

Unplugged - Voices

Martin PARKER (2019) : Following the Money. Review of Damien Hirst's exhibition 'Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable', Venice 2017.

Research in management and organization may only gain by being inspired from arts, culture and humanities in order to rethink practices but also to nourish its own perspectives. Life in organizations is artificially separate from ordinary life: all of mundane objects are thus conducive to astonishment, inspiration, and even problematization. The unplugged subsection "voices" gives the opportunity to academics and non-academics to deliver an interpretation about an object from the cultural or artistic world. Interpreted objects are or not directly related to organizational life, resonate or not with the moment, but share some intriguing features. These interpretations suggest a patchwork of variations on the same object.

Martin Parker
Department of Management
University of Bristol,
martin.parker@bristol.ac.uk

nervos belli, pecuniam infinitam

'Endless money forms the sinews of war' Marcus Tullius Cicero,
Philippics 5.1

Behind the main altar in the basilica of St Mark in Venice is the Pala D'Oro, the Golden Cloth. It is a panel made of gold and silver, three metres by two, and is covered with about 250 enamel plaques, 526 pearls, 330 garnets, 320 emeralds, 255 sapphires, 183 amethysts, 175 agates, 75 rubies, 34 topazes, 16 carnelians, and 13 jaspers. It is an outrageous piece of twelfth century bling, a display of more money than sense by some very wealthy people. Jewels and precious metals traded and stolen from around the known world, assembled together in what was then one of the wealthiest cities in the world and defended by the ships made in the Arsenale, an early home for the division of labour and mass production (Davis 2009). Money, art and trade, in the name of some God or other.

In 2017, two Venetian galleries owned by the luxury goods billionaire Francois Pinault hosted the exhibition 'Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable', an astonishing collection of faux bling by the English artist Damien Hirst. In the 17th century customs house, jutting out into the languid lagoon, and the 18th century Palazzo Grassi, further down the Grand Canal, Hirst and Pinault had put together the biggest and most expensive single artist show ever created. It took place at the same time as the 57th Venice Biennale, the premier art show on the planet, and the shop window for global art capitalism (Thornton 2008, Thompson 2018). In June, I visited, and this review essay is an attempt to understand what I saw, and work out what I thought about it.

The conceit is astonishing. We are told that two thousand years ago, a freed slave built a huge fortune. His ship, the Apistos, was carrying his priceless collection of artefacts destined for a temple dedicated to the sun when it sunk off the coast of East Africa. After centuries of searching, the site was discovered in 2008, and Damian Hirst – probably most famous for his pickled animals in vitrines - bankrolled the marine archeology which brought the precious cargo to the surface. So what we are presented with in these two galleries is the very impressive and long lost collection of Aulus Calidius Amotan - better known as Cif Amotan II. Sculptures in gold, silver, marble, malachite, lapis lazuli, jade, agate - heavily encrusted in corals and barnacles, bearing all the signs of sea damage and patination. There is even a documentary about the discovery that shows the pieces being lifted from the seabed by divers. together with some embedded journalism which backs up the story (Mayer 2017, for example); a scale model of the ship with likely positions of the pieces; aged Renaissance sketches of the pieces on vellum; and guides that provides useful information about the history of the artefacts, together with references to academic work. It's a stunning collection of long submerged wealth and monuments to lost gods with pearls for eyes.

It's a fake of course. Apistos means unbelievable, and Cif Amotan is an anagram of 'I am fiction'. One of the statues is a coral encrusted Goofy, others are stamped 'Mattel', and an Aztec god turns out to be Optimus Prime, one of the Transformers, fabricated from gold. There is even a broken statue of 'the collector' which looks an awful lot like Hirst himself. And so I clicked my way through the echoing galleries with the rest of the cognoscenti in shorts, spotting the jokes, the references to contemporary and classical art, the faces of pop culture celebrities as Egyptian pharaohs. And outside the windows of these beautiful buildings, the boatloads of tourists murmured past on the canal, as they have done for hundreds of years.

This show was ten years in the making and contains 189 large works, together with 20 display cabinets of smaller pieces – coins, swords, flints, shells. Some of them are marked as being from the wreck, others not. (And I suspect that some of the smaller items might even be 'real'.) Of the larger pieces, we are told that some are gallery copies of the submerged originals, others have their provenance questioned, given the age of the Apistos and its likely trade routes. In one case we are told that the marble sculpture of the skull of a mammoth would have been deemed inauthentic by contemporaries of Cif Amotan, since they would have believed it to be the real skull of a cyclops. In another we are told that the golden shield of Achilles is simply a fiction, and hence that Cif Amotan had been sold a fake. We all fall for fakes sometimes.

The majority of critical opinion was staggeringly hostile. Andrew Russeth, writing in *ArtNews*, suggested that it was 'undoubtedly one of the worst exhibitions of contemporary art staged in the past decade. It is devoid of ideas, aesthetically bland, and ultimately snooze-inducing—which, one has to concede, is a kind of achievement for a show with work that has taken ten years and untold millions of dollars to create.' *Hyperallergic's* Tiernan Morgan said it was 'the most expensive artistic flop in living memory' and that 'Hirst's kitsch is simply an easier means to sell juvenile trinkets to idle and unengaged one-percenters'. The general tone was that this was a disgusting parody of excess, a blockbuster example of why more is not always better, a demonstration of the vacuity and

emptiness of unlimited power and money. This was no come back after a bad decade. Damian Hirst had lost it, and the critical wolves were circling.

Though accounts differ, depending on who you read, Hirst spent at least £50 million of his own money on the fabrication, with Pinault covering the costs of the exhibition itself. The gamble seems to have paid off. According to Hirst, as of November 2017, the show had already generated over \$330 million in sales (Colman 2017). All of the work here was up for grabs, mostly in editions of three plus two artist's proofs, with prices apparently running from half a million to five million dollars. The editions have been divided into three types - a 'Coral' edition (i.e. one of the encrusted artifacts recovered from the supposed wreck), a 'Treasure' (a restored artifact) or a 'Copy' (a reproduction of a wreckage find, with mock coral). The three different guides to the collection, healthy ticket sales, and revenues from the extended version of the film (now available on Netflix) must have generated a fair profit too. In a contemporary review of the show, the critic Robert Storr summarised what he thought was going on here with brutal clarity.

'...Hirst's ambition is not to make his mark in the history of art, or even to satirically critique its values and institutions, but rather simply, remorselessly make his mark in the history of finance. To that end he has teamed up with a world famous purveyor of luxury goods who has effectively turned his foundation over to one of his major suppliers who has in turned used it to launch a comprehensive new product line which, drawing heavily on the look of his competitors — Koons, Murakami, Barney, et al — in an effort to eclipse them. These appropriated elements in combination with other trade mark aspects of Hirst's output — notably vitrines crammed with 'stuff' — give the appearance of brand consistency to a disparate array/hodge-podge of gigantic baubles and exorbitantly ostentatious *bric a brac* spread out across a lucratively wide array of price points bracketing the all but limitless capacity of oligarchs to shop till they drop.'

What happens if we take Storr's lead, and follow the money? Treat this as smart business, not art for art's sake. Hirst's holding company, Science Limited, is registered in Jersey (presumably to maximise tax advantages and minimise reporting requirements) and (according to the Jersey Companies registry filing information) he owns all the shares. The holding company owns Science UK Ltd, which probably covers the trading activities of Hirst's art 'factories' in Stroud, Gloucestershire, England. One of these buildings has a nice parody of the overhead chain disassembly line of the Chicago slaughterhouses which were supposedly the inspiration for Ford's assembly line, in which the chassis replaced the corpse (Ackroyd and Crowdy 1990). In the Science UK version, the animal to be pickled moves between different baths, an act of alchemy which turns dead meat into formaldehyde scented gold before it enters the international art market¹. At the time of the planning application for the factories, the local newspaper, *The Stroud News*, reported resident Vicky Radwell expressing her disgust at the plans.

1. See the plans at www.dezeen.com/2013/08/08/science-studio-and-formaldehyde-building-for-damien-hirst-by-designscape-architects/, and a hostile commentary in the *Daily Mail* here www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2126645/Damien-Hirsts-macabre-art-factory-guards-building-pickling-dead-animals.html.

"I can't believe he can use dead animals as art," she said.

"I believe that he's just a business man.

"I find it really weird that it's in the middle of a residential area. If you're going to take slaughtered cows somewhere, take them to a farm." (Pyrah 2007)

Science UK Ltd posted a profit of £774 thousand in 2016, on a turnover of nearly £22 million. The company is valued at nearly £51 million – most of which is stock - and claims 155 employees. The highest paid director, presumably Hirst himself, was paid £915 thousand during the year². The holding company also owns the publisher 'Other Criteria', the Newport Street gallery in London and was also involved in several restaurants. His art trading company, 'Murderme Limited', also wholly owned by Science Limited, showed £31.6 million turnover in 2016, realising £11.6 million in profits. It claims £170 million in stock, which is presumably Hirst's art collection.

Hirst stands in a long line of artists who see no contradiction between art and money – Dali, Warhol, Koons, Murakami and many others (Siegal and Mattick 2004). Indeed, opulence is a continuing thread in his work, in the diamond encrusted skull which was valued at £50 million, or the sale of 223 new works at Sotheby's in 2008 (while the financial markets crashed all around) which raised more than £111 million. The single most expensive item in that sale was the £10.3 million paid for 'The Golden Calf', a bull in formaldehyde adorned with 18-carat gold horns, hooves and a golden disk above its head. For Hirst, there seems to be no necessary contradiction between worshipping the idol of money, and making art. As Andy Warhol famously said, 'Making money is art and working is art and good business is the best art'. So for Hirst to display this shipwreck opulence in the old customs house and a Venetian villa, in the city that all but invented the modern trading world, bankrolled by a billionaire who owns luxury brands, seems to make a great deal of sense. Money, God and trade, in the name of Art.

The French businessman Francois Pinault is, according to Forbes, the 63rd richest man in the world. His diversified holding company, Artemis S.A. –

...operates in apparel and accessories, auction house, vineyards, press and publishing, real estate, sport and culture, and art sectors in France and internationally. It retails luxury, sports, and lifestyle apparel and accessories; provides auction services in the categories of fine and decorative arts, clock-making, design, manuscripts, wine, and jewelry; and produces wines. The company also publishes general news weekly magazines and digital daily newspapers, as well as books on biographies, historical essays, accounts, and archives; operates various service and information Websites; offers real estate brokerage and mortgage brokering services; owns a football club; and operates a theatre that hosts one man shows, concerts, and classic and modern plays. In addition, it deploys and operates energy, transport, and communication infrastructures; retails cultural, leisure, and technical products; provides reinsurance services to the vehicles; provides investment to the companies operating in various sectors that include construction materials,

2. See the 2016 accounts at beta.companieshouse.gov.uk/company/03426602/filing-history

information and communication technology, financial services, real estate, agriculture, and seafood; produces desserts, snacks, sweet biscuits, and savoury biscuits; and operates exhibition sites. (Bloomberg 2017)

A modern Venetian Doge with more money than sense, Pinault is fascinated by modern art and spends heavily. After all, he can afford to. In June 2017 it was announced that he intends to convert the old Paris stock exchange building – the Bourse – into a museum for his 3500-piece art collection, which of course includes works by Hirst.

In order to understand this exhibition, you need to follow the money, and the money goes back a long way here, before even the Pala D'Oro and the Venetian empire. In a delightful essay on the history behind Hirst's speculations, Sean Kingsley reminds us about treasure ships, and of the imperial economy that supported them. In June 1907, off the Tunisian city of Mahdia, a sponge-diver came across what he said 'looked like a lot of big guns' in the sea. The cannons turned out to be Roman marble columns, and with them were statues, including an Eros, grotesque dwarves and clowns, an antique sculpted head signed by the artist Boethos of Chalcedon, a marble bust of Aphrodite, statues of Pan and of two satyrs, torsos of youths as well as bronze urns and candelabra (Kingsley 2007). The Mahdia treasure ship, probably from Greece with a cargo to be sold in Rome, sunk around 60 BCE, has been valued at 857,000 sesterces – around \$10 million in contemporary money, but more like \$100 million if the objects were traded. Hirst nicely set his fiction in the ancient world's most productive sea-lane. As Kingsley tells us, by the end of the 1st century BCE, 120 Roman 500 tonne teakwood merchantmen sailed for the markets of India and Africa every year. The 'East' was the last word in Roman luxury for everything from cinnamon and pepper to pearls, ivory statuettes, emeralds, diamonds, sapphires, drugs, eunuchs and even panthers. Romans with cash to burn, the oligarchs of their day who could afford to shop until they dropped in order to feed their habits of conspicuous consumption.

This wreck, and others like it, remind us of the power that moves treasure ships, whether the Spanish gold from the galleon *Nuestra Señora de la Concepción* which kick started the Bank of England in the 17th century (Hamilton and Parker 2016), or Admiral Zheng He's Ming Dynasty treasure fleets from the 15th century. The point is that treasure is booty, whether traded by those who have the knowledge to make money from selling it, or stolen by force by those with the bigger guns. Kingsley takes us back to the world of one of Rome's most notorious plunderers of art, Gaius Verres, governor of Sicily in 73–70 BCE. Verres ransacked Sicily so heavily that the Roman politician Marcus Tullius Cicero put him on trial for misconduct and extortion. In his second oration 'Against Verres' he asserted that 'there is no silver vase, neither Corinthian nor Delian, no gem or pearl, no object of gold or of ivory, no bronze, marble or ivory statue, no picture either painted on a tablet or woven in a tapestry, which he has not sought out, inspected, and, if it pleased him, stolen' (Kingsley 2017). And it is these looted treasures that now populate the museums of the Global North, just as Cif Amotan's treasure was headed for an imaginary temple to the sun. 'It has been rightly concluded that if it had been installed in his Indian or African palace, it would have represented the contents of the first encyclopaedic museum, the direct ancestor of the British Museum and the Louvre.' (Loyrette 2017:16)

Given the accusations of plagiarism that have so often surrounded Hirst's work, it seems appropriate to wonder about theft at this point, most particularly the theft of other people's labour. It is very difficult to discover much about how his art is produced, presumably because all the fabricators – the technicians who actually make the stuff - sign non-disclosure agreements. One of the companies he uses a lot is the foundry 'Pangolin Editions', based near his factories in Gloucestershire. Pangolin makes a lot of things for Hirst, including work for this exhibition, with the casting of the Garuda sculpture being accidentally outed by a journalist in 2010 (Milner 2010). Other pieces must have been made by the fabricators in his factories, presumably where a lot of the 155 Science UK Ltd employees are based. In the exhibition catalogue, as if at the end of a film, there is a long list of names. People from the Pinault Foundation, exhibition coordinators and designers, photographers, graphic designers, a long list of companies and some individuals. But no crediting of the stone carvers, painters, mould makers, sculptors, model makers, designers and others who actually made this stuff, as well as pretty much everything that Hirst and Science Limited sell and make money from. Of course the 'atelier' system predates Hirst by centuries, being a common form of guild and artistic production from the medieval period onwards. The idea of a workshop where those in training are learning from the master, doing the drudge work, is not unusual. Many contemporary artists use someone else to fabricate their work, and often develop close relationships with the fabricators (*Artforum* 2007). Anish Kapoor, Ai Weiwei, Rachel Whiteread and the rest don't usually make the things that they exhibit. They get other people to make them (Glaister 2012). Other people get their hands dirty.

The difference in Hirst's case is the sheer scale of the appropriation. These incredible treasures in marble and bronze, gold and silver, this whole assemblage of artefacts, gallery, film, embedded journalists and academics like Simon Schama (whose mock Borges essay appears in the catalogue) might have been imagined by Hirst, but it is unclear whether he has actually done anything other than sit at the front at the press conferences. Art is clearly a form of work (Parker 2013), but what work is Hirst doing here? Perhaps he is better described as an impresario than an artist, more like Phineas T. Barnum than Tintoretto (Cook 2005). Indeed, after making four of his dot paintings, Hirst said that 'he couldn't be fucking arsed' to paint anymore, so got other people to do it for him (Willett 2013). According to Hirst's dot painting catalogue raisonné, by 2011 there were 1365 dot paintings, but more have been made since. This is artistic production on an industrial scale, in which the artist is the owner-manager of a diversified range of businesses. As with all organizations, whether the auteur director of a film which involves hundreds of people, or the superstar executive of the corporation, those at the top claim the credit for other people's work. They also claim the reward of course, the graphite credit cards and premium gold class travel lounge pass.

The Japanese pop artist Takashi Murakami also employs lots of people in a company called KaiKai Kiki to make his work (Parker 2012). He and Damian Hirst had a conversation in 2009 in which they both sound like self-congratulatory business managers comparing their management practices. At one point, Hirst says -

'I've been expanding for over 20 years really, and most people who work for me have stayed with me so I get to know people very well, know their strengths and weaknesses, and I delegate wherever I

can. [...] I always look for short cuts and I'm very impatient. Once I work out how to do something I kind of try to make a lot quickly then move on to something else. I always OK finished pieces and I'm the only one who has the ideas. But the key is to delegate.' (Murakami and Hirst 2009)

He is the one who has all the ideas, and understands how to motivate his employees. In this Hirst is no different from any other entrepreneur who has now become the manager of a medium sized and rather successful organization. And just like Richard Branson, or any number of dot com millionaires in T-shirts and sneakers, he likes the idea of being an outsider, a pirate, a chancer, as the wealth builds in his offshore account. Such a person likes to believe that they are challenging 'the establishment', breaking conventions, but also able to afford a very good dinner.

Looking at the Pala D'Oro, I was simultaneously dazzled and disgusted. The opulence is staggering, but it is also a record of imperial plunder. So it is with Hirst, with the added frisson of being in one of those shops in which there are no prices, because if you have to ask, you can't afford it. It's all so clever though. Whoever wrote the notes on the exhibition guide suggested that the five 'Mattel' stamped Grecian nude torsos, which also somehow turn up in a photo taken at the International Surrealist Exhibition in London in 1936, 'are symptomatic of the classical predilection for forms that lent themselves to seriality, a trend that contradicts the modern fetishisation of the original'. It's a nice line, and Hirst's mass production of elite art works certainly questions the idea of an original, of an artist craft worker who makes unique things with their own hands. The problem is that an exhibition like this leaves the idea of the elite artist entirely untouched. Hirst's name is embossed in gold on the cover of a catalogue of items that he did not create.

The political economy of 'Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable' is clear enough. Artists with elite patrons make money by selling work which can only be seen by people with money – people like me – and only owned by people with even more money. This is no challenge to the art establishment, but exactly the function art has played for centuries, in Venice as elsewhere. It is easy to be seduced by all the cleverness, the meta-reflexivity about authenticity and the coral encrusted Mickey Mouse, but this is no more than P.T. Barnum did in selling his museums of curiosity and the 'Grand Traveling Museum, Menagerie, Caravan & Hippodrome'. Roll up, roll up and pay your money at the door. See the Feejee mermaid, the bearded woman. But there is something more sinister in Venice than Barnum's knowing winks to 'humbug', something less honest than the wide-eyed dishonesty of the showman (Cook 2005).

Hirst, in an interview in the mockumentary, talks about the moment in a film when someone opens a treasure chest and the light illuminates their face with gold. It's a childlike image, of someone thrilled by a Lost Ark, and in the middle of an adventure. He forgets to say what happens after that, which is that the protagonist becomes possessed by the gold, cursed by the treasure to follow the money forever. Because Hirst is now so dazzled by the booty, and his own cleverness, that he can't see that behind every gallery is the counting house, and behind every treasure ship is an empire.

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