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"Freeze"

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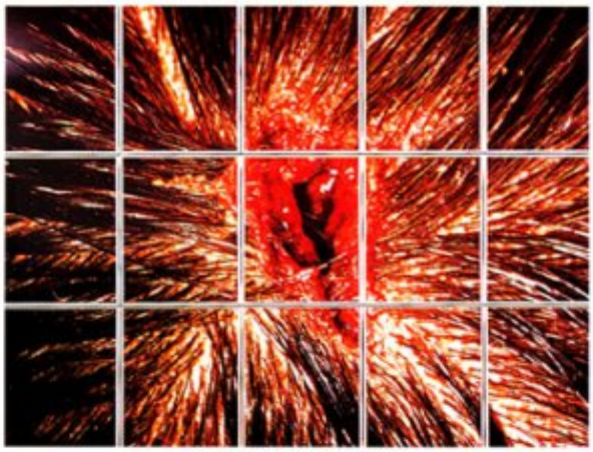
IN 1988 THE UK WAS IN CRISIS: The economy was still reeling from the previous year's stock-market collapse, the conflict in Northern Ireland was escalating by the day, and on the night of December 21, a terrorist's bomb brought down Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland. Throughout, Margaret Thatcher remained defiant, determined to see Britain rebuilt in her own image: as a classless society in which, with enough hard work, any individual could succeed. London's Docklands—a fading conduit for Britain's declining manufacturing industries—was ground zero for Thatcher's master plan. Lodged uncomfortably amid the working-class neighborhoods that housed the docks' erstwhile labor force, the Docklands would eventually become a monument to free enterprise: a home to luxury waterfront apartments and headquarters for multinational media and banking conglomerates. It was here that Damien Hirst—at the time an undergraduate fine-art student at Goldsmiths College—organized the exhibition "Freeze."



Mat Collishaw, *Bullet Hole*, 1988.
color transparencies in light boxes, 6' 4" x 10' 2" x 5 ½".

Throughout the '80s the British art scene had become increasingly complacent. Dominated by the "Lisson sculptors"—Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, Anish Kapoor—and older painters such as Howard Hodgkin and expat Malcolm Morley, the arena offered scarce opportunity for younger artists. Hirst and his Goldsmiths peers elected—with positively Thatcherite zeal—to determine their own fate. Clearly impressed by the vast white spaces of Charles and Doris Saatchi's Boundary Road gallery—a private museum that, since its opening in 1985, had put the dowdy British art establishment to shame—Hirst and Co. transformed an abandoned Docklands building into an airy showcase for their own work. Accompanied by a sleek catalogue sponsored by the government-approved property consortium Olympia and York Canary Wharf Ltd., "Freeze," with its unshakable self-confidence and shameless professionalism, would display none of the anarchic amateurism typical of student shows.

Today "Freeze" is probably better known for who, rather than what, was in it. While the exhibition would ultimately provide a platform for the careers of Hirst, Gary Hume, Anya Gallaccio, Angela Bulloch, and Sarah Lucas, among others, the work itself was surprisingly conservative. Predominantly abstract, it included Angus Fairhurst's systematic grid painting and Hirst's accumulation of hand-crafted colored cardboard boxes—works that could have been made at any point in the preceding twenty years. Mimicking the swagger of much of the art collected and promoted by the Saatchis, many of the works on display merely looked like art, approximating (and often conflating) the languages of Greenbergian formalism, Minimalism, and post-Minimalism, with a dash of Conceptualism for good measure. The majority were stridently apolitical, offering little reflection of the prevailing climate of unrest. (A notable exception was Mat Collishaw's *Bullet Hole*, 1988, an imposing backlit photograph of a fatal head wound, appropriated from a forensics textbook and hinting at the visceral nature of Young British Art to come.)

Given the inconsequential nature of much of the work it contained—and the scant critical press it received at the time—the show's subsequent legend probably owes more to its aggressive ambition and marketing (tales of Hirst ferrying curators to the exhibition in taxis are now part of its folklore) than to its import as a show. Only in hindsight is it possible to interpret Hirst's gesture as a catalyst for British art's subsequent development. Now we know the story: The intelligent artists in "Freeze"—of whom there were many—soon abandoned their derivative collegiate manners. In 1992 Charles Saatchi unveiled Hirst's "shark"—*The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*—and the YBA was officially born. The rest of course is history. Yet despite the exhibition's consequence as an early platform for this rising generation, "Freeze" was, and remains, a period piece, a testament to Hirst's skillful manipulation of a moment. Without Thatcher's license, the exhibition that launched a sensation would have been inconceivable; given her subsequent fall from grace, and the rise of Tony Blair's soft socialism, we can safely predict that we'll never see the likes of it again. □

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