



For The Love of God

Hans Moor

'For the love of God, what are you going to do next?' mother of Damien Hirst

These are the words Damien Hirst's mother uses upon seeing her son's work of art. Death seems unavoidably linked with this artwork.

That's when you stop laughing, says Hirst, you might create something that people might die because of. I guess I felt like Oppenheimer or something. What have I done?

New York Times Magazine, 3 June 2007

The work of art is made by famous British artist Damien Hirst. He managed to acquire the skull from a 35 year old European male from the 18th century. The artist himself buys the

skull in North London and used it for his new masterpiece. He fully covers it with real diamonds and indicates that they are all ethically pure.

On the front page of Dutch newspaper the Volkskrant of June 5, 2007, a remarkably large image of the piece is shown with the text: *Diamond Skull - Victory over Deterioration*. It is a remark made by Rudi Fuchs. He adds to it: *An out-of-this-world skull, almost heavenly - victory over deterioration. (...) Compared to the sadness of a vanitas-tableau, the diamond skull is glory itself.'*

Damien Hirst is a controversial artist, who already has a number of well-known works of art to his name. In the nineties he created a life-like shark on aqua fortis, which is titled *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*. The artworks of Hirst usually find themselves on the line between life and death, which is also the case with the skull artwork.

The observer confronted with this image, will at first instance feel clarity. This is a human skull. Death manifests itself irrevocably. But the sight also creates confusion - because the skull is masked. It is seamless and completely covered with 8601 diamonds. While keeping a respectful distance it is certainly possible to put the tension between life and death into words as follows: life is all glitters, but this life is dead as a dodo. The contrast between decoration and death is considerable, yet, at the same time they are close. Death appears to be decorated. The skull is decorated in an extreme manner - everything is covered by diamonds, all curves and every little detail. From a photo-reportage by the artist becomes clear that it is real craftsmanship creating this artwork. The skull is executed in platinum and in addition important choices were made to reach this end result.

I was worried for a while, because if it looked like bling – tacky, garish and over the top- we would have failed *Damien Hirst - New York Times Magazine – 3 June 2007*

The contrast between life and death is even emphasized by the artist using the original teeth in the jaws of the skull, in stead of the platinum teeth that were originally planned.

I want it to be real. That you have the feeling it contains an animal. A tooth was missing, but that only adds to the humanity of the skull. *Damien Hirst – Volkskrant, 5 June 2007*

An important detail is the differentiation on the forehead. In the centre of the skull's forehead is a flower shape with a large pink fifty-two carat diamond from Angola, enclosed by fourteen diamonds.

This makes the decoration as a whole more explicit. Are the regular diamonds covering the skull not beautifying enough? Why this extra decoration on the forehead?

There was a search for the right expressiveness.

If this work of art will generate the expected seventy-five million dollar when it is sold, it will be the most valuable contemporary art work ever created. Or the most extravagant glitter piece.

The Dutch paper, the *Volkskrant*, carried the following heading: *Diamond skull - Victory over Deterioration*.

This is no more than a general observation. It is not the first time that deterioration is conquered. Think of the painting *Les Femmes d'Alger* by Picasso in 1908. Here too you can see the deterioration and the victory thereof. The romantic bodies in the painting are prostitutes. They embody deterioration. This is replaced by the new abstract art. Picasso's fragmented lines. A new meaning surfaces. Life and death meet in the painting.

Why then is the artwork *For the Love of God* different?

Hirst says, *you might create something that people might die because of. I guess I felt like Oppenheimer or something. What have I done? Because it's going to need security all its life*

New York Times Magazine, 3 June 2007

This human skull is from our times. The artwork lives. Its mouth is open and laughs at us. The artwork is alive. The living aspect of the costly artwork is: Lifelong Security. Why do I also detect horror? Because the face of the other doesn't tell me anything. There is no recognition. It's the diamonds that glitter. Nevertheless, it brings me to death, but only to experience the terror that death has left. Death has become commoditized.

The individual of this skull is portrayed here as a mesmerized type, lifeless, as is described in *The Facts In The Case Of M. Valdemar* by Edgar Allen Poe and described in the book *Omerta* by Th.C.W. Oudemans

Poe's The Facts In The Case Of M. Valdemar, is about a case of mesmerizing - a magnetically induced trance. This case is special. The dying Valdemar remains mesmerized after his death. The normal decomposing processes of the body didn't take place. Obviously, death (or the process we call death) was delayed by the mesmeric process. What makes one think is that Valdemar speaks in death, even if it is only with his tongue. Omerta-Th.C.W.Oudenmans, 2007



'Isolated elements swimming in the same direction for the purpose of understanding'

Damien Hirst

Life and death are not always portrayed as directly as in *For The Love Of God* . Sometimes imagination will show an apparently comforting thought, which will, as is the case with Damien Hirst, be accompanied by a special aptitude for language.

This can also be said for the artwork which is titled *Isolated Elements Swimming In the Same Direction For The Purpose Of Understanding*. Unlike the artwork of the skull, this is a calm image, executed as an installation. The question is whether this shields an equally troubling thought. The title of the artwork is possibly even stronger and more puzzling than the installation itself. Literally, the title itself directs word and image to create tension. The installation is a collection of aquariums, each of which holds an amount of water, some coloured, some clear, and contains some fish or other. Fish is bred here! The fish are placed in such a way that they all seem to be swimming in the same direction.

It is clear. The artist has applied extreme selection by creating a piece of art. This installation contains a great variety of fish. The types are isolated by placing them in separate aquariums. The fish swim in the same direction. Because of this selection, one could say that the various species were made inferior to the direction. One could say that at the same time by this selection the diverse types are equalized with respect to direction. The form and individual identities of the various species are reduced by sharing direction.

The artwork is sophisticated. It shows the relation between human and animal. People breed fish. They select fish. The following question arises: what is the meaning of the choice or selection of a human? On the one hand human and animal seem to be different. That, which at first glance doesn't belong together, in view of shape and species, is combined and made equal. No discrimination! One could say that free human choice still has value here. But is this an example of human free will? Is this reduction, this equalization, (equality - democracy - antidiscrimination) freely chosen?



The underlying thought for this reduction is presented by science. Science reduces in order to gain knowledge. Scientists are doing the same thing in another way. The species, or in other words the differences between them, must be reduced (equalized). Productivity is enhanced by a similar sort of uniformity in contemporary mass production systems. Reducing diversity fosters replication. The species or the differences must be reduced (be made equal).

This artwork also betrays precisely the same equalization (reduction). The question is whether the selection manifest in this piece is indeed human selection.

Maart 2008