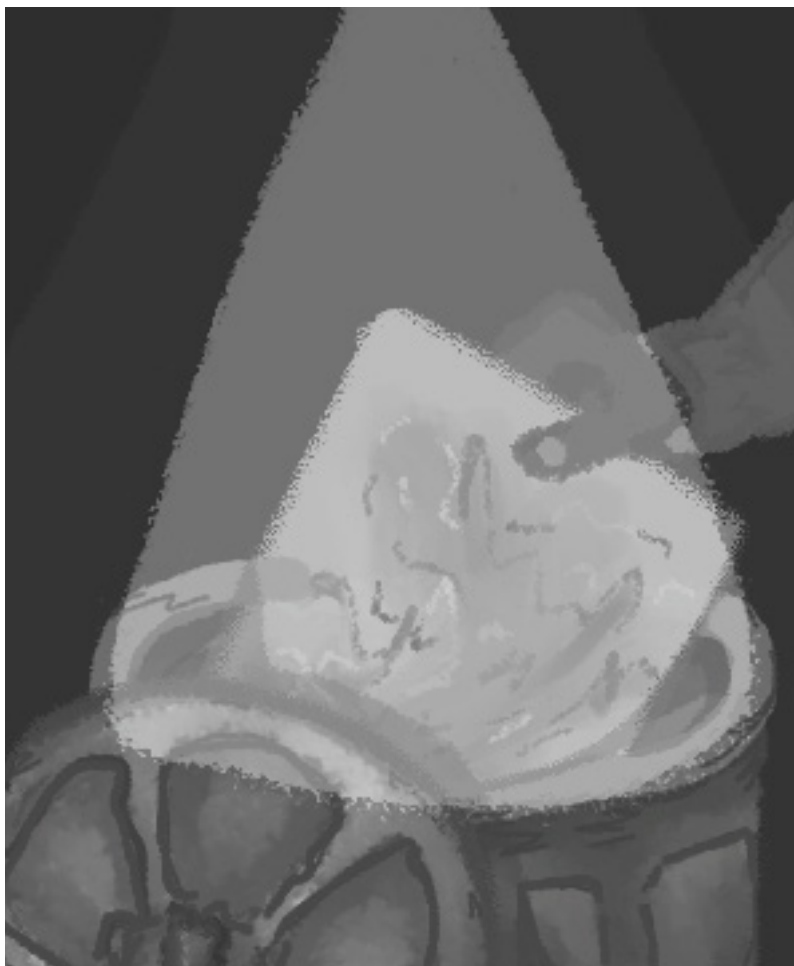


# ARTISTIC CLASSISM AND “CAMP” AS CRITICAL KITSCH



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## ABSTRACT

In the philosophy of art and art criticism, there is disagreement over whether works deemed “kitsch” can be considered art. I discuss the perspectives of two thinkers, Clement Greenberg and Robert Solomon, to elucidate the kitsch debate as ultimately an issue of classism. Using AP Nguyễn’s exhibition *Lovecore* as a case study, I consider how the artist utilizes the concept of “camp” to assert the value of kitsch and comment on the classism of art criticism that denigrates kitsch art. Camp as critical kitsch celebrates artworks for the same kitschy qualities that many critics cite as negating their ability to be called art at all.

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The term “kitsch” in art criticism is often used to refer to straightforwardly expressive objects mass-produced for inexpensive consumption. In discussions of the value and validity of artworks, there is debate regarding whether kitsch devalues artworks or eliminates the possibility for an object to be called art at all. Art critic Clement Greenberg rejects the possibility of kitsch artworks, considering kitsch to be merely a capitalistic method of appropriating genuine art in order to appeal to a lower class that lacks sophistication but desires an artistic culture. Robert Solomon disagrees, arguing for the value of art that is overt in the emotions it intends to engender and that appeals to a wide audience. With respect to Vietnamese artist AP Nguyễn’s exhibition *Lovecore*, which focuses on the kitsch objects of her parents’ history, I argue that the question of significance is not whether Nguyễn’s exhibition is itself kitsch but how it utilizes the notion of kitsch and for what purposes. In other words, I propose to read *Lovecore* not merely as a work of kitsch but as an exercise in camp. “Camp” is a much-debated term in art criticism and beyond, but for the purposes of this paper, it can be understood as denoting works which arise from deliberate, critical engagement with culturally “classed” objects or ideas that endeavor to amplify and complicate easy distinctions between elegant exclusivity and garish tastelessness. Camp, therefore, interrogates underlying conceptions of class at stake in such assessments of artistic sophistication to begin with. Supported by Solomon’s point that there can be kitsch art and that appreciating it can be a self-aware act, Nguyễn’s *Lovecore* employs the idea of kitsch through the concept of camp in order to comment on the classism inherent to a total disregard of all art deemed kitsch.

## I. CLASS, CULTURE, AND KITSCH: THEORISTS' PERSPECTIVES

In “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” Clement Greenberg tracks the rise of kitsch by contextualizing the inaccessibility of avant-garde art to a lower class increasingly demanding an artistic culture of their own.<sup>1</sup> Avant-garde art is a fundamental component of cultural progression, and true artworks are those that are “valid solely on [their] own terms.”<sup>2</sup> Greenberg explains that kitsch arises to meet the needs of a class that is too immense and small-minded to comprehend the nuance of truly innovative cultural works but is still “hungry” for

some form of culture.<sup>3</sup> Kitsch, then, is characterized by the formulaic generation of conceptually shallow cultural works mass produced for widespread appeal. It is “popular, commercial art and literature.”<sup>4</sup> Whereas genuine art is defined by the process of its creation and values originality and depth, the purpose of kitsch is to appeal to a vast, lower-class audience assumed to lack the sophistication necessary for critical analysis and enjoyment of the avant-garde. Kitsch, according to Greenberg, necessarily comes about after a “fully matured cultural tradition,” appropriating “real” art to create products marketable to a broad, working-class consumer base.<sup>5</sup> Kitsch is not art because it is not meant to be art, at least not with pure intentions. By Greenberg’s account, when the masses of a capitalist society desire culture, one is provided for them—not for the sake of genuine engagement with a living artistic tradition but to generate profit and satiate the working class.

In contrast to Greenberg’s rejection of kitsch on the basis of its profit-motivated appeal to the desires of a less educated lower class in need of culture, Robert Solomon argues for the value of art that engages “softer” emotions. His argument focuses specifically on “sweet kitsch,” which he defines as “art (or . . . intended art) that appeals unobtrusively and unapologetically to the softer, ‘sweeter’ sentiments” like endearment and nostalgia.<sup>6</sup> By Solomon’s account, a total disregard for kitsch is itself a shallow perspective because “the real objection to kitsch and sentimentality is the rejection (or fear) of emotions.”<sup>7</sup> He too recognizes that the issue of kitsch is ultimately an issue of class, but for him, this fact does not devalue kitsch. Rather, it diminishes the taken-for-granted credibility of upper-class art criticism. He writes that “the ‘high’ class of many societies associate themselves with emotional control and reject sentimentality as an expression of inferior, ill-bred beings.”<sup>8</sup> In Solomon’s view, this prideful sense of emotional regulation is not the mark of sophistication but rather is indicative of an elitist bias not grounded in the appreciation of art at all. In his view, “much of the contempt for kitsch . . . is not the product of personal or cultivated taste” but rather a classist disdain for the people to whom inexpensive cultural works are accessible.<sup>9</sup> The label of kitsch therefore proves not to be an assessment of artworks but of people.

3 Greenberg, *Art and Culture*, 10.

4 Greenberg, *Art and Culture*, 9–10.

5 Greenberg, *Art and Culture*, 11.

6 Robert Solomon, “On Kitsch and Sentimentality,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 49, no. 1 (Winter 1991): 1, 10.2307/431644.

7 Solomon, “Kitsch and Sentimentality,” 13.

8 Solomon, “Kitsch and Sentimentality,” 9.

9 Solomon, “Kitsch and Sentimentality,” 9.

1 Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Beacon Press, 1961).

2 Greenberg, *Art and Culture*, 5–6.



## II. LOVECORE AND “CAMPING” KITSCH

Hanoi-based artist AP Nguyễn’s exhibition *Lovecore* “playfully subverts the convention and expectation of viewers” by meaningfully engaging with the concept of kitsch.<sup>10</sup> The project began due to the artist’s interest in her parents’ past engagement with kitsch art and media in Vietnamese popular culture. In an interview with *Vietnam Life*, Nguyễn explains that the only way for her to authentically represent experiences from her parents’ life, given that she herself was not present in them, was “to be really fake.”<sup>11</sup> Because Nguyễn’s exhibition looks at historical kitsch objects and thinks about their function in order to create something unique out of them, I argue that Greenberg would not consider *Lovecore* to itself be an example of kitsch. While he would disagree with Nguyễn’s belief that kitsch objects are art and comprise genuine culture, her manipulation of kitsch to send a message about it means that the exhibition as a whole falls outside the realm of kitsch by his definition. Although Greenberg notes that not all kitsch objects are “altogether worthless” and that some works of kitsch may be difficult to spot due to their strong resemblance to genuine art, the question of whether *Lovecore* is kitsch is unclear for a different reason.<sup>12</sup> The exhibition does not deceptively resemble avant-garde art despite being kitsch. Rather, it looks like kitsch—precisely because it makes use of kitsch objects and imagery—but is more likely genuine art by Greenberg’s definition because the artist is sending a thoughtful message without being motivated by profit.

*Lovecore* and Nguyễn’s perspective on kitsch as genuine culture aligns more closely with Solomon’s view that kitsch allows its audiences to enjoy “the seeing and not just the seen.”<sup>13</sup> His argument for the legitimacy of kitsch as quality art is reflected in Nguyễn’s claim that kitsch intentionally gives the name “culture” to objects “that are in bad taste.”<sup>14</sup> For Nguyễn, it is important to recognize kitsch as valid in art and significant as culture because failure to do so runs the risk of perpetuating the kind of artistic elitism that makes the creation and enjoyment of cultural works “inaccessible to so many people.”<sup>15</sup> This claim resembles Solomon’s account of cheapness as an argument

10 Xuan Tung, “Kitsch or Art? Art Installation Pays Homage to Vietnamese’s Campy Way of Living,” *Vietnam Life*, November 16, 2021, <https://vietnamlife.tuotirenews.vn/news/vietnamese-culture/20211116/kitsch-or-art-art-installation-pays-homage-to-vietnamese-s-campy-way-of-living/64168.html>.

11 Tung, “Kitsch or Art.”

12 Greenberg, *Art and Culture*, 11.

13 Solomon, “Kitsch and Sentimentality,” 10.

14 Tung, “Kitsch or Art.”

15 Tung, “Kitsch or Art.”

against kitsch, which he summarizes as the claim that “cheap” means “low class” and people ought to be “above such sentiment.”<sup>16</sup> Contrary to distaste for the cheap or sentimental, Nguyễn invites her audience to relish in a celebratory archive of memory and culture “in all [its] brilliance, vulnerability, and honesty” according to the *Lovecore* exhibition’s webpage.<sup>17</sup> Solomon’s defense of sweet kitsch lends credibility to Nguyễn’s work, demonstrating that the relatability of sentimental art through explicit, digestible, and emotional expression can be an artistic virtue.

## III. A CASE FOR KITSCH

With respect to *Lovecore*, I side with Solomon’s perspective on the merit of kitsch. Solomon defends the value of the “sweet” emotions that kitsch engenders, and this sentiment is evident in Nguyễn’s goal for her exhibition. The exploration of her parents’ life is not intended to belittle or even critique their enjoyment of kitsch but rather to send a message about the beauty and power of those cultural objects that are so often invalidated as art. Revisiting the kitschy past of her parents as young adults in Vietnam is a way for Nguyễn to express appreciation and second-hand nostalgia for the vibrant life that she herself was not present for. Underlying the *Lovecore* project is her position on kitsch as significant to art culture. She utilizes the concept of camp to address the classism of wholly rejecting the artistic merit of kitsch objects. The *Lovecore* exhibition webpage quotes scholar and critic Matei Călinescu, stating that camp “cultivates bad taste . . . as a form of superior refinement.”<sup>18</sup> Building on Solomon’s claim that regardless of its quality kitsch art is “deliberately designed” to inspire us by expressing a “moving aspect of our shared experience,”<sup>19</sup> camp is an intentional strategy by which artists can “subvert the conventions of a ‘good taste’.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, camp is the conscious manipulation of kitsch in order to talk about kitsch and art criticism as a whole. By creating an exhibition that puts kitsch on display and calls it beautiful and valuable, Nguyễn demands that her audience see the artworks as worthy of their attention and contemplation. She shows how denying the worth of kitsch ignores a genuine, diverse, and indispensable aspect of art culture.

16 Solomon, “Kitsch and Sentimentality,” 8.

17 A.P. Nguyễn, “Lovecore,” *Manzi Art Space*, 2021, <https://www.manziart.space/exhibit/lovecore>.

18 Nguyễn, “Lovecore.”

19 Solomon, “Kitsch and Sentimentality,” 12.

20 Nguyễn, “Lovecore.”



Given the nuance of the *Lovecore* exhibition, one might argue that if a work like *Lovecore* has such obvious value, why call it kitsch at all? Put differently, if kitsch is shallow by definition, and a so-called kitsch piece has true depth, it could be argued that the piece is a genuine work of art. This assertion echoes Greenberg's perspective, which would disqualify *Lovecore* from counting as a kitsch work even though it engages with kitsch conceptually. *Lovecore* is thoughtful and one-of-a-kind. As an exercise in camp, it looks at its own themes from outside itself. If kitsch is defined by mass production and profit motivation, it could be that seemingly tacky or garish artworks that are still meaningful originals are simply not kitsch. However, I reiterate that kitsch is a class issue. Despite coming to different conclusions on the validity of kitsch art, both Greenberg and Solomon recognize that dominant perspectives on art are rooted in class biases that tend to esteem the presumed sophistication of a higher-class over lower-class simplicity. The point of defending kitsch art is not to show that a work deemed kitsch is not kitsch but to prove that kitsch itself can be valuable. The assumption that kitsch cannot be self-aware or that self-awareness negates kitsch ignores the meaningful ideas present in many kitsch artworks and denigrates the intelligence of their audiences.

While it is a fair claim that mass production for the sake of profit diminishes—or eliminates—an object's standing as art, it is worth noting that any approach to this issue is undeniably linked to the way in which what is considered high-class is distinguished from what is considered low-class, or, in this case, how so-called "art" is distinguished from "non-art." Much of what is deemed "kitsch" is simply that which is deemed low-class, be it due to an object's affordability, simplicity, or widespread popularity. I revisit Greenberg's point that some kitsch—namely high-class kitsch, such as *The New Yorker*—is harder to spot because it resembles genuine art.<sup>21</sup> It seems as though it is easy to identify those objects already deemed to be "for" lower classes as kitsch, all the while failing to recognize that kitsch permeates all levels of art culture, even the supposedly untouchable upper class. Further to Solomon's claim that "the real objection to kitsch and sentimentality is the rejection . . . of emotions," I argue that a total rejection of kitsch cannot help but disregard the possibility of genuine artistic engagement from a lower class for whom kitsch is often the most accessible alternative to the high-class art culture that excludes them.<sup>22</sup> This insistence on recognizing the merit of kitsch art because the issue is rooted in condescending conceptions of class is what Nguyễn means when she claims that "kitsch is a small kind of revolution."<sup>23</sup>

21 Greenberg, *Art and Culture*, 11.

22 Solomon, "Kitsch and Sentimentality," 13.

23 Tung, "Kitsch or Art."

## IV. CONCLUSION

Nguyễn's "yearning to learn about the world around her, and to question her own position in that world" forms the basis for the *Lovecore* exhibition.<sup>24</sup> At its core, the project insists that engaging with kitsch as both an artist and a spectator is a worthwhile practice. *Lovecore's* investigation into the young adulthood of Nguyễn's parents makes a case for the value of kitsch and in doing so exposes the classism inherent to the belief that kitsch art by-nature lacks meaning and sophistication. Nguyễn's work counters Greenberg's rejection of kitsch and transcends even Solomon's more empathetic view in its employment of camp. Through the concept of camp, which at its most basic level demands only self-awareness and a critical approach to discourses of taste, Nguyễn is able to powerfully experiment with kitsch to assert its depth. *Lovecore* therefore offers a persuasive critique of a culture which denies that widely accessible, inexpensive artworks can be worthwhile for artists and audiences. Nguyễn's own discussion of *Lovecore* ultimately asserts the unforgettability of class issues in art criticism. The exhibition invites its audience to embrace art that is unconstrained by mandatory adherence to regulatory notions of sophistication and, most importantly, to approach assessments of taste with skepticism. Refusing to relegate every object deemed kitsch to insignificance would inevitably widen the scope of what is available to audiences as art, and—as even opposing contributors to discourses around kitsch would seem to agree—we all need art.

24 Nguyễn, "Lovecore."





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