The Intellectual Travels of an Artist: A Letter to Claire Marcille Gadrow of Rhode Island School of Design

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The Intellectual Travels of an Artist

Letter to Claire Gadrow

Johannes H. von Gumpenbergs
THE INTELLECTUAL TRAVELS OF AN ARTIST

A Letter to Claire Marcille Gadrow of Rhode Island School of Design

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Dear Claire,

When last we spoke I mentioned the painting and the sculpture pages in the catalogue and the graduate exhibit as signs that my way to look upon and study art could scarcely hope to win a ready welcome at the present RISD* with her main endeavor driven by New York. Yet the RISD of today is not all the RISDs there will ever be. She is the daughter of her times—wayward times, in part, they seem to me. But a span of time I cannot like is not a cause to cherish any less this school, the good she gave and memories I kept lifelong.

Undoubtedly I came to think about and look at art differently from many of my fellow artists and would like here to record for you what that difference is and the path I took to reason out the alternatives I advocate and try to practice.

RISD takes—with a degree of justice—some pride in the variety of her students’ products, which range, however, from one show to another over closely similar terrain. There is a marked sophisticated aptitude for mounting an up-to-date display; and that can be worth having and worth learning. But the witty whims and found-object shortcuts deliver seldom a strong coherence of design. Frequently we see a discipline of composition too casually practiced or even cleverly evaded. Within this charmed circle of our fashions of the day there are surely tugs of war; but the real competition strikes with greatest force mostly from without:

Flights of aerial show-planes cross from Quonset Point over our island every summer—each plane a work of sculpture on the move at blazing speed and a miracle to see. How frequently can any art created currently in three dimensions equal the sparkling visual appeal of these machines—will be able so to capture the imagination and the senses? Art, however, must surpass inventions such as these—though it is not an easy thing to do—by moving us to a sustained, rewarding contemplation the quick excitement of the planes is not designed to equal.

There are rather fine examples close at hand: Gilbert Franklin contributed to RISD spaces the Frazier Fountain and a design, essentially pure form, on the triangle of green students call “The Beach.” The two sculptures differ from each other in their theme and formal striving as well as notably from the appearance and the purposes of modern military aircraft. Yet, overall, their merits are curiously similar, because they all have been worked through—thoroughly constructed and composed. Nothing we behold or make will be unsurpassable perfection. But our “post-modern” floods of productivity leave too much undone we could achieve.

* For the stranger to Rhode Island School of Design: The school’s initials R.I.S.D. are nearly always pronounced – RIZ-dë. My sentences will run more smoothly if this monogram is read that way throughout the text.
Though I am a painter, sculpture is one of my loves I try to understand. So let me add this general observation, that I have concluded sculptural success must rest upon the visual mastery of the direction and the pace of surfaces — their continuities and intersections and that this aim seems rather often absent from the works I meet when I look around.

Had I been ever a participant in a meeting of faculty at RISD, my thinking would have made of me a glaringly bad fit. Faculty, you told me, freely disagree with one another. True enough — they disagree and loudly too, but likely not so very freely. I was present in the past at a plenitude of those “more student-oriented..., more up-to-date... and busier than thou” political correctness competitions to take too seriously this ever-boasted independence of the individual mind and individual will.

However that may be, what I showed and said to you and Jay and what I am putting here on paper can tell you that the several outlooks on the RISD campus will be more similar to one another than any have in common with my own. The causes, I believe, which can make me a bad fit will be quite identical to those that perhaps endow my contribution with genuine utility and worth.

When John Frazier, decades ago, conceded I had a logical mind, he probably paid me this compliment with a reservation. For it was concluded then as now that man’s more deeply humane sensibilities cannot unfold by reason. Hence logic is seldom preferred currency in any of the fine arts.

Although the work of analytical and lucid thought honors and confirms the truth and may thereby even train the painter’s eye to open wider and grow more discerning, I am taken much to task for the intellectual bend of my ambitions. I am admonished in a lot of different ways that “reason is not everything.” Yet I have never claimed it is; and surely no one needs to resist reason for what it cannot be or the jobs it cannot do. For rational deliberation, quite on its own, will be halted at its proper limit and natural frontier.

When we met you in your office, you could hardly fail to notice that the mischances of my past encounters in my calling still grieve and anger me. Self-sentimentality and wrath are wayward passions which do not deserve the center of existence. But to shove them sideward will be easier if a more useful, better passion assumes the pride of place. The impartial quest for understanding is a passion also and my means to master such disorders.

Let us now try to discover how far my talents reached or failed to reach in my study plan and passion of rational analysis.

The Basic Schooling

I rejoice that RISD will not let her students drift into a rudderless, freewheeling individuality without instruction, but values drawing and the liberal arts; and I sense happily a wider scope of learning than I can accurately measure at this moment.
A concise determination of what an education is may delineate it as a threefold quest to study and to teach the Humanities, the Arts and Science. The sciences seek to secure technical development and progress.

In music, literature and the visual arts the authors do not only speak to us but are also spokesmen for us, where we most often are unable to speak for ourselves. The visual arts in addition want to give us livable surroundings. Unsightliness irritates, thus distracts and thereby weakens the human person in his every enterprise. A world all ugliness and entirely without a grace of art would be a hellish place.

The humanities prepare the student as a citizen, peculiarly the citizen of a democratic commonwealth. The framing of the constitution of this country would be unthinkable without the able literacy and humanistic moral purpose of the Founding Fathers. Together those three vast domains comprehend the arts of civilization and furnish the specialties of work we learn most thoroughly in order to supply to one another the help we need to live a valuable, fully human life.

Let me now try to remember the Foundation Year at RISD fifty years ago in which Basic Design was the center of the effort.

Basic Design, as most course work at RISD, offered value through aiming at genuinely desirable results. These at times depended more on the teacher’s rejections and acceptances than on crisply reasoned discourse, so that some parts of our time were mis-spent on needless bungling.

If one knows, the teacher said, what one is doing, one can break the rules, because the eye invariably is the final judge. We picked up rules along the way on balance, focal points and warnings not to set important parts into the center. Later, on reflection, these rules seemed breakable, because we can obey them with very poor results and disobey while scoring a success.

Nor was a claim that the eye moves over a display on a certain path confirmable by the unaided vision. Yet an aid exists. During a summer fellowship to the Center for Cognitive Studies at Harvard I learned the use of an electronic optical device which casts upon a picture spark-like, very quick reflections – called “fixations” – in the precise sequence one regards the contents. The “scan-path” thereby traced is instructive for an artist, because it runs only upon rare occasion as he predicts and wants.

The planning, therefore, of a scan path is likely not a profitable pastime. The designer’s job of invention, of selection and the trimming of the parts to fit with one another – aside from manual labor – inevitably falls upon the unaided sense of sight. The human eye is indeed the final judge. That, in any case, remains good and true instruction. To probe the question how the artist’s eye may be trained to judge reliably is the teacher’s lasting mission and a principal pursuit.
RISD’s current first year basic program is intensely serious and genuinely interesting but perhaps so laden with ambitious undertakings that a body of practical and fundamental learning as the student’s lifelong resource seems a doubtful outcome.

One may treat a signal portion of the design and drawing of the Foundation Year the way you dealt with language when you learned to parse a sentence in the early grades. Through study of the parts of speech you won a grasp of the role each plays in the syntax of a spoken or a written declaration. We may thus separate the parts of art from one another and so learn more precisely the function and potential of each one. The need to divide art instruction into workable component tasks caused in the past mainly drawing to be singled out. Modern Art built on this historic precedent with the discovery that further parts of visual expression merit separate concern. From that understanding derive the color-work and shape arrangements of contemporary basic courses.

A table of the parts of art cannot be wholly parallel to the divisions practical for speech. But the conception thus derived from words brings clearness and utility. Let one demonstration stand in the place of all:

From found papers – wrappings, junk mail and so on – one creates a color composition. Cuts are made with scissors at right angles and glued upon a paper backing. Snippet upon snippet one keeps correcting the result till a fine attraction and coherence are achieved. All is done without intrusion by the slants and curves of varying shapes or other complexities of art, so that every labor is only aimed at showing color.

You may commission me – quite free of charge – to assemble such a study for you. It will be about stationary size and take maybe an evening to do. If you will then hold up my little work near any paintings on the RISD campus, you may find that as a pure display of
color it outshines them nearly all — as likely it will also the pictures on my walls at 14 Bay Street.

The tasks of observation, of drawing and construction, of the brush and pigment, are distractions which demand their due. They cause to some degree a loss of color. This inevitable forfeit is reduced, however, when the candlepower color represents is studied and experienced at its unimpeded best.

Because the assignment requires neither advanced knowledge nor a special skill, most beginners can learn to do it readily and well.

Non-Representation and Abstraction

Arrangements of shapes, discovery of the behavior and consequent uses of color, volume construction and the truly varied ways to render the surfaces of form, observation of the shape and color play of nature brought to us by light, are each an efficient and practical abstraction. For they are choices drawn, as aids to study, from the entire space of action we call art.

The non-representational divisions of the above series become powerful through their educational intent. They are derived from a world of art greater and more inclusive than themselves and aim at a preciser, wider understanding of that world.

Works of pure color and pure shape — but lacking pedagogic purpose — can be miracles of beauty, yet partake of abstraction only slightly. For their final form derives chiefly from the artist’s often vague, incipient vision and from the successive intermediate states each work piece travels through during its production.

Every enterprise is an abstraction — that is, a derivation — from some sort of conception of the job and from the essential paces on the road to an end-result. That way abstraction is, of course, ubiquitous but, most frequently also, unremarkable.

Neither my fellow undergraduates nor myself doubted received opinion that art is the more thoroughly abstract the closer it approaches to non-representation. But once we look and listen a bit further, we find the visual arts are not sole owners of significant abstraction and that other disciplines can shed a clarifying light on how abstraction works.

Maybe you have read The Iliad, Homer’s epic story of the siege and fall of Troy. Had Homer tried to render every ordinary action and word of conversation, each highlight and each shadow, sparing no particulars however trifling, the volumes would have filled several times the entire shelf space of the Library of Congress; and if you planned to read them, you would need immortal life.

The vast and troublesome abundance of the world recommends selection of essentials and deletion of the overflow. The principal facts about the Iliad may be told in a single compact paragraph: Around 1200 BC an alliance of Mycenaean chiefs assembled a fleet at
Aulis and set sail for Troy on the upper coast of Asia Minor. They besieged the city for ten years, then entered by a ruse, plundered and burned the place, enslaved the population and so took military and political control of the Dardanelles Strait.

My dry-as-dust account has built a genuine abstraction – a true derivation from the events and action we call the Trojan War. But we either derive powerfully or end up deriving feebly. My puny sentences will not, three thousand years from now, capture any human heart. To even hope for such a capture two functions of abstraction must follow one another:

My spare, compacted paragraph poses an example only of the first, whose task it is to disengage the quintessence of experiences and deeds from a chaos of distractions and surrounding complications.

By the second function of abstraction the bare framework of essentials is filled out again. Artful choices are set into the fabric of the work to interpret and articulate the subject as eloquently and coherently as the author-artist can possibly accomplish.

In this way, Homer with his harp and voice reached and moved the souls of people in his time and, even now, stirs our feelings towards a loftier, heroic striving across the roundabout of our alien tongues and modern printed pages.

There are numerous parallels in visual art. Though the medium of words and the parts of fine art differ from each other and tend to bring us different openings for subject choice as well as treatment, the operations of abstraction and their utility abide reliably unchanged. May one great masterwork of painting suffice us here as an example:

*Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* is Paul Gauguin’s most ambitious canvas. The biologist may aver that eons ago we arose out of primeval slime, some philosophers that man is but a thinking animal, and religion sustains our hope of an imponderable, blessed destiny – while all we can observe with certitude is that we go back to dust.

Whole libraries of learned volumes explore such themes; yet man’s knowledge of himself continues incomplete. The three questions can’t be settled. For they consider in the sparsest, abstract form the riddle of man’s whole existence. So we cannot really know how the artist meant his painting to be seen. Let me therefore play a little and form playfully a friendship with this picture we cannot have by all the weighty erudition in the world.

Maybe the people in the painting do not ask the questions for themselves to answer, but inquire rather of the viewer:

“Whence do we come? Do you know? Or can you guess?” And I reply, “From Monsieur Gauguin’s mind, his brush and paint.”

“Who are we?” “You are lovely folk at peace in a delightful place where I forever will be glad to join you as companion.”

“Where shall we be found a great or little while from now?” “In Monsieur Gauguin’s painting, naturally, where you and I may rendezvous each time I travel up to Boston.”
My interpretation gives to me a comforting, beneficent assurance. Perhaps you wish to venture now your own response. One is quite free to do that, where an author's aims are not completely clear. This is, however, not a self-indulgent license. What meanings one attributes must be sustainable within the extent and limits of the work.

You and I would never venture our singular interpretations had Paul Gauguin not filled his unanswerable puzzle with comely people in a magic land, because through them he gave to us his invitation – we found irresistible – to contribute the participation of our hearts and minds.

RISD Teachers in the Fifties

John Frazier, Chairman of Fine Arts and teaching mainly Figure Drawing, owned the most commanding personality I have met anywhere in art. Requests for technical advice provoked easily exasperated growls. Yet nobody could equal his lofty talent to inspire. I too felt much inspired, but it was not for me the easiest way to learn.

I understood that Frazier contemplated light and shade mostly with disdain, but could not grasp what he directed us to do instead. Eventually I dared his ire to constructive purpose and received a useful guidance. He had a reproduction handy, a sixteenth century old master drawing with descriptive shading. "Those are not shadows," he instructed. "They are clues to the direction of the form." Years later, I expended many hours studying the causes to which such clues owe their legibility.

The comment was helpful straight away. I began "...looking like a draftsman." To hear John Frazier say that – and it took me quite a while – could make a happy day. When the two semesters ended, we students felt – probably more proudly than was wise – that we could draw anything on earth.

I recall a story which so fits the man it ought to be the truth – though it may be only myth. I believe Frazier had two sons who used a deal of salty language. The father, vexed by that rude habit, was quoted thus: "Christ Almighty! I cannot understand why in hell those goddamned boys have to swear the way they do?"

Gruff fondness and reliable good will were John Frazier's bearing and his very nature. He never displayed even traces of common, human pettiness. It was his largeness of the soul which made learning from this man an experience like no other – never to be forgotten and unthinkable to do without.

John Frazier's successes encouraged imitators who failed to grasp, however, that only Frazier could be Frazier. The "mini-Fraziers" taught too little and inspired seldom. But among the admirers were also men true to their own thinking brains and own endowments:
Stephen Macomber taught first year drawing. Through including technical guidance other teachers did not care to give, Macomber fitted a signal missing piece into our training. He was a fierce enthusiast for drawing, a most trustable and upright man and my favorite instructor during the Foundation Year.

My classmate, Roger Ferriter, remarked that painting was for Gordon Peers a way of life. That was true and our considerable gain. Owing to a somewhat dour personality, Peers was not invariably popular. Yet he was a demanding, tireless instructor – articulate and thoughtful. So I valued him and am today, as I was then, grateful to the teacher and the human being.

Illustration was my field at RISD. I assessed that I had little aptitude for business and so turned later back to painting, as had others already in midstream. I sensed, however – and still so judge – that the course deserved the four semesters on its merits as a fine arts study. Harve Stein was a splendid teacher who covered the complicated ground in a most intelligent, in fact a brilliantly, constructed program.

The Raemisches befriended me as a young countryman, and I spent some pleasant hours with them at their house. Waldemar Raemisch was not my teacher. But his sculpture students plainly loved him and revered him. He was the finest artist RISD had. Two enormous figure groups in bronze on Philadelphia’s Franklin Parkway – not far from the Rodin Museum – easily confirm that claim.

These were first constructed at half-size in the RISD sculpture workshop, where I often visited and saw them grow. The two groups were then shipped to Italy, where Raemisch worked on them full-scale preparatory to the casting. There he died most unexpectedly in 1955, and Gilbert Franklin completed the great work.

John Howard Benson was too ill to continue to teach lettering when I arrived at RISD. Nonetheless, the lettering I know which really counts I learned from Benson. The Elements of Lettering and Benson’s page-by-page handwritten translation of Arrighi’s Opera – The Little Work – a sixteenth century manual for chancery writing, were my able teachers, the best indeed in the entire field.

From Newport Benson continued to commute to RISD to teach each year one semester of Philosophy of Design. The course dealt rarely with works of solely visual appeal whose failures and successes rely on the beholder’s “involuntary attractions and repulsions.” Instead our study emphasized the making of objects of utility, so that the patron was considered more as user than as viewer.

The many ill-made things we must endure remind me of Benson’s rendering of wear as “the deformation of an artifact through use.” A “good desired by the patron,” I currently conclude, will be a favorable pace of wear.
Clarity of intellect and of articulation, excellence in the artistic execution of each task, all were joined in this one man and made of Benson the most persuasive model I have known of what an artist, a scholar and a teacher ought to be.

Not even John Frazier’s gift to stir us powerfully ranks in my mind as high as this communion with Benson’s incisive exactitude of thought and illuminated intellect. Frazier moved us in some part by our weakness of wanting to feel strongly through stimulation at the hands of others. Benson addressed himself to our strength – our ability to reason and our soberly considering brains.

No doubt, these artists owned diverging views. Yet most seemed to hold the fashions of New York in rather low esteem. Though recent and contemporary influences contributed to RISD painting, we most of all revered the painter Paul Cézanne.

The tally of Cézanne’s chief excellences is strikingly brief: Form, Color and Design. But he builds them up together with a firmer hand than nearly any other painter. Neither at centers elsewhere nor in New York were these strengths on prominent display. Printmaking instructor, Herbert Fink, remarked on Jackson Pollock that he played a game of ten rules using only two. The yearbook of my class quotes Waldemar Raemisch: “It is not a good age for art…”

Pollock as a composing colorist appeared unconvincing, and in his best-remembered work the exclusion of all solid form is impossible to miss.

RISD practiced an open-minded skepticism toward contemporary trends. It was a valuable stand to take. For it taught that the new is not different from the old in its fallibility and that prejudice lies not just in mechanical rejection of the new but also in mindlessly embracing it.

Basic Knowledge

During college my summer jobs were mostly Boys Camp Waterfront Directorships. In early June, to prepare for camp, I traveled regularly to Aquatic School at Springfield College. The long-weekend sessions were directed by Charles Silvia, Swimming Coach, Professor of Physical Education and a teaching personality of intellect and depth. One lesson had far longer reach than pure Aquatics. He urged the pursuit of “basic knowledge.” I believed him and have many times experienced since that to do properly the work of a teacher and a learner one needs an aptitude and craft to frame those prototypes of basic study Silvia sought and often found.

We have a wish list – miles, it seems, in length – of all a teacher ought to be and do. Unless he needs specific telling to be a decent person and right citizen, the list is wasted words and wasted paper. The teacher has the job to save the student time. Models of basic learning carry out this task better than any other way I know.
A college course which is the well-made product of this plan is not a routine result of teaching drudgeries, but a valuable research triumph.

Our learning – particularly at the heights of its development where research is accomplished – is product of a long history of growth. Without instruction, that historic journey of the thought, the trials and the errors of numerous and gifted people could never be reconstituted within a span of life by any individual attempt. The enlightened choices and lucid expositions of able teaching are therefore literally the ultimate conservators of man’s hours, days and years.

It was Charles Silvia’s merit that he was able to use work to range his thought more widely than his work. All vocations may be educators teaching truths in similar essential ways, so that the disciplines we study hold signal traits in common – especially an attribute of beauty. When, by rarest chance, the student and the teacher succeed most happily in their shared endeavor, the student perhaps senses in his learning an ably joined coherent unity he may find altogether artful.

Much clear thinking can proceed from our work, shape in turn its progress and thereby lead to understandings of important philosophic merit. Thus we may discover – besides an education in the visual arts – also a valuable education by means and through the visual arts. Equally, the eager student can sharpen his human gift of thought through agriculture, engineering, medicine and so on.

One of our main defenses against the vastness of reality, the rule of the division of labor, has so advanced that closely studied specialties appear to shorten and constrain our intellectual reach. Yet I see for modern man in the very limits and exactions of his calling this open window toward life through which he may in time see farther and comprehend more broadly.

Three decades after Silvia, I read in Plato about a class of understanding he calls a “Form.” It so parallels Silvia’s basic knowledge that I look on both their constructs as indistinguishable twins. This likely proves my limits as an artist who has received too little training as a scholar. But let me elaborate my theme, and let the truly learned – if they so wish – accept my invitation to rebut.

We kept detailed notes in Benson’s course and regularly wrote brief essays. There was no required reading, and I discovered also fairly soon that approaching philosophic literature untutored can be heavy going. In any case, the serious reading I prefer is apt to be historical. Yet seeking fundamental learning is a philosophic task which I attempted by writing essays solely for my progress and personal illumination.

I was young enough and bold to undertake the weightiest subjects: What is Meaning? What is Love? What the Intellect, and What is Will? What is the Likeness of a Beautiful Thing? What are the Logical Dependencies of Justice?
I grew through writing a little more familiar with philosophical expository prose and then was better able to read the thoughts of others and not wage a superhuman struggle. Thus I found that my cherished, carefully constructed insights were, not infrequently, repeat originalities. This brought me reassuring confirmation of my thinking. But it was in equal measure daunting how little there existed that I could think about which was really new. The growth of personal understanding made the effort profitable, and there is ever the uncertain hope of surpassing in precision and completeness antecedent renderings.

The basic reasoned insight was to Plato our sole reality he therefore called a Form. Objects and particular experiences were only “smoke.” After Plato’s Dialogues I ventured Aristotle’s Ethics. In Ethics Aristotle differs with Plato on the Forms and thereby prods the reader into taking sides. I did his bidding and chose Plato. Aristotle’s labors admirably join and complement the thought of Plato. But he quarrels to no gain or purpose.

Let me explain: you do a necessary task with your figures and your facts and succeed because you understand the principles which point the way where I, in ignorance, must lurch and stagger. Yet each achievement retreats into the past as fresh assignments take its place. They tend all to pour into a gradually dimming memory and there thin out into a kind of smoke.

We derive basic knowledge out of the abundance of impressions from the world – a plenitude of smoke – then apply what we have learned to plot a course and so to master this otherwise unfathomable, murky mass. Plato’s powerful abstractions spoke convincingly to me; for it appears that I had made myself a Platonist years before I studied Plato.

Educators tell their students that they come to college so that they will learn to think. How wholeheartedly they mean it may be an unanswerable question. Formal coursework is, at any rate, mainly a prescription diet and relies unevenly on the students’ reasoning abilities. I did not shine in it at RISD nor at Yale. But I took thinking seriously, and great schools are able to stimulate the mind in unpredictable and unpremeditated ways.

The year after graduation I painted and I drew with an aim to take as firmly as I could intellectual possession of the ways we had been taught. My eyes particularly opened toward color. You could say I completed my RISD education a year late – and then I learned that this was not quite good enough.

The rational works – chiefly black and white – you and Jay saw at my house began in fact with a certain worry. The year following on RISD I learned to draw more easily than I had ever done before. But doubts about my comprehension of the displays I put on paper began to goad my mind, so that I grew eventually unable to draw with any genuine conviction – trusting only what I had first carefully constructed and in that way more fully understood.
Imagine a person accustomed to speak fluently becoming gradually almost tongueless and only with much effort capable of utterances he may credit as validly expressive of his meaning. Imagine further this person pondering and troubling over how precisely words can ever shape themselves within the mind to be called upon and sounded as required.

Happily this was my quest only in the form of visual parallel. Graduate school could not be the place to stagger through such bogs – however profitable in the end. Yet I made my difficulty welcome, because I could foresee that it would give the mind and eye a training unreachable by any other path.

Some years later I saw light on the far side of my tunnel; and eventually the precision I found so necessary for my task even learned to dance – at least a little.

Düsseldorf and Munich

In early summer of 1956 I went back to Germany. Through a boyhood friend at the Academy in Düsseldorf I was invited to join Bruno Goller’s class for the remainder of spring term. My progress in color earned me there a bit of praise. It was Goller’s kindly overstatement to call me “Meister der Farbe” – a master of color. At RISD nobody had cause to consider me a master of this or any skill; and I was no master now. Yet there are milestones on the path of growth in art, and to have reached one gave me pleasure.

Bruno Goller commented besides that I dealt with form too negligently; and in Munich, where I spent the two semesters following, Franz Nagel told me much the same.

Form at RISD was not feeble; but neither – despite Cézanne – was it invariably strong. I recall two tenets which may have a share in that diminishment, first, that drawing is making marks on paper, and second, that the universal form of painting is all the content of the height and width of the entire canvas. Both are true and apply – in their essential meanings – equally the other way. But, when such and similar modernisms are accepted as exhaustive, clarity and structure tend to weaken.

To me Nagel’s and Goller’s criticism was most acceptable, because it led me toward my own aptitude and strongest inclination.

At Munich Medical School, in a lofty amphitheater with live dissection work projected overhead, I heard one of the choicest lecture series offered anywhere: Titus Ritter von Lanz – Titus Knight of Lanz – read Anatomy. In Germany fine lecturing is rewarded by applause. It is not the usual explosive clapping of the palms, but a sound like knocking on a door – knuckles hammering on wood. And von Lanz always paid us back with courtly inclinations of his comely and distinguished head.

Their students paid a tribute to Bruno Goller and Franz Nagel one very seldom hears. It was said of their corrections that they were always right; and this was very nearly true. Both were helpful, wise instructors and unpretentious men. When I arrived, however, back in
the United States, I was headed for a meeting with the only prima donna professor of all my student days – former German Bauhaus Master, Josef Albers of Yale.

Albers and Yale

The joy of admittance to Albers Land was followed by the singular experience of an Albers interview – in my case a droll medley of English, German and inimitable Albers. Our talk traced a rarely varied pattern of Albers’ questions, my five-syllable reply and the inescapable put-down-demolition:

Albers: “I see you did a lot of work with the human figure.”
Johannes: “Yes, Mister Albers.”
Albers: That doesn’t count here. Here we do Farbe.”

About my studies in Munich: “That is a very bad school. I went there with Klee and Kandinsky.”

Nor did Albers judge kindly of my years at RISD: “My predecessor had a gentlemen’s agreement with the Director of Rhode Island School of Design to accept their students here for graduate work. But I was forced to abandon this gentlemen’s agreement, because Rhode Island School of Design students are very badly prepared to do graduate work.”

A whole hour of such therapy for whatever was supposed to ail me gets old quickly. The purpose was, no doubt, to make it crystal-clear to me that my sole hope – and my last – to amount to anything worthwhile at all was by grace of his, Albers’s instruction.

My first day of class brought me scathing criticisms for two pictures. At last, Albers, with an air of princely condescension, mercifully ended thus: “Are there any more of those?” “No, Mr. Albers.” “Na, Gott sei Dank,” which is – thank God – in German.

Eventually I comprehended that I had met with a considerable character, then relaxed a little and began to enjoy the show.

Albers pronounced about himself regularly and with grandeur. “They say young people learn better than old people. This is not true. In all my years of teaching I have learned more than my students.”

During an absence, Anni Albers, herself an artist of renown, hired a student to assist her husband, who was then past seventy. Albers allowed no troubling questions to linger in the fellow’s mind on who was an emperor of intellect and who the dimwit serf. “Wilson, I am brighter than you.” It was surely meant most kindly for the good of that young man’s immortal soul.
Every messiah has a favorite disciple. Robert Engman, a RISD painting graduate, was that person in Albers Land. At Yale Engman turned to sculpture and later led the sculpture program. As a student he returned once from a protest in New York, still wearing the blue armband of a marcher, and met Albers on the steps of Street Hall. He was summoned to the royal presence thus: “Come here, Boy.” and then questioned, “Tell me, Robert, what is that you are wearing around your sleeve?”

Robert: “Well, Mr. Albers, this means I am opposed to atomic bomb testing.”

Albers: “Ach, Boy, since when do you wear your emotions on the sleeve?”

The armband, Engman told me, came off very quickly.

In my hearing Engman remarked to Albers that, aside from art he had himself created, he owned only pieces Albers had given him from time to time. The reply was the Albers-ego at its best: “Robert, this is not right. You should have a Picasso to see how much greater I am.”

You may think he must be joking – not true. It is how Albers really felt about himself, told to us “in jesting guise.”

“What nonsense is this?” was Albers’ standard shout when you tried his patience unendurably, which we accomplished fairly often: “Student representation? What nonsense is this! You are represented to me in class.”

The vogue phrases of the hour, “manipulating paint,” for instance, could trigger storms of wrath: “This morning I asked a girl what she was doing. She said, ‘I am manipulating paint.’ What nonsense is this! Manipulating paint!…..” The tape-recording of these words all but exploded in Albers’ thunderings of rage.

If now you think you have the measure of this man, please be advised that Josef Albers breathed a loftier air far above the commonplace congruities which burden you and me. My astounded brain could scarcely grasp this utterance my ears were hearing: “It is my constitutional necessity not to dominate.” After claiming every excellence and brilliant talent, Albers also seemed to wish renown for his humility.

Although John Benson was the teacher I continue to admire most, I am able to write more elaborately about Albers because in his bearing and his talk, Albers put on stage the most memorable, indeed, a peerless show. Even Frazier in a crusty mood, commanding you to use your head or growling at us all to stifle our yawns had not this range of entertaining oddities.

Albers, in addition, used to preach a favorite theme on “honesty and modesty.” Modesty was quite beyond his reach, but he was an honest man. His passion and his energy for teaching never wearied. He gave what he resolved we ought to have; and much of that was very fine. It was frequently unique and occasionally also indispensable.

Albers owned a precise and brilliant intellect he made available to us; and we were able always to depend on his good will. In a way, then, we indulged his swagger, because we
were brilliantly rewarded. All artists are trained to strut their splendid stuff. Like Shakespeare, Albers proclaimed the world a stage—“and no one lives for not appearing.”

You have not asked me yet if I show off. But let me answer anyway as forthrightly as I can. How may I fail to honor my teachers and my training? Vain as any peacock, I have discerned a truth Benjamin Franklin learned about himself and recorded charmingly for us more than two centuries ago. He saw no cause, he wrote, to disclaim his trait of vanity, as no other feeling brought him so much comfort.

I had occasion to reflect upon the strut and swagger of existence as Janet’s companion during Sunday Mass in Lancaster. After a year of Sundays came and went, I was eventually conscripted as head-usher and began to notice there was quite a show unfolding to my eyes: the hair-dos, décolletés and macho-struts, the ponytails and beards, the maxi-skirts and minis, left no question—no one lived for not appearing.

Shakespeare and Albers rightly told us that our world’s a stage. May Johannes then observe that humanity’s dance across the boards is a bold affair in gaudy plumage with no visible beginning nor an end—a preening parade in which everybody seeks a moment’s notice in the shifty sun of fame.

Albers and Color

Josef Albers wrote The Interaction of Color. Richly illustrated, superbly executed, and weighing over twenty pounds, the book and pictures may be worth today a fortune. However, they do not convey exactly how Albers really taught us color. Technical illustrations of all but impossible precision assemble a most beautiful portfolio, but functionally shift the emphasis. For the many little reproductions of “free study” designs—crowded as a kind of afterthought into a few final pages—never reveal how central to the course was in fact the student composition effort.

The most effective of the technical assignments was the “color change.” It is sometimes an action of such power that a single color against different grounds must be called by different names. There was other, doubtless valuable, technical work. But the free studies, ever finer and more colorful, grew into an abundant, splendid flow; and of this Albers’ book supplies no true account.

The course used colored papers only and thereby saved a vast amount of time. For it is possible to see and put to use countless colors in innumerable settings one cannot experience by the slower craft of the brush and paint.

Therefore, when I taught a similar course, I mostly kept to colored papers glued upon a paper backing, though not quite so exclusively as Albers. For I found that some behaviors cannot be fully studied through colors we have not seen develop as a result of mixing them by hand.
Was I able to surpass the Albers course? If so, there will be no great merit in it. Modern makers surpass the lightbulb Thomas Edison invented, but they are no Edisons. I could do well at teaching color, because Albers’ grand achievement gave me my beginning.

RISD from the first did win my heart. Though I had a high regard for Josef Albers, the operation he created never could.

A School Designed by Josef Albers

Albers held emotions to be prejudices and so misjudged the source and fuel from which derived his extraordinary energy. He averred, as indisputable, the total logic of his teaching and, in fact, could reason with precision. But he applied that power with a dubious willfulness in his choices as well as his exclusions. “Naked women” was Albers’s contemptuous opinion of the study of the human form. There was neither painting nor drawing from the nude nor descriptive geometric learning; and the courses created in their place had not invariably merit to deserve that preference.

Because Albers’ insight frequently was brilliant, the unwary gave too readily their reverential admiration to his entire educational plan – indeed, to every utterance – though troubling gaps appeared in the preparation of such students as were products solely of Yale training. Yet one also wishes that every young artist, before he sets out to make his way, could look back upon a span of time when a Josef Albers was his teacher.

The rewarding personalities teaching then at Yale were people who had learned from Albers and were able to admire him without dissolving their own personhood in imitation of all of Albers’ crotchets and beliefs. Despite his fond discipleship, one of these was Robert Engman, and Neil Welliver another. I was not a student in their courses, but I valued their good minds and their good will.

Because Albers planned his teaching carefully and used language with deliberate exactitude, a “mini-Albers” was a stronger teacher than a RISD imitation of John Frazier. But the mini-Albers could be also an unpleasant, waspish human being and without a trace of the generosity behind Albers’ lordly overbearing.

Nor could I care for the yearly invitation to an artist – mainly from New York – to share with Albers professorial honors. Of that company, Willem de Kooning’s renown endures, while the others – though each a favored child of fortune at the time – are mostly, I believe, forgotten. The program was for graduate students and for seniors only, and my disaffection for it was in part my fault, because it probably was able, for students who felt ready, to prepare a valuable path to the New York action of galleries and shows.

To me the setup was no use and the one cook too many stirring in my broth – a frequent irritation and distraction.
When Albers retired, the house he built did not quite crumble into dust and rubble, but weakened and immediately displayed too many cracks and leaks. Oddly, coursework I approved – descriptive geometry and a bit of figure drawing – came back into the program, but so feebly that it never could make up for the forfeit of the sense of break-through, the loss of Albers’ pioneering spirit.

In my final year at Yale there was no Albers – only two visiting celebrities. Neither owned sufficient lore to help me with my analytical intent and aims. One was kindly tolerant; the other – an excitable sparrow of a man – preened forever with his fine, sublime emotions he considered whole infinitudes superior to my chilling, logical endeavor.

No longer distracted but still irritated, I ignored the sparrow – though we remained civil at the time. That civility did not endure forever, but ended in rather a surprising way. Years later, when I was in charge of the foundation program at the University of Illinois, the celebrated sparrow – full-professoried, tenured and with the biggest paycheck our treasury could give – reappeared as newly hired head of painting.

He assailed instantly my person and my program, and I repaid those fetid favors with my toploftiest disdain. Some colleagues seemed amused that our discontents of Yale had sprouted offspring at the U. of I. Neither of us was then behaving at his best. Later we grew more conciliatory; and by the end of year, this artist – ever more disliking the duties of his job – quit the University.

Albers’ sayings – often startling by their needlepoint acuity as well as self-enthronement of the speaker – never lacked clear purpose. Within a year of his departure fluffy thinking started to express its aimless wandering in lofty sounding utterances meaning very little. “Ambiguity” thus became a name given whole outpourings of brushstroke blurs. It was just a word of vogue. But I pondered how to turn this amorphous ooze of ambiguity into a theme of clarity executed with precision.

The perceptual oddity below is famous. I do not know who the author was but hope that he will be content to let me borrow the outline-layout of his fine invention. The display
doubtless is ambiguous, because neither of two ways of reading it is able to prevail. Yet the ambiguity is not an unintelligible mire but a construct of opposing clarities.

After Yale I listened to how the artist “sets up tension” more often than I cared to hear, and found too frequently that I was unable to give due appreciation to visual parts of merit— even beauty— because a distraction intervened. Wanting to look one way, while being pulled in a less rewarding other, sets up tension. But it is a forfeit—not a gain.

The figure above, however, unites a theme of tension by a contest of the left and right for possession and control of the center plane. Thus I found a tension without a loss of firm coherence and an ambiguity of clearly rendered, readable assembled parts.

Composition

Readability was a requirement of weight in Albers’ teaching plan. “I can read that,” he once told us of a painting. “This is FLOWERS in a bowl.” It was not, therefore, a BOWL with a few incidental, trivial flowers marking time before inevitably wilting. How much art inside of RISD and without error thus unhappily off theme is past all reckoning.

Unpremeditated rejections and acceptances—Benson called them “involuntary attractions and repulsions”—rule man’s aesthetic sense and receptivity. If Albers’s and Benson’s observation can be joined, we may discover a dependably practical and fundamental precept of design. Let me try to work it out.

Aesthetic sensibility may be a mere bonus—an extra grace of nature—enhancing a survival tool of indispensable utility. Consider a dog testing with the nose a find he will either reject as noxious and repellant or accept as edible and wholesome food.

We are now sitting in a pretty room to hear lovely chamber music melodiously played. There intrudes, however, a distraction. A door swings to and fro, endlessly repeating a piercing, strident squeak. You and I will not attempt to stop the music in order to listen to the squeaking, but will instead silence the offending door to partake and to delight in the magic we have come to hear—that is, we choose the good food and reject the bad.

When you and Jay came to visit, I performed this function on the surfaces of pictures by means of corrective colored paper snippets and thereby stopped a squeaking you could not hear but plainly see, in order thus to sound a music intended solely for reception by the eyes.

I have slides trying to capture the essentials of this method. But the way you and Jay saw it applied, it invariably functions best—taught and demonstrated live. The placement of the cuttings, subduing the distractions, gradually joined together and strengthened each design. With the snippets suddenly cast off, failures of coherence and a certain dimming of vitality became, I think, observable and even obvious to see.

You were able to perceive the effects of my corrections much the way I did myself, because you and I are of one species and own almost identical optical and intellectual tools.
[Presented as a cutout in original manuscript.
The reader can use a piece of white paper or a white card.]

Use with Illustration after Pg. 18

Please turn this rectangle of paper blank side up. Cover first the right-hand version and look at the unaltered picture on the left. Then cover that and note the more eloquent and strengthened showing on the right.
I cannot here reproduce the full corrective impact of the paper snippets put down & cast off live. Happily, a mere few changes can strengthen a design of merit, such as Erich Heckel's Snow Drift shown unaltered on the left. My tasks were chiefly two: the first was to improve the intersections of the long steep passage at the left with the ridge slanting from the hills above, with the roof-line of the house below. The second was to make more visible the little hut near center which invites rewardless scrutiny by the very weakness of its presence.
But I have made a study of observing my responses while looking at a work of art. To observe yourself in the action of beholding art is a skill in which you likely will have little training.

Visual parts stand out for innumerable qualities and traits—brilliance, darkness, length or thickness, and so on. They are all subject to one rule: If we permit a visual part to command the attention of the viewer, it also must reward him. Have you ever said or heard it said, “There are no absolutes”? Then here you have one which will be difficult to challenge, because you cannot contemplate any possible exceptions. For how, with any prudence, could you shout “look here,” while at the same time well aware that “here” is not worth seeing?

Even experienced judgments of what will not or will reward the viewer are fallible indeed; and if we are hasty, distracted or fatigued, we go often badly wrong. Assuming—at least hoping—that my paper snippets, as you saw them put in place, rendered proper judgments, then each one—by purging adverse, noisy accents—made it easier to engage yourself as a beholder of each picture. You could observe the composition one step forward and a snippet at a time grow gradually more beautiful to see.

Though rivers of writings treat the elusive theme of beauty, their success seems only partial. So let me add to all their plenitude my two cents’ worth of reflection. We say about a product or event which appeals to our understanding that we find it “interesting.” It appears therefore consistent to conclude that we regard as beautiful sounds and sights which can engage us by the senses—the visual arts through sight, as music does through hearing.

For this we perform the labors of composing. Our cherished subjects and inventions—unimpeded by distractions—are thus delivered at full value through excellent design. A just and fitting valuation of our unpredetermined attractions and repulsions cannot let us stray off theme but will lead us faithfully towards our subject—the invariably desired end-result. For our best pictures are most beautiful and best because they are themselves—a true rendering of all their theme and striving.

The Artist and His Patron

We may celebrate an ideal of the patronage of art as a communion between noble spirits but find the reality a dubious pleasure. The wine label near the ending of my letter showed me how an ambush of troubles can befall the relations of an artist and his patron.

I made exact provision for Allegro’s technical demands—the poster size of my final execution, space for printed information—and took license only they spontaneously had offered. Yet it needed stubborn immobility and unanswerable argument to keep my painting safe. Later Allegro seemed glad I had prevailed; but the event was not at first a harmony of hearts. In these circumstances such tilts are ordinary; we expect them while we dream of better times.
We are accustomed to hear art spoken of as a liberty of self-expression. To me this makes at most a limited and trivial sense. I take it as a given that all action must arise out of a self and in part, therefore, reveal a self. Freedom, however, grows from discipline in the sense of a precise obedience to the exactions of a choice. Discipline is not a tyrant but our indispensable submission to the causes from which every possibility must flow. My letter therefore advocates a comprehensive lore to prepare the artist as the servant of his pictures whose task is to discern and carry out what his pictures desire him to do.

Benson’s lesson on the orderly sequential paces – the intermediate forms of making – is as true for artifacts of use mass-produced by industry as it is of the unique art object aiming at a single buyer. When an artifact is manufactured to be used, errors of design reveal themselves in part as faults of function, but when an object is made only to be seen, the patron may not so clearly comprehend its merits and defects. Benson’s course emphasized the patron as a user, while I want now to understand him as beholder – a user, if you will, whose sole desire is to look.

The noble patron, like the best of artists, must develop. He cannot attain his especial excellence as a raw beginner. We suffer together from the common human ills of ignorance, of prejudice, of seeking fulfillment and acclaim at too cheap a price, so that our ways of self-expression may be shoddy goods indeed. The will to become prudently more tolerant, to learn more thoroughly and labor better can master many failings, while ill will inevitably shuts the door on art as well as on nearly every other excellent and worthwhile thing. Good will joined to intelligently built experience can give in time the patron a clear mind and open eyes, that is, a parallel ability to the artist’s craft of looking at himself while constructing his creations.

Art lives by its intensity. I could not show to you and Jay all my arsenal of means. The paper snippets not only silence wayward loudness, but correct also the distractions of the feeble voice – of potential strength failing to unfold. By years of over-plentiful production, particularly an experienced artist may numb his mind and so grow unaware of the weakening intensity of his achievement. Yet each time a work goes on exhibit it is attended by a lofty claim. The artist tells the patron: “I declare my product a fine and well-done job and therefore want to share it.” The patron then has just and reasonable cause to measure the performance against this brave assertion.

The patron’s insight to discern and his resolve to seek intensity grow more able with training and experience. My fellow artists no doubt join me in a distaste for criticism and a love of praise, so that the patron who is competent to judge and prods us to excel may not be always welcome. We speak of wanting to be understood, but often only in the indulgent sense of understanding. Yet the artist who determines not to falter on the mission of his calling can cherish the affectionate beholder who sees him analytically and understands him truly.

When we look at a work of merit, we can feel gratified and pronounce it pleasing. These are useful words for describing an emotional response and in ordinary discourse we
need not avoid them. But “gratified” and “pleasing” are not a verbal reconstruction of exactly how we feel when art captures our whole awareness and entire sensibility.

Artworks of all disciplines render sometimes terrifying themes: Christ’s tortured body, bloody and lifeless on the cross, a Last Judgment where the sinful damned are thrown in the abyss or Puccini’s Madama Butterfly and Shakespeare’s King Lear with their dread, indeed, their deadly outcomes. All urge us to compassion. To find in them our satisfaction and delight would be a cruelly vile, a diabolic, pleasure. These works are very beautiful, no doubt. But they are not designed to please. What occurs, through the expressive power of a work of art, at the root and deepest center of our capacity to feel is really more than a mere pleasure.

Aldous Huxley, in The Devils of Loudun, speaks of upward and of downward self-transcendence. Upward self-transcendence requires a self-mastery of sober thought and diligence of learning. The book, however, is a narrative of a religious frenzy Huxley holds to be a path to downward self-transcendence he likens to our much more common self-abandonments to roaring motors, deafening music and the false bliss of psychoactive drugs.

Huxley gave me an idea of some use, I think, in art. The thrills which he describes are perfection in one sense: while they perure we wish for nothing else. By changing Huxley’s “self-transcendence” into self-fulfillment I have not found necessarily a better word, but one easier comprehensible perhaps as a feeling of unexceedable completeness in its binding hold upon the person.

We may add to Huxley’s downward self-transcendences our own short list of downgrade self-fulfillments, such as cheap entertainment, cheap reading, fashionable self-display and, in any of the arts, pompously heroic or sentimental overloading. Downward self-fulfillments demand of us too little effort to render prizes of achievement we can cherish, once their energy is spent. Thus the craving after endlessly escapist, mind-bemumbing fare and more alluring thrills is never sated. We always must want more.

Seeking downgrade self-fulfillments is a most human failing. From time to time all of us are customers; and – speaking for myself – how could I authoritatively have learned so much about it, except by my industrious participation? But as an artist, I would rather not supply that greedy market, if I can possibly do better.

The noble patron and the artist who deserves his generosity will not ask each the other to pander to him and indulge him. To reach an upgrade self-fulfillment by partaking of the visual arts requires self-expenditure and striving, so that the patron over time may gain the powers of a lucid mind, of open eyes and a self-command of his good will. Upward self-fulfillment comes therefore at a price of self-enrichment or it cannot come at all. For an artist may only give such excellence of beauty as the patron has prepared himself to grasp and, in that sense, render to himself. As a store of memories, a fulfillment so achieved may long endure, because we love most steadfastly the gains which cost us labor.

The rewards can reach perfection, not because artists create regularly flawless works, but because – when their creations are genuinely fine – they urge our eyes and minds to
complete an excellence not wholly achievable in rude reality. That action is quite similar to our completed reading of my little house below from a fairly sparse suggestion of mere fragments.

It seems miraculous to me that our blundering human paces can sometimes so engage the beholder’s focus and attention that no foreign desires are able to intrude to diminish his experience and the rendezvous with art becomes perfection.

Upward self-fulfillment is the good desired by the patron – the purpose of his venture into art. Let me as an artist not deliver any less on account of feeble effort.

The noble patron, the artist as the ever faithful servant of his calling are shapes of my imagination assembled from many partial observations of our imperfect human race on those rare occasions when we strive at our best. We may thus discover more useful and more certain truths than any living, actual person with his incalculable tempers and dubious endowments would supply. The ideal gives true guidance, however stumbling our steps when we try to follow and inescapably fall short.

Solid Form

If structures which have volume appear within the wider form of the page and canvas, they may not be slighted without a costly forfeit. A work will give to the beholder what its
author has designed it to contain, so that the artist’s negligence must be as legible as any
triumph of his talent and his skill.

When I was a student, we occasionally painted and drew strong forms at RISD, but
not so regularly as we ought to have achieved. So appeared at Yale from time to time in
drawing and in painting forms of merit – but as an exception rather than the rule; and during
a recent visit to the RISD campus I saw a powerful construction at the “Met” in ceramic tile.
Such examples were not years ago, nor are they now, the reliable product of instruction. They
seem instead the outcome of individual struggles a few students wage mostly on their own.

In the past, while the human figure was my chosen subject, I became an ardent
student of Anatomy and found that study to reach just a little further than its uses for the
human form. If the skeleton, for instance, of a quadruped is fairly understood, the layout of
the muscles will sufficiently resemble the design of man to fall roughly into place – because
muscle leverages cannot change. Nonetheless, human anatomical lore rules a rather limited
domain. However, we may win a more widely applicable grasp of anatomical particulars by
considering their relation to the volume-mass on which they are observed. Teaching
Anatomy to that especial end made me prize Descriptive Geometry even beyond my previous
high regard. For my course produced a pedagogic misadventure – but not the first year I
attempted it. In that year – through Descriptive Geometry – the students still had preparation
to comprehend my purpose. Descriptive Geometry, however, was widely loathed at U. of I;
and in the “protest years” the students complained the course out of its unpopular existence.
Hardly trained at all to see a volume and approach it structurally, the next set of students was
no longer ready for the work.

The neglect of form is a neglect of widest scope. Look at a tree, a dog, a lump of
stone, a human being. They differ from each other in nearly every visible particular yet share
the attribute of cubic magnitude. They all are volumes. Volume is not merely my personal
eccentric derivation of tree, dog, table, stone and man, but a centrally significant abstraction
of the home in which man dwells.

We understand this home as a world of spaces shaped by objects at once massive and
detailed. Thus the artist takes visual possession of his world as a maker of form or not at all.

My search for form separated into two pursuits: one, a scientific program of
descriptive geometric studies, and the second, a perceptual inquiry – only inexact scientific
– but of greater weight in art.

The geometric studies, though more demanding than a pure beginner’s course, were
straightforward and rest on well-known rules. The harder tasks were intersecting forms and
the appliance of projection drawing to the laws of light – mainly, for converting the light-
path diagrams of Mirror Optics into sparkling portraits of reflecting shapes.

In summary, my self-given assignment – so far as my talents would allow – was to
capture within the compass of descriptive geometric study the structural character and
possibilities of solids.
This sphere & "Baroque Icicles" obey no rule of light & shade but rather one of close accord of the descriptive parts with the volume whole & endeavor to suggest how variously designable form descriptions really are.
The larger number of the works I shared with you and Jay would be called by the makeshift term of “Optical Art.” That name, however, does not accord precisely with my purpose.

The surfaces of volumes – as the expression of the bulk which lies behind them—were my playground I have roam for many years. To achieve through unbroken sequences of line one way for rendering all forms fulfilled a long-held wish. But one way was not enough. My best progress lay in developing the basic learning for describing all forms in all possible ways.

You and Jay saw the grid constructions that turned any shape arrangements into descriptive surface elements of every kind of form. But the wealths which came into my hands and meant to me one fulfillment of my artist’s dreams can be explained more simply: My first insight told me that light and shade upon a solid, let us say a sphere, are each a geometric section expressive of the whole and that therefore spherical sections of my own design would describe this form with equal clarity.

If you now consider a polished, spherical brass doorknob with all the world reflected and returned to us as spherical parts, you will know how happily unlimited are our means for representing form. The task of form description is not to carry out a scheme of light and shade, but to learn how details are related to a volume-mass. For this will be most useful lore for representing every object at once massive and detailed, that is, anything in all the world.

All rendering of three-dimensionality must—in order to succeed—remind us of information we already know. For the visual parts we draw rest completely flat upon the page, so that space and volume have to be made readable by the associations our skill of drawing can awaken. That is as true of my little house in the preceding section as it is of the main body of my work.

It also applies to the rendering of textures, and—in an effort to explain them—let me also add some observations on how I have experienced intuition: Intuitions proceed from the known to an unknown we predict. The known on textures is that they are either exact or inexact repeating patterns and that the play of light in part reveals them clearly and in part conceals them, so that we see foliage on trees, the fur of animals, and so on, seldom as wholly and exactly as they do in fact exist.

Such foregoing information fades frequently from our conscious thought and thereby causes intuitions to seemingly appear out of spontaneous inspirations and so masquerade as feelings. Instead our earlier preparation lays a ground of actuality from which we may consider probabilities. Intuitions, as reasoned and exploratory but not necessarily unerring actions of the mind, will serve us best if we distrust them and act upon that skepticism by a thorough work of testing. Intuition is an intellectual probe; it is not the certitude of the already known.

In the figure below, setting pins of equal length in each crosspoint on the left and arriving at their right foreshortened measure demanded only technically correct construction.
The drawing on the right is the outcome of predictions building upon one another from the familiar and the known. Let one such forecast stand for all. Indicating the true measure of the points on the perimeter, I planned merely a repeating zig-zag of a kindred aspect and laid out that pattern to imply my object in the round.

I calculated this could move the viewer to associate – that is, to link – the inside pattern with the outer and would not require the precise construction on the left, because – as already stated – we see textures but infrequently as they really are.

Let me try by this example to persuade you how far the artist and the viewer are pre-instructed by this world they share. By reason of that common ground the viewer joins the artist’s perceptual leads together and thereby helps the artist to transmit his meaning. Perception, as a study for inquiring after man’s ability to carry out associations and so to read space and volume clearly from entirely flat clues, enlarges indispensably the range and eloquent potential of the way an artist speaks, not to the human sense of hearing, but to sight.

While solid form remained my passion, I considered also that our themes in art are frequently expressive wishes we declare which may call upon an aptitude for exact interpretation. The history of art supplies to us an almost limitless array of masterly interpretive achievement.

Our powers of interpretation were required more often in Harve Stein’s Illustration Class than in our painting courses. But acceptability in Illustrative Art has seldom quite so wide a range as that at the command of the wholly free creative painter. Picasso’s “Guernica”
would therefore be unlikely as a commissioned literary illustration. Yet we rightly honor “Guernica” as a work of eloquent interpretation as well as excellent design.

Some of my teachers held more prejudices than did others. Albers, though often brilliant, seemed overmastered by his great conceptions and was apt to sweep impatiently all else out of his way. He therefore dismissed Life Drawing as “naked women” and disdained Ceramics as mere “ashtray art.”

However, we never knew a teacher who did not urge us to be keen observers of the natural world, but at the same time never met one who really taught us to observe. Occasional utterances, prodding one or another student to attend more carefully to some observable particular, gave us fleeting glimpses of a realm we never entered. Looking back, this nibbling at a line of study without ever letting it unfold seems most peculiar. A prejudice, never put in words, appeared, in the sense of unaccountable neglect, to rule in practice — though observation is not an unknown craft, is unquestionably useful and not exceptionally hard to learn.

Precise observing — mainly unrelated to mechanically considered light and shade — discloses upon almost any surface a vivid show of nature’s shape and color play. An artist may strengthen what his educated eyes perceive and thereby clarify and render to himself a treasury of shapes and colors in a various array of ever freshly gatherable visual parts — indeed a spare imagination.

Below my drawing of a five-pound weight of simplest manufacture is not a
memorable work. But seemingly trivial surface inequalities and faint shiftings of reflected light are reworked here with the aim that the completed drawing, in its appeal to the beholding eye, shall surpass the barbell plate from which it is derived.

To intend a picture to be better than its subject is a necessary purpose — a reason why we can behold the outcome with appreciation though, as such, the objects shown may interest us little.

With certitude my object comes before the viewer as a shape display no one can entirely invent and no unobservant artist has even power to desire. Indeed, it will be futile for an artist who is neither an observer, nor a student of perception or the geometry of solid form, nor of the articulate interpretation of his themes, to tell himself, "I draw, I paint, I do exactly what I want," while his range of will for wanting anything worthwhile at all remains confined within his space of obviously little learning.

An artist, in his youth, starting on the labors of his calling, treasures dreams of working miracles. Such lofty hopes do not inevitably come to nothing but mostly to much less than we had looked to do. My studies and researches did not make of me the artist I once dreamed I could and ought to be. Besides a richer creativity in painting, joining sculptural form to color was a plan I never carried out — a wish remaining so far unfulfilled. I need another life to put to use what I have learned, to even reach one half my goals.

There is training useful for creating art which comprises really a body of industrial techniques. Sculptors may weld, pour metal and mold plastics. Printmakers honor traditions which once filled the place photo offset and laser reproduction hold today. Might I have my wish of one more life, some of this could tempt. But, valuable as these several skills can be, they have but secondary weight in visual art. Let me show you why.

A performer may attain masterly ability in the craft of etching, as a welder, or become expert in the use of the computer, and yet end up with wretched art. But no artist who is an able colorist, form-maker and designer will deliver ill-made or feeble work.

Because my principal overall endeavor was to develop an analytical, modern parallel to Cézanne’s program of Color, Form and Composition, I began to look for means to do this task. And I found them partly in the understanding of the pioneering twentieth century that the basic visual parts of lines of varied weight, of colored shapes and fields of tone hold visual worth and merit our deliberate attention.

It seems an oddity, therefore, that we have no precise, inclusive study to demonstrate how far such basic visual parts can cooperate with one another to achieve an artist’s aim and how richly they are able to express. As I tried to learn more about the capabilities of the fundamental parts — chiefly for articulating volume — I discovered how easily the new unfolding to my eyes was able to accompany the already known — of observation, for example, perspective and construction — in a progressive, seamlessly continuous tradition.
My labors from the outset were intended to instruct and mend my troublesome and many ignorances. After some years I had redone nearly my entire training as an artist, so that there was quite a lot I was eager then to teach.

The Teacher as Learner

In John Frazier’s classes, if you asked too much explanation and technical advice, it was supposed you were not nearly trying hard enough to deserve the charity of a reply. “I realize you feel neglected – you are indubitably neglecting yourselves,” was one of Frazier’s several kinds of growl, and we endeavored mightily not to let him catch us scurvily neglecting our trifling selves.

Following my graduation I taught briefly and may have felt temptation to posture as a duplicate John Frazier. But the broadening influences of new places and new people amended several such erring understandings of myself as well as of my calling. Today I have awareness of no finer tool for practical self-teaching than to plan with care a subject of instruction. Harve Stein, Josef Albers and John Benson set the examples here.

Painting classes profit perhaps seldom from detailed preparation, while courses we consider ancillary to the Fine Arts – Lettering and Calligraphy, Descriptive Geometry and Human Anatomy – succeed mainly by efficient planning. The Basic Designs, however, are centrally essential fare and demand, in my opinion, always careful preparation.

How to assemble lore for Three-Dimensional Design insightfully and with the aim of continuing utility, I have ideas, but no certain knowledge nor experience. But Basic Two-Dimensional Design must supply the intellectual key to the treatment of every kind of surface art, showing with exactitude how our inventions of shapes, the behaviors of color and our perceptions of form can be put in service as if they were elements of our native tongue we may conjoin to speak clearly, with eloquence and force.

Excepting Albers’ course in Color, I had never met with Basic Design instruction truly fundamental to any of the labors meant to follow. My complaint is not that those other courses never helped at all, but that they might have helped measurably more. Thus, when came my turn to teach, I tried to give to others what I must forever wish I had been taught, because it would have spared me much confusion and saved considerable time.

Triumph and mischance, in my role of teacher, were from the outset oddly yoked together. Picture an instructor, newly arrived at Illinois and mounting his first exhibit of his students’ products. The Department Head comes by with a word of praise so generous it embarrasses as well as pleases. At the same site – maybe a week later – we meet again, and all has changed. Now he questions: “Don’t you think what you are doing is a little narrow?”
To whose reproaches he had lent an ear was not directly plain. But one learns with time that mere minutes of ill-natured carping can defeat untold hours of difficult and earnest toil. How a line of study which taught that every solid form may be described in limitless array could at all be sensibly decried as narrow, while lack of such an understanding had license to display itself as broadly-based sophistication, endures as a perplexing puzzle.

My Department Chairman’s about-face of opinion took me to unlovely places I had known before. Though once, at Yale, this self-permission of such saying and afterward unsaying – besides vexation – afforded entertainment also. The celebrated Sparrow you have already met praised me one day for a painting, only to take back his pitance of fine words before the end of week.

I was friendly at the time with a Turkish foreign student and talked to him about the Sparrow and several kindred fowl. “Maybe,” he remarked, “they only want to know whether you are flexible.” My reply, “Let me alleviate their anxious doubts by telling them that I am not,” set us both to shorting.

My answer was and remains true: Problem solving and ventures at self-teaching have equipped the action of my mind with a fair mobility and range. That, however, is not a flexibility to the purposes of others.

It turned out, however, that – by the measure of events to come – I had not much to complain of yet. For the about-faces in all of academic life and well beyond were soon to strike amazement and dismay that never quite wore off. It was as though a mass-conversion to an insidious new religion, oddly constructed specially for parrots, scoured thoroughly and laundered every other human brain. In its early days this peculiar creed developed slogans, attitudes and dogma, but so far had no name. Today we call it “Political Correctness,” and it is an unappetizing, foul affair.

My teaching of color was at first rewarded with that liberality of praise which gives reason to suspect things go too well to last. The Department Chairman’s son transferred to Art from Architecture; and his mildly, perhaps, thankful parents conveyed that of his various teachers he talked only about me. Later this color education too received a grade of “narrow” – sometimes through a compliment with a needling pinprick appended at the end, thus: “I wish I could achieve the discipline and quality of your results.” That was, of course agreeable to hear. What followed disclosed the real intention of the kindly speech: “But don’t you think what you are doing is a little narrow?” No, I did not think so.

First year Design at Illinois was listed as a course in two dimensions with Three-D to follow the year after. While I had charge of the Foundation Program I could resist a marked new inclination toward three dimensions for the first year in addition to the second. Three-dimensional assignments proved costly, clumsy time-consumers in the perceptual task of instructing the beginner how to see, that is, to verify to him what he himself – what, really,
man – is capable of seeing and so unfold to him how, as a visual designer, he would have to learn to speak.

Only tasks in two dimensions are at all convenient for the placing of corrective paper snippets as a means, not only to show fault, but bring out also visual merit. Thus, for teaching composition as a basic craft toward the most varied future use, the surface arts can render study aids of utmost value. Putting down one snippet at a time, the improvements may appear as imperceptible as the advancing of the hands on the dial of a clock. But when the snippets are all cast off at once, the resulting sudden sense of visual breakage and disunion startles – quite as does at times the sudden lateness of the hour. Striking, so to speak, the student straight between the eyes, instruction is thrust thereby upon him that the coherence of design is not a mere devout artistic sentiment but the intractable exaction of his calling.

“Handling materials” or, sometimes more pretentiously, “Exploring materials,” became a Three-D teaching plan by a more-is-better rule and, inescapably, a soon worn threadbare word of fashion as unthinking – and hence irritating – as Albers ever found “Manipulating paint.” The product was too often poor design – indeed, pretended work.

Years ago, when I was building our furnishings, I gave occasional thought to Three-Dimensional Design. The modern material possibilities are almost endless. But, if we differentiate this daunting plenitude into a very few, exceedingly broad subdivisions, we may obtain a practical – though limited – overall appraisement of the suitabilities of the material world for taking shape according to man’s will.

Three-dimensional creations are not invariably of cubic magnitude alone, because strings and wires, papers, sheet metal and fabrics come into play besides such weightier matter as solid plaster, wood or stone. A design can thus advance through one and two dimensions to constitute the third.

Though a single representative of each, the linear, the planar and the bulky, may not by themselves exhaust the content of the whole material world, they can perhaps together span in sparsest form its essential sculptural range. The assignments of materials for beginning work may, no doubt, reflect this understanding. But my background, of such practical labors as I am able to recall, causes me to favor the mastery of sculptural surfaces over this or any other, however cunningly contrived, listing of material categories.

By which specific substances we inquire – as a class of study – after the potential of materials does not appear of critical importance, so that ready access and convenience may determine the selection. Our striving must be to discover the suitabilities or aptitudes of materials of whatever sort by learning to observe how they behave under the action of the workman’s means and method. Conversely, this response of a material to our attempts at shaping it instructs us how to render the right choices of handling and of tools. Finally, our labors ought to teach us the capacity of the materials which we choose for cooperating with each other towards an array of outcomes.
To achieve design work of distinguished merit we need, I think, to learn how to pay alert attention to the workable characteristics of materials as they reveal themselves to us through our wielding of appropriate tools.

Such are my ideas on Three-D Design, tentative and incomplete without a doubt. But the careless, speeded-up production I could everywhere observe was a disheartening sight – one may not declare oneself a student of world literature because one has sprinted through Tolstoy, Dickens and Melville in juvenile abridgments. Materials reveal their aptitudes and therefore offer us their technical utility when they are worked with thorough method and to a thoughtful purpose.

I found three conceits eternally repeated by all kinds of people who taught art. But let me represent them here through the utterances of three specific individuals. The first came to my hearing through one of our visiting celebrities at Yale: “Thinking had never anything to do with creating art.”

The second came my way not far from here at all—namely on Block Island, where my Illinois Department Head owned a summer place. As I also spent summers in New England, he invited me for a long weekend, at a time when I was still considered correctly up-to-date and modern-minded, and conveyed to me the following: “We no longer need to teach so much in the first four years, because more students expect to go to graduate school in any case.” It was not just talk. When, however, Descriptive Geometry was purged, it proved one of the numerous times that such a scheme of the deletion of required studies overshot its mark. For, but a few years later, a new passion for image rendering by the computer restored that study back to life. A fad of fashion had deposed the course, and another fad—deserving surely our thanks—afterward returned it to its proper role.

There is little chance, in fact, that subjects withdrawn from undergraduates will reappear in programs for their M.F.A. They must study such material either on their own or experience none of it at all.

The last of those three wayward notions arrived with the newly installed President of Kalamazoo College: “Art ought to offer to the students emotional release from the hardship of their intellectual labors.” At the time the students’ tasks were still intellectually to a right

*Summary of My Opinion on Beginning Work*

*The Foundation Year – with Basic Design its Central Enterprise – seems to me indispensible as schooling in the main divisions of visual literacy. Its lore on Color, Composition, Geometric Form Construction, Drawing and Observation needs to accrue into a resource residing in-depleatably in the artist’s understanding as his most efficient tool for the lifelong job of self-instruction. For the student who has heard his teachers well must learn to listen also to himself, because, eventually, artists teach themselves or remain untaught forever. The specialized techniques for shaping various materials are a worthwhile study, but will not be able to replace this fundamental and therefore more inclusive plan.*

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degree demanding; and I could find no seemly cause why Art should be chosen an exception to that well and salutary rule.

There are the worthless bones of academic quarrels — occasions for mere hurricanes in teacups which blow a while and then depart. But these I have described unfolded into serious struggles, because they never went away. No rational rebuttal to my program and defense of fundamental learning ever offered. As prudent advocacy it was essentially unanswerable, yet also proved to be a weapon of insufficient weight.

I do not recall when “non-structured” first appeared as an educational fancy, a term of exceeding approbation and a word of vogue. It brought, without a doubt, irresistible temptation to the Arts — a license of free-wheeling. Habitually, my striving had been to become more skillful at the craft of shaping into clear coherence and utility everything I taught. Thus “non-structuring,” as a surging current of the moment, was most of all to me an erring, trendy irritation. The word “non-structured” may have, to some degree, gone out of use; but much of the attitude it meant persists.

Before K. College hired me, they asked me for a paper on my plans as Art Department Chairman. It was afterward conceded that I delivered “almost to the very letter” what I had pledged my self to do. Thus the new leadership dismissed me precisely for the reasons an earlier leadership had given me the job.

In a change of wording but unaltered as to meaning Kalamazoo repeated Illinois. They did not call me “narrow”; instead they took me to account for strangling my students’ individuality. It seems incongruously contradictory that in modern educational thinking — already by that time — this was a tale grown trite and old. Josef Albers, rightly believing that “productive individuality” would find its independent way, had decades earlier mocked his critics who carped that he “enslaved” his students.

Albers never enslaved any student by a training that he gave, but only by the learning he denied him. For man must wear his ignorance like a ball and chain — his want of understanding a strait-jacket endlessly confining.

Modern Art, if one grew up in Hitler’s Germany, remained unknown terrain. Thus, at RISD, I gained my first long look at the art of my own time and came to love it passionately, in fact to love this art uncritically and happily far better than I can love it now. It was a treasured, magical awakening one can experience only once.

Later, in Munich I became more particularly curious than I had been in America about the Brücke and the Blaue Reiter Expressionist Societies, while the powerful effect upon this country through the German Bauhaus Movement was from the beginning clear. In Germany Hitler had derailed them all.

The evils of the Nazi Reich produced a hell throughout the larger part of Europe more deadly far than Hitler’s forbiddances and rulings on Modern German Art. Still, the Nazi bias cut like a gaping cultural wound across the life of every art.
In Munich I felt almost as though I had a part in a brotherhood of pioneers and in a legendary time. Yet the fellowship of artists in joint enterprise and mission will be more frequently a dream than a dependable reality.

How venomous toward his fellows can become the Academic Artist I observed for the first time at Yale. We naturally judge of issues as we have light to see. But our differing opinions are the fuel of debate, not a call to prosecute a spite. If we use our passions well in such debating, we may reason closer to the truth and win a prize of clearer insight and a larger view.

When educators attack and threaten colleagues with whom they disagree, we must wonder if they wish to take up Mr. Hitler's work and finish what Mr. Hitler left undone. The ideas which I pondered and of which this letter gives you an account were a summons to my fellows to test their thinking against mine. More than once did colleagues owe their jobs to my good will, though I did not share their views. My tolerance was not repaid — nor might they have had such benefit of my forbearance, were it not for the dread memory of Adolf Hitler. So I gave of my good will — sometimes, no doubt, more grudgingly than gladly.

Good will is man's excellent ability and essential tool for the correction of all shortfalls and all failings. Often it is obviously difficult to practice. Aggressive pride, disdain for others, get ever in the way and may be mastered solely — if at all — by my good resolve to steer a straighter course.

Ill will and its frequent outward counterpart of callous incivility incline to hide behind false colorings of honest candor. That claim is patently self-serving and a clear deceit. The discourteous and most especially the ill-intending person makes himself a fraud, because he tells us that he will not pay his debts.

The political temper of academic faculties is nearly always liberal; and they are seldom tolerant of deviations from that norm, so that — to my astonishment — I met the Liberal as an oppressor. My surprise, however, was a blindness. Conservatives and Liberals are each frozen in competing partialities, that is, in attitudes scholars may not allow themselves to hold, because the scholar's will does not rule knowledge; alas, it can and does the scholar's conduct. Once a thinker thus departs from his path of duty of the impartially considered truth, he will readily pour out ever fancier flows of words to defend trespasses on others' rights to go their independent intellectual way.

We had a meeting at K. College on the evaluation of teachers by "questionaries" handed to the students. Three Professors with some repute as teachers were invited to give statements. My contribution advised against the innovation. I foresaw unmendable injury to academic freedom — the content of instruction, which concerned me existentially, as well as grading, which was to me a routine matter I paid little mind.

I must have been eloquent that evening, as I was the only speaker rewarded with applause. My speech, however, was not politically astute and could not change the outcome. Correctly righteous sentiment preened very differently indeed. Let me offer you a sample: I
asked a colleague who loved grading more than I, how, with this new measure, he would go about marking students’ work: “Evaluations will not ever influence any grades that I shall give,” was the lofty answer I received.

Virtue shining like a very flame of truth from the noble brow, the fellow had exactly right the spirit of the hour and altogether wrong the reality which was to follow. For we have come home with grade inflation everywhere and — led by the near collapse of the study of the English Language — in a sad decline of all the liberal Arts, where language must be used with disciplined precision.

Art went easily the way of English, because it is not a field of exact science in which the penalties for bungling work prove eventually expensive as well as unmistakable. In Art and the Humanities evaluation rewards with an especial generosity the skillful, entertaining medley of half-substance and half-chaff and otherwise, at best, cattleprods the disinterested or the weakling teacher up to lower mediocre.

While the excellent Professor is much diminished in the range and freedom of his action, an erring liberal outlook has delivered to the student a most dubious cultural influence and license. This Youth-Culture is not the burden solely of the elders, but lays a blight upon the future of the youth itself, when society’s admiring accommodations must be surrendered to the relentless paces of the years. Since the Protest Period of the nineteen-sixties and the early seventies, adults have witlessly cheered on and wooed our ever self-applauding youth by a ceaseless patter of indulgent psycho-babble, by copying their language, their attire and their conduct, and so have set the young into the center of nearly every action in which they have a part.

My friend, John Spencer, at K. College, remarked on the unfolding of this trend that the student should not ask or want to be the center of the educational process. “For, if he is, he gets a lousy education.” I agree.

There can be room for spontaneity at the time of choice. Nearly every work I showed to you and Jay owed its distant start to a spontaneous interest and chiefly to my lifelong, unpremeditated love of Art. But once our choices are in place, we have assignments to complete. Did I not tell you that my pictures are my masters who tell me what to do? Education is a fountainhead of all the works important to the well-being of man. Each line of study is therefore a right center of the enterprise of education, the master who tells both the teacher and the student what they have to do.

Teachers do continue teaching, even in unfavorable times. But there is a task which has remained undone. In the years just before the Protest Period, I knew a charm of anticipatory joy, the promise of a cultural flowering and Golden Humanistic Age almost immediately at hand, and felt keen urgency to discern my part in that adventure. The decade following put an end to such fond hopes.

So greedy, almost everywhere, were academic faculties to be loved by youth that they encouraged youth to tell them always how they felt about their lot in life and what it was they wanted. The wider social consequence of supporting that aggression has been multiplying
crime. For this is what a criminal will do—regardless of the official, detailed list of his offenses—he invariably shows us how he feels and what he wants. It is the root-cause of all crime. In our Centers of Culture and of Learning the leaders became weathervanes turning with the winds of our time and so brought on the forfeit of a Golden Age, so truly possible, eagerly foreseen and so soon derailed.

Where students feel permitted to try to set their self-cossetting wills upon the truths of learning and thereby to impede instruction, their teacher cannot bring to them his best and undivided effort. He will therefore unavoidably interpret and transmit to them superficially and incompletely the contents of their task.

I have sent to you as greetings and shown to you and Jay several works which require lore beyond the reach of any Art School preparation; and, as a whole, my letter expresses what I think is wanting and the instruction I therefore recommend. These last few paragraphs aim at a wider sweep and attempt a rendering of current education overall in the Humanities and Arts. If you or any reader will not be in accord—and you are surely free to disagree—then you are telling me that our college-educated people speak good English, read the Classics fluently, write the language clearly and with grace and own an adequate geographic and historical perspective of the world.

The better the teacher, the more faithfully he seeks to make himself unnecessary to the student. But they do not begin as equals. For the student is yet a colleague in the making—not a colleague made; and our best, most cherished younger colleagues in time ought to surpass their teachers and so reward us liberally and in happily surprising ways. That result, however, will be a feat of the student’s self-instruction and may not be too impatiently awaited.

By thus surpassing, through advanced ability and a clearer vision, the insights and instructions of the teacher—that is, not through mere short-lived surges of exuberant youth—a creative individuality can reveal itself to its owner and to others. The unfolding of an individuality is a life-long road of partly excited, partly routine wanderings and occasional self-finding which we travel as participants in the action of the world. A young person may think it stylish to proclaim he wants the people who cross his path in life to know profoundly who he really is. Over time I had to learn, however, it was futile to demand that others know or understand my person, while I had done so incompletely and inadequately my job to know and understand myself and to express myself to others. Before and after, as well as during, our role as College Students, the various situations set assignments which take the measure of our individuality and disclose its capabilities against the resisting difficulties of the labors we must do. Thus, to an extent, may ourselves and others learn who indeed we are.

I found at Kalamazoo, mostly in the Liberal Arts, colleagues whose company I liked. Though we had much in common, there were differences. My colleagues’ philosophic ponderings could be divinely lofty. Such ideals kept, however, so distant from everybody’s daily, personal concern that scholars whom I valued looked acquiescently, that is,
incongruously upon adverse administrative practice and intent. Certainly, they saw the usages and ways of our day campus-politically more realistically than I. Yet philosophical reflection was my elected guide to purposes I found productive to pursue; and in that sense my approach was frequently more functional than theirs. An exchange of speech, decades ago at Yale, may verify for you the inclination of my thought to practical utility.

Two graduate students — one, myself, an artist, the other of a field I do not recall — discourse on a subject no longer remembered. A third played the part of interested witness. Once we finished and my interlocutor departed, that witness remarked on the main division between the other and myself: “You use your philosophy.”

That holds also true today and may be a reason why I favor History as my serious reading. When we reach painlessly what our antecedents had to live and learn subject to great hardship, we succeed to insights of important merit at a price already paid by others.

Frequently, though never gladly, I had to pay that price in a currency of vexing errors. My learning could not match my friends’ wide reading nor the exactitude of their specialized vocabularies. But I had grown accustomed to probing my experiences and observations till their external attributes slowly disassembled to reveal a fundamental cause. Comprehending such results represents the basic learning I have always found so true, so useful and so very fine.

One’s colleagues can be a delight. To my friend Jim Lynch at Illinois the student was a mere amorphous lump of putty to whom his teachers owed a duty to “whop that lump of putty into proper shape.” This truth appeared too valuable to let die; so I repeat it on occasion — naturally with the kindliest intent. Jim admired Shakespeare and often paraphrased: “Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to perceive.” He also was the first to bring to my attention the Liberals’ ignoble bent toward the role of an oppressor; and he made plain to them that intellectual challenges may not serve as grounds for academic purges but merit fair consideration and intelligent rebuttal.

When I considered writing, not for myself alone but for others, Harold Schulz of Illinois taught me more in one half hour than had any formal course about the writing craft. What you can like about my letter you well may owe to Harold Schulz; and what you don’t you surely owe to me.

Affectionate colleagues help one stay on course and keep perspective. At K. College, Dr. Wen Chao Chen lauded that I knew what I was doing, but noted: “You are blunt.” Bill Briggs of Illinois summarized in Counterfeit-Germanic my way to show frustration: “I am surrounded by Inkompententers!” And Nelda Balch — able student of irony and Head of Theater at K — perfected the most telling quip of all: “Your pride is too angular. It sticks out all over.” Doubtless they had each a point — and much the same point, I suppose.

Political Scientist Wen Chao Chen could be nearly as much fun as Albers. Though he practiced none of Josef Albers’ overbearing art of brag, but was a courteous man, the
similarity shows patently in the following nimble-witted Albers quote: “I must take care not to learn English too well. It would interfere with my communication.”

Chen wrote perfect English, but spoke his oriental variant more unforgettably and eloquently than he wrote. I questioned him on the lamenting in the U.S. Press about the expulsion of Taiwan from the U.N.: “Couldn’t anybody see this coming?” “There are many things we don’t see,” he replied. “But if you set helpless child with skates on downhill slope, it going to go down.”

During the Nixon-McGovern Presidential rivalry of 1972 he counseled: “If you have choice between crook and fool, you must choose crook. Fool will do more damage.”

Colleagues who approved and, to a notable degree, understood my sense of mission must be cherished for their various signals of good will. At K. College they sought to give me tenure; and the Administration turned them down. But they also had other things to give:

Kalamazoo enjoyed liberally funded lectureships reserved for visitors of some renown – mostly, though not exclusively, for scholars of recognized ability. Besides these there existed – unendowed – a speaking assignment proffered annually by the Dean of Chapel to a scholar of the College. In my final year at K. that invitation fell to me. It was mainly a reward for my applauded speech about the sorry prospect of students grading teachers in more needling and more finicking detail than the teachers ever judged their students. For on that evening my recital of Robert Burns’s poem Address to the Unco Guid:

O ye, wha are sae guid yoursel,  
sae pious and sae holy,  
Ye’ve naught to do but mark and tell  
Your neebour’s faults and folly…

moved a stoney heart of two. And my “reasoned discourse” attracted the Dean of Chapel’s notice and won perhaps his understanding. I cannot tell if I remained the only artist asked to give this “Honors Day Address.” I know I was the first.

For many years I had with Pen and Ink employed myself in an exacting exploration of varied ways to perceive and render form, and described in writing what I thought I was technically achieving. Additionally, I recorded my accompanying philosophical reflections about this effort as a whole and finished just before my appointment at K. ended. Several passages from this writing were read at that year’s induction of Phi Beta Kappa honorands. You can easily, I think, reckon how I felt much moved and heartened by this amiable, graceful tribute.

A friend of a colleague from my days at Illinois was some years later our guest in Lancaster and told Janet this colleague had expressed that I was the only teacher of distinction who ever came to Illinois.
In my student years RISD kept a Dean’s List; but I remember nothing else. Whether the RISD of today confers Summa, Magna, and Cum Laude honors – and gives them like the Ivy League to half, three quarters, nearly all their graduates – I do not know. Had such honors been awarded when I was a student, I would no more have deserved them than the greater number of our Harvard, Yale and Princeton friends.

The acknowledgments here cited were, however, rightly earned – not in the sense that, for example, I look upon myself as the finest Art Instructor of all the decades Art was taught at Illinois – but I had studied much material others did not know and over time had learned to teach it with precision. I really owned a bit of magic as a teacher.

The RISD of My Dreams

Looking at the Sculpture and the Painting pages of the Year 2000 catalogue, I asked you: “Where is the Painting – where the Sculpture?” I told you also of my admiration for both the Universal Kitchen projects. Their thoroughness and thoughtfulness spoke to me of endless hours of the labors of bright people.

Time to think is never an inclusion in any job descriptions you or I have read. But, lacking such support, excellence will be a wishful, transient fancy. In our daily paper, perhaps a year ago, a quite disheartened University Professor lamented: “We need time to think!” This is not one more opinion amid a swarm of dubious academic views in current vogue. It is a cri de coeur. The need which it proclaims is rarely met; and so we pay a costly forfeit:

At Illinois, at Yale, at the RISD of the Fifties as well as the RISD of today, a student show brought the beholder a more intense and sparkling individuality than any faculty exhibit. Yet so rapidly depleted after graduation are these surpluses of energy that our reverential praise of them will not be nearly skeptical enough. The bloom is too short-lived to deserve more than sincere thanks for our moments of enrichment.

An individuality celebrated prematurely wearies of itself when it is allowed to understand and know so little that its wellspring for creative labor must too soon run dry. To repair a cheerless pattern of precocious individuality in youth and depletion at the age we call the prime of life, the Modern Art School wants a change of heart as well as change of pace.

The bigger, louder, more is better, cultural approach is ever a temptation but cannot be good for RISD and her students. To do fewer tasks and do them better with more lucid and more frequent thought will be a prudent plan. The energy of culture derives from a right relationship of thought to action – from the acknowledgment, therefore, of a vitality of quietness attending man’s visibly productive deeds.

The innovative pioneers of Modern Art pruned back to a more fitting measure the authority of the commonplace, mere information signals indicating only objects. Instead
those artists taught us the inherent worth of the independently perceivable pictorial elements. These are kindred to the sounds of speech from which first the words and then the larger meanings must be built and to the letters which we write to reproduce those sounds in every literary work. Shapes and lines of unequal hue, magnitude and weight are atomic in this sense, that subdividing multiplies and makes them smaller but cannot alter them in kind. We have no means to disassemble or to analyze Visual Design beyond these basic elements. They are the non-compound, indivisible root causes whose capabilities we have to learn.

Courses in Basic Design were unthinkable before the Modern Revolution in the Fine Arts and will, at their best, instruct us thoroughly how those simplest Parts of Art can serve us well in our tasks of visual arrangement, in the rendering of volume and the display of color – indeed, in every design pursuit.

As a young beginner Josef Albers endured Professors who proclaimed: “Paul Cézanne does not exist for us.” My RISD teachers of the Fifties judged the opposite. They saw in Cézanne’s labors of solid Form, of Composition and of Color the chief excellences of the Painting Art and were rightly led by that intuition. To slight this artist’s work means likely more than to dismiss a sentimental memory and must wreak incalculable losses if, along the way, also is discarded the great plan of basic study for which Cézanne has set the pace and pattern.

I do no more advise any RISD students to paint imitations of Cézanne than I desire them to create sculpture which looks like Military Aircraft or resembles Gilbert Franklin’s
works on the RISD campus. I look hopefully, however, to such successes at engaging the beholder to be understood and equaled and, if possible, surpassed.

The Wine Label above – a two and one half foot painting in the original – does not apply itself to imitate the manner of Cézanne, but seeks faithfully to complete the task given to me by my patron and to constitute Form as powerfully as I might, with an eye on Color and Design.

Line, shape and fields of color are the causes of every decisive visibility and by their clarity are notably composable, that is, workable in trained, creative hands. Through that discovery the early Moderns brought to us a new and better way of seeing and designing which merits to endure – not as a buried treasure – but as an assignment to be carried forward to its full unfolding in its varied parallels in Illustration, Architecture, Industrial Design – in fact, in every visual field. Toward those many purposes a growing body of new tools and methods for shaping new materials to nearly every will becomes continually available and so enlarges, past all precedent, Man’s potential as Creator.

It is a troubling failure that we let our material-technical advances outstrip what we achieve in Visual Art. I frequently feel powerless to get into clear focus recent creations of Sculpture and of Painting as visible interpretations of their authors’ design-will. It seems as if these works were unable to be born and cannot reach true visual existence.

Can we still prize the Art Community we see, or has it turned a hollow world? It is a daunting question. Around 1960 arrived a trend the wordsmiths of Art Journalism called “Nostalgia.” It prospers currently in many places. The island where we live is one of these. Ambitious houses abounding in Victorian detail are rising up all over. I know of only one design of merit displaying modern architectural daring, and that was built some decades past.

Do, through Nostalgia, the people of this island – and many places everywhere – complain that they are culturally let to starve? If so, the RISD that I dream about may offer aid to end the famine and thus make obsolete this vain attempt at flight to bygone, irrecoverable times.

When the Bauhaus Movement arrived in the United States, the American Design World embraced it almost whole, but – a generation later – turned upon that foreign creativity as if in anger at its own concessions and immoderate enthusiasm earlier. The pioneering break-throughs of the Bauhaus deserved unstinting praise – not, however, a frozen Bauhaus Mode grown imitative and, in that sense, eventually unthinking.

The backlash disaffection piled upon a first misunderstanding of unimaginative repetition the second error of seeking to dismiss and bury the inspiring Bauhaus lesson that a school can lead – that a school may be a living center and unspent reservoir of compelling cultural energy. The creative impulses of Paris and Berlin brought these Cities no unchallengeable world monopoly on Modern Art. Instead they had to yield a portion of their
eminence to a new enterprise of learning in a provincial German town called Dessau, wherefrom ranged everywhere the Bauhaus influence on twentieth century Visual Design.

Bauhaus errors are easy to discern: The Bauhaus Motto, "Art and Technology, a New Unity," was a right and powerful idea, but seldom realized as splendidly as once foreseen. Bauhaus Architecture is frequently too plain and bare of interesting light and shadow play to allow its surfaces to age with grace; and so we might endlessly continue to find fault.

Yet the Bauhaus passion was the analytic exploration of the whole domain of Visual Design. Its striving celebrated reason; and that emphasis deserves acceptance: For the resolve to think thoroughly and with precision, and thereby seek a line of progress toward the discoverable truth, will at least endeavor – like a conscientious guardian – to steer us right on our blundering way.

Its weight and fame set the Bauhaus on a summit it could not inhabit by itself alone but shared with other claimants. Today, a RISD where an exacting discipline of learning and a love for Art conjoin would probably outdistance every rival. For RISD values the Humanities, continues to believe that talent is strengthened through instruction and has thereby maintained in service – as other schools have not – the tools that might enable her to resist the fools-gold glitter of New York.

The hegemony of New York, since my student days, seemed mainly built on ceaselessly self-praising; and that drumbeat has now quickened and grown noisier than ever. But I will not credit that the Visual Culture of New York shows to us the greatest Art this world may possibly create.

The Bauhaus demonstrated that a school can be the Avant Garde. Let me dream, then, of a RISD stoking sturdily against the adverse currents of her time and filling thus the spaces which the Bauhaus has left vacant.

This chronicle of "Intellectual Travels" has consumed several false starts and much more time than I supposed in the beginning. If you compare the starting date of just this final draft with the ending date below, you will remark a span of almost a whole year.

I began with the desire to write to you a letter, but allowed that modest aim to run a self-willed course and so, as time went on, stretched the letter to an essay. The ambition to tell you my most weighty thoughts and – on the side – to entertain you with droll anecdotes needed a discipline of selection and concision, or I should have burdened you with an entire book.
At the end I sought to show you a RISD of my dreams, not as the creature and recipient subject, but as an architect and mover of her times. Perhaps there are nigh as many cherished dreams as RISD has affectionate Alumni. She cannot prudently content us all nor forfeit our love on that account.

Faithfully yours,

Johannes von Gumppenberg

Jamestown, R.I., January 24, 2003

P.S. It is well that letters allow post-scripts. For we sometimes harbor thoughts or fancies that in their proper places failed to come to mind but, in the end, one feels a wish to put in words. So let me here append what I have left undone.

Of modern man’s new tools, the computer holds the pride of place: In every line of work – including Art – it is saluted with unparalleled enthusiasm. I cannot, however, join that celebration; nor am I computer-literate myself, but rely on Janet for all computing tasks. I value some services the computer can supply. Yet the great time-saver turns also greedy time-consumer. The servant – instead of easing our life – commands, more often than I like, its direction and its pace.

By the computer’s capabilities our time derives its name: “The Age of Information.” It ignites no fires in my soul. For I was once a young man looking forward to a wholly different future in which the role of the computer would have been subordinate and only instrumental. This future also had a name – “The Space Age.” What a glorious adventure seemed to lie ahead when the first American went into orbit and Apollo Eleven touched down upon the Moon. Today we have a weaker passion and much less ambitious will for deeds in Outer Space.

The brief span – of perhaps a dozen years – when we looked to space as the great enterprise awaiting human effort, brought also the happiest opportunity for educators at every level of instruction. When the Soviet Union shot the first Sputnik into orbit, there arose reactively an eagerness for study in this country and desire to respect her educators’ expertise and learning. But from the professoriates of the universities and colleges – who provide the training for every educational endeavor – to all persons employed as guides and teachers of the young, this marvelous chance was squandered. The harm was done by vain parades of words, disunity of spirit and, hence, a want of purposeful resolve, even on the weightiest concerns. Because educators improvidently thus threw away a freely proffered gift of honor and esteem,
we have come home in a more purse-proud, but intellectually negligent, community of men and women.

Are these the harbingers of a broader cultural decline? I anxiously hope not; and it is too soon to tell. To me, our Information Age – so arid and so sterile – in exchange for that prodigious vision of a future when human beings, such as you and I, might attempt the stars appears a sorry comedown-bargain.

P.P.S. Janet is here not altogether in accord and will not concede that the Computer Age is quite the bureaucratic nightmare and so devoid of charm as I represent.
This essay contains reflections on an artist’s education and various teachers, gaps and omissions, and some thoughts on the ideal education for an artist.

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