

**THE \$12
MILLION
STUFFED
SHARK**

THE CURIOUS
ECONOMICS OF
CONTEMPORARY ART

Don Thompson

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THE \$12 MILLION STUFFED SHARK
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DAMIEN HIRST AND THE SHARK

Becoming a brand name is an important part of life.

It's the world we live in.

Damien Hirst, artist

It takes a certain amount of nerve to act as though one knows what is good or, more important, what will be deemed good in the future. It's an article of faith in the art world that some people have an eye for it and some people don't; the disagreement arises over which do or don't.

Nick Paumgarten,

"Days and Nights in Leo Koenig's Gallery,"

The New Yorker

British artist Damien Hirst, creator of the \$12 million stuffed shark, is one of a very few artists who can claim to have altered our concept of what art and an art career can be. Britain's *Sunday Times Rich List* claimed Hirst as worth £130 million at the age of forty-two. This means that he was worth more than Picasso, Andy Warhol, and Salvador Dali combined at the same age—and these three are at the top of any list of artists who measured their success in money.

Francis Bacon, who briefly held the auction record for contemporary British artists, had an estate valued at £11 million when he died in 1992 at the age of eighty-two. It is hard to imagine a greater contrast than the artistic lives of Francis Bacon and Damien Hirst.

Do these amounts mean that Hirst deserves to be discussed in the same breath as Picasso or Warhol? The story of Damien Hirst—his art, his prices, his shark, and his client Charles Saatchi—is a good introduction to some of the objects now accepted as conceptual art and to the role of the artist in marketing and achieving high prices for this art.

Hirst was born in Bristol and grew up in Leeds. His father was a motor mechanic and car salesman, his mother an amateur artist. He first went to art school in Leeds, then worked for two years on London building sites before applying to and being turned down by St. Martins in London and a college in Wales. He was accepted by Goldsmiths College in London.

Many art schools in the United Kingdom serve the function of absorbing students who cannot get into a real college. Goldsmiths in the 1980s was different; it attracted some bright students and creative tutors. Goldsmiths had an innovative curriculum, one that did not require the ability to draw or paint. The model has been widely adopted.

As a student at Goldsmiths, Hirst had a placement in a mortuary, which he has said influenced his later themes in art. In 1988 he curated the acclaimed *Freeze* exhibition in an empty Port of London Authority building in Docklands, showcasing the work of seventeen fellow students. Hirst's own contribution was a cluster of cardboard boxes painted with household latex. *Freeze* was Hirst's personal creation. He chose the art, commissioned a catalogue, and planned an opening party. He raised money for the show from a Canadian company, Olympia & York, which was building the Canary Wharf business complex. When Norman Rosenthal of the Royal Academy said he did not know his way to Docklands, Hirst picked him up and drove him to the exhibition. The *Freeze* exhibition both launched the careers of several (yBas) and brought Hirst to the attention of art collector and patron Charles Saatchi. The Goldsmiths class that took part in *Freeze*—Hirst, Matt Collishaw, Gary Hume, Michael Landy, Sarah Lucas, and Fiona Rae—was perhaps the most successful of all time in the United Kingdom in terms of later careers in art.

Hirst graduated in 1989. In 1990 he and a friend, Carl Freedman, curated another warehouse show called *Gambler*, in an empty Bermondsey factory. Charles Saatchi visited the show; Freedman describes him as standing open-mouthed in

front of Hirst's installation *A Thousand Years*, a representation of life and death in which flies were hatched inside a vitrine to migrate over a glass partition toward a cow's rotting head. The flies were electrocuted en route by a bug zapper. A visitor could see *A Thousand Years*, and then visit it again a few days later and see the cow's head becoming smaller and the pile of dead flies larger. Saatchi purchased the installation, and offered to fund Hirst's future work.

In 1991, Saatchi funded and Hirst created *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*. Hirst had described the idea of the shark in an interview in the first-ever edition of *Frieze* magazine. "I like the idea of a thing to describe a feeling. A shark is frightening, bigger than you are, in an environment unknown to you. It looks alive when it's dead and dead when it's alive."

Hirst's titles are an integral part of marketing his work, and much of the meaning flows from the title. If the shark were just called *Shark*, the viewer might well say, "Yes, it certainly is a shark," and move on. Calling it *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* forces viewers to create a meaning. The title produced as much discussion as the work.

In January 2005, amid a great deal of art-world hype about the sculpture, *Physical Impossibility* was purchased by Steve Cohen. Later in 2005 Hirst agreed to replace the now decrepit shark. He called Vic Hislop, the fisherman from whom he had purchased the first shark in 1991, and requested three more tiger sharks and a great white shark of the same size and ferocity as the original. Hislop actually sent five sharks, one of which he threw in for free. These were refrigerated and shipped to a former aircraft hangar in Gloucestershire. The shark chosen to replace the original was injected with 224 gallons of formaldehyde, ten times the amount used on the first shark and in a stronger concentration. The replacement shark was exhibited at the Kunsthau Museum in Bregenz, Austria in *Re-Object*, an exhibition of ready-mades and pop culture that also included work by Marcel Duchamp and Jeff Koons. In September 2007, the new shark was shipped to the Metropolitan Museum in New York where it will be displayed at the entrance to the contemporary art section for a three-year loan period.

Hirst's shark was not the first. A man named Eddie Saunders displayed a golden hammerhead shark in his JD electrical shop in Shoreditch in 1989, two years before Hirst. In 2003 Saunders' shark was put on display in the Stuckism International Gallery in East London under the title *A Dead Shark Isn't Art*. Stuckists are an international movement encompassing forty countries; they are against conceptual art like sharks, and say they are also against the anti-art art trend.

Saunders emphasized that not only had he caught his shark himself, but it was much more handsome than Hirst's. Saunders offered his shark for sale at £1 million, with an ad that said "New Year Sale: Shark for only £1,000,000; save £5,000,000 on the Damien Hirst copy." He received a great deal of media coverage but no offers.

One of the things that give value to a work of art is scarcity, the assumption that it is one of a kind and will never be duplicated. Prints or sculptures can be produced in multiples, but the size of the series is known. To protect the value of Cohen's shark, it might be expected that Hirst would never produce a competing version. But he did. In early 2006, Hirst opened *The Death of God*, his first exhibition in Latin America, at the Galeria Hilario Galguera in Mexico City. Front and center, there was *The Wrath of God*, another tiger shark in formaldehyde. This was a five-foot shark, the one Vic Hislop had thrown in for free, stuffed and mounted by assistants in Germany working under the artist's supervision. The new shark sold before the show opened, for \$4 million to the Leeum Samsung Museum in Seoul, Korea. There was no public comment from Steve Cohen on the sudden expansion of the shark family, or on the threat posed by the three sharks remaining in Hirst's freezer.

So what does one of the world's richest artists create, besides sharks? Hirst's work falls into six categories. The first group are the "tank pieces" which he calls his *Natural History* series, and which incorporate dead and sometimes dissected creatures—cows and sheep as well as sharks—preserved in formaldehyde. Hirst describes these as "suspended in death" and as the "joy of life and inevitability of death." A pickled sheep, said to have sold for £2.1 million, followed the first shark.

The second category is Hirst's long-running "cabinet series," where he displays collections of surgical tools or pill bottles in pharmacy medicine cabinets. In the Mexico City show, Jorge Vergara, president of a Mexican vitamin company, paid \$3 million for *The Blood of Christ*, a medicine cabinet installation of acetaminophen tablets. In June 2007 Hirst's *Lullaby Spring*, a cabinet containing 6,136 handcrafted pills mounted on razor blades, set a record at Sotheby's London for the highest price paid at auction for a work by any living artist, £9.6 million (\$19.1 million), topping the previous record of \$17 million, paid for a work by Jasper Johns, and Hirst's own record, set when the companion piece, *Lullaby Winter*, was auctioned a month earlier in New York for \$7.4 million. (The record lasted only a few months until broken by a Jeff Koons sculpture.)

Hirst's third long-running production series consists of spot paintings. These consist of fifty or more multicolored circles on a white background, in a grid of rows and columns and usually named after pharmaceutical compounds. The allusion to drugs refers to the interaction between different elements to create a powerful outcome.

The spot paintings are produced by assistants. Hirst tells them what colors to use and where to paint the spots, but he does not touch the final art. Which assistant does the painting apparently matters a lot. Hirst once said that "the best person who ever painted spots for me was Rachel. She's brilliant, absolutely fucking brilliant. The best spot painting you can have by me is one by Rachel." Hirst claims ownership of the concept of spot paintings, and once sued British Airways subsidiary Go for breach of copyright after it used an advertisement containing colored spots. Every UK paper reported the case. In May 2007 at Sotheby's New York, a 76 in × 60 in spot painting sold for \$1.5 million.

The fourth category, spin paintings, are "painted" on a spinning potter's wheel. One account of the painting process has Hirst wearing a protective suit and goggles, standing on a stepladder, throwing paint at a revolving canvas or wood base and shouting "more red" or "turpentine" to an assistant. Hirst said that the great advantage of spin paintings is that "It's impossible to make a bad one." He claims to have tried, using a broom, to smear the colors as the wheel spun, but the painting still looked good. Each spin painting represents the energy of the random. The Mexico City spin paintings differed from previous versions in having a skull in the center and darker colors.

The fifth category is butterfly paintings. In one version, collages are made from thousands of dismembered wings. Another version has tropical butterflies mounted on canvas that has been painted with monochrome household gloss paint. The mounted butterflies are intended as another comment on the theme of life and death. These works are constructed by technicians working in a separate studio in Hackney. One of the first butterfly paintings was purchased by footballer David Beckham for £250,000.

Hirst's London dealer, White Cube, has sold four hundred butterfly and spin paintings and six hundred spot paintings, at up to £300,000 each. The smallest 20 cm × 20 cm spot paintings sell in the gallery for £20,000. Signed photographic reproductions of a spot painting entitled *Valium*, in an edition of five hundred, were sold for \$2,500 each. That begins to explain how Damien Hirst came to be worth

£100 million at the age of forty, and why a comparison with Picasso's earnings might be misleading.

Some of Hirst's art incorporates several categories. A cabinet of individual fish in a formaldehyde solution combines stuffed creatures with the cabinet series, but has the same intention as the spot paintings, to arrange color, shape, and form. These too have publicity-producing titles, such as *Isolated Elements Swimming in the Same Direction for the Purposes of Understanding*.

The final category was first shown at the Gagosian Gallery in New York in March 2004. This was a collection of thirty-one photorealist paintings, which caused some art writers to comment, "Yes, he really can draw!" The show was entitled *Damien Hirst: The Elusive Truth*, and the large canvases filled six rooms of the gallery. Most of the canvases depicted violent death. One was titled *A Crack Addict, Abandoned by Society*; another, set in a morgue, was *Autopsy with Sliced Human Brain*.

In an interview at Gagosian, Hirst pointed out that the artworks were, like the shark and the spot and the butterfly paintings, produced by a team of assistants. Each painting is done by several people, so no one is ever responsible for a whole work of art. Hirst added a few brush strokes and his signature. In another interview he said that he cannot paint, that a buyer would get an inferior painting if it was done by him. On the artistic ethics of using four studios and forty assistants to produce "Hirsts," which he then signs, he has said: "I like the idea of a factory to produce work, which separates the work from the ideas, but I wouldn't like a factory to produce the ideas."

Those who praised the show said Hirst was engaged in a meditation upon death in the tradition of Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol. *Village Voice* art critic Jerry Saltz commented:

The best that can be said about these canvases is that Hirst is working in the interstice between painting and the name of the painter: Damien Hirst is making Damien Hirsts. The paintings themselves are labels—carriers of the Hirst brand. They're like Prada or Gucci. You pay more but get the buzz of a brand. For between \$250,000 and \$2 million, rubes and speculators can buy a work that is only a name.

Every work was sold on the first day of the Gagosian show, the top price of \$2.2 million almost equaling Hirst's record at the time, achieved for a medicine

chest sculpture. Hirst emulates fashion designers in also selling a diffusion line. Visitors unable to afford the paintings or the signed prints at Gagosian could purchase T-shirts.

Because branding raises the value of the ordinary, the public activities of a branded artist like Hirst often end up being about money and publicity. On New Year's Eve 1997, Hirst and friends Jonathan Kennedy and Matthew Freud (related to painter Lucian Freud and distantly, to Sigmund Freud) opened a bar and restaurant called Pharmacy in Notting Hill. Prada designed the uniforms and Jasper Morrison the furniture, while Hirst filled the restaurant with medicine cabinet sculptures and butterfly paintings. There were cabinets containing latex gloves and suppositories in the lavatories. The cocktails were named "Detox" and "Voltarol Retarding Agent." Hirst installed a lime-green neon cross out front, just like a real UK pharmacy.

The restaurant attracted an art crowd and celebrity diners Hugh Grant, Madonna, and Kate Moss. Pharmacy made headlines when the Royal Pharmaceutical Society sued, claiming the Pharmacy name was confusing the sick. Hirst went along with the publicity by agreeing to change the name every few weeks to a different anagram of "Pharmacy": "Achy Ramp" or "Army Chap." The challenge was dropped when newspaper coverage waned. The words "Bar and Restaurant" were added to the Pharmacy name, and the green cross was removed.

Pharmacy closed in 2003. Sotheby's contemporary art specialist Oliver Barker was on a bus when he spotted the fittings being removed for storage, and suggested an auction. One hundred and fifty items from the restaurant were offered in what Barker described as the first auction in Sotheby's 259-year history made up completely of consigned work by a single living artist. Hirst designed the cover for the catalogue, which itself became a collector's item.

The pieces from Pharmacy, estimated at £3 million, sold at auction for a staggering £11.1 million. Five hundred people attended the auction and thirty-five assistants took absentee bids on phones. The butterfly canvas *Full of Love* sold for £364,000 to London dealer Timothy Taylor; the underbidder was Harry Blain of Haunch of Venison, representing Christie's owner François Pinault. Blain then outbid Taylor at £1.2 million for a medicine cabinet, *The Fragile Truth*, one of a pair of six-vitrine medicine cabinets from Pharmacy's bar.

Six Pharmacy ashtrays, expected to sell for £100, brought £1,600 for the six. Two martini glasses, estimated at £50–70, sold for £4,800. London dealer Anne Faggionato paid £1,440 for a pair of birthday party invitations. A pair of salt and

pepper shakers went for £1,920. Forty rolls of the restaurant's Hirst-designed gold wallpaper brought £9,600. Bidding on a set of six Jasper Morrison dining chairs had reached £2,500 when a standing-room bidder called out "£10, 000," a textbook illustration of the "must have it" culture in which money is no object.

Hirst had negotiated an agreement that allowed him to repurchase his art from the bankruptcy receivers for £5,000. This turned out to be a good investment, given the £11.1 million realized at auction. The Hirst-branded contents of Pharmacy, as auctioned art, produced more profit in one evening than the restaurant had made in six years.

Does Hirst's contemporary art have an intrinsic meaning, or does the meaning just flow from the brilliant titles? Virginia Button, a curator at Tate Modern, says there is meaning. She called *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* "brutally honest and confrontational, he draws attention to the paranoid denial of death that permeates our culture."

Many others share Button's thinking about the importance of Hirst's work. Consider the awards he has received over a ten-year period. In 1995 there was the Turner Prize, awarded each year to a British artist under fifty. His prize-winning sculpture involved two glass cases with a narrow passageway between them. Each case contained one half of a cow that had been split lengthways from nose to tail. This and a calf similarly split were called *Mother and Child, Divided*, illustrating again the marketing value of the title in forcing the viewer to interpret the object. Why a cow? A horse was too noble, and viewers share no affinity with goats.

In May 2003, Hirst became the first artist to have his work sent into space. A spot painting was used as an instrument calibration chart on the British *Beagle* lander, launched that month as part of the European Space Agency's Mars Express mission (illustrated). The painting was accompanied by a track by the British rock band Blur, to be played from the probe as a signal that the *Beagle* had landed. On Christmas Eve 2003, *Beagle* landed on the Martian surface at 150 miles an hour, and lander and spot painting were reduced to rubble. Another spot painting appeared in the Meg Ryan movie *Kate and Leopold* as representing the art and culture of the twentieth century.

The most incredible Hirst-branding story involved A. A. Gill, feature writer and restaurant critic for the London *Sunday Times*. Gill owned an old painting of Joseph Stalin by an unknown hand, which he said "used to hang over my desk as an aid to hard work" and for which he had paid £200. In February 2007, Gill offered it

to Christie's for sale in a midweek auction. The auction house rejected it, saying it did not deal in Hitler or Stalin.

"How about if it were Stalin by Hirst or Warhol?"

"Well then, of course we would love to have it."

Gill called Damien Hirst and asked if he would paint a red nose on Stalin. Hirst did so, adding his signature below the nose. With the signature, Christie's accepted it and offered an estimate of £8,000–12,000. Seventeen bidders later, the hammer fell at £140,000. It was, after all, a signed Hirst.

Hirst's most recent and much-publicized project is a life-size cast of a human skull in platinum, with human teeth, from an eighteenth-century skull of a European, aged about thirty-five, who died between 1720 and 1810. Hirst purchased the skull from an Islington taxidermy shop. Encrusted with 8,601 pave-set industrial diamonds with a total weight of 1,100 carats, the cast is titled *For The Love of God* (illustrated), the words supposedly uttered by Hirst's mother on hearing the subject of the project. Hirst says that *For The Love of God* is presented in the tradition of *memento mori*, the skulls depicted in classical paintings to remind us of death and mortality. It is also presented in homage to the Aztecs, as he now spends four months each year at his second home in Mexico. He emphasizes it is context that a buyer will acquire, a reminder of our thoughts about life and death. The owner acquires with the jewelled skull a major security problem, with the diamonds in the work worth about £3 million.

At the center of the forehead is a pink 52.4 carat, brilliant-cut diamond said to be valued at £4 million—the number changes with the telling. Hirst once said the skull cost £12 million to fabricate; his business manager Frank Dunphy said it cost £15 million. The work was constructed by artisans from the Bond Street jeweller Bentley and Skinner, with Hirst maintaining creative control. Claimed to be the largest diamond commission to a British jeweller since the Crown Jewels, it contains three times as many diamonds as the Imperial State Crown. It went on display in June 2007 in a show called *Beyond Belief* at White Cube's Mayfair gallery in London, in a darkened upstairs room lit only by spotlights directed upon the diamond-encrusted skull. Entrance was by timed ticket for groups of ten, each allowed in for no more than five minutes.

The skull was offered for sale at £50 million, which Frank Dunphy described as being "on the cheap side." Cheap or not, the price was certain to produce headlines.

White Cube also offered limited edition silkscreen prints of the work, priced at £900 and £10,000; the highest priced is sprinkled with diamond dust. Three months later, Hirst launched a diffusion line, clothing for speciality stores as part of the *Warhol Factory X* label. Some items feature miniature skulls with black denim as a canvas. Hirst had become a brand and a label in more than just art, and his clothing line another kind of lithograph.

In September 2007, ten weeks after it went on display, the skull was purchased by a group of investors for what Frank Dunphy said was “full price, and in cash.” Hirst retained a 24 percent interest, so the investors put up £38 million for their share. The £50 million total price made the skull by far the most expensive work by any living artist, in the gallery or at auction. As part of the deal the buyers are required to display the skull for two years in museums. Hirst’s manager Frank Dumphy said it was the buyers’ intention to resell the work at a later date.

Early in 2008, Hirst opened his own retail store in Marylebone High Street in central London. It sells T-shirts and posters, but also *Happy Head*, a \$50,000 painted plastic take-off on the platinum skull. Also offered is a \$500,000, 18-carat gold bracelet with pills as charms, and wallpaper decorated with Hirst’s pills, at \$2,000 a roll.

White Cube considers Hirst the most marketing-savvy artist in the world. No artwork other than *For The Love of God* was ever written about in a hundred publications, a year before it was created. Artist Dinos Chapman called the skull a work of genius—not the art, the marketing.

What does all this tell us? First, that it may today be unimportant whether work is created by the actual hand of a famous artist, as long as the branded artist has conceptual input and the work is associated with his name. Damien Hirst’s success rests on a strong brand and a quality-controlled manufacturing operation. A spot painting signed by Hirst has great value; one by his artisan Rachel does not. Also, uniqueness in art may not be as important as has been thought. The second version of the shark produced a very high price.

At the age of forty-two, Damien Hirst is richer, more famous, and maybe more powerful than any other living artist. He lives on a country estate, Toddington Manor in Gloucestershire, with his wife, Maia Norman, and their three children. Andy Warhol and Salvador Dali each lost some of their creative spark as money became more central to their existence. Will this happen to Hirst? He says he will stop producing spot, spin, and butterfly paintings because while they produce income,

they do not develop him creatively. He will continue to do photorealist paintings, and will do at least one more shark.

Does Hirst command power and high prices because he is good, or because he is branded? Is he famous because of his work, because the shock value of his work holds public attention, because Charles Saatchi first made him famous with the high price reported for *Physical Impossibility*, or is he famous for being famous? Is he a social commentator who offers a profound meditation on death and decay? No two critics would likely agree on the answers to these questions. What is clear is that Hirst’s work and his flair for marketing and branding cannot be ignored. His brand creates publicity, and his art brings in people who would never otherwise view contemporary art. It also produces a great many bad headline puns in newspapers, the worst being “Dismembered Cows Are Absolutely Tearabull.”

Jerry Saltz says: “We sneer at Hirst, his dealers and his collectors for having bad taste and bad values; they scoff at us for being old-fashioned, out-of-the-money sourpusses. We all tell ourselves what we already know. The only thing at stake is gamesmanship.” One Christie’s auctioneer shrugged when asked about values and said: “Would I buy a Hirst? No. But we don’t dictate taste, the market creates it—we just auction the art.”