Surface Density

Inhale

The shock of Jeff Koons’s work is that it is what it is and not some other thing. It does not pretend or disguise. It does not, for all the density of historical, cultural and artistic reference that it may contain, offer a commentary on itself. It sits before you and is available for your viewing pleasure. Think of Pop, who appears in and gives his name to one of Koons’s recent series of works. Popeye: the uncomplicated hero who has no ideas, everything on the surface, nothing hidden. ‘I yam what I yam,’ he says, and this goes for Koons’s work, too. Koons will not give you an opinion. He will not ever lay on what his views are, so there is never an opportunity for you either to agree or disagree with him. He will never tell you what a work is about. He will not give you a meaning. He will not tell you what you ought to look for. He will say something that appears definitive, reliable, that you can count on – such as, ‘The things we have in our history are perfect.’ And then, just as you think you are onto something, he will say, ‘I don’t believe in perfection.’ Or he will tell you it is important that he makes things just as well as he possibly can, and then he will say, ‘I don’t believe in craft,’ and then you are back to square one.

This can be frustrating if what you are wanting is a stance, a point of view, a way of checking in which direction a work is facing before you start looking. There are lots of words to read on Koons’s work, and in addition there are numerous interviews in which he provides lengthy answers to questions about his various series, his education and career. They will tell you many things, and they will tell you nothing. You will discover a consistent vocabulary that indicates a strong aversion to things just as well as he possibly can, and then he will say, ‘I don’t believe in craft,’ and then you are back to square one.

You will read comments that privilege the biologist as the only ‘really true and important narrative’ we have, in comparison to which all others are seen as ‘just fabricated.’ And yet this vocabulary, even when you have learned and been taught on it, will not give any answers because, according to Koons, ‘what my work tells the viewer is that art is not in the particular object but in the viewer. And the art is what happens to him or her.’

There are countless choices taken and selections made in realising Koons’s work, of course. There are the objects to be cast, copied, painted or in some other way rendered. There is the material or materials in which they are realised, the technologies and processes employed in their making, their colour, their scale and much else besides. Likewise there are myriad references to other art and artists, including the exemplary openness of Duchamp’s readymades, Dali’s Surrealist paintings and objects, the directness and exuberance seen in Pop and its precursors, the unfussiness of Minimalism and the sensuous physicality of the Baroque. These can be recognised and appreciated as potential dimensions for exploration in experiencing Koons’s works, but it is not necessary to know or spot any of them. As he sees it, his job is to give you the work and to make it as well as he can so that it is easy for you to do all of the looking and thinking and experiencing and finding of pleasure and discovering of meaning for yourself. Everything is open: ‘I think anyone can come to my work from the general culture; I don’t set up any kind of requirement. Almost like television, I tell a story that is easy for anyone to enter into and on some level enjoy.’

It is certainly possible that you might recognise a fragment of a Popeye painting as a copy of H.C. Westermann’s print The Dance of Death (San Pedro), or that you identify the lobster-shaped pool toy in Acorn as the creature from Dali’s Lobster Telephone, and that it is performing a handstand, as Westermann apparently used to like doing, or that the Hulk’s stance in the Hulk Elvis series: legs apart, weight forward, arms slightly bent and poised for action, echoes that of Elvis in a publicity still for the film Flaming Star. It’s the image Andy Warhol silkscreened onto a roll of canvas for his Double Elvis and Triple Elvis paintings in 1963. And if you know this you might also sense that there’s a strong link to the trio of basketballs in Three Ball 50/50 Tank (Spalding Dr & J.K. Silver Series). But you do not need to possess this or any other particular knowledge in order to look. You do not need permission. You just need to keep breathing.

Blow

‘I have always enjoyed objects that contain air because they are very anthropomorphic,’ Koons has said. ‘Every time you take a breath, it’s like a symbol of life, and every time you exhale, it’s a symbol of death.’ When we consider our bodies it is the air that surrounds and contains our interior density, whereas inflatable objects are airy on the inside and the density is all to be found out beyond their external surfaces – their shiny, glossy, polished, reflective, absorbent surfaces. The earliest works in this exhibition is an inflatable piece from 1979: Inflatable Flowers (Short White, Tall Purple). It is from a series of experiments Koons did with cheap, store-bought inflatable objects, placing them in various combinations on mirrors. (One of the toys in this shifting constellation was the bunny eating a carrot that would later appear in polished cast
form in the ‘Statuary’ series.) He was interested in display from the outset, and these arrangements were his first attempts not only to display those particular objects, but also to show that anything we might want to display is already there in the world around us. It exemplifies the lesson learned from Ed Paschke who was one of Koons’s teachers at the Art Institute of Chicago: ‘Ed taught me about the readymade and revealed to me that everything is already here, you just have to look for it and open yourself up to your environment.’

Despite the obsessive attention to detail and finish he brings to the production of his work, Koons is adamant that he does not believe in perfection – which is to say, he is under no illusion that he can produce something that attains that ideal state. He does believe it when he says – and this meshes with his attitude towards the readymade – that ‘the things we have in our history are perfect’. But what makes the display of the short white and tall purple flowers of Inflatable Flowers are the mirrors on and against which they sit. Mirroring pervades Koons’s work, from these early ‘Inflatables’ pieces through the glazing in the framed Nike posters and the refractions and reflections created by the water in the ball tanks of the ‘Equilibrium’ series, the shininess of the vacuum cleaners of ‘The New’, the highly polished surfaces of Balloon Monkey and Titi, to the glossy surfaces of the ‘Popeye’ sculptures. Koons has openly acknowledged that his use of mirrors in the ‘Inflatables’ as the surface on which to place objects was influenced by Robert Smithson, who made them a key element in his work. In his essay ‘Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan’ (1969), for example, Smithson writes that when we look into the mirror, ‘the true fiction eradicates the false reality’, and goes on to observe that ‘reflections fall onto the mirrors without logic, and in so doing invalidate every rational assertion. Inexpressible limits are on the other side of the incidents, and they will never be grasped.’

Suck

The eponymous lightbox work that inaugurated Koons’s series ‘The New’ was first shown as part of the display of Hoovers he installed in the window of New York’s New Museum in 1980. Once again, Koons’s objects affirm his unashamed interest in display, an interest famously nurtured when, growing up, he witnessed the changing displays in his father’s home decor store. Vacuum cleaners are anthropomorphic objects par excellence, what with their lungs/stomachs filling with air, full of dust, and their mix of phallic and womb-like features: long tubes that are rigid and flexible, and openings and interior spaces. They are androgynous, sexual, breathing, eating and excreting machines. What is unquestionable about the Hoovers in Koons’s works, as the overall title of the series attests, is that they are new and unused. Their shininess and cleanliness is an index of their unavailability for ordinary domestic chores.

As Koons has said, these machines are in a position to out-survive you, and are ‘better prepared to be eternal’. The same goes for the bourbon decanters that make up the Jim Beam – J.B. Turner Train, whose seals must remain unbroken, their contents undrunk. The decanters, as with other pieces in the ‘Luxury and Degradation’ series and the subsequent ‘Statuary’ series, are cast in stainless steel. Koons saw this as an egalitarian material that would resonate right across the class spectrum. Casting the decanters effects what Koons has described as a ‘recodifying’, though by this he is referring less to the idea of turning the original object into something else, than to the process of revealing its essential nature.

Hold your breath

For ‘Equilibrium’, the group of works made between ‘The New’ and ‘Luxury and Degradation’, Koons cast his objects in bronze. The two featured in this exhibition are ambivalent forms: a snorkel and a snorkel vest – sufficient, you would think, to let you breathe regularly while you lie half in, half out of the water like the three basketballs in Three Ball 50/50 Tank. But these solid-bronze casts would cause you to sink and drown. The Nike posters that accompany these pieces also offer a hollow promise. Koons saw the basketball stars they feature as ‘sirens’, luring you with the guarantee of access to superhuman, and hence clearly unachievable, levels of physical prowess. The tanks, with their floating orange basketballs, represent the beginnings of everything:
on a microscopic scale, the nucleus, the egg from which anything might develop, and on the macroscopic, a world that contains and promises everything. This idea is transformed and translated in *Boat with Eggs* from ‘Calabrostan’ and, in another guise, the giant lump of Play-Doh from the same series, a multi-coloured mound of infinite, joyous potential.

Koons works, to borrow Smithson’s words again, ‘beyond the rational’, blocking and undermining so many of the standard assumptions and demands we habitually bring along from ‘Celebration’ and, *Bowl with Eggs*.

The idea is transformed to something other than it purports to be. To imagine that there is the presumption that the work needs to be understood as something other than it is would be to introduce the idea that its status is somehow ironic. But as Koons says, irony causes too much critical contemplation. Irony implies the acknowledgement on the part of the artist that what is presented stands in some critical contemplation. Irony implies the acknowledgement on the part of the artist that what is presented stands in some critical contemplation. Irony implies the acknowledgement on the part of the artist that what is presented stands in some critical contemplation. Irony implies the acknowledgement on the part of the artist that what is presented stands in some critical contemplation. Irony implies the acknowledgement on the part of the artist that what is presented stands in some critical contemplation. 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