

How We Got Here

By Chuck Close

I am the first visual artist that has been asked to give the Blashfield Address. You are about to find out why not using visual artists was a good idea. I was tempted to call my talk the “Dreaded Blashfield Address,” as it was aptly named by Edward Albee. I can’t think of any good reason why I should be giving this address, other than the fact that those of us who are in wheelchairs are seated in the front row. In an institution that encourages consumption of large amounts of alcohol starting at noon and a heavy meal with wine before assembling in this hall, I, like many of my front row colleagues, have difficulty keeping awake – or pretending not to be asleep. What you in the audience don’t know is that you can’t hear more than a word or two on the stage. Sometimes they can’t keep everyone awake long enough to take the group portrait. So, I’m assuming I was given this task as it would be the only way to guarantee that I would be awake for at least one Blashfield Address.

In an attempt to prepare for this speech I read several previous addresses penned by distinguished writers. It was interesting to read what I had missed while sleeping over the years. Wally Shawn, for whom I have the utmost respect no matter what artistic hat he is wearing, surprised me with a near Mitt Romney-like remark. He said he didn’t know people who worked in factories or on farms, but he knew many who owned those factories and farms, because he could see their huge houses from his window. Unlike Mitt, Wally was not making an argument against taxing the wealthy, but instead talked about how his affluence had kept him from realizing as a child how many people had to live on near starvation wages to support his privileged existence. So, it was a brilliant essay – a piece of social criticism that we all can learn from. He stressed the comfort and pleasure that he got from membership in the Academy. To me he might have seemed almost preordained as a member – with his background and immense talent he seemed a natural – a shoo-in.

Others of us without the aid of family, wealth and connections, and the best prep schools and Ivy League educations, found a different route into this Academy. For every Louis Auchincloss there is an Allen Ginsberg. We have had as members people like Robert Rauschenberg who like me came from modest circumstances and shared my severe learning disabilities. He literally couldn’t read. Anyone who grew up in the ‘40s and ‘50s knows that there was no such thing as dyslexia or learning disabilities, we were just deemed to be dumb and lazy. My favorite painter and hero Willem de Kooning came to America as a stowaway on a freighter and went to work painting houses in New Jersey before embarking on his magnificent career. He was, in fact, an illegal alien. For those people who think we should seal the borders, think what we would have missed had de Kooning been caught and made to return to Rotterdam.

My history makes my path to the Academy one of the most unlikely cases I can think of. An only child, I was raised in near poverty in the Pacific Northwest in a smelly mill town where everyone I knew was going to work in the same mills that their mothers and fathers worked in. No one seemed to escape. My father died when I was eleven. That was the tragedy of my life, but oddly enough there was a gift in this tragedy. I learned early on that the absolute worst thing can happen and you will get past it and you will be happy again. Losing my father at a tender age

was extremely important in my being able to accept what happened to me when I became a quadriplegic. As a student I was not athletic, was severely learning disabled and suffered from face blindness. By the end of a school year I still couldn't recognize the other students in my class or remember their names. When I was in the eighth grade I was told not to even think about going to college. I couldn't add or subtract, except by using the spots on dominoes, never could memorize the multiplication tables, was advised against taking algebra, geometry, physics and chemistry and therefore would not get into any regular college. Since I was good with my hands, they recommended a trade school, perhaps where I could learn body and fender work. I have since learned to never let anyone define what you are capable of by using parameters that don't apply to you. Don't bloody yourself by trying to do something you are not cut out to do. Just find something for which you are suited and about which you have passion. Luckily, my schools, as was the case in most of America at that time, including very poor communities, offered art and music several times a week from the 1st to 12th grade as an absolute right. Without art and music – things that I was good at and that made me feel special – I very likely would have dropped out of school. No one gets anywhere without help. Mentors, including your parents and an occasional teacher can make you feel special even when you are failing in other areas. Everyone needs to feel special.

There was a junior college in my hometown with open enrollment. I'm a really big fan of open enrollment. They literally accepted every taxpayer's son or daughter. It had a great art department. I got in, did well, transferred to the University of Washington and ended up doing graduate work at Yale. I always say, "If I hadn't gone to Yale, I might have gone to jail" – and I mean it literally.

Virtually everything I've done is influenced by my learning disabilities. I have prosopagnosia, commonly known as face blindness, an affliction I share with the brilliant Oliver Sacks. I think I was driven to paint portraits to commit images of friends and family to memory. Once a face is flattened out I can remember it better.

I believe in signing on to a process to see where it takes you. You don't have to reinvent the wheel every day. Today you will do what you did yesterday and tomorrow you will do what you did today. Eventually, you will get somewhere.

Inspiration is for amateurs. It's better to just show up and get to work. All great ideas grow out of work itself.

Get yourself in trouble. Ease is the enemy of the artist and can make your work formulaic.

We care too much about problem solving. Problem creation is much more interesting than problem solving. Ask yourself an interesting enough question and no one else's answers will fit. Then, your solutions will be more personal.

The choice not to do something is almost always more interesting than the choice to do something.

Conventional wisdom is just that – conventional and ordinary.

If you are overwhelmed by the size of a problem, break it down into many bite-sized pieces.

It's better to be lucky than smart, but if you are by nature optimistic, which I am, that puts you in a much better position to be lucky.

When I was first in the hospital things were really grim. Someone said to me, “Oh, you will be all right because you paint with your head and not your hands,” and at first that really pissed me off. I thought, “Easy for you to say...” but it was absolutely true. Once you know what art looks like, you're going to find a way to make it again.

Being self-involved and having the arrogance to think you have something to say and that somebody else should pay attention to it, is a necessary component of an artist's life.

Painting is a lie. It is the most magical of mediums – the most transcendent. It makes space where there is none, and transports you somewhere else, and yet it's only colored dirt smeared on a piece of canvas. It's always a tug of war between the image and the marks on the surface. I never liked being called a realist, because I'm as interested in artificiality as I am in reality. You don't have to have a dramatic story – it's all in the telling.

I grew up in a community devoid of original art. Instead, it was the public library where as a young kid I pored over *ARTnews* with a magnifying glass examining tiny black and white reproductions of paintings, trying to figure out what they actually looked like -- their color, scale and physicality. I am indeed thankful for the role the public library system played in my life.

Finally, I am pleased and honored to be part of this wonderful organization surrounded by incredibly gifted and passionate artists and architects, composers, scholars and writers. I realize now that it matters not what route we took to get here – whether we come from the most elite environment or the most humble, we are all of us, by nature of our membership in the academy, judged to be part of the cultural elite of our country. But, this is an "equal-opportunity elitism" – based on a meritocracy of sorts in which we are nominated and inducted by our professional peers. In my wildest dreams it never would have occurred to me that I would end up a member of a group that had already recognized and celebrated all of my heroes.