

**In Search of Kitsch at U.S. Living History Museums:
Self-Conscious Kitsch as Historiographic Strategy in Museum Performance**

Kitsch is a spell to which one succumbs willingly, knowing its delicate fabric can disintegrate with the slightest interference, who knows when to be reconfigured again. An interregnum, kitsch drifts between waking and sleeping hours, half dream and half reality, all memory and desire. It transits the unwieldy space between tangibility and perception with the smoothness of a cat burglar, intruding on us when we least expected. Kitsch is the world as we would like it to be, not as it is; the capturing in a concrete thing of the most ineffable feelings and tenderest emotions. Kitsch is a flight from the present, a siren's song luring us into a voyage void of time distinctions. It is an enchanted grotto where unknown treasures lie scattered, awaiting the lucky traveler who will rejoice at stumbling onto such wonder.

Celeste Olalquiaga
*The Artificial Kingdom*¹

Kitsch is the absolute denial of shit, both in the literal and figurative senses of the word.

Milan Kundera
*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*²

The museum industry has, for the last several years, been engaged in nothing less than an effort to completely eradicate “kitsch” from its living history sites—Colonial Williamsburg, Plimoth Plantation, Old Sturbridge Village, to name a few. A *museumification* of the past has been systematically replacing dusty dioramas, cheap postcards and wax mannequins with historical accuracy, social history, archaeological rigor, and well-educated costumed museum staff. It would appear that museums have gotten “better” in their historiographic representation in that they are moving toward greater accuracy and seriousness, seemingly guaranteeing their institutional authority in the minds of visitors. What is it, though, about the schlocky, awkward, overly sentimental, and tawdry representation of the past that somehow makes our touristic encounter more genuine, more fun? Does this element (where it still can be found) keep

¹ *The Artificial Kingdom: A Treasury of the Kitsch Experience* (New York: Pantheon, 1998) 97-98.

² Trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York: Harper Perennial, 1999) 248.

historical sites from being too heavy-handed--from limiting the historical narrative to a singular, institutionally-enforced trajectory? Is there an authenticity to be found outside of historical accuracy in the pleasurable moment of kitsch? “Tourist-kitsch,” as a concept or mode of representation, should be reexamined not as a fault to be squelched but as a historiographically important element that provides the visitor agency and more than one mode of seeing.

Jay Anderson has articulated a particular European distaste for kitsch in American museums and historical institutions, and a seeming fascination on the part of the American museum-going public for displays that also include performance.”³ For conservative anthropologists and historians, the trappings of this American-style museum fly in the face of authentic, genuine, and documented historical fact, and are based instead on imagination, improvisation, and the performance conventions and aesthetics of the performers. Umberto Eco, similarly, finds a particularly American enunciation of “kitsch reverence” in Americans’ fascination with and desire for the hyperreal replica.⁴ This taste, while “snubbed” by Europeans and American intellectuals, is nevertheless powerful--and spreading--and it blurs the boundaries between the high-brow cultural institution and low-brow pop culture. Tourist kitsch performance is linked, then, with a particularly American taste, and a particularly middle- or low-brow taste.

Ludwig Giesz, however, began to dismantle these associations in his work on kitsch and tourism. Giesz posits the “Kitsch-man as tourist,” drawing on Hermann Broch’s postulate that kitsch and the Kitsch-man (*Kitschmensch*: the lover and consumer of kitsch) necessitate one another.⁵ For Giesz, the tourist has a latent need for kitsch (“a self-indulgent desire for privacy; feelings of tenderness toward one’s home and family [...] an attempt to make every experience

³ Jay Anderson, *Time Machines: The World of Living History* (Nashville, American Association for State and Local History, 1984) 22.

⁴ Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1986) 7.

⁵ Ludwig Giesz, “Kitsch-man as Tourist” in *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*, ed. Gillo Dorfles (London: Studio Vista, 1969).

seem familiar by transforming it into something cosy [sic] and snug”⁶). Ultimately, he writes, the tourism industry offers “Kitsch-man” transformational encounters with the sublime through kitsch, distancing/alienating the spectator from the reality of space and time.⁷

Kitsch and Museums have been in relationship since their mutual emergence. Museum historians take it as a given that the roots of living museums are grounded in the same modernist desire for the accumulation and display of antiquities and natural and man-made curiosities—the *wunderkammer* that emerged in the sixteenth century: jewel-boxes displaying the vast and sundry collections of their owners and celebrating the owner’s status while offering him and his visitors the comfort of familiarizing the exotic through containment. Arthur Hazelius’ Skansen open-air museum, in Stockholm, opened to the public in the late nineteenth-century, can be regarded as an outgrowth of this desire for accumulation and nostalgic salvaging of rapidly disappearing folklife. Hazelius collected houses, shops, barns and outbuildings, representative of the folkways of every region of Sweden, and arranged them into his own vast open-air cabinet of curiosities. Henry Ford and J.D. Rockefeller, Jr., taking their cue from Hazelius, engaged in similar maneuvers in the United States in the early twentieth century, resulting in Greenfield Village and Colonial Williamsburg, respectively. Both sites were collections of kitsch in both their aesthetic mass appeal and their sentimental and nostalgic celebration of fictionalized past utopias: Greenfield Village offered a Main-Street-U.S.A. *milieu* where Ford’s boyhood home could be found adjacent to the bicycle shop where the Wright Brothers worked and to the courthouse where Abe Lincoln first practiced law (down the street was Thomas Edison’s Menlo Park Laboratory). Colonial Williamsburg, while it had more of an eye toward restoring or reconstructing buildings that actually were all from the same location, also offered a

⁶ Giesz 160.

⁷ Giesz 169-170.

romanticized depiction of the former Virginia capital. A mid-century account from a reporter for a National Geographic Society's publication entitled *America's Historylands* described his movement through the reconstructed town:

Cocking my tricorne over one eye and giving a tug to my blue velvet coat, I quit my lodgings on Francis Street and strode down the Duke of Gloucester toward Chowning's Tavern. In the yellow glow of the lantern I carried, my brass shoe buckles winked up at me with every step, and from each Yule decked window I passed, a candle shed its hospitable light.⁸

From such descriptions, Williamsburg seems resoundingly to have been a place of sentimentality, good will, and, at least during the time of year in the above account, of the Christmas Spirit. Meanwhile at Plimoth Plantation, Ford and Rockefeller's counterpart philanthropist-*cum*-history-purveyor Henry Hornblower was reconstructing the Pilgrims' 1620s village on Massachusetts Bay. Tourists (after paying homage to Plimoth Rock under its Greco-Roman portico in modern downtown Plymouth) could visit this open-air museum and find dioramas of English Separatist life, complete with English and Dutch antiques and paintings and peopled with wax mannequins in ill-fitting costumes with the requisite buckled hats.

But something happened: trouble was afoot in these kitsch paradises, and it started, if Anderson and Snow's genealogies are to be believed, the day before the 1969 season at Plimoth, when Assistant Director James Deetz removed the wax mannequins, period antiques, anachronistic and inaccurate artifacts, and oyster-shell walkways from the 1627 Pilgrim Village, in favor of archaeologically-based, and somewhat more dirty and acetic *tableaux*.⁹ Later, these

⁸ *America's Historylands: Touring our Landmarks of Liberty* (Washington DC: National Geographic Society, 1967) 121.

⁹ See Anderson *Time Machines: The World of Living History* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History 1984), Snow, *Performing the Pilgrims: A Study of Ethnohistorical Role-Playing at Plimoth Plantation*

scenes were inhabited by costumed interpreters in historically accurate costumes (*sans* buckled hats) who spoke in first-person with one of several rigorously researched period dialects. They made their own ceramics and split their own rails. They tended livestock and planted gardens. The museum staff started tearing down reconstructed buildings that were over seven-years old and rebuilding them from scratch in order to avoid the reconstruction becoming older than the village it represented. While some conservatives and Mayflower descendents were furious at the disappearance of their shrine to early “American” ideals in favor of a grungy past peopled with actors that looked more like “barefooted hippies”¹⁰ than the familiar Pilgrim fathers, social and revisionist historians celebrated the direction in which Plimoth was headed: toward *bona fide* museum status, bolstered by institutional authority and the promise of historical accuracy. By imbuing its presentation and performances with archaeological research, the careful poring over of historic documents, rigorous staff training, and incorporating a kind of museum realism with water-tight historical characters, Plimoth and museums to follow were able to claim authenticity in their historical reconstructions and market themselves as legitimate historical institutions. These sites could then stand in contrast to the other kinds of tourist traps that increasingly dotted the station-wagon filled, post-World-War-II/GI-Bill leisure-class landscape, as well as the “amateur” history presentations found in historic houses, cemetery walks, Old-West shootouts, Victorian Christmases, *et cetera*.¹¹

(Jackson: U P of Mississippi, 1993), Deetz, “A Sense of Another World: History Museums and Cultural Change,” *Museum News* 58.5 (May/June 1980), James Deetz, Patricia Scott Deetz, *The Times of Their Lives: Life, Love, and Death in Plymouth Colony* (New York: Freeman, 2000), and Scott Magelssen, “Stepping Back in Time: The Construction of Different Temporal Spaces at Living History Museums in the United States.” *Theatre Annual* 57 (2004).

¹⁰ Snow 37.

¹¹ Elsewhere, I have described this move as the signing of what Jacques Rancière calls the “scientific contract.” Because history is the “poor cousin” of science, writes Rancière, it needs to engage in maneuvers the mirror the procedures of the hard sciences, in order to guarantee its legitimacy as a discipline. See Jacques Rancière, *The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge* (Minneapolis: U of MN P, 1994).

The museums looking to Plimoth's success followed suit in various ways. Some ways were small, like the gradual replacing of garish postcards and trinkets in museum gift shops with handcrafted ceramic reproductions and slick museum literature. Some were much bigger: Old Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts added social history to its performance agenda, staging examples of social conflict over controversial issues like temperance, abolition, and the treatment of the poor.¹² Old Sturbridge Village and Indiana's Conner Prairie added cemeteries to their sites, physically acknowledging for the first time the significant place of death and dying in these societies, heretofore glaringly absent. Some of the most striking ways a museum sought a shift to more legitimate history can be found at Colonial Williamsburg. If Milan Kundera described kitsch as "the absolute denial of shit," Williamsburg sought to transcend its kitsch by putting the "shit" back into its history, from the literal—the "horse apples" now found on the site's main thoroughfare, Duke of Gloucester Street—to the figurative—the inclusion of more difficult and unsanitized subject matter, most visibly the neglected history of the slaves that made up over half of Williamsburg's eighteenth-century population. Slave history at Williamsburg can now be found in the "Other Half" guided walking tour, and at special programs, like Williamsburg's 1994 "Publick Times Estate Auction" in which four black slaves were auctioned in front of Weatherburn's Tavern on Duke of Gloucester Street.

But, with the shifting emphasis on social history and scientifically corroborated performances and displays at living history museums, was the atmosphere of authority beginning to loom inappropriately beyond that which tourists could reasonably expect from a history exhibit? That is, was it getting harder for tourists to differentiate the restored or documented past from the conjectural elements? Even more troublesome, was the multiplicity of tourists'

¹² See Andrew Baker and Leon Warren, "Old Sturbridge Village introduces Social Conflict into its Interpretive Story" *History News* (March, 1986).

individually-conceived narratives about the past becoming narrowed to a select number of institutionally-produced and enforced narratives? If so, then in spite of the availability of “better” history, without the kitsch, museums were inscribing their histories more indelibly on their visitors’ bodies.

All, however, was not lost. Despite the initial impressions about the absence of tourist-kitsch at museums I described at the beginning of the essay, a closer look at living history museums reveals that kitsch performance has not really been eliminated. On the contrary, it has been there all along, but has simply been veiled beneath curatorial procedures that seek to make it invisible. Kitsch has become de Certeau’s shard that emerges from the museum’s subconscious to continually disrupt the institutional veneer of historiographic legitimacy.¹³

This failure to be able to suppress kitsch is a consequence of the museum industry’s historic allegiance with the tourism industry, and the latter is vigilant about offering comfort and nostalgia to its consumers. In effect, the Museum compromised its integrity and authority the moment it became complicit with tourism’s agenda. In order to survive as cultural institutions, museums must appropriate the advertising strategy of the very institutions they sought to distance themselves from with their Deetzian museumification efforts. Consider this quote from Timothy W. Luke’s book, *Museum Politics*:

[It] is now de rigueur for museums to promote their big exhibitions by arranging discount packages at hotels, planning related musical and other performing arts events, offering special meals at their own or nearby restaurants, and, of course, selling related items in their shops.¹⁴

¹³ Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, Trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia UP, 1988) 4.

¹⁴ Timothy W. Luke, *Museum Politics: Power Plays at the Exhibition* (Minneapolis, U of MN P, 2002) 224, citing a *New York Times* piece, 1 Feb 1999 E1, F3. A personal example bears mentioning: as I write this essay, my friend and collaborator John Troyer forwarded me an emailed advertisement for Williamsburg tourist packages: “Dear

As per Luke's analysis, living museums will forever be associated with Disney-style theme parks because they occupy the same cultural landscape constructed and maintained by the tourism industry—despite the museums' (and even Disney's) claims to the contrary.¹⁵ Indeed, in the analysis of both Maxine Feiffer and John Urry, for what they call “post-tourists” there is no qualitative difference in legitimacy between living history museums and theme parks. Both are recognized as cultural constructions in which there is a multiplicity of tourist games to be played out. Feiffer writes that the post-tourist is one who has an eye for, and can buy, a piece of touristic kitsch without making a fetish out of it, and who recognizes “the glossy tourist brochure is an interesting piece of pop culture, maybe, but not ‘reality.’” [T]he post-tourist knows that he is a tourist: not a time traveler when he goes somewhere historic.”¹⁶

Furthermore, if, in fact, we look to Clement Greenberg's definition in “The Avant Garde and Kitsch,” living museum performance in its very nature qualifies as kitsch by appropriating performative modes from Theatre Arts without the accompanying creativity, originality, or “taste.”¹⁷ It is, to use Greenberg's word “academic”: it is pedagogical and didactic first and foremost, not a work of beauty or originality. It is, at the very least, an act of double imitation: the interpreters imitate the historical roles they portray *and* imitate the conventions of realism,

John, Take a walk on the wild side or through history – you decide! Williamsburg has the best of both worlds from interesting exhibits at Colonial Williamsburg® to exciting new attractions at Busch Gardens. Book today and be transported to another place in time! (Mail.Orbitz.com email flier “Go Colonial and Save: Williamsburg for \$89/package—includes 2-night stay, 2 theme park tickets and dinner!” 8 June, 2005). The ad copy in the email directly links theme parks to historic sites, both in the text above and in the delineated available packages that follow the invitation, each suited for a different set of touristic needs, comforts, and desires. In this list, admission to Colonial Williamsburg (the museum) and Busch Gardens (the attraction) are conflated into a single phrase: “theme park tickets.”

¹⁵ Disney executives admitted, when criticized for their plans to build a historic theme park in Virginia, that there was a more authentic, museum-brand history, which Disney could not approximate. “Colonial Williamsburg has the same thing the Smithsonian and the Manassas Battlefield have: real history. We can do everything we want, but we can't create that” (Eric Gable and Richard Handler, “After Authenticity at an American Heritage Site,” *American Anthropologist* 98.3, citing *Daily Progress*, Charlottesville, VA, articles from 11 and 14 November, 1993).

¹⁶ Maxine Feiffer, *Tourism in History: From Imperial Rome to the Present* (New York: Stein and Day, 1985) 270-71. See also: John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (London: Sage, 1990).

¹⁷ I suspect, though, judging even from the bulk of the wares at most mainstream theatre gift shops, that a large number of theatre patrons are *Kitschmenschen*.

with psychological immersion, attention to character and back-story, and kitchen-sink attention to detail. To illustrate, Cynthia Gerdraitis, Supervisor with the Colonial Interpretation Department at Plimoth Plantation, describes the Stanislavskian transformation into a seventeenth-century individual that happens to her and other interpreters through the visceral act of putting on the period clothing:

It comes with whatever happens to you as you're getting ready in the morning, or you're down on site. [I]t's when you change in the morning and get into your clothes. Because the clothes are *so* different [...]. [Y]ou're tying your neck. You're tying your garters, you're tying your shoes, you're tying your skirts, your hooks, your buttons and, you know, twenty minutes later, you're ready to go. You're wearing a corset, a coif on your head. That's where the transformation happens.¹⁸

Living museum interpretive performance shuns the avant-garde, eschews non-realism, or any Brechtian convention that might ruin the illusion. As Greenberg held in 1939, kitsch is art that looks real. Kitsch is all artistic art that requires no effort from the spectator. Kitsch is art that “tells a story”—that downplays any discontinuities between life and art.¹⁹ Greenberg's definition holds true for the kitsch of living history. Tourist-kitsch performance knows its primary audience: it wants adventure, it wants fun, it wants nostalgia and sentiment. It does not want significant discomfort or images and text that challenge its notions of the past, of time and space, or of representation. These folks are on *vacation*, damn it.

¹⁸ Cynthia Gerdraitis, personal interview, 15 June 2000.

¹⁹ Greenberg 14.

Why, then, am I advocating for kitsch performance at living history museums, especially given the inherent danger of high-stakes kitsch?²⁰ I believe that *any* deployment of kitsch is important precisely *because* it distances/alienates the spectator from the reality of space and time. *Because* it draws attention to historic inaccuracies in representation. *Because* it is hokey, gauche, corny, cheesy, and schlocky. *Because* it is trashy, tawdry, artless, contrived, gaudy, and second-hand. *Because* it is fetishistic, synthetic, and ersatz. *Because* it denies the existence of shit. *Because* it is clearly *not* the past.

The historiographic danger of slick, anti-kitsch museum performance is that it erases, or at least minimizes, the references that allow for unmasking of the representation, that equip visitors to distinguish between the lived past and its interpretation, and that allow visitors to see that the museum performance they encounter is only one of a multiplicity of possible interpretations and is a construction of curatorial choices motivated by the agenda of the institution staging the reenactment. When kitsch is negated, museums withhold from the spectators a particular capacity of seeing. As Timothy Luke writes,

History exhibitions formalize norms of how to see without being seen inasmuch as the curators pose as unseen seers, and then fuse their vision with authority. In

²⁰ Low-stakes kitsch includes, but is not limited to, the overly-passionate living history interpreter wearing historic costume, but with twentieth-century eyeglasses and telltale perm or haircut that visually jars the spectator away from willing suspension of disbelief. This is the kind of performative kitsch history that appears “dated” in time and space. It is, as it were, *out of date*, anachronistically standing out. High-stakes kitsch, however, is that which solidifies in visitors a problematic nostalgic impression of the past and which may bear more dire political implications. This is often the case with sentimental depictions of the past that involve representations of historically disenfranchised groups: Native Peoples, African Americans, women, and the very poor. A visit to the Plimoth Plantation museum store in 1998 (these were called “gift shops” before museumification), revealed tourist trinkets like plush turkey toys and cute ceramic figurines of Indians holding hands with smiling Pilgrims. Such cuteness was an act of violence to Wampanoag Native history. Not only did it perpetuate nostalgic and inaccurate Thanksgiving mythology, but it silenced the centuries since 1620 that saw the ethnic genocide of the King James' War, treaty violations, disease, and the decimation of Native populations in North America. Many living-history representations dealing with issues of injustice do not fit the category of high-stakes kitsch: questions of aesthetics and talent aside, Williamsburg's “Publick Times Estate Auction” or Conner Prairie's currently offered “Follow the North Star” Underground Railroad program are too serious in nature, too rigorous, or have substantial enough content to be kitsch performance.

the organization of their exhibitions' spaces, the inscription of any show's textual interpretations and the coordination of an exhibit's aesthetic performances, curators are acting as normative agents, directing people what to see, think and value. Museum exhibitions become culture writing formations, using their acts and artifacts to create conventional understandings that are made manifest or left latent in any visitor's/viewer's personal encounters with the museum's normative practices.²¹

When kitsch is banished, the subsequent institutional claim of authenticity foments trust and passive, uncritical acceptance of the historical narrative. On the one hand, this narrative is necessarily simplistic, because it needs to be geared toward a family audience, and because it selects only those events that emphasize the theme for the season, or that draw attention to larger historical themes of American historical narrative—that our forefathers fought for the ideals in the Declaration of Independence, that the Pilgrims laid the foundation for religious tolerance and freedom, that social conflict ultimately strengthens Democracy and the American Way. On the other hand, the historical narrative denies a voice to histories that do not fit into the dominant themes—the histories of the politically and economically disenfranchised, of those whose histories were not seen as important enough to include in the historical record.

So far, this sounds counter-intuitive. Didn't Greenberg and Broch, and, later, Adorno, argue the opposite: that kitsch anesthetizes the masses, while *real* art prompts the questioning of reality? Let me explain. Kitsch can be of value to the individual in a way that differs from the value imposed on it by the culture industry.²² Returning to the paper's first epigram, kitsch is a mediator of individual memory. Celeste Olalquiaga categorizes kitsch along the lines drawn by

²¹ Timothy W. Luke *Museum Politics: Power Plays at the Exhibition* (Minneapolis, U of MN P, 2002) 3.

²² Norwegian painter Odd Nerdrum has spoken extensively on this point. See Odd Nerdrum, *On Kitsch* (Kagge 2001).

Walter Benjamin in modernity's two types of memory, conscious "reminiscence" and unconscious "memory proper."²³ She locates kitsch as that which captures a freeze-frame of conscious memory so that it may be repeated indefinitely—a souvenir, for instance ("nostalgic kitsch")—or that which solidifies unconscious ephemeral nostalgia and desire into a permanent state ("melancholic kitsch").²⁴ Both kinds of kitsch mediate memory through interaction with the concrete.²⁵ This mediation can be linked to what Michael Taussig describes as a "sensual way of knowing." While Greenberg condemns representational art, Taussig cautions us to not be dismissive of mimesis out of hand, and reminds us that, while mimesis has taken a hit from those who consider it to be a "naive form or symptom" of Realism, Naturalism, and Essentialism, it offers ways of knowing that cannot be reproduced with the reading of a text. Mimesis is a sensual way of knowing—a "steeping" of the subject in the object being represented.²⁶

The trick, if kitsch is to be usefully and deliberately applied to allow for more visitor agency, is that it somehow must be intentional in its occurrence, at least at the level of the interpreters in the performance, rather than just sort of occurring willy-nilly, without the awareness the practitioners. Lacking the self-aware element, kitsch at living museums, if it is the overly sentimental kind, merely turns institutions into Ada Louise Huxtable's "Republican Disneylands,"²⁷ or Thomas Schlereth's "peaceable kingdoms."²⁸ How, then, can kitsch be used as an *intentional* performative strategy at living history museums? Here, I draw upon what Chuck Kleinhans calls self-aware kitsch:

²³ See Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969) 155-215.

²⁴ Olalquiaga 70-75.

²⁵ In the former, as per Benjamin's theory, the permanence of the object negates the idea of the passing of time and of death and decay, focusing instead on life recalled as "immaculate memory." The latter, however, carries the mark of passing time. It marks and constitutes death, something lost and to be longed for: a lost age, for instance.

²⁶ Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 44.

²⁷ Ada Louise Huxtable "Dissent at Colonial Williamsburg," *New York Times*, 22 September 1963. "Inventing American Reality," *New York Review of Books* 39.20 (1992), 24-29. See also Handler and Gable 44-45,

²⁸ Thomas Schlereth, "It Wasn't that Simple," *Museum News* 56.1 (Jan/Feb 1978) 39.

[T]here is a sense in which kitsch can be used in a descriptive way, that is, when the text gives evidence that the makers themselves were aware of their “bad taste.” Contemporary culture objects are often highly self-conscious of their own de-based status. I will call this self-aware kitsch²⁹

Self-aware kitsch offers museum visitors more agency by challenging the dominant authority of the institutional historical narrative and grounding the narrative, instead, in the autonomous moment of exchange between performer and spectator—a “wink” that acknowledges, invites, and foments irony, slippage, critique, and oppositional camp readings of the dominant narrative. When both museum interpreters and tourists embrace and foreground this wink, they subvert the authoritative script of the institution. Therefore, a radical insertion of kitsch may offer a more authentic history for spectator in that he or she is able to have the agency, *vis-à-vis* Luke’s theory, to determine his or her own trajectory of historical narrative through the museum site.

In practice, planning self-aware kitsch performance poses some amount of difficulty—the reliance upon interpreter improvisation, for instance. This particular element, however, need not be an obstacle. Because living history operates ostensibly without a script (though improvisation is based on written documents), the performance is untethered, uncontrolled by the institution, and therefore open to slippage, camp, irony, and winks invited by either the spectator or the interpreter, as a way of playing out a post-touristic game.

Examples can already be found in the field: the reenactor uses irony to provide the visitor with markers that he or she is acknowledging the slippage between past and present that accompany historical reenactment. Or, the interpreter winkingly plays upon the slippage in word meanings, homonyms, and other differences between the present and the seventeenth century to

²⁹ Kleinhans “Taking Out the Trash: Camp and the Politics of Parody,” in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed., Moe Meyer (London: Routledge, 1994), 185.

let the young visitor in on the joke, yet not break his or her character (and thus maintain the function, say of the total-immersion Pilgrim Village at Plimoth Plantation). Let us assume, then, that self-conscious kitsch needs mutually-acknowledged irony. The irony can concern the artifice that both tourist and reenactor know they are maintaining in order for the playing out of the chance meeting between an individual from the past and an individual from the present to “work.” It can also wink at the fact that these two parties are taking themselves much too seriously for the situation. It is this self-aware irony that makes the performance truly helpful kitsch, *versus* merely poor-quality, non-rigorous schlock: frustrating and embarrassing amateur histrionics, or naïve, flag-waving nostalgia. Self-aware kitsch performance requires talent and rigor on the part of the interpreter, and active, savvy engagement on the part of the visitor. This is precisely the subtlety that Urry and Feiffer refer to when they talk about the post-touristic eye, but also goes back to what Giesz described as the mutually-acknowledged kitsch sensibility, in this case between kitsch (the interpreter) and Kitsch-man (the museum visitor). Let us assume, then, that self-conscious kitsch needs mutually-acknowledged irony. The irony can concern the artifice that both tourist and reenactor know they are maintaining in order for the playing out of the chance meeting between an individual from the past and an individual from the present to “work.” It can also wink at the fact that these two parties are taking themselves much too seriously for the situation. It is this self-aware irony that makes the performance truly helpful kitsch, *versus* merely poor-quality, non-rigorous schlock: frustrating and embarrassing amateur histrionics, or naïve, flag-waving nostalgia. Self-aware kitsch performance requires talent and rigor on the part of the interpreter, and active, savvy engagement on the part of the visitor. This is precisely the subtlety that Urry and Feiffer refer to when they talk about the post-touristic eye,

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Alert readers will point out that I'm now talking about a kind of camp sensibility. After all, I'm referring to the ironic celebration of over-the-top and over-serious artifice. Is mine, then, a camp discourse? Kleinhans definitely makes connection between camp and self-aware kitsch:

The characteristic parody of self-aware kitsch promotes what John Fiske has called "skeptical hedonism" in audience response to much mass culture documentary, that is, we all know this is a fantasy, but we want in on the fun of such phenomena, for example, as television wrestling or supermarket tabloid headlines. In this duality of response, self-aware kitsch is related to, or overlaps with, Camp.³⁰

With Susan Sontag, Kleinhans argues that camp is a strategy of reading a text and seeing it through a lens informed by the "love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration."³¹ Sontag's 1964 essay, "Notes on Camp" charted certain definitions and functions of camp that do dovetail with what I'm describing as the mutual ironic acknowledgement of self-aware kitsch performance. She writes, for instance, that "[c]amp is a certain mode of aestheticism. It is one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. That way, the way of camp, is not in terms of beauty but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization."³² Echoing Giesz, she writes, "The camp eye has the power to transform experience."³³ She notes how camp erases the distinction

³⁰ Kleinhans, 185, citing John Fiske, Comments at Northwestern University Seminar, Northwestern, Evanston, IL, 1989.

³¹ Kleinhans, 185, citing Sontag "Notes on Camp", 105.

³² Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," *A Susan Sontag Reader* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1982) 107.

³³ Sontag 107.

between the “unique object and the reconstructed object,”³⁴ revealing the culturally constructed membrane between art and kitsch drawn by Greenberg, Broch, and others. And, finally:

Camp taste is, above all, a mode of enjoyment, of appreciation—not judgment.

Camp is generous. It wants to enjoy. It only seems like malice, cynicism. (Or, if it is cynicism it’s not a ruthless but a sweet cynicism) [...]. What it does is to find success in certain passionate failures [...]. Camp is a tender feeling.³⁵

Camp, in the case of living history, is produced by the visitor in the touristic exchange with the site when he/she turns his or her ironic gaze on the performance. That is, when he/she sees it as artifice and enjoys it as such.³⁶ Living History sites are not “campy” on their own. On the contrary, museumification requires that, for the sake of authority and legitimacy, institutions continually seek to banish opportunities for camp readings from visitor experience. From the curatorial standpoint, camp and irony, like kitsch, have no place in the institution. They undercut and expose the weaknesses in its authority. Camp is a threat to museums because it privileges artifice over content, and therefore becomes, as Sontag argues, disengaged—unserious.³⁷

The evocation of the theoretically complex notion of camp, though, brings with it some discursive complications. For one thing, camp runs the risk of alienating a good portion of its audience, because it often relies on more subtle ironies that not all observers may get, and thus becomes a somewhat elitist modality of performance. A related dilemma is that camp celebration of kitsch as “kitsch” is different from the celebration of elements that some regard with sincerity as art and culture, but that others label as kitsch, thus also constituting elitism or

³⁴ Sontag 116.

³⁵ Sontag 119.

³⁶ “[A]lthough kitsch is never intrinsically camp,” writes Mark Booth, “it has a certain toe-curling quality that appeals to the camp sense of humor. Kitsch is one of camp’s favourite fads and fancies.” (Mark Booth, *Camp* [London: Quartet, 1983] 23).

³⁷ Sontag 109.

snobbery.³⁸ In addition, there is the recent idea that the term “camp” should be reserved for queer discourse or it’s not, in fact, camp. Third, and perhaps most poignantly, camp celebration of kitsch is possible only from privileged positions, for the most part in nations or communities where high-stakes kitsch employed by oppressive regimes has not been successful in suppressing independent political thought, or in promoting a fascist agenda. Let me briefly address each of these ideas.

First, how do we deal with contentions that a camp sensibility in recognizing and celebrating tourist kitsch performance is elitist? The dilemma bears some amount of irony, in that modernist discourse has tended to create a snobby binary between “real” art and kitsch. Clement Greenberg is particularly to blame for this. But, the contemporary predicament is that a binary can now be just as easily be drawn between “sophisticates” who enjoy and recognize kitsch as such, and the “naïfs” who see no distinction between kitsch and high art, or who enjoy it legitimately, without irony. Kleinhans dismisses such binaries as useless. He reminds us that, in Greenberg’s words, kitsch is

the mechanically reproduced “ersatz culture” which depends on formulaic patterns. In his words, it is the art of “vicarious experiences and fake sensations.” Other commentators have also used the term kitsch in an extremely judgmental way. Gillo Dorfles calls it “the world of bad taste,” and Abraham Moles defines it as “the art of happiness.” Of course a term so obviously subjective and class-biased (*whose* bad taste?) is virtually useless as a critical and analytical tool.³⁹

³⁸ Richard Hoggart referred to the camp appreciation of kitsch as “cultural slumming” in *The Uses of Literacy* (Chatto and Windus, 1957).

³⁹ Chuck Kleinhans, “Taking out the Trash: Camp and the Politics of Parody,” *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Moe Meyer (London: Routledge, 1994), 182-183, citing Greenberg 10, and Dorfles 9-12.

Sontag also responded to judgmental regard for kitsch along elitist binaries: “one cheats oneself, as a human being, if one has *respect* only for the style of high culture, whatever else one may do or feel on the sly.”⁴⁰

Second, is this camp discourse a queer discourse (or, is it not really a camp discourse)? Moe Meyer, in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, takes issue with Sontag’s 1964 contention that camp is an overall apolitical and aestheticized sensibility. “What emerges from Sontag’s essay,” writes Myer, “is the birth of the camp trace, or residual camp, a strategy of unqueer appropriation of queer praxis whose purpose [...] is the efusement of the un-queer with the queer aura, acting to stabilize the ontological challenge of Camp through a dominant gesture of incorporation.”⁴¹ Rather, he argues, Camp is an activist strategy, the function of which is the production of queer social visibility.⁴² It is “a suppressed and denied oppositional critique embodied in the signifying practices that processually constitute queer identities.”⁴³ Since camp is solely a queer discourse, then, argues Meyer, all unqueer activities of camp are examples of the appropriation of queer praxis: “the unqueer do not have access to the discourse of Camp, only to derivatives constructed through the act of appropriation.”⁴⁴ Here’s where we get back to the inclusion (or lack thereof) of disenfranchised voices. It would be a fair assessment to say that living history museums are ripe for camp celebration of tourist kitsch as queer activist strategy. These environments have always proved difficult for marginalized oppositional narratives to reach tourists.

⁴⁰ Sontag 115.

⁴¹ Moe Meyer, “Under the Sign of Wilde,” *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Moe Meyer (London: Routledge, 1994) 5. Many contemporary camp scholars now largely dismiss Sontag’s influential essay, citing that it often falls short in articulating its theories, is politically problematic, or, in many cases is just plain wrong about dates and facts (for a listing of errors, see Mark Booth’s *Camp*).

⁴² Meyer 5.

⁴³ Meyer 1.

⁴⁴ Meyer 1. Meyer spells authentic, queer discourse “Camp,” capitalizing the “C,” and reserves the lower case for appropriations of queer Camp elements for non-queer discourse. I default to lower case “c” in this essay, when not quoting, only for consistency.

Gay aesthetics, for instance, would seem to be discouraged by living history sites, and, while homosocial systems are certainly easy to find, references to homosexuality or homoeroticism are extremely rare. Living History, in fact, is decidedly heteronormative. It reinforces the notions that American democracy is rooted in struggle, but buttressed by ideals of individualism and family. These notions were heavily inscribed by early and mid-twentieth century museums like Colonial Williamsburg, especially in the face of the Great Depression and, later, World War II and the Cold War. In the 1970s and 1980s, waves of revisionist social history swept through the museum industry, helping historical sites to draw attention to previously untold histories (those of women, blacks, and Native people), but queer histories did not make the cut in those rounds of revisionism, and are still noticeably absent.⁴⁵ There are spaces which might offer exceptions: the “after-hours” candlelight or “lanthorn” tours offered by Colonial Williamsburg and Old Sturbridge Village, for instance, purvey details and folklore about the past for mature audiences that return after the family-friendly daytime hours.⁴⁶ These programs treat courtship rituals, gossip, and human sexuality in past eras. In all my research, however, I have only encountered one reference to same-sex practices, and that was at a Williamsburg Program called “Theatre on the Road to Revolution,” staged on a modest plank platform in a remote corner of the Historic Area behind the Capitol building. Staff enacting eighteenth-century players staged short scenes from period drama (e.g. *Cato*), then read letters and newspaper excerpts regarding theatrical life. Included in these items was a Paris society

⁴⁵ Stephen Eddy Snow describes a “mock” sodomy trial staged by the female interpreters at the expense of two of their male colleagues at Plimoth Plantation the day before the museum opened for its season in 1986. The men “were charged and found guilty of ‘lude and sodomiticall practices.’” Snow uses the example to demonstrate a behind-the-scenes counternarrative in which the women got to have the power: “a little postmodern feminism penetrated the patriarchal reality of the Pilgrim Fathers” (*Performing the Pilgrims: A Study of Ethnohistorical Role Playing at Plimoth Plantation*, [Jackson: U Press of Mississippi, 1993] 118).

⁴⁶ Fort George, in Ontario, advertises its evening “Ghost Tours” program at the ticket office with the somewhat cryptic sign: “The Dead have been to over 60% of our Tours. Why Not You?” (“Ghost Tours: Phantoms of Fort George,” sign, Fort George, operated by Parks Canada, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, August 2005).

page account of two female acquaintances of Molière that lived together “as man and wife.” Upon hearing this the ladies next to me loudly tsked, “Isn’t that terrible?” and shook their heads disapprovingly. The interpreters smiled the item off with mild lewdness, and moved on.⁴⁷ This one instance of same-sex subject matter, then, was framed by the staff, and received by the audience, in a less-than-sympathetic manner.

Part of the problem is the representational mode on which living history has settled, itself—what Richard Handler and Eric Gable call “mimetic” or “progressive realism”⁴⁸—which, because of its mainstream elements and approach, say recent critiques, does not allow authentic witness to queer history. S.I. Salamensky writes that one cannot do justice to gay and lesbian characters with dominant realistic staging conventions:

As Jill Dolan has argued, realist forms fail to approximate the lesbian experience in dimension or depth. “Only by commenting on the ideological codes of dominant representation,” Dolan writes, can the playwright “reconstruct a lesbian position outside of radical or liberal feminist ideology.” David Savran makes a related argument regarding issues of masculinity.⁴⁹

Salamensky continues that this “general formulation might be extended to any non-normative love, or life, experience—which most, if well-perceived, may well turn out to be.”⁵⁰ Living history museums’ institutional trajectory is toward realism,⁵¹ but authentic explorations of non-normative life experiences, if not “most” life experiences, are prevented from being articulated in

⁴⁷ Tape-recorded presentation, “Theatre on the Road to Revolution” Playbooth Theatre, Colonial Williamsburg, 6 June 2000.

⁴⁸ Richard Hander and Eric Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg* (Durham: Duke UP, 1997) 70. This is where Taussig’s advocacy of mimesis can be problematized.

⁴⁹ S.I. Salamensky: “Re-Presenting Oscar Wilde: Wilde’s Trials, Gross Indecency, and Documentary Spectacle,” *Theatre Journal* 54.4, 587-88, citing Dolan, *Presence and Desire: Essays on Gender, Sexuality, and Performance* (Ann Arbor, U of MI P, 1988) 172.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, n.23

⁵¹ See Magelssen, “Stepping Back in Time.”

such a representationally bankrupt mode of performance. Camp strategies of self-aware kitsch performance could help to subvert the dominant performance conventions and narratives that have continually repressed queer discourses at these museums.

Third, what about those situations where kitsch has been marshaled out by dictators in order to construct and police regimes where unquestioning sentiment for homeland disallows explicit critique, and how does a camp celebration of tourist-kitsch performance recognize and maintain a sensitivity to these histories? As I mentioned earlier, Greenberg has been one of kitsch's strongest opponents, arguing that kitsch, if taken to its natural conclusions will always result in fascism. It is not hard to draw analogies between Greenberg's historically-situated cautionary discourse, and the propagandistic echoes of our current administration's post-9/11 patriotism in living history performance today (the performative answer to the kitschy American flag and yellow-ribbon car magnets⁵²). Greenberg's explicit condemnation teases out the more subtle discursive dilemmas of kitsch. While a camp-eyed celebration of kitsch may very well be a subversive reading that dismantles the hegemonic apparatus before it imposes its normative template on the spectator's body, there are arguably many more spectators who will be swept up by the easily consumed narratives that affirm jingoistic "us vs. them" binaries that are dominating the narratives of America domestically and abroad. Kundera wrote that kitsch was the absolute denial of shit, but goes on to explain that "kitsch excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence."⁵³ In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, much of which is set in Prague after the Russian invasion and forceful re-imposition of

⁵² As Andrew Ross pointedly observes, "the British flag, for Mods and other subcultures, and Victoriana, for the Sergeant Pepper phase of later sixties, became camp objects—precisely because of their historical association with a power that was now in decline. The Stars and Stripes, and most Americana, by contrast, could only be kitsch (gracelessly sincere), because they intend serious support for a culture that still holds real power in defining the shape of foreign tastes" (Ross 140).

⁵³ Kundera 248.

Communism, the character Sabina reflects that the *example par excellence* of Communist kitsch was the imperative May Day Parade. Its propaganda, after all, boiled down the most essential and sentimental associations for mass consumption, rallying the masses to these metonymic concepts:

The feeling induced by kitsch must be a kind the multitudes can share. Kitsch may not, therefore, depend on an unusual situation; it must derive from the basic images people have engraved in their memories: the ungrateful daughter, the neglected father, children running on the grass, the motherland betrayed, first love.

Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says:
How nice to see children running on the grass!

The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind,
by children running on the grass!

It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch.⁵⁴

It is clear that kitsch, in these instances, has not been a matter to be winked at and enjoyed. But camp can, and, in fact, should, take on the current enunciations of such high-stakes kitsch, in the U.S. and elsewhere. This can't, however, work with Sontag's model of camp as the "democratization of taste," because, as Andrew Ross points out, that model is based on a naïve liberal pluralism that is usually the privilege of the college-educated, mostly white, moneyed class.⁵⁵ Camp embracing of kitsch is not really about democratization: it's an unmasking of the constructed-ness of aesthetic, political, and cultural boundaries and tastes—a back-door diffusing

⁵⁴ Kundera 251.

⁵⁵ Ross 142.

of the rhetoric of hegemonic systems, undermining their credibility. Camp does more than just wink. Camp smirks.

Living history museums, despite curators' efforts in recent decades, are enterprises in tourist-kitsch. If viewed and consumed with unquestioning sincerity, this kitsch risks the enunciation and reification of unhelpful and nostalgic narratives of the American past that both limit the ways we think about it and silence the voices that do not fit the museums' curatorial agendas. When, however, the kitsch is acknowledged at the level of performative exchange between the interpreter and the visitor in all of its richness and irony—when it is campy and self-aware—we know not to take it *seriously*. Irony and insincerity can combat the oppressive sincerity of museumification. Camp celebration of tourist-kitsch diffuses and disarms sincerity with an unmasking strategy that allows the perception that the narrative performed by the museum is not the only, nor the most authoritative one. The pleasurable moment of the tourist-kitsch encounter subverts the historiographic script of the institution and allows tourists to see that there are still a multiplicity of narratives regarding the past that are available.

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