

Responses to Anni Albers – Material as Metaphor

All notes from the guidebook to Tate Modern's 2018 Anni Albers' exhibition

Material is a means of communication. The listening to it, not dominating it makes us truly active, that is: to be active, be passive.

How can one be active in passivity? The answer is simple: one must remove oneself. Or, rather, one must shift away one's central focus from the self. One must step in – as though in metaphor – to take the place of the absent object whose subject hangs over you and invest in it. In the aesthetic experience, you are the only Real Object present; you are the only Thing that can feel its own Thingness. In passivity, you can stop trying. Letting yourself take the place of the absent object, you fuse with the metaphor's subject, creating a new compound. Now not a correlation, for you are inwardly invested in the inwardness of the absent object and present subject. You do not dominate it, as you would if you engaged with it unaesthetically, that is, without stepping in, without metaphorical engagement. The domination is a by-product of anthropocentric ethics, a view that the object – the material – exists as an object for the thinking human mind to respond to. I do not mean that when you look away it will vanish, but that we can never access the inwardness, the Dasein, the Thing-in-Itself of the object any more than we can of ourselves. We are mutually withdrawn from each other, our inwardness out of touch. Not for transcendental reasons, resorting to an external grounding for solidity, nor an endless regressive association of shadows, but for *reality*. Reality is that in which we *must* be grounded: the solidity of uncertainty, that which we encounter in radically different ways to how we envisage. Our experience of reality is always different to how we imagine. This is reality; I do not access the inwardness of a spoon when I use it, I simply use it as a tool. This is not knowledge; we do not discuss what something does, or looks like – we avoid prescriptivist knowledge in favour of other cognitive forms of access. The aesthetic experience, administered through Albers' passivity: that is the metaphorical engagement. The anthropodecentration in the engagement with the world.

I tried to put my students at the point of zero

Here is a flat ontology writ large: the point of zero. A starting point, certainly, but a crucial one. It is a removal, an attempt at a removal, of any taxonomical prejudices and assumptions. One cannot reach passivity – metaphorical engagement – without it. Reach the point of zero rephrased: do not cave to personal or cultural (im)positions of what is or what is not real. Start from nothing, giving primacy to nothing, do not pigeon-hole either "nature" or "culture" as the modernists did, or any other simple dichotomised system, which always reduces *reality* into a theory which can exist only in theory. The zero point must be attained for metaphorical engagement: it is that after finitude, it is a humbling of the inquiring mind in acknowledging that, really, it knows and is nothing beyond itself, and has no authority over any Thing with which it engages. Socrates' greatness was his ability to maintain this point of zero, this humbling. He only knows he knows nothing. *Reality* remains directly inaccessible, but – in metaphorical engagement – we can touch it for a coruscating moment. Indirect access is the best tool we ever have at our disposal.

an unprejudiced attitude towards materials and their inherent capabilities

Materials, with any object, are withdrawn from us. We cannot access their inwardness in either description (third-person access) or introspection (first-person access). But we must try. In order to

confront the reality in which we exist, we must try. Unprejudiced attitudes begin at the point of zero, at the removal of the human from the centre of the experiential world, the acceptance of objectival perspective within critical parallax (indeed, the most crucial perspective in metaphorical engagement (object-ive subject-ivisation). They are capable fully without human interference. We manipulate them to an extent and call that extent their limitation: this is arrogance and flawed. The objects exist and operate beyond us. They are an “I”: not wielding the nebulous concept of consciousness, but simply because *they are*. And, because they are, we cannot access them directly. In order to have any hope of indirect access, metaphorical engagement, object-ive subject-ivisation (the stepping into the space of the absent metaphorical object), we must become unprejudiced and reach the zero point. The objects, the materials must be left to express their inherent capabilities themselves. The aesthetic experience is a vessel, we are merely a vessel for the absent objects, and thus can access ourselves and the world.

to let threads be articulate again and find a form for themselves to no other end than their own orchestration, not to be sat on, walked on

We can indirectly access inwardness of objects and ourselves through the aesthetic act. The aesthetic act is only possible if we accept the thread as articulate, and inherent capable beyond our interference. To walk on, to sit on: this is not aesthetic but functional and real. We do not access reality or inwardness in these actions, for we impose upon them, we use the objects and do not engage. If we step away, and see their own orchestration – visualise their inaccessibility to us, their mutual autonomy – we can then experience the aesthetic act. For only then do we remove ourselves from the centre of that exchange and create a mutual space. Accepting withdrawal, finding forms for themselves (the objects/thing/act/event), we remove the human domination and reach the point of zero, the passivity necessary of metaphorical engagement. To be passive is to be possessed, to allow possession by the absent object: the key to object-ive subject-ivisation, metaphorical engagement: the aesthetic act.

To accept all of this, we accept that the objects in which we engage aesthetically contain their own inwardness, their own noumena. Thus, they must (from Kant) contain their own ethical realm. We do not wish to dominate, to walk on, to sit on: we strive to access their reality, just as we wish at all times to be told we are ok, that we exist, that we are known in the face of a void. The point of zero is an opening up to a non-human ethics, or, rather, an ethics of the non-human. To actively accept passivity and possession by absent objects in metaphorical engagement we can access these non-human ethics. Aesthetics enables this movement. Aesthetics is the ethics of the non-human, the reality we cannot directly access. Only through stepping in, through deferral do we even get close.

Anni Albers is an improviser, a musician. An improviser is the keenest artist of all, because they surrender their centrality to the point of zero, to the necessary passivity of aesthetic investment (object-ive investment; metaphorical engagement). At no point does an improviser assert their dominant centrality, but instead flow in place of the deferred absent object.

Albers saw her designs, her work as scores – recipes – to be replicated, by permission and otherwise, by other artists, other people. The thread was an event: a diachronic object with which she and we engage metaphorically. The thread's exectutant nature was her improvisation: she was the master

of getting out of her own way, of reaching the point of zero. She accepted her inconsequentiality and therefore was able to create greatness, access to *reality* indirectly. She stepped aside, and let the absent object of her art possess her, the only Real Object present in the exchange. She knew and trusted that the thread had its own nature beyond her enacting of it, that it was as withdrawn from any other object and the world as she was. She respected the ethics of the thread and created aesthetic experience, an indirect access to the inwardness of the thread and ourselves – for even when possessed in object-ive investment, we are still present. Any indirect access felt to the metaphorical absent object resounds on our own inner unknown being.

Turner

Turner was a misanthropist.

In his work, humans are in the way. They are an imposition on the power and sublimity of the natural world. By placing humans and industry front and centre he does not champion them, he mocks them, derides their arrogance. For all you have achieved, you still do not see you are nothing. Turner is an ecologist and an understander that things are mutually withdrawn. He used pigments that would fade deliberately, his work was ephemeral in its intended state. The power of nature towers over the hubris of man. He anthropodecentrises the landscape by mocking the humans thinking they dominate it, that they are somehow special in their place and understanding of the world, that they – only they can grasp reality. When in actuality, we have grasped, we can grasp, nothing – not even ourselves.

Odysseus mocks the cyclops as the sun beats down and the sea rocks his ship. He is triumphant in the joy that – we know – will deny him happiness for decades. He believes himself central, but is as much a discrete pawn as the sheep with which he fooled Polyphemus.

For Turner: man is an imposition. The aggression in his work is not industry, but nature's – the world's, *reality's* – disbelief that one fragment of itself could think itself so highly, could assert itself so harmfully. What this image could be – Turner seems to say – if man were not here.