CHAPTER NINE

9/11 AS SCHMALTZ-ATTRACTOR: A CODA ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF "KITSCH"

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> You'll be like the next Van Gogh
> With your own little style
> And your own little smile
> And your own little way of dressing
> Messing up everybody that tries to categorize you
> […]
> And all those teams
> That you're trying to not be a part of
> Only for the art love
> […]
> You there!
> With your horn-rimmed glasses
> Your ironic tee-shirt
> And your asymmetrical bird-like haircut
> Don't get too involved in wearing your uniform.
> Just be natural.
> Loosen up your vintage jeans a bit.
> —Zano, from "Ass Birth"[1]

> When the rapture comes atheists will steal your Hummel figurines.
> —James DiGiovanna[2]

As the present anthology amply demonstrates, the term "kitsch" invites contention. Competitors in high-culture turf wars have often kept the term "kitsch" in special reserve for use in their internecine salvos. The superiority and disapproval usually taken to be at the heart of its meaning make its use fraught with the tensions inherent to issues of class, status, and the maintenance of one's reputation. Most people certainly would not like to see the term "kitsch" in its usual sense applied to music, movies, or

images that they believe are good. What makes matters worse is the fact that this term, like many terms in the humanities, is—to be honest—at best a provisional tool not merely *open* to revision but also inviting or even *requiring* revision, adjustment, and re-thinking. But no matter how many revisions the use of the term "kitsch" undergoes, it almost always carries at least some mark of its original pejorative thrust.[3]

Much of what could be said about the obstacles to arriving at any sort of stability or certainty about the term "kitsch" could be said of numerous other terms, such as "beauty," "genius," "taste," or the "sublime."[4] In addition, the term "kitsch"—along with similarly slippery terms—becomes even more difficult to track because it is an item of culture, which means that it is for that very reason always open to co-option, disguise, re-use, and self-referentiality. Examples of the artistic realization of these possibilities have been discussed, *inter alia*, in Gillo Dorfles' well-known anthology on kitsch in relation to the fine arts, but given the advent of Pop Art and its descendants (not to mention the much earlier Cubist pastiche or Dadaist collage pieces), examples and discussions of the phenomenon are not hard to find.[5]

The energy spent in defending the lines around such terms is as well attested in pop culture as it is in the art world. The journalist and music writer Carl Wilson, in his book about the extremely popular singer Céline Dion, *Let's Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste*—a book he refers to as itself "an experiment in taste"—discusses the traditional one-upmanship of fans and rock critics: in high school one might define oneself by rejecting "teenybopper pap," or by declaring that "only hippies like that band," whereas a rock critic can find an identity in a "belief that 'difficult' music can shake up perceptions, push us past habitual limits" or by searching for the presence of a particular "sonic innovation, verbal inventiveness, social criticism, rough exuberance, [or] erotic charge."[6] On the other hand, Wilson himself foregrounds the ways in which the entrenched "rock" vs. "pop" wars of the 1980s have been replaced to a degree by a new eclecticism among critics as well as fans—"the outcome of many cycles of revisionism: one way a critic often can get noticed is by arguing that some music everyone has trashed is in fact genius."[7] He is nonetheless painfully aware of the ways in which such passionately defended distinctions between genres resist being eliminated, even in someone who honestly struggles for such a change within his own person.[8] That conflict between an open eclecticism and a resistance to "the relativistic rabbit hole" motivates his entire book.[9]

The very fact that the Continuum "33⅓" book series in which Wilson's book appeared (a series usually devoted to the rock canon and cult albums

such as Bruce Springsteen's *Born in the USA*, Joy Division's *Unknown Pleasures*, and Captain Beefheart's *Trout Mask Replica*) had added a book on Céline Dion brought about a miniature commotion. The commotion itself depended upon a perception that the rock-and-roll canon had been violated.[10] The epigraphs which open this chapter are an attempt to capture the tension between, on the one hand, an open eclecticism (the mark of a presumably "free" postmodern age) and, on the other, a recognition that not all distinctions and divisions have in fact evaporated: Zano Bathroom's warning that one should not lose oneself in the fight to maintain one's coolness is met by a quip from James DiGiovanna which depends upon a perception of the unavoidable (if also heavily financed and somewhat manufactured) rifts in American culture.

The energy devoted to maintaining the borders around these classifications of genre can be partially explained by the fact that, in practice, the distinction between description and evaluation is often ignored when fans of a particular genre equate a cultural item's belonging to that genre with its being good. This often-seen slide or total collapse of description into evaluation encourages the fans of a genre to denigrate at least some other genres as inferior, on the one hand, and to be very careful about policing which items are "real" or "authentic" examples of the genre, on the other. Even though the cultural critic Harold Rosenberg was put off by any criticism of pop culture which "ducks the question of the quality of the object it is examining—'the swampy ground of esthetic dispute,' as one expert puts it,"[11] everyday fans of country music, punk rock, goth, or Christian screamo (just to name a few rock music genres and subgenres) are not about to "duck the question" and are more than happy to state in no uncertain terms their assessment of the "quality of the object." As one detractor of Christian screamo put it, "to each his own unless you're dealing with someone who isn't a relativist, and really hates shitty music."[12] Granted, Rosenberg was hoping for a disapprobation of popular culture *tout court*, not a criticism of one type of popular culture by a fan of another type; nevertheless, the issue of *quality* haunts discussions of kitsch as with perhaps no other genre.

The passion with which fans and detractors police the boundaries of these terms found violent expression in the so-called "emo wars" which burst out principally in Mexico (but also to a lesser degree in other Latin American countries) in the first half of 2008.[13] The first attacks to be picked up by the press took place in Mexico on the evening of March 7, 2008, in the "quiet colonial capital" of Querétaro, when close to 800 "punk, metal, goth, and ska" teenagers attacked "emo" teenagers in the main city square, the Plaza de Armas, where the emos were known to regularly meet.

The attackers organized through emails and flyers passed out in schools. The mass attack was broken up by about 100 members of city security, who detained 22 minors and 7 adults over the course of the evening. Eventually the group attacks were reproduced in other cities, notably at the Glorieta de los Insurgentes square in Mexico City. One emo girl, "Cherry," explained in an article on the Querétaro attacks that the teenagers belonging to other groups, such as goths and punks, were angry with the emos because the emos were understood to be copying stylistic elements from the other groups and mixing them together. In one Mexican television news report on the emo wars, one of the teens, when asked why emos were being targeted, screamed the reply, "Because they're copying our styles!"[14] Although a number of online commentators speculated that the attacks were also motivated by a belief that emo males were overly effeminate (an idea which comes up frequently in online discussions of emos in the United States as well), it is not insignificant that attackers, whatever their other motivations may have been, justified the emo wars by referring to the 'crime' of stealing elements of their style or "look." For, in a different context, we hear the same complaint from Clement Greenberg and Umberto Eco when they point to the theft of stylistic elements from Modernism and fine art generally as essential to kitsch.[15]

Art world institutions still police the boundaries surrounding fine art—though not through the use of violent attacks in city squares. "Kitsch" and its cognates (schmaltz, schlock, sentimentalism, inauthenticity, mass appeal, decoration, etc.) remain as a resource for the border guards, even now, in an art world expressing a presumably free-for-all postmodern age. When the popular realist painter Andrew Wyeth died three years ago at the age of 91, the *New York Times* art critic Michael Kimmelman utilized his Wyeth obituary to highlight the still-existing battle-lines revealed by Wyeth's place in our culture:

> Because of his popularity, a bad sign to many art world insiders, Wyeth came to represent middle-class values and ideals that modernism claimed to reject, so that arguments about his work extended beyond painting to societal splits along class, geographical and educational lines. […] Bucking the liberal art establishment, and making a fortune in the process, allowed him to play a familiar American role: the free-thinking individualist who at the same time represented the *vox populi*. A favorite saying of his was: "What you have to do is break all the rules." And as bohemianism itself became institutionalized, Wyeth encapsulated the artistic conservatives' paradoxical idea of cultural disobedience through traditional behavior.[16]

Thomas Kinkade, the self-proclaimed Painter of Light™, famous for his painted images of cozy Christian cottages and waving American flags, and seen by some as the king of kitsch, has carved out an identity which takes advantage of the same role of bucking the art world establishment, as Monica Kjellman-Chapin has documented.[17] Kinkade, however, can play his role with even greater effectiveness, since he has attained a popularity much greater than Wyeth's—indeed, due to his popularity, and the ubiquity with which his "brand" has penetrated the national culture, Kinkade has reputedly become the richest artist in the United States.

Responses to 9/11

Rosenberg asserted outright that American culture itself simply *is* kitsch: "Kitsch is the daily art of our time, as the vase or the hymn was for earlier generations. […] In America, kitsch is Nature. The Rocky Mountains have resembled fake art for a century."[18] Even if one does not wish to go so far as Rosenberg in declaring that American culture *in toto* is kitsch, it is undeniable that the play of forces in United States culture continually gives rise to repeated debates over "kitsch." I will now be turning to two arguably kitschy responses to the horrific terrorist air attacks on the East Coast of the United States on September 11, 2001 (hereafter referred to, as is popular custom, as "9/11") to make the varied attitudes to "kitsch" more concrete.

The decision to focus on works responding to 9/11 may at first seem forced or overly casual, but there are good reasons for this focus. Given that the shocking attacks of 9/11 had such a deep impact on United States culture, particularly in relation to nationalism, patriotism, political and religious identity, and narratives of American innocence—all notorious attractors of "kitsch" culture—it is no surprise that 9/11, too, has been the focus of numerous disputes involving questions of authenticity, irony, beauty, and kitsch. In addition, the events of 9/11 were so emotional and were debated with such energy and attention that almost any piece of culture whatsoever even mentioning 9/11 was bound to receive repeated commentary. This means that debates surrounding the "kitschiness" of responses to 9/11 leave behind an especially detailed record of reactions and counter-reactions, a rich fund of evidence not usually available regarding other instances of kitsch. What is more, focusing on merely two works related to a single event reveals the degree to which the numerous competing attitudes to "kitsch" already arise even within a restricted compass, and do not require a wide-ranging survey for instantiation. Using works turning on 9/11 has the added advantage of quickly making the

often somewhat hidden political implications of kitsch harder to miss. Finally, looking to these 9/11-related works underscores the extreme lability which kitsch can have: even here, among those for whom 9/11 meant that all considerations must truck in political certainties, kitsch can exhibit a surprising shape-shifting quality. I will spend some time examining these disputes before closing with an outline of the attitudes towards the term "kitsch" which this chapter has ultimately revealed.

I will be focusing on debates surrounding two responses to 9/11: Dennis Madalone's music video, *America We Stand as One,* and Jenny Ryan's sculpture, *Soft 9/11*, two items which by themselves will provide a wealth of evidence for attitudes toward the use of the word "kitsch" and kindred labels.[19] Both received conflicting interpretations and served as objects of highly contentious evaluation due to their connection to the attacks of 9/11 and likewise the connections drawn either by their creators or their interpreters to questions of patriotism, nationalism, heroism, memorial, and respect for the dead. It goes without saying that there are many other items which could be discussed simply in relation to 9/11, particularly the heated debates over what should be built on the site of the former World Trade Center, but I will not have the space here to discuss them in any detail.[20]

Dennis Madalone's *America We Stand as One*

America We Stand as One, Dennis Madalone's 9/11 "rock anthem" music video, was first released in June 2003, but apparently did not go fully "viral" until sometime in 2005.[21] I myself had only become aware of it long afterwards, via a 2007 link from *Der Spiegel* online—Madalone's video was one of seven selections in a post on "unbelievably strange music" under the heading "Megalomania in Pop: Self-Absorption and Croaking." The magazine's blog post introduced *America We Stand as One* with this statement:

> Driven by bombastic patriotism, Dennis Madalone released this video—and in so doing raked in the ridicule of the online community. On his website Madalone particularly emphasizes that he has nothing to do with those "spoofs."[22]

The mention of "those 'spoofs'"—presumably referring to the innumerable snarky send-ups of popular culture available on YouTube, in *The Onion*, and elsewhere—points to one of the most fascinating aspects of *America We Stand as One*: a performer who was driven by repeated speculation about his music video to clarify that it was in fact *not* a parody.[23] The

suspicion that Madalone's music video is a spoof rests on a perception of artistic overkill in the video: a similar, but more recent online compendium of music videos on the *A.V. Club* website places the Madalone video with other ones under the rubric of "Baseball, Apple Pie, and Kicking Your Fucking Ass: 21 Hilariously Hyperbolic pro America Songs."[24] Clearly, the authors of these online compendia believe that *America We Stand as One* exemplifies megalomania, bombast, and hyperbole. But does the music video in fact go overboard? We will have to look at it more closely.

America We Stand as One opens with a shot of a silhouetted figure (Dennis Madalone) walking on the beach toward the camera. Soft music plays and progressively increases in volume as the viewer sees a close-up of Madalone which allows the viewer clear visual access to his "USA" tee-shirt, followed by a mid-range shot in which a burst of light appears in the sky. Three sparks of light travel from the sky through the air to Madalone, entering him and causing him to briefly glow. Charged with light from heaven, he begins to sing. The lyrics—reinforced visually by the imagery of heavenly inspiration, and reinforced soon after by images of angels—make clear that he is giving voice to heavenly beings, humans who have passed over to the afterlife. As he sings, "I had to go but it's OK / You see I'm with you in a different way," the viewer sees a cluster of clothed human figures who sprout white wings and begin to fly. Judging from their everyday clothing, the implication is that these are contemporaries who have entered the afterlife.

With this, the chorus at the heart of the song begins: "USA … America … We stand as one […] And you must carry on." As Madalone sings "USA," the screen shows Madalone from above, standing on the beach, as a wave washes in, the water rising up to his knees and filling most of the screen. Superimposed upon the wave, however, is the image of an American flag, so that the screen fills with a liquid flag, and Madalone is engulfed by it. After a short close-up on Madalone, the next shot, displayed while the chorus still unfolds, is emblematic of the music video's characteristic semiotic redundancy: atop a large rock in the ocean just off the beach stands Madalone, holding an American flag in his hand as the wind blows; meanwhile, above him, surrounded by thin rays of light, floats a cloud in which can be seen the moving image of two pairs of clutching hands while a ghostly Statue of Liberty stands on the neighboring ocean rock (Fig. 9-1).

Over the course of the video, in addition to numerous children and more angels, we see many more patriotic symbols: more flags, two flying eagles, and Mount Rushmore. The music video also presents many images of firefighters, police, and military personnel—usually depicted in

clouds—who have presumably passed into the afterlife and to whom the song is clearly intended to give voice. As the chorus is repeated a second time, we hear the additional words which close the song: "America … America … We are so strong / good and beautiful. America." In the final shot, we see the three heavenly sparks of light depart from Madalone.[25] Their message has been delivered: the heroic American dead are still watching over us, and we living Americans who remain must continue, in unity, on our way.

This description of the music video omits the charitable mission wedded to it. Anyone encouraged by the music video to visit its official website will have the opportunity there to donate to an array of charitable causes. Initially, the charities were explicitly connected to those who suffered from the attacks at the World Trade Center, such as the Uniformed Firefighters Association Widows and Children Fund, but, as the attacks have receded in time, other charities, such as the Autism Society of America, St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, and the Make-A-Wish Foundation of America have been added. The manner of donating has apparently also evolved; initially, Madalone passed along donations which were physically sent to him, but he now encourages people to donate directly to the charities themselves. Madalone is also very open to the idea that his music video will inspire people to donate to charities other than the ones listed on his website.[26]

In addition, Madalone will send a free copy of the *America We Stand as One* CD single or music video DVD to anyone who writes to him at the address provided on the official website; in effect, Madalone performs the charitable act of donating the comforting message of his song to anyone who asks. According to a 2004 front-page story on Madalone and the music video for the *Tolucan Times*, Madalone had been invited to perform at a re-dedication ceremony for the Bob Hope Hollywood USO at Los Angeles International Airport and had at that time already given away 8,000 DVDs and CDs, among which were ones distributed to 400 families of firefighters who had died "on 9/11 and since 1980."[27] When asked, Madalone was unable to approximate how much money had been raised for charity, but he did emphasize that he had passed on any money sent to him to the appropriate organizations.[28] Judged as a means of inspiring charitable donations, at any rate, Madalone's video seems to be a success. And, regardless of whether viewers chose to donate to a charity, the music video attracted many, many viewers. During its "viral" stage, *America We Stand as One* was repeatedly referred to as one of the most-viewed music videos on the internet.[29]

Fig. 9-1. Images from Dennis Madalone's 9/11-inspired "New American Rock Anthem," *America We Stand as One*, 2003. Reproduced courtesy of the artist and www.americawestandasone.com.

America We Stand as One was certainly marked as kitsch from numerous quarters. Of course, it is not always referred to explicitly as "kitsch" by its detractors. Though the *Spiegel* online post referred to it as "bombastic patriotism," and the A.V. Club post cited earlier referred to the music video's "bludgeoning patriotic imagery that seeks to prove that there is no object over which you cannot drape, wave, or superimpose Old Glory," and asked, "why bother making your anthem original or even coherent when you can simply rely on stock footage of soaring eagles and lots of fist-clenching emoting?" in asserting the music video's excessive emotion and patriotic overkill, neither applies the word "kitsch." Nevertheless, the music video features many elements often understood to be kitschy: sentimentality, smiling children, angels, American flags, and an indifference to the possibility of excess.

Understandably, explicit references to kitsch in discussions of the music video elsewhere are not hard to find. A 2005 post on *America We Stand as One* for the critical religion blog, *The Revealer*, for example, classifies the video as an exceptional case of "religious kitsch":

> Religious kitsch is a fact of life for religion writers, and after awhile [sic] the wobbly pope dolls and the wind up nun who spits sparks and the neon psychedelic Jesus get pretty old. It is especially rare to find a work of religious Americana, combining flag and Bible, that has anything new to offer. But [*America We Stand As One*] is, as we are fond of saying of our favorite religious writing, the Word made strange and the word here is "Corny." Transcendently corny, cheese so pungent it redeems.[30]

An interview with Madalone later in the same month also referred to the music video as "kitsch" and "Ground Zero cheese."[31] A 2006 Salon.com "Video Dog" post on *America We Stand as One* (a post classifying it as "comedy") notes that, although "there's been speculation that the whole song is a spoof of post-9/11 kitsch," Madalone's video is not meant as a joke—a remark which implies that, since it is not a *spoof* of post-9/11 kitsch, it is simply *straightforward* post-9/11 kitsch.[32] More recently, the music video found a home on the French-language *Kitsch Video* blog, dedicated to videos which are "kitschy, corny, ridiculous, and … very kitschy!" The blog entry introduces Madalone's music video with the question, "Ever wondered what concentrated patriotic clichés, really cheap special effects, and a total absence of self-awareness would be like?"[33]

Most interpretations of the music video fall into one of three types: either one

a.) takes the video as it was intended and finds the video and its message touching, moving, and comforting, even spiritual;
b.) believes the video to be made with all sincerity, but finds its many flags, angels, and even its very sincerity to cross over into bombast, overkill, and therefore mawkish sentiment and, ergo, kitsch; or
c.) takes the whole thing to be an intentional farce, a satire meant to attack patriotic overkill itself.

There is certainly plenty of evidence that many people followed the first path: the simpler, comforting, and inspirational one. When I contacted Madalone by email, he forwarded to me numerous fan emails, the very day he received them. The implication was clear: years after originally releasing the music video, he still receives, on a daily basis, message after message from those who took it exactly as he intended it. On the phone, Madalone underscored that he has received thousands of similar messages from fans who were clearly touched and inspired by the video and its message of comfort and courage from the afterlife.

Given that Madalone continuously receives messages of this sort, it is not hard to see why he might be so baffled by the questions the video raises in the minds of many viewers. Time and time again, Madalone has been told in no uncertain terms that his viewers "got" his message. If we remember, however, that this first understanding of his video was only one of three competing interpretations, the first interpretation implies a premise that might not be immediately obvious (more on that below). While many took Madalone's sincerity for granted, it is also clear that many other viewers suspected that the music video was a deployment of the mawkish and semiotic redundancy of kitsch as an ironic retort to the excessive displays of sentimentality and patriotism in the wake of the 9/11 attacks.

Both of the other two basic interpretations of *America We Stand as One* turn on the idea that some line has been crossed—that the video simply goes too far in piling on patriotic, religious, and emotional symbols. Where the two remaining interpretations differ is on the question of whether this having gone overboard is intentional or not. For those who do not take the video to be a parody, clearly, the maximum has been passed unintentionally, though that unintentionality does not rescue it from being labeled kitsch, whereas for those who take the video to be a spoof, the line was crossed on purpose. What sort of reaction the video elicits on these critical interpretations will depend upon additional factors, such as whether one takes this particular religio-patriotic overkill to be disgusting, frightening, funny, or some combination thereof. Some who saw the video as unintentionally funny thought that it was obviously in bad taste, but

found that its sincerity compensated and made it simultaneously somewhat endearing.[34]

Perhaps most interesting are those who took the music video to be an intentional parody, and who therefore took offense. In at least one case, a viewer stated his own disgust at the idea that someone could parody patriotism; a commenter to the *Salon* entry reported that he had sent the following email to Madalone:

> I think your “America: We Stand As One” video really undermines the heroic efforts of the police, fireman and paramedics that were involved in the 9/11 incident.
>
> Furthermore, it can only bring down the morale of our troops who are fighting so hard for freedom in Iraq. This kind of satire is fine for the TV and those of us with a “different” sense of humor, but most of us are just regular, god fearing, red blooded Americans and I think I speak for the majority when I say that your inappropriate and sarcastic video is not welcome.
>
> If you’re going to poke fun at this great country of ours, why not find something we can all universally agree on during these difficult times. Using images of angels, firemen, children and the spirit of post 9/11 America is no way to promote your tongue in cheek, liberal slant.
>
> We stand as one, indeed. God bless America.
>
> Regards,
> Anonymous[35]

The commenter reports that Madalone responded with the following remark: “Dear Mark: Our song brings words of comfort and faith to believe that all our loved are still with us. Please believe. Love and hope, Dennis Madalone and my family.” Mark (the commenter) sums up: “Unintentional satire at its best. This is one of my favourite internet phenoms of all time. [Having read Madalone’s reply,] I was sold on the sincerity of the video.” Madalone’s sincere reply changed Mark’s interpretation from that of intended to that of unintended satire. Judging from Mark’s targeting of ‘tongue-in-cheek, liberal’ irony as the source of (what he took to be) a disgusting satire of American patriotism, and his self-identification as a “red-blooded American,” we may surmise that Mark sees himself as a defender of not only conservative values, but also of limits on the number of flags one should be allowed to pack into a music video.[36]

Given the two interpretations of the music video which turn on the idea that *America We Stand as One* has crossed some upper threshold, the interpretation that assumes the song and video to be touchingly and spiritually comforting and sincere implies that there simply is no upper

limit for how many patriotic, religious, and emotional symbols one should pack into a single music video—or, to be more fair, that *America We Stand as One* does not cross that line, that this particular music video's piling on of patriotic, religious, and emotional symbols, and the specific way in which it presents them, is not jarring or excessive in any way.

This oblivion to the presumed excess requisite to the other two, comparatively "critical," interpretations lends some plausibility to the complaint of some kitschographers that the kitsch attitude is one which fastens on a cultural item's symbols or stylistic elements with disregard to the manner in which they are presented. The claim is that, in many pieces of kitsch, the mere presence of certain symbols or references is understood to be enough to satisfy the intended viewer, irrespective of how they are combined, how many there are, how they are arranged, or the care with which they are presented. This is a common thread running through Clement Greenberg's "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," Umberto Eco's "The Structure of Bad Taste," Tomas Kulka's *Kitsch and Art*, and Marita Sturken's *Tourists of History*, whatever their individual differences may be (and there are many). To put it in other terms, the functional elements of much kitsch are not primarily aesthetic: on some level, much kitsch uses simple symbolic triggers to carry out its task, with an apparent disregard for the aesthetic dimensions of the work. It brings to mind the character Florentino Ariza in Gabriel García Márquez's novel, *Love in the Time of Cholera*, a man who devoured romantic novels and poems but who could not judge them critically, precisely because for him their only purpose was to allow him to project his own romantic emotions onto their narratives.[37] Referring to a similar case of content as all-important in such symbolic triggers, Sturken writes of how teddy bears in the United States have almost become automatic tokens for quickly providing comfort:

> No context of loss seems to be complete today without teddy bears with particular insignia. […] The ubiquity of teddy bears as a response to the [Oklahoma City] bombing […] also demonstrates a particular kind of ease with teddy bears as symbols of reassurance, circulating as easily through the world of adults as of children.[38]

Similarly, Madalone's music video, which he explicitly intended to comfort and inspire, trades on well-worn *signifiers* of comfort and inspiration. Those who find fault with the music video do not necessarily question the functions of comforting and inspiring (though some do); rather, they do not believe that those functions take precedence over all other considerations.[39] In other words, the complaint is with the idea that all that matters is the comforting message and the fact that the comforting

message has been stated, and not how it is said. The belief that the message trumps all other considerations is a weakness that has been pointed out—by conservative, liberal, and Marxist kitschographers alike—in much political art. The implication of these critiques (whatever the political perspective on which they rest) is that inserting a political or other message into a work of art does not make the artistic task easier, but in fact makes it more difficult, particularly in art forms which cannot as easily take advantage of linguistic and narrative devices, such as traditionally understood painting and sculpture. In the case of Madalone’s music video, which—given that it contains a song and unfolds over time—clearly *does* have linguistic and narrative resources, those resources are merely used as a tool for multiplying simple patriotic and religious cues.

In my communications with Madalone, I was particularly struck by his seeming unwillingness to consider—or perhaps even inability to comprehend?—the other two interpretations of his work, interpretations which, from his perspective, would be misinterpretations. He clearly seems deeply invested in the spiritual message and wider charitable project of his music video—he speaks, for instance, of the “family” of new friends his interactions with fans has engendered—and so it is possible that Madalone’s reluctance to discuss critical interpretations of his music video rests simply on the diplomacy required of a spokesperson for a charity, but I suspect there may be more to it than merely an attempt to appeal to the widest base of donors.

Madalone’s music video seemingly comes from an attitude of complete sincerity, and therein lies the rub: as with the rhapsode Ion interviewed by Socrates in Plato’s dialog named after him, it is that sincerity, particularly as it is backed up by a claim to divine inspiration (or “enthusiasm”), that seems to make the conduit unable to take a reflective stance toward the message that he is carrying or, more importantly, how he carries it. One might justifiably counter that in fact hardly any songs are composed in a frenzy of divine possession or enthusiasm (Horace speaks in the *Ars poetica*, for example, of the poet, like a hard-working blacksmith, methodically hammering out defective lines), but the genesis account of Madalone’s *America We Stand as One* goes in the opposite direction:

> When Dennis [Madalone] first sang the song, the words just flowed. He started to cry, his dog, Honey Honey, started to howl, and then his wife, Linda, started to cry. Dennis knew immediately in his heart that he had been the instrument for this special message, and that the words were “words from heaven.”[40]

Madalone described essentially the same scenario in his interview with John Gorenfeld, expanding,

> Out of nowhere these lyrics kept ripping through my mind. […] We knew that these words needed to be heard. I try to stay true to the words. I never claim that I wrote the song. I don't mean that I'm a spiritual guru. But these words came from heaven, not New Jersey.[41]

Whatever serious limits Plato's divine inspiration model may have as the default model for poetic composition, it certainly matches the birth story Madalone provides for *America We Stand as One*.

Madalone presents himself—and seems to perceive himself—as a conduit for a wellspring of sincere emotionality; thus, when questioned about critical or negative responses, he invariably, perhaps inevitably, cannot explicitly admit that such "misreadings" occur, and turns the discussion instead towards the many positive responses he has received and continues to receive.[42] In the Gorenfeld interview, when pushed about people taking his music video to be a joke, Madalone baldly stated: "If anyone doesn't like America they're not going to like the video. If anyone doesn't like their loved ones, they're not going to like the video."[43] Madalone seems unable to separate an unfavorable appraisal of the video as an aesthetic and artistic work from a hatred of the United States or the heroic American dead for whom he takes himself to be speaking. As for those who took the music video to be a parody, he says in the same interview:

> I can't imagine anyone alone in the room when they look in the mirror when they look in the video if they think that this is not being sincere than they're not looking in the mirror. Look at the words. Look at the kids. Look at the firemen. Look at the angels. It's sincere. When people are alone they won't be chucklin'. All they have to do is think of their loved ones that passed away [sic].[44]

Despite the music video's almost indistinguishable visual similarity to military recruitment advertising and election-season television spots such as Reagan's "Morning in America" campaign, Madalone seems unable to or refuses to comprehend how someone could garner the impression that it contains a pro-war message or that it means to say that America is "number one," citing as evidence the complete absence of weapons.[45] In the immediate post-9/11 climate, when American flags emblazoned virtually every surface and object, the cartoonist Art Spiegelman wondered if it would possible to respond in some manner other than adding yet

another flag: "Why not a globe?"[46] This is the one point where Madalone seems to have some appreciation for the questions his music video raises for many viewers: upon reflection, he admitted that if he were to change one thing about the music video, it would be to add a final scene in which the flags of the world, held aloft by children, blend into a single flag.[47]

A number of aspects of Dennis Madalone's *America We Stand as One* music video and the reactions to it come to the fore in the context of the present discussion. One is that, given the great amount of attention the music video received, one need not merely speculate as to the reactions many people might have. The presence of the internet and the consequent ease with which people can post comments, leave remarks, and write blog entries means that a rich record of evaluations and reactions has been left behind. While many found the video to be inspiring and comforting, many others wondered out loud whether the whole thing was a "spoof." In fact, as has been shown, Madalone was directly attacked for "undermin[ing] the heroic efforts of the police, fireman and paramedics that were involved in the 9/11 incident" and "bring[ing] down the morale of our troops who are fighting so hard for freedom in Iraq." The music video, seemingly an undeniable avatar of kitsch, manifested itself to some as a parodic spectacle aimed at patriotic kitsch or, more troublingly for others, the height of poisonous, "liberal" irony and sarcasm—and therefore an outright attack on patriotism itself. In addition, Madalone's music video—unlike many of the items displayed in compendia of kitsch—was not product of an anonymous process; its creator was not only known and alive, but extremely open to communication. The fact that so many of the reactions to the music video included speculations that the video was a joke or parody led those who interviewed Madalone to press him on this point. Madalone's perplexed or even somewhat touchy responses to these questions suggest that in some cases "kitschy" items arise out of a world-view incommensurable with other perspectives, those which involve—as comment thread poster "Mark" put it, "a 'different' sense of humor."

As shall become clear when we turn to the second arguably kitschy work under consideration, even the comparatively small compass of 9/11 memorabilia and tributes is more than enough space to establish the various attitudes toward "kitsch" at issue here. Granted, this second work arises within a different community: not a world of monolithically sentimental, religious patriotism, but instead a world of hip, omnivorous sci-fi novelists, graphic artists, steampunks, and Japanese culture enthusiasts. And yet this audience will fall into debates over interpretation, sincerity, patriotism, and the limits of taste at times strikingly similar to

the debates we saw rise up over Dennis Madalone's unashamedly patriotic music video.

Jenny Ryan's *Soft 9/11*

Jenny Ryan's small sculpture, *Soft 9/11* (Fig. 9-2), provides a vivid example not merely of the intensity of the feelings and reactions which artwork visibly connected to 9/11 can still arouse, seven years after the attacks took place, but also of the *variety* of interpretations—and therefore reactions—which a single "kitschy" object can support. *Soft 9/11* consists of a soft felt sculpture, made along the lines of a plush toy or stuffed animal, of the twin towers of the World Trade Center under attack from two airplanes (also soft). The two buildings have been anthropomorphized by the addition of cartoon faces and thin black arms and legs. Each building is depicted being penetrated by an airplane (complete with United Airlines and American Airlines logos) while both buildings hold hands. Ryan explained that she "sewed snaps onto their hands so they are held together permanently." One building's cartoon face displays drooping eyelids and an extended tongue, indicating that it is feeling ill; the other building's cartoon face sports raised eyebrows and an open mouth, indicating surprise and dismay, as its eyes look upward towards the plane colliding with its head.

Soft 9/11 was posted to the *Boing Boing* blog with the following declaration:

> Some might think…*Soft 9/11* trivializes a horrible tragedy, but that kind of knee-jerk reaction prevents them from contemplating this profoundly heartfelt work of art.[48]

The ensuing comment thread included responses from both the original poster, Mark Frauenfelder (the founder of *Boing Boing*) and Jenny Ryan. Although many commenters posted either to simply mark their approval or disapproval of *Soft 9/11*, much of the discussion repeatedly circled around and returned to the question of how to interpret the piece and the artist's intentions in making it. In this way, the debate around *Soft 9/11* bears some resemblance to that surrounding Madalone's *America We Stand as One*. Another similarity between the two debates is that the work was almost immediately placed within the field of "kitsch": the very first comment in the thread on *Soft 9/11* asks, "How is the kitsch [9/11] commemorative coin you link to [in the caption] any more crass and exploitative than this?" Continuing this consideration of cuteness,

sentimentality, and patriotism, another commenter remarks that "there is an odd sort of comfort to be had in humour, no matter how dark or how kitsch," whereas a third refers to the original sketch from which the sculpture was made as "exploitive kitsch [created] for shock value." Finally, in the back-and-forth over the proper interpretation of the work, there is another similarity with the debate surrounding Madalone's music video, for there is evidence that, presented with an explanation of an alternative interpretation, some people may change their interpretation of a work and thereby their evaluation of it. Most of those who took issue with the sculpture as inappropriate on some level saw it as expressing a cynical attitude, "trivializ[ing] a horrible tragedy," as Frauenfelder feared a "knee-jerk reaction" would produce.

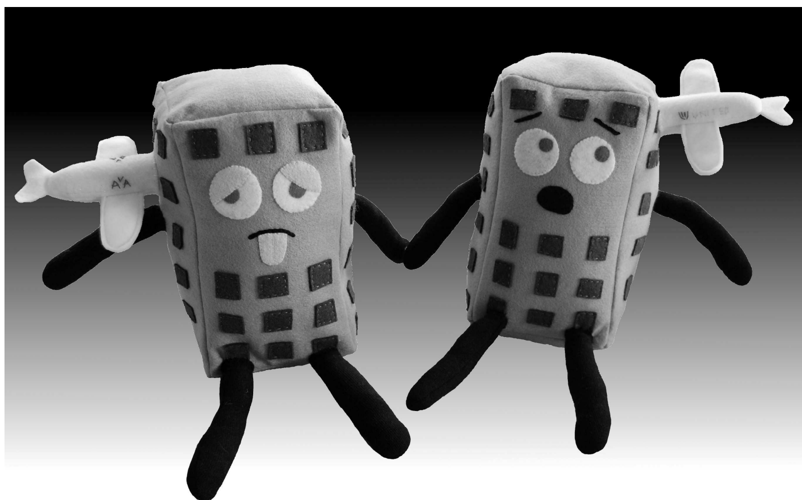

Fig. 9-2. Jenny Ryan, *Soft 9/11*, 2008. Plush toy sculpture made by Jenny Ryan based on a design by Johnny Ryan; original image posted to *Boing Boing* website on Dec. 10, 2008 by Mark Frauenfelder. Reproduced with the permission of Jenny and Johnny Ryan.

Given that reactions to *Soft 9/11* revolve so doggedly around questions of interpretation and the relationship between its interpretation and the artist's intention, it functions as a kind of virtual set piece, laying out as if on cue the core issues of critical engagement with art and artists. Certainly the main positions are staked out straight away and dominate the ensuing discussion:

> a) the artist's intention was to make a "profoundly heartfelt work," and the "cute" elements are to be taken as providing needed comfort;
> b) the "cute" treatment, given the horror of the 9/11 attacks, is a Trojan horse for a cynical, mocking attitude on the part of the artist, who is crafty in both senses of the term; and
> c) the artist intended it to be an ambivalent or multivalent work, expressing both comfort and critique.

If one took the second reading, there was also the question of whether the target of the artist's attack was the "horrible tragedy" itself or simply the "crass exploitative garbage" meant to turn a quick profit in the aftermath of the attacks by capitalizing on people's need for comfort and tangible "souvenirs" of the tragedy through familiar and non-threatening vehicles such as plush toys. At the same time, another debate raged over whether the work had a privileged reading at all, or whether one had to settle for a multiplicity of equally valid subjective responses.

Both Frauenfelder and Ryan implied that the work had an intentional ambivalence—a position from which it would be difficult to directly invalidate critical reactions, though several of their comments seem to invite the reading that the work is indeed an attack on "exploitative garbage" (and thus, presumably, *not* sweet and comforting), or that the work is meant to move between different emotional registers. Over the course of a number of comments Ryan wrote:

> These were made as a piece of art and are not for sale...unlike the 9/11 hair scrunchies[.] However several folks […] have been begging us to make these to sell, which just underlines my whole point in making the dolls. Yes I think they are funny AND cute … but that doesn't change the fact that these crafty cutesy dolls are, I think, a not too far off expansion of the ghoulish kind of capitalism that is already going on at Ground Zero. I was thinking of items like patriotic Beanie Babies and Bald Eagles with tear filled eyes as I stitched them. … There is something funny about them for sure. But I hope you can see that I intended something a bit more with these. Maybe I didn't achieve it, but it works for me.[49]

Ryan makes clear that she intends the work to have a critical component; she sets her sights on the "ghoulish capitalism" generating profits out of 9/11. It is difficult, however, when confronted with *Soft 9/11*, to reconcile the cutesy, seemingly irreverent treatment of 9/11 with a comforting, therapeutic intention, and raises the thorny issue of taste's role in interpretation.

When discussing presumably "kitschy" items, and even more so when discussing the attitudes supporting and surrounding them, one always

faces the danger that one has simply equated one's own preferences with those the rest of the world should have. A corollary danger is that one then expands upon the global projection of one's own preferences by attributing imaginary attitudes to imaginary consumers of kitsch to whom one imagines oneself to be superior. [50] Having reviewed the debates surrounding Madalone's *America We Stand as One* and Ryan's *Soft 9/11*, however, one can appreciate a signal advantage provided by the internet: even though Frauenfelder's *Boing Boing* post and its comments thread are not a controlled survey, and even though commenters are not guaranteed to post what they actually feel, their comments are certainly not imaginary responses from imaginary viewers thought up by a speculating armchair theorist. Similar considerations apply to the online discussions of Madalone's *America We Stand as One*. Whatever faults may be found in my own speculations on the deeper import of these reactions, or the reliability of the reactions themselves, they are speculations drawing upon actually existing reactions. Nevertheless, having performed a brief review of the discussions surrounding merely these two responses to 9/11, we are already well positioned to turn to an outline of the reigning attitudes to using the term, "kitsch."

Four Competing Attitudes toward Kitsch

Where, then, do all of these considerations bring us? At the present time, there seem to be at least four concurrent attitudes toward the use of the word "kitsch"; I will quickly spell them out before discussing them in more detail below. The term "kitsch" is often understood to express or embody:

1.) a legitimate term of disapproval, critique, or abuse
2.) an illegitimate, empirically ungrounded abusive term
3.) an ironic, condescending enjoyment of the badness of bad taste, similar to some forms of camp
4.) a light-hearted enjoyment of cute or exotic cultural snacks, in defiance of their reputed low nutritional value

By no means should this list be taken as exhaustive, but rather a sampling or distillation of the possible attitudes one might have or that people have actually taken. My contention here is merely that these are the attitudes that one encounters most often, and that these four basic attitudes to the term "kitsch" are all currently in play—they are all *co-existing* and *living* attitudes. In retrospect, I believe that it will become clear that the various, at times seemingly chaotic, reactions we saw to Madalone's *America We*

Stand as One and Jenny Ryan's *Soft 9/11* all take one or the other of these four attitudes for granted.

Before discussing those four attitudes to the use of the word "kitsch," it will be necessary to briefly discuss what might be called "simple," "single-order," or "first-level" kitsch.[51] With these terms I am trying to point to the phenomenon of someone enjoying an ostensibly "kitschy" object for its own sake. If we think of a Thomas Kinkade painting of a cozy cottage scene, the Precious Moments Chapel in Carthage, Missouri, or the *America We Stand as One* music video, for that matter, and consider the person who genuinely enjoys these things as sincere, inspiring, heart-warming sources of comfort (in other words, takes them to be *good* for their face-value, presumably or ostensibly intended effects), then we have the "single-order" appreciation of kitsch I have in mind. The thing to notice here is that this appreciation is not usually connected to the use of the word "kitsch." As I have argued elsewhere, "a person directly enjoying kitsch would not call it *kitsch*, but rather *beautiful*, *wonderful*, *charming*, *sweet*, *nice*, or some similar approbative term."[52] The absence of the word "kitsch" in such cases flows directly from the fact that the word "kitsch" basically expresses some sort of disapproval, and in the case of "single-order" kitsch, the person enjoying it does not disapprove. One can go farther, and note that many who might appreciate kitsch in this "single-order" fashion aren't even aware of the word "kitsch" in the first place. The straightforward enjoyment of "single-order" kitsch does not usually involve an attitude toward the *term*, which is why I have not included it in my list of four basic attitudes, even though, in a certain sense, it is prior to all of them.

"Kitsch" as a Legitimate Abusive Term

The first of these four basic attitudes to the term "kitsch" takes it to be a legitimate abusive term for that which is considered excessive, overly sentimental, or in bad taste.[53] This use of the term is the most intuitive. What might pass unnoticed is that the use of "kitsch" as a term of abuse can come from many possible stances; these world views can sometimes be diametrically opposed, such as liberal or leftist disdain for ideologically suspect sentimentalia as over against an elitist, conservative disdain for cultural products that do not rest on the "classics," exhibit the traditional acculturation, or exhibit a connection to "eternal" values.[54] Even though the use of "kitsch" as a critical term can rest on a multitude of different assumptions, there have been times or at least sub-cultures in which some meeting-ground has been found, albeit perhaps only temporarily. Reading

the transcripts of a 1990 symposium on kitsch in a special issue of *Salmagundi*, for example, there is a sense in spite of disagreements that the symposium does have a common referent which rests on the critical attitude in question here, though that impression could be the effect of the fact that the members of the panel had all been provided with a common "packet of selected readings."[55] So much, then, for "kitsch" seen as a legitimate abusive term or tool of critique. This is the use of the term that comes most easily to the lips and is the easiest to find. The debates surrounding Madalone's *America We Stand as One* and Ryan's *Soft 9/11*, at any rate, show that this use is still a living option. Given that this use of the term "kitsch" has also come under fire, however, let us turn to that critique.

"Kitsch" as an Illegitimate, Empirically Ungrounded, Abusive Term

Some take "kitsch" to be an illegitimate, empirically ungrounded term used to enforce social hierarchy. The sociologist David Halle captures much of this view in his entry on "highbrow/lowbrow" for *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, since a great deal of the traditional impetus for the use of "kitsch" as a critical term has rested on an assumption of the superiority of "high culture" over popular culture:

> As a college degree became increasingly normal [in the United States] this education gap [between an educated elite and the rest of the population] has faded, and so has the plausibility of maintaining that there are two radically different cultures. […] [I]n the late 1950s and early 1960s[,] researchers, especially sociologists, undertook empirical studies of "popular/lowbrow" culture and of the associated audience. These studies often challenged, on empirical grounds, the earlier claims that the products of "popular/lowbrow" culture were of little or no aesthetic value and were experienced by the audience in an uncreative and unimaginative way. [A later stage] took the debates in a more radical turn, upending earlier aesthetic evaluations and arguing that "popular/lowbrow" culture is, in some respects at least, aesthetically superior to "high/highbrow culture." [E.g., "lowbrow" buildings such as casinos often communicate their particular function better than "anonymous" "highbrow" glass boxes.][56]

Halle cites Pop Art and the influence of Pierre Bourdieu as forces which question the illegitimacy of popular culture or which unmask pretentions of "high culture" as a veil for "struggles for power." He ends his article with a discussion of the final, present stage in the debate, according to

which the very distinction between "highbrow" and "lowbrow" culture is for the most part untenable, given that everyone, regardless of social class, consumes popular or "lowbrow" culture, and that institutions of "highbrow culture" are themselves actively erasing the former boundary between the two realms.[57]

These concerns about the viability of the term "kitsch," at least insofar as it rests on the opposition between "high culture" and popular culture, cannot be simply brushed off, since they touch on the inherent danger in any application of the term in its abusive or pejorative sense, namely the possibility that the critic has simply assumed that her particular taste is, or should be, universal. When the term "kitsch" expresses disdain, issues of power and cultural prestige are almost always in play. Especially when, in the use of the term, the person applying it can easily find it applied in turn to her, it would be foolhardy to take for granted some eternal standard behind it.[58]

Even if correct, however, the contention that the "highbrow/lowbrow" distinction is evaporating would do little to lessen one's feeling that the mock threat in the epigraph of this chapter—that, come the Rapture, "left behind" atheists will steal the Hummel figurines—touches on real divisions in American culture, divisions which have an important role to play in determining the quality of education, medicine, and scientific research in the United States. Likewise, the contention that "kitsch" is an illegitimate elitist weapon does little to reassure someone who suspects that all is not right when Thomas Kinkade can amass millions upon millions of dollars selling cozy, patriotic, self-declaredly Christian paintings which dovetail seamlessly with the complacent mythology of American innocence and freedom so necessary to the militaristic foreign policy of Republican and Democratic administrations alike.

Cultural critic Marita Sturken, a scholar in the field of culture and communication, contends that a critique of kitsch need not depend upon an assumption of the "highbrow/lowbrow" distinction in any case. Sturken writes:

> Debates about kitsch in the context of modernity have often focused on distinctions between high and low culture and between art and mass culture. […traditional] definitions of kitsch in the context of modern culture inevitably raise […] issues of taste and elitism. The mass culture critiques of kitsch were, in effect, criticisms of lower-class taste, defining it as uncultured. Yet, in the contemporary context of mixing modern and postmodern styles, ironic winking and the cross-class circulation of objects, such critiques carry little meaning. Contemporary kitsch cultures defy simple hierarchies of high and low. Kitsch forms of easy emotionalism can

> be found in the realms of high art and architecture as easily as cheap trinkets, and irony, which is often kitsch's antidote, can also be part of camp's deliberate engagements with kitsch. […] In the context of postmodern culture, understanding kitsch means moving beyond simple definitions of high and low precisely because of the way that kitsch objects can move in and out of concepts of authenticity. […] The challenge to understanding how kitsch operates today is to see the range of responses that it produces, to consider how it can encourage both a prepackaged sentimental response and a playful engagement, simultaneously and to varying degrees, with history, innocence, and irony.[59]

Clearly, Sturken believes that the present dissolution of hard lines between high and low culture eliminates neither the possibility of nor the need for a critique of kitsch.[60] Her remarks above also point forward to the last two of the four main attitudes toward the term "kitsch" which I would like to highlight.

"Kitsch" as an Ironic, Condescending Enjoyment of Bad Taste as Bad

"Kitsch" can be applied as a backhanded compliment through an ironic, mocking, or "hip" stance, which, though it sees "kitsch" items as being excessive, overly sentimental, or in bad taste, enjoys them precisely for these (or other) failures *qua* failures, given that an awareness of these failures (sometimes manifested through owning and displaying these objects) demonstrates one's superior knowledge, taste, or judgment.[61] This attitude highlights the overt and covert pathways which connect the idea of "kitsch" not merely to other ideas such as sincerity and authenticity, but also camp, irony, and sarcasm. Here what should not be overlooked is the fact that this ironic re-appropriation of "kitsch" items usually rests on similar presuppositions to the attitude of disapprobation just discussed; but it *enjoys* the act of disapprobation (though that enjoyment maybe highly moderated or mediated) and incorporates it into a sarcastic simulation of appreciation. Some kinds of camp appropriation, it should be noted, involve a loving, melancholic embrace and rejuvenation of cultural dejecta.[62] So a wide range of attitudes and emotions can potentially be woven into the self-referential field of irony; its very self-referentiality and engagement with meta-commentary encourages just such a multiplication of layers and levels. This understanding of the term "kitsch" stands behind or at least in close proximity to much of the art world's appropriation of popular culture.[63]

As we have seen, one variety of this multiplicity was the stated intention behind Jenny Ryan's *Soft 9/11*—regardless of whether one takes the sculpture to have successfully fulfilled its stated intention or not. As Ryan made clear, with her "Beanie Baby"-style Twin Towers, she targets the "ghoulish capitalism" profiting from 9/11, but at the same time, she *enjoys* the cuteness of her sculpture, a cuteness which she nonetheless admits is "a not too far off expansion of [that] ghoulish capitalism." She expresses her approval of those who report ultimately finding *Soft 9/11* sad. Judging from her reaction to comments from the *Boing Boing* discussion thread, there is in her view an interpretation which can capture exactly what she is trying to get across, a reaction beginning with gentle laughter (presumably at the commercialized, automated sadness epitomized by the cutesy buildings) which then turns to real sadness as one takes the depicted cuteness not as a parody, but a sincere expression of loss.[64] The stated intention of Ryan's *Soft 9/11* provides a concrete example of a multi-layered, self-referential recuperation of kitsch. The competing reactions to her work, however, simultaneously demonstrate the possible confusion which such an ironic product can generate.

The fact that in many cases *something* (in this case "ghoulish" 9/11 memorabilia) is rejected puts into question both the presumed freedom of a postmodern era and the claim that cultural distinctions of high and low have practically disappeared. The more hard-edged irony which offers only condescending, mock appreciation of "kitsch" items clearly retains an idea of superiority, but even the more accepting, "omnivorous" attitude of the eclectic hipster can contain elements of distinction and rejection. The fact that distinguished groups ravenously consume pop culture, too, does not mean that all boundaries have been erased. Carl Wilson for example writes that

> in a hyper-mediated, mass-production culture, a lot of reference points are shared across classes. Almost everyone now will wear jeans. Nearly everyone has spent time listening to rock music. […] American sociologists Richard Petersen and Roger Kern […] suggested that the upper-class taste model has changed from a "snob" to an "omnivore" ideal, in which the coolest thing for a well-off and well-educated person to do is to consume some high culture along with heaps of popular culture, international and lowbrow entertainment: a contemporary opera one evening, the roller derby and an Afrobeat show the next. […] But nobody is a true omnivore. To have taste at all means to exclude. [In Princeton sociologist Bethany Bryson's study,] the most educated, high-cultural-capital respondents (who were the most politically liberal and racially tolerant) disliked the fewest forms of music. […] But they did have music they disliked—the four types that had the least educated fans: rap, heavy metal, country and gospel.[65]

The implication of these and similar studies is that the new omnivore demonstrates her superiority not by a "snobbish" rejection of pop culture *tout court*, but rather through being able to consume a wider range of high and low culture than less distinguished segments of society. All the same, the omnivore rejects certain items of culture. And even in her appropriation of less distinguished culture, the omnivore does not consume in the same way as less omnivorous consumers: Wilson observes that "[e]ven if I can set my prejudices and status anxieties aside […] and find aspects of Céline [Dion]'s music to embrace, the research suggests that I'm not going to appreciate her in the same terms her fans do."[66]

For all its advantages, irony is not without its own limits and pitfalls. Just as kitsch can be attacked as worthless or harmful by both liberal and conservative commentators, irony has both its conservative and liberal detractors. Conservatives triumphantly declared the "end of irony" in the wake of 9/11, but within liberal/progressive intellectual circles (often presumed to be postmodern in outlook) there can also be pushback against a (presumably postmodern) free-for-all attitude. An example of this pushback can be found in the periodical *The Baffler*, which often exhibited a suspicion of marketing strategies meant to capitalize on this very free-for-all attitude or to coöpt the very irony employed to guard against marketing strategies.[67] A less nuanced but perhaps just as effective questioning of the ironic attitude can be found in an article from the satirical newspaper, *The Onion*, entitled, "Ironic Porn Purchase Leads to Unironic Ejaculation,"[68] which describes a young man purchasing a pornographic movie, *Terrors from the Clit*, under a false pretense of ironic disdain.[69] These criticisms imply that irony can be unmasked as a means of having one's cake while eating it, too: allowing one to participate even further than others in consumer culture while simultaneously congratulating oneself for one's exceptionally vigilant critical attitude toward that consumer culture.

Finally, it has to be admitted that, due to the varying degree to which irony, satire, and parody explicitly announce their ironic stance or satirical intent, they can easily lead to misinterpretation and misunderstanding. A recent study from the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the Ohio State University concluded that conservative viewers of Comedy Central's political satire, *The Colbert Report*, were more likely than liberal viewers to misinterpret the show's ironic slant. Stephen Colbert plays a conservative reporter / commentator of the same name, spoofing the conservative FOX News pundit Bill O'Reilly. The authors of the study note that Colbert delivers his routine in a "deadpan" fashion that usually conceals its ironic stance, a quality that increases the probability that the

audience will (mis)interpret the ironic performer to be speaking sincerely. In the case of the *Colbert Report*, conservative viewers were more likely to misinterpret Colbert's intentions in order to find support for their own views, the views actually under comedic attack—though the authors' way of putting this result was that the misinterpretation "was more likely to occur if the person's political beliefs and/or affiliations are consistent with the statements made at face value."[70]

As we saw, many viewers of Madalone's *America We Stand as One* had the opposite problem: they were not sure that the (sincerely intended) density of patriotico-sentimental symbols was meant to be sincere. This misinterpretation of Madalone's music video was enabled precisely by their familiarity with the preponderance of satirical music videos online. When the irony is carried not by a performer over time, but instead by a stationary art object, the possibility for confusion often increases. Anecdotes about a viewer's inability to make out the basic (let alone the ultimate) intent of art works are legion, and many artists intentionally push ambiguity in their works. In one recent case of such confusion, a sculpture intended to be a satirical attack on kitsch was examined for illegal sincerity: a work by German artist Ottmar Hörl came under scrutiny from the Nuremberg public prosecutor's office when it was informed that the statue was a golden, 16-inch tall garden gnome holding its arm erect in a "Heil Hitler" salute. Swastikas and other icons of Nazi propaganda are strictly policed in Germany, and accordingly his sculpture had to be examined "to establish whether the artist and the gallery owner had intended the gnome as an endorsement of the Third Reich or as a rejection of Nazi ideology." Though the authorities were duty bound to determine whether the work fell within the limits proscribed by law, the artist (who is also president of Nuremberg's Academy of Fine Arts) was incredulous: "In 1942 I would have been murdered by the Nazis for this work."[71] Hörl's incredulity almost reverses Madalone's: whereas Madalone could not understand those who doubted his sincerity, Hörl has a hard time believing that anyone would take his saluting gnome to be a sincere endorsement of Nazi ideology. This implies that the fine artist presupposes an eye for satire just as much as Madalone presupposes a heart for sincerity.

A borderline case—one of many—in these ironic territories would be the work of Norwegian artist Odd Nerdrum, who expressly claims to paint "kitsch" instead of art. As with Ryan's *Soft 9/11*, it can sometimes be difficult to connect the artist's stated intention with the work itself. Though his manifestoes often invoke works which would sit comfortably next to Thomas Kinkade paintings, Nerdrum's paintings themselves are frequently dark, cold, and scatological. The fact that he refers to his own

work with the term “kitsch” at all, and claims the term “kitsch” as an abject honorific, places him in relation to ironic uses of the word. But the particular ambiguity surrounding his work also brings it some relation to the last use of the term “kitsch” I would like to discuss.[72]

“Kitsch” as a Light-Hearted Enjoyment of Cute or Exotic Cultural Snacks, in Defiance of their Reputed Low Nutritional Value

In certain instances, “kitsch” is applied as a positive term, used to indicate items which—though it is understood (however vaguely) that these items are seen or could be seen by others as excessive, overly sentimental, or in bad taste—are nonetheless accepted in a loving and charitable fashion as being good. In effect, it is a sort of recuperation or rescuing of these items from what is seen as an overly harsh attitude; even if it sometimes makes light of the items, it does so in a forgiving, accepting way. (One’s ancestors may have been banned from the kitschy Garden of Eden once their eyes were opened to its kitschy nature, but the flaming sword held at its entrance only keeps *them* from returning.) Though many examples can be found elsewhere in newspaper articles and blog posts, this attitude can most easily be found in restaurant reviews and travel writing. In other words, it often appears in writing closely tied to promoting consumerism.

Examples abound. I will mention just a few here. A travel piece on the village of Salento, in Columbia, remarks that “the colorful, two-tone plus white facades give the square a cheery tone even on a dreary day—though a touch of kitsch as well.”[73] An article for *The Kansas City Star*, “Kitsch Fan Charles Phoenix Finds Plenty to Love in KC,” describes how one kitsch chronicler, as he passes through Kansas City, hunts down kitschy locales—Americana such as John’s Space Age Donuts and the White Haven Motor Lodge—under the rubric, “Kansas City: Cooler Than You Think.”[74] In “Kitsch Me If You Can,” fashion designer Anna Sui describes her home décor as “the essence of Victoriana twisted with the kitsch of the 1960s.”[75] In a recent review of the Los Angeles restaurant, BoHo, the reviewer writes, “you feel a bit like you’re walking into your grandfather’s den […] BoHo is bursting with kitschy knickknacks, gaudy oil paintings and mismatched lights and furniture.” Kristofer Keith, the restaurant’s creator, says that “It’s almost like you’re dining in a junk store […] I call it beautifully ugly.” The article closes, “The only downside so far is that people are stealing the kitsch. ‘I had about 10 teddy bears, and now there are only five,’ says Keith. ‘But I bought them for a buck a piece, so I’ll just buy more.’”[76] A student-run alternative magazine serving both Ithaca

College and Cornell campuses is simply entitled *Kitsch*, the title meant to express the eclectic outlook of the magazine (its mascot is a garden gnome). One of its editors, Evan Mulvihill, explains that "In the art world, 'kitsch' is defined as riffraff, something that you have to look down upon and push away[…] Calling the magazine *Kitsch* is almost a way of reclaiming the word and saying 'Hey, "kitsch" isn't that bad.'"[77] Finally, we saw this sort of attitude in some of the reactions to *America We Stand as One*, insofar as some who remarked on the kitschiness or cheesiness of the video simultaneously remarked that it was irresistible *and* positive.[78]

Kitsch Resists Being Discussed Abstractly

Certainly one of the central lessons to be drawn from the contributions to this volume is the following: it is difficult to speak effectively about kitsch in the abstract, or with an *a priori* approach, since (as this collection shows so well) the application of the term is so often bound up with particular battles over cultural boundaries and intellectual turf. While it would be foolish to declare a moratorium on attempts to analyze kitsch as a phenomenon with its own outlines and contours, the essays collected in the present volume (as well as the work of Halle, Pawłowski, Sturken, Wilson, *et al.*) encourage all who approach the idea of kitsch to do so with extreme caution—especially insofar as any attempt to treat "kitsch" in the abstract, to give it a purely theoretical or philosophical treatment, tends to strip off all of the specificity that enabled the term to be applied in the first place.

This body of work also suggests two antidotes, or at least two inoculations, against precipitate philosophizing in the abstract. First, particular studies of individual battles for cultural dominance—battles which capitalize on the negative charge of the word "kitsch" and related terms—reveal ways in which an overly abstract approach to "kitsch" can obscure the very context which provides the use of the term "kitsch" with its meaning and motivation. Second, empirical research into the use of, and attitudes about, ostensibly "kitschy" items can work against pre-conceived notions and bring to the fore cultural assumptions on the part of the theorist which might otherwise pass unexamined. I am aware from my own attempts at grappling with the "kitsch" concept that it hides numerous theoretical dead ends and traps.

In many cases, the most fruitful way to approach "kitsch" is the first: to examine the very cultural battles from which the term arises to see why and how the term is applied, and what cultural fault lines its application reveals. In other words, investigating the very context out of which a particular use of the word "kitsch" emerges will usually be more

informative and more revealing than a concentrated focus on the term or concept considered *per se*. This precaution is especially important at the present time, when, as has been shown in some detail above, there is no consensus on a single use for the term. The fruitfulness and effectiveness of the contextual approach and the use of varied methodological tacks is precisely what the present collection demonstrates.[79]

Notes

[1] Zano Bathroom (improvisational rapper in the Atlanta, GA region), "Ass Birth": side A of 7" record album (*Ass Birth / There's Apple Fuzz in the Peach of My Eye*), Rob's House Records (2006), #RHR014.

[2] James DiGiovanna, assistant professor of philosophy at John Jay College (New York City, NY), and long-standing film critic for the *Tucson Weekly*, Twitter posting, August 5, 2008. <http://twitter.com/jamesdig/statuses/878490184>.

[3] In order to underscore that fact that my discussion centers on attitudes toward the use of a *term*, I usually place the word "kitsch" within quotation marks.

[4] Similar difficulties surrounding the terms "society" and the "beautiful" might be mentioned. Tom Huhn writes: "As Keith Baker writes of *society*: 'Few words can have been more generously invoked in the course of the eighteenth century; none seem now more difficult for the historian to pin down. Yet, by the same token, none was more central to the philosophy of the Enlightenment.'" Tom Huhn, "Burke's Sympathy for Taste" *Eighteenth Century Studies* 35, no. 3 (2002): 379–393, here pp. 379–380, citing Keith Michael Baker, "Enlightenment and the Institution of Society: Notes for a Conceptual History," in *Main Trends in Cultural History: Ten Essays*, ed. Willem Melching and Wygee Velema (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), 95–120. Huhn goes on to say, "For the eighteenth century, 'beauty' appears to have been hardly more stable than 'society'" (p. 391, note 4).

[5] Dorfles speaks of "the *intentional and conscious use* by top flight artists (one can at once list important names: Duchamp, Picasso, De Chirico and so on) of avowedly kitsch elements […] when [kitsch] is used *intentionally and consciously* by the very artists or people of today who, precisely because of their awareness of the experience of kitsch, make use of it for diametrically opposed ends. The attempt by some artists to redeem kitsch, intentionally and consciously, in their work is worthy but two-edged" (Dorfles' emphasis); in this regard he specifically mentions the artists Giacomo Balla, Marcel Duchamp, Paul Delvaux, René Magritte, Félix Labisse, Méret Oppenheim, Richard Hamilton, Roy Lichtenstein, Enrico Baj, Claes Oldenberg, Robert Rauschenberg, Edward Keinholz, Winfred Gaul, Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns, Tom Wesselmann, Peter Blake, and Lucio Del Pezzo. See Gillo Dorfles, ed., *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste* (New York: Bell Publishing, 1968), "Conclusion," 290–302 (the above quotation is from p. 290). For the cultural critic Harold Rosenberg, writing in 1957, "…genuine artists like Stuart Davis and Willem de Kooning continue to make good use of billboard type or the lips that sell rouge. […] Using kitsch is one of art's juiciest devices, and a

comic revenge for the looting of art by kitsch," whereas Philip Crick (for whom kitsch is essentially parasitical to art) writes in very similar terms almost 20 years later of "the way in which Western artists have taken up facets of the enormous Kitsch output in their own culture and through a deft act of allusive irony incorporated them into fresh aesthetic statements," continuing: "[m]odern art therefore engages in a crucial if low-key dialogue with its feverish parasite." See Harold Rosenberg, "Pop Culture: Kitsch Criticism," chapter 18 of his *The Tradition of the New* (New York: Horizon Press, 1959), 259–268, here 265 [originally in Harold Rosenberg and David Manning White, eds., *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1957)] and Philip Crick, "Kitsch," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 23:1 (Winter 1983): 48–52, here 52. A more sustained treatment can be found in the "Pop Art and Kitsch" section of Tomas Kulka, *Kitsch and Art* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 107–113.

[6] Carl Wilson, *Let's Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste* [#52 in the "33⅓" series] (New York: Continuum, 2007), 18, 17, and 20. The book, it should be noted, takes up the question of kitsch by name and at some length.

[7] Wilson, *Let's Talk About Love*, 12–13.

[8] Wilson, *Let's Talk About Love*, 11–13, 85–86, 94–100, and *passim*. See also the blog post by former Lemonheads member J. P. Strohm, "Punk-Approved Wuss Rock," from Jan. 4, 2009 on the "Indiana MP3 Archive and Online Community," *Musical Family Tree* <musicalfamilytree.net>; he writes that in "the early 80s, when Michael Jackson ruled the charts and airwaves[,] I listened almost exclusively to punk and hardcore in those days. Freda, my high school girlfriend, and I kept our shared appreciation of Michael Jackson and Prince very much under wraps among our group of friends, who would not have been very understanding." He writes in the comment thread, however, that "[s]peaking of hipsters (to use a blunt term for lack of a better one), one thing I've noticed about current hipsters is that they are willing to pick and choose from genres. It's not necessarily uncool to dig something that's mainstream or even hokey. That's a positive change to me. The fascism of regarding anything mainstream as evil is just fuckin' silly."

[9] Wilson, *Let's Talk About Love*, 20–21.

[10] The way in which Wilson's book is seen to stand out from other books in the series can be seen in Andy Battaglia's remark that, at first glance, the book "would seem to be a novel stunt." Andy Battaglia, "Let's Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste," *Bookforum Magazine* (Feb./March, 2008), from <www.bookforum.com>. Sam Anderson's review refers to the book's exceptional status in much starker terms: "For four years now, Continuum's 33⅓ series has been issuing a steady stream of hip little rock-and-roll catechisms: idiosyncratic pocket-size meditations by eminent critics on seminal albums. Subjects skew toward the artsy-intellectual (Radiohead's *OK Computer*), the canonical (Dylan's *Highway 61 Revisited*), and the cultish (Neutral Milk Hotel's *In the Aeroplane Over the Sea*). Among such countercultural titans, the series' newest topic—Céline Dion's *Titanic*-era *Let's Talk About Love*—feels alarmingly out of place." Sam Anderson, "Taster's Choice: Is Disdain for Céline Dion Innate or Learned? And

What’s Wrong with Liking her Music Anyway?,” *New York Magazine* (Dec. 17, 2007), from <nymag.com>. Both Battaglia and Anderson invoke a violation of the rock-and-roll canon insofar as they explicitly state that Continuum’s 33⅓ series deals with “canonical” albums. Likewise, Jennifer Carden, in her review of Wilson’s *Let’s Talk About Love* for the online college magazine *Kritik*, wrote that it “is the newest installment of the semi-ultra hip 33⅓ series, in which informed music junkies delve deep into their favorite records. Wilson […] threw the train off course.” Jennifer Carden, “Let’s Talk About Love: How ‘What Do You Listen to?’ Became the New ‘What Do You Do?,’” *Kritik Magazine* (April 21, 2008), from <kritikmagazine.com>. Jason Anderson’s review states that Wilson’s “project is very different from the other titles in Continuum’s 33⅓ series, which consists of tributes to the Smiths’ *Meat is Murder*, Love’s *Forever Changes* and other albums that have more of the qualities that excite self-respecting, cool-conscious critics.” Jason Anderson, “Learning to Love Céline Dion,” *The Globe and Mail* [Canada] (Jan. 19, 2008), D5. Practically no review of Wilson’s book neglects to mention the way in which—because it deals with Céline Dion—it clearly stands out from the rest of the books in the series.

[11] Rosenberg, “Pop Culture: Kitsch Criticism,” 262.

[12] Comment posted by “Metallic” to an *eBaum’s World Forum* “Christian Metal/Screamo” discussion thread started by Christian screamo fan “Xandir” on Feb. 11, 2007 <forum.ebaumsworld.com/showthread.php?t=184736>. The “screamo” name combines “emo” with “scream”; it is associated with emo, itself an offshoot of emocore, a subgenre of hardcore (punk rock). Not surprisingly, screamo usually involves the vocalist screaming. The music writer Andy Greenwald, in his book on emo, *Nothing Feels Good: Punk Rock, Teenagers, and Emo* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2003), mentions on the first page that “[t]here are even subgenres [of emo], such as screamo and nuemo.” Christian screamo is part of an open family of Christian rock music (such as Christian metal and Christian punk) which appeals to young males by coöpting aggressive rock music instead of fighting against it.

[13] For more on emo as a genre, see Greenwald, *Nothing Feels Good*, as well as Sarah Williams, “‘A Walking Open Wound’: Emo Rock and the ‘Crisis’ of Masculinity in America,” in Freya Jarman-Ivens, ed., *Oh Boy! Masculinities and Popular Music* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 145–160. Vincent J. Novara and Stephen Henry briefly consider emo within the wider context of indie rock in “A Guide to Essential American Indie Rock,” *Notes* (second series) 65:4 (June 2009): 816–833. Two of the bands most often mentioned in discussions of emo are Rites of Spring and Dashboard Confessional, though Greenwald claims that “there is not now, nor has there ever been, a single major band that admits to being emo. Not one. […] The one thing everyone agrees on is that they’ve never encountered a band that claimed to be emo” (*Nothing Feels Good*, 2 and 4).

[14] My account of the emo wars rests principally on the articles, “Agreden tribus urbanas a jóvenes ‘emo,’” *El Porvenir* [Monterrey, Mexico] (March 9, 2008) and Jeremy Schwartz, “Emos under Attack” *The Austin American-Statesman* [Austin, Texas] (March 20, 2008), though also numerous blog posts, principally those by

Daniel Hernandez on his *Intersections* blog <danielhernandez.typepad.com>. The television news report was broadcast by TV Azteca in mid-March, 2008. The emo wars story eventually made its way to national print news outlets such as the *Los Angeles Times* and *Time* magazine. A posting by "genevi" on the *Multitude* website <multitude.tv> first brought my attention to the emo wars.

[15] See Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 3–21 (partially reproduced in Dorfles, *Kitsch*, pp. 116–126), and Umberto Eco, "The Structure of Bad Taste," in *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 180–216. Eco refers to these stylistic elements, which kitsch steals, as "stylemes" (pp. 200–205).

[16] Michael Kimmelman, "Andrew Wyeth, Revered and Ridiculed Artist, Dies," *New York Times* (Jan. 16, 2009).

[17] See *inter alia* M. Kjellman-Chapin, "Kinkade and the Canon: Art History's (Ir)Relevance," in *Partisan Canons*, ed. Anna Brzyski (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 267–88, and "Manufacturing Masterpieces for the Market: Thomas Kinkade and the Rhetoric of 'High' Art," in *Thomas Kinkade: The Artist in the Mall*, ed. Alexis L. Boylan (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 206–37. Kjellman-Chapin argues that Kinkade capitalizes on his status as an art world outsider while simultaneously mobilizing an array of elements which rhetorically place him within the canon of classical fine art.

[18] Harold Rosenberg, "Pop Culture: Kitsch Criticism," 264–65.

[19] Though Dennis Madalone has also released the song heard in the music video as a piece of music (a CD single/audio file), it is the music video which has received all of the attention in magazines, newspapers, and blogs. Indeed, my impression is that, at least in the case of *America We Stand as One*, most viewers would take the music video to be primary, and the song to be by contrast something taken or detached from the music video. For these reasons—and given that the "*Gesamtkunstwerk*" of the music video includes the song as one of its elements—I will not be focusing on the song considered as a stand-alone work. As for Jenny Ryan's work, though she made the *Soft 9/11* sculpture based on a sketch by her husband (Johnny Ryan), given that the sculpture was her re-working, I will treat her as the artist of the work throughout.

[20] Among the many items one might want to discuss in a more extended treatment of such responses or reactions to 9/11, one may mention the spontaneous shrines that appeared in the wake of the 9/11 attacks; the exhibition, *Here Is New York*, organized by Alice Rose George, Gilles Peress, Michal Shulan, and Charles Traub in NYC in the fall of 2001; the *Pop Patriotism* exhibition curated by Peter Scott for Momenta Art in Brooklyn, NYC (Sept. 7–Oct. 8, 2002); the HBO documentary, *Nine Innings from Ground Zero: The 2001 World Series* (2004); Art Spiegelman's comic book, *In the Shadows of No Towers* (New York: Pantheon, 2004); and the art exhibit, *The Art of 9/11*, curated by Arthur C. Danto, at the Apex Art gallery in NYC (Sept. 7–Oct. 15, 2005). A number of these (as well as many others) receive detailed treatment in Marita Sturken, *Tourists of History: Memory,*

Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

[21] Judging from blog posts. Although web caches of the *America We Stand As One* website <americawesatndasone.com> maintained on <archive.org> begin as early as January of 2002 (which would imply a very quick turnaround for the 9/11-inspired music video), according to Madalone, it was not released until June of 2003 (email from Dennis Madalone, June 13, 2009). Madalone however has also stated in an interview with a *Star Trek* blog that the video was released to the internet in April of 2005 (Madalone has worked as a stunt coordinator for *Star Trek*, and for this reason receives mention in items related to *Star Trek*). Sebastian Prooth, "America, We Stand As One's, Dennis Madalone, Speaks to SebRT.com!" [sic], *Seb's Web Archive* (July 12, 2006) <tektrekgamer.wordpress.com>. It may well be that the 2005 rise in attention was connected to the appearance of YouTube itself at that very time <youtube.com>.

[22] Stefan Schultz, "Grössenwahn im Pop: Narziss und Krächzmund," *Der Spiegel* online (Sept. 20, 2007) <spiegel.de>. The introductory paragraph to the post reads: "The accordion wheezes asthmatically, the singer presses on into undreamed of tonal ranges: the history of pop is crawling with freaks who take themselves to be unrecognized geniuses—even though the entire world is laughing at them. A compendium collects this 'unbelievably strange music'" [my translation].

[23] I was unable to find any such assertion that the video is not a spoof on the official *America We Stand as One* website when I looked most recently, and Madalone seemed unwilling to discuss the fact that some had taken his video to be a spoof when I asked him about it in emails or in a telephone interview conducted on June 10, 2009. See <americawestandasone.com>. In an interview in 2005, however, Madalone did explicitly state that "it's not […] a parody joke." John Gorenfeld, "America Stands As One: The Exclusive Interview," an online article for Google's *Orkut* social networking website (April 20, 2005) <media.orkut.com>. In his interview on Sebatian Prooth's blog the next year, Madalone stated that bloggers and journalists "think there is a gimmick to it and that there is a catch, but there is no catch it's not a gimmick" [sic]. Sebastian Prooth, "Dennis Madalone Speaks to SebRT.com!"

[24] Amelie Gillette, et al., "Baseball, Apple Pie, and Kicking Your Fucking Ass: 21 Hilariously Hyperbolic pro America Songs" *A.V. Club* (June 30, 2008) <avclub.com>. *A.V. Club* is a product of the satirical fake news publication, *The Onion*, but the reviews, it should be noted, are not satirical meta-commentaries.

[25] The religiosity of the music video is hard to pin down, suggesting some location between traditional Christianity and New Age spirituality. This vagueness may be a conscious choice on Madalone's part in order to allow for the widest range of believers to participate in its spiritual invigoration, but it could also simply reflect his own religious worldview.

[26] Dennis Madalone, telephone interview with the author (June 10, 2009).

[27] Debbie Laskey, "America We Stand as One the Music Video: A Tribute to Our Heroes and All of Our Loved Ones," *The Tolucan Times and Canyon Crier* 60:36 (Sept. 1, 2004), 1–3. The article, which includes photographs connected to the

making of the music video, encourages readers to donate to the Uniformed Firefighters Association Widows and Children Fund and the Bob Hope Hollywood USO.
[28] Dennis Madalone, telephone interview with the author (June 10, 2009).
[29] Madalone's webpage sports a banner on the main page stating, "Welcome to America We Stand as One… The Most Downloaded Music Video on the internet," and his online biography declares that he "is now known as the artist with the most downloaded Music Video on the internet." British international relations and international security professor Stuart Croft refers to the video as "one of the web-based hits of 2005," noting that "Over 40,000 people logged onto the website in the first fix or six days, after which the phenomenon grew much further." Stuart Croft, *Culture, Crisis, and America's War on Terror* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 248. Croft bases his remarks on John Gorenfeld's interview with Dennis Madalone, in which Madalone states that "We know for sure that 42,000 people have hit our website in 5–6 days." Sebastian Prooth's interview with Madalone, "Dennis Madalone Speaks to SebRT.com," cited above, repeats the assertion that "America We Stand as One is the most downloaded music video of all time." In that interview, Madalone states that the music video had 7,000 hits from the official website within the first three days, and that the high demand for the music video forced him to change ISP's twice in order to find one that could handle the demand.
[30] "Big in the Trading Card World," *The Revealer* blog (April 7, 2005) <therevealer.org>.
[31] John Gorenfeld, "America Stands As One: The Exclusive Interview."
[32] K.L., "America We Stand as One" (Video Dog: Comedy), *Salon* (July 25, 2006) <salon.com>.
[33] "Déjà demandé ce que donnaient un concentré de clichés patriotiques, d'effets spéciaux bien *cheap* et une absence totale de remise en question?" [my translation], from "Dennis Madalone: America We Stand as One," posted to the blog, *Vidéos kitsch: des clips kitsch, ringard, ridicules et ... très kitsch!* (27 July 2008) <videoskitsch.blogspot.com>.
[34] For example, the blog post on *The Revealer* (cited earlier) which refers to it as "cheese so pungent it redeems" and the following remark about *America We Stand as One* from a *Globe and Mail* piece on *Star Trek* fandom: "For all the gagging and manic forwarding Madalone has inspired online, it proves again that there's something irresistible about people with no capacity for irony, especially if their awful song is catchy. And at risk of having my citizenship revoked, I'll admit that I'm becoming fond of it, in its refreshing puppy-dog simplicity." Ivor Tossell, "Enterprising Geeks Rally Round Star Trek," *The Globe and Mail* [Canada] (May 13, 2005), R32.
[35] Email sent by "M*****" (who however is referred to as "Mark" in Madalone's reply) on April 15, 2005, as posted on July 26, 2006 to the comments for the *Salon* entry on *America We Stand as One* already cited. The text has been reproduced without correction. I have not forgotten that it is always possible for a commenter to post dishonestly, but the exchange—especially given the voice of Madalone's

purported reply, and the fact that the commenter seems to have forgotten that Madalone mentioned the very name he was trying to hide—seems believable. I contacted Madalone via email to check the accuracy of the commenter's claims, but did not receive a reply.

[36] One odd element of the comment Mark leaves unexplained: whereas he refers to himself as a "regular, God-fearing, red-blooded American" and he closes his email to Madalone with the words, "God Bless America," he also states in his introductory remarks, "For the record, I'm Canadian." Apparently this Canadian has lived in the United States long enough to see himself as an honorary citizen, or, from across the border, sees attacks on the United States as impinging on him in a way that would baffle many citizens of the United States.

[37] Gabriel García Márquez, *Love in the Time of Cholera* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 75.

[38] Sturken, *Tourists of History*, 6 and 132.

[39] Witness the *Salon* commenter, Mark, who expresses his own patriotism as a "regular, God-fearing, red-blooded American," but who was led by the overkill he perceived in the music video to condemn it; only after the video's creator made assurances that—contrary to all appearances—the video was in fact not an intentional satire, was Mark able to accept it.

[40] Debbie Laskey, "America We Stand as One the Music Video," 2. Horace complains that the poets of Latium "shrink from the tedious task of polishing their work," and then offers these words of advice to the aspiring poet: "you must have nothing to do with any poem that has not been trimmed into shape by many a day's toil and much rubbing out, and corrected down to the smallest detail." Horace, "The Art of Poetry," in Penelope Murray and T. S. Dorsch, eds., *Classical Literary Criticism* [2nd edition] (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 98–112, here p. 106 (lines 289–294); the "hammering out" of "badly turned" lines appears on p. 111 (line 441).

[41] John Gorenfeld, "America Stands As One: The Exclusive Interview." Cf. also Sebastian Prooth's interview with Madalone, in which Madalone recounts that "suddenly 9-11 happened. I picked up my guitar, that Friday it was the national day of prayer. I started playing my guitar with my German Shepherd beside me—I started to write, the song came out of no where, What I can only call a gif from our loved ones" [sic]. Sebastian Prooth, "Dennis Madalone Speaks to SebRT.com."

[42] Dennis Madalone, telephone interview with the author (June 10, 2009).

[43] John Gorenfeld, "America Stands As One: The Exclusive Interview."

[44] John Gorenfeld, "America Stands As One: The Exclusive Interview." In his piece mentioning Madalone, "Enterprising geeks Rally Round Star Trek," cited above, Ivor Tossell characterizes Madalone as a personality with "no capacity for irony."

[45] John Gorenfeld, "America Stands As One: The Exclusive Interview," and Dennis Madalone, telephone interview with the author (June 10, 2009).

[46] Art Spiegelman, *In the Shadow of No Towers* (New York: Pantheon, 2004), as cited in Sturken, *Tourists of History*, 54 (also reproduced on p. 282, fig. 109).

[47] Dennis Madalone, telephone interview with the author (June 10, 2009).

[48] Mark Frauenfelder, "Soft 9/11 sculpture by Jenny Ryan," *Boing Boing* blog post (Dec. 10, 2008) <boingboing.net>. Ryan's remarks came from the discussion thread.

[49] Comment thread to Mark Frauenfelder, "Soft 9/11 sculpture by Jenny Ryan." Some viewers hoped—or assumed—that *Soft 9/11* was not a one-off item, but would be reproduced for sale.

[50] I discussed some of these pitfalls—following a hint by Tadeusz Pawłowski, "The Varieties of Kitsch," *Dialectics and Humanism* 4 (Fall 1977): 105–115, and having been warned by David Halle, in his book, *Inside Culture: Art and Class in The American Home* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994)—under the rubric of the "problem of corroboration" in C.E. Emmer, "Kitsch Against Modernity," *Art Criticism* 13, no. 1 (1998): 53–80, in particular pp. 55 and 57–59. Carl Wilson's more recent *Let's Talk About Love* includes a sustained consideration of these pitfalls (e.g., chapters 5, 8, and 10).

[51] I have also briefly discussed this "simple," "single-order" kitsch in "The Flower and the Breaking Wheel: Burkean Beauty and Political Kitsch," *The International Journal of the Arts in Society* 2, no. 1 (2007): 153–164, here p. 155.

[52] C. E. Emmer, "The Flower and the Breaking Wheel," 155. In this way one can see some similarities between the dynamics of the term "kitsch" and the "emo" label (see Greenwald's claim above that no well-known band refers to itself as "emo").

[53] There are many other qualities which can be intended by the term. For a more complete enumeration, refer to the discussions throughout this book, in addition to Kjellman-Chapin's introduction.

[54] Canonical as a leftist approach to kitsch is Clement Greenberg's "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 3–21; cf. Saul Friedlander, *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984)—Friedlander's treatment of kitsch is not as partisan or programmatic as Greenberg's. For conservative commentators' examinations of kitsch, see, e.g., the article by the expert in Eastern-European history of ideas, Assen Ignatow (1935–2003), "Schönheit des Guten, Schönheit des Bösen, Schönheit des Banalen: Der langsame Tod der Kalokagathie" ["The Beauty of the Good, The Beauty of Evil, The Beauty of the Banal: The Slow Death of Kalokagathia"], *Prima Philosophia* 15, no. 3 (July–Sept. 2002): 343–50, which observes, "…the boundaries between art and kitsch are erased. Correspondingly, also the boundary between good and bad taste disappears. […] Whereas before, artistic innovation had to fight with the conformism of narrow-minded bourgeois and conservatives [*bien pensants*], now conservatism needs this courage, because the new conformism is precisely postmodernism" (here p. 347; my translation); the many contributions of art critic Hilton Kramer to the conservative cultural review, *The New Criterion*, which he founded in 1982; or conservative aesthetician Roger Scruton's article, "Santaphobia," *American Spectator* 41, no. 1 (February 2008): 50–52, where he writes of "the ever-expanding ocean of Christmas kitsch," gives a balanced critique of Clement Greenberg's famous "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," and, while attacking Christian kitsch in a way not unlike the moral theologian Richard

Egenter, declares that "Kitsch is like a disease, a mold that settles over the entire works of a living culture, when people prefer the sensuous trappings of belief to the thing truly believed in," a critique he has more recently incorporated into a discussion of fine art in chapter 8 of his book, *Beauty* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). On this aesthetic agreement between right and left, Richard Shusterman writes that the "denigration of popular art, or mass culture […] seems particularly compelling since it is widely endorsed by intellectuals of violently different sociopolitical views and agendas. Indeed it provides a rare instance where right-wing conservatives and Marxian radicals join hands and make common cause" (he also notes that Clement Greenberg labels popular culture "kitsch"). Richard Shusterman, "Don't Believe the Hype: Animadversions on the Critique of Popular Art" *Poetics Today* 14:1 (Spring 1993): 101–122, here 101–2.

[55] "On Kitsch" [symposium: Saul Friedlander, Irving Howe, Stanley Kauffmann, Robert Nozick, Susan Sontag, et al.], *Salmagundi* 85–86 (Winter/Spring 1990): 197–312. The reference to a "packet of selected readings" is from the editors' introduction to the "On Kitsch" symposium, 198–200, here 199. The introduction, which was written by Robert Boyers and Peg Boyers, does not detail the contents of the readings, but Robert Boyers has subsequently explained that the reading packet included Saul Friedlander's book, *Reflections of Nazism*, Clement Greenberg's "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" essay, and numerous short pieces culled from anthologies on kitsch (email from Robert Boyers, March 13, 2010).

[56] David Halle, "highbrow/lowbrow," in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, ed. George Ritzer (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 2123–2125.

[57] Among the sources to which Halle refers are Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984); Herbert Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); and his own *Inside Culture: Art and Class in The American Home* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

[58] This one-upmanship in applying the term "kitsch" is compactly captured in the interstitial text, "Was heißt 'Kitsch'?: Etymologische Spurensuche," in Ute Dettmar and Thomas Küpper, eds., *Kitsch: Texte und Theorien* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2007), pp. 94–97; they write that "According to *Trübner's German Dictionary* (1943), the term 'kitsch' first appeared in the urban art scene and is attested since 1881 in Berlin. In the following period as well, the term was applied with gusto within the art world: The word 'kitsch' was, as established by Robert Musil (1880–1942), 'beloved as no other as the first judgment among artists themselves' and served to disqualify competitors in the artistic field. The strategy whereby a new generation of artists attempted to distance itself from its predecessors with the derogatory label of 'kitsch-mongers' [*Kitschiers*], was already common in the art world [*Kunstbetrieb*] in 1922, as Ferdinand Avenarius (1856–1923) observes. This distinctive function of distancing oneself from predecessors or competing artistic movements befits the term 'kitsch'—which successively expands its area of application from the area of painting outwards—again and again" (p. 94; my translation with internal references to other pages within the book here removed

for ease of reading). See also Emmer, "Kitsch Against Modernity," pp. 53–55, where I recount how my own laughter at kitsch was cut short when my own taste for Pre-Raphaelite painting—and, later, the literature published in the *New Yorker* magazine—came under fire as kitsch.
[59] Sturken, *Tourists of History*, 19 and 21. The idea of irony as a sort of antidote against the surrounding culture, briefly mentioned in this passage by Sturken, receives sustained treatment in R. Jay MaGill, Jr.'s *Chic Ironic Bitterness* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007). Apparently, the post-9/11 declarations of the "end of irony" were premature; see MaGill, *Chic Ironic Bitterness*, 11; Sturken, *Tourists of History*, 17; and Peter Scott's unpaginated catalog essay for the *Pop Patriotism* exhibition cited above.
[60] Her own critique focuses not merely on the easy collusion between kitsch sentimentalism and United States' militaristic foreign policy, but also on the way in which kitsch enables police, gun, and prison culture within the United States.
[61] Sam Anderson has this attitude in mind when he writes in "Taster's Choice" of Carl Wilson's *Let's Talk About Love* that "A book pondering the aesthetics of Céline risks going wrong in about 3,000 different ways. Most obviously, it could degenerate into one of those irritating hipster projects of strategic kitsch-retrieval, an ironic exercise in taste as anti-taste in which an uncool phenomenon is hoisted onto a pedestal of cool simply as a display of contrarian muscle power." The reviewer for London's *Daily Telegraph* had the same fear: "Now, here comes the writer and self-declared fan of edgy, avant-garde music Carl Wilson to write about [Céline Dion's] best-known album, *Let's Talk About Love*. It is, on the face of it, a rather perverse undertaking, the kind of contrarianism you might have assumed was passé even in the early 1990s, when a wave of Oxbridge graduates managed to blag their way onto the pages of the broadsheets by waxing lyrical about the Steve Wright radio show and the movies of Arnold Schwarzenegger." Sukhdev Sandhu, "How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Dion: Sukhdev Sandhu is very nearly Convinced by a Defence of one of the World's most Reviled—and Popular—Singers," *The Daily Telegraph* [London] (Feb. 2, 2008), Books section, 30. As was made clear at the opening of this chapter, Wilson himself is well aware of such games of one-upmanship (see *Let's Talk About Love*, pp. 12–13).
[62] This is touched on in Susan Sontag's seminal 1964 essay, "Notes on 'Camp'," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 275–292, here 285 (#31) and 291–292 (#56). To some degree, this rejuvenation can shade into the fourth, more accepting, attitude I will be examining.
[63] See for example an article on artist Jeff Koons' first solo exhibition in Britain which notes that Koons "is often billed as the King of Kitsch": "King of Kitsch to Make British Eyes Pop," *The New Zealand Herald* (July 6, 2009). See also the previously cited extensive list of examples provided by Gillo Dorfles.
[64] Comment thread to Mark Frauenfelder, "Soft 9/11 sculpture by Jenny Ryan," *Boing Boing* blog post (Dec. 10, 2008).
[65] Wilson, *Let's Talk About Love*, 96–98. For a similar example of exclusion in the art world, see David Halle and art historian Elisabeth Tiso, who, having surveyed

the art on display in New York City's Chelsea galleries for five years, observe that, of the five most central themes in contemporary art, a new one is "the nuclear family, but typically depicted with a critical or satirical edge as a troubled institution (16% of all topics). Serenely confident families and individual family members, of the kind depicted by Norman Rockwell, are so rare as to be almost taboo." David Halle and Elisabeth Tiso, "Lessons from Chelsea: A Study in Contemporary Art," *The International Journal of the Humanities* 3, no. 11 (2005–2006): 45–66, especially 47 and, here, 60.

[66] Wilson, *Let's Talk About Love*, 100. Birgit Eriksson provides a useful summary of sociologists' studies in omnivorism, adding some reflections on Kantian and contemporary aesthetics, in "On Common Tastes: Heterogeneity and Hierarchies in Contemporary Cultural Consumption," *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* 36–37 (2008–2009): 36–53.

[67] Thomas Frank's *The Baffler* ran from 1988–2003, but Thomas Frank has recently announced a revival of the periodical. See Leon Neyfakh, "Color Me Baffled! Thomas Frank's Magazine Lives Again," *The New York Observer* (June 23, 2009) and Christopher Borrelli, "The Baffler is Back, Relevant as ever: 1990s Literary Journal never really Went away," *The Chicago Tribune* (February 7, 2010). A similar vigilance can be found in the work of documentarian and new media expert Douglas Rushkoff, central to two PBS *Frontline* documentaries, *The Merchants of Cool* (2001) and *The Persuaders* (2003). More information can be found at his official website, <rushkoff.com>.

[68] "Ironic Porn Purchase Leads to Unironic Ejaculation," *The Onion* 35:44 (Dec. 1, 1999).

[69] The criticism implied by the humor article from *The Onion* bears comparison to Rosenberg's essay, "Pop Culture: Kitsch Criticism," insofar as it sees the attack on presumably low-quality culture as itself merely an excuse to further engage with (and enjoy) that same culture.

[70] Heather L. LaMarre, et al., "The Irony of Satire: Political Ideology and the Motivation to See What You Want to See in *The Colbert Report*," *International Journal of Press/Politics* 14:2 (April 2009): 212–231, quote from p. 217.

[71] "Germany Opens 'Nazi' Gnome Case: A Garden Gnome Giving the Nazi Salute Has Landed a German Artist in Trouble with the Authorities in Nuremberg," BBC News (July 17, 2009) <news.bbc.co.uk>. See also "Police Investigate 'Nazi' Gnome: German Prosecutors Have Launched an Inquiry into Whether a Garden Gnome with its Right Arm Raised in a Hitler Salute in a Nuremberg Art Gallery Breaks the Law," *The Daily Telegraph* [London] (July 16, 2009). Nuremberg city prosecutors eventually ruled that, since Otto Hörl's gnome was critiquing, and not promoting, Nazism, it was not illegal, though they warned that others should not try to imitate Hörl's maneuver. See "Nazi-Salute Gnome 'not Illegal'" BBC News (22 July 2009) <news.bbc.co.uk> and Tristana Moore, "The Curious Case of the Nazi Gnome," *Time* magazine (Aug. 12, 2009) <time.com>.

[72] Odd Nerdrum, et al., *On Kitsch* (Oslo: Kagge Forlag, 2001).

[73] Michael Kay, "Cute—and Slightly Kitsch—Salento," *Columbia Reports* (Oct. 27, 2008) <columbiareports.com>.

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[74] "Kitsch Fan Charles Phoenix Finds Plenty to Love in KC," *Kansas City Star* (April 12, 2009) <kansascity.com>.
[75] Mark C O'Flaherty, "Kitsch Me if You Can: Fashion Designer Anna Sui Owns Two Apartments in the Same a Building—A Colourful Rococo one and a Monochrome Sanctuary that Mixes High Victoriana and Sixties Collectables," *The London Times* (April 12, 2009) <timesonline.co.uk>. Interestingly, even though Victoriana has long been considered by many to be a central repository of kitsch, the article implies that the Victoriana, as opposed to the 60s Americana, is *not* considered kitsch.
[76] Jessica Gelt, "Boho in Hollywood: Call it the Ultimate in Green Gastropubs. The Recession-Friendly Restaurant Has a Kitschy, Thriftstore Feel to it, and a Creative Menu that Is Filling and Meant to Share," *The Los Angeles Times* (April 13, 2009) <latimes.com>.
[77] Maggie Hibma, "Alternative Student Magazine Collaborates across Campuses," *The Ithacan online* (Sept. 4, 2008).
[78] As we saw was the case in *The Revealer* blog's "Big in the Trading Card World" and Tossell, "Enterprising Geeks Rally Round Star Trek."
[79] The author would like to extend his thanks to all whose conversation and advice have improved this text, especially Profs. Monica Kjellman-Chapin, Elizabeth Locey-Hampe, and Roxane Riegler (all at Emporia State University, KS); Prof. James DiGiovanna (John Jay College, NYC); and the artist Filip Noterdaeme (of the Homeless Museum, NYC). None of them, however, should be held responsible for any faults or oversights in the text. Thanks should also be extended to the Department of Social Sciences at Emporia State University, for granting a partial work release in the spring of 2009 which provided time for research and writing.

KITSCH

HISTORY, THEORY, PRACTICE

Edited by

Monica Kjellman-Chapin

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Kitsch: the mere word evokes mental images of cutesy collectibles, treacly trinkets, sweetly sentimental scenes, thematically trite tabletop tchotchkes, or perhaps anemic appropriations of canonical works of art. Frequently dismissed as facile, lowbrow, or one-off, throwaway aesthetics, kitsch elicits responses that range from the sardonic smirk laced with derision to the grin glimmering with the indulgence in a "guilty" pleasure. Kitsch, however, is surprisingly mobile and complex, as evidenced by its recent renewal as "kitschy cool." This ambiguity not only allows it to gesture towards a disparate array of artifacts and ideations, but also to be pushed and pulled in various applicatory directions. The contributors to this collection address the problem of how and what kitsch might signify, and approach the kitsch question as a complex, nuanced interrogative. They consider kitsch in relation to its historical association with pseudo-art, its theoretical underpinnings and connections to class, the deliberate mobilization of kitsch in the work of specific artists, kitsch as a form of practice, as well as kitsch's traffic with race, patriotism, and postmodernism. The essays in this collection necessarily cut a wide interpretative path, mapping the terrain of the phenomenon of kitsch – historically, conceptually, practically – in multivocal ways, befitting the polysemous creature that is kitsch itself. Drawing upon art history, popular culture studies, philosophy, and visual culture, the authors' responses to the "big" question of kitsch move well beyond habitual artificial boundaries, far beyond the simple binaries of good/bad, high/low, elite/popular, or art/kitsch, into far more complex, challenging, and ultimately rewarding territory.

Monica Kjellman-Chapin is Associate Professor of Art History at Emporia State University. Her work on diverse topics, including James McNeill Whistler, Thomas Kinkade, autofictionalization, and fake folk art, has appeared in the journals Rethinking Marxism, Specs, Art History, and Konsthistorisk Tidskrift. Kjellman-Chapin has also contributed essays to the edited collections *Partisan Canons*, *Thomas Kinkade: The Artist in the Mall*, *The Computer Culture Reader*, and *Cultural Production in Virtual and Imagined Worlds*. Her current research is on collections of amateur and "bad" art.

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