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Sharks Patrol These Waters – Objectifying Animals in Postmodern Art

There was a moment in the history of art when a traditional approach to categorizing artworks became somehow inadequate. The change which took place in the previous century when Dada artists entered the stage still affects modern art. Nowadays, it is sometimes impossible to use these simple categories which used to be so handy for art critics and historians all those years ago. The process of replacing traditional materials which were associated with sculptures or paintings is still in progress. The article discusses the artworks in which animals were used as crucial elements of an artwork, in which case the art of one of modern British artists, namely Damian Hirst, can be employed as the example. Hirst's artworks seem to be of great help due to his diversified uses of animals as material. For a broad public, Hirst is the artist who placed a shark in an art gallery, however, this was not the only animal he has turned into a gallery item.

Damian Hirst belongs to a group known as Young British Artists, who in fact are no longer young, but still a few of them are well known in the artworld. The YBAs were a group of students and graduates of the Goldsmiths in London who began their careers from exhibiting together at the end of the 1980s. Hirst was the one who organized their first show (*Freeze*, 1988), and then quite successfully managed his own career as a modern British artist. The shock tactics which were so successful during the first exhibition proved to be still working. One of the shocks was definitely creating a specific "zoo" of dead animals preserved in formaldehyde. These works intertwine at least two discourses – the discourse of science and of art. Hirst also mixes the natural (animal bodies) and the artificial (chemical concoction). Although for some individuals science and art may seem worlds apart, there are some areas where they overlap. A clear

division between various discourses has been disappearing for some time, and a good example of expanding interpretative skills is Bruno Latour's work. His influence on the social studies of science, especially the development of Science and Technology Studies (STS), shows how differently we can look at creating scientific knowledge.

Since it was a shark that drew such a big attention to Hirst's art, let us start from discussing this work, and ignore a chronological order. Hirst did not choose the shark on his own, he just bought the animal which was caught near Hervey Bay, Queensland, Australia. Total cost of the piece is another element which was of special interest for the media. Hirst called the artwork *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, and it consists of a stuffed shark floating in formaldehyde in a glass container. Thus, in 1991 a shark started to patrol "gallery waters" mainly thanks to Charles Saatchi who commissioned the piece.

This impressive animal faces the viewers in a manner typical for our popular imagination of sharks – jaws wide open, presenting the array of teeth, and still quite menacing behind the glass walls, although no longer alive. While commenting on the artwork, Julian Stallabrass asks: "Does the shark really get us to think about mortality – who's really afraid of sharks rather than of cancer or being run over? – or does it simply remind us of *Jaws*?"[1]. We may wonder why the commentaries always refer to us – human beings thinking about their death, and not the death of the animal so boldly placed in front of our eyes. This anthropocentric attitude is quite common and I can even risk a claim that if Hirst left the same title and suspended another animal there in a tank, the comments would lead in the same direction – death as a human experience.

However, sharks play a specific role in our culture and are mainly associated with the wild, the dangerous or even deadly. It is not a common experience to be threatened by shark's presence but popular culture or, to be more specific, movie makers made us think about sharks as bloodthirsty animals lurking in deep (or shallow) waters. Thus, choosing a corpse of a shark was quite a strong and attention grabbing gesture. Mario Codognato writes that "the enormous tonnage of the shark, and its disproportionate relationship of scale to human beings/viewers, reproduce the sense of impotence that is felt in the wake of the forces of nature and evoke a fear and ancestral loss in terms of death, through the struggle for survival in the food chain. Danger seems immobilized, in the pause of a sequence drawn out into eternity"[2].

The shark was not the only fish which was changed into an art object or a part of it. There are the fish which are incorporated into the work *Isolated Elements Swimming in the Same Direction for the Purpose of Understanding* (1991).

[1] J. Stallabrass: *High Art Lite*. London, New York 2006, p. 26.

[2] M. Codognato: *Warning Labels*. In: *Damien Hirst*. Naples, Italy 2004, p. 31.

Neatly organized in rows, fish of various kinds and sizes are forever frozen in the same pose. This act of "swimming" is deprived of any movement although they are clearly heading somewhere. Codognato calls it "the fish's static ballet"[3] and suggests that the work itself may be interpreted in a number of ways "in part because of the enigmatic title, half-sarcastic, half-ironic…"[4]. There is nothing which would at least partially link the fish with their natural environment. The work without a title could become an exhibit in a classroom where children are taught biology. This is the very absurd of the situation, namely, animal corpses used by an artist to create a work of art, which draws our attention as much as the title. Here again, once living creatures became material for a piece than to be exhibited or sold.

Formaldehyde is a crucial element of some other works which can be collectively referred to as the "Natural History". Although the shark belongs to more exotic creatures, the ones which were closed in similar manner in glass tanks – forever suspended in greenish liquid – are more familiar to us. The majority of them is normally bred for food but it is rather doubtful that bought in small pieces they are as striking. The titles are sometimes straightforwardly linked with what we can see, as it is in the case of *Mother and Child. Divided* (1993). The work consists of four glass tanks – the bigger ones contain two halves of a cow in formaldehyde solution, and there are smaller ones with two halves of a calf. The latter part of the title (*Divided*) can be interpreted in the following way: obviously, the mother (cow) and the child (calf) are separated from each other, but a further separation can be also observed, that is, both the cow and the calf are cut in two, and their respective halves are parallel. A similar observation is made by Mario Codognato, as we can read that "maternal archetype and offspring are separated from one another metaphorically and literally, in an exploration of their inner bond, made tangible by the rigid and aseptic symmetry of the structure that contains and exhibits them"[5]. When exhibited in a gallery, they are placed in such a manner that you can walk between the tanks and see what is normally hidden behind the animal skin. You can just as well walk past and keep in your mind only the image of the outer surface of the animal.

Division between a mother and a child is one of the key notions when we speak about human child development from a psychoanalytical point of view. If we reached to Lacanian psychoanalysis, we could interpret the work as a representation of a process which is necessary for a child to develop in a proper way. The castration complex, which we can clearly associate with Freud's theory[6],

[3] Ibidem.

[4] Ibidem.

[5] Ibidem, p. 35.

[6] See Z. Freud: *On the Sexual Theories of Children*. In: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Ed. J. Strachey. Vol. 9. London, 2001. The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex. *SE*. Ed. J. Strachey. Vol. 19. London 2001.

operates here to enable the child to separate from the mother, or rather the mother's desire. This separation, or division, is possible when the Name of the Father intervenes. The Name of the Father is a specific law that forbids incest, it is a social law and it operates within the Symbolic order[7].

Cows preserved in formaldehyde can be found in *Love's Paradox (Surrender or Anatomy Separateness as a Precognition for Connection)*, the work dated to 2007. Here we can see two tanks in which halves of two cows, measuring from the animal's head, are placed opposite each other. They turned their "backs" to each other forever stuck in this position, or at least as long as the artist (or someone else) decides to rearrange the tanks. Again, we face an intricate title Hirst gave to his work. There is nothing in the title which could link it to the cow's world. Animals chosen by Hirst are not there because he wishes to draw our attention to their condition, they are only there as objects employed by the artist to address his (our?) human dilemmas. There are two notions related to human relationships: closeness and separateness, and they are equally important if the relationship is to be successful. The ideal situation would require to preserve the balance between them, and such a balance is easily preserved between two Hirst's exhibits.

Smaller animals are also employed by Hirst, for example flies, both dead and alive, occupy the space of his works. This space can be either a glass container or the surface of canvases. There is a series of black paintings which were made without any black paint, since the bodies of dead flies glued to the surface fulfill the function of traditional paint. A comment from Codognato on those works is as follows: "The flies expose and become a metaphor for cruelty of struggle for survival, and they visually translate its incessant and pitiless energy"[8]. It is probably an understatement that we do not treat flies as material for an artwork. The very idea of presenting to viewers monochromatic black canvases whose specific materiality can be recognized only at a close range may seem very challenging. Flies do not evoke in us pleasant feelings, quite the opposite – the majority of us find them rather repelling. Here something supposedly sublime (artwork) is created with the use of appalling material (dead flies). What we feel once we realize that we have thousands of dead flies in front of us must be the same as what we feel facing the abject. The abject is the term used by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror* (1992) and it refers to all that disturbs, upsets or repels us, among which a corpse would be the most potent example. We experience the abjection when we get close to exudates, feces, open wounds, body fluids or dirt, waste, and even food. The abjection defined and discussed by Kristeva became also the notion we can come across when studying modern art. The term "abject art" can refer to "artworks which explore themes that transgress and threaten our

[7] See J. Lacan: *The Psychoses. Seminar III*. Trans. R. Grigg. New York, London 1993, p. 96.
[8] M. Codognato: *Warning Labels*, p. 45–46.

sense of cleanliness and propriety particularly referencing the body and bodily functions"[9]. According to the definition, the paintings by Hirst do not qualify to be included into "abject art", nonetheless, there is no doubt that they can be called the abject.

It must sound naïve, however, I wonder whether anyone looking at the works would think of the flies and their fate? Once living creatures ended up as mere black "paint". Any other bigger, furrier or cuter creatures which would be glued to the canvases would probably cause fierce objectives from the public. Looking at thousands of flies giving the black color to the painting called *Black Sun* (2004) makes only some of us look away. The works which preceded *Black Sun* and created with the same technique were called, for example, *Aids*, *Typhoid*, *Genocide*, and *Holocaust* (2003).

Due to the color, these works by Hirst can be related to another series of black paintings known from the history of art – the black paintings by Ad Reinhardt, to which he referred to as "ultimate paintings". Reinhardt was an American abstract painter who lived and worked in New York, and belonged to the group of painters known as abstract expressionists. His black paintings were created in the years 1954–67, and Reinhardt described them in the following way: "A square (*neutral*, *shapeless*) canvas, five feet wide, five feet high, as high as a man, as wide as a man's outstretched arms (*not large*, *not small*, *sizeless*), trisected (*no composition*), one horizontal form negating one vertical form (*formless*, *no top*, *no bottom*, *directionless*), three (*more or less*) dark (*lightless*) no-contrasting (*colorless*) colors, brushwork brushed out to remove brushwork, a matte, flat, free-hand, painted surface (*glossless*, *textureless*, *non-linear*, *no hard-edge*, *no soft edge*) which does not reflect its surroundings – a pure, abstract, non-objective, timeless, spaceless, changeless, relationless, disinterested painting – an object that is self-conscious (no unconsciousness) ideal, transcendent, aware of no thing but art (*absolutely no anti-art*)"[10]. When you walk up closer, you can see that the blackness is not uniform but there are hints or shades of other colors. A lot is expected from a viewer since such a monochrome requires a specific attitude. While looking, you have to accept the fact that such paintings need sufficient patience from a viewer, and bracketing the usual expectations for an artwork defined as a painting. This seems a quite bold demand.

Alive flies constitute a part of Hirst's work since he "was thinking that the flies could be like points in space, moving around"[11]. This installation is called *A Thousand Years* (1990) and we can see huge glass containers again, however, they are not filled with formaldehyde this time. The construction was commissioned by Hirst to be built. In the interview with Mirta D'Argenzio he

[9] http://www.tate.org.uk/learn/online-resources/glossary/a/abject-art, August 26, 2015.

[10] http://theworlduntitled.tumblr.com/post/32200946666/a-square-neutral-shapeless--canvas-five-feet, August 26, 2015.

[11] M. D'Argenzio, D. Hirst: *Bodies in Motion*. In: *Damien Hirst*. Naples, Italy 2004, p. 70.

says: "I made a little thing out of cardboard and I worked out elements. I decided on two cubes because I wanted it to be simple. I made the whole thing in cardboard then I went to a fabricator and said make it big. Can you make it for me?"[12]. And he obviously could, since the work was exhibited in 1990. A more detailed description is as follows: one cube contains a severed cow's head in a pool of blood, and above it a device for killing flies is hung; in the other glass cube there is a box in which new flies are hatched. The newly hatched flies get through a hole in a glass partition between those two cubes, and then they are killed by a system called Insect-O-Cutor. The number of dead flies surrounding the cow's head increases proportionally to the exhibition time. The longer the installation/sculpture is presented to the viewers, the more dead flies you can see. All the flies are just driven to the piece of dead meat in one of the vitrines and they end dead. If we comment on what we simply see, we have an illustration how an instinct works in the animal world. On the other hand, if we decided to interpret the installation in an anthropocentric manner, we may speak about *Trieb* – a Freudian notion which refers to a specifically human activity. According to Freud, a human drive originates from within the human organism, it is an internal force which cannot be resisted.

We can also interpret the cow's head as a specific object of desire, thus reach for the psychoanalytical explanations offered by Jacques Lacan's teaching. *Object a* is an unattainable object of desire, the concept which was suggested by Lacan and remained under construction for many years, which resulted in various possible interpretations of the notion. Slavoj Žižek offers the following explanation of it: "In what precise sense is object a the object-cause of desire? Object a is not what we desire, what we are after, but rather that which sets our desire in motion, the formal frame that confers consistency on our desire. Desire is of course metonymical, it shifts from one object to another; through all its displacements, however, desire nonetheless retains a minimum of formal consistency, a set of fantasmatic features which, when encountered in a positive object, insures that we will come to desire this object. Object a, as the cause of desire, is nothing but this formal frame of consistency"[13].

But again, we can look at this work from a different point of view and ask an ethical question – can all these flies be killed just like that only to fulfill some artistic project? Would we be more concerned if instead of flies there would be colorful butterflies? Actually, Hirst turned living butterflies into dead decorations of his canvases, too. They were monochrome paintings with live butterflies which he bred in his bedroom. Hirst says that "it is like a butterfly has flown around and died horribly in the paint. The death of an insect that still has this re-

[12] Ibidem, p. 72.

[13] S. Žižek: *Desire: Drive = Truth : Knowledge*. www.gsa.buffalo.edu/lacan/desire.html, 31 December, 2007.

ally optimistic beauty of a wonderful thing"[14]. The butterflies died – stuck to wet paint, flies died – killed by electricity, and as dead animals they became indispensable parts of Hirst's artworks. Is it cruelty to animals, or such a question is inappropriate when we address the works created by internationally recognized modern artists who incorporated once-alive insects into their works of art?

Animals are living things but as soon as they are submitted to all these artistic procedures they are turned into objects, sometimes inanimate objects when we speak about the animals after the intervention of taxidermists. The difference between "thing" and "object" can sometimes seem very slight or even illusory; however, to notice this difference is crucial for Thing Theory. For some discourses the thing and the object are two separate entities and there is no possibility for them to become one, as it is argued by Jacques Derrida[15]. It is hard to deny that in some contexts they occupy the same area when we want to refer to the material world. Thus talking about things and objects requires extreme caution since their "semantic reducibility" seems to be very easy. Bill Brown in his Thing Theory attracts our attention to the fact that discussing things and objects can be marked by a certain ambiguity, since: "You could imagine things, second, as what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects – their force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems"[16].

The vocabulary we use gives us no choice – we refer to artworks as the objects of art and consequently objecthood is the state of animals or animal bodies which we encounter in the art world. There are artists who try to preserve the subjectivity of animals[17], but those who clearly objectify or, in other words, turn animals into objects are of my interest here. Here animals become material of the artworks, and as it is observed by Steve Baker "*materials count*, materials create knowledge, or at least encourage open and imaginative thought"[18]. The examples of these various uses of animals in postmodern art have also the potential of drawing our attention to the ethical question of using living animals by artists. They can cause also emotional reactions which would simply ignore the fact that we have entered the realm of art, and it is a specific area to explore.

[14] M. D'Argenzio, D. Hirst: A *Different Kind of Love*. In: *Damien Hirst*. Naples, Italy 2004, p. 83.

[15] See B. Brown: Thing Theory. *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 28, Autumn 2001, p. 3.

[16] Ibidem, p. 5.

[17] Rosi Braidotti speaks about "a posthuman sensibility that aims at overcoming anthropocentrism" (p. 56). This new sensibility characterizes artists who – like for example, Olly and Suzi – exhibit "a post-anthropocentric approach" (p. 58) toward animals in their works. Braidotti also emphasizes the role of Donna Haraway in introducing this approach, and calls her "a pioneer in post-anthropocentric thought" (p. 71). See R. Braidotti: *The Posthuman*. Cambridge 2013.

[18] S. Baker: *Postmodern Animal*. London 2000, p. 61.

Abstrakt

Rekiny patrolują tutejsze wody –
uprzedmiotowienie zwierząt w sztuce postmodernistycznej

Rekin unoszący się w roztworze formaldehydu, zawieszony w przestrzeni, unieruchomiony, to zobrazowanie zmienionego sposobu, w jaki zwierzęta mogą być reprezentowane przez sztukę. Z jednej strony Damien Hirst zaproponował całkowicie nowe podejście do kwestii wykorzystywania zwierząt w sztuce, kiedy zaczął wystawiać prace z cyklu *Natural History* (*Historia naturalna*), z drugiej strony zupełnie nowy „materiał" został użyty w pracy, którą można zakwalifikować do prac rzeźbiarskich. Rekin przyciągnął uwagę publiczności i mediów, ale Hirst posłużył się też zwierzętami takimi jak krowa, owca czy świnia. Jednakże tytuły jego prac pozostały intrygujące i skomplikowane. Artykuł skupia się na tym, jak zwierzęta, zarówno te martwe, jak i te (ledwo)żywe, stały się częściami prac artystycznych. W artykule omówione zostały wybrane prace jednego z przedstawicieli Young British Artists, aby zaprezentować kwestię uprzedmiotowienia zwierząt w sztuce postmodernistycznej.

Słowa klucze:
Damien Hirst, sztuka postmodernistyczna, ciała zwierząt, obiekt sztuki, uprzedmiotowienie

Абстракт

Акулы патрулируют здешние воды –
приписание свойств предмета животным в искусстве постмодернизма

Акула, находящаяся в растворе формальдегида, подвешена в пространстве, обездвижена. Это изображение измененного способа представления животных в искусстве. С одной стороны, Дэмьен Херст ввел совершенно новый подход к вопросу использования животных в искусстве, когда начал экспонировать произведения из цикла Естественной истории (Natural History). С другой стороны, совершенно новый «материал» был использован в произведении, которое можно зачислить в скульпторские произведения. Акула привлекла внимание публики и СМИ, но Херст пользовался также менее экзотическими животными (корова, овца, свинья). Названия его призведений оставались, однако, интригующими и сложными. Статья сосредотачивается на том, каким образом как мертвые животные, так и (еле) живые, стали частями художественных произведений. В статье обсуждаются также избранные произведения одного из представителей Молодых британских художников, с целью представления вопроса приписания свойств предмета животным в искусстве постмодернизма.

Ключевые слова:
Дэмьен Херст, искусство постмодернизма, тела животных, объекты искусства, приписание свойств предмета