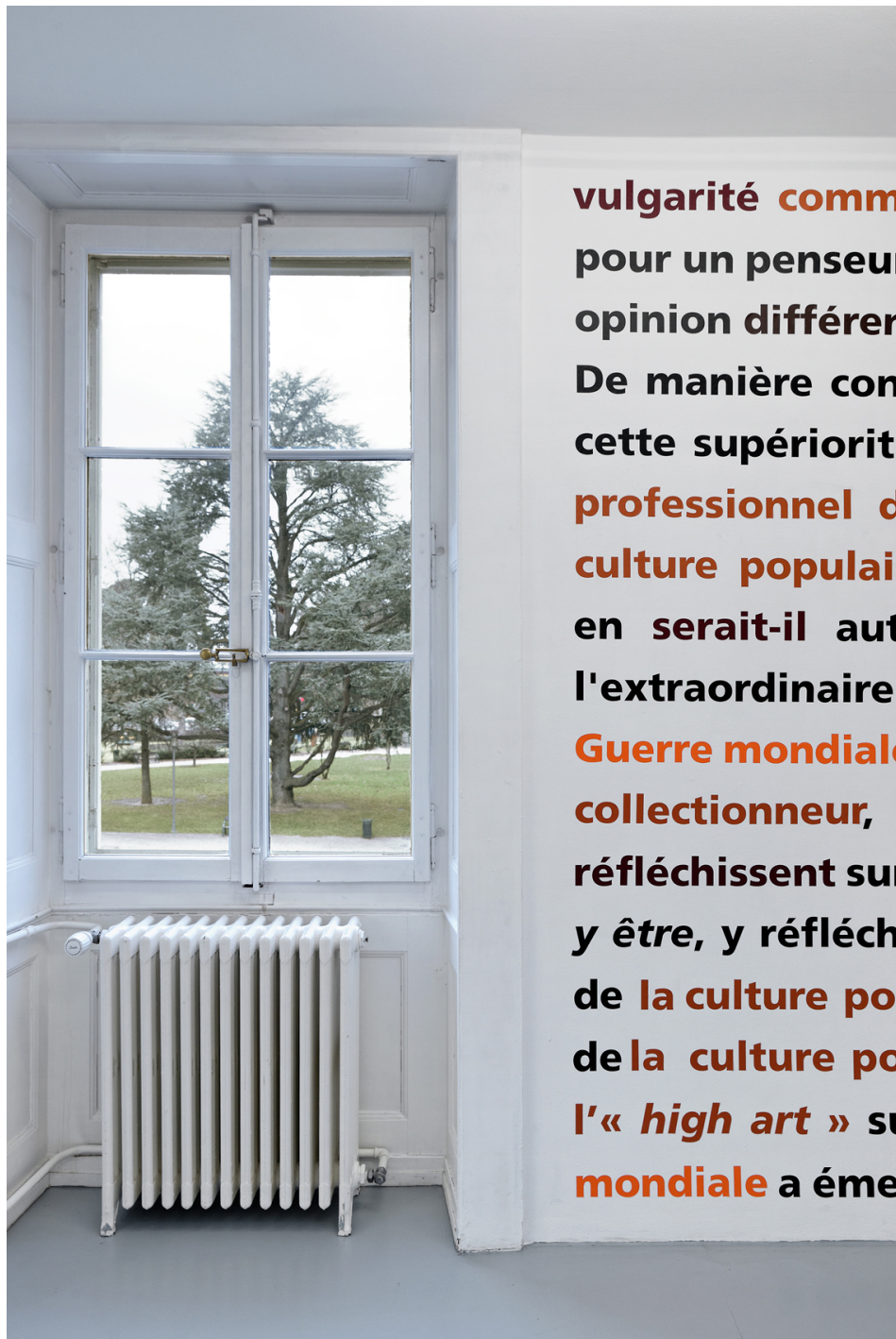


Classism: An Introduction



Le Classisme, installation view, Villa Du Parc, Annemasse, France, 2015

by Joe Scanlan

They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented.

—Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

Art has a long tradition of Classism. It will become clear to the reader (and clearer still throughout the pages that follow) that by Classism I mean several things, all of them, in my opinion, interdependent. The most readily accepted designation for Classism is an academic one, and indeed the label still serves in a number of academic institutions. Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches popular culture—and this applies whether the person is a cultural critic, sociologist, historian, or art historian—either in its specific or its general aspects, is a classist and what he or she does is Classism. Compared with American Studies or area studies, it is true that the term Classism is distasteful to specialists today, both because it is too vague and general and because it connotes the high-handed executive attitude of nineteenth and early-twentieth-century European colonialism. Nevertheless, books are written and congresses held with “pop culture” as their main focus, with the cultural critic in his new or old guise as their main authority. The point is that even if it does not survive as it once did, Classism lives on academically through its doctrines and theses about the political economy of culture.

Related to this academic tradition, whose fortunes, transmigrations, specializations and transmissions are in part the subject of this essay, is a more general meaning for Classism. Classism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between “popular culture” and (most of the time) “fine art.” Thus, a very large mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and museum curators, have accepted the basic distinction between pop culture and art as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions and political accounts concerning pop culture, its people, customs, “mind,” destiny, and so on. Classism can accommodate Aeschylus, say, and Victor Hugo, Dante, and Karl Marx. A little later in this article I shall deal with the methodological problems one encounters in so broadly construed a “field” as this.

The interchange between the academic and the more or less imaginative meanings of Classism is a constant one, and since the late nineteenth century there has been a considerable, quite disciplined—perhaps even regulated—traffic between the two. Here I come to the third meaning of Classism, which is something more historically and materially defined than either of the other two. Taking the late nineteenth century as a very roughly defined starting point, Classism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with pop culture—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Classism as a sophisticated style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over pop culture. I have found it useful here to employ Michel Foucault's notion of a discourse, as described by him in *The Archaeology of Knowledge and Discipline and Punish*, to identify Classism. My contention is that without examining Classism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which the art world is able to manage—and even produce—pop culture politically, sociologically, aesthetically, ideologically, critically and imaginatively throughout the twentieth century and even today. Moreover, so authoritative a position does Classism have that I believe no one writing, thinking, or acting on pop culture could do so without taking account of the limitations on thought and action imposed by Classism. In brief, because of Classism, pop culture was not (and is not) a free subject of thought or action. This is not to say that Classism unilaterally determines what can be said about popular culture, but that it is the whole network of interests inevitably brought to bear on (and therefore always involved in) any occasion when that peculiar entity "popular culture" is in question. How this happens is what this article tries to demonstrate. It also tries to show that art gains in strength and identity by setting itself off against pop culture as a sort of surrogate and even underground self.

In the most benign sense, Classism is a way for art to come to terms with popular culture and the special place it holds in daily life. Indigenous or "pop" culture is not only adjacent to art; it is also the place of art's greatest and richest and oldest traditions, the source of its imagery and its languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring specters of the Other. Pop culture has helped to define art (and its institutions) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience. Yet none of pop culture is merely imaginative. Pop culture is an integral part of visual art's material organization and context. In America, the understanding of pop culture

is considerably more complicated than in Europe—although the influence of China, India and global consumerism is beginning to create a sobering, more realistic awareness of the cultural power of consumers. In response, the vastly expanded political and economic role of art museums and art fairs makes great claims on our understanding of exactly where art originates and how its cultural value is determined. This expanded role—and the assumed usurpation and dominance that is inherent to it—is what I call Classism. As a mode of discourse, Classism expresses and represents the lower classes culturally and even ideologically through supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even bureaucracies and styles.

Historically and culturally there is a quantitative as well as a qualitative difference between the art world's involvement with popular culture and—until the ascendancy of the Independent Group and Pop Art after World War II—the involvement of every other middle-class consumer. To speak of Classism therefore is to speak mainly, although not exclusively, of a detached, ruling class cultural enterprise, a project whose dimensions take in such disparate realms as the imagination itself, the whole of America and Madison Avenue, cinema and Hollywood, consumer products, fashion and a long tradition of taste makers, a formidable scholarly corpus, innumerable pop culture “experts” and “hands,” a pop culture professorate, a complex array of pop culture ideas (glamour, gender, camp, sensuality, “dumbness”), many popular subcultures, philosophies and wisdoms domesticated for local use—the list can be extended more or less indefinitely. My point is that Classism derives from a particular closeness experienced between the “detached” class and popular culture, which until the early twentieth century was an extremely local affair, its broad definition being largely limited to common knowledge of the Bible, Greek mythology and archetypal notions of Nature. Out of that closeness, whose dynamic is enormously productive even if it always demonstrates the comparatively greater strength and performance of the ruling class, comes the large body of texts and strategies I call Classism.

It should be said at once that even with the generous number of books, artworks, authors and artists that I have examined, there is a much larger number that I have had to leave out. My argument, however, depends neither upon an exhaustive catalogue of texts dealing with pop culture nor upon a clearly delimited set of artworks, authors and ideas that together make up the canon of Classism. I have depended instead upon a different methodological alternative—whose backbone in a

sense is the set of historical generalizations I have so far been making—and it is these I want now to discuss in more detail.

II

Pop culture, or even indigenous culture, is not an inert fact of nature. It is not merely there, just as art is not just there either. We must take seriously Vico's great observation that men make their own history, that what they can know is what they have made, and extend it to economics: as both economic and cultural entities—to say nothing of historical entities—such communities, locales and economic values as popular culture and fine art are manmade. Therefore, as much as art itself, pop culture is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the ruling class. The two economic entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other.

Having said that, one must go on to state a number of reasonable qualifications. In the first place, it would be wrong to conclude that pop culture was essentially an idea, or a creation with no corresponding reality. When Hal Foster said in his exhibition *Damaged Goods* that appropriation strategy was a career, he meant that to be interested in commodity display was something bright young artists would find to be an all-consuming passion; he should not be interpreted as saying it was only a career. There were—and are—nations and cultures whose daily lives are organized around sites of commerce, be they Vancouver, the Niger River, or suburban shopping malls. Their lives, histories, and customs have a brute reality obviously greater than anything that could be said about them in the world of art. About that fact this study of Classism has very little to contribute, except to acknowledge it tacitly. But the phenomenon of Classism as I study it deals principally, not with a correspondence between Classism and its ideas about pop culture, but with the internal consistency of Classism and its ideas about pop culture (appropriation strategy as a career, etc.) despite or beyond any correspondence with, or lack thereof, a "real" popular culture. My point is that Foster's statement about appropriation strategy mainly refers to that fabricated consistency, that regular constellation of ideas, as the pre-eminent thing about pop culture and not to its mere being, as the Wallace Stevens's phrase has it. Pop culture only exists to the extent that it conforms to what the art world thinks of it.

A second qualification is that ideas, cultures and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force, or more precisely their configurations of power, also being studied. To believe that pop culture was created—or more precisely, “aestheticized”—and to believe that such things happen simply as a necessity of the imagination, is to be disingenuous. The relationship between the art world and pop or indigenous culture is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony, as is quite accurately indicated in the title of William Rubin’s classic, *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*. Pop culture—and we would be prejudiced to think of Rubin’s primitive African artifacts as anything other than just another form of popular culture, as examples of a particular society’s daily objects, no more or less fetishized than our own cars and stoves and handbags—has been aestheticized not only because it was discovered to be popular in all those ways considered commonplace by the Baby Boom generation, but also because it could be—that is, submitted to being—made popular. There is very little consent to be found, for example, in the fact that Jack Kerouac’s encounters with jazz music produced a widely influential model of the African-American man. In *On The Road*, the black man never spoke of himself, he never represented his emotions, presence, or history. Kerouac spoke for and represented him. Kerouac was white, comparatively wealthy and male, and these were historical facts of domination that allowed him not only to possess that musician creatively but to speak for him and tell his readers in what way he was “typically black.” My argument is that Kerouac’s situation of strength in relation to the jazz musician was not an isolated instance. It fairly stands for the pattern of relative strength between art (in this case, literature) and popular culture and the discourse about popular culture that it enabled.

This brings us to a third qualification. One ought never to assume that the structure of Classism is nothing more than a structure of lies or myths which, were the truth be told about them, would simply blow away. I myself believe that Classism is more particularly valuable as a sign of curatorial-theoretical power over pop culture than it is a reliable discourse about pop culture (which is what, in its glossy or scholarly form, it claims to be). Nevertheless, what we must respect and try to grasp is the sheer knitted-together strength of classist discourse, its very close ties to the enabling socio-economic and political network of high-powered commercial galleries, trade journals and museums and its redoubtable durability. After all, any system of ideas that can

remain unchanged as teachable wisdom in the United States (in academies, books, congresses, universities, biennials) from the period of Jasper Johns in the late 1950s until the present must be something more formidable than a mere collection of lies. Classism, therefore, is not an airy, ivory tower fantasy about pop culture, but a created body of theory and practice in which, for many generations, there has been a considerable material investment. Continued investment made Classism, as a system of knowledge about popular culture, an accepted grid for filtering pop culture through and into high art consciousness, just as that same investment multiplied—indeed, made truly productive—the statements proliferating out of Classism into the general culture.

Gramsci has made the useful analytic distinction between civil and political society in which the former is made up of voluntary (or at least rational and non-coercive) affiliations like schools, families and unions, the latter of state institutions (the army, the police, the central bureaucracy) whose role in the polity is direct domination. Culture, of course, is to be found operating within civil society, where the influence of ideas, institutions and colleagues works not through domination but by what Gramsci calls consent. In any society not totalitarian, then, certain cultural forms predominate over others, just as certain ideas are more influential than others; the form of this cultural leadership is what Gramsci has identified as hegemony, an indispensable concept for any understanding of cultural life in the industrialized world. It is hegemony, or rather the result of cultural hegemony at work, that gives Classism the durability and the strength I have been speaking about so far. Classism is never far from what Reyner Banham has called the pretense of Art, a collective notion identifying “us” cultural authorities as against all “those” mere consumers, and indeed it can be argued that the major component in high art is precisely what made it hegemonic both inside and outside the art world: the idea of art appreciation as superior to the everyday actions of consumers, however similar (indeed, identical) their preferences often are to those of art professionals. There is in addition the hegemony of art world ideas about pop culture, themselves reiterating aesthetic sensitivity over commercial crassness, usually overriding the possibility that a more independent, or more skeptical, thinker might have different views on the matter.

In a quite constant way, Classism depends for its strategy on this flexible positional superiority, which puts the art professional in a whole series of possible relationships with pop culture without ever losing the relative upper hand. And why

should it be otherwise, especially during the period of extraordinary artistic ascendancy from World War II to the present? The artist, the critic, the curator, the collector, or the viewer is in, or thinks about, pop culture because he or she can be, or can think about it, with very little resistance on pop culture's part. Under the general heading of knowledge about popular culture and within the umbrella of high art's hegemony over pop culture since World War II, there emerged a complex pop culture suitable for study in the academy, for display in the museum, for reconstruction in the artist's studio, for theoretical illustration in art historical, curatorial, linguistic, pictorial and racial theses about mankind and the universe, for instances of economic and sociological theories of development, revolution, cultural personality, national character or religious affiliation. Additionally, the imaginative examination of things popular was based more or less exclusively upon a sovereign art consciousness out of whose unchallenged centrality a popular world emerged, first according to general ideas about who or what constituted popularity, then according to a detailed logic governed not simply by empirical reality but by a battery of desires, repressions, investments and projections. If we can point to great classist works of genuine scholarship like Lucy Lippard's *Pop Art* or Dave Hickey's *Air Guitar*, we should note that Lippard's and Hickey's ideas come out of the same impulse (as did a great many postmodern novels by the likes of Donald Barthelme or Don DeLillo). This impulse, by turns respectful, awestruck and contemptuous, recognizes the delusional absurdities of popular culture, marvels at them and resigns itself to them, and even makes use of them. Ultimately, though, such uses, however skeptical or sympathetic, can only have the consequence of proposing that this or that fragment of popular culture is worthy of consideration as Art. In other words, is a worthy subject of being subjugated by Classism.

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