



On 15–16 September, 2008, Damien Hirst held an unprecedented auction, “Beautiful Inside My Head Forever” at Sotheby’s, London, selling 244 new works directly to the public, by-passing his dealers. The sale generated an astonishing £111,576,800. Hirst was quoted as saying that he believed his direct engagement with the market for his work to be “very democratic” and “a natural evolution for contemporary art.”

A few months later, he gave a rare interview to Michael Bracewell, reflecting on value, belief, myth and an obscure book called *Treasures from the Wreck of The Unbelievable*.

Cover image: a meteorite

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MB: You have said that “Beautiful Inside My Head Forever,” your ground-breaking sale of new work at Sotheby’s last September, was a means of democratizing the way art is sold. Do you believe that the true value of an artwork is whatever someone is prepared to pay for it today?

DH: Value is constantly shifting, and it’s not always about money. If two or more people want something and it’s scarce, and they have a lot of money, then whatever it is will sell for a lot. But that’s not necessarily a true reflection of its value. Or, is that actually just the definition of value?

MB: The Sotheby’s sale seemed like a single artwork, comprising concept, performance, objects, documentation. Did you conceive the actual sale, on one level, as an artwork in its own right?

DH: Yes, I see it as a single artwork. It’s important to me that all the pieces are dated 2008 so that they are always connected to the date of the sale: it’s a moment in time, an event; and I wanted that unavoidability of the scale, so that you can’t argue with it. But the money attached to all the artworks makes the whole thing real for me in a different way, I suppose, transcending the temporal.

MB: You wrote a text in 2004 called “Why Cunts Sell Shit To Fools.” It reads like an angry diatribe against corporate consumerism, and against the art world in particular; for example:

I’ve always said that art is about life and the art world is about money although the buyers and sellers, the movers and shakers, the money men will tell you anything to not have you realise that their real motivation is cash, because if you realise — that they would sell your granny to Nigerian sex slave traders for fifty pence (ten bob) and a packet of woodbines — then you’re not gonna believe the other shit coming out their mouths that’s trying to get you to buy the garish shit they’ve got hanging on the wall in their posh shops.

Did the feelings and opinions you express in this writing contribute to you creating the Sotheby’s sale?

DH: I don't think so. I wrote that piece for fun—it's really a piece of comedy writing, a fantasy. Maybe it's a part of my personality or a portrait of someone I used to be when I was growing up.

MB: What do you think motivates most of the collectors of your work?

DH: Their love of art, but of course there are many who do it just for money, but really I think they are a minority.

MB: A lot of the works in "Beautiful Inside My Head Forever" seemed to have a pre-Christian feel—almost like you were going back to the mixed themes of power, wealth, religion, mortality and magic that occurs in art from many ancient civilizations. Did this figure in your thinking at all?

DH: I love the past and how we try to inhabit or understand it today. And now I can feel that my own work has a growing past—and my own past before that has a strong hold over me. I was brought up Catholic so a lot of that stuff has a fierce grip on me. In terms of art, I don't think things used to be better back in the day though—I hate that view. I think the art being made today is as good as the work made in any time since the dawn of time, and always will be. I love now.

MB: You are a very dedicated collector of art yourself. Do you have an interest in antiquities?

DH: I'm interested in antiquities and how they allow us a glimpse of the past. They can be seen as objects from far away lands, beautiful tools that help us understand our present, by imagining and understanding our own history. But people forget that all art starts its life as contemporary art; and I try to remember that, even when I'm viewing or collecting what's now become an antiquity.

MB: In Vienna, the Natural History Museum has an incredible collection of meteorites. A lot of your art seems to be about awe, wonder, mystery, nature. Does the natural world interest you?

DH: I collect scholar stones and rocks and minerals and I've bought meteorites from auctions and I love the idea of them because they are truly

out of this world, objects not of this planet, objects that have spun through outer space and I love the way that they are formed. I often think I would love to make art that's formed in that way and then realize I do, when I make bronzes. That's why I love bronze casting so much, because making bronzes uses the forces and energies that were used to create our world; and the first bronze cast artworks were created 6,000 years ago.

MB: You are famous internationally as the ultimate "modern artist." Are you interested in history?

DH: I'm an artist and a collector and I feel that I'm no different from the first artists and collectors, on this planet or any since.

MB: The Sotheby's sale was an epic undertaking that raises many questions about value and wealth. What comes next?

DH: At the moment I'm thinking about lots of projects. One that I'm currently working on isn't really art, but after making the diamond skull, I've become increasingly interested in treasure, and what it actually means. There's a book called *Treasures from the Wreck of The Unbelievable* that I've been reading recently and I'm now looking into funding a dive expedition. I love the idea of salvaging a hoard of lost treasure from the bottom of the sea, one that has been thought for centuries and centuries to be a myth but from new discoveries, it's looking increasingly like it's actually real. I can't say more than that about it. Again though, I love the idea that these artworks come from a world outside of our world.

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