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Jeff Koons, *String of Puppies*, 1988.
Polychromed wood, edition of 3; 42 x 62 x 37 in.

Jeff Koons, Sonnabend Gallery,
November 19 to December 23, 1988 —

For the moment at least, Jeff Koons seems to be *the* artist of his generation, or at least the most notorious one. His latest show at Sonnabend garnered more press than any exhibition in recent memory and for weeks the first question people asked each other at parties was, "What did you think of the Koons show ?" Given the nature of Koons' work I should probably end this review right now, but for the sake of criticism I will continue.

Prior to Koons' show I was in Sonnabend and asked someone who worked there what sort of work the artist would be showing. The reply was explicit on one point, that people were sure to be upset by Koons' new work. Privately I doubted this. After his suspended basketballs, his encased vacuum cleaners, his liquor ads, stainless steel trains, Louis XIV busts and rabbits, I didn't think he had enough tricks left up his sleeve to draw further expressions of outrage from his audience. Not surprisingly for an art critic, I was wrong. The first intimation that this was the case came with the ads for the show. Four different full page ads appeared in major art magazines, each a glossy color photograph of the artist in some staged setting that had more to do with Hollywood than Soho, at least in production values. In one Koons posed with two bikini clad models, another had him in a fake tropical paradise, a third showed him nuzzling a pig. In each of the ads Koons looked as unreal as his surroundings. Rumours began to circulate, most having to do with Koons' avowed model, Michael

Jackson. One had it that the artist had had extensive plastic surgery, another that he had hired the pop singer's stylist to stage the photographs. Despite all this advance excitement, I was still not optimistic about Koons' chances for delivering the promised "shock". The moment I finally entered the show however, I realized the extent of my error.

In place of stainless steel Koons has found two even more vulgar mediums : faultlessly polychromed wood and porcelain. The wood is so expertly carved and painted that it looks like cast ceramic, while the porcelain looks like, well, porcelain. Of course Koons has not so much as touched his sculptures, each of which has been made in an edition of three by Italian craftsmen following the artist's instructions. (Simultaneous shows were held in Cologne and Chicago.) Similarly the forms have been taken from gift shop schlock, with Koons doing a bit of recombining and alteration here and there.

A naked woman in a bathtub screaming in surprise at the appearance of a snorkel rising from the suds (Koons has sliced off the top of her head), two insipid cartoon bears waving and smiling, another much more ominous bear towering over a British bobby, a couple on a park bench holding eight blue puppies in their laps (they remind one of Duane Hanson's work, which only serves to increase their ludicrousness), Michael Jackson with an identically attired ape in his lap, the Pink Panther embracing a buxum blonde, a naked boy and girl (complete with pre-pubescent genitalia) exchanging a flower. Part *Playboy* cartoon, part *Sesame Street*, part tourist souvenir, these scaled-up vulgarities were not only as outrageous as promised but were also wholly fascinating.

One looks at them first thinking about the "Koons phenomenon", amazed that the guy gets away with it, that someone is willing to pay $150 000 for the bear and bobby, that this is the face of contemporary art. Then one thinks about the kind of society that can produce such monsters — I mean not so much Koons' work as the knick-knacks he employs. What kind of people buy these things ? Who designed them ? Then, and this is where it begins to get interesting, one becomes amazed that one is giving these gross banalities the kind of visual attention that is usually reserved for masterpieces. One becomes fascinated with one's own fascination. It was this discrepancy between the quality of attention solicited and the object of that attention that drew me back repeatedly to the show, that found me studying, say, the noses of the blue puppies or the bear's obscene girdth or Michael Jackson's shoe as if they were details of a Rodin. Much to my own amazement I found that this was work whose meaning and form were difficult to exhaust, whose visual stimulation was of a high order. But I also suspect that these sensations were ephemeral and that the next time I see one of these pieces, when they will no longer be able to be seen as "the new Koons", they will cease to resonate.

To be as banal as the work itself, we should ask : "What does it all mean ?" Koons himself claims a total identification with popular culture, with Michael Jackson, with making lots of money, with being an entertainer. Unlike, say, Malcolm MacLaren, he makes no explicitly subversive claims for this art, but of course it is subversive, not of society at large but of the art world. It is the 1980's equivalent of the Surrealist dream of going out into the street and firing off a gun at random, except that Koons prefers to do his shooting in an art gallery. There is a political philosophy which holds that the fastest way to effect social change is by exacerbating the repressive tendancies of the state by commiting violent outrages, that things must get worse before they can get better. This philosophy is called terrorism. It is hard to know if Jeff Koons wants to make things better, but there is little doubt that what he practices is visual terrorism. *Caveat emptor*.

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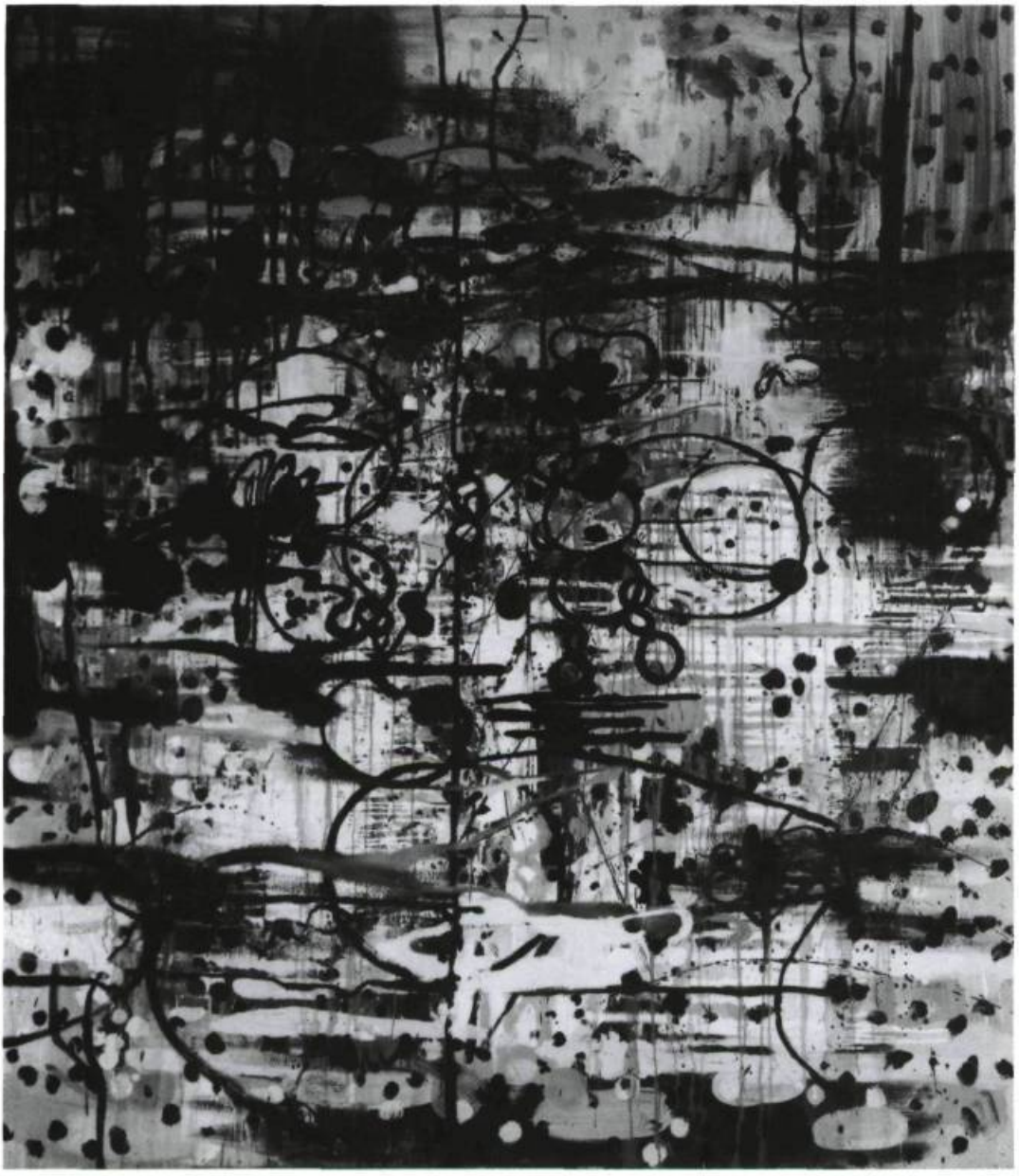
Willy Heeks, David Beitzel Gallery,
November 1988 —

If Jeff Koons is out to dynamite the last remaining columns in the temple of art insisting that we have outgrown this antique notion of self-expression, there will always be painters like Willy Heeks to prove him wrong. Where Koons derives his "art" from pre-existing artefacts, Heeks relies on his own powers of invention; where Koons never so much as touches his work, Heeks' paintings are very much about the possibilities and limitations of the human hand; where Koons is following a worst-case scenario, Heeks is painting as if on the first day, as if everything remained to be done. This is not to say that Heeks is a cheerful, carefree painter : in fact his paintings can be rather dark and ominous and he has his own cult of ugliness, but these qualities are enlisted in what is an essentially regenerative aim.

Over the last few years as Heeks has developed and personalized his 1950ish, more or less gestural abstraction — indeed, it is no longer necessary to use that decade as a reference point with his work — his paintings have always been unabashedly viewer-directed. He is painting in order to communicate rather than strike some narcissistic pose, he is not saying "look at me, look at what an interesting artist I am" but, rather, "look at these paintings, join me in them". Loaded with an extensive lexicon of painterly event, offering the eye a practically inexhaustible field of action, Heeks' paintings always *deliver*. Seen from twenty feet away or examined at the distance of one inch, they epitomize the anxious joy, the retinal inves-



Willy Heeks, *Philosophy*, 1988.
Oil on canvas; 92 x 80 in. Photo : Pelka/Noble Photography

tigation on which modern painting has sustained itself. They offer not the fascination of fascination, but simply pure fascination.

I sometimes think that, when it comes to abstract painting, the more successful the painting, the less likely it is that criticism can offer an adequate account of the work. There are of course numerous strategies for avoiding this inadequacy — and I could spend several pages describing Heeks' painting in the familiar rhetoric of art criticism — but after any such fusillade the painting would, to paraphrase Francis Ponge, fly off again, untouched. This resistance to language is not true of most current media-obsessed art, every aspect of which is in the public domain, devoid of any secret recesses. Heeks, on the other hand, produces work which establishes a private circuit, a confessional space, enclosed from other discourses. This is not to say that he is a recidivist painter : if a painting like *Philosophy* suggests any other artist, it is Sigmar Polke. The calligraphic black lines in the foreground recall Polke's Dürer-inspired paintings of a couple of years ago, and *Philosophy*'s atmosphere of defacement, smudging and perverse color sense also seem quite Polkian. Heeks' melange of virtuosity and abuse account for much of his work's power, but in these days of a low-calorie aesthetic it is also a very welcome change to be confronted with paintings containing so much sheer matter, paintings so generous with themselves. Perhaps the alternative to terrorism is charity, an often maligned virtue but one we still have much need of.

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