



*Over and Over and Over Again: Reenactment Strategies in Contemporary Arts and Theory*, ed. by Cristina Baldacci, Clío Nicastro, and Arianna Sforzini, Cultural Inquiry, 21 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022), pp. 255–60

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## 'We Are Gathering Experience' Restaging the History of Art Education

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**ABSTRACT:** In recent years, critics and art historians have pointed to an 'educational turn', a rise in participatory pedagogical art projects and artist-led experimental schools. This essay considers artist-led projects and museum programmes that restage or reenact educational experiments from the past, analysing their limits and possibilities in the study and presentation of modern art history. Much like performance art, pedagogy is ephemeral and contingent, and yet it differs in that it does not establish a fixed spectatorial role. To be understood it must be participated in, for, as Josef Albers described his teaching, 'we are gathering experience'.

**KEYWORDS:** Pedagogy; Teaching; Museum Education

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# ‘We Are Gathering Experience’

## Restaging the History of Art Education

ALETHEA ROCKWELL

Art is concerned with the how, not the what.

Josef Albers

Draw the negative space between the rungs of a stool. Draw your name backwards. Draw a page of zigzags. Make a rock look like fur. These directives may ring of instruction-based conceptual art, but they predate that movement by thirty years. They are exercises developed by artist and educator Josef Albers to train young artists in what he referred to as the ‘how’ of art.<sup>1</sup> Albers’s emphasis on technical and material experimentation has had a major influence on art education since he began teaching at the Bauhaus in 1923. It is also a touchstone for museum education departments, where there is an interest in shifting audiences’ perceptions of works of art as fixed and final objects. Moving away from simply presenting the object (the what), how do museums make present artistic processes (the how)?

This essay considers the restaging of those aspects of artistic practice that fall outside of what is considered a work of art. It specifically

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1 Frederick A. Horowitz and Brenda Danilowitz, *Josef Albers: To Open Eyes* (London: Phaidon, 2006), p. 82. Cf. Josef Albers, ‘The Meaning of Art’, paper presented at Berea College, Berea, Kentucky, and Black Mountain College, 12 March 1940.

looks to examples of teaching exercises and therapeutic protocols that modern artists have developed in tandem and dialogue with the body of artistic production that is typically displayed. Actively carrying out these exercises animates the study of how artistic practice is transmitted from one generation of artists to another — whether in formal educational institutions or, as is so often the case, through alternative channels and communities. When presented through participatory programming in a museum context, this strategy of reenacting an artist's specific pedagogical exercises and protocols allows for a richer reading of their material processes and their social and collective ways of working.

The examples given here are drawn from my experience working in the public programming division of the Education department at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. While museums have overarching educational mandates, education staff members are often distinguished from those in curatorial departments through their focus on audiences over objects, or, put differently, their charge to make objects as accessible as possible. The word 'accessible' can take on negative connotations, because it brings to mind the 'watering down' of material. In this paper, however, I echo the scholar Irit Rogoff, who has defined access as 'the ability to formulate one's own questions, as opposed to those that are posed to you in the name of an open and participatory democratic process, for it is clear that those who formulate the questions produce the playing field.'<sup>2</sup> I will return to this idea of access later on, because it can serve as a useful measure for adjudicating the value of reprising pedagogical practices from the past.

Albers's pedagogical theory has a particular resonance for educators at MoMA because of the history of his relationship with the museum. In the early years after its founding in 1929, the museum used the Bauhaus as a model, both in its architecture and its division of departments, which placed equal value on fine arts, architecture, and design. When the Bauhaus was shuttered due to mounting antagonism from the Nazi party, it was Philip Johnson, MoMA's first curator of architecture, who helped secure positions for Albers and his wife and

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2 Irit Rogoff, 'Turning', *e-flux journal*, 00 (November 2008) <<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/00/68470/turning/>> [accessed 14 November 2017].

fellow artist Anni Albers at the experimental Black Mountain College in North Carolina. Later, both Josef and Anni Albers would teach through MoMA's education programmes.

Albers's pedagogical innovations began with the Bauhaus *Vorkurs*, or preliminary course, which he took up teaching in 1923. As an introduction to colour and form, it became a central expression of the school's philosophy. It cast off the traditional approach that would have students copy from live models, plaster casts, or the work of the masters, and instead focused on experimental interrogation of the qualities of materials and form. In Albers's words:

First we seek contact with the material. [...] Instead of pasting it we will put paper together by sewing, buttoning, riveting, typing, and pinning it; in other words we fasten it in a multitude of ways. We will test the possibilities of its tensile and compression-resistant strength. In so doing, we do not always create 'works of art', but rather experiments; it is not our ambition to fill museums: we are gathering experience.<sup>3</sup>

After leaving Germany, Albers would further his progressive teaching methods at Black Mountain College and, beginning in 1950, Yale University, his students including Eva Hesse, Ruth Asawa, Ray Johnson, Cy Twombly, Richard Anuszkiewicz, John Chamberlain, Richard Serra, and Robert Rauschenberg. What makes Albers's educational theory relevant to this discussion is that he had defined methods for students to learn about materials through systematic study. For example, he would hand out a single sheet of paper and talk about the paper's tendency to lie flat. What can be done with this flat thing to make it more interesting? With a single fold it can stand on edge. With two or three folds, the strength and visual design of the paper becomes more complicated. Albers decried art education that he characterized as 'undisciplined laissez-faire' or 'self-expressionism', just as much as he dismissed the traditional methods that he called 'imitative parroting' or 'discipleship'.<sup>4</sup> For him, moving away from copying the Old Masters did not mean renouncing discipline altogether for a perspective that

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3 Josef Albers, 'Creative Education' (1928), in Hans Maria Wingler, *The Bauhaus: Weimar, Dessau, Berlin, Chicago*, ed. by Joseph Stein, trans. by Wolfgang Jabs and Basil Gilbert (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1969), pp. 142–43 (p. 142).

4 Josef Albers, 'On Education and Art Education', lecture held 28 November 1939 at a teacher's meeting in Winnetka, Illinois, published on the website of the Josef

defined everyone as creative, requiring simply the encouragement to express themselves.

That insistence on exercising the eye and the hand through prescribed study means that, while museums cannot reproduce the confluence of individuals that came together in particular intellectual and political climates to make the Bauhaus or Black Mountain College such experimental educational models, they can grant access to this method of thinking through materials. During the 2009 exhibition 'Bauhaus 1919–1939: Workshops for Modernity', the Education department at MoMA ran workshops based on the school's teaching methods. Walter Gropius's daughter, Ati Johansen, who also attended Black Mountain College in the 1940s, taught some of the paper-folding lessons, reprising the curriculum of the original course. Then last year, Fritz Horstman, a scholar from the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, taught similar exercises according to Albers's methods. Inviting members of the public to test a material in this way, where they can notice the planes and shades created when they crush a sheet of paper, or attempt to construct the tallest freestanding structure using only a single sheet, demonstrates how art is a process and a way of seeing, not simply a set of fixed objects.

Much like performance, pedagogy is ephemeral and contingent, and yet it differs in that it does not establish a fixed spectatorial role. To be understood it must be participated in, for, as Albers said, 'we are gathering experience.'<sup>5</sup> I use Albers as an example because it is clear that his teaching practice informed his artistic production, but it was nonetheless distinct from it. We can take these procedures simply as exercises; they are in no way intended to be works of art. It is freeing that there is no ideal instance or original moment that needs to be carefully reenacted here. These instructions are specific in how they are meant to be carried out, but they are also open, and the way in which a student acts on them will look different each time, particularly because each student is just as much informed by their peers and environment as they are by the directives given to them.

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and Anni Albers Foundation <<https://albersfoundation.org/teaching/josef-albers/lectures/#tab1>> [accessed 14 November 2017].

5 Albers, 'Creative Education', p. 142.

Throughout the twentieth century, pedagogical developments aligned with trends in artistic practice toward material experimentation, blurring disciplinary boundaries, and viewer participation. Claire Bishop has established an analogy between post-1968 critical pedagogy's 'insistence on the breakdown of teacher/pupil hierarchy and participation as a route to empowerment' and 'the breakdown of medium-specificity and a heightened attention to the viewer's role and presence in art'.<sup>6</sup> The artist Lygia Clark fits into this analogy as a figure who not only experimented collaboratively with students as a professor at the Sorbonne in the 1970s, but also took up therapeutic practice in the 1970s and 80s, operating outside the typical confines of art. Clients were invited to lie down, and she would use various objects, such as stones, which were placed on different parts of the body, or fabrics, ranging from veils to blankets; she also offered cushions filled with heavier or lighter objects, objects made from stockings containing different materials (i.e., balls, stones, and shells), and plastic bags filled with air, water, or sand.

During the exhibition 'Lygia Clark: The Abandonment of Art, 1948–1988' at MoMA, facilitators in the educational wing of the museum were trained to assist the public in accessing these therapeutic protocols. Two of Clark's disciples, psychologist Gina Ferreira and artist and therapist Lula Wanderley, came to New York to train staff and help them experience first-hand how the artist would have treated her patients. Clark described her sensorial objects as 'gifts' that could shift a user's awareness of their body and the world. She did not create a clear distinction between art and life. This means that, in the museum context, these therapeutic protocols are treated as exercises rather than works of art, which allows visitors to experiment with them. Like Albers's teaching directives, they are specific enough to bring an audience member close to the artist's processes from the past. Yet they are open-ended enough that they can be shared freely with audiences without the anxiety of faithfulness to an original historical object. Granting access in this way allows individual participants to formulate questions that arise from the processes and relationships to materials that structure an artist's practice.

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6 Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), p. 267.

In conclusion, I would like to briefly touch on what critics and art historians, including Irit Rogoff, to whom I referred earlier, have identified as an 'educational turn', emerging around the early 2000s with a rise in artist-led schools or artistic projects that take on educational formats such as discussions, talks, symposia, and workshops. This 'turn' is aligned with the critique of neoliberal pressures on universities and the high costs of education today, but to my mind it also speaks to how sites of education in their ideal form seem to offer the promise of free exchange and emancipatory experiences. One can now think of a school or educational platform as a work of art. Yet in terms of creating access and addressing wider publics within museum practice, I still believe that it is important to position teaching and therapy as existing at the margins of art, which I see as a productively undefined area within which to work. In the historical examples that I have given here, that marginal position allows for reenactment and reprisal without the pressure to make present a fixed, original object from the past. Within museum programming, it sustains the idea that artistic practice need not be passively consumed by viewers, but can enter into the flow of daily life — as it has for artists themselves.

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