

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS OF ART AND DESIGN  
SEVENTY-THIRD ANNUAL MEETING — ATLANTA, GEORGIA  
OCTOBER 11–14, 2017

## Report of the President

**Denise Mullen, Oregon College of Art and Craft**

This year finds us in a very different place compared to a year ago. Change is everywhere.

Over the last few years at our NASAD conferences we've talked about design thinking, health and safety in the studio, the value of an art and design education as preparation for studio practice, academic research or any career our students might pursue. The underlying theme in each of these topics and trends not surprisingly has been change; change in how education is delivered, change in the public's perception of the value of a college degree, changes in how students select a college, how the economy and careers have shifted, etc. And those very real changes have brought a sense of urgency.

At last year's conference, keynote speaker William Deresiewicz spoke about the particular skill sets and creative abilities our art and design graduates have to navigate the post-work environment we are all facing. Data show that current graduates of baccalaureate programs will have an average of 38 careers in their first ten years out of school. Not jobs, but careers. This prediction brings last year's discussion into sharp focus. We (and I mean we in higher education) cannot train students for careers if they will have 3.8 a year. We in the visual arts all know that we teach our students the skills of the creative process – the ability to think beyond the norm to bring fresh ideas and develop new approaches to problems and situations. They put the knowledge, skills, qualities and attributes they acquire in their virtual "back packs" to carry with them throughout their professional lives and use them as needed, in different combinations, moving from career to career. This is the gig economy. It is a sea change from traditional economic, business and social models; however, it is not unfamiliar territory for artists and designers.

Visual artists and those in the performing arts have navigated challenging landscapes, both figurative and literal, including economic and social terrain, for years. It's true that artists regularly gentrify neighborhoods in urban areas [motivated of course by the need for affordable work and living space] and designers create spaces, communication and organizational systems that provide cohesion to the world around us. With the nature of business and manufacturing changing dramatically and quickly, who better than artists, designers and those educated in the creative process to lead by example as the economy moves in a new direction? To go back to Bill Deresiewicz for a moment, the thesis he puts forward is that an art and design education is the best career preparation because it instills in students the ability to think independently. I can't imagine a better skill in times of change and urgency than the ability to truly think independently.

In his October third *New York Times* article, David Brooks identified the "Nation's defining traits" historically as "energy, youthfulness and labor," and went on say, "The frontier demands a certain sort of individual, a venturesome, hard-working, disciplined individual who goes off in search of personal transformation. From Jonathan Edwards to Benjamin Franklin, Abraham

Lincoln to Frederick Douglass, Americans have always admired those who made themselves anew.” This sounds strikingly similar to the qualities that characterize our students. He continues, in making the point of his article: “They [Americans] have generally welcomed immigrants who live this script and fortify this dynamism.”

Along with the changing business model, we’re facing unprecedented change in other areas. When it comes to the climate, I think we can all agree that change seems pretty much a given. To take the long view for a moment, I haven’t seen any woolly mammoths walking around recently. Back to the short view: the catastrophic weather events this year, including the devastating fires and the onslaught of severe storms, one of which some of us had to navigate to get here, has even the heartiest denier thinking again.

No mention of change can avoid the obvious political power shifts we’re seeing around the world. In all of these examples of change, digital technology has heightened both the need, and the ability, to change. The rapid delivery of information through technology has heightened the sense of urgency and anxiety surrounding these changes.

To come back to our territory, the way people make and view art is changing; as is the way people collect. We’ve all heard that rising generations prefer to “collect” experiences not objects – what does that mean for artists and designers and for galleries, museums, curated biennials, the art market and the design field?

Looking at the trifecta this past summer: Documenta, Munster Kultur Projekte, and the Venice Biennale, we saw increased representation of women and people of color – and a corresponding shift in subject matter, particularly in the Arsenale. This trend was in sharp contrast to the Damien Hirst exhibition in the Punta Dogana and Palazzo Grassi that mimicked an archaeological find, poking fun at the art world, turning conspicuous consumption on its head and ridiculing how, as a culture, we obtain and process our information. The biennale played out against the exquisite architecture of Venice sinking into the Adriatic with the rising water levels invading its squares and first floors of shops and palazzos.

Even in the perceived hallowed halls of the museum world, change is occurring. Robin Pogrebin wrote in *The New York Times* this past Sunday:

“National politics is sensitive territory that arts organizations all over the country are trying to navigate during this polarized era, and some are asking whether it is appropriate for museum directors to also be public advocates ... increasingly they have been forced to defend and – in two recent cases, at the Guggenheim and the Louvre – remove controversial exhibitions. Many see the withdrawal of artwork as a troubling development for cultural institutions that are supposed to champion free expression.”

I would add to the Guggenheim and the Louvre, the Walker and the Whitney Biennial. Each for different reasons, with different details in different contexts, all were pressured to defend or remove exhibitions. Another *Times* article quoted Ai Wei Wei’s cautionary statement: “When an art institution cannot exercise its right for freedom of speech, that is tragic for a modern society. Pressuring museums to pull down artwork shows a narrow understanding about not only animal rights (in the case of the Guggenheim) but also human rights.”

Monuments, from ISIS destroying what are revered and treasured pieces of art and cultural history to the pulling down of Jim Crow era Civil War statues rebranded into icons of dominance in defeat, we memorialize what we want to remember or to promote. A recent *Hyperallergic* article by Sam Orndorff cited a monument in Los Angeles to the person who built the water system from Owens Valley that allowed Los Angeles to prosper. Orndorff noted that no mention has been made of the Native American people who for centuries farmed that area sustainably through an ingenious irrigation system that was in balance with the area and its population.

We struggle as a species to survive, to have something, to be dominant, to be right, to amass as much as possible, to have “our” views rule. We splinter, because we can’t see the whole, the larger picture of humanity on our planet.

Now at this point you’re probably wondering where on earth I’m going with this. Let me try to bring it to a simple point with a quiet plea. And I’ll do it with a potentially controversial example, that of the protest at the last Whitney biennial over Dana Schutz’s painting of *Emit Till* from the famous photograph of his horribly disfigured face in his coffin. His mother had wanted the world to see the barbarity of his attackers and the almost unbelievable physical result of their hatred. The calls to remove the Schutz painting and destroy it are understandable on a number of levels. However, when viewed from the universal perspective of one mother empathizing with another, the connection is deep and moving. To resurrect that moment, with respect and compassion, and to hold it up as a mirror of reflection for us all, seems not only appropriate, but essential to make progress in healing our collective disease of racism and hatred for “the other.” Uncovering our inhumanity is the only way to address these insidious, often hidden and sometimes unconscious hatreds.

Our students and we have the skills to navigate the change around us and to make change. My cautionary note is not to be overwhelmed by the urgency and rather to let the qualities and characteristics we develop in our students resonate with our collective better natures and embrace our common humanity. In the face of intensifying polarization and anti-inclusive impulses in political, religious, ethnic and cultural arenas can art pull us out of our narrow ways of seeing? At this point in our evolution, could it be the process by which we actually move mankind forward? Is that too grandiose a burden to place on art? Maybe not. It was heartening to hear yesterday’s presentation by Meghan Grace on Generation Z, which she characterized as “Dreamers and doers who want to make the world a better place.” Imagine the skill sets we teach in the hands of an entire generation with the good of those around them at heart.

Let’s lay the groundwork for the next generation of students and use those creative skill sets to look at the larger picture, one in which not just our side prevails, but we all prevail. This year’s conference looks at numerous topics that present ways in which we might move forward in shaping how we prepare our students for their world.

The roster of sessions from curriculum design yesterday, to the art of effective leadership today, to managing in challenging times tomorrow, and of course, our keynote today on “The Role of the Arts in a Culture of Democracy,” presented by a stellar roster of leaders in the field will give us much to discuss and to use in managing and creating change and maintaining balance at our home institutions.

Have a great conference. I look forward to seeing the results of our collective efforts.