



Investigating the Ordinary

The obsessive attention of some younger artists to consumer objects and the accoutrements of domestic space is here seen as an effort to disrupt the surface of quotidian life—a subversive attempt to “destabilize the everyday.”

BY DAVID JOSELIT

Last summer in Münster, amidst a carnival atmosphere that included representatives of the international art world, a lusty German folk band and the civic fathers of this small reconstructed town, Jeff Koons unveiled a sculpture [see *A.i.A.*, Sept. '87].¹ It was a sculpture, or rather the ghost of a sculpture, with great civic importance, for the statue of the Kiepenkerl—a tenant farmer who brings his wares to market in a huge basket carried on the back—is an explicit symbol of what is omnipresent, though nearly invisible to the first-time visitor in Münster: a pre-World War II past that of necessity has been totally reconstructed. As the catalogue for the “Skulptur Projekte” recounts, “The statue, created by an academic sculptor, became especially popular when, during the war, everything was burnt down, only the statue remained standing and then was blasted by a tank crew. . . . As early as 1953, the city of Münster still in ruins, Theodor Heuss inaugurated a new life-size Kiepenkerl monument in bronze.”² Koons had this bronze monument removed and replaced it with a highly polished stainless-steel cast of the same image.

The Kiepenkerl was shiny and new. Standing as it did, executed in the material of contemporary water faucets, or pots and pans, it was an embarrassment³ to the seamless texture of the newly restored “old” Münster: it opened up a wound in which the present met the past. As Koons has said about his other stainless-steel casts, “My objects are given an artificial luxury, an artificial value, which transforms them completely, changing their function and, to a certain extent, decriticalizing them. My surface is very much a false front for an underlying degradation.”⁴ Through its push-pull of attraction and repulsion Koons’s Kiepenkerl invoked a particular kind of degradation: the degradation (and falsification, or perverse renewal) of history.

This operation, in a small German city, brings to mind another sculptural displacement, by Michael Asher, eight years earlier. Invited to participate in the 73rd American Exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago, Asher chose to transfer a 1917 bronze replica of Jean-Antoine Houdon’s 1788 marble sculpture of George Washington from its central position on the neo-Renaissance facade of the museum to a European period gallery containing furniture and paintings from 1786 to 1795.⁵ Like Koons, Asher questioned the framing of the monument through a technique of embarrassment: he deflated the status of this sculpture—elevated on a pedestal, on the central axis of a major museum—by replacing it (with its obviously weathered patina) in the semi-domestic setting of a period gallery. The Father of Our Country, standing guard at the entrance of the



Jeff Koons: Der Kiepenkerl, 1987, stainless steel.

Opposite, Robert Gober, Untitled, 1985–87, plaster, wire lath, wood, semi-gloss, 24 by 24 by 20 inches. Collection S.I. Newhouse, Jr., courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery.

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Art Institute, was thus reduced to the status of just another decorative period sculpture—a badly weathered one at that—standing like a rustic colonial guest in the midst of an elegant European drawing room.

Like the Kiepenkerl, one of our foremost American folk heroes was in this way shown to be rhetorically magnificent but bankrupt: Asher domesticated the monument by changing its institutional context just as Koons had revealed a “new,” vulgar, perhaps even quasi-American soul under the tastefully historicized texture of Münster. This relationship between two apparently dissimilar artists—Michael Asher, who is typically understood as establishing a critique of the institutional framework, and Koons, whose art is often dismissed as a morally bankrupt recuperation of kitsch—points to the possibility of a shared ground, a territory for critique that is not tied to any one institution, but can go anywhere, including—as in the case of Koons—the domestic interior.

The key to the correspondence between Asher’s revelations of the museum’s hierarchy of objects and Koons’s analogous domestic investigations lies in the work of Louise Lawler. Lawler has incorporated the curator’s decision, the picture editor’s craft and the collector’s home, as well as the museum and gallery, into the art object’s institutional frame. In her 1984 photographs of the Burton Tremaines’ house Lawler sought and found the living version of the museum period room—but with its contradictions and absurdities still intact. In the home of the late Burton and Emily Tremaine, who were well-known collectors, iconic works of modern art were literally domesticated, installed in ensembles that included television sets, lamps and furniture, as well as decorative objects from earlier periods. The particular embarrassment that these photographs document is not the displacement of great modern objects from their supposedly proper environment of white walls and open spaces, but rather the almost invisible scandal of their easy integration into what appears to be a truly comfortable home. Koons, in speaking of his own work, may provide a clue to this impulse of domestication: “I see the ultimate role of art as one of pure function. . . . It will function solely as a means of support, as security.”⁶ The type of support Koons envisions and Lawler illustrates is the security of the prized possession, the treasured talisman or the hard-earned trophy used as an emblem of domestic safety achieved and, as confidently as possible, perpetuated.

In her photographs of the Tremaines’ house, Lawler presents art objects colonized as reassuring decorations, but in a subsequent series of works she establishes the converse of this relationship: reassuring everyday objects standing in for art. In her last exhibition at Metro Pictures Gallery in New York, and in a recent “Projects” show at the Museum of Modern Art, she pressed shelves of designer drinking glasses with slogans applied to them into service as the metaphorical center of installations that also included photographs and painted walls. The critic Jack Bankowsky has argued that

. . . the glass functions as a metaphor for the sign itself. Its emptiness implies an “arbitrary” connection to meaning which renders adjacent conventions—the photographs, the edition, the world—unstable. Lawler exploits this linguistic conceit with an almost slapstick literalness, “filling” the glasses with phrases she inscribes on their surfaces.⁷

These elegant bar glasses act as metaphors for—or the ghosts of—art objects. Like the Tremaines’ modernist treasures, these well-designed products are meant to lend graciousness and status to a home. But this function of security—as Koons might call it—is undercut by slogans like “going through the motions” that metaphorically shatter the glasses, showing them as the spoils of a life of rote obedience. The domestic institutional frame, which was explicit in the photographs of the Tremaines’ house, is here internalized in the object itself: the art work is envisioned as a problematic product, originally meant for consumption in the home, but destabilized—indeed perverted—by its own vulnerability to the subversive attentions of the alerted viewer.

There are many reasons for the widespread fascination at this time with the home as an institution. For us, the boundary between what appears public and what feels private is in a constant state of renegotiation. It is a by now familiar notion that advertising networks, rather than simply appealing to our preexisting needs actually do much to *establish* our desires, and that television (along with the other media), by bringing “the world into our living rooms,” greatly abets, speeds up and universalizes this process. That apparently private values may also be “marketed” by the same apparatus and given (often temporary) authority in the public domain is possibly a newer phenomenon. A particularly striking example is the sweeping (and quite recent) obsession in this country with the sexual behavior of political leaders. Apparently America has come to desire governance by morally pure Ideal Fathers whose sexual behavior vis-à-vis their wives and families is—if only temporarily—of central importance. The repressed but ever-present underside of this sexualization of politics is the poignant fear, much of it wildly speculative, concerning AIDS, a disease of the marginalized and underprivileged that raises the specter of legislation entering the bedroom, of testing and quarantine as ways of controlling sexual patterns.⁸ Such a colonization of everyday life was theorized 30 years ago, particularly in France, by a group of thinkers and artists identified as Situationists. As Alice Kaplan and Kristin Ross have summarized: “The Political, like the purloined letter, is hidden in the everyday, exactly where it is most obvious: in the contradictions of lived experience, in the most banal and repetitive gestures of everyday life—the commute, the errand, the appointment. It is in the midst of the utterly ordinary, in the space where the dominant relations of production are tirelessly and relentlessly reproduced, that we must look for utopian and political aspirations to crystallize.”⁹

It is with such intentions—of destabilizing the everyday, and particularly the domestic everyday—that the work of a recent generation of sculptors including Jeff Koons, Haim Steinbach, Robert Gober and Tishan Hsu develops its critical vocabulary. Each of these artists is acutely conscious of the desire we invest in the objects we acquire: desire for security, sexual gratification and insurance against death. Koons’s work proposes a game of cruelly, endlessly deferred gratification. He lets us see but not have. Vacuums (sucking machines that are hermaphroditic in shape and function) are encased in Plexiglas; inherently mobile basketballs are stilled in tanks of water; bourbon—the promise of delicious intoxication—is sealed up tight in its stainless-steel decanter: “So if somebody who has one of these works of art ever breaks the seal they’ve ruined the piece. They can get very intoxicated. They may learn a lot about distortion of thought patterns and maybe what the creative process is by drinking the liquor. But the piece is dead—it has lost its integrity.”¹⁰ This postponement of intoxication, this thwarted sucking, this arresting of the bouncing balls—such withholding is at the core of Koons’s acknowledgment that the everyday object’s surface of desire hides an intention to repress. When he speaks of his work

Michael Asher's untitled installation for the "73rd American Exhibition" at the Art Institute of Chicago, 1979.
Photo Rusty Culp.

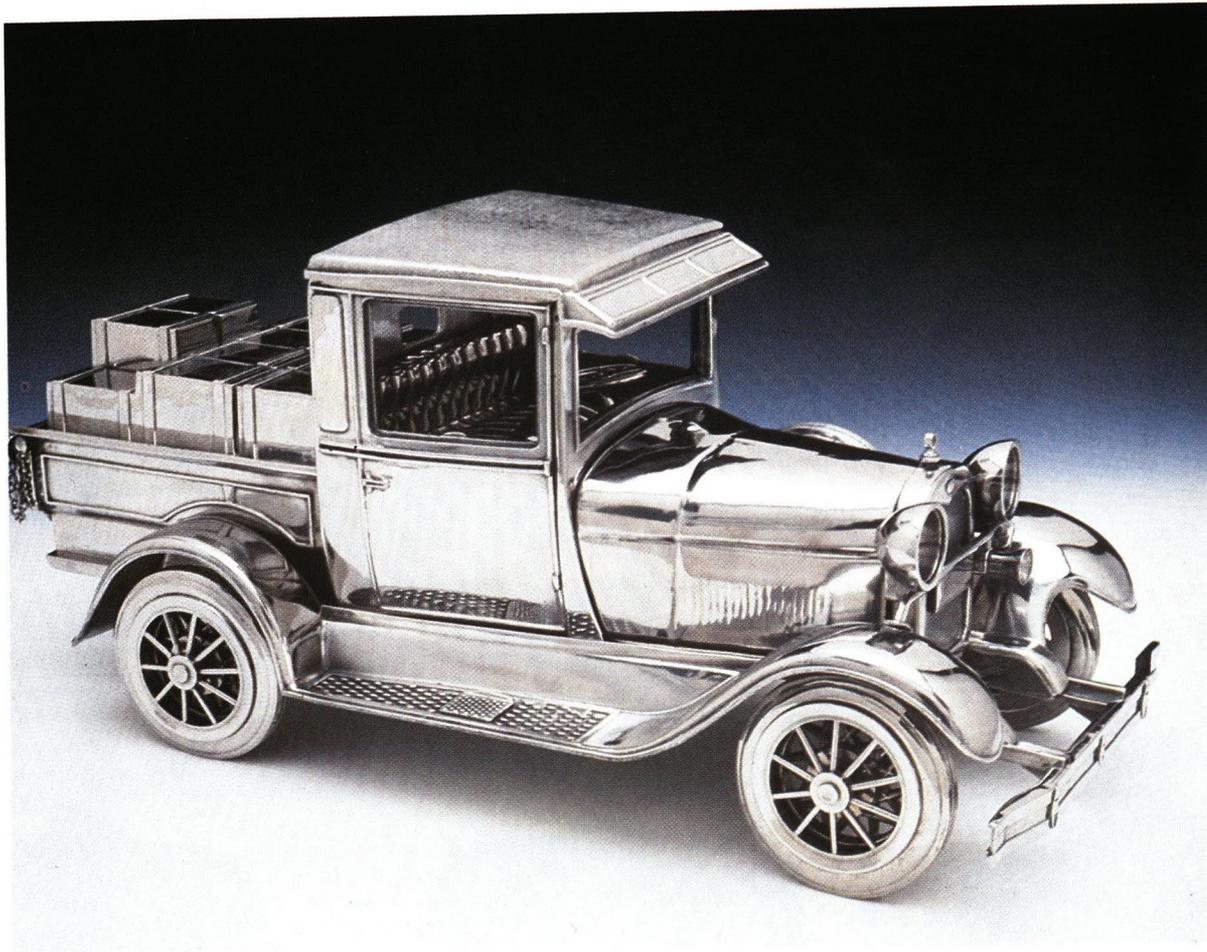


Louise Lawler: Three Women/Three Chairs Arranged by Mr. and Mrs. Burton Tremain, 1984, photograph.
Courtesy Metro Pictures.



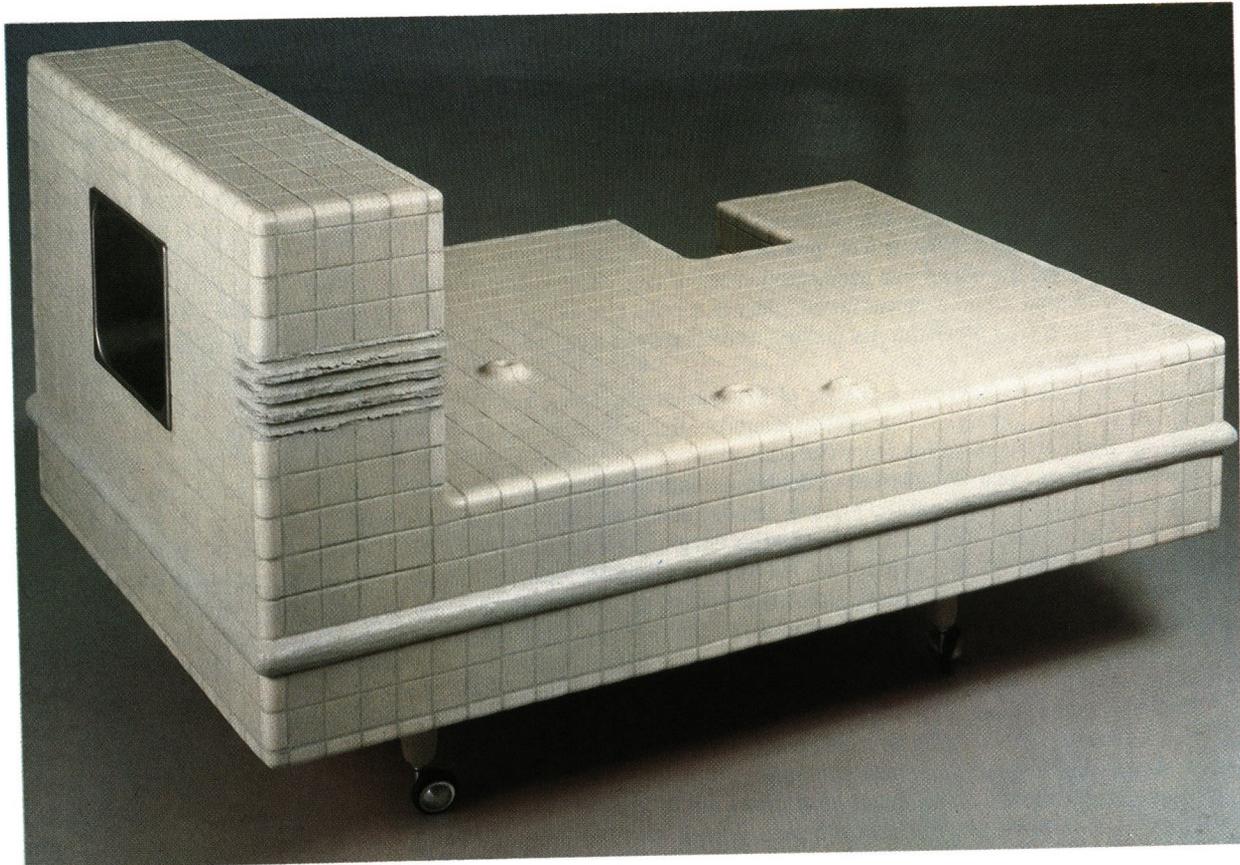


Robert Gober:
X Playpen, 1987,
wood and enamel paint,
27 by 37 by 37 inches.
Collection Mr. and Mrs.
Ronald Ostrow,
Palm Beach Gardens.
Courtesy Paula Cooper.



Jeff Koons: Model A
Ford Pickup Truck,
1986, cast stainless
steel Jim Beam bourbon
decanter, 6¾ by
6½ by 16½ inches.

Tishan Hsu:
Autocorp, 1987,
ceramic tile,
compound, stainless
steel, rubber, wood,
39 by 63 by 38
inches. Courtesy
Pat Hearn Gallery.



Haim Steinbach:
Untitled (walking
canes, fireplace
sets #2), mixed
medium construction,
31¾ by 90 by
26½ inches. Photo
© David Lubarsky,
courtesy Jay
Gorney Modern Art
and Sonnabend.



The home as an institution is a central metaphor for these artists. They show us that "family values" are in truth an ideological construction.

as a means of invoking unachievable states of being¹¹ he also reveals the false promise of the consumer products he manipulates or recasts: "Now that the object has been emptied out of its soul and is finally showing that it can perform functionally as a reflection of the robbing of desires that went into its making, it displays the induced emptiness of the soul."¹²

If Koons's work establishes a poetics of evacuation—invoking a home full of shiny, empty, stainless-steel wounds—Haim Steinbach creates a circus of signification from the equipment of middle-class domestic life. Steinbach is a master of double entendre, the visual pun, where the public slips into the private, and one embarrasses the other. For the subject Steinbach projects—the imaginary collector who owns and displays his trophies on shelves—is obsessed with good taste, and is always betraying it. In *Untitled (jugs, mugs)* goofy theme mugs give the lie to a series of tasteful antique "vessels"; the recurring presence of datedly decorative mood lamps puts a "tasteful" gloss on kinky sexual fantasy. Steinbach's groupings will not settle down and be "nice." In *pink accent* three groups of containers are juxtaposed: three stainless-steel postmodern teapots, two streamlined stainless-steel garbage cans with dome tops and two grotesque masks on which one small head grows out of another. At the core of this work are the garbage cans (which stand in the center): it is hard to imagine them without noxious contents, rotting food and discarded cartons, while the masks invert this premise by presumably transforming "nice" middle-class children into monsters. The teapots—which are in "perfect" taste—are inevitably thrown into question by the juxtaposition.

Steinbach and Koons recontextualize or recast real consumer products in order to embarrass their function in the everyday world. This choice of source material achieves a secondary level of meaning within the home of the art collector who may buy them. For unlike the Tremaines' masterpieces, Koons's and Steinbach's sculptures assert the memory of ordinary things that might be in collectors' houses already, albeit hidden away in a kitchen cabinet or broom closet. Some of the objects—those that are in the most questionable taste—are probably not present at all, or presumably would only enter the household as gag gifts, not privileged cultural artifacts. Reinstalled within the home, the contents of Steinbach's sculptures—which pose as art to get in the door—have the power to make every decorative object in sight ridiculous: they turn the everyday domestic codes of signification inside out by simply laying claim to our esthetic attention.

Robert Gober and Tishan Hsu have developed a different paradigm for the eruption of desire within the everyday world. For these artists, the domestic is made strange through distortion. Gober remakes the world of ordinary things in dollhouse-like ensembles at human scale.¹³ Sinks, a chair, cribs, beds, urinals, all are made entirely by hand. In these works he expresses an unmistakable desire to master the home emotionally, as a child socializes his or her attitudes toward family by playing with a dollhouse. Gober's choice to *make* the everyday world rather than retake it (like Koons and Steinbach) is an impressive act of resistance: he insists upon the everyday as personal and psychological in import rather than public and institutional. Hsu similarly elides the everyday with the psychological, and with the body. He uses tile—a bathroom or kitchen

surface—as well as stainless-steel faucets and food pans to mold organic forms reminiscent of the body. Like the others I have discussed, Hsu thrusts the private into the public: he endows the laboratorylike spaces of the kitchen and bathroom with a voluptuous awareness of the body, of what goes on in those domestic spaces to feed or cleanse it. But Hsu's sculptures must not be read literally: they are, first and foremost, psychological landscapes in which the organic and the technological have been fused.

"Complicity" is a word often used in conjunction with the artists under discussion here: complicity with the art market, and by extension the economic and political systems that the art market reflects in microcosm. Because they make objects that sell—and sell briskly—the work of these artists might be considered critically impotent. But this assumption leads to a question: where *is* the space for effective critical discourse today? Where has the framework for the art object migrated? Louise Lawler's work proposes that the frame may be found in any component of the art network, including domestic space, and in the '80s—a time when the contemporary art collector has in many instances achieved status equal to that of the museum or gallery—the home as an institution has become a central metaphor for many artists. Lawler, Koons, Steinbach, Gober and Hsu, as well as many others, have located the frame for the art work in everyday life; they have developed an art of embarrassment or resistance, which causes didactic ruptures in the seamless and ubiquitous surface of the quotidian, the intensely familiar. They show us the home as it is—an institution whose apparently "family values" are in truth an ideological construction, arising from the same social, economic and political forces that structure the museum or gallery. □

1. The 1987 "Skulptur Projekte in Münster," curated by Klaus Bussmann and Kasper König, consisted of site-specific projects throughout the town by 64 European and American artists.

2. Georg Jappe, *Skulptur Projekte in Münster: Guide*, p. 117.

3. As I am using it, the term "embarrassment" is related to the Situationist strategy of *détournement*, in which a given form (usually from a mass-cultural source) is filled with a new and contradictory meaning. See Alice Kaplan and Kristin Ross, editors, "Everyday Life," a special issue of *Yale French Studies*, no. 73, 1987.

4. Giancarlo Politi, "Luxury and Desire: An Interview with Jeff Koons," *Flash Art*, no. 132, Feb.-Mar. 1987, p. 74.

5. I am relying on Asher's description of this project, published in *Michael Asher: Writings 1973-1983 On Works 1969-1979*, edited by and written in collaboration with Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Halifax, Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, and Los Angeles, Museum of Contemporary Art, 1983, pp. 207-220.

6. Politi, "Luxury and Desire," p. 73.

7. Jack Bankowsky, "Spotlight: Louise Lawler," *Flash Art*, no. 133, Apr. 1987, p. 86.

8. In no way do I mean to criticize education efforts surrounding the prevention of AIDS, or in this article to express any particular attitude about how this health crisis is being handled politically. Nor do I mean to imply moral judgments about particular political candidates. In this context, I am more interested in the *fact* of these recent phenomena.

9. Kaplan and Ross, "Introduction," *Yale French Studies*, no. 73, 1987, p. 3.

10. Jeanne Siegel, "Jeff Koons: Unachievable States of Being," *Arts Magazine*, 61, Oct. 1986, p. 68. This is a direct quote from the interview section of Siegel's article on Koons.

11. Koons often uses this phrase, as in the interview cited above.

12. Politi, "Luxury and Desire," p. 75.

13. For my knowledge of Gober's work (as well as many conversations on the subjects covered in this article) I am indebted to Elisabeth Sussman, my colleague at the Institute of Contemporary Art. See Elisabeth Sussman, "The Problem with the Primal Scene," *Utopia Post Utopia: Configurations of Nature and Sculpture in Recent Sculpture and Photography*, Boston, ICA, and Cambridge, MIT Press, 1988. In Sussman's discussion of Gober she mentions that he made small dollhouses early in his career.

*Louise Lawler: Bought
in Paris, 1986,
Cibachrome, 23 by
15½ inches. Courtesy
Metro Pictures.*

