Paul McCarthy and Damon McCarthy exemplify comic grossness in their multimedia piece *Caribbean Pirates*, 2005.

**ARTnews** April 2012

# When Bad Is Good

**BY RICHARD B. WOODWARD**

Artworks that **mimic** soft porn, showcase embalmed animals, **mock** the Pope, and otherwise **offend** propriety are filling auctions, museums, and galleries. Is there anything left to be **upset** about?

ANN-MARIE ROUNKLE/©PAUL MCCARTHY/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND HAUSER & WIRTH

**Lisa Yuskavage engages in coy subversion with her satiric riff on Old Masters and codes of representation in her painting *Wilderness*, 2009.**

"There is nothing worse than good taste," thundered the English art critic Jonathan Jones in the *Guardian* in 2010. "Nothing more stultifying than an array of consumer choices paraded as a philosophy of life. And there is nothing more absurd than someone who aspires to show good taste in contemporary art."

The occasion for such hyperbole was an exhibition of Damien Hirst's work, at Paul Stolper gallery in London, widely derided by critics. Having often campaigned aggressively for Hirst's status as a genius, Jones was defending himself against his peers on the slippery slopes of "taste."

"Where being interested in Hirst would once have counted as good taste in terms of today's art, it now stands exposed as bad taste," wrote Jones. "I am happy to display the bad taste of still being interested in him."

If, as Jones asserts, bad taste is nothing but good taste after a few years of aging, declaring support for someone with a bruised reputation can be just a clever way of getting a jump on next season's fashion.

But the larger question is whether bad taste is even a consideration anymore. And if so, what might it mean? Take, for example, Hirst's 2007 sculpture *For the Love of God* (a.k.a. the "Crystal Skull"), a platinum cast of a human cranium encrusted with 8,601 flawless diamonds: the piece was interpreted by some as a commentary on wretched excess in an art world awed by glamour and swimming in cash, but, whatever Hirst's satiric intention may have been, it was hard to detect in the asking price of £50 million.

Through canny marketing and promotion, the skull became Hirst's most talked-about work since *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, from 1992. Crowds lined up around the glass case when the "Crystal Skull" went on view at London's White Cube Gallery and then at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, even as critics fumed.

The Maurizio Cattelan retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum in New York this past winter was another case of an artist whose bad-boy image—and impish mockery of same—has been immensely profitable for him and a winning ticket with audiences and some of the press. It didn't seem to matter that the show received a shellacking from most of the critics, the spectacle nevertheless attracted

*Richard B. Woodward is an arts critic in New York.*

record crowds (roughly 4,000 people a day), prompting the museum to add extra hours to accommodate them.

Cattelan, like Hirst, has hit on a formula that forecloses on the possibility of an audience's feeling insulted. Only a tiny number of Catholics took umbrage at *La Nona Ora*, Cattelan's 1999 sculpture of Pope John Paul II struck by a meteor, and even they weren't sure why they should be offended. When the piece sold at auction in 2004 for $3 million, Cattelan's act of smirking impiety was confirmed as a high-priced collectible. As Peter Schjeldahl wrote in the *New Yorker*, Cattelan's career "reveals, or even fortifies, the fact that self-parody has become the life-support system of international art infrastructures. Make people feel smart, and they will put up with anything. The mindset cannot be outflanked or overturned, because it routinely performs those operations on itself."

***Floating Skull*, 2009, painted by the artist himself, was in the Wallace Collection exhibition "No Love Lost, Blue Paintings by Damian Hirst."**

OPPOSITE **The public reaction to Maurizio Cattelan's *La Nona Ora*, 1999, showing the pope hit by a meteorite, was surprisingly subdued.**

## Bad taste often passes for avant-garde

taste these days—so long as the artist signals "transgressive" intent. And whereas kitsch in art was once to be assiduously disdained, art that traffics in sentimentality and bathos behind a dancing veil of ironic laughter has become highly prized. Jeff Koons, John Currin, Lisa Yuskavage, Richard Prince, and Takashi Murakami are just a few of those who have learned that coy subversion can be popular and lucrative. As long as everyone is in on the joke that the art is satirizing its own historical codes of representation, there is nothing to be upset about.

More difficult to place is outsider art, a genre that has expanded over the last 20 years from focusing on traditional folk crafts to including obsessive outpourings by the mentally ill and flea-market pickings. Jim Shaw's influential "Thrift Store Paintings" exhibition and book, from 1990, assembles and appropriates works by unknowns that prove to be as disturbing and complex as anything dreamed up by a schooled Surrealist. The Museum of Bad Art, founded in 1994 and now with three galleries in the Boston area, collects works by amateurs that, as its website says, have "a special quality that sets them apart in one way or another from the merely incompetent." The sincerity and conviction of the ineffectual artist is often what is so moving.

Further muddying the issue are the many painters and sculptors who now make deliberately "bad" art. The awkward figuration and ugly color harmonies in the canvases of Albert Oehlen and Werner Büttner, for example, are polemical sorties against good taste and look back to late de Chirico, Picabia's nudes from the late 1940s, and Magritte's *période vache*, all of which were similarly directed against academic surrealism. The proudly slipshod handiwork of Martin Kippenberger has spawned a school of admirers and earned him a MoMA retrospective in 2009. The gimcrack, bauble-encrusted assemblages of Rachel Harrison and Joana Vasconcelos owe as much to Kippenberger as to Rauschenberg.

Art made in a riotous spirit of bad taste not only undermines academic notions of correctness and stability, but it also renders itself virtually impervious to criticism, arming itself against attack from realists, modernists, Minimalists, and Post-Minimalists alike by gleefully confessing to its own intentionally questionable quality.

Even longtime offenders of propriety such as Paul McCarthy, Tracey Emin, Sarah Lucas, and Jake and Dinos Chapman are finding it harder to cast themselves as outlaws when they are represented by blue-chip galleries and their works are being snapped up by leading art museums and collectors.

By the same token, how is an audience supposed to react when the Salon des Refusés is indistinguishable from the academy? The worldwide notoriety of Hirst and Cattelan,

THIS PAGE: JONATHAN SHORT/LFI/NEWSCOM; OPPOSITE: ATTILIO MARANZANO/©MAURIZIO CATTELAN/COURTESY THE ARTIST

both of whom have cited Duchamp as an inspiration, has proved the crowd-pleasing appeal and cash value of neo-Dada tactics in the contemporary-art marketplace. If everyone is to agree that good taste is absurd and applaud as sales accrue to those who can best leverage publicity, where is a critic supposed to stand? What's the difference between the media spectacle generated by artists like these and Kim Kardashian's auctioning videos and photographs of her wedding to the highest bidder?

"Taste" is a word in bad odor lately, bearing connotations of rank snobbery. Judgments of what is in good or bad taste are often viewed as a masquerade for class privilege. Clement Greenberg may have been the last critic unafraid to wield the notion without trepidation. In the collection of essays *Homemade Esthetics: Observations on Art and Taste* he found several ways to insert the term into his arguments.

Certain artists, in his view, belong to the history of taste, others to the history of art. Eugène Carrière, for instance, a painter highly esteemed at the turn of the 20th century, now belongs to the history of taste, while Cézanne, less acclaimed at his death but subsequently revered by other artists, fits squarely in the latter category. Although Greenberg did not wrestle into submission the elusive concept of taste—the word has too many contradictory meanings in his writings—he did not shy away from esthetic judgments, dismissing Pop art as "academic" and, in the 1950s, even claiming that Abstract Expressionism and Art Informel had "a chance of being the worst art ever beheld under the name of art." He found Conceptual art, as well as other "avant-gardist" movements that derived from Duchamp, "fascinating because of its desperation."

Although the notion of linearity or progress in the history of art may no longer hold sway, the heroic origins of modernism as resulting from assaults on academic taste in mid-19th-century Paris by artists such as Corot, Courbet, and Manet is a story that still resonates.

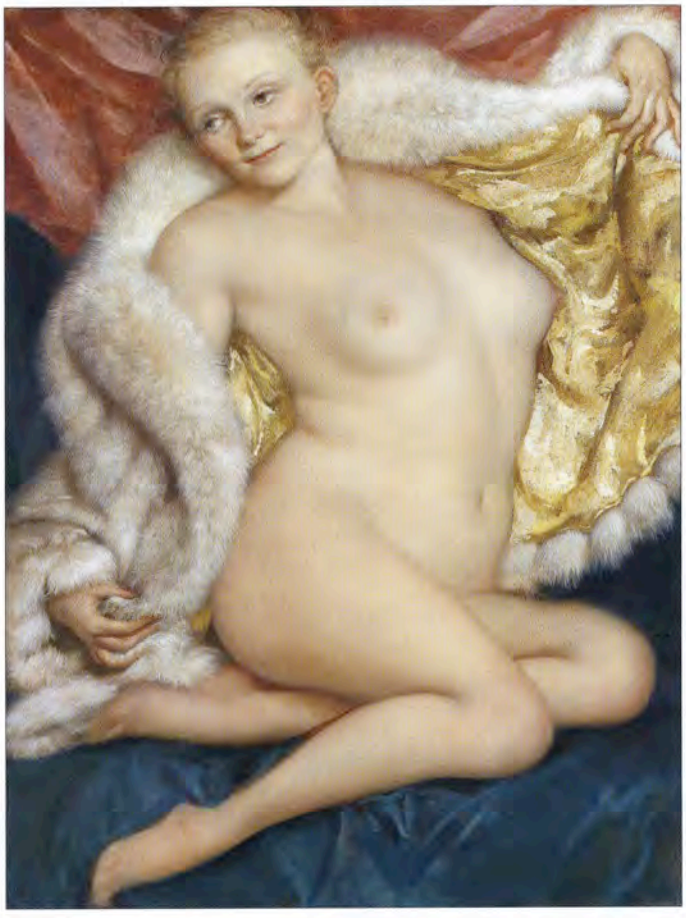
## Exhibiting "bad" taste is one of the simplest ways for art to attract notice.

Sophisticated practitioners cue their audience that they are simply riffing on safely outmoded styles. Currin's female nudes, with their distorted breasts and necks, reference both soft-porn fantasy and Italian Mannerism, a style that itself was considered by earlier Renaissance artists to be in dubious taste. Murakami's "superflat" style, reminiscent of Pop art, is an ironic take on Japan's tradition of commercial illustration, with its penchant for cute animals and candy-colored optimism.

By contrast, the late Mike Kelley's soiled toys and McCarthy's videos of comic grossness issue from a more visceral place and provoke less easy laughter. We embrace them at the risk of becoming dirty ourselves. Squeamishness, if not revulsion, is the effect the artists are looking for. Tracey Emin's confessional work in the 1990s, such as *My Bed* (1998), which mixed sheets covered with bodily fluids and personal detritus related to sexual activity and emotional distress, called to mind similar unhealthy fantasies in viewers.

None of these artists found themselves too far ahead of accepted taste. In fact, their fixations are those of the art world. The walls of museums are permeable and curators seem eager to welcome into polite society artists such as Edward Kienholz, Tom Wesselmann, William T. Wiley, and Valie Export, whose overt political and sexual content once made them marginal at best.

Many of the artists in "'Bad' Painting," Marcia Tucker's pioneering group exhibition at the New Museum in 1978, have faded from view, and those who haven't (Neil Jenney, Joan Brown, William Wegman) aren't often discussed in the context of that show. But Tucker's observation that



**In *The Old Fur*, 2010, John Currin marries art history and soft porn.**

OPPOSITE **Richard Prince's *Spiritual America 4*, 2005, offers an ironic take on well-crafted bodies, machines, speed, and celebrity, all geared to sell.**

THIS PAGE: ROBERT MCKEEVER/©JOHN CURRIN/COURTESY GAGOSIAN GALLERY; OPPOSITE: ©RICHARD PRINCE/COURTESY GAGOSIAN GALLERY

"the freedom with which these artists mix classical and popular art-historical sources, kitsch and traditional images, archetypal and personal fantasies, constitutes a rejection of the concept of progress" was prescient. Tucker's show also inspired the exhibition "Bad Painting, Good Art," at the Museum of Modern Art in Vienna in 2008, which brought together 21 artists, among them Currin, Yuskavage, Oehlen, Kippenberger, Julian Schnabel, and Sigmar Polke, connecting their rejection of good taste with the curdled Surrealism of Picabia and de Chirico, as well as comics and the non-high-art caricatures of Philip Guston.

**Albert Oehlen's *3 Amigos III*, 2000/2006. Are the artist's ugly color harmonies examples of bad taste?**

OPPOSITE **Sarah Lucas's *Tit Teddy*, 2012, on the couch; at right, *Nice Tits*, 2011, currently on view at Situation, a new gallery at Sadie Coles, London.**

It is still possible to make art that offends sectors of the general public. Feelings about September 11 are not nearly as raw as in 2002, when Eric Fischl was forced to remove his sculpture *Tumbling Woman* from Rockefeller Center. Meanwhile, race and religion have not lost their power to enflame. David Wojnarowicz's *A Fire in My Belly* (1986–87) was removed from a group exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., in 2010 because the video's images of ants crawling on a crucifix were deemed by the Smithsonian's secretary to be too politically explosive.

That this incident did not ignite another extended culture war, as did the homoerotic photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe in the early '90s, may only mean that institutions have learned to avoid potential trouble with warning labels and cordoned-off areas, or by keeping out anything that might be regarded as incendiary.

## In many cases today, subjects and figures

that were previously out-of-bounds are considered acceptable, safe, edgy, and fun, thanks to the Internet, which offers imagery without censors. The interconnectedness and fluidity of information and the larger number of art scenes on all the continents are not things that Greenberg could have imagined. The values of good taste that he stood for have long since been washed away, and many people would say good riddance.

John Waters, once the epitome of bad taste as a filmmaker, is now an art-world eminence, asked to curate exhibitions at venues like the Walker Art Center and share opinions in *Artforum*. His recent book *Role Models* includes a chapter about his art collection, which features flea-market items alongside works by artists such as Cy Twombly and Kelley. Indeed, a Kelley painting from 1991 titled *Wedged Lump*, which, in the words of Waters, "suggests a giant turd surrounded with comic stink marks," hangs in his dining room.

"I'm interested in artists who are okay with being hated," Waters said at the Walker's media preview for his show, "Absentee Landlord," last summer. "Because the work we hate today is often the work we end up liking and admiring in the future."

That's the story of Waters's career as well. Whereas 25 years ago no TV network would have dared to screen a Waters movie and no respectable magazine would have sought his views about anything, Broadway producers now transform his scripts into musicals and there's always a place for him in David Letterman's guest chair.

As Waters recently admitted to a reporter, it is the "final irony" of his life that a gay Catholic underground writer-director from Baltimore is now a member of the club. His highly refined interests in kitsch, scatological humor, porn, tawdry glamour, serial killers, and other tabloid fodder anticipated by decades the zeitgeist of our time.

"I think we need a new vocabulary, because now everybody wants to be an outsider," he told the *Financial Times*. "When I was one, no one wanted to be one. Counterculture won some things a long time ago. Counterculture's in control. I'm the insider. I'm the establishment." ■