

## COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

### WANGECHI MUTU HONORARY DEGREE RECIPIENT

HELLOOO MASS ART!

What an amazing day today is for you, and for me, and for all of us!

Thank you for having me come and speak in-front of your graduating class on this absolutely monumental occasion! I'm super honored to have been invited to celebrate your commencement, and also for being included in this year's graduating class... with an Honorary Degree.

Thank you to David Nelson, Pamela Parisi, Marika Prezioso and Caroline Chu and everyone who made this possible.

I also want to give a special mention to your dedicated parents, your caretakers, your incredible teachers and counsellors, your therapists, your boyfriends, girlfriends, boos, baes, families and dear friends, who have been there supporting you through this journey. I salute you all... You too have made it through! This is YOUR day too!

SO...

Congratulations

Mazeltoff and

In Kiswahili Hongera!

It's been quite some time since I graduated from Art School, and I'm really pleased and honoured that you' invited me, because I get to go back in time and bring back my memories of this day and re-remember how I began my journey into life as an Artist....and I would like to share some reflections with you, thinking some of them might inspire you, and hopefully not scare you too much...

On my graduation day I remember having the strongest feelings because let me tell you, it was an ELECTRIC day, that DAY!

I was nervous and ecstatic and I was also so so proud and relieved that I had survived the ordeal of Art School...AND I was proud of myself at least for that.

You're about to graduate from this fine school of Art into the World of everything UNEXPECTED and begin your life possibly and hopefully as great Artists...but most importantly, as great individuals.

I'm going to tell You this because it's true, you're about to enter the REAL world that surrounds and drowns out Art. I thought when I was in Art school that everything that was happening in my school was what I would expect in the real world. I'll tell you something - that is absolutely not the case...

This here, this amazing institution called Art School is a Greenhouse.... It's a wonderful, important, but artificial world, invented to grow and develop the greatest contemporary creative thinkers possible.

*(Pause)*

Once you are released from this magnificent place, you will have to pretty much forget everything you've learnt... and start anew.

It may not be exactly what you want to hear, but, I'll tell you exactly why I say that.

As art students and creative thinkers, you spend your days immersed in Art-making, Art critiquing, Art viewing and many kinds of conversations and deep discussions about concepts and ideas about Art. You were taught how to defend your work, and how to speak eloquently about what you do in front of others. Your teachers fostered in you an ability to stand next to your ideas through all those judgments and critiques and assessments. You've had to speak about your work, you've had to think about your thesis show, and you've had to spend a lot of time making a lot of things. And now all of a sudden it's about to get really really quiet.

*(pause)*

Tomorrow....is when the silence begins.

*(pause)*

What am I talking about?

I'm talking about the place where you and your thoughts will begin to stand alone, and you have to begin to develop ideas without anyone telling you where to go and how to get there... and whether it's done or not.

My hope is and I really do trust that you will walk into this VOID, into this silence, and begin to use all those Art muscles and that Art training, that ARTIST MIND to create a regimen of your very own.

*(pause)*

Art is unlike any other field of work and every other practice

Art is a discipline ...but with no boss.

Art is an exercise ...without a trainer

Art is a dance routine ...without mirrors to watch yourself in.

It's a habit that you will have to create until one day you realize you're actually hooked... and you can't stop.

See for me, it began when I met one incredible Art teacher... Sometimes it only takes ONE....In High School, in Wales. I knew I loved to draw, and I knew I was sort of good at this Art thing.

But to be honest ...coming from Kenya, no Kenyan parent in their right mind was going to encourage their child to go study, to become an Artist.

Art was for the ones who couldn't do anything else

The ones who'd failed out of the other classes.

Art was not for winners.

So when I left Nairobi for high school, and walked into my Art class in Wales and Marten Post our amazing art teacher handed us these big sketch books, some pencils and pens.... And space to make studios in..

I looked at him and so did the rest of the students with surprise.

We all thought the same thing.

What are we supposed to do with this??

And with a smile on his face and a big booming voice he said:

"Go, Go do whatever. Go write poetry, Go make drawings of the sea, Go paint your roommates' face, Go take pictures, Go write a song, Go collect leaves and feathers, Go begin researching the textures of the cliffs and make marks of the tree bark, ...

Do whatever you feel you are drawn to"

WHAT?

I had NEVER been told to go do whatever I wanted to do.

And I didn't understand what that meant.

But it IS this exact experience that made me understand how much I wanted to be an Artist and how much of an Artist I really was already. It's at that moment that I embraced the idea that this was the field where IF I worked hard I could get to do every day whatever I WANTED TO DO!

SO I began to learn how to fill that void by making things that meant something, things that had meaning.

And what is that meaning?...

*(Pause)*

Well, for me the first meaning was that I mattered and I belonged somewhere, where I loved to go back to again and again. That meant something...in fact that meant a LOT And meaning for me was that I was conquering my fear of being a weird kid who liked to spend a lot of time working on things that didn't look good at first, that didn't seem like anything to anyone else, but that made me feel so happy and empowered and unique.

The meaning of making Art first and foremost was that I was creating something that brought out the most fearless and authentic version of myself.

That is something no ONE could take away from me and it's something no one will ever take away from you. ... AND No one else could do but you!

*(Pause)*

Only you can get to that and on your own by working and making and beginning to understand how incredibly unique your peculiarities are and how AMAZING that IS.

And this is where you will begin to realize what your ROLE is in the world.

Making Art and creating things will absolutely give you the answer to what it is you should be doing.

And how do I know that...because that's what I do.

every single day

and as I create

and mold

and draw

and cut

and mix

and drill

and paint

and glue  
and knead  
and sculpt

...my thoughts begin to arrange themselves into the kind of calm that quietens the outside noises, and a of sort pattern emerges that gives me the confidence to see the ideas coming to life, and to see the magic connection in everything, and to feel compassion, and to feel sadness and to feel love, and loneliness, without judgement.

It's when I'm making things with my hands actively, that my brain is able to switch into a kind of fast lane.

The very act of changing something from its original form and shape into something else entirely is an Act of power and beauty. It's an act by which you decide on the fate of a material, be it a colour, or a piece of clay, or a rock, or even a photograph.

*(pause)*

That ACT of GIVING a new meaning to something changes you too. You begin to see the potential in this material and you create potential in your-self.

You become more who you should be as you create.

You begin to give something a newness that actually makes you ANEW.

It's the Art version of the philosopher Rene Decartes

I think therefore I AM

This is my version:

I MAKE therefore I BECOME.

Your active, realtime making something will tell you who you are.

TRUST me on this one.

This is almost the exact opposite of posting and looking and selfieing on your phone.

Phones and technology provide important ways to make yourself heard, but they rely too too much on the opinions of others and the ranking of others.

You can't imagine what this thing is you should be doing and becoming unless you actively and purposefully and physically do what it is - you should be doing...

*(Pause)*

Another thing that will GROW you outside of the Art-School Greenhouse is when you aren't making Art painting and sculpting editing in your studio...

if indeed that is what you end up doing...PAY close attention to what is happening around you. Paying attention is another way of saying...

## PRACTICE EMPATHY

*(Pause)*

When you were in Art school, most things were about you and for you, but the real world is full of people who aren't as fortunate as you.

Like many of you here, I would love to see a kinder world, and a more fair world, a more equal place for women, a less violent world.

A kinder world for those who have been forced to leave their countries, due to civil strife, because of war or because of poverty.

For those who suffer and are brutalized because of the color of their skin  
or their ethnicity,  
or their gender and sexuality,  
or their religious beliefs...

PAY ATTENTION to what is really happening, and you will begin to see where the truth is lacking.

Truth is something that needs to be guarded and reinforced and protected. By all of us, and this has never been more important than in a moment like this, when Truth is under attack.

Make your own mind up based on what you see and not what you're sold and told. That is part of your role as an Artist.

*(Pause)*

When it comes to your Art, make time and guard that time, and try not to pay attention to what others are saying about Art-world matters while you're making ART. You no longer need the constant approval and applause and critique that school provided...

As Agnes Martin said

"I paint with my back to the world"

Spend less time looking at others and how they make and post whatever it is they post and instead spend time thinking about your own Art and the things that make you most excited in the studio.

Ironically...that singular activity will also connect you to one another. This is the miracle of focusing deeply and sincerely and unequivocally on something you love...

It will begin to connect you to others.

By telling your stories and making your art with honesty and courage you will reveal how we ALL feel. AND because of how impactful and beautiful what you do is, you will draw people together who normally don't tend to gather with one another.

*(Pause)*

So make your work matter...Make things that are meaningful and speak of your humanity, and it WILL come through.

Art is a language, and it can communicate, and it will lift people like it lifts you when you are making it.

I know that being an Artist means you're some-way or another really okay with your inner child, your inner monk, your inner Weirdo.

Yes! Be the boss of your INNER most eccentric self...it is these very things that no one else IS and no one else is capable of being that make you STAND OUT and powerful!

Take this from someone who was here before the digital age.

Make work that no robot could ever do.

AND

*(Pause)*

FINALLY...

Be kind and compassionate to yourself, even when you feel like you're losing your sense of confidence, because the letters come back as rejections, or the curators aren't noticing, or the ideas are slow and inconsistent, or you feel the loneliness of non-recognition.

Be gentle to yourself and your own peculiar pace.

*(Pause)*

Things that are meaningful take time to grow.

Things that are important will all eventually be recognized as such.

YOU WILL SUCCEED...if you decide on what your success is, and not what someone else finds it or wants it to be.

Keep working, keep looking, keep being kind to those whose work is getting mentions. You will come upon success!

I'll quote Toni Morrison: YOU ARE YOUR **BEST** THING!

CONGRATULATIONS

GRADUATING YEAR OF 2018

Go forth and ARTIFY!!!