

A Matter of Taste

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In our relationship to mass consumerism there is one decisive mediator: taste. According to philosopher Christoph Menke, the role of taste in aesthetic and critical judgments is as central as it is vague,¹ whether observing and appraising art, music, fashion, film, TV series or interior design. It is precisely questions about good and bad taste that repeatedly confront the viewer in Halvor Rønning's works, and from which I draw the following considerations.

Collected in this artist book are collages made from advertisements, from Fendi to Versace, Rolex watches and diamond bracelets, crossword puzzles and tribal tattoos, and clippings from gossip magazines and architecture journals. Combined with abstract gestural painting and figurative, caricaturesque line drawings, one could see it as a collision of tastes, a deliberate confrontation of contradictory aesthetic codes. What kinds of relationships do the works establish with these codes, with the products depicted, and the media and gestures applied? What kinds of relationships do they produce and expect from the viewer, who may or may not (or even reluctantly) recognize, from a consumer's point of view, the brands, the items and the styles? To approach these questions,

I will begin by classifying Rønning's work in an art historical and conceptual context, and subsequently go on to the roles of medium and gesture, particularly in the fields of fashion and abstract painting.

For art to be concerned with issues of taste seems self-evident, and analyzing the aesthetic characteristics of art-related milieus is certainly no recent invention. Yet it also is no simple feat. Taste defines the social, but is also socially (pre)defined. It is shaped by the consumer's cultural environment, while, as we know from Bourdieu, it simultaneously creates this environment via distinction. Taste is individual, and when shared, confirms one's belonging to a group, a "scene," a class. It can be contested, but only in relation to the norms of a given social environment: for example, in the objection of a "yes but..." or defending something as "so bad that it's actually good." In these ways, even elements dismissed by critical consciousness can serve our personal identities, with both approval and/or dismissal becoming valuable in constructing the (entrepreneurial) self.²

Taste, one could say, is socially exposing. And writing about taste (as this text does) runs the risk of making assumptions about authors, artists, and

¹ Menke, Christoph, (September 2009) "A Different Taste. Neither Autonomy nor Mass Consumption," *Texte zur Kunst* 75

² See Bröckling, Ulrich, (2016), *The Entrepreneurial Self: Fabricating a New Type of Subject*, London: Sage

viewers who are making individual choices in a context which is never universal, but of a common scene, a common Western canon, a common (bourgeois/neoliberal) environment. There is no illusion of objectivity, and it is not surprising that strong subject positions have always been affirmed throughout 20th and 21st century art history in regard to mainstream consumer products or kitsch—all considered “bad taste” to bourgeois sensibility. Both the artist making an aesthetic selection and the initiated spectator with enough background knowledge to decipher the collision of codes seem to be fixed functions of such art, functions that can be ironized, but not, ultimately, dissolved.

Take “bad painting” for example. Martin Kippenberger’s series “Lieber Maler, male mir” (Dear painter, paint for me) (1981), painted by commissioned professional billboard artists, highlights the gap between different concepts of artistic subjectivity. Or Jeff Koon’s “Banality” series (1988), which elevates porcelain bric-a-brac and rural-naive picture postcards to expensive sculptures for rich collectors. Artists like Richard Prince and Sherrie Levine also come to mind, who throughout the 1980s perfected the position of hovering between

fascination and aversion as a critical gesture under the rubric of “appropriation.” Taste may never have been a prominent value category in art historical discourse, but it is precisely this kind of structure of desire—“bad” taste and “good” art—that the aforementioned works analyze: the desire to consume what critical consciousness rejects and yet is still aesthetically successful—a “guilty pleasure” if you will.

So, do Rønning’s works lend themselves to a postmodern ironic reading? A follow up to *Bad Painting and Appropriation Art*? In this book, strategies of ironic refraction certainly abound. They are emphasized by the placement of the collages on facing double-page spreads. For example, a reddish-purple, freestyle brush-stroked page of the gossip magazine “Cuore” showing a topless Leonardo DiCaprio flanked by hashtags claiming supposed plus-size trends, is set against the heading “Grand Gestures,” a feature on a Houston collector couple; or a pinkish-brown composition with tire tracks and flame tattoos opposite the heading “A Fine Balance” from an architecture magazine. The juxtaposed pages engage with one another and establish a relationship via the recurring colors and formats. Types and figures also recur:

stars and B-grade celebrities, comical sketches of androgynous dandies, a model styled as a Ken dress-up doll in tight underpants, women with bikini “nipples” and plumped-up lips. The motifs are so in-your-face and corporeally present that there is no escaping them. Art discourse since the 1960s has attempted to bundle this kind of conscious aesthetic exaggeration into the concept of Camp; and, according to cultural theorist Pamela Robertson, the figure of the “gold digger,” a favorite of the gossip press, is the heterosexual female counterpart to the “dandy” in camp aesthetics.³ Both reappear in Rønning’s work as figures who condense desire and mark out the boundaries of good taste through deliberate excess as well as calculating precision.

Rønning demonstrates his ambivalent fascination with these types of figures in an aesthetic that defines the body as an object of consumption for the masses, and abandons any pretension of achieving “a fine balance.”

It would be easy to classify what we see here within a long tradition of “camp irony.” And yet this conclusion falters when leafing through the pages as every secure and ordered relationship turns out

to be fragile. At times painting gets the upper hand, and the ironic messages give way to formal repetition. At other times delicate, almost elegant drawings take the paparazzi pics as motifs and pull the carpet out from under our voyeuristic gaze on unglamorous poses. Formalism and humorous commentary do not grant us any well-defined position from which to desire or ironize any superiority over the material, and thus, through repulsion and attraction, entangling both the spectator and the artist. At the same time, the material is never allowed enough room to completely form its own authority as a shunned consumerist fetish against which to construct an identity. The confrontation of various media (photography, painting and drawing) and the various gestures and positions they transport achieve a complexity beyond categorization into notions like camp or irony.

This confrontation operates largely through the targeted use of various compositional elements and references, each with their specific, respective functions in the spectrum of taste and aesthetic identity. One example of this is fashion. Art and fashion have a long, mutually fertile relationship, and since the 1980s have shared both a proximity to celebrity culture and

³ Robertson, Pamela, (1996), *Guilty Pleasures. Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna*, Duke University Press: Durham

the structures of a global creative industry.⁴ Furthermore, with its emphasis on constantly overcoming and renewing the present,⁵ fashion achieves an illusion of shared contemporaneity, which is also claimed by “contemporary art.” So it makes sense for art to latch on to particular fashion codes and brands so as to effectively position itself as stylish and affiliated to a particular generation and scene. Frankfurt-based artist Anne Imhof, for example, applies brands such as Balenciaga as an explicit marker of a subculture, which, depending on the audience, sets up either a distance or absorbs the performers into the crowd.⁶ Clothing and style as elements of identification (or lack thereof) emphasize a shared aesthetic, a lived present relating to and originating from the absolute “now.” References to such structures of mutual confirmation between art scene affiliation and fashion label branding can also be seen in Rønning’s works. For example the Italian fashion house Brioni’s 2015 collection, photographed by Collier Schorr and modelled by artists Seth Price and Karl Holmqvist, among others,



is processed here in a collage. We can read this as a direct address to the informed viewer who can decipher the references, recognizes the models and knows that the campaign is playing—along with the portrayed artists themselves—with the intertwined projections and desires of fashion and art. And yet Rønning’s fashion and taste references function radically differently from Imhof’s: they do not construct any “us,” members of a collective scene that the viewer may or may not feel a part of. Not only because Versace, Fendi, Dior, or Saint Laurent do not evoke an underground, or insider knowledge, but because they seem to make the expectation of standing for an “absolute presence” laughable. The branding logics of Brioni and Versace are here at the same level as those of “Juicy Fruit” gum and expensive scotch whisky, and are made, as it were, transparent.

And here art similarly reveals itself constrained in a multifaceted network of branding and desire. This is particularly so for abstract painting, which has

⁴ Graw, Isabelle, (December 2004) “Der letzte Schrei. Über modeförmige Kunst und kunstförmige Mode,” *Texte zur Kunst*, 56, p. 80–95

⁵ Simmel, Georg “Philosophie der Mode,” http://www.modetheorie.de/fileadmin/Texte/s/Simmel-Philosophie_Mode_1905.pdf, p. 16–20

⁶ Busta, Caroline and Dyes, Anke (May 2017), on Anne Imhof at Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, *Texte zur Kunst online*, <https://www.textezurkunst.de/articles/angst-web/>

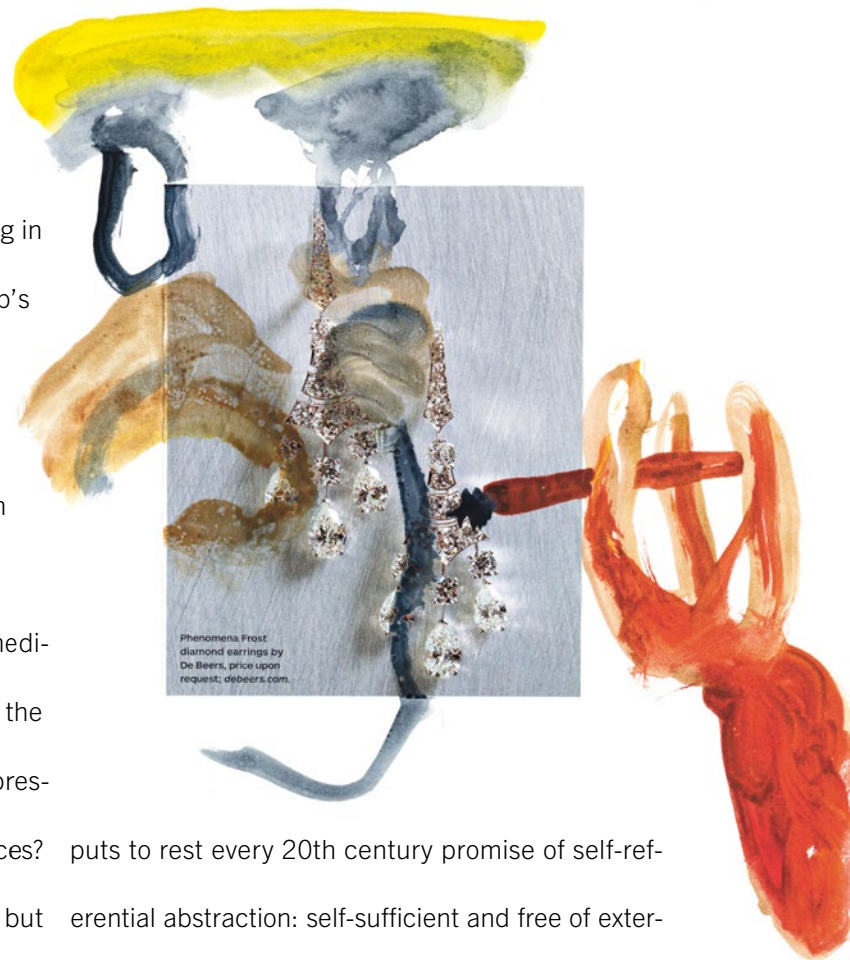
⁷ Started in 2014 by an article on ArtSpace.com: Robinson, Walter, (April 2014), "Flipping and the Rise of Zombie Formalism" http://www.artspace.com/magazine/contributors/see_here/the_rise_of_zombie_formalism-52184

experienced a revival in recent years, most recently in the context of "zombie formalism,"⁷ where it has (once again) run from being found favorable to becoming the snotty cliché medium of young, male artists. Far from being dead—it is, in fact, highly successful on the market—it has something of an image problem: isn't it always a bit of a hotshot move to swish a few vigorous and slightly careless brushstrokes across the canvas? Are these drips and swishes merely creating a "safe space" in a world of screens, fulfilling a craving for unique materiality, while avoiding the pitfalls of figurative representation? Investing in it certainly doesn't seem to hurt: as Ivanka Trump's Instagram exemplifies, abstract painting today best fulfils its "decorative purposes"⁸ when it is photogenic on the one hand, and goes nicely with the sofa on the other.

⁸ After failing to disclose their art collection, Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner issued a statement claiming that their collection is on display "for decorative purposes" only. See <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/jared-kushner-ivanka-trump-art-970010>

So what then do we do with painting, *the* medium of "Art with a capital A"? A medium always on the brink of identification with its own need for expression, with the affect-logic it produces and reproduces? Rønning doesn't dismiss the abstract gesture, but articulates a certain discomfort towards it, his palette hovering between the tasteful and the abject, as can

be seen, for instance, in the brown and white cloudy formations on raw canvas that were shown at Lucas Hirsch in Dusseldorf in 2017. Or, further seen, in the pink wipes over the equally pink lounge suite from a magazine clipping; or the grey-green-blue-purple blobs combined with the "trashiness" of tribal tattoos and tire marks. Dramatic brushstrokes surrounding a diamond ring alongside it's purchase order form finally



puts to rest every 20th century promise of self-referential abstraction: self-sufficient and free of external interests, merely performing its own production and materiality, and of course, taste-wise, fail-safe.

Effectively, Rønning's collages provide the abstract mechanism of self-preserving identity: taste is what with a suitable context (Rive Gauche apartment, is forever irrecoverably foreign at the subject's own Fendi sofa), and simultaneously use it as a contextualizing instrument. Instead of emptying itself in the Greenbergian tradition, painting here plays the role of commentator. And while historical "bad painting" was mostly figurative, perhaps necessarily so, Rønning seems to denote that it is the abstract painterly gesture that today must rid itself of self-identification. One thing becomes clear though: this kind of "painting beside itself" is hard work.

In Christoph Menke's words, taste "is a force that is neither a faculty for reflective subjectivity nor a

mechanism of self-preserving identity: taste is what is forever irrecoverably foreign at the subject's own core."⁹ Halvor Rønning's works bring this foreignness to the fore, along with the uncomfortable ties of all that is familiar to us, all those seemingly fail-safe choices. This strategy is, of course, a gesture itself, and quickly becomes a marker of a recognizable aesthetic identity. However, the works resist the essentializing of these kinds of markers that is so common in contemporary art today, and thus resist the glossing over of the ruptures of the everyday, the consumed, the present.

⁹ Menke, *op. cit.*, p. 112