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Current Issue

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Recognizing Artists as Public Intellectuals: A Pedagogical Imperative
Jodi Kushins

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Recognizing Artists as Public Intellectuals: A Pedagogical Imperative

[Jodi Kushins](#)

Why Recognize Artists as Public Intellectuals?

In *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, Howard Gardner (1983) argued that visual, spatial, kinesthetic, interpersonal, and other faculties beyond numerical and linguistic should be included in measures of intelligence. This idea has influenced theories regarding the form and content of schooling children. The time has come to apply this theory to lifelong learning, particularly the public education that takes place through the production and consumption of the arts. In other words, we need to reposition visual and performing artists as public intellectuals, educators who provide insights and raise questions about the world, and audience members as learners who actively make meaning of the artworks they consume.

Like Gardner's intelligences, my use of the term *art* is multiple. It includes the work of painters, playwrights, and other traditionally recognized *fine* artists as well as producers of *popular* culture including filmmakers, comedians, rock musicians, and photo-journalists. I am interested in individually and collaboratively produced work by formally and informally trained as well as self-taught practitioners exhibited in internationally renowned institutions and on neighborhood streets. My primary criteria for judging art as public intellectual activity is that it creatively engage audiences with observations of, reflections on experiences within, and re-visions for our world.

Unfortunately, public expectations for art have not been so comprehensive. As Becker (2000) observed, "very few people in American society grasp the complexity of the role of

the artist or the potential *pedagogical* [italics added] function of art. Few artists are themselves able to articulate the range of possible roles they might play" (p. 245). These conditions raise two primary questions: What does the public expect from art? And, how do artists imagine and position themselves within society?

Artists are Public Intellectuals

Stanley Fish stated that a public intellectual is "someone who travels easily in the world of ideas, fairly large political and social concepts, and is able to convey the importance and complexity of those ideas in an accessible language" (Spizzirri, 2003). As public intellectuals, artists are to be understood as more than producers of ornamental images and objects. They would be recognized for producing learning spaces where ideas are discussed, questions are raised, and possibilities are imagined. As Said (1994) suggested, a public intellectual is "someone whose place is to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma, to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations" (p. 11).

One might ask why artists are not already recognized as public intellectuals. After all, the history of art is full of examples of work that re-presents "political and social concepts" following Fish's description. Think, for example, of Maya Lin's *Vietnam Veterans' Memorial* (1982) or Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), which Francis Ford Coppola transformed into *Apocalypse Now* (1979). More recently, one might consider Neil Young's *Living with War* (2006) or Stephen Colbert's address at the White House Correspondents' Dinner (2006) as evidence of artists' contributions as political and social commentators.

Although he was not speaking of artists, per se, Said's definition reflects romanticized depictions of creative people as oppositional and bohemian. Why then are artists so often pigeonholed as producers of beautiful things but not great thinkers? What challenges stand in the way of recognizing the critical role artists play as public provocateurs and civic leaders?

Part of the problem lies in the education of artists and audiences. Modern visual art and art education, for example, generally focused on the study and development of works governed by formal or self-expressive characteristics. Painters like Vincent Van Gogh, Helen Frankenthaler, and Ad Reinhardt contributed to popular depictions of artists as personally or theoretically obsessed. Either way, their work was difficult for the public to access or appreciate.

An increasing number of contemporary artists, however, consciously create projects that engage their communities and challenge the status quo. Judy Baca's collaborative mural projects, for example, make visible the struggles of Mexican-Americans. In the

documentary film *Supersize Me* (2004) Morgan Spurlock used his body as a canvas to take a stand against McDonald's claims that their food is healthy. Art education has been slow to catch up with and reflect these practices.

Americans for the Arts's *Animating Democracy* project supports and celebrates artists who work as public intellectuals. Through funding initiatives and case studies, *Animating Democracy* supports and exhibits artists who "contribute unique programs, settings, and creative approaches that reach new and diverse participants, stimulate public dialogue about civic issues, and inspire action to make change" (n.d., ¶ 1). These projects, like Sojourn Theater's *Allen County Common Threads Theater Project* and the Jewish Museum's *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art*, should be discussed and emulated in art courses. Not only do they demonstrate the instrumental public value of art, they provide examples of the positions artists can make for themselves as community leaders.

Educating Artists and Society

My review of literature on public intellectualism in conjunction with analysis of socially- and politically-engaged artists revealed characteristics that should be cultivated by those invested in educating artists to "imagine themselves as citizens within the world - not only the art world" (Becker, 2000, p. 239). Many of these traits can be fostered through reforms of extant educational and artistic apparatuses.

For example, art students should be encouraged to develop *interdisciplinary curiosity and a capacity to critically synthesize information from disparate sources within and outside the arts*. This might be fostered through explicit integration of studies in, and research practices derived from, the liberal arts and social sciences with projects conceived in the studio. Students and faculty alike cite disconnect between these, so-called, "creative" and "cognitive" areas (Mayer, 1994). Students should be provided with structured exposure to and discussion of works that demonstrate inter- and intra-disciplinary complexity.

Likewise, art students need practice *communicating through visual, oral, and written media and identifying opportunities to interact with audiences*. During critiques, artists and art students should be encouraged to imagine and respond to their intended and likely audiences. They should contemplate and plan for how these individuals might engage with their work, in other words, they should consider how their work may or may not communicate to and through different viewers. This does not mean artists should attend to the lowest common denominator. Rather, they should consider building pathways into the work through its formal qualities or didactics like wall texts and artist's statements. Essays by Carol Becker, Henry Giroux, Maxine Greene, John Dewey and others who write about the pedagogical aspects of art can be incorporated into course assignments to encourage students to consider the pedagogical functions of art in society. Ultimately, artists should consider how their artistic and discursive statements help or hinder viewer engagement

and appreciation.

Direct curricular interventions would help artists and audiences alike. In order for artists to be appreciated as public intellectuals, general audience expectations for art must be re-structured. As reader-response theory suggests, audiences are not passive recipients of the sights and sounds we ingest. Meaning is not inherent in works or pre-determined by artists. Combating this perception can be directly addressed through the form and content of studio and appreciation courses. Indirectly, artists can involve viewers more explicitly in processes of collaborative inquiry and production highlighting opportunities for viewers to make the work relevant to their own experiences.

Artistic and intellectual labor and production is, to some degree, inherently pedagogical. This does not mean, however, that artists and other critical and creative cultural workers should not consider how they and their work perform as public educators. As we have learned during various debates over public arts funding, artists and the public need a new language to describe the role of art and artists as voices of sub-cultural representation and commentators on our dominant collective experiences. Ideally, the result of such efforts will be artists and audiences more capable of advocating for complex and challenging cultural work.

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