



Debbie Millman:

Good evening, so good to be here. Several years ago when working on a book about how designers think, I was challenged by an enormously talented designer who confided that he felt that designers talk to ourselves and about ourselves way too much. He pointed out how we have conferences where we talk to ourselves. We give each other awards. We publish each other's work and words, and basically, we pat each other on the back. I was reminded of these statements early this morning when the man who did this fabulous up-do seemed surprised when I told him I was attending a gala at the Waldorf Astoria. Wow, he said, are people still having those, in this economy? And it was a good question.

We committed to this Gala way before the recession officially began, and we had no idea that a financial tsunami would hit the world so hard. Even at last year's Gala, we had no way of predicting that in one year's time, we would be in the midst of the longest post-Depression economic decline ever. The current recession wasn't actually designated as such until December 2008, but because at that point it was determined to have started in December 2007, in thirteen days we are about to enter the twenty-second month of what is now being referred to as the Great Recession. Not to be too much of a buzzkill, but the current recession is also more widespread than any other since the Depression. The Federal Reserve has declared that eighty-six percent of all industries have cut back production since last November — the most widespread reduction in the forty-two years since the Fed has tracked the figure. And every state in the union has reported an increase in unemployment — the first time this has happened in the thirty-two years that records for unemployment have been kept.

So in the midst of this, do we really need to celebrate design and designers and ask you to pay for it? I think the question is especially relevant given that the eighteen-month freefall in household wealth has been larger than any on record since World War II. Household net worth has fallen a record eleven trillion dollars since the start of the recession. And according to most economists, it's unclear when the economy will really recover. Though our gross domestic product seems to have stopped declining, economists agree that this isn't a great indicator of recovery. So I ask again, in the midst of the greatest recession of our time, do we really need to celebrate design and designers? My answer to this question is unequivocally, unmistakably, loud and proud, yes, now more than ever.

[Applause]

More than any other discipline, designers are in the unique position of being able to impact our culture in significant and profound ways. Designers are creators and innovators. We find solutions where none previously existed. We imagine ideas and opportunities, and we realize those ideas and opportunities. We are currently living in a time where every gesture we make is cinematic and becomes swept up in a swift sequence of gestures that precede and follow it. We cannot waste this opportunity, and we cannot shirk away from the responsibility to it. If you were to look back at the last three great recessions, an interesting

pattern emerges. It seems some of our greatest inventions and innovations have been created during these bleak times.

In the great recession of the 1870s, an American designer and inventor named Cyrus McCormick created a device to more efficiently cut and harvest crops. One hundred years later — one hundred years later — the Academy of Sciences determined that McCormick's designs and inventions accomplished more for the cause of agriculture than any other living man. At the very same time, Andrew Carnegie founded the Carnegie Steel Company. By the 1890s, the company was the largest and most profitable industrial enterprise in the world. In 1901, the company was renamed U.S. Steel, and it is still to this day the largest domestically owned steel producer in the United States. History is peppered with these recession-era innovations. Southwest Airlines was founded in the recession of the 1970s. Costco was founded in the recession of the 1980s, and Apple first introduced the iPod on October 23, 2001, a little over a month after 9/11. So I say yes, yes, we must continue to celebrate.

We must honor the design innovators of our time. We must celebrate their accomplishments and we must constantly, steadfastly, and ardently recognize their impact and their contributions. The condition of design has become the condition of our culture, and ultimately, brilliant designers, such as Carin Goldberg, [background applause] Doyald Young and Pablo Ferro, and progressive organizations, like JetBlue and Patagonia, have the ability to make the world a better place for everyone. No matter how bleak the situation into which we have been thrown by this global economy, it does offer opportunities. Designers need only invent them. By understanding our living and working context, we blow open avenues of opportunity and innovation not yet charted or explored. So I welcome you to the sixth annual AIGA Design Legends Gala. Thank you for coming tonight. Thank you for helping us honor the great practitioners of our time, and thank you for your continued support of AIGA.

[Applause]