Shiny

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wexner center for the arts
THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

Like a Dog with a Bone

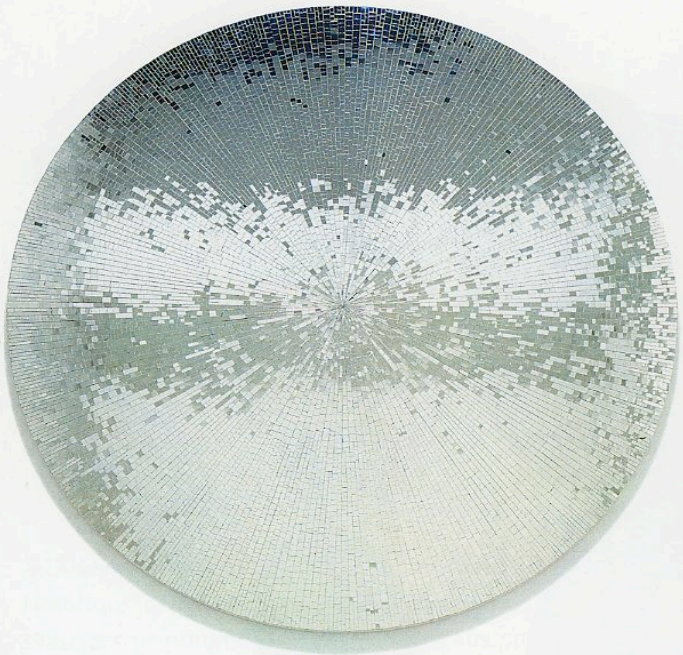
Andy Warhol is still America's most famous artist. Notorious for his portraits of Hollywood movie stars, silkscreen paintings of Campbell's Soup cans, sponsorship of The Velvet Underground, and uptown/downtown lifestyle, he epitomized the artist as celebrity. In doing so he broke with the now "traditional" mode of the avant-garde artist who stands outside of the society at large in order to act as its critic. One of the most vexing and rewarding things about Warhol is how hard it is to discern clearly whether he was deeply critical of American consumer culture (where brand-name soup and brand-name people are equally recognizable), or whether he was complicit with its penchant for transforming all experience into a form of entertainment. This was perhaps most clearly evidenced in his studio. He lined its walls with shiny aluminum foil and called it The Factory, turning a traditional space of work into a place for leisure.

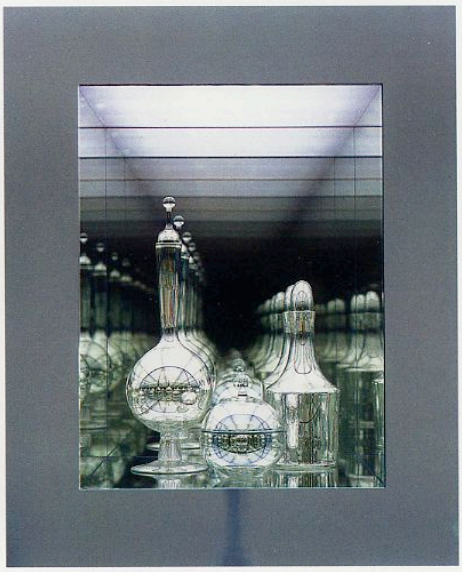
Warhol's love of glitz and glamour, evidenced by The Factory's silver walls and its denizens, also emerged in his legendary *Silver Clouds* of 1966. Its silver balloons magically hover in midair (due to a mixture of air and helium), like a school of fish underwater. They turn all historical notions of sculpture (as something that must have a base) and painting (as something that must hang on the wall), on their heads, all the while providing a kind of gleeful, and (dare we say it?) mindless, entertainment for the unsuspecting art viewer.

Warhol's balloons tease us. What do we want when we go to a museum or an art gallery? Do we want thought-provoking art or leisurely entertainment? Is there a way we can have both? If we are having both, have we given up on the role of the artist as a responsible critic of our culture? Might Warhol's balloons be asking just these very questions, or is this an overinterpretation? Is a room filled with *Silver Clouds* just a room filled with *Silver Clouds*? This is the conundrum that has obsessed many artists interested in criticism, avant-garde art, and the very particular problem of the commodity in capitalist culture. Accordingly, for the vast majority of contemporary artists, Warhol is the most important figure to grapple with, and the artists included in *Shiny* do just that.

Jeff Koons has carried through the Warhol problematic more comprehensively than any other artist. His monumental *Balloon Dog*, a 10-foot-tall rendering of a child's balloon animal in stainless steel, is emblematic of his dialogue with Warhol. Not only does Koons transform the everyday into an art object, he takes a ritual form of children's birthday party entertainment—something usually performed by a *clown*—and converts it into an object of aesthetic contemplation designed to hold pride of place in the sanctuary of the museum. Koons also puts the viewer in her place: she is small, filled with wonder, and sees herself reflected, both narcissistically and humorously. With this single gesture

JEFF KOONS *Balloon Dog*, 1994–2001





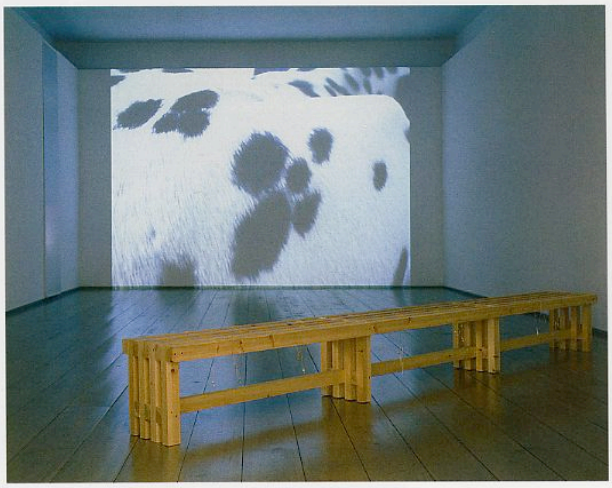
JIM HODGES *Light I*, 2004 ✳ **JOSIAH McELHENY** *Early Modernism Mirrored and Reflected Infinitely*, 2004

he transforms the museum, once thought of as a place for scholarly contemplation, into a fun house.

Works by Jim Hodges and Josiah McElheny further dramatize the deep pleasurability and vulnerability of reflective surfaces. Hodges's laboriously fashioned mirror pieces are assembled on canvas to hang on the wall like a painting but reflect the viewer like a mirror. Yet in *Light I* no complete or whole or satisfying likeness of the viewer arises from the hundreds, if not thousands, of glass tesserae. Instead the viewer is fractured into pieces and portions of herself, disassembled and altered. In *"Into the Stream" I* Hodges cuts the mirror into a camouflage pattern (a pattern Warhol used regularly). Lovingly reassembled on the canvas, the pattern offers a subtle, almost subliminal, reminder of the current state of war. Here the reflection is more coherent, but our pleasure in seeing ourselves is countered by the appearance of a haunting apparition of those at war while we are at play.

McElheny uses reflection to different ends. Rather than trying to catch viewers within their narcissistic desire to see themselves reflected, McElheny uses reflective surfaces to work at the edges of the concept of infinity. In *Early Modernism Mirrored and Reflected Infinitely* a mirrored cube, reminiscent of a Donald Judd sculpture, contains a variety of hand-blown glass objects based on icons of twentieth-century design. Here our desire for the commodity object to "reflect our personalities" or "speak to us" is foiled (pun intended?). Instead, the objects we feel to be so singular are shown to be one particle of matter among billions, one commodity plucked out of a stream of endless copies. (Warhol's soup cans, complete with the iconic design of their label, hover in the background.) Here the repetition of the same is offered as an inescapable monstrosity, a claustrophobic space in which the viewer's gaze is infinitely trapped.

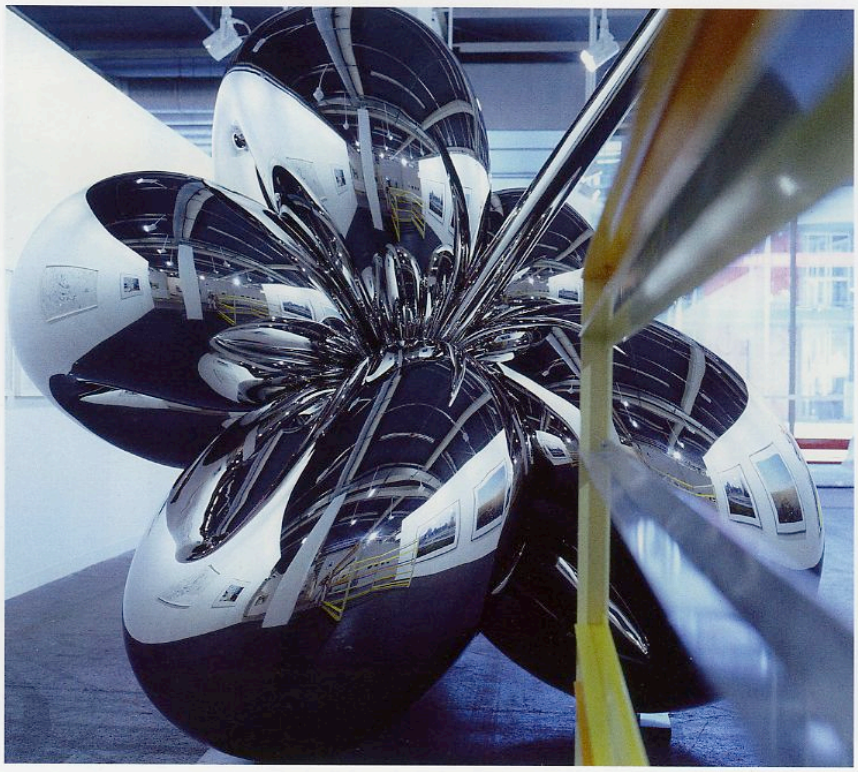
Kelley Walker also recasts Warhol's project in reflective glass. In 1984 Andy Warhol made a series of paintings of Rorschach inkblots, enlarging the diminutive blots to the grand scale of history painting



KELLEY WALKER *I see a Teddy Roosevelt–shaped thing.*, 2002 ✳ **RACHEL HARRISON** *Ringo*, 2004

and often using gold paint to further their ironic luster. By eliding the problem of interpreting a psychological test and deciphering an abstract painting Warhol jokingly implied that one obscure image was as good as another, as far as psychiatrists and museum curators and viewers were concerned. Walker frees the blots from their link to abstract painting, reinserting this image back into the object world, but the way he does this leaves viewers confronted with a reflection of themselves in the image within which they are supposed to see something else. Here Walker suggests that the narcissism of the viewer is boundless: whether in the museum or in a therapeutic session she always sees a projection of her own ego. Like a specter of bad 1970s' interior design, Walker's mirrored Rorschachs both literalize and provoke this phenomenon.

Rachel Harrison's sculptures, photographs, and videos all grapple with the problem of display, a problem endemic to both art and commodities. *Ringo* comprises a video projection of a docile dalmatian devouring a bone of dinosaur-like proportions. The dog's absorption and pleasure are consummate; there is no distracting him. As pop music plays in the background (its lyrics filled with desire), we watch the dog gnaw on the object of his desire in real time. And when we watch the video where do we sit? The bench that is part of the piece is made of rough-hewn pine but decorated with shiny gewgaws, costume jewelry, and the like. The contrast between the bench and the cheap bling attached to it subtly transforms the viewer into a kind of display, an object on a pedestal, a tchotchke, even. Between the pop music, the fake jewelry, and the dog's bone, we are caught in a web of desire for things, in which the happiness of a dog with a bone seems to forever elude us. This game of desire-infused looking is also evident in *Untitled*, with its small figurine in which dalmatians look longingly up at a cardboard envelope folded to evoke Jeff Koons's mammoth *Flower Puppy*; anthropomorphism is shown to be another kind of narcissistic projection of the desiring ego.



LOUISE LAWLER *Blume*, 2003/4

Louise Lawler, known for her photographs of art in various states of display, has returned to the work of both Warhol and Koons on numerous occasions. In *Blume* we see one of Jeff Koon's enormous stainless steel sculptures of everyday objects (among them bunnies, flowers, and the *Balloon Dog* featured in *Shiny*), photographed so that it is difficult to figure out what we are looking at: the iconic status of the object dissolves into abstraction. What we can see, however, is that the bombastic scale of the piece seems to have sucked all of the air out of the room, as it extends from floor to ceiling and from edge to edge of the photograph. In *HVAC* pieces of metal—equally shiny and industrially fabricated—stand propped against a bleak wall. The title may let us know that they are the metal components of an HVAC system, but their appearance alludes to minimalist sculpture. The result is a humorous conflation of similar technologies and the disparate effects and desires for "cool" they produce.

The problem of display, commodities, and viewing environments continues in Mai-Thu Perret's *Little Planetary Harmony*. Her giant teapot has the proportions of both Alice in Wonderland and Jeff Koons's *Balloon Dog*. Viewers can enter the aluminum-clad vessel through a door. Once inside they find a grouping of abstract paintings, modest in scale and executed in a latter-day modernist style. If Warhol's Factory was an aluminum-lined interior for the production of paintings then Perret has turned that historical space inside out. *Little Planetary Harmony* is an ineluctable combination of artwork and its display mechanism offered as one total environment. It is part fantasy (a childlike dream space for the viewing of the most "difficult" art of our time, abstraction), and part reality (there is no denying the existence of the teapot), and its cumulative effect is an acknowledgment that art viewing has become an experiential affair, in which the logic of Disneyland has pervaded the once-hushed halls of the museum. Art as entertainment, art is entertainment. "The problem of

MAI-THU PERRET *Little Planetary Harmony*, 2006 ✳ **MICHAEL MINELLI** *doberman*, from *not by everybody*, 2006

leisure, what to do for pleasure," lyrics of legendary punk band Gang of Four, run circles in the brain.

Mike Minelli's sculptures precariously straddle the boundaries between art and leisure, leisure and pleasure, criticism and the commodity, art and *objets d'art*. Meticulously carved in clay and subsequently cast in gleaming white porcelain they partake of the most rarified form of sculpture (carving) while also engaging in one of the most notoriously difficult forms of craft (porcelain). In this field of references, the viewer ricochets between high and low, as the sculptures are based on German baroque Meissen ceramics and on the ubiquitous tchotchkes found in tourist stores, Hallmark card shops, and on eBay. The average American home is filled with figurines and mementos, meant to express our personality for others and to encapsulate emotions in a thing. Minelli's sculptures borrow this kitsch language only to infuse it with some of the more harrowing episodes of recent history. The effect is a kind of hilarious madness about how much has gone so deeply awry in our society and how incapable we seem to be of changing it. The "purity" of the white glaze, combined with the delicately wrought gold chains, intimate that part of the reason may lie in our collective love of shiny things and in our conceivably pathological desire to manifest our emotions and feelings in objects. Minelli's work is hardly judgmental, however. His objects are far too finely and lovingly crafted to serve merely as a rejoinder to the unrepentant hoarder of mass-produced trinkets. Rather, as the plethora of dogs in his work might suggest, Minelli's sculptures put on display our culture's tendency toward narcissistic self-absorption in which we seek from shiny things the contentment of a dog with a bone. ✳

Helen Molesworth
Chief Curator of Exhibitions