

## More Work to Do: Recognizing Artists as Public Intellectuals

Jodi Kushins

Revisiting my writing on [“Recognizing Artists as Public Intellectuals”](#) (Kushins, 2006), two things come immediately to mind: a casual conversation I had on a recent visit to the doctor and the work of political satirists leading up to and immediately following the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. In this brief commentary, I’ll tie these threads loosely together. I hope others will take hold of them to weave something more substantial.

Last week, my dermatologist tried to distract me as he scanned my moles for signs of melanoma by asking about my work. He lit up when I mentioned I was an art educator and asked me about my favorite style of art. “Are you more into da Vinci or Rothko?” he asked. I took a deep breath and told him that I like Rothko, but that I am most interested in contemporary art that responds to our cultural context. I explained as best as I could in 2-3 sentences, providing an example from a recent exhibition that addressed social media and privacy (Wortham, 2017). He was interested but seemed totally in the dark about what I was talking about.

While he might not understand the place of cultural commentary in an art gallery, I wonder if he was one of the millions of people who watched Saturday Night Live’s impressions of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. And, if so, does he recognize these comedians as artists using the power of the stage to draw public attention to the issues of the day?

The work of political satirists like Trevor Noah, Samantha Bee, and Stephen Colbert, continue to strike me as powerful examples of public intellectual artwork. I’m not sure how I

would have gotten through the post-election season without them. Whether one believes they fuel public discourse (Lee, 2012) or complicate it (Gladwell, 2016), it's hard to deny that they creatively capture people's attention as they provide critical commentary on what many of us find complex and hard to follow political matters.

My doctor's understanding of art was far from comprehensive and suggests there is still much work to do in helping learners of all ages understand the role of artists as public intellectuals. For too many, the term *artist* still suggests producers of ornamental images and objects. We need to continue to promote and celebrate the work of artists who are not afraid to trouble the waters, to challenge the status quo, and help people imagine alternative ways to live. Perhaps we need this now more than ever.

## References

Gladwell, M. (2016, August 17). *The Satire Paradox* [Audio podcast]. *Revisionist History*.

Retrieved from <http://revisionisthistory.com/episodes/10-the-satire-paradox>

Kushins, J. (2006). Recognizing artists as public intellectuals: A pedagogical imperative.

*CultureWork*, 10(2). Retrieved from

<http://pages.uoregon.edu/culturwk/culturework34.html>

Lee, H. (2012). Communication mediation model of late-night comedy: An examination of

the mediating role of structural features of interpersonal talk between late-night

comedy viewing and political participation. *Mass Communication and Society*, 15(5),

647-671.

Wortham, J. (2017, January 1). Finding inspiration for art in the betrayal of privacy. *The New*

*York Times Magazine*, MM12.