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KINKADE, KOONS, KITSCH

A matter that complicates any discussion of kitsch is the mutability of its status. In his famous 1939 essay, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," Clement Greenberg warned against the encroachments of kitsch and its threat to the aspirations of modernist art. He defined kitsch as profit-seeking, mass-produced art pitched to the uncultivated tastes of the populace. Kitsch, he wrote, "is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations"¹ Yet, by the 1960s, with the emergence of the camp sensibility and pop art, Greenberg's avant-garde/kitsch distinction was less secure. By the 1980s, postmodern artistic practice had further dismantled the binary opposition, as avant-garde artists embraced kitsch in the provocative gestures of a trash aesthetics.

To be sure, kitsch is a contentious and problematic concept. First, it is ineluctably judgmental: once identified as kitsch, a work of art is instantly devalued, the taste of its admirers disparaged and derided. Second, the concept is exclusionary and classist: as a label, kitsch often serves to stigmatize art that does not conform to an aesthetic canon as determined by elite arbiters of taste.² Nevertheless, as a category, kitsch remains useful for designating formulaic and instantaneously consumable types of art. Such art has, in Irving Howe's words, a tendency to

¹ Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*, eds. Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White (London: The Free Press of Glencoe/Collier-Macmillan, 1964), 102.

² Robert Solomon notes the classist component in attitudes to kitsch. Identifying the rejection of kitsch as, chiefly, an intolerance of a "cheap" sentimentality, he remarks on the "unmistakable reference to the socio-economic status of the sentimental. 'Cheap' means 'low-class'...." (8). He continues: "One cannot understand the attack on kitsch...without a sociological-historical hypothesis about the fact that the 'high' class of many societies associate themselves with emotional control and reject sentimentality as an expression of inferior, ill-bred beings...." (9). Solomon, "On Kitsch and Sentimentality," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 49, no. 1 (Winter 1991): 1-14.

yield “amusement without insight, and pleasure without disturbance.”³ Or, as Greenberg put it, kitsch “pre-digests art for the spectator and spares him effort, provides him with a shortcut to the pleasure of art that detours what is necessarily difficult in genuine art.”⁴ And, whether or not we agree that “genuine” art is “necessarily difficult,” that “shortcut” – the custom of trafficking in clichés, platitudes, stereotypes, and sentiments – produces work that all too often is comfortable, familiar, and affirmative. In other words, kitsch militates against the kind of critical mindset respected by Greenberg and others who adhere to a secular-left critique of capitalism.⁵

Seventy years after Greenberg’s kitsch-alert, America’s two richest living artists are each widely known not just as a producer of kitsch but as “the king of kitsch”⁶: Thomas Kinkade and Jeff Koons. Kinkade (born Placerville, CA, 1958), a devout Christian who describes his cosy cottage landscapes as “faith-inspired,” addresses his work to a popular, largely evangelical, market. Jeff Koons (born York, PA, 1955), in contrast, is a secular artist whose work finds inspiration in the icons of commodity culture and is pitched to an exclusive market of, chiefly, wealthy metropolitan collectors. As typically viewed, Kinkade produces a nostalgic, sentimental strain of kitsch, and Koons a campy, conniving strain. Yet, radically dissimilar though their art may be, I want to explore the limits and inadequacy of kitsch as a standard for evaluating the work of both artists.

This reassessment calls for a more generous aesthetic criterion than that of the intrinsically judgmental standard of kitsch. (Kitsch, even when welcomed by admirers of Koons as a source of ironic enjoyment, will be seen to remain a restrictive standard of judgment.) Taking a cue from Rita Felski’s argument for a “phenomenology of enchantment,” her method of inquiry into the “condition of aesthetic absorption,” into the experience of surrender to “affective intensities and magical powers,”⁷ “enchantment-seeking” will serve as my shorthand for this alternative criterion. Kinkade and Koons will be seen to reject the postmodern culture of disenchantment and to approach their art as a medium for re-enchantment. Specifically, both artists seek to immerse us in a sense of the sacred: Kinkade by means of hallowed landscapes, Koons by means of haloed objects. And while a discussion of their art in terms of a drive for re-enchantment does not clear it of the charge of kitschiness, it subsumes the kitschiness in a

³ Irving Howe, “Notes on Mass Culture,” in *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*, eds. Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White (London: The Free Press of Glencoe/Collier-Macmillan, 1964.), 497.

⁴ Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 105.

⁵ Rochelle Gurstein notes, “[F]or Greenberg, as for all his compatriots at the *Partisan Review*, the only living culture was the avant-garde – the avant-garde as a holding action in a world made uninhabitable by capitalism” (139). Gurstein, “Avant-garde and Kitsch Revisited,” *Raritan* 22. 3 (Winter 2003): 136-58.

⁶For example, see Cahal Milmo, “Kinkade, king of kitsch, coming to a home near you,” *The Independent*, May 5, 2001, and Elaine Sciolino, who notes Koons’ “reputation as the king of kitsch.” Sciolino, “At the Court of the Sun King, Some All-American Art,” *The New York Times*, September 11, 2008.

⁷ Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 72, 54, 69.

more accommodating framework, one which enables an appreciation of their ambitions and a more sympathetic account of the appeal of their work.

THE CULTURE OF DISENCHANTMENT

To speak of a *postmodern* culture of disenchantment is to run counter to a common view of postmodernity as a disposition of cultural forces that reverse the disenchanting tendencies of modernity. For example, in *Intimations of Postmodernity*, Zygmunt Bauman argued that "postmodernity...is a re-enchantment...of the world that modernity tried hard to *dis-enchant*. It is the modern legislating reason that has been exposed, condemned and put to shame."⁸ And most recently, Craig Baron, citing the postmodern theology of Graham Ward, writes, "Postmodernity enables the re-enchantment of the world through the disruption of the rational and its resulting invitation to take a fresh look at ambivalence, mystery, excess, and aporia."⁹ Indeed, the view that postmodernity may be understood as a re-enchantment of the world is, to a large extent, derived from such recurrent *post-rationalist* terms as "euphoria," "the sublime," "intensities," and "ecstasy," which appeared in early discussions of postmodernism.¹⁰

We must also keep in mind that current of thinking which equates postmodernism with postsecularism.¹¹

⁸ Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 1991), x.

⁹ Craig A. Baron, "The Best of Times and the Worst of Times: Catholic Theology in the Media Age," *The Mid-Atlantic Almanac* 19 (2010): 55.

¹⁰ See, for example, Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 16, 32; Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1984), 77-81, and *Libidinal Economy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993); Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Washington: Bay Press, 1983): 126-134.

¹¹ John McClure, chiefly focusing on the work of Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo, has identified a post-secular mentality in the concerns of postmodern fiction. See McClure, "Postmodern/Post-Secular: Contemporary Fiction and Spirituality," *Modern Fiction Studies* 41, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 141-63. Yet, Brian Ingraffia, in a critique of McClure's "post-secular" thesis, cogently argues that both Pynchon and DeLillo are not in the business of "resacralization" but, rather, a "radical critique of religion through a parody of narratives of religious quests and revelation." See Ingraffia, "Is the Postmodern Post-Secular? The Parody of Religious Quests in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and Don DeLillo's *White Noise*," in *Postmodern Philosophy and Christian Thought*, ed. Merold Westphal (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 45. Moreover, it is quite apparent that the fiction of other mainstream postmodern writers, such as Barthelme, Vonnegut, Barth, Coover, Sukenick, Abish, O'Brien, and Leyner, does not endorse religious faith. (For a more detailed and nuanced engagement with McClure's thesis, as he developed it in a later monograph, *Partial Faiths* [University of Georgia Press, 2007], see my forthcoming *Christian Fundamentalism and the Culture of Disenchantment* [University of Virginia Press, 2012].) Finally, I agree with Gregor McLennan, who has observed "what is becoming an uncritical dogma in contemporary post-secularism: that recurrent metaphysical

Of course, the premise of postmodern re-enchantment acquires significance vis-à-vis Weber's famous characterization of modernity as "the disenchantment of the world."¹² For Weber, capitalist modernization depended on enhanced forms of rationalization and calculation, whose logic and prestige necessarily devalued belief in magic, supernatural powers and, by extension, religious habits of thought. (To be sure, Weber's thesis has been disputed;¹³ his metaphor of the "iron cage of reason" understates the persistence of "enchanted" forms of belief, yet, what cannot be doubted is that the rational pursuit of profit, industrialization, and bureaucratization have *hegemonized* rationalist modes of thought.) Weber also observed, "this process of disenchantment in Western culture...has been going on for millennia,"¹⁴ in which case, it is not only driven by capitalist development. For example, Weber saw in the rise of monotheistic religion the disenchantment of the pagan world of idolatry. The point here is that the process of disenchantment is historically variable: it should not be exclusively linked to modernity, nor indeed to Weber's modernist account of it. Disenchantment is also a postmodern process.

To speak of a postmodern culture of disenchantment is not to imply that such a culture is uniformly spread across America, less still that it is the only culture. However, its presence in key domains of public life accords it an influence and prestige that is disproportionate to the minority of "disenchanted" Americans. The premise of a postmodern culture of disenchantment in no way negates or underestimates the persistence of a pre-postmodern culture and the popular appeal of religious, occult, and mystical habits of thought.

Disenchantment flourishes, today, as a defining feature of postmodernity. Indeed, as long as capitalist modernization continues (and in the postmodern period it has intensified and accelerated), as long as capital accumulation depends on control of production and markets – technological innovation, strategic investment, financial planning, resource allocation, corporate administration, competitive marketing, labor management – rationalist forms of thinking will remain paramount, while non-rationalist / "enchanted" forms must fight for normative status, if not legitimacy.¹⁵ In postmodern culture,

puzzlement signals the timeless irrepressibility and primacy of religion rather than our continuous cognitive and imaginative activity, of which religion is but one (variable) expression." See McLennan, "Mr Love and Justice," *New Left Review II* no. 64 (July/August 2010): 149.

¹² Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation" (1919), in *Max Weber's Complete Writings on Academic and Political Vocations*. Ed. John Dreijmanis (New York: Algora Publishing, 2008), 35.

¹³ See, for example, Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985) and Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

¹⁴ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Routledge, 2001), 35.

¹⁵ This is not to ignore how much capitalism exploits magical modes of thinking, such as the dream worlds conjured up by advertising; all the same, the system cannot

disenchantment also flourishes in many ways other than those associated with Weber's use of the term. For example, a political *ethos* (albeit chiefly within metropolitan communities) of unremitting and boundless critique, in which all forms of institutional authority, hegemonic norms and precepts, have fallen under suspicion; artistic practices and alternative sites of popular entertainment, whose ironic self-reflexiveness and frequent use of parody serve to contest the myths and ideologies embedded in the prevailing genres and news media;¹⁶ critical-pedagogical programs that question the institutions of knowledge and the ideologies of curricula, which advance critical literacy and foster awareness of the contingency of textual authority; poststructuralist/neo-Nietzschean scholarship which exposes those submerged forms of metaphysical thinking that linger in what Enlightenment humanism assumed to be a full-fledged *post-metaphysical* order of knowledge.

The culture of disenchantment perceives omnipresent relations of power in all forms of cultural life. This perception has generated crises of legitimacy and sincerity and the widespread suspicion that official discourses and the narrative forms of popular genres may serve as vehicles for ideology, mythification, and propaganda. The institutions of everyday life (consumerism and mass media, bureaucracy and the corporation, schooling and medicine, etc.) have become the targets of endless interrogation. Nothing escapes scrutiny.

The culture of disenchantment produces a type of subject with a disposition to perpetual critique; that is to say, one defined by an ensemble of traits such as skepticism, cynicism, and suspicion; one with a deeply ironic sensibility; one with an impulse to demystify, deconstruct, and delegitimize. Needless to say, such a disposition would be hostile to re-enchantment, insofar as enchantment, generally understood as a non-rational immersive order of experience, lulls the critical faculties. Such a disposition is less likely to adhere to religious faith; as Charles Taylor says of our "secular age," "unbelief has become for many the major default option."¹⁷ To be sure, the percentage of Americans who conform to this profile of the disenchanted subject may be quite small: often, but by no means exclusively, those to be found within urban communities of secular liberals. Yet, these "postmodernized" Americans have had a major impact on shaping the national culture by virtue of their disproportionately large presence in entertainment and the arts, in journalism and advertising, in civil rights and radical-democratic struggles, in higher education and scholarship.¹⁸ Collectively

function without the rational calculation needed for the micromanagement of labor, merchandizing, investment, research and development, etc.

¹⁶ The postmodernism-as-reenchantment thesis overlooks the critical and adversarial orientation of so much postmodern art. See Paul Maltby, *Dissident Postmodernists: Barthelme, Coover, Pynchon* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991).

¹⁷ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 14.

¹⁸ This is not to overlook recent developments in scholarship which interrogate disenchanted thinking and which may signal an emergent trend away from the latter. Thus, in opposition to the "symptomatic reading" motivated by the hermeneutics of suspicion (the locus classicus of which is Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*

(and alongside the inherently disenchanting effects of ongoing capitalist development), they have instituted the culture of disenchantment. (This culture is by no means securely dominant; it is despised and resisted by evangelical and other communities of “values voters,” vast constituencies troubled by the culture’s irreverence, permissiveness, and normlessness.)

The culture of disenchantment is highly conducive to the production of ironically self-reflexive art (a species of art that made scattered appearances in some strains of modernism but becomes a programmatic and more developed feature of most postmodernism). The defining practices of such art include: interrogation of the artistic codes and conventions that produce meaning; texts that highlight the processes of their own composition, telling stories about story-telling; texts that reflect on their institutional function and cultural status; critical examination of the artist/audience relationship; renunciation of originality as a goal by conspicuous appropriation or pastiche of other texts; and, above all, texts that expose how their very language *qua public discourse* is contaminated by ideology and myth. By virtue of such practices, art becomes self-disenchanting, self-demystifying, self-deromancing; it reveals the compromised nature of communication. Such art is often affectless, devoid of aura, and adulterated. Much conceptual art (e.g. Jenny Holzer, David Hammons, Barbara Kruger, Mike Kelley, Hans Haacke, Cindy Sherman), given its radical questioning of the very status of art through its image-text dynamics and blatant use of consumer-waste materials and tawdry pop-genres, may be taken as the paradigmatic expression of ironic self-reflexiveness.

In the culture of disenchantment, ironic self-reflexiveness is diffused throughout the popular media; we see it in an unending stream of self-parodying movies and music videos (Quentin Tarantino, Tim Burton, Spike Jonze, Michel Gondry), in much TV comedy (“The Colbert Report,” “The Daily Show,” “Family Guy,” “The Simpsons”) and self-mocking advertisements. And though by no means mainstream in US culture, its principal artists enjoy the elite status and prestige of critical acclaim. By comparison, other currents of art, which speak conviction,

[London: Methuen, 1981]), Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus advocate “surface reading.” That is to say, they call for an attitude of “learned submission” to the text as opposed to “mastery” over it; an immersive mode of reading that “restore[s] the artwork to its ‘original, compositional complexity’” (14), (“Surface Reading: An Introduction,” *Representations* 108, no. 1 [Fall 2009]: 1-21). And the case for a “new aestheticism” or “new formalism,” which, resisting the imperatives of ideology critique, seeks attunement to the “affect” and “enchantment” of the text, has recently been made by Isobel Armstrong, John Joughin and Simon Malpas, and Rita Felski. (See Armstrong, *The Radical Aesthetic* [Oxford; Wiley-Blackwell, 2000]; Joughin and Malpas, eds., *The New Aestheticism* [Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2004]; Felski, *The Uses of Literature*.) Furthermore, Akeel Bilgrami has recently argued that disenchantment, which he traces back to the “orthodox” (as opposed to “radical”) strain of the Enlightenment, has had imperialist consequences. That is to say, the desacralization of nature into inert matter – whereby “there could be no normative constraint coming upon us from a world that was brute” (398)– paved the way for capitalist plunder and colonization. (“Occidentalism, the Very Idea: An Essay on Enlightenment and Enchantment,” *Critical Inquiry* 32 [Spring 2006]: 381-411).

passion, sincerity, and which enjoy far larger audiences, appear naïve and lack the cachet of sophistication; in David Foster Wallace's words, they manifest an embarrassing lack of the "cynicism [that] announces that one knows the score."¹⁹

Self-reflexive art, by virtue of its ironic self-questioning and even self-debunking nature, and its demythologizing impulse, is inhospitable to enchantment. That is to say, it cannot accommodate ideas of cosmic order or supernatural intervention, narratives that promote the magical or the sacred; it is essentially resistant to the seductive appeal of the mystical and the sentimental. And it is precisely to this state of radical disenchantment in the arts that Kinkade and Koons respond. Each seeks forms by which to rehabilitate our sense of the sacred; each approaches his art as a medium to redeem or "resacralize" the vision of a disenchanted public. Their strategies are diametrically opposed: Kinkade retreats to a premodern world, Koons embraces the postmodern world of consumerism for its enchanting potential; Kinkade purges his art of irony, Koons' art absorbs it; Kinkade communicates the sacred through a programmatically religious vision, Koons communicates it through a parareligious iconography. Finally, given the prolific output of both, each producing multiple series of works over three decades, I do not claim to speak for the entire oeuvre of each. For example, Koons' relatively recent *Hulk Elvis* (2005-2009) and *Popeye* (2002-2009) series are not amenable to the kind of analysis offered here; on the other hand, the several series for which he is best known supply dramatic examples of a project to recover the force of the sacred.

BRAND KINKADE

Thomas Kinkade is America's most commercially successful living artist. In fact, according to Morley Safer, Kinkade "has sold more canvases than any other painter in history....He is the most collected living artist in the US and worldwide."²⁰ Since 1992, his companies – first Media Arts Group, then Thomas Kinkade Company – have reportedly notched up over \$4 billion in sales.²¹ From 1997-2005, Kinkade earned \$53 million in royalties from his prints and licensed

¹⁹ Wallace 181. As early as 1993, Wallace observed how irony has become a pervasive cultural norm, thanks largely to its institutionalization via popular television. But he adds, "irony tyrannizes us," finding it "not liberating but enfeebling," and "singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks" (183). See "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 151-94.

²⁰ Morley Safer, "Thomas Kinkade: A Success," *60 Minutes*, CBS, November 25, 2004.

²¹ In 2002, Media Arts Group ran into financial difficulties. See Todd Hertz, "Darkness Looms for 'Painter of Light,'" *Christianity Today*, April 1, 2002.

<http://www.ctlibrary.com/ct/2002/aprilweb-only/4-15-31.0.html> (accessed April 8, 2010). In 2004, Kinkade privately acquired Media Arts Group, a public company, and renamed it Thomas Kinkade Company. He bought back the company for \$4 a share from a high of nearly \$25. This bargain price induced former dealers to allege that Kinkade manipulated the devaluation for his own benefit.

product lines.²² Around 300 employees are on the payroll. In what amounts to an assembly-line production process at the 100,000-square-foot headquarters in San Jose, Kinkade's original paintings are digitally transformed into lithographs, glued onto canvas, then individually highlighted by artists (the highlight strokes give prints the look of an original) and, lastly, framed. Each day, an average of 800 of these enhanced prints are shipped out to approximately 300 galleries across the US and to another 44 abroad.²³ Depending on edition size, the "canvas lithographs," when embellished by "master highlighters," can cost around \$6,000, or \$50,000 if highlighted by Kinkade himself. Among Kinkade's estimated 64 licensed products are commemorative plates, vases, teapots, nightlights, teddy bears, Hallmark Christmas ornaments and greeting cards, screensavers, calendars, umbrellas, air fresheners, and Bible totes. Moreover, all these products can be housed in a Thomas Kinkade home, in a subdivision or "village" of 100 Kinkade "cottages," built by Taylor Woodrow Homes, in 2001, in Vallejo, near San Francisco. The Village at Hiddenbrooke, according to marketing brochures, is landscaped in the image of Kinkade's cosy-cottage paintings, with interior décor supplied by Kinkade-branded couches, throw-rugs, sun-catchers, and so forth.²⁴ In many respects, "Kinkade," like "Martha Stewart," is a lifestyle brand.

Caravaggio and Rembrandt were renowned masters of lighting technique though, unlike Kinkade, they did not go so far as to announce it in the form of a trademark. But then the Media Arts Group, Inc./Thomas Kinkade Co. is one of the art market's slickest merchandizing machines and, accordingly, Kinkade has created a world-famous brand identity for its products: "Thomas Kinkade: Painter of Light." The company logo—as can be seen on Kinkade's official website and where one can shop online for Kinkade's products—is a gold medallion depicting a shining lamp circled by the inscription, "Thomas Kinkade Painter of Light."

At this point, we can see two kinds of enchantment at work: on the one hand, Kinkade actively pursues his project of resacralization through art; on the other

²² Kim Christensen, "Dark Portrait of a Painter of Light," *Los Angeles Times* March 5, 2006. <http://articles.latimes.com/2006/mar/05/business/fi-kinkade5> (accessed April 8, 2010).

²³ According to the "Kinkade Gallery Locator," a link on the official Thomas Kinkade website, of the 297 US galleries supplied with Kinkade's paintings, 69 are "100% dedicated to the works of Thomas Kinkade." <http://www.thomaskinkade.com> (accessed March 4, 2010).

²⁴ Misleading claims have been made for this development, marketed as "A Thomas Kinkade Painter of Light Community" and "a vision of simpler times." When Janelle Brown visited the "village," she found a treeless plot of tightly clustered generic tract housing on concrete patios instead of stone-and-thatched-roof cottages in a landscape of flowering gardens, gazebos, and ponds. Nor did she find any signs of "community": "not a church, not a café, not even a town square," Janelle Brown, "Ticky-tacky houses from the 'Painter of Light,'" *Salon.com*, March 18, 2002, http://www.salon.com/life/style/2002/03/18/kinkade_village (accessed April 6, 2010). And at \$400,000 per home, we may indeed wonder what kind of "simpler times" were envisioned by the developers.

hand, he uses branding – “Thomas Kinkade Painter of Light” – to enhance the religious aura of his product. The former is partly tainted by the market-oriented enchantment of the latter. In fact, Brand Kinkade has been exploited to the extent that Kinkade and his Media Arts Group, Inc. (MAGI) have earned a reputation for hucksterism and deception. Articles published in the *Los Angeles Times* and *San Francisco Chronicle* have focused on the ruthless sales tactics practiced by Kinkade and MAGI. Six arbitration claims have been filed against MAGI by the proprietors of independently owned galleries licensed to deal exclusively in Kinkade’s art. Arbitration panels have since ruled in favor of the ex-dealers, who were deceived into investment in Thomas Kinkade Signature Galleries by executives who overstated the potential profits in retailing Kinkade’s work or who pressured them into opening more galleries with the threat of setting up rival galleries in the same locations. The dealers also allege that Kinkade’s company exploited religious faith, speaking in terms of trust among fellow Christians, to seduce them into investment.²⁵ Consider also the deceitful technique of “master highlighting,” which serves to conceal the mass-manufactured nature of the prints by customizing them with a few daubs of oil paint. As Wendy Katz observes, albeit in an appreciation of Kinkade’s work, “The paintings are reproductions, but they thus offer access to the qualities and social status associated with original oil paintings that contain visible traces of the artist’s hand in the outline of the strokes and their build-up of paint on canvas.”²⁶ These mock originals then sell for thousands of dollars. Still, to be fair, Kinkade also practices a Christian ethics by way of raising hundreds of thousands of dollars for the Salvation Army, Make-A-Wish Foundation, World Vision, and other charities that provide humanitarian relief.

All the evidence suggests that Kinkade is sincere in his Christian convictions. In 1980, at the age of 22, he experienced a spiritual awakening. “When I got saved, God became my art agent,” he told Safer in CBS’s 2004 video biography. “My wife and I pray over these paintings,” which, he insists, testify to his faith. He inscribes his limited-edition canvas prints with the ichthus and “John 3:16.”²⁷ And given his trademark description as the “Painter of Light” – where light in his painting “represents God’s presence and influence”²⁸ – he often refers to John 8:12, where the apostle quotes Jesus, “I am the light of the world.” He also avers “My whole ministry is an expression of Matthew 5:16: ‘Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.’” In an interview, Kinkade has remarked “My work has a visual

²⁵ See Kim Christensen, “Dark Portrait”; “Kinkade Defends Self but Says ‘Sorry,’” *Los Angeles Times*, March 9, 2006, <http://www.latimes.com/2006/mar/09/business/fi-kinkade9> (accessed April 8, 2010); Bob Egelko, “Artist’s firm on hook for \$2.1 million,” *San Francisco Chronicle* June 18, 2009, B2.

²⁶ Wendy J. Katz, *Masterworks of Light: Thomas Kinkade*, Introduction and Essays (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 2000), 25.

²⁷ In the Revised Standard Version, John 3:16 reads, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

²⁸ Jeffrey Vallance, ed., *Thomas Kinkade: Heaven on Earth* (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 2004), 32.

characteristic that we might describe as light, but the light people see in my paintings is also a spiritual inspiration or hopeful feeling. I view it as an outgrowth of my own faith in God.”²⁹ His work is driven by a missionary program: “I want to use the paintings as tools to expand the Kingdom of God;” “I want to blanket the world with the gospel through prints. This is a very thoroughgoing form of evangelism.”³⁰

KINKADE'S ENCHANTED LANDSCAPES

Peacefulness is the keynote of Kinkade's art. He describes *The Hour of Prayer* (2002)³¹ as “anticipat[ing] the dawning of a Peaceful Kingdom where a brilliant sun pours down into the sylvan glade that shelters the sundial; the passage of its shadow across the dial marks the breathless hour of prayer. A lively brook murmurs nature's prayer into the silence as it nurtures a graceful willow tree, whose overhanging branches suggest the comforting embrace of God.” Kinkade's choice of words reflects the sacred tranquility of his garden paradise: “peaceful,” “shelters,” “prayer,” “silence,” “nurtures,” “graceful,” “comforting.” Indeed, this lexicon may be applied to all Kinkade's visions of gardens in the shadow of Grace, of the lamp-lit cobblestoned streets of “home,” of old stone cottages radiating fireside warmth at dusk—visions infused with a deep spiritual calm. Hence, no spectator would suspect the belligerent agenda behind these landscapes of perennial peace. For Kinkade is an evangelist at war with what he sees as the cultural degradations of modernism. “The disintegration of the culture starts with the artist,” he says. “In a way, Modernism in painting is responsible for South Park and gangsta' rap. I'm on a crusade to turn the tide in the arts, to restore dignity to the arts and, by extension, to the culture.”³² In his view, modernism has engendered the “fecal school” of art or “bodily function” art, by which he means the work, among others, of Chris Ofili, Robert Maplethorpe, and Andres Serrano.³³ Animosity towards secular modernity, the latter perceived as the ultimate expression of godlessness, irreverence, and impiety, is at the heart of evangelicalism's long history of militancy. Accordingly, Kinkade explains the business of the Thomas Kinkade Foundation as “a form of sabotage....[A] Trojan horse that we're sending into the enemy camp.”³⁴

²⁹ Qtd. in Katz, *Masterworks*, 29.

³⁰ Qtd. in Randall Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 315, 316.

³¹ All Kinkade's paintings and commentaries discussed in this paper can be viewed online at

http://www.christcenteredmall.com/stores/art/kinkade/thomas_kinkade.htm

³² Qtd. in Balmer, *Mine Eyes*, 316.

³³ In *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996), Ofili depicted a resplendent black virgin, the painting itself standing on dried balls of elephant dung and decorated with pictures of genitalia cut out of porn magazines. In *Piss Christ* (1987), Serrano immersed a photograph of the crucifix in urine.

³⁴ Qtd. in Vallance, *Thomas Kinkade*, 29. Koons has employed the same metaphor to describe how his work is conceived as an assault on the aesthetic values of the art establishment: “It's a Trojan horse to the whole body of art work,” qtd. in Arthur C. Danto, *Unnatural Wonders: Essays from the Gap Between Art and Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 301.

Moreover, this belligerent stance neatly dovetails with its overtly political counterpart. Suffice here to recall Patrick Buchanan's speech at the 1992 Republican National Convention, when he famously called on conservatives to wage a "culture war" in response to the "threat" to America's "traditional values."³⁵

Kinkade's paintings are self-consciously, one might even say assertively, anti-modernist. They are anti-modernist by virtue of their adherence to the conventions of what he simply calls "traditional art." In other words, he places a high premium on draftsmanship, representationalism, and tonal uniformity, while studiously avoiding any disfiguration (other than "soft" edges and lighting), stylistic eclecticism, and random gestures. Like the pastoral-sentimental works of his evangelical counterparts, his paintings *look* pre-modernist, often reminiscent of the work of late-Victorian fantasy illustrators. Furthermore, this anti-modernism is conducive to the aura of peacefulness, for which Kinkade assiduously strives, while the prevailing strains of modernism in the arts prefer or are inclined (through dissonance, distortion, shock) to create disturbance.

Michael Campus' straight-to-DVD movie, *Thomas Kinkade's Christmas Cottage* (2008), offers a valuable overview of Kinkade's aesthetic code. During production, Kinkade issued the crew a set of 16 guidelines for creating "The Thomas Kinkade Look." For example, #1 "Dodge corners or create darkening towards edge of image for 'cozy' look"; #4 "...an overall gauzy look [is] preferable to hard edge realism"; #5 "Each scene should feature dramatic sources of soft light"; #7 "Overall sense of stillness. Emphasize gentle camera moves, slow dissolves, and still camera shots"; #8 "...any transitory effect of nature that bespeaks luminous coloration or a sense of softness"; #13 "Mood is supreme."³⁶

But if Kinkade's paintings seek to tranquilize rather than disturb the spectator, it would be simplistic to dismiss his work as merely quaint or safe or escapist. Rather, his art, animated by evangelical doctrine, is largely oriented towards the End Times. "I like to portray a world without the Fall," he says, in anticipation of the glory that awaits the faithful. "I believe Jesus is coming again in this new millennium." Moreover, he asserts, "I want to build the new iconography for the coming millennium."³⁷ Thus, in the same vein as *The Hour of Prayer*, which "anticipates the dawning of a Peaceful Kingdom," Kinkade has painted *The Good Shepherd's Cottage* (2001) (which depicts "the Lord returning to call His faithful"), *The Garden of Promise* (1993), *Lamplight Manor* (2000), *Garden of Grace* (2004), and *The Garden of Prayer* (1998), among innumerable other depictions of the same theme.

³⁵ Patrick Buchanan, "Culture War Speech," Republican National Convention, August 17, 1992.

³⁶ Qtd. in Paul Cullum, "Thomas Kinkade's 16 Guidelines for Making Stuff Suck," *Vanity Fair*, November 14, 2008.

³⁷ Qtd. in Balmer, *Mine Eyes*, 313, 316, 315.

In a present where so much space has been degraded into what Marc Augé calls “non-places”³⁸ — that is to say, spaces of transience, such as parking lots, motels, airport terminals, highways, to which we cannot meaningfully relate in any personal or spiritual way — it is easy to see why Kinkade’s cottage scenes should appeal to so many. In paintings like *A Quiet Evening* (1998) and *Stillwater Cottage* (2005), we find Kinkade’s signature image of the smoky thatched cottage at dusk, whose windows are radiantly illuminated from within as if by a spiritual force and which projects the evangelical ideal of the domesticated (nuclear) family. Hence, Kinkade affirms, “What I paint touches on foundational values. Home, family, peacefulness.”³⁹ Here are spaces not organized for mass transition but places of permanence and rest, to which one can imagine *belonging*. Moreover, Kinkade’s places are often pre-modern, that is to say, they are neither commercially nor bureaucratically zoned; their *only* purpose is for dwelling. They are places rooted in an organic relationship to (an albeit landscaped) nature and perceived as hospitable by virtue of their village scale, accessibility, and the absence of corners and hard edges. In short, Kinkade’s spaces are not for transients but residents. He also reproduces a conception of home not as equity or financial asset or property but as family sanctuary. The smoking chimneys and lit windows suggest the comforts of warmth and family habitation. His vision of home never seems tantalizingly out of reach but proximate to the spectator by virtue of perspectives (which incorporate pathways and gates) that seem to invite him or her into the paintings. Thus, one owner of some of his paintings relates how, “I like to go home in the evening and turn the lights on them and relax. I imagine that I am in one and it seems to drain away all anxiety and tension.”⁴⁰ Kinkade’s conception of home conspicuously pre-dates the alienations and depredations of the industrial age.

However, if Kinkade’s paintings have the virtue of imaginatively reclaiming the impersonal non-places around us by sacralizing space, it is achieved at the cost of a vision of home that is *too* private. The dwellings are not simply remote from the despoliations of commercial and industrial life but neighborless. He projects an image of home so deep in nature that it is devoid of community. Perhaps this is the consequence of an evangelical’s vision of being at home in the Creation (the cottage is usually located in a natural setting) rather than at home in society.

The stone dwellings in the *Peaceful Cottage* series (see, for example, *Stillwater Cottage*) radiate peace precisely because society has been eradicated and replaced by banks of hollyhocks and foxgloves, maples and dogwoods, swans and running streams. And this absence of people ought to be troubling to those for whom Christianity is essentially a socially conscious religion, one oriented towards neighborliness and compassion. Surely, a Christian artist has some obligation to show what it means to be a Christian in our profane *social* world. But, like those TV commercials for luxury sports cars, which seem to drive

³⁸ Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* (1995) (London: Verso, 2008).

³⁹ Qtd. in Safer, “Thomas Kinkade.”

⁴⁰ Qtd. in Katz, *Masterworks*, 14-15.

themselves lest the banality of seeing a mere human driving them spoil the magic of an apparently superhuman product, so the graphic presence of people—actual humans in their awkwardness, their blemished and mundane specificity—must detract from the pure enchantment of Kinkade’s landscapes. So, consider Rembrandt’s famous engraving *Christ Healing the Sick* (1649). Etched in copperplate, beautifully composed within the severe limitations of black and white, the image is inspired by Matthew 19:2: “and large crowds followed him, and he healed them there.” The picture is certainly crowded (thirty-five figures) and includes not only the sick and the poor but figures that appear healthy and prosperous. Yet it is the sick who are center-framed and, most importantly, Christ appears quite at ease in the midst of their squalor. As is well-known, Rembrandt recruited his models from Amsterdam’s slum district, in pursuit of a realism that disavowed the tradition of ornate characterization of Biblical figures. Rembrandt’s Christ may be haloed but there can be no doubt that he is immersed in *this* world, hands stretched before him in a charitable posture that orients him towards others. Or briefly consider Georges Rouault’s *Christ in the Suburbs* (1920). Drawing on his knowledge of the Paris slum quarter of Belleville—the location for his *Suburbs of the Prolonged Sorrows* series of works—he depicts Christ in the presence of poor children. Moonlight illuminates an otherwise deserted street of gloomy brick buildings and what appears to be a tall factory smokestack. Yet Christ, in the center foreground, is a consoling presence in the derelict (and roughly pigmented) landscape. He is a source of spiritual hope for the deprived children, towards whom his head is gently inclined, as if attuned to their suffering. Indeed, Christ’s power of empathy with the poor is signaled by rendering him as an unhaloed and unresplendent figure (note that he is only moonlit rather than radiantly sunlit), whereby he appears as conspicuously ordinary. Neither Rouault’s painting nor Rembrandt’s etching could be further removed from Kinkade’s preoccupation with the enchantment of the “Peaceful Kingdom” or the radiance of His Glory, from which all traces of the social have been erased. The Christ of Rembrandt and Rouault is a populist figure, in particular, one whose primary presence is among the sick and poor. Yet, this Christ has no place in Kinkade’s evangelical art—a convention reinforced by a neoliberal order in which the poor and sick have been rendered invisible. In short, Kinkade has banished Christianity from sordidly real social contexts.

Cobblestone Bridge (2000) depicts a village in the quiet of dusk, whose thatched flintstone cottages are modeled on those seen by Kinkade on a trip to the English county of Hampshire. The leaded windowpanes—all of them!—are illuminated from within by spiritually radiant lamps and firelight. Smoke rises from chimneys in near-vertical columns, which suggests there is not even a wind to disturb the peace. An old stone bridge adorned with climbing wisteria occupies the foreground. A river flows under the bridge, its water still enough to reflect the village lights. The peace is enhanced by the complete absence of people; everyone is indoors, sitting, one assumes, in the cozy glow of their fires.

Cobblestone Bridge, like Kinkade’s art as a whole, was conceived so as to induce comfort in its viewers, an experience for which hundreds of his admirers are

thankful and say so in their fan mail.⁴¹ But art that brings comfort will be philosophically and politically suspect to the postmodern spectator; for in the light of the latter's cynical disposition, dystopian rather than idyllic representations will appear the more credible. To the postmodern eye, Kinkade's rustic image of "perfect harmony," as he describes the spiritual calm of this landscape, simply looks too fake; after all, living in a media culture, we are all too familiar with the recycled pop-generic features with which a commercialized nostalgia constructs a rural past.

One postmodern response to Kinkade's art is the practice of adapting his paintings so as to resist, in comic fashion, their tranquilizing effects. Indeed, websites have been founded specifically to parody the easy comforts offered by his art. For example, many of the artists whose work is exhibited under *Paintings of Light (Part 2)* (2006) Photoshop an idyllic Kinkade landscape, interpolating into the scene a garish figure from the cheapest sci-fi horror movies or comics. Thus, sinister-looking aliens or psychopathic monsters will be seen loitering in Kinkade's charming Cotswold gardens. Alternatively, these parodists will transform Kinkade's landscapes either by turning them into the scene of a crime, with squad cars parked outside a Christmas cottage or a bloody corpse on a cobblestone path, or by turning them into a scene of destruction, where a cottage is ravaged by fire or demolished by off-course aircraft. Two kinds of pop culture collide in these parodies: the evangelicals' pastoral-sentimental art, with its fantasies of peace and contentment, and the profane genres of the sci-fi horror or crime story, with their fantasies of destruction and violence. In other words, the characteristically postmodern ploy here is to manage its parody exclusively within the confines of the mass media; that is to say, exploit the familiar conventions of one type of popular discourse in order to disrupt the conventions of the other. The overall strategy is to deflate the spiritual claims that animate Kinkade's art by recontextualizing his paintings in the gaudy language of pop culture.

"I am often asked why there are no people in my paintings," Kinkade writes in the introduction to his novel, *Cape Light*.⁴² However, it would be more precise to say that people are absent from his *religious* paintings. Human figures are featured in his secular art, which constitutes about 20% of his output. The general atmosphere of these paintings, which are often themed around "hometown memories," is one of good cheer, neighborliness, affluence, and civic orderliness. Shopping is often the primary activity, but this is pre-Wal Mart America, the hospitable economy of old Main Street's Mom-and-Pop stores. Clearly, Kinkade is nostalgic for an America which, he feels, has largely disappeared. Hence, the evocative mise-en-scènes of vintage cars, hotdog stands, glowing street lamps, bunting, and balloons. Among the eminent examples of this strain of his art are *Main Street*, *Courthouse* (1995), *Main Street Celebration*

⁴¹ Tessa DeCarlo, "Landscapes by the Carload: Art or Kitsch?," *The New York Times*, November 7, 1999.

⁴² Thomas Kinkade and Katherine Spencer, *Cape Light* (New York: Berkley Publishing Group, 2004), v.

(1995), *Main Street Matinee* (1995), *Main Street Trolley* (1995), *Rotary Club* (1990), *Carmel, Ocean Avenue on a Rainy Afternoon* (1989), *Carmel, Sunset on Ocean Avenue* (1999). These works, given their soft evening glows, their warm mists and rains, their ambience of cordiality, reproduce the abiding myths about the contented life of small-town America, the life as celebrated by Frank Capra or Norman Rockwell or the producers of *Ozzie & Harriet*. Moreover, Kinkade's idealization explains why these human figures are generally non-descript and usually rendered on a miniature scale: they represent the myths' moral values and an approved way of life more than individual persons. As the fashions in the paintings illustrate, this ideal America is pre-countercultural and pre-cosmopolitan. Kinkade's Americans are conservatively dressed (this is a time safe from hippies, punks, and panhandlers), church-going (spires are visible in most of these paintings), family-oriented (many of the figures are depicted in family groups), and patriotic (the national flag flies in almost every painting in this series). These figures also are exclusively white and monoethnic. In general, they correspond to Sarah Palin's idea of "real Americans" and broadly represent the social composition, parochial outlook, and conservative values of the evangelical community. Above all, these small-town landscapes constitute an enchanted vision of America spellbound in an eternal 1950s of prosperity, security, innocence, and national pride. This is America before the social and economic devastation of an unregulated free market; an image of a sacrosanct society magically insulated from cynicism and skepticism, from the dissension of identity politics and the sacrilegious assaults of postmodern art and entertainment.

KINKADE'S PARADISE

The natural world of Kinkade's paintings is not simply pre-industrial but mythical. Hence, his English country gardens have been transfigured and exalted by a superabundance of flowers, by tranquil glades and the "living waters" of translucent brooks and, often, Arcadian ornaments, such as rotundas, gazebos, and giant stone urns. In such landscapes as *The Garden of Hope* (2005) and *The Garden of Prayer*, nature has been wholly cultivated and subdued by a divine Capability Brown. Kinkade's horticultured nature is devoid of danger and menace (not to say, weeds and pollution). This is not only Creation before the Fall, with neoclassical set pieces to enhance our sense of peace and contentment, but this is also the promise of the Heaven that awaits all true believers.

Kinkade's renditions of nature prompt a comparison with those of the Hudson River School. The immense, craggy, precipitous, and brooding landscapes of Thomas Cole, Frederic Church, and others reflected their "sublime" experience of a nature they believed to be suffused by divine power; that is to say, a perception of the Creation as intimidating by virtue of its grandeur, vastness, tumultuous forces, and primeval presence. In vivid contrast, Kinkade's nature is represented as benign, comforting, safe (fenced and gated), and domesticated to the point of being anthropocentric. We shift from dramatic images of nature as indomitable and turbulent (e.g. see Church's *Niagara* [1857]) to sweet images of nature as a Cotswold garden of foxgloves, rose bushes, and cobblestone paths.

The essential difference is between a (Romantic) religious vision of nature as wilderness—in Cole’s words, “the wilderness is yet a fitting place to speak of God”⁴³ —and a religious vision of nature as garden, whereby we can understand Kinkade’s landscapes as, in his description of *Lamplight Manor*, “the glory that awaits the children of God in Heaven.”

Of *Pathway to Paradise* (2002), a work in his *Visions of Paradise* series, Kinkade writes, “When humankind was young, we lived in a garden paradise. I like to think of myself as a fellow discover [sic] on the Pathway of Paradise—one of the fortunate few who have been granted a vision of peaceful perfection.” The painting depicts a sinuous, verdant pathway—part shadowed, part sunlit, bordered on each side by thickly flowering shrubs—which narrows as it extends into a hazy, spiritually enticing distance. As is usual with Kinkade’s religious pictures, the landscape is unpeopled. Taken on its own terms, the painting succeeds as a comforting image of peacefulness and spiritual retreat. Yet the postmodern spectator will not be captivated by Kinkade’s vision. “Paradise” has no place in the postmodern lexicon. Insofar as it is understood to designate some pristine state of “peaceful perfection,” it has been downgraded to mythical status. In this respect, “paradise” has suffered the same fate as “utopia”; in the culture of disenchantment, it is difficult to conceptualize a stage of history where human experience would be altogether undefiled and undamaged. This difficulty is partly a symptom of the deficiencies and often violent outcomes of 20th-century political programs (fascism, Stalinism) driven by a vision of a radically alternative way of life, and partly a symptom of the postmodern experience of hyperconsumerism, whereby an incessant flow of material comforts, pleasures, and luxuries has limited the allure of appeals to paradise. Another problem for the postmodern viewer of Kinkade’s painting is its very title: “Pathway to Paradise” sounds like a line from a cheap song lyric, comparable to “Stairway to Heaven,” or the catchphrase from an advertisement for an exotic travel destination. Simply put, in such contexts, paradise is a hokey concept.

A painting from Something Awful’s *Paintings of Light* series parodies *Pathway to Paradise*. Into Kinkade’s unpeopled garden paradise the artist has Photoshopped a suburban family. All present are engaged in activities that control, not to say subjugate, nature. The father is pushing a rotary mower over the grass-covered path, while his son imitates the action with a toy rotary mower. To his right, his wife is spraying a jet of water onto a plant flowering in an urn. To his left, a man in protective headgear and suit is spraying pesticide over the shrubs. The painting mocks Kinkade’s vision of “peaceful perfection” insofar as it reminds us of humanity’s aggressive interaction with nature—the very interaction on which Kinkade’s picture of paradise unwittingly depends. His imagination of the spiritual is contaminated by signs of the all-too-worldly and coercive activity of landscaping. And this fact surely compromises Kinkade’s explanation of his painting. In the commentary on a page facing its reproduction, he states: “[T]his

⁴³ Qtd. in Andrew Wilton and Tim Barringer, eds., *American Sublime: Landscape Painting in the United States 1820-1880* (London: Tate Publishing, 2002), 14.

place I'm talking about isn't necessarily linked to a physical location. Rather it's a sacred space in the depths of your being—in your spirit and your heart...."⁴⁴ But even if this "physical location" is only a figure for a "sacred space" (and not an image of Eden, in which Kinkade literally believes), nonetheless, through association with the metaphor, the sacred space may become tainted by an ecocentric criterion that indicts landscaping as a colonization of nature.

Yet, some credit is due to Kinkade's ambitious effort to resacralize our perception of nature. For, though his visual idiom accents the sweet and ornamental, by this means it also gestures towards a sacred sense of the marvelous. His landscapes shimmer with numinous energy. The viewer's eye wanders through gardens planted with banks of flowers whose colors glow with radioactive intensity, with clusters of richly foliated trees caught in the interplay of sunlight, mist, and shadow. Here, the viewer encounters an idea of the Creation as benign and beautiful. The bluebell is one of the most abundant flowers in Kinkade's gardens and he surely would have concurred with Gerard Manley Hopkins who, speaking of a bluebell, once said, "I know the beauty of our Lord by it."⁴⁵ In his art, Kinkade pronounces beauty to be an active principle of the Creation.

Kinkade's vision of nature as marvelous becomes all the more poignant if considered in the context of capitalism's unrelenting defilement and commodification of the natural world. Indeed, we may infer that his art appeals to the millions who hang his paintings in their homes by virtue of his utopian counter-vision of a world redeemed from environmental degradation. Similarly, we may understand the appeal of Kinkade's gardens—landscapes caught in the stillness of enchantment—as the flip side of our environmentalist anxieties about the accelerating assault on the planet's ecosystems.

Finally, from the critical perspectives of the conceptual artists whose works hold a prestigious place in the *visual* culture of disenchantment, Kinkade's vision of nature looks fake. Images of nature as advertisers' simulacra or monstrous mutation or, simply, as blighted, will have more credibility for viewers acclimated to eco-critical conceptual art. (Here, I have in mind the work of Alexis Rockman, Mark Dion, Eduardo Kac, Sophie Ristelhueber, Mary Lucier, and Alan Sonfist.) Furthermore, the chances of perceiving nature as charged with divinity have become more remote in a culture whose pop-media images now constitute our primary landscape, not to mention the displacement of nature by virtual realities. Yet, in the light of these contexts in which nature is diminished, we can then think of Kinkade's enchanted landscapes as an endeavor to *restore* a spiritual sense of wonder before the abundance, blooms, and variegated colors of

⁴⁴ Thomas Kinkade and Pam Proctor, *The Art of Creative Living: Making Every Day a Radiant Masterpiece* (New York: Warner Faith, 2005), 3.

⁴⁵ Gerard Manley Hopkins, in *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W. H. Gardner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), xx.

nature and, to borrow a line from Heidegger's meditation on cosmological wonder, "experience the marvel of all marvels: that what-is is."⁴⁶

BRAND KOONS

In 2008, 17 of Jeff Koons' sculptures were exhibited at the palace of Versailles, marking the first retrospective of his work in France.⁴⁷ The exhibition stirred protests among segments of the French right, in whose eyes American pop art had defiled a sacred site of French heritage. (Recall that the art of Versailles—its frescoes and tapestries, portraits and busts—extolled and mythicized the rule of Louis XIV and, by extension, glorified France as Europe's pre-eminent military and cultural power.) At the very least, the display of Koons' *Balloon Dog (Magenta)* (1994-2000), a ten-feet high, one-ton, chromium stainless steel rendering of a children's twist-up balloon animal, or the life-size porcelain sculpture, *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* (1988), seemed like a bizarre intrusion into the chateau's salons of gilded mirrors, crystal chandeliers, and rococo ornaments. Yet, in one key respect, this incongruity between the Sun King's *objets d'art* and Koons' sculptures is only superficial, for their design and function share a distinctive characteristic: ostentation. That is to say, a flashy aesthetics of excess and display in the service of flaunting wealth link the treasures of Versailles with Koons' high-gloss pop-cultural artifacts.

Louis XIV's profligate spending on the embellishment of (what would become) the most sumptuous royal residence in Europe was a continual headache for his Controller General Colbert. Excess reigned in the marble halls and chambers of Versailles: a profusion of bejeweled ornaments, of decorative foliage and scrolls, of murals, frescoes and tapestries whose narratives deified the monarch. The palace was designed to awe its resident nobility with a monumental display of the King's opulence. (The Latin "opulentia" signifies both wealth and power.) Such ostentation, even at the time, was recognized by some as vulgar. The Duc de Saint-Simon famously denounced the chateau for its "capriciousness and bad taste." Later, Voltaire would judge it to be "a masterpiece of bad taste and magnificence."

Like the treasures of Versailles, Koons' artworks are renowned for their exquisite craftsmanship and flawless execution. And, like those treasures, they both embody an aesthetics of ostentation *and* function ostentatiously as signifiers of opulence. For Koons' art has been embraced by the super-rich, not only as a lucrative business investment but as cultural capital, that is to say, as a badge of sophistication and a source of prestige. Since 1999, Koons has become the hottest commodity in the contemporary art market. (His closest rivals are Damien Hirst and Lucien Freud.) Consider the following statistics. The *Banality* exhibition of

⁴⁶ Martin Heidegger, "What Is Metaphysics?", in *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: New American Library, 1975), 261.

⁴⁷ See the official exhibition website at: www.jeffkoonsversailles.com To view most of the artwork discussed here, visit <http://www.jeffkoons.com/site/index.html>

1988 earned him \$3 million.⁴⁸ His porcelain cast *Pink Panther*, originally valued at \$150,000 in 1988, fetched \$1.8 million at Christie's, in 1999, when it was purchased by newspaper magnate Peter Brant. His stainless steel model *Jim Beam J. B. Turner Train*, priced at \$75,000 in 1986, fetched \$5.5 million, in 2004, from financier Thomas H. Lee. Then, in 2009, Lee sold the model for over \$15 million. *Michael Jackson and Bubbles*, originally priced at \$250,000, in 1988, was purchased at Sotheby's, in 2001, by Norwegian shipping tycoon Hans Rasmus Astrup for the sum of \$5.6 million.⁴⁹ Then, in 2007, art dealer Larry Gagosian, bidding on behalf of Ukrainian steel oligarch Victor Pinchuk, paid \$23.6 million for Koons' sculpture *Hanging Heart (Red/Gold)* (1994-2006), when it was auctioned at Sotheby's. (At the time, the sale set a new record for a living artist at auction.) Moreover, just the day before, at Christie's, Gagosian had successfully bid \$11.8 million for another Koons sculpture, a seven-feet-wide stainless steel fake diamond, *Diamond (Blue)* (2005), also on behalf of Pinchuk. The fact is that the status of Koons' art is largely the product of big-business transactions. Art critic Hal Foster locates Koons' work squarely within a flourishing trend he calls "business art," that is, art that chiefly serves as an investment opportunity: "an asset one can borrow against or trade on and defer capital gains taxes on."⁵⁰ An elite corps of collectors (e.g. Peter Brant, Victor Pinchuk, real estate developer Eli Broad, industrialist Dakis Joannou) and renowned dealers (e.g. Gagosian, Robert Mnuchin, the late Ileana Sonnabend) work hard to promote Koons' international reputation. Indeed, given their multi-million dollar investments in his work, they have a powerful inducement to keep boosting his position in the art world. "Koons" has become as much of a brand as "Kinkade."

Don Thompson, an economist and art collector, has investigated the process of branding in New York and London's markets for contemporary art. He notes, "Collectors patronize branded dealers, bid at branded auction houses, visit branded art fairs, and seek out branded artists. You are nobody in contemporary art until you have been branded" (12).⁵¹ He also explains how auction houses, such as Christie's and Sotheby's, produce brand equity (i.e. the premium the consumer readily pays for a branded product over a similar generic one) insofar as "they connote status, quality, and celebrity bidders with impressive wealth" (13). Hence, the marketing hype that attends auctions of Koons' art and such high-profile exhibitions as the one at Versailles. Indeed, François Pinault,

⁴⁸ Peter Wollen, "Sat hello to Rodney," *London Review of Books* 22, no.4, February 17 (2000): 3-7.

⁴⁹ Kelly Divine Thomas, "The Selling of Jeff Koons," *ARTnews*, May 2005.

⁵⁰ Hal Foster, "The Medium Is the Market," *London Review of Books* 30, no. 19, October 9 (2008): 23-24.

⁵¹ Thompson quotes Damien Hirst for whom, "Becoming a brand name is an important part of life. It's the world we live in," *The \$12 Million Stuffed Shark: The Curious Economics of Contemporary Art* (New York: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2008), 61. Koons has also proved himself adept at self-marketing. Unlike thousands of self-supporting artists who, today, find themselves thoroughly alienated from the art market, Koons exists in a happy symbiosis with it. From his Inflatable series of 1979 to his Hulk Elvis series of 2007, he has been producing work for a lucrative art market at a steady and prolific rate.

France's wealthiest art collector, who is not only a patron of Versailles but owns six of the 17 works by Koons shown there, helped finance the huge cost of mounting the exhibition, which led to charges that he used it to enhance the value of his Koons collection.⁵²

Pinault's business empire not only includes Christie's, the top auction house where Koons' works routinely fetch millions of dollars in bids, but the fashion houses of Gucci and Yves Saint Lauren. And these latter assets should remind us of the ostentatious social life lived by business-art millionaires, who intermingle with *haute couturiers*, rock aristocracy (Mick Jagger, David Bowie, etc.), and celebrity artists like Koons, Damien Hirst, and Tracey Emin. This, after all, is the social context in which proprietorship of Koons' sculptures—which must count as among the most expensive luxury items ever produced—confers cachet, serving as a sign of hip taste, artistic refinement and, above all, opulence. Indeed, the sculptures adorn the marble foyers and landscaped forecourts of corporate headquarters, banks, and other plutocratic spaces.

The important point here is that the kind of art that is chosen to serve as a symbol of opulence and cultural capital is not likely to be discreet or marginal: like the bejeweled ornaments at Versailles, it will be meretricious and extravagant and, in the postmodern era, it will also be mediagenic, i.e., art that is glitzy, spectacular, sensational, and celebrity-branded. (Koons has been the subject of puff pieces in such celebrity organs as *People*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Time*, and *Playboy*.) Consider the *Red Butt* set of silkscreens (1991; inks on canvas, 90x60 inches), which show Koons engaged in anal sex with his then-wife, Ilona Staller, the Hungarian-born Italian porn star-cum-politician. Key features of the image are rendered in lurid shades of red: Staller's shiny thigh-length boots, her lace corset and silk gloves, her thick lipstick, and, in the background, a melodramatic, blood-red setting sun. Koons and Staller are carefully posed to create the impression that the sex has been staged as a *tableau vivant* of some archetypal scene. (Says Koons, "We are the contemporary Adam and Eve."⁵³) Or consider his famous life-sized tableau of Michael Jackson holding his pet chimp—*Michael Jackson and Bubbles*—rendered in porcelain and painted gold and white so as to look like a garish rococo ornament veneered in decorative cake icing. Moreover, Koons could complement this self-consciously overwrought confection with the claim that it is the largest-ever porcelain sculpture.

To speak of cultural capital is to reference Pierre Bourdieu's investigation of status resources and the forms and institutional domains in which they are embodied. *Distinction* examines how cultural capital functions in such fields of consumption as clothing, cuisine, interior décor, and, in particular, the arts. The objective is to explain the role of taste in the reproduction of class boundaries and reinforcement of social position. Thus, the consumption of high-art products,

⁵² See Sciolino, "At the Court," and S.C., "Koons Kitsch Meets Versailles Glitz," *Art in America* 96, no. 10 (2008): 34N.

⁵³ Jeff Koons, *The Jeff Koons Handbook*, Anthony d'Offay Gallery (New York: London and Rizzoli International Publications, 1992), 140.

which may be difficult for those of limited cultural capital to appreciate, may be a source of “reputational currency,” a measure of one’s elite social status. However, Bourdieu’s analysis of cultural capital, as it functioned in Paris, in the 1960s, and its embodiment in the “high arts” (e.g. opera, ballet) cannot be transferred *tout court* to the postmodern media culture of Koons’ America. After all, the traditional boundary between “high art” and mass culture has largely been eroded: pop-cultural forms have evolved in complex ways (e.g. via hybrid genres or self-reflexiveness) and become the focus of serious scholarship, while elite forms, such as opera or classic novels, have been rendered accessible across classes through the mass media. In short, the traditional hierarchical differences in consumption patterns have largely disappeared in postmodern America so that they no longer delineate exclusionary class boundaries. Hence, as Douglas Holt explains, “for fields in which there is great overlap in the objects consumed, to consume in a rare distinguished manner requires that one consume the same categories in a manner inaccessible to those with less cultural capital.”⁵⁴ In the case of *Balloon Dog* and *Michael Jackson and Bubbles*, not to mention works that play on the boundaries of pornography like the *Made in Heaven* series, forms of taste and judgment come into play, which are alien to those outside the class enclosure of postmodern celebrity artists and their super-rich patrons and which, moreover, are validated by the vast sums of money paid for the art. When *Pink Panther* (1988), a porcelain cast joke about masturbation,⁵⁵ fetched \$1.8 million at auction, “the packed room...burst into applause at the result.”⁵⁶ This is wealth applauding its own power to determine aesthetic standards.

In short, an aura of cultishness and esoteric expertise, derived from its function as cultural capital, permeates Koons’ art. This is Brand Koons at work, a quality knowingly enjoyed by some, while leaving others mystified. And, as with Kinkade, the process of branding amounts to a worldly type of enchantment which compromises Koons’ pursuit of a resacralizing type of enchantment, that is, his project of investing commodities with the aura of sacred objects.

KOONS’ ENCHANTED OBJECTS

Koons works in two media in his famous *Celebration* series (1994-2008): oil on canvas and sculptures in high chromium stainless steel. The series includes some of his best-known work, notably *Balloon Dog* and *Hanging Heart*. At the manifest level, the theme that links the paintings and sculptures is the paraphernalia of a party to celebrate a child’s birthday: balloon sculptures, party games, party food, gifts, and fancy gift-wrap. But Koons’ “celebration” is not so much about a convivial event as signified by its most emblematic objects; rather, he is celebrating the cornucopia of consumer culture, a celebration which, moreover, magnifies the culture’s tackiest merchandise: souvenir tchotchkes, tawdry gift-packaging, plastic and inflatable toys. Thus, on the face of it, Koons works in the

⁵⁴ Douglas B. Holt, “Does Cultural Capital Structure American Consumption?,” in *Cultural Studies: An Anthology*, ed. Michael Ryan (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008): 710.

⁵⁵ Koons, *The Jeff Koons Handbook*, 104.

⁵⁶ Carter B. Horsley, *The City Review*, November 16, 1999.

domain of kitsch. We encounter what seems, if not irony, deadpan wit, in works that exploit the most astounding techniques of artisanship – Koons' formidable talent for design, his use of state-of-the-art engineered materials, a palette of exquisite synthetic colors – all in the service of extolling the junk of consumer culture. Thus, balloon dogs and dime-store jewelry, party hats and Play-Doh, are sculpted or painted in oils as if they were precious artifacts. There seems to be playful provocation here, a mischievous wink at the plight of the spectator, who feels under pressure to jettison preconceptions about aesthetic criteria, as if Koons' primary objective is to unsettle the binary opposition of kitsch and fine art. However, coming decades after the transgressions of pop art, such confusion of "low" and "high" art would have little subversive value, and we would be underestimating Koons' work if we dismissed it as aiming for nothing more than the frisson of surprising us with the illustrious presentation of schlock.

"I don't see a Hummel figurine as tasteless. I see it as beautiful. I see it and respond to the sentimentality in the work."⁵⁷ Koons sounds sincere when he speaks of the beauty he finds in the banal and sweetly sentimental, in the cute and excessively ornamental. These are the standards of "beauty" that he has cultivated on a grand scale, a project achieving spectacular expression in "Puppy." "Puppy" (1992) is a stainless steel and topiary sculpture of a Highland terrier, built out of seventy thousand flowering plants (and equipped with an internal irrigation system), which stands 43-feet-high and weighs 44 tons. Koons avers that "'Puppy' communicates warmth and happiness to everyone. I created a contemporary Sacred Heart of Jesus."⁵⁸ Either he invokes Jesus ironically in respect of what may amount to an apotheosis of kitsch, in which case there's not much more to be said, or else Koons is challenging us to think about his work in spiritual terms. I want to explore the latter possibility.

As was the case with Warhol, Koons runs a studio factory in Manhattan, in which around 70 artists and artisans execute his designs. He rarely touches a brush or casts; he is a conceptual artist who supervises technicians in the industrial process of producing his work. "I'm basically the idea person. I'm not physically involved in the production. I don't have the necessary abilities."⁵⁹ Arthur Danto traces this conceptualist approach back to Duchamp: "Koons has found a way of making high art out of low art – but in a way that would not have been a possibility until the conceptual revolutions of Duchamp and Warhol, and that accordingly links these artists in [a] progressive series...."⁶⁰ This link to Duchamp merits further consideration. In a panel discussion at New York's Heaven Gallery, in 1986, Jeff Koons declared, "I feel I come out of the Duchampian tradition; Duchamp showed the ready-made with indifference to it, but my personal development has been to maintain the integrity of the object."⁶¹ Recall that Duchamp argued, "If you want to break all the rules of artistic

⁵⁷ Qtd. in Danto, *Unnatural Wonders*, 292.

⁵⁸ Koons, *The Jeff Koons Handbook*, 144.

⁵⁹ Qtd. in Danto, *Unnatural Wonders*, 292.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 287-88.

⁶¹ Peter Nagy, moderator, "From Criticism to Complicity," *Flash Art* 129 (Summer 1986): 46-49.

tradition, why not begin by discarding its most fundamental values: beauty and artisanship." Accordingly, he exhibited his grubby, ungainly, mass-manufactured *objets trouvés*—a bottle rack, a bicycle wheel, a urinal—precisely in galleries and other spaces that valued "beauty and artisanship." Thus, if he is "indifferent" to his ready-mades, it is insofar as he displays them not for their intrinsic beauty but as a means to the end of promoting his anti-aesthetic. In contrast, Koons displays his objects as illustrious artifacts, worthy of admiration in their own right. His *New Hoover Convertible* (1980), *New Shelton Wet/Dry 10 Gallon* (1981), and other consumer objects from *The New* series are displayed in plexiglas showcases and lit with fluorescent lights. Koons' objects are *staged* so as to enhance our sense of their "beauty and artisanship," in which respects, he may be said to "maintain the integrity of the object." In short, a logic of display, quite different from that of Duchamp's, governs Koons' work.

The question of display also arises in comparisons made between the early work of Koons and that of Haim Steinbach. For example, Eleanor Heartney, in two studies of contemporary art, examines Steinbach and Koons together in a context that links their art to Andy Warhol's commodity-inspired aesthetics.⁶² And, to be sure, the work of both artists is premised on "the assertion of the commodity as art."⁶³ Yet, while Heartney makes productive comparisons and nuanced distinctions between the art of Steinbach and Koons, she misses a key difference in attitude that governs how each displays consumer goods. Steinbach arranges new mass-produced objects—e.g. boxes of washing powder and ceramic jugs (*Supremely Black* 1985); chrome tea kettles, chrome trash cans, and latex masks (*Pink Accent* 1987)—on wood-grain Formica shelves, which have been pared down and angled like Minimalist sculptures. Thus, Steinbach can suggest that a visit to a department store, with its stylized and alluring techniques of display and its goods embellished by the latest design principles, is just like visiting an art gallery; indeed, his point is that consumer aesthetics serves as the art of our time, insofar as choosing goods when shopping has become our principal form of self-expression. But to join Koons with Steinbach as "commodity critics," who have "created works designed to suggest that art [is] simply one more item in a galaxy of luxury consumer goods"⁶⁴ misses Koons' emphasis on the parasacred integrity of the consumer object. If Steinbach seeks to "glamorise the mass-produced object so that it [can] be appreciated from a purely aesthetic point of view,"⁶⁵ Koons seeks to glamorize the object so that it can be appreciated as something not of this world but seemingly transcendent.

An aura of the sacred haunts the forms in which Koons exhibited his earliest work. The fluorescent-lit vitrines in which he displayed conspicuously trite consumer products, such as brand-name vacuum cleaners and polishers, function like a contemporary version of the medieval reliquary. Positioned in

⁶² Eleanor Heartney, *Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 41-47; *Art & Today* (London: Phaidon Press, 2008), 40-44.

⁶³ Heartney, *Postmodernism*, 46.

⁶⁴ Heartney, *Art & Today*, 41.

⁶⁵ Heartney, *Postmodernism*, 47.

churches for public view, reliquaries—jeweled and decorated receptacles of holy relics—served as shrines. Similarly, Koons' vitrines enshrine their contents: they seclude them from the everyday world and render them untouchable as if they were holy, thus elevating mundane objects onto a parasacred plane. Indeed, according to Rex Butler, Koons "obsessively polish[ed] the glass vitrines...to remove all human traces."⁶⁶ In the commentary facing a photo-reproduction of *New Hoover Deluxe Shampoo Polishers* (1981-86) —three brightly lit brand-new polishers encased in a vitrine—Koons writes, "I have always used cleanliness and a form of order to maintain for the viewer a belief in the essence of the eternal...."⁶⁷ Moreover, entitling the series in question *The New* may at first seem like a tribute to capitalism's capacity for product innovation. Yet, in naming *every* work in the series "new" this and "new" that, Koons highlights the pristine and undefiled status of his objects. In other words, he establishes a context for the viewer to encounter consumer goods as if they were unearthly: not so much manufactured as immaculately conceived; an invitation to see the object afresh as though it were a miraculous creation. It is an early sign of Koons' ambition to conjure the marvelous out of the banal.⁶⁸

In an interview, Koons has described his works as "maintaining the integrity of the object to such a degree that my hand, my own physical involvement, disappears."⁶⁹ These words unwittingly invoke the very logic of commodification. One is reminded of Marx's famous reflections on the "fetishism of the commodity,"⁷⁰ where he argues that the commodity, once it enters the market as an exchange-value, acquires a life of its own, an existence independent of the labor of its producers. That is to say, the *living*, sensuous labor which produced the commodity becomes reified in the form of an anonymous exchange-value, while the (inanimate) commodity itself is, like a fetish, magically endowed with life. As Koons puts it, the "integrity of the object" is maintained only insofar as all traces of his labor ("my hand," "physical involvement") are erased. Indeed, the conspicuously hi-tech gloss of his bright oil and stainless steel textures, their polish and sheen, produce a singular effect: Koons' objects appear to have been created without human intervention. It as if we are looking at flawlessly engineered products not of this world: they have an unearthly, transcendent radiance. Sculptures such as *Diamond, Hanging Heart, Tulips* (1995-2004), and *Sacred Heart* (1994-2007) seem energized by a haloed intensity. And, by this means, Koons confers a spiritual or, at least, parasacred significance upon his objects. Victor Taylor has observed the "need to re-

⁶⁶ Rex Butler, "Damien Hirst's Death Drive: On the Post-Ironic Art of Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst," in *Damien Hirst*, eds. Christian Gether and Marie Laurberg (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag), 75-85.

⁶⁷ Koons, *The Jeff Koons Handbook*, 50.

⁶⁸ In his resplendent and charismatic staging of commodities, Koons could be said to replicate one of the functions of the colorful packaging and glamorous display of consumer goods: the need to protect their magic from any associations with the all-too-often grimy (not to say sordid and exploitative) conditions of their production.

⁶⁹ Giancarlo Politi, "Luxury and Desire: An Interview with Jeff Koons," *Flash Art* 132 (February/March 1987): 71-76. See also Danto, *Unnatural Wonders*, 292.

⁷⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital Volume 1* (1867) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), 163-77.

establish or render the sacred tangible in a postmodern age," to compensate for a culture devoid of "the supreme value of the sacred."⁷¹ Thus, Koons has created a parasacred iconography. And for this reason he should not be assessed as just another artist of the neo-kitsch, like his eminent contemporary, Takashi Murakami.

Koons' pursuit of "the integrity of the object," in conjunction with his view that, "In...objects we can see personality traits of individuals, and we treat them like individuals,"⁷² may also be appreciated in the light of an old scholastic concept: "the principle of individuation." The term denotes the particularity of form that distinguishes one thing from another. Duns Scotus named this particularity "haecceity" or "thisness." To invoke a line by the Jesuit poet, who famously pursued the quality of *haecceitas* in his verse, "thisness," when caught in art, "fans fresh our wits with wonder."⁷³ Hence, what seems like overkill in an aesthetic that, as in *Celebration*, transmutes party favors into praeternaturally luminous objects, may be viewed as Koons' perception of their miraculous thisness, his effort to communicate the wonder of their unique thinghood. For example, oils on canvas such as *Play-Doh*, *Balloon Dog*, *Party Hat*, and *Plate Set* (all dated 1995-98), depict children's party gifts enveloped in aluminum foil gift-wrap. The sheen of the creased foil refracts the light and colors of the objects with exhilarating force, so as to suggest an energy radiating out from within them. In this way, Koons animates his objects, accentuates their singular essence, thereby redeeming the tackiest merchandise to enchant the viewer.

Consider *Hanging Heart (Red/Gold)*, a steel sculpture of a red heart tied with a gold bow, designed to be suspended from a ceiling. It would be easy to dismiss this work, sold at auction for \$27 million, as an obscenely expensive joke. After all, it looks like a piece of neo-kitsch: camped-up sentimentality, art that is self-mocking, enjoying the confusion it causes the spectator by elevating the aesthetics of gift packaging to the level of art. Yet, realistically, Koons would not and need not have invested so much effort and money, worked with so much advanced technology, all for the sake of a whimsical joke. This sculpture, executed in high chromium stainless steel, weighing 3,500 pounds, standing nine feet tall, required 6,000 hours of labor for its production. Such statistics suggest a more ambitious purpose. Koons has begun with a pop-cultural, almost cartoonish, heart and enlarged it into a quasi-mythical object. Its extraordinary dimensions (106 x 85 x 40 inches), in conjunction with its alluring engineered sheen and its suspension above the ground, endow it with a totemic presence; it seems to invite veneration. Indeed, perhaps it was not by chance that Koons entitled the series to which the work belongs *Celebration*. The word, of course, has a strong religious resonance, and we can think of *Hanging Heart* and other works in the series as positioning its viewers as celebrants: they feel something of the aura or magic derived from participating in a rite of veneration.

⁷¹ Victor E. Taylor, *Para/Inquiry: Postmodern Religion and Culture* (London: Routledge, 2000), 51, 50.

⁷² Qtd. in Nagy, "From Criticism."

⁷³ Hopkins, "Henry Purcell," in *Poems and Prose*, 41.

Sacred Heart (1994-2007), a high chromium stainless steel sculpture of a heart, comes, like *Hanging Heart*, in five versions based on color coating (blue/magenta, violet/gold, etc.), each identically sized at 140.5 x 86 x 47.6 inches. For a few months in 2008, the red/gold version decked the roof of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The sculpture, with its gold-ribbon frippery adorning a shiny red heart, seems to have been inspired by some Valentine's Day heart-shaped chocolate box. At the same time, the title explicitly refers to the traditional Catholic iconography, whereby the Sacred Heart serves as a symbolic affirmation of Christ's love for humanity. Therefore, at one level, the work looks like a mediagenic stunt that vainly invokes a religious devotion, but other features suggest it amounts to more. First, this heart of prodigious dimensions (twice the size of its average viewer) stands up without external props: it looks self-supporting, apparently stabilized on the tip of its base in a manner that eludes gravity. Such exquisite balancing looks unnatural, giving the heart the appearance of a spellbound object or autotelic entity. And it is just these characteristics by which Koons aims to invest a popular icon with the transcendent quality of the sacred. Second, the crown of *Sacred Heart* is sculpted—its steel machine-cut—to simulate the folds and creases of foil gift-wrap and a decorative ribbon. (By the standards of Sacred Heart iconography, this is a wholly original adornment.) Hence, the heart is conspicuously packaged as a gift, another characteristic which may be read as lending a religious aura to the work. For Koons has built into his image of the Sacred Heart the suggestion of its very meaning: divine love is a *gratuitous gift* to humanity. In an essay that reflects on the theological import of giving, Jean-Luc Marion notes that the gift “lose[s] all gratuity, all grace” when it becomes part of an economy of exchange, and he quotes from Luke’s Gospel: “If it is for recompense that you give, where then is your grace?”⁷⁴ Pure giving, that is, giving without expectation of reciprocity, is an act of grace.

In a consumer society, one could say that the final stage of fetishization is the process of marketing the commodity, the magic invested in the latter by the aesthetics of advertising, packaging, and showcasing. And it is precisely this magic, this fetishism, that Koons has so successfully distilled into his work—in the consecration of his readymades, in the numinous sheen of his sculptures, in the supernatural vitality of his painted objects. Perhaps Koons’ singular and unrivalled achievement has been to capture the parasacred allure of the commodity in its elevated, late-capitalist phase. Koons’ commodities do not belong in the hardscrabble world of material need, and as if to maintain their spiritual integrity, representations of (utility-seeking) consumers are avoided.

According to art historian Robert Pincus-Witten, “Jeff recognizes that works of art in a capitalist culture inevitably are reduced to the condition of commodity. What Jeff did was say, ‘Let’s short-circuit the process. Let’s begin with the

⁷⁴ Jean-Luc Marion, “Sketch of a Phenomenological Concept of Gift,” in *Postmodern Philosophy and Christian Thought*, ed. Merold Westphal (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 138. See also Luke: 6:33.

commodity.”⁷⁵ While the Surrealists re-purposed objects so that they might function as conduits of psychic energy, and while the Dadaists often worked with rejectamenta (the street refuse of a Schwitters collage, Duchamp’s found objects), Koons pursues the object in its most lustrous form, that is, the object *qua* commodity. As I have argued, for Koons, the commodity in its unsoiled, mint condition has a purity that verges on the supernatural, the numinous, and thus serves him as a medium of the sacred.

FROM KITSCH TO RE-ENCHANTMENT

Those nurtured by the ironic sensibility and cool aesthetics of the postmodern media culture are likely to have a developed sense of kitschiness. Accordingly, they will be inclined to dismiss the work of Kinkade as an exemplary instance of kitsch, given its sentimental appeals, its comforting nostalgia, and evangelical convictions. On the other hand, they will be inclined to see Koons’ art only as an expression of neo-kitsch, as if it chiefly amounted to hip, edgy, and humorous play on the boundary between cheap and cultivated taste. In short, the ironic viewing position prompts the postmodern spectator to scoff at the unwitting kitsch of Kinkade’s evangelical art, while embracing the conniving kitsch of Koons’ pop-influenced art, the latter distinguished by its celebration of banality and cutesiness. Yet, both judgments can be seen as symptoms of a disenchanted culture, that is, a culture suffused with cynicism and a loss of sincerity; a culture uneasy with passion and emotional depth; a culture which, because of its ingrained irony and skepticism, is more comfortable with parody than spiritual narratives composed in earnest.⁷⁶

Kinkade’s art, in terms of its thematic development and conceptualization, is too easily accomplished, whereas faith and religious commitment should be themes that test a Christian artist to the limit. In the words of Norman Wirzba, “Seekers of God never arrive. They are, as Heidegger often put it, perpetually ‘on the way,’ traveling a path that is broken and fractured rather than smooth and straight....The life of the Christian is throughout characterized by ‘immense difficulty.’”⁷⁷ A religious art that pursues themes of spiritual struggle and crisis is sure to yield images radically distinct from the sweet comforts of Kinkade’s paintings. In *Doubting Thomas* (1599), for example, Caravaggio represents a shocked Thomas who, in the presence of two other Apostles, tests the fifth crucifixion wound of the resurrected Christ to see if it is real, only to find his

⁷⁵ Qtd. in Thompson, *The \$12 Million Stuffed Shark*, 82.

⁷⁶ In the absence of public statements, we can only speculate on what Koons and Kinkade think of each other’s work. My guess is that the assessment would be one of mutual contempt. For a strict evangelical like Kinkade, Koons’ work would embody all that he finds profane and degenerate in contemporary art. And for a self-consciously innovative artist like Koons, who seeks to “tak[e] us out of the twentieth century” (*The Jeff Koons Handbook*, 82), Kinkade’s work would look like a throwback to the nineteenth.

⁷⁷ Wirzba, “Love’s Reason: from Heideggerian *Care* to Christian *Charity*,” in *Postmodern Philosophy and Christian Thought*, ed. Merold Westphal (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), 253-54.

probing finger plunged into a gaping hole in Christ's side. The realism of the picture is augmented by a harsh lighting scheme, in which the figures are in part brightly illuminated, in part darkly shadowed, all posed against the unrelieved darkness of an empty background. Moreover, the Apostles, dressed in shabby robes, their faces coarsely furrowed, resemble peasants rather than holy men. The painting has a physical immediacy that repudiates the tendency to idealize religious figures. Above all, the image is disturbing and, therefore, not suitable for the shopping-mall galleries where, typically, Kinkade's paintings are sold. After a visit to The Gap or Bed Bath & Beyond, the shopper will be more receptive to Kinkade's consumer-friendly Christian art.

Yet, Kinkade's art, for all its faults—its tranquilizing coziness, its branded identity, its doctrinalism—can serve to highlight the spiritual limitations of secular disenchantment; it can serve to remind us that the embarrassment we feel in encounters with heartfelt expressions of spirituality says as much about the pervasive force of postmodern irony as it does about art that is naive and sentimental.⁷⁸ Above all, his art does more than traffic in comfort, softness, and sweetness; it performs as inspirational art. That is to say, this art gives spiritual encouragement and motivation to its admirers and reaffirms their religious convictions. In Thomas Kinkade's words, "Paintings are the tools that can inspire the heart to greater faith."⁷⁹ By contrast, the cool aesthetics and self-mocking stance of much postmodern art has no comparable inspirational effect.

The faith-based sincerity and religious aspirations of evangelical art can induce awareness of spiritual concerns whose absence from postmodern culture is simply taken for granted. Such concerns encompass an ambitious range of questions: questions of redemption, transcendence, sanctity, blessedness, piety, and eternity. We can think of a Kinkade painting as making an ethical demand on the viewer to look upon the world with reverence. "My paintings," he says, "provide a reminder of the beauty of God's creation."⁸⁰ The point here is *not* whether his evangelical art is premised on credible concepts; rather, the disdainful, superior posture of the postmodern spectator should be tempered by the acknowledgment that his or her position is compromised by the culture's excess of irony, skepticism, cynicism, and suspicion. Certainly, there is much that impedes an appreciation of Koons' work: knowing that his art ostentatiously functions as cultural capital for his plutocratic clientele; knowing that he essentially is an Establishment artist behind the façade of maverick and celebrity bad-boy; given his many self-aggrandizing and pretentious gestures and statements. But the principal impediment to an appreciation is that, at first glance, Koons' oeuvre looks like a trove of neo-kitsch: a tongue-in-cheek extravaganza of the cheap and trite, of the sentimental, ornamental, and monumental. And if this was the case, we could safely pigeonhole him as a

⁷⁸ In an interview with the New York Times, in 1999, Kinkade observed: "High culture is paranoid about sentiment. But human beings are intensely sentimental" (DeCarlo, "Landscapes," 7).

⁷⁹ Qtd. in Balmer, *Mine Eyes*, 312.

⁸⁰ Qtd. in DeCarlo, "Landscapes," 7.

postmodern ironist. But, as I have suggested, his art pushes beyond irony. Koons himself has remarked, "A viewer might at first see irony in my work, but I see none at all. Irony causes too much critical contemplation."⁸¹ Indeed, this post-critical, post-ironic stance is a *sine qua non* of his goal to animate his art with the force of enchantment. Kitsch is only his starting-point: it serves as his medium or channel through which to explore the transcendental possibilities of the banal, the cute, and vulgarly excessive. The kind of beauty he says he finds in a Hummel figurine (typically, a porcelain model of a mischievous apple-cheeked child) is writ large in his work. It is as if he has perceived a transcendental impulse in the cheapest forms of mass culture and then endeavored to liberate it. He has sought to restore the enchantability of art-objects generally dismissed as kitsch by releasing their parasacred potential. For example, of his transformational work on that which is extravagantly ornate, he has observed, "I use the Baroque to show the public that we are in the realm of the spiritual, the eternal."⁸²

To be sure, re-enchantment does not serve a progressive agenda; America's two best-known living and wealthiest artists are as remote as can be from any culture of resistance. Both Kinkade and Koons are brand names, primary stakeholders in the commodified art world. Furthermore, their art has nothing to say about social injustice. Even if we concede that their projects of re-enchantment amount to an implicit critique of postmodern disenchantment or capitalist depredation, the critique does not pose the slightest challenge to oppressive forms of power. Their art, unlike that of, say, Hans Haacke or Barbara Kruger, Victor Burgin or Banksy, puts no one on the defensive. Banksy has said as much of Koons in his wall painting of the latter's pink balloon dog wearing a muzzle. The artists at Somethingawful.com have said as much of Kinkade in art that explodes the magical calm of the latter's cocooned worlds. However, the principal concern here has been to expose the limits of kitsch as a designation for judging their work, in particular, their artistic pursuit of the sacred and wonderful. Put simply, the cost of the postmodern drive for disenchantment—i.e. its radically anti-metaphysical impulse as seen in its practices of demystification and deconstruction—is art defined by a deficit of spiritual meaning. Kinkade and Koons have responded to this deficit with an aesthetic that seeks to re-enchant art. Whether or not we feel they have succeeded, their endeavors merit some recognition.

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⁸¹ Koons, *The Jeff Koons Handbook*, 33.

⁸² Ibid., 106.