

Sol LeWitt and Josef Albers: Parallel Squares and Kindred Concepts

by Morgan Ridler

Abstract: Sol LeWitt and Josef Albers are two artists who were each deeply involved in the exploration of the square. Albers painted many color variations in homage to this fundamental shape and LeWitt expanded the square into three dimensions, breaking down its parts and exploring its conceptual identity. Although superficially their works have many parallels, their methods and their goals were very different. In 2005, LeWitt's *Walldrawing 1176 Seven Basic Colors and All Their Combination in a Square within a Square for Josef Albers*, was installed in the Josef Albers Quadrat Bottrop Museum in Germany. The drawing, completed by assistants following LeWitt's detailed instructions and conceptual framework, resulted in a systematic recreation and simplification of the Albers' square within a square motif and testifies to a longstanding kinship between LeWitt and Albers. But LeWitt's complex critique of and indebtedness to Albers goes well beyond this example. Although LeWitt was never directly a student of Albers his encounters with Albers' work and ideas in the New York galleries and through friends and colleagues during his formative years in the early 1960s, formed a foundation for LeWitt's practice and his method of systematic investigation and conceptual rigor. This paper explores LeWitt's debt to Albers, from his early paintings and constructions that mimic Albers' squares but bring the optical movement into physical space and eventually leading him to his own brand of Conceptual Art.

Keywords: Sol LeWitt, Josef Albers, Conceptual Art, Homage to the Square

In the early 1960s, one American artist was described as creating “anonymous, consciously limited art...stripped of its creator and of personal touch.” This artist, according to the author, appears to avoid “superficial identification,” believing that “somebody else could create similar work.”¹ The writer also describes the “constructional” work as “deceptively simple yet immensely sophisticated.”² Provided with these descriptions, the vocabulary used and the decade, one might assume the artist is a Minimalist. An apt association because the Minimalists were influenced by the described artist, Josef Albers, the Bauhaus master turned Black Mountain College and Yale professor and king of the square. The quotes above are excerpts from François Bucher’s 1961 book, *Despite Straight Lines*, which discusses Albers’ *Structural Constellations* series of 1953-1958 (fig. 1).

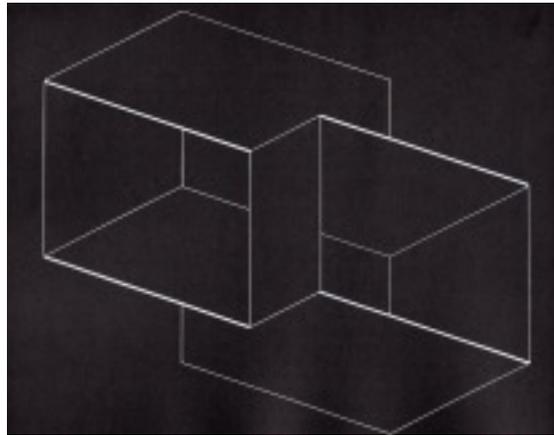


Fig. 1. Josef Albers, *Structural Constellation*, c. 1953-1958, machine engraving on black laminated plastic, 17 x 22 ½ in. (43 x 57 cm.) © 2014 The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

In the text, Albers himself describes the phenomenon of one *Structural Constellation*:

In this irrational interpenetration of 2 open cubes we notice first the heavy top and bottom edge of the front openings. They are presented by 4 lines equally long and thick, and, as parallels, equally oblique... But soon it becomes dubious whether they are parallel. It seems that they belong to a convex plane, or even to a twisted plane. Convex, because the interiors behind the openings converge. Twisted, because the axes of the interiors are bent down at right, up at left. And with this cor-

responds that we see the cubes at right from below, at left from above. But the fact remains: the 4 lines—are parallel.³

The parallel lines also seem curving, convex and shifting; the relationships between them are called into question.⁴ Albers left a lasting legacy on the art of the 1960s and 1970s but, like the optical confusion in this work, there are uncertain relationships and parallels between the work of Albers and the next generation of American artists, such as Ad Reinhardt, Barnett Newman and the younger Minimalists.

The title of the book *Despite Straight Lines* is a phrase that can also describe the relationship between Albers (b. 1888, d.1976) and the much younger Sol LeWitt (b.1928, d.2007). They share language like *anonymous* and they are both, “Deceptively simple yet immensely sophisticated.”⁵ And while these two artists make similar use of straight lines, squares and cubes, Albers and LeWitt approached their work and the role of art from immensely different historical backgrounds, artistic lineages, and with different objectives. The formal comparisons between them are tempting although perhaps misleading and when considering the relationship between these two artists many questions soon surface. How much is LeWitt’s work really indebted to Albers? What does LeWitt learn through Albers and what does he reject?

In this essay I begin to answer these questions, which have not been concretely or thoroughly addressed in any literature on LeWitt.⁶ I start by discussing some of LeWitt’s rarely discussed paintings and sculptures from his formative years and examining how he expanded beyond the influence of Albers, planting seeds for his later work. LeWitt’s synthesis of Albers can be understood in three stages: First, there is the compositional legacy of Albers to LeWitt’s early 1960s paintings and structures, second is LeWitt’s extrapolation of the visual into the conceptual when he rejects and reworks many of Albers’ formal devices and procedural methods and formulates his “conceptual” approach, and third, LeWitt returns to Albers in his *Seven Basic Colors and All Their Combinations in a Square within a Square: Wall Drawing for Josef Albers (Wall Drawing 1176)*, (2005), a culmination of a long dialogue with the earlier artist. Although LeWitt never directly studied with Albers, the influence of the Bauhaus master was in other ways foundational. LeWitt experimented with the square as a compositional device but learned as well from Albers’ conceptual ap-

proach, the serialization and systematization that was both a model and a contrast for LeWitt's new artistic strategy.

Despite the links between these two artists, there is no evidence that they ever met. Josef Albers was born in 1888 in Bottrop, Germany. He began classes at the Weimar Bauhaus in 1920 and became a Journeyman in 1922. He taught at the Bauhaus until its closing in 1933 before joining the faculty of Black Mountain College in North Carolina and eventually becoming the head of the design department at Yale University in 1950. In that same year, he began his most well-known series, the *Homage to the Square*, of which he made hundreds of variations of square-based works. By the mid 1950s he was exhibiting extensively in New York, executing large mural projects around the world and teaching across the country. He continued to lecture and exhibit internationally until his death in 1976 in New Haven, Connecticut.⁷

Sol LeWitt was born in 1928 in Hartford, Connecticut and attended Syracuse University, studying fine art. After serving in the Korean War, he moved to New York and enrolled in the Cartoonist and Illustrators School, now known as the School of Visual Arts. He worked as a graphic designer and in I.M. Pei's newly formed architectural practice from 1955-56.⁸ LeWitt quickly became bored with the tedious work of a graphic designer and began to re-explore art and the New York gallery scene as he built the foundations for his own artistic practice. With LeWitt's growing exposure to the New York art world, it is likely that from early on he was familiar with Albers' works and writings. By the mid-1950s, Albers was visible as a major international art figure. Albers exhibited at the Sidney Janis Gallery, New York in 1955, 1958, 1961, 1963 and 1964 as well as in many exhibitions in New Haven and around the country. As noted earlier, the book *Despite Straight Lines* was published in 1961 and Albers' immensely influential book *Interactions of Color* was published in 1963.

One particular exhibition LeWitt was likely familiar with was the 1958 Sidney Janis show celebrating Albers' 70th birthday, which included the *Homage to the Square* and the *Variants* series. Most of these works are dedicated to analyzing and illustrating the interactions of color and the optical power of these relationships. In *Homages to the Square*, his most iconic works, he used a standardized composition to better focus on the color interactions. This format has been described by Albers scholar Nicholas Fox Weber as "platters to serve

color,”⁹ and “vehicles for the presentation of different color climates and various effects, above all for the demonstration of the way that solid colors change according to their position and surroundings.”¹⁰ In constructing these works, Albers used paint straight from tubes, recording on the back of the Masonite panel the colors, brands and layers of application. Weber describes “this meticulous listing and almost scientific method of application,” as a process that ironically facilitates the attainment of a spiritual quality.¹¹ This spiritual quality was a result of Albers’ systematic painting structure and technique.

The 1958 exhibition prompted many reviews in the art press. Hilton Kramer in his April 1958 review of the show in *Arts Magazine* describes:

Albers’ method is designed to remove the act of painting as far as possible from the hazards of personal touch, and thus to place its whole expressive energy—or as much as can survive the astringencies of the method—at the disposal of a pictorial conception already fully arrived at before a single application of pigment is made to the surface. The pictorial image is then ‘developed’ in the act of painting in very much the same sense that photography is developed in the darkroom: it is not so much created as re-created.¹²

Underlying Kramer’s description of Albers’ paintings is a comparison with the Abstract Expressionists. Albers’ paintings are in many ways antithetical to the personal and expressive actions of Jackson Pollock or Willem de Kooning. The pictures are restrained by the system of squares and were created with a scientific-seeming precision, with a single-minded focus on color, unlike the arena in which the Abstract Expressionists act. As Kramer describes, Albers’ paintings are all previously arranged; they just need to be executed, “re-created” from the original concept.¹³

In this period, during the peak of Abstract Expressionism, this type of work may have been a welcomed retreat from gestural abstraction, but “to redeem such a radical dissociation of feelings from execution would seem to call for a conceptual content so compelling as to compensate for all that has been eliminated. In Albers’ new work this conceptual content dwells exclusively on color.”¹⁴ In short, the conceptual framework of the paintings almost makes up for their impersonal and cold character. Kramer in reference to Albers, describes

the lack of personal touch similarly to the way that Bucher discusses Albers work and both are echoed in LeWitt's later oft quoted phrase from his 1967 "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," "The idea becomes the machine that makes the art,"¹⁵ an issue which will be explored further below. For LeWitt, who did not identify with the Abstract Expressionists and who was searching for a different path, Albers, and these contemporary readings of Albers, provided an approach beyond personal touch and expressive gesture.

In 1960, as LeWitt became more aware of the gallery scene, he began work at the Museum of Modern Art. There he became fluent in the language of modernism and forged important relationships with contemporaries: Dan Flavin, Robert Mangold, Robert Ryman and Lucy Lippard.¹⁶ Perhaps his most influential friend was Eva Hesse, Albers' student at Yale, who would become a very close friend, artistic confidant and personal link to the lessons of Albers. Also in this year LeWitt begins to make new art, first emulating Albers' formal strategy, and quickly recognizing a conceptual strategy that fueled his later practice. It is in LeWitt's paintings and early sculptures from 1960 to 1963, currently located in the LeWitt Collection in Chester, Connecticut, which reflect these changing factors and influences in his early career.

In *Running Man*, 1960, LeWitt paints a small, approximately 24 inches square, work consisting of three concentric squares of blue, red and black converging on the central yellow figure. This work is an early example of many works centered on the theme of running. While *Running Man* seems to mimic Albers' formal device of squares within squares, there are a number of differences, and the parallels are not so clear. Albers' squares are not perfectly centered, as LeWitt's are, but are closer to the bottom of the canvas. In addition, LeWitt includes a figure, a component both antithetical to Albers' abstraction as well as much of contemporary art. The surfaces of the paint in Albers' *Homages* are smooth and thin, due to his diligent process. In LeWitt's work the paint is thick with ridges, the man is almost in relief, the paint mounded and incised to create a sculptural effect. Though Albers uses colors that interact with one another, LeWitt's squares within squares do not evoke these optical color interactions. The running figure in the painting has been linked to the influence of Eadweard Muybridge's revolutionary photographs of motion. Therefore while it may at first



Fig. 2. Sol LeWitt, *Run II*, 1962, oil on canvas painted wood, 60 x 60 x 10 in. (152 x 152 x 25 cm.) © 2014 The LeWitt Estate / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

seem that Albers provides the inspiration for this early painting, there are few real similarities.

The theme of running reoccurs in 1962's *Run II*, (fig. 2), and expands to include text, graphics and space. Four different explorations of the theme are vertically arranged with the word *run* at the top, the image of the runner underneath, with an arrow pointing to the right below that, and at the bottom a physically receding square with a square. The bottom version of this theme *run*, the square within the square, the purely abstract expression, is what will remain in later works, as LeWitt abandons the figure and brings his painting much closer to sculpture. This compositional device, a kin to Albers, is transformed into three dimensions and although one could argue that there are many other precedents for the square

within square, from Malevich and Mondrian to Reinhardt, for LeWitt, Albers seems to have been a primary influence, as he described in a 1974 interview with Paul Cummings:

Back around '61, '62, I did things using one figure, the running figure repeated, and then like an arrow pointing that way, and the word "run." These things could be done on different levels. They were done as three dimensional paintings. I also was very intrigued by Albers, but the thing about Albers that I couldn't grasp was that if he has colors that were receding, they should, I thought, physically recede; and if they advance, they should physically advance.¹⁷

Albers' concept of the optical relationship of colors, the push and pull that the viewer perceives in the eye is the conceptual framework for an Albers square within a square. LeWitt wants to make this conceptual framework, the receding and advancing, real, moving it beyond the optical and into the physical. Albers created the concept, and LeWitt brought the idea closer to a physical reality.

While in *Run II* LeWitt explores variations on same theme, in works like *Wall Piece* (1962), as well as a number of others from that year, he moves on to explore the physical advance and recession of space. In *Wall Piece* (fig. 3) a rectangular canvas, painted a dull yellow, sits within a large white frame. In the center of the yellow rectangle a square cutout reveals a silver layer beneath, and into that surface another square cutout houses a floating projecting white square. As in a Lucio Fontana cut canvas, LeWitt broke through the picture plane, producing a sculptural painting or a painted sculpture and violating Greenberg's mandate for pictorial flatness. Color is used to further emphasize the spatial play and the white square in the middle pushes just out beyond the colored surface. The cut-out space physically pushes deeper into the painting and the recession of spaces captures the viewer's attention, provoking investigations of this opening, creating a work that forces the viewer to move and examine.



Fig. 3. Sol LeWitt, *Wall Piece*, 1962, oil on canvas and painted wood, 63.25 x 22.625 x 7.5 in. (161 x 57 x 19 cm.) © 2014 The LeWitt Estate / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

This work has a certain resonance with another Albers exhibition from the previous year. LeWitt, now with the advantage of being friends with Hesse, had another opportunity to see, hear and read about Albers' work. Albers' 1961 exhibition at Sidney Janis Gallery contained 38 paintings, 33 of which were

Homages to the Square. Brian O'Doherty, in a review for the *New York Times*, praises the precise painting of Albers in this exhibition:

In the most impressive room six magnificent paintings emit a golden effulgence within which squares float and hover. Constantly displaying new ambiguities, they initiate an intimate dialogue with the spectator, and lift the spirits to warm and peaceful contemplation.¹⁸

The description of floating and hovering squares that engage the spectator could describe LeWitt's physically floating spaces and colors of the next year. LeWitt, however, does not absorb or reproduce the spiritual, heartwarming effect in *Wall Piece*. While LeWitt is still mimic-

king Albers' squares and push-pull effect, he is deliberately leaving the emotion and richness of color behind.

In his 1962 works, LeWitt questions the boundaries between painting and sculpture, taking painting where Albers never did and expanding the conceptual conceit of Albers to the three-dimensional plane. LeWitt explains this best himself in a 1993 interview with Andrew Wilson. He was interested in:

the ideas of Joseph (sic) Albers, of colour moving back and forth...I decided that I would make colour of form recede and proceed in a three dimensional way. The idea of flatness of plane naturally evolved into three-dimensionality of form which became wall structures, at first made with colour advancing and receding and then with only black and white, and finally as freestanding pieces.¹⁹

Albers' formal structures and visual devices attracted LeWitt and he turned Albers' optical play into something three-dimensional and physical.

Two works from 1963 display LeWitt's further shift to three-dimensional structures and away from color towards black and white. *Floor Structure* takes the colored rectangles off the wall and onto the floor. A large free standing rectangular yellow wood box stands like a pillar and in the upper third of the box, a blue, square, cage-like column shape impales the yellow surface, projecting through to the other side. Square after square, repeated like a stop action photograph of a square moving through space, breaks the solidity of the yellow slab. The square within the square concept has become fully three-dimensional.

Wall Structure, 1963, (fig. 4) is at once the most Albersian and anti-Albersian of these early works, a direct reference to and a direct refusal of Albers. A black rectangle hanging on the wall provides a base for a series of white wooden squares, or open frames, with their edges painted black that project into space. The squares are turned on their points and create diamonds, or as Mondrian describes a lozenge shape. The squares sit one within another, getting progressively smaller and deeper, projecting out into the room more and more. The last central square, the smallest, juts off the wall 25 inches into the space of the viewer. The work is completely stripped of color and has made the physicality of the progression and recession of the

space three-dimensional, rather than illusionistically or optical. Albers' flat paintings produce subjective effects of color: each viewer sees things differently, the colors look different next to each other, and they look distinctive for each person. But in this LeWitt work there is no room for such subjectivity; the structure simply exists in real space.

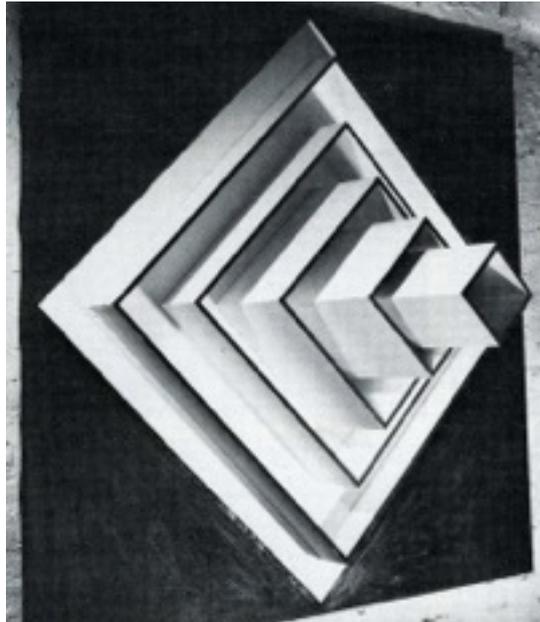


Fig. 4. Sol LeWitt, *Wall Structure*, 1963, oil on canvas and painted wood, 62 x 62 x 25 in. (157.5 x 157.5 x 63.5 cm.) © 2014 The LeWitt Estate / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

LeWitt discusses *Wall Structure* in his 1978 retrospective catalog as “the first serial attempt, although it was not very precise in its measurements. The projections and intervals, however, expanded and contracted in a controlled sequence.”²⁰ By *Wall Structure* the physical receding and advancing that began with the Albers square within a square model has now taken an important leap into a progressive, sequential and serial exploration. While Albers used color to vary his static composition, LeWitt developed systems and intervals to create the physical depth of space. Far from blindly absorbing or reiterating Albers' goals or methods, LeWitt was taking a few ideas, synthesizing some techniques, and developing his own artistic vocabulary out of certain Albers' concepts.

At this point it is important to stress the very real and important difference between Albers and LeWitt, and between Albers and the Minimalist in terms of technique and facture. Albers' surfaces are painted with precision, lacking any painterly impasto, but are still clearly hand painted. LeWitt's surfaces in his early paintings like *Run* and *Running Man*, discussed above, are thick and rough. By the middle of the 1960s, in his iconic open cube structures, LeWitt's signature surfaces become enamel and industrial, not handmade, as LeWitt was generally not interested in craft. In "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," he describes conceptual art as, "usually free from the dependence on the skill of the artist as a craftsman."²¹ The qualities of craftsmanship, the facture, the great effort that Albers put into his surfaces, the layers of underpainting and thinness of paint, are in many ways academic, labor intensive and based on a Bauhaus interest in the artist/craftsman with a emphasis on materials, which he learned and taught at the Bauhaus, and brought to schools like Black Mountain College. The Minimalists, by contrast, use industrial materials and procedures to create their works, having their boxes made in factories or professional workshops and not the studio, situating them apart from traditional art. The difference in craft is another instance of LeWitt contradicting Albers' example, contrasting with what Albers represents.

For the young Minimalist generation, Albers was a major international figure and the head of one of the most powerful and elite art schools in America. He was the great academician from the *École* of the twentieth century, the Bauhaus, from which the new techniques of teaching and making art were first developed and then exported to the United States. Albers' European heritage, age, easel-painting practice and focus on the ideas of beauty and spirituality in art represented exactly the paradigm Minimalism opposed. The problems of painting, and specifically "European painting," are mentioned in Bruce Glaser's 1964 interview with Donald Judd, Frank Stella and Dan Flavin. Stella and Judd both emphasize that European painting is relational, with compositions based on balance, while the new American art is termed non-relational, such that compositions are unimportant.²² When Judd is questioned by Glaser about the similar formal vocabulary of his geometric shapes to previous European movements, he responds, "I'm totally uninterested in European art and I think it's over with."²³ Glaser then asks, "What about the Bauhaus?" Judd responds, "I consider the Bauhaus too long ago to think about, and I never thought about it much."²⁴

Albers, a quintessential Bauhausler, and the younger generation, including his students, had a contentious relationship. Robert Rauschenberg, Albers' student at Black Mountain College described him as, "a beautiful teacher and an impossible person."²⁵ Eva Hesse, a student of Albers' at Yale, described him in her diary: "He is terribly limited but really maintains one point of view throughout. This is a paradoxically strong and weak attribute and shortcoming."²⁶ LeWitt, as a part of the art community in 1960s New York, would surely have understood this anti-Bauhaus and anti-Albers attitude. Nevertheless, he also must have understood the debt that these younger artists had to the forefathers of geometric abstraction. The lessons of Albers did have some resonances, even if it was not very cool to acknowledge them.

It would have been retardataire to appear to be following Albers' dictums or European art in general in New York in the 1960s, and LeWitt follows suit in his late 1960s essays on conceptual art, displaying a conscious rejecting and reworking of Albers. In 1967, LeWitt published his "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" in *Artforum*, where he defines what he understands as conceptual art. In a very blatant rejection of Albers' pedagogical approach, LeWitt states that "conceptual art is not theoretical or illustrative of theories."²⁷ LeWitt also describes a dichotomy between conceptual and perceptual art, stating: "Art that is meant for the sensation of the eye primarily would be called perceptual rather than conceptual. This would include most optical, kinetic, light and color art."²⁸ Albers seems to fit LeWitt's description of the "perceptual" artist, and thus he could categorize Albers as the antithesis of the conceptual artist. In addition to the perceptual elements of Albers' practice he was likewise dedicated to his method and the process of painting. Albers worked within a system, using the same composition for many, many paintings, painstakingly noting the exact paint and color used for each work, as if creating a scientific study. As O'Doherty writes in 1961, "Within this almost Cartesian (sic) framework, Mr. Albers produces, through color, a variety of seemingly inexhaustible effects." Albers' working procedure creates effect after effect, color next to color. LeWitt could very well be conjuring Albers when also in "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" he wrote: "When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair."²⁹ The work just needs to be executed, re-created following the concept. While Albers' art was exactly the type of

work that LeWitt differentiated from in much of his writings, the earlier lessons of Albers, the square within square method, were not completely forgotten. Albers, with his system, his pre-designed compositions and factory made colors, should perhaps be re-designated as a proto-conceptual artist.

LeWitt's work seems to parallel the way Kramer describes Albers' working process. The system, the seriality and the discipline of Albers is his legacy, although not perhaps his own goal. The common link between Albers and LeWitt is the idea of working on one idea, over and over until it has been exhausted. O'Doherty describes Albers as "an exact poet who measures and surveys with almost obsessional precisions, but who finally presents one with an immeasurable experience."³⁰ LeWitt also develops a way to work in which thinking and planning are the most important aspect of the artwork. This effect can be seen in many of his serial projects, like *Serial Project #1 (ABCD)*, 1966 and the *Incomplete Open Cube*, 1974, which take an idea like a cube within a cube and all the variations of an incomplete open cube and extrapolate all possibilities within that concept. Rosalind Krauss sees the madness and obsession of such a project:

The babble of a LeWitt serial expansion has nothing of the economy of the mathematician's language. It has the loquaciousness of the speech of children or of the very old, in that it refuses to summarize, to use the single example that would imply the whole, is like those feverish accounts of events composed of a string of almost identical details, connected by "and".³¹

In this respect, both Albers and LeWitt created obsessional work. Albers' strict formulas are all about procedure, but O'Doherty explains, "He is full of paradoxes, and the more discipline he submits to, the freer his invention seems to be."³² Both artists submitted themselves to a discipline of rules and plans, of concepts and systems, but the results were unforeseen and intriguing.

Though LeWitt and Albers each worked within similar systems, they did not have the same goals in mind. LeWitt declares in "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" that this conceptual art "is intuitive, it is involved with all types of mental processes and it is purposeless."³³ As LeWitt clarifies his position, he is not a scientist and there is no reason or purpose behind the art, aside from art itself. Whereas Albers presented a rationalization of color theory and lessons for his students,

LeWitt, as Krauss describes, is creating a parody of rationality, using the rational but taking it to an extreme. A LeWitt project takes the kind of directions Albers may have given to his students to logical but absurd ends. In LeWitt's own words, "Conceptual Artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach."³⁴ He celebrates the irrational, which "lead[s] to new experiences," and argues that "irrational thoughts should be followed absolutely and logically."³⁵ LeWitt is not interested in formalism or exploring the optical effects of colors; he is interested in formula and progression. Art historian Jeffrey Saletnik has argued that Albers instilled in his students, particularly Hesse, LeWitt's friend, an approach to materials and a process of experimentation. Hesse's experimentations with latex were an extension of Albers' in-class exercises of uncovering the qualities and potentials of the materials to an exhaustive length.³⁶ While LeWitt did not learn directly from Albers and certainly did not have interest in materials or craft, he did however absorb this fixation, the exhaustion of an idea and Albers' process of working by using conceptual and serial strategies.

As should be now apparent, this relationship between LeWitt and Albers is a troubled parallelism, with many contradictions. LeWitt was not lured by the nearly scientific study of color, the search for beauty or drive to instruct students. In fact, he quickly eliminated color and painting altogether, but he takes the simple geometric idea of a floating square and pushes it beyond painting into structures. Albers' rigorous geometry and systematic investigations provided LeWitt with a conceptual paradigm and gave him a fundamental lesson in formal questions, as well as an idea to outgrow and reject. In many interviews, LeWitt acknowledged Albers as a source of inspiration.³⁷ His most clear demonstration of the lingering effect of Albers and perhaps part of a reevaluation of his own earlier career was confirmed near the end of his life in 2005 at the Josef Albers Museum.

On July 29, 2005 the LeWitt wall drawing *Seven Basic Colors In a Square Within a Square: Wall Drawing for Josef Albers (Wall Drawing 1176)* was unveiled at the Josef Albers Museum in Quadrat Bottrop, Germany (fig. 5). The work is in many ways typical for a LeWitt wall drawing. It was executed by a team following a systematic set of directions. It uses a palette of seven colors, the three primary colors and the three secondary colors with the addition of gray. These colors had been present in LeWitt's wall drawings since the 1980s

and, as the title suggests, represent basic colors, expanding the Mondrian primaries to include the secondary colors. The formal composition of the work is in the familiar guise of the square within the square, the Albers compositional device. LeWitt modified the basic composition, using two squares, a large outer square, 96 inches on each side, and the inner square exactly half the outer square's dimensions, making a more mathematical version of Albers' grid.³⁸



Fig. 5. Sol LeWitt, *Seven Basic Colors and All Their Combinations in a Square within a Square: Wall Drawing for Josef Albers (Wall Drawing 1176)*, 2005, Josef Albers Museum Quadrat Bottrop Museum © 2014 The LeWitt Estate / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

LeWitt's organization of the color combinations makes Albers' subjective, quasi-scientific system of color relations more objective by systematically combining and eliminating color. LeWitt takes the combination of different primary colors to logical and irrational conclusions. In the beginning of the sequence the color red is used for the large outer square. Inside each large red square is a secondary square, with one of the remaining six colors. After this first red series is exhausted, yellow becomes the large outer square and the remaining five colors, excluding red, are used in the middle. This reduction continues until the squares wrap around the walls of the gallery and into the inner gallery space. The last square, the twenty first in the sequence, is purple with a gray center.

Heinz Liesbrock, the organizer of the exhibition, reported that when LeWitt was approached about the possibility of working with the Albers museum and creating a work that "reflects his own engage-

ment with the work of his older colleague, he responded spontaneously in the affirmative.”³⁹ According to Liesbrock, LeWitt then discussed his own work in the 1960s and some of the aspects of his work dealing with color and movement in space, “which the study of the paintings of Josef Albers had made him aware of, stressing at the same time that Albers’ heritage continues to this day to have an effect on his work.”⁴⁰ LeWitt, after solidifying his own legacy and within two years of his death, was finally able to comment on and support his connection with Albers.

This contemporary work demonstrates LeWitt’s reflection on his own development and interest in a previous generation of Modernists.⁴¹ This can be said of many American artists in the late Modernist 1960s and 1970s, who although often deny the important presence of the older artists like Albers, Picasso, or Kandinsky, were still working within a legacy of European modernism. The 2005 wall painting repeats Albers’ most famous compositional motif and the one that LeWitt had himself emulated. LeWitt takes the composition and Albers’ idea to combine different colors in order to illustrate optical effects, but instead of recreating the subtle, subjective and transcendental qualities of an Albers, he imitates the precision. One could imagine this museum filled with Albers’ style of squares within squares but instead LeWitt creates an affectionate parody of the Bauhaus Master. LeWitt reveals the true legacy of Albers in this work, the power of the idea as a driving force of art.

This wall painting acts as a bookend, a final testament to the significant role Albers played in LeWitt’s career. Certainly LeWitt developed his own singular works, forging new ground in Minimalism and Conceptual art, but by considering some of his early works and the early themes we can better appreciate how LeWitt arrived at his later grids, cubes, and wall drawings. LeWitt’s formal adoption of the square within a square and the physical recession of space was only a superficial adaptation of Albers. Albers’ exactness and obsession of his method, the standardization and serialization, can be identified throughout LeWitt’s oeuvre, from the conceptual completeness of the *Incomplete Open Cube* series to LeWitt’s own homage to Albers in 2005. By understanding how LeWitt mimicked, absorbed and then rejected much of what Albers represented and emblemized illustrates the complex relationships of the artists of LeWitt’s generation in dealing with their predecessors.

Rejection of parental guidance is a normal part of the maturation process. It is now time to look back and not only see the rebellion but also the continuities. The important legacy, the real parallel between Albers and LeWitt is in the serial and conceptual model that Albers inspired, and although there are deep and serious differences between the two artists, they shared the square.

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Endnotes

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- ¹ François Bucher, *Josef Albers: Despite Straight Lines; an Analysis of His Graphic Constructions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), 75-76.
 - ² Bucher, 17.
 - ³ Bucher, 78.
 - ⁴ Ibid.
 - ⁵ Ibid.

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- ⁶ LeWitt's early career has been discussed in: Sol LeWitt, Alicia Legg, Lucy R. Lippard, Bernice Rose, and Robert Rosenblum. *Sol LeWitt*. New York: MoMA, 1978; Sol LeWitt, and Gary Garrels. *Sol LeWitt: A Retrospective*. San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2000; Sol LeWitt, and Josef Albers. *Sol LeWitt Wall Drawing 1176: Seven Basic Colors and All their Combinations in a Square within a Square: for Josef Albers*. Düsseldorf: Richter, 2006. The 1978 MoMA exhibition catalog includes illustrations of early painting and structures, reproduced in black and white, like LeWitt's more well-known works, though many in fact are multicolored. The 2000 exhibition and catalog, organized by the San Francisco Museum of Art, offered a more comprehensive evaluation of LeWitt's early career. Building on these two texts, the most important resource for defining the relationship of LeWitt with Albers is the 2005 catalog for LeWitt's wall drawing from the same year at the Josef Albers Museum in Bottrop, Germany. In sum, while the extant literature provides the foundation for an exploration of this topic, it does not dissect and analyze the important early works at length in order to get to the root of the association between the two artists.
- ⁷ Albers taught not only at Yale but also at LeWitt's alma mater, Syracuse University in 1957-58, and many other institutions. He executed murals in Time and Life Building, New York in 1961 and in Pan Am Building lobby in New York 1963. His hugely influential book *Interactions of Color* was published in 1963. Josef Albers, Nicholas Fox Weber, *Josef Albers: A Retrospective* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1988).
- ⁸ *Oral History Interview with Sol LeWitt, 1974 July 15*, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. He began exploring the New York gallery scene with Tony Candido, an architect in Pei's office.
- ⁹ Nicholas Fox Weber, *Josef Albers: A Retrospective* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1988), 14.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Weber, 26.
- ¹² Hilton Kramer, "Recent Paintings at the Sidney Janis Gallery," *Arts* 32, no. (April 1958): 52.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," in *Sol LeWitt*, ed. Alicia Legg (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1978), 166.
- ¹⁶ Gary Garrels, *Sol LeWitt: A Retrospective* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2000), 50.

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- ¹⁷ *Oral History Interview with Sol LeWitt*, 1974 July 15, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
- ¹⁸ Brian O'Doherty, "Dialectics of the Eye," *New York Times*, October 3 1961.
- ¹⁹ Andrew Wilson, "Sol LeWitt Interviewed," in *Sol LeWitt: Critical Texts*, ed. Adachiara Zevi([Rome]; Köln: Libri de AEIUO ; Distribution, Buchhandlung Walther König, 1995), 123.
- ²⁰ LeWitt and Legg, *Sol Lewitt* (1978).
- ²¹ LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art."
- ²² "Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Frank Stella New Nihilism or New Art? Interview with Bruce Glaser (1964)," in *Minimalism*, ed. James Meyer (London: Phaidon, 2000).
- ²³ "Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Frank Stella New Nihilism or New Art? Interview with Bruce Glaser (1964)."
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall : A Portrait of Robert Rauschenberg* (New York: Picador, 2005), 29.
- ²⁶ Jeffrey Saletnik, "Josef Albers, Eva Hesse, and the Imperative of Teaching," *Tate Papers* (Spring 2007) (accessed May 18, 2011).
- ²⁷ LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art."
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art."
- ³⁰ O'Doherty.
- ³¹ Rosalind Krauss, "LeWitt in Progress," *October* 6, no. (1978): 55.
- ³² O'Doherty.
- ³³ LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art."
- ³⁴ LeWitt, "Sentences on Conceptual Art," in *Sol LeWitt* (1978).
- ³⁵ LeWitt, "Sentences on Conceptual Art."
- ³⁶ Saletnik.
- ³⁷ For example 1974 interview quoted above as well as in interviews in the 1990s and in connection with his large retrospective at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2000.

³⁸ Sol LeWitt, *Sol Lewitt Wall Drawing 1176: Seven Basic Colors and All Their Combinations in a Square within a Square: For Josef Albers*, ed. Heinz Liesbrock Ulrike Growe, Petra Richter (Düsseldorf: Josef Albers Museum Quadrat Bottrop and Richter Verlag, 2006); Heinz Liesbrock, "The Idea of Color: Sol Lewitt's "Wall Drawing for Josef Albers"," in *Sol LeWitt Wall Drawing 1176: Seven Basic Colors and All Their Combinations in a Square within a Square: For Josef Albers*, ed. Heinz Liesbrock Ulrike Growe, Petra Richter (Düsseldorf: Josef Albers Museum Quadrat Bottrop and Richter Verlag, 2006), 42-43.

³⁹ Liesbrock, 41.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

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