

Robert Hughes: A refreshingly frank comment on the art market

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On September 16, even as Lehman Brothers and Merrill Lynch were collapsing, Damien Hirst was setting a new record for sales at auction by an individual artist. His private auction at Sotheby's netted him \$197.8 million.

The staggering sums accrued here, particularly against the backdrop of such a massive financial crisis, indicate a new stage in the commodification of artwork. It is to the credit of the critic Robert Hughes, therefore, that his Channel 4 programme, "The Mona Lisa Curse," sought to explore and lay bare the ways in which the market stifles and dominates artistic endeavour.

In the programme, one of three one-off shows by different filmmakers on the broad theme of "Art and Money," Hughes looked at historical changes in exhibiting and selling art over the last half century. He was unafraid to give his opinion of just how bad much of this art is and how it is marketed and bought for commercial rather than aesthetic reasons. In the other programmes, Marcel Theroux looked at the bulk purchase of artworks by a new layer of Russian oligarchs, and Ekow Eshun examined the growth in purchases of Australian Aboriginal artworks.

"The Mona Lisa Curse" was in many ways a deeply personal film. A trip to Florence in the aftermath of the floods of 1966 pushed Hughes towards an appreciation of the significance and cultural value of art, and led to him becoming a critic. In 1970, he was offered the post of art critic at *Time* magazine. He moved to New York, where he was close to a number of artists, including Robert Rauschenberg. The film saw him revisiting many of the places and individuals he had known then.

However, even if the film had a personal tone--particularly over his sense of loss at the death of his friend Rauschenberg--Hughes rarely allowed this to lure him into sentimentality. Much of the hostility towards the show has accused Hughes of adopting a reactionary nostalgia about how much better things used to be. For the most part, he used his personal experiences to illustrate his general thesis. Whatever disagreements one might have with him, he is a serious critic. His argument has some weight.

Hughes dates the beginning of the present malaise within art and art exhibition to 1963, when the Louvre arranged to show the Mona Lisa in Paris. Hughes identifies a number of trends emerging from this moment. For the first time, people queued round the block "not to look at [the Mona Lisa], but to say that they'd seen it." Meaning within the artwork became secondary to it as spectacle. Every generation started looking for "its" Mona Lisa, and elevating works of art to celebrity status.

It was also the beginning of the global branding of galleries, which has seen the major museums opening franchised branches around the

world. Later in the programme, Hughes looked at the proposed Abu Dhabi branch of the Louvre. According to a *New York Times* article last year, entitled "The Louvre's Art: Priceless. The Louvre's Name: Expensive," this deal is costing \$520 million for the use of the name, with a further \$747 million going to the French government for art loans, exhibitions, and management advice.

The programme was devastating in demonstrating the way in which the major galleries have gone along with the frenzied racketeering of the art market. Hughes charted the development of the dealers and brokers. Through the 1960s, the New York taxi entrepreneur Robert Scull had built up a large collection of pop art, buying works cheaply direct from the artists. In 1973, he sold 50 works at auction for \$2,242,900. Watching footage of Rauschenberg arguing with Scull after the auction, the sense of betrayal is palpable. Rauschenberg shouted, "I've been working my ass off just for you to make that profit!"

Scull told Rauschenberg that although he had not benefited from the sharp rise in prices at this auction, the general trend would be good for the artist as it would raise his prices overall. This was the art market breaking cover. As Hughes drew out, it was the collector emerging as the determining figure in that market.

In a contemporary documentary on that auction, Scull declared that "Acquisition is...probably the most exciting kind of involvement" in art. In practice, this has meant an increasing importance of collectors, who bulk-buy art by individual artists as a means of pushing up prices. "The market is manipulated by collectors who decide to bid up the work of an artist [whose work they already own]," explains Hughes. "So when artist X comes up...the collectors all bid it up, so that they can then multiply the value of their existing holdings in artist X by the value of the inflated sale."

This has two knock-on effects for public viewing of art. Galleries, which have been the sole access to such works for ordinary people, are priced out of the market by a layer of financial oligarchs. "Instead of being the common property of humankind...art becomes the particular property of somebody who can afford it. And when you have some Russian squillionaire who started buying art three minutes ago but has the GNP of Georgia in his pocket, how can museums compete? They can't--which causes great social harm."

The other effect, which Hughes outlined with withering contempt, is that the galleries collude in this process. New wings are funded by and named after private benefactors. Galleries acquire works that drive up the market value of those artists. Hughes has elsewhere been particularly critical of museum curators who have given credence to Damien Hirst's "originality and the importance of his 'ideas.'"

He has criticised both London's Tate and New York's Metropolitan

Museum of Art for playing along with this. Hedge fund broker Steve Cohen bought Hirst's original shark in formaldehyde, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, for \$12 million. Hirst has a number of smaller sharks awaiting similar treatment for future customers. The original maintains its price and guarantees the price of its successors, even as it wrinkles and decays, to large extent because of its exposure in galleries like the Met. Hughes reserves much of his scorn for the exhibition of this work ("The Met should be ashamed"), which he describes as "a dismal trophy of...[n]othing beyond the fatuity of art-world greed."

As his interviews with collectors and advisors showed, this process has led to a direct assault on the idea that art should have any significance or meaning. His interview with Alberto Mugarabi, one of the leading collectors of Warhol, was particularly revealing. Hughes has written thoughtfully about some of Warhol's early work, but he is dismissive of most of his oeuvre and seemed about to choke with surprise at hearing the artist described as a "visionary."

Mugarabi is one of the clearest examples of what Hughes is describing: having bid unsuccessfully for a Warhol self-portrait two years ago, he told press, "I'm only helping my collection. If I don't get it, I'm keeping the market healthy." His lawyer said Mugarabi's father Jose had been among the first to see "not only Warhol's importance as an artist, but the economic upside of collecting him." These comments were made last year when the Mugarabis were negotiating the sale of some pictures to form the basis of a dedicated Warhol museum somewhere in the Middle East. John Martin of the Gulf Art Fair called Warhol the "obvious choice" for such a museum. "As a modern brand name, no one is bigger than Warhol."

When Hirst announced his direct auction, he made a big play that this marked the liberation of the artist from the manipulation of gallery-owners and dealers. Even before the auction took place, Hughes was scathing about such claims, noting that the auction houses are "now scarcely distinguishable from private dealers." As details emerged afterwards, it became ever clearer that the Sotheby's auction was yet another example of the process outlined by Hughes. Hirst has grown fabulously rich, if that is somehow supposed to signify the "liberation" of the artist. But even he is dependent to a great extent on the bidding of his dealers, Jay Jopling and Larry Gagosian, who bought some works and bid up some of the pieces less likely to do well. Hughes has called the art world the biggest unregulated market outside of illicit drugs.

It was, it must be said, difficult to suppress a cheer at the thoroughness of Hughes's demolition job. His acuity made him a difficult act to follow: the second programme in the series saw Marcel Theroux prostrate before all the thinking Hughes was condemning, repeatedly capable only of asking how much a painting was worth. The trend has been to look at the price tag, and commentators are left mute before the artworks.

Unsurprisingly, Hughes was excoriated by some for his exposé. One of the most dismissive responses came from Germaine Greer. Writing in the *Guardian*, Greer accused Hughes of "not getting" Hirst. Embracing everything Hughes had fought against in his programme, she elevated the banality of Hirst's work to the level of a artistic statement in itself and hailed his marketing genius as an act of creation: "Damien Hirst is a brand, because the art form of the 21st century is marketing. To develop so strong a brand on so conspicuously threadbare a rationale is hugely creative--revolutionary even."

She dismissed Hughes with a glib, "Bob dear, the Sotheby's auction

was the work."

At bottom, Greer was attacking Hughes's view that art should have some substance and meaning ("Hughes still believes that great art can be guaranteed to survive the ravages of time, because of its intrinsic merit. Hirst knows better"). Talking of Rauschenberg, Hughes said his work made us "experience things more clearly." He dismissed the notion that the marketing of vacuous artworks itself constituted a work of art. There is, he said correctly, no critique of decadence in such work, which is clearly aimed at a layer of the wealthy who want something that claims to be challenging without actually being so. It *is* decadence. As Hughes has put it, "No wonder so many business bigshots go for Hirst: his work is both simple-minded and sensationalist."

There is, too, in Greer's attack, an attempt to reduce this to a dispute between Hughes and Hirst. As Hughes makes clear, Hirst is simply one of the more successful of a string of artists producing such inferior work. Nurtured by collectors/entrepreneurs (in Hirst's case Charles Saatchi) as part of their investment portfolio, these figures turn away from artistic explorations. Instead, they have their workshops turning out the requisite number of pieces, of recognisable design, devoid of artistic merit. Hughes's film makes the valuable point that volume production is an essential function of any artist that might be considered to be "collectable." Producing art on what is effectively an industrial scale--particularly in the case of Warhol and Hirst--in itself must lead to a churning out of empty pieces. Hughes points the finger at these artists: "[T]he presence of a Hirst...is a sure sign of dullness of taste.... Where you see Hirsts you will also see Jeff Koons's balloons, Jean-Michel Basquiat's stoned scribbles, Richard Prince's feeble jokes and pin-ups of nurses and, inevitably, scads of really bad, really late Warhols."

He has described such works as a "uniform message from our fin-de-siècle decadence."

What made this programme such a pleasure was that Hughes continues to believe that art, to qualify as such, must have some content. Even where one might reach different conclusions about an individual artist, there is something heroic in his insistence that art should say something profound about our lives. As he wrote four years ago "Not everything of value is self-evident and there is no reason in the world why art should be."

He is unafraid to expose the market pressures to churn out vacuous and self-satisfied work. If, at times, he sounds a Cassandra note, fearing that the tide has overrun him, he is still bold enough to call such work what it is. In an atmosphere where wealth and patronage demand conformity and a suspension of critical faculties, his readiness to proclaim the emperor naked is deserving of much praise.



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