Happiness is not a bad idea

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"Happiness is not a bad idea"
Degeneration of Art and Happiness

Graduate Thesis
Master of Fine Arts
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology

by Wataru E. Okada
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"Happiness is not a bad idea", Degeneration of Art and Happiness

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_______________________ Date 10/10/96
Thank you, Everyone.
This is a story about how I reached where I am now. The entire text was originally prepared as a script for the Thesis Defense Presentation, and later modified for this Thesis Paper. It is my intention to pronounce logical accounts for what I have evolved.

MFA Thesis:
"Happiness is not a bad idea"
Degeneration of Art and Happiness
Wataru E. Okada

Windows of Perception:
Reality is contingent upon our perception.
Perception is a window over the world.
The question is whose window are we looking through?

In the very beginning of the graduate program, I was interested in the reciprocity between Perception and Reality. The perception of reality determines what is real and what is not real in our lives. Based on cultural background and experiences, each individual instinctively strives to develop his/her perception as something unique, as if they were not expected to be all alike. Each of us progressively constitutes the "windows of perception" that would define and re-define the elusive quality of our lives. We all wish for the real, or at least try to maintain the faith in the real. I would say that it is the perpetual desire of human beings to have something real.

The way we see things and the way we react makes us who we are, and that's what separates us from others. However, living in this highly informed post-industrial society, it is most likely that our individual perceptions have been excessively homogenized. My fear was that we might be looking through factory-assembled, standardized windows of perception, which could lead us to lose identities.
In relation to this idea of "windows of perception", I came to perceive certain things, which seemed to please people's mind very likely in a similar way: such as a blue sky with white clouds, pretty red flowers on a kitchen table, rich green grasses on a front yard, or even furnished decorative brass hardware. I felt that these were generally accepted symbolic coins of what I call "commodity happiness".

Commodity happiness nourishes itself within a social structure that generates and enriches a certain kind of taste called kitsch. Kitsch can be subtle or obvious, but in its essence, maintains the same effect: it sells available happiness. At this early stage, it was convenient for me to attack this kitsch culture as an epidemic plague: a symbolic socio-pathological phenomena, as a result of a confused perception of reality or a lost sense of authenticity, shared by members of a post-industrial mediocrity. This is what Greenberg had to say about kitsch.

"Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same."

"Kitsch welcomes and cultivates this insensitivity using the debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture as raw materials."

— Clement Greenberg
I made a series of pictures, originally titled as "Flowers on the Wall", later changed as "Human Condition: Act #1". I created pictures of flowers as representation of what I would identify as "kitsch taste", and used them in a time framed story. The permutation of the images were rather quiet and anticlimactic, but the underlying subtext was conceived in an iconoclastic manner. In retrospect, I understood that I was questioning human perception in relation to the domesticated notion of Nature as available commodity. In this picture story, a presumed reality of the flowers shifts between the picture frames in a state of flux. It was to question how we place reality in our minds, and how we learn to accept certain types of images as a condition of the real.

This experimental work allowed me an opportunity to look into the work of the Surrealists, especially of Rene Magritte. Although Magritte was not exactly a skilled painter, he had great insight into human sense-perception. His acute vision was particularly demonstrated in a group of paintings called, "Human Conditions". One of his works, titled "Plagiarism" clearly shows that we both had similar ideas. It was fascinating to see a superior model in its execution.
Naturally, the influence of Magritte characterized some of my following work. This particular piece was a combination of photography and 3-D painting. I made a small painted interior space (1/3 scale) as an installation, and generated a series of images using the installation set as a stage. Instead of a linear array of story-telling pictures, I wanted to create a miniature environment, that would throw our everyday perspective into a question. The picture frames are repeated inwards in such a way rendering an illusive visual play to provoke a possibility of perception beyond the picture frames. The intense colors were in use to proclaim the kitsch taste and the Surrealistic context, and as a whole, the installation was meant to re-introduce the vulnerability of our own perception.

In the following quarter, I made another set of installations as an extension of the same idea. But this time, the structure was a little more complicated, and I used a blue sky instead of pretty flowers as a kitsch icon.
I was looking for more refined, technically convincing pictorial illusions. The title of the piece was "My Blue Heaven". There were three kinds of window frames in this visual play of illusion and disillusionment: a television screen, a window frame and a pink door:

Suppose someone was watching T.V. at night, and the image of a blue sky came up on the screen. Gradually, the blue sky shifted into the actual window frame above. Then he/she opened the pink door to find out what was actually happening, and finally the moment of disillusionment: rejection and denial of the illusive Blue Sky. Consequently he/she was left with blue static on both the T.V. screen and the window.

In this story, the blue sky represents a simulacrum of happiness, or what I used to call 'cheap commodity happiness'. Genuine happiness is so elusive that you might rather wish for available happiness. Your perception determines whether you would accept it as real or not. If you could take it as "real", you would not have to live with a sense of
inadequacy. It is a dilemma of perception, in which commodity finds opportunities. The authentic may not be available, but an artificially reduced notion of the authentic: simulacra, can be good enough, or even better.

In the third quarter, I was looking into the structure of 'available commodity happiness'. Then I became familiar with a notion of an artificial hierarchy in reality.

"Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of the America surrounding it is no longer real"

— Jean Baudrillard

"The simulacra is never that which conceals the truth -- it is the truth which conceals the fact that there is none. The simulacra is true."

— Ecclesiastes

I was trying to scale the distance between what is available and what is not available, the cleavage between the authentic and the inauthentic. The piece was called "Study of Happiness". Using the dichotomy of Nature and Domestic as a model, I intended to lay out the process of reduction and domestication, and also to examine the term between the presumed authenticity and the expected reproduction.
I started with the construction of two miniature landscape-models: one for the *natural* and the other for the *domestic*. They were both presented in patterns and images within a mathematical order. Using these models as a stage, first I made a montage image, which turned out to be the precursor for an installation piece that spread out into a linear form. For the installation, I wanted to remove all the surrealistic visual play, and give it a simple structure with mathematical cleanliness. The images were presented in a step by step manner within the structural frames. The piece came with an instructive signage. Vertically, it indicated the process of reduction/domestication, and horizontally, it was to reveal the human desire to overcome something unique by accepting the reproductions.

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![Diagram](image-url)
I wanted to see the rigid physical structure, along with the images, reinscribing the function of commodity happiness, which is based on the presumed authenticity of the 
unreal and the artificial hierarchy of reality.

"Nature is less and less the mysterious nourishing force that emerged with the birth of the universe, and more and more something that we are re-creating ourselves. Genuine nature may now be more artificial than natural."
— Jeffrey Deitch

"Authentic Representation of Happiness"

After more than a year of speculations and experiments, I understood that all I needed was the primary images of Pretty Flowers, Blue Sky and Green Grass. I did not want my work to be didactic nor illustrative any more. I realized that as much as I tried to have my work loaded with thoughts and ideas, the work became less clear and less eloquent, annoyingly opaque, therefore mute. I learned to accept a rule: "Less is More". I had to find a simple but efficient way to present these symbolic images: perhaps some sort of mathematical formula.

I came across an essay written by Le Corbusier and Ozenfant in 1920. It was a defining statement for their new movement, "Purism". They talked about something absolute, some sort of constant factors to make genuine pure art, and they introduced the power of primary colors and primary shapes as the most profound part of the theory.
"These factors are so pure and unchangeable that they can cause irresistible sensations unthinkingly, in all individuals, uniformly in the same way."

"Nothing is worthwhile which is not general, nothing is worthwhile which is not transmittable. We have attempted to establish an esthetic that is rational, and therefore human. The goal of art is not simple pleasure, rather it partakes of the nature of happiness."

— Corbusie & Ozenfant

Their strong belief in Pure Art for everyone seemed like a mirror image of my concerns about happiness and perception; symmetrically facing each other.

This benevolent populist idea of "art for everyone" does not sound completely foreign. It may not be so pure, but the work of Komar & Melamid is somewhat related to this liberation of Art.

"Kitsch potentially has an Avant-garde Power."

— Komar & Melamid, 1993

I felt that the Purist conception of Art was quite sincere and serious, but I chose to be somewhat cynical and sarcastic.

I decided to integrate their formula of pure art into my work. My new intention was to leave the interpretation of the piece open as much as possible, situating myself between celebration and criticism of cheap commodity happiness. It was the audience who would determine what was/was not at stake. The title of the piece was "Happiness is not a bad idea". Primary colors and shapes were used in the
most symbolic way to present the three images. It was specifically designed to make people happy, and I would say it is the authentic representation of happiness.

The Function of Art and Happiness:

The populist idea of Art drove me to consider what is the science of visual art in relation to happiness as well as commodity. In the following quarter, I did some research on the psychological effect of colors and shapes. One of the most intriguing theories I found was called "4-color person", introduced by Dr. Max Luscher. In his book, Dr. Luscher encourages people to pursue happiness based on this rather peculiar theory.

- Green: self-respect and stable mind
- Red: self-confidence and active mind
- Blue: self-moderation and adjusted mind
- Yellow: self-development and open mind

Each color represents certain aspects of our minds. And when our mind is balanced in these primary colors, we can achieve a state of happiness.
Happiness is someone like,

Green

Red

You

Yellow

Blue

Under the delayed influence of the Postmodern-Deconstruction atmosphere, my cynical attitude had been increasingly developed, and I seemed to enjoy the distorted pleasure. I conceived a series of paintings as both pseudo medical devices and as works of art that had calculated commodity values. These have the appearance of contemporary art, but at the same time, they function as remedies for souls with the healing power of color psychology. The question is whether these paintings are phony medical devices that have the style of art, or just another commodity strategy to sell art taking the cynical attitude of postmodern practice.
"Color Vibration" (3ft. x 5ft.)
The combination of green and red promotes the positive thinking of a given situation.

"I love your smile" (3ft. x 5ft.)
The blue is self-moderation. The yellow and the red promote the sense of cheerfulness, and finally the touch of green with yellow gives you a fresh feeling. Comes with a circular mirror.

"Neo-Suprematist Painting" (4ft. x 4ft.)
It has the appearance of modern suprematist painting. Once you purchase this painting, you can change the combination of colors and shapes in any way you want, to improve your state of mind.

"Color is a power which directly influences the soul. Color is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand which plays, touching one key or another, to cause vibrations in the soul."

— Wassily Kandinsky

Furthermore, I made other pseudo paintings that have direct references to the history of painting rather than color psychology. I was fascinated by how advertisement and commercial designs adopt archetypes of master art works as sheer styles. Never mind the artist’s original intention. Ideas behind the work are simply forgotten and only the appearance is kept alive conveniently.
“Red Square after Malevich” (4ft. x 4ft.)
The original painting by Malevich was titled as “Peasant Woman”.

These paintings were both copied from packaging designs of commodity products, not from the original works. They were by-products of the proliferation of copies and commercial appropriations. I would say these were the landscape of a condition: *endless loop of simulacra*.

“Happiness Boogie Woogie” (4ft. x 4ft.)

Toward the end of the 2nd year, I became more interested in Art itself, particularly in relation to the Mass Audiences. I did a joint project with Phil Goldwhite, which experimented with our ideas about Art and Communication. The title of the show was “The Failure of Art to Communicate to the Masses”. Our aim was to see how easy it could be to generate mindless superficial art based on the disconnection between the art world and a public.
As a main piece for the show, we conceived a performance event, that would encompass the theme. The title was “Large Glasses”. We both dressed in complete black, and locked ourselves up in these glass cases. Using a pair of C.B. radio transceivers, we talked about art in general until we ran out of oxygen in the cases. Even though the audience could see us, since they could not hear our conversation, the C.B. radio became the metaphor for the education and the knowledge of fine art discourse. Also, "running out of oxygen" was symbolic of a small art world. Goldwhite recorded this performance on video and added some sound effect afterwards.

In relation to the theme of the show, I thought of three archetypes of enigmatic contemporary art that are generally difficult to be understood by a public: Minimalism; Performance; Ready-Made. I made three primary pieces for the show, that would cast specific shadow on each movement.

The first set of the installation was named “Target: Study after Minimalism”. The idea was to produce mindless minimalist sculptures, using a system of chance operation. I designed a target and a
complementary formula as a device that would determine the primary quality of sculptures effortlessly. The scores from the actual target shooting were to determine the four factors: Material, Form, Size, and Color. It required 4 shots to make one sculpture. I made two sculptures using this system. The result of the first target shooting was: [Size=>Big, Color=>Green, Material=>Air, Form=>Tetrahedron] The execution was 7ft. x 7ft. green tetra made of air illuminated in green.

The other one, the result of another target shooting was: [Size=>Small, Color=>Natural, Material=>Brick, Form=>Square] The execution was a 3ft. x 3ft. square of bricks. These two sculptures were presented along with the used targets. The vapidness of will to create turns the entity of sculptures into sheer objects. Depending on the position of audience(=target) in relation to Art, the intention(=aim) of the work changes.

I arranged a performance art, which never happened as Art. The title is “Falling out of the bed while I sleep”. An X-ray picture of my foot was presented with a platform like bed.
The sign said:

"The artist slept on the 8 foot high platform the night before the exhibition. The artist has been seriously injured. A pair of matching colored crutches are in use."

This incident did not happen in the gallery space. I sleep on a similar platform in my studio every night, and I actually fell out of the bed in real life three weeks prior to the exhibition. But the platform and the x-ray picture were presented as evidence of an intended performance, which actually happened only by accident. It was a pan on Performance/Body Art, but at the same time, it was about absence & presence of the "artist" in relation to the spectators.

"Bliss of Brass: a study in fetishism". Solid brass door knobs are embedded onto the surface of green paintings. I conceived this piece as a Ready-Made that was actually beautiful and has the quality of an authentic artifact. It reflects the same belief system that fetishism takes. Classic Ready-Made art intended to negate the notion of "what Art should be", therefore liberating the idea of art free from restrictions set by conventions and crafts. In the age of neo-avant garde, as typified in the work of Heim Steinback or Jeff Coons, Ready-Made art celebrates the beauty of commodity products dissolving the notion of the High and the Low. In the case of "Bliss of Brass", its symbolic beauty is pure, and intentionally elevated as subject of art as well as fetish icon.
After the exhibition, I found myself very detached from my own work. Probably because it was so easy to make these mindless 3rd generation art, and I did not have to feel responsible for them. Even though I enjoyed this exhibition as an experience, I could not believe that my work was "real". This is a note from my own journal, that reflects my thoughts from the period.

"Whether it is a celebration or criticism, genuine art provides the audience with a sense-perception experience of something real or authentic. Art revives the sense of "what is real" in the minds of the audience. As an artist, I cannot be happy knowing that my work is not real."

And this is a quotation from Donald Kuspit.
"Simulation is one postmodernist strategy of discreditation and mockery of modernist primordiality, and destruction of the boundary between avant-garde and Kitsch -- between the authentic and inauthentic, the high and low -- is another."
— Donald Kuspit

I was lost and disoriented. It was unavoidable to cancel the thesis show, which was originally scheduled in the fall. I left school for several months, and came back with a new set of ideas to salvage my own show.
I convinced myself that I was dealing with two subjects with one underlying theme. One was what I call *Degeneration of Happiness* as in kitsch culture and the endless reproduction of Nature, and the other was *Degeneration of Art* itself: the influence of highly contagious postmodern cynicism that I have been infected with.

"By the Eighties, investment manipulations and re-sale strategies had virtually usurped any possibility for an aesthetic discourse other than what inevitably became an over determined theoretical onslaught against the pitfalls of modernism. This onslaught against the canon became another more powerful canon: the highly financed postmodern or deconstructive mainstream --- more alienating in its politicized rhetoric than anything modernism had yet espoused. The language of deconstruction became more than the messages; it became a revenge."

— Robert Morgan

Bob Morgan believes that politicized rhetoric and the cynicism of Neo-Avant Garde could take away the internal drive for creation from the artist’s mind.

"The neo-avant-garde artist feels peculiarly powerless, unable to effect a therapeutic transmutation of existence --- and thus unable to produce a primordial art."

— Donald Kuspit
In an attempt of working on the first subject, (Degeneration of Happiness), my own work failed into the state of simulacra under the influence of postmodern politics: another form of degeneration.

I decided to divide the gallery space for the two separate subjects. As the audience walked into the gallery, the right hand of the space was dedicated to the celebration of commodity happiness, and to the left, I placed the works about art itself.
#1 Show Title:
MFA Thesis Visual Presentation, "Happiness is not a bad idea":
 Degeneration of Art and Happiness in association with Plastic Museum.
(The Plastic Museum was a small private museum conceived by Phil Goldwhite in an attic space.)

#2 Untitled from Linda & Untitled from Deborah:
Two yellow happy smiles. These were gifts from my Jewish friends. The cereal bowl on the right was from Linda Levinson, who used to teach here at R. I. T. On the left, this is an authentic Yarmulke from Israel, that my classmate, Deborah brought back for me. The meaning of these two objects in the show was almost strictly private. It was about "me not being white", as much as about my fixation with Jewish people.
#3 "A landscape":
This was my favorite piece from the show. The three primary images of Green Grass, Red flowers and Blue Sky were laminated on the layers of curved plastic sheets. The elements of the minimal nature were integrated into one plastic landscape as a pure archetype of what is available. It integrated the idea of the show in an organic way.

#4 "The happiness is not a bad idea":
For this show, I put a white picket fence around the three to make a specific reference to the notion of "domestic".

#5 Window of the Banal:
Across from the small Landscape, I placed a very white window frame. It contained four color prints, that were reproduced from my paintings. But the original graphic design of the pictures were ready-made: they came from decorative banners in a hardware store. The images represent my idea of domestic happiness with such perfection that it almost makes me feel sad. It is difficult to see in slides, but the prints have peculiar sponge-cake like quality that I adore.

#6 Seascape; #7 Garden of the Gods; #8 Tree Top Singers:
This was a triptych. All the images were out-of-focus reproductions came from calendars of popular National Parks, and they were placed behind frosted glasses in each frame. The picture frames were physically
holding the ornaments in front of the images:

#6: A rocking Wave Machine in front of a seashore landscape.

#7: A dried butterfly and flowers in a glass sphere in front of a picture of flowery prairie.

#8: Two plastic birds that actually sing when you come close to the piece. (They were singing constantly on the night of the reception.)

It appears to be about the distance between what is available and what is not. But actually it only represents the stretch between the imaginary entity of the authentic and its expected representation.

"Thus, the desire of contemporary masses to bring things closer spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its re-production. Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction."

— Walter Benjamin

"The adjustment of reality to the masses and of the masses to reality is a process of unlimited scope, as much for thinking as for perception."

— Walter Benjamin


**#9 Vibration:**
(Degeneration of Art occurs where art work is to comfort the audience or the artist himself)
This was the remake of the original "Color Vibration". The new Vibration had stereophonic speakers on the both sides of the paintings, and the size was about 2ft. x 6ft. Various kinds of Sound of Nature are played through the speakers along with the subliminal messages of a soothing voice: "It's O.K. It's O.K. Everything is fine. There is nothing to worry about.
"It's O.K. It's O.K. It's gonna be just fine. Things are getting better little by little, day by day."
It was an optical art with sound.

**#10 “I love your smile”:**
Happiness is a state of mind that may be consciously arranged by choice, or maybe not.

**#11 “Bliss of Brass: a study in fetishism”:**
I added a kneeler for this particular show, so that people can actually pray for the subject of fetishism. I wanted to see the ordinary objects, the door knobs, being elevated as a symbol of fetishism, or authentic artifacts. I believe the function of fetishism can be applied to Art as well as commodity.
In short, fetishism consists of seeing the meaning of things as an inherent part of their physical existence when in fact that meaning is created by their integration into a system of meaning. The mind does not create the fetishism, but registers it in a mistaken fashion. For Marx, commodity fetishism consists of things seeming to have value inherent in them, when in fact the value is produced by humans: it is to naturalize a social process.

— Sut Jhally

#12 An abstract painting:
   "a woman with long hair playing a guitar on a bed naked":
Since I was questioning my own work, particularly in relation to my acquired cynicism, I thought it was appropriate to detach myself. I showed these paintings as work of Ezra Gawky, as well as a collection of the Plastic Museum. I occasionally use this name, Ezra Gawky as my alter ego, or Jewish Caucasian persona. Two paintings by Ezra Gawky, and a Dictionary of Contemporary English were presented as a group.
   I made two almost identical
paintings in a different scale, which are both reproductions of an illustration on the dictionary. The title for the smaller painting is "A study for a woman with long hair playing a guitar on a bed naked", and the large one as a complete work of the same painting: "A woman with long hair playing a guitar on a bed naked." And the opened page of the dictionary was presented in a display case next to it. The illustration was an exact reproduction of the paintings although it was black & white.

A story behind this pan:
Ezra wanted to make some “academic” art that would reflect his education. Wondering what exactly is “academic”, he looked up the word in a dictionary. And there it is, he found the definition of “abstract painting” by accident.

#13 Happiness Boogie Woogie:
I adopted the pseudo painting that I made earlier, into a new context as a work of Ezra Gawky. With a blank space representing the exact dimension of one of Mondrian’s original work, “Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue(1921)”, it signified the absence of the original art as well as the appreciation of the work as intended. I also presented a hair care product that appropriated the Mondrian style for its package. Ezra was inspired to react by one of the most degenerated forms of art.
At the end of the space, I presented some texts in hierarchy that would reflect my thoughts on Degeneration of Art and Happiness.

"Art of painting is nothing but a game of illusions. You can do whatever you want. There is no wrong or right. You create your own world on a canvas. Escaping from the reality, you decide what you like, whatever makes you happy. And this is the very reason people paint. Happy Painting! God bless you".

— Bob Ross

"The work of art affords a kind of relief from the suffering that decadence represents, and at its best initiates a process of self-rejuvenation, giving the audience a taste of what it would feel like to be young again, to feel the spring of youth. For the work of art is emblematic of and embodies the artist's will to power."

— Donald Kuspit

"Thus, like a precious fleeting foam over the sea of suffering arise all those works of art, in which a single individual lifts himself for an hour so high above his personal destiny that his happiness shines like a star and appears to all who see it as something eternal and as happiness of their own."

— Herman Hesse
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Peter Burger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press), 1984

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