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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE

Bad Painting and Kitsch

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Art History

by

Steven Michael Hampton

August 2011

Thesis Committee:

Dr. Patricia Morton, Chairperson  
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The Thesis of Steven Michael Hampton is approved:

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## Introduction

If a work of art can become a commodity, and if this process seems fated to occur, it is also because the commodity began [historically] by putting into work, in one way or another, the principle of art itself.<sup>1</sup>

Many painterly practices occurring after and or within the history of Modernist painting have been critical of the discipline while still pushing our awareness of the conditions, structures, and spaces that painting can occupy. Bad Painting is a particular form of critical practice that manifests what I will call a “mock meta-critique,”<sup>2</sup> operating with a determined, grandiose seriousness.

Bad Painting is to modernist painting practices what “Spinal Tap” is to the genre of heavy metal, a painterly frame of mind fanatically devout to the genre while steeped in an awareness of the utter ridiculousness/ impossibilities of the programs historically assigned to it; all of the above manifesting in practice through a radical devotion to materiality and heterogeneity. It is for the above reasons that Bad Painting’s mock meta-critique may be so elusive; however, it is one of the most important practices for coming to terms with painting within modernity, and after. Another reason that Bad Painting can be so elusive is its embrace and celebration of kitsch, one of the most notoriously ambiguous and difficult concepts in the history of Modernist and Post-modernist practice. My intention is not to recapitulate a historical overview of the spaces and period in which Bad Painting has been potent; rather, working from the scholarship produced thus far, I intend to explore a model which embraces recent scholarship on kitsch in order to understand the Bad Painting practices of today. Before surveying some practices of Bad Painting historically and in the present, in Chapter One, I will attempt to set the terms from which we understand modernist painting. Although commonly-tread ground, I would be remiss to not begin

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 162.

<sup>2</sup> I will more fully define my use of this term later in the introduction.

this discussion with Clement Greenberg. From Greenberg's model of Modernity and the place of painting within it, I will use Thomas Crow as a way to offer a counter-version of how we traditionally understand the role kitsch plays within painting. From this point, the role Bad Painting plays in the celebration of kitsch and the alternative history it offers will be clearer.

Important to this initial discussion is to understand the ways in which Bad Painting creates an unorthodox relationship to Modernity, the avant-garde, and, most importantly to this study, kitsch. It is this last term around which I will focus my discussion of Bad Painting as a practice that, through performing its mock meta-critique, makes mourning and the process of reification explicit and central. After a description of the only two exhibitions taking Bad Painting as its subject in Chapter Two, I will propose the continuation of this practice with a survey of established Bad Painters leading into a suggestion of for the continuation of the practice with young painters working today.

Before going any further, I would like to more explicitly define the term "mock-meta critique" as it relates to Bad Painting's particular relationship to the practice of painting. To clarify this idea, first consider the traditional meta-critique as a critique aimed at the competencies and functioning of a discipline, using the means of that discipline in order to do so. Jacques Derrida outlines the workings of the meta-critique when he states that "[i]t is also, at the very least, a way of taking a position, in its work of analysis, concerning the political and institutional structures that make possible and govern our practices, our competencies, our performances."<sup>3</sup> A meta-critique takes into account the conditions and structures that shape a discourse as the critical subject of the discourse under review. As a result, the meta-critique develops a hyper-awareness of the consequences, limitations, and experiences of what it is to work in that given genre; for the purpose of this paper, of course, that would be the genre of painting. For Derrida, this work begins with the recognition of the *aporia*. Derrida defines the *aporia* as

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<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), 156.



[t]he “not knowing where to go.” It had to be a matter of the nonpassage, or rather from the experience of the non-passage, the experience of what happens and is fascinating in this nonpassage, paralyzing us in this separation in a way that is not necessarily negative: before a door, a threshold, a border, a line, or simply the edge of the approach of the other as such.<sup>4</sup>

Derrida’s meta-critique of Western metaphysics applies tension to foundational binaries. By noting the dependency of one on the other for the constitution of their pairing, and, as a result, their definition, the aporetic moment is to understand, outside of the rules of standard logic, that one element follows another, only in fact because it constitutes it and comes before.<sup>5</sup>

Bad Painting aims to deconstruct the structures and conditions from which painting is created. The “mocking” aspect is added as an attempt to categorize the derisive, irreverent attitude held by many Bad Painters. It is also an understanding of the ways in which Bad Painters perform their meta-critique by mocking one of the fundamental patterns of Modernity: specifically, the integration of kitsch into “high” art (itself a nonpassage), which perpetuates Modernity’s cyclical progress. The binary of low/high in painting is also structured by an aporia. High defines the low, but is constantly dependent on it for its own constitution. Painting depends on the sublimation of this kitsch element, while being dependent on its integration.

For Derrida, themes of death and dying continually thread themselves through his discussion of the aporia, in statements such as: “here dying would be the aporia, the impossibility of being dead, the impossibility of living or rather “existing” one’s death, as well as the impossibility of existing once one is dead...”<sup>6</sup> I believe that Bad Painters struggle with and paint this aporia. As many Bad Painters are identified as being in transitional periods between styles, movements, or ventures, there is an enduring theme of mourning that which has passed before. Additionally, many Bad Painters seem keen to remain fixated on the past, focused on (what appears to them

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<sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, ed. Werner Hamacher and David E. Wellbery, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 12.

<sup>5</sup> Niall Lucy, *A Derrida Dictionary* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 1.

<sup>6</sup> *Aporias*, 73.

as) the zombie-like corpse of painting, very literally “existing one’s death”. In large part, this effect is created by prioritizing the normally secondary kitsch element. As many Bad Painters appear fixed on recycling motifs from painting’s history, the effect of many paintings is souvenir-like. The souvenir, a prosthetic or instigation to an act of remembering, is symptomatic of an urge to collect, as well as associated with an impending death (possible death of memory, death of an event, etc.).

Having discussed the meta-critique of Bad Painters, I would briefly like to turn to the “mock” aspect. To mock something (or someone) is to simultaneously be derisive, irreverent, but also able to imitate. In order to imitate or counterfeit a subject, one must study the subject intently. Bad Painters perform their specific meta-critique with this approach: their meta-critique is founded on an irreverent yet consummately studied imitation/counterfeiting of the workings of painting and its conventions. To quote Greenberg as a figure whose influence on Modernism has provoked much of the “mocking” found in Bad Painting,

Under the testing of modernism more and more of the conventions of the art of painting have shown themselves to be dispensable, unessential. By now it has been established, it would seem, that the irreducible essence of pictorial art consists in but two constitutive conventions or norms: flatness and the delimitation of flatness; and that the observance of merely these two norms is enough to create an object which can be experienced as a picture: thus a stretched or tacked up canvas already exists as a picture – though not necessarily as a successful one.<sup>7</sup>

Many Bad Painters emphasize the material flatness of their surfaces while simultaneously utilizing the paint to create representational imagery. Greenberg’s irreducible essence is mocked as abstraction becomes the language for figuration. The derisive component, following Greenberg’s statement, is that Bad Painters willfully choose the unsuccessful appearance that his definition would default them to.

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<sup>7</sup> Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 131-132.

Greenberg also stated that the essence of Modernism exists in the “use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself – not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence.”<sup>8</sup> Again, Bad Painting mocks this process. While it certainly uses the methods of the discipline in order to provide a critique, it completely subverts painting’s entrenchment historically and teleologically. In Bad Painters’ reduction of painting, we are given the ability to see painting as an operating system, while simultaneously a visual and critical experience. Bad Painters find purchase by making visible the definition and functioning of painting’s area of competence. All in all, Bad Painting mimics the forms and dictums of a period (not just Modernism) in which painting is practiced, in order to critique those functions. Further, if the meta-critique is ultimately aimed at a discipline evolving from being the subject to criticism, Bad Painting only mocks this intention in offering no corrective progress. As Bad Painting is more in tune with an a-historical wandering it only at best mocks the reason and purpose for the meta-critique. In this sense, Bad Painting is not only Modern or Post-modern, but a form of practice viable within each. That it challenges painting’s claim to social, critical, or political potency is its expression of a devout and profound attention to its means, conditions, and production.

As a closing thought, I will end with a quote from Lyotard that simultaneously captures the role Bad Painting plays, along with its meta-critique:

[...] that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies the solace of good forms, the consensus of taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 101.

<sup>9</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), 81.

## Two Shows 1978 and 2008

### Bad Painting 1978

Marcia Tucker initiates the term and study of Bad Painting with an exhibition of the same name held in 1978 at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York. In bringing to light this alternative strain of figurative painting in the 1970s, Tucker redefines how we are to think or even use the term “bad.” While the fourteen artists Tucker assembled may have displayed a lack of technical competency, or even exercised poor judgment or taste, Tucker intends to deploy the term “Bad” painting as a strategically irreverent disrespect or complete avoidance of recent and popular styles (Tucker identifies between the two by placing her “bad” in quotation marks). Tucker’s chosen artists flaunt their strategic inadequacies against a prevalent “classicizing” style, namely Minimalism and Photo-realism. Thus, while “bad” painting shares themes and techniques connected to former avant-garde movements (Expressionism or Surrealism), such as a use of non-art sources, iconoclasm, etc., what separates it out is that it is not solely a reaction to Minimalism per se. Rather, it is my argument that “bad” painting targets the evolution and mechanics of artistic progression that would seat Minimalism as *the* reigning style (the cyclical model outlined by Crow). This broader usage also creates a framework to understand the cyclical reoccurrences of the impulse to “bad” paintings throughout much of Modernity. While Tucker divides her collection of painters into roughly four groups, they find common thematic ground in their strategic use of kitsch. All artists choose subject matter too difficult, untimely, illustrative, trivial, and or decorative, to reconcile into high art through performed avant-garde methods. This is further compounded by the ways in which these motifs are integrated into the works, since the prevailing approach is a sloppy, almost arbitrary relationship between the forms/ materials and the ways in which they present and or relate content. In short, Tucker sets the foundation from which “bad” painting acts as a critical rejection of progress and artistic continuity, with far reaching implications for assessments of taste, valuation of works, and so on. While I will spend more time looking at this show specifically, my intention here has been to relate a basic outline of these

works' deviation from the norms of artistic development in Modernity, as described by Greenberg and Crow.

Outside of the exhibitions of 1978 and 2008, Bad Painting's mock meta-critique maintains historical continuity through both Modern and Post-modern practices. Bad Painting has always remained a practice critical of painting's claim to a social, critical, or political value outside the medium, even while showing deep devotion to the means and conditions of its production. Before Tucker's exhibition of 1978, Bad Painting appears predominantly as a response against established avant-garde directions for painting. As the recognizable avant-garde begins to disappear in the late 1970s, Tucker's exhibition marks a generation of Bad Painters opposing current prominent conceptual practices through their indulgence in the scoffed at practice of painting.<sup>10</sup> After Tucker's exhibition, in the 1980s and 1990s, one finds a diminished tension from which Bad Painting finds purchase. In a time where most anything may become absorbed into artistic practices, the ability to act out becomes more rare. However, finding recourse and direction through kitsch still provides fertile direction for contemporary Bad Painters, and this approach is seen in the work of artists such as John Currin or Lisa Yuskavage.

For the purposes of this paper, I will use one artist in particular as an example of how the gap between the 1978 and 2008 exhibitions is bridged. Working beginning in the late 1970s, Albert Oehlen illustrates the means by which the exhibitions, as well as Bad Painting as a practice, continue to be linked: through the common critical reflection levied against painting's ability to be potent – period. At the end of this paper, I will conclude with a short survey of Oehlen's practice in order to not only provide an example of a transitional figure between the two exhibitions, but also to offer possibilities for the continuance of Bad Painting today.

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<sup>10</sup> Bad Painting, 78.

## **Bad Painting 2008**

In 2008, thirty years after Marcia Tucker's show, "bad" painting becomes the subject of a second exhibition, this time at the MUMOK, designed as an expansion on Tucker's initial exhibition. Unlike Tucker, who identifies "bad" painting around a very specific group of artists and moment in time, the 2008 exhibition, organized by and including articles by Eva Badura-Triska and Susanne Neuberger, argues for the movement as an alternative historical trajectory. Bad Painting is looked at less as a single occurrence; rather, it is a stylistic and strategic practice painters have adopted throughout Modernity in order to criticize the medium by using a number of objectionable practices (these include, but are not limited to, kitsch, shock, and "incorrect" paint handling). However, it should be noted that these painters critiquing their own medium are also the most loyal devotees, as they never abandon the practice outright. Rather, their critique is directed against Modernist claims and ideals under which painting, as a form of practice, labored. This is most notable in the reaction against the dogmatism of the avant-garde function.

In general, this turn to Bad Painting within a painter's oeuvre is a temporary period, and seems to precipitate a radical stylistic change shaping new formative periods of production. In this sense, the 2008 exhibition presents Picabia's work of the 1920s, Magritte's departure from his signature style in his "period vache" (1948 – as a reaction against the dogmatism of Surrealism), Asger Jorn in the late 1950s with the "Modification" paintings, Georg Baselitz, Sigmar Polke, Phillip Guston (in his turn from Abstract Expressionism), etc. What is represented in all of these shifts is a reversal of the avant-garde as outlined in Crow. There is no research-and-development-like exploration that is then integrated into an emancipated, higher form of experience. Between all artists there exists a refusal to adopt the avant-garde working practice as one that integrates the low, and, in effect, the work is an aborted, faulty, or "bad" result from what "should" be produced.

It is in this sense that an alternative history may seem to emerge that is different from Modernity's ever-renewing forward-march driven by the formative role of the avant-garde. It is

also in this sense which Bad Painting in the 2008 exhibition is discussed as not a moment in Modernity's progression, but rather outside of as a meta-critique. While the exhibition of 1978 sees Bad Painting as a singular occurrence, and the more scholarly 2008 exhibition makes the argument for an alternative historical trajectory, neither discuss in length or focuses on the profoundly important role and usage of kitsch within these practices.

### **Bad Painting as I See It**

In one sense, Bad Painting can be thought of as the "reset" or "clear" button within a painter's oeuvre, affording a different autonomy to painting. Programmatic concerns of avant-garde movements become secondary, if not wholly the focus of rejection. In this sense, Bad Painting privileges a depiction of painting as an incomplete act. Traditional binaries such as form and content, or high and low, are pressured, leaving painting looking at itself, now unencumbered by extrinsic motivations. It is a pyrrhic scenario in which painters' recognition of this specific autonomy results in a view of painting "in the void." The eventual question that results is whether the object painting is capable of performing any critical act – period. While there is very little in the way of a stylistic theme shared by Bad Painters, the works seem to favor an awkward, coarse, clumsy materiality with a propensity for troubling figure-ground relationships. The emphasis on material is so great that there is an almost traumatic recognition of its own physicality. Existing, on the one hand, as the ultimate celebration of materials and materiality specific to painting, Bad Painting also displays a failure that results from the impossibility of the materials under review to perform a legitimate role. In other words, painting's form takes on a negative value, illustrating the impossibility of what a picture cannot achieve, all the while demonstrating the effort and bravura of a master technician.

From its beginnings in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Bad Painting has simultaneously trivialized and buttressed the reason and purpose for painting within the art historical canon. Rampant with

ideas of trans-historicity and appeals to an anti-teleological model in favor of lateral wanderings, Bad Painting interrupts the militaristic march of progress, transforming the enterprise of painting into a mocked meta-articulation of its assigned purpose. It is this frivolity and ability to explore through play that exposes the crisis-production that typifies the avant-garde. To this point, my interest in Bad Painting is primarily its use in articulating sporadic lapses in the avant-garde march. Bad Painting not only provides a meta-critique of its own practice, but in so doing, creates a model that allows reflection on progress and mourning through the explicit integration of kitsch.

Taking the above into consideration, I believe Bad Painting can be understood as the painter willfully (conscious or not) mocking the process of Modernity: a process in which all goes according to plan minus an exaggerated, strained, and or failed dialectic between the urban referent and high culture. In Bad Painting there is no ascension to a privileged high cultural center or reconciliation of heterogeneous sources. Instead, there is the mocking of what should take place as the recognition of its failure. In this sense, Bad Painting becomes painting willingly acknowledging its utter and complete failure to be a critical force in the social or critical arena. It is only base materials. No more demands of the medium, Bad Painting is the truth of the medium – there is no more sensible reconciliation of form and content -- only material.

Although I will touch upon a number of historical examples within my survey of Bad Painting, in order to establish the practice as an existing trajectory, my focus will settle on the *Modifications* series painted by Asger Jorn. Jorn's engagement with kitsch and Bad Painting in his writings and artistic practice exemplify the workings of an artist by which all the above considerations can be studied. At the end of this paper, I will briefly suggest Albert Oehlen as a contemporary artist practicing Bad Painting beyond the Modernist narrative, and tied to the earlier works discussed, in an effort to provide a series of questions and or considerations for the possibilities in practicing Bad Painting today.



## Chapter 1

### The Role of Kitsch in Bad Painting

#### Introduction

The way we understand the role of painting and kitsch in Modernity is very much indebted to Clement Greenberg and his writings on Modernism, the avant-garde, and kitsch. Specifically, I am referring to Greenberg's most influential (and foundational) essay on kitsch, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch."<sup>11</sup> This 1939 essay identifies the nature of Modernity as one seeking (or the site of) a condition of autonomy within and for the practice of painting, characterized by an inward turning, self-critical/ referential endeavor. This teleological model of Modernity that Greenberg constructs becomes one entirely reactive to kitsch, in which the increasing turn towards autonomy can also be seen as a retreat (or rescue) of culture from kitsch effects, objects, and influence. Greenberg distinctly defines kitsch as "ersatz culture," a cancerous entity that functions in support of the workings of capitalism, against which the masses are powerless. Kitsch is defined by Greenberg as commercial art that arises as the byproduct of the industrial revolution. Kitsch panders to the urban masses and demands nothing from them except the opportunity to assuage their voracious appetite for effortless distraction as a result of boredom. It hardly bears repeating, the illustrious and vitriolic ends to which Greenberg rallies against kitsch; however, the role it serves in his construct remains of fundamental importance. In this sense, Greenberg's relationship to Modernity is the rejection and denial of low culture forms with an adamant forward/ future-oriented march; so it is no surprise that he rejects kitsch as the art form most associated with nostalgia and preservation. "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" is a warning against the most threatening and malignant conditions (politically and socially) of which culture can fall ill (caused by of kitsch of course), and, in every respect, something "other" than culture. However, kitsch functions also in Greenberg's model as the most important motivator/ reason for the avant-garde, in that the

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<sup>11</sup> Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 3-21.

avant-garde is defined in opposition and given purpose through kitsch. In this quest to save art/ painting from kitsch, Greenberg posits the avant-garde as the instrumental artistic remedy to this condition. He defines its role as follows: "[T]he true and most important function of the avant-garde was not to 'experiment,' but to find a path along which it would be possible to keep culture *moving* in the midst of ideological confusion and violence."<sup>12</sup>

In this sense, Modernism, through the avant-garde, becomes a directional advancement (or retreat) from the threat posed by kitsch culture. The avant-garde has the role of providing alternatives to the regime created under kitsch, the goal being to find some solace from the mass production of culture and to achieve some manner of resistance in favor of a real experience. This withdrawal, and its consequence on the arts, is further described by Greenberg as the art object taking on its own conditions as the subject matter. As Greenberg states:

In turning his attention away from subject matter of common experience, the poet or artist turns it in upon the medium of his own craft. The nonrepresentational or "abstract," if it is to have aesthetic validity, cannot be arbitrary and accidental, but must stem from obedience to some worthy constraint or original.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, Greenberg's solution, in response to the unfortunate underbelly of the Industrial Revolution, is to devise an autonomous form of practice completely removed from the society which produced it. Further, Greenberg positions the avant-garde as dependent and funded through an "umbilical cord of gold"<sup>14</sup> to the elite/ moneyed class. This class funds the avant-garde to save culture or keep it moving (among other things it is odd that Greenberg would rely on the socio-economic class most benefiting from this present culture to instead radically change it). Ultimately, Greenberg describes painting, via Kant, as aspiring to a quality of being

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 8.

“disinterested.”<sup>15</sup> This is the point at which the experience of the work removes the viewer from normal life to an autonomous plane of pure cognitive being that is devoid of any of the confines of the material world. The above is a brief sketch of the reactive and escapist model of Modernity that I believe Greenberg offers. This description is not meant to discount Greenberg’s contribution, but rather to provide a starting point. With these terms and the definitions in mind, I will briefly describe the model offered by Thomas Crow.

Thomas Crow’s essay, “Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts,” provides a brilliant model that can be viewed in contrast to the workings of Modernity in Greenberg’s writing. My interest in Crow’s article is to expand on the definitions of Modernity, the avant-garde, and kitsch, in order to sketch a working model of artistic production that I feel is much more generative to understanding what happens within the production of Bad Paintings of great value. Additionally, Crow offers tools from which Bad Painting’s mock meta-critique may become articulated more clearly. Crow provides a scenario outlining the mechanics of Modernity very much in contrast to Greenberg: if Greenberg’s Modernity is an escape or removal of the art object/culture to a space separate from kitsch, then what Crow describes is much more of a dialectical exchange between the high and low that is essential to the more cyclical nature of Modernity. Ultimately, Crow’s conclusion (and definition of Modernity) is stated thus:

Mass Culture, which is just another way of saying culture under developed capitalism, displays both moments of negation and an ultimately overwhelming recuperative inertia. Modernism exists in the tension between these two opposed movements. The avant-garde, the bearer of modernism, has been successful when it has found for itself a social location where this tension is visible and can be acted on.<sup>16</sup>

Crow’s view of Modernism is one of reciprocity between the role of the avant-garde and mass culture (kitsch); however, one in which he describes (consistent with Greenberg) a historical

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<sup>15</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Kant’s Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911), 38-39. Kant defines this as a fundamental condition for the aesthetic experience.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Crow, “Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts,” in *Modernism and Modernity: The Vancouver Conference Papers*, ed. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh (Nova Scotia: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2004), 256.

asymmetry leaving the mass culture element eventually sublimated or placed in a secondary position. In all of the examples provided by Crow (Manet, Signac, Mondrian, etc.), low culture provides a prior, necessary, determining role, from which the painter gains a foothold in the experience of the Modern. However, this component (primarily social) is fleeting, as from it a retreat into concerns of pictorial technique and desire for an “emancipated/ disinterested vision” allows the painting to transcend to a high/ autonomous cultural position. In this sense the emancipation of the mass condition (politically), or initial mass cultural referent, is saved (or exorcised) by a mirrored artistic practice enacting in visual/ artistic terms this same purified/ autonomous ascension. Crow’s argument is that this withdrawal or ascension to formal autonomy is

... achieved in early modernist painting not as withdrawal into self-sufficiency, but as a mediated synthesis of possibilities derived from both the failures of existing artistic technique and a repertoire or potentially oppositional practices in the world outside. From the beginning the successes of modernism have been neither to affirm nor refuse its concrete position in the social order, but to represent that position in its contradiction, and so act out the possibility of critical consciousness in general.<sup>17</sup>

Relative to Greenberg, Crow focuses on integration as what defines the process of painterly practices in Modernity, as well as an initial dependence on, not polarization of, high and low. From this, we can understand the avant-garde as the de facto “research and development” arm of Modernity. Its role is to scout areas of the societal fringe for appropriation upwards, although ultimately retreating/ discarding used cultural goods downwards, the cycle being one of perpetual renewal. I believe Crow defines the site of Bad Painting in the quote above, where the performance of Modernity’s process, minus the final cleansing stage in which the low cultural influence does not transubstantiate, actually becomes the point of painterly meditation.

In conclusion, it is important to take a brief moment to again qualify my use of Modernism and avant-garde. Bad Painting appears to be most rampant in periods of Modernity when the avant-

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 247.

garde is extremely prevalent or in decline. While the notion of Modernity is never reducible to the idea of the avant-garde, the avant-garde does rely on Modernity in its radicalization of core themes. As a strong utopian conception of the spirit of Modernity, the avant-garde demonstrates generally “a sharp sense of militancy, praise of nonconformism, courageous precursory exploration, and, on a more general plane, confidence in the final victory of *time* and immanence over traditions that try to appear as eternal, immutable, and transcendently determined.”<sup>18</sup> I am suggesting that Bad Painting is a reaction within Modernity by painters to an inflamed moment or weakening of avant-garde attitudes. To understand kitsch as the antithesis to the avant-garde is to also understand the effectiveness and importance of it within Bad Painting practices as a strategic tool of deconstruction. Therefore, my interest is not to simply understand Bad Painting as a moment which extinguishes avant-garde movements, but rather as something that opens avenues for potential new directions. In this sense, I am interested in T.J. Clark’s reassessment of Abstract Expressionism and its comparison to European painting of the same time. His characterization of this postwar period is governed by the Americans’ “vulgarity.” Clark states:

It is an advantage to the term “vulgar,” as far as I am concerned, that discursively it points two ways – to the object itself, to some abjectness or absurdity in its very makeup, some telltale blemish, some atrociously visual quality that the object will never stop betraying however hard it tries; and to the object’s existence in a particular social world, for a set of tastes and styles of individuality that have still to be defined but are somehow *there*, in the word even before it is deployed.<sup>19</sup>

I believe Clark’s description of the vulgar is something that is a contemporary occurrence and continues in Bad Painting practices, furthering an autonomy that many Bad Painters insist upon. With this brief summarization given above of Crow and Greenberg, I certainly do no justice to the complexities of either’s argument. Ultimately, my interest here is in using these two authors as an introduction to the terminology and structures that Bad Painting practices develop from, to set the

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<sup>18</sup> Matei Calinescu, *Faces of Modernity* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1977), 95.

<sup>19</sup> T. J. Clark, “In Defense of Abstract Expressionism,” *October* 69 (Summer 1994): 28.

stage. Having defined the structures in which kitsch is commonly thought, I will now turn to a more extensive description of kitsch.

While the subject of kitsch has received critical and historical attention, there is very little written on the subject of kitsch and Bad Painting, since the literature that solely focuses on Bad Painting is limited to two exhibition catalogues.<sup>20</sup> This distinction is important, as Bad Painting does not utilize kitsch in the same way as other artistic practices that involve painting. Even though artistic movements such as Situationism, Feminism, Abject Art, and Neo-Expressionism all incorporate kitsch in different ways, there is uniqueness to the way Bad Painters employ it (however, this is not to suggest that there isn't a Bad Painter practicing in any of those other "isms"). Primarily, Bad Painters use kitsch in a way which holds a deranged devotion to painting while simultaneously leveling a devastating critique against it, in a type of fanatical agnosticism. Bad Painting is distinct from other practices of the moment, particularly in the way kitsch is employed with little to no distancing filter or irony. It is here I see the mocking aspect of its meta-critique as different because it employs parody with little to no irony. Further, within the context of Bad Painting and its meta-critique, kitsch additionally plays the part of being largely symptomatic of a more profound sense of doubt that is directed at the role of painting within Modernist projects, specifically the role of the avant-garde.

The driving engine behind much of the Bad Painting that I intend to examine is the use of kitsch. Kitsch is the most exciting, frustrating, and complex subject within much of Modernism and Post-Modernism, taking on massive significance within its relationship to avant-garde practices. Treating them as an essential piece in avant-garde formulations, I will review the works of Bad Painters who deliberately force kitsch to coexist with their own avant-garde aspirations, forms, rejections, and programs. My specific interest is how Bad Painters reveal a specific autonomy

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<sup>20</sup> The exhibitions of 1978 and 2008 will be discussed in greater detail later.

through the resulting *aporia*<sup>21</sup> created by the avant-garde/kitsch dichotomy. On the one hand, the avant-garde must seemingly advance, existing completely free of any kitsch effect or influence, while, on the other hand, kitsch stands as the necessary constitution of the avant-garde's forward march. While it is traditional to favor the privileged term, in this case the "aporetic" moment is caused by the understanding of kitsch as coming after the avant-garde, only because it in fact comes before. It is this confusion of the standard practice of logic that activates the *aporia* at the heart of Bad Painting. In many ways, this logical contradiction functions as a meta-critique of the motivations of Modernist painting. In addition, it may also constitute a point of strategic similarity in the use of a deconstructive methodology among Bad Painters.

It is here that we may locate the dedication common to each painter under discussion, which is a desire to perform painting's failure, exposing a crux central to Modernity: the issue of reconciling high and low and continuing to let them co-mingle. It is in this sense that I see the meta-critique of Bad Painting (the deliberate bracketing of the strategies of the Modernist avant-garde), the mocking present in this deliberate clashing of high and low heterogeneous cultural forms, minus the ascension required for the process to be completed. To this point, we may think of Crow's model in reference to Modernism's tension between recuperative inertia and negation. These two poles are acknowledged in Bad Painting through the recognition of Modernity's progression, put on display in two resulting forms of effect: mourning and an overt sense of reification. This particular handling of kitsch is also why I will focus on recent kitsch scholarship, as it traffics in both of these qualities. I believe these qualities are also why many scholars on the subject discuss Bad Painting as an a-historical practice: it never advances, only mocks or mimics the process of advancement, preparing the painters' more "serious" production for its next evolution. Bad Painting may be the spinning tire of Modernity, stuck in the mud of history's advance.

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<sup>21</sup> I use the term *aporia* here as consistent with Jacques Derrida's, which should be understood differently from the Greek term noting puzzlement, doubt or confusion. Derrida uses the *aporia* to point out "blind spots" in any metaphysical argument.

## Kitsch

Throughout the history of art, kitsch has been rallied against with fanatical derision. Detractors of kitsch have used such colorful condemnations such as “the element of evil in the value system of art,”<sup>22</sup> “merely another of the inexpensive ways in which totalitarian regimes seek to ingratiate themselves with their subjects,”<sup>23</sup> and “a specifically aesthetic form of lying.”<sup>24</sup> Kitsch has been primarily associated with periods and qualities of decline, decadence, antagonism, and/or playfulness.<sup>25</sup> Kitsch has also famously and consistently been allied with the softer and less serious of emotions, at best a supplemental experience favoring the beautiful, while the “high” art experience is directed towards the sublime. In many ways, kitsch has constituted a type of “other,” always tentatively hidden under the surface or directly alongside much of modern and contemporary art. My argument is not to validate the sentimental qualities of kitsch central to many arguments, but rather to understand at which junctures the qualities of kitsch have had a critical/conversational operation for painters. The prejudices against kitsch also apply to schools of practice/thought that make use of it through any method except the distancing lens of irony. It is for this reason, perhaps, that the art movement known as “Bad Painting” has received fairly little recognition in comparison to the “high” art movements that have existed before, after, and alongside it.

### Kitsch: History and Background

Although I have introduced Bad Painting as a theoretical rather than stylistic movement, it is almost impossible to ignore the consistent use, appearance, and function of its kitsch elements.

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<sup>22</sup> Gillo Dorfles, *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste* (New York: Universe Books, 1969), 42.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>24</sup> Calinescu, 229.

<sup>25</sup> “Kitsch is the contemporary form of the Gothic, Rococo, Baroque.” Frank Wedekind quoted in Matei Calinescu.



In discussing kitsch, my interest is to avoid rewriting a history that repeats its evils. My interest is to understand the aesthetic effects kitsch produces within Bad Painting. In order to do this, I will rely more on recent debates and theories of kitsch, specifically focusing on its role in discussions of mourning and reification. My goal is to provide a framework for kitsch that allows for its positive revisal, particularly as an aesthetic element of the practices of many Bad Painters.

Recognized as the essence of modernity/embodiment of the modern *Zeitgeist*, kitsch is known for exhibiting qualities of repetition, embracing a sense of the banal, all in an effort to flaunt a faux prestige and or offer a widely accessible catharsis to the plebian masses,<sup>26</sup> kitsch is also discussed as a recent phenomenon connected to the rise of a market dedicated to the rampant distribution of beauty. Matei Calinescu gives a brilliant definition of kitsch that is one I would like to stress as paramount throughout my discussion. He defines kitsch as

... the most bewildering and elusive categories of modern aesthetics. Like art itself, of which it is both an imitation and a negation, kitsch cannot be defined from a single vantage point. And again like art – or for that matter antiart – kitsch refuses to lend itself to a negative definition, because it simply has no single compelling, distinct counterconcept.<sup>27</sup>

I believe Calinescu provides the most articulate definition to date. Kitsch is a constantly evolving, deliberately porous concept, almost constantly defined in relation to the forms/cultures it is tied to. With this in mind, what follows will be an attempt to frame the ways in which I see Bad Painting use kitsch, and the history of thought that its use is reacting to. Although here I will specifically discuss kitsch as a counter-concept to the avant-garde, I will later attempt to outline its current uses among contemporary Bad Painters.

While a plethora of etymological explanations exist for the evolution of *kitsch*, it is common to accept the term as German, coming into common currency in the 1860s and 1870s. The word

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<sup>26</sup> Calinescu, 225.

<sup>27</sup> Calinescu, 232.

either evolves from the mispronunciation of the English “sketch” by art dealers and painters in Munich, or the German verb “verkitschen,” meaning “to make cheap.”<sup>28</sup> Further, regardless of the semantic point of origin, author, or definition, kitsch, implies some degree of *aesthetic inadequacy*.<sup>29</sup>

I have already pointed to the relatively recent phenomena of Bad Painting as intimately linked to Modernity. This is another point of similarity with kitsch, a specifically modern concept. According to Herman Broch, kitsch is the product of Romanticism. Broch asserts that kitsch is born from a shift in the Romantic conception of an aesthetic ideal. This described turn away from an *open* system of art (a transcendent ideal in which beauty is unattainable and absolute criteria of value) to a *finite/closed* system in which the banal is elevated to the status of that absolute. Commonly associated with the middle class taste, kitsch has been condemned by many Marxist-inspired thinkers (e.g. the Frankfurt school), who see it as a means to divert the working class from their revolutionary potential.

As much as kitsch is reviled, I believe it is difficult to conceive of the avant-garde without being able to define its position in relation to kitsch. In the context of Modernity, kitsch is none other than the aesthetic opposite of the forward guard. Clement Greenberg noted this dependency in his seminal essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch.” Greenberg stated

Where there is an avant-garde, generally we also find a rear-garde, a second new cultural phenomenon appeared in the industrial West: the thing to which the Germans gave the wonderful name of *Kitsch* ... 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.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Calinescu, 234.

<sup>29</sup> Calinescu, 236.

<sup>30</sup> Greenberg, *Art and Culture*, 9.

Many writers working with kitsch in relation to Modernist practice (my discussion of Greenberg in the intro serves as an example of this) depend on it as supplement for their own definitions of the modern. Herman Broch believed that "[k]itsch is certainly not 'bad art,' it forms its own closed system, which is lodged like a foreign body in the overall system of art, or which, if you prefer appears along side of it."<sup>31</sup> Greenberg, Broch, and others defined art against kitsch, in which an freedom through art was articulated.<sup>32</sup> According to Greenberg and Broch, the function of Modernity is a repression of the kitsch element. The danger in allowing kitsch a role is to lose the function of art in general. In many ways, this anxiety stems not only from issues of taste and the level of sentimentality, but also the quality and type of appeal (making art available for a mass audience).<sup>33</sup>

While for some authors kitsch may result in a lack of criticality in the individual art object, there is also a significant fear of the involvement of a mass audience as well. This dilemma is succinctly put by Milan Kundera:

Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: How nice to see children running on the grass! The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass! It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch. The brotherhood of man on earth will be possible only on a base of kitsch.<sup>34</sup>

Kundera repeats the obvious warning and condemnations necessary to a description of kitsch, but here also includes a more concrete model for how the audience is involved. Using the metaphor of the tear, Kundera defines in the first's being shed, the possibility for experiencing something real or authentic (we might think of this as a descriptive metaphor for the process of kitsch as also aping art). The first tear is given access to an original experience (an individual

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<sup>31</sup> Dorfler, 42.

<sup>32</sup> Greenberg is also reacting to a recent past of failed Regionalist aesthetics tied to the defunct promises of the New Deal.

<sup>33</sup> Much of this, in Greenberg's case, can be explained by his experience with the rise of Fascism and the Nazis in the 1930s.

<sup>34</sup> Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), 251.

experience), whereas the second tear is not motivated by the pleasures of the real event, but rather the experience and feeling of being moved – essentially, a faked, second-hand sensation. In his warning of the dangers of a collective/global vision, Kundera also communicates how slippery the slope is between the two, the first tear seamlessly leading into the second. Pursuing this point, Kathleen Higgins offers an insightful reading of the kitsch image as appealing “by making reference to something not depicted.” More specifically, the kitsch appeal creates, “a whole complicated structure of beliefs about the way things are, and/or desires about the way things ought to be.”<sup>35</sup> Higgins refers to these structures or beliefs as “cultural archetypes,” and makes the argument that kitsch will connect to these archetypes without care for what the reference might imply.

Implicit in the above are scenarios in which the audience or viewer is duped by kitsch. Kitsch is an omnipotent entity, either inherently, or as the result of some other exterior force exerting control through it. However, this is not the only way in which kitsch is discussed. Kitsch may also be considered a product of consumption that arises as an expression of taste from the middle class. Its birth and purpose are not a conspiratorial way of assuaging the middle class by a sinister mastermind on high; rather, kitsch, according to Calinescu, “may be viewed as a reaction against the “terror” of change and the meaninglessness of chronological time flowing from an unreal past into an equally unreal future.”<sup>36</sup> In this sense, kitsch can be understood as an experience used purposely to negotiate the unrelenting pace Modernity unleashes. It is an expression of the ills of Modernity and a collective way in which we exercise a sense of existential grief tied to the rapid disintegration of our past gone. Celeste Olalquiaga provides a view of kitsch in which the audience isn’t deprived of an authentic experience or duped, but rather, is complicit.

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<sup>35</sup> Kathleen Higgins, “Beauty and Its Kitsch Competitors,” in *Beauty Matters*, ed. Peg Zeglin Brand (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), 87-107.

<sup>36</sup> Calinescu, 248.

## Kitsch and Olalquiaga

In her writing on kitsch, Celeste Olalquiaga takes the definition of Modernity's end and the age of the Postmodern to be equivalent: the release of kitsch becomes a long, overdue phenomena, and not just a populist form of art, devoid of any political significance. Postmodernity, thus, is the long-awaited liberation of kitsch. According to Olalquiaga, "Postmodernity is kitsch: the eclectic, over-determined and ubiquitous iconography of contemporary culture is at one with this popular and polemic aesthetic."<sup>37</sup> In her discussion of kitsch, Olalquiaga points out not only the dependence of the Modern on kitsch, but the Modern as the cause of kitsch. As an element deeply indebted to techniques of mechanical reproduction, kitsch is an expression of the very industrial nature that characterizes Modernity. Olalquiaga takes this assertion one step further in her discussion of Greenberg and Broch, stating

[B]oth Broch and Greenberg practice what may be called an anti-modern thought. The two lament a substitution of a transcendental aesthetic experience for that other earthly and ephemeral one which starts with industrialization and mass reproduction, two processes which, well, just happen to characterize modernity.<sup>38</sup>

Olalquiaga deliberately pushes off of the existing scholarship developed around kitsch by emphasizing the ways in which kitsch embodies qualities of the Modern. By recognizing these qualities inherent to the Modern exemplified in kitsch, Olalquiaga flips the accusations traditionally levied against kitsch into an aesthetic to be treated objectively, if not valued. This schism is further pushed by building a polemic with Greenberg as "anti-modern." To this quality of a kitsch aesthetic and a relationship to Greenburg's legacy, Celeste Olalquiaga has stated the following:

With its extravagant overdetermination, it unintentionally succeeds in achieving a communion between form and content which the avant-garde, in its excluding and purifying zeal, could only further abstract ...[I]t is possible to see that reality is not univocal, but that it changes according to the place from whence it's being looked at.

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<sup>37</sup> Celeste Olalquiaga, "The Dark Side of Modernity's Moon," <http://www.celesteolalquiaga.com/solitude.html> (accessed Feb. 21, 2009).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

Consequently, kitsch becomes an innocent parody of univocality, proposing its own joyous clutter as a reminder (let's call it a souvenir) of reality's infinite versatility.<sup>39</sup>

Olalquiaga celebrates kitsch for its multifaceted ability to present multiple views as opposed to one. Additionally, Olalquiaga notes one final element in kitsch and the way it relates to Modernity: the recognition and awareness of a sense of loss holding onto the past in the way of the souvenir.

It is at this juncture that I believe the themes important to Bad Painting become prominent. Bad Painting, as it makes explicit the dialectical integration, or non-integration, of low into high, is constantly involved in making explicit a form of mourning and or reification - both ultimately being expressions of loss or the substitution of something lost.

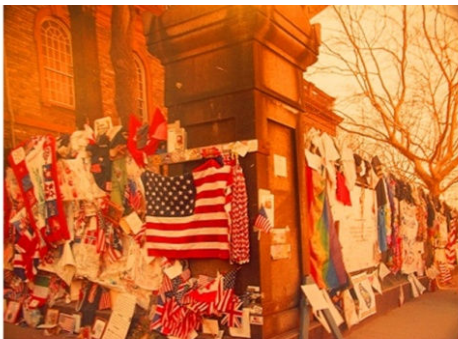


Figure 1. Photograph taken outside of Trinity Church, New York City, September 2001.



Figure 2. Memorial display inside of St. Paul's Chapel, Trinity Church, New York City.

Bad Painting articulates a form of mourning similar to the way we can today understand the contemporary/ temporary memorial. Today we see temporary memorials comprised primarily of souvenirs: stuffed animals, flowers, flags, or any other object invested in as a container for extreme sentimental value. The similarities here to Bad Painting are endless. Visually, there is a very consistent tie between the two in the way both employ a type of "heaping" aesthetic, bright vibrant colors, evocation of the personal, and use of materials which embody a rampant transience. Further, both seem to procure a similar function in occupying an exaggerated material presence in the face of an embodied absence. While the common day temporary memorial may

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

mark the death of a loved one, a national disaster, or a celebrity, Bad Painting, on the other hand, may be thought of as grieving the trauma of the low cultural referent sacrificed to the high, the surrender of the most recent artistic movement, or the epistemological trauma that is Modernity's constant progress.

By not completing the dialectic exchange between high and low (in thinking of the model defined by Crow above) there is a resulting mourning through a faux-monument effect (a deliberate resistance to move on). This effect can be explained in Bad Painting as the result of the low cultural element having not completely synthesized into the trappings of the high. The monument is what remains of this disaster/ failure. Much like the monuments shown, Bad Painting oscillates between the living and the dead in preserving or manifesting something absent through an extreme emphasis on (kitsch) materiality. Bad Painters also address the "masses," Greenberg, Kundera, and others fear with elements referencing kitsch culture and therefore more immediately accessible (illustration, pop culture, etc.). However, this is done in a way which assuages grief in the form of an aid to memory. In this sense, Bad Painting can be thought of as an exercise by the painter to meditate on history past by mourning the possibility of ever possessing it. To this point of trauma, Cathy Caruth has stated that "[t]he event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or an event."<sup>40</sup> This is consistent with how Celeste Olalquiaga describes kitsch as articulating a moment in-between or a dialectical image. The dialectical image, instead of embodying the promise of a utopian future, swaps the connection between past and present, emphasizing instead "the deteriorated conditions in which we now find the past, focusing on the current state (what is, not what was) as a source of meaning."<sup>41</sup> In one sense, kitsch, as a failed commodity, allows a meditation on its

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<sup>40</sup> Cathy Caruth, "Introduction," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1995), 4-5.

<sup>41</sup> Celeste Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom: A Treasury of the Kitsch Experience* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 27.

history, consistent with the dialectical image. The allure of the kitsch object as a commodity is its temporary, conditional access to an irretrievable past, made consistently more irretrievable by the unstoppable forward momentum of modernity, resulting in an impossible position when taking into consideration its status as a fragment of the present.



Figure 3. Philip Guston, *Monument*, 1976, Tate London.



Figure 4. Asger Jorn, *Stag Rut at the Wilder Kaiser*, 1960, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

I believe Olalquiaga's definition of melancholic kitsch theorizes precisely the way Bad Painting articulates this experience of mourning introduced above. Melancholic kitsch, as defined by Olalquiaga, is the main vehicle for the nineteenth century's expression of its existential loss. Allegory operates in melancholic kitsch by developing new narratives based on dismantling a symbol. Allegory simultaneously erases and maintains the symbol's primary meaning while allowing for these new narratives to multiply. Melancholic kitsch and allegory are, according to Olalquiaga, used during times of social breakdown, cultural transitions, and inherently connected to loss, as their signifying structure is always aimed at attempting to recover something. Contrary to the neglect of the original meaning that is consistently associated with kitsch, allegory incorporates the initial symbol found in melancholic kitsch. The accommodation of meaning has the effect of producing a permanent search. Olalquiaga attributes this search to the nineteenth century as a way to exercise fantasies of redemption. This redemption is denied to modernity because it offends its very structure. Or, in Olalquiaga's words, it is a "redemption denied to modernity because it implies a transcendence of the materiality which constitutes modernity's



being.”<sup>42</sup> This sense of melancholic kitsch connects to the profound quality of mourning evident in Bad Painting.

The desire for this connection to immediacy (which Olalquiaga defines as central to kitsch) is the result of the steady, steamrolling progress brought on under Modernity, and the accompanying sense of loss. The access to the immediate can only be transitory; therefore, the kitsch object is a failed one. In this failure, the kitsch object, through its constant struggle between retrieving a moment and simultaneously losing it, becomes a dialectical image. Melancholic kitsch/Bad Painting allows, within Modernity, the ability to exercise a complicated form of lamentation or mourning for conditions and forms of belief not allowed under the neck-breaking pace of Modernity’s progress.

On the other end of mourning and monument, Bad Painting also mocks the interchange between high and low by privileging the low culture element without distillation; in other words, treating the low as if it were the high. In this sense, the low cultural elements take on an exalted form of reification through the investment of the personal/ sentimental. The result of this is the development of a highly personalized relationship to material culture.



Figure 5. Virgin Mary Grilled Cheese Sandwich in plastic display case.



Figure 6. Julian Schnabel, *Resurrection*, 1984, Private Collection.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 130.

To provide a recent cultural form of comparison, I see this facet of Bad Painting as functioning in an incredibly consistent way to the Virgin Mary Grilled Cheese Sandwich (fig. 5), a prime recent example of the kind of effortless kitsch Greenberg would define high art against. The VMGC is an example of a found, originally worthless object, invested with an inordinate amount of meaning. It gained its significance not by a community of privileged elite, rather the low culture digital flea market of EBAY users. A product of a miraculous holy intervention during the routine composition of lunch in 1994, the sandwich would ultimately be sold by Diana Duyser (the initial chef/ owner) on Nov. 22, 2004 for \$28,000. The sandwich (as a result of the direct intervention of the Virgin Mary) has her likeness etched across its toasted surface and was preserved for over 10 years without any signs of deterioration. Of particular interest (among countless other things) is the way in which this object (a collection of banal materials: white bread, Land O' Lakes Cheese) transcends its own materiality (while still very much defined by it) through being imbued by an individual and community with almost sacred qualities similar to a relic. Duyser describes the routine act of making lunch as instead producing "shock"<sup>43</sup> when initially seeing her sandwich, removing this daily occurrence into something bordering on the sublime. Through an intense personal/ emotional investment and curatorial efforts, Duyser produces a paradoxical quality within the sandwich as both a product (a found object created by something with divine inspiration) and a work of art. As for the importance in reception as art due to this overwhelming sentimentality in the VGMC, Susanna Paasonen has stated

Sincerity implies innocence and directness, a position void of vested interests, yet a sincere position is also defined by a certain lack of analytical perspective. Whereas artists such as Serrano and Ofili inhabit the discursive space of high art where irony functions as a form of cultural superiority, Duyser has no access to a similar position of distance ...

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<sup>43</sup> Susanna Paasonen, "Virgin Mary In Grilled Cheese NOT A HOAX! LOOK & SEE: Sublime Kitsch on Ebay," in *Everyday Ebay: Culture, Collecting and Desire*, ed. Ken Hillis, Michael Petit, and Nathan Scott Epley (New York: Routledge, 2006), 206. Susanna Paasonen makes the point, through a discussion of the VMGC (Virgin Mary Grilled Cheese) sandwich and its circulation on Ebay that "... religious sentiment and consumer capitalism, kitsch and spirituality have become interpenetrable."

This dynamic of distance and proximity is explicitly connected to class and hierarchies of taste where distance is also a form of looking down upon something.<sup>44</sup>

In this sense, the changed reception of the VGMC (from lunch to quasi object of religious sublimity) comes from its kitsch-enabled ability to wear the camouflage of religion, much in the same way Bad Painting can elevate marks, signs, and otherwise unacceptable imagery through mocking the trappings of excellence in art (the avant-garde). To continue the metaphor Bad Painting presents the avant-garde's aspirations under Modernity as a grilled cheese sandwich.

The reification of the low through overt sentimentalism and melancholic kitsch are processes of the appropriation of objects evident in Bad Painting. The function common to both of these is their uncanny ability to sacrifice the original intentions of an object in order to indulge in conditional intensities of experience and memory. This process, while working to produce a longed for intensity of experience, further tortures experience by producing more fragmentary visions (melancholic), or developing fantastic relationships to material culture through personal investment. At stake is the way specific events are reconstructed as memories. Melancholic kitsch revels in memories in order to create a sympathetic experience to assuage an amputated feeling of loss, while the VGMC reconstructs "false" memories in order to maintain a resemblance of continuity with the past and history, in an ultimate effort to exorcise that same sense of loss.

### **Kitsch as an Element in Bad Painting**

I see Bad Painting as consistent with the two forms of kitsch expressed above. Through Melancholic kitsch, Bad Painting participates in the existential mourning of painting consistent with what Yve-Alain Bois termed painting's "apocalyptic myth."<sup>45</sup> Bad Painting does this by creating a type of "painting effect." This effect is a sensuous, playful, univocal collection of signs,

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<sup>44</sup> Paasonen, 212.

<sup>45</sup> Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990).

marks and references that are assembled with deliberate concern for articulating a mock meta-critique. This disconnect allows and is the function of including kitsch. The elements and practices of kitsch within Bad Painting function by “making reference to something not depicted (as stated above by Kathleen Higgins).”<sup>46</sup> In Bad Painting, there exist exhausted and vacant signs once representing the aims and motivations of avant-garde practices. Kitsch allows for the avant-garde to be present though this reference, though minus all its intentions. Therefore, the avant-garde function is absent and simultaneously present. These conditions allow for the strategic critical intervention common to most all Bad Painters.

As will be discussed, Bad Painting shows an extreme propensity for mourning or heightened moments of reification. It is in both of these that I see Bad Painting’s refusal of the dialectical integration of the low/ high culture needed by Modern practices. In this favoring of either of these extremes, there is ultimately a failure of painting (following the Modernist program). In Bad Painting, kitsch is privileged and in the foreground. No longer banished to a secondary, sublimated position, kitsch takes on an active role in a meta-critique directed at the discipline of painting under Modernity and Post-modernity. At stake in Bad Painting are the explicit ways in which artists recognize, through kitsch, the essence of Modernity as constituting a paradox, insisting on both decline and redemption simultaneously. Further, kitsch’s ability to articulate this complex form of mourning through memorializing and allegory using the language and cultural artifacts of decadence allows it to manifest a crucial aspect at the core of Modernity, or its very essence. The practitioners of Bad Painting hold painterly conversations using kitsch as a vehicle to perform a profound meta-critique on the operating systems and practices at the core of painting as a discipline in the Modernist avant-garde program.

In conclusion, Bad Painting presents the ability to understand a more dynamic model of kitsch historically, as well as in relation to Modernity and Post-Modernity. This provides a profound opportunity for the re-evaluation of kitsch as a critical tool for the present, as it is already

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<sup>46</sup> Higgins, 87-107.

integrated so seamlessly into many cultural and artistic operations. Today, we see a great deal of attention paid to the way in which kitsch allows a read or is implicit in the functioning of politics<sup>47</sup>, tourism and collective mourning, as well as the rampant reification of objects;<sup>48</sup> however, throughout the majority of literature and artistic practices using kitsch, it is still discussed through a lens of distance. Part of what I am proposing is that Bad Painting provides a reflection on not only kitsch, but also functions as a lens through which Modernist painting has incorporated it. In other words, most Bad Painting practices eliminate the appropriate amount of irony that previously caused a complete distillation of kitsch elements (this would be the VGMC Bad Painters). Additionally, Bad Painting can provide invaluable insight into the historical evolutions through which painting has integrated, distanced, or made tangible kitsch forms and effect. What I will show are the ways in which kitsch has been treated as a dynamic element from which interpretation can begin, not one from which judgment – and hence qualitative discussion – would atrophy. This is the positive role that kitsch ultimately contributes to the functioning of Bad Painting, becoming a key piece in the creation of a space from which painting can critique its diminished capacity to function (through a heightened mourning of unifying high and low, painting's vapid political and social potency, etc). Kitsch allows for the self-effacing shortcomings of painting to exist front and center by activating the moment of aporia central to its practice. Far from being the scourge of painting, kitsch becomes the motivating influence for re-evaluation and reflection.

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<sup>47</sup> Catherine A. Lugg, *Kitsch: From Education to Public Policy* (New York and London: Falmer Press, 1999).

<sup>48</sup> Paasonen, 213.

## Chapter 2

### Bad Painting: Two Exhibitions

#### 1978

Bad Painting has been the topic of only two exhibitions within the last 32 years. The first exhibition, organized by Marcia Tucker at the New Museum in New York in 1978, included a discordant, stylistically chaotic group of artists. Those included were: James Albertson, Joan Brown, Eduardo Carrillo, James Chatelain, Copley, Charles Garabedian, Robert Hendon, Joseph Hilton, Neil Jenney, Judith Linhares, P. Walter Siler, Earl Staley, Shari Urquhart, and William Wegman. Thirty years later, in response to the exhibition of 1978, the Museum Moderner Kunst (MUMOK) in Vienna continued the discourse with an exhibition and catalogue aimed at re-addressing the themes of the 1978 exhibition, as well as proposing an alternative history that “Bad” painting might offer. The title of the 2008 exhibition (and catalogue) *Bad Painting – Good Art*, was taken from a quote by Neil Jenney in a catalogue interview from the 1978 exhibition. This first historical overview of the phenomena of Bad Painting included a broader range of artists from the 1920s to the present. Included among the twenty-one artists were Francis Picabia, Asger Jorn, George Baselitz, Philip Guston, Neil Jenney, and Albert Oehlen. While the first exhibition focuses on a response through painting to Minimalism and the second to the development of Bad Painting as an alternative history in Modernism, both shows focus to define and validate Bad Painting practices in a historical context.

Although born of multiple causes, one impetus for the original 1978 exhibition arose nearly 10 years earlier: a visit by Marcia Tucker to the studio of Joan Brown in Oakland, California. It was her initial reaction to a “lack of consistency”<sup>49</sup> in Brown's work that intrigued Tucker. This “lack of

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<sup>49</sup> Marcia Tucker, *“Bad” Painting* (New York: The New Museum, 1978).

consistency” was so extreme both in style and subject matter that Tucker questioned if the works seen in Brown’s studio were even made by the same person. Tucker describes this initial encounter as ranging from elated surprise and amazement to embarrassment. Most “disconcerting”<sup>50</sup> to Tucker, having primarily worked with the Minimalist tradition on the East Coast, was the “intensely personal nature of the subject matter ... incredible juxtapositions of homely and sophisticated images, all insistent upon their own individuality.”<sup>51</sup> This schizophrenic reaction to the work would become a typical response to the paintings included in the 1978 show, and, as documented in the catalogue, this reaction is a consistent theme in many of the works themselves as well. Tucker describes her and others’ general experience of the included works as entailing initial reactions of horror, followed by pronouncements of a severe shortcoming of quality, lack of judgment on the part of the artist, all culminating in an uncanny inability to look away.

This, then, is the ironic nature of the title, “bad” painting, which, as Albertson himself said in the catalogue statement, is really “good” painting. It is the figurative work that defies, either deliberately or by virtue of disinterest, the classical canons of good taste, draftsmanship, acceptable source material, rendering, or illusionistic representation. In other words, this is work that avoids the conventions of high art, either in terms of traditional art history or very recent taste or fashion. Nevertheless, “bad” painting emerges from a tradition of iconoclasm, and its romantic and expressionistic sensibility links it with diverse past periods of culture and art history.<sup>52</sup>

Ultimately, Marcia Tucker defines Bad Painting as predominantly a phenomenon of the moment, although not without ties to history and recent artistic movements. Her opening statement explores the relationship the assembled artists may have to the avant-garde as well as connections to Romanticism, Dada, Surrealism, as well as Regionalism, in her outline of movements of particular importance (these movements are also explored for a shared Primitivism inherent to the included Bad Painters) in understanding the complex attitude driving her disjointed

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

collection of painters. Paramount as a unifying factor in her discussion, though, is the response of the painters within the exhibition to what she describes as the “classicizing style which prevailed in America for the last fifteen years,”<sup>53</sup> - namely, Minimalism. In response to Minimalism, an overarching stylistic theme of the Bad Painters in the 1978 exhibition can be understood: a dependence on an eccentric and highly personalized use of figurative imagery. In addition, all the artists reference disparate historical sources in a way that conjures a precarious sentimentality.

Digging deeper into the definition of Bad Painting then becomes more complex. In many ways, Tucker’s idea of Bad Painting flirts with proposing a definition as much as eluding definition. Factors that constitute Bad Painting are almost all the negatives of what would normally qualify as a movement within the Modernist canon. In other words, Bad Painting is a movement strongly defined by what it is not. For example, none of the artists included in this initial exhibition share any proximity geographically, and there is an extreme diversity in background, age, personality, and, perhaps most bizarrely, there is almost no stylistic connection between any of the artists shown. According to Tucker

In no way can this school or work constitute a movement. What does link the work is its iconoclasm, its challenge to the conventions of Minimalism, which have been prevalent from the late 1960’s to the present. .... Thus it is possible that the work of many of the artists in the exhibition is functioning in an avant-garde manner, i.e., breaking away from or discarding accepted conventions in favor of art that is clearly *not* art for art’s sake. Yet, the notion of progress usually associated with avant-garde ideas is in question here, given the openly nostalgic, figurative, and art-historical character of the work.<sup>54</sup>

Beyond simply being a reactionary non-movement in response to Minimalist practices, Bad Painters are further connected by a more profound interest and attitude. Tucker alludes to this complexity by characterizing the practice as multifunctional but impotent, progressive and avant-garde, simultaneously nostalgic and regressive. An isolated, exact methodology of Bad Painting isn’t reached in Tucker’s text. However, her vocabulary remains steadfast in the celebration of

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.



certain traits: deformation, distortion, antagonism, subjectivity or a clear personal point of view, and, finally, a certain and direct immediacy.

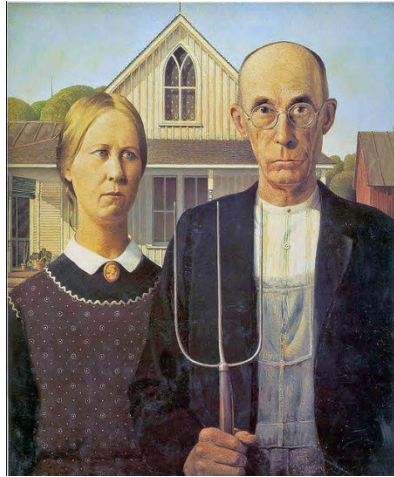


Figure 7. Grant Wood, *American Gothic*, 1930, Art Institute of Chicago.



Figure 8. John Steuart Curry, *My Mother and Father*, 1929, Private Collection.

While a critical analysis of many of the works may leave a viewer puzzled as to the connections between them, there are, in fact, many motivating factors, as well as historical precedents, that Tucker uses to gather the group together. Tucker frequently refers to a certain Primitivism or Neo-Primitivism. Additionally, in support of the quirky use of representation, Tucker regularly references 1930s practices of Regionalism. Tucker quotes Joshua Taylor's description of Regionalist painter John Steuart Curry's (1897-1946) practice as analogous to that of James Albertson, Neil Jenney, Earl Staley, and others.

Curry studied hard to leave things in their place, to retain a specific, homely sense of both physical and psychological environment, almost as a rebuke to transcendent urbanism and elegant form. The painting of his mother and father sitting in their Kansas farmhouse, dated 1929, is a careful study in formal anticlimaxes. Any potential elegance or formal adroitness is carefully undermined to suggest the humble but unique character of the objects. Painterly facility, like official rhetoric, he seemed to feel, might cause one to

doubt the truth. Curry's paintings, like a proper folk song, are sung by a carefully untrained voice.<sup>55</sup>

Tucker uses Taylor to link Bad Painting to Regionalist art, and a certain "American-ness." Tucker seems to insist on beginning again, using Regionalism as a way to develop an alternative historical thread, not ending with Minimalism.



Figure 9. James Albertson, *Sex, Violence, Religion, and the Good Life*, 1976.

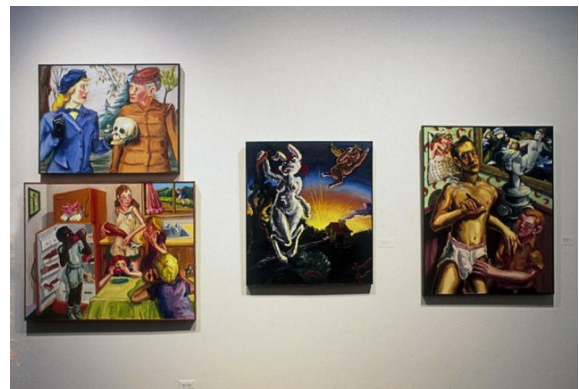


Figure 10. "Bad" Painting exhibition installation view at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York City, 1978.

For Tucker, works by James Albertson are emblematic of this Regionalist-like quality. In the painting *Sex, Violence, Religion, and the Good Life* (fig. 9), we are given a clear example of the aesthetic practices of antagonism set to the narrative of domestic, suburban America. The Albertson's painting shows a collection of five figures composed in a triangular scheme, very similar to the basic composition of a traditional religious image. The figures are grouped against the right side of the frame's edge. Separating the foreground and middle ground is a sparsely set kitchen table, around which the figures are arranged. Behind the tallest figure (apparently the mother - although the see-through negligee worn amongst the throng of children makes this reading problematic), there is a kitchen counter. Above the sink and hugging the top right corner is a window, prompting the self reflection common to the frame-within-a-frame theme. Seen through the window is a landscape (in a semi-Regionalist style) including an oversized figure

<sup>55</sup> Joshua C. Taylor, *America as Art* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1976), 238.

hoeing a field. In the bottom left corner of the image, which is also the greatest area of value contrast (hence possible first read), an African American youth is framed against the glow of a wide-open refrigerator; above him hangs a framed crucifix. While the scene may read as docile enough in basic description, what prompts a certain psychological tension is the cannibalistic fervor with which all of the participants ravenously gnaw on (what appears to be) a raw pig's legs. Adding to the discomfort of the scene is the overtly offensive depiction of racial stereotyping, as the African American child is shown in caricature holding a pork leg in front of the open fridge in a similar manner to how one holds a watermelon. The handling of materials adds to the oddity of the scene by exhibiting a certain purposeful naiveté. Albertson's marks straddle the line between a straightforward decorative impulse and an unsophisticated rendering of form. In reference to his approach to the painting's material and subject development, Albertson states

One way I do this is by expanding the painting's significance through purposeful ambiguity, references to subjects people care about (sex, death, religion ...), the use of familiar art-historical themes, and occasional quotes or borrowings from the masters and conventions of past time. *Another way I strive for vitality is by seeking to avoid the mere rendering of images by rote; ideally each brush stroke is a purposeful, unpredictable gesture. Finally I seek to reconcile both form and content in an aesthetically complete but not entirely satisfying way.*<sup>56</sup>

Albertson's painting of the most cherished domestic center, the kitchen table, functions as a forum to mock traditional American habits and values as well as art history, as everything referenced is also negated/ challenged by the kitsch context. The same may be said of Albertson's approach to painting itself. There is an irresolvable ambiguity between an emphasis on surface activity and mark and an insistence on illusionistic models and depictions of perspectival space (as mentioned prior we have an extreme emphasis on materiality with irresolvable figure ground relationships). While Albertson's painting may have some surface similarities to a Regionalist aesthetic, I believe the politically motivated, producer-centered works of an artist like Thomas Hart Benton are different from Albertson, or even Curry. What does seem

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<sup>56</sup> "Bad" Painting, 2. Italics added are mine.

to be a strong point of similarity, and central to my argument, is the dialectic of modernist influences and kitsch central to the operation of both. It is also in this sense that a history of Bad Painting (in America) could be seen to develop from Regionalism, although the two ultimately operate with dramatically different ends. Specifically, Regionalism functions as a socially-integrative model of painting<sup>57</sup> while Bad Painting primarily maintains an inward diagnostic of painting for painters (however this is not to suggest that Bad Painting is without a redefinition of the viewing public, specifically one that is more opened through kitsch). At core, what may join these two divergent practices is a model of kitsch that functions as a productive aesthetic element.

Walter Benjamin provides another position from which the works of Albertson may be appreciated. Benjamin was the first to see a political benefit to the use or acknowledgment of kitsch in the practice of art. Benjamin's work takes a radically different attitude towards kitsch, in that he does not accept the opposition upon which most other theorists rely (kitsch vs. avant-garde); rather, his work focuses more on the practice of integrating the two. While Benjamin never provides a definitive description for kitsch, he does provide a map for understanding its function. In his essay *Dream Kitsch*, Benjamin characterizes kitsch as

... the last mask of the banal, the one with which we adorn ourselves, in dream and conversation, so as to take in the energies of an outlived world of things.

What we used to call art begins at a distance of two meters from the body. But now, in kitsch, the world of things advances on the human being; it yields to his uncertain grasp and ultimately fashions its figures in his interior. The new man bears within himself the very quintessence of the old forms ...<sup>58</sup>

Kitsch does not require the austere distancing of classical works of art; instead, it allows for a more direct experience of the world. For Benjamin, kitsch offers the instantaneity of consumption/experience, and is without the distancing effect found in works of high art. With this

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<sup>57</sup> Erika Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

<sup>58</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume 2: 1927-1934*, ed. Michael Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 4-5.

advancement towards the viewer, however, the forms of kitsch still bear continuity with past forms. Far from being worthless, the experience of kitsch carries with it a history. It is in this sense perhaps that Albertson does carry forward and inhabit past Regionalist forms through stylistic quotation and the populist appeal of universal themes (family, sex, death). However the quality of Regionalism in Albertson's forms and narratives are forced to a point of complete and purposeful vacuity. Albertson employs ambiguity as a connective tissue linking form/ content, gesture/ meaning, and historical/ contemporary to hold these basic dichotomies hostage (in tension). The result is the relationship developed a new to an outlived period/ world.

Further, the ideas of kitsch often connect with Benjamin's concerns with an "awakening" from Modernity, which he views as a dream world. For Benjamin, the "awakening" is synonymous with revolutionary class consciousness. He saw mass culture as having the collective energy to provide the shock needed to allow for an awakening to take place. Benjamin believed that modern trauma, caused either by technology or warfare, breaks through the neutralizing effects of consciousness, but does so in a way that leaves no narratable tradition. In this sense, there is a poverty of experience. Simultaneously, traditional orders of the symbolic or social, such as religion or family, lose their power to provide any interpretation of desires. When these traditional authorities cease to provide interpretations, the child-like side of existence becomes atrophied and enters a deep slumber. According to Benjamin, the importance of this child-like side is, in part, the access to a collective consciousness or desire, in a time when more emphasis is put on individual reflection. We may think of Albertson, or the Bad Painters here, as also falling under a definition consistent with the above. Albertson also effects an awakening within Modernity as he counters the current narrative of Minimalism. Ultimately, the childish, personalized mark-making of Albertson appeals in a different way through always emphasizing the tactile. By highlighting action through the activity of making Albertson also demonstrates the absolute impenetrability of surface and access to tradition.

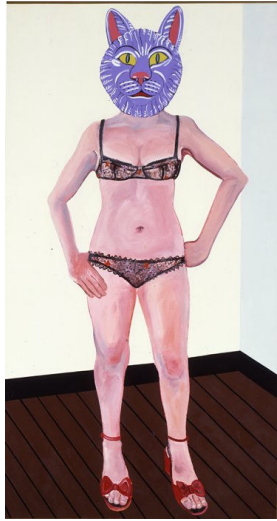


Figure 11. Joan Brown, *Woman Wearing a Mask*, 1972, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

While Joan Brown consistently provides inconsistency as thematic to her works included in the 1978 exhibition, she, like Albertson, finds affinity with Benjamin and his descriptions of kitsch. As Tucker, in her introduction, stresses the important role these artists serve in reacting against the notions of the avant-garde,<sup>59</sup> we might think of Brown's antagonistic use of kitsch as recalling Benjamin's regarding the "advancement" of kitsch on the viewer. However, in the works of Brown, kitsch does not only advance on us, we understand kitsch, through Brown, as being desired and sought out. Brown's work integrates Egyptian art, Fauvism, and Expressionism (to name just a few), all unified under the banner of a highly autobiographical bent. The inclusion of the personal allows for Brown to subvert any formal elements in her work that may also impede the participation of a viewer. Rather, in *Woman Wearing a Mask* (fig. 11), we see an image of nostalgia and the banal assembled with painterly quotations from the aforementioned styles. This image of a single, symmetrical female figure wearing only underwear, a gigantic cat mask, and large red high heels presents an extremely comic scenario dressed in Painting's history. The background and floor are painted with a broad application of large, intense color areas, while the body is very crude and direct, giving the flesh a movement and viscosity separate from either the

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<sup>59</sup> Tucker's catalogue exhibition essay for "Bad" painting opens with an acknowledgement of her reliance on defining "bad" with reference to Renato Poggioli's *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*.

negative space or head. Finally, the head, the privileged moment of any portrait, is handled instead with the more decorative/ cartoon-like mask of a purple cat face. While the viewer is granted direct access through the intense absurdity of the scene, they are also simultaneously given access to the picture and rejected by the use of materials. Brown's use of paint allows the representational space of the room and or parts of the figure to usher the viewer into a sense of illusionism as she patently rejects their ownership by instead stressing the materiality of the paint/ surface. In this work from Brown, there is a constant negotiation between surface and depth integral to the composition – the ability to retrieve a moment while constantly having to lose it. In *Woman Wearing a Mask*, it is possible to understand Brown as utilizing melancholic kitsch. Her work is a painterly indulgence into the broken-down languages of the past, all the while favoring a personal relationship to them. As these stylistic references co-mingle in the painting, they are incorporated into new narratives all structured around the comically absurd representation of the stoic female form. The moment of these styles is constantly retrieved (as we as viewers are given access) and lost (as we are rejected through the opacity of the surface and paint) as they depend on the tenuous personal relationship we must develop to the comically fragile figure which allows for their integration.



Figure 12. Neil Jenney, *Man and Machine*, 1969.

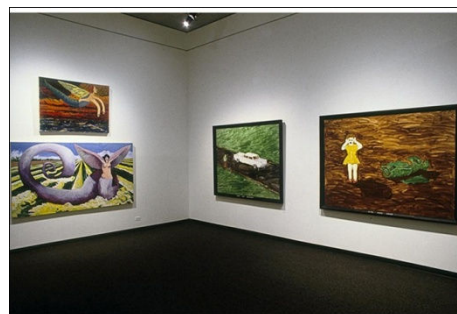


Figure 13. "Bad" Painting exhibition installation view at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York City, 1978.

The works of Neil Jenney provide an overlap and point of continuity between the two *Bad Painting* exhibitions as he is included in both. Included within the exhibition of 1978, Jenney's *Man and Machine* (fig.12) is a simple image containing a diagonal stretch of road (placed approximately center to the painting) a car and a solitary male figure. Contained in the illusionistic image is a crude color coding (green grass, white car, brown dirt road, figure a combination of green shirt and brown pants). The narrative content of the piece is primarily an emotional one. Jenney stresses the relationship between narrative pieces (figure, environment, and car) in a way that feels post-event. We sympathize with the man as contemplating the best course of action after having had his car break down, or stopping along the side of the road to take in the view. Either way, Jenney shows a deliberate reaction to the Minimalist tradition (that Tucker defines much of this show against) by making specific, concrete, emotional content co-exist with a heavy insistence on the literal. This quality is furthered by Jenney's sketch-like quality of paint application. In *Man and Machine* (a title with the literal components named) are visible pencils outlines within which Jenney brushes in uniform colors with a heavy insistence on allowing the brushwork to stay dominant. In this sense, like Albertson and Brown, there are the cues for illusionism but all ultimately balanced by a rejection of depth and insistence on materiality and surface. Jenney's brushwork appears, at best, borderline-hobbyist, yet also reinforces a specific literalism. This literal quality applied to his narrative and paint application is also what grants access to the emotive or personal. It is the low cultural referent held in deliberate separation from the high into which it should integrate. Jenney, reacting against the pure abstractness and non-referentiality of Minimalism, instead forces a wedge between high and low painting rather the tension between the two.

## 2008

The 2008 exhibition *Bad Painting – Good Art* takes Tucker's 1978 exhibition as a starting point and expands her initial concept. Susanne Neuburger and Eva Badura-Triska collaborated in an



attempt to theorize Bad Painting as an alternative thread and/ or trajectory within the discourse of Modernist painting itself. *Bad Painting – Good Art*, held at the MUMOK in Vienna, spans a much broader window of time in its development of Bad Painting than the exhibition of 1978, reaching as far back as the 1920s and including, among others, Francis Picabia, Asger Jorn, Georg Baselitz, Phillip Guston, and Albert Oehlen.

*Bad Painting – Good Art* attempts to offer an alternative history to painting's traditionally established history and selects new historical precedents. According to Susanne Neuburger, Bad Painting may find its inception within the scandal provoked by Manet's *Olympia*, which incited its viewing public to lose control. Eva Badura-Triska places the initiation of this practice as part of a more generalized process:

Ever since the demise of the golden age of the early twentieth-century avant-gardes, their various claims have repeatedly been ironized by forms of Bad Painting, most especially when these avant-gardes had become pale, feeble, and frozen; or during periods when the medium of painting found itself repudiated by these avant-gardes.<sup>60</sup>

While both authors agree that *Bad Painting* could be linked back to late nineteenth-century painting, it cannot be being pinned down to a specific period: "Bad Painting may be painting, but it is also project, action and text. It not only questions rules, but also avant-garde dictates, and speculates ahead, either successfully or unsuccessfully, attracting attention or meeting with disapproval."<sup>61</sup> Beyond the obvious, banal quality of the painting's ability to "act out," and therefore draw attention, there is a consistent recycling of painting's history. Neuburger points out that a fundamental constant among practitioners of *Bad Painting* is a trans-historical attitude.

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<sup>60</sup> Eva Badura-Triska and Susanne Neuburger, *Bad Painting: good art*. (Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, 2008), 50.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

Albert Oehlen's comment that "[b]ad painting has no foundation to build on,"<sup>62</sup> or Asger Jorn's remark that "painting is painting's favorite food,"<sup>63</sup> supports their assertion.

While the 2008 exhibition, and its surrounding scholarship, argues more for the collection of artists as representing a historical trajectory outside of more dominant narratives, it also reveals a consistent relationship of Bad Painting and kitsch. While no standardized formal approach can be identified in Bad Painting, there are formal constants in the qualities of mourning and reification manifesting as a consequence of an undigested kitsch presence. In taking this stance, Bad Painting assumes an implicit anti-classical, anti-modernist approach, utilizing kitsch, parody, humor, as well some shared formal techniques of appropriation, citation, and pastiche. With the aforementioned means, Bad Painting performs a balancing act between a complicit adherence to the avant-gardes while simultaneously distancing from them through regressive methods and/or alternative attitudes. Contemporary artist Michael Krebber asserts, in reference to Phillip Guston and Bad Painting, that "painters step backwards after opting out of the progressive (abstract) movement at the very moment in which it becomes established and academic. In this way anachronism can be revolutionary or even the very means of survival."<sup>64</sup> Thus, Bad Painting is anachronistic while simultaneously searching for an alternative, primitive origin. Georges Bataille then becomes Bad Painting's nearest theoretician, having identified the "unfolding of a work as its withdrawal."<sup>65</sup> To this point Bad Painting as a practice aspires not to exceed to something specific in the advancement of painting's history, but rather to evade the heavy insistence on "development" in search of a separate specificity. This separate specificity or autonomy may be thought of as the unfolding/ deconstruction of the practice of painting in Modernity by way of privileging kitsch.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 18.

Through the embrace of kitsch, Bad Painting can be said to work to unmask motivations of the avant-garde or Modernist ideals; however, it is not in the least limited to this pursuit. Its practitioners have a common reflection on and criticism of painting in order to uncover the futility of painting, as well as the impossibility of the expectations placed upon it. Seeing this futility in practice as a reality and limit to painting, may even be thought of as a key theme to the paintings. Most commonly this futility finds thematic expression, partly through kitsch, by way of recourse to mourning. Pursuing the quality of mourning contained within many of the Bad Paintings under discussion, Yve-Alain Bois, speaking specifically to the role of abstract painting within Modernism, suggests that it contains an “apocalyptic myth”:

Freed from all extrinsic conventions, abstract painting was meant to bring forth the pure *parousia* of its own essence, to tell the truth and thereby terminate its course ... One did not have to wait for the “last painting” of Ad Reinhardt to be aware that through its historicism (its linear concept of history) and through its essentialism (its idea that something like the essence of painting existed, veiled somehow, and waiting to be unmasked), the enterprise of abstract painting could not but understand its birth as calling for its end.<sup>66</sup>

According to Bois, a condition of Modernity – specifically, an articulation of the essence of modernist painting – is that it wants, even contains, its own death. With this in mind, it is possible to define a consistent character among suspect Bad Painters as not aesthetic, but strategic in nature. This strategy articulates through aporia the essence of painting: namely, the desire of its own death. Bad Painters find a specificity in painting’s truth, according to Bois, the conditions for its own termination. It is in this sense that Bad Painting is especially relevant as a practice that comes to articulate the crises of the avant-garde by insisting on its dissolution through embracing the unfettered kitsch element.

Phillip Guston’s works in the 2008 exhibition present the contemplation of painting’s futility by facilitating mourning effects common to many of the works discussed previously. Guston may be considered one of the first to officially reject the specifically American accomplishment of Abstract

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<sup>66</sup> Bois, 230.

Expressionism, instead lamenting the inability to paint badly.<sup>67</sup> In his turn from the official Ab-Ex style, Guston's works become autobiographical cartoony narrative depiction of figures; however, what is most interesting in this, is the proximity some of these paintings have to the aesthetics of the temporary memorial and concepts of melancholy kitsch. In his painting *Monument* (fig. 3), Guston presents a symmetrical composition of a rectangular collection of disembodied hairy legs and shoes set on a simple, slightly colored/ atmospheric ground (the banal image of the shoe was a common motif of Guston's). Compositionally, this arrangement may be considered the degenerate response to the sublimity often strived for in Rothko's compositions, which also use isolated rectangles in central areas of the frame. Guston gathers this central collection of discombobulated parts in a heaped arrangement, recalling the aesthetic of the temporary memorial discussed earlier. Taken literally, Guston's *Monument* is a collection of stacked anonymous corpses. While the compositional arrangement of the limbs and their overlaps suggest a shallow sense of depth (in addition to the atmospheric sky behind), the paint application coarsely insists on the specific, literal reality of the materials in use. Guston's *Monument* is in fact, one to a moment of past painterly trauma (perhaps the purity and idealism of Abstract Expressionism); however, it is simultaneously anonymous and only capable of grieving through the depiction of what cannot be possessed. Just as Guston laments the inability to paint badly, his *Monument* mourns through the inability to do so as well.

In his work *Resurrection* (fig. 6), Julian Schnabel presents yet another way we may think about the role of kitsch and Bad Painting. What is striking about this painting is the amount of imagery and reference present with absolutely no supporting formal hierarchy. Rather, *Resurrection* is Schnabel's best effort at a total discarding of form and symbol by completely relativizing everything shown. I would even argue here that there are shades of a Virgin Mary Grilled Cheese.

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<sup>67</sup> *Bad Painting: good art*, 98.

Schnabel's picture shows most prominently a saintly/ angelic figure rising weightless from the ground below, placed symmetrically in the composition. The painterly indication of this central figure is one lost in figure/ ground disparities, as the purple ground of the painting is also at times the shoulder area and hat of the saint. The resulting effect is one of an appearance. Just as the Virgin Mary appear as an oscillation between toasted bread and divine intervention Schnabel's figure functions in the same way. This theme is carried out in the remaining handling of the figure. For example, the torso and or dress is developed in a cluster of abstract marks, spray painting, splatters, splashes and wipes, that all also dissolve into the purple ground with just as much weight and purpose as the floating resurrected figure. The only other form existing within the composition with any explicit narrative role would seem to be the thrown/ splattered paint beneath the figure, as it looks like bird shit.

The oscillation of materials in and out of the figure/ ground relationship is also reflected in the takes content. Like the VGMC, painting is a (almost) worthless collection of base materials imbued with value far beyond what is rational. Schnabel's autobiographical scrawling attached to the icon-like composition simultaneously trivializes and buttresses it. In this sense, Schnabel's contribution to kitsch and Bad Painting may be considered in terms of what Celeste Olalquiaga has named nostalgic kitsch. Nostalgic kitsch enacts a fetishization of loss in that "[n]ostalgic kitsch is a shrunken sign: it has been reduced to its most basic and benign expression. It is a phenomenon that denies both present and past in the interest of its own cravings, the only place where this kind of kitsch can firmly locate itself."<sup>68</sup> While Schnabel may use kitsch in a different way from Philip Guston, at the core to is the consistent emphasis on mourning and /or loss.

In conclusion, as much as Bad Painting may be seen as an abnormality, it represents a necessary component in articulating the paradoxes and antinomies with the legacy of Modernism, a necessary reminder in the forward march of the need for crises. If the avant-garde is thought to be fueled by a certain crisis-production, Bad Painting is the inability of the avant-garde to mourn

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<sup>68</sup> Olalquiaga, 122.

the passing or death of its own disaster. While this section focuses more on describing the exhibitions of 1978 and 2008 with broad examples, I'll now move to a more in depth study of an artist from the 2008 exhibition, Asger Jorn. Jorn will serve as a continual example of the interactions of Bad Painting and kitsch.

### Chapter 3

#### Asger Jorn

What one calls “natural” is the released banality: generality or self-evidence without any attempt to impose on it the character of rarity. It is of importance to emphasize that the foundation of art consists precisely in the perpetual generalities, the facile and the cheap, that in fact turn out to be our dearest and most dispensable belongings.

Nowhere else does one find so many tasteless things as in Paris. That is precisely the secret why it is still the place where the inspiration of art lives on.<sup>69</sup>

The work of Asger Jorn, included in the Bad Painting exhibition of 2008, provides a compelling example the methods in which kitsch and Bad Painting co-habitate. Throughout this section, I will focus on Jorn's *Modification* paintings in an effort to more substantially engage with the works of a self proclaimed Bad Painter. In synch with the aforementioned works, I am interested in accenting the ways in which Jorn mobilizes qualities of mourning and/ or reification through kitsch, in order to offer deconstructive possibilities to painting and the project of the avant-garde. In his work, Jorn is explicitly aware of the need for kitsch as something foundational to art. It is for this reason that Asger Jorn provides a quintessential model for the practices of Bad Painting, particularly for his rich connection to avant-garde movements and his usage of kitsch. He is also an important artist within this movement as he often blatantly admitted his interest in Bad Painting and its necessary kitsch counterpart, before either of the Bad Painting exhibitions. In this sense, Asger Jorn is responsible for initiating much of the intellectual and painterly vocabulary of Bad Painting. Jorn's use of kitsch makes the viewer uncomfortably aware of this binary relationship with and dependence on kitsch by letting kitsch exceed, if not dominate, the image. Applying pressure to this binary relationship, through the emphasis on kitsch, is a consistent strategic position taken in Bad Painting.

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<sup>69</sup> Erik Steffensen, *Asger Jorn: Animator of Oil Painting*, trans. Reginald Spink (Denmark: Edition Blondall, 1995), 75.

In 1960, self-proclaimed Bad Painter Asger Jorn painted *Hirschbrunft im Wilden Kaiser* (*Stag Rut at the Wilder Kaiser*) (fig. 4). The painting is a serene view of a landscape, with a calm, streaked royal blue lake in the middle ground, tufts of foliage and yellow-green grass framing the foreground, and majestic mountains of softer, cooler hues, rising above the middle ground, leaking into the buttery sky of a setting sun. Central to the composition, and firmly planted in the foreground, is a powerful stag, its head leaning back in a grandiose roar. To the right is a smaller hind exhibiting a more passive gesture, and its gaze directed to the right and outside the immediate confines of the frame. Merged with the original painting, which was found by Jorn at a flea market, are overpainted marks that are in agreement and complicity with the underlying narrative. I would even describe the apparently random yet natural integration of these overpainted marks as dust-like. Indeed, the painterly reworking of the initial kitsch image is not outwardly a critical action. Jorn's contributed marks play with embellishing the existing composition without causing harm to the visibility of the underpainting. Jorn's marks introduce a wealth of color, texture, and virtuosity, which at times trace the movements of existing trees, and, on the far left of the canvas, culminate into an organic monument of brushwork, representing an answer to the initial gesture of the stag, changing his roar to a call of tribute, praise, or challenge. Jorn's marks enhance the image beneath as they gracefully settle into place, establishing an interaction based on a search between a source and its integration, not a rupture, violence, or crisis to the figurative elements within the pastoral scene. On the placement and integration of Jorn's reworkings, Guy Atkins believes,

To this day Jorn's overpainted pictures have not been widely understood or appreciated. Yet the best of them have a startling clarity of vision. Their impact on the viewer is increased through the double layer of imagery, which may either be brought into harmony or allowed to coexist in a state of tension. Jorn's own interest lay precisely in the complex courtship between the old and new.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Guy Atkins, *Asger Jorn, the crucial years 1954-1964: A study of Asger Jorn's artistic development from 1954 to 1964 and a catalogue of his oil painting from that period* (London: Lund Humphries, 1977), 71.



My interest in Jorn's *Bad Painting* lies primarily in this "courtship" or express state of tension. I intend to show that actualized between these two layers is a futile, yet sincere effort at mourning the irretrievability of immediacy. Jorn breathes new life into the found painting by attempting a resurrection of the pictorial concerns of a past era. Jorn's color choices, while saturating some areas, never break with the overall harmony of the existing composition, ultimately gelling into a unified pictorial statement. Thus, the image does not pander to a hierarchy, but rather collects marks, like souvenirs from the history of painting, that coalesce into something more than a collage. All marks, in their agreement with a non-privileged space, become mutually ineffective. There exists an agreement and representation of a completely impotent language, which gains potency in its ability to present the fact that non-communicability is the condition of art at the moment.

Danish painter/ essayist Asger Jorn (1914 – 1973) consistently investigated the integration and use of kitsch throughout his work. Although primarily known for his involvement with Guy Debord and the Situationist International, he was an active member of a number of avant-garde collectives. In his early education and studies between 1936 and 1942, Jorn worked with Ferdinand Leger (at which point he moved from figurative painting to abstraction) and Le Corbusier, and spent time at the Art Academy of Copenhagen. During World War II, Jorn co-founded the group *Helhesten* (hell-horse), for which he wrote the key theoretical text, "Intimate Banalities." This text claims that the future of art is kitsch, while praising amateur painting as the best art of the day. This 1939 text would set the tone for Jorn's lifetime engagement and interest in kitsch. In "Intimate Banalities," Jorn states that "[t]he great work of art is the perfect banality, and the failing of most banalities is that they are not banal enough. In such cases, the banality is

not endless in scope, depth, and consequence; it rests on dead foundations of spirituality and aesthetics."<sup>71</sup>

Jorn's early engagement with kitsch, as a necessity in understanding "great work," is clear. I am interested in Jorn's idea that banality offers access to a dead foundation of aesthetics, and I link it to Olalquiaga's melancholic kitsch. In both Jorn and Olalquiaga's melancholic kitsch, the initial kitsch element/ "perfect banality" is maintained and constantly referenced as something of a temporary intensity which also gives brief access to a recent past. Jorn's "great work of art" is more consistent with an obsessive attempt to relive the "impending loss of the present through a decayed remembrance of its mythical past."<sup>72</sup>

Between the years 1959 and 1962, Jorn produced a series of paintings named *Modifications*. These paintings were first exhibited in May of 1959 at Galerie Rive Gauche in Paris as a series of eight, and labeled by Jorn himself as "kitsch." The term *Modifications* was applied later as a designation for these works. Jorn pursued the *Modifications* until 1962, after which he returned to earlier styles. Jorn's *Modifications* consist of pictures bought at flea markets. Over these existing pictures, Jorn performed an abstract reworking of the initial existing motif. His goal was not the destruction of the original picture, but rather the "modification" of the picture.

This method of "modification" or "detournment" was an SI tactic defined as "the integration of present or past artistic production into a superior construction or milieu."<sup>73</sup> It was a practice that gave a critical foundation for Jorn's use of kitsch (as methods of detournment take recognition of objects or imagery from the cultural past in order to reinvest with a new purpose). Jorn began his *Modifications* at the height of his involvement with Guy Debord and the Situationist International.

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<sup>71</sup> Asger Jorn, "Intimate Banalities," [http://www.museumjorn.dk/en/text\\_presentation.asp?AjrDcmntId=261](http://www.museumjorn.dk/en/text_presentation.asp?AjrDcmntId=261) (accessed Feb. 1, 2009).

<sup>72</sup> Olalquiaga, 126.

<sup>73</sup> Claire Gilman, "Asger Jorn's Avant-Garde Archives," *October* 79 (Winter 1997): 38.

Detournement was as a tool for combating what the SI referred to as “the spectacle.”<sup>74</sup> The SI aspired to reinvent the conditions under capitalism in order to return to them the qualities of a human presence and without the mediating factor of spectacle. Guy Debord, leader of the SI, analyzed capitalist society and the use of art to counter the effects of the spectacle. *Detournement* was defined as the method of changing or modifying either the context or nature of an existing cultural object so that it acquires a new and higher significance.<sup>75</sup> It would become one of the SI’s key methods of critical subversion to counter capitalist alienation. The restoration of authentic human meaning would be attempted, through detournement, by the re-use of existing cultural elements (kitsch).

Jorn’s *Modification* paintings are detourned works. Detournement does not destroy prior forms of art, but strives usurp the prior work intact, as an artifact or souvenir, affirmed as an embodiment of a specific cultural moment. Jorn famously disliked avant-gardism with its implications of “leadership, coteries, fashions, and commercial exploitation,”<sup>76</sup> but he maintained a continuing and profound interest in experimentation. Jorn’s experimental methods served primarily as an avenue for self-renewal, but always eluded the traditional avant-garde emphasis on innovation and invention. Guy Atkins has described Jorn’s curious relationship to experimentation:

Jorn considered himself in later years to be a traditionalist. As such he felt free to use discoveries of others who were working within “the tradition of the new.” This is why he had no compunction about publishing open-shutter photographs of gestural drawings (following Picasso) or “disfigurations” of portraits (long after Duchamp and others) ...<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> The SI defined the spectacle as creating an inescapably immersive culture of alienation, robbing those under its sway of “actual” experiences, and instead, replacing those “actual” experiences with replayed ones. The SI believed that, through the spectacle, everything in our lives had already been turned into a commodity.

<sup>75</sup> Ralph Rumney, “Asger Jorn,” *Art Monthly* 9 (July/August 1977), 19.

<sup>76</sup> Atkins, 73.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

Jorn's *Modification* paintings detourn kitsch elements into the language of abstraction, and express a lost ability to communicate through art (specifically, painting). He implies that there is presently no language through which effective communication is possible. From this point, we can see the genesis of Jorn's ability to create a meta-critique of painting as a whole. In "Detourned Painting," Jorn writes:

Be modern, collectors, museums. If you have old paintings, do not despair. Retain your memories but detourn them so that they correspond with your era. Why reject the old if one can modernize it with a few strokes of the brush? This casts a bit of contemporaneity on your old culture. Be up to date, and distinguished at the same time. Painting is over. You might as well finish it off. Detourn. Long live painting.<sup>78</sup>

In his *Modifications*, Jorn exercises fantasies of redemption denied by Modernity. Through memorializing painting, Jorn's *Modifications* attempt to counteract a loss while maintaining an adamant vigilance in the continued practice of remembering.

Asger Jorn's detourned paintings take on special significance to Bad Painting in the way kitsch fuels the organization and presentation of his painterly motifs. Jorn's marks diverge from a typical modernist practice, resulting in the fracture and fragmentation of imagery and or primary source materials. In Jorn's case, the received gestures on the underlying image, and on the secondary layer on top, reference avant-garde procedures, but only function as effect.

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<sup>78</sup> Asger Jorn, "Detourned Painting," <http://www.notbored.org/detourned-painting.html> (accessed Feb. 1, 2009).



Figure 14 . Asger Jorn, *A Walk in the Park*, 1959.

In the 1959 painting *A Walk in the Park* (fig. 14), Jorn populates the found image of scenic park with abstract cartoon figures. As in other *Modifications* of this time, Jorn allows for the palette of the found image to guide the continuity and agreement of his additions. In total, six figures crowd the foreground space of the one-point perspective view. One figure resides in each corner, delineated with stark black lines. The black brush lines coerce the more formless scrapes, strokes, and swaths of color into a range of bipedal animal grotesqueries. Additionally, the black lines appear to have a double function. On the surface they delineate and resolve Jorn's initial marks as semi figurative. This in turn causes for an abruptness in paint handling not found in the source image. However, the separation also has the counter-effect of presenting these add-ons as spatial entities with a physical, dimensional presence with the park space. As they are all cropped by the frame, they are given an impromptu naturalized position, not unlike some of Degas's compositions. Central to the image is the most recognizable figure with two arms, two legs, and a face very much resembling that of a frog. His or her large eyes are reminiscent of a puppy's, and force a narrative read to assume a more sentimental relationship to the figure. In this particular image, Jorn appears to populate the found scene with character sympathetic to the initial sentimental scene. As the formal elements oscillate in *A Walk in the park* what remains

primary is this tension between the inability to resolve either read. Consequently we are given over to mourning either possibility as the only element reliably left to the viewer is the physical presence of the marks made and the surface extracted from low culture. Ultimately, Jorn's marks hang on this found surface not unlike a common temporary memorial from the present, souvenirs and marks of sentiment memorializing an inability to access the past.



Figure 15 . Asger Jorn, *The Disquieting Duck*, 1959.

In 1959, Jorn painted *The Disquieting Duck* (fig.15), a small *Modification*. The found image used by Jorn is of a quaint view of a cottage in the country. The initial paint handling is naïve in its use of linear perspective and heavily reliant on a repetitive stippling technique for the description of foliage and natural textures. The composition is weighted to the left side with the large foreground shape of a large tree. In addition, there is a cottage in the warmer-hued middle-ground, slightly to the right of the tree and almost hugging the bottom of the frame. If these elements occupy the left side of the composition, Jorn's contribution is dominant on the right side. Like the title, Jorn has painted a large, Godzilla-like rubber ducky (a brilliant kitsch icon), arising from what appears to be a lake in the lower right-hand corner of the painting. The duck rises in a gestural swirl of intense color and stroke, challenging and superseding the cottage a focal point to

the composition. The duck is primarily disquieting in scale, towering over the cottage and large trees in the otherwise serene view. As may be expected though, the duck does not seem to threaten the cottage or landscape with the damage and chaos one might expect from a three-story, blue-eyed, mohawk-wearing, mega fowl. Rather, the duck appears somewhat agreeable, if not stoic, and teeters on the point of harmonizing with the image, as its colors never break with the underlying palette Jorn is modifying. While most of Jorn's coloristic additions are more saturated, he does not introduce hues not already found in the composition. This is not a destructive painterly act, but rather an integration and extension of the existing palette. Further, what may even be more disquieting to some, is that collectively the shape and visual weight of the duck becomes a compositional element that creates balance within the image. The image is born anew as it attains a new harmony in the size and compositional relationship between the tree, duck, and house. In *The Disquieting Duck*, Jorn's dust-like collections of painterly marks settle into an idyllic scene as an act of reconciliation just as much as they appear alien. What we are left to experience is the tension or resulting impossibility of their juxtaposition.

Instead of a collage-like rupturing signaling an advance from a received form, Jorn's mark keeps the found mark intact, as a souvenir. Jorn's method of using kitsch is the antithesis of avant-garde methods that deliberately rupture with the past. By using existing painterly maneuvers, Jorn is able to present something not depicted. Jorn's detoured paintings share much with Olalquiaga's description of melancholic kitsch. Jorn avoids the feeling of comfort generally associated with the communal sublimation of events. The viewer does not experience Jorn's *Modifications* as a positive, collective affirmation of faith in the Modernist project. In this sense, Jorn sidesteps one of the primary roles of kitsch by diverting viewers from a universal emotion and/ or response. This unified sentiment, ostensibly shared by all of mankind, is prevented by Jorn's painterly additions. Jorn's work participates in the narrative of Bad Painting. As demonstrated in the *Modifications* series, Jorn makes problematic the modernist insistence on ideas of the unique and or authentic, being more comfortable in the role of the collector. By

associating contemporary marks of abstraction, Jorn's *Modifications* collectively become images that lament/mourn through blurring the distinction between the past and present.



Figure 16 . Asger Jorn, *The Avant-Garde Doesn't Give Up*, 1962.

In 1962, Jorn painted *The Avant-Garde Doesn't Give Up* (fig. 16), a *modification* of a found painting of a young girl. The subject matter, a young girl or child, is a common kitsch motif. Jorn has added a mustache and beard drawn on the face of the young girl, and haphazard scribbling in white on areas of the background. This work is a painterly digestion of Duchamp's famous defaced Mona Lisa in *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919). Jorn's painting can be viewed in a number of different ways: an act of vandalism meant to inspire questions about our reception to works of art, an act of negation, or, a reference to Duchamp. Claire Gilman gives an interpretation of Jorn's relation to Duchamp as not a mutilation, but rather "unmanipulated appropriation."<sup>79</sup> Jorn's use of Duchamp usurps Duchamp's act of negation. Appropriated by Jorn is the "act of Duchamp" synonymous

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<sup>79</sup> Gilman, 34.



with an avant-garde defacement. Pairing this, through his appropriation with a kitsch picture, forces the avant-garde and kitsch to cohabitate the same viewing space. According to Gilman, this experience doesn't inspire an irreverent sense of comedy (as Duchamp's image does) but rather a profound sense of embarrassment. This embarrassment is not only for us as viewers, but also for Jorn. The embarrassment may be a result of the "parodic-serious" stage discussed above. This indifference towards a forgotten original and simultaneous longing for an experience of sublimity is consistent with the operations of melancholic kitsch previously described. Jorn appropriates the history of painting not in order to negate and push forward, but to languish in the one as a meditation on the present. Jorn's painterly act allows for a re-emergence of the past in juxtaposition to the banality of the present in order to establish a tension. He doesn't anticipate in advance, but rather looks back while stumbling forward.

This element of embarrassment marks the most dramatic difference between the paintings of Duchamp and Jorn. The viewers of Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.* are placed in a comfortable relationship to avant-garde painting as parody, favoring a degree of critical, ironic, and intellectual distance. Duchamp's gesture dramatically and visibly alters the photo-reproduction of the Mona Lisa. In *The Avant-Garde Doesn't Give Up*, Jorn's marks have a unifying quality (this sense of unity is felt in Jorn's title choice as well, although, it is one of forced insistence, or tradition). The obvious brush strokes, while making noticeable changes, have the feel of suspension, not so different from the effect of a snow-globe. Jorn's gestures result in a flurry of movement, allowing for a brief melancholic participation with a forgotten tragedy, with a quick return to the present. Jorn's marks enter and participate with the surface instead of causing a violent fragmentation or rupture. It must be, then, that Jorn's straying from the past of, ironic distance is the cause of our embarrassment.

Jorn used kitsch for its productive aesthetic potential. His use of kitsch produced a critique of Modernist ideals specifically tied to the development and work of the avant-garde, and, consequently, a reflection on the futility of painting. He vacated the purported claims and

functions of avant-garde practices of their meaning, and willfully acknowledged the insurmountable expectations attached to the practice of painting. As Jorn acknowledged,

Anyone who tries to fight against the production of these bright, appealing, carefully executed pictures is an enemy of the best contemporary art. [...] The lakes in the forests and those roaring stags in golden, decorative frames hanging by the thousands in living-rooms on walls with patterned wallpaper are among the most profound products of artistic inspiration. It is always a little tiring to see people setting about sawing through the branch on which they are sitting.<sup>80</sup>

Jorn viewed painting as a futile practice that brackets its reality and establishes its limits. This is not to suggest that Jorn's works yearn for painting's death, or that Jorn introduced kitsch in order to revel in irony or deliberately mock the practice of painting. It is also not the case that Jorn employed "end game" strategies by bringing conclusion or an ultimate finalization of painting as a discipline. Instead, Jorn explored the sense of the futility or doubt connected to painting as its most intense and genuine trait, placing Jorn firmly in the sub-genre of Bad Painters.

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<sup>80</sup> Asger Jorn, "Intimate Banalities," [http://www.museumjorn.dk/en/text\\_presentation.asp?AjrDcmntId=261](http://www.museumjorn.dk/en/text_presentation.asp?AjrDcmntId=261) (accessed Feb. 1, 2009).

## Chapter 4

### Bad Painting Today

Having worked through some examples centered on the relationships between kitsch and Bad Painting, there are still lingering questions about the continued efficacy of this practice. In other words, can a (non-) movement, dedicated to the amputated quality of history and tradition within the Modernist canon, itself evolve? Additionally, does Bad Painting signal a transition into a Post-Modern sensibility or aesthetic? Or, does it only find critical purchase within a purely Modernist project? Is it possible to consider Bad Painting as the ultimate realization of the Modernist project, through its ability to elicit qualities that reside at the very core of Modernism? Or, is Bad Painting more tied to periods of transition, loss, and crisis, than something strictly and historically specific to the rethinking of Modernist legacies? What then explains such striking similarity in execution of Bad Painting strategies across such disparate cultures and periods? Is it a stance reserved only for painting? Can one be a Bad Sculptor? I believe that regardless of the specific answers to the above questions, the continuing value in Bad Painting practices, is their ability to formulate questions. This possibility of questioning painting as a critical object is the legacy of Bad Painting, with one small difference. Bad Painting of the past attempted to collapse meaning and faith in avant-garde pursuits. With that project largely trivialized and the role of the avant-garde more sidelined today, the role of the Bad Painter today is to work on rebuilding faith in meaning – and simultaneously the medium of painting – through questioning the ability to do so. I believe, therefore in this sense there may be a specifically important role for Bad Painting to play in recent thinking about our present as being part of the Hypermodern.

Albert Oehlen's practice stands as one compelling example of the continuing relevance of Bad Painting in the present. Oehlen is aware of this legacy and his place within it, naming his first

major exhibition in the UK, "I Will Always Champion Bad Painting."<sup>81</sup> Long before this exhibition, however, Oehlen frequently used a deconstructive approach. His close association to Martin Kippenberger and Werner Buttner, beginning in the 1980s with the joint exhibition *Warheit ist Arbeit* (Truth is Work, 1984), resulted in a co-authored text as part of the exhibition catalogue. The text includes a critical rejection of all models of "truth" and "failure," and posits the productive use of failure as the only viable option for art. As Oehlen has said, "Because we now refuse to deny the direct dependence and responsibility of art —via reality, and on the other hand see no chance for art as we know it to have an effect there is only one possibility left: failure."<sup>82</sup> In a manner similar to many earlier Bad Painters, Oehlen is especially attentive to slippery areas in the constitution of pictorial space, specifically in regards to figure/ground relationships and the use of color. Oehlen allows his spatial models to fracture, such as in his *Untitled* pictures, which include mirrors embedded within the layers of paint, and his more recent works incorporating digitally rendered perspective-based grounds containing flattening abstract marks layered on top, shown in paintings such as *Bild und Auge*. These areas are exploited and overloaded as potential sites for the collapse of meaning and implosion within the space of the painting. For Oehlen, the areas of greatest failure in the picture become points of consistent exposure; however, this is not to critically deconstruct in a negative sense. Rather, Oehlen believes this establishes a new autonomy within painting, stating: "In the last few years I have been particularly concerned with evidence – with not seeing anything in the painting other than what is actually there. Nothing is codified – a mess is just a mess."<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> This exhibition held at the Arnolfini Gallery from September to November of 2006 was sister to another exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery a few months earlier titled "I Will Always Champion Good Painting."

<sup>82</sup> Werner Buttner, Martin Kippenberger, and Albert Oehlen, *Warheit ist Arbeit*, exhibition catalogue, Folkwang Museum, Essen, 1984.

<sup>83</sup> Albert Oehlen, interview by Diedrich Diederichsen, "The rules of the game," *Artforum*, November 1994, 71.



Figure 17 . Albert Oehlen, *Peon*, 1996, The Saatchi Gallery.

In *Peon* (fig. 17), Oehlen demonstrates a frenetic ability to make a sensible composition from visual glut. Heterogeneous marks, decorative patterns, and styles overlap and overlay, the only relationship between them being that they share the same space of the painting. However, the fact that these elements are only unified through the painting is also what causes their dissolution. Colors clash, harmonize, form depths and immediately flatten, again showing inconsistency as the work's only consistent feature. The paint application in *Peon* seems to also be a catalogue of a myriad of textures with scumbles, sprays, and scrapes on the one hand, and decorative and precise outlining and curves on the other. Oehlen's process becomes the mourning/ memorializing of painting via Guston and/ or Jorn on speed. *Peon* is Oehlen's painterly demonstration of thinking that structures itself by shifting. Ultimately, the excess and overabundance of sign gives credence to painting as what is most rightfully its own, the place from which any number of heterogeneous thoughts, signs, marks, and models can be bridged, ordered, dissembled, etc. *Peon* is Oehlen's monument to hysteria of meaning.

Oehlen's definition of autonomy champions awkward materiality as a way of establishing a basic literal quality to the painting. However, what type of autonomy specifically should we see in Oehlen's Bad Painting? Further, how is it at all possible that an individual autonomy could ever arise as what appears to be an unbridled impulse to kitsch? Albert Oehlen presents the question today as to what type of Bad Painting (if any) we see, and whether Bad Painting is truly dependent on the tradition of Modernism as a component part in its refinement. Friedrich Petzel has observed that Oehlen's focus on the productivity of painting's failure has left open another discursive field, a field in which the question is posed as to whether painting has the capacity to produce a critique at all.

Oehlen's paintings are, instead, a type of complex research into the conditions of symbolic agreement. For him, painting's relationship to its own critique raises the question of whether painting can offer competent solutions that can be aesthetically formalized, or made operative as historically progressive forces. Accordingly, a confrontation must take place within the artistic conventions of painting as a medium of expression in order to articulate the break with the false promise inherent to criticism.<sup>84</sup>

Consistent with Petzel's description, Oehlen's paintings are an exercise in forced oppositions. The contradictions that are exposed remain as such and become part of the image. With this in mind, the only remaining quality left is the form the paint takes: form stripped becomes a motif in support of only what the painting cannot achieve. I would like to suggest that this acceleration of Bad Painting and kitsch within the work of Oehlen may be an example of a hypermodernist abstraction.

Hypermodernity is defined as a society characterized by "movement, fluidity and flexibility, detached as never before from the great structuring principles of modernity, which have been forced to adapt to the rhythm of hypermodernity so as not to disappear."<sup>85</sup> If Modernity championed change through negotiating history and focused on sustaining master narratives,

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<sup>84</sup> Friedrich Petzel, "Psycho Sludge," in *Oehlen Williams 95*, ed. Catherine Gudis (Columbus: The Ohio State University, Wexner Center for the Arts, 1995), 144.

<sup>85</sup> Gilles Lipovetsky, *Hypermodern Times*, trans. Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 11.

Hypermodernity posits history as an unreliable guide and isn't concerned with truth value as much as overabundance of source material and information. If Postmodernity relativizes the past and present by integrating signs and values from both, the hypermodern is more committed to reason in navigating the white noise of information within the cultural landscape. Further, according to Gilles Lipovetsky, the governing logic of the hypermodern is fashion.

Under the reign of total fashion, the mind is less firmly made up than before, but more receptive to criticism; it is less stable but more tolerant, less sure of itself but more open to difference, more receptive to evidence and to the arguments of others. To identify consummate fashion with an unparalleled process of standardization and depersonalization is to take a superficial view; in reality, consummate fashion is the driving force behind a more insistent questioning, a multiplication of subjective viewpoints, a decrease in the similarity of small personal viewpoints.<sup>86</sup>

Lipovetsky's description of the role of fashion has a number of parallels to that of Olalquiaga's aforementioned descriptions of the reign of kitsch. Kitsch, and the rose of allegory central to it, is a multifaceted experience able to rationalize and integrate a cacophony of views, a form of navigating through the clutter of history and the present. Here lies a consistency between hypermodernity and kitsch: a permanent recycling of the past by individuals, in turn promoting a type of personal autonomy through the exercise of choice. The hypermodern individual is described by Sebastien Charles as "both better informed and more destructured, more adult and more unstable, less ideological and more in thrall to changing fashions, more open and more easy to influence, more critical and more superficial, more skeptical and less profound."<sup>87</sup>

It is at this intersection that Oehlen may stand as an interesting figure in support of a relationship between Bad Painting and a thinking of a hypermodern practice. In privileging art as the site of failure, seeing painting as mess, and the research project into symbolic agreement, minus the ability for painting to function critically (described by Petzel), a hypermodern sensibility is evident in this self-professed Bad Painter. Further, Albert Oehlen, the personality, seems

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 15-16.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. 12.

consistent with the above description of the hypermodern individual. While painting, his principle function is to compose elements as an autonomous individual discerning and rationalizing excess information into superficial aesthetic configurations.

In *DJ Techno* (fig. 18), a mixed media painting that includes digital prints, photography, and oils, Oehlen performs painting's failure under the banner of the hypermodern. Further, the title is crucial in understanding Oehlen's role as painter. Oehlen's position in front of the painting is no longer the original author, nor even the one working to deconstruct established "truths;" rather, he is a DJ. The DJ (or Chef) seems the most appropriate metaphor for the function of the painter as his responsibility is the customization/ personalization of the materials, ingredients, and information which exists like a whirlwind around him. This work, like *Peon*, presents a compositional mish-mash of all manner of mark, style, media, and reference. The composition and included ingredients almost defy description in their randomness. However, all elements do seem to revolve spatially around a yellow mask emitting a purple scream in the upper left corner. The title and pop symbols smashed together simultaneously seem to point to sensations in excess of the purely visual.



Figure 18 . Albert Oehlen, *DJ Techno*, 2001, The Saatchi Gallery.



Oehlen's insistence that painting capitulate to its own failure links him, through kitsch, to Bad Painting of the past. This failure is shown in a form of mourning common to the monuments of Guston and Jorn. Like Jorn's, Oehlen's work functions as a means of reducing painting to a nominal state from which it can step back and assert a sense of autonomy specific to it. However, as Guston and Jorn mourned the past and tradition as something which evaded the present and prepared for a future evolution, Oehlen's relationship to the present is markedly different. Through recourse to kitsch, mourning tradition and its disintegration may no longer serve to emancipate the painter; rather the dissolving of tradition is presented in Oehlen's works as a source of tension. For Oehlen, this tension results in a hyper-frenetic monument mourning of the past and its dissolution into the present; however, not without a sense of fear and anxiety that is not common to Bad Painting of the past. Albert Oehlen's work is evidence that, although its future may be unclear, Bad Painting will continue to thread its way through the machinations of current painting practices, attempting to assert the possibilities within painting for critical reflection.

While I am still not suggesting that Bad Painting and Hypermodernity are one in the same, my goal has been to offer potential solutions from which Bad Painting, and specifically the role of kitsch within, may offer for understanding the present. While a much more extended period of research would be needed in order to sustain the relationships mentioned between Bad Painting and the Hypermodern, the aforementioned is a brief foray into the possibilities for continual study.

## Conclusion

Marcia Tucker's 1978 essay defines Bad Painting as a practice that exhibits multiple aspects of a formal equation, problem, or polemic. The tension inherent in problems of form and content, or kitsch and privileged models of viewing, however, does not arrive at a resolution and develop a progressive avant-garde advancement, but rather relishes in the *aporia*. The practitioners of Bad Painting (in Tucker's version), while reacting to Minimalism, exhibit tendencies generally familiar to avant-garde movements of the past, also performing a meta-critique of the functioning of the avant-garde proper. This short-circuiting of the avant-garde function is what makes the movement of Bad Painting stand out as unique for its redefined notions of progress and its productive spin on the usage of kitsch.

Kitsch is an attempt to relive a sense of immediacy through objects. Olalquiaga attributes the desire for this connection to immediacy disconnected sensation of loss created as a result of the steady, steamrolling progress brought on under modernity. The access to the immediate can only be transitory; therefore, the kitsch object is a failed one. In this failure, the kitsch object constantly struggles between retrieving a moment and simultaneously losing it. Olalquiaga's definitions of both nostalgic and melancholic kitsch allow modernity to exercise a complicated form of lamentation or mourning for conditions and forms of practice not allowed under the neck break pace of modernity's progress. Nostalgic and melancholic kitsch are processes of the appropriation of objects, which sacrifice the original intentions of an object to indulge in conditional intensities of experience and memory. This process, while an effort to produce a longed for intensity of experience, further tortures experience by producing more fragmentary visions (melancholic). In evolving from fragmentary effects of melancholic kitsch, nostalgic kitsch selects its own continuity based off of on a sampling of an objects past, in effect producing a perfect memory of something that never existed. At stake is the way specific events are reconstructed as memories. Melancholic kitsch revels in memories in order to create a sympathetic experience to assuage an amputated feeling of loss, while nostalgic kitsch

reconstructs false memories in order to maintain a resemblance of continuity with the past and history, in an ultimate effort to exorcise that same sense of loss.

In adapting artworks already in existence, Jorn's *Modifications* establish a number of themes consistent with Bad Painting. Specifically, these images demonstrate a rejection of "correctness," an indifference towards a teleological advancement of practice, a blatant indifference for avant-garde techniques and practices, and inclusion, and not sublimation, of kitsch. Through melancholic kitsch, the *Modifications* perform a mourning connected to practices of Bad Painting, without sublimating the feeling of loss common to the kitsch experience. The kitsch element in Jorn's work is usurped and incorporated. Consistent with Olalquaiga's theory, this search also manifests "fantasies of redemption" offensive to a reading of Modernist painting. Not only is the physical object appropriated by Jorn, redeemed and renewed, but so is the viewer's relationship to a sense of immediacy to past cultural forms. Caught between retrieving a moment and losing it (embodied in the impossible task of contemporizing the flea market picture with a flurry of marks), Jorn's work is a productive failure capable of performing a meta-critique of many of the follies of the Modern and the avant-garde.

Olalquiaga's melancholic kitsch provides a framework for how Jorn's archiving articulates a paradox within Modernity, also exploited by Bad Painting. Unlike nostalgic kitsch, which mutilates any inherited meaning, melancholic kitsch maintains original meaning through the process of allegory. The attempt to recover something lost through a proliferation of meaning creates a permanent search, through which Bad Painting is articulated. This allegorical exercise (which in and of itself is an expression of loss and the impossibility of recovering) articulates the utopian aspirations of modernist painting practice, bracketed by the language of its failure. Jorn's work embodies a fixation on the need to continually experience the loss of the present by sifting through the detritus of the heroic past. For example, a redemption fantasy is played across the painterly surfaces of *The Avant-Garde Doesn't Give Up*, a moment constantly in flux, coaxed back and forth between a recalled immediacy and a melancholy mourning. Jorn's use of kitsch

attempts at articulating a remembrance for a relationship to history that is no longer possible under the conditions of Modernity. Melancholic kitsch provides a cognitive process, which revels in memories in order to create a sympathetic experience to its unanchored, disconnected feeling of loss. It is from this exact position that the work of Bad Painting provides a crucial articulation of the essence of Modernity as well as, through kitsch, the mock meta-critique of its functions.

Albert Oehlen takes aforementioned themes such as Crow's dialectic of high and low, the necessity of mourning, reification, and kitsch inherent in Modernist and Bad Painting and gives them a contemporary voice. Oehlen ushers Bad Painting into the Hypermodern with an extreme impulse towards the personalizing of subject matter and a rampant propensity towards sampling paintings history. Oehlen simultaneously builds his monument to painting as an archive while simultaneously deregulating the structures and connection between elements. In this acceleration Oehlen obsessively archives the past, present, and future, through arranging, re-arranging, assembling, and orchestrating visual artifacts. With this abundance of painterly data rapidly collecting around him, like Bad Painting past, history is posited as unreliable and porous. However, the individual and personalized choice takes on a significant autonomy. While the effect in much of this work is a type of mourning, Oehlen shows through his hyperbolic use of Bad Painting and kitsch that now access to the present is only temporary.

In conclusion, the practice of Bad Painting through articulating a deconstruction of the aims of painting within the Modern and Post-modern canon privileges kitsch. The prioritizing of kitsch elements allows for a reconsideration of the aims of painting as well as articulating an aesthetic effect specific to itself, that of indulging in conditional intensities of remembrance. The mock meta-critique Bad Painting enacts in which allows for a positive reappraisal of the aims, place, and functioning of painting.

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