

Firstname Lastname

Teacher Name

Extended Essay in Visual Arts

December 2009

Word Count: 3925

The Use of Shock Tactics as a Legitimate Strategy in Contemporary Art

Artworks owned by Charles Saatchi, an internationally renowned art collector associated with the Young British Artists, from the *Sensation* exhibition reach New York in September 1999. The use of animals, everyday objects, food was acceptable by YBAs and this fact made them famous and affective in the art world. From early beginnings, artists of YBA including Damien Hirst and others, provoked the audience with shocking images. What was so different about this art to gain the name 'sick stuff' used by mayor Rudolph Guiliani (Sensations Sparks)? Definitely it was shocking. Not a single viewer walked out from the exhibition without any reaction. Anger, hate, offence, or confusion accompanied the public and this made the art of the *Sensation* called "shock art".

Around ten years later, Hirst's exhibition *Requiem* is presented in Kiev, Ukraine at the Pinchuk Art Center. This country being a former Soviet republic is an opportunity of new audience, unfamiliar with contemporary art, to view these works. Same artworks still shock the viewers. Voices of astonishment can be heard and frequent eyes turning away from the works can be noticed. The power of "shock art" is still present and nobody can walk indifferently by it.

Raising emotions and reactions by disturbing images used purposefully is what we can call "shock art". On the other side *shocking art* causes similar response but the shock value is not done intentionally. "Shock art" tends to be understood by an average viewer as art, which

creates often a mixture of negative feelings. The themes of such work touch the topic of religion, beliefs, sexuality, social problems such as disease, death or body issues. Whenever an issue which is thought to be forbidden like sphere of sacred ideas, which can hurt a particular side, we tend to avoid the topic. This is opposite to “shock art”, where an artist is ready to show any controversial topic.

By analyzing contemporary artworks with comparison to traditional (past) art and the techniques used in “shock art”, this essay will try to answer the question: Is the use of shock tactics a legitimate contemporary strategy? Finding answer to the above question can be challenging, however, by taking into account contemporary artworks and those from the past we can compare them and see the differences. Mainly focusing on the modern works of YBAs it will be possible to see what really shocks the audience and what are the artists’ tactics. Trying to find an answer to the above question, both sides will be taken into account when stating that “shock art” is a legitimate strategy.

WHAT SHOCKS IN “SHOCK ART”?

Often the topics of “shock art” evolve around religious concepts. These images cause controversy as they are considered to be holy for specific social group and in the artwork they are often shown as disrespected and offending. According to art critic, Eleanor Heartney: ‘contemporary world tends to see art and religion as enemies. Whenever the two are mentioned together, it tends to be in the context of some controversy or scandal (...)’ (qtd. in McDaniel and Robertson 281). Heartney’s statement turns out to be true, as abundant contemporary artworks touching upon the topic of religion create discussion and even hate, such as the work of Serrano *Piss Christ* (see fig. 1) or artworks by Hirst, which will be discussed in the following paragraphs. The topics of religion in modern art challenge the viewers, who cannot accept a piece offending their beliefs.



Fig. 1. Serrano, Andres. *Piss Christ*. 1987. Cibachrome print mounted on Plexiglas. *Artnet*. Web. 19 Sept. 2009.

Many contemporary works consist of features characteristic to historical religious artworks. Simply the use of specific materials can signify religious associations. The precious media, such as gold or other valuable jewels, colors (red) or format of a piece can indicate the sacred value of the artwork (282). What partially makes contemporary work controversial is the combination of characteristics used in religious artworks together with shocking materials. The combination of two oppositions is what shocks the viewers, who are not accustomed to see something so different from previous, experienced body of art. An example of such integrations of materials and images is the photograph *Piss Christ* by Andres Serrano showing the crucifix of Christ immersed in artist's urine (see fig. 1). This piece containing a Christian symbol and a disrespectful use of urine has been considered controversial. Materials used legitimately are part of artist's tactic, whose intention is to involve the viewer and cause reaction. In addition, the use of other materials such as rocks, honey, flowers, insects, or even

animals' dung in corporation with religious ideas are part of "shock art". These objects are natural, therefore, showing them creates the feeling of sacredness due to the connection to nature (282).

The form of performing art has an important effect on the level of the shock value. Each has its own power and needs to be suitable for art piece's aim. Body art is a form of art that raised controversy. Human body is in today's world a central topic of discussion. The issues of body size, shape, age, color, etc. 'attack' us from every side of society. As regarding the body, issues like sexual identity, mental and physical well-being, or the way of treating it, is frequently mentioned in "shock artworks". How impassive a viewer needs to be not to react to a shocking demonstration of human body? Controversy caused by displaying it in certain way emerges from the fact of viewing it, its meaning to us and the manner it is shown and treated in our culture (80). What shocks the public is the 'everyday occurrence of bodily processes and physical desires' (80). It turns out that we are shocked by daily actions and we are simply afraid of admitting it. An artwork showing the combinations of the human body, sexual identity and body liquid is Robert Mapplethorpe's 1977 photograph, *Jim and Tom, Sausalito*. This artwork, presenting a man urinating into another man's mouth, certainly caused controversy and confusion in the public (Freeland 7). The display of use of urine in such situation, without any context shocks and enters the area of morality. An example of this artwork demonstrates how today's "shock art" separates the viewer from the art world.

SHOCK TACTICS AS A DISINTERESTED ART DEVICE

For many, the idea of using shock tactics is clearly and strongly inappropriate. Their strongest argument is that a public that does not understand the artworks, cannot associate with it and as a result is alienated from the art world. Works by Serrano or Hirst, the leading

artists of the YBA, prove how “shock art” can confuse, offend, or hurt people and therefore be more distant.

Damien Hirst, one of the most important representatives of Young British Artists and controversial contemporary art, quickly became famous for provocative artworks. Present themes in his works include the uncertainty of human experience in life, love, death, loyalty and betrayal. He touches upon the topics of society’s illnesses, such as beliefs, meaning of life and existence. The human presence in his artworks is often represented by daily objects, for example clothes, tables, chairs or cigarettes. The importance of Hirst’s work lies in the way it is displayed. He chooses different media to show his message and that is one of his characteristics. Opposite to other modern artists Hirst uses dead animals as one way of creating the shock value.

Hirst’s *Away From the Flock* is a controversial piece (see fig. 2). Created in 1994 and displayed at the *Sensation* exhibition, it is a white lamb in a container filled with formaldehyde solution. Shockingly the actual lamb used to be a real animal, it is not artificially constructed. Showing Hirst’s main ideas, this work presented with simplicity, is straightforward for the viewer and therefore shocking and touching (McAdoo). The title of an artwork also increases the shock value. The sheep is a religious association to Christianity. Specifically the animal might represent a believer who turned away from the Church’s protection. However, it can be also interpreted as a human, who through his behavior and actions, left his beliefs and faith in Christ, for something negligible. The understanding of the title with relation to religion should be left for free interpretation of every individual.



Fig. 2. Hirst, Damien. *Away From the Flock*. 1994. Steel, glass, formaldehyde solution and lamb, Tate Collection, London and National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh. *Damien Hirst*. Web. 21 Sept. 2009.

As already discussed, “shock art” tends to use religious images or other aspects of faith in creating shock. This strategy shocks and as a result makes an artwork distant and unreachable. When analyzing Hirst’s *Away (...)*, we can see the use of symbols which easily connect with religion. Whether it was done with artist’s intention, the use of lamb, with a specific title and the way of displaying (container with formaldehyde solution), all create a sense of controversy in the viewer. An innocent animal used in such a way creates the feeling of compassion and at the same time anger.

Another example of “shock art” which alienates the spectators can be withdrawn from the work of Andres Serrano, an American photographer, born in 1950. Widely known for his controversial photographs of corpses, religious images, murder victims, homeless people, or Ku Klux Klan members, he is considered a “shock artist”, because of whom the scandal over government funding of controversial art started (Johnson). Serrano concentrates on the themes of religion and human state together with the use of “shock art” techniques. The combinations of religious images with body fluids lead to disgust. Menstrual blood, urine, semen or milk

displayed with images of holy figures are definitely an area of shock (Fusco). Some artworks of Serrano which made his person infamous include *Heaven and Hell*, *Ku Klux Klan* or the *Nomads* series of portraits (see fig. 3). However the artwork which raised the most discussion was surely *Piss Christ* from 1987 (Brenson).

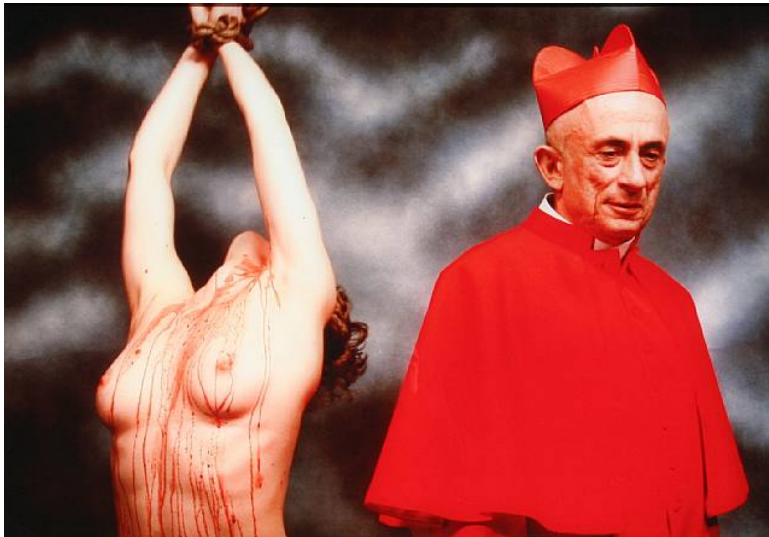


Fig. 3. Serrano, Andres. *Heaven and Hell*. 1984. Cibachrome, silicone, plexiglas, wooden frame. RoGallery.com Inventory Catalogue. *Artnet*. Web. 21 Sept. 2009.

The photograph presents a crucifix of Jesus Christ immersed in artist's urine. Its format is enormous for a photograph (about 60 × 40 cm). The technique used was Cibachrome, which is 'a color photograph that is glossy and rich in its colors' (Freeland 18). The artwork showing a crucifix submerged in urine is considered to be blasphemous and offending. Such work definitely alienates the viewers, who do not want to look at "art", which hurts their beliefs. For many, Serrano's photograph would not be considered even as art because it offends in such a great scale.

“SHOCK ART” TACTICS BEING PURPOSEFUL

While many are outraged by the use of shock tactics, others defend and even promote it. Taking a different look at the shock tactics used, we realize that they are done purposefully. Artists legitimately try to shock to raise controversy, which results in deeper analysis of specific work. People’s discussion makes an artwork successful. Furthermore work of “shock art” is nothing new as it appeared already in the past. “Shock art” being a legitimate tactic, is not meant just to be looked at but more information is necessary to understand and accept it.

As previously stated “shock art” tactics are purposeful and their aim is to bring attention to artworks. Although the controversy of the extreme brutality of many artworks at *Sensation* has been advertised by publicity, it still attracted the public to see the actual exhibition. The portrait of *Myra Hindley* by Marcus Harvey, showing Hindley’s face painted with handprints of children, raised numerous oppositions (see fig. 4). This would not be as surprising without knowing that Hindley and her lover Ian Brady tortured and killed five children in the area of Manchester in 1995. Viewers and mothers of the murdered children protested against the displayed images. The shock value created in this case has affected everyone. Showing a portrait of a murderer, who was widely recognized as the evil, brought up a lot of discussion. Was it right to display and remind the society of the immoral tragedy?



Fig. 4. Harvey, Marcus. *Myra*. 1997. Handprints. Royal Academy of Arts, London. *Saatchi Gallery*. Web. 21 Sept. 2009.

The shocked audience did not stop on protesting. One spectator ‘threw ink at it, after which it was removed, cleaned, and returned with a protective transparent sheet before it. (Naturally enough, the artistic fraternity took the attack as a tribute to the power of art: for no one attacks what is of no importance to him)’ (Dalrymple). The reaction of the viewers was considered as an act of art’s effect on the person, his feelings and beliefs. In this case the shock tactic was successful even though it alienated the public. “Shock art” is not just a display to be looked at, but it wants viewers’ reactions. Therefore, ‘Sensation was a success, as it aroused strong reactions in a public notoriously indifferent to contemporary art’ (Timms, Bradley and Hayward 8).

If we agree that shock tactics are legitimate another argument, in favor of using them, is that understanding or having insight into background information can influence our interpretations greatly. Referring again to *Piss Christ* is necessary, as the shock tactics used in this work can have an explanation and defend artist’s message. According to the art critic, Lucy Lippard, Serrano’s work can be partly defended if we have background information.

Lippard suggests, a three step analysis of an artwork is necessary to make. First, the *formal and material properties* are taken into consideration. The huge photograph itself has a glossy surface, which can be easily destroyed by fingerprints. When we look closer at the used urine, it appears as golden liquid, which creates a golden dust. According to Lippard, 'The small wood-and-plastic crucifix becomes virtually monumental as it floats, photographically enlarged, in a deep golden, rosy glow that is both ominous and glorious' (qtd. in Freeland 19). She suggests that the urine here, is not as important, but the effect it creates matters. Therefore if the title would not be mentioned possibly the viewers would accept the work, not even noticing the materials used. Following Lippard's analysis of the use of urine, it is significant to understand the real meaning of this liquid. Looking at the artist's background (he was raised according to Catholic beliefs), 'Serrano does not regard body fluids as shameful but as natural' (19). Informing an average viewer that in Catholicism, '(...) body fluids have been depicted for millennia as sources of religious power and strength' (19), maybe not as much controversy would have arouse. Serrano also stated that he wanted to use liquids similarly how a painter would use them, but here for the color real liquids would be used. Therefore, for red he would use blood and for golden yellow - urine, substances would be there for real, not only for representation (Casey).

Second step in defending Serrano's artwork by Lippard, is the content or the message of the artist. With controversy *Piss Christ* has created, Serrano explained that his intention was not to 'denounce religion but its institutions' (qtd. in Freeland 20). According to Lippard, it can be interpreted that the artist wanted to show how nowadays' culture is commercializing and devastating religion and its icons. When approaching his artwork with this direction, certainly many spectators would agree with artist's idea and would not consider it as morally wrong.

The last step Lippard takes in Serrano's photograph analysis is the context. This part is about the place an artwork takes in the Western art tradition compared to other pieces. As Serrano many times underlined, he associates himself with Spanish art and the Latin world, which is automatically related to Catholicism. Often the artist is compared with a Spanish painter Francisco Goya (21). This comparison suggests both artists created "shock art". In Serrano's case the shock alienated and disgusted the public, however Goya's paintings shocked but also educated.

Through above analysis of contemporary works, it is possible to state that modern art uses shock tactics legitimately. They catch viewers' attention resulting in a successful artwork. They involve and provoke. Interestingly, when we look at historical art there is a similarity. Therefore, third and final argument to prove "shock art" as legitimate strategy is its use in the past. When we look back for shocking images, created by humans, we can be amused by their amount. Looking back at the ancient Egyptians, who buried their emperors as mummies, with luxurious goods or the inhabitants of Jericho (settled northeast of Jerusalem) we can see the shocking images of death were already present. At Jericho, preserved human skulls have been found dating back to around 7000 BC (see fig. 5). Each discovered skull's 'nose cartilage had been reconstructed in plaster, and the eye-sockets were occupied by a pair of inset cowrie shells' (Spivey 261). This preservation of remains surprised because archeologists found smooth finish on the bottom of each skull, as if they were made for display. Looking back at the human's desire of seeing shocking images, it is noticeable that controversial art has not only been present nowadays. Looking at other examples of historical "shock artworks", the Aztec empire was also interested in fearing images of death and brutality, which are proved by the discovery of 'images of skulls, knives and ripped-out hearts' among this civilization.



Fig. 5. *Jericho Skulls*. 7000 BC. Human skulls covered with plaster and cowrie shells. Jordan Archaeological Museum, Amman. *The Skulls of Jericho*, PBS. Web. 21 Sept. 2009.

Artists in the Middle Ages are recognizable for the use of shocking images of death, devil, demons, blood or deformed creatures. As Christianity played an important role in the medieval society, the Church had control over the people. The Catholic Church used images of the Devil in contrast to saint figures. Through artworks Christian values were shown in opposition to the sinful life, which was represented by the Satan. He would appear as a man, animal or other creature, usually with imaginative features. ‘Since Satan’s physical appearance was never described in the Bible, images were often based on pagan horned gods, such as Pan and Dionysus, figures common to the religions Christianity sought to discredit or destroy’ (“Medieval Egg”). Many medieval artworks have been full of terrifying and fearful images, which were associated with religion. Again, we see that “shock art” combines religious representations with controversial visuals (here: the Devil). Is this an unconscious method of the artists? Analyzing more of the medieval paintings, the “shock art” features are noticeable again. The use of body fluids (blood) is common. Even the representations of certain animals have meaning. Toads, associated with the Biblical plagues, ‘were considered

demonic and characterized as unclean. Also, since toads eject poison that irritates the skin and eyes, they were used in Christian art as a symbol of death and the underworld' ("Medieval Egg"). Medieval religious art consisted of numerous symbols associated with Bible's teachings. Once again the combination of religious images with shocking symbols shows the tactics used by "shock art" even in the past. These artworks created fear causing people to obey certain laws. They showed what was unacceptable and what behavior was demanded.

Further analyzing "shock art" from the past, we come across the work of a Spanish painter from 18th-19th century Francisco Goya. At one moment of his life he encountered a physical and mental breakdown, which affected his productions. During this time he created the *Black Paintings* One of the famous paintings from this series is *Saturn Devouring His Son*, painted around 1820-1823 (see fig. 6). The painting relates to a Roman myth of Saturn, who ate his children. The scene depicted by the painter shows a man with expressive features, which make him look like a god. His goggled eyes and wide open mouth create a feeling of shock and disgust. The main figure rich in gestures and expression, holds in his hands a smaller figure, which with closer look turns out to be without his head and arm. The shocking realization of what the artist painted then leads the spectator's eyes on the action of god Saturn, who is in fact eating his son. This astonishing scene is created with the expressiveness of the main figure and his action.



Fig. 6. Goya, Francisco. *Saturn Devouring His Son*. 1820 – 1823. Oil on plaster. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid. *Museo Nacional del Prado*. Web. 20 Sept. 2009.

It is considered that Goya's *Black Paintings*, are among the most disturbing in all of art history (Freeland 24). Why is *Saturn* categorized as "shock art"? The presentation of an expressive figure, with strong physical features in an act of consuming his own son can be disturbing and cause mixed emotions. According to Freeland this work 'depicts the graphic and bloody dismemberment of a cannibalistic infanticide' (24). As fearful as it sounds, this piece shocks with its image. The fact that a human is eating a human, additionally father eating his child is an unacceptable situation we. Goya's aim of showing violence and shocking his audience worked out. However, he 'depicted violence (...) in order to condemn it' (26). The painter tries to teach a lesson, showing what is not accepted. Though the act of infant cannibalism was not exactly what Goya wanted to prevent people from, rather he wanted to warn them against any kind of violence present in the society which does not lead

to any right conclusions. Goya's painting similarly to a contemporary artwork, has connections which tie "shock art" in different time eras. The use of sacred themes or images and body fluids like blood are present. Even though there is a difference of few centuries between the artwork, we are still able to depict similarities that artists used to create shock. Similarly to contemporary artists, those in the past also used controversy to provoke the viewers and create some reaction in them. Although we are not able to say if the audience's response was at the same scale as nowadays (due to no reference about exhibitions, etc.), it surely had an effect on it.

CONCLUSION

When comparing both contemporary and historical artworks, a conclusion can be drawn that although the time barrier of few centuries separated the different art worlds, the shock value was still present. Surprisingly artists, some unconsciously, used similar methods to create controversy. The combination of religious images taken out of their context generated high levels of shock, which in contemporary world led to ban exhibitions and protesting. In both cases, the shock was as enormous that it caused a response, which probably was the biggest success for the artist. Although we see "shock art" was not our days' invention, as offending as it is, it does not seem to stop. Controversy in art continuously provokes the public, which is no longer able to identify with it, and in consequence moves away from contemporary art. Audience facing horrifying art cannot get any closer to it, instead moves away. Artists legitimately continue to raise not understandable questions through offending images. However, by doing so the people react to their work and interact with it. Nevertheless it is possible to state that "shock art" alienates the public as its forms are impossible for average people to fully understand. It seems as this type of art can be appreciated by people educated in art and therefore understood. Strategies used by "shock

artists” create a boundary that separates viewers from presented artworks, who cannot appreciate aesthetically works which offend them and are full of disgust.

In my opinion artists will continue creating “shock art”, as it will always bring attention to the viewers and as a result success to the artwork. As have been noticed the shock tactics were used in the past but it seems that nowadays the reaction is greater because the presented images are taken out of their context resulting in confusion. However, is it right to shock through such tactics, which offend so many of us? Is there a boundary that should not be crossed? Maybe it is safer not to show certain images? But if we follow these ideas maybe art would not be anymore what it is suppose to be? The will of self expression through any mean, is what artists should follow. Nevertheless tolerance needs to be presented and others’ emotions should not be played around with. As observed, oftentimes many artworks’ shock value is gained not by the quality of the work but only by what it shows. This should not be the case because even if it is “shock art” its quality of technique needs to be of a high level and worth at least considering to be part of world’s canon of greatest artworks.

Works Cited

- Brenson, Michael. "Review/Art; Andres Serrano: Provocation And Spirituality." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 07 Dec. 1989. Web. 12 June 2009.
 <<http://www.nytimes.com/1989/12/08/arts/review-art-andres-serrano-provocation-and-spirituality.html?scp=16&sq=Serrano&st=cse>>.
- Casey, Michael. "Piss Christ and the Serrano Controversy - A Theological Defence." *Piss Christ and the Serrano Controversy - A Theological Defence*. Australian Catholic University, n.d. Web. 5 June 2009.
 <<http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/staffhome/dacasey/Serrano.htm>>.
- Dalrymple, Theodore. "Trash, Violence, and Versace: But Is It Art?" *City Journal*, Winter 1998. Web. 25 Sept. 2009. <http://www.city-journal.org/html/8_1_urbanities-trash.html>.
- "Damien Hirst Exhibition to Be Shown in Kiev." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 23 Apr. 2009. Web. 5 Sept. 2009.
 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2009/apr/23/damien-hirst-kiev-exhibition>>.
- Freeland, Cynthia A. *But Is It Art?: An Introduction to Art Theory*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001. Print.
- Fusco, Coco. "Shooting the Klan: An Interview with Andres Serrano." *Community Arts Network*. N.p., Sept. 2002. Web. 13 Sept. 2009.
 <http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/2002/09/shooting_the_kl.php>

Johnson, Ken. "Andres Serrano 'America'" *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 18 Dec. 2003. Web. 12 June 2009. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/12/19/arts/art-in-review-andres-serrano-america.html>>.

Robertson, Jean, and Craig McDaniel. *Themes of Contemporary Art: Visual Art after 1980*. New York: Oxford UP, 2005. Print.

Mcadoo, D. "Damien Hirst: Fun for the Whole Family" *The Mass Media, Massachusetts*. 2 March 2005. Web. 19 Sept. 2009. <<http://media.www.umassmedia.com/media/storage/paper445/news/2005/02/03/Arts/Damien.Hirst-851496.shtml>>

Requiem, Damien Hirst. Summer 2009. Major Retrospective. Pinchuk Art Center, Kiev. Exhibition.

"Sensation Sparks New York Storm." *BBC News*. BBC, 23 Sept. 1999. Web. 12 June 2009. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/455902.stm>>.

Spivey, Nigel Jonathan. *How Art Made the World*. London: BBC, 2005. Print.

"Medieval Egg Tempera Painting :: The Devil and Demons in Medieval Art." *Medieval Egg Tempera Painting :: The Devil and Demons in Medieval Art*. N.p., n.d. Web. 12 June 2009. <<http://www.temperaworkshop.com/history/demons.htm>>.

Timms, R., A. Bradley & V. Hayward. *Young British Art: The Saatchi Decade*. Booth-Clibborn Editions, London, 1999. Print.