Report of the President

Ray Allen
Maryland Institute College of Art

Good morning again everyone.

If you've had a chance to look through this year's program, you'll have noted that we have a rather substantive and continuing focus on our conversation about quality and achievement in visual art and design education. As I said when we introduced this topic last year, I can't imagine a more important or appropriate issue for us to discuss as a membership.

In my remarks this morning, I'd like to spend a few minutes framing some aspects of this conversation. Let me say at the outset that this presentation is in no way intended to be inclusive. I know there are many considerations that I will not touch upon or include, but that's exactly the reason we've created a number of sessions in which we invite you to share your thoughts. In that spirit, I do hope that some of you find these remarks at least provocative. I am grateful for your attention and sensitive to the fact that I really will be describing to many of you what you already well know—or, as H.L. Mencken said, "The capacity of human beings to bore one another seems to be vastly greater than that of any other animal."

My sense is that the discussion on quality is a response to two seemly unrelated but equally urgent concerns.

The first came out of a recognition that while we have a long tradition of evaluating student work as a core element in our assessment process, we seem to have increasing difficulty being sure that in these processes, we share common values and indicators of relative quality and achievement.

The second concern has to do with the increasing demand from individuals and organizations outside of our fields that we explain or translate the importance of what we do in terms that are often fundamentally alien to our values. Many of you have asked for help in finding alternative and relevant ways to express the importance of what we do and, as one important response to that plea, Sam Hope, our executive director, has put together an excellent resource: *Achievement and Quality: Higher Education and the Arts.*

Returning to the first concern—the challenge to find and hold in common, formulations about student quality and achievement, I felt it was circular at best to explore this subject without considering carefully our current cultural context. I believe we have been living through a extended period of such extraordinary cultural changes that like the blind man and the elephant, we seem to be able only to experience—and talk about-- a piece at a time. I certainly don't claim to have my arms around the whole thing, but in trying to cite some of the causes and characteristics of the changes I've witnessed in my career, I keep being drawn to the overarching importance of pluralism and the ways in which it has shaped the students of today.

By now, the phenomenon of pluralism has been around so long that I'm sure the word lands softly on all of you. Yet I feel that both the experience and effects of this issue are as vibrant now as they were when the term first appeared. My experience is that pluralism, abetted by new technologies, has done more to change our values, assumptions, and behavior than any other force in our current culture. And I might add that it is entirely pluralistic that you go ahead and pick a different issue to focus upon.

To necessarily oversimplify a complex subject, pluralism appears to have been born out of important philosophic challenges to Western mainstream canonical thinking and a recognition that in a world in which many cultures co-exist, there are many equally valid world views, belief systems, and traditions of expression. Massive global immigration and a world made seamless by technology have made it almost impossible for anyone to escape the impact of this experience. That said, when pluralism first appeared, few of us imagined the world of today in which everyone is literally everywhere and the notion of culture itself has become multi-faceted, fluid, self-selective and situational. And mainly it has become *sub*, as in sub-cultural. There are still some simpler signifiers like race and language that might lead us to categorical assumptions about interests and beliefs. But we'd just as likely be wrong. Pluralism is the experience of all of us being part of many things at once.

In the world of art and design, all this, like Duchamp's bride, is laid bare. In the education of the fine and some applied artists, there is no longer an authority, no single way, and no dominant truth. All boundaries are blurred: at its extreme, the distinctions below high and low art are rendered elitist and 19th century disciplinary categories are simply a suggestion. Interest in and emphasis on skill varies greatly and is assessed primarily in terms of its appropriateness to the context and meaning of a particular work. And while our cultural roots in high European art still run deep, we find our students drawing from literally wherever (their word). (And I want to note that among there is a presentation on melting silos.)

In the absence of a dominant formal tradition or a fixed notion of the beautiful, many of these students focus on the intended meaning of their work as the locus for its importance and the justification for their formal choices. In general, these students have a deep ethical concern about a variety of scientific, philosophical, or political issues and draw upon these interests as sources for content. Many engage in kinds of preparatory research that mimic natural or social scientific processes. They seem to be adept at thinking metaphorically and often tend to value concept and process over a resolved art product. And oh yeah, no matter what your major, you might want to consider making a video.

In design education, we see a similar democratization of authority expressed in a variety of ways. Paralleling the fine arts, the specialist is steadily giving way to the interdisciplinary designer, while the lone ego is becoming part of a collaborative team. There seems to have been a shift away from privileging the design product and a move toward creating a methodology or approach that fully engages the client, defines the problem, and results in its own inevitable customized solution. Just as in the fine arts, students are concerned with the content or meaning of their work and how it potentially contributes to the good of society and the environment. In this way, contemporary designers are also social scientists, psychologists, and above all, critical, analytic thinkers. They are not intimidated by issues of scale, nor do they feel constrained by notions of boundaries. They are not elitists. They draw from all of the world's design traditions and mix them freely to address the problem at hand. At their best, they are smart, playful, pragmatic, idealistic, and deeply committed to design as a cultural change agent.

The broad themes growing out of pluralism are perfectly aligned with NASAD's values. Our organization has long believed in the importance of the collective member voice. In this current political environment, it has continued to celebrate and defend our institutional diversity and emphasized an assessment process that rests on a recognition of each institution's unique mission and purpose.

That said, I think we've sometimes used our perceived institutional differences as a justification for our difficulty in finding ways to talk in common about relative quality. But what I'm really trying to suggest here is that we've underestimated and underdiscussed the sheer speed and scope of the changes that have taken place in culture at large and the impact they've had on art and design practice.

In the face of so much change, it seems more urgent than ever to see if there are still common values, characteristics, and competencies through which we can meaningfully discuss issues of quality, achievement and success.

I think that there is no other group better qualified to do this and that we alone can do this in ways that respect and strengthen our diversity. This is after all, our content.

There's another urgent reason for doing this. If we are uninterested or unwilling to risk this conversation, there seem to be others interested in finding ways to do it for us. Which leads me to the second concern driving this conversation on quality: The demand from without that we explain the value of what we do in terms that assume no real expertise or for that matter, real interest in any of our fields. In many cases, these requests for explanation are framed by campus-wide outcomes assessment efforts, which are themselves responses to calls for accountability from both the private and public sectors.

I personally do not believe that *Outcomes Assessment* is inherently bad. I think the shift in emphasis from teaching to learning was long overdue. I also think there is real value in articulating what we want students to learn (apropos this very discussion). The idea that we could agree on the means of evaluation and hold ourselves accountable for what we find, is for me professional and consistent with what we've been discussing.

But when *Outcomes Assessment* becomes a tool of the accountability movement, we see its dark sides. The first of these is the notion that we translate what we do in terms that are generally quantitative and lean heavily on vocationalized indicators of success. Without saying as much, the focus of art and general humanistic education (this is not our challenge alone) is shifted away from the great liberal arts tradition with its emphasis on holism and quality of life toward economic reward and vocational usefulness as the primary determinants of worth.

The other dark side of *Outcomes Assessment* has to do with its being all too easily used to make everything the same—to make the inherently complex simple and thereby manageable. It is reductivism run amok and I'd bet that there is an absolute correlation between the zeal of the homogenists and increased pluralism in contemporary higher education.

There is a wonderful Hindu story about God and the Devil walking down a road. "Look," says God, "There's truth." The Devil replies, "Great, lets organize it."

I mentioned earlier that NASAD has always respected and defended diversity. But I think that many of us also believe that membership in NASAD is associated with high quality and achievement in

art and design education. If this is true, let's take on what that means and how it's expressed in 2007.

I have neither a desire nor an illusion that we're going to come to some absolute agreement, but I do think we can begin to share a language of evaluation. After all, very successful teachers in everyone of our schools are making judgments about relative quality everyday. Let's discuss what that means in your specific context and see how portable it might be.

We provided many opportunities to talk more and hear from you on this issue. Following this general session, there's a presentation on *Outcomes, Achievement and Quality* and one of the interest groups this afternoon will focus on Melting Silos.

Tomorrow morning we are going to have an open forum called *Presenting What We Do and Why It Works,* and I hope we are able to create a space in which we can share our respective, thoughts, concerns, and experiences. There is a list of questions in your packets to help focus that conversation and I would highly recommend that you look at the section on *Evaluating Individual Achievement in an Arts Discipline or Specialization* in the document *Achievement and Quality: Higher Education in the Arts* as a very useful and grounding resource. After this initial conversation (hopefully) lathers us up, you're invited to the session called *Assessing Instructional Achievement Through Student Work* (we tend to have rather dry titles for wet content) in which you will choose an interest group that will essentially continue the conversation while looking at actual images of student work. Please come to all of these and participate freely. We need your voice on this. After all, in this pluralist world, everyone's right.

And then there's that other reason:

   The philosopher Nietzsche said "We have art so that we may not perish from truth."

As I thought about that statement, I couldn't help but hear Donald Rumsfeld saying during the sacking of Baghdad, "Where did all those pots come from?"

So take your choice: who would you rather have talking about the SUBLIME?

Thank you.