

Colour Space
Ann Gallagher

I think you get meaning through repetition.
– Damien Hirst, 2004

Over the 30 years that Damien Hirst has been working as an artist, his production has been of a scale that has often required him to employ large numbers of assistants across various studios. Hirst works almost exclusively in series, and usually on several series simultaneously, with the specific type of painting or sculpture determining who makes it and where it is made.¹ In an interview in 2004, he noted: ‘I like to do series ... I think that I try to avoid doing something unique, or being unique. If you feel like that, you end up benefiting by using other people. I like the idea of a factory to produce work, which separates the work from the ideas, but I wouldn’t like a factory to produce ideas.’²

Hirst adopted this approach to collaborative working early in his career, consciously following a long tradition of studio practice that has had many prominent precursors. We know from Giorgio Vasari’s *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*,³ that Raphael, who in the high Renaissance period had assembled the largest known workshop of around 50 assistants, ‘kept in his service various assistants who continued the work from his designs while he supervised everything.’⁴

In the centuries that followed, successful artists – Rubens and Rembrandt among them – similarly employed large workshops, and routinely added their

1. At any one time Hirst’s studios may be involved in the production of paintings (the Spot, Spin and Fact Paintings being the most widely known); tanks containing animal carcasses in formaldehyde; vitrines containing medical implements; wall-mounted cabinets containing medicine packaging, cigarettes, pills or manufactured diamonds; series made up of houseflies and butterflies; and various other bodies of work, such as the finite yet monumental series that comprises the Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable, which was exhibited in Venice in 2017.

2. Mirta D’Argenzio, ‘Like People, Like Files: Damien Hirst Interviewed’ in *The Agony and the Ecstasy: Selected Works 1989–2004* (Naples: Electa Napoli, 2004) p233.

3. First published in Italian in 1550 as *Le Vite de’ più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori*.

4. Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of Artists (Volume I)*, trans. George Bull (London: Penguin Books, 1987), p308.

signature or monogram to paintings in which elements had been produced by assistants, often painters with a specialism, in drapery or still life for example. During the Romantic era (c.1780–1910) in Europe, greater prominence was given to the notion of subjectivity and individuality, and privilege granted to the hand of the artist-author, which had the effect of limiting the role of the studio assistant to preparatory work. This model arguably persisted into the twentieth century, but was challenged as artists involved in Pop and Minimalism began to routinely use ready-made elements and industrial processes. The most famous studio of all was Andy Warhol's Factory (1962–84), which was still operating in its third iteration when Hirst began studying art. The Factory was known as a salon and social meeting point for artists, musicians and poets, as much as a workshop, but was also the location of intense production, with assistants working on what was often described as an assembly line.

Hirst currently works in three studios, in Gloucestershire, Devon and London. In June 2016, he instructed his studio assistants to begin on a new series, which he had already decided to title *Colour Space*. To help explain the effect he wished to achieve, he hung in each of the studios in turn his first ever *Spot Painting* from 1986. This painting was made while Hirst was studying at Goldsmiths College, at a point when he was attempting to reconcile a firmly held belief in Abstract Expressionist painting, which he had acquired at Leeds School of Art (then Jacob Kramer College), with a more recently acquired interest in the type of art he had previously despised:

I moved to London thinking I am going to change the world and revert art back to how it should be. I saw that *New Art* show at the Tate⁵ and just thought it's all shit ... I was hanging on to something and I needed to keep the emotion in, because contemporary art was cold and didn't seem to have any feeling in it ... I remember what I really hated was Minimal art and then I saw Carl Andre's work and some other Minimal stuff, a couple of [Gerhard] Richter's Colour Charts as well. When I figured out what was going on with Minimalism, I realised that it actually does have feeling, even if you're lining up the screws on a [Donald] Judd sculpture or something, it still provokes an emotional response in you ... I then realised I had been painting into the past, so I needed to rid myself of that nostalgia.⁶

Hirst had been working on a series of collages and, encouraged by his tutor Michael Craig-Martin, experimented with arranging the component parts on the wall without a backing board. This was followed by a series of wall- and floor-based works made from ceramic plates and one featuring brightly



Spot Painting, 1986

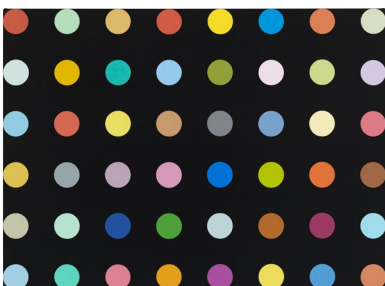
5. *New Art from the Tate Collection*, Tate Gallery, London, December 1986 – February 1987.

6. From a conversation between Ann Gallagher and Damien Hirst, London, Summer 2017.

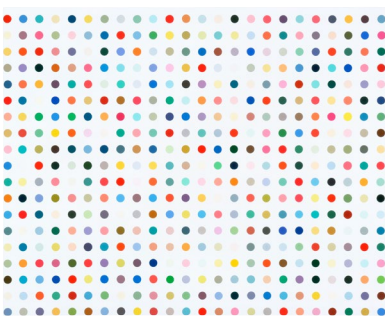
coloured pots and pans, *8 Pans* (1987). Meanwhile the urge to make paintings remained and on a three-panel board painted white, he used household gloss paint to apply randomly positioned coloured spots. The spaces between the spots were unevenly distributed and drips and trails of paint led from the blob-like shapes. This was the starting point from which he swiftly moved on to adopt a more systematic model:

I remember the board came in eight by four sheets so I just got three of them and bolted them together with coach bolts. It was about the way the bolts looked like black dots, 16 of them on that painting, and I just painted dots all over. There were about 15 colours, then I added more, and tried using different colours, about 35 I think. But they were messy and I felt I needed to shed the mess. So I went on to the Spot Paintings ...⁷

The Spot Paintings are one of Hirst's best known series, and have often been described as his logo. There are over 1,400 works on canvas, of varied shapes and sizes. After painting a small number himself, Hirst quickly established a system for others to carry out his instructions, with only a few basic rules – the spots are of a uniform size within each painting, hand-painted but each a perfect circle, and are positioned in a grid format. The space between them is equal to the size of the spot, and – with a few exceptions – every spot on each canvas is of a different colour. Within this there are infinite variations, with individual spots ranging from half a millimetre in diameter to 36 inches. Titles are taken from the *Sigma-Aldrich Catalog of Chemical Compounds* and grouped according to distinct types of drugs, of which by far the largest group, which has often served as shorthand for the whole series, is the Pharmaceuticals (begun in 1986). Other subcategories include: Antibiotics (spots spray painted using stencils, begun 2010); Carbon-13 Labelled Compounds (black canvases, and one red, begun in 2005); Controlled Substances (irregularly shaped canvases, for which 'key paintings' exist to identify the colours with letters, begun in 1993); Deuterated Compounds (greyscale spots, begun in 1992); Gold Compounds and Isotopes (gold canvases, begun in 2008); Lipids (single coloured spots, begun in 1995); Pheromones (pale coloured spots, begun in 1999); Radioactive Compounds (fluorescent spots, begun in 1997); Radiochemicals (spots predominantly of shades of the same colour, plus a contrast colour, begun 2007); Sedatives (white spots on white canvases with gold edges, begun in 2003); Tests, Reagents, Diagnostics and Random Samples (unique, irregularly sized spots, begun in 1998) and Venoms (pale or pastel coloured spots, begun 1989).



2-Methyl-3-Buten-2-ol, 1999–2008

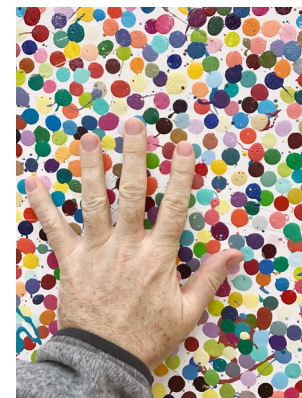


Chlorpropamide, 1996

7. Ibid.

In an interview with the artist Sophie Calle for the catalogue of his first major solo exhibition – at the ICA in London in 1991 – Hirst commented on his Spot Paintings:

If you look at things in the real world under the microscope, you find that they are made up of cells. I sometimes imagine that the Spot Paintings are what my art looks like under the microscope. The difference between art and life is the difference between cells in the real world and the Spot Paintings ... a way I can explain more directly how they relate is to think of them all as titled *Isolated Elements for the Purpose of Understanding*. The spots are separated from all the other spots by their boundary yet the colour takes them beyond that boundary and they communicate with each other ... the way they are constructed is very uncompromising – the grid structure allows no emotion. I want them to look like they've been made by a person trying to paint like a machine ... from this negative structure the end result is always a celebration, no matter how I feel.⁸



These paintings are integral to an understanding of the quasi-scientific rationality Hirst sought for his art during this time, using an imagery that reflected not emotional truth – the Spot Paintings always looked resolutely happy – but a contemporary world that uses advertising graphics and advancing technologies to promote certainties and belief instead. These ‘dumb’ paintings have all the confidence to make them stand out in a logo-saturated society, but for Hirst their apparent joyfulness is a façade:

If you look closely at any one of these paintings, a strange thing happens: because of the lack of repeated colours there is no harmony. We are used to picking out chords of other colours to create meaning. This can't happen. So in every painting there is a subliminal sense of unease: the colours project so much joy it's hard to feel it, but it's there. The horror underlying everything. The horror that can overwhelm everything at any moment.⁹

The Spot Paintings were conceived from the outset as an endless series. Hirst has, on occasion, halted production, only to return to them again with a new variation, often associated with a specific drug group. More recently, the urge to resume the series was prompted by the possibility of painting infinitesimally minuscule spots; a member of the painting team was hired to teach other assistants this skill, and in 2011 a work was begun, comprised of one million 1 millimetre spots, that will take nine and a half years to complete. In 2012 an

8. Damien Hirst and Sophie Calle, *Internal Affairs* (London: ICA, 1991), unpag.

9. Ibid.

international exhibition across 11 of Gagosian's galleries was devoted entirely to Hirst's Spot Paintings,¹⁰ and the very first, created in 1986, was positioned in the first room of Hirst's 2012 mid-career retrospective exhibition at Tate Modern. At this point Hirst began to reconsider this early painting – and a smaller one made the same year – in a new light, rather than merely as a precursor to the main series. One of his inspirations for the Spot Paintings is a love of snooker and pool, and the feeling, while playing the game, of being in a machine, or behaving like a machine. Just as a man playing snooker cannot achieve the level of accuracy a machine could, so the new series of Colour Space paintings refers back to the human imperfections of that early painting, which retained vestiges of Hirst's early belief in expressive painting. Gone is the grid in this new series, which resolutely prevented the viewer from making associations between the spots, or allowing any colour harmony. In dispensing with the grid format the paintings appear more organic, the spots more like particles or atoms. The reference to Hirst's key themes of life, science and belief are retained – the spots in the Colour Space paintings can still be read as 'isolated elements for the purpose of understanding' – but it is as if with hindsight and age he is able to tolerate more evidence of the human hand, to allow humankind's failure to imitate a machine.

While one formula established for the Spot Paintings persists – that every spot should be of a different colour in each painting – a major difference with the Colour Space paintings is that they were conceived from the beginning as a finite series. Four million spots feature in total, the largest painting containing 90,000. The sizes were calculated in advance for a group of 261 canvases, containing 6, 10, 25, 50, 75 and 100 millimetre spots, the majority painted on white backgrounds. The series also contains three triptychs and 12 canvases painted on black backgrounds.

Since Hirst's studios worked on the Colour Space paintings simultaneously, they share spots of the same colour on multiple canvases. They were applied in rotation, with each painter averaging 1,500 spots per day. Nevertheless, the desired effect of a more informal painting technique meant the series was initially a challenge for the studios to produce, and necessitated the establishment of various systems. 'I've got three studios doing it,' Hirst noted, 'so I keep having to get them to meet and then we compare all the paintings because they go drifting off in different directions and I have to pick one I like because in some of them the spots are closer together, or further apart, some are messier than others and then you find they start to go more red or yellow or blue.'¹¹

The basic instruction was 'a good balance of colour and space', and to avoid the colours verging on being too pastel, yet interesting differences emerged

10. *Damien Hirst: The Complete Spot Paintings 1986–2011*, January–February / March 2012 at Gagosian Athens, Geneva, Hong Kong, London (Britannia Street and Davies Street galleries), Los Angeles, New York (West 21st St., West 24th St. and Madison Avenue galleries), Paris and Rome.

11. From a conversation between Ann Gallagher and Damien Hirst, London, Summer 2017.

in the work produced by the different studios, irrespective of the size of the work – characteristics within the series which Hirst chose to keep. The paintings made in London for example seem to contain more reds, while those from Devon are more blue-green. The Gloucestershire paintings are more randomly coloured. The London paintings are marginally more condensed around the edges, perhaps because the studio is the smallest and there was less space to work. However, throughout all the paintings the effect on the eye is that swirly circular patterns emerge, just as with the original 1986 painting, without any of the individual painters consciously seeking to achieve this result.

While the Spot Paintings were executed on canvases hung vertically, or directly on the wall, all the Colour Space works were painted laid flat on tables. Painting teams came up with their own ideas to improve technique and efficiency, the best shared between studios to ensure consistency. Individual, double and multiple (caterpillar) stick ‘dabblers’ were invented to create the 25 and 50 mm spots, initially using wooden doweling, then replaced by Perspex versions. The 75 and 100 mm spots were painted by hand, and proved the hardest to paint randomly. Most of the colours were mixed, but some came straight from the can of paint (One Shot – an enamel sign writer’s paint imported from America). The effect in terms of density was, for Hirst, superior to water-based acrylic paint. To keep track of the colours used, painters established grid records of each colour mixed and applied, usually arranged by graduations of the same hue. The painters needed stretching stations, since they were constantly walking between paintings to apply the spots. They wore pedometers and calculated that each of them walked an average of 35 kilometres over the months they worked on the paintings.

It is evidently not unusual for Hirst to return to a work, or body of work, made at an earlier date and create new versions of it. After initially making monochrome canvases with dead butterflies adhered to them, he went on to create *In and Out of Love* (1991), a two-room installation containing live butterflies and a series of the coloured Butterfly Paintings. Around a decade later he then began the butterfly Kaleidoscope paintings. Houseflies were first used in *A Thousand Years* (1990), but it was several years later that he conceived the series of paintings composed of many thousands of dead flies. A vitrine containing a table, chair, ashtray, lighter and cigarettes – *The Acquired Inability to Escape* (1991) – was remade in three different versions in 1993: *The Acquired Inability to Escape (Divided)*, in which vitrine, table, chair and ashtray were split vertically; *The Acquired Inability to Escape (Inverted)*, in which the bottom of a chair was fixed to the inside of the glass ceiling; and *The Acquired Inability to Escape (Inverted and Divided)*, in which a vitrine with a chair fixed to the inside



The Acquired Inability to Escape, 1991



The Acquired Inability to Escape (Inverted and Divided), 1993



Beautiful Love and Jealousy Painting, 2007

ceiling was split horizontally through its centre. In 2008 an all-white version of the original appeared titled *The Acquired Inability to Escape (Purified)*.

In returning to his first Spot Painting with the Colour Space paintings, Hirst is in effect pursuing a course he has never abandoned, and a belief he refuses to renounce, though it has troubled him throughout his career – his belief in the possibilities of painting. Despite his early proclamations that after Pollock there was ‘nowhere to go with painting,’¹² he has often stated that: ‘[I] always wanted to be a painter much more than a sculptor or an artist, but I was overwhelmed by the possibilities of painting.’¹³

The certainty Hirst sought as a student, to resolve the conflict between art and life, continues to be a strong motivation, and the feeling of being overwhelmed by the possibilities of painting is still something he seeks to overcome. The mantras of his early teaching still echo, from Leeds School of Art, to ‘paint how you feel’ and ‘painting as truth’, and at Goldsmiths College, ‘the desire to be formally lucid and materially direct, and the intention to deal with the emerging complexities of contemporary life in an openhanded way.’¹⁴

This manifests itself in a range of different painting series, whether mechanically produced as the Spin Paintings [see *Beautiful Love and Jealousy Painting*], painted according to a simple system as with the Spot Paintings, made according to a defined style as the Fact Paintings, or painted more gesturally as the more recent works Hirst has painted alone (which have received the criticism that they are ‘less visually continuous than older works’).¹⁵ Some have never been exhibited, including two series that emerged as by-products of the Spin Paintings – one Hirst named Splatter Paintings, since they caught splattered paint when leant against the side of a spin machine; another, that caught drips from being on the floor, he named Interference Paintings, because the image that resulted from the random action resembled a television screen with bad reception. Hirst has consistently embraced effects that are apparently produced by accident rather than design in his work. ‘I think it’s the action of the world on things that I like in the collages. It’s just a repetitive motion, something repeated endlessly, a cycle that creates something. These paintings feel a bit like that. You’ve got that repetitive thing going.’¹⁶

A series that was exhibited as a group in 2017, the Visual Candy paintings (1993–95), seem to both refer to, and sit somewhere between, the gestural paintings Hirst made while in Leeds in the early 80s and the first Spot Painting of 1986. The sombre palate of the early gestural paintings, not dissimilar to the colour effects found in the collage series made in the same decade, is replaced in the Visual Candy paintings by strong, bright colours. Like the

12. Damien Hirst, ‘On Dumb Painting’ in *The Complete Spot Paintings 1986–2011* (London: Other Criteria/Gagosian, 2011), pAb.

13. Ibid.

14. Jon Thompson, ‘The Economics of Culture: The Revival of British Art in the 1980s’ in *The Collected Writings of Jon Thompson* (London: Ridinghouse, 2011), p434.

15. Alberto Mugrabi, ‘Hands up for Hirst’ in *The Economist*, 9th September 2010 (accessed 30th October 2017, <http://www.economist.com/node/16990811>).

16. From a conversation between Ann Gallagher and Damien Hirst, London, Summer 2017.

earliest paintings, no background colour is left visible and the image spills off the edge of the canvas. A few contain pointillist dots, with one or two colours predominating in the composition, while in others large daubs, more oval or rectangular than round, cover the canvas, with smaller spots seeming to fill in gaps between the larger shapes. Like the Spot Paintings, Hirst perceives them as happy paintings, and they all have ‘dumb’ cheery titles such as *Glee*, *Hot Fun*, *Happy Happy*, *Joy Joy*, *Jolly*, *Happiness* and *Super Happy Dabby*. Commenting on the series, curator Mario Codognato has commented: ‘Like candy that has been masticated and squashed, or like chewed bubble gum stuck to the street, the irregular stains of colour crystallise with one another as if becoming a metaphor for dissolution and consumption.’¹⁷ Though Hirst produced around 35 Visual Candy paintings, of which several are diptychs, there is enough variation of scale and technique to indicate that they preoccupied him quite intensively during a two-year period in ways quite markedly different from the painting he was best known for in the early 90s.

The range of Hirst’s expansive painting output is more complex than has long been assumed. As an artist known for his ability to work in several registers simultaneously – not just in terms of the range of artwork he produces, but alongside his engagement with art as a collector, and his collaborations in disciplines such as curating and publishing – it is unsurprising to learn that Hirst’s interest in painting has not remained confined to a few signature series, and that it continues to expand. The Colour Space paintings encompass a mid-point between the systematic and the painterly, the rational and the expressive in his work. That Hirst should choose at this point in his career to produce the series, to give animated expression to his most archetypical paintings, is an insight into his current thinking of where the possibilities of painting lie.



Hot Fun, 1993

17. Mario Codognato, ‘This Side of Paradise’ in *The Complete Visual Candy Paintings* (London: Other Criteria, 2014), p9.