

Reflections of consumerism in Damien Hirst's Spot Paintings

by Ulrich Blanche

1. Brief history of the Spot Paintings

We start out with a brief history of Damien Hirst's spots, whose unnamed predecessors he already created in the mid 1980s (Pic 1). We see irregular colored spots on white boards, they still lack a constant grit, perfection and the variety of colors of the ones Hirst painted straight on the wall of 1988's "Frieze" exhibition (Pic 2). Those prototypes, titled "Edge" and "Row" (Pic 2) were identical, except of the fact that one had half spots on the edge and one on the row. Two years later, in 1990 he came back to the idea of the spots, made drawings and started 1991 to transfer them to white canvases.

Hirst only painted the first five ones himself which are recognizable as the pin points of the dividers he used are still visible. From then on assistants (Pic 3) painted them following his allowance, but covered the pin points. Hirst started entitling the Spot Paintings after pharmaceutical drugs (Pic 4), which he read in the "Physicians' Desk Reference," an annually published commercial information for manufacturers prescription drugs.

The transfer from wall to canvas and from visually inspired to associative serial titles also marked the transition from an idea to an object, a commercially available consumer item, from concept art to painting. The "prototypes" of 1988 on a wall Hirst could only sell as an abstract idea with a certificate. With the transfer Hirst uncovers the separation of idea and mass production, which was no longer directly accomplished by the artist but by a (throughout the next 15 years) emerging number of assistants.

Spots are between "1 1/2 millimeter dots and one painting 7 foot-square" (Pic 5), the intermediate distance between each spot is about one spot diameter. The number of spots varies from at least a half to several hundreds. Canvas sizes and shapes may vary as well; there are triangles, oblongs or disks (Pic 6). Rarely dominated by a single color, the spots are usually not predominated by bright or dark colors; some are in grey or pale scale.

Due to the grid-like arrangement and the same size of the spots there seems to be no hierarchy or apparent order. The grid can vary, too, most are parallel to the canvas frame, but there are also Spot Paintings reminiscent of mandalas or church windows or some that are arranged diagonally to the frame. They always follow a point or axially symmetrical order which is based on the shape of the canvas.

2. Reflections and inspiration for consumer society

While their titles evoke pharmaceutical drugs, the aesthetics of the abstract spots go beyond reminding of prescription or illegal drugs (Pic 9). They became one of Hirst's logos, reflect and have, in turn, inspired consumer society in various ways (Pic 10), as color charts, logos, Smarties™, billiard balls, Go! Airline insignia, Kidscompany adverts, and commercial design and packaging.

The principle of potential over-identification Hirst's (the term over identification was coined by the Slovenian theorist Slavoj Žižek) with alleged buyer wishes, kitsch elements or high-gloss finish in the Spot Paintings is reminiscent of Slovenian music band / artist group Laibach, which presented at the time of communism in 1980s Slovenia their over-identification with totalitarianism, according to Žižek to "the obscene superego of the system":

*"Laibach's method is extremely simple, effective and horribly open to misinterpretation. First of all, they absorb the mannerisms of the enemy, adopting all the seductive trappings and symbols of state power, and then they exaggerate everything to the edge of parody."*¹

¹ Richard Wolfson: Warriors of weirdness. Daily Telegraph vom 4. September 2003.

Similar can be said about Hirst and his handling of consumption, especially of the art market. Unlike Laibach, which (had to) defend themselves clearly repeatedly against accusations of fascism; Hirst does not state entirely clear what actually his position to art as a commodity is. Many think he embraces it completely. But not just his essay "Cunts sell shit to fools" suggests for instance, that his over-fulfilling of alleged consumer desires is part of his art, yet he apparently feels comfortable in the role of the "cunt" selling "shit" to "fools" as well. "I try to say something and deny it at the same time," says Hirst.

3. Hirst's Over-identification, embracing and criticizing of consumer society

This paper tries to answer the question how exactly Hirst embraces and criticizes – or "over-identifies" - with consumer society - without taking position. The following phenomena of these series highlight certain aspects of Hirst Spots, where he avoids taking a position, i.e. these phenomena don't either celebrate or criticize consumer society, but do both at the same time, often contradicting each other. Contradiction often emerges between visual appearance and actual being, what we see and what we know about Hirst's Spot Paintings.

The pharmaceutical titles (Pic 11) contradict the positively color- and cheerful visual appearance, both remind of different kinds of consumption: The pharmaceutical titles, which are visually recalled in the clear and clean surface of the spots reminding of the reliable and serious impression of medical package in a pharmacy, remind of the at least temporary solution of mental or physical human problems through medical drug consumption. Hirst deals with the same subject in his cabinets of pharmaceutical drugs or pills (pic 12), the grid between the spots is recalled in the shelves of the cabinets, which remind of temples of consumption in general (Pic 13), supermarkets, pharmacies or drug stores. The grid-like structure of the spots is reminiscent of push-through blister pills packages (pictured) at the same time, however, also of white luxury supermarket - or pharmacy shelves, and the string of consumer products in stores (pictured), an association which is in Hirst's Cabinets

even more apparent. Hirst's spots seem to float, the shelves or grids are invisible, which gives them something magically hovering one finds even in the formaldehyde animals.

In these pictures (pic 14) you see his installation "Pharmacy". Some visitors went out of the exhibition in New York as they thought they were on the wrong floor. Both series, the cabinets and the spots, quote and question consumers' faith in getting happy through consumption (Pic 15), may it be consumption of medicine, illegal drugs or sweets. When Hirst was a child he had his stomach pumped out as he ate medical pills he thought were sweets. Hirst is interested in faith in general, which he questions, praises, quotes and criticizes – another contradiction – and he transfers faith in reality, in science (medicine for example) or financial value into art. Hirst shows that all these are consumed and believed in, they deliver a little hope for eternity, a solution of problems, at least for a while. When the spectator of Hirst's art looks at the details, nothing is what it seems.

Hirst's spots (pic 16) are abstract and concrete at the same time, another contradiction. The word "spot" can per se name something dirty, something unwanted, unplanned, human, individual that accidentally happens which is a contradiction to the clean and mechanical visual appearance of the spots, which are executed by assistants, who are - though individuals – between a tool, a machine and the artist Hirst, who still chooses the colors for each spot painting, who creates paintings, individual artworks and produces consumer goods for "over the sofa" at the same time. "Over the sofa" is a name of one of the artist-entrepreneur Hirst's companies, the name ironically quotes the era of the artwork as a commodity.

Spot paintings, i.e. paintings in general, these old-fashioned and timeless art objects are perfect for this "age of art as a commodity". Since the mid-1990s Hirst speaks of ending painting series like the spots, but never does. Maybe he was inspired by Warhol, who did the same (or did not). This behavior mirrors the much-vaunted "death of painting", which he neither confirms nor denies. For Hirst painting is

probably the artistic medium par excellence, as it is for Jeff Koons: "A *photograph for me does not have the same spiritual seduction, it does not have the same essence.*" Asked what makes painting more "eternal" than photos Koons answers:

"For one thing you have the support of the museum. And the framework of painting, and the support of the institution of museums, is in everyone, it's in the subconscious mind". They function as "fetishes, paintings about fetishes and about painting as fetish and they offend and flatter simultaneously. There is a [...] [spot painting] for every collector's taste if not perhaps pocketbook."

Conversely the spots look like art under a microscope, individual pigments on a surface. The status of painting itself as an object is discussed, through the use of pure geometric primitives - color and form - the "myths of originality and authenticity", which are so important for the art market, are almost revealed almost scientifically, in other words, "abstraction's mystery" is eliminated by the "endgame painter" Hirst. The same can be said for his series Butterfly or Spin Paintings.

(Pic 17) By paying a tribute to, stealing or quoting formally from artists especially of the 1960s and 1970s Hirst places himself in art history. Although Hirst's spots appear like dots of Armleder, Gernes or Downing, a detail of a Lichtenstein or a quote of Richter, they are different. Richter did paintings in which he replicated, in large scale, industrial color charts produced by paint manufacturers. As with his photopaintings, the use of found material as a source removed the subjective compositional preferences of the artist. The Color Chart Paintings took this a step further, eradicating any hierarchy of subject or representational intent, and focusing on color to create an egalitarian language of art. Unlike Richter Hirst chooses the colors himself, but lets assistants paint, Richter painted himself. Richter called his Color Chart Paintings "1024 Colours" or similar, Paul Gernes and Armleder called theirs "Untitled", Downing his "Grit #8", to support similar ideas of serious, idealistic but for us today a little mechanical democracy - what you see is what you get. With erasing content and individual artistic style these dot paintings like Hirst's

bear similarity with graphic design and the visual language of advertising, but Hirst's spots have postmodern ironic "added content".

Like the serious 1960s art he's quoting Hirst is also ironically over-fulfilling the wish to close the gap between art and life. Using real animals in his butterfly paintings or formaldehyde and cabinet works Hirst uses simply cheap and pure household gloss – unmixed – to get as ironic as flat reality in his Spot paintings, at the same time all traces of handmade assembly were erased. Hirst transferred the focus on the circumstances of production and the material from conceptual sculpture into painting. By that he quotes, questions and ironically comments as well on conceptual art's (and consumer society's) belief in the importance of the message of the material, as after the death of the author and the fading importance of ideologies there is not much else left to believe in. What you see might be the opposite of what you get or the visual appearance you see is simple, what you get is humorously "deeper" through "industrial" added association shells - like the associative drug titles, the embedding into a potential never ending series or the accent on the message of the material.

The technical and geometrical look of Bauhaus, De Stijl and Russian constructivists (Pic 18) influenced pop art – also the work of the painters we have seen, (graphic) design, fonts and the visual appearance of advertising. Especially pharmaceutical packaging is visually similar as it is trying to look dead serious, simple, honest and trustworthy. The 23 years old Hirst, who created the Spot Paintings in 1988 got visually educated through television, cartoon and advertising - consumer society's media. At Goldsmith he read the Art Directors' Annual compilation of advertising, here we see two ads from the one of 1987 (pic 19) that might have influenced him on his spot paintings. No just the work of the early Hirst (Pic 20) was charged with his art being decorative and looking like curtain design or flower arrangements, images one knows from shopping windows, catalogues and department stores, so he ironically over-fulfilled this critique.

A lot of the current flood of images every viewer knows is of commercial nature, Hirst and other YBAs used "material from mass media a lot of people cannot help but know about," said Stallabrass. Walter Benjamin distinguishes between a critical and a rather "relishing" viewer, one can either get used to art or consciously and actively learn, everyone is "half educated" at photography, film, TV and art. The masses seek distraction, they want to consume, art requires concentration from the viewer, Benjamin wrote. For Stallabrass this way of experiencing art, is rather inferior, but it is probably now the usual type of art experience and should become neither condemned nor underestimated. The artist group Stuckists consider it appropriate if "[t]he surroundings in which art is experienced (rather than viewed) should not be artificial and vacuous." For them this less confident, more relished-consumerist, unconscious experience of art is associated with the location of the museum and its presentation as a "home" and "part of life", which stands in contrast to the purely spiritual, conscious, active, "unrealistic" art experience in the "germ free" white cube. Hirst's Spot Paintings ironically reflect art in a white cube gallery space, they are also shapes and colors on white, they are made for the white cube they reflect. Hirst's consciously banal consumer art shows art in a gallery as commodity in a shop. So Hirst created a brand with different product lines, produced for this shop. One of them are the butterfly or the spin paintings, one the spots (Pic 21), which are all like a logo or a pattern, easily recognizable and simple to remember. Influenced by commodity design, looking like design, Hirst's spots finally became actual brand design for shoes or beer bottles, etc.

This reflection of consumerism in Hirst's oeuvre heated up and reached its extreme peak with the in art history unexampled Sotheby's auction (Pic 22) Beautiful Inside my Head Forever in 2008, when Damien Hirst sold 223 new works within three days – self ironic, mannerist and highly materialistic endgame versions of his best known commercial product lines or series: Spots and butterfly paintings with gold, silver or bronze background instead of white or other colors, cabinets, spin and butterfly paintings with diamonds or formaldehyde works with gold plated glass cases. Many

consider this sale to be an artistic act itself, the glitzy spots with gold and silver backgrounds can be seen as a props on Hirst's stage, a meta-comment on the earlier spots as luxury goods. Since the beginning of the crisis Hirst paints oil paintings – himself.

But until 2008 Hirst wanted it all, glorification and critique through his contradicting over-identification as artistic position, a traditional critical-sophisticated viewer on the one hand and a rather relishing viewer of postmodern media age on the other - or the one in between: the ironic consumer of his consciously banal, ironically serial “product line” art that is the same but different, familiar and new, as a consumer product for a consuming buyer-viewer should be, in a gallery shown as a shop, reminding of and inspiration for the disputable promises of advertising and design.