

CONFERENCE REVIEW

## AIGA National Design Conference 2015

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### ABSTRACT

AIGA's biannual conference was held in New Orleans, October 8–10 2015. This year's theme, Revival, nodded to both the resurgence of New Orleans after Katrina and AIGA's desire to inspire its membership. The main conference was prefaced by a Design Educator pre-conference, professional development workshops, the Emerging Designers Symposium, and other special events. This review focuses on the main stage presentations as key indicators of event trends and themes.

In the face of exponential technological growth – a civilization barreling toward pervasive, embedded technology fed by big data, that will, perhaps, ultimately be orchestrated by forms of artificial intelligence – 2015 AIGA conference speakers urged humanity to investigate, appreciate, and celebrate the wonders of the living world. And what better place to do just that than New Orleans, a location steeped in ritual, music and hot sauce. The ghost of Katrina left an air of fragility throughout the city, encouraging attendees to pay close attention to their surroundings. This ambiance of observation and revelation infused all of the subsequent events. This conference was not about aesthetic eye candy, design truisms and the adoration of design heroes. Presentations and conversations at the 2015 conference generally suggested a larger realignment of design practice: practitioners less as communicators of content and more as facilitators of curiosity.

Roman Mars advocated storytelling as a potent force for these new facilitators of curiosity. Host of the popular podcast 99% Invisible, Mars acted as MC, introducing speakers and leading Q&As – but the true magic surfaced as he live-mixed podcast-like performances on stage. He reeled in attendees and left them straining to find out more about topics as disparate as noisy escalators and municipal flag designs. Mars deftly wove meaningful narratives around tiny details to reveal truths of human experience. 'Once you know the story,' he explained, 'you can love almost anything.'

Noteworthy presentations included one by intergalactic experience designer, Nelly Ben Hayoun. Her high energy chaotic performance – a 'total bombardment' of the senses – exploded with the same passion that drives her subversive projects for organizations like NASA and the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) Institute. She exemplifies a bold

generation of designers who are attempting to shape the future by creating experiences that flood our senses and demand our engagement.

Later that day David Delgado, creative director of the NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL), and Dan Goods, Visual Strategist for JPL, brought to the main stage their drive to make visible the invisible, to curate curiosity. At JPL, Goods and Delgado transform complex scientific data into accessible experiences so that the public might better comprehend our solar system. Delgado described the participatory nature of his practice as ‘sneaking up on learning.’ Much to the mystification of the crowd, his presentation of Project Juno, a large-scale effort to say ‘hi’ to NASA’s Juno Spacecraft using crowd-generated code, brought tears to the attendees’ eyes. Turning dry data into compelling interactions led many discussions, playing out on the main stage and in affinity sessions. Attendees were eager to explore design as a mediator between big data and humanity – a need that grows daily as ubiquitous computing enables our environment to respond to us.

Noteworthy Saturday speakers included Wolff Olins CEO Ije Nwokorie and designer Keetra Dean Dixon. Both celebrated the inquisitive nature of human creativity. Nwokorie acknowledged the unsettling nature of smart machines when he predicted: ‘In a world that is becoming more automated, creativity will be the one thing humans still do themselves.’ He urged designers to invite participation and by doing so garner the creativity that lies in everyone. Dixon, a designer who recently relocated to rural Alaska, encouraged attendees to seek ‘the beginner’s mind.’ Her keen sense of making, breaking, and remaking both technology and tools produces work that forces the viewer to either revel in an experience or reflect upon an arduous but exquisite production process – her opulent wax letterform geodes provide the perfect example of the latter. Nwokorie’s inclusive spirit and Dixon’s hacker-like disregard for technical barriers models the kind of creative inquiry that could triumph despite exponential change.

Designers should embrace these kinds of models. The recurring theme of wonder and curiosity at Revival reacted beautifully against all the recent press suggesting a future of autonomous weapons and job-stealing robots. Overall, the crowd seemed more inspired than at any national AIGA Conference in years. Yet, more critical, reasoned dialogue examining the impact of technology upon our communities would have further enriched this experience. In the age of Technology, Entertainment, Design talks, easy exposure to meaty ideas has raised attendees’ expectations and they expect no less from conference presentations. Stronger, more critical main stage analyses of technology – not just as a tool, but also as a cultural force – could lead to strategies not just for responding to change but for shaping the change.

AIGA is moving to an annual cycle for its national conference. This year, attendance was higher than at any in the last 10 years. This sudden resurgence suggests something: time to reflect upon our discipline is a necessity, now more than ever. To do so, we need someone like Roman Mars to pull us into a room every once in a while, forcing us briefly to put aside the harried every day. We need to come together and scrutinize the moment. Whether this happens through a conference or another approach, we need time not just to revitalize our spirits, but to think critically how we got here and where we want to go.

## Note on contributor

**Helen Armstrong** views design from across the spectrum as a practicing designer, college professor, and published author. She is an associate professor of graphic design at North Carolina State University. In addition to teaching, she wrote *Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2009) and co-wrote, with Zvezdana Stojmirovic, *Participate: Designing with User-Generated Content* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2011). Her new book, *Digital Design Theory* (2016) bridges the gap between print and interactive experience by examining the impact of computation upon the field of design. Armstrong has an MA in English Literature from the University of Mississippi, an MA in Publication Design from the University of Baltimore, and an MFA in Graphic Design from the Maryland Institute College of Art.