

Caylee Pallatto  
Op Ed Final Draft  
3/30/2021

## Tulips as a Tribute?

### Jeff Koons' *Bouquet* is an Inappropriate Gift for Parisians



Jeff Koons' *Bouquet of Tulips* (2016-2019) in the public garden surrounding the Petit Palais, Paris, France.

Flowers are usually considered an appropriate gift in times of loss, but not when they're monumental tulips given by American artist Jeff Koons. His *Bouquet of Tulips* (2016-2019), a 41' tall bronze and stainless-steel sculpture for the citizens of Paris, France, was rightly rejected by many Parisians when it was unveiled in October 2019. The memorial failed to commemorate the victims of the terrorist attacks four years earlier, making it an inappropriate sculpture to remember a national tragedy.

Koons was commissioned in 2016 by the former U.S. Ambassador to France, Jane Hartley, to make a sculpture for the city of Paris to commemorate the 130 French citizens killed in the city's November 2015 terrorist attacks. ISIS militants targeted six locations across Paris, including the Stade de France soccer stadium and the Bataclan concert hall. Impromptu memorials

immediately appeared across the city, but *Bouquet of Tulips* was the first permanent memorial gifted to France by another country.

Modeled after the Statue of Liberty — a gift from France to the United States in 1886 — the sculpture was intended to evoke the sentiment of solidarity between France and the U.S. during a time of fear and uncertainty. Instead of Lady Liberty gripping a torch, a massive hand grips a bouquet of 11 pillow-like tulips.

Hartley approached Koons after discussing the idea of a “cultural offering” to France with Jerry Speyer, the former chairman of the board of New York’s Museum of Modern Art. Koons’ status as the “most prominent American living artist” was enough to qualify him to create this tribute.

Based in New York City, Koons rose to prominence during the mid-1980s for his oversized sculptural works based on figures from popular culture. *Bouquet of Tulips* doesn’t reference pop culture, but it bears Koons’ signature use of bright colors and overexaggerated forms. As a result, it sticks out like a sore thumb in the garden surrounding the Petit Palais, a neoclassical building that houses the city’s Museum of Fine Arts.

The sculpture fits the definition of “plop art,” a term coined in 1969 to describe a large, outdoor sculpture with no connection to its surrounding environment. Despite the sculpture’s conception as a gift from the U.S. to France, no figural or textual references to this relationship can be found anywhere on the sculpture or its plinth. *Bouquet of Tulips* could be installed anywhere in the world, and it would still be interpreted as a bouquet of inflated flowers (or, in the words of French critic Yves Michaud, “eleven colored anuses on rods”). The sculpture’s ambiguity and pop art playfulness diminish its significance as a memorial dedicated to the victims of the terrorist attacks.

The bronze plaque on the sculpture’s pedestal also contributes nothing to its interpretation, acting solely as an attribution to the artist: “Jeff Koons / *Bouquet of Tulips* / 2016 – 2019.”

According to Koons’ speech at the sculpture’s unveiling ceremony, the tulips represent the “loss, rebirth, and the vitality of the human spirit” found in the wake of the terrorist attacks. Instead of the traditional dozen flowers found in a bouquet, only eleven were sculpted by Koons. The missing twelfth tulip symbolizes the absence created by the loss of 130 lives. Without a proper inscription to guide interpretation, these deeper meanings are lost to the public.

Some Parisians are unbothered by the sculpture’s lack of overt connection to the attacks; they are excited to have a public work of art by a world-renowned contemporary artist in their city. “I don’t see the link between the statue and the attacks, but why not take it?” said one art student from Paris. Paris is no stranger to controversial works of art and architecture — after all, the Eiffel Tower was originally hated by Parisians — so how is Koons’ *Bouquet of Tulips* any different?

Aesthetic concerns similarly contribute to the controversy surrounding *Bouquet of Tulips*, but the main criticism is that it doesn’t function as a memorial. While Koons is known for his sculptural works, this is the first that is a public memorial. In the past he has stated that his art is void of any hidden meaning, but the memorial aspect of this sculpture appears to only exist *because* of its hidden context.

*Bouquet of Tulips* remains a popular public installation due to Koons' celebrity status in the contemporary art world, but the significance of the sculpture as a memorial is lost to visitors. To sufficiently memorialize the victims of the terrorist attacks, additional interpretive signage must be added on or near the sculpture. The city of Paris recently voted on plans for a "remembrance garden," which may finally give the victims the recognition they deserve. The quicker we are forced to move from one atrocity to the next, the shorter our memories become, which makes it all the more important to particularize the victims of these tragedies in some form other than an abstract bouquet.

Word Count: 814 – was able to decrease from draft 2 but not enough to get to 750!

Sources:

<https://www.nouvelobs.com/culture/20191005.OBS19360/les-tulipes-de-koons-onze-anus-colores-montes-sur-tiges.html>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/21/arts/design/jeff-koons-gift-to-paris-bouquet-of-tulips-terror-attacks.html>

<https://hyperallergic.com/527179/anuses-on-stems-parisians-react-to-jeff-koonss-gift-to-the-city/>

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-art-koons/koons-unveils-giant-bouquet-of-tulips-tribute-to-victims-of-2015-paris-attacks-idUSKBN1WJ21P>

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/oct/04/jeff-koons-bouquet-of-tulips-honours-victims-of-paris-terror-attacks>

<https://www.artsy.net/news/artsy-editorial-jeff-koonss-controversial-bouquet-tulips-installation-paris>

[https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2018/01/21/non-au-cadeau-de-jeff-koons\\_1624159/](https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2018/01/21/non-au-cadeau-de-jeff-koons_1624159/)

<https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20191004-is-bouquet-of-tulips-the-years-most-controversial-artwork>

<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/jeff-koons-tulips-poll-1682545>