

Sensational Cities

Article by **John J. Curley**



Abstract

The controversial and hugely popular exhibition *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection* opened at the Royal Academy in London in 1997, before travelling to Berlin and Brooklyn over the next three years. While best remembered for its highly controversial works and brash assertions of “Britishness”, the exhibition, especially its sculptural objects by Damien Hirst and Rachel Whiteread, registers a common, post-industrial attitude to urban space at the end of the millennium. While *Sensation* might have seemed subversive, it aligns with the rapid gentrification that transformed the former functionality of its host cities into qualities to be fetishized.

Alex Hartley’s *Untitled (Ronan Point)* from 1995 garnered little attention when it was exhibited in *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection* in London (1997), Berlin (1998–99), and Brooklyn (1999–2000).¹ Its steel and fibreboard Minimalist box is fronted with a monumental blurred photograph of Ronan Point, the London tower block that was partially destroyed in a gas explosion in 1968 (fig. 1). The disaster, which resulted in the deaths of four residents, had come to stand for the erosion of confidence in British public housing, not unlike the later demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe complex in St Louis, Missouri, in 1972. Hartley’s sculpture seems to equate the Minimalism of an artist like Donald Judd to a failed utopian impulse advocating affordable modern apartments for the masses. If Ronan Point collapsed, the sculpture suggests, so did faith in mere formal exercises in sculptural and geometric form. Both art audiences and urban dwellers in the late 1990s wanted something besides lifeless Minimalism. *Sensation* offered something to both groups.



Figure 1

Alex Hartley, *Ronan Point*, 1995, black-and-white photograph, MDF and steel, 200 × 90 × 35 cm. Digital image courtesy of the artist.

While painting, especially in the London and Brooklyn venues, was the focus of attention due to the controversial subject matter of a couple of works (which Courtney J. Martin discusses further in her essay in this special issue),² I want to argue that *Sensation* was, at heart, a show about the body's relation to time and place; a show, then, whose concerns were largely sculptural. It is no accident that the exhibited artists who remain the most relevant are predominantly sculptors: Damien Hirst, Rachel Whiteread, and Sarah Lucas. As Hartley's work implies, the sculptural concerns of *Sensation* turned upon questions of the city, especially referencing discarded objects and urban spaces. By this logic, even the flat photographs of Richard Billingham, depicting his father living in spectacular urban poverty, can refer to the viewer's own social, economic, and geographical position whether in London, Berlin, or Brooklyn. Instructors at Goldsmiths College, where many of the *Sensation* artists

(known collectively as the "Young British Artists", or YBAs) received their training, were well-versed in postmodern theories of site-specificity and the contingency of the viewing experience.³ Especially considering the shock tactics and visceral nature of much of the art on display (Hirst's pickled animals or Marcus Harvey's painterly pornography, for instance), viewers' experiences in the exhibition approximate to a sculptural encounter.

Julian Stallabrass has discussed how many of the artists in *Sensation* are interested in what he calls "the urban pastoral", engaging the imagery and attitudes of the working-class city, but in a way that transforms these forms—and the urban fabric itself—into spectacle.⁴ Considering the box office success of *Sensation* in its three host cities—London, Berlin, and Brooklyn—and the fact that each locale was declared a global capital of "cool" in the years immediately before or after the exhibition, can we view the works in the exhibition as marking a specific transatlantic attitude to urban space at the end of the millennium? Do these works, at some fundamental level, posit a common artistic language of post-industrial world cities? As we saw with *Untitled (Ronan Point)*, it is my contention that the art in *Sensation* thematizes urban transformations: from places of functional particularity to those merely fetishizing an image of particularity. Certain post-industrial details—factory fittings, dirty bricks, discarded objects, and the like—served as the nostalgic exception to the rule of slick global capital around 2000. While critics have focused much on the particular "Britishness" of the art in *Sensation*, in what follows I will consider the relation of the works to broader economic and social forces operative on both sides of the Atlantic.⁵ Fetishizing national stereotypes—whether British obsessions with class hierarchy or a characteristic British working-class "brashness"—distracts from the larger issue at hand: the ways *Sensation* registers the homogenizing forces of global capital in environments in circa 2000.

Even though *Sensation* opened at the Royal Academy of Arts in the heart of London's Mayfair, one can argue that the exhibition brought London's East End into these wealthy environs.⁶ As Richard Shone discussed in the catalogue: "The fragmented, despoiled, high-rise, war-scarred urban landscape of the East End and Docklands has made an immeasurable impact on the look of much recent art."⁷ Hartley's subject, Ronan Point, once stood in Newham, East London; Michael Landy's *Flower Cart* seems plucked from Columbia Road Flower Market; Sarah Lucas's gritty objects, such as worn chairs, buckets, and mattresses, engage with popular images of waste-strewn streets in Hackney, to cite three examples. When London was named by *Vanity Fair* and *Newsweek* as amongst the coolest cities in the world in 1996–97, the East End, especially the area around Hoxton Square, was the epicentre of so-called "Cool Britannia."⁸ And, as a number of commentators have noted, this moment of cultural relevance was tied to London's emergence as a key global financial centre, located between banking hubs in Asia and the United States.⁹ Given this, it is no surprise that the London art scene charted by *Sensation* developed around exhibitions in alternative spaces, whether the former office building in Docklands where Damien Hirst staged *Freeze* in 1988, or Building One, the former biscuit factory in Bermondsey, that was the site for the important YBA exhibitions *Modern Medicine* and *Gambler* (both 1990).¹⁰ The layered history of such buildings—as well as the urban pilgrimages required to get there—could generate nostalgia for London's industrial and colonial trading past, allowing the visual signs of ruin and former functionality to contrast with the architectural and economic abstractions of late capitalism. Put simply, these alternative exhibitions marked this transitional moment in London's economy, poignantly highlighting what had been lost.¹¹ And these warehouse exhibitions certainly helped ease the conversion of many East End neighbourhoods away from light industry to so-called "creative industries" like design, advertising, publishing, public relations, and technology. Charles Saatchi's conversion of a former paint factory in North London (marginal to any period geographies of the city's contemporary art scene) into a steel and concrete white cube in 1985 predicts the YBAs' later attitudes towards London's material and symbolic fabric. The opening of Tate Modern in 2000 in the borough of Southwark in southeast London made such shifts explicit, as this incredibly popular museum was housed in a former power plant located about two miles away from Building One in Bermondsey.

The cities hosting *Sensation*'s two international stops were in the midst of similar transitions of once-marginal areas into important sites of commerce and creativity: a recently reunified Berlin and New York City's borough of Brooklyn. *Sensation* was on view at the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin from September 1998 to January 1999.¹² While it did not elicit the controversy associated with the London and Brooklyn venues, it was still a popular draw for visitors, enough so that its run was extended. Of all the major cities in Europe since the end of the Cold War, Berlin has, without a doubt, undergone the most dramatic transformation. When divided by the Berlin Wall for twenty-seven years (1962–89), the city's urban identity found itself in a condition of permanent stasis—literally two halves waiting to become whole. Furthermore, the Wall's physical footprint meant that acres of prime central real estate, like the levelled areas around Potsdamer Platz and the Brandenburg Gate, suddenly became available for development when the Wall fell. Neighbourhoods in the former East, especially Mitte and Prenzlauer Berg, began to attract artists and intellectuals from across Europe for their distinctive and unrenovated architecture, in addition to affordable rents. The 1998 edition of *Time Out Berlin* described Prenzlauer Berg, for instance, as a place full of new cafes and galleries, "inhabited by everyone from artists to yuppies".¹³

The exhibition's location at the Hamburger Bahnhof would have directly confronted visitors with the changing nature of the city's landscape. Literally abutting the path of the former Wall, this new museum for contemporary art (opened in 1996) was surrounded by active construction sites that clearly implied the path of the Cold War barrier, especially the ambitious building projects in Potsdamer Platz and in the new government quarter, as seen in a photograph from 1998 with the Hamburger Bahnhof just out of view at the top (fig. 2). Much of the new architecture employed the abstract steel and glass vernacular of late capitalism, therefore erasing sites of contested Cold War history with a global style. The urban pastorals on view in *Sensation* could thus mark a new understanding of a unified Berlin. The Hamburger Bahnhof itself, a former train station not utilized since 1945, emphasized this message, like Tate Modern: urban functionality transformed into spectacle.

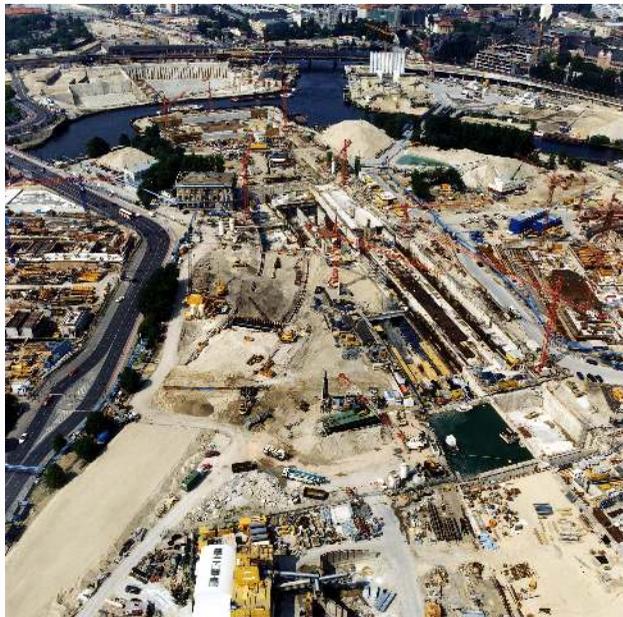


Figure 2

, Aerial View of building projects in Potsdamer Platz, Berlin with the Hamburger Bahnhof just out of view at the top, 1998. Digital image courtesy of Getty Images / Photo: Oltmann Reuter/ullstein bild.

While *GQ* magazine did not name Brooklyn the “coolest city on the planet” until 2011, it had been attracting artists with its affordable real estate since the mid-1990s.¹⁴ One of the reasons the Brooklyn Museum’s director Arnold Lehman hosted *Sensation* in 1999 was to increase the institution’s engagement with contemporary art.¹⁵ As Carol Becker has noted, Lehman was, in part, “appealing to his own new constituency—the hundreds of numerous not-so-young artists and professional who are increasingly making Brooklyn their home”.¹⁶ The neighbourhood of Williamsburg, about two or three miles from the museum, has since become synonymous with a certain type of “cool” gentrification that celebrates urban “grit”, similar to the situation in the East End of London.¹⁷ Sharon Zukin has recently bemoaned the loss of the area’s particularity, the disappearance of light industry, ethnic diversity, and local shops.¹⁸ Dick Pountain and David Robbins noted the ways that the ironic and “cool” attitude that has come to define Williamsburg has “become the dominant ethic of late consumer capitalism”.¹⁹

In different ways, Damien Hirst's and Rachel Whiteread's sculptures in *Sensation* thematize these urban sites in transition. Hirst produced *A Thousand Years*, with its famous rotting cow's head, flies, and bug zapper, in 1990, when it also appeared in the exhibition *Gambler*. In the context of the industrial venue of Building One, the work can conjure up the ghosts of the site, perhaps the flies once attracted to the sticky sweet walls of the biscuit factory. Hirst's sleek steel and glass vitrine, referring back to Donald Judd's Minimalism, can also suggest the architecture and styling of the post-industrial building boom that began appearing on the London, not to mention Berlin and Brooklyn, skylines in the 1990s.²⁰ Hirst thus employs abstract forms that speak the language of international modern art and architecture. *A Thousand Years* can suggest the new life of old buildings within changing neighbourhoods: neutral steel and glass vitrines with organic, messy souls that will eventually disintegrate and disappear. In the meantime, Hirst offers up this transformation as violent spectacle. The work can suggest the shift from the distinctive and functional particularity of world cities to one conceptualized via the predatory logic of late capitalism.

While decidedly more melancholic, Rachel Whiteread's work in *Sensation*, such as *Ghost* from 1990, also addresses urban transformations (fig. 3). Whiteread cast the interior of a North London Victorian parlour, effectively turning the room inside-out and making it into something resembling a mausoleum. Traces of soot visible on the protruding void of the fireplace punctuate such a loss of use. Furthermore, the sculpture communicated this isolation through its aesthetics; Simon Watney comments on this effect in the context of her work *House* from 1993 (her cast of the interior of an entire East End terraced house), but his words are equally apt for *Ghost*: "*House* places us in two places at once, in two dimensions—inside and outside. We gaze at its exterior, composed of interior walls, trapped forever outside and inside."²¹ The viewer and the ideas of comfortable familiarity and community represented by domesticity are thus doubly and radically isolated from one another. Whether referring to London's rapidly changing fabric, the fetishized *altbau* in neighbourhoods in former (and ghost-like) East Berlin, or the prohibitively expensive brownstones in Brooklyn, Whiteread's work speaks poignantly to the disappearance and spectacularization of particularity in these locales. *Ghost*'s showing at the Saatchi Gallery in 1992 – itself a space that had undergone conversion from factory to gallery – perhaps conveyed just these notions.



Figure 3

Installation view, Rachel Whiteread, *Ghost*, 1990, plaster on steel frame, 269 × 355.5 × 317.5 cm. Saatchi Gallery, London, 1990. Digital image courtesy of the artist and Gagosian Gallery / Photo: Mike Bruce.

Hirst's and Whiteread's works do have a particular British specificity but they also, when considered through *Sensation's* international venues, resonate with international artists of this period who deal with similar issues of urban transformation. In 1992, for instance, Mexican artist Gabriel Orozco pushed a heavy plasticine ball around the streets of New York (*Yielding Stone*), which literally incorporated the urban detritus it encountered. This object, when displayed as art, transforms into a kind of nostalgic urban fetish, especially given the context of Mayor Rudy Giuliani's sterilizing gentrification of New York after his election in 1993. Even Ai Weiwei's destruction and repurposing aspects of antique Chinese objects (including architecture), begun around 1995, registers the violence of China's own version of capitalist speculation. Perhaps *Sensation* had such international resonance around 2000 because the exhibition treated these site-specific themes of urban transformations in what had become an international language of contemporary art: accessible and recognizable forms that still engaged with art's history of Minimalism and conceptualism. In the context of Hirst and others, Stallabrass called this practice "high art lite".

Critics have labelled the artists in *Sensation* "Thatcher's Children"—referring to former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher—namely for their entrepreneurial acumen in organizing exhibitions and generating press coverage during periods of minimal public funding for the arts.²² We might also see artists like Hirst and Whiteread as more specifically allegorizing the transformation of urban space in the aftermath of Thatcher's embrace of global capitalism. Returning to Alex Hartley's *Untitled (Ronan Point)*, the sculpture clearly and poignantly fetishizes the failures and reconfigurations of the postwar welfare state, especially since one of Thatcher's most controversial schemes was the privatization of public housing. By the late 1990s, fashionable Londoners were "queuing up" to live in tower blocks similar to Ronan Point that had been renovated and turned over to private firms.²³ Such literal urban transformations are recalled in *Sensation's* symbolic conversions of older models of productive urbanism into the international language of contemporary art, including its monetary worth. The exhibition itself has been cited as a cynical ruse by Charles Saatchi to increase the value of his collection; he auctioned works

by *Sensation* artists (at exhibition sponsor Christie's) after the London run of the show.²⁴ This arrangement emphasizes a similar attitude present in the art itself in *Sensation—*objects complicit with new forms of enterprise and capital."

About the author

John J. Curley is Associate Professor of Art History in the Department of Art at Wake Forest University. He has published widely on American and European postwar art and photography. He is the author of *A Conspiracy of Images: Andy Warhol, Gerhard Richter, and the Art of the Cold War* (Yale University Press, 2013) and is currently at work on two new book projects: *Art and the Global Cold War: A History* and *Hybrid Objects: Postwar British Sculpture between America and Europe*. His research has been supported by the Getty Research Institute, the Yale Center for British Art, the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD), and the Henry Moore Institute, among others.

Footnotes

1. The exhibition was also scheduled to open at the National Gallery of Australia in June 2000, but was cancelled due to ethical questions concerning the show's funding. Saatchi and the auction house Christie's provided support for the Brooklyn venue, even though both parties had a clear financial stake in the works. See Carol Vogel, "Australian Museum Cancels Controversial Art Show", *New York Times*, 1 Dec. 1999. I briefly address the funding controversy at the end of the essay.
2. In London, the offending work was Marcus Harvey's *Myra* (1995) and in New York, Chris Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996). For a comprehensive look at both controversies, see Lela Capri Rosenberg, "The Meaning of *Sensation*: Young British Art in the Nineties" (PhD diss., Duke University, 2008).
3. Jon Thompson, Michael Craig-Martin, Richard Wentworth, and Yehuda Safran taught there. See Richard Shone, "From 'Freeze' to *House*: 1988–1994", in Norman Rosenthal and others, *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1997), 18–19.
4. Julian Stallabrass, *High Art Lite: British Art of the 1990s* (London: Verso, 1999), esp. 237–45. My thinking about YBAs owes much to Stallabrass's scholarship. Some of the ideas in this essay are also drawn from my own work on the subject. See my "Inside the New White Cube: The Ideology of Warehouse Exhibitions and the Aestheticization of Urban Space in London, 1988–98" (MA thesis, University of Manchester/Sotheby's Institute, 1998).
5. For instance, see Stallabrass's discussion of the artists' use of British stereotypes in *High Art Lite*, 225–57.
6. *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection*, 18 Sept.—28 Dec. 1997, curated by Charles Saatchi and Norman Rosenthal (Royal Academy of Arts, London).
7. Shone, "From 'Freeze' to *House*", 16.
8. David Kamp, "London Swings! Again!", *Vanity Fair*, March 1997, 199–28; Stryker McGuire and Michael Elliot, "London Reigns," *Newsweek*, 4 Nov. 1996, 34–36.
9. Simon Ford and Anthony Davies, "Art Capital", *Art Monthly* 213 (Feb. 1998): 2.
10. *Freeze*, 6 Aug.—29 Sept. 1988 (three parts), curated by Damien Hirst (PLA Building, London); *Modern Medicine* opened 1 March 1990, curated by Damien Hirst, Carl Freedman,

- and Billee Sellman (Building One, London); *Gambler* opened 1 July 1990, curated by Carl Freedman, and Billee Sellman (Building One, London).
11. Aidan While, "Locating Art Worlds: London and the Making of Young British Art", *Area* 35, no. 3 (Sept. 2003): 252, 261. For a contemporary understanding about the transformations of urban space in post-industrial locales, see Sharon Zukin, *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989).
 12. *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection*, 30 Sept. 1998—30 Jan. 1999, curated by Charles Saatchi and Norman Rosenthal (Hamburger Bahnhof für Gegenwartskunst, Berlin).
 13. Dave Rimmer, ed., *Time Out Berlin*, 3rd ed. (London: Penguin, 1998), 57.
 14. "Brooklyn is the Coolest City on the Planet: An Eater's Guide", *GQ*, Nov. 2011. Online version: <http://www.gq.com/food-travel/travel-features/201111/brooklyn-new-york-guide-food-dining>.
 15. Carol Becker, "The Brooklyn Controversy: A View from the Bridge", in *Unsettling "Sensation": Arts-Policy Lessons from the Brooklyn Museum of Art Controversy*, ed. Lawrence Rothfield (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 17; *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection*, 2 Oct. 1999—9 Jan. 2000, curated by Charles Saatchi, Norman Rosenthal, and Charlotta Kotik (Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn).
 16. Becker, "Brooklyn Controversy", 17.
 17. Sharon Zukin notes how the adjective "gritty" did not appear in the context of Brooklyn until the gentrification of the 1990s. See her *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 51.
 18. Zukin, *Naked City*, 35–61.
 19. Dick Pountain and David Robins, *Cool Rules: Anatomy of an Attitude* (London: Reaktion, 2000), 28.
 20. Joshua Shannon discusses the appearance of International Style skyscrapers in 1960s New York in similar terms. See his *The Disappearance of Objects: New York Art and the Rise of the Postmodern City* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009).
 21. Simon Watney, "About the House", *Parkett* 42 (Dec. 1994): 107.
 22. Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*, 127.
 23. See Terence Conran, *Terence Conran on London* (London: Conran Octopus, 2000), 39.
 24. See, for instance, Michael Kimmelman, "Critic's Notebook: In the End, the 'Sensation' is Less the Art than the Money", *New York Times*, 3 Nov. 1999.

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Imprint

Author	John J. Curley
Date	18 July 2016
Category	Article
Review status	Peer Reviewed (Editorial Group)
License	Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0)
Downloads	PDF format
Article DOI	https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-03/jcurley-sensational
Cite as	Curley, John J. “Sensational Cities.” In <i>British Art Studies: British Sculpture Abroad, 1945 – 2000</i> (Edited by Penelope Curtis and Martina Droth). London and New Haven: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and Yale University Press, 2016. https://britishartstudies-03.netlify.app/sensational-cities/ .