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Anni Albers

Tanya Harrod

1 In scattered workshops in Northern Europe, experimental hand-weaving made an important contribution to artistic and industrial modernism in the first part of the 20th century. The story of the weaver Anni Albers reminds us of the complexities and contradictions of this "lost" 20th century modernism, which was almost entirely led by women. Aside from the Bauhaus in Germany where Albers studied alongside great figures like Gunta Stölzl, Otti Berger, Margaret Leischner, and Benita Otte, there were interesting weavers in Scandinavia like the Finnish Greta Skogster and the Swedish Elsa Gulberg. In Britain there were the experimental weavers, spinners and dyers Ethel Mairet and Elizabeth Peacock, while the Swiss designer Marianne Straub influenced both hand and industrial weaving in Britain. In 1930s North America, Loja Saarinen and Marianne Strengell brought Swedish and Finnish modernist standards to weaving as teachers at Cranbrook while in France there were the remarkable experimental dress textiles, both woven and knitted, designed by the firm Rodier and produced in short runs on handlooms in small villages in Picardy. The Bauhaus weavers were, therefore, part of a Europe-wide movement using handlooms to explore weave structures in order to create discrete works of art but, also, more importantly, to transform industrial weaving.

2 One reason that we are particularly aware of Anni Albers is because, as well as being a creative weaver in a modernist mode, she also wrote with great clarity and beauty. Her various essays, collected in *On Designing* (1959) and *On Weaving* (1965) are classic texts, comparable to Bernard Leach’s *A Potter’s Book* (1940) and David Pye’s *The Nature and Art of Workmanship* (1968). Another reason for her relative fame is the more recent activity of the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation which has been closely involved with a succession of exhibitions and catalogues devoted to Anni Albers and her husband since the 1970s, looking at their work separately and individually, and at their collecting and their travels, particularly in Latin America. But even if we argue that Albers is best seen as the first among equals, this does not detract from the value of the beautifully designed book/catalogue accompanying the exhibition *Anni Albers* (held at

Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Dusseldorf and at Tate Modern during 2018) edited by Ann Coxon, Briony Fer and Maria Müller-Schareck.

3 Anni Albers was born into a wealthy assimilated Jewish family in Berlin in 1899 and was discouraged from painting by Oskar Kokoschka, no less. Aware at a young age of gender discrimination in the visual arts, she was drawn to the newly formed Bauhaus with its promises of equality. She joined the school in 1922, only to find that women were directed to their own department which swiftly evolved into a weaving workshop. As she put it: "fate put into my hands limp threads!" However, her fellow students, led by Gunta Stölzl and Otti Berger, were enormously talented and during her eight years at the Bauhaus, Albers, like other Bauhaus weavers, carried out creative research enriched by the teachings of artists like Johannes Itten, Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee, and by the women's own deeply-thought theoretical writings.

4 Albers's Bauhaus work included her well-known abstract double or treble cloth wall hangings, her gouache drawings for similar abstract designs, and industrial applications of weaving such as her wall covering for Hannes Meyer's Trade Union School auditorium near Berlin at Bernau whose structure was analysed scientifically by Zeiss-Ikon A.G., measuring the material's light-reflective and sound absorbing qualities. In 1925 while still a student she married Josef Albers, a former Bauhaus student and a teacher at the school. Arguably Anni Albers was the lucky one, given the political situation in Germany. In 1933, after a couple of years of freelance work, she and her husband Josef were invited to the United States to teach at the newly formed Black Mountain College in North Carolina, leaving Germany the year that Hitler took power. By contrast Gunta Stölzl left the Bauhaus in 1931 and subsequently struggled to make a living in a difficult political climate, eventually running a weaving mill in Switzerland. Otti Berger, refused a visa to the States in 1938, died in a concentration camp. Others, like Margaret Leischner, joined the artistic diaspora, fleeing abroad to find work as teachers or within industry.

5 As her husband became an increasingly respected teacher in North America, Albers had freedom to think, make and write. Although she and her peers at the Bauhaus had been aware of ancient Andean weavings, she was able to study them in depth on visits to Peru and Chile in the 1950s. Still earlier she was inspired by visits to the tombs of Monte Albán in Mexico, which led to her first named wall hanging of 1936. The experience of teaching at Black Mountain College alongside her husband Josef was both demanding and liberating. And in North America she was able to concentrate on an on-going sequence of similar non-functional weavings – "pictorial weavings"- mounted and framed like graphics or paintings. These are of great beauty, colouristically subtle, employing fancy yarns, bunched warps, leno weaves and floating wefts.

6 By the mid 1950s her weavings become markedly smaller than her Bauhaus wall hangings and suggest a certain scaling back on Albers's part. After the couple had moved to New Haven in 1950, Josef Albers having become chair of the department of Design at Yale University, Albers took to using a table loom rather than the large counter-march looms she had employed at the Bauhaus and at Black Mountain College. That would explain why in the 1960s she asked Gunta Stölzl to re-weave some of her lost wall hangings made at the Bauhaus. Her increasingly crippled state would have made using the foot pedals of large looms difficult. There may have been other reasons for downsizing. Charles Sawyer, Dean of the Yale School of Art in the 1950s, recalled "In

all candour I don't think that Josef was entirely sympathetic to her concerns. And I think he should have been."

7 We have to ask what the Tate publication brings to this well-rehearsed and researched area. Paradoxically *Anni Albers* is a marvellous book because weaving is seen as something unfamiliar. A helpful introduction by Anna Coxon and Maria Müller-Schareck is followed by the lead essay by Briony Fer. In a fine article Fer argues that "a handloom is hardly the most obvious choice for an artist of the historical avant-garde" and elsewhere she notes the "use of yarn, the handmade and a slow laborious process that are aspects of weaving". Weaving is certainly very different from painting, even if Albers took to presenting her work in ways that downplayed the diaphanous quality of woven textile, framing her later work as if it belonged on a wall like an abstract painting. As Fer suggests, the fact that weaving is based on "a complex play of vertical and horizontal" makes it "the ideal modern medium because it embodies the grid in its very structure of warp and weft".

8 Because the grid emerged as a crucial component of early modernism, it might seem that weaving, based on a vertical warp and a horizontal weft, was a modernist medium almost by accident, the result of the technique itself. Yet, over the centuries weaving had embraced every kind of figuration and decorativeness, particularly in the form of tapestry with its discontinuous wefts and, from the 19th century, through the use of Jacquard looms. At the Bauhaus and in the radical workshops run by Mairet and Peacock in England, by Gullberg in Sweden, and by the firm Rodier in France, weavers abandoned representation deliberately, concentrating on abstract colour, yarn texture and structure, not shying from new materials like cellophane. And as with other areas of modernism, radical weavers looked back in order to look forward, studying the distant present of peasant or vernacular weaving from remoter parts of Europe such as the then Kingdom of Yugoslavia, or investigating ancient Egyptian linens or pre-Columbian Andean textiles, the latter recognised as being technically among the most sophisticated weavings ever created. Fer's article, with its sub-title "Weaving as a Modern Project", is sensitive and suggestive, particularly on Albers's architectural commissions in North America. That Albers's individual radicalism is overemphasised is inevitable, given that this is a monographic study. And if Fer's essay is characterised by a sense of wonderment, this chimes with Anni Albers's own writings.

9 *On Weaving* has a luminous simplicity and clarity. It was not written for readers deeply immersed in either weaving, whether as art, craft or design for manufacture. Rather Albers reached out to a wider audience, setting out universal principles. This was not a how-to-do-it book. The great Anglo-Swiss British textile designer Marianne Straub noted in an admiring review that Albers's book had "distinction" and avoided "details that lie in the province of specialists". *On Weaving* anticipates more recent writing on the semantics of text and textile, which draws on literary theory, psychoanalysis and gender and identity politics, with thread operating as a carrier of meaning. Albers got there first. And by illustrating images that most weavers would regard as quotidian in *On Weaving*, such as the checker-board graphics of weave notations, she gave the art world space to make links with other forms of abstraction. By writing with no assumption of a craft audience, Albers was able to announce with deceptive simplicity that weaving was "the event of a thread" and "a method of forming a pliable plane of threads by interlacing them rectangularly", thus allowing all of us to look at the discipline anew.

10 Fer’s essay is followed by eleven short, insightful contributions that bring out aspects of Albers’s practice. Magdalene Droste offers a pithy account of the Bauhaus workshop system while T’ai Smith gives a brief account of Albers’s the 1929 Bernau auditorium wall-covering designed while Albers was still a student, noting that it was very much a product of the collective research in the weaving workshop. Briony Fer returns to look at Albers at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. Fer observes that Albers was initially teaching without looms, starting as it were from the "point of zero", making jewellery out of everyday hardware store items, experimenting with backstraps looms, making the most of the lack of equipment available at this pioneer art school. Maria Minera discusses Albers’s visits to the archaeological site of Monte Albán in Mexico, linking her experiences there to a turn to floating weft techniques. Brenda Danilowitz discusses the way in which Albers undermined the grid, bunching and twisting warp threads to make Peruvian-inspired gauzes. This leads on to an analysis of Albers’s knot paintings, remarkable gouaches on paper depicting entangled threads, possibly inspired by Max Wilhelm Dehn, the mathematician and knot theorist who also taught at Black Mountain. Jennifer Reynolds-Kaye discusses Albers’s parallel life as a discerning collector of Pre-Columbian textiles and small scale objects in clay and stone while Priyesh Mistry looks at Albers’s 1949 Museum of Modern Art travelling exhibition *Anni Albers Textiles*. Albers was the first weaver to be given a solo show at a major American institution. Maria Müller-Schareck offers an elegant discussion of the relationship between text and textile in the context of Albers’s "studies made on a typewriter", in which the typewriter was used as a graphic tool for abstraction. This leads on to an analysis of the text-like quality of Alber’s weavings, her floating wefts in particular appearing to suggest the line structures of poetry. Ann Coxon writes about Albers’s *Six Prayers* (1966-7) commissioned for the Jewish Museum, New York, re-emphasising the intersection between text and textile in Albers’s work. Finally, in a rather more personal account, Nicholas Fox Weber discusses Albers’s abandonment of weaving in favour of print making in the context of change and transformation in Albers’s own life.

11 All these essays are inspirational and will undoubtedly lead to further interest in the complex relationship between twentieth-century design, art and craft. Ann Coxon provides an *Envoi* which suggests that this is Anni Albers’s big moment among artists and within the art world in general. She was a far more conservative artist that, say, Sheila Hicks or Leonore Tawney but her disciplined approach and that of the Bauhaus weavers in general have inspired a new generation of artists. Artists as varied as Beryl Korot and Leonor Antunes have found Albers a model, Antunes paying tribute to a woman working in the shadow of a more famous husband, while the German artist Judith Raum has gone deep into the poetic technology of weaving to rehabilitate Albers’s Bauhaus colleague Otti Berger. Albers’s career was marked by slow meticulous work carried out in relative solitude. It is not surprising that Albers’s approach – dominated by "the event of a thread" – acts as an inspiration in a currently chaotic world.