



# Visual Shock

MICHAEL G. KAMMEN

*“Over the course of detailing myriad nineteenth- and twentieth-century art innovations and controversies,” in Visual Shock: A History of Art Controversies in American Culture, author Michael Kammen “tells the fascinating story not only of artists overtly politicizing art but also of corresponding social change and backlash. Drawing on original sources, Kammen elucidates dramatic skirmishes over public art, race and gender issues, modernism and conceptualism, depictions of the American flag, and disputed museum exhibitions. Kammen’s history of art considered shocking and art made to shock reveals that for all the controversy art arouses, efforts at censorship fail because even art’s harshest critics value freedom of expression.” (Description from Booklist). Page numbers refer to the 2007, Vintage paperback edition.*

1. Have you seen one of the pieces described by Kammen? If so, what was your reaction?
2. Have you intentionally traveled to see a controversial art piece? After reading this book, are there some pieces you will plan to visit?
3. Must art have some inherently controversial dimension to be of value? Is it possible for any piece of public art not to generate controversy?
4. On page 128, Kammen states, “Predictably, perhaps, trouble started with the media.” This is in reference to Diego Rivera’s mural for the RCA building. Does Kammen provide other examples of when the media has directed attention to or inflamed art controversies? What do you think the media’s role is in shaping public discussion on public art?
5. Kammen views the 1960s as the most pivotal point for controversies surrounding art in America, citing the confluence of Modernism, Vietnam war protests, and the emergence of Pop Art as some of the factors that make it a turning point. He also cites the General Services Administration’s 1962 Art in Architecture Program, which set aside one percent of the cost of a federally funded building for public art. What other aspects of American culture in the 1960s contributed to the national mood?
6. In reference to Robert Arneson’s memorial sculpture of George Moscone, Kammen quotes the associate director of the San Francisco’s Museum of Modern Art as having said, “The controversy will go away if you leave the work alone and let it be shown ... it will have a different meaning 50 years from now.” (236). Do you agree that the meaning of a piece evolves over time?
7. What is the role of art historians and museum curators in shaping interpretation of artwork? How important is the historical context of a piece to the viewer’s experience?
8. How has the internet and social media influenced discussion on public art?
9. Do you think public art is typically employed as a memorial function or to enliven public spaces?
10. Is public art a critical part of national and regional memory?
11. In chapter eight, “The Art Museum Transformed”, Kammen addresses the commercialization and the politicization of major museum exhibits. How can museums balance the need for income while avoiding self-censorship?

**Additional Resources:**

*Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts*, edited by Richard Bolton.  
New York: New Press, 1992.

*Maya Lin: A Clear Strong Vision*,  
written and directed by Freida Lee Mock, 1994.

[www.guerrillagirls.com](http://www.guerrillagirls.com)

Official website of the Guerilla Girls.

[www.nps.gov/nacc](http://www.nps.gov/nacc)

Website by the National Park Service on the  
National Mall and Memorial Parks.

[www.pbs.org/art21/artists/richard-serra](http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/richard-serra)

Website from PBS on Richard Serra that includes  
interviews with the artist.

[www.verisimilitudo.com/arneson/artworks.htm](http://www.verisimilitudo.com/arneson/artworks.htm)

Website chronicling the work of Robert Arneson.