

***Anni Albers and Josef Albers:
Bauhaus 1923 ► Black Mountain College 1933 ► Yale 1949***

Notes for a very brief talk
at the Black Mountain College Celebration, Crickhowell, 2018.

Anni Albers and Josef Albers left Germany and came to America on Philip Johnson's recommendation in 1933. The Bauhaus, where they both taught, had been closed by the National Socialists that year. Anni was Jewish and Josef had a prominent role in an institution that produced degenerate art.

slide 1

They arrived in Asheville in December. Clip from *Asheville Citizen*, 5 December 1933.¹

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This is Josef Albers' 1935 logo for the college.²

slide 3 Anni Albers, *Black White Yellow*, 1926

Before their arrival their reputations preceded them. Anni Albers' textile designs and work and Josef Albers' design for print and glass

slide 4 Josef Albers, *Upwards*, ca. 1926.

both demonstrated a clarity of line and shape, an attention to formal abstraction and colour and both with an exuberance and as Josef was to say, achieved with 'open eyes'.

slide 5 Anni Albers, *Ancient Writing*, 1936.

Anni Albers subsequent work developed shifts of symmetric attention with a strident engagement with depth achieved through tactile understanding as much as visual acuity without resorting to perspective or similar graphic aids. She drew from a clear range of sources which elaborated and complexed while at BMC, partly encouraged by her research into early weaving and the textiles of South American communities confirmed by her visits to Mexico and the work she saw from Peru and elsewhere. She particularly notes in her 1966 book *On Weaving* the work of pre-Columbian Peru as one of the highest achievements in weaving.³

¹ Frederick A. Horowitz and Brenda Danilowitz. *Josef Albers: To Open Eyes*, London and New York: Phaidon, 2006.

² Horowitz, *ibid.*

³ Anni Albers. *On Weaving*, London: Studio Vista, 1966.

In this book she exemplifies these associations as the last lines of her preface notes, 'Thus tangential subjects come into view. The thoughts, however, can, I believe, be traced back to the event of a thread.' (1966: 15)

slide 6 Anni Albers, *Development in Rose II*, 1952.

Chapter one begins, '... hand weaving is a method of forming a pliable plane of threads by interlacing them rectangularly. Invented in a pre-ceramic age, it has remained essentially unchanged to this day.' (1966: 19)

slide 7 detail of 6

slide 8 Anni Albers, *With Verticals*, 1946.

She notes in chapter 8, 'All progress, so it seems, is coupled to regression elsewhere. We have advanced in general, for instance, in regard to verbal articulation the reading and writing public of today is enormous. But we certainly have grown increasingly insensitive in our perception by touch, the tactile sense.' (1966: 62)

slide 9 detail of 8

'Structure, as related to function, needs our intellect to construct it or, analytically, to decipher it. *Matière*, on the other hand, is mainly non-functional, non-utilitarian, and in that respect, like color, it cannot be experienced intellectually. It has to be approached, like color, non-analytically, receptively.' (1966: 63)

slide 10 Anni Albers, *Red and Blue Layers*, 1954.

'It is safe, I suppose, to assume that today most if not all of us have had the experience of looking down from an airplane onto this earth. What we see is a free flow of forms intersected here and there by straight lines, rectangles, circles, and evenly drawn curves; that is, by shapes of great regularity. Here we have, then, natural and man-made forms in contradistinction. And here before us we can recognize the essence of designing, a visually comprehensible, simplified organization of forms that is distinct from nature's secretive and complex working.

Or on a beach, we may find a button, a bottle, a plank of wood, immediately recognizable as "our" doing, belonging to our world of forms and not to that which made the shells, the seaweed, and the undulated tracings of waves on sand. Also we can observe the counterplay of the forming forces: the sea slowly grinding an evenly walled piece of glass, foreign to it in shape and substance, into a multiform body suitable for adoption into its own orbit of figuration. On the other hand, we see the waves controlled, where dams and dikes draw a rigid line between land and water.

To turn from "looking at" to action: we grow cabbages in straight rows and are not tempted by nature's fanciful way of planting to scatter them freely about. We may argue that sometimes we follow her method and

plant a bush here and another there, but even then we "clear" the ground. Always, though sometimes in a way that is roundabout and apparent only as an underlying scheme of composition, it is clarity that we seek. But when the matter of usefulness is involved, we plainly and without qualification use our characteristics: forms that, however far they may deviate in their final development, are intrinsically geometric. If then, it appears that our stamp is or should be an immediate or implicit lucidity, a considered position, a reduction to the comprehensible by reason or intuition in whatever we touch (confusion always gets a negative rating), we have established a basis for designing - designing in any field. From city-planning to the planning of a house or a road, from the composing of music to the formulation of a law, the weaving of a fabric, or the painting of a picture - behind the endless list of things shaped is a work of clarification, of controlled formulation.

... regardless of the material and the method of working it, designing is or should be methodical planning, whether of simple or intricately organized forms; and if done imaginatively and sensitively, designing can become art.' (Anni Albers 1966: 70-71)

Anni Albers attention to rectangular structures and tactile depth is enhanced by her acts of interference. Modest aesthetic disruption is a significant feature of her articulation.

slide 11 *Study for K-Trio*, 1932.

Aesthetic disruption is also a feature in some aspects of Josef Albers' work. In the year before and year of his arrival at BMC had been experimenting with diagonal as well as rectangular construction. The dynamic of this structure is physically encouraged by the interposing of dark against overlapping light.

slide 12 Josef Albers, *Opera*, 1933.

The clarity of shapes' overlapping edges further energises these structures.

slide 13 *Study (Homage to the Square series)*, not dated.

During his working practice at BMC Josef Albers moves towards a reliance on energy with explicitly energetically static forms achieving the dynamic of his visual work from considerable experiment with colour. An energy and new perception that occurs explicitly in the shifts in the viewers' eyes at each split-moment viewed. The shifts of colour literally occur as you watch what was initially taken to be a static image.

slide 14 Josef Albers, *Homage to the Square: Apparition*, 1959.

Both Anni Albers and Josef Albers like some of their peers at BMC derive their comprehensions from natural experiences, that is with phenomena in Nature and their surroundings.

slide 15 Josef Albers, *Two studies (Homage to the Square series)*, not dated.

These experiments and trials with colour around the statics of a series of squares, windows, openings into the next location had been underway in Josef Albers' work as early as 1918. In this ink drawing squares are evoked from the arrangement of tree forms, a combination of reports from perception and aesthetic invention.

slide 16 Josef Albers, *Pine Forest in Sauterland*, ca. 1918, pen and ink.

slide 17 Josef Albers, *Homage to the Square* (blue and greens), not dated.

What then also comes into constructed play is Josef Albers' understanding of weight, weight of shape on shape, of colour on colour. Part of this understanding derives directly from the work of Juan Gris in post-world war I Paris.

slide 18 Josef Albers, Study for *Homage to the Square: Departing in Yellow*, 1964.

By this time, after 1949, Josef Albers and Anni Albers were in Connecticut, Josef working for Yale, Anni working in her studio.

Josef Albers 1963 silk screens for *Interaction of Color*,⁴ now also on iPad, demonstrate his astonishing clarity of colour in an Einsteinian frame.

slide 19 Josef Albers, page from *Interaction of Color*, 1963.

where the same pigment and pigment saturation changes colour before your eyes as you encounter each new juxtaposition of the same shapes and colours. In this example there are 3 greys, one orange, one blue and one red, each made different by their proximity to each other, to their relationships.

⁴ Josef Albers. *Interaction of Color*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 50th anniversary reprint 2013.

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"Germans To Teach Art Near Here"	Clip from <i>Asheville Citizen</i> , 5 December 1933	Frederick A. Horowitz and Brenda Danilowitz. <i>Josef Albers: To Open Eyes</i> , London and New York: Phaidon, 2006.
Black Mountain College logo	Josef Albers, 1935	ditto
<i>Black White Yellow</i>	Anni Albers, 1926, silk and rayon, 203 x 119 cm (80 x 47")	detail from Public Delivery, Seoul, South Korea
<i>Upwards</i>	Josef Albers, ca. 1926, sandblasted flashed glass with black enamel paint, 46 x 30 cm (18 x 12")	Josef & Anni Albers Foundation, Bethany, Conn
<i>Ancient Writing</i>	Anni Albers, 1936, cotton and rayon, 151 x 112 cm (59 x 44")	Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington
<i>Development in Rose II</i>	Anni Albers, 1952, linen warp-stripe weft bonded plain weave with open work and self patterned by area of discontinuation wefts and gauze weave, 62 x 45 (24 x 18")	Art Institute of Chicago
<i>With Verticals</i>	Anni Albers, 1946, pictorial weave, red cotton on linen, 155 x 118 cm (61 x 46")	Josef & Anni Albers Foundation, Bethany, Conn
<i>Red and Blue Layers</i>	Anni Albers, 1954, cotton, 62 x 38 cm (24 x 15")	detail from Public Delivery, Seoul, South Korea
<i>Study for K-Trio</i>	Josef Albers, 1932, gouache and pencil on paper, 46 x 44 cm (18 x 17")	Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris
<i>Opera</i>	Josef Albers, 1933, woodcut print, 33 x 46 cm (13 x 18")	Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris
<i>Study (Homage to the Square series)</i>	Josef Albers, nd, oil on paper, 33 x 30 cm (13 x 12")	Josef & Anni Albers Foundation, Bethany, Conn
<i>Homage to the Square: Apparition</i>	Josef Albers, 1959, oil on masonite, 121 x 121 cm (48 x 48")	Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York
<i>Two Studies (Homage to the Square series)</i>	Josef Albers, nd, oil on paper, 28 x 13 cm (11 x 5")	Josef & Anni Albers Foundation, Bethany, Conn
<i>Pine Forest in Sauterland</i>	Josef Albers, ca. 1918, pen and ink on wove paper, 32 x 25 cm (13 x 10")	Josef & Anni Albers Foundation, Bethany, Conn
<i>Homage to the Square (blue and greens)</i>	Josef Albers, nd, oil on masonite, 41 x 41 cm (16 x 16")	Josef & Anni Albers Foundation, Bethany, Conn
<i>Study for Homage to the Square: Departing in Yellow</i>	Josef Albers, 1964, oil on fibreboard, 76 x 76 cm (30 x 30")	Tate Collection
page from <i>Interaction of Color</i>	Josef Albers, 1963, silk-screen on paper	New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 50th anniversary reprint 2013