

## Malgré la ligne droite : l'écriture américaine de Josef Albers

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*Malgré la ligne droite*: The French title is a quasi-translation of Albers' 1977 *Despite of Straight Lines*, with a nod at the French "clear line" aesthetics of certain forms of comics language, but above all an immediate foregrounding of the very center of the book, namely the two meanings of the word "line" in English (line + verse), and the countless implications of this ambivalence for the artistic production and importance of Josef Albers, whose work is not only an homage to the square (to quote another of his titles), but above all to the line, as Broqua convincingly demonstrates in this wonderful and highly innovative study.

Broqua offers indeed a truly new approach to Josef Albers, not just by rejecting or bypassing the existing scholarship, but by revising, fine tuning, expanding, and eventually displacing and reframing it by reading Albers' visual work through the lens of his less-known yet never really studied poetry. He does so more precisely in light of the word and image interaction of Albers' artistic practice, which

blurs the boundaries between writing and painting, but also between theory and practice and, even more generally, between the actual production of the work of art and the moments of critical reflection as exemplified in teaching as well as lecturing (in museums, galleries, or interviews, for instance).

The basic stances developed by Broqua are twofold. First of all, he shows that according to Albers, the work of art is not just an object but an experience –and here it is easy to perceive the influence of John Dewey, the major theoretical reference of the Black Mountain College where Albers started his North American career, after having left Germany in 1933. Moreover, Broqua usefully insists on the fact that for Albers the ideal form of this experience is that of abstraction: an experience of pure (sic) form, unhampered by the noise of anti-historical, political, psychological, or ideological elements. Such an abstraction is, by definition, embodied—and thus syncretic and contextualized, yet always focused on the interaction between the material properties of the work and the physiological features of the viewer’s perception. Second, Broqua also demonstrates that abstraction is not something that can be reduced to mere visuality (or, in a later form of modern art, to “immaterial” conceptualism). It is a radically material and intermedial event, in the strong sense of performance, that is deeply interwoven with language. Yet language as well has a deep materiality, which has to do with the specific language one speaks and writes (in the case Albers, the shift from German to English, a language the artist had to learn from scratch at age 45, has of course proven decisive) and the type of language one practices (and for Albers, this type was not just plain English or American, but poetry, more specifically experimental poetry as was being

explored by US avant-garde writers in the modernist era, as Broqua, himself a great specialist of experimental North-American art and poetry, finely discloses).

This twofold starting hypothesis is examined in this book, which is also based on the study of the rich Albers archives, through the close reading of some major book publications by Josef Albers, mainly *Interaction of Color* (1940), *Poems and Drawings* (1958), and *Search versus Research* (1969). Chief in this regard is Broqua's intuition, here brilliantly unpacked, that Albers' writing is less a form of metatext, that is a comment by the artist on his own work, than a new kind of artist writing that is properly poetic. In other words it is a form of writing that reshapes ordinary language, for instance the way in which an artist presents her or his own work, in order to put forward the abstract qualities of language, such as semantic twists and ambivalences, sound and rhythm patterns, visual structures at the levels of line and page, with a special emphasis on the two questions of the enjambement or line break—probably the most fundamental feature separating poetry from ordinary language and spatial symmetries and tensions at the larger surface of page and double spread. In Broqua's reading it becomes crystal-clear that Albers' writing progressively transforms a traditional artist comment into a new kind of writing, that is at the same critical (metatextual) and poetic (and thus eventually abstract) and that the work on the "line" is the key element of this endeavor.

Broqua's argumentation is clear, sharp, (apparently) simple, no less than the transparent but infinitely complex poems and drawings of this book's model, Josef Albers. Broqua takes abstraction very seriously. Instead of "adding" all kind of

theoretical, art-historical, psychological and other comments to something that for some viewers seems to be in need of something, he shows that materiality itself is meaning, provided it has been poeticized by the artist's effort and provided also we as viewers and readers accept to fully explore its many potentialities, an attitude that is not without a strong political dimension, for we can only discover these potentialities by questioning our old ways of thinking, feeling, and experiencing. Close-reading is an essential part of this approach: it is not a pre-theoretical or a-theoretical way of reading and viewing, but the best possible way to fully experience what theory may hint at, and vice versa, just like in Albers' creative practice itself, where the traditionally separated domains of producing, conceptualizing, teaching, and sharing the work come together thanks to the multi-perspective action of poetry.