

In Defense of Blue Sky Art

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“Without the authoritative exercise of taste there could be no Art World, and with it its members can never know peace.”

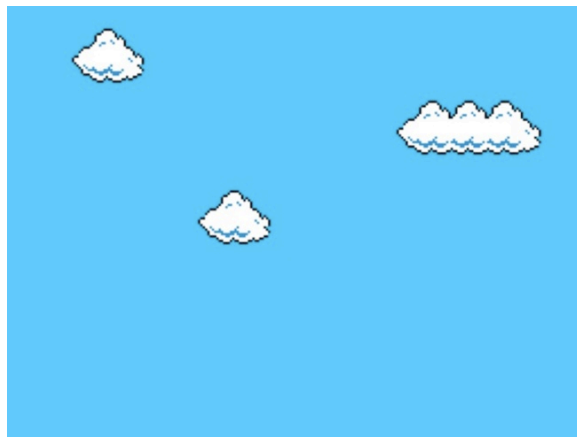
- Russell Lynes, *The Tastemakers: The Shaping of American Popular Taste*

Super Mario Clouds

A cartoonish mustachioed Italian plumber sets out to rescue a damsel-in-distress. Bounding toward his goal with superhuman agility across suspended steel girders and cliffs of brick, he avoids oil barrels and balls of flame hurled at him by an angry ape. Sometimes he succeeds but other times he is burned, crushed, or falls to his doom beneath a cheery blue sky dotted with puffy clouds. This modern folk tale starring a digital-era Buster Keaton has been iterated, with slight variations, a million times since Nintendo released the video game Super Mario Bros. in 1985.

In 2002, Cory Arcangel hacked a Super Mario Bros. NES game cartridge, re-writing some of the game’s code onto a computer chip, then taking apart the physical cartridge to place his modified chip, and thus his code, into the game. His modification was simple; it removed Mario, the damsel, the ape, the barrels and balls of fire; in fact it removed everything from the game except those puffy clouds drifting across the too-blue sky. What remained was a sparse silent skyscape with a few random clouds moving across the screen from right to left in an endless loop. It could have been the intro scene to an indie movie from the 1960’s but the clouds were chunky and pixilated and the sky was a flat and over-saturated blue; altogether unnatural and clearly not a “scene” so much as an artifact. Cory made an animated gif image of the scene (video on the Internet being technically problematic at the time) and released it out onto the Internet with the intent to

generate a viral meme. In addition to the animation, he created a webpage with detailed instructions on how to repeat his game hack. Together, these comprised the artwork, *Super Mario Clouds*. Later, Arcangel would present *Super Mario Clouds* as a video projection in museum exhibitions such as the 2004 Whitney Biennial, but it began life as a work of net.art and it can still be viewed on YouTube as well as on the artist's website.¹



Cory Arcangel: *Super Mario Clouds*, 2002

Super Mario Clouds is a hybrid work; it is simultaneously a popular game mod and viral net meme and a work of video art, net.art, hacker art, and game art. It is not too surprising then that it is also deeply conflicted. My intuition, however, is that these conflicts do not cancel out the work, but rather add up to a whole reading and, moreover, the tension in those conflicts reveals something about *Super Mario Clouds* and about net.art.

net.art

Now that Internet art, and digital art more broadly, has been subsumed into the discourse of contemporary art – for better and worse – do we take the view that this art’s history never really constituted a distinct practice or community and should be subsumed retroactively as well? Or is there a more specific historicity to it and we need another way to look at it (Or is there a more specific historicity to it and we need another way to look at it (aside from technocratic teleology or unprecedented “heroic” novelty)?² It’s possible to have it a little of both ways. By focusing the intellectual toolkit of art history to recognize net.art, we can honor it’s historic specificity, and if we leave open the possibility that these specifics may in turn expand or re-shape said toolkit, they may do so in ways that may help illuminate contemporary art more broadly.

In this paper, I will examine *Super Mario Clouds* through the lens of taste culture and through the specific taste operations of restraint and archaism (I’ll get to all this shortly). I maintain that *Super Mario Clouds* creates a space in which multiple layers of taste culture operate simultaneously, sometimes in conflict; it is status-seeking, conservative, elitist and critical, rigorous, and utopian. Of course, I will go beyond simply identifying the different taste operations active in *Super Mario Clouds*. What I’m really after is considering the *effects* of those invocations. How were these taste operations invoked in previous historical periods and how are they inflected in *Super Mario Clouds*? Whose world-view do these taste operations represent? How does each taste operation really function and what might that tell us about *Super Mario Clouds* and about net.art?³

Super Mario Bros. was the highest-selling video game for most of the history of video games (until the introduction of the Wii in 2009) and as such, it has become the

exemplar of video games. Perhaps not coincidentally, *Super Mario Clouds* has become, in the art world, an exemplar of its genre(s) and thus a fitting case study for my purposes.⁴ Since I'll be using terms and concepts (such as "taste culture") developed in several disciplines – from Art History to Sociology to Cultural Studies – it makes sense first to define these terms and how they will be used here. Please be patient; for me the journey is not only requisite but is as interesting as the arrival.

Taste Culture

Taste culture is the means through which material conditions and social class manifest in everyday life as aesthetic choices, mannerisms, and lifestyle. It provides the seemingly innocent forms through which material conditions and the social relations that obtain from and reinforce them are maintained (forms such as the suit you wear to a job interview or how you pronounce Ed Ruscha's name at an art opening, for example, display your cultural capital and locate your position inside or outside social contexts.) Taste culture is an insidious dynamic of power because it is largely invisible, in part because it appears too trivial to critique. Taste culture operates both outside and within the art world where it hides in the crevices of the discourses of aesthetics and social histories of art.

Clement Greenberg wrote about taste culture in his 1939 essay, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" in which he asserted that popular culture, especially kitsch, allowed a population to be manipulated by tyrants and fascists. The only defense, he argued, was a critical and intellectual elite, an avant-garde.⁵ More recently, T.J. Clark also wrote about taste culture (and provided the inspiration for my paper's title) in "In Defense of Abstract

Expressionism". Here Clark characterized Abstract Expressionism as vulgar, arguing that this vulgarity was the result of the ideal of individualism being played out through the class filter of the petit bourgeoisie.⁶ Other scholars have written about this concept as well, whether they use this term or not, and my understanding of it is a selective synthesis of these accounts.

For Marx, power emanates from the economic foundations of society (its base) into all other areas of social operation including society's cultural and artistic levels (its super-structure). For later social art historians such as Janet Wolff, the super-structure enjoys a "relative autonomy" from the base in that the super-structure is influenced by its base, but not entirely predicted by it. While taste culture reflects and manifests economic power, it also provides areas of slippage via this relative autonomy. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu writes about the "habitus" of taste and life-styles as including the reciprocal dynamics of taste expression of taste reading. The habitus is built of capital, both economic and cultural. Bourdieu asserts that taste can and should be considered not only in relation to mass culture, but to the arena of "legitimate culture" (including the art world) as well. Herbert Gans coined the term that I will use, "taste culture", to indicate the structural context surrounding specific expressions or readings of "taste". Gans' term also foregrounds the social nature of taste.⁷

Taste Operation

A taste operation is a manner or aesthetic that functions as a cultural signifier. If taste culture describes the structural context surrounding specific expressions of taste, taste operation denotes those specific expressions. Cultural Studies scholar Dick Hebdige

characterized these as styles, or “ coded exchanges of reciprocal messages”⁸ when he describes punk fashion and aesthetics as a taste operation enacted by 1960s and 70s lower-class youth in Britain and America. Art Historian Nicos Hadjinicolaou takes it one step further by linking class to styles in art and dubbing them “visual ideologies...a specific combination of the formal and thematic elements of a picture through which people express the way they relate their lives to the conditions of their existence, a combination which constitutes a particular form of the overall ideology of a social class.”⁹ For example, Hadjinicolaou argues that David’s portrait of Marat combined figurative naturalism and compositional classicism that combined to reflect the objective rationalism of the rising middle-class and position the painting as belonging to the visual ideology of the revolutionary French bourgeoisie.

Super Mario Clouds Restrained

Super Mario Clouds empties Super Mario Bros. of most of its form and all of its content. The progenitor of Super Mario Bros., Donkey Kong, is known as the first video game to employ a complete narrative (the damsel-in-distress trope that it passed on to Super Mario Bros.) but the silent looping clouds in *Super Mario Clouds* offer no story. Super Mario Bros. was praised initially for the relative complexity of its game play, requiring and rewarding intense involvement, but *Super Mario Clouds* reduces the game to a video and eliminates the possibility of game play. The garish visuals of Super Mario Bros. are reduced to a spookily empty pulsing blue field that could have been produced by the child of Yves Klein and the Joker. The sparse clouds emphasize rather than relieve the sense that you are looking at negative space; they prevent you from reading the blue

square of light as a positive entity in a room and remind you that you are looking at a part of a picture, something incomplete. The artwork is an exercise in negation, reduction, and restraint.

Next, I will explore this restraint as a taste operation and artistic tactic. For my purposes here, “restraint” can be defined as simplicity, visual sparseness, conservation of materials, minimized complexity, conservation of action or effort, and negative space that is bounded but not filled. This brief description must suffice for now because I don’t want to posit restraint as an a priori absolute idea that is discovered or expressed in culture or in artworks. Rather, I will now offer selected examples that demonstrate how restraint has been historically constructed as a taste operation.

Restrained Victorians

In *The Tastemakers: The Shaping of American Popular Taste*, Russell Lynes described how, throughout the 19th century, industrial fabrication offered the newly ascendant bourgeoisie the look-n-feel of labor-intensive luxury without the cost. The middle class could now afford tuned balustrades that had been produced on a machine lathe rather than individually, and expensively, crafted by artisans. Lynes describes how “pictures” were, after the American Civil War, for the first time, available at very low prices (think of the mini-revolution in representation embedded in that turn alone) so that middle class houses could sport their own favored images of landscapes, children, and (oddly) trains and burning buildings.¹⁰ The same was true for cheap mail-order sculptures of erotic-historic genres such as alabaster (actually cast plaster) slave girls by John Rogers (to whom Koons has nothing on).¹¹ All of home décor and fashion was similarly

transformed until the signs and markers of class had all but disappeared.¹² The wealthy class had to do something to re-establish their distinction from these uppity housefrauen.¹³ What they did was turn the tables by exercising restraint in display, framing the extravagance and opulence that had once distinguished themselves as now being gaudy and tawdry “mid-brow” excess (does this ring a bell to anyone who has watched “Cribs”?) For instance, at the time, Harpers Bazar complained of the “uniformity of dress” where, “the man of leisure and the laborer, the mistress and the main, wear clothes of the same material and cut.” Their solution was to propose that American laboring men adopt the French peasant blouse, seductively positioning it as the blazon of freedom. Lynes describes Edward Bok, who had married into the wealthy Curtis publishing family, as, “knowing that a straight lines was better than a curved one, that fanciness was immoral and plainness was goodness.....one of his first attacks on the world was an attempt to rid it of what he called the ‘repellently ornate’.”¹⁴ Here we see restraint as a defensive taste operation enacted by the wealthiest class and adopted as their new coat of arms.

Restraint Now

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argues in his 1993 book, *Distinction: A Critique of the Judgment of Taste* that restraint continues to characterize the elite classes today.¹⁵ Moreover, restraint is not only a taste operation enacted by the wealthiest classes, but one that now invokes their class no matter who deploys it. Bourdieu’s famous construction of the “habitus” proposes that expressions and readings of taste are reciprocal and inextricable from each other. If I am successful in expressing my upper class status by

wearing a simple black dress with pearls, you will eventually come to read such simplicity, wherever you see it, as an indicator of my class. Bordieu further argues that such an aesthetic, if it is to characterize an entire class, will be deployed in more than one area, for instance in my cuisine as much as my clothes.

Bordieu writes that “expressive” taste operations can pervade all areas of an individual or class, “Taste...is the generative formula of life-style, a unitary set of distinctive preferences which express the same expressive intention in the specific logic of each of the symbolic sub-spaces, furniture, clothing, language, or body-hexis. Each dimension of life-style ‘symbolizes with’ the others, in Leibniz’s phrase, and symbolizes them.”¹⁶ And the operative taste operation that pervades and symbolizes wealthiest (“dominant” in Bordieu’s terms) is restraint. Bordieu continues, “...The dominant aesthetic – of which the work of art and the aesthetic disposition are the most complete embodiments – proposes the combination of ease and asceticism, i.e., self-imposed austerity, restraint, reserve.”¹⁷

So, what does this mean for *Super Mario Clouds*? Well, there is more than one way to inflect or to read restraint, and I’ll come to some of those readings soon. But if the constructions offered above apply, and I think they do, then perhaps one layer of taste operation in this work lay in its up-class striving; its desire to be read as high culture despite its pop culture associations. In a UK Guardian interview with Arcangel, the artist says he was trying to make *Super Mario Clouds* a popular meme and to make it artful. He knew that his reductive strategy would work, but he couldn’t say why, “Why I picked the clouds and erased everything else? I have no concrete thoughts on that – I just knew to do

it...”¹⁸ Hopefully my arguments have provided one answer to this question: restraint evokes the high culture world of high art.

What I’ve described above is just one layer of taste operation in *Super Mario Clouds*; later we’ll encounter others that will complicate these valid but early conclusions. Now I’ll turn now to another historical construction of restraint and how it came to be inflected at that moment and then see if that might help us understand *Super Mario Clouds* from a different angle.

Minimal Restraint

In the 1960’s, Minimalism employed restraint in some ways familiar and some not. In *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties*, James Mayer writes, “The Primary Structure replaced the traditional, pedestal scale of sculpture with architectural scale, muddled tones with bright or severe colors, baroque excess with tasteful austerity. It both generated and echoed a larger visual tendency of the sixties to simplify, to reduce.”¹⁹ Minimalism’s restraint also came to be associated with high culture; contemporary high fashion took its cues from the first Minimalist exhibition and Donald Judd eventually designed furniture/objects for high-end designer stores like Calvin Klein (before the down-classing of that brand.)²⁰ But Minimalism also inflected restraint with its own historically generated agenda – for instance as a stance of refusal to be read, to be analytically broken down into component parts Minimalism’s large generic forms refuse to be read as figure/ground and they lack any hierarchy and detail necessary to impute them with narrative.²¹ Their reductive forms and crude industrial materials refused to be

read as high art. If they had originally been placed on the outside of the gallery instead of inside, they might have been mistaken for air conditioning units.

I do not propose that *Super Mario Clouds* is a Minimalist work (though others have argued that it is at least neo-Minimalist.)²² nor that there is some kind of direct teleological lineage between the two. Rather I propose that its invocation of restraint allows us to see some similar tactics between Minimalism and *Super Mario Clouds* even those historically constructed quite differently. For instance, new media artist and curator Patrick Lichty writes about *Super Mario Clouds*, “Commenting on this particular work on the public radio show Studio 360, Arcangel mentioned that he wanted to inject some frustration into the game console by creating a game cartridge that had no elements of the game left, and that the user really could not interact with much.”²³ In this sense, restraint takes on a whole other meaning; of restraining or holding back the viewer from the usual easy pleasures of gaming and new media. This relational restraint attends with *Super Mario Cloud*’s visual restraint and serves a similar function as the visual ‘refusal’ of Minimalism. *Super Mario Clouds* also uses industrial materials to distance itself from art world conventions in a similar kind of “anti-art” statement or refusal to be read by those conventions.

Super Mario Clouds appears to be ambivalent about whether or not it wants to be read as high culture, as high art. Perhaps it wants to expand what constitutes “high culture” or perhaps it really wants to be a different kind of art altogether. Let us see.

Super Mario Clouds Archaism

Archaism is a taste operation that references the past and with it, history. It can be

an effective class barrier; defining the Ancien Regime and barring the Nouveau Riche. It is the reason the Great Gatsby paid to have ivy attached to his new house as if it had grown there for a century. For the upper classes, the further back the reference and the more authentic and personal the connection, the greater its power. References that tie one's personal or family history to regional or national history are best. In *Class: A Guide To the American Status System*, Paul Fussell writes, "There seems a general agreement, even if unconscious, that archaism confers class."²⁴

But there are different types of archaistic taste operations, with different aims. For instance, retro-chic is employed by hipsters who dress like extras from *The Wild One* or *Charlie's Angels*. Fussell, who calls these retro-actors "X" to indicate their status "outside" the standard class matrix, writes, "X's like to watch classic re-runs like *The Honeymooners* or *I Love Lucy*...by these pursuits X people pay their obeisance to the great status principle of archaism."²⁵ Hipsters position themselves in closest relation to the extreme upper and lower classes (avoiding the mid-brow bourgeoisie that has been the bane of every bohemian culture). Fussell calls them an "unmonied aristocracy", similar to Greenberg characterizing the avant-garde as being connected to the ruling class with an "umbilical cord of gold."²⁶ Hipsters use retro-chic to distinguish themselves from their closest neighbors; they differ from the lower classes in that they value popular culture, but with a purposeful mixture of cutting-edge new and banal old (iPads and one-speed Schwinn). They differ from the upper classes in that they reference the past, but not quite so distant a past. If the upper classes currently fetishize Colonial or Art Nouveau, hipsters will cleave to Mid-Century modernism or even the era of their own childhood.

As restraint characterizes the habitus of the wealthy (and the anti-artists), retro-chic characterizes the habitus of hipsterdom. For instance, cartoonish mustachioed hipsters from Williamsburg, Brooklyn to Austin, Texas to San Francisco's Mission District comprise the contemporary dealers, traders, performers, and collectors of 'mid-century modern' furniture and artifacts. Using these objects 40-60 years after the fact of their production puts these objects outside the mainstream of new-product capitalism with its attendant spectacle of advertising and requirement of obsolescence and waste. Their small domestic scale allows these objects to serve of magnets for social organization from the bottom up, and hipsters gather around them regularly at small ad-hoc heterotopias like flea markets that bring to mind William Morris' village markets or Benjamin's arcades.

The game cartridges used in *Super Mario Clouds* were outdated at the time of the work's creation, in fact they were from the era of the artist's childhood; from a game he had grown up with. The nostalgia of *Super Mario Clouds* and similar retro-tech artworks is well-known, but this particular taste operation also confers another, more critical function of "refusal". Media artist Steven Read posted this online, "People in the world today seem to have this incredible ability to quickly embrace and consume new technologies. It is built into the media and culture I constantly face, at least here in America. Call it a gadget religion. I find this fascinating. A somewhat obvious approach to this trend is a strategy of negation or rebellion, which is perhaps a thread of what we are calling here 'digital minimalism'."²⁷ In 2002, contemporary video games were quite different from Super Mario Bros'. flat chunky cuteness. The sleek space cruisers in *Jedi Knight II* or the sepia-toned wasteland of *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* dazzled the eye

with 3-D renderings, texture mappings, 3-point perspectival spaces, and increased resolution, not to mention the advanced computation affecting game play. In refusing this glitz blitz by using obsolete technology, Arcangel opts out and offers a critique of conspicuous consumption, proposing instead to DIY.

I should be careful about uncritically valorizing the hipster, and the hipster taste culture present in *Super Mario Clouds*, because in truth hipsterdom is not entirely anti-market; rather it represents a parallel status market with its own forms of consumption and obsolescence. But what I wanted to show is how archaism functions as artistic tactic and taste operation that forms part of the hipster's habitus. And, perhaps more importantly, I warned you at the start of this paper that *Super Mario Clouds* represented simultaneous layers of taste operations, many of which carry conflicting values and functions. Let us plumb a bit more deeply the confluence of hipsters, retro-tech, and art and see where it takes us. New York Times writer, Holland Cotter, suggests an interesting, in fact utopian, direction,

To many Americans, the world feels more threatened and threatening today than at any time since the 1960's. Terrorism, nuclear proliferation, the prospect of war on Iraq and ever tightening security measures at home have sent a hum of tension through daily life. In the 1960's, comparable tension, excruciatingly amplified, produced a big response: the spread of a counterculture...The collective itself, as a social unit, was an important element in the 60's utopian equation.²⁸

Cotter continues to describe how newer Internet-based artist collectives, like Forcefield, are electronic descendents of earlier artist groups like Colab, Group Material, or Guerrilla Girls and how these newer groups exhibit retro-tech tastes,

Forcefield's vividly low-tech approach to art-making has inspired other, newer East Coast collectives. The group's play with conventional ideas of aesthetic value is shared, to some degree, by Beige, a young collective that takes obsolete computer technology as its medium.

Beige is comprised of three founding artists; Paul Davis, Joe Bonn, and, not coincidentally, Cory Arcangel.²⁹

This article seems to capture the conflicted nature of hipsterdom that is contained within the taste operation of retro-tech; utopianism mixed with despair at the future. In addition to the aforementioned terrorism-induced terror of the world, Peter Weiss writes in *The Clustered World : How We Live, What We Buy, and What It All Means About Who We Are* that a Third Millennium survey found that 53 percent of this demographic, “...believe that the TV soap opera General Hospital will last longer than Medicare.”³⁰ Hipsters employ the taste operations of retro-tech and retro-chic to critique capital and rally utopian communities at the (game) arcades, but they also employ them to nostalgically digress into their childhoods because growing up might not be worth the effort. The contemporary hipster’s retro-active utopia invokes the futurity of Modernism, but not its grand engineering and totalizing vision. The current utopian impulse is domestic in scale and less polarizing with regards to capital. It might even be equal parts earnest drive and nervous escapism. If we were to visualize this hopefulness and hesitation, what might it look like? A blue sky darkened by only a few clouds?

As I said when I began, I think the conflicts in *Super Mario Clouds* do not cancel out the work into an algebraic and algorithmic null, but they characterize the work. Looking at it through the lens of taste culture suggests that *Super Mario Clouds* and other net.art was stricken with a longing for cultural legitimacy while it was repelled by culture’s chaperone, convention. It enjoyed the populism of industry and capital, but was deaf to their glossolalia and snuck out of the revival tent toward a different utopia. Just as Clark’s vulgar paintings played out a soon-to-be lost individualism on the Westchester

walls of the bourgeoisie, perhaps *Super Mario Clouds* and other net.art screened the anxieties and fantasies of its own cartoonish and mercurial demographic.

End Notes

1. "Cory Arcangel's Internet Portfolio Website and Portal," Accessed Sept. 29, 2010, <http://www.coryarcangel.com/things-i-made/supermarioclouds/>
2. Net.art produced by a few well-known artists between 1994 and 2000 has become known as net.art's "heroic" period as the following sources testify.
 - "Miniatures of the Heroic Period," 1999, Accessed on Nov. 19, 2010 <http://art.teleportacia.org/exhibition/miniatures/>
Online exhibition.
 - Eryk Salvaggio, "Duchamp's Ideal Children's Children: Net.Art's Brat Pack," Accessed on Nov. 19, 2010 <http://www.turbulence.org/curators/salvaggio/>
Salvaggio equates net.art's heroic period with an avant-garde period that has passed.
 - Bryan Mackern, 2010, "NetArt Latino 'database' / Interface-Map," Accessed on Nov. 19, 2010 http://www.isea2010ruhr.org/files/redaktion/pdf/isea2010_proceedings_p45_mackern.pdf
Bryan calls the heroic period as the period of self-canonization.Additionally, "Heroism" oddly seems to reconstruct a grandiose mode of Modernism that much populist net.art opposed, and if there was any irony in the term originally, it has since been lost (as often happens with art terms for genres or schools that originally had other, usually negative, intentions – Fauvism, Minimalism, etc.)
3. I will also not pursue other arguments that "taste" gets tangled up in, such as:
 - Using taste to talk about the quality or value of art works (as in "good" or "bad" taste). Greenberg was a master at this, but it's just not my interest.
 - Defending mass/pop against high/art culture or vice versa. Cultural Studies has played out this argument in more detail that I would care to revisit.
 - Describing low and high cultures as separate realms that borrow content from each other (rather, taste operations cut across such divisions and play out in all areas, though perhaps they may be inflected differently depending on the context.)
4. For instance, the 1999 artwork *SOD* by the net.art duo JODI (a re-working of the commercial Castle Wolfenstein game engine into a ponderous, slow moving game of monochromatic geometric abstractions) is equally exemplary of the issues discussed here around restraint and archaism. See <http://www.leonardo.info/gallery/gallery351/jodi.html>
5. Clement Greenberg. "Avant Garde and Kitsch," In *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste* (Universe Books, 1969), 116-126.
6. T.J. Clark. "In Defense of Abstract Expressionism." *October* 69 (1994): 22-48.
7. Jon Elster. Ed. *Karl Marx, A Reader* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). Janet Wolff. *The Social Production of Art* (2nd Edition) (New York: NYU Press, 1993).

Pierre Bourdieu. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).
Herbert Gans. *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation Of Taste*. Basic Books, 1974.

8. Dick Hebdige, *Sub-culture: the Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1981), 129.

9. Nicos Hadjinicolaou, Transl. Louise Asmal, *Art History and Class Struggle* (London: Pluto Press, 1973), 95-96.

10. Russell Lynes, *The Tastemakers: The Shaping of American Popular Taste* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1955), 66.

11. Russell Lynes, *The Tastemakers: The Shaping of American Popular Taste* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1955), 70.

12. Russell Lynes, *The Tastemakers: The Shaping of American Popular Taste* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1955), 75.

13. This defensive maneuver is described by Bordieu, "...Whenever the attempts of the initially most disadvantaged groups to come into possession of the assets previously possessed by groups immediately above them in the social hierarchy or immediately ahead of them in the race are more or less counterbalanced, at all levels, by the efforts of better-placed groups to maintain the scarcity and distinctiveness of their assets."
Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 161.

14. Russell Lynes, *The Tastemakers: The Shaping of American Popular Taste* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1955), 175.

15. While social classes certainly still obtain, categorizing them into "Bourgeois" and "Proletarian" or even "Upper-, Middle-, and Lower-Classes" can over-simplify many class dynamics and anyway those boundaries have been subsequently blurred through...taste culture. For a description of social class as a more complex matrix, I am intrigued by the model presented in *The Clustered World : How We Live, What We Buy, and What It All Means About Who We Are*. Here, Michael Weiss proposes 62 "culture clusters" (later expanded into 69) – micro-classes defined through a combination of marketing research, demonstrated taste practices, and economic status. It's not surprising that twenty-first century marketing could produce a more precise and granular picture of this landscape, but it's perhaps also not surprising that this model makes it more difficult to trace the exact flow of influence and power evident in the older "class ladder". While it would be a fascinating project to do that tracing among the culture clusters, it would distract from the current discussion and so I will have to suffice with a sort of happy compromise. Weiss provides one chart that ranks and groups the clusters according to socioeconomic groupings, demonstrating that the culture clusters are not entirely divorced from society's economic base. So, when I use the shorthand "upper class", I am

also referring to the clusters known as “Blue Blood Estates” and Winner’s Circle”. “Mid-brow” is a taste marker that signals the cluster “Middleburg Managers” and so on.

16. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 173.

17. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 176.

18. Keith Stuart, “The game of art: a profile of digital artist Cory Arcangel,” *Guardian* UK, Dec. 4, 2009, (Accessed Nov. 12, 2010)

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/gamesblog/2009/dec/04/games-art>

19. James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 24.

20. Mayer illustrates how Minimalist art was read with, and as, fashion in a contemporary writer’s elisions, “The Wadsworth show, the style writer for the Hartford Courant declared, was ‘the perfect fit for this season’s contemporary fashions’. Created in ‘the same monotone colors’ with a comparable ‘simplicity of silhouette’...” To this example, I might add that fact of Judd’s designing art-furniture for high-end designer boutiques, and on and on.

James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 80.

21. “...the popular concept of the minimal as an aesthetic of refusal, of reduction, became so omnivorous that it quickly overtook the practices it was first applied to (even now we speak of ‘minimal’ painting, music, design, dance, fiction; the applications are endless.)” This quote demonstrates how Minimalism not only received restraint, but how it carried it forward, newly inflected with refusal.

James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 80.

22. Patrick Lichty, “Caught in the Grid: Toward a Digital Minimalism,” Accessed Oct. 17, 2010, <http://www.voyd.com/texts/LichtyDigitalMinimalism.pdf>

23. Patrick Lichty, “Caught in the Grid: Toward a Digital Minimalism,” Accessed Oct. 17, 2010, <http://www.voyd.com/texts/LichtyDigitalMinimalism.pdf>

24. Paul Fussell, *Class: A Guide Through the American Status System*, (New York: Touchstone, 1983), 73.

25. Fussell and other authors often have trouble incorporating “bohemians” or other “sub-cultures” into the convenient but simple class ladder of upper-, middle- and lower-class, and often define them as “outside” or “sub”. The culture clusters presented by Michael Weiss provides a more accurate model in that bohemians are not “outside” class

considerations; they comprise just another cluster, “Bohemian Mix” that, moreover, can be nailed down to specific zip codes. As if to remind us of the “umbilical cord of gold”, Weiss also characterizes the “Bohemian Mix” cluster as belonging to a high socioeconomic group, despite its name.

26. The umbilical cord is of course from Clement Greenberg’s 1939 essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”.

27. Steven Read, “Pushing Technology to the Minimum,” Dec. 15, 2006, Accessed Oct. 14, 2010, <http://vagueterain.net/journal05/steven-read/01>

28. Holland Cotter, “Art/Architecture; Doing Their Own Thing, Making Art Together,” Jan. 19, 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/01/19/arts/art-architecture-doing-their-own-thing-making-art-together.html>

29. Another New York Times writer, Neil Strauss testifies to the fact that not only do artists deploy retro-tech, but in turn it conflates the artist-hipster-nerd into a contemporary trope and further defines this particular habitus,

“This decade, if geek savvy isn't a sure shortcut to fortunes anymore, it's at least a passport into an exciting artistic underground, epitomized in events like Burning Man....At the Soundlab party, the quartet 8-Bit Construction featured an answering-machine message from a band member's mother, who was rummaging through his possessions looking for an old Atari computer. The band's stage show was a testimony to nerdiness. It wasn't enough for the group simply to play dance music on old Atari and Commodore 8-bit computers and show homemade "Star Trek"-like films. It continually stopped its show to announce the type of computer being used, how much memory it had, its assembly language and other technical minutiae.”

Neil Straus, “Critic’s Notebook; Three Parties In One Night: Sounds Like Nerd Heaven,” June 12, 2001, Accessed Dec. 1, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/06/12/arts/critic-s-notebook-three-parties-in-one-night-sounds-like-nerd-heaven.html?pagewanted=2>

30. Michael J Weiss, *The Clustered World: How We Live, What We Buy, and What It All Means About Who We Are* (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 2001), 60.

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