

Factories of Banality: The Role of Works by Jeff Koons in the Art World's Discourse of Wealth and Power

Nadia Issa, University of Arkansas, USA*

Paulina Tendera, Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland

ABSTRACT

An examination of the omnipresent relations of power within the art world, focused on marketing strategies and the process of identification and differentiation in the perception of Jeffs Koons's artworks reveals a complex interest in Jeff Koons's personality. It shows the relationships of Koons's artworks with the economy and identifies them as products of big-business transactions. It also explains how the art world produces brand equity. Such artwork is chosen to serve as a symbol of opulence and as the locus of capital. Identification, differentiation, the elite, and art commodification are the main themes explored. This is a reflection on the state of the contemporary art world.

KEYWORDS

Art Market, Art World, Commodification, Commodity Fetishism, Elite, Kitsch, Koons, Marketing, Power Relations, Wealth

INTRODUCTION

When I was about four years old I remember a dress that I dreamt of: a sparkly, sequined, pink dress that my mother refused to buy me, justifying her decision with words such as: "You are not gonna wear that kitsch."¹ I did not know then that, as my dreams of being a dressed in pink princess were vanishing, the public was admiring the pinkish, reflective *Balloon Dog (Magenta)* from the Celebration series by Jeff Koons (<http://www.jeffkoons.com/artwork/celebration>), and people were even paying millions of dollars to own one of these childish (in my opinion) sculptures. Since 1980, Koons sculptures have been exhibited internationally in such prestigious places as the Centre Pompidou, Venice Biennale, Whitney Museum of American Art, Château de Versailles, and Guggenheim Museum Bilbao (Koons, n.d.). When work is shown or purchased by a museum, it is the highest kind of institutional approval in the contemporary visual art world (Becker, 2008). What happened, then? Did my mother not recognize that I had "sublime taste" since I was a little child because I admired shiny and pinkish objects and dresses, or did I, as a 4-year-old, along with half of the art world, become drawn into the illusion and pleasure of the "simple aesthetics" that post-pop-art movements might offer?

According to Rosler (1997), "The popular and financial success of pop art proved that there might be both a wide public and a ready market for high art, as long as it did not challenge the received worldview too strenuously" (p. 21). Does the worldview of the viewer affect the perception of the artwork and thus dictate aesthetic judgment within the art world? Does the emergence of "new"

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*Corresponding Author

elites affect the redefinition of good and bad taste? What is the role of kitsch in this new economic and intellectual discourse? Further, is it true that only the collector's wealth affects the price of a work of art, or do any ideological factors play a role? Is it true that "it is clear that the price of an art object is limited only by the amount that collectors are willing and able to pay for it" (Goetzmann et al., 2011, p. 222)?

Paul Maltby summarized Clement Greenberg's definition of *kitsch* as "profit-seeking, mass-produced art pitched to the uncultivated tastes of the populace" (Maltby, 2012, p. 53). On the contrary, a famous Latin proverb says, "*De gustibus non est disputandum*" (literally, "about tastes, it should not be disputed/discussed"). Categorizing viewer taste might be regarded as enforcing the dominance of the elites² and their long-lasting distinctions between "high art" and "popular art," but it might also point out what should be regarded as valuable in the modern world and what might be too recent to stand the test of time (Botti, 2000, p. 21). The authority and responsibility of developing a complex aesthetic judgment rather than a "vicarious experience and faked sensations" (Greenberg, 1961, p. 10) lay, in my opinion, in the hands of the elites, or my case in the hands of my mother, who since young age helped me to distinguish elegant clothes from what Greenberg would call "trash aesthetics" (Maltby, 2012, p. 53). As controversial as it might sound, and as much opposed to the idea of freedom and a free aesthetic judgment of the viewers it might seem, I believe that taste is something that can be trained and developed, and I am saying that based on my own experiences as a visual artist. In my opinion, it is just a matter of training, practice, and knowledge instead of taking shortcuts to the experience of aesthetic pleasure. Although using the word *kitsch* might seem judgmental and hierarchical, I would identify kitsch in the context of works by Jeff Koons as one of the means of his artistic expression (and here, I mean a philosophy towards art, more than the aesthetic value of the works themselves).

Kitsch, as described by Greenberg, "predigests art for the spectator and spares him effort, provides him with a short cut to the pleasure of art that detours what is necessarily difficult in genuine art" (Greenberg, 1961, p. 15). For centuries artists have viewed their activity as "the production of meaning—often disruptive meaning—rather than as the production of objects per se" (Rosler, 1997, p. 23). The famous readymade sculpture *Fountain* by Marcel Duchamp, who highly inspired Koons, aimed first of all to redefine the perception of the work of art; secondly, it was based on deep, intellectual, provocative, and controversial thought; and lastly, it was created more than one hundred years ago! It was valued for solving an artistic problem that related to the times that the artist lived in. Jeff Koons's declarations of being inspired by Marcel Duchamp, without going deeper into the context in which the works of Duchamp should be regarded, betray shifting Duchamp's philosophy in favor of his interests, as seen in the way he talks about Duchamp's influence:

He's given me the ability to be able to remove a physical involvement with my work, and by removing that physical involvement, it's let me focus on what the initial interests have been and not to get kind of manipulated by the medium itself. (Art and Object, 2021, 0:14)

Taking apart using such phrases as "ability to be able," being "manipulated by the medium itself" is one of Duchamp's essential thoughts and the main idea of the readymade objects exhibited in the gallery space, in which their function is being redefined, and we as viewers are being manipulated by the context in which they are being shown.³ On the other hand, the notion of removing physical involvement perfectly illustrates his model of art production.⁴ Taking all of the above into account, I might argue that Jeff Koons references Duchamp as one of his marketing strategies. There is a high probability that Koons' efforts in this matter are conscious, planned, and deliberate. Maintaining the "aura" that characterized traditional art is necessary to stabilize the art world as a world of financial investment.

Marketing is quite an adequate word in that case, as well as *product*, *commodity fetishism*, and *art market*. We cannot simply impose a general model of exchange or commodity production to deal with the political economy of art by simply referring it to a contemporary Marxist economic analysis. We cannot, as Wartofsky argued, "impose . . . an 'interpretation' of artistic production

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