

Seeing Widely

“Color is the most relative medium of art,” writes Josef Albers in *Interaction of Color*, first published in 1963. “Colors present themselves in continuous flux,” he elaborates, “constantly related to changing neighbors and changing conditions,” demonstrated most exactly in his series of paintings *Homage to the Square*. Color therefore cannot help but to choose sociality over singularity, and Albers likens this phenomenon to theater and the series of relationships that occur on the stage: “A set of 4 colors is to be considered—singly as “actors” together as “cast.”” Open to “innumerable readings,” color’s contingency and capaciousness extends to its viewers as well. *Interaction of Color* not only serves as a tool for understanding the relative nature of color, but it also evolves into a mode of seeing, learning, and teaching, encouraging an ongoing process of “searching” with experimentation, imagination, and creativity as our guides.¹

Anna Kunz animates interaction through the three dimensional space of her installation *COLOR CAST*. In Kunz’s hands, a warm palette unfurls over large swaths of silk and fiber, muscularly draped and hung throughout the room. Like Albers, the artist paints in the language of geometric abstraction, but her edges are unabashedly—and charmingly—imperfect: a chorus of variously colored squares, rectangles, and a handful of irregular shapes are stacked on top of each other or nestled next to one another. As light filters through the fabric, the colors cast through each other, leaving a “ghost color” on the white walls.² Blocks of pigment also appear on the custom-built accessible floor, elevated several inches off the ground. This quasi-sculptural surface bears scuffmarks and other patina, connecting the colors of human activity to paint itself.

¹ Josef Albers, *Interaction of Color: Revised and Expanded Edition* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2005), 1–2, 5, 8, 44, 65.

² Anna Kunz, email message to author, May 7, 2018.

On the upper gallery overlooking the main space, Kunz has displayed several drawings and collages on structures resembling music stands. “Scores,” as she refers to these works on paper, both broadly prefigure her paintings and might serve as “scores” for the infinite variations of encounters to take place below.³ Kunz’s cast, then, is not simply composed of colors—it’s made up of us, too, as we weave in and out of the lengths of fabric and move around the floor, the curtain and the stage, for our own performance as visitors. In the exhibition, color is the property through which the artist explores *interaction* in its potential forms: the yellow seen through a scrim of red, the sense of sight experienced through that of touch or sound, and the unpredictable social encounters among viewers and other artists invited to work in the space. This, for Kunz, is painting’s promise.

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Painting has long been associated with “ocularcentrism,” a “specifically Western character of visibility,” as Laura Marks has argued, predicated on a disembodied position of distance and autonomy.⁴ This site of vision—an optics of omniscience—has been historically granted to universal subjects, (un)marked as white, male, heterosexual, at a distance removed, rather than within, the world. On the other hand, “haptic visibility,” as Marks terms it, can involve the “fabric of everyday experience that tends to elude verbal and visual records.” Although Marks’s objects of study are intercultural cinema, she points us to a larger form of perception grounded in the body and on “mutuality” rather than mastery.⁵ The tactile quality of

³ Anna Kunz, conversation with author, April 14, 2018.

⁴ Laura Marks, *The Skin of Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 133.

⁵ Marks, *The Skin of Film*, 130, 162, 184.

images holds the possibility of communicating alternative forms of knowledge and ways of being in the world.

COLOR CAST invites us to experience painting through other means, occasioning Albers's own invitation "to see in the widest sense."⁶ Kunz widens our sight through her use of textiles, the favored medium, notably, of Anni Albers, artist, teacher, and Josef's wife who shared with her husband a devotion to geometric form.⁷ Instead of canvas, Kunz turns to silk and non-grid fiber. Digital prints based on paintings, the silk pieces possess a delicacy that departs from the uneven texture of the fiber. I imagine Kunz's own surfaces—the smoothness of the silk, the scratchiness of the fiber, even the scuffed-up painted floor—as her paintings' skin, the organ most associated with touch. The fabric paintings have also touched other surfaces in the room: Kunz created the fiber works by pinning the textile to a wall in the exhibition, applying pigment, and then removing the fabric to leave traces of the painting on the formerly bare surface. Pressing the textured fiber and wall close together, Kunz makes a painting by way of touching and transference, composing visual rhymes and relationships throughout the space. In *COLOR CAST*, the white wall of the museum becomes another locus for interaction, shaking its status as a plane so often reserved for acts of pure perception. The artist thus casts "mutuality" between the senses as touching painting, materializing the optical strategies long associated with her medium.

Sara Ahmed calls for an interaction between self and world, self and, in particular, those we deem strangers, based around a specific type of touch *and*, critically for Kunz, hearing that can elude voice. "In my notion of ethical encounters, hearing does not take place in my ear or in

⁶ Josef Albers as qtd. in Nicholas Fox Weber et al., *Josef Albers: A Retrospective* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1988), 11.

⁷ Nicholas Fox Weber, "The Artist as Alchemist," in Nicholas Fox Weber et al., *Josef Albers: A Retrospective* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1988), 29.

yours, but in between our mouths and our ears, in the very proximity and multiplicity of this encounter,” Ahmed writes. “The multiple ears that are required to ‘hear’ the other, without transforming this other into ‘the Other’ or ‘the stranger’, are ears that are alive to, or touched by the sensations of other skins.”⁸ In addition to touch, sound and hearing play an important role in how Kunz builds interaction through collaboration. During the exhibition, the low groan of a cello could be heard—and felt (and I also feel the presence of Charlotte Moorman, whose cello became an instrument for ceaseless experimentation and collaboration with artists and friends). Kunz worked with composer Beth Bradfish to record a soundscape programmed to play at random from transducers placed underneath the elevated floor, causing the painted surface to vibrate, an effect the composer notably likens in haptic terms to being “held—gently and unobtrusively.”⁹ Bradfish, who experiences synesthesia, translated the blues, yellows, reds, pinks, purples, ochres, blushes, and greens in Kunz’s work into an unpredictable sound design filled with low tones that “hold us to the earth,” in Bradfish’s words, and occasion contemplative moments of pause or even a kind of peace. Indeed, collaboration is a vital part of Kunz’s larger practice. In 2009, she created the set design for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, first formed at Black Mountain College, the experimental school where Anni and Josef Albers also taught, oriented around communal living and non-hierarchical pedagogy.¹⁰ Interaction in Kunz’s practice is therefore conditioned on collaboration. What results are kinships, rather than hierarchies, between different media and sensory experiences.

⁸ Sara Ahmed. *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000), 155, 158.

⁹ Beth Bradfish, written conversation with the author and Anna Kunz, July 2, 2018.

¹⁰ Anna Kunz, “Once Upon a Rainy Day: Designing a Cunningham Event,” Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, April 20, 2017. <https://mcatchicago.org/Publications/Blog/2017/04/Once-Upon-A-Rainy-Day-Designing-A-Cunningham-Event>; Sheri Bernstein, “Purism and Pragmatism: Josef Albers and László Maholy-Nagy,” in Stephanie Barron with Sabine Eckmann, *Exiles and Emigres: The Flight of European Artists from Hitler* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1997), 255.

In addition to working with Bradfish, Kunz also asked iconic jazz musician Mwata Bowden and the Jazz X-tet, an ensemble from the University of Chicago, to perform in the exhibition space. Bowden has been a member of Chicago's Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) since 1974, a legendary jazz organization grounded in improvisation and an interdisciplinary ethos. On a spring afternoon, the performers filled Kunz's installation with improvised sound, analogous to how color changes in the space as light shifts both throughout the day and over the course of exhibition's run. The musicians performed barefoot, their skin touching the vibrating floor. The textured surfaces of Kunz's interacting colors assembled a haptic architecture for this collaborative encounter, an indefinable space "between" a painter and a musician, between an invitation and improvisation, between touch and sound, without privileging one over the other.

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In 1933 when the Nazis gained power, Josef and Anni Albers left their native Germany where they had been teaching at the Bauhaus, which closed the same year, for positions at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. In 1993, Josef Albers also wrote: "In short, our 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 his own living, being, and doing."¹¹ Studying and seeing the "relatedness" of color doubled as a way of relating with the world, inside and outside the classroom.¹² Similarly, Kunz considers the connections between colors as something significantly more than a self-reflective exercise about the properties of painting itself; rather, neighboring colors serve as a starting point to "see in the widest sense." The artist let's us begin small as we navigate the accumulative effects of interactions in the installation: the

¹¹ Josef Albers as qtd. in Weber et al., *Josef Albers: A Retrospective*, 11.

¹² Albers, *Interaction of Color*, 1.

seemingly simple relationship between two colors acts as a score to study the relationships among fabric, wall, sight, touch, sound, abstraction, materiality, body, painting. A live embodiment of experimentation, encounters, and collaboration, *COLOR CAST*—an abstract painting extended in space—summons the world in.

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