

Bologna e le collezioni comunali d'arte. Dalla 'Mostra del Settecento bolognese' alla nascita del museo (1935–1936) (Atti dell'incontro di studio, Bologna, Collezioni Comunali d'Arte e Museo Civico Medievale, 9–10 novembre 2006). Edited by Carla Bernardini. 320 pp. incl. 134 b. & w. ills. (Silvana Editoriale, Cinisello Balsamo, 2011), €25. ISBN 978–88–366–2237–5.

Reviewed by STÉPHANE LOIRE

ON 12TH MAY 1935, on the second floor of the Palazzo d'Accursio in Bologna, the exhibition *Settecento bolognese* was inaugurated, an important temporary show of works that intended to illustrate the rich artistic heritage of the capital of Emilia-Romagna in the eighteenth century. In the wake of the vast and more general exhibitions devoted to Italian Baroque painting held in Florence in 1922 (*Mostra della pittura del Sei e Settecento* at Palazzo Pitti) and Venice in 1929 (*Settecento italiano* at the Palazzo delle Biennali), this exhibition aimed at detailing their content for Bologna. From the outset its importance was measured by the number of works on show: 347 paintings and 277 drawings, of which 230 and 203 respectively came from private collections, but also sculptures (46) and works of decorative art (92). For the first time, a significant number of paintings by Giuseppe Maria Crespi (64), Donato Creti (30) and Ubaldo Gandolfi (24) were shown together, as were the sculptures of Giuseppe Maria Mazza, which made it possible to make a balanced appreciation of settecento Emilian art. Some weeks after the opening, the catalogue was published, with the artists' biographies written by Roberto Longhi and the catalogue entries by Guido Zucchini. When the exhibition finally closed on 10th November 1935, over 50,000 visitors had seen it, a considerable number for that date. A year later, in the same rooms in the Palazzo d'Accursio, the municipal collections of the city of Bologna of the art of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were put on permanent display as a sequel to this exhibition.

Entering the relatively new field of studies devoted to the history of the great retrospective exhibitions held in the twentieth century, after studies on *Primitifs flamands* in Bruges in 1902 and the *Primitifs français* in Paris in 1904, the present volume allows us to assess the importance of the Bolognese exhibition of 1935 and its legacy. But it also belongs to the more general history of the reception of Emilian settecento art in the first half of the twentieth century and assesses its repercussions up to the present day.

Several of the contributions in this book are concerned with the organisation of the exhibition and with its prime movers. Prepared in an astonishingly short time, which today would seem unimaginable, it was officially launched on 10th January 1935 as an appendix to a *Mostra Nazionale dell'Agricoltura* held at the Giardini Margherita (the catalogues of the

two shows are reproduced on a CD Rom that accompanies the book). From March the local press mentioned the loans agreed by foreign museums, whereas the lack of space very quickly constrained the curators to turn down loans offered by private collectors and dealers. A certain number of the works were chosen by members of the 'Comitato Scientifico', among whom no one is more frequently mentioned in this volume than Roberto Longhi (1890–1970); he was a newcomer to Bologna, having been nominated professor at the University in 1934, the year of the publication of his *Officina ferrarese*. The exhibition offered him the chance to establish himself as an expert on the Bolognese settecento, as much through his artists' biographies in the catalogue as with his famous inaugural lecture, '*Momenti della pittura Bolognese*'. However, we know less about Guido Zucchini (1882–1957), an architect who specialised in the restoration of ancient buildings in Bologna – Longhi named him 'Viollet Le Zuc' – but who was also profoundly knowledgeable on local art history: as the tireless *segretario* to the organisation of the exhibition, he was the linchpin of the show, and the following year presided over the permanent installation of the communal collections in Palazzo d'Accursio. It had been preceded, in 1924, by the opening of the Museo Davia Bargellini, devoted to the applied arts at the behest of Francesco Malaguzzi Valeri (1867–1928), *Soprintendente* of Bologna and director of the Pinacoteca Nazionale since 1914. Several essays in the book underline his role as the forerunner in the rediscovery of the Bolognese eighteenth century and reassess the career of this exceptionally active figure; the accusations of his mismanagement of the collections in his charge may have been the cause of his suicide, which had the effect of a kind of *damnatio memoriae* at the time of the exhibition of 1935.

Despite its scale, the exhibition of 1935 gave a rather restrictive view of Bolognese eighteenth-century art. Local patriotism had decreed that there was a gallery dedicated to the Bolognese pope Benedict XIV (Lamber-tini), while the 'domestic' dimension of the epoch was emphasised by an abundance of genre scenes, but still life was virtually absent, while large-scale 'history' painting, in particular that from churches, was mostly represented by small-scale sketches. But by displaying paintings, sculpture and decorative works of art side by side, they could be viewed in the context of daily life, and offered the possibility of re-evaluating some forgotten minor masters. Other revelations included the display of a beautiful series of mythological paintings by Donato Creti that had been given to the Bolognese Senate by Marcantonio Collina Sbaraglia in 1774 and which were rediscovered in a municipal building, while the exhibition of two of the allegorical tombs painted for Owen McSwiny, only recently identified, led to a greater understanding of the ensemble to which the two paintings belonged. As for the selection of drawings, Galli Bibiena's fantastic

architectural studies were striking, but many unpublished sheets, 145 of which were attributed to forty-six different artists, were lent by the musician and collector Antonio Certani, allowing their authors to enter the history of drawing.

Damien Hirst – The Complete Spot Paintings, 1986–2011. With essays by Robert Pincus-Witten, Michael Bracewell and Damien Hirst, and a conversation with Damien Hirst, John Baldessari and Ed Ruscha. 929 pp. incl. 1400 col. ills. (Other Criteria and Gagosian Gallery, 2014), £195. ISBN 978–1–906967–48–2.

Reviewed by JOHN-PAUL STONARD

IN EARLY 2012 OVER three-hundred Spot Paintings by Damien Hirst were exhibited simultaneously at all eleven branches of the Gagosian Gallery, from Athens to Beverly Hills.¹ The title of the exhibitions, *The Complete Spot Paintings*, was overly modest; Hirst has made well over one thousand Spot Paintings since the series began.² If the displays, individually and together, conveyed some sense of the general character of the Spot Paintings, the retrospective of works by Hirst held at Tate Modern the same year showed their place in his work as a whole. It is only, however, with the publication of *The Complete Spot Paintings, 1986–2011* that the true extent of the series can be gauged. Illustrating 1,361 of the some 1,400 Spot Paintings that Hirst estimates have been made, the catalogue offers an overview of one of the most perplexing and provocative series of abstract paintings ever produced.

Following a first 'prototype' Spot Painting made in 1986,³ Hirst made two wall paintings at the 1988 exhibition *Freeze*, rectangles of coloured spots that defined the rules for the series: no colours alike, spots perfectly circular, evenly spaced and set in a grid (Fig. 37).⁴ The first Spot Painting on canvas appeared later that year, although it was only in the early 1990s that the series gained momentum. From this moment the series took on a life of its own, proliferating wildly according to some inscrutable inner logic. This was due, at least in part, to what could be described as the 'social' nature of its production; after completing the first five paintings himself, Hirst delegated the manual work to assistants.

Most of the titles for the thirteen subcategories of Spot Paintings are taken from a trade catalogue of 'biochemical and diagnostic reagents', published by the Australian company Sigma Pharmaceuticals.⁵ The largest subgroup of paintings, 'Pharmaceuticals', not however listed in the Sigma catalogue, seems to have been chosen rather as a generic title, one which came to define the series as a whole. Direct links between titles and paintings are impossible to pinpoint. It is of no consequence,

for example, that *Abnus Toxin*, the title of a work from 1991, is a highly toxic substance derived from the Jequirity plant; or that *Parvalbumin*, used as the title for a striking painting from 2004, is a chemical extracted from frog or rabbit muscle (all facts noted in the Sigma catalogue). The inscrutable scientific exoticism of the chemical names (*2-Methylbenzimidazole*; *N-Chloroacetyl-L-phenylalanine (PFS) Crystalline*; *Sulfisoxazole*) draws the series into the orbit of science as the hard, objective opposite of art.

From the first variant, the repetition of a painting to form identical twins (and titled as such, as in *Mary, Mary*), the proliferation of the series is spectacular. Shaped canvases, at first triangular and rhomboid, later circular; different placement of the spots in relation to the canvas edge, sometimes offset, sometimes cut; the introduction of text and numbering in the *Controlled Substance* series; paintings containing a single spot; variations in the colour intensity, for example in the 'pale' spot paintings; Kandinsky-like compositions of different sizes of spot; alternative colour backgrounds, notably black, gold and a highly effective pale green. Sometimes the spots are blurred, as if deliberately poorly painted, the dripping and smudging giving the impression of weary and inattentive studio assistants. The extension of the motif beyond 'art' into the world of design – skateboards, drum kits, handbags – and most famously with the 'Spot Tate Boat', the catamaran that joins Millbank and Bankside on the Thames, are noted in a 'miscellaneous' section of *The Complete Spot Paintings*. The dizzying volume of works in endless variation give the impression of Hirst struggling to escape from the first, brilliantly complete statements of *Row* and *Edge* (one thinks of Lucian Freud's famous comment, on seeing the vitrine *One Thousand Years*, that Hirst had begun with the final act).

This is a vast, heavy book, which adopts the 'scientific' design of all Hirst's productions (he is in this sense the heir to Richard Hamilton). Three short essays offer interesting assessments of the paintings, in particular a text by Michael Bracewell, opening with a brilliantly acute description of viewing a Spot Painting ('a state close to happiness, yet something disturbs...').

Yet the texts hardly exhaust comment on the painting, hardly mentioning, for example, the extreme variations of scale between works, which seems to me their most fundamental characteristic. The enormous canvas *Erucyl Acetate* (2005), for example, carries six large thirty-six inch spots (or, more accurately, discs) on a six-metre square field. *Erucyl Acetate* remains an overwhelming work, dominating the viewer by its sheer size. It is an architectural painting, gesturing back to the origin of the series in paintings on a wall.⁶ In his short essay 'On Dumb Painting', reproduced in the current catalogue (and still one of the best pieces of writing on the series), Hirst describes the environmental nature of the paintings in sculptural terms: 'I started them [the Spot Paintings] as an endless series like a sculptural idea of a painter (myself)'.⁷



37. *Edge*, by Damien Hirst. 1988. Household gloss on wall, 217.2 by 325.8 cm. (Damian Hirst).

At the other extreme are dazzling miniatures painted with uncountable fields of one-millimetre spots, extraordinarily labour-intensive, unphotographable paintings such as *L-Isoleucinol* (2010–11). These paintings demand their own type of viewing, the optimum close position giving the effect of a 'lustre', the optical phenomena notable in pointillist paintings. Hirst is reported to be currently producing an 'ultimate' painting comprising one million spots (presumably smaller rather than larger). Pushing scale to physical extremes is one way of showing the boundaries of the medium, creating a sort of 'frame' for what is possible in painting. It is in this sense that the Spot Paintings are emblematic of painting itself – a metaphor for the possibilities of painting, but also a metaphor (as Bracewell notes), for life itself. The 'charge' of the Spot Paintings remains, the vivid, irreverent life that courses through the series with cheerful indifference, desiring extreme physical states, overreaching boundaries and creating spectacular effects.

The critical response to the Gagosian exhibitions was largely negative. Writers described the paintings by turn as 'perfect corporate artworks', 'cold random repetitions generating endless sameness' and 'intellectual formaldehyde'.⁸ For some they epitomise the superficiality of contemporary art, unworthy of prolonged attention.⁹ There is little doubt that the Spot Paintings will continue to exemplify the 'hard coin of art', a phrase taken up by Leo Steinberg to describe the way in which the look of art changes as the art market expands.¹⁰ And it is true that individual paintings remain inscrutable, resistant to prolonged interrogation, leaving the viewer with a sense of a loss of bearings, as if the warm truths of art had been exposed by the cold truths of science. *The Complete Spot Paintings* only adds to the confusion by reproducing individual works without catalogue numbers, reflecting Hirst's desire that their presentation should be like 'cutting the fucking ropes in the middle of a storm'.

Consciously or not, the Spot Paintings have come to define an era in terms of their look, and their impact on contemporary design; their position in the vastly expanded market for contemporary art; and their apparently

infinite adaptability through translations of scale. It is in this sense that they should be considered major statements of abstract painting, and beyond any doubt Hirst's greatest works. The overview given in this catalogue provides the grounds on which such an assertion can be judged.

¹ The Gagosian displays were the partial realisation of Hirst's original ambition to show the series as a whole. In the late 1990s, in response to an invitation to exhibit at the Tate Gallery, Hirst proposed showing all the works completed to date, numbering around 300. He later recalled his intentions: 'You won't know up from down. It'll be like being in a ship and just cutting the fucking ropes in the middle of a storm. You'll just be lost. Once you've got more than four, you've got nothing to compare them to'; D. Hirst: *On the Way to Work*, London 2001, p.220.

² In this publication (unpaginated) Robert Pincus-Witten cites Hirst's 'rough guess' that there are around 1,400 Spot Paintings in existence.

³ This painting was included in Hirst's first solo exhibition at the Old Court Gallery, Windsor, which opened on 6th March 1988.

⁴ The bottom line of spots in *Row* and the far right line in *Edge* were truncated by the canvas edge into semi-circles, giving a sense of overlap, as if the painting had somehow slipped behind the wall. Hirst repeated the wall Spot Paintings, complete with a bisected upper row, on the walls of the Third Eye Centre, Glasgow, in spring 1989, his second solo exhibition. *Freeze* took place in three phases. In the first (6th to 22nd August 1988), Hirst showed *Boxes*, a series of cardboard boxes, including cigarette packets, evenly painted with bright household gloss paint. He did not exhibit in the second phase, but for the final installation, which closed on 29th September, painted the two wall Spot Paintings *Row* and *Edge*.

⁵ Sigma Chemical Company Ltd.: *Biochemicals Organic Compounds for Research and Diagnostic Reagents*, Dorset 1991. The thirteen subcategories are: 'Antibiotics'; 'Carbon-13 Labelled Compounds'; 'Controlled Substances'; 'Deuterated Compounds'; 'Gold Compounds and Isotopes'; 'Lipids'; 'Pharmaceuticals'; 'Pheromones'; 'Radioactive Compounds'; 'Radiochemicals'; 'Sedatives'; 'Tests, Reagents, Diagnostics and Random Samples'; 'Venoms'.

⁶ The vast architectural context of Manhattan was an apt setting for *Erucyl Acetate* during the Gagosian displays. Thomas Crow has emphasised the importance of the 'American experience' of scale for Hirst's work (picking up on the artist's own comments on this subject), commending him for breaking free from the provincial dimensions that had hampered British Pop artists: T. Crow: 'Village Green Preservation Society. Damien Hirst Seen from America', in C. Gether and M. Laurberg, eds.: *Damien Hirst*, special issue of *Arken Bulletin* 4 (2009), pp.53–65.

⁷ D. Hirst: 'On Dumb Painting' (1997), reprinted in the current catalogue, unpaginated.

⁸ R. Dorment: 'Damien Hirst. The Complete Spot Paintings, Gagosian Gallery, review', *Daily Telegraph* (12th January 2012); A. Searle: 'Full Circle: the endless attraction of Damien Hirst's spot paintings', *The Guardian* (12th January 2012); and P. Schjeldahl: 'Spot On', *The New Yorker* (23rd January 2012), p.84.

⁹ 'Labouring attempts at traditional connoisseurship among the spot paintings, judging some better than others, mostly make the would-be connoisseur look silly. Hirst's Conceptual project renders such discernment irrelevant'; C. Knight: 'Art review: Damien Hirst at Gagosian Gallery', *Los Angeles Times* (13th July 2012).

¹⁰ L. Steinberg: 'Other Criteria', in *idem: Other Criteria. Confrontations with twentieth-century art*, Chicago and London 1972, pp.55–91; here p.55.