National Association of Schools of Art and Design

Seventy-Second Annual Meeting — Atlanta, Georgia

October 11–14, 2017

***Keynote Address:* The Role of the Arts in A Democratic Culture**

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When I was dean of the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University, a former president of NYU (may he rest in peace) was fond of telling a story that paints a picture of the artist as a romantic outlier and rebel. The story comes from a time when Greenwich Village was at the heart of Bohemian life in this country. As the story goes, a group of these Bohemians—the painter John Sloan and iconoclastic artist, Marcel Duchamp among them—chose a chilly winter night in 1917 to break into the doorway on the side of Washington Square Arch, the historic monument that marks the entrance to Washington Square Park in the Village. Inside the doorway of the arch are 110 steps that lead to the top. On this particular night, armed with bottles of wine, cap pistols, and paper lanterns, the artists climbed the stairs to the top and spent the night atop the arch, drinking, reading poetry, and singing. At dawn, they fired off their toy guns and declared a revolution and issued a proclamation. After a few “whereas, whereas, whereas,” they proclaimed that they were seceding from New York City and founding “The Independent Republic of the Village.”

Eventually the police came, convinced them to come down and permanently locked the door to the arch. The NYU President, my boss, used to get a big kick out of telling that anecdote on admitted students’ day. I would watch the faces of the students who were laughing their heads off and then I watched the parents who were stone faced. They were probably thinking, “I would be paying tuition for this?”

The idea of the artist as outlier and rebel, someone dangerous, disruptive, and even a little threatening, is still alive and well in our culture. Anna Deveare Smith once described being an artist as like being a lone wolf howling at the moon. But there are other ideas of being an artist as well. For some, being an artist is a calling, like becoming a teacher or a priest. For still others, it’s a liberating path to self-discovery and self-realization. Some regard the role of artist as the same as any other profession for which you require specialized training and education, a period of apprenticeship before you eventually achieve mastery.

This morning, I want to re-visit yet another idea of being an artist. It is a view of the role of the artist popular over fifty years ago and it was a view that gave birth to the federal endowments of the arts and the humanities. That view is that the artist is vital to the health of a culture of democracy. President John F. Kennedy championed this view and gave it his fullest expression in one of his last public speeches.

On October 26, 1963 at Amherst College, less than one month before his death, on the occasion of the dedication of a library in honor of the poet, Robert Frost, Kennedy articulated his deeply personal ideas about artists and thinkers and democracy. His administration had been studying the possibility of some form of federal support for the arts and humanities and this speech held the seeds of a rationale for that support.

Kennedy’s words were unequivocal. After observing that the artist is “the touchstone of human judgment,” he goes on to note:

“I see little of more importance to the future of our country and our civilization than full recognition of the place of the artist…If art is to nourish the roots of our culture, society must set the artist free to follow his vision wherever it takes him. We must never forget that art is not a form of propaganda; it is a form of truth…In free society... the highest duty of the writer, the composer, the artist is to remain true to himself and to let the chips fall where they may.”

In 1965, in the years after Kennedy’s death, the U.S. congress passed legislation to establish the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities, the most significant federal effort to recognize artists and scholars, since the Works Project Administration (WPA) during the Depression.

The enabling legislation of the endowments resonates with Kennedy’s ideas. Listen to excerpts of that legislation:

“The arts and the humanities belong to all the people of the United States.”

“An advanced civilization must not limit its efforts to science and technology alone, but must give full value and support to the other great branches of scholarly and cultural activity in order to achieve a better understanding of the past, a better analysis of the present, and a better view of the future.”

Another passage notes:

“Democracy demands wisdom and vision in its citizens. It must therefore foster and support a form of education, and access to the arts and the humanities, designed to make people of all backgrounds and wherever located masters of their technology and not its unthinking servants.”

And yet another passage from the legislation:

“The arts and the humanities reflect the high place accorded by the American people to the nation's rich cultural heritage and to the fostering of mutual respect for the diverse beliefs and values of all persons and groups.”

And finally:

“The world leadership which has come to the United States cannot rest solely upon superior power, wealth, and technology, but must be solidly founded upon worldwide respect and admiration for the Nation's high qualities as a leader in the realm of ideas and of the spirit.”

The endowments came to life in the midst of the monumental upheaval of the Civil Rights Movement. The movement spurred the dismantling of the Jim Crow era, that is a set of legislative, judicial, and executive racial barriers that divided the public sphere. At the same time that these legal barriers were removed, the country chose the arts as an opportunity to affirm the ideals of democracy. You can hear that affirmation in the words of the endowments’ enabling legislation: rich cultural heritage, mutual respect for diverse values and beliefs, wisdom and vision of the citizenry. And, of course, Kennedy’s observation that the authentic artist and scholar possess a capacity for truth, a capacity to “let the chips fall where they may” and, that this capacity for truth telling is a necessity, not a luxury, in a free society. In our current political world order—imagine that.

So, here we are in 2017 navigating the terrain of this new political world order. Like the Civil Rights Movement, we are living in a time of enormous upheaval and change. Demographics are rapidly changing. Our minority populations will become the majority before mid-century. Our federal government has taken down the welcome sign for immigrants. Barriers to voting have been re-installed around the country. Our government seems to have trouble distinguishing between on the one hand, white supremacists and antisemites and, on the other hand, decent people. We are quarrelling louder than ever over issues of national identity and who gets to enjoy the privileges of citizenship. Unlike 1965, however, there is no clarion call for the arts and its role in our democracy. Quite the contrary, in the executive budget, the endowments were plucked like a couple of unwanted gray hairs.

Though funding for the endowments was restored, they were restored with none of the triumphant idealism that brought them into existence in the first place. Their tenuous existence these days begs the question: do the underlying assumptions that brought the endowments into existence still hold sway? Do we still expect the arts to make known to us our rich cultural heritage, or encourage mutual respect for diverse values and beliefs, and embody the wisdom and vision of our citizenry? Do we still expect the arts to deliver the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth? In other words, do we still believe that the arts are necessary for a democratic culture?

This morning, I want to share some of the lessons that I have learned from my forty-year career in the arts and why I think they are especially vital in an era of false news, fictional facts, and 140 character narratives.

Lesson # 1: Making Something From Nothing

If I have learned nothing else it is exactly that. Forty years ago, when I started my career at the Studio Museum in Harlem, the “museum” was a rented loft over a fast-food joint and a liquor store. New York City, teetering on the verge of bankruptcy, was literally falling apart. Subways rarely worked, public parks were a morass, and Harlem was a ruin. Paradoxically, at the city’s lowest point, there were arts organizations all over the city—in store fronts, vacant garages, church basements, abandoned NY city school buildings--rooted in decaying neighborhoods in all five boroughs. Even though they existed hand to mouth they embodied the city’s creative vitality. In virtually all of these arts organizations--the Bronx Museum, El Museo Del Barrio, Studio Museum, Queens Museum, New Museum, PS 1, Fashion Moda, Exit Art—living artists were the beating heart of their exhibitions, artist residencies, and education programs in the city’s beleaguered public schools. All of them were sustained by vital relationships with their surrounding often impoverished neighborhoods and all of them in one way or another disrupted conventional narratives about who made art and what kind of art was art historically consequential. In some cases, these organizations were not new at all but were old organizations that were re-envisioned, like the Brooklyn Academy of Music that re-conceptualized itself as BAM at a time when NYC’s cultural elites avoided Fort Green in Brooklyn like the plague. BAM’s great opera hall, that once housed karate demonstrations, was re-conceptualized to stage audacious new operas, ballets, concerts and theatrical work by artists from every continent. Creative vitality flowed through the arteries and veins of all of these once depleted neighborhoods.

It is tempting to write off these phenomena as the reminiscences of an aging arts activist, but in fact, there is an entire new generation of artists who are re-thinking once lost neighborhoods. Theaster Gates in Chicago, Rick Lowe in Houston Texas, Mark Bradford in Los Angeles and scores of artists who are reclaiming derelict buildings in Detroit Michigan. Is it time to harness a new wave of creative energy, this time avoiding the pitfalls of gentrification and artist displacement to take advantage of artists’ capacity to breathe new life into our local communities? Would this not be a win for a culture of democracy?

Lesson # 2: Disrupting the Single powerful narrative

Many of what were considered alternative spaces in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, have since matured into influential cultural institutions. That maturation is one of the great triumphs of an open society that has retained the resilience and fluency to shift hierarchies and encourage change. Critical to this fluidity has been the power of the arts to disrupt the single powerful narrative. When I was studying the history of art as a graduate student, women artists and artists of color were all but invisible in American museums and seldom mentioned in histories of American art. It is unimaginable now to walk into the MoMA or the High Museum or the National Gallery of Art and not find women, Latino, African American, Asian, Native, Arab American artists and other ethnicities under the category, American art. Where there had been a single powerful story of art history, there are now multiple narratives. We know that we all have been bequeathed what the poet, Kevin Young would call, multiple inheritances.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the Nigerian novelist, delivered a brilliant TED talk in 2009 entitled, “The Danger of a Single Story,” that outlined the perils of relying on the single story. By the single story she meant a dominant, incomplete narrative about a people, a culture, or a set of events that is repeated over and over and flattens and simplifies a people or a culture in a way that distorts and deadens. Adichie’s talk is meant to call attention to how this process of radical simplification robs us of knowing each other, of comprehending the rich complexity of each other’s histories and identities. If we make of each other paper cutouts, silhouettes with no discernible individual features just interchangeable shapes and figures, we have de-humanized each other. If we de-humanize each other, we set the circumstances for us to become disposable to one another. In non-artistic terms, our disposability renders it possible for us to speak about building a wall, splitting families apart to depart the undocumented, tolerating police brutality and mass incarceration. Artistic expression is one form of complicating narratives that give us a greater sense of the depth and breadth of the citizens who make up our American communities and delivers to us insights about each other’s lives.

One of the most stunningly successful example of complicating a narrative comes from the theater and that was the collaboration between the biographer, Ronald Chernow and the theater artist, Lin Manuel-Miranda. Chernow’s biography of Alexander Hamilton recounts his life and his role as a founding father in establishing many of the institutions that bring structural continuity to American democracy to this day. By now the story of the genesis of Hamilton the musical is well-known. The artist Lin Manuel-Miranda, read the biography during his vacation and thought, this could be a musical. He requested and received permission from Chernow to use the biography as the basis for the book and lyrics of the musical. For nearly eight years, Miranda and Chernow entered into an intense collaboration as the musical took shape.

What I found most instructive about their collaboration was a story that I heard Chernow tell a group of my Spelman students who attended the play. Lin invited Ron to sit in on the first reading of some of the musical’s songs. This is where the actors sing their parts from music stands. Chernow recounts his shock, when he walked into the rehearsal room and in front of him were a row of Black and Latino actors. He thought that he was in the wrong room. Quietly he pulled the artist aside. There must be some mistake. As Chernow was to discover, not only had Lin cast all of the white historical characters with Black, Latino, and Asian actors, he had chosen contemporary musical idioms of hip-hop, R&B, jazz and, in one notable case, ballads as the musical’s framing musical expressions. Manuel-Miranda counseled his collaborator to be patient and listen to the songs. Chernow reports that after five minutes, he was convinced, after 10 minutes he was enraptured. He went on to watch the musical on Broadway over 40 times. Hamilton, the musical, is audacious in its capacity to disrupt a single powerful narrative about the origins of our country. To see that musical was to experience a new vision of our ideal self. We could see and feel and the pulsing living vibrancy of a set of our democratic ideals that fit young black, Latino and Asian men and women as comfortably as they fit white slave owners.

Our culture is a living breathing culture. And the artists we train have to be resilient and porous enough intellectually to allow multiple cultural forces to run through them. They need to be aware that they have the power to change the way we see each other and the power to create new ways of seeing the world.

Lesson #3, the third and final lesson, I want to share with this morning: Art is fundamental to education.

During the Obama administration, I had the privilege of serving as the Vice-Chair of the President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities (PCAH). A few years into Obama’s first term, the PCAH commissioned a report on the role that the arts played in improving schools and student academic performance. The report compiled data from research completed between 2008 and 2010 that looked at correlations between academic performance and the presence of sustained, well designed arts program. Unabashed in it bias, the report was entitled--: “Re-investing in Arts Education: Winning America’s Future Through Creative Schools.” Released in 2010, the report documented outcomes that state with consistency that the presence of the arts of well-designed arts interventions creates a culture and climate in schools that has a profound impact on the learning environment.

The report’s findings are divided into three different types of investigations:

* Longitudinal studies
* Brain research
* An evaluations of model arts in education integration programs, that is programs that make use of the arts to teach subject areas.

Longitudinal Studies

A seminal longitudinal study, conducted by researcher, James Catterall, chose a cohort of low income students who had access to well-designed arts programs in their K-12 years and tracked them over ten and twenty years. Catterall compared the arts enriched group to a control group of low income students who did not have access to high level arts programs. The results from this study were startling. The arts cohort was more likely to attend college, have successful careers and volunteer in their communities. Researchers concluded that their life time outcomes looked more like the outcomes of high income students.

Brain Research

Brain research on the impact of the arts on the physical development of the brain and cognitive function was equally impressive.

* One set of findings correlated early music training with phonological development, a precursor to reading.
* Another study determined that students who practiced a specific art form on a regular basis experienced improved attention spans and general cognitive improvement.
* Another study of arts integration models reported that the use of multiple senses to repeat information resulted in greater long-term memory.

Arts Integration Models

The report also included results from model arts integration programs in Maryland, Oklahoma, and North Carolina, some of which members of the President’s Committee visited. The model programs cited targeted the entire school in their application of arts programs and also forged productive relationships with community based cultural organizations. School leadership, including the principal, staff, as well as faculty, participated in professional training with teaching artists so that everyone in the community proceeded with a shared view of using the arts in teaching and learning. Schools that participated demonstrated improved academic performances in math, reading, science and social science as compared to schools without arts integration models. They also demonstrated dramatic improvements in levels of engagement like reduced discipline, better attendance, and greater parental involvement.

Based on these findings, the members of the PCAH went on to develop a national program, supported by private and public funding, called Turnaround Arts. To underscore the findings of the report in what we thought was the most dramatic way possible, we decided that we would conduct a pilot project that targeted failing schools. A school was failing if the Department of Education had been assessed it as failing and it was on a list maintained by DOE. The program goal was to work with each school to customize a program that would be part of the school’s strategy to turn it around from a failing to a successful school. By a process of application, schools requested participation in our pilot project. We chose 8 schools to participate. They served student populations in places as diverse as Des Moines, Iowa, Portland Oregon, New Orleans, Louisiana, Boston, Massachusetts, Washington DC, Bridgeport, Connecticut and Lame Deer, Montana.

Though each community was very different and each arts program had to be customized to fit the talents and skills of the principal, the teachers, and the population of students served, there were five basic pillars that each program was required to have:

1. Leadership and commitment of the principal,
2. Teacher buy in and teacher training in the use of the arts to teach subject areas,
3. School willingness to hire arts specialists to teach some arts discipline and to establish partnerships with local arts organizations,
4. Parent/community involvement, and
5. Ongoing teacher development and training throughout the school year and in the form of an annual teaching summit.

Working with the consulting firm of Booz Allen and the University of Chicago, we devised an intensive evaluation process. In devising their strategies to move from failure to success, schools were required to make improvements on test scores in math, science, and reading, improve attendance, record a decline in disciplinary actions, demonstrate improvements in the school’s culture and climate and enhance parent involvement. Virtually all of the schools showed real progress in those areas and well over half were able to move from failure to success by the end of two years. Based on the success of the pilot, the program expanded to 60 schools, in 15 states, serving over 20,000 students. Toward the end of the Obama administration, because we could not be sure that whoever was elected would be committed to the program, we moved Turnaround Arts to the Kennedy Center where it is alive and well. Last week, I chatted with New York City’s cultural affairs commissioner, Tom Finkelpearl—there is now a Turnaround Arts in NYC—and he enthusiastically described its success in New York.

We know that good schools are the cornerstone to a vision and wisdom of our citizenry and role of the arts in education is so self-evident that it never ceases to surprise me that we still have to argue the case.

In closing, I want to acknowledge that whenever I speak about the arts and its role in anything—re-vitalizing cities, or improving our schools or our democracy, I am always challenged. Art, good art, valuable art, art that should be preserved for generations to come need not have any utilitarian value at all. I could not agree more. But I do think that we should be aware that sometimes the arts can’t help themselves. No matter what we think, no matter what role we assign them, the arts rebel. They break into the arch, climb the stairs and declare their independence of whatever we intended them to be, howling with joy at the moon.