

Koons in Versailles: Verticality Versus Introversion

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Daniel Hill on Koons and the problems in contemporary art.

“Profound” was the word Jeff Koons used most frequently to express his feelings about his Versailles show at the opening day press conference. After viewing the 17 sculptures installed in the castle's rooms and courtyards, we have to agree. [1] Thus reported one well read art and design website regarding a recent exhibition that my wife and I happened upon when visiting the amazing palace of Versailles on our recent honeymoon (a video of the artworks can be found here). Koons' art may have been funky, colourful and dazzling but having the famous and breathtakingly beautiful 'Hall of Mirrors' cut short by a big metallic pillow (at least that is what it looked like) had this art historian in nothing but a profound bother, not to mention the giant Michael Jackson (fig 1.), Pink Panther with a semi-nude woman, vacuum cleaner collection, a giant pig and some modified pool toys that were strategically placed around the palace. Sure, the French government's culture officers and the artistic elite were clamouring to justify the choice of site for the exhibition after some strong criticism, but the best they could come up with was that Koons was a notorious artist and Versailles a notorious place; a bit of a tepid segue. The audio guide was full of the same mindless and vacant jargon that one finds in the best postmodern analyses of works of art, with references to 'inner aesthetics' and the obsession with the use of different mediums. Nevertheless, with all this talk the main reason offered for why Koons is such a good artist was the fact that his art sold for very high prices in the auction market! The exhibition was the most obvious example I have seen of the inherent decadence, elitism and 'Paddington' (to use a Sydney Suburb) snobbery that the modern art movement has created. I wondered why Versailles was really chosen as a place to see the works; perhaps because if the exhibit was in its own gallery nobody would actually come to see it? Instead the French Cultural Department decided to foist it upon thousands of unsuspecting tourists actually looking to see something beautiful, breathtaking and historically significant. The other tenable argument put forwards for the exhibition's location was that the scandal it caused by being in Versailles would increase the value of the privately owned Koons' creations, of which the French Government's officer used to be the private curator. One American university student who was confronted by the images summed up the feelings of my wife and I. "I don't get this. Why?…. Oh at least it is only a temporary exhibit." This example, of course, is not an isolated incident. The feeling of absolute confusion that often occurs when one is confronted with an artwork from the 20th or 21st century is quite common. Likewise is the even more bewildering result of ever having such a piece of art 'explained'. If any reader has not experienced this in some way, you would have had a great opportunity to do so if you had combined a November visit to Versailles with one of the provided audio guides to the Koons exhibition. This is a very important topic because the arts is one of the manifestations of the culture of the day and the contemporary social mind. As an expression of interior movements within the human person, a work of art (for example, a music, poetry or prose) shows to other people what the artist perceives and which he attempts to communicate to the world. If we are to take today's visual art as an example, one would conclude that as a culture we are intensely introverted, care little for the common good and are concerned only for our own sense of popularity, or that we are confused and endlessly searching for meaning. In the 20th and 21st centuries, society has suffered from a very prominent and convenient ideology called postmodernism. Founded on the idea that truth is a relative phenomenon, contained more in one's perception rather than in actual reality, it essentially gives the individual the decision as to what the truth is. In practical terms, the only exception is that the individual cannot claim that post-modernism is a non truth, which demonstrates the ideology's inherent contradiction. This idea has pervaded almost all parts of our civilisation, including the arts, and by this I mean not just visual art, but literature, sculpture, drama, poetry, architecture and music. Many modern artists, like Koons, do not attempt to convey significant or transcendent meaning in their works at all, even if they do have a thirty word explanation for why there is a giant blow up rabbit in the Versailles Grand Hall, or why they have decided to paint a sculpture of the sacred heart in a superman cape and Mexiacn death mask. (fig. 2). It is not only postmodernism that has infiltrated our cultural expressions. It has also suffered heavily from an influence of Marxism, which saw art mainly as a way to protest, and the 20th century obsession with technology and novelty. Marx and his offspring considered art as another way of protesting against the current political systems of the time, and this, over the years, has resulted in the all-too prevalent cultural view that all good art must be novel, outrageous (for example, piss Christ (fig. 3) and protest against something about which the artist is aggrieved. Sometimes the inherent 'protest' is against the definition of art itself. Modern art still considers itself, in many senses, to be an attack on more traditional views of beauty and creativity. Try, for instance, to take a classical-style work painted in the modern day into the Museum of Contemporary Art in Circluar Quay and see how far you get. When, in 1917, Michel Duchamp signed a urinal and put it in a gallery, he provoked the viewer into asking the question, "what is art (fig. 4)?" Artists like Andy Warhol (fig. 5) in the mid-20th century took this further, creating works out of, or about, cheap, mass-produced objects and his popularity has had immense influence on art today. Such an approach contrasts with the seminal meaning of the word 'art' which meant craftsmanship of any kind (like blacksmithing). The 'art' of a painter or sculpture was the good performance of a particular task, usually the beautifying of a space and the evocation of certain ideal often to the specifications of a patron. With Duchamps, Warhol and their general contemporaries, however, art became 'art for art's sake'. This is a particularly introverted way of defining the artistic endeavour. Instead of art aiming for a higher purpose or at least some purpose beyond itself, it becomes simply the creative whim of the artists own inner feelings, or desire to be controversial. Art became in many instances an end in itself, not a means for something greater. Today it is this attitude that is prized above all others when an artwork is

commissioned for public display and paid for by public funds. When a society is gripped in the throes of war, which much of the 20th century was, an intense amount of focus is given to technological advancement. This is perhaps one of the contributing factors to the contemporary habit of using the level of technology achieved as a basic measure of a civilisation's greatness. Even when looking into the past often a period of history is considered 'more advanced' due to how closely it resembles our own. Thus Leonardo da Vinci is a genius because he designed a helicopter that would never have worked but is similar to our own concept. It was inevitable that this attitude would influence artistic expression. This idea is also tied very much to the current economic rationalism that is prevalent. Something must demonstrate clear economic 'viability' and have 'measurable outcomes' to be considered worthy of care and attention. The notion that something must be 'fresh' and 'cutting edge' is inherent in contemporary attitudes to life and society. This is particularly evident in the world of architecture, where engineering and art meet in a relationship not found anywhere else, and often in spectacular displays of ingenuity and ugliness (fig.6). This has also led to what I call the 'order of perpetual refurbishment.' The modern architectural and interior design fads move so quickly that a prize-winning building will soon be out of date and in need of refurbishment. It is no surprise that one of the first chapels in the world ever built specifically for the new Rite of the Mass, the Chapel of the Resurrection at Sydney University, is currently being destroyed, while many other chapels, like the Neo-Gothic church on Broadway in Sydney, are being restored. This current ideological state (post modernism, protest and novelty) prompted Johnsonian Professor of Philosophy at Colombia University, Arthur Danto, one of the most prominent contemporary philosophers of aesthetic, to come up with a definition that underlies attitudes to the nature of art today. He writes in *The Artworld* (1964), one of his many works on the subject, 'The answer to what is art? An object will be art if it exists inside of and in relation to the artworld'. Here, the 'artworld' refers to a somewhat vague concept of art history/theory, other artworks, artists, galleries and their curators, academics, and anyone in any sort of position to comment on or contribute to art. Thus, we see here that art has become, or at least is seen by many, as an introverted, self-perpetuating and purposeless adventure for the enjoyment of the special elite who 'understand' modern art. The general postmodernist idea of there being no truth is a theory to which it is popular to subscribe, simply because it is easy. It frees people to ignore the quest for beauty and truth, because 'Ladette to Lady' is as good as the opera, Britney-Spears as good as Monteverdi, blow-up lobsters have just as much of a 'right' to be in Versailles as anything else, a signed urinal is in the same category as the Sistine Chapel and a pile of concrete blocks is equivalent to Rouen Cathedral. This is true also for the art world; in many respects contemporary art is simply lazy and easy. It's also a lot cheaper to pile concrete blocks than to carve them into meaningful and inspirational sculptures, and it is easier to splash a bit of paint here and there than paint a portrait that intends to send a deep message. Of itself there is no problem with people piling up concrete blocks or splashing paint or designing big blow up lobsters, but there is a serious ideological and identity problem when we are, as a culture, spending more time on this kind of endeavour than we are deeper beauty. Thus, in a sense, art has become a victim of a horizontal mentality. By this I mean a mentality that is only concerned with itself and its own feelings or pleasures. Art can only be critiqued in an 'artworld' focused on itself and those who disagree with it are considered ignorant. It is not about beauty, but about 'my own personal perception' and is often more focused on how novel or technologically clever it can be than on what it is exactly trying to say, if it is, in fact, trying to say anything other than pleasing those in the artistic social elite. The philosophy of aesthetic beauty is an issue that is integral to this topic, but one that cannot be fully explored in this space (I recommend A. Nichols *Redeeming Beauty*, Ashgate, 2007 or some of the works by J. Saward for good coverage of the topic). However, it behooves us to say something on the matter. A general principle about beauty is its sense of 'verticality.' It points above and beyond ourselves to something greater. For instance, a beautiful (as opposed to sexed up and hot) woman inspires a man not simply because of a sexual urge, but because she makes him see beyond himself and created a desire, even if sometimes fleeting, to change himself to be with her. In a sense, beauty, whether artistic or otherwise, is a taste of heaven and part of the nature of the divine, the others being truth and goodness. Hans Urs von Balthasar, the great 20th Century theologian, put it very well 'Beauty... dances around the double constellation of the true and the good and their inseparable relation to one another. Beauty is the disinterested one, without which the old world refused understand itself, a world which both imperceptibly and yet unmistakably has bid farewell to our new world, leaving it to its avarice and sadness.' (The Glory of the Lord: a Theological Aesthetics, Ignatius, 1982) In line with what Von Balthasar says about the relationship between truth, or that which exists beyond ourselves, and beauty, I would like to propose the idea that it is possible to create beautiful things in the modern day. We simply need to stop looking in the mirror and start looking out the window. In art, the vertical underpinning serves a purpose, to communicate something to a viewer. In monumental art (i.e. that which is significantly public, such as a fountain, library, church or a town hall), this is often to personify a particular circumstance. Architecture serves to inspire those within its walls with a certain attitude or aspiration. The University of Sydney Fisher Library/ big car battery (fig. 7) may house one great big stack of books, but it does not do much to inspire students to be students and to take their study seriously, unlike the former Fisher Library, which did (fig. 8). Another example from the Sydney metropolitan area is the former State Savings Bank in Martin Place (fig. 9). It is an example of how architecture attempts to create a vertical attitude. Its imposing structure sends the clear message that it is an important place with important things. Nobody swoons at its intricate beauty necessarily, but it does make them feel that it is more than just another building. Its 'verticality' is that it brings one to consider the grander things in life, and that the bank respects your money- quite a good message for a bank to send and one explicitly propagated in the architecture. There are many more examples, which I have chosen from the first half of the last century, which demonstrate transcendence in some form (the examples from more ancient periods of human history are entirely self-evident). The Chrysler building in New York (fig. 10), the Australian War Memorial (fig. 11) and the Sydney Opera House (at least the exterior) (fig.12) are a few. These are famous because promote a desire to evoke a

transcendent purpose and ideal. As such, these buildings have, and will continue to 'stand the test of time.' In fine art the same principles apply. Michelangelo's David (fig. 13) directs the mind to the wonder and beauty of the human form and creation, while his Pieta (fig. 14) does the same as well as emphasizing the beauty of a mother's love and sorrowful compassion and various other theological themes to do with Mary and the Passion. This verticality is, of course, most explicitly manifest (or lacking) in religious expression and art. Church spires point to heaven and metaphorically 'link heaven and earth' just as the Mass does in reality. Much of what we, as Catholics, have been and continue to be subject to regarding church art and architecture are simply horizontal structures designed more to worship ourselves 'as community' rather than to worship God. Church design has abandoned its lofty heights and inspiring edifices for post-modernist temples to self-worship. Churches designed in accordance with this ideology of horizontalism '...singularly [fail] to serve as vessels of meaning. Instead the Modernist churches [are] structures that [are] little more than monuments to their designers- or to their patrons' (Michael S Rose, *In Tiers of Glory*, Aquinas, 2004 p.101) who are intent on being 'hip and relevant' but forgetting or even opposing what exactly the real purpose of the structures should be. This is true of much of the artworks, liturgical translations and music that fill our churches. Instead of the sound that draws one away from oneself to something higher and more beautiful, we are too often left with emotionally charged tunes that mimic (and rather poorly) the changing musical trends of the year based on 1970's didactic instead of transcendently poetic liturgical translations. Once again, the focus is on one's own feelings and comfort zone other than divine worship. Christian visual art proper has also suffered from this mentality. Splatterings of stained glass, post-modern images and architectural shapes, like that in St Patrick's Cathedral in Parramatta (fig. 15), do more to further one's worship of oneself than a God who is the unchanging truth. Benedict XVI has been working tirelessly to re-orient contemporary worship towards a more healthy 'upward' and God centered direction. Sacred art and architecture is no exception to this. Just as the great 15th century artist and art theorist, Leon Battista Alberti said that painting has 'contributed considerably to the piety which binds us to the gods, and to filling our minds with sound religious beliefs,' (On Painting, 1435, Book II), Benedict XVI explains 'Truly it would not be presumptuous to say that, in a liturgy completely centered on God, we can see, in its rituals and chant, an image of eternity. Otherwise, how could our forefathers, hundreds of years ago, have built a sacred edifice as solemn as this? Here the architecture itself draws all our senses upwards, towards 'what eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined: what God has prepared for those who love him' (1 Cor 2:9). In all our efforts on behalf of the liturgy, the determining factor must always be our looking to God.' (Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI, Visit to Heiligenkruetz Abbey, Sunday, 9 September 2007) It is to this end that I would like to demonstrate to you in the next issue what art focused on God is like by exposing what I consider one of the most amazing pieces of religious art- the Ghent Altarpiece. But until then, I encourage you to listen to Monteverdi's Gloria Patri which comes at the end of his Magnificat for Vespers of the Blessed Virgin Mary, composed in 1610. The text- Gloria Patri et Filio, et Spiritui Sancto, (Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit) is a prayer to the Trinity. In this composition the Monteverdi attempts to give a glimpse of the way the Divine Persons of the Blessed Trinity relate to each other. Monteverdi uses his art- that of a composer, to elevate the listeners' 'carnal senses to dwell upon that transcendent mystery. The Father, in the strong voice of the Creator, begins the prayer whilst the Son, who's love and union with the Father is one and complete, mimics him. From this divine 'conversation' the Holy Spirit is 'begotten, not made' as the Nicene Creed tells us, and floats like a dove while the divine conversation continues. In conclusion, it is not implied that everything created in the modern world is ugly and debased, or that we must return to some classical or gothic wonderland. It is proposed, however, that certain notions that are particularly prevalent in today's western culture are not healthy and that we as a civilization need to regain our love of beauty and, from this, discover and strengthen truth and goodness. It is hoped that truly vertical art will result from a constant dialogue between the artist and God, just as the dialogue between the Father and the Son beget the Holy Spirit. Though in this article I have focused on art, with an emphasis on visual and architectural art, the same general critiques that I make can be applied to our culture itself. Afterwards, think of the basic tenets of the postmodern mindset and its introversion and see if you can identify it in some other 'parts' of our culture, like sport, journalism or the corporate world. Australia, if it wants to leave a strong cultural heritage for the future, instead of a plethora of buildings and sculptures that will need to be demolished and rebuilt by our children at great expense, needs to take its public beauty seriously. When designing St John's College at the University of Sydney William W. Wardell made a statement that is a maxim for approaching anything in life and demonstrated the vision and care needed in art and architecture: 'you are about to build not for this generation only, nor for the next, but for those who will exist in centuries yet far removed from us; ... What you do now do well.' There is nothing wrong with trendy and fun designs and some personal reflection within design, but these excursions are a far cry from truly beautiful art and are part of the endless road of changing fashion that, if given free reign, serves only market value and horizontalism. The current artistic status quo is so introverted and self-serving in so many respects that it seems impervious to criticism or even question. It is desperately in need of that little child to ask 'why does the Emperor have no clothes on?'

[1] http://www.coolhunting.com/archives/2008/09/jeff_koons_vers.php