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Oral history interview with Anni Albers, 1968
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Anni Albers on July 5, 1968. The interview took place in New Haven, Connecticut, and was conducted by Sevim Fesci for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

SEVIM FESCI: Mrs. Albers, the first question I would like to ask you is when did your interest in weaving start?

ANNI ALBERS: Well, it really started when I first went to the Bauhaus at Weimar in 1922. I had been to an art school and an applied arts school in Germany, which I felt were very unsatisfactory. And also I was at that time interested in painting and I felt that the tremendous freedom of the painter was scaring me and I was looking for some way to find my way a little more securely. But I didn't know how. And when I got to the Bauhaus I found that every student who entered there had first to go through a preliminary course and then choose one of the workshops. And I wasn't at all interested in those workshops really. Because the metal workshop I felt was painful to the hands. The woodworking workshop was so terribly hard, lifting lumber and so on. The wall painting I couldn't stand. I'd be standing on a ladder and getting all dirty every day. In the distance I saw my husband in the glass workshop, in the stained glass workshop. And I thought that was rather intriguing. The material and the men working and him in the distance there, you see. And I was told that there wasn't a chance to get into that workshop because there were so very few chances to execute a stained glass window. And there was one man that was already there; that was all. So the only thing that was open to me was the weaving workshop. And I thought that was rather sissy.

SEVIM FESCI: You never did weaving before?

ANNI ALBERS: No, no.

SEVIM FESCI: This was before the Bauhaus?

ANNI ALBERS: No, there was this weaving workshop. I didn't like the idea at all in the beginning because I thought weaving is sissy, just these threads. And there was a very inefficient lady, old lady, sort of the needlework kind of type, who taught it. And I wasn't a bit interested. But the only way of staying at that place was to join that workshop. And I did. And once I got started I got rather intrigued with the possibilities there. And, as I have mentioned in this little magazine here, . . .

SEVIM FESCI: Yes.

ANNI ALBERS: . . . I'll show you an article. There -- there is this very mistaken idea that there really was an organized course teaching the student at that time. Early there wasn't. And, as I have written in that article, what I learned I learned from my co-students. But I got more and more intrigued with it and gradually found it very satisfying and very

SEVIM FESCI: More secure in a way?

ANNI ALBERS: Yes. I felt that the limitations and the discipline of the craft gave me this kind of like a railing. I had to work within a certain possibility, possibly break through, you know.

SEVIM FESCI: Yes.

ANNI ALBERS: And I find today that, if the New York scene people would stick to or turn to a craft, it would save their soul. Because they are, I think, in this really hopeless situation of constantly searching their inners and not finding a way to something that is really satisfactory. They splatter and they spit and they do heavens knows what and try to be awfully original. And the results to my mind are very awful things that you have one look at and wouldn't look again or turn away sometimes even in disgust. And I have this very what you call today "square" idea that art is something that makes you breathe with a different kind of happiness.

[Mr. Albers' voice fleetingly on the tape: How is it going?]

SEVIM FESCI: Very good.

ANNI ALBERS: And I find art is something that gives you something that you need for your life. Just as religion is something that you need even if you constantly find it denied today.

SEVIM FESCI: Are you religious yourself, Mrs. Albers?

ANNI ALBERS: Well, not in any organized way. But there is something I think that everybody believes in whether they deny it or not.

SEVIM FESCI: So you would say that . . . ?

ANNI ALBERS: And they are searching for something. And I feel that art is this something that goes beyond that what you need in your daily doings in a sense.

SEVIM FESCI: Yes. To be above all this daily

ANNI ALBERS: Well, I find that Pop art or Dada have tried to get away from this fine art barrier in a very healthy way, maybe. But that still it's only breaking away to find . . . to free yourself for a new way of doing things, but that very often it's not an end in itself.

SEVIM FESCI: Yes. Would you say . . . ?

ANNI ALBERS: What am I saying? I have to think. I'd better Sometimes one talks more easily than one thinks.

SEVIM FESCI: But would you say that an artist needs some discipline?

ANNI ALBERS: Yes. Very much so. And I find that a craft gives somebody who is trying to find his way a kind of discipline. And this discipline was driven in earlier periods through the technique that was necessary for a painter to learn. In the Renaissance they had to grind their paints, they had to prepare their canvas or wood panels. And they were very limited really in the handling of the material. While today you buy the paint in any paint store and squeeze it and the panels come readymade and there is nothing that teaches you the care that materials demand.

SEVIM FESCI: The love of materials.

ANNI ALBERS: And it produces this too great quickness, I think.

SEVIM FESCI: Yes. Not enough consideration involving the work

ANNI ALBERS: Yes. Yes. That's it. When the painter or the weaver or someone has to prepare the material, you learn what the material tells you and what the technique tells you. While today

SEVIM FESCI: There's a sort of dialogue between you and the material.

ANNI ALBERS: And that frees you from this too-conscious searching of your soul which very often turns just into this kind of intestinal painting. It frees you and gets you away from a too-subjective way of work. And I think that art should be something that can last above the 30 years that Duchamp puts on a work of art. I don't believe in that.

SEVIM FESCI: Yes, I understand. But although, as you said, that it frees you from the subjective

ANNI ALBERS: From the too-subjective. You can't avoid being subjective. But a kind of objectifying happens when you have to concentrate on the demands of the materials and the technique.

SEVIM FESCI: Yes.

ANNI ALBERS: And I find that healthy and not limiting. And I still think that it really might be the salvation for many of those who dabble so easily in the too-readily-available materials.

SEVIM FESCI: Yes. I understand now. If I understand correctly, Klee was your teacher?

ANNI ALBERS: Well, in a very limited way. I admire Klee very much. But what I learned from him I learned from looking at his pictures. Because as a teacher he was not very effective. I sat in a class which he gave to the weaving students and I think I only attended perhaps three of the classes. Klee was so concerned with his own work. He would walk into the room, go up to the blackboard, turn his back to the class, and start to explain something that he probably thought was of concern to those listening to him. But he probably didn't know at all where each of us there was in his own development, in his own concern, in his own searching. I'm sure there were some students who had more direct contact with him. But I didn't have it at all. On the other hand, I find that he probably had more influence on my work and my thinking by just looking at what he did with a line or a dot or a brush stroke and I tried in a way to find my way in my own material and my own craft discipline.

SEVIM FESCI: I understand that imagery never interested you very much?

ANNI ALBERS: You mean by that representational work?

SEVIM FESCI: Yes, representational.

ANNI ALBERS: No. No, not really. Because of this what I just said I was trying to build something out of dots, out of lines, out of a structure built of those elemental elements and not the transposition into an idea, into a literary idea.

SEVIM FESCI: Yes. It was more abstract idea.

ANNI ALBERS: Not the cat or the sunset but a building out of that what was available to me in the elemental form of thread, and loom operation, et cetera.

SEVIM FESCI: Yes. And what about the colors. Mrs. Albers?

ANNI ALBERS: Yes. Color. That is an interesting thing because color of course involves you in an emotional sense far beyond line and

SEVIM FESCI: Squares and dots.

ANNI ALBERS: Yes. On the other hand, in concentrating on what the weaving materials told you color was almost interfering with this because the roughness, the smoothness, the gloss, et cetera, comes out clearer if you are not concerned with additional color, but if you stick to just what this character of the material was. And therefore, I find that colors in weaving have not the first place, like with a proper painter, but only as a secondary one. And if you think of working for industrial production, as I have done to a small degree, a curtain that you build should be -- I don't know -- transparent, or opaque, folding easily, washable, and so on, and you can have it in blue or red or green in the end, which is further concern, but is not the one out of which to build the main character of the material. You see?

SEVIM FESCI: Yes, I understand. But, looking at your work, you are interested very much also in color. I mean the different, you know . . . ?

ANNI ALBERS: Yes. I was concerned for a while with working for industrial production, material production

SEVIM FESCI: Yes.

ANNI ALBERS: And there I tried to concentrate on the utility of the material and I think I quoted there in my article that little sentence that Klee once said: "Textiles are serving objects."

SEVIM FESCI: Yes.

ANNI ALBERS: And I tried to develop this serving quality to the best I could so that upholstery material would be really suited to upholstering, that drapery material would drape well, et cetera. And then I tried very much to avoid in those serving objects, in this utility material, the personal handwriting, the subjective work. Because I thought that it's very disturbing to come into a room and immediately say, "Ah, this is Mr. X doing this." I find that this kind of -- well, "expression" is such a bad word -- but this personal expression should be reserved for a concentrated form, which is art, to my mind. So in my own work I try to separate very clearly the utilitarian objective work from that what I think of as in the direction of art. And there color of course comes in. Do you see?

SEVIM FESCI: Yes, I understand now. Yes. You just said that you did some designing for industrial design?

ANNI ALBERS: Yes.

SEVIM FESCI: Do you enjoy doing it? Or do you feel . . . ?

ANNI ALBERS: To a degree, yes. It is really interesting to concentrate like an architect has to concentrate on the functioning of a house, so I enjoyed concentrating on what that specific material demanded. I developed a series of wall covering materials, which at the time I did it was non-existent really. And I tried to make them so that they were partly even light reflecting, that they could be brushed off, that they could be fixed straight and easily on the wall without pulling into different shapes, you know. So a specific task sets you a very interesting way of dealing with your choice of material, with your technique, and so on. On the other hand, I was concerned also with -- well what one usually thinks of as art. And I tried to work something in that direction. Although, as I told you before we started taping this, I find this great problem that people are so inclined to think of textiles always in this useful sense. They want to sit on it; they want to wear it. And they don't like to think of it as something

that might hang on the wall and have the qualities that a painting or a sculpture has, that you turn to it again and again and that it might possibly last for centuries, as some of the ancient Peruvian things have.

SEVIM FESCI: You just mentioned Peruvian textiles. If we look at the history of weaving, which epoch are you most attracted to?

ANNI ALBERS: Well, I admire the pre-Columbian, the Peruvian textiles more than any other cultures. And I think I'm not the only one who thinks of those textiles as the highest textile culture in the world. Because, although the Coptic period has beautiful examples of textiles, it is technically much more limited and also in the inventiveness within the scope of weaving. It's much more limited than the Peruvian materials which have a tremendous range and go far beyond in technique what we today can do.

SEVIM FESCI: And what about Western traditional weaving?

ANNI ALBERS: You mean European?

SEVIM FESCI: European, yes.

ANNI ALBERS: Well, of course there are beautiful Renaissance materials and so on and, well, mainly also the Gobelin tapestries of the Renaissance. The earlier medieval tapestries are very beautiful.

SEVIM FESCI: Maybe for you they have this sense of symbolism?

ANNI ALBERS: Yes. This is a great period, too. Well, it soon slipped into the area of painting that Raphael's tapestries are not as good as paintings by Raphael and not as good as weaving. They missed this specific character that a textile might have.

SEVIM FESCI: Yes. Before we leave the Bauhaus, because we were still there -- I would like to ask you what is this creative atmosphere of the Bauhaus?

ANNI ALBERS: This is what I mentioned there in the article -- well, the Bauhaus today is thought of always as a school, a very adventurous and interesting one, to which you went and were taught something; that it was a readymade spirit. But when I got there in 1922, that wasn't true at all. It was in a great muddle and there was a great searching going on from all sides. And people like Klee and Kandinsky weren't recognized as the great masters. They were starting to find their way. And this kind of general searching was very exciting. And in my little articles this is what I called the creative vacuum. But the word "education" was never mentioned. And the people we think of as the great masters -- Klee and Kandinsky -- they weren't available for questions. They were the great silent ones who talked among themselves maybe, but never to small little students like me. But we knew that what the Academy was doing was wrong and it was exciting that you knew you had the freedom to try out something. And that was fine. But, as I say, it wasn't that you went there and were taking something home from there. You were a contributor.

SEVIM FESCI: It was more a kind of laboratory.

ANNI ALBERS: Yes, from all sides. Everybody tried his best and we didn't know in which direction we were going. Because there was nothing. You only knew that what there was in other schools or academies was wrong and didn't satisfy.

SEVIM FESCI: That something new had to be done.

ANNI ALBERS: There was a need for doing something new but what it looked like nobody knew.

SEVIM FESCI: Yes. But in relation -- I'm not sure now what it said -- but wasn't there also a relationship with industry?

ANNI ALBERS: Not in the early years. This idea of industry gradually developed and it really came on much stronger after Gropius left. Because, in the early years, there was a dabbling in a kind of romantic handicraft where you made beautiful pillowcases which -- well, you couldn't wash them, perhaps you couldn't sit on them. And these tablecloths in very brilliant and bright colors. But this wasn't what was suited for industry. They couldn't make it in a hundred different threads and colors and so on. And also it wasn't satisfying because it was an over-subjectifying of something that wasn't worth it. When you have a tablecloth that is so active you can't put a plate on that tablecloth, you can't put a vase with flowers on it, it was far too dominating. And we only very gradually turned to this what I explained to you coming with this very excellent sentence from Klee to these "serving objects."

SEVIM FESCI: Yes. And then you left the Bauhaus, I think, with your husband in the Thirties?

ANNI ALBERS: Well, no, I left the weaving workshop earlier because they had a teacher there and there was really no place for me. And I had developed something for which I got the Bauhaus diploma. Which was a rather interesting kind of work because it was something very different from what you usually think that textiles can do. The Director of the Bauhaus who followed Gropius was Hannes Meyer. And he was building a large school, a kind of union school, and in the auditorium there was an echo.

SEVIM FESCI: An echo?

ANNI ALBERS: Yes, when you spoke it sounded back. You see?

SEVIM FESCI: Oh, yes, yes.

ANNI ALBERS: And he asked me if I could think of a way of subduing this echo, if we could make a textile that would be suitable. The usual solution at that time, in the 20's, was that you put velvet on the walls. The little fibers absorbed the sound. And, of course, if the velvet was to be at all practical in a room used by hundreds of people so very often it would have to be a dark color. Otherwise you could see all the marks of fingerprints and so on. A light color just wouldn't work there. And I had an idea that if I made a surface that was made out of a kind of cellophane -- and cellophane just was coming as a new material. We had been in Florence, Italy and I had bought a little crocheted cap made of this material. And I unraveled it and used it for a first attempt to make a surface for a material that could be put on the wall, and this velvet quality of absorption I put in an interesting construction into the back of this material. So it had on the surface a light-reflecting quality and in the back the sound-absorbing quality. And this went into production. I don't think it was produced on machines. But it was produced in workshops that made yard goods. And it was used for this auditorium. And it worked. And I think in this little pamphlet that I gave you there is a photo of it because at that time we were very intrigued by scientific angles to various problems. And the Zeiss Icon Works in Germany made a kind of analysis of how the light-reflecting surface worked when light fell on the surface at different angles.

SEVIM FESCI: I see. The relation of light with the material?

ANNI ALBERS: Yes. And a light-reflecting material was something completely new at that time, as was a sound-absorbing material that had a light surface. So this was quite an intriguing kind of textile engineering.

SEVIM FESCI: That's interesting. I didn't know that.

ANNI ALBERS: Yes. You asked me if utilitarian materials are that interesting. Well, this was a very interesting task, you see. It led me then to other materials for wall coverings, which I mentioned just now. And also, for instance, I made for architectural use when the idea of a textile exhibition came up that the Museum of Modern Art was giving me, I made a series

SEVIM FESCI: When was this?

ANNI ALBERS: That was I think 1949 or thereabouts. I made a series of space dividers which was also a conception at that point -- it probably was in existence but was quite unusual. And I thought that architects might, well, make use of materials separating between rooms instead of always the rigid walls. And so I made a series of seven or eight, I believe, different materials in different opaquenesses. You could look through at this very open one with 4-inch spaces between. In my book on Designing there's a photo of it which shows that material. And on the other hand I made one that is quite opaque but again of a quality that can be brushed off if you can't send it, like a piece of silk, to the cleaner's -- or that the moths would get into.

SEVIM FESCI: So when you left the Bauhaus . . . ?

ANNI ALBERS: Yes -- how did I get onto my sound-absorbing material? I left when I was given this diploma. But I had come to the end there. And I did freelancing at home in Dessau. And in 1933, of course, my husband and I

SEVIM FESCI: You came to the United States.

ANNI ALBERS: First the Bauhaus was shifted to Berlin for a very ineffective short period. Funds ran out. And the Nazis and so on. And in 1933 we both were asked to come to Black Mountain College which was a small pioneering college in North Carolina.

SEVIM FESCI: Yes. Before we talk about that I just want to ask you how many years did you spend at the Bauhaus altogether?

ANNI ALBERS: From 1922 to 1928 or 1929 or something like that. I can't quite remember any more.

SEVIM FESCI: Yes. And were you doing free lance at the same time? Or were you just a student?

ANNI ALBERS: Well, I was a student for many years, until my diploma. But I did those wall hangings which I showed you just now, which only now really get recognition. Which is 40 years later. They weren't really liked very much. What was liked was a much more romantic kind of thing.

SEVIM FESCI: Now we've just talked about your work. I would like to ask you do you really sense there's a very different style between what you did at the Bauhaus and what you're doing now, for instance, where the line is much more . . . ?

ANNI ALBERS: Not really. Well, like everybody has a period of development. Those which I showed you are -- although they may look very simple -- are technically very intricate. They are two-ply weaving. That is something that is in handweaving very rarely done today. And so from technical considerations various ideas developed. I see no real break, although the things may look different.

SEVIM FESCI: I see. In the looks.

ANNI ALBERS: There is no break. When I left the Bauhaus I stopped doing this.

SEVIM FESCI: No, I mean I was thinking of the whole period of your work.

ANNI ALBERS: Well, as a whole period of the work you can say -- and I mentioned that to you also -- that I am less interested in areas and more interested in the voice of the single thread. On the other hand, in the work that I showed you also just now -- the silk screen prints that I'm doing -- there I am turning back again to areas playing against each other in colors. Which is of course related to a different technique. Every technique brings up a different kind of demand on the use of the element.

SEVIM FESCI: Yes. And then you came to Black Mountain?

ANNI ALBERS: To Black Mountain College. During the start and rise of the Hitler period we received a letter at Berlin which said, "Will you consider coming to Black Mountain College? It's a pioneering adventure." And when we came to that point we both said, "That's our place." And it turned out to be a very interesting place because it gave us a freedom to build up our own work. Josef built up his whole teaching there and his whole color work which has nothing to do with anything we had left behind in Europe. I built up a weaving workshop and got into teaching and developed teaching methods that . . .

SEVIM FESCI: What is your method of teaching? How do you . . . ?

ANNI ALBERS: Well, maybe it's an exaggerated term to call it "method" at all. But I tried to put my students at the point of zero. I tried to have them imagine, let's say, that they are in a desert in Peru, no clothing, no nothing, no pottery even at that time (it has been now proved that archaeologically textiles have come before pottery), and to imagine themselves at the beach with nothing. And what do you do? There are these fish at the Humboldt Current, marvelous fish swimming by, the best in the world in fact, because of the cold current there. And it's hot and windy. So what do you do? You wear the skin of some kind of animal maybe to protect yourself from too much sun or maybe the wind occasionally. And you want a roof over something and so on. And how do you gradually come to realize what a textile can be? And we start at that point. And I let them use anything, grasses, and I don't know what. And let them also imagine what did they use at that point. Did they take the skin of fish and cut it into strips possibly to make longitudinal elements out of which they could knot something together to catch the fish? And get carrying materials in that way.

SEVIM FESCI: Quite a bit of imagination there.

ANNI ALBERS: Exactly. Absolutely inventing something. And gradually then we invented looms out of sticks and so on. And the Peruvian back strap loom. And once they understand these basic elements, that the Peruvian back strap loom has embedded in it everything that a high power machine loom today has. And they understand it in a completely different sense than walking into a factory and seeing these things operate because they know what is necessary and what kind of inventions have occurred in the course of history. Well, this is a very rough way of doing it. So it goes back to imagination and invention.

SEVIM FESCI: Yes. And how many years did you teach there?

ANNI ALBERS: How long? Well, we were there for 16 years. And I continued here in a free lance way. And you develop those ideas. Because I don't think I started that way in Black Mountain. I think I started with the loom and so on. And in my two books you will find various developments of some of these ideas and how I went about it and how I developed it. So I have been working in these three areas: utilitarian fabrics, teaching, and the things in the direction of art.

SEVIM FESCI: That's very interesting. I would like to ask you, today, -- is weaving fashionable?

ANNI ALBERS: No, no. And I think also that the invention of new knitting machines comes much closer to what we need today. That is shaped fabrics for wearing. While the Peruvians had shaped fabrics in weaving and worked them in very intricate ways, but we wouldn't think of wearing underwear woven out of heavier material and the shaping would be very difficult and awkward, while the knitting process perhaps does it now already, and probably more in the future. So weaving I think is probably a dying art in a way. Although you wouldn't believe it seeing the millions of yards of material that are produced today. But perhaps less for wear than for interiors and so on.

SEVIM FESCI: And what would be for you a definition of weaving if somebody asked you? What does it require? A lot of discipline maybe?

ANNI ALBERS: Well, that is vague because anything needs that. I think it is closest to architecture because it is a building up out of a single element, to building a whole out of single elements.

SEVIM FESCI: Yes, I understand. Yes, it is closer to architecture than painting or sculpture.

ANNI ALBERS: Yes, because you are building up something. While painting is applied on to something. Sculpture uses a given material. But, on the other hand, sculptors today are welding very much; they are building again something out of elements. So there is an interpenetration in the various fields really.

SEVIM FESCI: Well, thank you very much, Mrs. Albers. I enjoyed it very much.

ANNI ALBERS: Not at all.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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