

DAMIEN HIRST: MUSEUMS AND THE LASTING VALUE OF ART

FANTASIES OF ETERNITY

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“I had found myself in this world where all these hedge-fund guys were becoming billionaires and everybody was buying everything I made. It’s quite difficult to make art in that situation... It became quite crazy; I’d start making another spot painting and a guy would buy it and I’d make another spot painting and a guy would buy it. It was a very quick turnover in terms of objects and art and ideas, and it started feeling a bit alien to me.”
– Damien Hirst (Coleman 2017)

It is easy to read Damien Hirst’s claim that “It’s quite difficult to make art in that situation”, while billionaires lust after his work, as a disingenuous, whimpering cry from a millionaire who has gained everything he has ever wished for. But actually, he is scratching at the surface of an important problem: when art is reduced to the status of a commodity, it ceases to be art at all because it lacks the essential character of mystification. As Hirst knows all too well, art is at its best when the lines between fantasy and reality, fact and fiction, myth and truth are blurred.

Hirst’s 2017 exhibition in Venice ‘Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable’ presented us with an unexpected dichotomy of fantasy and reality: on the one hand, there is no reasonable doubt about the reality, since that which is real is straightforward and plain to see. The fantasy, on the other hand, is much harder to discern. While the show purported to present the relics of a lost shipwreck, it was a stunt on an industrial scale, one which interrogated the process of value construction in art.

Staged across the two venues of the Pinault Collection in Venice, ‘Treasures’ remains Hirst’s largest and most ambitious project to date. The premise of the show was simple and, on the surface, believable. It asked us to consider that, in the 1st and 2nd centuries, Cif Amaton II – a liberated slave who had amassed enormous wealth – was set to build a temple dedicated to the sun. It was to be filled with the treasures aboard his ship, the *Unbelievable*, but the ship sank off the coast of east Africa, leaving its cargo strewn across the seabed, only to be discovered by a team of archaeologists 2,000 years later and painstakingly restored, preserved and curated over a period of a decade, to be triumphantly displayed in this mammoth exhibition.

The collection comprised Egyptian statues, Chinese bells, coins in hitherto unknown currencies, effigies of Medusas, Greek armour, relics of Norse mythology and trinkets aplenty. The collection was so vast and varied that you’d expect the British Museum to have fallen over itself to

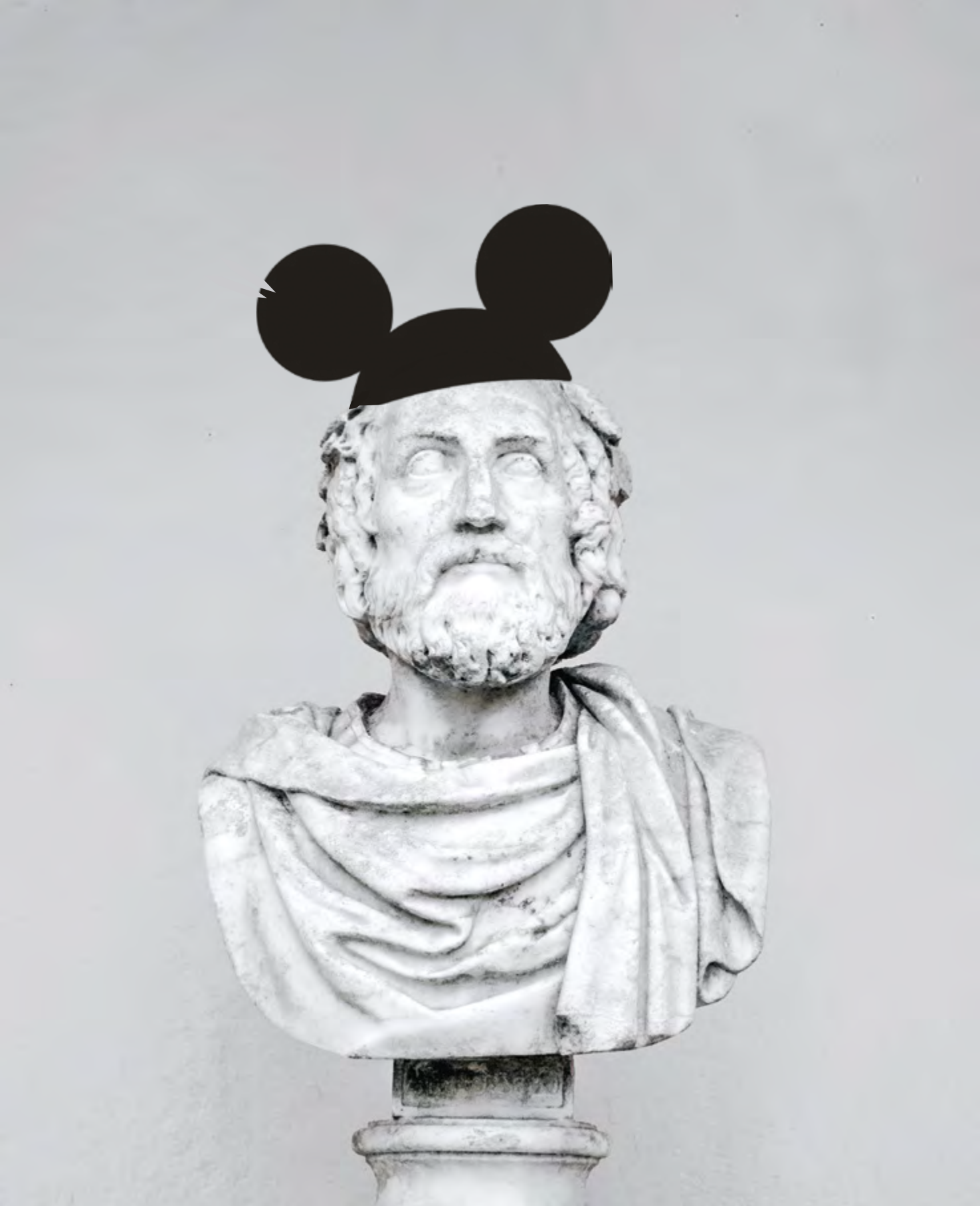
acquire it, since it brought to the 21st century languages, customs and civilisations that have lain dormant, unknown and unknowable for centuries. Hirst created 189 pieces for the project, each available in three editions: the coral-studded object ‘rescued’ from the seabed, an ‘original’ that, according to the story, had been *restored* to its former glory, and a museum copy plaster cast. Additionally, each was produced in an edition of three with two artist’s proofs. This totalled 2,835 works. It was widely reported that Hirst spent £65 million on production. Insiders such as Kenny Schachter (2017), speculated that the collection could sell for \$1 billion.

Hirst expended a great deal of effort in making his premise believable, even though it self-consciously failed to fool anyone. The show was partly about the plausibility of appearances. It looked exactly like a museum presentation of historic artefacts, with for example, the exhibition guide beginning with a telling of the legend of Cif Amaton II who came from humble beginnings in Antioch, was freed by the Romans and who climbed the socio-economic ladder of the ancient world. It detailed, with the aplomb and earnestness of a museum, how the vast shipwreck had been discovered in 2008 near the south-east African port of Azania. At no point did it mention Hirst, even though the bust of Amaton, which loomed large as both quasi-historical artefact of antiquity and iconic centrepiece of the myth, depicted Hirst himself. Hirst was simultaneously there at the centre and nowhere to be found.

The illusion was bolstered by the insertion, among the artefacts that Hirst himself had concocted as part of the legend of Amaton, of references to the canon of Western mythology including the *Iliad*, such as the Shield of Achilles. Each artefact is accompanied by a wall text which explained with academic detachment its origins and relevance, sometimes directly referencing Homer or emulating his style.

For example, *The Severed Head of Medusa* (2013) is a bronze which Hirst has subsequently shown internationally and which featured on the cover of the catalogue. The exhibition guide, as museums are inclined to do, focuses on the context and meaning, telling us, “Rendered in diverse materials including malachite, gold and crystal, these works emphasise the unique combination of themes Medusa personifies... Ovid relayed that it was Medusa’s blood, dripping from her neck onto twigs and seaweed strands... that accounted for the existence of coral” (Pinault Collection 2017). It describes every artefact in the show in a similar vein. It even tells us whether the object is an original or a copy commissioned

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**IT WAS SUSTAINED
BY WALTZING WITH
OUTRAGE ON THE EDGE OF
PLAUSIBILITY FROM
START TO FINISH**

First: *The Shoulders of Giants*, 2022
Left: *You Don't Say*, 2022
Next: *McPrandiale*, 2022
Last: *Indy Antoinette*, 2022

by Amaton himself. There is also a documentary, released by Netflix, which chronicles the archaeologists’ discovery of a haul of gold near the site of the wreck. The effect is all bolstered by fresh and glittering back-lit photographs, dotted around the show, of divers hauling the artefacts from the seabed, so that next to the object there was documentary evidence of its salvage. At the press preview, as Jonathan Jones (2017) recounted with insatiable glee in the *Guardian*, Hirst had ‘the curators’ introduce the show to the breathless swathe of critics. In all this, still no mention of Hirst.

Just in case anybody was to be fooled, about halfway through the visitor was presented with coral-encrusted statues, weathered and stricken by 2,000 years of ocean immersion, of Hirst himself holding hands with Mickey Mouse. The point of all this artifice was to construct the pristine appearance of a museum show of ancient artefacts, which it succeeded in achieving more or less effortlessly. That appearance, however, with its plausibility and its failure to fool anybody, was the central conceit of the show. As such, the reality at hand was that the exhibition really consisted of a collection of artefacts made by Damien Hirst between 2007 and 2017 that purported to be relics from the shipwreck of the *Unbelievable*. The name of the ship was not only a simple giveaway, for it was surely titled as such to frame our viewing in terms of more than just a fiction, but also as something difficult or imprudent to believe but that should be believed nonetheless.

Of course, it fooled nobody, and nor was it supposed to. As Laura Cumming noted at the time, “It gradually becomes apparent that this is not just a spectacular combination of storytelling, visual invention and slow-building humour, but a meditation on belief and truth” (Cumming 2017). The key thing is that this meditation was at no point shattered; it was sustained by waltzing with outrage on the edge of plausibility from start to finish. After all, we knew that it was a Damien Hirst show, but we also knew he was up to something much more than simply making a visual joke at our expense.

The abiding theme of the show was deeper than a meditation of belief, since it turned our introspection on truth to another timeless philosophical conundrum: quality. As Hirst (in Coleman 2017) said at the time, “I knew the thing I wanted to draw everybody in with was quality – unheard-of quality... there’s a real obvious difference between the past and today in the level of effort that people put into each individual object... I wanted it to be believed.”

The key way to achieve that belief, then, was to replicate the quality of the artefacts of antiquity rather than simulating the form alone. It could all just as well have been bronze painted to look like gold, marble or jade, and have the same visual effect, but then it would have ultimately failed to realise what we had to believe Hirst’s larger project to be – to *rescue* the value of art from the clutches of big money, to steal it from the hands of the 1% and restitute it to the inherent democracy of the museum.

Why it works

It was, in the purest sense, a simulacrum – a copy without an original. Jean Baudrillard (1994) argues that the simulacrum is not a copy of the real because there is no reality for it to copy. ‘Treasures’ was the truth, since it really was a collection of artefacts which look like they were salvaged from an ancient shipwreck, but it did not copy any original truth or reality because there never was one. It is in this sense that ‘Treasures’ was reality and not fantasy: the museum-style wall labels, the cabinets containing precious artefacts, the photographs, the audio guide, the running commentary and the model of the *Unbelievable* filled with its cargo all convened to create a world in which Hirst was archaeologist rather than artist. As Baudrillard says, and (knowingly) falsely attributes to Ecclesiastes, “The simulacrum is never what hides the truth – it is truth that hides the fact that there is none. The simulacrum is true.”

If the shipwreck was not the fantasy here, then what was? The story of Cif Amaton II and his treasure-laden ship was a legend that sounded like it belonged to a narrative tradition, retold for a contemporary audience, but that possessed no historic authentication. The moment of the monumental discovery of the shipwreck was the moment at which the legend passes into reality and becomes its own truth. So the story goes. Hirst, speaking in his ancient persona through Amaton, gave the game away: Cif Amaton II is an anagram of ‘I am a fiction’ and it was up to the viewer to decide whether it was only Amaton who was the abiding fiction.

The real fantasy at work, a sleight of Hirst’s omniscient hand, was the manner of display – the eminently plausible simulation of a vast display of relics that recreated the experience, and therefore the reality, of a museum show. It looked and felt like an historic display of museum artefacts, a simulacrum which belied the deep fantasy of the entire project: that all contemporary art will be lauded and valued in the future as relics of a bygone age.

Contemporary art is just that which is produced now, in this moment, and as such it carries no guarantee or promise of perpetuity. Consider all the artists, all over the world, who are making art now – how much of that art will survive even a century? And how much of it will be treated with the respect given to a Rembrandt, or a pharaoh, or the loot from a Roman shipwreck? It is not about the physical survival of art, for that is a mere contingency over which we have no long-term power. It is about the survival of the work’s reputation among communities of art lovers and, ultimately, of its value to culture.

Hirst’s fantasy was precisely that art, to use Anselm Kiefer’s phrase, “will survive its ruins” (Kiefer 2011). Hirst, in an attempt to help art survive, collects it obsessively; he says, “I’m a shopper, so I’ll buy shit. If I’m in a gallery and there’s an artist I like and they haven’t got a great work, I’ll buy a shit one just to have the buzz of buying” (Coleman 2017). And that is how he ended up opening Newport Street Gallery, where he shows his collection, and that is how he ended up buying the 300-room monolith Toddington Manor - he cannot stop collecting things and needs more space to put them in. There are echoes of Hirst’s struggle for meaning and significance in Amaton – obsessive, extravagant, and unparalleled in ambition – as if they both think buying stuff and showing it to other people will ensure those things do not get lost or broken or squirrelled away from a public which deserves to share in the wealth of art.

In this sense, ‘Treasures’ was a meditation on art history and the fate of art as something we inherently value. Hirst is concerned with what Isabelle Graw (2009) calls the “symbolic value” of art, which is the prevailing significance of art to culture and its value as a cultural artefact that enriches and edifies human life – quite apart from either contemporary preoccupations or market value. The fantasy is that contemporary art will retain this symbolic value for generations into the far-flung future, just as the treasures of the *Unbelievable* were supposed to do. ‘Treasures’ purveyed the fantasy that the art of our time will resist not just decay by being forever conserved and preserved in a museum, but that it will also be immune to the entropy of fashions, fads and prejudices of the ages.

Hirst only achieved this by creating a perfect world in which the cracks do not show. In seeing ‘Treasures’, you never once believed that it was anything other than what it purported to be, and the facsimile enabled Hirst to dream of a world where art – his art – was forever preserved as so many priceless relics. The fact that Hirst – an ageing Young British Artist





**VALUE IN ART (AS
ELSEWHERE IN CAPITALISM)
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COMMODITY OBJECT**

and former agitator of the establishment of which he is now a cornerstone – was doing this with reference to antiquity was the final joke: even if you trawl back 2000 years, he was saying, the process of value construction is the same.

The logical consequence of Hirst’s spectacular rumination on value construction thus leads to the mystifying conclusion that the symbolic value of art is itself a fiction, constructed through elaborate storytelling and impenetrable simulacra. Hirst is not, by any stretch of the imagination, a Marxist, either in theory or in practice, but the conceptual core of ‘Treasures’ was a notion of commodity fetishism: artworks, for Hirst, appear to have a value quite distinct from their material reality and from artists themselves, a value which is bound up in historical, theoretical and economic narratives. After all, what was Cif’s shipwreck if not a cluster of ancient relics bound by a narrative constructed after the fact?

Value in art (as elsewhere in capitalism) is constructed through the mystification of the commodity object. It is the narratives we, artists, gallerists and critics, weave around works of art which secure their value. It is the mystification of the commodity object in action, whereby the reality is obscured and distorted. Hirst’s ‘Treasures’ is an extreme example of the way in which it is only by draping a veil of fantasy around an object that it can accrue a value greater than the sum of its parts, for any given artwork’s cost price, if you like, its labour and materials, is insignificant compared to its market or symbolic value. In order for art to participate in capitalism, we must mask its true nature as just stuff, like tables, cars, chairs, houses and bottles, made by people to

fill a hole in our existence. After all, the social reality of art is little more than the combustion of intellectual property with material craftsmanship and that, like houses, has a value but not the worth ordinarily attributed to it by the machinations of capitalism.

The central conceit of ‘Treasures’, then, was that the museum, which allows us to believe our art will last forever, is also complicit in the construction of value. In being part of a museum collection, art accrues value. Moreover, with the passing of time, art becomes a relic of a prior age. As such, Hirst’s critique of value is twofold: on the one hand, he is questioning whether the museum succeeds in preserving value, but on the other, he is critiquing the construction of value from fantasy, mystery and even fiction.

Hirst is not the first, and will certainly not be the last, artist to reflect on his position with self-awareness and to see that his immense privilege – that is, both his wealth and the freedom to experiment artistically that it affords him – has come at a price and to conclude that he no longer wishes to foot the bill. Hirst’s distinction lies in his response to the appalling conclusion of that introspection: he resolved to turn it up to eleven by creating a body of work so vast, so ostentatious and so preposterous that only an all-encompassing myth could justify its existence. Only a narrative about antiquity, the mystery of a lost shipwreck and the triumphant story of a slave who amassed untold wealth, woven and realised on an industrial scale around a body of contemporary art, could transfigure the products of an artist’s immense privilege into the sacrament of art world mythology.

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