

Sculpture and the Vitrine

Edited by John C. Welchman

ASHGATE

The transparent signifier: Hirst, invisibility, and critique

Elyse Speaks

Enclosed space—entrapment, encasement, isolating boundaries—forms one core of the work of Damien Hirst. At times the gallery itself bounds its subjects, as when it embodies both cocoon and coffin in Hirst's 1991 exhibition, *In and Out of Love*. There, the six-week lifespan of the show matched that of the Malaysian butterflies hatched and deceased within the space. As Hirst remarked of this, his first installation, "The whole thing ... [t]hat whole show is like one sculpture; and the gallery was just like the vitrine ... the vitrine was the gallery."¹ On other occasions the encasement is total and the effect more distanced, enabling the showcase of death to appear all the more fantastic. Hirst's *A Thousand Years* (1990), for example, contains a life-cycle (of less savory maggots and flies), while *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991) makes the connection iconic as an embalmed great white shark set in a giant display tank offers emphatic testimony to the special place of the vitrine in Hirst's visual practice.

This chapter focuses on Hirst's use of the vitrine in the exhibition, *Theories, Models, Methods, Approaches, Assumptions, Results and Findings* (2000) (Figures 11.1 and 11.2), a show in which he employed approximately 19 glass case structures. Several hung on walls as quasi-reliefs, but most, presented at the scale of nearly habitable rooms, dioramas, theatrical sets, and vitrines within vitrines, towered over their viewers. Their collective ambition complemented the range of epistemic alternatives suggested by the show's elaborate title. While their connotations are somewhat indeterminate if considered one-by-one, together the title's terms clearly invoke the language of scientific analysis. Accordingly, the symbols, objects, and images set out inside the display cases on the adjacent walls and throughout the gallery present themselves as tools for such analysis. The scale of the majority of vitrines and the sheer mass of medical and scientific readymades they contained—small surgical tools, gurneys, pills, microscopes, anatomical models, and drug labels—announce that one aim of the show was

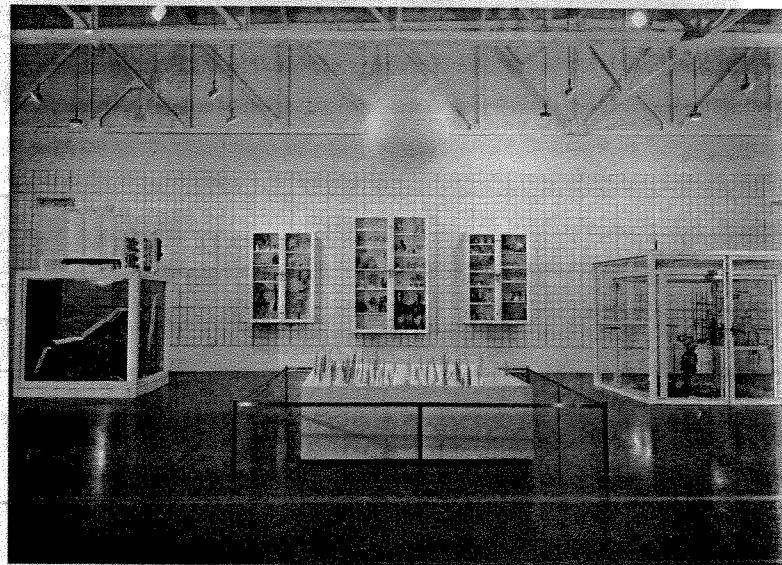
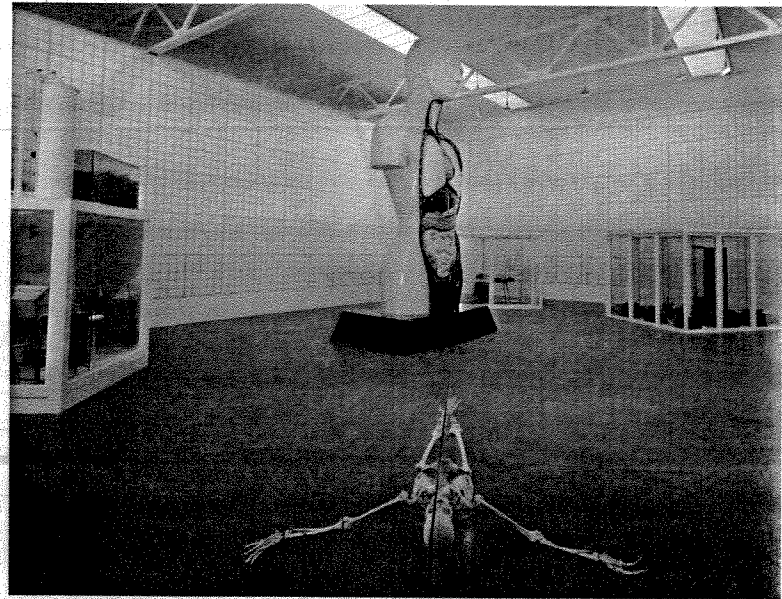
somehow to inhabit the rhetoric and substance of the fields of science and medicine. The viewer assumed that the assembled components were present in order to offer connections within and between these discourses, drawing them alongside notions of truth, knowledge, and belief. But both the method and wider purpose of this enterprise were much less clear. In what follows I will attempt to supply some of the missing connections.

My focus on *Theories* was prompted by the show's wide-ranging approach to a number of questions often directed to Hirst's use of the vitrine, particularly those regarding value and belief structures. Examination of the artist's persistent tendency to encase often reveals a symbolic squeezing-out or collapse of the "ideas" or ideals that are "contained." I will argue that one of the effects of encasing is to dispel the "myth" of the work itself by unraveling its conceptual points of origin.

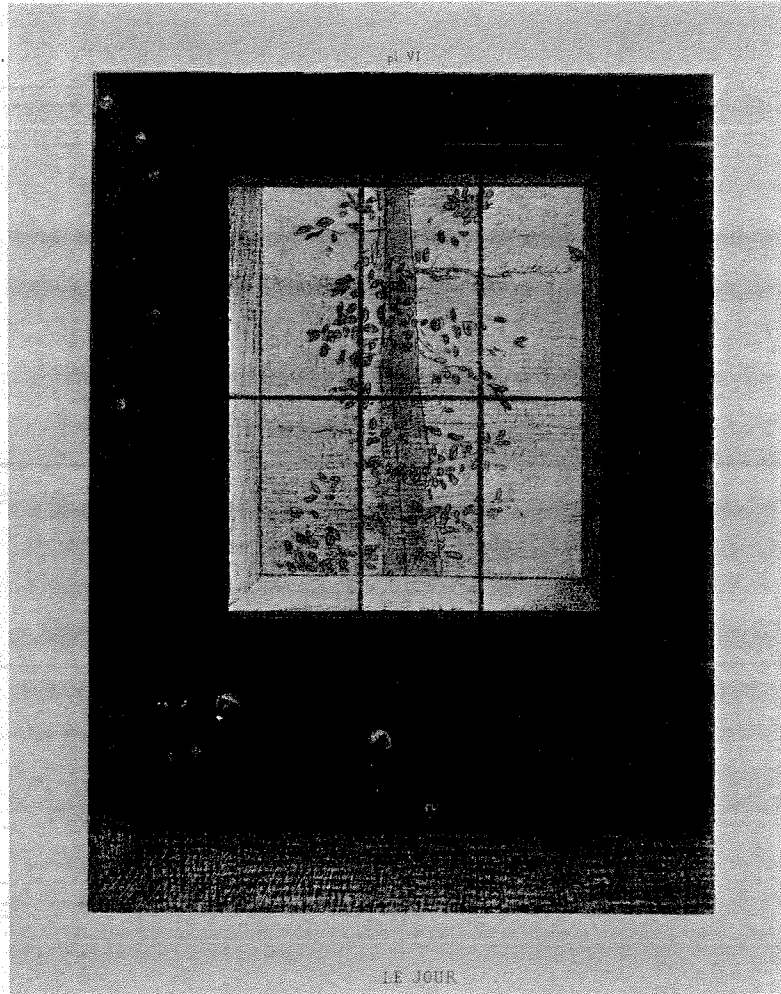
The transparent signifier

To introduce the means by which the vitrine addresses questions of belief in Hirst's work, it is useful to begin with a comparison to the use of the window and grid in modern painting. Like the window in the history of Western painting, the vitrine operates in contemporary art as both surface and lens, often leading to abstraction. At once transparent (by virtue of its glass frontage) and material (as signified by its physical armature), the vitrine adapts the window's dual function, providing a structure through which the gaze can pass, but also a frontier at which its movement is arrested. The terms of this operation are elucidated in Rosalind Krauss's essay, "Grids."² Krauss argued that the window was the predecessor of the ubiquitous modernist grid, suggesting that both set up a symbolic mode of seeing within the picture plane by simultaneously summoning the terms of materialism and idealism. While the idealized, two-dimensional space of the grid stands at a distance from the "real" space of the world as a result of its flatness, organization, and abstraction, the window performed an analogous abstraction, setting up within the canvas a mediated proposition rather than a natural fact. One function of the symbolic window is to distance the world visible through it from the world of the viewer; one looks through the frame with the knowledge that those things within are to be seen in relation to one another and at a distance from those things without. As surface, moreover, it flattens what is beyond; its graphic armature acts as a spatial adhesive that binds together the pictorial contents into a near parallel plane even as it connotes depth.

Acting as a kind of lens, windows posit loaded representations of the scenes or objects they frame. Krauss points in particular to the use of this device by Symbolist painters to engage with such universal themes as life and death, as in Odilon Redon's *The Day* (1891) (Figure 11.3). Appealing to



11.1–2 Damien Hirst, *Theories, Models, Methods, Approaches, Assumptions, Results and Findings*, Gagosian Gallery, New York, 2000. Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery / © Damien Hirst and Science Ltd. All rights reserved, DACS 2013. Photo: Mike Parsons



11.3 Odilon Redon, *Le jour (The Day)*. Lithograph, plate VI from the portfolio, *Songes* (Paris: Becquet, 1891), published in an edition of 80. Sheet 17 3/4 × 12 1/2 in. (45.1 × 31.8 cm). Courtesy: Marc Rosen Fine Art, Ltd

the double states of solidity and liquidity that characterize glass itself, Krauss articulates the metaphor posed by light, a kind of viscous vehicle issuing in the origins of life as it passes through the transparent surface and into the interior, noting the apposite connotation of the French term *glace*.³ But the solidifying of vitreous form into an impenetrable, reflective surface marks

what Krauss points to as an opposite condition: a freezing into the stasis of self-reflection, “the unfecund immobility of the mirror,” and extinction in death.⁴ The symbolic tie between the window and the terms of birth and death forms one thematic connection between Krauss’s essay and Hirst’s appropriation of the vitrine. Krauss claims that the terms through which this opposition is mobilized recur throughout the twentieth century in the visual rhetoric of the grid. Abstract painting—metonymically embodied in the grid’s cruciform structure—became a “secular form of belief.”⁵ “The grid’s mythic power,” Krauss posits, “is that it makes us able to think we are dealing with materialism (or sometimes science, or logic) while at the same time it provides us with a release into belief (or illusion, or fiction).”⁶ The grid, in other words, carries the weight of both legacies in a tacit—almost mythical—and conveniently modern, union.

When Hirst employs the vitrine/window in conjunction with the grid (especially in the spot and graph paintings) in *Theories, Models, Methods* the terms remain largely the same, if more self-conscious. Hirst (presumably inadvertently) adapts Krauss’s main argument regarding the type of detachment that the window enables—promoted through a sense of distance effected in temporal terms rather than with spatial means. Such a translation is easily understood in the conventional use of the vitrine, the demarcated contents of which are often associated with a discrete past, especially when encasement occurs in the museum (as opposed to the department store or home). There, the vitrine feels like the “*what has been*” of the photograph, the “reality that one can no longer touch,”⁷ as Roland Barthes put it. Function is replaced with representation: we observe rather than use whatever is presented. As with its predecessor, the cabinet of curiosity, the contents of the vitrine aim to fashion “a picture of the world.”⁸ The act of preservation implied by encasement and invested with the authority of the institution takes the object out of circulation and consigns it to a privileged location. The effect is that the “other space” of the vitrine promotes the incongruous pairing of significance and investment, on the one hand, with finality and detachment, on the other. The vitrine bestows an unyielding “exhibition value,” as Walter Benjamin suggested, on its contents in order to secure their integrity over time.⁹

Koons, abstract value, and the sealed vacuum

Hirst’s predecessor in using the vitrine to examine questions of value, belief, and abstraction is Jeff Koons. Like Hirst, Koons uses the vitrine to establish a structure of seeing—but to what ends? Hal Foster, author of one of the most compelling analyses of Koons’s work, argues that Koons’s appropriation of commodity structures results in the collapse of the distinction between art and commodities.¹⁰ Setting up a key distinction between the historical readymade

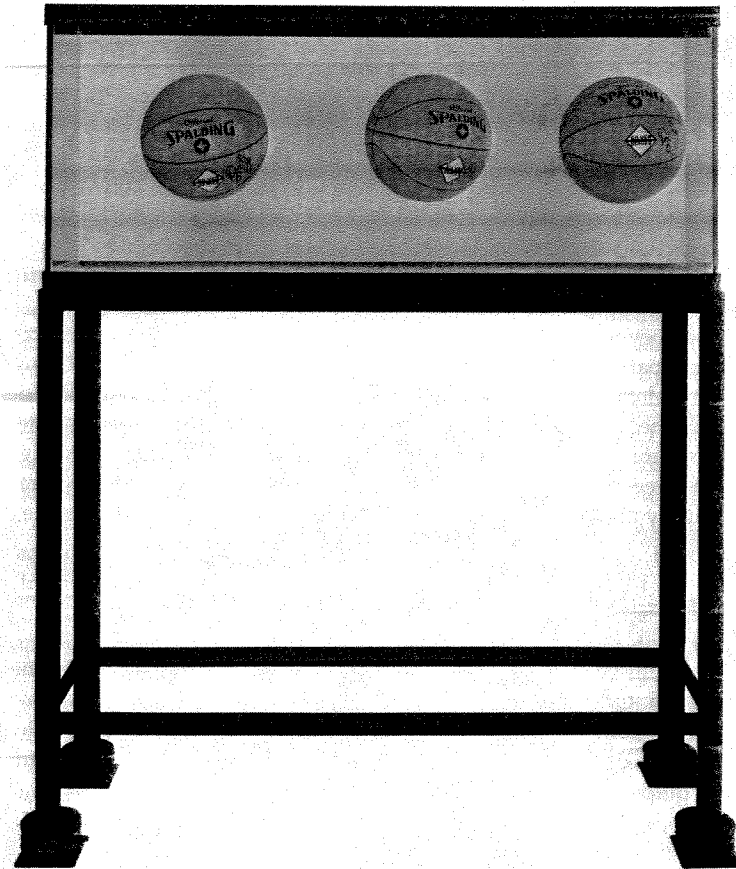
as such and its appropriation by Koons, Foster claims that commodity sculpture subverts the legacy of the readymade by using the vitrine to effect an “ironic distance” from it. Encasement prompts redirection of the viewer’s attention away from the object itself and toward the context and circumstances of viewing. Koons’s method thereby encourages an abstraction: the object becomes a signifier for the intangible power of the brand or label. Invoking Jean Baudrillard, Foster cites the import of *sign exchange value*:

we covet and consume not the vacuum cleaners so much as the Sheltons, not the basketball shoes so much as the Air Jordans, and ... this passion for the sign, this fetishism of the signifier, governs our reception of art as well: we covet and consume not the work per se so much as the Koons, the Steinbach.¹¹

At stake, in other words, was a redirection of attention toward abstractions like the value of signs that intercept or mediate our relationship to things. Koons’s glass case itself reiterates that mediation, becoming at once a party to and a metaphor for the belief in intangible values. Yet Foster argues that Koons’s work falls short as critique because it participates too readily in the system that it holds up for examination; it mimics the original operation of the sign, encouraging value or belief through branding, but does nothing to interrupt that cycle. In the end, we like Koons’s sculptures for much the same reasons that we like luxury items like Shelton vacuums.

Foster’s critique rests partly on the stability of the division set up in Koons’s vitrines. The artist suggested that his equilibrium tanks, for example, promote a symbolic view of an impossible state—balance, order, control—which in turn functions to organize, sustain, and close-off the display of the (branded) basketballs (see Figure 11.4). The visual rhetoric of the sculptures speaks so vividly of the attainment of equilibrium that it appears to bolster—even to promote—related possibilities for social mobility and celebrity as viable outcomes of a juvenile faith in sports. The sculptures seem to preserve such fantastical ideals, sustained as they are in a seemingly magical manner within the tanks. Despite the salience of the fluid (especially in the “50/50” tanks) and its tacit reminder of the potential for change, the tanks’ composition and geometry together convey the sense of a stable, vacuum-filled space, airtight and unchanging.

If an element of critique is present in the equilibrium tanks, in other words, it is left implicit. It might be found in our oblique awareness of the strict boundary constituted by the glass walls, their presence pointing toward the sense of impossibility that surrounds the dream as much as the work. But if the exhibition, *Equilibrium* (1986) is considered as a whole, something more manifestly dialectical emerges. The show’s found, flat posters, for instance, taken as they are from mass culture, infuse the apparently sealed tanks with a sense of temporality. Seemingly incongruous, their slick, kitschy combinations of text and image are somewhat antithetical to the abstract, volumetric ideals



11.4 Jeff Koons, *Three Ball Total Equilibrium Tank (Dr. J Silver Series)*, 1985. Glass, steel, distilled water, sodium chloride reagent, three basketballs, 60 1/2 × 48 3/4 × 13 1/4 in. (153.7 × 123.8 × 33.7 cm). Courtesy Jeff Koons LLC © Jeff Koons

of the sculptures. A framed readymade of a Nike ad that ran that year, which rests on the image of a recognizable sports celebrity, *Dr. Dunkenstein* (1985), for example, lends an “of the moment” air to the sense of timeless geometry.¹² The poster reiterates the tanks’ ideas all the more frankly, for when read against their timely but obvious rhetoric, the sealed nature of the tanks’ ideals

comes across rather differently. They read as potentially obtainable, but also that much more “low” in kind or nature, far-fetched in their packaging, and absurd in their results.¹³

More like Koons’s early vacuum cleaner pieces than those in *Equilibrium*, Hirst’s earliest uses of a tank or vitrine structure operate more or less independently. In the early Natural History work, such as *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991), Hirst produces a sealed specimen, one available for viewing but completely encased and distanced from its audience. But by the following year he renews his attention to alternate, environmental strategies (deriving from the butterfly exhibition) that promote a different kind of looking. One strategy is premised on the division of the animals into sections, each in its individual vitrine. Breaking the specimens open offers the possibility for a type of looking that goes beyond the casual engagement of a bystander. Such serialized divisions, particularly when coupled with the shock propagated through titles like *Mother and Child, Divided* (1993), corrupts the idealized authority of the vitrine; with the specimen itself cracked open, “encasement” registers as less secure or assured. Should viewers choose to walk through the tight space between the sculpture’s parts, they would be presented with a rare opportunity to act less as detached observers than as engaged practitioners.

Discarded science and double acts

In these multi-part vitrines it is the specimen itself whose surface is opened for scrutiny. On other occasions, the vitrine is unsealed, initiating a direct questioning from within. The latter strategy increasingly solicits a multivalent approach—a double vision—from its viewers. In 1997, for instance, Hirst himself quipped:

This is what it’s like. I’ll do a magic trick, and I want it to be amazing. But if anybody asks me how to do it, I’ll show them exactly how to do it. I want you to be amazed twice. Once you’re amazed because it seems impossible, and then you’re amazed because it’s fucking easy. That’s what I like.¹⁴

Here he suggests a double act intended to prompt a split experience—aimed at mystification *and* revelation, though what Hirst leaves less clear is whether or not “revelation” is, in fact, desirable. That first “act” takes many forms in Hirst’s work, but is most often associated with the spectacle and grandeur of the work and its trappings. We might consider one critic’s assessment of the notorious diamond-encrusted skull, *For the Love of God* (2007, discussed in Chapter 2). Addressing not only the media attention that the show received beforehand but also the elaborate staging of the work itself, Eliza Williams wrote: “The fuss [also] raised anticipation to fever pitch”¹⁵

The cloud of information regarding the number of diamonds used and the cost of production was matched *in situ* by the presence of bodyguards, the jewelry-like encasement, and the spot-lit ambiance. Together they form a type of mystification that unites magician and branding agent. Of more note, however, is the second half of Williams’s observation:

[S]o, perhaps inevitably, when finally reaching the skull, it was something of a disappointment. Beyond the impressive glitter of the diamonds, it [too] appeared lacking in depth and emotion, a feeling that wasn’t helped by the jewelry-shop atmosphere of the space.¹⁶

Had she read the clear references to that consumer space as intentional, Williams might have noted that the secondary setting had a purpose: to complicate amazement and investment by provoking something akin to disappointment. It could be claimed, in fact, that what was a kind of latent strategy in 1997 (when the artist was quoted on the topic), had, by 2007, been hardwired into the mechanisms of Hirst’s process.

Such a multifaceted and oblique approach serves to separate Hirst’s work from the discourses with which it engages, including consumerism, science, and medicine—spheres that share a reliance on abstractions. The doctor, the drug label, and the luxury brand name (or its packaging within a type of store decor) all inspire the same kind of unquestioning confidence. By contrast, Hirst is interested in dismantling that confidence; and part of his method for doing so is to puncture or disrupt the absolute space of the vitrine. The “amazement” of which Hirst speaks the second time around does not arise from a distanced, sealed space commanded by an authoritative framework; it stems from the kind of knowledge or truth we associate with the user, the performer herself.

Hirst’s preoccupation with the interconnections that persist among attention, belief, and value surface increasingly through the 1990s, coming to a head in *Theories, Models, Methods, Approaches, Assumptions, Results and Finding*. Its titular terms establish several orientations. First, their range suggests gossip and hearsay as much as scientific investigation. Set in sequence, secondly, they connote doubt as much as understanding; for listing each alternative as one among many bestows an ambiguity on what is actually presented in the space. Thirdly, by mobilizing strategies adapted from Koons’s 1980s exhibitions, Hirst underlines that ambivalence. The show capitalized on the theatrical and the spectacular, and like Koons’s *Equilibrium*, the tone approached that of a mad scientist’s fun fair.¹⁷

The massive figure of *Hymn* (2000), the first sculpture encountered by viewers entering the exhibition, initiates such a reading. Recasting the sculptural nude in the form of a monumental anatomy model (over 609 cm high), in all of its generalized and didactic specificity, at once proposes a kind of grand tribute to the science we know—pop science, maybe—

and at the same time exaggerates the kitschy grotesquery of that familiar object. Suggesting variations on the past, flanking vitrines anchored the ubiquitous figure, temporally. The diorama of *Lost Love* (2000) resembles an ancient, submerged ruin; while *From the Cradle to the Grave* (2000) takes the form of a more familiar diorama of a domestic interior. Placed in conjunction, the three works seem to elevate the inflated didactics of grade school science and the natural history museum as superior mutations, in comparison to the sparse, impoverished spaces of daily life.

Painting the vast walls of the entry space to resemble graph paper signals the way in which *Theories*, plays its three-dimensional works against the two-dimensional elements. Where Koons appropriates and frames advertisements in *Equilibrium* to set up a contemporary dialog with the more timeless look of the modified aquariums, Hirst allows his abstractions to roam unbounded, filling the space with an easy, fun, optical field that both complements and contests the time-bound motion, sound, and complex maze of vitrines. As discussed above, Koons's use of *Dr. Dunkenstein* plays out social metaphors of elevation, race, and sports, in fast, fun, and timely ways. Hirst's spot and graph paintings and drug label prints, in contrast, stand as timeless, slick, disembodied versions of the best of medical product packaging.

When medical labels appear, their colors are subdued and the manipulated texts are not appropriated from specific, recognizable bottles. Utility and timeliness are disavowed in favor of a kitschy game that both engages and mocks the authority of the label. In the case of the screen print series, *The Last Supper* (1999), text and compositions are easy, flat, graphic, and legible, adapted so directly from the look of pillboxes and bottles that one had to read carefully to see the substitutions made by Hirst. Graphics and designs ordered to inspire confidence are then undercut by substituting familiar (English) foods like the "Cornish Pasty" for the complex drug terminology one might expect. These are blended seamlessly into the lingo and look of medical labels, with the hybrid packaging in turn appearing all the more ridiculous.

By invoking religion through the series title and format (thirteen prints with "Christ" at the center) and placing it alongside the ubiquitous, disembodied medical "voice" of authority (manifested graphically and textually), Hirst captures the peculiar mix of medicine and religion so pervasive today. As George Poste suggests in the catalog essay:

The high priesthood of secular medicine has replaced the church as the source of salvation ... Medicine takes high ritual to a fine art, to be choreographed carefully to induce maximum respect from a vulgar public who must be kept ignorant about the scientific gospels and accept without comment or dissent the wisdom of decisions made about their own care.¹⁸

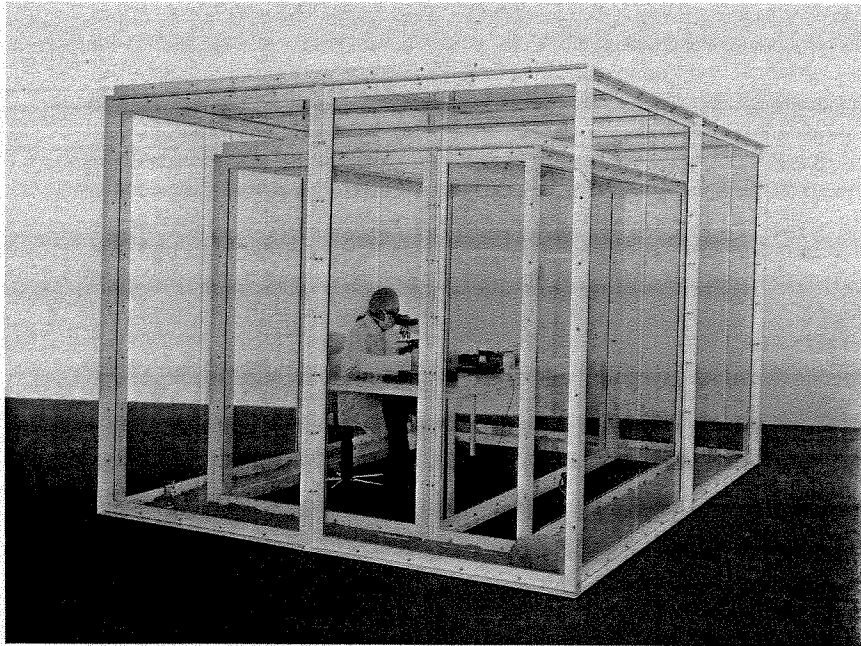
The disinvested, almost childish, tone that marks the visual and textual rhetoric of the prints speaks to this model, which solicits a kind of blind faith. The prints participate in the ridiculousness of the appropriated Nike

ads (discussed above). In the *Dunkenstein* poster, Darrell Griffith appears as a doctor-cum-chemist, his athletic prowess mixed into a fog/potion that apparently transforms him (rather than his audience) into a demi-god. The tongue-in-cheek title of Hirst's prints, *The Last Supper*, bears similar overtones as the nature of each drug's panacea is no longer the relevant point.

This is not to say, however, that the two cases, Koons's *Equilibrium* and Hirst's *Theories*, are entirely analogous. One way to distinguish between them is to suggest that Hirst wants viewers to see his show twice, or at least twice. It is in this exhibition that Hirst employed the vitrine to excess, using it not only to hold water, but also invisible elements, such as germs, heat, scents, and sound. The multiplication of oversized vitrines is matched by a generalized excess enabled by the warehouse scale of the Gagosian Gallery. Painting the walls themselves, a nod to Andy Warhol's use of wallpaper, enhances the visual and sensory overload. The eye is made to bounce between persistent transformations of form, from three-dimensions to two and vice versa. Two shapes dominate that interplay—the sphere/circle and the box/square. Circular forms populate the space not only as ping-pong balls, and spots, but also in distorted, biomorphic, even degraded forms—as pills, invisible germs, odors emitted by trash, semi-invisible bacteria and organisms produced by fish, and sound bites transmitted by televisions (all of which one imagines as a series of small dots that travel through air and water). The circle's translation, coupled with its volumetric mutation and sensory adaptation, affords this most ideal of shapes the feel of an unchecked biological growth, uncontrollable, unstable, in constant flux. It also acts as a sliding scale that connects visible with invisible and science with religion, encapsulating the way that belief systems adapt, mutate, and link up. Contemporary analogs might include the work of artists such as Matthew Ritchie or Tara Donovan, whose drawings and installations directly manifest the accumulations and organic growths overtaking the gallery.

Such dynamism marks a difference between *Theories* and *Equilibrium*, which was premised on a kind of (alleged) stabilization. In *Theories*, the propagation, splitting, and destabilization of scientific information fills the space. The hyperbolic scale of *Hymn*, and the rampant spread of the scientific form of the grid, splayed graph-like across the walls, announce that growth. Together, these elements act to model the terms at stake in the exhibition: biology, science, and medicine on the one hand, divisions and dualities on the other.

Hymn's presentation of the body (traditionally, the subject of sculpture) as conventionally construed by science rather than art initiates the thematic use and scrutiny of the scientific eye, a topic taken up explicitly in *A Way of Seeing* (2000) (Figure 11.5) in which the scientist/lab tech himself is situated in the interior space of the vitrine. The mechanized dummy endlessly readjusts his microscope, acting out his physical self-definition according to his mode of viewing, even as the beach-like accouterments of the outer vitrine suggest



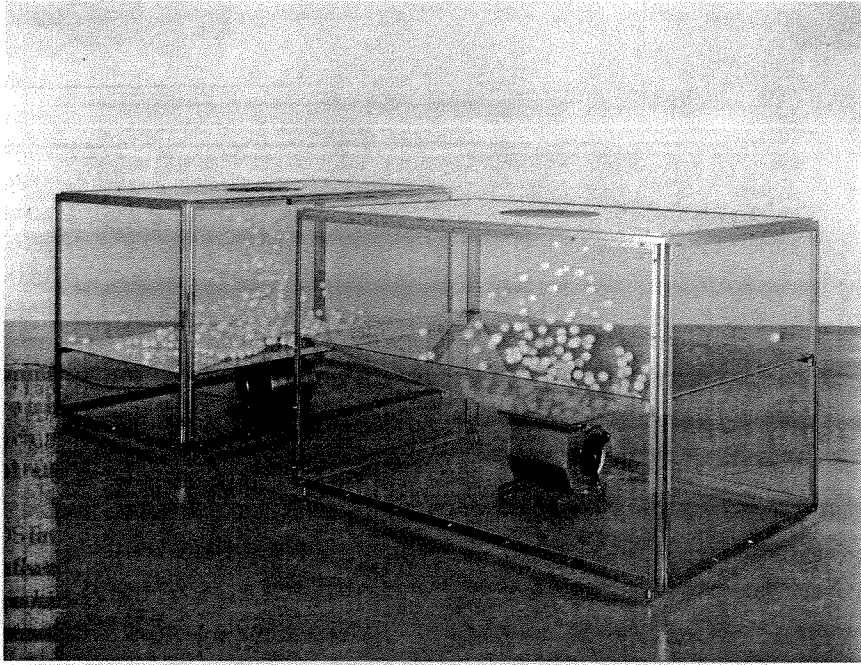
11.5 Damien Hirst, *A Way of Seeing*, 2000. Glass, painted steel, silicone rubber, Formica, MDF, chair, animatronic man in laboratory wear, microscope, boxed slides, laboratory equipment, spectacles, plastic bucket, polystyrene cup, water glasses, natural sponge, ashtray, cigarettes and sand, 96.125 × 155.875 × 120.125 in (2440 × 3960 × 3050 mm). Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery / © Damien Hirst and Science Ltd. All rights reserved, DACS 2013. Photo: Mike Parsons

that mentally he may be elsewhere. His tunnel-vision affords access only to fragmented, atomized versions of the body, splayed out as it is in two dimensions on the surface of a slide. (The parallels with the curator or art historian are clear.) This model of looking, conventionally aligned with ideals—truth, order, careful study, technological progress—is called into question. Pairing that repetitive motion with cheap coffee, an ashtray and cigarettes, and, most significantly, an array of flattened, apparently indigestible visual information, suggests frustration and uninspired looking. Posed thus against a stereotypical image of unattainable escape in the outer vitrine (metonymically embodied by the sand and sea sponges), the diorama reads as one of several instances in which the role of the case morphs, uncoupling from its normative capacity to house, elevate, and display valued specimens and shifting toward its potential to act as a sealed, disengaged, or trapped space that deflates the very ideals it may have initially been intended to protect.

Oblique references to the frustration and myopia that might result from a scientific way of seeing recur throughout the space, as do references to the outdated, self-implosive nature of such envisioning. As noted in one review, the exhibition—the vitrines in particular—largely presents a brand of medicine from the past, one that relied on plastic models, dissections, diagrams, and experiments performed by hand rather than with the use of new technologies.¹⁹ In this vintage regime, sight, and by extension belief, was still attached to physical objects and material bodies. In the exhibition, however, the outdated nature of that model is highlighted by a sleeker, more contemporary vision, one associated less with objects than with graphic symbols like the dot. But the two alternatives do not form easy binaries: old versus new, bad or myopic versus good or longsighted. The model envisioned by Hirst appears much more open-ended, and more bleak.

One pair of sculptures, for which the exhibition was named, underlines my argument here, quite directly. *Theories, Models, Methods, Approaches, Results and Findings* (2000) (Figure 11.6) uses motion and sound to defer “sight” and refocus attention on problems of order and randomness. The work is comprised of a pair of vitrines that house ping-pong balls bounced about by noisy air blowers. The balls easily recall the spot paintings, but the regular, factual scientific models presented in those works here become randomized and untheorizable. Measuring 122 cm high, the top of the case is low enough that the viewer can look down from above, calling up an analogy with slides and placing the viewer in the role of lab tech or scientist. Hyperbole is increasingly manifest as we come to see the work as a farcical envisioning of the microscopic body and its workings at the cellular level. Or is it a viral container, a kind of quarantined space? The prominent inclusion of air vents forces seepage of the work’s audio component and prompts a questioning of the potential for containment. In addition, the near duplication of the vitrines exaggerates problems of probability and randomness by highlighting the unpredictable nature of the balls’ actions. Such replication allows you to see the work twice, literally, without enabling a definitive reading of its form. Instead, doubling encourages many more anterior associations, some of which leave science behind entirely and move toward the chance nature of other ventures—games, lotteries, luck, life—all collapsed into a kind of banal, boxed metaphor.

When read against their visual predecessors, the spot paintings, these ping-pong balls appear to have escaped, subtracted from the former governance of their grids, only to be entrapped by another caged model. The relationship between the ping-pong balls and the spot paintings also signals a dialectic perpetuated within the broader space; repeatedly, almost mechanically, the vitrines and walls set up and, in turn, dismantle the principles of order and structure held to be hallmarks of scientific thought. It is as if Hirst uses the violence that underlies so much of his work to beat such principles to a pulp,



11.6 Damien Hirst, *Theories, Models, Methods, Approaches, Assumptions, Results and Findings*, 2000. Glass, stainless steel, steel, brass, silicone rubber, air blowers and ping-pong balls, Two parts, each: 48 × 71 × 45 in (1219 × 1803 × 1143 mm). Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery / © Damien Hirst and Science Ltd. All rights reserved, DACS 2013. Photo: Mike Parsons

literally to flatten them into superficial symbols, forcing viewers to regard their initial seduction with ridicule. The spin paintings, in which the spots seem to have shattered or ruptured, act as a precedent for these pulverizing methods: the spots are subjected to such strong centrifugal forces that they are destroyed, their shapeliness and order lost.

The self-conscious crassness and implicit violence of these paintings, often titled profanely for emphasis, as in *Beautiful, Kiss My Fucking Ass Painting* (1996), is matched at times in *Theories*. In one of its most visually anomalous works, *Figures in a Landscape* (2000), the murderous intentions of the author suggest the kind of (divided) figures or bodies that might occupy the garbage bags; while the horror movie script scrawled onto the mirror in the space reads, "Stop me before I kill again." The unseen olfactory implications of a pile of rotting corpses in such a sealed space lends palpability to the hidden products of those acts of violence; but the glass barriers that encase the trash

bags are also responsible for our inability to process the implications. It is not until a doubly distanced thinking-through of the process of fragmentation occurs that a visceral response might arise; and the garish slasher film tactics are subdued by Hirst's routinely clinical approach to violence.

No less brutal, yet equally distanced, are Hirst's appropriations of medical instruments and stations in which violence is often replaced by biological cross-pollination. This is performed most straightforwardly in *Love Lost* (1999) and *Lost Love* (2000), the pair of vitrines that consist of two gynecological examination rooms submerged underwater and turned into fish tanks. These clinical spaces of discomfort and ordered sexuality are suddenly de-sanitized, even de-anesthetized. Their subjection to the bacterial invasion of a biological system of growth and decay is implicitly visualized through the random movements of the fish. The bacterial corruption of the space seems to be a means of bringing to light the violent operations conventionally played out in such clinical settings. The filtration system, massive and self-evident as it is (sitting atop the vitrine), can neither control the actions of the fish nor entirely undo the process of de-sanitization put into place. The entropic nature of that undoing seems intended to point to the play of larger forces.

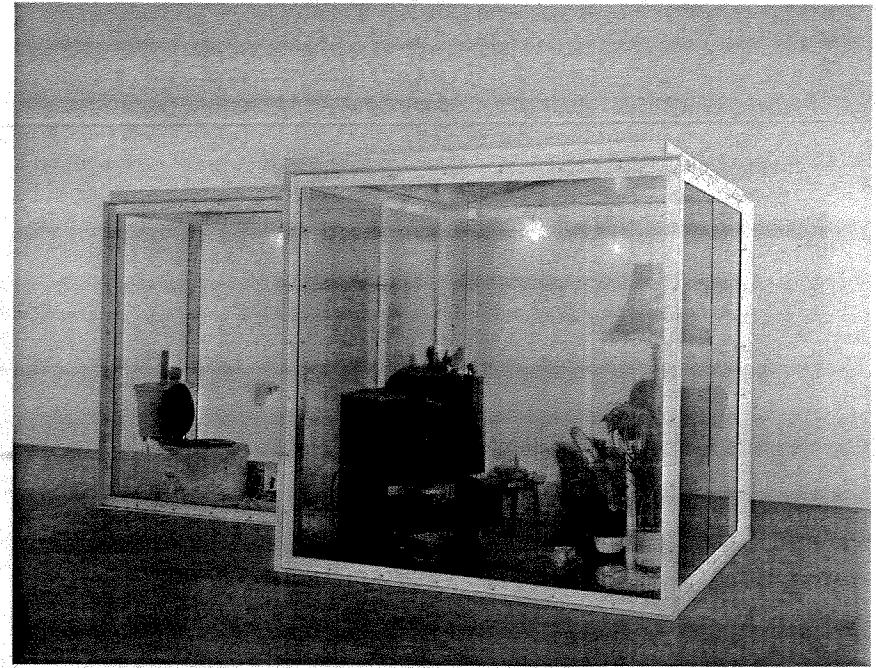
What is built into the structures of Hirst's work, in other words, is an act of dissolution, physical in some cases, symbolic in others. When we see a physical disruption of boundaries, as in those moments when a double vitrine, like *The Way We Were*, has been pierced, we recognize the permeability of spheres held distinct and the futility of our attempts to order life in such a way as to fend-off any interruption by death. It is the absolute mockery of this tendency that fuels the absurdity of many of Hirst's works. In *The Way We Were*, this is signaled by the decision to attempt to heat (give life to? preserve?) the appropriated, oversized version of the porcelain collection "box." That national figure, known as "Charity," is a disheveled and disabled girl whose aspect is meant to inspire empathy and compassion. Here Hirst capitalizes on the role of this young girl as authority figure, an absurd icon of the religious compulsion to give. The bizarre coupling of the sculpture with an operating space heater, itself an outdated piece of equipment prone to fires, relates not just to the compulsion for compassion (in the form of warmth), but—more to the point (as the catalog intimates)—to an accidental method of death, the result of a chance chemical reaction to mixing multiple medications that leads to an inability to regulate body temperature.²⁰ In such cases the very attempt to prevent or inhibit illness itself is the cause of death.

The compacted, degraded, and strange humor of this installation suggests the inaccuracy of alleging that Hirst merely refuses to uphold the order according to which science or medicine pictures the world. It might be more appropriate to contend that such failures signal the necessity of the intermingling of spheres conventionally divided. It has been repeatedly remarked, correctly I think, that Hirst finds the kind of sanitized world of

health associated with “life” bleak and falsely promising. In this context we should acknowledge Hirst’s fixation on death: that it seems attached to an imperative that brings death more forcefully back into life. Such a need sounds out through the exhibition over and over again, most forcefully in cases where the box itself is opened up to the viewer, spatially or aurally.

Few of Hirst’s works invite actual entry, but in those that do, such as the media installation, *Looking Forward to the Total and Absolute Suppression of Pain* (1999), there is less seduction than in most of his works. After warning the viewer to mind her head as she enters the inconveniently, intentionally low door frame, *Looking Forward* subjects its visitors to the blare of four monitors loudly sounding the promises contained by various painkiller commercials. The absurdity recalls Bruce Nauman, and seems to mock the viewer’s investment in the denial of any physical residue of death or decay at the cost of repeated subjection to the banalities of life. It “lur[es] the viewer into a vitrine that becomes increasingly claustrophobic,” and thereby transgresses convention by allowing the vitrine’s forces to *act* on the viewer, to subvert directly its traditional role as barrier.²¹ It seems relevant that the engagement is a pejorative, sensorily disorienting one. The manufactured banalities of the commercials that surround the viewer in the vitrine find further expression in the squalid space of another work, *An Unreasonable Fear of Death and Dying* (2000) (Figure 11.7), in which a single (outdated) tube television broadcasts the ostensibly more significant news of CNN. The emission of sound and image in a sealed space merges with the biological waste of the adjacent vitrine, a fetid bathroom. Read in tandem with the overall violence of the sitting room—the chainsaw ripping through the recliner, the blood spatters—the work suggests a viral infestation of the gallery as a whole.

Despite the constant feeling of encasement, permeability and seepage are found everywhere in the *Theories* exhibition. This is due, in part, to the viewer’s growing awareness of a tendency toward absolute fragmentation: the particles decrease in size, from ping-pong balls to germs, scents, and sounds, so that the containment of these discrete elements no longer appears viable. It is as if the vitrines were able to be collapsed like the beach ball in *The History of Pain* (1999). This implication is palpable in moments when one recognizes that life is being drained, incrementally, from the space. But obsolescence offers a more explicit manner in which the absence of life is symbolized. In works such as *The Way We Were* and *Unreasonable Fear*, Hirst pairs increasingly obsolete symbols of science (beakers and other outdated equipment) with other outmoded (though not too much) everyday elements—the console television, the aging recliner, the charity box. Hirst’s material world is a near ghost town, a series of relics.²² In this sense, he fills the vitrine with the kind of content normally consigned to it: specimens and symbols that point to a past. Likewise, when animation is present, it is largely mechanical and electrical, as if Hirst has placed these displays on an equally outdated form of life support.



11.7 Damien Hirst, *An Unreasonable Fear of Death and Dying*, 2000. Glass, steel, TV, video recorder, armchair, chainsaw, sheepskin rug, standard lamp, coffee table, potted plants, toilet, toilet paper, waste bin, air freshener, books, glasses in case, newspaper and magazines, books, tea tray, tissues, cigarettes and lighter, blood and faeces. 84 × 84 × 84 in (2134 × 2134 × 2134 mm) and 84 × 84 × 84 in (2134 × 2134 × 2134 mm). Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery / © Damien Hirst and Science Ltd. All rights reserved, DACS 2013. Photo: Mike Parsons

But the pastness of this way of life is somewhat latent; it takes thought and distance to recognize that this is the world as it was, and to see the difference between such works and their more updated—sometimes spatially collapsed—counterparts, like *The Void* (2000). It is for these reasons that the vitrine played such an important role in the *Theories* exhibition, which employs spatial metaphors to detach and blur ideas and constructs of temporality, belief, and life and death. The effects of “lifelessness” are perceived much more directly in the gallery’s two-dimensional elements, which ironically also appear the most up-to-date in their visual language. The graph and spot paintings and the drug label prints feel at once easy and fun, but also flat, empty, and meaningless.

The key sculptures that link these two bodies of work are the reliefs, which expressly straddle two and three dimensions. *Trinity: Pharmacology, Physiology,*

Pathology (2000) and *The Void* establish the exhibition's dichotomies most directly. *Trinity* appears to be no more than a set of storage cases containing anatomical models, the sum of which overflows with didacticism and the charm of a kind of quaint, elementary, scientific mode. *The Void*, in contrast, seems to hold the promise of a more contemporary vision of science today. While there is a sense in which the pills here are still material and embodied, their abstracted extraction from bottles engenders a relative freedom from older confines. Their new lightness and dissolution into an ethereal image is redolent of the virtual and phantasmatic and their greater capacity for promise.

The atomized elements of *The Void*, one of the largest (236 × 471 × 11 cm) and most alluring of all the medicine cabinets Hirst has produced, are confined to the strictures of a grid: organized, ordered, and apparently filled with all the promise that medicine holds. But randomization and disorder are equally—if implicitly—present in the division of each pill from its box. The pills are no longer required to perform their intended roles. Instead, their value consists entirely in their unencumbered availability to the eye. *The Void*, finally, refuses to hold its form, instead dizzyingly expanding outward even as it doubles inward into a reflective, graphic depiction of itself as volume dissolves into flatness and image.

It is helpful, here, to recall the analogy of the window in nineteenth-century painting, and its role, as read by Krauss, in setting up a proposition often thought to be experiential, to do with sweeping views of life and death—and their potential to invade the interior space of the occupant or viewer. Light—or its absence—threatened to blur the boundaries set into place by windows, so that its penetration of the frame could bring forth a new truth; or so that the trauma of death might transgress the protective boundary of the home. This, too, is the hazard caught up in Hirst's use of the vitrine, which is at once suggestive of an interior process that threatens to spill out into the space of the viewer, while also implying that such processes are already present in daily life, and—by further implication—that the fictive boundaries of order and disorder were never actually present, never really available for transgression.

Examination of the multi-sensory methods undertaken in *Theories* is key to Hirst's manner of framing the issues of sight and belief. The transparent glass of the vitrine functions to undercut what might otherwise appear as a spectacular and theatricalized aesthetic practice. It is the allusion to transparency—seeing through something material, yet invisible—that directs our attention to the presence of the invisible elements that mediate our experience and understanding of “big” terms such as life and death. In other words, Hirst's appropriation of Koons's method of display is intended to raise questions about misapplied belief and the investment in similarly branded, though transparent or invisible, ideals. Koons's uses of the vitrine in the 1980s courted an analogy between the transparency of the glass case

and the intangibility of the brand name. Both were able to bestow value while essentially being seen through. But in Hirst's use of the same system, the vitrine itself is not burdened with as much labor. While the vitrine sets the scene for modes of investigation, initiating a dialog on the frameworks of vision, it is the works themselves that achieve a measure of transparency; for they are to be “seen through,” in the process trumping the strategies that brought them on stage in the first place. The laying bare of the work's own principles is—intentionally—its draw and its failure.

Notes

1. Damien Hirst, as quoted in Mirta D'argenzio, “Like People, Like Flies: Damien Hirst Interviewed,” in *Damien Hirst* (Naples: Museo Archeologico Nazionale, 2004), p. 77.
2. Rosalind Krauss, “Grids,” (1979), rep. in *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), pp. 8–22.
3. Krauss glosses the term: “glace in French means glass, mirror and ice; transparency, opacity and water” (*ibid.*, p. 17).
4. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
7. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), pp. 85, 87 (emphasis in original).
8. Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 81.
9. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936), in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp. 217–52. On this topic, see also, Sharon Macdonald, “Exhibitions of Power and Powers of Exhibition: An Introduction to the Politics of Display,” in Sharon Macdonald (ed.), *The Politics of Display: Museums, Science, Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), esp. p. 2.
10. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 107–8.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
12. Displayed as they are today without the two-dimensional works, the glass boundaries of the fish tanks feel rigid and unyielding, leaving the terms entirely intact. In this sense, Koons's equilibrium tanks, as with the encased vacuum cleaners that preceded them, risk repeating the legacy of the vitrine, sealing the value of its contents into an unyielding vacuum. But read together with the posters (not to mention the bronzed air tank and scuba gear), a less heavily shrouded, mythical portrait of the stakes are conveyed.
13. I think there is a similar argument to be made about Koons's exhibition *The New*. For instance, the constant repetition of the term “new” in the titles of the works emphasizes not simply the ideal state of the commodity, but a timely moment. Koons had to be aware of the passing of time and its effects on the viewer's perception of this term. Time, then, acts on the contents of the vitrine from the outside, imposing itself rather intrusively on the alleged ideals meant to remain intact inside. However, *The New* affords a rather less effective example of this process than *Equilibrium*, which is why I choose to focus on the latter.
14. Damien Hirst (1997) in Gordon Burn, “The Hay Smells Different to the Lovers than to the Horses,” in *Theories, Models, Methods, Approaches, Assumptions, Results and Findings*, exhibition catalog (New York: Gagosian Gallery and Science, 2000), p. 7.
15. Eliza Williams, “Damien Hirst: Beyond Belief,” *Flash Art*, 40 (October 2007), p. 121.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

17. Following Mikhail Bakhtin, we might also refer to that exhibition space as “carnavalesque” as it evokes something of a “world turned upside down” — in spite of its initial apparent orderliness. Hirst’s take on carnival, however, is less concerned with the suspension of time, as Bakhtin suggests for the carnival activities of the Middle Ages, than with an infusion of temporality into an otherwise abstracted, timeless space. See, Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984).
18. George Poste, “Revealing Reality within a Body of Imaginary Things,” in *Theories, Models, Methods, Approaches, Assumptions, Results and Findings*, p. 101.
19. Grady T. Turner, “Damien Hirst,” *Flash Art*, 34 (January/February 2001), pp. 98–101.
20. The exhibition catalog points to such connections by pairing images of *The Way We Were* with a chapter titled “Determining the True Cause of Death in a Dermatological Disaster.” The essay outlines several possible “causes,” but highlights complications from such diagnoses as TEN (scalded skin syndrome) and other drug-induced skin lesions that amount to an internal burning of the skin.
21. George Poste, “Revealing Reality,” p. 106.
22. Grady Turner’s review in particular notes the “outdated” nature of Hirst’s material embodiment of science, see “Damien Hirst,” pp. 20, 100. There is also a possible parallel here with the role of the vitrine itself as an outdated form of display. Eileen Hooper-Greenhill notes: “Now [i.e., today] material things present themselves in their relation to human beings [Foucault]. Material things are now constituted as objects through organic, historic links, through stories, and through people. In the museum, the three-dimensional display case was evolved to show the artefact or specimen in its physical dimension. Display cases seem to us now as, on the one hand, a metaphor for our understanding of what counts as a museum, but on the other hand, as curiously outdated. How can organic relationships, histories, and links to people be shown in display cases?” (*Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, p. 204).