

## The "Rocky" Dilemma

*Museums, Monuments, and Popular Culture  
in the Postmodern Era*

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In 1982 United Artists film studios installed a statue of Rocky Balboa, the celebrated boxer played by Sylvester Stallone, at the top of the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art for the making of *Rocky III*. In the film, the statue is ceremoniously dedicated in front of a cheering crowd and a humbly bashful Rocky. The actor-mayor thanks Rocky on behalf of the citizens of Philadelphia for his many accomplishments and his generous contributions to the city's charities. He lauds the monument as a "celebration of the indomitable spirit of man," and, as the sculpture is unveiled, Rocky's eyes open wide with surprise at the larger-than-life bronze posed in his characteristic victory gesture. While the band plays and the crowd applauds, Rocky turns bashfully to his wife, Adrian, who declares, "It's beautiful!" as she eyes the statue admiringly.

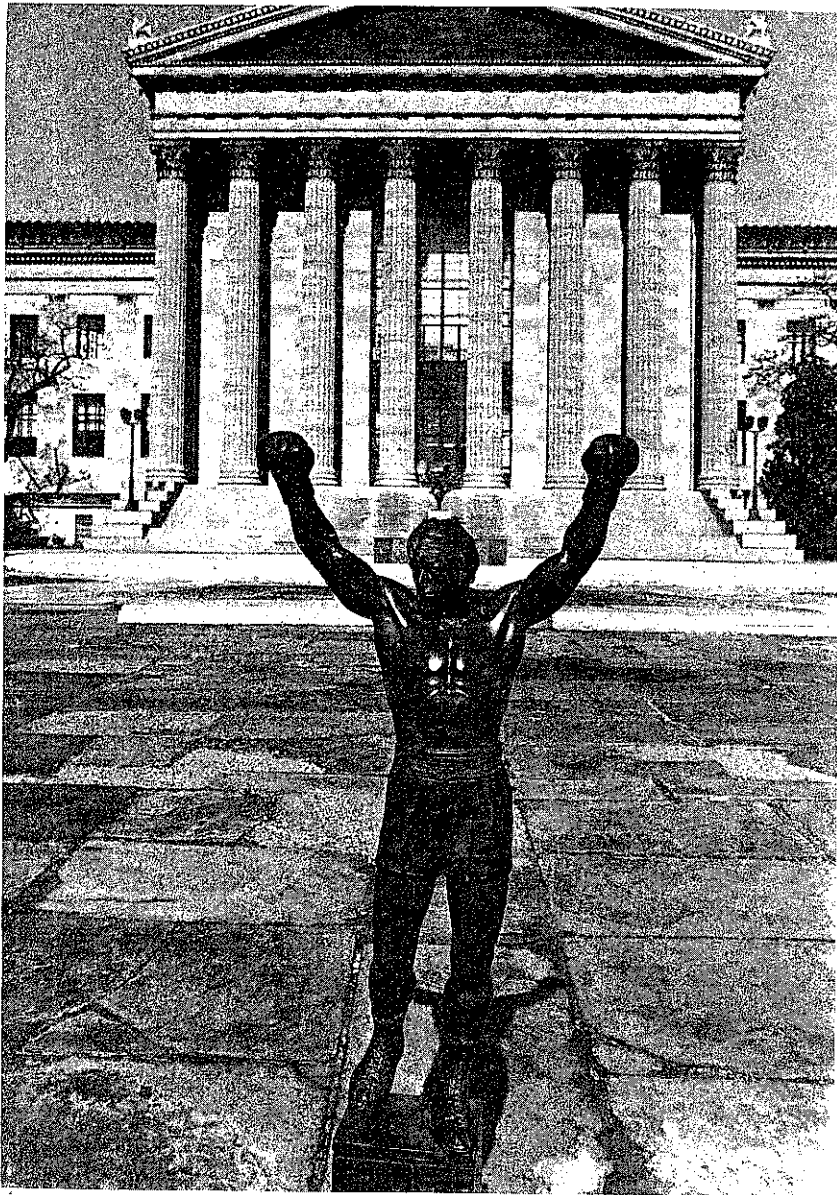
After the completion of *Rocky III*, Stallone donated the film prop to the city of Philadelphia, assuming that the statue would remain in its prominent and strategically significant position, overlooking the grand Benjamin Franklin Parkway, on axis with a monument to George Washington and the statue of William Penn located atop City Hall. But, after much controversy, the statue was removed to the Spectrum, the sports stadium in South Philadelphia where the fictional Rocky and the real Stallone have their roots.

In 1989 United Artists requested permission to reposition the statue for the filming of *Rocky V*. Having been burned the first time around, when they had to pay to have the statue removed from the museum steps, museum authorities negotiated to have the film studio remove the statue at their expense immediately after the shooting. But Stallone reopened the debate

regarding the proper home for the Rocky statue at a press conference that generated much interest in his new film, supposedly the last in the series. In a conflation of fiction and reality characteristic of the Reagan era, Stallone claimed that he had done as much for the museum as Walter Annenberg (who donated \$5 million and recently loaned his art collection for exhibition at the museum) and that he had single-handedly done more for Philadelphia than Benjamin Franklin. Museum authorities were once again accused of elitism, and the media eagerly picked up the ball and stirred up the old controversy, casting it in the expected terms of art authorities versus ordinary citizens, elite culture versus popular culture.

Although the museum does not actually have jurisdiction over the disposition of sculpture on its grounds—city property supervised by the Fairmount Park Art Association—it clearly is the most visible and influential target. Museum authorities had to fend off the media attack. They began by arguing that the statue was not art because it had a specific function, that of movie prop. This line quickly became untenable given the nature of the museum's diverse collections, including the celebrated ready-mades of Marcel Duchamp. Stallone hired lawyers to keep the statue there. His lawyers began by arguing the legitimacy of the sculpture as art. It is the work of a Colorado-based artist, Thomas Schomberg (b. 1943), who was called by *Sports Illustrated* (March 23, 1987) "perhaps the best known sports sculptor working today." It is interesting that Schomberg's name is not actually mentioned in any of the numerous newspaper articles about the statue, a fact that would indicate that the piece was indeed conceived of more as a prop. That is, in fact, what Stallone's lawyers ultimately decided when they did an about-face and embraced the museum's initial position, claiming that indeed the sculpture was merely a movie prop and not art at all. This reversal was logical in light of the fact that the Philadelphia Art Commission, and not the museum, has ultimate responsibility for the disposition of public art. In claiming that the statue was not art, Stallone's lawyers hoped to keep the decision on its ultimate disposition out of the hands of the Art Commission and in the hands of city officials eager to capitalize on the statue's popularity with tourists. In the end, the Art Commission considered a number of possible sites for the statue; however, because the piece had already been removed to the Spectrum, and substantial funds were required for the transfer of the 1,500-pound bronze, the Rocky monument remains at the sports arena at the time of this writing.<sup>1</sup>

It could be argued that the Rocky movies themselves constitute a popular monument more appropriate to today's culture than any other form of art, such as sculpture, because the movies more accurately reflect



Sylvester Stallone as Rocky Balboa, film prop from *Rocky III*, 1982, United Artists. (Photo: Mort Bond)

the tastes of a majority. But it is clear that these tastes have been rather consciously manipulated for the financial gain of a few individuals rather than for loftier ideals. The myth of the Rocky films is the wish-fulfillment fantasy of the hometown boy who achieves success through perseverance and hard work but maintains his humility despite a number of challenges and temptations. After confronting his own limitations and sometimes awesome foes, the hero always triumphs and generally savors the fruits of his success in the arms of the woman he loves. Rocky's rigorous training includes a symbolic run from the bowels of South Philadelphia, a neighborhood inhabited largely by a mixture of working-class Italian, African, and Asian Americans, down the imposing Benjamin Franklin Parkway. The run climaxes at the top of the museum steps, that ultimate monument to ascendant, owning-class culture. The message of the working-class boy triumphing over the authority of the elite is thinly veiled, although it is never explicit in the movies. Inspired by the Rocky story, thousands of tourists and busloads of schoolchildren each year ascend the museum steps, now commonly referred to as "The Rocky Steps," in order to jump up and down with their hands in the air at the top, like their hero.

While situated at the top of the museum steps, the Rocky statue was acknowledged by city officials to be the second largest tourist attraction in the city after the Liberty Bell. State senator Vincent Fumo introduced a resolution to keep the statue at the museum, saying that it is "a symbol of the spirit of Philadelphia" much like the famed Liberty Bell itself.<sup>2</sup> Because tourism in modern industrial societies helps people define who they are and what matters in the world, it may be interesting to consider the significance of the Rocky monument as a tourist attraction. In his book entitled *The Great Museum*, Donald Horne deconstructs the symbolic language of European monuments, pointing out that "as tourists moving among Europe's sights, we are moving among symbols that explain the world in ways that justify the authority of the few over the many."<sup>3</sup> This symbolic discourse of monuments can probably also be applied to the United States. But there is a second rhetorical thread that is particular to the American tourist experience.

One of the powerful concepts sustained in the three primary nationalistic tourist sites in the United States—Boston, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC—is the peculiarly American notion of the rights of the individual, more broadly defined as the pursuit of liberty. In Boston one visits the places where the pursuit of liberty began in the American Revolution; in Philadelphia one pays homage to the cradle of the documents of liberty, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution; in Washington, DC, one

can be awed by the hallowed halls that safeguard liberty in the present time. The operative American definition of liberty is the opportunity to achieve enormous individual success and wealth through hard work and perseverance.

The Liberty Bell and the Rocky monument are not as dramatically different as they may at first appear. Rocky is perfectly suited to reinforcing the mythic vision of liberty as free enterprise, and thus it molds itself perfectly to the American dream. During the Reagan era, this myth of self-fulfillment through hard labor took on heroic proportions and became the prime justification for the free-market economic system that shaped the policies of the administration. Ronald Reagan himself, a movie star, had achieved the ultimate symbol of success, the presidency of the United States. The discourse of the Rocky movies is the perfect complement to the mythos of the Reagan years and may in part account for the great popularity of these redundant flicks. The "he-man" boxer, not much brains but lots of heart, is the perfect counterpart to Reagan's tough-man persona, the man who created "Star Wars" and the readiness to fight the "Evil Empire." Like Reagan, Rocky is a small-town boy who does good. And if a movie star can become president, why not a monument to the fictional hero himself who, as the real-life mayor of Philadelphia, Wilson Goode, argued, "represents the struggle of so many people."<sup>4</sup>

As a number of analysts have pointed out, the Reagan era was characterized by a great conflation of illusion and reality. Barbara Goldsmith in "The Meaning of Celebrity" suggests how the long-term American preference for illusion has been given new meaning and power in the last twenty years, owing to the combination of technological expansion and the collective disillusionment following the destruction of the heroes of the 1960s—Martin Luther King and the Kennedys—and the Watergate-Vietnam crises.<sup>5</sup> In her book, *Selling Culture*, Debora Silverman traces the degradation of historical thinking in the Reagan era. She points out how during the 1980s museums also participated in this illusionism, celebrating the aristocracy of taste, often with little concern for historical issues. Her study focuses on a number of exhibitions organized by the Metropolitan Museum's Costume Institute and shows how these extravagant installations not only corresponded with marketing efforts at department stores such as Bloomingdale's and Neiman-Marcus but often were indistinguishable from displays in the stores. Silverman cites the exhibitions "Chinese Imperial Robes" (1980), "The Eighteenth-Century Woman" (1981), "La Belle Epoque" (1982), and "Twenty-five Years of Yves Saint Laurent" (1983) and describes how they both glorified aristocratic tastes and disregarded historical accuracy in favor

of an approach that celebrated the cult of visible wealth and distinction as a new cultural style concordant with the politics born at the first Reagan inauguration.<sup>6</sup>

A *New Yorker* cartoon recently defined a hero as "a celebrity who has done something real." The confusion between real and manufactured heroism today is clear in the newspaper coverage of the Rocky statue controversy. One Philadelphia writer expressed her regrets that the Rocky statue had been removed as follows: "A hero: But to the museum administrators and their Main Line cohorts, Rocky belonged anywhere else. He was a boxer, after all, a hero of the masses: hardly one of the cultured elite." Clearly this author's definition of hero does not require that he or she have done anything real at all.

Rocky probably comes closer to embodying a modern-day hero than any actual historic figure. He is more widely known than actual historic figures in this society, where curriculum in history varies considerably from school to school and district to district. Only television and the movies can now create such broadly known and revered figures as Rocky and the president of the United States. As a result, Rocky is in a sense more real to a large number of people than George Washington or William Penn, the subjects of the two monuments on axis with the Rocky statue when it was displayed at the top of the museum steps.

The popularity of the Rocky movies and their perfect fit with the myth of the day combined to give the debate over the placement of the Rocky statue the flavor of political controversy. But, whereas in 1982 the controversy over the statue was cast primarily in terms of popular versus elite culture, in 1989 the public brouhaha was all the more poignant against the backdrop of the conservative backlash against the arts brought on by the censorship of the Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano exhibitions. The aggressive actions of conservative politicians such as Senator Jesse Helms, seeking to destroy government funding for the arts by limiting the powers of the National Endowment for the Arts, also fueled a public outcry against the perceived esoteric nature of contemporary art. Although Helms and his supporters supposedly attacked obscenity in art, all art of an obscure and difficult nature became suspect.<sup>8</sup>

In the art world, the realm of expertise and specialization that is characteristic of all disciplines today has traditionally been more suspect than in other fields, such as math and science. The public institutions of the art world, especially art museums and art education, founded as they are on Enlightenment idealism, still celebrate the concept of art as a universal language. Ironically, this assumed universality of art, the principle that

museums and art world institutions represent, can be inverted by outsiders to call into question any art practice that one does not understand or accept. In effect, this is what gave Senator Helms his self-righteous position against the judgment of art world experts.

The idealist theory of art as a universal language comes into direct and virtually daily conflict with the actual practices of the contemporary art world. Thomas Crow characterizes the art world as a village culture, with a localized dialect. This dialect, the language of high theory, he says, "has become part of the material of art-making."<sup>9</sup> Thus the meaning of art is not the concrete, perceptible substance of the art objects; rather it is everywhere extrinsic to them. In this kind of village culture, outsiders who fail to understand the local argois are doomed to remain outsiders. In contemporary museum culture, however, outsiders are all too aware of their outsider status, and resentful of it. The media further fuels the fire by creating the illusion of a universal culture.

Conservative politicians are easily able to capitalize on the ready resentment of people excluded from the high art hegemony. Although many people did not support the more restrictive of Senator Helms's attempts to limit artistic expression, large numbers registered their dissatisfaction with the practices of the art world. For example, a *Los Angeles Times* poll taken September 14–19, 1989, revealed that while two out of three Americans supported freedom of speech, on the issue of who should make decisions regarding government funding of the arts, an overwhelming majority thought the question should be put to public vote (as opposed to being decided by artists or government-picked experts as is currently still the procedure).<sup>10</sup>

The Rocky controversy coincided with this upsurge of hostility toward the "authority" of the art world, symbolized by the imposing structure of the museum itself. Rocky atop the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art stands for the victory of the disenfranchised outsiders of the art world over their snooty and elitist cousins. Hostility toward the hegemony of art world practices easily translates into a hostility toward oppressive authority in general, thus the self-righteous tone of many of the articles in the Rocky controversy.

It is not surprising that this same political environment nurtured another well-publicized controversy over the removal of a symbol of art world authority from a public space. Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* was removed from Federal Plaza in New York City during the summer of 1989, just a few months before the Rocky controversy. The destruction of Serra's piece resulted primarily from the efforts of a single individual, the politically

appointed General Services Administration's regional administrator, who took office in 1984, three years after the piece had been commissioned and installed.<sup>11</sup>

Public art, specifically the contemporary practice of installing works of art in urban spaces, usually through a process that combines jurying by art world "experts" with consensus building among bureaucrats and city dwellers, has traditionally provided a forum for the airing of conflicting opinions about the nature and role of art. The controversies over the Rocky statue and *Tilted Arc* highlight the failure of communication between the practitioners and experts of the art world and the diverse publics of urban environments. But the controversies also reveal the active—and to a great degree unstudied—role of the media in mythifying and representing so-called public opinion. It is not coincidental that these media-supported and, in the case of Rocky, probably media-created controversies ensued in this particular political climate at this particular moment. Under a banner celebrating mass culture over elite culture, strong individuals have tried to bypass well-established, democratic review procedures either for reasons of personal aggrandizement, as in Stallone's case, or for political ones, as in the case of Helms and Diamond (the GSA administrator responsible for the demise of *Tilted Arc*). Much remains to be written about the pressure from conservative politicians to erode in the 1980s the due processes established in the 1970s for the facilitation of public art and the granting of public money for art.

Finally, the controversy over the Rocky statue raises questions about the nature of the monument in contemporary society. What does a monument of our age look like? Who gets to decide? Is an authentic artifact of a fictional hero the perfect answer? Could the Rocky monument have been transformed from self-aggrandizement and pop cult worship to a form of public art able seriously to engage people in questioning modes of authority? The difficulty of resolving such questions may make one wish for a simpler, gentler time, just like in the movies. Inspired by the Rocky controversy, David Boldt imagined the following scenario:

Sylvester Stallone has stopped by the museum for a late afternoon glass of sherry with his new friends, museum president Robert Montgomery Scott and director d'Harnoncourt. After an hour or so of pleasant chat, Sly gets up to go, and with a smile playing on his face, starts talking in his Rocky voice as he hands an envelope to Scott.

"Bob and Anne, diss is something I wanted youse to have," he says. "De only ting is dat I don't want youse to tell where youse got it. Unnerstan?"

Scott glances at what's in the envelope, looks up and says, "Absolutely, Mr. Balboa."

A month or six weeks later a brief press release from the museum announces that thanks to a huge gift from a donor who desires to remain anonymous, the museum's current capital fund campaign goal has at last been reached. Maybe even exceeded.<sup>12</sup>

Ah, would that life were really just like in the movies!

### Notes

1. Philadelphia Art Commission, "Report on the Rocky Statue," March 23, 1990. The commission's report evaluates four sites: the museum steps, the Philadelphia Visitors' and Convention Bureau, the current Spectrum site, and a location in South Philadelphia, the home of the fictional Rocky. The report concludes that the South Philadelphia site would be the most desirable.

2. Quoted by Steve Lopez, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 22, 1990, p. 1B.

3. Donald Horne, *The Great Museum* (Sydney and London: Pluto Press, 1984), p. 1.

4. Lopez, *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

5. Barbara Goldsmith, "The Meaning of Celebrity," in *New York Times Magazine*, December 4, 1983, p. 80.

6. Debora Silverman, *Selling Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), p. 11.

7. Paula Guzzetti, "Yo Adrian! Is This Art?" *Newsweek*, June 18, 1990.

8. A large number of art journals covered, with self-righteous indignation and a sense of impending doom, the developments on Capitol Hill. See, for example, the May 1990 issue of *Art in America* for a number of discussions regarding the conservative censorship crusade.

9. "Versions of Pastoral in Some Recent American Art," in *The Binational: American Art of the Late 80s* (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art and Museum of Fine Arts, 1988), p. 20.

10. *The Polling Report*, December 4, 1989, pp. 6-8.

11. Harriet F. Senie, "Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*: Art and Non-Art Issues," *Art Journal*, Winter 1989, p. 298.

12. David Boldt, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 25, 1990.

## Baboons, Pet Rocks, and Bomb Threats

### Public Art and Public Perception

HARRIET F. SENIE

The "Chicago Picasso," the sculpture that signaled the revival of public art that began in the late 1960s, is frequently compared to a baboon or an Afghan (the dog, not the blanket). In Seattle two very different sculptures (Isamu Noguchi's *Landscape of Time* and Michael Heizer's *Adjacent, Against, Upon*) were, at the time of their installation, related to the then popular "pet rock" craze.<sup>1</sup> And two even more radically different works (George Sugarman's *Baltimore Federal* and Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*) were perceived as physically dangerous, likely to inspire bomb throwers and rapists.

Such public responses to public art are consistently elicited and gleefully reported in the popular press and on the nightly news. After all, they constitute a human interest story—always good for a laugh, and always bad for art. The public derides art, and the art community bemoans the ignorance of the public. Time and time again well-meaning individuals (local officials, public art administrators, and artists) involved with a public art commission are shocked that their carefully considered project is so glaringly misunderstood. Hands are wrung, wounds are licked, participants commiserate, the public laments, and yet another opportunity for dialogue and understanding is lost. Underneath the comical comparisons, disparagements of monetary worth, and expressions of anxiety lies a core of expectations for art in our society, and particularly for public art imposed on a communal space. These are the expectations that must be addressed if public art is to communicate with its intended audience.

When William Hartmann, an architect at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, initiated and pursued the commission of a Picasso sculpture for Chi-