

comes surprisingly close to the concept of kitsch, though never using the exact term: «If the new art is not accessible to every man, this implies that its impulses are not of a generically human kind.»⁶

6. Kitsch: the escape from everyday life. It is this that so angers Broch, the «moral philosopher». In his essay «Kitsch» from 1986, Matei Calinescu describes kitsch as a systematic attempt to escape from everyday life, an escape to a personal past (manifested in the souvenir culture), or to places created by the imagination.⁷ Kitsch is the kind of beauty one wishes to be surrounded by in one's daily life.⁸ What are the consequences of the kitsch views of these critics? A pathetic, retrospective monster (or Satan, if you wish), called kitsch, forcing us to become involved in emotionally intense situations, robbing us of the ability to feel true feelings when we come across a real crying child, because these emotions have been spent through hedonistic self-indulgement.

So why Kitsch? Why not a nicer term? Why does classical figurative painting need a name? After all, we live in a postmodern era, where everything is permitted! I wish it were like that, but it seems to me that postmodernism accepts «everything», except the passionate, sensual painting.

On August 13th, 1999, myself and fellow student Hans Schamait were present during the Culture Days in Gothenburg, Sweden, and discussed kitsch with art historian Folke Edvards and artist Mariann Wikström. Wikström confronted me on this occasion, with liberal postmodernism, and felt that from this perspective, the distinction between kitsch and art was superfluous. I formulated my answer as a question, with reference to the art festival in Cologne: «If it is true that we live in a postmodern era, why then were the figurative art galleries forced to exhibit their works at the very back of the hall in 1998, and why were they refused participation in 1999?» My question was never answered ...

At a number of places where I have held speeches, I have been met with the assertion that the kitsch-concept allows one to kick down open doors. I have already rendered an account of this in the above example, but I would like to discuss it in greater depth.

I believe there is a prevailing idea of pluralism among art experts

⁶ Ortega y Gasset: op. cit. p. 8

⁷ M. Calinescu: *Five Faces of Modernity*, Duke University Press 1987, p. 244f

⁸ Ibid. p. 250

and art historians, which can be called «ironic pluralism». By this I mean that one can be accepted as a figurative painter only if one remains dispassionate about what one paints. A typical example of this is Kari J. Brandtzæg's review of the Whitney Biennial, in the Oslo newspaper *Morgenbladet*, on May 5th 2000. Brandtzæg writes of Currin's figurative work: «One artist who still resorts to figurative representation on a two-dimensional background, is John Currin. Fortunately, he does this with a sense of humor. His female motifs are irritatingly funny, and balance between the banal and the vulgar. Currin toys with paintings of the past, and picks and blends whatever inspires him, be it a Botticelli Venus or magazine photos.»

How could I answer the only two figurative students at Dundee University in Scotland, who approached me following my lecture, asking for my help. They were being harassed and bullied by their teachers because they painted and sculpted figuratively. They were being manically encouraged to work with video or installation instead. As an artist, then, one must accept that paintings of the past, specifically the mimetic/imitative, are disapproved of as a serious project.



*Han van Meegeren:
Christ in Emmaus,
1937. Oil on canvas,
115 x 127 cm.
Rotterdam, Museum
Boymans-van
Beuningen.*

I hope I have been able to clarify why I want to use the word Kitsch. If one ignores any and all possible accusations of self-importance and egocentrism, (if a hitherto derogatory term can even promote such a thing,) I have no other choice than to pragmatically accept Kitsch as the correct name for passionate figuration of our time.

⁹ Kulka: op. cit. p. 90