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KITSCH PARADE IN PUBLIC ART:  
A CASE STUDY OF CRITICISM ABOUT FIBERGLASS ANIMAL SCULPTURES

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Vancouver has an abundance of fiberglass animal figures, painted by local artists to raise money for charity. But can the orcas, sprit bears, and eagles, made from a universal mold and painted discerningly, be considered art? In an interview on the fiberglass CowParade exhibit which predates the Vancouver installations, Louis Torres, an online reviewer of the arts, says: "The answer is no. The cows are more closely related to mannequins, which at least have a legitimate utilitarian function - to display clothing" (Ellis). Unlike mannequins, however, the cows are each uniquely painted with various brands of kitsch art, which fufils the CowParade mandate to "simply make everyone smile" (CowParade). But, not everyone is simply smiling at these figures clad in kitsch clothing. International reactions to the CowParade public art installations help us examine the evolution of the critique of kitsch, from its origins in elitist assumptions to the formation of democratic judgments. Insight may be gained into the power of the individual to critically evaluate other public art displays without operating under elitist assumptions; simultaneously, we may better determine the value and future of the ever-increasing menagerie of fiberglass animals as public art displays.

The definition and intrinsic condemnation of kitsch as the embodiment of counterfeit aesthetic experience under the banner of art is born from elites, whose assumptions about art are based on education, authority, and experience in the art world (Kulka 7). The introduction of this attitude is tidily described by Tomas Kulka as having "widely popular appeal, but considered bad by the art-educated elite" (12). Kitsch quickly outgrew its original elitist critique. Its application expanded beyond mass commercial art to all areas of consumption, sped on by middle-class buying power (Calinescu 246-247). The market demand for readily accessible, easily devoured sensations which imitate authenticity allows kitsch to become one with mass culture (247-57). Fully intergrated with consumer culture, kitsch became an all-permeating way to "deny shit" in the world (Kundera 248).

As a result, a forum of consumers is now in a position to critique kitsch. The saturation and incorporation of kitsch into mass culture has resulted in the development of a kind of democratic aesthetic judgment. The people most in contact with different forms and varieties

Too much of a leap (more)

of kitsch (Calinescu 235, 247) are now judging it. Mass culture thus comes to propagate its own students and masters of kitsch. Elitist assumptions are democratized (or undermined) when an education in kitsch, rather than art, develops from the mass consumer experience of kitsch. This is further supplemented by the inherent authority of the consumer who exercises a right to judgment between "good" and "bad" kitsch through a kind of critique grounded in buying power.

Market value (and demand) is also one of the original critiques of kitsch by elites. Art may be valued as a means to its own end without commercial intent. Kitsch, although laden with commercial interest, is also valued by consumers as a means to its own end, as a product of consumerism for the sake of consumption (Kulka 20). While interpretations of the intent of art remain in the domain of elitist assumptions (5), the intent of kitsch is not hidden from universal judgment. Thus the value of kitsch becomes the rift that divides elite from anti- or non-elite, rather than the critical assumptions themselves, which are universalized by kitsch's accessibility and fraudulent aesthetic.

Speaking of the herd, CowParade is "the largest and most successful public art event in the world", exhibiting in over 50 cities worldwide (CowParade). CowParade throws a wide net to be able to lay these claims. Several observations bear Calinescu's take on the "fake aesthetic" of kitsch upon the cows (Calinescu 247). One is found in the explanation of the choice of fiberglass animal, which has been reproduced in three poses (standing, grazing, or reclining) over 2500 times (CowParade). CowParade claims their pieces evoke a universal emotional response to the figure of the cow since "she connects us to our past--but the common feeling is one of affection" (CowParade). This appeal to universal emotional contentment—the hallmark of kitsch—is challenged by both elite and non-elites artists, who have sought to defy reliance on nostalgia and complacency.

In June 2000, three cows were excluded from the CowParade exhibition in New York. One of the rejected cows was sponsored by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). The New York Times reports that PETA filed a lawsuit against the rejection of their cow, which

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depicted "a butcher-shop poster cow with such claims as 'eating meat causes impotence'", (Ramirez). The rejection was due to the mandate to have a "non-political event", according to parks commissioner Henry J. Stern (Ramirez). So, if the so-called art strayed too far from that which is defined as kitsch, the art would be rejected. In other words, if kitsch became non-kitsch, by engaging views politically, it no longer functioned as public art. Stern also denied David Lynch's bovine on similar grounds—the piece was "too gruesome" (Barron and Bagli). Stern revealed that he did not "know whether it's shock art or schlock art" (Barron and Bagli). The commissioner's comment reveals the extent to which kitsch has permeated public art. Lynch, critical of the selection process for kitsch cows, responded that "they should show my cow proudly and let people make up their own minds" (Barron and Bagli). Lynch's response invites a critique of both art and kitsch to be engaged in by all, rather than restricted to an (anti-)elite assumption bound by public office pragmatism.

The critique of the validity of the kitsch cows as art is not limited to upper echelon film and TV elites such as David Lynch. In the 2006 exhibition in Paris, over "40 percent of its 80 cows have been vandalized—or stolen outright" (Ellis). In Sweden, members of the Militant Graffiti Artists of Stockholm make up a group of anti-elites that radically support the freedom of art to express itself (ArtLiberated.org). The CowParade, a marketing tool masquerading as art, is condemned by the citizen art militia. A translation of the video tape sent to local newspapers lists the rationale in excellent detail:

"We, the members of The Militant Graffiti Artists of Stockholm feel morally obligated to protect our city against the Cows that have invaded our streets. The cows are Not Art. That these cows are presented as Public Art is the biggest fraud. Advertisements can never be art. Freedom of Expression doesn't belong to the average person anymore, only to those who have the money to buy a billboard or in this case, a cow that serves the same purpose as a billboard. We believe Freedom of Expression is threatened. Challenging the legitimacy of the of the cows in order to defend Freedom of Expression is the duty of every citizen. We have taken a hostage. We demand that the cows be declared Non-Art and that all the cows, before 12:00 August 23rd, leave our streets. We also demand walls where we Stockholmers can paint and practice our freedom of expression. If our demands are not met, the hostage will be sacrificed. Vandalism and artistic justice will be administered " (ArtLiberated.org).

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The cow was decapitated, but whether artistic justice can be dispensed on fiberglass animals is for you and I to decide. The critique of kitsch is fully now accessible to most people as a part of mass culture. The abundance of kitsch, like the abundance of fiberglass animals all over Vancouver, can only make us, the people, become more able to differentiate between what kitsch is valuable and which is worthless—if it does not kill us with cute, ugly, or neutral feelings, and complacency, first.

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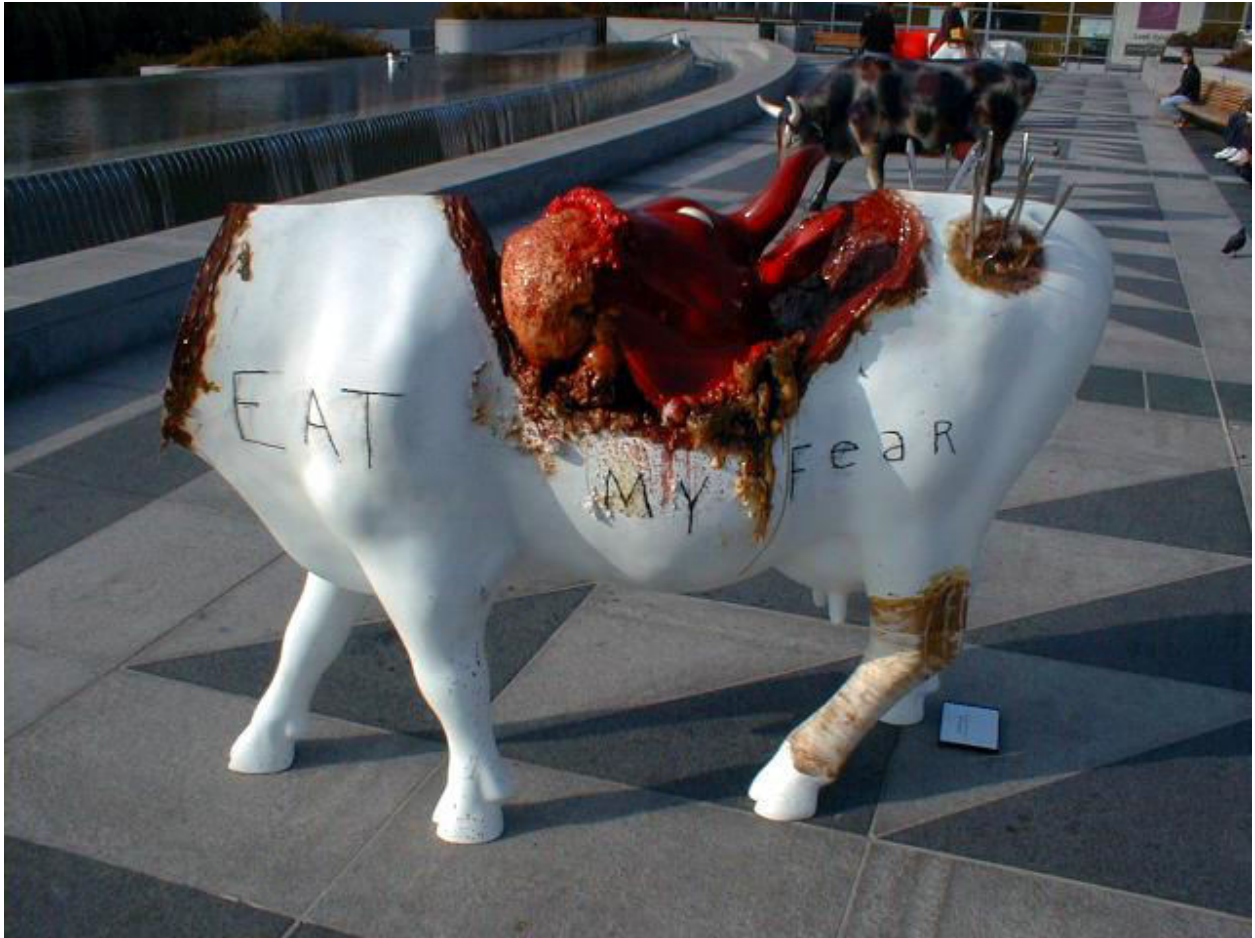
Phaidra-

This is a very interesting piece which focuses on an excellent example of a low-cost artistic of kitsch. I would like to see yet more structure & coherence in your argument, but you are making good progress.

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## Appendix



### **Cows On Parade - David Lynch**

[Cows on Parade](#) at San Francisco's [Yerba Buena Gardens](#).  
<http://ican.edithispage.com/cowsonparade/>