

# ARTPULSE

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**Young British Artists  
and the Brit Pop in  
the 1990s**

Contemporary Art and  
Online Popular Culture

**Interview with  
Gianni Vattimo**

Mieke Bal

Peter Drake

Videogame Aesthetics

**High Art vs. Pop Culture**

An International Survey



In today's artistic climate, modernist art categories seem to be less transcendent. Scholars like Horkheimer and Adorno, Marcuse, Eco, Lyotard, Bourdieu, Huyssen, Mitchell, Jameson, Bauman, Debray et al have all addressed our most complex cultural challenge—the high art versus pop culture debate—but we still lack a conceptual framework for providing critical judgment. From Modernism's high art culture, based on typographic knowledge and forms, identified with the dialectic of “innovation,” we have shifted into Post-Modernism's pop culture, defined by visual recognition and narratives and rooted in the rhetoric of “post-production.”

Some scholars and professionals claim this debate is outdated, nostalgic, even irrelevant, but at *ARTPULSE* we believe the opposite. The debate sits at the heart of today's society. Investigating the complex, contradictory relationship between high art and pop culture helps us recognize the ideological, sociological and cognitive conventions of Neo-liberalism and how it affects the contemporary subject.

Even if different adaptations of this debate have been tackled in the past, today's coordinates come from totally different technological, political and sociological perspectives, especially when we consider the relationship between cultural producers and consumers. So today's conclusions must differ from those of past debates.

Also, in the current atmosphere of “culture capitalism,” culture has become, in Marx's terminology, infrastructure. It subsumes economic, political and ideological capital. Think of Olympiads, World Cup Championships and other big sporting events, tourism, casinos, festivals and biennials, museum blockbuster exhibits, and mass distributed pop culture in movies, songs, books—all these products of the so-called “experience economy.”

Amidst all this, Clement Greenberg, from his bygone era, seems as relevant as ever. His stigma of kitsch haunts us still. Our definition of kitsch needs to be expanded and redefined. It assaults all contemporary life in art, aesthetics, politics, social lives and even the utopian. Twitter, Facebook and Instagram have only accentuated the narrative of “kitsch.”

And finally, we must look inside the art world, to whom the analysis of pop culture has never been important—except for some works that acquire the status of oeuvre d'auteur. We dismiss it as simple pop, as low culture. We at *ARTPULSE* think art historians, art critics and artists themselves need to look *extramuros* to revitalize the arts. One way of doing this is by engaging with current visual pop society.

As such, two cultural vectors intersect during our contemporary moment. On the one hand, we have high art practices that are “poppish,” incorporating pop culture references that most often lean on kitsch and celebrity (Jeff Koons, Richard Prince, Elizabeth Peyton, Julian Opie, Francesco Vezzoli, Damien Hirst, Takashi Murakami et al). This approach accommodates the tastes of both new and seasoned collectors. We also witness “high artists” such as Shirin Neshat and Steve McQueen, whose ventures into the more commercial film world have been very successful. Spectacle-driven exhibitions like that of Salvador Dali at the Reina Sofía or Marina Abramović's retrospective at MoMA, aimed at mass audiences, reinforce the crossover of high art into mainstream culture.

All the while, as Adorno points out with his “culture industries,” we manufacture cultural artifacts and mass distribute them—from pop songs (Madonna and Lady Gaga), films (*Matrix* and *Memento*), books (*Freedom* and *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*), TV series (*The Wire* and *The Simpsons*) comics (Superman's “The Incident” and Marjane Satrapi's “Persepolis”), to videogames (Grand Theft Auto and The Stanley Parable). These pop forms all incorporate both subtle and obvious references to high art. In addition, there are performers like David Bowie, James Franco, Brian Eno and Peter Greenaway who have engaged both domains for many years.

Following is a series of questions to help articulate this paradigm:

- 1) Is there a way past the Marxist and Frankfurt School's “undialectical” dialectics of high art as authentic art and pop culture as mere commodification?
- 2) How can we reformulate Greenberg's definition of kitsch that has comprised practically all pop culture?
- 3) Are museums to blame for turning artworks into mass-consumed icons reproduced on mugs, bags and towels, or is this process inevitable in advanced, free-market democratic societies?
- 4) Can we develop strategies to comprehend the complexities and contradictions of pop culture in the context of contemporary capitalism and thus provide a more critical perspective of culture?
- 5) Does pop culture have any positive effects on democracy and social life?
- 6) Is art history still the primary discipline engaged in a critical and fruitful dialogue with pop culture, or do we need to look *extramuros*?

We have asked international professionals in fields relevant to this ‘expanded field’—art history, visual studies, cultural studies, film, literature, sociology, philosophy and anthropology—to address any of these questions or express a position on the topic in general. To all, our sincere gratitude for the time, commitment and knowledge they have generously shared with *ARTPULSE* and its readers.

In addition, this issue of *ARTPULSE* features essays and interviews by leading professionals on the relationship between high art and pop culture: Michele Robecchi talks in his column in a personal manner about “pop icon” Marina Abramović; Alistair Brown on video games' aesthetics; Domenico Quaranta on contemporary art and online popular culture; Javier Panera on Brit Pop and YBAs; and interviews with philosopher Gianni Vattimo by Max Rynänen, visual artist Peter Drake by Stephen Knudsen and my own interview with Mieke Bal, cultural theorist and filmmaker. The questionnaire and essays serve as *ARTPULSE*'s contribution, and its challenge, to recent developments in the interpretation of culture.

Paco Barragán  
Guest Editor

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**Front Cover:**  
Erwin Olaf, *Rouge, Player 1*, 2005. Courtesy of Erwin Olaf Studio.

# HIGH ART VERSUS POP CULTURE NOW

## (An International Survey)

*ARTPULSE* has asked professionals it has identified as relevant in this ‘expanded field’ to address either one or several questions related to the dialectics of High Art versus pop culture—or, on the contrary, to express an overall position on the topic in general. The *ARTPULSE* questionnaire has been sent out to approximately 130 professionals internationally, among which art professionals (art historians, art critics, artists, curators and museum directors) and professionals from the field of visual studies, cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, philosophy and literature.

BY PACO BARRAGÁN

In our current era of ‘cultural capitalism,’ as I like to frame it, revising and reformulating the complex and contradictory relationship between High Art and pop culture is not merely an exercise of nostalgia or outdatedness, but a serious attempt to comprehend the ideological, sociological and cognitive conventions of neoliberalism and how it affects the contemporary subject.

Besides the global international scope of the *ARTPULSE* questionnaire, we also pursued a mix of established and emergent practitioners. And at the risk of sounding self-congratulatory, we sincerely believe we have achieved this goal—we received 62 questionnaires—and would like to express our gratitude to the wide and varied participants for their commitment, knowledge and challenging perspectives.

Following are the series of questions we posed to help articulate this paradigm:

1) Is there a way past the Marxist and Frankfurt School’s “undialectical” dialectics of High Art as authentic art and pop culture as mere commodification?

2) How can we reformulate Greenberg’s definition of ‘kitsch’ that has comprised practically all pop culture?

3) Are museums to blame for turning artworks into mass-consumed icons reproduced on mugs, bags and towels, or is this process inevitable in advanced, free-market democratic societies?

4) Can we develop strategies to comprehend the complexities and contradictions of pop culture in the context of contemporary capitalism and so provide a more critical perspective of culture?

5) Does pop culture have any positive effects on democracy and social life?

6) Is art history still the primary discipline engaging in a critical and fruitful dialogue with pop culture, or do we need to look *extramuros*?

### BOUNDARIES, ROPES, AND DIFFERENTIAL AUTONOMY

We will start by highlighting some of the answers of those participants who have expressed an overall position on the topic. For visual theorist **James Elkins** (USA, based in Chicago) this debate “will seem like an old question, one that was asked in the early 1990s.” Elkins

supports his argumentation by recalling Kirk Vanerdoe and Adam Gopnik’s exhibition at MoMA titled “High & Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture,” (1991). He states that expecting the return of this debate is “an effect of the artworld’s habit of reading and forgetting selectively.” For theoretician **Jozef Kovalčík** (Slovakia, based in Bratislava), who lectures at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design Bratislava (AFAD), the identity of pop culture was traditionally “defined in relation to high art as mere kitsch—simple, formulaic and commercial,” and since the 1960s “high culture was open to popular culture and democratization,” and “the concept of high culture is not plausible anymore” but ends up signaling the fact that art institutions where high culture is produced “are still not democratic enough.”

For associate professor of communication and culture at Indiana University **Jon Simons** (UK-Israel, based in Bloomington, Ind.), “The boundary between cultural producers and consumers is being effaced,” and this “transformation of relations between cultural production and consumption matters far more than the distinction between high and low culture, or postmodernism’s undermining of it.” In this same spirit, a series of art practitioners signal this mutual approach or hybridization between “hi and lo.” Dutch photographer and filmmaker **Erwin Olaf** (The Netherlands, based in Amsterdam) is of the opinion that “Pop culture adapts more easily to high art and wants to use often the ‘look’ of (high) art as an inspiration or plain imitation to sell more of a mass product,” while high art insists on “communicating first of all that it is art by creating first sight non-aesthetic, repetitive and super intellectual works that prevent the mass consumer from understanding.” For visual artist **Walter Bortolossi** (Switzerland, based in Udine, Italy), high and pop culture are part of the “same rope,” in which the two ends of the rope signal “different manifestations of the rope, and not necessarily the most fundamental” and in which each artist is confronted with the “risk of ‘watering down’ the product in the interest of appealing to a public and shying away from any kind of complexity.”

Performer and new media artist **Pamela Z** (USA, based in San Francisco) thinks that operating along and occupying the “soft borders of disciplines” has been irresistible, and it is the very nature of our “capitalist society’s commercialism which encourages the co-opting of any idea or thing that can in any way be monetized,” but “affording artists the freedom to incorporate whatever elements they feel moved to include in their work”. On the other hand, painter and educator **Jason Hoelscher** (USA, based in Savannah) acknowledges as well “today’s intensive hybridizations of culture modes” and proposes the term “dif-





Walter Bortolossi *Immanuel Kant meets Mark Zuckerberg*, 2011, oil on canvas, 47.24" x 59." Courtesy the artist.

ferential autonomy": "not a linear, hierarchically exclusive mode of discourse like that posited by Greenberg, but rather a heterarchical, networked system of feedback relations, in which a form's independent status is reciprocally clarified and enhanced through the ways it differs from surrounding forms." Visual artist **Jeanne Susplugas** (France, based in Paris) acknowledges the "leveling of culture" in which "quantity became quality" and provides two examples: While "the Pharrell Williams curated show at Galerie Perrotin Paris is like rush hour in the metro, people [also] queue up to see Bill Viola's show at Grand Palais," concluding that "the problem is that culture has become synonymous with leisure." Finally, for visual artist **Sašo Stanojkovik** (Macedonia, based in Skopje, Macedonia, and London), it is important to point out that "in some contexts where the art market hasn't developed yet and the capitalist structures and relations haven't yet involved art (e.g. Macedonia), a completely different set of questions are more urgent but are also related to the relation between neo-liberal capitalism and art and how populism overwrites art."

The director of Spanish MUSAC Museum **Manuel Oliveira** (based in Leon, Spain) considers "culture today, more than ever, porous and interconnected" and, although he's aware of the "way in which pop culture feeds back to produce new habits of thought and action, conduct and expression that likely wouldn't exist in its absence—a

culture of high art, as it were"—he is nevertheless worried about the fact "that this open field of culture tends to reinforce more than it challenges one's existing preferences or ways of doing or appreciating images, things and cultural products." For anthropologist **Carlos Granés** (Colombia, based in Madrid), "Pop is acceptance," and "Acceptance is, or can be seen, as the reverse of high culture." Furthermore, "Pop culture is an urban culture" that appeals to a "contemporary sensibility because it is transgressive, youthful and rebellious, but in such a way that nothing is really defied or altered."

For his part, art critic **Barry Schwabsky** (USA, based in New York) wrote a couple of years ago in his recently reprinted book *Words for Art: Criticism, History, Theory, Practice*, "The art world is a specialized milieu based on taste" and dependent "on the value of authenticity and a disdain for the aesthetics of mainstream mass culture" and, in a funny sense, "The art world doesn't know whether it is a subculture pretending to be a culture or a culture pretending to be a subculture." Finally, Iranian visual artist and filmmaker based in New York **Shoja Azadi** points out that with the contradictions of cultural production "through the complex web of exchange and the theoretical (read: ideological) mumbo jumbo of academic valuation and curatorial appraisal, the end result is none but that of alienation and estrangement."

## MARXIST AND FRANKFURT SCHOOL 'UNDIALECTICAL' DIALECTICS

Regarding the first question of our survey—"Is there a way past the Marxist and Frankfurt School's 'undialectical' dialectics of high art as authentic art and pop culture as mere commodification?"—we can consider the words of Shoja Azadi, who affirms that "The discourse needs to address the morphing of both academia and cultural production within the new realities of financial capitalism. Art and culture are now treated and viewed as financial assets, while academia at large is vested in power sharing with, as opposed to challenging, institution." French art theorist and director of the Visual Arts School (ENSBA) in Paris **Nicolas Bourriaud** prefers "to oppose an art which generates thought and sensations to an art that produces nothing but the repetition of its premises, that needs a 'cultural' crutch to exist. And I am not sure that 'authenticity' is not a really dubious concept." **James Lough** (USA, based in Savannah), a professor in the Department of Writing at Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) thinks we can't ignore "the anxious dialectic between high and low, the Great Divide that Huyssen critiqued. We have to be able to look at all of it, from sitcoms to Nam June Paik, and evaluate the works' artistic merits as well as their ideologies—based on what the works are trying to achieve artistically and the messages they convey, on purpose or not." For director of the Van Abbe Museum **Charles Esche** (U.K., based in Eindhoven, the Netherlands), this is a debate that "already happened long ago" and says you can't see "the last 30 years without thinking this issue is already resolved." Furthermore, he reminds us, "The market determines art's authenticity through trading it in the galleries and auction houses."

For **Manuel González de Ávila** (Spain, based in Salamanca), a lecturer in comparative literature at the University of Salamanca (USAL), "This dialectic is, in its epistemological and sociological sense, insuperable, and will never disappear from our discourses about art. Even the debates that put it in question merely counter-sign and authenticate as its very condition of possibility as debates," stressing furthermore that what makes a work of art high or low "is not only a set of characteristics or properties inherent to the one or to the other, but also the type of aesthetical, cognitive and emotional operations its receiver carries on in his reception." That is, "We must recognize that 'high' culture is something embedded in social subjects, in their minds and in their bodies, and not only a property of the select objects they manipulate, create, transform or receive." Professor in screen studies at Melbourne University **Angela Ndalilianis** (Australia, based in Melbourne) considers that "High art also succumbs to an economic logic. It may not be concerned with 'mere commodification,' but it is focused on an elitism that I find even more problematic," because above all, "popular culture has mastered the capacity to engage in undialectical resistance (often more so than high art) that runs parallel with the changed conditions of our cultures, economies, models of technological communication."

Executive director of Higashiyama Artists Placement Service **Endo Mizuki** (Japan, based in Kyoto) thinks that it doesn't really matter whether it's "high or not, pop or low" as we see that "a sort of autonomous logic appears in specific cultural contexts, with critical potentials to society" that forms the "base of cultural reality, which is not divided in a binary way nor developing linearly." **Peter Weibel** (Germany, based in Karlsruhe), the chairman and CEO of the Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe (ZKM), says "that the expectations and claims of high art have been partially as illusion-

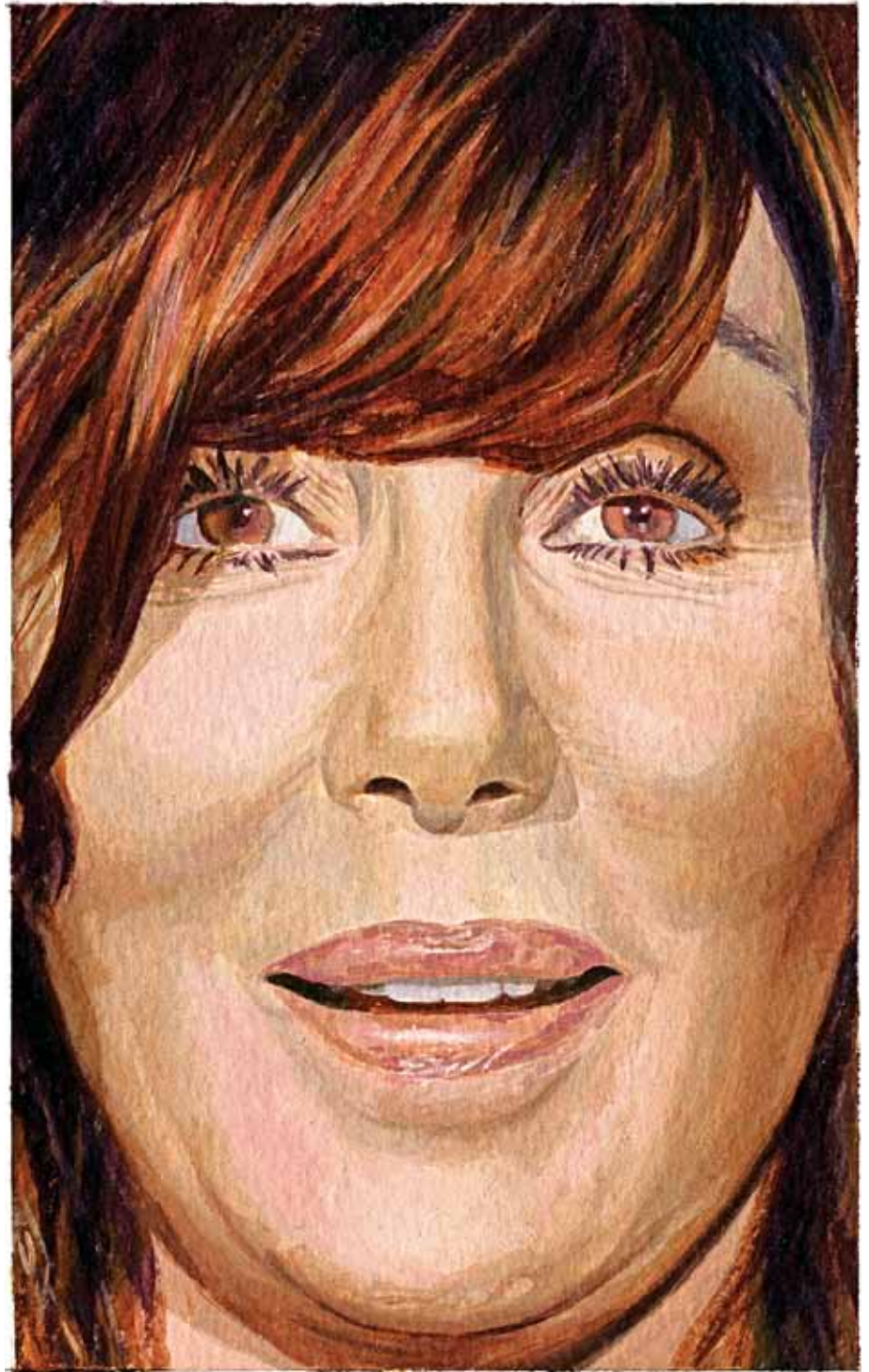
istic as the promises of pop culture. The starting point should be the question of distribution. Mass culture is for infinite distribution for the many. High culture is for zero distribution: the original for the happy few. High art must accept a new logic of distribution in the digital age." Distribution also appears to be a strong argument for **Domenico Quaranta** (Italy, based in Brescia), the artistic director of the Link Center for the Arts of the Information Age, who signals that "In the age of globalization, information and accelerationism, this perspective is completely outdated," as the "contemporary art world stopped being a place for innovation in the 1970s" and reminding us that "only a few collectors are buying digital files, in most cases stored on a physical support (!) and accompanied by a certificate of authenticity (!!)."

Chinese **Colin Chinnery**, artistic director of Wuhan Art Terminus (WH.A.T) in Beijing, feels that "There is no way we can divorce commodification and culture, at least not in visual art and not in this era," despite "pop art's valiant attempts to confront or even destroy this dialectic," largely "because contemporary art no longer deals with one but many cultural/economic contexts, each going through a different stage in the transition to post industrial consumerist societies." For visual artist **Arturo Duclos** (Chile, based in Santiago), the breakdown of the Berlin Wall and the fall of the USSR brought with it the disappearance of this dialectics and the "construction of a new order, which is beyond a dialectic between high art and pop culture" in which "the phantom of utopia still feeds art and moves artists to search a better life quality for the people instead of questioning high or low culture." For his part, Australian based in Perth **Darren Ansted**, coordinator of painting at Curtin University in Western Australia, Adorno's "pronouncements on art, both high and low, are pessimistic," and the "conservative Marxist lens through which he views art is unduly narrow," as "he situates art as part of the superstructure, and not part of the material basis of society, a view which casts art as empty." He ends by saying that we can better "explore theorists who have engaged different ways of understanding art, like Mikhail Bakhtin—for whom artists co-author reality with viewers."

We finish a selection of the first block of answers regarding the "undialectical" dialectics with three reflections on the commodification of society. For visual artist **Marc Bijl** (The Netherlands, based in Berlin), we live "in an overconsuming capitalist society where everything is for sale, resale and to buy," and "if you want to live you have to work and participate and accept the very fact that intellectualism, high art and high culture is—by nature—a 'commodification' itself. It always was in its own right. A product of its well-educated people and society," it indicates that "the 'undialectical' can be made dialectical, Beuys can be made Pop, kitsch can turn into intellectualism and Warhol can sound like a sociopolitical criticaster if you only read the right auction house catalogues." Director of Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art **Davis Liss** (Canada, based in Toronto) is aware that "Capitalism has most certainly found a way around dialectics and authenticity. So if one wishes to make distinctions between 'high art' and 'pop culture,' for better or for worse, commodification is no longer a meaningful way to measure such distinctions. Certainly art and cultural industries have done very well by capitalism, and I wouldn't make the assumption that art's status as a sought-after commodity automatically renders it inauthentic."

**Max Rynänen** (Finland, based in Helsinki), an aesthetician and a lecturer in theory of visual culture at Aalto University, finds that





Miguel Aguirre, *Cheryl Sarkisian LaPierre*, 2008-2011, oil on paper, 19.68" x 11.8." Courtesy of Galería Pilar Serra, Madrid.

“Adorno’s ‘Culture Industry’ is a fun and provocative text to read, but I can’t see that this division of culture would really be relevant for all fields of culture,” as “we’ve had avant-garde popular culture—from the first rough bebop recordings to today’s experimental rock music—and we’ve always had a soapy side in the arts as well (some fairs, museums, etc). A lot of that is more from the logic of commodification.” We can conclude with **Robin van den Akker** (based in Rotterdam, the Netherlands), a lecturer in continental philosophy and cultural studies at Erasmus University College Rotterdam, who affirms that “If we were to speak of dialectics we should therefore rather say that the contradiction between high art and pop culture had been ‘resolved’ (*aufgehoben*) under postmodernism, resulting in both a dissolving and a maintaining of the distinction between high and low, pure and corrupted, autonomous and fallen (in the Heideggerian sense).”

### GREENBERG, KITSCH, AND CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

For **Celeste Olalquiaga** (Venezuela, based in New York and Caracas), cultural historian and author of *The Artificial Kingdom: A Treasury of the Kitsch Experience*, “Greenberg’s definition of kitsch (which, by the way, is not his, but was taken from Hermann Broch) as a bad copy of art has the advantage of mainly being applicable to art itself. Popular culture is an entirely different ballgame. It is not interested in being art, anymore than kitsch cares about whether it is original or fake. It just is, period. This is one of the big pluses of popular culture, kitsch or no kitsch: it just doesn’t care to bow to distinctions, it is not in the business of establishing hierarchies of better and worse, it just wants to be liked.” But, Olalquiaga proceeds, “Both art and popular culture can be kitsch if by kitsch we understand a saturation of codes, that formal excess which modern rationality abhors.” She concludes by stressing



Erwin Olaf, *Rouge, Player 1*, 2005.  
Courtesy of Erwin Olaf Studio.

“Kitsch is anti-essentialist and deeply democratic. It is not a stored-up cultural capital that feeds off its ancestry or intellectual depth, but rather a free radical that ignites both what is valued and what is discarded. It is precisely this equalizing talent that makes kitsch so hard to accept.” **Jennifer Gilmore** (USA, based in New York), novelist and author of *Something Red* and *The Mothers*, reminds us that “Greenberg himself came to reject his own notion of kitsch,” and while “looking at kitsch in the literary world, one of the primary concerns of Greenberg’s piece, it makes itself known in a variety of ways. We see it through irony, for example. It signals the reader with a wink, always aware of itself as in some of the novels by Philip Roth, Umberto Eco and Salman Rushdie.” We can come

to the conclusion that “Now, kitsch is high art, even though what that looks like is up for debate. Literature has come to embrace the kitsch of comic books, genre literature, young adult fiction.”

**Hajime Nariai** (Japan, based in Tokyo), curator of Tokyo Station Gallery, understands that “Kitsch can’t be separated from avant-garde; for example, when Pollock’s painting appeared on the cover of *Vogue*, the artwork had changed into kitsch.” In addition, “The contrast between avant-garde and kitsch, or authentic and fake, is not a conflicting concept and can’t be classified by Kantian affirmation.” For visual artist **Adel Abidin** (Iraq, based in Helsinki), what is important is not “whether something is kitsch or not, but much more: How did the work affect our daily life and our perception of



art.” Says visual artist **Nicola Verlato** (Italy, based in Los Angeles), “Greenberg launched the stigma of kitsch on popular culture in order to create, in America, the realm of high art, of which, for a while, he was the king, distancing as much as possible the traditional arts field from the formation of the values of mainstream society. In doing so it made the arts become themselves socially completely irrelevant,” but today, “After the all-including sedimentation of popular culture of the last 50 years, we can’t accept anymore the distance between ourselves and the culture which formed us, therefore we have to overcome the concept of kitsch and finally remove it from our box of interpretative tools.” Echoing that opinion is **Luis Antonio Pérez Vidal** (Peru, based in Lima), lecturer in communication studies at Atlantic International University and author of *Pop Power: Diplomacia Pop para una Sociedad Global* (Pop Power: Pop Diplomacy for a Global Society), who affirms “Kitsch can get very subjective as it points out something that doesn’t fit the standards of opinion leaders or specialists,” and “instead of reformulating the concept of kitsch we should stop using it,” because “Why should we discriminate a form of expression just because it’s a product of mass consumption? Shouldn’t that be the artist’s goal—to make a piece appealing to a massive audience?”

This brings us to the relevance of the geopolitical and cultural context in which kitsch manifests itself. In this sense, visual artist and art historian **Gregory Buchakjian** (Lebanon, based in Beirut) translates this debate to the new art market in the Gulf States (UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar): “The role played by these monarchies is the total opposite of the dictatorships mentioned by Greenberg. Till the 2000s, the Arabian Gulf was, with few exceptions, a cultural desert, and its imagery was exclusively associated with bad-taste-gilded fussy interiors. So that the question raised here is what will happen when a kitsch environment hosts major patrons of ‘high art?’” Visual artist and lecturing professor at Silliman University **Kristoffer Ardeña** (Philippines, based in Dumaguete, Philippines, and Madrid) stresses that “We should address the big factor called cultural context,” because had “Greenberg grown up and lived in Southeast Asian (SEA), in this heterogeneous cultural geographical salad, he’d probably think of kitsch in a different manner”; and so, “perhaps the idea of high art plus pop plus culture plus commodification are all part of the same equation in Southeast Asian contemporary art system.”

The aforementioned Chilean **Arturo Duclos** states that “Kitsch is a totalitarian and colonial definition coming from McCarthyism, used as a domination concept of high culture. Instead of kitsch we should speak about a shift in our patterns from the traditional West-East axis to explain kitsch as pop culture alive in the North-South axis.” From a formal point of view, Mexican artist based in London **Alicia Paz** recalls “in the 1990s having a sense of curiosity and relief as a painter in relation to the more frequent integration of kitsch in painting,” as it “constituted a kind of ‘back door’ through which one could escape the increasingly narrow postmodernist trajectory that painting had become associated with,” in which everything “had already been done” and that precisely “the problematic of kitsch and social satire led the way in opening up possibilities again.” For **Christian Caliandro** (Italy, based in Bari), art historian and cultural theorist, “Greenberg’s definition of kitsch was perfectly inserted in his monolithic conception of avant-garde and modernist art: in that sense, it’s practically impossible to use.” But “the term and the concept of ‘kitsch’ can still be useful, instead, to discover how it has invaded the whole cultural territory of contemporary art: is there a single artwork of the last 30 years that

is not affected, in a way or another, by a ‘kitsch attitude’ towards the world and the social reality?” We can conclude this section on kitsch with **Manuel González de Ávila**, for whom “The contemporary kitsch has to be understood in terms of the object-subject interaction which supports many degrees and qualities,” and where “the presence or absence in the work of a strong, self-reflective tone is a good criterion to distinguish potentially interesting kitsch (the ‘subjective’ kitsch) from what is not but intends to look like it (the ‘objective’ one).”

## MUSEUMS, MUGS AND MASS-CONSUMPTION

We will address this topic by starting with some of the participants from Down Under. For **Elizabeth Ann Macgregor** (Scotland, based in Sydney), director of the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia (MCA) in Sydney, we can’t deny the fact that “The democratization of art through increasing access to more people is a hallmark of much museum practice today and is essential in societies where public funding is ever more contested. Art for the elite is not a sustainable option. The adoption of pop art strategies to popularize art is therefore to some extent inevitable and not necessarily reductive. All museums face increasing competition from the entertainment business, and the key issue is how to engage audiences in critical debate within art without surrendering to the lowest common denominator.” **Russell Storer** (Australia, based in Brisbane, Australia), the head of Asian and Pacific Art Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane, signals the “rapidly changing economic and political climate in which museums are increasingly expected to provide entertainment, education, civic promotion and tourism to justify and retain their levels of government funding. They compete with a growing number of events and organizations for a small pool of benefactors and corporate support.” In Australia in particular they “work with many artists from Asia and the Pacific, as well as Aboriginal Australian artists, who come out of art histories where the question of the modernist autonomy of art was often framed differently, or not at all, and the desire to communicate broadly is embraced perhaps with less anxiety.” Public support is also an important issue for **Christiane Paul** (Germany, based in New York), associate professor of the School of Media Studies, The New School, and adjunct curator of New Media Arts at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, who believes the lack of public support obliges museums to “make a conscious choice to ‘denature’ artworks by mass-reproducing them on utilitarian items.” In addition, Paul continues, “Art as ‘decoration’ for consumer goods is not an inevitable process of the free market, but a choice made due to economic pressures, lack of better options, or lack of imagination and inventiveness in creating better options.”

For his part, **Oliver Kielmayer** (Switzerland, based in Zurich), director of the Kunsthalle Winterthur, doesn’t “see the problem here. Mugs, bags and towels are commercial goods, and if they have a Mona Lisa or Lady Diana on it, doesn’t matter. Art is an essential collective memory, so the more often it appears the better!” **Charles Esche**, the director of the Van Abbe Museum, shares a similar opinion when he states that “There are very few museums that count in terms of the market today, perhaps 10 worldwide. Those museums are largely subject to the influence of their funders, who are mostly collectors with particular interests in the museum programs. If merchandising helps to give museum and independent income stream, then it is helpful to protect their diversity.” For **Peter Weibel**, chairman and CEO of ZKM in Karlsruhe, Germany,



Students protesting inside Taiwanese Parliament; on the right side painting by Chen Ching-Yuan. March 2014. Photo Courtesy SANADA (康絃齊), Taipei.

from the moment artists entered the free market and offered their works at the *salons indépendants* of the 19<sup>th</sup> century “they realized that you attract more clients when you provoke some scandals in the media. Thus, the *salon indépendants* became “schools of scandals” (Richard Brinsley Sheridan, 1777). This was the entrance to mass consumptions. The museums of today just continue in this logic.” Tam Gryn (Venezuela, based in New York), Head of the Curatorial Department of the Artist Pension Trust (APT), the changing nature of a “world saturated with information” will affect “institutions who need to take advantage of the fast pace of information to educate people about art. It was only in the 1960s that museums became educational institutions thanks to Pontus Hulten, and now we are ready to take it to the next level with museums and artists participating actively in social media.” For David Liss, director of Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art Toronto, “it’s inevitable” because it “apparently is no longer feasible to expect to be supported by increasingly impoverished governments.” This same idea is shared by British artist collective Ben Langlands and Nikki Bell (U.K., based in London), who say, “Given today’s drive to monetize everything this tendency seems inevitable. Museums are merely the latest ‘followers’ in a promiscuous drive to generate income from cultural assets. In the course of turning themselves into global entertainment brands they reveal themselves prone to the same opportunistic economic temptations as nearly everyone else.” Finally, visual artist Fabián Marcaccio (Argentina, based in

New York) states “We are no longer in an advanced free-market democracy, so we can leave alone the mugs and bags. The actual pieces in the wall of most museums look like souvenirs, not useful living art! Look at MoMA—it looks like Bloomingdales.”

Sociologist and arts writer Nicola Mariani (Italy, based in Madrid) sees museums “from a sociological point of view no longer ‘art temples’ as they were in the past” but as “multifunctional places with many different business units: art exhibitions, bookshops and merchandising, coffee shops, restaurants, etc.,” as “the cultural business is only part of the entire business,” and many museums are called “to sell ‘experience’ or ‘augmented reality.’” For art critic and curator Tokke Lykkeberg (Denmark, based in Copenhagen), “Museums may be said to do two things at a time: they produce originals and copies.” Therefore, “the production of originals and copies go hand in hand. A Mona Lisa mug does not debase the tableau. It celebrates it.” Also, art critics Francesca Bonazzoli (Italy, based in Milan) and Michele Robecchi (Italy, based in London), authors of the recently published *Mona to Marge: How the World’s Greatest Artworks Entered Popular Culture*, remind us that “Although very tempting, the notion of casting museums as the ultimate villains is probably misplaced. Museums and institutions can’t do anything without the agreement of artists or their estates.” Concerning merchandising, they understand that “the mere gesture of bringing home a book tag or a mug reproducing the art of a genius like El Greco could be seen as a contribution to stimulate the curiosity about the artist.” We can conclude by discussing the “com-

modification of the museum” with visual artist **Vargas-Suárez Universal** (USA, based in New York), for whom it’s crystal clear that “It’s not only the museum, but artist’s estates, their heirs and the public’s appetite for affordable art consumables. It’s the perfect storm for bastardizing art and its original intentions.”

## POP CULTURE, DEMOCRACY AND CAPITALISM

In this section we will include answers to question number four—“Can we develop strategies to comprehend the complexities and contradictions of pop culture in the context of contemporary capitalism and so provide a more critical perspective of culture?”—and question five—“Does pop culture have any positive effects on democracy and social life?” This seems the most complex part: what strategies can we implement for culture to have a more democratic effect on the citizen?”

For **Nicolas Bourriaud**, “None of them are driven by culture, unfortunately. But anything, from great art to an inspired TV series like *The Wire*, can slightly modify or orientate the collective gaze.” Independent curator and arts writer **Carla Acevedo-Yates** (Puerto Rico, based in New York) considers that we have to look at capitalism first. “Neoliberalism as a way of life seeps into all forms of cultural production (including what is defined as ‘high’ art and pop culture), i.e., how art/culture is produced, circulated, disseminated and consumed,” as “it is no longer a question of economics or even content, but one of finance and asset diversification.” **James Hellings** (U.K., based in Birmingham, England), lecturer at the Birmingham Institute of Art & Design, expresses his worries about our late-capitalist society by acknowledging that “It is reprehensible to live in a society that produces and prescribes high-quality education, experience and products for some (the rich) and low-quality education, experience and products for others (the poor). Art, play and culture, here isolated from work and labor, made independent from society,” he concludes, “catastrophically fails its own concept.” Iranian film-maker **Sjoha Azadi** thinks the real problem is that “The Illusionary ideology was all so encompassing that it ultimately dismantled the artist as the independent creative producer. By elevating a few celebrity ‘artists’ and creating schooled mass aesthetic workers, it triumphed over the unruly and subversive nature of art and artists.” For **Alistair Brown** (U.K., based in Durham, England), researcher in the Department of English Studies at Durham University, talking about pop culture’s democratic effects is difficult because “Like popular art in general, from television drama to the graffiti of Banksy, we view the works not because we freely rank them best among a wealth of alternatives, but we have no option *but* to look at them, because they shout more loudly, buzz through more channels, saturate our media.”

Concerning the possible strategies, for visual artist **Jaime Gili** (Venezuela, based in London) it’s about “being curious and sensitive to the point where some football elements may have the same nuances as a medieval painting,” just as any cultural creation is about “intensity and depth.” For Lebanese **Gregory Buchakjian** it’s about acknowledging that “At a time ideologies and politics don’t have anything to offer but isolationism, popular culture has the ability of bringing together people around something: a story, a dream, shared by people of different races and ages.” **Luis Antonio Pérez Vidal** recalls how “in the 1970s Latin America was the scene of multiple *coup d’états* in the region. Where civil organizations failed to restore democracy, artists and musicians succeeded by denouncing these *de facto* governments. Art is always on the first line of fire when it comes to defending democracy, true democracy.” And this brings us to contemporary Taiwan, where visual artist and curator **Ada Kai-**

**Ting Yang** (Taiwan, based in Taipei) witnessed how “the Sunflower Student Movement, a group of average 25 year olds occupied the Legislative Yuan (congressional building) to protest the Service Trade Agreement with China” and how “pop culture arose together with propaganda and social life” while students sang “songs and made creative installations and sculpture-like chairs.”

However, maybe we should not talk about strategies but instead “tactics to critically reflect the nature of contemporary art,” according to **Timotheus Vermeulen** (The Netherlands, based in Nijmegen), assistant professor of cultural theory at Radboud University Nijmegen and co-director of the Centre for New Aesthetics. “Can we perceive the artist as we see the Hollywood film director, the television star or the game developer, not as some autonomous individual but as a discursive subject?”

## ART HISTORY GOES EXTRAMUROS

The last question of our survey was whether art history is still the primary discipline engaging in a critical and fruitful dialogue with pop culture or whether we need to look *extramuros*.

For some—**Fabián Marcaccio**, **Charles Esche**, **Kristoffer Ardeña**, **Vargas-Suárez Universal**—art history is still important, but looking *extramuros* in a “transdisciplinary gesture” (Esche) is always good, but remembering the roots is necessary. For others—**Angela Ndaliansis**, **Timotheus Vermeulen**, **Carla Acevedo-Yates**, **Tokke Lykkeberg**, **Arturo Duclos**, **Oliver Kielmayer**, **Elvis Fuentes**, **Christiane Paul**, **Nicola Verlato**—art history has never been the privileged domain in which to engage critically with pop culture. Angela Ndaliansis offers an interesting reflection when she says, “Art history as a discipline is destroying itself internationally by stubbornly refusing to adapt traditional approaches to new forms of cultural practice.” It would need to take into consideration “1) how the traditions also impact on and can be reconceived in relation to contemporary practice, and 2) include an analysis of new art forms and new theoretical approaches that have emerged since the 20<sup>th</sup> century.” A third group—**Endo Mizuki**, **Nicola Mariani**, **Francesca Bonazzoli**, **Michele Robecchi**, **Max Ryynänen**, **Christian Caliandro**, **Manuel González de Ávila**, **Domenico Quaranta**—suggest other realms and disciplines beyond art history, such as social sciences, new media art, aesthetics, cultural studies, semiotics and anthropology. An image engages in multiple interartistic and interdisciplinary dialogues. We can easily agree with Francesca Bonazzoli and Michele Robecchi when they affirm that “Our *zeitgeist* is pop, whether we like it or not. Those who keep seeing pop as low art and stubbornly resist it are failing to see the same road they’re walking on.”

I would like to underscore the importance of this topic with some finishing remarks. While for **James Lough** it’s important if we want to interpret the “million of aesthetic adventures of the 21<sup>st</sup> century” not to “abandon a certain ‘high modern’ critical elitism” that can return “evaluating art based on criteria of artistry, as well as on political and ideological grounds” (unlike his students who shy away from critique), for **Jason Hoelscher** it is up to us to decide “whether the glass is half empty or half full: does high/low fusion prompt a cultural dissolution into interchangeable, high-entropy meaninglessness, or does it present an expanded field of opportunity for reciprocal influence, differential interactivity and recombinant creativity?”

We can confidently finish with **Barry Schwabsky**’s question, which in a very suitable way summarizes our endeavor: “If this is not the time to look with skepticism at the direction our culture is taking, what is?” ■