

***The Work of Art in the Age of Digital
Reproduction and Mediated Reality.
Ethics and Aesthetics
in the dream and cream world
of every-extending publicity***

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Shift in publicities

My focus is on the public, published, reproduced sides of reality – existing in the contemporary world is something more than immediate presence, it very often also means touching what is already mediated. Reality, as public and social, consists not only of persons, actions and social structures; it is also made up of images and words, reflections and reproductions. I shall call these reproduced parts of reality-mediated *realities*.



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Art and science are traditional forms of reflecting and interpreting reality, but in today's society there are also many forms of mediated reality that did not exist just a short while ago.

Public realms of words and images have undergone enormous change, massive growth, and a kind of virtual urbanization. In spite of silent villages, consisting of prayer books, textual newspapers and religious imagery, we have today real *publiCITIES*: crowded centres and favelas consisting of advertisements, reality shows, magazines, lifestyle books, music videos, blogs and so on. This development has been made possible by various technical discoveries, inventions from photography and cinema to computers and digital reproduction.

In the 19th century advertising, marketing, entertainment, celebrity culture and similar fields were either non-existent or minimal if we compare their coverage today.¹ These areas are generally based on visual enjoyment, so aesthetics (with its visual orientation criticized in anti-ocularcentric² philosophy) could have dealt with them. Nonetheless these areas are still very seldom treated by aesthetics.³

In the public sphere – in reproduction technologies and the productions they enable – we see shifts, changes, in different fields:



¹ In the timeline of celebrity culture in Cashmore (2006, pp. 270–279), there was little activity before the 20th century. In the 19th century the celebrities mentioned are still figures like Charles Dickens or Oscar Wilde, persons with a life's work.

² Martin Jay (1993) and David Michael Levin (1993) have criticized that Western thinking and aesthetics has been dominated by a privileging of vision over the other senses. Jay (1993) reads French philosophers such as Georges Bataille, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Emmanuel Levinas, Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, Guy Debord, Jacques Lacan, Luce Irigaray, Roland Barthes, Christian Metz, François Lyotard and Jacques Derrida as critics of ocularcentrism.

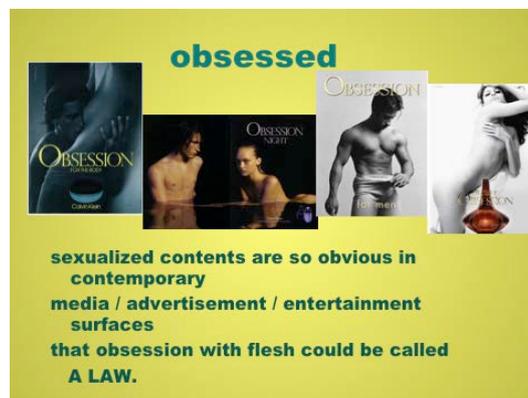
³ Despite the existence of applied aesthetics or contemporary pragmatism. Richard Shusterman's apology for popular arts is well known (Shusterman, 1992, Shusterman, 2000), but with advertisements or internet porn we move still further from today's acceptable popular arts, like rap or comic strips, and especially into more socially charged areas, whose processing needs an interdisciplinary approach, which joins cultural and media studies and sociology with aesthetics.

There's a shift not only from immediate to mediated realities, but also from the textual to the visual, from local to global, from mechanical to digital reproduction, from information to entertainment, from state-controlled to market-based structures, from the religious to the profane, from intimacy to publicity and from innocent to sexualized/pornificated media surfaces.

These histories of change can be represented by a simple series of advertising pictures.



Advertisements were at first textual, seeking to give information. Until the 1960s one can see a kind of chastity and innocence for contemporary viewers in the advertisement images. In the present situation, on the other hand, most ads are visual, and constructing brands means building mental images of happiness, which generally means simply erotic attraction.



Ads, like entertainment, must be sexy, because it helps producers to sell products. The principles of selling and competing form the ethics of contemporary consumer society. The market economy has made an enormous advance from the sexual liberation of the 1960s: advertising would lack means without sexual connotations. Erotic contents are so obvious in contemporary media, advertisement and entertainment that they could be called a norm, a law.

To describe erotic connotations as a norm, I have a still of a commercial video that has been banned in the United Kingdom.



The reason why this ad has been banned is here the most interesting. It was not for erotic reasons, although there is an actress who takes ecstatic, orgiastic positions. The brand is well known and appreciated: YSL's perfume *Belle d'Opium*.

The Advertising Standards Authority declared "the woman's actions simulated drug use". That was hardly noticeable in this erotically explicit ad, but sufficient. Simulated or real erotic scenes could not serve as a reason for banning, because they confirm the standard.

However, the standards are different in art and in advertisements. If this picture were included in a market-critical work, an issue we will examine later, it would have been banned for 25 years – and for another reason.

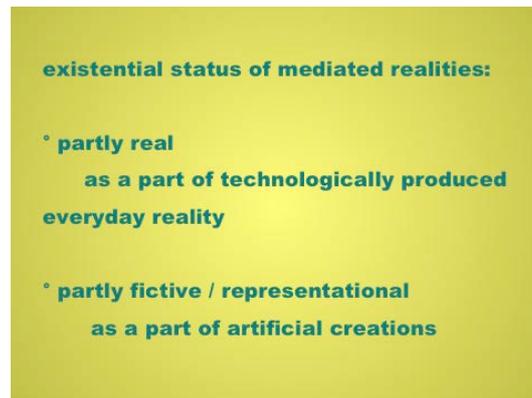
Mediated realities and aesthetic economy

Various fields of contemporary life are linked to the virtual and digital realms. We use e-mail and social media, search for information, read internet magazines, buy flights and reserve hotels on the internet, order books, check translations, listen to music, read blogs, and so forth.



In the digital age our relation to reality has become more and more mediated. I do not, however, mean to speak of mediated realities as a danger. Art is not a

danger merely because it is generally fictive or representative, not direct action. Mediatedness is just a fact, and should be just a starting point for aesthetics to grow to reach new realms of reality: fields that are as real as reality, but also virtual, fictive, representative as art. If aesthetic research deals with mediated realities, it will also notice that the borders between the aesthetics of art and the aesthetics of the real world are blurry.



Mediated realms are part of the *aesthetic economy*. The contemporary Western economy has largely been turned aesthetic. From habitation to traffic, from food to clothes, from media to entertainment, consumers are seduced by aesthetic refinement. The aesthetic economy seeks to transform customers' lives into a never-ending flow of enchantment and pleasure. We can refer to all productions that have been designed to sell through sensual pleasure with the term *aesthetic economy*.⁴



In numerous fields in contemporary society the aesthetic and the economic are intertwined. Contemporary society shows in every detail that the era of the

⁴ Economics and aesthetics have generally been kept apart in the history of aesthetics. For recent efforts to treat aesthetic and economic theories together see Mossetto, 1993 and Gagnier, 2000. Entwistle, 2009, uses the concept of aesthetic economy in a case study focusing on fashion.

aesthetic field being separated from the practical is over, at least if aesthetics wants to remain a relevant science and say something about contemporary reality.

The aesthetic economy also has an impact on mass media.⁵ In the digital age media has undergone a development of both visualization and simplification; news are sold as scandalized visual products. Information delivery is under massive aesthetization, under market terms.

Even before the digital age, there has been talk of a process of *tabloidization*. This term signifies that communication has become more condensed and sensationalized, that there is a shift to a more entertainment-oriented content, and a shift from verbal to visual priorities. Tabloidization has been seen as a threat to rational debate: the stress upon the sensational and emotive undermines the place of reason.⁶ In the digital realm this process only goes further.

The human being in the digital age: consuming advertisements

One material example of tabloidization, scandalization, and tendencies towards simplification and visualisation of media can be seen in the contemporary coverage of celebrity culture. "Celebrities are performative texts: they act out." (Marshall 2006, 11)

In celebrity culture the worlds of media and advertising intermix. A celebrity is someone who has become a picture in repetition, an advertisement in continual reproduction. From a basic-style celebrity we do not even remember why he or she is famous. What is important is that images are delivered widely. "Each time we are photographed, it could be argued, we *reproduce*." (Giles 2006, p. 482.)

One might claim that cultural studies can deal with celebrities, but aesthetics is about beauty. Let us then talk about what is beautiful.

While in a plane last summer travelling to the 18th International Congress of *Aesthetics* in Beijing, I happened to hear a true story from the Chinese countryside. There was a family who wanted to give their daughter the most beautiful name, a name in English. The baby was honoured with the name *Pornstar*.

The story summarizes in one word the perceived message of Western media. The aim of human beings today is to become famous and sexy, and the training to

⁵ The scene of medias, publicities, must always be spoken of in the extreme plural, for there is not a single mass media, but an "amorphous plurality"; Siegert, 2003, p. 38.

⁶ Critics of the phenomenon see that "the process of tabloidization is usually considered to sacrifice information for entertainment, accuracy for sensation and to employ tactics of representation which entrap and exploit its subjects", but "it would have to be admitted that many of the concerns expressed about the influence of tabloidization are grounded in a conventional and longstanding hostility to popular culture itself" (Turner, 2006, pp. 491-492).

become a sexy star can begin already when one is a baby. Porn stars are the existential idols of the digital age.



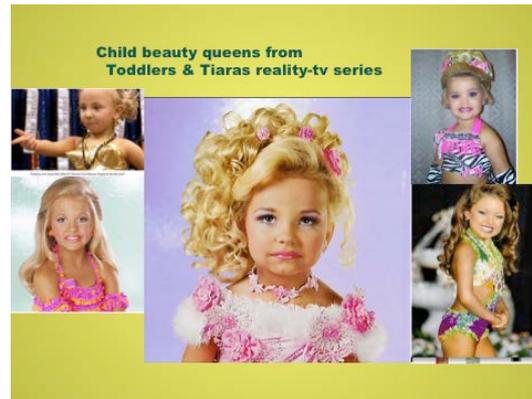
These are pictures to show how a porn star's education can begin already as a baby. Baby Bratz dolls wear long hair with strings and feeding bottles.



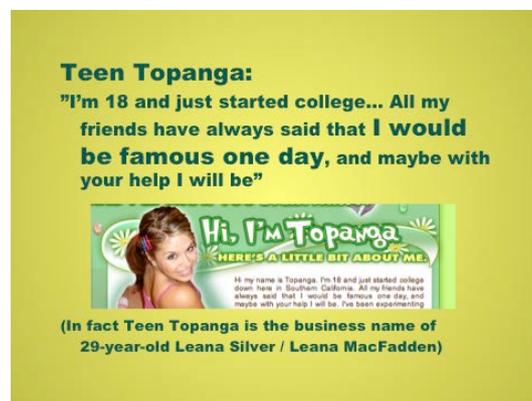
Black leather or pink fur coats with bikinis make hot babes.



Fashion, cosmetics and poses idealize a pornographic, sexy style.



The next step for a 3- or 4-year old, at least in America, is to take part in a child beauty queen reality television program. And the next natural move would be to start a career as a teen porn star.



Internet porn stars are the prototype of celebrity, reproduction and self-commodification. The celebrity's profession means trying to maximize visibility, deliver images. The logic is the same as anywhere else in the consumer society: advertisements are distributed as widely as possible in order to get enough paying clients.

Normally advertisement images advertise the product and nobody consumes them. In Internet porn the situation has changed. Images in the free-access pages are actually advertisements that seek to lure visitors to pay sites. But because there are millions of free images in circulation, most consumers just use them, without even going on to the products advertised.

For the first time in history the advertisement image in itself has become the object of consumption and enjoyment. A large clientèle has begun to consume ads on a daily basis.

**historical moment:
advertisement pictures
have become
consumed objects
themselves
(in net porn)**

Consumer culture is in this gesture – human being as a consumer of advertisements – sucked inside flesh, made part of a personal and intimate being.

Art in the digital age: art of success and seduction

Everybody remembers from Walter Benjamin at least one thing: his article *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (2008 (1936)) is one of the most canonical articles of art. It is philosophical already in its title, which speaks about technologies, the meaning of reproduction techniques, for interpreting the status of art.

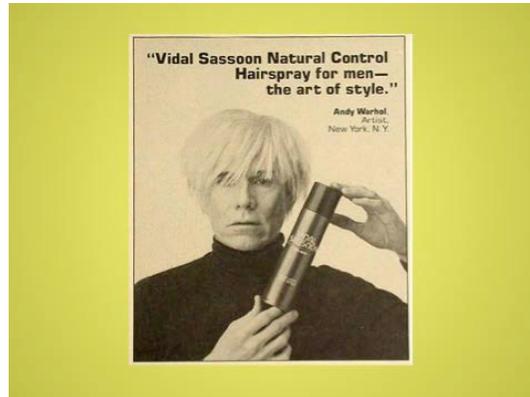
When environmental and applied aesthetics have led aesthetics to study the real world, we could read from Benjamin another extension for aesthetics as well. We should not just deal with art or reality, but mediated, reproduced realities as well, and also see how technological conditions shape the concept of art.

Unfortunately, I have no time here to concentrate on digital technologies in producing art, although I am also a visual artist, who has focused precisely on digital imagery. Here I am more interested in the effects of how the digital age has formed social reality and what kind of place the contemporary situation gives to art.

Benjamin wrote about the impact that reproduction technologies have had on the definition of art. In the corresponding ways we must ask if the structure of contemporary reality – digital reproduction as its reproduction technology, and mediated and virtual realities as its living world – produces changes in the ways that art and reality are understood. Benjamin argued that art loses its aura, but he also hinted towards a new politics of art. What could be the politics of art in the age of digital reproduction? Is there any place for controversial art in our dreamy universe of seduction and fulfilment?

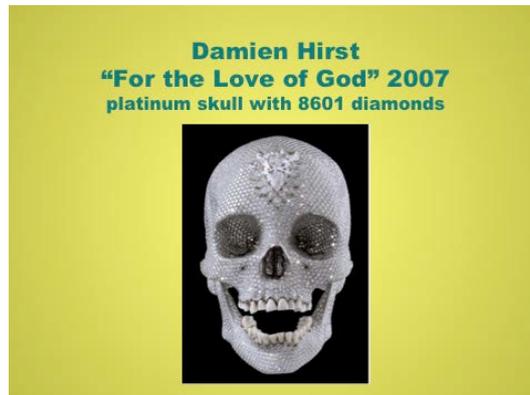
The concept of contemporary art is considered to have begun from the 1960s. One important starting point is seen in Andy Warhol's replicas of celebrities and

ads, as the whole range of Arthur C. Danto's books relate.⁷ Here, in Warhol, the importance of publicity and commercialism has been built into the concept of contemporary art.

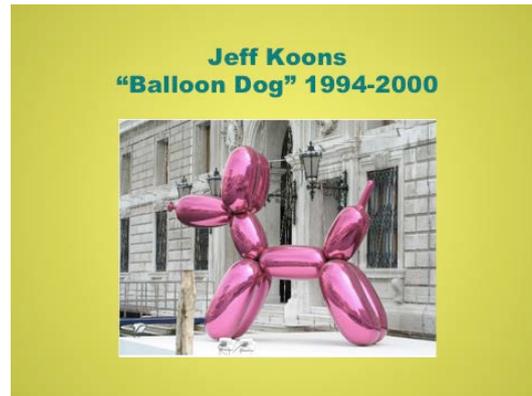


Andy Warhol advertising hairspray

There is a direct line from Warhol to Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst: art that is inventive, ironic, and witty with a pop attitude, market-minded, monumentalistic, as shiny and cool as the best design. Warhol, Koons and Hirst have created the artist as CEO, with his or her own production team, factory and workers, equipment of financial and media consults.



⁷ Danto writes about the revelatory moment in front of the *Brillo Boxes* in many books, e.g. (Danto 1986, pp. ix–x, pp. 171–172; Danto 1987, p. 208, p. 216; Danto 1994, pp. 6–7, p. 12, p. 384)



Much lesser known art also follows this line of ironical, conventional and true-to-market art. Art retraces the easy shocks and seductions of advertising and luxury objects, with spicy, nasty and quasi-rebellious details (like skulls) borrowed from urban style boutiques for teenagers.



In this stylish conventionality where art is one part of the style business, its philosophy owes much to two unphilosophical items: celebrities and luxury objects. An uncritical part of the art world cannot stop singing the praises of this glorious business. From the celebrity cult such art borrows the importance of the largest possible publicity, and from luxury objects the largest possible price and creating surplus value by the brand.

Is there any possibility of resistance, of questioning, in these altars of seduction, the ironical pop of ludo-capitalism?⁸

⁸ The concept of “Ludo-capitalism” is from de Mul (2010).

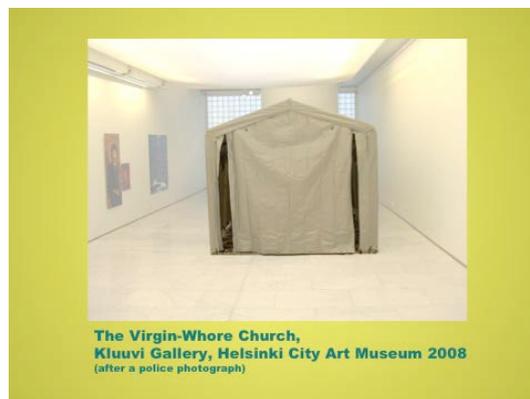
“Art resists political, cultural, aesthetical habits. Art resists morality and topicality. Art - because it is art - is resistance”

Thomas Hirschorn

The contemporary artist **Thomas Hirschorn** understands art as resistance in his 2011 Venice Biennale work.⁹ It has been said of **Michel Houellebecq** that he “tackles the dark side of the late-20th century: the descent of the west into an orgy of consumerism.”¹⁰

What are possibilities of critical, resistant art in the orgy of consumerism? Perhaps we should meet this question from the other end: if the orgies of the market establish the laws of contemporary society, is the only place for critical art as a crime? Let us examine one case where art criticizing the dream world of the market was seen as a crime.

A case from Finland



The artwork (Ulla Karttunen, *the Virgin-Whore Church*, in the exhibition *Ecstatic Women: Holy Virgins of the Church and the Porn*, 2008 Kluuvi Gallery, Helsinki City Art Museum) criticized the same jubilated fields that I have introduced earlier in this paper.¹¹ It was a work of *reality art*, where one part consisted of direct prints from the Internet in the floor of the carriage-chapel.

⁹ Hirschorn (2011).

¹⁰ 'Michel Houellebecq Biography' (2008).

¹¹ See e.g. Heikkilä & Purhonen 2008, Hoikka & Rautiainen 2009, Jyränki & Kalha 2009, Karttunen 2009, 2010 & 2011, Schanz 2008, Sevänen 2010, Vänskä 2011.



Reality art comes close to various genres of contemporary art, such as socially engaged art or activist art. In *reality art*, commenting on real-world phenomena, acting, is more important than the object.



This artwork offered commentary on public mediated reality, the virtual flesh market in Internet: teen porn galleries. It is interesting that on the Internet there is a gallery structure more popular, global and available than art has ever had.

Is it possible to criticize Internet galleries in an art gallery? Not in Finland. The work sent the artist to court, which ruled that artists are not allowed to make critical comments of society as researchers or journalists are.¹² Artists must accept markets as they are.

Teen Topanga, whose picture was presented in the previous chapter and who said she wanted to become famous, was one of the stars included in the material.

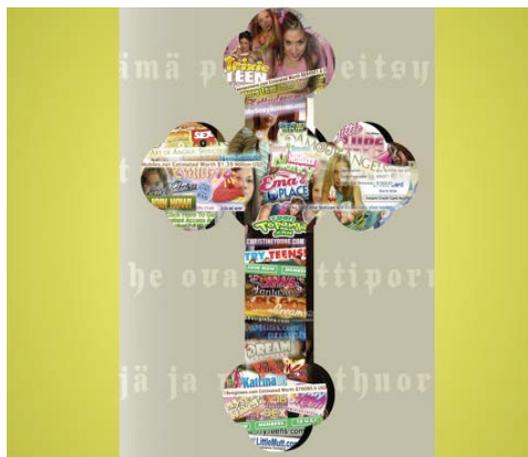
¹² The Judgment of the Helsinki City Court, 22 May 2008, p. 20.

The number of Google hits (read June 30, 2011) **show that the lifelong career of most well-known contemporary artists can hardly compete with the fame of teen pornstars**

"marina abramović"	944 000
"tracey emin"	1 190 000
"sophie calle"	774 000
"teen topanga"	2 050 000

As we see from the statistics, teen porn stars can be much more famous than the most important internationally known contemporary artists, who have a long career behind them. Teen Topanga advertises herself as "just 18", because teen porn stars remain forever at their 18th birthday.

A Google search also returns in 0.16 seconds 13,800¹³ pictures of Teen Topanga. In spite of this immense publicity, cultural criticism of the phenomenon is forbidden.



A collection of the teen porn brands piled on the floor of the Virgin-Whore Church

This case of Virgin-Whore Church might be quite extraordinary in the history of censorship. As far as can be determined from case studies from art trials and censorship cases, this is the first time when justice has judged market reality legal but commentary or criticism of this market in art illegal.¹⁴ Reality is fine, but criticism of reality is a crime.

¹³ Google search 30 June 2011.

¹⁴ For art trials, see McClean 2007; for art censorship in America, see Bolton 1992, Dubin 1992, Dubin 1999, Heins 1993, Heins 2001, Byrd 2006.

**The case of the Virgin-Whore
Church shows:**

**Reality as
public market is accepted
but
criticism of same reality
a crime.**

Ethics and aesthetics in the age of consumerism

When the ethos of the market is creamy and dreamy, it demands that art be made in the same spell. Porn can of course be used in art, but in a glorifying, sweet way – one cannot take reality as it is. Warhol-like beautifications of teen porn stars would surely be okay, and Koons already has his *heavenly* porn works.

Ethics and aesthetics in the age of consumerism are constructed on pleasure, on a pornified sweetness. That is why reality art, when it is too real, is a crime.

Art becomes crime, if it does not glorify the market.¹⁵ The task of art in the age of digital reproduction and mediated realities remains offering heaps of whipped cream, in order to conceal reality.



This last picture is from a performance where I gave people the possibility to stone me to death (if the stoning would have been just after the case and the media uproar it provoked, I would not be here to talk about it, but it occurred one and half years later). In an advanced market society like Finland there is not much place for art as resistance.

¹⁵ As Benjamin (1996 (1921), p. 289) writes in his "Capitalism as Religion", "Capitalism is entirely without precedent, in that it is a religion which offers not the reform of existence but its complete destruction."

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