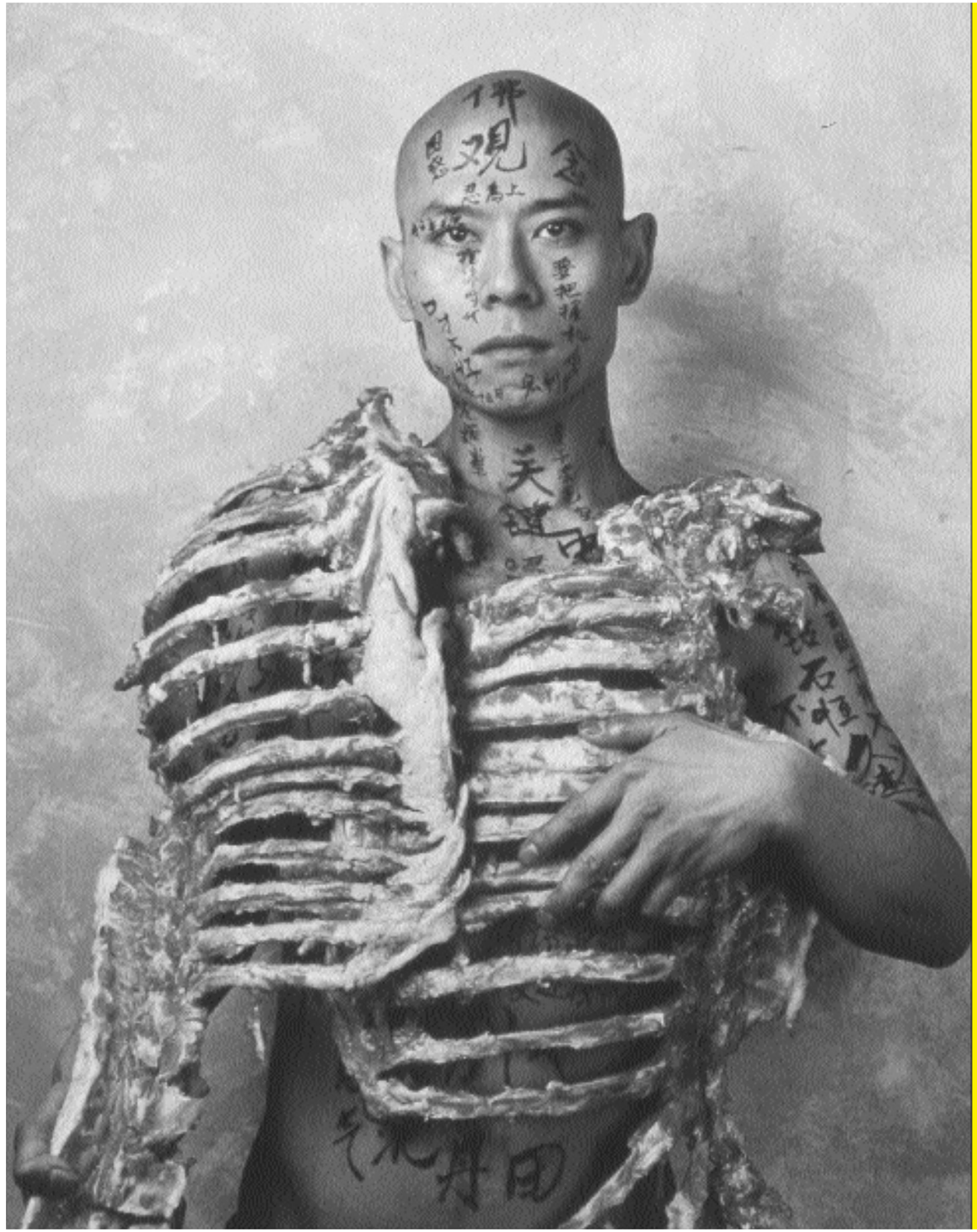

Shock Value:

THE COLLECTOR AS PROVOCATEUR?

BY REENA JANA

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Kent Logan is burly, clean-cut and grey-haired—the farthest thing you could imagine from a gold-chain-wearing sleazeball or a death-obsessed goth. In fact, the 57-year-old usually sports a preppy coat and tie. They go with his patrician bearing, which resembles that of some retired investment banker.

Which is what he happens to be. Yet this particular patrician has become associated with some of the most sexually explicit and graphically violent works in the contemporary art world. Consider "Lonesome Cowboy" by Takashi Murakami, a giant, cartoony statue of a blond, blue-eyed young man, rendered in the Japanese drawing style known as "anime"—with an oversized penis ejaculating a swirling rope of sperm. Or "Bullet Hole" by Mat Collishaw, a close-up photograph of a fatal head wound.

You get the picture. Logan, who primarily resides in the San Francisco Bay Area, owns both. And while he says he doesn't have an agenda to buy "shock art," his tastes tend toward in-your-face works that, if they were movies, would be classified as hard-core porn or snuff films. He's making a name for himself as a leading collector of such work; his holdings are vast enough to prompt *San Francisco Chronicle* art critic Kenneth Baker to state, "I don't know another private collection as heavy on 'shock art' as Logan's is."

When asked why his tastes veer toward the blatantly gory or overtly sexual, Logan doesn't attempt to deny that he's interested in shock art. But he does use predictably general terms to "defend" his collection, as if aware that such a collecting strategy may need a defense.

"I have always sought out art that faces contemporary issues," he says. "The nature of contemporary art is that it isn't necessarily pretty."

In other words, collecting habits like Logan's reflect the old idea of *le bourgeoisie* needing a little *épatement*. Logan likes to draw a line between his tastes and what he believes are those of the status quo.

"The majority of people in general like to see pretty things when they think of what art should be. But I believe there is a better dialogue when work is unpretty," he says. "To my mind, art doesn't fulfill its function unless there's a dialogue started."

Indeed, if shock art can be defined, it's art that produces a visceral, often unpleasant, reaction, a reaction that prompts people to talk, even if at first just to share their unease. The shocked response is the political/aesthetic purpose of the work, confronting viewers with what they normally might not wish to witness. But the shock also functions to promote the artwork. Any public outcry or media buzz validates the artwork—its undeniable impact, its effectiveness at confrontation. But it also helps to market the work by spreading the "shock," increasing the work's notoriety through word-of-mouth and thus increasing its value.

Thanks to this self-validating, self-perpetuating phenomenon and to collectors like Logan, shock art has become among the most valuable and visible work of the late 20th and early 21st century, and it is edging its way into the art-historical canon. Not only does it sell for large sums at auction and at galleries, it has made its way into major museums as a result of Logan and his peers—the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art alone has received 300 works from Logan. Shock-art collectors have become so influential that they're

even opening their own museums, not just donating their holdings to established institutions. Charles Saatchi of "Sensation" infamy has a private museum in London to display his acquisitions. Logan is building a 6,000-square-foot gallery in Vail, Colo., near one of his homes.

Logan is hardly an extreme or isolated figure in all this. He is representative of the entire shock-art trend, personifying the way collectors have become a major force not only in shaping the market for shock art, but even in defining shock art. This is something of a new cultural and financial role for the collector—the collector as curator, showman, entrepreneur and provocateur all at once. Logan is only one of the more headline-grabbing of the many collectors who have holdings heavy with shock art and who regularly make the annual roster of *ARTnews* magazine's Top 200 collectors. Other shock patrons include:

—Charles Saatchi, the British advertising magnate whose collection provided the controversial works shown in the "Sensation" exhibition that drew so much attention at the Royal Academy of Art in London and the Brooklyn Museum of Art. He is known worldwide for his patronage of "daring" work ranging from the elephant-dung-decorated "Holy Virgin Mary" by Chris Ofili to the nude mannequins by the Chapman Brothers that feature mutant children whose facial features are reshaped to look like genitalia.

—Peter Norton, the Santa Monica software multi-millionaire. Norton makes it very clear that he and his wife support young "cutting-edge" artists such as Peter Saul (whose "Ethel Rosenberg in the Electric Chair" could almost pun on "shock art" when it comes to political provocation) and Nan Goldin, who photographs strung-out addicts (often nude and in pre- or post-coital situations) in seedy motels and fleabag apartments. Other artists, such as Alexis Rockman and Haim Steinbach, may not deal primarily in "taboo" themes or approaches, but the Nortons collect the individual works of theirs that do. In fact, the couple's collection of erotically graphic art is extensive enough to have figured prominently in a *New York Times* story on the nascent Museum of Sex in Manhattan, a recipient of some of their works.

—Norman Stone, a Bay Area psychologist, and his wife, Nora. They focus on erotic art with such zeal that their cache has been dubbed "the penis collection" in art-world circles. They own a silkscreen by Jeff Koons called "Red Butt" that depicts the artist having anal sex with his ex-wife, La Cicciolina, an Italian porn-starlet and former member of Italy's Parliament. The Nortons were also among the first to purchase Gilbert and George's shit and piss series, which featured the British artists in acts of defecation and urination. And their collection includes now-classic examples of modern art such as a pair of potholders that resemble a vagina and a phallus created by Marcel Duchamp.

The name Marcel Duchamp brings up a common defense of shock art: There would seem to be little that's truly new in artists' offending the public. Shock-art patrons argue that the works in their collections are very much in the well-established, avant-garde or revolutionary line. Modernism in particular—and many of the subsequent "isms" of the 20th century from dadaism to futurism to surrealism—was expressly predicated on the idea of breaking with the past, upsetting conventions and redefining what was, or was not, art. Precedents can be found from early 20th-century artists such as Duchamp, with his grimy, used urinal "sculpture," or Joseph Beuys, who declared that stomach-turning globs of fat were art. Even Picasso's landmark "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon" caused a stir in 1907, not just for its radically new style of cubism, but for its reported subject of whores in a brothel.

As David Ross, director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, says, "A primary tenet of modernism is to reunite art and life. Art is no longer a separate, hermetic world, outside of real life. Any aspect of the world, including sexuality or death, can or should be a subject to an artist."

The idea of *collecting* the freakish or disturbing, too, has its own long tradition, connected to the very roots of the modern museum. In the 17th and 18th centuries, wealthy European collectors such as Peter the Great and Dutch anatomist Frederick Ruysch owned and displayed such prize curiosities as a

baby's head suspended in alcohol or geological tableaux fashioned from human gallstones and kidney stones. These assemblages of anatomical oddities—called "cabinets of wonder" or "cabinets of curiosities"—were perfectly respectable and indicated an interest in the natural sciences, biology, anatomy and botany.

Highlighting this historical continuity, a show of works from Logan's collection opened earlier this year at the California College of Arts and Crafts. Entitled "A Contemporary Cabinet of Curiosities: Selections from the Vicki and Kent Logan Collection," it included "Paul (The Twelve Disciples)," Damien Hirst's skinned bull's head under glass, plus other morbid works such as Katarina Fritsch's unglazed porcelain skull.

One thing that *is* new about today's shock art, however, is the prominence and activity of collector-promoters such as the Logans. They have taken their cue, in part, from Hirst's cheeky curating success with the now-famous "Freeze" exhibition in 1988 in London's Docklands—which instigated the "Young British Artist" phenomenon of the '90s and has become a model for alternative galleries looking for a media splash. Following that prototype, today's collectors have been instrumental in promulgating shock works, providing (or provoking) media context and shaping an often-outraged public reception.

Logan, in fact, argues that it is today's collector who has the real power to provoke thought. He or she can do it more effectively than any artist or curator can.

"Unlike an artist who tries to make a statement alone," says Logan, "we are able to make important statements by offering a broader context in terms of an issue, like an extreme political stance. It's the collector who has the unique opportunity to stand back from the trees and look at the forest."

Indeed, Logan wishes that more people would acknowledge him and his wealthy peers for what they are doing, for the risks they take that they underwrite with their own cash. He believes that the most underappreciated role in today's art world is that of the collector and his or her checkbook.

"Frankly, we're the ones making the most important statements," Logan says. "We make statements with our own money. A curator doesn't put up his or her own money. . . By definition, curators can work only in consensus with others at the museum. But in terms of deciding what controversial contemporary art is deemed important or, for that matter, unimportant or too taboo or controversial, it's the collector who takes the big risk and makes the biggest decision."

In other words, if an artist, alone in his or her studio, breaks a taboo and there's no one there to hear it, did the taboo really break? According to Logan, it's only when the private collector displays and *positions* that artwork before the public that it truly has any impact, that it truly even exists. If shock art doesn't provoke public response, it's not shock art. And that public reaction, Logan argues, generally is initiated only by the kind of exposure and media placement that a prominent, savvy collector can gain for it.

But there are weaknesses in Logan's argument.

First, it's simply not true that only private collectors have been daring enough to break taboos on a high-profile stage. The Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, to take just one example, sponsored the notorious 1994 "needle" performance by Ron Athey. Steel needles were woven through his scalp and used to pierce his cheeks. He also carved designs into another performer's back, blotted the blood with paper and then hung the paper over the audience—causing a heated public controversy over AIDS and infected blood.

Even so, Walker executive director Kathy Halbreich said at the time, "The reputation of this institution allows us to tackle difficult and topical issues and, in fact, we have a responsibility to do so. We raise these issues through artistic endeavor and I believe strongly that this community is uniquely able to grapple, as the staff does, with the important questions raised by this performance."

In short, the Athey performance wasn't a one-shot deal: it was part of an institutional commitment. The Walker did not subsequently shy away from "problematic" art. The next year, the museum exhibited 14 of the artists who would later become part of "Sensation"—with none of the media ruckus that would greet the Brooklyn exhibition.

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Second, shock art, despite its eyebrow-raising qualities, clearly isn't that risky a financial venture, even for wealthy collectors who don't have to worry about alienating funders. To buy shock art today represents a rather conservative collecting strategy if one looks at the economics of such work. It consistently sells for and is valued at high dollar amounts. Indeed, this situation led Lynne Munson, author of "Exhibitionism: Art in an Era of Intolerance," to conclude on Salon.com that "shock art is the safest kind of art that an artist can go into the business of making today."

Given the prices that these works have been going for at auction, it's hard to argue. Christie's recently sold a silkscreen of Koons' "Red Butt" for $369,000, far above its estimated value of $150,000 to $200,000. At the same sale, Lisa Yuskavage's "Tit Heaven," a soft-porn-like watercolor of a female nude and fruit, sold for $7,638—which, while it didn't come near the $50,000 that Yuskavage's signature portraits of buxom, naked women often fetch, was still above its estimated value of $5,000 to $7,000. Mind you, these are young, living artists. By creating shock art, they have already been able to establish themselves as brand names and good investments.

Third, rather than being transgressive, images of explicit sex and violence—even self-consciously *ironic* images of sex and violence—are hardly foreign to popular culture. They're available on any magazine stand, in any stroll through Chelsea's galleries, and on many movie screens and web sites. Hirst's sliced-up animals in formaldehyde have even gone mainstream: They were referenced in "The Cell," the Jennifer Lopez psycho-horror film, directed by Tarsem Singh.

In other words, rather than being truly disruptive of convention, rather than being difficult to explain or convey through mass media, shock art looks awfully camera-ready. This movement that has touted its provocative iconoclasm, its outrageousness, its offbeat *difference* from the culture-at-large, often seems very much at home in the kind of carny sideshow that media attention and marketing can produce—and that some artists and collectors encourage. Kenneth Baker, the *Chronicle* art critic, notes that though shock art purportedly represents the marginalized or repressed, he has never found it to express such culturally "marginalized values" as "tenderness, generosity or objectivity as an aspect of love." Instead, says Baker, its concentration on the scandalous seems less like an interest in the truly taboo and more like "a desperate effort to re-imbue art with something like universal import."

Scandal can alienate or offend, but obviously, it draws attention. Shock pieces (and the promotions surrounding their exhibitions) have *focused* the entire tradition of revolutionary art to this single point: goading a public response. Those raised eyebrows on viewers' faces represent a strong, unambiguous audience reaction—something most artworks never elicit. Unlike other forms of contemporary painting, photography, sculpture or performance art, which may take years to acquire an audience or may require some study or reading to appreciate fully, shock art is often *designed* to be accessible to anyone. It doesn't take much reflection or refinement to grasp the implications of a photo of a fatal head wound.

The media notoriety that such works provoke—as thin or uninformed as it may be—only underscores this easy-access immediacy. The raised eyebrow is a response that the entire media machine is now geared to respond to, to cash in on, to draw into the general cultural chatter. The scandals that have roared around such works and the controversies about sex, violence and public funding of art often drive the news coverage out of the arts sections. When these controversies hit the front pages, the op-ed sections and the evening news, the discussion is removed from knowledgeable critics and patrons—and is shaped into simpler, more convenient narratives of scandal and outrage. It becomes a *news event*, a status few non-shock-art exhibitions ever gain. This is what happened with "Sensation" in 1999, the NEA "culture wars" throughout the '90s and Hans Haacke's work (with its Nazi references) at the 2000 Whitney Biennial.

Collectors such as Logan or Nora Stone decry or dismiss these media uproars. “Why can’t the press give more context to the subject matter of ‘taboo’ works of art?” Stone asks. “They have such an opportunity to get the public thinking about cultural and social issues—beyond the controversy of the work itself.”

“I understand the media has a formidable task,” Logan says, “which is to take sound-bite reactions to Ofili’s work at the Brooklyn Museum or the Haacke at the Whitney and spin them into something sensational in time for a Tuesday deadline. Why should the press be interested in a broader historical or thematic context for these works? It’s not their job.”

Yet it’s hard not to see the collectors and their associated institutions as more than a little hypocritical here. After all, they have a financial interest in gaining the public spotlight. These works expressly solicit strong responses and Logan himself argues that this discussion-provoking attribute is the chief validation of their “unpretty” value. Consider the exhibition at San Francisco’s Haines Gallery of many of the same Young British Artists who appeared in “Sensation”—an exhibition titled “Now It’s My Turn to Scream.” The title’s open invitation to respond was accepted: An anonymous package filled with what appeared to be rotting animal flesh was mailed to the gallery. It was taken to be a protest of Hirst’s “Paul (The Twelve Disciples).”

If we are to buy Logan’s point about the collector’s curatorial power, isn’t it then the collector’s *responsibility* to help provide this “broader historical or thematic context”? Sadly, today’s collectors seem to focus on what can’t be called anything but scandalmongering—promoting the more *outré* aspects of pieces in their high-profile collections by choosing provocative venues (the Museum of Sex) or by agreeing to controversy-stirring exhibition titles (“Sensation,” “Now It’s My Turn to Scream”) that take emphasis away from other powerful elements of the artists’ work.

Rather than providing a more fitting, more explanatory context for individual works, shock-art exhibitions can cast paintings, sculptures and installations in an inappropriate light, lending them a pornographic or bloody

hue they don’t deserve. Jenny Saville’s stunning nude portraits of women, for example, convey a virtuosic handling of paint and a profound, dispassionate understanding of light and of ordinary, fleshy human anatomy. They serve as a comment on how women consider other women’s bodies and force us to examine the differences between the viewpoint of a female portraitist versus a male one. Yet because Saville’s vast canvases were included in the “Sensation” show—with its signs warning viewers that the exhibition may induce nausea—such remarkable nude studies may now be lumped with “shocking,” exploitative images of women.

The huckster atmosphere prompted by such exhibitions may limit or misrepresent some artists or their works. Art critic Kenneth Baker argues, for example, that Hirst’s self-conscious self-promotion distracts from his purpose. The vitrine of Hirst’s “Paul (The Twelve Disciples)” is reminiscent of an elegant Sol LeWitt cube, and the work can be seen as a poetic comment on our contemporary attempts to distance ourselves from the gruesome realities of death and decay. Instead, thanks to “Sensation” and “Now It’s My Turn to Scream,” it becomes an unappetizing hunk of bloody flesh behind glass.

Logan and his peers have recast the way their holdings are viewed in shows that seem to aspire to no more than the exploitation of the general public’s repressed libidos and morbid curiosities. Unfortunately, they incite the same lowest-common-denominator instinct that causes one to gawk at a centerfold or a car crash. In a way, these collectors have indeed overshadowed the artists in setting the stage and defining these works. Irritatingly, however, by concentrating on marketing such pieces as shocking, by playing the role of provocateur, the collectors take away from these objects their identities as more complex, sophisticated works of art.

That may be the most shocking act of all.