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Kitsch and the Social Pretense Theory of Bullshit Art

Abstract

This essay argues that *bullshit art* is a meaningful concept that differs from *bullshitting about art*, although the two may occur in tandem. I defend what I call the social pretense theory of bullshit art. On this view, calling a work of art 'bullshit' highlights a discrepancy between the prestige accorded a work of art and its nonsense character. This category of aesthetic criticism plays a unique role that cannot be identified with kitsch but bears only a contingent connection to it.

Keywords

Bullshit, Kitsch, Nonsense, Social Pretense, Art

“That’s bullshit!” is a claim sometimes leveled against art. Even if it is not explicitly stated, such suspicion may be silently harbored. However, what does such a charge mean? It might be thought that this is a mere emotional outburst devoid of any substantial philosophical content. Against this suspicion, I will argue that *bullshit art* is indeed a meaningful concept, and it differs from *bullshitting about art*, although the two may occur in tandem.

The academic study of ‘bullshit’ as a type of speech-act has been popularized by Harry Frankfurt’s (1986/1988) analysis of the concept. This analysis has served as the ground for recent claims that there are resonances and parallels between the phenomenon of bullshit and that of kitsch. Thorsten Botz-Bornstein (2015) has argued “[g]iven bullshit’s intrinsic link with techniques such as embellishment and the willful stylization of facts, as well as its ambition to create an autonomous realm, bullshit seems to be as much at

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home in the realm of aesthetics as in the realm of ethics" (305). In a different way, Eva Dadlez (2018) has also suggested that bullshit and kitsch have something in common. As she puts it, "kitsch is to aesthetics what bullshit is to epistemology" (59). Both, she claims, are "exemplars of bad faith" (59), albeit of different kinds.

While I agree with Botz-Bornstein and Dadlez that the notion of 'bullshit' has a role to play in the aesthetic realm, I want to offer an alternative account of what it means to speak of 'bullshit art' rather than looking for parallels between art and bullshit understood as a mode of deficient discourse. Moreover, I question the idea that kitsch stands as a sort of aesthetic counterpart to bullshit, and I offer two reasons for this. First, there is, I will argue, a direct sense in which art can count as bullshit; it needs no intermediary concept. Second, bullshit in the aesthetic realm bears only a *contingent connection* to kitsch. While kitsch may indeed count as an instance of it, it neither necessarily is bullshit nor is bullshit necessarily kitsch. This account suggests a unique role for the concept of 'bullshit art' in aesthetics, one that transcends the category of kitsch, even if, in some cases, the two concepts apply to the same works of art.

My analysis begins with two classics of the field: Frankfurt's initial essay and G.A. Cohen's (2002) response. These authors and the subsequent discussion in their wake centers on language use and a particular sort of communicative failing. However, if we want to understand *bullshit art* rather than merely *bullshit about art*, we need to cast our net a little wider. Thus, I consider David Graeber's (2018) use of 'bullshit jobs' as an instructive lesson for how we might understand the role of the concept 'bullshit' as it is applied to activities beyond speech-acts (§ 1). Next, I offer an analysis of the meaning of bullshit art, focusing on the role that the concept 'bullshit' plays in calling out a particular sort of nonsense. More specifically, I highlight the social role played by the concept of 'bullshit' and suggest that bullshit art is characterized not simply by the intrinsic properties of a work of art but rather by an atmosphere of social pretense surrounding the artwork. This discrepancy between the prestige accorded a work of art and its nonsense character creates the conditions under which a work can count as 'bullshit art.' Thus, I call this *the social pretense theory of bullshit art* (§ 2). Finally, I argue that bullshit art cannot be identified with kitsch, but rather 'bullshit art' represents a unique category of aesthetic and artistic failure that stands in merely a contingent relationship to kitsch. Bullshit art need not be kitsch, and kitsch need not be bullshit art (§ 3).

1. What does it mean to call something 'bullshit'?

Before we can proceed to examine whether we can talk meaningfully about 'bullshit art,' we need to get clear on the meaning of 'bullshit.' Harry Frankfurt (1988) offers a pioneering analysis of the meaning of the term 'bullshit' using the methods of analytical philosophy. He distinguishes the *liar*, who aims to pass on certain false beliefs to her listener, from the *bullshitter*, who does not care about truth or falsity whatsoever: "It is just this lack of connection to a concern with truth—this indifference to how things really are—that I regard as the essence of bullshit" (125). Bullshitting still involves deception, but it is about the nature of the speech-act rather than the content of the speech:

What bullshit essentially misrepresents is neither the state of affairs to which it refers nor the beliefs of the speaker concerning that state of affairs...The bullshitter may not deceive us, or even intend to do so, either about the facts or about what he takes the facts to be. What he does necessarily attempt to deceive us about is his enterprise. His only indispensably distinctive characteristic is that in a certain way he misrepresents what he is up to (130).

G.A. Cohen (2002) has argued that Frankfurt's analysis does not capture the "essence" of bullshit but rather only one of its species or, in his words, "just one flower in the lush garden of bullshit" (323). More specifically, he points out that Frankfurt's analysis is less about bullshit itself as it is of the act of bullshitting, which focuses remains on the agent's intentions. By contrast, he thinks we can identify a distinct type of bullshit by focusing on the object rather than the speaker or, as Cohen colorfully puts it, "start[ing] with the shit, not the bull" (331).

Understood in the "output" sense of bullshit (338), Cohen further articulates it as "nonsense" or what he calls "unclarifiable unclarity" (333). As he elaborates:

what particularly interests me is a certain variety of nonsense, namely, that which is found in discourse that is by nature *unclarifiable*, discourse, that is, that is not only obscure but which cannot be rendered unobscured, where any apparent success in rendering it unobscured creates something that isn't recognizable as a version of what was said (332).

What Cohen (2002) has in mind here, more specifically, is academic nonsense, especially the dense, impenetrable text that he associates with continental philosophy. Yet even if we disagree with him about the meaningless-

ness of this mode of philosophical discourse as some (including Frankfurt (2002) himself) are inclined to do, we might still agree with Cohen that he has isolated an interesting variant irreducible to Frankfurt's analysis: bullshit as nonsense, specifically academic nonsense.

Frankfurt and Cohen thus focus on different aspects of the phenomenon of bullshit: the speech-act of producing it versus the product of speech or writing that has specific qualities in itself. Some writers have attempted to identify still other types of bullshit, e.g., "performative bullshit" (Richardson 2006) or pseudo-science (Maes and Schaubroeck 2006). Even more recent analyses have suggested still further variations that incorporate both the speaker and the speech. Viktor Ivankovic (2016) suggests that obscurantism counts as yet another form of bullshit: "the obscurantist who might be concerned with both truth and knowledge, but who manipulates the way those truth-claims and knowledge-claims will be taken by others by shielding them with obscurities" (537). Eldar Sarajlic (2019) has also offered a hybrid analysis that combines both features of the speech and the speaker's intentions. He argues that bullshitting can occur when one embeds certain nonsensical utterances that lack truth-conditions within an attempt to persuade another of something. This embedding effectively combines both a particular intentional stance of the speaker and specific properties of the speech or writing—namely, that a critical premise does not admit truth or falsity.

Despite their disagreements regarding whether bullshit should be understood as a speaker-focused, speech-focused, or hybrid phenomenon, all of these theories take as their starting point that bullshit is a matter of communication. Yet there is another way in which 'bullshit' can be applied more broadly. An excellent example of this is David Graeber's (2018) use of the term 'bullshit jobs' to describe the status of many forms of work under contemporary capitalism. As he defines it, "a bullshit job is a form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence even though, as part of the conditions of employment, the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case" (9–10). Graeber's use of 'bullshit' picks out a type of nonsense, like Cohen, but goes further in two ways: (a) he applies it to a broader activity rather than just texts—it is the broader sense of 'nonsense' understood as pointless or meaningless activities and (b) he suggests that the possessors of such jobs cannot openly acknowledge it; they are forced to keep up a pretense.

Following Graeber, we might consider the act of calling something 'bullshit' as opposed to the act of 'bullshitting.' This focuses on the critic's perspective rather than that of the producer. To call something a 'bullshit X' thus

implies two things: (a) the pointlessness, insignificance, meaninglessness, or nonsensical character of the thing or activity and (b) the pretense that such a thing has a sense, meaning, or point. Call these, respectively, the *pretense condition* and the *nonsense condition*. In brief, we might say that *bullshit* = *nonsense* + *pretense*. ‘Bullshit’ must contain both of these elements. Something that is merely pointless does not count as ‘bullshit.’¹ For example, Sisyphus’s task of rolling a stone perpetually up a slope only for it to roll down again, Camus’s (1942/2000) famous analogy for the human condition, is not a bullshit task; it is transparently pointless. However, were the gods to insist that Sisyphus pretend that his stone rolling was meaningful, then his punishment would count as a form of bullshit.

Talk of nonsense that cannot be acknowledged as such further resonates with yet another significant yet underappreciated use of the term ‘bullshit’—namely, ‘calling bullshit.’² In this use, to label something as ‘bullshit’ is to unmask something that pretends to be sensical. It is to call it out and thus break through the pretense that otherwise shrouds and protects bullshit. Designating something as a ‘bullshit X’ is, above all, to expose it as nonsense.

We can thus distinguish between *speech-centered* theories of bullshit and *thing or activity-centered* theories of bullshit. Frankfurt and those writing in his wake exemplify the former approach. The latter analysis is the type found in Graeber’s work on contemporary capitalism. I have suggested we can understand this second use of ‘bullshit’ as characterizing a feature of activities that are meaningless things shrouded in pretense that prevents them from being openly acknowledged as such.

2. Bullshit Art

The primary sense in which ‘bullshit’ has been discussed in contemporary philosophy concerns acts of communication both in terms of a speaker’s intentions and specific properties of speech or writing itself. Such speech acts may undoubtedly be about art. For example, an art-dealer may be a skilled bullshitter in talking up her pieces of art and thereby selling them at

¹ There is also a parallel to linguistic ‘bullshit’ here. As Pennycook et. al (2015) write, “bullshit, in contrast to mere nonsense, is something that implies but does not contain adequate meaning or truth” (549). Thus, even linguistic ‘bullshit’ can be understood as having a *nonsense* element combined with a *pretense* of meaning and/or truth.

² While many philosophical analyses overlook this turn of phrase, Scott Kimbrough (2006) recognizes the role of ‘calling bullshit’, which he characterizes as venting indignation towards bad reasons and rationalizations. For a recent academic use of this phrase outside of philosophy see Bergstrom and West (2020).

high prices. This promotional activity may not involve telling lies, even if the speaker is fast and loose with the truth. It may be the case that in this sort of arena, many utterances surrounding art may lack truth conditions—thus fitting the criteria articulated by Sarajlic (2019). Indeed, as Turpin *et al.* (2019) have suggested, it may further be the case that in the realm of art, especially abstract art, it is easy to get away with bullshit as well as rewarding, i.e., prestige-enhancing. For this reason, they have argued that the use of what is called “pseudo-profound bullshit” is a widespread strategy.³

All of this is *bullshit about art*. My question is different: can we apply the concept of ‘bullshit’ directly to aesthetic or artistic phenomena? In other words, can we speak of *bullshit art* itself rather than merely *bullshitting about art*? I will argue that ‘bullshit art’ is a meaningful category that picks out a genuine phenomenon. But more than this, the term ‘bullshit’ in the artistic domain plays a unique evaluative role in our aesthetic vocabulary that exposes a mismatch between a work of art and its social prestige. That one can call ‘bullshit’ on art serves as an important clue for our analysis of the meaning of bullshit art.

My theory of bullshit art will take its lead from the more general pattern discussed above. There we saw a sense of ‘bullshit’ as it is applied to activities in an evaluative manner, e.g., in Graeber’s theory of ‘bullshit jobs.’ This use has two necessary features: nonsense combined with pretense. Thus, it must be possible for X to be called out as bullshit, i.e., having its pretense exposed, unmasked as something lacking in meaning, significance, or point. The constitutive conditions for bullshit thus presuppose a tension between how some X is treated and what it warrants.

Within the realm of art, we can identify features that parallel the use of ‘bullshit’ as it applies to activities. What is required is locating something that meets the (a) nonsense condition and (b) pretense condition. We need to identify within the artistic domain nonsense that is pretending to be something else. Insofar as one is calling out a work of art as nonsense and thus attempting to unmask the social pretense surrounding it, one can apply the concept of ‘bullshit’ to art.

I want to suggest that it is plausible to ascribe both the nonsense and pretense conditions to works of art. To meet the *nonsense condition* an artwork need only be considered to be vapid, silly, derivative, or in some other way meaningless. As we shall see below, this is open to more and less sophisticated variants. Meeting the *pretense condition* involves claims to im-

³ The phrase “pseudo-profound bullshit” originally comes from (Pennycock *et al.* 2015).

portance signaled by an artwork's social positioning. 'Bullshit' refers to the phenomenon of a gap created by meeting both conditions. Such a discrepancy only exists in particular social contexts—it does not attach to the thing itself as it is considered in a void.⁴ Thus, bullshit art is context-sensitive: bullshit does not attach to the art object isolated in a vacuum but instead as it occurs in social space. Pretense surrounding art involves a mismatch between the prestige attached to a work of art and whether a work of art merits or deserves such status. The nonsense condition attaches to the vapid, empty, or otherwise meaningless character of the work of art, and the pretense condition attaches to its social placing. More concretely, this would involve a work's being on display in galleries or museums, the high price such a piece commands at auctions, the glowing words of critics, and many other such metrics of social esteem. Thus, when we talk of 'bullshit art,' we are not talking merely about the properties of the artwork itself, but we are talking about how a particular low-caliber or nonsensical work is situated in prestige space.

Calling a work of art 'bullshit' is not simply saying that it is bad art. The reason is that bad art recognized as bad art lacks pretense and therefore is not bullshit. No discrepancy exists between the qualities of the art and how it is received. The defining feature of bullshit art, as I understand it, is that the art has an inflated or hyped character, whereby the art itself does not warrant its social prestige. Thus, describing it as 'bullshit' draws attention to and highlights the gap between the artwork and its social context. It suggests, for example, that what is presented as meaningful is non-sense or what is presented as deep is actually shallow.

Suppose a critic enters a family's home to discover a child's doodle attached to the refrigerator and remarks 'that's bullshit!' to the proud parent. This would likely strike us as not only mean-spirited but as an absurd abuse of language. It doesn't make sense to call something 'bullshit' in this context. This is not because there is a deeper sense to the child's scribble, but rather because there is no social pretense whatsoever. This situation simply lacks one of the necessary social conditions under which the assertion 'that's bullshit' would be intelligible. No matter the quality of the child's drawing,

⁴ Here we find a parallel to bullshit speech-acts. As Sarajlic (2019) has argued, for a speech-act to count as a 'bullshitting', it must occur within a certain context: "context is constitutive of bullshit" (872). Similarly, I want to argue that designating something a 'bullshit X' is also context-dependent. In certain situations or environments, it may make no sense for X to be considered 'bullshit' because it lacks certain social features constitutive of bullshit.

it would not count as bullshit art. However, put in the context of an art museum or gallery absent special circumstances—e.g., an exhibition devoted to childhood—it may indeed count as bullshit art.

To be clear, bullshit art is not merely overrated art, although these are related concepts. To call an artwork ‘overrated’ suggests a weaker claim: that a mediocre piece of art is excessively praised. Overrated art may involve social pretense, but it does not meet the nonsense condition. We might say that merely *overrated art* involves a combination of (a) mediocrity and (b) social pretense. To call something ‘bullshit’ is to make a more derisive indictment that a work of art is not merely average but actually nonsense. Of course, the boundary between being merely over-hyped and being genuine bullshit may be, in practice, unclear. We might thus think about it as a continuum where a work approaches bullshit status as the gap between the quality of the work of art and its inflated social standing widens.⁵

My aim is not to pronounce judgment on any particular pieces of art as bullshit but rather articulate what it means to deploy the concept of ‘bullshit’ with respect to art. We should be able to illuminate the concept even in failed applications for these still reveal what is at stake in calling art ‘bullshit.’ Thus, I will seek to illustrate the concept of bullshit art not by appealing directly to particular pieces of art but rather how the criticism of being ‘bullshit’ is deployed in both hypothetical and real scenarios.

For starters, imagine a philistine who declares that Duchamp’s “Ready-mades” are bullshit. Looking at *Fountain* (1917) or *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (1915), our befuddled and indignant spectator may think, ‘That’s bullshit. I could scrawl some words on an appliance, say, a washing machine, call it *After the Ketchup Spill*, and put it in a museum too.’ Our philistine’s glib charge lacks an understanding of art history and aesthetic theory, something thinkers from Adorno (1958-1959/2018) to Danto (1964) have seen as necessary for properly appreciating art. Nevertheless, our hypothetical philistine’s deployment of ‘bullshit’ is still instructive for understanding the concept because we can detect the sorts of conditions under which it might sensibly be uttered. And in this case, the philistine’s response is prompted by the suspicion of nonsense combined with social pretense, precisely what our theory suggests. It just happens that the viewer’s operating understanding of artistic nonsense is a shallow one.⁶

⁵ I’m thankful to Lorraine Yeung for encouraging me to clarify this.

⁶ This paragraph is indebted to feedback from a blind reviewer.

Consider a grander type of ‘bullshit’ charge against art targeting a larger phenomenon rather than the work(s) of a particular artist. Writing about imitative and derivative art pieces in the wake of Duchamp and others, Salvador Dali (1968/1987) criticized what he perceived as widespread aping of the avant-garde:

The first man to compare the cheeks of a young woman to a rose was obviously a poet; the first to repeat it was possibly an idiot. The ideas of Dada and Surrealism are currently in the process of being repeated monotonously: soft watches have produced innumerable soft objects. And ‘readymades’ cover the globe! The loaf of bread fifteen yards long has become a loaf of fifteen miles (13).

Even though he didn’t use the term ‘bullshit’, the spirit of Dali’s comment evokes it. These derivative works have the pretense of mattering in the art-world, but they lack any interesting novelty or may even be total nonsense. They are merely stale variations on artistic breakthroughs. They do not warrant the sort of attention to which they aspire and sometimes receive.

A still more radical example is found in a Jean Baudrillard’s (2005) provocative critique of “the conspiracy of art” (25-29). Although he too doesn’t say the word ‘bullshit’, his criticism of the art world fits the pattern we have traced. The ironic world of contemporary art, in his view, “now belongs to insider trading, the shameful and hidden complicity binding the artist who uses his or her aura of derision against the bewildered and doubtful masses” (26-27). He continues, “[c]ontemporary art makes use of this uncertainty, of the impossibility of grounding aesthetic value judgments and speculates on the guilt of those who do not understand it or who have not realized there is nothing to understand” (28). The contemporary art scene engages in what he calls a “bluff on nullity” (28). While operating with a much more sophisticated charge of artistic nonsense and a much wider scope, Baudrillard’s critique embodies the criteria we have articulated as the core of ‘bullshit art’—namely, nonsense combined with pretense. Indeed, both of these elements are quite explicitly stated in his account: “contemporary art, with its incoherent artifice, relieves us of the grasp of meaning through the spectacle of nonsense” (96), and elsewhere he complains, “the pretension of art shocks me... The mental racket run by art and the discourse on art is considerable” (64). Here we find the charge of ‘bullshit’ in all but name.

We have thus seen several ways in which the charge of ‘bullshit’ can be levelled against art. These operate with different levels of sophistication. Some of these understandings of artistic nonsense are premised on shallow

or flawed understandings of art, as in the case of the philistine, while others rest on more elaborate theoretical understandings, e.g., that of Baudrillard. Moreover, the scope of pretense can vary from the esteem of a particular artwork to broad swaths of artistic imitators and again to the art scene broadly construed. Nevertheless, in all of these criticisms, we find the charge of nonsense combined with one of pretense, i.e., the essence of calling ‘bullshit.’

Note that the social pretense theory does not traffic in the ontology of art. It neither depends on claims about the essential nature of art nor presupposes that bullshit art is not genuinely art.⁷ The theory is remarkably porous to various interpretations and understandings of the artistic enterprise. All it requires is that art be engaged in pretentious nonsense. Claims regarding ‘bullshit’ do, however, depend on suggesting that an artwork is defective in some sense—vapid, derivative, silly, etc. It involves making the claim that a work of art’s attention, esteem, etc., are unwarranted—indeed, grossly so. Bullshit art is thus an inherently normative notion—implying that some art should not be accorded credit in the way it has.

The concept of ‘bullshit’ plays an unmasking role. By declaring that some art object is ‘bullshit,’ the speaker suggests that it receives inappropriate esteem—that it is nonsense veiled in pretense.⁸ This role is the function of dispelling the social pretense surrounding a work. We can identify this as the essential role that the concept plays without limiting the grounds for which a piece of art may be called out as ‘bullshit.’ Various speakers may disagree about the standards for determining whether a given work of art merits social prestige. Thus, one party may call a particular work out as ‘bullshit’ because they think that it does not merit its acclaim based on specific standards. Given that there may be continuing disagreement regarding the standards for evaluating art, ‘bullshit art’ should be understood as an “essentially contested concept” in Gallie’s (1955) apt expression.

The concept of ‘bullshit art’ thus corresponds to a perceived discrepancy between a work of art and its social standing. So far, we have assumed the critic’s perspective, but what about those making or pushing the art? Can we also speak of someone ‘bullshitting’ not just *about* the art, which would fall under the category of bullshit speech-acts discussed by Frankfurt and oth-

⁷ While my argument refers to the ‘artworld’ and various institutional agents, the claim does not presuppose a theory that these settings constitute a work as ‘art’ (e.g., Danto 1964, 2013; Dickie 1969). Rather, my point is that the concept of ‘bullshit art’ only has application given a discrepancy that occurs within social settings.

⁸ In this respect, my account follows a pragmatic line of interpretation (cf. Reisch 2006; Meibauer 2013).

ers, but *through* the art? Would acts such as creating, promoting, displaying certain sorts of meaningless artifacts count as bullshitting? And if so, then who exactly is the bullshitter?

As Ivankovic (2016) has pointed out, Frankfurt's original analysis of 'bullshit,' which stresses the intentionality of the bullshitter, raises the possibility of an agent being merely a "gullible distributor... [and] oblivious victim of bullshitting" (539). Should we say that those who unwittingly pass along bullshit also engaged in bullshit? Sarajlic (2019) has suggested that we need to distinguish between "bullshitters," who intentionally produce bullshit, and "dupes," who are taken in by it, even if they pass it along (871). However, such a clean distinction may prove to be illusory in practice. As Scott Kimbrough (2006) has argued, in many cases, merely passing on "second-hand bullshit" involves an individual's own contributions that, to his mind, suggest an element of self-deception that renders even the mere bullshit circulator ethically culpable (12-13). What implication does this have for bullshit in the realm of art?

Consider, again, Frankfurt's distinction between 'lying' and 'bullshitting.' The former involves the intentional delivery of a false belief to a receiver, whereas the latter does not care at all about truth and falsity. There are correlates to both of these stances concerning the promotion of art. In the first case, an agent (say, artist, curator, art-dealer, etc.) may intentionally promote a work of art that she does not believe warrants the sort of attention she is trying to whip up. This promotion is a species of dishonesty: selling a product one believes is shit. By contrast, there is a second case where an agent may engage in promotional activities for a work of art without concern as to whether the work of art warrants such attention. This case is a species of indifference parallel to the Frankfurtian sense of bullshit.⁹

Notice that while bullshit speech-acts may be employed in the above described promotional activities, I am trying to articulate another sense in which one can be engaged in bullshitting. Bullshitting in Frankfurt's sense turns on an indifference to truth. Bullshitting, in the sense I am discussing, involves promotional activities with an indifference to whether or not the work of art merits the prestige it gets. This consideration need not, but may in some circumstances, involve engaging in bullshit speech-acts. The suspicion here is that non-aesthetic motivations are at play, overriding more genuine artistic considerations. Thus, for example, a curator or art-dealer that

⁹ Botz-Bornstein (2015) suggests that a kitsch-hawker "selling valueless items for a lot of money" strikes a parallel to the bullshitter (308). While I agree that transparent financial motivations may give us reason to suspect an art agent of being a bullshitter, this may be a broader phenomenon than kitsch-goods. I will return to the topic of kitsch in §3.

pushes a new artist to make a fortune engages in a form of bullshit: an indifference to the artistic merits of a work. But what about those further downstream from the production of art? Might they too be involved in bullshitting?

The sociologist Raymonde Moulin (1994, 1995) has shown the internal complexity of the artworld, with its various agents involved in artistic production, discovery, promotion, and consumption. She suggests that market forces play an essential role in shaping what gets valued in the artworld, a condition that may lead us to suspect that there is bullshitting going on. I want to suggest that it is possible for bullshit to be socially distributed and still be genuine bullshit. The more passive participants are not necessarily exonerated as mere “dupes.” Insofar as various agents within the artworld go along with promoting a work of art without caring whether it genuinely warrants the attention they are seeking to bestow upon it, then they too are engaged in bullshit. Indeed, part of what may allow bullshit art to flourish is precisely an unwillingness to resist it. The same “low-cost” of bullshitting in the art sphere described by Turpin (2019) may also make it harder to expose it.

3. Bullshit Art and Kitsch

Having articulated what it means for art to be ‘bullshit,’ I now want to investigate the relationship between bullshit art and kitsch, a theme in recent literature. Botz-Bornstein (2015, 2019) and Dadlez (2018) have argued, albeit in different ways, that bullshit and kitsch share important resonances with each other. I want to suggest, however, that bullshit art, as I have construed it, differs notably from kitsch. Specifically, contra Dadlez, I will argue that kitsch does not stand in a parallel relationship to bullshit art, but rather their relationship is merely one of contingent connection.

Dadlez’s (2018) argument holds that kitsch and bullshit are parallel phenomena that involve “bad faith” of some sort (59). She writes, “Kitsch presents itself as art. Bullshit presents itself as being about the world. Neither one is what it tacitly purports to be” (63). More specifically, that means kitsch purports to be art but is actually motivated by non-artistic factors: “kitsch departs from aesthetic norms: its aims are not the aims of art. Kitsch may aim at enhancing status or reinforcing political affiliations or demonstrating the elevated tastes or religious convictions of the purchaser of the work” (62).

For example, she points to the work of Thomas Kinkade, the so-called “painter of light” whose idyllic, sentimental landscape paintings are widely sold in a sprawling empire of commercial outlets (63-64). The problem is, she argues that his work is not truly art but rather exists in a parallel ecosystem aimed at getting “the largest possible number of buyers, not to fulfill any of the aims of art” (65). She thus claims Kinkade (and kitsch more generally) “pose[s] as art because it employs the painterly and sculptural and related techniques of art,” but in reality, the aims are quite different (65). Moreover, kitsch purports to be genuine art also through its social presentation:

by being made available to the public in venues comparable to those in which art is made available (galleries, etc.), by sometimes assigning steep monetary values to its products, by ascribing artistic inspiration to its producers, and by being widely understood as a primary purpose private contemplation and appreciation (65).

Dadlez’s discussion of kitsch resonates with the account of bullshit art offered in this essay in the following way: through its promotion, appearance, display, and sale in a parallel ecosystem of shops and galleries, kitsch purports to be art when, in reality, it is not. Here we may suspect these kitsch works to count as ‘bullshit art’ because they may meet the nonsense and social pretense conditions. One may suspect that such kitsch works receive, at least in some quarters, more attention than is warranted. Moreover, if, as Dadlez suggests, this is primarily an economically motivated enterprise rather than one motivated by artistic considerations, then there are other grounds for suspecting the promoters and distributors to be involved in bullshit insofar as their primary motivations are profit-seeking rather than aesthetic.¹⁰ However, at most, this would show that some kitsch can count as bullshit art.

I have no qualms in accepting that kitsch can be an instance of bullshit art. Indeed, Matei Calinescu (1976) has suggested that “[t]o call something ‘kitsch’... dismisses the aesthetic claims or pretensions of anything which tries to appear as ‘artistic’ without genuinely being so” (5). Here we see resonances between calling something ‘kitsch’ and calling something ‘bullshit’; both dispel aesthetic pretenses. Nevertheless, even though kitsch may count as bullshit art, there are still important differences between the two concepts. In what follows, I will argue that the connection between the two remains merely contingent.

¹⁰ The grounds for suspecting that kitsch is bullshit art are various, but commercial and propagandistic reasons come to the fore. Cf. Botz-Bornstein’s remark, “dictators need kitsch and bullshit for propaganda reasons, while democracies need kitsch and bullshit mainly for commercial (though also for political) reasons” (2015, 316).

Before turning to this task, let me note an essential difference between Dadlez's view and my own. Notice that Dadlez's analysis rests on the strong claim that kitsch is not a genuine form of art and thus counts as an analogue to bullshit. The social pretense analysis of bullshit art, by contrast, does not require that we dismiss whatever we deem to be 'bullshit' as not a genuine instance of art. It is not committed to this strong ontological claim but rather only requires the minimal claim that pieces of bullshit art do not warrant the admiration and prestige they are accorded. It does not require delegitimizing them as genuine instances of art—instead, they are just bad art.

The main difference between my theory and Dadlez's account, however, is that I see no basis for claiming a necessary connection or parallel between kitsch and bullshit. Her account both overstates the connection between kitsch and bullshit as well as overlooks ways in which other, non-kitschy forms of art stand in a relationship to bullshit. Contra Dadlez, I will argue that not all kitsch counts as bullshit art, and not all bullshit art is kitsch. Even if some classic examples of kitsch are exemplary forms of bullshit art, this is merely a contingent connection. I believe the social pretense theory can provide an explanation of both bullshit as an aesthetic phenomenon as well as kitsch's relationship to it.

The meaning of 'kitsch' is a vexed topic with a substantial body of literature (e.g., Greenberg 1961; Dorfles 1969; Calinescu 1976; Pawlowski 1977; Crick 1983; Eco 1989; Solomon 1991; Emmer 1998; Rynänen 2018, 2019). Dadlez's account relies heavily on the theory of kitsch developed by Tomas Kulka (1988, 1996), and its plausibility rests, in part, on certain exclusions made by his theory of kitsch, which sees it as essentially a flawed counterpoint to art. Kulka's theory, it should be noted, builds in some distinctive biases not shared, as we shall see, by all theorists of kitsch, and these will have implications down the road for how we think of the relationship between kitsch and bullshit art. For starters, Kulka (1996) sees kitsch as essentially opposed to "real art" and often sets up this opposition. For instance, he writes, "[a]s opposed to real art, which involves an enhancement of certain experiences, kitsch tones them down" (37). Or again, "[i]n contrast to real art, with kitsch the *what* overshadows the *how*" (115). Thus, his focus largely ignores ordinary objects that are sometimes taken to be candidates for kitsch, e.g., knickknacks (e.g., Dorfles 1969, Olalquiaga 1998), with the exception of tourist souvenirs, which he sees as characteristically embodying the imitative character of kitsch that reproduces fine art (1996, 82), say, a Michelangelo T-shirt. Moreover, Kulka's (1996) view also rejects the idea that high art that incorporates "kitsch elements" as in Pop Art or postmod-

ern art genuinely counts as kitsch (109-113). He writes, “*using kitsch or commenting on it isn’t the same as presenting it... irony is incompatible with kitsch*” (116). While he doesn’t deem it “inconceivable” for kitsch to be incorporated into future “paradigmatic examples of art,” he remains skeptical (117-118). Thus, on this view, kitsch is quite narrowly conceived, a move that, as we shall see below, has relevance for its relationship to bullshit art.

Not all theorists of kitsch agree with Kulka’s conception. For instance, Max Ryyänen (2018) has argued that the contemporary view of kitsch has shifted away from seeing kitsch as “pseudo-art” and “has become almost completely attached to everyday aesthetics” (74). Simplifying Ryyänen’s insightful account of the historical changes in understanding kitsch, let us distinguish two basic ways of construing what kitsch is: (a) the *pseudo-art conception of kitsch*, which sees it as essentially an art-like object that isn’t true art, and (b) the *aesthetic conception of kitsch*, which conceives of kitsch much more broadly in terms of aesthetic or perceptual features.¹¹ Kulka’s theory (1988, 1996) aligns most closely with the former conception, which takes kitsch as an essentially degenerate art wannabe.¹² As we have seen above, for Kulka kitsch is opposed to “real art” and those pieces that ironically incorporate “kitsch elements” are deemed to not count as genuine kitsch.

Other approaches to kitsch, as Ryyänen (2018) has shown, have considered it in more aesthetic terms that are not restricted to the artistic realm and include everyday objects. Thus, for example, the classic volume by Dorfler (1969) discusses kitschy souvenirs and knickknacks, a topic more recently taken up with great sophistication by Celeste Olalquiaga (1998). It also includes certain core aesthetic properties mentioned in Ryyänen’s (2018) analysis of kitsch as tending toward certain colors like pink or certain materials like porcelain (80). We might also add his (Ryyänen 2019) more recent suggestion that we might even perceive nature as kitsch, e.g., perfect mountains or a palm tree-lined beach that we perceive through the filter of, say, kitschy postcards or souvenirs. These all point to a much broader conception of kitsch that focuses on certain perceptual features rather than its status as a flawed, art-like object.

¹¹ This distinction is useful for the purposes of this argument, but it is not intended to be exhaustive. As a third category, we might add, for example, the sense discussed by Botz-Bornstein (2019)—namely, “kitsch... as a general cultural structure underlying behaviors, economies, and politics” (43-44).

¹² It should be noted that Ryyänen (2018) interprets Kulka as a transitional figure, but I see him as leaning more toward the earlier “pseudo-art” moment of kitsch theorizing described by Ryyänen.

Dadlez's account of the relationship between kitsch and bullshit draws on and presupposes Kulka's (1988, 1996) theory. I want to suggest that her analysis runs into trouble on both ways of understanding kitsch—the pseudo-art conception and the broader aesthetic conception. For the moment, let us grant this starting point for what kitsch is. I want to argue that even so understood, the link between kitsch and bullshit art is not as strong as she assumes. In Kulka's view, kitsch has certain content restrictions: it deals with things that prompt a sentimental response, e.g., kittens, village cottages, children with their mothers (his examples), etc., and is portrayed in a manner to elicit this immediate sentimental response. This portrayal is done in a way that tends to be simple, stereotypical, and does not "enrich" our existing experience (1988, 26). Kitsch merely represents sentimental scenes and thereby prompts these corresponding emotions. This view resonates with the novelist Milan Kundera's (1984) diagnosis that "kitsch is the absolute denial of shit, in both the literal and figurative senses of the word; kitsch excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence" (246). The critical point I want to underscore is that this conception of kitsch includes a content restriction at its core: there are thematic and stylistic aspects that are essential to something being kitschy.

This content restriction is one reason why kitsch does not exhaust the possible set of what can count as bullshit art. A work of abstract or conceptual art that lacks any kitschy subject matter or stylizing may be suspected of being bullshit. The artist may be thought to be a fraud or poseur without making kitsch. Consider again Baudrillard's (2005) critique of the "conspiracy of art." This critique was targeted not at the kitschy, mass-produced middle class art-shops found in malls, the sort of phenomenon highlighted by Dadlez, but rather the high-flying, avant-garde art of premier galleries and museums. If Baudrillard is essentially calling 'bullshit' on the elite art-world, it is not directed at kitsch. Thus, bullshit in the aesthetic realm plays a broader evaluative role and is not limited by kitsch's stylistic and thematic constraints. Even on Dadlez's preferred conception of kitsch, its linkage to bullshit is contingent: bullshit art need not be kitsch.

Moreover, given the central role that social prestige and positioning play on the social pretense theory, we might also suspect that not all kitsch would count as bullshit art. Some kitsch, even of the pseudo-art variety, is lacking pretense. It just is accepted as tacky decoration.

The linkage between kitsch and bullshit art further erodes if we jettison the narrow conception of kitsch underpinning Dadlez's analysis and adopt a broader understanding of it as it occurs in everyday aesthetics (Ryynänen

2018). Many kitsch items, understood as having certain aesthetic properties, e.g., being pink or porcelain (Ryynänen 2018), lack the social pretense necessary to be considered bullshit art. Indeed, they don't seem to be art at all. Consider many sorts of kitschy knick-knacks and household items or plastic reproductions of classic artworks (as cataloged in Dorfles 1969), e.g., towels emblazoned with cute bunnies or small pocket-sized notebooks with Van Gogh's *Starry Night* plastered on the cover. Or, again, the millefiori paperweights and fake grottos discussed by Olalquiaga (1998). While these items smack of kitsch, they lack the necessary social pretense to count as bullshit art. These items neither garner nor aspire to great admiration or prestige as art objects. This stuff may be shitty consumer junk or tasteless decoration, but that is all it is. It certainly is not aspiring to be treated as prestigious art. It would be utterly bizarre if one tried to call it out as bullshit; doing so would display a wrongfully attributed significance to these knick-knacks. Thus, we find kitsch that clearly isn't bullshit art because it doesn't purport to be art—it is merely an aesthetic style.

Moreover, some kitsch fails to count as bullshit art because it may indeed be genuine art. As we saw above, Kulka (1996) excludes this possibility, at least for the present historical moment. However, this is a contestable point. Several theorists have noted the interplay between kitsch and the avant garde (e.g. Crick 1983, Eco 1989). Even Dorfles (1969) suggests in his classic anthology that aspects of kitsch have been taken up by contemporary artists and re-appropriated in a way that attempts to “redeem” it as genuine art (293). As examples, he points to Meret Oppenheim's *Lunch in fur* (1938), elements of plate setting covered with fur, Rene Magritte's *Quand l'heure sonnera* (1965), which displays a painted torso bust sitting on a beach below a hot air balloon, and Warhol's montage *Mona Lisa* (1963). Kulka would likely say that these high art pieces don't count as genuine kitsch, despite appropriating kitschy aspects. However, Ryynänen (2018) has more recently suggested that there is contemporary high art such as the Tokyo Pop of Takashi Murakami that is also genuine kitsch, a move that is consistent with his suggestion that kitsch is primarily seen today in aesthetic rather than “pseudo-art” terms.

Once we abandon the pseudo-art conception of kitsch, these examples problematize Dadlez's thesis. If we admit such ironical uses of kitsch, as Botz-Bornstein (2015, 2019) does in his treatment of the issue, we have reason to think that there can be another sort of kitsch that does not fall under the heading of ‘bullshit art.’ This sort is kitsch that rises above bullshit—it engages in genuine aesthetic novelty and warrants the social pres-

tige it garners. Thus, the supposed parallel between kitsch and bullshit is further complicated, and we have reason to think that 'bullshit art,' as a category of aesthetic critique, is doing something irreducible to the category of kitsch.

Of course, not all attempts to appropriate kitsch ironically are successful. Dorfler speaks of this as "vampire kitsch," i.e., the situation where "the person who believes he is creating works of art when he is in fact creating mere kitsch objects" (301-302). It is precisely in these sorts of cases where the concept of 'bullshit' serves us well. We can use it to call out artistic failures that parade around as something other than what they are.

I have argued that Dadlez's analysis of the relationship between kitsch and bullshit fails. Not all bullshit art needs to be kitsch, e.g., as in Baudrillard's critique of avant-garde art, and kitsch need not be bullshit because, on the one hand, it may not purport to be taken very seriously, and on the other hand, some cases of kitsch may indeed be taken up in genuine art. In both cases, a necessary condition for something to be 'bullshit' is missing. Such kitsch thus fails to count as bullshit art because it is either not nonsense or if it is nonsense, it is simply ordinary nonsense lacking the social brouhaha needed to count as 'bullshit art.'

The social pretense theory provides a satisfactory explanation of the divergences between kitsch and bullshit art. As I have argued, even on its "pseudo-art" conception, kitsch is a thematic and stylistically grounded concept whereas bullshit art is a socially-oriented concept. For something to be kitsch, it must possess certain content-related properties; for art to be bullshit, there is no such requirement, and this opens up a gap between the two concepts. This problem is further amplified if we consider kitsch on the aesthetic conception; then the connection between kitsch and bullshit art becomes even more contingent. For it to count as bullshit art, a social dynamic must exist characterized by a tension between (a) the work of art and (b) its inappropriate or inflated social standing. The social pretense theory thus explains when kitsch can count as bullshit art as well as when it would not.

The social pretense theory of bullshit art liberates an evaluative concept for assessing failings of a social variety, i.e., those that stem from how art is (mis)placed in society. It can take on board many different grounds for why the prestige accorded a work of art is unwarranted: these need not be of the same type. A work of art may not warrant its reception because it is vapid, derivative, silly, kitschy, uninteresting, propagandistic, or transparently financially-motivated, among other reasons. There is thus a certain versatile-

ity in the concept of 'bullshit art' that enables it to mark several different failings. Common to all of these deficiencies is the art's (mis)placement in social space—the prestige and acclaim granted to it.

Conclusion

Bullshitting about art is not the same as bullshit art. Expanding on David Graeber's sense of 'bullshit' used in his analysis of so-called 'bullshit jobs,' I have suggested that we can meaningfully speak of 'bullshit art.' When applied to the sphere of art, this concept suggests that a work of art is nonsense veiled in pretense. Calling an artwork 'bullshit' exposes the gap between the social charade surrounding a work of art and that prestige that it actually warrants. I have called this the social pretense theory of bullshit art.

Against recent attempts to draw a parallel between kitsch and bullshit, I have further argued that there is only a contingent connection between bullshit art and kitsch. While kitsch indeed can be bullshit art insofar as it occupies a position of inflated standing in social space, not all kitsch counts as bullshit art, and not all bullshit art counts as kitsch. The reason is that kitsch picks out thematic and stylistic factors of artworks. To count as 'kitsch,' it must have certain necessary aesthetic content. However, to speak of 'bullshit art' is to operate on a social plane—namely, picking out aspects of how a work of art is received and the place it occupies in social space. Calling out 'bullshit' functions to reveal and thereby dispel the pretense surrounding a work of art.¹³

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