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# The Art of Appropriation

*An investigation into the re-contextualization of the kitsch and  
commonplace object in the work of selected artists of the 20th century*

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## **CONTENTS**

List of Plates	1
Introduction	2
Chapter I : Kitsch and Modernism; the concept of 'Taste'	3
Chapter II : Marcel Duchamp; the banal object as art form (I)	9
Chapter III : Jasper Johns; the banal object as an art form (II)	15
Chapter IV : Jeff Koons and John Kindness; 'low' as 'high'	29
Conclusion	43
Bibliography	44



## LIST OF PLATES

1. Marcel Duchamp <i>Fountain</i> 1917	12
2. Jasper Johns <i>Flag</i> 1954-55	18
3. Jasper Johns <i>Target with Plastercasts</i> 1955	20
4. Jasper Johns <i>Ballantine Ale Cans</i> 1960	23
5. Jasper Johns <i>Savarin can</i> 1960	25
6. Jasper Johns <i>Gray Alphabets</i> (detail) 1956	27
7. Jasper Johns <i>0-9</i> 1959	28
8. Jeff Koons <i>Rabbit</i> 1986	31
9. Jeff Koons <i>Michael Jackson</i> 1988	33
10. Jeff Koons <i>Pink Panther</i> 1988	35
11. John Kindness <i>Scraping the Surface</i> 1990	38
12. John Kindness <i>Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle Harp</i> 1991	39
13. John Kindness <i>Mr. American Express</i> 1990	41



## INTRODUCTION

22. p202

David Hamilton, the british Pop artist has commented that :

It took until the mid-fifties for artists to realize that the visual world had been altered by the mass media and changed dramatically enough to make it worth looking at again in terms of painting.

Thus, it is my intention, in this dissertation, to examine the appropriation of the banal, common and frankly vulgar in the work of selected artists of the avant-garde of this century.

Chapter I - will look at the existence of kitsch in the era of modernism, demonstrating how kitsch and the avant-garde are correlative in their similar violation of 'good aesthetic taste.'

see 10.

Chapter II - will investigate the origins of the re-contextualization of the common object at the beginning of this century with reference to Marcel Duchamp and the first significant example of the 'transfiguration of the commonplace.'

Chapter III - will consider the work of American artist Jasper Johns who further elaborated the ideas initiated by Duchamp by revaluating bland , familiar images for their ironically subversive implications about the differences between art and reality.

Chapter IV - brings the argument up to date by looking at the work of two contemporary artists, Jeff Koons and John Kindness, both of whom make comments on, among other things, the social implications of consumerism, by appropriating the recognizable forms and motifs that characterize kitsch.

In conclusion, this thesis will consider how a century that gave rise to the phenomenon of modern consumerism, might also, logically speaking, host generations of artists concerned with the significance of kitsch and the common object. in an attempt to get to the very root of all thinking about the very nature of art and aestheticism in the 20th century.



## CHAPTER I

## Kitsch and Modernism; the concept of 'Taste'

...today in Pompeii tourists are visiting murals depicting Romans with huge penises; originally meant as adverts for brothels, they are now considered great art.

...In two hundred years we may consider Picasso inferior to the man currently responsible for the 'Coca-Cola' commercials...so we should never be afraid to analyze marginal or inferior manifestations of our culture - Umberto Eco

1. p33





In 'Five Faces of Modernity', Matei Calinescu observes that :

5. p231 If the avant-garde and camp fashions can resort to artistic forms and techniques clearly related to the most obvious varieties of kitsch, kitsch in its turn can mimic with profit the appearance of avant-gardism. This is another explanation of kitsch's constantly renewed power of survival within the domain of what is commonly regarded as 'high art'. Certainly, the kitsch artist mimics the avant-garde only to the extent to which the latter's unconventionalities have proved successful and have been widely accepted or even turned into stereotypes.

Both kitsch and the aesthetics that characterize 'modernism' appear almost complementary to one another. Compulsive consumption and the need for escapism characterize both. Again, Matei Calinescu comments that:

5. p8 The temporal relativism implied by the aesthetic concept of modernity, and specifically the view that no tradition is by itself more valid than any other, while serving as a justification of the overall antitraditionalism of modernism and the total freedom of individual artists to choose their ancestors at their own discretion, may also be seen as a precondition for the all-embracing and blandly tolerant eclecticism of kitsch as a style.

ibid. Today, in our consumer 'luxury-oriented' society which stresses the importance of status and material wealth, kitsch has become one of the key factors of 'modern civilized life'. Immediately accessible and easy to digest (aesthetically speaking), kitsch is designed to both 'save' and 'kill' time (a great paradox inherent in kitsch) - saving time by making enjoyment of itself instantaneous and requiring little (if any) effort; killing time by helping 'modern man' escape temporarily from his disturbed "post-industrial state".

5. p225 With that "kitsch, technologically and aesthetically, is one of the most typical products of modernity." Kitsch is dependent on fads, crazes and built-in rapid obsolescence. 'Modernism' in terms of the consumer is equally dependent on these factors. Once kitsch is technically possible and economically profitable, it is only the limitations of the market that can determine the extent of its proliferation.

The idea of kitsch has a lot to do with Modernism's illusion about beauty



5. p236

and taste as a commodity, and the extent to which it can be manufactured, bought and sold. I am inclined to agree with Calinescu when he says that this is directly attributed to " the use of genuine great art as mere ostentatious decoration." Kitsch implies aesthetic inadequacy as it neither demands nor requires artistic education for the understanding of possibly difficult ideas of aesthetics or the philosophical/social function of art. The 'Luxury-industry' that has become so dominant in modern Western society produces situations and devices that are not entirely appropriate in terms of art criticism - relaxation, fun, suitability in terms of home and office environments. As Stephen Bayley has pointed out - "the idea of art devoted to the excitement of pleasure is a recent one." Art theorist T.W. Adorno further argues that:

5. p242

**A fully concentrated and conscious experience of art is possible only to those whose lives do not put such a strain on them, that in their spare time they want relief from both boredom and effort simultaneously. The whole sphere of cheap commercial entertainment reflects this dual desire. It induces relaxation because it is patterned and pre-digested.**

1. pxv

So what then are the 'proper' criteria by which a work of art *should* be considered ? Of course, taste and the criteria for such are inextricably linked to social climate and current fashions at any given time. Stephen Bayley draws up an interesting 'cycle' of taste which begins with *modishness* turning to *disfavour* which in turn, comes full circle with *camp revival*.

1. p10

Taste, of course, cannot be scientifically rationalised despite three centuries of vain attempts to do so. Bayley argues that 'good taste' cannot be objectively defined, and that at each period in history " each age finds its own expression in material things and the faculty we use to identify those we find palatable or repellant we call taste".

Of course an object in itself cannot inherently be in 'good' or 'bad' taste. These are categorisations applied by social conventions that are, as we have seen, constantly in a state of transience. Derek Clifford draws an interesting example of this with reference to the guillotine - "Because a machine





7. p113

fulfils its purpose with obvious efficiency there are those who believe it to be beautiful, but the beauty they see is not a beauty of form but of performance. This is the beauty of the guillotine. But to those who saw behind the smooth functioning of a machine to the bloodlust of the degraded mob it served, the guillotine was not beautiful in form but ugly." Bayley argues further that the gaudy and vulgar are not inherently 'bad' taste either and that, again, this is dependant upon which ideas of beauty and aestheticism are dominant at any particular time.

1. pxviii

The intention of an individual in creating a work of art is the key to understanding that work, and in this respect education is important when confronting sometimes difficult aesthetic concepts in much avant-garde art - indeed, there would be no need for learning if all works of art initiated their relevant responses. Every choice we make is relative to a particular set of socially conditioned aesthetics which is in turn relative. Preferences and prejudices vary for different social classes - "designs by Walter Gropius are fine for those like Gustav Mahler and me who ... share positivist beliefs in [functionalism and reductivism] but are less successful when foisted on blue-collar workers whose own aspirations are to live in a blaze of polychrome vulgarity like Mr.[Donald] Trump." I think that criteria are necessary when one comes to evaluate much avant-garde art (diverse perhaps in content and intention), in order that we be made aware of more valid forms of criticism and judgement. Otherwise we run the risk of dismissing potentially rewarding qualities of an artwork and employing inappropriate standards like "valuing the paintings of Veronese by the square yard or Maillol's nudes by the ton", although this is obviously grossly exaggerated.

7. p138

I would, however, agree that the rise in popularity of kitsch is directly related to the ever increasing tendency in avant-garde art movements towards abstraction, conceptualism and other cerebral-driven ideologies. Much of the art of this century and, indeed, contemporary art more so, requires considerable intellectualism in order for it to be understood and then perhaps appre-



ciated. Only then can it have the potential to be enjoyable.

7. p147      Clearly it might be all gain for us if we were able to derive from every work every pleasure of which it was properly capable. But the set of mind which some works require of us is so strange that we cannot readily accomodate ourselves to it.

14. p116-126      Art critic and theorist Clement Greenberg, in a dissertation dating from 1939, makes mention of this fact with an interesting reference to Picasso, whose work at that time was not widely understood outside of the art cognosceti. Greenberg remarks that a degree of conditioning is necessary for anyone to understand the concept of Cubism, for example. 'Analytical Cubism', which represents the first era of Cubist painting, holds little superficial appeal for the unprepared viewer being visually abstract and largely monochromatic.

7. p149      Derek Clifford, with regard to this need for conditioning, makes reference to a Professor Panofsky who discussed a painting by Titian, "An allegory of Prudence", a painting steeped in intellectual motifs and references to Classical Literature, with little visual appeal: " It is doubtful whether this human document would have fully revealed to us the beauty and appropriateness of its diction had we not had the patience to decode its obscure vocabulary." Clifford reinforces this by believing that "paintings should be that which they contain", if they are to be significant in themselves as visually aesthetic expressions.

ibid.

5. p230      Kltisch is more readily enjoyed because we are familiar with its motifs and metaphors. This does not of course imply that 'realist' or representative art is kitsch. It can be, of course, but is not necessarily so. Kitsch holds the unique power of satisfying a universally popular aestheticism. Kitsch also, ironically, enjoys a kind of negative prestige in avant-garde circles .Moreover, the artists of this avant-garde have (as I will illustrate) repeatedly made use of many of the elements that characterize kitsch for their "ironically disruptive purposes."Stephen Bayley goes a stage further than this and argues that





"kitsch and the avant-garde look very different, but are correlative in substance : they are the equal and opposite manifestations of that unique historical awareness which produced the concept of modernity. Just as the avant-garde places originality and novelty above all else, so banality and vulgarity are lionised in kitsch. Both violate everyday conceptions of good taste." We can deduce from this that both kitsch and the avant-garde are subversions of what is commonly regarded as socially -acceptable aestheticism.



## CHAPTER II

## Marcel Duchamp : the banal object as art form (I)

24. p123

I think a picture is more like the real world when it is made out of the  
real world - Robert Rauschenberg



10. p1-33

In his essay on the differences between works of art and 'mere real things', Arthur Danto makes an important distinction between the intention of the artist and that which is communicated to the audience through the work. Essentially context penetrates purpose, and this concept is fundamental to an examination of the history of appropriation in the art of the avant-garde.

Danto illustrates these fundamental differences by inventing a hypothetical situation - he describes an exhibition of paintings of diverse subject matter but all resembling each other superficially - they all *visually* appear as a painted red square on a canvas. Danto then introduces an interesting diversion where another artist, having seen the exhibition, brings along a painting of a red square that resembles the other paintings in the exhibition - "I can only observe that he has produced a pretty minimal artwork, not to be told by naked inspection from a bare red expanse of paint; he has not yet made an artwork out of that bare red expanse."

10. p3

What Danto has illustrated is that although the 'artworks' in the exhibition resemble one another visually, they are essentially different by virtue of their context and intention - and that a work of art that visually speaking is a red square on a canvas, is also different from a *mere* red square, in that the 'work of art' has a criterion, a context, and the 'red square' is *only* a red square.

So what makes something a work of art when it so closely resembles something that is *not* a work of art ? Danto argues that aesthetic conventions dictated by society at any given time, can allow some object or idea to be considered within the context of art if it satisfies these prearranged conventions.

10. p23

**It is precisely the confidence that the [artistic] conventions are understood which enables the mimetic artist to carry mimesis to its extreme point, to make whatever is to appear within the relevant brackets as much like what would be encountered in reality as he can manage.**

The confines of the picture frame (and the gallery) - the remove or "psychic





10. p24 distancing" - allows the artist to practice mimesis knowing that conventions will indicate to the viewer not to react to the reality it implies.

ibid. **The greater the degree of realism intended, the greater the need for external indicators that it is art and not reality.**

This idea of psychic distancing, demonstrating that it is not reality but is entirely invented, has also been seen as an issue of immorality. Danto believes that it is perhaps immoral to represent scenes of violence in art and film as it removes the incidents it represents from a moral sphere and places it within a purely aesthetic context.

10. p22 **It is possible to see the whole world across aesthetic distance, as a spectacle or comedy, whatever. But for just this reason we cannot explicate the connection between artworks and reality on the basis of this distinction which is at right angles to it.**

22. p273 This brings us to the work of Marcel Duchamp, an artist who illustrated one of the most critical and revolutionary issues underlying all theorizing about art in the 20th century. Duchamp, inspired by modern advertisements' attempts to transform everyday objects and people's attitudes and relationships to these objects, initiated his move towards an art concerned with the re-contextualization of objects from a purely functional position. Under the general title of 'Readymades' (a term derived from retail merchandising catalogues), Duchamp displayed "prosaic things of relatively general utility" as works of art - bicycle wheel, snow shovel, steel comb.

Duchamp's most notorious readymade was Fountain (illus. 1) of 1917, a urinal that was not only one of the least likely objects to be re-contextualized but which was also amongst the least prestigious of distinct grades of urinals available !

We all know what a urinal is and what purpose it serves, but we are very unsure about how to confront a urinal that also happens to be an artwork. Critics generally agree that Duchamp's 'work' is in fact the *gesture* of exhibiting the urinal as 'art', and not the object itself. But what makes it art ?







illus 1. Marcel Duchamp *Fountain*





Duchamp outlined his reasons in an issue of *The Blind Man* magazine in 1917, after it had been rejected from an exhibition of contemporary sculpture (considered by the judging panel to be a joke in the worst possible taste): "Whether Mr. Mutt [the pseudonym employed by Duchamp] with his own hands made the fountain or not is of no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view - and created a new thought for that picture."

22. p277

Duchamp insisted that it was quite valid to consider plumbing as art, claiming that "the only works of art that America has given are her plumbing and her bridges." Kirk Varnedoe illustrates an ironic parallelism between Duchamp's statement and gesture and the way in which Plumbing Retailers promoted their merchandise. He quotes a 1915 'Trenton Potteries' brochure:

ibid.

**Someone has said that, so far, the great contribution of America to art is the pure white American bathroom. Certainly one of the chief contributions of America to health and comfort is her sanitary potty.**

Varnedoe points out also the fact that trade showrooms, where bathroom fixtures are displayed in 'artistic' environments have been part of consumer society since the advent of mass production.

22. p273

**The world of the plumbing fixture was one with developed, self-consciously modern notions of display, which were concerned precisely with the notion of giving an object a new appeal over and above its functional significance.**

24. p27

However, what Duchamp did was to take the same ideology but to subvert it and make people think about urinals as 'art' - thereby turning it "into a vehicle for some of the most tendentious and longest-burning intellectual debates in this society."

Danto further argues that what establishes the differences between art and reality, are the socially- accepted aesthetic conventions and that because these fluctuate ( and are in a constant state of transience), that what may



not be considered a work of art today, may be considered as such at some point in the future - which recalls Umberto Eco's observation about particular murals in Pompeii (see title page of Chapter 1.)

10. p48 Some critics have analyzed 'Fountain' in terms of formal aesthetic considerations. This began as early as 1917, when a number of supporters of 'Fountain' likened its form to that of a meditative seated-Buddha figure, although Duchamp discouraged this idea insisting that "the choice of the readymades was never dictated by an aesthetic delectation. The choice was based on a reaction of visual indifference, with at the same time a total absence of good or bad taste, in fact a complete anaesthesia."

Critic and theorist George Dickie made a notorious analysis of 'Fountain' in which he wondered why could not :

10. p93 **the ordinary qualities of 'Fountain' - its gleaming white surface, the depth revealed when it reflects images of surrounding objects, its pleasing oval shape - be appreciated ? It has qualities similar to those of works by Brancusi and Moore which many do not balk at saying they appreciate.**

ibid. Dickie is, of course, correct to an extent. But his argument is quite inappropriate when we consider the intentions of Duchamp - to challenge conventional aesthetic and artistic ideologies. Dickie disregards Duchamp's argument and is adamant that -"what we appreciate is just what we would appreciate in non-artworks when they happen materially to be the same, as 'Fountain' is from countless urinals."

With regard to the viewer who suffers from the "I could do that" syndrome, Dickie's argument is largely appropriate, but perhaps concurs with Irish artist John Kindness' belief that the general public have just about caught up with the Impressionists.

Duchamp's revolutionary approach to an avant-garde aestheticism that championed the abandonment of an aesthetics based on visual appearances and concepts of taste, was the most significant contribution to the undermining of the strictly conventional boundary between art and non-art.



## CHAPTER III

## Jasper Johns : The banal object as art form (II)

The street and sky - they can only be simulated in canvas, but a flag, a target, a 5 - these can be made, and the completed painting will represent no more than what it actually is - Leo Steinberg

2. p1





**Painting should not be exclusively visual or retinal. It must interest the grey matter, our appetite for intellectualization - Marcel Duchamp**

Jasper Johns has stated that he was not aware of the work of Marcel Duchamp when he executed his first 'Flag' and 'Target' paintings in the mid 1950s, and that it was only after his first exhibition when he was inaccurately categorized as a 'neo-Dadaist', that he discovered the work of Duchamp. From this point onwards, Johns became increasingly interested with the ideas and published theorizing of Duchamp and through both artists' mutual friend, the avant-garde composer John Cage, Johns met Duchamp late in 1955. I feel, therefore, that it is appropriate to establish the extent to which Duchamp's art influenced that of Johns and then to look at the similarities and essential differences therein.

Johns's involvement with Duchamp was the result of a common interest in the very nature of representation in art and the role of the artist himself. For the two artists, the commonplace object is endowed with a new significant rhetoric by dislocation into a new context - 'art'.

ibid.

**Like Duchamp's objects, Johns' have the quality of being provocative and irreverent through their banality and their lack of what is commonly considered, in art terms, good aesthetic taste.**

Duchamp's objects, although visually familiar as functioning 'everyday' items, are made more ambiguous by virtue of their dislocation from the 'real' world - Johns's works also confront this sense of ambiguity - but both artists work manages to retain their recognizable appeal despite the innovative context in which they are placed.

ibid.

**At every point in nature there is something to see. My work contains similar possibilities for the changing focus of the eye.**

Johns's work, however, stresses the importance of the abstract/conceptual *and* the visual/retinal aspects of a work of art ( in his paintings and sculptures both aspects are complementary), and essentially this is the difference between his work and that of Duchamp. As his significant predecessor,



Duchamp was the only artist to consistently concern himself with *ideas* in relation to art.

ibid. **For both Duchamp and Johns, the type of visual and mental experience presented in a work of art should have the quality of referring the viewer to the space in which he or she is situated, rather than creating an illusion which leads the viewer somewhere else.**

This outlines both artists similar intentions - primarily concerned with a reinvestigation of the object in terms of redefining our perceptions of everyday commonplaces, and perhaps the dismissal of an art that endeavours to remove us from reality.

Johns was interested in presenting his works in a detached, depersonalized manner which complemented the motifs of his subject matter. Duchamp before him had always been completely indifferent to the objects and images that he appropriated, often signing them '[from] Marcel Duchamp' in order to stress the limited intervention and choice undertaken by Duchamp in the making of his artworks.

24. p134 Johns's first major artistic work with regards to the concepts initiated by Duchamp (although, as I have outlined above, at this time unaware of any antecedent), was his Flag (illus. 2) of 1954-55. By taking a universally recognizable and thus to an extent, anonymous image, Johns was able to *reinvent* the American Flag by virtue of it being hand-painted to the full scale of the original. But far from being a flat, straightforward graphic reproduction of the flag, Johns's painting has a "painterly, encaustic surface as sumptuous and aristocratic as the subject-object was blatantly literal and banal." By adopting the rigid, geometric pattern of a flag, Johns was able to concentrate his efforts on innovative ways of pictorial representation, without having to employ conventional pictorial illusionistic techniques - perspective, foreshortening.

**In this way a visual cliché was transformed into a fresh experience, the product of its having been re-presented not only with a delicately manipulated fine art means but also with a formal rigour characteristic of the most**





illus 2. Jasper Johns *Flag*







24. p135

**advanced abstract painting.**

Thus, the paradox of 'Flag', is that the painterly surface of the canvas endows a static or visually inert image with a sense of depth and subsequently provides the viewer with a whole new way of looking at it.

'Flag' was important in the sense that it demonstrated that we should no longer look at familiar or recognizable objects or images in a pre-conditioned way. Each of the many variations of the theme of the American flag that Johns executed helps to increase our awareness of the significance of everything in our environment, despite how familiar or mundane it may at first appear.

Despite the fact that we would normally look at a flag's design as a compositional whole, Johns's representation of the flag isolates each aspect of the flag and arranges them as independent shapes within a grid-like geometric surface.

2. p2

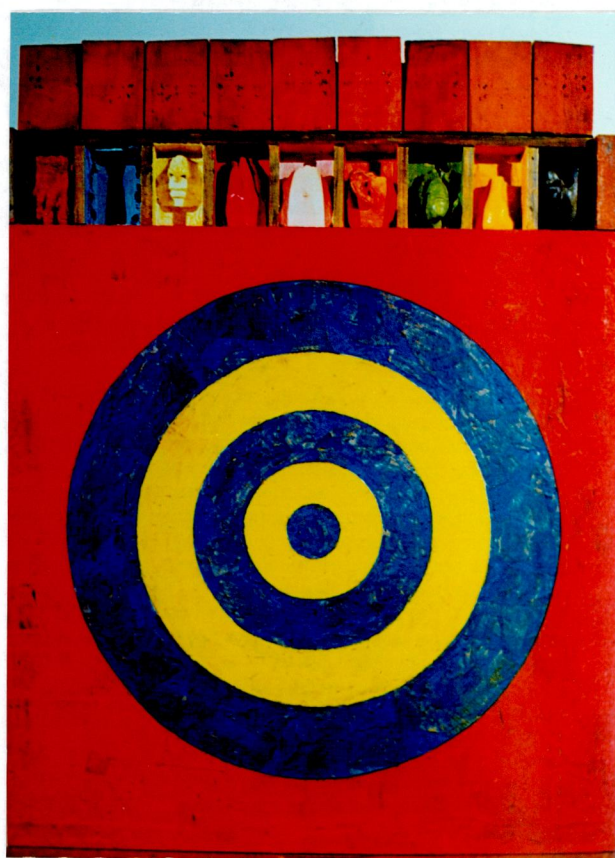
**The flag design has no hierarchy of focus : each part is of equal importance ... we are encouraged to explore the entire visual field.**

24. p136

The next important work within this field was the aestheticization of a motif even more widespread and commonplace than a flag - the target. Again, not having to design the composition of the symbol, more geometric and abstract than the flag, Johns was free to concentrate on various modes of organization and re-presentation. Johns's series of 'Target' paintings demonstrated "how a sign having everything to do with perception could be re-perceived." The symbol of the target is universally known by the significance and context conferred upon it by society. But by Johns's act of displacing it from *this* context, it ceases to function in those terms and takes on a whole new meaning - endowed further by Johns sensitive brushwork. The target's focus - its most central motif - has been counteracted by the innovative format of presentation.

Target with Plastercasts (illus. 3) is one of these re-aestheticized targets,





illus. 3 Jasper Johns *Target with Plastercats*





ibid.

on top of which rests a series of nine wooden boxes, each containing a plastercast of different parts of Johns's body in bright monochrome colours - a purple foot, a white face, a red hand, a pink breast, an orange ear, a green penis and a yellow heel - the human body broken down into a series of isolated specimens. Art critic Robert Hughes describes 'Target with plastercasts' as having "two systems of seeing locked in perfect mutual opposition, the sign becoming a painting, sculpture becoming a sign."

24. p135

We look at the target symbol not as a target, but as an arrangement of concentric colours; just as we look at the anatomical plastercasts as a series of isolated objects, and not necessarily as the individual parts of a whole. The distinction between 'art' and 'reality' becomes blurred although it is re-asserted in the formal strategy of the painting surface. 'Target with Plastercasts' is an illuminating example of Johns' re-invention of a motif that is usually "seen and not looked at".

Johns wittily described his 'working method' in a sketchbook dating from this period in the mid to late 1950s -

**Take an object**

**Do something to it**

**Do something else to it**

" " " " "

21. p136

ibid.

These instructions are reminiscent of the published documents that Duchamp prepared for his *Large Glass* painting 'The Bride stripped bare by her Bachelors, Even.' Johns had, like Duchamp, liberated himself to work on other more abstract levels "with the dead centre focus now shifted to overall scanning and with a functional object thus converted to an aesthetic one."

The objects chosen by Johns for his sculptures are from the same sources from which he drew inspiration for his paintings - familiar or 'everyday' items. Johns's sculpture of this period refers to Duchamp's gestures in an oblique way and the 'Readymade' is the obvious significant predecessor.





Although Johns's sculptures have the appearance of being merely appropriated, they are in fact entirely hand-made and then hand-painted, essential different to the 'method' employed by Duchamp.

13. p9

Legend has it that Johns's first painted bronze sculpture Ballantine Ale cans (illus. 4) came about from a casual remark made to him by William de Kooning about the gallery owner Leo Castelli - "somebody told me that you could give that son-of-a-bitch two beer cans, and he could sell them. I thought, what a wonderful idea for a sculpture."

The 'Ballantine Ale' cans are recreations of the exact shape and scale of consumer objects. The 'Ballantine' brand may have been chosen because of the bronze colour of the can which ironically appears to imitate the traditional sculptors' material. From a distance they appear to be 'actual' beer cans, but on closer inspection the 'labels' have a painterly quality, and many of the smaller details bear no traces of any attempt at facsimile. Johns comments:

2. p35

**You have a model and you paint a thing to be very close to the model. Then you have the possibility of completely fooling the situation, making one exactly like the other, which doesn't particularly interest me. (In that case you lose the fact of what you have already done)... I like that there is the possibility that one might mistake one for the other, but I also like that with a little examination, it's very clear that one is not the other.**

Another aspect of this sculpture is that while at first the two cans may appear identical, they are in fact quite different. One can has been 'opened' and is hollowed out, the other is 'full' and sealed. Thus one is physically heavier than the other (they are not attached at the base).

2. p54

**Johns' works have always been involved with distinguishing differences between objects which initially appear identical.**

A second version of this sculpture executed in the same year, illustrates this idea of "distinguishing differences" in what appear to be identical objects. This time the form is the same but the labels have slightly different surface details.





illus 4. Jasper Johns *Ballantine Ale Cans*





Johns's second painted bronze sculpture Savarin Can (illus. 5) executed in the same year is another object appropriated from Johns's daily environment, while at the same time referring to the process of the creation of a work of art - Johns used Savarin coffee cans to hold his brushes.

Johns employed the same method of casting and hand-painting for 'Savarin can' as he had done for 'Ballantine cans', only this time even the minutest details have been copied exactly; the silver edges and seams of the can, the wood-stained effects on the brushes. Traditionally the palette is the icon associated with painting (more recently investigated by German painter Anselm Kiefer) but Johns took the equally significant symbol associated with the end of an artists day's work - the can into which he puts his brushes.

19. p331 **In this sculpture, the point where the the handiwork of the individual artist meets the stream of replicating commercial design is not a crisis of identity but a situation of unprejudiced, improvised adaptation. The banal item is seized on to serve the purpose of the moment, first as an accessory to the making of art, then as art's substance.**

ibid. In effect, Johns has successfully turned two bland and, to an extent, ignored consumer disposables into objects worthy of aesthetic contemplation. (No-one would dare throw the 'empty' Ballantine can in the bin, or put the 'full' one into a refrigerator.) Perhaps, though, Kirk Varnedoe's assessment of the two "Painted Bronze" sculptures is equally appropriate : "the final result ... seems made up in part of the sophistication of French modernism and in part of the straightforwardness of bronzed baby-booties"

2. p21 In much the same way and indeed, for the same ends, Johns painted number sequences and alphabets, where the sequence was not important - the emphasis shifted from specific information and focused on the surface of the paintings. Roberta Bernstein has also pointed out an ironic pun that Johns outlined when executing the 'Figures' paintings - originally they were meant to be called the 'Numbers' series, but Johns decided he wanted to paint 'Figures' like his friend William de Kooning!







illus 5. Jasper Johns *Savarin can*





The figures and alphabets (illus. 6 and 7) are painted within a formal grid structure which unites the surface into an even pattern. Some of the individual numbers and letters are clearly 'defined' and therefore legible, while others are less distinct from the heavily worked surface, thus encouraging the viewer to investigate the painting's surface more thoroughly.

2. p26-27

With regard to this, Roberta Bernstein draws an interesting parallel between Johns's 'Figures' series and Claude Monet's Rouen Cathedral paintings. Johns, she observes, uses the fixed motif of the number arrangement to show just how radically they can alter from each other by employing variations in pictorial technique like colour and medium. Monet's paintings show a similar ideology at work - the paintings are executed from the same viewpoint, but depict the subtle changes that light makes to the facade of a building at different times of the day. Both artists stress the flatness of the picture plane.

Essentially, Johns's work consistently re-invents the way in which we perceive the most commonplace images and objects. What was previously 'neutral' became focused as the main subject matter for a painting or sculpture.

17. p13

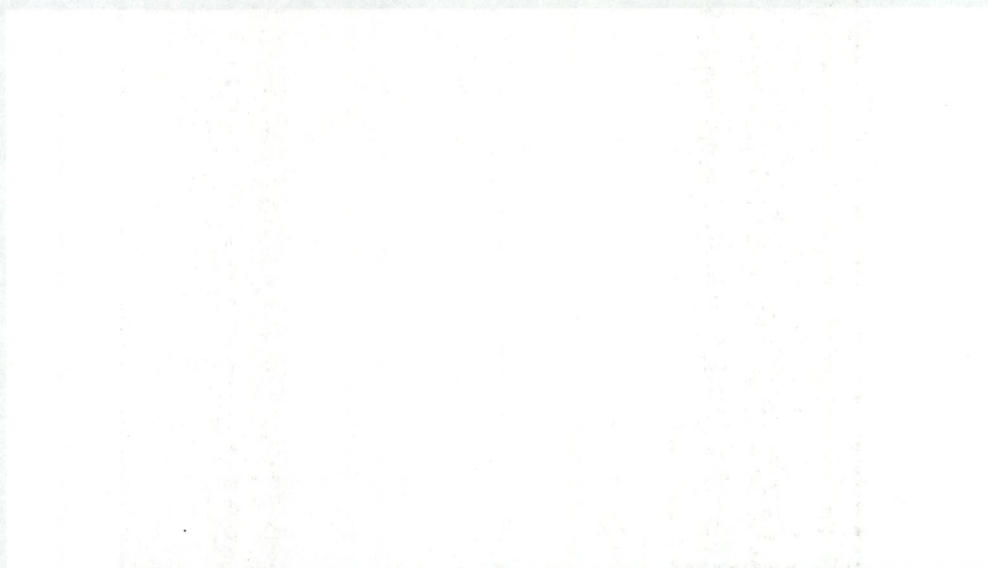
**Jasper Johns established a new possibility for art ordering ... the was looked at rather than into ... Johns took painting further towards a state of non-depiction than anyone else - Robert Morris**





illus 6. Jasper Johns 0 - 9









illus 7. Jasper Johns *Gray Alphabets* (detail)

At this point, the first of his many journeys.  
Having, without a horse, he proceeded from his tent  
the Wood Tree, being the horse's path on a pole by the  
the first of his many journeys.



## CHAPTER IV

## Jeff Koons and John Kindness : 'low' as 'high'

20. p202

In dominating and conditioning the visual data of contemporary lifestyles, and therefore requiring an informed understanding for modern living, popular culture warranted close study; in altering the visual landscape, it became a crucial ... source for the modern artist to consider.



Barbara Kruger

9. p10

If the 1980s was the decade of the consumer, then perhaps "Born to Shop" is an appropriate motto; or even "I shop, therefore I am", to put it into a contemporary artist's words. "The United States has generated a concentration of artists compelled by the issue of consumerism". Is there any wonder ?

9. p10

As a one-time commodities broker (who also sold memberships for the Museum of Modern Art in New York), it seemed appropriate for Jeff Koons to draw on the commodification process within contemporary art, as the primary source for his sculptural work. Koons's early works, dating from 1979, were largely impersonal assemblages of appropriated objects of mass manufacture - Koons stressing the the 'consumer' aspect of his then Duchampian gestures. These works illustrate the process of commodification of the art world..." an art in which shopping has replaced making." Large plexiglass containers housing up-to-the-minute household appliances like vacuum cleaners, somehow lacked the appeal of say Warhol's soup cans; instead they were lifeless, charmless and devoid of any associative rhetoric.

9. p10

In 1987 Koons exhibited a collection of stainless steel sculptures, many of them cast from Kitsch sources and gave them a new life in the art context. "I don't seek to make consumer icons, but to decode why and how consumer objects are glorified."

21. p331

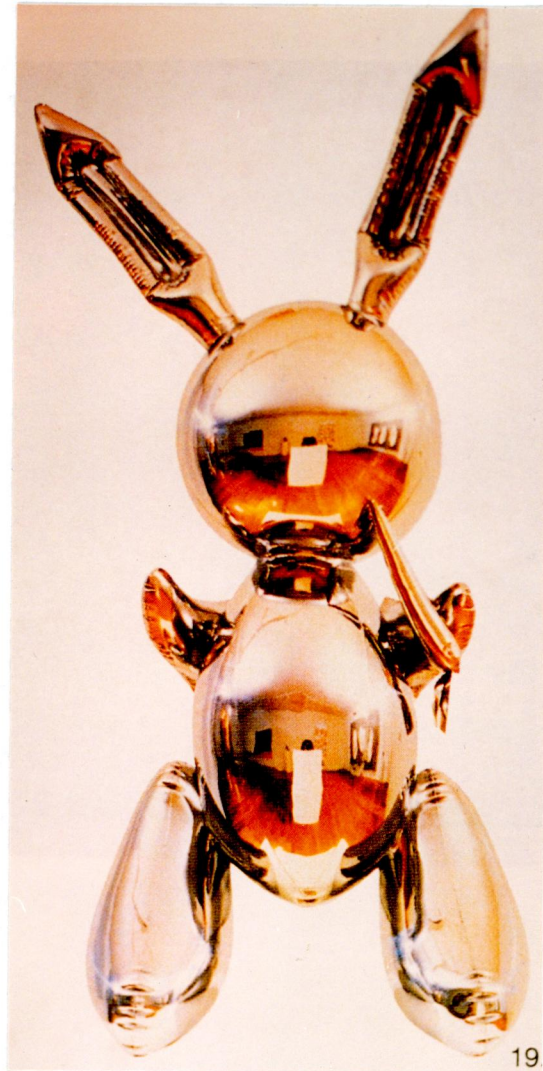
Rabbit (illus. 8), an inflated rabbit balloon cast in stainless steel and "polished to resemble a Pop Brancusi", may appear to comply with the vernacular culture it's supposed to be criticizing, but Koons' sculpture has, in effect, gained the allure of a fine-art object:

9. p10

The polished stainless steel has a reflective quality which is associated with a luxurious item. In my work the situation is set up so that the individual from the lower classes feels economic security in a false situation. Polished objects have often been displayed by the Church and by wealthy people to set a stage of both material security and enlightenment of spiritual nature; the stainless steel is a false reflection of that stage.







illus. 8 Jeff Koons *Rabbit*





1. pxvi

Koons has taken a kitsch object and has transformed it into a luxury designer object, simply by virtue of manipulating the medium (stainless steel) and the context in which it is seen. Stephen Bayley remarks that much of what is considered 'bad taste' or *kitsch* is in fact designed to impress (e.g. "Trump Tower") and that it usually succeeds in doing so.

22. p398

In 1988 Koons held his most notorious exhibition to date (*excluding* the recent "Made in Heaven" show, in which Koons investigates the concept of *pornokitsch* ) at the Sonnabend Gallery in New York. Titled 'Banality', the exhibition did something which no-one could have expected to happen in these late days of the avant-garde - it shocked the art world. Koons exhibited a series of large (some life size) porcelain and polychromed wood sculptures, that resembled almost exactly (apart from their scale) the traditional mantel-piece figurines so popular in the luxury industry of contemporary consumerism. These works were intended to display ... "the insipidity of mass-culture in all its garish colours and glazes". And they did.

ibid.

Koons's working method for these sculptures is interesting in that it refers to the later working method of Andy Warhol, where a number of specifically chosen technicians execute 'the work' from a set of specifications and drawings. (The sculptures were actually executed by Italian craftsmen - the very same craftsmen who in fact *make* mantel-piece ornaments and figurines). Whereas Duchamp, Warhol and Johns appropriated or were influenced by mass-produced objects which were not necessarily kitsch, Koons actually uses kitsch objects, or rather, he *reinvents* the objects in different situations within the context of art. A superficial look at his work may leave one with the impression that they are merely vulgar ornaments on a grotesque scale. However, as Kirk Varnedoe points out, they are in fact "relentlessly invented pieces far from being haphazardly appropriated from a discount store".

One of the most interesting of these sculptures is a representation of *Superstar Michael Jackson* (illus. 9) with his pet chimpanzee 'Bubbles' in gilded, white porcelain. Preserving all the 'glamour' of a shop-bought orna-







illus. 9 Jeff Koons *Michael Jackson*





20. p47

ment, the sculpture appears to comment on the somewhat perplexing nature of Jacksons' racial colour and features, which has been in a constant state of transience since the beginning of the last decade - as one critic unkindly (though quite accurately) put it - "[Michael Jackson is] a freak of the type our ancestors might have put on display for quite different reasons." What is interesting about this piece is that, despite its vulgarity as a decorated object, it manages to retain the *acceptable* appearance of a mass-produced figurine. We know how to 'approach' it. Or at least we think we do, because it is only when we examine it within the context of 'art' (in terms of it making some form of statement, aesthetic or otherwise) as opposed to 'ornament', that we become aware of the inherent implications of the piece - the white china possibly referring to Jacksons' self-idealized form; the close cosmetic resemblance of Michael Jackson to his chimpanzee; and the fragile nature of the medium reflecting perhaps, the medias view of him.

9. p4

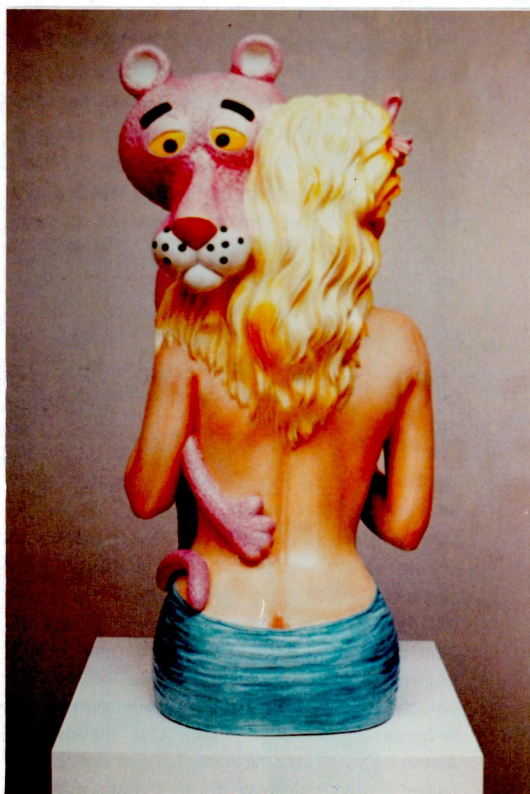
**I transform the content of an object by putting it in a specific context. This recodifies the object so that it gives off the kind of information I would like people to view.**

Koons's statement indicates his affinity with the ideas of Duchamp ( re. the re-contextualization of the object) and indeed the tradition of appropriation in avant-garde art movements in general.

20. p47

Another outstanding work in the 'Banality' exhibition of 1988, was Pink Panther (illus. 10). 'Pink Panther' commanded the viewers attention by virtue of its use of a universally recognizable cartoon character. In his arms is a vivacious, semi-naked woman who, it is safe to presume, is a representation of 'La Cicciolina' (aka Ilona Staller) the Italian politician and strip-tease artiste, and more recently Mrs. Jeff Koons. La Cicciolina's much publicized (and to an extent notorious) views on sexual promiscuity might go some of the way to explaining the Pink Panthers' rather apprehensive facial expression, while in her embrace, in the light of the emergence of A.I.D.S. The combination of "two unlikely breeds", lends an air of humour to the sculp-





illus 10. Jeff Koons *Pink Panther*





ture's serious implications. Again, we only become aware of these implications when we look at the sculpture in its newly appointed 'art' context.

Detractors of Koons argue that he works with a considerable degree of cynicism, working in an almost condescending fashion - laughing at the people who take ornaments of this nature seriously - or who at least regard them in aesthetic terms. I am not inclined to agree with this viewpoint and I would argue that Koons's work contains large amounts of irony and satire but ultimately "produces a result which retains its appeal within the realm from which the original material came".

6. p9

Irishborn John Kindness's work also retains the appeal of the kitsch objects from which he draws his inspiration. Kindness, like Koons, appropriates kitsch objects and motifs into his sculptures in order to make statements about, among other things, the simultaneous extremes of wealth and poverty that coexist in contemporary society. Kindness' work is less ambiguous than that of Koons in this respect ; indeed one critic went so far as to say to Kindness that "this is what Jeff Koons was trying to do but failed."

see 16.

Kindness believes that by taking a mass-produced image or object, and transforming it by a removal into a different context, we can become aware of a new standard of aestheticism for that image.

**When you're looking at a cheap publication, bad ink on cheap paper, you're not so much aware of that as when you see it as a huge canvas - the same image, and it has been given a sort of reverential treatment in a museum or gallery space.**

ibid.

In the "Treasures of New York" series, Kindness describes visually the polarity of wealth and poverty that exists simultaneously in New York "in the exaggerated language of popular culture, mitigated by humour, through which painful reality is made palatable to be swallowed and digested." "Treasures of New York", is an ironic reference to the elaborate exhibitions staged in New York where sudden crazes for things Egyptian one week are replaced by things in the Louis XV style the next. In the "Taxi" series,

18. p1





Kindness brings our attention to social issues by depicting contemporary 'everyday' situations in a stylized 'classical' style (the style most appropriated in kitsch consumerism), but painted on old taxi doors, roofs and bonnets. Using the visually appealing and recognizable classical style, Kindness is able to attract the viewers' attention, and from there expose them to the irony therein. Or as Lucy Lippard puts it, " Kindness uses the alchemy of art to turn city rubbish into precious iconic (and ironic) relics."

ibid.

In one of these works entitled Scraping the surface (illus. 11), we see a slender athletic-looking figure kneeling by a dog. When we look more closely ( that is *beyond* the stylized appearance of the painting surface), we see that he is in fact bending down to pick up the dog's excrement in order to dispose of it discreetly. Kindness thus exposes the irony of a situation where people are perhaps more attentive to the cosmetic problems of the city, while the more important social problems of homelessness and drug-addiction escalate all around them.

**The viewer is drawn to the historic beauty of the figure and design, then thrown rudely into social self-reflection that we are constantly making history whether we intend to or not.**

ibid.

One of the things that Kindness regrets in the art world today is the tendency in contemporary art towards too much theoreticisation: " every decade since Duchamp somebody has done some kind of appropriation of that nature, just really repeating the same thing he did except that there are now volumes of theory about it." The use of familiar, recognizable objects in his work, Kindness feels, helps people to relax in front of a work of art and as he quite correctly points out, "people immediately warm to humour".

see 16.

ibid.

There does exist the danger, however, that people respond only to the objects that have been appropriated, and miss out on the intended irony. Kindness made mention of this with a reference to his sculpture Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle harp (illus. 12), which is a harp encrusted with plastic toy reproductions of the currently popular cartoon characters. Intended as "a

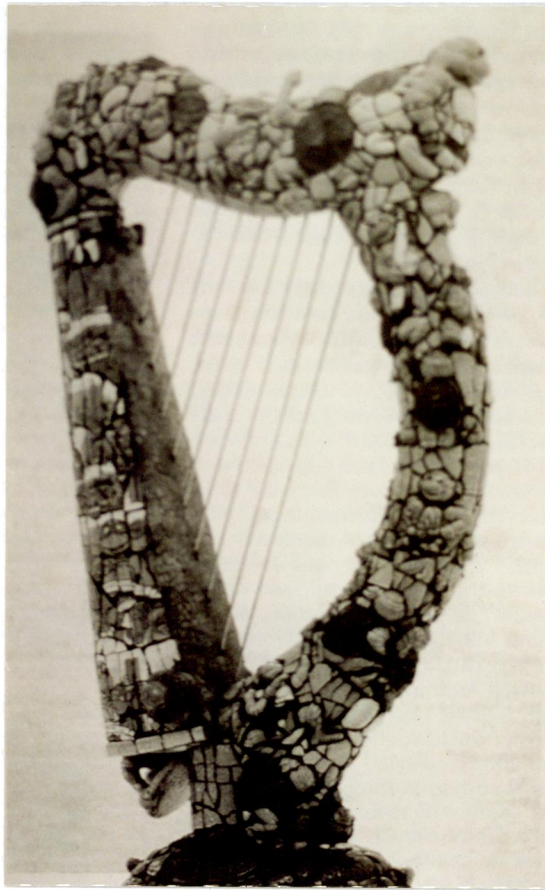






illus. 11 John Kindness *Scraping the Surface*





illus. 12 John Kindness *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle Harp*





ibid. very simple parody of the American influence on Irish culture" , the work could be misconstrued as a mere visual joke - the idea of two quite independent objects joined in an unlikely combination - but this would only serve to dismiss its important and more ironic implications.

By adopting classical motifs, Kindness creates works that superficially resemble the worst kind of 'artistic' kitsch. By using the technique of mosaic, Kindness imitates both 'High' Roman art whilst at the same time parodying its many imitators. Kindness always provides a visual clue to these sometimes subtle concepts - like making a mosaic entirely out of biscuits.

18. p2 In Mr. American Express (illus. 13), Kindness employs this biscuit- mosaic technique in order to rework the logo of the American Express Credit Corporation. Kindness "borrows commercial clichés for his own public enterprise. Classical becomes class. The idealized past is transparently used to validate a sleazy present."

5. p8 The logo of the American express company is a typical example of Kitsch mis-appropriation, in that it attempts to suggest, by using a classically-derived image, the ideology or properties (reliability, status etc.) of the company - something which the original art/image never intended to do. Matei Calinescu attributes the rise in popularity of kitsch as a style as a direct result of the intrusion of business (consumerism) into aesthetic modernism. This also concurs with critic Harold Rosenberg's assessment that there exists "a slackness associated with finding an audience responsive to certain norms."

5. p225 'Mr. American Express' humourously investigates the cliched use of classically-derived iconography in corporate identity, and the extent to which this type of mis-appropriation (in business/consumerism) has almost become aesthetically *standardized* in modern society.

see 16. Kindness exposes the inappropriate contexts for which many Classical images and icons have been employed. Kindness's use of the technique of







illus. 13 John Kindness *Mr. American Express*





mosaic (one that is characteristic of 'High' Roman art) and his subversion of this via his use of an inappropriate medium (biscuits), parodies the type of mis-appropriation he addresses in this work, and illustrates the ironic implications therein.

ibid.

24. p331

While there are many comparisons to be drawn between the work of Jeff Koons and John Kindness, there *are* essential differences in strategy. Koons's work is very much a part of the Gallery system in New York, Kindness's is obviously not and he dismisses much of the art of this system (including, to an extent, the work of Koons) as "product; it conforms to the current fashionable ideologies." Koons in his defence has established himself as a *superstar* in this field (all of his works are reproduced in triplicate, oriented towards mass manufacture), "albeit one with a Wall Streeter's respect for the market and the strategies necessary to target it with breathtaking success".





## CONCLUSION

1. p22

The century of consumerism has moved the entire man-made world into the province of aestheticism.

Consumerism in the modern world is typified by the ever increasing popularity of kitsch in our everyday environment, and is as much a part of modernism as the avant-garde. Little wonder then that throughout certain periods of the avant-garde that have been outlined, artists have concerned themselves with ideas about beauty and taste as marketable commodities.

5. p239

Hermann Broch ... links the modern rise of kitsch to the change brought about by Romanticism in the conception of the aesthetic ideal. Before Romanticism, the aesthetic ideal had been considered as transcendent in regard to any possible work of art : Beauty appeared as an absolute, practically never attainable model and criterion of value.

Marcel Duchamp had been interested in the ideology behind advertising and display in exhibiting mass produced consumer items in 'artistic' environments, and subverted it by questioning the very nature of representation in art. With 'Fountain', he investigated the idea of the commonplace as 'art' object and opened up one of the most significant debates in art of this century.

Jasper Johns also selected everyday recognizable icons and , taking his cue from Duchamp, subverted the theme of the revaluation of the familiar, and reaestheticized the commonplace through a rigourously formal fine-art means.

12. p302

Today, Jeff Koons and John Kindness have taken this investigation to its next logical stage, imitating kitsch for 'diametrically opposed ends', that is to comment on the social aspects of consumerism in Western culture.

9. p16

Appropriation, then, is a logical aesthetic device for our century because it reflects the continual attempt to secure a position in this culture by physically possessing its endlessly emerging products, many of which cut us off even further from the physical world of nature. It is a perpetual motion feeding an endless hunger - Michael Danoff





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