

TO SHED THREE TEARS

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Michael Jackson sits in a relaxed position—his right leg in front of him, slightly bent, his left leg crisscrossed underneath. He leans back on his left arm naturally, and on his lap a chimpanzee reclines, clasping a white cloth. Together, the two form one unit—Jackson and the chimp sport identical crisp, collared white shirts, gold and white pullover sweaters, and gold pants with a single white stripe down the side. Both characters pose casually, yet the surface of the material from which they are formed conveys a more extravagant aura.

The bodies of the King of Pop and his primate companion are actually fashioned out of white porcelain, the surface coated with a glistening gold paint reminiscent of the small painted figurines one could buy in a flea market for pocket change. Their faces, contrastingly, are left the natural stark white color of porcelain, stylized with artificially blackened eyes, bright red lips, and unchanging, eerily stiff facial expressions. The two appear immortal and infallible, untouchable and perfect—as if manufactured by machine or produced in bulk to be sold to any MJ fanatic for a few dollars by a street vendor in New York City. However, this porcelain duo is not to be sold on the street. It is the life-sized, \$5.6 million, 1988 sculpture *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* by the American artist Jeff Koons.

Looking simply at the construction of *Michael Jackson and Bubbles*, we may understand why many critics label Koons's work as kitschy. Originating in 1860s Germany, the term "kitsch" was used to describe cheap, low-brow trinkets that could be bought within artist communities, and at street fairs and shops. More commonly, kitsch refers to inexpensive, mass-produced works that rely on popular iconography to appeal to the masses. Koons's piece definitely appears kitschy—the porcelain and shiny gold are not necessarily wildly expensive. Yet Koons does not mass-produce his artworks, nor does he create works for the purpose of generating a wide consumer market. Perhaps the term kitsch, in a contemporary setting, has evolved even further

into a critical pillar of the “what is art?” conversation within the art community.

In his novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera effectively summarizes in one simple metaphor the manipulative calculation—the use of cultural imagery to trigger a universal response—involved in kitsch. He writes, “[k]itsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: how nice to see children running on the grass! The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass! It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch” (Kundera 251). Applied to Koons’s work, the metaphor makes evident that the two tears do not adequately summarize the conceptual meaning and contemporary implications of his work. In this case, the first tear says: how nice to see my favorite pop star, Michael Jackson, and his chimpanzee! The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all of America, by the King of Pop, the legendary celebrity! Yet perhaps there exists a third tear, which says above all: how nice to be confronted, together with all of America, by artwork that questions the artificiality, materiality, and culture which has created for me the icon that is Michael Jackson. It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch, and it is the third tear that makes Koons an artist.

To qualify Koons’s work as art, rather than kitsch, we must first put art and kitsch in conversation with one another. Generally, artists and the art critic community have rejected kitsch as “bad art,” if it is even art at all. In his 1939 essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” Clement Greenberg seeks to expand on these terms in order to more fully develop the critical lens through which we view art and kitsch. He first discusses the avant-garde movement of the early twentieth century, which he argues “keep[s] culture moving through its mentality of creating ‘[a]rt for art’s sake’” (Greenberg 36). These types of works, he argues, propel society by focusing on experimental processes, whether through unusual techniques or experimental ideas. Greenberg praises the avant-garde. Unlike kitsch, it did not merely imitate pop culture or create artworks based on popular demand, but rather pushed the intellectual boundaries of the current times.

According to Greenberg, since works typically eschew popularity in favor of experimental ideas, avant-garde artists tend to be marginalized in the modern world. He posits that the avant-garde movement was linked to and

dependent upon a wealthy or elite culture in order to survive, stating, “the avant-garde . . . has always remained attached by an umbilical cord of gold” (Greenberg 38). By contrast, common consumers favor kitsch because it does not depend on the bourgeoisie to exist, but rather is self-sufficient in our contemporary conditions. Greenberg writes:

the pre-condition for kitsch, a condition without which kitsch would be impossible, is the availability close at hand of a fully matured cultural tradition, whose discoveries, acquisitions and perfected self-consciousness kitsch can take advantage of for its own ends. It borrows from it devices, tricks, stratagems, rules of thumb, themes, converts them into a system and discards the rest. It draws its life blood, so to speak, from this reservoir of accumulated experience. (40)

This “accumulated experience”—a “vicarious experience and faked sensatio[n]”—is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch, and is probably the source of the capitalistic lure of making kitsch (40).

For this reason, Greenberg warns that avant-garde artists will be tempted by the potential monetary gains and calculated systems of kitsch. Now more than ever we see artists putting avant-garde aesthetics and kitsch into conversation with one another—focusing on popular consumer culture and our “second tear” response to it as inspiration to broaden this conversation around kitsch. While Jeff Koons technically exhibits qualities of kitsch in many of his works, such as *Michael Jackson and Bubbles*, his themes show that he ties the principles of avant-garde and kitsch together.

Consider his series *Pre-New* and *The New* (1979-80; 1979-87). Here, Koons directly borrows from consumer culture, using mass-produced goods such as vacuums, toasters, and other appliances as the centerpieces of his series. The *Pre-New* works are wall and floor installations. *Nelson Automatic Cooker / Deep Fryer* places the deep fryer over two vertical plexiglass tubes, both of which are home to vertical rods of fluorescent light. The fryer itself is black, white, and silver, the plug poking out to the right the only aspect of asymmetry in the composition. *The New* works similarly use recognizable appliances but include prints of advertisements as well. *New Hoover Convertible* features a pristine green Hoover vacuum placed on top of five evenly distributed rods of fluorescent light.

Many of these pieces are placed under large plexiglass boxes—as if they were collectors' items or favorite trinkets on a bookshelf. Here, Koons borrows from the mechanics of kitsch, using recognizable and purchasable items from the current culture. Beyond that, these works are clearly avant-garde: he asks his viewers to open their minds to new technologies, new ideologies, and new processes. Koons has simply illuminated and framed the appliances, as one might light and frame a sculpture, but this minimalistic installation ultimately detaches the appliances from their original, intended purposes. The objects remain eternally new and unaffected by the American culture for which they were created. By placing them in a gallery or museum, Koons uses their commercial allure to seduce his viewers, proving his fascination with consumer culture and the lure of kitsch itself.

Yet the effect seems cold: he essentially detaches these goods by placing them behind glass—creating inherent distance. By doing so, he shows his career-long fascination with the tragedy of buying into them as products. Take for example his 1983-93 series *Equilibrium*, which perpetually keeps works new, or in what he calls “the penultimate state of being,” just as *Pre-New* and *The New*, *Equilibrium* examine an endlessly renewable state of objects (qtd. in Varela-Ferreira). For example, in *One Ball Total Equilibrium Tank*, a Spalding basketball floats in the exact center of a glass tank which rests on a simple black metal stand. *Aqualung* casts a scuba device in bronze to theoretically provide air forever; *Lifeboat* provides eternal inflation. In each piece, Koons shows his fascination for temporality and what it means to be permanent in a culture that is continually consuming new gadgets and goods.

Perhaps it is this rapid and evolving consumption of consumer goods that interests Koons, rather than kitsch itself. How does the consumption of time play a role in actual kitsch? To answer this question, we should consider a larger scope of the term; clearly, kitsch can be hard to classify. According to Robert C. Solomon's 1991 essay “On Kitsch and Sentimentality,” the problem with defining kitsch is actually due to its sentimentality, which he explains by splitting kitsch into two types: “sweet kitsch” and “high kitsch” (Solomon 1). He first discusses sweet kitsch, noting, “the heart of the problem lies in our poor opinion of the emotions in general and in particular the ‘softer’ sentiments” (1). Sweet kitsch refers to the common definition of kitsch: the mass-produced, cheapened, “K-Mart-style” trinkets (3). He calls

them “sweet” due to their subject matter: sweet kitsch often depends on sentimental, nostalgic imagery in order to secure an emotional response from its audiences. Solomon criticizes this result, calling it a “‘cheap’ emotional experience” (4). Thus, he proposes a second definition of kitsch, which he calls “high kitsch”: work that cannot be openly dismissed as cheap due to the professionalism and expertise in the craft of the work (Solomon 4). These types of works are generally well-made and expensive, regardless of the subject matter—much as the works of Koons are.

Just as Greenberg links the avant-garde movement to a wealthy, bourgeois class, Solomon links “high kitsch” to an elite group—“the *‘nouveau riche’*” (3). Is high kitsch then, in a way, somewhat avant-garde? Solomon is incredibly critical of high kitsch, arguing that it may not even be art, let alone avant-garde. He argues that, conceptually, the lure of high kitsch is the same as sweet kitsch. People with “unsophisticated taste” invest in sweet kitsch, and people “who have money but not taste” invest in high kitsch (Solomon 4). The only difference between the two is that instead of relying on sentimentality, high kitsch can raise its price tag due to impressive form, composition, and style.

If we were to try to classify Koons’s works as one type of kitsch or the other, it would be incredibly difficult to do so. *Pre-New* and *The New* are clearly not sweet kitsch, as they do not really focus on sweet, sentimental, or nostalgic subject matter. But take, for example, *Inflatable Flower (Tall Yellow)* (1979), a piece that does focus on the sweetness of a product. Made out of shiny plastic vinyl, this inflatable flower sitting in the perfect center of a mirror has bright yellow petals, a straight green stem, and dark green leaves. Aesthetically, this flower might be taken as high kitsch: it is perfectly and expertly stylized. There are no blemishes on the surface, the color is brilliant, and the mirror reflects it from all angles in the gallery. However, while creating this piece and others from the series, Koons literally dipped into the consumer market for sweet kitsch. Perusing bins of discount shops in New York City, he searched for cheap toys and kitsch trinkets, collecting inflatables to transform into art products. Clearly these works seem to be sweet kitsch, as physically they are appropriated from childhood tchotchkes. Yet Koons expands sweet kitsch to be avant-garde in that he conceptually pushes what qualifies art as art. In a 2009 interview with London’s *The Art*

Newspaper, Koons speaks about the concept behind these works. He muses, “I think of the inflatables as anthropomorphic, we are ourselves inflatables, we take a breath, we expand, we contract, our last breath in life, our deflation” (qtd. in Murg). With these words in mind, Koons returns to the notion of time and temporality, in which there is incredible optimism—our inflation; our pessimism—our deflation. He copes with this tragedy by immortalizing the inflatable. It will never deflate, nor take its last breath.

The precipice between the living and the dead, the young and the old, the past and the future, *Pre-New* and *The New* inspires Koons to question the fast-paced culture in which we live. With new products introduced each day, and the population’s fickle and insatiable hunger to consume them, America is constantly changing, and alongside it, so is kitsch. Popular iconography shifts as the trends do—and thus true kitsch is always changing as technologies grow obsolete, celebrities become irrelevant, and innovation takes place. To document the moment in between change, to bring it to equilibrium, to elongate the celebration of culture is to bring kitsch in conversation with the avant-garde. The present and the future are linked, and in bringing them together for the sake of art, the result, Koons finds, is the suspension of time.

Koons thirsts for this moment of suspension of time, seeking it out and expanding upon it in every medium, shape, and form, each time rendering it differently. Consider *Balloon Dog (Orange)*, part of Koons’s 1994-2015 *Celebration* series. Its sturdiness and enormity will forever celebrate childhood. The showy, gargantuan, flawless sculpture is an enormous balloon animal, standing twelve feet tall in a gallery space. The statue is recognizable as a dog and the image itself is incredibly familiar, referencing the same balloon animals twisted by a typical clown or magician at a child’s birthday party, Fourth of July picnic, or other celebratory gathering. Yet the sculpture is not made out of latex, but rather a shiny, bright orange aluminum. With each and every bright orange curve, the brilliant gallery light is reflected off the glistening material, informing viewers of its pristine perfection—appearing almost imperishable and infallible. Michael Jackson is immortalized in porcelain; a lifeboat is cast for its perpetual inflation; a child’s inflatable flower remains in a shiny, forever-taut position; the Hoover convertibles of the late 1970s will never not be “new.”

Koons can preserve these objects because they are just that—they are not human, they will not pop, deflate, break, age, shrink, wrinkle, fade, fall, or die. Even kitsch, although inexpensive, is immortal in the same way. Human beings, on the other hand, have a trajectory—they can never remain neither-child-nor-adult, and eventually must evolve. In his later works, Koons addresses this issue more literally. As an adult, he has used photography, photographing himself rather than the anthropomorphic sculptures he typically uses to celebrate childhood. In his 1989-1991 series *Made in Heaven*, in which he photographs himself in pornographic scenes, Koons strays from the sugar-coated imagery of a *Balloon Dog* or *Inflatable Flower*, abandons the pessimism of *Lifeboat*, and finds humanism beyond porcelain sculpture. He photographs himself removing “guilt and shame,” according to his artist statement (qtd. in Jones). The composition of his photographs is indeed shameless. When a consumer views pornographic images, the images often seem glossy, edited, retouched, enhanced, and perfected—almost like Koons’s anthropomorphic sculpture. The culture of the porn industry objectifies the subject. It does not humanize it. Koons seeks the opposite result, approaching the form and composition from a raw, flawed standpoint, a frame without shame.

The result is a series of large, incredibly explicit photographs of the artist himself in various sexual positions, engaging in vaginal and oral intercourse. However, these works are different from typical pornographic images in that the background to the production is shown in the image. One particularly keen example is a photograph that gives the series its title. *Made In Heaven* features Koons with his wife at the time, porn star Cicciolina, dressed in white lace, thigh-high fishnets, and silver heels. Koons has Cicciolina positioned on her back with her legs in the air. The photograph directly frames her vagina, with the backs of her thighs and the bottoms of her stilettos pointed towards the camera. Koons himself holds her thighs with his right arm, his penis rubbing up against her. His eyes gaze into her face, which is thrown back in pleasure. But apart from this scene, the background shows a white backdrop, a ladder, and another female in the corner, pleasuring herself. It is as if the whole room is being set up to create images of erotic pleasure for the public. Koons photographs a sense of indulgence, uncovering the calculation of the image-making process. He uses himself as a human prop. He includes

physical props in the series as well—in this case, *Made in Heaven (Kama Sutra)* displays a small, six-inch, clear plastic figurine of a couple having sex in a position identical to the one he and his model had assumed. Here, Koons has literally objectified himself and the act into a plastic, manufactured item.

Innocent toys, basketballs suspended in water, pop icons, perpetually sterile vacuums, full frontal vaginal sex—Koons has an undeniable obsession with the suspension of time. This obsession will render these works immortal. Yet I see him shedding tears in the process of creating them. The first he sheds is for appreciation of the product itself; the second, for the mass popularity of such products; and the third, fourth, fifth, are those he cries for the happiness, pleasure, and pain of being human. Happy to celebrate his childhood, pleased by living as an adult, he is pained by the awareness that he cannot truly suspend himself in a moment of time as he does in his artworks. In crying, Koons becomes not only a successful artist, but also incredibly human.

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