The Object Reader

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HOLY KITSCHEN
Collecting religious junk from the street

Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: How nice to see children running on the grass! The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass! It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch.

Milan Kundera, 1984

Catholic imagery, once confined to sacred places such as church souvenir stands, cemeteries, and botanicas, has recently invaded the market as a fad. In the last few years, the realm of religious iconography in Manhattan has extended beyond its traditional Latino outlets on the Lower East Side, the Upper West Side, and Fourteenth Street. The 1980s appropriation of an imagery that evokes transcendence illustrates the cannibalistic and vicarious characteristics of postmodern culture. This melancholic arrogation also diffuses the boundaries of cultural identity and difference, producing a new and unsettling cultural persona.

A walk along Fourteenth Street used to be enough to travel in the hyperreality of kitsch iconography. Cutting across the map of Manhattan, Fourteenth Street sets the boundary for downtown, exploding into a frontierlike bazaar, a frantic place of trade and exchange, a truly inner-city port where among cascades of plastic flowers, pelicans made with shells, rubber shoes, Rita Hayworth towels, two-dollar digital watches, and pink electric guitars with miniature microphones, an array of shrine furnishings is offered. Velvet hangings picturing the Last Supper are flanked on one side by bucolic landscapes where young couples kiss as the sun fizzes away in the ocean and on the other by 1987’s “retro” idol, Elvis Presley, while the Virgin Mary’s golden aura is framed by the sexy legs of a pin-up, and the Sacred Heart of Jesus desperately competes in glitter with barrages of brightly colored glass-bead curtains.
Nowadays, the Catholic iconography brought to the United States by immigrants from Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, and Cuba is displayed in places where the predominant attitude toward Latino culture is one of amused fascination. Religious images serve not only as memorabilia in fancy souvenir shops but also as decoration for night clubs. The now-exorcised Voodoo, on Eighteenth Street, used to have a disco on its first floor and a bright green and pink tropical bar on the second. The bar's ceiling was garnished with plastic fruits hanging from one end to the other, and in the center of the room stood an altar complete with Virgin Mary, flowers, and votive candles. Fourteenth Street's Palladium, famous for a postmodern scenario in which golden Renaissance paintings emerge from behind a bare high-tech structure, celebrated All Saints' Day in 1987 with an invitation that unfolded in images of and prayers to Saint Patrick, Saint Francis of Assisi, and Saint Michael the Archangel.

Suddenly, holiness is all over the place. For $3.25 one can buy a Holiest Water Fountain in the shape of the Virgin, while plastic fans engraved with the images of your favorite holy people go for $1.95, as do Catholic identification tags: "I'm a Catholic. In case of accident or illness please call a priest." Glowing rosary beads can be found for $1.25 and, for those in search of verbal illustration, a series of "Miniature Stories of the Saints" is available for only $1.45. In the wake of punk crucifix earrings comes designer Henry Auvil's Sacred Heart of Jesus sweatshirt, yours for a modest eighty dollars, while scapularies, sometimes brought all the way from South America, adorn black leather jackets. Even John Paul II has something to contribute. In his travels, the Holy Father leaves behind a trail of images, and one can buy his smiling face in a variety of pope gadgets including alarm clocks, pins, picture frames, T-shirts, and snowstorm globes.

This holy invasion has gone so far as to intrude in the sacred space of galleries and museums, as a growing number of artists incorporate Catholic religious imagery in their work. Some recent examples are Amalia Mesa-Bains's recasting of personal altares, Dana Salvo's photographs of Mexican home altars, and Audrey Flack's baroque representations of Spanish virgins. Can the objects found in botanicas and on Fourteenth Street, the ones sold in souvenir shops and those exhibited in galleries be considered one and the same? I will argue for their synchronized difference, that is, for contemporary urban culture's ability to circulate and support distinct, and often contradictory, discourses.

Religious iconography as kitsch: developing a vicarious sensibility

I will begin by describing the peculiar aesthetics and philosophy underlying the circulation of the iconography of home altars. A popular Latin American tradition, home altars or altares are domestic spaces dedicated to deities and holy figures. In them, statuettes or images of virgins and saints are allocated space together with candles and other votive objects. Triangular in analogy to the Holy Trinity, altares are characterized by a cluttered juxtaposition of all types of paraphernalia; they are a personal pastiche. Illustrating a history of wishes, laments, and prayers, they are built over time, each personal incident leaving its own mark. Altares embody familiar or individual histories in the way photo albums do for some people. Consequently, a home altar is not only unique and unrepeatable, it is coded by the personal experience that composed it, and the code is
unreadable to foreign eyes. This mode of elaboration explains the variety of artifacts to be found in home altars and why there are no set rules as to what they might be made up of, except that everything must have a particular value. In altars, value is measured both sentimentally and as an offering. Since most of the people who make them have low incomes, their economic worth is symbolic and is conveyed by glitter and shine, mirrors and glass, a profusion of golden and silvery objects, and sheer abundance. This symbolic richness accounts for the artificial look of altars, as well as for the “magical kingdom” feeling they evoke.

Fundamentally syncretic, altars are raised or dedicated to figures who are public in some way, usually taken from the Catholic tradition, a local miraculous event, or national politics. Instead of following a formal chronology, home altars rearticulate history in relation to events relevant to the believer. To symbolize personal history, they transgress boundaries of time, space, class, and race. This is well illustrated in the Venezuelan cult of María Lionza, a deity who is revered along with heroes of the Independence and contemporary presidents—such as Carlos Andrés Pérez—in the gigantic altar of Sorte, a ritual hill dedicated to her worship. In both their elaboration and their meaning, altars are emblematic of the mechanics of popular culture: they familiarize transcendental experience by creating a personal universe from mainly domestic resources. In so doing, they stand directly opposite the impersonal politics of high and mass culture, although they steal motifs and objects from both.

That the altars tradition is being appropriated by artists both in the United States and abroad (Cuban artist Leandro Soto’s home altars to revolutionary heroes, for example) at the same time that their constitutive elements are heavily circulated in the marketplace is no coincidence. This phenomenon is based on the stealing of elements that are foreign or removed from the absorbing culture’s direct sensory realm, shaping itself into a vicarious experience particularly attracted to the intensity of feeling provided by iconographic universes like that of Latin American Catholicism. Vicariousness—to live through another’s experience—is a fundamental trait of postmodern culture. Ethnicity and cultural difference have exchanged their intrinsic values for the more extrinsic ones of market interchangeability: gone are the times when people could make a persuasive claim to a culture of their own, a set of meaningful practices that might be considered the product of unique thought or lifestyle. The new sense of time and space generated by telecommunications—in the substitution of continuity and distance with instantaneousness and ubiquity—has transformed the perception of things so that they are no longer lived directly but through their representations. Experience is mainly available through signs: things are not lived directly but rather through the agency of a medium, in the consumption of images and objects that replace what they stand for. Such rootlessness accounts for the high volatility and ultimate transferability of culture in postmodern times.

The imaginary participation that occurs in vicarious experience is often despised for its lack of pertinence to what is tacitly agreed upon as reality, for example in the generalized notion that mass entertainment is dumbfounding. Ironically enough, vicariousness is similar to the classic understanding of aesthetic enjoyment, which is founded on a symbolically distanced relationship to phenomena. This symbolic connection, which used to protect the exclusivity of aesthetic experience by basing it on the prerequisites of trained sensibility and knowledge, has given way to the more ordinary and accessible passageway provided by popular culture. Therefore, it is not against living others’
experiences—or living like another—that high-culture criticisms are directed, but rather against the popular level where this vicariousness is acted out and the repercussions it has on other cultural projects. Vicariousness is acceptable so long as it involves a high-level project (stimulating the intellect) but unacceptable when limited to the sensory (stimulating the senses).

The acceptance of vicariousness enables an understanding of how, as the result of a long cultural process, simulation has come to occupy the place of a traditional, indexical referentiality. For this process is not, as many would have it, the sole responsibility of progressively sophisticated media and market devices, but is rather the radicalization of the ways in which culture has always mediated our experience. The difference in postmodernity is both quantitative and qualitative, since it lies in the extent to which experience is lived vicariously as well as in the centrality of emotion to contemporary vicariousness. The “waning of affect” in contemporary culture is intrinsically related to a distance from immediate experience caused in part by the current emphasis on signs. Attempting to compensate for emotional detachment, this sensibility continually searches for intense thrills and for the acute emotionality attributed to other times and peoples. The homogenization of signs and the wide circulation of marketable goods make all cultures susceptible to this appropriation, and the more imbued with emotional intensity they are perceived to be, the better. It is in this appeal to emotion that religious imagery and kitsch converge. The connection proves particularly relevant because kitsch permits the articulation of the polemics of high and low culture in a context broader than that of religious imagery, smoothing the way for a better understanding of its attraction and importance for vicarious experience.

Known as the domain of “bad taste,” kitsch stands for artistic endeavor gone sour as well as for anything that is considered too obvious, dramatic, repetitive, artificial, or exaggerated. The link between religious imagery and kitsch is based on the dramatic character of their styles, whose function is to evoke unambiguously, dispelling ambivalence and abstraction. After all, besides providing a meaningful frame for existence and allocating emotions and feelings, Catholicism facilitates through its imagery the materialization of one of the most ungraspable of all experiences, that of the transcendence of spiritual attributes. Because of the spiritual nature of religious faith, however, iconolatry (the worship of images or icons) is often seen as sacrilegious, as the vulgarization of an experience that should remain fundamentally immaterial and ascetic. In this sense, not only Catholic iconography but the whole of Christian theology has been accused of lacking in substance, and therefore of being irredeemably kitsch. Like kitsch, religious imagery is a mise-en-scène, a visual glossolalia that embodies otherwise impalpable qualities: mystic fervor is translated into upturned eyes, a gaping mouth, and levitation; goodness always feeds white sheep; virginity is surrounded by auras, clouds, and smiling cherubim; passion is a bleeding heart; and evil is snakes, horns, and flames. In kitsch, this dramatic quality is intensified by an overtly sentimental, melodramatic tone and by primary colors and bright, glossy surfaces.

The crossing over between the spheres of the celestial and kitsch is truly concordant. Religious imagery is considered kitsch because of its desacralization, while kitsch is called evil and the “anti-Christ in art” because of its artistic profanities. Kitsch steals motifs and materials at random, regardless of the original ascription of the sources. It takes from classic, modernist, and popular art and mixes all together, becoming in this way the first and foremost recycler. This irreverent eclecticism has brought both glory
and doom upon kitsch, for its unbridled voraciousness transgresses boundaries and undermines hierarchies. Religious kitsch is then doubly irreverent, displaying an impious over-determination that accounts, perhaps, for its secular seduction.

Kitsch is one of the constitutive phenomena of postmodernism. The qualities attributed so far to kitsch—eclectic cannibalism, recycling, rejoicing in surface or allegorical values—are those that distinguish contemporary sensibility from the previous belief in authenticity, originality, and symbolic depth. Furthermore, the postmodern broadening of the notion of reality, whereby vicariousness is no longer felt as false or secondhand but rather as an autonomous, however incredible, dimension of the real, facilitates the current circulation and revalorization of this aesthetics. Likewise, in its chaotic juxtaposition of images and times, contemporary urban culture is comparable to an altarlike reality, where the logic of organization is anything but homogeneous, visual saturation is obligatory, and the personal is lived as a pastiche of fragmented images from popular culture.

Fourteenth Street and first-degree kitsch

One of the most conspicuous features of postmodernity is its ability to entertain conflicting discourses simultaneously. Rather than erasing previous practices, it enables and even seeks their subsistence. This peculiar coexistence of divergent visions is made possible by the space left in the vertical displacement of depth by surface, which implies a gathering on the horizontal level. Fragmentary but ubiquitous, discontinuous and instantaneous, this new altarlike reality is the arena for a Byzantine struggle in which different iconographies fight for hegemony. In this manner, cultural specificity has given way to the internationalization of its signs, losing uniqueness and gaining exposure and circulation. Within this context, it is possible to distinguish, according to their means of production and cultural function, three degrees of kitsch that have recently come to overlap in time and space.

In what I will call first-degree kitsch, representation is based on an indexical referent. Here, the difference between reality and representation is explicit and hierarchical, since only what is perceived as reality matters. Acting as a mere substitute, the kitsch object has no validity in and of itself. This is the case of the imagery available at church entrances and botanicas, sold for its straightforward iconic value. Statuettes, images, and scapularies embody the spirits they represent, making them palpable. Consequently, this imagery belongs in sacred places, such as home altars, and must be treated with utmost respect. In first-degree kitsch, the relationship between object and user is immediate, one of genuine belief. Technically, its production is simple and cheap, a serial artisanship devoid of that perfectly finished look attained with a more sophisticated technology. In fact, these objects exhibit a certain rawness that is, or appears to be, handmade. This quality reflects their "honesty," as lack of sophistication is usually taken for authenticity. On the other hand, this rawness adds to first-degree kitsch's status as "low" art, when it is considered art at all: usually, if not marginalized as folklore, it is condemned as gaudy.

Almost a century old, first-degree kitsch is what is usually referred to in discussions of kitsch. It is not, however, inherently kitsch. It is understood as such from a more distanced look, one that does not enjoy the same emotional attachment that believers
have to these objects. For them, kitsch objects are meaningful, even when they are used ornamenteally. Yet for those who have the distanced look, whom I will call kitsch aficionados,\(^\text{14}\) it is precisely this unintentionality that is attractive, since it speaks of a naive immediacy of feeling that they have lost. Aficionados’ nostalgia leads them to a vicarious pleasure that gratifies their desire for immediacy. They achieve this pleasure by collecting kitsch objects and even admiring their inherent qualities: bright colors, glossy surfaces, and figuration. By elaborating a scenario for their vicarious pleasure, kitsch aficionados paradoxically reproduce the practice of believers, since this scenario is meant to provide an otherwise unattainable experience, that of immediate feeling for the aficionados and of reverence for the believers. Aficionados’ sensibility cannot be dismissed as secondary or intellectual because their attachment to these objects is as strong and vital as that of first-degree believers. Yet what is relevant here is that first-degree believers’ attachment is directly related to the devotional meaning of the iconography, while for aficionados, this meaning is secondary: what matters is not what the images represent, but the intense feelings—hope, fear, awe—that they inspire. Aficionados’ connection is to these emotions, their appreciation one step removed from first-degree kitsch.

The different relationships to first-degree kitsch may be illustrated by a Fourteenth Street fad of the past few years, the Christ clocks. Rectangular or circular, these clocks narrate various moments of Christ's life in three dimensions. We see Christ gently blessing a blond girl while a few small, fluffy white sheep watch reverently, Christ bleeding on the cross or delivering the Sermon on the Mount, or all of these scenes together in the special “quarter-hour” versions, where, in the narrative logic of the Stations of the Cross, each quarter hour has its own episode. True to Fourteenth Street and home-altar aesthetics, Christ clocks eschew the boredom of bareness, naturalness, and discretion and exploit the prurience of loudness, dramatics, and sentimentality. The profusion of these clocks bears witness to their popularity. Selling for about twelve to fourteen dollars, they have become a dominant part of the Fourteenth Street scene.

For most Christ-clock shoppers there is no contradiction in using Christ’s life as a backdrop for time. In kitchens or living rooms, these clocks are used as extensions of the home altar, conveying a comfortable familiarity with a figure that represents cherished values. This relationship to Christ is loving and quotidian, totally ordinary. For kitsch aficionados, however, these clocks are a source of endless amazement and wonder. Lacking a religious attachment to them, aficionados are fascinated by the directness of the feelings these clocks represent and evoke: there is something definitely moving about Christ’s sorrow as—on his knees on Mount Olive, hands dramatically clasped—he implores his Father’s compassion for the sinful human race. For an aficionado it is the intensity of this drama—heightened by an artificial aura created by the picture’s lack of depth and bright colors—that is attractive. This aesthetic experience is radically different from the highly conceptualized one of modern art.

**Little Rickie and second-degree kitsch**

First-degree kitsch familiarizes the ungraspable—eternity, goodness, evil—while tacitly maintaining a hierarchical distinction between reality and representation. The opposite is true of second-degree kitsch, or neo-kitsch,\(^\text{15}\) which collapses this difference by making representation into the only possible referent. In so doing, it defamiliarizes
our notion of reality because representation itself becomes the real. Neo-kitsch is inspired by first-degree kitsch and is therefore second-generation. Sold as kitsch, it lacks the devotional relation present in first-degree kitsch. Its absence of feeling leaves us with an empty icon, or rather an icon whose value lies precisely in its iconicity, its quality as a sign rather than as an object. This kitsch is self-referential—a sort of kitsch-kitsch—and has lost all the innocence and charm of the first-degree experience.

Whereas first-degree kitsch is sold in variety stores, among articles of domestic use, second-degree kitsch is found in more specialized shops, like those that sell souvenirs. Among the most interesting is New York’s Little Rickie, where in the midst of all types of memorabilia, religious imagery reigns. In its dizzying clutteredness, Little Rickie is a sophisticated microcosm of Fourteenth Street and home-altar aesthetics. As such, it succeeds in creating a total disorientation that engulfs the viewer inside the store. But although it offers all the religious kitsch one could ever hope to find, the catch for aficionados lies in the given or prefabricated quality of the objects. Take for instance the holy water bottles, transparent plastic bottles in the shape of the Virgin Mary. These bottles stand obliquely to the original iconography—which does not include them—and rely exclusively on concept for their existence. Lacking in visual and signifying exuberance, they profit from the religious imagery fad and from the idea of a bottle for holy water being funny. Never having established a first degree of affection, these bottles are devoid of the intensity aficionados seek. They are simply toys, curiosities bought to show or give to somebody else. Second-degree kitsch exists only for transaction, to pass from hand to hand, and in this lack of possessing subject lies its ultimate alienation and perishability.

Neo-kitsch is intentional, and it capitalizes on an acquired taste for tackiness. It is a popularization of the camp sensibility, a perspective wherein appreciation of the “ugly” conveys to the spectator an aura of refined decadence, an ironic enjoyment from a position of enlightened superiority. This attitude allows a safe release into sentimentality. Neo-kitsch’s exchange value is intensified by the interchangeability of religious imagery with the rest of the memorabilia in the store. For consumers of second-degree kitsch, the choice between, say, a sample of holy soil and a plastic eye with two feet that winks as it walks around is totally arbitrary, decided only by last-minute caprice or a vague idea of which would be more hilarious. For “authentic” aficionados half the pleasure of acquisition is lost when kitsch is a given and not a discovery. As for first-degree believers, they are not among the store’s buyers, although the store is located in the East Village, which is home to a substantial Latino community.

Mass marketed, these products involve a more elaborate technology and often come from mass-culture production centers like Hong Kong. First-degree homeliness is replaced by the mechanical look of serial reproduction. Designed as a commodity for exchange and commerce, second-degree kitsch has no trace of use value, no longer being “the real thing” for connoisseurs. The passing over of kitsch to mass culture is similar to the desacralization of high art occasioned by mechanical reproduction. In both cases the loss of authenticity is based on the shift from manufactured or low-technology production to a more sophisticated industrial one, with its consequent displacement of a referent for a copy. To consider second-degree kitsch less authentic than first-degree kitsch because of its predigested character would be contradictory, since kitsch is by definition predigested. The difference lies in how intentional, or self-conscious, this predigestion is.
The mass marketing of religious imagery as kitsch is only possible once the icon has been stripped of its signifying value. The religious kitsch that was available before the 1980s was first-degree kitsch, albeit mechanically reproduced. The change to a fad, something fun to play with, is a recent phenomenon. What matters now is iconicity itself; worth is measured by the icon's traits—the formal, technical aspects like narrative, color, and texture. Void, except in a nostalgic way, of the systemic meaning granted by religious belief, these traits are easily isolated and fragmented, becoming totally interchangeable and metonymical. As floating signs, they can adhere to any object and convey onto it their full value, "kitschifying" it. This lack of specificity accounts for neo-kitsch objects' suitability for random consumption.

**Third-degree kitsch and the advantages of recycling**

Religious imagery reached its highest level of commodification when it lost specificity to market interchangeability. It has gained a new social place, however, thanks to a simultaneous and related process: the legitimization of its signifying and visual attributes by the institutionally authorized agency of artists. This revaluation takes place through the multifarious recycling of Catholic religious iconography, constituting what I will distinguish as third-degree kitsch. Here, the iconography is invested with either a new or a foreign set of meanings, generating a hybrid product. This phenomenon is the outcome of the blending between Latin and North American cultures and includes both Chicano and Nuyorican artists' recovery of their heritage as well as white American artists working with the elements of this tradition.

Since individual *altares* represent personal histories of memories and wishes, the tradition of home altars as a whole can be taken to represent collective remembrance and desire. In varying degrees of nostalgia and transformation, several Chicano and Nuyorican artists are using the *altares* format to reaffirm a precarious sense of belonging. Second-generation altar making is complicated by the currency of its iconography: in more ways than one, the fashionable home altars' aesthetic benefits from such timely recirculation. Yet any consideration of these artists as the authentic bearers of the *altares* tradition assures Chicano and Nuyorican artists' marginality by stating that they are the most suited to carry on with their forebears' work, since cultural continuity conveniently eliminates them from participating in other creative endeavors. Chicano and Nuyorican home altar recycling, therefore, is treading a very fine line between reenacting a tradition whose exclusive rights are questionable and being artistically identified solely with that task.

Some of the edge can be taken off this discussion by acknowledging the differences between this kind of artistic recovery and first-degree home-altar elaboration. As a recent exhibition title suggests, the recasting of *altares* is often meant as a "ceremony of memory" that invests them with a new political signification and awareness. This artistic legitimization implies formalizing home altars to fit into a system of meaning where they represent the culture that once was; they are changed, once again, from referents to signs. This loss of innocence, however, allows *altares* to be reelaborated into new sets of meanings, many of which were inconceivable to the original bearers of this tradition but are certainly fundamental to more recent Chicano and Nuyorican generations.\(^\text{18}\)

One such example of home-altar recycling may be found in Amalia Mesa-Bains's
work, which is both a recovery of and a challenge to her family tradition and cultural identity. Mesa-Bains is a Chicana who began making altares after earning several college degrees. Her revival of this tradition is therefore not spontaneous but calculated, impelled by a conscious gesture of political reaffirmation of Chicano cultural values. One of her recent shows, Grotto of the Virgin, consisted of altares raised to such unhallowed figures as Mexican painter Frida Kahlo, Mexican superstar Dolores del Rio, and her own grandmother. What is specific to Mesa-Bains’s altars is that the personal is not subordinated to a particular holy person. Rather, a secular person is made sacred by the altar format, the offerings consisting mainly of a reconstruction of that person’s imagined life by means of images and gadgets. The Dolores del Rio altar, for example, is raised on several steps made with mirrors, bringing to mind the image cults that grow up around Hollywood actors and actresses. This altar is stacked with feminine paraphernalia such as perfume bottles, lipstick, and jewelry, as well as letters, pictures, and other souvenirs of her life. In this way, the image of Dolores del Rio as a “cinema goddess” becomes literal.

This secularization of the altares is probably due to the importance Mesa-Bains assigns to personal experience. In traditional altar raising, the personal was always secondary to the deity, and religious sensibility articulated in the last instance the whole altar. By privileging what were only coding elements so that they become the main objective of her altares, Mesa-Bains has inverted the traditional formula. As a result, women and mass culture are invested with a new power that emanates from the sacredness of altares: in postmodern culture, Mesa-Bains’s work would seem to contend, old patriarchal deities are no longer satisfactory. What she has done is to profit from an established tradition to convey new values. Beyond mere formal changes, her altares replace the transcendental with the political. In them, the affirmation of feminist and Chicano experiences is more relevant than a pious communication with the celestial sphere. Such a secularization of home altars is evidence of their adaptability as well as their visual versatility. 19

Chicano and Nuyorican artists are not alone in exploring home-altar aesthetics. Boston photographer Dana Salvo has exalted the tradition of Mexican home altars by uprooting them from their private context and presenting them as sites both of unorthodox beauty and of first-hand religious experience. Salvo transforms altares into objects of aesthetic contemplation: in elegant cibachrome prints, the colors, textures, and arrangements of altares stand out in all their splendor. For Salvo, an artist who has also focused on the recovery of lost or ruined textures (some of his other work consists of uncovering the debris and capturing the layers of time and decay in ruined mansions), the seduction of home altars is primarily visual. The absence of some contextualization to help decode home altars underlines their value as objects as well as their ultimate otherness: they represent a reality that speaks a different language. Still, even if the appreciation of altares is limited to an aesthetic discovery of their iconic attributes, this remains a relevant connection to a hitherto ignored cultural manifestation. Furthermore, the participatory process in which Salvo and the creators of the altars engaged when they rearranged the altares for the photos speaks for the reciprocal benefits of active cultural exchange. 20

Finally, religious iconography is used as a format for modern experience in the work of Audrey Flack, who explores her own feelings through images of the Virgin Mary. For more than a decade, Flack has drawn from the Spanish Marian cult as a source of
Figure 26.1  Macarena Esperanza, 46 × 66 in. oil on canvas by Audrey Flack, 1971. Courtesy the Louis K. Meisel Gallery.
inspiration. Her choice of imagery is based on an identification with what she feels are analogous experiences of motherhood. Flack over dramatizes her Virgins, making them hyperreal by accentuating color, giving the paintings a glossy quality, and even adding glittery tears. It is this over dramatization that, together with the baroqueness of the imagery, makes her work “popular kitsch,” a kitsch that takes itself seriously and is sentimental and Romantic. Flack distinguishes this kitsch from “art world kitsch,” which in her opinion covers sentiment with humor. Emotional identification is the basis for her claim to a more valid relationship to religious imagery than that of other artists. 

Flack’s emotional affinity with the Virgins notwithstanding, her use of them is mainly functional and isolated from the Marian tradition as a whole. A syncretist, she takes elements from any religion that suits her needs, in an interchangeability that renders the specificity of religious traditions secondary.

Third-degree religious kitsch consists in a revalorization of Catholic iconography and the accentuation of those traits that make its aesthetics unique: figurativeness, dramatization, eclecticism, visual saturation—all those attributes for which kitsch was banned from the realm of art. In providing an aesthetic experience that transcends the object, kitsch is finally legitimized as art, an issue that has been of more concern to art critics than to kitsch artists. Consequently, it has been argued that the recirculation of kitsch is but a co-optation by the late avant-garde, a formal gesture of usurpation coming from its desperate attempt to remain alive. There is little difference between the use of kitsch as a motif by the market and by avant-garde art, since the value of the icon lies for both in its exotic otherness, its ornamental ability to cover the empty landscape of postindustrial reality with a universe of images. Such pilfering of religious imagery is limited to reproduction, displacing and subordinating its social function but not altering the material in any significant way.

But what is happening in the third-degree revaluation of kitsch is more than the avant-garde’s swan song. It is the collapse of the hierarchical distinction between the avant-garde and kitsch—and, by extension, between high and popular art—a collapsing of what modernity considered a polar opposition. According to this view, sustained principally by Clement Greenberg, the avant-garde revolution transferred the value of art from its sacred function (providing access to religious transcendence) to its innovative capabilities (leading to a newly discovered future via experimentation and disruption). Since kitsch is based on imitation and copy, countering novelty with fakeness and artificiality, it was consequently understood as the opposite of the avant-garde and considered reactionary and unartistic.

The current crisis of representation, however, implies not only disillusionment with progress, originality, and formal experimentation but also a reconsideration of all they excluded. It follows that copy, simulation, and quotation are raised to a new level of interest, representing a different experience of art and creativity. In postmodern culture, artifice, rather than commenting on reality, has become the most immediately accessible reality. Fakery and simulation were present in modernism as aesthetic means. They had a function, as in the reproduction of consumer society’s alienation in Andy Warhol’s work. In postmodernity, there is no space for such distances: fake and simulation are no longer distinguishable from quotidian life. The boundaries between reality and representation, themselves artificial, have been temporarily and perhaps permanently suspended.

Moreover, these boundaries are questioned not only by third-degree kitsch, but
also by the current recirculation of kitsch. Anticipating this postmodern taste, Walter Benjamin wrote in a brief essay that kitsch is what remains after the world of things is extinct. Comparing it to a layer of dust that covers things and allows for a nostalgic recreation of reality, Benjamin believes kitsch—the banal—to be more accurate than immediate perception (thus favoring intertextuality over indexicality). For him, immediacy is just a notion of reality, and only the distance left by the loss of this immediacy permits a true apprehension of things. Therefore, he trusts dreams, rhythm, poetry, and distraction. Because of its repetitiveness—worn by habit and decorated by cheap sensory statements—kitsch is most suitable for this nostalgic resurrection, making for an easier and more pleasurable perception.24 In discussing the Iconoclastes and their fury against the power of religious images, Baudrillard ascribes to simulacra a similar nostalgic function. Yet in his characteristic neutralization of signs, Baudrillard fails to assign them any discursive power.25 Such empowerment is precisely the issue at stake in third-degree kitsch.

Besides imploding the boundaries of art and reality, the third degree carries out an active transformation of kitsch. Taking religious imagery both for its kitsch value and its signifying and iconic strength, it absorbs the icon in full and recycles it into new meanings. These meanings are related to personal spiritual experiences, recalling users' relationships to first-degree imagery, except that the first-degree images are part of a given cultural heritage and as such they are readily available and their usage is automatic. Third-degree kitsch, on the other hand, appropriates this tradition from "outside," searching for an imagery that will be adequate to its expressive needs. Its cannibalization of imagery, however, stands in sharp contrast to previous appropriations. In the early avant-garde, for instance in Picasso's use of African masks, the break with Western imagery had a symbolic function. Similarly, in surrealism and the release of the unconscious, exploring difference meant disrupting a cultural heritage perceived as limited and oppressive. Venerated for its ability to offer an experience in otherness, difference stood as the necessary counterpart of Western culture. Its function was to illuminate. Yet this assigned purposefulness tamed the perception of those cultures, ultimately erasing difference from the Western imaginary landscape.

In the work of the artists mentioned earlier, Catholic religious imagery provides access to a variety of intense emotions that seem otherwise culturally unattainable. In Salvo's photography the pleasure seems to come from the intimacy of the home altars, where family history is revered in a colorful clutter of figures and personal objects. This affectionate and ingenuous assortment stands in contrast to the photographic gaze through which it is perceived. For their viewers, the beauty of altares lies in their direct connection to reality, a connection that succeeds in stirring the capacity for amazement. A similar pleasure is found in Flack's virgins, whose melodramatic intensity becomes almost sublime, following the tradition of Catholic hagiography. Meanwhile, Mesa-Bains and other Chicano and Nuyorican artists are moving toward a radical transformation of tradition by imposing their own will on the material they work with, as in Mesa-Bains's use of altares to sanctify contemporary femininity.

This colonization of religious imagery, in which it is occupied by alien feelings and intentions, can be said to work in both directions. After all, the exotic, colonized imagery has now become part and parcel of the appropriator's imagination—it is part of the cannibal's system. Instead of appropriation annihilating what it absorbs, the absorbed invades the appropriating system and begins to constitute and transform it.
The unsettling qualities of such cross-cultural integration are underscored by kitsch's syncretic tradition of mixture and pastiche. Since kitsch can readily exist in a state of upheaval and transformation, there is no eventual settlement of the absorbed. In the past, this reverse colonization has been minimized by adverse historical conditions. Yet the vast Latin American immigration to cosmopolitan urban centers in the past few decades is forcing a redefinition of traditional cultural boundaries, one that both shapes and is shaped by the circulation of images. If at one time exotic images were domesticated, they now seem to have lost their tameness to a newly found space: the one left by the exit of traditional referentiality. It isn’t surprising then that third-degree kitsch in the United States is coming mainly from the East and West Coasts, since it is in these places that a new culture, deeply affected by Latinos, is being formed.

Religious imagery in third-degree kitsch surpasses the distance implied in second-degree kitsch. Instead of consuming arbitrarily, it constitutes a new sensibility whose main characteristic is the displacement of exchange by use. The consumption of images has been qualitatively altered: images are not chosen at random; they must convey a particular feeling, they must simulate emotion. Third-degree kitsch is the result of that search. Whether its potential destabilization will have a concrete social result before it is annihilated by a systematic assimilation that hurries to institutionalize it—making it into second-degree kitsch, for example—is debatable. Still, it is not a question of this assimilation seeping down into the depths of culture and carrying out some radical change there. After all, American culture is basically one of images, so that changes effected at the level of imagery cannot be underestimated. Since commodification is one of the main modes of integration in the United States, it can certainly be used as a vehicle of symbolic intervention. Third-degree kitsch therefore may be considered a meeting point between different cultures. It is where the iconography of a culture, instead of ceasing to exist, is transformed by absorbing new elements. Rather than of active or passive cultures, one can now speak of mutual appropriation. Even if an iconography is stolen it remains active, and the artists’ work discussed here illustrates how this iconography can occupy the appropriator’s imagination by providing a simulation of experiences the native culture has become unable to produce.

It can be said that each degree of religious imagery satisfies the desire for intensity in a different way: in the first degree through an osmotic process resulting from the collection and possession of objects still infused with use value; in the second degree by the consumption of commodified nostalgia; and in the third degree by cannibalizing both the first and second degrees and recycling them into a hybrid product that allows for a simulation of the lost experience. Even though they’re produced at different moments, these three degrees cohabit the same contemporary space. Their synchronicity accentuates the erasure of cultural boundaries already present in third-degree kitsch, throwing together and mixing different types of production and perception. This reflects the situation of the urban cosmopolis, where myriad cultures live side by side, producing the postmodern pastiche. Such an anarchic condition destabilizes traditional hegemony, forcing it to negotiate with those cultural discourses it once could oppress. The ability of cultural imagery to travel and adapt itself to new requirements and desires can no longer be mourned as a loss of cultural specificity in the name of exhausted notions of personal or collective identities. Instead, it must be welcomed as a sign of opening to and enjoyment of all that traditional culture worked so hard at leaving out.
Notes


2 I would like to thank the following people for allowing me to repeatedly photograph in their stores: Sam and Silvia at Sasson Bazaar, 108 W. Fourteenth Street; Maurice and David at Esco Discount Store, 138 W. Fourteenth Street; and Jamal at Sharon Bazaar, 112 W. Fourteenth Street. Fourteenth Street’s internationality can be fully appreciated in these people’s polyglotism: most of them speak four or five languages, including English, Spanish, Hebrew, Arabic, and French.

3 Little Rickie is located at 49 ½ First Avenue (at the corner of Third Street). Thanks to Phillip Retzky for letting me photograph in the store. The prices quoted are from 1987, when this chapter was written.

4 Available at Hero, 143 Eighth Avenue, and Amalgamated, 19 Christopher Street.

5 Much has been written about the video pope. For his 1984 visit to Puerto Rico see Edgardo Rodríguez Julià, “Llegó el Obispo de Roma,” in *Una noche con Iris Chacón* (n.p.: Editorial Antillana, 1986): 7–52. For his 1986 visit to France see the wonderfully illustrated “Pape Show” issue of the French daily *Liberation*, October 4 and 5, 1986: 1–7.

6 Amalia Mesa-Bains, Grotto of the Virgins, Intar Latin American Gallery, New York City, 1987; Dana Salvo, Mary (group show), Althea Vialora Gallery, New York City, 1987; Audrey Flack, Saints and Other Angels: The Religious Paintings of Audrey Flack, Cooper Union, New York City, 1986.

7 Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism; or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” in *New Left Review* 146 (July-August 1984): 53–92.


10 The concept of cultural cannibalism was advanced in a different context by Oswald de Andrade, *Do Pau-Brasil a Antropofagia e as Utopias*, Obras Completas, vol. 6 (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira-Mec, 1970).
For some art theoreticians, this is a “primitive” confusion between referent and representation. See Aleksa Celebonovic, “Nota sul Kitsch tradizionale,” in Dorfles, II Kitsch, 280–89.


Hermann Broch spoke of the “kitsch-man” in Gillo Dorfles, II Kitsch, 49.

This term was first used by Abraham Moles, Le Kitsch, 161–86.


Ceremony of Memory, Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art (MOCHA), New York City, 1989. Ironically, this is happening at a time when Hispanics are said to be turning away from Catholicism. See “Switch by Hispanic Catholics Changes Face of U.S. Religion,” New York Times, May 14, 1989.

For a more extensive account of Mesa-Bains’s work and of altares in general see Tomás Ybarra Frausto’s essay “Sanctums of the Spirit—The Altars of Amalia Mesa-Bains,” published in the catalog for this show.

In his artist’s statement for the Pastorale de Navidad show (Nielsen Gallery, Boston, 1987), Salvo describes this exchange: “The Polaroid process quickly dispelled any apprehension or superstition that arose, and the instant image generated an enormous amount of enthusiasm. Soon a crowd of villagers would be about the camera and house. They were moved that their creations were being photographed, and they treasured the Polaroids, displaying the image as part of the altarpiece . . . Once everyone was accustomed to the photograph they would oftentimes arrange the interiors to better fit the frame. Or, this would encourage others to add small treasures to an altar as it would be seen minutes later in a Polaroid image.”

Personal interview with Lowery S. Sims, published in the catalog for Flack’s Cooper Union show.


This is Greenberg’s main proposal. See also Miriam Gusevich, “Purity and Transgression: Reflections on the Architectural Avantgarde’s Rejection of Kitsch,” Working Paper no. 4, published by the Center for Twentieth Century Studies of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Fall 1986.


Jean Baudrillard, Simulations, 7–9.