

"Sculpture After Sculpture"

MODERNA MUSEET, STOCKHOLM

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WITH "SCULPTURE AFTER SCULPTURE," Stockholm's Moderna Museet staged one of the most suggestive presentations of contemporary sculpture I can remember seeing: a show brilliantly choreographed as both an experience and an argument. Few exhibitions manage to bring the two together; where "Sculpture After Sculpture" outpaced the ordinary offering was in its success in materializing its thesis as an installation, an orchestration of objects in space. Picture a presentation of just thirteen objects: no filler, no extras—just an encounter, straight up. Such a display follows from Minimalism, certainly, but also from postmodernism, though it is not mortgaged to either. Both this recent past and others more distant underpinned the exhibition's characterization of sculpture at the present moment—sculpture as it survives when "sculpture" is dead. What we have now, as the show demonstrated, is utterly up-to-date in its use of technology. Today's surfaces can be matte paint or polished metal, just

as today's materials can be ceramic or stainless steel or polyester. Yet this is not to say that anything goes. Sculpture remains a bodily art. It is just that at present there is absolutely no body, human or otherwise, that isn't a fit subject for representation in sculptural (i.e., material) terms. Both art and technology are sculpture's topics, as are labor, leisure, the commodity, childhood, history, mythology: Where does sculpture stop? Or, better, what does its inclusiveness mean?

Asking this question, it bears insisting, depended on only thirteen sculptures, all of them at least life-size (and a few considerably larger). All are the work of a trio of artists who are certainly among the most individual, even idiosyncratic, sculptors today: Katharina Fritsch, Jeff Koons, and Charles Ray. *Sculptors*, notice, rather than *object makers* or any other epithet that might obscure their loyalty to a resolutely figurative practice, a loyalty that doubtless helps to account for the current success of their art. It's not incidental that in the course of 2014, the work of two of the three (Ray and Koons) was on offer in major retrospectives, while Fritsch's blue *Hahn* (Cock), 2013, confidently passed the difficult test of London's notorious Fourth Plinth.

These occasions only underscore the risks courted by "Sculpture After Sculpture" in breaking with the always more manageable monographic model. (Something of the sort was attempted earlier this year at London's Hayward Gallery, in a show titled "The Human Factor: The Figure in Contemporary Sculpture." Chaos ensued.) An exhibition must be something other than a thought experiment carried out in three dimensions. Galleries are not abstractions. Thus, it seems worth observing that in Stockholm the show was presented in a white-walled rectangular gallery, in which one sensed immediately the modular system that underpins its 1998 design by architect Rafael Moneo. Nothing could seem more studiously neutral than

its square ceiling bays and wood flooring, nor could the ease of re-partitioning provided by its measured divisions answer more fully to the spatial multitasking demanded of museums today.

All the more striking, therefore, that the curator of "Sculpture After Sculpture," Jack Bankowsky (a former editor of *Artforum*, who now serves as editor at large), chose to leave its allotted gallery unpartitioned, a measurable whole. The result was a space as strategically active as an exhibition can be. Think gallery as chessboard, its pieces drawn up in formation, a game well under way. If Moneo's grid system played into this impression, so does the gridded installation plan published as the frontispiece to the exhibition catalogue; Bankowsky took on the guise of master tactician—an art-world Kasparov at the top of his game.

As Bankowsky's collaged scheme demonstrated, to stage a show as ambitious as this one, every move must be planned. Let no one imagine that pieces like Fritsch's life-size *Elefant*, 1987, or Koons's permanently bouncy *Balloon Dog (Red)*, 1994–2000, can be installed on a whim. Instead, think mock-ups and riggers, and surrender the temptation to believe that even the smallest work in the show, Ray's poignant painted-steel *The New Beetle*, 2006—in which a naked boy plays on the floor with a model car—could have come to rest casually, the way you or I nudge a sofa into place. Yet the installation still somehow kept idiosyncrasy alive. Given that most exhibitions nowadays are curated by committee, it is rare to encounter a particular strategy, let alone a narrative, at work—so much so that it seems fair to ask what "Sculpture After Sculpture" could have left to chance. Nothing and everything, of course. This was an exhibition that risked everything on the flatland of its design laying claim to life in space. For while the sequence and placement of objects were visible on paper—they formed a narrative of sorts—



This page, from left: View of "Sculpture After Sculpture," 2014–15. From left: Katharina Fritsch, *Elefant*, 1987; Charles Ray, *Tractor*, 2005; Jeff Koons, *Metallic Venus*, 2010–12. Charles Ray, *Young Man*, 2012, stainless steel, 70 1/4 x 20 1/2 x 13 1/4". Opposite page: View of "Sculpture After Sculpture," 2014–15. From left: Charles Ray, *The New Beetle*, 2006; Jeff Koons, *Balloon Dog (Red)*, 1994–2000; Charles Ray, *Fall '91*, 1992; Katharina Fritsch, *Frau mit Hund* (Woman with Dog), 2004.



what emerged in the gallery were conversations and echoes, analogies and references, which the physical presence of these objects set in train. All of them concerned the nature of bodies in the world. To encounter these works as an ensemble necessarily meant investigating the qualities of sculptural figuration of the present moment: the ethos and aura of bodies that we—we Westerners, I mean—mostly already know.

Yet simply to speak of bodies in the context of this exhibition is to sidestep one crucial fact: All of these works rely on bodily models or prototypes that they both scrupulously replicate and sometimes expand or inflate. In only one instance, Koons's *New Hoover Convertibles*, *New Shelton Wet/Dry 5-Gallon Doubledecker*, 1981–87—a piece whose “medium” amounts to two tidy shelves of vacuum cleaners arranged in a brightly lit case—do the objects themselves, with Duchampian inevitability, stand in for themselves. As these various degrees of literalism make clear, such procedures declare their difference from sculpture understood as a grand tradition: No chiseling is needed, no heroic blocks of stone. At the same time, they also register the fate of another, longer tradition, one that is technical, technological, and cultural—a matter of production and typology as inevitably intertwined.

Consider how the show declared its large ambitions from the outset, via a narrative that started unfolding the moment viewers entered the show. There stood Ray's life-size solid-stainless-steel *Young Man*, 2012: Naked and love-handled, he greeted us like some postlapsarian Adam. No wonder Fritsch's gorgeous blue *Apfel* (Apple), 2009–12, came next in the installation, as if to stand as the sign of the temptation that brought about man's fall. This was followed by Koons's wanton *Metallic Venus*, 2010–12, raising her drapery in a scandalous gesture that flaunts the fact of female sex; think Venus as Eve. And then—for the plot continued to thicken—there was Fritsch's dreaming

Madonnenfigur (Madonna), 1987/2009, in yellow-painted polyester, hands joined in what looks like a powerless (though perhaps only insipid) invocation of prayer.

This sequence sent us back to the origin stories of Western civilization, refigured for viewers today. As types and icons, these objects are entirely familiar, even if the materials and colors that represent them are not: a yellow Madonna, a blue apple (as yet unbitten), a woozily reflective Venus. And a too-sturdy Adam that, though echoing the great tradition of standing bronze statuary, doesn't repeat it. On the contrary, its weighty presence comes from having been milled from a solid block, not cast in

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pieces: At some point in this lengthy process the living model Ray worked from took on another sort of being. As the artist put it, “It's a work that I feel I didn't make, but that somehow made itself.” Yet as Ray would also be quick to tell us, his *Young Man* owes its presence to a technology normally devoted to making jet engines—objects, it needs hardly be said, that, like the fashion mannequins he once reproduced so scrupulously, have absolutely nothing in common with flesh.

If Ray's work regularly uses such apparently excessive processes and uncanny surrogates to ventriloquize its relationship to sculptural tradition, then Fritsch's gift as a colorist serves as a gorgeous distraction from her own artistic concerns. Consider, along with the abovementioned elephant, whose creased and drooping skin is moldy-cheese green, the pretty-in-pink protagonist of *Frau mit Hund* (Woman with Dog), 2004. If the latter, one suspects, is the color of its supercute original, the deathly elephant

is nothing if not ironic in tone. What better color for a “life cast” (read: death mask) made on the basis of the stuffed skin that for decades has said *Elefant* to museumgoers at the Bonn zoological museum? As for Fritsch's pink woman, she is a member of the tacky family of sea-shell tchotchkes just as likely to live in dollar stores as in tourist traps by the beach. What the artist presumably saw and then showed us in her chosen example is the strikingly ceremonial presence that inhabits this fashionably fertile goddess: She and her pooch have the bearing of the geisha with lapdog I once saw promenading in Kyoto, while her magical parasol and blossom summon something of the majestic ritual rendered in Assyrian reliefs.

With Ray's *Young Man* and Fritsch's gorgeous *Woman*, the argument of this exhibition comes most clearly into focus. If they speak of sculpture “after sculpture,” then we are right to read them not just as sculpture today—what we have now—but as sculpture that follows on from, or picks up with, the past. And the show's goal, though doubtless not its only one, was to draw out particular sculptural relationships and develop analogies in form. Thus we moved from the trunk of the elephant to the hose of a vacuum, from a boy's toy car to Michael Jackson's “toy” chimp Bubbles, and from Jackson's haunting paleness to Fritsch's spooky, white-shrouded ghost. To say that such analogies were unsettling puts it mildly; one result was that utterly familiar categories and contrasts—between large and small, for example, or machine and animal—were unmoored in such company, an uncanny congeries of objects that seemed both very old and very new. For me, only Ray's playing boy kept firm hold of a sense of the human, and as a result seemed to have a vulnerability more unbearable than ever before. □

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