

141

gennaio 2017

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Bowie | Cerutti | Huber | Martino | Pedersoli | Scarlini | Spaziente
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Il corpo dell'artista.
Omaggio a David Bowie

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(s)Now

David Bowie meets Damien Hirst and contemplates life, death and everything*

David Bowie

Scritto all'epoca della collaborazione di Bowie con la rivista inglese "Modern Painters", l'articolo si apre con una riflessione su un'epoca in cui Damien Hirst non era una star internazionale e in particolare quando il suo lavoro, approdato alla Gagosian Gallery di New York, fu apprezzato dalla critica ma snobbato dai media. Bowie riporta poi una sua intervista a Hirst, introducendola con una sorta di racconto-parabola che gli serve per dimostrare che quello che lo accomuna con Hirst e con molti artisti inglesi della sua generazione è "That same sense of pluralism and surface-chaos surf [that] has become a major consideration in all the work that I do". Bowie ci delizia con la sua originalità e cultura, citando preziosità letterarie come *Murder Considered as a Fine Art* di Thomas De Quency, a proposito del rapporto fra l'artista e la morte, e stimolando il pittore a parlare della forte compresenza della dimensione estetica e concettuale nella propria arte: sono temi, come è evidente, che riguardano anche l'opera di Bowie. Il musicista, poi, scava alle radici dell'opera di Hirst, che contemplano Gericault e "anybody who dealt with the gruesome", ma anche, ad esempio, la purezza di Donald Judd. L'articolo si conclude con una nota di scetticismo nei confronti del valore dell'interpretazione dell'opera d'arte da parte del critico e con la condivisione, da parte dei due artisti, di un distacco filosofico e pacato: "Nothing is a real problem for me".

STOP-PRESS DEATH ROW DAMIEN DELIGHTS

In the late fall of last year I wrote a short piece on the then imminent Hirst show at the Gagosian Gallery in New York, his first major outing in America. As fate and the US Department of Agriculture would have it, the main showpiece, *Couple Fucking Dead (Twice) Corruption* was banned. It comprised a dead cow eternally mounted by a dead bull. Surprisingly, this tabloid-worthy situation passed virtually unnoticed in the American media. The show was subsequently postponed and eventually opened in May of this year. This time Hirst gave us two cows, each sliced wormlike into vertical segments contained within twelve (yes, we've got religious spin here) glass

* This essay has been taken from: "Modern Painters", 1996, vol. IX, n.2, pp. 36-39.

tanks, all preserved with the usual formaldehyde solution. The whole is entitled *Some Comfort Gained From the Acceptance of Inherent Lies in Everything*. The opening went splendidly. Art icons such as Schnabel, Clemente and Hackney poured out praise; the overall feeling, one of delight. The oft-jaded downtown crowd, all Oscar dealer-rented-up for the night, seemed perceptibly embarrassed with their cheerfulness, almost apologetic for the fun they were having. Big show, bit hit.

Yet again, Hirst's work went almost unmentioned by the tabloids and television, but, within the art-world and heavier-weight newspapers, received almost unanimous praise. So, well, he's cracked the States, folks, cutting a swathe for all our other Britarts. No doubt, with a bit more scorn and our usual lack of support we shall wave goodbye to most of our best young talents within the next couple of years, a jolly good clear-out before the next century, get things back to normal around here. Nice and quiet. Anyway, back to Hirst. Admirably enough, this has not been a sensation driven success. People just like the work. For a city that has long been exposed to the severer side of body-part art — Kiki Smith, Joel Peter Witkins's human-corpses in *tableaux*, or Beth B's wax sculptures of female circumcision — Hirst's work is acclaimed for its boundless enthusiasm, free of both detachment and cynicism, its humour, simplicity and how well it's made,



Rock God and Friends in New York, David Bowie, Damien Hirst and Julian Schnabel photographed by Iman.

rather than its blood or organ content. Quite refreshing. In fact, hard-hearted Kimmelman of the *New York Times* noted that Hirst's work was 'likeable' and that 'the show left me somehow, unexpectedly, smiling'. Wow. I thought you might like to see the original piece that I had put on the backburner. It contains a slab of interview that I had with Damien before the agri-agro.

TIME OF THE SIGNS

Peter Koenig was the Marlboro man, snow-burnt, narrow-eyed and silent as the tomb. Hauling me up, my son too, thousands of feet to feed us to the hard-packed snow trails of Zermatt, he rarely said much more than 'that's good' or 'that's bad'. Having relinquished all claims to a *Wunderkind* career as heroic would-be speed-skier champ of the world after a total, near fatal, wipe-out crash at a hundred and something miles an hour, he brought himself back, slouching slowly, to life, finding interested muscles and receptive sinews, lifting, walking, running, then finally skiing again. Now, regarded as one of the supreme teachers of 'inner skiing', he's floating at the sight of this all-smoking, all flailing Englishman who's valiantly trying to match his own son's skills on the *piste*. Years before, he told me a strange story. 'Many years ago, a young skier was lost in a blizzard on one of the slopes below the Matterhorn. Parties were sent out to search day after day, but they never found him. Cut to 25 years later. I receive a call from the *piste* check-out patrol to come and look at something very sensational. The snow has turned, as it will, and thrown up the perfectly preserved body of the skier. The patrol stand around in silence as I bend down and look into his face. It is my double, a twin, except he's a few years younger than myself. It is my father.' I've dwelt many time on Peter's story and told it many more. It even crops up in that most wonderful of films, *Smoke*, by director Wayne Wang, proving the resonance of something that shatters our preconceptions of beginnings and endings. That same sense of pluralism and surface-chaos surf has become a major consideration in all the work that I do; also for many of the younger artists now coming out of Britain!

David Bowie | The piece that you're making for the Gagosian later this year sounds extremely confrontational. Are you concerned at all about the puritan eyes through which some of your American viewers will be seeing?

Damien Hirst | Well. I suppose the work sounds incredibly gruesome when described, but I think you can talk it in, out and over, but never really visual-

lise or get near to the physical experience of standing in front of something like this. However well it's described, the actuality is just something that you don't expect. You could read about it in the tabloids and it would sound sensational, but when you actually encounter it, there's something sad and very quiet, almost fragile and very beautiful about it. It's very difficult. If you try to talk it up as being something gross and excessive, then it's almost like spiralling down through your own mortality or something. I mean, the fly pieces that I did a couple of years ago worked much in that way. They sounded quite disgusting, but when you actually saw them, you underwent a considerable self-revelation. You couldn't look away, but somehow you couldn't criticise.

why london - how come - slouching and packed - he stirs a silent and narrow art into the conservative hard world - a thousand international images - new places unforgettable - then they isolate this would-be walking speed skier - them - the resentful traumatised - hauling the emporsario - the sub-culture - isolating this virus. why london - the culture is fascinated to feed at hard miles an hour - the supreme trying to be interested in the significant. were that they were dead all these smoking dots in the face. here is damien they said career walking through his silent tragic art. snow lifting years in the sight of decay. different from anything that we have killed before. then time stands still to accept the knacker's box. why london.

DB | It seems that André Breton was one of the original writers to suggest the artist as murderer, or, maybe, before him, Thomas de Quincey.

DH | Oh yeah. Wasn't de Quincey the one who wrote *Confessions of an Opium Eater*?

DB | That's right. In around 1820 he wrote an article for *Blackwood's Magazine* called 'Murder Considered as a Fine Art'.

DH | I suppose if you consider the law as a set of disciplines, then murder is an ultimate test of those disciplines as art. For me, it's a way to stretch things to the limit, to go beyond the law. That, I would guess, is what I do as an artist.

DB | What seems to define your work as being so different from that of your peers is a far greater degree of personal passion. A strong resentment of the idea of death or something like that. Anyway, it certainly strikes me as emotive, a reverberation of sorts, whereas in the work of your friends like Gavin Turk or Sarah Lucas, say, the basis seems to be a no-nonsense

cynicism, a dark ironic stance maybe. You seem to straddle two worlds — conceptualism and a rather more traditional self-expression. Something that smacks of an emotional life. Is that accurate?

DH | Yes I think it is. I mean I can't deny it. I think that at the end of the day, art is not only a visual language that communicates an idea. The ideas maybe don't change but the world certainly does. So then, does the context of that idea change? However, something that really gets to me is that the work should be totally delicious visually and that you shouldn't necessarily have to work hard at intellectualising. It can just be something fundamentally expressionistic. Like Bonnard said, 'I just love these colours'.

DB | So, what's the title of your fabulous pieces with the butterflies embedded the paint?

DH | *In and Out of Love*.

DB | Yes, *In and Out of Love*. Those pieces are as strongly aesthetic, as thoroughly beautiful, as they are broadcasters of ideas.

DH | I think they contain contradictions. I mean, they're beautiful as paintings, I suspect, but if you look closely, the butterflies are stuck in the paint, to you ask yourself, did they get there by accident or is this a result of some evil little scientific experiment or is this merely a display of some kind? I find it beautiful, I also find it repulsive. Imagining oneself as the butterfly in question, it would be quite an awful thing.

DB | Does one have to have a social conscience as an artist?

DH | I have no social conscience when I'm working. It's out of my hands. The viewer may want to make that judgement. I'm not too concerned with interpretation. Neither can I allow myself to be bothered by taboo or even an idea of integrity. Integrity you either have or you don't. I couldn't make some kind of effort toward working at integrity. It would be nonsensical.

I'm particularly battered or supersaturated with image-drift. No one meaning, no author, only multi-interpretation. I'm beginning to forget history. I mean the actual fact of history. A world leader is led by the nose from crisis to crisis by CNN or any number of other news networks. He doesn't have space to analyse any situation, only time to come up with a network-grabbing sound-byte. Maybe two hours at the most. He won't know the facts,

he'll just have a couple of moments to scan the event and then pronounce an action-plan. We, as audience, respond in kind. One hundred items on the hour, every hour. Retain nothing but the buzz phrase 'The mother of all blah', etc. I'm at home with contradiction. My roots are in the pluralistic '70s. That two-trunked form, however, has now sprouted a plethora of twigged branches. Absolutes are obsolete. Somewhere between the judgement of Christ and the celebration of the birth of Mithras lies the Simpson trial, or is it a Michael Jackson premier or Newt the Talking Soup? Suddenly Pollock looks like a figurative painter. I recognise shapes in linseed and pigment strands. It's my father's face only many centuries younger. I'm at home with twigged absolutes; the birth of Simpson and the celebration of judgement has turned, as it will, and relinquished the all walking, running Englishman. We love beginnings and endings but what captivates even more is no beginning, no ending. That used to be scary but now it's the state of the read. Now is the now. Our chaos-mutation is the bastard industrial offspring of Buddhism. Our past and future, rather than melting away in the bliss of transcendence, were hacked off like rotting limbs, gangrened and snow-bitten by indifference. The pain must be all over now, Baby Blue. The pain must feel like snow. (s)Now.

who's new around here - who's trying to cockeye the hockney - hockney the splash man as speed shark all faces are unforgettable - all hauling the forgettable up thousands of images when he stops to think he is insect traumatised - he is a total inner attention - son of the emporario. would be dwellers royal slowly up what is left - feet flailing - valiantly narrow. the sub-culture fixed in the fact - relinquish the wipe out - finding art - skiing again - freeze killing the sub who's new around here. what conservative skills these teachers of all attention - now - when regarded - the significant goldsmiths of the inner image with burnt after match muscles - crash sinew art as heroic near fatal images. he's floating as one of someone to the skills packed - all smoking astonishment in the face. years of butterfly teachers of eyed images - hauling slowly - trying on his insect muscles - why london - the culture of feet - a career as the tomb silent champion - as one of the resentful paintings - hard lifting and tragic. it seems like confessions of a the art as a set of murders. the ultimate test is a way to stretch things. a lot of your peers go beyond the law - straddle an accurate life. a visual passion can't deny it - evil little damien contains contradictions. i mean - they're beautiful as suspects - in and out of intellect - the viewer may want social conscience - a traditional self taboo. a dark ironic end of the day - is that accurate - i mean - i can't deny it. who's new around here.

DH | It starts with playfulness and then develops depth. I don't think I can

avoid that. I guess there's a point where playfulness becomes science.

DB | Here's a general question. Which artists had an effect on you? Not necessarily the work but maybe their attitude toward their work?

DH | Some are quite obvious, I suppose. Like Boon, like Soutine, Gericault, Denis Potter. Anybody who dealt with the gruesome. Then I went through the Goldsmith's experience and made some strange connection with minimalism, and then the gallery became merely a piece of white paper, a situation for a visual experience. For me it can be the contradiction between life and death, the body and existence. The body against a creative landscape, say. I'd say a Judd box exudes more health and life than I ever felt. Well, sometimes I'd say that.

DB | The work that you produce, does it bounce from real life experience or relationships, or do you work until an idea begins to form, or is it a combination of both?

DH | A combination I should think. I'm always looking and playing. Living in a world of so many objects in so many juxtapositions, there are a million ideas. I will often be stopped by an everyday object placed in a frightening situation. But then, sometimes I start with a visual sculpture. For a long time I've had the image of an umbrella in my head, from Bacon I guess, and I've been trying to think of a way to use that in a very physical and horrific situation. A sort of three-dimensional Bacon.

DB | It seems that it's painters that stimulate you far more than sculptors.

DH | It's such a completely illusionary world. It's a kind of belief in the square. If you look at many of the paintings that I've done, there's always a sculptural approach. They're almost like a logo as an idea of myself as an artist. Some sort of sculptural consumerist idea.

DB | Product plus personality equals brand.

DH | Artwork plus artist equals art.

In the January 1992 *Artforum* Michael Cords wrote, 'to experience something of the international flavour of a Hirstian Gesamt-Kuntswerk, imagine a "social sculpture" conceived of and realised by Bret Easton Ellis's savagely empiricist serial killer Patrick Bateman'.

I think I disagree. Damien's work is unconcerned with the savageness of life. It's optimistic, it's here and it's soot. 'Look at my forearm', he now urges. 'How can I possibly die?' Death is not an option. Through the complex machinations of the neo-ecclesiastical Damien has bargained a simony for himself. One look at *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* and a toad of fecund certainty lodges itself in the nervous system. The vacuum of nescience is flooded with palpable knowledge. Life is not the other side of death. It is its twin, a magical simultaneity. One cannot possibly summon up the probability of death. It's one hand clapping. It's trying to imagine black while staring at white. Damien's dream. 'I arrived, after a long journey, back home, and found my mother perched on the edge of her sofa chatting animatedly with a perfect clone of herself. On the other side of the room was my brother also in heated discussion with a doppelganger. It was all perfectly friendly but somehow immensely disturbing. My mother turned to me and said, 'Damien, say this little chant and you're own self will appear. It's really wonderful'. She gave me the chant and try as I might I could not say it. As as the chant words poured out of me, I ran as far away from the sound as I could. Finding myself hiding on the roof of a warehouse I glanced down into the street and, needless to say, there, advancing toward me was my wraith, ominous and relentless. That, of course, was the point at which I woke up.' That, of course, is always the point at which Damien wakes up. That is the point.

DB | When you look at an early art-work, a Bosch, say, is you feel the need to know the personality of the painter who created it in order to decode it successfully?

DH | To a certain extent I suppose. Looking at an old Charlie Chaplin movie for the first time, one always thinks, 'shit, why did everybody walk at that speed in those days?' A basic history of movie-making puts the phenomenon in perspective.

DB | Do we then need the critic, the translator? We have arrived now in a time where the critic is not only indispensable, somehow the work does not exist without him; but in some cases the critique itself is seen as the work of art, the physical work merely an explanation or appendage to the critical essay. The depth of analysis is measured by the sculpture or painting. Do we need the actual physical work now that art-philosophy is a genre itself worth analysis?

DH | Oh dear, we enter a world of metaphors. I'm always a bit wary of me-

taphors, I mean if something is built on the metaphorical, then the chameleon mode takes over. It shall no longer be what it is or can be what it implies. It becomes vague. It becomes a trigger. I'm quite prepared for interpretations to be stimulated in the mind of the spectator. We have smoking, for instance. Smoking as a life cycle. The cigarette itself can stand for life; the packet with its fresh supply stands for birth; the lighter can signify God giving life to the whole situation. The ashtray, of course, represents death and the graveyard. As soon as one tries to read it like this, one feels ridiculous. I feel ridiculous in the metaphorical world, anyway. But it's an unavoidable ridiculousness. In my mind I have all ideas and their equivalent metaphors flying around together becoming a series of triggers. No questions and no answers. Just instability. I'm perfectly happy with contradictions. And it always is a contradiction at the end of the day. I have a sculpture which is called *Nothing is a Problem for Me*, meaning I'm afraid of nothing and I have no problems and I have none at the same time. Interpret that one way, then interpret it the opposite way. All problems can be solved by giving something up. Life usually.

DB | Yea, nothing is a real problem for me.

DH | Nothing is a real problem for me, too.

'No Sense of Absolute Corruption', until 15 June, Harry Gagosian Gallery, New York. David Bowie: New Paintings, until 6 July, Blaise Thorens Gallery, Basle, Switzerland. Damien Hirst, *i want to spend the rest of my life everywhere with everyone one to one always, forever now*: Damien Hirst, thoughts about the world around him, in the form of a running commentary, designed by the artist with Jonathan Barnbrook, to be published next autumn by Booth Clibborn Editions.

SUMMARY

The article, written at the time of Bowie's collaboration with "Modern Painters" magazine, opens with a consideration on an era when Damien Hirst was not yet an international star, and in particular when his work, arrived at the Gagosian Gallery in New York, was praised by critics but snubbed by the media. Bowie then presents an interview to Hirst, introducing it with a sort of story-parable that he uses to prove that what unites him with Hirst and many British artists of his ge-

neration is 'That same sense of pluralism and surface-chaos surf [that] has become a major consideration in all the work that I do '. Bowie delights us with his originality and culture, quoting literary treasures such as *Murder Considered as a Fine Art* by Thomas De Quency, on the relationship between the artist and death, and encouraging artists to talk about the strong presence of the aesthetic and conceptual dimension in their art: these are issues, as is evident, which also affect the work of Bowie. The musician then digs down to the roots of Hirst's work, roots that contemplate Gericault along with 'anybody who dealt with the gruesome' but also, for example, the purity of Donald Judd. The article ends with a note of skepticism towards the value of the interpretation of the work of art given by critics and with the mutual feeling, shared by the two artists, of philosophical detachment and calm: 'nothing is a real problem for me '.



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