**Josef Albers, Late Modernism, and Pedagogic Form,** by Jeffrey Saletnik. Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2022, 320 pp., £32 (hardback) ISBN: 9780226699172

For those of us who came of age in western art schools during the late twentieth century, the idea there is anything new to say on the work of Josef Albers (1888–1976), either as an artist or a pedagogue, might seem unlikely. There was a time when he seemed to be everywhere, but that time has passed, and so it is all credit to Jeffrey Saletnik that he has not only thwarted this assumption, but given Albers something of a new lease of life. It all leads one to wonder whether it is worth reaching once again for Albers’s seminal text *Interaction of Colour* to reintroduce him into the art curriculum for a new generation of art students.

Although this book covers Albers’s artistic practice to some extent, it is very much focused on Albers as a teacher. Consequently, while there is a section on Albers’s development as a painter, and we discover that he was a keen photographer, who almost never showed his photographs in public, Saletnik is really interested in the underlying sources for Albers’s teaching method, and how that method was applied by him, first in the studios of the Bauhaus school of art in Germany, and later at Black Mountain College, Yale and elsewhere in the United States. It is refreshing to be reminded of just how open his teaching method was, with no apparent attempt by Albers to foist pre-existing narratives or social meanings onto his students’ activities. To do so would have been to predetermine the outcomes, leading to a conservative reiteration of existing knowledge and understanding rather than original creativity. For Albers, it was through a kind of play with the materials at hand, undertaken by his students through a process of physical experimentation, that visual meaning emerged.

However, it is in examining the origin and afterlife of Albers’s teaching method that Saletnik makes some of his most striking claims, several of which are likely to prove controversial.

The first controversy is to dismiss the influence of the American philosopher John Dewey both on Albers’s thinking and the Bauhaus. Saletnik notes that the dates of translation of Dewey’s work into German make it unlikely Albers and his Bauhaus colleagues knew of Dewey’s work at all, and even if they did, the radical democratising tendency in Dewey was so heavily modified in early German translations that it was effectively lost. But Albers did not have to look to Dewey for a pedagogical role model, as the principles he followed in the development of the revolutionary *Vorkurs* preliminary course at the Bauhaus, and more widely in his teaching after his move to the United States in 1933, were already explicit in educational theory in Wilhelmian Germany before the First World War. For Albers, familiarity with these principles came from his early training as a primary school teacher, which necessarily introduced him to contemporary debates as to the most effective way to educate children. As Saletnik explains at some length, this was informed by philosophical heavyweights such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant and J.G. Fichte, and it was through the interplay between them that Albers developed his own pedagogical method.

Despite the staid cultural reputation of Wilhelmian Germany, the pedagogical debate that Saletnik argues informed Albers’s thinking was surprisingly radical. It does not appear to have alternated between a Gradgrind model of cramming school children with facts on one side, and letting them have free reign on the other. Instead, both sides saw childhood play as central to the learning process, with the question only as to whether one believed that play should be directed towards a pre-determined goal, or that the goal would emerge organically from play itself. Albers appears firmly in the latter camp, as his subsequent teaching method with older art school students demonstrated.

Perhaps wisely given its already extensive coverage in other texts, Saletnik tends to gloss over the Bauhaus years in favour of Albers’s work in America at various institutions, most notably Black Mountain College and Yale. Using accounts of both his teaching method and striking examples of his students’ work, much of it anonymous and surviving only in photographs, Saletnik again makes a compelling case for a pre-Bauhaus German origin for Albers’s teaching method. It is this that leads Saletnik to what are perhaps his most controversial suggestions, relating to the artists Eva Hesse and Richard Serra. Both have chapters dedicated to them in the book, each of which starts with a recognition that the mainstream approach to these artists has tended to see them as rejecting Albers’s philosophy of art. To suggest otherwise is likely to be most controversial in relation to Hesse, not least as she was frequently scathing in her personal writings on the teaching at Yale. Similarly, while Albers’s own art practice seems to have been the epitome of the modernist cliche of an entirely depersonalised formalist art, Hesse has been presented repeatedly, particularly from a feminist art historical perspective, as an artist whose work is very much focused on the personal. Yet, as Saletnik suggests, the working methods of Hesse, as well as those of Serra, were remarkably similar to those advocated by Albers, to the point that when Hesse began to teach art students herself she appears to have copied verbatim a large number of his lesson plans.

There is no doubt that Saletnik has given us a new view on Albers that is an important contribution to scholarship on a figure who had a profound impact on the direction of post-Second World War western art. This extends to an enhanced understanding of several of his pupils too, most notably Hesse and Serra, all delivered in a clear and elegant style that is eminently readable. If there is a minor fault in the book it is merely that there are times when the individual chapters read as if they were papers delivered to different conferences, rather than as parts of an integrated book. Yet, overall, the attempt at a unifying theme, that links Albers’s beliefs about art and art education to his early experiences as a primary school teacher in pre-First World War Germany is successful.

More importantly, the recognition that there is scholarly mileage in looking for continuities between the past and present, particularly through the often-neglected route of tutor-student interconnection, rather than a succession of philosophical, political or stylistic breaks, is welcome as an approach that undoubtedly deserves more attention from academics moving forward.

Dr Michael Paraskos

Senior Teaching Fellow in Art History

Centre for Languages, Culture and Communication

Imperial College London

m.paraskos@imperial.ac.uk