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Terms of Art – Reframing Key Concepts in Philosophy and Art Theory: "Kitsch"

Deadline: Mar 31, 2026

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Call for Papers for the second edition of the series Terms of Art – Reframing Key Concepts in Philosophy and Art Theory, focusing on the concept of "Kitsch".

Terms of Art – Kitsch undertakes a multi-perspective, in-depth examination of the concept of kitsch. It is part of the series Terms of Art – Reframing Key Concepts in Philosophy and Art Theory. Through historically and systematically argued contributions, Terms of Art – Kitsch offers a timely reassessment of a concept that remains both ambiguous and elusive.

Even before its first documented usage, debates were already underway on the distinction between high and popular art, and on good versus bad taste. Around 1800, the rise of mass-market literature, designed to evoke emotion, drew criticism from figures like Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, who dismissed its authors as commercially driven "money writers." However, theorists such as Friedrich Schiller and Karl Philipp Moritz recognized that this type of literature fulfilled specific needs. Schiller, for instance, saw in its fragmentary, compilatory style a response to the readers' desire for immediate sensory experience. This popular "fashion art" was less criticized for lacking skill than for its emotionally self-referential character: the reader, Johann Gottfried Hoche observed in 1794, "enjoys themselves," not the aesthetic object.

At this stage, however, the term "kitsch" had not yet been coined. It first appeared in German artistic circles in 1881, often used to discredit the work of competitors. The dichotomy between kitsch and art was employed explicitly for the purpose of taste education. Gustav E. Pazaurek, director of the Stuttgart Museum of Applied Arts, was especially vocal in this regard. He described the "dissemination of good taste" as the "most noble cultural task in national, aesthetic, and economic terms" (Pazaurek 1912). In 1909, he organized the influential exhibition Errors of Taste in the Applied Arts.

After World War I, organizations such as the Deutscher Werkbund, the Dürerbund, and the Youth Book Movement turned against so-called "trash literature" and popular cultural products that lacked moral or aesthetic integrity. During National Socialism, the kitsch concept was politically weaponized: the so-called "Anti-Kitsch Law" was passed in 1933 to "protect national symbols from irony and trivialization."
Just a few years later, Clement Greenberg addressed the relationship between aesthetic avant-garde and kitsch in his seminal 1939 essay Avant-Garde and Kitsch. He viewed the avant-garde as a defense mechanism to preserve artistic standards threatened by mass production and consumption, positioning kitsch and art as diametrical opposites.

From the 1960s onwards, attitudes toward kitsch became more permissive. Its pedagogical rejection faded, giving way to amused and ironic displays in publications such as Die Kitschpostille (1966) and Kitschlexikon (1970). The theoretical opposition between kitsch and art also began to unravel, as seen in Ludwig Giesz's Phenomenology of Kitsch (1960). In Theodor W. Adorno's posthumously published Aesthetic Theory (1970), the relationship between art and kitsch becomes more fluid: "Kitsch parodies aesthetic catharsis. [...] As a toxic element, it is mixed into all art." Umberto Eco, in his influential essay La struttura del cattivo gusto (1964), sought to challenge the conflation of mass culture with kitsch. In his semiotic analysis, he defines kitsch as an aesthetic work "that parades borrowed emotional content for the sake of stimulation and yet unabashedly presents itself as art."

Against this backdrop, kitsch has increasingly become legible as a discursive figure. Gregory Fuller argued in 1992 that the term was losing its meaning due to the dominance of industrially pre-fabricated products. Martin Kirves described "kitsch!" as a polemical term, not used for precise description but to draw aesthetic and cultural boundaries. Kitsch and art can thus be understood as relational concepts whose meanings are often established only through mutual opposition.

Today, the distinction between "high" and "low" culture seems increasingly untenable. Charlotte Bolwin notes that the normative imprint of Western-modern aesthetics is most evident where the divide between art and kitsch is drawn most sharply. The more rigid this boundary, the more visible its discursive, historical, and strategic foundations. Judgments about kitsch, then, reflect deeper assumptions about cultural identity and aesthetic belonging. It is also notable how frequently the term "kitsch" appears in commentary on contemporary art, particularly in works produced with the aid of artificial intelligence.

Kitsch can further relate to other aesthetic categories, such as the now ubiquitous figure of "cuteness." Both kitsch and cuteness engage with questions of taste, pleasure, power, and gender. The notion of "camp," too, with its reflections on irony, surface, and seriousness, proves a relevant reference point (Notes on Camp, 1964).

This brief excursus reveals that the concept of kitsch is constantly evolving and remains deeply ambivalent. The edited volume will therefore focus on questions such as:
- What accounts for the contemporary rejection of kitsch?
- How might we reinterpret classic theories of kitsch by thinkers such as Theodor W. Adorno and Umberto Eco?
- How can art resist becoming kitsch?
- What role do artists themselves play in defining kitsch?
- How does kitsch relate to seriousness, aspiration, and originality?
- What is its relationship to gender?
- How does it intersect today with consumption, pleasure, and amateurism?
- Does kitsch still pose dangers of trivialization, leveling, inauthenticity, and deception?

About the Series:
Terms of Art – Reframing Key Concepts in Philosophy and Art Theory (edited by Moritz Pretzsch and Anna-Lisa Scherfose, forthcoming with De Gruyter/Deutscher Kunstverlag) is dedicated to re-examining central concepts in art for their current relevance and substantial significance. At its

core, the series focuses on essential terms in art, art studies, art theory, aesthetics, and adjacent disciplines. It centers on terms with complex histories of definition and usage – concepts that emerged in specific historical contexts but have retained their relevance.

In light of technological transformations and the political and social challenges of our times, the series aims to revisit such concepts in comprehensive and multilayered ways, challenging the perception that they are outdated, abstract, or vague. Its goal is to present a polyphonic spectrum of art-theoretical and philosophically grounded perspectives that open up new insights and angles on seemingly familiar terms.

Key questions include:
- How must we approach each concept today?
- What new interpretive potential has emerged from recent technological developments?
- To what extent can each term be applied to current societal processes, and where does it risk becoming obsolete?
- How must we reconceptualize the nexus of art and the human in relation to each foundational term?

Each volume will comprise about twelve contributions of roughly 20 pages each, authored by leading researchers selected through invitation and open call.
The first three editions will focus on Style, Kitsch, and Taste.

Please submit proposals for the volume Terms of Art – Kitsch (max. 350 words), along with 5 keywords, a brief CV, and contact information, compiled into a single PDF, by March 31, 2026, to Moritz Pretzsch (moritzpretzsch@uni-kassel.de) and Anna-Lisa Scherfose (a.scherfose@uni-kassel.de).

Notifications of acceptance will be sent by end of June 2026.

Final contributions (English language, max. 50,000 characters including footnotes and spaces) are due by November 30, 2026.

All submissions will undergo a double-blind peer review process.

Reference:

CFP: Terms of Art – Reframing Key Concepts in Philosophy and Art Theory: "Kitsch". In: ArtHist.net, Dec 13, 2025 (accessed Jan 27, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/51322>.