Carol Becker
SAIC 150 Keynote:

The Future Is Already with Us (and has been for some time)

I am indebted to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. It was here that I broke with years of university education to discover an entirely new pedagogy. Here too I learned about leadership—and began writing about art and artists. My first art essay was for Christina Ramberg's retrospective catalogue. It led to my second essay, also commissioned by the Renaissance Society, for another colleague—Barbara Rossi—for her retrospective, which followed shortly after Christina's. Working closely with these artists, trying to comprehend their intentions, was a perfect place for me to begin. They each gave me so much time and insight into their individual process that, as a result, I developed a way of talking to and about artists that has helped me to this day. It was a thrilling and terrifying leap of thought and action, and it all began here.

In order to convey the breadth of importance of this institution, not just in my life but in shaping the present and future of art and the education of artists in society, I'll have to go back to the late 1970s and 1980s, when I arrived, to recreate a narrative of what the School was like then and what it represents now.

How I Got Here

A brief stint in journalism brought me to Chicago from graduate school in California in the late 1970s. But I was eager to return to teaching. I knew someone who knew someone and was soon hired at the School part-time to teach literature and philosophy. I fell in love with the ambiance almost immediately and eventually assumed various roles—first as faculty in Liberal Arts, then

as Chair of Liberal Arts, Chair of the Graduate Program for several terms, Associate Dean, Acting Dean, then Dean and Vice President for Academic Affairs, then Acting President for a short time, and finally Dean of Faculty again—until I left for Columbia University in 2007.

During that period, the School evolved from an institution focused almost entirely on the making of things to one with a curriculum that transformed it into a microcosm of what we think of as the art and design world. The School came to engage with all forms of art making and also with Arts Administration, Art Education, Art History Theory and Criticism, Art Journalism (then just beginning), Art Therapy, Visual and Critical Studies, Writing, Architecture, Interior Architecture, and Designed Objects. It became a leader among independent schools of art and design and a hub of new ideas and multifarious practices, focused on the importance of art to the human psyche and to society.

It was exciting to watch the School become the prototype for many other art schools, each aspiring to the same breadth, depth, and success. It set the pace and the tone for the future as no other institution could, because it had the confidence, solidity, and stability that came from its deep roots in the avant-garde, from its close relationship to history, and its partnership with such a great museum. It also consistently had excellent leadership in the Boards of Governors and the Trustees.

When I first arrived, the School of the Art Institute struck me as wildly experimental. Because I was new to art schools and had few assumptions about what they *should be,* I was like an anthropologist observing another culture, somewhat strange and exotic. I could see clearly how

different SAIC was from a university—how it functioned more like a workshop, factory, or laboratory experimenting with materiality than like a place of theoretical thinking or self-conscious research. It was expressive, interdisciplinary, playful, performative, and open to new ideas. But it was also anarchic, unpredictable, and filled with “weirdness and joy.”[1]

The prevailing art school culture in those days was to act things out in performative and, at times, rebellious ways. There were pig roasts in the foundry and goat roasts in the interior courtyard. Students ran the cafeteria in the Columbus Drive building, then our only building, and therefore the food service moved at a glacial, albeit playful pace. During lunch hour a line of hungry faculty, students, and staff snaked around the second-floor corridors, which were then the Photography Department. When one finally got to the counter, using up almost the entire hour to do so, some sweet student would ask, very slowly, “Um, do you want avocado on your sandwich? I think we have some, somewhere.” And if you said yes—big mistake—then he or she would open the large refrigerator and begin looking on every shelf, while the masses (and you, too), increasingly aware that classes were about to begin again, became agitated. Still the cafeteria was a fun place, and really the only place at that time where we could all gather. Even the models from the Figure Drawing classes were there, dressed only in kimonos.

The amazing bookstore run by Joan Flasch was in the basement of the Columbus Drive building. The incredible, groundbreaking archive of the Video Data Bank, run by Lynne Blumenthal and Kate Horsfield, operated out of a space smaller than a closet in what was then the library and is now the Rymer Gallery.

There was a so-called student newspaper, which turned up sporadically as crumpled paper in a garbage can or as somewhat soiled placemats on the cafeteria tables. The “news” was insider art-school jokes, which I really didn’t get at the time. But that was probably a good thing, because that paper motivated me to hire Paul Elitzik, who owned a small publishing house, and together we started a real student newspaper. The result was *F,* a remarkable publication that has won innumerable awards for content and design, beating out the student papers of Columbia University’s Journalism School and many others.

There were champagne-and-black-tie bronze pours in the foundry and at John Bryant’s country estate. In the museum there was the biannual *Chicago and Vicinity Show*, which began as early as 1897, always an amazing exhibition, featuring the most exciting work being made in the city at that time. But the show was also always controversial and was periodically shut down because of artwork that caused a scandal, such as the urban landscape installation, encased in a vitrine in which live rats ran around miniature buildings.

Later, Hugh Hefner gave the School the Playboy Mansion, which we transformed into our first-ever dormitory. But before that occurred, we threw a few pool parties for faculty and staff, swam under the fake grape clusters that hung down over the dreamy pool, and watched each other swim through the porthole window while drinking Mai Tais in the grotto bar. We held an auction to get the best price for the heart-shaped waterbed and the bowling alley. Ultimately we sold the mansion to condominium developers and put the money into a scholarship fund.

Faculty-led study trips took students around the country and the world. The trip to Wyoming became infamous when two female students chose not to return, marrying gentlemen cowboys they had met along the way.

One memorable day, at the start of the Digital Age, a student worker was entrusted to dispose of what-were-then obsolete papers. But instead of tossing them in the dumpster as advised, he piled them in the interior courtyard, took off his clothes, set the pile ablaze, and danced around it, as if in some faux initiation rite. Of course, all the alarms went off, and you can imagine the rest.

It is hard to conceive of this now, but at one time there were no graduate studios for second-year graduate painters; students were given stipends to work at home. Students were upset about change when we reconfigured an interdisciplinary mix of studio spaces in 112 South Michigan, but it was a brilliant move. Students then made work in collaboration and in new forms that would never have occurred to them had they not worked in proximity. Painters produced animations, and filmmakers made performances. During the first year, a painter married a filmmaker. At graduation, they walked across the stage hand-in-hand to riotous applause.

There is so much more I could recall about this time at the School. Many will have their own favorite stories to recount. Surely someone needs to chronicle it all.

But, amidst the creative theatrics, which I completely enjoyed (until I became the official person on security's speed dial when things went awry), some very serious work also was under way. Faculty and students alike were deeply engaged in the process of making art. It was a time when

visiting artists, who later became very famous in the global art world, were in and out of the School all the time: John Cage, David Hockney, Ed Paschke, Ann Hamilton, Bill Viola, Nam June Paik, Barbara Kruger, Carolee Schneeman, Joan Jonas, Yvonne Rainer, Phillip Glass, Chris Burden, Lucy Lippard, Claes Oldenburg, Bruce Nauman, Joseph Kosuth, Hans Haake, Kenneth Anger, Pat Steir, Trisha Brown, Meredith Monk, Alan Kaprow, Joseph Beuys, and so many others. Although these artists were unknown to a large audience then, their work reflected the deep experimental nature of the School and anticipated how art would look in the future and how technology and performance would push all fields to explore new dimensions. These artists gave us a glimpse of what art making would become. As Stefano Harney and Fred Moten might put it, they refused to shape the noise into "music." John Cage made this refusal overt. Because of him, we now can hear the music in the noise and the noise in the music. Artists like Cage wanted us to see beyond the traditional categories of art making and to embrace the new and the now. Their work allowed students to refuse the expected and to generate the unexpected.

The general public cannot always understand why artists don't just make things beautiful, simple, enjoyable, and easily comprehensible; why they seem committed to giving their audiences such a hard time. One answer is that often the artist's mission is much larger than pleasing the audience. Many artists hope to shake up the audience and, actually, to unsettle the species by changing how we see, hear, and think. Artists often want art to refuse to be assimilated into the prevailing culture. But over time, most work does get absorbed, and even so-called "difficult" work becomes assimilated and is accepted by the art world that initially rejected it. The goals of an art school must always include pushing boundaries and refusing limitations. The School of the Art Institute was doing just that at this time.

The art making that was underway came from artists' deep engagement with their work and grew out of personal choice. Artists' goals were not yet as dependent on the art market and its definition of success as they were in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Artists still were making the work they wanted to make. That it became successful, replicated, coveted, and economically valuable was perhaps inevitable, but such results were neither planned nor anticipated.

Unlike most workers, artists are often unalienated from what they do (and I would also say the same about writers, thinkers, intellectuals, filmmakers, theater/performance practitioners, educators, designers, and architects). They enjoy their projects profoundly. This enjoyment is why they and others who do the work of the imagination continue, despite the daily uncertainties about their livelihood and stability—financial and otherwise. This is also why many artists are willing to work for little or nothing, and why in fact they are nonetheless romanticized and, at times, envied by society, even as their efforts are often misunderstood.

The School's seriousness of purpose, combined with its encouragement of active playfulness, captivated me. Until then I had never thought a learning environment could promote both. I was greatly interested in, and also completely challenged by, the opportunity to help direct a school whose practices were so different from my own and about which I knew so little. The School embodied a physicality of making that required particular knowledge of each discipline—knowledge of the specific craft, its technology, history, current practices, and most effective teaching methods. My role in leadership was to see beyond the particularities of these unique

practices and orientations, to understand how such laborious efforts together formed a whole, how they comprised a school, and how such a school affected society.

At that time, the rapid development of computers quickly changed how things were being done, and many methodologies became obsolete. Such change was a great source of excitement but also of serious stress, financial and conceptual, for all institutions. How would the School adapt? How could it afford these radical changes? How could it anticipate what would come next? What to purchase? What to give up? Where would technology take us and how would it affect the integrity of the art-making process and the haptic mission of the institution?

It was a time of enormous transition and exhilaration but also one of fear. The economy had taken a downturn. Other art schools were embracing the then-prevalent corporate model of “downsizing” and “retrenching” (remember that word?) in order to address their financial concerns and their confusion about where it all was going. SAIC alone moved to expand. It was a brave and smart decision, and one that many other schools soon followed. That decision also catalyzed the School’s need to evolve conceptually and spatially, in order to survive.

The Growth of Theory / Theory of Growth

While I was studying the needs of different forms of art making and learning to “look” at artwork intelligently, I saw that there was a deep struggle going on around me. Concepts that were once central to how people looked at art were now being challenged, as were ideas of what

it meant to be an artist. The School's faculty was then primarily composed of artists, and a rupture was taking place among the makers themselves.

Many of the senior artists resisted any discussion about art that was not focused primarily on formal issues. For them the School was about the craft of making work—that is how they themselves had been educated. Art was primarily about materiality and form. Because these artists were visual in orientation, they believed that using other parts of their intelligence to produce work might interfere with the artist's basic, essential, intuitive, creative self. They feared externalizing the process into language, as if language could obliterate the image or take its place.

Simultaneously, from the fields of Liberal Arts, Art History, Sociology, Anthropology, Semiotics, and art making itself, new ideas were emerging: postcolonialism, globalization, transnationalism, gender, identity politics, and social responsibility. These concerns, as influences on the making and presentation of work, not only challenged the existing art world, they threatened to become the basis *for* the contemporary art world. Many artists, curators, and art historians already considered themselves global citizens or transnationals, displaced by the postcolonial dilemma, and they were deeply affected by these ideas. All art schools eventually became engaged in the same debates. The inevitable integration of art making with theoretical concerns could no longer be restrained.

Intellectually, this tension within the faculty and among the students interested me greatly. It was clear to me that artists entering the art world at that time, in whatever capacity, would need to be

conversant in this new level of discourse. It was also clear that an art school was the perfect place to foster an integration of making *and* thinking. The School's curriculum had to take into account the increasingly obvious fact that artists, designers, thinkers, and cultural practitioners of all sorts, working in many forms, were essential to the evolution of ideas shaping the public discourse. Yet to honestly address such concerns, the School itself had to evolve its mission.

It Started with Writing

When I became Dean, there were two programs obviously, inevitably, waiting to be developed by the School. The first was Writing.

Most writing programs in the United States are positioned within English Departments, which only makes partial sense. It is true that literary scholars often study contemporary literature, but I had spent many years getting a BA and then a PhD in English and American literature, and I understood how wedded these programs are to the canon and, therefore, to the past—and how little they seem to care about the making of new work. English departments should love contemporary writers, but that is rarely the case, especially when writers come to writing from other disciplines and work in unique ways. Traditional English departments also are not focused on process, on how things get made. They are more concerned with analyzing the final product and figuring out where it does or does not fit into that which exists. The School was already educating writers. It just needed to give shape and authority to that pedagogy and to ensure it reflected how work was actually made by writers themselves.

David Sedaris arrived at SAIC as an undergraduate painter, took several writing classes, and soon found his voice as a writer. Anchee Min came as an undergraduate and continued as a graduate filmmaker until she became a novelist. Richard House entered the graduate program in Performance (after unsuccessfully applying three times). He then helped form the collective Ha Ha, whose members all came from the School, including faculty John Ploof, former faculty Laurie Palmer, and Wendy Jacobs. House is now a renowned writer. His novel *The Kills,* long-listed for the Booker Prize, is being developed as a TV series by the producers of *Wolf Hall.* I recently saw Richard in London, and he reminded me that after his first critique in Performance, I told him he should become a writer—in part, because he was such a bad performer. I have no memory of this, but my remark was prescient, and I probably was not alone in this evaluation.

These SAIC writers did not evolve as much out of a literary tradition as out of a visual and performative one. As a result, their writing was and continues to be extremely unexpected and original. One can say the same about the work of Paul Chan, who has never given up visual art making for writing, but for whom writing and now publishing have become central to his practice. These writers are not only standing on the shoulders of other writers, they are also indebted to artists. They are not as interested in fitting into the existing literary canon as in creating a new one, and they didn't need to study the history of literature in order to do so. They only needed permission to leap fearlessly into the future. This we could offer them.

SAIC created a Writing Program that is similar to art-making programs, allowing writers to move across forms fluidly. It is inherently interdisciplinary and radical. This orientation makes a

lot of sense for an art school, so much so that many other schools quickly followed suit: Cal Arts, CCA, and others. Writing, as a means to express process, untethered from the past, attracted different kinds of students, both visual and literary.

In a sense, Arts Administration evolved in a similar way. Business school environments, which have traditionally housed Arts Administration programs, are not always able to take advantage of the unique approach that art students bring to administrating the art world. Arts administrators are most effective when they understand art and the artist's process. They also need to know how to think globally about policy, produce events, create budgets, write grants, make institutional decisions, understand contemporary theory, and so forth. And they need to do all of this creatively. There were art students at SAIC who, in the course of study, decided that what most energized them was the chance to bring artwork into society in innovative ways. This is how the School's Arts Administration Program first emerged, seeking to put art and artists back into leadership roles in arts administration.

Art Education, Art Therapy, Art History, and Liberal Arts were already in place when I arrived at SAIC. But out of Art History, Theory and Criticism, and Liberal Arts came a new hybrid, designed to address contemporary theoretical concerns, to give them shape and language: Visual and Critical Studies, founded and originally directed by our beloved colleague, historian George Roeder. George understood that the thinking that was going on in arts schools about the visual environment was expansive, cutting edge, and timely. In a field like Visual and Critical Studies, the complex issues that were neither the terrain of Liberal Arts nor Art History, yet were

essential to both, could come to the fore. Many other art schools soon realized the same thing. But SAIC did it first.

Then came the design programs—Design, writ large. For some time, the School had taught Interior Architecture, led by Linda Keane and our late dear colleague John Kurtich. Out of this well-established discipline and out of Sculpture emerged a new program, unburdened by the past, titled Architecture, Interior Architecture, Designed Objects. Artists joined designers and architects in completely unique configurations, not unlike the artists of the Bauhaus, for whom design and art converged with contemporary thought.

SAIC proved that it was fluid and could respond quickly to the evolution of ideas. As I was leaving in 2007, Howard and Donna Stone made a wonderful gift to the School that allowed us to begin the Stone Theory Summer Institute, which James Elkins continued after I left. Universities, for the most part, are like enormous cruise ships or jet planes that cannot change course rapidly. But art schools can turn on a dime. They also are inherently interdisciplinary. To respond to the changing intellectual environment of the 1990s, years also marked by an economic downturn, this agility of actualization and thought is what was needed. Art schools had to reimagine themselves to become economically viable for and intellectually relevant to the future.

So, as a result of all of these additions and mergers, SAIC began producing artists, critics, arts journalists, writers, educators, therapists, curators, arts administrators, theorists, and designers who worked together to imagine new forms in the public arena. The School became a true

microcosm of the contemporary art world and, in this way, became a great learning environment for its students. SAIC led the way by diversifying its objectives and positioning itself strongly in the world, while at the same time widening its applicant pool with new students eager to explore. It created a contemporary version of what an art school could be, and our visionary Board of Governors supported it all.

What Is Unique about This Environment?

Today, we have another, different phenomenon to consider, one that has been gaining momentum for some time: the corporate and business sectors are showing interest in art schools. At a time when technology, start-ups, and entrepreneurial thinking are ubiquitous, it is not surprising that those outside the art world would look for strategies in a place where the product-outcome for all students is creativity.

Many have studied the uniqueness of art-school pedagogy and have tried to take from it a clue as to how to get to what business calls "innovation." Creativity is the force that generates innovation, and so, innovation can be understood as *applied* creativity. In the business world, "innovation" also implies a useful end product. But utility is not necessarily what art schools are about. Experimentation, risk, and failure are not just concepts artists romanticize; rather, they are practices that artists engage in most days, in order to succeed some days.

For an institution to commit to "creativity," however, it must ensure that its creators feel safe and free enough—in mind and spirit—to explore all possibilities. And in an art school, where we cultivate this supportive environment, we *rarely* talk about creativity, in part because, like air, it

is above, beneath, behind, and in front of everything we do. It is assumed. We revere the creative atmosphere and depend on it for all disciplines, but we also know that it is ephemeral, difficult to achieve and to sustain, and not always profitable or predictable.

Art schools actually create what psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott called a “holding environment”—a safe place such as that provided by the psychoanalytic situation, in which people feel secure enough to push themselves into unknown terrain, to explore the imagination and the unconscious, to play, and to take risks.[2] A recent museum exhibit about Black Mountain College was entitled *Leap Before You Look.*[3] A creative environment must be both challenging to the work and consistently supportive of the state of mind needed to produce it. Art schools are not interested in “enrichment,” to use Winnicott’s phrase. They are about the “growth” of the individual and the “removal of blocks”—practical and emotional—that might keep students from doing their best work.[4] Art schools encourage a sense of play. C. G. Jung quotes Friedrich Schiller as conjecturing that we are “completely human only when at play.”[5] Play allows us to live our lives uniquely. It triggers imagination, which is the source of creativity. Without it, we remain trapped within the confines of what already exists.

Also key to this environment is the cultivation of hybridity—the mixing of elements and disciplines. Multidisciplinarity helps artists and others frame new knowledge. Even when experimentation leads to failure, something is learned. In creative environments, we are often more interested in an ambitious failure than in a more modest success. “Try again. Fail again. Fail Better,” as Samuel Beckett famously said.[6] If art is going to fail, then it should fail *big*.

Business schools, start-ups, and successful companies like Google try to simulate supportive, creative environments, but, of necessity, they are usually too focused on product, profit, and success to establish them. It is easy to talk about failure and risk, even to act as if one encourages it, but no business wants to, or can afford to, fail. As Buckminster Fuller said, "Failure in design is honourable, in science and engineering it is found to be a mark of incompetence and failure in politics and finance is ruinous."[7]

However, an art-making environment thrives on the tension created by potential failure. If students leave art school making the same work they were making when they entered, or simply a better version, then we've failed them. They have not used the time with us to learn how to take risk and recover from failure—essential daily skills for all creative people.

Artists and those educating artists know that what at first might appear to be failure can actually lead to a different kind of success. At the Miró Foundation and at the Picasso Museum in Barcelona, you can see the evolution of each artist's work. It is easy to recognize that Miró's freedom came early and, ironically, was linked to his *inability* to render or draw representationally, which freed him to play. If Miró had possessed Picasso's innate drawing skills, he might never have invented his own unique iconography. On the other hand, if Picasso, who from the age of seven could render anything accurately, had been satisfied with his own success as a draftsman, he might never have discovered Cubism with Georges Braque.

All art schools try to admit the most talented and unique students in all disciplines and then attempt to accommodate their uniqueness. There are few, if any, other parts of the academic

world that actually measure pedagogical success by how effectively they encourage the particularity of each student's development. Creative people refuse to assimilate to what already exists. They insist on imagining something else. Their vision can be threatening—and also thrilling—because it defies a type of socialization and attempts to open a door that might otherwise remain closed. Art schools try to encourage students to create an original place for themselves in society so that they can effect change in their unique way.

Such environments must embrace change in order to allow the practices of the newest generation of artists to influence the evolution of the curriculum established by those who came before. Faculty know that the most startling ideas might come from the youngest students. They tend to value the irreverence of youth. In this openness to the new, art making is like the sciences. However, unlike the sciences, the arts do not require that newly generated knowledge be verified or "proven." The work that artists do *is* art. We only debate its effectiveness. Unlike science, art is an experiment in thinking that cannot be proven "true" by replication.

The entry point for knowledge is not necessarily through the mind alone, but also through the senses. Artists with the most cultivated philosophical minds are not necessarily the best artists. They are not always the ones who imagine the most unique metaphors or engage most successfully in symbolic actions to influence the world. It is often those best able to use their minds, senses, and intuition in concert who are able to achieve this type of success. As the Tao suggests, those who are receptive to the state of *wu wei* ("letting things happen") are often the ones who make the most engaging and effective art.[8]

So how has the pedagogy of art making, once considered marginal to the creation of new knowledge, become central to understanding the way knowledge is generated and communicated in the twenty-first century?

If We Can See the Future, Can It See Us?

At this moment in history, most academic institutions—including my present home, Columbia University—are enamored with fields of research such as Big Data, Personalized Medicine, Brain Science, and so forth. These disciplines are generating possible solutions to present and future problems. So, of course, there is a lot to be garnered from research in these areas. Big Data can give us probabilities, algorithms, and other types of information that are extremely useful in planning the future, healing illness, and making art. It can present a wide array of knowledge to enhance, simplify, and solve the problems of our daily lives. But can it change our hearts?

As a species we have always been obsessed with technologies and information that we believe might transform our mortality into immortality. As excessively focused on the physical body as we are, we give short shrift to our psychic and spiritual bodies, through which ideas for the future often flow before finding form.

Our beloved and now deceased colleague historian George Roeder, asked a fundamental question: What is missing? From that starting point, he generated several essential questions: What is seen? What is not seen? What is hidden? So I ask: What is missing from this scientific, technological version of society that might not address the concerns of the species, now and in the future?

I would speculate that what is missing from present conversations is the importance of subjectivity and interiority; of how we talk to each other across cultures; of how we understand our humanness in relationship to the planet and to all other sentient beings. If the species is suffering, it is in part because we seem unable to coexist with each other, our fellow animals, and the earth. We have not yet learned that the project of living on this planet is our *collective* endeavor, our "common home," as Pope Francis has called it.[9] We have divided ourselves into countries, states, territories, religions, professions, disciplines, races, genders, and species. These subdivisions often make us much less able to negotiate the goal of a harmonious life. Will technology and Big Data save us from ourselves or will we still construct the world in polarities? Our consciousness needs transformation in order to effect change on the material plane or we will obliterate the only home the species has ever known.

Some say that art and ideas cannot transform the world, that they are not forces with that kind of intent or immediacy. But art can point to where human problems and their potential solutions might be found. Artists working in all forms often seek to represent human interiority as it connects to the exterior world. They know how to speak the language of the heart—the way one human understands another through metaphors, images, and symbols. And because powerful forms can awaken consciousness and make us see what is otherwise hidden, some art and ideas can in fact generate action.

When Hannah Arendt writes that the artist's work is unalienated labor, she concedes that art mostly has no direct utilitarian value.[10] The important point here is that creative work, as

opposed to physical labor, *is* a manifestation of freedom. It is undertaken not out of necessity but rather to create that which is *not* essential to survival and daily life. It represents freedom *from* laboring and is therefore not "subordinate" to anything outside itself. The reason creative work can feel so fresh and original is because it emerges from deeper places in the human psyche: from the world of dreams, the unconscious, the imagination. Although filled with archetypes that cross cultures, it is still particular to each individual and culture. We share a world, yet we each construct that world in a unique way, every day. Those who seek a form within which to express our shared world are doing the work of the species, providing insight into what it means to be human at this historical time.

Repressive, fundamentalist regimes will always want to destroy images. They will want to wipe the imagination clean of the past, to embed *their* version of what it means to be human into the collective consciousness. They *should* fear art and culture because art quietly seeks to disempower this strategy for authoritarian control of the imagination, this desire to destroy the possible multiplicity of ideas.

Art talks to us across cultures and history to communicate complex issues through narratives and images. But not everyone understands *how* or *why* art speaks to us so deeply and immediately. Increasingly, instructors in university Humanities programs and in Public Health, Medicine, and the Sciences turn to filmmaking and performance to examine the important issues that concern them: race relations in America and the world, global tensions, gender-based complexities and evolutions, aging populations, memory in postconflict societies, environmental concerns, utopian possibilities, and so forth. But most of those instructors who incorporate art and culture into their

pedagogy and into their analyses of events use them in very utilitarian ways to *explain or illustrate* issues. They do not always understand that art goes beyond explanations. It can recreate issues and tensions in a form that allows mind, body, and spirit to come together to understand and respond in meaningful ways.

The mission of an art school is to provide the next generation of artists, writers, and designers with permission to create multiple representations of their world and to empower them to intervene in the present and future. Artists need to learn to embrace their power and to recognize that in the twenty-first century, narrative, visual, and audio expressions are ubiquitous communicative forces. We must be the first to recognize this and to accept the responsibility that comes with it.

A Brilliant Idea

One hundred fifty years ago, someone in Chicago had a brilliant idea. Let's create an art school and then build a collection of objects, casts, and images that will help artists learn their craft. Because we, Chicago, aspire to be a world capital, we must have artists and a great repository of art at the heart of our city. As a result of such thinking, the Art Institute—School and Museum—sits here today.

The need to cultivate the visual in society has been a mission of this collaborative structure for more than a century and a half. The museum has always physically documented the evolution of the production of artists. The collection also has served as an inspiration for generations of art

students and thinkers who have come to the School and have fallen in love with individual art pieces and with the idea of possibly making similarly fabulous work themselves.

Museums like the Art Institute of Chicago also have become performative spaces—producing work, allowing it to develop inside the space, giving living artists, designers, and their processes a presence within an historical art context. At the same time, art schools like the School of the Art Institute have become more theoretical, a repository of historical and sociological knowledge. These two entities, now more than ever, remarkably reflect and complement each other.

What We Have Learned, What We Have Taught

Only a school that is reimagining itself on a regular basis—and manifesting these reimaginings—has a chance to remain vital in this changing world of "rapidification."[11] Many institutions have stopped generating new ideas and, like stars whose reflected light deceives us into believing they are still radiant, such places maintain enormous reputations long after bureaucracy and habit have squashed their once-ambitious mission. A great deal of education in America continues in this way. These schools are no longer vital to the world as it exists, yet they go on without examining their relevance to history.

Artists and other thinkers rightfully refuse to conform to the evaluative processes that have become so obsessively central to our educational systems and that threaten to overwhelm it. Why can't we measure the success of our own pedagogy without quantifying it to death? "Bring out number, weight & measure in a year of dearth," wrote William Blake in *The Marriage of Heaven*

and Hell.[12] But there is no dearth of creativity. There never was. Art schools push and test such protocols. As a result, those working and studying in such contexts do at times get into trouble. They insist on a certain degree of freedom. They will not be completely tamed. Or as Jack Halberstam might theorize, they "refuse" to call the class to order.[13]

This refusal to conform sometimes presents a dilemma for art schools, but it also presents a dilemma for artists and most creative people who must exist within society, even as they challenge its rules, constantly. They must see ahead to the future while living intensely in the present. They have to maintain a careful balance between order and a necessary and deliberate disorder to create those interstitial spaces, without which no new ideas or forms can come into existence.

We might say that art schools rebel against what Herbert Marcuse calls "surplus-repression," the repression of that which exceeds what is necessary for a society to function.[14] "Surplus repression" seeks to kill all creative thought by insisting on more rules and more deferred pleasures than are actually necessary to run a society. Those places that encourage creative thought by minimizing rules and encouraging pleasure are utopian worlds. They exist as conceptual spaces in which artists and others, as inventors, are allowed to manifest their intentions freely. Without such spaces, we cannot actualize the dream of a healthy, creative society or protect the primacy of the imagination to affect real social change.

The future discussion of education in the United States will not just be about technology, flipped classrooms, and MOOCS (Massive Open Online Courses). It will also be about who can engage

the most talented students to help reimagine a sane, equitable global future and who can bring those students together with others to address the world's most difficult problems. If a school is not up to serving this purpose, it will not be relevant to the future.

To the School of the Art Institute, now 150 years old, I say: never lose the edge, never try to fit into a world organized around fear and conformity, never look to other institutions for leadership. Be the leader you have always been and never doubt your ability to transform the world—one student at a time.

Thank you to those who have allowed me to be part of this magnificent past, and thank you, too, for giving me this space to dream your future with you.

Notes

1. Barry Schwabsky, "The Weirdness and Joy of Black Mountain College," *The Nation,* February 24, 2016, http://www.thenation.com/article/the-weirdness-and-joy-of-black-mountain-college/.

2. The term "holding environment" is fundamental to most of D. W. Winnicott's work. It appears in "The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship," *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 41 (1960): 585–59.

3. *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College 1933–1957,* a traveling exhibition curated by Helen Molesworth, premiered October 10, 2015, at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston.

4. D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock, 1971), 50.

5. C. G. Jung, *Jung on Active Imagination,* ed. Joan Chodorow (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 91.

6. Samuel Beckett's famous quote on failure: "Ever Tried. Ever Failed. No Matter. Fail Again. Fail Better." *Worstward Ho* (London: John Calder, 1983), 7.

7. Eva Diaz, *The Experimenters: Chance and Design at Black Mountain College* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 132.

8. C. G. Jung, *Jung on Active Imagination*, 10.

9. Pope Francis, *Encyclical on Climate Change and Inequality: On Care for Our Common Home* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2016).

10. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 127.

11. Pope Francis, *Encyclical on Climate Change,* 13.

12. William Blake, “The Marriage of Heaven and Earth,” in *The Portable William Blake,* ed. Alfred Kazin (New York: Penguin Books, 1959), 253.

13. Jack Halberstam, “With and for the Undercommons,” introduction to *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study,* by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 9.

14. Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 224–25.