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The National College of Art & Design

‘A Critical analysis of the work of Jeff Koons’

A thesis submitted to:

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By:

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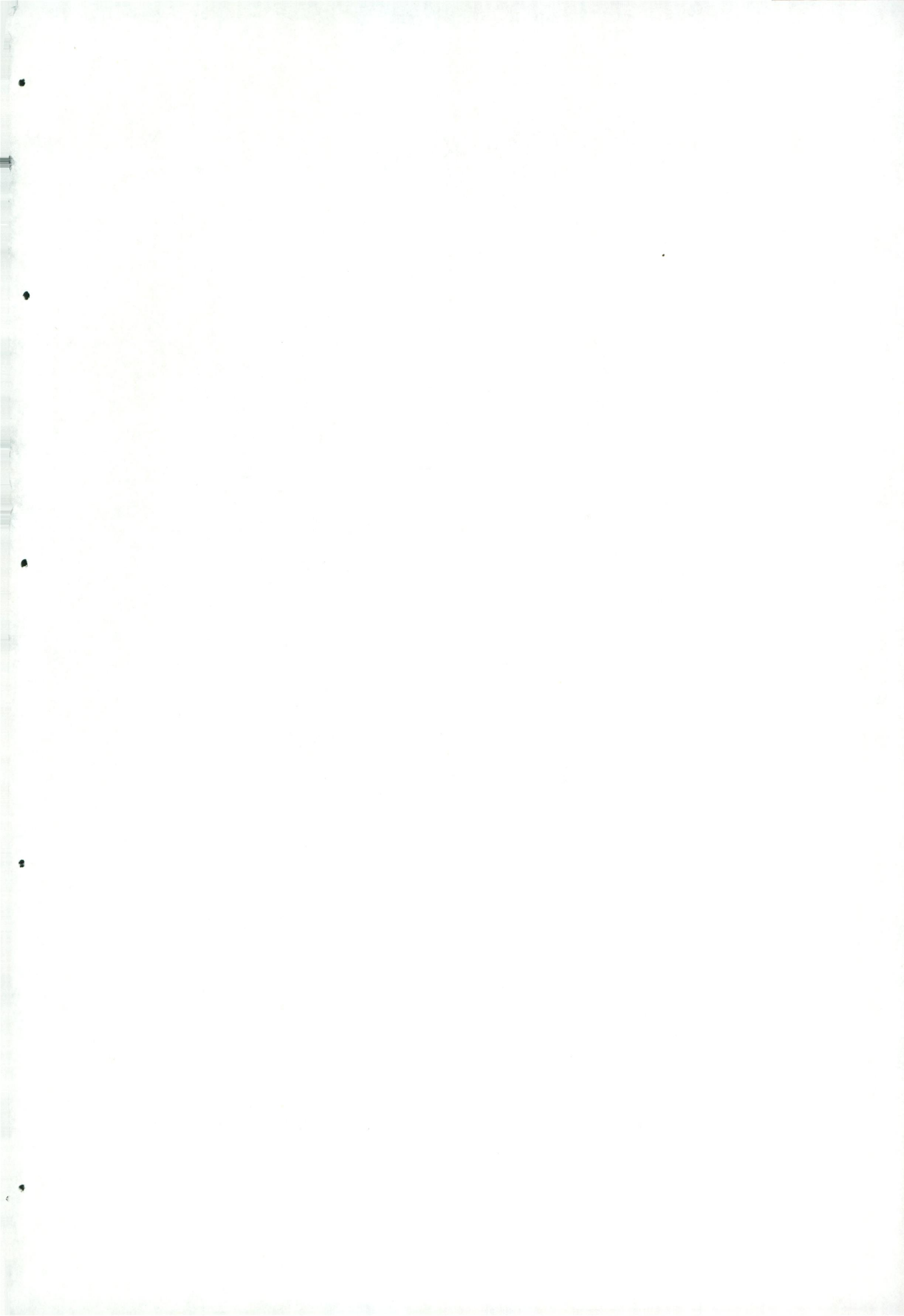


TABLE OF CONTENTS

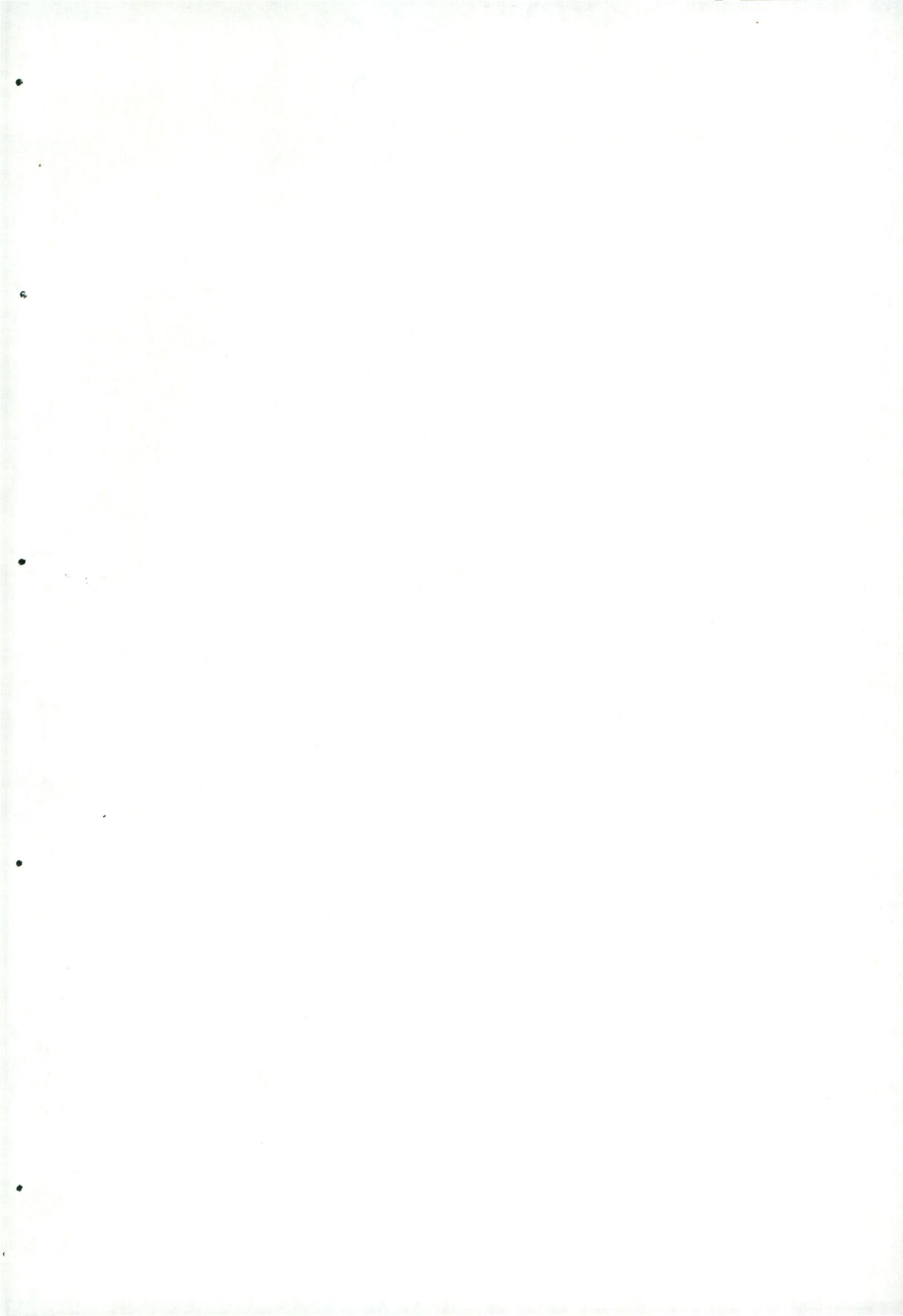
<u>CONTENTS</u>	<u>PAGE No.</u>
Acknowledgements	2
List of illustrations	3
Introduction	4
CHAPTER 1	
JEFF KOONS AND AMERICA CULTURE	
(i) Jeff Koons and the american way of life, discussing the aspect of fictionality and fairytales - like lifestyles.	6
(ii) Obsession with cleanliness, life and the body, discussing Koons' exhibition 'The New' and applying it to America's fear of death and decay.	12
CHAPTER 2	
POP ART AND CONSUMERISM	
(i) Koons and the 1960's pop artists	17
(ii) Koons addressing social issues	21
CHAPTER 3	
JEFF KOONS AND THE KITSCH OBJECT AS AN ART FORM	25
(i) 'Ushering in Banality'	30
CHAPTER 4	
JEFF KOONS AND MARCEL DUCHAMP	
<u>The Provocative Tradition</u>	35
Conclusion	38
Bibliography	39 - 41

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List of Illustrations

<u>CONTENTS</u>	<u>PAGE No.</u>
Chapter 1	
(i) 'Made in Heaven' - Jeff Koons	9
(ii) 'Michael Jackson and Bubbles'	13
(iii) 'New Hoover Delux Shampoo Polishers'	15
(iv) '3 Ball 50/50 Tank'	15
Chapter 2	
(v) 'I could go for something Gordons'	20
(vi) 'Frangelico'	20
(vii) 'Moses'	23
Chapter 3	
(viii) 'Rabbit'	26
(ix) 'Louix xiv'	26
(x) 'Christ and the lamb'	29
(xi) 'Ushering in Banality'	31
(xii) 'Policeman and Bear'	33



Introduction

'Today we are everywhere surrounded by the remarkable conspicuousness of consumption and affluence, established by the multiplication of objects, services and material goods. This now constitutes a fundamental mutation in the ecology of the human species. Strictly speaking, man of wealth are no longer surrounded by other human beings, as they have been in the past, but by objects.'

(Baudrillard (ii) 1988 p.)

Jeff Koons is part of a phenomenon sometimes called neo-geo, or neo-conceptual. He is one among a growing group of artists whose coolness, intellectuality and disdain of the handmade are seen as directly opposed to neo-expressionism. Divorced from their social function and represented as art, Jeff Koons' objects become subject to radical transformations of meaning. Koons' psychologically works reveal the intensity of people's relations with their possessions.

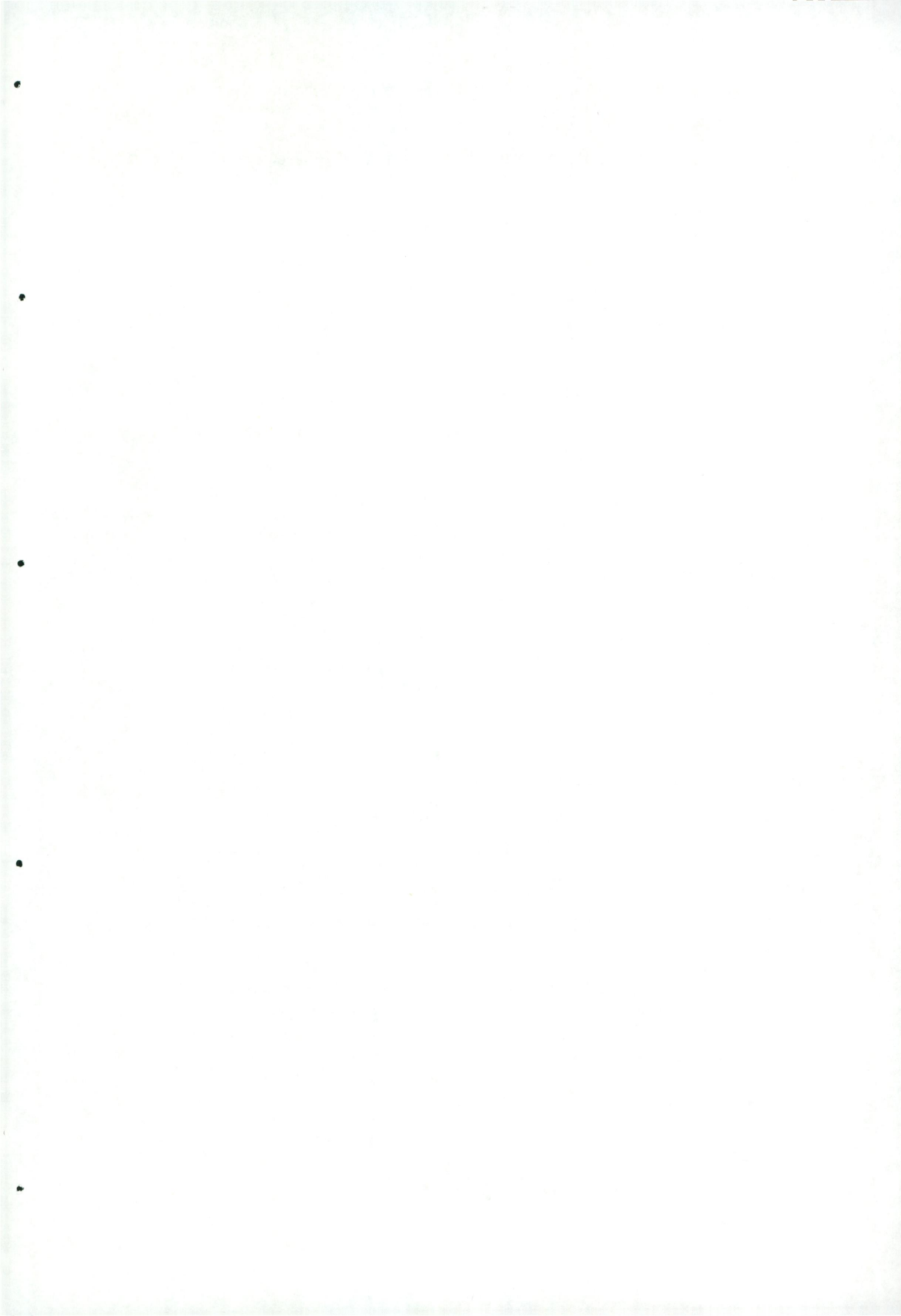
'From television, film and photography, we receive a stream of images everyday. There is no way of paying equal attention to all that surplus, so we skim. The image we remember is the one that most resembles a sign, simple, clear, repetitions. Everything the camera gives us is slightly interesting - not for long, just for now'

(Hughes, 1980, p.346)

Chapter two will discuss the new wave of regenerated pop in the eighties, of which Koons, along with other artists was a part. I will explore Koons' own consumerist background from leaving art college to working in the stock exchange and then back to art, (a commodities broker producing his own commodities) and how Koons, along with Andy Warhol, believed that business and art was the most excellent combination.

Chapter three, *the Kitsch object as and art form*, will be explored, primarily focusing on *'Ushering in Banality'*, secondly the use of stainless steel in his *'Luxury and Degradation'* series will be examined and how it is used to seduce (akin to the use of gold and silver in the Baroque and Rococo periods).

In the final chapter, chapter four, I will address the fact that Marcel Duchamp in 1917, used the same tactics as the pop artists, decades before their time. Similarly Jeff Koons shocks with his banal images of cheap supermarket ornaments exaggerated in size and painted in glorious disneyland technicolour.



CHAPTER 1

Jeff Koons and American Culture

(i)
Jeff Koons and the American way of life.

(i i)
Obsession with cleanliness, life and the body

(i) JEFF KOONS AND THE AMERICAN WAY OF LIFE

'I try to use the material, not in any cynical matter, but to penetrate mass consciousness, to communicate to people. This is the only vocabulary I know that I can communicate with'

(Koons, Taschen, 1990 p.24)

The modern definition of 'popular culture' first emerged in the nineteenth century from the oppositions between folk tales, folk art and popular theatre, and the 'high' art forms of fine art, opera and literature. It could be argued that the once berated folk art is now superior to popular culture, in that the distinction between them is this: folk culture is something you make while popular culture is something you buy. The gradual convergence of high and low culture as exemplified by pop art is entirely a western cultural phenomenon. Research was undertaken into consumer habits. This resulted in a massive restructuring of demand for consumer goods and mass media programmes, which in turn had its effect on individual behaviour. People experienced a new licence to like Kitsch, to read comics, heat hot dogs and drink coca-cola. The trivia of everyday life soon became the object of common interest, breaking through all class barriers to become socially acceptable and respectable.

Elvis Presley and James Dean, among others, became idols of a youth culture whose aim was liberation and emancipation. This was all taking place in a society characterised by affluence and the easy availability of everything. The culture objects designed for the masses, could not, in the eyes of elite male critics such as Dwight MacDonald and poet T.S. Elliott, qualify as art. MacDonald was disturbed by what he saw, as *'bad stuff driving out the good by mimicking and debasing the forms of high art (Maltby, 1989 p.13)*. His colleague Clement Greenberg, in 1946 wrote that;

'Mass culture predigests art for the spectator and spares him effort, provides him with a short cut to the pleasures of art that detours what is necessarily difficult in genuine art'.

(Maltby 1989, p.13)

In Europe, it has been argued that the crucial difference between high culture and popular culture is that high culture is sold to a small elite audience. European film and television, for example, reflects specifically middle class values and are directed much more firmly towards an elite audience than, for example, the products of Hollywood

and the networks.

'When we look nostalgically at the recent past, we often recognise it by the things we used to buy or else by modern 'heroes' such as movie stars. The movies, music and fashion provide a vivid map of our past because they are all the things of the moment designed to have a brief life, to burn brightly for the instant and disappear but are always replaced by other, even more gaily coloured things of the hour'.

(Maltby, 1989, p.13)

Koons wishes to communicate with as wide an audience as possible and believes that the way to do it now is through the media, through television and advertising, through the film and entertainment industries. He puts himself as the self publicist, self media-made man on the same level. But will his success be shortlived?

According to Hughes:

Everything the camera gives us is slightly interesting- not for long, just for now. The extension on the human level, of this glut of images celebrity, which replaces the Renaissance idea of fame. Fame was a reward for manifest deeds. It stood for a social agreement about what was worth doing. The celebrity is famous for being famous, nothing else. Hence his gratuitousness and disposability'.

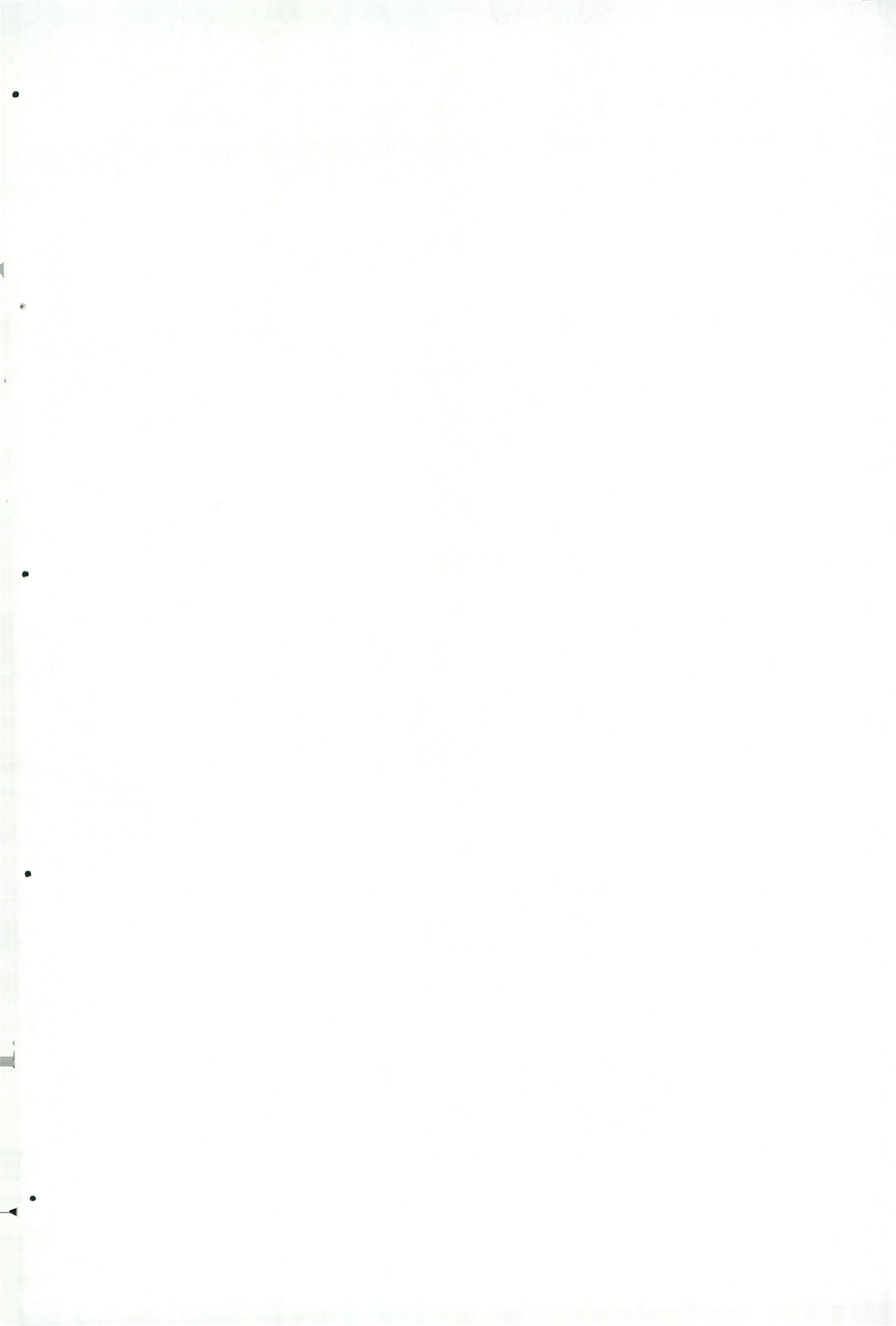
(Hughes, 1980 p.346)

The Kitsch surface of Koons' work functions as a false front for an underlying moral dilemma in America. Absurd images such as the friendly policeman of the pink panther can only draw attention to the banality of the culture that permits such ideas.

'America is the original version of modernity it avoids the question of origins. It has no past and no founding truths. It lives in a perpetual present of times. America is Utopia achieved. The Americans are not wrong in their idyllic convictions, that they are the centre of the world, the supreme power, the absolute model for everyone. This is basically founded on the idea that it is the realisation of everything that all the others can only dream of - justice, plenty, wealth , freedom'.

(Baudrillard (i), 1988, p.32)

When Baudrillard speaks of American life, he emphasises its utopian nature, its mythic banality and dream quality which is immanent in the characters of fiction. It is Disneyland and Hollywood that are authentic in America. America was founded on Hollywood, the worlds biggest film industry, thus America was founded on a myth. The cinema and television are America's reality not the galleries, churches and other



high cultural manifestations.

'There is no culture here, no cultural discourse, no ministries, no commissions, no subsidiaries, no promotions. Culture is space, speed, cinema, technology. In America, cinema is true because it is the whole way of life that is cinematic, life is cinema'.

(Baudrillard (i) 1988 p.32)

Baudrillard also discusses how American idols are fetishes, object fetishes, that have nothing to do with the imagery but rather with the material fiction of the image. Koons works by systematically appropriating areas in which there is a high degree of fictionality. His works in both the *'Banality'* and *'Statuary'* shows are based on fiction. He uses the same methods that are already at work in fiction, be it woodcarving, porcelain manufacturing or murano glass blowing. Koons' entire *'Ushering in Banality'* exhibition was based on fiction in order to reach the American public, this being the only vocabulary he can communicate with. (Taschen, 1990, p.24) There is also an obvious degree of fictionality in Koons' work with Ilona Staller, his now ex-wife. Staller had been a primary artistic source for his work for about five years, dating from 1987 to 1992. She was long officially denied entry to America on grounds of her 'profession'. (Once her status changed to 'ex'-porn star, wife and mother, so did her ability to enter the country). Koons was aware of her work in 1987. The star of pornographic films and her own cabaret act in Italy, she adopted the stage name *Cicciolina*, meaning 'the cuddly one, and a series of cuddly toys were her trademark. She was elected a member of the Italian Parliament under the banner of the 'Love Party', where she campaigned for stat run brothels and love parks. Jeff Koons' *'Made in Heaven'* exhibition consists of large format photographs (which he continuously refers to as 'paintings'), of himself and Ilona having sex in romantic, almost puritanical settings in a Kitsch fairytale land / Disneyworld of humming birds, butterflies, cherubs, flowers and waterfalls. Critic Jo Anna Isaak writes:- *'If this is sex, it is scrubbed and sanitised - sex with Ken and Barbie'* (*Artforum* v. 30, Feb 1992 p. 86). Where *Cicciolina* eroticises the intrinsic perversity of Kitsch in her own work, such as the cabaret acts, Koons keeps his Kitsch squeaky clean.

'Ilona comes from an art background that is sometimes considered a low art form but has a very large mass. I come from a background that is considered a high art form, but of smaller mass'.

(Koons - the South Bank Show, 1992)



III. No. 1 'Made in Heaven' from the Made in Heaven exhibition, 1992.

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In *'Made in Heaven'* Koons co-mingles high and low culture. The crowds were drawn, not by the power of his pornographic images, but the furore of seeing images like that in a setting like that.

'I'm trying to deal with art being able to communicate with people and being able to meet their needs and dealing with the basic questions, of the act of creation, the act of being alive, the act of union, of love and communication, it's really dealing with the basics, to let people have hope in their lives again, that they can achieve their goals and desires and to be able to participate - to let them regain their self confidence. To let them live their desire, to be able to make fantasy a reality.'

(Koons, Flash Art 1991, p.111)

Koons repeatedly refers to Ilona as the 'eternal virgin' and refers to them both as a 'contemporary Adam and Eve, sharing their oneness with everyone':

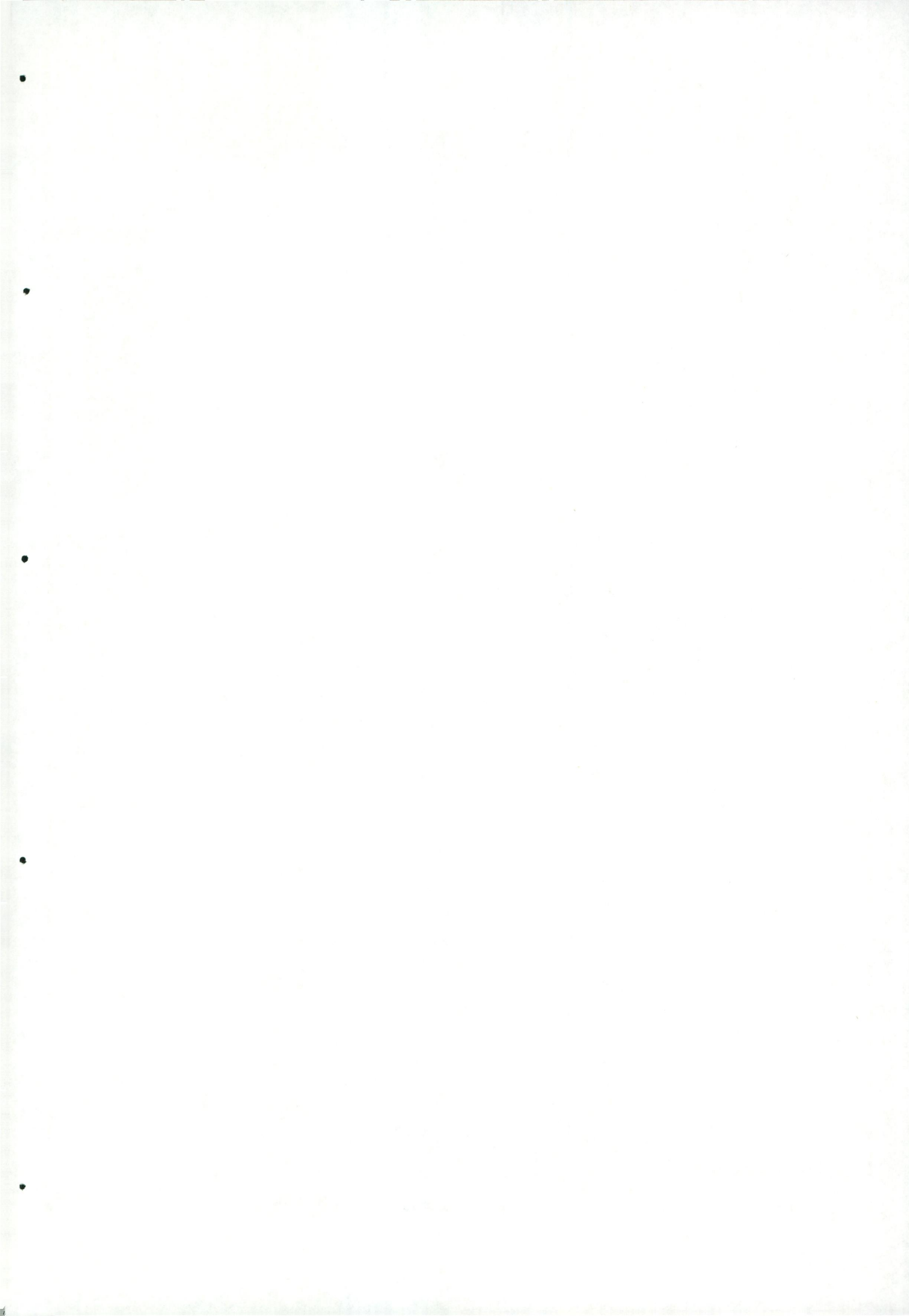
'She's a great communicator. She is a media person. She is a media personality. She survives by the media. I am dealing with the objective here, we're dealing with communication. Together Ilona and I are able to communicate these ideas. We have a sexual, spiritual, intellectual relationship. This is a complete relationship - this is made in heaven'.

(Koons, Flash Art 1992, p.112)

They married in 1991, and unsurprisingly their 'perfect' marriage ended a short time later (could the lack of verbal communication have been the main reason? Ilona could barely speak english!). The question of exploitation arises regarding Ilona's role in Koons' work. Although she was paid a fifteen thousand dollar wage by Koons, he exploited her work and ideas. He appropriated many of his *'Ushering in Banality'* objects from many of Ilona's cabaret acts - he openly admits the dress in *'Le fait d'hiver'* sculpture was copied from one of hers that he saw in a magazine before he even knew her. Also, a serpent which featured in one of his sculptures with Ilona, played a frequent part in her previous stage acts. In one of Staller's films, *'The Rise of the Roman Empress'* in which she sings *'Amore'*, a teddy bear is permanently featured. In Koons' *'Banality'* he exhibits a teddy called *'Amore'*, and displays the sculpture *'Popples'* which was undoubtedly inspired by *'Cicciolina'* and similarly, the female figure in the porcelain *pink panther*.

Koons' image is designated 'fine art' where *Cicciolina's* is categorised as pornography.

This has nothing to do with inherent quality. 'Fine Art' is what we see in museums, which in turn sanction, value and protect artistic production. Pornography, because of its different systems of distribution and context, it is marginalised and receives no sanctions.



(ii) OBSESSIONS WITH CLEANLINESS, LIFE & THE BODY

Americans are people of conviction, convinced of everything and seeking to convince. One of the aspects of their good faith is a stubborn determination to reconstitute everything of a past and history which were not their own or which they, themselves have largely destroyed'.

(Baudrillard (i) 1988 p.36)

Since they were not the first to be in on history, they will be the first to immortalise everything by restoration. Everything is worthy of protection, embalming, restoring. Americans are anabaptists, (Baudrillard) - having missed out on the origin of baptism, they dream of baptising everything a second time. An example of this is the Mormons religious group, recording twenty generations of living souls throughout the world, re-baptising these souls and bringing them a new promise of salvation. Jeff Koons shares the pathos of 'annunciation' with one of his favourite stars - Michael Jackson. Both are self styled redeemers.

'Michael sent me a photo of himself with his pet chimpanzee. This is a ceramic porcelain piece. I was always a tremendous fan of Michael Jackson because of his radicality of doing really what he felt was necessary to be able to communicate to the public. There was a lot of talk about me making Michael very white faced, although I enjoy by all means the transformations that Michael has played with, and the whole Darwin quality of being photographed with his chimpanzee, this best friend of Michael's, but I also wanted to maintain a state of purity, a state of being in a God-Like state.'

(Koons, The South Bank Show, 1992)

Koons immortalises Michael Jackson in his sculpture, almost in the same sinister way the pop star wants to immortalise himself, (e.g. plastic surgery, sleeping in oxygen tents, living the life of a child in his 'Disneyland' empire). Koons' 'Making Michael White' is ironic in that Jackson has undergone radical plastic surgery to change the colour of his skin and features typical of a coloured race. Koons was fascinated by the phenomenon that Jackson was.

This omnipresent cult of the body is extraordinary - it is the only object on which everyone is made to concentrate - not as a source of pleasure but as an object of frantic concern, in the obsessive fear of failure, a sign and anticipation of death, that death to which no-one can any longer give a meaning, but which everyone knows at all time to be prevented.

(Baudrillard, 1988, p.)



III. NO. 2 'Michael Jackson and Bubbles' From Ushering in Banality (Sonnabend Gallery, New York, 1989.)



Koons' exhibition ('The New Artists Space, New York) a series that began in 1980, was a collection of works consisting of vacuum cleaners in plexiglass cases, that brought him to the fore and gave him recognition as an artist.

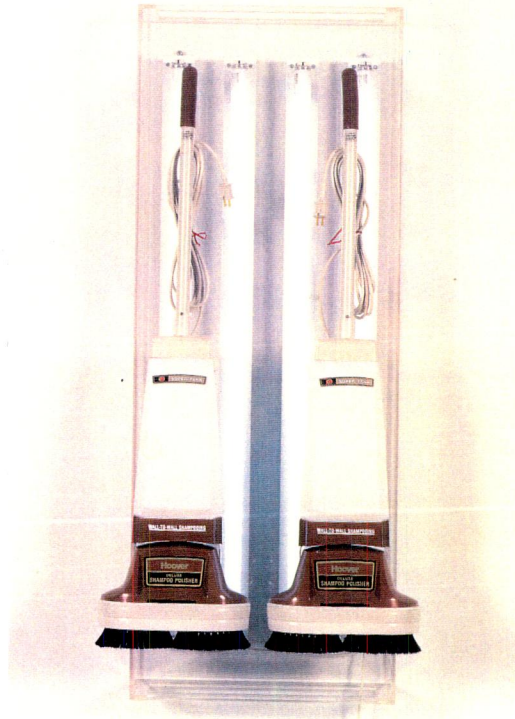
'I chose the vacuum cleaners because this is a machine, if used, is used to collect dirt, which is just the opposite of the absolutely pristine situation in which I placed them. They are very virginal and very frightening. They're dealing with the immortal. The vacuum cleaners are being displayed for their newness. They are displaying their integrity of birth - they never function'

(Koons, Taschen, 1990, p.16)

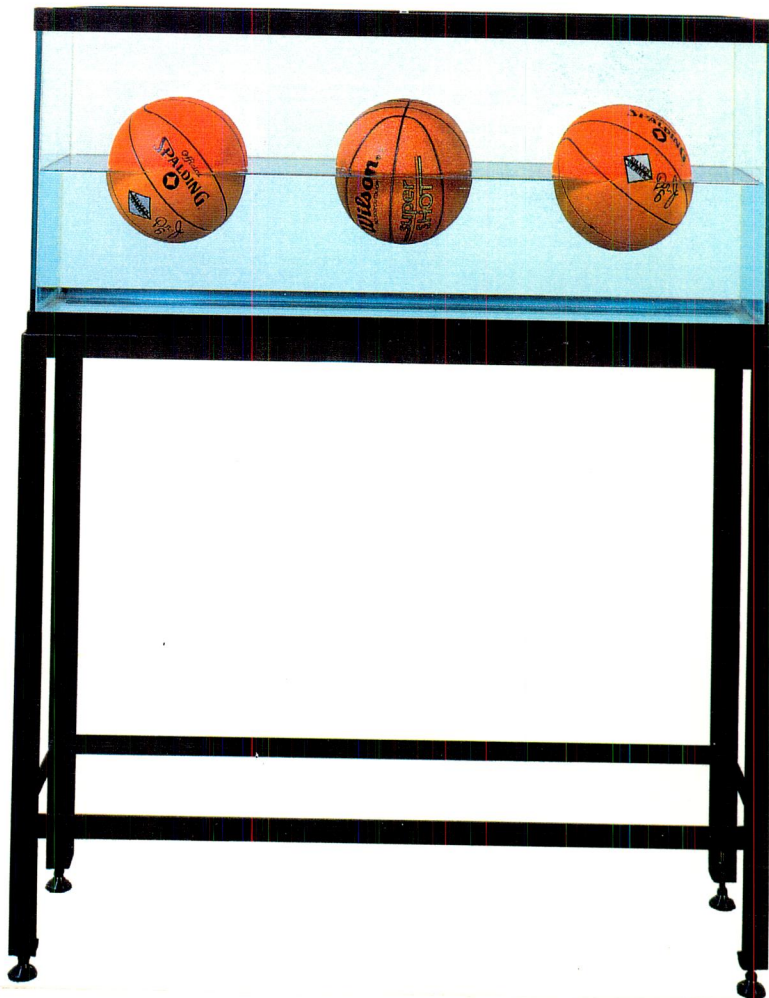
Koons' vacuum cleaners are monuments to sterility and shrines to the primitiveness of bourgeois manias about cleanliness. The work is about immortality. It reflects America's obsessional fear of death and disease: *'protect everything, detect everything, contain everything'*. (Baudrillard)

Jeff Koons' vacuum cleaners make it clear that consumption is simply the concrete shape of a puritanical, bourgeois morality: hygiene and morality are identical in a culture which fetishises the body. Cleanliness is next to Godliness.

The hoovers suggest breathing and sucking as air moves through the appliances. Air is vital to the existence of these objects. Koons' stainless steel 'rabbit', modelled from an inflatable plastic version, owes its life and shape to the air that's breathed into it. As the air leaves the inflatable, it ages and deforms, approaching its death. This however will not happen to Koons' bunny because it is immortalised by the stainless steel he uses as a medium. Related to *'the new'* and from the same year, are the flotation tanks of the exhibition *Equilibrium* (international with Monument Gallery, New York, 1985). The glass tanks are environments and containers of life, like the plexiglass incubators storing the vacuum cleaners. The *Equilibrium* exhibition contains basketballs, some suspended in water, some submerged, all in glass tanks. Various combinations of water and air keeps them suspended in the tanks. The tanks act as life-giving environments, the air being akin to breath. There is an obsessive desire for survival as manifested in America - anti nuclear sheds, high pressure therapy and cryogenisation, these all paradoxically forms of extermination. To avoid dying, people withdraw into a protective bubble and this in my opinion is what is conveyed in Koons' early works.



Ill. No. 3. 'New Hoover Deluxe Shampoo Polishers' from 'The New' 1981 - 1986.



Ill. No. 4. '3 Ball 50/50 Tank' from 'The New' 1985.

CHAPTER 2

Pop Art and Consumerism

(I)Koons and the 1960's pop artists

(i i)

Koons addressing social issues

(i)

KOONS AND THE 1960'S POP ARTISTS

'I've made what the Beatles would have made, if they had made sculpture. Nobody ever said that the Beatles music was not on a high level, but it appealed to the masses, and that's what I want to do'.

(The Jeff Koons Handbook, 1992, p.6)

In the early 1980's, issues of consumerism returned to the fore. This re-emergence was portrayed in the recent phenomenon of the upwardly - mobile, or the *nouveau riche*, consumption being a primal activity. This was apparent in New York, where artists witnessed the stampeding art market, and accompanying media interest, which gave political artist Barbara Kruger inspiration for her work, *'I shop therefore I am'*. Jeff Koons was part of the new wave of pop art that had escalated in the last decade. Andy Warhol taught people that art could be made out of Kitsch, while Koons inverted this process and presented Kitsch as art. In his *Ushering in Banality* exhibition, Koons takes Kitsch objects - ordinary banal objects that would normally be overlooked, and has them cast in stainless steel, porcelain or wood, eight or ten times the size of the original object. He makes us look at the pieces as though they were something luxurious and expensive simply because of the material used which makes them gleam. Koons forces us to look at these artifacts, whether we like it or not, and is basically saying, this is American culture, this is what our culture consists of. This is justified in one of Koons' overstated and over emphasised phrases, telling people to embrace their past:

'I wanted to remove their guilt and shame so they can embrace their history, embrace what motivates them'.

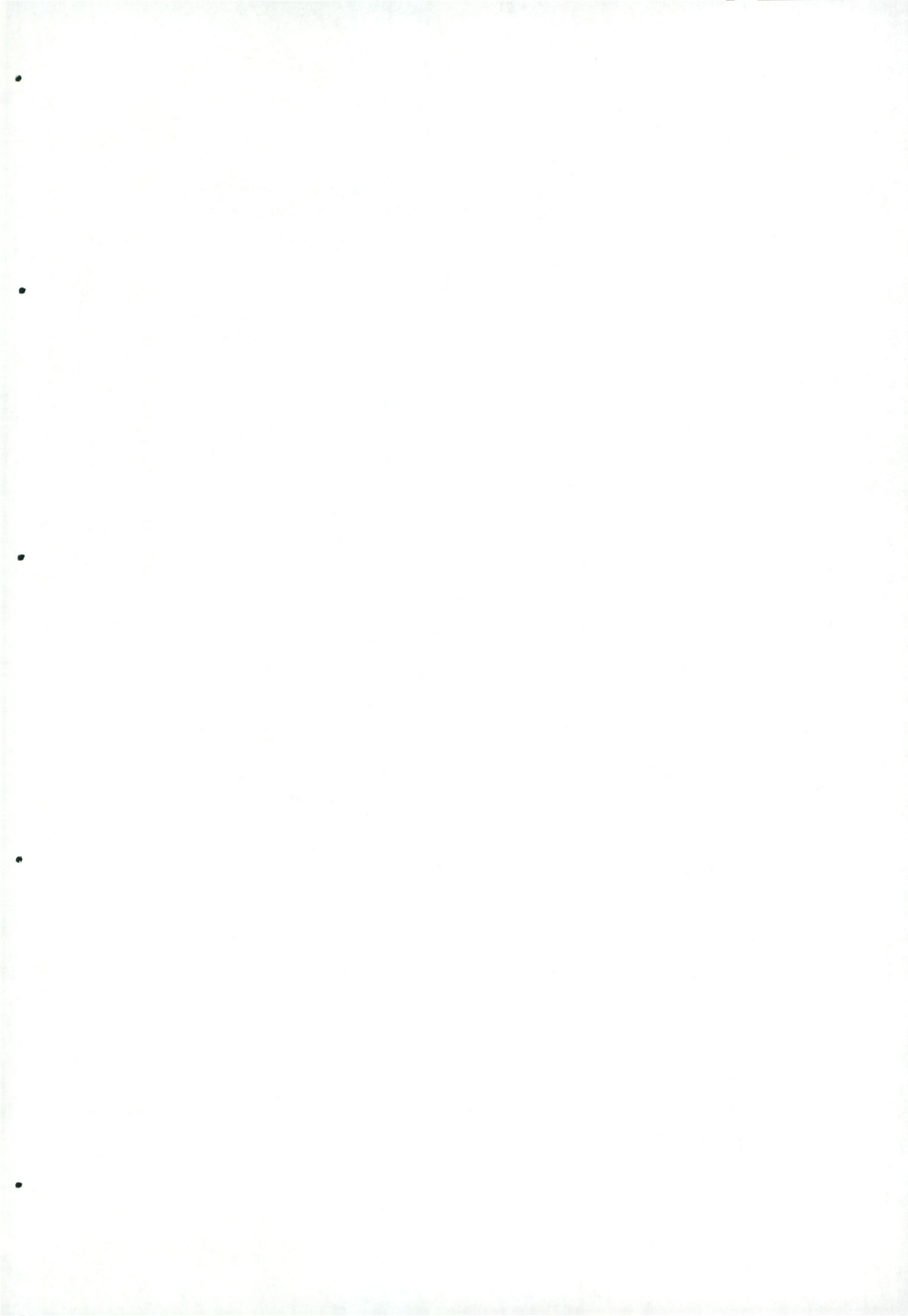
(Koons, The South Bank Show, 1992)

People should not feel guilty or be ashamed about their identity or the fact that they are part of a consumer engulfed society.

I've always thought that pieces that are able to survive, just reflect whatever the needs are of that society in the future'.

(Koons Handbook, 1992, p.11)

Koons surrenders to the capitalist mode of production by his use of techniques and by glorifying the commodity which he chooses, in the same way that Andy Warhol did



with his soup cans, and Roy Lichtenstein with his comic strips.

The art world divides into those who manage and those who are managed. Culture in post-modern society is increasingly 'administered' - transmitted and controlled by means of corporate management techniques, public relations and professional marketing. French philosopher Jean Baudrillard states that in post industrial societies, appearances or simulcra have supplanted reality entirely to the point where politicians get elected on the basis of their television presence, where products get purchased for image rather than need (even Socrates on looking at a multitude of wares exposed for sale had quoted:

'How many things I can do without - over two thousand years ago').

In the eighties the most spectacular of consumer items were artworks, selected and merchandised until empties of all meaning except as objects of desire. Jeff Koons and Ashley Bickerton for example opted for simulation which involved reforming rather than appropriating cultural products, believing it better to make them hyperreal, just as the media do.

Sixties pop artists were concerned with the reality of manufactured goods on the one hand, and the realities of commercial art on the other. They were concerned with the product that had become both the reality and the dream in American life. Most of the sixties pop artists had agreed that art was making a return to the object, as opposed to abstract expressionism. Jeff Koons, in my opinion, does not share this love for the object itself, but is more interested in the phenomenon of advertising. Koons' bronze aqualung and stainless steel rabbit come close conceptually to Claes Oldenberg - the rafts and aqualung address the issues of dysfunction and utilitarianism, the threatening uselessness when an object is transformed into an artifact. Similarly, Oldenberg's soft typewriters, ghost telephones and giant clothes peg sculptures were transformed from useful objects into art.

Business art is the step that comes after art. I started as a commercial artist, and I wanted to finish as a business artist. After I did that thing called 'art', I went into business art. I also wanted to be an Art Business man, or a Business Artist. Being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art.'

(Andy Warhol)

Jeff Koons was well familiar with consumerism. At an early age his father sold the young Koons' paintings in his furniture shop for seven or eight hundred dollars. He studied in the School of the Art Institute, Chicago, for three years before moving to New York in 1979. Instead of going straight into painting, he worked in the Museum of Modern Art, starting in the ticket booth and ending up as a senior representative selling memberships and doubling sales. He left M.O.M.A. at the end of 1979, in order to earn more money, to be able to produce his work. Koons became a commodities broker on Wall Street, specialising in cotton. He claims that his background in the stock exchange enabled him not only to produce his own work, but to remain independent from the commercial art world system, (though not the commercial) Koons highlighted the commodity fetishism that categorised the eighties decade by glamorising brand new mass produce of appliances. Domestic appliances had also featured in first generation pop artists such as British artist, Richard Hamilton and Tom Wesselman.

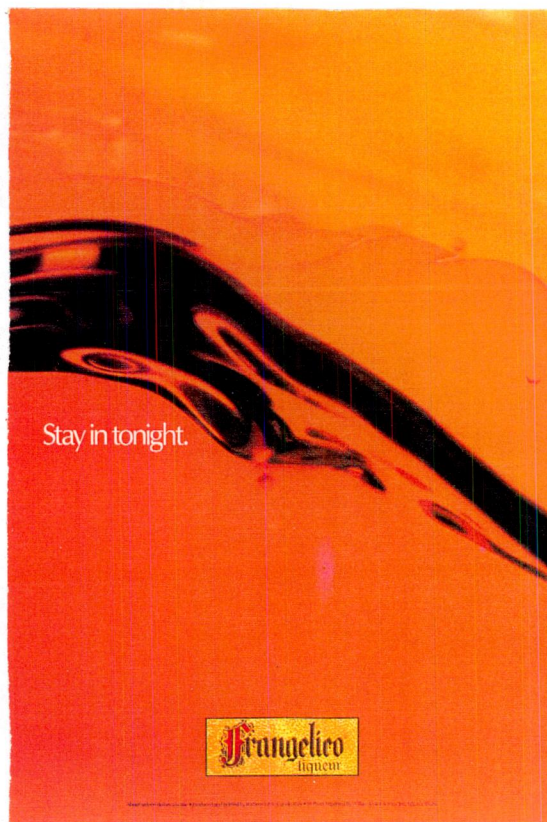
'Salesmen are todays great communicators. They are out there, pushing cars, pushing real estate, advertising. That's where the real morality is played out in society today.'

(Koons Handbook 1992, p.33)





Ill. No. 5. 'I could go for something Gordons' from 'The Luxury and Degradation2 series - 1986.



Ill. No. 6. 'Frangelico' from the 'Luxury and Degradation' series - 1986.

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(ii)

KOONS ADDRESSING SOCIAL ISSUES

Jeff Koons' advertising posters in the *'Luxury and Degradation'* series (Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Los Angeles, 1986) such as *Hennesy Agui Bacardi*, and *Frangelica*, address social issues and class structures. The different advertising posters were directed at different class strata. One advertisement, for example, would be directed at the fifteen thousand dollar and lower income bracket, which is the lowest scale of advertising, and another such as *Frangelico* was aimed at the forty-five thousand and upwards group, the latter being more concerned with thought patterns.

'The public is being deceived in these advertisements on different levels of thought because they are educated in abstraction and luxury on different levels of income.'

(Jeff Koons, Arts Mag. Oct 1986, p.68)

In these works he also points out the degradation from alcoholism encouraged by the images. This parallels Richard Prince's rephotographing of the macho cowboys who would later addict a nation to Marlboro cigarettes. In *Luxury and Degradation* survival and success were prominent themes. The question was, how could we hold our alcohol and maintain our equilibrium in the face of success. Would alcohol take us to the bottom? Was luxury anything more than a form of degradation? In a previous series of framed posters on sports advertisements, for example, *Moses* and *Dr. Dunkenstein*, Koons wanted to stress the difference between the dream being sold, and the realities that exclude certain classes from obtaining the dream:

'I'm personally opposed to the fact that somebody from a lower class situation does not have the same educational opportunities as other class structures. That's my main battle with class structure.'

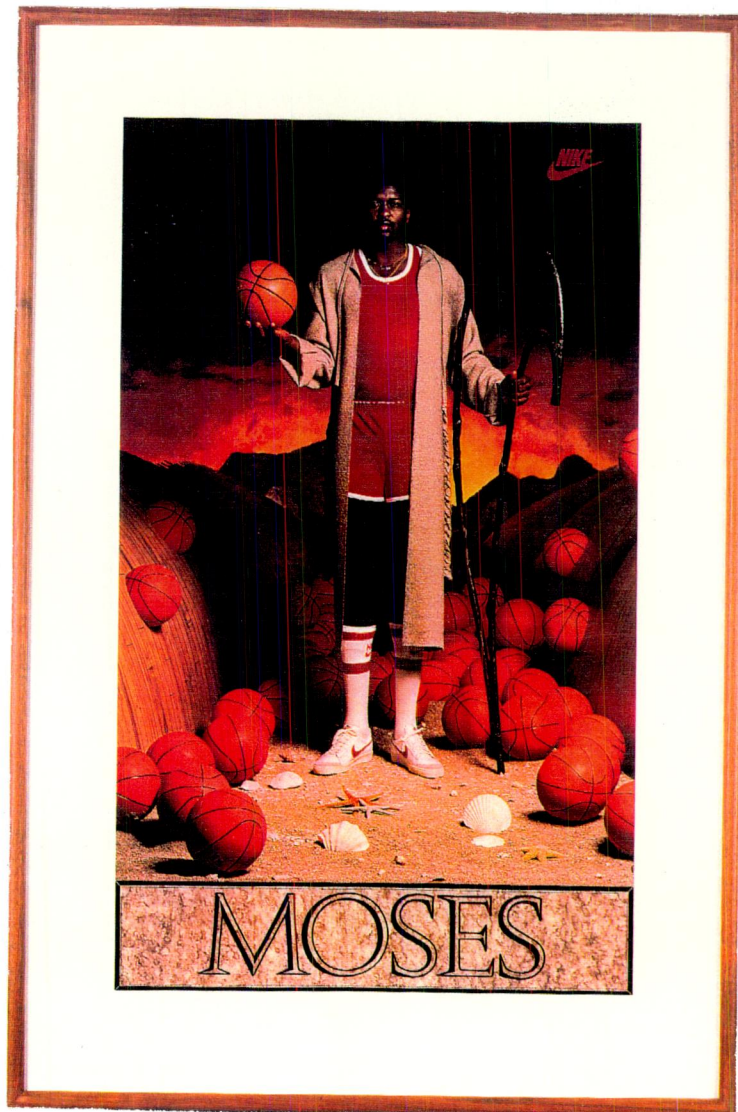
(Jeff Koons, Taschen, 1992, p.19)

This is a contradictory statement coming from Koons. What would he know about lower classes and how does his work help them? His work is directed at the middle and upper class, and those who can afford to buy it. The poster advertisements for Nike sports shoes, depict famous black athletes from a basketball team. One of the posters depicts Moses, a player, wearing a robe over his uniform carrying a shepherds staff with a flock of basketballs at his feet, referring to the biblical Moses. Koons feels that the basketballs 'denote social mobility particularly for urban blacks.' (Koons, Arts

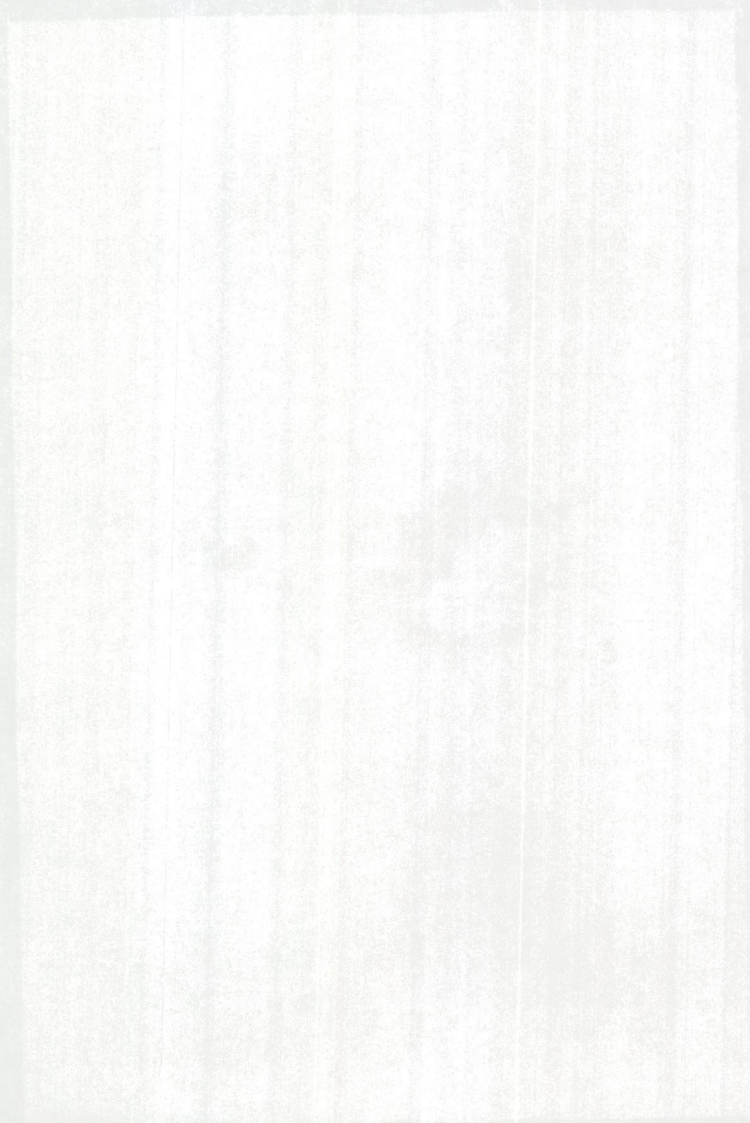
Mag. Oct. 1986, p. 65) In their own way, the posters are images of false security, they encourage goals that can drag you down.

*'In dealing with the Nikes, I am dealing with unachievable sociological states of being. Having my Nike posters there, the great deceivers - with references not only to Nike (the Goddess of Victory) but sirens the mythological temptresses and deceivers; 'Oh come on', 'I've achieved it', 'you can do it', 'go for it' and course they never have, they're just liars'.
(Koons, Arts Mag. Oct. '986, p.68)*

Equilibrium saw a sharper treatment of media myth and also of class structures, both of which had been hinted at in *'The New'*, where the contrast between household appliances and luxury items, implied a distinction between the people who cleaned houses and those who owned them. The bronze aqualung and raft suggest a loss of equilibrium, in my view. Implements of survival, to help you float, they underscore the ambiguity of the basketball players success.



Ill. No. 7. 'Moses' from 'Equilibrium', 1985.



CHAPTER 3

Jeff Koons and the Kitsch Object as an Art Form

(i) Ushering in Banality

'Debasement is what gives the bourgeois freedom.'

'I believe that bad taste is really unimportant.'

(Jeff Koons Handbook 1992, p.31 & 35)

Kitsch may be conveniently defined as a specifically aesthetic form of lying, a subversion of the truth. It takes on the role of false appearances. Beauty is easy to fabricate and this is evident in Koons' *Ushering in Banality* exhibition where a touch of Disneyland and Hollywood is displayed. Kitsch is excess. It is the excess appropriation of an idea more for sentimentality rather than sincerity. It is dependent on fads and phases and is concerned with modernism's illusion about beauty and taste as a commodity and the extent to which it can be bought and sold. It is a by-product of industrialisation and consumerism where the real can of Campbell's soup can be bought in a supermarket and its simulcra purchased as a high class art commodity, or an inflatable plastic rabbit can be bought in a poundshop and it's simulcra purchased by Saatchi for one million dollars. Kitsch is culture processed to culture overprocessed.

'Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations - the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our time.'

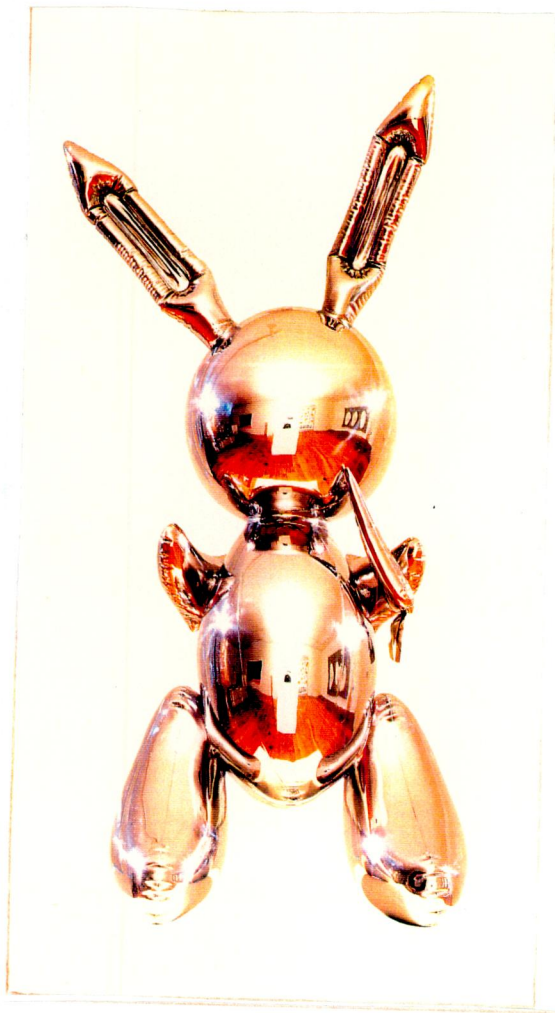
(Greenberg, 1973, p.10)

High styles used in a subversive manner can also constitute Kitsch. Koons takes a Kitsch object and transforms it into a luxury designer object by using stainless steel as a medium, therefore manipulating the context in which it is seen.

'The polished stainless steel has a reflective quality which is associated with a luxurious item. In my work, the situation is set up so that the individual from the lower classes feels economic security in a false sensation.'

(Koons, Taschen, 1992, p.19)

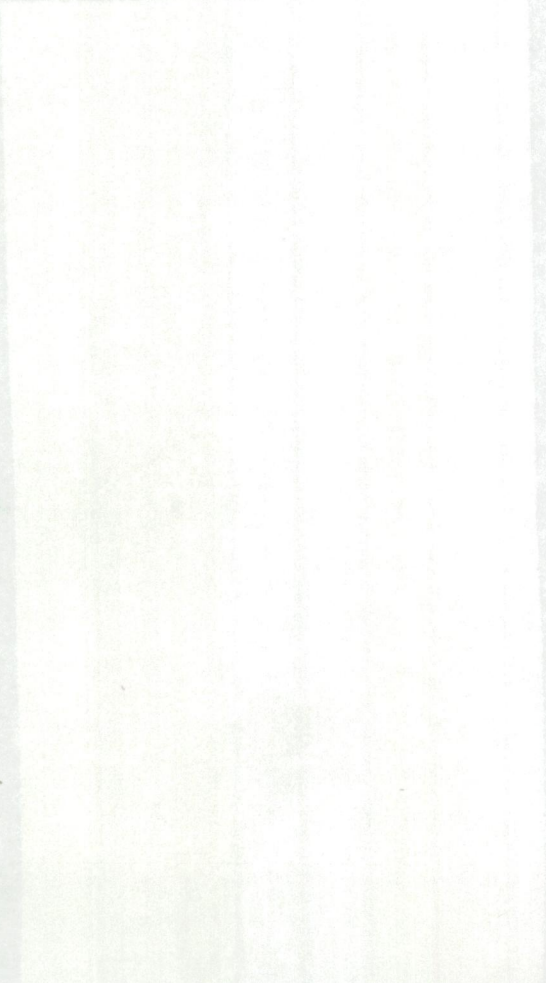
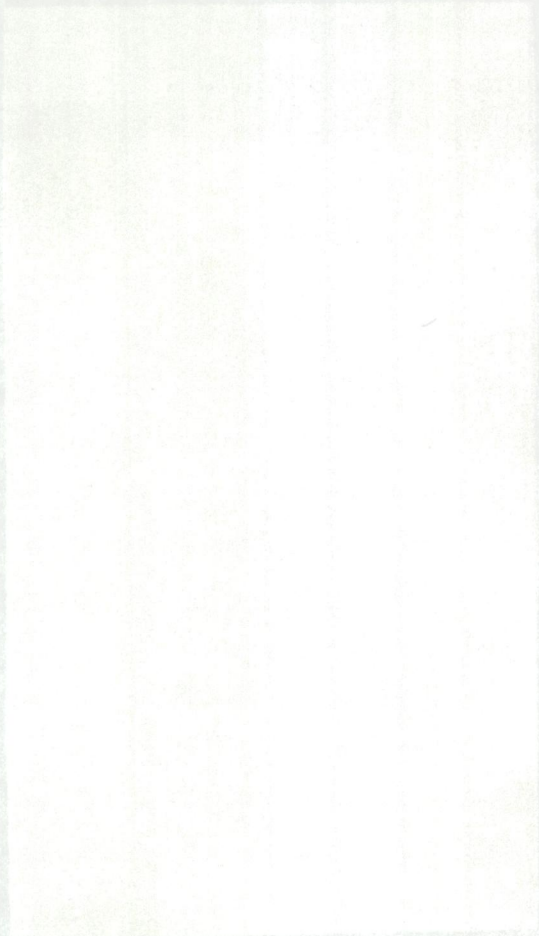
Koons likes the fake luxury of the stainless steel, it is, in his words, *'The symbol of the proletariat - a poor man's luxury.'* The stainless steel sculptures of the bowls of flowers, celebrities, particularly those of the statuary show are shiny and seemingly luxurious objects, but they are, according to Koons, really a false sense of luxury and a false security. In dealing again with class structures, Koons views the rabbit as lower class and Louis XIV as upper class but both are made equal by being cast in stainless steel. One looks as luxurious as the other, therefore there is no class distinction in his manipulation of the objects.



Ill. No. 8. 'Rabbit' from the Statuary Show, 1986.



Ill. No. 9. 'Louis XIV'



'The rabbit is a very seductive and shiny material and when the viewer looks at this, for the moment feels economically secure. It's like the gold and silver leaf in the church during the Baroque and Rococo.'

(South Bank Show, 1992)

When Koons settled in Bavaria in 1986, he was heavily influenced by the architecture of the Baroque and Rococo movements.

'For me the Baroque and Rococo is negotiating everything. It's negotiating the rational with the irrational. We have economics being negotiated, we have gold and silver everywhere. A lot of the materials that are there were always at the service of the King or Pope- to manipulate and seduce.'

(South Bank Show, 1992)

Koons mentions the movements together, frequently as though they were of the same period when in fact they vary substantially in their objectives and the duration of time lapsed between them. Baroque being a seventeenth primarily German art movement. Following the religious upheaval of that period and the Council of Trent, attempts were made to restore painting and sculpture to their pre-renaissance state. Art was to be made accessible to the common public once more attempting to reach them through their senses rather than intellect. Its main objectives were to capture the imaginations of the people and above all, to glorify the church. These elements were fundamental to Baroque art. The dynamic force of high Baroque eventually gave way to something more lighthearted and decorated. Dubbed the 'Rococo' - a frivolous collection of shells and shell-like forms it was an eighteenth century primarily French where designers of building interiors, furniture and ceramics, and painters drew their inspiration from the sinuous forms of shells, seaweed and plants. The Rococo, now, would be more associated with modern definitions of Kitsch in that it had no other function than to decorate. The movement was purely excessive and over-produced and, at the time dismissed as an attempt to satisfy the whims of a dissipated upper class.

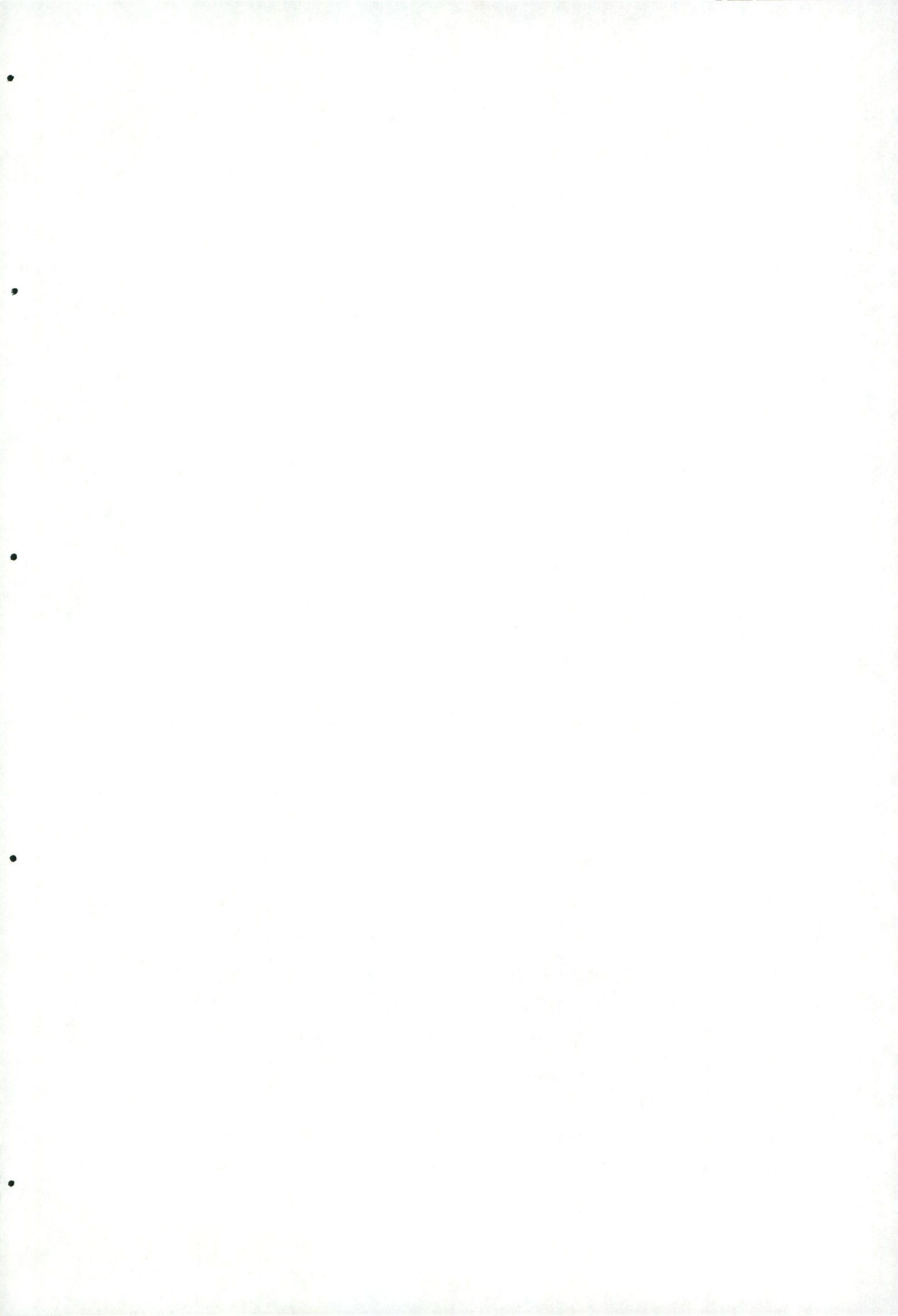
The Baroque and Rococo intervention (i.e. excessive, garish ornamentation and decoration) feature predominantly in Koons' work, indeed in several works of the statury show, but in particular to the Banality show with several references to the movements using cherubs, gold gilt frames ('Christ and the Lamb' for example), flowers and over-use of gold gilt works such as 'John the Baptist' and 'Michael Jackson

and Bubbles'. His work in this show is excessive and this is how it can be compared to Rococo and this in turn applied to Kitsch. All three are frivolous, over indulgent and extravagant. All three have no other function than to decorate, and none of them need much intellectual thought to work out what they are. The Baroque and Rococo attempted to reach the ordinary public through their senses rather than their intellect, Kitsch is also defined as doing this through sentimentality, and Koons' work is also directed at the public, the popular culture public. The cartoonland characters on which Koons models his sculptures are derived from popular imagery such as postcards, magazines and the reason for this is so that the public won't feel threatened or undermined by the work - they will understand the popular images.

'In the statuary show, I worked with Kitsch in a more specific way; that body of work which was about art that is not functioning, showed what happened when art leaves the realm of the artist and is placed in the hands of the aristocracy, on one extreme, and those of the masses on the other. When you are confronted with Kitsch, it's a socio-economic situation you're really responding to; 'I am above Kitsch, I'm better than that, I'm closer to a blue blood situation than this Kitsch object or the socio-economic situation it comes from.'

My objects give an artificial luxury, and artificial value, which transforms them completely, changing their function, and to a certain extent, decriticalising them. My surface is very much a false front for an underlying degradation.'

(Flash Art, v. 132, 1987 p.74)





III. No. 10. 'Christ and Lamb' from Ushering in Banality, 1988.

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

USHERING IN BANALITY

'Despite the artist's professions of ingenious generosity most of the banality objects struck me as dumb and perverse, acid, totally aware criticisms of the needs and preferences of the Great Western Unwashed and of the attitudes of smirking, sophisticated collectors willing to pay huge prices in order to mock the bad taste of their inferiors. But that's not the way they strike Jeff Koons, he insists.'

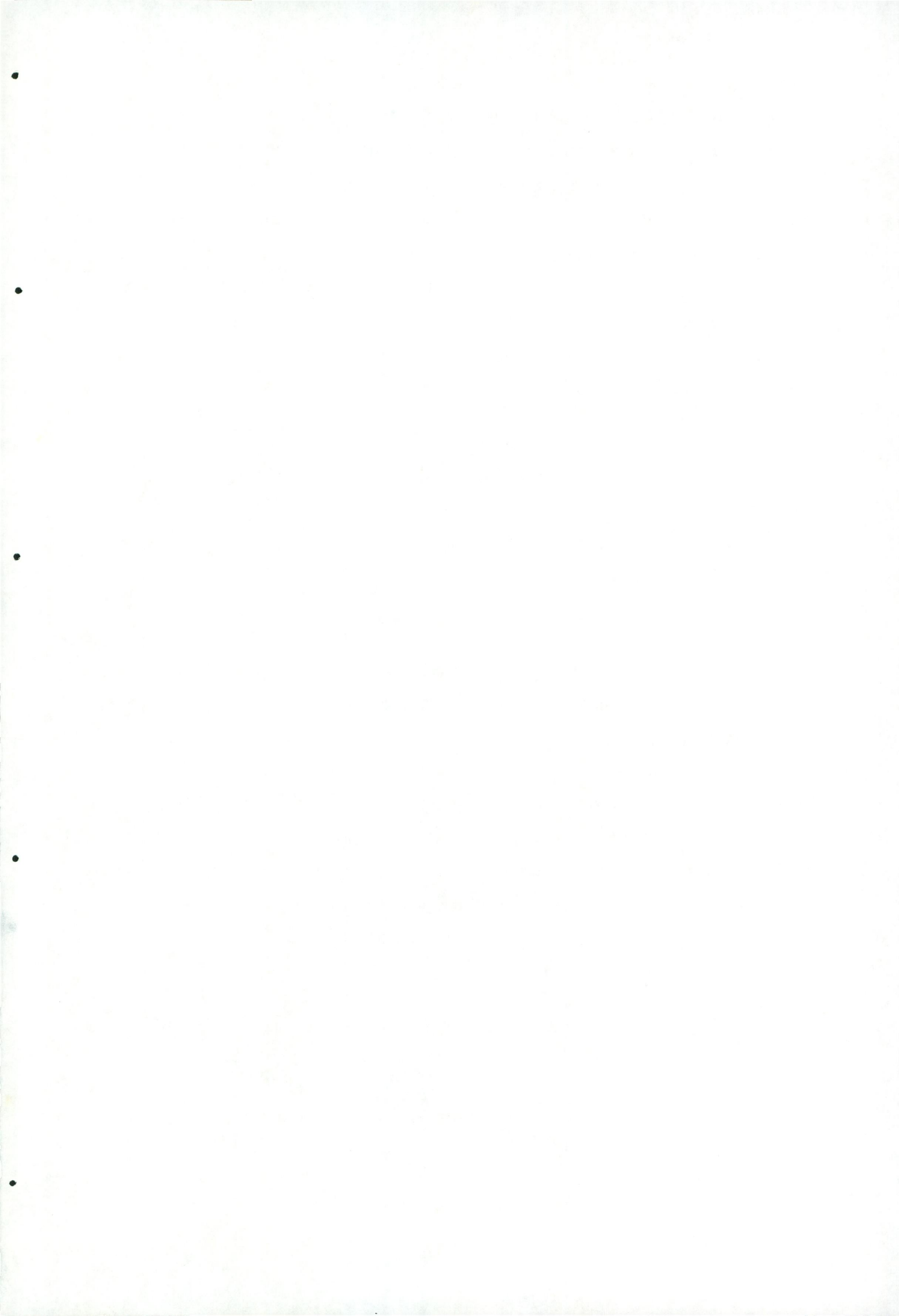
(Art News v.92 1993 p.90)

The show consisted of ceramic and wooden toys, all derived from popular culture imagery, such as a porcelain pink panther, teddy bears entitled 'Popples' and 'Amore' a porcelain *John the Baptist*, worthy of a neapolitan souvenir shop, a giant teddy bear and policeman, gilded Rococo mirrors, and the piece which gave the show its title, a ceramic work consisting of two angels and a little boy leading a pig. With these and various other Kitsch souvenirs, Koons insists that he intended no put down of popular taste - such things he feels, are part of everyone's past in the Western World, a past which should not be denied, that his work is ultimately about reinforcing class structures, rather than exploding them. In his book 'Five Faces of Modernity', Matee Calinescu asks;

'What does the Kitsch artist have in mind when he sets out to work? He obviously thinks in the first place of impressing and pleasing the average consumer who is going to buy his products. Aesthetically then, we may say that the Kitsch artist applies a 'principle or mediocrity' which offers him the best guarantee that his works will be favourably received.'

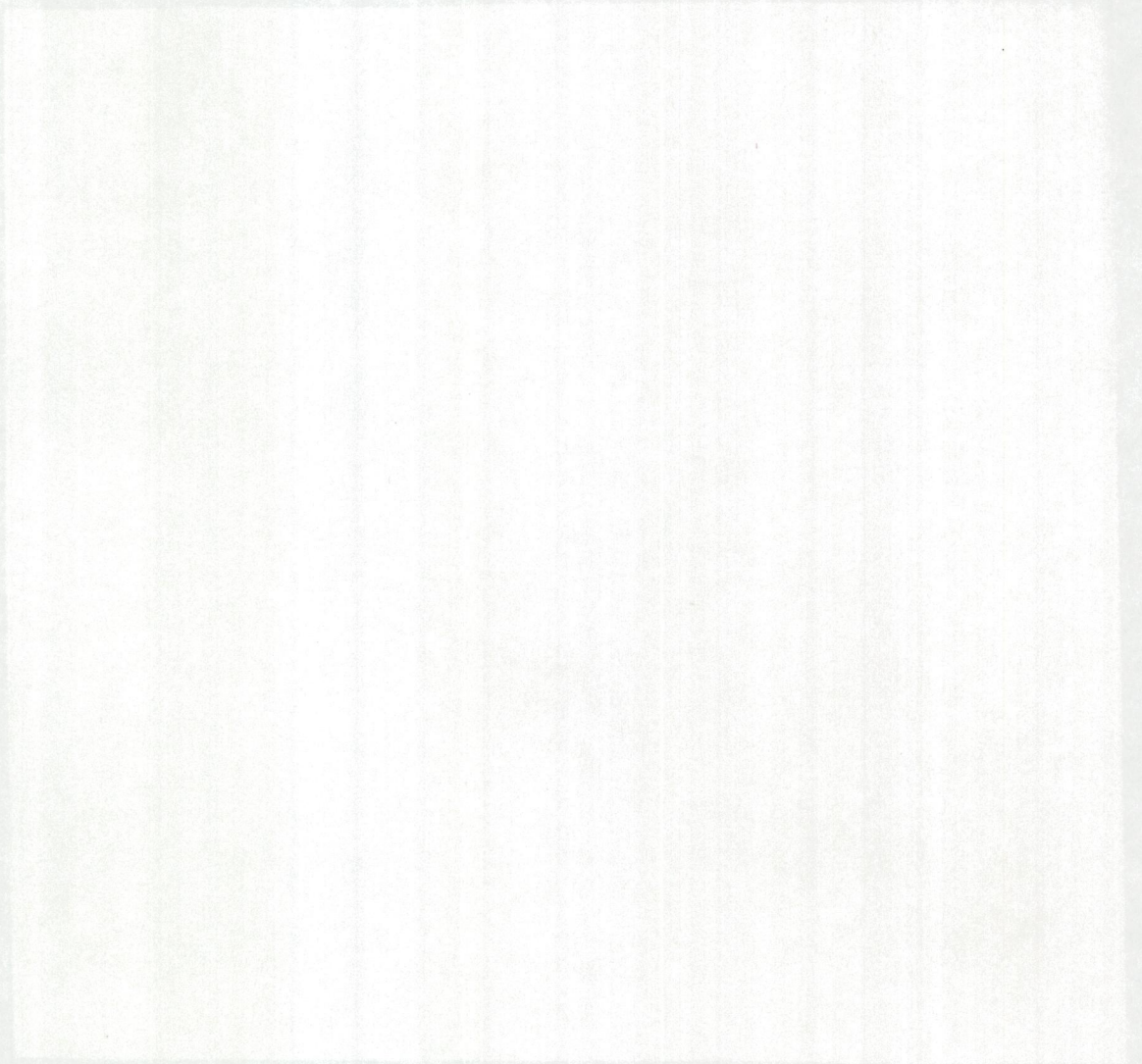
(Calinescu, 1987, p)

Koons works however, couldn't be considered to be second-rate, having been sculpted and cast by some of the best craftsmen in the world, it isn't shoddy or mediocre. It wouldn't be directed at the average consumer either, with the prices of his works equivalent to that of any other contemporary artists. I don't think Koons is as serious about his art as he makes out to be, regardless of all his pontificating and puffed-up interviews that he gives. I personally think he is mocking the elite, or petty bourgeois, like Duchamp did, deriding the whole consumerist society that America is (although this is profusely denied). Kitsch is important for its seductiveness - it is efficient, which is why it is so seductive. However, the excitement of Kitsch is quickly followed by the subtle depression of boredom. There is the feeling of having been taken in, deceived.





Ill. No. 11. 'Ushering in Banality' from the exhibition of the same name, 1988.



Kitsch makes deceptively simple sense of existence and experience. This is its ultimate amorality. The critic, Robert Hughes, who has previously described the artists' work as 'the last bit of methane, in the dead cow of post-modernism' (South Bank Show) has claimed in his critique of 'Ushering in Banality';

'You can like something for fairly perverse reasons, just because it's so awful, or because you think; 'yuk what a gesture, bringing these repulsive looking teddy bears into a gallery and spending so much labour and money on constructing them eight or ten times life size' the thing is, that this is not an emotion that tends to renew itself, it is surprising how quickly these objects tend to lose their punch once you've seen them a few times.'

(South Bank Show, 1992)

So, what Hughes is saying, and I agree, is that at first, the work of Koons looks impressive, and extravagant, but this does wear off the viewer eventually. Hughes doesn't think that a long museum life would add to Koons' stature, unlike other contemporary artists.

The pieces of the show have a high degree of fictionality, having been derived from popular imagery. '*Bear and Policeman*' originally a postcard, is one of the most outstanding pieces of the exhibition. Koons has various different explanations for it varying from interview to interview. Apparently the policeman is being sexually toyed with by the bear / the bear is banality out of control / the bear is exploiting power by 'blowing the whistle' on the policeman / banality and the power of artists is something that can be of political order, presumably the original postcard of '*Bear and Policeman*' would not have meant anything of the kind.

Koons, however, was confident and ever optimistic about the *banality* show, claiming that it was 'probably the most important ever held at the end of the twentieth century.'

(Jeff Koons Handbook, 1992 p.)

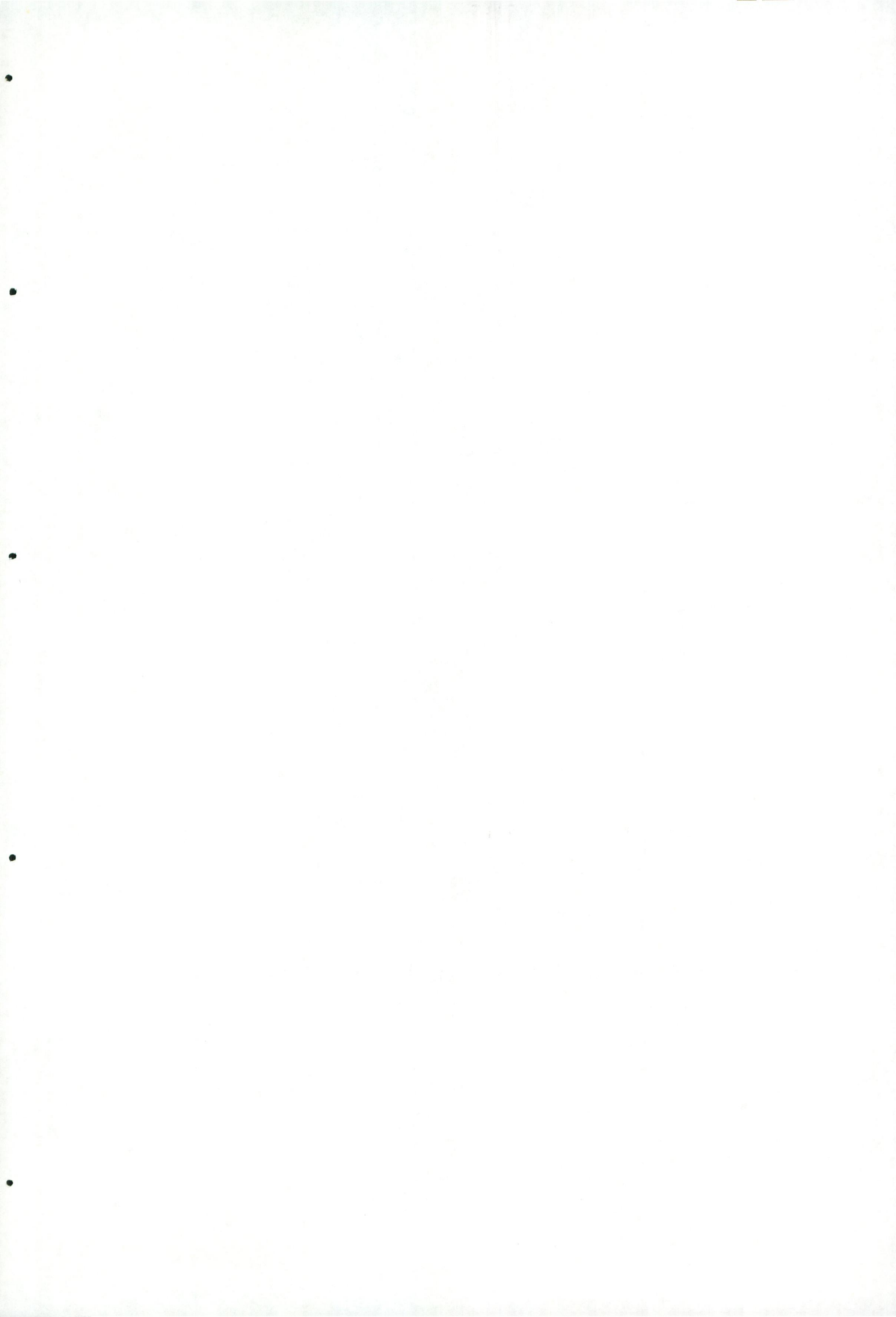


III. No. 12. 'Policeman and Bear' from Ushering in Banality, 1988.



CHAPTER 4

Jeff Koons and Marcel Duchamp - the Provocative Tradition



In 1919, Marcel Duchamp took a reproduction of Leonardo's *'Mona Lisa'*, pencilled in a moustache and beard, and titled it *'L.H.O.O.Q'* - *'elle a chaud au cul'*, or *'She has a hot ass'* of course Duchamp mainly intended to provoke and shock the bourgeois. He ridiculed the cult object that the *'Mona Lisa'* had become. In a similar way to Duchamp, Jeff Koons also provokes by placing banal and trivial objects in museums. His reconstructions of three dimensional Kitsch, from porcelain pink panthers to painted wooden pups we have all seen in supermarkets and cheap shops before, but to see it in a gallery setting puts it on a different level completely.

Just as Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol, along with the other pop artists, did before, and Duchamp three or four decades again before them. (Lichtenstein's wall sized inflated comic pictures with enlarged Ben Day dots, and Warhol's series of Marilyn Munroes and 'Campbell' soup cans) Koons provokes in the same way by placing the commonplace into the gallery, and bewildering the audience with larger-than-life teddy bears, *Winter Bears*, puppies, cherubs, flowers, and so on.

The phrase 'anxious objects' was first used by critic Harold Rosenberg to describe the uncertainty as to whether we are in the presence of a genuine work of art or not. Faced with an 'anxious object' we are usually challenged and may find ourselves disturbed, bewildered or just plain bored. The difficulty is to discover why this is art or even if it is art. An 'anxious object' is easily recognised by its subversive tendencies. Usually it has not been made in the way we expect art to be made. Often it touches the bounds of credibility, putting itself just beyond the boundary of what is acceptable. The undeniable first 'anxious object' was Duchamp's 'urinal'. Marcel Duchamp challenged the traditional concepts of beauty, creativity and originality when in 1917, he declared as a piece of art, a urinal which he called *'Fountain'* and signed with the pseudonym 'R. Mutt'.

'I threw the urinal into their faces as a challenge, and now they come and admire it as an art object for its aesthetic beauty.'

(Marcel Duchamp 1917)

Duchamp was later to continue with a bicycle wheel, a shovel, a bottle drying rack and a flask of air. A 'found' object, or 'anxious' object, the urinal becomes a work of art only by virtue of the fact that an artist exhibits it. But the 'anyone could do that'



attitude places the ordinary craftsman or person who made the urinal or bicycle wheel, as the artist. Apart from Koons' series of hoovers and basketballs, which compare with Duchamps readymades, this also applies to Koons' work in general, none of which he makes himself. Instead, he brings ideas or models to artists' foundries or skilled craftsmen in Europe, but credits himself as the artist. This he sees nothing wrong with;

'One of the reasons I chose craftsmen that normally work in the novelty field, in making things for the home, or souvenirs, is because I wanted the public to feel a sense of the familiar when they came in contact with my work. My relations with the artisan is something very interesting, it's a very fragile thing. The artisans that I work with, they think themselves as artists, as maestros and maybe they're fifty, fifty-five years old and they've never achieved the notoriety of success that I have, in their minds, as a very young man. I appreciate the work they're doing for me, but I am in complete control of the project. I have hired them in the same way that Disney will hire a platemaker to put Mickey Mouse on it. Disney is in control of that situation, and of course when we're making a Jeff Koons work, I'm in control of the work.'

(South Bank Show, 1992)

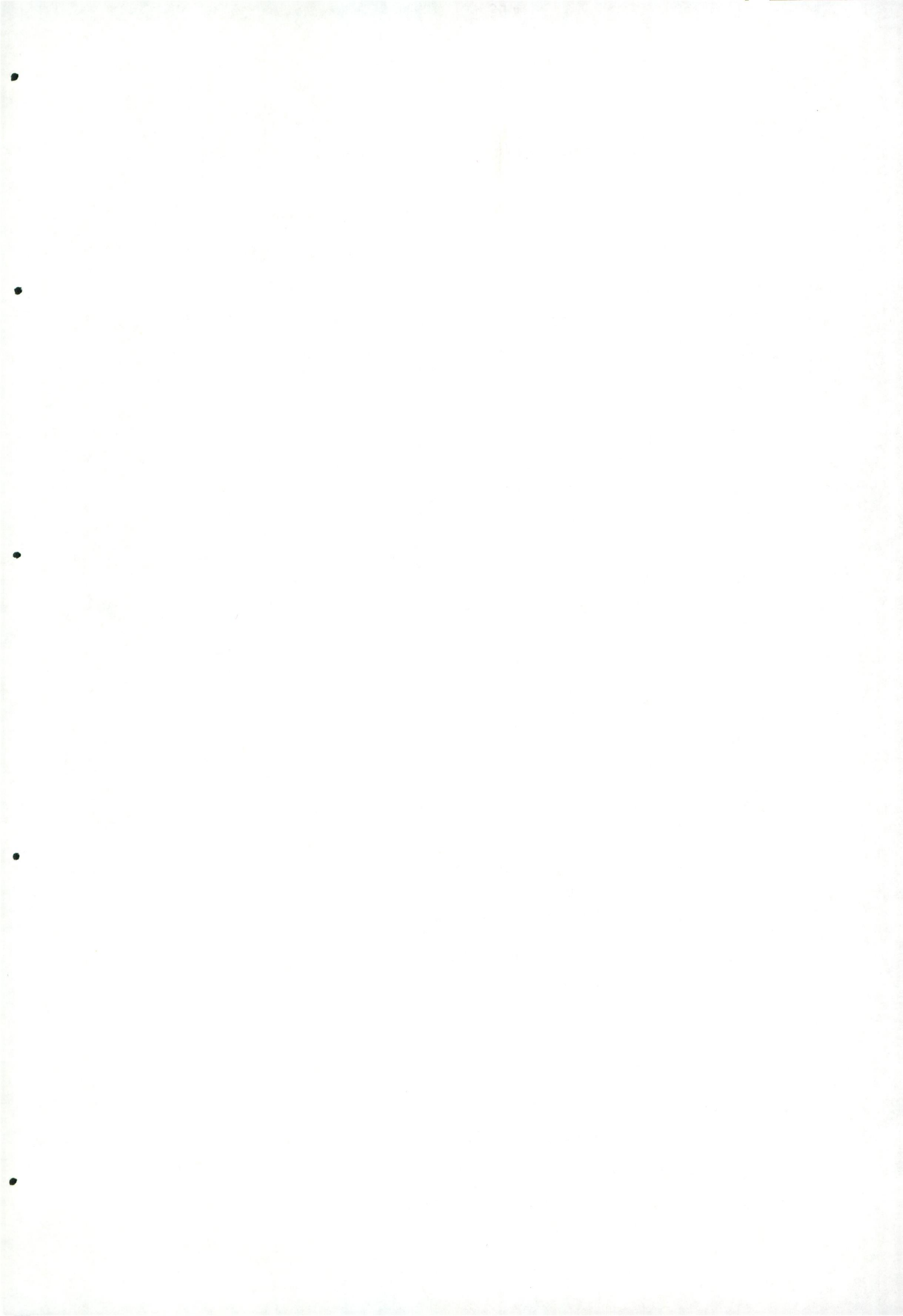
The critic and historian, Robert Rosenblum,

'Mr. Koons will have nothing to do with all of that pious nonsense. It has to do with the traditions of artists not having any money and having to make their own paints and their own canvases and so on. He's living in the real world, this is a world of technical know-how. A world of mass production, and he directs traffic as if he were a movie producer - and a movie producer doesn't do anything but direct people, and tell them what to do, and that's what Koons does in terms of the craftsmen who fabricate his work.'

(South Bank Show, 1992)

Koons claims to have always been a painter, but wanted to take his hand away from the process. He wanted to divorce himself 'from the subjective', which he said Duchamp never did (because Duchamp added his own hand to the pieces, such as the urinal, by signing them, therefore interfering with the readymade), but Koons wanted no involvement of the hand.

While many of Koons' sculptures recall Duchamps readymades - the 'Hoover' vacuum cleaners, and 'Shelton' wet and dry cleaners from 'The New' exhibition, and the 'Spalding' basketballs from the 'Equilibrium' exhibition - what may have been sacrilege



in Duchamps attitude towards 'aesthetics', is sacrilege towards the object in the case of Koons. With Koons, there is no irony intended, unlike Duchamp, or so he professes, and the objects purpose is to seduce, not to serve intellectual insight.

With the accidental quality of its elegance, Duchamps '*Bottle Rack*' humiliated the art world demands for the essential and the necessary that is for aesthetic completeness. Duchamps respect for the beauty of this object was also an affront to a set of values the art world shared with the larger world - the hierarchy that places manufactured objects at the bottom and handmade works of art at the top. Such artists mock professionalism, through of course everyone approves of professional standards in certain situations, and hopes they will be maintained. What oppresses is professionalisms tendency to extend its rhetoric - its images, languages and styles of self presentation into nearly every domain of life. Duchampian displacement can register objections to this tendency, yet that is not how Koons uses the device. This displacements assert rather than defy the dreariest generalities of banal taste and pop psychology. These are emblems of professionalism at its tackiest. In bringing them from the larger world into the art world, Koons is careful to transform them only in ways that preserve their readymade oppressiveness.

CONCLUSION

'I'm ending the twentieth century. There's no one else out there doing what i'm doing.'

(Jeff Koons, The South Bank Show, 1992)

Koons' 'paintings' employ appropriation from the mass media, and the sculptures are present in everyday life, not the traditional territory of fine art. Since 1979, Koons has been making art that provokes throughout. His earlier works such as 'The New', 'Equilibrium' and 'Statuary' address social issues such as class roles and consumerism.

Simultaneously, his art expresses personal and individual concerns about confinement, life and death. But is his work taken seriously in this context? His earlier work is contradictory to that of the most recent. Where he is apparently opposing consumerism in the former, he is actually promoting it in the latter works, such as 'Ushering in Banality'.

It is interesting the way Koons' whole career is constructed, not just his work, but the actual construction of his career. It seems that it is the final phase in the assimilation of mass cult imagery which is given this huge iconic push.

Although a tremendous amount of effort went into Koons' work, it is effortless to look at. It doesn't tax the brain, there's no questioning involved, it's just there. That is its sole purpose (especially in the 'Banality' show and 'Puppy at Arolsen'), to decorate - it serves no function other than this, and this also constitutes Kitsch. These works allude to excess and extravagance, and are inspired by the Rococo movement, they also perhaps unwittingly call attention to the artist's own status, to his puffed up reputation and intoxicating effect of success.

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