

Commencement Speech
Dr. Tania Bruguera
School of the Art Institute of Chicago
150 Anniversary
Monday, May 16, 2016
Auditorium Theater

Thank you to the board of governors, to president Massi, to dean Lisa and to Rachel for such a wonderful introduction. I want to congratulate my fellow honorees.

I want to acknowledge the parents who when their SAIC kids showed them their work or their ideas for future projects responded with a “ah how wonderful” while they were probably thinking “what are they teaching them at that school?” thank for supporting this wonderful group of people.

Some of you are the first to graduate in your family, that is a huge accomplishment. Congratulations! Give yourself a big applause.

I want to thank all the amazing and fierce full-time and part-time faculty who keep giving so much, for so little, thank you for taking time out of your own careers and creative work, which is a huge sacrifice, to keep pushing the boundaries of these wonderful students here.

My speech today is dedicated to one of you: the wonderful Barbara DeGenevieve, who taught me some things you may hear today. I also want to thank the students who sent me their questions, suggestions and concerns, respecting your anonymity I forward them to the institution, let’s make sure the conversation continuous. I’d would love to meet you in person after the ceremony.

I want to thank those who proposed me for this honor and to the committee who chose me, especially when we are celebrating the 150th anniversary of the school.

I’m humbled. I’m an alumna, I’ve being a student, a t.a., a part-time faculty, an advisor and an artist in residency at the school. I’m one of you!! My presence here tells you it is not that difficult to make it. You are now part of a tradition at SAIC: go out in the world to make your mark.

Congratulations to the class of 2016!! Can I call you the sweet 16 class?!

On my first day at The School of the Art Institute I attended, like many of you, orientation day – for international students. The first thing they said to us was: when an American asks how are you doing? Do not stop and tell them your problems, just say politely “very well, thank you” and keep walking (keep walking seemed to be the key part of what they tried to tell us). I said to myself “ay, dios mío.” I was, like many of you international students, in a foreign country without sufficient emotional support and overwhelmed by the amount and variety of classes I could choose from (and also by the variety of soy sauces in the grocery store which didn’t help with the overwhelming feeling).

But the real reason to be overwhelmed was that my life was in my hands. In the years here, I found lifetime friends (including some professors), I understood by contrast, by confrontation, by admiration, by reading, or by osmosis, who I was and what really matters to me. The conversations we started right here, continued long after graduation, so I want to reassure you that today is not a commencement, but a continuation.

During my years here I got a lot, there were many opportunities to grow. Part of that growth came out of feeling misunderstood, I felt that things where not built for me. As a Person of Color and an international student I felt that it was too hard (I was not even sure I would finish the first semester) and on top of it I felt that my identity was in jeopardy. It was at some point frustrating when some of my projects were seen through cultural and political lens and traditions I did not identified with or that I didn't even knew existed for that matter, for others such hardships were located in their gender social class or the burden of high loans.

Yes, it was hard, but I tell you now, the school is just a sampling of what is out there and those were exercises that shaped the artist I am today and they will shape each of you too.

What you do not know yet, is that you are now ready to give an answer to similar challenges in the world, precisely because you encountered them and fought them here first. This was the hardest part in the battle and you made it!! You are here today!

Never forget the things you wanted to change (for yourself or for your community) while you were a student, those are the things you care the most about and those are the things you should be fighting to change once you hold your diploma in your hands.

After today you will be unpacking all the knowledge and the experience this place gave you and you will start to recognize the wonderful things you got out of it, (it may take some time, be patient) especially you will recognize your own transformation, you will find out how strong, how independent and qualified you are to be your own self.

Many of you wrote asking how to succeed now that you are entering the 2.0 version of what you have done so far. Often success is confused with money, respectability, a place in an institution (whether it is a gallery or a good job). Success is often confused with power, with being above and at a distance from others. Sometimes people think success is like the flu, contagious, so they stand close to those who have it, in hopes that they catch it. But success is not something others decide for you, it is not a finish line you have to arrive at, it is not a path that is equal for all.

Success is not material or external to you, it is the peace you feel when you are proud of the work you have done.

Success is knowing what you are doing your work for? It is when you are able to see yourself, when you are proud of yourself even when others cannot see yet why.

Success is doing your work under any circumstance and to be inspired by every circumstance. It is to be true to yourself.

Success is doing what is good for your art even when it is not good for your career.

Success is understanding that even when life is not pure you will try to have your soul untouched.

Success is to enjoy other people's success.

It is to find your community and sometimes it is to build your community.

It is to have an inspiring creative dialogue with someone for years.

Success is the ability to be in awe in front of a wonderful artwork after seeing so much art.

It is not to become cynical with yourself.

Success is to remain modest even when you receive the highest of honors because while people see what you have done you are seeing all that is still ahead to be done.

Success is knowing what your work needs and pursuing it while remaining curious.

It is to understand and respect the rhythm of your work.

Success is when someone remembers your work because it changed them (whether it's a class you gave; an artwork you exhibit or a text you wrote).

Success is understanding the difference between "making" art, teaching, designing, writing, administrating and being an artist, a professor, a writer, an administrator.

Success is enjoy serving others without expecting anything in exchange.

It is to treat everybody equally.

Success is to be able to hear criticism without offense.

Success should be on your own terms and it should be whatever it means to you, remember to be the best you can at what you do but never forget to be a good person because we do not need more asshole artists, sorry.

But real success is not to be interested in success. It is not easy, it took me a long time to think this way, I had to unlearn all society expected from me in order to be able to learn what I expected of myself.

I will give you only two examples out of the many many many I have, of times when I did things the "wrong" way in the eyes of others but I thought they were the right decision for my work.

The first one was precisely when I decided to come to study at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

I applied six years after I graduated from the Instituto Superior de Arte in Cuba, by then I was already an artist who was exhibiting internationally, I had already received a Guggenheim fellowship and was an artist in residency at SAIC itself.

I know, it is not the way people do it but I had arrived to a moment in my work where I felt stuck, the artistic community I was part of in Cuba was too satisfied with the reception of the work they were doing, it was hard to have any critical feedback, I felt I was not growing. Moreover, I never studied performance art and here I found a department focusing on what I loved, I had found heaven so I applied to it. Meanwhile in Cuba I was made fun off, I was not understood because people felt my action was a comment on theirs (which it was not) so I was called silly and was criticized for not spending more time producing art for exhibitions or selling my work like the rest of the community. Well, it is also important that you understand which community fits you. Now I can say with pride that a few years later more and more Cuban artists are studying their masters abroad. Today I am a better artist because I heard what my work asked for above the conventions of a career, over the expectation of what is “correct”. Don’t be afraid to take risks. Don’t be afraid to do things you do not know what the result would be, if they move you and if they feel urgent. Pursue what makes you grow!

Another example is when after *Documenta* I decided to go back to Cuba to start a school for performance as well as politically and socially engaged art which demanded all my energy and focus. The “correct” path would have been to pursue profiting from the “success” of my piece in Kassel to find galleries and sales and more exhibitions opportunities, becoming a “successful” artist. Instead I disappeared from the international art world for some years I even had to stop showing my work at some point because the project took all my creativity my energy but I created a community of people I wanted to have a conversation with, and today these are great and successful artists in their own rights but more than anything they are my friends. After 7 years, when we decided to close the project, people started to write about it for books, other places in Latin America were inspired and artists and critics started their own and alternative schools. I had the wonderful honor to conduct the inaugural workshop in two of them. I never did this project for recognition, I did it out of frustration. Frustration with the international art world’s lack of commitment on social and political issues. I did it out of the growing influence of the art market in Cuba. I transformed my frustration, my anger, my deception into art. You need to be true to what you believe is necessary. Do your work for the urgencies of today but set your expectation for recognition (if you really need this) 50 years from now, believe me, it takes a lot of pressure out, it makes you free and it makes the joy of doing your work greater. And who knows, maybe 50 years from now recognition doesn’t seem that important to you anyways.

You will find that there are as many ways to “make it” as there are each of you. Go for the DIYW: Do it Your Way. Do not wait for the institutions, if what you want is not there, create it, do your own galleries, your own schools, your own books, create your own community.

But be assured that this community is already here today, you already have it. You are now part of a global network, so students do not fear, there will always be an SAIC alumni around.

As per today you are officially educators (where are the educators in the house?), (the) art historians, art administrators, curators, designers, writers, art therapists, architects, journalists, performers, visual scholars and artists, you are a community that can make the world the way you want it to be! Be for others the mentor that you wanted to have because at some point someone will be looking up at you! You will go in and out of institutions, be critical about them, they are never perfect, get together and force them to change to foster the needs of today and of the future. The world is yours! Take it and transform it! Make it a better place for the rest of us! You have the power to transform affect into effectiveness! You have the power! Use it!