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vision



The gift I treasure the most is the ability to live in the now. Every day I am fresh, like a poet, like the taste of freedom. Don't worry about growing old—worry about staying new.

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Riua Akinshegun, from *People I Could Have Been*



## A Vision for the Future

Art pushes limits and shows a culture not only where it is, but also where it is going. Many pieces of art considered seminal today were derided in their own time. F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* was a flop. Claude Monet's canvases were criticized for looking unfinished. Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* was such a departure from ballet norms it caused a riot. It might be avant garde, edgy, or just plain "out there," but from a place of reflection, the arts are the vanguard, shining the light that guides a society forward.







VSA is the international organization that merges and drives the causes of arts and disability, moving them beyond where societal norms now stand. Throughout its history VSA has been at the forefront of change. It was founded before the Education for All Handicapped Children Act passed—landmark legislation assuring that children with disabilities received equal access to quality education. It held its first festival years before the passage of another important milestone guaranteeing the rights of people with disabilities—the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

The 2010 festival also celebrated the 20th anniversary of the passage of the ADA. Access, opportunity, the freedom to live and create up to one’s full potential: This is the promise of the ADA and the work of VSA.

The ADA’s anniversary presented an important reminder of the advances made in the disability movement. The festival was an opportune moment to discuss the future: a critical part of which will be shaped by universal design and its many cultural and social implications. Universal design is an approach to creating that can be applied to everything from architecture to curriculum development to making society more accessible to people of all abilities.

VSA works with school practitioners, artists, and others in the education community to adapt and apply



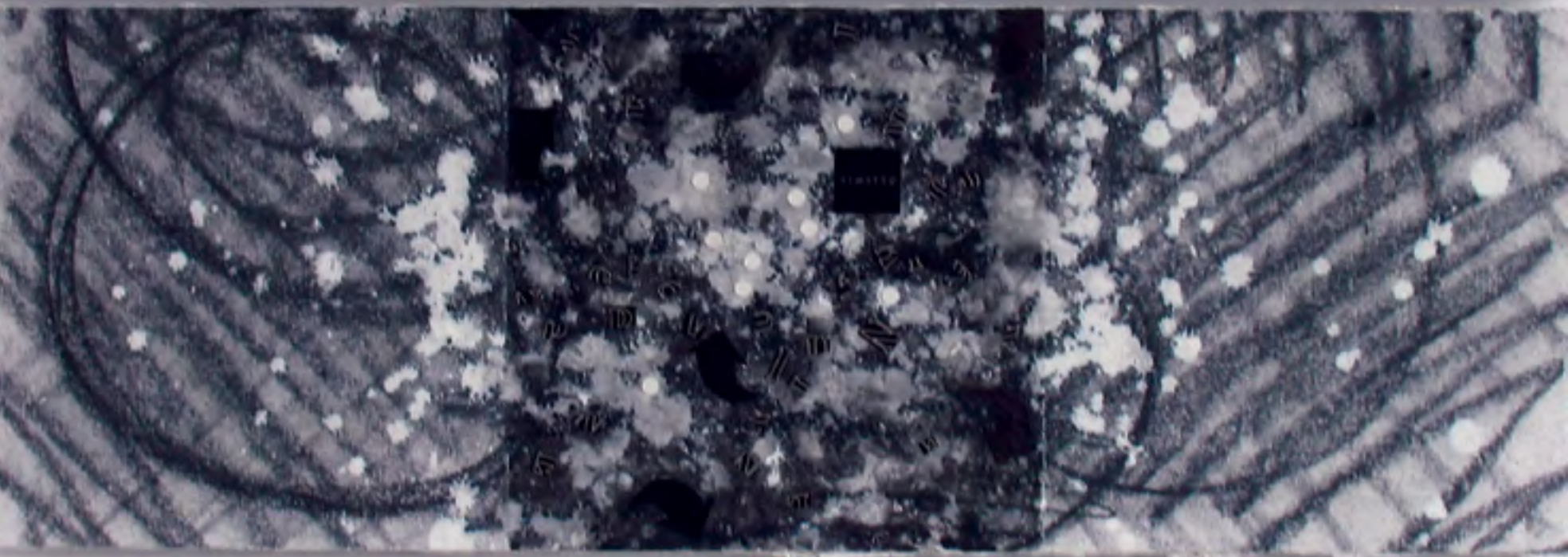
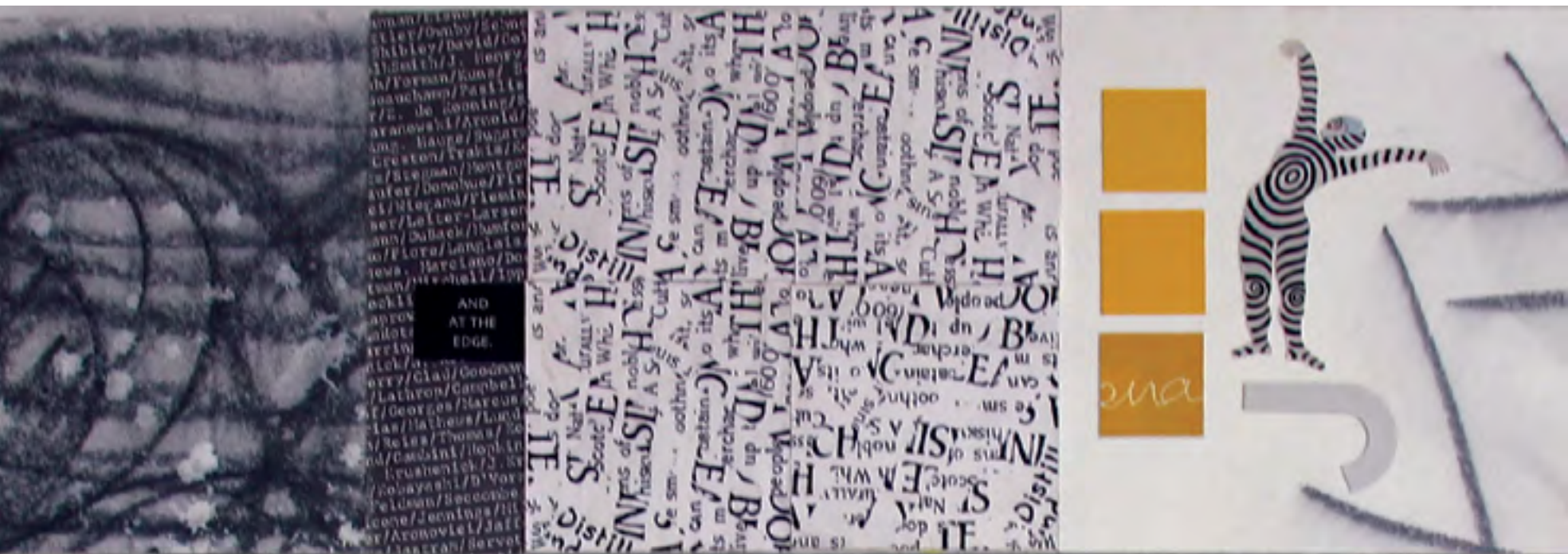
“It becomes amazing and astounding what the human body can actually achieve. You can never say to another person, ‘No, that’s not possible in your situation.’”

Dame Evelyn Glennie, musician

the principles of universal design to engage all students in arts-based learning experiences and environments. VSA's ongoing Communities of Practice provide teaching artists working with students with disabilities a place for meaningful professional discussion about learning, universally designed curriculum, and assessment. The festival afforded a platform for VSA to bring these concepts to the fore during an international education conference in which universal design for learning played a key role.

The three-day gathering featured keynote addresses from Sir Ken Robinson, a renowned expert in the field of innovative education; Kenneth Eklindh, head of the flagship UNESCO program "Education for All and the Right to Education for Persons with Disabilities"; and Dame Evelyn Glennie, the Grammy Award-winning solo percussionist. More than 400 educators and advocates attended workshops that explored innovative ways to foster greater inclusion in the classroom and create educational settings that value arts in education.

Dame Evelyn has experienced profound deafness since age 12, yet she was encouraged to pursue her musical ambitions alongside her fellow classmates, making her a powerful example of the benefits of inclusive practices. "Just as we give kids an opportunity to learn a language or to do their math, English, geography,



history, science, and so on, likewise we should not treat the arts as soft subjects,” Glennie said. “It becomes amazing and astounding what the human body can actually achieve. You can never say to another person, ‘No, that’s not possible in your situation.’”

No one could doubt the sincerity of her statements when Dame Evelyn joined her singular percussion talents with those of the National Symphony Orchestra at the Kennedy Center Concert Hall as part of the festival.

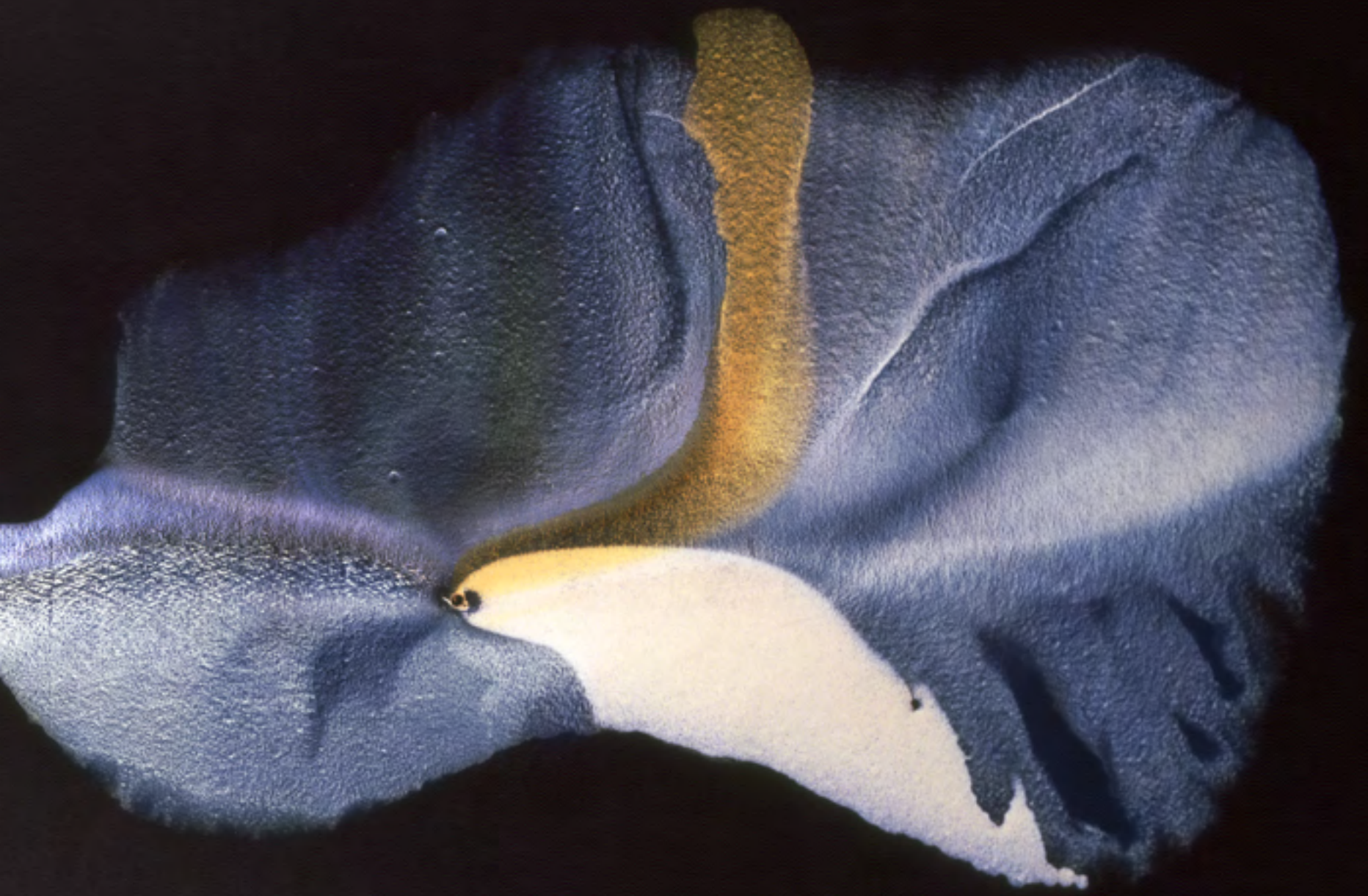
VSA set a new standard for applying universal design to art exhibitions with *Revealing Culture* at the Smithsonian Institution’s International Gallery. This groundbreaking exhibition explored how culture positions people with disabilities, turning a mirror on society to reveal honest portrayals of personal experiences. The multisensory exhibition featured more than 130 works of art in a broad range of media including installations, video, performance, painting, sculpture, and printmaking, from emerging and eminent artists with disabilities in the U.S. and abroad. Nearly 600,000 people visited *Revealing Culture* during its three-month run at the gallery.

Beyond experiencing the works of art, *Revealing Culture* gave visitors the chance to see what conventional exhibitions might not—how artists work. The “wave table” designed by Seattle-based artist Jesse Higman

“Art is an avenue for the soul and the physical senses, and appendages—even profoundly affected—don’t limit the purity of the human thing that is art.”

Jesse Higman, visual artist





“...accessibility, if done right, can disappear into the landscape...it may become, over time, part of the basic poetic language of design.”

Philip Kennicott, culture critic for the *Washington Post*, on *Revealing Culture*



to assist in spreading his pigments on canvas was on display, along with a video demonstrating its use. In an interview with the Associated Press, Higman, who has quadriplegia, explained his process: “I’m so disabled that maybe I have a need to feel some kind of movement. So I started to pour things and watch how they flow...I really got a lot out of watching things happen and seeing a miracle occur in front of me.”

Designed by Michael Graves & Associates/Michael Graves Design Group, the exhibition offered a state-of-the-art, fully accessible experience for all who visited. Unlike a traditional museum where touching the art is not permitted, *Revealing Culture* included pieces created by the artists that encouraged visitors to experience the art with multiple senses.

Graves was familiar with universal design principles through his architecture practice, though he developed a new understanding of their value when he began using a wheelchair later in life. In his firm’s design of *Revealing Culture*, there were pieces to touch, descriptions of the art to hear, and subtly lit baseboards that guided visitors through the exhibition while illuminating the path for those with low vision. Art was displayed at levels comfortable for viewers in wheelchairs as well as for student visitors. By ensuring the exhibition was universally designed, all visitors

PREVIOUS: Jesse Higman,  
*Bone Orchid*, mica flakes  
in solution on masonite,  
from *Revealing Culture*  
OPPOSITE TOP: *Revealing  
Culture* exhibition design  
by Michael Graves &  
Associates/Michael  
Graves Design Group  
BELOW: Emily Eifler, *Cavum*,  
wood, yarn, polyester stuffing,  
from *Revealing Culture*





could enjoy a rich, multisensory artistic experience. The designers' self-described mission was to create "a work of art that reveals the art."

The reaction of Philip Kennicott, culture critic for the *Washington Post*, shows they succeeded: "...accessibility, if done right, can disappear into the landscape...it may become, over time, part of the basic poetic language of design."

VSA also demonstrated how accessibility can seamlessly blend into any venue by incorporating audio description for people who are blind or have low vision, sign language interpretation, and Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART) at every event and performance during the festival. These computerized CART screens generally provide captions for audience members who are Deaf or hard of hearing. Like many access services, the CART transcription also enriched the experience for other audience members, including the person who happened to miss a line or the child learning to read.

Even performance itself can become a case study in accessibility. The Opening Ceremony of the festival began with the first scene from *Nobody's Perfect*, an original children's musical commissioned in 2007 by VSA and the Kennedy Center Theater for Young Audiences and adapted from a book by Marlee Matlin



and Doug Cooney. The show is about a nine-year-old girl who is Deaf, whose plans for her perfect birthday party are thrown off when a new girl joins her class. Performed by the actors simultaneously in American Sign Language and spoken English, with CART screens designed into the set, the show was conceived to be accessible to all audience members.

The festival gave VSA the opportunity to show an international audience what is possible when the innovative spirit is unleashed. It was a platform to showcase advances in universal design, cutting-edge artistry, and progressive educational concepts. Moreover, the 2010 International VSA Festival celebrated the arts and disability, captured imaginations, and provided a glimpse into the future of a fully inclusive society.





Christina Casebeer, *Touch*,  
antique crocheted gloves  
and fabric stiffener,  
from *Revealing Culture*