

Cranbrook commencement address

Victoria Vesna, Ph.D.

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Board of Governors and Chair Alan Rothfeder, President of the Educational Community Dominic DiMarco, Director Christopher Scoates and Dean Amy Green Deines -- on this glorious day, with clear blue skies, I thank you for inviting me to share in this critical moment of commencement – the point of ending and beginning –here at the Cranbrook Greek theatre.

Congratulations class of 2017 and a big nod to the parents! I would like to ask the parents stand up and together we give them a thunderous applause. On this day, you deserve a medal for making it to this point! I say this as someone who was a crazy student artist and I know what I put my parents through. My mother would threaten me that one day I would have children and experience the same thing she was going through – she was right. No matter how cool and open you think you are, their job is to find the weak spots and push those buttons. Today, you too should be honored for supporting your offspring to study art – not exactly reassuring for the job market but in the long run, their comprehensive education in fact prepares them to be creative no matter what life presents them with.

It is a true honor to share this important moment in an institution with a rich history of world-changing ideas. Indeed, the fact that I was invited by Director Scoates to give this commencement talk attests to the commitment of looking forward and taking risks. He graduated from Cranbrook in 1986 and went on to be the Director of the University Art Museum at California State University Long Beach and then, before coming back here a couple of years ago, was at the

Getty. We were literally next-door to each other and now we meet as he makes a full circle. Life is that way – when you follow your heart, things happen in order that is not linear or rational – many times it is circular and there is no coincidences.

Now you probably wonder why someone like me is standing in front of you – and what is that slight accent you can't quite place your finger on? It is what some refer to an international accent and sometime I myself am not sure where I am from. So a brief life path summary that will explain a bit -- my father was a diplomat for X-Yugoslavia, I was born in Washington D.C., we moved to Belgrade for a few years, then I started school in Djakarta, Indonesia, continued in Belgrade, X-Yugoslavia and then landed in New York city in the 70's. By the time I was 12, I had three different versions of WW2 and very early on learned that these are stories people tell – and do we have some stories today! Most of the narratives we are hearing lately are rooted in fear and generating anxiety but I will not go there -- that is all I am going to say regarding current politics today!

Probably like most of you, I had terrible math and science teachers – this is why we are artists, right? So, naturally I went to high school of art & design and being thirteen, of course I majored in fashion. After awhile, I learned that there is not much you can do beyond a simple black dress with a string of pearls and at the same time that I got very ill and -- I thought I was going to die. Looking back, I dramatized this it bit, but at that time I thought – I am going to die so I will be an artist for the rest of my short life. During this time in NY, I also witnessed the NY dolls at Max's Kansas city and learned about Nikola Tesla from my father who was obsessed with introducing him to the American public who were only aware of Edison at that point. So, I shifted to painting and as my family moved back to X-Yugoslavia, I went to study in a traditional Beaux Arts academy in Belgrade. After three years of doing anatomy, painting and drawing landscapes, nudes, bones and more bones, I dropped out and went back to NY city and formed a

band. I wanted nothing to do with the art world and absolutely fell in love with the club scene – and this was quite a scene in the early eighties! What I did not realize at the time was that I was actually teaching myself media arts education and learning how to collaborate. I was doing all kinds of lowly jobs to survive and pay the rent, but also working in a film supply house on Broadway. It was a really marvelous time and our band was even starting to take off a bit so when a manager appeared and told me to repeat songs and be sexy, I realized it could actually become a real thing so I decided to return to Belgrade to finish my degree.

As fate would have it, soon after graduating, in 1986, I got an invitation to exhibit at the Aperto section in Venice Biennale. You would think my path in the art world was set, and it certainly could have been if I followed everybody's advice, but I did not. You see, when you follow your heart, and by extension, your gut, you will go much further than the unlikely road your mind would devise. Your heart connects to an invisible network of like-minded people and here's an example: Exhibiting next to me was musician Brian Eno who was visited by his Professor Roy Ascott, who happened to be exhibiting his ground-breaking telematics art work. Not to mention that the title of this Biennale was Art and Science! This was so outside of what I had learned in school – Eno's light and sound boxes and Ascott's networked art – I could not even process this, but my subconscious mind registered what I saw and, I started taking the path with no markers and few to support my decision. I experimented with performance, video and started dabbling with computers – everything taking me further away from the gallery path. I rented a basement for a studio on Mercer st. in NY thinking I would paint, but upstairs was a cigar factory and this took my attention – and instead I started videotaping the women rolling cigars and created a sculptural work with tobacco leaves that got me a Special projects exhibition at the P.S. 1 – I was on my way, or not...

Because – right at that point -- I married a nuclear physicist, got pregnant with my first child and opened the show in the ninth month of my pregnancy. I was told by many artist friends that having a child will put my career on hold and when I got pregnant with my second daughter, all pretty much decided I was done. Not easy to be told this at the beginning of your career! But, when I landed in John Wayne airport and saw the bronze statue of John Wayne surrounded by artificial palm trees, I knew I made the right decision! As soon as I was able to, I returned to that location and started a project with the artificial palm trees – I had no connections, no institution, no one knew me – but I was excited and determined to manifest the idea of palm trees with embedded video monitors and this crazy vision started my journey in discovering California. Turns out that the all the different twists and turns in my paths came together into developing a new area – I was recruited to the fine arts department at UCSB to start the media arts area and at that time did not have much competition. They were looking for someone who could introduce new media to art students. Now there are media arts programs all over the country and the world – but at that time you could count them on your one hand. And -- I was not alone in searching and self educating – and following the inner voice – many of my colleagues and friends working at that time were similarly responding to something we were all anticipating -- change.

My first collaboration with a scientist did not end well but we did produce together two daughters so no regrets. I will however, give you my first advice here: NEVER SAY NEVER – when I was your age, I would with great confidence say – I will never live in California, who would live there? I would never be a single mother, who would do that? I would never teach -- artists don't do that. Well, it all came true and, these are the best things that happened to me – gifts that came in packages I did not recognize. I love California, my daughters are the most amazing gift, taught me many lessons and made me a much better artist, and I discovered that teaching is the highest honor bestowed to an artist. And, enough about me --

Standing here, I am reminded of the philosophy of Black Mountain college that inspired me so much and of course Buckminster Fuller and the idea of the Anticipatory Design Scientist. If you imagine that we are on a ship together and are about to arrive to the shore that is unknown – what is on the other side? Now let's take it further and imagine a large wave covering us all and throwing us even further into the unknown – where do we land collectively, where do you land individually? Can we anticipate and work towards this without really knowing? How much can we predict really?

To consider this, let's rewind the film to the beginning of the vision of this school – early 1900's when the Booths bought this piece of land and started envisioning the art and design school of the future. This Greek theatre was built in 1916! If we take a 100-year marker -- 1917, literacy was at 23% -- today it is 80%; WW1 was raging, Russian revolution was in full swing, Kazimir Malevich presented the white on white painting, Marcel Duchamp exhibited his fountain – those works to this day resonate and inform the art world; D'Arcy Thomson wrote on Growth and Form – a book still influential to biologist and artists alike; Einstein wrote his famous paper on the laser and we know how far this technology has gone, Freud came up with his ideas of the unconscious – think of the advances in brain / consciousness research, the war technology was making fast progress with use of airplanes and even gas attacks – now we have drone attacks and much more. In 1917, women in this country finally got the right to vote; in 1917 only 6% of Americans graduated from high school, now we are arguing whether artists should do a PhD, we had 1,9 billion people on the planet, today it is 7,9 billion. It took 3 grueling months of travel from London to NY, now we bitch when the plane is late, and here in Detroit Ford Motor co. was in full speed with the newly introduced idea of mass assembly line production ushering in the car as transportation available to the middle classes. [Sitting with us is President

Dominic DiMarco who spent 35 years at Ford and has seen so many changes in his lifetime – right here in Detroit!]

Now, if you asked any one of these genius people to predict what would happen in a 100 years, not one would have come even close to the reality we face now. Class of 2017, you are graduating in a year that is marking the paradigm shift and we are entering a new era. CRIS – PR/Cas9 gene editing technology, which enables us to reprogram life as we know it, Artificial Intelligence, Artificial Life, robotics, sensors, networks, synthetic biology, materials science, space exploration and more about our consciousness every day.

Neuroscientists agree that we use 5% of our brain and that most of what we do is unconscious and that it optimistic! Some even believe that this is closer to 1 or 2%. While you are listening to me, your past experiences inform your judgment and understanding of what is going on, and on the other hand, you are already thinking about what happens next. But, that large space of unconscious is reserved for your dreams, your feelings and senses beyond the visual and auditory. No scientist today can explain this complexity -- this is the realm of the artists – this is where your comprehensive education truly serves you. As Anticipatory Design / Art Scientists, we can put up what John Cage calls our antennae's to the future and present to the world other visions, counter to what is being fed through our media daily. It is an exciting time, it is a dangerous time, it is unpredictable but we can anticipate and respond. This does not have to be predictive – it can be non-verbal experiences we share that tap into the collective unconscious.

And to do this, we do not have to go 100 years ahead – things have speeded up, everything is moving faster and many things that would have been deemed impossible even 20 years ago are happening now. We are in the midst of a major paradigm shift and if are bound to land in a whole different world sooner than we

think. So, in tradition of this great art school – think into the future, think big, envision how this planet can survive through creative thinking and doing – go beyond the limits imposed and don't care about categories. Why not present a vision that counters all the bad news, why not come up with ideas that give people hope? No matter what you do, what life throws at you – see it as an opportunity to respond and create something out of it, give it your all and you will move on. Give yourself big goals and if you fail, fail BIG – everyone will still be impressed that you dared and admire what you attempted – you will definitely get a second chance. Fail small and it is embarrassing!

And when you are told that what you envision is impossible – remember that every great proposition has an equally great opposition, take no as a hello and respond with I'm possible! Now – graduates of 2017 – go change the world!