

Damien Hirst: Impossible Desires, Sublime Designs

If I were to propose “Damien Hirst and the Sublime” as the topic of this paper – and of my thesis in general – there are those who will start with an objection, before I have even started: “Damien Hirst and the sublime!!? What’s sublime about Damien Hirst? Damien Hirst and the ridiculous perhaps...”

And yet I would not be the first to suggest the link between the work of Damien Hirst and the sublime. Critics writing both for and against Hirst have repeatedly mobilised the notion to attempt to make critical judgements about his work.¹

But I insist on the link between Hirst and the sublime not in order to make a judgement that since the notion of the ‘sublime’ might be at play somewhere in the production of Hirst’s work, this body of work ‘is’ sublime in any way. I’m not really interested in using the term to make a value judgement, and am somewhat sceptical as to whether being ‘sublime’ is in any case a good thing at all. Rather, the point is that this body of work insistently seems to make

¹ For example: Arthur Danto, "'Sensation' in Brooklyn," The Madonna of the Future: Essays in a Pluralistic Art World (Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2001) 393-4, Jonathan Jones, "He's Gotta Have It," The Guardian 4th April 2003: 14, Laura Wixley Brooks, "Damien Hirst and the Sensibility of Shock," The Contemporary Sublime: Sensibilities of Transcendence and Shock, ed. Paul Crowther, Art and Design; V.10 (London: Academy Editions, 1995) 54-67, Gene Ray, "Little Glass House of Horrors: High Art Lite, the Culture Industry and Damien Hirst," Third Text 18.2 (2004): 119-33, Damien Hirst, Damien Hirst's Pharmacy (London: Sotheby's, 2004).

reference to the art and literature, the motifs and rhetorical devices that were associated with the notion of 'the sublime' as it was defined within a complex and contradictory discourse during a long eighteenth century.

A flick through a Damien Hirst catalogue can sometimes look as if one is being presented with an attempt at a practical demonstration of what art would look like if one was to take Edmund Burke's famous essay on the topic (the snappily titled A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful)² – as a manifesto or as a handbook for artistic production. Hirst's work, like Burke's idea of the sublime, seems to take the production of the pleasure of horror and terror as a central aim, understanding this as the height of art's affective powers. Furthermore, Hirst seems to focus his pursuit of this affect of pleasurable horror on the representation of death: precisely that which Burke calls the "king of terrors",³ and places at the heart of the sublime. Hirst's titles and motifs seems to plunder the Gothic and Romantic art and literature that were spawned by notions of the sublime. The 'Natural History' series (of animals preserved in formaldehyde) seem to have wandered right out of Frankenstein's laboratory (via a Hammer B-movie studio, of course). The reference to the literary and artistic tradition of Romantic landscapes of the sublime in titles such as Standing Alone on the Precipice Overlooking the Arctic Wastelands of Pure Terror (1999-2000) is clear, and the work itself, a 9-metre-long, wall-mounted, mirror-

² Edmund Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful, and Other Pre-Revolutionary Writings, ed. David Womersley (London: Penguin, 1998).

³ Burke, Enquiry Part I, sec. 7. 86.

surfaced cabinet, containing row upon row of neatly, geometrically arranged, individual pills, relies for its power to baffle and disorient its viewer, to on key characteristics of the Kant's 'mathematically sublime' object: its overwhelming scale, the incommensurability of the detail and the whole, and the resulting impossibility of grasping its totality in a single perception.⁴



Figure 1: Damien Hirst, Standing Alone on the Precipice Overlooking the Arctic Wastelands of Pure Terror, (1999-2000). Stainless steel and glass cabinet with resin, metal and plaster pills, 236 x 871 x 11 cm. View of Installation at the 2003 Venice Biennale.

⁴ Immanuel Kant and James Meredith (trans.), Critique of Judgement, 9th April 2000 [1790], downloadable hypertext, University of Adelaide Library Electronic Texts Collection, Available: <<http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/k/k16j/k16j.zip>>, January 2004. §25-7.

As another prime example, Hirst's most (in)famous piece of work, the shark in formaldehyde, entitled The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living (1991) seems to roll all this into one, and for good measure adds in a concern with the limits of representability that marked the Kantian sublime and its successors in German Romanticism and Idealism.

But I'm struck at once with problems. Simply cataloguing these rather miscellaneous borrowings from a discourse from a distant moment of time can only be a beginning point, rather than an end, setting out a problem rather than its solution. Just what bits of the sublime does Hirst seem to pick up, and why these ones? How might we tie together the various motifs, formal properties and thematic concerns so that they might make some kind of sense of Hirst's work? Why do we see these references to the discourse of the Romantic and Gothic sublimes appear at the end of the twentieth century, and what exactly are they doing in this work?

These questions are further complicated if we attempt to return to the past in order to try to come up with the 'definition' of a 'concept' of the sublime. Its discourse is a long and tangled one; it was one of the key aesthetic concepts for over a hundred and fifty years, and as such was a fiercely contested term. It was a word which Neoclassicists, Gothicism and Romantics all had different stakes in defining. No two authors seem to be referring to quite the same thing when they use the word, and in fact many accounts are entirely

contradictory to others. As Samuel Holt Monk has noted in what remains the touchstone history of the development of the sublime, the history of “the extremely diverse and individualistic theories of sublimity that one finds in the eighteenth century” appears itself as something of a “formless mass,” which resists to the utmost being put into any order which does not do a “violence” on the facts.⁵

Of course, one could look to a single author for a ‘concept’ of the sublime and attempt to apply this, trying to ‘explain’ the effect of Hirst’s work as an example of the working of, for example, the ‘Burkean’ or ‘Kantian’ sublimines. But my interest lies somewhere slightly different from this. As a historian of visual culture rather than an aesthetician, I’m interested in the historical links between Hirst and this rather heterogenous field of theoretical and practical discourse which was named by ‘the sublime’, and in what’s at stake in its reappearance in recent times. This is to say several things: that I’m interested in that very complexity of the history of the sublime which would be cut out by taking a single ‘theorist’ as its representative. It is also to say that I’m interested in the relation between ‘theories’ of the sublime and associated artistic or otherwise cultural practices, rather than a merely theoretical conception of it. And it is also to say that I am interested primarily in looking at the problem from the perspective of Hirst. Therefore, my definition of the sublime – a Hirstean Sublime, rather than a ‘Kantian’, ‘Burkean’, ‘Gothic’ or

⁵ Samuel Holt Monk, The Sublime. A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England, Ann Arbor Paperbacks. No. Aa40. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960) 2-4.

‘Romantic’ sublime – will have to be developed from the inside out, by trying to answer the question of what it is that Hirst pulls from the history of the sublime, and what it is doing in his work, in the here and now...

In this paper, I will attempt to outline for you some of the contours of this ‘Hirstean sublime’, although this is obviously only a partial and rather ‘impressionistic’ mapping, as limits of space and time dictate, but hopefully it will be enough to get across a sense of the object of my study and the kinds of methodological problems and approaches that my study entails. I shall also attempt to plot the re-emergence of this Hirstean in relation to the reappearance of some of the theoretical tropes of the sublime in late-twentieth-century thought, rereading these in their turn through their synchronicity with the appearance of Hirst’s own version of sublimity.

I shall carry out this mapping of the Hirstean sublime around one of the two rare occurrences in Hirst’s own discourse where the word ‘sublime’ explicitly comes up, in the title of a preparatory drawing for one of Hirst’s sculptures.⁶

This is a somewhat more arbitrary starting point than it may seem, and I perhaps have to make clear from the outset how I do not want my using this starting point to be read. The very rarity of Hirst’s use of the term in his voluminous body of interviews would seem to indicate that it has not been for

⁶ The other time Hirst uses the term is in an interview, where he rather simply refers to his work as “fucking sublime”. Damien Hirst and Gordon Burn, On the Way to Work (London: Faber, 2001) 219.

him an explicit theme, or a concept with which he is consciously working as a basis of his practice. Furthermore, when he does use the term in these isolated instances, it is in a fairly offhand way, and there does not seem to be any clear intended reference to a particular technical or philosophical sense in which the term is used; rather, it is used in a way that is quite in keeping with the general, colloquial sense of the word, suggesting something somehow 'transcendent', otherworldly, perhaps even ethereal, something vaguely but superlatively excellent, or something beyond the ordinary.⁷ To take the instances when Hirst says the word "sublime" as the key to a 'theory' or 'concept' of the sublime with which he is working, and which his work 'expresses', would thus be ridiculous, and I am in any case profoundly distrustful of any criticism which would either aim to 'solve' the meaning of works of art simply as products of artistic 'intention', or – worse! – which would treat an artist's statements as a transparent medium for the communication of such intention.

However, to start with these references (although there are perhaps other places just as good to begin) is not entirely arbitrary. As I hope to show, the appearance of the term here carries with it all kinds of theoretical baggage which the word has taken on from its use in the past, a set of connotations that seem to be structured into the very language which Hirst is using.

⁷ This is in keeping with Hirst's general non- or even anti-theoretical manner of speech. In interviews, Hirst's speech is not littered with quotations from Deleuze, Foucault and Barthes, but with anecdotes about the life and work of Manzoni, Bacon, and Duchamp, and when interviewers bring up theorists, Hirst tends to become prickly and defensive.

Although it may not be 'intentional', the putting into play of this baggage can also hardly be taken as accidental, found as it is in a body of work so packed with the imagery and themes of what was once precisely called 'the sublime'. What Hirst's use of the word opens into, I propose, is something rather like Fredric Jameson's "political unconscious": we are dealing with a structure of the very possibilities of a work of art or literature, a structure that nonetheless an artist cannot fully consciously grasp or know, which remains largely 'barred' to him or her.⁸ In a sense, it is this 'unconscious' of Hirst's work – and the role that the notion of the sublime plays in this – which my inquiry takes primarily as its object of study. In this case, we can now determine the proper status of the appearance of the term sublime: neither 'accident' nor 'intention', it is a symptom.⁹

⁸ Fredric Jameson, The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act (London: Methuen, 1981).

⁹ One word of caution here: a 'symptom', in psychoanalysis at least, is usually something which one would expect, as a result of repression, to find displaced and disguised, hiding under another name...

'Loving in a World of Desire'

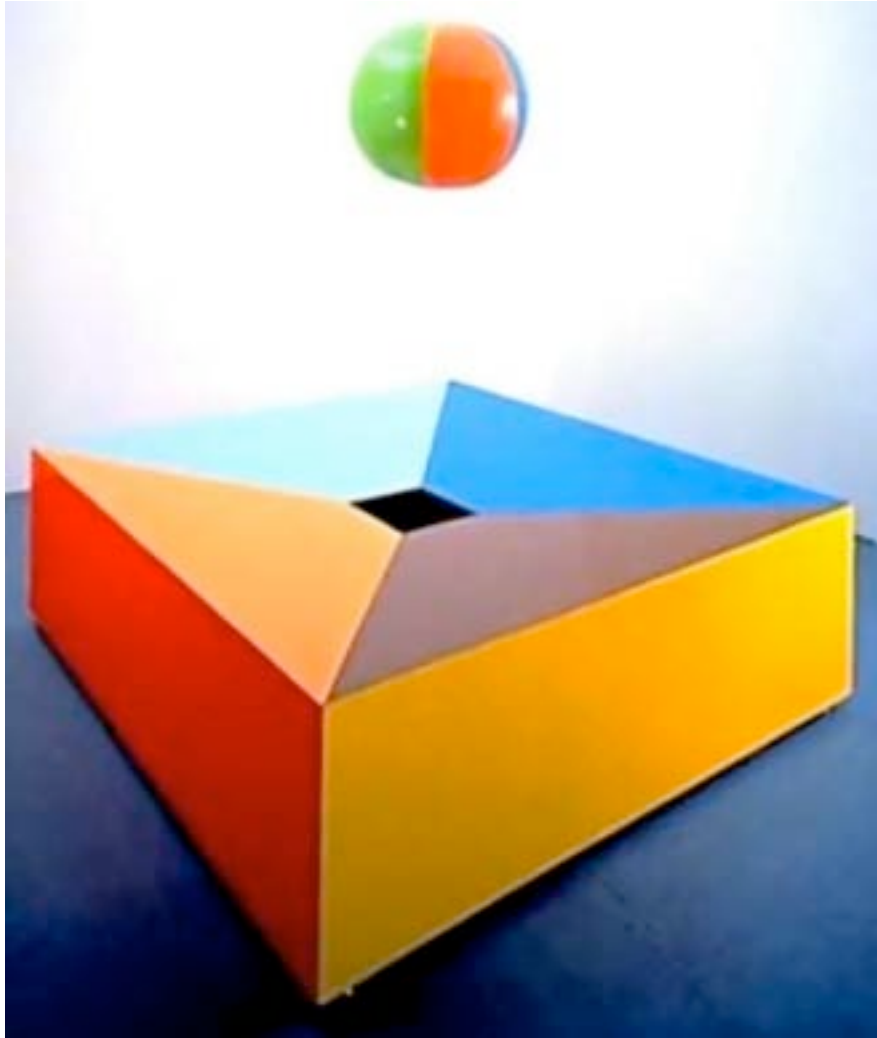


Figure 2: Damien Hirst, Loving in a World of Desire (1995), MDF, steel, air blower, beach ball (78x78x23 in)

The use of the word 'sublime' by Hirst that I shall look at is found in a somewhat unlikely place, in one of Hirst's preparatory drawings for a rather light, jolly, jokey work, whose concerns might seem far from those of the sublime, with all its overtones of the horrible, the terrible, the melancholy, the

heroic and the profound. The sculpture in question is Loving in a World of Desire (1995), in which a brightly-coloured beach ball is suspended over an equally colourful rectangular plinth by a jet of air.

One of the striking aspects of Hirst's work is his use of titles, which, abandoning modern art's traditional appellation of a work merely as "Untitled", are usually lengthy, rhetorically elaborate, often highly charged and full of complex allusion. As part of his 'drawing' process, Hirst frequently jots down possible titles for the works, either next to his designs themselves, or on separate sheets, adjusting them and rearranging the order of words, trying out permutations and combinations, variations on a theme. The attention Hirst has obviously given to them – not to mention their sheer elaborateness – seems to elevate them to a different status from that usually given to a 'title': one reviewer has even gone as far as to describe the titles as a modern form of 'haiku' poetry.¹⁰ Indeed, in interview, Hirst has referred to them less as mere labels and more as 'equivalents' to the sculptures: "the title explains an idea in the same way a piece does".¹¹ Indeed, since Hirst notes that sometimes the titles come before the pieces, they would seem an important part of the thought or production process.

In the drawing in question, Hirst is playing with a possible title, albeit one he finally rejects. Above and to the left of the sketch of the sculpture stand four words, arranged in a kind of quadrilateral: "impossible", "desires", "designs"

¹⁰ Jerry Saltz, "More Life: The Work of Damien Hirst," Art in America June 1995: 84.

¹¹ Hirst and Burn, On the Way to Work 19.

and (you've guessed it!) "sublime". This quadrilateral of words, as a sketch of a linguistic 'equivalent' to the 'idea' of the sculpture, attempts to set up a the co-ordinates within which it might be 'plotted'.

On its own, this quadrilateral is rather enigmatic; there is little to anchor these terms, and so to start to make sense of it – and in particular to locate the notion of the sublime within it – a 'detour' through the work itself is necessary.

However, to start to pick out its thematic concerns, we need to place Loving... in its turn within Hirst's highly self-referential body of work. This sculpture is in fact a reworking of Hirst's 1991 work, I Want to Spend the Rest of My Life, Everywhere, with Everyone, One to One, Always, Forever, Now, in which a ping pong ball takes the place of the beach ball and instead of the bright plinth, containing the hidden air jet, a 'T-shape' made of vertically balanced sheets of glass, their edges still raw and sharp from the industrial process of manufacture, supports a rubber tube connected to a compressed air cylinder secreted behind the gallery wall. Whilst Loving... speaks the brash language of pop art (or of the packaging and advertising from which pop drew vocabulary) I Want to Spend... draws from the more austere sculptural traditions of minimalism and conceptualism.

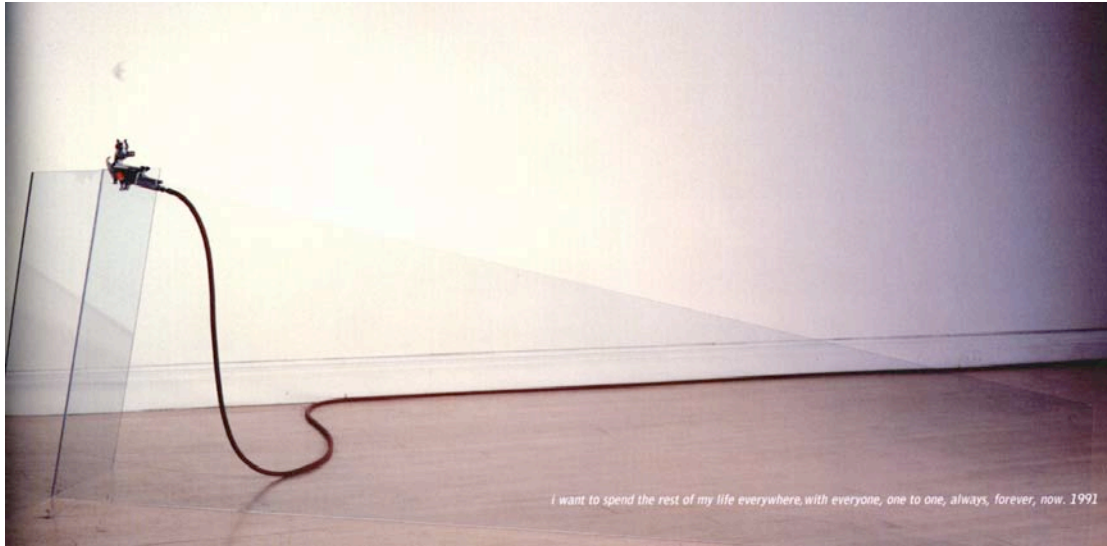


Figure 3: *I Want to Spend the rest of My Life Everywhere, with Everyone, One to One, Always, Forever Now* (1991). Glass, rubber tubing, compressed air jet, metal clamp, ping-pong ball

In spite of their different uses of materials, the central metaphor of both pieces remains the same: the ball bobs on a jet of air, seemingly at once miraculously defying gravity, but also being thrown about helplessly by the tiniest variations in the inherently chaotic system of the circulation of gas particles, threatening at any moment to unseat it from its temporary equilibrium and send it bouncing across the gallery floor. Metaphorically the ball – we recognise this all too easily – stands for us, for the fragility and transience of human life, for the seeming nothingness that separates life from death, and for our own helplessness as we are blown by the winds of chance.

However, it is a metaphor offered up in both sculptures only ‘under erasure’, taken back in the moment it is given to us.¹² We seem invited to take it at the

¹² Hirst has said of his work, exemplifying the double bind in which such an irony places him, “I try to say something and deny it at the same time.” Cited in Annushka Shani, “On Wishing, Thinking, and Joking on Paper: Damien Hirst’s Drawings,” Qd

most half-seriously. It is as comic or bathetic as it is tragic or pathetic: as ridiculous as it is sublime.

It is in the difference of the staging of the ironic stance towards the metaphor that the two works differ. In the earlier of the two pieces, this metaphor, overstrained and ironically set in play as it is, attains a poignancy that seems lacking in its 'pop' reworking, and does this through our awareness of the physical lightness of the ball, an insubstantiality to which we can all attest in our memory and experience of this everyday item¹³. The ball, as is evidenced by its very suspension is almost nothing, full itself of mere air. If the metaphors of the sculpture suggest that we also are next-to-nothing, it is a sense of lightness and insubstantiality which is there to be (mis-)recognised corporeally in the physical relation between our body and the ball in the space of the gallery.

The materials – the ping-pong ball, the shiny metal nozzle, the rubber tubing, the sheets of glass – all seem to bring with them resonances from the everyday world, and the emotional charges of memory and recognition.¹⁴ The

Zibelke Do Groba: Izbrane Risbe: Damiana Hirsta / from the Cradle to the Grave: Selected Drawings: Damien Hirst, eds. Damien Hirst and Jason Beard (Ljubljana: International Centre of Graphic Arts, 2003). Shani does not give a source for this statement.

¹³ I am sure that there are many others besides myself who during childhood played for hours fascinated by the physical qualities of a ping-pong ball: its size, its lightness, its brittle fragility, its subjection to a gust of wind, its manic bounciness...

¹⁴ Bruce Nauman would seem perhaps to be, directly or indirectly (though Hirst's admiration for Nauman is no secret), the clearest influence for Hirst's use of materials here. In Nauman's work, familiar materials take are used in a seemingly unfussy way with an uncanny precision, giving the impression merely of being what they are, of having been left to speak for themselves, which is only belied by the fact that they

central image of the sculpture, for example, is drawn from primary-school demonstrations of the laws of physics, where a Hoover is put in reverse to cause just this (seemingly magical) suspension of a ping pong ball in mid-air. On the one hand, in spite of its nostalgic emotional charge, this reference to childhood gives the work a deliberately bathetic effect, reducing the exploration of the human condition, the 'profundities' of existential philosophy, and art itself, to the abject status of a banal childhood educational toy. On the other, however, this very withdrawal of the metaphor as absurd seems, in a kind of reflexive turn, to offer an image of the very helplessness and insubstantiality that the sculpture already presents. If the ball represents us as lightweight, abject and absurd, the staging of our knowledge of the 'human condition' in such an abject, lightweight and absurd metaphor only underlines this fact.¹⁵

In Loving in a World of Desire, however, the irony and the reflexivity of the work become radicalised; the work becomes a representation of itself, an

are so carefully staged. Hirst's rubber tube, along with its jet of air, coiled theatrically in the gallery space, also echoes the blowtorches attached to many of Janis Kounellis's sculptures.

¹⁵ This sculpture does exhibit what I like about some of Hirst's early work: that it really does – for me at least – seem to offer a highly charged image of the isolation and containment, not perhaps of 'the human condition' but rather of modern technological, bureaucratic capitalist societies, with their intrusion into the life, mind, desires and body of its citizens at every level, and their mystification of social relations in the alienating fetish of the commodity... In a sense, Hirst's unease with modernity can be read as oddly sympathetic with a (somewhat crass version of) Marxism. The charge could be levelled at Hirst that the expression of this in these early sculptures is perhaps as much to do with a kind of lingering adolescent anxiety as anything else. In which case, I find myself asking whether Hirst finally just 'grew out' of his best ideas when he got married, had kids, became wealthy, and moved to the country, assuaging the sexual, emotional and financial worries that had beset him earlier, along with the harshness and instability of his working-class, single-parent, Northern-English childhood, and which served as the motor of his creative work...

image of an image which has already become iconic 'Hirst'. As it becomes a parody of itself, of the impossibility of its own production of meaning, the abyss of meta-commentary on its own conditions opens up. The irony which is so ubiquitous throughout Hirst's oeuvre starts to look – to my eyes, at least, though I am still somewhat suspicious as to quite what might underlie my own value judgement – more like a paralysing affliction than an artistic strategy. Materials seeped in associations from their use in the world outside art are replaced with the blank but jolly surfaces of popular culture, denying the kind of sensuous and affective corporeal recognition that the earlier version of the sculpture offers us. We can no longer recognise in the bobbing ball the same kind of lightness and insubstantiality. The sculpture no longer seems to attempt to address a 'human' or a 'capitalist' condition, or any such thing, but rather seems to turn back onto a representation of its own condition as representation.

Its refusal of the sensuous pleasures of I Want to Spend... – at just the moment it resurrects itself as spectacle – could arguably be 'read', as allegorising contemporary media culture and its self-referential hyperreality, and the way that this media culture – appropriately, rather like a shark – swallowed Hirst himself and his work whole.¹⁶ But to let oneself be caught in this circularity as Hirst seems to be in the self-referentiality of this image,

¹⁶ This is, after all, the year Damien Hirst won the Turner Prize, and his own status as iconic media figure – as 'Damien Hirst' rather than Damien Hirst – became cemented once and for all. From this point on, all of Hirst's work could only appear as a kind of media image of itself.

asserting as it does the impossibility of representation by failing to represent, can only be a blind alley.

However, this is not the place for a further examination of 'Hirstean Irony', and of exactly what kind of a relationship to 'spectacularised', 'capitalist', 'media' culture it might entail.¹⁷ I should, though, point out that in addressing the question of Hirst's irony we have not moved so far from some question of the 'sublime' as it may have seemed. There is a pole being set up in these works between on the one hand the more 'sublime' and serious questions of "life and death and all that stuff" (as Hirst so notoriously put it) – questions of 'great' and 'serious' truths, high ideas, noble thoughts¹⁸ – and on the other hand the meagre, the ridiculous and the everyday.

¹⁷ For an extended polemic against the endemic irony in the work of the 'young British artists' see Julian Stallabrass, High Art Lite : British Art in the 1990s (London: Verso, 1999). For Stallabrass, the irony which overcomes this body of work leaves it entirely unable to come to any position of oppositionality to capitalism. Although I would embrace Stallabrass's admirable political commitment, and although art which can respond critically to the world, as a form of thought which offers the chance of an opposition to an unjust order would seem to me undeniably 'a good thing', I'm not so sure that *all* art need be such a statement (art is not philosophy or politics, after all), and I'm not so sure that there is no value whatsoever in art which does not take up such a commitment. Hirst's work at its best, at the very least, gives us striking, sensuous images of (post)modern life and its contradictions, even if these contradictions are only 'staged', rather than worked through to a resolution. Furthermore, there are different kinds of irony with different kinds of effectiveness, and Stallabrass would have to go further into an analysis of just what kind of irony is involved in the work of the 'yBas', and what kind of agency it might involve. I shall gesture towards this question of the different forms of irony later in this essay, though again, I cannot deal with the issue fully, both due to the constraints of my current topic and since I am not fully expert in this field,

¹⁸ This idea of the sublime as a 'great' or 'lofty' thought in opposition to the base concerns of the worldly permeates the eighteenth-century literature. John Dennis defines the sublime as "nothing else but a great thought, or great thoughts moving the soul from its ordinary situation by the enthusiasm which naturally attends them." John Dennis, The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry (London: 1704) 78. Usher describes the soul under its influence as "rapt out of the sight and consideration of this diminutive world." James Usher, Clio: Or, a Discourse on Taste (Bristol: Thoemes

It could further be argued (though this argument can only be taken so far) that something rather like the question of the ‘unpresentability’ of the sublime is also being raised. Kant argues that what is involved in the sublime is a “negative presentation” (“negative Darstellung”)¹⁹. In such a negative presentation the mind is led to an intuition of the ‘supersensuous’ (“übersinnliche”) realm of Ideas – a realm beyond our empirical experience, but in which our true ‘vocation’ (“Bestimmung”) lies. The sensory presentation which evokes this realm of the absolute only does so through our experience of its very failure and inadequacy (“Unangemessenheit”) as a representation of this realm (KdU, §27)..

In fact, the problem of irony itself is not so distant from the problem of the sublime. Put rather crudely, irony involves saying one thing, and meaning another; it involves the gulf between the ostensible content of a representation and what it actually represents. In the aftermath of the Kantian sublime, “Romantic Irony” was taken up by such thinkers as Friedrich Schlegel as a

Ltd., 1998) 103. Reynolds, in his address of December 10, 1771 to the Royal Academy of Art, asserts that “the most sublime ideas and the lowest sensuality” cannot exist in the same mind. Joshua Reynolds, Discourses, ed. Pat Rogers, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin, 1992).

¹⁹ “though the imagination, no doubt, finds nothing beyond the sensible world to which it can lay hold, still this thrusting aside of the sensible barriers gives it a feeling of being unbounded; and that removal is thus a presentation of the infinite. As such it can never be anything more than a negative presentation” Kant’s example of such a ‘negative presentation’ is the Hebraic injunction against graven images, which suggests that God can only be represented in the negative terms of the impossibility of his adequate representation through the means of the senses. See §29 of Immanuel Kant, Kritik der Urteilskraft, [1790], Project Gutenberg-DE, Available: <<http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/kant/kuk/kuk.htm>>, October 2003. An online English translation is also available: Kant and (trans.). further references will be given in the text marked by “KdU” and followed by the section number.

strategy for registering (if not eliminating) the gulf between the visibility of the 'phenomenal' knowledge which we have access to and the invisibility of the Nachtseite (or 'night-side') of our experience, the Kantian Ding-an-sich ('thing in itself') to which our own fragmentary and incomplete existence can only point. Such an irony, registering a radical and infinitised doubt about the conditions of its 'knowledge', like the Kantian sublime, takes precisely the form of a 'negative presentation,' a presentation of its own inadequacy as a representation.²⁰

But I'm not bringing up this argument to add to Hirst the cultural cachet or philosophical respectability of association with Kant. I don't want to suggest that through the use of the device of a 'negative presentation', Hirst's work actually achieves some kind of "sublime" transcendence. In any case, I, for one, am rather less sure than Kant as to whether such a supersensible and transcendent realm of 'Ideas' exists; whether any 'ideas' that we draw from a realm beyond the empirical might point to Reason as our 'vocation'; and whether access to such a realm might be given through a 'negative presentation'. At any rate, the access offered to us to such a realm by these sculptures by Hirst is tenuous as best – and, it would seem, more tenuous in

²⁰ Friedrich Schlegel's and the Jena circle's writings on irony are centrally found in the literary fragments from the short-lived Athenaeum and Lyceum journals that the Schlegel brothers ran. One such sample from Friedrich Schlegel: "[Irony] contains and arouses a sense of the indissoluble antagonism between the absolute and the relative, between the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication" Carl Wilhelm Friedrich von Schlegel, "Selected Aphorisms from the Lyceum," trans. Ernst Behler and Roman Struc, Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms [Gespräch Über Die Poesie] (University Park, Pa. and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1968) 108. The question of Irony has more recently been taken up in Paul de Man, "Semiology and Rhetoric," Allegories of Reading (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

Loving than in I Want to Spend. Similarly, Hirst's altogether more crude and nihilistic use of irony would seem to owe more to his own historical moment of radical 'postmodern' doubt and relativism than to the Jena Romantics. It would seem to measure up as rather inadequate against the complexity and subtlety of Schlegel's conception and literary use of it in his enigmatic philosophical and novelistic fragments.

What Hirst's negative presentation – as a kind of repeat of the sublime (first as tragedy, then as farce?) – might mark, is not an actual instance of the breakthrough of some form of sublime transcendence into the empirical world, but a continued (or resurrected?) functioning of the idea of the sublime in contemporary culture not as fact, but as desire.²¹

But let's not fall into the trap of nostalgia. I am not suggesting that once there was a culture which offered a true sublimity which is now lost, leaving us only with an intense longing.²² The point that I would like to make instead is that the 'sublime' has always been a largely ideal rather than actual category of experience. Eighteenth century treatises on the topic are marked by the frequency of long lists that ostensibly enumerate the objects that do or will produce the effect of the sublime in the viewer, and by the descriptive or

²¹ And the term 'desire' is key in thinking about this cluster of Hirst's work. In the titles of these two works we have 'wanting' and 'loving' (in a word of 'desire'); in the drawing we started with what is at stake is also, precisely, in its own words, 'impossible desires, sublime designs'...

²² Perhaps Hirst's work might itself be accused of embodying something like this nostalgic projection of the sublime into the past: this position is quite implicit in the title of Hirst's a recent show at the White Cube Gallery, "Romance in the Age of Uncertainty."

analytical mode that these texts take up in order to tell us what the experience of these objects is like. However, the texts themselves often show signs that they do not serve merely as descriptions of 'actual' experience, but that the experience described is an ideal, fantasised one. To take just one example, Kant develops his famous account (KdU, §26) with regard to key examples – the sight of the pyramids in Egypt, and St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome – which, since he hardly ventured out of the provincial town in which he was born, he can never have experienced. Furthermore, it can be argued that this ideality evidenced in accounts of the sublime is a symptom of the fact that, rather than being merely neutral descriptions, they have in addition an important prescriptive value. They do not just tell you how the sublime feels and what might cause such a feeling, they tell us what we should feel (if we are to count ourselves as people of taste) when confronted with sublimity, and what objects should (and shouldn't) evoke this response. The very metaphor of height inherent in the word 'sublime' itself marks it out as involving a value judgement.²³

In particular when we look at the discourse on the sublime from the angle of its cultural history, rather than regarding it as a purely philosophical concept, it appears not as a series of propositions about how the world is, but as having an important performative dimension. These texts and their definitions of what was and wasn't sublime served to inculcate sensibilities and tastes, to bolster

²³ Perhaps the very frequency of disappointment and anticlimax in the face of what is marked as sublime, and of feelings of one's own inadequacy at the failure to feel its elevating effects, should alert us to this.

rituals and practices of making and viewing, to canonise particular authors and artists, and privilege various themes, images and affects. The sublime is experienced as something at once like an injunction and a desire : to produce the sublime (to 'design' for it), to recognise the sublime, to feel its affects and enjoy them.

'Impossible Desires, Sublime Designs'

I have been led, then, if perhaps rather slowly, back into Hirst's matrix of four terms, 'impossible, 'desires', 'designs' and 'sublime', scrawled at the top of a preparatory study (a 'design'?) for a decidedly un-sublime sculpture. This route has involved a certain negotiation of an 'impossibility' which is embedded in Hirst's descent into postmodern irony, and led us to note that the 'sublime' in Hirst is experienced as a 'desire', as perhaps it has always been.

What I haven't addressed – something which must stand at the heart of the matter – is just what this desire which we might name the sublime is a desire for, beyond noting that it must be something vaguely to do with 'transcendence'. It is this question to which I shall finally – if all too briefly – turn.

In Hirst's drawings, titles rejected for one work find themselves reappearing in other drawings, and become accepted as titles for other works. This slippage

of titles from work to work can be explained in that, as Hirst admits, “the ideas are always about something similar”.²⁴ Thus Hirst’s matrix of the four terms links into a thematic network which runs through his entire body of work, following associative chains of condensation and displacement²⁵ which can start to make the words seem like not just an equivalent for this particular sculpture but a title for his whole oeuvre.

In this network, we find again and again several linked ‘impossible desires’. The form of wish for ‘transcendence’ that these ‘impossible desires’ might express (although perhaps we might still want to name it some kind of desire for the ‘sublime’) is obviously a very different transcendence from the one that Kant proposes (as we have already seen). What’s very notable is that Hirst repeatedly articulates these impossible or transcendently sublime desires in the form of the ‘terrible sublime’, as if his works are a peculiar, ironic, unseasonal flowering of the Gothic imagination. Thus in terms of a history of the ‘Hirstean sublime’, the Kantian questions of transcendental idealism and critical philosophy – intellectually profound, and central to the history of the discipline of aesthetics as they may otherwise be – start to look somewhat like a secondary elaboration on what is a more primary experience. In spite of Kant’s complaints (KdU, §29) about the limitations of Burke’s psychologism, the Hirstean sublime, at least, would seem much more a matter for empirical psychology, than of transcendental critique. What would seem to be at the

²⁴ Hirst and Burn, On the Way to Work 19.

²⁵ We have already seen examples of such intertextual condensation/displacement in the relation between Loving.. and I Want to Spend....

heart of the matter is the psychology of the peculiar paradox which was commented on repeatedly during the eighteenth century as a paradox of the feeling of the sublime: that it is a self-contradictory feeling, at once of pleasure and pain, of horror and joy, or of terror and wonder.

So what form does the pleasure/pain of the sublime take in the Hirstean network? And in what sense might this be a case of 'impossible desire'? The final title that Hirst chose for the floating beech ball, 'Loving in a World of Desire', marks the impossible desire in question as one of 'love'.²⁶ In Loving..., the ball hovers alone and monadic, isolated. Emphasising this theme of isolation, another reworking of I Want to Spend... was entitled Alone and yet Together and in Love (1992), which differed only from I Want... in that it had two ping pong balls, each on its own jet of air, bobbing close together, but separately.²⁷ It's an image which might remind one of the dream in Georg Sluizer's Spoorloos (1988), where the two lovers are a pair of eggs floating forever through a sea of blackness, close together and yet absolutely apart; a

²⁶ A ready association is Lacan's various discussions of 'desire', in opposition to mere need, as being essentially insatiable, having as its aim not the relief of an instinctual urge, but the need, stemming from an essential lack in the subject, for unconditional recognition by an other which might fill this gap. The catch, of course, being that all others are equally lacking, and are thus in no better position to fill the lack in being which the subject feels... Hence, suggests Lacan, "there is no sexual relation".

²⁷ An unbearably long list of examples could be produced here. Perhaps the most literal image of isolation is the sculpture Some Comfort Gained from the Acceptance of the Inherent Lies in Everything (1996) in which two cows, each sliced into a series of thin cross sections, each cross section being contained in its own vitrine, are arranged in a row, alternating between the two cows, so the two cows occupy the same space in the gallery whilst remaining entirely separate. This highlights the function that the vitrines play in this series in the isolating their contents, sealing them off from the outside world.

dream that becomes a nightmare reality when they are kidnapped, drugged and buried alive in two adjacent coffins.

The title “I Want to Spend the Rest of My Life Everywhere, with Everyone, One to One, Always, Forever, Now” itself speaks of the same ‘impossible desire’, only in a sense radicalised, demanding a transcendence of the very orders of time and space and of the individual’s physical incorporation. The demand for love isn’t here a demand for a single other’s love, but rather for the universal love which Freud dubbed “oceanic”, drawing the term from that key image of the sublime, the immensity and boundlessness of the sea.²⁸

In Hirst’s title we are entering the territory of ‘design’, as a sort of partial synonym for ‘art’. This transcendence of time and place, and the ‘one-to-one’ confrontation, are aimed at in the rituals of the modern art gallery, its white cube lifted out of historical and geographical context, the work displayed for the disinterested, subjectivised gaze of an ideal, lone spectator, in his or her subjective and autonomous construction of meaning from the encounter. In becoming an artist and displaying this work, having it collected for posterity, Hirst is spending forever, one-to-one, with everybody, everywhere, now. Such an impossible universal ‘one-to-one’ communication is also what is allowed by

²⁸ Sigmund Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents, trans. David McLintock, The New Penguin Freud (London: Penguin, 2002) 3. Freud in fact is immediately drawing the term from his correspondence with Romain Rolland, but Rolland himself seems to draw the term from a late Romantic tradition, looking to the far East, very much in the vein of Schopenhauer. For more on the relation between Freud’s notion of the oceanic and Schopenhauer’s philosophy, see Steven Z. Levine, "Seascapes of the Sublime: Vernet, Monet and the Sublime," New Literary History 16.2 (1985).

the more obviously 'designed' realm of 'mass culture' in the 'age of mechanical reproducibility'. Thus it is unsurprising that when in 1997 Hirst produced a lavishly over-designed book, a compendium of his work and sayings to date, he decided to recycle just this title for it.²⁹ Such a desire, incidentally, might also lie somewhere near the heart of the obsession with celebrity which in our current society is not exclusive to Hirst...

But this desire for the 'oceanic sublime' is a peculiar and contradictory one. If we trace the question of this particular impossibility in Hirst's work itself, we might start to note its relation to another famous 'impossibility' in his titles: "The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living," the title of the 'shark' sculpture. The pleasure of the encounter with this dead shark, hanging ominously in its tank of formaldehyde, seems to stem from twin fantasies: in one, the shark appears still alive, it is a delicious fantasy of being eaten alive; in the other, the shark is dead, and we find ourselves identifying its lifeless flesh with our own: in both there is a kind of horrible - if highly sensual - pleasure in the idea of our own death.

The relation between death and 'transcendence' or 'escape' is cemented in the series of vitrine pieces that Hirst made throughout the early and mid 1990s. The most famous of these is The Acquired Inability to Escape (1992), in which an office table and chair are encased in a vitrine, with a packet of

²⁹ Damien Hirst and Gordon Burn, I Want to Spend the Rest of My Life Everywhere, with Everyone, One to One, Always, Forever, Now (London: Booth-Clibborn Editions, 1997).

cigarettes and an ashtray on the table. It seems a little unclear whether the metaphor is simply that a lethal addiction like cigarette-smoking is just like the hard graft of labour, like our daily habits and routines (weighing down on us with the force of social and economic imperatives; the violent force of 'rational' symbolic order materialising in the form of the clinical prison of the glass case), or whether the cigarettes in fact appear as an escape in the form of death itself, appearing in the work as perhaps the only escape from this death-in-life of alienated labour. Similarly in She Wanted to Find the Most Perfect Form of Flying (1992), metaphors of escape are conflated with those of death, in the spattered blood which coats the interior of one half of the vitrine.



Figure 4: Installation view of *The Acquired Inability to Escape* (1992), Museo Archeologico, Naples, 2005

It's probably clear by now that I have been edging towards two of Freud's famous essays as a way of understanding the Hirstean sublime: "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920) and "Civilisation and Its Discontents" (1930). These are the essays in which he articulates, respectively, his notions of the 'death drive' and the 'oceanic'. I take these late works by Freud, along with his examination of the themes of Gothic literature in "The Uncanny" not so much as a tool of metacommentary on the discourse on the sublime, but as one of its greatest articulations. It is through Freud's account of a fundamentally split psyche, the assertion that the ego is not the master of its own house³⁰ that there can be offered an answer to the riddle of the seeming contradiction of 'pleasing horror' which eighteenth-century thought seemed so unable or unwilling to adequately resolve.³¹

Freud's oceanic feeling, an ecstatic desire to merge with the cosmos, poses the psyche with just such a contradiction. It harks back to an early stage of infancy, before the realisation of the difference between inside and outside, self and other, in which there is a primal form of consciousness of selfhood which is complete and contains all phenomena. It is only with the institution of

³⁰ Although it must be noted that intimations of this realisation also scatter the history of discussions of the sublime, and Freud is clearly himself developing the notion from the concern in German Romantic thought with a fundamentally unknowable source of our thought...

³¹ Except by suggesting, rather unconvincingly, that *first* we feel horror and *then* we feel pleasure from its relief. Although this solution, which was dominant in eighteenth-century notions of the sublime, if not universally accepted, seems rather unconvincing to the modern eye, its power might be accounted for once again in terms of its performative function: it was such idea that allowed the eighteenth-century to make the feeling of the sublime into an edifying experience, to add an ethics to it, and to institute particular practices, behaviours and forms of subjectivity as 'appropriate' to it; such an argument might be seen as involving the regulation of the experience of the sublime, putting it to socially 'beneficial' uses.

these differences (of self/other, inside/outside, etc.), the constitution of the world in terms of a subject and its objects, that an ego develops to defend us against the vicissitudes of an externality we cannot control. However Freud suggests that there remains a nostalgia for this seemingly lost – but in fact impossible – world, a state of ‘primary narcissism’ with its illusion of wholeness and absolute satiety. This nostalgia, however offers a rather ambivalent experience. On the one hand, it is deeply desired, as a release from the violence of the ego, which binds the energies of some of the drives into its own sublimatory structures, and must repress other desires in order to enforce its ‘reality principle’. On the other hand, this desire is experienced by the ego as a threat to its very existence, a violent unbinding of the integrity of the energies of the psyche, a form of death.³² The ‘oceanic’ feeling returns then, accompanied by a kind of terror, in the images of the sublime.

This oceanic wish or feeling may also be understood as that described even in the oldest theories of the sublime, Longinus famously defining the ‘sublime’ (hupsous) in literature in terms of its power to place a reader in a state of ‘ekstasis’: which the eighteenth century translated as ‘transport’.³³ ‘Ekstasis’ -

³² Freud, Civilization 3-11.

³³ “The effect of elevated language upon an audience is not persuasion but transport [...] [I]mposing speech, with the spell it throws over us, prevails over that which aims at persuasion and gratification. Our persuasions we can usually control, but the influences of the sublime bring power and irresistible might to bear, and reign supreme on every hearer. [...] Sublimity, flashing forth at the right moment scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt[...].” Longinus, Longinus on the Sublime: The Greek Text Edited after the Paris Manuscript, trans. W. Rhys Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1899) 43. A fascinating account of the ways that subject positions are undermined in Longinus’s sublime, as its textual power unseats audience and orator, critic and quotation, so each of these, in taking up a subject

the root of the modern English term 'ecstasy' - involves being outside oneself, being transported so that one is 'beside oneself'. This ecstasy, as a form of self loss, is also the terrifying bliss of the oceanic as death wish. The peculiarly ambiguous identification of oceanic narcissism – at once a loss of self and an identification with a 'larger' self – may also explain the disagreements amongst Romantic authors as to whether the sublime was, as with Wordsworth a sort of egotistical expansion where the self comes to encompass the universe, or whether, as with Keats, it is a form of the annihilation of the self in the wider stream of being.³⁴

"Beyond the Pleasure Principle"³⁵ can in many ways be read as a reworking of the problems of the oceanic, but now in terms of Freud's proposal that there is in fact a 'death drive'³⁶. This drive, a kind of entropic force, is, like the oceanic wish, a compulsion to return to a previous state – one which, since life has ultimately evolved from the inorganic, is a drive to return to this state of non-

position is very much 'beside themselves' is found in Suzanne Guerlac, "Longinus and the Subject of the Sublime," New Literary History 16.2 (1985).

³⁴ John Keats "Letter to Richard Woodhouse, 27 Oct. 1818," Selected Letters: John Keats (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 147-8. This peculiar figure of a tension between self loss and expansion is remarkably consistent throughout the literature on the sublime, even if we find it interpreted in quite different ways. For Burke and many early eighteenth century writers, it is ultimately a vision of God which is the ultimate unity at stake in the sublime, whilst with Kant, for example, the empirical self with its limited interests and desires gives itself up to recognise its vocation in the merger with universal and impersonal moral Law of Reason.

³⁵ Sigmund Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings, trans. John Reddick, New Penguin Freud, ed. Adam Phillips (London: Penguin, 2003). Freud wrote this whilst reading Schopenhauer, whose theory of the sublime itself involves an 'oceanic' relinquishing of the will of the ego/self, a merging with the universe, and forms a sort of 'death drive'.

³⁶ Freud's death drive ('Todestrieb') is often translated as a death instinct; but 'Trieb' in German is a somewhat different term than 'Instinkt', which Freud reserves for something much more unambiguously biological. 'Drive', as others have suggested, would seem a better translation of 'Trieb', implying a form of desire more like a motive force rather than something with a definite end.

life³⁷. Its destructive force must be projected outwards or involve the destruction of the self, but this projection will always remain secondary. The essay is one of Freud's most contradictory and rich, and Freud seems to prevaricate as to the exact relationship between the death drive and the pleasure principle³⁸. Now is not the time or place to go into the subtleties of its argument, nor make a full evaluation of it, but what seems of use at this moment is that Freud seems at various points to posit that this death drive is a more 'primary' form of desire than the instinct or drive he wished to oppose to it, the 'life instinct', Eros.

His argument here seems to resurrect an earlier argument from his "Project Towards a Scientific Psychology", which attempts to build a 'metapsychological' model of the mind in terms of a system of charged 'neurones' which seek some form of discharge, and in terms of the circulation of energy around this system. The charges come from the biological pressures of the body, as they achieve representation in the mind, and Freud posits two forms which such a discharge might take. First, there is the possibility of an absolute discharge, a tendency of the system to absolute zero excitation, which would seem to involve a discharge of the energies in bodily

³⁷ Claiming this, Freud is leaving the realm of psychology behind and making the two drives into the metaphysical principles of a dualist cosmology. Freud here is at his most problematic and provocative. It's worth noting, however, that this argument foreshadows attempts by both Bataille (in his theories of 'general economy') and Lyotard (in his book The Inhuman) to decentre human agency in images of cosmic process.

³⁸ For a good discussion of the essay, see Leo Bersani who argues that the reason for this prevarication is that Freud the rationalist cannot accept the subversive implications of his own argument. Leo Bersani, The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art (New York and Guildford: Columbia University Press, 1986).

satisfaction. Such an entropic, unbinding force, with its goal the zero-excitation of inanimate matter, would seem to be what is at stake in the 'death drive', and in the desire to 'return' to an imagined state of absolute satisfaction and oceanic de-differentiation. The other route for the psyche is a more relative form of discharge, in which energy passes from neurone to neurone, bound into a complicated system of circulation, a system which can store energies and transfer their release from one site to the other. Its aim is not an absolute discharge of tension, but only its maintenance at a manageable and relatively constant level.³⁹ This is the function of the ego, of the sublimation of desire, and of 'Eros'. For Freud, then, Eros is finally only a 'detour' for the workings of the death drive.⁴⁰

Since the sublime is to be associated with the more fundamental and radical discharge of energies, it would tally with the insistence by eighteenth-century authors on the particularly intense, compelling nature of the feeling of the

³⁹ The opposition of the two principles, which end up in tension with each other leads Lacan to discuss the death instinct as fundamentally aimed at the death of the ego. Since, for Lacan, this ego is formed through an identification with an ideal image, it expresses itself in particular through images of the ideal body violently reduced to fragments. Hirst's work itself is packed with this kind of imagery, a central formal device being the slicing-in-half of an animal or object. See in particular Lacan's "Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis," in Écrits: A Selection, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 2001). There is also a discussion of this in Richard Boothby, Death and Desire: Psychoanalytic Theory in Lacan's Return to Freud (New York & London: Routledge, 1991): see esp. 38-40. Then opposition between Lacan's two terms jouissance (which like the sublime involves a pleasure-pain) and plaisir (a more measured, unproblematic and reasonable form of pleasure) perhaps captures something of the difference between the two orders of desire, of Thanatos and Eros respectively.

⁴⁰ A very subtle look at the eternal deferral at stake in the relation between the death and life drives is to be found in Jacques Derrida, "To Speculate: On 'Freud'," trans. Alan Bass, The Post Card: From Socrates and Freud and Beyond (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1987).

sublime⁴¹. It would bring together the question of such an intense affectuality with that of the undoing of the ego (ekstasis). It would also tally with Hirst's frequent discussion of the goal of art as being something which must above all deliver affect: as he puts it, "with all good art I just want to feel something about my existence or something. [...] Even if it's just laughing hysterically, I want to feel something. I just want to feel." ⁴²

Brilliant and thought-provoking, subtle and perceptive though Freud's analysis is we should not leap too quickly to place it as our master-theory. His attempts to provide such a model on the basis of psychic energies are of course to some extent questionable. Science since Freud seems not to have shown any physical mechanism that might account in any materialistic way for these 'quanta' of energy he discusses. The existence of the death drive is, furthermore, pure metaphysical speculation. But in terms of the experience of the sublime it would have to have some kind of descriptive force, at the very least. As an account of sublime experience which is neither Idealist or religious, in an age which eschews both, it will continue to exercise some influence. Its place in our account, rather than that of metatheory, is to within the context of a larger developing historical narrative of theory, which includes that of the sublime. With the popularisation of notions such as that of the

⁴¹ "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible [...] is a source of the sublime, that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is feeling." Burke, Enquiry Part I, Sect vii, 86.

⁴² Hirst and Burn, On the Way to Work 19. Numerous other examples could be given. Hirst also talks about "the desire of the painter... You know, Turner strapped to the fucking mast." (69)

Oedipus complex, the unconscious, the repressed sexuality inherent in all human thought and behaviour, the Freudian slip (and many other concepts) Freudianism has become as much a part of the mythology through which art and culture is produced as the notion of the sublime once was.

Freud's account itself, like Hirst's work, belongs rooted in a tradition of the sublime, a tradition which extends into the basis of the way that we still think about and respond to art today. Thus if Freud's account, which links desire for transcendence of self with the most base repressed urges that would undo this self, starts to make sense of the simultaneous 'baseness' and 'sublimity' of the desires expressed in Hirst's sculptures (the longing for escape often juxtaposed with crude sexual or sadistic innuendo), this insight must be bracketed as having become general to our culture, and also thus serves as part of the more diffuse discourse which provides the assumptions about human nature on which Hirst's work rests. Thus Freud's insight as to the link between strong affect, 'transcendence' of self and base desires it is also fore-echoed in Diderot over a century before Freud – the insight that is replayed in Hirst – is fore-echoed in for example Diderot, over a century before Freud, and within the terms of a discussion of the sublime.

Diderot writes (and how Hirstean is he here?):

Les grands effets naissent partout des idées voluptueuses entrelacées avec les idées terribles; par exemple de belles femmes à demi-nues qui nous présentent un breuvage délicieux dans les cranes sanglants de nos

ennemis. Voilà le modèle de toutes les choses sublimes. C'est alors que l'âme s'ouvre au plaisir et frissonne d'horreur.⁴³

Diderot has also, more generally argued that : "Il y a un peu de testicule au fond de nos sentimens les plus sublimes et de notre tendresse la plus épurée."⁴⁴

What's interesting about Diderot's vision of the sublime here is that although he plots the familiar axis of the noble and the base, 'sublimity' as affect in art is not to be located simply in the process where the base is 'sublimated' into the refined (épurée). What Diderot seems to suggest in the first of these two passages is that the affect of the sublime is a kind of reversal of this direction, a 'desublimation' if you like, the reappearance of the repressed or sublimated drives in their more basic form, a kind of liberation of energy returning with "plaisir et frissonne d'horreur", "entrelaçées avec les idées terribles", just as Hirst's sculptures also lead us back from high ideas of love or art to more sadistic, childish and explicitly erotic urges.

⁴³ "Grand effects are everywhere born of the intermingling of voluptuous and fearful ideas—beautiful women, say, half-naked, presenting us with a delicious potion in the bloody skulls of our enemies. In this is the model of all that is sublime. It is then that the soul opens up to pleasure and shudders with horror." Denis Diderot, Correspondance, ed. G. Roth and J. Varloot, 16 vols, Paris 1955-70, iv, 196; cited in Peter Klein, "Insanity and the Sublime: Aesthetics and Theories of Mental Illness in Goya's Yard and Related Works," Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes 61 (1998): 235-6.

⁴⁴ "Something sexual lurks at the base of all our most sublime feelings and our most refined sentiments of love." Diderot, Correspondance, iii, 216; cited Klein, "Insanity and the Sublime," 236

This 'sublime' is in keeping with so much of what we may identify - in its widest sense - as the sublime in late-twentieth-century theories and practices of art. I write 'in its widest sense' since this discourse does not necessarily use the concept of 'the sublime' to name itself or its object. Rather, such a theory or practice can be described as a form of the 'cotemporary sublime' due to the homologies with the some of the writings on the sublime – writings such as Diderot's – which serve as their precursors, and without which they very well might not have been possible. We might take Bataille and Kristeva as paradigmatic, though the legacy might be seen as culminating in the explicit return of an explicit naming of the sublime in Lyotard.

Such writings, under the guise of different names, take just such a Freudian return to something like the body or to materiality, rather than its sublimation in culture and a pure realm of Ideas (à la Kant or Hegel) as the aim of avant-garde art. They aim, for somewhat diverse reasons, at the return to affect and intensity, a project that was already underway in the eighteenth century under the name of 'the sublime'. Hirst is not the only, the best or even the most inevitable outcome of this discourse. (In the case of a commercially oriented artist such as Hirst, there is also, for example, the effect of the market to consider, when such theory becomes institutionalised and becomes

itself a kind of yardstick for artistic judgement⁴⁵). But it seems to me that in attempting to understand what is at stake in the resurrection in his work of the flotsam and jetsam of the sublime, the drawing of such a tradition is necessary.

⁴⁵ see e.g. Pat Simpson, "Sex Death and Shopping: The Commodification of Taboo in the Contemporary Art Market?," Visual Culture in Britain 4.2 (2003).

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