I. Thesis Statement

Jeff Koons is a well-known contemporary artist most famous for his controversial, even racy, subject matter. What is it that makes his art so toxic, while at the same time, so compelling? And why is it institutionally embraced, while some see it as a symptom of all that is wrong with today’s culture (Bankowsky 167)? I think that some of the hype along with the publicity he receives (both negative and positive) about his work is the driving force behind his creations. All of the attention brought on by the controversy he creates fuels his artistic drive along with the criticism he receives for it. Most of the technique, stylization and subject matter incorporated in his work are reminiscent of Pop Art. As an artist, my work relates to Koons’ in that it uses subject matter from consumer society and it often deals with a change of scale. I intend to analyze and evaluate Koons’ work through Postmodernism criteria to confirm my statement above. In this, I will focus mainly on his use of appropriation, irony, parody and pastiche. I will then compare it to my work by determining the similarities and differences in our use of scale and references to consumerism.

II. Art Historical Influences & Cultural Context

Jeff Koons was born in 1955 in York, Pennsylvania. He attended the Maryland Institute College of Art, in Baltimore where he received his BFA. He also studied at school of the Art Institute of Chicago. Koons emerged as an artist in the 1980’s where he was influenced by Pop, Conceptual and appropriation art. His art personifies his obsession with sex and desire, race and gender, and celebrities, the media, commerce and fame. Much of his work contains controversial subject matter to provoke extreme responses from the public and critics alike. The fact that so
many people have such drastic reactions to him and his art is symbolic of his accomplishment as an artist (Gagosiangallery.com).

Andy Warhol and Marcel Duchamp influenced Jeff Koons’ art creation process and artistic principles. He was mostly interested with their idea that the hand of the artist is not an important part of the subject matter. Koons’ work is manufactured by hired technicians who produce the actual art. In this, he removes the idea of “good taste” while considering the vulnerabilities of hierarchies and value systems (Gagosiangallery.com). The creative act here is to find a means, a form or a format to make those means available. The form and the technique are usually drawn from the original production process of a film, an architectural trope, or a social situation of some kind (Wall 168).

To some, Warhol’s *Brillo Box* was the beginning of Postmodernism. This piece initiated the recognition of the identity of artworks and consumer products while questioning the philosophical nature of art. Art became self-conscious in an idealistic, adherent way by raising the question of “why is this art and not simply a Brillo box?” This same line of questioning began with photography which stole its earlier justification as an imitation of reality. (Heartney 41) Neo Pop references found in much of Koons’ work have connotations of Duchamp’s discovery that anything can be art if so designated (Bankowsky 167).

This new way of looking at art shares many similar foundations associated with Pop Art, in that it glorifies consumer items such as vacuum cleaners, chairs and lava lamps. These types of things were now looked at as being “gallery worthy”. This work was a response to what the artists saw as the takeover of individual consciousness by mass media and advertising. Many felt that late capitalism in Europe had created a society in which false excitement provoked by the
consumption of mass-produced objects and images masked the importance of their powerful
economic system (Heartney 42).

III. Formal Analysis of works of art

Consumer societies emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century with the
rise of mass production. In a consumer society there are great social and physical distances
between the manufacture of goods and their purchase and use. (Berger 189) Warhol’s assertion
that making art is the same as making any other commercial product is evidently influential to
Koons’ artistic ideals. (Bankowsky 167) Comparatively, the manufacturing process of a majority
of Koons’ work is based around very similar principles. His trafficking in the realm of mass taste
largely takes place in the form of objects and paintings (Bankowsky 167).

Artists today work as creative directors, employing skilled artisans to make things
according to their specifications (Wall 167). Standing over forty-three feet tall, Jeff Koon’s
Puppy was exhibited in Rockefeller Center in New York City in the year 2000. Organized by
Rockefeller Center in association with the Public Art Fund, this structure endured a three-week
installation process by a team of over fifty individuals. Constructed of stainless steel, to hold
over 70,000 multicolored flowers, this gargantuan sculpture was said by Koons to be a symbol of
love, warmth and happiness. This contemporary work of art captures his sculptural imagination,
horticultural dexterity, and engineering skills (Public Art Fund).

Visual images play a primary role in the functioning of commerce through
advertisements. This means that images are a central aspect of our consumer society which is
dependent upon the constant production and consumption of goods in order to function. Koons
often borrows objects and images from advertising and commercial production to create an
individual statement suggested by use of its specific subject matter (Berger 189).
Jeff Koons and three teams of three assistants worked eight-hour shifts, twenty-four hours a day for more than a month on his 2003 painting titled *Olive Oyl*. This process began with a photograph taken by Koons of a boat in a Cape Town harbor. In this, he paired the industrial seascape with a child’s pool toy drawn from his interest in the tires that adorned the vessel’s hull. His next inspiration came from an image of Popeye bordered by a round frame on the cover of a comic book. These three references were fused together to form the central formal and thematic motifs of the painting (Rothkopf 170). Throughout the creation of this piece, a lot of retouching was done in Photoshop to mask the original imperfections of its layering processes and create a flat, graphic effect. Its smooth appearance manifests Koons obsession with perfection as well as the sliding scale of “realism” that governs his art (Rothkopf 171).

To Koons, Popeye represents a typical cartoon heart throb. In connection to this, he included an image of his “Venus”, Gisele Bundchen. He digitally removed her body, leaving only inexplicably firm but empty clothes to be partially overlapped by additional visual references (Rothkopf 170). His references to the female body were then superimposed against the harbor background to suggest his ongoing attempt to blur the line between innocence and sexuality in his art.

Koons’ collection of household electrical appliances encased in clear plastic boxes with rows of fluorescent lights below them, referred to as “The New”, can be seen as modern variations of Duchamp’s ready-mades. These works help us to explore the way our fantasies and desires are transferred on to ordinary objects. Koons is said to have chosen vacuum cleaners because of their human-like qualities, their ability to breathe, and the hermaphroditic connotations of their hoses, nozzles, and orifices. The works’ titles incorporate the brand names of the machines such as *New Hoover Convertibles, Green, Red, Brown, New Shelton Wet/Dry*.
Displaced Doubledecke. (Rosenthal 231). Koons found the term ‘wet/dry’ to be a suggestive oxymoron. By naming this series “The New”, the idea of new life, or childhood is suggested. A combination of these two ideas creates an evident relationship between purity and sexuality which continues to be an ongoing theme throughout much of his work.

IV. Evaluation of works through a selected Theory of Art Criteria

Postmodernism rejects the literature, drama, architecture, cinema, journalism and design from the laws, culture and religion of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. In particular, it discards the objective truth while emphasizing the role of languages, power relations and motivations of society. This genre predominantly criticizes the specification in classifications such as male v. female, straight v. gay, or white v. black (Curiger 12). It is often associated with difference, separation, and skepticism, rejecting Modernist connotations to identity, unity, authority and certainty (Smith).

Many contemporary artists, such as Koons, have a tendency to conform to the ideas and rejections of societal beliefs associated with Postmodernism. His use of appropriation and parody within his work exemplifies this. Koons’ love of mingling the sacred and the profane gives context to parody as a common theme in much of the paintings and large scale sculptures he creates (Kennedy 1).

In the opinion of some critics, Koons’ work can be classified as ‘Kitsch’. His deliberate use of cultural icons as subject matter allows it to cater purely to popular demand for commercial purposes rather than as self expression. On this topic critic Christopher Knight stated, “He turns the traditional cliché of the work of art inside out; Rather than embodying a spiritual or expressive essence of a highly individual artist, art here is composed from a distinctly American
set of conventional middle-class values” (Gagosiangallery.com). This is exemplified in his 2003 collaborative painting titled *Olive Oyl*.

Some of his art is often thought of as pretentious, vulgar or of bad taste. Many also interpret his deliberate use of cheap, unoriginal, mass produced objects as a tasteless copy of the existing artistic style within that specific object. His work of the early 1980’s including *New Hoover Convertibles, Green, Red, Brown, New Shelton Wet/Dry 10-Gallon, Displaced Doubleddecker*, referred to as “The New,” are a primary example of this. Koons justifies this collection of art by saying that “You could think of the state of being “new” as the individual. That’s what I really want you to think about, how you can’t be new. To have your own integrity you have to live and you’re not immortal. But here the machine can just have integrity forever by not participating” (Rosenthal 231).

V. Self Reflection

As an artist, I feel that my work can be compared to that of Jeff Koons in that we both reference subject matter that is realistic and observational. Like Koons, I often find myself obsessing over the idea of perfection. To me, my work can never be too smooth, seamless or complete enough. His frequent use of mass produced objects as sculptural elements helps to suggest a sense of precision or flawlessness in his work.

Similarly, our work is very literal; what you see is what you get. Like Koons, my work can be seen as anything but abstract. Often referencing modern every day subject matter, both of our collections of work can be classified as contemporary. Media wise, I tend to work mostly in sculpture and painting, much like Koons.
Koons has frequently stated that he wants his art to communicate with as broad an audience as possible. I often take this same principle into consideration when designing a work of art. This seems to be most successful when the viewer can relate to a subject matter that is most commonly drawn from everyday life. Comparatively, Jeff Koons and I both create art that draws reference to popular culture and Pop Art themes. This is depicted through the subject matter, scale and stylization of my work.

Jeff Koons’ forty-foot-high sculpture titled *Puppy*, is an example of his tendency to play with the scale of an object. The exaggerated size of this monumental installation instills a sense of eternal solidity and pleasure in the viewer. Sculpturally, I like to experiment with enlarging and reducing the scale of everyday objects to change their overall purpose and assumed functionality. Doing so creates a sort of satirical reference that can be compared to that of Koons.

**VI. Conclusion**

As an artist, I feel that my work can be compared to the concepts and principles of Jeff Koons. Although some may consider his art to be tasteless or vulgar, it is evident that he creates with intention. His use of appropriation, irony, parody and pastiche are what gives his work its distinct individual style. My work relates to Koons’ in that it references subject matter from consumer society and Pop Art while implementing unconventional switches of scale. Many of the Postmodernist rejections of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century can be recognized in my art similarly to Koons.
Puppy

stainless steel, wood, soil, geotextile fabric, internal irrigation system, live flowering plants
486 x 486 x 256 inches
1234.4 x 1234.4 x 650.2 cm
2000

Olive Oyl

oil on canvas
108 x 84 inches
274.3 x 213.4 cm
2003

New Hoover Convertibles, Green, Red, Brown, New Shelton Wet/Dry 10-Gallon, Displaced Doubledecker

vacuum cleaners, Plexiglas, fluorescent lights
99 x 54 x 28 inches
251.5 x 137.2 x 71.1 cm
1981-1987
Works Cited


