



Introduction

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When people hear that I am editing a book about Thomas Kinkade, I usually get two reactions. The first, typically from colleagues and students, begins with a look of abject horror. Their eyes widen in shock, and they ask, “The lighthouse guy?” Then, after a second or two, there is the smirk and the knowing nod, “Ah, funny. Can you believe people think that’s art? Will you be sending up his audience? Religion? The contemporary art scene? American consumer culture?” Invariably, before I can respond to these questions the speaker has moved on to tell a story about a relative, a coworker, or a neighbor who actually *owns* a Kinkade painting, “Can you imagine?”

The second reaction is more direct. The speaker looks me in the eyes, smiles openly, and says, “Oh my gosh, how wonderful. I love his art.”

Many contemporary artists elicit “love them or hate them” responses. In certain circles if the names Damien Hirst or Jeff Koons are mentioned, there is no end to the ways in which people will praise or vilify their work, either applauding the artists as the saviors of art or tossing them out as evidence of an artistic apocalyptic condition. Yet if one were doing a random survey of the general public, most people would probably never have *heard* of Hirst or Koons. Mere recognition, not love or hate, would be the issue.

Kinkade does not suffer from that problem. It has been estimated that a Thomas Kinkade image is present in almost one out of twenty homes in the United States.¹ His primary works—paintings—are technically not paintings at all but rather high-quality prints. These are sold with painted highlights added by the artist himself, or by other artists Kinkade has trained or his corporation has authorized, or simply as unadorned prints. Kinkade’s paintings are distributed through his gallery stores in malls across

the country, and his images have been merchandised to sell everything from Bibles and bedsheets to La-Z-Boy chairs.² Kinkade sells his works on QVC, in Christian stores, and through an extensive website, and he enjoys a significant secondary market on auction sites such as eBay. Even as his corporation has taken hits in recent years with the “great recession,” lawsuits, talk of bankruptcy, and closed gallery stores, Kinkade continues to expand his empire with licensing deals with NASCAR, Disney, and Major League Baseball.³ His corporation boldly proclaims him to be “the most successful and most collected living artist in U.S. history,” and it is hard to challenge that assertion.⁴ Love him or hate him, Kinkade and his art are known in the United States in a way Hirst and Koons could not even begin to approach.

For many these facts merely prove that Kinkade is engaged in a different game than Hirst or Koons. Hirst and Koons are “fine” artists, speaking to selected audiences who understand the elixir of materials, pop culture references, and art-historical precedents that result in works of art that puzzle the complexities of capital, irony, individualism, and artistic authority in complicated and intellectually provocative ways (see Jeff Koons, *Pink Panther* [1998; pl. 1]). Their works are created for the homes of a few exclusive patrons but primarily for museum and gallery spaces. The selling of art for these men is facilitated by their agents or gallery owners, whose job it is to worry about the marketing and press so that the artists can focus their energies on the “creative” process.

Many would argue that Kinkade is more of a marketing phenomenon than an artist, not at all in the same league or in the same intellectual or philosophical profession as Hirst and Koons. To these critics Kinkade’s work does not stimulate the audience toward complex, ambiguous, or subversive understandings of our world the way that “art” would, and, likewise, the work does little to question his role as an artist or our role as audience. And finally, for those who might still believe in Kantian ideas of the sublime and beautiful in art (art historians mostly, the visual culture scholars sighing deeply at this obsession with taste and beauty), his work fails on that front as well, resorting to cloying color schemes and formulaic landscape tropes that borrow heavily from Hudson River school artists and impressionists but do neither source justice in terms of technique, originality, or innovation.⁵ His popularity, it follows, is merely a sign of the commodification of art and the way in which contemporary audiences are easily seduced by kitsch and marketing through the disassociating mecha-

nisms of capitalism. Kinkade's work is thus a nightmare about the future of culture manifested in a poster, sold as a painting, hung in a gold frame, and named "art."

It is with a variation of this narrative in mind that many assume that for an art historian to edit this book, there must be an element of disdain or mocking involved in the approach to Kinkade. Although Kinkade does, indeed, elicit a certain degree of disdain from some of the authors of this collection, a book that engaged only that perspective would be impossibly limited, both in its intellectual and political value. The methodology of art history is often mobilized to disparage Kinkade, but it can also encourage the investigation of the historical and social circumstances that gave rise to him and his career. This is a perfectly respectable approach, and several of the essays in this collection exemplify the crucial value in such a historical methodology. Context matters, and a historical lens takes away some of the power of theoretical paradigms that argue that cultural forces simply manipulate passive human actors and activities. Locating Kinkade with biography and influences reminds readers that accidents or coincidence can be as important as large social and political mechanisms in creating culture. For example, while Kinkade certainly capitalized on the resurgence of evangelical power and the broader cultural turn toward political conservatism in the United States in the 1990s, it was his California upbringing during the 1960s and 1970s that shaped much of his trajectory. Some might argue that a Kinkade-like figure was bound to emerge or that the careers of many other artists and graphic designers mirror his (save the business savvy), but in fact, as several of the following essays argue, Kinkade's rise to prominence was not just a matter of the right person at the right time. The historical analysis offered suggests a knowing artist who engaged with conversations about iconography and the broader art world and created work that did not merely reflect culture but also gave vision and shape to that culture. Thus, as an art historian I find satisfaction in analyzing Kinkade with these methods because he is contextualized and therefore contained in ways that make him less a chimera or a boogeyman hovering around the edges of our view or projected as some omen of the demise of culture broadly. Kinkade is placed in perspective and located within paradigms that remind us that his art, and indeed his vision of himself as a specific kind of artist, are born out of dialogues that have important intellectual and social currency.

Yet, as has become apparent in the past decade with the rise of visual culture studies and academic programs, to limit the discussion of Kinkadee to these traditional “art-historical” parameters would be to overemphasize both the artist and the objects in ways that obscure the power of the visual and the power of audiences to use these images to their own ends. Visual culture studies has emerged in part to address, as Mieke Bal argues, art historians’ failure to “deal with both the visibility of . . . objects—due to the dogmatic position of ‘history’—and the openness of the collection of those objects—due to the established meaning of ‘art.’”⁶ Instead, we must pay more attention to the act of looking itself. To that end this book also asks readers to consider how Kinkadee’s images speak to audiences, how audiences use those images, and how the images abandon the artist (and even the audience) and take on a life of their own. Scholars of visual culture typically point to the ways in which visual images activate their own responses and, as W. J. T. Mitchell has so evocatively suggested, the ways in which images activate their own wants and desires.⁷ This line of inquiry points to the subversive possibilities inherent in visual culture of circumventing power and reassigning it to a multitude of sources. Indeed, what is perhaps so captivating about Kinkadee’s works, and what several authors in this collection point out, is that within the images that critics have found stale, stagnant, and confining, viewers have found room for radically different conversations. Kinkadee’s religious message would be one such example. Kinkadee himself speaks directly to his desire to have his art testify to his belief in the salvation of the soul through Christ. Yet numerous viewers purposely tune that message out, look past it or around it, and still connect on deep and meaningful spiritual levels with Kinkadee’s art. In considering this phenomenon in traditional art-historical terms, viewers who miss the intentions of the artist and the Christian imagery would simply be misreading the images or only appreciating a select aspect of the painting. But discarding assumptions about the authority of the artist and even the object to dictate “rightness” or “wrongness” opens a dialogue about what audiences want and need from visual imagery more broadly. Several authors raise this question to argue that using a Kinkadee Visa card or living in a Kinkadee-style home evokes wholly different relationships between audience and object. While numerous theorists of consumption have argued why people buy certain kinds of objects for their homes,

theory and practice diverge when we examine what desires are met and *sustained* by audience uses of Kinkade's images.⁸

Thus, from both art history and visual culture perspectives the subject of Thomas Kinkade emerges as a tool to illuminate ideas about the artist, his historical and cultural trajectory in the late twentieth century and beyond, and audience response to and manipulation of his works. And yet the taste issue lingers, lurking around every attempt to clarify, mark with precision, and articulate these points. Art history and visual culture studies, while diverging in numerous ways, seem to agree that it is best to leave aesthetics to others because it muddies the critical water.⁹ But taste, loving or hating, as seen from the two sets of comments I typically receive about this Kinkade project, matters. A colleague of mine put the issue quite bluntly: "Do you worry that in writing about Kinkade you are advocating him in some way, making him legitimate?"

The question itself asserts that it is not the millions who have purchased and engaged with Kinkade on an emotional, spiritual, and aesthetic level that can make him "legitimate"; instead, scholars, critics, and museum professionals hold that magic key. On a political level I do not want to agree with that assertion, but as one who writes from within that world, and who has access to write because of my position among those ranks, it would be absurd to imagine that there is not significant power in those institutions. Aesthetics has often been sheared from art-historical inquiry in ways that attempt to affect some sense of objectivity. Yet these divisions are often false and arbitrary, and as a result the questions of beauty, worth, value, and taste do not go away but tend to resurface in tricky and deceptive ways. The line between the contemporary art critic and the contemporary art historian is foggy, and taste, whether acknowledged or implied, is omnipresent. In choosing authors for this collection, I have sought to represent a variety of voices with different tastes, both personal and scholarly, in respect to Kinkade and with different intellectual perspectives as to the problem of taste in determining who in the art world gets recognized and who gets ignored. If Kinkade garners some "legitimacy" from this volume, he is welcome to it, but I would also hope that discussions of his art and his audience open up the far more pressing questions of the place of aesthetics in art history and visual culture. *Beauty* and *value* are understandably treacherous words, and these ideas have historically been the tools by

which those in power have silenced the voices of those on the margins.¹⁰ Yet as Kinkade and his popularity prove, there is a craving for such things. While many academics and artists have sought to move beyond ideas such as “taste” and “beauty,” or have theorized that they no longer (or never did) exist or matter, Kinkade has swept in and filled a need for these concrete concepts for millions. We should not respond to this with attempts to edify those terms or reinscribe ideas like “beauty” with their previous authority or meanings. It is worth noting, however, that while we have been looking elsewhere, Kinkade has filled the malls, the Internet, and homes with his version of beauty and art. Perhaps the question is not whether this art historian can legitimize Kinkade but whether Kinkade casts doubt on the legitimacy of art scholars in general.

In his discussion of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Nicolas Bourriaud argues, “The availability of things does not automatically make them commonplace.”¹¹ His comment is in reference to Gonzalez-Torres’s sculptures of colorful wrapped candies that are arranged in exhibition spaces. The candies are small and wrapped in shiny paper, and viewers can look at *the* piece and leave it undisturbed or take *a* piece of candy to keep as a memento of the visit or to eat. For the sculptor, and those familiar with his works, the candies often symbolize particular biographical details.¹² The vibrant candies act either as a memorial, evoking the past and a fixed moment of wholeness while speaking simultaneously to the flux of the present moment as the candies, like memories, are taken away, moved, and then replaced, or as a site of infinite hopefulness with the possibility of renewal and replenishment. For Bourriaud, whose theory of relational aesthetics openly embraces the desire for art to speak to both beauty and the sacred in this contemporary postmodern moment, Gonzalez-Torres symbolizes an “ideal balance” between “visual beauty and modest gestures.”¹³ Finally, the candies represent the artist’s attempt to break apart the monopoly of experience dictated by museum space. The audience can take home or consume the piece, thus denying the museum some of the authority of ownership.

Now consider Kinkade’s *Sweetheart Cottage III: The View from Havencrest Cottage* (1994; pl. 2). The commonplace here, to reference Bourriaud’s passage above, is the landscape, as familiar in function and visual dynamics to viewers as the wrapped candies. Like Gonzalez-Torres, Kinkade does

not mask his work's intentions; the landscape is immediately readable and requires no decoding. The colors are soft and alluring, as is the light that emanates from the Cotswold-style cottage. The cabin stands at the edge of a deep precipice from which picturesque mountains emerge triumphantly. The tops of the cliffs are shrouded in a thin pink and blue gauze of fog and clouds, and several birds float lazily through the air. As with the Gonzalez-Torres piece, for the casual or unschooled Kinkade viewer there is one level of interaction in which a landscape is simply a landscape. Yet for "the cognoscenti" this is part of a series of images devoted to Kinkade's wife, to whom he has been married for decades and who is responsible for guiding him back to his Christian faith. This painting, the third in a series of sweet-heart cottage pictures, is an homage to their love and, by proxy, to the love of God. Also like Gonzalez-Torres, Kinkade defies the cultural authority of museums and galleries by making this piece infinitely reproducible. It can be purchased in mall stores or on the Internet; it is available in numerous sizes, and as a notepad; or the image can be sent as an e-card to anyone through Kinkade's website.

As I suggested earlier about Hirst and Koons, any comparison of Kinkade and Gonzalez-Torres dissolves around definitions of *art* and *kitsch*. Gonzalez-Torres plays delicately with audiences and tosses colorful, happy, sweet treats before their eyes as a metaphor for the dissolving human body and the temporality of all things (even art). Gravitas is the decisive factor here; Gonzalez-Torres considers memory and death in sophisticated and contradictory ways, whereas Kinkade prefers the realm of pleasure and visual satisfaction. Finally, the ability to literally and freely consume pieces of Gonzalez-Torres's candy spills within the walls of a museum challenges the value-producing function and the institutional authority of the place itself. Kinkade's works are simply for sale. It is this complexity and subversiveness, along with playful uses of the familiar, that make Gonzalez-Torres's work *art*. Kinkade, likewise, tosses colorful, happy, sweet treats before his viewers, but his work is labeled *kitsch*.

Several authors in this collection puzzle over the historical trajectory of this art-kitsch divide and the mechanisms that maintain and defend these terms. A brief discussion of the pertinent issues concerning kitsch, taste, and consumer culture sets the stage for these conversations. As a paradigm, kitsch highlights some of the questions and contradictions that Kinkade reveals about definitions of and desires for art. The concept of kitsch is an

apt vehicle to use in considering theories of consumption and the pleasures and anxieties afforded through the range of purchasing possibilities provided by Kinkade's work. Kitsch also reflects the tensions surrounding contemporary religious art, particularly evangelical Christian images. In the end, while the very notion of kitsch may be flawed, it is useful for understanding the extent to which Kinkade is implicated in several key discussions about the very nature of contemporary visual culture.

Clement Greenberg's essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," published in 1939, remains the foundational text on the nature of kitsch.¹⁴ Greenberg begins his essay by questioning how "one and the same civilization produces simultaneously two such different things as a poem by T. S. Eliot and a Tin Pan Alley song, or a painting by Braque and a *Saturday Evening Post* cover" (6). Greenberg's introductory premise, therefore, is constructed on the notion that T. S. Eliot's poetry and Tin Pan Alley music are fundamentally different. They come from the same place but do not share the same defining features; they are made of different stuff.

Out of this initial distinction Greenberg forms his construct, which posits kitsch as standing against the radical social and political possibilities of the avant-garde. The latter's social value stems from its artistic ability "to keep culture *moving* in the midst of ideological confusion and violence" (8). This movement is what maintains the value of culture; it is the beginning and end of all artistic inquiry. Kitsch, according to Greenberg, is "commercial art and literature" (11), which were born out of the Industrial Revolution. Urbanized masses (a result of the Industrial Revolution) simultaneously lost their taste for their indigenous folk cultures and "discovered a new capacity for boredom." Out of this need kitsch is born. Greenberg argues, "Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money—not even their time" (12). All the more insidious is the deceptive nature of kitsch. It has many "different levels" and masks itself as something more valuable and different from what it is, making it possible for fascist and totalitarian regimes to use it as a tool for manipulating the masses. Greenberg understands the draw of this culture. High art is hard, he argues, and demands concentration, while kitsch is easy, and for those who labor all day, easy is better.

Greenberg's premise—which divided artistic production into two diametrically opposed camps, one on the side of progress, complexity, and social justice, the other defined by boredom, stagnation, and passivity in regard to power—was challenged by the advent of pop art in the 1950s. Andy Warhol, for example, took the visual imagery of kitsch that Greenberg so despised, removed it from its context, and repackaged it, thus confusing or disrupting the boundary between the commonplace and art. Warhol's soup cans are the most famous example of this, but he pillaged liberally, from commercial products and celebrity publicity stills to FBI mug shots, for his source material. This mixing of visual imagery of popular culture, commercial culture, and political culture appeared both personal and impersonal, but if one appealed to Warhol to clarify the situation, one was met with an artist who also refused to explain himself. He claimed that his art had no deeper meaning, no ulterior motive, no authority, no agenda beyond itself, and he hinted at no theoretical structure that could support his objects or artistic persona. Similarly disassociating, Warhol's medium, screen printing, with its promise of infinite reproducibility, undermined the notions of originality, authenticity, and aura that Greenberg and others found so crucial, so progressive, about art. As Dick Hebdige argues, "Pop challenged the legitimacy of validated distinctions between arts and the lingering authority of prewar taste formations."¹⁵ In this view kitsch is rendered as a radicalizing visual vocabulary with which to speak to modern or postmodern life, liberating the viewer to look with new eyes at all categories of culture.¹⁶ Analyzing the works of second-generation pop artists such as Koons (pl. 1), Sarat Maharaj argues that "no sooner are the kitsch elements [in works by these pop artists] 'mastered and framed' by a self-reflexive, ironic gaze than they elude its grip, doggedly reasserting their 'kitsch quality.' A radical indeterminacy prevails—we never quite find our feet with regard to which element serves and manipulates the other."¹⁷ Pop seems to offer a kind of double-consciousness (to twist W. E. B. Du Bois's term) that allows viewers, and indeed the artist, to position themselves as a part of the "problem" and then also as part of the "solution" through detachment and irony. Meaning and intention are not fixed onto objects alone but instead must also include considerations of context and framing. Pop art would seem to admonish Greenberg—with his obsession over categories of art and kitsch—to calm down, chill out, get cool, and see the joke.

Yet while pop art no doubt expands the category of “art,” it is less clear that pop art fundamentally shifts the definitions or shape of materials that continue to be defined as “kitsch.” For if kitsch really is no longer a category of any distinction, the choice of pulling visual images from popular culture becomes moot. More important, the marketplace of art objects, regardless of pop’s play with multiplicity and materials, maintained an affection for and reliance on the elite trade in art. Warhol’s works might have been screen prints, undermining the value of originality, but most now reside in museums and galleries. Or, to put it another way, patrons and museums did not imagine soup cans in a profoundly different way after Warhol and purchase cans instead of screen prints to hang in their homes or institutions. To use a different example, Koons’s images might borrow from tabloids and cartoons, but the aesthetic qualities of those original sources have remained quarantined in the world of kitsch. The indeterminacy that kitsch gives to the category of art when it borrows from it is not returned; if anything, kitsch as a category becomes more solid. Kitsch must remain kitsch for pop art’s borrowings to have meaning. Thus, regardless of the radical promise that pop might disrupt Greenberg’s paradigm, it instead reinigorates the very binary he theorized.

Perhaps as a response to pop art’s engagement with kitsch, numerous scholars have focused less on the role of kitsch in culture than on the nature of kitsch itself in an attempt to define or mark the boundaries of its reach. This search cannot be separated from a central desire to see “art,” as Greenberg does, as ultimately important and redemptive to society. Those who look to find the heart of this thing called “kitsch” are actually looking for a way to define *art*. Emblematic here is Milan Kundera’s description of kitsch in his novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*:

Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: how nice to see children running on the grass!

The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running in the grass!

It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch.¹⁸

For Kundera it is the act of feeling oneself moved, not as an individual but as some act of common humanity, that is at the heart of kitsch. It is the thing that moves from a personal, individual state of emotion, with all the complexity, isolation, and contradiction that might entail, to the organ-

ized and performative emotion that claims to speak for some global or human vision that damns the object into kitsch-hood. Kundera distrusts any claims to a shared moment or a unifying narrative, but in his definition of kitsch lies the suggestion that contained within the first tear is something real, something authentic, something that might have been “art.” But the second tear—the universal one, the calming one, the tear that makes it not just one tear but a cry—is where art is extinguished and kitsch invades.

It is also in this second tear that Kundera reveals the element of pleasure or satisfaction that he sees at the heart of kitsch. The first tear *enjoys the vision of the children running*; it accepts and is moved by the thing itself. The second tear is about the pleasure not of the thing *but of the act of being moved*. Kitsch is about the feeling, not the real. It has become removed from the authentic (the sight of the children) and is instead about the idea of having a profound emotion (“how nice to be moved”). In this distinction Kundera suggests that pleasure is crucial to kitsch, but it is a false pleasure, born of lazy and self-indulgent fantasies of what an emotional moment feels like. Kitsch is therefore a mimic and one that denies the ability to experience the real by replacing it with a performance and script of what emotion is.¹⁹

Kundera, like Greenberg, sees kitsch as duping most viewers out of an authentic relationship with the world. But others have suggested that audiences may activate kitsch in more primal and knowing ways. Pleasure and authenticity remain at the core of Celeste Olalquiaga’s ruminations on kitsch, yet she does not view it as duplicitous or misleading. Kitsch denies nothing to the viewer because it never promises to be more than what it is: “Kitsch is nothing if not a suspended memory whose elusiveness is made ever more keen by its extreme iconicity. Despite appearances, kitsch is not an active commodity naively infused with the desire of a wish image, but rather a failed commodity that continually speaks of all it has ceased to be—a virtual image, existing in the impossibility of fully being. Kitsch is a time capsule with a two-way ticket to the realm of myth—the collective or individual land of dreams.”²⁰

In this view of kitsch it is always a weak or “failed” entity that merely stores, in an incomplete way, the fantasy or memory of what once was the real. Olalquiaga continues: “Kitsch is the attempt to repossess the experience of intensity and immediacy through an object” (291). In other words, kitsch is connected to time and to death, to repossession of the thing that is no longer available—an imitation, to be sure, but not of a malicious sort.

The familiarity and the emotions kitsch elicits are all knowing compromises in a failed attempt to recapture that which has been lost. Kitsch does not represent a fleeing from reality or a denial of the real, and it in no way competes with art or any kind of profound emotional state. For Olalquiaga kitsch is “a spell to which one succumbs willingly, knowing its delicate fabric can disintegrate with the slightest interference. . . . Kitsch drifts between waking and sleeping hours, half dream and half reality, all memory and desire” (97). The deception is not one the viewer is tricked into seeing but one she or he embraces as a fulfillment of need. In Olalquiaga’s view kitsch makes the world livable because it mediates the nagging want that hovers at the edges of our lives and allows us to freely engage in memory without a trace of morbidity or regret.

Although these authors diverge in the context of their assessment of the authenticity of kitsch, what is perhaps more interesting is their positions on the audience’s sense of control or consciousness in relation to it. Kundera, in using the metaphor of the tear, asserts that the inner self cannot dictate or control the impact of kitsch. One might perhaps keep from crying, but once the first tear has fallen, it is nearly impossible to stop the next one. For Kundera there is no stopping kitsch’s impact once viewed because the audience is trapped in the performance and emotion. But Olalquiaga sees agency: we decide to succumb to a spell. For her the control ultimately rests with the viewer who looks to kitsch with desire, knowing that desire cannot be satiated through the object but wanting the object just the same. Kitsch is both the longing for satisfaction and the recognition that it can never be obtained.

This conceptual range concerning kitsch and its authority infuses the way most critics, audiences, and the authors in this collection view the impact of Kinkade. On the one hand, a work like *Sweetheart Cottage III*, viewed through Kundera’s notion of kitsch, speaks to the profound and sublime beauty of nature while demanding that it be viewed in that way. Kinkade is not speaking to a specific landscape and denies the viewer the ability to locate this geography with any specificity. Instead, he speaks in broad visual generalizations about landscape and directly to the vocabulary of awe that has historically defined the genre (the bold vista, the bright sky, the lush greens of the grass contrasted with rocky and steep mountain cliffs). For those, like Kundera, who view kitsch as an impediment to the real, Kinkade’s art prevents any possible engagement with landscape. In-

stead, the viewer is confined to the space of emoting about the *feeling* of landscape. Kinkade does not paint things; he paints the desire to feel (and also to feel in unison with others).

But if viewed as a spell, as a memory and a fantasy that is not the real thing (with that distance from the real constituting its value), Kinkade's art is kitsch at its most useful. Viewed this way, his imagery serves the needs of his audience, who recognize the painting for what it is and what it does. Kinkade's pastel landscapes—the cottage cuddled into the folds of the land, the emanating of a soft light, and the birds flying gently through the air—are understood as not real, not living, not approachable in any actual sense. The value is instead in the fantasy, the suspension of time, the allowance for memory and fantasy to commingle in the mind of the viewer. In real landscapes winter comes, forests burn, and people get lost; in other words, in real landscapes decay and death exist. Kinkade's images are frozen; they suspend time and disallow decay and death, which soothes the mind if only momentarily. He gives pleasure of the most profound sort, and the audience recognizes its remove from lived experience as the source of that pleasure. As Kinkade himself would argue, “[My art] beckons you into a world that provides an alternative to your nightly news broadcast. . . . People are reminded that it's not all ugliness in this world.”²¹

For the viewer, and indeed the reader of this collection, the first crucial issue that one must settle in regard to Kinkade is one's position on kitsch as an aesthetic experience. Various authors in this book will suggest alternative definitions to the ones I have presented and give nuance to critical appraisals of kitsch, but the heart of the issue is questions of authenticity and the truth of experience. For those who see Kinkade as a sham and a charlatan, his art will always represent the pathway to deception, the dead-end street of kitsch that promises the real but delivers nothing but processed fantasies and deferred dreams. In his recent catalogue of the contemporary artist Rudolf Stingel, Francesco Bonami argues that Kinkade “indulges in the mundane to ideologically exploit the banal.” For Bonami wonder lies at the heart of true art (or, as he writes in his essay, in “Painting” [with a capital *P*] as opposed to “painting”), and Kinkade “subdues wonder to taste, bad taste.” He concludes triumphantly, “Painting can either aim for the picturesque, the cheesy cottage, the plurality of bad taste, the underdeveloped childhood inside the average viewer, or strive to be a great work of art—hence the triumph of resolution, the mono-logical and mature expression

of a single artistic expression.”²² Bonami is not addressing kitsch directly but rather defining the flip side of kitsch: art. Yet the idea of “wonder” here is the same as Kundera’s first tear—the thing that stops the mind, that isolates in awe. It is the power of art that Kinkade seems, to his critics, to undermine and mimic.

But again, the words that Bonami uses—*picturesque*, *cheesy*, *plurality*, and even the idea of an “underdeveloped childhood”—can be seen as the positive and desirable end of Kinkade’s project. For what Bonami views as Kinkade’s use of nostalgia, his obvious and overt desire to please the eye with his works, his unrepentant quest to visually satisfy, some would suggest, is exactly what the viewer wants. It is kitsch in the best sense of being the “spell” that Olalquiaga claims we desire. And after all, what exactly is the difference between wonder and a spell?

Greenberg’s assessment of the poor aesthetic quality of kitsch is based in a materialist understanding of culture and political economy. As a Marxist, and in response to the rise in fascism and Nazism that he witnessed in the 1930s, Greenberg viewed kitsch as a malevolent force that worked in the aid of the mechanisms of capitalism. Greenberg, along with the cultural theorists of the Frankfurt school, assumed that the masses were relatively powerless against the forces of the dominant class, which maintained its power through the manipulation of popular culture. For Greenberg only the avant-garde could stand in opposition and offer alternatives to this dominant regime, and, even then, only a small segment of the population would ever see through commodification and mass-produced culture to recognize originality and resistance.

Since the historical moment when Greenberg wrote “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” the impact of popular culture in the United States and, indeed, around the world has only increased. Globalization and the Internet are but two factors that have worked to expand the forces by which material goods and imagery circulate at dizzying paces. Yet it is the promise of a radical avant-garde as existing separately and somehow isolated from these trends that seems the most antiquated aspect of Greenberg’s theory. The institutionalization of art practices through schools, residencies, corporate sponsorships, and the increasing corporate presence in museums and gallery circles has corrupted the already tenuous fantasy that these worlds could stay apart.

In this way all art—from high to low, kitsch to “Painting”—is engaged

in the world of commodities. The dissolving of this boundary is most acutely argued by Jean Baudrillard in his work on consumption and culture. For Baudrillard consumers do not want commodities because they *need* them but because objects have themselves come to be symbols: “You never consume the object in itself (in its use-value); you are always manipulating objects (in the broadest sense) as signs which distinguish you either by affiliating you with your own group . . . or by marking you off from your own group by reference to a group of high status.”²³ Baudrillard is still focused on the problem of production, like Marx and Greenberg, but for him the issue is not the quality or context of an object. The object is merely a referent by which the consumer establishes her or his own set of symbols for decoding. Thus art is no different from any other commodity; it does not exist in a rarified world separate or oppositional to the mainstream. There is no “difference between ‘cultural creativity’ and ‘mass culture’; . . . both play primarily on a code, and on a calculation of market share and amortization.”²⁴ The differences between art and kitsch thus become not inherent but rather symptomatic of notions attached to symbolic value. Class and class aspiration or anxieties create the values that are then placed on all commodities, and art is no different. Kitsch “reaffirms the value of the rare, precious, unique object,” Baudrillard contends, but only to the end that both are involved in the logic and organization of consumption.²⁵

Pierre Bourdieu’s theories about taste have likewise worked to disengage the notion that the objects of consumption have fixed and trans-historical qualities (such as being “art” or “kitsch”). Instead, he argues that taste is a learned quality attached to objects as mechanisms of maintaining class order and identity: “The aesthetic disposition is one dimension of a distant, self-assured relation to the world and to others which presupposes objective assurance and distance. . . . Being the product of the conditions associated with a particular class of conditions of existence, it unites all those who are product[s] of similar conditions while [it] distinguishes them from all others.”²⁶ The very idea of taste, of one object retaining more or less value in an aesthetic sense than another, is a part of complex systems of codes that are maintained through the language of distinction. Or, as Bourdieu writes, people “distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make.”²⁷ In regard to art, or what one learns and accepts as art, this theory holds. What one believes art to be depends entirely on what class

or group one belongs to, and investments adhere to understanding, within that identity, what is and is not art.

For Baudrillard and Bourdieu class is crucial to the appraisal and understanding of goods and their meanings. While they come at the question of consumer choice from different philosophical and disciplinary models, both illuminate Kinkade's popularity and cultural impact. In detaching, or at least distancing, Kinkade's paintings from notions of inherent artistic value that can be judged in some objective sense, we are able to consider more concretely the activities that surround the object, audiences' relationships to it, and what the object might signify beyond the imagery it represents. In short, what a focus on Kinkade's art as commodity provides is a mechanism to consider how these objects operate, not merely as the producer and distributors dictate but in conversation with audiences as symbols of the ways in which class and class desire are constructed.

This was evident at a Kinkade event in Birmingham, Alabama, hosted by local Kinkade gallery owners. The event was held at the convention center in a multipurpose room. Numerous Kinkade paintings were on display around the perimeter in a manner similar to an auction house's presentation of objects before the start of a sale. About a half-hour into the event, Kinkade himself came to the stage and spoke about his life, his art, the movie about his life, and, finally, his charity work with Points of Light, a group spearheaded by former president George H. W. Bush. Kinkade handed the microphone over to one of the event hosts, and the man announced that he was going to auction off a Kinkade painting that the artist had signed for a local charity. To begin the process, he asked how many in the crowd had been to an art auction before; only about five or six out of the seventy-plus in attendance raised their hands. He smiled at the crowd and said, "Well, now you can tell your friends and family that you have been to a *real* art auction." Then he made a joke about being careful not to itch or sneeze because that might be mistaken for a bid. There were lots of laughs.

To certain communities this entire scene might appear as a huge farce. "Real" art auctions take place in auction houses, and unique objects with some level of pedigree are sold. Typically, the objects are not the sort of thing one could buy anywhere in the country (as you can Kinkade's), on the Internet, or on television. To many at the Kinkade event, however, there was currency in being able to participate in a "real" auction and tell-

ing family and friends about it. Although a certain class of people might not recognize this as an art auction, the people in that room had perhaps found value in this new “real” experience. As Bourdieu might argue, the distinctions made here are class based, not aesthetic. Was this event any less “real” than buying a Jackson Pollock at Sotheby’s? How “real” are any of these objects in defining an individual’s purpose, meaning, and presence in our culture or even in individuals’ own lives?

Kinkade himself often blurs the lines of what exactly his art represents and what it symbolizes. At this Birmingham event he referred to his paintings both as “investments” and as “heirlooms.” No doubt Kinkade assumed that the people in that room would already be aesthetically drawn to his work, but he was unafraid to directly address things they might desire beyond the aesthetic experience. These terms, *investments* and *heirlooms*, both suggest some deferred gratification, some pleasure and benefit to be reaped at a later date (perhaps even after the grave). It is this willingness to speak to the various wants that surround his paintings—the joy of ownership, of pride in displaying art, the flourish of sophistication in using art as decoration, the satisfaction in imagining art as an investment, and the obsessive thrill of collecting—that perhaps makes Kinkade such a potent target for vilification as a pied piper of consumerism and product placement. It is also his willingness to sell his work in places previously deemed “off-limits” to serious art collectors, such as the mall, television, the Internet, and even a convention center, that adds to the unease of many with his marketing techniques.²⁸ I am not the only voice in this collection to suggest that much of the discomfort and animosity hurled at Kinkade results from his overt willingness to speak to art as a class-conscious commodity. Kinkade’s products soothe the class anxieties of some and disrupt others, but the specter of class lurks nonetheless.

We are also left with the question of Kinkade’s role in the art/class binary. Is he a figure of democratizing purpose? Does he bring art to the masses? Returning briefly to the discussion of pop art is instructive here. Warhol’s work suggested the dismantling of hierarchies and an ironic-innocent stance that devalues, or at least reestablishes, the links between the artist, object, craft, authenticity, and value, yet his work also represents a new fissure between the “art world” and the public. Visual vocabularies that shift with context and intention are a bit like passwords, whispered among those in the know to get them into the club but designed to keep

others out. Not surprisingly, this artistic turn was viewed by many as the latest and most austere evidence of the disdain the art elite have for the masses. The joke, some will still contend, is one by the artist on the viewer, and many viewers do not find it funny. Kinkade would concur with that and positions himself as an antidote to that kind of art-world snobbery. Yet his version of art-as-populism is a tricky balancing act, particularly given that his works can sell for several hundred dollars and that his work has made him a very rich man. Who and what is liberated or denied here is foggy; as several authors will suggest, Kinkade profits from these class-art tensions and perhaps even reinvigorates the divide.

Kitsch is also a crucial paradigm for understanding Kinkade as a religious artist. He was raised a Christian but experienced a religious reinvigoration in the 1980s; Kinkade was born again. Although few of his paintings are explicitly religious in nature, he describes his images as “messengers of God’s love.”²⁹ In an interview for a Christian magazine in 2000 he says, “I want to use the paintings as tools to expand the kingdom of God.”³⁰ Kinkade’s Christian values not only motivate his own life and work but are coded into his artistic production. In this sense his art proselytizes the masses; he wants his images to spread the word of God.

Kinkade is part of a growing social and political movement in the United States among some evangelical Christians, active through groups such as the Moral Majority, Promise Keepers, Focus on the Family, and the Traditional Values Coalition, who advocate a “return” to traditional Christian-based ideas about societal structure and propriety.³¹ This movement has also had a significant cultural impact. Films such as Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) and Andrew Adamson’s *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (2005) were marketed specifically and successfully to Christian groups and organizations, as were books such as the Left Behind series, first published in 1995 by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins and that as of this writing have sold more than fifty million copies.³² There is clearly money to be made in marketing to Christians, yet few of these projects have achieved critical success beyond the scope of Christian organizations. Kinkade, who has been associated with this growing phenomenon based on his marketing strategies (his company works with Christian bookstores, for example) and his own stated religious beliefs, has likewise suffered from accusations that his work panders to Christian audiences. He has often been collapsed into the larger category of religious art and collec-

tibles that has been popularly understood as kitsch because of its manufactured reproduction, sentimental imagery, didactic function, and ephemeral qualities.³³

This collapsing of kitsch and religious imagery marked much of the conversation about art and religion in the twentieth century. As the historian Colleen McDannell neatly summarizes, “What in the nineteenth century was considered tasteful and pious, in the twentieth century came to be seen as tacky and religious.”³⁴ Yet audiences have continued to crave religious imagery and objects regardless of the ways in which those images have been critically appraised. As a result, when evaluating religious art, scholars have separated notions of aesthetics and religious value; in other words, when critics consider a religious image, what the object looks like is typically not evaluated vis-à-vis what the image means to various consumers.³⁵ This critical divide has, not surprisingly, had an impact on the relationship that contemporary artists have to the subject of religion. James Elkins notes, “Contemporary art, I think, is as far from organized religion as Western art has ever been, and that may be its singular achievement—or its cardinal failure, depending on your point of view.”³⁶ For those scholars who have sought some kind of language to bridge the “divide” between art and religion the problem revolves around sentimentality and didacticism. In assessing, for example, the Precious Moments Chapel in Carthage, Missouri, Frank Burch Brown argues, “The problem is not that the art is accessible. It is how it achieves that accessibility, and at what price. . . . These are formulas that trigger a predictably tearful or heartwarming response but that offer no new insight, and in fact tend to trivialize genuine religious feeling, and so to profane what is sacred.”³⁷ For Brown it is important to take into account that people seek an emotional and spiritual experience from religious art and that when that art fails to give “a new insight,” it fails *both* as art and religion and is remanded to the world of kitsch.

Kinkade’s paintings offer little of the kind of “insight” that Brown speaks of. Kinkade does not produce any images that explicitly reproduce biblical stories. His religious imagery is mainly in the guise of bridges and church steeples, lighthouses, and suggestive beams of light. Jesus is represented in only a handful of images, and, again, Kinkade does not historicize or give them any specific biblical detail. Images such as *The Good Shepherd’s Cottage* (2001; fig. 1) locate Jesus in Kinkade’s world, herding sheep into a warmly lit home. Here Jesus conveys no biblical message, illustrates

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Figure 1. Thomas Kinkade, *The Good Shepherd's Cottage*. © 2001 THOMAS KINKADE.

no scene, provides no moral lesson. He is instead loosely depicted as a kind shepherd in a brightly lit landscape with acquiescent sheep. The religious message is tenuous beyond the notion that Jesus tends to his flock and that the flock gets to live in a comfortable home.

But audiences have clearly responded to Kinkade's brand of religious imagery. The quality of insight it provides is minimal; Kinkade breaks no new ground either in his depiction of Jesus or in his reading of Jesus as a shepherd. Instead, he works to distance the figure of Jesus from any narrow biblical reading and any specific landscape or time period. The cottage looks like a Cotswold-inspired home, but nothing about the landscape anchors it geographically or chronologically. Jesus's clothes and the building he stands near are not from the same period. Kinkade also overtly courts the sentimental, both in his use of soft coloring and fuzzy lighting and in the general message of the piece. Jesus here is not a judge but a kindly shepherd looking to care for his flock. All is warm, calm, and reassuring. Depending on what one wants from a painting, from art, and from spirituality, the image is either a wonderful success or the worst kind of kitsch.

This collection examines the works of Thomas Kinkade from multiple competing, complementary, and, at times, contradictory perspectives. To that end we begin with David Morgan's discussion of Kinkade in relation to previous producers of Protestant imagery. Morgan maps the ways Kinkade both borrows and deviates from religious iconography, which has itself moved historically between didactic and artistic aims. In tying Kinkade to artists as diverse as Currier and Ives and Warner Sallman, Morgan creates a historical framework by which we can see more clearly the various visual associations that Kinkade plays with in his work.

The next two essays confront the contemporary religious conversations and communities that Kinkade engages. Micki McElya begins by arguing that although Kinkade is popularly known as the "Painter of Light™," a more fitting title would be "Painter of the Right." She situates Kinkade's personal history, work, and wide popularity within the history of the rise of the Religious Right in the 1970s and the "culture wars" of the 1980s and 1990s. Using a clever comparison of Andres Serrano's *Immersion (Piss Christ)* (1987) and several of Kinkade's works, McElya interprets Kinkade as an overtly political artist who is engaged deeply with the rhetorics of Republican conservatism. Seth Feman's "God in the Retail: Thomas Kinkade and

Market Piety” approaches the issue of contemporary religious communities through the lens of Kinkade and capitalism. Feman contends that Kinkade’s true contribution to art, and indeed theology, is the artist’s advocacy of a spirituality that is tied to the activity of consumerism. This “market piety,” as Feman terms it, binds Kinkade’s artistic persona, his art, and his Christian values to the desires of his audience for a purchasable vision of spirituality. Feman complements his astute arguments concerning contemporary religious culture and capitalism with some fascinating interviews with Kinkade’s fans, who reveal complex and surprising relationships to the art they collect.

Karal Ann Marling has built her formidable scholarly reputation by advocating artists and work that others dismiss or disregard. Her contribution here is no exception as she considers Kinkade’s collectibles. Using a methodological *mélange* of art history, visual culture studies, and affection for popular culture, Marling provides an overview of the recent history of the collectibles market and the ways in which Kinkade has successfully blanketed our malls, drugstores, and televisions with a myriad of merchandise. While her tone is often lighthearted, Marling demands that readers consider how they judge the objects in other peoples’ homes and the spiritual value of the objects we claim as our own.

If Marling’s tone is slightly irreverent, the next essay reasserts the very serious side of considering Kinkade’s work. Andrea Wolk Rager explores how Kinkade creates a powerful and persuasive aesthetics of nostalgia within his imagery. Using postmodern and psychoanalytic theory, Wolk Rager contends that through repeated images of nostalgic fantasies, Kinkade’s art enacts a landscape of repression that denies consumers the true healing they seek. Numerous critics associate Kinkade with nostalgic impulses, but Wolk Rager pushes past easy or trite assumptions on this subject. Her readings of Kinkade’s works assert the value in traditional art historical techniques of close looking while forcing the reader to confront the very definition of nostalgia historically and in this contemporary moment.

The focus of the volume then turns to topics more material—concrete and asphalt to be specific. Christopher E. M. Pearson relates Kinkade’s “virtual real estate” to his gated housing complex, The Village at Hiddenbrooke, built near Vallejo, California, in 2002. Referencing the neoconservative New Urbanism movement and contemporary real estate practices,

Pearson argues that Kinkade's painted cottages stand as hyperbolic manifestations of the suburban ideal. By speaking to desires to buy into a controlled social environment based on safety and exclusion, Kinkade's audiences perform their own class anxiety and aspirations. Yet while Kinkade's visual images are manifested physically in the form of houses, the artist also seeks a far more conventional form of institutionalization: a place in a museum. Julia Alderson focuses on Kinkade's opened—and then closed—museum that featured his original paintings. Alderson documents the history of Kinkade's museum and cultural center in its various iterations and considers this endeavor within the context of the changing role of museums in American culture. She argues that there is increasingly little space between the goals of public institutions such as museums and a private corporate entity like Kinkade; both seek a paying audience.

The collection then breaks from traditional scholarly writing and voice with the inclusion of an essay by Jeffrey Vallance. Vallance is most famously known as a conceptual artist who blends elements of performance and installation to explore concepts of spirituality, mortality, and the legitimacy and hypocrisy of the art world. The first work to garner him notoriety was his piece *Blinky the Friendly Hen* (1978), in which Vallance purchased a whole chicken from a supermarket and then buried it in high fashion at the Los Angeles Pet Cemetery. His more recent work has focused on the power and history of reliquaries; Vallance assembles shrines that combine objects of autobiographical value, from an Orange Crush bottle cap to boxer shorts, to speak to both the preciousness of religion and memory and the humor of the egoistic artist. Vallance curated the first major museum exhibition of Kinkade's art and collectibles. This show, *Thomas Kinkade: Heaven on Earth*, made headlines in 2004, and Vallance recounts here his experiences organizing the show, speaks of his personal friendship with Kinkade, and considers the future of Kinkade as an artist. Vallance professes utter and complete sincerity and asks the reader to trust him and that he writes with no irony and only a little gentle-spirited mischief. Yet, as with his curatorial turn with the Kinkade exhibition, many will read this essay as another of Vallance's performance pieces, where the artist plays the role of the art-world jester, with Kinkade as the spectacle he directs us to laugh at. Readers will have to judge Vallance's tone and intention for themselves, but of interest here, too, is the nature of collaboration between two

contemporary artists. Competition, respect, repulsion, and attraction have long been the energy promised when artists choose to work together, and all of this is in evidence in Vallance's telling of his half of this collaborative experience.

The last two essays deal directly with Kinkade and the language of contemporary artistic production. Monica Kjellman-Chapin argues that Kinkade relies on a calcified and formulaic division between "high art" and low forms of culture, usually tagged with the dismissive and derogatory label "kitsch," in order to imbue his own productions with value, prestige, authenticity, and singularity. The rhetoric he deploys and the associations he mobilizes in his work, exhibition venues, and publications, which Kjellman-Chapin investigates in some detail, function to convince the buying public that his work, despite mass reproduction, is in fact unique. In this way Kinkade maintains his identity as a creative artist and elevates his status to that of a great master painter. Finally, Anna Brzyski takes up Kjellman-Chapin's specific claims about Kinkade's strategies and reads them against the broader project of defining art in the postmodern age. Brzyski argues that the segment of the art market that includes Kinkade will always stand outside the boundaries of "fine art" because of the investments that art professionals—critics, artists, museum and gallery professionals, and academics included—have in defining art narrowly. For Kinkade to be considered outside of the limited scope of the marketplace is, according to Brzyski, impossible without a monumental paradigm shift in concepts about art and art production.

As I stated at the beginning of this introduction, Thomas Kinkade elicits widely varying responses that point to the ways in which we, as a culture and, indeed, as individuals, value or distinguish between the real and the fictive. Kinkade reveals the stakes in considering concepts such as art and kitsch, beauty and surface, style and insight. His work also demands that we consider the degree to which we want those terms and the outcome of this discussion to be dictated by the marketplace. Kinkade's images have permeated American visual culture, and this feat is all the more amazing when we consider that it has happened within the space of two decades. While it is possible to argue, as many have, that this is merely a marketing anomaly and a passing fad, this answer does not truly satisfy the distinct sense that several of the authors discuss in this collection that there is a tan-

gible *desire* for the objects and art that Kinkade creates. Audiences *need* his works, and this need should also be measured against the wave of available visual imagery from which to choose. People seek out his art and bring it into their homes, an intimate act even in a cynical world of crass consumption. What drives this collection is the quest to understand what that desire for Kinkade means about art and what it means about his audiences. This collection also exposes in productive ways the tensions that exist in terms of the methodological approaches in art history, visual culture studies, and cultural studies.

By way of some last words concerning the purpose and goals of this volume, I want to recount a discussion I participated in a few years ago. I had been asked to speak to a class of MFA students about Kinkade; the discussion was lively. Not surprisingly, most of the students damned the artist, calling him a fraud and making derisive comments about his work. But then one student quietly and tentatively spoke up. She said that she grew up in a home full of Kinkade images and that her parents are great fans of his work. Her own art has little in common with his aesthetic, and she said that while her parents have been supportive of her career, after several of her shows they have opined, “Your work is so interesting. Very different. But have you ever thought of painting like Kinkade? His work is so good and you have so much talent. You could try to paint like him.” The class laughed, but there was nothing but pain on the face of the student.

This poignant moment reminded me that beyond all of the rhetoric and furor that surround Kinkade, there are people whose lives, relations, and perceptions are shaped profoundly by his art. This student was raised in a home with art and with parents who clearly valued that art. In many ways this is the kind of a household that all art professionals and those dedicated to art education hope for. And the art had, in one sense, served its function as a gateway into creativity for the child that grew up in that house. Yet a disconnect had occurred in this creative interchange. Instead of art being a conduit for connection, it had become a source of isolation and distance. The story is evidence that Kinkade is, in fact, contributing to the shaping of a new generation of artists in ways that are complex and worth considering with seriousness and focus. His words and images, like all important art, leave traces and mark us in deeply personal ways.

Notes

1. This is a frequently quoted figure, although there is no way to definitively verify it. Based on Media Arts Company sales figures and the sheer number of licensed Kinkade products, it is a reasonable statistic. Kinkade himself more regularly boasts that his images are in “ten million homes.” Interestingly, that is a number he started repeating in 2001, but the figure has not increased in more recent years. For the one-out-of-twenty statistic, see John Leland, “Subdivided and Licensed, There’s No Place like Art,” *New York Times*, Oct. 4, 2001. In regard to the figure of ten million, see Orlean, “Art for Everybody,” 125; and Associated Press, “Often-Scorned but Popular Artist Thomas Kinkade Gets First Museum Exhibit,” April 3, 2004, www.grandcentralartcenter.com/press_2004_4_3.php (accessed May 10, 2010).

2. I will be referring to Kinkade’s works as paintings since that is the way he refers to them, and that is the way his audience refers to them—it is typical that contemporary artists define the nature of their work, and critics and scholars follow suit.

3. In regard to issues of bankruptcy, see Kim Christensen, “Thomas Kinkade Firm Seeks Bankruptcy Protection,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 3, 2010, <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/jun/03/business/la-fi-kinkade-20100603>.

4. Press release, The Thomas Kinkade Company, Oct. 11, 2004, www.mediaarts.com/press/index.shtml (accessed Nov. 20, 2004).

5. Immanuel Kant’s paradigm about the power and essential qualities of the sublime and the beautiful root much of art historical conversations about taste. He writes, “The sublime moves, the beautiful charms” (Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, 47).

6. Bal, “Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture,” 5. Discussions about the divide between art history and visual culture are ongoing, but for a good summary see “Responses to Mieke Bal’s ‘Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture.’” See also “Visual Culture Questionnaire”; Rogoff, “Studying Visual Culture”; Mitchell, “Showing Seeing”; Alphen, “‘What History, Whose History, History to What Purpose?’”; and Corbet, “Visual Culture and the History of Art.”

7. See Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, esp. 28–36.

8. See Baudrillard, *Simulations*.

9. For more on this issue, with particular emphasis on beauty and cultural studies, see Shumway, “Cultural Studies and Questions of Pleasure and Value.”

10. There are numerous examples of this argument, particularly in art criticism that deals with feminism and postcolonial theory. One of the most accessible and illuminating remains Berger, *Ways of Seeing*.

11. Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 58.

12. For more on this piece and Gonzalez-Torres's works, see Dietmar Elger's two-volume catalogue raisonné *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*.

13. Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 58.

14. This and the following paragraph derive from Boylan, "Stop Using Kitsch as a Weapon," 44–45.

15. Hebdige, "In Poor Taste," 78.

16. There has been much written about the radicalism of pop art and its place as a marker of the divide between modernism and postmodernism. For a good summary of this debate and issues of the radicalizing and racial possibilities of pop art, see Kobena Mercer's introduction to *Pop Art and Vernacular Culture*; see also Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*.

17. Maharaj, "Pop Art's Pharmacies," 337.

18. Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 252.

19. It is worth noting, however, that Kundera acknowledges that everyone falls for kitsch in certain moments and that what saves one is the knowing of kitsch and its power. Then it is, as he writes, that kitsch is reduced to yet another "human weakness" (Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 256).

20. Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom*, 28.

21. Quoted in Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom*, 97.

22. Bonami, "Paintings of Painting for Paintings," 14, 15, 19.

23. Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*, 61.

24. *Ibid.*, 102. Baudrillard goes on to argue that art "no longer stands opposed, as *works* and as semantic substance—as *open* significations—to other *finite* objects. They have become finite objects themselves and are part of the package, the constellation of accessories by which the 'socio-cultural' standing of the average citizen is determined" (107).

25. *Ibid.*, 111.

26. Bourdieu, "The Aesthetic Sense as the Sense of Distinction," 205.

27. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 6. For more on Bourdieu, art, and taste, see Greenfell and Hardy, *Art Rules*.

28. It is worth noting that museums, those rarified temples of culture, have also begun to aggressively court consumers in malls and on the Internet. See Ritzer, *Enchanting a Disenchanted World*, 25.

29. *Ibid.* In terms of religious imagery in Kinkade's work, he has published one image of Jesus Christ, *The Prince of Peace* (1999) (see p. 44), and one image that features a Christlike figure emerging from a Cotswold-style cottage beckoning sheep to him, *The Good Shepherd's Cottage* (2001) (see p. 20). More typical are his images of churches nestled in scenic woods by a brook. See, e.g., *The Aspen Chapel* (2001), *Streams of Living Water* (2000), and *Mountain Chapel* (1998).

30. Balmer, "The Kinkade Crusade," 50.

31. Numerous books track the changing landscape of religion and politics in

the past decades. See, e.g., Watson, *The Christian Coalition*; and Gutterman, *Prophetic Politics*.

32. For more on Christian culture, see Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*; and Kintz, *Between Jesus and the Market*.

33. The artist Betty Spackman explores this genre of art in her book *A Profound Weakness*.

34. McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 164.

35. For a good analysis of these strategies, see Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste*, 128–37.

36. Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*, 15.

37. Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste*, 144.