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Seismic Shift. With David LaChapelle in the Museum

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Seismic Shift

With David LaChapelle in the museum

GRONINGER MUSEUM



LACHAPELLE

GOOD NEWS FOR MODERN MAN

GRONINGER MUSEUM



Foreword and Word of Thanks

LaChapelle. Good News for Modern Man is the first major exhibition of David LaChapelle's work in a Dutch museum. Or rather, it is the first ever exhibition of his work in the Netherlands at all. This is something we are proud of, but it is also slightly odd, as LaChapelle, who is now 55 years old, already boasts a long and fruitful career. The fact is that the established art scene has not exactly embraced him; his editorial work for magazines such as *GQ*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Vogue* did not fit with the picture. And that is while LaChapelle actually satisfies almost all the requirements that people would usually demand of an artist: He is original and has a personal signature; his photos are meticulously composed and technically virtuosic; his themes are critical and have impact, are simultaneously topical and timeless.

The Groninger Museum has a long tradition in the presentation and collection of work by image-makers who are active beyond the realms of the canon. Many of them are now part and parcel of our collective cultural heritage, such as the Australian aboriginals, New York's graffiti artists, and the German neo-expressionist *Neue Wilde* artists. Our museum has always paid attention to the fashion photography and staged photography of artists such as Inez van Lamsweerde and Erwin Olaf. We therefore expect that David LaChapelle will feel at home with us, with regard to work as well as character.

Exceptional about this exhibition is that it is more than a retrospective. We are showing

LaChapelle's classics as well as his most recent work. In close consultation with the artist, the curators have opted for a thematic approach with a didactic character. We analyze LaChapelle's complex compositions and follow his search for a new world.

For those who wish to explore the artist's work in greater depth, there is Taschen's stunning two-volume publication *Lost + Found* and *Good News*. In this appendix you will find an essay about LaChapelle's iconic work *Seismic Shift*. At the Groninger Museum we are very proud that we have been able to acquire this work for our collection. Staged photography is one of our spearheads. *Seismic Shift* has numerous things in common with our collection and our museum philosophy. The photos by LaChapelle are not a question of museological navel-gazing but deserve full attention. His work is complex and rich in details and allusions that only divulge their meaning on closer consideration. With our essay we hope to offer novel insights into LaChapelle's art, and we are grateful to the Rembrandt Association for their generous support for this acquisition.

We also wish to extend our thanks to Studio David LaChapelle and its marvelous staff for the intensive collaboration: Johnny Byrne, Amanda Crommett, Ghretta Hynd, Kirsten Iverson, Hennadiy Kvasov, Kumi Tanimura, Daniel Pleacoff, and Glen Vergara. The studio is the most important lender for the exhibition, followed by the Maruani Mercier gallery in Brussels and Galerie Daniel Templon in Paris. Without their

support, an exhibition of such scale and quality would have been impossible.

Reiner Opoku served as guest curator and his contribution was of inestimable value.

For their tips, contacts and inspiration we would like to thank Laurens Besselink, Alice Cantigniau, Alex Daniëls, Charlotte Desaga, Sonia Digianantonio, Martina Gattoronchero, Leonard Goetz, Michael Kaune, Peter de Kimpe, Martine Krips, Sandrine Lalonde, Irene Lombardo, Rudo Menge, Gianni Mercurio, Mieke Mesker, Consuelo Nocita, Xavier Roland, Marlene Taschen and Cornel Wachter.

Anna-Rosja Haveman has made an important contribution to the research around *Seismic Shift* and as the assistant for this complex project she effectively served as the overall manager, a role in which she was supported by the Groninger Museum's entire team.

Last but not least, we wish to thank the artist himself. Many of his images were already seared into our minds, even before we connected name and photo. When we subsequently turned our focus to the photos, LaChapelle helped us to discover his rich visual universe. To our delight, the artist himself has been closely involved with the exhibition's realization. We can treasure happy memories of his engaging personality and the fact that he was so keen to share his art with many people.

Andreas Blühm, April 2018

This publication appears for the occasion of the exhibition *LaChapelle: Good News for Modern Man* at the Groninger Museum, 21 April 2018 t/m 28 October 2018.

Seismic Shift is acquired in 2018 with the support of the Rembrandt Association, thanks to its Titus Fund and its mr Rickert J-F. Blokhuis Fund.

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David LaChapelle, *Seismic Shift*, 2012, chromogenic print, 183 x 452 cm, Groninger Museum
Acquired in 2018 with the support of the Rembrandt Association, thanks to its Titus Fund and its mr Rickert J-F. Blokhuis Fund

Seismic Shift

With David LaChapelle in the museum

Andreas Blühm and Anna-Rosja Haveman

On 16 November 2017, a *Salvator Mundi* attributed to Leonardo da Vinci was auctioned at Christie's New York for the exorbitant sum of US\$ 450,312,500. Setting aside the question of whether this work can be (partially) attributed to Leonardo, why was it offered in an auction for modern and contemporary art, rather than in an auction with other Old Masters? An expert answered that question in an interview with the sarcastic comeback: "Because 90 percent of it was painted in the last 50 years."¹

Having recovered from the initial shock, perhaps we should also be glad that old art still sparks such enthusiasm. Old art was once modern, and at a certain point modern art becomes old. But even though factors such as style, the circumstances under which the work is created, and the market situation are constantly shifting, the criteria that determine the judgment of quality remain surprisingly stable. Many contemporary artists measure themselves by their predecessors, handling altered historical circumstances lightly. Michelangelo, Piero della Francesca, Caspar David Friedrich, Frida Kahlo, and many others are easily claimed as brothers and sisters in art by younger generations. And why not?

There are few people as aware of the transience of public interest and taste as the American photographer David LaChapelle: "Well, if you knew what they were all saying about Warhol in those days. In 1986 I took his last portrait. By that time critics were writing terrible things about him and there wasn't a soul who came to his exhibitions."² David LaChapelle falls somewhere between the categories of popular glamour photography and 'serious' art produced for museums. He does not conform to standard classifications, which makes it slightly difficult for critics. His large flock of fans makes him suspect for quite a number of snobs

from the scene. And that is a shame, because LaChapelle not only possesses a highly distinctive signature and a breathtaking technique, but he also has something to say. Anyone who categorizes him as a man who photographs celebrities is selling him short. He holds up a mirror to celebrities, but also to us as self-appointed art lovers. And that mirror reveals more than just the attractive sides of fame and wealth. Or, as was recently articulated by writer Dan Piepenbring in *The New Yorker*: "Very popular people doing very unpopular things."³ What on first encounter seems like an overwhelming staging of his photos distracts from the fact that strictly speaking David LaChapelle is a realist. He brings truths to light.

One of those truths is the aforementioned fickleness of taste, ethics, and morals. LaChapelle walks with the curious eye of an artist and a gaze sharpened by training and experience through museums and places of worship in order to admire works of art from the Baroque and Renaissance eras. To draw inspiration from the astounding technical virtuosity of many of these works is not his only reason to do this; these works also tell stories about life's great dramas and ageless human vicissitudes. For example, LaChapelle manages to transpose the *vanitas* theme that was popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to our time with profound insight and empathy. Between 2008 and 2011, he liked to quote from floral still-lives by the Dutch Masters of the Golden Age, in which a cell phone could take the place of a skull. The deluge is the subject of a series in which he depicted flooded museums (2007). And in his *Negative Currency* series (1990 to 2015) he lingered over the transience of paper money. His team painstakingly constructed entire factoryscapes using plastic refuse, from which the future – that of abandoned industrial parks – can already be read (the *Refinery* series,

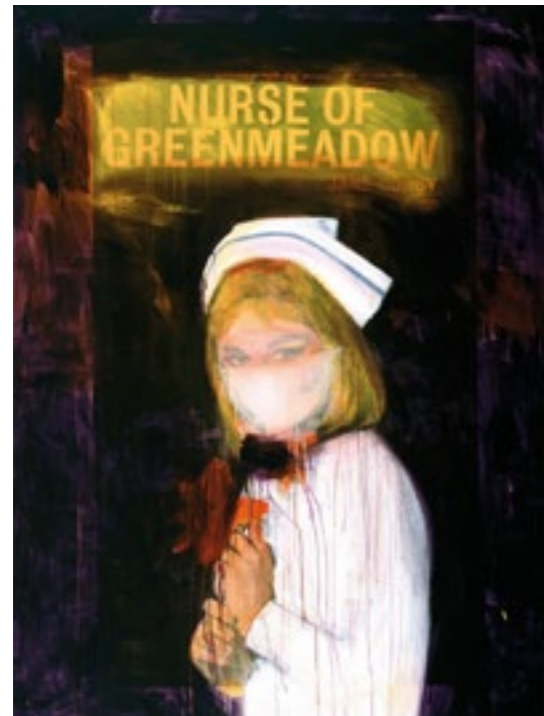
2013). In 2009 and 2012, LaChapelle collected pieces of discarded wax figures in Dublin and Hollywood, photographed them and thus gave them a new – albeit dubious – lease of life.

A highlight in LaChapelle's endeavor to gain an artistic hold on the changeability of everything that must be or wants to be modern is his ambitious *Seismic Shift* from 2012. An analysis of this photographic museum landscape can serve to gain a better insight into the artist's mode of thinking and working.

The building that is on the point of collapse in *Seismic Shift* is the Broad Contemporary Art Museum (BCAM), which is part of the Los Angeles County Museum of Modern Art (LACMA). The steel girders with their bright red color are an unmistakable feature. This building was designed by Renzo Piano, who, after creating the Centre Pompidou (1977) in Paris and the Fondation Beyeler (1997) near Basel, became one of the most popular museum architects in the world. Museums have long been the new cathedrals, used by countries and cities to compete with one another. With its striking ensemble of buildings designed by Alessandro Mendini, Michele de Lucchi, Philippe Starck, and Coop Himmelb(l)au, the Groninger Museum (1994) commands a place in the tradition of iconic architecture that has become the norm in the modern-day museum-scape. The newest in the series is the Louvre Abu Dhabi by Jean Nouvel, which may soon be the home of Leonardo's (?) aforementioned *Salvator Mundi*.

Eli Broad is one of the wealthiest businessmen in the world, and has also gained a reputation as a fervent art collector and serves on the boards of the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the LACMA. In the build-up to the BCAM's construction, for which Broad donated

Museums have long been the new cathedrals, used by countries and cities to compete with one another



Richard Prince, *Nurse of Greenmeadow*, 2002, inkjet print and acrylic paint on canvas, 198 x 148 cm, whereabouts unknown, auctioned by Christie's, New York, on 12 May 2014



Louis Vuitton, Takashi Murakami bag



Yue Minjun, *Free and at Leisure-10*, 2004, oil on canvas, 200 x 300 cm, Today Art Museum, Beijing



Takashi Murakami, *Tongari-kun (Mr. Pointy)*, 2003–2004, plastic, steel, and oil, acrylic and urethane paint, 702 x 350 x 350 cm, whereabouts unknown



Jeff Koons, *Balloon Dog (Blue)*, 1994–2000, polished stainless steel with transparent color coating, 307 x 363 x 114 cm, Installation photography of BCAM Inaugural Exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art



Andreas Gursky, *99 Cent*, 1999, chromogenic print on Plexiglas, 207 x 337 cm, The Broad Art Foundation, Los Angeles

US\$ 60,000,000, many people presumed that this funding was an indication for the donation of a large portion of his famous collection of contemporary art to the museum. When the new building opened in 2008, no fewer than 160 of the 200 works were owned by the Broads and a mere 40 came from the collection of the LACMA. However, shortly before the new building's inauguration, Broad explained in an interview that his collection would remain under the ownership of The Broad Art Foundation.

Given the sky-high prices, the Broad collection typifies a tricky dilemma for museums that collect contemporary art. Museums are on the one hand dependent on private donations and want to please lenders to ensure future bequests; on the other, there are the perils of conflicts of interest, and the extent to which a museum should allow itself to be guided by the wishes of collectors remains open to debate.

In *Seismic Shift* it is not just the building, but also many of the artworks represented within it belong to the collection of the philanthropists Eli and Edythe Broad. In hindsight, the fact that the Broad couple retained management of the collection could be seen as a pre-indicator for their decision to establish their own museum: since 5 September 2015, the Broad collection has been on show in the private museum named The Broad in Downtown Los Angeles. A portion of the works were location-specific and have therefore remained in the LACMA, while several works in *Seismic Shift* are no longer located in the LACMA, but in The Broad. Business details of this nature have already prompted the customary critique, but there was even greater criticism of the collection itself: "Did the Broads shape the market or follow it?" Holland Cotter wondered in *The New York Times* of 28 October 2015: "Either way, their collection follows the commercial mainstream

so closely as to read less like a 'personal choice' than an investment portfolio."⁴

Let's start on the left side of the image: The *Nurse of Greenmeadow* painting by Richard Prince (b. 1949) is grafted onto the eponymous romance novel by Jane Colby from 1964. The typical artistic strategy that brought Prince to fame, namely the appropriation of existing, often commercial images, is present in the reference to the stereotype of the sexualized female nurse, though on closer inspection the obscured nurse on the canvas is not as seductive as the woman who initially graced the cover of a paperback novel. The *Naughty Nurse* series, to which the painting belongs, also served as the basis for the Spring/Summer 2008 collection by Louis Vuitton, for which fashion designer Marc Jacobs invited Richard Prince as a creative collaborator.

While Prince used an inkjet printer to mechanically transpose the image of the novel to his canvas, David LaChapelle physically constructed the museum environment. He not only recreated the diverse artworks, but paid attention to many details. Note that in *Seismic Shift* the earthquake has transplanted also the surroundings into the gallery. To the left in the background, alongside the work by Richard Prince, there is a lone mammoth that, together with automobiles and architectural elements smeared in tar, has broken in. Such mammoths are exhibited at the La Brea Tar Pits adjacent to the LACMA, a famous and much-visited location with fossil remains.

In the foreground stands one of the iconic Balloon Dogs by Jeff Koons (b. 1955), rendered here in red (1995). The larger *Balloon Dog (Blue)* (1994–2000) is part of The Broad Collection and is exhibited at LACMA's Broad Contemporary Art Museum since 2008. (In 2015 the blue

Balloon Dog was transferred to The Broad in downtown Los Angeles.) Over the last two decades, Koons has probably become the symbolic figurehead of commercial modern art. With major exhibitions in leading museums and the millions that are paid out for his art, the work of Koons, initially a critical commentary on consumer culture, has become an example of the worldwide demand among super-rich buyers for whom art is a brand.

Behind Koons's *Balloon Dog (Red)* you can discern a painting by Chinese artist Yue Minjun (b. 1962). He was one of the first artists to be highly successful on the Western market from a country that was busy throwing off the chains of the rigid socialistic doctrine. Yue's trademark is male figures that smirk hysterically. In the background of *Seismic Shift*, the laughing figures seem to add an additional uncomfortable layer to the situation. Are the men roaring with laughter from satisfaction or are they laughing because of embarrassment?

Takashi Murakami (b. 1962), who is sometimes dubbed the Japanese Andy Warhol, is renowned for his style in which 'high art' is fused with 'low art' such as Japanese anime films and manga cartoon culture. *Tongari-kun*, nicknamed Mr. Pointy, brings together diverse real and imaginary cultures. For example, the artist imagined the antenna on the head of the sculpture as a communications center with alien beings, and the sculpture's numerous arms allude to various religions, including Buddhism. Murakami does not shy away from commercial collaborations and the associated mass production, but actually seeks them out, as shown by his collaboration with the fashion giant Louis Vuitton. A gallery in the background of *Seismic Shift* is wallpapered with the so-called Multicolore Louis Vuitton pattern, which arose from the collaboration between

Is LaChapelle trying to conjoin the untenability of the art system and consumer society?

Takashi Murakami and Marc Jacobs in 2003. Floating in the water are several Louis Vuitton bags, which were also created thanks to the collaboration between the fashion brand and the Japanese artist. In response to an exhibition by Murakami at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in 2007 and the Brooklyn Museum in 2008, where a huge selection of expensive Louis Vuitton merchandise was on sale in the museum shop, the artist's intertwining of art and commerce was subjected to a barrage of criticism. According to the artist, the merchandise is in fact an extension of his art and he even described the shop as "the heart of the exhibition."⁵

With his large-scale, detailed, and colorful works of everyday and global scenes, Andreas Gursky (b. 1955) is one of the most famous photographers from around the turn of the century. The photo, visible just behind Murakami, captures endless rows of 99-cent bargains in an American supermarket. Ironically enough, a similar work by Gursky, *99 Cent II Diptychon*, a diptych of the depiction of cheap goods, was auctioned by Sotheby's London in 2007 for the then record amount for photography of GBP 1,700,000. Consumer society is an important and frequently recurring theme, in the work of Gursky as well as LaChapelle. While Gursky's work is an ostensibly objective reflection on the scale of the global economy, LaChapelle introduces a more dramatic twist to the whole. With his inclusion of *99 Cent* in *Seismic Shift*, is he trying to conjoin the untenability of the art system and consumer society in general?

Barely discernible, alongside the Gursky hangs one of David LaChapelle's own works. In keeping with the subject of a museum as ruin, we see his *After the Deluge: Museum*. This photo could be understood as the classic pendant of the contemporary *Seismic Shift*. (In a more

recent print of *Seismic Shift* this photo has, incidentally, been switched with *99 Cents*, so that the former is in a more prominent place.)

Around the corner, fairly centrally positioned, lies a pile of several classic street lamps that belong to the *Urban Light* installation by Chris Burden (1946–2015). This installation was realized in 2008 in the LACMA's forecourt on the occasion of the opening of the new BCAM building and is composed of 202 restored street lamps of the 1920s and 1930s from Los Angeles. The restored lamps have become a favorite spot, where many tourists pause to take a selfie. In *Seismic Shift* this is no longer possible, except in the case of disaster tourism, as a number of these lamps have ended up in the exhibition space due to the fictitious earthquake. The installation by Burden is a late work by this artist, who in the 1970s rose to fame with performances, of which the most notorious was *Shoot* (1971). While the artist himself was the center of attention when he had himself shot in the arm during this mythic and transient performance, with *Urban Light* he invites visitors to enter into the work of art themselves. The artist restored the lamps and turned them into art with the intention of them being preserved forever. Most recently in 2018 it has been announced that another Leonardo, Leonardo DiCaprio, will pay the museum to swap the work's 309 incandescent lights with more energy-efficient LED bulbs.

To the right of Burden's soon to be eco-friendly installation stands *Untitled (Shafted)* by Barbara Kruger (b. 1945). This installation consists of a huge digital print, specially designed for the location in the elevator shaft, and was first presented when the BCAM opened in 2008. The red, black, and white texts in Kruger's signature style are echoes of contemporary advertising slogans, with words like SNEAKERS, CELL

PHONES, SWEATERS, and LIPSTICK. Kruger is renowned for her powerful visual motifs, often combined with black-and-white photographs, with which she critically pokes fun at consumer culture and power structures in society. The slogan in what is perhaps her most famous work is: *I shop, therefore I am* (1987). If you take a careful look at the red words in *Seismic Shift*, there are literary references to be found in this text. The word PICTURE is part of a quote from George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984*: "If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face – forever." The quote above it has an older source and alludes to the poem *When We Two Parted* by English Romanticist Lord Byron (1788–1824): "The dew of the morning, / Sunk chill on my brow / It felt like the warning, / Of what I feel now. // Thy vows are all broken, / And light is thy fame, / I hear thy name spoken, / And share in its shame." Both these quotes seem to be a textual equivalent of the ominous imagery that LaChapelle has created in *Seismic Shift*.

To the right of Kruger's elevator shaft there are two paintings by Jeff Koons hanging on the wall. The three basketballs also belong to Koons's iconic oeuvre, floating as part of *Three Ball 50/50 Tank (Two Spalding Dr J Silver Series, Wilson Supershot)*, normally perfectly centered within the black frame, but here in *Seismic Shift* they have broken free. This work is emblematic of Koons's approach, in which everyday American objects as symbols of capitalist society are elevated to the realm of high art. Like a modern-day Marcel Duchamp, Koons is unsurpassed in taking up commonplace motifs and selling the resulting art to illustrious collectors for astronomical sums. There are, for example, different versions of the three basketballs in the Broad collection, the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and Tate London. The yellow-green



David LaChapelle, *After the Deluge: Museum*, Los Angeles, 2007, digital chromogenic print, 183 x 246 cm, David LaChapelle Studio



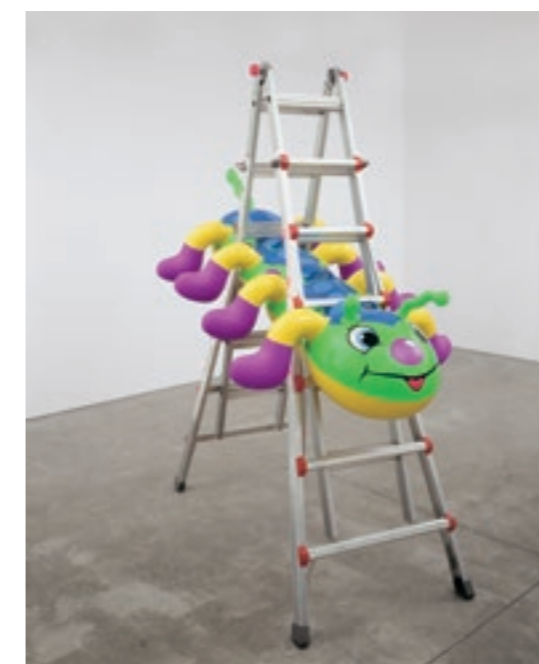
Andy Warhol, *Camouflage (pink)*, 1986, acrylic and silkscreen ink on canvas, 102 x 102 cm, whereabouts unknown



Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (Shafted)*, 2008, digital print/installation in the elevator shaft, 2865 x 549 x 366 cm, Commissioned by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art for the opening of the Broad Contemporary Art Museum



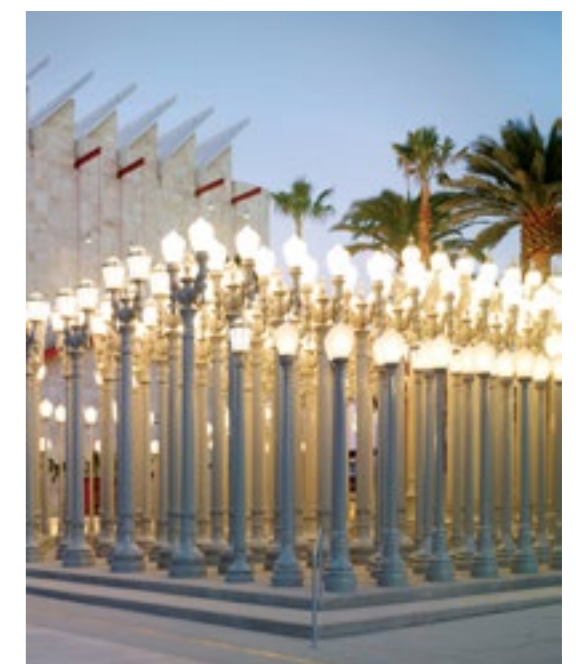
Jeff Koons, *Popeye*, 2003, oil on canvas, 274 x 213 cm, whereabouts unknown



Jeff Koons, *Caterpillar Ladder*, 2003, colored aluminum, aluminum, plastic, 213 x 112 x 193 cm



Jeff Koons, *Three Ball 50/50 Tank (Two Spalding Dr J Silver Series, Wilson Supershot)*, 1985, glass, steel, distilled water, three basketballs, 154 x 124 x 34 cm



Chris Burden, *Urban Light*, 2008, installation consisting of 202 restored antique street lamps at the entrance of LACMA, 814 x 1743 x 1789 cm, Los Angeles County Museum of Art

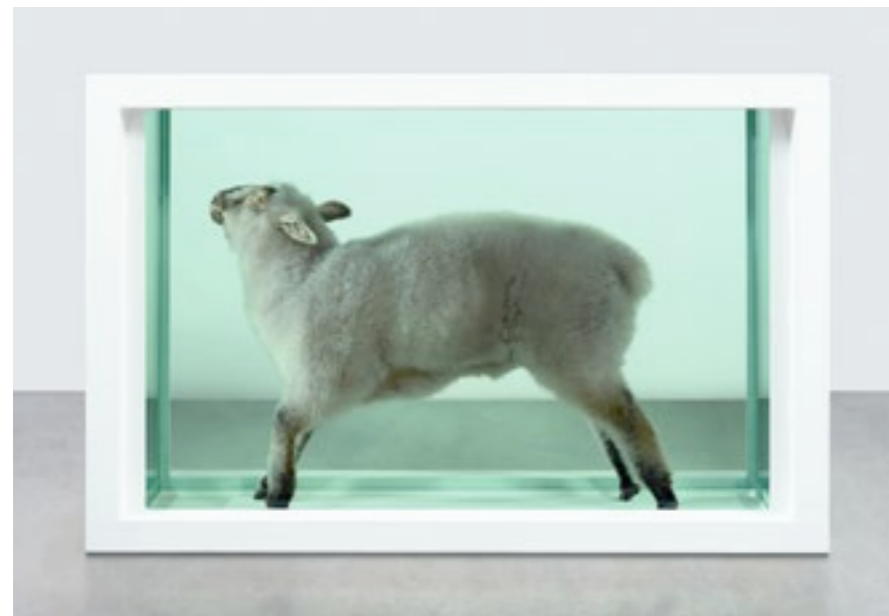




Damien Hirst, *Temple*, 2008, painted bronze, 660 x 330 x 200 cm, whereabouts unknown



Damien Hirst, *No Arts; No Letters; No Society*, 2006, glass, Formica, MDF, aluminum, steel, metal support, surgical equipment, broken mirror, rosary beads, anatomical skulls, duct tape, and pharmaceutical packaging, 213 x 559 x 36 cm, The Broad, Los Angeles



Damien Hirst, *Away from the Flock*, 1994, glass, painted steel, acrylic paint, plastic, lamb, and formaldehyde solution, 96 x 149 x 51 cm, Tate/National Galleries of Scotland



Damien Hirst, *Beautiful Guests Must Dress In Pastel Only For The Pictures Painting*, 2007, household gloss on canvas and electric motor, diameter: 152.4 cm, whereabouts unknown



Damien Hirst, *Chlorpropamide (pfs)*, 1996, household gloss on canvas, 193 x 239 cm, The Broad Art Foundation, Los Angeles



Damien Hirst, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, 1991, glass, painted steel, silicone, monofilament, shark, and formaldehyde solution, 217 x 542 x 180 cm, whereabouts unknown

“Being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art”

caterpillar entangled in a ladder, which borrows its motif from inflatable water toys, that is, the ‘inflatables,’ is also a work by Koons and likewise part of the Broad couple’s collection.

This caterpillar treads across the pink painting from the *Camouflage* series by Andy Warhol (1928–1987) that is floating in the water. Warhol produced the painting from this series in 1986, the year in which LaChapelle captured his last portrait prior to his death in February 1987. Andy Warhol can be regarded as the spiritual father of all artists whose work is critical of consumerism as well as market-driven. As an artist he did not shrink from the cross-connection between art and the economy; Warhol actually sought out the borderline territory and thought ‘business’ was highly intriguing, going by one of his famous statements: “Being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art.” LaChapelle’s choice of a work from the *Camouflage* series may well have a deeper meaning. Warhol lies behind the force of the new commercial art. According to a relatively plausible legend, seeing the patterns of military clothing that were meant to protect soldiers in natural environments once prompted Picasso to exclaim: “We came up with that!” An artistic pattern assumed a utilitarian purpose. Warhol won back the pattern for art. With pink camouflage you are bound to stand out in a forest, but in a museum not so much.

Damien Hirst (b. 1965) is the best represented artist in *Seismic Shift*, with: an anatomical model such as *Temple* (2008), medicine cabinets as *No Arts; No Letters; No Society* (2006), a lamb *Away from the Flock* (1994), one of Hirst’s ‘spin paintings’ with resemblance to *Beautiful Guests Must Dress In Pastel Only For The Pictures Painting* (2007), a ‘spot painting’ *Chlorpropamide (pfs)* (1996) and the monumental *The Physical Impossibility of*

Death in the Mind of Someone Living (1991). The Englishman caused a furor in the art world of the 1990s as one of the Young British Artists who rose to fame via the collection of the advertising mogul Charles Saatchi and his *Sensation* exhibition in London in 1997. Death is a frequently recurring theme in Hirst’s oeuvre, as is evident in several works in *Seismic Shift*, such as the medicine cabinets and even more apparent by the dead shark that floats in a formaldehyde solution. Unlike the floating basketballs by Koons, the shark is a less durable material that ended up aging quickly despite preservation in a special solution. The shark was replaced in 2006, because the rotting process was unstoppable. Perhaps that is why the shark looks especially frightening and decayed in *Seismic Shift*. Despite its perishability, Hirst’s work is also sold for the top price on the art market. In 2008 he organized an infamous auction, sidestepping his gallery. It is a somewhat incredible coincidence that the auction was held on the day Lehman Brothers was declared bankrupt, yet Hirst’s work generated sales to the tune of GBP 111,000,000. Likewise, with his most recent exhibition in Venice in the summer of 2017, Hirst managed to hold his controversial image high. This *Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable* exhibition presented new work that Damien Hirst and his studio worked on for a decade. Knowing Hirst’s entanglement with the market, it is no surprise that the two museums where the exhibition was held, Punta della Dogana and Palazzo Grassi, are the property of billionaire François-Henri Pinault, who is also a collector and a shareholder in Christie’s auction house. So he probably earned a few cents from the sale of the *Salvator Mundi* as well. As one of France’s richest collectors, Pinault is a notorious rival and the greatest competitor of Bernard Arnault, founder of the luxury conglomerate Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy. While the result of the

most recent collaboration between Louis Vuitton (Arnault) and Jeff Koons was a new series of bags, Hirst is the showpiece of Pinault, which glaringly demonstrates the closeness of the ties between these major artists and their investors.

LaChapelle’s perspective on the art scene is that of a man who is simultaneously insider and outsider. With *Seismic Shift* LaChapelle has created a work that could be a symbol for the state of art at the start of the twenty-first century. Typical of the period around 2000 was the coexistence of faith in progress and skepticism, as in the *fin de siècle* period. Around the turn of the twentieth century people thought that the possibilities of modern technology were more or less exhausted, and in a certain sense that outlook is also evident in our computer era. Information technology can never process data more quickly than the human brain is able to conceive it, and space travel is for the time being held back by the physical limitations of what humans can engineer.

Just like around 1900, it was the ultra-rich benefactors who made their mark on the art world and decked out their villas with work by great names. Public collections hobbled along behind the taste of the bourgeoisie, and were of course also drawn by the well-filled wallets of the lead actors among the upper class. That is still the case. Eli and Edythe Broad as representatives of the financiers and Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst on the side of the artistic creators are the dubious heroes chosen by LaChapelle in that narrative.

Yet fame is ephemeral. LaChapelle transports us into a partly dilapidated ruin of a modern museum gallery. The costly building and its even costlier contents have been severely damaged by a devastating earthquake, which

Hubert Robert and David LaChapelle may not be comparable as artists, but what connects them is that they have at some point rendered their visions of an important art collection in decay in a large format.

is a real possibility in Los Angeles. Some works of art might still be saved, while others are a 'total loss.' The vast majority of LaChapelle's photos are populated by a great many people, but here – fortunately – the human figures are lacking. We can but hope that all the museum's visitors and staff were able to reach safety.

Ed Ruscha (b. 1937) had previously depicted a ravaged LACMA in *The Los Angeles County Museum on Fire*. He painted the museum shortly after the opening on Wilshire Boulevard in 1965, with its new, modernistic, but unpopular accommodation designed by William Pereira. This painting is seen as an example of work by artists who were increasingly distancing themselves from museums, and thus this painting adorns the cover of the book *Institutional Critique and After* (2006), though the artist had not created the work with that intention.

With *Seismic Shift* and its modern museum in ruins, LaChapelle harks back – consciously or unconsciously – to a much older art-historical source: In the 1790s, French ornamental and landscape painter Hubert Robert (1733–1808) produced a series of views of the royal palace that had just been converted into the Louvre museum. He painted several variants of his subject: as a magnificent new building but also as a decayed ruin. There has been plenty of speculation about the reason for Robert choosing this disturbing vista into an uncertain future. It seems plausible that this ties in with the revolution, which cost tens of thousands of people their lives and unleashed an iconoclastic outbreak of unprecedented scope. The revolutionaries rejected the cultural legacy of the detested political regime, but also appropriated cultural heritage. The revolution thus became the mother of all our present-day museums.

Hubert Robert was himself a member of a committee that was responsible for the layout, the selection, and the hanging of the works in the Louvre. The overhead lighting of the Grande Galerie is reputed to have been his idea. At that time the Louvre was largely unused, because the kings of France, starting with Louis XIV, preferred to reside in Versailles. The annual or biennial exhibition of the Salon, named after the Salon Carré of what was still the Palais du Louvre, was staged here. Long before the revolution there was already open discussion about whether it would be a good idea to exhibit sections of the royal art collections permanently. Young artists would then be able to study the art of painting in the galleries, with works by masters of the Renaissance as their examples. Under pressure from an articulate public many monarchs, not just those in France, undertook steps to make their art accessible to a broader circle. During the French Revolution, the initially hesitant undertaking of increasing art's accessibility continued apace. Most especially, royal art treasures were for the first time transferred into public ownership.

More than two centuries later, the private collection of Eli and Edythe Broad has likewise been made accessible to the general public, albeit without ownership being transferred from private to public. But that could still happen. Hubert Robert and David LaChapelle may not be comparable as artists, but what connects them is that they have at some point rendered their visions of an important art collection in decay in a large format. Everything that was once fine and valuable – or was in any case regarded as such – has tumbled, been exposed to the elements. With Robert we see a budding artist contemplating and sketching studies in the middle of the rubble. The Classical works – among them

a bronze cast of the *Apollo Belvedere* and Michelangelo's *Dying Slave* – continue to be founts of inspiration today, points of reference for contemporary artists. We cannot know whether that will ever apply to Koons, Hirst, and Louis Vuitton's bags. LaChapelle does not open up a vista to a more distant future either. The ravages of time have gnawed at Robert's Louvre and whole eras have now passed. But the Seismic Shift could happen at any time. Perhaps even tomorrow.

What connects artists of then and now is that they search for the sense and meaning of creation and preservation, for what determines good taste and how art relates to fashion, modernity, and eternal validity. Robert personally witnessed and participated in a radical upheaval of all sorts of values and norms, of which we are still feeling the effects. And LaChapelle? To see what major upheaval he is foretelling we will have to bide our time.

Notes

- 1 Jerry Saltz, 'Christie's Is Selling This Painting for \$100 Million. They Say It's by Leonardo. I Have Doubts. Big Doubts.' *Vulture*, 14 November 2017.
- 2 David LaChapelle, quoted in Wim Denolf, 'Sterfotograaf David LaChapelle: "Een slechte recensie verknaakt misschien mijn ontbijt, maar niet de lunch."' *Knack Weekend*, 7 November 2017.
- 3 Dan Piepenbring, 'What Can David LaChapelle's Celebrity-Fuelled Fantasies Tell Us Now.' *The New Yorker*, 18 December 2017.
- 4 Holland Cotter, 'Toward a Museum of the 21st Century.' *The New York Times*, 28 October 2015.
- 5 Takashi Murakami, quoted in Carol Vogel, 'Watch Out, Warhol, Here's Japanese Shock Pop.' *The New York Times*, 2 April 2008



Hubert Robert, *Vue imaginaire de la Grande Galerie du Louvre en ruines*, 1796, oil on canvas, 114.5 x 146 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris



Edward Ruscha, *The Los Angeles County Museum on Fire*, 1965-1966, oil on canvas, 135.9 x 339.1 cm, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1972



David LaChapelle, *Seismic Shift*, 2012, chromogenic print, 183 x 452 cm, Groninger Museum. Acquired in 2018 with the support of the Rembrandt Association, thanks to its Titus Fund and its mr Rickert J-F. Blokhuis Fund

