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The “Sensation” Exhibition (London 1997-New York 2000): Public Scandals, Private Funding

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When the “Sensation” exhibition travelled from London to New York in 1999, it seemed as though young British artists were taking the United States by storm. In fact, the event confirmed the Americanization of art funding systems in the United Kingdom.

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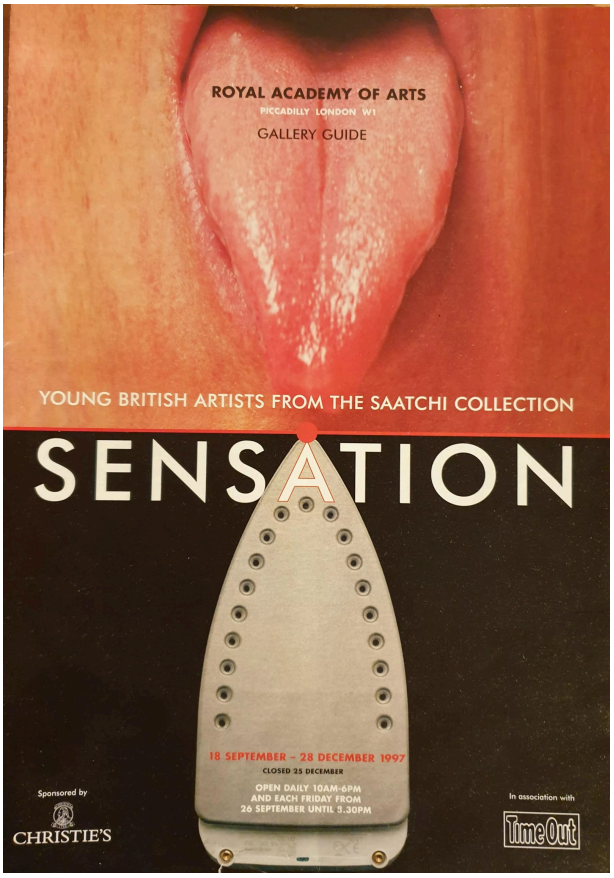
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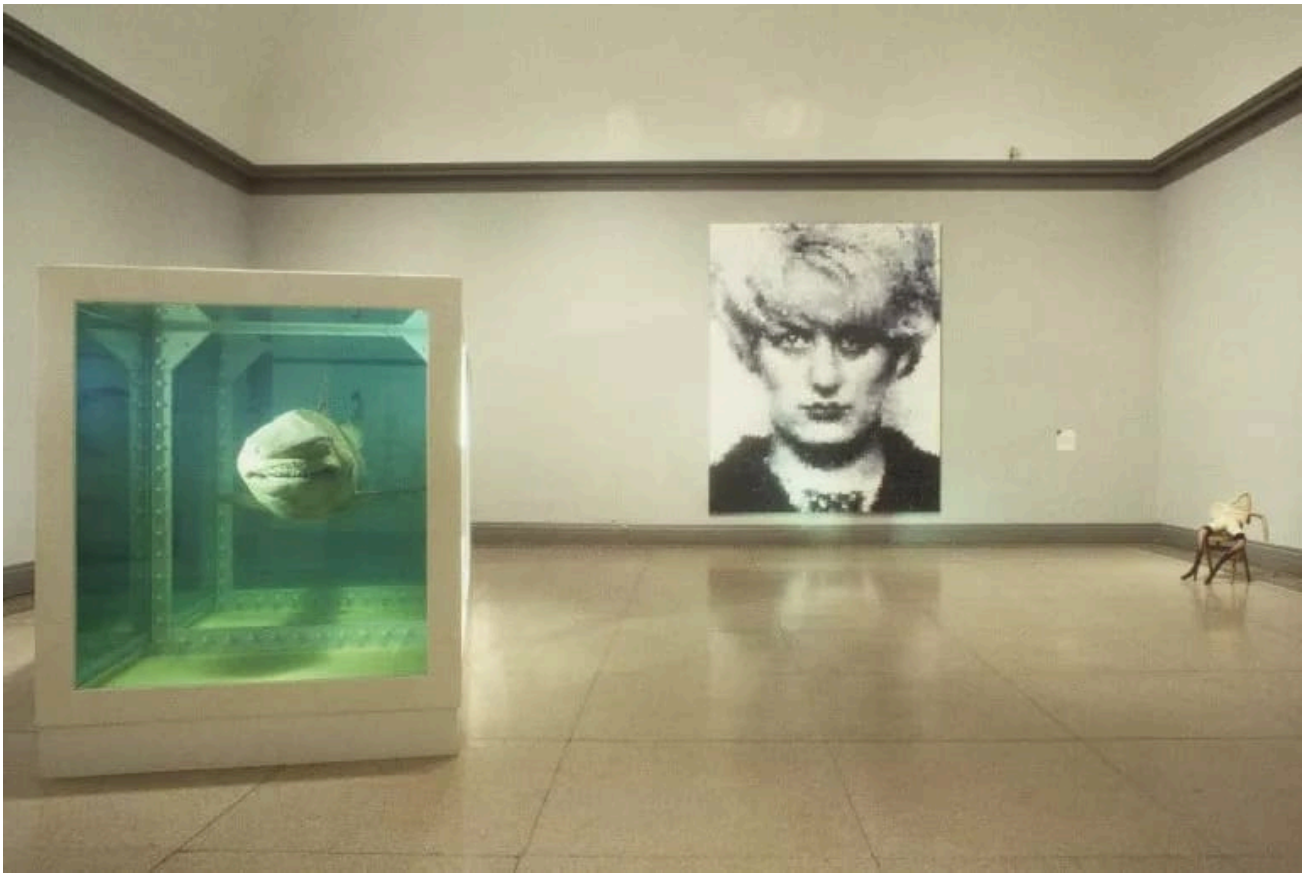
When Norman Rosenthal, director of the Royal Academy of Arts in London, ran into a programming snag in the mid-1990s, collector and advertising mogul Charles Saatchi came to his rescue by loaning him 110 works by the Young British Artists, also called YBAs, the artistic sensation of the moment. The founder of the Saatchi & Saatchi agency and architect of the Conservative Party's 1979 victory had avidly begun snatching up their works in 1988 after turning away from the American artists he had collected until then. "Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection," [1] the turnkey exhibition he funded and promoted with his own money, ushered in a new, "American" style relationship between private collectors and dealers on the one hand, and non-profit institutions on the other. This transatlantic dialogue continued in 1999 when the exhibition traveled to New York and sparked as much of a scandal there as the one it had caused in the United Kingdom, although for quite different reasons.



Leaflet for the Royal Academy's 1997 "Sensation" exhibition, Private Collection.

The show's title said it all: it was indeed controversial and set off a scandal, or rather two more or less orchestrated scandals, which pulled in the crowds. In London, Marcus Harvey's *Myra* (1995), a portrait based on the mug shot of Myra Hindley, one of the two "Moors Murderers" who killed five children in Yorkshire in the early 1960s, ran afoul of an organization called Mothers Against Murder and Aggression. Demonstrators picketed Burlington House demanding that the portrait be removed. It had been easy to ship the works from the Saatchi Gallery in northern London and, with the addition of two sponsors (Christie's auction house and *Time Out* magazine), "Sensation" allowed the Royal Academy, whose accounts had been in the red, to replenish its coffers. Almost 300,000 people paid to see the exhibition, 80% of whom were under 30. Joanna Drew, the head curator of the Hayward Gallery, said Rosenthal had claimed to be furious when the show had to close temporarily but was happy to have entrusted a communication genius with the event.

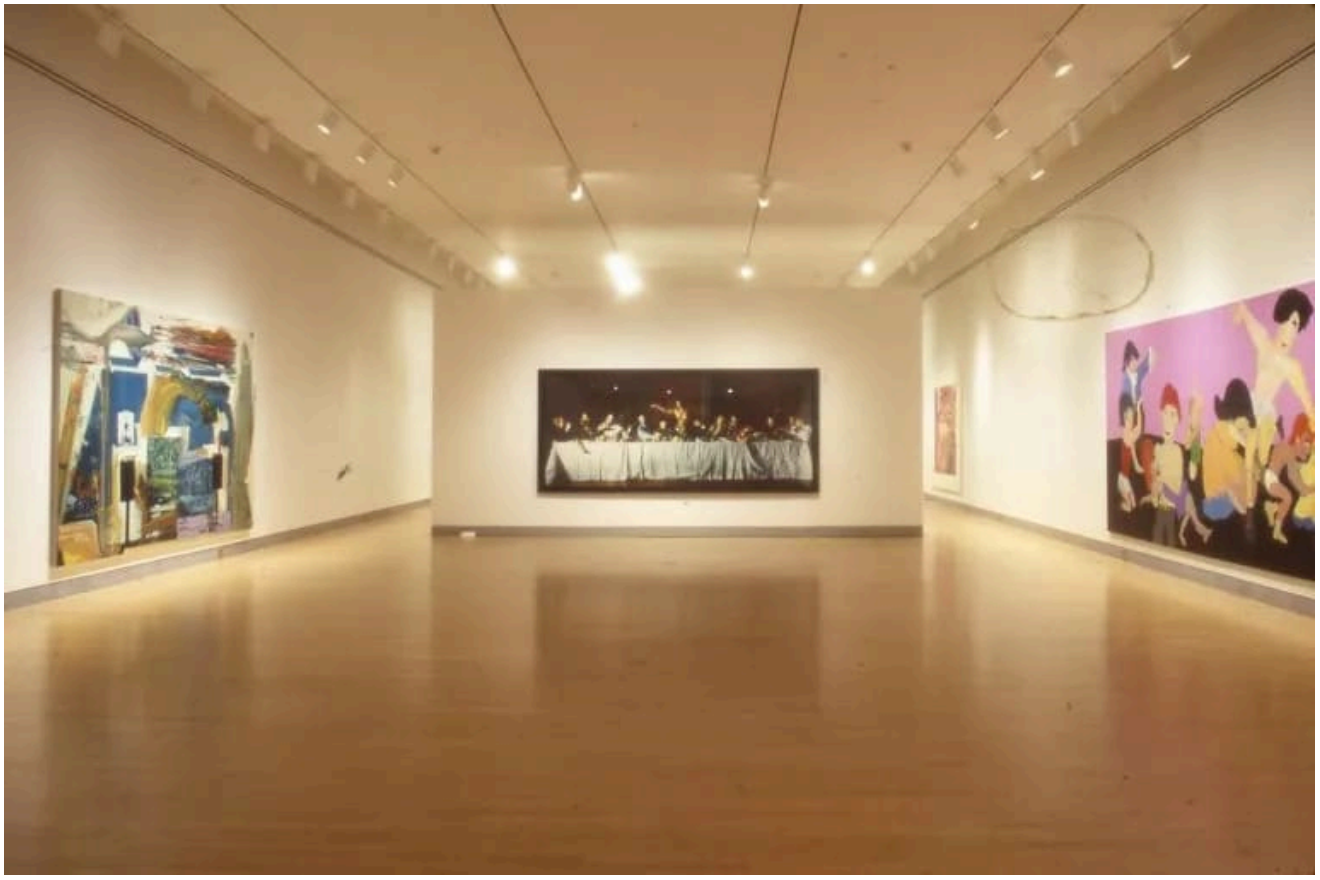
"Sensation" already looked like a retrospective. By 1997, the YBAs no longer needed an introduction and one of the key pieces, Damien Hirst's 1992 *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, was already showing signs of fatigue. Rather, the show was an endorsement of a wealthy private collector's direct influence on the art scene and the formation of a national taste.



View of the "Sensation" exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum (October 2, 1999-January 9, 2000). Left, Damien Hirst's *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1992). Right, Marcus Harvey's *Myra* (1995)

Source: Wikimedia

In New York, the museum-going public knew nothing about the story behind *Myra*, but, while it had traveled to Berlin without incident, the show caused a scandal in the US nonetheless, getting caught up in the culture wars that had already shaken the country when artists like Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano made headlines in the late 1980s. Chris Ofili's painting *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996) became a lightning rod. The scandal took a religious turn when New York Catholic League President William A. Donahue joined the campaign against Sam Taylor-Wood's *Wrecked* (1996), a photograph recreating the Last Supper with a female, bare-breasted Christ. The city's Catholic mayor, Rudolph Giuliani, condemned the show even before it opened. Censorship was barely avoided by the intervention of Floyd Abrams, a lawyer specializing in the First Amendment, but New York City suspended its grant to the Brooklyn Museum and threatened to close the institution. Judge Nina Gershon restored the funding, arguing that the attacks were a matter of opinion. As in the United Kingdom, the scandal was instrumentalized, this time by New York's two candidates for the 2000 Senate elections, Republican Rudolph Giuliani and Democrat Hillary Clinton.



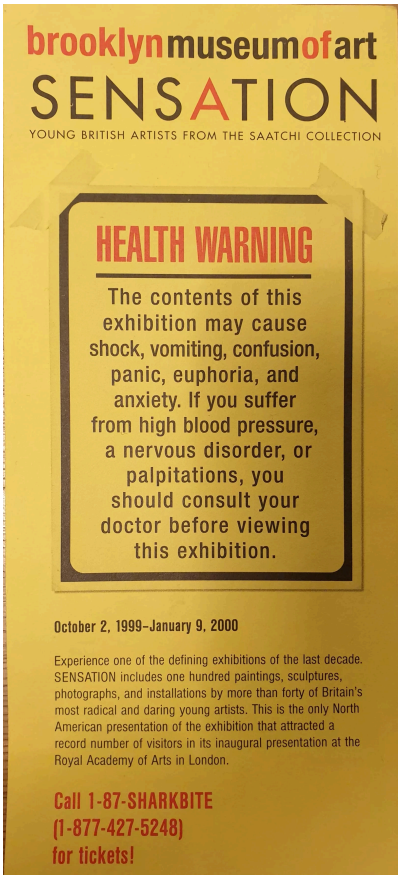
View of the "Sensation" exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum (October 2, 1999-January 9, 2000). Center, *Wrecked* (1996) by Sam Taylor-Wood.

Source: Wikimedia

However, the transatlantic dialogue we are interested in here transcends the framework of the scandal's cultural relativism, for it sheds light on cultural policies and upheavals in the United Kingdom's art scene since the 1980s. For Saatchi, the dialogue began with his first wife, Doris, with whom he assembled an impressive collection of works by key American artists including Bruce Nauman, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, Alex Katz, Jeff Koons and Philip Guston.

At the Tate Gallery, the Patrons of New Art (PNA), a group of benefactors, was created to help the museum purchase contemporary works after the acquisition of a controversial piece by minimalist Carl Andre. The first PNA-backed show was devoted to Julian Schnabel in 1983. But the Tate failed to specify that nine of the 11 paintings exhibited belonged to one of the PNA's founding members, Charles Saatchi, who had to resign. An apparently philanthropic deed brought to light how private collectors benefit from displaying their works in public institutions.

In 1985, the advertising tycoon decided to support contemporary art by opening his own venue, the Saatchi Gallery, in Saint John's Wood, a New York style white cube that influenced a whole generation of British art students. After the 1990 recession, Saatchi turned to the same young artists he had discovered at the 1988 "Freeze" exhibition organized by Damien Hirst. Many had come out of Goldsmiths College and were called Thatcher's children: the Conservative government's budget cuts led them to organize their own shows in some of London's disaffected industrial spaces.



Leaflet distributed during the "Sensation" exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in 1999, front. Private collection.

"Sensation" was resoundingly successful in New York. The triumph was a significant milestone for British artists because they finally achieved major international recognition. It was almost like a sweet revenge after having spent decades in the shadow of American art. Accompanied by a titillating health warning, the show took Hirst's shark as the emblem of this scandalous success. But "Sensation" also revealed a journey in the opposite direction, from the United States to the United Kingdom. Two controversies echoed each other like mirror images. The one in the United States involved the use of public funds. In the United Kingdom, it was about the promotion of a private collection by a public organization, the Royal Academy. "Sensation" actually acknowledged the British art world's acceptance of an American modus operandi and the effects of support for private collections under Margaret Thatcher (1979-1990).

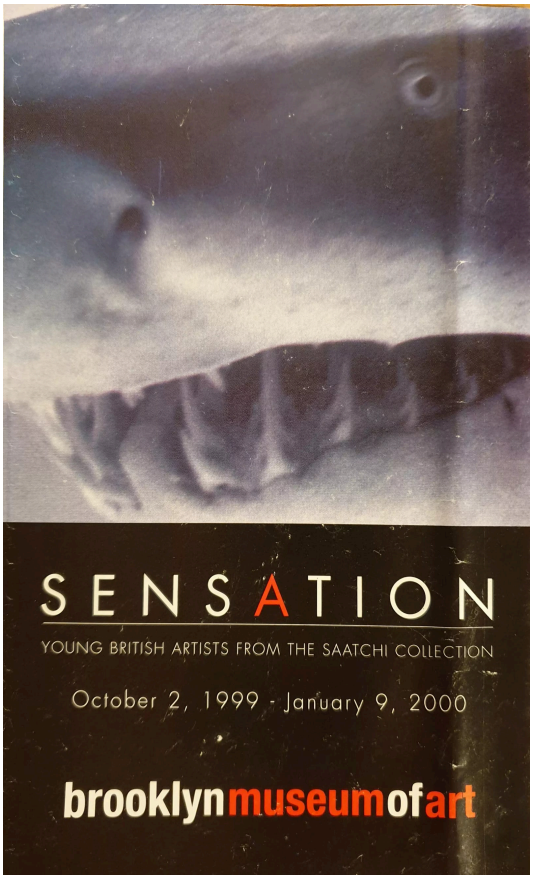
But it was not drastic cuts that Thatcher imposed in 1979: much of the public funding for art and culture was rechanneled to agencies whose mission was to obtain private backing, such as the ABSA (Association for the Business Sponsorship of the Arts and its royal support), or to subsidize mechanisms tied to corporate support, like the BSIS (Business Sponsorship Incentive Scheme). Like Ronald Reagan with the NEA (National Endowment for the Arts), Thatcher was tempted to abolish the Arts Council, but instead preferred tilting its ideological balance by appointing allies like former journalist Sir William Rees-Mogg and real estate developer Peter Palumbo to leadership positions.

Yet, drawing inspiration from American cultural policies, Thatcher had first talked about private sponsors or patrons in rather Victorian terms. When her terminology began reflecting a shift towards corporate sponsorship, it sent a clear message that private sources had become the cornerstone of arts funding in the United Kingdom. Private interests benefitted from a new tax policy, the introduction of a plan to devote 1%

of their profits to art and the use of art to support an urban renewal policy, all inspired by the Reagan model. This was when spectacular commissions and prestigious awards were renamed after their private backers—the Barclay's Young Artist Award, the Unilever and the Hyundai Commissions at the Tate Modern—confirming the role of sponsorship as a form of advertising. BP was omnipresent at Tate Britain until environmental activists from the Liberate Tate artists collective pressured the museum into rejecting the oil company in 2017.

The rhetoric of conquest used to promote the YBAs abroad highlighted their provocativeness and a typically British popular culture steeped in football, tabloids and beer. In 1995, another group show, "Brilliant! New Art from London", organized by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, was promoted by evoking an invasion of irreverent, iconoclastic young punks. After years of American domination, British artists took the announcement of the catalogue of "Brilliant!", "the Brits are coming!", literally. They rejected being labelled as followers and took their revenge, monopolizing the front pages of *Artforum* and *Art in America* and the top of the sales rankings.

But these shows, including the most notorious one, "Sensation", actually confirmed the exact opposite: with the emergence of the YBAs, American cultural policies gained an enduring foothold on British soil. Although Tony Blair (1997-2007) slightly increased public funding, he was guided by New Public Management (NPM), another of Thatcher's American imports, and the economic and political use of culture. Under Jeremy Hunt, Secretary of State for digital technology, culture, media and sport, David Cameron's coalition government (2010-2016) continued to treat art as a business, promoting private endowments and antinomic corporate philanthropy. The tiger shark that took New York by storm was only on display, already harmless in its glass case.



Leaflet distributed during the "Sensation" exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in 1999, back. Private collection.

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NOTES

1 Norman Rosenthal, *Sensation. Young British Art from the Saatchi Collection* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1997).