EDUCATION NOTES
INVESTIGATING ARTWORKS IN THE GALLERY
www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/education

ART
GALLERY
NSW

40 YEARS
KALDOR PUBLIC
ART PROJECTS

1995
JEFF
KOONS

1995
JEFF
KOONS

PROJECT

Puppy
12 December 1995 – 17 March 1996
Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney

I'm always trying to create work that doesn't make viewers feel they're being spoken down to, so that they feel open participation.

Jeff Koons, *ArtForum International,* vol 41, March 2003

JEFF KOONS

Puppy was designed and constructed in
Sydney in 1995, towering 12.4 metres high
along the harbourfront outside the MCA

Photo: Brendan Read
Courtesy Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney

1995
JEFF
KOONS

This giant topiary toy telescopes the old and new baroque, mixing memories of the kind of fantastic garden follies which were meant to dazzle the absolute monarchs who could afford them with the most deliriously deviant branches off that old tree, whether the flower floats at the annual Rose Bowl pageants or the animal-shaped hedges that greet visitors to Orlando's Disney World.

Robert Rosenblum, *Artforum International*, vol 39, December 2000

INTRODUCTION

Controversial artist Jeff Koons polarises people. Many scorn him for relinquishing all the rules of good taste, while others get a kick out of his elevation of unapologetic kitsch to the status of high art. Children unselfconsciously love the work, while Freudians are intrigued. Dubbed 'loony Koons' and 'the Liberace of fine arts', he certainly shuffles our conventional categories. Beautiful or ugly? Ridiculous or sublime? Or all of the above? His monumental floral sculpture *Puppy*, installed outside Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art as a Kaldor project in 1995, remains the most popular contemporary art project created in Australia. Koons' work explores contemporary obsessions with sexuality and desire, celebrity, advertising and the media. His deadpan choice of objects and images addresses the impact of status, plutocratic power, materialism and cupidity in contemporary life. 'We might wish for a better artist to manifest our time,' wrote Peter Schjeldahl in his *New Yorker* column on 9 June 2008, 'but that would probably amount to wanting a better time.'

ARTIST

Jeff Koons
born 1955 in York, Pennsylvania, USA
lives and works in New York and York, USA

Jeff Koons studied painting at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the Maryland Institute College of Art. In New York, he manned the membership desk of the Museum of Modern Art, displaying formidable salesmanship, and later worked as a Wall Street commodities broker while establishing himself as an artist. This background probably accounts for his incomparably nuanced take on contemporary cultural marketing and consumption. Today, around 100 assistants labour in Koons' Manhattan studio to replicate his computer designs, producing the small-scale works while the larger works are outsourced to metal fabricators and foundries.

Koons' early work was in the form of conceptual sculpture, and almost from the start, his work has come in thematic series or product lines. The absolute opposite of minimalism, Koons' fusion of Woolworths and Versailles advances Andy Warhol's pop-art treatment of throwaway subjects onto another level altogether. From fluorescent-lit, spotless vacuum cleaners hermetically sealed in plexiglas cases, to lovable topiary puppies; from basketballs floating on chemically treated water in glass tanks, to ten-feet-tall gleaming sculptures based on balloons twisted into the shape of a toy dog; from glazed-ceramic and painted-wood blowups of Michael Jackson with his chimp Bubbles, to photographs and figurines of himself and his then-wife, porn star and Italian MP Ilonna Staller, as a god and goddess of fervent love, Koons manages to disconcert and revitalise our seeing and thinking about art.

Koons is also known for his public sculptures, such as *Split-Rocker* and the monumental floral *Puppy*, shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney as a Kaldor project in 1995. In 2006, his enormous stainless steel *Balloon Flower (Red)* was unveiled in New York City. In 2007, his metal sculpture *Hanging Heart* sold for US$23.6 million – a record at the time for a living artist at auction.

PROJECT

Topiary work is an old-fashioned form of gardening art that goes back to Roman times. It is found in specialised private gardens or in formal parks and botanical displays, where dense shrubs or trees are clipped to resemble statuary such as birds, nymphs or urns. In 1962, Walt Disney recreated his cartoon characters in landscape shrubbery throughout his theme park. The Johnny Depp character in the 1990 Tim Burton film *Edward Scissorhands* had a natural gift for topiary. Jeff Koons has advanced this old medium into an artwork on an epic scale.

Puppy is a 12.4 metre (43 foot) tall topiary sculpture of a West Highland White Terrier puppy executed in a variety of flowers on a steel substructure. The first of Jeff Koons' public sculptures, it was originally created in a smaller version for a site outside a baroque castle in Arolsen, Germany in 1992 but the foundations included wood and the design didn't last; it was destroyed at the close of that exhibition. The version that now stands outside the Guggenheim museum in Bilbao, Spain, is the one designed and created on Sydney Harbour at the Museum of Contempoary Art in Sydney in 1995 as a Kaldor project. The Sydney *Puppy* held around 60 000 plants (the Arolsen *Puppy* had 20 000). It took many months to create: flowers were grown offsite to order and 3D computer modelling was used to construct a stainless steel armature, covered in hand-moulded wire-mesh, which was then lined with soil and fitted with an internal irrigation system. A highlight of the 1996 Sydney Festival, it was an extraordinarily popular and memorable work.

Is *Puppy* perhaps an echo of the six-metre-high Christmas trees that Koons' father, Henry, a successful interior decorator, enjoyed covering with glossy balls?

Believe it or not, just before the official inauguration of the new Guggenheim museum in Bilbao in 1997, Spanish police foiled a plot by three terrorists to blow up the giant *Puppy* floral sculpture outside the building. Disguised as gardeners, the men planned to carry out their mission with exploding flowerpots, designed to be triggered by remote control. A policeman was shot dead before two of the flowerpot men hijacked a car at gunpoint and fled, only to be arrested later.

WORLD EVENTS: 1995

_ First centenary of the moving image
_ CD-ROM can now carry a full-length feature film
_ Sony demonstrates a flat-screen TV
_ Release of film *Pulp fiction*, directed by Quentin Tarantino, which wins the Palme d'Or at Cannes
_ Timothy McVeigh bombs an Oklahoma City federal building, killing 168 people
_ William Robinson wins the Archibald Prize with *Self portrait with stunned mullet*
_ Loti and Victor Smorgon Collection of Contemporary Australian Art gifted to Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art
_ **10th Kaldor project:** Jeff Koons' *Puppy* created outside the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, accompanied by an exhibition of Kaldor projects, John Kaldor's collection, past Koons works and documentation of the making of *Puppy*

THEME
Pop and neo-pop/post-pop

Jeff Koons' work is classified as neo-pop or post-pop, as part of a 1980s movement that opposed the pared-down art of minimalism and conceptualism in the previous decade. The original pop art (1955–70) represented the spectacular crossover between art and life, between high and low culture, between the gallery and the streets. Slowly the barrier of privilege that high art hoped would keep it separate from fashion, entertainment and everything else art flirts with was giving way.

Traditionally, art belonged in palaces and churches. Access to it was the domain of merchant princes and cardinals. The very fact of a 'museum' was an introduction of the idea of democracy. But even into the 19th century, culture was seen as a secular space for improvement. It was a place apart from the hustle and bustle of everyday life. It was meant to be civilising and uplifting. And so a wedge had been emphatically established between how people lived and what they learned. Pop culture, meanwhile, in the form of newspapers, comics, advertising, even movies, started to emerge from cities in the late 19th century when people started to have more leisure time. Artists, who up till then had elitist audiences, started to put mass-media references in their work – Picasso and Braque, for example, put cut-up newspapers into their paintings. By the mid 20th century, the industrialising effects of modernity and the marketplace changed everything.

By the 1960s, mass forms of communication (movies, pop music etc) were so pervasive it was impossible for you to insulate yourself against the flood. TV, less a medium than an environment, saturated homes, bars, motel rooms. High art was for individual appreciation, popular culture was into mass release (screaming, crying, laughing). It also dissolved the values of the dominant interest group with its trademark features of one race, one class, one gender (ie white, male, middle class).

The term 'pop art' was coined by art critic and curator Lawrence Alloway in the late 1950s to indicate that art has a basis in the popular culture of its day and takes from it a faith in the power of images. It was about looking cool but cheap (as in kitsch), and it resembled something you could find mass-produced in the supermarket. Pop art valued the short-lived and disposable. Though it was not a structured movement in the sense of a group putting on collective shows, it did have a certain coherence. The strategy was to hijack the 'bad new things' rather than genuflect towards the 'good old things' (Bertolt Brecht). But while pop art quotes from a culture specific to the consumer society, it does so in ironic mode, as inferred from the British painter Richard Hamilton's definition of his artistic output: 'Popular, transient, expendable, low-cost, mass-produced, young, witty, sexy, gimmicky, glamorous, and Big Business'.

Perhaps the defining artist of pop art was Andy Warhol. His evolution from smart commercial illustrator to paradigm maker of the future of Western art parallels the social shift from the 1950s to '60s. People still have mixed feelings about whether he was a great artist or a great phoney. Warhol was, on the one hand, an unabashed entrepreneur who used art to further his fortune, a genius manipulator and public relations guru; and on the other hand, he was an astute analyst of commodity culture who helped revolutionise the process of art-making, rendering it more democratic and accessible to the masses. A celebrant of society's obsessions with money, sex and celebrity, Warhol was also perhaps one of the first to intuit that the core cultural experience of our age is the echo chamber effect of reproductions of reproductions.

After Warhol walked into the supermarket and signed Campbell soup tins for a fantastic mark up, post-pop culture has had to learn How to Stop Worrying and Love the Commodity. Like Taiwanese copies of designer labels, forms in America were being grasped at once, while content and its attendant mysteries ceased to be of interest except as a commentary on the capture of form. Through the magic of media overexposure Andy could see that nobodies could be turned into celebrity superstars, and second-hand experience, second-hand identities and second-hand feelings had paradoxically become the jackpot, rather than the consolation prize.

Within this more savvy commercial terrain, planning a career was like planning the digital circuitry of a new all-purpose module that could make anything more or less on dealer deadline. Enter Jeff Koons. Like Warhol, people have never been sure whether Koons is a superficial scammer or a wry prophet. Both share a cultivated shallowness, a cagey dumbness. But while Warhol's statements had a camp irony about them ('I like boring things. I love Los Angeles. I love Hollywood. They're beautiful. Everybody's plastic, but I love plastic. I want to be plastic.'), Koons' statements are delivered with all the earnestness of the motivational seminar. With eyes wide open and embracing all of American culture, he has appropriated everything from advertisements and vacuum cleaners to cartoon characters, collectibles and plastic toys.

In this new culture of manufactured fictions, images are all that matter: how you shape them, layer them, solve their problems. Beyond just the radical switch of original and copy, the person becomes the 'buy-product' of representation. The dislocations in art and society that this leads to probably defines 1980s neo-pop: with the ancient contours of things fading, there was a vanishing line between the real and everything else.

Within the post-pop Warholian universe – a pure plastic environment of images and signs, whether peopled by Michael Jackson or Barbie or Britney Spears – the stage was set for a new species of artist – including Koons, Damien Hirst, Cindy Sherman, Matthew Barney, Yasumasa Morimura, Charles Ray and Vanessa Beecroft – whose works played perfectly in this parallel universe that was quickly replacing those old-fashioned things called nature and the real.

COLLECTION CONNECTIONS

Relevant works in the Art Gallery of NSW collection
www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection

• **Maria Kozic** (Australia, b1957)
Pulse Mk2 1994
4 incubators and mixed media; dimensions variable
Rudy Komon Memorial Fund 1995 504.1995.a-d

• **Louise Weaver** (Australia, b1966)
Moonlight becomes you (Tipsy Bolero) 2002–03
hand-crocheted lambswool, black sequined discs, silk embroidery thread, plastic thread, high density foam; dimensions variable
Contemporary Collection Benefactors 2004 126.2004

• **Jeff Gibson** (Australia, b1958)
Karloff 1997
colour screenprint; 99.5 x 69.5 cm (image); 129 x 99 cm (sheet)
Contemporary Collection Benefactors 1998 29.1998.3

• **Scott Redford** (Australia, b1962)
PHOTO: the pizza boy... 1995
vinyl lettering on wall, Converse trainers, black Doc Martin boots, black leather jacket, black studded leather belt, Silvio's pizza warmer, bathroom mirror with surf stickers, car tyre; 320 x 380 cm approx
Gift of the artist 2004 143.2004.a-h

• **Cindy Sherman** (USA, b1954)
Untitled #113 1982
type C photograph; 114.3 x 75 cm
Mervyn Horton Bequest Fund 1986 372.1986

SELECTED REFERENCES

_ Sophie Forbat (ed), *40 years: Kaldor Public Art Projects*, Kaldor Public Art Projects, Sydney 2009

_ Thomas Kellein, *Jeff Koons: pictures 1980–2002*, DAP, New York 2003

_ Robert Rosenblum, *Jeff Koons: easy fun-ethereal*, Solomon R Guggenheim Foundation, New York 2003

_ Eckard Schneider, *Jeff Koons*, bilingual edition, Kunsthaus Bregenz, Austria 2002

Websites
_ Jeff Koons
www.jeffkoons.com
_ Kaldor Public Art Projects
www.kaldorartprojects.org.au
_ Kaldor Public Art Projects Explorer, Art Gallery of NSW
www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/kaldor_projects

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

Koons' work is often referred to as kitsch. Define the meaning of this word and assess whether it is an appropriate description to use. Is kitsch a quality that is embraced in our culture today? Propose some everyday examples to illustrate your argument. Discuss why it often has negative connotations in the art world when referring to an artist's work. Discuss why Koons is considered by some to be at once a genius and fraud? Why do you think he is so popular with the general public?

Investigate Koons' body of work. Consider the titles of the series he produced. List the key themes he has investigated. Propose if there is an overarching narrative he is exploring in his work and what it may be. Consider the decade in which he came to prominence, the 1980s. Debate the proposition that Koons is an artist of his time for his time. Outline the concepts and art practices Koons was reacting against and suggest why artists like Koons felt that these forms had run their course.

Assess Koons' background and its influence on his work and career as an artist. Is he equally concerned with his creative and commercial output? Investigate the process for Koons to create and produce his work. Although it is, at first glance, a highly commercial, almost factory-like system, it also harks back to Renaissance workshops. Investigate how these artists managed their business and compare this to Koons.

Investigate pop art and the connections it drew between art and daily life in the 1950s and '60s. How was it an assault on the art museum system and why did it resonate with so many people so quickly? What is irony and how did the pop artists use it? Suggest why the United States was the perfect incubator for pop art's development and for its 'guru', Andy Warhol. Compare Warhol and Koons in terms of how they present themselves publicly and conduct themselves as artists. Is there a discernable difference between Warhol's pop and Koons' neo-pop?

Examine Koons' Kaldor project. In what way does his use of materials and amplification of scale make *Puppy* more than just a big statue, sculpture or topiary of a dog? Identify how this artwork is quintessentially Koons but also has all the trademarks of a Kaldor project. Research the response to *Puppy* by the popular press and the art press. A version of the work has since been installed permanently at the Guggenheim museum in Bilbao, Spain. Suggest if the context and site for *Puppy* has any bearing on its interpretation by an audience.