Helena Kontova: ‘How does your socio-political intention relate to, say, the American system as represented by Reagan and his following?’

Jeff Koons: ‘With Reaganism, social mobility is collapsing, and instead of a structure composed of low, middle, and high income levels, we’re down to low and high only. Reaganism has defined two ends, and these are the areas where insecurity is greatest. My work stands in opposition to this trend.’ (Giancarlo Politi, 1987).

We have now for the first time a collective art which acts as a symbolic logo for the New Right. The Smart art, sometimes called Neo-Geo or Simulationist art, emulates the desires and practices of a Yuppie milieu down to the last shining details. (Bruce W. Ferguson, 1987).

Critics have argued since 1986 that the American artist Jeff Koons lacks criticality and, moreover, cynically capitalizes on art’s commodification. These criticisms stem from a debate internal to the leftist critical establishment over the character of simulationism, a short-lived artistic movement, also known as neo-geo and neo-conceptualism, which coalesced in the mid-1980s. Its loosely affiliated members, including Koons, Ashley Bickerton, Peter Halley and Haim Steinbach, variously recombined pop art, minimalism and conceptual art in intellectual and theoretically sophisticated critiques of consumer capitalism, which relied upon the strategies of appropriation, design and abstraction and took the form of slick, diagrammatic sculptures and paintings. More than the other simulationists, Koons exemplified the core contradiction of this movement, which was its market orientation in spite of and as part of this critique – a strategy that the curator Brian Wallis characterized as ‘sly complicity’ in the summer of 1986.

Interestingly, Koons sought to publicly disassociate himself from simulationism as early as the late fall of 1986, which was only shortly after the movement began to gain recognition. Indeed, starting in late 1986, Koons arguably reinvented his artistic project, at least partially in response to the criticisms that were then being made of simulationism as a movement and his work in particular. This essay identifies and examines Koons’ reinvention of his artwork and of himself as an artist in the summer of 1986 as a major and as-yet unnoticed turning point within his artistic development that helps to clarify his changing positions in relation to the critical debates and artistic and political movements of the 1980s.

Even though Koons has recently received seemingly definitive critical, institutional and scholarly validation, he remains one of the world’s most controversial artists, precisely on account of the above criticisms. Advocates of Koons have tended to ignore
them, while critics of Koons accepted them long ago as fact. These criticisms, this essay maintains, remain relevant and can be newly understood as factors in dynamic interplay with Koons’ artistic production. The argument is ultimately made here that Koons did not lack criticality, either before the reinvention of his artistic project or after it. Rather, in 1987, he began to critique the concept of criticality itself, as had a number of other leftist artists and critics during the mid-1980s, including the simulationists. Unlike his cohort, however, Koons claimed to do away with criticality, and introduced in its stead a farcical utopian social and political agenda in which all people would become aristocrats. Needless to say, Koons was not a political activist and never imagined that this agenda could come to pass. Rather, his artwork, which was rich in contemporary political references, allusions and associations, revealed how people had been persuaded by a version of this fantastic promise at their expense.

Koons exhibited some key characteristics of criticality and yet notably not an aversion to the art market, which he manipulated knowingly and, as part of his reinvention, deliberately offensively, for instance by publicizing his high sales prices and profits. During the mid-1980s, Koons developed a business model in which gallerists and collectors helped to finance the fabrication of his sculptures, ‘like futures’, observed the curator and art adviser Allan Schwartzman in 1987. The ever more valuable artworks that Koons created, however, especially by jointly investing in precious materials and skilled labour, were anything but commodities, which only served to increase their market value (plate 1).

The fact that Koons sought profit – like a capitalist – determined the interpretation of his artwork, which was widely seen through the lens of these ethics and his presumed class position and interests. Koons’ decision to distance himself from

1 Jeff Koons with his Banality series of sculptures at Sonnabend Gallery, New York City, 1989. Photo: © Thomas Hoepker/Magnum Photos.
simulationism in late 1986 and develop a personal brand may be read cynically. After all, it made good business sense. It also, however, carries a greater art-historical interest. When Koons veered from simulationism, he provocatively personified and pictured the way that politics was then remaking American society. It is often remarked that Koons reflects the spirit of the 1980s. This essay seeks to examine more precisely how, in part by differentiating between capitalism and Reaganism.

Reaganism was the context in which Koons situated his reinvention in late 1986 and in which his work was interpreted during the later 1980s. As in the epigraphs above, Koons explicitly positioned himself against Reaganism, while he and his simulationist peers were accused of being complicit with it. Given that the terms of critique and defence were identical, what remains to be done is analyse how Koons’ work related to Reaganism, which was invoked monolithically and negatively by the artist and his critics alike. It is ultimately argued here that Koons provided a jarring picture puzzle in the dynamic group portrait of contemporary American society produced by the Banality series of sculptures and exhibitions (plate 2). The mostly polychromatic and figurative sculptures of wood, porcelain and mirror were conceived by Koons as a group, with each of the designs handmade to his specifications in multiples of three by European artisans in 1988. The multiples were individually displayed by Koons in three separate, jointly advertised and roughly concurrent exhibitions under the title Banality between the late fall of 1988 and the early winter of 1989. Art world audiences were asked to contemplate the sculptures as a group, and to piece together – between discordant iconography, period style, scale,
Re-examining ‘the Ronald Reagan of sculpture’

The larger cultural, social and political context in which the ethical criticisms of the simulationists acquired their urgency was the rising tide of Reaganism, or as the term then came to denote, the proliferation of President Ronald Reagan’s post-war conservative policies and principles throughout the 1980s in the United States. This reactionary turn was called a revolution soon after Reagan’s landslide election in 1980 on account of the magnitude of the victory and the ideological reorientation of the government. In 1981, it became known and discussed by sceptics and supporters alike as the Reagan Revolution. It sought to dismantle the welfare state that President Franklin D. Roosevelt had established in the 1930s and to reverse the social revolutions of the 1960s. For the American artistic avant-garde, which had been re-politicized toward the left during the late 1960s and early 1970s in line with the broader American culture, Reaganism constituted a psychological shock, an intellectual conundrum, a threat to its values and a call to arms.

Even though throughout the 1980s Koons depended upon Marxist theories and analytical tools such as alienation, exploitation, class analysis and ideology critique, Koons was not a Marxist. He did not advocate proletarian revolution or envision a communist utopia. On the contrary, he was a capitalist: he not only worked on Wall Street during the early 1980s, but also as a political canvasser during the summer of 1982, soliciting signatures for petitions to lower property taxes in Florida. Given this ideological mixture, what he created in the Banality series was a dystopian view of Reaganism and an internally conflicted view of capitalism, in which the underestimated social and psychological costs of a system centred on social mobility were opposed to its obvious social, financial and material benefits.

Koons did not militate for collective action as part of these critiques; rather, he remained committed to individual upward social mobility, which was the main reason why candidate Reagan had argued that Americans should vote for him rather than President Jimmy Carter in 1980: ‘Are you better off than you were four years ago?’, Reagan famously asked in the concluding remarks of the televised debate held a week before the election. Reagan’s appeal overcame Carter’s criticisms, including of the ‘Reagan-Kemp-Roth’ tax cut proposal, which, as Carter had already pointed out in the same debate, Reagan’s ‘own running mate, George Bush, described as voodoo economics’.

The relatively new theory of supply-side economics held that tax cuts on the wealthy would jumpstart the economy, but as Reagan’s Director of the Office of Management and Budget, David Stockman, scandalously admitted to a journalist in 1981: ‘It’s kind of hard to sell “trickle-down,” so the supply-side formula was the only way to get a tax policy that was really “trickle-down.” Supply-side is “trickle-down” theory.’ In televised and radioed speeches Reagan charismatically inspired confidence in his tax cuts, which relied upon the economist Arthur Laffer’s argument that overly high tax rates were discouraging productivity, while lower tax rates would incentivize those in the highest tax brackets and thus generate economic growth and more government revenue overall. ‘A rising tide lifts all boats’, Reagan reassured African-American listeners in a radio broadcast on Martin Luther King Jr. Day in 1986. Believing in this formulation meant looking toward the wealthy for leadership, rather than having confidence in the abilities of all individuals. More feudalistic than capitalistic in spirit, it ran counter to the ethos of the American Dream of individual social mobility through hard work and talent.
In the interview cited in the epigraph, which took place on 10 December 1986 — the first articulation of Koons’ new project — he told his interviewers: ‘I envisage the formation of a total society where every citizen will be of the blue blood’.20 This statement of purpose paradoxically mixed the totalitarianism of ‘a total society’ with the egalitarianism of ‘every citizen’ and the elitism of ‘blue blood’. It was subversive in three respects. Firstly, in the context of the late Cold War, Reaganism was rhetorically positioned against the totalitarianism of the Soviet Union. Koons’ statement emphasized the unexpectedly totalitarian, conveniently predictive and fraudulently communistic character of Reaganism, in which the theory of trickledown or supply-side economics held as a principle that the wealth of the elite ‘will’ certainly spread, appropriately, to everyone in the near future. This was a promise of a less violent and more natural redistribution of wealth: a gentle ‘trickledown’, versus the sudden national seizure of all private assets that characterized communist revolutions. Secondly, Koons’ statement stressed the historical and logical impossibility of a ‘society’ in which ‘every citizen will be of the blue blood’. Because blue blood is inherited and necessarily relative and exclusionary, the notion that it could be reassigned in the present to everyone was nonsensical — although this was precisely the illusion generated by the period aesthetic and ethic of what could be called ‘aristocratizing kitsch’, a compound term defined at length below.

Finally, Koons’ statement was at once ironic and not ironic: he rephrased the logic of Reaganism in a manner that exposed its absurdity. Such a statement begins to explain how Koons came to be identified as a Reaganite during the 1980s and called, as recently as 2007, ‘the Ronald Reagan of sculpture’.21 And yet, it also points toward a critique of the social bonding that was taking place in the United States in the interest of the Reaganite elite. Koons would display and disfigure this social bonding, which was being facilitated by the period style of aristocratizing kitsch, in his Banality series of sculptures and exhibitions.

Reinventing Artist and Artwork ‘for a more public arena’

Koons’ reinvention qualifies as a distinct project, because it was so deliberately planned and carefully executed over the course of the late 1980s. It constituted both a dramatic departure from his previous work and a sustained attempt to realize a specific set of explicitly articulated objectives. That this reinvention ultimately involved the development of a public self, or persona, is crucial and, in retrospect, unsurprising. There was the period feeling that the mass media was replacing the primacy of lived reality.22 Leading American artists and critics were becoming highly conscious of their public personae.23 Also, one element of Koons’ biography — his former day job in finance — was coming to figure importantly in the interpretation of simulationism. Thus, even before his reinvention, Koons had been transformed from a private individual into a person whose intentions and character were assessed in print. Koons’ reinvention drew upon this critical discourse, resulting in an inextricable and compelling combination of actual and fictional identity.

Koons’ new project, which culminated in the Banality series, possessed remarkable coherence from its conceptualization to its materialization. After the Flash Art interview, Koons announced the project more formally in a seven-page, text-and-image work, titled Baptism, which was published in the November 1987 issue of Artforum and which Koons later characterized as a ‘manifesto piece’ (see plate 6, plate 7, plate 8 and plate 9).24 Only in retrospect can one see the idiosyncratic physical appearance of the 1988 Banality sculptures foretold in Baptism or the Flash Art interview, in which Koons declared: ‘My newer works will be on a larger scale; they are intended for a more
public arena’. Baptism employed precisely the kinds of ostensibly legible but actually opaque pictures and words that, in Koons’ view, had insulated the slightly more senior artists of the pictures movement and the earlier, pioneering conceptual artists from broader, real-world relevance. Baptism contained an explicitly class-based critique of the artistic lineage from which the simulationists, including Koons, descended. In a word, the aesthetics of American conceptual art were elitist, despite the fact that they had been partially developed by Sol LeWitt, Lawrence Weiner and others in an attempt to democratize artistic practice and access to contemporary art.

The Banality series was exhibited to the art world and yet figured another, larger world, which was worlds away from the contemporary art gallery. That there was such a gap between the social groups addressed and represented helped to make the artwork inherently political in import. Not only in import, however: The analysis of Baptism below demonstrates that the series was also political in intent, although self-evidently not with the objective of influencing government policy, even though the manifesto did contain American political references and allusions. Rather, the manifesto was addressed to the art world, like the Banality exhibition itself, which caused a sensation in the art world.

It could be argued that the Banality series contained an institutional critique of the New York art world, although not one directed at the usual suspects, namely trustees or collectors, but instead at certain critics and approaches, and more broadly, at the elitism and thus the provincialism of the ostensibly open-minded, democratic and urbane art world. What ultimately gave the Banality series its moral force was the unexpected coincidence of Koons’ critiques of the art world and the larger world, both of which were elitist, despite their rhetoric to the contrary and their political and ideological differences. These critiques were difficult, however, for the art world to appreciate, because of the provocative way in which Koons embraced the art market and aligned himself with the collectors who invested in his artwork.

**Separating from Simulationism**

Simulationism involved a local internal rebellion, on behalf of artists and in the name of aesthetics, against the leftist critical establishment that had organized and theorized the pictures movement in New York City in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In an important and often-cited panel discussion of the simulationists, titled ‘From Criticism to Complicity’ and published in Flash Art, Bickerton stated: ‘If we’re going to draw a difference, it’s going to have to be between the original program, as outlined by critics such as Douglas Crimp and Craig Owens, and the tendencies now beginning to emerge with younger artists’. Steinbach explained their relative position: ‘There is a stronger sense of being complicit with the production of desire, what we traditionally call beautiful seductive objects, than being positioned somewhere outside of it. In this sense the idea of criticality in art is also changing.’ Steinbach’s use of the term ‘complicit’ was polemical and self-deprecating, relating to his larger point that artists, or critics, were not entitled to a special, ‘critical’ space apart from the rest of the population.

It was not that the oppositionality of criticality was undesirable, but instead that criticality began to look like a convenient fiction. The notion of criticality, which originated in the 1930s and emerged in 1970, served to reconcile the longstanding dilemma that modern artists on the left faced between either political commitment or artistic experimentation. Criticality was a conceit that allowed for the possibility of both pursuits at once, in part, by adopting broad and vague standards for political commitment. The term was invented and popularized by the art critic and historian...
Donald Kuspit at a time when the American art world was being re-politicized and yet, in the main, still regarded political activism and artmaking as distinct activities. Criticality came into use to designate what Kuspit defined as utopian protest. This was an oxymoronic concept, which allowed for a politics in the abstract, that is, without the particulars of class, movements or issues or the messiness of action. Given, however, external and internal pressures, including the art market boom, Reaganism and the AIDS crisis, criticality seemed to be an increasingly insufficient strategy in the later 1980s.

Also, the integrity of criticality was cast into doubt as it became valuable on the art market. In 1988, the curators Tricia Collins and Richard Milazzo, who organized exhibitions of the simulationists, described the trajectory of the pictures movement: ‘We have watched’, they wrote, ‘the “picture” theory of art pass from the critique of reification into the reification of critique’. They observed a larger ‘crisis in criticism’: ‘While the artists have had to deal, sometimes rather perversely, with the exigencies of the marketplace, the critics have turned their own critical response into a kind of commodity’.

On the Flash Art panel, Steinbach admitted that ‘The anxiety of late capitalist culture is in us: in the futility we experience in value systems when faced with our reality; in the futility we find in moralizing as a way of determining what’s good or bad’. None disagreed with Steinbach’s assertion of ‘futility’, which came to stand for the moral attitude of the group, in combination with Halley’s often-cited statement: ‘I think it’s difficult nowadays to talk about a political situation: along with reality, politics is sort of an outdated notion. We are now in a post-political situation’. Halley’s comment, which is rarely quoted in full, started from the premise: ‘I think that Marxist thought really has to be integrated into one’s thinking, but I identify myself more with a New Left position, in which an absurdist or existential position is integrated with Marxian concepts’.

Criticisms of simulationism soon developed, including that the simulationists were cynical, and not only because of their cultural and political pessimism. The complicity acknowledged by the Flash Art panel appeared to be calculated and self-serving, as the movement quickly found commercial success. In the summer of 1986, the art critic and historian Hal Foster argued that the ‘cute-commodity’ art of Steinbach and Koons ‘does not critically repeat “the devaluation [of the object] to the status of a commodity” so much as capitalize on it’. Foster’s essay appeared in the catalogue of an exhibition that was held at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, the first of two museum exhibitions on the movement in rapid succession.

Despite their success and recognition, Koons publicly distanced himself from simulationism. Firstly, he rejected the interpretation of his artwork through the lens of postmodernist theory, including the ideas of the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, which was fundamental to the identity of the group.

My art has not been directed toward defining someone else’s philosophical points of view; it has often been admired for the way it has enhanced these points of view. Baudrillard envisages an end time when art will be purely nonfunctional, a term of economic exchange; I see the ultimate role of art as one of pure function.

When the Banality series debuted in late 1988, Koons reasserted: ‘I am not lost in the practice of studying theory’. He had further differentiated himself from the
simulationists in the Flash Art interview, in which he claimed to be ‘defining a new area’ and expressed a utopianism so fantastic that it appeared to be farcical:

My work, hopefully, is showing new possibilities of art. At the same time I am trying to look back, to see what attributes of art have been performing psychologically, and to work with those attributes in defining a new area, a situation in which the individual will have pure confidence in his position by virtue of the objects with which he surrounds himself. These objects will not be looked at in a contemplative way, but will only be there as a mechanism of security. And they will be accessible to all, for art can and should be used to stimulate social mobility. In fact I envisage the formation of a total society where every citizen will be of the blue blood. In such a society the individual will exist in a state of entropy, or rest, and will inhabit an environment decorated with object art that is beyond critical dialogue.43

While at that point Koons’ meaning was unclear, in hindsight we can observe that his resulting work responded, whether intentionally or coincidentally, to Foster’s critique of what he called commodity sculpture. Koons decided to discontinue his appropriation of mass-produced consumer goods and began to fabricate hand-made works of art in traditional media under the ironic title of the Banality series. These sculptures were the very opposite of banal readymades in that they were created by European artisans working in pre-industrial, luxury crafts. Moreover, whereas the simulationists – Koons among them – had given up on politics, Koons all of a sudden adopted a social and political agenda, which was, however, articulated with such hyperbole that it could easily have been read ironically and thus reaffirmed the charge of cynicism.

_Baptism as the Bad Guy_

In _Baptism_ (see plate 6, plate 7, plate 8 and plate 9),44 Koons opted to confirm the art world’s worst suspicions about him in its most widely read periodical. This was a way to accept, validate, reclaim and instrumentalize already existing criticisms as part of his reinvention. The title page figured the baptism of the artist as a celebrity in a high-contrast glamour shot taken by the photographer Greg Gorman (plate 6). Koons’ face, only slightly turned, was deviously caught in shadow, while his upper body was immersed in the oceanic blue background of the period’s most decadent studio portrait photography. The title’s claim that Koons was hereby undergoing a difficult, transformative process of initiation into the religion of mass culture was designed to scandalize neo-Marxist art critics.

Unlike the other simulationists, Koons had worked in finance. This fact was often mentioned prominently in the literature on simulationism. In The New Yorker, Tompkins wrote: ‘Jeff Koons, who supported himself for five years as a highly successful commodities broker with Smith, Barney, Harris Upham & Co., Inc., is said to be as adept at promoting his art work as he was at selling cotton futures.’45 Koons was applying skills and strategies that he had learned on Wall Street in the production and promotion of his artwork. Even though he had attended art school and later maintained that he worked on Wall Street in order to finance the creation of his artworks, such a formulation, as it circulated in journalistic accounts, contributed to the impression that he was originally a stockbroker, who had decided to become an artist as an extension of his career in finance and, moreover, as a business venture.

In the context of the Wall Street and resultant art market booms of the 1980s, this scenario did not seem so far-fetched. Indeed, it served to confirm the generality of
what the art critic Robert Hughes had earlier in the decade influentially termed ‘supply-side aesthetics’ with reference to Andy Warhol: ‘How can one doubt that Warhol was delivered by Fate to be the Rubens of this administration, to play Bernini to Reagan’s Urban VIII?’ 46 ‘Koons et al’, as Schwartzman put it in 1987, were ‘inheritors of the Warhol legacy’, producing ‘work that speaks to these materialistic times’. 47

By the time that Baptism debuted in November 1987, the art critic and curator Bruce Ferguson had already formulated a more elaborate critique of simulationism, taking Koons as an individual and his artwork as its basis:

This is art made by ostriches for peacocks. It is Reaganite art, akin to its politics and its TV; the problems of the very rich cynically posed as a region of democracy, where sliding signifiers of ‘ambiguity’ are used to reissue critique in the guise of a new policy of involvement or interaction. 48

Koons was aware of the social ramifications of consumer capitalism. In his simulationist-era Luxury and Degradation series of 1986, an installation view of which illustrated Ferguson’s essay, Koons discovered and demonstrated through class analysis and ideology critique how consumer capitalism was actively defining class structure through advertising and manipulating demand through marketing gimmicks, like collectible decanters (plate 3). Found advertisements for alcohol, which Koons had inked onto canvas, revealed the use of edifying, lofty abstraction for the upper classes and suggestive sexuality for the lower classes (plate 4 and plate 5). Koons later explained his intentions:

---

In the liquor advertisements, the purpose was not so much to direct the viewer as to define social class structure. For example, the Frangelico ads define a $45,000 and up income, and are more concerned with being lost in one’s own thought patterns. The public is being deceived in these advertisements on different levels of thought, because they are educated in abstraction and luxury on different levels of income.  

Koons emphasized the class-specificity of advertising aesthetics and collecting and display practices through the Jim Beam decorative decanters, which were cast in stainless steel and placed on pedestals, as if sculptures. And yet, these clearly
anti-consumerist artworks could serve their collectors as personal reminders and social displays of their self-awareness and superiority as consumers. Ferguson cited the television critic David Marc: “YUPPIEISM IS THE BELIEF THAT ONE’S TASTE IN MASS-PRODUCED GOODS IS SUPERIOR TO OTHER’S [sic] TASTE IN MASS-PRODUCED GOODS”.

To Foster’s critique of commodity sculpture, Ferguson added the argument that simulationism was serving a social class and a political movement: ‘New Right Yuppies’. By virtue of the fact that Koons had worked in finance and developed a business out of his art, Ferguson and others identified him as a yuppie and a member of the corporate elite who served its class interests. As with simulationism in the art world around 1986, there was much discussion in the mainstream press and political journalism about the new social type of the yuppie from 1984 through 1988. It emphasized the materialistic, consumerist, hedonistic, egotistical, cynical and apolitical nature of this demographic and, more profoundly, sought to determine its political preferences in the context of the presidential elections. While the ethical values of the young, upwardly mobile, urban professionals were fairly clear, their individual political commitments or total potential political power as a constituency were not and so became the subject of much speculation. Fundamentally, their successful upward mobility served a political function in the midst of Reaganism: it reinforced the nearly universal value of upward social mobility and testified to its continuing attainability in spite of Reagan’s new economic and social policies.

While Koons may well have never seen Ferguson’s essay, it seems doubtful that he was unaware of the increasingly political critiques of simulationism that were then circulating. The cheekiness of Koons’ ploy in Baptistism smacked of parody, and yet he played the period villain of the ‘stockbroker-turned-artist’ convincingly, despite the ham acting, because he was not only acting.

Reclaiming Kitsch

On the following page of Baptist Koons identified an artistic and political point of departure: a specific category of object within the common culture that can be
described as aristocratizing kitsch, or a mass-produced decorative art object that is made to resemble an anterior, hand-made, aristocratic art object (plate 7). Koons pictured a porcelain table top figure of Don Quixote from the ‘Collezione Laurenz’, which was designed by the Italian artisan Enzo Arzenton to be sold in the United States by the company Forest Lamps & Gifts, Inc. Koons credited this source for the image of the object in the issue’s table of contents. The New York City-based company imported porcelain that was made in the tradition of Capodimonte, the short-lived, eighteenth-century Neapolitan royal porcelain manufacture. The medium and style of the object served to give the appearance of membership in the upper classes that once patronized such manufactures. Only by reading the issue’s table of contents, which identified this object and the genuine Capodimonte porcelain, with which Baptism concluded, could
the viewer know the ontological difference between these ostensibly similar objects. This suggested Koons’ scepticism about the arbitrariness of aesthetic judgements against the former and in favour of the latter and that he was thereby zeroing in on the class politics of kitsch, which was being rigorously defined and questioned through these examples.

Importantly, the aristocratizing kitsch that Koons referenced in his work did not resemble the kitsch that the art critic Clement Greenberg had described in his landmark essay of 1939, ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’. Greenberg defined kitsch as ‘popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc., etc.’. This kitsch was plebeian and populist in both of the political contexts that Greenberg analysed: the democratic, capitalist United States; and totalitarian Soviet Russia (and, more widely, fascist Germany and Italy). According to Greenberg, kitsch had a demagogic, propagandistic function, serving to ‘flatter the masses by bringing all culture down to their level’. As a remedy, Greenberg advocated elite culture: ‘[…] it’s Athene whom we want: formal culture with its infinity of aspects, its luxuriance, its large comprehension’.

Nearly a half century later, in the age of Reagan, the prestige of aristocratic culture was serving instead a demagogic, propagandistic function in undermining the masses’ sense of identity, self-worth and actual wealth. In her 1986 book, Selling Culture: Bloomingdale’s, Diane Vreeland, and the New Aristocracy of Taste in Reagan’s America, the art historian Debora Silverman formulated a critique of ‘an important movement of aristocratic posturing in American culture and politics’:

The movement is centered in New York, with direct links, in both personnel and themes, to the center of political power in the White House of Ronald and Nancy Reagan. Though the movement originated before Reagan’s arrival, the 1981 inauguration of a president dedicated to visible wealth and unchecked ‘new luxury’ solidified its ranks and gave it political meaning and significance.
Silverman traced the circulation of certain antiquated styles between the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Costume Institute under the direction of Diana Vreeland, clothing designers like Ralph Lauren, and department stores like Bloomingdale’s, demonstrating that non-American, aristocratic styles, such as Imperial Chinese, French Rococo and English Edwardian, were serving to legitimize a new American aristocracy. It was because this consumerist power elite actually depended upon the mass market and consumerism for its wealth and status, Silverman argued, that it sought to obfuscate this reality through style.

The prominence and availability of these aristocratic styles for purchase allowed people to participate in the legitimation of the new Reagan elite and to imagine that they could one day belong to it. Greenberg had revealed how kitsch could facilitate the bonding of the social classes and thus the installation of a new political regime half a century earlier: ‘The encouragement of kitsch is merely another of the inexpensive ways in which totalitarian regimes seek to ingratiate themselves with their subjects’. While Reagan was evidently not establishing a totalitarian state comparable to the Soviet Union or Nazi Germany, which were Greenberg’s concerns, the New Right was reordering society in favour of the wealthy, and the lower classes had to be convinced of the new system’s legitimacy and advantages.

Supply-side economics provided one argument, but that was a theoretical model for the future growth of the whole society; it did nothing to gratify immediate individual desires. Ralph Lauren was ‘selling a dream of elegance and the good life’, ran the headline of a Time magazine cover story on the designer in 1986. One could purchase the look of a life of leisure and live out one component of the American Dream, if only in a fantasy costume, on the cheap. This short-circuited and upended the American myth of rags to riches, undermining its democratic spirit. ‘There’s no nobility in poverty anymore’, declared Gordon Gekko in Wall Street of 1987, while Reagan cut the budgets of welfare programmes, arguing that President Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty of 1964 had made poverty worse.

The condescension that Greenberg exhibited toward kitsch in the 1930s appeared cruel in the context of 1980s elitism. Among Koons’ peers, Steinbach articulated this cruelty as part of a group exhibition (which included Koons) at the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago in 1986:

I’m acknowledging the validity of common objects. This is very much related to the snobbishness of the pervasive use of the word ‘kitsch’ which identifies a certain object as dismissible, that is, not worthy of being experienced, or if experienced, only by a low class of people who have much less refined feelings and sense of things than we do. The word doesn’t just qualify the object. But it’s one of those words that doesn’t have an objective meaning. It’s used culturally, a class kind of experience. It closes off meaning. It says you can’t experience these things because they are categorically defined.

Steinbach’s shelf-like sculptural arrangements forced viewers to confront such class biases, as if his store-bought objects on sculptural platforms were themselves self-aware subjects in an artificial social situation. It is worth noting that Steinbach’s work was presented by the artist and analysed by others in terms of kitsch, before that of Koons. Whereas Steinbach was validating ‘common objects’, Koons would, in relative terms, ultimately go on the attack in the Banality series, presenting the iconography of mass culture in the media of the elite with an eye toward caricature and satire. This effectively redeployed the weapon that had long been used to diminish the
lower classes against the followers of a certain fashion. It exposed the unintentional kitschiness of the contemporary fashion for all things aristocratic.

Between the 1930s and the 1980s, the function of kitsch had changed, as had the status of the American middle class, in which the vast majority of Americans had previously confidently counted themselves. The state policies and economic circumstances that had allowed for the creation of this middle class — the largest middle class in modern history, as we say today — were under threat by the 1980s and, with it, the mythical American Dream. Whereas in the 1930s kitsch threatened to dominate culture and allowed people to cultivate middle-class aspirations — which were both problematic propositions from the double perspective of Greenberg, who was a modernist and a socialist — the trend for aristocratizing kitsch of the 1980s testified to an equally threatening but more pathetic and hopeless desire for impossibly high social status.

**Allegorizing Reaganite Politics**

*Baptism* was allegorical in structure, which would not have been surprising to its audience, given that allegory was the preferred mode of the pictures artists, and Koons was working in their wake.68 The political nature of this allegory may initially appear enigmatic, but it belonged to an already vast and sophisticated body of anti-Reagan literature.69 After *Baptism*’s title page, christening the artist a celebrity, the manifesto unfolds in three dialectical sets of facing pages, with tensions throughout between European and American culture, elitism and populism, aesthetics and politics. The figure of Cervantes’ Don Quixote on horseback has several functions: it identifies the manifesto as a satire of virtue, both knightly and artistic; it serves as a surrogate for Koons and as a character within the allegory that follows; finally, it admits the frankly quixotic character of Koons’ reinvented artistic persona and project, as they were being introduced.

Don Quixote with the words ‘to BE’ could also be seen as a personification of America’s ultimate cowboy, Ronald Reagan, who was often photographed on horseback during this period (see plate 18). It might further be viewed, metonymically, as a representation of the new, legendary post-war American corporate elite of ‘capitalist cowboys’ from the sunbelt, whose wealth and ultraconservative agendas, according to contemporary sociologists, had helped to bring Reagan to power.70 The political significance of this miniature, satirical equestrian statue is confirmed as it charges onto the next page into what has been labelled in the issue’s table of contents as George Washington’s pew in St Paul’s Chapel in New York.

As the text reads from one page to the next, the charging figure threatens to assume the American presidency with the words ‘FOREVER FREE’. As the dialectical manifesto’s thesis, this first set of facing pages describes how the Reagan Revolution was remaking the United States in a post-war conservative model. Reagan often invoked the example of the Founding Fathers, and ‘freedom’ became the conservative movement’s rallying cry during the mid-1980s.71 Formerly a liberal value of the left, ‘freedom’ came to characterize the new free-market economy and free society, opposed, by this logic, not only to the Soviet Union’s central planning and single-party police state, but also to the similarly meddlesome and burdensome liberal welfare state. As in *Baptism*, Koons would throughout his enterprise provocatively pun on the originally liberal and new conservative meanings of ‘freedom’, which were only contradictory values from an increasingly minority and oppositional leftist perspective.

In the next set of facing pages, photographs of four objects from the Metropolitan Museum of Art have been cropped and collaged, so that they seem to interact with one another in an arrangement that the installation of the *Banality* exhibitions would
share, suggesting animate objects and even speaking subjects in a common celestial blue space, with the words ‘in the POWER Glory SPIRITUALITY and ROMANCE’ (see plate 8). If the first two pages introduce the contemporary American political target of Koons’ critique, then these facing pages display the kind of early modern European figurative sculpture and decorative art that Koons would weaponize in the Banality series of sculptures, which would be produced in Germany and Italy. The Banality series would consist of only three media: polychromatic wood, and gilded and painted porcelain and mirror, evoking the kind of antiquated art that once decorated aristocratic homes and religious institutions, had since been donated to museums and was then fashionable again with the Reagan elite, who drew upon the museums for their inspiration. As Silverman argued, ‘The 1980s mass market moguls are cultural cannibals; they absorb the historical materials of art-museum exhibitions for the purposes of advertising, public relations, and sales campaigns’.72

It was during Koons’ travels in Europe, the artist has stated, that he recognized the possibilities of working in the Baroque and Rococo styles.73 Whereas in Europe these styles were innocuous, no longer serving the institutions and classes (such as the Catholic Church and aristocracy) that had developed them, in the United States the Baroque and the Rococo were used to generate and legitimate a new elite in the 1980s, by assuming, in the grand old manner of the American elite of the Gilded Age, an older, European pedigree. This new elite promised that the glitter and gold of the Baroque and Rococo would trickle down to the masses, if only they would reach for it. Against the inherent humiliation and inevitable futility of waiting for the glitter and gold to fall from the clouds, Koons would instead ground the iconography of the Banality series in mass culture, disrupting this top-down social dynamic through a massive uplift from below. This uplift would depend upon the recommunication of this mass culture through the sophisticated, elite and traditional media, in which the aura of ‘POWER Glory SPIRITUALITY and ROMANCE’ inhered.

Finally, in a twofold reversal of the first set of images, the choir and first rows of pews of St Paul’s Chapel on the left, with the words, ‘LIBERATED in the MAINSTREAM’, are set against the destruction of a Capodimonte piece (plate 9). The last page rhymes with the manifesto’s first page, which featured the figure of Don Quixote in the

tradition of Capodimonte, but contrasted in its violent negativity and in that the vase of flowers in porcelain was identified in the issue’s table of contents as the genuine, eighteenth-century aristocratic article. The thesis of the manifesto is thus reversed in its resolution: not the President’s pew, but the church’s choir and nave are viewed euphorically from above, just as an original piece of eighteenth-century porcelain is violently struck and destroyed. That the satirical capitalist cowboy is replaced by a moralizing symbol of the transience of earthly goods suggests their dialectical relationship and the first prong of what can be called Koons’ critique: attack the new Reaganite elite through the consumer capitalism upon which it depends, materially and morally. Consumerism meant that the masses were buying into the system, literally and figuratively, by transferring their wealth to the consumerist elite and by placing their confidence in it. What if Koons’ artwork could expose the contemporary fashion for aristocratizing kitsch as ridiculous, fraudulent, ugly and even dangerous?

Critiquing Criticality

The Capodimonte porcelain is hit with a hammer between the words ‘Criticality Gone’. The euphoric ‘LIBERATED in the MAINSTREAM’ of the previous page casts criticality, by contrast, as oppressive and elitist. These charges would have been familiar to Koons’ former fellow simulationists. But Koons raised the stakes significantly in declaring criticality ‘gone’. He also responded to the charge that the simulationists were creating visually appealing artworks by hinting at a new iconoclastic visual strategy to come in the Banality series, which critics would find unsightly: ‘The aggregation of rebarbative effigies at the Sonnabend Gallery was a vision of an aesthetic hell’, wrote Danto on the New York exhibition.74

What is criticality in this picture, if it is being expelled? Is the criticality that is gone the piece of Capodimonte porcelain that is destroyed? Is criticality, in other words, a fragile, pretentious object? Not only the flowers painted yellow and pink but also their fictional container of grey tones, mimicking burnished metal, pretend to preciousness. Should this still-life be seen as classical, moralizing vanitas imagery, turned into the commodity fetishist’s prized possession and smashed to pieces? Or is criticality somehow associated with the act of iconoclasm? Is criticality the action of

the common household hammer exploding the aristocratic decorative arts object? And
is this an act of class violence? The iconoclast is only barely visible, and yet gender, race
and class are discernible in the gripping hand of a white man, wearing a white-collar
dress shirt, who is maybe Koons himself (the only person otherwise pictured in the
manifesto). The final pages frame Koons’ opposition to criticality as a deliberate, self-
conscious and class-conscious critical gesture.

And yet, critics resisted the idea that Koons could be a social critic, in part because he
sowed doubt about his character and intentions and in part because earlier expectations
of what constituted critique were being applied to the interpretation of his artwork.
‘If Jeff Koons’ work is about class struggle’, Hughes was quoted as saying in 1989, ‘I am
Maria of Romania’, continuing: ‘Only a fool could believe his work has anything to do
with class struggle – he probably knows as much about the subject as Clem Greenberg
knows about the history of fly tying in Scotland in the 1890s’. In the much-debated
compromise between aesthetics and politics in the late 1930s that was formalized as
criticality in 1970, a more militant engagement in class struggle was suppressed and
redirected into a more symbolical stance against capitalism. In ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’,
Greenberg claimed that ‘Capitalism in decline finds that whatever of quality it is still
capable of producing becomes almost invariably a threat to its own existence’.

The idea that the avant-garde could somehow sabotage capitalism by producing
artwork of quality in opposition to kitsch persisted, although it became increasingly
difficult to support, morally as well as financially, as the market for contemporary
American art developed, from the late 1950s onward, with a ferocity that could not
have been foreseen during the Great Depression. Furthermore, the socialism that
seemed imminent to Greenberg towards the end of the Great Depression and on the
eve of the Second World War never arrived. Capitalism was a foregone conclusion for
Koons’ cohort. The struggle was not waged on behalf of the working class in pursuit of
socialism but, as the sociologist Charles Simpson observed about Soho artists in 1981,
as part of the middle class, in order to maintain its values and lifestyle. Ironically,
Greenberg was a Trotskyite in the midst of depoliticization when he penned his most
celebrated essay, whereas it was politicization that Koons sought by some means
in late 1986. Criticality rose to prominence as a term as part of a broader critique
of Greenbergian modernism in the 1970s and 1980s. Still, it served to maintain
a distinction between aesthetics and politics and, in effect, continued to allow for
the evasion of politics in good faith. Importantly, Koons did not subscribe to a later
premise of Greenbergian modernism: that modern art was historically, and should
continue to remain, apolitical. In a filmed interview in 1989, Koons argued:

Artists used to be the masters of propaganda. Before the French Revolution
you could not have a revolution without having an artist be in charge of the
propaganda. We were the great seducers. We were the manipulators. But
after the revolution as subjective things came more and more into play and
as modernism grew, the idea of the objective and having impact in the world
around us was diminished. And other powers to be continued to grow and
became more and more inflated and with a better understanding developing
depth of what these tools were, as we were losing our abilities. This would be the
entertainment industry and the advertising industry. I believe that we are still
the best. And can manipulate these tools better than anyone else. We originally
created them, and I would like to see us regain them, at least to absorb this
vocabulary back into our activity and to assume the responsibility of being able
to try to be the most effective force around – in communication.
Koons thus foregrounded politics in his historical account of modern art, beginning with the French Revolution. He argued that modernism constituted a turn away from engagement in the world, not the starting point that Greenberg celebrated in his essay, ‘Modernist Painting’, of 1960. Indeed, Koons considered mass culture to be an innovation of the avant-garde. For those, however, who self-consciously associated themselves with the tradition of the American avant-garde, mass culture was formally tabooed territory, since Greenberg had famously diametrically opposed mass culture to the avant-garde in 1939 in ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’, drawing upon the then-recent writings of the Frankfurt School. Koons’ aberrant position that artists could reclaim the mass culture that was rightfully theirs may have seemed misguided if one subscribed to the Greenbergian view of modernism, or overly optimistic and arrogant, given what all acknowledged was the near total omnipotence of mass culture. If, however, one accepted the possibility of Koons’ position, then the majority of artists and critics appeared defeatist by comparison.

Koons thus differed in his viewpoints on capitalism, mass culture and politics from the baselines that Greenberg had established and that were being essentially maintained, despite the internal challenges of critics to Greenbergian modernism in the 1970s and 1980s. Greenberg’s and Koons’ analyses of kitsch were, nonetheless, arguably similar in that both emphasized the political implications of kitsch. Koons ultimately revealed the valiant and poignant aspects of kitsch as a sign of class struggle and class violence from the perspectives of the still aspiring and the already arrived. The Banality series would emphasize the class violence that was at once operative in the art world and the society at large. This violence was inherent in the derogatory term, kitsch, just as aristocratizing kitsch was serving a counter-revolution.

Advertising and Branding as an Anti-Beuys

For the Banality exhibitions, Koons created a series of four now well-known advertisements, which were published in Artforum, Arts, Art in America and Flash Art in late 1988 (plate 10 and plate 11). In their emphasis on beauty, youth, gender and sexuality, and in their communication of cool, fun, humour, irony and daring, they resembled the famous and by-then classical ads of Ed Ruscha in bed with women (1967), Judy Chicago in the boxing ring (1970) and Lynda Benglis with a dildo (1974), all of which had been published in Artforum. They differed, however, in that the series amounted to an extensive and targeted advertising campaign of an artist who had already been accused of commercialism. Also, they involved professional set design and a more theatrical staging of the artist’s persona.

In particular, they ironically recalled Joseph Beuys’ performances with animals, blackboard lectures and revolutionary mantras (plate 12 and plate 13). Koons posed with animals and as if he were teaching students in front of a chalkboard, on which was scrawled ‘EXPLOIT THE MASSES’ and ‘BANALITY AS SAVIOUR’. During the 1980s, Beuys was considered a problematic conceptual artist, especially within the neo-Marxist critical establishment that Koons sought to challenge. This was not least of all because of Beuys’ self-absolving mythologizing of his Nazi past, but, most importantly here, because of his pseudo-spiritual, pseudo-political rhetoric (‘simple-minded utopian drivel lacking elementary political and educational practicality’) and his only apparently revolutionary and actually deeply opportunistic politics (a ‘public-relations move’), according to the influential arguments of the art critic and historian Benjamin Buchloh in 1980.

Seizing upon Beuys’ rhetorical strategies and negative American reception, Koons was presenting himself as a Beuysian figure that mocked Beuys’ theatrics, leftist politics...
and slogans. Underlying the mockery, Koons was revealing a deeper connection, which was described by curators close to him before the publication of the advertisements. In the summer of 1988, Collins and Milazzo argued that Koons was constructing a ‘social sculpture’ in Beuys’ model. This goes a long way toward characterizing Koons’ reinvention, which involved a turnabout from the lineage of Marcel Duchamp, Andy Warhol and Donald Judd, in which Foster had located Koons in 1986.

In his reinvented project, Koons was seeking the kind of public presence in American culture that Beuys had created for himself in West Germany, where Koons spent time in the late 1980s. The art historian Isabelle Graw has demonstrated how, relative to his reception in New York, Koons was defended in Cologne, which Graw attributes to the fact that, in the Rhineland, artists from Beuys to Martin Kippenberger had already cultivated public personae, that served as supplements to their artwork. Koons can arguably be seen as another example of the set of American artists recently identified by the art historian Cara Jordan as influenced by Beuys’ concept of social
sculpture to develop a socially engaged public art during the Reagan and Bush years – albeit, in Koons’ case, partially ironically.88

In Beuys studies, there is a recent debate about whether and to what extent to interpret Beuys as ironic or sincere, comic or tragic, humorous or serious.89 When compared to Koons, the irony, comedy and humour that Beuys may have intended appears much reduced. Still, Koons may have picked up on these qualities. Regardless, and despite the fact that Koons invoked the model of Beuys ironically in the advertisements, the reference was not only ironic. Indeed, even before his reinvention of late 1986, Koons might have taken artistic inspiration from Beuys: one can, for instance, compare the aquaria of the Equilibrium series of 1985 to Beuys’ vitrines. As part of his reinvention, however, Koons arguably turned to Beuys, who had recently died in January 1986, as a model in a more substantial way: by making more traditionally
creative sculpture with an emphatic materiality that would ideally be public in address and site; by developing a persona; and by elaborating a utopian social and political agenda, which was so far-fetched that it cast doubt – seemingly intentionally in Koons’ case – upon the intentions and even the character of the artist.

In particular, Koons drew upon Beuys’ language and discourse, also conceptually and likewise not only ironically. Beuys’ famous statement, Kunst = Kapital, both acknowledged the current status of art within the capitalist system and presented it as an alternative and superior system of exchange.90 This corresponded with the stance that Koons took in late 1986, except that, for Koons, art’s imbrication in capitalism was a utility: ‘Art can define ultimate states of being in a more responsible way than economics because art is concerned with philosophy as well as with the marketplace’, Koons stated in the Flash Art interview.91 The idea that art could counteract the current economics resembled the existing model of criticality in its components and ideology, but amounted to a more confrontational approach. While Beuys organized people into a political party, Koons’ proposition could only have been interpreted as further provocation, given his business practices, which he was helping to make notorious in the New York art world.

In one of the advertisements for Banality, Koons confirmed the criticism that he was a bourgeois capitalist pig (see plate 10). It was published in the same issue of Flash Art as a special supplement on conceptual art, which was organized, according to its editor, Mary Anne Staniszewski, in order to ‘foreground [...] recent art that has appropriated and reworked conceptual strategies in order to function as something more than fuel for the commercial system’.92 By then, it was old news that conceptual art had failed to evade the art market and had instead inspired increased entrepreneurship.93 Already in 1973, the art critic Lucy Lippard lamented the commercialization of conceptual art, while in 1974 Roy Bongartz chronicled in The New York Times all the alternative ways (tickets, documentation, receipts, books) in which artworks were then being marketed.94 ‘The artist turned businessman and worse is one of the legacies of conceptual art’, observed the British artist Michael Baldwin, who had co-founded Art & Language, in the same Flash Art supplement.95

Koons embraced this legacy, rather than refused it. This did not disqualify him as a conceptualist. On the contrary, in an interview with Staniszewski in the supplement, he framed his market-mindedness in terms of conceptual art:

As far as conceptualism is concerned I am interested in total coordination: to have as strong a market as possible, to be able to create as great a stage as possible, and also to have a critical dialogue taking place.96

His celebration of the market and pursuit of profits would, however, alienate him from his neo-conceptualist or simulationist peers, like Halley and Meyer Vaisman, who publicly distanced themselves from him shortly after the Banality exhibitions.97
Accounting for Banality as Critique

The Banality exhibitions were held at three sites: the Galerie Max Hetzler in Cologne from 13 to 30 November 1988; the Sonnabend Gallery in New York from 19 November to 23 December 1988; and the Donald Young Gallery in Chicago from 3 December to 7 January 1989. The discussion in the mainstream and specialized press was dominated – at Koons’ direction – by the artworks’ high prices (up to $250,000) and sales (mostly sold out). In interviews, Koons boasted about his desire to make money and be famous. Nevertheless, and maybe partially as a consequence of his strategy of ‘total coordination’, there was an intense ‘critical dialogue’, certainly in the New York art world. As Danto testified:

In the waning weeks of 1988, it was impossible to meet an art-worlder who was not burning to know what one thought about IT. IT could refer to nothing but the Sonnabend Gallery exhibition of recent works by Jeff Koons.

It forced viewers to piece together a picture puzzle of internally consistent, socially divided objects, which thereby had coherence as a group. Firstly, viewers had to come to terms with a socially specific iconography and classify it. This exercise instantly revealed the class bias of the judgement of taste. ‘[V]arious grades of kitsch commonly found in living rooms with vinyl slipcovers, Toys R Us-stocked nurseries, and knotty-pine-paneled dens. They represent genres that educated folk tend to regard generically, with blanket disdain’, explained the art critic Peter Schjeldahl. Danto described ‘an order of imagery so far beyond the pale of good or even bad taste as to be aesthetically, and certainly artistically, disenfranchised’. This iconography was also beyond the pale geographically, belonging to the visual culture of American suburbia. Danto elaborated:
I am referring to such things as cute figurines in thruway gift shops; the plaster trophies one wins for knocking bottles over in cheap carnivals; marzipan mice; the dwarves and reindeer that appear at Christmastime on suburban lawns or the crèche figures before firehouses in Patchogue and Mastic [...].

Precisely because this iconography was 'disdain[ed]' and 'disenfranchised', it seemed triply displaced, as it appeared in traditional, elite media on view in a contemporary art gallery in the big city. This manoeuvre linked the traditional elite with the contemporary art world and characterized a crowd of viewers who might have thought about themselves otherwise as a bastion of the establishment, provincial in their urbanity and vulgar in their social striving. 'You could call it an act of aggression on Koons' part – the revenge of the smalltown Pennsylvania boy on the powers-that-be and the nearly-arrived who collect art', wrote the art critic Amie Wallach in the Long Island newspaper, Newsday. Collectively, the artworks made a subversive and concerted claim to power. Their cultural foreignness, figurativeness, number, scale, intense colouration, materiality and elevation on top of pedestals, which raised the objects to roughly human heights, made this claim feel human, interpersonal, even real and threatening. 'To stroll into the Sonnabend Gallery today is to be gang-banged by a crew of inanimate demons', recounted Schjeldahl in the Manhattan weekly, 7 days.

That this aesthetic experience was physical and psychological, as well as spectacular and theatrical, can be partially explained by Koons’ incorporation of minimalist ideas and techniques. In late 1986, Koons termed his artworks ‘objects’ in the minimalist manner of Judd and explained that he installed his works in ‘a minimalist context’, defining it thus: ‘Within each piece there is a sense of air, of well-being, of equality in space. There’s no territorial dispute taking place.’ Unlike the minimalists, however, Koons would arguably seek to generate a ‘territorial dispute’ in the Banality series. As in minimalism, these ‘specific objects’ possessed more ‘power’ and ‘interest’, to use Judd’s terminology, than either sculpture or painting, while their proportions endowed them with the ‘strong gestalt sensation’ that Robert Morris had likewise sought in his Untitled (L-Beams).

Like Morris’ Untitled (L-Beams), Koons installed the Banality works at varying angles and positions within the gallery space, placing figurative sculptures, however, on minimalist plinths. These compensated for differences in size and gave the individual works a unified group character, as well as anthropomorphic presences. Also out of the minimalist repertoire, there were mirror works on the walls, such as Wishing Well (see plate 2). These demanded self-awareness and ultimately class consciousness, forcing viewers to consider themselves in relation to the disparate class characters of the category of objects evoked, the media on display, the gallery site, other viewers and the gilded and alternatively non-gilded mirrors themselves. Viewers were thus caught, psychologically and socially, between the extremes of identification with or differentiation from either the ‘disenfranchised’ or the elite. Wishing Well, for instance, promised viewers an aristocratic vision of themselves and yet frustrated that desire by superimposing gilded frames within gilded frames onto the viewers’ reflections, thus fragmenting what might have been a coherent view.

In the Banality series, Koons partially channelled an implicitly utopian minimalist installation space, which Morris characterized thus:

Such work which has the feel and look of openness, extendibility, accessibility, publicness, repeatability, equanimity, directness, immediacy, and has been formed by clear decision rather than groping craft would seem to have a few
social implications, none of which are negative. Such work would undoubtedly be boring to those who long for access to an exclusive specialness, the experience of which reassures their superior perception.  

But Koons modelled a vivid dystopia by presenting a class-specific and conflicted ‘feel and look’ – to borrow Morris’ words – and by emphasizing ‘groping craft’ with its ever-negative ‘social implications’. Whereas the minimalists celebrated American industrial power, as would Koons in his Celebration series of the mid-1990s, in Banality Koons instead sabotaged the same ‘long[ing] for access to an exclusive specialness’ by reversing the operation of the period style of aristocratizing kitsch: he had fabricated hand-made, limited-edition sculptures that resembled mass-produced, plebeian tchotchkes.

Even though minimalists, like Morris, had envisioned a public space in their exhibitions, they had not reached the public at large, as had pop artists or public figures like politicians or entertainers. Without irony and nevertheless critically, Koons proclaimed in 1988, ‘I see myself as an entertainer’, with an explicitly political rationale:

About being an entertainer – if you go into an exhibition, you’ll find few people there; the interaction art has with the public is very small. I feel that to be able to exploit areas of the entertainment industry, to bring this into art, is a positive for increasing the power base.  

Entertainers played starring roles in the Banality series, as in Buster Keaton and Michael Jackson and Bubbles (plate 14 and plate 15).

Buster Keaton would serve as the pillar of the installations, with the figure surveying, his hand to his forehead, the other sculptures from the corner of the gallery spaces (see plate 1). The sculpture directly quoted a publicity still of Keaton’s silent film, Our Hospitality of 1923 (plate 16). Life-size and yet, at 167 centimetres or around 65 inches in height, considerably smaller than the average viewer, the sculpture appropriated Keaton’s own gag about his famously diminutive size for an art world audience that grew up on television and, even if sceptical of mass culture in general, deeply admired the early masterpieces of the Golden Age of Hollywood. Like Don Quixote in Baptism, this comical equestrian figure served as a surrogate for Koons, a sign of his intentions and a symbol of the target of his satire. Buster Keaton can be considered its own ‘manifesto piece’, which declared Koons’ connection to and difference from the pictures artists before an art world audience in much the same vein as the Flash Art panel discussion of the simulationists or Baptism.  

An actor on horseback and an entertainer with a chimpanzee could readily have been seen as common tropes of anti-Reagan political satire, which emphasized the President’s Hollywood origins. The White House was then occupied by an actor who had starred with a chimpanzee in the film Bedtime for Bonzo, while in his role as President, Reagan often had himself photographed on horseback, playing the American cowboy on his California ranch (plate 17 and plate 18). Reagan displayed precisely the pretentions that Buster Keaton mocked in the still that Buster Keaton cited and betrayed none of Keaton’s self-consciousness, despite the fact that Reagan was acting in life and not for a film.

To Keaton’s parody of the heroic figure of the American male on horseback, who is virile, visionary, strong, stoic, solitary and dynamic, Koons added one tragicomic touch: a vaguely symbolic, cartoonish, canary-like bird on the figure’s shoulder that, like the figure, looks past the viewer. The bird’s beady black eyes and wings thrust backwards, as if in fright, point toward a specific danger in plain sight. It directs the dramatic impact of Keaton’s legendary gaze, forcing the viewer to scrutinize Keaton’s
facial expression for similar signs of fear or recognition and to look backwards, behind his or her own shoulder, at the other sculptures. This creates the conditions for, and yet denies the viewer the pleasure of, dramatic irony and the superior knowledge that being an actual person, observing a fictional scenario, might allow. Buster Keaton thereby situated viewers physically, emotionally and mentally as vulnerable figures within the fictive field of the exhibition space.

Michael Jackson was, by contrast, an emphatically contemporary and immediately recognizable figure, who had adopted the emperor’s new clothes and thus differently posed the same broader cultural problem of the gap between fantasy and reality. Michael Jackson and Bubbles depicts him in the old-regime military uniform that the pop star wore in the early 1980s, until he switched in the later 1980s to a more punk-rock look, like the one that Koons himself sported when photographed at the Banality exhibition in New York (see plate 1 and plate 15). That Jackson’s attire was so exaggerated and had
already been discarded by 1988 made it an easily quotable instance of the period’s peculiar paradox of aristocratizing kitsch.

These sculptures could be compared, within avant-garde culture, to the Ramones’ ‘Bonzo Goes to Bitburg’ of 1985, or to Richard Prince’s series of Cowboys produced throughout the 1980s, which was by contrast appreciated as a pointed political critique of Reaganism. But the Banality series did not refer or allude so specifically to a single act or tendency of the President. Instead, it distilled the social dynamics of the elitist society that Reagan had helped to create and with which he was associated at the time by the left. Despite the critical and even liberatory potential of Koons’ inversion of aristocratizing kitsch, the picture was unnerving, and not only because of Koons’ ironic tone.

While not a Marxist, Koons, like Marx, emphasized individual and collective class conflict and posited a classless society as its desirable endpoint, albeit ironically. Rather than calling for the dictatorship of the proletariat as the best intermediary solution, Koons would collapse Marx’s social division between exploitative bourgeoisie and exploited proletariat and more pragmatically (and pathetically) advocate self-exploitation instead, submitting himself as an exemplar of this approach: ‘I’m trying to exploit myself and to do everything that’s possible within my limitations. And I think everybody should be doing that.’ This idea took one of the major critiques of capitalism by Marx – that of exploitation – and made it even sadder, scarier and uglier in one respect: in Koons’ model of capitalism, individuals dehumanized themselves.
not others, in order to succeed. Koons’ notion of self-exploitation would preserve the American Dream of upward social mobility and yet eviscerate this Dream, emphasizing its costs and removing its rewards of respectability and stability.

Where some might have seen this self-exploitation as humiliating, tragic even, pessimistic and ultimately unconvincing, Koons presented it as exciting and empowering. His gilded white porcelain sculpture of Michael Jackson (see plate 15) foregrounded the then controversial physical and cultural whiteness that had allowed Jackson to become the King of Pop. In interviews throughout the late 1980s, Koons celebrated Jackson as his personal hero, emphasizing Jackson’s sacrifice of his race as a bold and strategic choice:

For [Jackson’s] photograph to be hanging on the walls of pre-pubescent and pubescent white middle-class girls, there were certain things he had to do. He had to make himself a mulatto, to make himself more white. That’s radicality. That’s abstraction. I’m much more interested in that kind of abstraction than in any formalist idea. I point to that sort of thing because it’s an example of what everybody faces every day of their lives; when they have an opportunity to be really effective, that’s exactly the moment when they back off. It’s as plain as day. Effectiveness is power and the exercise of power. And that’s what separates the men from the boys.
**Picturing Reaganisms**

Whereas the Banality series could be seen, in retrospect, as a critique of Reaganism according to its contemporary political definition (which was how Koons himself employed the term in the opening epigraph), it could also be considered, likewise in retrospect, as an appreciation of the cultural dimension of Reaganism, which the performance historian Timothy Raphael characterized a decade ago as mass-mediated performance. Whereas Reagan’s Hollywood past served as fodder for anti-Reagan critics during the 1980s, in Raphael’s account it provides the beginnings of a cultural explanation for his political rise to the presidency, which could not be explained by ideology alone. Thanks to his training in the mass media, according to Raphael, Reagan was able to represent, in his person, the American body politic in a way that deeply affected and inspired people, whether or not they thought about his policies.

17 Promotional shot of Ronald Reagan and Bonzo the chimpanzee for Bedtime for Bonzo, 1951. Photo: Underwood Archives/Getty Images.
More broadly, Reagan embodied the further interpenetration of the formerly distinct cultural and political spheres, revealing the potential or even actual political power of cultural actors, like musicians or artists. Koons sought for his artwork and for himself ‘a more public arena’ of the kind that in his estimation Jackson and Reagan had generated for themselves through politically calculated performances of the self, which resonated with the American people as a whole and thus in turn governed the country. A decade earlier, in 1977, in an often-cited passage from the pictures exhibition catalogue, Crimp wrote what must have shortly thereafter read as political prophecy:

To an ever greater extent our experience is governed by pictures, pictures in newspapers and magazines, on television and in the cinema. Next to these pictures firsthand experience begins to retreat, to seem more and more trivial. While it once seemed that pictures had the function of interpreting reality, it now seems that they have usurped it.119

Within the Banality series, Buster Keaton best expressed Koons’ attitude to this new reality. Even though he may have opposed the ideological content of Reaganism, Koons embraced the new political power of mass culture, which Reagan’s election demonstrated. Only a film buff, however, would have been familiar with the reference of Buster Keaton to Our Hospitality, whose critical and comedic picture of a long-lost America contradicted the then current, deeply nostalgic and likewise specifically American mythology of Reagan and Reaganism, whose idealizing representations of reality and history prevailed during the period according to the historians Eric Hobsbawm and Sean Wilentz.120

Ironically titled, Our Hospitality parodied the Hatfield–McCoy feud of the nineteenth century, in which these two families fought endlessly, killing their enemies and revenging their losses, across generations and state lines in the rural South. In Keaton’s telling, his character, Willie McKay, realizes that the elder Canfield will not allow his sons to kill him in their home and thus survives by becoming their permanent house guest. Whereas Keaton’s film emphasized this society’s backwardness, lawlessness and violence (no doubt relative to the modernity of his civilized, sophisticated, urban film audiences in the 1920s), in Reaganite mythology, the male hero rides solo in the west, free from any social ties, state authority, and even modernity. ‘Home, in Reaganite mythology’, Wilentz has written, ‘was a re-created bygone place of close-knit families and neighbors’.121 Even if the viewer could not appreciate the filmic reference of the sculpture, once the viewer learned its title, it might have prompted a comparison, especially for those in the art world, between the comic genius of the silent era and the ‘B’-movie actor, television host and president, with whose politics Koons was identified at the time by art critics, like Ferguson.

Although President Reagan was a lame duck when the Banality exhibitions opened, the popularity of the Reagan Revolution had just been confirmed in the landslide election of Vice-President George H. W. Bush. The exhibition was received as a victory lap after this election result. Schjeldahl concluded his review:

The future pertains to a new oligarchy which, after years of throwing money at art of all sorts, at last has in Koons a major artist specifically attuned to its finer feelings: lust for possessions and anxiety about the lower classes. This oligarchy has at least four more years to develop a really big-time style, the last I checked.122

In a manner that recalled Hughes’ neologism, ‘supply-side aesthetics’, Koons was considered a court artist in service of the same elite as Warhol and Reagan.123 As a consequence of Reagan’s economic policies, ‘the tide that lifts all boats’ had lifted those of Koons, his patrons and the elite much higher than those of most others. Also, Koons glorified – only partially ironically – the chief excesses and injustices of capitalism. Consequently, he lacked credibility as a critic of the increased social inequality that Reaganism was then generating, despite his clearly stated intentions and the implications of his artwork that this essay has demonstrated. Against the new, violently elitist regime and culture of the 1980s, Koons was proposing an aesthetic and ethics
of social infiltration of the elite culture by all means. In feudal times, banality was the French term for the vast rights and powers of the lord to extract labour and payment from his subjects, to give orders and mete out justice and punishment to them.124 Banality meant for Koons what the term came to denote in French in the nineteenth century: ‘open to all’, in defiance of the arguably elitist negative connotation that the English term acquired during the first half of the twentieth century, and that still remains with us.125

Notes
I am deeply grateful to the anonymous readers of this essay, as well as to the editors of Art History, for their insightful comments and helpful suggestions. I am also grateful to Margaret Kurkoski for her help in obtaining image permissions. Some of this research was presented at an academic workshop, ‘Visible Hands: Markets and the Making of American Art’, held at the Tate Britain in 2016. I would like to thank Alex Taylor, who convened this workshop, as well as the participants for their feedback. I would also like to thank Charles Simonds for sharing his experiences with and thoughts about Joseph Beuys, which helped me to better understand him.

1 Giancarlo Politi, ‘Luxury and Desire: An Interview with Jeff Koons’, Flash Art, 32, February/March 1987, 75.
2 Bruce W. Ferguson, ‘When the Yuppies Come Marching In’, C Magazine, 15 September 1987, 42.
3 Hal Foster, ‘(Dis)Agregable Objects’, in Brian Wallis, Damaged Goods: Desire and the Economy of the Object, New York, 1986, 17. Brian Wallis later summarized the consensus that emerged: ‘It seems to me that it is this very lack of criticality that is most offensive to critics. For the most part, Koons appears simply indifferent to the issues that motivate critics: formal and aesthetic issues, on the one hand, political and social issues, on the other.’ See Brian Wallis, ‘We Don’t Need Another Hero: Aspects of the Critical Reception of the Work of Jeff Koons’, in Jeff Koons, San Francisco, 1992, 28.
5 For the first survey of this movement, see Amy Brandt, Interplay: Neoconceptual Art of the 1980s, Cambridge, MA, 2014.
7 Koons’ reinvention registered as such only exceptionally and belatedly. See Stuart Morgan et al., ‘Four Reactions to the New Jeff Koons’, Artscribe, 74, March/April 1989, 46–49. To my knowledge, this acknowledgement of a major shift in Koons’ work is unique. Its uniqueness can be explained by the fact that Koons’ reinvention took time to materialize and, when it did, it seemed to confirm already existing criticisms. This essay builds upon Alison Pearlman’s insightful analysis of the debut of Koons’ persona through interviews already existing criticisms. This essay builds upon Alison Pearlman’s

17 ‘October 28, 1980 Debate Transcript’.
30 Nagy et al., ‘From Criticism to Complicity’, 46–49.
31 For the argument summarized here and below, see Perl, ‘Defining Criticality’, 38–41.


Steinbach quoted in Nagy et al., ‘From Criticism to Complicity’, 49.

Halley quoted in Nagy et al., ‘From Criticism to Complicity’, 47.

Halley quoted in Nagy et al., ‘From Criticism to Complicity’, 47.


The second exhibition was ‘Endgame: Reference and Simulation in Recent Painting and Sculpture’, organized at the ICA in Boston in the autumn of 1980.

Koons quoted in Politi, ‘Luxury and Desire’, 73.

Koons quoted in Mary Anne Staniszewski and Jeff Koons, ‘Jeff Koons: Conceptual Art of the 60s and 70s Alienated the Viewer’, Flash Art, 143, November/December 1988, 113.


Ferguson, ‘When the Yuppies’, 44.


David Marc cited in Ferguson, ‘When the Yuppies’, 41. Capitalized in original.

Ferguson, ‘When the Yuppies’, 42.


See Dyer, ‘Yuppie Culture’, 47.


See Artforum, 26: 3, November 1987, Table of Contents. The information about the ‘Laurensz Collection’ and Forest Lamps & Gifts, Inc. was found on the website of Forest Lamps & Gifts, Inc.: http://www.capodimontemadeinitaly.com/ (accessed 30 June 2017).


Silverman, Selling Culture, 5–11.


For instance, see Michael Paul Rogin, Ronald Reagan, the Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology, Berkeley, 1987.


Silverman, Selling Culture, 18.


Hughes quoted in Kristine McKenna, “‘The Art World is Ripe for Me”–Jeff Koons’ High-Profile Marketing...’, Los Angeles Times, 22 January 1989, K4. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

Perl, ‘Defining Criticality’, 42.


Koons quoted in Tschinkel and Berry, Jeff Koons, 1989.


Tricia Collins and Richard Milazzo, Art at the End of the Social, Malmö, 1988, 54.


Cox, ‘Feeling Victimized!’, 1.


Jeff Koons’ Reinvention in the Midst of Reaganism

112 Koons almost met Jackson, who was apparently a fan of Michael Jackson and Bubbles. See ‘Interviews with Artists: Jeff Koons’, in Mark Rosenthal et al., In Regarding Warhol: Sixty Artists, Fifty Years, New York, 2012, 196.
119 Crimp, Pictures, 3.
122 Schjeldahl, ‘Jeff Koons’, 84.