

# Surface Density



Jeff Koons, 1986. Photo by Ari Marcopoulos

## 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 dissemble. 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 Popeye, who appears in and gives his name to one of Koons's recent series of works. Popeye: the uncomplicated hero who has no sides, 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 let 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.'<sup>1</sup> And then, just as you think you are onto something, he will say, 'I don't believe in perfection.'<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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 empty, self-consciously slick art that is the aesthetic equivalent of a dog chasing its own tail. You will find stress placed on the need to trust and accept what the world has to offer, and to respect the viewer. You will read comments that privilege the biological as the only 'really true and important narrative that we have', in comparison to which all others are seen as 'just fabricated'.<sup>4</sup> And yet this vocabulary, even when you have learned and been tested 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.'<sup>5</sup>

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, Dalí'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.'<sup>6</sup>

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 **Acrobat** as the creature from Dalí'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 JK 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'<sup>7</sup> When we consider our bodies it is the air that surrounds and contains our interior density, whereas inflatables are airy on the inside and the density is all to be found out beyond their external surfaces – their shiny, glossy, polished, reflective, absorbing surfaces. The earliest work 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 wish 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.'<sup>8</sup>

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.'<sup>9</sup>

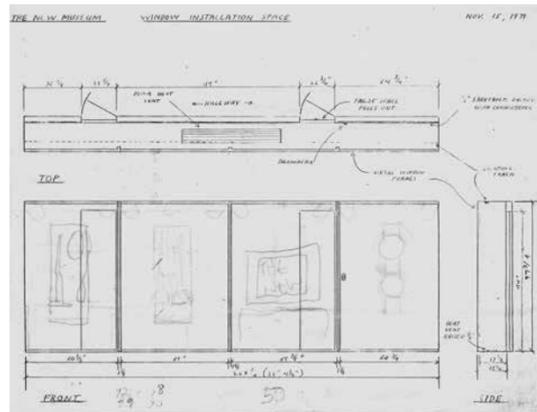
#### Suck

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.

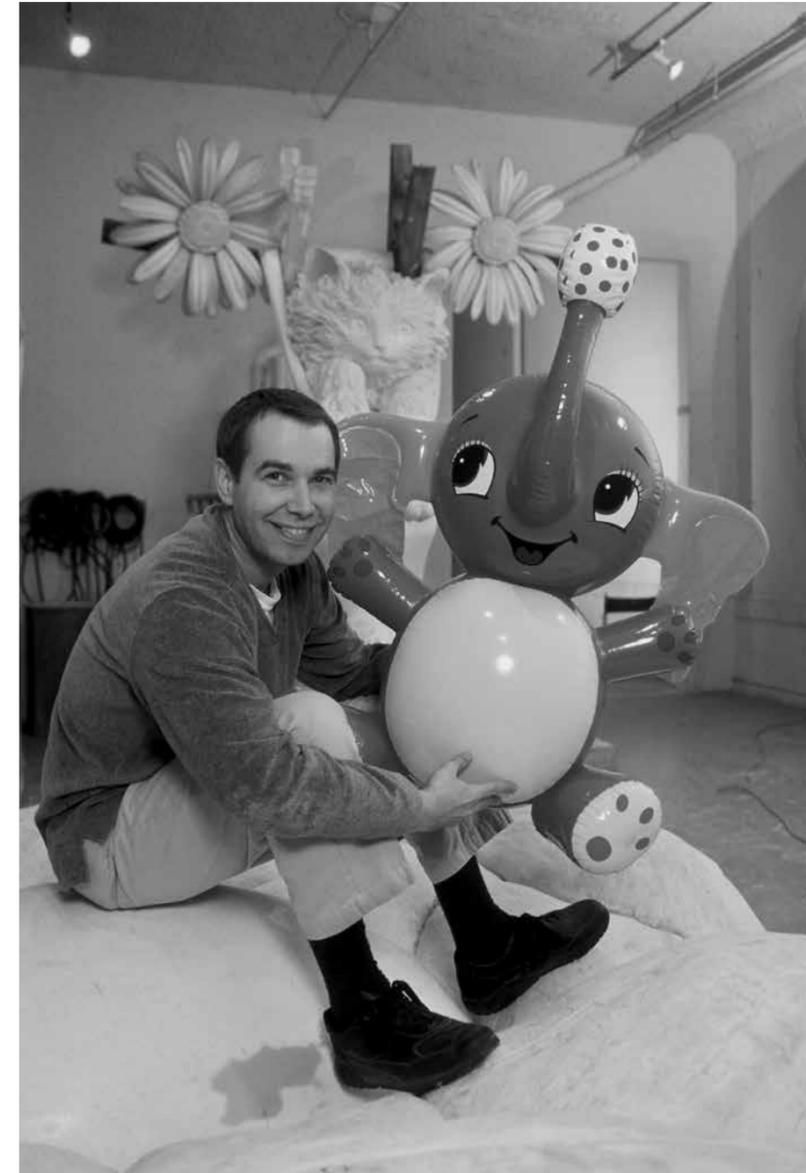
Once again, Koons's objects affirm his unashamed interest in display, an interest famously nurtured when, growing up, he witnessed the changing displays in his father's home decor store. Vacuum cleaners are anthropomorphic objects par excellence, what with their lungs/stomachs filling with air, fluff and 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'.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>

#### 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:



Concept drawing from November 15, 1979, for the window installation at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York



In his studio, holding a model for **Elephant**, 1997. Photo by Maritza Cooper

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 **Bowl with Eggs** from 'Celebration' and, in another guise, the giant lump of **Play-Doh** from the same series, a multi-coloured mountain 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 with us when we look at art. For him, judgement is alienation.<sup>12</sup> It distances the viewer from their enjoyment of the work and from a full appreciation of the experience that viewing his art excites in them. The act of judging moves attention back onto the work and away from the viewer, and implicit in such an act is the presumption that the work needs to be understood as something other than it purports to be. To imagine that there is a distance between what is in front of you and what the work really 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 way in ambiguous relation to his or her own views. This is of no interest. The only view that matters is yours. The only experience that matters is yours. The forms of, and imagery in the work are easily identifiable; the viewer is not intimidated by it. A party entertainer's balloon animal, a cartoon character, a child's toy, a novelty decanter, advertises for a popular make of family car or a major brand of sportswear, a comic-book superhero, sports and leisure equipment, household appliances – all these things are familiar to us because we encounter them, or an equivalent, every day of our lives.

#### Pump and fluff

Are you pumped? How does that make you feel? Lighter on the inside, or denser? Are you pumped like the big green Hulk is pumped, and like Popeye is pumped after he has eaten his can of green spinach? In 2014 Annie Leibovitz did a photoshoot for Vanity Fair to coincide with Koons's

retrospective at the Whitney in New York. The article's lead picture shows Koons standing naked, working out in his gym. His back is to the camera, but he is standing in front of a mirror – the true fiction eradicating the false reality: pumped Jeff, Jeff the Hulk, Popeye Jeff. We've seen Koons naked before, in the paintings and sculptures of 'Made in Heaven', the series he made with his former wife Ilona Staller, the Hungarian-Italian porn star known as 'La Cicciolina', between 1989 and 1992. With 'Made in Heaven' Koons's life and Koons's art became inextricably entangled since, along with the making of the artworks themselves, this period featured the couple's marriage in Budapest, the birth of their son and their subsequent divorce. The estrangement that followed, along with the absence of his son as a result of Staller absconding with him to Italy, provided a strong motor for the 'Celebration series' that began in 1992, and which has continued up to the present.

As Alison Gingeras has remarked, 'Made in Heaven' marks the point at which Jeff Koons **became** Jeff Koons, the man transformed into the cultural phenomenon, in what she describes as the 'orchestrated collapse' of the boundaries between art and life.<sup>13</sup> However, this apparent melding offers an ambivalent form of access: although the paintings and sculptures of 'Made in Heaven' show Koons and Staller in various poses familiar from porn stills and films, their staging and overall production values together with their very public display in the gallery compromise any efforts we might make to use them for our own sexual satisfaction. 'It's not about sexual arousal,' says Koons, 'it's arousal about life. I'm an optimist. I'm pro-existence. I think it's more interesting to see where we can go than how soon we can stop.'<sup>14</sup>

- 1 Jeff Koons – **Conversations with Norman Rosenthal** (Thames & Hudson, London 2014), p.140
- 2 *ibid.*, p.225
- 3 *ibid.*, p.230
- 4 'There is no art in it', Jeff Koons in conversation with Isabelle Graw, in Vinzenz Brinkmann, Matthias Ulrich, Max Hollein (Eds.), **Jeff Koons: The Painter and The Sculptor** (Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern, Germany 2012), catalogue to a two-venue exhibition at Liebieghaus and Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, 20 June–23 September 2012; p.83 of **The Painter**
- 5 *ibid.*, p.78
- 6 Quote from 'From Criticism to Complicity', a panel discussion at Pat Hearn Gallery, New York, 2 May 1986, with Jeff Koons, Sherrie Levine, Peter Halley, Haim Steinbach, Ashley Bickerton and Philip Taaffe, moderated by Peter Nagy; transcript edited by David Robbins and published in **Flash Art**, no.129 (Summer 1986), p.47
- 7 Jeff Koons, quoted in **Jeff Koons Versailles** (Château de Versailles, Paris 2008), catalogue to an exhibition at Château de Versailles, Paris, 14 September 2008–4 January 2009, p.111
- 8 Jeff Koons, 'Ed Paschke: Transcendence', in **Ed Paschke** (Gagosian Gallery, New York 2010), catalogue to an exhibition of Paschke's work curated by Koons at Gagosian Gallery, New York, 18 March–24 April 2010, p.9
- 9 Robert Smithson, 'Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan', in Jack Flam (Ed.), **Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings** (University of California Press, Berkeley 1996), pp.123-4
- 10 *loc. cit.*
- 11 'I'm placing the object in a context or material that will enhance a specific personality trait within the object.' – from an interview with Klaus Ottman, New York, October 1986, published in **Journal of Contemporary Art**, Vol.1, no.1 (1988), pp.18-23; also available at [jca-online/koons.html](http://jca-online/koons.html) (accessed 15 March 2016)
- 12 'There is no art in it', p.81
- 13 Alison Gingeras, 'Born Through Porn: How Jeff Koons Became Jeff Koons', in **Jeff Koons Made in Heaven Paintings** (Luxembourg & Dayan, New York 2010), catalogue to an exhibition at Luxembourg & Dayan, New York, 5 October 2010–21 January 2011, p.16
- 14 **Conversations with Norman Rosenthal**, p.178



With Titi, 2012. Photo by Matthias Willi

## Michael Archer