I consider taste—bad or good—the greatest enemy of art. In the case of the ready-mades, I tried to remain aloof from personal taste and to be fully conscious of the problem.

— Marcel Duchamp

The most pitiful among men is he who turns his dreams into silver and gold.

— Kahlil Gibran

To the bourgeoisie, fascism is a matter of taste.

— Vyacheslav Molotov

This is an introduction to the course and outlines our first theme: Taste.

Consider the two images below: one of Damien Hirst after the 2008 self-organised auction at Sotheby's after he fell out with Larry Gagosian, the world's most powerful art dealer (the split was announced in the Financial Times). And our second image: one of Vincent van Gogh's grave, and also his brother Theo's, who died six months after Vincent in 1890 and was buried beside him: he was an art dealer too—but however hard he tried he could not sell Vincent van Gogh's work. The question I would ask you is: who would you rather be: a rich famous Thatcherite entrepreneur or a poor unknown genius?

I could say that the ten sections of the course moves between these two myths: The historical myth about van Gogh's poverty—the idea that no one supported him is not really true. That he was often hard up was entirely due to his ceaseless passion for work. And Damien's prices are dropping and important art critics like the late Robert Hughes dismissed the relevance of his work in no uncertain terms: "Actually, the presence of a Hirst in a collection is a sure sign of dullness of taste." Hughes saw Jeff Koons, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Richard Prince and late Warhol as a: "uniform message from our fin-de-siècle decadence," which ironically was supposed to dominate van Gogh's age. Then the people running the Art World then got it spectacularly wrong: they actually refused to show works that are now worth millions—if we are to judge them by their monetary value. Their taste was wrong or as Hughes says ‘dull’; and Hirst’s type of work—the pompous—was what they were buying then: but what conditions taste: addiction, habitual behaviour, advertising, fashion? Both van Gogh's has a deep commitment and mutual understanding that they were engaging in a joint struggle for ‘the art of the future.’ Because he had vision van Gogh was hitting a target the contemporary dealers and critics couldn’t envisage: they thought he was aiming
the contemporary dealers and critics couldn't envisage: they thought he was aiming elsewhere: do people consistently undervalue future wants?

So here is a second question: what would Vincent and Theo have made of Larry and Damien? Do the owners of Van Gogh’s work enjoy the fact that he died poor, just as one might enjoy a Hirst because he is such a showman, such an entrepreneur who will die rich?

Perhaps by the end of the course you will be able to go beyond these questions and be more fully informed by a study of the History of Art and Money in the twentieth-century and beyond. Our first subject is ‘Taste’ and from there we look at: Commodification, Price, Value, Funding, Poverty, Worth, Patronage, Philanthropy and Luxury. Throughout I refer to three categories: the Art Scene, the Art World and the Art Market to aid our understanding of how money functions socio-economically. All of these general themes are related to money with a range of different arguments running through them. Some of these themes overlap and I have tried to design them so that they build i.e. they might refer back or forwards or link and develop our knowledge. Your task is to ask questions, participate in debate, to move from opinion to knowledge (in a way that doesn't alienate anyone). The ten lectures (we only do eight) are written out so you can prepare for them and make an attempt to do your own research or follow the links if you wish.

With 'The History of Art and Money' we will explore the voices that might inform choices we are faced with as artists and move into territory such as: intellectual matters, matters of taste, moral decisions, historical developments, cultural and political changes and continuities. People will interpret these things in any way they want, but our task is to learn discernment. We are trying to steer away from 'relativism' whereby we are left believing one value is the same as another, just like the free floating signifiers of post-modernism. Our task is to navigate out of this confusion and relate different values and explanations—something the relativists fail to do—we are aiming for the virtue of practical wisdom and circumspection. And so we study and engage in three main things that have been around since the ancient Athenians:

(a) Póiesis (bringing-forth).

(b) Práxis (the act of engaging, applying, exercising, realising or practicing ideas).

(c) Theoría (considering or contemplating).

In other words, through the course you should try to orientate yourself in terms of seeing and knowing to enable a particular way of being concerned and caring about art and money in the real world—largely to inform your future direction. We achieve the impossible by using thought experiments and rhetorical questions—such as my attempt to bring van Gogh back to life and get an honest answer from Damien Hirst.

Taste

One of the more memorable quotes on Taste is the phrase ‘Fascism is a matter of taste’ by Vyacheslav Molotov, no not an art dealer: one of the top officials in the Soviet government, who said it after he signed an agreement with Nazi Germany in 1939 (a few months before WWII). Molotov was asked: "How can you sign an agreement with Nazi Germany?" and replied: "Well, we have agreements with all kinds of bourgeois states." Journalists said: "Yes, but these are fascists." Molotov supposedly said: "To the bourgeoisie, fascism is a matter of taste." What did he mean by this?

In 1767 Dennis Diderot warned that the fine arts were subordinated to the whims and caprices of a handful or rich, bored, dull, men whose taste was as corrupt as their morals—this is similar to Hughes’ statement above. Diderot also said the fine arts were given over to a greedy bunch of mediocre artists who were after the reputation and
Diderot also thought that deserving artists died in poverty because of the nation's bad taste. Morals had been corrupted by the influence of money and in turn had corrupted the arts and he asked this question: **if morals are corrupt, do you believe that taste can remain pure?** For Diderot commodified art had no value: and it was precisely because of its economic value (to the ignorant rich) that it was without moral value, which he equated with aesthetic value. Taste brings these things together—it worked to reflect the social standing conferred by well-informed purchases and defined a cultural elite.

Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* is often the starting point for a discussion of the role of 'taste' in art and culture, particularly the sections ‘The Antinomy of Taste and Beauty as a Symbol of Morality’, ‘Fine Art and Genius’ and ‘The Sublime’. On money one of the seminal text is Georg Simmel’s *The Philosophy of Money* particularly the sections ‘The historical development of money from substance to function,’ ‘The concept of culture’, ‘The increase in material culture and the lag in individual culture’ and ‘The objectification of the mind.’ Simmel is a key work on understanding the sociological and philosophical aspects of money. His idea of a ‘perfect society’ was part of a long tradition of thought on monetary utopias that aim not for the abolition of money but its radical transformation as a means of improving society. Here we turn money into an absolute importance. One of the things you might notice is how easily all other considerations drop away when money makes an appearance. Simmel tells us:

> For money expresses all qualitative differences of things in terms of ‘how much?’ Money, with all its colorlessness and indifference, becomes the common denominator of all values; irreparably it hollows out the core of things, their individuality, their specific value, and their incomparability. All things float with equal specific gravity in the constantly moving stream of money.

**So how does this affect modern art?**

Simmel wrote on Rembrandt and talked about art as a life philosophy: creativity is captured in and through art (and other forms of human action). We think of creativity as an individualized phenomenon (genius) but with Rembrandt, Simmel develops the philosophical essence of the work arguing against mechanistic, rationalistic, instrumental and essentialist conceptions and interpretations of life and art. **Has taste changed in the last 100 years? How does taste change? Do artists actively try to change people's taste? Is successful art necessarily the product of refined and cultivated taste?**

Possibly the life philosophy that Hirst’s work puts over or stands for is not appealing in contrast to van Gogh’s. Hirst stands for neo-liberal capitalism and the centralization of wealth; van Gogh is some kind of seer, a visionary prophet…or a dangerous mad man.

If Vincent and Theo came back to life, Damien could probably tell them that the global art market has ballooned into an industry turning over an estimated $25bn or more a year in sales; a contemporary single art sale at Christie's in New York made £325m, the highest total in auction history. **But when did buying art start? Why are auctions such a feature?** The history of the ‘Art Market’ is often traced from European beginnings through the nascent markets in Flanders to the first dealers on the Pont Notre-Dame, that was where a lot of Theo's contemporaries started—they switched from selling old prints etc. into Impressionism because no one else was buying it at first. We could also identify the history of major art collections from that of King François I of France to that of François Pinault, owner of Christie’s. It is important that we differentiate between the Art World, the Art Scene and the Art Market—and explore how they relate. **Is this system effective? How does it reproduce itself?** These are things we tackle later on.

Taste also seems to conjure up consumption—with taste a momentary, fleeting sensation: a tang. Perhaps most people’s desire to be rich and acquire expensive objects comes from a belief in *market forces* and this is demonstrated in the magic that turns an
old bit of canvas into an expensive commodity. But competing systems of value exist that are powerful enough to compete with the market's commodification of the good. Ideological struggles have persisted that attempt to fend off the redefinition of value by market forces, and although these efforts are not always successful perhaps they try to preserve this ‘life philosophy’ ‘vision’ so that morals will not be corrupted by the influence of money.

**How is art consumed as a commodity?** Most of us wander to galleries or indeed make our own. But how do the big collectors consume their expensive commodities? The owner of van Gogh’s ‘Portrait of Dr Gachet,’ a Japanese industrialist and crook, Ryoei Saito, paid $82.5m for it and locked it away, later announcing that he wanted it buried with him (some say cremated). Saito also owned some great Renoirs. He died some time ago: the portrait survived (it also survived the Nazis and was featured in the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition) and there are two versions, but no one seems to know where the painting is. Secrecy has shrouded all future transactions as it vanished into the murky waters of the international Art Market and tax evasion. Oddly enough van Gogh said somewhat prophetically of the painting that Gachet had: "the heartbroken expression of our time […] that may perhaps be looked back on with longing a hundred years later.” What would van Gogh have thought about being interred in a rich man’s coffin? Somehow we are back to ancient Egypt and the Pharaoh’s: what did they do with their surplus wealth: they buried it under huge pyramids.

![Vincent van Gogh (1890) Portrait of Dr Gachet](image)

**So what is taste?**

The last essay [David Hume](#) wrote before his death in 1776 was on the varieties of taste and Hume makes a few contrasts (and can himself be contrasted to Kant above).

Hume was writing on art criticism and how we judge art (he was more focused on literature) and whether our judgments are subjective and relativist or objective and universalisable. For Hume, taste means the capacity to respond to external stimuli with approval or praise or its opposite (this is related to ‘attitude’: that which comes in between stimulus and response). If the stimulus is artistic what happens can be understood as the: "refined ability to perceive quality in any artwork" and to have what we call an aesthetic experience. For instance you might have a frisson listening to music. This is similar to Kant's distinction between an object of art as a material value that is subject to societal convention and the transcendental condition of the judgment of taste as a refined value; yet art is the fruit of unsociableness and comes about due to antagonism in society. For Hume what we like and dislike are expressed in value.
If beauty is not rational or objective it can be seen as an effect on the mind—it could be seen as a quality of mind—an ability. Appreciation of the arts begins to have things in common with morals in that it is more based on sentiments (feelings) than reason. There is no universal reasoning (that is called a mathesis universalis) the notion of universality is an effect of the inner logic of language. Both art and morality accept universal general rules that differ in practical application: we do not agree about morals (particularly when times are tough). The source of the apparent universality of moral principles is related to how the positive validation of certain virtues are instilled in us (such as justice) that in other cultures or another time might be considered injustice. So art (or our response to it, our taste) is socio-historically specific. It is easier to follow the instilled meanings than to go in search of universal ones—for instance there is nothing in Hirst's work and reception that might make us question capitalism, but there is in van Gogh's.

Hume presents four claims that complicate this:

1. It is natural to seek a standard of taste.
2. Such a standard of taste exists.
3. The standard of taste can reconcile different sentiments.
4. The standard of taste allows us to evaluate different tastes as to their quality and thus decide which one is to be preferred.

From here we are stuck with the 'what is quality' argument. But Hume asserts the equal right of every personal evaluation: we are free to believe anything we want but we do not live in a vacuum. If we say there is no standard of taste we make a fundamental distinction between taste and opinion, between feelings and facts.

If taste is entirely subjective then we must accept the equality of taste and abandon any rational dispute in matters of taste, rather like the saying: De gustibus non disputandum est, which roughly means: there is no disputing against taste. So theoretically I cannot persuade you that Hirst is a great artist—if you do not like his work—and that does not mean you do not like modern art or are deficient in some way—you might just not like pickled sharks. Arguably we are dependent on those organisations dedicated to the recognition, understanding, and implementation of standards of taste for the good of us all: but who are they: who guards the guards? Does money settle the argument here? Are we back to Molotov's cocktail of morality and language?

But what of something really obvious here: common sense. Some judgments of taste are just clearly wrong whereas others are obviously right. If I say "differences do not matter," if I insisted that all judgments of taste regarding art are equal, it is clearly implausible and irrelevant. It would also imply that all judgments of taste are right, and clearly they are not. Relativism does not stop all thought in its tracks: even if we believe all values to be relative we must relate them to each other and test our positions and evidence and objectivism—that is called learning and it is a basic human activity. Hume offers another four claims:

1. Rules exist.
2. They are empirical (experiential not logical).
3. They are general (comprising all cultures and all ages).
4. But they are based on sentiments (that which plesaes overall).
This is back to pleasure as the whole point of existence—the Epicurean. When Molotov said fascism is a matter of taste he was pushing the undesirable term fascism onto the term bourgeoise (as opposed to the term communist) to avoid the association he had literally just made: he presents the contradiction as a false dichotomy, wallowing in this relativism for ulterior motives. He might as well have said shut up, because everyone knew this was an accommodation and that states are not moral entities—such treaties can be ignored: this one lasted months. Hume is not saying you can make great art by following the rules: they could be discovered by accident or inspiration: the rules of art could just as well be said to emerge in a creative and innovative way by exceptional creators or individuals, he argues:

1. There are general rules of art—what pleases everywhere and always.
2. There are general rules of composition—publicly stated patterns.
3. There are general rules of beauty—established models.
4. There are general principles of approval—uniform feelings or opinions.

None of these can be inherent in a work of art—they are socially produced through social interactions. Distortion is allowed in art as much as falsehood is in fiction. Art allows for stylistic deformation and distortions of every kind: in spite of transgressions other qualities represent these rules. So according to Hume:

1. The general rules of art are founded on experience.
2. They can be discovered by observation.
3. If there is something that pleases universally this in turn implies that human nature has some common traits that produce common sentiments despite cultural and historical differences.

Our reasoning towards these can be either sound or defective. We can improve our assessment ability (beyond just ‘I like it’ or ‘I do not like it’) through frequent and repeated exposure to the objects of art. Kenneth Clark, one of the first chairs of the Arts Council said people spend more time peeling an orange than they do looking at a great work of art. We have to judge a work of art by comparing it to other works of art—preferably good ones. A proper comparison requires that we try to release ourselves from the prejudices of our own culture and especially of those against other cultures, then the art will begin to speak to us. When evaluating art we can substitute our point of view (prejudices) with the perspective of the artist and the original recipients. What did the original ‘King Kong’ movie feel like to its audience in the early 1930s?

Good sense is in fact the foundation for a good judgment of taste and common sense is its basis.

So if we return to compare Hirst and van Gogh, we can observe that people often insist that there are metaphysical qualities to their work (most of Hirst’s titles play on this as a gimmick) to sell it. Art in our time has been largely indifferent to religion or actively opposed to it. A recurrent motive in art has been the principle of ‘de-mystification’ in terms of letting things appear as they are and moving on from halos and religious, philosophical, national, or ethical ideals. Harold Rosenberg argued that by universalizing the concept of the aesthetic, modern art had destroyed the barrier that once marked off Beauty and the Sublime as separate realms of being. For modern art and modernist aesthetics, anything can legitimately appeal to taste. The museum rules out any associations with sanctity, but yet the artist’s most mysterious power is the power of creation itself—this power is still revered.

For Rosenberg (1975) how to be inspired with certainty (and to be filled with the certainty of inspiration) was the overwhelming problem of our age. So it can be argued
that the artist is the model of how individuals can train themselves to be more than themselves. With artists, that state of magically heightened capacity—inspiration—is a matter of everyday necessity. Modern art is the practice of self-inspiration, an adventure into the unknown. Art has always searched into those areas of experience formerly considered to be the province of religion and metaphysics. But most of this involves the artist's abnegation of their ego, and that is where Damien is overtaken by Vincent. Hirst's work is also cynical; it is hard to say that of van Gogh. If we performed some impossible experiment to arrive at a more scientific comparison: we could swap Hirst and van Gogh's lives: we would monitor van Gogh organizing 'Frieze' and doing remarkably well, being taken up by Charles Satchii, all his showbiz chums and we would see how Hirst would cope with a dealer who could not sell him, no money, no attention, no Art World or Market and a loaded revolver nearby. And for it to be good social science we would have to do it over and over again.

And we know Hirst does not want to be like van Gogh because he has told us (on Blue Peter) his raison d'être:

I started thinking about Van Gogh and all those painters, and cutting your ear off when you're painting, and at that point I just thought: 'Why does it have to be like that?' I thought: 'No, actually, the better art is the art made with the spin machine.'" (Brown, 2012)

Van Gogh did not cut off his ear when he painted. Hirst credited Blue Peter with idea for his 'controversial' spin paintings, produced by revolving machines, but it sounds like he is talking about 'spin' in the sense of the spin-doctor's art. In this quote we see a simplistic, trivialised and confused interpretation of what it is to be an artist—no agonizing of any kind, no depth—art is to be an amusing pun and as crass as an advert. In 2009 the Spanish artist, Eugenio Merino made a sculpture of a life-sized Hirst: it has just committed suicide by shooting itself in the temple. Called '4 the Love of Go(l)d', it parodies Hirst's diamond-encrusted skull, 'For the Love of God.' Merino is urging Hirst to be more like van Gogh on his own terms:

Hirst is always trying to think of ways to make his art the most expensive. If he killed himself, then the value of his art would increase a lot. (Winkelman, 2009)

Bad taste there? Merino faced trial in Spain accused of damaging the honour of the Spanish dictator Franco and again there is no such challenge in Hirst’s work; they are designed to be bought by dictators like Franco. Merino’s ‘Always Franco’ represented the dictator put inside the freezers they make for coke (there's also a sculpture of bin Laden as John Travolta in 'Saturday Night Fever' and so on). Of course there have been attempts to turn van Gogh into a superstar artist, with the film ‘Lust for Life’ staring Kirk Douglas—Harold Rosenberg tells us collectors started only wanted the paintings that featured in the film.
the self: an alienation: in art, rebellion is consummated and perpetuated in the act of real creation, not in criticism or commentary. I cannot imagine Hirst's work existing without criticism and commentary (usually on sales). Everything about it is outsourced even outrage. Van Gogh went through his whole life without the Art World offering anything other than disdain. For Rimbaud:

The Poet makes himself a seer by a long, gigantic and rational derangement of all the senses. All forms of love, suffering, and madness. He searches himself. He exhausts all poisons in himself and keeps only their quintessences. Unspeakable torture where he needs all his faith, all his superhuman strength, where he becomes among all men the great patient, the great criminal, the one accursed—and the supreme Scholar!—Because he reaches the unknown! Since he cultivated his soul, rich already, more than any man! He reaches the unknown, and when, bewildered, he ends by losing the intelligence of his visions, he has seen them. Let him die as he leaps through unheard of and unnamable things. (Rimbaud, 1966: 307)

This is partly related to Plato's remarks in the *Phaedrus*:

If a man comes to the door of poetry untouched by the madness of the Muses, believing that technique alone will make him a good poet, he and his sane compositions never reach perfection, but are utterly eclipsed by the performances of the inspired madman. . . . Madness, provided it comes as the gift of heaven, is the channel by which we receive the greatest blessings.

(Plato, 1973: 46-48)

This is the idea of the sacrifice of sanity to attain creative genius—and this frightens Hirst. Rimbaud reversed centuries of tradition by not assuming that the artist’s task is to create order out of experience, for Rimbaud the disorder of the poet’s mind was sacred. There's something dangerous about this: a taste for danger not money. To paraphrase Tarkovsky: Art is related to a timeless and insatiable longing for the spiritual and the ideal: the longing that draws people to art because beauty is summoning them. Modern artists took a wrong turn by abandoning the search for the meaning of existence in order to affirm the value of the individual for its own sake. This is just an eccentric occupation for suspect characters who maintain that any personalised action is of intrinsic value simply as a display of self-will. But in artistic creation the personality does not assert itself, it serves another, higher and communal idea.

**References**


