ON KITSCH

Odd Nerdrum et. al.
Immanuel Kant is to art, what Karl Marx is to communism.

Odd Nerdrum

Thanks to Charles Roia.
The understanding of who you are and what you are really doing does not always come easy. Most people need time to mature and gain full insight into these difficult matters. This is often related to the fact that certain things are hard to admit to oneself, and perhaps even harder to admit to others. In my case it might have taken longer than usual. But now, at an occasion like this, I believe the time has come.

For me, as for most others, the question of your true identity is linked to experiences and conflicts in childhood. I was captured by art at an early age, and painted Poliakoff-like abstractions before I turned 9. A reason for this was probably my stepfather. He was a cultivated man who collected modern art. Often he took me on skiing trips. Because he was a rationalist and fond of exercising, he desired the trips to be very, very long. Once, when we reached a height, we stopped and looked at the scenery. The valley in front of us lay bathing in the light from a magnificent sunset. For a moment we were enthralled by the sight. Then he said: «It is beautiful, but remember never to paint anything like this if you become an artist, then you will not be accepted at the Autumn Exhibition.»

My mother is also a cultivated person. In her opinion, it is not educated to be religious. I remember once we stopped in front of a shop window in Oslo, looking at a painting of a gypsy girl by Roka. It was painted in the manner of Sargent and cost 2000 Norwegian kroner. My mother was impressed and admired the picture, but found it too expensive. For me it was one of my first crucial experiences of art. I felt immediately at home in this painter’s direct expression of his experience of the body.

Many years later, at the end of the 70’s, Norwegian television asked me to compare some paintings of my own choice. I chose a nude in the collections of the National Gallery by my grandmother’s cousin, the modernist painter Jean Heiberg, and placed one of Roka’s gypsy girls next to it. To me, the difference was striking.

Even though I was captured by art early in life, I soon came into contact with something else. By the age of 20, I was caught up by the red light of the sunset. Still, I heard my stepfather’s warnings: «Remember the moderns. Things go well for them. If you go on like this, you will do badly.» As I forced my way into the art world in the late 60’s, I could hear the echo of his words in my head. The reactions to my work were ferocious. The harassment I was put through had deeper roots than the opposition against Edvard Munch, which soon turned into a noisy appreciation as he became a modernist. At the time I understood that something was wrong, but exactly what, was beyond my comprehension. I tried to act like an artist to the best of my abilities, and for many years I actually believed I was an artist.

The first time I got an idea of what might be wrong was in the late 70’s. I had been allowed to hang two of my larger paintings – The Arrest and The Murder of Andreas Baader – in the new students house at the University of Oslo. I must confess I had bribed the board with prints,
though this was at a time when artists were paid to exhibit. However, I felt it served its purpose as long as I could fulfill the dream of seeing my large compositions displayed to the public. They were beautifully hung in a staircase, which almost looked like a Caravaggio chapel. But it did not take long before someone disliked the show. A committee at The Academy of Art had decided that the paintings in this particular staircase had to come down. They surprised me with a letter saying that all «decorations» had to be removed within a fortnight. Then I ran into one of those who had made the decision, the recognized artist Arvid Pettersen. I looked him straight in the eyes and asked: «How could you do this to a colleague?» He just stared at me and could not answer. Then I got the feeling he had understood something I had not: That I wasn’t an artist. People had been writing that I was an anti-artist and such things, but at the time it was impossible for me to comprehend that I was not a real artist. Later, I came to think differently. Later, even I understood what this artist had discovered so early.

My path to this insight ran through art history and the story of the great Cezanne breakthrough at the beginning of the century – how art became the metaphysical applause for the new sciences, and how it got its meaning and substance by being the expression for a certain truth. It could be the truth about man as a social being, as a rational or irrational being, or the truth about the agonized or ironic relationship between the artist and reality. From this time on, art received its justification for existence from the rebellion against tradition, history and power in all its forms. Subsequently it became a characteristic trait with the new art to seek innovation instead of tradition, and to legitimize itself by something outside the work of art.

Today, at the end of the century, we see the paradoxical result: Modernism itself has become a tradition which has conquered the entire western world. Institutions, critics, artists, and not least the educated public are obliged to be «open for the new». What is important in this context is not Modernism’s all-embracing legitimization of the existing order. My concern is what Modernism pushed out as its «other.» In the same way Christianity demonized its competitors, so too did Modernism. And the ruler of Modernism’s hell was christened «Kitsch» – signifying the antithesis of modern art. Kitsch became the unified concept for all that wasn’t intellectual and new, for all that was conceived as brown, old-fashioned, sentimental, melodramatic and pathetic. Or, as the Austrian author and philosopher Hermann Broch said in the 1930’s: Kitsch is the Anti-Christ, stagnation and death.

We all know the gypsy girl and the little boy with the tear. The grandmother with the child on her lap and the fisherman with his pipe. The two silhouettes against a sunset, and not least the moose by the lake. All this became a forbidden area for the educated taste. This so-called «simple» and «blind» taste stood in contrast to Marx, Freud and the entire modern elite who had been seeing through everything down to the smallest particle. But the devil is not just stupid, and kitsch is not just low. There are also higher forms of kitsch, or in the words of Broch: «There are geniuses within kitsch, like Wagner and Tchaikovsky.»

The process of exclusion that began at the breakthrough of Modernism - this terrible moment - brought immediate consequences. The composer Puccini was declared kitsch, as was Zorn, the Swedish painter with the luscious female nudes. He suffered from the allegations and was confused about this for the rest of his life. Most of them acclimatized fast though. Edvard Munch became a modernist, as did the Finn Gallen Kallela. Even Ilja Repin in Russia began to paint sloppy in order to satisfy the new truth. Sibelius, the great Finnish composer, was also accused of being kitsch. In the 6th and 7th symphonies, he started to fumble for the new disharmonies, but gave up and remained in silence for another 40 years. Now that the epoch of Modernism faces its 100 year anniversary, we can look back on what it wanted to demonize and what it wanted to get rid of.

Kitsch is about the eternal human questions, the pathetic, whatever its form, about what we call «the human». The task of kitsch is to create a seriousness in life, at its best so sublime it will bring the laughter to a quiet. Kitsch serves life and therefore seeks the individual, in contradiction to art’s irony and dispassion. Some people have tried to tie kitsch to political propaganda. But kitsch has nothing to do with Stalin or Hitler. They built a propaganda machinery for the masses, in which all the arts should serve their politics. Consequently, the propaganda had to reach the people in a blatantly clear language, like commercials. On the other hand, an opera like Puccini’s Madame Butterfly appeals only to an individual’s vulnerability, and not his rationality.
Kitsch is passion's form of expression at all levels, and not the servant of truth. On the contrary, it keeps relative to religion and truth. A well painted madonna therefore transcends its holiness. And truth, kitsch leaves for art. In kitsch, skill is a decisive criteria of quality. The work of the hand is self-revealing in the light of long-established norms. In this way, kitsch is without protection because the standards are the best ever created in history. To Picasso and Warhol, it was different. They were protected by contemporary values, and still are. You do not compare Warhol with Rembrandt, unless ironically. Art is protected against the past, because it is something different. For kitsch, there is no mercy.

As opposed to art’s craving for the new, kitsch roams around among the familiar forms in history. It becomes engrossed and spans the expression to the utmost – the kind of exaggeration that Baudrillard calls «the obscene». If kitsch happens to create something new, it would be an exception, like we find in Rodin’s insatiable passion.

Looking at the conditions for kitsch at the end of the modernist era, you might think that it could gain an opportunity after the postmodern rebellion against «the one and single truth.» But it keeps surprising me that there is such a confined space for «the human voice.» Is then a sunset only water and air, only broken rays of light?

After I had discovered the nature of art and the nature of kitsch, I understood where I belonged. I would therefore like to take this opportunity to apologize. I have called myself an artist with a foul taste in my mouth. Now I know that I am not. I have called myself by a false name and abused the attention given to me by the media – and the intelligentsia has of course been rightfully angry. There is nothing more to my work. Everything can be seen on the surface. More I can not give – neither to the artist nor to the intellectual. And, rightfully, they miss the intellectual and the contemporary in my work. God knows I have strived to become skillful enough to depict man’s longings in my kitsch. And what could possibly drive us more strongly than the longings of our childhoods and youth? If there was a truth in these longings, it must be found in the gypsy girl wandering into the sunset.

Art exists for its own sake and appeals to the official room. Kitsch serves life itself and appeals to the individual person.
The distinction is just as clear today as it was then. There's no point in using excuses like “camp”, because this falls together with the irony that has become a part of our century's perception of art. Still, there is now an immense seat of worship for a rather singular group which appear to adhere to a strict set of rules. There are clear-cut guidelines for what you are not supposed to do.

- Someone like Jeff Koons is often used as an example of kitsch ...
- Nooo, that's not kitsch. Far from it. That's camp. With camp, the artist laughs first and then cues the public to laugh. Kitsch is dead serious. A moose by a clear lake. Creating great kitsch is something extraordinary. It demands a great deal.

One argument against Nerdrum's confession of kitsch, is that his paintings have achieved acclaim. But his recognition as a painter says nothing about the work itself — if it is art or kitsch. Art experts have viewed his work through the spectacles of the art establishment, and have found art. To find the kitsch Nerdrum describes, one must approach the work with passion and pathos, tossing theory and irony aside.

First, I would like to express my gratitude to the Haugar Museum for this permanent exhibition of my work. The museum has been courageous and has chosen a controversial path when they respected my special request for dark painted walls, so that the light will only come from the pictures. The common background for arts’ innovations in our own century has otherwise been «The White Wall Tyranny», popularly speaking. Such a decor is well suited for modernist thought. This white is clean and apparently «germ-free», like the sanatoriums at the beginning of the century.

Today, everybody is in agreement that the modernist dominance has had a liberating effect, for better or for worse. The idea of a new world, where our aesthetic and moral perceptions should be improved, has been tried out by both the Communists and the Nazis, as well as the modernists. All of them have had «The New Kingdom» as a goal, but the sovereign winner has become Modernism. All over the globe, we find the same art — the same installations and the same decor — whether it be in the Muroroa Islands, New York or Hong Kong. The fragmenting innovations of art have helped us to understand that there is no fixed order of things, and that nothing has a guaranteed form. For this refreshing clarification, this purity of thought, we can rightly thank the modernists. And all those who have tried to ridicule their naked attempts have not been much better than racists. A large community ought to have open hearts. But let us for a minute look at what is lacking in contemporary art. What are we missing? I see four things: 1. The open, trustful face, 2. The sensual skin, 3. Golden sunsets, and 4. The longing for eternity. Taken together, these values add up to kitsch — whether we like it or not.

The concept of «Kitsch», in the derogatory sense of cheap decoration, came into use a hundred years ago when the new Modernism clashed with the old European culture – the stagnant and regressive world. Most people in the art world seem to believe that if
17th-century Rembrandt had lived today, he would have been a Jackson Pollock or a conceptual artist. I don’t. People develop according to their own needs. I don’t believe that all talented people bow to their times and follow the Zeitgeist. Rembrandt was dictated by his gift for drawing, just as Puccini was dictated by his melodic repository. A modern atonal composer is a completely different person. He is not as strongly controlled by his destiny, and is free enough to experiment. Rembrandt would hardly have painted his 17th-century Dutch interiors today, but the same eyes would have been there, the same darkness and the same sensual skin. As strange as his heartfelftness and entire being was to his own times, so it would seem to us. Even his most timeless pictures would be considered kitsch if they had been painted today.

The conflict between the old world and the emerging Modernism was similar to the one between Indians and whites in the books of my childhood. The Indians were always the bad guys. Now they are a tragic and oppressed people, who no longer can afford the white horse which at one time carried them proudly into the rosy dawn. In Africa, there was no «black man» before the Europeans arrived, a term understandably preferred to being called «second class white». In our part of the world, we never use terms such as «native white» or «ethnic Europeans». But looking at a Lapp in the north - his proud national costume quite loud in color - do we say that his culture, or its remains, is kitsch? I do. And I say the same about the solution to the problem that he who paints in the figurative tradition is facing. Should he carry on as a defeated reminiscence, being a «second class artist>>, or call himself by his rightful name: «Kitsch painter»?

«Kitsch» became the nickname for all those who didn’t go along with the new century; Sibelius, Ilja Repin, Zorn, Tchaïkovsky, Rachmaninov, Gershwine and many others. All of them suffered from being branded «kitsch» in their own lifetimes. Auguste Rodin is a good representative of kitsch, and at the same time an interesting example that it can be both good and bad. He represents the whole scale from the lowest to the highest form of kitsch. I have never been able to understand why this sculptor is considered a modernist, when he is at his best, suddenly turning into an artist.

Today, the solid superstructure «Art» has become an overwhelming force, unparalleled in history. It protects all kinds of intellectual scribble, while a beautifully drawn nude can be criticized to pieces, because a work like this lacks a respectful superstructure. In war, the «enemy» loses its superstructure. A captive is shaved and deprived of his uniform. He receives a number, loses his name - and thereby, he is unprotected. In this way, a superstructure is very important to all individuals and groups. It has to do with respect. When you turn a man into a king, he automatically gets an aura, a metaphysical superstructure. «Art» also works in this way. Someone is declared to be an artist, and the aura takes up its protective position.

Plato, the great-great-grandfather of Modernism, speaks with contempt of «Mimesis» - the imitation of nature. Ideas and the one, single truth, is the only good and the only beauty, which is also what Christianity based its world view upon. Everything else is evil. Aristotle picked «Mimesis» up from the ground and made the word shine again. For many hundreds of years, craftsmanship was also a part of the concept of «Art». This is no longer the case. Only ideas count. And the predominant art world has been brutally uniform, either you go along or you are out. All the cultures existing as remains from the past have been badly treated. But one should bear in mind that even the
Renaissance grew out of such a reminiscence, almost obliterated by the authoritarian Middle Ages. This culture blossomed after the Black Death. God was not so strong any longer, and «Mimesis>>, with its aesthetic cultivation of the body and necessary technical skills, returned in full power. An excellently painted madonna surpassed the Madonna herself by its beautifully rendered bodily presence.

The great misconception of the modernists is that they have demanded everything that a classical figurative painter can not give them; constant renewal, exciting experiments and compliance with contemporary styles, etc. A painter using the old master style is sensual. His aim is to become engrossed in his work and skillfully render life’s eternal moments without prejudice. But in doing this, he is not protected by his time. He has to compete with the best ever created in all times. This is a heavy burden to bear, which becomes heavier when his striving is ignored or even laughed at. When additionally he claims to be an artist, he is of course placed at the bottom of the hierarchy. Because he is in a false situation, all he does is wrong.

In art, there are apparent limitations. Some things are forbidden. There are taboos against the beautiful, trustful life you meet. You have to walk on a tightrope, and the self-censorship is strong. Are you in, or are you out? Critics and curators have been brought up into a stern clergy. The question is not whether a work is well done, but if it carries the right ideas. Preferably it should be poorly done, in order for the true message to reach through, just like in the Middle Ages. But if this sensuality, which art can not incorporate, were only given another name, then all would become easier.

Kitsch must be separated from art. A kitsch painter works toward different goals than the artist. I know that «kitsch» is a difficult word, but being strictly pragmatic, it is the only thing which can give the sensual form of expression a superstructure of its own, something which can in its turn restore the shine to a beautiful work. Then, perhaps, can the others – the modernists – gain respect for such a work, when it honestly presents itself as what it is, and does not come disguised as art.

Kitsch and Art
BY JAN-ERIK EBBESTAD HANSEN, ODD NERDRUM AND JAN-OVE TUV

When modernism in art gradually gained acceptance and hegemony during the last century, it was recognised that this occurred with a break in tradition. However, whilst the avantgarde established itself, it would not allow other equal or secondary forms of expression. On the contrary, it was radically totalitarian, a fact which had repercussions when it became the art of the establishment. For in establishing itself, it utilised the strategy of radical definition which sought to exclude and annihilate its other. One of these strategies was a elitistically oriented demonization of figurative art with a strong emotional expression. This art was no longer to be understood as art, but as kitsch. This derogatory term for a simple, down-to-earth, vulgar aestheticism was expanded to encompass most of what was until then considered great art. This is made evident by the Austrian writer Herman Broch’s two kitsch-essays from 1933, where he proclaimed kitsch to be a blight upon the earth, and declared that the Preraphaelites, and many others, were kitsch.1 Another example is the American art critic Clement Greenberg, who was involved with the stigmatisation of the Russian painter Ilya Repin as kitsch.2

Both Broch and Greenberg were of course right. According to the new artform’s conditions, Repin and the Preraphaelites were «evil», in other words, kitsch. But now, with the mannerism of modernism and at the start of a new century, the relevant question is if it is not necessary to consider a re-evaluation of the powers-that-be and the traditional modernist values, if indeed it is not within the undefined that change is to be found? Maybe the time is ripe to give the term kitsch a new meaning, as Thomas Kulka suggests in his book Kitsch and Art: «Anyone using this concept normally implies a negative aesthetic judgement about works of art enjoyed by a great number of people. In this sense kitsch simply is an elitist concept and unless its meaning changes, it will remain one.» 3

3 Tomas Kulka, Kitsch and Art, University Park, Pennsylvania 1996, p. 12
The Work of the Hand, or the uncontrollable

In the previous century, art was defined by an extensive attempt to overcome mimesis, the ability to imitate. A consequence of this was that basic craftsmanship, what we call the work of the hand, was lost. Instead, art became more and more subservient to science and technology, in other words, what was perceived as an expression of the time. Through technology one has tried to destroy the open, the humane, the apparently sleazy, and the uncontrollable that we find in the work of the hand. On the art scene of today this work is therefore seen as old-fashioned and passé, not to mention meaningless, despite the level of quality. Closeness between hand and brain now belongs to a reminiscent culture which obviously resembles those values that modern art critics call kitsch.

However, there are still some individuals who will not relinquish the work of the hand in their attempt to imitate nature. Despite ardent efforts to marginalise and trivialise them, talents still emerge. And they speak to us, or, at least to most of us, because in the recognizable pattern which is formed by the work of the hand, there is a permanent attraction, which stretches existing boundaries far beyond that which technical aids can assist us in. Today one can find these qualities in kitsch.

Tradition, or copying the greats

In modernism, the annihilation of mimesis and the attack against work of the hand, went together with a permanent rebellion against tradition. However, in Kitsch, respect for tradition has survived, or, as Clement Greenberg says in his famous kitsch essay Avant-Garde and Kitsch: "The precondition for kitsch, a condition without which kitsch would be impossible, is the availability close at hand of a fully matured cultural tradition, whose discoveries, acquisitions, and perfected self-consciousness kitsch can take advantage of for its own ends." Greenberg is right in his accusations against kitsch. Kitsch steals the best of what has been created in previous cultures. The creative human tries, to the best of his ability, to learn from past masters, uncovering compository and colour secrets, not the least how to emulate skin. Painting was originally invented to render skin, and so far, nothing has proven itself more suited for this than painting.

The public space, or the collapse of intimacy

In earlier days, there was a severe difference between the public and the private room. In the 20th century this difference became nonexistent when the public world invaded the private sphere, and turned the bedroom into a transit hall. Everything was now to reflect and conform to the public, with the consequence being that the intimate and strictly private was destroyed and vulgarised to a degree that the world had never previously seen. Another consequence of this breakdown was that the public became permeated by the quasi-personal, the pop-intimate.

This had wide ramifications for art. Most of it now became public art, in the sense that it reflected the public's ideals of formalism, objectivity and functionality, together with the problematics of the political and critical. And, when it purported to be personal, it was really only a reflection of the public. In other words, art was in constant dialogue with the community surrounding it.

A dramatic example of this development is the livingmachine; the functionalistic architecture which took over the suburbs more and more with hard design and ascetic decor. Most of the intimate qualities found in houses are TV soap operas, pornography and film violence. Music, perhaps the most intimate of art forms is another example, but even here one sought to achieve a new objectivity. Or, as the Spanish theoretician José Ortega y Gasset said in his essay «The dehumanization of art», written in 1925: «The private emotions had to be eliminated from music, and had to be purified to perfectionist objectivity. That was due to Debussy's efforts. After Debussy one can listen to music with a happy and harmonious mind, without intoxication and tears. In the last century, all new efforts were rooted in the new realm beyond our own, which Debussy's genius had conquered.»

Kitsch is the opposite of the public space, of the public conversation, of the demand for objectivity and functionality. Kitsch is the intimate space, our selves, our love and our congeniality, our yearnings and our hopes, and our tears, joys and passion. Kitsch comes from the creative person's private space, and speaks to other private spaces. Kitsch deals therefore with giving intimacy dignity. This is the reason the kitschperson does not long for official innovation. On the contrary, he or she yearns for a human state of emotion where the same thing repeats itself in different clothes. Kitsch will not therefore create a better world, or new realm, for humankind.

¹ Greenberg p. 10


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Kitsch will lighten the existence of the individual. Kitsch does not flee away from human condition, it runs into it.

The escape route, or elitist laughter
The symbolists at the end of the 1800's were refugees in humanity. They sought shelter in a dreamworld, away from naturalism’s conquerings. However, their problem was that they emerged into a vacuum, where both the classical myths and Biblical stories had lost their actuality at the same time as the optimism of progress and the belief that the new realm was triumphant on all fronts. Symbolism therefore became a flight without purpose or destination, a flight that ended in trying.

Most of the 20th century pictures that have been described as kitsch, whether they portray the alluring gypsy girl, the deer by the pond or the crying child, were all incapable of creating flight routes from life’s and the world’s rational and trivial demands. And the modernists laughed. However, in these attempts the scrutinising eye finds representational ideals, and a relation to the human which is in pact with the most central themes of art from Old Europe. The 20th century was, despite all fears, marked by a sincere belief in progress, a belief that science and technology would lead us into a new world. But, after this futuristic fantasy which also became decisive for avant-garde art, it also became obvious to many that the flight has become even more intense than ever; a flight from society, optimism and progress. After all, it must be that the innermost, that which what moves us, must eventually be expressed. The flight is an escape towards the dark flame in the cave.

Ancestors, or the independent individual
Kitsch painters will of necessity relate towards history, tradition and the past. Contrary to art, they will find central values in «the old». However, not everything in old European painting is in pact with the ideals of kitsch. Just as modernism came to represent power and the public, there is also an official, power-oriented painting in the European tradition. Examples of such changes of power in the public domain are Raphael, Rubens with his «types», neoclassicism, David, and impressionism.

On the other hand, the ancestors of kitsch were independent individualists who chose their own private expressions, such as we find with

Albert Pinkham Ryder: The Race Track, 1890. 70.5 x 89.2. The Cleveland Museum of Art

Masaccio’s beggars, Caravaggio, Rembrandt or Käthe Kollwitz. With all of these we find individual departures from the public and the linear development. Rembrandt’s Jewish bride is perhaps the greatest icon of this tradition. It will never be pinpointed either to a specific time or to a specific metaphysic. The painting does not conform to official norms or values, it is private. Seen in this perspective, the Jewish bride is the source for the Gypsy girl.

Transcendence, or the rescinding of time and place
In the old world, the transcendental meant a spiritual world, which existed above the created world, and to transcend meant the surpassing of «this world», in dedication to the spiritual. However, after heaven closed itself to us, we remained only with Man and Nature. Therefore, the term «transcend» has been freed for new meanings.

In this situation, when art could have become an opening to something else, it became closed as well. It was a prisoner of the work or of
the media, and the aesthetic, formal qualities. «Pure» art became the only valid art. In kitsch the access to reality is however preserved, it is obligated by opinion and reality, kitsch transcends its own medium. More importantly however, kitsch surpasses also in the sense that it transcends what the light and playful which became the content of art. At the same time it transcends our world's trivialities, improper and outward, public tendencies. Kitsch is the way to solemn importance, and, in the last instance, a transcendence to the untenable, to the undefinable humanum.

However, this surpassing is not a denial of the sensory, the hedonistic. Quite the opposite, it is in this shining, luxurious sensuousness, the material substance, that we approach transcendence. A well-painted motive therefore surpasses the metaphysical assumptions that decide the presentation. Ilya Repin's Ivan the Terrible killing his son has dimensions enough to bring one in contact with a deeper level of reality. Even when Chardin paints an apple, it is illuminated by something else. Kitsch is not about public truths, but about sensuality. In kitsch we find a hedonistic approach to life, which, at its most penetrating level, can become so strong and vital that the viewer is gripped by the transcendent values.

It is this excessiveness which art in the public domain has trouble reaching. In the moment it became a power factor which confirms the establishment, it has become the prisoner of the public, triviality and life. The demand for «purity» in art prevents excessiveness. Or, as José Ortega y Gasset maintained, «that when art lays aside its human solemnity, it loses all transcendental significance...».

Public art has moral, religious, ethical or just purely aesthetic obligations. We see this when we compare Picasso's Guernica with Goya's Third of May. Guernica represents all of humanity's suffering, it is a painting for the UN. Goya's painting on the other hand, shows the individual victim's suffering. Guernica is an abstract symbol, whilst Third of May subjectively confirms and transcends.

With the slipping beyond to the human, one is snatched out of a time-space-dimension and into an eternal dimension. Or, as the litteratist Matei Calinescu said: «By and large, kitsch may be viewed as a reaction against the «terror» of change and the meaninglessness of chronological time flowing from an unreal past to an equally unreal future.»

This is where the great challenge lies, especially for the figurative underground traditions in the USA. Painters who work inside this tradition will have difficulty in reaching the transcendental as long as they conform to the demands of the here and now. Living kitsch tries to bring the body into an eternal atmosphere where linear time no longer has a hold.

Archetypes, or yearnings for the eternal
In his essay on kitsch and art, Tomas Kulka discusses the motives one finds in what he calls the universal kitsch: «... they play on basic human impulses irrespective of religious beliefs, political convictions, race or nationality. They exploit universal subjects such as birth, family, love, nostalgia etc. which could, perhaps, be further analysed in terms of Jungian archetypes.»

Something great may be about to happen. If one is free enough from prejudice to detect the path of the great humanum into kitsch, one will gain access to new realities. If one has the courage to look beyond the gypsy girl, beyond the moose, one will find the great kitsch and its eternal values.

Since the higher kisch orientates itself towards universal basic themes it will never be «out of fashion» or cease to be fascinating. According to Ortega y Gasset, it forces us to be emotionally involved, unlike art that gravitates away from passion. There is something naïve, something childlike in the greatness in kitsch history, as for example, in Puvis de Chavannes The poor fisherman. It is as seen by a child and painted by an adult.

In the same way there are different levels in art, (since the elimination of quality criterias, there are in reality only two levels of art; art and famous art,) there are also levels in kitsch. Levels from bad kitsch, harmless kitsch and transcendental kitsch which stop laughter. The goal is to reach this highest expression, where vulnerability goes beyond irony, a presence beyond abstraction. Only then, when the work of the hand realises the great humanum in the work, can the final re-evaluation of merits of the previous century begin.

Everyone takes pleasure in contemplating a leaping horse. 
Kitsch is a horse. Art is a car.

José Ortega y Gasset p. 73
Matei Calinescu, Five Faces of Modernity, Durham 1987, p. 248
Kulka p. 27
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even in the false needs of living humans stirs something reminiscent of freedom."

It is philosopher Ernst Bloch who has made the deepest and most extensive search for the great «humanum» in lowbrow culture. He strived to develop a detective-like ability in order to enable his search for clues leading to humanity in this culture. At the flea market, in motion pictures' happy endings, in teenage fantasy novels, in all of these things he finds a shimmer of the same «humanum» which shines in more sophisticated forms within higher culture.

In the humanity which modernism singled out and defined as kitsch, Nerdrum has found a common denominator connecting traditional low culture with the art that modernism has detached itself from. It is this rebellion that has now turned toward the fundamental tendencies in the art of the past century. It is difficult to understand how Richard Serra's Shaft still could hold any rebellious potential. The sculpture, as Brochman said, expresses the main tendencies of the past century's dominant artwork. Nerdrum's work springs from that humanity which has been cast out. That which ties Roka's Gypsy Girl to Rembrandt's Jewish Bride.

I will now tell you what art is

BY ODD NERDRUM

You could say that art has reached its summit today. Never before has art held such a solid position in the public room as it does in our time. New cathedrals are constantly being built in its honor, the most recent one in London, the Tate Modern. This is as it should be, for this is the reality of our time. Art is an expression for what is valid at a certain point in time.

What first and foremost characterizes this art, in my mind, is the conquest of the sensual expression, in favor of a philosophical purity, a purity that finds its clearest and most consistent expression in conceptualism. Here it has reached a philosophical level which makes it into a cool, clean expression of art, in sharp contrast to commercialism and sensuousness.

For a long time, the reasons for this development was a mystery to me. It was not until I read German philosophy from the 1700 and 1800s, that I realized what had happened. That was when I discovered that the one who, more than any other has been instrumental in determining our concept of art, is Immanuel Kant. In *Critique of Judgment* (1790) he distinguishes esthetics as a separate philosophical discipline where art and beauty are considered an independent category with its own rules and values.

The antithesis of craftsmanship. This, which was originally a result of a philosophical reflection, was to have dramatic consequences for the separate disciplines. When esthetics was considered autonomous, as independent of everything but itself, the groundwork was established for the understanding of art as autonomous, something which refers only to itself.

Today, we use the term «art» quite naturally in referring to a number of different forms of craftsmanship before the 1700s. For instance, we speak of the art of Antiquity. But it is important to acknowledge that «art» did not exist before Kant. What existed earlier was a craftsmanship regulated by certain technical or dramaturgical requirements. Therefore, when we employ our concept of art on the craftsmanship of earlier times and other cultures, we are actually robbing graves.

In *Critique of Judgment*, Kant establishes several central criteria for esthetics, criteria that have had a significant impact on a number of leading art historians, and therefore have become decisive of the understanding of art in the last century. I can mention Ortega y Gasset, Adorno, Greenberg and Malraux. All of them have furthered the thoughts of Kant, in one way or another. These men and their descendants have created the awareness that have become decisive for the artists of the twentieth century. When Brockmann, the former director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Oslo, once was asked what book he kept on his nightstand, he replied with art historical correctness: «Kant's *Critique of Judgment*.»

This line drawn from Kant to the art historians and then on to the artists, is visible in many respects.

We often find it in the many popular statements of artists. For
instance, when an artist claims that he is not engaged in depicting what he knows, but what he doesn't know, this can be traced almost literally to Kant. But more important in this context is Kant’s disparagement of craftmanship and the sensual in favor of intellectual reflection. Art is something that pleases in itself, as opposed to craftmanship which he perceives as toil and struggle, and as an expression of greed for money. That which pleases must remain free from sensual perception. The pleasing is pure contemplation: in other words, pleasure comes from contemplation and judgement. If the assessment of a work of art is connected with sensual perception, it is considered bodily oriented and thus inferior.

Another central issue in the esthetics of Kant is his view on the genius and on originality in art. It is the genius who provides art with rules, it is he who searches in the unknown. The genius is free and does not imitate nature, he is nature. In other words, the genius creates that for which there is no particular rule. Originality is therefore the hallmark of the genius, but he is subject to the judgment of the critic. Even Kant’s reflections on color have been groundbreaking. When passion lies in reflection and not in the physical presence, this means that color must be left aside. A dramatic expression, in other words a substantial color, throws the spectator out of balance, and thus it is no longer art. As Kant says: «When the work is too much alive, it ceases to be art.»

The realization of this esthetics can be found in the work of Paul Cezanne, a great Kantian. Here the skin is gone, here we find the clear colors and a restrained expression which has become a mask. Here, the carnal has disappeared in favor of an intellectual understanding, as the sensuality of skin has become a color painting. This is all Kantian. Cezanne must have read his Kant very thoroughly!

Another man who has been significant to the new art esthetics is Hegel, who was influenced by Kant, but went further. He claimed, among other things, that distortions and faults in drawing can be necessary for the sake of expression. Here we take leave of the masterly rendering of skin, in favor of freedom of the idea.

However, the most important issue is Hegel’s philosophy of history and its significance for esthetics. He claimed that great art depends on contemporary time and its means, and that art must accept the values of its time. The artist is not a great artist unless he is completely bound to his time. This led to an evolutionary optimism which implied that artists build on each other, and that they must constantly create something new and original in history. It is important to be aware of the fact that the new and the original are closely linked with what Hegel conceived of as the course of history, and which we now only find in the so-called «white wall tyranny». Here we find much of the basis for the avantgarde dictate of modernism.

What we find in the great philosophers from Germany, who have conquered the esthetics of our time, is thus the fact that art expression is emphasized as a clear antithesis to the pride of craftmanship.

Renewal and originality, disconnected from a tradition of craftmanship, are concepts constituting the basis of art and are decisive to everybody’s language when speaking of art. We constantly hear about «the inner journey», the demand for originality and the new, and of the necessity of spontaneous expression – a «sketch reality». Historically speaking, the first great expression of the triumph of Kant and Hegel is the «real art» of the impressionists, as opposed to the falseness of the salon art of the 1800s. At this time, the salon painters were considered oldfashioned painters who could not keep up with things. The impressionists, on the other hand, felt and thought that they were the real artists.

Even though the concept of art has achieved a predominant significance in our time, there are still cultural arenas untouched by this esthetics, i. e., Hollywood film productions and the world of literature. One important reason for this is that film and literature depend on great commercial success. And when you depend on a large audience, you are facing a «vulgus» problem. The general public wants what speaks to their hearts. Intellectual reflection will not be satisfactory. People want love, death and the ocean. Film and literature are therefore examples of arenas that have not had the economic possibility to bringing the ideas of Kant and Hegel to realization. The Weltgeist is superseded by economy.

In art, on the other hand, art in its purest value, art in particular, the situation is quite different; it is dependent on public or semi-public funding to get by. The reason being quite simply that this commodity, the art commodity does not easily fall under the definition of mass product.

Personally, I am convinced that art can be made into mass products by producing and selling reproductions of paintings in a far greater
extent than what is being done today. This was being done towards the end of the 1800s, but the practice has all but disappeared due to the isolation of modernism. Because art has been protected from the masses, it has been free to realize Kant’s ideas. Art in the twentieth century has contributed to creating a lighter atmosphere, it has brought forth clarity of thought. It has created an architecture that has brought light into the homes of ordinary people. It has taken sides with progress, against the old, the dark and the brown. However, the reverse side of art’s historical march of triumph consists of all those who were expelled. There will always be people who fail to follow, who fall out of grace. In the art world, where religious absolutes rule, these people have become exterminated – not ethnically, but ethically. They are perceived of as the losers of progress and are thrown on the landfill of history. I am one of these losers, one of those who has not been able to keep up with things, and as a result, I have been forced to sustain the whip of God’s angels. I have not been able to recognize myself in art, no matter how great my respect for it. I respect art as I respect jazz and football. These are, in themselves, excellent disciplines, but I do not recognize myself in them. What I have recognized myself in, ever since I was a child, are the outdated values. Where transcendence pierces through body and skin, and the eyes, those that gaze at you with their painted depths. Those that were made at a time when «art» did not exist, when decadent emperors allowed themselves to be impressed by the miracles of painting, carried out by the young and the old.

The ethic of pietism and the spirit of art

Can pietism in the early 18th century have given a necessary contribution to the origin and content of the modern concept of art?

by Dag Solhjell

Reflections on the possibility of pietistic origins of the modern concept of art, illuminated by texts from the Danish bishop and psalmist Hans Adolf Brorson’s (1694–1764) psalmody Troens Rare Klenodium from 1739 (Brorson:1953), the German philosopher Immanuel Kant’s (1724–1804) Critique of Judgment from 1790, and personal notes and diaries of the Norwegian expressionist painter and printmaker Edvard Munch (1858–1944). 2

Introduction

In the article «The concept of art at stake>>, I have concluded that kitsch is the underworld of art – the hell of aesthetics. Hermann Broch has stated that kitsch is the evil in the value system of art (1975), thus implying both that art has a value system and that the evil is its negative pole. This points to a religious origin of the modern concept of art. In this article, I will discuss the possibility of an influence from early 18th century Northern European pietism on the development of the modern concept of art, and by consequence, also of the concept of kitsch.

There seems to exist two distinctly different assumptions about the origin of the concept of art as we use it. The first is universalistic, implying that art has existed at any given time in any given culture – that art is an anthropological constant, so to speak. The other is a reductionist view, claiming that the concept of art was developed in Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries (Bo-Rygg, Cook Evjenth, Danbolt, Kristeller, Woodmansee, Østerberg and many others) along with an autonomous institution of art. The question discussed here is based on the reductionistic assumption.

Reductionist theories for the development of the social institution of art have been suggested within the framework of two different approaches: theories of social differentiation, and theories of social