative Instinct: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Arts and Crafts," *Winterthur Portfolio* (Summer/Autumn 2008).

#### **IV. Summation**

*Assignment: Short essay to accompany final object from studio, elaborating on the object's meanings and contextualizing design decisions in light of seminar research (3-4 pages)*

November 26 Legacy of the New Deal in American Social Debate

Read the *Next New Deal* blog at: <http://www.nextnewdeal.net/>

**\*Seminar Assignment #3 due (common man analysis)**

December 3 Final Object Critique

December 12 (Liberal Arts Exam Day)

**\*Seminar Assignment #4 (object essay) due by 12 p.m. in College Building 144**