
Editorial

Jeff Koons and the celebration of banality: impressions from Oslo

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The annual conferences of the European Public Health Association are a good opportunity to look around in the old continent. I vividly remember the Dresden conference in 2002, which brought the European public health community to a city reflecting the great and tragic history of Germany. Some of that history, and its effects on German public health, can be experienced first hand in Dresden's famous Deutsches Hygiene Museum.¹

Last year's conference was in Oslo, a city whose heated pavements melt the snow below shoppers' feet, effectively symbolizing the high standards of living in Norway and other Scandinavian countries. This time, I used my spare time to see the Jeff Koons retrospective exhibition in Oslo's Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art. Far from being typically Norwegian, the exhibition did illustrate some of the problems of public health in a context of affluence.

Jeff Koons (born 1955) is a controversial modern artist who lives and works in New York (USA). He became widely known in the 1980s with assemblages of inflatable flowers and toys, displays of brand new vacuum cleaners and a life-size ceramic sculpture of 'Michael Jackson and Bubbles' (the pop idol's favourite chimpanzee pet). His work reputedly exploits 'mass culture iconography' and celebrates the 'banality of middle-class taste'.² Around 1990 he married Cicciolina, an Italian porn star who got herself elected into the Italian parliament. Some of his 'portrayals of genuine love', huge photographs of himself and his wife engaging in sexual acts, could be seen at the exhibition—behind small notice-boards warning visitors that the images could be shocking.

In an interview in the exhibition catalogue, Koons explained that his hope is "that viewers will become confident of their own judgment and taste ... I tried to remove bourgeois guilt and shame in responding to banality ... I was telling the bourgeois to embrace the thing that it likes. Don't divorce yourself from your true being, embrace it. Don't try to erase it because you're in some social standing now and you're ambitious and you're trying to become some upper class."² This is all incredibly ambivalent—his work will of course never affect the tastes of the middle-classes. The very rich who can afford to buy his works do not appreciate its banality, but enjoy the ironical game he is playing with their supposedly more sophisticated tastes.

In his rejection of the distinction between low and high art, Koons is a typically 'post-modern' artist, and his work illustrates some of the challenges of health promotion in the early 21st century. 'Post-modern art' is a reaction to the 'consumerism' that has been facilitated by the fact that manufacturing, distribution and dissemination have become exceptionally inexpensive.³ However, instead of criticizing the resulting banalities, post-modern art just accepts them, and in Koons' case somehow both celebrates and ironizes them.

Many of the health problems of Europe's richer nations are directly linked to overconsumption. Cigarette smoking is just one boring example, eerily transformed by Koons into a glossy advertisement for a fictitious brand called 'Merit'. Some of his more recent work plays with the attractiveness of photographs of food, perhaps anticipating the new banality of obesity. Affluence has become an embarrassment to public health, the more so since all these health-damaging lifestyles have become concentrated in the lower socioeconomic groups, particularly in countries like Norway.^{4,5}

But what can we do about it, I asked myself when I left the Astrup Fearnley museum. Norwegians are a virtuous people, but even among them a call to higher values is unlikely to be as effective as it used to be. Perhaps health promotion should carefully study Jeff Koons' strategy, and take an ironical stand towards the banalities of affluence? Who knows, but developing a post-modern evidence base for ironical health promotion will certainly be fun.

References

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