2015

Contemporary Kitsch: An examination through creative practice

Sally Stewart
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Appendix 1: The Aquarium is available as an additional file (at the bottom of the page). The backing music has not been included in this version of the video.

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Contemporary Kitsch: An examination through creative practice

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ABSTRACT

This exegesis examines the theoretical concept of contemporary kitsch within a creative practice that incorporates sculptural and installation art. Kitsch is a distinct aesthetic style. Once designated to the rubbish bin of culture, kitsch was considered to be low class, bad taste cheap fakes and copies (Greenberg, 1961; Adorno & Horkheimer, 1991; Calinescu, 1987; Dorfles, 1969). I argue, however, that this is no longer the case. This research critically examines the way in which contemporary kitsch now plays a vital and positive role in social and individual aesthetic life.

Although there are conflicting points of view and distinct variations between recent cultural commentators (Olalquiaga, 1992; Binkley, 2000; Attfield, 2006) on what kitsch is, there is a common sentiment that "the repetitive qualities of kitsch address . . . a general problem of modernity" (Binkley, p. 131). The research aligns the repetitive qualities to what sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991) refers to as "dissembeddedness" (1991) or "the undermining of personal horizons of social and cosmic security" (Binkley, 1991, p.131). The research investigates: how the sensory affect of sentimentality imbued in the kitsch experiences, possessions and material objects people covet and collect, offer a way of the individual moving from disembeddedness to a state of being re-embedded; and locates the ways in which the artist can facilitate the re-embedding experience.

Through this lens it is demonstrated that kitsch has become firmly rooted in our "lifeworlds" (Habermas, 1971), as an aesthetic that reveals "how people make sense of the world through artefacts" (Attfield, 2006, p. 201) and everyday objects; that the sensory affect of sentimentality on connections to possessions and material objects that contemporary kitsch offers is shared across cultures and societies.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

i.   *incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;*

ii.   *contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text of this thesis; or*

iii.   *contain any defamatory material;*

Sally Stewart

Date

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Two DVDs accompany this exegesis: Appendix 1: *The Aquarium*, which presents a short video of *The Aquarium* (2009) installation and residency, and Appendix 2: Additional Images of Artworks, provide additional documentation of the creative component of this research.

It is suggested that Appendix 2 be viewed as an accompaniment to Section 3 of this exegesis in which a reflexive overview of my creative practice and the use of kitsch is given.

Appendix 1 accompanies Section 3.2: *The Aquarium* Installation and Section 6: An Analysis of *The Aquarium* Within a Framework of Olalquiaga's Three-Degrees of Kitsch.

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INTRODUCTION

This research examines the theoretical concept of contemporary kitsch within a creative practice that incorporates sculptural and installation art. Kitsch is a distinct aesthetic style. Having been consigned to the unflattering realm of cultural rubbish, kitsch was considered to be low class, bad taste, cheap fakes and copies (Greenberg, 1961; Adorno & Horkheimer, 1991; Calinescu, 1987; Dorfles, 1969). The purpose of this research, however, is to demonstrate that this is no longer the case. The research aims to evaluate and validate the ways in which the value and meaning of kitsch has shifted to meet the changing needs of individuals and societies; and to highlight the vital and positive role that contemporary kitsch now plays in individual, and social, aesthetic life.

Several studies between recent cultural commentators (Olalquiaga, 1992; Binkley, 2000; Attfield, 2006) have produced more positive analyses of kitsch, but there is still little agreement and distinct variations between these theorists on what kitsch is, and how it should be defined. There is, however, a common sentiment between these theorists that "the repetitive qualities of kitsch address … a general problem of modernity" (Binkley, p. 131). This sentiment aligns the repetitive quality of kitsch to what political theorist and sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991) refers to as "disembeddedness" (1991) or "the undermining of personal horizons of social and cosmic security" (Binkley, 1991, p.131). The research seeks to address how the sensory affect of sentimentality instilled in kitsch experiences, possessions and the material objects that people desire and collect, can offer a way for the individual to move from a state of disembeddedness to one of being re-embedded. The research therefore aims to reveal how, through its ability to re-embed, kitsch can assist people to fulfil memories, dreams, and fantasies, and in so doing, find a sense of comfort and safety in a changing world (Attfield, 2006).

Through a reflexive analysis of my creative practice, the various exhibitions held throughout candidature and a broad cross-section of examples from popular and contemporary culture, Olalquiaga's (1992, 1998) Binkley's (2000) and Attfield's (2006) recent concepts of kitsch, and the ability of kitsch to re-embed the individual (Binkley, 2000) are examined. From this perspective it is demonstrated that kitsch has become firmly rooted in our "lifeworlds" (Habermas, 1971), as an aesthetic that reveals "how people make sense of the world through artefacts" (Attfield, 2006, p. 201) and everyday objects; that the sensory affect of sentimentality on connections to possessions and material objects that contemporary kitsch offers is shared across cultures and societies.

The fundamental aim of this creative praxis, therefore, is to examine the ways in which kitsch functions in contemporary life and to seek to address the following question:

- How can kitsch produce an experience that re-embeds the viewer and how can my sculptural and installation art practice, which utilises aspects of kitsch, facilitate the experience of re-embedding?

I. Background

Four bodies of work have been developed throughout this research: The main work, *The Aquarium* (2009) installation and residency; the installation *Budgietopia* (2009–2013); a series of sculptural *Snow Domes and Dream Spheres* (2009–2010); and the sculpture *Jesus* (2010). Reference is also made to my earlier work, *The Lotus Pond* (2007, 2008) that was developed during my honours candidature. *The Lotus Pond* (2007, 2008) has been fundamental in the development of my doctoral research as it is where my examination of kitsch began and has in turn provided a foundation for my creative praxis.

Due to the close relationship between my creative practice and the theoretical framework examined within this research, reviewed literature—particularly

Olalquiaga's (1992; 1998) and Binkley's (2000)—and examples of my creative work are woven together throughout this exegesis. The artworks I have made are by no means literal interpretations of these theories, however they do incorporate various aspect of this research.

There are two appendices in the form of DVDs accompanying this exegesis. Appendix 1: *The Aquarium*, presents a short video of *The Aquarium* (2009) installation and of my time spent inhabiting the tank. Section 3.1 and Section 6 in Appendix 2: Additional Images of Artworks, provides supplementary photographic documentation of each work produced throughout candidature. Images of each of the works are included throughout this exegesis, however, due to the size and scale of the works, additional images showing the installations and sculptures from various angles and also the finer details of each work are included in Appendix 2. It is suggested that Appendix 2 be viewed as an accompaniment to Section 3 of this research in which a reflexive overview of my creative practice and the use of kitsch is given. A list of the images included in Appendix 2 has been included in the table of contents (under the heading Appendix 2).

Because the analysis of this praxis is positioned within the everyday and the "lifeworld" (Habermas, 1971) a deliberate decision has been made to draw on examples of texts from a broad field of discourse beyond the visual arts. The examples include popular culture texts from films to fashion accessories as well as social culture texts including the story of Janet Williams and her extensive collection of British royalty memorabilia, to a Hamster-themed hotel and decorative household objects, just to mention a few. It is through these examples that I demonstrate the communicative capacity of kitsch and my artwork within the lifeworld (Habermas, 1971) and the everyday, and therefore demonstrate my critical and reflexive praxis model.

The differing contexts in which the creative works have been exhibited is of particular importance to this research, as it positions kitsch within the everyday and lifeworld. The works have been exhibited in public spaces and venues including a church, and central Perth, Western Australia's Town Square. These

venues were specifically chosen, as they are accessible to people, doing everyday things.

Aspects of the artworks, which examine kitsch—created throughout this research—are explored within my lifeworld, but are foremost examinations of broader social and cultural constructs. Throughout the reflexive process of praxis it became apparent that the constructs of kitsch and sentimentality are shared across cultures and societies and could be applied to a broad demographic, almost universally, but more generally in the affluent developed world. Yet the experiences of and relationship to these constructs for individuals and societies are both unique and subjective. By positioning the creative work developed throughout this research within the lifeworld, I aim to offer an insight into the unique relationship between experience, sentimentality and kitsch.

II. The Lifeworld

The term 'lifeworld' refers to Jurgen Habermas' notion of 'The Lifeworld and System'" (Habermas, 1971) and is central to his *Theory of Communicative Action*, published in two volumes (1971, 1987). For Habermas (1971) the foundation of any 'action' is grounded in 'communication'. His theory investigates the paradigm shift from 'purposeful non-verbal activity' (1971, n.p.) (traditions and rituals) to those of communicative action. He considers the fundamental problem of contemporary societies as being how to create conditions for "communicative action" (Habermas, 1987, p. 46). He considers the 'legitimacy' of societies (social institutions and nation states) to be in crisis. Therefore as "advanced capitalist societies" continue developing their central integrative function of communication, the lifeworld continues to be weakened or systemically "colonised" (Habermas, 1987, p. 46). As a result, society has fallen into a legitimacy crisis, whereby communicative action becomes colonised. Colonisation in turn undermines the legitimacy of the lifeworld.

Habermas links 'legitimacy' to social order and the individual's desire to believe that the institutions within their lifeworld are "just, benevolent, in their best interest, and deserving of their support, loyalty, and adherence" (University of Calgary, n.d., para. 2) From this view communicative action is foremost a critique of the manner in which the communicative act has come to be colonised, and of colonisation in turn undermining our sense of 'legitimacy'. It is a process with parallels to Giddens (1991) notion of 'disembeddedness'[1].

According to Giddens (1991) disembeddedness effectively lifts out social relations from time and space so that they lose their original context. Disembeddedness, like the systemic colonisation of the lifeworld, not only changes the way in which communication takes place, but breeds radical doubt amongst citizens. As with the systemic colonisation of the lifeworld, trust is undermined, increasing radical doubt that the "institutions of abstraction" (Habermas, 1994) have the interests of their citizens at heart, and are worthy of support.

A large portion of Habermas' (1994) theory of the lifeworld and system is dedicated to finding ways of restoring legitimacy through developing conditions for ideal speech. However, rather than offering an insight into his critique of ideal speech, social rationality or the process of secularisation, this research focuses on aesthetic colonisation and how the human lifeworld is shaped by systemic influences. I am specifically interested in examining how material pursuits and the collective action of modernisation have influenced individuals and societies' aesthetic lifeworlds. It is through this lens that the resulting implications and increased value that is now placed on kitsch can be investigated.

Habermas observes an imbalance between the lifeworld and system, claiming that the lifeworld has been 'colonised', annexed by institutions of authority of which he calls 'systemic imperatives' (1994). Entwined by systemic ties and abstract connections, the theory of communicative action, and therefore the lifeworld and system, is in many ways a study of the transition from an agrarian

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[1] The term 'disembedded' or 'disembeddedness is defined in Section 2.6

culture and pre-industrial action—to modernity. It links the move from the 'authority of the sacred', to the organisations (Habermas, 1994), and in my view, to the modern world.

The term lifeworld has been used by several theorists but was first coined by the German theorist Edmund Husserl in his theory of the phenomenology of the lifeworld. Habermas has adapted Alfred Schutz's notion of the lifeworld, which is based on that of Husserl. The term lifeworld, as used by Habermas, describes the environment in which we live, our intricate universes of day-to-day lived experiences. It is the sphere where everyday social life is acted out and where communication and the exchange of information take place. The lifeworld is where cultural traditions and reflexive socialisation are expressed through collective social action and the communicative activities (spoken and non-spoken) of individuals. It permits us to develop a sense of who we are and whom we value being—senses that are also attributed to kitsch. The lifeworld is the sphere in which we live, where thoughts, ideas and stories are shared and expressed. It is not necessarily a harmonious place as it is the site in which social fragmentation occurs. It is where individual and collective social action unfolds.

The lifeworld and system are inherently interconnected. The 'system' refers to the regulating system in which actions are coordinated through "functional interconnectedness of action consequences" (Habermas, 1994, p. xxvi). Habermas, however, makes a clear distinction between the lifeworld and the system. The lifeworld of a social group, for example, is where actions are coordinated through "harmonising action orientations" (1994, p. xxiii). Conversely "the functional interconnectedness of action consequences" (p. xxvi) means society is likewise exposed to the pervasive effect of impersonal self-regulating systems. Self-regulating systems are the authoritative institutions (i.e., the justice system, educational institutions, governments, etc.) that are associated with social needs and that act in response to social problems. Even so, the lifeworld is positioned "in peculiar contrast to the explicit knowledge of something" (Habermas, as cited in Outhwaite, 1991, p.331). Within the lifeworld, for example, day-to-day lived experiences of the individual stand side-by-side with

systemic imperatives such as the state, economic markets, and other influential institutions. As a form of hegemonic power, this kind of knowledge has subtly yet strategically made its way into our daily lives. Habermas sees the infiltration of systemic imperatives into the very private sphere of the lifeworld as an assault comparative with "colonial masters coming from the outside into a tribal society" (1989, p. 335). Systemic dominance forces individuals into a process of assimilation that occurs gradually and insidiously. Little by little, the moral values that have founded our traditions and values, and therefore our lifeworlds, are replaced with what is more often than not some sort of irrational logic (Habermas, 1989) the motive of which is to create social integration through the process of assimilation.

ii.i The Lifeworld and System within my Praxis

My creative practice plays a significant role in my lifeworld and this praxis. It is where I translate theoretical concepts, like kitsch into form and content. It is where the philosophies I have engaged within my artwork can be communicated on a broader-ranging cultural and societal level, as is demonstrated in the immersive world of *The Aquarium* (2009), discussed in Section 6.

To a significant degree, the lifeworld depends on cultural traditions and the procedures of reflexive socialisation that in my view, is facilitated through the "repetitive quality of kitsch" (Binkley, 2000, p.131). When expressed through the process of collective social action and the communicative activities of societies and individuals, the lifeworld, kitsch and art meet. Within the everyday, the lifeworld is where individual and collective social action is acted out. The lifeworld as kitsch is, I assert, where art and the lifeworld touch and because of the system of interconnectedness, art, the lifeworld and system affect each other.

ii.ii Summary of the Lifeworld and System and Theory of Communicative Action

In summary, Habermas' lifeworld and system and theory of communicative action operate on the premise that institutions invade social life on many levels. In so doing, the interconnectedness of the lifeworld and system effectively disconnects individuals and societies from the meaningful content that once gave their lives purpose. The colonisation of the lifeworld is a process that holds close ties to Giddens' (1991) notion of 'disembeddedness'. Disembeddedness effectively 'lifts out' social relations from time and space so that they lose their original context. Disembeddedness, like the systemic colonisation of the lifeworld, changes the way in which communication takes place. It is from this position of disembeddedness that, I argue kitsch operates within contemporary life through its ability to reconnect disembedded individuals to society and to their own lifeworld within the system. It is from this position that I argue that the use of kitsch by the artist can produce an experience with the potential to re-embed the viewer and give meaningful content and purpose to their lives.

Thus, the systemic colonisation of the lifeworld simultaneously undermines societies and individuals' ontological security while destroying fixed social relations and traditions. However, it can, on the other hand, bring about opportunities for change and reveal new possibilities in both social and individual realms. It allows for the release of old social patterns that no longer serve us and also makes room for new ways of being and for new traditions to develop within societies and individuals' aesthetic lifeworlds.

III. Structure

The methodology of 'arts-practice-led research' (Adams, 2008) and the methods I have used within this praxis to create the artworks developed are reflexively

examined throughout this research and are defined in Section 1. The methodology (the theoretical framework through which this research has been developed) and methods (the development of my artworks from theoretical conception through to their construction and exhibition) are closely linked. Drawing on Christopher Crouch's *Praxis and the Reflexive Creative Practitioner* (2007) and Carole Gray and Ian Pirie's '*Artistic' Research Procedure: Research at the Edge of Chaos?* (1995), my approach to practice-led-research as well as the use of 'reflexivity' (Giddens, 1991) and 'praxis' (Gramsci, 1971) is defined.

Section 2, Defining Kitsch*,* gives a brief examination of the development of the term 'kitsch', including those by Clement Greenberg (1961), Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1991), Matei Calinescu (1987), Hermann Broch (1955) and Gillo Dorfles (1969). The research then surveys my re-evaluation of kitsch starting with the shift in the development of taste, culture and status in definitions of kitsch that began to emerge between contemporary commentators (Binkley, 2000, 2002; Attfield, 2006; Olalquiaga, 1992, 1998) in the late 1990s and the 2000s.

An overview of the concept of 'taste' (Attfield, 2006) in analyses of kitsch is given and an argument for redefining taste is offered. Popular culture examples of Japanese artist and theorist Takashi Murakami (2008) and television chef Nigella Lawson (2001) are given, demonstrating the way in which the re-evaluation of kitsch and taste function in contemporary life.

A review of three recent re-conceptualisations of kitsch, is proposed, including Binkley's, *Kitsch as a Repetitive System: A Problem for the Theory of Taste and Hierarchy* (2000), Attfield's, *Redefining Kitsch: The Politics of Design* (2006), and cultural writer, Tracey Potts, '*Walking the Line': Kitsch, Class and the Morphing Subject of Value* (2007). In doing so, an argument in favour of Binkley's (2000), notion of 'kitsch as a repetitive system' is established, a view that is supported by Attfield (2006). Binkley's claim that kitsch "artificially inflates the comfort of decoration into a uniquely fake aesthetic statement" (2002, p. 1) is challenged, as is Potts' anti-Binkley (2000) and anti-Attfield (2006) stance, in which she asserts taste and hierarchies cannot be separated from analyses of kitsch.

Drawing on the work of Giddens (1991), and Binkley (2000), it is demonstrated how the repetitive quality of kitsch addresses the general problem of modernity that is referred to as 'disembeddedness'. A detailed explanation and examination of disembeddedness is given, supporting the view that disembeddedness, and therefore embeddedness, are as "central to any theory of kitsch as [they are] to any theory of modernity" (Binkley, 2000, p. 135). Finally, the notion of authenticity in analyses of kitsch is addressed. I examine why kitsch has generally been viewed as a 'faker' or less authentic reality (Broch, 1933, 1951; Greenberg, 1939; Binkley, 2000) and not simply just another reality. An argument is put forward demonstrating how the effect of historical and cultural changes have transformed kitsch to be a very real, aesthetic. It is demonstrated that analyses in which kitsch is limited to definitions of being a fake aesthetic statement, like that of Binkley's (2002) Broch (1933, 1951) and Greenberg (1939) are no longer relevant.

Section 3, offers a reflexive overview of my creative praxis and the use of kitsch within my artwork. The aims, content and context for each artwork, *The Aquarium*, 2009; *Budgietopia,* 2009–2013; *Snow Domes and Dream Spheres*, 2009–2010; *Jesus*, 2010, and my earlier work, *The Lotus Pond*, 2007–2008, are given and reflexively analysed.

The Lotus Pond (2007)
Installation
Plastic, vinyl, wood on rubber inner-tubes and water
.80m x 8m x 14zm (Variable)

Figure 1:   ***The Lotus Pond* (2007) exhibited at Spectrum Project Space, (Spectrum) Northbridge, Western Australia, for the Exhibition *White Monkey Holding Peach* (2007)**

The Lotus Pond (2008) (Figure 1) was initially developed during my honours candidature as part of a body of work called *White Monkey Holding Peach* (2007). Together, *The Lotus Pond* (2007, 2008) and *White Monkey Holding Peach* (2007) explore cultural incommensurability by looking at East/West cultural conventions and ideologies, as well as, contemporary kitsch. Influential in the development of my doctoral research, it was from gaining an understanding of the historical and cultural contexts of the designs in the plastics from which the lotus flowers are made, that my continued research into kitsch evolved. The installation has been through several incarnations between 2007 and 2010, some of which are discussed in relation to kitsch.

The Aquarium (2009)
Glass, steel, wood, hot pink gravel, and mixed media
3.5 x 2.5 x 2.4?

Figure 2: *The Aquarium* **installation (2009) exhibited at Spectrum (2009)**

The Aquarium (2009) (Figure 2) installation and residency is the principal work developed during my doctoral research. Created for a one-month artist residency, the installation was exhibited at Spectrum Project Space, Northbridge, Western Australia. The aim of this artwork was: to develop an environment whereby I could experiment with the ways in which the sensory affect of sentimentality associated with kitsch experiences, possessions and material objects can act to re-embedded the individual (in this case myself); and to experiment with the ways in which the artist, through the use of kitsch, can facilitate the experience of re-embedding for an audience. A reflexive analysis of my role as a mermaid, 'living' within the confines of *The Aquarium* (2009) is given. The analysis is related to Olalquiaga's 'three degrees of kitsch', highlighting the intricacies of contemporary kitsch apparent in the lifeworld created within the aquarium, and also outlines my observation of how various audience engaged with the work.

Figure 3:   **Image *Budgietopia Everest Reunion* (2009) exhibited at Spectrum (2009)**

The installation *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) was an ongoing project that ran between 2009 and 2013. *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) exists as a utopian bird world that explores—through the lives of budgies—how humans can find a sense of comfort, value and safety in the world through developing sentimental attachments to objects, particularly those that are kitsch. The installation incorporates 3,000 lifelike budgie ornaments an excessive array of trinkets and knick-knacks and masses of artificial flowers, shrubbery and lawn. *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) has been exhibited in a variety of different formations, each adapted to suit the requirements of the space in which the work was exhibited or to portray a specific scenario. These exhibits include: *The Budgietopia Everest Reunion* (2009) (Figure 3), *The Budgietopia Evening Commuter Cake Off* (2010), *The Budgietopia Super Rally* (2010) and *The Budgietopia* installation developed for *City in Bloom* (2010).

Budgietopia (2009–2013) also hosted a budgie adoption program for budgies that where either lost, or in search of new friendships (as discussed in Section 3.2). The research outlines the ways in which the installations, exhibitions and budgie adoption program have played a significant role in this praxis when examining how people's experience of objects influences the kinds of sentimentality they feel toward kitsch.

Ganesha Glory and *Call Me Golden Sugar Britches* (2009)
Glass, stainless steel, water and various mixed media
32cm x 25cm x25cm, 75cm x 50cm x 50cm

Figure 4: **Ganesha Glory (2009) and Call Me Golden Sugar Britches (2009) exhibited at The Moores Building and Gallery, Fremantle, Western Australia (2009)**

The *Snow Domes and Dream Spheres* developed between 2009 and 2010 are a study of the things people collect. The sculptures examine the ways in which people are able to make sense of the world through the artefacts and everyday objects they collect (Attfield, 2006), and of course, kitsch. Each snow dome encapsulates a collection of objects that represent the complex day-to-day lived experiences that influence us as individuals and as a culture. The body of work *comprises* a collection of fifteen snow domes and dream spheres. Of the fifteen, *Ganesha Glory* (2009) and *Call Me Golden Sugar Britches* (2009) are reflexively examined within this exegesis in relation to 'Olalquiaga's three degrees of kitsch' (1992) and Binkley's concept of 'kitsch as a repetitive system' (2000).

Jesus (2010)
Wood, plaster and mixed media
95cm x 380cm x 195cm

Figure 5:   ***Jesus* sculpture (2010) exhibited in studio (2010)**

Commissioned in 2010 by Uniting Churches Australia *Jesus* (2010) (Figure 5) was sculpted for *The Stations of the Cross* (2010) exhibition and was exhibited inside Wesley Church, in Perth, Western Australia. *Jesus* (2010) is my interpretation of the ninth station of the cross, where Jesus falls for the third time. Analysis of this artwork demonstrates a unique communicative function of kitsch within the lifeworld in that the sculpture of Jesus was exhibited for not just aesthetic, but religious purposes as well.

Section 4 outlines the theoretical foundation on which the remaining four chapters of this exegesis are based. The three key theories relating to methods of categorising different types of kitsch are introduced: Olalquiaga's notion of 'three degrees of kitsch' (1992), Binkley's notion of 'kitsch as a repetitive system' (2000), and what I have called 'Olalquiaga's modes of perceiving experiences and kitsch' (1998). An outline of the division of the analysis of each artwork in relation to both Olalquiaga's and Binkley's theories is also given.

Section 5 relates to Olalquiaga's 'three degrees of kitsch' (1992), a system through which kitsch can be classified based on an object's means of production and cultural function. After an explanation of Olalquiaga's theory, a breakdown of each degree of kitsch is offered followed by examples that illustrate the synchronised difference and overlapping of the definitions of each degree (Olalquiaga, 2000) of kitsch. These examples include: *Jesus* (2010) and *The Aquarium* (2009), Janet Williams, the Royalty Lady; Hans Christian Andersen's (1837) and Disney's (1989) versions of *The Little Mermaid*; and the work of artists Carl Andre, Jackson Pollock and Jeff Koons.

Section 6 is dedicated to a reflexive analysis of *The Aquarium* (2009) within the framework of Olalquiaga's 'three degrees of kitsch' (1992). Particular attention is paid to third-degree kitsch (1992), in which "the legitimization of [kitsch's] signifying and visual attributes by the institutionally authorized agency of artists" (Olalquiaga, 1992, pp. 46–47) is examined. Through the lens of third-degree kitsch it is demonstrated how a creative work, like *The Aquarium* (2009), is developed beyond being an illustrated idea to become a reflexive synthesis of the theories examined within this research.

Section 7 examines Binkley's notion of 'kitsch as a repetitive system' (2000). Binkley's theory "establishes three distinct ways in which kitsch aestheticizes repetition" (2000, p. 142). These are: through the emulation of other cultural products; as a decorative feature; and through a "love for all things sentimental" (p.142). Binkley's classification of the repetitive qualities of kitsch are then related to the snow domes *Ganesha Glory* (2009) and *Call Me Golden Sugar Britches* (2009), *Budgietopia* (2009-2013) and *The Lotus Pond* (2008) as well as the French rodent themed hotel La Villa Hamster*,* Queen Elizabeth II and artist Allison Jackson.

'Olalquiaga's modes of perceiving experiences and kitsch' is reviewed in Section 8. Olalquiaga's theory examines the process by which differing memories, experiences and desires affect an individual's emotional response to objects and to kitsch. The installation *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) is used as a case study in which the process of recreating experiences is illustrated. This process

demonstrates the manner by which kitsch objects allow us to recreate experiences that exist between "an irretrievable past and a fragmented present" (p. 68), and the fluid boundaries of memories, fantasies and loss.

In summary, by examining the ways in which the value and meaning of kitsch have shifted to meet the changing needs of individuals and societies—and establishing the vital and positive role contemporary kitsch now plays—the aim of this research is to lift kitsch permanently out of the cultural scrap heap, proving that kitsch is no longer just low class, bad taste, cheap fakes and copies (Greenberg, 1961; Adorno & Horkheimer, 1991; Calinescu, 1987; Dorfles, 1969). Through a critical examination of the ways in which the meaning and value of kitsch have shifted to meet the changing needs of individuals and societies; this research places kitsch in a position of importance, as it demonstrates the ways in which contemporary kitsch now plays a vital and positive role in individual, and social, aesthetic life. The research demonstrates the ways by which "the repetitive qualities of kitsch" (Binkley, p. 131) address the modern condition of "disembeddedness" (Giddens, 1991; Binkley, 2000), reinforcing and strengthening individuals, and societies, prospects of replenishing their "social and cosmic security" (Binkley, 1991, p.131) enabling them to become re-embedded.

The chapters that follow will demonstrate the manner in which the sensory affect of sentimentality associated with contemporary kitsch is shared across cultures and societies. That firmly entrenched in the "lifeworld" (Habermas, 1971), kitsch, in modern life, has become an aesthetic through which people are able to "make sense of the world through artefacts" (Attfield, 2006, p. 201) and the everyday objects that they desire and collect.

1. METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

This chapter describes the methodology of 'arts-practice-led research' (Adams, 2008) through which my doctoral research is framed, and the methods I have used within my praxis to create the artworks developed throughout candidature. As is often the case with creative research, methodologies and methods are so closely connected they at times operate together. Methods thus relate to the development of my artworks from theoretical conception through to construction and exhibition. Methodology focuses on the theoretical framework through which this research has been developed. Drawing on Christopher Crouch's *Praxis and the Reflexive Creative Practitioner* (2007) and Carole Gray and Ian Pirie's '*Artistic' Research Procedure: Research at the Edge of Chaos?* (1995), I explain my approach to practice-led-research as well as the use of 'reflexivity' (Giddens, 1991) and 'praxis' (Gramsci, 1971).

1.1 Methodology

As with many creative praxises, my arts-practice-led-research does not follow a linear or easily formulated methodology. My research incorporates creative practice and studio-based work supported by theoretical study and an exegesis. With this creative praxis the theories adopted and the making of my artworks are closely interconnected and can be described as "a way of thinking about action and a way of acting on thought" (Crouch & Pearce, 2012, p. 40). My methodology, therefore, could best be described as a multi-method series of systems that are in many ways "inclusive . . . chaotic . . . and holistic" (Gray & Pirie, 1995, n.p.). The techniques that I adopt for each studio-based project or artwork, are generally tailored to suit the specifics of each work. 'Praxis' (Gramsci, 1971), the relationship between theory and practice, and 'reflexivity' (Giddens, 1990) play an important role in my methodology, as do the materials and concepts upon which I draw.

Reflexivity is a model of personal, social and cultural action defined by Anthony Giddens. It concerns the way in which knowledge spirals "in and out of the universe of social life, reconstructing both itself and the universe as an integral part of that process" (Giddens, 1990, p. 16). This is achieved through the "reflexive ordering and re-ordering" (p. 52) of knowledge, information and social relations, where thoughts and actions continuously bounce off each other. For Giddens, the process of "thoroughgoing, constitutive reflexivity" (p. 52) is undoubtedly a defining attribute of all human action. It is a process that he describes as a "chronic revision of social practice in the light of knowledge about those practices" (p. 40). By employing reflexivity within my research, I am able to monitor, order, and re-order my subjectivities as they are mediated by the social constructs of my 'lifeworld'. It is in this way that reflexivity gives the artist/researcher the ability to "explicitly position themselves in relation to their objects of study so that one may assess researchers' knowledge claims in terms of situated aspects of their social selves and reveal their (often hidden) doxic values and assumptions" (Maton, 2003, p. 64).

Within this methodology, praxis refers specifically to the theories from which I have drawn in the development of my study of kitsch as well as the "creative processes" (Crouch, 2007), research and artwork produced throughout my candidature. It was the Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci who first described praxis, defining it as "the unification of critical theory and revolutionary practice" (as cited in Oliga, 1996, p. 217). It is through praxis that the creative practitioner, as artist and researcher, is able to reflect upon and reconstruct the constructed world (Crouch, 2007). For the artist and researcher, adopting praxis as a methodology assumes a process of meaning making, where both "meaning and its processes are contingent upon a cultural and social environment" that is about "negotiation" rather than "acting upon others" (Crouch, 2007, p.112).

Assuming a reflexive approach within my praxis has been an important if not essential component of my doctoral research. Christopher Crouch (2007) highlights the importance of reflexivity, stating that "adopting a reflexive

viewpoint allows an understanding of the creative process from a subjective viewpoint" which in turn can "reveal the dynamic relationship between the context, construction and the articulation of the [communicative] act" (p. 108).

Aspects of the artworks that I have created throughout this research have been explored within my lifeworld but are foremost examinations of broader social and cultural constructs. Throughout the reflexive process of praxis it became apparent that constructs of these paradigms (kitsch and sentimentality) could be related to a broad demographic, across cultures and societies, particularly in the affluent developed world. Yet the experiences of and relationship to these constructs for individuals and societies, are both unique and subjective. By positioning the creative work developed throughout this research within the lifeworld, I aim to offer an insight into the unique relationship between experience, sentimentality and kitsch.

When *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) was first exhibited a significant number of budgie ornaments 'flew the coop' or simply 'went missing' (Additional images of *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) can be viewed in Appendix 2, Section 3). While initially disappointed that the budgies had been stolen, I realised that their being taken could be significant to my research. The fact that the budgies had been taken seemed to support my view that people liked, or simply enjoyed, kitsch things enough that they would risk taking them. From this point on, whenever *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) was exhibited I strategically positioned several budgies in places where people would find them, and I would also give some away. Each budgie was either numbered or named and held a note in its claws. The note invited the budgie's new owner to make contact with *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) via email and to provide updates on where their budgie was, and what it had been doing. The anecdotal documentation of the budgies' lives sent to *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) via email and has been invaluable to this research.

The photographs and text of the 'cute' kitsch budgie ornaments sent by the adoptees (and some apparently by the budgies themselves) are documented evidence that supports this research. An example of this is the man who took

his budgie to and from work each day, and even purchased a bag of birdseed to feed it. The emails I received, as discussed in Section 3, have highlighted the unique ability of kitsch to transform an inanimate object into a desirable item that could be imbued with sentimentality, friendship, comfort and a range of other affects. The messages detailing the names and daily rituals of the budgies, including what they wore or where they liked to sit, were also fascinating as they demonstrated that the adoptees were personifying the plastic budgie ornaments. The emails were evidence of how kitsch operates to re-embed the individual. The ongoing relationships that have developed between adoptees and their budgies and the personification of the plastic budgie ornaments support my hypothesis regarding the ability of material objects and kitsch to re-embed societies and individuals. I discuss this in the research that follows. If not for the humanistic and inclusive nature of arts-practice-led research, praxis and the reflexive analysis of the emails and photographs of people and their adopted budgies, this pivotal aspect of my research would not have evolved.

For many of the works I developed I was not only the artist or creator, but also the subject and object of the works. For the installation *The Aquarium* (2009) my methodology, and method, involved exploring how contemporary kitsch operates as well as the aspects of Olalquiaga's notion of the 'three degrees of kitsch' (Section 5). This was achieved by *becoming* a mermaid — adopting a mermaid persona, dressing-up in mermaid costumes and living in an aquarium for eight hours a day over a one-month period. The work investigated how kitsch objects can fulfil dreams and fantasies, and offer a sense of comfort and safety.

When developing works like *The Aquarium* (2009), as the artist-practitioner/researcher and also the subject and object, it would be easy to fall into the trap of defining kitsch, authenticity and experience within my own personal narrative. It is through continually conducting a reflexive analysis of my praxis as artist-practitioner/researcher both in and on action (Gray & Pirie, 1995) that "the pitfalls of introspection and narcissism . . . towards an

analytical engagement with human interaction" (Crouch, 2007, p. 112) can be avoided.

Within arts-practice-led research it is necessary for researchers to adapt and continually review their methodology and methods reflexively, both in and on action (Gray & Pirie, 1995). Gray and Pirie point out how "the artist-practitioner/researcher is embedded within the procedures and responds to the reciprocating relationship between responsive research strategies and associative creative artistic practices" (1995, n.p.). Adams (2008) highlights the aforementioned relationship, stating "methodologies engaged by arts-practice-led research involve a process of information gathering; including various visual and multi-media methods of selection, analysis, synthesis, presentation and communication" (p. 32). By reflexively reviewing my methodology and methods throughout this research I was able to monitor and adjust, when required, my approach to this praxis both theoretically and conceptually. In this manner I was able to modify aspects of my work throughout the various stages of conceptualisation, production and presentation. In so doing I found that I was more likely to engage an audience with my work in ways that communicated the messages or theories that I aimed to present.

An example of the type of reflexive adaptation that I am describing occurred in *Budgietopia* (2009–2013). The budgie ornament was chosen foremost for its kitschness, but also because people generally find them cute. Careful consideration was also given to the fact that the palm-sized budgies were comfortable to hold and also easy to transport on mass. But, the cute small budgies were easily lost in the garish and voluminous array of artificial flowers and greenery that is also part of *Budgietopia* (2009–2013). As a result people would not always notice the sweet budgies beckoning them toward the work. By adjusting the height at which some of the budgies were displayed, so that they were not just overhead but also at ground level and eye level for both children and adults, I was able to attract viewers to the work. Once just one or two of the budgies were discovered by a passer-by,

they would generally start to look around and suddenly notice that they were surrounded by hundreds of budgies and become engaged with the artwork.

1.2 Gathering Information within my Praxis

The process of gathering information within my creative praxis generally begins by visiting places and collecting objects or 'things'; souvenirs, 'pretty' packaging, trinkets and items that appear common to a particular place or culture. These things are often materials that I use in the construction of my creative projects, but they are often of equal, if not greater, significance from a research and theoretical perspective. An example of this is a trip I took to Bangkok to purchase artificial flowers for *Budgietopia* (2009–2013). The cost of purchasing the volume of artificial flowers needed for *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) in Australia was prohibitive for me. After some investigation I found that I would easily be able to import them from Bangkok at a more affordable price. As many travelers to Thailand might attest, parts of Bangkok are abundant with kitsch objects for sale. Not only did I purchase artificial flowers, but also a multitude of miniature kitsch objects that were also included in the work. I was invited to an absolutely incredibly kitschly decorated home that belonged to one of the shopkeepers, which gave me a fascinating insight to the types of kitsch objects that are common in Thailand. It also reinforced aspects of the universal sentiment of kitsch to which I attest, a view that is supported by Binkley (2000) (as discussed in Section 7).

My observations of people, places and the objects I collected during this project have been juxtaposed and related to theory, continually refined within the reflexive process. Gray and Pirie (1995) discuss practice-as-research, describing it as a 'generating' instrument, whereby "research processes are tailored to respond to practice and practice to research, continually re-orientating itself to refine the research question through reflexive processes" (n.p.).

It is through reflexive processes that the 'interdisciplinary' nature of arts-practice-led-research is able to support "a range of research strategies which are multi-method in approach, rigorous, open, transparent and accessible" (Gray & Pirie, 1995, n.p.). Unhindered by the constraints of more traditional modes of research, arts-practice-led-research is a "humanistic model" that is "based upon new intellectual paradigms . . . and must consider the ontological (knowable in art) and epistemological (relationships of enquirer to knowledge) issues, which are 'adaptive'" (Gray & Pirie, 1995, n.p.) and reflexive.

1.3 Fields of Discourse

This research provides a historical analysis of kitsch; however, the main focus of enquiry is to examine and re-contextualise kitsch within a contemporary context, and to then demonstrate how kitsch operates within my creative praxis. The reason behind this approach is threefold. Firstly, to highlight many of the negative misconceptions that surround kitsch in a contemporary context, the majority of which can be attributed to the still lingering, dated, traditional theories of kitsch that define it as being low class and bad taste (Greenberg, 1961; Adorno & Horkeimer, 1991; Callinescu, 1987; Dorfles, 1969). Secondly, is to demonstrate the particularly positive role that kitsch now plays in modern life (Olalquiaga, 1992; Binkley, 2000; Attfield, 2006). Thirdly, is to show how kitsch, largely through its connection to sentiment (Binkley, 2000; Attfield, 2006), can be a valuable tool for the artist. Kitsch achieves this by its ability to positively engage an audience, (Binkley, 2000) and to deliver in an easily digestible manner a vast array of different subject matters and emotions, be they pleasant or challenging.

The process of data collection and analysis within this praxis crisscrosses broad and varied fields of discourse. There is no single field of discourse that neatly encompasses all of the theories from which I have drawn. Both my

theoretical and creative work include the study of cultural theory and popular and social culture across a broad spectrum: my artwork to the work of other artists past and present; television from cooking shows to current affairs; handbags and trinket collections; easily recognised cultural and religious icons; real life examples; my lived experiences or lifeworld; the disciplines of cultural theory and sociology. These subjects have each played a significant role in repositioning the mostly negative established thinking of earlier theories on kitsch (Greenberg, 1961; Adorno & Horkeimer, 1991; Callinescu, 1987; Dorfles, 1969) in favour of a contemporary perspective that is positive, universal, and welcoming (Olalquiaga, 1992; Binkley, 2000; Attfield, 2006).

1.4 Methods

While the theoretical conception of my artworks is entwined within the methodology and methods I employ, the post-theoretical conception of the methods—the development, construction and exhibition of the artworks themselves—is many and varied.

Unlike many artists who draw, methodically maintain journals, and keep visual diaries, I most commonly document my processes by collecting 'stuff'. As a kitsch aficionado, and avid collector of what may appear to some as 'random stuff' or even 'junk', I have always surrounded myself, and filled my studio, with a vast array of ornaments, gadgets, and things that I love or that 'might come in handy someday' (Figure 6).

Figure 6:   **Image of my studio (2011)**

The artworks I make are usually in response to or made with these things. Ironically, it took me a long time to discern any rationale behind the random things that I surround myself with and how they operate within my practice. In time I realised that the answer lay not in what I collect, but in what was excluded. I rarely kept or displayed things that made me feel bad or that I associated with a bad experience. If I did, they were tucked away in a safe place, but kept out of sight. All of the things I surround myself with are things that, on some level, make me feel good. On further reflection I realised that these objects are either a reminder of, or connection to; a past experience; part of a plan or dream of a future experience; or something that I just really loved, or saw great potential in, and had to have. A tea set of which almost every piece is chipped that belonged to my late grandmother who I adored; an entire snow dome collection, 170 pieces in total, bought on impulse at a flea market because I'd always wished I'd had one; a collection of

ornaments, figurines and statues of religious icons that I started to collect a few years before moving onto a new fad, and the pale blue budgie paperweight that gazed up at me from the shelf next to my computer that was the inspiration for *Budgietopia* (2009–2013).

The kitsch objects I covet and collect, the things I have used in my art— the budgies, snow domes, religious iconography, fake flowers and mermaid paraphernalia—seem to generate an excess of emotions and sensory perceptions: comfort and safety, melancholy and nostalgia, memory, fantasy and irony. Although unique to my lifeworld, through a reflexive analysis of my praxis I came to realise that these kinds of connections to experiences, possessions and material objects—particularly those that are kitsch—are not just my own, but shared across cultures and societies. That objects like these, and the experiences that are associated with them, function by re-embedding individuals and societies, myself included, and give value and meaning to our lives. It is from this understanding that my work is created.

1.5 Construction of Works

Once I decide to create a work I begin to plan how the work will be made and what other materials I am going to need. As a sculptor and installation artist, and also because of the scale in which I like to work, the materials I use are likely to be found in hardware stores, flea markets, salvage yards or acquired from light industrial suppliers and giftware wholesalers. The armature for *The Aquarium* (2009), for example, was constructed using a set of shop windows purchased at a salvage yard, and amongst many other components the tank was filled with half a ton of hot pink gravel purchased through a pet supply store (Figure 7).

Figure 7:   *The Aquarium* **(2009) under construction in studio and completed work installed at Spectrum (2009)**

Often, cost, weight, transportability, safety and a range of other factors will dictate how and from what a work is made. The sculpture *Jesus* (2010) for instance, was commissioned for a church and was hung in the nave from parapet gables, directly above the pulpit where the choir assembles. This proved a great challenge as the work had to meet stringent occupational health and safety guidelines.

Figure 8:   *Jesus* **(2010) sculpture ready to be hoisted into position in nave of Wesley Church, Perth, Western Australia and the completed installation ready for exhibition (2010)**

There were also stringent heritage regulations to be considered that restricted the overall weight of the work and the type of hanging devices that could be used. This proved a great challenge as the sculpture had to be hung approximately eight metres above the floor, hoisted from a position above the church's organ and then fastened to the gables in front of the organ pipes. Finally, to add to the challenge, the largest entrance to the Gothic-styled building is less than a metre wide. The sculpture, which is over four metres in length, had to be designed to fit through the small door and a series of corridors.

1.6 Summary

Regardless of the project, adopting a reflexive approach to praxis is an important, if not essential, component of my creative process. Arts-practice-led-research is, in my view, an invaluable intellectual paradigm for artist-practitioners/researchers to be able to contribute to their field and to communicate with other fields of research. As a humanistic model, arts-practice-led-research—being inclusive, chaotic, and holistic—recognises the impact of chance, coincidence and the freedom to explore (Gray & Pirie, 1995), as has been the case within this research.

An understanding of the power and importance of art to represent a myriad of emotions and social or cultural views is valuable to this research. The exegesis explains the theories surrounding these works in great detail—understanding how kitsch operates in a contemporary context, and the challenges of defining authenticity, taste and kitsch.

The purpose of my artwork and overall praxis, at its most simple level, is to create a happy, pleasant experience for the viewer. As demonstrated in the pages that follow, the homeliness and easy visual recognition associated with kitsch, unlike other aesthetics favoured by artists, offer an audience an uncomplicated entry point to a work of art. As discussed in detail in Section

5.2, this type of easy access to art that kitsch offers is supported by Olalquiaga's notion of second-degree kitsch. Kitsch "preserves a unique aesthetic sensibility that spurns creativity per se while it endorses a repetition of the familiar and a grounding in an affirmation of the everyday" (Binkley, 2000, p. 134). Kitsch, as Binkley (2000) has observed, "reduces the complexity, desperation and paradox of human experience to simple sentiment, replacing the novelty of a revealed deeper meaning" (p. 145).

If the viewer of my work was to 'have a giggle' at the humour in *The Aquarium* or find themselves peering over the balustrade into the utopian world of *Budgietopia* smiling at the masses of fake flowers and 'cute' budgie ornaments, it would be enough for me. If the viewer was to consider the objects that they accumulate and how kitsch informs their lifeworld, to walk away, feeling more connected to . . . or "re-embedded" (Giddens, 1991), my work will have been a success. Kitsch allows the viewer the option, even if only initially, to put aside the signifying and/or use value associated with other analyses of art and simply enjoy (or not) their experience.

2. DEFINING KITSCH

2.1 What is Kitsch?

Garden gnomes, flying ducks, fake flowers, plastic tablecloths, faux fur and suburban 'weatherboards'[1] built in the style of Roman mansions are all examples of kitsch. At a glance, kitsch may seem an easy genre to categorise; however, kitsch is not limited to just 'cheesy stuff', 'funky retro things' or material objects that are thought to be poor copies or, even worse, simply bad taste as is commonly understood. Through contextualising kitsch within a contemporary context, this research attempts to re-position kitsch as a valuable aspect of everyday life and more specifically of the "lifeworld" (Habermas, 1994). This contextualisation is not limited to aesthetic judgement and categorisation, but aims to provide a broader sociological, theoretical and conceptual framework through which kitsch can be understood.

Definitions of kitsch are many and varied (Greenberg, 1961; Adorno & Horkheimer, 1991; Calinescu, 1987; Broch, 1955; Dorfles, 1969; Kundera, 1985; Kulka, 1996; Attfield, 2006; Binkley, 2002). Judy Attfield (2006) notes that kitsch "belongs to a genre of …things that elude categorization under conventional definitions" (p. 202). Through understanding these varied definitions it is apparent that kitsch is more than just a "broad category of objects that inhabit the contemporary material world" (p. 202), but has continually managed to defy neat definitions within contemporary life, the arts, and within popular culture since its introduction in the late nineteenth century.

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[1] A 'weatherboard' is a colloquial Australian term use to describe a small house made of wood.

2.2 The Social and Historical Development of Kitsch

The word 'kitsch' first appeared towards the end of the nineteenth century in response to the effects of early industrialisation on the 'common culture' of Western nations (Binkley, 2002). Since its inception, the term 'kitsch' has continued to evolve and take on various different, often contradictory meanings. Kitsch has been used by regimes to impose ideologies (Dorfles, 1969; Attfield, 2006; Kundera, 1995). It has been applied as a "strategy to elevate its own status" (Attfield, 2006, p. 202) allowing its own integration into serious critical academic discourse by theorists including Dorfles (1969) and Greenberg (1969). It has been used as a way of establishing levels of class and status, or lack thereof (Greenberg, 1961; Calinescu, 1987; Broch, 1955; Dorfles, 1969) and also to establish what is and is not art (Broch, 1955; Greenberg, 1969; Olalquiaga, 1992, 1998).

While the etymology of kitsch is unclear, the term is generally agreed to be of German origin, and is thought to have derived from the word *kitschen*—to collect rubbish from the street or *verkitschen*, to make cheap (Calinescu, 1987, p. 234). Kitsch was popularised in the mid-1800s (1860–70) by artists and art dealers in Munich, Germany, who used the term to describe the "aesthetically impoverished reproductions of sketches and drawings that tried to be artistic" (p. 235).

Kitsch was thought to lack the creativity and originality displayed in genuine art, and to appeal to the naïve tastes of the newly moneyed Munich bourgeoisie. In typical *nouveau riche* style, the bourgeoisie thought that they could achieve the status of the cultural elite by copying the most obvious features of their cultural habits. They perceived and aspired to 'high taste', without really knowing what 'high taste' actually was (Binkley, 2002; Calinescu, 1987). While the bourgeoisie felt they had achieved their cultural aspirations, the cultural elite saw the bourgeoisie, and the art that appealed to them, as being aesthetically impoverished and morally dubious. As a result, the elite believed aesthetic life had been sacrificed in the

bourgeoisie's (usually poor) replications of objects that were thought to have a higher level of social status and value[2].

Since the late nineteenth century, kitsch has continued to ride through a barrage of criticism. Some of its less attractive attributions have stuck while others have been shaken, and kitsch has again drawn the attention of contemporary cultural commentators. As a result, many established points of view have been re-evaluated, previously ignored aspects have gained recognition, and several new and valuable insights have been identified.

2.3 Re-evaluating Kitsch: The Development of Taste, Culture and Status in Definitions of Kitsch

Despite ongoing and plentiful research into kitsch, its definition continues to be contentious and has been repeatedly modified to suit the conditions of its use (Attfield, 2006; Binkley, 2002). This is illustrated by a comparison of the work of earlier commentators on kitsch, particularly the mass culture theorists including Greenberg (1961), Adorno and Horkheimer (1991), Calinescu (1987), Broch (1955) and Dorfles (1969). These writers popularised the term by relating kitsch to the 'avant-garde' forming a general consensus of kitsch as hierarchical, taste and class based—that is, bad taste and low class. During the late 1990s and the 2000s, the kitsch debate re-emerged between contemporary commentators (Binkley (2000; 2002), Attfield (2006), Olalquiaga (1992; 1998)). Although only partial consensus has been reached between these theorists, each have significantly

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[2] For more on the etymology of kitsch see Matei Calinescu, Kitsch in *Five Faces of Modernity*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1987. pp. 222-262. For early perspectives on kitsch a useful point of departure is *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste* (1975), edited by Gillo Dorfles, this collection of essays has been a key text on kitsch since the 1970s. It includes Herman Broch's essay, 'Kitsch and Art-With-a-Message' (1955), pp. 68-70, which is said to be the uncredited source of Clement Greenberg's influential and highly criticised text, 'The Avant-Garde and Kitsch' (1939), pp. 116-126. Also included is Broch's essay, 'Notes on the Problem of Kitsch'*,* (1955), pp. 49-67, where he expanded on his earlier essay. The anti-kitsch stance endorsed by these texts created the traditional frame through which kitsch has typically been understood. It is the traditional frame that I challenge throughout my research.

repositioned definitions of kitsch, a significant part of which has included separating kitsch from discussions of taste. The repositioning redefines the relationship between kitsch and taste as 'popular taste' (Binkley, 2000; Attfield, 2006) but not necessarily bad taste as was the case with traditional views of kitsch (Greenberg (1961), Adorno and Horkheimer (1991), Calinescu (1987), Broch (1955) and Dorfles (1969).

The role of taste in analyses of kitsch, is in my view, inextricably linked to popular taste, but *not* limited to the notion of taste hierarchies in the traditional view. I assert that the re-evaluation of kitsch should view taste as popular, but cutting across high and low class or 'status'. This research supports Attfield's view that kitsch can be found in "all manifestations of visual culture", not only traditional low class and/or bad taste objects and experiences but also in high art and culture. I concur with Attfield (2006) that to understand kitsch may help to better understand popular taste. I also agree that "kitsch cannot be reduced to a single stylistic genre", but can most certainly be recognised "from within a consciously critical context that has something to say about taste" (p. 203).

Herbert Gans (1974) coined the term 'taste cultures' in a bid to replace the hierarchical distinctions and status that were, and still are, implied by the words 'popular' and 'high'. Gans conveyed that 'taste' was quite simply 'taste'. His intent was to expose and distribute institutional limits and creative freedoms evenly up and down the cultural ladder and, effectively, to turn half a century of mass culture on its head (1974).

Of the key commentators on taste, Pierre Bourdieu in *Distinction* (1994), a study of France's consuming public's taste habits, linked popular taste with the working class, characterising popular taste as a direct response to aesthetic judgement. Bourdieu classified bad taste as the intellectual analytical definition that would have otherwise automatically defined 'kitsch' as the opposite of classical forms that represent perfection (1994). This view is strongly contested. I assert that popular taste plays a particularly positive role in contextualising kitsch. As noted by Attfield:

> . . . positioning kitsch within a social context of popular taste
> recognises popular culture as a more inclusive field of Inquiry,
> it acknowledges the aestheticisation of everyday life as a
> positive aspect of culture and allows the consideration of taste
> as part of the habitus, the material culture of everyday life.
> (Attfield, 2006, p. 207)

Therefore, 'popular taste' and kitsch can be found at all levels of society, and can be subjectively analysed as both good and/or bad taste. I agree with Binkley (2002) that taste no longer plays an authoritative role in definitions of kitsch. I assert that while certain objects may be more common to specific groups or classes within society, popular taste and kitsch cannot be relegated to any specific hierarchy, taste group, or class as illustrated in Figure 9. This thesis re-evaluates kitsch and taste as popular, but as cutting across status (or class), as evident in aspects of visual arts and popular culture.
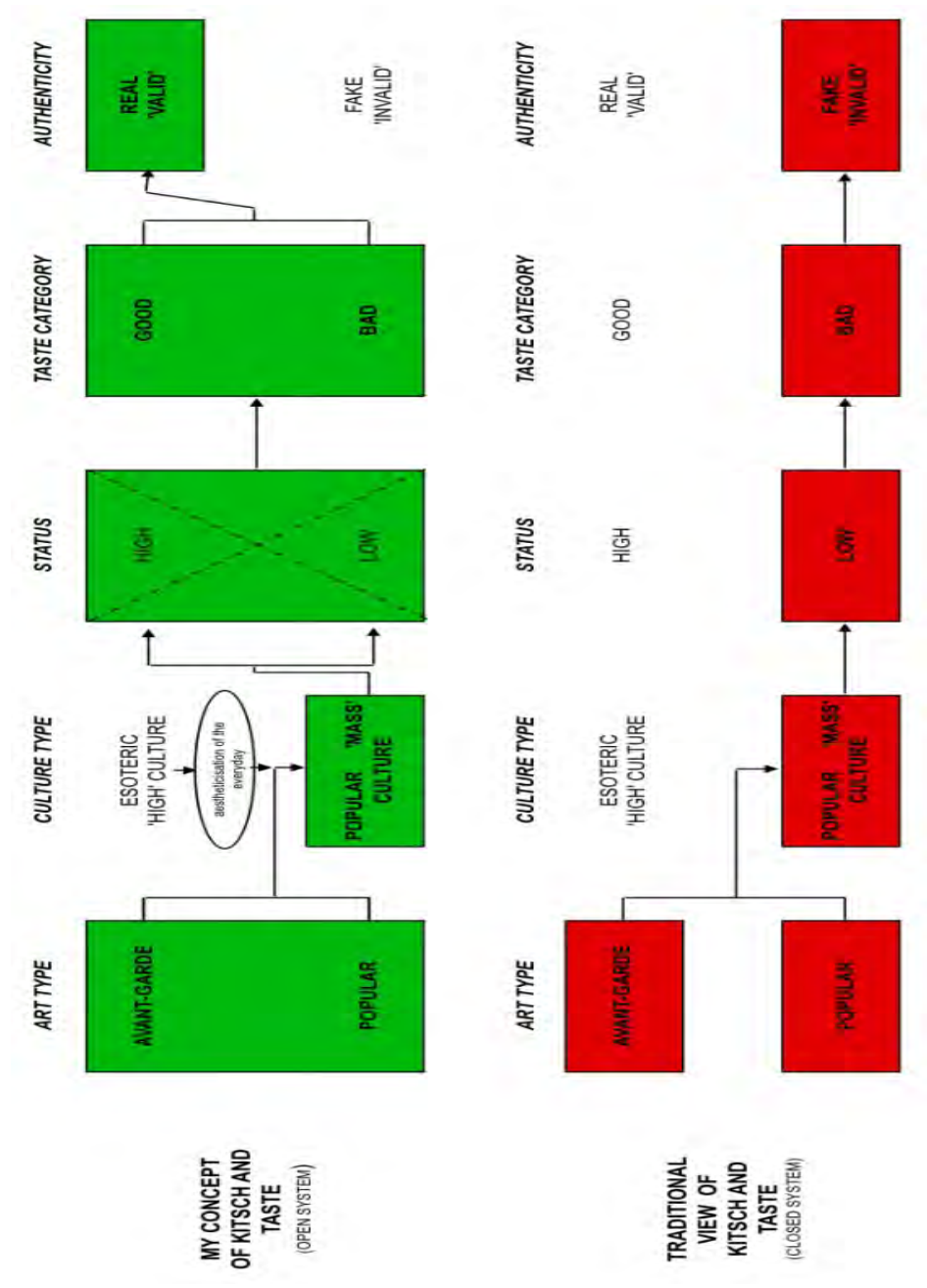
Table illustrating the re-evaluation (my concept) and the
traditional views of kitsch and taste.

Figure 9: **Comparison of contemporary kitsch and taste (my concept) and
traditional views of kitsch and taste**

2.4 Re-evaluating Kitsch: Examples of the Re-evaluation of Kitsch, Taste and Status

Useful examples of the re-revaluation of kitsch and taste as popular but cutting across status, can be found in the kitsch iconography identified in the work of Japanese artist and theorist Takashi Murakami (2008). As I will illustrate, this is contrasted with the television chef and 'domestic goddess' Nigella Lawson's dialogue (2001) in her television cooking show "Nigella Bites" (2001, n.p.), and text in the cookbook of the same name, where a chapter is dedicated to 'kitchen kitsch'. Although diverse choices, they illustrate how the meaning of the term kitsch has evolved within contemporary popular culture into popular taste, and how the concept of kitsch is often stretched beyond reasonable means and definitions.

The work of Takashi Murakami is an excellent example of the shift in the use and meaning of kitsch in contemporary society. Murakami adopts themes from mass media and popular culture, mixing art with commercial branding and merchandising. He is responsible for an enormous range of high art sculptures, paintings and animations as well as mass-produced, low art signature products including figurines (Figure 10), toys, clothing and accessories. Murakami's work is recognisable by the use of flat planes of colour, and cute heavily codified motifs that have a base in 'anime' and 'manga'. By the arrangement, and use of flat planes of colour in a non-hierarchical 'flat' manner, in both his paintings and sculptural work, Murakami has achieved his own unique style, which he calls "superflat" (Gritz, 2008).

Figure 10:   **Selection of Murakami figurines**

Critics of Murakami, including Magdalene Perez (2006) and Anna Gritz (2008), position superflat as straddling both fine art and commercial products, "blurring" the boundaries between high and low art (p. 1). In an interview with Perez for *Artinfo* in 2006, Murakami noted that rather than blurring boundaries, he sees his work as "changing the line" (p. 1) between what has typically been considered high or low art. I concur that Murakami's work has changed the line, as is illustrated in the range of handbags and accessories he was recruited to make for Louis Vuitton in 2003 (Keehn, n.d.). The handbags, although both hand and machine made, are mass-produced and are thought of by many to be works of be high art. Yet because these 'works of art' are handbags that have been mass-produced, and not a one off painting for example, some traditionalists struggle to accept them as art or even low art. It is these types of shifts in perception that Perez (2006) and Murakami (2006) are referring to when discussing blurred boundaries and the "changing of the line" (p. 1). Over ten years later, the relationship is still strong and Murakami continues to work with the brand.

Figure 11:   Murakami's bags for Louis Vuitton

Combinations of images from Murakami's artwork and the Louis Vuitton logo
were incorporated in a range of handbags and matching accessories with
graffiti inspired designs, cute smiling cherries and cherry blossoms, a panda
and other cartoon-like characters (Figure 11). Printed in bright candy colours
that look as though they have been randomly printed over the top of the
classic brown and gold LV (Louis Vuitton) logo, the designs have been
criticised for their "gratingly discordant colour schemes" (Keehn, n.d., p. 2)
and kitschness. Although having been struck with remarks such as "irritating"
and "jarring" (Keehn, n.d), the range sent Louis Vuitton's sales soaring by 20
percent in the third quarter of 2003 (p. 2). In 2011 the relationship between
Murakami and Louis Vuitton was still strong with the fashion house launching
Murakami's new 'Cosmic Blossom' collection (Figure 13, below) and also
"reinventing the QR code[3] together" (Litman, 2011, May 15) (Figure 12). The
new ranges have continued to maintain their success largely due to what has
been described as Murakami's "impressive knack for turning mass culture
into high art" (Enrique, 2011).

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[3] A 'QR code' or 'Quick Response Code' is "a type of two-dimensional barcode" or "image
based hypertext link" that can be read using "smartphones and dedicated QR reading
devices, that link directly to text, emails, websites, phone numbers". They can be used for a
very large range of tasks including identification of objects people or places, recognition of
liking something (i.e. a Facebook page). They are generally found on "product packaging,
shop displays, printed and billboard advertisements as well as in emails and on websites"
(What is a QR code, 2012).

Figure 12:   Louis Vuitton QR code designed by Takashi Murakami

Figure 13:   Advertisement for Takashi Murakami 'Cosmic Blossom'

Keehn (n.d.) has described the popularity and strange irony surrounding the bags as:

> the supreme marriage of the "dark" and of the "light". A three thousand dollar [US] handbag with a kids cartoon design. Stifled old European money meets childish computer-geek chic. High art meets consumerism, we can go with that, we love that…we get it. (Keehn, n.d., p. 2)

What is it that we get though? Why have the cutesy, kitsch designs on Murakami's bags for Louis Vuitton been so successful? A possible explanation is that the smiling cartoon-like designs and icons operate through an attachment of consumers to sentiment. The designs on Murakami's bags may very simply offer a sense of happiness and comfort amidst the humdrum of everyday life. The smiley face, for example, possibly the most widely recognised insignia of universal happiness, as Binkley (2000) states, is a basic form that "calls out 'have a nice day'" (p. 146). It expresses the most "fundamental, trivial and universal of languages—simple human love and joy" (Binkley, 2000, p. 146). I concur with Binkley (2000) that the simple, happy message delivered by the smiley face is extremely "captivating in its ability to elevate the unique charm of the commonplace to a value of universal significance" (p. 146). Paradoxically, however, Murakami could very well be said to have raised the value of the humble smiley face to a new level, as the bags spattered with graffiti and cute kitsch smiling motifs, range in price from around two to five thousand dollars each—clearly priced well out of range for the average shopper. The success of the kitsch bags can be used to illustrate the levelling of taste hierarchies or, to use one of Murakami's terms, the "changing of the line" (as cited in Perez, 2006). In my view, the popularity of the bags highlights the shift from traditional notions of kitsch (that is, low class and bad taste) to a modern view indicative of the flattening of taste hierarchies. Murakami's bags for Louis Vuitton offer the opportunity to literally purchase sentiment and happiness in the form of kitsch.

In contrast to Murakami's 'cutesy' pandas and cosmic blossoms, the chapter in Nigella Lawson's cookbook, *Nigella Bites* (2001) titled 'Kitchen Kitsch' takes a rather different, even absurd, twist on kitsch. It is my opinion that the common and often misguided use of the term kitsch, illustrated by Lawson, exemplifies—and is responsible for—the more recent conflation of kitsch and the confusion of the position of class surrounding definitions of kitsch. Subtitled 'Trashy', Lawson (2001) introduces the chapter in her cookbook by writing about the very fond place in her heart "for a bit of kitchen kitsch" (p.

123). The chapter includes recipes for Coca-Cola glazed ham, Elvis Presley's apparently legendary banana and peanut butter fried sandwich, and the use of "low rent ingredients" (p. 145). The recipes appear equally as judgemental as Nigella's instruction to "seek to evoke some food, or food-related substance that is industrially produced" rather than "naturally occurring" (p. 145), and to use "gorgeously garish" vegetable fat—the kind a blue-collar worker would commonly use" (p. 145). Rather than kitsch, it is my interpretation that Lawson's 'trashy' chapter constitutes a very literal judgement of taste (or lack thereof). The dialogue used in Lawson's recipes demonstrates how taste is often directly linked to class hierarchies as an indicator of social position and is wrongly associated with kitsch. Lawson's approach demonstrates an elitist approach akin to "class tourism" (Potts, 2007, p. 14), showing that class hierarchies are definitely alive and well. Gastronomy aside, the use of taste hierarchies as status markers as opposed to simple good or bad taste in re-evaluations of kitsch remains in dispute.

2.5 Re-evaluating Kitsch: Contemporary Theories on Kitsch, Taste and Status

Of the contemporary theorists re-evaluating kitsch, academic Sam Binkley in *Kitsch as a Repetitive System: A Problem for the Theory of Taste Hierarchy* (2000) and Judy Attfield in *Redefining Kitsch: The Politics of Design* (2006) argue, on similar grounds, for breaking away from the traditional analyses that categorise kitsch as bad taste, aligned with 'taste habits', class identities and crass consumerism. Tracey Potts, however, in *'Walking the Line': Kitsch, Class and the Morphing Subject of Value* (2007) contests several of the re-evaluations of kitsch, particularly those of Attfield and Binkley.

Attfield (2006) argues that "it is no longer acceptable to limit [kitsch] to the crude elitist critique that categorizes it as bad taste and as a cynical manifestation of consumerism" (p. 201). Attfield states that kitsch, as more

than a single style, is an aesthetic that engenders a rapport with a large audience. Moreover, when conditioned by mass media, kitsch can create "a strategic knowingness about self-identity through taste choices" (p. 201). Attfield positions kitsch as a valid category of popular taste, but not as poor taste, recognising popular culture as a field of inquiry inclusive of kitsch. This in turn allows the consideration of taste as part of the material culture of everyday life, but not as a vital constituent of analyses of kitsch (2006). Attfield acknowledges the aestheticisation of the everyday as an authentic, positive feature of culture, and of kitsch. Therefore, I argue, popular should no longer be equated with low status, bad taste, and impoverished art. The conflation of class to taste, typical of traditional views of kitsch, is an inadequate description of how our society works. Mass culture weaves through most aspects of our society; it reaches us through the Internet, through film, MP3 players, tablets and smart phones. The once esoteric, such as opera, ballet, and theatre are now consumed within the everyday, where high and low cultures inhabit the same contexts.

Similarly, Binkley (2000) has broken away from the traditional analyses that align kitsch with 'taste habits' and class/status identities, asserting that the taste hierarchies established by the 1960s mass culture theorists and cultural commentators, which inform judgements surrounding kitsch, have been dismantled. Binkley maintains that taste habits and preferences are no longer easily aligned with class identities. Binkley (2000) argues that kitsch, "is not the property of a distinctive strata…but a general corrective to a general modern problem, of existential disembeddedness, loss of assurance in the community of life and ones place in the world" (p. 149). Binkley's (2000) position is of significance to this research as he not only redefines taste hierarchies but highlights the function and value of kitsch in contemporary life through its ability to re-embed the individual.

2.6 Re-evaluating Kitsch: Disembeddedness and the Repetitive Features of Kitsch

Drawing on the work of political theorist and sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991), as well as sociologist Sam Binkley (2000), I argue that the repetitive qualities of kitsch address the general problem of modernity that is referred to as 'disembeddedness'. I concur with Binkley that disembeddedness, and therefore embeddedness, are as "central to any theory of kitsch as [they are] to any theory of modernity" (p. 135).

Binkley describes disembeddedness as "the undermining of personal horizons of social and cosmic security" (2000, p. 131), arguing that the 'repetitive qualities of kitsch' address the problem of disembeddedness by working to re-embed consumers and shore up stocks of ontological security[4]. According to Giddens, disembeddedness is a characteristic of contemporary life that expresses the lifting out of social relations from local contexts and their rearticulation "across different tracts of time and space" (1991, p.18). 'Lifting out' is precisely what is meant by disembedding and "is the key to the tremendous acceleration in time-space distanciation which modernity introduces" (p.18). Time-space distanciation is the process of disembedding that occurred with the historical movement from traditional to modern societies. It is a progression that was set in motion by the process of modern industrialisation, which was exacerbated by globalisation, and continues to gain momentum.

Giddens deliberately chooses the metaphor 'disembedding' in distinct opposition to the notion of "differentiation" (p.18), a concept that is often used by sociologists to compare modern and pre-modern social systems (1991). I concur with Giddens that differentiation is suggestive of a "progressive separation of functions" (p. 18), whereby "modes of activity" (p.

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[4] Ontological security is a term used by Giddens to describe "a sense of continuity and order in events, including those not directly within the perceptual environment of the individual" (Giddens, 1991, p. 243).

18) in pre-modern societies were ordered in a "diffuse fashion" (p.18), compared with the more specialised and precise social systems that came with the arrival of modernity. Whilst a valid approach, I agree with Giddens that the concept of differentiation fails to capture "the lifting out of social relations from local contexts" or "their rearticulation across indefinite tracts of time [and] space" (p. 18). In so doing, the concept of differentiation neglects both the nature and impact of the modern institutions, elements that are addressed by the concept of disembeddedness.

In contrast to disembeddedness, embeddedness is defined by Giddens (1990) as "the re-appropriation or recasting of disembedded social relations so as to pin them down (however partially or transitorily) to local conditions of time and place" (pp. 79-80). Binkley extrapolates on this, stating that embeddedness is:

> . . . a condition of daily life in which uncertainties, existential questions and a sense of the freedom and creativity of human action are bracketed by reassuring traditions and habits of thought which penetrate the deepest crevices of the quotidian, is broadly taken to represent the forms of sociability characteristic of pre-modern societies. (Binkley, 2001, p.135)

I assert that as an aesthetic that gives back some of the reassurance that was lost in the process of modernisation when "too much is new, and much too little is familiar" (Jensen, 1999) kitsch addresses the modern condition of disembeddedness. I concur with Binkley (2001) that kitsch "preserves a unique aesthetic sensibility…that endorses a repetition of the familiar and a grounding in an affirmation of the everyday" (p. 134). This is not unlike that which Pierre Bourdieu (1984) calls "the taste of necessity", an "aesthetic expression that endorses the sense of conventionality, rhythm and meter of aesthetic forms, and their embeddedness in daily life" (as cited in Binkley, 2000, p. 134). Taking pleasure in its "embeddedness in routine, its faithfulness to conventions and its rootedness in the modest cadence of daily life" (Binkley, 2000, p. 135) kitsch is able to re-embed consumers by "replenishing stocks of ontological security" and bolstering "a sense of cosmic coherence in an unstable world of challenge, innovation and

creativity" (Binkley, 2001, p.135). Through its ability to re-embed, kitsch provides a "protective cocoon" (Giddens, 1991, p.40) in which people can trust and find relief from the pressures of modern life.

2.6.1 Time-Space Distanciation

The term 'time-space distanciation', or "distancing' across time and space" (1991, p. 16) was coined by Giddens and is a primary aspect of modernity and a precursor to disembeddedness. It is a consequence of the movement from traditional, pre-modern societies, like the agrarian age, to the contemporary societies of today. Time-space distanciation involves an "emptying of time and space" (p. 17) that is characteristic of modern cultures and has led to the disembedding of social institutions. Time-space distanciation explains why remote interactions have become an increasingly important feature of human life. An awareness of time-space distanciation is important to contextualising the subsequent discussions on kitsch in relation to experience (Olalquiaga, 1992) and authenticity (Binkley, 2000), that follow.

Giddens (1991) proposes that social life is made up of interactions that are either face-to-face or remote. In modern societies, the social systems that were previously distinctive and separate in traditional societies have become connected and interdependent. It is generally agreed that, "there is no [or has never been a] society in which individuals do not have a sense of future, present or past" (p. 16). Also, "every culture has [or has had] some form of standardised spatial markers which designate a special awareness of place" (p.16). As societies modernised, formal methods were developed and conventionalised to calculate time and to order space, such as calendars, clocks and maps. However, in pre-modern cultures "time and space were connected *through* the situatedness of place" (1991, p.16). Therefore, while going about basic everyday activities "time and space remained essentially linked through place". This is in distinct contrast to modern societies in which the *when* and *where* of social conduct is now linked to the substance of the

conduct itself. In Australia, for example, if one desires to conduct a sophisticated and cosmopolitan lifestyle they might drive a European car, drink Italian sparkling water and wear imported designer clothes. Furthermore the Internet instantaneously removes time from space, as is evident through online share trading, dating sites, and social media groups like Facebook and Twitter. Above all, the separation of time from space that came with modernity has resulted in "an 'empty' dimension of time", the main consequence of which "also pulled space away from place" (1991, p.16).

In modern cultures, "modern time" is now separated from any specific place. Modern cultures now operate across regions via systems of uniform measurements and technologies (calendars, maps, clocks, etc.). The emptying of time was a prior condition of the emptying of space and the separation of space from place. Place thus becomes increasingly "phantasmagorical", in a "process whereby local characteristics of place are thoroughly invaded by, and recognised in terms of, distanciated social relation" (1991, p. 244). As a constantly shifting complex succession of things (seen or imagined), place is therefore affected by distant and spatially absent social influences. It is this separation of time and space that continues to maintain time-space distanciation.

Giddens (1991) uses the invention of the mechanical clock as a prime example of time-space distanciation, noting that it is a model that should not be considered superficially. The use and spread of "mechanical timing devices" (p. 17) like clocks has changed the make-up of time and space not just locally, but universally. A world with a "universal dating system" (p. 17), and "globally standardized time zones" (p. 17) as ours is today is "socially and experientially different" (p. 17) from any pre-modern era.

As "a universalised projection" (p. 17), a globalised world does not privilege place, which metaphorically "is the correlate system of the clock" (p.17) as it brings about the emptying of space. A universalised projection or "global map" (p. 17) such as this is more than just a way of representing "the

geography of the earth" (p.17) but is a key aspect of "basic transformations in social relations" (p. 17).

The emptying of time and space is in this regard a dialectical process and is by no means a "uni-linear'' development. The separation of time from space allows the development of countless forms of 'lived time' to become possible in a social setting. Therefore, the division of time from space has not become a mutually foreign characteristic of social organisation. It has instead provided a new foundation for time and place. Re-combined in ways that facilitate and order social activities, time and space are left unhindered by points of reference that are dependent on the specificities of place (Giddens, 1991).

According to Giddens, the 'organisations' and 'organisation' that are characteristic of modernity are barely conceivable without the "reintegration of separated time and space" (p. 17). Social organisation in modern life relies on "the coordination of many human beings physically absent from one another" (p. 17). The 'when' and 'where' of actions are now directly connected, but not as they were in pre-modern epochs in which they were mediated by place.

The separation of time from space has been fundamental to the dynamism we now experience in modern life and social affairs. As Giddens points out, the separation is a phenomenon that has effectively universalised the "use of history to make history" (the year 2000, for example is a universal marker for all of humanity). It is a constituent in the processes that continue to drive modern life and social affairs away from 'the hold' of traditions and can be seen as having encouraged the development of kitsch. This use of history in Giddens' view "becomes global in the form of creation of a standardised 'past' and a universally applicable 'future'" (1991, p.17).

As a process, time-space distanciation and the disembedding of social institutions have had great implications for the evolution and development of kitsch. Many disembedded individuals have, in my view, been left with an

intense craving for something that is, or at least feels, real: something tangible that can anchor them in time and space, something that they can trust. As is demonstrated in the sections that follow, this desire is the reason why for many modern societies a shift in the value and meaning of kitsch has occurred.

2.6.2 Disembedding Mechanisms: Symbolic Tokens and Expert Systems

Giddens has identified two types of disembedding mechanisms, 'symbolic tokens' and 'expert systems', which together form 'abstract systems' (1991). Symbolic tokens are "a media of exchange that have standard value" (p. 18) and are therefore "interchangeable across a plurality of contexts" (p. 18). Symbolic tokens can thus be circulated without consideration of the specific characteristics of the groups, or of the people that handle them. The most pervasive example of a symbolic tokens is money (1991). Various larger forms of pre-modern social systems developed monetary exchanges of some kind, however, with the development and maturation of modernity a "money economy becomes vastly more sophisticated and abstract" (Giddens, 1991, p. 18). Money brackets time and space—time "because it is a means of credit", and space "since standardised value allows transactions between a multiplicity of individuals who never physically meet one another" (p.18).

Re-evaluated within a contemporary context, kitsch, in the form of sentimentality, I assert, can closely mirror a symbolic token. While the objects and experiences that are considered kitsch may vary from person to person, or from one culture to another, kitsch's overarching premise of "sentimentality" (as defined in Section 7.4) (Binkley, 2000) is universal and therefore "interchangeable across a plurality of contexts" (Giddens, 1991, p. 19) as are symbolic tokens. However, although kitsch can be transacted "between a multiplicity of individuals who never physically meet one

another" (p.18), unlike true symbolic tokens (i.e. money) the 'value' of sentimentality in kitsch is subjective—as is arguably the case with money—and therefore cannot be standardised across a multitude of contexts, as is the case with a true symbolic token.

The most eloquent description of how kitsch mirrors a symbolic token can be seen in Milan Kundera's (1984) statement in the novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*:

> 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. (Kundera, 1984, p. 244)

Kundera observes "when the heart speaks, the mind finds it indecent to object" (Kundera, 1984, p. 244). It is 'the second tear' that flows at the simplicity of watching children running on the grass, free and joyful—and the sentiment this vision invokes—that "takes us back to our common roots" (Binkley, 2000, p. 145). However, what is most significant about kitsch as a symbolic token—compared to money—is its ability to reconnect and re-embed human beings on a deeply personal level. The sentimentality of kitsch is recognised and circulated without consideration of the specific characteristics of the groups, or people who engage with it. In this way, kitsch comes within a hair's breadth of having true standardised value as a symbolic token. The sentimentality of kitsch has become a universal currency, arguably a symbolic token, that supports transactions between a diverse array of individuals who may never physically meet or come to know each other.

Kitsch, like children running on the grass, "calls out our forgotten love and wonderment in all things wholesome" (Binkley, p.145). It is a reminder of the pleasures that can be found in the simple things in life, and it therefore plays an integral role in modern life as it works to re-embed social relations not

only to the "local conditions of time and place" (Giddens, 1990, p. 80) but globally.

On a side note it must be pointed out that Kundera does not see kitsch as being a positive aspect of culture, having unforgettably stated that kitsch is "the absolute denial of shit" (1984, p. 242). Kundera is of the traditional view that considers kitsch "evil" (Broch, 2003) and an "aesthetic lie" (Greenberg, 1975) mostly due to his experience of kitsch being used as propaganda in totalitarian regimes. I mostly agree with Kundera's view, given the context in which he discusses kitsch. However, as is argued in the chapters that follow, I view kitsch as being able to be a positive aspect of culture. This research demonstrates the positive and valuable role kitsch can play in modern life, providing it is not exploited, as was the case within the totalitarian regimes that Kundera rightfully denounces.

The second type of disembedding mechanism Giddens identifies is expert systems. Expert systems are an outcome of the industrial and scientific revolutions, and mark an increase in technical knowledge and specialisation (Giddens, 1991). Expert systems are consequently organisations of the technical accomplishments, professional expertise and social relations that make a significant contribution to the material and social environment (1991). Expert systems "bracket time and space through deploying modes of technical knowledge which have validity independent of the practitioners and clients who make use of them" (1991, p. 18). Expert systems filter into almost all aspects of social life and are not limited only to technical expertise. They range from the provision of the food we eat, where we live and what we buy, to social relationships like those with a doctor or a therapist, for example.

Giddens (1991) notes that all disembedding mechanisms, both symbolic tokens and expert systems, are dependent upon 'trust' and abstract capacities. In this context, trust is a form of faith or confidence in a probable, or expected, outcome. Trust is about having a commitment to 'something" rather than relying on cognitive understanding alone. The dynamic nature of

modernity and our reliance on expert systems makes trust an essential aspect of kitsch.

2.6.3 Trust

Trust is undoubtedly the key to a functioning relationship between individuals, symbolic tokens and expert systems. It is the social glue that unites and holds modern societies together. Without a trusting relationship between the individual and expert systems, modern societies would likely fall apart. When trust is diminished, or in some way undermined, the individual is exposed to ontological insecurity that can in turn lead to an insecure social reality and disembeddedness (Giddens, 1991).

Giddens defines trust as "the vesting of confidence in persons or in abstract systems, made on the basis of a 'leap of faith' that brackets ignorance or lack of information" (1991, p. 244). He makes a clear distinction between this view and what Georg Simmel (1978) refers to as "weak inductive knowledge" (p.179) that is part of formal transactions. By trust, Giddens (1991) is referring to the manner in which many decisions in life are based on a confidence in past trends and inductive references that are considered a reliable platform for gauging the present. However this is only a singular aspect of a trust relationship. Trust requires a leap of faith, a commitment to an irreducible belief and is "specifically related to absence in time and space" (p. 19). For example, we are more likely to trust a qualified professional like a paramedic, fire fighter or pilot than we would a used car salesman or a telemarketer (*Readers Digest*, 2011). Just as with kitsch, something that is perceived to be real (perhaps an object that has been handed down through generations, or a souvenir bought to mark a specific experience) or authenticated (such as limited editions, individually numbered or signed copies) will generally attract greater value and a higher level of trust. Within symbolic tokens and expert systems, "trust brackets the

limited technical knowledge which most people possess about coded information which routinely affects their lives" (p.19).

Trust, of many kinds, operates on a variety of levels and in a multiplicity of ways. It lies beneath an entire host of daily decisions and experiences that orient our activities. However, as Giddens (1991) points out, trusting is by no means "always the result of consciously taken decisions" (p.19). It is more often than not "a generalised attitude of mind" that underpins our choices. It is an attitude that stems from the relationship between trust and the development of an individual's personality. Therefore, as reflexive individuals, we are able to make the decision to trust. Yet, in spite of this, the leap of faith which trust requires has a tendency to resist any form of "calculative decision-making" (p.19).

By calculative decision-making, Giddens is referring to "attitudes of trust in relation to specific situations, persons or systems" (p. 19) that on a generalised level "are directly connect to the psychological *security* of individuals and groups" (p. 19), the institution of marriage for example. Within conditions of modernity "trust and security" together with "risk and danger" exist in a multitude of historically individual combinations (p.19). An example of this is when disembedding mechanisms take grip of large fields of "relative security in daily social activity" (p.19). In industrialised countries, people are generally able to receive protection from many hazards, such as storms or acts of nature that were commonly experienced in pre-modern times. Conversely, disembedding mechanisms have themselves created a host of new risks and dangers such as cyber stalking or terrorism for example, not only locally but also globally.

2.7 Examples of the Embedding Nature of Kitsch

Useful examples of the "disembeddedness" (Giddens, 1991) people experience in modern life, and in turn, the ability of kitsch to re-embed the individual can be found in the experiences of Cuc Lam, a refugee of the Vietnam War and also a woman I observed on the evening news escaping severe floodwaters in Queensland. Both women were forced to leave their homes with little notice, able to take only a few of their most treasured possessions. The significance that a person invests in their possessions under extreme circumstances, like war or a natural disaster, I argue is an exaggerated but accurate illustration of the embedding nature of kitsch.

I have never forgotten an image I saw on an evening news report that was covering some of the worst floods in Australia's recorded history. Almost three quarters of the state of Queensland was underwater. As the rains rolled in, and floodwaters continued to rise, ongoing news coverage showed stories of great loss, hope, courage and luck. Amidst the turmoil a reporter captured footage of a middle-aged woman saving an elaborate chandelier style lamp and a very large kitsch elephant ornament from her home. She travelled down the stairs of the submerged house and waded through chest deep water holding the elephant above her head.

Initially the image proved a moment of light relief from the tragedy that was unfolding. However, as the woman risked the unpredictable floodwaters to rescue the lamp and the kitsch ornament, the irony of the situation could not be ignored. Lives had been lost, family pets and cattle drowned or left stranded, and entire homes washed away. Tens of thousands of people had been evacuated to makeshift shelters. I do not know who the woman was, or why she chose to save the lamp and the elephant. Obviously, the objects were of great enough significance to her that they were worth trying to save. There was no possible way she could have saved all of her possessions, but of the things she was able to save, she had chosen the lamp and the elephant ornament.

There is the story of Cuc Lam and her husband who like many Vietnamese were forced to flee their country as a result of the 19-year long Vietnam War (1962–1975). Lam and her husband had tried many times to escape but without success (Lam, n.d.). Recounting the ordeal, Lam recalls how in 1978 she had travelled alone by train to meet her husband. Disguised as fishermen and with minimal food and water they attempted yet another escape, travelling by riverboat, unaware of whether or not their journey would be successful. The plight of Vietnamese boat people like Lam had become an international humanitarian crisis. Her young niece and nephew had tried to escape with their parents, but were drowned when rough waters hit (Lam, n.d.). After being rescued Lam and her husband were taken to a refugee camp in Malaysia. Camp life was tough. Three months pregnant with her son, they struggled to find enough food and ate "little sea shells" (Lam, n.d., p.1) to survive.

Recounting the ordeal in an interview with Museum Victoria, Lam explains how having feared so desperately for their lives she, and her husband, fled Vietnam with almost nothing except for the clothes they wore, and a small pink pouch she had "kept close to her skin" during the escape. Inside the pouch was a photographic negative of her family, passport photos of her parents, her sister's watch, her mother's earrings and her wedding ring. Lam explained the significance of some of these items, commenting that her "mother pass [sic] away when I was thirteen years old so I thought if I die I still have some image [the earrings and picture] from my mum with me . . . my mother with me . . . so that would satisfy me" (p. 1).

Months had passed and eventually Lam and her husband were offered refugee status and chose to move to Australia. Lam explained how as refugees they had almost nothing to bring to Australia with them, only the clothes they had worn during their escape from Vietnam, a few tickets and notes she and her husband had saved, and the pink pouch containing her treasures. Lam touchingly recounted her preparation for Australia, explaining that:

> We decided I sold [sic] my wedding ring to purchase a suitcase . . . I don't want to sell my mother's earring, you know, I decided to sell my wedding ring to purchase that to bring with me, even though I have nothing to bring with me but I just want to bring with me to show that, you know, I come to a new country I got something with me and I don't come to the new country with empty handed. (Lam, n.d., p.1)

Lam was determined that despite their ordeal they would appear neat, clean and be holding a few possessions when they arrived in Australia. To do this Lam and her husband sold her wedding ring for a meager sum to buy a small, red vinyl suitcase (Figure 14).

Bloomfield, J. (2004). Cuc Lams suitcase. [Medium: Photograph] Retrieved from
http://www.cv.vic.gov.au/data/1469/mn008557.jpg
Exception to copyright: Section ss40, 103C, Exception, Research or Study.

Figure 14:   Cuc Lam's Red Vinyl Suitcase 1 (2004)

To ensure the little red case was not lost while they waited to depart, the couple wrote their address at the Malaysian refugee camp on one side of the case and their new address in Australia on the other (Investigating National Treasures, 2004). Although virtually empty, the kitsch vinyl case was as Lam

states "a symbol of a new beginning in a new country" (Investigating National Treasures, 2004).

Describing the harrowing nature of refugee life, Lam described how she is "still very touched and very emotional because this always in my mind how I had to face with the difficulty try to escape and try to survive" (Investigating National Treasures, 2004, p. 2). She explained how as a refugee "you don't have anything . . . but you have a courage and a motivation and you have to work hard because you come here with bare hand . . . (p. 2). Bare hands, except for a couple of photos, a few items of jewellery, the clothes on their back and a very basic, red vinyl suitcase that is symbolic of so many things.

Bloomfield, J. (2004). Cuc Lams suitcase. [Medium: Photograph] Retrieved from
http://www.cv.vic.gov.au/data/1470/mn008560.jpg
Exception to copyright: Section ss40, 103C, Exception, Research or Study.

Figure 15:   Cuc Lam's Red Vinyl Suitcase 2 (2004)

Family photographs, jewellery and important documents are usually amongst the first things people gather when fleeing a disaster, as was the case with Cuc Lam. If possible, people usually try to save a few other precious objects, as did the woman with the lamp and the elephant ornament during the Queensland floods. People often covet seemingly random collections of objects. The monetary value is usually not only irrelevant but immeasurable

because the experiences, sentimental and emotional attachment associated with the objects makes them irreplaceable and priceless: family heirlooms; gifts received to mark a memorable occasion (births, deaths or weddings); something used during, or bought in anticipation of, a significant event (Lam's suitcase for example); childhood toys; or religious icons and symbols (religious statues, Christian crosses, prayer beads).

The items people save in a catastrophic situation often assist in re-embedding people in a variety of different ways. Objects can assist individuals in maintaining a link to the people, places, experiences, memories and fantasies they cherish. This is not dissimilar to modern consumer culture where as a means of coping with change individuals surround themselves with material objects—many of which are kitsch. These kitsch objects, imbued with sentimentality and nostalgia, assist the individual to become and to remain re-embedded. They allow them to hold on to time, fulfil dreams and fantasies, and mediate affects like sentimentality, melancholy and nostalgia so that we can create our own highly personalised sense of comfort and safety in a disembedding world.

Fundamental to my thesis is the view that kitsch is an aesthetic that is able to yield some of the security, certainty, familiarity and reassurance of the unchanging, of the everyday, a reassurance that people lost as they entered modernity, when time and space were distanciated. Re-embeddedness, however, is only possible if individuals and societies are prepared to trust in the consensus generated by expert systems and symbolic tokens like kitsch. Kitsch is a system that, in contrast to disembedded autonomy and singularity, imitates distinct modes of aesthetic repetition and imitation. I concur with Binkley, that kitsch—and the different qualities of kitsch—can be used as a way of exploring the disembeddedness of modernity, not unlike the sense of dislocation experienced by Cuc Lam and the woman with the elephant ornament. By better understanding the disembeddedness of modernity we can better understand the significance of kitsch in contemporary life and its potential as a tool for the artist.

2.8 Re-evaluating Kitsch: A Real or Fake Aesthetic?

The notion of authenticity (or lack thereof) has traditionally been a key identifier in conceptualisations of kitsch, which has long been considered as an imitative cultural style; Broch (1933; 1951) claimed that kitsch gives a distorted reflection of reality, Greenberg (1939) casts kitsch as an aesthetic lie. These critics were renowned for the most unflattering attacks on kitsch, in the mid-twentieth century. Intriguingly, of the contemporary theorists who have re-evaluated kitsch, Binkley (2002) does not consider kitsch to be authentic. Binkley (2002) states "what makes kitsch, kitsch . . . is not simply its decorative nature, but that kitsch artificially inflates the comfort of decoration into a uniquely fake aesthetic statement" (p. 1). This is a view I fervently contest. I am intrigued as to how Binkley can purport to see kitsch as having "re-embedded its consumers at the 'deepest' personal level" (p.135) as part of the everyday, and yet still view kitsch as a 'faker', representing a less authentic reality rather than 'another' form of reality. While I agree with Binkley that "kitsch is a unique aesthetic style" (p. 1), I argue that style is the result of specific social and historical circumstances. I argue that the effect of these historical and cultural changes is to have transformed kitsch from the 'uniquely fake aesthetic statement' described by Binkley (2002), to a 'very' real, aesthetic firmly embedded in everyday life.

Walter Benjamin was one of the earlier commentators on aesthetic authenticity and was perhaps the only one to address this issue in his 1936 essay 'Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'. Benjamin (1936) described how the proliferation of mechanically reproduced copies (particularly photographs) effectively dismantled the notion of an 'authentic experience' based on privileged ownership or contact with a unique aesthetic product. Benjamin placed greater value on kitsch over art (or original objects), stating, "what we used to call art begins only four feet away from the body" (n.p.). Now however, with kitsch, the object world approaches human beings. It yields to their touch, shaping its own figures within them

(Benjamin, 1936). Judy Attfield states that kitsch "responds to a wider need for an engagement with authenticity" (2006, p. 207). Olalquiaga in *Megalopolis* (1992) touches on this, claiming that:

> . . . the definition of the real has expanded and become more complex, including representation as a determining element of perception that eliminate the traditional hierarchy between reality and simulation. Theatricality, artifice, and the presentation of a reality whose saturation with signifying codes makes it into hyper-reality, are finally some of the ways of knowledge and aesthetic enjoyment of our time. (Olalquiaga, 1992, n.p.)

Kitsch always has and still does represent, copy, emulate, imitate and reproduce. However, some objects are considered kitsch in their original or authentic form. I cannot help but question whether re-conceptualisations of kitsch, like Binkley's, that still partner fake with kitsch—instead of authenticity—are carrying the baggage of a lingering class-consciousness.

2.9 Other Commentators on Kitsch

There are, of course, those commentators who cling to the traditional 'class equals taste' notions of kitsch. Tracy Potts (2007) has strongly contested many of the re-conceptualisations of kitsch, particularly those of Binkley and Attfield, arguing for what I consider to be the traditional definitions of kitsch. Potts finds taste hierarchies still extremely prevalent, with no sign of aesthetic judgement being relaxed any time soon. In her essay '"Walking the Line": Kitsch, Class and the Morphing Subject of Value' (2007), Potts draws attention to what she calls the "subtle symbolic economic activity that attends kitsch in its rehabilitated state" (n.p.). Potts highlights what she sees as the intricate manoeuvrings of kitsch that has brought about the revaluation of many kitsch objects. Potts claims that she has identified "a set of obscured class actions" (p. 1), but this is not a systematic classification methodology as Binkley and Olalquiaga have developed, merely scattered examples and anecdotes. Potts seem to believe there is hegemonic power at play, securing

social distinction for kitsch and remaining unseen by commentators such as Binkley and Attfield.

I propose that there is a major problem with Potts' analysis of kitsch, which stems from her understanding or analysis of taste, the key focus of her argument. Potts appears to have radically misunderstood both these theorists by opposing the limited role of taste in definitions of kitsch, to which both Binkley and Attfield assert. Binkley and Attfield's arguments separate kitsch from subjective notions of good or bad taste, the distinction of which is vital to Potts' interpretation of their definitions. Binkley and Attfield's contestation of the role taste plays in analyses of kitsch refers directly to the notion of taste being unrelated to hierarchies, class and status, which they claim no longer play a significant role, if any, in definitions of kitsch. They do, however, agree that hierarchies, class and status are inextricably linked to evaluations of taste, a distinction that I have ascertained Potts overlooks.

Taking into consideration the overwhelming profusion of 'so-called kitsch' we are confronted with, as well as the obvious difficulties in defining kitsch, it is easy to understand why there is little consensus as to what kitsch *is.* I contend that the taste debate can be better understood if kitsch is positioned within a social context of popular taste and as an important aspect of popular culture (Attfield, 2006). Acknowledging the aesthicisation of everyday life as a positive aspect of culture, both taste and kitsch can be seen as playing an intrinsic role in the habitus and material culture of everyday life (2006).

Using Attfield's analysis, which clearly operates in the new and changing era of modernity, we are able to better negotiate the recent debates on how to re-contextualise kitsch, as illustrated in Figure 9. Given the confusion described, it is necessary to clarify the kinds of objects that I identify as being kitsch within the context of this exegesis. Having re-contextualised the relationship between kitsch and everyday experiences Section three will now show how I have negotiated the kitsch aesthetic within my practice.

3. Reflexive Overview of Creative Praxis and the Use of Kitsch

The methodology (or theoretical framework) and methods (the development of my artworks from theoretical conception through to construction and exhibition) within this praxis are closely connected, at times operating together. Therefore, rather than being a linear unfolding of ideas the theories examined, and the artworks produced, are strongly intermeshed. The reflexive praxis model employed has enabled me to monitor, order, and as has often been the case, re-order, my own subjectivities within the works as they develop. Thus, specific aspects of my analyses of kitsch have been privileged within the artworks developed (sentimentality and the ability of kitsch to re-embed for example), as is demonstrated in the following outline in which the aim, content and contexts of the works are given.

Mediated by the social constructs of my lifeworld as an artist/researcher, the reflexive approach taken has enabled me to position myself critically in relation to the works I have developed and the theories by which the works within this praxis have been examined. The works are related to both Olalquiaga's (1992; 1998) and Binkley's (2000) theories in the following Sections of this exegesis. However, in order to ensure a rigorous examination of how each artwork operates within this praxis, analysis of individual works is related to specific aspects of each theory: Olalquiaga's notion of 'three degrees of kitsch' (1992) is applied to *The Aquarium* (2009) and *Jesus* (2010); Binkley's concept of 'kitsch as a repetitive system' (2000) to *Budgietopia* (2009–2013), and *Snow Domes and Dream Spheres* developed in 2009–2010; 'Olalquiaga's modes of perceiving experiences and kitsch' (1998) to *Budgietopia* (2009–2013). I establish how these theories can be applied to the communicative capacity of my artwork, and therefore demonstrate my critical and reflexive praxis model. It must be clarified that my creative work is by no means a literal demonstration of Olalquiaga's (1992; 1998) and Binkley's (2000) theories, but rather, is a synchronous

amalgam of theory and practice. My creative work therefore does embody aspects of Olalquiaga's (1992; 1998) and Binkley's (2000) philosophies, but as noted previously, is not rendered as a visual expression of their theories.

The sections of this exegesis that follow, examine in detail, each of the works pertaining to this research in relation to Olalquiaga's and Binkley's theories. In this section, however, a description of the aims, content and context of each work is given. The differing contexts in which my work has been exhibited, is of particular importance for two reasons. Firstly, because my research positions kitsch within the everyday and lifeworld, I have made a conscious decision to exhibit the works in a variety of locations and public spaces, not just art galleries. This decision was made as I have wanted my work to be viewed by a broad range of people, in everyday situations, and attract a larger and wider demographic than visitors to art galleries. Secondly, an understanding of the contexts used in my approach is an important aspect of the critical and reflexive decisions that I make as an artist.

3.1 *The Lotus Pond*

The Lotus Pond (2007)
Installation
Plastic, vinyl, wood, on rubber inner-tubes and water
.80m x 8m x 14m
(Photographer: Brendan Beirne)

Figure 16: ***The Lotus Pond* (2007) exhibited at Spectrum for the exhibition *White Monkey Holding Peach* (2007)**

The Lotus Pond (2008) was initially developed during my honours candidature and resulted from an artist residency undertaken in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam in 2007—which culminated in the development of the interactive work—that conveys ideas regarding the lifeworld, culture and kitsch. Philosophically, although pivotal in my investigation of kitsch, The Lotus Pond (2007, 2008) also explores cultural incommensurability by looking at East/West cultural conventions and ideologies. The work examines what I have identified as the "multidirectional cycle of appropriation, commodification, and the hybridisation or homogenising of everyday cultural symbols and icons, as they are trafficked across national and cultural borders" (Stewart, 2008, p.20). The materials used to make the lotus flowers, the central aspect of this work, were collected as souvenirs

while travelling to various locations in South East Asia. For me, the lotus flowers have acted as a metaphor for identity and the individual lifeworlds that we create and inhabit. As lifeworlds, each lotus flower could be said to hold what Olalquiaga has called "collective remembrances and desires" (1992, p.47). In the works I likened this to personal histories, wishes and sentimentality, all of which I assert, play an important role in the development of society, creating a significant part of the lifeworld, and of kitsch.

The Lotus Pond (2007, 2008) has been pivotal in the development of my doctoral research as it has provided a context to the background and longevity of my creative praxis. It was through gaining an understanding of the historical and cultural contexts of the designs in the plastics from which the lotus flowers are made that I first observed what appeared to be sensory the affect of sentimentality, that this research demonstrates, is facilitated by kitsch. Furthermore, it is where I first came to realise, that the sensory affect of sentimentality associated with kitsch, is shared throughout cultures and societies– that the affect of sentimentality associated with kitsch is arguably universal, a theory that is supported by Binkley (2000). This realisation is pivotal to my research because it identified a gap in analyses of kitsch in which researchers (Greenberg, 1961; Adorno & Horkheimer, 1991; Calinescu, 1987; Broch, 1955; Dorfles, 1969; Potts, 2007) had struggled to define, and reach consensus, on exactly what kitsch is, and in turn, how to classify kitsch objects. By linking my definition of kitsch to sentimental affect instead of actual objects, in which meaning is highly subjective dependant on context (culture, class, status, race for example), I have developed a definition of contemporary kitsch that is inclusive of cultural and societal difference and can be applied to a broad range of cultural and societal objects and experiences.

Although there are many aspects of kitsch at play in *The Lotus Pond* (2007, 2008) installation, within my doctoral research, the lotus flowers are examined as an example of kitsch as a "decorative feature" (Binkley, 2000)— an aspect of this work first reviewed during my honours research. Through the lens of kitsch as a decorative feature (Binkley, 2000), it is demonstrated

how the designs on the various plastics and vinyls from which the lotus flowers are made have evolved through several cycles of repetition and kitsch. As demonstrated through my earlier research, it is explained how as a decorative feature, the plastics become encoded by the personal contexts in which they were used or experienced and the impact this has on the individual and on kitsch.

Since first being exhibited in 2007 the installation has been shown in a variety of configurations and contexts, but generally incorporates a large pond at 70m x 4m x 9m, and 17 lotus flowers made of plastic, vinyl and wood attached to rubber inner tubes. The lotus flowers range in size from 40–120cm in diameter.

The installation when exhibited at Spectrum Project Space, included the lotus flowers, which were floated in a room of the gallery, filled from wall-to-wall with water (Figures 16 and 17, above). As it was an interactive installation, visitors were able to literally wade through the water, which divided the gallery into two. The expanse of water created a trafficking zone, with the intention of demonstrating how we negotiate barriers within cultural exchange. Floating on inner tubes that came from car tyres, many of the lotus flowers had random, odd petals. This was to give the appearance of cross-contamination or pollination as they made contact with other lotus flowers, becoming hybridised as they were trafficked through the expanse of water.

In 2008, the work was re-shown at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (PICA) as part of the annual *Hatched* exhibition (Figure 17). Due to the confines of the institute, instead of filling a room with water, I constructed a transportable pond in which the lotus flowers where exhibited. *The Lotus Flowers* (2007) have appeared in several other locations including an exhibit in Ipswich Queensland, with the final showing of the work being for the City of Perth's 2010 *City in Bloom* exhibition (Figure 18, below) in which the lotus pond was exhibited at the entrance to The Art Gallery of Western Australia.

The Lotus Pond (2008)
Installation
Perth Institute of Contemporary Art
Plastic, vinyl, wood on rubber inner-tubes and water
.70m x 4m x 9m
(Photographer: Michael Gray)

Figure 17: ***The Lotus Pond* (2008) exhibited at Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, (PICA), Western Australia (2008)**

Figure 18:   *The Lotus Pond* **(2008) exhibited at entrance to The Art Gallery of Western Australia (2010)**

Although there are many aspects of kitsch at play in *The Lotus Pond* (2007, 2008) installation, within this research, the lotus flowers are examined as an example of kitsch as a "decorative feature" (Binkley, 2000). Through the lens of kitsch as a decorative feature (Binkley, 2000) it is demonstrated how the designs on the various plastics and vinyls from which the lotus flowers are made have evolved through several cycles of repetition and kitsch. It is explained how as a decorative feature, the plastics become encoded by the personal contexts in which they were used or experienced and the impact this has on the individual and on kitsch.

3.2 The Aquarium **Installation**

The Aquarium (2009)
Glass, steel, wood, hot pink gravel, and mixed media
3.5 x 2.5 x 2.4

Figure 19: *The Aquarium* **installation (2009) exhibited at Spectrum (2009)**

The Aquarium (2009) (Figure 19, above) installation and residency is the major work that was undertaken during this research. The overarching philosophy behind the development of this work was: to gain a deeper understanding of how the sensory affect of sentimentality associated with kitsch experiences, possessions and material objects offers a way for the individual to move from disembeddedness to a state of being re-embedded; and, to investigate how my creative practice, which utilises aspects of kitsch, can facilitate the experience of re-embedding. In addition to this, *The Aquarium* (2009) installation and residency, and my performative role within this work have proved to be a rich source of information when reflexively analysing the various communicative functions of kitsch that are examined throughout the following sections of this exegesis.

The Aquarium (2009) was developed specifically for a one-month residency at Spectrum Project Space, Northbridge, Western Australia. Spectrum Project Space (Spectrum) is "an exhibition and performance space that functions as a laboratory for exploration and experimentation" (Spectrum Project Space, para. 1) run by the School of Communications and Arts at Edith Cowan University, Perth, Western Australia. Unlike many traditional galleries, as a project space, works exhibited at Spectrum do not have to necessarily be completed prior to being shown to the public. *The Aquarium* (2009), which was prefabricated in my studio, was assembled at Spectrum for the opening of the residency and remained a work in progress throughout the entire month. The permanent features of *The Aquarium* (2009), a glass, timber and steel aquarium structure included: a mermaid throne, treasure chest, Grecian pillars, artificial coral and other underwater foliage and sea creatures; deep sea treasure including large urns, a bust of David, dolphin ornaments; 400kg of hot pink gravel and a waterfall on the rear glass panel of the tank.

However throughout the residency I continually added and removed various other objects and mermaid paraphernalia, and redecorated the inside of the tank. Interchanging these objects was an important part of this research as it enabled me to reflexively examine the various theories and aspects of kitsch that have been researched throughout this exegesis. The two DVDs accompany this exegesis, Appendix 1: *The Aquarium* presents a short video of the installation and of my residency. Section 2 of the other DVD, titled Appendix 2: Additional Images of Work, offers supplementary photographic documentation of *The Aquarium* (2009), including images that detail the various objects that were housed inside the tank.

The Aquarium (2009) was positioned in the front window of Spectrum, which at the time of my residency was located in Northbridge, Perth City's arts and entertainment district. Positioning *The Aquarium* (2009) where it could be viewed from the street was a deliberate decision, as I wanted people to be able to view the installation, and my performances, on an ongoing basis, and

to also capture a broad audience. Because Spectrum was positioned on a commuter route for the central business district, as well as Perth City's shopping precinct—by being in the window—I was able to attract the attention of passers-by who would generally not visit an art venue. Attracting their attention was a particularly important aspect of the delivery of *The Aquarium* (2009), as with other works developed throughout this research. I have positioned my thesis on kitsch within the lifeworld and as part of the everyday. It has therefore been an essential aspect of this creative praxis that the works I display were not just viewed within the gallery paradigm, but shown in a variety of contexts and experienced as part of the everyday, by people, doing everyday things.

3.2.1 Behind *The Aquarium*: Ariel and *The Little Mermaid*

The concept behind *The Aquarium* (2009) came by chance, after visiting a friend's house where the children were watching the 1989 Disney remake of Danish author Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* (1837). Having years earlier read the original story by Andersen, I recognised a distinct adaptation of the storyline that held an important link to my research. Ariel, the little mermaid in Andersen's story, like most tradition mermaid fables, seeks to lure those around her through offerings that are "for the fulfilment of others wishes" (Olalquiaga, 1992, p. 247). The Disney version of *The Little Mermaid* (1989) comparatively, places a modern consumerist spin on the original storyline, demonstrating just how disembedding modernity can be. This is an adaptation that in my view highlights the shifting value of kitsch in contemporary life. Disney's version depicts Ariel roaming the great depths of the sea, exploring shipwrecks for the remains of human objects like silver and glassware, vases and bottles. She arranges them on the rocky crevasses that double as shelves in her underwater cave. Olalquiaga (1998) too observed the "spinoff and twist" (p. 247) in Disney's adaptation of *The Little Mermaid* (1989). She poetically describes how the interstices between the rocks and the water's surface saw the cave's tower become "a dizzying

spiral of objects where the mermaid princess can get lost in her daydreams"
(p. 246). In stark contrast to Andersen's little mermaid, Disney's Ariel
displays fetishism for late twentieth century commodities (Figure 20). Instead
of offering the fulfilment of others' wishes, as do the mermaid of myths and
legends, Disney's Ariel collects objects to enhance her own daydreams and
life. She collects objects in which she places her own sentimental
attachment, her own personal and unique narrative and symbolic
connections.

Figure 20: **Still from Disney's *Little Mermaid,* Ariel in her underwater cave with collected objects**

This reflexive analysis, I assert, demonstrates the visual and conceptual
signification of Disney's version of *The Little Mermaid* (1989). This text
embodies my position of how kitsch operates in the contemporary
consumerist society we inhabit.

Through the rhythm (repetition, imitation and emulation) of "the repetitive qualities of kitsch" (Binkley, 2000), Ariel attempts to 're-embed' (Binkley, 2000; Giddens, 1991) herself in her underwater world. She uses kitsch as a "decorative feature" (Binkley, 2000, p. 142) as she works to create a homely environment by displaying the trinkets and treasures she has found in the cracks and crevasses of her cave. Instead of collecting objects that naturally occur in the sea, she searches for objects that "emulate other cultural products" (Binkley, 2000)—those of the human world. Furthermore, the intrinsic connection of kitsch to a "love of all things sentimental" (Binkley, 2000, p. 142) is undeniably apparent in the Disney version. Ariel's sentimental attachment to and love of the objects she collects is both "melancholic "and "nostalgic" (Olalquiaga, 1998) as she laments that she cannot be with her prince, the love of her life, and live on land.

It is important to mention that *The Aquarium* (2009) utilises the symbolism of the mermaid for its value as an "inanimate curiosity" (Olalquiaga, 1992, p. 237) and easily recognisable construct. I therefore do not offer a historical or sociological study of mermaids, as *The Aquarium* (2009) installation concerned creating a private (yet very public) world that exposed the multiple workings of kitsch examined within this research. Furthermore, my performative role in this work, taking on the persona of a mermaid, enabled me to systematically and reflexively communicate with the audience the workings of kitsch and the everyday.

3.2.2 *The Aquarium* Residency

Figure 21:   **In character within *The Aquarium* (2009) exhibited at Spectrum (2009)**

Through the reflexive process, my decision to take a performative role in *The Aquarium* (2009) (Figure 21) was extremely important for a variety of reasons. As an artist-researcher adopting a mermaid persona and living within the confines of the aquarium, was like being an anthropologist on a field trip. Only performing as a mermaid within the aquarium, I was an artist-researcher reflexively analysing the intricacies of contemporary kitsch in the lifeworld I had created. More importantly, as part of the exhibit, I was able to closely observe how viewers' engaged with the kitsch environment I

inhabited. It gave me a platform to explore the paradoxical reality between the imaginary world I had created, and the symbolic narratives that commonly accompany the sentimentality associated with kitsch, and to reflexively order and reorder the knowledge, information and social relationships that developed throughout the month spent inside the tank.

Having adopted a "throughgoing, constitutive reflexiv[e]" (Giddens, 1990, p. 52) process within my practice I was able to constantly review the social practices of both myself and the audiences of *The Aquarium* (2009). As both the inhabitant of the tank and as the artist-researcher negotiating my way through this reflexive process I was able to "reveal the dynamic relationship between the context, construction and the articulation of the [communicative] act[s]" (p. 108) apparent in the work. This not only enabled me to refocus if required and reflexively fine-tune the aims of my research, but also afforded me the opportunity to adjust accordingly the manner in which the work was communicated to the audience.

An example of this was the decision not to engage with the audience, especially by speaking, while performing in the aquarium. However, people seemed determined to communicate with me, gentle calls sometimes reverting to shouts, soft taps on the glass, often turning to firm and loud knocking, in a bid to gain my attention. After only a few days I decided it would be fascinating to know what people wished to communicate. I began to collect empty bottles, which I placed outside the tank with a notebook and pen. Visitors to the gallery were able to write messages which were then placed in the bottles and deposited into the tank (Figure 22, below).

Figure 22:   **Messages in bottles left by exhibition visitors at Spectrum (2009)**

The messages varied greatly from technical questions about the construction and development of the work, to compliments and a few criticisms. Surprisingly, people most often wrote seemingly private, sentimental wishes or confessions—a greeting to a deceased love one, hopes of marriage, love and travel and an affirmation to one day become a 'rockstar' (Figure 23).
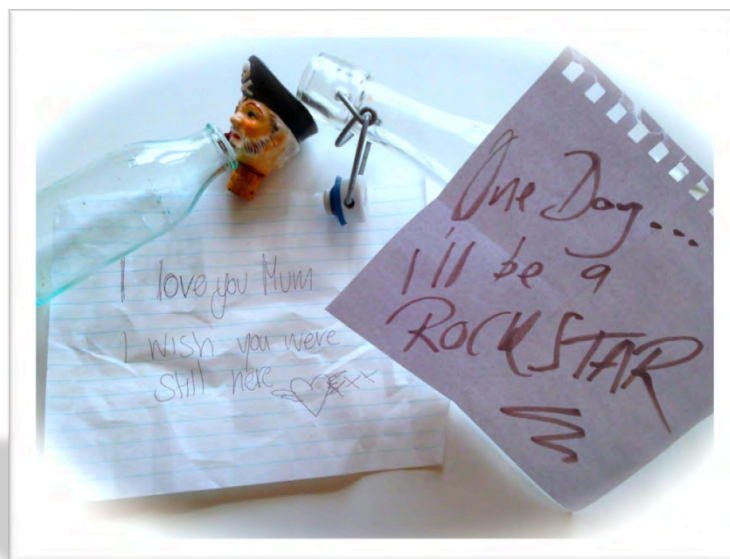
Figure 23:   **Example of messages in bottles left by exhibition visitors at Spectrum**

The Aquarium (2009) examines kitsch through creative practice and how the objects and experiences we collect can fulfil dreams and desires, and play a significant role in the lifeworlds we inhabit. The work aims to embody and therefore to communicate the human desire to be surrounded by the things we cherish. The belongings to which we feel intense sentimental attachment, for me metaphorically, 'give something back'—a sense of reassurance and safety from the pleasures and/or pain of our lifeworlds.

3.3 *Budgietopia*

Figure 24:   Image of *Budgietopia* from *The Everest Reunion* pop-up installation (2009) at Spectrum (2009)

Budgietopia (2009–2013) was an ongoing project that ran between 2009 and 2013. This work exists as a utopian bird world that explored—through the lives of budgies—how humans are able to find a sense of comfort, value and safety in the world through developing sentimental attachments to objects, particularly those that are kitsch. It is a celebration of the simple things in life—the things we collect and enjoy—the 'stuff', through which the sentimental affect of kitsch, simply makes life feel good. *Budgietopia* (2009-

2013) was initially developed over a twelve-month period while artist-in-residence at Spectrum, but continued to evolve depending on the circumstances and context in which it was exhibited. The installation incorporates 3000 lifelike budgie ornaments and an excessive amount of artificial flowers, lawn and shrubbery. Combined with a vast array of trinkets and knick-knacks, the budgies have been incorporated in various installations and exhibitions as well as in a budgie adoption program.

As the artist in residence at Spectrum from March 2009 to March 2010, I held a series of pop-up exhibitions of *Budgietopia*. These exhibits included *The Everest Reunion* (2009), *The Evening Commuter Cake Off* (2010), and the *Budgietopia Super Rally* (2010). For The *Everest Reunion* (2009) (Figure 24) around 1000 budgies were exhibited congregating on a mountaintop for 'high' tea. Viewed through the gallery front window the display could be viewed by passers-by. *The Evening Commuter Cake Off* (2010) (Figure 25) involved attaching garlands of budgies and flowers to the underside of the galleries awning, while playing sweet bird songs in the street and giving lamingtons to evening commuters. *The Budgietopia Super Rally* (2010) (Figure 26) involved 12 budgies with racing regalia that drove convertible cars (that were operated behind the scene by remote control) throughout the front floor of the gallery. The super rally, was observed by an audience of several thousand budgies, exhibited singing and cheering budgie anthems as the cars raced past.

Figure 25: *The Evening Commuter Cake Off* (2010) (Detail) exhibited at Spectrum (2010)

Figure 26: *The Budgietopia Super Rally* (2010) (Detail) exhibited at Spectrum (2010)

There were eleven pop-up exhibitions of *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) in total. Because the exhibits were shown between other programmed events within the space, they were only ever displayed for short periods of time. In between the pop-up exhibits I would, from time to time, leave budgies resting on the window ledge outside Spectrum. The combination of the ongoing pop-up events and the random budgies left outside overtime began to attract a following. People began to enquire what the budgies were for, when the next exhibit would be and others became a part of the budgie adoption program discussed in Section 1.

The main exhibition in which *Budgietopia* appeared was the City of Perth's, *City in Bloom Exhibition* (2010). The narrative behind *Budgietopia's City in Bloom* (2010) is based on two budgies, 'Reggie' and 'Rose'. Reggie and Rose, determined to fulfil a lifelong dream of experiencing city life, left their flock and set to the sky in pursuit of finding a new place to nest. Having reached the city but, unsure of their way, the couple headed to Perth's tourist information kiosk, located in the city square, know as Forrest Chase. Tired after their long journey they built a nest on the roof of the kiosk and settled in for the night. They awoke the following day spellbound by the vast range of activities, pleasures and material pursuits offered in modern city life—food, fashion, shopping, sightseeing and people watching. Wanting to share their experience, they invited a thousand of their closest friends to join them. Within days the flock arrived, joining Reggie and Rose on top of the kiosk.

The fortuitous opportunity to exhibit *Budgietopia* (2010) within the city centre, on the roof of an information kiosk, was greatly welcomed, as it again provided a chance to locate my artwork and praxis within the public domain. Theoretically, the development and use of *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) in this research has been multifaceted and strongly influenced by Binkley's notion of kitsch as a repetitive system (2000). Foremost, *Budgietopia* focuses on the sentimentality, the third feature of the repetitive system of kitsch. It explores, through the lives of budgies, how humans are able to find a sense of comfort, value and safety in the world through developing sentimental attachments to objects. Binkley's theory of kitsch as a repetitive system

(2000) coupled with what I have called 'Olalquiaga's modes of perceiving experiences and kitsch'[5] (1992), have been influential in *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) when examining how people's experience of an object influences the kinds of sentiment that they feel. This has been achieved through reflexive analysis of the various aspects of Binkley's theory at play within the installations, exhibitions, the budgie adoption program and this reflexive creative praxis. By bringing to light the embedding nature of the repetitive qualities of kitsch identified by Binkley (2000), that are operating in this work, it is demonstrated that the repetitive rhythm of kitsch presents a support system propped up "by reassuring traditions and habits" (p. 135).

The budgies incorporated in this project have been utilised in two distinct ways. First, they are exhibited in ways that enact everyday human scenarios where the comfort and warmth of kitsch and its repetitive qualities can be found (tea parties, relaxing at home and group gatherings, for example). Second, the budgies are particularly kitsch objects, in and of themselves, and the work examines the interactions and relationships people have developed with them. Overall, the budgie ornaments and *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) have been reflexively examined throughout this praxis to explore how the repetitive nature of kitsch and the sentimentality associated with kitsch operate.

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[5] What I have called Olalquiaga's 'modes of perceiving experiences and kitsch' is a critique on kitsch from *The Artificial Kingdom* (1998). Based largely on Walter Benjamin's (1973) two types of memory, Olalquiaga's modes of perceiving experiences and kitsch examines the process by which differing memories, experiences and desires affect an individual's emotional response to objects and to kitsch. Section 8 of this research is dedicated to an analysis of this theory.

3.4 *Snow Domes and Dream Spheres*

Collection of Snow Domes and Dream Sphere's (2009)
Glass, stainless steel, water and various mixed media
Dimensions ranging between 50cm x 40cm x 40cm – 32cm x 25cm x25cm

Figure 27:   ***Snow Domes and Dream Spheres* (2009) exhibited at The Moores Building and Gallery, Fremantle, Western Australia (2009)**

Each of the snow domes and dream spheres developed in this body of work were produced with the intention of encapsulating a collection of objects that represent the complex universe of day-to-day lived experiences that influence us as individuals and as a culture. The sculptures are foremost a study of kitsch, of the things people collect—of how people make sense of the world through artefacts and everyday objects (Attfield, 2006)—and the interrelationship between the experiences we collect and the aesthetic colonisation of the lifeworlds we create.

The often absurd combinations of aspirations, dreams and fantasies encapsulated in each of these works preserves a brief moment in time; experiences and memories that shape our day-to-day lives. They explore how, through the objects and souvenirs we collect, we develop a sense of

assurance in life, a sense of who we are and value being (Attfield, 2006): the collective memories and desires that influence the highly individualised lifeworlds that we create and inhabit.

The works were developed throughout 2009–2010 and were exhibited at the Moores Building Contemporary Art Gallery, Fremantle, Western Australia as part of the exhibition, *Ummmm . . . The Articulate Practitioner* (2009)*.* The body of work comprises a collection of 15 snow domes and dream spheres. Of the 15, *Ganesha Glory* (2009) and *Call me Golden Sugar Britches* (2009) are reflexively examined in relation to Olalquiaga's 'three degrees of kitsch' (1998) in Section 5 and Binkley's concept of Kitsch as a Repetitive System (2000) in Section 7.

3.4.1 *Ganesha Glory*

Ganesha Glory (2009)
Glass, stainless steel, water and various mixed media
32cm x 25cm x25cm

Figure 28: ***Ganesha Glory* (2009) exhibited at The Moores Building and Gallery, Fremantle, Western Australia (2009)**

The snow dome *Ganesha Glory* (2009) (Figure 28) explores the concept of being a cultural tourist, collecting kitsch souvenirs as memories of an exotic experience. The snow dome encapsulates, in a glass dome, a cast resin figurine of the Hindu deity Lord Ganesh, heart shaped prayer beads, silk lotus flowers and buds suspended in a solution of water and glycerine with golden glitter snow.

During my undergraduate studies in visual arts, I spent a year abroad as part of an international exchange program. The final three months of the year were spent in India. *Ganesha Glory* (2009) was born of this experience. Throughout my time in India I became fascinated by repetitive narrative of many of the tourists I encountered. There was a recurrent theme of having been part of an 'exotic' cultural experience—meditating, visiting a Guru, living like a 'local' or having taken a specific tour—of which the cultural content was somehow more authentic and more real than anyone else's experience.

For a kitsch aficionado like myself, India is a treasure trove. Somehow seeing myself as being different to the 'other' travellers I encountered, I spent time seeking out the most kitsch ornaments I could find. After weeks of reconnaissance my mission for the final week of the trip was to go back and buy the best of the ornaments I had seen. After agonising over what to get, I bought a series of cheap copies of original ornaments of Hindu deities, of which Lord Ganesh was one. The shopkeeper carefully packaged the ornaments I had bought and I took them back to the hotel and placed them in my backpack.

On returning to Australia, I proudly unpacked my bag, eager to show my family the fantastic ornaments I had found. As I unwrapped the ornaments there right before my eyes was a shiny gold and black oval shaped sticker that said, "Made in China". To add insult to injury, later the same year I travelled to Singapore and visited Little India and saw hundreds of ornaments almost identical to the ones I had bought.

Ironically, as with most tourist kitsch, the ornaments I had bought were implicated in what Binkley (2000) would describe as the 'emulative ploy of kitsch': the authentic natural stone they were supposedly made of turned out to be cast resin and more closely aligned with the irony of what Olalquiaga (1998) would describe as second-degree kitsch (second-degree kitsch is discussed in detail in Section 5.2). Thus, if nothing else, I at least had "a trace of exotica to show off" (Binkley, p. 143) to my family and friends.

3.4.2 *Call Me Golden Sugar Britches*

Call Me Golden Sugar Britches (2009)
Glass, stainless steel, water and various mixed media
75cm x 50cm x 50cm

Figure 29: ***Call Me Golden Sugar Britches* (2009) exhibited at The Moores Building and Gallery, Fremantle, Western Australia (2009)**

The snow dome *Call Me Golden Sugar Britches* (2009) (Figure 29) was made in memorial of a friend's late Golden Retriever named 'Sugar Britches' or 'Sugar' for short. This snow dome contains a cast resin figurine of a golden retriever dog, a cast resin butterfly and bird, a red plastic ball, shuttle cock and a rubber chicken leg, suspended in a solution of water and glycerine with blue and silver glitter snow.

Sugar had died of old age several years prior to making this work and my friend had created an altar of sorts on a shelf that housed Sugar's favourite things. He even wore a small pendant on a neck chain that contained one of the dog's toenails and a clump of fur he had collected from Sugar's brush. Amongst the things on the shelf were photographs of Sugar; bird and butterfly ornaments, as one of Sugar's much-loved pastimes had been to bound around the backyard playing with any creatures that fluttered by; Sugar's favoured red ball; and one of the shuttlecocks Sugar was notorious for chewing if ever they were left lying around.

Unlike *Ganesha Glory* (2009), which explored my own experience, a part of my own lifeworld, *Call Me Golden Sugar Britches* (2009) encapsulates my own observation of a particularly personal aspect of someone else's lifeworld. The rationale for developing *Call Me Golden Sugar Britches* (2009) was to explore the manner in which kitsch and sentimentality can offer a sense of reassurance, comfort and security by re-embedding the individual through emotional attachment.

3.5 Jesus

Jesus (2010)
Wood, plaster and mixed media
95cm x 380cm x 195cm

Figure 30: *Jesus* **(2010) exhibited at Wesley Church, Perth, Western Australia (2010)**

Jesus (2010) (Figure 30), was commissioned by Uniting Churches Australia, for the *Stations of the Cross* (2010) exhibition and was later purchased as part of their collection. The sculpture comprises a painted wooden cross that is 3.8 meters in length and 1.95 meters in width, to which a life-size sculpture of Jesus is attached. Jesus is constructed in fibreglass, plaster, aluminium and other mixed media, with a hand painted finish. The sculpture was exhibited inside Wesley Church, in Western Australia, suspend from the ceiling above the altar.

The Stations of the Cross are generally a series of 14[6] artistic representations of Christ's path as he carried the cross to his crucifixion[7]. Christians traditionally understand Jesus' death on the cross to be for the atonement of humanity's sins, a selfless act that made salvation possible for all. The stations are generally placed around the walls of the nave of a church. Parishioners commemorating the passion of Christ move from station to station to pray. Each station is designed for parishioners to engage with it with a sincere belief in the spiritual symbolism of that station.

My presentation of *Jesus* (2010) is based on the ninth station of the cross, where Jesus falls for the third time. In the Stations of the Cross, when Jesus falls for the third time, it is acknowledged that mortality is a heavy burden, and that one can easily stumble or fall under its weight. Suspended in the nave of the church the sculpture was placed above the altar. By suspending the work I hoped to remind the viewer to look up, to look to a higher power, to know that if you fall you can bounce back, that through a higher power, or Christ, no burden is too great to bear.

The opportunity to develop the sculpture of Jesus for Wesley Church was of particular interest, because a fundamental aspect of this research has been to examine how kitsch operates within everyday life and the lifeworld. It has therefore been a critical aspect of my research to show my work in a variety of different contexts—not only within an art gallery—but also in places where everyday people, participating in everyday activities, can view it. The communicative function of the sculpture through being displayed in the church, was significantly different to how I would expect *Jesus* (2010) to be received if exhibited in a gallery. While still considered an artwork when displayed in the church, because the sculpture was representative of an archetypal Western version of Jesus, it appeared to be considered as a decorative feature, as if 'part of the place', like the churches stained glass windows for example. This was in distinct contrast to the highly conceptual

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[6] There are traditionally 14 Stations of the Cross although some contemporary interpretations include a fifteenth station that represents Christ's resurrection.
[7] This ritual is generally performed in the Roman Catholic Church and can be undertaken at any time but is generally takes place during Lent or on Good Friday.

and abstract works also displayed that seemed less accessible to the parishioners.

The most significant aspect of *Jesus* (2010) being displayed within the context of the church, for this research, was the way in which the main communicative function of the sculpture was one of religious purpose: prayed to by parishioners as if embodying the spirit of Christ; and as part of the Stations of the Cross Easter ritual. As is laid out in the following sections of this research I argue that contemporary kitsch plays a vital, and also positive role, in social and individual aesthetic life. From this viewpoint, I argue that the manner in which the parishioners connected with *Jesus* (2010) exemplifies the importance of aesthetic representation as an attribute of kitsch. I believe this to be directly related to the sensory affect of sentimentality, instilled within the experiences and material objects people yearn for or place in high regard. I argue that the subtle manner in which kitsch operated while the sculpture *Jesus* (2010) was exhibited in the church demonstrates the ability of kitsch to discreetly offer a way of the individuals remaining embedded, or re-embedding themselves. I argue that this was demonstrated by the manner in which the parishioners channelled their spiritual connection through the sculpture.

4. Methods of Categorising Different Types of Kitsch

As illustrated in Section 2, defining kitsch is problematic. Having been applied to a broad range of objects that make up the contemporary material world (Attfield, 2006), kitsch still manages to challenge traditional definitions of taste, culture and art. I concur with Olalquiaga who identifies an eminent feature of kitsch and late modernity as being "synchronised difference", that is "for contemporary urban culture's ability to circulate and support distinct, and often contradictory, discourses" (1992, p. 38) simultaneously. Instead of "erasing previous practices, kitsch enables and even seeks their

subsistence" (p. 42). The divergence of coexisting visions has created a "Byzantine struggle in which different iconographies fight for hegemony" (p. 42). Given this, a single object can concurrently hold several different meanings, and with this in mind, some of the confusion as to what constitutes kitsch can be alleviated.

This section of the exegesis outlines the theoretical foundation on which the remaining four chapters of my creative praxis are based. A summary contextualising the methods by which different kinds of kitsch can be categorised (Olalquiaga, 1992, 1998; Binkley, 2000) follows. These sections (5-8) demonstrate how objects designated to be 'kitsch' can simultaneously have different, but related meanings, and how these objects are utilised within my praxis. It highlights how "cultural specificity has given way to the internationalization of signs" that often lose "uniqueness" but gain "exposure and circulation" (Olalquiaga, p. 42). Finally, it helps to explain how the varying contexts at play when categorising an object impact whether or not it is considered to be kitsch.

My criteria for categorising different types of kitsch is established using three key theories: Olalquiaga's notion of 'three degrees of kitsch' from *Megalopolis* (1992), outlined in Sections 5 and 6, a system through which kitsch can be classified based on an objects means of production and cultural function; Binkley's notion of 'kitsch as a repetitive system' (2000), examined in Section 7; "establishes three distinct ways in which kitsch aestheticizes repetition" (2000, p. 142) which in turn address the modern condition of disembeddedness; and what I have called 'Olalquiaga's modes of perceiving experiences and kitsch' from Olalquiaga's critique on kitsch from *The Artificial Kingdom* (1998) examined in Section 8. Based largely on Walter Benjamin's (1973) two types of memory, 'Olalquiaga's modes of perceiving experiences and kitsch' examines the process by which differing memories, experiences and desires affect an individual's emotional response to objects and to kitsch.

Both Olalquiaga's and Binkley's theories are related to my artwork in the following sections of this exegesis. However, in order to ensure a rigorous examination of how each theory operates within this praxis, and to avoid repetition, analysis of individual artworks are divided between each theory, although there is some overlap: *The Aquarium* (2009) and *Jesus* (2010) to Olalquiaga's notion of 'three degrees of kitsch' (1992); *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) and the *Snow Domes and Dream Sphere's* developed in 2009–2010 to Binkley's concept of kitsch as a repetitive system (2000); and *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) to 'Olalquiaga's modes of perceiving experiences and kitsch' (1998). Although the creative work developed incorporate aspects of Olalquiaga's and Binkley's theories, they are not a literal interpretation, but instead a coordinated grouping of theory and practice. My creative work therefore does embody aspects of Olalquiaga's and Binkley's philosophies, but is not rendered as a visual expression of their theories. The re-embedding nature of kitsch—and the method by which the sensory affect of sentimentality influences the connections to possessions and material objects that are shared across cultures and societies—is a vital aspect of my re-evaluation of kitsch. By expounding these inter-relationships, that is the embedding nature of kitsch and the sensory affect of sentimentality, the research aims to both clarify, and validate, the significant role kitsch plays in the everyday and "lifeworld" (Habermas, 1971). This has been demonstrated by drawing on texts, from not only the visual arts, but a broad range of examples including popular and social culture

These examples include popular culture texts: Andersen's and Disney's versions of *The Little Mermaid* (1837; 1989); Louis Vuitton's collaborative work with Murakami; tourist souvenirs; and colourful plastic sheeting from South East Asia, and social culture texts including: Janet Williams, the 'Royalty Lady' (O'Brien, 2011); the significance of Easter eggs, toy eggs and eggs displayed as art; La Villa Hamster (Kaushik, 2012); decorative household objects; religious iconography and others. Also, the work of artist: Carl Andre, Jackson Pollock, Jeff Koons, Takashi Murakami and Allison Jackson. It is through these examples that I demonstrate my critical and reflexive praxis model and the communicative capacity of my artwork.

5. Olalquiaga's Three-Degrees of Kitsch

By locating the various different discourses that are in operation within an object Olalquiaga has identified 'three degrees of kitsch', that through synchronised difference, overlap in definition dependant on their means of production and cultural function. 'First-degree kitsch', pertains when "representation is based on an indexical referent . . . [where] the difference between reality and representation is explicit and hierarchical, since only what is perceived as reality matters" (Olalquiaga, 1992, p. 42). In this context, the kitsch object acts as a substitute for whatever it is representing. 'Second-degree kitsch', or 'neo-kitsch', in opposition to first-degree kitsch, collapses the difference between reality and representation, resulting in the representation of an object becoming the only possible point of reference (1992). Because 'neo' or second-degree objects are generally inspired by first-degree kitsch, they become a new, second generation of kitsch that is without the devotion attributed to first-degree kitsch objects. As a result, second-degree objects are essentially empty icons as they are recognised for their quality as a sign rather than as a substitute (1992). Finally, third-degree kitsch is concerned with "the legitimisation of [kitsch's] signifying and visual attributes by the institutionally authorised agency of artists" (pp. 46–47). As a multi-faceted recycling process, third-degree kitsch is able to produce hybridised products that hold new, often foreign, meanings.

After outlining in detail each of the three-degrees of kitsch, I give examples that illustrate the synchronised difference and overlapping of the definitions of each degree. These examples are from a broad field of discourse and include: my own art work—the sculpture *Jesus* (2010) and the installation and residency *The Aquarium* (2009); real life examples, like Janet Williams, the 'Royalty Lady'; popular culture, including Hans Christen Andersen's (1837) and Disney's (1989) versions of *The Little Mermaid*; the work of artists Carl Andre, Jackson Pollock and Jeff Koons. Although discussed as an example within the initial analysis of the three-degree's of kitsch, as the main work

undertaken throughout this research, a full case study of how Olalquiaga's three-degrees of kitsch operate within *The Aquarium* (2009) follows.

5.1 Olalquiaga's First-Degree Kitsch

Of the three degrees, first-degree kitsch is the closest to traditional discussions of kitsch. It is where "the difference between reality and representation is explicit and hierarchical, since only what is perceived as reality matters. Acting as a mere substitute, the kitsch object has no validity in and of itself" (Olalquiaga, 1992, p. 42). These are commonly the objects that Binkley (2000) refers to as 'ornamental statuary'; 'chachkas' (an inexpensive, showy trinket); and 'manufactured sentimental knickknacks'. However, as objects of the first-degree their value is purely iconic. In this context, a hand-painted egg for Easter, for those with a Christian ideological belief, would literally embody the spirit of Christ and new life, and would be purchased or decorated for its value as an auspicious icon—to exchange—with the genuine belief in its spiritual symbolism.

Hand Painted Easter
Egg from the
Ukraine
(Retrieved 2012)

Chocolate Easter
Egg
(Retrieved 2012)

Hand Painted
Easter Egg
(Retrieved 2012)

Hand painted Easter egg from the Ukraine. (n.d.). [Image]. Retrieved from
http://www.tridenttreasures.com/
Chocolate Easter egg. (n.d.). [Image]. Retrieved from, 2008, from http://www.frieze
Hand painted Easter egg. (n.d.). [Image]. Retrieved from
http://moon.ouhsc.edu/jcollins/Images/Egg_Cross.jpg
Exception to copyright: Section ss40, 103C, Exception, Research or Study.

Figure 31: **Examples of first-degree kitsch: eggs for Easter**

Additionally, in modernity, first-degree kitsch objects can become high art or have high status. An example of this is Peter Carl Fabergé's handmade and individually decorated, precious metal, diamond and gemstone encrusted 'Fabergé eggs' (Fabergé, Proler, Skurlov, 1997) (below).

Jones, I, (2008). The 'Cuckoo' egg given by Tsar Nicholas II to his mother in 1900. [Medium: Photography]. Retrieved from http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/non_fictionreviews/3672041/A-Faberge-egg-is-not-just-for-Easter.html
Exception to copyright: Section ss40, 103C, Exception, Research or Study.

Figure 32:   Example of Faberge Egg: first-degree kitsch

Generally, however, first-degree objects are often characterised by a rawness and lack of sophistication in their execution, a characteristic that is often related to authenticity, low art and craft (Olalquiaga, 1992), although this is not always the case. Vietnamese refugee Cuc Lam's red vinyl suitcase, for example, could be classified as first-degree kitsch. I argue that the suitcase acted as a metaphor for the life and possessions that Cuc Lam and her family had had to leave behind in Vietnam. The red suitcase represented the spirit of deep loss and sadness her family had experienced, and also the 'good' that life offers, hopes and dreams for the future. Remembering of course that the case Lam and her husband carried with them to Australia was virtually empty, I argue that the case was brought with the belief in its symbolism; as an object

that would carry the memories and goodness in their life, to their new home in Australia.

5.1.1 First-Degree Kitsch and the Kitsch Aficionado

First-degree objects are often collected by the 'kitsch aficionado' (Olalquiaga, 1992). Closely associated with first-degree kitsch, the 'aficionado' is a character with whom I closely relate. While still a first-degree believer, the aficionado cherishes kitsch objects for the intense feelings of sentimentality and nostalgia they imbue, rather than placing importance on what the object represents. Paradoxically, the aficionado reproduces a connection to an object, comparable in magnitude to that of first-degree kitsch, only their attachment lies in a passion for all things kitsch, rather than the iconic value imbued by lovers of a particular first-degree kitsch item. It is through this paradox that both the aficionado and the true believer of "first-degree kitsch familiarize the ungraspable—eternity, goodness, evil—while tactically maintaining a hierarchical distinction between realities and representation" (Olalquiaga, 1992, pp. 44-45).

5.1.2 *Jesus*: First-Degree Kitsch and the Aficionado

Jesus (Rebotar) (2010)
Wood, plaster and mixed media
95cm x 380cm x 195cm

Figure 33:   ***Jesus* sculpture (2010) exhibited at Wesley Church, Perth, Western Australia**

The sculpture *Jesus* (2010) (Figure 33) fits perfectly with Olalquiaga's (1998) notion of first-degree kitsch. It was designed specifically for its' iconic value—developed for a church with the specific intention of creating an artwork that parishioners could pray to as they partook in the religious ritual of the Stations of the Cross. Although the "difference between reality and representation" (Olalquiaga, 1998) of *Jesus* (2010) is obvious, the communicative function of the sculpture was to be viewed by parishioners as a substitute or embodiment of Christ at his crucifixion. For an object to be considered first degree-kitsch, the consumer, in this case the parishioner, must perceive the object, *Jesus,* (2010), to be real. Therefore, even though the parishioner knows that the

sculpture is not actually Jesus, it is considered to be real as a representation of the embodiment of Jesus himself.

For the kitsch aficionado, by contrast, the relationship to the sculpture *Jesus* (2010) would primarily be for the kitschness of the work, rather than its religious significance. But if the aficionado was a Christian, the connection to the sculpture would likely be equally as intense as a true first-degree kitsch consumer. I would consider that the person responsible for the purchase of *Jesus* (2010) for the Uniting Church would likely fit the latter category.

For the *Stations of the Cross* (2010) exhibition, contributing artists were each paid an artist's fee. The fee is designed to contribute toward the cost of making the work and for it to be exhibited, but is usually much less than the actual value of the work itself. Since only a fee has been paid, ownership of the work usually remains with the artist. Because *Jesus* (2010) was a particularly large work (95cm x 380cm x 195cm) and the transportation, storage and care of the work had the potential to be costly I was eager for it to be sold.

Although the church wanted to purchase the work, there were issues around storage. The woman brokering the purchase of *Jesus* (2010), who I suspected to be a kitsch aficionado, was determined to make sure the sale went through. However, due to storage limitations I was asked to cut the arm off the sculpture and install a screw-like mechanism so that the arm could easily be taken on and off as it was moved in and out of the storage area. As the artist and creator of the sculpture, and passionate lover of kitsch, who had spent months creating *Jesus* (2010), I was nothing short of horrified by the request. However, knowing the difficulties I would face with storing the work myself I acquiesced. The sculpture was purchased and I returned to the church with an angle grinder to remove the arm.

About a week passed and I received a phone call from the exhibition's curator. The reverend of the church where the sculpture was to be kept had contacted her to let her know that a large group of parishioners and church elders were extremely alarmed by the removal of Jesus' arm, and by having learnt that a

new detachable version was being made. The iconic religious significance and genuine belief in the spiritual symbolism of the sculpture for these parishioners was one of true first-degree kitsch. The significance of the work was so great that for them, removing the arm from the sculpture was like cutting the arm off Jesus himself.

After several weeks of negotiation, the armless sculpture was returned to my studio. Having in the eyes of parishioners ironically fallen from his iconic status as true first-degree kitsch, Jesus, it could be said had fallen for a fourth time and become a devalued, empty icon—the type of which Olalquiaga (1998) would likely refer to as second-degree kitsch.

A reflexive analysis of the praxis relating to the sculpture *Jesus* (2010) undoubtedly identifies the power of art, and the artist, when considering the radical shift that occurred in the communicative function of *Jesus* (2010) once the arm had been severed: From an object of significance and religious purpose—that embodied the spirit of Jesus—to a devalued icon in which "meaning and its processes are contingent upon a cultural and social environment" (Crouch, 2007, p.114).

5.1.3 Janet Williams the Royalty Lady: A Case Study of First-Degree Kitsch

An archetypical example of first-degree kitsch I have identified is Janet Williams of Woonona in New South Wales, Australia, and her collection of British Royal Family memorabilia. Janet's patriotic parents, who were post-war immigrants to Australia, "had a sentimental attachment to all things Brit and Royal" (O'Brien, 2011). To commemorate the "Queen's first visit to the Australian colony" in 1954, Janet's mother bought her a small commemorative cup. Over 60 years on, Janet, now known as the "Royalty Lady" (O'Brien, 2011), has a "Royalty Collection" that takes up almost her entire home and is made up of over 12,000 pieces. The extensive collection incorporates 'fine' china (Figure 34, below), dioramas, statues and soft sculptures.

O'Brien, S. (2012). *Janet's royalty room, first china cup.* [Medium: Photography]. Retrieved from
http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2011/10/25/3347822.htm
Exception to copyright: Section ss40, 103C, Exception, Research or Study.

Figure 34: **Janet Williams with her extensive royal china collection, which fills two rooms in her home, holding the commemorative cup given to her by her mother.**

Pictured below, Janet, surrounded by her treasures, even has a soft sculpture of Queen Elizabeth II. The sculpture is clothed in a satin teddy bear print pyjama suit and Charles and Diana, Union Jack slippers. The traditional 'Order of the Garter' blue sash is draped over the sculpture's torso. Propped up by a couple of Union Jack cushions, the Queen Elizabeth II sculpture is posed lounging back on Janet's couch sipping a cup of tea with her hair in curlers. Janet appears at home in the image, and is pictured sitting on the couch with the Queen's feet resting on her lap.

O'Brien, S. (2012). *Janet Williams in her royalty room relaxing with the Queen.* [Medium: Photography]. Retrieved from http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2011/10/25/3347822.htm
Exception to copyright: Section ss40, 103C, Exception, Research or Study.

Figure 35: **Image of Janet Williams with the soft sculpture of Queen Elizabeth II putting her feet up—while wearing 'Order of the Garter' (blue sash), Prince Charles and Princess Diana slippers, a teddy bear dressing gown and having a cup of tea with hair in curlers.**

Figure 36:   **Soft sculptures of the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall, holding hands as
they relax on Janet's front porch**

Even the exterior of Janet's modest suburban home, pictured above (Figure
36), has been decorated with British Royal Family memorabilia: a soft
sculpture of Charles, The Duke and Camilla, The Duchess of Cornwall; Union
Jack bunting, and Beefeaters guarding the front porch.

Until recently, Janet conducted regular guided tours of the collection during
which she served Devonshire tea to her visitors. Highlighting the fascination of
many for all things kitsch, the tours proved to be so successful that people
began to arrive by the coach load. Unfortunately, due to noise complaints from
neighbours, Janet has now had to minimise the number of tours she conducts.

The iconic value intrinsic to first-degree kitsch and passion for all things kitsch
felt by the aficionado are undoubtedly evident in the deep sentimental
attachment and commitment Janet William's has for her extensive royalty
collection. Unlike the attachment and commitment evident in the examples of
Janet Williams' connection to-first degree kitsch, the opposite, however, can
be said for second-degree kitsch.

5.2 Olalquiaga's Second-Degree Kitsch

Second-degree kitsch, also referred to as 'neo-kitsch', Olalquiaga (1992) identifies 'representation' as being the only possible referent. This means that the referent—the object itself—is the only possible signification. Since second-degree kitsch is said to defamiliarise our understanding of reality as a direct result of its ability to represent itself, it effectively becomes the real, rather than a representation or copy (1992). Inspired by first-degree kitsch, neo-kitsch therefore becomes second generational. Actually sold as 'kitsch', these items, for example, include objects such as boxes of cheap painted eggs used as decorator items; a wind-up dancing egg toy (Figure 37), mass-produced in China and shipped to Christian countries for Easter, but which can also be bought all year round from a novelty shop. Unlike first degree-kitsch, the wind-up dancing egg toy for example, would not symbolise the resurrection of Christ, or new life, or have any religious meaning. It doesn't refer to anything other than itself, and its' meaning is contingent upon the context in which it is consumed.

Wind-up dancing egg toy, (n.d.). [Image]. Retrieved from http://nerdapproved.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/08/chicken-vs-egg-wind-ups.jpg
Exception to copyright: Section ss40, 103C, Exception, Research or Study.

Figure 37:   Example of second-degree kitsch: wind-up dancing egg toy

It can be reasoned that neo-kitsch objects are effectively empty icons as they do not evoke the devotional or sentimental relationship that is attributed to first-degree kitsch, as was the case with the sculpture *Jesus* (2010) after his arm was removed. Neo-kitsch objects are valued specifically for their "iconicity and quality as a sign" (Olalquiaga, 1992, p. 45).

I once saw a Buddha statue that provides a good example of neo-kitsch. Designed to be placed near the front door, the Buddha sits on a traditional lotus flower pedestal, appearing to hold both the religious sentiment and iconic value to which it is normally attributed. However, when switched on—amidst a plume of smoke and flashing coloured lights—this 'Lord Buddha', complete with a motion sensor, wolf-whistled at passers-by. Created and sold purely for joke value (1992) or impulse spending, second-degree kitsch objects, like the 'Lord Buddha', are never connected with the intense level of attachment associated with the aficionado or lover of kitsch in the first-degree (1992). "Second-degree kitsch exists only for transaction, to pass from hand to hand, and in this lack of possessing subject lies its ultimate alienation and perishability" (Olalquiaga, 1992, p. 45).

Where first-degree kitsch might be found in a variety store or in places that sell items for everyday and domestic use (Olalquiaga, 1992), second-degree kitsch is generally found in a gift store or souvenir stand. Mass-produced, manufactured and marketed, second-degree kitsch replaces the low technology, handmade homeliness of first-degree kitsch. Designed as a commodity to exchange, second-degree kitsch is stripped of the signifying value and meaningfulness associated with first-degree kitsch (1992). It is important to note, however, that second-degree kitsch still remains as authentic as first-degree kitsch. To denounce "its predigested character would be contradictory, since kitsch is by definition [is in some way] predigested. The difference lies in how intentional or self-conscious, this predigestion is" (p. 46).

Mass-marketing of imagery or icons as kitsch, like the wind-up dancing egg toy pictured above (Figure 37) is not possible unless "the icon has been

stripped of its signifying value" (Olalquiaga, 1992, p. 46). To use the analogy of an iceberg, as second-degree kitsch the exposed tip of the iceberg would represent the wind-up dancing egg toy. The mass of ice hidden beneath the water represents first-degree kitsch and in this case the traditional Easter egg steeped in religious history and significance. As a second-degree kitsch object the tip of the iceberg is all that exists. The mass of ice beneath the water has broken free, taking with it the history of first-degree kitsch, or in this case the significance of a traditional Easter egg. Therefore all that exists is the tip of the iceberg, no complex history, but a second-degree kitsch icon recognisable simply as a funny dancing toy egg.

As an icon, the value of second-degree, can be measured by its traits: "the formal, technical aspects like narrative, colour and texture" (p. 46). Because the icon has been emptied of its signifying value, these traits according to Olalquiaga (1992) can be "easily isolated and fragmented" (p. 46), as they become interchangeable and easily substituted. Consider for instance the result of attaching a pair of cute plastic legs and a wind up function to various different objects—Mick Jagger's lips, or a set of false teeth for example—that would most likely result in the object becoming the type of second-degree kitsch Olalquiaga describes. Like the tip of the iceberg, as "floating signs" (Olalquiaga, 1992, p, 46), these traits can adhere to almost any object, and convey onto it their full value as authentic meaning, turning the object into 'kitsch' (1992). This is not unlike what had happened to the Buddha ornament discussed earlier, that amidst plumes of smoke and flashing lights wolf-whistled at passers, qualities that for a devout Buddhist would demonstrate disrespect of such an auspicious icon. I argue that the lack of specificity associated with second-degree kitsch objects, combined with the aptness with which second-degree kitsch randomly and unashamedly consumes iconography, demonstrates its ability to adhere to almost any object.

5.2.1 *Jesus* and Second-Degree Kitsch

I could not have predicted the ironic fall from the status of first-degree kitsch to the lesser-valued second-degree kitsch bestowed on *Jesus* (2010) with the loss of its arm. From my perspective, the signifying and use value associated with first-degree kitsch (Olalquiaga, 1992) was removed from the work at the moment in which function took precedence over form—when easy storage became more important than the form of the actual sculpture. Literally stripped of its first-degree significance, as a second-degree construct, instead of being prayed to, *Jesus* (2010) had become the subject of tense negotiation. I could not have known just how pertinent Olalquiaga's statement that "second-degree kitsch exists only for transaction, to pass from hand to hand, and in this lack of possessing subject lies its ultimate alienation and perishability" (Olalquiaga, 1992, p. 45) would become.

Eventually *Jesus* (2010) made its way to my mother's backyard and had a piece of plastic ivy poked into the hole where the forearm use to be. After a couple of years it made its way to the annual bulk rubbish collection and was put on the side of the road for pickup. Over the next few days my mother watched as someone driving by stopped and pulled the head off. By the following morning the other arm and a foot were also missing. Thankfully over time, my sensitivity to the situation had dissipated and I was relieved to see it go. I do wonder what the new owners did with their roadside finds. I am guessing that the foot and arm would probably have been the butt of someone's joke and maintained their status as second-degree kitsch, if only for a short while. Strangely, I find myself hoping that the head of *Jesus* (2010) was somehow elevated back to its status of first-degree kitsch, if not for its religious significance, at the very least, for its appeal as a work of art.

5.2.2 The Value of Second-Degree Kitsch as a Tool for the Artist

As an artist-researcher, bound by the constraints of academic analysis, the simplicity of second-degree kitsch, for me, comes with a great sense of light relief. It is, in fact, a crucial aspect of how I intend my work to be received. I have always held a great appreciation of art as a powerful communication tool. I recognised early on in my career that I greatly appreciated the power of ugly, gruesome, grotesque or sombre portrayals in other artists' work, but that I struggled to engage with highly negative portrayals of subject matter within my practice. This by no means implies that I refuse or find myself unable to work in this capacity. Through reflexively understanding my praxis I have developed a style in which if required I am able to use beauty, colour, humour and kitsch as alternative inroads to dark subject matter. This is demonstrated in the sculpture *Jesus* (2010) (Section 5.2.1). It is in part about finding the silver lining in every cloud—beauty in emotionally tough, negative or painful subject matter—but also palatable ways of communicating negative emotion without diluting the underlying message. Although a life experience and not part of my work, the funeral of a recently deceased family friend who had lost a fast and harrowing battle with an aggressive form of cancer—leaving behind an adoring family and grandchildren—is a noble example of this.

Having reached the crematorium, the congregation burst into a chorus of heartbroken sobbing combined with uncontainable laughter and smiles as a glossy white coffin emerged from the hearse emblazoned with the strap line 'shop-till-you-drop' and a pair of cherry red high heels. Surrounded by a magnificent array of brightly coloured flowers, on top of the coffin was the most glamorous of handbags—gold, encrusted with hundred of diamantes. After the service, puffy eyed and red faced, the congregation were still highly emotional, sobbing with great sadness at their loss, yet laughing at the humour and irony of the funeral service and the joy that their loved one had brought them. Weeks on, and those close to me who attended, still appear to be experiencing the same intense, mixed, emotional response as they discussed the funeral.

There are many ways in which a funeral can play out, but it is certainly not difficult to imagine the opposite depiction of this scenario—a black coffin; no flowers; no accessories; no laughter and a morose, dark mood—and the likely after-effects on those who attended. The 'shop-till-you-drop' funeral to me seems a perfect example of how humour and kitsch, and more specifically second-degree kitsch, can be a positive and powerful communication tool. It is the power of second-degree kitsch to communicate which I place great value on within my work.

To further explain why I value kitsch as such a fundamental aspect of the visual aesthetic of my work, I look to some of my experiences when viewing the work of other artists. Few people would be alone in having come across an artwork so heavily burdened with complex theory that it is inaccessible to the viewer. Unless you are formally trained or prepared to research the philosophy behind these works, they often remain incomprehensible. Oftentimes the artist simply expects too much of an audience, to the degree that the audience refuses to accept the work. A well-known example of this is American artist Carl Andre's sculpture *Equivalent VIII* (1966) purchased by the Tate in 1972.

Equivalent VIII (1966)
Firebricks, 120-unit rectangular solid
12.8 x 68.5 x 229
by Carl Andre

Figure 38:   *Equivalent VIII* **(1966) by Carl Andre**

Commonly and critically referred to as the 'The Bricks' (Figure 38), the sculpture, made from "120 firebricks arranged in a rectangular formation" (Tate Archive, 2003, para. 3) became "one of the great modern-art furors" (Sivasathan, 2011, n.p.) in Britain in the 1970s. Intense ridicule surrounded the work and, more ferociously, the Tate was strongly criticised for "being conned into buying a 'pile of bricks'" (Tate Archive, 200, para. 5.) (Fiqure 39).

What a load of...
art work, Bob

Evening Post, Luton. (1976). *What a load of . . . art work Bob.* [Press cutting]. Retrieved from http://www3.tate.org.uk/research/researchservices/archive/showcase/item.jsp?item=1580 Exception to copyright: Section ss40, 103C, Exception, Research or Study.

Figure 39:   Newspaper article demonstrating controversy caused by 'The Bricks'

Andre is said to have described the sculpture as conveying the sensation of "wading in bricks" and of being like "stepping from water of one depth to water of another depth" (para. 4). But the general public could not achieve his perception and failed to see any creativity in *Equivalent VIII* (1966), some believing that anyone with access to bricks could have made the sculpture themselves and pocketed the 2000 plus pounds the Tate paid for the work (Sivasathan, 2011). The purchase of the Minimalist work, however, was defended by others who recognised Andre "as an important artist… arguing that the Tate ha[d] to be adventurous in order to remain a major player in the international contemporary art world" (Tate Archive, 2003, para. 5). *Equivalent VIII* (1966), has since "become one of the best-known pieces of modern art in [the Tate's] collection" (Sivasathan, 2011, para. 11), mostly because of its reputation.

A similar example, closer to home, was the purchase of *Jackson Pollock's Blue Poles: Number 11* (1952) (Figure 40). Purchased by the National Gallery of Australia in 1973, the "monumental abstract painting" acquired by then Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, was purchased for the record price of 1.3 million Australian dollars (Heanue, 2012). The high price paid for what appeared to be a whole lot of paint splatters, and rumours that the work was developed "as a drunken collaboration between Pollock and other artists" (White, n.d., para. 3) fuelled public outrage, which led to a political and media scandal. Thankfully, the purchase has paid off as the painting has become one of Pollock's most famous works and is considered to be one of the Australian National Gallery's most major and valued paintings.

Blue poles, Number 11 (1952)
Jackson Pollock
oil, enamel, aluminium paint, glass on canvas

212.1 h x 488.9 w cm

Pollock, J. (1952). Blue poles, Number 11. [Medium: Painting] Retrieved from
http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/whats-on/exhibitions/exhibitions/jackson-pollock
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Figure 40:   ***Blue Poles, Number 11* (1952) by Jackson Pollock**

However, in an ironic twist there is now a tendency amongst some critics to devalue works that are deemed kitsch—for some traditionalists a pile of bricks

like Andre's (1966) and paint splatters similar to Pollock's (1952) would in fact be considered a higher form of art than an intricate kitsch counterpart. Certainly when compared to other forms of art and even first-degree kitsch, second-degree kitsch works could easily be mistaken for a devalued icon—particularly as second-degree kitsch is more often than not accompanied by a high level of irony or humour. Thankfully, it would appear, that most critics of modern contemporary art are these days familiar with kitsch aesthetics, even if they are unfamiliar with contemporary theories on kitsch. For these critics, a second-degree kitsch reading of a work by no means demotes a work of art to 'less than' or 'low art' when compared to traditional forms of 'high art' and other forms of kitsch.

I argue that because of the homeliness and easy visual recognition associated with the context, construction and articulation of the communicative capacity of kitsch, particularly second-degree kitsch—an audience is easily able relate to kitsch works of art. This has been demonstrated in the examples of Koons' *Celebration* exhibition (1994–2008) (Section 2), Murakami's bags for Louis Vuitton (Section 5) and my works *Snow Domes and Dream Spheres* (2009), *The Aquarium* (2009), *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) and *Jesus* (2010). The snow domes (Figures 27, 28 and 29) for example encapsulated a variety of different objects, some of which were inexpensive second-degree kitsch trinkets and knick-knacks, and others, which were quite valuable first degree-kitsch. Yet, once housed within a glass dome, the value of the objects seemed to shift. Constructed as part of a snow dome, the worth of the objects appeared to level and take on a unanimous second-degree value. Surrounded by floating glitter the communicative capacity of the objects, now within the domes, also shifted making the objects more easily accessible to the audience. The dome developed as a memorial to the Golden Retriever 'Sugar' for example, for most viewers was simply a cute dog in a bubble, instead of holding the first-degree altar like status the objects represented to Sugar's owner.

This is a view supported by Binkley (2000) who argues that kitsch "preserves a unique aesthetic sensibility that spurns creativity per se while it endorses a repetition of the familiar and a grounding in an affirmation of the everyday" (p.

134). I agree with Binkley that the affirmative grounding of kitsch within the everyday is analogous to the "taste of necessity", described by Pierre Bourdieu (1984) as "an aesthetic expression that endorses the sense of conventionality, rhythm and meter of aesthetic forms, and their embeddedness in daily life" (p. 371). I contend that kitsch art is much less likely to be met with the type of criticism that surrounded works like *Equivalent VIII* (Andre, 1966) and *Blue Poles, Number 11* (Pollock, 1952) because it can be developed in a manner that is easier for an audience to digest. For kitsch as Binkley (2000) has observed, "reduces the complexity, desperation and paradox of human experience to simple sentiment, replacing the novelty of a revealed deeper meaning" (p. 145).

It must, however, be stressed that the creative freedom second-degree kitsch affords the artist by no means 'dumbs down', or excludes, a complex theoretical underpinning to a work. The works developed throughout this research—including *The Aquarium* (2009), which is critically examined below through the lens of Olalquiaga's three-degrees of kitsch—are highly theoretical. It simply means that by acknowledging the presence of second-degree kitsch within the communicative function of my artworks, I am recognising the connection to sentiment, which creates the lightness and accessibility to a work of art within a second-degree kitsch construct. Second-degree kitsch, unlike first and third-degree kitsch, and other frameworks for assessing art, offers an audience an uncomplicated entry point. By connecting with an audience through sentiment, a work of art like *The Aquarium* (2009) for example, can be freed of the complex analysis of academic art and over-ambitious artists, even if just for a brief moment in time. It allows the viewer the option, even if only initially, to put aside the signifying and/or use value associated with other analyses of art, and also kitsch, and simply enjoy (or not) the work.

5.3 Olalquiaga's Third-Degree Kitsch

Third-degree kitsch has a different cultural place. As a visual artist and self-confessed kitsch aficionado of the first-degree, my praxis is fundamentally linked to Olalquiaga's notion of third-degree kitsch. Creating an outlet for the artist, third-degree kitsch allows great scope to explore the dynamics of everyday life and develop new artworks. According to Olalquiaga, the key role of third-degree kitsch is the "legitimisation of [kitsch's] signifying and visual attributes by the institutionally authorised agency of artists" (pp. 46-47). Legitimisation is therefore achieved by the artist through appropriation and combining first and second-degree kitsch to create hybrid works of art that can create new or simulated experiences (Olalquiaga, 1992).

The Guardian. (2006). Jeff Koons with *Cracked Egg (Blue)* [Photograph]. (Photographer Eamonn McCabe). Retrieved from http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2006/nov/11/art.art
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Figure 41: **Example of third-degree kitsch: Jeff Koons with *Cracked Egg* (Blue) (2006)**

The American artist Jeff Koons has been nicknamed "The King of Kitsch" (Saad, 2010; Jones, 2009) and his work fits well with the notion of third-degree kitsch. *Cracked Egg* (1994–2006) (Figure 41) from Koons' body of work, *Celebration* (1994–2008) "is about Easter, birth and rebirth, in art-historical terms the Botticelli Venus", Koons stated in an interview with art critic Gordon

Burns for the Guardian UK newspaper (2006, para. 10). Burns quotes Koons as saying that he wanted the works from *Celebration* to be "a support system for people to feel good about themselves, to have their life be as enriching as possible, to make them feel secure" (2006, para. 9). Although Koons ironically denies that his work is kitsch, his quote, in my view, is an almost perfect assessment of how kitsch works.

Cracked Egg (1994–2006) meets the criteria of third-degree kitsch, recycling the egg through the various degrees of kitsch. From a first-degree reading as an icon of spiritual symbolism, the egg as Koons stated is about "Easter, birth and rebirth" (2006, para. 10). However, there is a charming, yet sad irony here. The *Celebration* series (1994–2008), of which *Cracked Egg* (1994–2006) is a part, was initially inspired by the simple shapes of Koon's first child, Ludwig's, toys. Koons had set out to make art to which a small child could relate (Jones, 2009). However, after the breakdown of his marriage and the custody battle that ensued over his now-estranged teenage son, Koons was making art about his own personal pain. In an interview with journalist Jonathon Jones, Koons, spoke of this commenting:

> I was trying to make art that my son could look to in the future and would realise I was thinking about him very much during these times… that he can look and see my dad's thinking about me, but to also embed in these things something that is bigger than all of us. (Jones, 2009, p. 4)

I am not certain as to what Koons meant when remarking that he hoped to have embedded 'something bigger than us all' in the works developed for *Celebration* (1994–2008)—perhaps his comment about *Cracked Egg* (1994–2006) being about "Easter, birth and rebirth" alludes to God or a higher power of some kind. I would however, assert that within an analysis of contemporary kitsch, *Cracked Egg* (1994–2006) exposed a softer, more vulnerable part of Koons that had not yet been publicly seen in his work, revealing one of the unique ways that kitsch operates.

As a second-degree reading, the normally fragile egg is recreated in shiny blue stainless steel in which you can see your reflection and those of others passing by. The perfect form of the egg is cracked and broken, the top of the egg lying on the ground. Broken, the egg is much more than a devalued icon. While the work could have been about rebirth, it is about the very opposite: *Celebration* (1994–2008), and *Cracked Egg* (1994–2006) were "joyous lamentations; broken mirrors to a world losing touch with its loved ones" (Jones, 2009). Koons' *Cracked Egg* (1994–2006) is a symbol with its own iconic meanings, which relate to first and second-degree kitsch, but as an artwork, this egg is attached to new and very personal ideas. As a third-degree object, the egg has been recycled by Koons, reinvested with new sets of meanings, resulting in a work of art that hybridises the three degrees of kitsch.

5.4 Summary of Olalquiaga's Three-Degrees of Kitsch

To summarise the three-degrees of kitsch, it can be argued that each degree addresses the confusion in defining kitsch objects in various ways: first-degree kitsch and the aficionado relate to the collection and possession of objects that still maintain their use value; second-degree kitsch, through the consumption of commodified goods; and third-degree kitsch, by appropriating and combining first and second-degree kitsch to create hybrid works of art that can create new, or simulated experiences (Olalquiaga, 1992). I would suggest that through an understanding of the system of three degrees, it becomes easier to establish the type of things that constitute kitsch. This, in turn, can help to develop a clearer understanding of the context of kitsch interpreted throughout this exegesis and how it relates to my practice.

6. An Analysis of The Aquarium Within a Framework of Olalquiaga's Three-Degrees of Kitsch

The Aquarium (2009)
(Video Still)
Glass, steel, wood, hot pink gravel, and mixed media
3.5 x 2.5 x 2.4

Figure 42: *The Aquarium* **(2009) exhibited at Spectrum (2009)**

This reflexive analysis of *The Aquarium* (2009) (Figure 42 above, also Appendix 1: *The Aquarium* and Appendix 2, Section 2), the major work undertaken during my doctoral research, demonstrates how I have utilised the visual and signifying attributes of Olalquiaga's (1992) three-degrees of kitsch within my creative praxis. Particular attention is paid to third-degree kitsch (1992), which is concerned with "the legitimization of [kitsch's] signifying and visual attributes by the institutionally authorized agency of artists" (pp. 46–47). As already mentioned, there are multiple classifications of kitsch at play in all of the works developed throughout this research, beyond Olalquiaga's three-degree's of kitsch. So as to establish a rigorous examination of each theory,

within this praxis, various different aspects of each theory have been applied to the assessment of the individual art works. *The Aquarium* (2009) is therefore by no means a literal expression of Olalquiaga's three-degrees of kitsch, though it is an artwork in which these degrees of kitsch are highly prevalent.

6.1 *The Aquarium* and Olalquiaga's Three-Degrees of Kitsch

According to Olalquiaga, third-degree kitsch as expressed by an artist is able to legitimise kitsch through a process of appropriation and also by combining first and second-degree kitsch to create hybridised works of art. I concur with Olalquiaga that through this process the artist is able to create new and/or simulated experiences (1992) within their work. It is in this way that third-degree kitsch is enmeshed in my creative praxis, as I consider the hybrid aspects of third-degree kitsch to be fundamental characteristics within it. By incorporating the various degrees of kitsch within a third-degree construct I am able to create new and simulated experiences, in which a creative work moves beyond being just an illustrated idea to a reflexive amalgam of the theories examined within this research; *The Aquarium* (2009) as third-degree kitsch examines the central focus of this research. That is, how the sensory affect of sentimentality imbued on the kitsch experiences, possessions and material objects that people covet and collect, offers a way of the individual moving from disembeddedness to a state of being re-embedded. "How people make sense of the world through artefacts" (Attfield, 2006, p. 201) and everyday objects, and how the sensory affect of sentimentality on connections to possessions that are kitsch function within the lifeworld.

The analysis that follows details the attributes of first and second-degree kitsch evident in *The Aquarium* (2009), after which the work is examined within a third-degree construct.

6.2 *The Aquarium* as a First-Degree Construct

The Aquarium (2009) (Figure 43 and Appendix 2, Section 2) as a first-degree construct privileges the perception of reality, meaning that what *The Aquarium* (2009) represents for the viewer, is privileged above the kitschness of the work alone. From this perspective, although obviously an artificially constructed environment that has "no validity in and of itself" (Olalquiaga, 1992, p. 42), *The Aquarium* (2009), and my role as the mermaid, are considered to "embody the spirits" (p. 42) represented—that is the spirit of a 'real' mermaid with 'real' mermaid paraphernalia, inhabiting a 'real' mermaid world. *The Aquarium* (2009) as a first-degree kitsch construct, the relationship between the 'object' (the aquarium and mermaid) and 'user' (the viewer or audience), "is immediate, one of genuine belief" (p. 42). From this perspective, the difference between reality and representation in this installation, although obvious is effectively collapsed (Olalquiaga, 1992), because as a first-degree construct, *The Aquarium* (2009) installation finds its validity as a substitute for the real thing and not just for its kitschness.

The manner in which *The Aquarium* (2009), and my role as a mermaid, were perceived as a substitute for a real mermaid could not have been more apparent than in the actions of several of the children who returned several times to visit the work. One small girl returned with a mermaid doll, which she showed me through the glass. She then held a mermaid picture she had drawn against the aquarium wall before asking her mother to place it in a bottle and deposit it in the tank. Another, in a mermaid costume, brought along a gift of green jelly that had been set in a mermaid shaped mould and displayed on a tray. There were also two other small children that I recognised as having visited at least half a dozen times each throughout the residency. During their visits, they would sit and watch my every move, delighting in any small gesture I made. I remember one of them visiting on a day when I was taking a nap on the aquarium's pink gravel floor. The expression on his face was one of obvious disappointment when I was at first unresponsive to his attempts at gaining my attention. His reaction seemed to be similar to the emotions that

one would experience if they went to visit Father Christmas only to find he wasn't really interested in knowing what you wanted for Christmas present.

I would argue that for these children, "the relationship between object and user [was] immediate, one of genuine belief" (Olalquiaga, 1992, p. 42). For the children *The Aquarium* (2009) and my role as the mermaid strongly, if not completely, "embod[ied] the spirit [. . .]" (p.42) of the mermaid I was representing. For these children there seemed to be no doubt that I was a 'real' mermaid with 'real' mermaid paraphernalia, inhabiting a 'real' mermaid world. I argue that, for these children, the difference between representation and reality that Olalquiaga (1992) describes as the dominant features of first-degrees kitsch seemed clear. *The Aquarium* (2009) and my role as a mermaid had validity as a substitute for the real thing, rather than just for its kitschness, and for what it represented to the children. The manner in which these children interacted with *The Aquarium* (2009) in my view validated how kitsch operates within a first-degree kitsch construct.

6.3 First-Degree Objects within *The Aquarium*

The types of first-degree objects, things that Binkley (2000) would likely refer to as 'ornamental statuary'; 'chachkas' (an inexpensive, showy trinket); and 'manufactured sentimental knickknacks', are bountiful within *The Aquarium* (2009). The more obvious included: a replica bust of Michelangelo's David; toppled Grecian style pillars styled as if to be straight from the lost city of Atlantis; ornate furniture; snow domes; golden seashells; crystal bottles and vases; silverware; pearls, diamonds and other jewels. Objects of the first-degree also featured, those that could be best described as modern consumerist kitsch including my 'shell' phone; a shell-incrusted laptop; opalescent glazed ornaments (Figure 43, below); cosmetics and other beauty products. There was also a collection of shell-encrusted objects: dolls; picture frames; jewellery boxes; and other knickknacks that I would decorate each day as part of my performance.

Figure 43:   **First-degree kitsch objects in** *The Aquarium* **(2009)**

It could, however, be argued that from Olalquiaga's (1992) perspective these objects would acquire a more intense level of sentimentality than Binkley (2000) would ascribe. For Olalquiaga (1992), as first-degree objects, the kitschness of these items alone would be secondary to what the objects themselves represented. From this perspective, the interactions of the children with *The Aquarium* (2009), which appeared "immediate" and of "genuine belief" (Olalquiaga, 1992, p. 42.), illustrated that the items placed within the aquarium were transformed from mere kitsch objects into 'iconic' mermaid treasure and paraphernalia.

I assert that analysed within a first-degree kitsch framework, there is a fascinating parallel between the mythical character of Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (1989), Ariel, with her collection of deep-sea treasures and the real life example of Janet Williams and her collection of British Royal Family paraphernalia (Section 5.1.3, Figures 34, 35 and 36 above) that relates to how I aimed to communicate kitsch to audiences of *The Aquarium* (2009).

Not only are Ariel and Janet Williams' collections—and interactions with these collections—both archetypal examples of how first-degree kitsch operates in contemporary life, they both utilise first-degree kitsch as a tool to either remain

or become 're-embedded' (Giddens, 1991; Binkley, 2000). Where Ariel from *The Little Mermaid* (1989) collects her treasures through a deep-seated fascination for life on land and later as she laments the loss of her beloved prince[1] (Disney, 1989), Janet's "sentimental attachment to all things Brit and Royal" (O'Brien, 2011) expounds her passionate connection to her British roots. The sensory affect displayed by these examples is precisely this level of intense fascination, sentimental attachment, passion and connection to kitsch that I aimed to communicate in *The Aquarium* (2009) installation and residency.

In my view, Ariel and Janet's collections of kitsch highlight a deep-seated connection to "symbolic value statements" and "sentimentality" (Olalquiaga, 1992; Binkley, 2000) that help people to reinforce their identity—how they communicate their passions and beliefs and remain embedded within a world that communicates to their own unique emotional needs. By surrounding themselves with objects to which they affix intense sentimental attachments, *The Little Mermaid* (2009) and Janet Williams exemplify the embedding nature of kitsch in contemporary life. I sought to emulate these qualities within *The Aquarium* (2009) by filling it with an abundant collection of ornaments and mermaid paraphernalia that I continued to add to. I kept a treasure chest within the tank laden with seashells and other knickknacks and trinkets.

Performatively (as demonstrated in the accompanying DVD, titled Appendix 1: *The Aquarium*), I spent several hours throughout each day decorating, and redecorating, the aquarium with objects from the trunk. I continually rearranged, polished, admired and acted adoringly toward the treasures. I did this in a manner in which I imagined *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and Janet Williams might interact with their collections if alone in their homes (or underwater cave). As I interacted with each item, I worked at showing a range of emotions—intense happiness, great sorrow, love, worry, serenity or contentment for example. I held some of the objects as though they were my most precious and fragile possessions and others light-heartedly. As I did not

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[1] Unlike the original story of *The Little Mermaid* by Andersen (1837) the Disney (1989) version of *The Little Mermaid* sees her marry Prince Eric.

speak to the audience, I was able to communicate with them through these acts.

The archetypal example of first-degree kitsch exhibited in Disney's version of *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and Janet Williams' collection of British Royalty accoutrements are undoubtedly more extreme examples of first-degree kitsch. As with *The Aquarium* (2009) the excessive affective investments kitsch invites, as is the case with these examples, are what makes them so accessible to an audience. A viewer is likely to be able to relate to one, if not several, of the objects as being like their own, or as being similar to a relative or friend's possession. This kind of accessibility, that is the everyday, mass-produced nature of the objects—their ubiquity—is in my view an invaluable tool within my praxis.

6.4 *The Aquarium*, the Kitsch Aficionado and First-Degree Kitsch

For some viewers of *The Aquarium* (2009), the iconic validity of first-degree kitsch may be less accessible. For these spectators the work is more likely to be seen through the lens of the "kitsch aficionado" (Olalquiaga, 1992). As an aficionado, a viewer of the work would place greater importance on the feelings of sentimentality and nostalgia evoked by the work than on what the kitsch objects represented. An aficionado might, for example, adore the work for it excess and garishness. They might indulge in the fantasy world of *The Aquarium* (2009) and of being a mermaid, but would not go as far as a true first-degree believer—as for a true first-degree believer of kitsch *The Aquarium* (2009) would have to embody the spirit of a real mermaid world.

The intensity of connection an aficionado could have to *The Aquarium* (2009), for example, should not be underestimated. The aficionado's passion for first-degree kitsch is comparable in magnitude to that of true lovers of kitsch in the first-degree. However, an aficionado's attachment to *The Aquarium* (2009)

would come from their delight in the kitschness of the work, rather than an investment in the iconic values of the mermaid or of the treasures within *The Aquarium* (2009). Although there is an obvious difference between the aficionado and a true believer of kitsch in the first-degree, despite their differences, I concur with Olalquiaga (1992) that they both "familiarize the ungraspable—eternity, goodness, evil" and do so while "tactically maintaining" intense but varying levels of "hierarchical distinction between realities and representation" (pp. 44–45). Because of this commonality, it is difficult as the artist-researcher to differentiate between the responses of a true first-degree believer and an aficionado within an audience—particularly as I was confined within the walls of the aquarium. Additionally, to communicate verbally with the audience would have meant breaking character and therefore shattering the kitsch experience.

One of the methods by which I was able to tell a kitsch aficionado from a true follower of first-degree kitsch was by discreetly watching as people purchased items from the collection of *The Aquarium* (2009) giftware and commemorative memorabilia for sale in the gallery shop. The objects on sale included some traditionally mass-produced objects like postcards, snow domes and key chains that incorporated a series of photos of the installation and of myself in different mermaid suits. There were also more unique, hand-made objects for sale that included shell-encrusted mermaid dolls, photo frames and trinket dishes that I would decorate whilst in the aquarium each day. There were also limited edition commemorative plates, coffee cups and prints available.

From my perspective, it appeared that a follower of first-degree kitsch would be most likely to purchase, even 'invest', in the more unique, handmade objects as well as the limited edition commemorative objects that were on sale. Several of these followers made requests that the work be signed so to add to its authenticity. The aficionado, alternatively, appeared generally to favour the mass-produced style of objects on sale over the unique and handmade items (unless of course they 'just loved' something for its kitschness). I assert that this was most likely because the aficionado wanted to maintain a memory or sentimental attachment that they associated with the

work, a requirement most easily fulfilled by a souvenir. Thus, what the work more broadly represented, that is its iconic value, was less important to them.

Described in the following section are the types of viewers who visited the gift shop and appeared closely aligned to kitsch within a second-degree construct—loving the work for its 'quirkiness' and ironic, rather than iconic, value. The following story illustrates my affiliation to first-degree kitsch: I can still feel the teeth-clenching shock, on hearing a shriek from a woman who had been skylarking in the gallery with one of the most ornate and beautiful mermaid dolls I had decorated. I can still hear the sound of smashing shells as I watched my treasured creation slip from her hands, slam onto the concrete floor, and shatter into hundreds of tiny pieces. This was followed by raucous laughter as the woman exclaimed, "Oh my God, that doll, was like, insane". Thankfully, it had already been paid for.

6.5 *The Aquarium* as a Second-Degree Construct

Within a second-degree or 'neo-kitsch' reading of *The Aquarium* (2009) analysis is focused solely on what the work represents. This is in contrast to first-degree kitsch where there is "a hierarchical distinction between reality and representation" (Olalquiaga, 1992, p. 45). Because of second-degree kitsch's ability to represent itself, it is said to defamiliarise our understanding of reality. Therefore, an object is said to be 'real' in and of itself, and is not considered to be a copy. Focus is placed on what the object, or in this case *The Aquarium* (2009), represents and it is not considered to be a stand-in or representation of anything else. My role as a mermaid, for example, would not be considered to represent Ariel (Andersen, 1837; Disney, 1989), or the incarnation of any other mermaid. Within a second-degree reading, I am simply a mermaid. Second-degree kitsch is what it is, and it is kitsch for the sake of being kitsch. Freed of the sentimental baggage and emotional intensity of a first-degree reading, a neo-kitsch analysis of *The Aquarium* (2009) sees the kitsch object valued specifically for its "iconicity and quality as a sign" (Olalquiaga, 1992, p. 45).

Without oversimplifying a complex theory, or invoking obvious links to consumerism and commodification, within the parameters of a second-degree construct the viewer of *The Aquarium* (2009) can take in the work without being bogged down by the complexities of academic analysis. As second-degree kitsch, *The Aquarium* (2009) can be loved, or hated, for the fun it represents, its quirkiness, its pinkness, its kitchness, even irony—there is, after all, a great deal of humour and irony in this work. The reality of a woman, spending a month inside a glass box in a lycra mermaid suit, surrounded by a swathe of pink gravel in the name of research could easily be viewed as bizarre or humorous. Second-degree kitsch allows works of art like *The Aquarium* (2009) not be taken too seriously, to be loved, or hated, just for what they are.

However from the second-degree kitsch perspective *The Aquarium* (2009) is rarely, if ever, associated with the intense attachment felt by lovers of first-degree kitsch or the kitsch aficionado. Thus, as a second-degree kitsch construct, *The Aquarium* (2009) is more likely to be appreciated on a superficial level. Olalquiaga states, "second-degree kitsch exists only for transaction, to pass from hand to hand, and in this lack of possessing subject lies its ultimate alienation and perishability" (1992, p. 45). This was the case in the example of the woman who had been skylarking in the gallery with the mermaid doll she had purchased. The doll appeared to have been bought as a perishable commodity—for fun, for its quirkiness. From my perspective, the mermaid doll was a work of art, a first-degree object, to be treasured and handled with great care. But my observation of the woman's interaction with the mermaid doll demonstrated an extreme example of a relationship to second-degree kitsch. The doll was a commodified good, a toy of minimal importance to her and of little, if any, sentimental significance. It was perishable, to be consumed and then discarded.

Second-degree kitsch can be a positive and powerful communication tool for the artist, a tool that I place great value within my praxis, as demonstrated in *The Aquarium* (2009) installation. Through reflexive analysis it is apparent that

The Aquarium (2009) can be enjoyed in a more relaxed manner within the parameters of a second-degree reading. It can be, and was, enjoyed by its audience simply for the colourful, cheery, humorous and ironic scenario it presented. Although viewers did have mixed experiences and relationships to the work, it was not necessary for them to have a philosophical or technical understanding of art to engage with *The Aquarium* (2009). As demonstrated through the viewers' responses, engaging with the work generally made people feel good, an outcome that I assert is largely connected to the open, simple and honest attributes that second-degree kitsch offers an audience. The sense of freedom to create that second-degree kitsch affords the artist, is a valuable communication tool.

6.6 *The Aquarium* as a Third-Degree Kitsch Construct

Third-degree kitsch has proved to be an exciting paradigm to explore within my praxis. As discussed in Section 5.3, Olalquiaga describes the fundamental role of third-degree kitsch to be the "legitimisation of [kitsch's] signifying and visual attributes by the institutionally authorised agency of artists" (pp. 46–47). As my role as a mermaid and much of the imagery that makes up *The Aquarium* (2009) installation demonstrate, "a new social place" was developed, in which "revaluation takes place through the multifarious recycling of iconography" (p. 47). Through this lens, a work like *The Aquarium* (2009) is legitimised firstly through 'appropriation' or borrowing, and secondly by the manner in which first and second-degree kitsch are combined to create 'new', or 'hybridised', 'simulated experiences' and 'products' (Olalquiaga, 1992).

From the outset of this research, my aim was to examine the ways in which kitsch can create experiences that re-embed the viewer and how to facilitate the re-embedding nature of kitsch within my artwork. As my research progressed, and my understanding of kitsch grew, I was continually looking for ways to reflexively apply my findings within my creative work. Drawing on examples of kitsch from wide-reaching fields of discourse and popular culture

was a conscious decision and is an important aspect of this research. As discussed in detail in Section 2, I have challenged traditional classifications of kitsch as low class and bad taste (Greenberg, 1961; Adorno & Horkheimer, 1991; Calinescu, 1987; Broch, 1955; Dorfles, 1969), in favour of a holistic view of kitsch (as demonstrated in Section 2.3-2.8) as native to 'all' levels of society, and possible to analyse as both good and/or bad taste (Binkley, 2000; Attfield, 2006; Olalquiaga, 1992, 1998).

With my new classification of kitsch came a new creative challenge as I aimed to ensure that my work used iconography that reflected kitsch in a holistic manner, which did not favour or discriminate against specific groups or classes within society (i.e., specific hierarchy, taste group, high or low for example). I had little difficulty identifying first and second-degree kitsch objects and scenarios to incorporate in my work but finding a way to present contemporary kitsch that would not discriminate or glorify any particular taste, group or hierarchy was a challenge. I was excited to discover Disney's version of *The Little Mermaid* (2009), as I realised that by taking on a non-human role, I would be able to avoid many of these pitfalls.

Philosophically, rather than aesthetically, the most obvious example of "appropriation" or borrowing—that Olalquiaga describes as a feature of third-degree kitsch—evident in *The Aquarium* (2009), is the influence of Disney's version of *The Little Mermaid* (1989). The signifying attributes that I drew on from this example include: the mermaid as an easily recognisable and unintimidating icon; *The Little Mermaid's* (1989) sentimental attachment (nostalgic and/or melancholic) and symbolic connection to, and consumption of, commodified goods; and the 'embedding' nature of kitsch (Binkley, 2000). On completion of the work there were visual echoes that related to Disney's version of *The Little Mermaid* (2009). These included some of my treasure—silverware, crystal, and fine china for example, and also some of the behaviours acted out in my performances. However, through the reflexive process of developing *The Aquarium* (2009), and from having combined so many aspects of first and second-degree kitsch in the work, traces of *The Little Mermaid* (2009) were barely visible once the work had been made. Thus,

undoubtedly, the 'new', attributes to 'hybridised', 'simulated experiences' and 'products' (1992) that Olalquiaga attributes to the artist who produces a third-degree kitsch construct, were revealed.

Judy Attfield's (2006) statement that "kitsch presents a particularly intriguing group of physical objects with which to explore how people make sense of the world through artifacts" (p. 201), and Jeff Koons' assertion that he wanted *Celebration* (1994–2008) to be "a support system for people to feel good about themselves, to have their life be as enriching as possible, to make them feel secure" (Burns, 2006, para. 9) are important references, as combined, they encapsulate how I consider kitsch operates and how I desire my work to be received. Attfield and Koons' statements place emphasis on the effect of art and kitsch rather than on the aesthetic alone.

The ambition of my artwork has been to demonstrate how sentimental attachment to kitsch objects helps to give people a sense of who they are and who they value being—how they made sense of their own worlds, as Attfield's statement suggests that kitsch does. Koons, "The King of Kitsch['s]" (Saad, 2010; Jones, 2009), statement about celebration reinforces Attfield's position, highlighting the way in which humans are able to find a sense of comfort through possessions and recognisable, familiar icons, like those used by Koons in *Celebration* (1994–2008). By incorporating familiar objects and iconography in *The Aquarium* (2009) installation and residency—in an obviously simulated or artificial environment—I created experiences for the audience that demonstrated the workings of kitsch, and that were familiar and therefore easily recognisable and accessible: and that engendered comfort and safety, melancholy and nostalgia, memory, fantasy and irony. Through the reflexive process undertaken within my creative praxis, and the multi-faceted recycling process that leads to third-degree kitsch evident in *The Aquarium* (2009), I aimed to demonstrate that the sensory affect of sentimentality on connections to possessions and material objects that contemporary kitsch offers is shared across cultures and societies.

7. Binkley and the Repetitive Features of Kitsch

My definitions of classifying kitsch, as mentioned earlier, are established using Olalquiaga's notion of 'three-degrees of kitsch' (1992) and Binkley's concept of 'kitsch as a repetitive system' (2000). These two systems of understanding kitsch are best considered as operating alongside each other, in parallel rather than in tandem.

Binkley (2000) argues "for a uniquely kitsch aesthetic that employs the thematics of repetition, imitation and emulation as a distinct aesthetic style" (p.131). As discussed, Binkley (2000) identifies the repetitive qualities of kitsch as addressing the problem of disembeddedness, felt in modernity, by working to re-embed consumers and shore up stocks of ontological security, a view that this research strongly supports.

I argue that embeddedness is a fundamental aspect of theories of kitsch, a view that is drawn from Binkley's argument. This is due to kitsch's rhythm of "repetition, imitation and emulation" (Binkley, p. 131), which broadly represents the nature of pre-modern societies, before time and space were distanciated from place (Giddens, 1991). In other words, kitsch's repetition represents a way of life in which "existential questions and a sense of freedom and creativity of human action" were "bracketed by reassuring traditions and habits" (p.135). Kitsch is a system that, in distinct contrast to disembedded autonomy and singularity, is able to emulate distinct modes of aesthetic repetition and imitation. The repetitive qualities of kitsch can therefore be used as a means of examining the disembeddedness (Giddens, 1991) that is characteristic of modern life.

7.1 The Three Features of the Repetitive Quality of Kitsch

Binkley (2000) has identified three distinctive ways "in which kitsch aestheticizes repetition" (p. 142). First, is "kitsch's emulation of other cultural products" (p. 142). This kind of kitsch "often copies the signs of class status" (p. 142), although it can also be observed emulating "the rustic qualities of vanishing folk traditions or the exotic products of non western cultures" (p. 142). Second, is kitsch as a 'decorative feature' associated with places like the home or the office. As a decorative feature kitsch achieves "an aestheticization of the everyday, and the repetitive, imitative habits this implies" (p. 142). I agree with Binkley that this type of kitsch taste is generally seen in numerous "home-bound objects of mundane pleasure" (2000, p. 142). Such objects, by offering "contrived modesty", provide "comfort" capable of deflecting "any significance that might disturb the tranquillity of the patterns and habits, the repetitive schemes themselves that constitute the fabric of daily life" (p. 142). Third, and most important, is "kitsch's love for all things sentimental" (Binkley, 2000, p. 142). This type of sentimental kitsch expresses "a joy in feeling itself" whether these feelings are of "elation, sorrow, or fondness" (p. 142), or as Binkley describes, a "feeling for feeling" (p. 142). Kitsch sentiment, for Binkley "elevates imitation itself to a universal value, emulating in a hackneyed fashion, the universal aesthetics of high culture" (p. 142).

In each of the three aspects of kitsch recognised by Binkley (2000) a common structure has been identified. That is, kitsch "repeats and imitates what has gone before"; "it transforms its proclivity for imitation into frankness and sincerity"; and "it fabricates a web of familiarity and comfort" (p. 142). Binkley extends his hypothesis to assert that the repetitive style of kitsch "reaches out to a humanity whose fundamental essence is imitative", a view that I do not fully support. I contest Binkley's view of authenticity in relation to the imitative nature of kitsch, positing instead a kitsch aesthetic that is often imitative but that can also be original. Furthermore, I argue the imitative nature of kitsch can be reinvigorated by the individual. Once invested with the individual's own signature and placed within a new context, an original and authentic meaning

is formed. Differences aside, I concur with Binkley that kitsch "expresses an attitude toward daily life" that invites us to "affirm our true human essence . . . taking our place in the rhythm and cadence of familiar time and familiar forms" (p. 142). For as Binkley states, "kitsch tucks us in", at home "in the repetitive fabric" of imitative [and in my view also non-imitative] cultural objects, producing a sense of belonging in a rhythmic pattern of routinized experience" (p. 142).

In the sections that follow, each of the repetitive qualities of kitsch are discussed in greater detail. Binkley's taxonomy is applied to analysis of my works; the snow domes *Ganesha Glory* (2009) and *Call Me Golden Sugar Britches* (2009), *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) and *The Lotus Pond* (2008). Additionally, popular culture and real life case studies are discussed, including the French rodent-themed hotel La Villa Hamster*,* Queen Elizabeth II and the artist Allison Jackson.

7.2 Feature One: Kitsch Emulating Other Cultural Products

The 'emulation of other cultural products', according to Binkley (2000) typically involves replicating, often clumsily, the most obvious indicators of privilege. The types of objects produced under this guise are what Calinescu (1987, p. 236) would likely describe as having, "formal qualities (material, shape, size, etc.)" that "were inappropriate in relation to their cultural content or intention". Examples could be an elaborate garden statue, an ornate water feature or Grecian pillars supporting the veranda of a modest suburban home (Figure 44); a sexy portrait of a scantily clad 'lady of the house' posing as a lingerie model; a stainless-steel home kitchen designed to look as if it belongs in a restaurant; basic cars 'hotted up' with spoilers, mag wheels and loud engines so that they look and sound like a racing car (Figure 45); volumes of leather-look bound books displayed but never read; glass cabinets displaying collections of crystal and fine china; or a gilt framed Picasso fake in the

entrance hall; and certainly Janet Williams, the 'Royalty Lady', lounging on her sofa with 'the Queen's feet' on her lap.

Figure 44: **Suburban home with Grecian pillars as an example of kitsch emulating other cultural products**

Figure 45: **'Hotted-up' car as example of kitsch emulating other cultural products**

These objects can be categorised as the type of kitsch that emulates other cultural products because they faithfully imitate with the "belief that the reproduction of an elite style will convey an aesthetic response and identification of class equal to that of the original" (Binkley, 2000): preparing meals in a commercial look kitchen in a family home will make your food taste better; a home with Roman pillars, statues and water features "could actually enrich the next family barbeque in the same way that Classical statuary enriched the houses of the ancients" (Binkley, p. 143).

Kitsch's emulation, however, is not limited to levels of high class and status alone (Binkley, 2000). It embraces the desire for the 'exotic': faux fur throws; it also imitates cultural experiences elaborate experience based holidays spent living like a 'local' for example. The kitsch emulation of other cultural products can also be extended to cover 'tourist kitsch' (Binkley, 2000) "tourist tat" and "modern classics" like a "cooking apron depicting the naked torso of Michelangelo" or even underpants with a provocative Leaning Tower of Pisa design (Barkham, 2011, para. 7) (Figure 46).
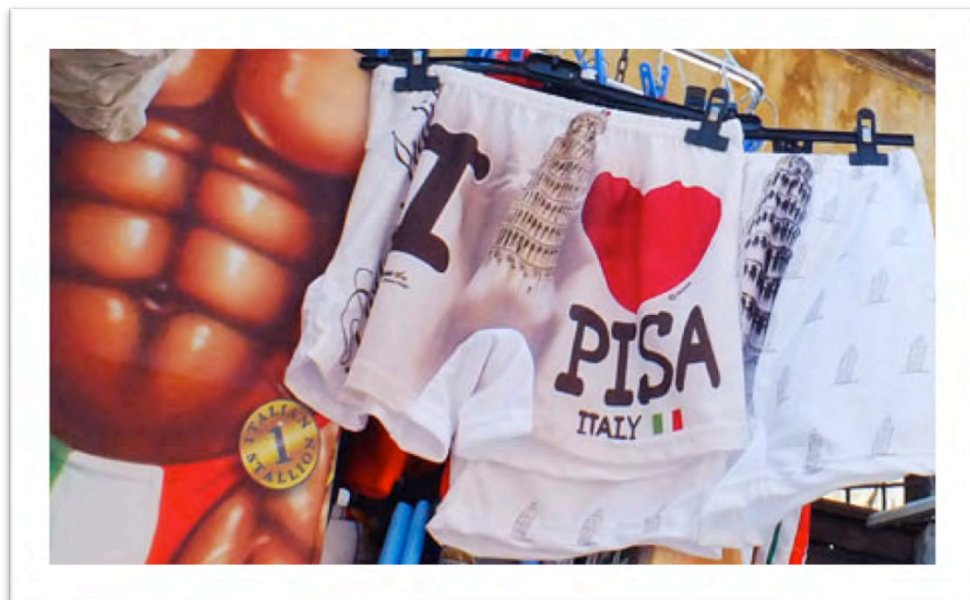
The Guardian. (2011). A load of pants ... Pisa is clamping down on the trashy side of the tourist trade. [Photographer: Fabio Muzzi]. Retrieved from http://www.theguardian.com/travel/2011/aug/31/holiday-souvenirs-tacky-gifts
Exception to copyright: Section ss40, 103C, Exception, Research or Study.

Figure 46: **Examples of tourist kitsch**

Figure 47:   Examples of kitsch souvenirs of Uluru and the Sydney Opera House

Tourist kitsch also includes souvenirs that preserve traces of exotica as proof
of an experience. These types of object include miniature figurines of famous
landmarks like Sydney's Harbour Bridge and Opera House or Uluru (Figure 47)
or the Eiffel Tower, and of course, snow domes and dream spheres such as
those that I developed as part of this research.

7.2.1 *Ganesha Glory* as an Example of Tourist Kitsch and Kitsch Emulating Other Cultural Products

Snow domes and dream spheres such as those developed during this
research are a classic example of tourist kitsch and kitsch "emulating other
cultural products" (Binkley, 2000). The snow dome G*anesha Glory* (2009) for
example explores the idea of the cultural tourist who collects souvenirs as
proof of an experience or exotic memory or as Binkley (2000) states, to
preserve "a trace of exotica to show off to one's friends" (p. 143). Although

the Ganesha ornament was cheap, it was hand painted, and I considered it to be more authentic than many of the other souvenirs I had seen.

Figure 48: ***Ganesha Glory* (2009) exhibited at The Moores Building and Gallery, Fremantle, Western Australia (2009)**

Both Binkley (2000) and Callinescu (1997) argue that the erroneous belief that emulation betrays is the naive conviction that the aesthetic value of exceptional art (and in my view, also experiences, and objects) can be merely "injected into cheap copies" (ornaments like Ganesha or package holidays for example) and into "the routines of everyday life" (Binkley, p. 143). The emulation of other cultural products, as Calinescu (1997) suggests, intends that the cultural content and aesthetic value of a copy—like the cheap ornaments from India discussed earlier—will be similar, even equal in value (in my view this could be sentimental, emotional or financial value) to that of the original.

At this point Olalquiaga's notion of 'first and second-degree kitsch' (1992) and Binkley's 'emulation of other cultural products' (2000) converge. Common to both theories is what Olalquiaga describes as "the difference between reality and representation [being] explicit and hierarchical as only what is perceived as reality matters" (Olalquiaga, 1992). Therefore, sitting in your apartment anywhere in the world, gazing at the kitsch Ganesha ornament now

encapsulated in the snow dome, you could be transported to my Indian experience and in some way feel the same sense of adventure and delight that I had without leaving your armchair.

However, the cultural meaning of an object is often lost once the object is placed in a different context. As 'an emulated cultural product', the significance of the *Ganesha Glory* (2009) snow dome could be aligned with Olalquiaga's "second-degree kitsch" (1992), as a mass-produced object and ironic representation of the real thing. For the person upon whose mantelpiece *Ganesha Glory* (2009) sits, the object would likely retain its "first-degree" (1992) significance where the difference between reality and representation becomes irrelevant as only what is perceived really matters. In this example, *Ganesha Glory* (2009) would be seen as a direct substitute for the 'real thing' or for the experiences that have been associated with it.

7.2.2 Aspects of Kitsch Emulating Other Cultural Products in *Budgietopia* and La Villa Hamster

The category of kitsch emulating other cultural products also undoubtedly includes the humble budgie ornaments and *Budgietopia* (2009–2013). Adorned with an abundance of artificial flowers and greenery, and a seemingly endless array of trinkets and knickknacks to 'feather' the small creatures nests, the scenarios portrayed in *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) are of budgies emulating human scenarios. Figure 48 displays two budgies relaxing in a boudoir style setting during the *City in Bloom* exhibition (2010), Racing in a convertible at the *Budgietopia Super Rally* (2010) (Figure 49) and offering lamingtons to passers by at *The Evening Commuter Cake Off* (2010) (Figure 50) exhibited at Spectrum Project Space during a pop-up exhibition.

Figure 49: Examples of budgies in boudoir-style setting from Budgietopia (2010)
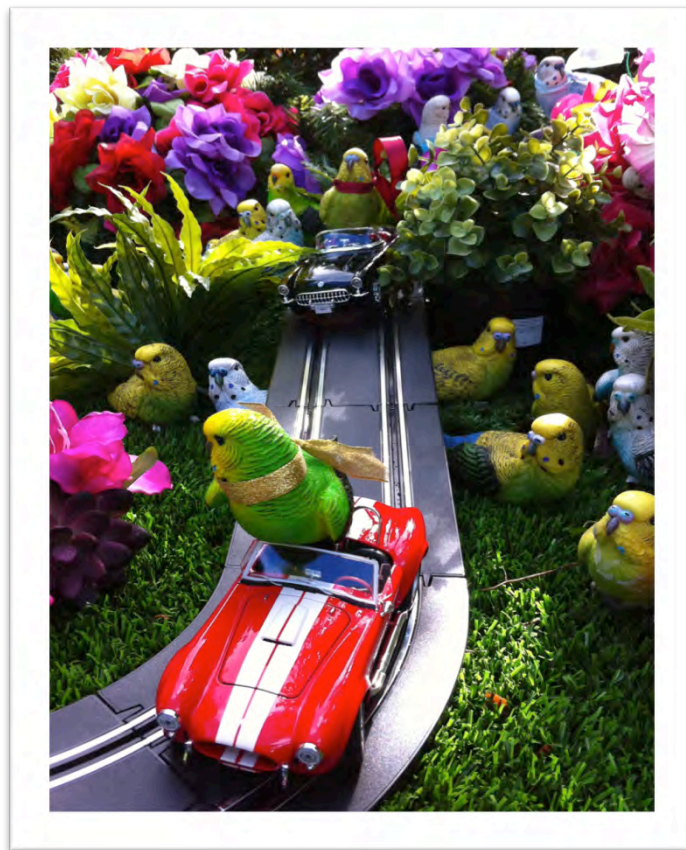
Figure 50: Budgies racing convertibles at *The Budgietopia Super Rally* (2010) at Spectrum

Figure 51: **Budgies sharing lamingtons to passers-by at *The Evening Commuter Cake Off* (2010)**

I came across a rather fascinating real-world example of the emulation of other cultural products that to me drew remarkable parallels to *Budgietopia* (2009–2013), the hotel La Villa Hamster in France. In uncanny comparison to the utopian bird world, but in a strange inversion of the human/animal habitus the, La Villa Hamster is renowned for offering "guests the 'unique' opportunity to live the life of a rodent" (Kaushik, 2012, para. 1), more specifically, a hamster.

Figure 52:   Image of proprietor riding hamster wheel at La Villa Hamster

Providing "all basic amenities essential for a rodent" (Kaushik, 2012, para. 1),
La Villa Hamster provides its human guests with: "containers of organic grain;
a metal water spigot activated by pushing a giant lever with your foot; and a
double bed accessible only by a step ladder and a crawl space" (Kaushik,
2012, para. 1). If that's not enough, the bathroom comes equipped "with a
giant vat of wood chips, a giant tro[ugh] for a sink" (para. 1) and a there is also
a fully functional human-sized hamster wheel in every suite (2012) (Figures 51
and 52). In case you haven't your own, hamster suits are also provided—
guests are said to "don hamster hats and sometimes run around the rooms on
all fours" (Davis, 2012). Interviewed in their hamster masks, the proprietors
described how they had "wanted to create a place that was a real gîte [self-
catering holiday accommodation]—a place where you could sleep and be
comfortable—but also where you could have a real experience" (Kaushik,
2012, para. 2).

Amusing Planet. (2012). *Live like a hamster at La Villa Hamster hotel*
[Photographer: Stephane Mahe] Retrieved from http://www.amusingplanet.com/2012/03/live-like-hamster-at-la-villa-hamster.html
Exception to copyright: Section ss40, 103C, Exception, Research or Study.

Figure 53:   **View of stepladder, hamster wheel and masks taken from upper crawl space**

Having spent several years reflexively engaging with *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) within my praxis, I couldn't help but be reminded of Oscar Wilde's famous quote: "life imitates art far more than art imitates life" (Brainyquote, n.p.)

Illustrating in curious parallel the kitsch emulation of other cultural products (Binkley, 2000), *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) and La Villa Hamster were a particularly fascinating and bizarre twist on the balance between life and art I have been examining throughout this research. There were even strong

echoes of my experience in *The Aquarium* (2009) and a relationship to Olalquiaga's notion of 'first and second-degree kitsch' (1992). It would appear that the proprietors of La Villa Hamster have designed the accommodation with the honest intention to emulate the cultural content of rodent life to a degree that invites guests to partake in an experience where reality and representation merge. I would be fascinated to know the degree to which guests at La Villa Hamster sucking on a spigot, munching wood chips from a vat, or gazing at their very own hamster wheel are engaged with the romance of hamster life. As 'an emulated cultural product' La Villa Hamster could undoubtedly be aligned with Olalquiaga's "second-degree kitsch" (1992), an ironic representation of the real thing, the life of a real hamster. For the guest energetically spinning around on the hamster wheel in their hamster suit, the experience would likely retain a "first-degree" (1992) significance where the difference between reality and representation is beside the point as within this context only what they perceive as real matters.

La Villa Hamster, in my view, demonstrates the ironic power of kitsch for the artist working in a "third-degree" (Olalquiaga, 1992) sense; the power to explore the space between what people think is happening and what may be happening. This becomes an interesting juxtaposition of global modernity and local traditions, as is the case with *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) where the exotic and the banality of everyday experiences intersect. It is at these interstices— where the exotic and banality of everyday meet—I assert, there is a space for experiencing the possibilities of Olalquiaga's "third-degree kitsch" (1992) and Binkley's class of "emulation of other cultural products" (2000) as valuable and fascinating tools for the artist.

7.3 Feature Two: Kitsch as a Decorative Feature

Kitsch as a 'decorative feature' is common to places like the home or work environments. Kitsch provides an almost mundane sense of pleasure, "as an aestheticization of the everyday, and the repetitive, imitative habits this

implies" (Binkley, 2000, p. 142). I propose this is perhaps why kitsch appears so often in the spaces we inhabit everyday: the bus, the cafeteria, the waiting room, or at your next-door neighbour's house. As a decorative feature, this category of kitsch is linked to Olalquiaga's 'second-degree or neo-kitsch' (1992) where the object is effectively an empty icon. In both Olalquiaga's second-degree kitsch and Binkley's kitsch as a repetitive feature, the object is recognised for its "iconicity and quality as a sign" (Olalquiaga, 1992, p. 45).

7.3.1 *Budgietopia* and the Decorative Features of Kitsch

The decorative features of *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) were developed with the idea of expressing what Binkley (2000) describes as a "sentimentally idealized image of the quotidian" (p. 143). The quotidian includes the kinds of everyday objects that can be found in most homes—if not your own, they would probably be found in the home of someone you know. However, in *Budgietopia* (2009–2013), because it exists as a utopian kitsch world, there is a rich and excessive array of these types of kitsch items and artefacts: artificial flowers; plated silverware, candlesticks, sugar bowls, trays and cutlery; plastic crystal-look vases and glassware; faux fur and silk; reproductions and copies of fine china like cups and saucers; ornaments including figurines, clocks and souvenirs; and, of course, the budgie ornaments, just to name a few.

These are the types of objects that, by the idealised sentimentality imbued on them by their owners, are elevated within the banal quotidian of everyday to significance and cultural importance. Consider, for example, one of the scenarios played out in the *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) installation, developed for *City in Bloom* (2010) (Figure 53), in which over a thousand budgies partook in an afternoon tea party on the rooftop of the city's tourist information office.

Figure 54:   *Budgietopia* **installation, exhibited for** *City in Bloom* **(2010), Murray Street Mall, Perth, Western Australia (2010)**

The budgies played out a variety of scenarios: sipping cups of tea while indulging in cakes, biscuits and gossip, some riding through the field of flowers bareback upon ponies, while others admired the sparkling crystal, china and ornaments. Not unlike Binkley's (2000) observation of a kitsch painting by Norman Rockwell, *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) for me displays the "fawning affection for everyday human weakness" through an:

> unmistakable valuation of the trivial as the single most enduring of human qualities. Everyday curiosities, desires, jealousies and indulgences are . . . the common stuff of human nature, the point to which we all inevitably return, despite our pretension to do otherwise. (Binkley, 2000, p. 143)

The budgies in the *City in Bloom* (2010) exhibition are involved in the trivialities of everyday, and they are doing so, surrounded by the warmth and familiarity offered by the decorative features of kitsch.

I concur with Binkley (2000) that it is precisely this kind of human weakness (in this case, exhibited by budgies) and the "adherence to repetitive codes" apparent in everyday behaviours that "brings us all together" (p. 144). Furthermore, it is undoubtedly the image of an everyday "infinitely forgiving of human folly" that, I assert, "typifies kitsch's ultimate triumph over comedy, tragedy and cosmic aspiration" in which just about "everything comes back to the repetitive fabric of daily life" (p. 144).

The scenarios played out in *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) endeavour to recreate scenarios and human idiosyncrasies that are a part of daily life. They pay tribute, even celebrate, the mundane—at home, work or play, the places that are part of our everyday—with its "rhythms, routines and imitative patterns" (p. 144). The repetitive nature of decorative kitsch in *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) demonstrates how "the existential security of a closed cosmology of cultural objects" (Binkley, p. 145) offers comfort and a sense of safety in modern life.

7.3.2 *The Lotus Pond* and *Lotus Flowers*: An Example of Kitsch as a Decorative Feature

The Lotus Pond (2008)
Installation
Plastic, vinyl, wood on rubber inner-tubes and water
.80m x 8m x 14m (Variable)

Figure 55: ***Lotus Pond*** **(2008) exhibited at Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, (PICA), Western Australia (2008)**

The vinyl sheeting that I used to make the lotus flowers for the installation *The Lotus Pond* (2007, 2008) (Figure 54), developed during my honours research, are a good example of kitsch as a decorative feature. The designs on the sheeting are so divorced from their original cultural context that they hardly refer back to that context. Consequently tartan, for example, used in the work, exists as just a decorative pattern, not a complex Scottish system of clan identification.

The designs on the vinyls I bought in South East Asia evolved through several cycles of repetition and kitsch. Their motifs and materials, seemingly taken at

random, were appropriated regardless of their original context, with no acknowledgement of their original source. This is a characteristic typical of kitsch, an attribute which Attfield (2006) suspects is to do with kitsch's ability to operate "indiscriminately stealing and appropriating references from every cultural genre and reworking them into familiar accessible forms and inserting them into everyday life, so that they become imbedded in contemporary culture" (p. 208). The designs shown in the lotus flowers (Figure 55) are a combination of vivid country-style check and tartan tablecloths, lace doilies, 60s psychedelic pop art, and garish flowers.

Lotus Flowers (2007)
Plastic, vinyl, wood
Diameters: 120cm, 100cm, 60cm, Depths: 10-30cm

Figure 56: *Lotus Flowers* **(2007)**

These plastics are endemic in Vietnam where they were purchased: adorning restaurant tables, lining cyclo (a type of bicycle) roofs and bedecking market stalls and displays as a tool of trade and item of exchange. They are a part of the everyday experience in Vietnam, reproductions of table linen that have been placed in the construct of everyday life as colourful, strong, durable material with seemingly endless applications. The combination of images on these plastics homogenises Eastern and Western symbols, and while distinctly Vietnamese, these plastics are somehow common to all places. A cultural cacophony of visual styles they reference Scottish, Japanese, French, American, Chinese and other cultures. For me they offered a sense of comfort; a feeling that while I was in Vietnam, I could also be at my grandmother's house in Australia, or someone else's almost anywhere in the world. Binkley (2000) describes the sense of familiarity in kitsch, reminding us that:

> One of kitsch's most noted techniques, the combination of high culture imagery with everyday functional objects . . . images socially marked as unique and . . . exceptional for their aesthetic uniqueness and their propensity to speak to human uniqueness are subordinated to the practical everyday problems of the household. (Binkley, 2000, p.145)

As a decorative feature, the plastics become encoded by the personal contexts in which they were used or experienced, a code that is without set rules and is often unreadable by foreign. The code is often unreadable by foreign eyes as the personal contexts in which kitsch as a decorative feature, and the plastics, are experienced are unique to the individual and the particular context in which they were experienced (used as a table cloth in a family home, the plastic sheeting would be encoded with different meaning than if it were lining the roof of a cyclo in Vietnam).

From examples of the plastic sheeting used to make the lotus flowers to the trinkets and treasures that make up *Budgietopia* (2009–2013), kitsch as a 'decorative feature' revels in the routine sense of pleasure it provides. Through its easy recognition as part of everyday experiences the decorative quality of kitsch has proved to be a valuable creative device within my praxis.

7.4 Feature Three: Kitsch's Love of All Things Sentimental

The third aesthetic feature of kitsch identified by Binkley (2000) is 'sentimentality'. Binkley (2000) argues that sentimentality is the most important aesthetic feature of kitsch, a view supported by Olalquiaga in *The Artificial Kingdom* (1998). Binkley, not unlike Olalquiaga, relates the sentimentality of kitsch to a range of affects that vary in intensity from the warm-hearted, sorrowful or sympathetic. I concur with Binkley, that kitsch's sentimentality operates by creating emotional attachment to objects and re-embedding consumers, offering them a sense of cosmic coherence in an unpredictable world of challenge, innovation and creativity (2000). It does so by "sweeten[ing] raw human feeling with melancholy and nostalgia" (p.145) where kitsch and sentimentality give a sense of reassurance and security.

7.4.1 *Call Me Golden Sugar Britches* and Sentimental Kitsch

An example of how kitsch and sentimentality can offer a sense of reassurance and security is demonstrated in the snow dome *Call Me Golden Sugar Britches* (2009) (Figure 56). This sculpture was made in memorial to a friend's late Golden Retriever, 'Sugar Britches' or 'Sugar" for short. The sentiment associated with this work deals with warmth, heartbreak and sympathy associated with loss. On a side note, the type of dissembeddeness caused by loss, and in this case the death of a pet, is different to the type of disembeddedness described by Giddens (1991) as the lifting out of social relations from local contexts and their rearticulation "across different tracts of time and space" (1991, p.18). However, in the example of the loss of Sugar Britches, I argue that Binkley's description of disembeddedness as "the undermining of personal horizons of social and cosmic security" (2000, p. 131), which does still relate to Giddens (1991) can be applied. I argue that the repetitive qualities of kitsch defined by Binkley (2000) can address the type of disembeddedness experienced by Sugar's owner.

Call Me Golden Sugar Britches (2009)
Glass, stainless steel, water, resin, rubber and mixed media
50cm x 40cm x 40cm

Figure 57: ***Call Me Golden Sugar Britches* (2009), exhibited at The Moores Building and Gallery, Fremantle, Western Australia (2009)**

By constructing the snow dome in Sugar's honour I hoped to create the kind of sentimental kitsch that would operate through emotional attachment and work to re-embed Sugar's loving owner, offering him the sense of 'cosmic coherence' described by Binkley (2000). Such attachments sweeten the rawness and melancholy one feels through loss and offers a feeling of nostalgia, reassurance and security (p.145) as the sentimentality associated with kitsch does so well.

It is precisely the kind of sentimentality associated with kitsch that enables it to reduce the "complexity, desperation and paradox of human experience to simple sentiment" (p. 145). Because of this reduction, or simplification, the

sentiment associated with kitsch takes us "back to our common roots", to the "practical wisdom of daily life" (Binkley, 2000, p. 145).

The simplification of raw emotion sentimental kitsch offers is not only linked to melancholic experiences like the loss of Sugar. The cute smiley faces on Murakami's 'Cosmic Blossom' range for Louis Vuitton (discussed in Section 2) offer an illustration of another kind of kitsch sentiment. The sentimentality associated with the cosmic blossom, in my view, nostalgically "calls out to our forgotten love and wonderment in all things wholesome [and] simple" (p. 145). As with most smiley face icons, I assert that kitsch offers a smile, a sense of comfort and warmth, and a metaphorical hug to those in its presence.

7.4.2 *Budgietopia* and Sentimental Kitsch

The scenarios played out by the flock of over 3 000 lifelike budgies that inhabit the utopian world of *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) for me illustrated the repetitive, especially sentimental and universal values of kitsch identified by Binkley (2000). I argue that the sentimental kitsch demonstrated in *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) "raises up its image of happiness to an absolute universal value" (p. 145)—a characteristic ability of sentimental kitsch identified by Binkley. Claims of the universality of kitsch may prove challenging for some critics of kitsch. It must therefore be clarified that it is the sensory affect of sentimentality on connections to experiences, possessions and material objects offered by kitsch—that is shared across cultures and societies—that is universal. Claims of universality of kitsch therefore do not relate to objects themselves. This is because the labelling of an experience or object as kitsch is subjective and variable dependant on the context in which the experience or object is placed and by whom the assessment of kitsch is being made.

One of the strongest examples demonstrating the universality of the sentimental affect of kitsch, is Kundera's insightful proclamation on kitsch and

sentimentality from *The Unbearable Lightnness of Being* (1984), discussed earlier. Kundera's text describes the sentimental affect of kitsch by stating:

> 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. (Kundera,1984, p. 244)

Binkley (2000) who also critiques Kundera's statement in his analysis of kitsch, relates the sentiment portrayed in the text to a universal fellowship described as "kitsch joy" (p. 145). I agree with Binkley that kitsch joy is a sentiment that "has room for anyone and everyone . . . as the most fundamental form of happiness that enlivens us all" (p. 145). For many this is hard to admit, quite possibly because kitsch so often discreetly and humbly goes about its business unnoticed and wanting nothing in return. I strongly support Binkley's view that "kitsch happiness expresses a universal human fellowship" a desire that is "so inclusive and so fundamental as to be undeniable" (p. 145). Although I extend Binkley's view to include a broad reaching range of emotions and sensory affects, including but not limited to, joy and happiness, but also affects like melancholy, nostalgia and sorrow for example. Through the notion of universal fellowship the various strands of the sentimental affects of kitsch including the "kitsch joy" and happiness, described by Binkley (2000) are woven together to create "a reassuring cosmic web" (p. 146) which no one is outside.

It is this kind of sentimental affect that *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) aims to engender. The different scenarios played out by the budgies in *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) as they play and frolic in their grass-covered world replicate the "kitsch joy" Binkley (2000, p. 145) describes creating a vast system that is undeniably all-inclusive, yet at its core simple. It involves a system that because of its ability to restore confidence in humankind through its reassuring cosmic web, has created a loyal and enduring universal fellowship shared across cultures and societies.

7.4.3 Universal Beauty and Sentimental Ordinariness

From the ability of kitsch to raise images of happiness "to an absolute universal value", kitsch joy, or what I describe as the sentimental affect of kitsch, according to Binkley (2000), "is the most fundamental form of human happiness". The "reassuring cosmic web" that sentimental affects of kitsch weave, "elevate the unique charm of the commonplace to a value of universal significance" (Binkley, 2000, p.146). I concur with Binkley that, "in this gesture kitsch combines the elements of status emulation (imitating the appeal to a universal quality of beauty implied by the taste for high art) with a celebration of the quotidian" (2000, p. 146). In so doing, as it relishes in its' everydayness, the sentimental affect of kitsch produces a gushing passion for "sentimental ordinariness" (Binkley, 2000, p. 146). Binkley observed that Kant (1987) and later Bourdieu (1984) identified "that it is a quality of aristocratic taste to pretend to speak of universal properties of the beautiful" (p. 146). Thus, for Kant and Bourdieu the predilection for what is considered universally beautiful is essential to a so called "emancipated, autonomous and disembedded aesthetic disposition", unhindered by the "'interests' of politics, status and daily life" (p. 146). Binkley surmises that the apparent lack of interest evident in the "sophisticated aesthetic gaze" is dependent on the "universality of its aesthetic values" (p. 146). Such values are realised "through a disengagement from everyday interests and traditions" (p. 146) and the patronage of a so-called "pure, disinterested appreciation of beauty" (p. 146).

The 'disembedded, disinterested freedom' associated with universal qualities of beauty and high art portrayed by Kant (1987) and Bourdieu (1984), are particularly troubling for me as they are obviously entangled with an obsolete view of how art and kitsch operate. Yet it is precisely this unfortunate and dated view of high art, still adhered to by many, that as Binkley states, "make it necessary that kitsch produces its own universalistic claim" (p. 146). As a result, instead of the apathy engendered by aristocratic taste, kitsch affirms, even relishes, "the petty interest, the everyday folly, the failure to escape interest and the failure to be autonomous" even, as Binkley would attest, the

failure to be original—a failure which defines the true stuff of common humanity" (p. 146).

I concur with Binkley (2000) that the manner in which kitsch emulates "is not intended to operate with the success of a forgery" (p.146). Un-like the "emancipated, autonomous and disembedded aesthetic disposition" of the so-called "sophisticated aesthetic gaze" (Kant, 1987; Bourdieu, 1984; Binkley, 2000). Kitsch is deeply embedded in social interests and the intricacies of daily life, and in so doing, offers "a gesture of 'antielitist availability'", and of honest, "human sincerity" (Binkley, 2000, p. 146). I agree with Binkley (2000) that it is the forgiving and inclusive manner in which kitsch operates that sees "the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch", described by Kundera (1984, p. 244) express:

> . . . the self-satisfying moment by which kitsch rejoices in its own feeling, and closes and completes its own system: kitsch wants to see itself participating in a universal happiness, not of high noble accomplishments, but a real universality of modest origins, of common fellowships between all people, of love for that which is commonly, undeniably and obviously lovable. (Binkley, 2000, p.146)

The "universal happiness" (Binkley, 2000) and sentimental affect of contemporary kitsch I contend undoubtedly holds its position in society as a universally applicable aesthetic who's sentimental affect is all inclusive and responsible for having created unique and valuable fellowship between all people, regardless of their status, that is shared across cultures and societies.

Even the British Monarchy, headed by Queen Elizabeth II has been observed indulging in everyday comforts and the sentimentality, warmth and cosiness of kitsch. I recall reading a newspaper article in which Queen Elizabeth II was said to spend time "using a small cottage on the Sandringham Estate as a place where she could 'play ordinary'" (Church, 2012, para. 57). It detailed how sometimes she spends a full day at the cottage "tidying up, watching The Jeremy Kyle Show and organising an 'ordinary' dinner-party for close friends" (Church, 2012, para. 58). Her Majesty is also said to be particularly fond of "the Australian favourite the Lamington—sponge squares dipped in chocolate

and rolled in desiccated coconut" (Church, 2012, para. 49)—which, thanks to Dame Edna Everidge (Figure 57) (the comic character played by Barry Humphries), is perhaps the most iconic kitsch cake in Australia.

Contacts Photography. (2012). Zahn Pithers for Jenny Craig. [Photographer; Zahn Pithers]. Retrieved from http://contactsphotography.blogspot.com.au/2012/07/zahn-pithers-for-jenny-craig.html
Exception to copyright: Section ss40, 103C, Exception, Research or Study.

Figure 58: **Actor Barry Humphries as Dame Edna Everidge with lamington pyramid**

The Royal Family, and particularly Queen Elizabeth II, are also known for their great sentimental attachment to corgis. British artist, Allison Jackson, famous for creating images that are ultimately "depicting our suspicions" of what we imagine the rich and famous do behind closed doors (Jackson cited in Garfield, 2007) created the image of Queen Elizabeth II (Figure 58) kneeling on a cushion with one of her beloved corgis in a Christmas hat.

Jackson, A. (n.d.) *The Queens quiet Christmas*. [Medium: Photography]. Retrieved from
http://www.alisonjackson.com/queen-quiet-christmas-exclusive-photos-show-monarch-chatting-to-corgis-
and-doing-the-washing-up/queen-corgi/
Exception to copyright: Section ss40, 103C, Exception, Research or Study.

Figure 59:   **Artist Allison Jackson's depiction of Queen Elizabeth II playing with her corgi**

Or the photograph (Figure 59) of Queen Elizabeth II, during a visit to Sherborne Abbey, as a part of her Jubilee Tour of England, (Gerstein, 2012) as she stops to say hello to some rather cute corgis wearing British themed frilly garlands around their necks—one of the cute pooches being lucky enough to receive a gentle caress.

Figure 60:   **Queen Elizabeth II stops to pat cute corgis**

For as Binkley states, "who could deny the cuddliness of a cute little dog" (p. 146). Clearly even Queen Elizabeth II could not refuse "the simple love for simple things" (Binkley, 2000, p.147) of life; a pleasure as simple and ordinary as stopping to pat a cute dog. I argue, that the universal beauty and sentimental ordinariness that kitsch engenders, demonstrates "the sentimental appeal to the tautological (and repetitive) love of the lovable" kitsch provides (Binkley, 2000, p. 147); a universal fellowship that is shared across cultures and societies regardless of how grand or humble they may be.

Yet as Binkley (2000), and Calinescu (1987), attest, the manner in which kitsch copies and emulates is not fraudulent. Rather, kitsch attempts to share the sentimental affect, a deep emotional response that is comparable in magnitude

to the sentimental affect an individual would feel if they were to experience an original object, an artwork for example, first hand. As feeling for the kitsch objects intensifies, so too does the connection and attachment between the object and user. This phenomenon was deeply apparent within *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) in which I observed a range of fascinating interactions between viewers of the work and the budgie ornaments, such as people chatting to the small resin creatures for example. Various photos and even a hand-sketched portrait of one of the adopted budgies were made or taken. Another adoptee even bought birdseed for their budgie (Figures 60 and 61).

Figure 61: **'Violet Sparkles' with adoptee Yvonne Doherty—photograph courtesy of Yvonne Doherty (2012)**

Figure 62:   **Water colour and pencil on paper sketch of budgie by adoptee Patrick Tofts (2012)**

7.5 Summary of the Repetitive Qualities of Kitsch

For Binkley (2000), kitsch challenges aesthetic sensibilities by emulating cultural products and decorative features that appeal to sentiment and, in effect, re-embed those who see it. This quality of kitsch is a powerful tool that can, if subverted by the artist practising Olalquiaga's third-degree kitsch (1992), be channelled to show just how disembedded, disconnected and alienating most of modernity is in contrast. This is a place from which to define and then challenge the everyday and the assumptions that we make. The notion of kitsch as a repetitive system uncovered by Binkley (2000) has highlighted the manner in which the multiple positive aspects of kitsch and its "taste for repetition achieves a transmutation of the conventional aesthetic values" (p. 149). This kind of originality, creativity and as Binkley states "power to induce existential reflection on the nature of one's being, outside of time and place" is greatly valued, particularly in affluent Western societies.

8. Olalquiaga's Modes of Perceiving Experiences and Kitsch

What I have called 'Olalquiaga's modes of perceiving experiences and kitsch' is an analysis of Olalquiaga's study of kitsch from *The Artificial Kingdom* (1998). Olalquiaga's theory draws on Walter Benjamin's (1973) two types of memory: conscious and unconscious memory. This theory examines the process by which differing memories, experiences and desires affect an individual's emotional response to objects and to kitsch. Olalquiaga's notions of 'the souvenir' and the 'cultural fossil' from *The Artificial Kingdom* (1998) play a valuable role in expanding upon Binkley's (2000) concept of sentimental kitsch. Additionally, Olalquiaga's model can be used to demonstrate how kitsch has addressed the sense of disembeddedness (Giddens, 1991), discussed earlier, that has created the still lingering sense of 'loss' that occurred as we entered modernity (Giddens, 1991; Binkley, 2000). It is my assertion that kitsch has not only addressed this sense of loss, but has become so assiduously rooted, embedded, in our lifeworlds that it has become an irreplaceable constituent of everyday life.

Olalquiaga demonstrates how kitsch objects allow us to recreate experiences that exist between "an irretrievable past and a fragmented present" (1998, p. 68), and the fluid boundaries of memories and fantasies. Objects allow us to capture or repossess the intensity or immediacy of loss through lost experiences (1998). In describing the process of recreating experiences, Olalquiaga's theory demonstrates how kitsch is torn between attempting to possess and repossess fantasies and memories, and the embodiment of lived experiences, fantasies and loss. In doing so, kitsch can fulfil our dreams and aspirations or sometimes the "peculiar sadness of broken or even half-forgotten dreams" (p. 162). It is through such processes that, I believe, we are able to re-embed ourselves, and again find a sense of comfort in the world. These functions are crucial to understanding the role of kitsch in modern life and are imperative as the basis of my art practice.

8.1 The Process of Recreating Experiences
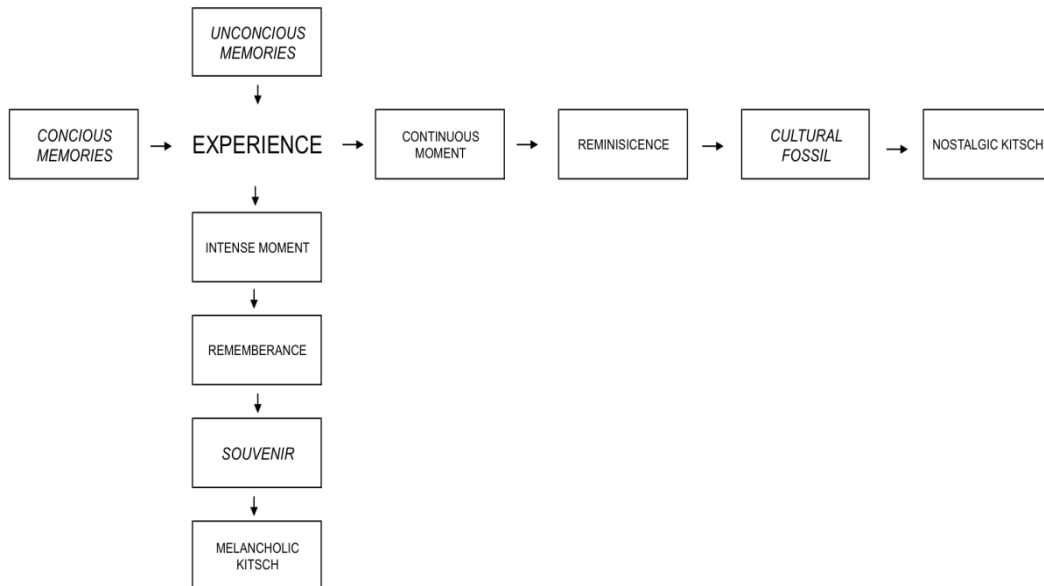
Illustration of the modes of perceiving experiences and Kitsch (Olalquiaga, 1998, p. 75)
Exception to copyright: Section ss40, 103C, Exception, Research or Study.

Figure 63:   Olalquiaga's 'modes of perceiving experiences and kitsch'

The process of recreating experiences (Figure 62) begins by dividing sentimentality into both 'melancholy' and 'nostalgia' the unconscious mode of remembrance proper, and the conscious mode that leads to reminiscence (Benjamin, 1998). These concepts are applied to Olalquiaga's (p. 75) theories of 'the souvenir', which becomes lost in 'melancholic kitsch' and 'unconscious memories' (remembrance), and 'the cultural fossil' which, according to Olalquiaga, is imbued with 'nostalgic kitsch' and is linked to the 'conscious memory' (reminiscence). For Olalquiaga (1998) memories of the unconscious are linked by "sacrificing the continuity of time for the intensity of experience" (p. 292), which produce a fragmented remembrance that, when commodified, becomes the souvenir. The souvenir, as a result of its mass reproducibility, is disassociated from remembrance and subjected to the interpretations of the consumer. Through this process Olalquiaga (1998) suggests the souvenir or

object's melancholia intensifies, which in turn engenders a new degree of loss, triggering the unconscious desire to recover what is gone. Again this understanding of kitsch provides the artist with powerful tools when creating art—a context in which I choose to work.

If the final product of the process of remembrance (focus on the feeling of loss caused by death) is melancholic kitsch, then reminiscence, the alternative form of memory, according to Olalquiaga (1998), sacrifices the intensity of an experience for a fabricated sense of conscious that generates 'nostalgic kitsch'. Nostalgic kitsch, according to Olalquiaga (p. 292), is "more limited in its cultural impact and scope". Incapable of tolerating the intensity of the moment, reminiscence (disregard for the obvious demise of an object) privileges and consolidates parts of an event into a perceived complete memory. In doing so, it rejects any recollection of the mythic load that gave the original experience its intensity. This restructured experience becomes a frozen emblem of itself, or what Olalquiaga (1998) calls a cultural fossil.

The idea of the cultural fossil as the shell of a supposedly founding experience becomes fetishised. Its presence "[serves] to evoke and legitimise an origin whose imaginary autonomy acquires utopian overtones" (p. 292). *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) is a useful example here. The life of the budgies is contingent upon the brief moment that they were appropriated, recreated in resin and placed within the gallery paradigm. Whether as part of my installation, in their adoption from an exhibition to a viewer's home, to the communications from adoptees, the budgie becomes a frozen emblem of itself and is now a fetishised "cultural fossil" (Olalquiaga, 1998, p. 292).

For me, kitsch raises questions about the type of experience in which the viewer indulges, and of their own predominant narrative, when interacting with or simply viewing *Budgietopia* (2009–2013). The sweet budgie ornaments, trinkets and masses of vivid artificial flowers, although static, somehow becomes alive as people interact with the work, smelling the flowers and patting the little budgie ornaments. As people meander through the utopian bird world, past the budgie tea parties, dances, and rows of pretty budgie

homes, the illusion created in my view, fulfils the wish image's fetishistic potential. Simultaneously, as a metaphor for the lifeworlds in which we live, *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) offers an intense and flagrant taste of a utopian reality.

The experiences people have had with *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) could be seen to represent the leftover human desire to collect, and the status of the utopian bird world, as a cultural fossil, underlines the failure of our attempts. For as Olalquiaga states we exist "as participants in a culture that does not accept death and seeks to capture life at whatever cost, even that of sacrificing real life for the sake of a fleeting imagery perception" (1998, p. 68).

Returning to Benjamin's "two basic ways of perceiving events in modern time" (cited in Olalquiaga, 1998, pp. 68-69) is important: the conscious mode, leading to reminiscence; and the unconscious mode of remembrance proper (Benjamin, 1973). As a conscious memory for instance, the perception of *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) automatically disregards an awareness of mortality. It instead concentrates on the life of the bird world, not dissimilar to that of the gallery or museum vitrine where, Olalquiaga suggests, exhibits or 'fossils' can be resurrected in the imagination by aesthetic cues that are presented within the image or display. Similarly, Olalquiaga (1998), suggests "the cultural fossil recalls an immaculate memory, [that is] continuously regenerating [into] an ahistorical purity without the distortions brought about by . . . time" (p. 70).

By contrast, unconscious perception occurs without the erasure of an actual experience. Olalquiaga (1998) describes unconscious perception as being a perceptual process that eventually leads to kitsch as intensity of the lived moment, as an outdated unconscious perception that focuses on the "distressing sensations that consciousness cannot afford to indulge" (p.71). It is this moment that *Budgietopia* (2009-2013) becomes a remembrance, a fragmented recollection "that can direct perception to the hidden archives of individual memories, where experiences are stored as atemporal myth[s]" (p.71).

Olalquiaga (1998) distinguishes between subjective mythical time relating to remembrance and the mystification of the perception of an experience (that never really happened) associated with the cultural fossil. Rather than being simply frozen in time, *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) can be seen as a moment in time whose artificial preservation is a reminder of mortality (1998). It is in this moment in time, through remembrance that, "is obsessed by the transitoriness of lived moments and [is] constituted by what ceases to be" (p. 74).

Once commodified, the cultural fossil "leads to a nostalgic kitsch that craves an experience based on a desire for a perfect memory of something that never really happened" (Olalquiaga, 1998, p. 293). *Budgietopia* (2009–2013), as a central aspect of this research, is a valuable illustration of nostalgic kitsch, as it traces the transformation of a natural fossil (the budgie ornaments and artificial flowers) into a cultural one. Instead of referring to a lived moment and the full recognition of its death, the utopian bird world erases this death and substitutes it for an impossible scenario where the biological qualities of the display endear the work to the audience by alluding to an organic garden scene or display. The utopian qualities of the scene created by *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) are rendered as a formal, static display reflecting a lost moment in time.

It is in this way that kitsch can be seen as rigid and particularly limited as its strength relies on recreating something that was either never there in the first place or that has been glorified beyond recognition. If one were to imagine, for example, a version of *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) in which a 'dystopia' of sorts was depicted, the viewer immersed in a less welcoming environment designed to place them out of their comfort zone, unsure if they are welcome, the experience would be quite different. The only reassurance is the kitsch beauty of the sweet budgie ornaments, comforting rather than threatening. However in the more welcoming version of *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) that has been depicted, the viewer could complacently enjoy and engage with a vibrant and welcoming scene where little negotiation or reassurance is required. Within the differing contexts, as I have asserted, *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) arguably could be associated with the cultural fossil.

Conclusion

This exegesis has examined the theoretical concept of contemporary kitsch within my creative practice that incorporates sculptural and installation art. I have investigated and challenged the traditional framework of hierarchical and class-based analysis through which kitsch has typically been understood (Greenberg, 1961; Adorno & Horkheimer, 1991; Calinescu, 1987; Dorfles, 1969), arguing in favour of recent re-conceptualisations of kitsch (Olalquiaga, 1992, 1998; Binkley, 2000). Throughout this investigation, the aim was to demonstrate how kitsch has become an irreplaceable, fundamental constituent—that is assiduously rooted—embedded in our lifeworld's and in the multiple levels of everyday life: an aesthetic that reveals "how people make sense of the world through artefacts" (Attfield, 2006, p. 201) and everyday objects.

Arguing in line with Binkley (2000) I have demonstrated how "the repetitive qualities of kitsch address a general problem of modernity" (p. 131), which Giddens has referred to as "disembeddedness" (1991), or "the undermining of personal horizons of social and cosmic security" (Binkley, p. 131).

I have examined my praxis in relation to the artworks developed throughout my doctoral candidature: *The Aquarium* (2009), *Budgietopia* (2009–2013), *Jesus* (2010), *Snow Domes and Dream Sphere* (2009–2010) and my earlier work *The Lotus Pond* (2007, 2008)*.* The research has explored the role that kitsch has played within my praxis, relating various aspects of Olalquiaga's 'three degrees of kitsch' (1992), to what I have called 'Olalquiaga's modes of perceiving experiences and kitsch' (1998) and Binkley's notion of 'kitsch as a repetitive system' (2000) to aspects of my artworks. These works were used as illustrative case studies to demonstrate the significance of kitsch in this praxis. The studies spanned the process of creating these works and demonstrated the various aspects of kitsch apparent in both the process and production of this work.

After an examination of the social and historical development of the term 'kitsch', I challenged the traditional notions of taste, culture and status associated with kitsch. It has been demonstrated how the role of taste in definitions of kitsch is inextricably linked to popular taste, but not limited to the notion of taste hierarchies in the traditional view. Concurring with Attfield (2006) it has been demonstrated how "kitsch cannot be reduced to a single stylistic genre and can only be recognised from within a consciously critical context that has something to say about taste" (p. 201). I have asserted that popular taste plays a particularly positive role in contextualising the social and historical development of kitsch. In doing so, I have supported Attfield's (2006) notion that:

> . . . positioning kitsch within a social context of popular taste recognises popular culture as a more inclusive field of inquiry, it acknowledges the aestheticisation of everyday life as a positive aspect of culture and allows the consideration of taste as part of the habitus, the material culture of everyday life. (Attfield, 2006, p. 207)

The results of this research support the hypothesis that, 'popular taste' and kitsch can be found in 'all' levels of society, and can be subjectively analysed as both good and/or bad taste. It is therefore asserted that while certain objects may be more common to specific groups or classes within society, popular taste and kitsch cannot be segregated to any one specific hierarchy, taste group, or class.

I have shown how the re-evaluation of taste and kitsch as popular, but cutting across status, is evident in aspects of the visual arts and popular culture. This has been demonstrated tthrough a study of kitsch iconography that I identified in the work of Japanese artist Takashi Murakami (2008). I contrasted this with the dialogue used by the television chef Nigella Lawson (2001). Specifically chosen as diverse choices, they illustrated how the meaning of the term kitsch has evolved within contemporary popular culture as popular taste, and how kitsch has in some cases—such as Murakami's bags for Louis Vuitton— flattened the traditional notions of kitsch. In particular the notions that were based in taste hierarchies. I have shown how through this levelling we are now

able to literally purchase sentiment and happiness in the form of kitsch. Through an analysis of the dialogue in Lawson's (2001) television cooking show, I have exposed how kitsch is often misunderstood or stretched beyond reasonable means and definitions within popular culture. This has been shown to be due to the outdated connection between my notion of popular taste, which I have aligned to Binkley's (2000) notion of taste habits, and class identities.

I therefore have concurred with Binkley that taste habits and preferences are no longer easily aligned with class identities (2000). That kitsch "is not the property of a distinctive strata . . . but a general corrective to a general modern problem, that of existential disembeddedness, loss of assurance in the community of life and ones place in the world" (p. 149). Still in line with Binkley, I see the repetitive qualities of kitsch as playing a vital role in addressing the general problem of modernity known as disembeddedness (2000) through its ability to re-embed individuals and societies. This has been demonstrated through examining the experiences of Cuc Lam, a refugee of the Vietnam War, and also a woman I observed on the evening news, escaping sever floodwaters in Queensland. It has been shown how through the objects they saved—of which many were kitsch—they were able to maintain a sense of comfort, safety and connection under extreme circumstances, that inturn, assisted their process of becoming re-embedded.

Extending Binkley's view I have argued on similar grounds to Attfield (2006) and have stressed that, "it is no longer acceptable to limit [kitsch] to the crude elitist critique that categorizes it as bad taste and as a cynical manifestation of consumerism" (p. 201). I assert that this in turn allows the consideration of taste as part of the material culture of everyday life, but not as a vital constituent of analyses of kitsch (2006).

I have demonstrated that the aestheticisation of the everyday is an authentic, positive feature of both culture and of kitsch (Attfield, 2006). Taken together, these results support my conclusion that 'popular' should no longer be equated with low class and status, bad taste, and impoverished art. I contend that the

tenuous traditional leap from class to taste is an inadequate description of how our society works. I further stressed the importance of this view due to the ever increasing strands of mass culture that continue to weave through most aspects of our society now being consumed within the everyday, where high and low cultures inhabit the same contexts.

I have vehemently challenged the aspect of traditional conceptualisations of kitsch and authenticity that consider kitsch as fake, and challenge the recent re-conceptualisations of kitsch like Binkley's (2000) that still adhere to this view. This is a position I believe is still carrying the baggage of a lingering class consciousness, something to which Binkley (2000) had claimed to strongly oppose. I have challenged how Binkley can purport to see kitsch as having "re-embedded its consumers at the 'deepest' personal level" (p.135) as part of the everyday, and yet still views kitsch as a 'faker' or less authentic reality, and not simply 'another' form of reality. I subscribe to Olalquiaga's valuation (1998) that "kitsch responds to a wider need for an engagement with authenticity" (p. 207). This research has identified several questions that are in need of further investigation, particularly when relating kitsch to the lifeworld. These questions relate to the perception of authenticity in analyses of kitsch and how authenticity and kitsch operate within modern life.

It is therefore asserted that Olalquiaga's (1992) three degrees of kitsch, when applied to my creative praxis, have addressed the desire for intensity in varying ways. In the first-degree as "an osmotic process resulting from the collection and possession of objects still infused with use value" (1992, p. 54). In the second-degree as "the consumption of commodified nostalgia" (p. 54) and finally in the third-degree, by combining both the first and second-degrees, recycling them into a hybrid product that allows for simulation of lost and new experiences (Olalquiaga, 1992). While the three degrees of kitsch are usually produced at varying moments, they cohabit the same contemporary space.

The research has highlighted the ironic power of kitsch for the artist working in a "third-degree" (Olalquiaga, 1992) sense; the power to explore the space between what people think is happening and what may be happening. This I

assert becomes a fascinating juxtaposition of global modernity and local traditions, as has been demonstrated in *Budgietopia* (2009–2013) where the exotic and the banality of everyday experiences intersect. It is at these interstices of the exotic and the banal that I argue, there is a space for experiencing the possibilities of Olalquiaga's 'third-degree kitsch' (1992) and Binkley's class of 'emulation of other cultural products' (2000) as extremely valuable and fascinating tools for the artist.

One of the more significant findings to emerge from this study is the crucial role that sentimentality plays in definitions of kitsch. "Sweeten[ing] raw human feeling with melancholy and nostalgia" (Binkley, 2000, p.145), kitsch and sentimentality provide a sense of reassurance and security. I have therefore argued that due to its embedded system of rhythm, kitsch is an aesthetic that gives back some of the security, certainty, familiarity and reassurance of the unchanging, of the everyday; a reassurance that people had lost as they entered modernity.

This research has demonstrated that kitsch is a powerful tool that, if subverted by the artist, can be channelled to show just how disembedding, disconnecting and alienating modernity can be. This is a place I would suggest, from which we can define and challenge the everyday and the assumptions that we make. Olalquiaga's (1992) and Binkley's (2000) notions can be used to demonstrate how kitsch has addressed the sense of disembeddedness (Giddens, 1991), that brought about the, still lingering, sense of 'loss' that came as we entered modernity (Giddens, 1991; Binkley, 2000). It is my assertion that kitsch has not only addressed the sense of loss, but has become so assiduously rooted in our lifeworlds, that it has become an irreplaceable constituent in everyday life.

Through a reflexive analysis of my praxis—the various exhibitions held throughout candidature, a broad cross section of examples from popular and contemporary culture and the theories of Olalquiaga (1992, 1998), Binkley (2000), and Attfield (2006)—it has been demonstrated that kitsch in contemporary life has become firmly rooted in our "lifeworlds" (Habermas,

1971), as an aesthetic that reveals "how people make sense of the world through artefacts" (Attfield, 2006, p. 201) and everyday objects; that the sensory affect of sentimentality on connections to possessions and material objects that contemporary kitsch offers is shared across cultures and societies.

I have demonstrated how kitsch is torn between attempting to possess and repossess fantasies and memories, and the embodiment of lived experiences, fantasies and loss. In so doing kitsch can fulfil our dreams and aspirations or sometimes the "peculiar sadness of broken or even half-forgotten dreams (Olalquiaga, 1998, p. 162). It is through this process that I assert we are able to re-embed ourselves, and in so doing find a sense of comfort in the world. These qualities are imperative for my creative praxis. Furthermore, if strategically applied by other creative practitioners and researchers, the positive attributes of contemporary kitsch can be used as a valuable communication tool to enhance an audience's engagement and emotional connection to a work of art.

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APPENDIX 2:
Additional Images of Art Work

Section1:
The Lotus Pond (2007, 2008)

Plastic, vinyl, wood on rubber

Figure 1.1: *Lotus Flowers* **(2007)**

The Lotus Pond (2007). Installation, Plastic, vinyl, wood on rubber inner-tubes and water, .80m x 8m x 14m (Variable)

Figure 1.2: *The Lotus Pond* (2007) exhibited at Spectrum Project Space, (Spectrum Northbridge, Western Australia, for the Exhibition *White Monkey Holding Peach* (2007)

The Lotus Pond.(2008). Installation. Plastic, vinyl, wood on rubber inner-tubes and water. .70m x 4m x 9m (Photographer: Michael Gray)

Figure 1.3: *The Lotus Pond* **(2008). Exhibited at Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, (PICA), Western Australia (2008)**

The Lotus Pond.(2008). Installation. Plastic, vinyl, wood on rubber inner-tubes and water. .70m x 4m x 9m (Photographer: Bohdan Warchomij)

Figure 1.4: *The Lotus Pond* **(2008) (Detail) exhibited at Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, (PICA), Western Australia (2008)**

The Lotus Pond (2008). Installation (detail). Perth Institute of Contemporary Art. Plastic, vinyl, wood on rubber inner-tubes and water. .70m x 4m x 9m

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(Exception to copyright: Section ss40, 103C, Exception, Research or Study).

Figure 1.5: *The Lotus Pond* **(2008) exhibited at entrance to The Art Gallery of Western Australia (2010)**

Section 2:
The Aquarium (2009)

The Aquarium (2009) Glass, steel, wood, hot pink gravel, and mixed media 3.5 x 2.5 x 2.4

Figure 2.1: *The Aquarium* installation (2009) (Video still) exhibited at Spectrum (2009)

Figure 2.2: In character within *The Aquarium* (2009) exhibited at Spectrum (2009)

Figure 2.3: *The Aquarium* installation (2009) (Detail of residency) exhibited at Spectrum (2009)

The Aquarium (2009) Glass, steel, wood, hot pink gravel, and mixed media 3.5 x 2.5 x 2.4

Figure 2.4: *The Aquarium* **installation (2009) exhibited at Spectrum (2009)**

Figure 2.5: *The Aquarium* installation (2009) (Details of Mermaid's paraphernalia) exhibited at Spectrum (2009)

Figure 2.6: Messages in bottles left by exhibition visitors at Spectrum (2009)

Figure 2.7: Examples of the messages in bottles left by exhibition visitors at Spectrum

Section 3:
Budgietopia (2009-2013)

3.1 *The Budgietopia Everest Reunion* (2009)

Figure 3.1.1: Image *Budgietopia Everest Reunion* **(2009)**

Figure 3.1.2: Image *Budgietopia Everest Reunion* **(2009) exhibited at Spectrum (2009)**

Figure 3.1.3: Image _Budgietopia Everest Reunion_ (2009) (Detail) exhibited at Spectrum (2009)

Figure 3.1.4: Image *Budgietopia Everest Reunion* (2009) (Detail) exhibited at Spectrum (2009)

3.2 *The Budgietopia Super Rally* (2010)

Figure 3.2.1: *Hillview Descent, The Budgietopia Super Rally* **(2010) (Detail) exhibited at Spectrum (2010)**

Figure 3.2.2: *The Chase, The Budgietopia Super Rally* (2010) (Detail) exhibited at Spectrum (2010)
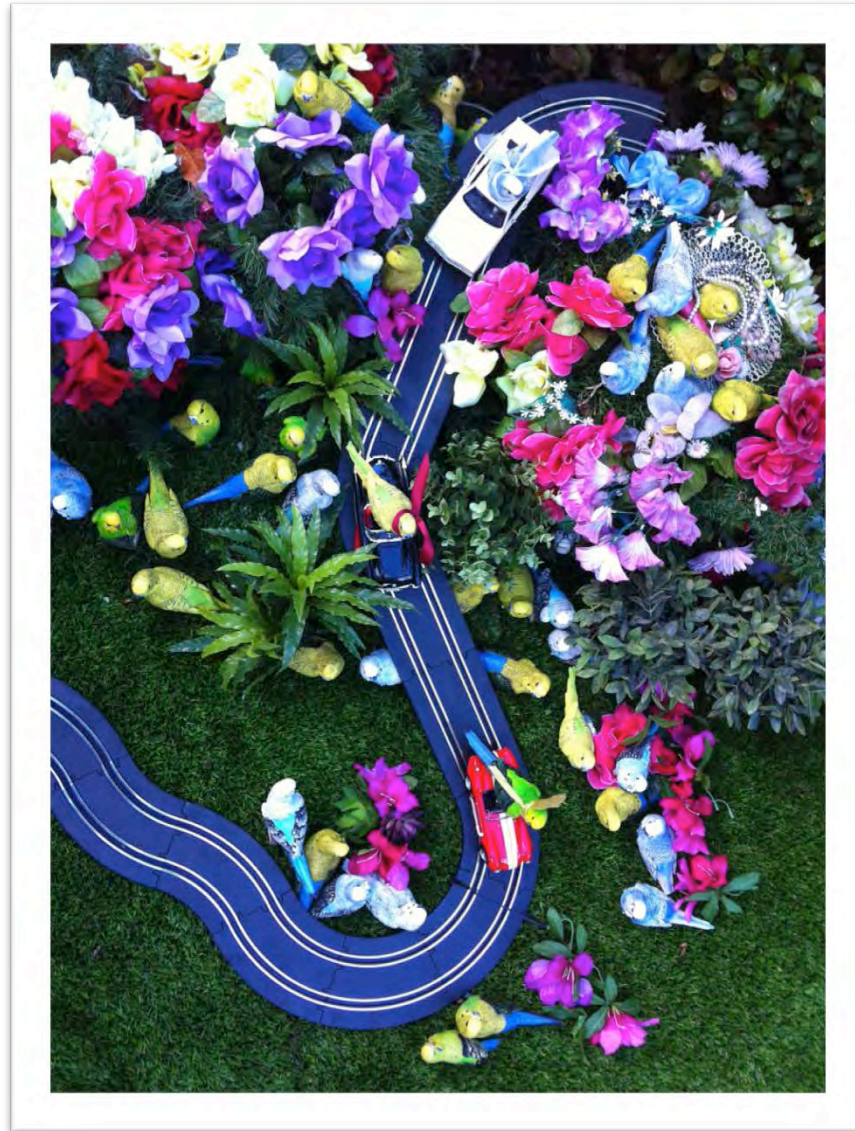
Figure 3.2.3: *The Helicopter's View, The Budgietopia Super Rally* (2010) (Detail) exhibited at Spectrum (2010)

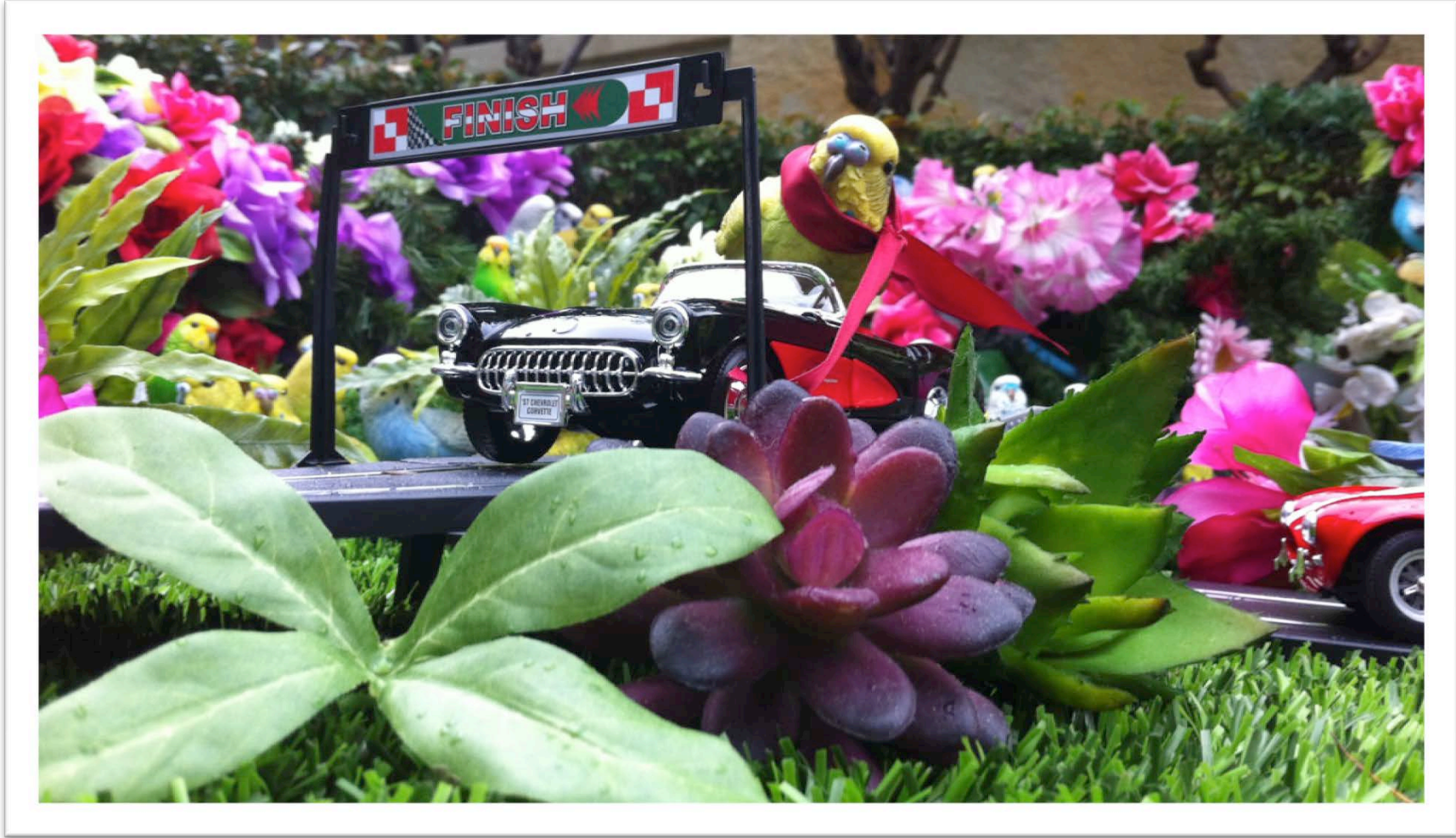**Figure 3.2.4:** *Cool Blue, The Budgietopia Super Rally* **(2010) (Detail) exhibited at Spectrum (2010)**

Figure 3.2.5: *The Winner, The Budgietopia Super Rally* **(2010) (Detail) exhibited at Spectrum (2010)**

Figure 3.2.6: *The After-Race Parade, The Budgietopia Super Rally* (2010) (Detail) exhibited at Spectrum (2010)

3.3 *Budgietopia*
The Evening Commuter Cake Off (2010)

Figure 3.3.1: *The Lamington Pyramid, The Evening Commuter Cake Off* (2010) (Detail) exhibited at Spectrum (2010)
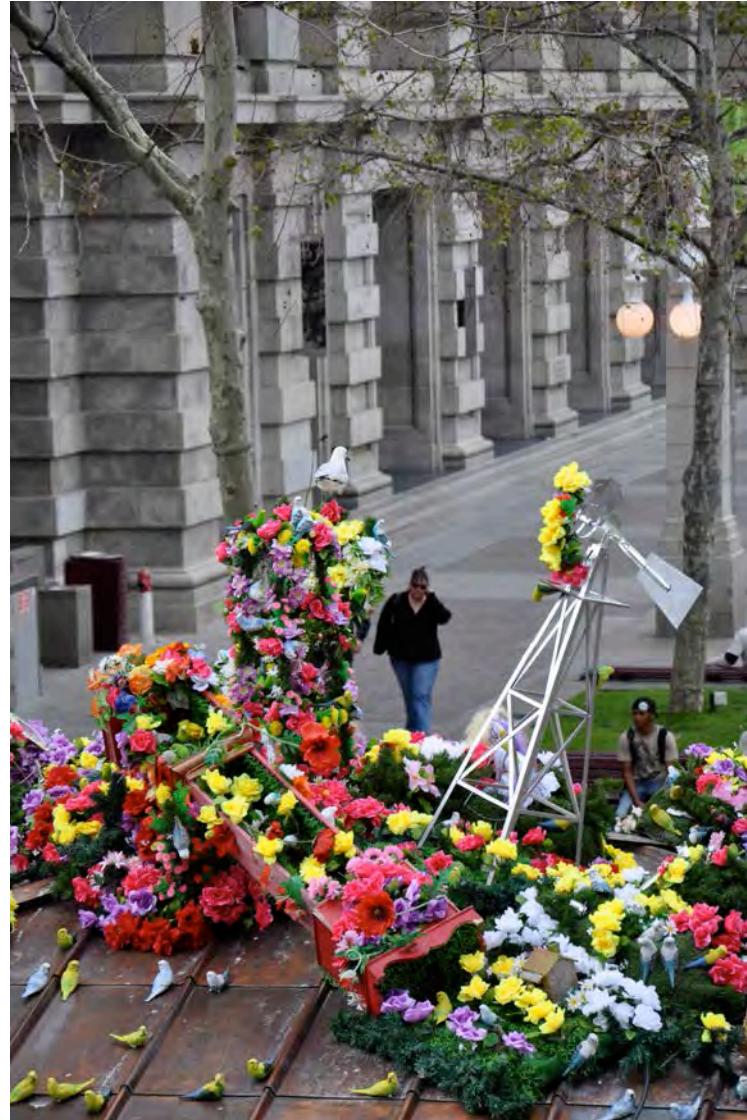
Figure 3.3.2: *The Birds Eye View, The Evening Commuter Cake Off* (2010) (Detail) exhibited at Spectrum (2010)

Figure 3.3.3: *The Gossip, The Evening Commuter Cake Off* (2010) (Detail) exhibited at Spectrum (2010)

3.4 *Budgietopia* for *City in Bloom* (2010)

Budgietopia (2010). Installation, Budgies, artificial lawn, artificial flowers and mixed media. 5m x 5m x 7m

Figure 3.4.1: *Budgietopia* **(2010) (Detail) for City of Perth,** *City in Bloom* **exhibition, Murray Street Mall, Tourist Information Kiosk, Perth, Western Australia**

Budgietopia (2010). Installation, Budgies, artificial lawn, artificial flowers and mixed media. 5m x 5m x 7m

Figure 3.4.2: *Budgietopia* (2010) (Detail) for City of Perth, *City in Bloom* exhibition, Murray Street Mall, Tourist Information Kiosk, Perth, Western Australia

Budgietopia (2010). Installation, Budgies, artificial lawn, artificial flowers and mixed media. 5m x 5m x 7m

Figure 3.4.3: *Budgietopia* (2010) (Detail) for City of Perth, *City in Bloom* exhibition, Murray Street Mall, Tourist Information Kiosk, Perth, Western Australia

Budgietopia (2010). Installation, Budgies, artificial lawn, artificial flowers and mixed media. 5m x 5m x 7m

Figure 3.4.4: ***Budgietopia* (2010) (Detail) for City of Perth, *City in Bloom* exhibition, Murray Street Mall, Tourist Information Kiosk, Perth, Western Australia**

Figure 3.5: Image of my studio during the development of *Budgietopia* (2011)

Section 4:
Snow Domes and Dream Spheres (2009-2010)

Snow Domes and Dream Spheres (2009). Glass, stainless steel, water and various mixed media. 32cm x 25cm x25cm

Figure 4.1: *Snow Domes and Dream Spheres* **(2009) exhibited at The Moores Building and Gallery, Fremantle, Western Australia (2009)**

Ganesha Glory (2009). Glass, stainless steel, water and various mixed media. 32cm x 25cm x25cm

Figure 4.2: *Ganesha Glory* (2009) exhibited at The Moores Building and Gallery, Fremantle, Western Australia (2009)

Call Me Golden Sugar Britches (2009). Glass, stainless steel, water and various mixed media. 75cm x 50cm x 50cm

Figure 4.3: *Call Me Golden Sugar Britches* **(2009) exhibited at The Moores Building and Gallery, Fremantle, Western Australia (2009)**

Section 5:
Jesus (2010)

Jesus (2010) Wood, plaster and mixed media 95cm x 380cm x 195cm

Figure 5.1: *Jesus* (2010), view 1, exhibited at Wesley Church, Perth, Western Australia (2010)

Jesus (2010) Wood, plaster and mixed media 95cm x 380cm x 195cm

Figure 5.2: *Jesus* **(2010) (Detail) exhibited at Wesley Church, Perth, Western Australia (2010)**

Jesus (2010) Wood, plaster and mixed media 95cm x 380cm x 195cm

Figure 5.3: *Jesus* **(2010), view 2, exhibited at Wesley Church, Perth, Western Australia (2010)**

Jesus (2010) Wood, plaster and mixed media 95cm x 380cm x 195cm

Figure 5.4: *Jesus* **(2010), view 3, exhibited at Wesley Church, Perth, Western Australia (2010)**