

Abundance and Banality

Jeff Koons at the Palace of Versailles

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Abstract

In September of 2008 seventeen works by Jeff Koons, representing the full range of his 30-year career, took over the grounds and interior of one of France's most sacred historical sites: the Palace of Versailles. In a seemingly discordant pairing of 18th century luxury and abundance with the commercial and pop imagery of a contemporary art superstar, the exhibition questions the value and meaning of exhibiting contemporary art in a site of historical significance. This paper will argue that the synthesis of contemporary art and historical setting, in fact, reconstitutes a new space where historical site and contemporary art are inevitably entwined, and that the exhibition of Koons' work at the Palace of Versailles creates a new visual environment that questions our notions of historic authenticity and contemporary cultural production.

Keywords

Jeff Koons, Palace of Versailles, historic authenticity, contemporary art, Laurent Le Bon

In September of 2008, seventeen works by Jeff Koons, representing the full range of his 30 year career, took over the grounds and interior of one of France's most sacred historical sites: the Palace of Versailles. In a seemingly discordant pairing of 18th century luxury and abundance with the commercial and pop imagery of a contemporary art superstar, the exhibition was the first comprehensive exhibition of Koons' work in France. Laurent Le Bon, the curator of the exhibition, was also the man behind the

program designed to bring contemporary art to the Palace of Versailles for a three-month period each year. Koons was the first artist chosen to exhibit at the palace for the program. Le Bon stated that the choice to exhibit works by Koons was obvious “because no French public institution had ever exhibited his work, and Versailles was a perfect environment for the presentation of his sculptures, technical tours de force that sometimes require thousands of hours of work.”¹ He, along with Jean-Jacques Aillagon, the chairman of Versailles, believed that if any contemporary artist is worthy of the honor of displaying his works in the same space that was the residence of one of France’s most decadent, influential and powerful kings, it is Jeff Koons. The staggering prices that his work grabs at auction, along with the long list of high profile art collectors that are in possession of his work, only begin to describe Koons’ status as the unofficial “king of the art market.”

His works, because of their value and Koons’ notoriety, may be worthy of display in a French palace, but why would Versailles, a historical site that welcomes 5 million tourists a year to the palace and 10 million a year to the gardens, want to partner itself with a contemporary artist whose works hold such a precarious position according to art critics? Koons’ work has been called kitsch, commercial and pornographic. What relation does his work have with the décor and history of Versailles? Aillagon describes the act of placing Koons’ work within the palace as “an optimistic act which singles out the unflagging youthfulness and the fathomless wealth of the glorious succession of apartments, galleries, salons, copes, pools and prospects that all make Versailles what it is.”² Aillagon continues by stating that Versailles is a “cultural object” that must remain relevant and vital in today’s world. According to Aillagon’s rationale, staging a retrospective of Jeff Koons is a means to revitalize a historical site to reflect modern and contemporary artistic trends. Above all, Aillagon claims that an exhibition such as this creates a needed dialogue between past and present.

Seeing Koons’ work placed in such a monumental site is intriguing. The enormous catalogue of the exhibition is, aside from the ability to transport oneself back to the latter months of 2008, the closest one can come to fully experiencing the impact of Koons’ work at Versailles. The catalogue is full of wonderfully clear images of the sculptures *in situ*. The images are undoubtedly seductive; the ornate ceiling decoration and elaborate textures of the palace tapestries are mirrored in the reflective surfaces of Koons’ *Balloon Dog* (Fig. 1), placed in the Hercules Salon, and *Hanging Heart* (*Red/Gold*) (Fig. 2) in the alcove of the Staircase of the Queen. It is



Fig. 1 Koons, Jeff, *Balloon Dog*, 1995-2000, François Pinault Foundation, Studio Jeff Koons. [Image source.](#)



Fig. 2 Koons, Jeff, *Hanging Heart*, 1995-2000, François Pinault Foundation, Studio Jeff Koons. [Image source.](#)



Fig. 3 Koons, Jeff, *Rabbit*, 1995-2000, François Pinault Foundation, Studio Jeff Koons. [Image source.](#)

arresting to see the piece *Rabbit* (Fig. 3), one of Koons' most iconic works, juxtaposed against the ornate sculptures and marble accents of the Abundance Salon.

However, there are deeper implications in placing contemporary art in such an established historical setting. Versailles is a palace, not an art museum. The difference between choosing to display Koons' work in a prestigious art museum and within the walls of Versailles is that the traditional white walls of a gallery space are meant to minimize context. A contemporary art museum, on the whole, strives to provide a neutral space for the viewing and contemplation of artwork without any interference or distraction. Versailles is the antithesis of a neutral space. Not only is the interior and exterior of the palace saturated with visual movement and constant textural noise, but the rich historical significance of the Palace is omnipresent.

Koons states in the exhibition catalogue how he views the setting of Versailles for his work: "I was very interested in the interactions. In a sense, it is a re-contextualization of both my work and Versailles itself. Bringing them together for me changes both, so I didn't feel any desire to change or manipulate Versailles in some way."³ There exists an obvious contradiction in Koons' statement when he states that the exhibition "re-contextualizes" and "changes" both his work and Versailles but yet he had no intention of manipulating the historical context and setting of the Palace. Just as the Palace of Versailles as a setting is far from neutral, can Koons' work remain neutral towards its surroundings? Is it possible, in such an exhibition, to separate and distinguish the visual and conceptual reception of the historical setting of Versailles from the reception of Koons' contemporary art pieces? The following analysis will argue the opposite: that the interaction, as Koons refers to it, between his work and the Palace of Versailles in fact reconstitutes a new space where historical site and contemporary art are inevitably entwined. In a state of mutual manipulation, the exhibition becomes a mediated platform between the historical and the contemporary that ultimately alters the viewer's understanding of both. No longer existing as two separate visual entities, the Palace and the artwork create a new visual environment that questions our notions of historical authenticity and contemporary cultural production.

To demonstrate this, it is important to discuss in more detail the intended interactive space created within the exhibition, which involves looking more closely at the curatorial strategy employed by the curators. By developing an understanding of how the works are

received in their new environment, it is possible to get a better understanding of what takes place within the exhibition and how the historical and the contemporary negotiate a new visual space. Another important element of this analysis will be to examine critical analysis of Koons' work and how such analysis can be applied to the specific exhibition at Versailles. Here, Dorothea von Hantelman's concept of the "social pact" between Koons' work and the viewer will be discussed, as well as Tino Segal's analysis, which argues that Koons' work exists beyond or outside the realm of artistic critique. Such analyses interpret Koons' work without the existence of the imposing historical context of Versailles. These interpretations of Koons' work in some ways unravel and become conceptually shaken when historical setting of Versailles enters into the dialogue of the constructing an understanding of Koons' work.

For the exhibition, fifteen works were placed within the rooms of the State Apartments, one piece per room. The curators, Laurent Le Bon and Elena Geuna, worked alongside Koons to choose each piece in relation to the décor, architecture and function of each room. The curatorial approach as defined by the curators was to create a dialogue between the location and the object.⁴ For example, *Moon (Light Blue)* (Fig. 4), a large stainless steel cast of a circular Mylar balloon, was placed at the far end of the Hall of Mirrors. Like the 357 mirrors that line the walls of the 240 foot-long hall, the surface of the piece wondrously reflects the contents of the space surrounding it albeit in a slightly skewed and blue-tinted manner. The name, *Moon*, as the complimentary celestial body of the sun, makes a direct connection to Louis XIV's nickname, the Sun King. *Moon* is also part of Koons' *Celebration* collection, which features many child-like inflatable toys and balloons. Other pieces of the Celebration collection on view at Versailles included *Balloon Dog* and *Hanging Heart*. In this particular collection, in the words of the artist, the work "progressively shifts from the original inflatable toys to their metal casts, monumentalizing and immortalizing the joyfulness of these fragile objects. The work is a celebration of childlike innocence, and is based on a sense of collective memory, familiarity with the object and self-representation of the viewer."⁵

In Koons' statement above, he concludes by making reference to the relationship of his work towards the viewer. In contrast, in describing his intentions for the exhibition at Versailles, Koons refers to the "interactions" between the Palace and his art, but does not make any mention of the viewer's role in this interaction. It is apparent that the curators and the artist attempted to create a visual and conceptual link between the location of the



Fig. 4 Koons, Jeff, *Moon*, 1995-2000, François Pinault Foundation, Studio Jeff Koons. [Image source.](#)

Hall of Mirrors and the work that was displayed there; they encouraged an overlap between object and context, hoping to create a unique synthesis between the past and the present, between the historical and the contemporary. But even though both Koons and the exhibition curators use the word interaction, which implies an active and mutual relationship, the viewer and visitor of Versailles has not been considered in the curatorial strategy of “interaction.” When considering the reaction and reception of the viewers, it may be more appropriate to discuss what takes place within the exhibition in terms of the concept of interplay, creating the possibility of a more dynamic understanding of the relationship between the viewer and the combined visual presence of the décor of Versailles and the contemporary artwork of Jeff Koons.

When analyzing the effect of placing Koons’ *Moon* in the great Hall of Mirrors, the concept of interplay produces a whole new level of meaning that is produced by the individual experience of each viewer/visitor. The light blue color of the piece stands in strong contrast to the delicate harmonious mixture of yellows and light reds from the surrounding marble accents of the room. As a result, the artwork becomes the visual focus of the hall; it vies for the attention of the visitor. Koons’ piece may then serve as a visual distraction that does not allow viewers to experience the majesty of the Hall of Mirrors in the same way that they would if Koons’ blue *Moon* was not there. On the other hand, unlike the experience of viewing Koons’ work in an art museum, the result of integrating Koons’ work seamlessly into the inhabited rooms of Versailles is that the setting becomes a new “voice” in the viewer’s interaction with the art object. Because art museums attempt to suppress context, the issue of setting and environment falls out of the dialogue or is not even considered as an active part of the dialogue. In contrast, within the walls of a heavily saturated environment such as Versailles, environment becomes an essential element in the reception and interpretation of the artwork.



Fig. 5 Koons, Jeff, *Lobster*, 2003, François Pinault Foundation, Studio Jeff Koons. [Image source.](#)

Another specific example of the placement choice of Koons’ work in the Palace is his piece *Lobster* (Fig. 5), which was hung from the ceiling in the Mars Salon. *Lobster* is made of aluminum and resembles a large inflatable lobster that might be used as a pool toy. The work is bright red with yellow accents along the body. The Mars Salon is named after the Roman god of war. Therefore, the décor of this room is inspired by military themes and the glory of conquest. The walls of the room are covered with heavy ornate red decoration and adorned with large paintings of men in uniform on horseback, telling stories of military victories. Playful yet confrontational, *Lobster* hangs from the room like a suspended, out

of place, cartoon character. Koons states that this piece relates “back to medieval-type times. The graphics painted on the lobster resemble flames and fire. And so there’s this sense that if you stay in the public eye too long, eventually that could be your fate.”⁶ In the eyes of the viewer, the playful imagery of the lobster could be viewed as a strong counterpoint to the refined, baroque aesthetic of the room. Possibly innocent and fun in a neutral gallery setting, *Lobster*, depending on the individual interplay and reciprocal relationship between each viewer with the visual synthesis of art and setting, might evoke a reaction that ranges from comical and irreverent, to intrusive, aggressive and disrespectful.

As a specific example of an individual’s interpretation of interplay within the exhibition, Christopher Mooney, in his review of the exhibition for *Art Review*, describes the physical effect of seeing Koons’ work in Versailles. The description directly refers to *Balloon Dog*, which was exhibited in the Hercules Salon. Mooney writes, “Viral and virile, it [*Balloon Dog*] turns everything in its orbit – tapestries, paintings, statuary, bedspreads, the logs in the chimney and the gardens out the window – into abominable whimsy.”⁷ Mooney provides a strong visual statement for how he viewed the mutual and interwoven relationship between the art and the setting. An implication of this statement is that, in the presence of Koons’ work, the meaning of Versailles as a cultural object is inextricably woven together with the influence and agenda of the art within its walls; for Mooney, Versailles is inevitably pulled into the orbit of Koons’ work. The decoration and furnishings within the Palace no longer maintain their purpose as objects of historical authenticity but become accessories to the flamboyant display of contemporary art. Therefore, at stake is the integrity of the viewer’s understanding of both art and the Palace of Versailles: in understanding the idea of interplay within the exhibition, both are shaken through mutual confrontation as the role of the viewer and the subjectivity of personal experience enters into the dialogue.

Another important aspect in examining how the exhibition at Versailles creates a new visual environment through the interplay between art, historical setting and viewer involves looking at critical analyses of Koons’ work and how they relate to this exhibition. These analyses have taken different forms. His work is equally loved and loathed by critics and museum visitors alike. Because of the “ready-made” quality and commercial themes used in his work, many critics view Koons as the joint descendent of Duchamp and Warhol. He has created a number of series of works throughout his 30-year career, many of which use popular images that relate to childhood and innocence or icons of pop culture and history such

as Michael Jackson, Louis XIV and Bob Hope. The materials he uses are meant to evoke a feeling of luxury though they are generally made from less expensive materials such as stainless steel, aluminum and wood. The culmination of his technique and subject matter is meant to break down the notion that art is only for an intellectually superior audience. His work is an attempt to lessen the critical distance between the art object and the viewer. Koons states, "My work is not a segregator. No one has ever looked at a Jeff Koons and has felt that this work was speaking down to them, they have always felt above my work."⁸

The most compelling interpretation of Koons' work, and one that seems to have taken hold among those who see Koons as a strong contributor to the canon of contemporary American art, is that it functions outside of the realm of critique. Tino Seghal, a fellow contemporary artist, talks about his work: "What interests me in Koons' work is that it is neither about alienation nor does it explicitly criticize alienation: it simply tries not to alienate the viewer...Koons is beyond critique and, without giving up a sense of reflection, has consequently entered the realm of seduction."⁹ Dorothea von Hantelman in her book "How to do things with Art," discusses at length how Koons' work successfully creates a new form of political impact that does not follow the typical understanding of art as a medium for political and social critique. Von Hantelman describes Koons' work as having an integrative empowering effect that redistributes agency away from the art object itself (and the artist) and onto the viewer. "In his view, art is above communication. The social existence and impact of art – the *social pact* that regulates the relation between work and beholder – is the core concern of his work."¹⁰

If the main foundation for this analysis of the work of Koons is the connection between the object and the viewer, and the movement of power from one to the other, what happens if this "social pact" takes place within the sacred historical interior of the Palace of Versailles? In the Palace of Versailles, does Koons' work still evade the realm of critique? As discussed above, the interplay that takes place in the exhibition creates subjective individual responses based on each viewer's experience and understanding both of contemporary art and the historical site of Versailles. Inevitably, context becomes an imposed part of the reception of the work and, therefore, the "social pact," referred to by von Hantelman above – consisting of a pact between art object and viewer – is violated; the "voice" imposed by the context of Versailles interferes with this pact and, therefore, is no longer an accurate measurement for critical analysis. Not simply an intimate interaction between the

art object and the individual viewer, Koons' work in the exhibition re-enters the realm of critique. The artwork's imposed context has to be accounted for, and in doing so, a whole new paradigm for understanding the merging of the contemporary and the historical is created.

The question following interpretive analysis of the exhibition is whether the interplay that is created between the viewer and the visual synthesis of Koons' work and Versailles is a beneficial exercise and whether it is the purpose of a historical site to encourage such encounters. It is obvious that in the eyes of the organizers of the exhibition, Versailles is in need of revitalization and an exhibition such as this serves this purpose. Aillagon states: "Versailles contains far too much power and elegance combined to fear anything. The only things that might bog it down in insignificance would be idle neglect and the château becoming swaddled in the excessive and nostalgic certainties of a bygone time."¹¹ Aillagon here is speaking from the perspective of injecting new energy into a well-known and iconic site. On the other hand, Koons talks about the benefits that such an exhibition can have on contemporary art. "Contemporary art is such a prisoner to the present that juxtaposing new works against old ones allows the return of a new link with history and the history of art."¹² These statements made by Aillagon and Koons cite the need for cultural and temporal exchange and claim that creating a dialogue between epochs will be mutually beneficial.

On the other hand, neither of these statements addresses the needs and wants of the millions of visitors who come to view the Palace of Versailles each year. A review in French weekly magazine, *Valeurs Actuelles*, underlines this point. The article points out that Versailles for many visitors is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. What happens to their perception of Versailles if the one time they see it is with a large hanging lobster in the Mars Salon and an enormous pink balloon dog in the Hercules Salon? Does the existence of Koons' art destroy the authentic experience that the visitors are expecting and possibly deserve? The article claims that the Koons exhibition is the result of an agenda that does not consider Versailles' main audience. "Cultural professionals who are used to private viewings and who have become blasé believe that everyone dreams like them for new points of view for a site that everyone thinks they know."¹³ The article ends by making the plea that contemporary art, which has countless museums dedicated to its display and whose presence is increasingly felt in urban spaces, should not invade the valued historical sites of the nation.

Nostalgia, the quality that Aillagon is attempting to evade through contemporary art exhibitions, is the main reason why so many visitors flock to Versailles each year. Versailles may have been a venue for experimentation in taste and fashion during the time of Louis XIV's rule but that is not its current cultural purpose. Visitors are expecting to be whisked into the past; they are not expecting to be confronted with contemporary art. The value and meaning that is most important to Versailles, in the eyes of many, is its ability to recreate authentic visions of France's royal and luxurious past. Versailles is a relic that has become part of the world's understanding of French culture and history. It holds value for both the French and for foreign visitors and because, as examined above, exhibitions of contemporary art ultimately create a new visual environment that represents the interwoven purpose of both the historical and the contemporary, there is also a risk that such exhibitions will alter the value of Versailles as a cultural heritage site.

The exhibition of Koons' work in the Palace of Versailles is an experiment that presents a new paradigm for examining the personal exchanges and the concept of individual interplay that take place when contemporary art is placed within a historical site. However, if the mission and main purpose of Versailles is to continue to provide an authentic cultural and historical experience, the Palace administrators may want to reconsider how this mission corresponds with exhibitions of contemporary art. Can the Palace of Versailles be both a contemporary art museum and a historical site simultaneously? Whatever the answer, it is important to be aware that placing contemporary art in historical places does more than just create visual "interactions" between past and present; it also transforms the places we thought we knew into new platforms of cultural and historic debate.

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Endnotes

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- ¹ Richard Leydier, "Laboratoire Artistique: Interview with Laurent Le Bon," *Art Press*, no. 359, 2009.
- ² Jeff Koons and Jean-Pierre Criqui. 2008. *Jeff Koons Versailles*. Paris: Éditions Xavier Barral, 10.
- ³ Ibid, 20.
- ⁴ See Jeff Koons and Jean-Pierre Criqui. 2008. *Jeff Koons Versailles*. Paris: Éditions Xavier Barral, pages 127-129 for a discussion of the curator's strategy for the exhibition.
- ⁵ Koons and Criqui, 130.
- ⁶ Elaine Sciolino, "King of Kitsch rules Versailles," *International Herald Tribune*, September 11, 2008.
- ⁷ Christopher Mooney, "Jeff Koons," *Art Review*, no. 28, 2008.
- ⁸ David Sylvester, *Interviews with American Artists*, London: Chatto & Windus, 2001, 302.
- ⁹ Catherine Wood, "Catherine Wood on Jeff Koons and Tino Sehgal," *ArtForum*, March 2009.
- ¹⁰ Dorothea von Hantelmann, *How to do things with art*, Zürich: JRP Ringier: 2010, 184.
- ¹¹ Koons and Criqui, 10.
- ¹² Fabinne Faur, "Les très kitsch Jeff Koons expose à Versailles," *Agence France-Presse*, June 19, 2008.
- ¹³ Ibid.

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