

Thomas Wagner

There is no correct pose in a wrong negligee

Martin Eder, desire, and the omnipresence of kitsch

"My paintings are actually battle scenes. They are full of murder and they are incredibly bloodthirsty."

Martin Ederⁱ

The motifs in Martin Eder's paintings have been quick to give them a center of gravity in the public perception. This center has placed them in a stable orbit – that of kitsch. At first glance, the figures that populate his paintings seem to support this – often, they are naked young women in poses that are melancholy and languorous, and lascivious at the same time; and there are plenty of over-sweet, fluffy white kittens. This kind of arrangement fits in well with the success story of contemporary art. Culture – kitsch – commerce is the alliteration that seems to sum it up. As if on a hermeneutic slide, romantically made-up figures frequently seem to slither down the precipitous slope from high art to the trivial.

But kitsch is neither a homogenous, precisely-defined concept, nor is it the only synonym for bad taste. The trashy and the drastic provide competition for kitsch here and there, and even the *camp* – as an ironical variation of a manner of experience based on tricks and exaggerationⁱⁱ – appears to have come back up out of the archives and returned to the stage. All these are ways of behaving in response to an increasingly heterogeneous and sexually-charged, collective world of emotions – emotions that are dominated by self-promotion and the demand for attention, the adulation of prominent people, and the cloning of gestures that seem to ensure success. They exist in this form as a result of the return to an increasingly global culture of taste, which cares nothing for historical or physical motifs and dispositions. Nothing holds the current mixture of revivals and evergreens, of success, longing for glory, and the profit motive together as surely as personal taste. Everybody thinks they have it, in one form or another, yet nowadays, no-one has to be ashamed of it. No matter how heterogeneous art becomes, no matter how warmed-over or decorative it appears, taste will make it acceptable. Anything is beautiful if somebody likes it – and is prepared to buy it.

Marcel Duchamp – who like no other led a nonchalant and ironical battle against the notion of taste – had a different definition. As early as 1949, he said in an interviewⁱⁱⁱ that taste “creates a sensual feeling, not an aesthetic emotion. Taste works on the assumption that there is one dominant observer who dictates what he does and doesn't like, and translates that into

'beautiful' and 'ugly.'" It's that simple. Duchamp continues: "It is quite different for a 'victim' of an 'aesthetic echo' – he is in a position like that of a man in love, or a religious believer, who automatically gives up his demanding ego and surrenders helplessly to a delightful and mysterious force... My personal conclusion from this is that, generally speaking, very few people are capable of feeling an aesthetic emotion or sensing an 'aesthetic echo.' While many people have taste, only a small number are equipped with aesthetic receptivity."^{iv}

However, at the same time, the intense use of taste, coupled with the unbridled fascination that arises from everything banal and trivial within feel-good societies – after all, nowadays almost everything is banal or is pulled down to the level of banality – leads to the almost inevitable reduction of the 'aesthetic echo' to a renewed career as kitsch. It appears the mass-culture observer only has these instruments with which to deal with the banal. He seeks to enhance its status with the help of stereotypical aesthetic and emotional patterns, and to process the surfeit of stimuli that he is constantly subjected to. The representations resulting from this kind of experience turn out accordingly. Thus kitsch becomes the symptom for grand emotions, and fundamentally existential situations cannot be dealt with or portrayed in any other way than disproportionately. Other means of expression in the collective repertoire built up by the media are apparently few in number and more difficult to access.

Martin Eder picks up on all that in his paintings. He operates between kitsch and the aesthetic echo, taking as his subject the extent of the inability to describe the depths of existence or master them in any other way except using the unsuitable means of trivial behavioral patterns used a thousand times before. These are things Eder tracks down at an especially sensitive place – in the souls of young women whose sense of worth is undermined by magazines, daily soap operas, and an endless parade of telegenic models. Their relationship with their own bodies and their own sexuality appears to be particularly vulnerable under these conditions. In a seemingly shameless manner, they copy what the media presents to them as stereotypically lascivious poses and seductive games. When self-perception and role identities remain ambivalent and full of anxieties, these kinds of patterns take on a ritual importance that they do not deserve. Appearance, styled and fixed by the media, triumphs easily over reality, which is perceived to be inadequate anyway. Thus, the desire to please and to be desired is wrapped in the strangest costumes. In order to give expression to this, Eder, with his perfect painting, copies the aesthetic repertoire of the inappropriate by taking up the common patterns of the trivial – then stretching them to the very limits of obvious kitsch. In this way, every situation is charged with every conceivable erotic fantasy and dragged into the sphere of the unreal and the

merely seeming; it is revealed in its full graphic distortion and reflects the fact that the collective demands on the individual are far too high – a tragedy in itself.

It also becomes clear what it means when there can no longer be a valid distinction between a genuine culture and a non-genuine one when it comes to the attempt to be authentic and immediate. What if kitsch today is less about the need to take part in the blessings of a refined culture than an unconscious desire for an immediate expression of one's own – which excludes the possibility of doing that any other way than with the repertoire of the un-genuine? Then that which we call kitsch still stands for the untrue and un-genuine. At the same time, however, within it, a real desire is articulated that forever gets bogged down in the false. Martin Eder's paintings are composed of the facets of this kind of straying into falsity. The manner of this imprisonment is like that "Babylon system" of the Jamaican Rastafarians, who saw parallels in the Biblical story of the Israelites' Babylonian exile with the enslavement of their own African ancestors and their transportation to America – seeing it as an expression of the Western and the white world. The only difference here is that – in the middle of the Western world – the exploitation of the desire to please is what is claiming victims. "My work," says Martin Eder, "is built on yearnings, on that which people desire."

Yet we must not forget that kitsch is a combative term. From beginning to end, it serves to devalue everyday cultural phenomena, and to separate high art from the crafts. Yet what is kitsch in an age in which everyday culture is valued higher and higher in the name of pop culture, ultimately to be imported into the realm of high culture? What happens to a concept equated not only with revulsion – but also which draws to itself that which is outcast, dirty, and offensive – under these conditions? Despite the irony hidden behind his bombastic motifs, Eder stands more on the side of the *camp* than on the side of a moral debate on the ubiquitous tendency towards kitsch. He plunges into the depths of a theatrical frivolity and short-circuits femininity with all manner of sexual fantasies, and with incursions over all kinds of boundaries. Today, sexual identity is formed through performance more than ever. Therefore – in line with what Judith Butler has to say – it arises from the processes of creation of social norms. Where Eder concentrates these using specific props and backdrops, placing them into kitschy and clichéd gestures, the categories of the genuine and original appear to have been atomized. There can be no correct pose in a wrong negligee.

Eder understands how to pinpoint the tragic contradiction between desire and reality, what appears to be and what really is, in paintings whose repertoire of charming motifs is just as rich as its techniques. Eder is no less of a virtuoso in his mastery of how to portray figures than he is in lyrical foundation and the expressive intensification of scenes and situations – which he conjures up using the delicate development of color, fields of color reflecting the mood, and

almost psychedelic protuberances of color. Regardless of whether it is the incarnation of a nude from a girly magazine, a kitten's fur, or clouds over the sea – Eder knows how to do it. Impressively, he plays the register of poses and styles – here a little Renoir, there a bit of Gauguin, with a bit of splatter movie and kitsch postcard thrown in – in order to find artistic equivalents of the internal turmoil of his protagonists.

It is precisely because Eder does not dissolve the difference between “high” and “low” art, because he does not give us a wink to put his turn towards kitschy exaggeration and self-promotion into an ironical perspective, that his allegories are so distressing. The degree of severity hidden below the surface of his seemingly sweet paintings is also underlined in his photographs, collected under the title of “Die Armen” (the poor things). The pent-up waste of an emotionally irritated culture seeps into the production of desires and threatens to flood them with kitsch.^v

It may be tempting, if one likes to look at relevant historical perspectives, to line up Eder's inscrutable scenes and portraits with a Surrealism of the unconscious production of desires, in order to decipher them in this way using Freudian-style displacement and facilitation. Yet Eder all too obviously takes up the performance effects of the projections and desires and gives form to them. Thus he creates illusions of desire, which don't go smoothly for a change, and do not get ethically lost in social-pedagogically correct, well-meaning arrogance. Eder reflects the contamination of intimacy by kitsch; but he does not confirm it. What he paints is no cheap peepshow, and it is certainly not pornography. His paintings are dispositives of a sexually charged society, whose voyeurism condemns even the most innocent desire to use worn, kitschy poses in order to attract attention and to receive acknowledgement.

Descriptions are never objective and arguments are not valid forever. They only attain weight within the gravitation field of a particular thesis or interpretation. Therefore, the following texts are only attempts to approach Martin Eder's paintings prismatically, and to take various perspectives on his work in the form of various texts.

ⁱ Martin Eder, *Über Illusionen, Faustschläge und Zeitkonten – Martin Eder im Gespräch mit Thomas Wagner*, Cologne 2007, p. 11.

ⁱⁱ cf. Susan Sontag, Anmerkungen zu 'Camp', in: *Kunst und Antikunst*, Munich Vienna 1980, pp. 269 – 284.

ⁱⁱⁱ Marcel Duchamp, *Interviews und Statements*, Stuttgart 1992, p. 39.

^{iv} Duchamp, *ibid.*

^v cf. Vilém Flusser, *Gespräch, Gerede, Kitsch*, in: *Kitsch. Texte und Theorien*, Eds: Ute Dettmar and Thomas Küpper, Stuttgart 2007, p. 281.