

The following text is a script for a performance. To perform this work, each numbered section is printed on a separate piece of A4 paper and laid upside down on the floor. The pages must be positioned in a grid of 5 sheets across and 4 down, with a small gap of I-2 cm between the pages.

The pages are picked up from the floor in a random order and read out loud. Once read, the pages are scrunched up and placed in a pile. The performance ends when all pages have been read.

I suggest that another action takes place in between each page being read. When I perform this work, I set up an Over Head Projector and prepare a pile of materials such as: wire, string, glass, fabric, mesh, objects, paper stencils and coloured acetate. Each time a ball of paper is placed on the pile, a selection of materials is laid on the OHP to create an image. When taking materials off the OHP they get placed on the grid in the space where paper once was.

At the end of the performance the pile of text rests where the pile of materials once was. The materials are now laid out in a grid format on the floor.

WORK WITH MATERIAL!

This is an instruction or imperative; a strong call for you and I to develop a manual and non-academic way of working. One that explores the inherent characteristics of elemental things. We understand the properties of materials. We push, pull and bend them. Rip, tear and puncture them. Combine, switch and manipulate them. We work with them until they resist our actions, until they crumble, collapse and corrode. We work with them until they work.

WORK WITH MATERIAL

This is a succinct description of an object; something that has been made with materials. Taken in a literal sense, this is an art work made of fabric, and therefore references the value and context of textiles. Objects to be worn by the body, Objects that fit and succumb to our movements. Objects to adorn the home, to break up the hard, cold, generic and geometric surfaces of our houses. Objects to personalise and decorate. Malleable, invaluable and mass produced.

WORK WITH MATERIAL

This is the title of a text written by Anni Albers in 1937, the female modern textile designer who trained at the Bauhaus and was married to artist and teacher Josef Albers. Her text discusses the difficulties of learning in a world overwhelmed by knowledge. She states that engaging with materials is the most immediate form of learning, unmediated by authority figures, such as teachers. This piece of writing also begins a dialogue between text and textiles, connecting writing with weaving and notions of structure and surface. Does my reference of this text cut across its sentiment and desire? – channelling the possibility of action and first-hand experience back into academic research, history and the written word?

This talk will draw upon the writing and ideas of Anni and Josef Albers, who believed in the development of tacit knowledge through first-hand experience with materials. Using an approach that sits between the experimental and academic I hope to apply the pedagogical and artistic ideas of Anni and Josef Albers to the material of language and the structure of narrative.

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Materials for a talk

I x overhead projector
A text on 20 pieces of paper
A collection of handled materials from my studio

Words / logic / materials

Presence

Pattern

Documentation that shudders and shimmers that re-enacts – knowingly – that acts – that pretends

Josef Albers stated that:

Action' is the noun of the verb 'to act'.

Acting in visual presentation is to change by giving up, by loosing identity.

When we act, we change appearance and behaviour, we act as someone else.

This is not a lecture – re-locating one history or stamping knowledge over narrative

I am not one character – instead I am a cipher / screen / glaze / mesh / veil or curtain

A membrane or material to pass information / to slow it down / obscure it / blur the source

To act as a face or focus for vague undercurrents

Or general experiences

Or shared concerns

Unfolding within the tensions between experience and knowledge, image and language the free gesture or choreographed action something fresh and always new and something repeated, repeated

My work falls into a fissure
between the first-hand experience of an experiment
and a desire to re-connect, re-trace or re-enact history.
To avoid the crutch of academic style
Or the authority of objective tone
And treating the past as a material
To work with it as a medium
To push it as far as it will go
Without Cracking, crumbling or collapsing

Language as medium imagining letters as physical elements to be moved around and assembled into objects that conduct information and communicate whilst resisting the taxonomy of words: those carefully violent definitions and divisions that denote a thing of relative or shifting value.

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A B C

The elements or building blocks of language
To learn and to build, the architecture of play and pedagogy
To build, take apart, repeat, perfect
The fragmented process of mass production or time work
And the fragmented process of practice
Practice: doing again and doing it better

Anni Albers told me to come down to earth from the clouds where I live in vagueness, and experience the most real thing there is: material.

She states that civilization estranges men from materials in their original form. For the process of shaping these is so divided into separate steps that one person is rarely involved in the whole course of manufacture often knowing only the finished product.

This reminds me of British historian E.P Thompson's text 'Time, work-discipline and industrial capitalism'. In which he describes how industrialisation and mass production changed people's perceptions of time, work and the making of objects. Mass production fragments the making process, with a worker making the same element of an object over and over again. There is no knowledge of the whole process; and in the making of the object there is no room for discovery, evolution, or mistakes.

In the advent of the machine, when the hand of the worker (and the skill it represents) becomes obsolete, the art academies come to value the hand. It is summoned and the marks its makes are celebrated as the residues of an almost spiritual instrument.



Josef Albers asserted that art cannot be taught! Yet he taught for years, at the Bauhaus, Yale and Black Mountain College. He designed exercises and courses to sharpen visual sensibility through experience: To open the eyes, to recognise the shifting relativity of forms and colours, and to master their selection, use and arrangement.

Anni stated that Material, that is to say unformed or unshaped matter, is the field where authority blocks independent experimentation *less* than in many other fields.

Can a teacher guide without authority? Demonstrate and question without being a master? I like the idea of materials blocking authority, or slowing down knowledge.

Words are the medium of *explicit* knowledge, knowledge that can be easily disseminated, understood and employed through objective language. Materials are a medium of *tacit* knowledge. A knowledge that is difficult to code, to share or pass on. This is slow knowledge, perhaps a refined skill, like gymnastics or blowing glass. Tacit knowledge is learned gradually through years of experience, embedded in the mind and body. It cannot be coded through language and shared easily.

If materials resist or block language and authority, is the introduction of materials into education today, seen as uneconomic?

Josef Albers states that all art starts with a material and therefore we have to investigate what a material can do. So, at the beginning we will experiment without aiming to make a product.

We prefer cleverness to beauty... our studies should lead us to constructive thinking.

I want you to respect the material and use it in a way that makes sense and preserves its inherent characteristics.

Recognise the manifold use of material, the changing organisation and presentation, unhampered by either harmony or disharmony, but lead by respect for both.

If you can do without tools, all the better.

ABC

Continuing to think about the ramifications and legacies of modernist art education, *The A Course* was a radical art course taught at Saint Martins College of Art in London from 1969 to 1973. During part of this course language was banned. Speaking in the studio was not allowed and students would be locked in one room during working hours; using strict discipline to free students from their former training and preconceived ideas.

Students were often given materials, such as large polystyrene cubes, with no instruction as to what to do with them. Tutors described this as teaching sculpture through sculpture, not through speaking about sculpture, insisting that language is not a suitable medium to teach people how to make art.

ABC

In 1563 the Florentine Accademia del Disegno was founded. 'Disegno' is that which has been imagined in the intellect and fabricated in the idea.

Disengo is a shorthand for intellectual, not manual activity - a very different approach to that of Anni Albers, in which the idea emerges only in working with the material itself. The academy of Disegno wanted to distance itself from the skill-based guilds that operated in Renaissance Italy.

A seal design for the Academy by Benvenuto Cellini displays the letters of the roman alphabet in order, almost as set of objective academic tools. Below this, is an alphabet of the visual arts made from sketches of artistic tools laid out in shapes that visually mimic or represent Roman letters. Is this a quest to place making and artistic endeavour at the same level as writing and academic learning?

Language as object. Letters as things. Speaking as sculpture. Hesitation as space.

Anni Albers says that materials have inherent laws (rules not set by man) and they introduce boundaries for a task of free imagination. Within set limits, the imagination can find something to hold on to. These boundaries may be conceived as the skeleton of a structure.

Back to the studio – what have I done this week?

Two weird days - inspired by Albers I started to think about weaving as a way to connect surface and structure – as a parallel to a particular kind of image making. A process of organisation in which an image or surface comes into being – rather than just appearing all at the same time, it materializes in parts from many passes of the hand.

Materials / paper spread out on the floor
A series of paints and media
Smearing this on that on this in a mindless naive unthinking un-thunk way.

Then got tired and disillusioned and went home.

When teaching about the properties of colour Josef Albers states that:

First, it is hard, if not impossible, to remember distinct colours. This underscores the important fact that the visual memory is very poor in comparison with our auditory memory. Often the latter is able to repeat a melody heard only once or twice.

Second, the nomenclature of colour is most inadequate. Though there are innumerable colours shades and tones, but in daily vocabulary, there are only about 30 colour names.

We are able to hear a single tone. But we almost never see a single colour unconnected and unrelated to other colours.

This instability of value is extremely characteristic of colour.

Unlike Johannes Itten, and others before him, Albers did not conceive of colour as a wheel, or any other ultimate and complete system. Colour is thought of as a shifting value dependant on context. It is fluid and relational, it must be negotiated.

The grid is a construct – an enlightenment structure, a series of equal boxes to compartmentalise, organise and keep divergent samples, to gather empirical evidence, from the wunderkammer to the museum. As a modernist construct in art and architecture the grid proposes objective order – the promise of a neutral context disconnected to the *real* and its representation. The grid is not figurative, it does not communicate depth or distance, narrative or history.

In the preliminary course taught by Albers, samples of materials would be arranged on grids in order to compare their formal qualities. Within a matrix, materials are divorced from their sources or uses in the world beyond.

The grid is a horizontal plane – operating in space rather than time. It is a desk or a playing field. Objects or information are spread out and sit, waiting, to be selected or moved. The collection is present in its entirety. It is modular and can be rearranged. It is a map or guide allowing information to be translated and transformed onto other matrixes. It is A-historical and A-political, until you step outside of it, and treat it as an object in its own right.

Anni Albers studied within the Weaving workshop, like many women at the Bauhaus. Writing in 1998, Carl Goldstein identified some important issues concerning gender and the division of activities at this institution.

Gropius often directed women towards the Weaving workshop – with textiles not only seen as the traditional craft of women, but also implicitly regarded as inferior to the fine arts or design. This division between the hand and the mind echoed Renaissance values, contradicting the Bauhuas' claims to move beyond such traditional divisions of workshop and studio / skill and concept / craft and art.

The Labour-intensive nature of weaving ties it to the everyday world of manual labour, requiring many hours of repetitive action before an object surfaces. This contrasts the instantaneous juxtapositions and discoveries found in painting, collage and sculpture.

Does gender matter today in terms of art objects and work? And, in historical terms what does it mean to be a partner, a complement or support: To stand beside the work of another, whilst being absorbed into its sphere?

Forms, colours and gestures repeat and re-emerge within the limitations of real or conceptual constraints. The images that remain exist as plans, objects, records and re-enactments. A hand appears: that of the artist and the archivist.

Strategies of displacement, operating in the then, now, and could-be future. Surface, image, object and information jostle for visibility and value.

How to span a complex set of associations around educational structures, material understanding and documentation?

Summoning modernist and other pedagogical models.

Exploring 'the exercise' 'curriculum' and 'series' as generative propositions.

Thinking about 'play sense' and the loaded environment of the artist's studio. When thinking about knowledge, Albers' text Search Verses Research privileges presence, experience and material understanding over the written or spoken word. I try to think about these approaches in today's context of educational homogenization and accountability, of constant communication and immaterial labour. I look at the work and teaching of Albers as a reference point; re-evaluating connections between 'modern' ideas and the contemporary whilst examining the retrospective gesture of research itself.

To quote:

To reject mechanical or habitual application is to promote inductive studies recognising practice before theory, trial and error before insight. In short, we believe in learning by experience, which naturally lasts longer than anything learned by reading or hearing only.

