

Taking a shine to art

Jeff Koons at the Ashmolean. Until 9 June.



Edgar Wind

It seems almost inconceivable now, but in the early 'sixties Edgar Wind would fill the Playhouse with undergraduates across all the disciplines who wanted to hear about Michaelangelo's Prophets and Sibyls. His performances have remained for me the Gold Standard of lectures ever since, which neither I, nor any lecturers I have heard, have been able to live up to. He used to rehearse them, and made his projectionist so nervous that he shook the projector. 'Samuels, the image is trembling!' he shouted at one point. His *Pagan Mysteries of the Renaissance* is a classic, and I recall him saying of the German Expressionists,

‘You can blow the trumpet of the Last Judgement once; you must not blow it every day.’ He told me that he did not like Roger Fry’s translation of ‘absence éternelle de lit’ in Stéphane Mallarmé’s ‘Une dentelle s’abolit’ as ‘bedlessness’. This was when I was being vetted to join his exclusive seminars with Austin Gill (Magdalen College) on French Impressionism. He gives his name to the Oxford Art Society, which made Jeff Koons an Honorary Member and invited him to Oxford. He came, and thus the idea of the exhibition at the Ashmolean was launched. He said, ‘I couldn’t think of a better place to have a dialogue about art today and what it can be.’ Koons was present at the press day, and was very generous with his time, and approachable in an exemplary manner. I said to him that ‘one wants to touch some of the sculptures, but wasn’t allowed. Wasn’t there a case for having an exhibition for the blind?’ He made a very intelligent reply, saying that the act of looking often generates the imagination of touch, and creates a ‘sixth sense’. So by implication a blind person feeling a sculpture imagines its visual form. The exhibition is accompanied by a beautiful shiny catalogue, with an essay by the curator Norman Rosenthal and an interview with Koons by Alexandra Sturgis, the Director of the Ashmolean.

What would Wind think of Koons? One’s immediate reaction is that a professor who valued the High Renaissance and austere elitist scholarship would be absolutely horrified, but I’m not so sure. He had a comprehensive, wise, overarching view of art history, and the way in which images are stolen, modified and recycled and he would perfectly have understood where Koons is placed in the evolution. Were he to return to the Playhouse to lecture as a revenant on Koons he would probably fill it again, helped by the name too. He would have some intelligent things to say about art and mechanization, the subject of his fifth lecture in *Art and Anarchy* (1960) (which one can hear on YouTube). He was slightly sympathetic to Federico de Montelfeltro, sitting on ‘Urbino’s windy hill’ and hating printed books: the fear of mechanization in extreme form.



Federico de Montefeltro



Studiolo for Federico de Montefeltro in Metropolitan Museum, New York. Vespasiano da Bisticci (1421-1498), a humanist bookseller who helped the Duke create and develop his library, wrote: In quella libreria i libri tutti sono belli in superlativo grado, tutti iscritti a penna, e non ve n'è ignuno a stampa, chè se ne sarebbe vergognato, tutti miniati elegantissimamente, et non v'è ignuno che non sia scritto in cavretto. ('The library contained books that were all superlative, all handwritten, and there is not a printed volume, for he would have been ashamed, they are lavishly illuminated, and there is not one that isn't written on kidskin.').

And likewise Wind was slightly sympathetic to Ruskin, despising 'vile manufacture' (letter to Henry Acland, 14 March 1871). However he would have the flexibility to see that one has to appreciate the part played by the new dispensations, as did Henry Adams in 'The Dynamo and the Virgin' (1900). And he would have understood that mechanization is a dominant theme and method of production in much modern art.



Paris. *Exposition Universelle* (1900)

Henry Adams: 'The Dynamo and the Virgin (1900)', chapter 25 of *The Education of Henry Adams* (1918):

Then he [Samuel Pierpont Langley] showed his scholar the great hall of dynamos, and explained how little he knew about electricity or force of any kind, even of his own special sun, which spouted heat in inconceivable volume, but which, as far as he knew, might spout less or more, at any time, for all the certainty he felt in it. To him, the dynamo itself was but an ingenious channel for conveying somewhere the heat latent in a few tons of poor coal hidden in a dirty engine-house carefully kept out of sight; but to Adams the dynamo became a symbol of infinity. As he grew accustomed to the great gallery of machines, he began to feel the forty-foot dynamos as a moral force, much as the early Christians felt the Cross. The planet itself seemed less impressive, in its old-fashioned, deliberate, annual or daily revolution, than this huge wheel, revolving within arm's-length at some vertiginous speed, and barely murmuring,—scarcely humming an audible warning to stand a hair's-breadth further for respect of power,—while it would not wake the baby lying close against its frame. Before the end, one began to pray to it; inherited instinct taught the natural expression of man before silent and infinite force. Among the thousand

symbols of ultimate energy the dynamo was not so human as some, but it was the most expressive.

Alexander Sturgis is probably right to say that Koons is the most influential figure in art for the last 50 years. He is up there with Andy Warhol. The exhibition has seventeen works, fourteen of which have never been exhibited in Britain before. The star is *Balloon Venus (Magenta)*, an enormous fifteen-ton glossy version of the Willendorf Venus.

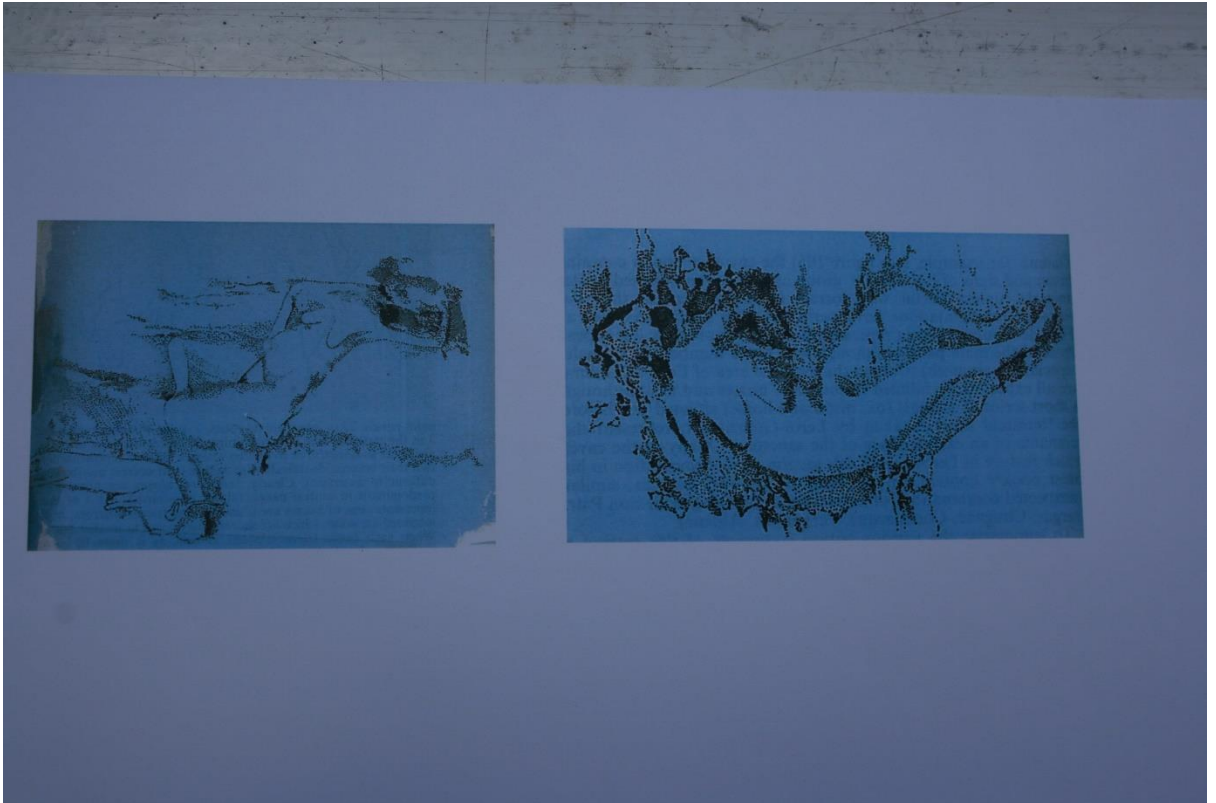


Balloon Venus (Magenta)

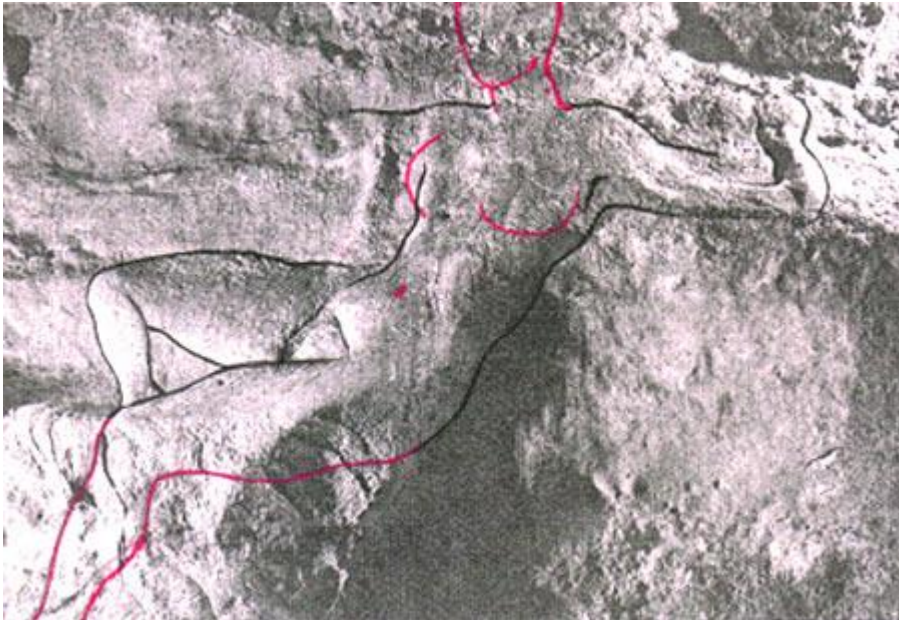


The Willendorf Venus

Which I don't like. Mind you, I don't much like the Willendorf Venus either; I much prefer the two graceful female nudes in the Grotte-abri de la Magdaleine des Albis (Tarn)—to which my partner alerted me.



Grotte-abri de la Magdaleine des Albis (Tarn)



Grotte-abri de la Magdaleine des Albis (Tarn)

There is a room dedicated to the blue gazing globes attached to venerable works of art.



Gazing Ball (Géricault Raft of the Medusa)



Gazing Ball (Titian Diana and Actaeon)



Gazing Ball (Belvedere Torso)

They do nothing for me, and one is thankful that these shiny objects were not attached to Ucello's *The Hunt in the Forest* and Piero di Cosimo's *Forest Fire* downstairs. Paintings of classical sculptures in the *Antiquity* series have obscene symbols overlaying them. One shows the actress Gretchen Mol impersonating the 'fifties pin-up Bettie Page astride an inflatable dolphin. A phrase from Auden's 'Schoolchildren' was running through my head: 'An improper word/ scribbled upon a fountain.'



Jeff Koons and *Antiquity 3* (in fact it was *Antiquity 2 (Dots)* which was exhibited).



Antiquity 2 (Dots)



Antiquity 4 (Dots)

Always reviewing an exhibition I identify which work I would steal if I had the opportunity. It would be *Seated Ballerina*.



Seated Ballerina

However it does not look particularly good indoors, and the beautiful flowing colours one sees on the big banner outside the Ashmolean disappear. A number of Koons pieces are best seen out of doors, such *Pluto and Proserpina*, set up in the Piazza della Signoria in Florence. It is, unlike the adjacent stone Michelangelo's *David*, made of steel and covered with gold leaf, so that it shimmers and threatens to dissolve its competently conceived form.



Pluto and Proserpina, Piazza della Signoria, Florence



Pluto and Proserpina

Perhaps he does not demand that we are familiar with the Proserpina and Pluto myth, and recall

that fair field
 Of Enna, where Proserpine gathering flowers,
 Herself a fairer flower, by gloomy Dis
 Was gathered, which cost Ceres all that pain
 To seek her through the world;

That would really frighten the horses and bring on a fit of anxiety, resentment and incomprehension. This sculpture makes a much more powerful and comprehensive statement in the Piazza della Signoria than it would in a confined museum. It *works* opposite the Loggia dei Lanzi, which for E.M. Forster was ‘the

triple entrance of a cave, wherein many a deity, shadowy, but immortal, look[ed] forth upon the arrivals and departures of mankind.’ And unlike some shamefully jejune pieces of modern art it survives as craft-work alongside the great Renaissance products. The Mayor of Florence Dario Nardello must have realised this when he gave the green light for the installation. Some of his works are very beautiful, such as *Coloring Book* shown in the courtyard of Royal Academy in 2011.



Coloring Book. Royal Academy Courtyard

I did say to Alexander Sturgis that a more interesting exhibition would have involved Koons works scattered throughout the museum. This is what happened in the Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung in Frankfurt (2012), when one could see *Woman in Tub*, complete with a snorkel, cheek by jowl with Andrea Della Robbia's *The Madonna della Cintola* (girdle).



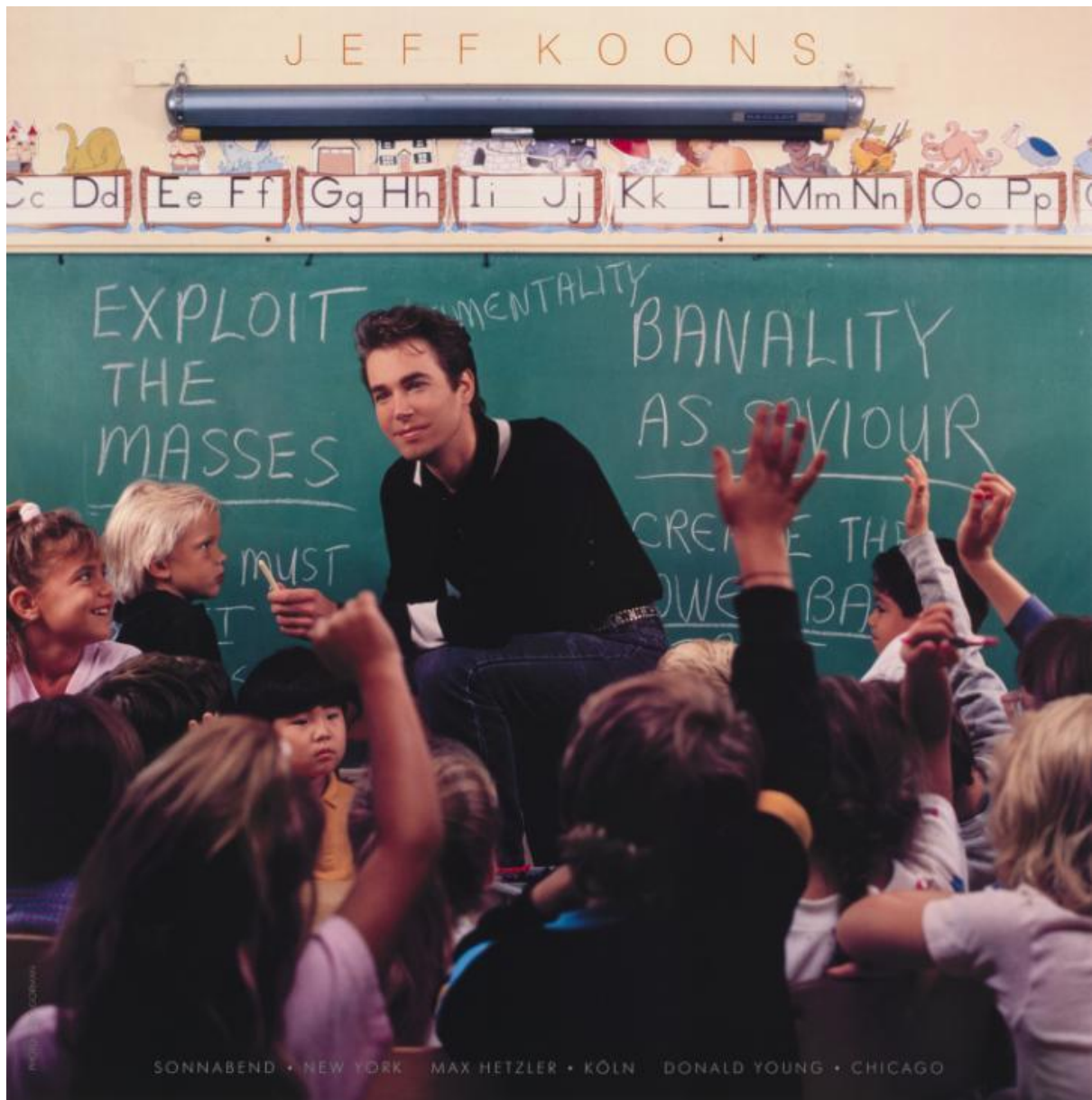
Andrea Della Robbia, La Madonna della Cintola (Frankfurt Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung)



Jeff Koons *Woman in Tub* next to Andrea Della Robbia's *La Madonna della Cintola* (Frankfurt, Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung, 2012)

Which would have given Walter Pater (who wrote on Della Robbia) terminal apoplexy. Sturgis said that the logistical complexities of such a display don't bear thinking about. It would though have created a more vivid 'dialogue' between past and present – except that the past can't answer back. Although we can answer back on behalf of the past.

Koons is deeply implicated in all the features of modern art which are so baneful for many, especially the commercialism, the commodification and the way in which those forces over-ride taste and expertise. We can't be one hundred percent sure that he means what he says when he says that his ambition is 'to relieve the viewer of his burden of cultural guilt and shame.' (Add her to that). Certainly it is financially convenient to espouse that view. Some of his most famous productions are breath-takingly dreadful, as if Disney and all that it stood for has become enthroned. One thinks of the enormous shiny purple dog, made of metal yet imitating the shapes of a balloon. Jed Perl in *The New York Review of Books* described his art as 'the apotheosis of Walmart.' He has moved kitsch, which ought to be marginal, to centre stage, but he is exploiting kitsch so that Roger Scruton's phrase 'pre-emptive kitsch' operates. Koons thinks a softer word is 'banality'.



Jeff Koons and 'Banality as Saviour'

A Whitney Museum exhibition in 1988 was called *Ushering in Banality*. One of the products depicted a pig dressed with a green garland being led in a procession by a couple of cherub angels and an infant Koons with a red headband. This is one of the show-pieces of the Ashmolean exhibition.



Ushering in Banality (1988)



Koons self-portrait on *Ushering in Banality*

Is it a cousin of Keats's lowing heifer 'coming to the sacrifice'? Who knows. Banality has traditionally been the enemy of art and the enemy of social existence

at its best. It is realism in its most aggressive, depressing and uncompromising form. Although having said that it has had a kind of endorsed presence even in high art. One thinks of Ben Jonson, one thinks of Pope, unable to exclude the bathos of Grub Street from his Apollonian vision. One thinks of my favourite poet, Louis MacNeice speaking up for it in *Autumn Journal* (XXII). Certainly the banal is there to be recorded, wandering by ‘vulcanite tables’ (the kind of texture Koons would love) in Paris, where he almost lovingly records ‘banal women with feathers in their hats and halos/ Of evanescent veils.’ And there is his poem ‘Homage to Clichés’ (1935), a strange and mysterious work, in which the inexorable forces of death and High Art, exemplified by Rameses, eight bells in a tower and a panther, ultimately threaten the familiar and comfortable ritualised security of a world, the world at the bar of a pub say, where all is known and foreseen: ‘This whole delightful world of cliché and refrain.’

This is all part of a conversation that has been going on for a long time on art and public taste. Baudelaire and Henry James took as their yard-sticks the comparisons between Delacroix and Meissonier. Delacroix, one of Baudelaire’s ‘phares’ (lighthouses), was brilliant; Meissonier, with his high finish and ready appeal to boobies (negauds), was lamentable. In a memorable image James said that the difference between them was ‘like the difference between plate glass and gushing water.’

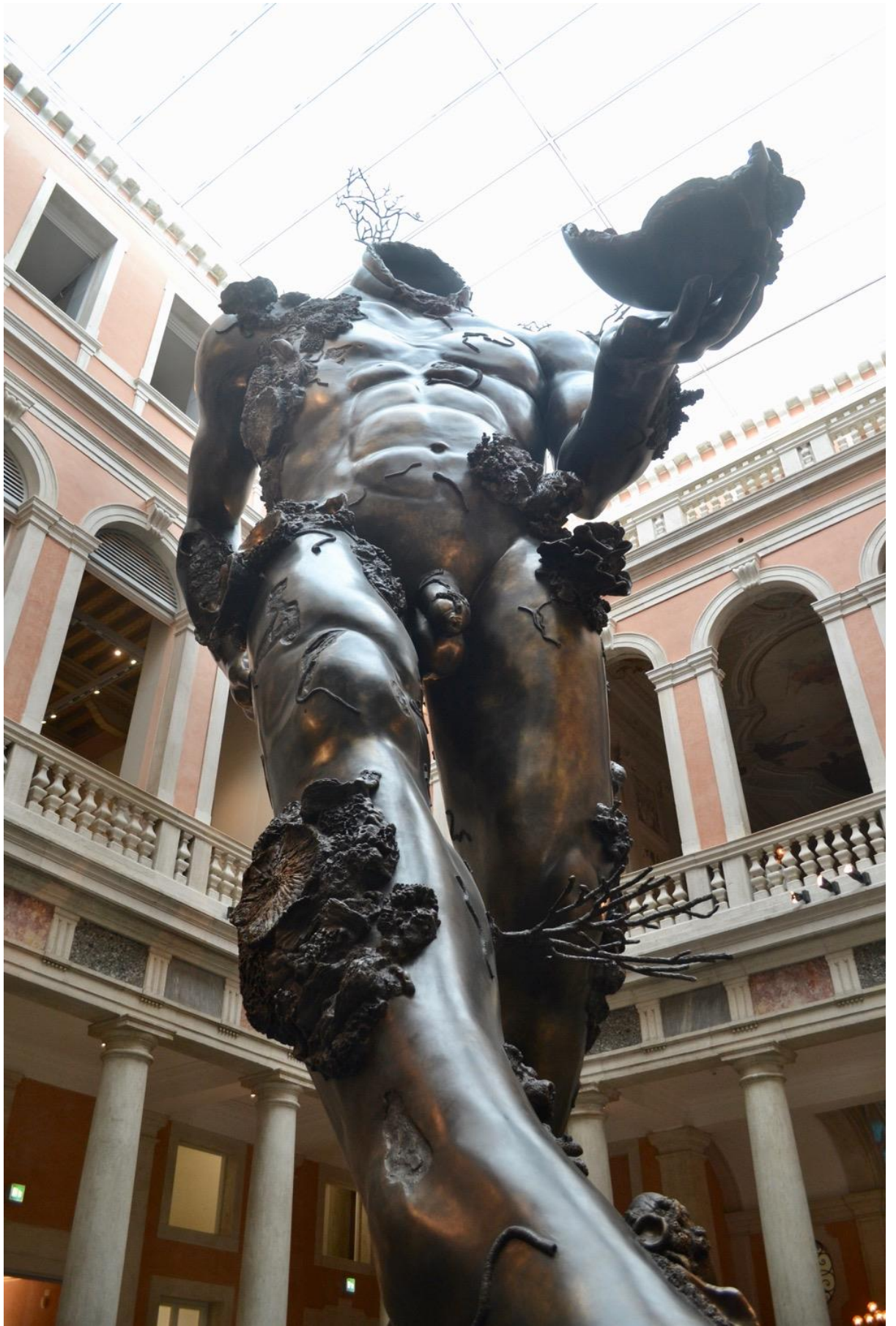
Koons is also part of modern art world which many of us hate, where traditional skills have been thrown into the dustbin, and the diktats of ‘conceptual art’ dispense with the challenges of the makers. Just forget Ruskin’s *Elements of Drawing*. It’s perhaps futile to wish that an artist whom I shall not name had not espoused bedlessness. Koons’s works are produced in factories by underling artisans – 120 in New York. Still, Henry Moore had assistants, what Edgar Wind would have called ‘delegated chisels’. And Rubens had them. The problem with conceptual art is, often, not that the Emperor has no clothes, but too many clothes,

and certainly Koons's prolific patter throws a rich sheen over what he does. Most of Koons's comments are intended to make us feel good about ourselves, although when some of his explicators talk about *vanitas* themes the optimism is compromised somewhat. Speaking about his art, and especially the inflatables, Koons places great emphasis on breath; not as powerful though as the life-giving breath in Shakespeare's Sonnet 18.

There are positive judgements to be made though. Edgar Wind would have had incisive things to say about Koons's relationship to the history of art. Unlike some artists who have espoused willed amnesia he has not forgotten his predecessors. Here he goes against some of his statements about the guilt and anxiety much of the public feels about art, because he puts himself into witty relationship with those predecessors. Perhaps the visitors to the Koons exhibition will go downstairs and take a glance at the Arundel Marbles, mercifully free from blue glass balls.

Another relief Koons offers to a tolerant public is freedom from guilt in drooling over porn, since he is marketing it as art. There are those notorious performance-art photographs and sculptures of him and his then wife Ilona Staller (La Cicciolina) *in flagrante*. They have since been divorced – not a marriage made in heaven. Koons's *Ilona's Asshole* (1991) is acceptable, perhaps, because of its intertextual reference to Courbet's *La Source*.

Koons has also managed to free many of his clients from the guilt of the association between art and money. The enormous prices paid for his works become part of the experience of encountering them. If you have colossal amounts of money you can make colossal sculptures and replicas of sculptures, which sometimes almost seem to bypass questions of taste. Examples are the elaborate Damian Hirst sculptures at the Venice Biennale in 2017, 'Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable' – ostensibly the drowned collection of Cif Amotan II (an anagram of 'I am Fiction').



One of the exhibits from Damien Hirst's *Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable*

This exhibition was described by one critic as 'undoubtedly one of the worst exhibitions of contemporary art staged in the past decade' and by another as 'the most expensive art flop in living memory'. And yet one's feelings encountering it are not so unlike the feelings when one encounters Koons sculptures.

This exhibition gives us a glimpse of Koons's very large oeuvre. Many aspects are not covered. For instance his appropriation of Old Masters to decorate Louis Vuitton handbags. Koons has appropriated Turner's *Ancient Rome: Agrippina Landing with the Ashes of Germanicus* (1839).



Jeff Koons and Louis Vuitton bag, with Titian's *Venus, Mars and Cupid*



Titian, *Venus, Mars and Cupid*



Manet, *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* on a Louis Vuitton bag



Turner *Ancient Rome: Agrippina Landing with the Ashes of Germanicus* (1839). Louis Vuitton bag.



Turner. *Ancient Rome: Agrippina Landing with the Ashes of Germanicus*
(1839)

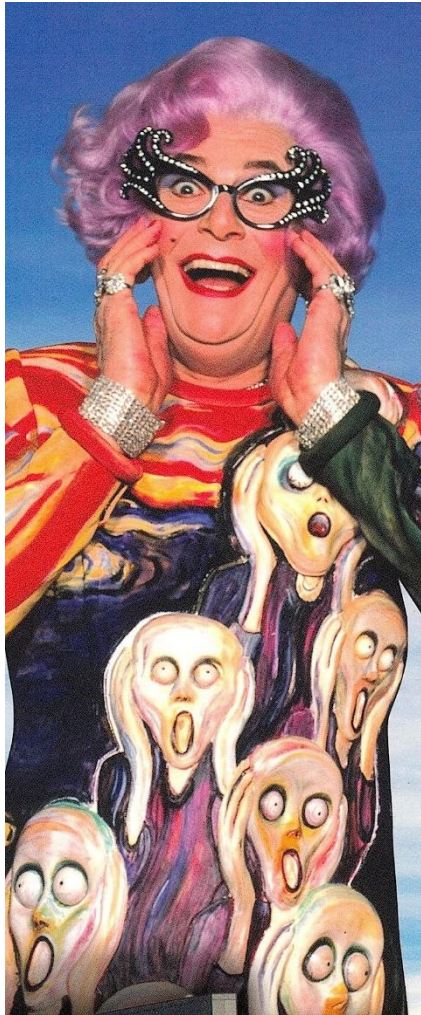


Jeff Koons and Turner's *Ancient Rome* with a Gazing Ball



Sculptures from the Tomb of Germanicus. Ashmolean Museum.

This is a large-scale kitschifying process, and art of the past has a hard time accommodating itself to it. There is though in these products not the wicked hard edge of Dame Edna Everage's dress adorned with Edvard Munch's *The Scream*.



Dame Edna Everage

He is not alone. There was a bit of boover not long ago when Dr Marten reproduced Turners on boots.



Turner's *Fishermen at Sea* on Dr. Marten boots (the image has been reversed).



Turner, *Fishermen at Sea (the Cholmeley Sea Piece)* (1796)



Turner *The Decline of the Carthaginian Empire* (1817) on Dr. Marten boot (the image is reversed)



Turner, *The Decline of the Carthaginian Empire* (1817)

Will Koons stay the course? Possibly, although it's worth recalling that the BMW M3 to which he gave a paint job retired after 53 laps at the 2010 Le Mans.



Jeff Koons's decorated BMW

And not even that was original mobile art: BMWs had been painted by Alexander Calder (1975, didn't finish at Le Mans),



Alexander Calder in front of the BMW which he decorated

Frank Stella (1976, didn't finish at Le Mans),



Frank Stella's decorated BMW

Roy Lichtenstein (1977, 2nd in its class at Le Mans),



Roy Lichtenstein's decorated BMW

Andy Warhol (1979, 6th at Le Mans)



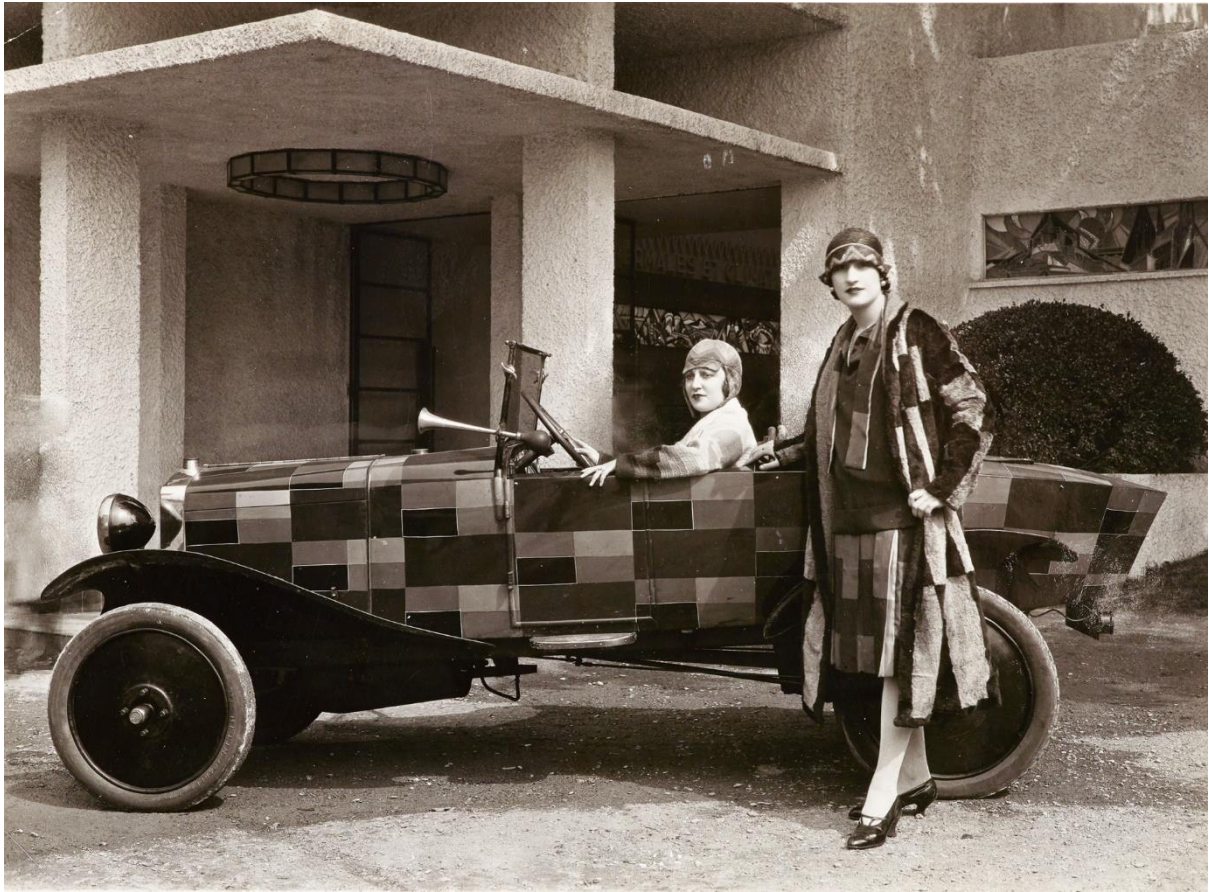
Andy Warhol's decorated BMW

and David Hockney (1995).



David Hockney's decorated BMW

Back in 1925 Sonia Delaunay decorated a Citroën B 12, colour-coordinated with her clothes.



Sonia Delaunay's decorated Citroën.

One wonders what colour would be registered if these vehicles had to appear on DVLA log books or French *Cartes Grises*.

Jeff Koons is going to be in conversation with Martin Kemp in the Sheldonian Theatre on May 8th.

BERNARD RICHARDS