

## Introduction

At the end of his life, Josef Albers, by then a legend in the art world and an international success, lived with his wife Anni in a modest raised ranch house on a quiet suburban street in the Connecticut town called Orange. The world-renowned colour theorist marvelled at the sign that marked the town boundary. Painted green, the lettering white, it said, 'This is Orange'; he considered this a perfect example of the trickiness inherent in the names of colours. He was enchanted by the deceptiveness of words and the idea of multiple meanings – visual or verbal.

With that relish of puns and alertness to the vagaries and discrepancies of language, the octogenarian painter, glued, like most of the United States, to the Watergate hearings on television, took particular delight in the idea that one of President Nixon's chief minions, very much embroiled in the corruption, had the name of 'Ehrlichman' – which in German means 'honest man'. Speaking two languages as he did, Albers was sharply aware of what a twist of the truth that name communicated.

The interplay of German and English caught his fancy; so did the balance of simplicity and complexity as one latched on to apprehensible details in a fluctuating world, opting for what was dependable – like the shapes of squares – as a stronghold amidst the infinite and

mysterious universe of colour, using few words and short lines as a handle to the vast worlds of form and language.

In that plain clapboard house on Birchwood Drive, Albers's bedroom looked like a modern version of a medieval monk's cell. There was nothing whatsoever on the walls, which were made of cold drywall painted a flat white. The garage was full of the artist's colourful *Homages to the Square*, lined up like matching books on a shelf, but their creator chose to look at none of them in the room where he read and slept. His bed was a plain mattress on a base with short wooden legs: nothing more. The desk, which he had made at Black Mountain College, consisted of two wooden planks, accompanied by a standard kitchen chair. The bookshelves and cupboards were procured from a store for office equipment; they were intended for a bank or an accountant's office, not for domestic living.

But in that room, at his bedside, Josef Albers always had a rather splendid looking leather-bound edition of nineteenth-century German Romantic poetry. This was how he chose to lose himself every evening – in the verse he had known since childhood.

Poetry was an essential part of Albers's life. He liked Schiller and Goethe; he also liked Haiku. And he was immensely proud of his own forays in the field – especially of the work that had been first published in

*Poems and Drawings* in 1958. This book contained a great deal of what the artist cherished: quietude and a look of modesty, the mix of the visual and the verbal. It put mysterious drawings, utterly lean and simple but with multiple meanings, against verse with the same qualities. Through this particular combination of elements, he had made something musical: where the phrasing and the voids count as much as the central themes, where weight is dissipated and rhythm constant.

The drawings in *Poems and Drawings* belong to a type Albers called 'Structural Constellations'. They demonstrate in an utterly refined and straightforward way his notion of 'the discrepancy between physical fact and psychic effect', and his belief that, while in mathematics and science the sum of one plus one is two, in art one plus one can equal three or more. If a viewer takes the requisite time with these drawings, they offer multiple and contradictory meanings; they invite you to read a space as being at first glance like a box viewed from the outside and on a second look like a container open at the end; they make straight lines appear curved or bent, they make parallel lines seem angled in relation to one another, they make flat trapezoidal planes twist like bent metal. The poetry, too, while deceptively simple and easy to read, invites endless reflection, suggesting, invariably, far more

readings than appear to be offered at first.

*Poems and Drawings* was also significant for Albers as a perfect object. He was obsessed with graphic layout, had written passionately on the subject, and cared intensely about both aesthetics and legibility. I had known of his concern with the printer's and graphic designer's craft ever since I had first met him. I well remember the occasion of my initiation; I was a graduate student in art history at Yale University, where he had headed the Department of Design fifteen years earlier and which was in New Haven, about fifteen minutes away from the house in Orange. I had been brought to the ranch house by an older friend who collected Albers's work. The great Bauhausler had greeted me by asking, 'What do you do, boy?'

'I'm studying Art History at Yale, Sir,' I replied.

'Do you like it, boy?'

I was nervous that truthfulness might cost me my fellowship funds, but the boldness of the great man with his shock of smooth white hair made it impossible for me to dissemble. 'No, Sir, not really.'

'Why not, boy?'

I explained that I was losing my passion for looking at art, my ability to feel the beauty and grace of the work, and was feeling encumbered with facts. After I gave an example of the detailed research I was assigned to do,

he asked, 'Which of those bastards in art history don't you like?'

My answer pleased him, and then he asked, 'What does your father do?' Of my two parents, my mother, a painter with a studio in the house, was the more excited that I was going to be meeting Josef Albers that day, but he seemed to care more about the male parent, so I answered that my father was a printer, that he owned a company that mainly did commercial offset work. 'Good, boy, then you're not just an art historian; then you know something about something,' Albers replied with a grin.

This became his reason for talking to me a great deal about printing. He had worked with some fine lithographers, and was fascinated by their technique. He had only recently met a screenprinter who managed to make *Homages to the Square* with such tight registration between colours that there was no need for one colour to be superimposed on another; rather, each could be printed on pure white paper, with no overlap of the hues and a perfect tight fit. Little in life thrilled him as much as technical mastery and refinement.

He was also deeply involved with typefaces. Albers began to give me his books of type, and to point out the ones he most liked. Bodoni and Garamond were often his choices for his own publications, and he had

a passion for Sabon. Serif types, he believed, were always better for text. He explained to me that the serif had been developed by people inscribing gravestones because, when they ended the stroke of the chisel, they invariably left a light mark; the inadvertent result of that mechanical necessity was the discovery that the serif served to carry the eye from letter to letter and facilitate reading. Serifs, like adequate margins, made a printed page work better.

On one of my visits to the house on Birchwood Drive – I had begun to go there regularly after the first grilling interview – Albers gave me, as a present, *Poems and Drawings*, explaining that this small volume, designed by his friend and colleague Norman Ives, exemplified his points.

Ives was both a screenprinter and a graphic designer. Additionally, with his business partner Sewell Sillman, he installed Albers's exhibitions – at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York, at least every two years, and, in 1971, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where Albers was the first living artist in America honoured by a solo show. Ives understood the balance of white space needed to surround Albers's paintings as well as his words and his drawings. That relationship of artist and designer was one of the most important in Josef Albers's life, and *Poems and Drawings* one of its finest by-products.

The first edition of *Poems and Drawings* was published by Readymade Press in 1958 in an edition of 500 copies. A small publishing operation, Readymade Press operated in the printing offices of Yale University Press in a basement on York Street in New Haven. This was during Albers's time at Yale, and he had a storage room in the same basement. The location made it easy for him to look at proofs or even watch press work as he walked in or out of the space where he kept everything from glass constructions he had made at the Bauhaus to current magazines featuring him and his work. Norman Ives was also living near New Haven, and was regularly in and out of that print shop. Thus it was possible to facilitate this work according to the meticulous standards of these two people who were obsessed with quality, determined for perfectly neat impressions and resolved to achieve just the right tone of the black ink.

A decade later, George Wittenborn, owner of the legendary bookstore at 1018 Madison Avenue (then the best place in America to buy art books) made a

second edition. There were a few variations from the first edition: the word 'Weg', for example, having been translated as 'road' the first time became 'path' in the second version. Beyond these refinements, comparable to the changing of a colour in an *Homage to the Square*, the verbal equivalent of switching a Grumbacher Mars Yellow with a Winsor & Newton Mars Yellow, the editions were the same.

Albers always hoped for a third edition. He had kept a list of the names of everyone who could be identified who had bought copies during the book's first lifetime (Readymade Press sold directly to individuals, rather than through bookstores, so this could be charted) and was especially pleased by the libraries and institutions that owned copies. In 1973, when the artist was eighty-five years old, George Wittenborn proposed an updated version to Yale University Press, but nothing came of the idea. There is no doubt that the artist would have been absolutely delighted by the decision of Tate Publishing to take on the project, and by the very Albersian care with which they have done so.

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