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Sincerity and irony examined through the work of Jeff Koons

ABSTRACT

The artwork of Jeff Koons had always seemed intentionally ironic to me. But after re-evaluating his work, I find sincerity. My initial assumption of Koons's use of irony formed a powerful impression on my understanding of the art world. Further research into Koons's life and work revealed to me a different perspective, one that has impacted the way I approach my own work and instructional practice. Examining two works by Koons, I show how St John the Baptist could be interpreted as ironic, but the more recent Liberty Bell demonstrates deeper complexity and vindicates the sincerity that Koons claimed all along. Perhaps irony is not always the favourable means of communicating, and sincerity can be used successfully.

KEYWORDS

Jeff Koons
 irony
 art appreciation
 art student
 sincerity

As a young undergrad art student in San Francisco during the late 1990s, living away from my small hometown for the first time, I was getting tired of the pretention that seemed to ooze from my classmates clad in black. Painting was out. Making anything at all was out. 'New Genres' and 'Conceptual Art' were what all of the 'cool' kids were doing. Critiques were boring because there was not anything to say about the shoddily assembled artefacts, props

or videos. The sky was overcast, the streets and buildings were grimy with exhaust and mildew – and suddenly, in full Technicolor, Jeff Koons appeared!

One day I entered the dimly lit lecture hall and realized that we were going to be watching yet another video clip. I hoped this one would be interesting. We watched the tail end of a clip with a British man pontificating on contemporary art. He introduced us to a man dressed in a suit and tie standing in front of a giant porcelain kitten. That man was introduced as Jeff Koons. Several workers standing on ladders polished the gleaming immaculate finish on the sculpture. With a million-dollar smile and a syrupy voice, Koons used quasi-religious language to describe the giant tchotchke standing behind him. While he described the spiritual experience his viewers were having in front of the work, I reeled from the startling juxtaposition of the scene behind him. There was no way he was serious! By describing something so cheery and unpretentious in this way, Koons seemed to be blatantly making fun of the art world – and I loved it!

This first introduction to the persona of Jeff Koons profoundly influenced the way I understand and appreciate the art world. The experience has taken on a mythological quality for me, though over the years the exact details have probably become a bit exaggerated. What Koons said and the way he said it changed me forever. With him was a promise that art could be fun, that it required things to actually be created, even though Koons had them fabricated. He seemed to be ironically taking the conceptual game and inverting it. His objects were the important element and his words seemed purposely deceptive, like a con to sneak his work into a cloistered art world. It reminded me of an abstract painting I did in high school that I impishly titled *Sex in the 90s* just to see if the other students would try to find non-existent connections. Through this introduction to Jeff Koons, I came to understand the central position of irony in a postmodern art world.

The precarious nature of meaning in the art world that leads many artists to eschew narrative and leave their work ‘open to interpretation’ is at least partially originated in linguistic studies of post-structuralism (Heartney 2001; Stiles and Selz 1996). Postmodernism takes the position that meaning is relative, and directly relaying an idea is impossible. Irony has been used as a core means of communicating under this ideology. At a conference in 2008, James Elkins describes the problem of sincerity as being ‘tainted by layers of post-modern irony that have been slapped all over it’. Rather, ‘irony in literary criticism [...] is self-awareness [...] if that’s the opposite, then sincerity is some state of immersive obliviousness’ (Elkins et al. 2008). In other words, art that is created from a place of sincerity can be in danger of being reinterpreted as ironic.

Years later, during my MFA programme, my thinking on Jeff Koons fundamentally shifted. Jeff Koons is not ironic; rather, he is hyper-sincere. When writing a research paper on Koons, evaluating the influence of criticism on his work, I began to see a blurring of lines between irony and sincerity in his work and my own. At the time, I was using parody as a strategy to analyse some challenging life experiences I had recently gone through – disguising my sincerity with irony. In contrast with my undergraduate work, I felt free to pursue interests meaningful to me. After extensive research, that for the first time was truly engaging, I began to take a new look at sincerity. Using the bright, shiny and hollow surfaces of Koons’s work as an analogy, I began to re-examine his use of irony. Was everything about him superficial and insincere? After discovering Koons’s reactions to highly criticized works

and events, I came to the conclusion that there exists a veneer of ridiculousness over a very complex individual who truly believes all that he says. His belief is so fervent, his quest for perfection so strident, that work which might otherwise be deemed trite is lifted into a new realm entirely, and accepted by the art-world elite.

In almost every interview and published work, Koons affirms his sincerity: 'A viewer might at first see irony in my work, but I see none at all. Irony causes too much critical contemplation' (Koons and Rosenblum 1992: 33). More important is the way he has responded to criticism, even seeming to be wounded if someone does not genuinely like him or his work. In an interview with Calvin Tomkins (2007: 3), Koons said, 'I'm always very upset if somebody doesn't like my work, because I never want to lose anyone [...] I feel like I've failed if I do that.' This conviction is illustrated in his marriage to porn star Ilona Staller, aka La Cicciolina, with whom he engaged in explicit sexual acts as part of his 'Made in Heaven' series of sculptures and paintings. In this series he attempted to show a kind of spiritual ecstasy, in his words 'to remove fear, guilt, and shame [...] so that when the viewer sees it, they are in the realm of the Sacred Heart of Jesus' (Koons and Rosenblum 1992: 130). He seems to have become so caught up with this 'spirituality' that, against the advice of friends and family, he married Staller and had a child with her. This rapture may have been one-sided because shortly afterwards Staller left Koons and absconded with their son to Italy. If Koons were engaged in ironic deception, it seems unlikely that he would open himself up to such personal



Figure 1: St John the Baptist porcelain 56 1/2 x 30 x 24 1/2 inches 143.5 x 76.2 x 62.2 cm Edition of three plus AP 1988.

turmoil in this way. I am convinced that Koons is sincere – perhaps his ideas verge on absurdity, but he is definitely sincere.

One example of sincere work that appears ironic is his sculpture *St John the Baptist*. Koons's porcelain sculpture of an effeminate or androgynous St John the Baptist seems to be the very opposite of the biblical St John. Wearing a hairshirt streaked with gold and holding a gilt reed cross, he looks like he has been to a day spa rather than living in the wilderness. His overly large index finger erectly points straight up to heaven, seemingly to show us the way to paradise. He holds in his arms a baby pig (a symbol of banality) and a pink penguin (a flightless bird unable to ascend to heaven on its own). Reminiscent of kitsch miniature collectibles or dime-store religious icons, this work and others in Koons's 'Banality' were seen as being meant to mock the art world. Rather, Koons's stated intention is to elevate the masses and make art accessible. In *The Jeff Koons Handbook* (Koons and Rosenblum 1992: 112), he says, 'I've tried to make work that any viewer [...] would have to say [...] "You know, it's silly, but I like that piece. It's great."'

While some have been skeptical of these early statements, his more recent work seems to vindicate him. Koons's *Hulk/Elvis* series, while retaining his usual lowbrow elements, displays layers of complexity that defy previously cynical readings. The many layers in the painting *Liberty Bell* connect threads to his previous bodies of work and to other influential artists. The immaculately reproduced photos and line drawings used in these layers seem to float in a sea of blue reminiscent of the sky or a celestial realm. Underneath the layers are images of a pair of inflatable Incredible Hulk toys that one might see at a fair or sold on the street to tourists. As signified in the title of the series, the Hulk here relates to Elvis and, more particularly, to Andy Warhol's *Double Elvis*. It has also been discussed as a sort of guardian, relating to the Agyo and Ungyo guardian statues in front of Buddhist temples.



Figure 2: Liberty Bell oil on canvas 102 x 138 inches 259.1 x 350.5 cm 2007.

Each subsequent layer obscures a little more of the overall image. The next layer is a white line drawing that is almost read as clouds on the celestial underlayer of this painting. The image is of a landscape with a train, a symbol of American industrial power. The train can also be a portrayal of masculine vigour, an image that Koons continues to use in a sculpture he is currently developing of a full-scale and working replica of a train locomotive that will be suspended phallus-like from a crane. Next comes the painting's namesake, a photorealistic image of the Liberty Bell. Possibly representing democracy, this could be read as a signal to waken the viewer from societal strictures. Overlaying the bell is a yellow line drawing of Popeye and Olive Oyl in a light yellow. This couple could represent a kind of perfect love to Koons, but also references his previous series *Popeye*, which, like much of his work, paired childhood innocence with sexuality. Finally, in a deep orange, is an image of a geisha taken from a Japanese Shunga erotic woodblock print. With this final, overtly sexualized layer, this painting continues and develops Koons's oeuvre by conjoining the sexual and spiritual, and high art with low art. Perhaps his ideas are getting more complex, or maybe his work has just gained such prominence that he has rewritten the rules, but it appears that he has finally shed the label of irony for sincerity.

As a young professor, I am interested in this tension between sincerity and irony. I want to help my students make work that is honest and does not cynically chase after art-world trends, but I also do not want it to become overly sentimental. I find that many of my students need to be helped to understand how a postmodern openness of meaning will affect their audience's reading of their work. Not everyone will approach a work with the same set of assumptions or experiences, both of which effect interpretation. Within a landscape of postmodern ambiguity, and its preference for irony with a distrust of sincerity, there is a common strategy to use subversiveness as a way to communicate. However, I believe this strategy is flawed. Simplicity is not necessarily obvious and obscurity is not always complex. Perhaps, like Koons, it is best to just say what we mean – but with such flair that it cannot go unrecognized.

As I have become more sophisticated, my understanding of Koons has evolved. Early on, I bought into the prevailing notion that Koons was being ironic. Oddly, this is because I was hungry for something that was direct and sincere. My assumption that he was making fun of the art world through his elevated kitsch reveals the cynicism I actually harboured. Really, he was trying to be straightforward and to reach as wide an audience as possible. While my understanding of him has changed, my appreciation has only grown. Recognizing this blurring of the difference between sincerity and irony has proven an important milestone in my understanding of the art world – one I endeavour to pass on to my students.

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