

Koons; “Bouquet of Tulips”: CADEAU EMPOISONNE (POISONED CHALICE)?

A decade ago, France gave Jeff Koons a gift: *carte blanche* at Versailles, the crown jewel of France’s patrimony and an ideal context for the King of Contemporary Kitsch. The 2008 temporary installation cleverly juxtaposed Koons’ postmodernist excess with Louis XIV’s more classical over-the-top-ness. It was the best kind of exhibition – you either loved it or you hated it. That show was paid for by Koons’ dealers and collectors but so what. It wouldn’t have happened without their support, and it set a high bar for the proliferating exhibitions of contemporary art and sculpture at heritage sites throughout Europe.

Koons – already a recipient of the Legion of Honor -- received international acclaim. France got...nothing.

It is customary for artists to leave a little something behind at a museum after a major monographic exhibition, but France’s unusual system of state cultural institutions did not, in this case, encourage that. Versailles had no permanent collection of contemporary art, thus no incentive to bargain in advance. Although all French museums and their contents belong to the state, they are so competitive with each other that these kinds of gifts are not seen as transferable. In an ideal world, Koons would have recognized his debt to the nation of France by gifting something to, say, the Pompidou. No such luck.

This “gift” of a “Bouquet of Tulips,” announced last fall to great fanfare, hardly wipes the slate clean.

For starts, it is not exactly a gift.

Koons is only giving the concept. Someone other than the artist needs to pay an estimated 3.5 million euros of production, site preparation, and installation costs. These funds are to be (or have been) raised from private citizens and corporate sponsors, whose names will not be made public until the project is fully greenlighted. My guess is that the money comes from the usual suspects among Koons’ coterie of collectors, who naturally wish to curry favor with the artist in order to move up the “waiting list” for future Koons artworks.

Koons apologists justify this avoidance of checkwriting by the artist as part of the conceptual nature of the artwork, but “Bouquet of Tulips” is not in any way, shape, or form a conceptual artwork. Supporters of the project have compared Koons’ “gesture” to the work of Sol Lewitt. This is a triumph of spin over critical theory. Sol Lewitt’s “wall” works can be installed, erased or painted over, and then reinstalled elsewhere, because all it takes is a few studio assistants with rulers and a bag of art supplies. It is 99 per cent

conception 1 per cent execution. “Bouquet of Tulips” is the opposite – 1 per cent conception and 99 per cent execution. It takes an army of engineers, workers, and heavy machinery just to install the thing. Fabricating it is even more complicated.

Nor does “Tulips” work as gesture from America to France in the aftermath of the recent terrorist attacks unless you believe that American “gestures” are typically clumsy, self-interested, and in your face. I can live with the references to Fragonard and Picasso that are being tossed about but throwing in the Statue of Liberty is truly pretentious. That project involved, among others Gustav Eiffel, Viollet Le Duc, and Ulysses S. Grant. It moved the poet Emma Lazarus to write her famous verses which remain today a manifesto of open immigration: “Give us your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free.” Moreover, the American financing was undertaken by Joseph Pulitzer’s newspaper which, in a remarkable populist operation, raised the funds necessary for the installation from over 120,000 small donors. Likewise in France contributions came from hundreds of small municipalities and schoolchildren. The Statue of Liberty was conceived as a monument to democracy, an anti-monarchical gesture. “Tulips” is at best a band-aid solution to declining tourism. Does anyone really think tourists will suddenly reconsider Paris a destination because of this bouquet?

Yes, the dire economics of public culture are driving France to such practices as franchising its museum brands globally and renting out its collections. Just the fabrication and installation costs of Tulips equal about three and a half years of the Pompidou’s annual acquisition budget! But France should still be able to distinguish between leveraging and mortgaging its considerable cultural patrimony. Koons at Versailles was leveraging. This one is mortgaging.

The selection of the plaza between the Palais de Tokyo and the Museum of Modern Art is the final insult. Aside from photobombing the Eiffel Tower and adding millions to the installation costs, putting the project here will suck all the oxygen out of a quintessentially French site, freighted with centuries of urban history.

If France feels obliged at this point to accept this gift it should put the thing somewhere else. Somewhere more purely touristic. Somewhere it is not shackled to two museums, who, if their institutional souls could speak, would say, No, thank you. Somewhere it doesn’t entail reengineering the guts of a public plaza.

And while you’re at it, Jeff, throw in an important artwork from the eighties for the Pompidou.

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Robert M. Rubin, former Chairman of the Centre Pompidou Foundation, gave Jean Prouvé’s Tropical House to France