The Arts and Public Contestation in American History

Presentation for a Symposium at Princeton University’s Center for Arts and Cultural Policy Studies. Oct. 11, 2002

By Michael Kammen
Cornell University

My purpose in this paper is two-fold. I have attempted to develop a tentative and informal typology of the diverse stimuli and provocations for public conflict in the United States concerning art or “the arts,” very broadly defined. Doing so has involved the compilation of a list of almost eighty contested “episodes” ranging from 1842 to the present and then trying to discern patterns with particular regard for chronology and phasing. I am, after all, a historian by vocation, and consequently the rhythms of periodicity and change seem quite important to me.

On the “humanistic side” I have opted to provide mini-narratives for an exemplary selection of these episodes in an effort to illustrate the broad and diverse range of conflicts that have arisen. I have deliberately avoided offering accounts of those conflicts most likely to be familiar to the greatest number of auditors, such as photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe (“The Perfect Moment”) in 1989-91, “The West as America” (1991), and “The Last Act” (the Enola Gay controversy in 1995-96). The case studies I have selected are likely to be familiar to some of you but perhaps not all. In any event, taken together they are certainly representative of the historical diversity of art-related provocations and the kinds that have been most persistent.

An approximate “sequence of emergence,” as I see it, acknowledging some important exceptions and deviations, might move along the following lines.
1. Monuments and memorials: issues of site selection and architectural style. Greenough’s *George Washington* (1842); the Washington Monument obelisk; and the Lincoln Memorial.

2. Issues involving “decency,” nudity, and appropriateness for kids. Thomas Eakins and nude models (1886); the circus; the movie Production Code (1930-34).

3. Ideological challenges to American values, esp. from the left. Kaweah Cooperative Commonwealth (later 1880s); Diego Rivera mural with Lenin’s portrait at Rockefeller Center (1933).


5. Nostalgia or sentimentalization of special places as “sacred space” or “shrines.” Jefferson Memorial at the Tidal Basin; Hirshhorn collection and museum (1966-74); Holocaust Museum; Manassas battlefield site and Disney’s America. Also, where to locate new national museums: Holocaust, Native American, African American.

6. Radically innovative architecture located in “inappropriate” places or belonging to inappropriate “entities.” The Gwathmey House in Amagansett, N.Y. (1965) and the Theory Center (Rhodes Hall) at Cornell; the Gropius House in Lincoln, Mass. (1938) taken over by the SPNEA in the 1990s; the Boott Cotton Mills Museum in the Lowell National Historical Park taken over by the National Park Service in 1978 (the first urban industrial site to become a part of the National Park Service, which resisted the idea for years but is now quite proud of the innovation).
7. Public money (NEA) in support of offensive or unacceptable art by
individuals. Erica Jong (1974); Serrano; Mapplethorpe.

finally achieves a permanent home at the BMA in October 2002; Carolee Schneemann,
*Interior Scroll* (1975) used her nude body as a “stripped-down, undecorated, human
object.” This performance art culminated in her reading to a feminist audience a
selection of texts, titled *Cezanne, She Was a Great Painter*, and then from a poem she
had secreted in her vagina and unfurled as a narrow scroll as she stood before the group.

9. What belongs in a “serious” museum, and why? “Harlem on My Mind” at the
Met (1969); “All in the Family” artifacts at NMAH (1978-79); Helga pictures by
Andrew Wyeth at the National Gallery of Art (1987); motorcycles at the Guggenheim
Museum (1998). What are museums for? What is the “proper” role for a museum:
uplift? education? entertainment? How have their missions changed? The implications
of programmatic populism for museums.

Serra’s *Tilted Arc* (1981-89), and Leicester’s *Flying Pigs* (1985-88). The real issue here:
who has and who should have cultural authority in a democracy? Fine arts commissions?
The “people”? How defined? Consulted in what way? Note the ultimate success of
Andrew Leicester and Judy Baca!

11. Post-cold war patriotic responses to iconoclastic art and history: “West as

I wish that time and expertise allowed me to make trans-national comparisons, but perhaps some of you will be able to help in that regard. At least a few of the conflicts I have chosen to highlight do have an international dimension, so there should eventually be some opportunity for comparisons. At this stage, however, I feel that we very much need to concentrate our focus upon diachronic as well as synchronic domestic comparisons because a number of these “infamous” episodes were controversial at some (often just one) American venue but not at others. Mapplethorpe’s “The Perfect Moment,” for example, caused no controversy in Philadelphia, Chicago, and Hartford (where administrators took pains to warn parents with special signage), but created very serious problems in Washington, D.C., and Cincinnati. The State Department-sponsored exhibition of recent American art, titled “Advancing American Art” (1946-47), prompted no protests abroad but outraged Congress and others at home because it seemed wildly unconventional and even unpatriotic to some. {Novelist and poet Erica Jong [Fear of Flying] could read her work in many public settings in 1974 but was banned by the Smithsonian Institution after being invited to participate in a series of readings by talented women writers.} Sally Mann’s nude and provocative photographs of her children, titled “Immediate Family” (1992), were found disturbing as “kiddie porn” in some locations but not others.

Consequently, without precluding the desirability of comparing the responses to national monuments and memorials, such as the Holocaust museums in Washington and
Berlin, we still need to know much more than we do now about why certain sites and locations supply a negative reaction while others stimulate little or no controversy in response to the very same exhibition or proposed structure. A photographic exhibition titled *Back of the Big House: The Cultural Landscape of the Plantation* was abruptly cancelled in 1996 when African-American employees at the Library of Congress took offense, yet the same show was quite acceptable when installed at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Public Library a mile away, and at several other settings as well.

Within the United States, Washington, D.C. emerges historically as the most important and critical venue, and for fairly obvious reasons: Congressional oversight is most readily accessible there, and the nation’s capital is the most likely place to be chosen for monuments, memorials, and museums that commemorate famous events and prominent individuals. These matters are most easily politicized in Washington. As sculptor Carol Anthony quipped in 1974: “In Washington, they’d have a controversy over the sky. There never has been a historical building here that hasn’t aroused disagreement” (Hyams, 188). It might not be a “stretch” to suggest that more major conflicts have arisen in Washington and New York City, as different as those two places may be, than in all other American locations combined.

It is worth noting, I believe, how few of these conflicts were avoidable (unless nothing whatever had been planned.) Most of them, in fact, seem not merely predictable but virtually inevitable, particularly works intended to be “public art,” such as memorials or modern sculpture destined to fill civic space. A number of them at least turned out to provide some sort of positive learning experience. In most instances, some kind of
lesson was learned even though the lessons were not always well remembered or clearly transmitted to other, subsequent situations where they might have been instructive. Many of these controversies have involved museums, of course, especially in recent decades. I think that several important developments help to highlight and explain that connection.

Museums are no longer merely about display, as they were from the time of Charles Willson Peale’s Philadelphia museum in 1800 until approximately the 1960s. The people who now run them feel a desire—sometimes even a sense of obligation—to contextualize and explain what is being presented. That means becoming more interpretive and didactic, at least to some degree, and when that happens, disapproval and disagreement from various sources are more likely to occur. When the director of the Jewish Museum in New York City needed to defend “Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art” early in 2002, she asserted the following: “This is art with a message, political art, so we’re not talking about aesthetic issues, by and large. It’s art that provokes discussion. We’re reporting on this trend, we’re interpreting the work” (NYT, 1/29/02). Art historian and critic Carol Duncan asserts that art museums function as sites for secular rituals. When they are disrupted by controversy, a dark shadow is cast upon the integrity of museums and those who run them. {Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums [London: Routledge, 1995].}

Moreover, the increased educational role of museums has coincided with a growing need by many directors to enhance attendance. Their willingness to mount or accept from other institutions shows likely to elicit potentially volatile responses has contributed quite significantly to the striking increase in contestation during recent years.
Some directors, though by no means all, have certainly known that they were risking (if not courting) conflict while seeking to augment visitation figures. (James Ballinger, director of the Phoenix Art Museum, was quite candid on this score when *Old Glory*, a presentation of 60 American flags as art, was featured in 1996, including Kate Millet’s *The American Dream Gone to Pot* (1970), a flag draped in and on a toilet bowl.) The most flagrant examples, perhaps, occurred in 1998-99 with the exhibition titled *Sensation* at the Brooklyn Museum of Art and *Art of the Motorcycle* at the Guggenheim in Manhattan. (The Royal Academy in London was two million pounds in debt when it planned *Sensation* in 1997. There surely was method in their madness.)

What can happen (and in fact has) when museum-related controversies become politicized and hence compounded by the exigencies of international competition? There have been numerous incidents and episodes, some of which are listed in the appendix (see nos. 23, 26-27, and 32) and occurred at approximately the mid-point of the twentieth century. Abstract art in the U.S. antedated the cold war by several decades, of course, and Abstract Expressionism had its genesis prior to 1947. But the Museum of Modern Art’s hesitant initial response in terms of acquisitions and exhibitions aroused resentment and harsh criticism from artists doing so-called “advanced art” at the time (1948-55). By 1956-57, however, when MoMA became notably favorable and along with USIA began organizing exhibitions of Abstract Expressionism abroad, criticism mounted increasingly from “realist” painters like Edward Hopper and many others who resented what seemed overwhelming favoritism and unbalanced neglect of representational art. Moreover, accusations were heard from radicals that Abstract Expressionism was manipulatively
deemed an “art indicative of freedom” and therefore had become a tool of U.S. propaganda in the cold war.

The general public was not fully (perhaps just partially) aware of all this at the time, but it certainly did pay attention when *Life*, *Time*, and other mass media “outlets” ran numerous feature stories early in the 1950s proclaiming Jackson Pollock, for example, one of the greatest among twentieth-century artists. Seeing the images of his work reproduced (sometimes upside down!) left the public quite perplexed and confused about the swiftly changing criteria for “great art.” Many regarded the latest “fads” as some sort of a hoax or bad joke, and subsequently felt embarrassed (or bewildered, at the least) when they learned that such art was being sent abroad as “highly representative” of American culture. By 1958, however, work by American artists achieved international pre-eminence and influence. As an added touch of unintended irony, despite all of the media attention that the “advanced artists” received, their work did not actually sell very well for most of the decade following 1948. That began to change dramatically during the 1960s, despite the swift ascent of Pop Art.

All of which made for a highly ambiguous, unstable, and conflicted situation in the art market and within the art world. Quite a few of the most prominent art critics, such as John Canaday of the *New York Times*, remained negative about abstract art throughout this period; and a figure like Clement Greenberg, who had done so much to promote “advanced art” by American painters and sculptors, found his influence waxing and waning so wildly by the later 1950s that he largely stopped writing exhibition reviews and withdrew to the comforting cover of psychoanalysis and the spectacle of public fistfights with artists (Willem de Kooning), critics, and former lovers (artist Helen
Frankenthaler). Needless to say, his star rose once again during the 1960s, though his
enmities endured, above all with rival critic Harold Rosenberg. Their polemical
exchanges persisted and prompted others in the art world to take sides. Controversies
between the two men caused quite a stir, especially in the mid-sixties (Rubenfeld,
Greenberg, ch. 14).

Suppose we now ask: When did willful (rather than unintended) acts of artistic
provocation begin? I would begin with the years 1932-34 when Hollywood studios,
desperate to please the Depression public and meet their own budgetary needs,
knowingly plunged ahead with films that emphasized gory gangster violence and
sexuality. Diego Rivera’s decision in 1933 to put the visage of Lenin prominently on a
mural in the heart of Rockefeller Center was certainly no accident! He was under
intense pressure from the communist party to “shape up” and épater le bourgeois. We
can point to subsequent episodes such as Andrew Wyeth’s watercolors from the Helga
series displayed at the National Gallery of Art in 1987, which prompted derision aimed at
director J. Carter Brown; but the frequency of exhibitions predictably poised to provoke
anger or dissent did not really intensify until the late 1980s and early 1990s with
photographic displays of work by Sally Mann and Robert Mapplethorpe, with so-called
“performance art” by radicals like Karen Finley and Ron Athey, and works that seemed
either unpatriotic, anti-religious, or racially insensitive, such as the slave auction
conducted at Colonial Williamsburg in 1994 (perhaps the ultimate in provocative
didacticism).
It also seems appropriate to ask: When did art museum officials first feel the need to post signs in exhibitions advising “viewer discretion” because certain installations might be “disturbing” to some adults or inappropriate for youngsters? When did they begin to organize exhibits with “early exit” opportunities to accommodate visitors made uncomfortable with the confrontational nature of much installation art? I would locate the beginning of that trend in the very late 1980s, with an intensification occurring in the mid-1990s.

Critic Arthur Danto has suggested that sometime in the early 1960s—when the vogue of Abstract Expressionism was giving way to Pop Art, Op Art, and other innovations—the perplexing question “What is art?” began to be asked pervasively. (Danto, After the End of Art [1997], 46.) It is noteworthy that growing uncertainty and disputes about the very nature and meaning of art, among critics as well as the viewing public, occurred at just the same time that the mission and function of museums began to change. That connected convergence can also help us to understand the escalation of conflict that began to take place during the final third of the twentieth century. As Smithsonian Secretary S. Dillon Ripley remarked in 1974 at the official opening of the Hirshhorn Museum on the Mall, a huge collection that prompted no less than eight years of bitter contestation, “This building and its attendant garden of sculpture have been appropriately controversial. If it were not controversial in almost every way, it would hardly qualify as a place to house contemporary art” (Hyams, 187).

If we schematize all of these episodes diagrammatically along a time-line, we swiftly notice a dramatic numerical increase in the frequency and intensity of controversies ever since the mid-1960s. The reasons are manifold and varied, I believe,
but have much to do with increasing numbers of commissions for public art; the growing aesthetic “radicalism” (and inventiveness) of artists in an era that Danto has defined as the “end of art” (post-1964 precisely); and the desire of museum officials to attract larger crowds with provocative, news-worthy exhibitions. Needless to say, art works that are shown at museums and at civic sites invite and involve different forms of spectatorship and response. Outrage and conflict can be equally strong in both instances, of course, but we need to be careful not to conflate them. The “clientele[s]” that get engaged have varied considerably in size; the nature of media coverage has also varied; and brouhahas concerning “public art” are likely to linger much longer before achieving some sort of resolution, often via litigation in the courts. (See especially the case of Serra’s *Tilted Arc*, which dragged on for years.)

A number of distinguished scholars (e.g., Prasenjit Duara for China, Bernard Lewis for the Near East, Carol Gluck for Japan, Wilbur Zelinsky, myself and others for the U.S.) have shown how very much people and nations care about the perception of continuity in their histories. Disruptions, disjunctions, and discontinuities are not customarily welcome because they undermine the social, cultural, and political sense of legitimacy. It should not be surprising, therefore, how often the conflicts concerning art that have been enumerated (see the appendix) arose because some innovation or perceived iconoclastic “statement” marked a stark break with the past, with tradition, with society’s sense of what had been normative.

Therefore the revisionism of “The West as America,” or perceived threats to family values and ”decency” (Sally Mann’s “At Twelve” and “Immediate Family” photographs), or alterations in the presumed criteria of cultural custodianship at a
museum (Wyeth’s “Helga” paintings at the National Gallery of Art), or anxiety about misunderstood avant-garde art all presented a break with what had been regarded as “normal” concerning art, or the function of art expertise, or the purpose and values of an art institution. Americans have been especially uncomfortable with discontinuities in the realm of art, in part because quite often the so-called experts have themselves been bitterly divided about the aesthetic worth of, say, Abstract Expressionism (especially in its second phase), or the presentation of mass culture artifacts in a “serious” museum, or even a reversion to the neo-classical style in public monuments when a more “American” design was expected. Note the harsh and highly symptomatic conflicts at mid-century between top brass at MoMA and the Met on one hand, and advocates (artists and critics) of recent American art on the other.

Conceptual art and installation art, fundamentally phenomena of recent decades, increase the distance between art insiders and the curious but incomprehending lay public, and frequently enhances skepticism directed by the latter at the former. Critic Michael Kimmelman put it succinctly and well in March 2002 in a review of “Mirroring Evil” at the Jewish Museum. The exhibition, he observed, “is dominated by the sort of dry, cool, Conceptual art that a vocal part of the contemporary art world invariably congratulates itself for finding endlessly fascinating. But it is art that leaves much of the public feeling confused, excluded and finally bored, if not pained and offended, which is of course the point” (NYT, 3/15/02).

Because we now have some very fine studies of controversies generated by “public art” (currently understood as contemporary art commissioned for public spaces), there may be a tendency to assume or believe that this is a fairly recent phenomenon,
primarily since the close of the 1960s, but especially since the mid-1980s. Examples on my enumerated list in the appendix dating back to the 1840s and continuing through the Jefferson and FDR memorials (1936-39 and 1962-97), however, serve to remind us that conflicts involving “public art” are not at all new. Between 1937 and 1941 community resentment boiled over at numerous locations in response to post office and courthouse murals commissioned by the WPA and the Treasury Department Section of Fine Arts. Too often the artists selected seemed to have no relationship to their “client” communities and little sensitivity to local traditions and values. Prime examples have been narrated for Aiken, S.C. and Kennebunkport, Maine (appendix, nos. 21-22).

Because the basic meaning of “public art” has undergone an important shift, I find it essential to distinguish between two basically sequential categories. The first—represented by Greenough’s Washington, Crawford’s Freedom atop the Capitol dome, and the Lincoln Memorial—involves iconic designs intended to inspire by defining national values and serving as a stimulus to collective memory and commemoration. The second—represented by well-known works from Calder, Serra, and Leicester—involves art on a very grand scale intended to decorate and vitalize civic space. These pieces were meant to delight or amuse. At the risk of making a fairly arbitrary distinction, I would say that they target the eye and the spirit rather than mind and memory. They have little if anything to do with defining national values or memory. Because they are fundamentally decorative, they have a much greater capacity or tendency to violate the varied feelings about civic space valued by large numbers of citizens.
Hence the need for historical perspective. Nevertheless, I recognize that the size, scale, intrusiveness, and abstraction of contemporary public art has “raised the ante” considerably during the past quarter century and increased the likelihood that public art can intensify issues involving cultural authority and power in a democratic society. If public art is supposedly “for the people,” shouldn’t “the people” have a larger voice in determining what is commissioned and where it is placed? Considered along those lines, public art has undoubtedly been more divisive since the 1970s than ever before in American history.

The use of public money (“taxpayer dollars”) to support a broad array of art-related projects has obviously become increasingly controversial during the past quarter-century; but here too it should be acknowledged that the issue does not begin with NEA grants following that agency’s creation in 1965. Congressional appropriations were required for most of the older (and quite famous) monuments and memorials. Many of them clearly had their genesis amidst conflict. But ordinarily it did not spin out of control to the public at large and become politicized to the same degree that it has since about 1974-75. For the most part, the earlier conflicts did not involve whether there should be a work of public art or not—only what form it should take. By contrast, after “the end of art,” in Danto’s memorable phrasing, controversies arose over whether the object (or performance) in question qualified as “art” in any broadly recognized sense, and therefore whether it warranted any kind of public funding at all. Also, whether it should clutter public space, impede vistas physical movement, and so forth. (See Serra’s Tilted Arc again.) Many observers much preferred preservation of the status quo.
A particular irony looms as a distinctive backdrop to many of the museum-related conflicts cited in my list (see the appendix) and described in some of my mini-narratives. Several important secondary sources supply background information that is germane. Andreas Huyssen has observed that ever since the 1980s museums, especially historical museums, have enjoyed marked and growing popularity as sites for cultural tourism and visitation. He also notes the resurgence of the monument and the memorial as major modes of aesthetic, historical and spatial expression. (*Twilight Memories* [1995].) Three years later Rosenzweig and Thelen found in a very broadly based survey that Americans ranked history-oriented museums above all other sources of historical information for “trustworthiness”--above college history professors and other teachers, above non-fiction books, and above movies and TV programs. (*The Presence of the Past* [1998], 21-22.)

If both of these observations are correct, and for the moment I am prepared to accept them as such, then we are faced with a bit of a dilemma. Do controversies involving art museums require us to place them in a discrete category from other kinds of museums? Or do art museums normatively share the enthusiasm and trust that these scholars have identified in a broad-gauge way, so that my enumerated controversies are no more than ephemeral blips in the on-going process of visitation and acceptance of whatever the wall-texts and brochures tell millions of visitors? I cannot speak with assurance on this point, but looking back I do not believe that the National Gallery suffered a significant loss of credibility because of the cynicism aroused by Wyeth’s “Helga” exhibition in 1987; and the Met recovered pretty swiftly from any damage inflicted by “Harlem on My Mind” because later in 1969 it finally acquired the long-coveted and superb early modern collection of Robert Lehman (more than 3,000
important pieces). The NMAA mounted many successful and non-controversial exhibitions in the wake of “The West as America.” The public’s memory seems to be fairly short. Does anyone in this room, filled with authorities, recall that during the 1950s an essential appropriation for the massive Iwo Jima memorial to the U.S. Marine Corps that is so visible on the banks of the Potomac was actually blocked by southern congressmen unless the inscription of all American wars that surrounds the base specified “The War Between the States” rather than calling that conflict “The Civil War”?

One of the most fascinating aspects of this entire narrative, of course, involves the way that a design innovation that was bitterly opposed at the outset can become so beloved and canonical that very few people have any notion that once upon a time the design was not merely rejected but scorned. The Lincoln Memorial, the Jefferson Memorial, and the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial provide prime examples. So do works by members of the Ash Can “school” of painting early in the twentieth century. (Their infectious enthusiasm for “Salome” paintings in 1909-10 led to “Salomania,” a seemingly salacious fad that became deeply disturbing to many critics and the public at large.) It is very difficult, by the way, to recall examples of public art, monuments, or memorials that did not cause some sort of initial controversy, with the possible exception of statues dedicated to Lincoln and Grant in the North and Confederate leaders in the South during the later nineteenth century and early twentieth.

Which leaves us with a connected question to ponder: why did some artistic statements or designs that we might have expected to be controversial become readily accepted?
E.g., Hiram Powers’ sculpture of the female nude *Greek Slave* (1843-47) enjoyed such appeal that he eventually made six full-size versions, and a great many miniature versions (Parian and plaster) found their way into Victorian parlors. {Actually, Powers and his American “agents” planned very carefully for the “public relations” needed in order to minimize controversy. The U.S. exhibitions, 1848-55, were quite successful despite some negative notes about nudeness.}

E.g., an exhibition at the NMAH (occasioned in 1987 by the Bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution) devoted to the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II.

E.g., Andy Warhol’s very first one-man exhibition (November 6, 1962), held at The Stable Gallery, promptly became a sell-out (every single item purchased) despite the radical innovations involved in his work that literally and figuratively linked art with the commercialization of culture (Bourdon, *Warhol*, 132-34).

It is intriguing and important to contemplate art that generated controversy and public conflict. I think it is almost as intriguing to contemplate art and exhibitions that might have done so, but for some reason did not.