Josef Albers

Interaction

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With this retrospective on the work of Josef Albers, we present an artist whose name is widely known today. Albers has come to stand as one of the central figures in postwar art, and his contributions to abstract art and to substantiating it philosophically definitely set a standard for quality. He made color the center of his idea of the image in a way that few others have done, and, in doing so, he analyzed the act of seeing as the actual mode of perception for artworks. With increasing remove from his own lifetime, his art shines all the more clearly. And the reception of his work seems to have been cleared of a misunderstanding—expressed here and there in the past—that it is about illustrating a theory or a didactics of color. At times, some also conjectured that Albers' roots are near to constructivism and op art. But these judgments have never done justice to the independence of his artistic aspirations. While the reputations of some of his colleagues—who used to be mentioned in one breath with Albers—have faded, he himself appears today as an unmistakable monolith.

But what do we know now about the artist and teacher Albers and the interaction of the two spheres of his activities, which is the view of his work that this exhibition outlines? When the Guggenheim Museum in New York arranged a first comprehensive exhibition on Albers in 1988 on the occasion of his hundredth birthday—he had died twelve years earlier—its curator, Nicholas Fox Weber, was able to gather an impressive panorama of works stretching from Albers' early work through the years at the Bauhaus and the more than four decades in the United States. This exhibition, which was then also shown at the Kunsthalle Baden-Baden and the Berlin Bauhaus-Archiv, impressed through its variety of works in different media and, even more, through the immediately perceptible weight of its artistic statement. Yet at the time, the art-historical preconditions of Albers' work, the logic of its development, and the internal relation between the different fields of his activities were just beginning to be grasped.

The understanding of Albers' work has been deepened in recent years by exhibitions and publications on different themes, and they have been initiated in particular by the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation and the Josef Albers Museum. The insights won from them have been incorporated into the conception of this exhibition, *Interaction*, and have allowed us to understand even better the lineages of twentieth-century art.

This applies, for instance, to Albers' contribution to the work of the Bauhaus. Albers, who first entered the Bauhaus as a student in 1920 at the age of 32, largely created works in glass and photographic works during his time there until the institution's closure in 1933. The standing of these works within the history of both genres makes them unmistakable. His achievements as a teacher are of comparable significance. Albers had previously worked for a decade as a public-school teacher in Westphalia and in his hometown of Bottrop. He was a passionate teacher, for whom teaching was never about reproducing academic knowledge. He was apparently successful at winning young people over to learning by guiding them toward investigating problems that made independent insights possible. When Albers took over managing the preparatory course at the Bauhaus together with László Moholy-Nagy in 1923—a course that was obligatory for all students—he developed a curriculum that concentrated on foundational practical skills and not on artistic exercises. In doing so, he was guided by his family's background in the crafts, with which he had been familiar since childhood. The course was above all about the appropriate way to handle different materials such as wood, glass, metal, and paper. At the same time, training a differentiated sensory perception was just as im-

portant. Such a consciously performed art of seeing—this was Albers' life credo as a teacher—is a precondition for all activity in the visual arts, independent of their particular form of expression. Only such a seeing is capable of meeting the challenge of a constantly changing world and its phenomena. Art and life actually come into contact in this insight. "Without seeing you can't do anything." This sentence of Albers's describes the foundation of his pedagogy and art.

Albers and his wife, Anni, left Germany in November 1933. The Bauhaus had closed in the summer under pressure from the new political conditions. Albers no longer saw a suitable teaching position in Germany as a possibility, and, at the same time, the pressure on the Jewish population had become noticeable. The two therefore accepted an offer to teach at the newly founded Black Mountain College in North Carolina. The appointment to this now legendary school ideally accommodated Albers's idea of a pedagogy based on artistic activity. Building on the premises of the preparatory course at the Bauhaus, he developed a teaching plan that would determine instruction at the entire college: practical artistic investigations were not only to form young people's personalities; they should also prepare students for a specialized academic education.

Albers stayed loyal to Black Mountain College until 1950 and then accepted an offer of a professorship at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, where he reformed the teaching program of the Department of Design on the same basis of work. In a short time, he transformed the department, which was still committed to the idea of the nineteenth-century École des Beaux-Arts, into an educational institution of art of a pointedly contemporary character. Albers' reputation as an outstanding teacher who combined pedagogy, art, and life in a unique way is especially based on his work at Yale. There he became a distinct voice in contemporary art in the United States.

The encounter with America also gave Albers' art a new foundation. One may claim that without this experience, his art would hardly have reached the characteristic intensity of expression we treasure it for. In America, Albers first emerged from the shadows of the Bauhaus and its aesthetics ideas but without disowning his roots. The coordinates of this American experience included New York, where the married couple arrived, as the example of a fascinating urban reality but also North Carolina with its vast landscape and lush vegetation, which had an overwhelming effect on Albers and endowed his artistic sensibility with a new direction. In comparison to Germany and Europe, the less strict structural hierarchies also had an enormously freeing effect. The generous friendliness and carefree, informal lifestyle in America had an immediate impact. One could say that Albers and his wife were emigrants who not only clung to their lost home and its intellectual space but also became happy in their new living environment. It seems only logical that they became officially naturalized in the United States only a few years later.

The encounter with Mexico, which began in 1935 and was deepened through multiple trips until 1967, was also decisive for this inspiration from America. There Albers discovered with his wife pre-Columbian art and architecture. The couple also became serious collectors of ancient artifacts, which reinforced their conviction that the language of all real art is timeless and that its validity unfolds independent of historical and geographical coordinates. In Mexico, Albers recognized that he was encountering a visual complexity within simple formal structures. It appeared to him like a reflection of his own aesthetic interests, which had already been formed in Germany.

For Albers, Mexico was also the land of emphasizing color in a way that he had not known before. His own already long-standing preference for color as the artistic idiom received a new inspiration there; one may speak of an awakening experience. Perhaps following an intentional decision, Albers had given up painting when he entered the Bauhaus. Returning to it after an interruption of fifteen years then became unavoidable, and in the

second half of the 1930s, he produced paintings that have an unmistakable color climate. A new tone truly enters here into the coloration of Western painting.

With that, the ground was prepared for an aesthetic program that would create image series that still vouch for Albers' artistic status today: *Variant/Adobe* starting in 1947 and, in particular, *Homage to the Square* starting in 1950. Put simply, they are about reducing the pictorial elements, about abandoning the idea of hierarchically constructed composition, and about renouncing an individual will to expression: form and color are everything; the personality of the artist and his emotions recede behind their interaction. Albers' aesthetic goal is spiritually defined; it is about absolute form as art's exclusive purpose. At the same time, this form is grounded and based in its concrete production on rational procedures and a craft ethos. And these are also the aspects through which Albers had an impact on the American art movements of minimal and conceptual art, which began to take shape around 1960. As a teacher and an artist, Albers was an eminent mediator between Europe and his new home. Above all, the spirit of the Bauhaus experienced its clearest echo in America, a true renewal, through him. In the face of the expressive emphasis of abstract expressionism—which they felt to be artistically dated—artists like Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, Agnes Martin, Robert Ryman, and also Ad Reinhardt were looking for a new point of departure, and the model of Albers's art offered it to them. Albers' influence will be presented in the exhibition in its own room.

A further theme that the exhibition addresses can be described with the heading "Albers, the Spiritual Artist." Whoever encounters his works without preconceptions can find, despite all his discretion with regard to anything confessional, traces of a transcendental dimension: when the tangible and the material transforms in seeing into something incomprehensible that appears to open a numinous space. Albers himself once spoke of his *Homages* as twentieth-century icons, and, although he never spoke of it publicly, we also now know more about his self-understanding as a Catholic. Charles Darwent, author of the forthcoming first biography of Albers, has made a contribution to our catalog that presents this hardly examined side of his life and art.

A separate room of our exhibition brings selected pictures by Albers into dialogue with the icons of the Orthodox Church and two late-Gothic works of Christian sculpture. Next to them are photographic montages of ancient sacred architecture and art, which Albers made in the 1950s while he lingered twice in southern Germany. The experience of space in churches and the tenderness of Christ's and the saints' sculptural expression, how they face us in these images, is touching in its own way.

One may see it as a lucky coincidence that the Kulturstiftung Ruhr and the Alfried Krupp von Bohlen und Halbach-Stiftung are opening the doors of the Villa Hügel and offering to host an artist whose background was so closely connected to the Ruhr region. Albers received important inspiration from his homeland in the first decades of his life, inspiration that guided him in his later career path at the Bauhaus and in the United States. He grew up in the living tradition of a family of craftsmen and learned his pedagogical techniques as a teacher at the local public schools. Even in his old age, Albers emphasized how important the local culture's influence had been in his life. It had remained a steady guide throughout all the changes in his life's circumstances. His thankful response when the city of Bottrop offered to establish a museum devoted to his art is only one indication of this devotion.

Encounters with first-rate contemporary art, which was presented in the region at the beginning of the twentieth century, belonged to this early influence. At the time, there was no place for art in the world comparable to the Museum Folkwang in Hagen. Albers later understood his first visit to the museum in 1908 as an actual initiation experience. From then on, he would regularly visit the building and also found a conversation partner in Karl Ernst Osthaus, who established this pioneering

institution. In the Museum Folkwang, Albers encountered international modernism as a truly contemporary art, especially in the pictures by Paul Cézanne, which, for his whole life, remained the example of a painting that thematizes the logic of its own premises.

In the Museum Folkwang, Albers also observed the dialogue between the European avant-garde and the art of Africa, Oceania, and Central America. His interests in non-European artifacts was awakened here, and it formed his conviction that they are also part of a universal language of art. His path to Mexico, which would later make an ancient culture speak in the light of the present, actually began here.

That Albers' art is now moving into the Villa Hügel, a preeminent place in the industrial and cultural history of the Ruhr region, also appears to be an indication of the region's possible cultural vitality. Through the three figures of Osthaus, the sculptor Wilhelm Lehmbruck, and Albers, the Ruhr region made a distinctive contribution to early twentieth-century modern art, a contribution that could only develop here under these particular living conditions between industrial and rural small-town space. Art appeared here as a particularly strong agent of cultivation and enlightenment. Considering the still dominant historicism, it imparted a truly living, contemporary input.

Finally, in the name of the Josef Albers Museum, I would like to thank the Kulturstiftung Ruhr and the Alfried Krupp von Bohlen und Halbach-Stiftung for collaborating on this exhibition. Susanne Henle, Volker Troche, and Ute Kleinmann were always receptive hosts and conversation partners for me and my colleague Ulrike Growe when it came to organizing an exhibition on Josef Albers of the highest quality. I warmly thank Ulrike Growe, my cocurator, for the important ideas she brought to the exhibition and book. Our thanks also go to Richard Viktor Hagemann, who stood by our sides as an academic assistant.

Torsten Braun as the light designer and especially Uwe Fischer as the designer were irreplaceable advisers in arranging the exhibition in the rooms of the Villa. We are thankful that Albers' art is now able to shine in the context of this historical architecture in the necessary clarity.

Our thanks also go to the authors who composed texts for this catalog, which presents important insights that accent the previous view of Albers and his art in a new way.

We warmly thank Ingo Offermanns for the convincing design and Nicola von Velsen for her commitment as the editorial manager in the demanding production of the book.

That the exhibition can be presented in this form is thanks, not least, to the support of American and European lenders who were easily convinced of our idea of a retrospective on Albers's work in Germany. We join Susanne Henle and Volker Troche in expressing thanks to the lenders and think first of all of the contribution of the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, from whose collection of first-class work we were allowed to choose. An exhibition on Albers at this level would not have been possible without this partnership. Thanks are therefore most of all owed to our colleagues Nicholas Fox Weber, Brenda Danilowitz, and Jeannette Redensek—not only for this occasion but also for the many years of proven generosity and friendship.

Heinz Liesbrock

Honesty and Modesty
Josef Albers

Beginning from Nothing

Josef Albers was in many ways a child of his time. This especially applies to his resolute contemporaneity, an explicit turning away from tradition. He belonged to a generation of young people who grew up under the star of Nietzsche's philosophy and saw the culture that came down to them from their parents and grandparents as exhausted. Clinging to the past was forbidden. They were to overcome the sterile historicism that was limited to citing the styles of older epochs and could not find the power to ignite spiritual sparks from within their own time. "Tradition for tradition's sake," as Albers later said concisely, "is stagnation." Art's task was to address the actual questions of the present and

to represent them with a living language.[1] This also included the central goal that one should no longer understand the sphere of art as a self-contained reality separated from social questions but rather as located in the middle of life. The idea of art and life intertwined, no longer separate spheres, thus stood at the center of artistic modernism as it developed in the first decades of the twentieth century during Albers' youth. His idea of art—its saturation with reality, its responsibility toward concrete social experiences—can be understood in this context. One of his most important beliefs was thus: "In my paintings I have tried to make two polarities meet—independence and interdependence, as, for instance, in Pompeian art. . . . One must combine both being an individual and being a member of society. . . . And from all this, you may conclude that I consider ethics and aesthetics as one."[2] The basic rhythm of an ethics of art and life was the impulse for his entire work.

Albers was born in 1888 to a family of craftsmen in Bottrop in Westphalia, a small town on the northern edge of the Ruhr region that had originally been rural but then became a flourishing industrial city—albeit of a still modest sort—with the emergence of the coal industry in the second half of the nineteenth century. In this process, the native population became the numerical minority through the rapid influx of workers from Poland and Upper Silesia, who were attracted by the booming mines. Simple living conditions and hard physical labor prevailed. As the remnants of a common attitude toward life, Catholicism at least formed a bond between the old and new inhabitants. A bourgeois class representing affluence and culture was hardly present, so there weren't any local artistic activities. The money earned in the pits did not flow into poor Bottrop but rather to the larger cities in the vicinity where the companies that ran the mines were headquartered. For this reason, there were theaters and concert halls in nearby Essen or in Duisburg and Dortmund but not in Bottrop. This remained the case for a long time. In fact, a cultural institution was first founded there in 1976, long after the economic golden age of heavy industry had already passed. And this initiative also began outside of the city. It established the *Museumszentrum Quadrat*, to which the Josef Albers Museum was added a few years later. Albers, the son of the city he had left in 1920, posthumously bequeathed a treasure to it: a considerable part of his artistic estate, which represented his complete works from the beginnings to the late images of *Homage to the Square*. In the meantime, Albers, who emigrated from Germany to the United States in 1933, had become an international figure in the art world, a teacher and artist of entirely his own kind. Over the decades, he had transcended the limits of the sphere of life in his hometown and then remembered it at the end of his life with an extremely generous gesture. He had taken a long path to get there.

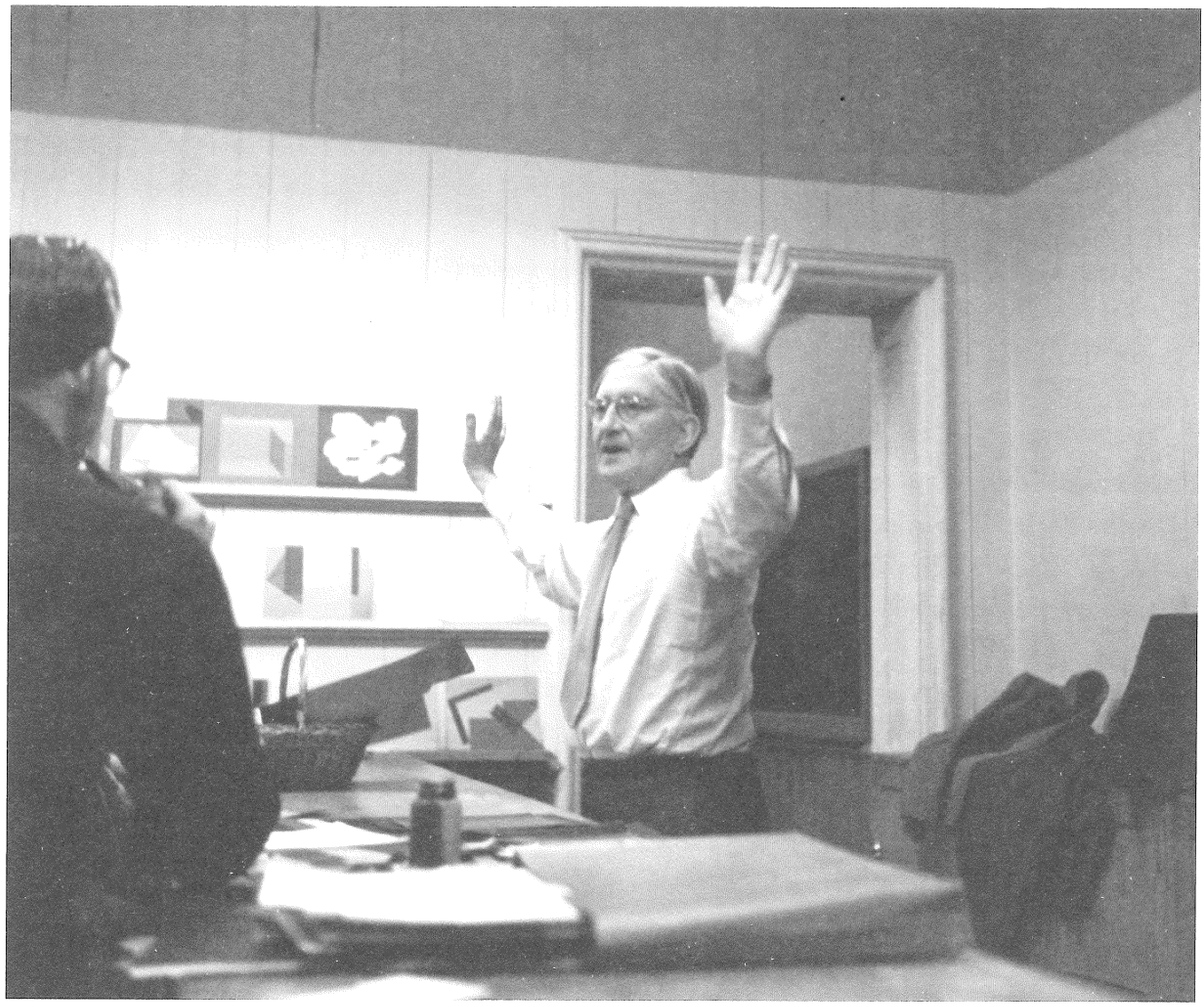
At first, one can see nothing in Albers' early life that suggests the calling of a painter. It initially seems hardly possible to perceive a coherent line connecting his background in a proletarian, petty-bourgeois milieu in Bottrop and his later life in the United States as a well-recognized artist and teacher who had taught at one of the country's top universities and had been acknowledged with numerous honorary doctorates from across the world. "Compared to his colleagues [at the Bauhaus], Albers came from nowhere and invented himself."[3] Nevertheless, this astonishing career had its own preconditions beyond personal fate; it was defined by an existential pattern that manifested itself again and again in different configurations. If one looks closer, one notices a rhythm of transgressing boundaries that characterized Albers' life journey. He left behind the accustomed circumstances that had become brittle, broke off connections, and turned his gaze decisively forward. He always lived, so it seems, entirely devoted to the moment, but when the moment to leave arose, he was able to let go and devote himself to something new. The movement of his life pointed inevitably forward, and he entrusted himself to it without reservation. It is as if Albers was predestined to one day become a citizen of the United States of Amer-

ica, that country whose people had broken down the bridges to their familiar living conditions and conquered a new world for themselves, their gaze turned from the east of the continent toward the west into the unknown. In this movement, there was no going back. Albers thus spoke, after he had lived a few years in America, of the nation's investigative and inventive spirit as its core virtues.[4]

Before Albers emigrated to the United States—at first driven away by political circumstances but also lured by the new possibilities that America promised—he had already twice redirected the course of his life. He entered the teaching profession as a young man, and in doing so, he was the first person in his family to pursue a vocation outside of the crafts; and he again entered new territory when he followed his actual calling to become an artist. To do so, he abandoned the economic security that his status as a Prussian civil servant had offered him. The period after the First World War—when almost all social, political, and also philosophical certainties seemed worn out—demanded that a person like Albers completely readjust his life compass. His strength was that he was able to stay true to himself during all the ruptures in his life. In the face of repeatedly new circumstances, he shed his skin but at the same time stayed confident in himself. His character was shaped by independence, and his background, as he stressed in later life, gave him an unusual self-confidence. This is because his convictions had been legitimized through personal experience. What he knew, he had worked out for himself. Restraint in appearance, clarity in style, and an immediate joy for living characterized his person to its core.

In choosing the teaching profession, Albers followed the urging of his father, who insisted on economic security for his son. But after ten years of teaching children, Albers followed a passion that was entirely his own and had seized him early, and he began training as an artist. Further education as an art instructor at the Royal School of Art in Berlin was a prelude to this. In 1919, he went to Munich to study with Franz von Stuck (1863–1928), who had earlier also instructed Kandinsky and Klee. Albers liked the city and the surrounding countryside, but he found Stuck's instruction disappointing and captive to the nineteenth century. But what Albers sought were ways to respond to the artistic problems of the present. The newly founded Bauhaus seemed to him to be the right place. Although at thirty-two years of age he was an unusually old student, he was quickly successful there. He again proved his independence and assertiveness when he decided to work with colored glass against the dictum of the faculty committee. But when everyone saw the results of his efforts, he was immediately entrusted with rebuilding the languishing glass workshop. Then, after the resignation of Johannes Itten (1888–1967) in 1923, he began teaching parts of the preparatory course under his own direction, and he gave the course a new basis that was less speculative and esoteric than Itten's ideas. In addition to his striking pedagogical genius, his competence in the crafts and his interest in everything practical were especially attractive to the school. In the committee of the other masters, all of whom had a decidedly artistic background, Albers became an independent figure whose qualities were respected. Probably no other artist of his generation was carried in his work by an awareness for craft material and processes as much as Albers.

As a child, Albers had the opportunity to observe blacksmiths, cobblers, joiners, and other craftsmen at work in their workshops in the neighborhood of his parents' home. But above all, he was influenced by his father and by his father's occupation. Asked later about the sources of his art, Albers answered tersely: "I came from my father, very much, and from Adam, that's all."[5] Here Albers retrospectively creates a founding myth for his art, a myth that he interweaves with images of his childhood and youth so as to make it more plausible. His father, Lorenz Albers (1859–1944)—himself the son of a carpenter—was a master painter who also indulged in artistic inclinations when he worked as a scenic painter for theaters. He possessed a rich spectrum of skills: he electrified his



[FIG. 1]

Josef Albers teaching his color course, Yale University, 1953
Photo by John Wheelock Freedman

house, took care of the water installation, and also knew how to produce stained glass. Albers seems to have learned his technical skills from his father, and he received his first public commission from a Catholic church, St. Michael's in Bottrop, to create a window in honor of the mother of God [ILL. P. 279]. Albers later respectfully called his father a tinkerer, a handicraft enthusiast and mender who knew how to find his way in every trade. Journeymen also lived with the family in his father's home. They were Albers' first teachers and showed him, for example, how to work with wood, how to cut gems, and how to paint. The young Albers was an eager student, who listened and watched attentively and soon tried things out himself: "I handled many things, which I learned to steal with my eyes."[6]

Here Albers speaks to the foundation of his later art. For him, every artistic activity is characterized by meticulousness, disciplined practice, and technical skill. Like a craftsman, the artist also has to carefully study his materials and the workmanship suited to them. As a result, Albers felt himself to be part of traditions that developed over many generations. Albers felt closer to the artists and anonymous craftsmen of the past than to the erratic and quickly changing ideas of modernism. To him, they seemed to be affectations of the mind that irresponsibly ignored the practical side of the artistic process. Whoever does not really grasp all the aspects of his work does not achieve the right spirit. The artistic imagination absolutely needs this practical foundation. Albers once described with open pride how a unique dimension of beauty arises from the mastery of all technical aspects of painting and their undisguised objectivity: what appears is "a healthy, durable paint surface of increasing luminosity."[7]

The arbitrary, the whim of the moment, and the exaggeration of the personal do not have any place in Albers' artistic ideas. He was averse to every emphasis on expression. Instead, he believed that the work resulted from regular practice, which was something like a spiritual exercise. *Homage to the Square*, the large picture series that kept him unceasingly busy for over a quarter of a century, is an example of such a focusing of his energy. The formal clarification thus achieved is cleansed of everything casual and accidental. For Albers, the antithesis to this was a certain type of artist, who disclosed his identity through gestures and clothing. His invectives against many positions of Abstract Expressionism in the United States, of course not against all of them, are forthright.[8] He criticizes the oversized canvas formats, whose artistic necessity he disputed, and an unreflected spontaneity that lacked a developed concept. As he saw it, color was spattered on them as if by a drunk. The energy of the work is driven more by alcohol than by a fully developed idea.

Yet the objectivity of his artistic process describes only one side of it. When Albers says that, in observing his father and other manual craftsmen and laborers, he acquired their skills like a thief, then he means that a special cognitive skill is inherent in the act of seeing. This seeing is fundamental and is capable of opening up a world. Everything is derived from it, in art and in life. When his students at Black Mountain College asked Albers right after his arrival in America what was the aim of his teaching, he answered simply, hardly able to speak English: "To open eyes."[9]

The idea of this seeing represents a challenge; nothing about it is natural or habitual. It demands sharpened senses, meticulousness, and concentration. Nothing is simply given to this seeing, and it leads us again and again to aporia, to irresolvable internal contradiction. We cannot believe what we see. As if subject to a magical transformation, the phenomena become unclear from one moment to the next. The more carefully we look, the more ambiguous they become. Albers was above all interested in what actually happens in consciousness with the visual data taken in through our eyes—this complex and unexplainable occurrence. Knowledge of "the discrepancy between physical fact and psychological effect,"[10] which always appears in seeing in the end, stood at the center of his thinking and spurred him on to ever-new experiments in paint-

ing. A philosophical and epistemological question that, in his case, is not, however, speculative but rather always arises again in the face of the picture's reality.

At the same time, color became his primary medium of expression with the advancing development of his art. Color shows us in a pictorially exemplary way the complexity, the paradoxical unfathomability of reality. For Albers, color has an unstable identity. In its appearance, it is deeply unreliable; its complexion changes from moment to moment. But this is a productive irritation. For in observing a color, one sees that the sensible given becomes ungraspable and mysterious. "Only appearances do not deceive," as Albers paradoxically formulated this fundamental insight into the character of color. This insight equally applies to the experience of art and life. The deeper we penetrate into the investigation of the colors and thereby observe their ability to change, the clearer their fundamentally deceptive character stands before our eyes. In this way, colors are parallel to our experience of the world, which in the end can never be based on a stable foundation.

Janus: An artist between Europe and the United States

Albers' gaze was turned to two continents and two generations of artists. His roots lie in the abstract art of early twentieth-century Europe and the trailblazing innovations of Paul Cézanne (1839–1906) and Piet Mondrian (1872–1944). But his successors are the artists of American minimalism and conceptual art, who carefully studied his art and found in it important pointers that helped show them how to formulate their own position in contrast to the overwhelming example of Abstract Expressionism. The traces of this reception are conspicuous in the work of Donald Judd (1928–1994), Sol LeWitt (1928–2007), Agnes Martin (1912–2004), and Frank Stella (b. 1936) to name a few of them. The engagement of American art with Albers is of considerable historical significance since it describes one of the last great turns in twentieth-century art. An individual chapter of our exhibition is therefore devoted to it (see p. 257ff).

For a long time, the uniqueness of Albers' work was not clearly recognized in Europe. One tended to see in it the intellectual concepts of the second generation of Constructivism and Concrete Art of the 1960s, but not its internal commitment to the sensuously comprehensible world. Above all, Albers' squares are, concern spirit, not the geometrically rational. Every form has its own particular meaning; in all of them, the sensory world is distinctly perceptible as an echo. "For me," as Albers stated, "a triangle has a face. A square, a circle—any elemental form—has features and therefore a 'look.' They act and provoke our reactions, just as complex forms, such as human or other faces and figures do."[11] But the square is not a goal in itself; rather, it above all gives a form to color and to the genuinely painterly organization of color. This form then enters into the background of our perception precisely because it appears so familiar and does not draw any attention to itself. It is the color that gives the pictures a specific individuality, in particular in *Homage to the Square*; in no way do the images appear as exchangeable elements of a series.

For a long time, and especially in Europe, Albers was often not understood as a genuine painter but rather as a theoretician whose works stand in as substitutes for ideas. He himself—and this belongs to the paradoxes of the artist—also encouraged this misunderstanding through a few statements. But whoever looks at Albers' images with a keen eye and compares them with one another and with the works of certain other painters of the twentieth century comes to conclusions that can surprise at first sight. Jeannette Redensek's essay in this catalog investigates, for example, the sensible or perceptible dimension of the series *Homage to the Square* in its development between 1950 and 1976, and illustrates how differentiated the actual artistic signature appears in individual paintings [ILL. P. 199ff]. It is not the invariable grid of the squares nested within each other that gives the images their identity, but rather the different arrangements of

colors and their particular application. Even though Albers works under the fundamental principle inexpression of by avoiding every gestural expressivity, the individual style in the application of color, its differentiated sensuousness, is unmistakable. Each of his images is animated by an individual breath.

Donald Judd and Paul Cézanne

One of the most impressive analyses of Albers' painting is by Donald Judd. This may at first astonish since in 1961 Judd himself gave up painting in favor of objects that no longer present an illusion of depth as in painting, which Judd considered to be an inherent lack in the genre. His objects no longer visually simulated the space but rather formed their own corporeal volumes in real space. Judd had an early interest in Albers' painting. Then in 1991, after initial early reviews of gallery exhibitions around 1960, he came to speak again about Albers in a substantial text that appeared on the occasion of an Albers exhibition at the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas. The text exhibits an explicit sympathy for Albers' painting that is all the more convincing because it feeds on a careful and independent observation of the pictures.

Judd emphasizes how decisively in *Homage to a Square* Albers realizes a unity that presents itself as natural to the viewer. It appears natural because it avoids figurative composition, insofar as the tradition of composition understood the balance of different elements on the surface plane. The images are nevertheless not neutral objects. On the contrary, the concentrically stacked squares take up the paint in an ideal manner. Judd shows himself to be an intimate connoisseur of painting and its history in his observations. His remarks are subtle. What fascinates him in Albers' handling of the paint are the tensions between an ethos of craft neutrality and a signature style that arises from it, that attention to the concrete application of paint by the painter that one characterizes into the nineteenth century as *peinture*. In Albers' case, so one could say, there is *expression under the conditions of inexpression*. It gives the paintings their unmistakable character. Let us listen to Judd: "The application of the paint in Albers' paintings is hardly mechanical. It is instead, quiet, enjoyable and matter-of-fact, the latter somewhat like the application in Malevich's paintings. It does at least two important things: it keeps the edges from being hard and turning into lines; it does not conceal the original surface, usually Masonite. This allows the surface to be definitely a surface while keeping it light in weight and light as light, since it is a little transparent."[12] Albers applied the paint in different degrees of thicknesses so that they also appear—depending on how clearly the white of the priming shines through—to contain light to different degrees. There is the paint as physical material—*paint as paint*—and there are the captivating *qualities* of different colors, in whose richness of appearance the painter Albers speaks. This exhibition is first and foremost about this language, the pictures' completely unique idiom. "Placing two colors next to each other excites me enormously,"[13] Albers said. In this sense, the images presented here speak of the appeal of immediate sensuousness and the conceptual rigor that goes alongside it. In Albers, intuition and construction go hand in hand.

Let us speak of the fruitful influence Albers had around 1960 on young American art and its innovative concepts; for him, Paul Cézanne's painting was a similarly great inspiration that guided him throughout his life. He already encountered the images of the Frenchman as a twenty-year-old in the Museum Folkwang and regularly studied them in the following decade in museums and galleries in Berlin and Munich. Albers viewed Cézanne as his teacher due to the pioneering innovation of his pictorial language but also as an artistic personality who concentrated solely on his own path and its development, who imitated no one and was undeterred by the many other voices in the tumult who sought attention with superficial effects. The example of this artist's existence was always on Albers' mind.[14] For, in his eyes, first-rate art could only arise from such an exemplary personal disposition, and for him that was all that mattered. "Cézanne got

into my bones,"[15] he stated in conversation in later years. According to Albers, Cézanne had set out into the open and freed himself from the certainties of the tradition through dedicated work. He left behind the stable spatial perspective as the focus of the image and led painting beyond what had been known until then; it became a labile structure of color spots which are parallel to the visible phenomena and at the same time constitute their own reality. In the same conversation, Albers said: "I was fascinated by Cézanne's organization of the color fields, how planes — areas of light and dark — touched or did not touch, had dissolved or abutted edges, and I was impressed by the independent articulation of the planes in reference to the image thus produced."[16] The world and its things are no longer depicted but rather newly arise as color "in parallel to nature," as Cézanne's dictum stated. In the image, the autonomy of color becomes an independent language that is capable of every statement—this essentially connects Albers with Cézanne even if they worked under different conditions. It is about the world as color.

Cézanne is also his model due to the striking significance of seeing that becomes the actual basis for formulating an image. Focusing sight for a long time, tracing the constant changes of the visible in all its nuances, and giving them a form—this is the task of art. It is about practicing a liberated seeing that does not hold onto seemingly authentic facts. The phenomena appear to someone who has learned to view them without presumptions, in a new light. Intuition and concept coincide. If one follows this perspective, then truth is actually visible.

America

When Albers arrived in New York in November 1933, he accepted an offer to become a teacher at Black Mountain College, North Carolina. It was a moment of liberation after the stressful conditions in Germany during the previous months. If one views his life in the United States in retrospect, then a quarter of a century of pedagogical work lay ahead of him, work that would grant him the highest reputation. At this point, the future of his own art was, however, still unclear.

At the Bauhaus, Albers particularly produced art that owed its craft and technical spirit to the institution. He worked in glass, designed furniture and other everyday objects, developed a font, and finally also devoted himself to photography. The utility of these works almost always played a role; they belonged to the field of applied arts. In the self-understanding of the Bauhaus, autonomous art had only a subordinate role. Nevertheless, three of the most important painters of the time taught at the institution: Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), Paul Klee (1879–1940), and Oskar Schlemmer. Albers held all of them in high regard his whole life long, personally and artistically, but he himself stopped painting when he entered the Bauhaus. Before this time, his painting was determined by figural representation and formally oriented on Expressionism, on Cézanne, Matisse, and Munch. But these are still the images of someone searching, and one may suspect that he gladly abandoned the figurative to follow the avant-garde dogma of abstraction, which was also dominant at the Bauhaus. Similarly, so one may assume, he would have felt inhibited to become active in painting again in the face of the three painters' strong presence.

This reserve toward painting dissipates in America. It does so, first of all, for three reasons of an entirely practical nature. At Black Mountain, where Albers and his wife lived after a short stay in New York, there weren't any technical workshops, such as a joiner's workshop or a darkroom, which would have allowed him to simply continue the Bauhaus working routine. But a change in his inner disposition appears to be more important for the revival of painting as a possibility for artistic expression. The encounter with the rich landscape of North Carolina was an immediate inspiration. Mountain ranges, lakes, and an extremely lush flora overpowered Albers' senses and had a liberating effect with regard to the technical, urban spirit of the Bauhaus. They sharpened his gaze for the vividness

of what was immediately given in the landscape. His artistic power of imagination was aroused and looking for new possibilities of expression. In this situation, painting, with its easily accessible materials and the haptic immediacy of oil paints, found a new significance for him.

And a further event followed: in the winter of 1935, two years after their arrival in America, Josef and Anni Albers set off for Mexico. Mexico—its landscape, its colors, the artistic relics of vanished cultures from a pre-Hispanic era, and also the country's people—became for both of them the greatest inspiration in their lives. For Albers, Mexico also meant a step in a new artistic direction. This step built on earlier experiences in Germany, but they first came to fruition here. What Albers the artist means for us today developed here. The idea of the image that he worked out under the impression of Mexico had an entirely unique value, and it would lead, in the end, to *Homage to the Square*. For that reason, a separate essay in this volume is devoted to Mexico and its extraordinary importance for Albers (see p. 140ff).

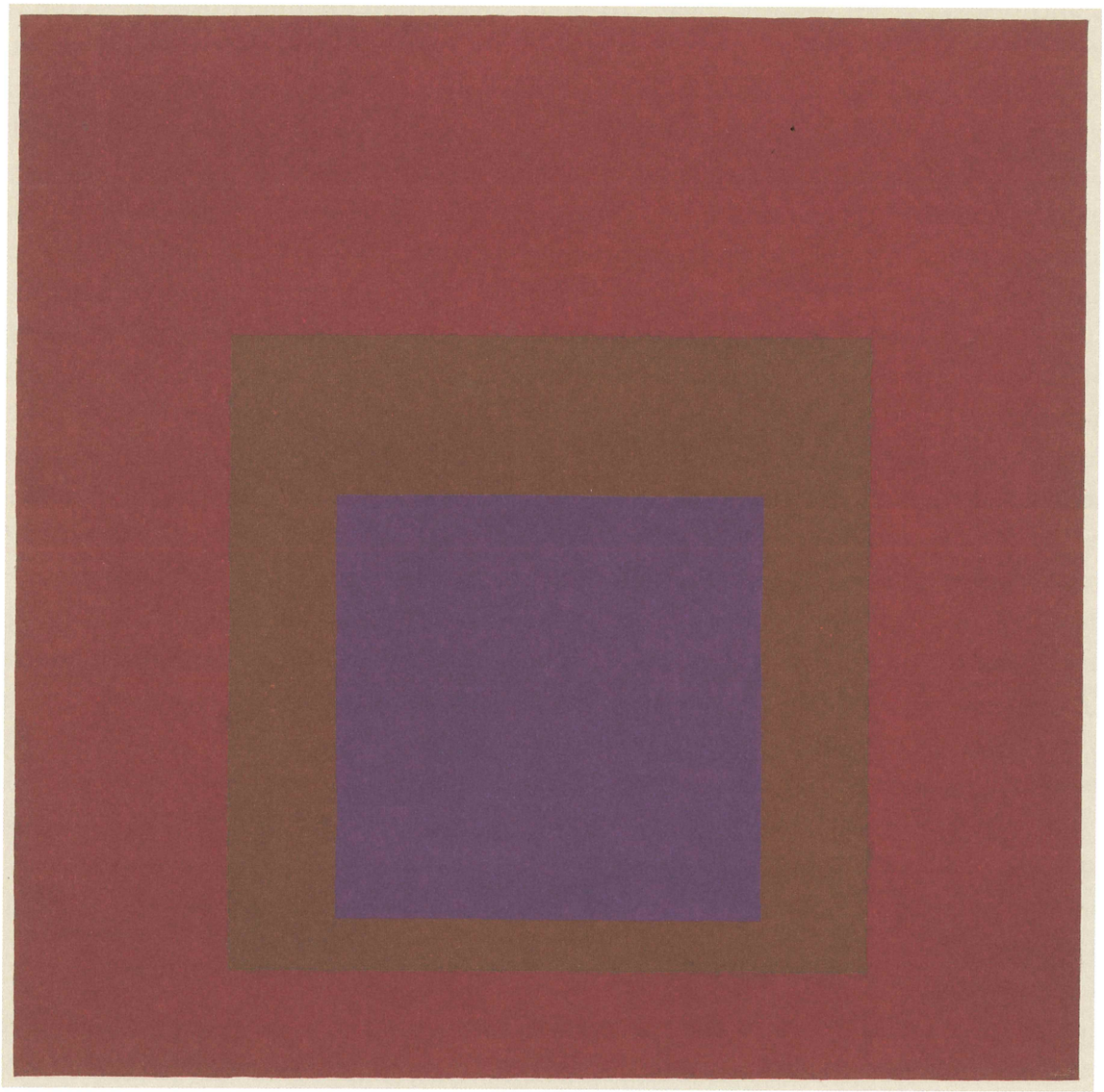
In the summer of 1950, Albers painted the first image of *Homage to the Square*. It quickly became clear that he had found the exact viable artistic form that would accompany him until the end of his life. The appeal of that form was enduring; he would produce more than two thousand works of this type.

The title of the series can be misunderstood since it seems to suggest that these images are about a formal, linear question that is inherent to the geometric figure of the square. But the actual theme is color: in its sensual richness, its unforeseeable forms of appearance, in the precisely tuned conversation that the three or four colors of an image enter into with one another. It is a carefully considered dialogue, whose results can, however, also surprise the author himself. Nowhere did Albers so emphatically formulate his deep fascination with the inexhaustible phenomenality of color as here when he speaks of the square as a plate on which he serves his fascination about color. To him, color is the medium of a comprehensive sensuous force of attraction.

Many have speculated about the origin of the both simple and complex square image pattern. The impressions that Albers collected of the ancient architecture of Italy, such as the Roman Pantheon, but also especially on the trip to Mexico are always drawn on to illuminate this question. In *"Farbenfabeln"* in this catalog, Jeannette Redensek presents the most plausible explanation when she analyzes and interprets in detail the artistic climate, the formal questions that occupied Albers in the late 1940s (see p. 172ff).

Beyond all historical analyses, it should be noted that the square possesses an immediate force in Albers: a shining sensuous clarity and restrained monumentality. The square leads our gaze into a state of calm that makes it possible for the movement of color in the image to answer us. Color and form relate to one another here in an ideal manner. Judd describes this interaction in *Homage to the Square* in a particularly illuminating way: "In Albers' paintings there is very much a simple, suitable and natural wholeness to the arrangement of squares within squares, which is one of the best ideas in the world, one which provided enormous versatility and complexity. This arrangement is easily at one with the color. It's amazing that it so quietly produces such brilliance. . . . [Earlier] I was most impressed by the color, so that I neglected, underestimated, the singularity and efficacy of the concentric squares. They of course easily allow the color to be so diverse."[17]

With the idea of the square, Albers is able to articulate timeless fundamental questions in a sensuously immediate manner. They examine the purpose of our existence within a cosmic order. The squares allude to the spheres of heaven and earth and the four cardinal directions. Invisible diagonal lines lead from the center of the picture plane to the corner points, which allows one to imagine the human body with wide open arms and legs. "Art is looking at us,"[18] as Albers formulated it in a seemingly paradoxical way. And so the presence of peo-



[9]

Homage to the Square: Saturated, 1951
Oil on masonite
23 ¼ x 23 ⅜ in. (59 x 59.3 cm)

ple as a viewing counterpart is inscribed in a peculiar way. Let us listen to Gottfried Boehm: "What is meant is the sinking of the center of gravity, which seems to compromise the surfaces on the lower edge. The geometric organization of the image creates space for the experience of heaviness, which it does not produce itself. Instead the viewer projects it onto the image. As a seeing being, the viewer is not only the eye but also the body that feels what weight and heaviness are, what it means to hold oneself in a vertical line—that is, upright—or to lie on a horizontal plane. The squares are stripped of all figurality, and yet they have a foot and head, a bottom and top, which are realized by every viewing person. This is a reflection of the viewer's own experiences, a reflection that comes out of the image to meet her."

With the square, Albers creates a carefully calculated proportional system. It establishes an ordering framework that is necessary to make color communicate as an energetic power. It requires the rationality of a geometric arrangement to let color become, in its elementary force, the image. Calculation and intuition intertwine. Albers was deeply fascinated by this balance between supposed opposites, and it drove him to ever-new pictorial solutions. *Homage to the Square* is a series with an immense number of parts in which the individual images each mean *the same thing* in a different way. Albers does not want to definitely solve a precisely defined question like a scientist. This would contradict his understanding of reality.[20] In its involutions, color takes part in the complexity of the world; it allows them to become vivid. For that reason, Albers' best-known dictum reads: "Color is the most relative medium in the world."[21] Each of the images represents one *perspective* that is valid but not exclusive since there are always also other possibilities for representing reality. New questions always arise from the answers. This was the drive for Albers, to not let up on the intensity of work. For him, it was an existential necessity that did not end, "a question of life and death. [. . .] It's a game which takes up ten hours of every day, an endless game. I'm like a fisherman who pulls up his net every hour to see what's in it. I need ten centuries millions and millions of squares."[22]

In Albers' hands, color becomes a universal bearer of expression that is capable of saying everything. Accordingly, there are also no binding rules for deriving the compilation of the individual tones in an image, such as, for example, the parameters of complementary contrasts.[23] For Albers, such conventions no longer had any of the validity they still possessed in nineteenth-century thinking about color, in Goethe, for example. The symbolic interpretation of colors representing moods was also alien to him. His idea of beauty was not determined by simple points of harmony. That seemed too narrow to grasp the vast communicative capability of color. In his eyes, every color could, in principle, enter with any of the others into an interesting, vital connection if certain proportional relations between the colors were observed. His images also often use color combinations, which at first sight appear to clash or to be simply pallid, but which then allow a particular visual intensity to arise. Albers loved to let seemingly uninteresting colors appear resplendent by juxtaposing other colors against them.[24]

In Albers, the kingdom of colors is one of freedom, but it never becomes arbitrary. It is about a vital total tone of the colors, which fit together into an image that appears to us as a specific energy. The condition for the successful image is a balance of the individual voices, which only together create a unified tone. This also refers to the ethical and social perspective of Albers' art described at the beginning. The individual colors maintain their identity and also belong to the overall structure of the image. For Albers, ethics and aesthetics are, as I have said, one and the same.

1 Josef Albers, "Present and/or Past," in: Design, 47, no. 8 (April 1946), 16–17, 27, and here 27.

2 Quoted in Katherine Kuh, The Artist's Voice: Talks with Seventeen Artists, (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 11–12.

3 Nicholas Fox Weber, The Bauhaus Group: Six Masters of Modernism, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 259.

4 "Why must exploration and inventiveness, two American virtues, too, play such a minor part in our schools?" Josef Albers, "Address for the Black Mountain College Meeting at New York," 12 June 1940, quoted in Eva Diaz, "The Ethics of Perception. Josef Albers in the United States," Art Bulletin, 90, no. 2 (June 2008), 260–285, here 262.

5 Quoted in Weber, The Bauhaus Group, 260.

6 ibid.

7 Josef Albers, quoted in Paul Overy, " 'Calm Down, What Happens Happens Mainly without You' (Josef Albers)," in: Getulio Alviani ed., Josef Albers, (Milan: l'Arcaedizioni, 1988), 235–237, here 235.

8 The offer of a position at Black Mountain College to Willem de Kooning (1904–1997) was thanks to Albers, who viewed him as an important painter.

9 "And the students asked me what I was going to do. I said, and stuttered, 'To open eyes.' And this became the rule for my life." Oral History Interview with Josef Albers, 1968 June 22–July 5, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

10 Quoted in Elaine de Kooning, "Albers Paints a Picture," in: Art News, 49, no. 7, pt. 1 (November 1950), 40–43, here 40.

11 Quoted in de Kooning, "Albers Paints a Picture", 41.

12 Donald Judd, "Josef Albers," in: Josef Albers, (Cologne: Distel Verlag, 1991), 7–24, here 14–15.

13 Quoted in Jean Clay, "Albers. Josef's coats of many colours," in: Realités, March 1968, 64–69, here 64.

14 "What I try to advise is sincere work and non-competition with anybody else than with yourself. It's easy to imitate somebody else's dancing. It's easy to imitate somebody else's dancing. But to find your own dancing, to find . . . your own voice. That has taken the real ones, like Cézanne, most of his life." Quoted in Frederick A. Horowitz, Brenda Danilowitz, Josef Albers: To Open Eyes. The Bauhaus, Black Mountain College, and Yale, (London and New York: Phaidon Press, 2006), 244.

15 Quoted in Margit Rowell, "On Albers' Color," in: Artforum, 10, no. 5 (January 1972), 26–37, here 30.

16 Ibid.

17 Judd, "Josef Albers", 10.

18 "Art is not to be looked at—art is looking at us." Josef Albers, quoted in Overy, "Calm Down", 236.

19 Gottfried Boehm, "Der Zauber des Quadrats. Über Josef Albers," lecture at the Josef Albers Museum Quadrat Bottrop, 29 June 2008.

20 "And why do I paint squares since 1959, in the same design, in the same arrangement? Because I do not see that there is, in any visual articulation, one final solution." Oral History Interview with Josef Albers.

21 Quoted in Clay, "Albers: Josef's coats of many colours", 68.

22 Ibid.

23 "Not accepting harmony is the final aim of all color, and not submitting to the theory that certain constellations within the system of a color wheel or a color solid provide harmony, we believe that any combination of colors in discord as well as concord, can produce esthetic experience, provided that their quantities – the amounts applied – are properly related. And for that, fortunately, there are no final rules so long as color appreciation depends on preference and expectation." Josef Albers, Search Versus Re-Search, (Hartford, CT: Trinity College Press, 1969), 22.

24 "I like to take a very weak color and make it rich and beautiful by working on its neighbors. What's gloomier than raw Siena? Now look at what I've done to it there: It's shining and alive, like an actor on the stage. Turning sand into gold, that's my life and aim." Quoted in Sam Hunter, "Josef Albers: Prophet and Presiding Genius of American Op-Art," in: Vogue, 15 October 1970, 172.