

Keynote Speaker Q and A: Using Limitations to Spark Opportunities



American Organization
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Phil Hansen is a visual artist who, while still in art school, developed a condition that would have ended many art careers: nerve damage caused his drawing hand to shake. Although he dropped out of school, he eventually came back to the vocation he loved. His persistence has paid off. Hansen has created a number of innovative multimedia works, and his art videos have been viewed by millions. In 2008, he was named the official artist of the 51st Grammy Awards. Hansen will discuss his lessons learned at AONL's annual conference in Anaheim, California, May 1 to 4. AONL talked with Hansen to learn more about his journey and his motivation to "embrace the shake," as he refers the condition that didn't stop him from becoming an artist.

AONL: After your diagnosis of nerve damage, what prompted you to return to art?

PH: I'm sure there were a number of different things happening in unison that caused me to dip my toe back into art. One was that 3 years had passed, which had softened some of the pain associated with walking away from art. Another was that my girlfriend at the time saw some of my old drawings and was surprised to learn I used to draw. I hadn't mentioned it. She encouraged me to get back into it, and so I began to explore. A little outside nudge from someone we respect and care about can go a long way!

AONL: How did you come to see a limitation as an opportunity?

PH: It definitely wasn't instantaneous, that's for sure. So, as I was getting back into art, it was a real struggle because I kept trying to work the same way I had before. But doing things the same old way was just going to cause me more troubles. I decided I needed to find a totally different way of making art. I needed to get away from my hands and explore largescale art and not do small detailed drawings. I explored and created some works which both surprised me and opened my eyes to the fact that my limitation had caused me to make art in new and different ways. I quickly began to wonder if I could use limitations to push myself

creatively. After I did some experimentation, I realized that constraints are an opportunity to reimagine.

AONL: Can you discuss the idea behind your project *Goodbye to Art* in which you destroyed your creations or created art from materials that would deteriorate over time?

PH: There were a number of different ideas behind the project. The big one was the idea to limit myself in the most constraining way possible. Destroying my art seemed like a horrendously perfect idea as I was someone who always preserved and held onto every aspect of the arts creation. So I set my sights on a yearlong project where each artwork had to be destroyed upon completion. It was a truly unpleasant experience at first, but over time was very freeing. I learned how to let go of the art that I used to expend so much effort to hold onto.

AONL: What motivates you to continue making art?

PH: I think motivation is the trickiest thing about creating art or having any sort of hobby. There are always other things competing for that time and money. And like many of my responses, this one has a menagerie of answers. Sometimes my motivation is my own curiosity about a material, sometimes it's

a problem in the world or question about the world that drives me to make art. Other times, I promise people I will work on a project, and they can hold me to it. Motivation is one place I try not to limit myself!

AONL: What advice do you have for those seeking to innovate even though they face limitations?

PH: My favorite thing to do is imagine that my limitation, whatever it is, is someone else's problem, and

then try to help that person solve it. Because, as I'll share when at the AONL annual conference, creating emotional distance from our challenge can provide room for insights. If we can set aside our own pre-conceived notions and expectations, and try to solve someone else's challenge, we will come up with many more creative possibilities.

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