

dag solhjell

## the defeat of the curatoriat

### odd nerdrum - a case study of the aquisition and use of symbolic power

● Odd Nerdrum (1944) paints in the tradition of Caravaggio and Rembrandt. Among contemporary Norwegian artists, his name is today the most widely known. His paintings draw the largest audiences and sell at the highest prices when they are exhibited. In 1998 he declared himself not to be an artist but a kitsch painter, and named his paintings kitsch. This paper studies the game of symbolic power around this instance of cultural disorder - or is it order?

*It is often useful, if we say to ourselves while philosophizing: to name something, is like putting a name label on a thing.* Wittgenstein.

#### 1. THE ART WORLD AS A GAME

The art world - in the philosophical sense of Arthur Danto and in the sociological sense of Pierre Bourdieu and Howard S. Becker - is the playground for a social game. The art game has its rules, players, stakes, ethics and plots, varying somewhat from country to country and from one period to another. In the Norwegian art game, Odd Nerdrum is the grand master. Here, I will attempt to explain how he has earned this title by defeating the lords of the game - the curatoriat.

#### 2. THE STAKES

The fame of an artist is a combination of two assets: artistic recognition and market value. Fame is here understood as the reputation as reflected in the status according to public opinion, at large or in mass media; that is, outside the art world. In one extreme, artists can be famous on account of their artistic recognition alone, even if they have no market value. In the other extreme, they can be famous because of their market value alone, even without artistic recognition. These two assets are the stakes at play in the game of art in most art worlds. Each player in the game tries to maximize the combined value of his or her assets. As we shall see below, the art game consists of rules that make combinations difficult, or even illegitimate.

#### 3. THE ELITARIAN ART GAME

In countries with a cultural policy based on the principle of arm-length distance between politics and art, the distribution of these two assets is left to the art world alone. The result is an extremely uneven distribution of the assets: most players end up with few assets, while a small elite ends up with most of it. On the surface, the ethic of the elitarian game appears to be: *winner takes all*. The American and French art games are elitarian in this sense.

#### 4. THE EGALITARIAN ART GAME

In Norway and other social-democratic countries, cultural policy is egalitarian and welfare oriented. Their governments take steps to level out the unequal distribution of assets among players by political means. The ethic of the social democratic art game is: *everybody has a right to art, or art is for everybody*. The governments take responsibility for the material welfare of artists in their countries. Thus, there are three assets at stake in the Norwegian art game. In addition to artistic recognition and market value, there are also government subsidies. This creates an *egalitarian art game*.

#### 5. THE PLAYGROUNDS AND THEIR PLAYERS

The art games tend to split the art world up in as many separate playgrounds as there are assets at stake. On each playground there is a separate set of players, namely those who see that their winning chances are greatest on that particular playground. There is an *artistic or exclusive playground*, where artistic recognition is at stake. Its specific asset is purely symbolic, and with Bourdieu we can call artistic recognition *symbolic capital*. Symbolic capital gives power to confer artistic recognition on others, a power that is purely symbolic. Besides the artists, the most important group of players is the *curatoriat*. The curatoriat consists of the top ranked museum directors and curators, critics, art historians, gallery owners, freelance curators etc in that part of the art world. The curatoriat controls most of the symbolic capital, and thus wields most of that part of symbolic power - the power to consecrate.

There is also a *commercial playground* for sales and income, assets which we call commercial capital. In addition to the commercially oriented artists, the dominating group of players is the private or commercial galleries - except those few who have become members of the curatoriat. The players compete for market shares and for income from sales - *commercial capital*.

The third field in social democratic countries is the *political playground*, where democratic and egalitarian considerations are as important as aesthetic ones. The bodies of cultural policy, the network of government subsidized galleries and the artists' trade unions constitute the major group of players. Often the players do not act individually on this playground, but collectively, because that gives them greater bargaining power. Its real asset is *political capital*, since goodwill among cultural bureaucrats and politicians is necessary to make them subsidize culture with the taxpayers money. In return, the players come up with projects that are politically interesting, and thus increase their political capital.

## 6. THE RULES OF THE SYMBOLIC CAPITAL

There are some vital rules governing the production and distribution of symbolic capital in the art game:

Only players in the artistic playground, who themselves are artistically recognized, can confer artistic recognition on other players.

No players can confer more symbolic capital on others than they have themselves. That is, in order to give artistic recognition, you have to be artistically recognized yourself, on at least the same level of symbolic capital. Therefore, artists bring their symbolic capital, large or small, to their galleries. And the other way round, galleries confer their symbolic capital on the artists they represent.

Symbolic capital can be converted into both commercial and political capital, but the opposite operation is not possible. That is, neither economic success or large government subsidies result in artistic recognition. It is the other way round: artistic recognition makes both the government and the market more willing to spend money on the ones that are already symbolically rewarded. This rule gives symbolic

capital an added economic value. Symbolic capital therefore has a triple value: symbolic, commercial and political, and a correspondingly larger motivating force. Symbolic capital whitewashes commercial capital, and makes government grants seem like wise cultural policy.

Lesser artists are normally said to be influenced by greater artists with symbolic capital conferred on them by the curatoriat, not the other way round.

## 7. THE ETHIC OF THE ARTISTIC PLAYGROUND

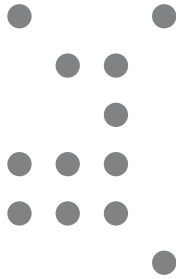
The ethic of the game on the artistic playground is the opposite of what it appears to be. The real name of the game is: *the loser wins*. From the rules mentioned in § 6, artists learn that artistic recognition, with its triple value, can only be attained by satisfying the demands of the curatoriat - the group of players that, because of its own high recognition, commands the greatest amount of symbolic capital. The curatoriat demands subordination to the doctrine of the new. Only the new are worthy of artistic recognition, because only the new will be recorded in the art history written by the curatoriat, and thus be given eternal life. The new has no commercial or political value until it is given artistic recognition by the curatoriat. Therefore, the creators of the new - the young artists striving for artistic recognition - will always be poor. They work in non-arts or arts related occupations only to the extent that they can finance their artistic work from it, and they live modestly to save money for their art.

## 8. AUTONOMY AND THE CURATORIAT

The autonomous work of art has liberated itself from references to everything except to itself and to other works of art. Objects are presented as art that are not art in other contexts than the art world's. It depends on commentaries from the curatoriat for being perceived as art. Thus, the autonomous work of art is dependent on the curatoriat and the exclusive playground. Its autonomy, therefore, is limited. Odd Nerdrum's paintings are non-autonomous and do not depend on the commentaries of the curatoriat in order to be perceived as art; they are accessible and of use to any-



1. Odd Nerdrum (b.1940) *The murder of Andreas Baader*, 1977-78, 330 x 270 cm. By the courtesy of Astrup-Fearnley Museum of Modern Art, Oslo.



one, because they look like art. The Norwegian curatoriat excluded Nerdrum ever since his debut, and has continued to do so for many years. Conflicts of belief within the curatoriat are resolved by the art history, written by the grand curatoriat - the Greenbergs and MoMas of the curatoriat. Artists excluded by the curatoriat do not enter art history - and are not given eternal life.

Only a playground that is comparatively independent of commercial, religious and political interests, attains autonomy. That is, the curatoriat must be able to make aesthetic judgements and choices independent of economic and political interests. Such autonomy is a precondition for symbolic power - the ability to give artistic recognition to others. The symbolic power also gives control of that concept of art which in the long run wins in the whole of the art world, on all playgrounds. The concept of art is defined, aesthetically and rhetorically, by the curatoriat choosing something, pointing at it, and saying in a convincing way: *that is great art*. For many years, the Norwegian curatoriat did not point to Nerdrum's paintings, except when saying: *that is not new, that is not art, that is kitsch*.

#### 9. THE EXEMPLARY AND THE CANONIZED

Great art consists of artworks that are exemplary for and canonized by the curatoriat. They become exemplary by repeatedly being pointed at by the curatoriat, as examples when identifying and defining a new direction or style in art. The artworks becomes canonized when the curatoriat gives them eternal life in the art history it writes, and in the museums exhibiting this history on their walls. The curatoriat uses the exemplary and the canonical works of art as flattering references when it promotes less recognized art and artists. It is the art it points at when it attempts to demonstrate what art the lesser artists are influenced by. Odd Nerdrum's art could not be exemplary, because the curatoriat already had examples of that direction in art - it was not new. It could not be canonized, because it's place in the history of art was already occupied by canonized works of art. It could not be used as a reference - a measure stick for quality - for other contemporary art, or be

said to influence or be influenced by other contemporary artists, because the curatoriat did not consider it contemporary. For this reason, Odd Nerdrum's art was not useful for the curatoriat, but dangerous, because it threatened both it's aesthetic, it's ethic and it's symbolic power. The curatoriat called his paintings kitch. They laughed, Nerdrum cried.

#### 10. THE PLOT

From the first moment in his career, Nerdrum has taken a stand for the pre-modern, heteronomous work of art, the ones that are independent of the comments, the exemplification and the canonization of the curatoriat. His Norwegian network is dominated by commercial galleries with no symbolic power, and they are not allowed to sell his paintings, only his lithographs. With this gesture he has disobeyed one of the commandments of the Norwegian curatoriat, saying: *You shall oppose commercialization of art*.

Recently he painted an apple to be used in the ads for apple juice. He has regularly made lithographs of his paintings, and sold them in commercial galleries - a practice scorned by the feinschmeckers of the curatoriat. He has not followed the ascetic ethic of Edvard Munch, who declared: "I hav never thought of painting for the sake of selling." The curatoriat accepts this practice only from painters they already have given their artistic recognition, because it then symbolizes the victory of art over money. With Nerdrum, it symbolizes the victory of money over art. His lithographs are not purchased by the National Gallery of Norway, whose acquisition policy is rather inclusive. He earned good money from sales already as a young artist, without first having received the recognition of the curatoriat. For many years he has participated in the popular Autumn Exhibition in Oslo, the traditional Salon, established in 1882, that draws a larger audience than any other exhibition of young, contemporary art, with a royal presence at the opening. The curatoriat despises that exhibition. A handful of his paintings were purchased by a few major Norwegian public collections early in his career. With their social-critical motives, they were politically correct for the leftist artists dominating the acquisition commit-

tees in those years. With a few exceptions, these early works are still the only ones representing Nerdrum in Norwegian art museums. For many years, he has denied selling more recent paintings to them, even if they ask for it. Nerdrum is not represented in the stable in any of the leading Norwegian private art galleries holding substantial symbolic power, but is represented by galleries based in New York. He teaches young artists privately, and has formed his own "school" - something unheard of in the art academies of today. Only one Norwegian art historian - the Swedish born Jan \_ke Petterson - has been allowed to write monographs about him, and this art historian is not centrally placed in the curatoriat. As director of the new, small and provincial Haugar Vestfold Museum of Art, Petterson is the only curator in Norway who has Nerdrum's contemporary paintings on show.

His first and only official position in the Norwegian art world was a place on the board of the governmental Norwegian Cultural Council. The place was offered him by the right-wing "Party of progress", the only Norwegian political party negative to government subsidies of art. The Social Democratic Party of Norway collaborated with Petterson and Nerdrum when the government decided to establish two new positions for professors of figurative art at the state art academy, against it's will, and against the will of the artists' organization - of which Nerdrum has never been a member, and whose journal always has characterized him in negative terms. He is probably the best selling Norwegian artist today.

Thus, Nerdrum has consistently avoided joining the network of the Norwegian curatoriat. Because of this, he has not received its artistic recognition, and has not gained symbolic power within the Norwegian art world. He owes it nothing.

#### 11. THE LOW RECOGNITION OF THE NORWEGIAN CURATORIAT

Almost everyone in the Norwegian curatoriat is in the service of government institutions or institutions strongly subsidized by the egalitarian minded government. This yields the curatoriat low international authority, because it is considered as having low degree of political and national autonomy. In other words, it holds

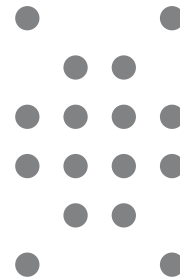
a low symbolic capital internationally, and a correspondingly low capacity to confer international recognition on artists, be they Norwegian or foreign. For this reason, it could not bring Nerdrum international recognition. He had to turn elsewhere. So he did, and has received an international recognition beyond the capacity of the Norwegian curatoriat. In other words, his symbolic power became larger than theirs. Now, he was in a position to challenge the art game. He had reached a position where he could confer his recognition on them. But he chose not to.

#### 12. THE PLAY - THE REVENGE

By avoiding it's network, and by refusing to follow its ethic, Nerdrum denies the Norwegian curatoriat a share of his own international recognition - a recognition that surpasses the recognition of the curatoriat. His symbolic capital also provides him with political and commercial capital. Nerdrum owes the curatoriat nothing, and is independent of it, both symbolically, commercially and politically. It needs him more than he needs it. He is truly an autonomous artist, and a winning loser. His has become the stuff artists' myths are made of.

#### 13. THE FINAL BLOW - THE CROSSOVER

In 1998, when Nerdrum had his very first large retrospective show, it took place in a private art museum, recently established by one of the leading Norwegian financiers based on his own collection of art - the only private art museum in Norway. A museum and a collection owing nothing to the curatoriat, like Nerdrum. At the opening, in front of the most exclusive gathering of art lovers, collectors and curators perhaps ever seen in Norway, he declared himself a kitsch painter. *I am not an artist, my paintings are kitsch*, he exclaimed, to the great consternation of the audience, many of whom were owners of his paintings. It was like saying *I am whoring with my art, I am a pimp for my students, and I do it for money*. Kitsch, for the curatoriat and for the good taste, is both un-aesthetic and un-ethical, and extremely so. Kitsch is everything art is not supposed to be. It is beyond the limits of art - the evil of the art world.



His kitsch confession is a logical consequence of his negative relationship with the curatoriat, and his striving for autonomy. With this confession he gives both a popular and an intellectual explanation for his break with the curatoriat. But he goes further. By declaring himself a kitsch painter, and not an artist, he expropriates from the curatoriat its traditional ownership to the definition of art. He grabs this right and distributes it freely to the people. In doing this, he supports the egalitarian cultural political message of the political parties in Norway: *Everybody has a right to art*. The logical consequence of that policy is that everybody has a right to his own concept of art. Nerdrum gives them this right. And they love it, and they love him, because his paintings look more like art than the works of any other artist they know. Thus, the concept of art as we have understood it since the 18<sup>th</sup> century disintegrates and disappears. With his doctrine of kitsch, Nerdrum attacks the concept of art, and thereby challenges the power of the curatoriat. This puts him on par with the surrealists and dadaists of the 1920's. He turns Duchamp upside down, and paraphrases Magritte by saying about himself and his paintings: *I am not an artist. This is not art*. Duchamp's followers turned kitsch into art. Now Nerdrum turns art into kitsch, the opposite way of Danto's *Transfiguration of the commonplace*. He is the winning loser. He has won freedom from the cultural order established by the curatoriat, by using the institutional framework of art against itself.

The greater his support from the heteronomous parts of the art world - the commercial and political playgrounds, with their markets, media, their public and politicians - the greater became his power to undermine the curatoriat and its concept of art. As result, the attacks from the curatoriat became stronger, and in turn, it served only to weaken its own position. Today it has understood the working of this mechanism, and runs after Nerdrum as if to redeem old sins. The kitsch doctrine was Nerdrum's answer to its proposals.

#### 14. THE SOCIAL COMPONENT OF ART

Nerdrum's actions make visible something which is normally is out of view, but which is valid for all artists and all works of

art: Art is more than what meets the eye, more than signs where a signifier points to a content. Works of art are also contributions to a discourse, not about the content and meaning of the works of art, but about the concept of art and the social institution that produces it. From the first moment when an artist comes out of her studio with her works, she has to make choices that appear not to be aesthetic, but social and ethical. Education, membership, outlets for exhibitions, preferred audience, work priorities, sources of income and public utterances are but a few examples. When such choices are made, they lead to a certain playground, and to a certain social position as player in the art world. The works of art then will be read as signs for the positions taken. The aesthetic decisions reached in the studio have social and ethical effects. Not even Nerdrum can escape such choices. It is only from a misrecognized, that is, a *de facto* recognized symbolic position of power in the art world, that he can attack and undermine it.

When recognition from the curatoriat threatens his autonomy, Nerdrum flees from it by placing himself outside the concept of art. And why shouldn't he? An art world that can make kitsch into art, must accept that someone can turn this miraculous transfiguration against itself, and turn art into kitsch. Only the ones who hold the greatest symbolic power can do that. The paradox is that it is only within the perspective of the art world the possibility of this is surprising.

#### 15. CROSSING OVER WITHOUT A CROSS-OVER

By declaring his paintings kitsch and naming himself a kitsch painter, Nerdrum performs the largest possible crossover in the art world. It is so large that he possibly has even crossed its borders, and finds himself outside the art world. Crossing such borders - cultural orders - is what crossover is about. However, his paintings are the same as before the great cultural leap. They have not crossed a border. What has crossed a border, then? Nerdrum's name has crossed the borders of symbolic power. The question is, will this give rise to a kitsch world, like the moderne concept of art gave rise to an art world? Or will kitsch continue to be the underworld of the art

world - a hell for sinners against the paradisaical order of the art world?

*... a reference to the feeling of pleasure and displeasure ...designates nothing whatsoever in the object, but here the subject feels himself how he is affected by the presentation. (Kant) ●*

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