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Centre Pompidou, 8 February – 30 April 2012

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Josef Albers, Color study for homage to the square, platinum, not dated, 29,5 X 29,6 cm © 2011 The Josef and Anni foundation / Artists rights society, New-York / Bild-Kunst, Germany. Rights reserved.

- 1 “Josef Albers en Amérique”, which ran at the Centre Pompidou from February to April 2012, focused on the artist’s work following his 1933 emigration to the United States, where he lived until his death in 1976. Albers was 45 years old when he left Germany and had logged thirteen years at the Bauhaus—initially as a student, then as a teacher, and eventually as deputy director. Yet it was during the second half of his life—the “American Years”, as the exhibition catalogue puts it—that he produced much of the work for which he is best remembered—notably the series *Homage to the Square*—and during which he taught a number of artists who went on to impact the development of American art in the second half of the twentieth century. Composed of studies for his completed works, the Pompidou exhibition drew attention to Albers’ process and preoccupations as a painter in his own right.
- 2 Exhibition organizers relied upon the title of the exhibition to communicate that these works were completed while Albers lived and travelled in the Americas. While a text in

the exhibition catalogue gives a brief overview of Albers' role in the development of the art of the United States ("Albers and American Art" by Isabelle Derveaux), text on the museum walls was minimal. There is no explicit exploration of the influence of this new country and new continent on the artist, nor does the exhibition address Albers' role as a bridge between European traditions and the new American art emerging in the 1940s and 1950s, his influence on artists such as Sol LeWitt and Donald Judd, or the resonances between his work and that of Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman. Rather, the relative lack of museological interpretation—only titles, dates, and provenance are indicated—gave voice to the vibrancy and variety of the colors, highlighting the curiosity in chromatics at the core of Albers' experimentations.

- 3 Upon arriving in America Albers first taught at Black Mountain College. The invitation was organised by architect Philip Johnson, fresh from organizing "The International Style: Architecture Since 1922" at MoMA (1932). Albers remained at the College some sixteen years before going on to direct the design department at Yale. As a result, Albers is often remembered as a teacher (students included Robert Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly, and Eva Hesse) and as a theorist (his 1963 book, *Interaction of Color*, remains a reference in color theory). However, as this exhibition and its accompanying catalogue make clear, his own art making followed a disciplined, precise, and determined path.
- 4 Albers often worked in series, an approach reflected in the layout of the rooms. The works in the first room, executed in the early 1940s, are the earliest; with titles such as "Marching Xs" and "Lozenge", their forms still contain something of the figuration that Albers had explored in his earliest years as a student of drawing (the catalogue contains a reproduction of a surprising Albers still life from 1914). The geometric forms in these first works made on American soil are repeated within the same frame and are painted with looser brushstrokes, suggesting movement and activity.
- 5 By contrast, the four rooms dedicated to studies for *Homage to the Square* that make up the second half of the exhibition highlight the extent to which the unvarying geometric form of the square shifts the focus away from shape and increasingly to the color. Albers had in the two decades since arriving in the United States struck upon the neutral square as an ideal vehicle for exploring the subtle variants of shades. The square, in his rendering, became a purely geometric shape of interest uniquely for its capacity to hold color. The exhibition's grouping of the studies (mostly undated) is roughly chromatic: one room in black and grey, the next in orange and gold, the next yellow with hints of green, and the final room red—thus forming a striking labyrinth of rooms hung with squares in hues ranging from bright to somber.
- 6 The *Variants / Adobes* from the 1940s occupying the second room formed a bridge between the earliest works and the squares. On numerous visits to Mexico beginning in 1935, Albers was struck by the simple, rectilinear geometry of the traditional Mexican architecture. The pieces make reference to real geographical entities but already prefigure the stripped down shapes of the later decades.
- 7 The exhibition's focus on studies rather than on completed works highlights the process behind the apparent simplicity of his mature works. On many of the sketches the artist's handwritten pencil scrawls are visible, notating the precise color to use in a specific spot, or the dimensions of the final piece—testament to the extent of his meditation on color. In some examples the paint bleeds out of the borders, in contrast to the slick, clearly defined squares hanging in museums. The studies range from color tests—daubs of paint on scraps of paper, not unlike paint swatches in a paint store—to

finely polished pieces that nearly approximate the finished works. Aesthetically the studies stand as powerful pieces on their own, regardless of their relation to the rest of the artist’s oeuvre.

- 8 The exhibition was organised by the Josef Albers Museum Quadrat in Bottrop (Albers’ city of birth) and the Staatliche Graphische Sammlung in Munich, where it was also shown prior to its arrival in Paris. The catalogue (Hatje Cantz Verlag) also contains texts by Nicholas Fox Weber (Staatliche Graphische Stiftung Munich), Heinz Liesbrock (of the Josef Albers Museum), and Michael Semff. Published in English, it contains a French translation as an insert.

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