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Josef Albers: art, education and democracy[1]

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Abstract. Throughout his career as an art teacher, Josef Albers made clear his vision of a methodology of education that put the arts at its core, with the aim of teaching people to see and to understand the world through its visual and material aspects. He believed that experimentation and direct experience with reality would ultimately generate real knowledge and that it was only in this way that a conscious understanding of the world was possible: a requirement for the development of free and democratic people. This paper will analyse how Albers intertwined the ideas of art, education and democracy, and the how he understood these relations within his contemporary world.
Key words: Josef Albers, art, education, experimentation, democracy

[es] Josef Albers: arte, educación y democracia

Resumen. A lo largo de su carrera como profesor de arte, Josef Albers plasmó su visión sobre una metodología de la educación que ponía las artes en el centro de la misma, con el objetivo de enseñar a entender el mundo a través de sus aspectos visuales y materiales. Albers creía que la experimentación y la experiencia directa con la realidad eran la forma de generar un conocimiento real y que este era el único modo posible de acceder a un entendimiento consciente del mundo, un requisito indispensable para desarrollar personas libres y democráticas. Este artículo analiza cómo Albers conectó las ideas de arte, educación y democracia, y cómo él entendía estas relaciones en el contexto del mundo contemporáneo.
Palabras clave: Josef Albers, arte, educación, experimentación, democracia

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1. Introduction

Throughout his career, Josef Albers would sometimes comment that his task as a teacher was to teach students "to make open the eyes" (Horowitz, 2006:73). This expression

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summed up his vision of the role of art education in the formation of individuals: namely to help people understand the world in depth through conscious seeing. This idea, which formed the basis of his teaching, drew on the Enlightenment pedagogical tradition that was heavily present in Germany since the popularization of Pestalozzi's theories and the expansion of progressive educational ideas during the first decades of the twentieth century (Lamberti, 2000). The idea of "teaching to observe" was a common theme among German educational reformers, among whom was Philipp Franck, Albers' teacher at the Königlich Kunstschule in Berlin, where he studied between 1913 and 1915, and with whom he collaborated on various art-education projects (Danilowitz, 2006). On this substratum, Albers established his own theory of art education that would also act as a theory of art and of the general education of the individual.

After his studies in Education, Albers began his professional career as an elementary school teacher in his hometown, Bottrop. However, his interest in the arts led him to study Fine Arts at various institutions (at the aforementioned Königlich Kunstchule in Berlin from 1913 to 1915; part-time at the Kunstgewerbeschule in Essen from 1916 to 1919, and at the Kunstgewerbeschule in Munich with Franz Stuck from 1919 to 1920), until, attracted by a Bauhaus pamphlet, he enrolled at this school in 1920, where a few years later he would teach and where he would begin to develop his theory of education[3].

His uncommon and rather irregular trajectory of artistic learning may also have influenced the configuration of his theory of art teaching and education in general, since he never defended the need to stick to academic parameters or educational programs along traditional lines. His theories were instead grounded in a philosophy of education and art as based on experience, emphasizing the role of art as the foundation of the human spirit. This philosophy, always rooted in observation, would be a constant throughout his career as a teacher and as an artist. It can be perceived in both his texts and his courses, and took shape during the time he taught at the two fundamental spaces of art education and contemporary art, the Bauhaus and Black Mountain College, and later at Yale.

2. The educational practice of Josef Albers

Before becoming an art teacher, Albers worked for several years as an elementary school teacher. When he entered the Bauhaus as a student in 1920, he was thirty-three years old, and shortly after arriving, he wrote to a friend: "Boy, I am living, living, living like never before and have never been so young never so happy to work" (Danilowitz, 2006: 16). Albers found in the Bauhaus an environment and artistic goals with which he could identify, sharing a set of educational ideals. There, influenced by the environment of the school, he began to develop a philosophy of education and art that he would continue to apply, in both his educational and artistic practice, for the rest of his life.

One of Albers' main contributions to the Bauhaus was the development of the preliminary course (Vorkurs), which he took over (initially together with Moho-

[3] See a brief summary of Josef Albers' biography on the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation website: https://albers-foundation.org/artists/chronology/#1880

ly-Nagy) from its creator Johannes Itten. Albers maintained the fundamental principles of the Vorkurs but added and structured it according to his own educational and artistic ideas. Thus, the preliminary course continued its objective, oriented, as Wick explains, towards suppressing the academic concept of art in all newcomers to the Bauhaus, liberating the existing creative forces, and confronting students not with "art", but with the most elementary problems of creation (2016:144). But while Itten's teaching had emphasized self-expression and intuitive experience, Albers sought to contain these aspects in favor of learning about the outside world through exercises of perception and understanding of the visible (Horowitz, 2006:101). Thus, while Itten's methodology was very much based on the idea of play and playful experimentation, Albers had a stricter and more orderly view of what the course should entail, since its ultimate goal was nothing less than understanding the world.

Image 1. Josef Albers and students in group critique, Bauhaus Dessau, ca. 1928–29. Source: The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation. https://albersfoundation.org/teaching/josef-albers/chronology/#slide2

Albers' preliminary course consisted of two kinds of exercises: with matter (Materistudie) and with material (Materialstudie). The former, following the path of Itten and Moholy-Nagy, referred to the study of the "external appearance of objects" and would serve to promote "sensory knowledge of the surface of the material" (Wick, 2016:155-157). The latter aimed at generating knowledge about the inherent characteristics of materials; their specific qualities – something of great value to Albers, since this was a way for students to come into contact with immediate reality and to better understand the problematics of the present. Of the exercises performed at the

Vorkurs, those based on paper folding are the most remarkable, and their methodology has become one of the best-known aspects of Albers' educational program. As Beggs explains (2013:73), Albers considered these exercises to be beneficial precisely because of the ubiquity and simplicity of the material, and of the fact that no prior knowledge was required, allowing the student extensive exploration of the material. Beggs cites one of Albers' students (1928-29) at the Bauhaus, Hannes Beckmann:

> Josef Albers entered the room, carrying with him a bunch of newspapers, which were distributed among the students. He then addressed us, saying something like this: "Ladies and gentlemen… I want you now to take the newspapers you got and try to make something out of them that is more than you have now. I want you to respect the material and use it in a way that makes sense –preserve its inherent characteristics. If you can do it without tools like knives and scissors, and without glue, the better…" […] [When Albers returned] there were masks, boats, castles, airplanes, animals… little figurines. He referred to all this as kindergarten products, which could have been made better in other materials. He pointed then at a study of extreme simplicity, made by a young Hungarian architect. He simply had taken the newspaper and folded it lengthwise so that it was standing up like a folding screen. Josef Albers explained to us how well the material was understood and utilized – how the folding process was natural to paper, because it resulted in making a pliable material stiff… Now that the paper was standing up, both sides had become visually active… After a while we caught on to his way of seeing and thinking.

When Albers and his wife, textile artist Anni Albers (who had been student and teacher at the Bauhaus), moved to Black Mountain College in 1933, he integrated the philosophy of the Vorkurs into the program of this experimental school, keeping the material and matter courses, the former now called "construction", "constructive", or "structural studies", and the latter "combination", "combinative", or "comparative studies", until landing in the name Matières (Horowitz, 2006:125). Matières exercises became one of the mainstays of Albers' educational methodology at this school, becoming such an everyday element that they appeared in daily conversations, jokes, and even songs (Beggs, 2015:86). The aim of Matières was still for students to achieve a broad and deep knowledge of materials through exercises in which they extracted textures from their normal context and placed them in relation to a different one, suppressing automatic associations (Beggs, 2015:86) and thus mental and visual habits. In addition to the exercises of matter and material, Albers had others, aimed at researching the links between figure and background and the fluctuations and illusions that could be created through the relationship between the two ("Schwindels"); others focused on "rearrangement", taking something static (a page of text, a wire mesh) and reworking it; and in 1930 he also introduced collages and photograms (Horowitz, 2006:118 and 102).

The criteria for evaluating students' work were based on two concepts: the first was economy, i.e., that the project generated as little (or no) waste as possible: there must be nothing superfluous or arbitrary in the work. The second element was Materialgerecht, that is, that the student had managed to make their project comply with and work according to the characteristics of the material, while simultaneously exploring all its possibilities, ultimately aspiring to show a quality of the material that had, until then, remained unknown or overlooked (Horowitz, 2006:106). Albers' principles for determining whether a work, or rather an experiment, had fulfilled its

purpose was revealed by his assessment of what was relevant in art: as he explained, "the things that count are how much the artist was engaged in his conception, how he treated his medium for his expression, and how intensely he speaks to us. Therefore, in art the HOW is deciding, not the WHAT" (Albers, 1939/2014:245).

About the art courses at Black Mountain College, Albers (1946/2014:264) explained:

> In drawing, we practice graphic formulation; in painting, special relationship of two-dimensional color, composition. In the color course we experience the relativity of color, how color is influenced by color, light, shape, quantity, placement. Basic Design is practicing planning. Here through the use of various materials (voluminous, flat, linear) we study appearance on the one hand and capacity on the other. Through exercises in combination we experience and understand surface qualities of material – of matière (structure, facture, texture). Through construction exercises we study mathematical and structural conditions of form (shape, space, volume).

As in the exercises on matter and material, the drawing courses were oriented, following Pestalozzi's philosophy, towards learning to observe, and the color course followed the same idea.

Drawing we regard as a graphic language. Just as in studying language it is most important to teach first the commonly understood usage of speech, in drawing we begin with exact observation and pure representation. We cannot communicate graphically what we do not see. That which we see incorrectly we will report incorrectly. We recognize that although our optical vision is correct, our overemphasis on the psychic vision often makes us see incorrectly (Albers, 1934:4).

Albers understood that "color is the most relative of the means that art employs" (Albers, 1985: 21) and that it was necessary to train the eye to be aware of this. Horowitz explains that Albers' color course was not a theory of color, but a method oriented to sharpen the eye's capacity and to provide understanding of the behavior of color. The exercises were, in this way, starting points, or small experiments, created to generate a certain activity, a search for solutions that would train the eye. The color course that Albers created and developed at Black Mountain College took its final form at Yale, where he structured it in the following order: 1) preliminary exercises; 2) color-change exercises; 3) mixture exercises; 4) various other exercises and; 5) free studies. Albers embodied the teachings of this course in his famous book The Interaction of Color, published in 1963, which summarized the approaches he had been developing in his courses on color (Horowitz, 2006:197).

Throughout his career, Albers maintained the idea that "testing is more important than studying" (Albers, 1928/2014:211). Practical work, the hands-on, had to reside not at the margins of education, but at the center of it, as the foundation of experience: "experiments must be guided by experience, and […] this requires a change in the educational method. To regain lost ground, to achieve more practical thinking, general and professional education must be oriented towards more practical work" (Albers, 1944/2014:260).

As Horowitz (2006:96) explains, by endeavoring to open the eyes,

Albers created narratives, metaphors, and myths to help his students see what was before them, and that pointed the way to a reality that lay beyond the fact. Fact: Lines, shapes, and colors are set down on paper. Myth: The lines breathe, the shapes

dance together, the colors sing together. "The aim of life", Albers wrote, "is living creatures. The aim of art is living creations". That creations were not creatures made them no less real. The concern of the artist and the poet was not objective reality, but the experience of reality. To transform fact into myth is to get at how things are experienced.

Regarding the students' experiences, their opinions were, logically, varied. According to Danilowitz, the vast majority highlighted Albers' value as a teacher and showed great interest (and even fascination) in his teachings, seeing him as a catalyst capable of bringing out students' creativity and their ability to analyze and look at the world. One explained that "Albers was a detonator ... [he] sparked an explosion in us" (Danilowitz, 2006:9). At the same time, however, many of them emphasized Albers' strictness and discipline, an issue that generated divided opinions. For some of the students, this was not a negative aspect, while for others he was too severe, especially when judging their work. While this can be seen as contradictory to his experimental educational philosophy, it is also true that, for Albers, a constantly critical vision and maintaining work discipline were fundamental elements of his vision of art and education. According to Saletnik (2007), the influence of Albers' education can be seen even in former student Eva Hesse, a sculptor who did not particularly appreciate his teachings and who worked in a different aesthetic line from her master. Saletnik points to the influence that Albers' pedagogy had on Eva Hesse's work with materials, noting how "pedagogies act as does ideology: surreptitiously and often without notice. They help structure how we think, let alone how we learn whether we realise it or not" (2007, par.19).

In the end, Horowitz recalls (2006:79) that the students' perceptions and personal experiences of Albers are diverse and varied, which shows that he was multifaceted, like any other person. But for a large majority, even including those who reproached his strict character, his teachings were meaningful, precisely because of his ability to make them perceive the outside world in depth. Robert Rauschenberg, significantly, explained, already as an established artist:

> Albers was a beautiful teacher and an impossible person. He wasn't easy to talk, and I found his criticism so excruciating and so devastating that I never asked for it. Years later, though, I'm still learning what he taught me, because what he taught had to do with the entire visual world. He didn't teach you how to "do art". The focus was always on your personal sense of looking. When he taught watercolor, for example, he taught the specific properties of water color –not how to make a good water color picture. When he taught drawing, he taught the efficient functioning of line. Color was about the flexibilities and the complex relationships that color have with one another. I consider Albers the most important teacher I've ever had, and I'm sure he considered me one of his poorest students. Coming from Paris, entering the middle of the term, and showing all that wildness and naivete and hunger, I must have seemed not serious to him, and I don't think he ever realized that it was his discipline that I came for (Rauschenberg, undated:1).

3. Artistic experience and education of the human spirit

Throughout his courses, Albers made clear his vision of a methodology of education as a means to "teach to see"; to make students learn to understand the world through

the visible, that is, its visual part, something that was closely linked to Pestalozzian thinking. "In that direction... I never taught art, I think. What I have taught is philosophy [...] I have never taught painting. Instead I have taught seeing" (In Danilowitz, 2006:22).

He further developed this philosophy at Black Mountain College, since – it being a school of general studies, in which art was understood as part of people's education on a rational, spiritual, and civic level – he could orient his teaching from the formation of artists to the formation of people (Horowitz, 2011): "In the Bauhaus I was more to it to develop a way of study, but in Black Mountain I came more to it to develop people... I felt much more personally obliged for the creatures under my hands" (In Danilowitz, 2006:35).

Image 2. Josef Albers's Drawing Class, Black Mountain College, ca. 1939-1940. Source: Western Regional Archives. State Archives of North Carolina. https://digital.ncdcr.gov/digital/collection/p249901coll44/id/1265/rec/14

This vision converges openly with the ideas mentioned above about the tradition of aesthetic education, so important in the German context, and which found fertile ground in the United States thanks to its own trajectory of progressive education and helped by the philosopher and pedagogue John Dewey. Dewey had explained that "esthetic is no intruder in experience from without, whether by way of idle luxury or transcendent ideality, but that it is the clarified and intensified development of traits that belong to every normally complete experience" (Dewey, 1980:46). This claim highlights the importance of experience for training and was summarized with the maxim of learning by doing, popularized by Dewey in the United States and closely

related to theories of progressive European education, especially in Germany, in whose context Albers was trained and which had influenced his thinking and his educational activity at the Bauhaus. Some studies of Albers' methodology and philosophy of education emphasize the European component, dominated by Pestalozzi, more than the American (Dewey) (Füssl, 2006), but what is clear (and in this all coincide) is the centrality of the idea of learning through practical experience. This implied a profound link between art education practices and real life, an idea that, while ultimately developed at Black Mountain College, Albers had already begun to shape at the Bauhaus. It underpins one of his earliest texts, Historical or contemporary (published in German as Historisch oder Jeztig? in 1924). Here, Albers defended the idea of a necessary link with the present and its demands, rejecting traditional education's veneration of the past and of the authority of "history". In his view, educational institutions had abandoned its original goal, namely, "to integrate the individual into the community, its economy and its values". Instead, school had become "a teaching institution that revolves around a center, its dominant figure, the professor. He imparts what has been established: knowledge, methods, rules, and thus thinks historically. The school is therefore based on ancient standards". The results, for him, could not be positive at all: "Given this, the end result of the present-day school is wrong: educated people, not creative ones". Albers was here making a strong critique of the traditional teaching system, which for him did not contribute to the formation of people, but to the generation of specialists in irrelevant elements for real life: a system that provided nothing of value to the students, who only repeated what had already been done: "The ablest pupils are called students; they go on to make yet one more book out of many, are then called doctors, and instruct more students. Teaching goes in circles". By doing so, nothing new nor valuable could be produced: "Passing something along with no increase in value is called profiteering. So today's school is producing profiteers instead of producers" (Albers, 1924/2014: 207).

Albers understood that this kind of education not only did not contribute what it should to the formation of people, but neither did it solve any of the problems of the present. Clarifying the symptoms of his time, he said that "the individualistic school has brought us the era of party newspapers and party affiliation, even the call for the great Führer. Thus individualistic education has made the masses helpless" (Albers, 1924/2014:207). In response, throughout his career Albers continued to defend education capable of generating individuals but not individualists, and, as he explained some years later:

> Schools should not promote individualism as such because individualism emphasizes separation. The task of a school is rather to integrate the individual into contemporary life, into society (state, profession, economy). Cultivation of individuality is the task of the individual, not the task of a collective enterprise such as a school. Schools should cultivate individuality passively, i.e. by not disturbing personal development. How many real personalities exist anyway? The vast majority of people are types. A sociological economy must reject conventional pedagogy's cult of personality: productive individuality asserts itself without, and despite, education (Albers, 1928/2014:213).

He often insisted that "to learn is more important than to teach" (Albers, 1934-1935/2014:223), that traditional pedagogy served to maintain the status quo, and its

effects tended to limit creative potential, since traditional methodology based on memorization and repetitive exercises could only generate repetitive individuals (Díaz, 2015:46). In contrast, Albers held that learning and education should generate dynamic knowledge, "for knowledge as a collection of facts is impotent unless we find a way to correlate them, to group them, to see cross-sections and interpenetrations, or to relate them to other fields and to life in general" (Albers, 1936/2014: 234).

The link between education and the problems of the present was crucial for Albers, because only in this way would individuals become aware of their present and capable of responding to the issues of the time, and not only trained to memorize or imitate previous eras. For this reason, he explained:

> If we must accept education as life and as preparation for life, we must relate all school work, including work in art, as closely as possible to modern problems. It is not enough to memorize historical interpretations and aesthetic views of the past or merely to encourage a purely individualistic expression. We need not to be afraid of losing the connection with tradition if we make the elements of form the basis of our study. And this throughout foundation saves us from imitation and mannerism, it develops independence, critical ability and discipline (Albers, 1934:3).

In the same way that it was pointless to uncritically adopt the artistic standards of other periods – since their values corresponded to other contexts – Albers considered it pointless to preserve educational values that not only belonged to another era, but that were actually detrimental to the formation of people and their true integration into the modern age. This did not mean that he rejected the study of ancient art and artists: on the contrary, he wanted them to be seen precisely in relation to their time and to be understood as creators producing works that held meaning within their contexts, which is also why it made no sense to copy and hold on to them as artistic models, as academia had done thus far ("Only inactive minds can be satisfied with so-called academic standards" [Albers, 1939]). The study of the old masters should thus focus not on "past methods, but principally [on] the causes and fundamentals of their vision and their technique" (Albers, 1934/2014:223).

He attributed to the so-called old masters the quality of being avant-garde in their own time, and that it is in accordance with their own contemporaneity that their value holds.

> Why were the ancient masters great, why were they victorious, why were they the ones who set the norms? […] Because they didn't look backwards, nor did they imitate what the previous centuries had left behind. Because they responded to the necessities of their times, and they knew how to draw the correct consequences out of those necessities, out of those limitations. Because they could feel development taking place; because they could feel the course of life. Because they were contemporary, placing themselves in the vortex of progress (Albers, 1934/2014:223).

Achieving this goal demanded an education that respected this factor and was based on experience in the real world, thus acting as a link between art and life. In the same text, Albers explains:

> As a teacher, I will take from the ancients a phrase that continues to be exact: Life is the best teacher. Which is to say, that which teaches most intensely is our own experience. This is precisely because it cannot be lost, nor can it be forgotten. Out

> of all our cultural patrimony, the most durable thing is our experience. Why don't we promote more experiences, instead of continuing or collecting our own or other people's experiences? Why make people learn things by memory, instead of teaching them to see inwardly?

Defending the educational quality of experience, he argued that one could "suffocate with knowing but never with experiencing", and that, actually, wisdom was more a result of experience than of knowledge (Albers, 1936/2014:234).

In order to be part of the real and contemporary world, one must first know how to analyze it, to understand it in all its complexity, and Albers held that the fundamental tool for this was perception, that is, learning to see. But perception had to form from experience and therefore from experimentation, since it was only in this way that knowledge could be integrated into life and become real knowledge; authentic wisdom. Art education would play this role, providing a means for boosting experimentation within general education with the aim to develop capacities useful for every field and for everyday modern life. As Díaz (2015) has profoundly exposed, for Albers, experimentation did not mean to focus on chance and uncertainty (as other artist at Black Mountain College, such as John Cage, conceived it), but it was rather a methodical analysis of what is perceived, and the construction of forms for designing new visual experiences, which he was always looking to provide students with in his courses.

Image 3. Josef Albers with Charles Kessler during a Drawing Class held outside, ca. 1939-1940. Source: Western Regional Archives. State Archives of North Carolina https://digital.ncdcr.gov/digital/collection/p249901coll44/id/1264/rec/13

In his vision of art and art education, Albers argued that it was time to "move from looking at art as a part of historical science to an understanding of art as a part of life", and included under the term "art" both the fine arts and applied arts, as well as music, drama, dance, theater, photography, film, literature, and so on: that is, all fields with "artistic purpose" (Albers, 1935/2014:231). But regardless of the field or activity being called "art", for Albers what mattered was that it acted as an experience. For him, art necessarily had to be an experience, understood from a broad perspective but always focused on the process, and therefore neither on the historical (the past, the finished) nor on the object (as a product). "Albers insisted that «art is not an object but an experience», – an experience in and of perception that facilitates complex understanding of the visual world" (Díaz, 2015:52). Rejecting the fetishization of the artistic object, he oriented his lessons to the generation of experimental processes rather than the final object (a vision he shared with Paul Klee), and focused his interest not on the result but on the process of growth (Eggelhöffer, 2015:116). He applied this philosophy profoundly at Black Mountain College, where he explained that "art here means more a process and a way of living than a product or its production. Art as educational means aims at an intensive use of our senses and a broader and deeper vision of our self and the world" (Albers, 1946/2014: 264).

By teaching how to see by experimenting, Albers' objective was to generate an experience valid for all aspects of the individual's life, which would contribute to the general and integral formation of a person. "The ultimate approach is experiment which leads us to the most decisive factor in education – experience. Experience is not the shortest and often not the easiest way of learning, but the broader and most far-reaching way" (Albers, 1946/2014:264).

In Concerning Art Instruction, a text written in 1934, in which Albers explained the role of the arts at Black Mountain College, he wrote that "art is a province in which one finds all the problems of life reflected – not only the problems of form (e. g. proportion and balance) but also spiritual problems (e.g. of philosophy, of religion, of sociology, of economy)". In this way, art was conceived as "an important and rich medium for general education and development" and elementary artwork was thus seen as a means of general education for all students (Albers, 1934:2). Albers pointed out that the school's first concern was not to train artists, but that "art instruction attempts first to teach the student to see in the widest sense: to open his eyes to the phenomena about him and, most important of all, to open to his own living, being, and doing" (Albers, 1934:3).

By enhancing the perception of individuals and their way of understanding the world through experimentation with art education, thus generating a personal and real experience of knowledge, people would be able to create a deeper relationship with their context, both individually and socially. Critical and conscious individuals would thus be able to generate a more conscious world. Artistic education would be the key to this process, and should therefore be present in all learning, whether for artists or non-artists. Regarding the Art Courses at Black Mountain College, Albers noted that they were "conducted as a means of general education as well as preparation for later individual artists. Therefore open to all – artists and non-artists. Aiming first at observation and articulation, that is, conscious seeing" (Albers, 1948-1949). Albers thus argued that art was an essential part of culture and life, and that "we must no longer educate our students either to be art historians or to be imitators of antiquities, but for artistic seeing, artistic working, and more, for artistic living" (Albers, 1935/2014:231).

Because of this vision of art, Albers' art education was oriented not specifically towards the art "world" but towards the general and real world; to the whole. A student explained (In Horowitz, 2006:80):

> I don't think that there was one single comment he made that pertained to the visual world that he didn't intend to pertain also the human world… He told us over and over that there is no meaning to teaching art unless it is a teaching for how to live your life. This was not a little side note. It was fundamental to his teaching.

The conjunction between art, life, and education would be the pillar on which Albers' philosophy – and to a great extent the philosophy of Black Mountain College – would be based. Albers brought from the Bauhaus an educational base founded on material experimentation and a conscious gaze, which he was able to develop and implement at Black Mountain College, and which he linked to the personal growth of individuals and the development of democratic thinking.

Image 4. Josef Albers and student Robert De Niro, Black Mountain College, ca. 1939-1940. Source: Western Regional Archives. State Archives of North Carolina. https://digital.ncdcr.gov/digital/collection/p249901coll44/id/1257/rec/8

4. Art, education, and democracy

Over the course of his life, Albers' writings evolved from focusing on the fundamental aspects of learning and creativity, and the practical aspects of teaching and experimentation (as those published during his time at the Bauhaus) to texts with a more pedagogical character, adopting a moral, social and political tone (Martínez,

Toledo and Fontán, 2014:205). It is particularly in the latter that the idea of art as the basis of an education aimed at the creation of democratic individuals can be appreciated. However, as mentioned, we already see this idea in his first text, Historical or contemporary (1924), which expressed the need for an education, both artistic and general, that was capable of overcoming the obstacles of an asphyxiating tradition, in order to generate capacities in students adapted to the contemporary era. In addition to his critique of traditional education, this text also contains a critique of the aggressively-growing German nationalist discourse. Although Albers consistently refused to take a public stand on political issues, this text can be understood as a cultural and political statement against nationalist positions. In his defense of an education for the present, Albers' approach can be interpreted as a rejection of the nostalgia for pre-war times, an epoch that, seen from the perspective of many conservative and nationalist groups, represented an idealized glorious past of Germany and whose mythification became commonplace among the far-right during Weimar Republic. Conservative circles perceived the modern artistic, educational, and social proposals of the Bauhaus as threatening, and the school was therefore often attacked, especially in Weimar (Forgács, 1997:39). In defending the need for a future perspective, focused on what could be done from the present moment on and not on the past, Albers censured these groups' desired return to the past, both in artistic and political terms: "In short, we cannot bring dead times back to life. What has once been chewed cannot be eaten again, what has already been said does not necessarily apply to us. We have to find our own solutions" (Albers, 1924/2014:208).

During his time in Germany, Albers maintained this line, both educationally and artistically, although his texts were focused more on practical aspects of education and did not explicitly deal with political ideas. Although positioned far from traditionalist thinking, Albers did not resonate with Hannes Meyer's Marxist and revolutionary ideas when the latter was director at the Bauhaus. Indeed, he avoided the influence of his thought and did not have a good relationship with him, pushing, with Kandinsky, for his dismissal (Forgács, 2010). When the Albers' emigrated to America to teach at Black Mountain College, Josef was influenced by Dewey's philosophy and by the college founder Andrew Rice's ideas and vision of education and democracy, closely linked to American progressive education theory. From this moment on, this theme becomes recurrent in his texts, conferences, and lectures, where he developed a series of arguments about the relation between education, art, and democracy. These excerpt from 1945, in which he expresses this idea as the real objective of the Black Mountain College, clearly show these tendencies:

> The aim of our college is a democratic educational community. Democratic I understand not only in its political and parliamentarian sense but just as much in its educational sense. So far – in my opinion – democratic education has been developed very little in the prevailing educational systems (Albers, 1945a/2014:261).

The development of democratic thinking through and with art education (through experimenting and experience, as explained above) formed the basis of this ideal of modern education that was closely linked to the present, and able to create aware citizens. It is important to note that Albers' call for democracy from Black Mountain College (especially before and during World War II) was set in a dramatic political context, in which European liberal democratic systems were increasingly being

threatened and crushed by authoritarian models. After having lived through the turbulent post-war years in Germany, and having suffered the arrival of fascism, his emphasis on the need for a democratic education is a clear example of how important it was for him to educate people into conscious citizens, and how art could be a means for critically understanding one's context. His emphasis on the importance of an education that could develop responsible individuals stresses the idea that education had to form free individuals that could develop a critical thought able to respond to authoritarian mass-control cultures. It should not, however, foster individualism, since this would lead to self-focused and irresponsible people. For Albers, "to educate is to adjust the individual as a whole to community and society as a whole" (Albers, 1945b/2014:262). As mentioned above, Albers held that a good education should integrate the individual into the society and into his or her context, and that individualist education had left people without the resources with which to respond – either individually or collectively – to contemporary problems. While he never positioned himself politically, he openly rejected any form of totalitarian regime, whether fascism or Soviet communism, and he always defended both individual freedom and social responsibility. For Albers, freedom and democracy had to be based on this foundation. In a paper from his time at Black Mountain College, he outlined this way of thinking, saying that "the liberal arts were originally the studies deemed worthy of free men. In a democracy, where all may be free, it is the duty of the liberal arts to make free men and women understand themselves and their environment so that they may be worthy of their freedom". It is remarkable how he emphasized the need to be aware that since "freedom is not an heirloom which may be inherited like wealth, but something that must be won by every individual and every generation, it is assumed that they will treasure and protect the democracy which makes freedom possible" (Albers, undated:2), prompting students to assume a collective and individual responsibility in constructing democracy and in protecting freedom.

It is interesting that, when specifically talking about arts and democracy, Albers advocated for hands-on – that is, manual – work, the materials and sensorial aspects of the arts, rather than so-called "cerebral" work (that is, pure theory).

> Much education of today offers little general education.
> Much academic education has become antiquated and undemocratic.
> Antiquated, when adhering to an outdated cerebral program designed for a minority of selected intellectuals.
> Undemocratic, when unrelated to a majority of non-intellectuals i.e. the visual, auditory manual type of student, in short, the artistic and practical minded.
> […]
> Evading the most important development of will and of sensory faculties presents a schooling of little or no cultural and social significance (Albers, 1950:2).

The emphasis he placed on manual work may seem of lesser relevance in comparison with his other reflections on democratic education, but it is an element of great importance. Key in the artistic-educational first configuration of the Bauhaus, as well as in its social objective, it sought to eliminate the differences between artist and craftsman, but also to give new value to other kinds of learning experiences usually despised in traditional (and elitist) education. The experience of manual work, with materials and experimentation held, for Albers, greater value than a merely cerebral or theoretical education, and breaking the traditional hierarchy that

put the former under the latter involved, for him, a true democratic impulse. It was actually here where real experimentation and thus real knowledge of the material and visible world could be undertaken.

Albers stressed that "if we want democratic or just education, that is fair opportunity for all, then we must consider the manual, visual, acoustical type of student as much as the intellectual type". So not only did every kind of human capacity have to be given a place in culture and in education, but those usually left at the margins were considered highly valuable to the development of thought: "for too long we have overlooked that there is thinking in situations and forms as well as in logical conclusions and verbal terms" (Albers, 1945b/2014:263).

Image 5. Shots from a silent film of Josef Albers teaching at Yale, by John Cohen, ca. 1955. Source: The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation.
Video available at: https://albersfoundation.org/teaching/josef-albers/introduction/

As explained above, to Albers, art, life, and education had to be integrated in order to produce conscious people, and in doing so, practical work was the most important factor: "Education, not divorced from life, proves a need for more laboratory, studio and workshop studies. It demands direct connection with creation and production. Consequently it recognizes again art and practical work as vital to general education" (Albers, 1950:2). The value of "this practical work" resided in the fact that it "develops curiosity for experience and information; judgement of usefulness and quality; insight and skill; respect for material and labor. It connects intellectual and manual workers" (Albers, 1950:2-3). As is well known, practical work and crafts were central to Bauhaus, in this sense connecting also with innovative 19th century thinking (especially William Morris' philosophy) about crafting as a means to reach social goals. Even after its technological and industrial turn, the idea of practical education and manual work stayed essential to the Bauhaus pedagogies. The idea of implementing egalitarian social thinking for the arts implied putting into practice within the art school what was intended to be achieved for the general society. Thus, advocating for crafts and practical work to be on the same level as the fine arts was

a way to fight against social and cultural hierarchies and, at the same time – especially among the school's more left-wing sectors – questioning class structures by identifying artists as workers. Although Albers never shared the radical vision of the bauhauslers of the communist left (especially during Meyer's time as Director), with its commitments to the total disappearance of the individual artist under the collective of art workers (Forgács, 2010), he always maintained Bauhaus' original elimination of artistic hierarchies between creators in different fields.

5. Conclusions

Through his teaching, Albers sought to expand his students' capacity for visual and material analysis of the world, and thereby produce a deeper understanding of it. Direct experience with reality and experimentation with it were for him the basis of an education in which the arts were to be at the center, precisely because they provided both a manual for, and an intellectual means of, interaction with the world. To Albers, this approach was indispensable for the formation of critical and creative spirits, and for that reason, democracy and freedom were only made possible through a conscious and modern education that put arts and experimentation at its core. "Endeavoring to open the eyes" was for him not only an artistic question but—especially—a spiritual and civic one, since it aimed at developing the human spirit and consciousness of the world.

Albers' ultimate goal of art education can be summed up as contributing to the development of a better and freer world through art and experimentation, a statement that can be seen as clearly utopian. However, this should not imply that his philosophy was that of a "dreamer". It was, rather, that of a meticulous and disciplined artist who understood that, through work and structured experimentation, students could reach profound and critical knowledge of the world, and in this way develop a critical and conscious mind, indispensable to their formation into democratic and free citizens. In this way, although Albers thinking about the connection between art, education, and democracy may be considered as utopian, his proposals were contemplated in practical and achievable terms, with clear and defined objectives. Albers did not suggest that this was going to change the entire world all of a sudden, but that this model of education, with art at its core, would permit people to develop (slowly, since – as he pointed out and as mentioned above – experience is not the quickest nor the easiest way to learn, but the broader and most far-reaching) critical thinking tools and a perspective that would, in the future, enable a more real and better world.

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