THE NEW SCHOOL

2006 University Commencement Remarks from Christina Joy Antonakos-Wallace

Dear fellow graduates.

It is truly honor to be able to speak to you today, particularly at this most controversial of commencements. I would like to begin with quotes from two individuals I am sure you know, but may not have known were affiliated with the New School:

The world is before you and you need not take it or leave it as it was when you came in.
James A. Baldwin, great American Author and former New School student

The self is not something ready-made, but something in continuous formation through choice of action.
John Dewey, preeminent philosopher and founding member of the New School

When I came to the New School to pursue a BA and BFA at Lang and Parsons, I came to one of the few institutions where I could combine seminar-style liberal arts with a rigorous fine arts education. Having been an activist for many years, I chose the New School because of its history of progressive scholarship, and location in New York City where I knew I would not be isolated but forced to encounter the larger world every day. I could not have been more correct—September 11th happened my second week of school, four blocks away from my bedroom window. Despite my already high expectations, I have learned far more than I ever could have anticipated.

My education has been about much more than becoming technically virtuous as an artist, or well-versed in leftist politics. My education at the New School has forced me to think—to truly question my own assumptions about both art and social change, and bring my experiences into critical reflection. It hasn't always been fun or easy. I lost sleep trying to make sense of my lived experiences in relation to the political theory and philosophy I was studying. I struggled to make art that was genuine to me and not dictated by the dominant discourse of the art world or a specific political ideology. I came to value the dialogue between radically different individuals as the critical basis for social change. Studying art encouraged me to see and imagine the numerous forms any given idea can take, and opened the possibilities of how I could think in all areas of my life. I was blessed with the opportunity to study at a school with nearly 40% international students, fundamentally breaking down concept of us versus them, narrow-minded nationalism, and helping us understand ourselves world citizens. I came to respect the intense commitment and personal challenge required of students in every course of study here at the New School. This realization in turn inspired a deeper respect in me of difference in general. It was through the exchanges, debates, and critiques of my classmates and professors that I came to think more complexly, and ultimately, be a better human being.

We are all different and all chose to attend this University for different reasons, but I can guarantee that very few of us came here because it was expected of us. We chose the New School: Mannes, the Jazz Program, Parsons, Eugene Lang, Milano, the NSSR, the New School for General Studies, the New School for Drama because we possessed a passion to study something meaningful. My education has helped prepare me to not only to take reflection action, fundamentally questioning my own assumptions.

As students at this University, I believe that we are extremely well positioned to use our educations to make unique contributions to better society. And we need to. We are living in a very troubled time. I am deeply concerned about the global AIDS epidemic, and the occupation of Iraq where already over 35,000 Iraqi civilians and 2,500 US soldiers have died, and the criminalization of immigrants worldwide. I am equally disturbed by social and environmental issues here in the United States: the increasing gap between rich and poor, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the growing power of the Christian and Fiscal Right which has been moving our government to radical conservatism: attacking women's right to choose, the most basic civil liberties of gay people, exploiting our natural resources, and divesting in *crucial* social programs such as public education. I truly hope that we each do our part to take action for peace and justice in the world around us, just as the founders and alumni of New School have done since the University's inception. While it may seem because of my interests and background that I am implying we should all be activists that is not what I mean.

What I want to add to my fairly cliché call for action is the deep belief that art is one of the things that makes life worth living. We can do nothing more

valuable than recognize our distinctive talents and visions, and use them to impact the world in a myriad of ways. We may act in a play that inspires deep empathy in another human being, or design a sustainable fashion line, or work in city planning to develop neighborhoods in a way that fosters community. Each of us have a contribution to make—from being involved in politics to simply living and making work with *integrity*, in a world that could use far more of it.

We may be graduating, but that does not mean that our educations end today. If we can take instruction from the words of James Baldwin and John Dewey, we should understand that we are now faced with the privilege and responsibility of engaging our formal education in ways that positively impact the world around us. The New School has a phenomenal history and we are now among the inheritors of its rich legacy. It is not a legacy that we should take for granted, it could easily be subverted by our lack of action or the administration's. It is up to us to distinguish ourselves, as our predecessors have, as artists and intellectuals who understand ourselves as world citizens committed to reflective action.