



The Changing Meaning of Kitsch

From Rejection
to Acceptance

Edited by
Max Rynnänen · Paco Barragán

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Contents

Kitsch: From Rejection to Acceptance—On the Changing Meaning of Kitsch in Today's Cultural Production (Introduction)	1
<i>Paco Barragán and Max Ryyönen</i>	
Part I Kitsch and Life	63
Kitsch in the Hypermodern Era	65
<i>Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy</i>	
Sailing the Seas of Cheese	87
<i>Erik Anderson</i>	
Kitsch in Relation to Loss	119
<i>Kathleen Higgins</i>	
Old Tricks for a New Dog: Toilet Humor, Politicized Kitsch, and the Trump Presidency	143
<i>Alison Rowley</i>	

Part II Kitsch and Culture	165
Kitsch and Architecture	167
<i>Andrea Mecacci</i>	
From Fashion as Kitsch to Kitsch in Fashion: Redefining Beauty and Taste Today	181
<i>Maribel Castro Díaz</i>	
Digital Kitsch: Art and Kitsch in the Informational Milieu	205
<i>Domenico Quaranta</i>	
Kitsch, Beauty and Artistic Practice	229
<i>Jozef Kovalčík and Michaela Hučko Pašteková</i>	
Biokitsch in Art: And the Survival of the Prettiest	249
<i>Laura Beloff</i>	
Epilogue: What Next?	263
<i>Paco Barragán and Max Ryyönen</i>	
Index	267



Kitsch in the Hypermodern Era

Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy

The notion of kitsch, as we know it, is dated historically and lexically; it appeared in Germany around the mid-nineteenth century. Since then, it has been associated with a series of not particularly flattering words: copy, junk, imitation, show off, excess, and flashy. These features are still visible in certain contemporary productions, yet they embody a different status than their original one. Today, we're witnessing a truly tectonic shift with regard to a kitsch culture that has translated itself into a 180-degree reversal from the common traditional approach.

A new kitsch¹ era affirms itself that takes over in the opposite direction of those grand models that represented bourgeois kitsch with its romantic origins, totalitarian kitsch from the fascist and communist dictatorships, and kitsch proper of the mass consumer society. In these moments of history, kitsch is unanimously vilified, deprecated, and considered an underproduction stamped with the seal of inauthenticity, sopiness, adulteration, and stereotype. "Kitsch is the evil in art's value system," argued Hermann Broch, adding that "it's far from having finished its

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victorious course.”² In the same spirit, Greenberg underlined that kitsch, which is commercial art destined for the leisure of the masses, “is about to become the universal culture.”³ In this sense, we must agree with him, as, for some decades, kitsch has undergone a formidable expansion, a success that grows from day to day.

Traditionally deprecated and judged as the height of mediocrity and bad taste, kitsch has become a “trend” that has infiltrated every realm of creativity and ornamentation, spectacle, and mass leisure to the point that it has “kitschified” mentalities and behaviors. This includes the new initiates, the billionaires—the leading class who has reclaimed and adopted this new style without complexity. Donald Trump emblematically shows this with the decoration of his New York apartment; his name displayed in huge golden letters on the frontispiece of his luxury building; the reality show that made him famous with television audiences; his impossibly undulated, orange-tainted hair; the fake Renoir in his jet; and the painting that hung behind his desk at the White House in which he appears surrounded by the most relevant Republican presidents.

To explain this phenomenon, one needs to depart from the fact that kitsch, a contemporary to the industrial age and the rise to power of the bourgeoisie, is intrinsically tied to modernity. It’s consubstantial to it, like liberal democracy, industrial production, avant-garde art, and cinema. In this secular continuation, shocks have appeared that show a watershed change, a radical evolution of modernity itself; our societies have entered the hypermodern era. And kitsch, like anything else, bears witness to it. Our era is observing the advent of hypermodern, rich, and reflective meta-kitsch that becomes both the object and subject of creation, arousing institutionally-valued production and creations that lead to this long unthinkable oxymoron: a chic and legitimate kitsch that, while prolonging and using the unchanging conditions of permanent kitsch, opens up to new ways of thinking, creating, and valuing it. And selling it.

1 The Extension of Kitsch Domains

In its inaugural state, historical kitsch reproduced existing, unique models made by artists and artisans by organizing their industrial production for a rising bourgeoisie that was offered products that were less expensive,

more accessible, made with less noble materials, fake marble, fake earthenware, paper-mâché—an industrial reproduction that expressed itself through an aesthetic ornament of overload, saturation, and excess.

Hyperbolic Kitsch

The novelty is that this excess now adds something to itself—the excess within the excess. The first characteristic of hypermodern kitsch is to push beyond the limits of that which was already protuberance and overload. Today's prevailing kitsch accumulates overabundance, complication, outrageousness, exuberance, saturation, exaggeration, emphasis, heaping, and proliferation. It's the hyper-hyperbolic register: anything flashy and ostentatious that hits, touches, awakens, shakes, and arouses the most immediate and vivid sensations;—in short, all that is characteristic of that which is spectacular—changes to a higher gear.

This hypermodern kitsch regime can already be read in the spatial scale of its architectonic and urban realizations. This is the time of macro kitsch, of kitsch XL: no longer a reproduction of small decorative objects but, on the heels of the Nashville Parthenon erected in 1895, entire suburban areas, even European cities that have been reproduced identically in China. Or, as is the case of Dubai, artificial islands have been built in the form of a palm tree whose multiple branches form a true postcard city where 80,000 persons live in luxurious Hollywood-style buildings. At the same time, swarms of tourists squeeze against each other as if they were admiring a cinematic color print. We will meet tourists at a rate of more than 150 million a year in the 300 thematic amusement parks in Europe alone. At the top of the list is Disneyland Paris, an enchanted garden of 55 hectares soaked in sugared colors where the most disparate heroes and fairy tale characters live side by side and where architectonic styles and personages from all sorts of origins and all kinds of epochs blend in a good-natured stylistic incoherence, heterogenous promiscuity, and decorative and sentimental profusion.

The universe of the small glass globes and other “snowballs” has been overtaken by the advent of this large-scale kitsch, of which Las Vegas offers the perfect evidence: an artificial city constructed in the middle of

the desert along a central strip of neon, stucco and marble decor, water fountains, Egyptian pyramids, and an Eiffel Tower. And precisely this same change of scale of the phenomenon illustrated by the immense American malls and their ornamentation relate to a pastiche aesthetics in which water fountains, gondolas, villages, and Italian squares are identically recreated. But this also applies to tourist villages whose main roads and building façades are rearranged, embellished, and flourished like a light opera spectacle. Entire streets in high-end tourist venues are dedicated to selling souvenirs and “typical” products of mediocre quality produced in Asia or Eastern Europe. Under the logic of aesthetic artificialization and stereotype, even the roads in the countryside have been remodeled with traffic circles decorated with wheelbarrows, plows, and other utensils.

The hypermodern era is characterized by a spectacular topographic extension of kitsch, leading to the construction of a neo-kitsch, which presents as an unreal reality, a simulacrum, a trans-reality.⁴ It's the fake era, so dear to Umberto Eco.⁵ We see the same thing practically everywhere, the fantastic *indoor* landscapes, tropical forests, ski slopes in the desert, snowstorms, earthquakes, waves, and tropical beaches, or where, as kitsch on kitsch, they go so far as to reconstruct nature and countryside within central parks in huge artificial greenhouses in the very heart of nature and the countryside!

This over-excess into the realms of artifice that always aims for more spectacle finds its acme in the music hall, which has always been fond of sequins, glitter, and “extravagant” decors; the tremendous pieces that represented the scenography of a Busby Berkeley musical, or the technicolor and loud acts enacted by the water ballet of Esther Williams staged in the middle of foaming cascades and alluring sirens, have multiplied through the upswing that technical advances allow. Nowadays, show business spectacles attest to the triumph of aesthetics that is constantly pushing the limits of kitsch. Concerts give way to excess with cascades of lights, smoke bombs, fountains of fire, gigantic screens, aerial acrobatics, and flying machines! As such, television varieties become super-kitsch with their blinding lights, their aggressive colors, their feathers and sequins, the outpouring of rhinestones and the decibels, their costumes, and their extravagant haircuts.

Ultra-kitsch also resides in musical comedies that turn Notre Dame into a popular old tune, the Ten Commandments into a singing playlet, and Mozart into pop rock. To impress, the grand spectacle has entered the reign of the “always more and the never enough.” We have shifted from stucco to strass, from kitsch to hyper-kitsch.

Far from declining, this “kitschization” annexes more and more domains: video clips with Christmas decorations, princely weddings advertised in the media, casino rooms with accessories, merry-go-rounds in cake shops, and Barbie dolls with rubber rings like flamingos floating in heart-shaped swimming pools. Even fashion shows indulge in this kitsch attitude by exhibiting, as is the case with John Galliano—against a backdrop of special visual and sound effects that transform the podium into a stage of a Baroque spectacle—models who look like they’ve just escaped from a curiosity shop, dwarves and gigantic creatures, homeless persons, and disheveled, spindly, or obese girls.

Design, Brand, and Store

We are talking about domains that appear open and favorable to this overkill. The true novelty now is that, within this excess, kitsch penetrates domains previously foreign to and radically opposed to it. We are witnessing a real extension of kitsch domains.

Stores display a remarkable image. The department store, which represents the emblematic home of kitsch, awards the prime spectacle value: a front with ostentatious style, caryatides, statues of reclining gods, and Orientalizing motifs; displays conceived as “show windows” presenting jolly skating scenes as well as the Sulpician evocation of the saintly figure of Joan of Arc; the ostentatious profusion of shop windows which act, thanks to electricity, on the visual effects, the contrasts, the shimmering of colors and forms; animation performed by singers and actors, parades and fashion shows, balls and party decors. Aristide Boucicault, the brilliant inventor of the commercial concept, had the ambition of turning the supermarket into a sort of fairy tale theater through the adoption of an aesthetic seduction strategy, with a view to the bourgeois in the big cities and the countryside that enabled them to progressively affirm their

class identity through shopping. The department store, insisted Abraham Moles, was “the first and biggest servant of kitsch.”⁶

Today we are confronted with another phenomenon in stores. The apostles of visual merchandising and experiential or atmospheric marketing have appropriated kitsch as the most important agent of their commercial approach. We are witnessing the proliferation and expansion of boutiques and franchises where retro decoration, girly rose and candy box frames oversee the representation of the brand. It’s the proper shop that nevertheless makes the sale by imposing an instantly attractive, facile, and seductive image. The commercialization of kitsch, present from the beginning, diffracts and multiplies in the urban space. It’s no longer just the objects sold but the setting itself that creates a world inspired by kitsch. The Kitsch’n Swell Boutique, which reveals in its very name that which it promises, declares itself “proudly offering a unique and tropical universe inspired by the period ranging between the 1920s and 1950s” and invites its clients to “take a voyage back in time by visiting in Montreal the most beautiful Tiki and retro ambiance boutique,”⁷ where one can find vintage inspired objects and all kinds of curiosities. The Kitsch Boutique, another brand that points directly to its source of inspiration, adapts all sorts of sweet ornaments, cozy decors, extravagant accessories, and objects which, after pushing through the door, give the impression of an enchanted world. And let’s not forget the cosmetics domain, whose salons, cabinets, and boutiques reveal the ideal of softness, well-being, and cozy pleasure by employing pastel colors, ludic displays, and cocoonesque layouts. They elevate the kitsch of which they are the herald into the true art of living: a world of sweetness and kindness, pink, syrup, which sees itself reflected in the common behavior, even in the way everyone, instead of the old and neutral “good morning,” wishes each other a “beautiful” day or when with attentive eagerness they tell their interlocutor “take care of yourself.”

We’re witnessing the same expansion in the catering world. Every city around the world has seen a proliferation of Italian, Vietnamese, Thai, Japanese, Indian, and Mexican restaurants that conform their identity through a decor that accumulates all the stereotypes and, as such, enhances all the clichés. It is exoticism within everyone’s reach, where a *sombrero* hanging from the wall guarantees the authenticity of the tacos.

A cheap poster of a Vesuvian eruption does the same for the Neapolitan pizzas. Exoticism is no longer that of the *Revue Nègre* and Josephine Baker's banana skirt; it has become the complete banalization, the exoticism of the quotidian.

Even more surprising is the penetration of kitsch into a domain that was not only hostile to it but erected as a reaction against it: design. It has evolved following the rules dictated by Bauhaus: the orthogonal rigor, rational geometry, pureness, simplicity, and the sincerity of the object—all of which are loathed by decorative proliferation. Ornament—is the enemy; design imposes a universe of strictness and functionality.

However, now we are witnessing a wedding of old adversaries. Design opens itself to the most unbridled kitsch and lends itself to contorted and comical forms. The Campana brothers give in to extravagant Baroque. Michael Graves imagines a kettle of a singing bird. Oscar Tusquets Blanca creates an Alibaba canapé. RADI Designers construct a fantastic garden covered with outsized plastic vegetables. Philippe Starck conceives a golden stool in the form of a gnome! It's no longer the functional reason that appears as design's horizon of expectation but creative, poetic, and ludic fantasy.

Even fashion has grabbed hold of kitsch, which not only touches objects, decors, and images, but becomes a marker and a commercial tool. Brands have deliberately chosen a kitsch positioning. Desigual specializes in a hotchpotch of vivid colors. Gucci moves from porno chic to bohemian chic. Fiorucci presents collections that mix glitter and candy pink. Versace, Prada, Jean Paul Gaultier, and Vivienne Westwood take the liberty of doing any kind of madness: shoes with sequined platforms, sparkling rhinestone glasses, shell-shaped tops, T-shirts with pieces of meat, rustling ball costumes, dressers in the form of a puff, and pink dresses embroidered with ostrich feathers, like the ones that Valentino had Kaia Gerber parade in. Kitsch, considered from the beginning as an under-luxury, has become a trendy luxury, mixing excess and extravagance, funniness, and glamour. Neo-kitsch is no longer the antinome of the creative avant-garde, as interpreted by Greenberg; it simply merges with it.

Kitsch once covered interior design, furnishing, objects, and trinkets. Today it has moved to street art, exposing itself in depth and breadth,

provocative or ludic, mixing naïf designs, bubbles of colors, Rococo ornamentation, contorted graphism, and childish collages. Shepard Fairey illustrates his portraits with flower decorations, comic book faces, and pompous images. In contrast, Banksy gets polemic messages across through graffiti, staging Super Mario, Snow White, Steve Jobs, and *The Raft of the Medusa*.

2 Kitsch, Seduction Capitalism, and the Individualization of Consumption

What does the extension of kitsch domains look like? Why has our civilization abdicated the modernist rejection of ornament unmistakably understood as a crime? Milan Kundera states, “kitsch is an aesthetics supported by a world vision, almost a philosophy. It’s beauty beyond knowledge. It’s the will to embellish things and to please. It’s total conformism.”⁸ But if kitsch pertains to the aesthetics of seduction, its amazing social expansion is heir to consumption capitalism, as this is no more than an economy of seduction, a system marked by an expansion of unprecedented seductive operations within the realm of production and communication, distribution, and culture.

Given the indefinite development of mass consumption, we are indeed embedded in a system that confounds itself with industrialization and the mediation of seduction. Capitalism has turned seduction into an industrialized and mass publicized universe and a key principle of the functioning of economic and cultural life. Systematically combining economics and innovation, instrumental reasoning, and aesthetic process while mobilizing *aesthesis*, rational calculus, and emotional demand, consumerist capitalism functions as immense seduction engineering in which kitsch enjoys a privileged position. Because the goal of consumption capitalism, with a view to more sales, is to “please and touch,” how can we be surprised by the all-out exploitation of kitsch aesthetics that exclusively looks to seduce and entertain, to provide instant pleasure without making “a big fuss” about it?

Consumption capitalism endeavors to please the public through attractive prices, well-being, novelties, and variety, but also images of enchantment, distraction, play, love songs, and dazzling and entertaining spectacles capable of immediately and effectively capturing the consumer's desires. The reign of kitsch is democratic; it intends to provide the greatest number of distractive, aesthetic, and emotional pleasures. No longer art steered toward the social elites for their spiritual elevation, but a permanently renewed offer of access to the public of all continents without the need for their understanding a specific and scholarly training. On a grand scale, creative industries propose programs and devices of enchantment that flatter the taste of the general public—a kind of easy spectacular culture that fully partakes of the rapid expansion of consumerist civilization.

Moreover, seduction capitalism is not only transformed by commercial offers. Since the mid-twentieth century, it hasn't ceased distributing and legitimizing a *fun morality*: immediate consumption pleasures, easy entertainment, and enchanting leisure. It created an increasingly enthusiastic consumer of hyper-spectacles, aesthetic emotions, ludic evasions, daydreams, Hollywoodian romances, ambiance music, convened charms, and comfortable exoticisms. It has exacerbated and generalized the demand for kitsch.

The social push of kitsch cannot be separated from the advent of a trans-aesthetic, hedonist, and ludic consumer in a world where you need to construct yourself without a model, constantly reinvent yourself and be performative in any kind of matter. Hence, increasingly heavy stress and ramped-up pressure are reinforced again by the dissolution of traditional references, the fear of an uncertain future, and the complexity of a progressively difficult world to master.

In such a context, the marshmallow universe provides the relaxation of a gluttony moment: it relieves like a valve; it has the lightness of that which is futile, the taste of sweetness in the face of the heaviness and the bitterness of the quotidian. It appeals to aesthetic forms of fairy tales and naïf drawings, medley and technicolor, Baroque effects, and Rococo proliferations. It tastes itself in a voluptuous and wonderous abandonment that relieves us from the weight of our subjective freedom. The more a performative culture imposes itself, the more kitsch expands to alleviate

the quotidian. Kitsch was traditionally associated with heaviness, heaping, and excess: today, it is relaxing laughter and ironic lightness. It expresses less contempt for the popular than a desire for the cheerful and distanced lightness.

At the same time, with the erosion of the opposition between high and low, the commercial offer multiplies, collective control weakens with the extreme individualization of lifestyles, and the imposition of a “total look” underpinned by class conformists retreats. Individuals are much freer now, and so is their propensity for turning consumption into an instrument of subjective individualization.

Within a culture dominated by an unrestrained process of individualization, that which escapes the standard of chic and legitimate beauty finds itself imbued with value, inasmuch as it represents a marker of individual personality not subject to impersonal “good taste.” As such, exhibiting objects or signs of “bad taste” at home can represent a refusal to be held prisoner by social norms, a sign of bigger freedom concerning taste. Introducing a garden dwarf into an ultra-chic interior functions like an audacious wink that projects ludic disrespect and subjective independence.

Neo-kitsch taste shouldn’t be interpreted as a symbolic class imposition: it’s an expression of the culture of the hyper-individual, the unaligned and post-conformist, stirring subjective singularity. Paradoxically, the social legitimation and the penetration of the ethics of individual authenticity (the right to be yourself) in our mores have rendered kitsch legitimate which, in the old days, was synonymous with the very idea of inauthenticity.

Second-Level Kitsch

If there is pleasure in the manifesting of individual difference, this act sees itself more and more reinforced by a second-degree pleasure: the amusing distance that one takes; for example, when singing an old song by Dalida in front of a karaoke screen, introducing a rubber soap dish in the form of a crocodile in the bathroom, choosing a yellow plush as a Water-Closets (WC) cover or when installing a plastic couch with big red daisies

in your living room. All this happens while mouthing this nineteenth-century dandy formula: "My god! How mean am I to allow myself to be that stupid."

It is to this kind of spirit that advertisements resort when adopting an offbeat tone that deliberately plays into stereotypes and clichés, into what is old-fashioned and in bad taste, and into the tackiest possible ambiances. Overexposed and intentionally bad taste becomes cool; playing with it is a badge of taste freedom and individual autonomy. We have come to love spectacles of derision and excesses of vulgarity while experiencing a half-provocative, half-infantile pleasure in the consumption of the banal and bad taste as a way of ridding ourselves of codes and dictates of good taste. Hence, kitsch affirms itself as a value of and for itself.

The "ugly," or what traditionally has been felt like it, is full of flavor.⁹ "Ugly contests" are held in the United States. The World's Ugliest Dog Contest celebrates man's ugliest best friend, and ugly Christmas sweaters highlight that season's most ridiculous second layer of clothing. Ugliness even succeeds in offering the specific pleasure of not being duped by what we appreciate and finding a supplementary satisfaction to amuse oneself.

In the hypermodern era, where cultural hierarchies and class norms have eroded, where art no longer has a metaphysical ambition or a revolutionary vision, we see the development of a form of a kitsch spirit that we could frame, with Susan Sontag, as *camp*; an expression entailing second-level sensibility, made from humor and ludic aesthetics, in relation to exaggerated things and "bad taste." In societies defined by individualization in relation to the world, consumerism, and values, the outrageous, the extravagant, the banal, and the "ugly" become exhilarating objects; it's "so bad that it's good." And the young generation, which sees nothing more than a funny theatricality in the imitation, the loud colors, and the aesthetic over-excess, gladly declares: "Kitsch, I love you."

The subjectivation of culture has enabled playfulness to triumph over seriousness, leisure over social distinction, and amusement over quality. By liberating norms and class cultures, the relation to things has become largely hedonistic and intimate. Henceforth, pleasure, fun, and ludic distance have been valorized; it's less about signifying one's membership in a distinguished social class by expressing that one has "good taste" and more about enjoying oneself, "having fun," being independently delighted

by the classical symbolic categorizations. As such, an entire public enjoys, without sulking, television series like *Dallas*, Spaghetti Westerns, and epic Hollywood movies, and it does so without shame or triggering the wrath of their entourage. The social acceptance of the right to be and freely disposing over oneself has opened the way to a world in which anti-conformism spreads and is no longer shocking, and where people look more to surprise than to dazzle and more to delight than to maintain a cultural honorability and a taste quality under the ascendancy of the objective “good-bad” axis.

In this sense, we should see an expression of emotional, relativistic, or perspectivist neo-individualism in the camp sensibility and the growing favor that kitsch enjoys these days. It translates less the nihilism and failure of culture and taste denounced by the nostalgic tenants of the traditional high culture¹⁰ than a new individualistic culture which, by turning every individual into its own referent, has liberated tastes, pleasures, and the whole of the artistic sphere from conventional frameworks and ancient elitist diktats.

So much so that, as Broch argued, we can no longer purely and simply assimilate kitsch as a “neurotic” aesthetics and attitude of life dominated by sentimentalism, convention, and beautiful fake effects. It is the *homo kitschicus* of a new genre that unfurls. No longer a romantic neurosis, but an ironic play with things, images, and clichés; no longer grandiloquent and academic aestheticism, but cool detachment; no longer the conformism of appearance, but the freedom of pleasures that savors extravagant fantasies by itself; no longer the submissiveness of taste to social norms and constraints, but the tender and smiling joy of assuming its almost childish desire for marvelous and enchanted castle worlds.

The Kitschization of Subjectivity

Beyond new objects and spaces are new attitudes, ways of being, and showing that signal the new age of kitsch. In the past, we could characterize the kitsch man by his sentimentality, conformism, and obsessive passion for material well-being. Nowadays, it is other types of behavior, and a new spirit expresses the kitsch sensibility.

We have witnessed the growing success of tattoos (aside from ethnic traditions) previously reserved for sailors and “bad boys.” Nowadays, they are a fashion statement for men and women, young and old, backgrounds branches, and popular categories. More and more young people exhibit themselves as a way of playing with their bodies, overdoing them with colors, motifs, forms, and inscriptions that offer an impressive catalog of the heteroclit, the Baroque, and the excessive. The skin becomes kitsch decor, and the body reveals itself by staging it. While doing so, it sees itself reinforced by other ostensible manifestations of self, such as outrageous makeup, piercing, pendants, and other mixed ribbons that are hung around the neck, wrists, and ankles. The hypermodern man has come to “kitschize” his own body to singularize himself.

This demand for individualization is even more at play in those spaces opened by new virtual communication mediums. La Toile¹¹ has become overexposed with kitsch images: on social media, everyone attempts to show themselves, to exhibit themselves by all means possible, yearning for the approval of friends and followers. It is, above all, through posts and pictures, about telling that one exists by revealing his singular taste from the most classic to the funniest. Who cares about the content of the messages, the “good taste,” or the quality when what’s important is to show what one likes here and now? Who cares about the banality of the conversations, the sameness of the “posts,” the photos of the sunset, and all those clichés associated with the good and the emotional, because we love it, and it fills us with emotion? Who cares about the bottle of perfume as long as we get drunk? It’s about the emotion that prevails and is valorized, not the beautiful alone or the creation. It’s an emotionalized subjectivism that entertains our new relationship with kitsch. Within a culture that exalts pleasure and the individual being, the excesses of kitsch can triumph without any symbolic sanction. This once was the synonym of blind following and conventionalism: today, it appears as a way, among others, of expressing our emotional individuality.

As it appears in its “neo” register, kitsch is also a way of affirming individual subjectivity, making fun of the norms of legitimate culture, escaping taste’s conformism, stereotypes of “seriousness,” and “respectable” appearances. With the selfie or the funniest pose, the most grimacing expression, or the silliest attitude worthy of shared curiosity, everyone

enters the scene by showing themselves indifferent to the norms of beauty, which often doesn't succeed without a kind of infantilism. With its all-full cute side, the kawaii spirit is very much like emoji signage, where the pictograms seem to stem directly from a Miyazaki movie and, on occasion, transform La Toile into a playground. Kitsch, formerly relieved of bourgeois conventionalism, becomes the favorite domain of the cool youth, "delirium," offbeat and riskless style. While kitsch initially represented the conformism of imitation and the negation of autonomous individualism, today, it has shifted into small individual dandyism within everybody's range.

A bling-bling kitsch has indeed unfolded parallel to this subjectivized kitsch, the same one that translates, occasionally arrogantly, ostentatious logos onto clothes and bags with a *have-you-seen-me* attitude that thrives especially on "rich kids" websites. Henceforth, the "show off" spirit steeped in vanity culture can't hide that which is most significant for our epoch: the rise of a distinctive will that does not respond to class or wealth but to a personal ostentation that enables one to assume the least noble and most eccentric, the least socially distinguished and most stereotyped signs; kitsch as high art.

3 On Kitsch Considered as one of the Fine Arts

The Plural Aesthetics of Neo-Kitsch

From its very origins, kitsch was excluded from fine art. It was seen as the dark side, representing degradation, negation, and perversion. In an absolute turnaround, what was once considered a by-product, a by-culture, now attracts more and more artists who appropriate it and work with and around it; through diverse registers, this bears witness to a veritable artificialization of kitsch.

The most obvious and direct first register is what we could call *le kitsch pour le kitsch*, like *l'art pour l'art*. An ingenious, innocent, basic kitsch developed in all quietness—familiar and self-evident. Jeff Koons offers

the perfect example: no transgression or second degree, but instead a way of turning everything aseptic, of embellishing the banal, of transforming everything into infantile happiness: a balloon, a rabbit, a bear cub, a pink panther, a bouquet of tulips. "One could see at first sight the irony in my work, but I don't see any. Irony causes excessive critical contemplation," declared Koons.¹² It's the assumed and free creation of an artificial carelessness, a paradisiacal and cozy universe. We have arrived at first-degree kitsch, without distance, made for arousing a re-comforting well-being, an immediate pleasure, the sensation which makes one feel at home in this stereotyped world, whether it's the typical and blue flowered Paris of *Amélie* (Poulain) or the operetta court of Empress Sissi. The receipt is infallible: *Sissi* broke all television programming records, Amélie Poulain pursued her fabulous destiny on movie screens, and in 2019, the steel molding of the inflatable *Rabbit* sculpture by Jeff Koons sold for \$ 91.1 million at Christie's.

Against this careless and light kitsch, a more ambiguous one developed that, while reserving a place for that which is bleak, invites one to call into question, at least partially, Milan Kundera's entrenched position when he affirms that "kitsch excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence."¹³ Given the new creations, this is no longer accurate; we witness today the deployment of kitsch artwork that is not unidimensional and does not reduce itself to a smooth and happy spectacle of wonderland or the "categorical agreement of being."¹⁴ No longer a paradisiac well-being but the reflection of a world that carries within it threats and misfortunes. Damien Hirst indeed aestheticizes his dead head encrusted with 8901 diamonds.

But, the bottom of the question is there: it's a skull that, in its own way, recaptures the vanitas theme and the finitude of things detaching itself from this "art of happiness," which, according to Abraham Moles, is what kitsch embodies.¹⁵ Cut and conserved in formol, the shark staged by Hirst offers the spectacle of particularly macabre contemporary art. Likewise, Gilbert and George compose motley photomontages that resemble windows with multicolored flowers in bloom, lightly dressed youngsters, and burlesque scenes where they include themselves in the staging in imaginary and funny postures. Yet, these lightweight visions are surrounded by diabolic masques, morbid scenes, and sanguine

crucifixions. The religious imaginary developed by David LaChapelle is also steeped in intrusive shades that show individual and social misery, derision, dereliction, disaster, and apocalypse.

This negative part affects even dark kitsch, illustrated by the distraught zombies that appear in Georges Romero's movies, Michael Jackson's cult clip *Thriller*, or the morbid compositions by Wim Delvoye: a Madonna with a dead head, a stained-glass window with skeletons, and tattooed pigs. For their part, Jake and Dinos Chapman create monstrous mannequins in synthetic fiber and mutant and deformed children's bodies, as if they stemmed from a nightmarish cloning. A kitsch that tunes into the spirit of the times of transgender variations that accumulate gory clichés, bloody metamorphoses, and swollen and tattooed bodies; these transgender variations are the very trendy phases of the iron path that the main character of *Titane* must traverse to construct an identity. The movie earned a Palme d'Or in 2021 at Cannes and was shortlisted at the Oscars.

In certain cases, it can lead to extreme provocations; this is the case with Paul McCarthy when he erects inflatable sculptures in the form of butt plugs in places of elegance and luxury, like the Place Vendôme, or in an exhibition titled *Inflation!* (not without malice). But it could more shrewdly imply a kind of game. And it is within the distance of this proper measure where kitsch, playing the game and getting played, finds in its more subtle variations a Janus side: an almost-but-not-absolutely-kitsch attitude that seeks to make understandable both the lighthearted and the genuine, the ludic and the profound.

A work of art like Joanna Vasconcellos's appears as the perfect illustration.¹⁶ Far from Jeff Koons' kitsch, the Portuguese artist impregnates the work with meaning and, far from conceiving art as a pure aesthetic game that eliminates the evils and the imperfections of the real, she creates a body of work admittedly seductive yet mixed with a social critique that plays out the contradictions of the world, makes sense, defends values, and expresses its disagreement with the present.

The perfect union of the sublime and the derisory, the serious and the ironic, Vasconcelos makes the stellar figure of Marilyn Monroe shine by constructing a luxurious giant shoe, the very symbol of glamorous beauty, but completely composed of trivial saucepans reminiscent of women's domestic condition. Likewise, she erects a luster monument,

wholly of virgin whiteness, by laying out hundreds of hygienic tampons and an imposing red heart inspired by a traditional motif from Portuguese jewelry and a synonym of passion made from 4,000 plastic spoons and forks. Pain and the shadows of life dilute across an amusing and ironic fantasy achieving a masterful work, both ambivalent and subtle, where “almost” is more relevant than “too much.”

This also illustrates the universe of Pedro Almodóvar, a patchwork that defies good taste, a constant mix of genres: melodrama and comedy, masculine and feminine, diverted quotes, infantile pleasures, Sulpician Rococo, many-colored decor, romantic sentimentalism, and provocative sexuality. Almodóvar plays out all the pleasure and suffering of life at the same time, symbolizing a world of “pain and glory,” according to the title of one of his most recent movies in which he reflects on his own artistic career.¹⁷ A third kind of kitsch has come to light: ironic, problematic, and critical. Inscribing itself within this atemporal vein of what Eugenio d’Ors defined as “permanent Baroque”¹⁸ or through an abundance of forms, it reads like a quest for elevation and sense.

The All-Art

Dignification and kitsch consecration. Impossible in our eyes to understand such a symbolic reversal without a connection to the advent, from the 1960s on, of what we have convened calling “contemporary art.” With its chain transgressions, it called into question the notion of art, the profession of the artist, and the traditional criteria of artwork ending with its abolition, thus the hierarchical dichotomy of noble art-popular art, great art-minor art, and art-quotidian banality. Since the 1960s, pop artists have rehabilitated the serial supermarket object pushing into the limelight industrial products. By so doing, they have diluted the opposition between high and “low” culture, between the artwork and the industrial product, and between creation and mechanical reproduction. Hyper-realism later highlighted billboards, motorbikes, car bodies, and window shops. From then on, the original avant-garde problematics, praised by Greenberg, have been deconstructed; art no longer requires formal pureness, the crippling rejection of commercial kitsch, and the

seductions of the world. Utilitarian everyday objects and images of media-market worlds have gained entry to the artistic city.

With today's common contemporary art standards, the hierarchical problematics of culture has jumped into the air. "Anything is art," proclaims Fluxus artist Ben, well-known for his "writings" questioning the limits between art and non-art. Nothing is prohibited anymore. Nothing is to be excommunicated anymore. It comprises all that is considered commercial, infantile, media-driven, and "easy." "Art is not only inscribed in a Van Gogh painting or a sculpture. For me, art is anything that excites or stimulates the spectator," declared Koons.¹⁹ When an artistic hierarchy ceases, is there anything to prevent us from elevating a toy, a piece of earthenware, or a teddy bear to the heights of art?

This reversal of the hierarchy is the process of the desacralization of the most profoundly made art by the modern imaginary of equality but also by the rapid expansion of image civilization, spectacle, and entertainment (publicity, Hollywood films, television series, comics, leisure theme parks, star systems...). The extraordinary expansion of the image society has contributed to dignifying kitsch taste for pastiche and iconic characters. She has given birth to a *hyper-spectacle* society that also embodies that of generalized *entertainment*. Through this process, the image society has allowed us to stop feeling guilty about our love of kitsch, spectacle aesthetics, shock images, and all sorts of subjective tastes, including those of commercial mediocrity and artistic banality. The hyper-image society has changed the relationship to kitsch and its social image.

The Institutional Acknowledgment of Kitsch

This breakthrough of kitsch inside the art world, to which it was previously barred, reached a climax through its museum institutionalization. In 2000, the historically charged Bagatelle Château and Parc held a large exhibition of garden gnomes, and in 2008 and 2010, Koons and Murakami were exhibited at Versailles. Henceforth, kitsch has its perfect place in the museum: the acknowledgment of naïf art, acclaimed in 1937 by the large exhibition dedicated in Paris to the *Les Maîtres populaires de*

la réalité (popular masters of reality), opened the door to other minor art forms which the institution formerly rejected.

Today, Musée International des Arts Modestes, founded by Hervé Di Rosa, strives to showcase that “which has been forgotten, marginal (commercial or wild), hidden, or is peripheric to creation.”²⁰ And in 2021, the Museum of Civilizations of Europe and the Mediterranean (Mucem Marseille), whose popular art collection contains up to one million items, presented the works by Jeff Koons from the Pinault collection in dialogue with works culled from its permanent acquisitions.

The caution shown by great institutions thus provides a form of legitimation to the innumerable museums of lesser importance that can devote themselves to eminently kitsch objects: museums of hairstyles, jukeboxes, animated scale models, small-scale models, and dolls. The French city of Romans-sur-Isère has disseminated monumental, colored, and shining sculptures of kitsch shoes everywhere in its streets, announcing its International Shoe Museum. Such examples abound in the Museum of the Unusual at Loriol-sur-Drôme, with more than 10,000 items contained in a true curiosity cabinet: ex-voto, cigar rings, posters, sculpted pipes, and even a coffin in the form of a crucifix made by the painter-founder, Max Manent, and covered with the skeleton of a naked woman with arms outstretched.

That which is pompiert art and yet occupies a pivotal place in one of the most relevant museums in France is said to be kitsch, as is the case with the Musée d’Orsay. It is recognized, stirs exhibitions, and has been sought after by big collectors who open their collections to contemporary art. It rubs shoulders with art brut and ethnic art, with whom the non-expert spectator confounds on occasions, being the motifs and colors of the garments of Thai dancers or the ornamented Indian trucks felt by a Western eye as pertaining to the purest kitsch decoration. Also classified as a historical monument is the *Palais Idéal* (Ideal Palace) from the postman Cheval, where André Malraux saw the sole representative of naïf art whose inspiration’s syncretism and forms offer a super-kitsch blending.

We must add the growing number of savvy books, colloquiums, large newspapers, and art magazines that have grabbed the subject. Like so many other instances of social recognition of the phenomenon, the

subject has become “serious,” legitimate, and worthy of analysis. Via television broadcasts, press impact, photos, social networks, kitsch shines with all these lights: we live in the era of its artistic and media consecration.

Consecration by the Art Market: Kitsch at a High Price

The explosion of “souvenir” boutiques in every tourist site on the planet, with their inevitable batch of trinkets, glass beads, derived products, and diverse crafts, bears witness to the symbolic consecration that unfurls against a background of tremendous commercial success. We no longer need to count the boutiques in the hearts of the cities with their kitsch posters, sweet color gadgets, junk jewelry, and useless, extravagant, derisory trifles. Everywhere an avalanche of postcards with incredibly rich kitsch clichés, Edenic sunsets, idealized and sentimental landscapes, romantic seashores, colorful decor, and pin-ups radiant with happiness.

Yet the radical novelty is that parallel to this mass market, another ultra-elitist one is developing that serves as a guarantee; artwork that ostensibly surrenders to kitsch is among the most expensive, valued at dozens of millions of dollars. Damien Hirst appears among the 50 biggest British fortunes, and the creations by Jeff Koons continue to smash sales records at auctions; he has been consecrated as the most expensive living artist on the planet. It’s an economic sort of valorization that arouses somewhere else overtly commercial strategies: the creation of series that deploy the artwork by multiplying its copies, and thus profits; the multiplication of public commissions; partnerships with big brands to design furniture, watches, and design clothing; the production of complementary products accompanying exhibitions and events.

And it is these astronomic prices that make headlines. Style is less emphasized than price; because of this, we speak of “art for the new rich.” A luxury market has thus replaced that which was only an infra-product and infra-luxury. Dignified, institutionalized, artificialized, and “luxurized,” kitsch can henceforth allow itself, through a supreme reversal, not only to be expensive but also prohibitive. For a very long time, fake has been the height of luxury.

Notes

1. Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy, *Le nouvel âge du kitsch. Essai sur la civilisation du "trop"* (Paris: Gallimard, 2023).
2. Herman Broch, *Quelques remarques à propos du kitsch* (Paris: Allia, 2001 [1955]), 33.
3. Clement Greenberg, "Avant-garde et kitsch" in *Art et culture. Essais critiques* (Paris: Macula, 1989 [1939]), 18.
4. Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy, *L'Esthétisation du monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 2013), 317.
5. Umberto Eco, *La Guerre du Faux* (Paris: Grasset, 1985).
6. Abraham Moles, *Psychologie du kitsch* (Paris: Denoë-Médiation, 1971), 92.
7. See www.boutiquekitschnswell.com
8. Interview with Antoine de Gaudemar, "Les grands entretiens", *Lire* (Oct., 2021 [1984]), 563.
9. Alice Pfeiffer, *Le goût du moche* (Paris: Flammarion, 2021).
10. "Being able to watch what's horrible, dreadful, hideous as something more than just fascinating and interesting, it means that you have passed the test that gives you access into the 'inner sanctum' of elegance of contemporary nihilism." Marc Fumaroli, *Paris—New York et retour* (Paris: Flammarion, 2011), 642.
11. Translator's note: La Toile de Jouy Museum is a Paris-based museum that manufactured "Toile de Jouy" designs with many mythological, nature and *fabled patterns*.
12. Quoted in David W. Galenson, *Conceptual Revolution in Twentieth-Century Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 176.
13. Milan Kundera, *L'Insoutenable légèreté de l'être* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), 357.
14. *Ibid.*, 356.
15. Moles, *ibid.*
16. See our analysis in Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy, *Joana Vasconcelos ou o Reencatamento da Arte* (Lisbon: Edições 70, 2021), 156–169.
17. *Pain and Glory*, a movie by Pedro Almodóvar with Antonio Banderas, 2019.
18. Eugenio d'Ors, *Du Baroque* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000 [1936]).

19. Videoconference Jeff Koons on the occasion of the opening of the exhibition at Mucem Marseille. See: <https://www.mucem.org/programme/exposition-et-temps-forts/jeff-koons-mucem>
20. See <https://miam.org>

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