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Divergent Thinking | RISD President

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Divergent Thinking

by
John Maeda
RISD's President

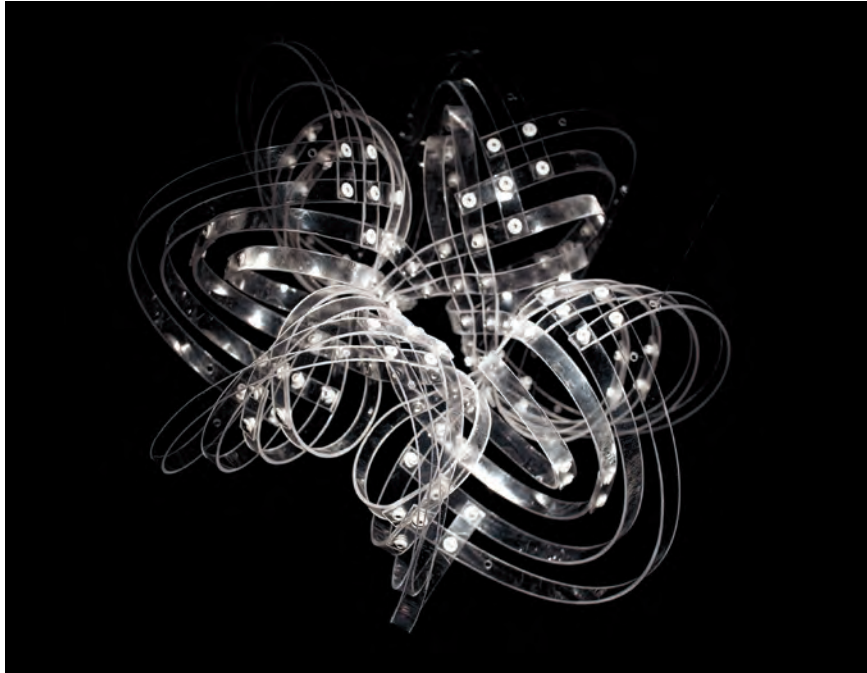
INNOVATION HAPPENS WHEN convergent thinkers—people who march straight ahead towards a clearly defined goal—combine forces with divergent thinkers, those who may wander professionally but who are comfortable being uncomfortable and who look for what is real. RISD harbors a lot of divergent, agile thinkers.

Artists and designers often wander in pursuit of answers to questions they've posed for themselves—naturally crossing boundaries without even thinking of them in that way. It's what creative people do in the course of following a particular tangent or tackling a difficult challenge.

When artists and designers make things, almost inadvertently they end up probing the purpose and meaning of what they're doing. The creative journey sometimes takes them backwards and sideways before revealing the way forward. The questions they pose may be enigmatic—and may lead to new, more challenging questions. But that's what the studio process and the thinking it engenders are about.

As you all know so well, at RISD there is no greater goal than to articulately express an idea by making something well with your hands. On campus we call this constant dialogue between the eye, mind and hand “critical making”—a way of creating that involves deep critical thinking. This fall we're excited that the well-known publishing house Wiley has

In *The Art of Critical Making*, Provost Somerson points to *Medusa* (acrylic and aluminum rivets, 5 x 12 x 12") by **Laura Kishimoto** 13 FD as a beautiful object symbolic of the type of thinking a RISD education supports—agile, divergent and able to “navigate circuitous complexity.”



brought to market an important new book about this process—appropriately produced via an amazing collaborative effort among our academic leaders. Called *The Art of Critical Making* (see page 51), the new book has been masterfully edited by Provost **Rosanne Somerson** 76 ID in conjunction with **Mara Hermano**. With input from faculty and deans across campus, it brings RISD to life in a way that allows us to share our intellectual signature with the world.

“With the virtual, physical and social modes of design increasingly converging, we can expect the definition of design and how it is practiced to morph dramatically.”

This fall I have also been speaking at various forums—like the *Gigaom Roadmap 2013* conference in San Francisco and the *Techonomy 13* conference in Tucson—about Moore's Law and how the days

of always wanting more technology are receding. Unlike a few years ago, we no longer need or want the increases in processing power Moore's law guarantees. Instead, we want a better experience and have begun to ask just what that means and where to find it.

As consumers, we are now choosing based upon something else: design. Designers are able to make products that not only work, but that people want to use.

But good design—like divergent thinking—is often subjective, unpredictable and even harder to define in the digital age. The timeless “design classics”—the ones enconced at the Museum of Modern Art and the Cooper-Hewitt, for instance—have always been rooted in the physical world and informed by our five senses. With design for the screen, the effect on the user is not just physical but deeply cognitive. And with the virtual, physical and social modes of design increasingly converging, we can expect the definition of design and how it is practiced to morph dramatically.

It's precisely that kind of seismic shift that will leave RISD's divergent thinkers in a better position than ever to help bend and shape those new definitions—and raise new questions about what we value most.