



# Why I Love Damien's Skull

BY ROBERT PREECE

*A diamond-encrusted skull...worth £50m (US \$100m)...said to be the most expensive piece of contemporary art...entirely covered in 8,601 jewels...skull of a 35-year-old man from the 18th century...new teeth were made...at a cost of £14m (US \$28m)...“It works much better than I imagined. I was slightly worried that we’d end up with an Ali G ring...I wouldn’t mind if it happened to my skull after my death.”*

—As of October 1, 2007, a Google search (in English) of <“Damien Hirst” +“skull”> commanded about 108,000 hits. A previous search on September 13, just after the first reports of the skull’s sale, produced about 212,000 hits.

Perhaps I’ve confused some readers with this introduction. So, let me start out by stating: I love Damien Hirst’s skull, otherwise titled *For the love of God* (2007). Why, you might be asking? Because this work designed by Hirst and his team brilliantly fuses the media/communications potential of an artwork with its artistic expression. And with the skull’s complementary contexts, this media/communications combo (the artwork and its language) propelled its reach far beyond the art world, securing it a wider range of media coverage, even to the point of hitting the headlines in several countries.

*For the love of God*, and the furor surrounding it, also crossed language barriers with incredible speed and efficacy. My jaw dropped the day I saw the skull and the reported sale on my <msn.nl> start-up screen—in Dutch. I wish I had set up a daily alert on Google to record the rise in Google hits across the world’s top 25 languages, to watch this snowballing media and Internet discourse in full multi-lingual action.

***For the love of God*, 2007. Platinum, diamonds, and human teeth, 6.75 x 5 x 7.5 in.**

In a strand of my previous writings, I’ve focused on the artwork, its embedded language, and its embedded media/communications power. I’ve referred to the power of visual elements and the principles of design, effective copywriting, and press relations—within the context of critical media analysis. This work has included analyses of media-savvy designer Philippe Starck and artists Marc Quinn and Tracey Emin—plus a rare interview, my favorite actually, with the creative mind behind Press Relations and Publications at White Cube gallery.<sup>1</sup>

What strikes me about the skull is its giant stride forward in media coverage—bejeweled, bizarre, and bewitching—and what lurks at the heart of this interest—price. Pounds, dollars—“most expensive ever,” our dear skull has demonstrated new opportunities in international cross-media coverage for contemporary artworks. This impact, and the context of the work, shows the power of media/communications strategies when embedded in a work and combined with visual art language and expression. The synergy makes one question to what extent combined media strategies (mass media and visual media) are dri-

ving some artistic practices and ask if what is surfacing is like a staged art intervention. The extent to which this can be characterized as performative art is contentious and up for debate.<sup>2</sup>

Anyone who takes media/communications opportunities seriously cannot be unimpressed, especially when one considers the size of the team that probably produced the the results. At the end of the day, this impressive achievement probably occurred on a relatively minimal budget for press planning and relations (when compared to the outlays of much larger organizations). It was no surprise when the artwork-artist-gallery-celebrity combo spilled into art, lifestyle, and ntertainment/celebrity magazines and newspaper sections—such a development was somewhat predictable after the media/communications design benchmarks of Philippe Starck hotel projects a decade earlier.<sup>3</sup>

But with the skull, the price appeared to drive almost all of the coverage. Consider the following searches: <“Damien Hirst” +“skull” +“50m”> (circa 755 Google hits); +“100m” (416 hits); +“50 million” (746 hits); +“100 million” (575 hits); +“million” (45,300 hits); +“millions” (10,900 hits);

+“pounds” (10,400 hits); and +“dollars” (13,500 hits). A search on “most expensive” pulls up about 11,100 hits led by *The Guardian*, the *New York Times*, *BBC News*, the *International Herald Tribune*, and the powerful new medium, Wikipedia. When you subtract all of these price-oriented terms and phrases, the Google count plummets from 108,000 to just 494 hits.

This price-led dependence, recalling large sales figures trotted out by auction houses, helps to account for the skull’s magnetism in international business and news media, something that would have been nearly impossible before today’s high-speed information flows. In, say 1998, a few hundred press results would have impressed, and it would have been very time-consuming to collect good samples and estimates. Now, however, the stakes have reached a new level with tens of thousands of easily searchable possibilities that give a kind of overview. Just go to Google, enter your search terms, click, and search for yourself.

Other interesting things pop up when you examine the coverage. For example, <“Damien Hirst” +“skull” +“diamond”> racks up about 61,600 hits, including *Artnews* and <[www.anthropology.net](http://www.anthropology.net)>, as well as ABC news in the U.S. Switch to “diamonds,” and the first 20 hits include the *Daily Mail*, <[www.Bloomberg.com](http://www.Bloomberg.com)>, and Reuters, as well as White Cube. <“Damien Hirst” +“skull” +“It works much better than I imagined”> (circa 158 hits); +“I was slightly worried that we’d end up with an Ali G ring” (circa 91 hits); and +“I wouldn’t mind if it happened to my skull after my death” (circa 117 hits) show samples of quote delivery and media result multiplication. Here, the results are not so impressive. But then try +“George Michael” (the singer was reportedly interested in making an offer on the skull), and about 13,300 hits appear: a clear expansion into celebrity, music, and, once again, general news outlets.

Another interesting search concerns the language of the work as presented on the gallery Web site: “explor[ing] the funda-

mental themes of human existence—life, death, love, immortality and art itself.”<sup>4</sup> I searched the second part of the sentence, and only five hits emerged, then switched to <“Damien Hirst” +life +death +truth +love +immortality>, drawing an unimpressive 389 hits.

Why this disconnect between the numerous appearances of sensational phrasing and the paltry showing of more elevated themes? Are the vast majority of the world’s print and Web editors unimpressed, or unexcited, by drier, thematic language? And how do we make sense of the dissociation between more specialist art classification (top-down approach) and non-specialist language that uses phrasing drawn from the fundamentals of art language (visual elements, principles, materials, context)?

For me, writings that do not account for the media/communications power, in other words, the “sex, drugs and rock n’ roll”<sup>5</sup> of *For the love of God* and works like it have bypassed the visual experience<sup>6</sup> of the piece to engage in a more elevated dis-

# Hype, Buzz, Glamour, and Art

## A Conversation with Patricia Ellis

While preparing this article, Robert Preece contacted Patricia Ellis to inform her—and ask approval—about the footnotes mentioning her words and actions. This prompted a discussion dealing with art and media coverage in relation to Damien Hirst’s skull. He wanted to share this discussion, which would normally be a behind-the-scenes conversation, with *Sculpture* readers (with her approval). Ellis is a freelance art writer (she has written essays for several well-known institutions including the Saatchi Gallery), curator, and artist in London. She was the editor of *Make* and a former news editor of *Flash Art* and has occasionally appeared on international broadcasts, including the BBC. Currently, Ellis is launching <[www.Quangoo.com](http://www.Quangoo.com)>, a new on-line arts journal.

**Robert Preece:** *I’m seeing a disconnect between the way art is elevated in language and the sensational phrasing that is multiplying the, at least, non-art-centered coverage. What do you think of this?*

**Patricia Ellis:** I think it’s just that art engages with different audiences in different ways. You’ve got the “professional audience” and the “public audience”—the people who come to art through its coverage in mainstream media. I think that there has always been a bit of a disconnect. If you ask Joe Public about Van Gogh, for example, he’s “the guy without the ear”; maybe they know his *Sunflowers*. I think often the general public only become acquainted with art when there is hype and buzz.

**RP:** *So are we saying that art people, while they recognize and are perhaps moved by the highly sensational elements, prefer to use this elevated language to describe it?*

**PE:** To a certain extent. I think that many “professionals” love the sensationalism, as it opens up new dialogues for approaching art criticism. A lot of writing from 20 or 30 years ago was very theoretical, critical, and quite dry. Along with the emer-

course removed from the art. Elevating language above elements, principles, materials, and contexts does not account for the work's mass media power or media/communications orientation. A combined analysis based on the fundamentals of artistic construction, paralleled with those of media/communications is the only way to account for such widespread cross-media coverage, with all but George Michael built directly into the art product.

The skull demonstrates the effectiveness of sensation-based media/communications art. Honey Luard, White Cube's head of Press Relations and Publications, believes that both aspects can co-exist in and around the same artwork, without the hype tarnishing the art. In 2002, she told me, "If a certain amount of hype means that it happens, means that all the

resources available are marshaled together to make it happen, even if it goes out in a huge fanfare with lots of flashing lights—like some of the White Cube openings with the paparazzi waiting outside. People criticize it for all of the perceived hype, but all of that does fall away, and does so very quickly. What you're left with—you hope—[is] some very good art, and some decent writing. This can then be built upon."<sup>7</sup>

No love is perfect, including my love for Damien's skull. While the media coverage maximization represents a sort of benchmark at this time, and it appears to fit the objectives of the stakeholders, what about competing artists and galleries? While it can be argued that the more attention paid to contemporary art is a positive step, will this approach crowd out others as brand-naming gains more power? We've seen this

with the English language, with local/national musicians, filmmakers, and TV producers being crowded out by their more high-profile, often American, competitors. Will the result be that more media-savvy artworks, artist practices, and teams gain a comparable, greater share of the market?

Only time will tell, but I should mention that the £50m skull, like its media discourse, has multiplied. Five silkscreen print editions are on offer, all available through Hirst's Web site <www.othercriteria.com>. Three in editions of 250, at £10,000 each. One edition of 750 at £5,000 each. And another of 1,700 at £900—each (prices do not include Value Added Tax; estimated shipping time: eight weeks).

*Robert Preece, a contributing editor of Sculpture, is based in Rotterdam.*

#### Notes

1 See "Just a Load of Shock?: A Conversation with Marc Quinn," *Sculpture*, October 2000; reprinted in *Conversations on Sculpture* (ISC Press, 2007); "Artist Over—and In—The Broadsheets," *Parkett*, 63, 2001. This essay on Emin's work addresses her involvement in media/communications; as agreed, Emin approved the text prior to publication.

"Behind the Scenes: Now It's Honey's Turn," *Make*, 92, 2002. Honey Luard was offered and accepted text approval prior to publication, with the agreement of then-*Make* editor Patricia Ellis. Also, see comments by Mark Pimlott in *Sculpture* 23(4) in relation to Starck hotels and Hirst/Emin/Quinn.

2 Clearly the precedents here include Andy Warhol, Chris Burden, Jeff Koons, and Mark Kostabi, with parallels to Tracey Emin and Spencer Tunick.

3 My MA thesis examined 100 published press results of a Philippe Starck-designed hotel on Miami Beach.

4 Search done on October 1, 2007.

5 This is a boiled-down description offered by Patricia Ellis.

6 See Robert Storr's comments in the 2007 Venice Biennial catalogue, volume I, p. 18. Storr directs viewers to look at the sensation-rich elements of the work of El Anatsui as a starting point, with reference to an excerpt of my published interview with the artist in *Sculpture*, vis-à-vis more art historically contextualized readings, which in this instance, he finds problematic.

7 Honey Luard, quoted in "Behind the Scenes: Now It's Honey's Turn," op. cit., p. 24.

gence of the YBAs, and increased mass media coverage of art, critical writing has in many cases become more performative, clever, and innovative in its strategies. It's more accessible. But you still have a lot of "academic" writing as well.

Hirst's skull piece is incredibly glamorous and sensational: real skull, real diamonds—it's obscene opulence and indulgence. In many ways, this is the critical context of the work—the critical dialogue exists within the sensationalist hype of the piece. For me, the iconography of the piece isn't so interesting—the bling disco death-head thing has been done before in more impoverished variations. The interesting thing is the brazen fetishization and attitude—Hirst's done it for real, using real diamonds, real cash.

**RP:** *Do you think that the rather effective media/communications elements are within the work?*

**PE:** The skull piece was most likely anticipated to create a huge interest through a wide variety of media. I'm sure that Hirst did not make the piece and then go, "Oh my God! I can't believe I'm on television in America." But I think these elements are actually part of the life, death, (im)mortality concepts of Hirst's work. If you look at how media operates it's very much about temporality, multiplication, and the sublime. Hirst is not so dissimilar from Andy Warhol. He is a global brand. I don't think you can separate it. I think it is definitely part of the concept of his work.

**RP:** *So in essence, you agree with what I've been going on about.*

**PE:** I think that all artists are hyper-aware of how their work is transacted and received. Visual art has its own language. You make things using that language to articulate an idea, direct its interpretation. It's entirely possible to appropriate the media structures surrounding the work as part of that statement.

**RP:** *But the art press is not having this kind of discussion?*

**PE:** The art press isn't really interested in how many Google hits Damien Hirst got—or why. It addresses a relatively small audience, like any publication written by and for "professionals." It's a small world: you're often reading about people you actually know. Art press doesn't usually discuss how art is situated in the mainstream, basically because everyone is very familiar with and has their own understanding of how this works. Art media acts as a forum for a much more in-depth investigation into the concerns of contemporary practice. Its concerns are very distinct from media hype. It may be "elevated" as you suggest, but if it wasn't we'd simply only appreciate art for its shock, financial, or social worthiness value. So "yes" to elevation—the higher the better!

**RP:** *So would you interpret Hirst as playing this at both an art world level and a more mainstream level? And is this central to his work?*

**PE:** Yes, of course, in a very sophisticated way.