

# THE PEOPLE'S ABSTRACTION

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In the awful, turning-point year of 1939, in an essay entitled "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," the American critic Clement Greenberg identified kitsch as the cultural weapon par excellence of fascist culture, seeing in it a way for Hitler to mollify the masses under Nazi control. As Greenberg saw it, Kitschy art appeals to the lowest common denominator because it is easy, attractive and self-reinforcing; there is nothing to interpret, nothing to parse, nothing to fundamentally understand. All it asks of audiences is simple, pleasurable, consumption. As such, it is addictive, a drug in cultural form that the people cannot keep themselves from. Because its only job is to deliver pre-packaged un-nuanced messages directly and seductively, for Greenberg, Kitsch is necessarily and exclusively narrative – that is, figurative. Even though he lived almost to the end of the twentieth century, the critic could never see the way clear to a moment when abstraction might join Socialist Realism as a carrier of dangerous content to the public at large, because, as he pointed out gratefully, it is just too difficult for too many to understand.

Greenberg cannot be faulted for being unable, at that crucial historic moment, to see into the future, but a little over ten years later, Jackson Pollock's work would be used as a backdrop for a fashion shoot, and memorably described by the critic Harold Rosenberg as "apocalyptic wallpaper." By the nineteen fifties in the U.S. and in countries like Italy and Germany, abstraction became generally recognizable as the face of sophisticated design taste, a fact that a young artist like Piero Manzoni took as his inspiration for his Achromes, white or colourless paintings, sculptures and objects of various materials that in their absolute modularity, sought to destroy notions of style, of taste, and of the artist's authorship. In Manzoni's oeuvre, there were no hierarchies of objects, and his Achromes were product (he even made a series of briefcase-sized "samples" to carry around with him during promotional tours) in the same way that his packaged line drawings (sold by the metre), and his little cans of "Merde d'artista" were. Working at the same time, Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama created for herself a logo in the form of a signature motif – the Infinity Net and its dot and phallic protuberance (direct opposite of the net) variants. First in all-over monochromes, and subsequently in sculptures, room-size installations, films, body decoration, a line of clothing, and more recently consumables like watches and paper-weights, Kusama seized on the inherently decorative qualities of the serially repetitive abstract mark and neatly turned the notion on its head to create something as optically jolly as it is menacing. Pleasurably optical, the Infinity Net/dot/phallus pattern is disturbingly all-encompassing, virus-like in its ability to spread and to mutate. Kusama was very open about her goals for her motif. She wanted it to "take over the world," in both a physical sense, as well as as a vehicle to spread her fame in the artworld and beyond. Both Kusama and Manzoni recognized that bridging the divide between mass culture and contemporary visual culture was the ultimate challenge of contemporary art after World War II. In their determination to distribute the content-less, the style-less, the abstract, in a manner that satirized,

but also capitalized on the modes of distribution created by mass culture, they knowingly flirted with Greenbergian notions of kitsch using an abstract platform.

In terms of a Greenbergian teleology, which until fairly recently, was mirrored in the narrative which reigned in American and European museums and art history textbooks, artists searching for the moral high ground after Pollock were hunted back to the monochrome, and finally, were chased by the public's rapacious penchant for learning to live with, and love modernism, to abandon the object altogether. It is all too obvious that that didn't work either, and here we are in the first decade of the new millennium, seventy years from the precipice of 1939, with the fundamental problem of the last century in visual art solved – that is, the connection of art to daily life – by precisely the mating of which Greenbergian modernism warned us to be very afraid – between contemporary art and popular culture. It's ironic that Greenberg's bogeymen of 1939 painted like Norman Rockwell and Ilja Repin, because it turns out the monsters of the New Age make art like Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons and, more recently, Anselm Reyle.

Reyle's obsession is with the surface, whether it be used to describe the physical surface of his works, or, in a more philosophical sense, their meaning. Given that he has stated that amongst his myriad assistants in his studio cum factory in Berlin he has two workers whose jobs are to research and develop interesting surfaces, it should come as no surprise that his oeuvre showcases an astonishing variety of two-dimensional visual effects including scumbled impasto on a grand scale as if applied by a monster brush, reflectivity, achieved by the application of foil, and the adoption of a technique of applying chrome finishes used on motorcycles and cars, airbrush effects, faux bois, and paint applications like Day-Glo. Compositionally and otherwise, his works are enormously attractive, alive to the eye in a way that gives so much visual satisfaction as to tip towards irritation, even tastelessness. The radically – almost dangerously – seductive quality in Reyle's work makes it double-edged; it pleases, while at the same time calls in to question the guilt that naturally must derive from this pleasure. Colours are carefully chosen to sing next to one another – violet with sun yellow, bubblegum pink with forest green, and crinkles are carefully and delicately applied to his foil works to maximize the sparkly effect and compositional balance. Signature modernist styles are appropriated but retain their formal rigour. Reyle has stated that most of his forms are "found", but they are also subtly translated with what seems like admiration. Those paintings that make reference to the German pre-war modernist Otto Freundlich, for example, are not send-ups, but homages in fireworks to Freundlich's heroic, martyred avant-gardism. Inspired by Freundlich's motifs, Reyle replaces the older artist's gravitas with the antic Pop spirit communicated through processed colours and an almost comic inflation of scale. Reyle's curvaceous biomorphic sculptural forms make clear reference to high modernist sculptors like Henry Moore, but do so indirectly, as they are actually modelled on a small African knick-knack from his mother's house. Precisely because they are recognizable as both modern and primitive, Reyle's sculptures cheerfully solve the influence/affinity problem by simultaneously paying homage to the faux primitive curios that influenced Moore and

myriad modernists, as well as the truly international penetration of modernist taste inspired by the work of Moore and his ilk.

Like Manzoni and Kusama before him, Reyle takes up the challenge to create a kind of popular abstraction. As evidenced by the disregard both older artists experienced from the contemporary art community until a little over a decade ago, residual Greenbergianism gives this task its perils. By all accounts, Reyle revels in them. In a recent question from a critic that asked: "Why is your work so close to being decorative?" Reyle has pertly answered "Why not?" reinforcing how conscious his efforts are to make his paintings and sculptures visually enticing to the eye. The fact that he actually produces decorative objects should indicate his unambiguous desire to goad the sensibilities of all those who fear attraction to the object. In fact, Reyle is an artist who actually baits the viewer with his foil, his mirrors and his chrome. Humans are like fish in one way; dangle before us a shiny object, and we can't help ourselves, we bite.

In the numerous interviews that Reyle has given in the past several years since his artistic profile has soared internationally, he has reiterated his fascination with the notion of cliché, ruminating, with obvious envy, on how exactly an object, a form or a style achieves this status. Some may argue that novelty is the sine qua non for mass popularity, but as Greenberg himself pointed out, however paradoxical it may seem, the absolute and general transparency of meaning that is a cliché is equally crucial to mass appeal. Reyle's vocabulary of forms is a virtual lexicon of recognizable artistic styles culled from the history of postwar abstraction, from the gestural tache of the European Informel, to the Pollockian drip, the Newmanian Zip, and the Nolandian stripe. Reyle even appropriates the Plexi glass box – signature accoutrement for neo avant-gardists like Yves Klein, Manzoni, and Arman – surrounding his crinkled foil works with an accoutrement that connotes both historical importance and formal experimentation. Unlike the term Kitsch, which nowadays can be applied somewhat affectionately, there aren't very many redeeming elements to our contemporary understanding of a cliché. More than bringing to mind bad art, the term promotes fatigue and promises boredom. However familiar these motifs and innovations, Reyle's borrowed forms are clichés only to a segment of the art cognoscenti that is stuck in the modernist (read Greenbergian) trap of the expectation of perpetual formal innovation. To any other eye, they actually represent the entire toolkit of abstraction-gestural marks, colour, geometric and biomorphic form. Reyle's works might make transparent the source material for every element of his object – from the colour, to the shape to the support – but he makes sure to make a fundamental modification to whatever he borrows. In those sculptures that consist solely of found objects like wagon wheels, a plough, a bale of hay, Reyle's seemingly small intervention – painting them with Day Glo or silver – alters them irrevocably. In fact, the addition of paint colours that resonate with the modern, mid-century moment they came in to common use, lifts these objects out of the realm of the hokey picturesque, and into the hard-edged atmosphere of the urban and industrial. In a way, once painted, these narrative objects shed their connotations of farm and folk and become found abstractions; the hay bale begins to resemble a metallic cube, a wagon wheel a glowing neon mandala.

**That Reyle treats the universal forms of folk culture <sup>2</sup> in a similar manner to the way he incorporates**

**the equally universal ones of abstraction, makes clear that the artist is thinking about the language of**  
For Reyle, a German artist, it is both logical and slightly touchy to toy with universal symbols of folk culture. The notion of popular culture itself is a late eighteenth century phenomenon, when interest in the cultural production of rural populations went hand in hand with the slow demise of those populations through urbanization and industrialization. Championed by nationalist thinkers like Johann Gottfried Herder as the "embodiment of national character" it was primitive, rural, anti-corporate and egalitarian. In twentieth century Germany, folk culture and mass culture converged to produce the visual art favoured by the Nazi Party.  
**popular culture in its broadest definition, one that includes both vernacular forms along with mass-produced ones. Abstraction, for Greenberg and others, was the Kitsch-proof language of "genuine art" not by, or for, but beyond the people. In Reyle's oeuvre abstraction is liberated and allowed to play**

**in all arenas of popular culture, even in the jury-rigged one called Pop, staked out by Warhol and thoroughly explored by Koons.<sup>3</sup> Whether created or found, the sum of Reyle's oeuvre makes a strong argument for abstraction's ubiquity in our visual culture. This is proof, one might suspect, for the artist, of its integrity as a genuine (!) and legitimate mode of expression and also a vehicle for content however simple (pleasurable sensation) or complex (transcendence and/or the act of creation as opposed to imitation).**

**In Greenberg's time, avant gardism meant "an emigration from the markets of capitalism," and indeed, a detachment from all but the smallest, most specialized public. In ours, the way in Greenberg's famous phrase "to keep culture moving" is to perhaps make our contemporary art as seamless with the fabric of our contemporary life as possible. Reyle's works do this, in their popularization of the language of abstraction, and in their revelation of the non-objective as a glorious object. In his paintings and in his sculpture we can witness production and consumption, drawn towards each other this past decade, touching – like a kiss that is both electrifying and deadly. Reyle's works are at once avant-garde and Kitsch and because of this they are perfect symbols for our dangerous and violent cultural moment.**