

**The Michael S. Rapaport
Everyday Ethics Across the Curriculum Initiative**

**Final Report for Course Development Grant
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This past spring term of 2008, I developed and taught my first Sophomore Research Seminar (SRS), a newly required general education course, titled “Visual Culture, Art & Politics.” Thanks to a Michael S. Rapaport Everyday Ethics Across the Curriculum Initiative Grant, I was encouraged to incorporate questions surrounding ethical issues and debates into my development of the course as the potential for such issues can often arise when art and politics intersect. In the end I designated ethical aspects to several units of the course syllabus and also proposed paper topics that would encourage students to deal with such issues in their own research and writing.

One of the overarching ethical considerations throughout the course was the question of how art works and other creative manifestations engage viewers and the broader public to contemplate, debate and act on issues of social concern, civil rights, and ethical injustices. This has been an important part of my own research and the ethics grant encouraged me to find effective ways for bring these issues into the classroom.

In several units ethical issues were particularly highlighted. In the unit “Monuments and Memorials: Commemoration and National Memory” we looked at the ethical issues involved in determining how does an artist and or country, venerate and commemorate historical events, particularly tragic and violent ones, be it World War II, the Vietnam War, the Oklahoma City bombing, or the 9/11 terrorist attaches on the World Trade Center. We had a very lively discussion on the two Vietnam War Memorials in Washington DC with regards to a wall of names (Mia Lin’s memorial) verse the realistic depiction of solders (a monument adjacent to Lin’s work). In this and other sites, we discussed how such cites can be criticized for being designed with the intention of promoting tourism and what are he ethical issues involved in relation to this subject. I chose two articles to further prompt debate including Erika Doss “Memorial Mania: Fear, Anxiety and Public Culture,” in *Museum Magazine* and Tony Walter, “War Grave Pilgrimage.”

In the unit “Protest Movements & Political Critique: The AIDS Epidemic” we looked at various creative approaches that have been used to bring awareness to the AIDS crisis. One such group we looked at was ACT UP (Aids Coalition to Unleash Power) founded in the late 1980’s which was formed in response to governmental and institutional neglect in dealing with the AIDS epidemic. In class we discussed the means by which the group protested and pressured city, state and federal governmental agencies for neglecting to address and educate people in order to help prevent the spread of the disease. ACT UP organized events such as “political funerals” and other visual/artistic/creative strategies that were utilized to bring about broad pubic awareness with regards to the injustice, homophobia and unethical practices, neglect and treatment of people dying of AIDS, including the subjects of health insurance and lack of funding going towards scientific research. In class we discussed how effective such approaches by such groups

as ACT UP are in addressing such issues in bringing attention to the ethical and unethical responses to AIDS by the government and federal agencies such as the CDC.

The main unit to incorporate ethical issues was the one developed around feminism and art. This unit was highlighted with a live performance of the Guerilla Girls On Tour (GGOT), who came to Union on May 15, 2008. This event, partially funded by my Ethics Across the Curriculum Grant, along with various other campus sponsors, was also connected to a unit I taught in my Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies. The performance stirred a variety of responses. Notably, students questioned the ethics of treating serious and sensitive subjects, like abortion, rape and domestic violence against women through a combination of humor and satire with somber seriousness. Some students greatly enjoyed this element and found it effective while others felt uncomfortable with how the GGOT used humor to address issues of social justice and women's rights. Another interesting response discussed in class was how some students felt the performance was slanted to liberal or "democratic" perspectives. This led to a discussion of art and politics in relation to biases and objectiveness versus intended goals and outcome for an activist group.

I encouraged students to choose paper topics, most of which I proposed in advance, that raised ethical issues and concerns. For example, one student wrote on Ferdinand Botero's 2007 painted series based on the torture of detainees at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq by US prison guards. The student looked at the question of how an artist paints a subject that deals with inhumane and highly unethical treatment of human subjects. She compared Botero's works to others who have treated the subject of violence and war, such as the 18th c. painter Francisco Goya. She also analyzed how Botero's images engaged the viewer to sympathize with those victimized by torture in a manner that differed from the effects created by the documented photographs that circulated throughout the media when the world first learned of the horrid events.

Another student chose to write on depictions of people with AIDS in film, from the 1980's to the present. His thesis centered on how depictions of people who have AIDS or are HIV positive has changed over time. He found that the early, often low budget films, tended towards the stereotypically male gay character or intravenous drug users as victims who consistently die by the end of the film. Over time he showed how this treatment changed to one in which a more ethical and sensitive depiction of characters with AIDS began to emerge in the late 1990's. In these later films characters came from all walks of life and are shown living and surviving with the disease. He contextualized this evolution in relation to the government's response (or lack of) to the crisis and the public's growing awareness of children and popular heterosexual and homosexual athletes and Hollywood actors who revealed they had AIDS.

One student chose to write about the commemoration of 9/11, from large sites such as at the World Trade Center, to smaller commemorations in town parks. In the end she showed the difficulties of trying to satisfy everyone, since people had various views on the ethical treatment and commemoration of the victims killed in the attacks. This topic was also addressed in class, as noted above, and complimented by a field trip to the New York State Museum which has a large display of 9/11 artifacts. In the museum and in class, we discussed the issue of tragedy, commemoration of the dead, exhibition display and tourism along with the ethical concerns which such subjects raise.

Other student paper topics looked at the issue of graffiti and concerns surrounding the subject of illegal versus legal graffiti. Another student looked at depictions of Russians in films since the Cold War in relation to stereotypes and another worked on civil rights and folk music of the 1960's.

In the end, putting ethical issues at the forefront of my development of the course was very beneficial. It also made me even more sensitive to my own ethical and objective treatment of these subjects in a classroom setting.