

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS OF ART AND DESIGN
SEVENTY-FOURTH ANNUAL MEETING — PORTLAND, OREGON
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Report of the President

Jeffrey Nesin

Good morning and thanks once more for making this time.

I recently found the great Yale literary critic Harold Bloom on Twitter. It's hardly likely that it's actually Professor Bloom himself—I imagine him still using a manual typewriter—but little texts are there nonetheless. HBloomtweets: "Eloquence depends upon the hard work that is art, and not upon moral indignation, however sincere."

So I'll take his wise counsel and steer clear of moral indignation this morning. Besides, the predominant subject, actual or implicit, of our meetings and of many previous President's Reports is change. Makes sense: change of all sorts is the current we're all trying to make headway in.

For some years now, when giving certain talks, I feel called to pull out my phone, wave it around, and say that when Wordsworth wrote, "The world is too much with us," he didn't know the half of it. In truth, at the end of the 18th century the percentage of world impinging on William was barely measurable compared with what each of us experiences in 2018, and the pace is picking up.

In the middle of the last century, the great American poet Charles Olson, the last rector of Black Mountain College, began his poem *The Kingfishers* thusly:

What does not change / is the will to change

It's true that for Olson and for us, for Black Mountain College and for our institutions, is that change is indeed a human imperative, bred in the bone to a real extent—and essential to what we do. But, as the esteemed Sam Hope, our former Executive Director, would ruefully remind himself and us, "how vastly information is expanding...while time is not." Your Apple watch can do a lot, but it can't make more time.

Now we seem to be in the midst of constant roiling change: imminent change, disruptive change; how so many matters that used to be settled are now blowing in the wind. One favorite example, perfect for Portland, is sneakers. When I find a pair that feels and looks right I struggle with the impulse to buy in bulk, knowing full well that in the next season (which is probably only four months away), they will have vanished, replaced by a new range of styles. For someone who grew up with Converse All-Stars, this is difficult.

The part of me that is what our program calls a “seasoned administrator”—the leader charged with making sense where little or none may exist—wants to say now, “don’t worry, ‘twas ever thus.” After all, it’s a very, very long way from the trivium and quadrivium to where our collective curriculum is today. No one expects that a firm grounding in homiletics is essential to a bachelor’s degree any longer (though it might help me this morning). But in fact, those changes took centuries. We wake up to new rules every day.

We dutifully work to codify established change, carve it right into digital stone tablets. For example, we all use a lot less paper in our departments and academic affairs offices: most of the apparatus of coursework is online now, and expected to be so by our digital native (Do people even bother to use that nomenclature anymore?) students. That’s only been 20 years.

We swim as steadily as we can to make headway in the tide of change that surrounds us now. What does the very visible death of newspapers mean for us and our students as informed citizens? How to accept this as a given and move forward by making the inevitable change positive, insofar as that’s possible? And what does the dark side of digital data collection and theft portend besides more worry and physiognomic ID?

Finally, we squint hard to see the horizon, hoping to guide our students to thrive in this flux, to themselves create the next changes. This is the truly thrilling change: our students and alumni are at the core of this process. In my career I have seen our students move from the periphery of our economy to its very center and that, I believe, is a glorious change.

So the rule I try to keep foremost in mind is: Move fast and try not to break things.

Now, in a round about way, to our meeting: About 30 years ago, I had the privilege of helping to organize a symposium in New York City imagining the education of artists in the 21st century. As part of the planning, I undertook with a wonderful colleague who was then the Dean of Yale School of Art, to set a kind of baseline: what was the state of our dominion at the end of the 1980s.

My colleague and I issued an international call for slides (I know some of you remember slides) of “typical” student work—not the stars and not the stragglers (distinctions which, as I have found, end up being poor predictors of anything anyway), but work at the self-declared median, from folks like us in programs all over this country and a few outside.

We were flooded with slide sheets and, when we met again, we dutifully stuffed them into a stack of carousels, trying to keep track of their origins. Then we sat in the dark for a couple of days clicking through and talking. I’m not sure what I expected, but I was not prepared for such a high level of work across the board. “Where’s this from?” I would ask and my colleague would run through our list or pull the slide and try to answer. He was not originally from a big city, but he seemed surprised, too.

For my part I was rocked. New York is my hometown and I'd been working at School of Visual Arts for almost 15 years at that point. I don't believe I've ever been a snob, but somehow I was unaware that so many young people across the nation were getting up, going into the studio, staring at the wall (or assignment sheets), and producing the entirely respectable work we were looking at.

The symposium was a success. Faculty from art schools and art programs came to New York from all over and heard from artists, critics and gallerists. I hope it changed their sense of the accessibility—the permeability—of the art world. One thing is clear: the work that my colleague and I did together absolutely changed the way I thought about life across the Hudson. Work of seriousness and quality was being made every day in many, many places. A few years later I was president of an art and design college on the Mississippi.

And I know my time with those slides caused me to think about my participation in NASAD quite differently. Like most if not all of you, I had begun attending these meetings as a self-study pilgrim. If my college was to be a member then we needed to know a lot more—and I was selected to seek that knowledge. I showed up in Louisville, KY for my first annual meeting knowing hardly anyone. The Association was considerably smaller then, less than half the size we are now, and I was able to meet people and listen to them. Some of the presentations were terrific, right on point. Some had little or no bearing on my institution, but they actually helped me to clarify who I was representing and how an independent art and design school in New York—maybe design and art school is more accurate—might fit in and be an engaged partner. I made some friends whose brains I could pick, and I was happy to return each fall to see them.

And through those friends I got more involved in the work of the Association. I was invited on accreditation visits. I was grumpy about the work, but fascinated by the work, just like the rest of my life! As my experience accumulated I was elected to the Commission, and ultimately became Commission Chair. I still think of that as the best—actually the most useful and meaningful—volunteer service I've ever done, and I recommend it to those of you who are newly arrived and those who've been here a bit, but are still lingering at the margins.

Academics are often caricatured as solitary and perhaps ornery by nature, and I'll avoid posturing and invidious comparisons here and simply say that we probably don't let the side down. But this is also your community, a gathering of professionals who have much in common with you. I urge you and welcome you to take advantage of this opportunity and the future opportunities each October.

Thanks very much for your kind attention.