



JANE ALEXANDER AND JEFF KOONS

# THE ART OF ADVOCACY

BY MICHAEL GROSS

ON OCTOBER 16, AMERICANS FOR THE ARTS, THE NATION'S FOREMOST GROUP OF ADVOCATES FOR ARTISTIC EXPRESSION, APPRECIATION AND EDUCATION, GIVES ITS ANNUAL NATIONAL ARTS AWARDS, CELEBRATING INDIVIDUALS AND CORPORATIONS WHO ENRICH AMERICAN CULTURE BY CREATING WORKS OF ART OR SUPPORTING ARTISTIC ENDEAVOR. JEFF KOONS, THE CONCEPTUAL ARTIST AND A MEMBER OF THE GROUP'S ARTISTS COMMITTEE, WILL RECEIVE THIS YEAR'S ARTISTIC ACHIEVEMENT AWARD, ALONGSIDE OTHER WINNERS, INCLUDING ARETHA FRANKLIN, KITTY CARLISLE HART, SHEILA JOHNSON AND UNITED TECHNOLOGIES. KOONS JOINED BG FOR LUNCH AT SWIFTY'S WITH ONE OF HIS FELLOW ARTISTS COMMITTEE MEMBERS, THE FORMER CHAIRMAN OF THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS AND ACCOMPLISHED ACTRESS, JANE ALEXANDER. THE DAY'S FIRST SURPRISE WAS THAT THEY'D NEVER MET.

**Jane Alexander:** I so admire people in the visual art world, but I rarely get to meet them.

**Jeff Koons:** It's the same for me. A lot of people that I meet are from the visual arts. It's always nice to have interactions with different disciplines.

**JA:** I met a lot of visual artists when I was chairing the National Endowment for the Arts and through the course of my travels around the United States, but I rarely met people who were well known.

**JK:** Does the NEA exist today?

**JA:** Yes, indeed. Very much so.

**JK:** Because I thought that recently it has dwindled to almost nonexistence.

**JA:** Well, unfortunately, when I was there, from '93 to '97, under President Clinton, that was the time that the 104th Congress, which was the first Republican [-majority] Congress in forty years, was trying to eliminate the NEA, and under my tenure they did cut the budget back to \$99 million from almost \$175 million. But it has worked its way back up.

**JK:** So it exists, and it's coming back?

**JA:** By very small increments. But I don't think it's going to be attacked ever again in the same way that it was.

**Bergdorf Goodman:** What makes you feel that way?

**JA:** Well, because the battle was so rough and, really, almost bloody during those four years. David Stockman, Reagan's budget director, had a great quote. When they tried to eliminate a lot of programs in government, he said, "I didn't know that sacred cows run in herds." The truth is, there were more advocates for the arts than that Congress ever understood. Once we won the battle, I think it was understood that you just can't come in and try to take on these things and get rid of them. It's not going to work.

**BG:** When you say "won the battle," do you mean secured the continued existence of the NEA and the National Endowment for the Humanities?

**JA:** Secured the continued existence, with caveats, unfortunately. They did eliminate individual fellowships for visual artists. It makes it very difficult for photographers, painters, people in your field, Jeff. Because they don't have an organization in the same way that we performing artists have. You have private galleries, you show, but unless you are part of a museum exhibition, how are you going to be helped by the NEA? Very, very difficult. That's probably what you heard.

**BG:** So NEA now only makes institutional grants?

**JA:** Except for literature. They saved the literature fellowships—which proved to me they don't read. Literature starts revolutions!

**JK:** Did the attacks start with the [Robert] Mapplethorpe controversy [which began after an NEA grant helped finance a Mapplethorpe retrospective that included sexually themed photographs at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Philadelphia]?

**JA:** Yes, Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano [whose photograph of a crucifix submerged in urine, which won an award from an NEA-supported arts organization, was similarly denounced in Congress after it was first shown in 1989].

**BG:** What induced you to take that job at that fraught moment?

**JA:** A passion for the agency. My career began in nonprofit theaters, everywhere from Indianapolis to Oklahoma, that had NEA support. An NEA grant of \$25,000 was given to the playwright who had developed a play called *The Great White Hope* at Arena Stage, and I was a company actress there, and then it went on to win the Pulitzer, and James Earl Jones and I won Tony Awards. We did the movie and that was the beginning of my whole career in films. So I felt that I owed a lot to the NEA; I was passionate about it. But it was pure naïveté to think that I could make a difference.

**BG:** Who approached you?

**JA:** I got a call from Claiborne Pell's office, and one of the aides to the senator asked, "Would you be interested in heading the endowment?"

I laughed. "Don't you mean be on a panel?" Because I had never had any experience in that kind of thing!

They said, "No."

I said, "Well, how long do I have to think about it?"

They said, "The weekend."

I was starring in *Sisters Rosenzweig*, Wendy Wasserstein's lovely play, on Broadway, and I was so happy in it, but it was going to wind down by the end of the summer, so I consulted with my family and my good friends and they said, "You must do it, because the NEA needs an artist there." So I went to the NEA as an idealist, that's the truth, and I came out a cynic about politics. But there I was.

**BG:** At a very trying time.

**JA:** It was fine the first year, actually. Because the 104th Congress wasn't elected until fall of '94. So we had one great year! But the NEA was already under the gun prior to the 104th Congress coming in.

**JK:** Jane, what started the attack on the NEA?

**JA:** Mapplethorpe and Serrano, essentially. But there were others too. Karen Finley, a performance artist; John Fleck; Tim Miller; and Holly Hughes were the infamous NEA Four. They were all performance artists whose work was found to be...well, in the case of Tim Miller, he was a homosexual talking about his homosexuality and his love affairs, and he was naked. Holly Hughes was also gay. Karen Finley was the one they really attacked, because she was talking about women, and she would be naked on the stage, and she would cover herself with chocolate to make a point.

**BG:** And they were each recipients of individual grants?

**JA:** They were. They were chosen by their peers. But the peers were not choosing them for salacious work. Maybe there are a few artists who are out to do propaganda, but the rest are just doing their work and looking at society in interesting ways.

**BG:** Jeff, people have the feeling that you do transgressive work, probably because of *Made in Heaven* [including a series of explicitly sexual paintings and glass sculptures made in

1990–1991, featuring Koons and his future and, later, ex-wife, the pornographic actress-turned-Italian parliamentarian Ilona Staller, aka Cicciolina].

**JK:** I was always surprised, because I always felt what I was doing was such a moral activity and that my interests were always to try to speak about things in a positive way. So I always felt that it was just the way people respond to honesty, that they find honesty shocking. I do think that if artists try to just create something for shock value, it has no lasting life to it. *Made in Heaven* was really a response to Mapplethorpe. I thought I would put it in a heterosexual context. Because at the end of the day, it's really just about dealing with ourselves, and it's always about self-acceptance.

**JA:** Interesting.

**BG:** Wasn't *Made in Heaven* inspired by art that you'd seen in churches?

**JK:** I spent a lot of time in the mid-eighties making my *Banalities* exhibition [which included, among other objects, Koons's porcelain sculpture of Michael Jackson with his chimpanzee, Bubbles] and going to a lot of baroque churches in Europe. One of the things that I was so moved by was how sexuality was used by the church. If you look at all the different images of animals and plants, you have the abundance of fertility and the aspect of the eternal, but they leave out the physical qualities, the male-female aspect, and it becomes very ephemeral. So I think I was trying to balance it a little more, showing another way of reaching for the eternal and keeping the species going.

**JA:** If you go to India, or many countries in Asia, you'll see the same pretty blatant and graphic sexual depictions on the old temples.

**BG:** Why do you think it was visual artists who caused the problems for the NEA?

**JA:** First, you can see the depictions. You don't have to go into a book and read about them. I mean, the rock-and-roll world was also attacked, but again, they're out there in the world. So it's kind of an easy target.

**JK:** They don't have the platform of an organization behind them. They may have some commercial support, galleries or something, but it's more of an individual endeavor. The reason that individual artists, visual artists may not have such a strong platform or be viewed as culture, is because they don't work in a mass medium, whereas with film or the performing arts, generally you think of a larger audience.

**JA:** You're right; individual artists are easier to attack. The religious right and the Congress have been going after the film business for years, but they can't make any inroads because it is such a massive commercial endeavor.

**BG:** Have either of you had political involvements outside of arts organizations?

**JA:** I was always an activist. I think I was born an activist. [laughs] But I never, until I got to the NEA, was confronted with being an activist for art and for the freedom of artists to express themselves. I never had to wave the flag for the First Amendment before in the way that I did.

**BG:** How did the NEA and the NEH come about?

**JA:** John and Jacqueline Kennedy, of course, were big supporters of the arts, and it all started with Roger Stevens, who was a major producer of theater and a real-estate magnate, a

big supporter of Kennedy. The idea was to develop an agency that would support the humanities and artists in America. Kennedy died before it came about, but Stevens continued to press Lyndon Baines Johnson, and under Johnson it became a reality. Johnson made some of the most eloquent statements about how we need people of vision in our country. So that's how it began, with a \$2.5 million budget. Then, under Nancy Hanks, who became the second chairman under President Nixon, it increased 1000%. I think she was our greatest chairman.

**BG:** Americans for the Arts is the successor of an organization that helped start the NEA, and it is now the largest nonprofit arts organization in the country. It has arts advocacy events where artists come from all fifty states to lobby on Capitol Hill. At one of them, during the Mapplethorpe-Serrano era, Sharon Stone asked Newt Gingrich, who was a huge fan of hers, to back down a bit, and it worked, didn't it? The Republicans weren't going to embrace Robert Mapplethorpe, but they did stop taking a consistently negative approach, right?

**JA:** Well, the moderate Republicans were the ones who finally stepped up to bat. The hardcore guys who originally sought the elimination of the agencies never changed their votes.

**BG:** But the agencies survived.

**JA:** Meanwhile, Americans for the Arts has gone through some transformations. [The American Council for the Arts and the U.S. Conference of Mayors joined forces with the National Alliance of Local Arts Agencies about seven years ago in a merger of groups that supported major museums and performance companies with those that supported smaller, grass-roots arts projects.]

**JK:** Jane, can I just interject? Coming from the visual arts, one of the images that I think was so memorable was seeing Leo Castelli giving a Jasper Johns flag to John F. Kennedy at the White House. Artists looked at that as an acceptance of the art world.

**JA:** You were really young!

**JK:** I was born in 1955. But I would see photographs, like Leo in Washington, at the time. There was a sense of support. You were speaking before about being activists. I've always felt that my work has been very political. When people think of political art, they expect a banner right up front, a very one-dimensional message about "stop the war" or something. But I've always felt that art can either enlighten people or debase and disempower them. You have to come to art without anything predetermined. If it's predetermined, it's used to make people feel inadequate. But if you can remove any sense of rules, if you can present a platform that says everybody is already perfect, your past is perfect, your cultural history is perfect, then art becomes this tremendous vehicle of empowerment, and it leads you from self-acceptance to the acceptance of others. And at the end of the day, the arts are about love and they're about acceptance. It's not about objects.

**JA:** I don't think that's understood at all.

**BG:** Up until World War II, aside from popular music and vaudeville, most of the arts in America were exclusionary. There was a clear distinction between popular art and high art.

**JA:** Definitely. That was true right through the Kennedys. They were interested in high art.

**BG:** But that all changed, didn't it, when the government got involved?

**JA:** Another of Roger Stevens's ideas was to decentralize art. We were never going to become a state-supported system, and I don't think we should. But what the NEA started to

do was see that communities and artists and institutions in communities always had matching grants. That still exists today.

**JK:** I remember applying for a New York State grant. And the organizations or the spaces that I showed at as a young artist—Artists Space, the New Museum, P.S. 1. I wouldn't have been able to have those exhibitions without the NEA.

**JA:** Unfortunately, Congress can put any kind of restrictions on grants that they want, so the NEA has had a decency clause for years. It was upheld by the Supreme Court in '98, and it's still on the books. So you're not going to have institutions applying for grants that are cutting-edge anymore. Because they don't want to have to go through a "decency" casting.

**JK:** The terrible thing about censorship is that what art does so well is define the parameters of what life can be and give us an opportunity to expand our parameters. When you deal with parameters, you have to deal with polarities. If you want to deal with good things, things that are positive and beneficial to people, you have to describe what the bad things are too. To show black, you need to be able to show white. To show movement, you have to have something still. As soon as you limit it, there's a disequilibrium. Whenever you censor, you lose that balance.

**JA:** Daniel Boorstin, who was the Librarian of Congress before James Billington, said, "Art awakens us to our own possibilities." That's what you were saying as well.

**BG:** So much of Jeff's work is wonderfully innocent, and yet it also has that transgressive component that has made him controversial. Have you ever taken a part, Jane, that totally contradicted your image?

**JA:** I've never censored myself in choosing roles. If the play was great, I would just jump in and do it. I remember as a young actress, I had to do a lovemaking scene on stage, and I never thought much about it. But we were highly criticized for that, even though we were under a blanket. Then, James Earl Jones and I were the first interracial couple to be in a bed together on stage, and even though I had a little T-shirt on, and he had a little towel, we were kissing, and I got a lot of hate mail and death threats and everything. But, again, one just does what one has to do, if the work is good. The next thing I'm doing is an HBO series called *Sex Life*, which is a very honest look at sexual relations. I play a sex therapist who counsels a couple in their twenties, one in their thirties, one in their forties, and then you see me with my husband in my sixties. There is real sex there. So I know that a lot of people are going to go, "Oh my God, you played Eleanor Roosevelt! How dare you!" But I didn't even think about it. You know, I read the script, and I thought, "Boy, this is really good, honest writing." Again, we bring up honesty. Artists are looking for honesty and truth. Jeff, what do you think it was about *Made in Heaven* that irritated people?

**JK:** The sexuality. I was really using the body as a metaphor, again, for self-acceptance. When people would mention the word pornography, I would really be a little upset, because I saw it as much more about love. I saw the painting *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden* by Masaccio in Florence, and I was so moved by how beautiful it was and how that's a symbol of every man and every woman and their sense of guilt and shame. It's like, why carry this guilt and shame? My work before was a metaphor; *Banality* was using guilt and shame, asking people to accept their own cultural history. In *Made in Heaven* I was just giving another metaphor—of the body. Watch a hummingbird pollinate. We all realize what a beautiful act it is to see the continuance of the process of nature, of life. Yet, we won't look at an image of a man and a woman...two people in love. *Made in Heaven* was making the same connection to the continuation of life. How could anybody attack that? It's just something that was very, very beautiful. But it's very much ingrained to keep the natural as unnatural.

**BG:** So, to go full circle, you were reacting to the repressive tide that was evident in the protests against Mapplethorpe and Serrano.

**JK:** You have to.

**JA:** All artists worth their salt had to. Because what Robert was doing was really quite beautiful. Unlike a lot of pornography, I think, which is not beautiful. Not only is it out there to make money, but there's a lot of ugliness in it. I find it sad. What do you feel about that, Jeff?

**JK:** Well, at one time in my life I was married to a woman, my ex-wife, who came from a pornography background. She grew up in a situation where it was a way for her to put food on the table and have a better life. Actually, pornography brought her fame, it brought her money. But she was a victim, and she really wanted a change. I was living my philosophy about acceptance and how every history is perfect—and it is. Everybody's history is perfect. But of course, it was much more complicated for my wife. So, yeah, I realized that pornography has a negative side, and the people involved with it come from tragedy, and usually they've experienced some trauma in their life. One of the attacks on pornography, though, is that it excites physically. And I believe in the arts exciting physically. Art makes chemical reactions. It's one of the wonderful things about art, the ability to make us feel alive and to experience the world physically.

**BG:** When reactionary forces try to fight art and attack artists, is it political? Or is it chemical? Or emotional?

**JA:** I think it's emotional, a lot of it. I don't think it was emotional for Newt Gingrich, but I think that for people like Jerry Falwell, it is emotional. For Jesse Helms, it was visceral. He found it ugly. It was indecent. He didn't want his daughter and his grandchildren to see it.

**JK:** So, emotions drove their politics?

**JA:** I don't know. I do know that his favorite kind of visual art were paintings of clowns, maybe with a tear coming down.

**JK:** Red Skelton always painted clowns. I think Frank Sinatra painted some clowns also.

**JA:** I happen to love clowns! I just saw a circus the other night. I was crazy about it! Jeff, I admire the playfulness in your work. Do you wake up in the morning, and does your mood influence what you will do that day? Or do you have an idea in your head and set out to complete it for weeks or months?

**JK:** You know, Jane, I wake up every day and I really pinch myself for the opportunity. I don't want to waste a moment. It's always interesting how art seems to present itself to you, you just don't know where it came from. When you look back, you realize, "I selected these post-cards" or "I took my children and we rode this train," and you can connect the dots. But there's this aspect of art that really comes from trusting in yourself and if you trust in yourself, you're dealing in a deeper kind of consciousness which leads you to more archetypal images, hopefully things that connect to other people, coming from a place which has a much longer history than the individual themselves.

**JA:** Do you think about metaphor consciously? Or do you think it just comes?

**JK:** I work as you were describing how you work. Very intuitively.

**JA:** Then maybe you see the connections later?

**JK:** Thinking back, you can start to see them. But I never sit down and try to create something within a framework, in an analytical way. The vocabularies tend to develop.

**JA:** Tennessee Williams said, "We all just have one theme in our lives, and we keep doing it over and over till we get it right" [laughs]

**JK:** In the visual arts it's easy to see that. You have images that are repeated, I'm sure, in acting.

**JA:** Absolutely. It becomes your signature. People have their own personal stamps. I know how Vanessa Redgrave will work, but I always love watching her.

**BG:** You are both in the very privileged position of being successful enough to pretty much do what you want and also advocate on behalf of those who are perhaps less able to do it for themselves. Was there a moment when each of you became conscious of having attained that point, and are you ever secure in it?

**JK:** First of all, I'm very grateful for the financial rewards that I've been able to have. But I always have tried in my life to be very self-sufficient, and I've always enjoyed doing that. I learned from a very young age. I'd go door-to-door, selling gift-wrapping paper, chocolates. It's actually a wonderful experience, because I'd love to knock on a door and not know who would answer the door. It's interaction, and it is the activity I'm still trying to do with my art today. I don't really think about money at all. I think about being able to take care of my family—just basic needs.

**BG:** Jane, did you have a moment when you said, "I am an actress now. I can make my living this way"?

**JA:** When I first came to New York in the early sixties, I didn't know anybody. I was a complete tabula rasa, and I would say, "I want to be an actress."

And an older actor met me and said, "Don't ever say that. You say, '*I am* an actress.'"

So I started saying that, and then I began to believe in it, and I got work very, very quickly. I was one of the lucky ones. But financially, I began to feel secure in the mid- to late seventies, when I began to do a lot of television movies. It was a great time, for about ten years. I was in one of the first miniseries, *Eleanor and Franklin*, and I got enormous acclaim. Then the market fell out of television movies. Suddenly they were gone. And I got older. So I've never been financially secure.

**JK:** After my divorce, I lost everything, I liquidated everything I had, and then I was in debt for years. It's only been since '99 that I've started to be able to start to rebuild a little.

**JA:** You and I share this understanding, then. But I think we also share, as artists, that we never really thought about going out and making money...

**JK:** Absolutely.

**JA:** A dear friend of mine said... She's kind of a California goddess-woman. And she said, "You know, the universe will take care of you." And it's like your idea of acceptance. You just accept what happens. BG