

Commencement Address

The New York Studio School

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by Carter Ratcliff

I'm very happy and honored to be here today. Strange as it may seem, I have never attended a commencement ceremony before. Not that I never graduated from college. I did, many years ago. But I was such a disorganized student—not to say, such a dysfunctional student—that I never registered for the commencement ceremony. I never even knew that one had to register for it. So I missed my own commencement. And my disorganization didn't stop there.

In those days, there was a draft waiting to grab you—if you were male—the moment you graduated from college. All the male students I knew had a plan to avoid this unpleasant trap. They got married. Or they ran away, to the Great White North. There were other options, including the most obvious: stay in school. So a lot of my friends went to law school. Then, when they got out and found the draft still poised to grab them, they went to business school. This was at the University of Chicago, which was and still is liberal to radical in the undergraduate departments. But its law school and, even more, its business school were and still are conservative—not to say citadels of fundamentalist thinking in matters of law and the economy. So here was an irony. As the American military was waltzing around the world, propping up strong men with fundamentalist ideas about law and economics, the draft was driving certain bright young men into the graduate schools at Chicago

where they learned the highly specialized skill of giving a sheen of intellectual respectability to fundamentalist ideas about law and the economy.

Anyway, I didn't have a plan, so I ended up in the Army for two years. People who know me as a poet and an art critic are surprised to hear that I was a soldier. Once they get over their shock, they are **not** surprised to learn that I was even more dysfunctional as a soldier than as a student. I did get a lot of reading done. I spent a lot of time at the PX, drinking beer. PX means Post Exchange—sort of a general store for members of the military. At every PX, the magazine rack offered a magazine called *Army Laffs*, with “Laffs” spelled L-A-F-F-S. I was thinking of “Army Laffs” as I set out to compose this address because I remembered the advice given by a sergeant, who gave a batch of us a talk on the subject of talking to an audience. You have to get their attention right at the start, he said. And, he added, humor can do the job. Tell a joke. It doesn't matter if the joke has anything to do with the subject you want to talk about. Just tell the joke, get the laugh, and you'll have their attention.

Like everything else in the military, this advice rubbed me the wrong way. For I had spent my college years in the English Department at the University of Chicago, where Aristotle was the tutelary spirit, the great authority standing behind the idea that all the parts should have a necessary relation to one another. All the parts of what? All the parts of anything, from a tragic play to the façade of a building. A work is not finished, it hardly counts as a work, unless every part has a clear and compelling relation with every other part. Nothing more is needed, nothing can be taken away. You can't just throw something in for effect. Well, you can but, if you do, the work won't be any good. Or it might be good enough for government work, as they used say in the Army, meaning: it didn't have to be any good. It just had to work for the moment. Of course, Aristotle was thinking of works that worked for longer than that, possibly forever.

Which is not to say that he enunciated a timeless principle. This principle of his—this principle of unity—has to be renewed every time it is applied. So there are no tried and true ways to produce a unified work—or, another way of putting it, there is no standard method for coming up with a successful composition. And with that word, “composition,” I finally get to the place where I am now, at the New York Studio School, for this is a school devoted to the idea of coherence and clarity I have been calling Aristotelian. Here, people actually talk about the way a painting is put together. Not about its subject, its concept, its style or its look—or none of that in isolation but as part of the painting’s form, its structure. Its composition. This is rare and it is valuable and I want to congratulate you all on having been here and taken part in this conversation—which is not of course just a matter of talk. It is a kind of doing, a kind of action, that engages you not only with others who are doing the same thing at present—who have been struggling alongside you with composition, with the idea or the ideal of a unified work—but also with those who have been carrying on this struggle for centuries. Over the millennia.

When Aristotle wrote about form, he was thinking, chiefly, of tragic plays. The playwrights of ancient Greece wrote hundreds, possibly thousands, of these works. Only thirty-two survive. By contrast there are a lot of ancient Greek sculptures, not to mention Roman copies and Roman ventures into sculptural originality. As it happens, no paintings survive from Aristotle’s Athens. Nonetheless, there was enough talk about painting and sculpture and architecture—and enough of it has come down to us in **written** form—to let us know that the idea of clear and coherent **visual** form has been alive and well and thoroughly conscious for twenty-five hundred years and more. It is crucial to Western civilization. Or you could say: **until** this idea became thoroughly conscious, a topic of a conversation as much a matter of doing as of talking, as much a matter of acting as of thinking, Western civilization hadn’t yet been born. Hadn’t yet launched itself on the long cycles of rebirth that

have kept it alive all these years. For, once again, nothing about any of this is timeless. Not Aristotle's helpful hints about formal coherence, not the very idea of coherence, not civilization itself. It all has a history—a past, a present, and future.

Which is not the same as Aristotle's famous beginning, middle, and end. People have been talking about the end of Western civilization for several centuries, at least. They have been talking about the end of painting for about half of that time. But there is no end in sight. There is, rather, a future, which you will be helping to define, all the more effectively because you have already joined the conversation that produces the crucial definitions.

There are a couple of things I should address before I go any further.

We live in a globalized economy, a more or less globalized society—or, anyway, people keep telling us that, so why am I emphasizing Western civilization? Because it's the one we live in. It's the one that supplies the Studio School with its great models, its exemplary instances. Globalization will change civilizations, but it will not homogenize them. Western civilization includes many languages. The one most like Western civilization itself is English, which is always open to other languages and seemingly the most useful as a second language. This openness, this usefulness, ensures that English is constantly evolving, and the same is true of Western civilization. So I emphasize our civilization—our local culture—not at the expense of others but in a spirit of openness to all of them.

Another point: I've been using the metaphor of a conversation, of artists in conversation with one another in the present and across the ages. I want to stop for a moment and let **you** know that **I** know that a metaphor always comes to the end of its rope. Sooner or later, it begins to lose its grip on the matter at hand. Once, years ago, I listened to a European critic give a talk about the present state of art. He wanted to address, in particular, the interaction between the various mediums, the various modes of art—visual, verbal, musical. He wanted to throw in dance and architecture and

what not. His metaphor was the jam session. He kept talking about “the jam session of the arts,” as if each of the arts was a jazz musician and they had all gotten together for an impromptu session.

I didn’t think the image worked but I went along with it because I felt that I knew what he was getting at. Furthermore, he was a European speaking to an American audience and he wanted to use an image that would show his respect for American culture—his respect for jazz, the classical music of America, as the cliché has it. The trouble is that he obviously didn’t know anything about jazz or the blues or the state of American art. So his metaphor came across as clunky, to say the least. And yet, as I said, it worked well enough to let me know what he was getting at—and his point was, in a general way, well taken. Ever since Minimalism evolved into everything from conceptual art to performance art to earthworks, certain artists have been indulging in an improvisation you could call “a jam session of the arts” if you wanted to be nice about it. If you didn’t, you might note that the idea of coherence got lost in the improvisatory blur.

But back to the question of metaphors. My talk of a conversation across the ages may well have stirred up an image of Aristotle and some early-modern tragedian like Racine sitting at a table chatting with Willem de Kooning. This is not what I want to evoke, but it’s bound to happen, in someone’s imagination, at which point my metaphor becomes clunky. Like any other metaphor, when I lean on it too hard. But what I’m talking about is so subtle that there’s no way to get at it, except metaphorically, all the more so because I’m not a painter or a sculptor. I can only extrapolate from my experience as a poet, my experience of seeing—or hearing—in another’s work, from whatever period, something that invites a response.

But what counts as a response here? As taking part, at least metaphorically, in a conversation?

One doesn't want to refute anything. Nor does one want to agree. What would agreement be? Imitation? No point in that. This question of a response to another's work is all trickier because the other artist has tried to come up with something complete—a fully composed work, from which nothing can be taken away, to which nothing need be added. Or this is what an artist has tried to do if he or she is ambitious enough to have produced a work that seems to demand a response. But neither agreement nor disagreement, acceptance nor denial. What then? What keeps this so-called conversation going?

I think it must be the need to have that completeness, that coherence, for oneself—to have created it on one's own terms. Not everyone feels this need. Many of us are content to look for it, to admire it when we find it. We're the audience for your work. It's from our point of view that there seems to be a conversation, an exchange from which disparate versions of visual coherence emerge. Giotto's idea of a harmonious, realized picture is not the same as Rembrandt's. Yet it is not entirely different. They seem to share certain premises, certain ideas about elaborating those premises, about the way to arrive at a finished structure. This perception of sharing leads to two false conclusions.

One is that there is progress in art: from a certain starting point, key figures advance, refining or improving whatever was available at the outset. There's no way to refute an argument along these lines because it's not really an argument. It's just a set of assertions strung together in the form of an argument. When Clement Greenberg did it, decades ago, he arrived at the conclusion that Jules Olitski and Kenneth Noland are more advanced, hence better, than Rembrandt and Caravaggio. One needn't linger long over this sort of thing.

The other false conclusion is that visual composition, the very structure of it, is timeless. Eternal. Universal. Giotto worked in the same timeless realm as Jules Olitski. Again, nothing so silly is really refutable. And why try to refute it? Wouldn't

it be nice to think that by becoming an artist you enter into a transcendent, virtual space populated by the likes of Giotto and Michelangelo and . . . I don't know . . . Whistler or Turner or . . . whomever you like . . . It would be nice to think that. But you know very well it's not true.

You are in your moment, inescapably, just as every other artist is or was or will be, and all you can do is struggle to realize the idea—or the ideal—of a coherent work in your own way for your own time. As I said, the historical spectacle of these successive struggles gives us, the audience, the idea that a conversation is going on. And sometimes this conversation not only seems to be going on but to get quite lively. For much of the 18th century, the idea of pictorial unity made room for quite a bit of fluff. This was the era of the Rococo. Then along came David, and to make a long story far too simple, David said, “No.” This “No” led to a more austere idea of structure, all sinews and flexed muscles. Neoclassicism. The neoclassicists may have felt that they refuted the Rococo, but they didn't. They just made it look old-fashioned—not the same thing as refuting it. And now, more than two centuries after David's heyday, the Rococo brilliance of Boucher looks no less brilliant than the neoclassical brilliance of David and his shining phalanx of followers. And at this very moment, if not the next, Boucher may look less old-fashioned.

My point?

No matter what metaphor guides you, what response buoys you up or casts you down, no matter what vision of a shared history orients you in the space of your imagination, you are alone in your moment, struggling to respond in your own way to the work that led you to want to become an artist in the first place. Struggling to claim coherence for yourself, on your own terms. This is the isolation of the artist, and those who are not artists tend to sentimentalize it.

As a poet, I don't want to sentimentalize it. I want to stress it. Its difficulty and its inescapability. Film is a collaborative medium. Graphic design can be

collaborative. So can architecture and haute couture. But art is not a collaborative enterprise. It is solitary, so much so that I feel I ought to switch roles—from poet to member of the audience for art—and point to a few things that mitigate this solitude. This isolation.

First, what you do matters—not only to you and to those who have a personal interest in you, not only to those who are involved with painting and sculpture and the history of those mediums. It matters to the culture. To our civilization. Earlier I mentioned “composition,” an art-world, art-critical word for visual order. In this sense, it is a specialized word, a term of art, in more ways than one. Yet it has a meaning, if not much currency, far beyond the artist’s studio and the room where the art critic works. For everyone, every last one of us, has an idea of composition. Of compositional order. Of the resolved thrust and counter-thrust, the sense of easeful containment, that marks a good composition. Granted, most of us in the audience don’t have very highly evolved ideas about these things. We don’t come up with very interesting compositional devices when we’re trying to get people into an arrangement that will produce an interesting snapshot. Nonetheless, we all know some of these devices, and when we look at your work we learn more of them—perhaps not consciously, certainly not deliberately. Yet we learn as we look. Our looking refines us, and this half-conscious process of refinement is essential to civilization. Order intellectual and emotional, social and political, the very idea of order is sustained—it is elaborated and kept flexible—by the visual arts, by your attempts to find your own versions of coherence. To reinvent composition for yourselves.

I haven’t said much about the styles of art or anything about its themes or subjects. I have concentrated on form, but I hope it’s clear that I am not a formalist in any sense of the word that isolates a concern for visual form to the world of visual art—that makes it the specialized subject of those who have mastered certain bits and pieces of jargon. You don’t have to look around you very carefully to see that there

really is no way to reduce visual form to a specialist's specialty. Visual form is a living, breathing, evolving, all-pervasive thing. Well-handled it is one of the glories of our civilization. However it is handled—now well, now badly—it is woven into the structure of things and in some cases simply is that structure. I'm thinking now of such things as bridges and buildings. From the less obviously utilitarian arts of painting and sculpture we learn of the possibility that life might be at once orderly and capable of change.

This is a possibility at least partially realized. However chaotic life sometimes seems, it is not totally chaotic. There is a degree of order and stability amid the whirlwinds of change, and perhaps life learned at least some of this order from art. This was Oscar Wilde's suggestion. By saying that life imitates art, Wilde was performing one of his familiar reversals, this time on the claim—made by Aristotle and many, many others—that art is an imitation of life. Both are right, all of them are, but only because there is no firm distinction to be drawn between art and life. What you artists do with your art is, among other things, to offer exemplary instances of passionately felt form—instances of living order that have a shaping influence on the rest of life.

This sounds extremely grand and vague, and I know that none of it can supply you with much guidance as you launch a new work. Your motives have to be more personal, more specific, more sharply focused. Yet you do have this influence, will have it, even if no one in your audience ever thanks you for it in so many words. It is very unlikely that any of us will do that—come up to you and say, I do appreciate the illuminating order that your work brought to this or that part of my life, of my experience. It is very unlikely that any of us will do that because we are hardly ever aware that art has this effect on us or on our world. But it does, and I want to commend you again for having come here, to this school, to begin your lives as artists. For here, the idea of formal order in its fullness is flourishing. This idea pervades all

talk of everything else—all the more specific, more immediately practical things that one talks about in a studio.

Just earlier, I talked of art critics as specialists. Sadly, many contemporary artists are specialists—not just in the sense that they have made themselves expert in some medium or another. But, rather, in the sense that they have a narrowly specialized idea of art—art as the examination of art issues, art as the means of investigation, art as a vehicle of some political concern. And so on. Here, at the Studio School, you have been grappling with a much larger idea of art. A much tougher and at the same time more generous idea. And you have faced up to the challenge. You have made it through. Congratulations.

Now you will continue, on your own. You are heading for the isolation that no collaborative interlude will ever mitigate. For you are painters and sculptors. No doubt some of you are loners. Some of you are gregarious. All of you will, at some point, show a work in progress to a friend—maybe a number of friends. But, as you know by now, having undergone the rigors of the Studio School—these openhanded rigors—none of this will make work any more sociable. You will continue, as I said, on your own. I am not talking now about career or personal life—only about work. And sometimes working alone, as you must, will seem lonely. Sometimes not. At some point, you may cultivate the loneliness of being absolutely isolated with some idea or precedent or possibility that has a potential only you can see. This can be exhilarating. It can be terrifying. It may come to feel like business as usual, the daily grind—and no less exhilarating or terrifying for all that.

But there will be times when you step away from your work, when you mingle with your audience, with the rest of us, and your point of view coincides, at least a bit, with the one I have taken up during most of this talk. You will see your work against the backdrop of history, or those stretches of history that you take seriously. You will glimpse something of the relations of art and life, of the interchanges that make it so

difficult to distinguish the two—art and life—and you may see or sense your place in those interchanges. You may even feel that you have been taking part in a conversation.