2006 Commencement

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2006 Commencement, University of Michigan School of Art & Design

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You are incredibly lucky to be making art in the 21st century.

It took thousands of years of conscious and self-conscious art-making, and two billion years of evolution, to get us to the point in human history where everything you say will be held against you. And also, when everything you say can be heard instantly by anybody.

Imagine your typical paleolithic artist at work in his cave, transmitting an image to the stone, aware that he was taking a giant evolutionary step by abstracting something in his mind sufficiently to give it shape. Awesome realisation, worth the huge effort of standing on two legs, of squatting and climbing on the cave wall, of creating the materials for the drawing! The artist must have been keenly aware that this momentous discovery, this actual leap of consciousness, was not going to be seen or understood by anyone outside his or her cave, and he/she must have had doubts about that. The tired cavemen and cavewomen back from the hunt or from plant-gathering may not have been in the mood to humor the artist who, it seemed to them, had used the excuse of a temporary injury to unsettle their living space by making disturbing resemblances of bisons on their formerly comforting walls.

But for all that, the news leaked out of the cave, and consciousness began its work of turning the cavemen first into ritual creatures who looked at the artist as a shaman, and then into tool-yielding locusts who caught on quickly to the idea of design and began to rapidly devour their cave, the rocks, the trees, and, more recently, the whole planet we live on in order to make it more suitable to modern cave-living.

So when I say that you’re incredibly lucky to be making art in the 21st century, what I meant is that you are incredibly lucky to have had the 20th century to rethink art for you and to make you aware, hopefully, that art is neither harmless nor just another profession. At the very beginning of the 20th century, so-called “civilised” people started massacring each other on a scale inconceivable in the long millennia before modern weapon design. In Zurich, Switzerland in 1914, a group of artists, poets, and writers who refused to offer their young bodies as corpse flesh for the first World War, founded the Dada movement, an exercise in the refusal of almost anything society held sacred: patriotism, blind faith, gainful employment, and Progress. (with capital P). In so doing, they rethought for us the meaning of art and the role of artists in a society that stumbles blindly into war in the name of reason.

It took the whole of the 20th century to expand the definition of what art is in order to make it possible to see that, for humans, art is an essential way of being because it is essential to rethink what Flaubert called “the dictionary of received ideas.” In other words, art is that which will not permit us to buy unexamined the bullshit of people in power.

The lesson of the 20th century is: don’t let design get ahead of your feelings!

Or, to put it another way, you can either be conscious or you can be dead. If you are conscious, you are charged with the spectacular job of rethinking the world every minute. If you’re dead, you are still material for artists whose job is to resurrect you.

The dead is what I call “the audience.” Hello, there. Unfortunately for us, we have not completely and fully arrived into the zeitgeist of the 21st century when everybody is an artist at work on a vast collaboration of war against war, or design for the living instead of design for the dead. Your art, at least for a little while, let’s say twenty years or so, is going to be to make the dead rise, or, in other words, to make an audience for your art that wants to make art with
you. The good news is that this is a very good time for this project: art has lost its capital "a", and the borders between art, life, and technology have dissolved. You no longer have to wait for professional art critics, PR men, art galleries, and museums to validate your existence. You can broadcast to the universe from your bathtub.

What you are going to broadcast to the universe from your bathtub is the real question. You can broadcast the fruits of your learning, or the prices of your objects, or simply the good news of your existence, or you can take an active hand in redesigning the world you live in.

Our society experiences a continually accelerating demand for design in every area, but it's a mindless kind of production that doesn't require you to be conscious of what the design is for, or what your talent is being made to service. You are a generation that must produce content for the future of our society, whether you like it or not, whether you've gone to art school or not. And you better like it, especially if you've gone to art school, because you have no choice but to produce it. So, in addition to liking it, it would be of great help to you personally if you also considered yourselves in charge of your own productions. Produce nothing that isn't awesome to you, as awesome as that first cave drawing was to the paleolithic artist. Release nothing that isn't a work of keen awareness. In other words, don't bore yourself. Better to make nothing than to make another inconsequential object. Our world is full of stuff. Don't add to it.

Back in the 20th century we had a great deal of disdain for commercial art and we did our best not to "sell out," as we called it, or, at least to hold off "selling out" as long as possible. Very few people talk like this anymore because selling has become natural, like the air we breathe. We take it for granted that everything is for sale. Well, it isn't true. The world is on sale, but the good stuff is not. The good stuff is against the sale, as a matter of fact. The good stuff, the real art, opposes the unabashed sale of the world going on around us, it throws wrenches into the machinery of the constant sale of the planet and everyone on it.

It's a buyer's market, so you don't have to sell anything. You must humanize the buyer, make the buyer into an artist. You have to take this frantically hypnotised, fevered buyer and make him sit down and reconsider. If you turn enough buyers into art-making members of your anti-buying commune, the future will thank you. And so will the cavemen who saw what no one saw before. Or as Arthur Rimbaud put it, in Ted Berrigan's translation, "And I have seen what other men have only thought they've seen before."

Your job as artists is to remake the world. Nothing less. You have to think about the world, the way the world functions, the way it is organised, and the way it looks, feels, and smells. You have to understand all that, and then you have to rethink it. After that, you must decide whether there is any way to make anyone else participate in your insights and become part of the process that spurs you on. Somewhere in the course of rethinking the world, you will produce certain objects that represent your momentary representation of what it is you're thinking. But they are not the point: making this little blue ball glow happily in the cave is the point.

And I thank you because that is precisely what you'll be doing.

Thank you.