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WHAT A WASTE OF MONEY: EXPENDITURE, THE DEATH DRIVE AND THE CONTEMPORARY ART MARKET

Paul Crosthwaite

Abstract *The commonplace, knee-jerk response to the enormous sums realised by iconic works of postwar and contemporary art - 'what a waste of money!' - is conventionally countered in three ways: by explaining that such pieces possess an aesthetic importance that fully justifies the amounts spent to acquire them; by, conversely, making the pragmatic point that artworks can often prove to be extraordinarily lucrative investments; or, in a synthesis of these polarised views, by arguing that collecting art yields a degree of 'symbolic capital' (evidence of one's knowledge, taste and sophistication; access to an exclusive, glamorous and creative social milieu) for which many are understandably willing to pay a premium. In this essay, however, I argue that the philistine and reactionary standpoint typically occupied by those who denounce money spent on contemporary art as money 'wasted' should not blind cultural critics to the kernel of truth in such assertions: that it is precisely the function of the contemporary art market - and of the art auction in particular - to provide an arena in which reserves of capital may be wantonly expended, and that the wastefulness of such acts of prodigality is maximised when the object purchased itself represents, or literally embodies, waste - hence the prominence today of artworks that entail death, decay, mortification and abjection. In articulating this position, I draw on a theoretical tradition that has its roots in the Freudian theory of the death drive and runs through the work of the French thinkers Georges Bataille, Jean Baudrillard and Julia Kristeva. I pay particular attention to the auction of work by the 'Young British Artist' Damien Hirst at Sotheby's in London in September 2008, a carnival of expenditure that partook of the wider zeitgeist of financial dissipation generated by the global 'credit crunch', then entering its most intense phase.*

Keywords art market, Damien Hirst, money, credit crunch, death drive, Sigmund Freud, Georges Bataille, Jean Baudrillard, Julia Kristeva

'What a waste of money!' In discussions of the enormous sums attracted by iconic works of postwar and contemporary art, it's a familiar refrain, a default position for conservative cultural pundits, irate bloggers (and their lurking, anonymous commenters) and upholders of commonsense everywhere, who, when it comes to art, don't know much, but know what they like - and hate. Thus, for example, in September 2008 the Scottish tabloid newspaper the *Daily Record* greeted the news that work by the English conceptual artist Damien Hirst had raised £111 million¹ at an auction at Sotheby's in

1. All prices quoted in this article are in the currency of the original transaction.

London with the headline ‘What a Waste of Money for Damien Hirst “Art”’. The accompanying article, by the notoriously vituperative columnist Joan Burnie, is a formulaic, throwaway exercise in populist philistinism, which nonetheless manages, in a single, caustic paragraph, to encapsulate the argument I will advance in this article: ‘Well, the hedge fund w*****s [*sic*] have to spend their filthy lucre on something, don’t they? And a shark in formaldehyde does sound rather appropriate’.² In this densely compacted, weirdly cathected passage, the prime representatives of present-day finance capital in the popular imagination - hedge fund managers - are characterised as subject to an absolute imperative to divest themselves of the money they have accumulated. Their profligacy is masturbatory³ (they are ‘wankers’ who indiscriminately ‘spend’ - that is, in the traditional British slang, ejaculate) but also excretory: the wealth they are compelled to squander is ‘filthy lucre’, suggesting the familiar psychoanalytic association between money and faeces, and, more specifically, a notion of money as a waste substance that - like shit - must be regularly expelled in order to maintain the healthy functioning of the system. For Burnie, a ‘shark in formaldehyde’ (a piece entitled *The Kingdom*, which sold to an anonymous telephone bidder for £9.6 million) is presumably an ‘appropriate’ object of such extravagance because it evokes the cold-blooded, predatory nature of the stereotypical financier. (This line of argument has a notable critical history in readings of Hirst’s sharks as evoking a deregulated, streamlined, ruthlessly Darwinian capitalism. For Luke White, Hirst’s work partakes of a tradition in which ‘the shark provides ... an image ... of nature being as rapacious, insatiable and unfeeling as capital accumulation itself’.⁴) As Burnie implies, however, via her mention of the formaldehyde that artificially suspends the processes of putrefaction inside Hirst’s trademark vitrines, this 7 foot 9 inch tiger shark is a fitting purchase for latter-day plutocrats intent on dissipating their fortunes because, like semen lost to the circuits of reproduction in masturbation or shit cast out of the body, it is itself, quite literally, waste, refuse, excrement.

The lesson I take from this knee-jerk response, then, is that the narrow-minded and reactionary standpoint typically occupied by those who denounce money spent on contemporary art as money wasted should not blind cultural critics to the kernel of truth in such assertions: that it is precisely the function of the contemporary art market - and of the art auction in particular - to provide an arena in which reserves of capital may be wantonly expended, and that the wastefulness of such acts of prodigality is maximised when the object purchased itself represents, or literally embodies, waste. Hence the prominence today of artworks that entail death, decay, mortification and abjection. In articulating this position, I draw on a theoretical tradition that has its roots in the Freudian theory of the death drive and runs through the work of the French thinkers Georges Bataille, Jean Baudrillard and Julia Kristeva.

In critical and scholarly commentary on contemporary art, there are, as I

2. Joan Burnie, ‘What a Waste of Money for Damien Hirst “Art”’, *Daily Record* (Glasgow), 19 September 2008, <<http://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/comment/columnists/lifestyle-columnists/joan-burnie/joan-burnie/2008/09/19/what-a-waste-of-money-for-damien-hirst-art-86908-20743257>>.

3. On the convergence of the idioms of economics and masturbation, see David Bennett, ‘Burglars, Burglars and Masturbators: The Sovereign Spender in the Age of Consumerism’, *New Literary History*, 30, 2, 1999: 269-94.

4. Luke White, ‘Damien Hirst’s Shark: Nature, Capitalism and the Sublime’, revised version of paper presented at ‘The Contemporary Sublime’ symposium, Tate Britain, London, 20 February 2010, <<http://eprints.mdx.ac.uk/4387>>, pp1-18, p10.

will show, occasional gestures towards the idea that the art collector's primary (if unacknowledged and perhaps unconscious) objective is not the acquisition of a valuable prize, but rather, to quote Bataille, 'a *loss* that must be as great as possible in order for that activity to take on its true meaning'.⁵ This essay offers the first sustained and systematic elaboration of this perspective, and expands it by establishing a previously unremarked connection between the waste matter that is the collector's disposable capital and the waste matter that constitutes many of the most sought-after artworks. In so doing, my study mounts a major challenge to conventional explanations of the staggering sums regularly pledged in the auction houses, galleries, art fairs and biennales of London, New York, Basel, Miami, Venice and other major cities.

FROM AESTHETIC VALUE TO SYMBOLIC CAPITAL

These explanations can be categorised under three broad headings: aesthetic, economic and symbolic. The aesthetic explanation maintains that sufficient demand exists to push the prices of certain artworks into the millions or tens of millions of pounds simply because the works possess such exceptional quality and importance. The collector and entrepreneur Adam Lindemann takes as an example Damien Hirst's earlier, more famous shark sculpture, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1992), which, when it came onto the market in 2004, sparked competition between Sir Nicolas Serota, director of the Tate Modern, the US hedge fund manager Steven Cohen and several other wealthy collectors, eventually selling to Cohen for a reported \$12 million in January 2005. In Lindemann's words, 'if one believes that it is the iconic art object of the Nineties, then it looks like an appropriate sum for a unique and historic cultural trophy'.⁶ The University of Chicago economics professor David Galenson has made a name for himself by systematising this view. For Galenson, it is straightforwardly the case that the best (that is, most 'innovative') modern and contemporary art attracts the most intense demand; being in tightly limited supply, it is therefore quite natural that such art should realise stratospheric prices. An article ranking living artists by the success of their work at auction, for example, shows 'that the most valuable art is made by the greatest artists'. The artists at the top of the list - the likes of Hirst, Jeff Koons, Jasper Johns and Gerhard Richter - 'are clearly among the most important artists alive today'.⁷ 'Importance' is determined by Galenson's and others' critical evaluations, but also, in a problematically circular logic, by the prices themselves: that is, Galenson seemingly wishes to claim that high prices reflect innate artistic importance and, at the same time, actively constitute it. This slippage raises the possibility - to be explored later in this article - that at the upper end of the market the price paid may be a more powerful statement and may yield a more exhilarating experience than the work acquired.

5. Georges Bataille, 'The Notion of Expenditure', in Allan Stoekl (ed), *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, Allan Stoekl with Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie, Jr (trans), Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1985, pp116-29, p118; emphasis in original.

6. Adam Lindemann, *Collecting Contemporary*, Cologne, Taschen, 2006, p7.

7. David W. Galenson, 'Who Are the Greatest Living Artists? The View from the Auction Market', National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 11644, 2005, <<http://www.nber.org/papers/w11644>>, pp1-47, p2.

Under the second explanation for the art market's landmark peaks, the work is decidedly secondary, or even incidental, to the price, but for purely pecuniary rather than libidinal reasons. This is the model of art as investment vehicle. The potential of art in this regard has been the topic of much research and debate. Historical data suggests that in the long term those purely concerned with financial returns would be better advised to invest in a stock portfolio than an art collection, but the art market has nonetheless always attracted buyers hoping to 'flip' their acquisitions for a profit, particularly during boom periods. The market for contemporary art boomed for most of the last decade, growing in value from \$4 billion a year to \$20-30 billion a year between 2000 and 2008, according to an estimate by the chief executive of Christie's.⁸ This rapid expansion undoubtedly attracted, and was in turn stimulated by, a significant level of speculative activity. For would-be speculators, the exemplary work was, once again, Hirst's original shark, which was commissioned by the British collector Charles Saatchi in 1991 for the seemingly outlandish sum of £50,000 (prompting the tabloid newspaper the *Sun* famously to crow, '£50,000 for fish without the chips'), but would sell for around 120 times that amount fourteen years later.

I have termed the third explanation of collectors' willingness to pay top dollar for key pieces of contemporary art 'symbolic' in reference to the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's notion of 'symbolic capital'.⁹ This model permits a synthesis of the high-mindedly aesthetic and the calculatingly economic motivations for collecting, and shows how they are embedded within a wider social field. For Bourdieu, 'symbolic capital, commonly called prestige, reputation, fame, etc.' is the form assumed by three other kinds of capital - cultural, economic and social - 'when they are perceived and recognized as legitimate'.¹⁰ So, collecting contemporary art both allows the pleasure of private aesthetic contemplation and serves as a sign of the collector's taste, intelligence and education; it entails the accumulation of valuable assets that may appreciate over time and functions as a demonstration of the owner's wealth; and, as the art historian Thomas Crow notes, it permits 'participation in a desirable network',¹¹ one that offers its own immediate pleasures and also attracts the admiration and envy of the wider world.

While the importance of cultural and social capital cannot be discounted, within the contemporary art market the primary factor in the generation of symbolic capital is economic capital. But, rather than deriving from the economic capital acquired (the artwork), symbolic capital in this case derives instead from the economic capital relinquished (the fee paid). The point is not to gain an economically valuable object, but to display one's lofty indifference to such value, eliciting the awe and respect of one's peers. As I have indicated, in order to account for this phenomenon it is necessary to trace an intellectual lineage that begins in the model of wilful dissipation outlined by Sigmund Freud under the name of the death drive.

8. Cited in Ben Lewis, 'A Second Tulip Mania', *Prospect*, 20 December 2008, <<http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/2008/12/asecondtulipmania>>.

9. For a book-length study of the contemporary art market from a Bourdieuan perspective, see Olav Velthuis, *Talking Prices: Symbolic Meanings of Prices on the Market for Contemporary Art*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005.

10. Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (trans), Cambridge, Polity, 1991, p230.

11. Thomas Crowe in 'Art and Its Markets: A Roundtable Discussion', *Artforum*, April 2008, <<http://artforum.com/imprint/issue=200804&id=19746>>.

12. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, James Strachey (trans), New York, Norton, 1961, p32; italics in original.

13. See e.g. Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1993, p262 n40; Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille*, Betsy Wing (trans), Cambridge, MIT Press, 1989, p108.

14. Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, Mary Dalwood (trans), San Francisco, City Lights, 1986, p60.

15. Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Iain Hamilton Grant (trans), London, Sage, 1993, p154.

16. Georges Bataille, 'Attraction and Repulsion II: Social Structure', in Denis Hollier (ed), *The College of Sociology, 1937-39*, Betsy Wing (trans), Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1988, pp113-24, p123.

17. Baudrillard, op. cit., p155.

18. Bataille, 'The Notion of Expenditure', op. cit., p118.

19. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, W.D. Halls (trans), London, Routledge, 1990, p74.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud famously makes the counter-intuitive claim that in tension with the instinct towards the preservation, amalgamation and propagation of living substance (the 'life drive' or Eros), organisms possess a contrary urge towards death - towards the complete discharge of energy and the reduction of organic matter to a state of quiescence that borders on the inorganic. In Freud's concise formulation, 'the aim of all life is death'.¹² Though Georges Bataille is seemingly reluctant to acknowledge the debt, his philosophy, as a number of scholars have noted, evidently owes a great deal to *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.¹³ Bataille's reorientation of Freud's theory of the death drive is examined in detail by Jean Baudrillard in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976). Baudrillard quotes Bataille's claim that 'On a comprehensive view, human life strives towards prodigality to the point of anguish, to the point where the anguish becomes unbearable ... A febrile unrest within us asks death to wreak its havoc at our expense'.¹⁴ The affinities with Freud's hypothesis of an innate organic inclination towards death are clear, but this remark also indicates an important difference: where Freud understands this inclination as a gradual process of enervation, an entropic dispersal of energy tending towards a state of equilibrium, Bataille posits it as an urgent, intensifying, overwhelming impulsion. As Baudrillard observes, 'instead of establishing death as the regulator of tensions and an equilibrium function ... Bataille introduces it in the opposite sense, as the paroxysm of exchanges, superabundance and excess'.¹⁵ For Bataille, death is the ultimate expression of a cosmic profligacy, a universal tendency to squander surplus energy.¹⁶ As Baudrillard suggests, in Bataille's thought, death stands for all those elements of the extravagant 'general economy' of premodern or archaic existence that the parsimonious 'restricted economy' of modern, industrial, bourgeois society has sought to eradicate: 'excess, ambivalence, gift, sacrifice, expenditure and paroxysm'.¹⁷ Just as, for Freud, the death drive is the primordial psychic impulse, to which all others are ultimately subordinated, so, in the theory of political economy that Bataille begins to outline in the early 1930s, are waste, loss and sacrifice - rather than the proto-bourgeois conventions of acquisition through bartered exchange - identified as the elemental forms of economic activity. In 'The Notion of Expenditure' (1933), Bataille enumerates various forms of 'unproductive expenditure': 'luxury, mourning, war, cults, the construction of sumptuary monuments, games, spectacles, arts, perverse sexual activity (i.e. deflected from genital finality)'.¹⁸ In this essay, and at greater length in the first volume of *The Accursed Share* (1967), Bataille pays particular attention to Marcel Mauss's account of the *potlatch* ceremony traditionally practised by the Native American tribes of the Pacific Northwest, a ritual in which rival chiefs challenge one another by gifting or even 'destroy[ing] for the pleasure of destroying'¹⁹ ever greater quantities of

valuable goods, their displays of munificence endowing them with a form of 'symbolic capital' that Mauss terms 'rank'.

In *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1972), Jean Baudrillard draws on the ethnographic reflections of Mauss and Bataille in order to analyse the phenomenon of the art auction. Baudrillard's argument hinges on the concept of sign value, which again bears a close resemblance to Bourdieu's notion of symbolic capital. He writes:

In consumption generally, economic exchange value (money) is converted into sign exchange value (prestige, etc.); but this operation is still sustained by the alibi of use value. By contrast, the auction of the work of art has this notable characteristic: that economic exchange value, in the pure form of its general equivalent, money, is exchanged there for a pure sign, the painting ...

In expenditure, money changes meaning. This fact, established in the auction, can be transferred as a hypothesis to the whole sphere of consumption. The act of consumption is never simply a purchase (reconversion of exchange value into use value); it is also an expenditure ... ; that is to say, it is wealth manifested, and a manifest destruction of wealth. It is that value, deployed beyond exchange value and founded upon the latter's destruction, that invests the object purchased, acquired, appropriated, with its differential sign value. It is not the quantity of money that takes on value, as in the economic logic of equivalence, but rather money spent, sacrificed, eaten up.²⁰

The primary function of the art auction, according to Baudrillard, is to provide a socially legitimised space in which vast sums may be spent on objects that are, literally, useless. The objective, then, is not the acquisition of an item of use value, or even of exchange value (i.e. an investment), but, as for a Tlingit or Kwakiutl chief participating in a *potlatch* festival, the apotheosis bestowed by a commitment to expenditure that cows one's rivals and assures a triumphant outcome from 'the direct experience of competition, the challenge, the agonistic community of peers'.²¹

In a study of Baudrillard's writings published in 1994, Gary Genosko notes that 'the Baudrillard-inspired art literature' has not generally recognised 'his idea of the symbolic value of the art auction, this potlatch-like circulation of objects which accrue value through their very circulation and afford legitimacy and prestige to those who possess them'.²² In recent years, however, several commentators have analysed the phenomenal boom in the market for contemporary art in terms that echo Baudrillard's. The sociologist Olav Velthuis, for example, ridicules the notion that contemporary 'super collectors' view their purchases purely as investments, arguing instead for the sheer prodigality of these acts of expenditure:

20. Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, Charles Levin (trans), St Louis, MO, Telos, 1981, pp112-13.

21. *Ibid.*, p113.

22. Gary Genosko, *Baudrillard and Signs: Signification Ablaze*, London, Routledge, 1994, p154. <http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.424/9780203201145>

23. The sale was conducted privately and the actual amount paid remains undisclosed: though \$12 million was the most commonly cited figure, a sum of \$8 million was also widely reported (see Don Thompson, *The \$12 Million Stuffed Shark: The Curious Economics of Contemporary Art and Auction Houses*, London, Aurum, 2008, pp3-4).

24. Olav Velthuis, 'Accounting for Taste: The Economics of Art', *Artforum*, April 2008, <<http://artforum.com/inprint/issue=200804&id=19747>>.

25. J.J. Charlesworth, 'Bonfire of the Vanities', *Art Monthly*, April 2007, <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_6735/is_305/ai_n28420900>.

26. Wolfgang Ullrich, 'Icons of Capitalism: How Prices Make Art', in Piroshka Dossi and Franziska Nori (eds), *Art, Price and Value: Contemporary Art and the Market*, Florence, Centro di Cultura Contemporanea Strozzi, pp42-55, pp43, 47.

27. William Shaw, 'The Iceman Cometh', *New York Times*, 3 June 2008, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/03/magazine/03Style-skull-t.html>>.

The idea that Steven Cohen, for instance, who reportedly made around a billion dollars hedging his bets in 2005, would spend \$8 million²³ on Damien Hirst's shark ... with the sole idea of reselling it for a handsome profit is simply absurd ... When they spend hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars on goods whose long-term value is far from guaranteed, these collectors engage in a kind of potlatch.²⁴

Similarly, the art critic J.J. Charlesworth suggests that the 'high-income consumers' who buy the most expensive works of contemporary art 'are not necessarily in the business of speculation for investment, but are effectively in the business of, as Bataille would put it, "squandering the surplus"'.²⁵ For the art historian Wolfgang Ullrich, the prices paid for contemporary art objects have virtually eclipsed the objects themselves. Buyers are intent not on securing valuable works (whether in aesthetic or economic terms) but on staging the most extravagant possible spectacles of expenditure:

It is above all through high prices that art seeks to assert itself today, if indeed it is not wholly defined in these terms. It has been transformed into a form of financial sublimity ...

Whoever recognizes the yearning for the sublime as the hallmark of modern art will ... see that with the boom of the market over the last few years, high and especially record prices have suddenly come to promise exceptionality and lofty feelings more than anything else. What was done in the era of the avant-garde movements with radical abstractions, daring ready mades and performances breaking all taboos is obtained today through art fairs and auctions.²⁶

Ullrich pays particular attention to Damien Hirst's *For the Love of God* (2007), a platinum cast of a human skull encrusted with 8601 diamonds that cost £14 million to manufacture and sold for £50 million. In this case it was first and foremost Hirst himself, in his capacity as a twenty-first-century hybrid of artist, collector and dealer, who lavished the requisite wealth on the work, financing its production (in the process causing a spike in the international diamond market²⁷) and acting as the majority partner in the consortium that purchased it. It goes without saying that Hirst undertook the project with the intention of selling the skull for a profit; when no buyer willing to pay the asking price was forthcoming, the consortium became a necessary compromise, at least in part because an outright failure to sell would have damaged Hirst's reputation and hence the future marketability of his works. As Ullrich suggests, however, Hirst's primary objective was simply the price itself - even when it became necessary for him to dig yet deeper into his own fortune in order to realise it - for the work *was*, in a sense, its price, the pure, sublime display of exorbitant expenditure it elicited: 'the true value of Hirst's

work is its price. It is this that makes the work unique'. Yet, on the other hand, 'the price also needs its object': *something* must be obtained in exchange for the fee, and the nature of this thing is not wholly incidental.²⁸

What Ullrich is insufficiently attentive to, however, is the way in which the work's constitutive invitation to dissipation is inextricable from its status as a universal symbol of death, one modelled on a real human skull and utilising the actual teeth for its rictus grin. Indeed, instead of standing for 'wealth against death', as Hirst himself claims,²⁹ the skull's glittering covering merely reinforces the affinity between the one and the other, for reasons Bataille explains in 'The Notion of Expenditure':

one sacrifices a fortune, preferring a diamond necklace; such a sacrifice is necessary for the constitution of this necklace's fascinating character. This fact must be seen in relation to the symbolic value of jewels, universal in psychoanalysis. When in a dream a diamond signifies excrement, it is not only a question of association by contrast; in the unconscious, jewels, like excrement, are cursed matter that flows from a wound: they are a part of oneself destined for open sacrifice ...

In unconscious forms, such as those described by psychoanalysis, [loss] symbolizes excretion, which itself is linked to death, in conformity with the fundamental connection between anal eroticism and sadism.³⁰

Hirst's skull is just one of many highly valued works of postwar and contemporary art that present the viewer with an image of death, filth, wounding or decay. This prominent style is often discussed in terms of 'abjection', drawing on a theoretical discourse that has its roots in Bataille's writings. In a series of unpublished texts from the mid- to late 1930s grouped under the title '*Abjection et les formes misérables*', Bataille states that abjection is 'merely the inability to assume with sufficient strength the imperative act of excluding abject things (and that act establishes the foundations of collective existence)'.³¹ As Rosalind Krauss notes, in these texts Bataille maps 'the activity of abjection onto that of heterogeneity, which [he] had developed elsewhere as another form of what a system cannot assimilate but must reject as excremental'.³² In 'The Psychological Structure of Fascism' (1933-34), employing terms that echo 'The Notion of Expenditure' (1933), Bataille observes that '*homogeneous* society is productive society, namely, useful society' while '*the heterogeneous* world includes everything resulting from *unproductive* expenditure', including 'the waste products of the body'.³³ Similarly, in 'The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade', a slightly earlier, unpublished paper, the domain of the heterogeneous is said to encompass 'defecation; urination; death and the cult of cadavers (above all, insofar as it involves the stinking decomposition of bodies)'.³⁴

Bataille's notions of abjection and heterogeneity have come to be influential

28. Ullrich op. cit., p50.

29. Quoted in Nigel Reynolds, 'Hirst's £50m Skull Goes on Display', *Telegraph*, 1 June 2007, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1553281/Hirsts-50m-skull-goes-on-display.html>>.

30. Bataille 'The Notion of Expenditure', op. cit., pp119, 122.

31. Georges Bataille, 'L'Abjection et les formes misérables', in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 2, Paris, Gallimard, 1970, pp217-21, p217.

32. Rosalind Krauss, 'Informe without Conclusion', *October*, 78, 1996, pp89-105, p90.

33. Georges Bataille, 'The Psychological Structure of Fascism', in *Visions of Excess*, op. cit., pp137-60, pp138, 142; emphases in original.

34. Georges Bataille, 'The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade: An Open Letter to My Current Comrades', in *Visions of Excess*, op. cit., pp91-102, p94.

in the field of contemporary art primarily via Julia Kristeva's key work of psychoanalytic theory, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980). The resemblances between Bataille's and Kristeva's understandings of abjection (and their relation to connected Bataillean concepts such as heterogeneity, base materialism, alteration and the *informe*) have been topics of substantial debate among art theorists.³⁵ As with Bataille, encounters with bodily waste and putrefaction occupy privileged positions in Kristeva's study:

The corpse (or cadaver: *cadere*, to fall), that which has irremediably come a cropper, is cesspool, and death; it upsets ... violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance. A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death ... No, as in true theatre, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit - *cadere*, cadaver.³⁶

The literal, material presences of lifeless bodies or of the discharges that precede death - to which Kristeva attributes such powerful effects - are features of some of the most iconic and prized works of contemporary art. The pre-eminent instances are Hirst's vitrines containing animal carcasses (sometimes flayed, pierced or dissected) and, latterly, human skulls (such as *The Inescapable Truth* (2005), which sold for £1.75 million in 2010) - works that have been instrumental in establishing Hirst as the wealthiest artist ever to have lived. Another key example is *Self* (1991) by Hirst's fellow 'Young British Artist' Marc Quinn, a sculpture of the artist's head cast in 4.5 litres of his own blood, which was bought by Steven Cohen for £1.5 million in 2005 and placed on display in the lobby of his hedge fund's Connecticut headquarters.³⁷

Numerous other major works of postwar and contemporary art seek to signify or represent states of abjection (whether indexically or iconically), rather than literally 'showing' them, but are hardly less gruesome for that. Several of these have recently entered lists of the most expensive artworks ever sold: one of Andy Warhol's horrific 'Death and Disaster' or 'Death in America' screen prints from the early 1960s, *Green Car Crash (Green Burning Car I)* (1963), raised \$72 million in 2007, while Francis Bacon's *Study from Innocent X* (1962) and *Triptych 1976*, with their contorted, agonised, putrefying human forms, sold for \$54 million and \$86 million in 2007 and 2008 respectively (the latter to Russian oligarch and Chelsea Football Club owner Roman Abramovich). Similar works, including Warhol's *Suicide* (1963) and Bacon's *Study of Nude with Figure in a Mirror* (1969) and *Triptych 1974-1977*, have recently realised prices ranging from \$5 million to £26 million.

35. See primarily Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide*, New York, Zone, 1997; Hal Foster *et al.*, 'The Politics of the Signifier II: A Conversation on the *Informe* and the Abject', *October*, 67, 1994, pp3-21; Hal Foster, 'Obscene, Abject, Traumatic', *October*, 78, 1996, pp107-24; Paul Hegarty, 'As Above, So Below: Informe/Sublime/Abject', in Andrew Hussey (ed), *The Beast at Heaven's Gate: Georges Bataille and the Art of Transgression*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2006, pp73-80; Craig Houser *et al.*, *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art*, New York, Whitney Museum of Art, 1993; Krauss, 'Informe without Conclusion', op. cit.

36. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Leon S. Roudiez (trans), New York, Columbia University Press, 1982, p3; emphases in original.

37. Edward Helmore, 'An Art Shark on the Trading Floor', *First Post*, 23 October 2006, <<http://www.thefirstpost.co.uk/2597.news-comment.news-politics.an-art-shark-on-the-trading-floor>>.

To cite only the most notable additional examples, collectors are likewise eager to spend large sums on the forensic-cum-surrealistic photographic self-portraits that make up Cindy Sherman's mid-1980s 'disaster' series (one of which, *Untitled #143*, a death scene issued in an edition of five in 1985, sold for \$67,000 in 2008); Paul McCarthy's grotesque, slapstick performance pieces (like *Rocky* (1976), a video recording of the artist punching himself into an apparently catatonic state that, produced as a set of ten, has sold for as much as \$108,000); the charnel and excremental photography of Andres Serrano (including *Piss Christ* (1987), the notorious shot of a urine-immersed crucifix whose ten prints have attracted offers of as much as \$147,000); and the dioramas of torture, atrocity and apocalypse produced by Jake and Dinos Chapman (the most ambitious of which, *Hell* (2000) was - given its infernal and holocaustal character - all too fittingly consumed by a fire at the east London warehouse of the art storage company Momart in 2004, only to be reconstructed as, inevitably, *Fucking Hell* and sold for £7.5 million in 2008). To reiterate, my argument is that works like these attract such enormous sums because, in their exhibition or portrayal of mortification and degeneration, the desire for dissipation that characterises the contemporary art market finds consummation: the waste of money performed by the art collector is all the more wasteful (and hence symbolically valuable) when what he or she gains in return is itself waste.

'DAMIEN HIRST SHOULD BE RUNNING LEHMAN BROTHERS'³⁸

There is no clearer demonstration of my argument than the event to which I referred at the opening of this essay: the auction of work by Damien Hirst at Sotheby's in London on 15 and 16 September 2008. *Beautiful Inside my Head Forever*, as the auction was titled, was an extraordinary event for several reasons. It saw Hirst take the virtually unprecedented move of bypassing his long-term dealers, Larry Gagosian of New York's Gagosian Gallery and Jay Joplin of London's White Cube, to sell his work directly to the public; it resulted in sales that far exceeded expectations (a total of £111 million for the 223 works on offer, against an estimate of £68-98 million); and, rendering this level of return all the more remarkable, it precisely coincided with the most intense phase of the 'credit crunch' in global financial markets triggered by the 'sub-prime' mortgage crisis in the United States. A week before the auction, the mortgage lenders Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac were rescued by the US government in one of the largest bailouts in history; on the eve of bidding, Merrill Lynch was taken over by Bank of America in a fire sale; on the opening day, the massive investment bank Lehman Brothers filed for bankruptcy and the Dow Jones dropped 4.4 per cent; and on the second day, the US Federal Reserve announced an \$85 billion rescue package for AIG, the nation's biggest insurer.

As Andrew Harris notes, there exist 'complex links between contemporary

38. Art dealer Alberto Mugrabi after the *Beautiful Inside My Head Forever* evening sale at Sotheby's, London, 15 September 2008, quoted in Eric Konigsberg, 'Is Anybody Buying Art These Days?' *New York Times Magazine*, 27 February 2009, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/01/magazine/01Brothers-1.html?pagewanted=all>>.

39. Andrew Harris, 'The Golden Calf: Art and Finance in Contemporary London', in *The Architecture and Urban Culture of Financial Crisis*, themed issue of *Figuropravda*, 1, 2009, pp48-56, p49.

40. 'ARTNews 200 Top Collectors', *ARTNews*, July/August 2010, <http://artnews.com/issues/article.asp?art_id=3003>.

41. Paul Crosthwaite, 'Blood on the Trading Floor: Waste, Sacrifice and Death in Financial Crises', *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 15: 2 (2010): 3-18.

42. 'Damien Hirst - Beautiful Inside My Head Forever', *Sotheby's Art Market Review*, 2008, <http://www.sothebys.com/liveauctions/amr/la_prevmarket/beautiful_0908.html>.

43. For claims that some bidders with a vested interest in Hirst's oeuvre 'propped up' prices, see 'Hirst Dealers Bolster Prices at Record Sale', *Sunday Times*, 21 September 2008, <<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article4795010.ece>> and Ben Lewis, 'A Second Tulip Mania', op. cit., and 'Why I Was Banned from Damien Hirst's £120m Gamble', *London Evening Standard*, 15 September 2008, <<http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/standard/>

art and high finance' but there has been 'little sustained critical analysis' of this relationship.³⁹ In recent years, investment banks and other financial institutions have amassed significant collections of art, particularly in the postwar and contemporary periods. The JP Morgan Chase Art Collection, for example, has 30,000 pieces, among them works by Andy Warhol, Cindy Sherman and Jean-Michel Basquiat. In September 2010, Sotheby's and Christie's participated in the liquidation of Lehman Brothers' assets by auctioning several hundred works from the failed bank's corporate art collection, including pieces by Hirst, Sherman, Robert Rauschenberg and Mike Kelley. According to *ARTNews* magazine's mid-2010 list of the world's top individual collectors, 73 of the top 200 and six of the top ten (including Steven Cohen and Roman Abramovich) derive their wealth at least in part from activity in the financial sector (as hedge fund or asset managers, venture capitalists, investment, commercial or retail bankers, insurers, or large-scale investors in stocks and other securities). Of those 73 collectors, 58 have substantial holdings in postwar and contemporary art and many focus solely on the period; all six of the financiers in the top ten collect concertedly in this area.⁴⁰

In a recent study, I have tried to show that the contemporary financial system betrays, in tension with its manifest urge towards profit and growth, a countervailing tendency - which is simultaneously structural and libidinal - towards destruction and unbinding: a 'death drive' that culminates in the mingled despair and euphoria of the crash.⁴¹ This theorisation helps to explain why finance capital should have been so powerfully attracted to the art market - a market in which the very accumulation of assets is a form of wanton, unproductive expenditure - and, more specifically, to the Western art of recent decades, with its marked tendency to internalise the insistent claims of mortality and dissolution. It also helps to account for the outcome of Hirst's auction. Responding to widespread amazement that collectors should have been willing to spend so much just as the global economy appeared to be on the brink of collapse, a report on the auction commissioned by Sotheby's explains soberly that, because of the indirect and non-synchronous relationship between the art market and the credit markets at the core of the crisis, there are 'good reasons not to link the two'.⁴² In other words, the auction raised huge sums in spite of the global financial crisis. What if, conversely, such staggering amounts were spent on these works precisely *because of* the crisis? My claim is that Hirst's auction is one particularly visible manifestation of the spasms of expenditure that convulsed advanced capitalist economies in the autumn of 2008: the febrile, frenzied mood on the trading floors and in the dealing rooms and board rooms of Wall Street and the City of London generated a climate that licensed the excessive, lavish consumption witnessed in the West End auction house. Indissociably blended with the motivation that some bidders may have had to support prices so as to protect the value of their existing holdings of Hirsts, or of the art market in general,⁴³ was

the imperative to participate in a carnival of expenditure, for, as Nicholas Cullinan notes, 'the performance that constituted the main artwork' was 'the auction itself, as a kind of *gesamtkunstwerk*'.⁴⁴

The profligacy of these collectors appears all the more reckless when one considers that, with the most severe financial crisis since the Great Crash of 1929 taking place around them, their purchases were virtually guaranteed to decline in resale value, at least in the short term, since the reserves of excess capital available for unproductive expenditure (what Bataille terms the 'accursed share') inevitably contract in times of economic recession. Contrary to the claim made in 2006 by Tobias Meyer, Sotheby's head of worldwide contemporary art, that 'for the first time in history since 1914 we are in a non-cyclical market',⁴⁵ it remains the case that, as Hal Foster observes in a discussion of the Hirst auction, while art and financial markets 'aren't synchronized', they are 'connected'. Foster notes that 'the art market fell dramatically in 1990, three years after the stock market crash of 1987'.⁴⁶ In the wake of the most recent financial crisis, the corresponding downturn in the art market was far more precipitous - indeed, it was already underway at the time of the Hirst auction, as the loss of three-quarters of the value of Sotheby's stock between October 2007 and November 2008 indicates.⁴⁷ In the round of contemporary art sales in London in October 2008, the auction house Phillips de Pury achieved only a quarter of the minimum estimate, while at Christie's almost half the lots failed to sell.⁴⁸ After *Beautiful Inside My Head Forever*, there was a particular decline in demand for Hirst's art. At the New York sales in November 2008, buyers passed on 11 of the 17 Hirst works on offer; at Sotheby's first auction in Doha in March 2009, none of the three large new pieces consigned by Hirst direct from his studio sold.⁴⁹ Prices for some Hirsts fell by 50 per cent in 2009.⁵⁰ At the fire sale of the Lehman Brothers art collection held at Sotheby's two years after the bank's collapse, the Hirst piece trumpeted as the star lot failed to sell. (As if to demonstrate that symbols of death and destruction had not lost their attraction as objects of conspicuous 'bonus-squandering',⁵¹ however, the auction at Christie's a few days later saw corporate signage that had once adorned Lehman Brothers' offices sell for tens of thousands of pounds, exceeding estimates ten- or twentyfold.) In December 2009, Philip Hoffman, chief executive of the Fine Art Fund investment house, singled out the highly derivative works produced by Hirst for sale in 2008 as poor investments.⁵²

It is worth considering the actual pieces sold at *Beautiful Inside My Head Forever*, for although, like the skull, they were to an extent mere 'props' around which the spectacle of extravagance was staged,⁵³ their material characteristics are, again, significant. It should not surprise us by this stage to learn that six of the top ten lots were vitrines containing animal remains: a shark, a calf, a sheep, a dove, some fish skeletons and a foal prosthetically augmented to resemble a unicorn. The construction of the highest-priced piece, *The Golden Calf*, which sold for £10.3 million, involved crowning the animal with a solid

[article-23555605-why-i-was-banned-from-clamien-hirsts-120m-gamble-do>;](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/artsales/5345375/Market-news-the-100k-Winslow-Homer-found-in-a-tip.html) for evidence to the contrary, see Philip Mould, *Sleuth: The Amazing Quest for Lost Art Treasures*, London, HarperCollins, 2009, pp288-89 and Colin Gleadell, 'Market News', *Daily Telegraph*, 18 May 2009, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/artsales/5345375/Market-news-the-100k-Winslow-Homer-found-in-a-tip.html>>.

44. Nicholas Cullinan, 'Dreams That Money Can Buy', in Jack Bankowsky *et al.* (eds), *Pop Life: Art in a Material World*, London, Tate, 2009, pp65-75, p73.

45. Quoted in Charlesworth, *op. cit.*

46. Foster, 'The Medium is the Market', *London Review of Books*, 9 October 2008, <<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v30/n19/hal-foster/the-medium-is-the-market>>.

47. Lewis, 'A Second Tulip Mania', *op. cit.*

48. *Ibid.*

49. Ben Lewis, 'How the Contemporary Art Bubble Burst', *The Times*, 13 May 2009 <<http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts and entertainment/visual arts/article6275738.ece>>.

50. Scott Reyburn, 'Koons, Hirst Prices Drop 50%'; May Take Next Decade to Recover', *Bloomberg*, 29 December 2009, <<http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=aDeSqBtxtGI>>.

51. Sam Jones, 'Lehman Brothers' Treasures Go Under the Hammer', *Guardian*, 29 September 2010, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2010/sep/29/lehman-brothers-auction-london>>.

52. Reyburn, 'Koons, Hirst Prices Drop 50%', op. cit.

53. Cullinan, op. cit, 'Dreams That Money Can Buy', p73.

54. Baudrillard, *For a Critique*, op. cit., p93.

55. Sebastian Faulks, *A Week in December*, London, Hutchinson, 2009, pp211-12.

gold disc, casting its hooves and horns in 18-carat gold, mounting it on a marble base and encasing it in a gold-plated box. It exemplifies the argument of this article that so much should have been spent on a destined-to-depreciate artwork consisting of an animal carcass adorned with what Baudrillard, in a reference to the golden calf, calls 'the faecal materiality of gold'⁵⁴ and named after a biblical story whose message is that, rather than being consolidated and idolised, wealth must be cast violently onto the pyre.

A version of Hirst's calf features in Sebastian Faulks's recent novel *A Week in December* (2009), a distinctly schematic satire on contemporary metropolitan life set during a slightly earlier phase of the credit crunch, at the tail end of 2007. Attending a showing of work by a superstar artist named Liam Hogg at a Mayfair auction house, one of the small-minded bourgeois characters who populate the novel weaves her way through the milling hedge fund managers to view the prize piece, reading from her catalogue as she does so:

'Arguably the most daring piece undertaken by a contemporary artist, *Cash Cow* is a mixed-media piece made from sterling silver banknotes and lutetium, the rarest metal in the world ... The materials alone cost in excess of £4 million. "I wanted to challenge people's preconceptions about art", says Liam Hogg.' ...

It was a life-size model of a cow in a glass case. It was coloured pink and had flaky silver-coloured horns and silver eyes, which gave it an odd, blinded look ...

'The piece is made from papier mâché of which the paper element consists of 60,000 £50 notes and is coated with notes of the same denomination' ...

'*Cash Cow* was sponsored by Allied Royal Bank, Salzar-Steinberg Securities and Park Vista Capital. It is for sale tonight at £8 million' ...

She understood why it was so expensive, because Liam Hogg had to cover his costs, but she wondered if she was missing something else about it.⁵⁵

The conclusion we are invited to draw is that the woman is quite right to be mystified: there *is* nothing 'else about' the work that justifies the gulf between its production costs and its price tag - it is precisely as vacuous as it appears to be. The 'something else' that does in fact surround such works, however, and that, as here, attracts the flows of global finance capital, is their deathly invitation to waste and expenditure.

The atmosphere that reached its peak of intensity in financial and art markets alike at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century is

captured nowhere better than in a passage written by Georges Bataille in 1933, in the wake of the twentieth century's greatest economic convulsion: 'A human society can have ... an *interest* in considerable losses, in catastrophes that, *while conforming to well-defined needs*, provoke tumultuous depressions, crises of dread and, in the final analysis, a certain orgiastic state'.⁵⁶ And the orgy may be beginning again. It was widely taken as a sign that the art market had reached a turning point when, in the opening minutes of the Frieze art fair in London in October 2010, a 2006 Damien Hirst vitrine sold for £3.5 million. There were further indications of an imminent new boom at the postwar and contemporary sale at Christie's that evening, where the top lot was another Hirst work from 2006, a painting created from thousands of butterfly wings, which raised £2.2 million. Its title? What else but the line from the Bhagavad Gita recalled by Robert Oppenheimer upon witnessing the 'infinite capacity for wasteful consumption'⁵⁷ brought into being by the atomic bomb? 'I am Become Death, Shatterer of Worlds'.

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56. Bataille, 'The Notion of Expenditure', op. cit., p117; emphases in original.

57. Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, Robert Hurley (trans), vol. 1, New York, Zone, 1991, p181.