

“Behind the orgy of images something is hidden. The world is hiding behind [them].”
-Jean Baudrillard¹

We have become increasingly defined by things external to ourselves. The images and music we surround ourselves with; the things that we like and those that we hate. Our clothes, the art we decorate our homes with, our mouse pads and desktop wallpaper all come together to form the multi-faceted selves that, whether consciously or unconsciously, we feel we are. These selves as they are defined by images have personality and everything contiguous to it; they may be funny or deep; upper class or low; classy, sentimental, sexy or campy. But once in a while a particular image or type of image comes along that, for those who consciously manage their admittedly image-construed selves, defies a clear approach. The work of Thomas Kinkade is one such type of image.

As the first artist ever to be listed on the New York Stock Exchange, Kinkade indicates a major populist shift in the world of art; the people have spoken up in favor of him with their pocket books. Yet for those of us who value democracy, disdain elitism, and appreciate high art at the same time, he constitutes a major stumbling block. With the recent Norman Rockwell show that toured many of the nation's most prestigious art museums, including New York's Guggenheim, many of those on the fence between the damaging elitism of high art and the parallel love of that art have been heartened to see the institution of the museum take on a populist tone. Yet there is something about Kinkade that does not seem belong in that institution, and many members of the high art world have attempted to describe what it is with minimal success.

I will attempt to show – after explaining Kinkade’s “myth” - that, among other things, it is his failure to speak in the contemporary dialogue of modernism and postmodernism which excludes him from the world of high art. However, I also assert that he deserves major consideration as a challenger of high art paradigms and as such merits close examination because, “after the end of art,” his work can help point the way to the future. Finally, I will consider why the division of Kinkade “lovers” and Kinkade “enemies” exists, and what may be in store for him with regards to the canon and the passage of time.

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It is important before beginning to clarify what, in this paper, is meant by “the canon” and “world of high art” or “high art institutions.” The canon simply refers to those artists considered integral to the history of art as it is construed in art history textbooks or courses on art history. The last two phrases denote fine art museums, curators of those museums, professors of art history, art critics. A significant purpose of this paper is to gain some understanding of why certain artists are admitted to the canon, and what goes into consideration of high art institutions in their (contemporary) derision of a leading popular artist.

Though often called “the most popular artist in America,” Kinkade is not considered critically by these institutions, nor is his work part of the canon. He sells his products in over 300 galleries across the nation, at least 200 of which, called “Thomas Kinkade Signature Galleries,” represent only him. These galleries exist by and large in suburban areas; there are no Thomas Kinkade galleries in the two major U.S.

cosmopolitan centers of Los Angeles and Manhattan. Kinkade's fortune comes solely from reproductions (on canvas) and art-generated products; he has not sold an original painting for over 3 years. His products include books, pillows, blankets, mouse pads, nightlights, La-Z-Boys, and, most recently, The Village, a community in Vallejo, CA, comprised of 101 homes modeled after the paintings of Thomas Kinkade. [Fig. 1] Kinkade markets his work in family and airline magazines, on his immensely popular website, www.thomaskinkade.com, and through countless other corporations. [Fig. 2] With these preliminary explanations, a more in-depth account of who Kinkade is can now be undertaken.

I. Kinkade's Myth: His self-presentation and the view of him in the eyes of others

During a contemporary artist's period of activity, assumptions and theories about the artist are relayed in a variety of media. These stories, interviews, and ideas come together to form veritable myths about the artist. Altogether separate from the physical work of art itself, these myths are as important as that physicality in the dictation of whether the artist will be inscribed in the canon of art history, as well as what form that inscription will take. Jackson Pollock's myth illustrates this well. While his art was a wild mass of intertwining, almost indecipherable webs of paint, he himself was depicted as "the brooding puzzled-looking man," who "finally, after days of brooding and doodling...decides the painting is finished, a deduction few others are equipped to make."ⁱⁱ Pollock's persona was suited to his style of painting, and this myth was

imperative to forming the public opinions about him that would lead to his now firm inscription in the canon of art history.

Kinkade's myth bears two important distinctions from Pollock's. First, Kinkade is largely the creator of myths about himself, while Pollock was mainly appropriated by others and then "created."ⁱⁱⁱ Second, Kinkade has two myths. There are two facets of his persona – the personal and the professional – that are presented in different media and that generally do not overlap. Kinkade's personal self is presented in his art and in his art-generated products, while his professional self is illustrated in magazines and newspapers where the artist may have been interviewed. In this media, Kinkade does not present the issues that are covered in his art, while conversely, in his art, he does not address the topics that are covered in magazines and newspapers.

The back flap of one of Kinkade's books, The Spirit of America, states "A committed Christian, husband, and father, Kinkade lives with his wife and four daughters in Northern California."^{iv} Kinkade's personal self as it is manifested in his art does not deviate from this standard formula. Three things are important to him: family, religion, and nature. As every person who enters a Kinkade gallery is informed, Kinkade includes an "N" in each of his paintings as a tribute to his wife, Nanette, and often includes the names of one of his four daughters, Chandler, Merritt, Winsor, or Everett. Kinkade's signature is accompanied by a small fish – an allusion to the miracle of the loaves and fishes - and a biblical citation, such as John 3:24. The content of the paintings themselves is a tribute to the beauty of nature. The categories of paintings available on Kinkade's website illustrate his values well: bridges, churches, cityscapes, cottages, estates, gardens,

gates, gazebos, great outdoors, hearth and home, holidays, impressionistic, inspirational, lighthouses, memories, seascapes.^v

Kinkade's professional self is manifested in media such as magazines and newspapers. Here, Kinkade addresses controversies in his art of which he is aware. He states "People say I've sold out. But not reproducing my art would be like telling a writer not to publish a manuscript because it's one of a kind,"^{vi} and "[At Berkeley] my professors would say 'Art should be all about you.' That's a very self-centered approach."^{vii} While Kinkade does address the fact that his art is about religion, stating, for example "I paint scenes that serve as places of refuge for battle-weary people. The world is filled with enough darkness. I don't want to add to that,"^{viii} he does not espouse any philosophies about God or Christianity in depth. In fact, one of the only articles in which he states directly that his art is about Christianity, saying that he views his art as "a very thoroughgoing form of evangelism," appears in the publication Christianity Today.^{ix} In an article in Time magazine, on the other hand, Ken Raasch of Kinkade's company Media Arts Group, Inc. (MAGI) states "The art establishment in this country knows there's a payoff if they keep art out of the reach of the average person."^x Generally, in this media, Kinkade presents himself as an artist who creates pictures that everyone can appreciate and understand, thereby reclaiming the practice of art for the masses. From these patterns, it is clear that Kinkade talks about certain things to certain people. To his financially supporting public, he presents his personal self, while to the media and his critics, he presents his professional self. These selves are committed Christian/family man and a sort of Robin Hood of art for the masses, respectively.

Kinkade's myth is both affirmed and refuted by others. To his collectors and fans, the values he espouses in his work serve him well. Paula Ricketts, who owns three Thomas Kinkade prints, states "He's the only painter who depicts the quaintness of American life. I can walk down that sidewalk, stand in front of that cottage, because Kinkade brings me there."^{xi} All Thomas Kinkade fans or collectors invariably point out the "N" in their pieces that the artist has included for his wife, as well as noting that he often includes one of his daughters' names. Kinkade's values as well as his own person are found in each of the reproductions, and viewing his work is akin to making contact with the artist himself – or at least with the personal self that Kinkade propagates in his products. "Because of his messages that celebrate home, family, nature, and tradition,"^{xii} Kinkade's fans find contact with the artist highly inspirational, even to the extent that some say he has saved them from suicide.^{xiii}

The view of Kinkade in the eyes of financial analysts stands in sharp contrast to his image in the eyes of collectors. Dave Lavigne, an equities analyst for Denver's EBI Securities, states: "It's a powerful, well-oiled distribution and manufacturing system."^{xiv} Of the built-in market that comes with Kinkade's name, MAGI Vice President of sales and marketing, Cheryl O'Connors, states that "It's a total marketing gimmick – I don't want to say gimmick – a total marketing plan."^{xv} Certainly the feeling of individual contact with the artist is negated by the notion that Kinkade includes these personal touches as a gimmick to sell more products. The artist, however, attempts to counter this by, for example, employing "Master Highlighters." These 'assistants' take a week-long course to learn about Kinkade's techniques, later branching out to his 300-plus galleries

across the country to personalize Kinkade's works for his collectors. Frank Weber, a Kinkade collector from Vacaville, CA, enjoys the touch-up process employed by Master Highlighters: "This personalizes it. So even if your next-door neighbor has the same picture, each one is different."^{xvi} While his collectors might not realize it, financial analysts have not missed the fact that MAGI and Kinkade are savvy businesspeople, covering up those aspects of commercialization and reproduction – the hubs of Kinkade's success - that are most unsavory.

II. Kinkade and the world of high art: Issues of class, commercialization, and style

It is Kinkade's commercialization along with his style itself that are the focal points for criticism of the artist. The opinions of writers as well as those of museum curators and art history PhD's inevitably form part of the myth surrounding the artist that is otherwise largely controlled by him. One might view these criticisms of Kinkade as part of the apparatus in which the artist talks about certain things to certain people – presenting his professional self to some and his personal self to others. Here, though, it is only his professional self that is depicted. While his Christian themes might be talked about, it is only in relation to the artist's "image" as he participates in the *profession* of painting and selling. While high art's opinions of Kinkade are either neutral or negative, they are virtually never positive. An article in the New Yorker, a quintessential "highbrow" publication, summarizes the reasons for which Kinkade is derided, stating "By and large, art critics consider Thomas Kinkade a commercial hack whose work is mawkish and suspiciously fluorescent and whose genius is not for art but for

marketing.^{xxvii} These two aspects – style and commercialization – are the ones focused on by high art institutions in their critiques of the artist.

Kinkade states that since he is relevant to 10,000,000 people – a recent estimate in number of owners of a Kinkade print or product – he is the most relevant artist in the world.^{xviii} The derision of such a thoroughly popular artist implies an elitism on the part of high art institutions. Yet, it is important to point out that the tastes of masses (which may include members of high art institutions), Martha Stewart for example, are not always objects of analytical attention. This does not alternately imply elitism on the part of one who has decided not to elevate or dissect the Martha Stewart commercial/cultural phenomenon. However, historical precedent for creating a cultural elite through taste in art demands that we ask the question: is Kinkade derided purely because he is popular to so many people?

A case study of the relative inscriptions in the canon of Jackson Pollock and Norman Rockwell has shown that elites of the 1940's, such as Clement Greenberg, utilized taste in the arts to affirm their social status. The first line of Avant-garde and Kitsch states “One and the same civilization produces simultaneously two such different things as a poem by T.S. Eliot and a Tin Pan Alley song, or a painting by Braque and a Saturday Evening Post cover,”^{xxix} clearly delineating a difference between upper class tastes and tastes of the masses. Greenberg elevated the style of Jackson Pollock because it was vague, abstract, and incomprehensible to the masses and derided the style of Norman Rockwell because it was comprehensible to them. These two devices served to separate the elite minority – who reputedly understood Pollock's work – from the lowbrow

majority who, in Greenberg's words, "have always remained more or less indifferent to culture."^{xx} Instead of being based on concrete features of the art, as one scholar states, "Their canons of taste merely reflected a defensive elitism prompted by status anxieties."^{xxi}

Is it possible that the intense dislike of Thomas Kinkade by high art institutions is based on the same elitism as the one which placed Pollock in the canon and excluded Rockwell from it? It is important to point out the distinction, first, that Rockwell and Pollock's formative years were characterized by a blurring of social class lines. As Russell Lynes wrote in Harper's Magazine in 1949 "The old structure of the upper class, middle class, and low class is on the wane..."^{xxii} Therefore during that period, the classes had a greater propensity toward employing artificial means of separation, such as taste. Second, since that time, the world of high art institutions has experienced a democratizing trend which leans toward a deeper questioning of the assumptions surrounding the formation of the canon. The study by Pierre Bourdieu, completed in 1979, empirically measured the notion that particular tastes are not isolated but can be linked with considerable accuracy to sets of esthetic values that correspond to one's place in the social system.^{xxiii} Following this study have been others, most notably the one by sociologists Paul DiMaggio, Michael Useem, and Paula Brown which found that out of all categories of museums (folk, science, history), the art museum was the least likely to attract representatives from low-income groups.^{xxiv} Such points are not employed to prove that nothing of the Greenbergian elitism comes into the derision of Kinkade, but

rather, to complement the fact that present-day critics of Kinkade have more concrete rationale behind their critiques than Greenberg did of the tastes of the masses.

The first of these critiques is Kinkade's commercialization. The mechanical reproduction that allows him to commercialize his art dates back to the mid-19th century, and with its invention came a host of implications that changed the entire thought process surrounding art. Walter Benjamin was one of the first to explore these. In his seminal essay, The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, Benjamin states that reproduction of art implicitly causes a loss of "aura" in the reproductions that viewers would otherwise attach to the original.^{xxv} While Kinkade garnered \$132,000,000 in sales in 2000 alone, not one cent came from the sale of an original painting. However, Kinkade attempts to counter the loss of aura reproduction causes by employing the aforementioned Master Highlighters, and certainly, as his fans have stated, they feel as though there is some aura in their highlighted copies. To some high art institutions, however, such a "gimmick" does not hide the fact that Kinkade is, to them, a purely commercial artist. As Guggenheim curator Robert Rosenblum has stated "Thomas Kinkade doesn't look like an artist who's worth considering, except in terms of supply and demand."^{xxvi} Herbert Palmer, a gallery owner in Los Angeles, states of Kinkade and like ilk "These guys haven't invented anything, they've just discovered an image that's salable, and they pump the market until they can't sell anymore."^{xxvii}

One might question the derision of Kinkade for his commercialization when no less than \$2,000,000 of Pollock-related merchandise was sold at MoMA's 2000 retrospective of the artist. The crucial distinction is that Kinkade himself both initiated

and controls his commercialization, while Pollock never commercialized his own work. There is one core reason why high art institutions do not want artists to commercialize their own work and instead wait for critics and wealthy patrons to lift them up out of poverty into the world of high art. It was probably stated best by Greenberg, and in fact is the only point at all which, despite his elitism, has the potential to be rationally argued. This is that Pollock was working on “ ‘art for art’s sake’ and ‘pure poetry’ [and that] thus, the aim of art [was] not to engage something external but to enter an internal dialectic with itself.”^{xxviii} By working in his own unique style that Pollock, Greenberg would have us believe, felt internally compelled towards, the artist risked poverty to follow his virtually divine inspiration. High art institutions want some of the divine in their experiences of art, something that implies a sacrifice to follow a vision, transcending the material limits of life on earth. Of course, and the fact is reasonable, many artists do not want to wait for their “discoveries” to happen. As artist Wyland puts it “The art snobs frown on any marketing or business, but the old masters weren’t successful until they were dead. I didn’t want to wait that long.”^{xxix} As another commercialized artist, Richard MacDonald, states: “What kind of business relationship is this where the artist puts out all the effort and money, and the gallery does nothing? A car dealer buys a certain number of cars and has a certain amount of time in which to sell them. That drives the market. Why shouldn’t art dealers meet the same performance requirements?”^{xxx} But perhaps, as the high art institutions hope, buying art should be different from buying cars.

In terms of style, high art institutions most often critique Kinkade for his idealization of the world. The San Francisco Examiner’s David Bonetti states that

“Kinkade’s is a world that would exist if everyone were on Prozac,”^{xxxix} while SF MoMA curator Gary Garrels explains that “It’s about reaffirming images that are comfortable, which isn’t very interesting. There’s just very little to discuss there.”^{xxxix} In terms of his technical aspects, art critic Kenneth Baker is impressed on certain points,^{xxxix} but this is countered by another stylistic accusation: that Kinkade has not invented anything new. As Brooke Cameron, professor of art at the University of Missouri at Columbia states: “Kinkade is reinventing the wheel: His work is like Currier & Ives...it’s just a nice, nostalgic look at the little stone cottage. His only gimmick is [that] he’s the painter of light. So the lights are on in the houses. But this is not exactly breaking new ground.”^{xxxix}

The critique of Kinkade for idealization of the world merits inspection when one considers the work of Abstract Expressionists – chiefly Mark Rothko. The use of these pictures as “visual aids in initiating and guiding inner ‘journeys’ uniformly depends [as it does for Kinkade] upon dim lighting, privacy...and freedom from self-consciousness in order to effectively trigger a deep animal response.”^{xxxv} As Doug Harvey puts it: “Why should we believe that telling people ‘Everything’s all right because I am a clever, privileged, manufacturer of contemporary cultural objects’ is more convincing to some friendless, lactose-intolerant middlebrow who lives and works in a cubicle than ‘Everything’s all right because you can imagine you are walking down this pre-industrial English country lane and a nice lady is making lactose-free cocoa in that stone cottage?’^{xxxvi} Certainly no one experience is more valuable as an artistically meditative recourse from daily life than the other. However, there are two important distinctions to point out. The first is that even if Kinkade had worked during the 1940’s when the inner

experience caused by the work of art was of chief importance to the high art world, his work is not abstract – a key feature of artwork of that moment.^{xxxvii} Second, Kinkade does not work during the 1940's – he works now; conversely, Rothko does not work now – he worked in the 1940's. The internal journey Rothko promoted might not be relevant – or at all successful - at present because the conversation in contemporary art now centers around different issues than the ones the Abstract Expressionists addressed.

III. Kinkade and the dialogues of modernism and postmodernism

The pivotal issue that Kinkade's critics concentrate around with regard to his style – although they might not state it forthrightly – is the failure of his art to speak in the current language of postmodernism. In the words of Jean Baudrillard, “most contemporary art...[is] in a process of mourning the death of the image and the imaginary, in an aesthetic mourning...But what are modern artists doing anyway? The artists of the Renaissance believed that they were making religious pictures while in fact they were creating artworks...Could it be that the objects [our modern artists] produce are something completely different from art? Fetish-objects, for example, but disenchanted ones...objects that are literally superstitious in the sense that they no longer assume the sublime nature of art nor a belief in art, but which nevertheless keep the idea and superstition of art alive.”^{xxxviii} In the postmodern tone of the moment, contemporary art does not work from inside, producing sentimental, romantic, or nostalgic images. Instead, it looks at itself from outside, in Baudrillard's opinion, mourning the (relatively new) impossibility of the suspension of disbelief that enjoying such art necessitates. A

body of literature by writers from many fields addresses the notion of “the death of art” of which Baudrillard writes. Yet in employing such a term, one must question the finality there implied, critically examining what exactly has brought about such a “catastrophe,” how art that pays no concessions to this notion can exist, and consequently how to approach it.

Considering the aforementioned body of literature on modernism and the death of art, it would be imprudent to suggest any drastically new insights into or a thorough explanation of the topic here. Instead, a few points as they are relevant to the work of Kinkade will be outlined. Matei Calinescu concisely describes the modernist shift, stating “What we have to deal with here is a major cultural shift from a time-honored aesthetics of permanence, based on a belief in an unchanging and transcendent ideal of beauty, to an aesthetics of transitoriness and immanence, whose central values are change and novelty.”^{xxxix} He further posits that while the concept of modernity was born in the Middle Ages as a reaction against the divine authority of the church and its contiguous ideals of utopia and divine beauty, the effects were only first realized in mid to late 19th century France. As he states: “since [that time], a reaction against the basic assumptions of classicism [has caused] the concept of a universally intelligible and timeless beauty [to undergo] a process of steady erosion.”^{xl}

While the precise reasons for this shift will not be dissected here, the fact that there has been a “self-consciousness of modernity as a distinct and superior period in the history of mankind”^{xli} indicates that the effects of modernity were felt in very real terms, to the extent that a “new period” was invented in order to classify and explain those

feelings. The self-consciousness of the period's existence is definitive of the period's feelings themselves – sensations of discomfort caused by an other-directed self-consciousness. These feelings may have been expressed most vividly in the writings of Charles Baudelaire. He characterized the atmosphere of “Modernism in the Streets” as fragmented and lonely, with the urban environment full of “floating existences.”^{xlii} This shift in the gaze affected traditionally conceived notions of beauty, and strains which had already begun in the 18th century with romantics thinking in terms of relative and historical immanent beauty – taste based upon historical experience rather than the “utopian,” universal and timeless beauty - were elaborated upon. As Calinescu states, “The new type of beauty was based on the ‘characteristic,’ on the various possibilities offered by the synthesis of the ‘grotesque’ and the ‘sublime’ on the ‘interesting’...”^{xliii}

Marcel Duchamp may have been one of the first artists to crystallize this other-directed gaze and the adjoining “new” notions of beauty in art, viewing its practice from outside, abandoning the “sublime nature of art” of which Baudrillard writes and producing a completely unsentimental, completely philosophical art form. This strain was picked up in more recent times by Andy Warhol. As Baudrillard writes of the artist, “Warhol is the perfect mirror of our radical disillusion of the world...a mere machine that creates his image objects.”^{xliv} More recently, Daniel Bell has outlined some of the more specific ramifications of the other-directed gaze caused by modernism: “...the traditional ideal of bourgeois life, with its concerns for sobriety and rationality, has lost its cultural champions and has reached a point where it simply can no longer be taken seriously.”^{xlv}

Kinkade's work represents the very opposite of the shift of modernism. It is the "traditional ideal of bourgeois life with its concerns for sobriety and rationality" that Bell states can no longer be taken seriously, but which Kinkade and his millions of followers do. Kinkade's work does not mourn the death of the image in any way or express the disillusion caused by the "catastrophe" of modernism. As Harvey states: "[his works] are pictures that look like scenes that look like pictures."^{xlvi} One example is Kinkade's painting, Chandler's Cottage. [Fig. 3] Here, the lights of the cottage on the left are nicely balanced against the single lamppost on the right. The path brings the viewer's gaze into the painting, inviting him to imagine walking down the perfect stone path among the immaculately manicured garden with, amazingly, every color of the rainbow represented therein. One enters the cozy and welcoming cottage – that has precisely the right level of old-fashioned fairytale-ness and smoke piping out of the chimney - just as clouds begin to form in the sky. Kinkade's own comments about the painting stress its whimsical and unrealistic nature as he explains that he had conceived of the cottage as one that his daughters could play in. His work emphasizes the enduring sentimentality and romanticism – and lack of overt philosophy - impossible in most other contemporary art.

Yet Kinkade's failure to acknowledge these problems does not imply an ignorance on the artist's part with regard to them. As art historian Karal Ann Marling points out, "He's not some ignorant pissant out there making velvet paintings to hang in the gas station."^{xlvii} Indeed, Kinkade is fully willing to participate in the dialogue of "high art" when he presents his previously discussed "professional self" which is manifested in articles and interviews. As Christianity Today portrays Kinkade: "He is waging a moral

crusade against what he sees as dominant themes in Modern Art: destruction of the beautiful, elitist contempt for the audience, and ‘the whole Modernist lie...that art is about the artist.’^{xlvi} Kinkade himself demonstrates his (at least partial) familiarity with postmodernism and its problems when he states “High culture is paranoid about sentiment. But human beings are intensely sentimental. And if art does not speak a language that’s accessible to the people, it relegates itself to obscurity.”^{xlvi}

The inner-directed/other-directed dichotomy Kinkade’s art illustrates – as it pits its inner-directed inspiration against the negatively other-directed nature of contemporary high art - is reflected in the artist’s very persona, or myth. It is paradoxical that Kinkade reserves his postmodern ideas – his ability to look at himself as an artist from outside, or his professional self – for people other than those he aims to “help.” It is necessary to question the possibility of both seeing Kinkade as a “Robin Hood of art for the masses” (his professional self) and perceiving oneself as a member of the masses from whom that self is withheld – in other words, who only sees Kinkade’s personal self. Hence, one must question how much Kinkade is truly helping “the masses” by creating the images he does, because participating in the process whereby his art is appreciated implies a tacit approval of having certain things (i.e. Kinkade’s goals as an artist) kept from oneself as the viewer.

As Harvey puts it: “What he understands (and many of his fellow [Pasadena] Art Center alumni do not) is that people consciously prefer to be seduced into agreement, rather than bullied into making up their own minds. To refuse to participate in such hardwired and unavoidable acts of commerce on the basis of moral superiority is, if not

puritanical, hypocritical and fascist, then just plain stupid.”¹ Harvey speaks of the ability to let go of the self-consciousness of postmodernism which can allow viewers to enjoy Kinkade’s art. What he does not account for is the fact that many people do *not* consciously prefer to be seduced into agreement. The joy one receives from philosophically considering a work by Sherrie Levine versus the joy one receives from the spiritual journey of a Thomas Kinkade print tap into two different human sensibilities. To some, the latter is most appealing while to others, it is the former.

Yet now, it appears that the differing opinions have come down to an issue of taste. This would be the case if it were true that everyone was consciously making the decision about whether or not to be “seduced” by Kinkade’s work. However, Harvey may be imprudent in assuming that Kinkade’s fans have all consciously made the decision to be seduced by it. I would suggest that it is the very facet of being faced with *no* decision whatsoever that is most appealing. The moment one thinks about Kinkade’s work in the very sense that Harvey does, it loses its charm, and I would argue that it is this charm that is most alluring to his fans. Harvey does not lend enough weight to the conscious effort that must be made (by a “conscious” person) to separate an artistically philosophical experience from an artistically meditative or spiritual one. Such a mental process undermines the blasé romanticism that is most attractive precisely because it does not ask the viewer to think. The conclusion to be drawn is that because the art loses its charm with consciousness of it, most people who are conscious (but not all, as Harvey has shown), will choose not to be seduced by it.

IV. Kinkade as challenger of high art paradigms?

The most ironic thing about Kinkade's work is that it asserts a political stance that poses as anti-political - but it is precisely this non-political stance that *is* his stance.

Consequently, one might suggest that Kinkade's style is the only way of achieving his goal of making art accessible to the masses and negating the dialogue of "high art" which excludes the possibility of his brand of romanticism. Is it possible that Kinkade, posing as a clever businessman who produces comforting images for the public, in actuality presents a major challenge to the paradigms of modernism and postmodernism in contemporary art? If so, could we then assume that he has, in fact, entered the dialogue of contemporary art and that he should therefore be considered for entry into the world of high art?

Assuming Kinkade does represent a challenge to high art, the first point to dissect is the necessity of entering the "dialogue" of high art in order to be considered for entry into that world. Such a point would seem self-evident - like the analogy of a young man entering a parlor where a conversation has been taking place for some time, loudly stating his opinion without knowing the issues involved, and seeming absurd and illogical - except for the fact that the high art world values subversiveness. Historically, the avant-garde has been praised for doing the "new" thing, for its outrageous and rebellious qualities.^{li} Certainly Kinkade subverts many of the deeply rooted assumptions about modernism that are intrinsic to contemporary art. However, in his art practice, Kinkade does not assert or purport that he is participating or aiming to participate in the dialogue of high art. Art that pointedly aims to subvert high art must have some of that discourse

in it from which it can depart. Kinkade's art does not overlap or engage with the high art world in any way. This division is most obvious in the way Kinkade markets his work. With ads for Kinkade products in airline and family magazines, [Fig. 4] and the remarkable fact that no Kinkade galleries exist in Manhattan and Los Angeles, it would appear that Kinkade is not aiming to enter the world of high art.

But even so, there is a definite point to be taken seriously with regard to what might be seen as a confrontation of high art models. Arthur Danto's notions of the death of art, in which art achieves self-knowledge by turning into its own philosophy, points to the historical end of art wherefore artistic activities are only of secondary importance. Elaborating on Danto's observations, Crispin Sartwell suggests that "[the development of avant-garde art which] culminates in the art's discovery of itself as its discovery of itself shows that there is something empty (and perhaps pathological) about the concept of avant-garde art...[he attempts to] reconstrue parts of this history, not only as the attempt to discover what (avant-garde) art is, but also as the attempt, through that discovery, to destroy (avant-garde) art."^{lii} Rather than viewing the culmination of avant-garde art in the postmodern tone it has now taken as an interesting development, Sartwell sees it as a neurosis, explaining "self-knowledge and self-consciousness are to some degree desirable...But too much self-consciousness is madness...Excessive self-consciousness can lead to a need for oblivion, an impulse toward self-destruction."^{liii} And as Baudrillard writes of, one might assume, a work by Sherrie Levine, "appropriations claim to be ironic...but this is only a by-product of disillusion."^{liv}

The very remedy Sartwell prescribes for this sad and destructive path is the substitution of “craft” for the avant-garde, a label that has been applied to Kinkade on more than one occasion. As Mark Pohlad, associate professor of art and art history at DePaul University describes it, craft art “provides for escape and is lovely, and is something that doesn’t really ask questions but provides solace and something predictable.”^{lv} If we consider Kinkade’s work as craft, then there is no real problem about making the distinction between it and “art” – since it is not art, it has no chance of being considered for entry into the world of high art. But if, as Sartwell suggests, we aim to substitute craft *for* art, the issue becomes more complicated. Does Kinkade’s craft constitute art after the end of the evolution, the final point where nothing more will change? Or might it indicate that the story of art will be beginning all over again?

Abolishing the avant-garde does not indicate that the mindsets which gave way to it have been abolished. In fact, Sartwell states that “what the differentiated art world represents, rather than a certain line of conceptual or experiential development, is the history of certain class relations, the elaborate development of snobbery into a systematic ideology which finally gets fossilized into institutions.”^{lvi} However, Kinkade himself creates these same divisions in his own practice of art marketing. With the different levels of available limited editions (with the highest priced at \$15,000 and with a bit of Kinkade’s DNA in the signature to verify authenticity), Kinkade creates a parallel world of “snobbery” where the high prices are part of the appeal: they imply that they are choice and exclusive, and that only certain classes of people will be able to afford them – a limited edition of people with taste and discernment. The point is that even if the avant-

garde were abolished, the impetus for it - whether it is the move towards an extreme self-consciousness or the desire to create difference in classes - would still exist, and new ways of practically materializing those drives would be created.

Tying together these thoughts, we can conclude that in a high art world which necessitates some sort of announced or pointed entry – even in order to subvert it – Kinkade does not attempt to enter it. If the purpose of Kinkade’s work is to destroy the entire system, which has a propensity toward self-consciousness and class divisions, we can conclude that not only is it impossible for him to abolish these things altogether – because they are part of a certain “human nature” that created them in the first place – but also that, for the same reason, he perpetuates them in his own art practice.

Kinkade has a definite point when he states that “High culture is paranoid about sentiment. But human beings are intensely sentimental. And if art does not speak a language that’s accessible to people, it relegates itself to obscurity.”^{lvii} But that the only way to include a sentimental art practice in the culture is through the negation of self-knowledge Kinkade’s viewers must engage in to enjoy his work is a cynical view. Considering that Kinkade aims to help his viewers, it suggests that he values ignorance over consciousness when weighing relative levels of well-being. One cannot help but be reminded of books like Brave New World or Fahrenheit 451, in which characters are given medications by their respective governments in order to make them “productive,” “happy” citizens of the nation. But what the authors aim to show through their nightmarish visions is that contentment possible only through ignorance cannot and should not be the key to well-being.

So considering again if Kinkade's methods are the only way to achieve his goals – those that negate the self-consciousness of the high art world and bring his viewers into a world of life-affirming art – a key question arises. Is there a way of working from within the existing framework of contemporary art (because, as Sartwell explains, a certain degree of self-consciousness *is* desirable) in order to negate the neurosis he (Sartwell) describes? Or is Kinkade's method the only way of reclaiming art for “the people” who cannot or do not want to participate in the cynical contemporary art dialogue? It is important to point out that in his quest to help people, by employing the methods Kinkade does he includes the most alienated but leaves behind the most neurotic. These are the people who, like myself, are fully aware of and engaged with the dialogue of modernism and postmodernism and cannot suspend disbelief to enjoy his images. Of course, if we assume that his art does help in some way, we might argue that he is helping the majority of people and leaving behind only a minority. But is there a way of bringing us all into a life-affirming world of art that can be *consciously* appreciated? What exactly happened at the moment when romantic images could no longer be taken seriously? These are the types of questions that artists will grapple with “after the death of art.” As Danto elaborates on his groundbreaking ideas, “A story was over. It was not my view that there would be no more art, which ‘death’ certainly implies, but that whatever art there was to be would be made without benefit of a reassuring sort of narrative in which it was seen as the appropriate next stage in the story. What had come to an end was that narrative but not the subject of the narrative.”^{viii} Perhaps, though, there is a logical next step for our

history of art, and the dialectic Kinkade creates between his work and high art may give us a clue as to what it will be.

V. Reconsideration of class issues

I stated before that Kinkade includes a majority in his art but leaves behind a minority. It is critical to ask why this division exists on the massive scale that it does. As Daniel Bell explains, “During the last few decades the antinomian and deliberately deviant patterns of modernist imagination have not only won out culturally but have been adopted practically and translated into the life style of an increasingly large intellectual minority. Parallel to this process, the traditional ideal of bourgeois life, with its concerns for sobriety and rationality, has lost its cultural champions and has reached a point where it simply can no longer be taken seriously.”^{lix} Having established that the self-consciousness of contemporary art is a reaction to and reflection of the problems of modernism, and that, for the sake of argument, this is an important and significant strain in modern life, might we then conclude that only a minority of people – the artists who painted or wrote about it and the critics and patrons who adopted their ideas – experienced the problems of modernism?

Bell suggests this much when he states that “the deviant patterns of modernist imagination have been adopted by an increasingly large intellectual minority.” As the writings of Baudelaire and T.J. Clark demonstrate, the patterns of modernism originated in the urban minority of ultra-cosmopolitan 19th century Paris.^{lx} The step, then, between the adoption of modernist art by the wealthy minority and the museum’s adoption of that

art is a simple one; wealthy patrons provide the money for artists to produce the art and finance the institution of the museum. One need only think of the famous Peggy Guggenheim-Clement Greenberg partnership for evidence that those with expendable amounts of money play a great role, together with the intellectually elite critics, in establishing the canon. However, one key point is missing from the equation: why were modernism and the contemporary aesthetic of the avant-garde, specifically, the most attractive aesthetic strains of the elite minority to the extent that they became canonical? The answer to this question extends beyond the scope of this paper. However, within its borders we must still consider, even for a moment, the faith we put in the dictatorial bodies that called modernism and postmodernism the next “important logical development” in the world of art. Certainly, as Sartwell suggests, this development is also a reflection of a complex socio-economic system with needs to define class distinctions through taste and other social and cultural means. But while acknowledging that an interrogation of this authority is important,^{lxii} it is also nearly impossible to know what the precise reasons were for the adoption of a certain aesthetic as canonical. Moreover, shifting to a more pragmatic approach, regardless of the underlying factors, the precipitation of these changes over time has meant an abandonment of the majority and an inclusion of a minority in a great cultural component of human society.

This argument does not assume that before the canonical establishment of the modern and the postmodern the “art world” was a more democratic polity. In fact, the world of art patronage and the leisure implied therein has always been the domain of the upper classes. Instead, what the “new” polarity between masses and elites reflects is only

an increased ability to see it, a changing society that takes into greater consideration the group *as a whole*. In the Baroque era of France it was simply not considered why the lower classes (or those with tastes outside the academy) were misrepresented in the cultural pursuit of art. Therefore although the democratization of art has not occurred, a greater consciousness of its inequity has been fostered. Upon this consciousness, with those like Kinkade who represent the voices of the people and the museum that increasingly aims to include more people in its establishment, perhaps some middle-ground can be reached between those who view themselves from outside and those who do not.

VI. Time, history, and the canon

The picture painted above is an optimistic one. Having established already that Kinkade does not presently enter the world of high art, even to subvert it, is there a chance that he may do so in the future? As artists from Artemisia Gentilleschi to Norman Rockwell have shown, the canon, or at least high art opinion, is changeable to a certain degree. Might Thomas Kinkade, an artist who, like Rockwell, has been viewed and mythically created as an artist “for the masses” eventually be appropriated by the high art world to the extent that his work be displayed in New York’s Guggenheim? And if this were to happen, how would it be possible and what would be the reasons behind it?

Rockwell’s change over history is a useful case study for comparison with Kinkade because of similar divisions of taste along class lines. Rockwell was specifically employed by Greenberg in Avant-garde and Kitsch to deride the tastes of the masses:

“One and the same civilization produces simultaneously two such different things as a poem by T.S. Eliot and a Tin Pan Alley song, or a painting by Braque and a Saturday Evening Post cover.”^{lxii} The writing of Greenberg and others, such as the 1946 fame-confirming book on the artist entitled Norman Rockwell: Illustrator, firmly established Rockwell’s myth in the 1940’s as an artist of the people.^{lxiii}

In the catalogue of Rockwell’s recent exhibition, the artist has been appropriated by the fine art museum – the same institution that had earlier scorned him. For example, as Guggenheim curator Robert Rosenblum states in the last line of the catalogue, “The sneering, puritanical condescension with which he was once viewed by serious art lovers can swiftly be turned into pleasure. To enjoy his unique genius, all you have to do is relax.”^{lxiv} The capacity to which a later curator could apply this statement to another made by Rosenblum about Kinkade is remarkable, as Rosenblum himself implies: “[Thomas Kinkade] doesn’t look like an artist who’s worth considering, except in terms of supply and demand. Of course a lot of people would have probably said the same thing about Rockwell 20 or 30 years ago. But I think Rockwell is different.”^{lxv} Therefore, it is important to emphasize the role of time in Rockwell’s recent exhibition, and moreover the capacity of time to alter high art opinions in general. The myth created by “sneering, puritanical” art lovers in the 1940’s that painted Rockwell’s art as “low, for the people” is no longer as present in the collective consciousness. The passage of time has gradually purged the art world of some of its preconceived notions so that Rockwell could be appropriated by the museum institution.

At the same instant, however, Rockwell is maintained in the same reductive place as he has always been. While Dave Hickey positions him in the same tradition as Fragonard, David, and Poussin, making a clear effort to elevate him to the level of the established art historical canon,^{lxvi} Wanda Corn keeps him beneath the artists contemporary to him – specifically Jackson Pollock. By doing so, she tacitly collaborates in the same Greenbergian apparatus of “snobbery” that established the canon in the 1940’s.^{lxvii} With time, therefore, the high art world does have a degree of flexibility, but to a certain extent, the founding myths of artists – and the elitist apparatus of the “high art institution” - are inescapable.

Let us imagine that, in 40 years, a retrospective of the work of Thomas Kinkade is shown at the Guggenheim. What would the possibilities be for the curators’ logic? Could it be that, at that point, the tides of postmodernism would have changed and Kinkade achieved his (partial) goal of focusing the gaze back inside and creating a sentimental art form that everybody can appreciate? Just imagine scores of people walking through the Guggenheim picturing themselves walking down country lanes and sitting inside idyllic cottages. This would involve a complete erasure of part of Kinkade’s myth as it exists today (and as Rockwell has shown this does not occur) or a revolution on the part of the high art institution of the kind previously imagined – one that meets sentimental art “half-way” to create a new kind of sentimental yet conscious art practice. Considering trends in the world of art history, this seems farfetched.

Now let us imagine that a Kinkade show is put on at the Guggenheim that, like the Rockwell show, garners immense financial rewards and aims to seem “adventurous

and democratizing.” It is important to consider what it means for an institution to appropriate an art form that aims to subvert it without changing in the way that the political art form recommends. As Abigail Solomon-Godeau explains with regard to the appropriation of Sherrie Levine’s photography by high art institutions “... postmodernist photography, once conceived as a critical practice, had become a “look,” an attitude, a *style*... Postmodernism as style... eliminates any possibility of analysis insofar as it complacently affirms the interchangeability, if not the co-identity, of art production and advertising, accepting this as a given instead of a problem.”^{lxviii} Similarly, I would argue that if the work of Kinkade were appropriated by the high art museum, it would lose any capability of criticizing that institution and its lack of sentimentality, and instead be created as a certain “style.” In the case of the high art institution, keeping in mind that Kinkade’s myth as a purely commercialized and “low” artist would not have completely disappeared, this style would, by necessity, be camp.

Camp is the third choice available to people when casting judgment on something; it “offers a completely different, supplementary set of standards, outside ‘good’ and ‘bad.’”^{lxix} As Susan Sontag explains “Time liberates the work of art from moral relevance, delivering it over to the Camp sensibility... Thus, things are campy, not when they are old – but when we become less involved in them, and can enjoy, instead of being frustrated by, the failure of the attempt.”^{lxx} Therefore, camp is extremely reductive of any political message in art. It allows us to say we like something while at the same time have it be understood that we don’t completely take it seriously. It has been suggested that much of the impetus behind the Rockwell show was spurred by this same

sensibility,^{lxxi} and that the catalogue could be interpreted as revolving around it. Robert Rosenblum's closing quote, "To enjoy his unique genius, all you have to do is relax," suggests a reductiveness in line with camp.^{lxxii} Most importantly though, in his case, camp allows him to maintain a position of power over the art in question, implying that by not taking it seriously, it is not worth his time. If the Kinkade show were created, it would be possible because of the capacity of the high art world to maintain an elite position in relation to it through camp. As Sontag states "the history of Camp taste is part of the history of snob taste."^{lxxiii}

At the heart of the canon and its dictation are deep-seated notions about how we think people see us and how we want to be seen. With both Kinkade and Levine, the ability to maintain power over and seem as though we understand are at the core of their imagined and actual appropriations. Both are extremely reductive, coming down, in essence, to issues of style. The overlap between a postmodern photographer and her seeming opposite, Kinkade, exists because, as Sontag explains, "When he proclaimed the importance of the necktie, the boutonniere, the chair, Wilde was anticipating the democratic *esprit* of Camp."^{lxxiv} The camp aesthetic, but moreover the capacity of style to affirm class status reduces all art to a look, to how we think we look when we like it, hate it, or see it as camp.

For two artists who aim to subvert the high art world (in different ways, of course – Levine questions the commerce of the art market obvious in Kinkade's work while Kinkade questions the postmodernism clear in Levine's), both suffer at the reductiveness of an image-construed world. The difference between them within that world exists in the

artists' respective myths. Kinkade's positions him as a low artist, one of the people. Levine's is as the highest of artist's, whose underlying meaning is glossed over by most of the public. Therefore, for those who consciously realize that their tastes reflect their social status, Levine's work will be championed and Kinkade's seen otherwise. On the level of the high art institutions who engage in "self-constuction-image-management" (and want to maintain elite status - such as Rosenblum), this will mean inscription in the canon for Levine, and marginality with regards to it for Kinkade.

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As Doug Harvey states, "Kinkade's work raises more questions about what constitutes art in contemporary culture than most everything from within the art world it aims to supersede."^{lxxv} Indeed, as Kenneth Baker aptly puts it "If there's such a thing as naïve postmodernism, this is it,"^{lxxvi} and certainly, as this paper proves, Kinkade is far from wanting of things to discuss. But the crucial point is that the defining feature of postmodernism is a *lack* of naivete, a consciousness that by necessity brings with it a certain degree of disillusion, even sadness. Perhaps what the issues surrounding Kinkade truly reflect is the centrality of intent – or at least perceived intent – to the artist's work. But as long as he does not pointedly, consciously and intentionally create, the other-directed gaze will be absent from his work and that paramount marker of contemporary high art (and high class) will be lacking as well.

Kinkade's goals of bringing art back to the people are important, not only because in times when many speak habitually of the death of art he can help point the way, but because "he meets some kind of need for a great many people."^{lxxvii} At the risk of

sounding as dictatorial as the artists and critics who decide what it is people need, however, I suggest that it is not Kinkade's brand of work that people need, per se, but rather, any art practice that rewards looking. It may truly be that there is a middle ground between the unconscious rewards of pretty pictures, sentimentality, and contentment Kinkade provides and the conscious rewards of enjoying a piece of art that is challenging. Although it will probably never be fully rid of its snobbery, perhaps in the future the world of high art will create pictures that proactively attempt to engage the masses and challenge them at the same time. Art has the capacity either to challenge or subdue. But presently, the disparity between the work that challenges and the work that makes efforts to reward looking is too large to be reconciled. It would seem, then, that creating a new art form that engages – or at least attempts to engage – everyone rests in the hands of artists. It would be encouraging to be able to place the responsibility for caring about and demanding to be challenged on the masses. But as a result of an art world that has systematically excluded them and a society that increasingly profits from the fulfillment of unconscious desires and drives, turning the tides of an edifice traditionally based on commerce and class divisions is the task of a new generation of artists. An artist like Kinkade manifests at the intersection of a historically elitist art world with the free market valued in American society. Perhaps, however, the next challenger of high art paradigms will be one who, rather than fostering unconsciousness for the sake of a majority, will strive for consciousness and happiness for all. This is a formidable task, no doubt, but it is the one at the horizon of the art world, and it is time, as Kinkade declares, for some kind of change in a system that has been based on inequity for too long.

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- xxxiv. "Despite elitist gripes, he's still America's most popular artist." The Chronicle of Higher Education. (2/22/2002) B4.

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- xxxvii. It is also important to point out that even though Rothko's work promoted an inner journey, in its abstraction, intentionally or not, it also fostered a consciousness and philosophy about painting. In employing total abstraction, one implicitly questions traditional notions of painting whose beauty has in the past been based on figuration and the reproduction of physical reality.
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- xliii. Calinescu 38.
- xliv. Baudrillard 15.
- xlv. Calinescu 6.
- xlvi. Harvey 17.
- xlvii. "Despite elitist gripes" B4.
- xlviii. Randall 30.
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- li. During Jackson Pollock's formative period, his "rebellious" qualities were the most concrete features critics could say they liked about his work. See, for example, James Johnson Sweeney's

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- lxix. Sontag, Susan. "Notes on Camp." A Susan Sontag Reader. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1982. 114.
- lxx. Ibid. 113.
- lxxi. Dave Hickey explains in his article, "Crock Populi," (Artforum v. 37 Summer 1999 p. 33) that one critic "insists on retaining the old language of vanguardism that she believes the latest 'bad art' craze has permanently discredited: She doesn't celebrate Rockwell because of, say, any insight he might offer into middle-American life, but simply because he has never been championed by academic critics before, and wouldn't it be 'outrageous' if he were?"
- lxxii. Rosenblum 185.
- lxxiii. Sontag 117.
- lxxiv. Ibid.
- lxxv. Harvey 19.
- lxxvi. DeCarlo 54.
- lxxvii. "Despite elitist gripes."