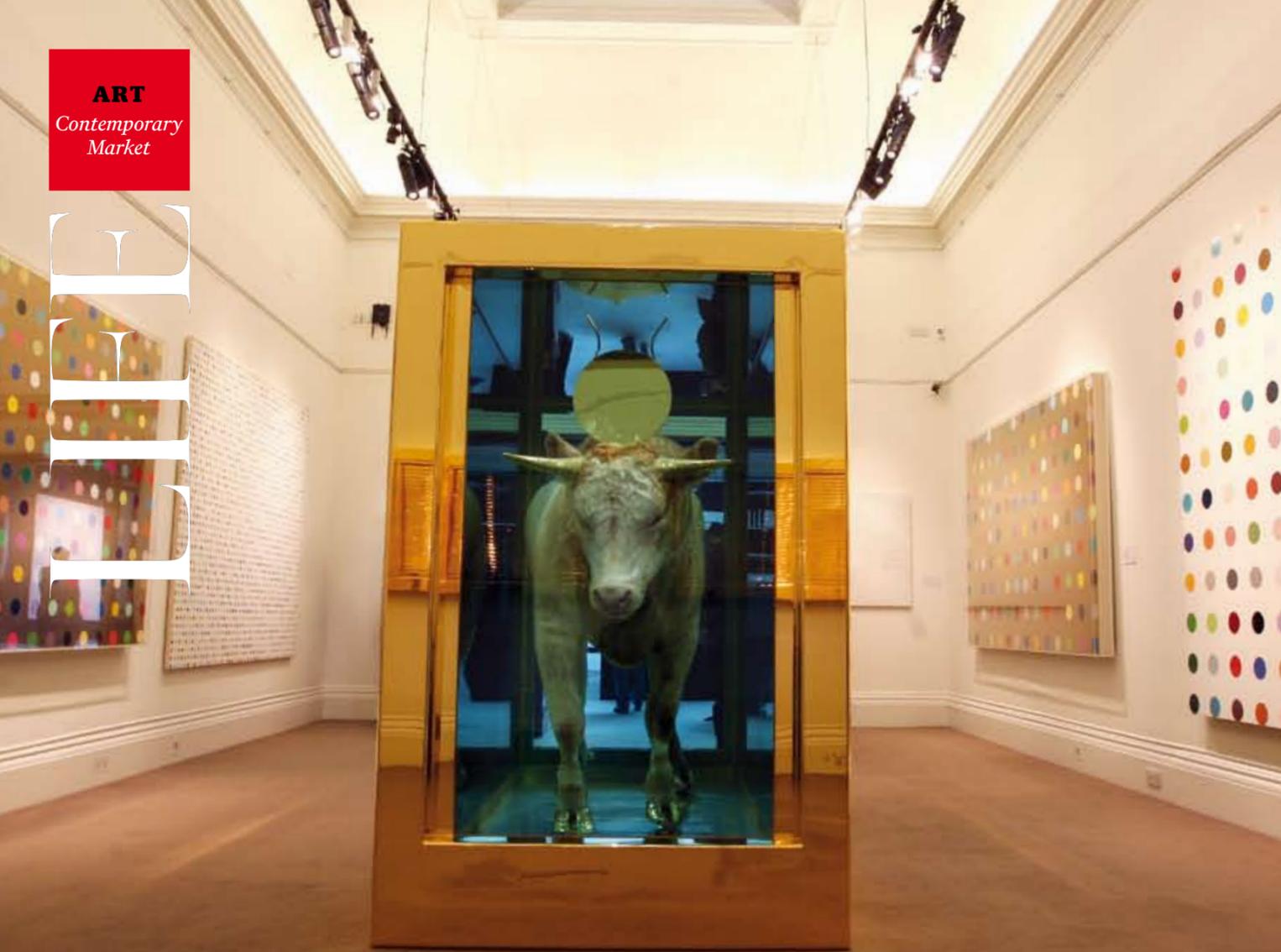


THE



Commercial Brandcaster

A MAN AFTER ANDY WARHOL'S HEART, **DAMIEN HIRST** IS EVERY BIT AS GOOD A BUSINESSMAN AS HE IS AN ARTIST, WRITES JON STORY

WITHIN A DAY OF LEHMAN Brothers' collapse last September, Damien Hirst generated about US\$200 million from 223 new works entered into his Sotheby's auction, *Beautiful Inside My Head Forever*. Critics quickly played down the outcome: Hirst's dealers helped to prop up prices by bidding on and buying a significant percentage of the lots. Indeed they had, but some of these dealers were also bidding on behalf of clients within estimates

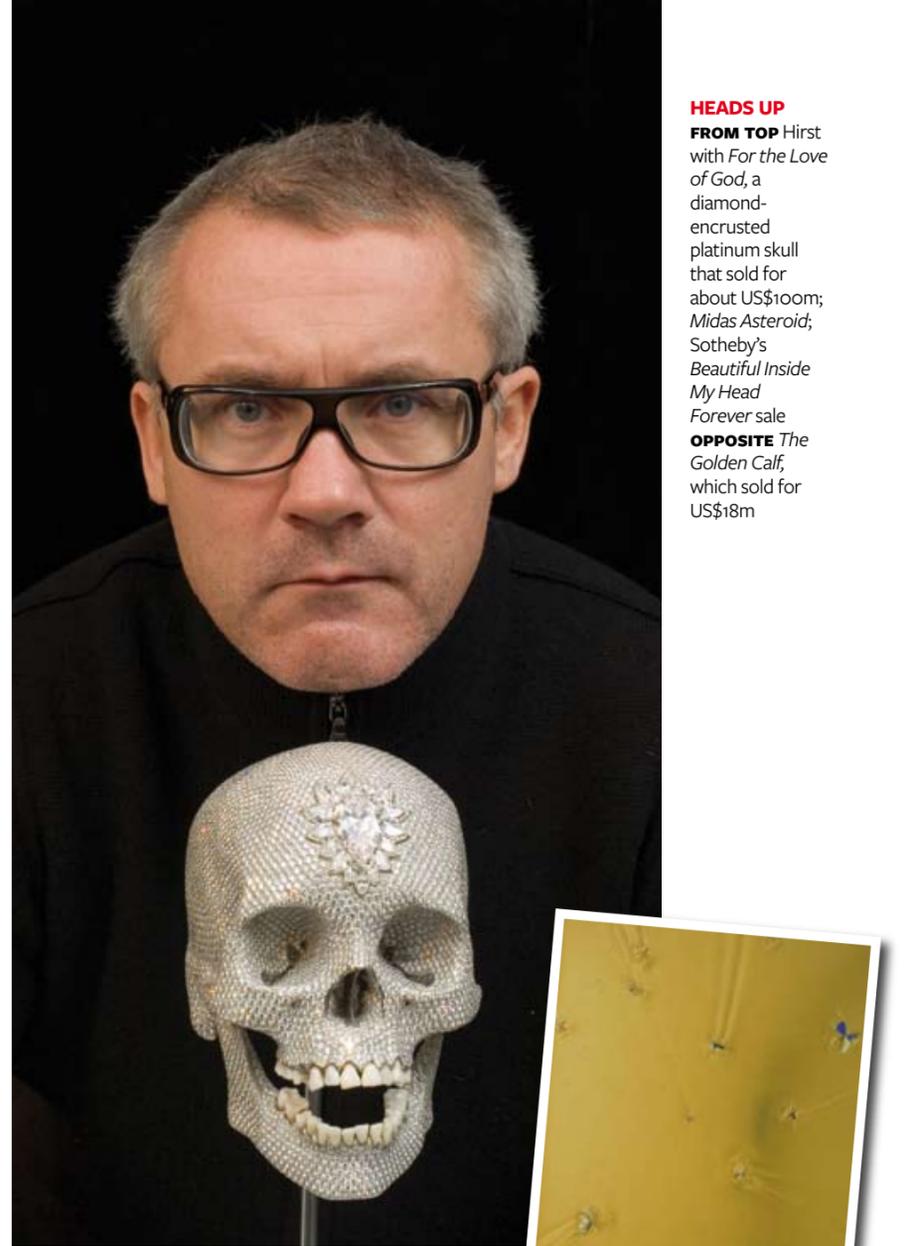
many claimed had been calculated at up to 30 per cent lower than market prices. Business is business, and art dealers, gallery owners and collectors around the world have invested and continue to invest a lot of money in Damien Hirst for one simple reason: they believe in him as the leading light of contemporary art, fearlessly pushing the boundaries; as the art world's most marketable brand since Andy Warhol; and as a very clever businessman running a highly organised industry.

Sometimes he works solo on a piece or as is controversially the case, "finishes them off"

In recent years, there have been more than a few post-mortems on the last of these. Gasps are no longer drawn at just the prices ("US\$100 million? *For the Love of God!*"), but also the quantity. Consider the Sotheby's auction apropos its number of lots. Its 223 works were all produced within two years, which works out at an average of one every three days. That is an astonishing rate of output by any artist's standards, even if its comparison is distorted by the resources at Hirst's disposal. At any one time, the artist has had up to an estimated 120 assistants working for him on various projects. His production company, Science Ltd, keeps all the balls in the air and is as multi-faceted as any major organisation could be, with its own sales team, PR department, administration side and investment arm. An indomitable marketing team keeps the brand full of vim and vigour, and three factory studios (two in south London and one in Gloucestershire) house the works in progress, the necessary materials and a handpicked crop of hired hands, most of them talented artists in their own right. Hirst directs the whole show and whatever he says goes. Sometimes he works solo on a piece from start to finish, or, as is controversially the case (especially with his spots and spins), he simply "finishes them off" with his signature.

He is unapologetic, brazen even, about his modus operandi. "The best spot painting you can have by me is one painted by Rachel," he once said, crediting an assistant, Rachel Howard, with the work. A good number denounce Hirst for this hands-off approach, but they are missing the point. Hirst is a conceptual artist and, in this sense, it is irrelevant whether he or an assistant or one of his children is involved in the actual construction of a work. The real work is the vision behind it and the ideas or feelings that the assembled media represent or evoke. Practical considerations, too, can determine the number of people drafted into the assembly line. The technical difficulties posed by the configuration of a large installation, for example, cannot be overcome by anything less than a workshop approach. Delegation is unavoidable. Strangely, it is in this respect that Hirst is a bit of a traditionalist.

Parallels with Warhol's factory are clear enough, but the buck doesn't stop there. For centuries, famous artists have delegated work to their assistants and apprentices en masse,



HEADS UP
FROM TOP Hirst with *For the Love of God*, a diamond-encrusted platinum skull that sold for about US\$100m; *Midas Asteroid*; Sotheby's *Beautiful Inside My Head Forever* sale
OPPOSITE *The Golden Calf*, which sold for US\$18m





BIG FISH

FROM TOP
The Body of Christ, 2006;
The Physical Impossibility in the Mind of Someone Living, 2007;
Harmony, 2008

much to the chagrin of later historians and critics. Which parts of the Sistine Chapel ceiling did Michelangelo's assistants actually paint? One could argue that some of the old masters deserve less credit, though it would be a pretty weak argument, for their genius shines through the sum of all parts. So, Hirst can count himself in good company then, which of course he has no qualms about doing: "Rembrandt, Velasquez, Goya, I think they were all thinking about the commercial aspects of art. I believe I'm only doing what any of these artists would be doing if they were alive," he is reported by *The Independent* as saying.

As a businessman, Hirst is exceptionally good at making money, and his business manager,

Frank Dunphy, is, by the artist's admission, even better at it. For his part, Dunphy has made it clear that the money should chase the art and never the other way around. Warhol would probably disagree, having famously said that "good business is the best art." When it comes to Hirst, likely this is where much of the controversy stems from. A theme especially prevalent in Hirst's later work is decadence, which is where the boundaries seem to blur. Is his work decadent or is it about decadence? When it comes to conceptual art, is there even a difference? Germaine Greer has already proposed that one of his greatest works yet could well be the Sotheby's auction itself, while Acoris Andipa of London's Andipa Gallery neatly sums up the Hirst phenomenon as such: "He is very courageous, daring to lay his neck on the block with every new venture. Every time the world watches in anticipation, and yet somehow it gets done. The controversy around his ideas or practices almost becomes a part of the work itself."

Whichever way you look at it, Damien Hirst is adept at keeping up with the times as both an artist and a businessman. In spite of the economic climate, Other Criteria, the artist's merchandising and publishing company, recently opened its second London store, where it now sells works by Hirst, among others, ranging from US\$5,800 limited-edition prints to US\$5 key rings. On the creative front, a new body of work will be released later this year in Kiev and then at London's Wallace Collection. It has also been said that he plans to revert to executing more work himself, by his own hand. As an industrious artist who has turned his art into an industry, it's a safe bet that Damien Hirst will continue to defy our expectations. **T**

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