On the Use of Animals in Contemporary Art:
Damien Hirst’s “Abject Art” as a Point of Departure*

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Abstract
Contemporary artists inclined to integrate animal elements into their works previously justified animal art as a means of reframing thought about life and ethics. But it is debatable whether the juxtaposition of animal and art is simply a gimmick. Damien Hirst’s animal installations, for example, have garnered both widespread acclaim and controversy. Do Hirst’s displays of animal carcasses amount, at best, to so-called “abject art,” or does the auratic perception they evoke serve to catalyze reflexive thoughts on ethics? Investigating Hirst’s animal works, this paper not only seeks to arrive at a better understanding of his oeuvre but also discusses the function of animal death in contemporary art. In the first two sections, Lacanian gaze and Benjaminian aura are drawn upon to explore whether eye-catching art is particularly thought-provoking and more likely to stimulate ethical thinking. The third section inquires into whether some of Hirst’s works are capable of evoking the auratic gaze; and if so, under what conditions do those works cease to be auratic and become abject? The last section compares the works of Hirst and Mark Fairnington to investigate how the auratic gaze emerging from artwork propels us to confront questions of life and ethics without remaining silent on the theme of animal concern.

Keywords
Damien Hirst, Mark Fairnington, contemporary animal art, Lacan, gaze, Benjamin, aura

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Contemporary artists inclined to integrate animal elements into their works have explained their use of animals as a means of reframing thought about life and ethics. The New Zealand-based artist Angela Singer, for example, construes her animal series as “recycled taxidermy” seeking to challenge a culture in which hunting trophies “are so prevalent, so accepted and so ignored” (qtd. in Baker, “You Kill Things to Look at Them” 85). The dead animal of botched taxidermy, she believes, can “create a difficult looking, an uneasy looking”: “I want the viewer to feel discomfort when they see my work, because the work is born of my discomfort with the way that animals are treated as a resource available for exploitation by human beings” (qtd. in Baker, “You Kill Things” 93). Steve Baker notes that a pertinent, recent argument for the juxtaposition of animal and art is to claim that such works enable the viewer to see “the human world (including human killing of animals) ‘from the vantage of the animal’” (“You Kill Things” 92). Since animal art touches a raw nerve among animal rights activists, some artists, such as Singer, Jordan Baseman and Chloe Brown, to name but a few, are concerned to emphasize the care taken in sourcing animal bodies. They emphasize that the real animal body parts used in their works are donated roadkill or recycled hunting trophies (“You Kill Things” 89). To counter the accusation that “in some contemporary artworks the killing of animals is simply hollow and unnecessary” (Aloi 124), they highlight the meta-ethical dimension of these seemingly sensational works. The justification argues, for example, that these works address unnecessary killing by constituting “a place for the spectator to think” (“You Kill Things” 92). However, Damien Hirst, a British conceptual artist who consistently uses the carcasses of large animals in his installations, claims: “I like ideas of trying to understand the world by taking things out of the world. You kill things to look at them” (Hirst et al. 285). Undoubtedly, his defiance and open derision of animal rights activists\(^1\) attracts more negative attention than the aforementioned artists. Notably, while his animal series is regarded as flagrant violations of animal rights by some activists, his defenders argue that once we overcome the initial shock, the ethical aftershock will arrive to “solicit a trans-species form of moral sympathy” (Cashell 196-97). Arthur C. Danto, for example, contends that the works actually address human-animal relations by posing a radical question: Is it “a better fate for an animal to wind up as a work of

\(^1\) Animal rights protestors, Hirst commented, often “get the facts wrong so they have to go away looking a bit stupid” (qtd. in Cashell 166). Speaking of his work with live fish, *Love Lost* and *Lost Love*, he sarcastically said that if animal rights protestors accused him of making the fish unhappy, he would reply, “Well there is the fish guy talk [sic] to him. He says they have never been happier in their lives; they have never been in a bigger tank. They are really happy” (qtd. in Cashell 166).
art when its destiny would otherwise be the dinner table” (53)? Thus, in the eyes of some, his ongoing practice of displaying dead animals in formaldehyde solution presents “‘dumb boxes’ with their silent aura” (Burn 9) and opens up the possibility of aesthetic contemplation, while others insist Hirst’s works “have no artistic content and are worthless as works of art.”

How ought we negotiate these polarized opinions to come to a better understanding of Hirst’s animal works? Do Hirst’s displays of animal carcasses amount, at best, to so-called “abject art,” or does the auratic perception they evoke enable us to confront “individual isolation and corporeal corruptibility” (Burn 9)? In either case, how far can we justify killing animals for the meta-ethical value of art? Isn’t it likely that this sort of animal art simply “ventriloquises human concerns and the artist’s own set of preoccupations and anxieties?” (Aloi 124). Taking Hirst’s animal art as a point of departure, this paper examines whether “the uneasy looking” aroused by the deaths of animals is indispensable if contemporary art is to catalyze the viewers’ reflections upon bioethics.

In the first two sections, I draw upon Lacan’s theory of the gaze and Benjamin’s conception of aura to reconsider if eye-catching artwork is particularly thought-provoking, and if it is tenable for transgressive art of the Hirstean sort to assert its meta-ethical virtues. I argue that abject art is not the only means to invite the viewer to ponder and reflect. In fact, artwork capable of evoking what Miriam Hansen calls “the auratic gaze” serves better to catalyze the viewer’s reflexive thoughts. The third section includes an inquiry into whether some of Hirst’s works, as his admirers suggest, are capable of returning the spectators’ gaze and thereby

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2 For example, art critic Julian Spalding said that Hirst’s work “isn’t worth a cent, not because it isn’t great art, good art or even bad art, but because it isn’t art at all” (par. 3).

3 Hirst himself once remarked: “I want the viewer to do a lot of work and feel uncomfortable. They should be made to feel responsible for their own view of the world rather than look at an artist’s view and be critical of it” (Hirst et al. 16). Hirst’s comment seems to suggest that the ostensibly pleasurable engagement with the spectacle of death is nothing but a façade, and his purpose is to attract the viewer’s aesthetic/ethical attention: “‘Through the formalism,’ Hirst comments, ‘you can make people think about things they don’t want to’” (qtd. in Cashell 178). I will proceed to inquire whether Hirst himself and his defenders overestimate the meta-ethical virtue of his aesthetic project.

4 Transgressive art refers to controversial artworks that shock or disturb the viewer “by virtue of its uncompromising mission to interrogate conservative views and subvert conventional moral beliefs” (Cashell 1). While many criticize the “unreflective contemporary endorsement of the transgressive” (qtd. in Cashell 1) and contend that some transgressive practices cannot be categorized as art, their defenders insist on the ethical responses or philosophical ideas they evoke.
catalyzing reflexive thoughts on ethics, and if so, under what conditions they will cease to be auratic and become abject. I argue that we should not homogenize his animal series as if all the works in the series were equally dubious (or enlightening) in terms of their meta-ethical virtues. While some of his works should be considered abject art, some are better viewed as “balanced between a cold stillness, redolent of scientific technology, and the most vivid depictions . . . of the transience of life” (Bracewell 23). In distinguishing between Hirst’s abject works and the auratic ones, I do not mean to suggest that the latter are thus ethically justified. The last section compares the works of Hirst and Mark Fairnington, a British artist

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5 One of the anonymous reviewers has reservations about my contention that auratic art may induce reflexive thoughts on ethics. S/he cautions me against overemphasizing reflexive thoughts, primarily because “reason, reflexive thoughts, and language are usually regarded as human-exclusive features that separate humans from nonhuman others.” Besides, s/he wonders if the linkage of reflexive thought and ethical consideration is too hasty, thereby suggesting that I further discuss whether the ethical decision deduced by reflexive thoughts can be animal-friendly or not. My responses to the questions s/he posed are as follows. First of all, the reason why I foreground the importance of reflexive thoughts is not to reinforce the anthropocentric assumption which regards cogito and reason as human-exclusive features but to highlight the specific function of art. As Niklas Luhmann points out, art communicates by using perceptions contrary to their primary purpose: “perception (in contrast to thought and communication) can decide quickly, whereas art aims to retard perception and render it reflexive” (qtd. in Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism* 271). In other words, I consider reflexive thoughts essential not because they serve to vindicate the primacy of human consciousness, but because I believe they may change the observer’s everyday perception by functioning “as a difference that makes a difference” (qtd. in Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism* 272). As for the relation between reflexive thoughts and ethical concern, I am not arguing that ethical decisions deduced by the spectators’ reflexive thoughts are necessarily animal-friendly. Nor am I implying, as the same reviewer kindly points out, that “by thinking about animal suffering and the related ethical issues, a good judgment can be formed.” As Wolfe notes, there is no “nonperspectival” ethics or “ethics imagined fundamentally as a noncontingent view from nowhere, a view which . . . can declare all forms of life of equal value” (Wolfe, *Before the Law* 85). Even within animal welfare/rights groups, it would be hard to reach any consensus concerning what a good judgment is or what can be termed an animal-friendly ethical decision. That there is neither the ethical sine qua non nor preprogrammed response to an ethical problem does not render the discourse on ethical obligations ineffective, for all ethical decisions are actually “contingent, selective and self-referential, or, as Derrida will put it, ‘performative’ and ‘conditional’” (Wolfe, *Before the Law* 86). According to Derrida, we cannot expect any norm or rule for us to follow when we are asked to make an ethical decision, insofar as a decision “made in advance” necessarily annuls itself and no longer decides anything: “It is simply deployed, without delay, presently, with the automatism attributed to machines. There is no longer any place for justice or responsibility (whether juridical, political, or ethical)” (*Rouges* 84-85). The ethical “implies putting the status of the knowing subject into question” rather than referring to any moral rules or universal principles (Varela 64). In this light, if a subject seriously takes into consideration human responsibility toward other forms of life, then the decision deduced by his reflexive thoughts can be deemed as ethical.
famous for his animal paintings, to investigate how the aural gaze emerging from artworks propels us to confront questions of life and ethics without remaining silent on themes concerning the welfare of animals.

I.

To what extent is the “uneasy looking” indispensable for artworks intended to carve out space for aesthetic/philosophical/ethical contemplation? We may borrow Lacan’s interpretation of paintings, especially his theory of the gaze, to address this thorny problem. In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan defines painting as involving a kind of showing (*le donner-à-voir*) that seeks to satisfy the appetite of the eye of the beholder (115). However, the gaze, as objet petit a in the scopic field, can never be satisfied. It is what is eluded in vision and can be presented to us “only in the form of a strange contingency, symbolic of what we find on the horizon, as the thrust of our experience, namely, the lack that constitutes castration anxiety” (72-73). Although the split subject will seek some stand-in to dispel the sense of lack, the lack can, at most, be filled only on the level of fantasy. For objet a is the object cause of desire rather than a concrete lost object that can be re-found. In fact, if the subject’s desire is really satisfied, he will find himself threatened with death: insofar as his world is actually constituted around the lack, the ultimate satisfaction of desire means the world that unfolds around the lack will be closed. When lack happens to be lacking, according to Lacan, “that’s when anxiety starts” (Seminar X 42): “Anxiety isn’t about the loss of the object, but its presence. The objects aren’t missing” (54). Lacan’s analysis of the nature of desire lays bare the paradox: while the subject ceaselessly pursues the lost object, he will simultaneously shun its presence in fear that satisfaction of his desire will go hand-in-hand with the threat of death. Having recognized how desire is coupled with anxiety, we may better understand why Lacan assumes the function of paintings as dompte-regard: a taming of the gaze. Motivated by the scopic drive, the subject will search constantly for something to feed the appetite of the eye, even though that appetite is too voracious to be satisfied. It is here that “the taming, civilizing and fascinating power of the function of the picture” (Seminar XI 116) can intervene:

He [The painter] gives something for the eye to feed on, but he invites the person to whom the picture is presented to lay down his gaze there as one lays down one’s weapons. This is the pacifying,
Apollonian effect of painting. Something is given not so much to the gaze as to the eye, something that involves the abandonment, the laying down, of the gaze. (101)

In M. Safouan’s words, we may conclude that “the eye seeks relaxation from the gaze” in contemplation (Seminar XI 103). That is, once the subject believes what the painter offers to be seen is exactly what he wants to see, he will feel satisfied and temporarily cease to be tortured by his scopic drive.

As for why painters, almost unanimously, seek to produce the Apollonian effect of appeasement, Steven Z. Levine answers the question by succinctly summarizing Lacan’s theory of art: the painting is the “Imaginary lure” the artist offers to the Other “in the hope that its duly constituted representatives—Mother, Father, Monarch, Patron, Critic, Public—will lay down the formidable weapon of their gaze and look kindly upon the work of art as an acceptable sacrificial gift” (82). Describing Cézanne’s application of paint to canvas as akin to the falling of the rain, Lacan is believed to have conceived of the painter’s brushwork as “the terminal result of a passionately embodied sacrificial gesture in the face of the hungry gaze” (Levine 89):

What occurs as these strokes, which go to make up the miracle of the picture, fall like rain from the painter’s brush is not choice, but something else. . . . Should not the question be brought closer to what I called the rain of the brush? If a bird were to paint would it not be by letting fall its feathers, a snake by casting off its scales, a tree by letting fall its leaves? What it amounts to is the first act in the laying down of the gaze. (Lacan, Seminar XI 114)

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6 Lacan’s elaboration on the split between the eye and the gaze can be found in Seminar XI, in which the example he borrows from Sartre can best illustrate how the gaze slips from vision and is therefore “not a seen gaze”: “far from speaking of the emergence of this gaze as of something that concerns the organ of sight, he refers to the sound of rustling leaves, suddenly heard while out hunting, to a footstep heard in a corridor” (84). As a matter of fact, in Seminar X Lacan has already formulated this concept by referring to the scene in which Oedipus tears out his eyes at Colonus. He contends that the anxiety evoked by this scene comes not so much from man’s possibility of maiming himself as from the impossible sight “of your own eyes lying on the ground” (162). Clearly, it is the split between the eye and the gaze that accounts for this impossible sight of being gazed at by one’s own eyes.
To put it simply, the painted canvas, like the painter’s cast-off skin, ultimately is aimed to “throw the Other off my trail”: “Who you lookin’ at? You lookin’ at me? Well, don’t look at me, look at this instead and let me be” (Levine 82).

Notably, Lacan does not posit *dompte-regard* as the painters’ final goal. Although he finds that many paintings seek to pacify the viewer by presenting something harmonious to appreciate, works capable of laying bare the dimension of the Lacanian real are necessary to explicate his psychoanalytic notions. As Levine points out, Lacan “likened the self-negating illusionism of art to the illusion-rupturing practices of psychoanalysis” (49). More specifically, the key examples to which Lacan had recourse functioned to remind the viewer of the emptiness of the Thing. Take, for example, the works of Italian painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo: *The Librarian*, and *Four Seasons*. Arcimboldo arranges books, fruits, flowers, or other objects, to compose the image of a human face, and in this Lacan sees paintings tailor-made to illustrate the psychoanalytic truth that “if there is a need for a persona it is because behind, perhaps, every form slips away and vanishes”:

In short this production of that which in its essential shape presents itself as the human image, the image of another, will be realized in the Mannerist method by the coalescence, combination, the accumulation of a pile of objects the total of which will be charged with representing what henceforth manifests itself at once as substance and illusion because, at the same time as the appearance of the human image is sustained, something is suggested which can be imagined in the disaggregation of objects which, by presenting in a way the function of the mask, show at the same time the problematic of this mask. (*Seminar VIII*, 19 April 1961)

As Levine points out, at stake for Lacan is “not the visual trickery of painting an Imaginary semblance of a human being” but “the frank declaration of the artifice of its Symbolic identity as a subject of the Other’s enigmatically masked desire”: “So why do I don the Symbolic disguise of my social persona, Latin for ‘mask’? In order to fend off the suspicion that beneath the mask there is in fact nothing of substance to see” (75). Lacan’s elaboration of *The Ambassadors* is another clear manifestation of his theory: a good painting “is not simply what hides the real, it surely is that, but, at the same time, it indicates it” (*Seminar XIII*, 18 May 1966). In this painting, the anamorphic skull, the “phallic ghost” (*Seminar XI* 88), subtly
disrupts the perspectival illusion created by the two figures. As we know, we can hardly recognize the “stain” in this painting as a skull unless we view it from a particular angle. But as soon as the unrecognizable shape, which initially resembles the profile of the masculine erecticle organ, “surges forth in its erect visible form” (Levine 77), we recognize it to be a skull and thus a reminder of our own nothingness. Here, the relation between presence and absence, being and nothingness, is reconfigured as dialectical and chiasmatic in a typically Lacanian way: the presence of the erect form of the anamorphic image indicates not so much the subject’s solid being as his dismemberment, or, to put it another way, his self-cancellation. At the same time, it is the absence, the lack of being, which drives the subject to encircle the void and thereby to constitute himself. For Lacan, what Holbein makes visible for us through the anamorphic skull is therefore something pertaining to the dimension of the real: “as subjects, we are literally called into the picture” (Seminar XI 92) and represented here “as annihilated—annihilated in the form that is, strictly speaking, the imaged embodiment of the minus-phi of castration” (88-89).

If we take Lacan’s conception of expressionism into account, we will be further tempted to conclude that paintings which appeal directly to the gaze are more likely to uncover the dimension of the real and thus rank high in Lacan’s estimation of art. Lacan distinguishes expressionism from those painting styles that invite the viewer to lay down his gaze, for they provide something different by way of “a certain satisfaction of what is demanded by the gaze” (Seminar XI 101):

Indeed, you saw clearly enough last time that after declaring that there is in painting a certain dompte-regard, a taming of the gaze, that is to say, that he who looks is always led by the painting to lay down his gaze, I immediately introduced the corrective that it is nevertheless in a quite direct appeal to the gaze that expressionism is situated. For those who remain unconvinced, I will explain what I mean. I am thinking of the work of such painters as Munch, James Ensor, Kubin. . . . (Seminar XI 109)

Accordingly, Levine infers that, informed of contemporary trends in the art world, Lacan “claimed to see a direct exposure of the painting to the gaze” in expressionism (86). A Lacanian reading of Edvard Munch’s Scream, for example, serves to locate a direct appeal to the anxiety-provoking gaze in this painting: “The gaze silently demands ‘Show yourself to me!’”, and the painter complies by thrusting
forward a contorted figure seeking to answer the enigmatic call with a stifled cry, ‘What do you want?’” (86). Further, Levine links The Scream to Italian conceptual artist Piero Manzoni’s Merda d’Artista (Artist’s Shit) on the grounds that both reveal how artists desperately attempt to “appease the silent demand of the inscrutable gaze”: the masochistic separation of ourselves from the abject, the faeces, the droppings of matter, becomes a way of responding to the Other’s sadistic gaze (90), that is, a way of posing, like the contorted figure in The Scream, the question “What do you want from me?”. However, can we thus infer that contemporary artists’ proclivity to produce abject art finds its justification in Lacan’s theory, for the “subject of art was repeatedly urged by Lacan to eschew the illusory plentitude of the image and identify itself with that abject material turd” (Levine 89)?

Although Lacan expects that the viewer will traverse the fantasy paintings offer to identify with the nothingness of his being, it does not mean the only way for artists to achieve this aim is to resort to abject art. Lacan regards certain kinds of art as more important than others; anamorphosis paintings, for example, are highlighted as marking the point of reversal in the history of art: “the interest of anamorphosis is described as a turning point when the artist completely reverses the use of that illusion of space, when he forces it to enter into the original goal, that is to transform it into the support of the hidden reality” (Seminar VII 141). But no sooner does Lacan prioritize anamorphosis than he reminds us that every work of art makes “something different out of that object” even when it appears to be nothing more than the imitation of an object: “The object is established in a certain relationship to the Thing and is intended to encircle and to render both present and absent” (141; emphasis added). Illustrating the point using Cézanne’s apples, Lacan argues that “the more the object is presented in the imitation, the more it opens up

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7 Notably, Lacan’s interpretation of this artwork gives more weight to the voice than the gaze. Covering his ears, opening his mouth wide, and screaming, this “human shape” is certainly a “phallic being” exposed under the gaze of the Other. But more intriguing is that we have no idea what this scream is, nor who will hear it. We do not hear this scream because, as Lacan states, “the scream creates the abyss into which silence rushes” (Seminar XII, 17 Mar. 1965). Žižek further clarifies that Munch’s Scream is a “sound of silence,” “the visual rendering of the point at which words break down”: “it is not that silence is broken, but that silence itself breaks, interrupts, the continuous murmur of the Real, thus opening up a space in which words can be spoken” (224). In short, it is impossible for the phallic being to utter the question, “What do you want from me?”, unless his scream interrupts the chaotic real to open the space of silence for words to emerge.

8 Merda d’artista, as Piero Manzoni’s excremental production, is a series of packaged tins which the artist alleged to have contained “his own real fecal matter” (Giesbrecht and Levin 143). According to Harvey Giesbrecht and Charles Levin, “each can contained about thirty grams and was priced according to the equivalent value of the weight in gold” (Giesbrecht and Levin 143).
the dimension in which illusion is destroyed and aims at something else”: the mystery in the way Cézanne paints apples lies in that “the relationship to the real as it is renewed in art at that moment makes the object appear purified” (141). To summarize, Lacan does not see anamorphosis, trompe-l’oeil, or any other technique as a prerequisite for attaining the goal of uncovering the real. Works which encircle the Thing to make it “both present and absent” have the potential to break the perspectival illusion. In other words, there is no need to think that abject art is the only means to destroy the illusions of representation. Even so, the problem is not yet solved. We still wonder, if transgressive art is an effective means of uncovering the real, then why not? In the next section, I further explicate Lacan’s notion of the screen and introduce Walter Benjamin’s conceptualization of the aura to reframe the debate about the abject art.

II.

Drawing on Julia Kristeva’s theory of the abject/abjection, Hal Foster defines abject art as that which rejects any sublimation of the object-gaze in order to “evoke the real as such” (152). According to Foster, abject art has tended in two directions: “[T]he first is to identify with the abject, to approach it somehow—to probe the wound of trauma, to touch the obscene object-gaze of the real. The second is to represent the condition of abjection in order to provoke its operation—to catch abjection in the act, to make it reflexive, even repellent in its own right” (157). Both approaches, supposedly, aim at challenging the status quo. Though Foster does not dismiss such “abject testing of the symbolic order” as totally ineffective, he does note that the option the artifice of abjection offers often turns out to be either Oedipal naughtiness or infantile perversion: either to provoke the paternal law with the secret wish to be punished, or to opt for the most defiled in the secret faith that the most perverse is necessarily the most potent (159). “Is abjection a refusal of power, its ruse, or its reinvention?”—the question reveals Foster’s awareness that abject art may also exacerbate the viewer’s exclusion of what is alien and uncanny (Foster 168). If contemporary artists intend to resist the oppressing social order by deliberately provoking the viewers’ sense of repulsion, they should also endeavor to be competent enough to register the possibilities of breakthrough rather than simply breaking down traditional values. But, as Foster notes, many artists appear to be nothing more than people eager to talk dirty or misbehave in galleries—little wonder so many viewers turn away in disgust from abject art and return to time-honored aesthetic standards. For Foster, abject art of
this kind might “reconfirm a given abjection” and inadvertently support the normativity of the symbolic order (157). Even when the artist claims the work is intended to confront viewers with the abject so that they can accept the strangeness within themselves, there is no guarantee it will not paradoxically perpetuate the conservative mechanism of abjection.

Foster’s analysis of abject art is indebted to Lacan’s notion of the screen. In *Seminar XI*, Lacan uses the diagram of two superimposed triangles to illustrate the intricate relation between the subject and the object being viewed, and the relation between the image/screen and the gaze. As I argued in the first section, the gaze is not a seen gaze and cannot be grasped in a concrete fashion. In fact, for Lacan the gaze will not be revealed unless it is screened. Nevertheless, as Foster notes, some contemporary artists are interested in encouraging “the gaze to shine, the object to stand, the real to exist, in all the glory (or the horror) of its pulsatile desire” (140). In other words, they seek “not only to attack the image but to tear at the screen, or to suggest that it is already torn” (Foster 141). What they fail to understand is that the gaze is “visible” only when we recognize its invisibility. In effect, these works may not achieve the self-alleged function of confronting the viewer with the traumatic real, however hard they try to evoke the gaze directly.

According to Lacan, the screen is “the locus of mediation” which the human subject, as the subject of the desire, knows how to play with “as that beyond which there is the gaze” (*Seminar XI* 107). As we can hardly come face-to-face with the traumatic gaze, the screen functions to mediate the gaze for the subject and to protect the subject from it (Foster 140). To use Lacan’s own words, the screen operates “not because it can be traversed, but on the contrary because it is opaque” (*Seminar XI* 96). If the gaze is not screened from the subject, the power it exercises can be “anti-life” (Lacan, *Seminar XI* 118). On the contrary, as the screen wards off the traumatic real, it points paradoxically to the gaze, which remains behind and beyond. To be more precise, “the screen allows the subject, at the point of the picture, to behold the object, at the point of light. Otherwise it would be impossible.

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9 The first triangle, namely, the perspectival model, positions the looking subject at the geometrical point. The second diagram introduces the point of light to show how the subject is illuminated by the light emitted from the object of his own look (Lacan, *Seminar XI* 91). For Lacan, the superimposition of the two triangles in the third diagram may account fully for the mechanism of gaze. As Foster succinctly states, the diagram reveals that “the subject is also under the regard of the object, photographed by its light, pictured by its gaze” (139). Since I have explored how Lacan’s notion of the gaze disrupts the hegemony of vision in “The Importance of Making Ashamed: Regarding the Pain of (Animal) Others” (*Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 35.2: 103-45) and 〈看誰在看誰？：從拉岡之觀視理論省視女性主義電影批評〉(*Chung Wai Literary Monthly* 25.4: 41-74), I will not go into a detailed discussion here.
for to see without this screen would be to be blinded by the gaze or touched by the real” (Foster 140).

Foster finds that more and more artists today are driven by an ambition “to possess the obscene vitality of the wound and to occupy the radical nihility of the corpse” (166; emphasis in original). Contemporary artists’ obsession with exposing the traumatic real and their fascination with the abject, according to Foster, ironically pushes the viewer to the paradoxical situation where one declares: “It hurts, I can’t feel anything” (166; emphasis in original). Under such circumstances, an inquiry into under what conditions the artwork may succeed in screening the real, and at the same time pointing to the real, becomes more urgent. The Buddha’s statue in the Chugu-ji nunnery in Nara, according to Lacan, is surely an exemplar of such artwork, as its “lowered eyelids protect us from the fascination of the gaze while at the same time indicating it to us” (222, 242). Other works capable of evoking Benjaminian auratic perception also indicate ways for artists to appeal to the gaze without falling prey to the cult of abjection.

To elucidate the paradox that we cannot possibly “see” the real without the screen, Lacan draws on the experiment of Gelb and Goldstein which Merleau-Ponty borrows in *The Phenomenology of Perception*: “If, by being isolated, an effect of lighting dominates us, if, for example, a beam of light directing our gaze so captivates us that it appears as a milky cone and prevents us from seeing what it illuminates, the mere fact of introducing into this field a small screen, which cuts into that which is illuminated without being seen, makes the milky light retreat, as it were, into the shadow, and allows the object it concealed to emerge” (Seminar XI 107-8). For a detailed explanation of the original experiment, see Merleau-Ponty 360-61.

Though Buddhist statues always have distinctive lower eyelids, for Lacan, the one in Chugu-ji nunnery is entirely different. While the lowered eyelid of other Buddha statutes “only lets show a line of the white and an edge of the pupil,” this one simply has “at the level of the eyes, a kind of pronounced ridge, which means that with the reflection off the wood one always seems to be able to make out an eye. But there’s nothing there in the wood” (Seminar X 228; emphasis added). That fact that “the slit of the eye on this statue has disappeared” (228) does not prevent us from being fascinated by the gaze. Rather, it is just because the figure, entirely turned towards the invisible, simultaneously “spares us this invisible” (242) that we can recognize “desire is illusion” (222; emphasis in original) without being engulfed by anxiety.

What must be added is that the term “auratic gaze” was proposed by the Benjaminian critic Miriam Hansen rather than Benjamin himself. Dissatisfied with the common understanding of Benjamin’s aura as shorthand for the particular qualities of traditional art, such as authority, authenticity, unattainability, etc., Hansen redefines Benjamin’s aura as implying “a phenomenal structure that enables the manifestation of the gaze, inevitably refracted and disjunctive, and shapes its potential meanings” (336, 342). Besides, she contends that Benjamin “attributes the agency of the auratic gaze to the object being looked at” (343). In other words, the ability to return the gaze is “already dormant in, if not constitutive of, the object” (343). In this sense, it is tenable to discuss if certain artworks are more competent to return the auratic gaze in the viewer’s experience of perception. I will further explain the significance of the auratic gaze in what follows and will apply this concept to examine Hirst’s works in the next section.
Whether Benjamin laments the decay of aura or welcomes it as enabling the emancipation of artwork from its cult value is a matter of some debate. Seeking the truth of Benjamin’s attitude only from his artwork essay tend to lead to the conclusion that he makes a case “not only for a recognition of the aura’s irreversible decline, but for its active demolition” (Hansen 355). Having analyzed the social basis of the decay of the aura, namely, “the desire of the present-day masses to ‘get closer’ to things, and their equally passionate concern for overcoming each thing’s uniqueness [Überwindung des Einmaligen jeder Gegebenheit] by assimilating it as a reproduction” (“Work of Art” 105; emphasis in original), Benjamin announces the decline of the aura as inevitable on the grounds that once technological reproducibility nullifies the criterion of authenticity, the artwork can hardly claim its auratic mode of existence. Facing the “stripping of the veil from the object, the destruction of the aura” (105), Benjamin, at least in the artwork essay, optimistically assumes that it may bring about the revolution of the social function of art: “for the first time in world history, technological reproducibility emancipates the work of art from its parasitic subservience to ritual. . . . Instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics” (106; emphasis in original). To be more specific, though contemplative immersion in auratic artwork is no longer possible, the change is not altogether negative. In fact, as the bourgeoisie degenerated, contemplative immersion “became a breeding ground for asocial behavior” (119). Under such circumstances, it is anticipated that the technological reproducibility epitomized by film will exert an important social function: “On the one hand, film furthers insight into the necessities governing our lives by its use of close-ups, by its accentuation of hidden details in familiar objects, and by its exploration of commonplace milieux through the ingenious guidance of the camera; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of a vast and unsuspected field of action” (117). Instead of concentrating before a work of art and being absorbed by its aura, modern spectators experience what Benjamin calls “reception in distraction,” which was made possible by cinema. The critical attitude developed in a state of distraction is lauded by Benjamin as a progressive reaction despite being at odds with the contemplative attitude demanded by auratic art.

If Benjamin unreservedly welcomed the decline of auratic art, our discussion of the importance of the auratic gaze would seem superfluous and even misleading. However, we cannot too hastily claim that Benjamin uncritically endorses the demolition of aura that accompanies technological reproducibility. And the artwork

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essay does not unambiguously celebrate non-auratic works of art as capable of allowing “the spectator a very definite autonomy” (Gasché 194). For Hansen, if we explore the full implications of the aura, we will notice that the artwork essay actually “restricts the concept’s potential for theorizing the transformation of experience in modernity” by “assimilating aura to a regressive fetishistic cult of beautiful semblance” (354-55). Benjamin describes aura as “neither the veil [Hülle] nor the veiled object but rather the object in its veil” and associates it with the idea of “beautiful semblance” in his early essay “Goethe’s Elective Affinities” (Hansen 353). The narrower sense of “beautiful semblance,” linking aura with aesthetic autonomy, thus seems antithetical to the productive revolutionary force much valued by Benjamin. However, the “object in its veil” can also be approached in its wider sense. Like that which simultaneously screens the real and indicates the real, “the object in its veil,” by soliciting an inquisitive gaze of the viewer, has the potential to evoke a form of perception which makes a self-reflexive meditation possible.

As Hansen reminds us, Benjamin himself established the linkage between auratic perception and gaze in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire”:¹⁴

Inherent in the gaze . . . is the expectation that it will be returned by that on which it is bestowed. Where this expectation is met, . . . there is an experience [Erfahrung] of the aura in all its fullness. . . . Experience of the aura thus arises from the fact that a response characteristic of human relationships is transposed to the relationship between humans and inanimate or natural objects. The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To experience the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look back at us. (“On Some Motifs” 338; emphasis added)

¹⁴ See particularly 339-45. Notably, for Hansen the definition of aura introduced in the artwork essay is not incompatible with the one Benjamin develops in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire”: “the two are conjoined in The Arcades Project when he invokes his ‘definition of aura as the distance of the gaze that awakens in the object looked at’” (Hansen 339-40). Moreover, the “optical unconscious” that Benjamin hails as an encouraging discovery made possible by camera, instead of being antithetical to the concept of aura, results from the “demolished fragments of auratic perception” (Hansen 357): “Aura’s epistemic structure, secularized and modernized (qua ‘profane illumination,’ Weimar flânerie, ‘mimetic faculty,’ and ‘optical unconscious’), can also be seen at work in Benjamin’s efforts to reconceptualize experience through the very conditions of its impossibility, as the only chance to counter the bungled (capitalist-imperialist) adaptation of technology that first exploded in World War One and was leading to the fascist conquest of Europe” (338; emphasis in original).
From the passage quoted above, Hansen infers that “the seemingly distinct sense of aura Benjamin develops in ‘Little History of Photography’ folds into the later definition of aura as the experience of investing a phenomenon with the ability to return the gaze (whether actual or phantasmatic)” (343). Indeed, in “Little History of Photography,” using the double portrait of the photographer Dauthendey and his fiancée as an example, Benjamin attributes the aura of early portrait photographs to “their ability to look back at us across the distance of time, answering to the gaze of the later beholder” (Hansen 343; emphasis in original):

[I]n Hill’s Newhaven fishwife, her eyes cast down in such indolent, seductive modesty, there remains something that goes beyond testimony to the photographer’s art, something that cannot be silenced, that fills you with an unruly desire to know what her name was, the woman who was alive there, who even now is still real and will never consent to be wholly absorbed in “art.” . . . No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it. (“Little History” 510)¹⁵

Notably, while Benjamin makes a sharp contrast between photography and painting to highlight the latter’s auratic effect in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” here he locates the auratic gaze in the early portrait photography. The seeming slippage shows that what matters most is not the genre; even though on many occasions it seems that “to the gaze that will never get its fill of a painting, photography is rather like food for the hungry or drink for the thirsty” (338), for

¹⁵ As Hansen rightly indicates, the “futurity that has seared the photographic image in the chance moment of exposure does not simply derive from circumstantial knowledge of its posthistory or that of its subject” (341)—in this particular case, the posthistory certainly refers to the tragedy that photographed subject slashed her veins after the birth of her sixth child. The young woman’s side glance, which passes her fiancé by and seems “absorbed in an ominous distance” (“Little History” 510), looks back at the beholder to capture his gaze. Thus, the futurity can be said to emerge “in the field of the beholder’s compulsively searching gaze” (Hansen 341).
Benjamin any art form has the potential to create the auratic effect as long as its returned gaze elicits self-recognition qua self-alienation in the viewer (Hansen 354).

To sum up, Hansen finds that the auratic experience, for Benjamin, is just like the seer’s visionary encounter with an alien self: “In this mode of vision, the gaze of the object, however familiar, is experienced by the subject as other and prior, strange and heteronomous. Whether conceptualized in terms of a constitutive lack, split, or loss, this other gaze in turn confronts the subject with a fundamental strangeness within and of the self” (345). The Benjaminian auratic perception and the Lacanian gaze, seen in this light, are in tune with each other, for both enable the viewer to confront what is alien and uncanny. Following Hansen to introduce the notion of the auratic gaze into our discussion, I am not saying that we must read Benjamin’s aura through the prism of the Lacanian gaze, or vice versa. What I seek to highlight is that the idea of the auratic gaze will direct a new possibility to anyone who undertakes to create a work of art: instead of choosing to produce either abject art, which simply shocks and disgusts, or traditional aesthetic work, which pigeonholes the viewer in a passive position of contemplative immersion, artists may appeal to art capable of evoking the auratic gaze as a third means to catalyze the viewer’s reflexive thoughts. In the following section, I examine whether Hirst’s works are effective in enabling “a visionary encounter with an alien self,” or fall into the category of abject art because in playing with the screen Hirst has gone too far and ruptured the screen. It is hoped the relationship between auratic experience and meta-ethical responses will also be uncovered through such analysis.

III.

Among Hirst’s works, the shark piece entitled The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living is probably the most acclaimed, even though the extensively reproduced images of the Hirstean shark also raise the

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16 As a matter of fact, we should keep in mind that while Lacan’s theorization of the gaze points to the lack/desire of the subject without laying bare the disjunctive temporality involved in the process of beholding, Benjamin’s auratic gaze, as a phenomenal structure betokening the constellation of past and present, has more to do with the dialectic between prehistory and posthistory.

suspicion that it has become a fetish object lacking artistic value. If we, following the discussion in the previous section, admit that work capable of evoking the aural gaze will open up a space for critical reflection, then it is easy to understand why the shark piece is particularly thought-provoking. As Rob Bartram points out, “the combination of bulging glass case and formaldehyde liquid refracts the view of the shark as you walk around the tank. Momentarily, the shark appears to move, causing you to glance back and forward to confirm that this is just an optical illusion” (9). The experience of encountering the shark’s gaze is so uncanny that most viewers are likely to be prompted to serious thinking. For Bartram, it is in performing the movement of glancing back and forward that the viewer becomes “aware of how nature is enacted through visuality”: On the surface, like wildlife documentary cams that seek to “capture nature at its most natural, from every conceivable angle” (9), we are witnessing the realities of nature through this technologically mediated work. Yet the vitrines, playing on ideas of distance and spectacle, “make the viewer aware of the act of viewing, of the spectatorial traits that are associated with nature” (9). Moreover, Bartram argues that Hirst’s use of highly toxic liquid to preserve life forms is a parody of “Western culture’s disastrous preservationist tendencies” (8). Drawing on Jean Baudrillard’s notion of hyperreality, he contends that

\[\text{the shark, as with the other natural history installations, is less an imitation of nature than a hologram version of nature itself. Hirst does not proclaim this as a new vision of nature, nor does he seek}\]

\[\text{18 In addition to the image of the shark, “the motifs that Damien has made familiar through his work—the butterflies, ping-pong balls, dying cigarettes, dead meat, Insect-O-Cutters”—all became part of modern life as the images were imprinted on T-shirts, high-fashion outfits, or umbrellas (Burn 8).}\]

\[\text{19 Hirst himself has explained the significance of his choice of formaldehyde: “I use formaldehyde because it is dangerous and it burns your skin. If you breathe it in it chokes you and it looks like water. I associate it with memory” (Hirst et al. 298).}\]

\[\text{20 Hirst claims that \textit{Natural History}, the collective title for the group of animals in formaldehyde, will come to look like a zoo. A zoo of dead animals” (Morgan 20). The remark seems to prove Bartram’s argument tenable if we read it as revealing Hirst’s criticism of the zoo which, allegedly playing the role of preservation and conservation of wildlife, is no more than a collection of inanimate objects. However, taking into account Hirst’s tendency to distance himself from animal rights discourse, I have reservation about construing \textit{Natural History} series as a parody of zoos. Recognizing Hirst’s showmanship, Bracewell contends that Hirst is good at using spectacle as a medium for art making. Hirst’s animal series, in this light, reveals more an attempt to “play conceptual, artistic and thematic games with the relationship between spectacle and empathy” (22) than direct criticism of our mistreatment of non-human animals. Later, I will further discuss Hirst’s art in terms of animal ethics.}\]
reconciliation with nature in the spirit of the Romantic art tradition. There is no suggestion that the vitrified animals are symbolic of a metaphysical, transcendent order. For Hirst, nature is hyper-realized, “perfected” by the gradual elimination of defects and impurities, and by its endless duplication through science, technology and the media. Hirst appears to be mimicking nature’s “minimalist,” banal status in Western culture where its plight becomes all too apparent through momentary glimpses of documentary film, cinema, advertising and consumer good packaging. (7)

To be more specific, while Western culture eagerly seeks to appease itself “with conservation ideals that fashion ‘perfected’ notions of nature,” it is actually enacting “the final act of severance from nature’s reality” through the scientific, technological, and media reproduction of nature (8).

Bartram is certainly not alone in endowing Hirst’s shark installation with such significance. Ron Broglio alleges that “the work can be seen to pivot around the idea that the dead shark ‘knows’ something that is ‘physically impossible’ for the ‘mind’ of the human viewer” (17). That the viewer cannot see the shark’s innards on display, for Broglio, subtly reveals how the “absolute knowledge and full presence” is denied to the human subject (18). In other words, by showing the “reflexive interiority of the human subject does not gain access to the animal interior” (17), Hirst is believed to have manifested how “animal interiority may be immaterial simply in the same way that human interiority is also not visible bones nor flesh” (20). According to Broglio, this installation challenges “the tradition of lifting nature’s veil” by representing the shark as a secret that even human perception with reflexive consciousness cannot decode (23). And it is when “we are haunted by the veil that remains before us but is impossible to lift” (22), that we realize we humans are far from omnipotent, no matter how much we manage to control nature.

Though the shark piece stands out as Hirst’s most representative work, for his admirers, other animal installations are no less illuminating. Terry Tempest Williams believes his animal series successfully brings art to the discussion of the wild and awakens those who are oblivious to the natural world (42). Bartram maintains that all these installations “attest to the scientific and clinical formality typified by Western culture’s fascination with genetic and cryogenic research and modern medicine”: “They are cold and hygienic, reminding us of the scientific and medical obsession with categorization of the natural world in which the chaotic and
dysfunctional are not allowed to exist” (8). In the same vein, Kieran Cashell argues that Hirst’s “specimens” are deliberately displayed in a scientific context so as to mimic scientific detachment; that is, the cold and dispassionate aesthetic is the medium used to subvert the aesthetic disinterestedness and to challenge the ideology of science (196-97). Hirst’s installations apparently evoke the auratic gaze and thereby make possible diverse interpretations, even though he did not intend to call forth all of the effects. His specimens and the glass vitrines he uses to accommodate these dead animals serve to activate the process of reflecting upon the issues of visuality, science, nature, and primarily, death.

Indeed, if Hirst’s animal works can be seen to return the gaze, the motif of death, itself intriguing enough to fascinate the viewer, must contribute much to eliciting the auratic gaze. Notably, though Hirst’s animal series brings us face-to-face with “the meaningless medical preservation of life in the shadow of death” (Cashell 192), the threat posed by death is somehow mediated. As we have witnessed in The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living, “the sculpture concedes death to be absolute zero, the impossible, the ruination of representation” (Cashell 178; emphasis in original). Indeed, the shark seems to look at us because we, too anxious to confront death, feel that we are there with it, that it could eat us (Cashell 178). But on the other hand, as Giovanni Aloi suggests, the sublime only functions “when the viewer is at some distance or protected from the source of overwhelming fear” (4). Insofar as the glass tank in this installation “visually prevents the shark from ‘killing’ the viewer,” a certain pleasure can even be found in panic (Aloi 4). In short, we are simultaneously reminded of death and kept from it as this “detached, distanced, oddly smiling” shark casts “the new kind of ghostly, frozen, remote look at death and suffering” (Burn 7-8). As for the fish sculpture Isolated Elements Swimming in the Same Direction for the Purpose of Understanding, it succeeds in conveying a philosophical message about human existence without showing the unbearable sight of death. The cabinet of fish

21 Noticing the typical response to The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living is that the shark may return the viewer’s gaze, Hirst commented that it is not only because the shark is preserved in liquid “which looks very similar to its natural habitat” but also because the viewer himself is obsessed with “trying to make the dead live or the living live forever” (Hirst et al. 285). In fact, the obsession with death has driven Hirst’s artwork from the very beginning. His Self-portrait with Dead Head clearly reveals his fascination with the motif of death. Though the photograph violates “our sense of the dignity owed the dead,” it is believed to have “created an unforgettable image of life and death and an artistic path that takes us through the body of his work from that moment on” (Danto 54).

preserved in salt solution, displaying “the diversity of species, where nothing is random” (Williams 43), even produces an incredible sense of harmony: the individually cased fish, swimming “blindly in the same direction without interaction”, is actually “a cold and clinical metaphor for a society without conflict. A utopian ideal of a harmony that comes at an unthinkable cost of sameness and emotional confinement” (Ellis 205). Similarly, in the sheep piece, *Away From the Flock*, the “angelically white sheep with pristine fragility” is thought to be “bringing to mind the biblical parable of the lost lamb, and the value of protecting the weak and innocent” (Ellis 205). The aforementioned works, by keeping the animal interior veiled, are likely to activate the auratic gaze dormant in them because the traumatic real is blocked from view to a certain degree.

In some other installations, Hirst shows the full bodies of animals cut open. *Mother and Child Divided*, for example, displays sectioned cows compressed against the transparent glass interior. The four sections of a bisected cow and calf are showcased in tanks of formaldehyde between which the viewer can pass. Even though the entrails and flesh are exposed, and the work thus appears somewhat uncanny, some critics still read meta-ethical values into it: “Flattened against glass walls, each animal’s interior was revealed as fascinating rather than repellent, making us reconsider the links between the meat that we eat and the quality of animality that we share” (*Love, Labour and Loss* 81). It is even argued that while ostensibly devoid of sentiment, the work actually touches “the most elemental of human emotions, that of the bond between a mother and child” (Nicholson).

23 Of course, Hirst’s conceptual art is never without its ridiculers. John McJannet, a journalist of *Daily Star*, has sardonically exhibited his chips next to this fish sculpture, claiming that his “chip sculpture” was especially designed to complement the fish for the exhibition at London’s Serpentine Gallery (Hirst et al. 152).


26 Given that viewers are “often repulsed or shocked at the visceral materiality” (Broglio 3) of this sculpture, it is debatable whether *Mother and Child Divided*, like other works which display inner organs of animals, has fallen into the category of abject art. But as Ron Broglio also notices, most viewers are at the same time “captured by wonder at the insides of these domesticated animals” (3). In a similar vein, Aloi argues that “it is the friction between the attraction and revulsion generated by the display that makes the work worthy of attention” (52; emphasis added). He finds that gallery visitors are so tempted to walk between the two halves that they often “spontaneously form an orderly queue at one end of the piece in order to experience the spectacle of the open animal carcass” (52). The complex network of animals’ organs, in this way, functions “as a piece of abstract beauty while reminding us of the undeniable biological similarities we share with animals” (52-53). Of course, either *Mother and Child Divided* or his other works can elicit a range of incompatible reactions. Some may suggest that the butchered animal series is offensive enough to be labeled as abject art. But the friction between the attraction and revulsion...
Hirst’s equally famous work, *Some Comfort Gained from the Acceptance of the Inherent Lies in Everything*, is also viewed as profoundly significant. Hirst slices a cow and a steer into six pieces each and mounts the twelve sections in vertical tanks: “they are presented in a line, their segments shuffled to create one long, impossible animal facing two directions at once” (Ellis 205). Patricia Ellis suggests that the work presents “a physical and spiritual union between partners, a desperate isolation in their merger” (205). Moreover, as Hirst invites the viewer to walk through these twelve cross-sections “with no order in mind” (Williams 44), it is believed that the work enables the viewers to “confront the wonder of the organism as is [sic], not as a continuum but as a design, the sheer beauty and texture of functional design”: “We see the black-and-white hide; there is no place to hide inside the guts of a cow sliced and stretched through space like an accordion between your very large hands” (Williams 43). For Williams, the clear display of internal organs thus reminds the viewer to think about “the topography of the body, the cow’s body, our body [sic]” (43). Obviously, though these works appear more disturbing than the animal series in which the carcasses remain intact, quite a few critics still find them thought-provoking rather than repellent. This, I suggest, is because the traumatic effects of these works are somehow dampened. Instead of deliberately shocking the audience, these sectioned animals are used to symbolize either the desperate isolation or the corporeal fragility of human existence.

*This Little Piggy Went to the Market, This Little Piggy Stayed Home* is another piece that reveals how Hirst succeeds in simultaneously screening and unveiling the traumatic real. At first sight, Hirst is replaying the same old trick by preserving bisected animals in formaldehyde. However, the operations of this sculpture deliberately make grinding, sawing noises: the glass cases of the bisected carcass “were mounted on a short track, driven by an electric motor, so that the two halves of the body, with meticulous slowness, ground back and forth past each other, perfectly re-joined and re-formed for an instant, then cut apart again for the long remainder of the cycle” (Baker, *Postmodern Animal* 85). As the work impacts on our vision as well as hearing, we are driven to ponder on the implied message it

and the sense of beauty conveyed through the uncanniness, I contend, salvage this sort of work from being classified as the abject art defined in the second section.

27 Damien Hirst. 22 Aug. 2014 <http://www.damienhirst.com/some-comfort-gained-from-the-a>. In Stuart Morgan’s interview with Hirst, he asked Hirst what the inherent lies refer to, and Hirst replied, “That you have to kill things in order to look at them” (20). Morgan then made a sharp retort: “they’re your lies, not everyone’s . . .” (21; emphasis in original).

seeks to convey. Hirst’s own interpretation of the pig sculpture—“I like the way that one half moves like a bacon slicer” (qtd. in Baker, *Postmodern Animal* 85)—is one way to decipher this “dark philosophical humor”: The work “articulates the restless human search for certainty, in the face of constant oscillation between states of hope and fear. . . . [H]is work can deploy the slapstick cruelty of cartoon humor—in which fate will always make a comic stooge of its chosen victim” (Bracewell 21). And Baker, regarding the work as undermining the audience’s omnipotence, indicates another way to interpret the sculpture: as highlighting their powerlessness by making them experience a sense of shame, “whether that shame is attributed to the displayed animal or to the viewing human” (85). 29 Again, we find that if Hirst’s animal series can be said to have encouraged open thought on death, it is paradoxically because the threat of death is kept at bay.

However, we can hardly say the same of Hirst’s “grim spectacle” (Cashell 189) such as *A Thousand Years*. 30 This fly piece is designed to be a work that has no second life; that is, it “could be experienced only in the present and in person” (Hirst et al. 13). The installation composes of a twin-chambered steel-framed glass container: “in a pool of blood darkened by the ultraviolet glow of an electronic insect-killer, the severed head of a cow is left to decay. In the other cell, a smaller cubic container with jars of sugar-water has been spiked with the larvae of the flesh-fly” (Cashell 188). The flies crawl over the cow’s head, lay eggs in the flesh and metamorphose into maggots. The maggots then “mature into flies that gather in the pool of blood to drink, leaving tiny red footprints on the glass installation, while some flies are destined to die as a life-stopping buzz in the electric fly-killing machine” (Williams 43). The work is satirically criticized by Julian Stallabrass as “*schlock* (‘the stuff of horror movies’)” (Cashell 190). Bartram, likewise, sees Hirst’s use of live insects in *A Thousand Years* as designed to “assault the viewer’s senses” (3). Indeed, *A Thousand Years* is one of Hirst’s most disturbing works,

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29 In addition to shame, Cashell contends that Hirst’s works also compel us to feel “humiliation and guilt for the instrumental and systematic abuse of those that deserve our care” (175). Notably, though Cashell and Baker both assume the sense of shame as the common experience shared by Hirst’s viewers, Cashell’s interpretation of the viewer’s response is more arbitrary or even smacks of wishful thinking. For Baker, Hirst’s work is able to encourage open and imaginative thought (*Postmodern Animal* 61); for Cashell, Hirst necessarily evokes “an emotional response that activates the ‘sympathy’ associated with the ethics of care to provoke our fundamental compassion for the animal-as-other” (175).

though he insists that it is a plain piece. Nicky Coutts describes this piece as “some sort of crazed experiment, an insect holocaust,” and the glass cabinet containing the flies “appears to be made for the abject voyeur, the deranged scientist at large”: “Hirst’s mass of flies is repellent because time has been condensed and the eye is forced to accommodate what it has come to fear, agents of fragmentation outnumbering, overwhelming, and preying on a vestige of wholeness” (305). Hirst’s play with death, this time, evidently ruptures the screen to compel the subject to confront the real. Likewise, his $Two F^{****}$, $Two Watching$ repels and even annoys art critics. It is “an installation of four dead cows, positioned to look as if they were copulating. The animals were to have been hermetically sealed in a case of steel and glass, with tubes connected to carbon filters eliminating the smell of decay” (Hirst et al. 151). In both works, Hirst deliberately allows the animals to rot: “As the cows continue to decay, the meat becomes visually attractive and very colorful, which I like” (151). But they are not so attractive to the public, apparently. Many people find these pieces outrageous, or at least, disturbingly unpleasant. In fact, $Two F^{****}$, $Two Watching$ leaked poisonous gases when it was on display at the Tate Gallery, and visitors were subject to emergency evacuation. Hirst assumes the work to be about “sex and death,” but his justification does not safeguard it from severe criticism: “Plainly, in their attempts to be provocative, some contemporary artists are graduating from graffiti to stink bombs. They may find some collector [sic] to indulge their pranks, but grown-ups will pass by on the other side” (150). Transgressive artwork of this sort has obviously become what Foster terms abject art.

Some such works are less than welcome. A sculpture similar to $Two F^{****}$, $Two Watching$ was banned from an exhibition at the Manhattan gallery in 1995. To simulate the movement of a dead cow and bull inside a glass tank, a hydraulic device was inserted into the dead animals. They gradually rotted away even as they continued to move and thus retained some appearance of life. The New York health department banned the work “on the grounds that it might explode or cause spectators to vomit” (Hirst et al. 150). This kind of work indeed makes Hirst famous/notorious, but the message the artist seeks to convey through the work, if any, can hardly reach the audience once banned. Facing the increasing use of animal carcasses in art, Anthony Julius charges this kind of taboo-breaking art with forcing audiences “into the presence of the ugly, the bestial, the vicious, the

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31 Being questioned if he finds the work a bit disgusting, Hirst replies: “A bit. I don’t think it is. I like it. . . . Being sensational isn’t sensational anymore. People do it all the time. The piece will look quite plain” (Hirst et al. 30-31).
menacing” (qtd. in Baker, “You Kill Things” 77). But, for Baker, Julius seems “more acutely concerned by the ‘cruelty’ to the sensibilities of art’s human viewers than to the lives of its occasional animal victims” (“You Kill Things” 77–78). We do not have to follow Julius to read “a certain heartlessness” into Hirst’s ‘ignominious’ display of these dead animals” (“You Kill Things” 77). Nor should we echo Julius’s hostile attitude and assume animal art an assault on audiences. In this debate, Baker’s argument may be more convincing—the reason some viewers find transgressive animal art disgusting is not that they are concerned with animal ethics, but because they are offended. Nevertheless, we have to admit that if the cruelty to the viewer’s sensibilities is unbearable, both attentive viewing and critical thinking will be suspended. As I argued in the previous section, we cannot directly confront the traumatic real in the face of its threat. Accordingly, the intention to unmask the corruptibility/corporeality/animality of human beings can only be fulfilled when this sort of unbearable real is, to a certain extent, masked. What artists obsessed with exposing the abject neglect is precisely the paradox that the real will be unveiled when it is veiled.

Thus far, we have seen how the micro-universe of death presented by Hirst can reveal “the terrible beauty that lies in death” (Danto 53). Yet it is also undeniable that sometimes he incurs the anxiety and even wrath of the audience. Therefore, I suggest that we distinguish between the diverse effects produced by Hirst’s various works rather than hastily lauding them as equally auratic. What is more, even when we admit that some of his works are capable of evoking the auratic gaze and thereby provide food for thought, we have to further explore whether his display of real animals smacks of anthropocentrism for reducing non-human animals to concepts of art and philosophy. As we have seen, Hirst’s admirers constantly try to infuse his works with meta-ethical values. They either argue that Hirst’s works function to raise ecological consciousness or justify his

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32 Bart H. Welling, when faulting “ecopornography” for its concealment of “both the material circumstances of their creation by humans and whatever impact humans may have had on the landforms and animals they depict” (57), classifies Hirst’s work into the models of what he considers “a less ecopornographic politics of representation” owing to its possibility of raising ecological consciousness (69). According to Welling, the term “ecopornography” was first used by Jerry Mander, a Deep Ecologist, as a synonym of “greenwash” (54). Welling employs the term to refer to “a type of contemporary visual discourse made up of highly idealized, anthropomorphized views of landscapes and nonhuman animals” (57). As ecoporn capitalizes on “posed” animals and visually appealing places to fabricate the “fantasy of benign but total visual power over these nonhuman creatures and habitats that are both comfortingly humanized and pleasingly ‘untainted’ by humans,” it places “the viewer in the same asymmetrical, sexualized
use of butchered animals as a strategy to arouse the viewer’s empathy. Nevertheless, Hirst’s own comment reveals that it is beauty, not empathy, which is his primary concern. Take Hirst on *Mother and Child Divided*, for example: “What do you do if an animal is symmetrical? You cut it in half and you can see what’s on the inside and outside simultaneously. It’s beautiful. The only problem is that it’s dead” (Hirst et al. 302). The tension between critical interpretation and the artist’s own intention is palpable here. Arguably, Hirst’s repeated use of animal carcasses is more “to address questions of human mortality” (Baker, *Artist/Animal* 8; emphasis in original) than to heighten our sensitivities about animal suffering. Broglio also points out that “animal flesh is put to human spiritual ends” in Hirst’s work (11). In this light, we have reasons to suspect that Hirst’s works speak to affairs that are predominantly of human concern.

Notably, Hirst has suggested that his animal installations “work equally well without the vitrified animals because the vitrines and the formaldehyde themselves convey the same sorts of ideas about nature, only in ‘shorthand’” (Bartram 8). In other words, he claims that the use of animals is not indispensable for achieving the typical Hirstean effect, for the tank filled with formaldehyde is, itself, powerful enough to function as a kind of *memento mori* [“remember that you will die”] (Ellis 205). However, if it is true that “[t]he huge volume of liquid is enough. You don’t really need the shark at all” (Hirst et al. 282), why does Hirst still include the shark in his installation? As a matter of fact, when his first shark piece, due to some technical flaws, began to decompose and rendered the solution murky, the Saatchi’s curators decided to “remove the shark, skin it and stretch the skin over a fiberglass mold before replacing it—a decision that didn’t satisfy Hirst” (Baker, *Artist/Animal* 206). Hirst commented on his dissatisfaction with the renovation of the first shark in 2006: “‘It didn’t look as frightening,’ he said. ‘You could tell it wasn’t real. It had no weight’” (qtd. in Baker, *Artist/Animal* 206). If the real animal’s presence, or, its “weight,” is something Hirst relies on heavily to impact his viewer, should not the artist be expected to engage with animal ethics in a more productive way? Alois contends that if contemporary animal art totally ignores ethical considerations concerning the use of animals, it would “not only be missing the opportunity to engage with the current, critically informed discussion on animals, but would also fail animals once again in using them, instead of trying to understand them from new and different perspectives” (124; emphasis in original). In the concluding section, I bring Mark Fairnington into discussion and into contrast with Hirst, in relationship to its subjects as standard pornography, even if its primary goal is not sexual arousal” (56-57).
hopes of explaining how an artist can avoid the pitfall of using animals without displaying concern for them.

Coda

Fairnington is well known for using insects, birds and other animals as his subjects in paintings intended to retell the “unnatural history.” Unlike Hirst, whose *Damien Hirst: Natural History* series more or less exhibits a sense of visual playfulness in the liberty he takes with animal carcasses, Fairnington seriously addresses the ethical significance of human intervention in nature. At first sight, his images seem to come from a zoology textbook, but they are not simply about particular insects or bizarre creatures: “they are about the way in which humans classify the supposedly natural world” (“An Interview with Darian Leader” 33; emphasis in original). Depicting “what we see as nature and how this seeing has changed over the centuries” rather than nature *per se* (Stather 6; emphasis added), Fairnington’s paintings alert us to the fact that human intervention has gradually become a threat to nature:

Genetically modified foodstuffs, animals that are bred with more ribs, more muscle tissue in the right places from a marketing-related perspective, or with a resistance to particular illness—human beings have long intervened in the natural cycle of nature and changed the creation according to their desires, and in the case of some animals and plants, according to their appetites. (Stather 7)

To counter the institutionalized version of natural history, the specimens he paints are “carefully arranged in a way different to how a museum would set them up” (Stather 6). Take his insects specimens for example. They are broken, rotten, holed, and blown up to the size of human beings. In contrast with Hirst, who mainly resorts to so-called mega-fauna to evoke the auratic gaze, Fairnington uses his *Specimen* series to show that insects, too, may stare back at the viewer.33

33 As I am going to elaborate, Fairnington used to combine fragile and desiccated remains of the insects and blow them up to the size of human beings. In this way, he “facilitates a focused look that is not diverted although it simultaneously causes a pulling away, that maintains a distance between the subject of the painting and the viewer” (Stather 6). If the “aura is appearance of a distance, however close the thing that calls it forth” (Benjamin, *Arcades Project* 447), the way Fairnington defamiliarizes the supposedly familiar insects to “take(s) possession of us” (Benjamin, *Arcades Project* 447) can be expected to produce the Benjaminian aura: “The living
famous painting *Specimen 4*, representing both the sightless gaze on the wings and the glint of the dead eyes from the delicate head, explicitly illustrates the magical counter-gaze cast by the insect. In this portrait, the oversized mantis pictured upright on its hind legs stands over two meters high. Its anthropomorphic pose “elicits an appearance of dancing, apparently mocking the viewer, reminding him or her of life from the point of view of death” (Coutts 311). What is more stunning is that the true-to-life specimen turns out to be true-to-death if we take a close look:

[T]he desiccated mantis corpse appears to mock the viewer silently as the details of its ghoulish makeup become apparent. Slowly the decayed, blackened joints, the incomplete legs, and the shriveled abdomen become apparent to the viewer. Its four-eyed stare adds to our discomfort. Bulbous eyes continue to glint from a curiously delicate head. These are amplified by the ocelli, the eye-shaped markings on the underside of the insect’s wings. (311)

Further, since the ocelli evolved long before mammals existed, according to Coutts, they function to unveil the anti-anthropocentric lesson that “it cannot be the eyes of mammals—our eyes—that are imitated, unless by prophecy”: “Older eyes, perhaps from the giant monstrous reptilian era of the dinosaur, lie beyond a form that we are capable of recognizing” (312). If the dead mantis eyes are animated to indicate that behind what lives there always lurks a sense of death, then the pair of fake blind “eyes,” disrupting the hierarchical chain of being, is to mock humanity’s omnipotence as nothing but an anthropocentric preconception. Here, both animal concern and philosophical pondering are made possible by the way Fairnington deals with his subject.

Taking account of Fairnington’s series of “eye paintings” allows us to better grasp his self-awareness as an artist. In these paintings, he restlessly focuses on the glass eye of taxidermic specimens—tiger, lion, zebra, goat, bison, etc. He chooses the fake eye as the subject of his painting rather than the real parts, the fur now seems lifeless, excised from the normal passage of time, dissected with the eye and put together anew. We are thus forced to see the supposedly familiar with entirely new eyes” (Stather 6). Moreover, as he blends the sense of resurrection into that of mortification when painting these specimens, his work is appealing enough to attract our gaze without blinding us by the unbearable real.

34 Fairnington et al., 10.
35 Fairnington et al., 68.
and the skin, for it “reflects the interior of the building, the room in which the specimen is being displayed, so you get the institution reflected in the creature” (“Interview” 36). To highlight the fact that “all scientific and artistic practice involves embodied observation, interpretation and (commodified) testimony” (Madden 80), he stresses that he often includes an image of himself taking the photograph in the eye paintings (“Interview” 36). In short, all these paintings are “observations of observations and representations of representations” (Madden 80). Asked why the shape of eye paintings is circular, he replied, “the shape strengthens that idea that this is a collected thing, rather than an image to be seen” (“Interview” 36). His answer again reveals how he is concerned about “the human necessities to classify, possess and contain” (“Interview” 37; emphasis in original). As Martin Stather rightly comments, Fairnington’s images have magical fascination because they “do not allow themselves to be pinned down in an unambiguous way”:

The images of eyes, always in the traditional form of the tondo, allow the viewer to encounter the animal (and more rarely: human being) eye-to-eye. Here, his artistic strategy is perhaps most clearly manifest: we see the observing eye, communicate with a counterpart—and ultimately find ourselves mirrored again in this eye. (7)

The auratic perception evoked by his eye paintings thus carves out a space for self-reflexive thought. The dimension of ethical concern, vague in Hirst’s installations, is explicit in Fairnington’s paintings, for his “specimens of specimens” always “question the classical idea that the specimen has to be a paradigmatic representation of the species” (“Interview” 33; emphasis in original). More importantly, his work reminds the viewer of the horror inherent in collecting specimens, “a kindly reminder that there is no such thing as innocent knowledge. The quest for knowledge, even on the basis of good intentions, is in itself absolutely no guarantor against horror” (Madden 81).

In contrasting Hirst and Fairnington, I do not mean to dismiss Hirst’s works as lacking ethical significance. Nor do I intend to conclude that artists ought to substitute paintings of dead animals for displays of real ones. Instead, I want to argue that contemporary artists should refrain from killing animals simply in order to put them on display as metaphorical figures. That is, if real animals are to be used, the animal itself should stand as the core concern of the work. Both the audience and the producers of animal art are urged to rethink whether the death of an animal is indispensable to “the exploration of such human fascination with
supremacy, power and death, or whether such impulses could be explored via other artistic avenues that do not require killing” (Aloi 115-16). After all, if the ability specific to art is to capture “complex relational systems in multi-layered, creative and original ways” (Aloi 118), and if animal art should aim for non-anthropocentric forms of representation (Baker, Artist/Animal 212), then artworks in which “the animal is doing all the heavy lifting” should be scrutinized in a more thorough way lest the use of animals become hollow and unnecessary.

Works Cited


36 “Heavy lifting” is a phrase Baker borrowed from Ron Broglio to explain how animal materials in art necessarily lend artwork its “clout” (Artist/Animal 209). Baker notes that in art’s space the animal material will have “an afterlife of its own” (207). That is, animal objects “won’t stay dead, stay down, stay still” (207). Accordingly, in many cases it is often the presence of animal rather than the artist’s creative talent which makes for the work’s singular power and its strong impact. Broglio’s complaint of Cantor’s installation The Need for Uncertainty also arises from this kind of situation. The Need for Uncertainty is an exhibition which displays a vast set of cages with peacocks. It is claimed that the “physical impact of the cages, heightened by the repetition of vertical bars as they arc upwards, and the jolting awareness of the animals in a space not normally their own, creates a palpable tension” to remind the viewer of the peacocks’ “silent and yet watchful companionship” (Cantor 25). Broglio thus comments: “It seems to me that the animal is doing all the heavy lifting in this art piece” (qtd. in Artist/Animal 205).
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