

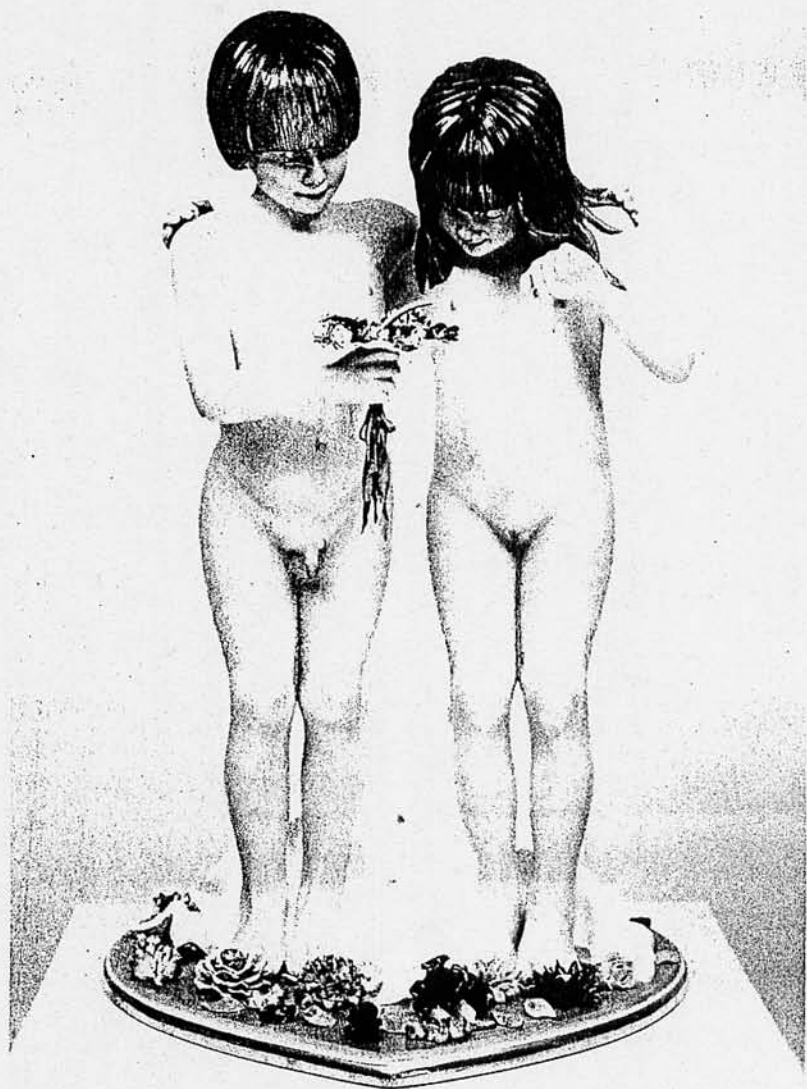
All You Need is Love

According to **Dave Beech** and **John Beagles**, Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons were in love

Beauty, Fame, Work, Time, Death, Economics, Atmosphere, Success, Art, Titles, The Tingle, Underwear Power: these are the headings to chapters 4 to 15 of Andy Warhol's *From A to B and Back Again*. The first three chapters are headed 'Love'.



Andy Warhol
at Stable Gallery
New York 1964



Despite this, Warhol is not renowned for his love of things, only his cynical use of them. Later on, too, Jeff Koons has been commonly regarded as a clever manipulator of commodities rather than having a genuine affection for the objects he collects or commissions. But what if this assessment is wrong? What if love is indeed at the heart of the work of Warhol and Koons?

More usually the link between Warhol and Koons is couched in terms of irony (cynicism, commodification, appropriation, business, celebrity, capital, complicity, sell-out, self-publicity, excess, tongue-in-cheek hand-on-wallet consumerism, naivety, banality, fashion, seduction, glamour, glitz, immorality). Perhaps the reason why art critics don't connect Warhol and Koons in terms of love is because they don't trust that their love is sincere or simply that they don't value what the artists profess to love. And this would be consistent with the fact that irony, not love, seems to most to be the shared feature of Warhol's and Koons' art.

Time and again it is assumed that Koons, even more than Warhol, is only serious about making money, that he has no love for the work he makes and, perhaps, he secretly laughs at those who take them seriously. Interviewers repeatedly ask Koons if he is being ironic, if he is appropriating the objects of popular culture to comment on it in some way. His replies are always steadfast denials. For instance, in conversation with Adrian Searle at the ICA in London, he insisted, 'I like the things that I like, I like colour, and I like materialism and I like seductiveness. And to me these things are absolutely beautiful. And if I didn't think these things were beautiful and they weren't spiritual to me I wouldn't work with them.' Koons, in fact, is remarkably consistent in his denials of irony. 'One hunts for irony or critique', writes Thyra Nichols Goodeve, 'but [Koons] exposes no interest in such a reading of the work.'¹

If Appropriation artists worked 'in the interstices of high art and popular culture'², as it was argued at the time, then they did so with the dignity of theory

not the pleasure of love. In fact, working between the two cultures was always going to be an intellectual and second order practice quite foreign to the ways in which popular culture is popularly received. The appropriationists invite us to examine the systemic operations of commodity exchange; Koons, on the contrary, encourages love, enthusiasm, euphoria, frank enjoyment of the playful, exuberance, manipulation, exploitation, spontaneity, beguilement of the senses, celebration. In short, when Koons makes a sculpture of a bear that towers over us he is inviting us to hug it. Maybe *Popples* is enlarged in order to create a Brechtian effect of estrangement followed by critique. If so, why does Koons never refer to such effects? If on the other hand we take him at his word and *Popples* is something to love, then the cuddly bear has been enlarged, perhaps, simply because we love him so much. As Koons has said, if you like ice cream have a big helping.

It is possible to view the main body of Koons' work as the progressive foregrounding of love in his art. As if, let's say, he is constantly upping the stakes because every time he displays what he loves the artworld responds with a knowing smile and a snide attack on the world from which his objects of love are collected. So, the sexy vacuum cleaners and womb-like basketball tanks are seen as nothing more than neo-minimalist commodity critique, and Koons therefore has to be more insistent. Posters and silver pieces which conflate luxury, liquor and love are still taken to be appropriationist, so Koons puts out his own advertisements. This is me, he seems to say, so who am I appropriating now? Well, the problem is that there is no final and finalising site of authenticity, no means at the artist's disposal to insist once and for all that they mean what they say and say what they mean. Misinterpretation is a bottomless pit. Koons ends up in a situation not unlike that described by Terry Atkinson as the Duchamp effect, namely that no matter what the avant-gardist did or didn't do there would always be someone ready to congratulate them on their last great ironic gesture. No matter what Koons did, no matter how intimate his work became, no matter how much he genuinely loved the things he did, there would always be someone ready to give his work an ironic, artworldly spin.

There was one thing left to do. Koons collaborated with his porn star wife, La Cicciolina, in a series of works titled 'Made in Heaven' which consisted of photographs and sculptures of Koons and La Cicciolina in various states of sexual entanglement. Making love, that is. Maybe there was always too much space



between himself and the objects which he represented in his love-struck art. Surely if he made work about the woman he loved no one would suggest that he didn't really love her. Would pundits continue to insist that he is being ironic in the face of images of marital bliss? With 'Made in Heaven' Koons had cut to the chase. Here was love as everyone could understand it, not the metaphorical or substitutional love in the objects we surround ourselves with, but real, immediate human love. Their relationship became his model for our relationship to art. Even after the failure of their marriage and the torment of their custody battle, the works of 'Made in Heaven' remain rooted in Koons' love for La Cicciolina.

Screwing, licking, coming and fondling, all in baroque settings, with saturated colours and simplified representations of flowers, animals, and other props, 'Made in Heaven' was a feast of love as sex. These works blended the artificial and the natural in a decorative idealisation that never covered up

Jeff Koons
Popples 1988



Jeff Koons
Bourgeois Bust –
 Jeff & Illona 1991

its manipulation of splendid effects and deliberately pronounced artifice. Close-ups of penetration and ejaculation, medium shots of oral sex, long shots of the couple in the landscape, it's all here. As well as the massive photos there were marble bust portraits, small-scale glass figurines in nature, and the largest porcelain sculpture ever produced in which Koons and La Cicciolina are accompanied by a serpent, foliage and cartoonish butterflies. 'Made in Heaven' combined these porn works with exquisitely carved wooden sculptures of puppies, flowers and cherubs. It was, in a word, fertile. Even the puppies seemed to pant. And the flowers were more like bunches of little arseholes. Maybe it shouldn't have come as a surprise that so many people couldn't see the love for the porn. But maybe there is another reason why so many people can't see the love in Koons' art: love itself.

The main obstacle to the use of love as an approach to art is its apparent simplicity. Love often seems to come into its own when self-consciousness and critique have ebbed away. Perhaps love is even anti-intellectual. In Niklas Luhmann's semantic account of the codification of intimate relations, love

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is not only revealed to be semantically complex, it is also very modern. Love is at once impenetrably self-referential (a sort of certainty) and specifically paradoxical (a realm of spinning dualities and groundless grounds). Historically, love is dependent on the concept of the Romantic individual. When Reason gave order to intimate relations the beloved was virtuous and honourable, and passion (a passivity of the subject) was considered a disease. 'By the seventeenth century', Luhmann says, 'all that remained of this view was the metaphor'.³ Love from this time on is not distinguished from passion but ruled by it (actual relations go through changes too, so that marriage is no longer 'arranged' but becomes a 'love match'). Love is a mystery or a miracle; love puts one in chains; it is a type of disease, a madness. In other words, love couldn't be further from the forms of attention and modes of address that we have come to expect from savvy, well-informed, self-conscious artists.

Love does not serve Koons well as a tool of cultural intervention and critique. What it does do is identify Koons with the subjects of popular culture rather than distinguish him from them in the role of an artist, intellectual or critic. Slavoj Zizek has claimed to make the same identification himself: 'the idiot for whom I endeavour to formulate a theoretical point as clearly as possible is ultimately myself'.⁴ And again, lining up the sublime with the ridiculous, Zizek says, 'I am convinced of my proper grasp of some Lacanian concept only when I can translate it successfully into the inherent imbecility of popular culture'.⁵ Can't we say that Koons, likewise, trusts his love of the sublime only when it comes to him via the banality of popular culture? If so, then Koons is certainly no anthropologist of the popular, and any populism in his work is not the easy populism of taking sides with the cultural other. Even if it turns out that Koons has indeed been faking all along and he had no affection for *Popples* and *La Cicciolina* from the outset, there remains something valuable and progressive in the extremity of his identification with popular culture and his avowed love (not just political allegiance) with its objects. ■

1. Parkett #80, p9.

2. Ibid, p9.

3. Niklas Luhmann, *Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy*, Stanford University Press, 1982, p52.

4. Slavoj Zizek, *Metastases of Enjoyment*, Verso, 1994, p175.

5. Ibid, p175.

Dave Beech and John Beagles are artists.