On the Actuality of Forms

Eeva-Liisa Pelkonen
Yale University, School of Architecture
New Haven, USA
Eeva-Liisa.Pelkonen@yale.edu

Keywords: *20th century art, Josef and Anni Albers , art education , formal and aesthetic theories*

ABSTRACT
The essay discusses some of the techniques Josef Albers, the famous artist-educator, employed in his own work and in his teaching to make form activate the mind of the creator. The concept "actual," which Albers used to draw a distinction between two types of knowledge, "factual facts" (passive) and "actual facts" (active), is used to describe forms that triggered innovation. The essay makes the point that Albers was not in search for the exceptional, but preferred forms that were ordinary, even banal, bearing resemblance to things that people encountered on an everyday basis. Some of his legendary teaching assignments in his color and free-hand drawing classes, as well as his "Homage to the Square" series, are discussed as examples of how he aimed at snapping students and himself out of the bond between form and meaning, and, in so doing, opening form to multiplicity of experiences and interpretations. In conclusion, that essay situates Albers ideas about how art is made and experienced within 19th and 20th century intellectual culture and speculates about its relevance for today's architecture. Main references include Federick A. Horowitz and Brenda Danilowitz Josef Albers: To Open Eyes *and period articles by Josef and Anni Albers.*

*Josef Albers famously exclaimed about color: "Color is a deception. Color is always fooling [*schwindle *in German] us" (as cited in Horowitz and Danilowitz, 2006, p. 195). When teaching his color course at Yale University in the 1950s, his first assignment was to make students to pick a Coca Cola-red from color samples only to demonstrate that everybody chose a different one*[1]*. A didactic exercise proved that when combined multiplicity of human experience and the variety of phenomena exploded into infinite many-ness. While Albers very rarely used the word "form" – he preferred to refer to particular geometric shapes instead – he could have similarly stated that form is a deception. Form is always fooling us, since forms in his mind were equally elusive and multifaceted as color when set into contact with human experience. Goes without saying that Albers thought this was a desirable outcome.*

In what follows I will discuss the techniques Albers employed in his own work and in his teaching to make form activate the mind of the creator and the beholder to the point of ecstatic bewilderment when countering the richness of the visual phenomena. It is noteworthy to emphasize upfront that, when it came to forms, he was not in search for the one-of-the-kind, but preferred those that were ordinary, even banal; forms bearing resemblance to things that people encountered on an everyday basis. To be sure, Albers was not interested in individual expression, or newness, even timeliness, of formal language: it was exactly these encounters with ordinary things and forms that allowed the multitude of individual experience resonate through space and time, challenging ideas of originality and uniqueness – be it individual or national kind – alike.

As a teacher whose career spanned two continents and three institutions – Bauhaus (1923-33), Black Mountain College (1933-49), and Yale (1950-57) – Albers' motto was to teach students to "see." This required, first and foremost, teaching students to depicting an object or a thing as if without any prior knowledge what he or she was looking at. In other words, to really "see" required breaking the bondage of between form and meaning, which would lead a student to repeat certain representational conventions without deeper explorations into the formal qualities of the thing one was looking at. So when drawing a nude, a flowerpot, a piece of bark, or a page from The New York Times, *for that matter, one would first need to struggle to overcome its signification and see it simply them as pure form and texture. Forcing the students to copy* The New York Times *backwards, was one of the many tricks Albers used to make students to see world anew.*

So what did Albers mean when he talked about learning to "see"? The process required both what Albers called "outer" and "inner" seeing; to really "see" meant transcending the merely optical and empirical "outer

*sight" by the somewhat mystical idea of "inner seeing." While the former was purely empirical, the latter called for "imagination and vision" pertaining to cognitive processes in the brain (Albers, 1969, p. 17). In philosophical terms, "inner vision" meant transcending actual form (phenomena) and gaining access to perceptual form (*noumema*). He used the word "interaction" to describe a process of creation as a moment when the two processes – optical and cognitive – met. Importantly, artists should not simply copy the real, but aim at conceiving a "visual formulation of our inner response to the world" (Albers, 1969, p. 10). In other words, the creative process was based on a feed-back-loop that required an act of responding and formulating what one saw; re-presenting, rather than simply representing, the real.*

The distinction between "factual facts" and "actual facts" Albers used to define his attitude towards knowledge clarifies this distinction between passive copying and more invested form of re-presentation; former described mere information, while the latter had the ability to enter the realm of imagination – a word Albers used a lot. In the world of art "factual fact" meant simply passively tracing or copying visual information available to the retina, while the latter involved active engagement from the part of the onlooker, leading to the discovery of formal and structural qualities that governed the way the object entered the visual experience in the first place (Albers, 1969, p. 17). He could have well spoken about "factual forms" opposed to "actual forms;" the former was merely a copy of a thing, while the latter had the ability to trigger imagination and sponsor associations both within and beyond the realm of art.

Free-hand drawing was the preferred medium towards the discovery of such "actual" forms. Here Albers preferred simple pencil line drawing over elaborate rendering techniques, like shading and hatching. The point was not to imitate or represent reality but rather to record form as it first enters through the retina before it has settled into any meaning, taking pleasure of pure form without meaning, pencil registering the movements of the eye as it followed the contours of the object, meandering, picking up details and mapping out the shape. The goal was to invest drawings with "character," Albers would teach how a line could be hard for hard objects, and softer for softer objects, and how the haptic, sensuous nature of the object could be teased out through subtle variations in the thickness, softness and sharpness of the line. Character was thus not a quality that was both inherent as well as invested into the object by the artist, or in his words: "Rendering of all form, in fact all creative work, moves between the two polarities: intuition and intellect, or possibly between subjectivity and objectivity" (1934, p. 1).

It is important to note that this preferred medium of outline drawing was discovered in the 18th century and went hand with a shift of sensibility in German aesthetic thought, when the category of the beautiful starts to get theorized in terms of individual experience. This included new ways of discussing and analyzing formal qualities that were previously considered absolute and innate, such as ideas about inanimate versus animate forms, revealed versus hidden meanings, qualities and nuances invested in artworks with human mind and produced by human hand. The credit for its rediscovery goes at least in part to Johann Joachim Winckelmann, the eighteenth century German art theorist who celebrated Greek bas-relief art as a technique that could transform the real. In his own passionate words Winckelmann noted how "bas-relief, being founded in fiction, can only counterfeit reality," noting bas-relief's ability to "entice," "bewitch" and "affect us with that irresistible delight which, flowing from the artist' pencil, enchants our senses and imagination" (1765, p. 93).

Albers' ideas about the production and experience of art seem to have been influenced particularly by the German romantics, specifically by the writings of Arthur Schopenhauer, who was the first to break free of stable aesthetic and formal codes, by insisting that beauty could be only studied through its effects on the subject. Albers shared Schopenhauer's conviction that art was ultimately about exercising human freedom and intuitive knowledge of the world, where representation is understood as seeing the world as a compassionate agent in a certain way, rather than as likeness. For Albers, the body, complimented by the mobile eye, was the main interface between Schopenhauerian human will and the external world. Drawing consisted thus both of "a visual and manual act. For the visual act (...) one must learn to see form as a three dimensional phenomenon. For the manual act (...) the hand must be sensitized to the direction of the will" (Albers, 1934, p. 4).

The methods Albers taught were meant to tease of the creative imagination and engagement out of each and every student involved not only the eye but the body as well. Albers' former Yale student, Frederick A. Horowitz, described how

> *"on the first day of the Basic Drawing course, you were told to stand up, hold out your arm, and draw your name backwards. Or with both hands in the air and your eyes closed, make a symmetrical drawing, then try it on paper. A week or so later, you might find yourself drawing lines to the left and then to the right; drawing clockwise and then counter clockwise; or drawing without lifting the pencil from the page" (Horowitz and Danilowitz, 2006, p. 97).*

At times, he asked his students to draw without looking the paper, simply recording the movements of the eye, or with eyes closed, forcing the hand retrieve formal qualities of objects from memory. The process allowed lines to flow organically from human life, both as its immediate manifestation, as well as a kind of Bergsonian durée, *where the past folds into the present as a trace of memory.*

The meandering line occupied a particular role in Albers' "actual" formalism, both for it had the ability to blur figure and ground, and because its existence expanded into historical times. Albers wrote:

> *"Because of its name 'Greek Key', or 'meander', (the name of a winding Greek river), it is considered a Greek origin. Factually we find it all over the world, revered in almost all cultures, East and West, very early and late" (1969, p. 27).*

Like his wife Anni Albers, Albers believed that all new art should be built on tradition. Working with certain materials and techniques – weaving in the case of Anni and drawing, color, and paper in the case of Josef – could reveal the complex phenomenology of our temporal experience, albeit by emphasizing craft traditions and historical memory. Her article "Work with Material" published in the Black Mountain College Bulletin *5 (1938) makes a case for her preferred craft, weaving, one of the most archaic art forms, which made the homology between material, structure and form, apparent. In Anni's powerful words "operations which embody the set laws" were a means to "provide a discipline which balances the hubris of creative ecstasy" (1938, p. 1). The operation opened thus in two directions: the past, with its rich tradition that spanned through history and across globe, while still leaving room for innovation within the autotelic grid structure.*

Here it is important to note that Albers often worked in series; his "Homage to the Square" series consisted of dozens, if not hundreds of self-similar paintings and prints done in different colors in a period of 25 years prior to his death. How to make sense of work that does not seem to have a trajectory towards the ultimate, absolute version? And furthermore, why did Albers choose to celebrate the square in the first place?

Reliance on simple mathematical shapes – grids, squares, and strips – might have helped Albers release from the idea of Platonic paradigm that these formal tropes represented something unique, ideal, and perfect. In the words of one writer "the mathematical differs from the forms inasmuch as there are many 'similar' squares, say, while there is only one unique form" (as cited in Mertins, 2004, p. 361). Detlef Mertins summarizes the argument:

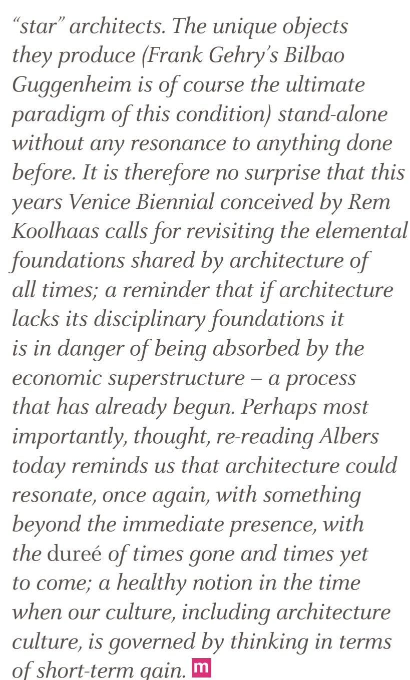
> *"A Euclidean construction, (...) does not produce heterogeneity, but rather negotiates an intricate mutuality between many-ness and kinship, variation and stability. It is always an image of this one, uniquely determinate specimen of the kind. There is no one perfect square, but every square has to be perfect of its kind, not* sui generis *[D. Lachterman,* The Ethics of Geomerty: A Genealogy of Modenity*]" (2004, p. 361).*

It comes therefore not surprise that Albers' work in question is best viewed when hung as groups, which makes these variations within series apparent. It is the combination of variation, familiarity and difference, rather than originality that makes the form come alive, be vibrantly present, and to have an after-life even in our minds long after we leave the room.

Albers "actual" formalism had a wide-reaching resonance within both European and American intellectual culture. The distinction between Daseinsform *and* Wirkungsform *he draws again and again can be traced to Kant and forms a stable in German aesthetic theory from 19th century onwards. Architectural historian Adolf Göller comes to mind as somebody who already in the 19th century insisted on releasing art and architecture from meaning and content and turn it into "pure formal play" in order to activate the mind, releasing individual memories and recollections.*

Albers did refer to the mathematician-turned-philosopher Alfred North Whitehead directly as an inspiration. It is from him that Albers might have borrowed the term "actual" facts; the famed mathematician turned philosopher talked about "actual occasions" or "actual entities," which could be either mental or material events that fueled creativity and synthetized past experiences into new potentialities. It is also worth mentioning his fellow Yale teacher, art historian George Kubler, whose 1963 book *The Shape of Times* taught to think in series and in ways that released art from being bound to particular place and stylistic periods, making shapes gain kind of global resonance through geographies and historical time. At the age of globalization we can sympathize with his cosmic vision, which insisted that all art, high and low, from all places and historical moments for him were manifestation of a somewhat mysterious creative energy and will that constantly shapes and reshapes the world. It comes therefore as no surprise that those following Albers and Kubler in the 1960s ended up endorsing the vernacular, the classical, and typological rigor as a means of returning to a notion of shared architectural language that would tie architecture back to its context – be it a city, or history. One of Albers' closest heirs, and his Yale colleague Louis Kahn responded his call by returning to elemental forms that resonated with Roman and Egyptian architecture alike. (Pelkonen, 2012, p. 133-147)

Albers call for art that is part of a larger historical *Weltanschauung* or a worldview is sobering the age of creative hybris and celebration of "star" architects. The unique objects they produce (Frank Gehry's Bilbao Guggenheim is of course the ultimate paradigm of this condition) stand-alone without any resonance to anything done before. It is therefore no surprise that this years Venice Biennial conceived by Rem Koolhaas calls for revisiting the elemental foundations shared by architecture of all times; a reminder that if architecture lacks its disciplinary foundations it is in danger of being absorbed by the economic superstructure – a process that has already begun. Perhaps most importantly, thought, re-reading Albers today reminds us that architecture could resonate, once again, with something beyond the immediate presence, with the *dureé* of times gone and times yet to come; a healthy notion in the time when our culture, including architecture culture, is governed by thinking in terms of short-term gain.



REFERENCES

ALBERS, A. (1938). Work with Material. *Black Mountain College Bulletin 5*.

ALBERS, J. (1934). Concerning Art Instruction. *Black Mountain College Bulletin 2*.

ALBERS, J. (1969). One Plus One Equals Three and More: Factual Facts and Actual Facts. In J. Albers, *Search versus re-search: three lectures by Josef Albers at Trinity College, April 1965*. Hartford, CT: Trinity College Press.

ALBERS, J. (2013). *Interaction of Color. 50th anniversary edition.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

HOROWITZ, F. A. & DANILOWITZ, B. (2006). *Josef Albers: To Open Eyes*. London: Phaidon.

MERTINS, D. (2004). Bioconstructivism. In L. Spuybroek (Ed.), *NOX: Machining Architecture* (p. 360-369). London: Thames & Hudson.

PELKONEN, E. L. (2012). Toward Cognitive Architecture. In S. von Moos, & J. Eisenbrandt (eds.), *Louis Kahn: The Power of Architecture* (p. 133-148). Weil-am-Rhein: Vitra Design Museum.

WINCKELMANN, J. J. (1765). *Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks*. London: A. Millar on the Strand.

NOTES

(1) Josef Albers describes this exercise in *Interaction of Color*. See Albers, 2013, p. 3.