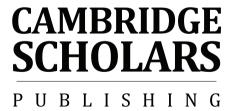# Kitsch

Kitsch:
History, Theory, Practice

Edited by

Monica Kjellman-Chapin

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Monica Kjellman-Chapin

The Kitsch Quandary

Kitsch: the mere word evokes mental images of cutesy collectibles, treacly trinkets, sweetly sentimental scenes, thematically trite tabletop tchotchkes, or perhaps anemic appropriations of canonical works of art, whether in frameable reproduction form or as a garden folly available for sale in a variety of sizes (fig. 0-1).[1] Although frequently dismissed as facile, lowbrow, or one-off, throwaway aesthetics, kitsch is surprisingly mobile and complex. It can constitute all manner of mass-produced trifles and gewgaws as well as the "fine" art essays of *les artistes pompiers*, for instance. Kitsch also cuts across the traditional terrain of the low and high in another way, by embracing within its purview simultaneously the paintings of nineteenth-century academicians such as Alexander Cabanel and Jules Joseph Lefebvre *and* their commercially consumable cousins, marketed through online home décor companies such as Design Toscano, Brushstrokes® Fine Art Inc., or Dafen Village Online.[2]

As the examples listed above suggest, the range of objects and images towards which the term kitsch gestures is astonishingly vast. Reactions to kitsch tend to be equally varied and pendular, eliciting a sardonic smirk laced with derision or a grin glimmering with the indulgence in a "guilty" pleasure. In *Five Faces of Modernity*, Matei Calinescu warns that, with the concept of kitsch, "[w]e are dealing…with one of the most bewildering and elusive categories of modern aesthetics."[3] Yet, despite its definitional slipperiness, it remains one of the most persistent concepts within modernist discourse.

From its etymological and, one might argue, its ideological, beginnings in the latter half of the nineteenth century, kitsch has steadfastly resisted a single definition. Although abundantly used as a taxonomical tag that confidently identifies a specific genus, despite differences within sub-species, kitsch's definitional boundaries are wildly irregular and frequently

indistinct, trading on contested notions of taste, vague and shifting notions of beauty, and unstable cultural hierarchies. In spite of this infirmness of category, kitsch still stands at the center of debates and disputes taking place within an increasingly wide range of disciplines about the relations between "high" art, popular culture, the avant-garde, and mass production. More recently, within the varied practices of postmodernism, kitsch's energy has been renewed and its shape again shifted by its deployment as a tool of ironic send-up or as an agent of the critical spirit. Due to the ever-transforming, context-driven, and experience-bound nature of kitsch, its continuing relevance is all but assured.

Fig. 0-1. *Venus de Milo* Salt and Pepper Shakers. Collection of the author.

Kitschstory

That kitsch is almost universally recognized—as a denigration, as a category of objects, as a set of responses—but simultaneously wildly elastic in its parameters has generated quite a bit of theorizing about what kitsch is and might be, what it suggests about class and taste, and how it functions as a reflective, proscriptive, and constructive device within culture.[4] Many early discussions of kitsch centered on its assumed parasitic relationship to and potential enervation of "high" art. Much of the writing about kitsch has centered on the visual arts, but the concept has also been applied to other forms of art, including music, literature, and theater. Increasingly, the concept of kitsch has been applied to other domains; the question of kitsch is debated in such diverse areas as architecture, business studies and economics, critical management and organization theory, design, urban planning, media studies, political science, public administration, queer theory, and religious studies. As with its application in the visual arts, kitsch in these varied discursive circles is not dependent upon a single point of view and does not present a unified version of the idea of kitsch itself. Instead, the concept of kitsch has been mobilized by disparate concerns to draw a line around questionable, low quality, "ersatz," or even potentially dangerous cultural expressions, or deployed as a recuperative and celebratory agent for those same cultural utterances.

The word kitsch was first used in the nineteenth century to refer to inexpensive pictures sold as souvenirs to tourists.[5] One frequently suggested etymological origin for the term is the German verb *verkitschen*, meaning to make cheaply.[6] Thus, from its earliest usage, kitsch was linked with a cheap(ened) form of art, something either mass-produced or produced hastily, and without much aesthetic merit or taste. For the most part, the term continues to connote that which is aesthetically wan or suspect. At the heart of discussions about kitsch lies a concern about authenticity and value, as kitsch is often understood to stand opposed to "real art," opposed to "true" aesthetic experience, offering instead only enervated and inauthentic approximations, merely syrupy, sugary surrogates for the more robust fare of "real" art. Kitsch is therefore seen as having few intrinsic properties except in a negative sense, as it is understood to either rely on "high" cultural artifacts to ape—and, in the process of that aping, diminish—or to sidestep the "high" altogether and offer the viewer a mass-produced, cheapened experience that trades upon hackneyed emotionality and trite themes.[7]

It is in part kitsch's glibness, its easiness, that made it so palatable and readily consumable, according to art critic Clement Greenberg, whose

1939 essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" has formed the theoretical backbone for many subsequent discussions of the kitsch concept. Calling attention to the undemanding nature of kitsch, Greenberg argued that kitsch was both formulaic and trafficked in faux sensations:

> Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money—not even their time.[8]

The effortlessness with which it could be consumed, both because of its ubiquity and because of its few demands upon the consumer, also made kitsch dangerously appealing. The problem with kitsch was that not only was it endangering to "legitimate" culture, but also that it could easily be deployed by totalitarian regimes as a mechanism of control and manipulation. While it may seem a bit of a leap from kitsch-as-showy-trifle to kitsch-as-agent-of-sociopolitical-evil, for Greenberg that chasm was bridged by kitsch's absent or diminished substance. Lacking intrinsic content of its own, and instead possessing only effect, kitsch could be infused with propaganda and thus operate as an ideal mechanism of political manipulation and social control. In part this is because kitsch supplies readily digestible morsels for passive consumption, but also because kitsch intimates that its proffered emotions are universally shared.

It is this idea of community based on a shared (if insubstantial) sentiment that subtends Milan Kundera's oft-quoted passage from *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* about kitsch:

> Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: How nice to see children running on the grass! The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass! It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch. The brotherhood of man on earth will be possible only on a base of kitsch.[9]

For Kundera, kitsch shifts the focus from active enjoyment (children running on the grass) to passive and ultimately hollow gratification (emotionally moved, together with all humanity) by a fundamentally false sense of community of sentiment. Kitsch is thus not, for Kundera, bound up in the superficial qualities of objects, but in the *experience* and *enjoyment* of superficiality itself.[10] The remedy for the enfeebling (and worse) effects of kitsch, according to Greenberg, was the avant-garde, whose task it was to "to keep culture *moving* in the midst of ideological confusion and violence."[11] In order to fulfill this task, the vanguard needed

to stand apart, and above all, to resist the siren song of kitsch.[12] Part of kitsch's tantalizing lure was its tremendous capacity for profit, but the pleasure principle was also in play; kitsch held a profound "power to please, to satisfy…the easiest and most widespread popular aesthetic nostalgias," as Calinescu has written.[13]

These concerns about the sham and emptily imitative aspects of kitsch have long attended discussions of it. Kitsch supplies the viewer with counterfeit emotions, borne on the back of trite or pandering subject matter writ in formal terms that are, as Nick Capasso has argued, "phenomenologically prone or culturally coded to evoke positive responses."[14] Calinescu, likewise, has noted that the whole of kitsch, regardless of whether one views it from the position of stature-seeking *Kitschmensch* or as a cathartic escape from the banality of modernity, is enveloped in fraudulence. "Kitsch," he writes, "may be conveniently defined as a specifically aesthetic form of lying. …the whole concept of kitsch centers around such questions as imitation, forgery, counterfeit, and what we may call the aesthetics of deception and self-deception."[15] The problem is not, then, that kitsch is bad art, but that it is not art at all. In fact, kitsch, though it may be carried through the hackneyed and clichéd, does not necessarily reside in the *object*, but in the *response to* the object.[16] Kitsch supplants genuine art with pretense, as it usurps real emotion and replaces it with phony feeling.

Kitsch appeals to an audience whose tastes have been conditioned to prefer, to use Gillo Dorfles' pithy phraseology, the condiment instead of the main course.[17] The question of taste (or lack thereof) has haunted many considerations of kitsch, but the issue is not as clear-cut as Dorfles' prandial metaphor implies. Like kitsch, taste is remarkably mobile and malleable. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu articulated taste as a marker of class and an act of social positioning.[18] For Bourdieu, "kitsch" does not gesture towards a cluster of attributes that inhere in an object, but rather functions as a signifier that serves to produce and in some cases protect social differences and class distinctions. A preference for kitsch might be taken as an indicator of poor taste, but might just as easily be a signpost of cultural conditioning for the facile, lack of education, class distinction, or a knowing and ironic appreciation for the aesthetically glib. Understood thus, kitsch can therefore be seen as a kind of identity art, locating the collector, appreciator, labeler, and/or appropriator's position in social space and marking him or her as a particular type of consumer.

Kitschcraft

In the past few decades there has been a reclamation of kitsch both as an idea and as an aesthetic. The popularity of kitsch artifacts, especially in recent years—mid-20th-century modernist design and 1950s "retro," for instance, have become über-chic—combined with the discursive prevalence of the kitsch concept, means that a considerable body of new literature has developed around the topic. Much of the current publication on kitsch can be divided into three basic categories: 1) articles on a specific aspect of kitsch; 2) single-author books on kitsch, usually dealing with kitsch as a global phenomenon or with a particular, narrow subfield; and 3) what might be termed "kitsch compendia," or books which collect together many examples of kitsch images, objects, literary passages, advertisements, and other "tacky" phenomena. The books in this last category are often presented as a kind of curiosity cabinet between covers; in some cases the objects are even offered up as humbugs to be exposed as sham to the reader through acrid captions or celebratory exultations about knowing participation in "bad taste." Thus, while there have been a great number of insightful, important, interesting, and even impudent publications about kitsch in recent years, there remain gaps in the critical literature, particularly with regard to texts which grapple with the question of kitsch from a variety of scholarly approaches.

One might argue that today we have reached a kind of taste reversal as far as kitsch is concerned, with kitsch compendia and other publications, the notion of "kitsch as cool," and sites like *cuteoverload.com* and *worldofkitsch.com* forging different forms of appreciation—indeed, different sensibilities and emotional responses—around objects previously viewed with disdain.[19] Cultural omnivorism and the multi-directional mobility of taste—a kind of tourism of taste, one might say—has helped establish a relationship to kitsch that is radically different than that of earlier generations.[20] This does not, however, mean that the older notions of kitsch as art's opposite, as low to art's high, have been evacuated, or that there is no need for fresh evaluations of the ways in which kitsch operates in culture. Kitsch certainly shows no signs of going away, and in fact its usage—as a term, as a strategy, as a classification—seems to be proliferating. As it moves and mutates, kitsch gathers to it added problematicity, and thus the question of kitsch continues to be a question of some critical import.

Kitsch Colloquies

This anthology addresses the problem of how and what kitsch might signify, and approaches the question as a complex, nuanced interrogative. The essays in this collection cut a wide interpretative path, mapping the terrain of the phenomenon of kitsch—historically, conceptually, practically—in multivocal ways, befitting the polysemous creature kitsch itself. In an attempt to avoid a reductive understanding of kitsch, either as a category of production, a class of objects, or a theoretical construct, or to impose a singular vocality, these essays are deliberately broad in scope and varied in their methodological strategies. The writings assembled here fit loosely under the tripartite division of the book's subtitle: history, theory, practice, but while some essays are more clearly concerned with historical production or theoretical considerations, there is no attempt to constrain them to those divisions. The authors' responses to the "big" question of kitsch move well beyond such artificial boundaries, as well as taking us far beyond the simple binaries of good/bad, high/low, elite/popular, or art/kitsch into far more complex, challenging, and ultimately interesting terrain.

This is by no means an attempt at an exhaustive examination of kitsch. Rather, the essays collected here undertake inquiries and investigations of particular objects or sets of objects constituted or operating as kitsch, or practitioners and practices that relate to some aspect of kitsch's conceptualizations in order to enrich our understanding of the term's historical and contemporary applications, meanings, and consequences. *Kitsch: History, Theory, Practice* is intended, therefore, to provide a kaleidoscopic view of kitsch as an historical and contemporary discursive entity in order to provide an elaborated framework for future considerations of kitsch, and to spark further debates about the continued presence of kitsch in our culture.

The book opens with two chapters that engage with the theoretical underpinnings of kitsch. The first, Anna Brzyski's "Policing the Border between Art and Kitsch," locates kitsch as a conceptual category of art discourse, rather than a phenomenon of material culture. By examining the history of the term in tandem with its pre-history—which the author identifies as a period when the concept of "pseudo-art" developed, but was not yet identified by the term "kitsch"—Brzyski makes the argument that kitsch has functioned as a category of exclusion, operating as a negative ("thou shalt not…") definitive of normative art practice. The emergence of kitsch as a concept, Brzyski argues, coincided with a fundamental re-definition and simultaneous contraction of the concept "Art." Moving

from the moment of its historical development in the nineteenth century, Brzyski considers kitsch's adventures in the twentieth century, analyzing its fortunes in the wake of the emergence of the camp aesthetic in the 1970s. Identified in this essay as a self-conscious citation of kitsch by normative art practices, camp turned kitsch into a legitimate subject and device for contemporary art. It did nothing, however, to alter the basic relationship between the two concepts; in fact, Brzyski argues, camp participated in a further contraction and reification of both categories by bringing them together and therefore rendering their opposition much more explicit.

The next chapter, by Caroline A. Jones, relates to Brzyski's in that it also undertakes a consideration of kitsch as a conceptual and regulatory category, but understands it as one built more firmly upon a foundation of class. Fundamental to Jones' essay is a nuanced reevaluation of Clement Greenberg's role in formulating a particular idea of kitsch through an assiduous re-reading of his writing on the subject. Jones argues that while "camp" might be understood as gender theater, kitsch is always about politics. Greenberg salvaged the term kitsch from the margins of German and Yiddish culture, according to Jones, propelling it into prominence in his 1939 essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." Beginning that essay by asking how "one and the same civilization produces simultaneously two such different things as a poem by T.S. Eliot and a Tin Pan Alley song, or a painting by Braque and a *Saturday Evening Post* cover,"[21] Greenberg reveals that he perceives the *Saturday Evening Post* cover and the Tin Pan Alley song as similar to one another but diametrically opposed to the Braque painting the Eliot poem. Greenberg's "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" is a crucial exposition on kitsch, Jones argues, for it is here that kitsch is given its historico-Marxist definition as a category of mass-produced objects imitating (but always dumbing down) the past conventions of aristocratic and avant-garde culture. Without defending this view or arguing for the positives that might now be associated with the term kitsch, Jones suggests that the primary task is to understand how the discourse Greenberg set in motion through kitsch is fundamentally about regulation. Partnered by the analytical apparatus of formalism, the rhetoric about kitsch does not merely regulate taste in art, according to the argument Jones builds in her chapter, but rather, it functions as a technology of the self.

The third chapter takes up the question of kitsch relative to a specific historical event, the 1951 show *Black Eyes and Lemonade*, held at London's Whitechapel Gallery. Using recently re-discovered and previously unavailable archival material as a critical guide, Gillian Whiteley analyzes

the development and the staging of the exhibition, including the selection and collation of objects within the show, as well as examining the contemporary cultural discourses and debates with which it engaged. In particular, Whiteley argues, the exhibition reflected the tensions between an enthusiastic promulgation of the acceptable face of British modernism espoused by a group of cultural elites and the interests of a cohort that anticipated the postmodern, embracing a populist aesthetic and material culture in its "kitschiest" form. Whiteley puts forth the view that *Black Eyes and Lemonade* should be understood as much more than merely the efforts of an idiosyncratic British designer; in fact, she contends, the exhibition represented a site of cultural contestation and exemplified the key issues at stake in the battle for cultural hegemony at a crucial point in early post-World War II Britain. In this respect, Whiteley's comparative analysis of contemporaneous events—focused as it is on re-evaluating the dichotomy of kitsch versus culture—is salient, especially the consideration of the Independent Group's activities at the Institute of Contemporary Art in 1951 and Eduardo Paolozzi's *Bunk* of that year. Whiteley concludes her chapter by connecting the struggle for cultural hegemony played out in the "Black Eyes and Lemonade" exhibition to an emerging postmodern sensibility and an anthropological and ethnographic approach to artistic practice among certain contemporary practitioners.

The next two chapters deal specifically with individual practitioners whose traffic in kitsch enriches our understanding of kitsch in artistic and theoretical culture. The first, by Karen Kurczynski, addresses the dismantling of the dichotomy of avant-garde and kitsch in the work of Asger Jorn, in the very period when Greenberg's theory of modernist painting came to prominence. Jorn, a Danish artist and theorist, explored kitsch as early as 1941, in an article entitled "Intimate Banalities," a scant two years after the publication of Greenberg's seminal "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." Jorn's "Intimate Banalities" praised the "artistic value of banality," in marked contrast to the premise put forth by Greenberg. Jorn's work engaged with kitsch on several levels at once, the author contends. His writings, Kurczynski argues, analyzed the ideological use of the term as a label investing social objects with value by categorizing them as "original" versus "kitsch," while his artistic experiments made use of the latest manifestations of kitsch in the mid-twentieth century, including mass-marketed art reproductions, the efforts of amateur or "Sunday" painters, and magazine advertisements. Jorn's projects critiqued the commodification of the avant-garde itself in the 1950s by the publicity machine of the artworld. Central to Kurczynski's argument is a careful and thorough-going consideration of the engagement with kitsch in Jorn's work,

especially the "Modification" paintings of 1959–62 and his artists' books of 1957, *Fin de Copenhague* and *The Golden Horns and the Wheels of Fortune*. As Kurczynski makes clear, in precisely the period that the American Abstract Expressionists were interested in the authenticity of the gesture and European painters were making repeated and public attempts to reach the "zero degree" of art, both of which, she argues, might be understood as part of an international preoccupation with "purity," Jorn was creatively reinvesting value in preexisting images and outdated artistic methods. Kurczynski contends that this is a strategy that should be understood as part of Jorn's explicitly political interest in democratizing art.

The following chapter, Nuit Banai's "Yves Klein—The Midcult Manager of Kitsch," also scrutinizes the engagement of a particular individual with kitsch. Using Yves Klein's 1961 encounter with the American avant-garde art scene on the occasion of his first solo exhibition in New York at Leo Castelli's gallery, Banai explores the way in which Klein responded to the negative reactions to his American debut by deliberately occupying the negative connotations of kitsch through careful manipulation of his artistic practice and persona. Banai simultaneously attends to the ways in which kitsch consolidated and expanded its power by mutating into the "Midcult," a kind of *juste milieu* formulated by Dwight Macdonald in a two-part essay published in 1960. As Banai's analysis lays bare, Macdonald understood the Midcult to be spawned by kitsch's traffic with the avant-garde, and the stakes of this offspring were enormous, eroding divisions between the faux and the fine, destabilizing their differences while offering itself up as "high culture," thereby threatening the fine with extinction. Klein, whose American debut met with derision and charges of charlatanism, responded to such negative criticism by absorbing kitsch, deploying it in his work, and channeling it into the constructive of a performative persona. Banai argues that "The Chelsea House Manifesto," in part written as a retort to his critics, and Klein's monochromes, should both be seen as part of his development of the *corny*. In advance of articulations of camp, the corny, Banai contends, functioned as a subcategory within the larger theater of kitsch to reveal the pervasiveness of the Midcult at mid-century. Klein's performative occupation of the Midcult and the corny, Banai argues, exemplifies a paradigm shift in which kitsch escapes the logic of the object and bleeds into an "economy of the senses," a transformation that will have radical implications for the critical and conceptual apparatuses of modernism.

The next chapter also investigates the hinge between the canonical and kitsch, but with an eye to unmasking the ways in which habitual

applications of the term "kitsch" contains and enacts racism. Recent scholarship maps how racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities have been the subject of and fodder for mass-produced and popular objects typically defined as kitsch. From salt-and-pepper shakers in the shape of a Mammy to cast-iron images of a tomahawk-wielding Indian, the visual and social consumption of these images has been debated and documented. As Alexis L. Boylan argues in her contribution to the anthology, all too often, however, kitsch is invoked as a ready signifier, and wielded as if everyone understands and relates to that utterance in the same way; the very definition of kitsch remains static and unacknowledged as a problematic, contested, and highly malleable term. Furthermore, the ostensible neutrality assumed by the easy usage of that term not only ignores, but actively conceals the issue of race. The author begins by demonstrating how conversations about kitsch have frequently denied race as a factor in assessing how culture operates, both at the high and low ends of the cultural spectrum. The high/low paradigm so prevalent in considerations of kitsch fails to accommodate minorities, because they cannot inhabit fully either pole of such a binary structure. "Low" or popular culture is especially fraught for racial minorities, she argues, because often they are set up, as is frequently the case with collectibles, as the "joke" or stereotypical body in the image. The choices are then limited to either accepting or reproducing themselves as the racialized "joke" or rejecting and excluding the offending imagery. According to Boylan, race therefore binds minorities to popular culture and kitsch while refusing to grant them full acceptance or access. Using the example of Michael Ray Charles, Boylan lays bare the faultiness of the high/low paradigm, and demonstrates the urgency to rethink the models on which visual culture scholarship has relied in order to redress the racial imbalances and covert racism that haunts it.

Although the majority of the collection is dedicated to kitsch in practice within larger historical or theoretical glosses of kitsch, two chapters deal more expressly with kitsch *as* practice. The first is Victor Margolin's exposition of his collection of objects—the sort typically denigrated as tourist tchotchke or kitsch—as the Museum of Corntemporary Art, and how that enterprise has been put into service as a practical and pedagogical tool of cultural investigation and critique. Margolin contends the classification of the corntemporary should be viewed as distinct from kitsch, arguing that these habitually debased objects are powerful bearers of cultural meaning and in possession of a categorically unique aesthetic quality, founded on their (usually cheap) materials, their use value, and their circulation in particular and often classed social spaces. Margolin

suggests that a transvaluation of these objects has implications not only for museological practice, necessitating as it does a new type of *kunstkammer*, but also broaches issues that dovetail with concerns addressed by Boylan, particularly with regard to souvenirs and keepsakes produced and proffered by ethnic groups which lampoon that same ethnicity through racist stereotypes. Reading through Margolin's breezy recounting of the founding and fortunes of the Museum of Corntemporary Art, or MoCRA, one might be tempted to perceive a new kitsch identity subtending his— kitsch as performance. It is a performance, moreover, that slips across a dividing line with autofictional practices, as Margolin details his role as simultaneous and successive founder, collector, curator, and critic, and introduces the reader to his critical interlocutor alter ego. While flirting with the ironic sensibilities that attend camp, however, the author hints at this class of kitsch's changing fortunes, from reviled, debased, and cheap object to its new status as a collectible artifact of culture, one whose value inheres not in its proximity to "high" art, but in fact emanates from its very (apparent) kitschiness.

My chapter on the ways in which Thomas Kinkade, self-proclaimed and trademarked Painter of Light has been pressed into service by other artists as an ironical readymade also deals with the question of kitsch as practice. Many critics are quick to dismiss Kinkade's production as not worthy of sustained consideration, tagging it as kitsch and using the attributes that circulate around that term—illegitimate, without redeeming aesthetic merit, schmaltzy, sappy, derivative, cliché, formulaic—to condemn his work. Kinkade's work seems so replete with every quality ascribed to kitsch (in the negative) that it is almost overwhelmed by them, while these same attributes make his work consumable on a mass scale, abetted by the promiscuous proliferation of his imagery in every imaginable variation. It is this same veritable impregnation with the attributes ascribed to kitsch, however, which has both caused and enabled contemporary artists to use Kinkade as simultaneous medium and message in the production of a category of artwork that operates at the interstice of camp and the category of production Dorfles identified as "hyper-kitsch." These deployments of Kinkade, instead of announcing the breakdown of cultural distinctions between high and low and the evacuation of concepts like kitsch, work instead to reaffirm the vitality of the kitsch concept.

The concluding chapter, penned by C.E. Emmer, both revisits and greatly expands upon disputations within the contested territory of kitsch as term and as tool in cultural turf-war arsenals. Focusing on debates surrounding two visual responses to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, Dennis Madalone's 2003 music video for the patriotic anthem

America We Stand as One and Jenny Ryan's "plushie" sculpture, *Soft 9/11*, Emmer utilizes these debates to reveal the coexisting and competing attitudes towards ostensibly kitschy objects and the contentiousness of deploying kitsch as a term in these debates. The buzzing activity of the internet provides much of the raw material for his arguments. Through his close reading of both the works themselves and the public response to them, Emmer once more focuses attention on the competing and overlapping attitudes towards kitsch and the way in which it and its semantic cousins remain a viable and valuable resource with which to police the borders that surround the artworld. Ultimately, his contribution further grounds a wider premise operative in this collection—namely, that a simple and rigid dichotomy of kitsch and (high) art does not and indeed cannot capture the elusive and mercurial nature of kitsch.

Kitsch's polysemous nature is simultaneously vexing and exhilarating, because its ambiguity allows it to gesture towards a disparate array of artifacts and ideations, but also to be pushed and pulled in various applicatory directions. Appropriately then, as outlined above, the authors in this volume take varying views—sometimes adversative, sometimes concurring—of kitsch. Each grapples with kitsch's ambiguities, its implications, its shape-shifting properties, its resistance to obsolescence, and its adaptivity. As an editor, it is tempting to put one's ideological imprint on the material presented for the sake of a cohesive narrative, to harness the arguments to a larger agenda. In this case, I deliberately resisted that position, electing instead to let the contradictions, overlaps, contestations, and intersections stand, as I believe they yield an infinitely richer picture of the complicated creature—historical, theoretical, practical —that is kitsch.

Notes

[1] Portions of the following derive from M. Kjellman-Chapin, "The Politics of Kitsch," *Rethinking Marxism* 22, no. 1(January 2010): 27–41.

[2] http://www.designtoscano.com; http://www.brushstrokesdirect.com; http://www.wendoverart.com. The Wendover Art Group markets itself as "a provider of wall décor catering to the home décor and hospitality markets. On the Wendover Art Group and Dafen Village, see further Jones, "Greenberg's Formalism and Kitsch," in this volume.

[3] Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 232.

[4] Many of the essays gloss a history of kits as a term, category, and concept, and should be understood as supplements to the brief historical overview sketched here.

[5] Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 234.

[6] Tomas Kulka, *Kitsch and Art* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 18–19; Denis Dutton, "Kitsch," The Dictionary of Art (London: Macmillan, 1998), http://www.denisdutton.com/kitsch_macmillan.htm; Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 233–34.

[7] On the question of the waning of the "aura," see Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970).

[8] Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism. Volume I: Perceptions and Judgments, 1939–1944*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986), 12.

[9] Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York: Harper Perennial, 1999), 251–52.

[10] For Dorfles, the *Kitschmensch* was a person in possession of bad taste, who would experience both "real" art and pseudo-art or kitsch in the same way; see further Dorfles, *Kitsch: A World of Bad Taste*, 15. In this way, kitsch is a matter of both experience and behavior, and inextricably a consequence of bad (or at least mistaken) taste. This participation in a community predicated on the denial of real emotion about devastating events in favor of blithe sentiment and mawkishness is brilliantly exposed in Barbara Ehrenreich's "Welcome to Cancerland: A Mammogram Leads to a Cult of Pink Kitsch," *Harper's Magazine*, November 2001, 43–53, where she limns the breast cancer culture awash in cheery optimism and pink merchandise as an infantilizing mass delusion that denies the complexity of authentic experience and emotional range. See also Marita Sturken, *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

[11] Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," 8; emphasis in original.

[12] Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," 13, notes that "Kitsch's enormous profits are a source of temptation to the avant-garde itself, and its members have not always resisted this temptation. Ambitious writers and artists will modify their work under the pressure of kitsch, if they do not succumb to it entirely."

[13] Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 230.

[14] Nick Capasso, "A Sentimental Journey, or How Did We Get Here?" in *Pretty Sweet: The Sentimental Image in Contemporary Art*, 2005, http://www.tfaoi.com/aa/5aa/5aa192a.htm.

[15] Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 229. See also p. 262, where Calinescu writes: "Basically, the world of kitsch is a world of aesthetic make-believe and self-deception."

[16] On this point, see also Ruth Holliday and Tracey Potts, *Kitsch! Cultural Politics and Taste* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, forthcoming), who argue that analyses and discussions of kitsch must take the *pronouncement* of something as kitsch as the point of origin; kitsch, therefore, must be viewed as a cultural operation oriented around taxonomies of taste and concerns of class. Their understanding of kitsch as a *doing*, rather than a *being*, allows them to come at kitsch from a different vantage point from many other interlocutors of kitsch for

whom kitsch references an inherent if unstable cluster of attributes, qualities embedded *in* objects and events. I am deeply grateful to the authors for graciously providing me with a pre-publication proof of their book. See also Potts, "'Walking the Line': Kitsch, Class and the Morphing Subject of Value,"
http://mlpa.nottingham.ac.uk/archive/00000071/01/NMLP_Potts_Walking_the_Line.pdf.

[17] Gillo Dorfles, "Kitsch," in *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste* (New York: Bell Publishing Company, 1968), 15. Dorfles also compares kitsch to the experience of background music: "…it is a problem of individuals who believe that art should only produce pleasant, sugary feelings; or even that art should form a kind of 'condiment,' a kind of 'background music'…in no case should it be a serious matter, a tiring exercise, an involved and critical activity" (15–16).

[18] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

[19] See, for instance, Cliff Samaniego, "Sophisticated Kitsch,"
http://www.sfstation.com/sophisticated-kitsch-a2119, who discusses the idea of kitsch-as-cool and the radicalized restructuring of taste and sensibilities around certain kinds of objects.

[20] The literature on the concept of cultural omnivorism is extensive, particularly within the field of sociology; see, by way of introduction, Richard A. Peterson and Roger M. Kern, "Changing Highbrow Taste: From Snob to Omnivore," *American Sociological Review* 61, no. 5 (Oct. 1996): 900–907, and more recently, Alan Warde, David Wright, and Modesto Gayo-Cal, "Understanding Cultural Omnivorousness: Or, the Myth of the Cultural Omnivore," *Cultural Sociology* 1, no. 2 (2007): 143–64; Oriel Sullivan and Tally Katz-Gerro, "The Omnivore Thesis Revisited: Voracious Cultural Consumers," *European Sociological Review* 23, no. 2 (2007): 123–37; and Angèle Christin, "Omnivores Versus Snobs? Musical Tastes in the United States and France," Princeton University Center for Arts and Cultural Policy Studies Working Paper Series, Working Paper 40 (Summer 2010): 1–58.

[21] Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," 6.

CHAPTER ONE

ART, KITSCH, AND ART HISTORY

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On the most basic level kitsch is not art. Our ability to distinguish between the two terms—even in those instances when kitsch approximates the appearance and logic of art and art that of kitsch—marks us as members of the cultural elite. Precisely because we are aware of their crucial dissimilarity, we can identify, discuss, and diagnose a wide range of phenomena usually associated with popular or mass culture as kitsch. We can even indulge in kitsch as camp, because unlike the actual consumers of kitsch, who lack the necessary critical distance and therefore fail to recognize kitsch for what it is, we know better. As Susan Sontag noted in the 1960s, our eager willingness to watch the very best "bad movies" or to relish with a hint of revulsion the extravagantly "awful" reveals our membership in the hip inner circle.[1] Kitsch is therefore *our* term for *their* lack of taste and as such always a value judgment made from a position absolute cultural superiority.

But what exactly is it that we mean when we identify something as kitsch? At different times, different authors have used this label to denigrate nineteenth century academic paintings, anything made by Salvador Dalí, various "inappropriate" forms of art reproduction, decorative bric-a-brac, political propaganda, votive objects, erotic images, advertisements, and Hollywood movies.[2] The diversity of this list and the seeming lack of consensus among those who have written on the subject suggest that the rationale used to group those disparate phenomena under the same rubric may be based on external considerations rather than any qualities shared among them. The pertinent question with regards to kitsch appears to be, therefore, not what is kitsch, but rather what exactly is meant when that label is applied to something.

That we continue to consider kitsch a useful term is readily apparent. Even though the word has been tarnished by its association with the Greenbergian either/or—either avant-garde or kitsch—view of culture, it

still retains much of its signifying power. We continue to use it to signal a particular kind of disapproval. Such references to kitsch, which assume that the author and the reader fundamentally agree on what determines cultural value, are a regular feature of cultural and more specifically art criticism. Moreover, with the development of visual, cultural, and media studies kitsch has become a legitimate subject of academic inquiry, migrating from a purely negative to a rather more ambiguous position within our lexicon. Various authors have attempted an ethnographic rehabilitation of kitsch arguing that it should be considered on its own terms, that it possesses a unique aesthetic and signifying value, and that it is no more commercial than normative art practices.[3] Ironically, by focusing on particular aspects of popular culture and identifying them unambiguously as kitsch, those well-intentioned scholars and critics have affirming the status of kitsch as an empirical phenomenon—something that actually exists, and because it does, deserves our serious attention. Although they have raised questions concerning the core assumptions of the Western value system that continues to divide culture into high and low and identifies some forms as inherently more significant, autonomous, and critical than others, they have not raised the possibility that both terms, *kitsch* as well as *art,* perform an evaluative function. In other words, they are never simply descriptive, but are always used to confer or withhold value.

My argument in this essay is based on that assumption. Instead of considering kitsch as a phenomenon of mass culture that merely requires identification and description, I will examine its history as a concept and its role within the discourse on art.[4] Mapping of that history will reveal some of the consequences of our continual reliance on this term. It is my contention that without the awareness of kitsch's discursive function and specific geographic and cultural location, any art historic effort aimed at expanding the scope of disciplinary concerns beyond the narrowly conceived register of contemporary art to a much fuller spectrum of contemporary cultural and artistic production is destined to fail. In short, what is ultimately at stake in reckoning with kitsch is no less than a future shape and ultimately relevance of art history.

Early History of Kitsch

The history of kitsch as a term is inseparable from the history of modernism. The word itself has been around for some one hundred fifty years. Although its etymological roots are uncertain, there is a general consensus that the term first came into colloquial usage at mid-nineteenth

century in Munich where it designated inexpensive, minor works that could be quickly produced in large quantities and sold for small sums of money.[5] The fact that these generally anonymous works were "handmade" gave them an important advantage over mass produced engravings, lithographs, and photogravures, which catered to a growing market for tourist souvenirs, religious pictures, and other decorative images used to decorate domestic interiors. The geographic location of the first documented appearances of kitsch as a term is significant for my argument. Munich was not just any city. During the nineteenth century the Bavarian capital developed an international reputation as one of the most important European art centers. The Munich Royal Academy of Fine Arts became a favorite destination for students from Central and Eastern Europe as well as the United States. The city's famous museums and its international art exhibitions held at the Glaspalast exhibition hall and the Munich Secession attracted thousands of German and foreign, in particular American, art buyers. [6] The local art production spanned the full spectrum from ambitious history paintings to minor sketches, and, by the 1890s, ranged from traditional academic fare to modern works.[7] Given the sheer number of artists who made the city their home (at least temporarily) and the size of the so-called *Kunstproletariat* comprised of art students and individuals who struggled to make a living as professional artists, it is hardly surprising that the so-called kitsch works were produced in large quantities and sold on regular basis adding to the competitiveness of the already highly competitive local art market. Neither should it be unexpected, given the sophistication of the city's art community and of its audiences, that such works would be labeled with a specific term that distinguished them from "proper" art. For those educated in the value system of the fine arts and dependent on the art market for their living clear demarcation of the difference between "legitimate" art and "illegitimate" kitsch pictures was, after all, not just a matter of social status, but also of economic survival.[8]

There is, however, a significant time gap between this original, local usage of the term kitsch in Munich and its widespread adoption in Germany during the 1920s and subsequent migration into English and other European languages in the 1930s. What happened during this period of roughly sixty years, which also witnessed the emergence of modernism and its consolidation into the dominant art ideology? I would like to suggest that even though the word kitsch was not being used, the concept of kitsch or pseudo-art was already well developed in Europe and its cultural diaspora. In fact, it began taking shape roughly two hundred years earlier, in the mid-seventeenth century, when the members of the newly constituted French Royal Academy of Painters and Sculptors drew a sharp

distinction between *fine art* (practiced by the member of the Academy) and *mere* painting and carving (practiced by the members of the Maîtrise—the guild of painters and sculptors). As Paul Duro has noted, the academicians "accused the artists of the Maîtrise of being mere color grinders and hewers of stone engaged in perpetuating cycle of repetition by copying from pattern books in which one account emanating from the Academy indignantly tells us, 'art' was nowhere to be found."[9] The French Academy set an important precedent for the future. It *de facto* postulated that not every painting or sculpture deserved recognition as art; some were simply more or less competently produced images. Nor were all painters and sculptors artists; some were merely trained craftsmen. From that point on, the physical making of paintings and sculptures and the making of art were recognized as two very different endeavors.[10] Even though the members of the French Academy did not give a specific name to "not-artists" and "not-artworks," they in effect created a need for a term that would unambiguously label them as such. That need was initially met by a number of different pejorative words that functioned as early synonyms for the modern term kitsch.

The French Academy served as a model for academies throughout Europe and European colonies. By the middle of the nineteenth century, virtually all European states had established such institutions. Everywhere the adoption of the academic model coincided with the emergence of discourse that aimed to distinguish between works of art and works of mere skill. Everywhere academies claimed a monopoly on the former and hence on the education of artists. They often drew on a rapidly developing field of aesthetics to buttress those claims. It is notable in this context that aesthetics became part of the academic fine arts curriculum well before art history began to be taught as a distinct subject within art schools. In fact, in many places outside of Germany, art history was initially taught by professors trained in aesthetics.

However, aesthetic theories, which proved so useful in fighting the guilds and elevating the status of fine arts, proved to be a double edged sword. Although they provided arguments for separating the notion of art from that of manual skill, they also gave critics of the academic art education (some of whom were trained within the academic system) ample ammunition to challenge the system on its own terms.

One set of ideas in particular had a lasting impact. The developing discourse on artistic genius, which tended to follow Emmanuel Kant's claim that individual genius was the sole source of great art, proved particularly problematic. Following an established tradition, Kant argued that genius was an inborn and therefore natural endowment, and as such

could not be created but only developed through education.[11] What this meant was that one could provide instruction in particular technical skills or artistic traditions, but one could not provide aspiring artists with a recipe for how to make works of art. The implications of this way of thinking were far reaching. If art could not be taught and if it were not synonymous with manual skill, then academic training did not guarantee that one would become an artist. It also meant that the lack of such training did not necessarily mean that one was not capable of creating art.[12]

Writers and artists associated with Romanticism, who described art as a sacred calling not to be sullied by commerce, conventions, or professionalism, vigorously explored this ambivalence during the early nineteenth century. Their discussions tended to produce affirmative and highly idealistic statements on what art was, or rather what it was supposed to be.[13] Although the subject of pseudo-art was not yet explicitly invoked, it was suggested by the rhetorical framing of the arguments since statement that used terms such as *must*, *ought* or *should*, also implied their opposite—*must not, ought not, should not.* Those injunctions were refined and elaborated over the course of the nineteenth century in discussions on the nature of art that surrounded the emergence of modernism. In the majority of those debates what was ultimately at stake was no less than the claim on "true art." Across the entire spectrum of contemporary sources, from art criticism, texts on aesthetics and art history to public and private artists' statements, one finds recurring references to "real" and therefore legitimate art practice, or "true art" and "true artists." Although sometimes such references were purely descriptive and proscriptive, defining the qualities of "true art," they were often accompanied by implicit and explicit statements directed against forms of art that were not "true," and, therefore, considered potentially harmful in their effect on the public taste and the state of contemporary, often national, art.

James McNeill Whistler's famous "Ten O'Clock Lecture," delivered in 1885, provided one of the clearest discussions of the difference between true art and pseudo-art. The artist believed that whereas art had an organic history and was created by uniquely endowed individuals practicing "the science" of art, "the sham … the tawdry, the common, the gew-gaw" or the pseudo-art was produced by "the manufacturer and the huckster" to satisfy "the taste of the tradesman."[14] Without specifically using the word genius, he invoked its signifying power by describing artists as naturally sensitive and gifted individuals driven by an inner urge to create. He did not mince words when it came to describing "sham [art]." This pseudo-art was "an abomination" that threatened the very existence and future of art,

a view that would be repeated with remarkable consistency by the future critics of kitsch. He wrote:

> Countless, indeed, the horde of pretenders! But she [Art] knew them not. A teeming, seething, busy mass, whose virtue was industry, and whose industry was vice! Their names go to fill the catalogue of the collection at home, of the gallery abroad, for the delectation of the bagman and the critic.[15]

It is important to point out that this type language was not associated exclusively with the modernist circles. Both the supporters and the opponents of modern art used similar arguments to make their points. The critics combating the new tendencies often diagnosed what they disliked about modern art not just as a failure of skill or a breach of decorum, but as an affront to the very dignity of true art. John Ruskin's statement about Whistler's *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket* (1875), which caused the artist to sue the critic for libel, certainly implied this. The fact that Whistler won his case confirms this interpretation. The artist's lawsuit for libel was not a reaction to a bad review that offered an unfavorable assessment of the painter's work, but to a direct attack on his competence and professionalism. What Ruskin seemed to suggest was that Whistler was an impostor, that he was not a true artist, and that his works were, therefore, not works of art. As "not art" they were not worth the asking price. No wonder Whistler felt a need to defend his professional credentials in the court of law.[16] The artist's victory in the lawsuit had an important consequence. It meant that from a legal perspective, at least in print, one could no longer question the art status of modern works; all one could do was to evaluate their merits.

The situation in the German speaking parts of Europe was quite different and that is perhaps why a specific term for pseudo-art developed there and not in England. Max Nordau's book *Degeneration* (1892) likewise embraced the discourse of true and pseudo-art in the service of an ant-modernist cause. [17] It contained one of the most explicit and comprehensive indictments of modern art and literature before the reign of the German and Soviet totalitarian regimes. Nordau argued that modern art not only reflected the lack of moral values that characterized modern, urban society, but that it actively promoted decadence. The basic claim of the book, that decadent (modern) works were produced by a decadent (modern) society and that their degenerate character led to the further decline and degeneration of the society, foreshadowed arguments against kitsch that would be made by the proponents of modernism in the interwar period.