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Research in Context.

Theories on the overall progress of the kitsch at movement.

Q) From the series of Fine Art research strand lectures, choose a theme, movement, or selection of artists or designers that relate to our practice or interests, and contrast a 2500-word essay. Critically assess primary themes, key writers, and relevant practitioners.

During my essay I will be exploring the idea of the kitsch art movement and discussing how this concept has affected art in the modern day. According to the Tate Modern [Tate Modern Art Gallery] (2024) 'the word kitsch came to be applied to this type of popular and commercial culture sometime in the 1920s'. Kitsch in German is described as cheesiness or tackiness. Defined as art or other objects that appeal to popular or uncultivated taste because they are garnished or overly sentimental. Which means that these objects are without style, false, or in poor taste but enjoyed or appreciated in an ironic or knowing way. To brand visual art as "kitsch" is generally pejorative, as it means that the work in question is gaudy, or that it serves a solely ornamental and decorative purpose rather than amounting to a work of moral standard. However, the concept of kitsch has escalated over time. From going to general painting to now describing knick-knacks and household ornaments. Deemed as, according to the Tate Gallery [Tate Modern Art Gallery] (2024), a term that refers to 'vulgar and sentimental forms of popular and commercial culture'. The term kitsch carries negative connotations in the art world and despite it being recognized in the 1920s, the term kitsch cannot be defined by a certain art period or cultures because it can range from the mid-20th century to now. According to Wikipedia [Wikipedia Encyclopedia] (2024), 'since the emergence of Pop Art in the 1950s, kitsch has taken on a newfound highbrow appeal, often wielded in knowingly ironic, humorous or earnest manners.' (Wikipedia) describing how a lot of Pop Art has been described as kitsch due to its popularity. There have been theories around the idea of kitsch and how it has been an art form that has been capitalized purposefully for economic gain.

Clement Greenberg was an American essayist known mainly as an art critic who has published essays on the kitsch art movement. In the opinion of Greenberg, art should challenge the audience to interpret and react to it. He describes this concept in his famous essay Avant-Garde and Kitsch. Where he mainly explains the difference between the art movements but also theories why something labelled kitsch is popular in customer consumption. 'It is the source of its profits. Kitsch is vicarious experiences and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style but always remains the same. (Greenberg, 1939, p. 10) Describing how for an object or art piece to be popular and trendy, it will need to be capitalized and exploited for it to be discussed. Kitsch is the opposite of this so-called great art, this is because a Kitsch art piece does not challenge the viewer and audience in the way it should. It does not confront the viewer with new ideas and new techniques.

Jeff Koons is an American sculpture artist who is renowned for his stainless steel balloon-like sculptures. His orange Balloon Dog sold at the price of \$58.4 million in 2013 and held the record for the most expensive item to go at auction for five years. He is one of the most famous but controversial contemporary artists. According to Charlotte Stace in Artland Magazine 'the artist has also been accused of plagiarism on multiple occasions and, in some cases, lost the trials' Charlotte Stace (2024). The magazine then goes on to explain how Koons was found guilty of infringing copyright by a court after having 'based a sculpture, called String of Puppies (1988) on a photograph taken by Art Rogers, entitled Puppies' Charlotte Stace (2024). Artist Rights covered this case in an article [Artist Rights Website] (2024), where they mentioned that 'the Court looked at the effect that Koons's work would have on demand for the original photograph and authorized derivative works'. The article then further explains that because Court determined that Koons had produced "String of Puppies" for monetary gain, this is because of the demand for similar works would then decrease due to the lack of licensing rights Koons had for the artwork. Koons does not talk much on the

concept of kitsch and how his art relates to it, but in a biography, article published by the Art Story they discuss how Jeff Koons has acknowledged these criticisms towards him and has tried to challenge other artists on what they believe fine art to be. [The Art Story Organization] (2008-2024) 'Koons has challenged top collectors to revise their notions of what is fine art. This marketing strategy has been very successful, and his work garners some of the highest prices of any living artist.' Jeff Koons has always publicly shown that he in fact never works on a piece by himself, but in fact has a team that works with him during these processes. According to the Medium Newsletter Ben Shahar (2024) 'Koons rejects the notion of any hidden meaning or irony in his artwork. This elevation of unashamed kitsch has divided opinions in the fine art world. However, Koons has become a globally recognized name'. Jeff Koons was also interviewed by Robert Storr at the artist's duplex for the Independent Newspaper where Koons states 'Some people certainly think that my work is kitsch, but I never see it that way' Robert Storr (1990).

It seems to be what people deem to be popular and/ or trendy, which can differ and tends to change over time. Questioning the moral intension of the artist. Implying that certain approaches to art are of more value than others. 'Kitsch is a relative concept, and understanding the phenomenon requires a psychological, sociological, historical or anthropological analysis rather than an aesthetic one'. (Kulka, 1996, p. 1) Why is it that the majority of what are labelled kitsch artworks are some of the most famous ones? It seems to be what is defined as trendy or aesthetically pleasing to own. Sontag has previously stated that the buyer usually does not realize that the object or art piece they have purchased is kitsch. In one of Sontag's previous essays in 1966. In Susan Sontag's "Notes on Camp" publication (1964), she gives an argument against Greenberg's "Avant Garde and Kitsch", where she compares the term kitsch with camp and discusses how both terms are used in the same context of 'bad taste'. 'It doesn't argue that the good is bad, or the bad is good. What is to offer (and life) a different – a supplementary – set of standards' (Sontag, 1964, p. 9) describing how similar to camp the term kitsch is used in a negative light, but does not necessarily determine what is considered good or bad art. Sontag has also said in a later interview for the Baffler 1999, 'if kitsch is cheap and anti-intellectual, it can also be fun, and fun is the truly revolutionary quality' Daniel Lazare (1999). Describing how art is elevating and does not necessarily need to be a bad thing. She then again goes on to compare the concept of kitsch to camp, 'she declared. But so, what? The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious.' (Daniel Lazare 1999). Sontag's point of view is to celebrate kitsch, because like camp, it has become relevant in modern art. Similar to how camp was used as an insult when the term first originated but has not developed into its own theme. The same thing can happen with the term kitsch. Rather than looking at Greenberg's point of view of it being a decline in moral standard, she sees it as more of an opportunity and revolutionary breakthrough in the art world.

Willem Venter is a Ph.D. Student and lecturer in History of Art. He wrote an essay discussing the Norwegian figurative painter Odd Nerdrum and how Nerdrum declared in 1998 that he is not an artist but prefers to be known as a kitsch painter. Venter discusses the overall history of the term kitsch and how Nerdrum has taken this concept and decided to use it in a more positive light by using the popularity and prominence to his advantage.

'The term kitsch, as a modern phenomenon, has been used since the 1860s. first recorded as being used by artists and art dealers in Munich to describe what they call cheap artistic items. By "cheap" these artists and art dealers refer to items of an artistic nature which have been manufactured in such a way where they could be sold cheaply to tourists. Speeding the production of these kitsch products along with the use of lower quality materials imply that the craftsmanship and intellectual underpinning of these items were mostly not of high quality.' (Venter, 2018)

Describing how kitsch is labelling art that is for production due to the amount made and how cheap it is. It is an art form that is made for profit. 'Greenburg thus clearly signals his concern with a longstanding question in aesthetics: is the existence of limits serving to distinguish between the various arts also a condition of the possibility of value within them?' (Blackwell, 1991, p. 554).

I believe that kitsch is determined by the eye of the beholder but only if there are multiple people who think the same way about a certain artwork. There are many theories around the idea and ethical values of making what is determined as kitsch artwork, but even that can be questioned. This is because some artists make work, for it to be determined as kitsch. It does not have to be seen in a negative light despite companies and/ or artists making it for the purpose of monetary gain. As shown, what is defined as kitsch objects or artworks is what modern day society and people look to buy. Despite if they are cheaply looking or made to look designer. Binkley argues that in the last decade of the 20th century we saw the end of the division between art and kitsch. These products were also designed to act as luxury products which even the lower members of society could afford to buy. In the essay *Under the Title of Taste and Ethics*, Binkley proposed that 'Kitsch tucks us in making a home in the repetitive fabric of the imitative cultural objects' (Binkley, 2000, p. 1).

This book describes the background of the Kitsch movement and why the appreciation for Kitsch art is so looked down upon. In the Preface of the book, Kula writes 'Shouldn't these two topics be dealt with independently?' and 'shouldn't one keep kitsch and art appreciation as far apart as possible?' 'Questions as why kitsch is bad have led to more general questions such as, what do we value in real works of art? How can we justify aesthetic value judgments?' (Kulka, 1996, Preface). He goes on to explain that he cannot answer these questions for himself, but he insists that it is what people look for what is deemed as 'respectable works of art'.

Kitsch has been part of my research and practice a lot recently, in argument of the aesthetic value judgments when it comes to relating aesthetics to kitsch. When using kitsch in my practice, it is more to the fact that because kitsch is typically an art form used for a modern-day home, that the idea of these art works or objects can have a comforting sense to them. And going back to when Sontag mentioned how an artist who makes kitsch objects generally does not know that the objects, they make are defined as kitsch. Then also re visiting what she mentioned when she was discussing how kitsch should not really be used as an insult and looked at more of a positive light, this is because kitsch is so much more common than in the 1920s. So, to deem something as with no moral value when some households may use them for an aesthetic sense rather than looking at the economic reasoning. You could argue that the artists that do define themselves as kitsch artists have been successful because they have reached their target audience.

In conclusion, after looking at different theories and statements put out about the kitsch art movement. There are very good arguments as to why kitsch art can be a depletion in the art world, especially when it was first identified, as described by Greenburg and shown by the court case against Koons that this was the time in the art world that different values were shown and exploited when coming to different artist creations and questioning what their morals and values were when it came to making art. But as time went on, as discussed by Sontag when she compared it to the concept of camp, it should be celebrated more rather than looked down upon. Because as she mentioned in her interview, it needs to be more of a revolution and an art shift in the modern world when it comes to different artists on the rise. The same way that graffiti art was shown negatively in the media when it was first popular but is now used as an expression or way to show political opinions.

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