

Part 3

Exercise 3.7 Jeff Koons and Simulacrum

Write a paragraph on a single work by Koons according to what you understand of the simulacrum. (400 words)

“Imagination is the faculty of delusion” – G. Deleuze (1983)

Michael Jackson and Bubbles, 1988
(Koons, 1988) ¹

Koons' work depicts the 'King of Pop' Michael Jackson with his pet friend, the chimpanzee Bubbles², sitting on a bed of flowers. The nearly life size scale, and the material (painted porcelain) is a reference to Rococo³ figurines and the Hummel figurines⁴. A shiny, white golden surface, childlike faces, like puppets, and masks. A pastiche of history⁵, popular culture,



Figure 1: Jeff Koons (1988) *Michael Jackson and Bubbles*, from <http://www.sfmoma.org>

¹ This work is one of Koons' series called *Banalities* from the 1980s, made in an edition of three. One edition was sold for 5.6 Mio US\$. Koons' was sued by court for several works of that series for copyright infringement. His appeal of fair use or parody was rejected. (Kattwinkel, 2007)

² Michael Jackson became known for his eccentric appearance as singer and dancer and his affinity for children and pets. In the mid 1980s he was at the height of fame. His appearance changed (Diagnosis: Vitiligo, Lupus) and apparently used skin bleach. His outer appearance resembled more and more a puppet, as if the porcelain 'sculpture' by Koons is just an analogy of appearances. The chimpanzee was acquired by Jackson mid 1980s and moved with him in the 1988 created range Neverland in California. Jackson's outer appearance, his eccentricity and detachment of reality is retrospective to be seen from a mental health perspective and not only from as a simulation of a pop icon, a constructed product by media.

³ Rococo is associated with an ornamental and decorative style in the mid 18th century that covered wide areas of culture and art. It is characterized through playful, flowery, and asymmetrical elements

⁴ The Hummel figurines are based on drawings by the first by Sister Maria Innocentia Hummel, O.S.F and produced a small porcelain figurines 1935 by Goebel in Germany. These figurines became popular after World-War II by American soldiers who sent those as gifts from Germany back home.

⁵ Besides the reference to Rococo and Hummel figurines, Koons refers to Antiquity and Egyptian sarcophagi. Presented by the juxtaposition of objects in the exhibition 'Jeff Koons: The Painter & The Sculptor', 2012 in the Schirn Gallery in Frankfurt, Germany (Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, 2012) Koons describes this in an interview 'I think what's interesting is to see them in museums with other historical artefacts. I had an exhibition in Frankfurt, Germany, in which Michael Jackson was with a sarcophagus from Egypt. It's fantastic. It's like an Egyptian pharaoh. It's a historical context.' (Brockes, 2015)

theatre, art, a delusion of reality. The work appropriates areas of fashion and publicity and is as deceiving as those⁶.

Nevertheless, the work can be effortlessly enjoyed alongside stock emotions of sentiment and sympathy, the people's 'best friend' a pet enforces this. A work of Kitsch.

The work is a simulation by the way it absorbs the viewer's look, neither active nor passive, like a sponge absorbing what is in front of us⁷. The used medium cannot be separated from the image and according to McLuhan the blending of both results in a 'confusion of the medium and the message' (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 30). In Baudrillard's order of simulation of one can say that Koons' work is like the simulacra of Disneyland, as it conveys the delusion of a reality outside of it, the intension of experiencing 'a world of innocent childlike gratification, of toys and party hats' (Jones, 2009) The presence of an 'illusionary world' as image or sign in a systems of signs and the absence of a real world, 'concealing the fact that the real is no longer real.' (Baudrillard, 1994, pp. 12-13) It has its own hyperreality.

Although the work points towards actual figures in life, it is not a copy of the essence, not in a causality sense⁸. It shows an external semblance, literally through a masked semblance, an irony, and it stays on the surface like the spectator's gaze. It is a simulation to the limits of banality and golden glamour shine. One cannot connect with a deeper meaning or signification as there is no deeper meaning concealed, it refers to itself, to its own beauty. Its essence is that of being different, experienced through an effortless gaze on a staged artificial place in a museum. A similitude of the pop idol on stage or on TV screen. Koons' work embraces the notion of desire as the 'escape from the real in the realms of imagination and fantasy' and 'simulating not an illusion of the real but affirming the whole realm of sensation' (Camille, 2003, pp. 45-46)⁹ In this context, Koons' work can be seen as an example of Baudrillard's simulacra and Deleuze aspiration of 'real experience' of difference.

⁶ J Berger in *Ways of Seeing* noted on publicity that it shows a future world of desire. It denies the reality around it. (Berger, 1972)

⁷ Massumi explained Simulacrum as 'We absorb through our open eyes and mouths' (Massumi, 1987)

⁸ Or as Plato describes an image is a copy that reproduces the essence and internal proportions of a model. He drew line of division between iconic copies and phantasmatic simulacra (Deleuze, 1983, p. 48)

⁹ Deleuze expressed his concern that 'aesthetics suffer from an agonizing dualism' and suggested instead of a theory of feeling as the form of possible experience a theory of art as the reflection of real experience. In that sense, art is a 'reflection of real experience' (Deleuze, 1983, p. 51)

(Word count: 413)

Addendum:

On a meta-level one can say that the sculpture *Michael Douglas and Bubbles* resembles the 'most photographed barn' in DeLillo 'White Noise', 1985, destroying authenticity and experience of 'a real barn' (Lane, 2009, pp. 81-82) Jeff Koons became Jeff Koons through its object commodification. He himself resembles Michael Jackson, the 'King of Pop' in becoming the 'King of Kitsch' (Jones, 2009) The irony of the work from 1988 at the peak of Jackson's career that it anticipates the resurrection of the 'King of Pop', overcoming death as Baudrillard would say, like the myth of Elvis.

Jeff Koons in an interview about his intentions (Art21, 2010)

"To see how people will live to their potential ... it's what is happening inside the viewer, that's where Art happens, that's where the value is, ... to achieve their desire" - Jeff Koons

Images

Art21 (2010) *Jeff Koons: Potential | ART21 "Exclusive"*, [Video], Available from: https://youtu.be/oN_kxFmznhY [accessed 26 July 2017].

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