



## **3 MILLION STORIES AND COUNTING**

### **Deborah Sussman Susser**

From March 3 to March 5, 2016, Arizona State University hosted 3 Million Stories, a national conference on the preparation and careers of America's arts graduates in a rapidly changing economy. The second of its kind, the conference builds on the insights of the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP), a survey of over 140,000 arts graduates from more than 300 institutions. The title comes from the roughly three million people with arts degrees from American educational institutions.

Last fall alone, SNAAP received responses from the largest number of alums yet: 40,000 different voices, from 53 different institutions. As Sally Gaskill, director of SNAAP, reported during the conference: "SNAAP is the largest comprehensive alumni survey in North America, in any field. No other discipline in academia has a similar research effort. The arts are leading the way."

At the end of the first 3 Million Stories conference, which took place in Nashville in 2013, Steven J. Tepper, SNAAP research director, promised that SNAAP would continue "to collect and synthesize data and bring people together to discuss big ideas." Now dean of the Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts at ASU, the largest comprehensive design and arts school in the nation, as well as a professor in the institute, Tepper made good on that promise.

More than 300 arts school presidents, deans, faculty, administrators, working artists, academic scholars and arts leaders from 33 states and three Canadian provinces gathered in Tempe, Arizona, to revisit the status of arts graduates – and arts education – in an economy that continues to shift shape at an accelerating pace. More than 40 speakers presented and animated conversations about the future of creative work, about how higher education is changing, about how artists and designer are working differently in the world and how their work gets supported, and about the culture of design and arts schools and the critical role universities and colleges play in shaping culture in the U.S.

### **WHO WE INCLUDE, AND HOW**

Several themes that became clear during the first conference reemerged in Tempe, amplified. Key among them were the challenge of preparing students for a "gig" economy; the tension facing arts schools as they balance, on the one hand, broadening the skill set that graduates need as they enter the workforce and, on the other hand, continuing to provide structured, disciplinary training; and the persistent inequalities that exist in the art world and within arts training institutions for women, students of color and others from less privileged backgrounds.

New and related themes also emerged, notably the changing profile of college students, which in many ways ties back to the issue of persistent inequalities.

In a talk that kicked off the first full day of the conference, ASU President Michael Crow welcomed the group to what he called "the strangest public university in the world, in a frontier town" and pointed to several game-changing statistics higher education must

evolve to contend with, including this: Only one fifth of today's 18 million undergraduates are 18-24 year-old traditional students; the other 80 percent are working, first-generation, returning and non-traditional.

Crow noted, "If you're from the bottom 50 percent economically in this country, you have a 15 percent chance of getting a college degree." He shared ASU's mission to change higher education through action rather than rhetoric, and pointed to ASU's charter, which states that success is measured "by who we include, not by who we exclude." And he flipped the notion of the college dropout on its head, saying that it was higher education that had failed by dropping those students who chose not to continue: "We did not have ways to help them achieve their pathways."

This theme of how higher education, and particularly arts and design education, can best help not just a few but many students on their path in life ran throughout the conference.

### **THE CREATIVE ENTREPRENEUR**

In "The Death of the Artist—and the Birth of the Creative Entrepreneur," a panel that paired author William Deresiewicz with the University of Leeds' Kate Oakley, Deresiewicz talked about the influence of the market on arts education, and cited the founder of an MFA program in applied craft and design who lamented the emphasis on "the website and the outer appearances" over the actual work. "It's all about customer engagement, customer feedback," Deresiewicz said. "There's a radically new conception of how art gets made." He quoted a faculty member at a design school who was concerned that "our students are becoming a lot less weird."

Some of the problems Deresiewicz sees – namely that "everybody is an artist, taking photos with phones, posting comedy online" – are also enabling opportunities, he said, noting such examples as the award-winning movie "Tangerine," which was shot on an iPhone, and the comedy series "Broad City," which began as a cheaply produced web series.

In the end, Deresiewicz advised acknowledging the market imperatives without allowing them to change or define the education being offered – a difficult balancing act.

In response, Oakley said that she was "amazed" by the persistence of the idea of "selling out" among the arts grads she interviewed. She saw what she called "a very romantic view of the arts," and said the grads experienced a "huge amount" of internalized blame if they weren't making art.

For her part, she preferred what she called "slashies" – e.g., "She's an artist/engineer" – to the word "entrepreneur." Other presenters during the conference embraced the latter term.

As part of a panel titled "Inside the Blackbox: The Education and Culture of Arts and Design Schools," Ruby Lerner, president and executive director of Creative Capital, delivered an inspiring "graduation speech" for the arts and design school of the future that outlined some of the entrepreneurial tools that had been provided to the graduating students and enumerated the ways in which their education had prepared them to thrive artistically and economically.

And Aaron Dworkin, dean of the School of Music, Theatre and Dance at the University of Michigan, underscored the necessity of providing students with entrepreneurial skill sets. “Artists have to be an enterprise of one,” he said.

At the end of the conference, Tepper encouraged those in attendance to get together with faculty and think about why that particular word, “entrepreneur,” causes unease for people. “There’s something there that needs to be worked through.”

### **WHO’S SERVING WHOM?**

One of the conference’s highlights, a panel featuring Creative Capital’s Lerner, artist Liz Lerman (faculty in the Herberger Institute) and Rick Lowe, artist and founder of Project Row Houses, touched on a range of critical subjects, from the panelists’ own career trajectories to issues of social practice and social justice, including the topic of mostly white student artists carrying out projects in underserved communities. “Social practice students tend to be white and working in communities of color,” Lowe pointed out. “This is troubling.”

Lerman said she likes to think about the work as being not just for the underserved but also for the “overprofessionalized.” She said that, in her own experience working in senior centers, the wealthier the center, the less the participation. “They were drugged and they were isolated.” The panel concluded that one of the biggest barriers to participating in this kind of social practice is, in fact, wealth and status.

In feedback provided by conference goers after the event, they praised the panel for “encapsulating the reason for the conference and the value of it.” One person wrote, “(Liz) mentioned that maybe we should be also considering ways artists can be engaging/interacting with the ‘over-served’ populations. I took this to mean how artists might look at how to break down the barriers the ‘over-served’ have created to avoid their own engagement in supporting the arts. The 1% have immense access to the ‘high’ arts (able to pay the extraordinary ticket prices; fly to the art meccas of NYC, London, Paris). But the 1% are not investing in a broader democratization of the arts...The idea of artists who pursue art-in-social-practice working with impoverished and/or disenfranchised communities (but) are not pushing, nudging, engaging wealthier populations raises lots of critical issues. Why don’t artists nudge the ‘over-served’?”

At the conclusion of the conference, Tepper pointed out how frequently inequality and access had come up. He quoted Oakley’s remark that “the cultural workforce is becoming more white, more elite, more upper class,” as well as Deresiewicz’s comment, “If you de-monetize the arts the only ones who can afford to do it will be rich people.”

Tepper noted, too, that SNAAP data show that women are less likely to earn as much money from their art work as men, they are less likely to be able to work as many hours in their primary occupation as artists than men.

He continued, “In spite of the general political attitudes of the arts – we tend to think of ourselves as more progressive on these issues – when it comes to workforce outcomes, we don’t look that much different.”

“This is the cultural collision course we all need to worry about,” Tepper warned. “If our nation’s storytellers don’t look like our nation, then that’s a cultural collision waiting to happen in this country.”

## **RELEVANCE, INCLUSION AND DISRUPTION**

The question of cultural leadership – who’s steering the ship, and how? – also ran through many of the sessions.

As Douglas Dempster, dean of the College of Fine Arts at the University of Texas at Austin, noted during the conference, the university has a double role as both educator of students AND the single biggest, most reliable patron of the arts in the 21st century.

“If we don’t change the cultural infrastructure, the cultural ecology, our graduates will not be sustainable or have sustainable lives,” Tepper said. “So we can’t just ignore this. We have to take seriously our role in advancing cultural vitality and cultural life well beyond our campuses.”

In his presentation, Dworkin addressed the critical importance of disruption and inclusion as forces for change in the arts. As an African American man in classical music who worked and works across disciplines, he was and is an outlier, he said, calling his appointment at Michigan “disruptive and innovative” in and of itself. He quoted novelist Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie, who said: “The danger of a single story is not that it is untrue, but that it is incomplete.”

Dworkin also advocated for bringing together people in disparate disciplines and forcing them to be in the same space to do interdisciplinary work, which he acknowledged was not always comfortable.

“We have to force in some instances that type of physical environment so that we can purposefully, intentionally be uncomfortable,” he said. He quoted Larry Page, cofounder of Google (and a University of Michigan alum), who said, “You need to be a bit uncomfortable to stay relevant.”

In a public lunchtime conversation between Tepper and “comedian in residence” Maysoon Zayid, the ASU alum talked with her characteristic candor and humor about growing up Muslim and disabled in a small New Jersey town, becoming a successful comedian, and using comedy as a tool to make the world a better, more accessible place. The conversation underscored another point about relevance that Dworkin made during his presentation: “We cannot be relevant if we are not inclusive.”

## **A “BOTH AND” WORLD**

At the conclusion of the conference, Tepper pointed out another theme in evidence, which he identified in almost every presentation: loss.

“We talked about the loss of control as we engage the community more,” he said by way of example. “The more we embed ourselves, the more we lose control, and what does that mean – should we mourn that loss? We talked about the loss of the thing itself as we try to measure it. Whenever we think about measuring and assessing what we’re doing, there’s always a sense that we’re losing the art when we do that.”

“It’s worth thinking about: What IS the loss that we worry about as we confront change?”

In the face of loss, and change, Tepper is realistic and yet fundamentally an optimist: To William Deresiewicz’s concern that artists are turning into designers and therefore losing their understanding of themselves as unique individuals with the capacity to say something meaningful in the world, Tepper responded, “I think we all believe we can do both. It’s a ‘both and’ world – our students can design the world, they can design enterprises, and they can keep their art and their purpose and their meaning at the heart of what they do. It’s not necessarily one or the other.”

And in his final comments, Tepper urged, “Let’s keep making our institutions better. We do great things, but they need to be great things in the context of a changing reality.”

While the date for the next 3 Million Stories is not yet set, the majority of responses to the survey distributed after the conference indicated that it will be a welcome and necessary continuation of some of the conversations that took place in Tempe. In the feedback after the fact, one participant wrote, “It is easy to get caught up in your busy day-to-day work, and forget about the big picture. This conference allowed me to take a step back and re-examine: where I fit within the whole, where we are headed as a whole, what is changing in the industry, in higher ed, and in society, and what we need to do to prepare for, and adapt to, the changes.”

### **OTHER NOTABLE QUOTES FROM THE CONFERENCE**

“We need to reevaluate what it means to prepare students for success. We need to rethink what success means in the first place.”

Steven J. Tepper

“I believe so much that if we want... to work in the area of being innovative and being disruptive, you must be prepared to fail.”

Aaron Dworkin

“How can universities help shape the ‘we’ – not the privatized we of me and my friends, but the secular we that includes people you don’t know?”

Roberto Bedoya

“The dancer in me loved my classical training; the choreographer hated it.”

Liz Lerman

Sammy Hoi on cultural leadership: “We need to keep asking ourselves, if we don’t do it, who will?”

“I start with the problem and let it grow into art.”

Lerner, Lerman and Lowe

“Don’t mind me...I am just iterating.” Ruby Lerner