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Jeff Koons: Split-Rocker at Rockefeller Center
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JEFF KOONS, Split-Rocker, 2000, stainless steel, soil, geotextile fabric, internal irrigation system, and live flowering plants, 446 7/8 x 483 1/8 x 427 5/8 inches (1,135.1 x 1,227.1 x 1,086.2 cm), edition of 1, plus 1 AP © Jeff Koons. Photo by Tom Powel Imaging

A ready-made sculpture has an essentially ambiguous, philosophically fascinating double identity: It is a work of art; it is a functional artifact, a tool. Neither Donatello nor Michelangelo could have made a ready-made; like abstract art, they are a distinctive product of modernist artistic culture, for only when there exist a plenitude of machine-made artifacts could ready-mades be created. All works of art, it might be said, have such an ambiguous identity—they are both physical things and art. Michelangelo's *David*, for example is a piece of marble and a representation of Goliath's killer. And, as Arthur Danto famously argued, Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box* is both a brillo box, a utilitarian artifact and, also, a work of art. But ready-mades complexify how we understand this familiar ambiguity because their nonartistic identity is so self-evident. Duchamp's *Fountain* is a urinal—and his *Bottle Rack* is a bottle rack. How, then, can they also be works of art?

Because ready-mades literally consist of commonplace objects, understanding why the artist selected them, when—after all—there are so many artifacts available—provokes commentary. And because our styles of toolmaking have changed drastically, the history of the ready-made provides an historical perspective on our culture. Jeff Koons' vacuum cleaners such as *New Hoover Convertibles Green, Blue, New Hoover Convertibles, Green, Blue Doubledecker* (1981–87) and his basketballs, *One Ball Total Equilibrium Tank* (1985) is a good example, consist of ready-mades plus containers vitrines for the vacuum cleaners; tanks for the basketballs. And as Larry Gagosian rightly notes, Koon's very Duchampian public sculpture *Split-Rocker* (2000) “really (is) a ready-made.” More exactly, it is a planter composed of two (vastly enlarged) halves of two entirely distinct originals, two different toy rockers, a pony belonging to his son and a dinosaur (“Dino”). Normally ready-mades by Duchamp and Koons are utilitarian objects and so the same size as their source. (This is true also of *Brillo Box*, which is the same size as a Brillo box.) The dramatic change in scale of the ready-made sources of *Split-Rocker* means that we become like children faced with a gigantic toy.

Just as Duchamp's ready-mades inspired elaborate discussion of his erotic imagination, so Koons' assisted ready-mades provoke discussion of race, gender-politics and economic inequality. Interpreters treat his art as a referendum on our political culture. A generation ago interpretation of Duchamp preoccupied scholars. Now, such is the pressure of historicism his ready-mades require reinterpretation. Urinals similar to *Fountain* are still used but the bottle rack, employed in Duchamp's day, as Calvin Tomkins has observed, by “thrifty French families” to reuse “their wine bottles”, looks exotic nowadays to most Americans.

Also discussed in this capsule review: Jeff Koons: A Retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art , June 27-October 19, 2014; Marcel Duchamp at Gagosian Gallery, New York, June 26-August 29, 2014.