

## The Currency of Kitsch

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Since the 1970s, artists, particularly in the west—and in the US, this means “The West,” our one-time frontier lands and the setting of our most romantic creation myths—have built or intervened in the landscape to great effect: Michael Heizer, Walter De Maria, Robert Smithson are only some of the most well-known. Their works—*Double Negative*, *Lightning Field*, *Spiral Jetty*—have taken on the status of cherished pilgrimage sites for the global cosmopolitans that tour that semi-autonomous social and culture industry we call the “art world.” Escapist sentiments underwrote many of these projects, as urban settings began to corrode, both due to economic negligence (inflation, labor unrest, the oil embargo) and a kind of conservative intellectual decadence that was desperately holding on to the achievements of an earlier age. But so did photography, or “media” more generally, throw some chips in the game, as the distances traveled came to signify the geographic linkages and spatial networks in and by which images and—or rather “as”—information would be exchanged. Such is the ultimate lesson of works such as Smithson’s earlier *Non-Sites*, whose materials are shot through with information. This is ontology (what things are) and epistemology (how we know them) stirred and poured into the spaces of a radically reduced aesthetic, one which gave way onto an inexorably expanded field of art.

That photography, or imaging, was instrumental to the reception and enduring import of these works was lost on no one. And as the calculus of images and mediation has grown, romantic attachments to the pilgrimage act have increased as well. Having “gone there” gets the last word, just as today, in the context of performance and what we have dubbed participatory work, “being there” is held as essential to even apprehending what is going on, let alone understanding it, because in the end it is one’s personal experience that licenses one’s claim to speak about, let alone for, the work, whatever we take this to be.

Now there are two things I feel are worth pointing out here, and the first has to do with the correlation between on the one hand the activities of the “three Ps” of contemporary art, pilgrimage, performance and participation; and on the other the promotion of individual, personal experience as the final arbiter or authority of aesthetic meaning. If there is something vaguely Evangelical in flavor about this equation, then it is not to suggest that what we are witnessing is the seepage of religious thought into our well-defended secular precincts but rather that the current and currency of a blanket faith in “personal experience”—from the rising importance of the opinion poll to one’s “personal relationship” with art, Jesus, or whatever—finds a kind of symptomatic corollary in people’s growing appetite for the sense of reality that comes with, say, the performance form or through the supposed sanctity of the pilgrimage.

The second thing to point out is perhaps best addressed as a question, and that would be: “symptomatic” of what? To this I want to answer “abstraction,” or at least the kind of abstraction that we have been witnessing at the economic level, whose financial failings and crises have revealed hitherto undreamt of fabrications and fabrications, such that the very notion of finding something “concrete” underneath the folds of all of this “fictitious capital” becomes downright laughable. Nevertheless, it is just this fugitive sensibility (“capital flight”?) which would seem to drive the urge to confront reality in all of its unmediated splendor, even when that reality itself seems somehow lacking and so in need of, say, enhancement.

Exemplary in this instance would be the total mediation that accompanied something like Marina Abramovic’s “The Artist is Present” at the Museum of Modern Art, for which webcams transmitted every moment of the artist sitting in her chair across from lines of willing and waiting “participants” hoping for their little dose of one-on-one reality. Yet one doesn’t need recourse to the circuits of information technology to find examples of this kind of reality enhancement in other places and at prior moments. Looking at Juanli Carrion’s *Kei-Seki* project reminds us that during the period when American artists were undertaking their westward expansion, the great pyramids at Giza (in 1960) and the Temple of Karnak (in 1972)

were being “brought to life” by new sound and light shows, an aesthetic correlate to then-President Nasser’s social and economic modernization programs. What once showed up on the glass plates wielded by nineteenth-century photographers such as Antonio Beato was now both promoted as a prideful symbol of Egypt’s national heritage and its movement onto the modern political stage. It did not hurt that the tourism industry began its takeoff during the same decade.

We cannot but recognize such aesthetic enhancements echoing at the core of Carrion’s project, just as we cannot now fail to see the Egyptian sound and light shows for what they are, and that is kitsch. What takes place at Giza today is a kind of cultural cheapening which cashiers the historical reality of the monuments of a once-great civilization and, later, a proud nation, in the interest of a bland tourist spectacle in which, to borrow a well-worn phrase, “all that is solid melts into air,” here in the solvent of bright lights, cloying music and faux-imperious voiceovers.

The Marxian alignment is not accidental, insofar as the “monuments” that Carrion has adapted to his own aesthetic ends are the remnants of an aborted infrastructural project in the Spanish countryside about 100 kilometers from Valencia. The concrete forms alone are worthy of some of Todao Ando’s better stylings or even Michael Heizer’s ongoing desert folly, *City* (1970 – Present). That the roadway which these pylons were meant to carry was actually built some 500 meters away can only add to our understanding of these forms as products of the kind of capital excess that accompanied the financial surpluses and speculations of the past decade. Spain’s own role in the sovereign debt crisis that enveloped the Eurozone in the first half of 2010 should stand as a reminder of the depths to which the abstractions of financialization can reach: when a country gets snared in the game of economic acronymization—quite rightly, the Spanish took umbrage at their having provided the plural for the “PIGS” (Portugal, Ireland, Greece, Spain) economies at which the markets took aim—then there cannot be much argument that what we have to do with here is an achieved autonomy—albeit of global finance—about which good modernists could only ever dream.

Yet the enjoyment one gets from considering Carrion’s abandoned infrastructure no doubt derives, at least in some part, from the realization that one cannot really “cheapen” that which doesn’t have any kind of value in the first place. The lighting effects here raise the very possibility of aesthetic value at the same moment that they would undermine it, a kind of all-at-once “pump-and-dump” scheme on the market for aesthetic equities. In the hands of Bernd and Hilla Becher, for example, such images would function in some anomic documentary capacity, providing a glimpse of the various morphologies of global industry and infrastructure. Carrion seems to understand that this is not enough, that the photograph’s power to act upon such forms on its own has been seriously diminished in an age of imaging when manipulations and effects come first and the representative evidence of concrete reality comes trailing behind. What underwrites that reality in this case, in a reversal of Roland Barthes’ famous analysis of the image’s “rhetoric,” are “special effects,” though here these effects (lighting, smoke) are applied directly to the environment to be imaged, or to the site *as* image, to the “scene”—this is what *kei* means in Japanese—that the images then double by producing further effects.

This scenic doubling is taken a step further with the installation that constitutes the “Third Chapter” of Carrion’s project: there, cast-concrete agave plants, lit from below in the manner of the *Sankeishi-seki* images, appear scattered in a field of smoke, while a video plays above. That video, also titled *Kei-Seki* (another doubling), shows a manmade arroyo lined with blue lights and decked-out with a disco ball. The only movement in the image belongs to the ball’s faceted reflections, which stream at changing speeds (an effect of the image, not the scene) across the arroyo’s retaining wall. In all of this it would be tempting to say that Carrion’s project simply has to do with smoke and mirrors, which it certainly does, but here again the effects are meant to reveal more than they disguise.

And the cast-concrete agaves offer one significant revelation among many, because they ask: How does one cheapen nature? How does nature become kitsch? One might argue that industrialization has treated nature cheaply, but this is not the same thing. The expansion of global industry into every geographical pocket of the globe ensures that “nature” will in fact become more “rare,” more “precious,” and so more expensive with time. It becomes kitsch, on the other hand, when we fabricate it, when we “cast” it as—and in—something which it is not, and then celebrate it, often by lighting it up. Kitsch cuts both ways here too: Mount Rushmore no less than plastic pink flamingos.

Given the preceding we must recall that Carrion’s *Kei-Seki* project finds its referential raw material in the Japanese practice of *suiseki*, where stones are collected and appreciated—“worshipped” is too strong a word, but it offers the direction in which the sensibility leans—for how much they look like some imagined landscape or other natural setting in miniature. The logic here is not really even metonymical, insofar as the stone is not taken to be “part” of the greater landscape, to count for it in some representative way. Instead the stone stimulates some falsified recall and proffers a fantasized landscape—ordered, serene, even blissful—of the mind. This is what Milan Kundera, in his stinging diagnoses of kitsch, calls our “categorical agreement with being,” the escapist representations either handed down (in totalitarian states) or sold (in capitalist ones) in order to divert attention from the unacceptable, but no less structural, excesses of any empire of signs. “Kitsch is a folding screen,” Kundera writes, “set up to curtain off death.”

Kitsch offers a kind of tenuous delusion, which is why it found such fertile ground in the former eastern bloc countries and held some urgency for writers like Kundera whose characters sought to sidestep its pernicious effects. The political landscape has changed in the intervening years however, which is not to suggest that kitsch is any less prevalent today (indeed, certain critics, such as Hal Foster, have identified its mechanism’s at work in the seemingly innocuous proliferation of yellow ribbons and nationalist anthems during the years of “Bush Kitsch” in the US between 2003 and 2008). But the landscape with which we have to tend at present is more expansive; it is the geography of capital that has been revealed in the crises that followed on the implosion of the US housing market. Now, a full four years later, the stalled real estate and infrastructural projects in every major urban development center, from Panama City to Abu Dhabi to Chonqing, promise more contingent “monuments” on the order of Carrion’s *Kei-Seki*—monuments whose momentary status as such can still be celebrated as announcing, even requiring, the necessity of continued capital investment.

Carrion’s *Kei-Seki* dramatizes this implicit announcement, and places it in the context of an aesthetic sentiment—yes, kitsch—that has long been in the business of covering up and diverting out attention from the unseemly excesses of whatever political economy rules the day. The question remains whether we’re attentive enough to want to do anything about it.