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Press, Clayton: Review Jeff Koons

24 May 2019

Marcel Duchamp + Jeff Koons, Appearance Stripped Bare (Apariencia Desnuda), Museo Jumex, Mexico City



Clayton Press Contributor

Arts

"Consider the practical effects of the objects of your conception. Then, your conception of those effects is the whole of your conception of the object." Charles Sanders Peirce, *Popular Science Monthly*, January 1878.

Jeff Koons is a very practical man, pragmatic even. He has developed a set of unembellished, yet polished principles that envelop his work, which he talks about in philosophical, near-spiritual terms. He wants his audience to experience awareness, acceptance and transcendence. These transformative possibilities can seem incongruous with Koons' subject matter, which is shaped by commercialism in popular culture and Pop art. As Roberta Smith wrote in "Stop Hating Jeff Koons," an article that appeared two days after *Jeff Koons'* 1986 stainless steel *Rabbit* sculpture was sold at Christie's Post War and Contemporary Sale on May 15, 2019,

“ Mr. Koons is a lightning rod, and has been for some time. It is fashionable and easy to hate his work. In certain quarters of the art world it seems to be required—collectors, many dealers and museum curators excepted. . . Mr. Koons's art has proved resistant to easy absorption into art history. We're still fighting about him. (*The New York Times*, May 17, 2019.)

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Marcel Duchamp. *Roue de Bicyclette*, 1913. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. FOTOGRAFIA: NGC © MARCEL DUCHAMP / ADAGP / SOMAAP / ME XICO / 2019.

Koons has contributed to this perception. He has, as curator Maria Emilia Fernández has written, followed "in the paths of other artists not [the] least those of Marcel Duchamp . . . who cultivated a public identity that could accompany and enrich their works." (The term "enrich" is unquestionably ambiguous, potentially alluding to both symbolic and economic enrichment.) Fernandez continues,

“ the need to promote the self alongside the work of art could be seen as symptomatic of the degree to which our present economy fuels a distorted perception of social interaction. . . in the art world, where people value and consume not so much the actual product but its brand name, not so much the artwork but the trademark of the artist.

Auction house catalogs for major sales invariably position art and artists as

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intent and meaning may be articulated in a catalog entry, but this is of secondary, if not tertiary, importance to the art consuming public. They have already been swayed by price and celebrity. This is hardly a new phenomenon. You can look to the art markets of 15th and 16th century Bruges and see how Jan van Eyck, Hans Memling and Petrus Christus leveraged their talents and celebrity in a tightly controlled guild system. Celebrated artists are simultaneously victims and perpetrators. But by cultivating public identities, artists have often created a conundrum, diluting or diminishing critical acceptance. Their art is primarily consumed as commercial objects rather than symbolic ones.



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This conundrum is readily apparent at Museo Jumex in Mexico City in a two-person exhibition of genuinely masterpiece works by Marcel Duchamp and Jeff Koons. (Neither artist has had a retrospective exhibition in Mexico before.) Duchamp and Koons are presented as art establishment equals. Intentionally, the exhibition does not try to establish a linear artistic relationship (or, as curator Massimiliano Gioni puts it, "direct filiation") between Duchamp and Koons. Rather, it positions the two artists in their respective roles of art and public identities, as "a system of elective affinities consisting of both formal and conceptual resonances." In a sense, museum-goers have the opportunity to see three exhibitions, one each by Duchamp and Koons and the third, an animated dialogue between the artists. (There is a fourth, related and not-to-be-missed exhibition on the museum's lower level by Saâdane Afif.) This exhibition strategy demonstrates curatorial flair, without gimmick. There will be a Duchamp audience, blind to everything Koons. There will be a Koons audience, blind to everything Duchamp. And, there will be an audience with an appetite for everything.

The exhibition is organized into five themes, ultimately tracing the trajectory of the readymade to the facsimile. Duchamp is the acknowledged originator of the readymade. He selected ordinary objects, doing so with aesthetic indifference, which were often exhibited (unaltered, but wryly titled) side-by-side with works by other 20th century artists. Duchamp's "fountain," an inverted urinal, a snow shovel, or a French bottle rack, may be among his best-known pieces. They are icons of conceptual art. Later, Duchamp worked with facsimiles of his own work. In 1964, Arturo Schwartz, the Italian dealer, made calibrated facsimiles of lost works, using diagrammatically exact "blueprints." These works are considered *bona fide* Duchamp works. They mark a transition from mass-produced, commercially available, off the shelf readymades to faithfully fabricated reproductions of a readymade, which prepared the way for Koons.

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Marcel Duchamp. *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, 1915. Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Rome. © MARCEL DUCHAMP / ADAGP / SOMAAP / ME XICO / 2019.

Koons, in contrast, selectively used (or deployed) readymades early in his career with plexi-encased vacuum cleaners with fluorescent lights and equilibrium tanks, in which basketballs were suspended in salt water. Better known are Koons' interpretative facsimiles of readymade objects, ranging from silver-plated novelty alcohol bottles, to exaggerated reproductions of elements from everyday culture

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(like balloon animals and heart-shaped ornaments with bows), to the Liberty Bell and an inflatable The Incredible Hulk. Koons' works are not merely made. They are engineered, fabricated and finished to a degree that usually surpasses luxury products. This is his genius, really. In her essay for Koons' 2014 exhibition at The Whitney Museum of American Art, Michelle Kuo conjectured that the artist's "fabrication standards now easily—and incredibly—exceed those of advanced industry, whether aerospace or military." It is easy to understand the appeal of Koons' art. He has taken great care to seduce his audience with (near-)perfection, something missing in everyday life.

Nor can it be overlooked that awareness of Koons' public identity (that is his celebrity) rivals that of Andy Warhol's. The 1986 work by Koons—*Rabbit*—recently sold at auction for \$91.8 million, the current world record for any living artist. Koons is an art star, a celebrity. Duchamp, in contrast, has entered public consciousness for a few of his readymades, but it is only among the cognoscenti that his artistic achievements and enigmatic public identity is known. (In commercial terms, auction results for Duchamp's work have only exceeded \$2.0 million five times, most prominently in 2009 when *Belle haleine - eau de toilette*—a 1921 work from the collection of Yves Saint Laurent and Pierre Bergé—was sold at Christie's Paris.)



Jeff Koons. New Hoover Convertibles, New Shelton Wet/Drys 5 Gallon, Doubledecker, 1981-1987. Astrup Fearnley Collection, Oslo, Norway. © JEFF KOONS.

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A DNA analysis of the Duchamp and Koons relationship may not withstand testing by 23andMe™. Their shared features are more like those of cousins than (grand)father and (grand)son with Warhol as father. There are a few important commonalities that underscore Duchamp's originality and importance in the entirety of art history, and the critical thinking that underlies Koons'. Most prominently, Duchamp and Koons both “view the viewer” in similar terms:

“ *Duchamp*: “All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act. This becomes even more obvious when posterity gives a final verdict and sometimes rehabilitates forgotten artists.” (*Marcel Duchamp*, New York: Grove Press, 1959.)

Koons: “The readymade that I cared about was the viewer. That was my readymade. And it had nothing to do with the object. I don’t think there’s any indifference there. Other than the indifference [that] I don’t care who the viewer is, but that they were the readymade.” (Interview, May 17, 2019.)

For both artists, the viewer completes the art work.

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Marcel Duchamp. *Étant donné s in the Fourteenth Street Studio*, 1965. Color photograph for the first Manual of Instruction, 1966. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Marcel Duchamp Archives, Anne d'Harnoncourt Papers. © MARCEL DUCHAMP / ADAGP / SOMAAP / ME XICO / 2019.

Without question, both Duchamp and Koons have changed contemporary art, including designations of value and taste. They have both challenged concepts of commodity, consumption and value. Koons has often asserted that his work “aims to remove any guilt or shame from the viewer’s experience.” Yet, when asked if his work could be perceived as “just fun,” Koons responded,

“ I [would] perceive it somewhat as a tragedy . . . because I have certain intentions. And my intentions are to—because I do enjoy the chemical reactions, I enjoy how personal iconography can be used to communicate feelings and ideas—so there’s a certain point of view, a certain context, and intentions that I hope that can be carried through to a certain point. . . I realize that the viewer finishes that narrative.

Appearance Stripped Bare is subtitled, “Desire and the Object in the Work of Marcel Duchamp and Jeff Koons, Even” (a further reference to the full title of Duchamp’s *The Large Glass*). As an exhibition, it covers a diverse landscape of

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topics in contemporary art issues. The accompanying exhibition catalog is a collection of essays and dialogues that contextualize, compare and contrast Duchamp and Koons. Reading, for example, “Secular Spirits: Production, Consumption, and Transcendence,” an essay by Dorothea von Hantleemann, is a window on Koons’ most fundamental principles. Francis Naumann’s essay, “Jeff Koons and *Étant donnés*: A Lesson in Circular Reasoning,” explains how when talking with Koons about his work, “He will jump from one work to another, making comparisons and establishing connections that, initially, might seem far-fetched, but if one keeps listening, eventually everything will come full circle and make sense.”



Jeff Koons. Large Vase of Flowers, 1991. Private collection. © JEFF KOONS.

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Exhibitions are generally difficult to install. Assembling and installing the masterpieces in *Appearance Stripped Bare* was an extraordinary undertaking. Gioni and his curatorial team secured major loans that showcase both artists at their most accomplished. (Think, greatest hits.) Yet, Duchamp's work—typically domestic in scale—is often overpowered when shown alongside or even nearby Koons'. Few works by Koons are really modest, even smaller framed ones, because the visual content is invariably bold. In the large, open plan of Museo Jumex's galleries, Koons work physically dominates Duchamp's, complicating direct dialogue.

Visual and intellectual conundrums, paradoxes and contradictions abound in *Appearance Stripped Bare*. This in itself may be its greatest innovation and contribution when comparing Duchamp and Koons. Duchamp “repeatedly insisted that a work of art could only be considered complete when taking into consideration the spectator’s participation. The gap that he believed existed between an artist’s “intention” and a work’s “realization” was something he called the “art coefficient.” It is in this coefficient, that *Appearance Stripped Bare* reveals the exhibition’s challenge to apprehend meaning through direct experience. Context is everything. The viewer—now a readymade—completes each work with a unique set of experiences and ideas. The work invades the viewer’s memory. Transcendence is complete.

Appearance Stripped Bare: Desire and The Object in the Work of Marcel Duchamp and Jeff Koons, Even, Museo Jumex, Mexico City, through September 29, 2019.

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