Indiscernibly Bad: The Problem of Bad Painting/Good Art

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Before the emergence of postmodernism, it was unusual to hear the judgment 'bad painting' alloyed with 'good art'—a peculiar formula that became the title and theme of an exhibition held in Vienna in 2008. Opening in the summer of 2008, *Bad Painting/Good Art* was a major survey exhibition that displayed twenty-one painters representing approximately ninety years of art history. By offering such a gamut, it made a cogent argument for the prevalence of bad painting in avant-garde and neo-avant-garde practice while also demonstrating its currency in the contemporary artworld. And indeed, recent years have seen contemporary paintings of that ilk performing very well on the secondary market. For instance, Georg Baselitz and Albert Oehlen, who both exhibited in *Bad Painting/Good Art*, set new personal records for their auction turnover in 2017 at $9.1 million and $3.6 million respectively. The recent auction successes of George Condo, although not exhibited in *Bad Painting/Good Art*, likewise testifies to continued interest in this mode of painting.

But in facing such an exhibition, we surely find ourselves confronted by two questions: firstly, how we can tell the difference, or make the distinction, between bad

paintings that are good artworks and bad paintings that simply *are* bad artworks? And secondly, does the first question carry any weight or make sense? In what follows, I want to argue that the first question is both legitimate and, moreover, necessary insofar as it is internal to the practices shown in *Bad Painting/Good Art*. To render the distinction between bad painting/good art and bad painting/bad art, I shall adapt Arthur Danto's writings on indiscernibles and aesthetics before moving onto the insurgence of Neoexpressionist approaches in the 1980s. Lastly, I shall analyse Martin Kippenberger's practice for the purpose of contending that the first question asked above is indeed one of his motivating questions.

Although the formula bad painting/good art came into place during the late 1970s with Maria Tucker's 'Bad' Painting exhibition, the painting/art distinction is especially prevalent a decade before with the development of non-traditional mediums and conceptual approaches. In the American context, Joseph Kosuth presented this as the logical next step in modernist reflexivity, famously writing:

> Being an artist now means to question the nature of art. If one is questioning the nature of painting, one cannot be questioning the nature of art. If an artist accepts painting (or sculpture) he is accepting the tradition that goes with it. That's because the word art is general and the word painting is specific. Painting is a kind of art. If you make paintings you are already accepting (not questioning) the nature of art. One is then accepting the nature of art to be the European tradition of a painting-sculpture dichotomy.

Also reacting against that European tradition but from a European perspective, the short-lived group BMPT (Daniel Buren, Olivier Mosset, Michel Parmentier, and Niele Toroni) sought to contest painting in June 1967 by polemically contending that 'Painting is by nature objectively reactionary'. However, a few months later in September of that year, they proposed their own practice as a critical reconfiguration of painting, and, in doing so they implicitly reversed Kosuth's terms: Art is the illusion of disorientation, the illusion of liberty, the illusion of presence, the illusion of the sacred, the illusion of Nature. . . . Not the painting of Buren, Mosset, Parmentier, or Toroni. . . . Art is a distraction, art is false. Painting begins with Buren, Mosset, Parmentier, Toroni'.

Kosuth and BMPT, then, proffer opposing value judgments that assert the criticality of one half of the painting/art dyad relative to the perceived weakness of the other. And yet, in doing so they suggest a partial mutual independence of each term. For instance, in Kosuth painting is simply a kind of art inessential to the investigation of art as philosophy; whereas for BMPT the reinvention of painting becomes pledged to a material and presentational specificity capable of illuminating particular artwork contexts that the generality of art as such cannot manage. The category of 'bad painting/good art', however, works differently: rather than positing the logical distinction between painting and art, 'bad painting/good art' emphasizes the dialectical interdependency of both sides of this binary opposition. Indeed, the second part of the category (good art) appears, at first glance, to derive as a corollary of sorts from the first part (bad painting).

Such a line of thinking is likely to generate confusions, to be sure. It seems right to say that 'good art' is not a necessary corollary of 'bad painting' but a possible outcome so

say that "good art" is not a necessary corollary of "bad painting" but a possible outcome so that, for example, bad painting also might occasionally result in bad art (which, in pre-modernist times, wouldn't have been surprising). And while Kosuth posits painting as a specific category, he can only do this in tandem within a larger generic system, namely art. Analysed in its singularity, though, the category of painting opens up to include an extraordinary range of practices and displacements—some of which that may not even require actual painting in order to count as paintings. In equal measure, the 'bad' involves a whole gamut of failures and sins such as poor composition, sloppy handling of paint, unresolved conceptual ideas, a suspect politics, being devoid of imagination, or even a worrying lack of morality; most of these symptoms and causes of failure, of course, are to be judged according to particular cultural horizons and historical conjunctures and successfully avoiding any or all of them is still not a guarantee that the final painting would be accepted as good art. Jack Vettriano—let's be honest—is a reasonably good albeit derivative painter, technically; but I would agree with many who contend that he is a bad artist.

At this conjuncture, it's worth listing some of the eighteen artists exhibited in Bad Painting/Good Art and attending to the diversity of painterly approaches taken by them. Present were pre-war paintings by Giorgio de Chirico and Francis Picabia John Currin's cartoony images which add up to a grotesque pictorialization of American life; Lisa Yuskavage's works are similarly exaggerative of the human body, but their cartoon qualities are less indicative of the legacy of Pop Art and instead betoken a more child-like or dreamlike perception of the world. What this list underscores is the sheer multifacetedness of bad painting as a category: it ranges from works that appropriate more

traditional, ‘realist’ or art-historically referential figurative modes of picture-making to putatively ‘expressive’ forms of highly gestural brushwork. While some canvases appear deliberately over-worked, others might strike one as under-worked, not quite resolving into a picture as such. Cartoonish depictions relating to consumerism and modified

canvases bought readymade from flea markets vie with more atavistic works that seek to resist the trappings of contemporary society through recourse to a fierce individualism. The stylistic disunity and historical extendedness here renders it difficult to detect an underlying element that irreducibly defines the badness of bad painting, let alone signal how bad painting can on occasion translate as good art; the one style that didn’t appear was geometric or pure abstract painting. Ultimately, such diversity raises the suspicion that bad painting is nothing more than a subjective judgment applicable to a wide number of examples. Bad painting seems a quagmire cunningly disguised as a category.

Of course, it could be objected that we have moved beyond the age of value judgments in art and so there is nothing to be gained from constructing or possessing a category labelled ‘bad painting’. Postmodernism, after all, teaches (or taught, depending on whether or not one thinks the era of postmodernism has now passed) cultural sensitivity, highlights the significance of perspectivism, questions the point of high/low distinctions, and, in its more simplistic versions, permits an happy ‘anything goes’ approach, while some accounts of modernism have underscored its destabilization of notions of criteria—largely fermented in the European art academies—that formerly not only defined the distinction between good/bad art with unquestionable clarity but also what even constituted painting or sculpture as such—Manet’s Olympia, after all, was

decried as a bad painting at first prior to being accepted according to other criteria. Furthermore, it does not seem overly paranoid to check the credentials of those who assort particulars into good and bad piles and ask what Foucauldian disciplinary apparatuses they are upholding; for instance, nineteenth century aesthetic criteria generally maintained the academic system of art education and its symbolic ties to the nation state until the emergence of what Harrison and Cynthia White nominate 'The Dealer-Critic System' in the latter part of that century. But there has been a growing perception—especially articulated within art criticism—that neglecting questions apropos judgment might not be an efficacious position to take (the present paper, indeed, might be apprehended as a plea for art-critical judgment). Along these lines, one weakness of the Vienna Bad Painting/Good Art exhibition was that the redemptive evaluation of bad painting as good art was largely attended by a refusal of microscopically examining such evaluative judgments and therefore leaving no sense of why bad painting cannot simply be bad art. Indeed, it seemed fair enough to the curators to refer to good art, but grossly unreasonable in their minds to label anything bad art. Eva Badura-Triska remarks early in her essay for the Bad Painting/Good Art exhibition catalogue:

> But let us begin by establishing what we are not talking about here. First, it almost goes without saying that it's not about showing pictures that are 'actually bad'. Not that this never happens in museums, but the notion of doing so deliberately, as a concept—for whatever reason—is bound to quickly end up on thin ice, even if it is motivated by socio-cultural or

historical interests (as, for example, in the case of fascist painting). Such an approach cannot but lead to the many-faceted and banal question of the relative nature of value judgments such as ‘good’ and ‘bad’, a broad and ultimately irresolvable issue that we certainly won’t be dealing with here.

For Badura-Triska, then, the issue of bad painting cannot be satisfactorily investigated from the standpoint of evaluative judgment, but if this is the case we are therefore asked to consider what angle it *can* be investigated from. Instead, she shifts the

question of badness away from the painters themselves and issues of volition. She writes: ‘Bad Painters . . . who clearly declare their commitment to the medium. They stand by it even (or especially) in times when it is repudiated by the dominant movements in art, accused of being unsuited to the issues of the day and thus outdated. For this reason alone, such artists are often considered “bad”.’ In this respect, Benjamin Buchloh’s 1981 attack on Neoexpressionism—which I shall return to later—might be regarded as an attempt to foster the category of ‘bad painting’ upon a number of painters, even though he does not use the actual term itself.

Still, if the category of bad painting seems external to the paintings it purportedly designates, Badura-Triska identifies a shared focus upon what we might term a ‘referentialism’ that unifies the paintings: ‘they mostly paint figuratively, sometimes even using traditional or Old Master styles . . . Bad Painters reflect on and criticize the ability of painting, and ultimately of art in general . . . and thus, logically enough, their attention is focused on the history of painting as a whole’. Such referentialism, however, aims to:

> ruthlessly reveal the incapacity of painting and the impossibility of the expectations placed in it—which are in fact the weakness and limits of all art. Consequently, they also see no sense in switching to a different medium, as this would be of no use. The realization that all such claims are futile can be expressed just as well in the medium of painting and is in fact often a key theme of their work.

Through this argumentative strategy, Badura-Triska underlines the centrality of referentialism even as there are moments in her discussion when the gap between bad painting and bad art almost closes, thereby threatening to render the fundamental premise of their exhibition—bad painting as good art—of little import while nonetheless holding onto bad painting as a category. While Badura-Triska's identification of referentialism seems apposite, if we are to take the hermeneutically open label 'bad painting' with any degree of seriousness, then it would be misguided to set the issue of evaluative judgment aside too readily. In any case, at the risk of appearing self-absolving or just plain cheeky, this paper shall be ultimately contending that the category of bad paintings emerges not from art criticism per se but instead actually derives from the painters themselves. That is to say, bad painting insists upon the importance of evaluative judgments and, in that respect, accepting such paintings on an anti-normative, anti-judgment, 'anything goes' basis misunderstands these artists from the get-go. In a sense bad painting is an oppositional strategy against bad painting. But this is clearly not a fact for all examples of bad painting. What I have in mind here is a specific mode of bad painting that utilizes

mimetic techniques with a high degree of self-reflexivity—the kind of painting which seems appropriately compartmentalizible as bad painting/good art—thereby establishing most pertinently the category of bad painting/bad art. Instead of speaking in alignment with Raphael Rubenstein's use of 'provisionality' as an alternative for 'bad painting', we are arguably enjoined to consider this form of painting more in terms of cunning deliberation and, at times, an admittedly complicated agency. Only in this manner can we learn why an artist might want to paint badly, and thereby elicit the conditions through which we can evaluate the resultant artwork and thus garner some sense as to why it is worth us, as beholders, even bothering to apprehend artworks that seem, at least on first glance, irredeemably substandard.

Bad Painting as a Problem of Indiscernibility

If, however, it makes any sense to claim there is a difference between paintings that look bad and are bad, then how can we even cogently to make this claim? One route forwards would be to revisit Arthur Danto's influential philosophy of art that began with his 1964 essay 'The Artworld' and would be later developed into a potent discussion of indiscernibility. That is to say, the difference, or lack of, between paintings that look bad and are bad may be explicated through an analysis of indiscernibility that follows Danto's own externalist account. In proposing a homology of sorts between problems of categorization concerning bad painting and Danto's philosophy, there is ultimately good reason to confess there are crucial limits and disjunctions here—I shall come to these in a short while. And it won't be possible to construe these matters in the philosophical depth

ordinarily required due to constraints of space. But the overall shape of the argument, I would contend, has a *prima facie* plausibility that offers a certain explanatory value.

Famously, the locus of Danto's extensive writings on art is his experience of Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, which he saw exhibited in 1964 at the Stable Gallery. Presented with an array of plywood boxes silkscreened and sawn so they closely matched actual Brillo Box cartons, Danto was led to consider what specifically made Warhol's boxes art while the originals retained their non-art status. Such a question is prompted by the fact that Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* and actual Brillo boxes were more or less identical to the eye, with any minor differences being strictly contingent and hence negligible. If how they looked—their formal qualities—was not enough to guarantee their pigeonholing into either art or non-art, then what were the relevant properties equal to the discriminatory task? From this paradigmatic case, then, Danto concluded that the traditional procedures and conceptions of aesthetics were incapable of expounding the difference between

objects that look like Brillo boxes (hence, art) and those that are unequivocally Brillo boxes (hence, not art). For instance, Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* are not more beautiful or possess greater formal rigour than the actual Brillo boxes. And if the factory that manufactured the actual boxes started making them from plywood and Warhol decided that just using cardboard would be a cheaper option, than that, too, would have little bearing on their art status. Instead, Danto argued that the difference between the two types resides not in our perceptions or in the materials used, but instead derives from our cognitive knowledge that subtends our capacity of sorting the art from the non-art. As Danto writes:

> What in the end makes a difference between a Brillo box and a work of art consisting of a Brillo Box is a certain theory of art. It is the theory that takes it up into the world of art, and keeps it from collapsing into the real object which it is . . . Of course, without the theory, one is unlikely to see it as art, and in order to see it as part of the artworld, one must have mastered a good deal of artistic theory as well as a considerable amount of the history of recent New York painting.

Danto's *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* extends his conclusions reached in 1964 and proceeds from a striking example: an imaginary exhibition comprised of identical red rectangles affixed to the gallery wall. As Danto comments, though, these red squares stem from very different periods of history and embody divergent intentions. So, for example, there is a red square entitled Nirvana which represents transcendent experience; another titled *The Israelities Crossing the Red Sea*,

which depicts the last thing the pursuers see prior to their immediate death by drowning in the Red Sea; also included is Malevich's *Red Square* and an unfinished painting (barely begun, in fact) by Giorgione consisting of nothing but a preliminary red ground an array of other paintings. How, then, are we to differentiate between this selection of objects—mostly artworks in this instance—and recognize their different meanings and intentions?

At least early on, as we have seen, Danto's solution to the conundrum was to posit the existence of the artworld as a network of institutions and discourses capable of

conferring the status of art upon objects. In this regard, philosophical aesthetics came to be viewed as inadequate for the task at hand. Quickly becoming somewhat dissatisfied with this answer, and fellow philosopher George Dickie's development of it as the institutional theory of art, Danto adjusted his theory by refocusing on more essentialist criteria. Two facets arose to the forefront of this philosophy, namely that artworks are in general defined by *aboutness* and the ability of *embodying that aboutness*. While these facets purportedly delineate art from non-art, in a more restricted sense they also allow us to extra-visually distinguish between artworks that are visually identical.

Now, what makes all this problematic specifically for the argument that I am building is that the notion of indiscernibility appears to be not fully applicable here. Look again at Danto's examples—the *Brillo Boxes* perceptually no different from actual Brillo boxes, the red paintings that are all visually identical but disparate in meaning. The comparison in Danto's analysis is between objects that are, at least visually, the same. Brillo boxes were not the only packaging appropriated by Warhol in his 1964 exhibition. In broad terms, let us say that the different forms of packaging appropriated by Warhol constitute the replication of a single artistic strategy—all these artworks work in the same way and pose the same philosophical question about the demarcation between art and non-art—and so they belong to a particular class of artworks. Yet in belonging to the same class, the relations between the artworks within this class does not consist of indiscernibility. Rather, the relation of indiscernibility is between two different specific classes of objects, the art and non-art. In a similar manner, the imaginary exhibition of red monochromes presents us with identical objects that, in regard to their individual meanings and historical contexts, occupy different classes. This illustrates that Danto's

examples are highly particularized, the red monochromes are comparable only insofar as they are morphologically identical. But no such comparison is likely to be possible for paintings that look bad and art bad because the matter is placed at a level of generality. Simply put, where does this leave my attempt to use Danto's philosophy, then?

Although Danto's thought experiment stems from a comparative analysis between morphologically identical examples, the overall thrust and ramification of his argument is that these are limit cases demonstrating a lesson that he takes to be true of art since the 1960s in general: namely, the categorization of a particular artefact as an artwork is a non-perceptual affair, and one that is therefore not readily amenable to aesthetics. In other words, an eyeball inspection of the object in front of you will not be enough to determine with sufficient precision its status as an artwork. If this is following Danto's argument correctly, then it might be remarked that there are actually two modes of indiscernibility. On the one hand, there is the mode that appears through the examination of specifically identical objects, and, on the other, a second mode that is constitutive of post-1960s artworks as such. By analogy, then, what follows from this is that my own account is not reliant upon finding particular 'good' bad paintings that are morphologically indiscernible from 'bad' bad paintings *a la* Danto's first mode of indiscernibility. Rather, it is the case that in general terms what makes a 'good' bad painting a 'good' bad painting—and hence

different from a 'bad' bad painting—is indiscernible, therefore not available to a visually-based analysis, and consequently only securable via an externalist report.

Another sticking point here would that recourse to the badness of bad painting implicitly suggests an evaluative judgement—perhaps even an aesthetics—not

countenanced by Danto's externalist philosophy of art. After all, there has long been something of a rift between Danto the art critic writing for *The Nation* and Danto the philosopher of art inasmuch as the latter withholds from the judgemental explications volunteered by the former. Whether we are tackling paintings that look or are bad, an evaluative judgement is present: this is obvious enough in those placed beneath the rubric of 'being bad' (however that might be defined), though perhaps less for those that merely look or pretend to be bad. However, a later book by Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty* indicates a step forward (while also accruing further difficulties). Based on his Carus Lectures delivered in 2001, Danto endeavours to reposition aesthetics—in which beauty has occupied a simultaneously privileged and neglected role—in relation to his own philosophy. As he writes, his mission is to 'show how to use the concept of beauty with a clearer sense of art critical responsibility than has thus far been the case'.

For Danto, what has been distinctive of the concept of beauty in aesthetics is that it functions not merely as a sensuous attribute but also as a value, one that is often apprehended in moral terms. However, as the preceding discussion suggests, beauty has played little role in his philosophy of art. While at earlier stages of history beauty has served as the measure of art, the 'Intractable Avant-Garde'—to use Danto's phrase—have shown that beauty is unnecessary to the production of art. Danto's philosophy, coincident with the anti-aesthetic attitudes flowering in the 1960s, has hitherto largely followed this track by contending that only extra-aesthetic elements can secure the definition of art.

After the 9/11 attacks, Danto remarks that his attention was redirected towards the necessity of beauty in everyday life by the appearance of ad-hoc shrines marking the

tragedy. Although still holding the view that beauty is inessential to art, this turn in his thought led him to reconsider how beauty might be meaningful in art as and when it is present.

'Meaningful in art' is the key here. One feature of Danto's rapprochement with aesthetics is his categorical division between external and internal forms of beauty. By external beauty Danto refers to artworks that are contingently beautiful, but this beauty is not entailed or required by the artwork's meaning. Examples of external beauty potentially include Warhol's *Brillo Box* and Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (assuming, for argument's sake, that these works are indeed beautiful); whereas in Danto's terms paintings such as Robert Mothewell's series *Elegies for the Spanish Republic* are internally beautiful insofar as their beauty is construed as essential to the work's meaning (i.e., that these are works of mourning, elegies for a lost society). Of course, it does not follow from this—nor is it meant to follow—that Motherwell's works are 'better' than Warhol's or Duchamp's. But what Danto does take as a corollary from this demarcation between internal and external beauty is that former can be judged aesthetically while latter cannot insofar as its material qualities are merely contingent to the work's fundamental conceptuality. This is problematic as it equates aesthetics and beauty together, thereby hamstringing Danto's efforts to reinvigorate aesthetics beyond the anti-aesthetic.

Setting this problem to the side for the time being, the internal and external distinction can be utilized for the problem of bad painting. It could be argued, for example, that paintings that *are* bad are, in a logical variant of Danto's categories, *externally* bad. That is to say, their badness is an accidental sensuous attribute that has no

intentional or conceptual counterpart. By the same token, we can formulate a category of

intentional or conceptual counterpart. By the same token, we can formulate a category of paintings for which their badness is an *internal* condition; their manifest badness is necessarily entailed by their intentionality. This would also suggest that their sensuous attributes can and perhaps ought to be judged aesthetically. This however begs the question: how do we know when the badness of the painting is internal or external? At this juncture, Danto's *The Abuse of Beauty* runs aground to the degree that, as his account of experiencing Motherwell's *Spanish Elegies* makes clear, he conceives internal beauty as aesthetically received in the first instance and its conceptuality grasped only afterwards. Arguably, however, such an order should not be construed as too much an obstacle; after all, working out the contexts, relevant intentions, and resultant meanings is part and parcel of art-historical and art-critical discourses. And as Whitney Davis has cogently argued, we do not simply proceed unilaterally from initial visual contact to developed understanding, but rather engage in a complex interplay of successions and recursions in which the basic constituent visual elements become pictures. There is no great problem, in that case, if the awareness of the painting's internal badness is only understood in the 'second' instance if it is then recursively identified as being internal.

The Rise of Neoexpressionism and other Bad Paintings

Here we might consider the situation that emerged at the beginning of the 1980s that saw a resurgence of figurative and expressive painting on both sides of the Atlantic. This resurgence, generally associated with a conservative cultural politics, was picked up by the art market and exhibition programmes and is relevant here as these paintings are very much of the sort that might fall into the 'bad painting' category. In 1981, the infamous exhibition A New Spirit of Painting was staged at the Royal Academy in London which

brought together older painters such as Lucien Freud and Francis Bacon with German painters such as Gerhard Richter, Georg Baselitz, and Anselm Kiefer, alongside the Americans Julian Schnabel and David Salle; the following year witnessed an exhibition that was a sequel of sorts entitled Zeitgeist. The sheer paucity of woman artists in either exhibition was striking, with the earlier exhibition featuring no women amongst its thirty-eight artists, while Zeitgeist did slightly better (it could hardly have done much worse): out of forty-four artists, only one was a woman. Such statistical facts are raised here not so much for raising the issue of gender equality and inadequate representation of woman painters in both exhibitions, but rather align with the unabashed counter-feminist re-entrenchment of the male gaze and the assertion of heterosexuality as normative condition in much Neoexpressionist and self-consciously bad painting.

The German critic Wolfgang Max Faust at the time described this period as manifesting a 'hunger for images' and Conceptualism was routinely decried as visually austere and likened to period of sensuous starvation. Christos Joachimides, one of the curators of A New Spirit offered in his essay for the exhibition catalogue his own personal version of the failure of the neo-avant-garde: 'The overemphasis on the idea of autonomy in art which brought about Minimalism and its extreme appendix conceptual art, was bound to be self-defeating. Soon the avant-garde of the 1970s, with its narrow puritanical approach devoid of all joy in the senses, lost its creative impetus and began to stagnate. . .' By contrast, A New Spirit of Painting 'conspicuously asserts traditional values, such as individual creativity, accountability, quality, which throw light on the condition of contemporary art and, by association, on the society in which it is produced. Thus for all its apparent conservatism the art on show here is, in the true sense, progressive'. Rudi Fuchs, meanwhile, wrote apropos of Anselm Kiefer 'Painting is

salvation. It presents freedom of thought of which it is the triumphant expression. . . . The painter is a guardian-angel carrying the palette in blessing over the world. Maybe the painter is the darling of the Gods'.

Kiefer's elevation to god-like status appeared within the context of the late 1970s German art scene which also witnessed the rise of artists such as Martin Kippenberger and those figures referred to as Neoexpressionists—keeping to the German context, we should mention Baselitz, Jörg Immendorf, and the Cologne-based Mülheimer Freiheit group of painters including people like Walter Dahn and Peter Bömmels. The German example is especially prevalent—arguably more so than the contemporaneous and formally resemblant moves taken by Italian painters—and tied in complex ways to pre-war Expressionism, the subsequent Nazification of hegemonic cultural production, and the need to renew artistic practices and institutions in face of mass social and urban destruction. In 1955, the first Documenta exhibition sought to reinstall a connection between the German populace and the varieties of modern art that had been torn asunder by the ideological label of 'degenerate art'. Given such a context, Die Brücke and The Blue Rider painters could seem to be radicals displaced by an admixture of political and aesthetic conservatism, while countries that succeeded in maintaining some level of avant-gardism indicated artistic directions that could be taken by a resurgent German art scene. Indeed, the USA, France, the UK, and Russia, all of which were occupying different sectors of Germany, self-consciously staged exhibitions designed to counter the legacy of 'degenerate art' and the Nazi mind set it propagated. Adding to the historical complexity here is that both artistic poles, Western modernism and Eastern Socialist Realism, equally stood as correctives against the Nazification of cultural production and the subjectivities it sought to instantiate.

It is worth acknowledging, however briefly, those socio-cultural postwar histories insofar as the fierce arguments waged over Neoexpressionism largely set those histories to one side. Without having at least some sense of those histories it is difficult to fully comprehend why the emphasis upon individual creativity and self-expression would appear a viable artistic procedure to Neoexpressionists like Baselitz or Kiefer (for instance, it might be viewed as a response to the programme of de-individuation and the formation of a singular mass subjectivity in Nazi politics and propaganda). And conversely, being in possession of those histories renders all the more perspicuous why Baselitz's painterly attempts to strip particular forms of their symbolic content (such as his depiction of swastika-like forms) or Kiefer's photographic project recording him giving Nazi salutes at various locations are liable to remain substantially problematic.

Arguably the most cogent polemical account was Benjamin Buchloh's 1981 essay 'Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression' which identified an historical context through rendering a parallel between conservative or reactionary tendencies in art produced between the wars—for instance, Picasso's retreat to neo-classical visual language, the rappel l'ordre in France, Malevich's simplification of Renaissance styles, and the rise of New Objectivity—and the then-current market availability of Neoexpressionism. Buchloh underscores that the historical attitude of Neoexpressionism —principally its re-enactment of a specific pre-war semi-figurative mode of painting—is, perhaps paradoxically, undercut by a lack of historical awareness that manifests itself as a failure to recognize the obsolescence of its precursor. This obsolescence is revealed on two interweaved levels: firstly, the reliance upon notions of expression and self-expression problematized by structuralist and post-structuralist philosophy; and secondly,

the parallel critique of expressivity and authorship carried out especially by artists

working within or alongside the spheres of Pop, Minimalism, and Conceptualism. As Buchloh wrote:

> It had seemed until recently, for example, that the representation of saints and clowns, of female nudes and landscapes, was entirely proscribed as an authentic expression of individual or collective experience. This proscription did not extend, though, to less conspicuous aspects of pictorial and sculptural production. Excited brushwork and heavy impasto paint application, high contrast colours and dark contours are still perceived as 'painterly' and 'expressive' twenty years after Stella's, Ryman's, and Richter's works demonstrated that the painted sign is not transparent, but is a coded structure which cannot be an unmediated 'expression'.

Yet, as Buchloh noted, the obsolete visual language was more or less papered over through exaggerated recourse to a rhetoric of newness:

> The secret awareness of their obsolescence is belied by the obsession with which these regressive phenomena are announced as innovation. 'The New Spirit of Painting', 'The New Fauves', 'Naive Nouveau', 'Il Nuove Nuove', 'The Italian New Wave' are some of the labels attached to recent exhibitions of retrograde contemporary art (as though the prefix neo did not

indicate the restoration of pre-existing forms). It is significant in this regard that the German neoexpressionists who have recently received such wide acclaim in Europe . . . have been operating on the fringes of the German art

world for almost twenty years. Their 'newness' consists precisely in their current historical availability, not in any actual innovation of artistic practice.

If 'newness' was one facet of Neoexpressionism utilized to position it within the global art market, then another was an emphasis upon national identity, its supposed Teutonic-ness. This, Buchloh argues, happens at the level of form—with these artists reviving polychromatic woodcarving, linocut—and content. However, this resurgence of national identity within the sphere of artistic production is less to do with recuperating a suspended tradition than it is with regressing to the most clichéd national character types —regardless of their historical or contemporary actuality—that serves commercial interests as 'production protection in the increasingly competitive international market'. Buchloh describes the process very precisely:

The reference to expressionism in contemporary West-German art is the natural move to make at a time when the myth of cultural identity is to be established specifically against the dominance of American art during the entire period of reconstruction. Since the Second World War, expressionism, the 'German intuition' of early twentieth-century modern painting, has received increasing esteem. It had of course lacked just this esteem in the

post-World War I period, prior to its eventual suppression under fascism. But during the early sixties skyrocketing prices indicated that expressionism had achieved the status of a national treasure, the best of the pre-Fascist heritage of German culture.

Soon after expressionism became commercially and cultural available, the artists later placed under the banner of Neoexpressionism underwent a process of artistic streamlining after their discovery by the market and galleries with the consequence of affirming the imagined continuity between expressionism and Neoexpressionism. While the early production of artists like Immendorf and Penck during the 1960s was of 'considerable interest' and more varied (Buchloh singles out Immendorf's work at the prestigious Düsseldorf Academy and the LIDL happening), they switched to 'large-scale easel painting. For that purpose individual eccentricities of aesthetic activity had to be sacrificed, as did all references to twentieth-century developments contesting the practice of painting'.

While Buchloh's essay is a particularly strong account of Neoexpressionism as a market category, its argument overall is applicable for many currents within Bad Painting which frequently exhibits a return to past styles without regard to their historicity and or the problematic use of so-called expressive forms. However, such was the polarizing quality of the debate between those who defended and those who attacked Neoexpressionism that alternative positions were sorely unrecognized.

Martin Kippenberger, for example

The artworld battles of the early 1980s which pitted conceptualism versus painting, critical writing, whether pro or contra Neoexpressionism, largely failed to differentiate artists like Kippenberger and Albert Oehlen from figures such as Baselitz and Kiefer. The return to painting was a complex phenomenon with some artists linking painting with higher values, unmediated signs, and personal expression (Bömmels, for instance, remarked that ‘mir geht es in meinen Bildern um mich selbst’—my pictures are about me). For others, such as Kippenberger, ‘painting could seem to be such a discredited medium that in it content was now completely preeminent’. And yet, while many critics initially failed to distinguish between Kippenberger and the Neoexpressionists on the basis of formal resemblance, there has been a countermove which has asserted in an absolute terms the complete separation between these two parties. As Isabelle Graw has argued, however, the relationship between Kippenberger and the Neoexpressionists, as well as between conceptualism and the resurgence of painting, is not as clear-cut as some might think. We are left with the question, then, upon which basis we can cogently render these differentiations.

Kippenberger’s first significant series of paintings were produced whilst living in Florence in 1976. Entitled One of You, a German, in Florence, the series consists of a quantity of stretched canvases purchased by Kippenberger which when horizontally stacked one-upon-the-other would match his body height; upon the surface of each canvas was painted black-and-white images taken from newspapers. Having calculated

how many paintings he would need, however, Kippenberger's actualized work resulted in incompletion due to presumed abandonment. Which is to say, the work ultimately fell short of his height. 'Falling short', though, does not index mere failure for Kippenberger; rather, it seems to have become his ambition to recuperate 'falling short' as a viable artistic strategy. As we shall see, such a strategy was not restricted to personal output or served as a cynical judgment weighed against himself insofar as collaboration and outsourcing of labour were recurrent deployed Kippenberger. In that regard, 'falling short' goes beyond individual failure (whether deliberately intended or not) but expands to include the

artworld whether understood in a more localized sense of the Cologne art scene which was somewhat circumscribed by the opposition between Kippenberger and the Neoexpressionist Mülheimer Freiheit group, for example, or in the more global sense encompassed by Kippenberger's peripatetic international lifestyle.

We might, then, be tempted to read his early Lieber Maler, male mir as an attempt to share—rather than avoid—failure through the imposition of commissioned banality. A key transformative moment in his career, this series of twelve paintings were first exhibited in 1981 at Berlin's Neue Gessellschaft für Bildende Kunst and associated with the catalogue entitled Kippenberger: Durch die Pubertät zum Erfolg (*Kippenberger: From Puberty to Success*). A billboard artist named Werner following Kippenberger's instructions executed these paintings and the completed works were given the authorial signature of 'Werner Kippenberger'. In terms of theme the paintings vary and seeking for a common thread is largely a futile gesture. We have, for instance, a portrait of Kippenberger dressed in a suit and seated on a sofa incongruously left on a street corner

along with some garbage bags. Although technically accomplished, there is a kitschiness that reaches its apogee in a head and shoulders portrait of a fluffy dog (fig. 1). In effect, through his selection of subjects, Kippenberger had set a trap for Werner that permitted him to outsource bad painting—however, once the trap was sprung, the double authorial signature presents Kippenberger's willingness to share failure rather than reify Werner as an aesthetic scapegoat.

Perhaps the closest Kippenberger came to spotlighting the wilful falling short was not in the paintings as such, but is rather to be found in a constellation of forty-eight sculptural works first shown in Cologne in 1987 in an exhibition titled Peter: The Russian Position. In an important essay on these works, Diedrich Diederichsen explores the

change in Kippenberger's idiosyncratic usage of 'Peter' from a suffix betokening a variable distinct attribute of something or someone to indicating an element of failure in his own works or recognizable in artworks produced by others. Such an approach required an almost cruel gaze that magnified individual failure and thematized it. Once again, in the creation of the Peter sculptures, Kippenberger developed strategies to outsource failure. Diederichsen emphasizes the use of 'assistants, whose job it was to develop ideas and contribute their personal style. It was also their job, however, to produce insufficiencies and obstacles, to make mistakes, to misunderstand and sidetrack the boss, and so forth'. Particularly skilled at the task was Michael Krebber, a former assistant to Baselitz who became Kippenberger's assistant and was 'famous as a merciless observer of art and the art industry, as well as discovering the painful, forced, and pretentious aspects of even the tiniest technical details and most unintentional gestures in a

painting'. For that reason, Krebber was the ideal pick for spotlighting Kippenberger's own distinct Peter-hood that the artist wanted to take as the object of his artistic practice.

If much of the Peter artworks evidenced a self-lacerating but unembarrassed criticality directed upon his own work, there is also a hint of intergenerational rivalry insofar as one of the sculptures was a Gerhard Richter painting bought by Kippenberger that had been converted into a table and renamed Model Interconti so as to underscore its 'Peterness' (fig. 2). Richter had been a decisive reference point for Kippenberger and the influence of the older painter's work is apparent in Kippenberger's Florence artworks and his Lieber Maler series. The discovery of Richter's 'Peterness' was a tough call for Kippenberger, for if Richter ultimately proved disappointing to Kippenberger, then that at least suggests a prior moment of interest towards the elder painter. Kippenberger bought the Richter canvas at its then-market value, reinvented it as a table that he then sold at a

lower value (consistent with it being re-identified as a Kippenberger work) than the original price. It would be inaccurate, however, to take such intergenerational conflict as merely indexing Kippenberger's idiosyncratic aesthetic judgment or competitiveness. The 'Peter' principle was ultimately identified with art rather than artworks or artists per se, which explains why Kippenberger sought to demonstrate it within his own practice. Once made manifest, 'Peter-ness' became a resource to be both mined and mimed rather than a rationale for defeat and surrender.

Context and intentionality, then, serves as the basis for discerning between Kippenberger and neoexpressionism. To an extent, Kippenberger imitates the latter without replicating it in all its discursive particulars. But if Kippenberger's art involves a mimetic strategy that incorporates bad painting, then the significance of that strategy is the

manner in which he simultaneously mimics the badness of bad painting and produces the identification of that badness. Through this process a qualitative difference is established between his bad painting and, say, Baselitz's bad painting—this difference, however, occupies a complicated relation vis-à-vis the perceptual. While discovering the discernibility amid indiscernible objects might well necessitate an extra-visual analysis, the visual itself or its relevance is not voided as such. If we return to Danto's 1964 essay, for instance, it might be proposed that whilst the eye cannot descry the difference between Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* and those produced by the Brillo company, therefore meaning that the categorical status of these artifacts cannot be secured through straightforward visual analysis, one can nonetheless offer as a rejoinder that the indiscernibility between *Brillo Boxes* and Brillo boxes is something that the eye can see. It is on the basis of perceived indiscernibility that categorical distinctions can be made, thereby indicating that within the framework of Danto's philosophy of art there remains a vestige of aesthetics. What

becomes crucial, then, is less Danto's intended rejection of aesthetics and the appeal to vision than the more productive implication of the visual and extra-visual aspects being necessarily interwoven. The interplay between or confusion of the visual and the extra-visual appears explicitly thematized in Kippenberger's painting With the Best Will in the World I Cannot See a Swastika which refers not only to the reduction of emblems associated with Nazism to mere visual motifs by the likes of Baselitz and Kiefer (they see the form, but refuse to or just plainly do not see the form's content and historicity), but also to Kippenberger's reference to that reduction and even to our own search, as viewers, to the swastika upon the pictorial canvas (fig. 3).

By the same token, Kippenberger's programmatic decision for his One of You, a German, in Florence series of paintings of being determined by his actual bodily height is an act of agency that remains somewhat invisible to the beholder. Seen in a gallery, the paintings that comprise the series are arranged upon the wall in a grid rather than stacked as a column upon the floor (and indeed, if they were to be exhibited as a stack, then the actual composition upon each canvas would become largely unviewable). Such extra-visuality reflects surely the most difficult barrier to a developed comprehension of Kippenberger's oeuvre, namely the high significance and persistence of personal anecdotes and in-jokes throughout his practice that for the most part are kept as resolutely elusive allusions.

The overall referential effect of Kippenberger's strategies is to reject any contention that holds bad paintings in equal regard, whether positively or negatively. Instead, he forces critical differentiation into a field, bad painting, that is often taken to resist high/low differentiation. As he once remarked: 'If everything is good, then nothing is any good any more'. Lest this seems merely to place Kippenberger atop a pedestal

where he could look down upon his less self-reflexive counterparts, he repeatedly exposed his own capacity for failure and that of his assistants, as is evidenced by his Heavy Burschi installation (fig. 4). Entering the gallery space, one comes is confront by a large skip overfilled with broken paintings. On the walls surrounding the skip are framed posters. Inspection of both elements of the installation soon reveals that the posters hung upon the walls are reproductions of the destroyed paintings that have been tossed into the skip.

Although this essay has taken the early 1980s as its example, the problem remains pertinent if we consider the popularity—and, of course, commercial success—of so-called Leipzig School painters such as Neo Rauch and Martin Eder. Like Shakespeare's jesters that often tell the truth via witty riddles and barbed insults, Kippenberger's protracted joke enjoins us to take the 'bad' of bad painting seriously rather than as empty rhetoric. Moreover, by taking the claims made by artworks such as those produced by Kippenberger seriously, it becomes possible to rediscover the seemingly lost possibility of art-critical judgment—the willingness to render evaluative discriminations, no matter how provisionally—within artworks themselves. If the last decade or so has witnessed an increasingly financialized art market existing alongside the spread of a non-judgmental or inoculated art criticism, then the discovery of an authentically critical attitude internal to art practice becomes very vital indeed.

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Image List

Fig. 1. Martin Kippenberger, *Untitled* (from the series *Dear Painter, Paint for Me*) 1981. Acrylic on canvas, 200 x 150 cm. Private collection. © Estate of

Martin Kippenberger, Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne

Fig. 2. Martin Kippenberger, *Modell Interconti*, 1987. Gerhard Richter painting from 1972, wood, metal, 32 x 79,5 x 59 cm. Private collection. © Estate of Martin Kippenberger, Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne

Fig. 3. Martin Kippenberger, With the Best Will in the World, I Can't See a Swastika, 1984. Oil, silicone on canvas, 160 x 133 cm. Private collection. © Estate of Martin Kippenberger, Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne

Fig. 4. Martin Kippenberger, Heavy Burschi,1989 – 1991. Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, on loan from Thomas Borgmann. © Estate of Martin Kippenberger, Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne