

Jeff Koons: One Ball Total Equilibrium Tank

Introduction

I first saw Jeff Koons's work in the original Saatchi Gallery in Boundary Road, North London, in 1987 as part of the two-part 'NY Art Now' exhibition.¹ Upon entering the building you walked past the reception desk before turning to the right and descending a few steps into the main gallery. From there, there were further galleries up to your left, but Koons's work was in that first main space. There was *Rabbit* (1986) from the *Statuary* series, the Jim Beam decanter train from the *Luxury and Degradation* series (1986), and there were some Plexiglas-encased vacuum cleaners from *The New* series (1980-86). All of this work was arresting in various ways; there was a functionality denied to the vacuum cleaners by their pristine, dust-free casing, and to the decanters of *Jim Beam – J.B. Turner Train* by the need to keep their contents undrunk behind intact factory seals. There was the implicit eroticism of the cleaners with their hoses, drums, rigid and flexible tubes, their suction and their inflatable bags. In this demonstration of polymorphous sexuality rather than in the fact of their unaltered, shop-bought state, they paid elaborate homage to Marcel Duchamp. And there was another kind of rigidity in *Rabbit* that contrasted with the blow-up plastic toy from which it was cast, a contrast that drew Andy Warhol's *Silver Clouds* (1966) and Claes Oldenburg's soft sculptures into contact with the once-inflated balloon of Piero Manzoni's *Fiato d'artista (Artist's Breath, 1960)*. All of this was absorbing, but none of it was what ultimately held the eye. Over towards the far wall, resting on a simple black metal stand, was what looked like a fish tank full of water. Suspended, it seemed, in the precise centre of this tank was a Spalding Dr J Silver Series basketball. My first thought on approaching was that it was a set-up, and that the ball had been cast in a block of some kind of ultra-clear plastic. But even though the ball did not move, there were clues

¹ 'NY Art Now', running from September 1987 to January 1988, included work by Ashley Bickerton, Ross Bleckner, Carroll Dunham, Robert Gober, Peter Halley, Ti-Shan Hsu, Jonathan Kessler, Jeff Koons, Jonathan Lasker, Allan McCollum, Tim Rollins and K.O.S., Peter Schuyff, Starn Twins, Haim Steinbach, Philip Taaffe, and Meyer Vaisman.

that gave the lie to that initial suspicion. Several small air bubbles on the ball's surface soon told me that it must be physics rather than subterfuge that lay behind the apparent defiance of gravity. The ball had to contain some liquid rather than just air, and the weight of the ball combined with the specific gravity of this liquid must exactly match the specific gravity of the surrounding fluid. As the work's title, *One Ball Total Equilibrium Tank* (1985), indicated, the system must be in equilibrium, albeit a dynamic one that was unlikely to last for very long. If the two fluids inside and surrounding the ball were different concentrations of some salt solution or other, there would be exchange between them. The gradient between the solutions would gradually even out, causing the ball to sink slowly over a period of time. But that was something that would happen at an unspecified point in the future. For the moment, the ball hung there, equidistant from top and bottom of the tank, from its front and back, and from each of its sides. It was unsullied and mute. It offered itself absolutely. It was perfect.

Only three years before this, Charles Saatchi had published a lavish, four-volume catalogue of his collection.² It featured some of the major figures associated with Pop and Minimalism, together with much work marking the more recent resurgence of interest in gestural painting, and which was loosely branded under the heading Neo-Expressionism. The catalogue had been given the title *Art of Our Time*, as if to say, 'Look no further, young man. This is it. This is what there is.' But things move and change quickly: none of the artists whose work was in 'NY Art Now' appeared in that catalogue. They were, on the whole, a little younger, and while there were links and references, both positive and critical, to much art that had preceded them, their work was already elsewhere. The catalogue text for 'NY Art Now' took the form of an extended round-table discussion between several contributors to the exhibition, including Koons,

² *Art of Our Time: The Saatchi Collection*, 4 vols, Lund Humphries, London, 1984, and Rizzoli International, New York, 1985.

(Vol 1: Andre, Baer, Bell, Flavin, Hesse, Judd, LeWitt, Mangold, Marden, Martin, McCracken, Morris, Nauman, Ryman, Sandback, Serra, Tuttle; Vol 2: Artschwager, Chamberlain, Samaras, Stella, Twombly, Warhol; Vol 3: Baselitz, Guston, Kiefer, Morley, Polke, Schnabel; Vol 4: Bartlett, Borofsky, Burton, Close, Fischl, Golub, Jenney, Jensen, Longo, Murray, Nutt, Rothenberg, Salle, Shapiro, Sherman, Winters, Clemente, Deacon, Hodgkin, Kossoff, Scully, Willing.)

Ashley Bickerton, Phillip Taaffe, Ross Bleckner, Tim Rollins and KOS, Meyer Vaisman, Peter Halley and Haim Steinbach, although it was, as compiler Dan Cameron made clear, a cut and paste job collaged together from a number of individual interviews. The endgame tone to the lines of enquiry pursued in the discussion bore in particular upon two pressing aspects of then-current cultural and political reality. The first of these was the commodity form of the work of art. If Neo-Expressionism was a return to painting following a decade in which conceptualist practices had enquired into the nature and status of the art object, the phenomenon could well be viewed negatively as a simple capitulation to market forces. How – this new work by Koons, Bickerton, Vaisman, Halley and others asked – might the realities of that market be acknowledged without the art that fed it being reduced to a token whose value is determined wholly by its place in the system of exchange? In similar vein, an exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston the previous year, in 1986, had borrowed the name of Samuel Beckett's play *Endgame* (1957) for its own title.³ There, too, the show focused critical attention on the question as to whether art might successfully resist the pervasive reach of market economics. 'Endgame' included several artists whose work was also included in 'NY Art Now' – Peter Halley, Ross Bleckner, Philip Taaffe, Haim Steinbach and Jeff Koons – and was a show in which, as David Ross, ICA Director at the time, wrote in his catalogue preface, we could see artists 'respond to the bleak situation in which the art object approaches commodity status'.⁴ The second pressing issue informing the 'NY Art Now' catalogue discussion was the appearance and continued disturbing presence of AIDS in society as a whole and in particular within the artistic community. Paintings in the exhibition by Philip Taaffe, Peter Schuyff and Ross Bleckner spoke vividly of a profound effort to assimilate and comprehend the personal and social impact of this new condition. In their work, the imagery of Op art was presented as the last modernist hurrah – it was the moment, they

³ 'Endgame: Reference and Simulation in Recent Painting and Sculpture', Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, September 25 – November 30, 1986. The catalogue, edited by the exhibition's curators David Joselit and Elizabeth Sussman, was published by ICA Boston and MIT, Cambridge, Mass, 1986. 'Endgame' included work by Ross Bleckner, Peter Halley, Sherrie Levine, Philip Taaffe, General Idea, Jon Kessler, Jeff Koons, Joel Otterson, Haim Steinbach, Richard Baim, Gretchen Bender and Perry Hoberman.

⁴ *Endgame: Reference and Simulation in Recent Painting and Sculpture*, p 8

seemed to be saying, at which modern art's development ran out of steam. What better than to take this point of exhaustion as subject matter and – in another kind of endgame – to refigure it, to make it the focus of an intense, productive engagement carried on in circumstances that made any activity beyond what was necessary for the continuance of existence look futile and irrelevant?

I looked at *One Ball Total Equilibrium Tank* for a long time, and I recall thinking two things. Firstly, that this work was very definitely in the way. It sat slap bang in the middle of whatever road you wanted to go down, and you couldn't simply pass it by. You couldn't ignore it. It had to be reckoned with, negotiated. Secondly, I thought that whatever I had been told about art up until that point was not adequate to deal with it. My own poor review of 'NY Art Now' made that inadequacy painfully clear, resorting as it did to the dismissive put-down rather than to a proper addressing of the works in the exhibition and of the issues which animated them. What stood out even then, however, was what I referred to as the 'exquisite stillness' of *One Ball Total Equilibrium Tank*.⁵ *One Ball Total* knew all that stuff I knew, all the history, especially the bits about Duchamp and Dada and Surrealism and Expressionism and Pop and Minimalism and Conceptualism; it was well-versed in all the theory, all the stuff about value and the commodity status of the art work – aesthetic value, exchange value, use value; it had read all the stuff about Donald Judd's 'specific objects' and Michael Fried's theatricality and Rosalind Krauss's articulation of Robert Morris's 'complex and expanded field';⁶ it was familiar with the intensity of the current debates about postmodernity, and about the ways in which we were now suffering an experience that people were excited to call, after Fredric Jameson,

⁵ Michael Archer, 'NY Art Now', *Art Monthly*, November 1987, p 23

⁶ See Donald Judd, 'Specific Objects', *Arts Review Yearbook 8*, 1965, reprinted in Donald Judd, *Complete Writings 1959 – 1975*, The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, and New York University Press, New York, 1975, pp 181-9; Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', *Artforum*, June 1967, reprinted in Gregory Battcock (ed), *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, E.P. Dutton & Co, New York, 1968, pp 116-47; and Rosalind Krauss, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', *October*, no 8, Spring 1979, reprinted in Hal Foster (ed), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Bay Press, Port Townsend, Washington, 1983, pp .

'the abolition of critical distance'.⁷ It was aware, because we had been to the moon and had seen with our own eyes, that the world was a fragile place, an ecosystem whose delicate balance could be disturbed by the slightest occurrence. It knew all of that stuff, and it passed judgement on none of it. It wasn't that it dismissed any of it either. To do that would have required it to signal the taking of a position just as much as aligning with, or opposing any part of it would. If anything, what was so striking was that it was politely accepting of the world in which such things, with their attendant histories and theories, existed. It could do that because the world was, after all, the same world in which it, too, existed as a basketball floating in a tank of water. It was what it was. And it knew, too, that Frank Stella had once said something like that: 'What you see is what you see.'⁸ It might have been happy for you if you knew that as well, but it wasn't relying on Stella in any way. It didn't need Stella to have said that in order to be what it was. It was a basketball floating in a tank of water. It was what it was, and it was perfect.

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⁷ See Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *New Left Review*, no 146, July/August 1984, pp 53-92, especially Section VI: 'The Abolition of Critical Distance'.

⁸ See Bruce Glaser, 'Questions to Stella and Judd: An Interview edited by Lucy Lippard', *Art News*, September 1966, reprinted in Battcock (ed), *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, p 158.