



Beyond The Rhetoric of Color

[Interaction of Color](#)

by Josef Albers

Yale University Press. 1975

Paper, 81 pages, \$5.45

[Barbara Flug Colin](#)

Three quarters of the way through Josef Albers' book [Interaction of Color](#), he says, offhandedly, between double dashes: " — as in life so with color — "

It is the charm, the merit, the profundity of this small book — in the guise of a teaching implement, in the guise of prose with spare words and deliberate line breaks measuring each line as if it were a 75-page poem — that Albers does and doesn't seem to know it is about more than color. It is "as in life." The first time I read this book I found myself copying out whole lines as you would a guide to living, a how-to. Or a poem.

On page 2: " What counts here — first and last — is not so-called knowledge/ of so-called facts, but vision — seeing. Seeing here implies Schauen(as in Weltanschauung) and is coupled/ with fantasy, with imagination."

There are many painters you would read for their writing. Kandinsky's poems, Motherwell's speech to psychiatrists, David Smith on himself, Matisse on anything...

Albers' thin self-contained book is not like other art writing. Not like other teaching manuals. It was first published in 1963. Painters still use it for what he intended. But should it be read by others for more?

Albers' voice, vision.

It is one thing to have a vision. Another to make a vision visible. One way is through art. Another might be talking about art. He seems to be talking about color interaction and about something else: the interaction of color seems to have a larger plot.

Page 1: "In visual perception a thing is never seen as it really is."

Page 3: "Each will receive the same projection on his retina,/but no one can be sure whether each has the same perception."

Page 20: "One....color can perform many... roles."

Page 20: "One is able to 'push light and/or hue,/by the use of contrasts, away from their first appearance/toward the opposite qualities."

Page 22: "Colors read differently/from what they really (physically) are."

Page 42: "By giving up preference for harmony,/we accept dissonance to be as desirable as consonance."

Page 44: "Independent /of harmony rules, any color 'goes ' or 'works'with any other color/presupposing that their quantities are appropriate."

Page 44: "The increase in amount of a color.../....reduces distance.....produces...intimacy — and respect."

Page 66: "Its [color's] greatest excitement lies beyond rules and canons."

Is he talking about something beyond color?

Page 52: "As we begin principally with the material, color itself, and its action and interaction as registered in our minds, we practice first and mainly a study of ourselves."



Interaction of Color
by Josef Albers

Ourselves.

His spare text, seventy-five pages, is a series of line breaks and separations between paragraphs (stanzas?) that make you know, feel, that each word is important, that the rhythms of the words are important. That the way the words look on a page is important.

Could a teaching manual be the vehicle for a subject larger than itself? Albers' choice of subject, color, is in his paintings and in his teaching. Color, he tells us, is the most relative medium. And shows through analogies with all the senses and with diverse subjects — music, cooking, photography, theater, psychology, weather, architecture... And finally: Life is like color.

Wallace Stevens says, in *The Necessary Angel* : "There is still another reader for whom the effect of analogy is the effect of the degree of appositeness, for whom the imaginative projection, the imaginative deviation, raises the question of rightness, as if in the vast association of ideas there existed for every object its appointed objectification." (page 114)

Color is never seen as it really is. It deceives continually. It evokes innumerable readings. Even its opposite. It can work with any other. The more it manifests itself, the more intimate it is. And respectable. You have to see it (color action) as well as feel it (color relatedness).

As I read and reread this book I too associate, substitute: Color. Person. Life.

Page 17 (Albers): "As it is with people in our daily life, so it is with color."

The reader is learning about color and much more. About humans and human invention and how they mutually reflect.

Page 22 (Albers): "...colors read differently/from what they really (physically) are..."

Humans do too.

Stevens (p. 118): "There is always an analogy between nature and the imagination, and possibly poetry is merely the strange rhetoric of that parallel: a rhetoric in which the feeling of one man is communicated to another in words of the exquisite appositeness that takes away all verblivity."

Not that *Interaction of Color* is poetry. But Albers's subject, devoid of ego, is experience projected on the screen of color. The book implies and imparts human truths as well as physical/optical truths.

Albers uses what he calls "the most relative medium in art" to create an open-ended suggestibility.

The book makes me think about vision. About the vision Stevens says we are born with. About Albers's vision. About invention as self-projection.

Albers, page 64: "We have found that/ nature occasionally provides an opportunity to see ["equal light intensities"] on cumulus clouds/against blue sky.....gleaming white....in full sunlight,/separate from and rising against a distant deep blue....underneath they show gray tones as shaded white....boundaries between gray and blue vanish, and we do not see where clouds end and where sky begins."

Writing infused with something deeper than information.

Do not read this book just for information. See how the particular can achieve a metaphoric language when a subject is as Stevens says "essential." (p. 121) "It is often said of a man that his work is autobiographical in spite of every subterfuge. It cannot be otherwise, even though it may be totally without reference to himself."

Albers's words are spare. His tone is reserved. And it keeps meaning more than color. His allusions flare. He creates a palette from the spectrum of senses and a spectrum of varied unrelated subjects he relates to his subject: photography, theater, psychology, cooking, weather...He compares color and music harmony. He compares visual and auditory memory.

Sometimes there is the aura of a poem. His line breaks really make us pay attention to the rhythms and the metaphoric possibilities.

Page 45: "In a very different way, distant mountains appear uniformly blue, no matter whether covered with green trees...The sun is glaring white in daytime, but is full red at sunset."

And we learn a humane progressive approach to teaching itself.

Page 69: "[Our study of color] promotes a more lasting teaching and learning through experience. Its aim is development of creativeness/realized in discovery and invention — the criteria of creativity,/...being imagination and fantasy."

Page 69: "Advocate.../learning which promotes recognition of insight coming/from experience."

Page 71: "Education is self-education."

Page 71: "In the end, teaching is a matter not of method but of heart....[a teacher's] enthusiastic concern with the students' growth counts more than how much he knows."

Page 71: "Teaching is more a giving of right questions than a giving of right answers."

The teaching examples are accessible: On page 3 he cites Coca-Cola signs. On page 8 he advocates dipping your own hands in water so that one "feels — experiences — perceives....a discrepancy between physical and psychic effect..."

In comparing the visual and the auditory on page 34, he invokes the four tones of "Good morning to you."

Page 45: "Usually we think of an apple as being red" to explain "film colors."

On page 45, he uses the example of tea in a spoon and tea in a cup to explain "volume color effect."

p. 44: "To use a theatrical parallel:/A set of 4 colors is to be considered — singly as "actors,"/together as "cast." They are to be presented in 4 different/arrangements — as "performances."

p. 42: "Good painting, good coloring, is comparable to good cooking. Even a good cooking recipe demands tasting and repeated tasting/while it is being followed./And the best tasting still depends on a cook with taste."

We learn why Kandinsky's paintings work. What Cezanne, Van Gogh, Soutine, Matisse, and Klee discovered.

Sometimes Albers is practically biblical:

Page 23: "He who claims to see colors independent of their illusionary changes/feels only himself and no one else."

Maybe this thin self-contained tome is tamed emotion. Maybe this, like his art pieces exploding with color theory, is an analogous art piece

Try reading this book for the wrong reasons. Not for information or even to learn about the subject. But to see how a subject can mean more than itself.

ALSO DRAWN ON IN THIS ESSAY

Stevens, Wallace. [The Necessary Angel](#). New York: Vintage Books, 1942.

Editor's Note: Both the Albers and the Stevens titles are available in more current editions than were used in the preparation of this article.

Albers, Josef. *The Rhetoric of Color* Yale University Press, 1987. pb, 81 pp. \$12.00.

Stevens, Wallace. [The Necessary Angel](#), Random House, 1987. pb \$9.00.

©2000 Frigate: The Transverse Review of Books www.frigatezine.com

All rights reserved on behalf of the authors.

We welcome your comments and suggestions on our site. Please email [<webmaster@frigatezine.com>](mailto:webmaster@frigatezine.com).

Back to [Frigatezine Home Page](#)