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Convocation 2013 Address by Denise Pelletier

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CONNECTICUT COLLEGE

Convocation Address

Denise Pelletier, Associate Professor of Art

August 29, 2013

I'm an artist, and although I lecture pretty frequently on my work, I usually get to rely on projected images as my cue cards. And because my images are often provocative, puzzling, or beautiful, they give my audience something to get lost in while I weave a story, unpack a subject, or throw you something to chew on. When I speak about my work, it's like a living thing for me, an organic event that fluctuates between careful preparation and flying by the seat of my pants. It's often non linear, a little disjointed, and I am always a little nervous. But those images save me every time.

Today I want to share some personal reflections, some thoughts on work, art and sustainability, plus a few things I wish someone had told me when I started college. To make it fun for myself, I'm going to share this mash-up in a way that mimics the way I might give a talk about my work, without the veiled literary references, of course. And because I'm nervous, and I don't want to cuss, I've written it down. There aren't any pictures, so I'll have to depend on you to just listen, imagine the pictures, use what you need and leave the rest.

About 20 years ago, fresh out of graduate school, I attended what I thought was going to be a pretty standard artist lecture by Robert Wilson, an internationally prominent artist who, together with Philip Glass, conceived a multimedia performance work titled "Einstein on the Beach." It's described as "an Opera in Four Acts," but "Einstein" is an exercise in endurance for the audience that defies anyone's traditional definition of opera. I was pretty excited to hear Robert Wilson speak. It wasn't a large auditorium and there was no screen, just Wilson in his impeccable suit looking real fine, speaking from center stage in a stream of consciousness on various topics, alternating with a description of a new work in progress. There were two things, always switching. He didn't move much except to occasionally take a drink of water from a glass sitting on a fancy little fake Baroque table. I was mesmerized. And when it was over, I hardly remembered his narrative; instead, I remembered the visual impressions of him in the space, the sound, the light and the gestures. But there was one thing he said that has stuck with me all these years, and it was something I already knew to be true: when you do your work, it's good to get lost in it.

When you get lost in your work you lose your bearings. Sometimes your balance is off. You can't default to what you know or expect. You're forced to renegotiate your relation to things outside yourself, and you might need to correct a wrong turn or change direction entirely. You'll probably need to experiment, with no guarantee at all that it will work out. You court failure and it's risky. It takes extra time to be lost, but when you're done finding your way out of it or you come back to earth, you just might have been somewhere you'd never been before.

I work a lot with clay. I love that material. There's a visceral connection in your hand that connects with your brain and lights it up in a way most other materials don't. And because this is a sensuous connection, there's a tactile value to it that's unlike any other. Plus it's everywhere and plentiful. It's one of the few things of this earth that they say will never run out. Who among us has never squeezed clay, or dirt with clay in it, and made something that directly imprints their hand? A thing made with clay speaks in a language that can be transmitted and received by others through their own tactile memories.

There are lots of ways to speak and be heard in the world, and it's a good idea to try some of them.

Growing up in a small town in Connecticut with woods in the back and a lake in the front, I was always wet or dirty or building something out of nothing. My creativity was born from having not enough money, but that lack ended up being a gift. I built a lot of tree forts with my best friend Bonnie; I broke bones getting whacked with hockey sticks and spent hours hiding out with a book. I was lucky to be a free-range kid, compared to how kids are raised today. My parents didn't know where I was half the time, and believe me that was a good thing. Getting to know the world through your senses is getting harder today in developed western societies like ours, with so much fear when kids are out of our sight, and with so much technology. Think about it - we don't even write much anymore, we don't fire that impulse directly from brain to hand and back again without mechanical tools that take away our innate need to draw. We need to remember that while progress is made, something is always lost. And we have to make up for it.

Creativity takes many forms. All of my colleagues are creative in their fields. They need to look at problems and solve them, find new connections, illuminate questions, or invent new modes of expression. Artists often speak about being in the "zone". I know that same zone exists for scientists and writers and researchers and anyone engaging in sports. Maybe you know what feels like - it's when you're really focused and absorbed in what you're doing. It's a charged state, a little like being lost, but with more adrenaline and purpose. When you're in the zone, you're oblivious to things that don't matter at the moment. You get to play, or achieve things not otherwise possible.

It's harder to get in that zone if you aren't excited about what you're doing. Sometimes there's no helping that - maybe that thing just isn't for you. That's OK. But sometimes it's a matter of looking at your problem or subject differently. I'd start by being curious. Your job becomes finding that little part of something that lights up your brain or excites your senses. When you do this, you'll own it. And that may excite you.

Red clay and white porcelain embody the tension of opposites.

Dirty/clean/dirty/clean - elemental materials, rich in history and culture. One is low and cheap, the other pristine, pure and precious. I like to blur their boundaries in the work that I make. Used for millennia for bricks, dishes and plumbing, clay can speak to our most basic needs - shelter, sustenance and water. I mine these potentials in my work, as I recycle old or

obsolete vessels and structures and try to enrich our understanding of our relationship to the past and to one another. To bring history to the present is to see structures and systems in a new time and context. We're lucky if we get to question whether we should celebrate and restore a history, or whether we need to change the things that formed it.

We live in a designed world. Throughout history we've created systems that are meant to solve problems and enable progress. At base level, these systems address the necessities of life: water, food, shelter and mobility; and from there we enter the complex realms of power, social relations, economies and the environment. By any measure, sustainability is the challenge of our day. While preserving history is necessary if we want to sustain and enrich culture, there's danger in preserving outmoded systems as icons, relics or default positions.

There's a wonderful talk titled, "Revolution by Design," recently given by Jocelyn Bailey at the TEDx Oxbridge conference. Jocelyn is a researcher at the Westminster think tank "Policy Connect," where she runs a stream of activities around design, innovation and manufacturing policy. Her question is "What Can Politics Learn from Design?" And since the "essence of design is to change an existing situation into a preferred one so that things work better," I think she's on to something. Her talk is enlightening and it urges anyone, especially politicians, to think like a designer. So there's your homework – look up "Revolution by Design."

Sustainability is a word we hear so often it can become white noise, a sound bite that we think we know. We quickly connect the word to visual images of strip mines, shuttered factories, crashing markets and polar ice caps, and the victims of social inequity, mostly in countries other than our own. It's natural to compare the enormity of a problem with our own smallness, and we tend to rationalize at least some bit of helplessness in this equation. We all need community for personal and global sustenance. Nobody here's going to go it alone.

So remember - when you lose pressure in the cabin, you put that oxygen mask on yourself before you put it on your baby. There is a reality larger than yourself, you can't control every X factor, and you can't control what others think. You can only control what you do. And you can't help anyone or anything if you're not striving, healthy, caring, passionate, disciplined and creative. As we start the school year together remember how lucky and privileged you are to have an opportunity that so few have.

Now, I want to tell you 5 secrets:

- Everything is temporary. EVERYTHING.
- Find work that lights you up, or find a way of working that lights you up.
- Blur the line between work and play.
- Find something or someone to trust.
- Love generously, and commit to a community.

Oh! And don't forget to dance. Thank You.