



BY PHILIP ALVARÉ

Before I left for England last month, I met a man who runs a company specializing in conservation and archives. He had worked for Graceland, the Elvis Presley museum. Then the other day, I read an interview with artist Jeff Koons in a magazine supplement of an Oxford newspaper. Koons has two exhibitions, “Hulk Elvis” and “Popeye,” showing at the two Gagosian Gallery spaces in London. Elvis strikes again! The interviewer referred to a Calvin Tomkins story about Koons that ran in *The New Yorker*. Maybe it’s just coincidence, but everywhere I look, I see kitsch.

Andy Warhol made his career, in part, by uplifting the most banal, mass-produced commercial logos and consumer product images (i.e. Brillo boxes, Campbell’s Soup cans, and Elvis), into the realm of fine art. Many count him among the greatest artists of the 20th century. “*But*,” a friend of mine asked, “Is it kitsch?”

“Exactly what is kitsch?” I queried. Then I thought about a cartoon with a caption that read: “The only reason I liked you, George, was for your kitsch value.” Poor George was one of those big-headed, doe-eyed little waifs that an artist named Keane popularized in the 60’s. Pure kitsch!

What exactly is kitsch? Like most topics I’m drawn to, it resists description. I can’t say exactly what kitsch is, and it may be easier to say what kitsch isn’t. So with that in mind, I set to exploring the ideas about kitsch — the realm of kitsch. I went on a kitsch hunt. First stop, the American Heritage Dictionary. Nothing. Next, Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations; a single entry under Milan Kundera from “*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*”: “Kitsch excludes everything from its purview

which is essentially unacceptable in human existence.” Hmm. But it wasn’t until I Googled “kitsch” that I started hitting some pay dirt. Where else should one research a term pertaining to mass culture, but a mass-culture database? A Wikipedia entry offered the following: “Kitsch (rhymes with “rich”) is a term of German origin that has been used to categorize art that is considered an inferior copy of an existing style. The term is also used more loosely in referring to any art that is pretentious to the point of being in bad taste, and also commercially produced items that are considered trite or crass.”

Well, I thought, that would accurately define at least 90 percent of what passes for art these days. It’s easy to call Jeff Koons’ work kitsch at first glance, but then it doesn’t quite fit these definitions. Warhol’s work fulfills some of the kitsch criteria, but not quite. Suddenly, I’m on the tube in London. The seats are littered with giveaway tabloid rags called *London Lite* (please note kitschy spelling). Lead story, running under the headline “Bling It On! The 50M Hirst Skull”:

“Hirst unveils diamond geezer, and buyers are queuing up ...” A caption under a picture of a diamond-encrusted skull reads, “A celebration against death,” as Hirst describes his latest creation, a skull “studded with 8601 diamonds.” Bingo!

Celebrity artist Damian Hirst became an arts scene darling with his dissected animals floating in formaldehyde. His latest work, “*For the Love of God*,” is on exhibition at White Cube Gallery in Mayfair, a section of London. Hirst, like Koons, expresses sincerity and altruistic ideals about his work. But he’s faking: “You kind of think it might be a gross idea, but when you look at it, it’s calm. To see something of such beauty after the end, you hope it would give people hope.” (Mind you, this is a diamond pavé skull.) Both artists deliver the same shtick when discussing their work. Many people

have difficulty discerning if Koons is sincere, naive, or manipulative. I say he’s a pitch artist, expert at foisting his product onto the consumer art market. Like Warhol, both artists mystify their work and intentionally confuse people with a hyped mixture of art, product, and merchandising. They are their own best work. They are the art objects. Their art is performance. The work itself is secondary. The product is traded on the market. It may be a sad reflection of our times that important art is about commodities, celebrity, and mass-marketing kitsch. It’s kitsch about kitsch, so it’s conceptual. It’s ironic commentary about the world we live in — a world dominated by mass-consumer-culture and marketplace.

So, maybe Warhol, Koons, and Hirst are not quite *kitschmeisters*. Kundera’s definition suggests something bled of anything considered unacceptable or offensive. Certainly these three artists’ work is, at times, disturbing. It forces us to look at grotesque, nearly nauseating aspects of mass-



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market culture. It starts a dialogue. The work is contextualized as art, not kitsch.

The term was first coined circa 1939 by Clement Greenberg in an essay entitled "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in which he viewed kitsch as a popularized, mass-market, faked form of art that is merely another product of the marketplace. According to Greenberg: "Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience ... and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money — not even their time."

Kitsch may be something that passes as art, but art reduced to aesthetic white bread. Kitsch involves copying, reproducing existing styles. When romantic pastoral landscapes popular in the 19th century were still being peddled well into the 20th century, the term kitsch was applied. The Victorian period, associated with sentimentality or melodrama, is often deemed kitsch. Art that is wholly derivative, a copy, imitative, a reproduction, is kitsch. There's a lot of it out there.

Turn on the television. In some respects all reproductions, or mass-reproduced "art," can be considered kitsch. A friend of mine, whom I'll call "DAV" (Defender of the Avant-Garde), thinks that television, just by dint of the nature of broadcasting and peddling images to consumers to sell stuff, is kitsch. DAV says the further away you move from originality, uniqueness, or the *new* in art, the closer you move toward kitsch. Kitsch repeats conventions and formulas and lacks the creative integrity or originality of art. Art is innovation. Kitsch is reproduction. Kitsch appeals to the masses.

DAV says, "Art is for the few." He thinks art is perishing because it's hawked like handbags to the masses. It's become a product, a commodity within the commercial marketplace indistinguishable from other consumer goods. Mass marketing reduces art to kitsch. This is why a lot of people

## Kitsch-O-Meter

It may be said that everything can be arrayed on a kitsch spectrum - "pure" kitsch on one end and "pure" art on the other. And that spectrum might look something like this:

mass reproduction **PURE KITSCH**-----originality & innovation **PURE ART**  
 0 - - 1 - - 2 - - 3 - - 4 - - 5 - - 6 - - 7 - - 8 - - 9

### MUSIC

Lawrence Welk  
Liberace

Herbert Von Karian  
Vladimir Horowitz

### ARCHITECTURE

McMansions  
Disney  
Dollywood

Frank Gehry  
Antoni Gaudi  
Louis Kahn  
The Acropolis  
Kew Gardens

### FINE ARTS

Hirst  
Contemporary Landscape  
paintings in manner  
of the Hudson River School  
Paintings of large  
eyed waifs by Keane  
Elvis on Velvet  
Lawn Gnomes

Koons  
Warhol

Hudson River School  
of Painting  
Lucien Freud  
portrait  
The Unicorn Tapestry  
Brancusi sculpture

### PERFORMING ARTS FILM & TV

Dream Girls  
Paris Hilton  
ZaZa Gabor  
Soap Operas

Penelope Cruz  
Meryl Streep

Babel  
The Orestia

### DECORATIVE ARTS & DESIGN

The Bombay Company  
Restoration Hardware  
Pottery Barn

Period George III Furniture  
Design Within Reach

### FASHION

The Gap

Armani

Prada

Cristian LaCroix

### LITERATURE

Danielle Steele  
Judith Krantz

William Faulkner  
Henry James

objected to the Armani exhibition that ran in 2000 at the Guggenheim. Suddenly, a temple of art was in the service of the marketplace. Other exhibitions, the Cezanne show for example, played major museums in major cities like a show-biz circuit. These “celebrity artist” marketing extravaganzas may be more about hawking product (like scarves and mugs), than the artworks themselves. It trivializes the original work. Turns it into kitsch. I feel something like indigestion every time I see a reproduction of van Gogh’s “Sunflowers.” *Some* people think Chopin’s “Nocturnes” should be banned from performances for at least 100 years before they’re irreversibly trivialized. They have become cliché.

The minute you start mass-marketing art (considering how to reach the widest possible market share), you have kitsch. It’s artistic pap. Some people call it “Disneyfication.” There are cute little towns and villages, planned and developed by Disney, that have been designed and built to resemble cute little New England towns and villages. Only problem is that most of them are in Florida. They’re fakes. Total kitsch. What’s even more amazing is that the people who design the cutsey-pie kitschy villages for Disney are called “imagineers.” Kitsch alarm!

While on the topic of architecture, I recently had a conversation with a designer and builder. He wasn’t an architect and made a point of saying architects weren’t worth the hassle. “They have a lot of cockamamie ideas that don’t work out. Nothing but trouble,” he said. My father’s an architect. He’s a lot of trouble, but it’s not because of the buildings he’s designed. I told this fellow my father was an architect — *and if looks could have killed!* I asked the builder about his house designs. Was there a particular style, or vernacular? He said “storybook style,” and I nearly burst out laughing. But he was dead serious. The problem is, just which storybook are we in? The Brothers Grimm? Is it “Rapunzel” or “Goldilocks and the Three Bears”? Kitsch.

In truth, the world is littered with storybook-style buildings. The proliferation of houses known as “McMansions” represents the apogee of kitsch. Colonnades, French doors, loggias, pergolas, cupolas, turrets, dramatic sweeping staircases — they all add up to a glitzy pastiche that’s kitsch. My father calls this style “Late Halloween.” Brainwashed by the Bauhaus and the Yale White Box school of architecture (which has become a kind of kitsch), he was further indoctrinated by Louis Kahn before striking out on his own. Kahn, like many other great architects and artists, was wary of imitative or traditional architecture, the dictates of so-called classical or academic approaches to art and culture. Innovation and originality are hallmarks of the buildings he designed. Not kitsch.

Kahn, like many other artists and intellectuals of that era, was far too close, memories of the recent past far too painful. They were wary of proclamations and pronouncements about the way things should be done. It might be important to note that when style and culture are dictated from a single source, and products and programs reflecting these ideas are mass-produced and flood the marketplace, it smacks of fascism. Both Hitler and Mussolini had very strong ideas about art, aesthetics, and design. It might be said they had complete control of a total-design concept.

Whatever the case may be, it probably pays to be wary of kitsch. My last thoughts about this topic hover around my recent correspondence with cultural critic and Warhol biographer Wayne Koestenbaum. I suggested that I was flummoxed by the term kitsch, and asked if he could illuminate the difference between kitsch and camp.

“All I know about ‘kitsch,’” he wrote, “is that whenever someone (a critic) uses the term, it’s intended as an insult, and implies a

set of values and standards unnecessarily rigid and sectarian. ‘Camp’ can be leveled kindly, as an affectionate accusation. ‘Kitsch’ is always — usually — hostile, when pronounced as judgment. I guess that both terms ... say as much about the person using them as about the artifacts judged.”

Then in another correspondence he sharpened the distinction with what is, I think, one of the most accessible definitions of kitsch I encountered.

“One other thought — kitsch is without feeling, or with false feeling. Camp contains soul, intensity, love. I’d love my home to be filled with camp objects. But I’d rather keep kitsch out of the picture. (Kitsch is tasteless. Camp is tasty?)”

So, maybe next issue we should all go to *camp* and throw in a bit-o-tack while we’re at it. ❖



PHILIP ALVARÉ specializes in writing about decorative, fine arts and design. For ten years he distinguished himself as owner of BOTANICVS Antiques & Fine Arts in Hudson, New York, a gallery of late eighteenth and nineteenth century antiques and decorative elements for the garden. His background includes film, television and print production where he earned a variety of credits including PBS, ABC, NBC and MGM-FOX.