The Acquired Inability to Escape, 1991, m./m., 84 x 120 x 84 cm. Courtesy Jay Joplin Fine Art, London.

AN INTERVIEW WITH **DAMIEN HIRST**

BY MICHELE C. CONE

The following interview took place in New York in December 1992, within view of the large floor pieces, spot paintings, pharmacist's vitrines that Hirst showed at Jay Chiat's house under the collective title "Where's God Now." What struck me about the work when I first saw it in Paris ("When Logics Die") was the daring approach to the true and tried subject of death, an exploration that oscillated between the macabre and the clinical. The setting for our interview, a series of minidramas including one with dripping blood, abandonned clothing and other haunting paraphernalia observable inside a room-size glass cube, revealed the consistency of his project: to explore and merge contradictory impulses and artistic styles. Like Cady Noland, Hirst is haunted by cold-blooded violence, he uses installations to present his ideas, and he is attracted by the materials and forms of Minimalism. But as will become apparent from our interview, another influence dominated Damien Hirst's early work, a specifically English one.

MC: I feel that each country has its own idea of art history, particularly post-war art history. So how would you make a quick sweep of recent English art history? In America, I probably would begin with Abstract Expressionism, continue with Minimalism, Pop and Conceptual art, then bring up a first synthesis with New Image painting, Neo Expressionsim, Neo Pop, Neo Geo, and a second synthesis with p.c. art of all varieties.

DH: I don't find those fixed points useful. I leave that kind of question to art historians. I am interested in Warhol, in Minimalism, Nauman, Sol Lewitt, Mario Merz....And Bacon is one of the few British artists I like. I see Expressionism and Minimalism together, like two sides of a coin.

M.C.: One does not have to look very far to recognize the role of Minimalism in your work...

D.H.: For me Minimalism represents some kind of logic. Like a medical logic, it's like the idea of perfect formalism on the one hand and on the other hand you are falling apart yourself. The way things build up and fall apart, I think the two go together universally rather than as a particular kind of state. So I like to make things that refer to both. I like Soutine and, in Schwitters, for instance, I like the formalism and the decay. Schwitters separates the two, the formalism and the decay.

M.C.: Another question on your cultural background. I read somewhere that you were interested in Kafka. His oeuvre being I guess on the expressionist side, there must also be anti-expressionist authors you admire, minimalist literati?

D.H.: I read a lot of Kafka about two years ago. I don't have favourites. I like everybody - I read Vonnegut while I was reading Kafka, they're very alike. I've read *American Psycho* and what I like about it is the lack of morality in it, the fact that it is very objective and descriptive. I am reading a book called

Killing *for Company* about a mass murderer in London, a very straight guy who commits all these murders. I like it because it is written very objectively....It's objective writing about a very gruesome subject matter, I like that contradiction.

M.C.: Speaking of gruesome subject matter, what attracted you to dead animals?

D.H.: Initially I worked with live animals, I wanted what I was making to be more alive and I favoured the direct approach. Originally I wanted to be a painter, but I could never do it, because the idea of a painting being like a void. I could never decide what to put in the picture or where, given the infinite mass of possibilities and places. But with sculpture or collage, when formal elements are predetermined in their own right, a chair is a chair to a large extent and you know how it can relate to a table. I could never do that with elements in a painting. I needed it to be more real.

M.C.: So your work with flies and butterflies emerged out of painting?

D.H.: It came out of the urge to paint. When I started painting, I enjoyed the process more than the end result. With painting, at the end of the day, you look at it and it's fantastic. And the next morning... you wake up, and it's still the same and it's depressing. I always wanted the actual movement rather than the end result in my work. A friend I was with at college said he felt like a painter who didn't use paint or canvas; I always thought that was a good thing to say.

M.C.: Is painting a dead animal?

D.H.: No, the process of painting is alive, it's the end result that is dead. For me it's as if the artist is the animal and the painting is the record of the artist's tracks through space and time. Although there are great painters who go beyond that, I did not want just a record, but rather the actual movement. That's how I got into the live fly pieces. They are about movement.

M.C.: Here, in this room, there are no live flies, no dead ones either; only structures in glass with things inside them, and on the wall those spot paintings. Objects, products. So is there no contradiction between intention and realization?

D.H.: I always believe in contradiction compromise...It's unavoidable. In life it can be positive or negative like saying "I can't live without you." I am certainly not against objects. I love them. I like to look at objects in galleries, in homes, everywhere. And I'm interested in how an artwork moves through a career, through finance, that kind of life as much as the more formal aspects of movement.

M.C.: This show, and the one uptown at the Cohen Gallery emanates the opposite of movement. The spot paintings in particular look very static. Almost like with them you have a signature: a bunch of circles in geometric arrangment done directly on the wall. What else is there?

D.H.: The spot paintings are part of the floor pieces. They are like reduced maps of the other - seven by eight spots equals seven by eight feet. This is red paint, that is blood. And if you were to completely reduce it and reduce it [the floor piece] you would end with this kind of color and this kind of form. It's like a map of the piece within it. The paintings make the sculpture real like the difference between art and life. The spot paintings I do directly on the wall are a good example of the kind of contradiction I am interested in. There are three different processes I have used. The first ones I painted randomly. Then I numbered the tins I used and gave them to somebody to reproduce. Then that random order became an organized copy, and ceased to be random. Then I made some that were completely random, and whoever painted them painted them randomly but I premixed all the colors. Then I did not even mix the color; I just put down a hue and said that no spot should be darker than this hue. I like the changing life of the spot paintings: the product changes, the scale changes, the color changes but the form does not.

M.C.: So far, process art tended to be organic, to show the process of transformation. And in your work with flies feeding off dead animals, and with the butterflies hatching from pupae, this organic quality, the idea of a life cycle was observable. Then you moved away from showing the transformation and concentrated on the end of the process,

dead butterflies, dead fish in formaldehyde. In this show, and in the pharmacist's display uptown, transformation is no longer a visible part of the work.

D.H.: I don't feel that I've moved away from that transformation. There is live goldfish in "She Wanted to Find the Most Perfect Form of Flying". I don't decide to use live or dead animals. They come out of the urge to communicate an idea, to make art that's more real....

M.C.: The vitrines or medicine cabinets are to me the most innovative and strongest because they speak most unemotionally about the life cycles, about our desire to live for ever, about sustaining eternal life artificially, about the potent drugs that keep death at bay.

D. H. - Yes, I agree completely. There is also arrangement involved...in a kind of Morandi way. And there is also color, but none of that is visible I find that exciting, art isn't there. And then there is also the idea of a city, the idea of hierarchy.

M.C.: It is true that all of this is there, but I still think that what matters here is the way you have subverted the allegedly neutral language and materials of Minimalism.

D.H.: Some people think that they are about Cornell. They have a spiritual resonance...

M.C.: What do you mean?

D.H.: This purity of form, rather than being empty, it becomes frightening. It could represent an anti-decaying idea or a decaying idea, in terms of life or in terms of art.

M.C.: Even the materials of Minimalism are rendered lethal!

Damien Hirst, *Pharmacy*, 1992. Installation. Overall: 9ft 5ins x 22ft 7ins x 28ft 3ins. Courtesy Cohen Gallery, New York.

D.H.: I like the violence of inanimate objects. I'm interested in the idea of surrogate humans. The back of this office chair is shaped like a human spine. Male and female internalized. It's divided right down the middle by a pane of glass. I'm interested in the fear glass induces because it is invisible.

M.C.: And these large bead like things?

D.H.: The gas canisters? I like the idea of people being like high pressure containers, cool and formal on the outside with incredible forces going on inside. They are what carbonated water is made with, but today they have become a cheap drug: each capsule can give you a short high...

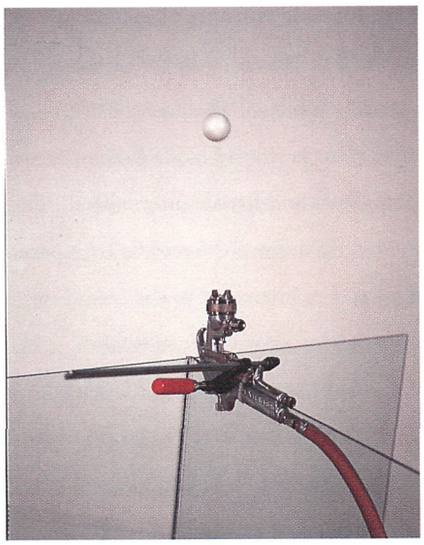
M.C.: And may be kill you? They look so perversely~ innocent, lined up on this impeccably clean surface. I still say that it is this anti-expressionist way, the ironic detachment almost a la Don Juan - with which you treat highly emotional subjects like drugs, like sickness, like death, that is most shocking in your work.

D.H.: Death is an unacceptable idea, so the only way to deal with it is to be detached or amused.

M.C.: We did not talk about Georges Bataille who has a lot to say about this "joy in the face of death" syndrome.

D.H.: I've read some Bataille. *The Story of the Eye*. I like him although I find him a bit too lyrical. Even though there is that kind of horror.

M.C.: In your show at Emmanuel Perrotin in Paris entitled "When Logics Die," the announcement showed a photo



Damien Hirst, *I want to spend the rest of my live everywhere, with everyone, one to one, always, forever, now* (Detail), 1991, dimensions variable. Courtesy Jay Jopling Fine Art, London.

of yourself next to the head of a dead human. Was it a trick photograph?

D.H.: No. It's a very old photograph. It's ten years old, it dates from when I was studying anatomy.

M.C.: The show at Perrotin was rather exceptional in that you used human beings rather than insects. The human body seems to turn you off?

D.H.: I've always avoided it. In dealing with corpses I was initially horrified, and then when I looked further death was removed. I think the only way to deal with the subject is through metaphor. With a corpse, you can't believe it's a dead body. It's a lot easier to connect with a dead animal.

M.C.: Yet today, the body is a hot subject!

D.H.: I find it, in a kind of way —formalism. It's some way of isolating elements, cutting something out. When years ago, I studied anatomy, I became very interested in how the body works. It just works on one level, and it's marvellous, but on another level, you can take it apart like a toy. And I remember becoming very depressed when I looked at a brain and it did not have compartments that showed anything. It's like an airplane, unbelievably marvellous and yet very crude in another way.

M.C.: It sounds as if your artistic education was quite special. You went to Goldsmith ~. Tell me about it.

D.H.: At Goldsmith~ they mostly teach you to have an open mind. Even historically you can take from anywhere....I did some stupid things there and considered them seriously. They have a belief that if you try to do something then you set up some sort of view into a structure, and if you fail to work within it, you fail. You set up your own rules as you move. Suppose you go out and buy loaves of bread. They want to know why that bread, and did you look at all the types available? Why does this loaf say more about what you want to say than all the others possible. It was good fun.

M.C.: Whose art history books were you made to read?

D.H.: Anything and everything. The only thing we were positively encouraged to read were the art magazines.

M.C.: Who did the encouraging?

D.H.: Michael Craig Martin, Richard Wentworth, John Thompson. He was my main tutor. He used to teach Gilbert and George. He taught at St. Martin's. Albert Irvin, the painter was there. Elma Thubrun, Carl Plackman, a conceptualist sculptor, and a lot of extra people who came in from outside.

M.C.: How long were you there?

D.H.: Three years. The reason I went there was I was doing paintings and sculpture, collages and installations, and in all the other colleges they ask you to choose between painting and sculpture courses. At Goldmith they don't make a difference between the two. Before that I went to Leeds, although I was born in Bristol.

M.C.: One last question: Why would you have liked to be a twin?

D.H.: I said I would, and then I said I wouldn't in an interview. I've made work in pairs, and it seems to have a kind of confidence, of *déjà vu* to it, which gives it solidity, history. I made a piece in Cologne where I had two random arrangements of the same spots in a square on the wall, small spot paintings. In front of it I had two chairs with a pair of identical twins dressed identically. And the name of the piece was the name of the twins. As we changed the twins, the title of the piece changed. That, I really liked. I think that individuality is a confusing thing, so to get rid of that visually is quite exciting.

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