

MEANING FROM MONEY: JEFF KOONS AND THE TAUTOLOGY OF VALUE

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Can a ten-foot-tall balloon animal possibly be worth \$58.4 million? In November 2013 at Christie’s in New York, someone clearly thought so, coughing up that exact amount for Jeff Koons’s 1990s-era sculpture *Balloon Dog (Orange)* (Tully). The sale marked a watershed moment for the contemporary art scene, setting what was then the record for the most expensive work of a living artist ever sold (Tully).¹ Not only did it catapult Koons even further into the most-famous-artist-around status that he had arguably occupied for the previous three decades, but it also subjected him and his work to vigorous controversy about how art merits—or doesn’t merit—its worth. The *Balloon Dog* itself fits none of the admittedly subjective criteria for “great art” in a traditional sense, being neither poignant, nor incisive, nor meaningful in any readily apparent way (Gemtou). As a result, its high monetary value strikes some viewers as undeserved or even disgraceful.



Arbogast, Charles Rex. “Jeff Koons in front of *Balloon Dog (Orange)*,” 2008, ©AP Photo.

Koons’s sculpture is—quite literally—a giant, hollow, stainless steel reproduction of a glossy orange balloon animal, the sort made for children by clowns at carnivals. This is, to repeat, the most expensive artwork sold in an artist’s lifetime ever, but it’s certainly not the most nuanced: it comes from a creator who “stresses that his work has no hidden meanings” (Galenson 176). If it is not the presence of any meaning that gives art its value in this case, it is instead the complete lack thereof, reveling solely in the sheer audacity of being a balloon dog elevated to the status of art. Understandably, some art enthusiasts view this as downright insulting (Hughes). However, one cannot simply disregard any significance to the work altogether—if someone shelled out that much money for it, there has to be something that gives the work value, or else the basic rules of monetary economics would be upended and shattered. Whatever that

meaningful feature is, though, it is not apparent within the content of the piece itself. The sculpture's unrestrained self-absorption contradicts the idea that worthy art is necessarily meaningful. Rather, the *Balloon Dog's* success demonstrates that a lack of meaning and a high monetary value can coexist.

Koons's work is analogous to another visual medium that's popular, financially lucrative, and not always terribly deep: television. Around the time of *Balloon Dog's* creation, David Foster Wallace wrote that TV had "become immune to charges that it lacks any meaningful connection to the world outside it," because although "television used to point beyond itself . . . today's audience is way better trained, and TV has discarded what's not needed" (Wallace 160). TV, like Koons's art, was all about itself. In the age of sitcoms in which Wallace was writing, it lacked the smallest effort at pretending it was an authentic portrayal of the real world and its many complexities. It chose a self-aware acceptance of the medium's base entertainment value over genuinely human statements. Moreover, it did this in full recognition of its existence as a money-making enterprise. Wallace argued that viewers themselves knew about this televised emphasis on profitable self-reference and were aware of its dehumanizing implications. Because of the medium's catchy appeal, though, they kept on watching and were unable to look away.

Similarly, Koons's *Balloon Dog* relies on simple, even cheap, thrills to visually engage its audience—it makes no pretensions about being a genuinely human statement. Art enthusiasts may feel a strong expectation to despise the work as an example of unabashed provocation in contemporary art; nevertheless, its saturated color, its childlike subject, its enormous size, and its reflective surface all play important roles in viewers' literal inability to turn away. First, its bright orange color coerces viewers into engaging it. Then, a millisecond later, they see that it is just a giant balloon dog, something they all once held as a child in its regular-sized latex form. Walking closer, they notice themselves in the reflection of the sculpture's glossy surface, perhaps compelling them to take a selfie with it. But then they step back and laugh to themselves, thinking just how pointless and ironic the *Balloon Dog* still seems as a mere object. Despite the work's lack of conceptual meaning, the audience's undeniable initial intrigue indicates the visual and nostalgic magnetism it possesses. The *Balloon Dog* has no intended conceptual motive, other than to be large and colorful and optimistic. It is absent of any philosophical meaning beyond being *itself*—reveling in its own glossy, overwrought, gigantic, expensive, and yet ultimately banal existence, showing that just like TV, in the *Balloon Dog's* case, art doesn't point beyond itself either. (Even if there is an appeal to nostalgia inherent in the *Balloon Dog* as a reminder of the latex animal we all held in our hands as children, this appeal does little to explain how a super-sized steel version of such an object has now become worth \$58.4 million.) Disconnected from any intended conceptual motive or philosophical purpose, it exploits the most basic human reactions towards the bright, shiny objects of childhood—pulling its audience in and holding it hostage.

Critics, the self-proclaimed philosopher-kings of this public mass known as the Audience (or its individual unit, the Viewer), have held Koons's work in moralistic disdain similar to the way Wallace viewed TV. His oeuvre's alleged visual cheapness drew the ire of one of the world's most respected contemporary art critics, the late Robert Hughes, who decided to feature Koons in a BBC series he presented that drew connections between contemporary art and show business (Hughes). If that doesn't already say enough about his view of the artist's work, he wrote in a related article that Koons's art is nothing more than "an extreme and self-satisfied manifestation of the sanctimony that attaches to big bucks" (Hughes). In the absence of any real meaning, Hughes argues, the audience the work wishes to attract consists solely of wealthy collectors attracted by the bold acts of artistic provocateurs. It overtly seeks to feed the hunger of that large and powerful entity called the art market—a dangerous precedent, in Hughes' eyes. He goes on to write: "Koons is the perfect product of an art system in which the market controls nearly everything, including much of what gets said about art" (Hughes). According to Hughes, this system is so powerful that it has the ability not only to dictate the price of a particular work of art, but also to drive a work's most fundamental public perception.

Certainly, the fame the *Balloon Dog* received from its sale serves as testimony to the feasibility of this system's power. We may never be absolutely certain whether or not Jeff Koons is primarily focused on making money when he makes art, but it is irrefutable that the work's high price has become a part of its interpretation. When looking at the sculpture, the viewer knows that it is worth millions. As a result, the piece is inextricably linked to its perception as an *expensive* work of art.

Scott Rothkopf, the chief curator of the Whitney Museum of American Art's prominent 2014 Koons retrospective, chose not to view this connotation in a negative light as Hughes did, but instead as a positive and intellectually intriguing aspect of the work. He wrote of the *Balloon Dog* that "its cold, shiny surfaces seem to condense the hothouse flows of capital and desire that both bring it into being and buoy its movement around the globe" (Rothkopf 29). He effectively concedes that Koons uses the market as a motivation for creativity, but maintains that this is purely a way of creating art that is innovative, original, and—consequently, in his assessment—*good*. "Koons's example is not that of an artist playing to or just riffing on a market," the curator writes, "but of one who in supple ways uses that market to create something that could never have been made before and could now be made only by him" (Rothkopf 29). In this reading, the artist doesn't want to exploit the market for personal fame or wealth, but wants to use it as a tool solely for the sake of his artistic creativity.

There is indeed a cold reality to the omnipresence of economic influence in Koons's artistic process. *Balloon Dog (Orange)* is only one of a number of balloon dog sculptures that the artist produced between the years 1994 and 2000, all of which would be identical were it not for the fact that each was produced in a different color.

They were also crafted as part of a larger collection of work he called his “Celebration series,” which sounds like it could be anything from a fashion line to a limited edition of plastic cups (Sischy). This categorization of the work as part of a larger collection signifies a type of organization to Koons’s artistic production, reminiscent of a large company’s branding strategy. What’s more is that almost none of Koons’s works, never mind just the *Balloon Dog* sculptures, are produced from his own hand. He has a team of well over a hundred assistants, operating out of a factory-like studio, which constructs the sculptures based off of the artist’s designs and ideas (Sischy). Koons has evidently defined his artistic role as similar to that of a creative CEO driving the development of a luxury brand. He delegates the execution of his work to technicians, categorizes his works like products, and attempts to make each one as visually attractive as possible. This art-industrial complex simply wouldn’t be possible for Koons to have at his fingertips without the high monetary value the market puts on works like the *Balloon Dog*.

Before one deems this an unusually self-serving means of artistic production, though, the reality is that this isn’t even close to the first time that market forces have driven an artwork’s creation. Rembrandt and Rubens willingly catered to the needs of their wealthy Dutch patrons. Reviewer Bart Cornelis elucidates this when he writes that “many of the [art market] mechanisms at play in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are not very different from those of today” (Cornelis). Indeed, wealthy religious and political institutions have driven the creation of works of art even extending back into ancient history, with Pericles’ financial patronage of the Parthenon and its associated artworks being just one example (Kallet-Marx). Economics have *always* been a consideration in the creation of art, because the marketplace has been the main arbiter of which art stands up as more significant in its time than the rest. It is difficult to argue, though, that Koons’s *Balloon Dog* possesses the deep humanism of a Rembrandt portrait or the masterful technicality of a Michelangelo sculpture. The *Balloon Dog* revels in this market success, as it is likely that these earlier works did as well—however, it does very little conceptually to encourage this success. How is it, then, that this work is considered so enormously valuable?

Just before the *Balloon Dog* went up for auction, the critic and scholar Jonathan Neil argued that the work’s meaning is found within its very status as an economic asset. Echoing Cornelis’s assertion of economic influence throughout art history, Neil makes the case that this is not an uncommon characterization of how art can manifest itself, either today or into the past. He defends the *Balloon Dog*’s high estimated value, arguing that:

Even when works of art were not selling for many millions of dollars, they were assets . . . wishing it weren’t so, dismissing the language . . . or continuing to trot out classical or eighteenth-century aesthetic theories of art’s purity or

non-utility are examples of intellectual laziness and blinkered thinking. Art is many things, and an asset is one of them. (43)

He claims that this characterization of art as being fundamentally concerned with its economic value doesn't merely *apply to* Koons's *Balloon Dog*, but in fact gives the work its central meaning. Like many other products in our marketplace economy, it has been given importance through its price tag. That the work sold for more than any other by a living artist is not just an intriguing fact about the piece's backstory, or an inevitable part of the audience's perception of the work—it is an essential and integral part of the art itself reflective of the world around it. If the monetary value of the art is indeed part of the work, it is precisely this that grants it its substantive value.

Herein we glimpse the source of the *Balloon Dog's* worth: The fact that it is worth so much monetarily is the reason why it has such immense value. *It is expensive because it is expensive.* This confounding tautology not only reinforces the idea of the piece's ironic existence, but it also gives this irony a reason for existing. (There's another tautology for you.) When looking at the object, the viewer can simultaneously engage with its lack of conceptual commentary and its high value, and then arrive at the understanding that through its value, it creates a sort of commentary within itself. It is easy to take this conclusion and condemn Koons's work for it, but to do so immediately would be to ignore the valuable lessons of this work's revelations about the art market and our social economy.

The cause-and-effect relationship between money and meaning as exemplified by the *Balloon Dog* has the power to frustrate and enrage many viewers, but it reveals how art is not immune to the forces of a market economy such as ours, whether one likes it or not. Though it may not make a normative argument of its own about this relationship, the work is itself illustrative of our age of hyper-saturation and relentless self-marketing just in its plain existence. *It is a product.* Its very point is that it captivates our attention, and that we then laugh. We know it's trying to fool us, just like TV; we are the well-trained "Audience" that Wallace was talking about. But we keep looking, and wealthy collectors gobble it up. Whether or not the *Balloon Dog* falls under the name of *great art* is totally irrelevant—it may be brilliant, or it may be pathetic. What matters is the objective fact that people look—they look, and then, if wealthy and passionate enough, they buy.

This puts the work squarely into territory that many critical viewers consider to be quintessential of American culture. No matter how high a price we place on an object like the *Balloon Dog*, it ultimately remains hollow in both concept and physical substance. Hughes, who is so critical of Koons, cannot go without conceding that "you can't imagine America's singularly depraved culture without him" (Hughes). It exemplifies the idea of our nation as a consumerist inferno, filled with flashy advertisements and a hedonistic emphasis on money, power, sex, and, in this case, balloon dogs. Commentators have always criticized how America is connoted as much

by this relentless consumerism as by its idealized freedom, and Wallace in particular considered this hedonism as manifested in TV to be dangerous (Wallace). Koons, on the other hand, refrains from criticizing that connotation or explicitly using his work to comment on it at all, and instead embraces it as an unavoidable reality of today's society.

The repulsion some feel towards the *Balloon Dog* reveals how we have grown accustomed to romanticizing the idealized notion of the independent, free-willed artist. True visionaries, we say, are those who make powerful and beautiful art of their own accord with absolutely no consideration for their work's profitability. In our condemnation of the *Balloon Dog*, though, we are negating the fact that this idealized notion has never existed entirely, and will never exist, because art is not priceless. People value it, and it carries economic weight, no matter what higher realm it is supposed to occupy. Koons's work makes this contention as forcefully as it can in the act of its existence, with its identity intended not as an expressive or inherently meaningful piece of art, but as a shiny luxury good to be bought and sold. Some viewers may be troubled by the societal conditions that fueled this work's creation, but within that internal frustration is exactly how the piece's existence is significant. We should understand the *Balloon Dog* as an object that communicates the all-powerful market forces that have governed art since the beginning, and for that we should see it as an important and valuable work in the ongoing conversation around the ethics of our consumerist, wealth-driven culture.

NOTE

1. In November 2018, David Hockney's painting *Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures)* surpassed it at the same auction house, maxing out at \$90.3 million (Scott).

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