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Anni’s Orchestra

Christopher Benfey
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The late prints of Anni Albers bear out her conviction that artists need to “listen” to their materials, be “tuned” to them.

Lotte and Annelise Fleischmann, Berlin, circa 1908

Years later, when she could look back on her career as one of the towering twentieth-century textile artists, Anni Albers remembered attending the Berlin State Opera with her little sister, Lotte, and sitting in the family box. It wasn't the performances that Anni remembered. It was the musicians tuning up, each contrasting instrument in its appointed place, trying to match the oboe's A. The Impressionist painter Max Liebermann, who occupied the neighboring box, painted several scenes from the vantage point of audience members. He must have been struck by the sight of the two little girls in their matching black dresses with white collars and cuffs.

That memory of tuning up, according to Nicholas Fox Weber, executive director of the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, inspired Anni's series of prints titled *Orchestra*, executed when she was in her eighties. The four prints are the centerpiece of an exhibition this fall at the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, in South Hadley, Massachusetts, titled "Anni's Orchestra: Theme and Variation in the Prints of Anni Albers," which I guest-curated in collaboration with Ellen Alvord. (On November 11, an exhibition titled "Anni Albers: Constructing Textiles" opens at the Zentrum Paul Klee in Bern, Switzerland.) Anni's inspiration for them seems to have moved in at least two directions. The first two might call to mind violin bows held horizontally or vertically, as Weber has suggested; they might also evoke sheet music with its slightly inscrutable notations. For me, the next two prints, composed of quadrilaterals with a single triangle, convey the different zones of sound emanating from the component parts of the orchestra, a reminder that music has a spatial dimension.

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In 1933 tens of thousands of books by Jews, Communists, and others the Nazis deemed "un-German" were burned on Opernplatz, the public square in front of Berlin's opera house. Many Jewish musicians were forced from their posts amid the ensuing Nazi crackdown. Max Liebermann resigned from his position as president of the Prussian Academy of Arts.

The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/Photograph: Tim Nighswander/Imaging4Art

Anni Albers: *Orchestra*, 1979

That same year the Gestapo padlocked the Bauhaus, the design school where Anni studied weaving. It was there that she met her future husband,

Helen M. Post/Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina

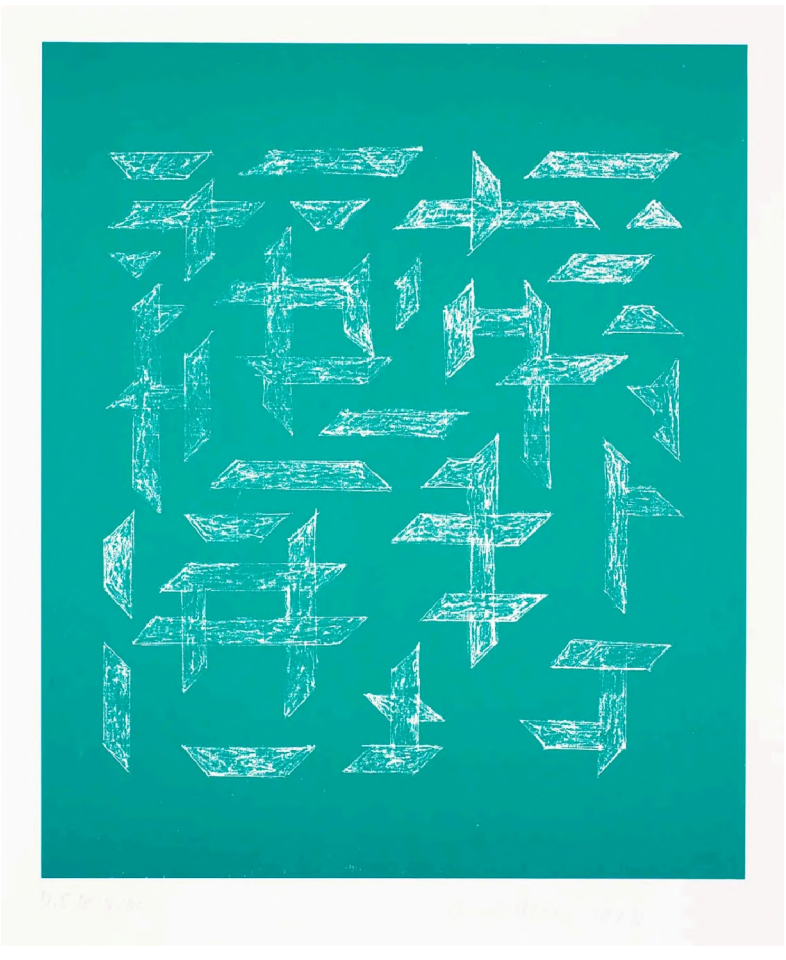
Anni Albers in her weaving studio at Black Mountain College, North Carolina, 1937

the abstract painter Josef Albers, and took a course with Paul Klee. According to Weber, Anni remembered being invited to the Klees' house where Paul (on violin) and Lily (on piano) performed Bach and Mozart. Anni's Jewish background put her in peril under Hitler's racial laws, and when she and Josef, at the instigation of the architect Philip Johnson, received an invitation to teach at the experimental Black Mountain College, in North Carolina, they accepted. It was one of Anni's weavings that caught Johnson's attention. That, he said, was her passport to America.

At Black Mountain Anni found herself in the midst of the American avant-garde. She befriended the composer John Cage, who composed his *Six Melodies for Violin and Keyboard* (1950) for the Alberses. The artists Ruth Asawa and Robert Rauschenberg took her classes. Her embrace of new materials like cellophane and rayon as well as techniques borrowed from Indigenous Peruvian artists brought weaving into the mainstream of modern art. In pieces like the drop-dead gorgeous *Ancient Writing* (1936), now held at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, we are in two worlds at once. Our first impression, guided by the title, might be a quipu-like record of epic events from some centuries-old culture. At the same time, we are

dazzled by an abstract structure worthy of Mondrian at his most urbane and up-to-date. Rayon crosses with linen, cotton, and jute—another layering of ancient and modern.

Less well known is Anni's energetic transition to printmaking in the early 1960s. "A work of art," Anni wrote when she was making her first forays in the medium, "can be made of sand or sound, of feathers or flowers, as much as of marble or gold." Artists, she insisted, borrowing musical metaphors, have to "listen" to their materials and be "tuned" to them.



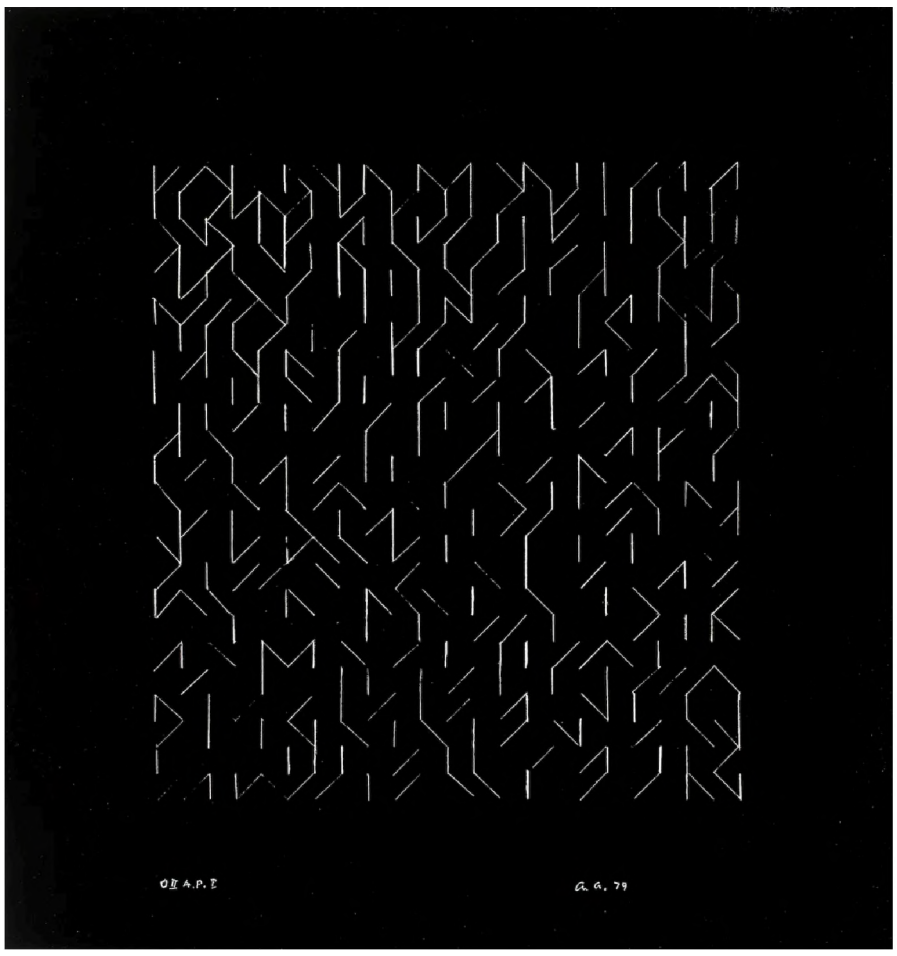
The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/Photograph: Tim Nighswander/Imaging4Art

Anni Albers: *Double Impression III*, 1978

Every Christmas Eve the Alberses listened to Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, that astonishing keyboard masterpiece of thirty transformations of a simple aria. Anni approached printmaking as a medium inviting similar variation: reversing, doubling, adding or subtracting color. In a sequence of four variations titled *Double Impression* from 1978, we can see her gradually leaving behind the weaving modes of thread and grid while embracing more open-ended patterns. The pieces suggest lost languages, crystal structures, computer printouts, and more.

The four prints of her *Orchestra* series, which she began the following year, can be seen as elaborations on the theme of music itself. As Thomas Mann wrote in *Doctor Faustus*, his novel about a modernist composer, "the form of variations, something archaic, a residuum, becomes a means by which to infuse new life into form." After Josef's death in 1976, Anni had begun attending the Salzburg Festival in the company of Maximilian Schell, winner of the 1962 Academy Award for Best Actor for *Judgment at Nuremberg*, with whom she had a close but troubled friendship. There she would watch Schell perform in the annual production of Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Jedermann*, and once

witnessed Schell and Plácido Domingo playing soccer. Anni also appeared in Schell's 1984 documentary about Marlene Dietrich—her near contemporary, fellow Berliner, and American transplant—poring over film footage in the editing room as though she's a silent sybil summoning a shared past. She was back in the seductive world of musical and dramatic performance, the world she celebrated in *Orchestra*.



The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/Photograph: Tim Nighswander/Imaging4Art

Anni Albers: *Orchestra II*, 1979

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The little sister in the opera box, Lotte, was my grandmother. She and her husband, a Jewish judge fired by the Nazis, entered the United States in 1939, sponsored by the Alberses. They lived near Brattle Street, in Cambridge, where Lotte was one of the capable women who ran the Window Shop, a haven for refugees that combined a bakery, a restaurant, and a boutique selling stylish clothing and gifts. Her best friend, Alice Broch, trained as a pianist in Vienna and the sister-in-law of the novelist Hermann Broch, had smuggled a book of dessert recipes, the basis for the Window Shop offerings, given to her by the family cook. "So many happy faces greeted me there," wrote Eleanor Roosevelt in 1950, "women who had been in concentration camps or had spent long years waiting to find themselves able to begin life again in a new country." Remembering his friendship with the *New York Review* founding editor Barbara Epstein, whom he met in 1945, the poet John Ashbery wrote that they saw each other "almost daily, doing things that Harvard undergraduates considered chic in that distant era, like afternoon tea with wonderful pastries at the Window Shop on Brattle Street."

Spry though hard of hearing at sixty-nine, Mutti, as we called my grandmother, asked me to take her to see the new documentary about Woodstock. We sat through the film's nearly four hours, culminating in Jimi Hendrix's fire-and-brimstone variations on the National Anthem. Mutti watched attentively from start to finish. Afterwards I asked her what she thought. She liked it, she said, but found it "a little loud."

The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation

Anni Albers, Hans Farman, and Lotte Benfey at Albers's eighty-fifth birthday party, 1984

"Anni's Orchestra: Theme and Variation in the Prints of Anni Albers" is at the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum through December 9.

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