

Conceptual art movement characteristics



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Conceptual art is based on the concept that art may exist solely as an idea and not in the physical realm. For supporters of this movement, the idea of a work matters more than its physical identity. While having its roots in the European Dada movement of the early 20th century and from the writings of philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, conceptual art emerged as a recognised art movement by the 1960s. When the expression “concept art” was coined in 1961 by Henry Flynt in a Fluxus publication, it was also adapted by Joseph Kosuth and the Art and Language group (Terry Atkinson, David Bainbridge, Michael Baldwin, Harold Hurrell, Ian Burn, Mel Ramsden, Philip Pilkington, and David Rushton) in England, in which the term took on a different meaning. This group saw conceptual art as a reaction against formalism and commodification and believed that art was created when the analysis of an art object succeeded the object itself and saw artistic knowledge as equal to artistic production. The term gained public recognition in 1967, after journalist Sol LeWitt used it to define that specific art movement. Conceptual artists began the theory by stating that the knowledge and thought gained in artistic production was more important than the finished product. Conceptual art then became an international movement, spreading from North America and Western Europe to South America, Eastern Europe, Russia, China, and Japan. All these movements came to a major turning point in 20th century art, when the theory that ‘art is idea’ was reaching a summit debate, challenging notions about art, society, politics, and the media with the theory that art is ideas. Specifically, it was argued that this form of art can be written, published, performed, fabricated, or simply an idea.

By the mid 1970s many publications about the new art trend were being written and a loose collection of related practices began to emerge. In 1970, the first exhibition exclusively devoted to Conceptual Art took place at the New York Cultural Centre. It was called “ Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects”. Eventually the term “ conceptual art” came to encapsulate all forms of contemporary art that did not utilize the traditional skills of painting and sculpture.

Conceptual art also had roots in the works of the father of Dadaism, Marcel Duchamp, the creator of the “ ready-made.” Duchamp had a key influence on the conceptualists for the way he provided examples of artworks in which the concept takes precedence. For example, Duchamp’s most famous work, Fountain (1917) shows a urinal basin signed by the artist under the pseudonym “ R. Mutt”. When it was submitted to the annual exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in New York it was rejected under the argument that traditional qualities of art making were not being reflected. It was a commonplace object and therefore exceedingly ordinary and not unique. Duchamp’s focus on the concept of his art work was later defended by the American artist Joseph Kosuth in his 1969 essay “ Art after Philosophy” when he wrote “ All art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually.”

Between 1967 and 1978 Conceptual art rose to its golden age, enabling distinguished conceptualists such as Henry Flynt, Ray Johnson, Robert Morris and Dan Graham to emerge on the art scene. During the influential period of conceptual art, other conceptualists such as Michael Asher, Allan Bridge,

Mark Divo, Jenny Holzer, Yves Klein and Yoko Ono also established names for themselves.

Conceptual art was intended to convey a concept to the viewer, rejecting the importance of the creator or a talent in the traditional art forms such as painting and sculpture. Works were strongly based on text, which was used just as much if not more often than imagined. Not only had the movement challenged the importance of art traditions and discredited the significance of the materials and finished product, it also brought up the question at the nature of the art form – whether art works were also meant to be proactive. Conceptual art was the forerunner for installation, digital, and performance art, more generally art that can be experienced.

“ In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.” – Sol Lewitt, Paragraphs on Conceptual Art (1967)

Conceptual art is art formed by ideas. It is a form of modern art of which the idea or ideas that a work conveys are considered its crucial point, with its visual appearance being of minor importance. As Sol Lewitt says, “ What the work of art looks isn’t too important. ...No matter what form it finally have it must begin with an idea. It is the process of conception and realization with which the artist is concerned.” – Sol Lewitt Paragraphs on Conceptual Art (1967)

Conceptual art challenges the validity of traditional art, the existing structures for making, publicizing and viewing art. Moreover it claims that the materials used and the product of the process is unnecessary. As the idea or ideas are of major significance, conceptual art consists of information, including perhaps photographs, written texts or displayed objects. It has come to include all art forms outside traditional painting or sculpture, such as installation art, video art and performance art. Because the work does not follow a traditional form it demands a more active response from the viewer “ is made to engage the mind of the viewer rather than his eye or emotions.”, in other words it

Marcel Duchamp Fountain 1917

could be argued that the Conceptual work of art in fact only exists in the viewer’s mental participation. “ It doesn’t really matter if the viewer understands the concepts of the artist by seeing the art. Once out of his hand the artist has no control over the way a viewer will perceive the work. Different people will understand the same thing in a different way.” – Sol Lewitt, Paragraphs on Conceptual Art (1967)

Conceptual artists deliberately produced works that were difficult if not impossible to classify according to the old traditional format. Some consciously produced work that could not be placed in a museum or gallery, or perhaps resulted in no actual art object which hence emphasize that the idea is more important than the artifact. “ Conceptual art is not necessarily logical. ...The ideas need not be complex. Most ideas that are successful are ludicrously simple. Successful ideas generally have the appearance of simplicity because they seem inevitable. In terms of idea the artist is free to

<https://assignbuster.com/conceptual-art-movement-characteristics/>

even surprise himself. Ideas are discovered by intuition. .” – Sol Lewitt,
Paragraphs on Conceptual Art (1967)

Echoing the difficulty in classification as mentioned above, conceptual art cannot be defined in terms of any medium or style. Rather, it can be defined in the way it questions what art truly is, a piece of conceptual art is recognized in one of the four forms: a readymade, a term devised by Duchamp through his piece Fountain. (photo)

Joseph Kosuth’s One and Three Chairs 1965

Traditionally, an ordinary object such as a urinal cannot be thought to be art because it is not created by an artist or possesses any meaning of art, it is not unique, and it possesses hardly any probable visual properties of the traditional, hand-crafted art object; an intervention, in which image, text or object is positioned in an unpredicted context, hence rousing awareness to that context: e. g. the museum or a public space; written text, where the concept, intention or exploration is presented in the form of language; documentation, where the actual work, concept or action, can only be presented by the evidence of videos, maps, charts, notes or, most often, photographs.

Joseph Kosuth’s One and Three Chairs (photo) is an example of documentation, where the ‘ real’ work is the concept – ‘ What is a chair?’ ‘ How do we represent a chair?’ And hence ‘ What is art?’ and ‘ What does it represent?’. The three elements that we can actually see (a photograph of a chair, an actual chair and the definition of a chair) are secondary to it. They are of no account in themselves. It is a very ordinary chair, the definition is

photostatted from a dictionary and the photograph was not even taken by Kosuth – it was untouched by the hand of the artist.

If a work of conceptual art begins with the question ‘What is art?’ rather than a particular style or medium, one could argue that it is completed by the intention ‘This could be art’: ‘this’ being presented as object, image, performance or idea revealed in some other way. Conceptual art is therefore ‘reflexive’: the object refers back to the subject, it represents a state of continual self-critique.

Being an artist now means to question the nature of art... The function of art as a question, was first raised by Marcel Duchamp... The event that made conceivable the realization that it was possible to ‘speak another language’ and still make sense in art was Marcel Duchamp’s first unassisted readymade. With the unassisted readymade, art changed its focus from the form of the language to what was being said. Which means that it changed the nature of art form from a question of morphology to a question of function. This change – one from ‘appearance’ to ‘conception’ – was the beginning of ‘modern’ art and the beginning of ‘conceptual’ art. All art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually... Artists question the nature of art by presenting new propositions as to art’s nature.

Kosuth, Art After Philosophy (1969)

Hence runs the famous passage of the serial essay first published in Studio International in 1969 in ‘Art After Philosophy’, in which Kosuth set out his stall for purely conceptual art. In it we find transition from the negative

questioning inherent in the aesthetic indifference of Duchamp's readymades to the positive 'investigations' of Kosuth's distinct brand of Conceptual art: a transition from the wide-eyed surprise of 'This is art?' to a new way of claiming 'This is art.'

Before standing a chance of entering into the general vernacular, art first must be conceived, then executed and lastly presented to a public, however small. In the 19th century, in France, the Impressionists were all innovative artists imposing themselves on reluctant audience. The same applies to the great art movements of this era. They consisted of artists producing works that the public for art neither wanted or anticipated, but were forced to gulp down because it posed issues of innovation which could not be avoided. The reluctant audience included collectors and critics, and even older artists, who inevitably feel their own pre-eminence being threatened. Who, after all, is not made to feel uncomfortable by the unknown art form, as for the matter in all things? It is normal and effortless to fall in love with what is preconceived to be good, beautiful, right and proper. We now all love the Impressionists because we have come to acknowledge and therefore feel comfortable with them. But the first and foremost task of the new art is to instigate a sense of comfort.

In autumn 1997, the show 'Sensation' subtitled 'Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection' was mounted at the Royal Academy. It was one of the first to focus on shock art. According to the publicity leaflet, 'Sensation' was 'both an attempt to define generation and to present Charles Saatchi's singular vision in an established public forum.' On display were 100 works by 42 artists selected from the Saatchi collection. Works that evoked powerful

visual and emotional reactions were selected. With the figure of attendance going over 285, 000 – ‘ Sensation’ undoubtedly created sensation.

Among all the artists shown, Damien Hirst was undoubtedly the most successful and sought after at present. Having several records of the highest ever paid living artist, Hirst’s works creates a phenomenon in the current art market. Hirst’s work falls into seven categories. The first group are his Natural History series, the ‘ tank pieces’ which he calls incorporates dead and sometimes dissected creatures such as, cows and sheep as well as sharks preserved in formaldehyde. Hirst describes these as ‘ suspended in death’ and as the ‘ joy of life and inevitability of death’. A pickled sheep, said to have sold for 2. 1 million, followed by the first shark.

The second group is Hirst’s long-running ‘ cabinet series’, where he displays collections of surgical tools or pill bottles usually found in pharmacy medicine cabinets. The Blood of Christ, was paid \$3 million, consists of a medicine cabinet installation of paracetamol tablets. In June 2007 a record was set at Sotheby’s London for the highest price paid at auction for a work by any living artist, \$19. 1 million for Hirst’s Lullaby Spring, a cabinet containing 6136 handcrafted pills mounted on razor blades.

Spot paintings were Hirst’s third long-running production. Usually named after pharmaceutical compounds, these paintings consist of fifty or more multicoloured circles painted onto a white background, in a grid of rows and columns. The reference to drugs refers to the interaction between diverse elements to create a powerful effect. The spot paintings were produced by assistants. Hirst tells them what colours to use and where to paint the spots,

and he does not touch the final art, only to affirm it as a finished product of art with his signature. In May 2007 at Sotheby's New York, a 76 x 60in spot painting sold for \$1.5 million.

The fourth category, spin paintings, are 'painted' on a spinning potter's wheel. One account of the painting process has Hirst throwing paint at a revolving canvas or wood base, wearing a protective suit and goggles, standing on a stepladder, shouting 'turpentine' or 'more red' to an assistant. Each spin painting represents the energy of random.

The fifth category is butterfly paintings. In one version, tropical butterflies mounted on canvas which has been painted with monochrome household gloss paint. In another version, collages are made from thousands of mutilated wings. The mounted butterflies are intended as another comment on the theme of life and death.

Some of Hirst's art incorporates several categories; together with publicity-producing titles, like *Isolated Elements Swimming in the Same Direction for the Purposes of Understanding*, a cabinet of individual fish in a formaldehyde solution combines stuffed creatures with the cabinet series, but has the same intention as the spot paintings, to arrange colour, shape and form.

The sixth category was a collection of 31 photorealist paintings, first shown at the Gagosian Gallery in New York in March 2005. Most canvases depicted violent death. Hirst pointed out that the artworks were, like the shark and the spot and butterfly paintings, produced by a team of assistants. Each painting was done by several people, so no one is ever responsible for a whole work of art. Hirst added a few brushstrokes and his signature.

<https://assignbuster.com/conceptual-art-movement-characteristics/>

The seventh category was the much-publicized project – a life-size cast of a human skull in platinum, with human teeth, from an eighteenth-century skull. Encrusted with 8,601 pave-set industrial diamonds with a total weight of 1100 carats, the cast is titled *For the Love of God*, the words supposedly uttered by Hirst's mother on hearing the subject of the project. It was sold for £50 million. Hirst says that *For the Love of God* is presented in the tradition of *memento mori*, the skull depicted in classical paintings to remind us of death and mortality.

And most recently, the collection of 25 works, known as *The Blue Paintings*, are predominantly white images painted on dark blue and black backgrounds, with pictures featuring iguanas, shells, beetles and a still life of a vase of roses, entitled *Requiem, White Roses and Butterflies*. The collection also includes two self-portraits, two triptychs and several paintings featuring skulls, one of Hirst's favourite motifs. All the paintings were produced by Hirst himself, without the help of assistants who created some of his most famous pieces.

The illustrious Australian art critic Robert Hughes, however, isn't buying the hype. This is partly because Hughes – who presents *The Mona Lisa Curse*, a one-off polemic broadcast on Channel 4 this Sunday – considers Hirst's work flashy and fatuous. Indeed he has described Hirst's formaldehyde tiger shark, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, a “tacky commodity”, and “the world's most over-rated marine organism”.

The critic said commercial pieces with large price tags mean “art as spectacle loses its meaning” and identified the British artist's work as a

cause of that loss. “ The idea that there is some special magic attached to Hirst’s work that shoves it into the multimillion pound realm is ludicrous,” Hughes says. “[The price] has to do with promotion and publicity and not with the quality of the works themselves.”

It is not the first time that Hughes has made public his contempt for Hirst’s art. Four years ago making a speech at the Royal Academy of Art’s annual dinner, he said: “ A string of brush marks on a lace collar in a Velazquez can be as radical as a shark that an Australian caught for a couple of Englishmen some years ago and is now murkily disintegrating in its tank on the other side of the Thames.”

Brian Sewell, art critic of the London Evening Standard, was appalled by Hirst’s Turner prize-winning work. ‘ I don’t think of it as art,’ he said. ‘ I don’t think pickling something and putting it into a glass case makes it a work of art... It is no more interesting than a stuffed pike over a pub door. Indeed there may well be more art in a stuffed pike than a dead sheep. I really cannot accept the idiocy that “ the thing is the thing is the thing”, which is really the best argument they can produce. It’s contemptible.’

Even at his most recent show of his Blue Paintings at the Wallace Collection early reviews for the show were not good. The Guardian said that “ at its worst, Hirst’s drawing just looks amateurish and adolescent,” and The Independent dismissed the paintings as “ not worth looking at.”

Hirst’s work has drawn criticism from all quarters. Predictably, his work has been ridiculed in the tabloid press. When Hirst won the Turner prize in 1995 with *Some Went Mad, Some Ran Away*, an exhibition he curated and which

<https://assignbuster.com/conceptual-art-movement-characteristics/>

featured many of his works – including *Mother and Child Divided* (cow in formaldehyde) and *Away from the Flock* (sheep in formaldehyde) – the Conservative politician Norman Tebbit wrote in the *Sun*: ‘ Have they gone stark raving mad? The works of the “ artist” are lumps of dead animals. There are thousands of young artists who didn’t get a look in, presumably because their work was too attractive to sane people. Modern art experts never learn.’

The *Daily Mail*’s verdict on the 1999 Turner Prize also referred to Hirst’s work: ‘ For 1, 000 years art has been one of our great civilising forces,’ the newspaper commented. ‘ Today, pickled sheep and soiled beds threaten to make barbarians of us all.’

Reviewing Hirst’s works and the criticisms made on them engage us in discussion about whether the art work he produced command the power and high prices deserved because it is good, or because it is branded? Is the artist famous because of his work, because the public was awed by the shock value of his work, because Charles Saatchi first made him famous with the high price reported in *Physically Impossibility*, or is he famous for being famous? Another question is perhaps if Hirst is famous because he, as an artist, or took on the role as a social commentator, who offers a profound meditation on death and decay? All these questions clearly imply that Hirst’s work and his talent for marketing and branding cannot be ignored. His brand creates publicity, and his art attracts people who would never otherwise view contemporary art.

What must not be overlooked is the originality of Hirst's concept. He shared ideas and interests quickly and easily, his work developing during the decade to reflect changes in contemporary life. He made important art that contained little mystery in its construction by relying on the straightforward appeal of colours and forms. His work is striking at a distance and physically surprising close up. Hirst understood art in its most simple and in its most complex. He eliminated abstraction's mystery by reducing painting to its basic elements. During the time when art was a commodity, he made spot paintings – saucer-sized, coloured circles on white ground – that became luxury designer goods. His art was direct but never empty. In the later spin paintings, Hirst emphasized a renewed interest in hands-on process of making, which is referred as the 'hobby'-art technique, drawing attention to the accidental and expressive energy of the haphazard. Like the spot paintings, the cabinet of individual fish suspended in formaldehyde worked as an arrangement of colour, shape and form. Overcoming an initial distrust of its ease of assembly, the work came to be seen in the popular mind as a symbol of advanced art, people were mesmerized by how stunning and beautiful ordinary things of the world could be created and seen.

Hirst creating paintings brought together the joy of life and the inevitability of death. A scene of pastoral beauty became one of languid death: in *A Thousand Years*, flies emerged from maggots, ate and died being zapped by the insect-o-cutor; in *In and Out of Love*, newly emerged butterflies stuck to freshly painted monochromes. Soon the emphasis changed from an observation of creatures dying to the presentation of dead animals. A shark in a tank of formaldehyde presented a once life-threatening beast as a

carcass: it looks alive when it's dead and dead when it's alive. Hirst was at his most inventive by elevating the ordinary, the typical and the everyday with his fascination.

Art is about experimenting and ideas, but it is also about excellence and exclusion. In a society where everyone is looking for a little distinction, it's an intoxicating combination. The contemporary art world is ' what Tom Wolfe would call a " statusphere". It's structured around nebulous and often contradictory hierarchies of fame, credibility, imagined historical importance, institutional affiliation, education, perceived intelligence, wealth, and attributes such as the size of one's collection.' Great works do not just arise; they are created – not just by artists and their assistants but also by the dealers, curators, critics, and collectors who " support" the work.

Today's rapid pace of [artistic] innovation encourages short-term speculation, and speculation, in turn, enables the market to absorb new directions in art. Artistic innovation feeds speculation and vice versa. –

Moulin, The French Art Market

Why has art become so popular? In the first place, we are more educated than before, and we've developed appetites for more culturally complex goods. Ironically, another reason why art has become so popular is that it is so expensive. High prices command media headlines, and they have in turn popularized the notion of art as luxury goods and status symbols. In a digital world of cloneable cultural goods, unique art objects are compared to real estate. They are positioned as solid assets that won't melt into air. Auction houses have also courted people who might previously felt excluded from

buying art. And their visible promise of resale has endangered the relatively new idea that contemporary art is a good investment and brought “greater liquidity” to the market. But the art market also affects perception. Many worry that the validation of a market price has come to overshadow other forms of reaction, like positive criticism, art prizes, and museum shows. Art needs motives that are more profound than profit if it is to maintain its difference from – and position above – other cultural forms.

Nevertheless, collectors demand for new, fresh and young art is at an all-time high. But as Burge (Christopher Burge, Christie’s chief auctioneer) explains, it is also a question of supply: “We are running out of earlier material, so our market is being pushed closer to the present day. We are turning from being a wholesale secondhand shop to something that is effectively retail. The shortage of older goods is thrusting newer work into the limelight.” Another Sotheby’s specialist explains, “Our lives are constantly changing. Different things become relevant at different times in our lives. We are motivated by our changing sensibilities. Why can that not be applied to art as well?” Art used to embody something meaningful enough to be relevant beyond the time at which it was made, but collectors today attracted to art that “holds up a mirror to our times” and are too impatient to hang on to the work long enough to see if it contains any ‘timeless’ rewards. Experts say that the art that sells most easily at auction has a “kind of immediate appeal” or “wow factor”. On one level, the art market is understood as the supply and demand of art, but on another, it is an economy of belief. “Art is only worth what someone is willing to pay for it” is the operating cliché. Although this may suggest the relationship

between a con artist and his mark, the people who do well believe every word they say – at least at the moment they say it. The auction process is about managing confidence on all levels – confidence that the artist is and will continue to be culturally significant, confidence that the work is a good one, confidence that others will not withdraw their financial support.

Amy Cappellazzo from Christie's explains what kind of art does well at auctions. Firstly, " people have a litmus test with colour. Brown paintings don't sell as well as blue or red paintings. A glum painting is not going to go as well as a painting that makes people feel happy." Second, certain subject matters are more commercial than others: " A male nude doesn't usually go over as well as buxom female." Third, painting tends to fare better than other media. " Collectors get confused and concerned about things that plug in. Then they shy away from art that looks complicated to install." Finally, size makes a difference. " Anything larger than the standard dimension of a Park Avenue elevator generally cuts out a certain sector of the market." " These are just basic commercial benchmarks that have nothing to do with artistic merit." With such constraints from the art market, artists would tend to make art that fulfills the criteria to appeal in order to do well in auctions.

" Collecting is a powerful tactic for making sense out of the material world, of establishing trails of similarity through fields of otherwise undifferentiated material. ... The drive to acquire more things contains, orders and arranges people's desires, creating an illusion of mastery through delineating a ' knowable' space within that apparently endless universe of materiality. ... At whatever scale, collecting is informed by the desire to insure the owner

against the inevitability of loss, forgetting and incompleteness.” (Cummings, N. Lewandowska, M., The Value of Things)

“ Works of art, which represent the highest level of spiritual production will find favour in the eyes of the bourgeois only if they are presented as being liable to directly generate material wealth.”

Karl Marx on the notion of surplus value in Book IV of Capital

When a branded collector like Charles Saatchi purchases an artist's work in bulk, displays the work in his gallery, loans the work for display in other museums, or exhibits it in Sensation, the cumulative effect is to validate both the work and the artist. Each stage serves to increase the value of Saatchi's own art holdings.

Being described both as a ' supercollector' and as ' the most successful art dealer of our times, Charles Saatchi himself responded, “ Art collectors are pretty insignificant in the scheme of things. What matters and survives is the art. I buy art that I like. I buy it to show it off in exhibitions. Then, if I feel like it, I sell it and buy more art. As I have been doing this for 30 years, I think most people in the art world get the idea by now. It doesn't mean I've changed my mind about the art that I end up selling. It just means that I don't want to hoard everything forever.” Nevertheless, his practice of buying emerging artists

work has proved highly contagious and is arguably the single greatest influence on the current market because so many others, both veteran collectors and new investors, are following his lead, vying to snap up the work of young, and relatively unknown artists. He was also said to be

<https://assignbuster.com/conceptual-art-movement-characteristics/>

capable of making or breaking an artist. However, his passion for art is not to be overlooked. In pursuit of established and new artists, Saatchi makes a point of visiting both mainstream and ‘ alternative’ galleries, artists’ studios, and art schools. Moreover, he did fall in love with works that were not saleable but still purchased them, for example, Hirst’s A Thousand Years big glass vitrine holding a rotting cow’s head covered by maggots and swarms of buzzing flies and installation art like Richard Wilson’s oil room [both purchased by Saatchi in 1990]. Perhaps Saatchi’s greatest legacy will be that he, more than any other, have been responsible for pitching modern and contemporary art into the British cultural mainstream which he set out to achieve from the start.

In 2005, British Artist Damien Hirst’s work titled “ The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone living”(photo) sold for \$12 million dollars. People were asking the same question ‘ Why would anyone even consider paying this much money for a shark?’ Another concern was that while the shark was certainly a novel artistic concept, many in the art world were uncertain as to whether it qualified as art. The problem with conceptual art is that everyone has their own way of imagining it, based on their own fantasies, but perhaps it is not what they thought it is, it is relevant as long as it escapes the strict rules of painting, sculpture, and photography as they prevailed in the past. “ It thus takes paths that have no rules, where the principle of valorization is not or is only very slightly, based on art history.” (Benhamou-Huet, The worth of art, 2008, p. 95)

But why so much money? What drives these collectors to invest astronomical sums of money – as much or more than a working-class man earns in a

<https://assignbuster.com/conceptual-art-movement-characteristics/>

lifetime – in order to possess objects of intrinsic, nonmaterial value?

American psychoanalyst Werner Muensterberger explored this quandary in his book *Collecting: An Unruly Passion*, in which he hints that these avidly amassed objects are like security blankets for grown-ups. “ The collector, not unlike the religious believer, assigns power and value to these objects because their presence and possession seem to have a modifying – usually pleasure-giving – function in the owner’s mental state.” The unconscious reasons, then, for what we might call “ collector’s security blankets” are manifold. For some, the idea may be that the value of objects they buy will rub off on them. In this way, they may convince themselves that they can “ be somebody”. Money itself is meaningless in the upper classes of the art world – everyone has it. What impresses others is the ownership of precious work. What the rich seemed to want to acquire is what economists call positional goods; possessions that prove to the world that they are really rich. And above all, art distinguishes you.

Another part of the answer is that in the world of contemporary art, branding can substitute for critical judgment, and lots of branding was involved here. You are nobody in contemporary art until you have been branded. “ Saatchi & Saatchi believes in global marketing, i. e., the use of a single strate