

‘The Better Form’ Josef Albers’s Idealistic Concept of Art Reveals its Socio-Cultural Function

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Abstract

With the aim of teaching and practicing art for the good or moreover the better, Josef Albers proves to be an idealist. At the same time, he confirms with this conviction that art can also arouse the opposite. This conviction is already evident in the grammatical form of the term, which proves that art is functional or a technique for socio-cultural applications, whether good or bad. In the presentation of the political and philosophical background of this idea as well as in the analysis of Josef Albers’s ‘artistic research’ on the artistic means as cultural techniques, this assumption is to be proved by the essay.

Political backgrounds to the ‘better form’ as opposed to ‘the worse form’

It was Max Bill who, in the 1950s, invented the well-known term ‘The Good Form’ at the Bauhaus successor institution, the Ulm School of Design in Germany. From 1969 to 1992, the official design award of the Federal Republic of Germany was listed under this name. With this idea, Bill joined originally Josef Albers, whom he had already invited before the completion of the new building for first preparatory design courses in 1953/54 and again in 1955. For Bill, however, not only the idealistic ideals of Albers were important, but his affiliation with the Bauhaus, where from 1923 until its closing in 1933 he was the teacher of the preparatory course, the so-called *Vorkurs*. Also, Albers introduced the Bauhaus concept later from 1933 to 1949 as Artistic Director of the famous Reform College at Black Mountain, and finally from 1950 (until 1961) with the appointment as the founding director of the Department of Design also at Yale University in the USA. All this made Albers the ideal candidate for reform design education in Germany.



Figure 1: Inge Aicher-Scholl, Josef Albers and Otl Aicher
on the terrace of the Ulm School of Design in summer of 1955.
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The importance for Albers himself to focus on the ‘better form’ lied in his belief as well as in that of Bill’s and the other two founders of the Design School Inge-Aicher-Scholl and Otl Aicher to pass on this idea to design students, so that they later take on a valuable and responsible job in society (fig. 1). Already shortly after his emigration to the USA in 1933 Albers expressed this conviction. It formed the conceptual basis about teaching at Black Mountain Reform College, to which he and his wife Anni Albers were called. That is why he wrote in the second edition of the university's own journal, the Bulletin of 1934:

“to understand the meaning of form is the indispensable preliminary condition for culture. Culture is the ability to select or to distinguish the better, that is [...] the more meaningful form, the better appearance, the better behavior. Therefore, culture is a concern with quality.”¹

It is obvious that this basic consideration for 'the better form' was coming up after the tyranny of the National Socialists in Germany. It came into focus because the regime did not only drive away from the Bauhaus from Weimar (1919-1925) and Dessau (1925-1932) but stormed it at its last station in Berlin in 1933 with Police and SA-troops, and thus closed it forever; just as Josef and Anni Albers personally experienced it. Against this background, the concept of founding a sort of New Bauhaus at Ulm was driven by the idea to contribute to a new democratic education that had been massively repressed by the National Socialist regime. However, another personal reason related to the previous one was important especially for Inge Aicher-Scholl, but not only for her. It concerned the fate of their siblings Hans and Sophie Scholl. As members of the resistance movement *Weiße Rose* (White Rose), the two students were executed in 1943 for the dropping of leaflets at the University in Munich.

Exemplarily, this gruesome event expresses a fate that continues to move Germany and is discussed in class at schools until today. Insofar, it was not only the suppression of the Bauhaus but as well the persecution of dissenters be it students or artists in the sense of a modern iconoclasm² as 'entartet' or degenerate, which elicited the will of doing something constructive to change the situation after World War II in Germany. This change of situation seemed all the more necessary because these actions of the National Socialist regime make clear that she was well aware of the influence not only of responsible thinking and acting personalities but also of the arts on life. Her own style of propaganda speaks of it. This far-reaching assumption can be underlined by Adolf Hitler's own artistic experience, who was intensively concerned with painting from 1903 to 1914 and always convinced of his faculties as an artist.³ His sense for (ab)using artistic strategies for propaganda purposes speaks in favor of their influence on life. Seeing this, the historian Saul Friedländer said, that we have to accept aesthetic categories as "certain basic elements of the aesthetic-emotional temptation of the Hitler regime."⁴

Philosophical backgrounds to 'the better form' opposed to the 'worse form'

Against this political background, it becomes apparent, that with the emphasis on 'the better form' Albers set itself apart from 'the worse form' of National Socialism. Thus, behind the idea of design as 'the better form' were accordingly idealistic goals, which stand in one line with a philosophy that is important for European Humanities that started in Antiquity by Plato and is followed by the philosopher of the Enlightenment Immanuel Kant. This tradition is convinced of the true, the good and the beautiful as necessary guiding ideas of society.⁵ Thus, Kant warned against abusing the arts as "machines of persuasion" ("*Maschinen der Überredung*").⁶ With this concern, he stands in one line with Plato, who, like Kant, advocated that the arts should not be tied to the needs and purposes of man, but to the truth and the good, which ultimately can only be attributed to the divine. As a "true rhetorical speech" and as a "symbol of the moral good" ("*Symbol des Sittlich-Guten*") the arts were eventually rehabilitated by both, Plato, as Ernesto Grassi showed it, and Kant.⁷ Ultimately in line with this concept, Albers finally said in 1958: "Concluding: I dare to forecast. It will be seen again that beauty is more than outside surface make-up – that beauty is virtue."⁸

It is noteworthy that the approaches of these philosophers already show that there is a long tradition that knows very well that the arts are functional and therefore techniques. This knowledge is astonishing because in Europe today there is a firm conviction that the arts are good at the core and thus deeply connected to the beautiful. According to this approach, which is based on aesthetic feelings, they cannot influence life, as the philosopher, Sabine Döring has shown.⁹ Contrary to this, both the mentioned philosophical tradition and Albers deny this. Instead, they assume that the arts affect society. The starting point for this is that they evaluated the excitement of aesthetic feelings differently. Plato spoke of the possibility of art to arouse a "musically enthusiastic" ("*musischen enthousiasmos*") for something. That is why he rejected her. So, he assumed that the arts unconsciously could elicit feelings for something. But this possibility should not be used by humans but reserved for the divine.¹⁰ Kant as well said, it is the ability of art to raise an agreeable "aesthetic feeling" instead of a "reflective aesthetic

judgment" ("*ästhetisch reflektiertes Urteil*"), which is critical. That is the reason why it can be abused for evil instead of good.¹¹ When Albers spoke of 'the better form', he saw the same possibilities. That is because talking about 'the better form' only makes sense if there is a 'worse form'. Against this background, however, Albers did not focus on the aesthetic feelings but their artistic premises. That is the artistic order of form and color. In his opinion, it is ultimately the composition which is responsible for arousing aesthetic feelings, be it for the good or the bad. The design of forms according to the theme is a technique and can thus be used for both higher ideas and fascist ideology. That ultimately means that form is functional. Albers, therefore, focused on the analysis of artistic means and their way of influencing people. That explains very well, why it was so important for him to search for 'the better form'. For the effects of the artistic means challenge the viewer in a particular way, as Stephan Schmidt-Wulfen emphasized after Saul Friedländer:

"[...] because there is a conflict between rational knowledge and visual experience that can only be solved in two ways. Either through the sense of responsibility of each individual who has to answer for his seduction. Or by the cancellation of the moral offer that these images make him, in which the painter and his art are condemned."¹²

Of course, Albers also acknowledged these conclusions. However, he saw his task not in the enlightenment of the beholder, but in teaching the designer. In the light of what Friedländer already saw, he was more concerned with providing design students with the basics of a 'better form' so that they can take on valuable and responsible work in society. That was due to his belief that design methods are techniques. They are suitable for socio-cultural applications. Ultimately, it depends on what the designers use it for, good or bad. The purposes for which the artistic techniques are intended ultimately depend on society, or more precisely on the individual designer, who should know that. Thus, Albers says in 1935: "To say it essentially: Everything has form, and every form has meaning. The ability to select this quality is culture."¹³

Artistic Research: Experimenting with material,
form and color as functional prerequisites of images
to the realization of 'the better form'

It is consistent, that Albers's idea of 'the better form' determined not only his thinking and teaching but his artistic work too. Thus, the over 2000 variations of the Homages to the Square since 1950 can be understood as offers, to connect us with their perfect, harmoniously coordinated color spaces and to dissolve ourselves in them. In doing so every time our feelings are addressed in different but always harmonic ways. That is because colors and forms affect us. Due to Albers's ideal, it is evident, and they should affect us for the better (fig. 2-3).

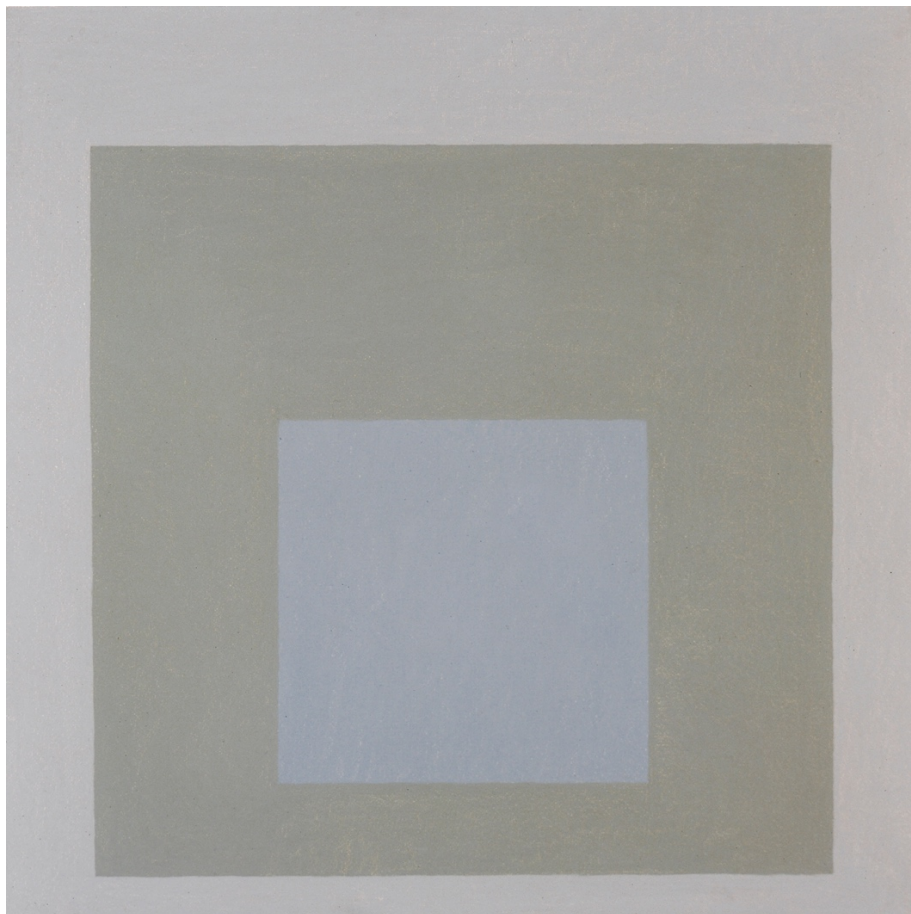


Figure 2: Josef Albers, Homage to the Square, White Nimbus, 1964. Oil on masonite, 122 x 122 cm.
Josef Albers Museum Quadrat Bottrop © Anni & Josef Albers Foundation

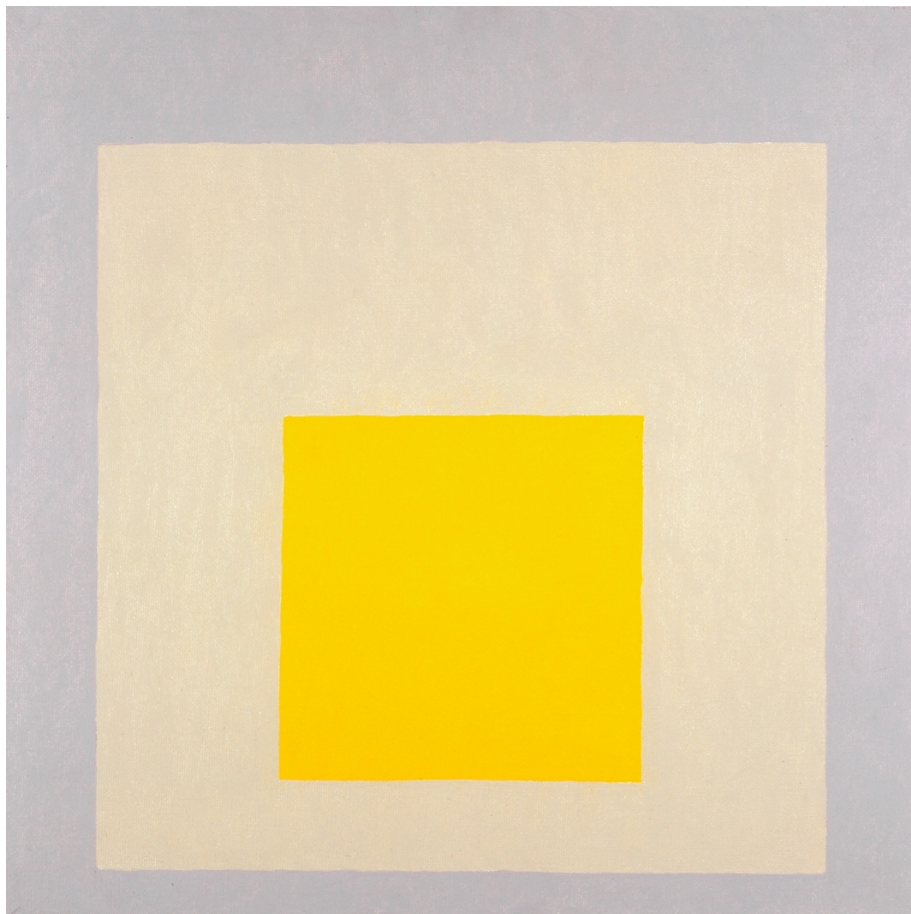


Figure 3: Josef Albers, Homage to the Square, Reticence, 1965. Oil on masonite, 80,7 x 80,7 cm.
Josef Albers Museum Quadrat Bottrop © Anni & Josef Albers Foundation.

Looking back, Albers began experimenting with these effects of colors and forms with his own work from 1932, at his last year at Bauhaus in Berlin. It had been many so-called Treble Clef with which he experimented at first. When we look at them, each one has the same shape, but remarkably the form of the treble clef changes respectively with the chosen colors. These changes in color effect that sometimes the form seems to belong to the ground whereas in others it becomes a different and thus new figure (fig. 4-5).



Figure 4: Josef Albers, Treble Clef "G7", 1935. Gouache on paper, 36,5 x 20,5 cm.
Josef Albers Museum Quadrat Bottrop © Anni & Josef Albers Foundation



Figure 5: Josef Albers, Treble Clef "G4", 1935. Gouache on paper, 36,5 x 20,5 cm.
Josef Albers Museum Quadrat Bottrop © Josef & Anni Albers Foundation.

Therefore, an old assumption by Albers's colleague at Bauhaus Wassily Kandinsky, with whom Albers associated a lifelong friendship, seems to be correct: Through the composition of color and form, "the inner qualities" ("*die inneren Eigenschaften*") of the artistic means come to sound in the beholder as a lively interplay, that the artist can trigger:

"The color is the key. The eye is the hammer. The soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand that purposefully vibrates the human soul with this or that key. So, it is clear that the color harmony must rest only on the appropriate touch of the human soul. This basis should be called the principle of inner necessity."¹⁴

This understanding of art by Kandinsky and moreover of the Bauhaus was described by the former already in 1911 in *About the Spiritual in Art*. His second book about linear principles *Point and Line to Plane* appeared in 1926 at the Bauhaus in Dessau. This concept about the constructing and the effects of artistic means of color and form became fundamental for Albers. Far-reaching for his own approach and art theoretical research he brought this concept together with its material prerequisites. Both – the material presuppositions of material, color and form and their arousing effects that base on artistic constructing methods – were, therefore, the subject of his courses.¹⁵

In the Bauhaus period from 1923 until 1932, the courses were still limited to the investigation of the material conditions. Later, in the Black Mountain College from 1933 to 1949 and at Yale University from 1950 to 1961 he integrated the study of the color conditions. Also, this expanded concept became an integral part of his writings. In 1934, he already presented the university community his own concept of art and instruction in his first essay *Concerning Art Instruction* in the Bulletin of the Black Mountain College. So, that was long before his well-known book about *Interaction of Color* appeared in 1963, which was translated in numerous languages. In this early essay, the essential points of his concept were already becoming evident. He already distinguished in this essay between 'material' and 'matière', which he later summarized in an easier understandable pair of terms in 'factual fact' and 'actual fact' of artistic means. So, he wrote:

"*Matière* studies are concerned with the appearance, the surface (epidermis) of material. Here we distinguish structure, facture, texture. We classify the appearances according to optical and tactile perception. We represent them by drawing and other means. In a combination of exercises, we examine the relationship of different surface qualities. Just as the color reacts to and influences color in contrast or affinity so one 'matière' influences another. Material studies are concerned with the capacity of materials. We examine firmness, looseness, elasticity; extensibility, and compressibility; folding and bending in short technical properties. These studies in connection with the mathematical inherence of form result in construction exercises. With these we try to develop an understanding and feeling for space, volume, dimension; for balance, static and dynamic; for positive and active, for negative and passive forms. We stress the economy of form, that is the ratio of effort to effect."¹⁶

Only in 1946/47, in his second Sabbath year, when he traveled with his wife Anni through the southwestern territories of the USA and Mexico did he find time and leisure to discuss with his own work these questions concerning the relationship of the 'factual fact' and the 'actual fact.' The simple mud huts of the Mexicans, the so-called adobes rekindled his interest in solving this problem. His observation that the always same rectangle geometry of the buildings seems to change when painted in different colors caught his eyes at first. There, the same effects he early recognized in Berlin become obvious.

The factual situation is another than the appearance of it. Driven by the idea to compare the results, he started to structure his working processes very clearly. In contrast to his first attempts with the Treble Clef, this time he started more systematically than before with the so-called Variants or Adobes (fig. 6-7). There is only one suitable expression for the systematic way working he has introduced, which is currently being discussed in art and design colleges: Albers practiced artistic research.

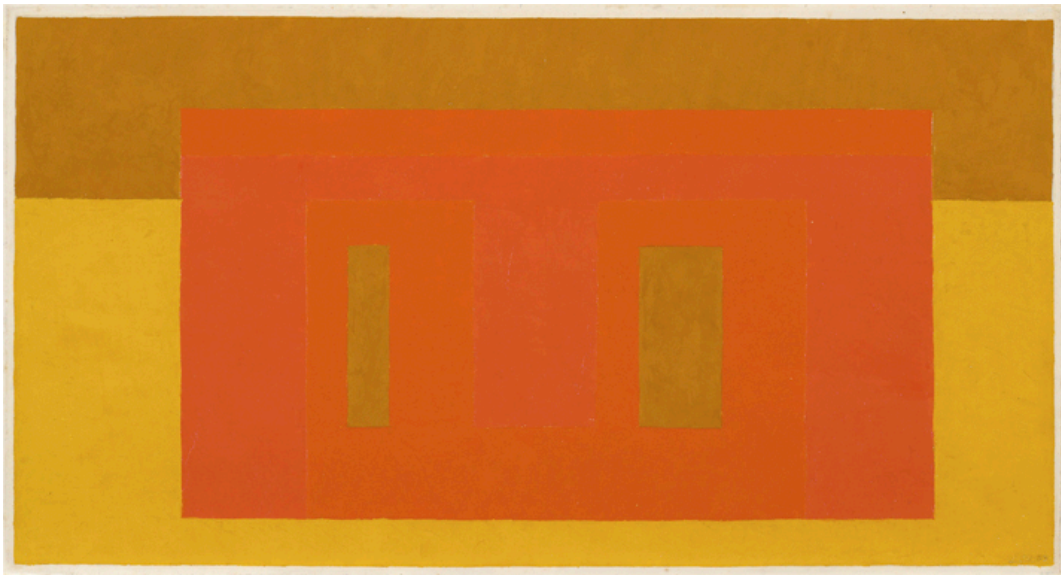


Figure 6: Josef Albers, Variant/Adobe, Southern Climate, 1948-53. Oil on masonite, 31,1 x 57,2 cm.
Josef Albers Museum Quadrat Bottrop © Anni & Josef Albers Foundation

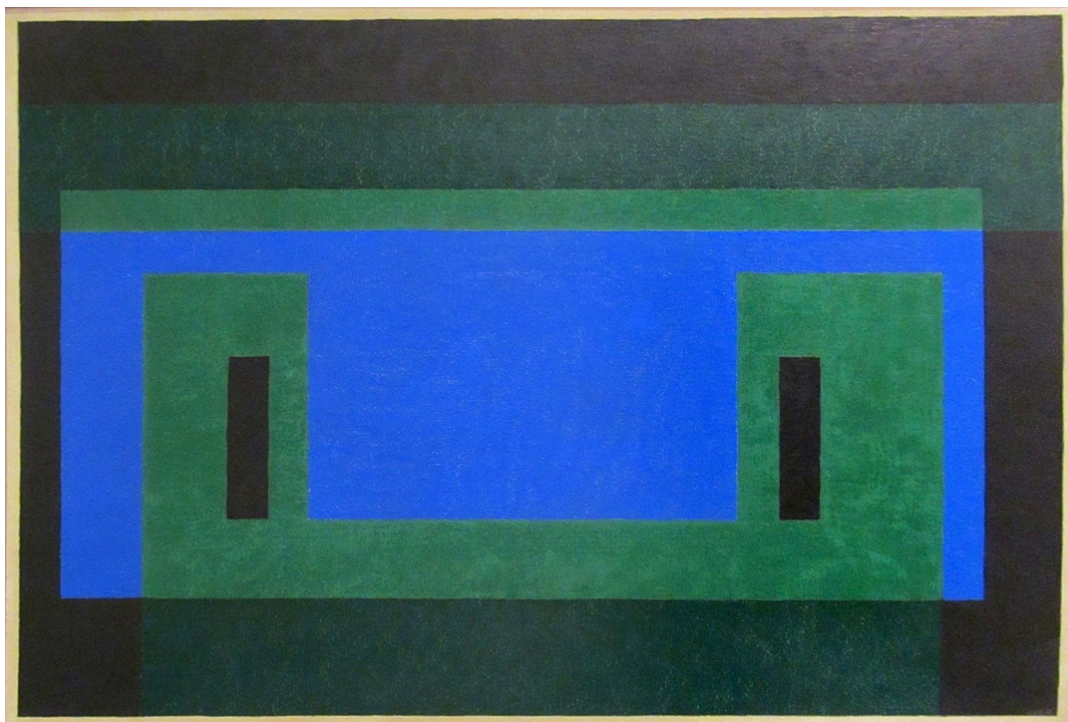


Figure 7: Josef Albers, Blue Front, 1948.
Photo by Rob Corder. February 21, 2019. Licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0.

Given this interest, he began to plan his painting boards in advance on graph papers. He calculated the dimensions of the buildings as rectangle shapes with two windows or entrances. Then he transferred the plan proportionately on masonite boards. He then pressed the colors directly from the tube onto the board but chose different ones for each variant. Therefore, each of the so-called Variants or Adobe series is based on the same area ratio, but with different colors. The results made it clear for him: each variant affects us differently.

The 'factual fact' of systematic construction does not match the 'actual fact' of the color effect. Each image has the same surface system but is still different. That is due to the color rules which do not have to be confused with the color system of Newton. They do not depend on physical, but anthropological conditions and thus on the psychological effects of seeing. Albers systematically discussed its effects with his work.¹⁷ As an example, the system of complementary or simultaneous color contrasts shall be introduced. Depending on the intensity and the brightness of the red color, it creates its complement of green in the eye of the beholder and vice versa. The same effect can be observed in both blue and orange as well as in yellow and purple. Depending on this rule, for example, a neon red creates a bright neon green. Based on the material prerequisites of the chosen form and color, their effects affect the viewer. Furthermore, it influences the picture's theme; the process of perception gives it a special meaning.

A few years later, starting in 1950, when he went from Black Mountain College to Yale University, he had some time to work independently. He used it to start a new series; this is the well-known group of Homages to the Square, which until his death in 1976 was most important for him. It can be seen as the culmination of this experimental approach to culturally relevant aspects of his work. So, he became a famous artist at the age of 62. This series has been exhibited over six years in both North and South America as well as Europe including Germany. In New York's MoMA in 1971, he was the first living artist to have a solo exhibition. At this time, he was present in print and television media and was invited as a visiting professor to numerous universities. In total, he received 14 honorary doctorates. Behind this background, Ulrike Growe of the Josef Albers Museum in his birthplace in Bottrop in West Germany once concluded in an interview, that nobody at that time could avoid Albers when he was interested in color.¹⁸ As can be seen in one of these Homages to the Square, called Festive of 1951, a blue inner square is surrounded by a lighter blue and finally an orange square (fig. 8). Compared to the blue square, the brighter blue frame calms the expression of the first through the complementary contrast of the orange. Their powers seem to be balanced in that they all radiate bright and clear. Also, this is mediated by the relatively small format of 52 to 52 centimeter. However, in a larger format, the complementary color effects would almost overwhelm us because of their extensive presence.

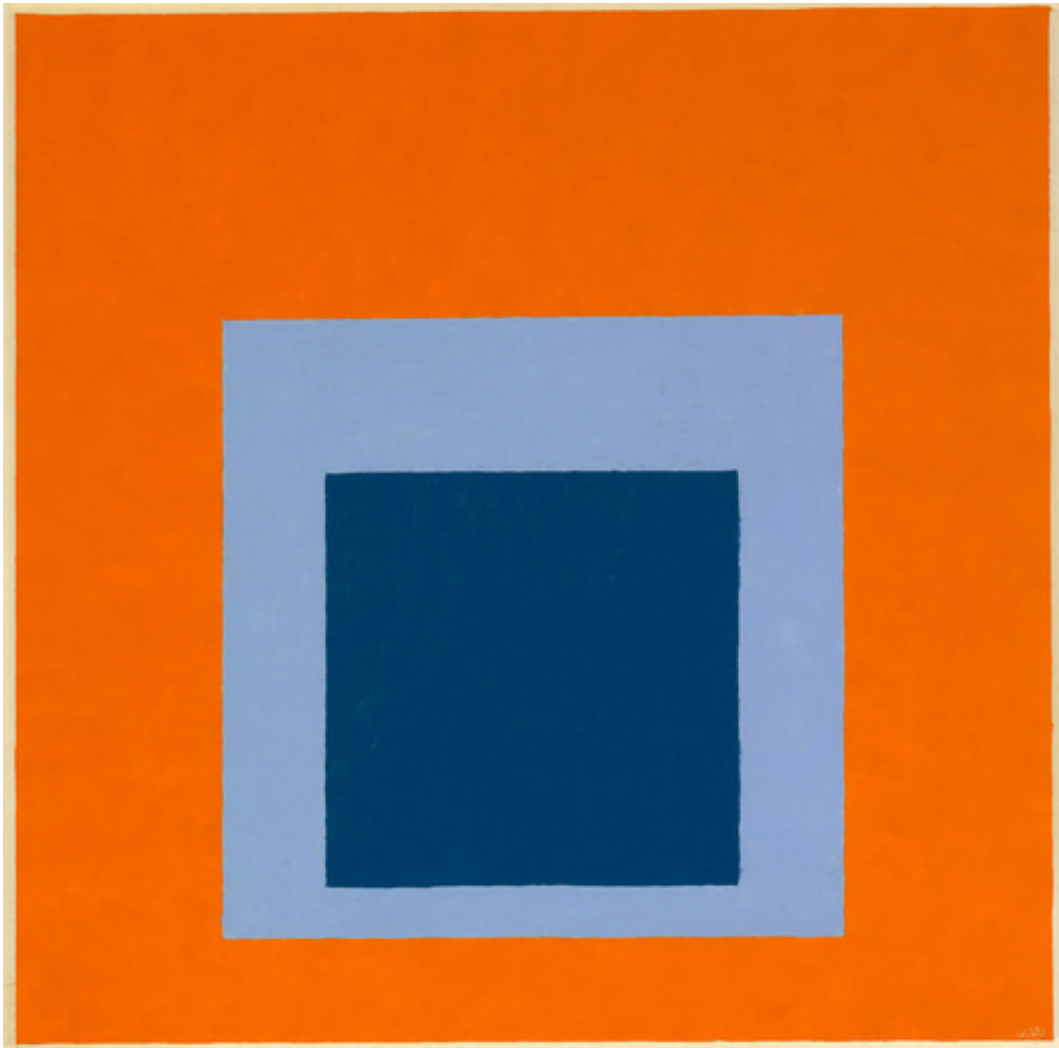


Figure 8: Josef Albers. Homage to the Square, Festive, 1951.

Oil on masonite, 52 x 52 cm, framed 77,4 x 72,4 cm.

Yale University Art Gallery © Josef & Anni Albers Foundation.

So, it is the proportional, mathematical balance between forms and colors in line with the plate format which balances our impressions and feelings. This balance is also mirrored by the fixed proportions so that the distance of the inner square to the outer edge is three times and laterally twice compared to the lower edge. When you try to describe the effects of the harmonic forms on us, "festive" seems to be a very well-chosen title. The effect of this work is impressive. It changes our sense of our being-in-the-world. Therefore, it can have a lasting impact on us. Eva Díaz summarized this as follows:

"This type of experimentation –Albers's ethics of perception– served as an important impetus to perceptual and possibly cognitive change; indeed, he believed it "can lead to illusions, to new relationships, to different measurements, to other systems." His is perhaps the most concise description of the importance of explorations of form in transforming understandings of the word."¹⁹

Final Words

In summary, it is remarkable that Josef Albers was the one – perhaps the first – who in 1932, at the age of 44, tried to use artistic research to prove that the arts are techniques and thus functional. The starting point of this idea, which is the subject of this essay, is his understanding of 'the better form'. It should become obvious that it depends on socio-political decisions whether the artistic means are used for the evil or the good, be it for fascist purposes or a 'better culture'. Against the background of teaching at the Bauhaus and his own experiences with fascism it is evident for Albers to focus only on 'the better form'. In this context, however, it is astonishing that the concept of 'the better form' encounters resistance from European art theory in contrast to the American one. The French art-historian Isabelle Decobecq saw the reasons for this in Europe in her "[...] die-hard fantasy of universalism, that of the antique paideia, which still pervades a large part of our teaching institutions [...]."²⁰ That means if Albers's assumption is correct and the artistic means work in a way so that designers can use them for the bad or the good, then Europeans must abandon the desirable but unrealistic universal ideal of art. Therefore, they have to leave the idealistic concept of art, which is according to them not functional, but fundamentally only beautiful and thus good.

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Notes

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1. Cf. Albers, concerning *Art Instruction*, 1, see as well: Albers, *Art as Experience*.
 2. On the influence of the arts or "iconic form processes" triggering a picture storm by late medieval sculptures on the eve of the Reformation: cf. Bredekamp, *Die Prägnanz der Form*, 131-132. See as well concerning this idea: Belting, *Bild-Anthropologie*, 12-13.
 3. Cf. Schwarz, *Geniewahn*.
 4. Cf. Friedländer, *Kitsch und Tod*, 7-17, 14; moreover cf. Sauer, *Faszination – Schrecken*, 107-119.
 5. Cf. Sauer, *Faszination – Schrecken*, 46-81, in detail to Plato and Kant, 202-211, 226-233 and 237-240.
 6. Cf. Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, § 53, 268, see as well 266-273 and § 59, 308-310.
 7. Concerning Plato: cf. Grassi, *Macht des Bildes*, 147-168, 166.
 8. Cf. Albers, *Dimensions of Design*.
 9. Cf. for that: Döring, *Ästhetischer Wert und emotionale Erfahrung*, 53-73.
 10. Grassi, *Macht des Bildes*, 147.
 11. Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, 310-313.
 12. Cf. Schmidt-Wulffen, 42-50, see 46-47 (translation M.S.), cf. as well: Friedländer, *Kitsch und Tod*, 7-17.
 13. Albers, *Art as Experience*.
 14. Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, 64 (italics in the original, translation M.S.).
 15. Cf. Horowitz, *Albers as a Teacher*, 72-252.
 16. Albers, concerning *Art Construction*. Cf. for 'factual fact' and 'actual fact' Albers's analysis in *Interaction of Color*, 112-120, see 117-118.
 17. Cf., in addition, his theoretical analysis, which is also based on the discussion with students in Albers, *Interaction of Color*.
 18. Cf. Sauer, Josef Albers, 9.
 19. Cf. Díaz, *The Ethics of Perception*, 260-285, see 282.
 20. Cf. Decobecq, *I don't know*, 251, and see as well concerning Albers, Sauer, Josef Albers, 9-13 and 115-117.

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