

The Double Life of Jeff Koons' *Made in Heaven* Glass Artworks

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This article owes a lot to Arthur C. Danto's heuristic writings about the Artworld, which have shown us, that the ontological status of works of art is, at least when we discuss some current, maybe even dominating trends in contemporary art, dependent on our more or less philosophical interpretations of them. The effects of the Dantoan atmosphere of theory and art historical consciousness are, still, decisive for just some contemporary art. Danto's interest in the philosophical side of contemporary art makes his philosophy of art exclusive in relation to art which is less philosophically appealing than the readymade tradition, to the extent that Danto did not, for a long time, even try to incorporate problems of beauty, aesthetic experience, and formal qualities, to his theory of the Artworld.¹

As long as we discuss the artistic games played by Marcel Duchamp or Andy Warhol, Danto's theory does not pose any problems. But the field of contemporary art consists of a broad variety of practices, of a whole family of game-like territories of art, embodying a multiplicity of aesthetic interests, ideologies, and narratives of art history, as well as differing practical conventions, as uses of popular or local imagery, artistic techniques, and, if audiences are discussed, countless ways of making intertextual connections, ways of framing, and interpreting objects.

Anish Kapoor's somatically appealing colourist sculptures, the provocative manga glass fibre statues of Takashi Murakami, which require as much understanding of

¹ Even if we consider Danto to be one of the leading philosophers of art, we have to remember that he writes exclusively about contemporary art, and mostly about its philosophical side. He has neither been very interested in beauty or sensuality in art, and this has narrowed substantially the heuristic scope of writing about even contemporary art. Nor seems aesthetic experience to have been an important issue for Danto. About aesthetic experience, see e.g. Arthur C. Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 67. For Danto's views on e.g. the Artworld, see Arthur C. Danto, "The Artworld", in *Philosophy Looks at the Arts, Contemporary Readings in Aesthetics*, ed. Joseph Margolis (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), 155-167. For Dickie's theory, which will be discussed below, see e.g. George Dickie, *The Art Circle: A Theory of Art* (New York: Haven Publications, 1984).

contemporary popular culture as of the Artworld, and the irritating, disgusting performances and videos of Paul McCarthy, all recall how philosophers may just want to see art as a philosophical enterprise, without taking into account the variety of ways contemporary art flourishes, without even mentioning broader, more democratic fields of art, including the popular and folk arts. Competence to understand some contemporary art, like the philosophical game made famous by Duchamp and Warhol, does not automatically lead to a competence required for another one.

This does not mean that the games Duchamp and Warhol played with the ontology of art, and which Danto portrayed in his writings, would not be important, maybe even central to contemporary art, and many of the works of art we consider to be important have at least some connection to the readymade tradition, whether roughly philosophically, as in Duchamp's case, or, appealing also for popular consumers, as Warhol's pictures often did, and still do.

Philosophers of art, have not, however, given enough attention even to later moves connected to the Duchampian tradition. One contemporary artist, Jeff Koons, claimed already in the beginning of the 1990's, that he, as an artist, had made the next big move in the readymade game.² I am not aware if Koons referred to a singular exhibition, series of works, or, just one piece, but, I doubt that most of his works, like his readymade drycleaners or kitsch statues, would make a difference. The 1991 series *Made in Heaven*³ is philosophically more interesting. For *Made in Heaven* Koons produced a group of works of art, which are, whether intentionally or not, fully, and without any contradiction, members of two different artistic realms, at the same time as they have two authors, two artists who made them.

I

Before going into the delicate example case, it may be good to get a theoretical grip of the problem by turning to Danto's, and to Dickie's nowadays less popular theory of

² Koons said this in an interview published in a 1990 edition of *Vogue*, and the interview is republished in *Jeff Koons*, ed. Angelika Muthesius (Köln: Benedikt Taschen, 1990), see e.g. 153.

³ Pictures of the series can be seen in *ibid.*, 124-161, see especially 132, 134-135, 138-139.

art. Danto gave us the "Artworld", a concept, which has, to some extent, become part not just of aesthetics, but also of artists' jargon, and even of the cultural bureaucracy's vocabulary. In his theory Danto described the peculiar logic, sensibility, which makes it possible, in the Artworld, that any object may become presented and interpreted as art in a meaningful way. Dickie's institutional theory was an attempt to explain how the realm of art works from a sociological point of view. Dickie seduced philosophers of art to understand how the abductions of everyday objects into the Artworld take place with the help of museums, critics, and other gatekeepers, and how also the name of the artist, when it becomes well known, works like a brand, a meaningful factor in producing meaning when presenting radical objects as art.

Dickie does not, like Danto, discuss only the Artworld of New York, neither exclusively conceptual, nor intellectualistic art. Still, Dickie's theory is so narrowly sociological, that, as a model, many philosophers feel that it is a dead end for the project of defining art, where theory, even if first heuristic, ceased to be productive and informative. What is presented in the "Centre Pompidou", the Guggenheim's, or in the snobbish galleries of London, among many other arenas of contemporary art, including huge international exhibitions like the "Kassel Documenta" or "La Biennale di Venezia", and, what the critics of the main newspapers and art magazines write about, has to be art with the capital A, at least in some respect, but this, even if true, does not really satisfy the interest most of us have in philosophy of art.

Danto's and Dickie's models could be used as models of thinking about art. To take an example, visual artist Steve Harvey created, to make a living, a package to be mass produced by the Brillo Company. Harvey's background in abstract expressionism did not turn the Brillo Box into an interesting object, but, as we know, Andy Warhol brought one mass produced Brillo Box to the East 74th Street "Stable Gallery". The self-conscious customers at the gallery connected Warhol's work to an art historical context, Danto himself with the help of a whole bunch of writings about the Brillo Box. We will never know if Warhol meant his early works to be just jokes, critiques of the world of art, or a new move in a more or less Duchampian game. Maybe Warhol was made to be a contemporary artist by an enthusiastic public, and he decided to

accept the invitation. This would not, of course, change the ontological status of his works, as works of art.

Chronologically Danto's theory, the Artworld, always comes one step ahead of Dickie's institutional theory of art, in the process of theorizing the fact that something is becoming high art. The Dantoan atmosphere of theory and art historical consciousness gave the public, which attended Warhol's show at the "Stable Gallery", the ability to enjoy a radical work, which was not yet institutionalized, and, by accepting Warhol's work as art, they, as powerful gatekeepers, helped to institutionalize the work.

The *Brillo Box* brought analytic philosophy of art from the world of objects and their intrinsic qualities to the realm of non-objective factors, stressing the fact that our interpretations of art are an important factor in the process where some works get the status to be works of art, but at the same time, it made analytic aesthetics stick to the works of contemporary art which could be called philosophical, i.e. made the analytic philosophers see the realm of contemporary art from a very narrow viewpoint, forgetting not just other spheres of contemporary art, but also broader uses of the concept of art, including the popular and folk arts. And strangely, Danto could not really free himself from object centered thinking, traditional ways of seeing an object as a bearer of exclusively just one singular identity. In a way, Danto did not work out his theory to its logical end, even if he started to take analytic aesthetics away from focusing just on objects and their qualities.

Warhol's *Brillo Box* became a special case in the class of mass produced Brillo packages, but Danto did not think about the possibility, that the ontological status of an object of art could, following our possibility to abduct nearly everything into the realm of contemporary art, sometimes be divided between two different realms of art. Harvey's authorship of the Brillo Box may not be a topic worth of discussion, but Danto, who has been criticized for concentrating too much on the New York art scene, could have concentrated even more on his local Artworld, as Jeff Koons worked with Dantoan themes in the 1990s, producing objects, which may have led Danto to continue on his ontologically radical path.

II

The history of the arts shows us, that, at least types of works of art may have been divided between two different tokens, already before the era of modernism. In his book, *Highbrow / Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (1988) Lawrence Levine shows, that Shakespeare's plays were performed and appreciated in 19th century United States as entertaining popular culture, and, for a while, at the same time, as high art theatre.⁴ According to Levine the two different Shakespeare audiences fought violently over the right interpretation of Shakespeare's plays in the so called Astor Place Riot, where dozens of theatre fanatics, belonging to the entertainment wing, were killed, and hundreds of theatre goers were wounded. The entertainment wing lost, with its non-dogmatic version of Shakespeare, shows filled with jokes about political issues, and the whole entertaining evening built to resemble more a variety act than an event we connect to appreciating an autonomous play in high culture. The art version of Shakespeare was legitimated as the only right way to enjoy Shakespeare, for a long time, with devastating results concerning the multiplicity of the ways a good Shakespeare play can serve us, and, as Levine hints, entertainment Shakespeare was born again when film came to satisfy our needs of entertainment in the 20th century. Anyway, the violent case reminds us about the fact, that we often want our dearest objects of appreciation to have the status of belonging just to our ways of using them. In the case of a normal readymade artist, who takes an object, which has no importance as art, and presents it as art, we do not get into problems concerning other ways of appreciating art.

My own proposition for a kind of a new *Fountain* consists in the creation of unique physical objects, not types for different incarnations of the work, like playwriting might be for their performances, but two differing works of art in one object, with differing ontological statuses, two authors, and, paradoxically, without any contradiction.

⁴ Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1988).

Koons' *Made in Heaven* show, consisted of photos, and glass and marble statues portraying Koons himself with his wife, Cicciolina, more known as a porn actor, in sexual acts.⁵ Koons was already known as a readymade-artist who had presented mass produced basketballs and dry cleaners in his shows, ready-mades in the traditional meaning of the work, in cameo roles, and, as material for installations. He had also worked with readymade-themes by, for example, copying pictures from kitschy post cards to his own own porcelain works, and by using famous brands in his artworks.

The glass and marble works of *Made in Heaven* were ordered from skilled Italian artisans, which are, at least in some language games, called artists, and who are appreciated in their local artistic realm in a manner which resembles the high appreciation we give to modern or contemporary artists as authors. How can a work ordered from another artist be a readymade? In a way it cannot, and maybe we should be talking about a special case in the class of ready-mades, or a clever comment on the readymade-tradition.

A legitimate, canonized, and, for art dealers, safe contemporary artist like Jeff Koons may possibly bring any object into the Artworld. The history of art is, in its turn, full of example cases, where we find works from less valued art forms and artists rising in the cultural hierarchy, or entering the Artworld in different ways. One of these historical examples could be the poster art of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, which belongs to all contemporary versions of our canons of art. In this case works of art outside the institution of art are being interpreted in fresh ways, and become part of a new artistic context. In the Toulouse-Lautrec example we still have only one author, which is not the case with the *Made in Heaven* artworks, as we shall see.

It may be useful to shortly exclude some other paradigmatic cases before going into the main problem. One of them could be exemplified with the help of a personal memory, concerning the relationship between a skilful artisan and a contemporary artist. The father of one of my best friends, a carpenter, used to execute the artworks of a famous contemporary artist. The fact does not shock anyone who is educated in

⁵ As Thierry de Duve commented, during a congress presentation of this paper, we might also want to see Cicciolina as one possible author of the *Made in Heaven* artworks, even if not as an important challenger of Koons as Signoretto.

contemporary art, but it was an illuminating experience to spend time in his studio, to see the instructions written down on paper, and, future works of art, simple, geometrically shaped, huge pieces of wood, lying on the floor. Once there was a problem with the instructions, i.e. the order, and the carpenter called the artist, who advised him to solve the problem by his own.

Philosophically the case is not that interesting, nor problematic, and it is more than a half century later than the *Fountain* made by Duchamp. From the viewpoint of authorship it is even less problematic than the masterpieces signed by early modern masters, who, as we know, were often partly executed, maybe even created by their students. This was the way artists were educated in early modern times, but, in the end, the maestro was responsible for the work produced. The artisan in our contemporary story produced physical objects which would not have had any meaning outside the realm of contemporary art, as they were formally dull, not very beautiful, useless pieces of wood, and even quite easy to execute. In fact the contemporary artist would probably not have needed the help of the carpenter, as the execution of the work was not very complicated. We would have an analogous case, from the readymade-point of view, if our exemplary artist would have thrown a piece of wood in the river to rot, as he seemed not to care very much about the final form of the work when the carpenter called him and asked for advice with the instructions. The carpenter could be said to be the author of the works only in a very banal, non-artistic meaning of the word. The pieces became interesting when they were presented as art in an exhibition of the famous artist, in the Artworld.

In the other, aforementioned historical example, let us for example talk about the school of Raphael, the early modern artist used his, not that often her, students' skills to produce paintings in his own style. He was responsible for the exact planning of the work, as well as all formal decisions, and, in the end, of all details, as he had the authority to accept or not to accept the work of his students. The students had differing roles in the execution, but none of them had an independent role as the author of the work.

There is still one nearly paradigmatic example which should be recalled. It is the already classical, delicious example of the Willem de Kooning painting which Robert Rauschenberg wiped away. The destroying of the de Kooning painting took place, as we know, peacefully. Rauschenberg asked de Kooning for permission to erase the colours of one of his paintings. Art philosophically the story is quite simple. A contemporary artist, a giant in our contemporary Artworld, proposes to another, already then a canonized artist, that he would like to deconstruct one of his works of art. An institutionally secure work of art becomes another, nearly one as institutionally secure object. We are talking about games played by two Midas-like characters in contemporary art.

III

In his series *Made in Heaven* Jeff Koons presented glass and marble works, and photos, portraying himself and his wife Cicciolina in a variety of more or less pornographic acts. The *Made in Heaven* works have then been presented on many occasions, and they have already become canonized in the art history of the 1990's. In the execution of his work Koons used virtuoso-like artisans, who continue to cultivate old, highly valued local traditions, which are, more or less, naturally, nowadays also affected by modern art thinking, which happen to also have deep historical roots in Northern Italy, ways of appreciating art, which have, throughout our own post-modern era been expansively and democratically, step by step, distributed to artistic realms outside the modern fortress of art.

The busts, made of marble, were produced in Tuscany, in the inspiring marble area extending from Carrara to Camaiore, all the way to the slightly kitschy art deco town of Viareggio on the Italian Riviera. The glass works were made in the lagoon of Venice, in Murano, a cluster of small islands, where crystal, among a variety of ancient and modern trends in glass and mirror work were invented, and where the unique tradition of Muranese glass artistry is preserved by using the old skills for the benefits of contemporary art, but of course even more, to produce design and tourist kitsch.

There, Koons and Cicciolina modelled for an at least in Veneto well known, but also internationally recognized glass artist, Pino Signoretto. It is important to know that the Signoretto brothers have produced erotic art also without Koons, which you may be able to see, at least in one of the classy shops selling glass on the Fondamento da Mulan, or, in fact, in the backroom of it, where freaky glass collectors make expensive shopping.

So, Koons hired a first class glass artist to execute his works. Those who know Signoretto's work, or maybe even the works he made for Koons, know that he is able to produce works with a high enough formal quality for us to call them "glass art", which is a concept, I presume, we often use when the formal quality of the glass work is on a high level. In other words, Signoretto's work as a glass artist is here used by Koons.

The story differs from Rauschenberg's and de Kooning's story. Signoretto does not have the status needed in the world of contemporary art. If Rauschenberg would have asked de Kooning to paint for him, we would know everything about it. We are allowed to forget Signoretto as the other author involved in Koons' work just because he is situated hierarchically lower, or even outside the hierarchy of contemporary art, the field, where Koons is one of the main trendsetters.

There has not been a lot of discussion about the autonomy of glass art works, nor have philosophers cared about it in the way they have done with e.g. painting and literature. A visit in Murano's glass museum, and taking a look at the beautiful lamps, plates, and even furniture made of glass, as well as the Mickey Mouses and seahorses sold to the tourists, recalls that the world of glass art belongs, at least partly, to the realm of design. Glass art has usually some practical functions, even if the works would be appreciated for their artistic merits, and at least the Venetian glass artists do not stress their autonomy in the way contemporary visual and conceptual artists do. Signoretto has, anyway, made some non-design objects, which may be appreciated more in the manner of modern art, but for us it is more important, that Signoretto is a real glass artist and has the status of glass artist in the traditional meaning of the word.

I suppose that if someone orders a work of glass art from a glass artist and the artist produces the work wanted, say, a glass imitation of Duchamp's *Fountain* for a professor in art history, we would think of the work, in the realm of glass art, as a work of the glass artist, not the person who ordered the work, even if the glass artist was given the idea and constructions to execute the work. Why would it be a different case when Jeff Koons orders a work of art from a glass artist? The fact that Koons is the author of the works in contemporary art does not change the logic of being an author of something in the realm of glass art.

In this aforementioned context the works are so to speak Signoretto's works of glass art, not just executed by him, but attributed to him. This can be tested by walking into a couple of glass shops in Murano, where it may happen, that someone talks about Signoretto, not surprisingly, as the glass artist you may know, even if you are not into Muranese glass art, because he made the famous sculptures of Cicciolina. (Koons seems not to be as interesting as Cicciolina as an object to be portrayed in glass art.) Signoretto's authorship gets force from the long historical tradition of glass art in the Venetian lagoon, and the fact, that the realm of glass art is highly valued, and broadly cultivated, in its own terms in Venice. There is a whole world tying Signoretto and the *Made in Heaven* artworks together in a meaningful way. In this world, modernist ideas of originality do not make the artist, and the fact that somebody who ordered the work gave instructions for it, does not change the fact that the glass artist is the author of the work.

I think we have to accept the fact that the *Made in Heaven* glassworks have two authors, and, partly because of that, two differing statuses as art, in two different systems, realms of art, without contradiction.

The Brillo Box was abducted from everyday life, and even as a nice looking package it does not represent the most highly valued side of everyday life, nor is Steve Harvey an appreciated and well-known artist of everyday objects. But glass art is its own realm, an artistic and culturally highly developed, historically stable and uncontested field with its own laws of action, sensibilities, and rules. We may imagine an old glass artist in Murano — and it does not really matter if he knows contemporary

art or not — seeing the *Made in Heaven* artworks, and thinking of them as masterpieces made by Pino Signoretto as Pino Signoretto's works of art, which is the same thing in the world of glass art.

If the artworks would physically be made by Koons, they would amusingly not interest the world of glass art, or maybe they would, just as a curiosity, an example of the way contemporary artists may sometimes play with glass as a material for their work. If made by Koons, the works would not have status in the glass art world, at least not in Murano, even if they would be as well executed as Signoretto's pieces. The realm of glass art, or more narrowly, the realm of Venetian glass art does not consist of the same kind of a network of museums, critics, and connoisseurs, as the world of contemporary art, and it is far smaller in size, but it has as well tight rules, and the meaning and value of the works are connected to a variety of factors, one of them being the name of the author. And, as in contemporary art, it is hard to become a respected member in the world of glass art.

The aforementioned facts do not pose any problems for the Artworld, where the *Made in Heaven* glassworks are definitely just works attributed to Jeff Koons. We have a contradiction only if we have reason to argue that objects of art may have only one ontological status and identity as works of art, i.e. a status just in one realm of art. This position, needless to say, would be hard to defend.

Two different artistic realms attribute the *Made in Heaven* works to two different persons. One of them has, as artist, his roots in a historical tradition of craftsmanship and artistry, not anymore totally distinct from modern ideologies of art, but still relatively autonomous as well in relation to contemporary art and other spheres of culture in Veneto. Murano may well be an exceptional case because it is even physically distinctive, a cluster of islands outside a nearly bizarre, architecturally appealing but commercially exploited tourist resort, with deep historical roots in glass artistry going as far back as a millennium. The other one is, or at least was known, as one of the most famous *enfants terribles* of contemporary art. If we claim that the difference between the two identities in question is just a product of different

interpretations, we face a rather strange position: we are claiming that the difference between the works of two different artists follows from our interpretation.

I do not claim that the *Made in Heaven* artworks would be ontologically unique, and I do not know if we have followed Koons' intuitions, nor intentions, but I think we have to give Koons, anyway, a point in the Duchampian game, even if this would, as possibly also in Danto's Warhol case, be a philosophical intervention in art. The difference is still that Danto stole the Brillo Box and Warhol's also popularly appreciated art for his own exclusively high cultured purposes in philosophy, but here we stand forced to admire the beauty of plurality, the ways worlds and realms of art may live side by side, and, sometimes, intersect, and maybe, in the future, enter in a more democratic dialogue.

Signoretto's position may be a bit weird, even problematic. Maybe the works, signed by Koons, in the spotlights of global media and the Artworld, have seduced him to doubt his own role as an artist. There is no reason for it. As I said earlier, we do not have a contradiction here. And the aforementioned ways Koons and Signoretto are authors of the *Made in Heaven* artworks are more than just different ways of using the word author. They point to real artistic authorship which, even if the aesthetic realms in question are clearly separated, and there are hierarchical pressures to put the Artworld into a dominant position in relation to the world of glass art, should be appreciated and taken care of by philosophers.

These problems may disturb especially those of us who are members of not just differing cultural worlds, but many more or less differentiated, and, sometimes intersecting artistic, aesthetic realms, if one of these realms is the contemporary Artworld, which, I suppose has to be counted as the artistic realm which has made us aware of these problems, and where interpretations are more important than in other realms of art, as both a way of creating and appreciating art.

The ways we perceive and experience, given by our cultural background and training, are indeed powerful and deeply rooted in our way of being. An especially interesting case would be, if we would find an ideal subject, a member of the two artistic realities in question, contemporary art and the Muranese world of glass art, who

would see the *Made in Heaven* artworks at the same time as contemporary art and Muranese glass art, oscillating at the boundaries. This experience is, as poetical as it may sound, still of a marginal importance, and, anyway, goes far beyond the scope of this paper.⁶

⁶ I would like to thank Arto Haapala, Ossi Naukkarinen and Thierry de Duve for their valuable comments on the earlier versions of this paper.