

SABINE DORAN Departing in Yellow: Josef Albers and Helmut Federle

Josef Albers's abstract painting *Homage to the Square: Departing in Yellow*, 1964 (Color Plate 13), one of his over 1000 homages to the square, could be read as a screen of projection par excellence of the waves of migration in the twentieth century, which, as we have seen, are marked in yellow. Albers, who started his career at the Bauhaus before emigrating from Nazi Germany to the United States, observes in his treatise "Interactions of Color" that the nuance of a color, its shade, is the exposition of detail in "permanent movement:"¹³¹

In contrast to the historical notion of the nuance, which is rooted in Romantic and decadent concepts of vagueness, Albers uses the square, considered the most stable form, the form of foundations, to expose an instability.



Josef Albers, *Study for Homage to the Square: Departing in Yellow*, 1964, oil on board, 76,2 x 76,2 cm, © ARS, NY, Tate Gallery, London, UK. Photo credit: Tate, London/Art, Resource, NY

In *Departing in Yellow*, Albers folds four squares into each other; dyed in different nuances of yellow, a sense of movement is conveyed. Albers notes that "color is permanent movement, an aggression towards and away from the spectator... a breathing and a pulsating in color:"¹³² To see is to have an insight into the act of seeing itself. The interaction between oil, paint, square, and subtitle creates a constant flux between objective and subjective characteristics of color, between what Albers calls the "physical fact" (the materiality of color, texture, and tonality) and the "psychic effect." In this sense, the impact of the subtitle *Departing in Yellow* is crucial, for it points to the persistent movement of color in Albers's square paintings: the three or four superimposed squares become three-dimensional as one shade of color seems to advance, while another shade appears

¹³¹ As Ulrich Finke shows with respect to painters such as Delacroix and poets from Verlaine to Baudelaire and Mallarmé, the French notion of the *nuance* (derived from *nuer* "to shade", based on the Latin word for cloud, *nubes*) attracted both painters and poets of the nineteenth century. See Ulrich Finke, *French 19th Century Painting and Literature with Special Reference to the Relevance of Literary Subject Matter to French Painting* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1972), 34. See also Wolfgang Lange's extensive study entitled *Die Nuance: Kunstgriff und Denkfigur* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2005), in which he explores the history of the term nuance and the central role this notion plays in European decadence and its reflection on style, as in the philosophy Nietzsche and the poetics of Mallarmé and Baudelaire.

¹³² Josef Albers, *Interaction of Color* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971), 174.

to recede, due to their contrast. In *Departing in Yellow*, the contrasting movement between advancing and receding shades of yellow embodies the notion of departure. In constant migration across planes of different shades, yellow resists its reduction to any one shade.¹³³ Thus the *Homage* series, as one critic writes, "exists only in the here and now of the visual experience."¹³⁴ Albers's statement that "color deceives continually"¹³⁵ is exemplified in *Departing in Yellow*, which shows how Albers pursues pure and timeless fundamentals, while destabilizing the very fundamentals (primary colors, square) that he exposes.¹³⁶

While Kazimir Malevitch's *Black Square* (1915) and *White Square on White Background* (1918) were, despite their formalism, considered political art in the Soviet Union of the time (subverting the Bolshevik claim to know the course of history through mythic notions of time), square paintings lost their political impetus on their way across the Atlantic, becoming in the second half of the twentieth century an international prototype for "pure" art that, as Susan Buck-Morss remarks ironically in a "A Short History of the Square," "could only flourish in a political democracy."¹³⁷

Nevertheless, "artistic impurity"¹³⁸ strikes in the abstract paintings of Helmut Federle, namely in his controversial painting *Asian Sign*, 1980. The color scheme of yellow on grey recalls the stigma of the "yellow star" that Jews were forced to wear in Nazi Germany, but of course what strikes the viewer immediately is what appears to be the figure of the swastika. Upon closer inspection, however, we notice that the swastika is in fact inverted. According to the artist, it is a depiction of Asian sunwheels (hence the title *Asian Sign*):

[*Asian Sign*] is an abstract work in a climatic sense; it carries all possible readings in itself and is fundamentally without morals, thus dissolving the question of a specific reading. [...] It is important, it seems to me, to see the code "Africa" or "Asia" in an artistic orientation and conceptualization.¹³⁹

¹³³ Charles Riley II, *Color Codes: Modern Theories of Color in Philosophy, Painting and Architecture, Literature, Music, and Psychology* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1955), 155.

¹³⁴ Achim Borchardt-Hume, "Two Bauhaus Histories," in *Albers and Moholy-Nagy: From the Bauhaus to the New World*, ed. A. Borchardt-Hume (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 78.

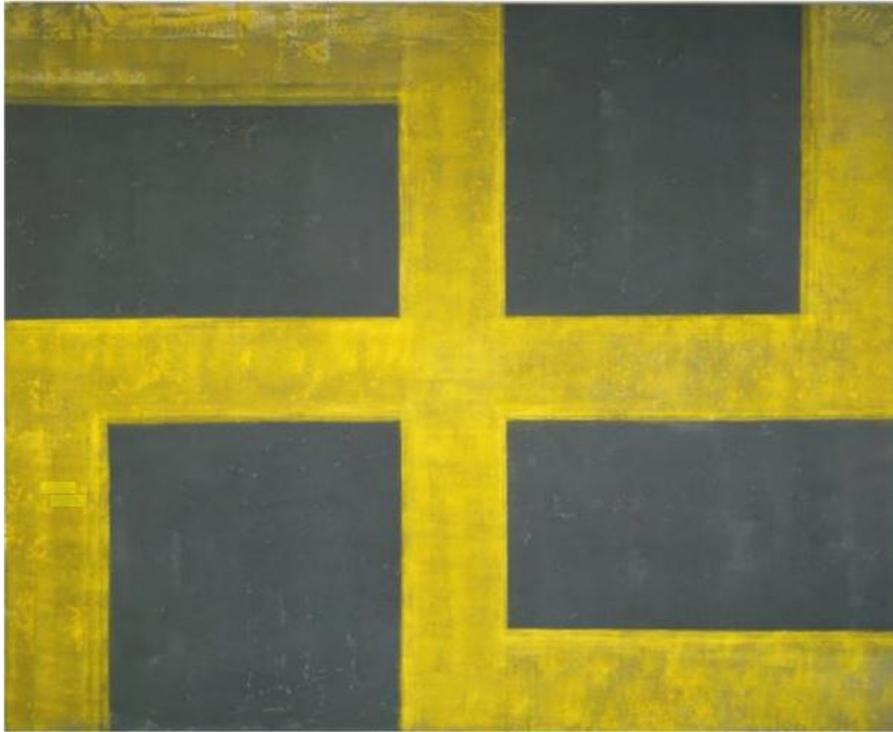
¹³⁵ Albers, *Interaction of Color*, 1.

¹³⁶ Albers emphasis is on an active reflection on color perception, and he is therefore critical of a reduction of color to movement, as in kinetic art. In Op-art, for example, yellow plays an important role as closest color to light. In his "Yellow Manifesto" (1955) Victor Vasarely emphasizes the notion of movement in the act of looking itself: "Movement does not rely on composition or a specific subject, but on the apprehension of the act of looking, which by itself is considered as the only creator," <http://www.op-art.co.uk/victor-vasarely/> [accessed November 2, 2012]. While Albers foregrounded a rather cerebral contemplation on the dichotomy between the physical fact of a color and its constantly changing physical effect, Vasarely shifts the emphasis towards the kinetic reaction that the color yellow triggers in the spectator.

¹³⁷ Susan Buck Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass ludes Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 89. Buck Morss concludes her chapter on "A Short History of the Square" thus: "Conceived in the revolutionary turmoil of Russia at the beginning of the century, its fate, ironically, is to have become the recognized logo of U.S. 'high culture' at the century's end" (ibid., 95).

¹³⁸ Mitchell comments on the reopening of the artistic field to "worldly concerns" as follows: "Among the accomplishments of the revolution signaled by John's Flags and Targets was the reopening of art (for better or worse) to what Edward Said would call "worldly concerns" -- to kitsch, mass culture, political propaganda and theater -- the resurgence of artistic impurity, hybridity, and heterogeneity summarizes as the 'eruption of language into the artistic field'" (*Picture Theory. Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994], 239). Federle's *Asian Sign*, which recalls the Nazi emblem, the swastika, strikes not only through its form of artistic impurity (thematizing propaganda art), but especially through the thematization of impurity through an impure yellow that dominates Federle's paintings from the 1980 on.

¹³⁹ Personal email, March 12, 2012 (my translation).



Helmut Federle, *Asian Sign*, 1980, acrylic on canvas, 234,5 x 288,5 cm, Kunstmuseum Basel/Museum for Contemporary Art, © Helmut Federle and Pro Litteris, Zurich, Switzerland

The evocation of the Nazi symbol is doubly ironic, for it also evokes the motif of the "yellow peril" that I have explored in this chapter. The symbol is perverted both by its formal inversion and by its color, yellow, which explicitly recalls the victims or marginalized group, whether the European Jewry or Asian immigrants. However, the stigmatizing color of the Jewish star is here turned back against the persecutors, insofar as it announces in the same stroke the innocence of the victims and the condemnation of the perpetrators.

Federle insists that despite the radical symbolism of his work, he is not interested in its political implications. And yet, his dramatization of yellow in its dirty condition ("pure yellow never interested me")¹⁴⁰ connects the color yellow inadvertently to its visual or, more precisely, its racial politics. The clash between the color of the Emperor's clothes and the color of the "yellow star," which became after the Second World War an emblem of genocide, is the clash that Federle performs in the multivalent figuration that is *Asian Sign*. Federle's exploration of the impurity of yellow itself thematizes the mechanism of staining a sacred symbol (the inverted swastika as a symbol of the sun in China, the Star of David as modern symbol of the Jewish community with the stigmatic power of yellow. The racial politics that its form (swastika) and color scheme (impure yellow) invoke takes on "a life of its own," in W. J. T. Mitchell's phrase:

If any set of images seems to have a "life of its own," it would seem to be the racial stereotype. And yet there is something paradoxical in saying this, insofar as the usual notion of the stereotype is that it is a static, inert form of representation, an unchanging, compulsively repeated schematism. [...] What the stereotype wants, then, is precisely what it lacks -- life, animation, vitality. And it obtains that life by deadening its object of representation and the subject who uses it as a medium for the classification of other subjects. Both the racist and the object of racism are reduced to static, inert figures by the stereotype. Or perhaps more

¹⁴⁰ In a personal email, March 12, 2012) Federle emphasized the ambivalence of yellow and yellow's multivalent figurations. What interests him in the use of an impure yellow is the impossibility of fitting it into any conventions.

precisely, we should define their condition as a kind of "living death," the zombielike condition of the borderline between the animate and the inanimate.¹⁴¹

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¹⁴¹ W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 297-8.