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# A Heads Up on Kathy Griffin's Trump Head Depiction

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## A Heads Up on Kathy Griffin's Trump Head Depiction

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These words appear at the bottom of Belgian surrealist artist René Magritte's painting of a pipe: "Ceci n'est pas une pipe." Magritte indicates that the pipe depicted on the canvas is the image of a pipe, not a real pipe. Similarly, Kathy Griffin's use of a picture portraying a bloody decapitated Trump head is a representation, not Trump's real head. It is a crime to threaten the President with decapitation. It is no crime to create a feminist art work which comments upon the President's overtly sexist remarks about a woman. (The bloody head addresses Trump's infamous comment about blood and Megyn Kelly.) The most important concern is not whether or not Griffin crossed a subjective good taste line. The most important concern is recognizing the difference between art and life and protecting a female artist's creative freedom to decry sexism.

There is a name for what Griffin is facing: censorship. It was said that Mel Brooks' *The Producers* was in poor taste. Ditto for Chris Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary* which depicts a black Madonna surrounded by elephant dung. Rudolph W. Giuliani famously said this about Ofili's artistic creation: "There's nothing in the First Amendment that supports horrible and disgusting projects." The buyer who acquired the painting for 4.5 million dollars (in 2015) did not concur with Giuliani's opinion. If Brooks can use humor in relation to the Holocaust and Ofili can use large mammalian feces to express his scorn for the Catholic church, then Griffin can use an exceedingly jarring image to create feminist art to counter Trump's misogyny.

Melania Trump said that it is necessary to "wonder about the mental health of the person who did it [created the Trump head image]." If Melania had graduated from college, she might have learned that there is a difference between the artist and the artist's work. Jonathan Swift, for example, cannot correctly be called insane because his "A Modest Proposal" describes using impoverished children as ingredients in a "fricassee" and a "ragout." Swift artistically used shock as a means to make a point; so did Griffin. Chelsea Clinton, who did graduate from college, is as confused as Melania about the difference between art and reality. She tweeted "[t]his is vile and wrong. It is never funny to joke about killing a president." Griffin is absolutely not joking about killing a president. She is using shocking art to take issue with a president who uses words to debase women and limit their lives. As an American citizen, she has the right to do so without being vilified.

It is ludicrous that Griffin is facing criminal investigation. How exactly does the Secret Service expect that she would carry out the beheading of Trump? Do they envision her dragging a guillotine into the White House? A guillotine would certainly set off the metal detectors. Beheading is un-American. Beheading is British and French. (Think Ann Boleyn and Marie Antoinette.) Griffin's decapitated Trump picture is not analogous to the lynching of Obama in effigy images. Once upon a time lynching was general all over America to the extent that it was seen as entertainment. Beheading—not so much. Because beheading is not a part of American culture, it is appropriate fair game for shocking performance art. Griffin's artistic reference to beheading, no evidence to warrant criminal investigation, is as benign as the use of a canon in a Roadrunner cartoon. In contemporary America, canons and guillotines are objects which incite laughter, not violence. Joan Rivers' question "too soon?" is relevant. Beheading does not now resonate as a threatening criminal act in America. Since we are still impacted upon by the cultural memory of Jim Crow and the Kennedy assassination—and even the Lincoln assassination—it is too soon to juxtapose guns and nooses with the presidency. Beheading, on the other hand, is temporally benign.

Trump, unlike Griffin, is generating real threats. The pussies he talks about groping have nothing to do with the representations of female genitalia Olifi portrays in *The Holy Virgin Mary*. Picture this: those pussies are real parts of real women's bodies. Trump, unlike Griffin, has made a real threat against real people: "If she [Hillary Clinton] gets to pick her judges, nothing you can do, folks. . . . Although the Second Amendment people — maybe there is, I don't know." These words denote shooting a

Presidential candidate and liberal judges. These threatening words constitute a very real criminal act. Trump is the only presidential candidate in American history who has incited violence against his political opponent. More specifically, he threatened violence against a woman. Violence against a woman should not be seen as business as usual.

These are Griffin's words: "I'm not afraid of Trump. . . .He's a bully. I've dealt with older white guys trying to keep me down my whole career." Unlike art, misogyny is real. Griffin has an absolute right to use feminist shocking artistic truth to speak to patriarchal power. If Griffin is being fired because she has been judged to have crossed an artistic taste line, then Trump should be treated in kind. Over and over and over and infamously Trump flouts presidential decorum norms in shocking ways. If Griffin is defined as being unfit to work as a comedienne, then this man should be defined as being unfit to serve as the President of the United States. Words in general—and sexist words in particular-- matter. Trump, to use Hillary Clinton's word, is "deplorable."

This is the American people's appropriate locution in response to Trump's anti-female bombast: "You're fired." Or, in Griffin's artistic metaphorical no reality intended phrasing: "Off with his head!" She is an outspoken red head—a woman who has a huge public open mouth--who has the right to use artistic shock to echo the Red Queen.

The Red Queen threatening decapitation is British. For her next performance art piece, I suggest that Griffin might turn to Belgian culture. She can hold up a picture of a Trump head attached to a Trump body with these words appearing below the image: "Ceci n'est pas un président."