

JEFF KOONS

A RETROSPECTIVE

SCOTT ROTHKOPF

— With contributions by —

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OBJECTS THAT ARE ONLY BOUNDARIES

ALEXANDER NAGEL

Recently, I visited the house of an elderly collector who would qualify for the TV show *Hoarders* but for the fact that a lot of his stuff is very valuable. Between two doors a sculpture attributed to Gian Lorenzo Bernini rose above a sprawl of other things, some precious, some junky, some of it junk that happened to be thousands of years old. The sculpture was a bust of Cardinal Richelieu, in pristine white marble, which had been draped with a necklace of gray, pearlescent “stones” made of plastic, a gauche and loving gesture that immediately made me feel closer to the figure than I had ever felt when faced with the version in the Louvre. The additional chintz gave a jaunty accent to the cardinal’s gaunt Gallic elegance. He looked quite alive.

Months later, out of curiosity, I Googled “Richelieu jewelry”—what jewelry had the Cardinal actually worn?—and discovered that a company by the name of Richelieu had done a fairly brisk business in necklaces of fake pearls during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. I don’t really want to know if the Cardinal’s new adornment was vintage Richelieu, but I like to imagine that the name sealed a sympathy between faraway things.

Before they got cordoned off in museums, works of art often had unfixed boundaries. They grew in sympathy with their environments, absorbing gifts and embellishments. The miracle-working ninth-century statue of Sainte Foy at Conques, for example, was encrusted over time with gems and cameos offered by well-to-do worshipers. The more modest and fragile offerings haven’t lasted.

Humbler accruals could, however, enter the record in different ways. At some point around 1400, a grateful devotee adorned a silver statue of the Virgin Mary in Milan Cathedral with a robe woven out of ears of wheat, a fitting gift for a fertility goddess. When the figure was replaced over the course of the fifteenth century, first by a painting and then by a marble statue, the impermanent cladding was absorbed into the new works, which

now showed the Virgin adorned with her remarkable accessory. None of the successive versions of the Virgin in Milan survives, but its fame spread through copies. You can find five-hundred-year-old images of the *Madonna of the Wheat Ears* all over Europe that show the special robe and other accoutrements of its Milanese setting. You can take the copies whole or puzzle out the sedimentations of life within them.

I look at Jeff Koons’s *Banality* series (pls. 53–68) in particular with these processes in mind. Many of these works look as if they are the sealed result of a series of agglutinations. Cascading flowers have fused into *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* (pl. 63); a ribbon has slipped into place around the pig’s neck in *Ushering in Banality* (pl. 53); a bird perches on the shoulder of *Buster Keaton* (pl. 54) or at the feet of *Popples* (no. 20, p. 117); and a penguin and pig have been taken into the eternal embrace of *Saint John the Baptist* (pl. 57). The elements are based on prototypes that are themselves already sculptures, tchotchkes, or figurines, suggesting a series of previous castings and recastings, as well as absorptions. These figures are in turn based on living creatures, the real Michael Jackson or Bubbles, an actual penguin or pig. I imagine creatures becoming figures at different points, and then figures being absorbed into new composites at successive stages. The works of art are the end result of a staggered passage from life into art, smoothed into glazed porcelain.

Of course, the absorptions are all internalized in the work, which is sealed off again. A Koons sculpture points to a past of touching and adding, but admits none to come.

Jeff Koons consecrates not just living beings but also ordinary things, and that is why when I look at his work I am always checking it against the Christian relic cult. There is no one-to-one correlation, and yet setting the two in relation to one another helps to bring the protocols adopted by the artist into focus.



Reliquary of Sainte Foy, late 9th century with later additions. Gilded silver, copper, enamel, rock crystal, precious stones, cameos, and wooden core. Conques, France

The Christian cult of relics democratized the sacred. Religious objects didn't have to appear in the form of awe-inspiring figures. A divinity had lived and died on earth in human form, and that meant that from then on low didn't have to stay low. Any thing might be touched by God, recognized as such, and acquire a halo of real gold. Things indistinguishable from other examples of their class—a sandal, a drinking cup, a tunic, prison chains, a slab of marble, a girdle, a rock, a bone—were encased in precious metal and jewels. The relic of Saint Andrew's sandal now preserved in the Cathedral of Trier is sacred because it was for some time in contact with the saint's foot, the foot that traveled distances preaching the gospel and that was attached to a body that ended in martyrdom. In its presentation at Trier, it is what Marcel Duchamp would have called a *readymade-aidé*: The relic is presented in its reliquary, inside a golden box, with a golden foot pressing down on it.

On specific occasions such relics were set up to receive the adoration of people who came to touch and look at them. The Church achieved success not by preaching humility but by making humble things glitter. Banal readymades passed in and out of zones of consecration. New relics could reveal themselves at any time, and enshrined ones could be exposed as false and returned to the nameless heap from which they were drawn. Objects were both socially and conceptually mobile. Art emerged as an enshrining zone around such objects. As they aged, artworks could shift function, becoming the core around which new art formed.

Relics are always pieces pointing to a whole, whereas the art of Jeff Koons celebrates perfect wholeness. His store-bought items are not fragmentary, old, and dusty; they are shiny, new, and pristine, relics that haven't lived at all. They are unsealed only to be immediately sealed again as art. Moreover, they anticipate their own encasement by being encasements themselves. Vessels, inflatable toys, vacuum cleaners, basketballs, an aqualung, a train whose cars are containers for liquor—all are relics that anticipate the structure of the reliquary. They are loved not for their thing-ness but precisely for their capacity to hold and contain, even if they hold nothing but air. They are then enshrined by being put in vitrines or by being transfigured into shiny metal versions of themselves. The logic of the relic cult is there even as it is transformed at every turn.

This logic encourages a traffic from the realm of figures to the realm of objects. A Baccarat crystal set is treated in the same way as a public sculpture. Things become statue-like and figures become thing-like. The rabbit is obviously a toy, but abstracted as it is, it is also the animal. Offerings can be anything, things can become figures, and figures of any sort can become "sculpture."

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I like to imagine the Venus of Willendorf (Naturhistorisches Museum, Vienna) (no. 9, p. 201) as one of the cheapo replicas of the Paleolithic. Since antiquity, the democracy of cult objects has been propagated through copies produced on an industrial scale and in a wide range of sizes and materials. Many of the great Greek statues we study in textbooks and museums are represented today by later Roman versions, often made in a different medium. Some famous Greek works, such as the Aphrodite of Knidos by Praxiteles, have come down to us in variants so divergent in pose that no one really knows what the original looked like.



Reliquary of the sandal of St. Andrew, Carolingian, 977–993. Gold, gemstones, pearls, and enamel. Cathedral of Trier, Germany

Small-scale replicas traveled fastest and widest. The little plastic Davids for sale outside the Florence Accademia—actually, they are available outside museums all over Italy—have their ancient ancestors. Even today, the cabinets of any major collection of ancient art are filled with statuettes in various materials that look like grand statues yet can be held in the hand. It tends to be the ones in metal—the expensive ones—that survive, but a few pieces made in fragile materials for more modest purchasers can also be seen. They must have outnumbered the more durable ones a thousand times over.

When Jeff Koons uses a small tchotchke replica of the Callipygian Venus as the prototype for his very large *Metallic Venus* (pl. 122), or when he inflates the tiny Venus of Willendorf into a huge pneumatic figure for *Balloon Venus (Orange)* (pl. 125), he is not subverting the antique tradition so much as perpetuating its scalable logic.

In freestanding figural statues, the figure is coextensive with the work of art. There is no part of the work that isn't also a part of the figure. The word *statue* is related to the Latin word *status*, the condition of standing. Statues are works of art that stand, in the form of figures that enact the standing. This perfect redundancy generates uncanny effects of autonomy and animation, chronicled and marveled over through the centuries. The history of statue-making—or at least

large tracts of it—can be seen as the ongoing management of this basic danger and enticement.

Koons's figures respond to these impulses by insisting on their made-ness. This is clearest in the figures based on inflatables, which are emphatically objects that are only boundaries. A Venus of Willendorf made out of balloons is an earth mother that is all volume and no substance. Here, technological trickery aims not to fool but to celebrate the artifice, and anyway points to a toy, not a Paleolithic figure. Obsessive exactitude is lavished on the nipple used to inflate the Hulk figure, which is reproduced in bronze made to look like vinyl for *Hulk (Rock)* (pl. 118). The gigantesque *Balloon Swan* has been remade in stainless steel. It weighs tons, yet the "links" of balloon still seem to press against the retaining balloon rings, suggesting the squeaking sound they made as they were twisted into their shapes. Despite their mass, they look protuberant, buoyant, barely touching the ground. We know it is an effect, but we linger in it as an effect.

Even when they do not reproduce empty volumes, Jeff Koons's sculptures insist on their outsideness, a shape that is nothing but a once liquid, highly conforming surface. To return for a moment to ancient statues, the miniature copies often look like copies; they register on their surface the incidental imperfections of casting on an industrial scale. Koons takes that element—the work's copy-quality—and isolates it, turns it into a principle. Unlike the mass-produced ancient copies, with their seams and burrs—and unlike Warhol's repetitions, which luxuriate in the degradation and noise that enter into the transfer process—here the result is hypersmooth figures with zero imperfection, the ultimate luxury objects. But they have that generalized look of a copy, as if not the figure but the silver in which it is dipped is all that stands before us. *Metallic Venus* looks like it is still liquid, still arising, and at any moment could spontaneously melt down and arise again, in a different shape.

My first direct encounter with the work of Jeff Koons occurred in December 1988 at the *Banality* show at Sonnabend Gallery in New York. The peculiarity of that experience, produced in part by the excitement and alarm whipped up around the exhibition, forms the core of what I feel about his work, still. I would like to describe it as I felt it then.

The work made me a little sick, even as I felt an almost irresistible invitation to submit to it. It was a giving over, but not just in the way you give in to fun

things, like action movies and fashion magazines. This was stranger, more concentrated, not really fun. It was also clear that everything was here; I didn't have to do anything other than accept it. Each thing was complete in its familiarity and strangeness. Nothing about it was lying. Koons's Michael (pl. 63) was more real than the real Michael Jackson, who was altering his own shape and surface anyway. It insisted that it was more than a likeness, that it came from elsewhere but was now here. It looked like Michael but not really, and yet that didn't seem wrong, or rather the estrangement seemed right given the strangeness of the whole thing.

My eyes wandered to the flowers strewn around him, and I thought, "Yes, of course." I felt the queasy joy of the devotee. I both inhabited that role and stood outside it. I remember thinking that this is how people throughout history must have felt in the presence of cult statues, a touch of hilarity enlivening the tremor, a moment of recognition amid the surrounding hubbub of profanity and desire. If you really want to see what happens when you turn people into gods, the statue was saying, here it is.