

## FOREWORD

For over forty years, *Interaction of Color* has been a best-selling book, demonstrably altering the lives of its readers all over the world. It brings infinite personal pleasure while perpetually expanding the way that colors are used and perceived in art, architecture, textiles, interior design, and graphic media at every level of technology. But when it was initially published, *Interaction* was, like everything Josef Albers did, a brave experiment, and like all forays into the unprecedented, it was the subject of controversy.

For the most part, *Interaction* was highly praised, but occasionally the response was far from laudatory. Writers vary in their responses to negative criticism—some saying it is fine, since all that counts is the amount of coverage, others feeling stung. Josef Albers, who saw himself as something of a martyr to modernism, both regretted the attacks and was intrigued by them. Part of the fascination of being blasted was that it confirmed that he had really startled people and taken them beyond their normal comfort zone. Ever since he had left a world where art was practiced in an acceptable, academic way—in the academies of Berlin and Munich, and in the public education system in which he taught in his native Westphalia—and gone to the Bauhaus, he had known what it was to inspire such controversial response.

Bauhaus modernism may now be in the pantheon of acceptability, but back then it startled and displeased the larger audience. The same was true of Black Mountain College, where Albers went after 1933, when the Bauhaus closed, and where he remained for sixteen years; today that pioneering institution is worshiped, but at the time a lot of what was created there was viewed as a form of heresy. Later, in 1950, when Albers began his *Homages to the Square*, he was mocked. Twenty years after that, when he was the first living artist given a solo retrospective at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the work that people like Clement Greenberg had lambasted was finally recognized for its ingenuity, integrity, and subsuming beauty. Now that half a century has passed it has achieved the status, however dubious, of being a blue chip financial commodity, but at the start it was, like any statement by a messiah, criticized vociferously.

When Yale University Press courageously, and with all of the superb standards required by as exacting an artist as Albers, brought out *Interaction of Color* in 1963,

the publication generally had an easier time than most of the artist's ventures. This was equally true when the paperback version came out in 1971. But there was the occasional diatribe. And Albers, proud as he was of the sales and all the enthusiasm for the book, of the applause worldwide, was fascinated at being a lightning rod for dissent. The octogenarian clipped the few bad reviews that appeared along with dozens of favorable ones, and tried to find out more about their authors. The voices of "nay" appeared in obscure publications, but they still counted. One of the reasons the artist was so interested is that the things for which the critics attacked the books were exactly the elements that excited him the most, because they recommended such a radical departure from traditional, hidebound ways of seeing.

Arthur Carp was the author of an attack in the magazine *Leonardo*. To present the flaws, Carp wrote that Albers considered "good teaching . . . 'more a matter of right questions than . . . of right answers.' He deprecates 'self-expression,' as opposed to 'a basic step-by-step learning.' . . . Students are urged to use disliked colors in the hope they may overcome their prejudices." Carp used these points to demonstrate that "one doubts if Albers is really being helpful" and to justify the statement "Would that he were less of a dilettante (pejorative connotation)!"

Everything that Carp attacked, of course, was what Albers believed in and what others applauded. As Howard Sayre Weaver wrote in a review that appeared in 1963 following publication of the first edition, *Interaction of Color* was a "grand passport to perception." It assumed that glorious role because it was, "essentially, a process: a unique means of learning and teaching and experiencing."

Weaver referred to Albers's fondness for the words of John Ruskin: "Hundreds of people can talk, for one who can think. But thousands of people can think, for one who can see." Most people, sooner or later, have recognized the miraculous way in which *Interaction of Color* facilitates such seeing. In the 1963 *Architectural Forum*, a design teacher at Cooper Union was among those prescient enough to write, "*Interaction of Color* is the most comprehensive and intelligent, as well as the handsomest, book we yet have on this subject. It is an indispensable volume for the artist, architect, or teacher who finds a greater challenge in discovery than in a 'safe' color system." That same year, Dore Ashton, reviewing the book in *Studio*, was perceptive enough to recognize that Albers was the opposite of the pedagogue Carp accused him of being; rather, his achievement justified his comment that "teaching is not a matter of method but of heart." The year after the paperback came out, the poet Mark Strand, in *Saturday Review*, saw Josef Albers's work as demonstrating that "when color challenges the safe, enclosing geometrical properties of the pictorial surface, as it is meant to, it does so with a slowness and delicacy that are disarming and a beauty that is exhilarating."

What one person disdained, another saw as groundbreaking. Albers's approach was revolutionary, putting experimentation at the fore. It disputed traditional notions of taste. It sought to engage rather than merely inform.

As a keen observer of the human comedy, Albers was particularly aware that sometimes his detractors were well-known figures, and his champions obscure ones. Donald Judd, in *ARTS Magazine* in 1963, called *Interaction of Color* "primarily pedagogical." Judd went on with a mixture of moderate, pseudo-Hemingwayesque adulation—"The book makes, to put it simply, one unqualified point, that color is important in art. It does this very well."—and bizarre, incomprehensible disparagement: "The *Interaction of Color* is the best that can be done. It is just that it has all the Biblical possibilities, since it is clear and has limits, of anatomy or of the other subjects whose presence and perfection are supposed to define art. The book should be used but not that way." Albers would never know that Judd would, two decades later, following the older artist's death, rescind these words and make pilgrimages to Albers's studio, feeling that he had not done justice to what *Interaction* was all about and regretting his youthful arrogance. In any event, taking it all in stride, Albers was certainly pleased that an unknown academic at the University of Nevada in Las Vegas had been among those to get the main point, in spades, of *Interaction*: "In an age in which increased human sensibility has become such an obvious need in all areas of human involvement, color sensitivity and awareness can constitute a major weapon against forces of insensitivity and brutalization."

This was the point. The quality of heart, the impact on all of human life, was what Josef Albers sought in his approach. This above all is the reason that we are so pleased that Yale University Press, Josef Albers's partner through thick and thin for four decades, has remained in that role as splendidly as ever. Supportive of the artist's legacy as it was of him during his lifetime when he was in the act of creating, Yale has shown a wonderful and consistent understanding of the brazen, self-generating newness of the artist's approach. Thanks to that fine relationship, Albers's marvelous, unsettling revelations—unsettling to some, exhilarating to others—are again flourishing in this current incarnation of *Interaction of Color*. With its additional plates and refinement of other details, this new volume, which effectively updates what is now a "classic," allows Albers's courageous invitation to experimentation, openness, and intellectual and personal expansion to thrive. It invites readers to thrive as well—exactly as Josef Albers would have liked.

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