JUST ANOTHER WORD FOR NOTHING LEFT TO LOSE?

By Franz Schulze, Professor of Art, LFC
Commencement Address, Lake Forest College, June 10, 1972

On graduation day people are to be forgiven their reminiscences,
and I hope you will let me ease into this by reciting a few of my own. I
recall my first years at Lake Forest—in the 1950's—when Business
Administration was by far the most popular academic major here, when
freshman women had short hair and 9 o'clock hours, when the book store
was located in the basement of Durand Institute, in a space about the size
of the back seat of a Volkswagen; when there were still faculty apartments
on the third story of College Hall and you could smell baked beans and
garlic on your way up to the night school classes on the top floor. Well,
maybe not garlic: in those days the college had a rule that all faculty must
be active members of an evangelical faith, and I'm sure you will agree that
people brought up in Protestant churches tend to know very little about the
magic of garlic. I remember that campus social life was hung on the frame-
work of ten rather formidable fraternities and sororities, and that initiation
into one of them not only certified your humanity and respectability but was
the closest you might ever come to a mystical experience. The fraternities
had their folk heroes too—(if I may dip into some deeper lore)—one of
whom gained legendary status by sandpapering the ends of his fingers so that
no one would be able to identify the fingerprints he left on the window sill
of the Economics Office he broke into in order to steal some examinations
for the general enlightenment of his fraternity brothers. He was more
imaginative than he was bright, and he got caught, of course, because the
police simply looked around campus until they found someone with sanded finger-
tips.

I recollect also that the Art Department occupied the top floor of
College Hall—(lies were being told in Room 404 long before the Stentor ever
took it over)—and that, in contrast with our present collection of color slides,
which numbers about 50,000, we had exactly 200, about 150 of which were
badly underexposed. We literally saw art through a glass darkly.
I repeat: those were the 1950's. At the time the arts were hard-breathing cultural step-children. You had to fight to keep them alive, within the curriculum and in American society, and there were plenty of people around who acted as if they would just as soon see the arts go off into a corner and expire. You don't have to be older than 40 or so to recall Congressman Dondero of Michigan, who believed that modern art was a communist plot, or the fulminations of Time magazine against what it called the anarchy of abstract expressionist painting, or the legal efforts to deport Charlie Chaplin (now I'm talking about the '40's too), or the attempts to prohibit the singing and acting of Paul Robeson, the conducting of Wilhelm Furtwaengler, even the showing of a movie based on Oliver Twist.

Meanwhile, in the studio classes at Lake Forest, you were lucky if you had one male student for every five or six females, and even then he might be a wildly deviant personality. Art was not a career most robust young men opted for, and in this respect most young men were only reflecting the values of the rest of society.
In view of all this, and in view of the fact that I am talking about a spirit that was still much alive when the 1960's started, I think you must agree that the changes which have occurred within and around the arts in America during the past decade and a half are nothing less than spectacular.

Now students are mad for the arts; they come to Parnassus in droves. And they leave Lake Forest College in various states of frustration when we do not make enough room for them in our arts courses. Not only do they want to study the arts, but they want to be artists themselves. Making pictures, or writing poetry, or performing on musical instruments are activities which the young pursue today with some of the same energy their predecessors of the 1950's reserved for playing football or succeeding in the business world.

And this too reflects a national temper. Never within recent memory, certainly never within my own, have the arts been so taken up by American society as a whole, nor the fine arts so immensely popular. Here we are today, bestowing our own ceremonial gifts on four talented men all of whom are old
enough—Richard Hunt included—to remember plenty of moments when no
one around them seemed to see or hear what they were doing except for those
who scowled at it. Furthermore, the contemporary audience is not merely more
respectful of what its artists are saying, it is willing to tolerate nearly any
kind and degree of experimentation the artists want to carry on in their work,
whether it be an exceptionally skull-rattling piece of subject matter or an
extreme reconstitution of the form of an art. On and off Broadway and in and
out of Hollywood, we are being, for want of a better word, treated to a wave
of physical violence, sexual circus and general value inversion that leaves
one wondering seriously how anything more aggressive or exotic can be
concocted. And while playwrights never seem at a loss to come up with
that concoction, they find their audiences have become capable of taking
just about anything they dish out, with the most unflinching equanimity.

Within my own field, which used to be called painting and sculpture, but
which has so expanded its limits and so intermarried with other arts, and
sciences, that we no longer have a reliable generic name for it, the artist
has been busy assaulting the very notion of form in art— for that matter, the very concept of art. What do you make of an artist who exhibits a roomful of air, or another, no less able than Claes Oldenburg, who buries an object in a field somewhere and refuses to let on what or where it is, but claims some artistic dimension for his act anyhow?

It is an extraordinarily varied scene, which also has room in it for Norman Rockwell, Irving Stone and Lawrence Welk, and it is as much a consequence of the audience's acquiescence as of the artist's aggressiveness. We have achieved an exceptionally widespread state of freedom in the arts today—whether we are watching them or making them— which, of course, is what most of the best minds in the field have been striving for since the beginning of the modern era. The search for freedom is as surely the hallmark of the present moment in cultural time as any other you could name. It certainly has been the central momentum in the rapidly changing college and university scene lately. Where requirements and theoretical structures once reigned, now internship and independent study programs hold sway,
or if they do not yet, they soon will. All the old grammars, catechisms
and hierarchies are on the defensive, and just as we no longer know for
sure what art is, we are equally uncertain what a liberal arts education
should consist of.

Furthermore, judging from all the sounds about us, the momentum
is by no means spent. Nevertheless, I would like to cite another of my little
reminiscences here in hopes that it may cast some light on the scene from
another angle. Back to the arts. I recall a moment in Chicago during the
summer of 1970, when a group of visiting Uruguayan avant-garde artists staged
a Happening at the corner of Ontario and Michigan. For about a half hour
they marched around, brandishing strange-looking white abstract wooden
constructions and going through peculiar bodily antics, occasionally confront-
ing, even jostling, passersby and, in a way, somewhat disturbing the peace.

Now you all know that one of the frequently stated objectives of Happenings
is to unsettle the audience, to get it to think on new and different levels, to
perceive in new, different and sensibility-expanding ways. Well, indeed the
passersby were unsettled at first, and most of them wanted to know what on earth was going on. As soon as someone said, "It's a Happening that's being sponsored by the Museum of Contemporary Art down the street," invariably the passersby (a pretty sophisticated lot, all in all—Ontario and Michigan is a pretty sophisticated corner) would say, "Oh, it's just art," meaning "Oh, it's not life after all; I wasn't really being provoked," and equally invariably they would regain their composure, watch for a minute in tolerant amusement, and then go about their business. I don't know whether the Uruguayans realized it or not, but that audience's very estheticism tended to put them beyond the artist's reach. You can take any amount of provocation if the provoker doesn't really touch you where you are vulnerable.

This is not my original thought, by the way. A marvelous old art historian named Edgar Wind commented a few years ago on the contemporary flood of exhibitions and glut of art picture books. He said: "This diffusion brings with it a loss of density. We are much given to art, but it touches us lightly, and that is why we can take so much of it, and so much
of so many different kinds. If a man has the time and the means, he can see a comprehensive Picasso show in London one day, and the next a comprehensive Poussin exhibition in Paris, and--what is the most amazing thing of all--find himself exhilarated by both. When such large displays of incompatible artists are received with equal interest and appreciation, it is clear that those who visit these exhibitions have acquired a strong immunity to them. Art is so well received because it has lost its sting."

So there seems to be a paradox here. On the one hand, we want freedom for the arts, because we say we love the arts and wish them well, yet the more freedom we accord them, and the more they respond to this freedom by seeking radical extensions of it, the more we seem to run the risk of becoming impervious to what they are saying to us. In turn, the arts themselves run the risk of speaking increasingly in trivialities and obscurities, or else simply shouting loudly and stridently at us, the way one does to a deaf man.

Our problem is evidently the opposite of the one that troubled Plato, who lived in a society--ancient Athens--where it was possible to be powerfully
affected by art. Plato, so Professor Wind goes on to tell us, "rated the strength of man's imagination so high that he thought a man could be transformed by the things he imagined." And so Plato favored censorship of the arts, and he had the following to say about the way the ideal state should deal with what he called a dangerous poet: "If any such man," Plato said, "will come to us to show us his art, we shall kneel down before him as a rare and holy and delectable being. We shall anoint him with myrrh and set a garland of wool upon his head—and send him away to another city."

Professor Wind adds that "if this ritual were to be translated into modern terms, it would sound like a burlesque: it would mean that before an artist can be condemned he must receive the highest possible honour, something like the Order of Merit." Well, clearly we are not likely to do anything so apparently preposterous, and clearly we see, I think, that censorship in today's world promises far direr consequences than does the abuse of artistic freedom. But censorship is not our only problem, or even our most
pressing one. If anything, it is freedom that we have not learned how to handle profitably. A friend of mine who is both a violinist and Jewish, as most violinists seem to be, recently expressed doubts about the future of violin playing in America. The old way, he said, which consisted of a little kid being coaxed, wheedled and cajoled endlessly by a doting Jewish mother into practicing, practicing, practicing the fiddle, is passing away. That kind of mother is departing the scene, on wings of freedom, and it is thus becoming easier for the little kid, who has his own set of wings, not to practice, or else to take up some other craft that is a good deal less exacting.

I would like to affirm that I am not recommending we return to authoritarian modes of training our artists. Everything we have learned from contemporary psychology suggests that such methods are more deadening to most students than they are vitalizing. On the other hand, too often the freedom we have sought has been gained at the cost of the intensity of our values and beliefs. Kris Kristofferson, in one of the great lines of the last few
years, captures the essence of this loss when he has one of his drifters say,

"Freedom's just another word for nothin' left to lose; nothin' ain't worth
nothin', but it's free."

I would like to believe, however, that there are some other concepts of freedom that hold out more hopeful prospects for us. Old Goethe said—very roughly translated—that "if you want to earn freedom, and life, you'll have to conquer both of them every day." For the paradox works the other way, too. To master a subject comes only by submission to it, and submission only with the belief that the subject is worth submitting to. The deeper the belief, the greater the creative tension between the desire to express and the need to learn the means of expression. Somehow, despite the authoritarian system we presume they grew up in, artists like Rembrandt, Degas and Matisse learned to draw, not only with surpassing authority, but freely. And men like Wind, Kenneth Clark and Erwin Panofsky learned to write about art with a humaneness of outlook, a felicity of style and a breadth of knowledge which the younger breed of art historian has rarely matched and never outclassed. I don't believe
the old guys achieved this because they were drilled in lockstep. But I
likewise don't believe the best of our present-day artists and scholars have
made their own gains by virtue of freedom alone either. The most important
ingredient in the case of both generations was a passionate belief in the
rightness of what they were engaged in, which generated its own internal
discipline and fire in equal amounts. Without that belief, rules yield up
little more than dull uniformity, and freedom itself is likely to produce only
a sort of unbuttoned disarray.

I think we are unanimous that the rules have their limitations; I'm
not sure we agree, however, that freedom is similarly constricting. Never-
theless, that's what I am suggesting: in the arts the old tyrannies have been
pretty fully defeated. It is the awful burden of the new freedom we have gained
with that victory that constitutes the greatest problem for the arts in the
remainder of the 20th century. And no less for liberal education. To be free
of dead issues and old constraints in learning finally raises the question, what
do you now believe is alive and worth learning? Keep in mind that in answering
this you may run the same risk the contemporary artist does, of speaking
increasingly in trivialities and obscurities, or of simply shouting loudly
and stridently in order to be heard, and perhaps worst of all, of being at last
only patronized and tolerated.

The recipe for talks like this one calls for a conclusion on the upbeat.

In view of the circumstances, that's not easy, but I will. It is not only my
belief but my observation that the world doesn't really want to satisfy itself
with toleration and patronage. However insensible, and turgid, and slothful
it looks most of the time, it would much rather care passionately, whether
it is about art or education or you or anything else. That preference is some-
thing like an instinctive drive, the thing that makes us want to stay alive and
avoid death, but whatever it is, it's also your oyster.

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