

In monstrous shallows: pinpointing where the real art of Jeff Koons lies

Jakob Zaaiman
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Abstract

Art is about the exploration of the strange and disturbing; it is not about classical fine crafting. Artists use artworks to exteriorise their inner landscapes, thereby allowing others to experience their take on life, at least vicariously. It is this exteriorisation which is 'art', not the aesthetic features of the individual artworks themselves, which are properly the domain of crafting and design. Aesthetics cannot explain the work of many major modern contemporary artists, because it fails to locate the underlying unifying ideas. Jeff Koons qualifies as an artist not because of his production of standalone objects, but because behind these objects is a distinctive and unusual mentality and mindset which gives meaning to them. This is where the art of Jeff Koons is to be located. His work is contrasted with that of Andy Warhol and Damien Hirst, in order to further illustrate and clarify the conception of art employed in this study.

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Introduction

Jeff Koons is an astonishingly successful contemporary artist whose main interest appears to be an exploration of the banal and inconsequential. This is a bizarre recipe for success, given the kind of sensation hungry world we live in, yet he is always able to generate interested publicity, and he consistently sells his works for tens of millions of dollars. His massive 'sculptures' of puppies and children's playthings can be seen in public spaces in major cities. His oeuvre could be described as 'kitsch writ large', and his trademark style has now achieved a certain recognisability. He follows in a tradition stretching back through Warhol to Duchamp, and like his predecessors, his works are perplexing, combining the apparently innocent with the slightly mystifying. And adding another layer to this already mysterious mix is the enigmatic Jeff Koons himself, insofar as we encounter him through his public persona.

Current critical thinking on Koons predictably veers from the mildly entertained¹ to the overtly hostile², with others³ throwing up their hands in despair at being unable to find the conceptual resources to reconcile Koon's public acclaim with a more scholarly and considered analysis of what it is he thinks he is up to. The truth is that Koons is difficult, if not impossible, to analyse successfully using the intellectual weaponry of traditional art criticism, as his work offers no real points of contact with academic classicism. All of which means that, despite his commanding financial position in the art market, Koons has largely been ignored by serious scholarship⁴, the prevailing wisdom being that he does not warrant being taken seriously.

This judgement against Koons depends for its strength on the idea that 'art' is either about the display of traditional academic technique – resulting in sublime crafting, and objects of some form of recognisable beauty – or it is about finding ways to represent so-called 'interesting ideas'. In effect, you either find a way to show that you can paint, or you make sure that your installation is sufficiently symbol heavy to make the critics think that it must be something profound. Koons does neither, and his subject matter, whether through readymades, sculptural casts, or photomontages, is invariably either trite, infantile or quasi-sentimental; in fact, the very essence of 'anti-profundity'.

But it is our contention that the prevailing conceptions of ‘art’ – from a conservative classicism to the notion that contemporary art is all about ‘interesting ideas’ – not only fail to explain much of the best of modern art, they actually obscure an understanding of what art is all about, and in doing so prevent the appreciation of an avenue of experience which is actually much more interesting than mere aesthetic sensoriality, or the decoding of symbols. Art, properly understood⁵, offers an immersive imaginative experience in exactly the way a good movie, or a novel, does.

This study has therefore set itself two goals: one, to explain – in the barest outline – the nature of art; and two, to show how this explanation can be used to interpret the art of Jeff Koons in a comprehensive and meaningful way, clarifying and illustrating it without doing violence either to what we already know, or to what is plain for all to see. In other words, our explanation does not involve the imposition of any kind of theoretical template which might distort the facts in one direction or another.

‘Art’ as an overall effect, not as individual standalone aesthetic objects

Now imagine visiting a home that has been carefully decorated in a specific way, with the owner striving to achieve an overall atmospheric ‘effect’ of some kind. The key to grasping the look and feel of the house is located in the overall ‘effect’, not in the various individual items which have been deployed to achieve it. Of course the individual items aren’t somehow irrelevant, but they derive their real ‘meaning’ entirely from their collective orchestration into an overall ‘effect’, not from their singular placement; and in doing so become items with a quite different significance than they might otherwise possess on their own. And when it comes to the art of Jeff Koons, it is the overall orchestrated effect which you have to grasp if you are to grasp the meaning of the individual works; you cannot properly understand them the other way around.



1950s décor: it is the overall effect which counts, not the individual items

In authentic art, as opposed to merely decorative, aesthetic craft, artists are using their artworks to represent a certain very distinctive and unusual 'take' on life. And it is this 'take' which is the art, not the individual artworks. And if you get the 'take' – if you are able to intuit it, or grasp it from the various individual artworks – then you understand the art, and any confusion as to the meaning and purpose and significance of individual pieces resolves itself. 'Art' then no longer appears to be the mysterious insertion of apparently non-traditional objects in a fine art context, it becomes a representation of a specific outlook, and 'cast of mind'; and the 'art' then reveals itself to be an intriguing glimpse into life and culture through someone else's eyes. Koons, through his many and various artworks, is presenting us with a distinctive perspective on things, and he is inviting us to look at things from his perspective, and it is this perspective, and the looking at things through it, which is his art.

So what Koons is doing is showing us a sensibility, a 'condition of mind', a mindset. This sensibility may or may not correspond exactly with his own – although from his accounts of himself it does⁶ – but the point is that he has convincingly articulated this sensibility through his artworks, and as such we are able to experience it, and engage with it – vicariously – in the same way that we are able to engage vicariously with the take on life we might find in a movie, or, more subtly, the take on life we find in the way a house has been decorated, or perhaps even in the way a person dresses. The works of a modern contemporary artist are invariably cumulative, not singular, their meaning only emerging when seen as reflecting an underlying idea; and this is how they have to be approached, and understood.

Why isn't 'art' better understood ?

This immediately brings up a raft of questions. Why, for a start, is this theory of art not more widely understood ? Better still, why is it not understood at all ? Why does the confusion as to what art is all about persist ? Why are even artists themselves mightily confused as to exactly what their 'art' consists of, and is trying to do ? Why is it that even if we were to ask Jeff Koons himself to explain his art, we would likely not get an explanation which is remotely near what is being explained here ? How can all this be ?

The simple answer is that 'art' continues to be confused with the aesthetics of 'craft'. Most people, including critics and art professionals, conceive of 'art' as synonymous with 'fine art', though in reality 'fine art' ought properly to be classified as 'fine craft'. 'Art', in a seemingly ineradicable misidentification with 'craft', is widely believed to be all about the application of specialised techniques and talents for the creation of works displaying manifest qualities of 'beauty' and 'splendour', such as would be discerned and appreciated by those with a certain level of aesthetic education. This means in turn that modern contemporary art – as it is encountered in any non-classical form – is repeatedly conceived of as an attempt by those without the necessary technique and appreciation of tradition, to have their presentations taken seriously, and accorded the same respect as items of classical fine art. Put differently, to the extent that you believe, secretly or consciously, that 'art' is equivalent to 'classical fine art', you will have great difficulty in appreciating modern art.

What 'art' is, and what it is not

Basically, 'art' is of a quite different categorical order from 'fine craft'. Art is about achieving the realisation, not of mere aesthetic excellence, but of entire perspectives – 'takes' – on life and experience. Artists, through their artworks, reveals an unusual angle on things, and this angle becomes an opportunity for others to witness and experience life itself from that particular perspective. In this understanding, modern contemporary art, as a cumulative 'imaginative' experience, has more in common with theatre, and theatrical installations, than with

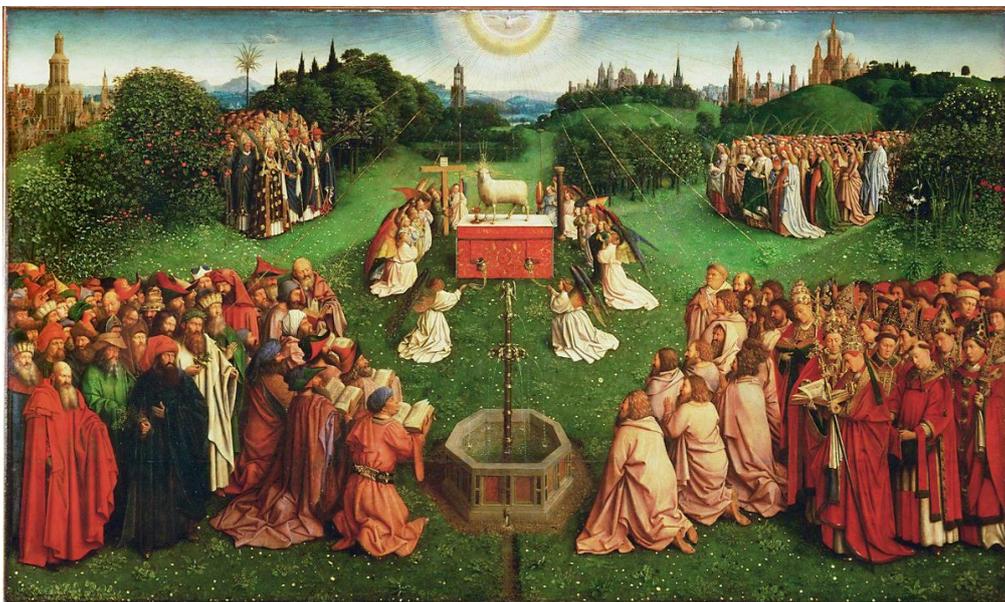
‘fine art classicism’, which treats each artwork as something to be assessed on the merits of its manifest aesthetic qualities alone.

In an everyday invitation to appreciate something aesthetically – that is, in terms of its appearance and manifest craft – one switches from viewing things in one’s characteristic everyday mode – whatever that might be – to viewing them as objects of contemplation, focussing on their sensual qualities which, in the case of aesthetically crafted objects, appear to the viewer as the culmination and realisation of skill and technique, over and above any delight one may take in their colour and shape and texture. In other words, you judge an object in terms of its beauty. So aesthetics relates to the invitation to appreciate colour, form and craft; whereas art also involves a change in perception, but this time it is an invitation to recalibrate one’s perceptual mentality, or mindset, and an invitation to look at the world through the artist’s eyes.

To summarise: crafted aesthetic objects are presentations designed to appeal to the senses; art objects are designed to recalibrate one’s perspective, and take you into someone else’s mindset.

What exactly do we want ‘art’ to do for us ?

It is at this point that we need to be more specific about the distinctive nature of art, so as to distinguish it from other more ordinary forms of presentational crafting. For ‘art’ to be a useful concept, it has to have a distinctive nature. And one of the ways we can clarify it is by asking the question as to what we want to get out of art, in terms of its direct value to us. In other words, what do we want art to present us with ? What exactly are we looking for in artworks ?



**Crafting is about beauty and sensual splendour . . .
(Jan van Eyck *Ghent Altarpiece* 1432)**

If we accept the division between objects crafted for their aesthetic features alone (‘craft’), and objects designed to embody a mental perspective, or mindset (‘art’), we can take this a stage further and say that aesthetic objects, generally speaking, aspire to ‘beauty’ and ‘splendour’, whereas art objects explore something more provocative and unsettling, though not necessarily the polar opposite of beauty and splendour, yet definitely something darker and more disturbing.

The realm of the positive and the attractive is already well served by ordinary aesthetic crafting, be it through the medium of music or painting or dance or film, and it is the function of art to use these same media to explore the negative and unsettling.



**whereas art is about the strange and disturbing
(Scene from David Lynch's *Eraserhead*, 1977)**

So aesthetic crafting is about beauty; art is about the strange and disturbing. Now of course we all want to live in a positive and attractive world, and aesthetic crafting addresses this need. But when we want to be provoked and disturbed – in a safe and entertaining way – we turn to art. The key thing here is that art is not real life; we contemplate the dark and deadly from a safe distance, free to turn our backs on it if it gets to be too much.

So what we are looking for in art is an exploration of the dark side of life, but from a secure vantage point. This, we believe, is basically why the darkest and most disturbing artists – whether painters or poets or filmmakers – tend to be thought of as the most substantial, as well as the most profound: the masters of darkness invariably tower above the masters of light.

The essential value of this conception of 'art'

We are arguing for a conception of 'art' as equivalent to an invitation to a 'state of mind', where the artist creates a mental landscape by orchestrating elements in their chosen medium, in the same way that a filmmaker or a novelist does. And for this mental landscape to be authentically artistic – as opposed to merely ordinary or aesthetic – it must be characteristically 'strange and disturbing'.

Now we need to acknowledge that there is a powerful tendency in popular thinking to want to elevate sublime crafting into a realm of its own, and to call that realm 'art', so as to distinguish it decisively from ordinariness. This is an expression of the desire to grant exceptionally beautiful crafting a numinous, vaguely spiritual quality. And in holding fast to the idea that sublime crafting is where 'art' is to be located, the possibility that art might be something

else altogether gets overlooked, and this means that the current difficulties that many critics have in explaining what modern art is all about, continue to persist.

The point is that the conception of 'art' being argued here is not about finding a way to integrate the classical with the modern, it is about saying that art is not about aesthetics – classical or modern – it is about taking on an entire state of mind, and recalibrating one's perceptions accordingly. We do this effortlessly with films and novels, but we fail to do it with modern contemporary art because we are not aware that that is what we should be doing, and we get distracted by the aesthetic features of the artworks themselves, fixating on them, and thinking that they are the 'art'. We should be looking instead at the whole mental landscape that is being presented to us, and realising that that is the 'art', and as soon as we do that it becomes clear what any and every particular artwork by an artist is all about, and how their whole project holds together.

And the essential value of this particular conception of 'art' lies in the fact that it not only explains what artists are up to when they present us with all kinds of what appear to be desultory and nonsensical objects, it also affords us a more interesting way to engage with them, in that we hook up with the artist's mindset, and experience things from their point of view. An artist's art then becomes something like a movie that we join, as an immersive experience of an inner landscape. Of course art which relies on paintings and sculptures to get its message across is obviously subtler and more demanding than watching a movie, in that its 'narrative' is not anything like as overt, but it's no less enthralling, once you find your way in.

Differing artistic methods

The means and methods by which an artist can achieve the embodiment of their inner landscape may vary enormously from case to case; in some instances relying entirely on paintings (Francis Bacon); in others on a combination of media (Andy Warhol, Grayson Perry, Joseph Beuys). Some artists (Warhol, Koons, Beuys, Gilbert & George) include their public persona in the artistic mix; others restrict themselves wholly to their chosen medium (Bacon again). The point is that when it comes to analysing an artist's output, the issue is not whether or not they display ravishing classical technique, or tackle supposedly profound subjects, or inspire reams of dense commentary; the issue is the extent to which they have successfully brought into being a distinctive, strange and disturbing perspective on things, such that we as observers can engage imaginatively with it. If a craftsman can do this, he or she becomes an artist; if all they can do is ravish us with their craft, they are not artists, they remain craftspeople.

The distinctive Jeff Koons vision

At its most meaningful and essential level, the art of Jeff Koons amounts to the concrete embodiment, through his artworks, of a singular mentality and mindset, and it is this distinctive embodiment which is the true Jeff Koons art, not the individual artworks themselves. The many and various artworks act - collectively and individually - as an actualising vehicle for the 'Jeff Koons take on life' – the 'Jeff Koons mindset' – and in this way render it something we can all participate in, at least vicariously. And this means that apart from the incarnated 'Jeff Koons take' which we encounter when we see his works, his works have no other real meaning and purpose. Koons's mindset – his angle on life – underpins everything he does in art, and this in turn gives rise to, and informs, each and every one of his works, through each and every one of his artistic phases. So if we want properly to understand what Koons is up to, we need to look well below the surface and grasp the unifying ideas holding everything together. This is where his 'art' – and any other authentic art for that matter – is located.

All of which means, in effect, that Jeff Koons, despite his wealth and success, is, at least where it counts, seriously and persistently misunderstood. Perhaps ‘misapprehended’ would be a better term for the kind of critical misrepresentation Koons has faced. This is not to disparage people who want to buy his works, or people who want to visit galleries to see giant children’s inflatables in fact made of metal, or giant sized lumps of play-doh made out of aluminium. This is more about correcting a general understanding of what his works represent, and how they are best to be appreciated. And as has been said earlier, grasping the true Koons experience does not involve cancelling any of one’s prior responses to his work, it simply adds another more expansive layer to them. Also, Jeff Koons has not helped articulate his own case, in that he tends to contribute heavily – through his accounts of his own ideas – to the kind of misdirection that his works seem to encourage⁷.



Jeff Koons: *Balloon Dog (Blue)* 1994-2000

Now we need to try to identify the key features of the distinctive Koons vision, and work forward from there. What, then, is the Jeff Koons take? What is he telling us through his ‘art’? What is the perspective and cast of mind that his work embodies? Well, at the most simplistic and obvious level, he is inviting us to believe in – and take on – the idea that the production of sentimental and ephemeral kitsch is as worthy of esteem as is the production of classical fine art; and that ultimately – in and through his eyes – the two are interchangeable. This is not about making a satirical or a political statement, or a cultural criticism: in fact he’s asking us to immerse ourselves in a mindset where kitsch *is* the fine art, and where tastelessness *is* high culture. This is quite different from merely thinking how Koons’s individual artworks can be interpreted according to various intellectual theories. His art is not about decoding clues and interpreting symbols: it is about grasping the mental perspective that he is orchestrating, and then viewing the world through it. This can relatively easily be done with art films – such as *Mulholland Drive* (2001), or *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961) or any of a host of others – because there are key elements in film as a medium which facilitate our more or less total immersion in the narrative, and in doing so we readily take on the director’s perspective, and effortlessly view the world through their eyes; but it is more difficult when the artist is using static, apparently non-narrative media, especially when the mediated objects get confused with ‘classical fine crafting’. This confusing misdirection is why so many observers miss the point of art entirely. In movie terms, it would be as if the audience could only see varying colours and shapes on the screen, and were unable to detect any sort of unfolding plot.

Comparison with the art of Andy Warhol

We can further illustrate this through the example of the work of Andy Warhol. Over a number of years – in the early 1960s – Warhol began presenting a series of somewhat crude artistic statements, some sculptural – like the Brillo and Corn Flakes Boxes – some more like advertising posters; and these individual statements then slowly began to coalesce into a recognisable artistic vision, and in doing so their meaning unquestionably changed from rough, standalone, student-level assignments in commercial art, into recognisable signposts to, and artefacts in, a characteristic Warholian universe. This kind of underlying artistic narrative had antecedents, stretching at least as far back as Duchamp, otherwise it would have been an extraordinarily ambitious and uncertain project for Warhol to embark on; and even insofar as he was doing something that had already been done before, it was still a bold move, with a highly unreliable outcome, and one that predictably met with a certain bemusement⁸.

What exactly was happening with Warhol and his 1960s artworks ? What was he trying to do ? At one level we can be sure that he was simply presenting what he thought would be interesting artworks – attractive items that the public would like the look of, and would want to buy – at another, he may have been trying to make a more pointed statement about what he thought had real cultural value, or some such. Perhaps he was even joking, who knows. But what in fact happened was that – irrespective of what Warhol himself was thinking and planning – an entire Warholian ‘take on life’ was beginning to emerge, and, in time, it became a clearly identifiable phenomenon, such that any interested observer could pick up on it, and participate in it, in one’s imagination. So if you saw a picture of something to do with Warhol, you immediately connected with his perspective on things, and, however momentarily, participated in his narrative vision.

In this way, the Warholian narrative – and one’s entry into the Warholian mindset – became the locus of the ‘art’, not the individual artworks. Andy’s ‘art’ is the Warhol world, not the Brillo Boxes or the Coke posters. Of course it includes them, and gives them meaning, but without Andy’s world to underpin them, they are as nothing – just disconnected bits of slapdash imagery. So when you see a Warhol, you should find yourself taking on his unique drug-addled, sensationalist, party-going, fashion obsessed, primary coloured vision, not start parsing thoughts about ‘the end of art’⁹ or a ‘damning condemnation of capitalist society’. You are welcome to think those things as well, but they are a dismal substitute for the other experience he is offering.



Warhol's inner world made flesh

But why should the underpinning vision be the 'art', and not the individual artworks and their aesthetic features, as one would expect? Because the Warhol world – Warhol's sculptures and paintings and movies and interviews – constitute art by other means; in this case not an aesthetic display but rather a theatrical presentation, combining various media to lay bare a type of experiential landscape. It doesn't make sense to compare Warhol to Raphael, because you are not comparing like with like: it's not even equivalent to comparing Beethoven with the Beatles; Warhol and Raphael are using their media in different ways, to different effects: whatever Raphael might have wanted to achieve, Warhol ended up letting us share in his world, and this constitutes a much greater, more expansive and more interesting experiential 'art' opportunity than does any critical obsessing about the lack of technical and narrative depth in his artworks. And his participatory, 'shareable' world is, from the point of view of us in the audience, decidedly theatrical, obviously not in a strictly formal sense, but rather in the sense of an ongoing 'happening', or performance, transcending specific times and specific places, and instead finding a way to locate itself in your life as a whole. Once again, real art is exactly like a good movie, and to the extent that it touches you, it won't end when you leave the theatre – or the gallery – because it's a state of mind that you then come to inhabit, colouring the rest of your experiencing in all kinds of ways.

Now we come to what may seem the unusual task of explaining how Warhol's art qualifies as 'strange and disturbing'. One could say that there are certain clues in some of his subjects, such as *Electric Chair* (1964), and *Orange Car Crash Fourteen Times* (1963), but these examples are not really the gist of it. What makes it all strange and disturbing is the Warhol ethos – the Warhol mentality – out of sight perhaps to the casual observer, but quite apparent to anyone who takes the trouble to look. As a personality, Warhol projected an air of detached languor, not exactly vacant, but not exactly present either. And it turns out he existed in a slightly numbed zone of ruthless sensationalism and desultory chatter, where everything had to be in the moment, and only the lurid and shocking commanded attention. It was a world of thoughtless spontaneity, drug-poisoned ramblings, celebrity obsession, camp posturing and faux dramatics. Warhol was surrounded by hangers-on who could only hang on because they thought as he did – or wanted to – so it amounted to a hermetic, self-referential universe.

Warhol's world – especially his self-styled artistic studio cum production unit 'The Factory' – thrived on suicides, cat fights, drug deaths, attempted murders and various forms of madness¹⁰. Andy expressed a desire to record everything that happened around him¹¹, preferably on film, for a kind of instant and meaningless posterity, as if all of life was really just a kind of camp performance, with sensationalism the necessary bulwark against possible boredom. Depraved cult groups of varying shades are not that unusual, but what gives the Warhol world its unique flavour is the distinctive personality of Warhol himself, in that it coloured everything that it came into contact with. There were some famous names in his circle¹², but none came close to generating the influence he did.

All of this is simply to say that the Warholian landscape, and the artistic signposts leading to it and furnishing it, are, when you dig beneath the surface, deeply strange and disturbing. It is a world of an almost terrifying emptiness, set in an unfeeling superficiality, where all that we normally cling on to for reassurance and sanity is completely unknown. You wouldn't want to come to grief in 'The Factory', as no one would lift a finger to help: they would either just stare at you contemptuously for spoiling their self-absorbed vibe, or have Andy film it.

Perhaps it is possible to find yourself misdirected by the surface dazzle some of his more famous images – Marilyn, Mao, Campbell's Soup – into deciding that Warhol was really just all about pop and fizz and celebrity, but this will only hold true if you don't investigate any further,

or are curiously insensitive to undercurrents. You wouldn't be alone: the critic Robert Hughes is on record as having concluded that 'Warhol had nothing to say', meaning that his art, in its totality, was as devoid of meaningful content as were his answers to interview questions¹³. But from our point of view, Warhol had plenty to say, and all of it very powerful and provocative and interesting, though this does depend on having the ears to hear it.

Now the point is, you don't have to endorse Warhol to enjoy him, just as you don't have to become a heroin addict to enjoy Keith Richards' guitar playing. Art offers you an entry into all kinds of worlds from a safe distance, where you can savour the delights of varying shades of darkness – and flirt with their implications – without succumbing to them. And if art has a purpose, above and beyond the pleasure one derives from its enjoyment, then that is what it is.

Hopefully it is becoming apparent how all of this relates to Jeff Koons and his art. Like Warhol, Koons is extending an invitation to us, through his art, into his mindset; and his individual artworks constitute the furnishings – the features – of his inner world. They are also the embodiment of that world, incarnating it in such a way that we can – to the extent that we grasp it – also participate in it, and take it on as if it were our own. Then we look at the world, and at life, as if through his eyes. This is, in its own way, a very specialised artistic experience, and one that could not be offered to us any other way. And to get to it we have to understand that artworks are like a stage play without audible dialogue, and where the scenery and scenery changes alone contains all the necessary narrative clues. Art – as installation – combining artworks from an entire oeuvre, can do this.

Koons's art as essentially strange and disturbing

Now we need to show how the Koons oeuvre is characteristically strange and disturbing. Once again, we come up against the issue of misdirection, and how it prevents people from going beneath the surface and being able to recognise eddies and undercurrents; effectively preventing them from recognising the art itself. Yet we have to concede that misdirection is clearly not a trivial affair, as almost all modern art criticism has failed to go beyond aesthetics, and pick up on the experiential realm beyond.

We're employing the concept 'misdirected', as opposed to that of 'misunderstood', because this issue struggles against several deeply held preconceptions, starting with the idea that 'art' is synonymous with 'singular objects of fine crafting'. And beyond that, there is the problem of the relation between an artist's perceived – or explicitly expressed – intention, and the way they want their work situated, and then understood and interpreted. If the disparity between expressed intention and outcome is vast, an artist might forfeit their credibility; but if they have managed to achieve a certain status, they will be granted a measure of respect, no matter how absurd their accounts of themselves are. And as a point of reference, it is worth reminding ourselves how few artists have anything valuable to say, apart from the odd soundbite, about their own work.

All of which means that it is not easy to know with any real certainty, from the surface chatter, what the relationship between what an artist says they are up to – set alongside what misinformed and misguided critics think is going on – and what actually is the case, given the evidence. An artist may say one thing, and the critics may agree or disagree, and out of this mix - compounded by the desire to judge artworks on their physical merits - emerges something like a popular consensus, which may or may not result in the kind of misdirection we are referring to. 'Misdirection' in this sense has nothing to do with deliberate deception, but it has everything to do with being persuaded of one explanation, when the facts are better explained by another.

How does all this relate to Jeff Koons ? Well, the current consensus – comprising the mix of his own account of himself, coupled with that of the many critics who take him at face value – is that Koons is something of a ‘regular guy’ with no particular talent, who has somewhat miraculously hit the biggest of the bigtime, and who for that reason deserves a modicum of respect¹⁴. He’s personable if a bit bland, has nothing much of interest to say for himself, and his artworks are, with the exception of the pornographic *Made in Heaven* phase, harmless to the point of tedium. His ‘cash in the bank’ popularity is, if anything, mystifying.

Yet if we dig below the surface, following the signposted artworks, and enter into this mystifyingly harmless-looking world for ourselves, taking on its perspectives, and opening our eyes to the evident undercurrents, we discover something different, though not entirely unexpected. Like the Warhol world, the Koons universe is eerily confining, and claustrophobic. Nothing in what Koons has ever said or done would lead you to think that he shelters a liberating hinterland, where kids’ toys and shallow imagery would be put in context, and one could be done with them, at least for a day or two. The marvellous thing about Koons is that he seems to believe completely in his disturbingly vacuous world, and can think of nothing he would rather do than propagate it, whatever it takes financially.

The Koons world is also mostly very clean, and neat, and shiny, and antiseptic. ‘Mostly’ as opposed to ‘totally’ because of the hardcore pornographic *Made in Heaven* photos, though *Heaven* is clean, sunshiny day type porn, pleasantly bright and breezy and cheerful, and a world away from the types of morbid gore to be found elsewhere. What it’s supposed to be doing amongst the kids’ toys is another question, though one well worth asking, because even if it represents a desire for a more adult set of concerns, it’s still bookended by these toys, and therefore amounts to more of an anomaly than to a change in direction. But does this then mean that the toys are of a piece with pornography, or that pornography is of a piece with kids’ toys ? In practical terms it means you can’t really take your pre-teens with you to a Koons retrospective, or have them leaf through a catalogue of his; and this in turn must mean that the Koons pitch is essentially directed at adults, which deepens the peculiarity of his vision: it’s adults he wants staring at the lobsters, and Hulks, and balloon dogs.



Jeff Koons: *Amore* (1988)

And if it's adults Koons is aiming at, we then enter something of a science fiction zone. Is this a parallel universe, operating on unknown principles? How is an adult meant to respond to a world where the dominant imagery is a mixture of kitch, toys, lifeless advertisements and readymades, leavened only with hardcore pornography? Sculptors like Alexander Calder, whose works decorate corporate plazas with colourful steel structures, can be seen as having made sculptural statements later echoed by Koons, yet Calder's narratives – such as can be discerned – never extend into the realm of the disturbing, always remaining attractive if unusual decorative craft, whereas it doesn't take much of a plunge into Koons's oeuvre to detect an unsettling feeling of dislocation, even disorientation, where various points of reference – the adult, the subtle, light and shade – have irrevocably been replaced by the juvenile, the brash, and the eternally floodlit. It's not difficult for the mind to come to a complete halt, unable to work out where it has ended up.

And of course this is exactly what's so stimulating about Koons. He's living out a strange wrongness, and showing us what it looks like, and showing us how we can try it on. He's achieving this by installing his artworks in what amounts to an exteriorised inner landscape. He doesn't seem to be pretending, or if he is, it doesn't much matter, as his persona is convincing enough to hold the illusion. It's something of a seamless artistic operation, once you pick up on his real meaning and purpose.

Damien Hirst: only a Koons wannabe

The real problem in proposing this particular angle on a definition of 'art' is that many people are not particularly sensitive to sinister and disturbing undercurrents, and believe the surface to be more or less all there is to everything. They don't see anything creepy about ugly little painted concrete homunculi dotted about their gardens, or anything unsettling about the nightmarish masks of circus clowns. If it smiles, then it must be okay, is the thinking. Which makes Warhol just a camp guy in a blond wig who did brightly coloured posters of Marilyn and Mao, full stop. And Koons is just a conventionally good looking guy who likes Hoovers, basketballs and balloon dogs. Such starting points make it difficult to argue that midday is in fact harbouring midnight, and that bright and breezy is in fact a front for darkness.

And perhaps the distinction between surface and undercurrent can be better illustrated through an example where the artistic undercurrent is contrived, and made to order, and so fails to reach peak velocity. The point here is that 'making' or 'orchestrating' something into art is not that easy, as it relies on the coming together of factors in somewhat of a mysterious way, and that you can't just go out and do it – however much you might want to – otherwise real art would be much more common than it is. 'Strange and disturbing' is not a quality that you can call up at will, and very often aspirant artists have to settle for much less, and their work suffers accordingly. The thing to remember is that strange and disturbing is not commensurate with frightening and disgusting, or with distressing and horrifying, or with any other combination of commonly experienced negative perceptions; nor is it guaranteed to manifest itself even under optimal conditions. The ability to 'call it up' is perhaps something of a special gift.

Damien Hirst is best known for his shark and sheep vitrines, and of course these works share an acknowledged debt to Koons; though it should be said that having a strong influence, even to the point of plagiarism, is never, of itself, a sin in art: it only becomes a serious defect if the art it contributes to is unable to generate a specific narrative of its own. Hirst's other major topics include pharmaceutical displays, cigarettes, dots, butterflies, and gemstones. A flip through a retrospective catalogue, or through his book *'I want to spend the rest of my life everywhere, with everyone, one to one, always, forever, now.'* (1997) will soon bring Koons to mind, but the chief difference between the two as 'artists' is that Koons has managed a certain durable cogency to his

programme as a whole, whereas Hirst just looks opportunistic. This is not that easy to justify, as the reasoning behind it depends for its persuasive power on an ability to discriminate between the relative strengths of subtle forces which most people don't seem to recognise in the first place.



Damien Hirst *Cock and Bull* (2012)

So why do we say that Hirst falls short of the coveted realm of 'art', given that he and Koons share so many similarities? First and foremost, because Hirst's work somehow seems calculated and contrived, instead of appearing to be genuine. There is something about the composition and construction of his various vitrines and displays which looks to be more imitative and derivative than straightforwardly declarative, and this destroys their impact. And the more you know about his debt to Koons, the less substantial his works seem to be. No question but that his ideas clearly make for great art events, and a great media buzz, and excellent sales figures, but it's hard to detect the strange and disturbing undercurrent which would qualify them as true art. Hirst is more show business than art. Whereas Koons, like Warhol, is clearly living out an inner world of his own, semidetached from the rest of us, and driven by forces of which we are only distantly aware, and this imparts on more or less everything he does – and ever will do – an irrevocable seal of authenticity. Hirst wants to follow the same path, but he doesn't have the same singularity of vision, or the same mysterious connection to the unsettling. And it comes through in interviews as well¹⁵.

When it comes down to it, it's just not enough for crafted material merely to be puzzling, or startling – any old presentational junk can do that – it needs to be decidedly peculiar as well. But how exactly do you 'do' peculiar? We all know it when we see it, or hear it, or sense it, but it's impossible to manufacture at will. Koons can do peculiar in spades; as could Warhol; Hirst can only pretend to.

Drawing the threads together: Koons as a genuine artist

We have tried to show how, with a definition of 'art' – as a very specific type of crafted presentational material exploring the 'strange and disturbing' – Jeff Koons very much qualifies as an authentic artist. His various individual works have to be understood collectively if they are to

be understood at all, in that they make no sense on their own, other than as utterly dismissible trivia. Giant toys are not art in themselves, but when they come to be seen as part of the exteriorising of an entire inner landscape, they can become art of a high order. The Koons narrative – peculiar and fascinating in itself – amounts to an embodiment of his mentality – his inner world – and it is this which is his art, not the physical features of his standalone objects. Koons inhabits a world of monstrous shallows.

Of course this may well not be how Jeff Koons sees himself, and it may well not be how very many collectors, critics and aficionados see Jeff Koons, but that is not the point: we have defined him using a vision of art which is much more immersive and expansive and straightforwardly explanatory than one which identifies art with classical fine crafting.

Endnotes

¹ Eg Davies (2012).

² Eg Jones (2016).

³ Eg Schjeldahl (2008).

⁴ There are of course scholarly essays in various retrospective catalogues, eg the Whitney, published by Yale (2014), but not many academic studies.

⁵ For more detail, and differing angles on the same idea, see Zaaiman entries in the bibliography.

⁶ See Koons and Rosenthal (2014).

⁷ See, for example, Robert Hughes and Koons in *The New Shock of the New* YouTube excerpt cited in Bibliography.

⁸ “[The boxes] were very difficult to sell. He thought that everyone was going to buy them on sight, he really and truly did. We all had visions of people walking down Madison Avenue with these boxes under their arms, but we never saw them.” *Eleanor Ward, art dealer: Stable Gallery, in ‘Warhol’ by David Bourdon, Harry N. Abrams, Inc. (New York, 1995), p.186.*

⁹ See Danto (2009).

¹⁰ See Wilcock (2010).

¹¹ See Bockris (1989) p.246-7.

¹² See the list in Wikipedia ‘The Factory’ web page.

¹³ See Hughes on Carms2k (2009), a YouTube video.

¹⁴ See for example Schjeldahl (2008),(2014); Tomkins (2007); Hughes (2004), and others.

¹⁵ See for example BBC Newsnight interview YouTube video cited in Bibliography.

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