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Dropping Like Flies. Post-humanism in Damien Hirst's *Natural History* series

The Natural History *series of Damien Hirst, by alluding to human death through animal bodies, subverts Heidegger's humanist conception and reflects the now prevailing ethos of the technological-scientific domain*

Damien Hirst (Leeds, 1965) has made of death (its ineluctability, unpredictability, the inability of human reason to find a consoling reason in it) the recurring theme of his work. Catapulted to fame in the early 1990s, thanks to the sensationalism of works containing bodies of animals immersed in a solution of formaldehyde, Hirst has alchemically transformed dead matter into gold, becoming one of the richest artists of his generation. Stabilizing its production in a range of serial works manufactured by a host of collaborators, varying and combining a limited number of signature motifs, almost always centered on the theme of death and diseases, Hirst has established himself as a producer of aesthetic – and a multiplier of economic – value, up to, for example, the unprecedented coup of having Sotheby's auction 244 new works on the 15th and 16th of September 2008, earning some 111 million pounds. One work, the platinum skull encrusted with diamonds *For the Love of God* (2007) summarizes the two aspects of his oeuvre, celebrating in a single object Hirst's freedom in dealing with the iconography of death, while substantiating his capacity to avail himself of precious material as much as to craft the most expensive contemporary work of art ever[1].

Starting from the animals used in the *Natural History* series, I will try to explore a conceptual nexus as evident as it is usually overlooked by critics, namely the philosophical implications inherent in alluding to human death through the presentation of carcasses of animals. Developing a suggestion taken from an illuminating essay by Una Chaudhuri about the interdisciplinary field of animal studies which she defines as *zooësis*[2], and taking into account the concept of humanism in Martin Heidegger and Giorgio Agamben's comment on the latter, I propose to interpret the success of Hirst's thanatological imagery as a reflection of the post-humanism dominant in today's zeitgeist. The general sense of dissolution of historical progress, impermanence and 'liquidity' of certainties are the context – both at the micro-social level, and in the chimerical world of financial economy – with which the disturbing works of Hirst resonate. The artist's sharks and other animals, collected by the 'sharks' of financial hedge funds, capture the spirit of the current post-historical animalization[3].

1. CORPUS

Trained in the intellectually stimulating environment of Goldsmiths College in London, Hirst came to the attention of the public in 1990,

1. D. Hirst, *A Thousand Years*, 1990, glass, steel, silicone rubber, painted MDF, insect-o-cutor, cow's head, blood, flies, maggots, metal dishes, cotton wool, sugar and water, 207.5x400x215 cm (© Damien Hirst and Science Ltd. All rights reserved, DACS 2016, photo Roger Wooldridge).

exhibiting in the group show *Gambler* in the warehouse of a former biscuit factory in London's Bermondsey area, *A Thousand Years* (fig. 1). It is a steel-framed parallelepiped of glass panes of about 2 x 4 x 2 meters, divided into two compartments. One half houses a drilled cube inside which pupae of flies develop into adult insects. These then migrate to the other section attracted by the smell of a rotting cow head resting in a pool of blood, in whose meat they lay their eggs, only to be sooner or later electrocuted by the wires of a bug zapper. The viewers are struck by an intense sensory experience. They observe the cycle of life, and at the same time contemplate what disgusts them: the decay, the smell, and the proliferation of insects, inside a box of glass that, in its minimalist purity, contains filth and death.

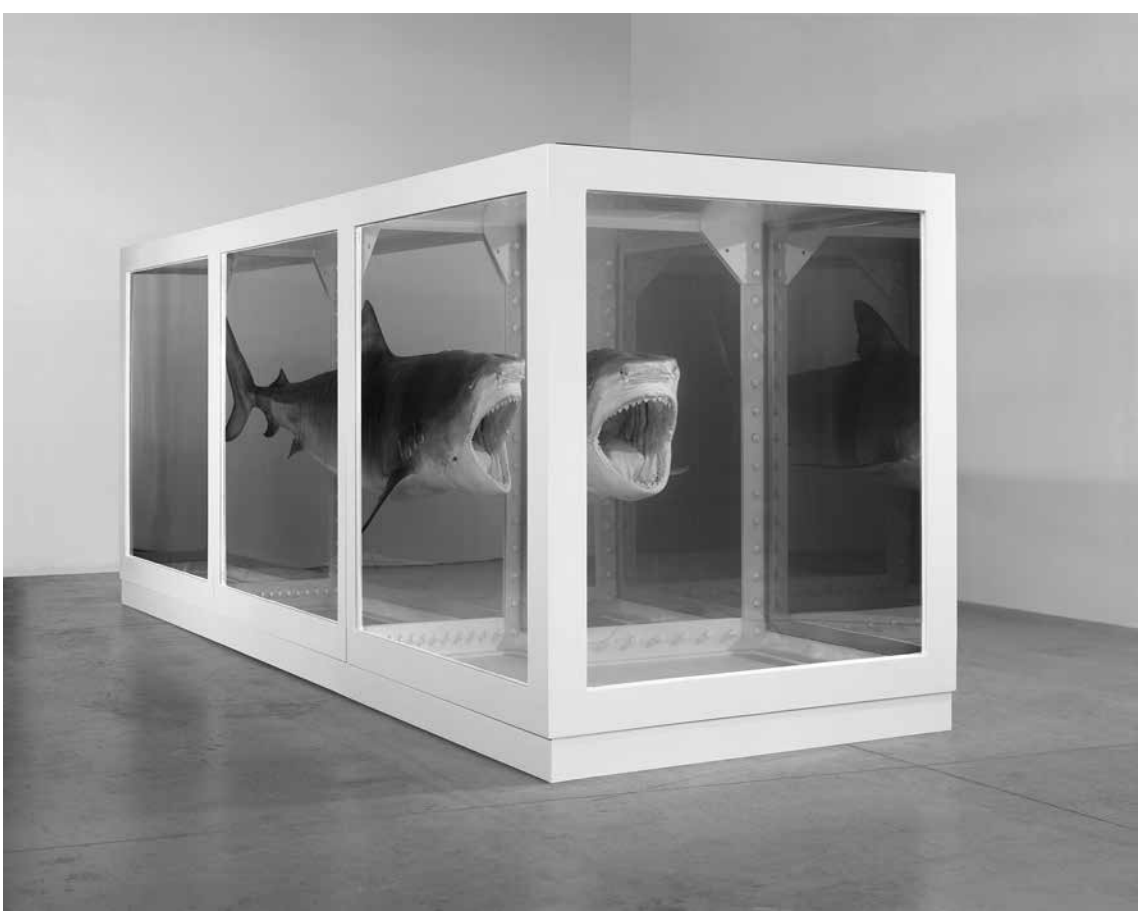
A Thousand Years is the matrix of a major part of Hirst's subsequent works, based on metal-and-glass cases, derived from minimalism but used as containers of death. Literal death – when Hirst places in them dead bodies of animals – or death by allusion, when the vitrines contain furniture or objects that suggest claustrophobic existences, seemingly traumatic or otherwise deadly events. The first example of this second group was *The Acquired Inability to Escape* (1991), consisting of an austere desk with a packet of cigarettes and a filled-up ashtray, which refer to both physical death (in the carcinogenic potential of smoking) and to a deeper sense of spiritual emptiness, a metaphor from the glass container.

Two other major series use dead insects as a pictorial medium: the monochrome pseudo-suprematist 'paintings' made of layers of flies, and the series of paintings similar to stained glass – or psychedelic mandalas – composed of thousands of butterfly wings. More generally, death hovers over much of Hirst's work, with the conspicuous exception of the series of canvases painted in colored circles (*Spot Paintings*)[4]: from the spectacular blown-up photographs of histological sections of cancerous tissues (*Biopsy Paintings*), to the decorative compositions of surgical instruments, to the cabinets of medicines, to a work such as *The History of Pain* (1999), in which a jet of air keeps a beach ball suspended above threatening knife blades. Ultimately, Hirst takes into account the most profound human fear, and counters it with the creative imagination of the artist; it is there-

fore a mental 'escapology' in the face of the anxiety of annihilation of the self.

In Hirst's polymorphic and prolific oeuvre, the *Natural History* series, begun in 1991 and still ongoing, remains the most significant, and includes some of the works that have established the reputation of the artist, all from the early 1990s, before his production became largely repetitive. *Natural History* consists of bodies of animals, whole or split – or their heads or organs – immersed in formaldehyde solution, which was meant to preserve them from corruption as in anatomical museums. It includes some memorable pieces, especially the tiger shark of *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, 1991 (fig. 2, pl. XVIII), suspended in a case of 2.17 x 5.42 x 1.8 meters that engages observers in a comparison between themselves and the animal, their corporeality and that of the gigantic fish, and in an emotional-physical dialectic between proximity to the creature and self-distancing behind the glass. It is not just the dead animal per se that arouses bewilderment; this feeling is amplified by the fact that the animal itself is a symbol of our ancestral fear of being devoured, especially after the *Jaws* film series started in mid-1970s made it an icon of absolute otherness, evil, and soulless bestiality. *Mother and Child Divided* (1993) (fig. 3) is a pair of cattle – a cow and a calf – literally divided, cut in two along the sagittal plane, from mouth to anus, each of the four halves placed in separate containers, so that the observer can pass between the pieces of bodies, and peer into their subcutaneous interiors. *Away*

2. D. Hirst, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, 1991 (three-quarter view), glass, painted steel, silicone, monofilament, shark and formaldehyde solution, 217x542x180 cm (© Damien Hirst and Science Ltd. All rights reserved, DACS 2016, photo Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd).



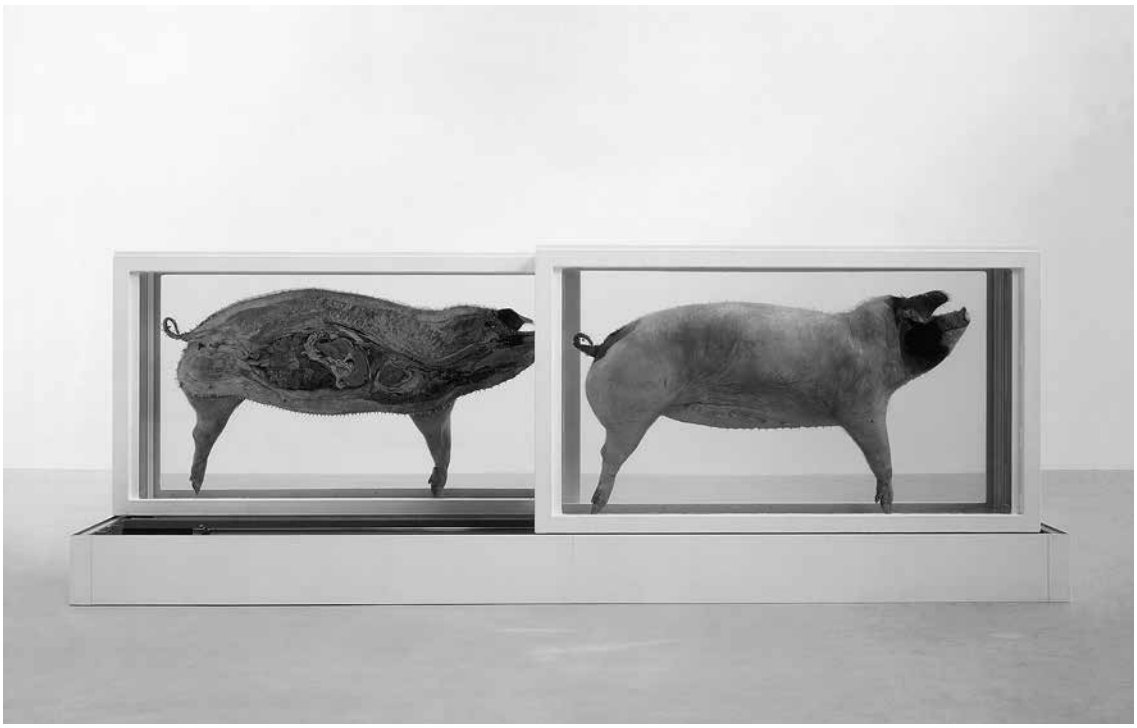
3. D. Hirst, *Mother and Child (Divided)*, 1993, steel, GRP composites, glass, silicone sealant, cow, calf and formaldehyde solution; two parts: cow, 190x322.5x109 cm, calf, 102.9x168.9x62.5 cm (© Damien Hirst and Science Ltd. All rights reserved, DACS 2016, photo Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd).

from the Flock (1994) and the pendant *Away from the Flock (Divided)* (1995) are two lambs – one whole, the other bisected longitudinally – almost suspended (the feet barely touch the ground) in the formaldehyde bath that inflates the soft fleece. *This Little Piggy Went to Market, This Little Piggy Stayed at Home* (1996) (fig. 4, pl. XIX) is a pig cut lengthwise and arranged in two adjacent units sliding on the same base. *Some Comfort Gained from the Acceptance of the Inherent Lies in Everything* (1996) are a bull and a cow split into twelve sections arranged in an ABABA format.

Among other animals of the series, in 1994 Hirst created *The Twelve Disciples* – twelve cases with bovine heads, representing each of the apostles of Christ. To each of them he has further dedicated a collection of hermetic poems (*The Cancer Chronicles*), that allude to tumors, oncology, a war accumulating dead. They express a conception of life without redemption, reduced to the inexorable passing of time and the struggle for power, devoid of solidarity or gentleness. Also, on a couple of occasions he has rearranged the display cases of the 'apostles' along with thirteen canvases smeared with flies and titled with the names of diseases[5]. In other works, he elaborated further on religious iconography and the metaphor of the sacrificial Lamb of God, alluding to Hirst's belief that the Christian message of salvation is empty. In these pieces, Hirst has manipulated the carcasses of animals, opening them, putting them on their knees, forcing their anatomies to mimic the postures of prayer. The mortuary zoo of *Natural History* was gradually expanded to include variants of the first works, or mythological animals (*Golden Calf*, 2008, with hooves and horns in solid 18-karat gold).

2. STATE OF THE ART

Regardless of the wealth of references to art history (from Rembrandt to Francis Bacon, from the Wunderkammern to minimalism and conceptualism, from surrealism to Jeff Koons, to name



4. D. Hirst, *This Little Piggy Went to Market, This Little Piggy Stayed at Home*, 1996, glass, pig, painted steel, acrylic, stainless steel, plastic, formaldehyde solution and painted steel with motorised base, two tanks: each tank 120x210x60 cm (© Damien Hirst and Science Ltd. All rights reserved, DACS 2016, image courtesy White Cube, photo Stephen White).

but a few), some fundamental concepts distilled from Hirst's oeuvre have found a substantial critical consensus: it is a meditation on the universal themes of life and death, articulated in a bipolarity between the beautiful and the uncanny, with the artist oscillating, in the words of Francesco Bonami, along «this treacherous parcour between fun and despair»[6] and willfully affirming life, even in moments of black humor more apparently nihilistic.

Hirst himself has insisted, in numerous interviews, on the model of the artist-demiurge who subverts the world, and draws the strength of his imagination from an implicit dealing with the appointment with death[7]. Without conceding to subjectivism, he defines art as a magic that breaks into reality, works with real objects, transforming them to articulate new perspectives in our relationship with the world. In a world spiritually desertified, Hirst affirms that his faith in art is religious in nature, and that it is impossible to live without beliefs: «we're all trying to find a pathway through the darkness and you need a bit of science and a bit of religion. [...] You've just got to believe that you're not going to die in the next moment»[8]. Art, making the unexpected happen, is the bulwark and antidote to the impending sense of self-extinction. Hirst's Promethean impulse is most evident in his drawings, in which he indulges in visionary projects of Frankenstein-like recreation of life and death, such as in *The Butterfly* (2003) where he imagines a monstrous butterfly composed of two pigs united by their bottoms and attached to 'wings' formed by four half-carcasses of cow, to be placed in a mirror-lined case and engineered like a kaleidoscope (fig. 5).

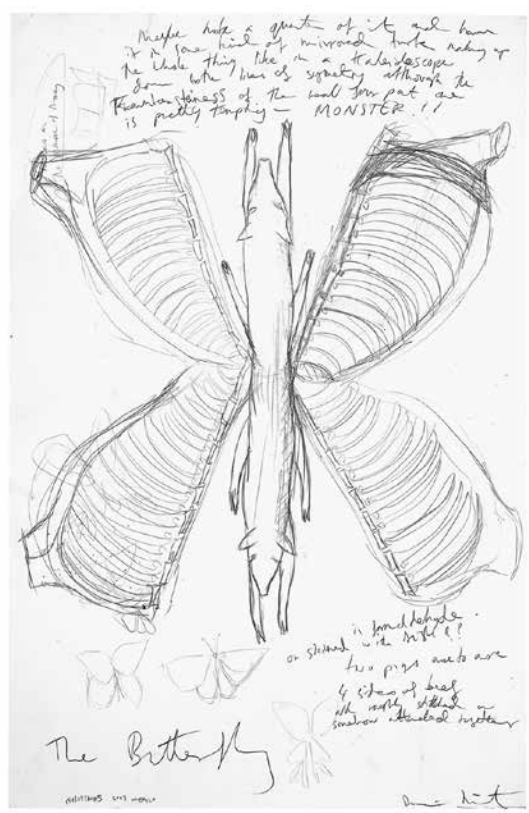
Hirst admitted that the fatality of death is a recurring thought since he was seven years old – an 'obsession' which, consequently, induces the «celebration of life» – and that, fundamentally, «I do not think there's art that is not about death»[9]. Implicitly, Hirst seems to confirm the arguments of scholars who consider the psychological motivations behind the artistic impulse as the need to create a personal 'firmament' against the annihilating anomy of modernity, or, from a historical-anthropological perspective, as a reaction to the decomposition of the corpse (Debray). To give a sample of Hirst's argumentative register, «I think life's completely meaningful. [...] We all feel like a died-out cigarette now and again. Everybody

gets into dark holes. And it's always reassuring to find out you're not the only one. Always. [...] If God just walked over that hill now and went, 'Hi boys', I would fucking punch his lights out and smash him right in the fucking face. [...] I'd pin him to the floor with my boot on his neck [...]. I'd punch his lights out for this fucking fabulously optimistic planet with fuck-all behind it. 'What d'you mean? You can't give me all this and then take it away'. It's insane. I'd have to smack him in the fucking face, that's it. That's life and death in a nutshell»[10]. Yet, however much Hirst claims – and critics echo – the mantra that his art celebrates life, one must remark a certain opaqueness in such alleged celebration, as I will try to argue below. In fact, the quote continues: «everybody's life is completely meaningful. I mean, we're all the star of the show. [...] Cut us all in half, we're all the fucking same. [...] Everything is just so fucking complicated, whichever angle you look at it from»[11]. Here the reader falls into a disappointing anticlimax, because Hirst neglects to appeal to humanistic values – love, solidarity, ethical recognition of the other – as it might be expected from those who appeal to the 'meaning' of life, reducing it to the complexity of the anatomical apparatus, or the structure of matter. The essence of life seems therefore to coincide with biology.

We can also concede that Hirst did not intend to say that life is *only* corporeality, but certainly the way he presents death does not suggest meanings that transcend the body. Hirst has faced his fear and probed the mystery of dying by attending the morgue of the medical school of the University of Leeds, where, as a teenager, he would go to draw the bodies (and he had himself photographed in 1981 next to a decapitated head). This process of de-idealization of the spiritual dimension of death continued in artistic practice, and in collateral episodes such as when Hirst punched the corpses in the morgue in Leeds before a shocked gallerist Jay Jopling, to show him that «There's nothing behind the taboo; they didn't explain anything about death. [...] In our lives, we're separated from corpses, so you think, Oh, that's where death is. And there's a sort of respect. And then when you get to the mortuary and you look [at] them... The people aren't there. There's just some *objects* which look fuck all like real people»[12]. On other occasions, he commented on death as a fundamental unfairness of life, irreconcilable with the idea of a religion: «it was like death was one fundamental flaw in the planet. [...] It is like how can you even think about it? How can you plan anything? There is no point getting out of bed, because there is this thing that can just occur at any moment that you can do nothing about. I remember there is that great quote that Samuel Beckett said, 'Death doesn't require us to make a day free'»[13].

The animal heads or bodies in the vitrines are usually noted as meditations on death (they are *cogita mori*, Maurizio Lorber has suggested)[14]; they can be circumnavigated by the onlookers, and – in the case of the smaller works, including *Twelve Disciples* – inspected from above. However, it is hard to apprehend anything about death, other than acknowledging the physicality of the animal residue, which we see at the same time close-up and at a distance, due to the diffraction of light through the liquid and glass. On a less forgiving critical front, Marc Fumaroli has held up the work of Hirst as an aspect of general 'barnumization' of art and culture today, and Debora Silverman even as «expressive forms of cultural pathology»[15]. With greater sophistication, Chris Townsend has argued that Hirst's 'death boxed' forces the real to become a mere sign-index, reducing it to spectacle and ignoring the ethical dimension of the discovery of the dying Other, nor is it an event that

5. D. Hirst, *Butterfly*, 2003, pencil on paper, 102x63.3 cm (© Damien Hirst and Science Ltd. All rights reserved, DACS 2016).



arouses feelings or commemoration – themes on which Townsend focused his masterful book *Art and Death*. According to him, Hirst is a skilled creator of «extreme gestures [...] rendered palatable for the art market», a consummate manipulator of «the abject and offensive superbly presented»[16]. Encased, dissected, flayed but disinfected by the formaldehyde, the animals of *Natural History* stand out as an opaque counterpoint that does not illuminate the sense of living. In addition to admiring the talent with which Hirst pumps-up the surrealist 'marvelous' to the needs of a 'think big' aesthetic typical of a generation accustomed to the marketing strategies of Charles Saatchi and the sensationalism of mass culture, what has Hirst brought to the understanding of dying in our culture? And why, above all, should the presentation of bodies of animals be exemplary for the human being?

The implications of this question have remained surprisingly marginal among most of the critics who have commented on the artist. Rudi Fuchs, after speaking of the «radical realism» implicit in the presentation of animals per se (the shark, in particular), has only briefly underlined the nature of merely physical event of death for Hirst, that attacks the «physical machinery» of the body[17]. For Lorber, Hirst manipulates the bodies as mere anatomical apparatuses; they are the object of scientific practices – the 'new religion' – while death is seen as a malignant force that operates so that our body-machine fails, in a frankly mechanistic conception of life that sees death as 'expiration' and defeat. Even animals, he adds, are no longer possible objects of empathy but only machinal bodies to be disposed of dispassionately[18]. Townsend and Chaudhuri are the only exceptions. For the former, Hirst takes carcasses of animals (a rarely seen and unwelcome by-product of industrial efficiency) and makes them simple metaphors of our own death, assimilating this one to that of bovines, ovines, or insects, denying its potential to generate human culture. Chaudhuri, in particular, has specifically commented *A Thousand Years* as a form of animalization of humans, in line with the post-humanist philosophy; I will develop this reading below.

3. MEN LIKE FLIES

In an interview in number 0 of «Freeze» in 1991, Hirst commented on *A Thousand Years*: «It's like a society of some sort. The flies could be people», while from the formal point of view it could be seen as a composition of free-moving dots in space[19]. On the environment *Pharmacy* (1992) – a simulation of a real pharmacy store, including a bug zapper – Hirst said: «in the art works you are metaphorically saying that flies are like people as well»[20]. Referring to *In and Out of Love* (1992) – which consisted of a farm of live butterflies in one room, plus monochrome canvases painted in enamel incorporating dead butterflies in another room – and thinking also of flies and butterflies which accidentally die remaining stuck to the fresh pigment on a painting, he affirmed: «The death of an insect that still has this really optimistic beauty of a wonderful thing. [...] They don't rot like humans»[21]. In the context of a comment on *The Twelve Disciples*, after speaking of *heads* detached from the body, Hirst has steered the discussion on the term *faces*, thinning the line between the animal and the human: «I did those heads in 1994[. A] head without a body is quite an odd thing. The idea of being beheaded. [...] When you do a drawing you can do a whole body or you draw just the head, you draw the face. It still keeps the personality»[22]. Similarly, in an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, he admitted that he likes to use *meat* (referring to the calf pierced by arrows placed in the pose of martyr in *Saint Sebastian, Exquisite Pain*, 2007) and to «give it back a personality», or to make it a metaphorical vehicle; then he added «People don't like faces, do they, on meat», or see the tragic side, or feel «empathy with it or some sort of understanding or to feel its pain or tragedy. [...] I know I always like doing it with like a cow or sheep»[23].

The use of insects as metaphors for men, and the slips between animal and man that occur in applying the notion of 'personality' not only to animal heads (moreover disfigured by their skinning) but to meat – unmistakably the product of butchering – indicates that in presenting dead animals Hirst seems to be willing to articulate a discourse on human death. This association of human dying to the animal is far from obvious, because there is a philosophy of the 20th century, culminating in Martin Heidegger, that drew a clear distinction between human and animal, between Being and organic existence. The point is not that we humans do not know death more than animals do, but to suggest that there is no significant ontological difference.

Through the title *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, Hirst seems to affirm either something obvious (such as the physical impossibility of a coffee pot in the mind of a living, for example), or trivial, because it informs us that the mind is precluded the comprehension of death due to the impossibility to be dead and still thinking. It also defines death primarily as a physical fact, forgetting that anyone can experience the death of others – assisting, comforting,

and with intellectually productive empathy. Moreover, if we hypothesize that the shark embodies the content of a human being's meditation about death, we must assume that man can only conceive of the death of the other-as-animal. It is clear that this contrasts, if not with common sense, then with Heidegger's statement that only men die, not animals. Critic and curator Mario Codognato, and philosopher John Gray are the only ones, to my knowledge, who have evoked Heidegger's thought on the death of the animals in discussing this artwork. However, the former quoted a passage from the German thinker («Mortals are they who can experience death as death. Animals cannot do so. But animals cannot speak either. Their essential relation between death and language flashes up before us, but remains still unthought»), but then he nullified his argument, noting that the title of Hirst's shark «has a relationship with our perception of death as a characteristic that distinguishes the human species from other animals, through the presence of thought and language, specific only to man, which words can express but not prove»[24]. Indeed, Hirst does exactly the opposite: he connects but does *not* distinguish human beings and animals, pairing both under the category of the 'living'. Instead, Gray mentioned Heidegger's theory that animals do not know death, without developing the issue[25].

As early as *Being and Time* (1927) Heidegger distinguished three modes of dying, differentiating animal and man. The former, considered as a mere 'living' (*der Lebende*) *perishes* (*verenden*), that is it ceases to live physiologically; man (*der Mensch*), instead, witnesses the bodily *demise* (*das Ableben*) – as a medical examination can ascertain – while *death* (*das Sterben*), in the conceptualization of Heidegger, is the completion of a project of authentic life, which, eschewing the conformation with socially dominant behaviors and discourses, finds the basis in the awareness of the inevitable appointment with the end[26]. The conception of being-towards-death as the authentic possibility of man implies the need to investigate what essentially constitutes *Homo humanus* and to do so, in the *Letter on Humanism* (1949), Heidegger criticizes the Aristotelian tradition that interprets the human being as *zoon logon echon* (a living/animal that has language/reason), translated into Latin as *animal rationale*. This concept, in fact, identifies the essence of man in *animalitas*, while for Heidegger man «essentially occurs in his essence only where he is claimed by being»[27]; man, in the purest sense, is the locus in which being posits himself as *Da-sein* (Being-there). His *humanitas* is therefore not just a branch of animality, but resides in the 'ek-sistence' (*Ek-sistenz*), that is the 'clearing', Heidegger says, where being unfolds and finds a dwelling, unconcealing the truth of things[28]. The ek-sistence is the exclusive prerogative of man, so that Heidegger insists that despite the similarities in the organism with the animal, the latter is «at the same time separated from our ek-sistent essence by an abyss» and this distance is «scarcely conceivable»[29]. Ek-sistence is also the language, not to be understood in the common sense of phonetic ability, or a capacity among others of the species *Homo* (as in the Aristotelian concept of the living who, *in addition*, possesses speech). More fundamentally, language is the «correspondence to being», «the house of being in which the human being ek-sists by dwelling»[30].

This will be enough for some initial considerations. Hirst's works seem an about-face to Heidegger's humanism (and Sartre's, who posited the foundation of the human in factual existence, or Freud who situated it in the unconscious), suggesting that the essence of human being is in the organism investigated by natural sciences. That is not only a quasi-return to Descartes – who regarded animals as soulless mechanisms – but also a downgrading of human beings to the rank of mechanical bodies, by animalizing them. Not only does the series' title *Natural History* allude to specimens of science museums, or taxonomic works of eighteenth-century naturalists (like *Histoire Naturelle* by Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon, or *Systema Naturae* by Linnaeus), while implying, as stated, a discourse on human death[31]. A number of works, whose matrices have been *Mother and Child Divided*, *This Little Piggy* ... and *Some Comfort Gained* ..., stand out precisely for their unraveling of the subcutaneous anatomy with surgical precision, as if to underline that the truth about death, and perhaps also the human one, is in the organic and not in existentialist elucubrations. This hypothesis is further encouraged by works in which Hirst subverts the tradition of sculpture meant to celebrate the beauty of the ideal body and humanist ethos. These include the colossal translation in painted bronze of an anatomical toy (*Hymn*, 1999-2005) – the hymn to man, Hirst seems to say, is an educational toy – or *The Anatomy of an Angel*, 2008, resembling a funerary statue classically carved in marble, but showing flayed body parts and internal organs exposed, or *The Virgin Mother* (2005), based on a famous sculpture by Degas, where the pregnant woman is partially open to expose the anatomy of her womb.

Other considerations of Heidegger about the abyss between humanity and animality, mediated by Giorgio Agamben's comments, can offer guidance to the implications that may be distilled from Hirst's works. During the 1929-30 academ-

ic year, Heidegger pointed out that the animal is «poor in world» (*weltarm*), unlike man who is «world-forming» (*weltbildend*) [32]. The animal is always captivated by the sensory stimuli it finds in its environment – to which it is instinctively drawn and that determine the behaviors typical of its species – and can never escape from this ring. Heidegger exemplifies this typical daze, or captivation (*Benommenheit*), with the moth that is completely drawn by its attraction to the flame, which eventually burns it and yet remains unknown to the end. Conversely, the *Da-sein* rises when man is capable of suspending his animality, that is the state of blinding captivation in his sensorial *environment* that closes-off the *world* as such. It is when man first sees his own not-seeing – so to speak – that is when he grasps his inability to comprehend some beings in the world (which, however, disclose themselves, if only in their closedness), which produces the *Dasein*, that is «the being which exists in the form of potentiality-for-being» [33]. In Agamben's words: «Dasein is simply an animal that [...] has awakened *from* its own captivation *to* its own captivation. This awakening of the living being to its own being-captivated, this anxious and resolute opening to a not-open, is the human» [34].

For Heidegger the 'world' is produced then in the dialectic between veiling and openness, concealedness and unconcealedness, and language is exactly this «clearing-concealing advent of being itself» [35]. Also, to think means to accomplish (*vollbringen*) being, and acting, hinged on thinking, is the exemplary form of accomplishment. Consequently, the possibility to act (and not only to behave instinctively) exists only as the reverberation of the opening of being into its fullness. Conversely, the animal cannot act and cannot even die. The dynamic between concealedness/unconcealedness, the revelation of something that I can grasp in its potentiality and nevertheless resists to be fully open, this unveiling of truth (*alétheia*) is not only the conflict between humanity against animality, action against behavior, world against environment, but it is also the political paradigm par excellence, for Heidegger. The *polis* is the locus where all the nuances of the conflict take place [36].

In the light of these new considerations, we can return to *A Thousand Years*, a work based exactly on the model of animal behavior described by Heidegger, as well as by ethologists. Flies symbolize humanity devoid of possibility of 'action' and only able to 'behave' conducted by sensory stimuli and dazed by them (the smell of the cow head that begins to rot, the neon light), while other items in the environment (the wires that incinerate the flies) remain invisible to their 'poor world'. I'm not suggesting that Hirst has deliberately illustrated Heidegger, but, alluding to the condition of human life, he has deployed the demonstrative brutality of his micro-ecosystem against the sophisticated theoretical monument of a philosopher committed to restore full meaning to the noun 'mortal' with which poetry designated man, and the idea of authentic life as being thrown into the world in a continuous project of self-accomplishment acknowledging our own being-toward-death. Contrary to Heidegger's affirmation that action is to accomplish being, Hirst's flies/men die in the manner that the philosopher would consider simply perishing, without ever having come into being, nor having had the environment, in which both pullulate, unveiled as a world. The apparent model of a 'behavior' antithetical to political 'action' in Hirst's work is consistent with the more general crisis of the political and historical progress typical of post-modernity.

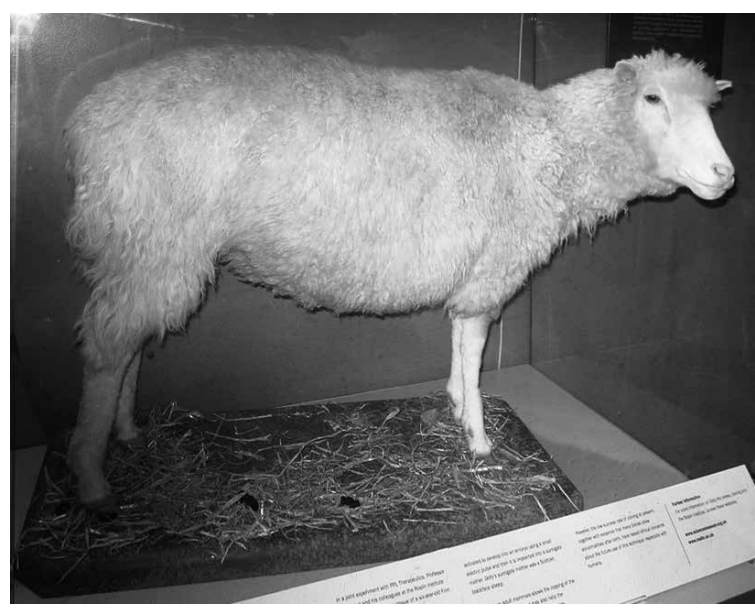
Inspired by a comment by Alexandre Kojève to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* in 1938-39, which introduced the concept of 'posthistory' and evoked the end of historic human action, the disappearance of man and his survival as an animal, Agamben suggests that in our contemporary world prevails animalization, which is the end of the political and historic mechanism of the conflict animal/man described by Heidegger. The depoliticization of human societies, the end of religion, poetry and philosophy in Western world as forces of historical progress and, on the contrary, the triumph of globalization («the unconditional unfolding of the *oikonomia*») or the assumption of biological life «that is, of the very animality of man [...] as 'the supreme political (or rather impolitical) task», are examples [37].

Undoubtedly, the era of globalization of industrial and financial markets began in the 1990s, along with the expanded management of the biological. The diffusion and social acceptance of plastic surgery, the development of biomedical technologies, genome mapping and application of genetic engineering in zootechnical and agricultural production, the ethical problems raised by eugenics and euthanasia, have since then continuously called into question the definition of what it means to 'be human'. The management of the biological inspired some of the most iconic works of art of the decade, made by colleagues of Hirst among the Young British Artists (e.g. the somatically altered individuals by Jake and Dinos Chapman, or the self-portrait in frozen blood by Marc Quinn), or genetic manipulation of life forms (plants, animals, cell cultures) by Eduardo Kac, or prosthetic implants or electronic devices

in the human body, thus transformed into a cyborg, by Stelarc. In 1992 the exhibition *Post human* (which Hirst also took part in) aspired to capture the ethos of the epochal transformation of the definition of the self, now fluid and interchangeable, permitted by the increasing accessibility to cosmetic surgery, medical technologies, and communications (from the 'electronic space' of the first mobile phones and virtual reality, to the then imminent global spread of the Internet)[38].

Hirst's concept of bodily and animalized life and death reflects both the desecration of the idea of death in a secularized society, and the pervasiveness of the dominant scientific and productive paradigm. As metonymies of the main products of the meat industry, the manipulation of the bodies of sheep, cattle and pig made by Hirst is conceptually justified by the existing practices of productive maximization. Presented in their chemical bath as scientific specimens or demonstrations 'from life' of dissecting tables, they are consistent with the industrial and biotechnological *hubris*, which, instead, the museum presentation of the sheep Dolly (fig. 6) – the first mammal successfully cloned from a somatic cell in 1996 – conceals. In fact, Dolly is now taxidermized at the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh, in a showcase where she is made to look more natural with a bunch of straw underneath her legs and her head turned sideways as if to look curiously about her environment (fig. 5), whereas Hirst's animals express the ethos underlying both the imperatives of the food industry and of animal cloning. When Hirst realized *A Thousand Years*, he was aware of the precautions to be used in skinning the cow's head, as the first cases of the disease known as the 'mad cow' had been discovered in 1986. In the 1990s, the diagnosis in human patients of a variant of Creutzfeldt-Jakob dementia (1996) ascribed to previous consumption of meat of 'mad' cows, then the subsequent epidemic of hoof-and-mouth disease, helped change the sensitivity for animal welfare in British public culture. While not an ecologist, nor a millenarian, Hirst captures the zeitgeist of a decade in which the pastoral image of England was shocked by news on the aberrant treatment of cattle (the mad cow disease had been traced to the animal diet based on bonemeal produced from the carcasses of other cattle) and the images of the mass cremations of potentially affected animals.

By animalizing the human, Hirst does not so much imply an attempt to subvert humanist logo-anthropocentrism in favor of a *zooësis* inclined to reconsider animals as sentient beings capable of feelings – and our relationship with them, accordingly – but reminds us, in the words of artist Francis Bacon, that «we are meat, we are potential carcasses», and that the millennia-old familiarity between men and animals is lost forever[39]. This issue had already been addressed by an art historian known in Britain for his educational work aimed at larger, not exclusively academic, audiences – John Berger – in his essay *Why look at animals?* (1977)[40]. The text opens with the evocative



6. D. Hirst, *Dolly the sheep*, 1996-2003, ovis aries Linnaeus, 1758, Finn Dorset breed, National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh.

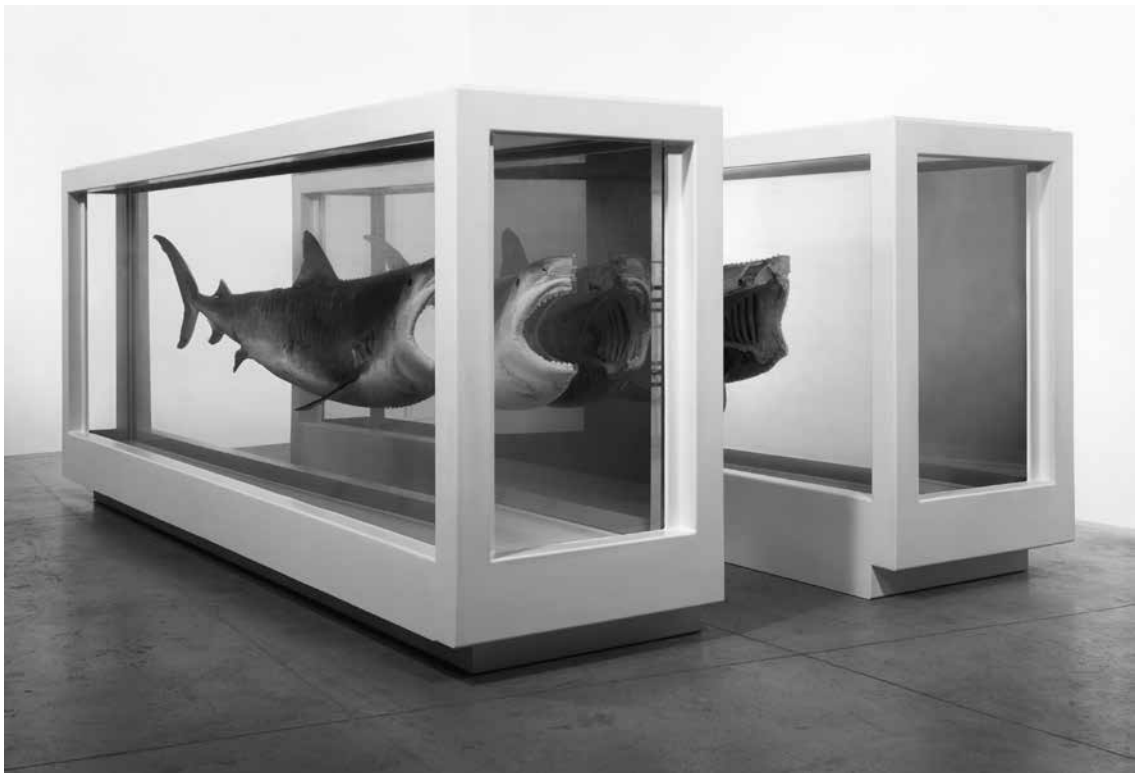
description of the encounter with the gaze of the animal, which we perceive as an inscrutable mask but by which we feel simultaneously scrutinized «across a narrow abyss of [mutual] non-comprehension»[41]. Since prehistoric times, men and animals have established an ambivalent relationship, based on acknowledged similarities and distinctions, and lives running in parallel. The lack of language separates them, but both are born and die, and have comparable anatomies, and «only in death do the two parallel lines converge and after death, perhaps, cross over»[42]. With modernization, not even in zoos, where now we go to see animals like paintings in a museum, we no longer encounter their look, and when we do, we find an eye looking with indifference because these animals were forced into artificial environments where they can only survive. «That look between animal and man, that may have played a crucial role in the development of human society, and with which, in any case, all men have lived until less than a century ago, has been extinguished»[43]. If Berger lamented the loss of a relationship of inter-species familiarity, albeit through the abyss, Hirst documents at the highest degree that irreversible loss.

Anyone who sees Hirst's animals probably undergoes the uncanny but frustrating experience of the encounter with their dead look. My personal encounter with *Mother and Child Divided* at the Venice Biennale of 1993 struck me for the intrinsic duality of their nature of objectified once-living beings. I felt interrogated by the eye of the cow, since I recognized her as a familiar mammalian; at the same time, I found myself entangled in ambivalent feelings of attraction and repulsion at the view of the brain, spine and whole body cut in two – from mouth to anus, the internal route of the whole digestive system exposed. The violence once exerted on the animal appeared then composed into stasis, the spasms quelled in stillness, the blood drained out of tissues left pale, the bellows suffocated into a sepulchral silence. Yet, this sublimating classical *mise en forme* of the physicality of the animal and the brutality of butchery resisted my search for empathy and a possible meaning about death. Not only was I ill at ease about the gratuity of the sacrifice of the animal, but in intercepting her empty look – the eyeball whitish and expressionless – I realized that Hirst presented the impossibility of any empathic recognition. Unlike in painted portraits or in photographs, where we seem to be interrogated by the sitter's look, here the *punctum* referred to nothing else than the total opaqueness and unbridgeable otherness of death. Therefore, when Hirst mentions the 'face', or 'personality', in the meat, he can only affirm so superficially or as a paradox.

Moreover, Hirst manipulates animals to call into question – subverting, vilifying it – the symbolic role that they have played in Western culture, or the moral characteristics that a tradition dating back at least to Aesop has attributed to them, and that is entered in a millennial use of animal metaphors in the history of poetry, in everyday language, and in nursery rhymes. (*This Little Piggy Went to Market*... is a cynical subversion of the idealized cuteness and humanization of farm animals in childhood imagination in general, and, more specifically, in an English finger play and nursery rhyme). In sum, Hirst strikes at the heart of the role that animals have in our collective imagination.

Therefore, if Hirst abandons logocentric humanism, and yet does not embrace the New Age ethics, the alternative is the animalization of the human that leads toward the amoral post-humanism advocated by philosopher John Gray, the author of the 2002 book *Straw Dogs*. Drawing upon a patchwork of scientific theories, philosophical and historical examples, Gray assigned himself the mission of «removing the masks from our animal faces», and to demolish any reincarnation of humanism[44]. He counters it with the theory of Gaia, according to which the Earth is a self-regulating system similar to an organism, and for which «human life has no more meaning than the life of slime mould»[45]. The fact that humans are different from animals – as individuals, capable of making choices and actions, self-consciousness and free will – is for Gray an illusion born from the human need to find meaning in the world, certainties and happiness, all working as bulwarks against the anguish of the passing of time. Gray therefore proposes a Darwinian perspective, one that relativizes faith in rationality and progress – or the universality of morality and truth – as self-indulgent myths, and considers man as just one of the many species that temporarily colonize the Earth. Gray urges us to abandon the anthropocentric solipsism and open ourselves to «the coast opposite humanity», and see that the animals have a life without death (which they ignore together with time). He suggests that humans will find a convenient modus vivendi when they stop devising strategies for immortality, and will use science and technology without delusions of progress and triumph of good[46].

It is no coincidence that Hirst asked Gray for two introductory texts. Commenting on an exhibition of Hirst and Michael Joo in 2010, the philosopher reiterated the points of his radical skepticism about the illusory goals of art and philosophy to create a humanist sense for the world, urging rather to accept positively the inherent lack of meaning in things, and if anything, consider the me-



7. D. Hirst, *Death Explained*, 2007 (three-quarter view), glass, steel, shark, acrylic and formaldehyde solution, 215.4x514.2x122.8 cm x 2 (© Damien Hirst and Science Ltd. All rights reserved, DACS 2016, photo Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd).

anings as transient *objets trouvés*. Hirst's works are such a case; they present a de-anthropomorphized world, and express disillusioned visions onto aspects of universal non-sense, for example in the visually beautiful magnifications of tumor tissues of the *Biopsy Paintings* series, documenting life forms that develops inside our organs to give us death, «inhuman life that destroys our bodies»[47].

Despite the fact that Hirst's claims of life as meaningful conflict with Gray's radical skepticism, it is the absence of human meaning that the series *Natural History* suggests. Not even death – which anthropologists and psychologists consider the primal historical and individual urge to cultural creation – is something we can now say anything about. *Death Explained* (2007) (fig. 7), a tiger shark bisected longitudinally, confirms this emptiness. The rationality of scientific observation can scan the interior of the body, but if on the one hand it reduces the scary otherness of the shark to a carcass open to inspection and thus neutralizes its terrorizing power, on the other hand it explains nothing about death. It is also a death of the symbolic: the shark, a symbol of death, is itself dead thing; it remains only as an exhibited statement of epistemological impotence and the spectacularization of the inert.

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NOTES

I am indebted to Paolo Gabrielli for his illuminating considerations that contributed to route the initial stages of this research, and Giulia Simi and Jonathan F. Walz for their intellectual generosity in sharing opinions, and the patient reading of the text.

1. D. Silverman, *Marketing Thanatos: Damien Hirst's Heart of Darkness*, in «American Imago», 68, n. 3, Autumn 2011, pp. 391-424.

2. U. Chaudhuri, *(De)Facing the Animals: Zooësis and Performance*, in «The Drama Review», 51, n. 1, Spring 2007, pp. 8-20.

3. For Silverman, *Marketing Thanatos...*, cit., p. 399, businessman Steven A. Cohen, current owner of *The Physical Impossibilty of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (bought in 2004 for 8.3 million dollars from Charles Saatchi), is known by his employees as 'Barracuda Steve'.

4. The other major painterly series, the spin paintings – started in 1992 as abstract works – since 2008 often feature outlines of skulls within the splashes of color.

5. *Cancer Chronicles*, London, 2003 (the texts are also available at http://www.damienhirst.com/texts/2003/cancer-chronicles, accessed: 12/11/2014). The 2003 suite of thirteen canvases smeared with flies and titled after disease names (*Smallpox*, *Tuberculosis*, *Bubonic Plague*, *Leprosy*, *Typhoid*, *Syphilis*, *Leukaemia*, *Malaria*, *Ebola*, *Meningitis*, *Aids*, *Cholera*, *Septicaemia*), was shown at the solo exhibition *Romance in the Age of Uncertainty*, along with the *Twelve Disciples* in an adjacent room (White Cube gallery, London, 2003). Both the canvases and the *Twelve Disciples* have been mounted in 2007 in a single room at the collective show *Reflections* (Pinchuk Art Center, Kiev).

6. F. Bonami, *Supernatural Aid: Hirst's Travels*, in F. Bonami (ed.), *Damien Hirst: Relics*, Doha-Milano, 2013, p. 16.

7. During his career, Hirst has given several interviews, sometimes repetitive in themes and anecdotes, other times rhapsodic and elusive. The most meaningful are the twelve conversations with Gordon Burn, between January 1992 and April 2000, collected in D. Hirst, G. Burn, *On the Way to Work*, London, 2001; a long interview with Mirta D'Argenzio *Like People, Like Flies. Damien Hirst Interviewed by Mirta D'Argenzio*, in E. Cicelyn, M. Codognato, M. D'Argenzio (eds.), *Damien Hirst*, Napoli, 2004, pp. 50-250; *Leviathan. A Conversation with Damien Hirst and John Gray*, in *'Corpus' Damien Hirst. Drawings 1981-2006*, London, 2006, pp. 29-41; the interview with Rudi Fuchs *Victory over Decay*, in D. Hirst, *For the Love of God, the Making of the Diamond Skull*, London, 2007 (available on Hirst's website: http://www.damienhirst.com/texts/20071/jan-rudi-fuchs; accessed: 11/11/2014); H.U. Obrist, D. Hirst, *An Interview*, in *Beyond Belief Damien Hirst*, London, 2008, pp. 22-37; *Nicholas Serota Interviews Damien Hirst*, in *Damien Hirst*, London 2012, pp. 91-99.

8. Obrist, Hirst, *An Interview*, cit., p. 28.

9. The quotations are, respectively, from: D. Hirst to G. Burn, January 1992, in Hirst, Burn, *On the Way...*, cit. p. 22; *Nicholas Serota Interviews...*, cit., p. 96; see also *ibidem*, p. 95.

10. D. Hist to G. Burn, 22 April 2000, in Hirst, Burn, *On the Way...*, cit., pp. 228, 230, 231.

11. *Ibidem*, pp. 228-229.

12. D. Hist to G. Burn, April 1996, in Hirst, Burn, *On the Way...*, cit., p. 52; see also *Nicholas Serota Interviews...*, cit., p. 97 and B. Dillon, *Ugly Feelings*, in *Damien Hirst*, cit., pp. 22-23.

13. D. Hirst to M. D'Argenzio, in Cicelyn, Codognato, D'Argenzio (eds.), *Damien Hirst*, cit., p. 164.

14. M. Lorber, *Damien Hirst: l'estetica del relitto e l'autopsia di un'ossessione*, in «Arte in Friuli Arte a Trieste», 29, 2010, pp. 225-258.

15. M. Fumaroli, *Parigi-New York e ritorno. Viaggio nelle arti e nelle immagini. Diario 2007-2008* (transl. G. Cillario), Milano, 2011, pp. 161-65; Silverman, *Marketing Thanatos...*, cit., p. 391.

16. C. Townsend, *Art and Death*, London-New York, 2008, p. 49.

17. R. Fuchs, *Baroque Minimal & Hymnes*, in *Cornucopia. Damien Hirst*, London-München, 2010, p. 25, also available in http://www.damienhirst.com/texts/2010/march--rudi-fuchs (accessed: 11/11/2014).

18. *Ibidem*.

19. *Damien Hirst Life and Death*, in «Frieze», n. 00, Summer 1991, pp. 22-25, also available in http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/damien-hirst/ (accessed: 11/11/2014).

20. D. Hirst to M. D'Argenzio, in Cicelyn, Codognato, D'Argenzio (eds.), *Damien Hirst*, cit., pp. 109-110.

21. *Ibidem*, p. 83.

22. *Ibidem*, pp. 221-223.

23. Obrist, Hirst, *An Interview*, cit., p. 34.

24. M. Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, 1959, quoted by M. Codognato, *Warning Labels*, in Cicelyn, Codognato, D'Argenzio (eds.), *Damien Hirst*, cit., p. 32.

25. *Leviathan. A conversation...*, cit., p. 30.

26. M. Heidegger, *Being and Time* (transl. J. Stambaugh), Albany, NY, 1996, in particular: pp. 229-246.

27. M. Heidegger, *Letter on Humanism* (1949), in Id., *Pathmarks* (transl. F.A. Capuzzi), edited by W. McNeil, Cambridge, 1998, p. 247.

28. Heidegger defines what is proper to man as 'ek-sistence', by which he means 'standing in the clearing (*Lichtung*) of being' (*Letter...*, cit., p. 247). By coining the word ek-sistence, he differentiated the advent of Being from the concept of existence (*existentia*), typical of metaphysical vocabulary, meaning the actuality of life, as opposed to essence (*essentia*).

29. *Ibidem*, p. 248.

30. *Ibidem*, p. 254.

31. I thank Chiara Savettieri for bringing the work of Buffon to my attention.

32. On the 'poverty in world' of the animals and their 'captivation', see G. Agamben, *The Open. Man and Animal* (transl. K. Attel), Stanford, 2004, pp. 49-56 (original edition: *L'aperto. L'uomo e l'animale*, Torino, 2002).

33. *Ibidem*, p. 67.

34. *Ibidem*, p. 70.

35. Heidegger, *Letter...*, cit., p. 249.

36. Agamben, *The Open...*, cit., pp. 72-73.

37. *Ibidem*, p. 76.

38. G. Deitch, *Post Human*, New York, 1992.

39. Francis Bacon, quoted by Chaudhuri, *(De)Facing the Animals...*, cit., p. 15 (the original quotation is from D. Sylvester, *The Brutality of Fact: Interviews with Francis Bacon, 1962-1979*, New York, 1987, p. 23).

40. J. Berger, *Why Look at Animals?* (1977), in Id., *About Looking*, London, 1980, pp. 3-28.

41. *Ibidem*, p. 5.

42. *Ibidem*, p. 6.

43. *Ibidem*, p. 28.

44. J. Gray, *Straw Dogs*, London, 2002, p. 38.

45. *Ibidem*, p. 33.

46. *Ibidem*, pp. 151 and 194.

47. *Damien Hirst/Micael Joo. Have You Ever Really Looked At The Sun?*, London, 2010, p. 66.