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Allan McCollum, Plaster Surrogates, 1982/84. Installation: Cash/Newhouse Gallery, 1984.

INTERVIEW with McCOLLUM and KOONS

From a point on the balustrade located two steps from the corner, an oblique sight-line thus enters the bedroom through the second window and cuts diagonal across the foot of the bed to the chest.

A . . . , who has straightened up, turns toward the light and immediately disappears behind the section of wall that separates the two windows and conceals the back of the large wardrobe.

-- Alain Robbe-Grillet

DANIELA SALVIONI

Daniela Salvioni: Display and the notion that the medium is the message seem to have a significant place in the work of both of you.

Jeff Koons: This is true for my art because I transform the content of a chosen object by putting it in a specific context. I control the new content through the support mechanisms. I use, billboard ads, the juxtaposition of the object with the other objects, as well as the actual process of transformation I put the object through. This recodifies the object so that it gives off the kind of information I would like people to view. One of the interesting facets of Allan's work from this angle is how the space supports it as display.

Allan McCollum: I aim to highlight the gallery as a very specific situation of display. Jeff's shows fuse the idea of a trade show or a department store or a natural science museum with the case of the gallery situation in such a way that one can't discern in what sense the space is being used to display a thing. I tend to reduce the space quite specifically to a shrine and a place of commerce.

DS: This, very directly, questions the social nature of art as commerce.

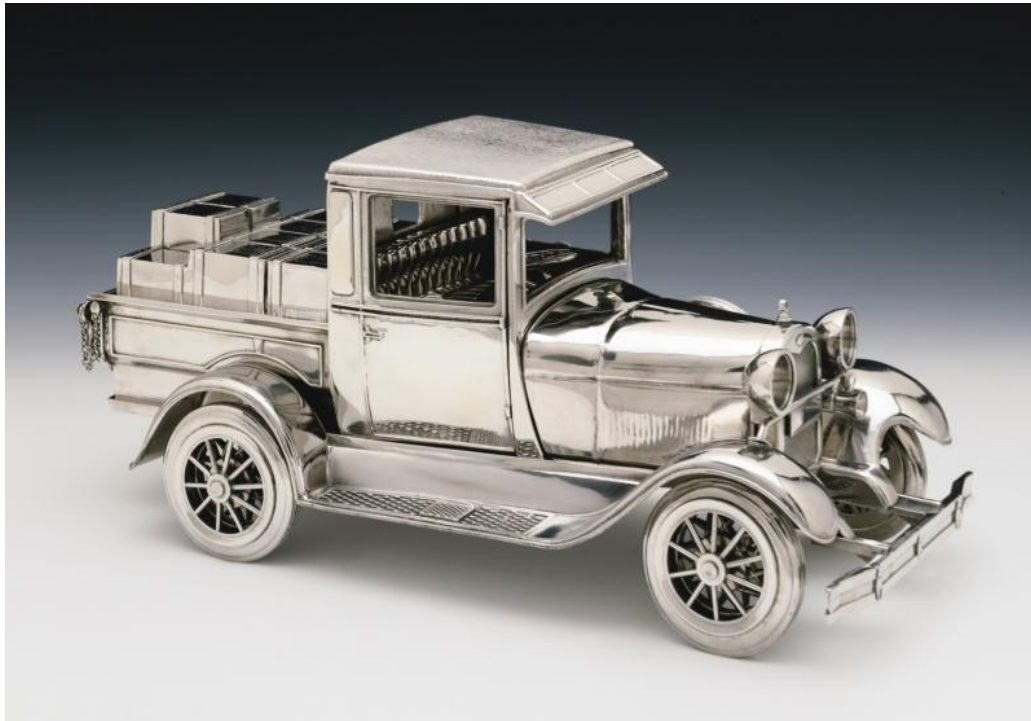
AM: I agree that people use art to establish social distinctions, to exclude one class of people from another. One of the ways a class consolidates its exclusivity is through the sharing of specific esthetic values, and through collecting certain similar types of objects. Because I tend to focus on this particular use of art, as a sort of exclusionary device, artworks often seem all alike to me. My producing of the same artworks over and over again alludes to this feeling of mine, to some extent. Museums are powerful instruments of class exclusion, for instance, and I know that in some ways I compete with their overbearing predominance in governing the public's perception of art. I work out my own class anger, I think, by trying to produce more artworks than most museums have in their inventory.

I address the institution of the commercial gallery in a similar way, as well, by the way I reduce the artwork to a kind of sign of itself. A sign of the artwork as an object-in-the-world and as a particular kind of commodity. I'm interested in the idea that a single, individual artist might compete with the powers of mass-production through the use of his own hands. I think the upper middle class exalts the handiwork of 'artists' in order to de-value the handiwork of those 'workers' who fabricate the other ninety-nine percent of the objects that make up their environment. Which objects we designate as spiritually valuable and which objects we designate as merely utilitarian depends on political, ideological, and philosophical distinctions we create to protect the boundaries of our class; and I mean to bring some of this to light with my work, if possible.

DS: Yet mass-producing your work does not itself avoid the aspect of exclusivity. Although not mass producers in your sense, some of the Conceptual art and the Arte Povera of the late '60s and '70s came up against a similar contradiction.

AM: But that's exactly it, I'm interested in *accentuating* the fact that an artwork functions as a commodity, not in denying it. I mean to point out how much the spiritual value we assign to art often arises completely from its commercial value. I believe that for years the avant-garde has been merely celebrating the power of the museums and the gallery, by constructing these institutions as ideal spaces, ideal moments: perfect situations where any object can become an artwork.

DS: Jeff your work has often been interpreted as "commodity" art. Beyond this, however, I think it is three-tiered. 1) On the material level, your pieces evoke physical laws and therefore universal, timeless truths. This is clear, for instance, in the piece with the two basketballs suspended in an aquarium, where half of the balls are submerged in water. 2) On the social level, especially around the notion of social mobility. This is also exemplified in the "Equilibrium" show by works such as the Nike ads. 3) Finally, there is a "metaphysical" moment which refers to your idea of ultimate states-of-being and of the integrity of the object. The new pieces—the vacuum cleaners encased in plexiglass etc.—and the decanters in your latest body of work, are examples. Actually I think all three levels are operative throughout your art, although the emphasis shifts.



Jeff Koons. Model A Ford Pick-Up Truck, 1986. Cast Stainless Steel, 6 3/4" x 6 1/2" x 16 1/2"

JK: Yes, it stems from my need to perform art with a value that is not just masturbatory. I don't care to move a paint brush across a canvas and think "Oh, this is right, this feels good". I don't seek to make consumer icons. but to decode why and how consumer objects are glorified. The *Equilibrium* body of work was in part based on physics <think of the basketballs suspended in a fifty-fifty tank> because the tools of science, such as the tank, are seen as purely analytical, not as commodities. The basketballs denote social mobility particularly for urban blacks and, more removed, those who practice art for that reason rather than live it as a philosophical way of life. The accompanying Nike ads are the sirens of "go for it", they are the great deceivers who tell you "I've achieved the state of equilibrium. You can do it too. You'll be a star"

AM: What you say is interesting, because that show had many life-and-death overtones. There were inflatable rafts, aqua-lungs and snorkels, all related to survival, but you cast them in bronze.

JK: Yes, these tools of equilibrium would pull you under. This body of work, like *The New*, is about unachievable states. The show was in browns and oranges also because of the tragic, threatening side of consumerism, which is often seen as only fun and games and the colour pink.

DS: Your latest show, *Alcoholism*, is very complex. Not only does it incorporate all of these elements, including the "ultimate states-of-being" more obviously raised in *The New*, but it also takes your idea of transformation very far.

JK: Coming out of a Duchampian background, I am concerned with the object and with transformation. For the last show I emptied decanters of their bourbon, cast them in stainless steel, sent them back to Jim Beam to have them be refilled, and had the government reapply its tax stamp to them. It's almost as though no one ever touched them because they are, again, things in themselves, their integrity has been preserved. I'm neither trying to do the original, nor

appropriate them; they are now charged things. The objects and the ads here reflect different income levels. The upper class is absent because the show is about how this class controls the class structure by propounding, through information, the desire for luxury and abstraction above people's level of education. The more people seek these things, the more they are lost in the seductive glitter, and reflectivity of everything that is luxury. It moves from an abstraction of sexuality to the dizzying heights of pure abstraction. This is a form of degradation, it is like the alcoholic who is going for something and just ends up babbling.

DS: You're saying that drunkenness, striving to master the hegemonic ideology is not just a dead end for the individual but also serves to preserve the existing class structure?

JK: Yes, the morning after the fleeting moment of drunken intellectuality only confusion remains, so its a fake abstraction just like steel is an ersatz luxurious metal.

DS: As opposed to transformation. Allan, you are concerned with substitution or, as has often been said, simulation.



Allan McCollum, *Five Perfect Vehicles*, 1986. Acrylic on solid-cast Hydrocal

AM: I'm trying to make substitutes for all art objects. I've made substitute paintings, photographs with substitute images, and so forth. My solid-cast vases, what I call my *Perfect Vehicles*, these are a sort of substitute for sculpture. An art object is already a substitute for something else, you see, and so to make a substitute for a substitute is to foil its original allure. This leaves a frightening sort of void, and this is what interests me. When a substitution is voided, I think, another kind of truth is revealed.

I really just want to reiterate things, to multiply them. I don't want to replace anybody else's artworks with artworks I have made, I just want to keep replacing my *own* artworks. At some point in time my questioning myself about my role in society transformed itself into a perpetual re-enactment of the simplest gestures of being an artist, like performing a charade. I began making objects that were only nominally artworks, signs for artworks, over and over again, as if the ultimate solace available to an artist was in just repeating. I didn't feel I could understand my own work unless I understood the basic impetus behind my wanting to perform the role of the artist in the first place. Watching myself re-enact this gesture has become a way of understanding.

Mass-produced consumer goods, especially, are *everywhere*, each one being but a sample of thousands of the same object. They're scary for this reason, they seem to have spiritual power. This power is economic, though, and ultimately military. Thus we're surrounded all the time by the signs of enormous power. This produces a vitalistic psychology, I think, as when trees have souls and stones are inhabited by dead ancestors. We ascribe this psychology to primitive

peoples, but we find ourselves surrounded by objects which represent more demonstrable power. The fascinating thing is how attached we all are to objects, and how emotional these attachments are, and how impossible it has become to separate ourselves from them.

DS: The power of objects is a common concern to you both, but you have somewhat different attitudes to this.



Jeff Koons. Baccarat Crystal, 1986 Cast Stainless Steel, 12 1/2" x 16" x 16".

JK: In *The New* I transformed vacuum cleaners by placing them in lit plexiglas cases in order to display them as a state of being new. The idea behind this is that objects can achieve such ultimate states-of being, while we humans cannot: we have to deteriorate. This confrontation shows the threatening aspect of the object, the power it has over us, because in many ways it is stronger and better prepared to survive. The object, then, is like a little smart-ass that says: "Ha-ha, I can have integrity and last forever just by being encased whereas you can't."

AM: Yes, perhaps. I'm interested in the way an artwork functions as a commodity, and it seems to me that Jeff deals with the way commodities function as artworks. We all imagine there to be two different kinds of objects: artworks and consumer goods, from which we expect different types of fulfillment. Usually, however, we seek in commercial goods those magical qualities that we tell ourselves we are looking for in the art-objects, and vice versa. Jeff and I both address this dichotomy in our work, I think, but from different directions.



Allan McCollum, *Surrogates on Location, Incidental to the Action*. 1982-84. 8" x 10" photo print.

Power is expressed through an object, I agree; through the “face” of the object, through its surface. But the power is that of the institutions which underwrite its production, its distribution, and so forth. It’s the mystical power of the industrial patriarchy, the social forces an object represents, this is the force of any consumer good, as well as any artwork. Objects sell best when they are best able to accommodate our magical thinking. For instance, the basketball has certain physical qualities which invite a metaphysical investment: it has skin, and it breathes, so to speak, it grows with air. It moves, it bounces, it’s animate, it seems alive. These kinds of qualities represent the appeal of

objects—artworks and consumer goods both—and it’s through these “hooks,” these devices of allure, that power expresses itself. I try to analyze these things in my work.

That’s why I used photographs with the black pictures in the background which look like my *Surrogate Paintings*. It’s about how a photographic image mediates with a physical object to change the status of both: both change. We’ve seen so many photographs of the objects that surround us that the things themselves have become more like *imaginary* objects, each stimulating its own *deja-vu* response. I doubt if “seeing” the Mona Lisa is any more possible than “seeing” a pack of Marlboros, so many imaginary images have preceded it.

DS: Laying questions of commodity fetishism to rest, do you think it possible to expand the domain of art, to create new “images” as opposed to creating old images anew? Or is all art now in the same predicament as Allan’s Mona Lisa?

JK: I believe that the integrity of an artist is to continually challenge oneself even when it seems nothing new can be done. I make a point of pushing myself, of letting go and taking chances, although I may choose to repeat certain elements from my previous works.

AM: I think it’s always possible to make new images, but I basically long for the utopian condition where art is totally traditional, and the world is a stable world. Then, the joy and delight in making an object would be when you’re making one similar to a lot of other objects, because in making it you would be participating with other people, people with whom you share a world. Constant attempts at making something new is a symptom of our world, where little is shared and nothing is right, hence the constant attempt to make it right.