

9 March – 4 June 2006

# ALBERS AND MOHOLY-NAGY

## FROM THE BAUHAUS TO THE NEW WORLD

Information and activity pack for teachers

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# Introduction

This teachers' pack has been produced to accompany the exhibition *Albers and Moholy-Nagy: From the Bauhaus to the New World* at Tate Modern. It focuses on four key works by Albers and Moholy-Nagy and provides information, discussion points and classroom activities about each one. There is also general information about Albers and Moholy-Nagy and their careers at the Bauhaus. The pack is designed to both support a visit to the exhibition and to link with work you are doing in the classroom.

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## For more information

Borchardt-Hume, Achim and Foster, Hal. (2006) *Albers and Moholy-Nagy: From the Bauhaus to the New World*, Tate Publishing

Anker, Peder. (2006) Biology and The Bauhaus. *Tate Etc. Visiting and Revisiting Art, etc. Issue 6 – Spring 2006. pp48-55* (Plus other essays relating to the exhibition in this issue)

Ferrier, Jean-Louis. (1999) *Art of the 20th Century. A Year-by-Year Chronicle of Painting, Architecture and Sculpture*. Chene-Hacket publishing p191 (For the Bauhaus Manifesto)

Gropius, Walter. (1923) The Theory and Organization of the Bauhaus, in Harrison, Charles and Wood, Paul (eds.) (1995) *Art in Theory – 1900–1990 – An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Blackwell Publishing

[www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bauhaus](http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bauhaus) (This is a good website for general Bauhaus information, and information on other Bauhaus teachers)

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## QCA schemes of work

KS1 1B Investigating Materials – link to Albers' interest in mass produced materials  
KS2 (years 3 & 4) 3B Investigating Pattern – link to abstraction, geometry  
KS2 (years 5 & 6) 6C A Sense of Place – link to Bauhaus building  
KS 3 9A Life Events – link to Albers fleeing Nazi Germany, living in America, visiting Mexico – how environment influences art practice

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# The Bauhaus

'The final goal of any plastic activity is the building! To decorate it was once the most noble task of the plastic arts; they belonged intimately to the component parts of the great art of architecture.' Walter Gropius

The Bauhaus was originally a German art college, opened in Weimar from 1919 to 1925, then moving to Dessau from 1925 to 1932 and finally moving to Berlin for one further year, until 1933. Taking its name from the German verb to 'build', Bauhaus might be literally translated as *Architecture or Construction House*. Between 1919 and 1933, the school had three separate architectural directors – Walter Gropius, Hannes Meyer and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe – and the Bauhaus style of architecture, with clean lines, elegant geometrical shapes and volume, and a well considered use of light, space and materials rather than 'decoration', was very influential in Modernist architecture.

The Bauhaus aims were not, however, solely architectural; the school did not even offer an architecture course until 1927. The aims of the Bauhaus were social – to combine art, craft and technology into an educational program fit for the modern age. Architecture represented an ideal fusion of art and craft disciplines for a social purpose. The Bauhaus was originally formed as a merger of two pre-existing schools, The School of Arts and Trades, and the School of Plastic Arts which was a traditional art school. Reflecting this merger, at the Bauhaus, industrial mechanisation was embraced, and old boundaries between the fine and decorative arts were broken down. Gropius wanted to establish a 'working community' where the craftsman could become an artist, and the artist could learn the benefits of artisanal work, for the betterment of wider society. Industrial design and mass production were considered important alongside painting and sculpture. In 1919 World War I had recently ended, and under Gropius' direction, the Bauhaus curriculum was conceived to form training in the design and production of quality buildings and consumer goods for a new era – functional, affordable and mass-produced. Against an economically depressed background, the Bauhaus presented a utopian goal and a social responsibility for the artist - to make good design affordable and through this to contribute to a better society. '*Art and Technology. A New Unity*' was the title of a pivotal Bauhaus exhibition.

Courses at the Bauhaus were not taught historically, with students studying examples of past art and crafts. Rather, students were encouraged to learn from experience, and to respond to the needs of the present – experimenting with tools and everyday materials. The influence of the Bauhaus approach extends to the modern day, with elements of the 'Vorkurs', or preliminary course, persisting in art and design courses today.

# The Bauhaus

The style and inventiveness of many products created by Bauhaus students and teachers also remains influential. The *cantilever* chair was designed by a Bauhaus student, where the strength and tensile properties of steel are exploited to produce a chair with not four or three legs, but with one continuous loop of steel forming the back, seat and support. The design of economically viable, marketable products was an important commitment for Bauhaus staff and students alike.

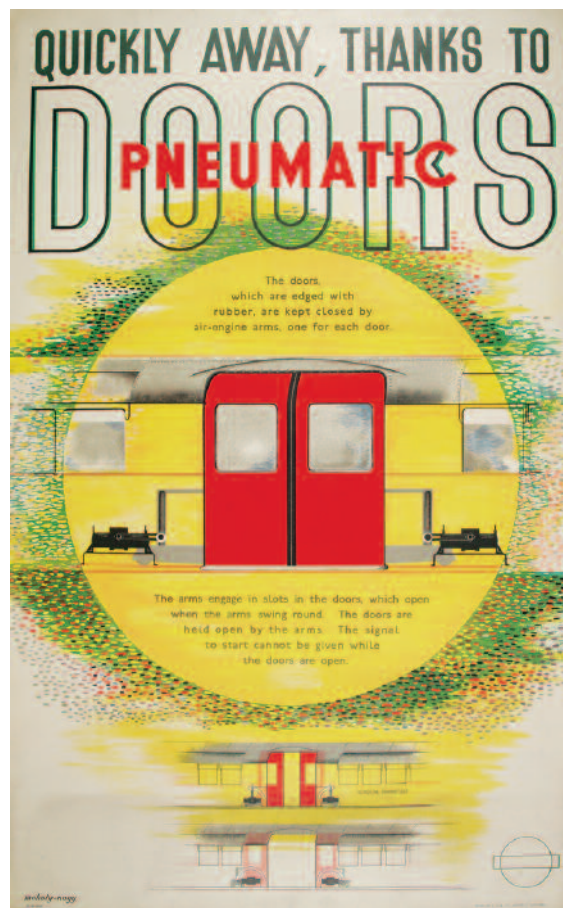
# Albers and Moholy at the Bauhaus

Josef Albers and László Moholy-Nagy were jointly responsible for running the 'Vorkurs', or preliminary course, which was compulsory for all new students at the Bauhaus. Josef Albers originally enrolled as a student at the Weimar Bauhaus in 1920. He started teaching in the Department of Design in 1922 and by 1925 he had been promoted to professor. Under Nazi harassment, the Bauhaus closed in 1933. Albers and his Jewish wife emigrated to the United States where he took up a teaching post at the Black Mountain College in North Carolina until 1949, then moved to Yale University as head of the Department of Design, until he retired in 1958.

László Moholy-Nagy joined the Bauhaus staff in 1923 and remained until 1928 when he resigned, to open a design office. In 1934 he left Germany and made his way to England, via the Netherlands. Along with other members of the Bauhaus faculty, Moholy moved into the first Modernist residential building in London, surrounded by other intellectuals and designers. In 1937, he was sponsored by Walter Paepcke, a rich industrialist, to become Director of a New Bauhaus in Chicago, with headquarters in a mansion originally designed for a department store magnate. With the loss of financial support only one year later, it closed in 1938, but the philosophy of the school had been essentially that of the original Bauhaus, and Moholy went on to open a school of design, which later became the Institute of Design in 1944.

Both Albers and Moholy were committed and influential teachers, leaving a lasting impression on their students, and the art world. Once in America, differences in their teaching priorities became more apparent, with Moholy sharpening his focus on establishing a unity between art and technology, while Albers concentrated more on experimentation with aesthetic form and materials. However, the ethical dimension so clearly evident in their Bauhaus teaching remains constant throughout their careers.

As teachers, they also shared a fundamental approach to education. Both believed that the role of the teacher was not to pass on canonical knowledge, but to encourage discovery and to help realise the potential of their students. On his arrival in America, Albers declared his pedagogical ambitions for teaching at the experimental Black Mountain College to be 'to open eyes.' His students included the influential artists Robert Rauschenberg and Eva Hesse. Moholy was a prolific writer, and contributed to an influential series of publications known as the Bauhaus Books, covering art and educational subjects. Moholy's writing on photography and film presented a broad understanding of contemporary media and culture, and was instrumental in changing attitudes to photography as a creative medium. Through their artwork, their teaching and their writing, both Albers and Moholy made a significant contribution to the European avant-garde and later to American Modernism.



Josef Albers  
*Set of Four Stacking Tables*, c. 1927  
 Ash veneer, black lacquer, and painted glass  
 39.2 x 41.9 x 40 cm; 47.3 x 48 x 40 cm;  
 55.4 x 53.3 x 40 cm; 62.6 x 60.1 x 40.3 cm  
 The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation  
 © The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation/VG Bild-Kunst,  
 Bonn and DACS, London 2006

László Moholy-Nagy  
*Poster for London Transport: Quickly away,  
 thanks to Pneumatic doors*, 1937  
 Colour Lithograph  
 101.3 x 63.3 cm  
 Victoria and Albert Museum, London  
 © 2006 Hattula Moholy-Nagy/DACS



# Josef Albers *Grid Mounted* 1921

'I was 32, but I went to the Bauhaus. Threw all my old things out of the window, started once more from the bottom. That was the best step I made in life.' Albers

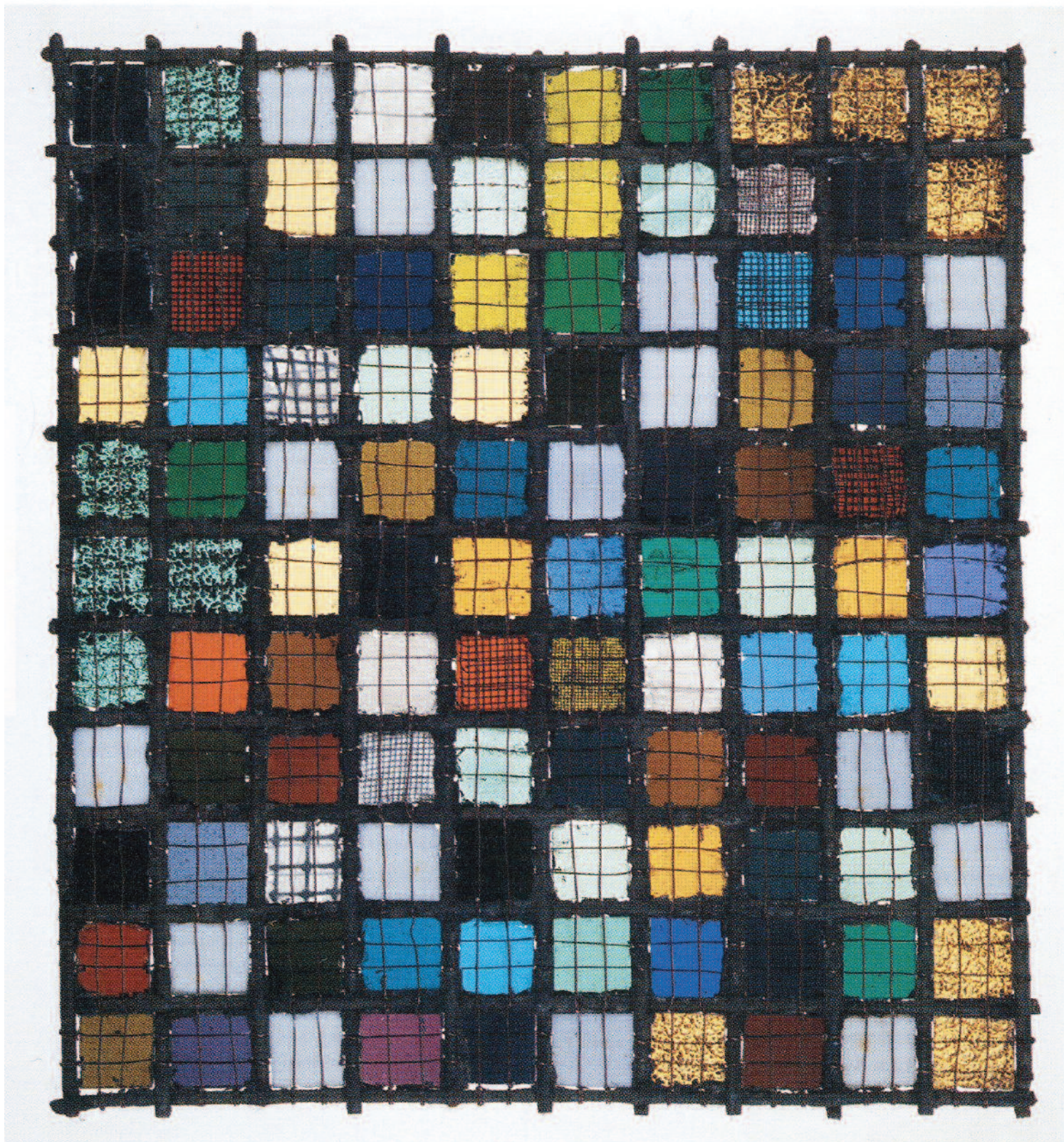
Before Albers enrolled at the Bauhaus, he was an accomplished glass-maker. He studied under Johan Thorn Prikker, who believed in the medieval associations of stained glass as a medium which could embody spiritual and social convictions. Albers had been commissioned to make his first stained-glass window for a church in Bottrop, his home town, while he was still studying with Prikker. The original Bauhaus manifesto had also used a Medieval image of the 'craftsman' engaged in the communal work of building cathedrals, and presented this as an ideal role model for the modern artist.

As a student at the Bauhaus, Albers experimented with the medium of glass, creating assemblages from found shards of broken glass, roughly shaped and supported by metal constructions. He walked the streets looking for broken bottles and windows from war-damaged buildings, with a bag and some tools at the ready. Johannes Itten, then head of the preliminary course, promoted the idea of collage and assemblage, which Albers applied to a medium and material with which he was already familiar. In his glass assemblages, he accepts and accentuates the variety of texture, colour and surface in the pieces of glass he uses. He exploits the chance uniqueness of his materials, and also the associations this brings with the real life and social context of the environment in which the glass was found.

These glass assemblages are Albers' first abstract works. He concentrates not only on colour, transparency - lasting artistic preoccupations - but also on contrast of surface textures, opacity and transparency, and the beautiful yet discarded nature of the glass pieces he found. Such experimentation with materials had been Albers' route to abstraction, rather than theoretical investigation, or borrowing from the formal innovations of Cubism or non-European art, which had pushed many artists toward abstraction in their work. However, Albers' vocabulary of visual fundamentals – line, contrast, texture, light, balance – was appropriate for its time at the Bauhaus. Albers believed that simple forms would make mankind more united, life more real, and more essential. He rejected excessive individualism and expression in favour of a visual vocabulary that could provide an accessible experience for the viewer, regardless of prior art-historical knowledge.

On the strength of Albers' experimental glass works, he was put in charge of re-organising the Bauhaus stained glass workshop. He placed as much emphasis on the connection between glass and architecture as he did on the making of stained glass windows. However, Modernist architecture





*Grid Mounted* 1921

Glass pieces interlaced with copper wire, in a sheet of fence latticework  
32.4 x 28.9 cm

The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation

© The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation/ VG Bild-Kunst,  
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# Josef Albers *Grid Mounted* 1921

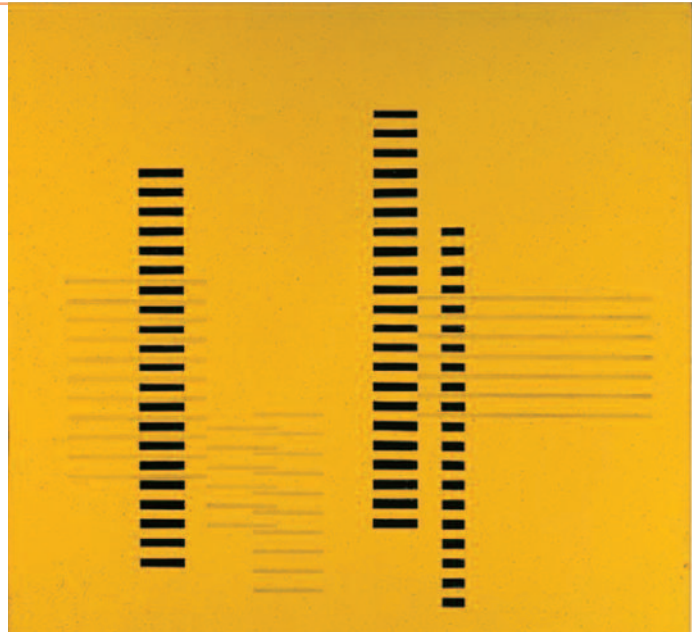
no longer called for such traditional decorative embellishment. In the face of technological advances, and mounting pressure from Bauhaus staff to keep the college up-to-date following the example of industry, the initial Bauhaus ideal of the medieval craftsman shifted to a more contemporary emphasis on art and industrial production.

## Links with other works in exhibition

Josef Albers  
*Skyscrapers on Transparent Yellow*  
c. 1929  
Sandblasted glass with black paint  
35.2 x 34.9 cm  
The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation  
© The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn and DACS, London 2006

Responding to changes in architectural style, Albers further experimented with abstraction in glass. Employing a semi-industrial technique, originally intended to keep the costs of engraving headstones low, Albers began a further series of abstract glass compositions.

Made with the help of stencils, and potentially mass-producible, his sandblasted compositions extend his geometric style and his use of contrasting colour and surface texture to a new parity with Modern architectural style. He gave such works architectural titles: *skyscraper*, *pillars*, *walls*, *city* etc. Several of these sandblasted compositions were illustrated in an important book on glass which referenced the spiritual history of glass and its practical and contemporary potential as a design and architectural medium. His geometric compositions of lines, squares and rectangles also resemble the work of his wife, the weaver Anni Albers.



## Links to other works

The use of found materials in collage or assemblage art was not new in 1960, as Marcel Duchamp had already presented an ordinary bicycle wheel mounted upside down on a stool in 1913. In 1914, he bought and exhibited a drying rack for bottles as a 'ready-made' art object. However, New Realism, founded in 1960, was none-the-less intended to express an awareness of life, un-idealised, through the materials that urban life is made of. The art critic Pierre Restany described their work as 'poetic recycling.' Albers' glass assemblages link his work to a process of poetic recycling. Arman, a New Realist, not only constructed collage and assemblage from found materials, but his work also represents destruction. For his assemblage *Chopin's Waterloo*, 1962, Arman used a sledgehammer to publicly destroy a piano, then used the smashed components to construct a collage onto a panel prepared in advance.

# Josef Albers *Grid Mounted* 1921

## For discussion

- Stained Glass – Have your students seen stained glass before? Where have they seen it? What did it depict? What do they associate with it? Discuss how *Grid Mounted* compares to their previous experiences of stained glass.
- Found Materials – On a walk around their school or local area, what materials would they find? How would this reflect or represent their environment? Is it urban? Discuss their attitude to using materials found on the street.
- Experimentation – What materials or processes are your students already familiar with? What do they associate with these materials? How could they experiment further to challenge assumptions or change the rules? Discuss the role of experimentation in art – is it necessary?

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## Classroom activities

The Medieval craftsman was used as an ideal role model by the first Bauhaus director because the craftsman had worked communally on architectural projects. Architecture involved all forms of art – building, carving, glass, paintings, textiles. A cathedral or church was also the focal point for a whole community. Is there anything like this today? What places are focal points for a community? Are there events that are focal points for the community? What role can artists have to be involved in these places or events? Is there any location or local event that your class can get involved in – a mural, a festival, community centre.

Collect materials from the area around your school – rubbish, shops, woods and parks – and create a communal collage. Ask pupils to bring in bits-and-bobs to represent their home, or bits-and-bobs from their pockets, which can be added to the collage. Use the collage as a focal point for a class activity – perhaps a presentation to the whole school.

Collect transparent/reflective materials and create a collage using wire or string, to hang over a window in the classroom. Discuss whether it should be abstract or have a theme – texture, recycling, etc.

# Josef Albers *Homage to the Square: Study for Nocturne* 1951

‘When you really understand that each colour is changed by a changed environment you eventually find that you have learned about life as well as about colour.’ Albers

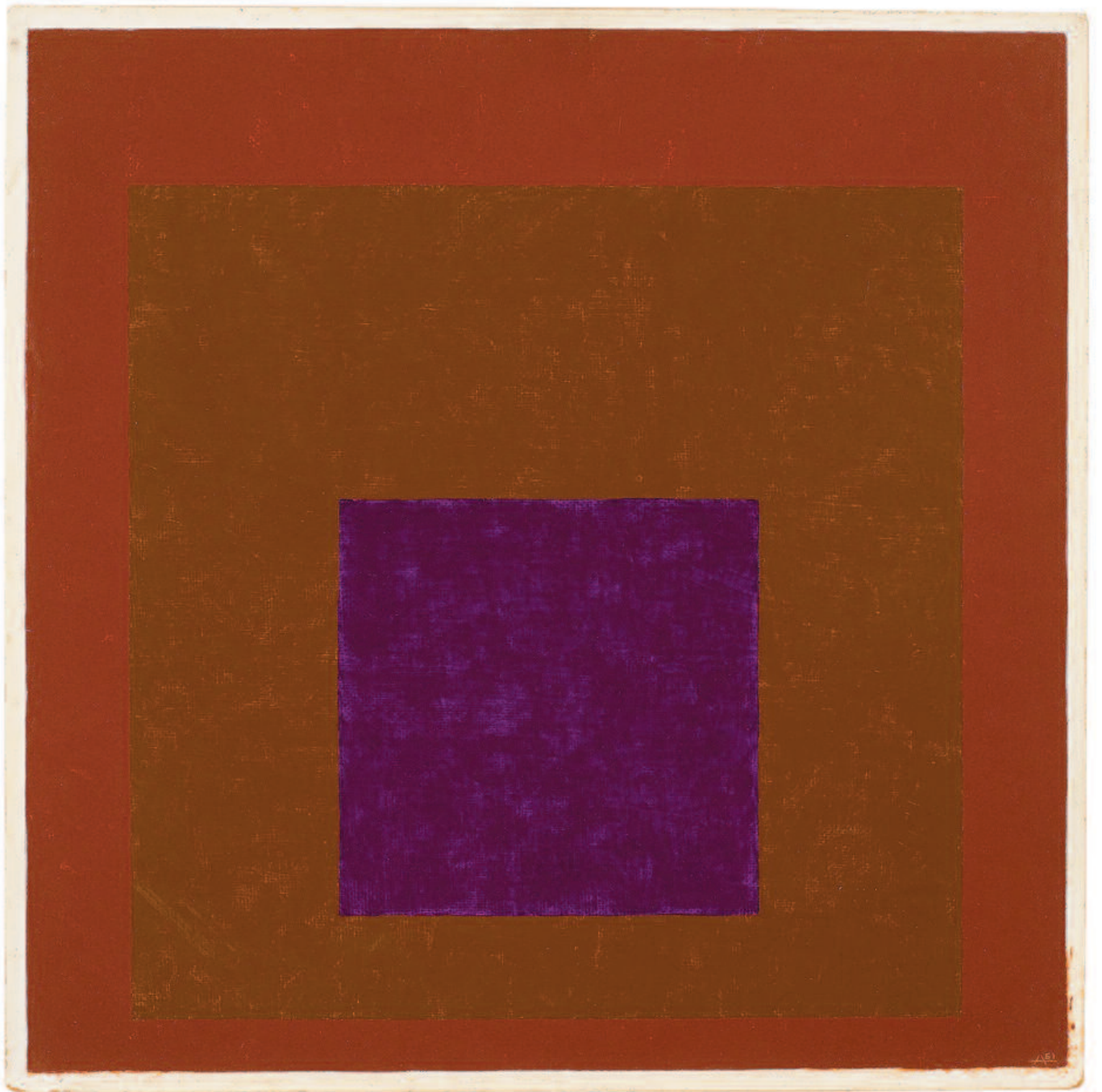
Fleeing Nazi Germany, Albers found the move to America remarkably easy, and in his art the transition marks a new departure. He returned to painting for the first time since his early student days, and began a process of colour experimentation that would culminate in his most well known series of paintings, *Homage to the Square*. Once in America, together with his wife Anni, Albers made many trips to Mexico, where his abstraction was influenced by the style and colourful exuberance of the architecture and art they saw there. Albers had also long been interested in perceptual ambiguity: the discrepancies between what visual information the retina receives and what the mind perceives to be there. In 1940 Albers began a series of paintings, entitled *Variants*, directly inspired by the simple geometry and colourful decoration of Mexican Adobe houses, which are constructed from a compacted mixture of mud and local materials such as straw. In the *Variant* series, Albers uses a limited palette of colours and careful compositional strategies, to illustrate the complexity of visual perception. Each *Variant* is composed of equal amounts of certain colours and yet depending on composition, colour combination, and colour interaction, the viewer perceives a certain colour to dominate.

Albers’ research experiments with perception are documented in his book *Interaction of Colour*, published in 1963, which summarises his findings of the previous decades and is an important contribution to colour theory. He writes that colour is the most relative medium in art.

He began his series of paintings *Homage to the Square* in 1962 at the age of 50. Until his death in 1976 he would continue with this series to produce more than 1,000 paintings using the same compositional device of three or four squares set inside each other, placed closer to the bottom edge of the picture frame. Paintings early in the series employ clashing and bright colour combinations, flying in the face of received wisdom about which colours ‘go together.’ As the series progresses, the colour combinations become more subtle. The paintings from this series are not simply intended as a research exercise, but intended as a rewarding sensual experience for the viewer. But, he continued to believe that art could play a social role, and that a heightened sense of perception such as that the colour combinations of the *Homage* series provoke, would result in an improved awareness of the world.

In America, Albers remained committed to geometric abstraction and to an exploration of processes that were removed from the expressive hand of the artist. He also continued to exploit modern, mass-produced materials.





Josef Albers

*Homage to the Square: Study for Nocturne* 1951

Oil on Masonite 53.3 x 53.3 cm

Tate. Gift of the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation 2005

© The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation/VG Bild-Kunst,  
Bonn and DACS London 2006

# Josef Albers *Homage to the Square: Study for Nocturne* 1951

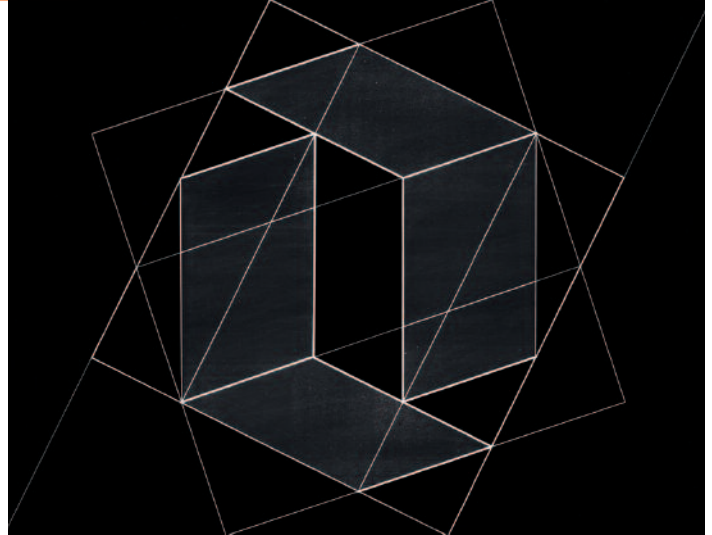
For the *Homage to the Square* series, Albers used masonite boards and readily available paint, straight from the tube.

## Links with other works in exhibition

Josef Albers  
*Structural Constellation:*  
*Transformation of a scheme no. 12*, 1950  
Machine engraved  
Vinylite mounted on  
board. 43.2 x 57.1 cm  
Tate. Gift of The Josef  
and Anni Albers  
Foundation 2005  
© The Josef and Anni  
Albers Foundation/VG  
Bild-Kunst, Bonn and  
DACS, London 2006

In Albers' photography it can be difficult to discern truth from fiction because of his careful use of positive and negative images and his playful use of reflections. As a printmaker, Albers was also interested in producing images that could be seen differently from different positions.

To explore his beliefs about the gap between what the eye sees and what the brain perceives, he often employed visual tricks. In a series of artworks begun in 1949 called *Structural Constellations*, which are machine engraved drawings on polished vinylite plates, Albers explores perspective. Illusions of depth and volume are shifting and uncertain, making the impression of space in these artworks ambiguous and complex. The shapes appear to float and hover in an undefined space.



## Links to other works

The visual language of geometric abstraction – the square, the grid, stripes and bold flat coloration, often on a large scale – was revisited by artists in the 1980s and given the term 'Neo-geo' by the art press. Neo-geo artists questioned the language of geometric abstraction and its expressive, inventive limitations. However, the New York painter, Peter Halley, saw geometry as a metaphor for certain social realities. In a series of paintings, he uses the square and rectangle to refer to confinement, making associations with jail cells, school desks, single rooms. A square representing a location is hemmed-in by abstract forms representing walls, paths, corridors – dead ends. They are similar to visual spaces in early computer games, painted in bright artificial colours, often with a rough texture similar to the stucco of walls and ceilings.

# Josef Albers *Homage to the Square: Study for Nocturne* 1951

## For discussion

- Nazi Germany – How much do your students know about Nazi Germany? Why do they think that an artist would flee to America to escape? What do they know about current refugee activity across the world? Discuss displacement, either on a global or personal level, and how they would react to a new environment? If they have personal experiences to share, have they ever used this as a creative inspiration?
- Colour – What do your students know about colour and colour theory in art? Where have they experienced rules for using colour? Do they have favourite colours? How do colours make them feel? Discuss Albers' belief that the sensation of looking at intense colour can change the way we perceive and interact with the world outside of paintings.
- Working in Series – Have your students ever made art works in a series? Do they know of any other artist who has done this? Are there any benefits to working in a series? Are there any disadvantages? How do you know when to end a series? If they were going to produce a series of over 1,000 images, how would they approach this – what medium, subject, scale etc.? Discuss Albers' choice of nested squares for his *Homage* series.

## Classroom activities

Albers is just one artist to have contributed to colour theory. Create a colour theory based on the responses and experiences of your class. Design a questionnaire to collect responses to colour samples. What questions would need to be asked to collect personal and cultural responses, visual responses, emotional responses?

Design a set of colour samples to show colour in isolation, colour in combination, colour and texture. Discuss the outcomes – are people's responses random?

Are there patterns of response? What does colour mean? Can colour express anything? Do our choices of colour mean anything?

Display your class findings as a conceptual artwork. Use Damien Hirst's ironic play on colour charts as an example. In the 1980s many painters were once more making expressive and individualistic artworks with an emphasis on the unique traces of the artist's hand – ambitions that Moholy and Albers had both turned away from. As a reaction against this 80s return to expression, Damien Hirst turned to industrial paints and the format of a colour chart for his ironic *spot paintings* decorated with uniformly-sized coloured dots on a white background. They refer to colour theory and to colour mass production but refuse to create meaning or expression with colour.



# László Moholy-Nagy *Laci and Lucia* 1925

'Everyone is equal before the machine. I can use it, so can you.' Moholy

Before joining the Bauhaus staff in 1923, Moholy had already embraced modern methods of production. For a series of artworks, referred to as his *Telephone Paintings*, he commissioned a sign factory to execute his geometrically abstract designs, composed using graph paper and standard colour charts. He also began to use combinations of letters and numbers to title his works. His appointment to the Bauhaus influenced a change in emphasis from the ideal of Medieval craftsmanship, to the modern designer in line with industrial methods of production. Both role models reflect the Bauhaus aims of social responsibility for the artist, but, for Moholy, technology definitively superseded hand craft – for the modern artist. He believed that bridging the divide between art and technology would not only develop the 'whole' man but contribute to a more whole and just society.

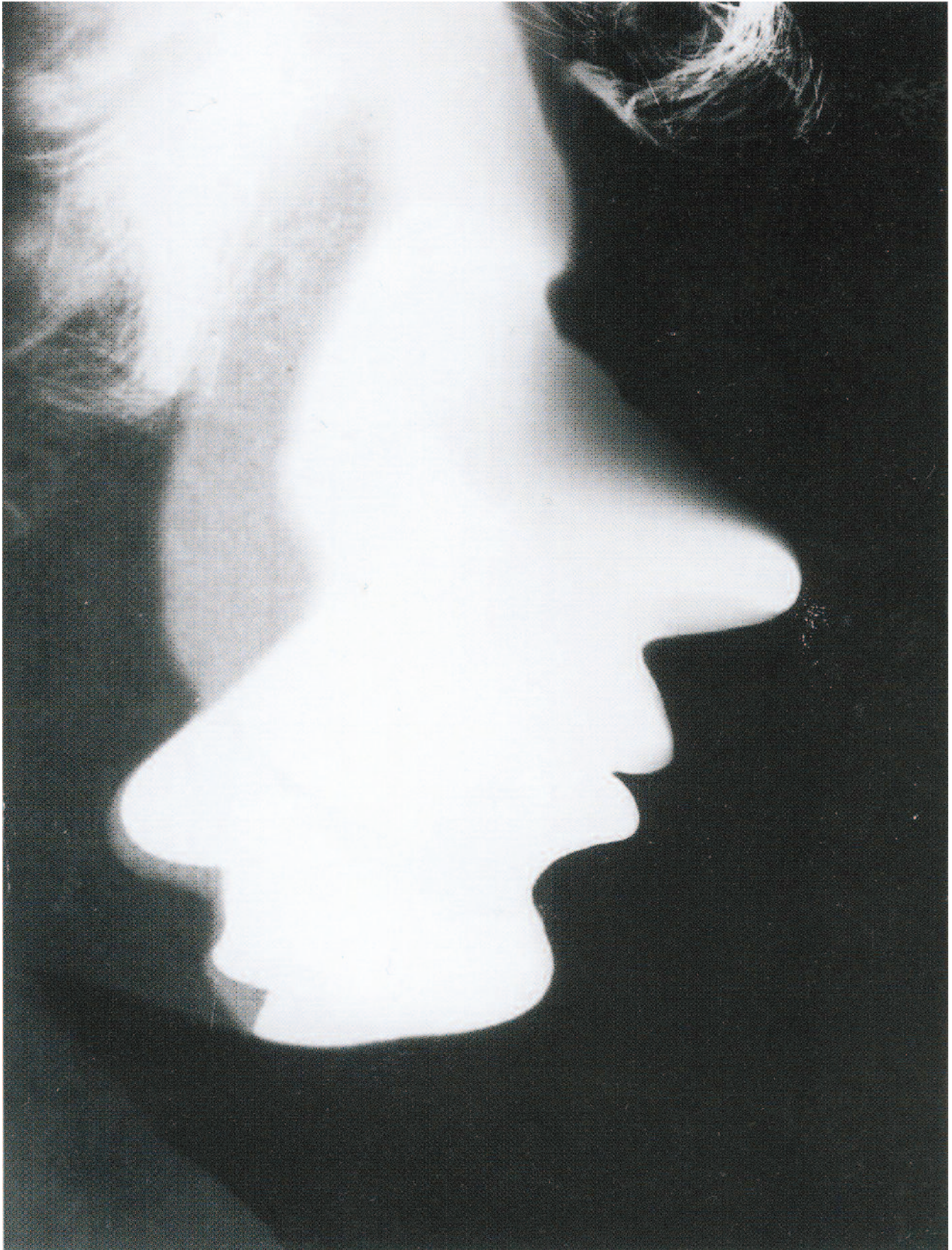
Moholy understood that good design required a thorough understanding of materials and he worked in a multitude of media over his career, using paint, print, photography, and new synthetic materials such as Bakelite and Perspex.

As a graphic designer, Moholy was keenly aware of the wealth of photographic images saturating modern society, believing that visual literacy would continue to become more important as Modernity progressed. Photography appeared to be perhaps the best means to communicate with a public about their experiences of a technologically advancing age and to extend an understanding of that environment. Not only could photography compensate for and extend the limitations of human retinal perception, but it appeals to a necessary appetite for visual experience, and has a privileged relationship with 'truthful' representation.

As a photographer, he worked in a direct documentary style, and he also employed a variety of camera angles and viewpoints to present familiar scenes in an unusual way, subverting the 'truth' value of an image. He used photo montage to create a revised, collaged version of reality. Abstract compositions resulting from unique camera angles, and the altered reality of photo montages not only make us think about reality, and vision, in a different way, but they illustrate the creative potential of photography.

A key issue Moholy addressed in his writing and in his artwork was whether photography could do no more than reproduce reality, or whether photography could be used to comment on reality, or create 'original' images. He literally used photography to 'paint with light' in his photograms, where objects have been placed above a sensitised paper which is then exposed to light, to produce enigmatic, delicate and suggestively abstract images. The face profiles in Moholy's photogram, *Laci and Lucia*, appear to





László Moholy-Nagy

*Laci and Lucia*, 1925

Photogram

15.8 x 12 cm

Collection Hattula Moholy-Nagy

© 2006 Hattula Moholy-Nagy/DACS



# László Moholy-Nagy *Laci and Lucia* 1925

rotate around a central axis and to float in space. These disembodied faces are more like elusive wisps of smoke than photographic portraits. However, the texture of the hair is crisp and gives a strong impression of reality, in contrast to the absence of detail across the rest of the image.

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## Links with other works in exhibition

When colour slide film became available through Kodak, in 1937, Moholy began to experiment with this medium, but he was not pleased with the printing techniques of the day. His slide images were never printed during his lifetime. However, his colour slides present a wide range of subjects, from abstract light compositions to familiar scenes shown in an unusual way.

*Moholy's Light Prop for an Electric Stage*, 1928–30, is a machine of reflective and transparent materials designed to rotate while illuminated. The resulting play of projected light and shade creates a similarly enigmatic show, which Moholy captured in a 30 minute film, presented as a 'moving painting.' This artwork also further illustrates his embrace of the machine age and of modern methods of mass production. He separated design from manufacture and commissioned the machine to be constructed for him.

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## Links to other works

Conceptual artists of the 1960s and 70s used black-and-white photography to document art events taking place outside the gallery. They also exploited photography's intimate relation to 'reality'. In ways identified by Moholy, photography was used to create images which drew the viewer's attention not only to issues of image manipulation, but also to broader cultural questions of truth and interpretation in the wealth of photographic and film material found in the world around us – advertising, magazines, TV. Towards the end of the 70s, Cindy Sherman began presenting black and white photographs which give the impression of being film stills, but were actually carefully staged self-portraits where her identity had been thinly concealed. On closer inspection, it is possible to see the switch used to operate the camera, which shows that she is not an actress, and that there is no film. She is presenting herself as someone else, using the language of photographic images that flood into our daily lives, and in part help define who we are.



# László Moholy-Nagy *Laci and Lucia* 1925

## For discussion

- Social responsibility – What do artists do? How do your students think that society benefits from having artists? Do they think that artists should try to contribute to a better world? What do your students know about design? How often are the things around us, and that we use everyday, designed and made by one person? Discuss Moholy's separation of design from manufacture, and his use of the designer as a role model for the artist. How do they feel about this?
- New materials – what materials or equipment would your students consider to be new? Do artists use these materials or processes? What materials or equipment do your students consider to be 'old' for artists to use? What are the newest materials or processes or equipment that your students have used? How do they think that new materials might develop in the future, and what use would they put them to, as artists? What is 'cutting edge' now?
- Photography – Where do your students encounter photographic images or information (including moving photography and digital photography?) Are they familiar with any artworks that are photographic? Do they consider any of the images (moving or still) that they have seen in their daily lives, to be artworks? What makes a photograph 'original'? Discuss how photography is connected to reality.

## Classroom activities

Moholy believed that the product designer, rather than the Medieval craftsman, should be the role model for the modern artist, and in-line with methods of mass production, he made artworks that had been designed with this in mind so that they could easily be manufactured by someone else. The abstract compositions for his *Telephone Paintings* were designed using colour charts, graph paper and a ruler, and because these materials were easily available to the manufacturer, he could be sure of getting predictable results. For a class project, work in pairs – one designer and one manufacturer – to make *Telephone Paintings*. Perhaps use email or text to send instructions and specifications. What information would the specifications have to include? Who 'owns' the artwork at the end of the project, the designer or the manufacturer?

Using photographic sources, such as the internet, magazines, newspapers, photographs etc. experiment with montage to 'play' with reality. Do your students associate photographs with 'the truth'? Using newspaper images, create a montaged response to a news story. Create a whole new news story, or re-interpret the news through montaged or manipulated images. Is a 'manipulated' photograph a 'lie'? Can a small change make a big difference to what a photograph presents? Use a computer to alter images, or to create abstract images from photographic sources.

# László Moholy-Nagy *Nuclear 1*, CH 1945

‘Art crystallises the emotions of an age; art is mirror and voice.’ Moholy

The shock of Moholy's World War 1 experiences had been influential in his decision to become an artist. His commitment to art was both intellectually engaged with a leftist political agenda, and informed by the artistic avant-garde. When Moholy arrived in Berlin, he made many contacts with the existing art scene. His style of abstraction was informed by the example of Constructivists like El Lissitzky. His social aesthetic was informed by Dadaists such as Kurt Schwitters and Hans Arp, in whose work it is possible to see mundane objects used humorously, and who demonstrate a commitment to breaking down barriers between artistic disciplines. What he found in Berlin was a Utopian belief in progress and the betterment of society. The Bauhaus represents a considerable contribution to defining the role of the artist within this radical project, and Moholy's embrace of modern technology, as well as his development of the role model of the designer, were incredibly influential at the Bauhaus.

When Moholy was invited to become director of a New Bauhaus in Chicago, his commitment to social improvement was to face a double challenge. One obvious beneficiary of good and affordable design is big business. On his arrival in America, he had moved closer to a corporate world of affluent commercialism that the original Bauhaus staff in Germany had not had to consider. Also, the utopian spirit of the avant-garde was replaced by the American dystopia Moholy found during World War 2 the nuclear explosions of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and later, the cynicism and mistrust of the Cold War.

Moholy was profoundly shaken by the destructive dawn of the nuclear age, compounded with his suffering of terminal leukaemia, from which he eventually died in 1946. Moholy's faith in the benefits of technological progress and his commitment to abstraction were both tested by the explosion over Hiroshima in 1945. Although he ultimately remained committed to his view of the social responsibility of the designer, he returned to a form of representational painting in response to these subjects, even giving his works titles rather than serialised captions of numbers and letters.

Several drawings he made while bed-bound in hospital represent the themes of the nuclear bomb, and of leukaemia, using a semi-representational style employing explosions of colour to depict the atomic bomb. *Nuclear 1* shows a fragile and transparent globe, as if it were made of glass, hovering over a plane of black and white grid design that has some perspectival recession into the distance. The colours are remarkably vibrant, when considering the theme represented and the state of Moholy's health at this time. There is a lightness and delicacy to the whole composition, which still reflects a mood of optimism in his attitude.



László Moholy-Nagy

*Nuclear I*, CH 1945

Oil on canvas

96.5 x 76.6 cm

The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Mr and Mrs Leigh B. Block 1947

© 2006 Hattula Moholy-Nagy/DACS



# László Moholy-Nagy *Nuclear 1*, CH 1945

## Links with other works in exhibition

László Moholy-Nagy  
*A19*, 1927  
Oil on canvas  
80 x 96 cm  
Collection Hattula  
Moholy-Nagy  
©2006 Hattula  
Moholy-Nagy/DACS

When *Nuclear 1* is compared to a much earlier composition of 1927, *A 19*, which was executed while Moholy was still at the Bauhaus in Germany, certain similarities are striking. These images share a transparent globe above a background with rectangular design. The geometric abstraction of *A 19*, where there is no



perspective and no illusionistic space, seems to have been given a third dimension in *Nuclear 1*. The colourful reflections on the globe of *Nuclear 1* tempt the viewer into trying to imagine what they are perhaps reflections of, although it is not possible to tell. This suggestive style of semi-abstraction shows that Moholy was still experimenting with artistic vocabulary until his death, and also that his belief in the accessibility of pure geometric abstraction had been opened up for reconsideration in the context of such complex and provocative subjects as nuclear devastation and his own mortality.

## Links to other works

Leon Golub became involved with artists' protests against the War in Vietnam in the late 60s. His *Assassins* series from 1972, and *Mercenaries* series from 1976, were large scale figurative paintings on unstretched fabric. Against plain monochrome backgrounds, larger than life figures confront each other, either in battle or conversation, or simply by juxtaposition. Golub's compositions often devote a considerable percentage of the canvas space to an empty divide between his figures, using empty space as a metaphor for the ideological, economic and political divisions of war into opposing 'sides.' His committed, political 'realism' was actually out of step with the expectations of the art world during the 70s and it wasn't until the 1980s that figurative painting could begin to reassert itself. The avant-garde had presented serious painting as abstract, rejecting 'expressive' representation, and, later, Conceptual artists had rejected painting altogether. Golub considered his figurative 'realism' combined with symbolically abstract backgrounds, as the appropriate means to comment on his political situation.

## For discussion

- Inspiration – Have your students ever been influenced or inspired by any artwork they have seen? Do they have a favourite artist? How often do they think that artists look at other artists' work for ideas? What kind of ideas do you think artists borrow – images, style, technical know-how? Is this cheating? Where else do artists get their inspiration and ideas from?
- War – What do your students know about World War 2? What do they know about the nuclear explosions of World War 2? Moholy decided to become an artist in response to his experiences of World War 1. Discuss his decision – do your students think his decision makes sense? What world issues would your students consider responding to through art? Do they have any examples to share?
- Abstraction – Moholy had been committed to abstraction for most of his career as an artist, but for *Nuclear 1*, he introduced a semi-realism. Can your students see anything recognisable in this picture? How do they think it relates to the theme? How would they represent the theme, or a theme of their own? Have your students ever made abstract artworks? Where they geometric? Did they represent or symbolise anything? Discuss abstract art as a form of representation – can an abstract artwork represent anything? Can an abstract artwork change the way we feel?

## Classroom activities

Discuss with your class what current events or issues they are aware of that are important. Use this as a theme.

Using books, gallery visits, internet etc. research other artists working in response to this theme. Is it possible to learn more about the event/issue from the artworks or artists that your class has discovered? Make artwork in response to the research – borrow style, imagery, methods or techniques.

Divide your class into four smaller groups, to decide upon a limited visual vocabulary for an abstract response to the theme. One group suggests a colour palette in response to the theme, one group the shapes/marks to be used, another group suggests appropriate materials to be used – for example types of paper, or paint only - and finally one group suggests the equipment available. As a class, reach a compromise between the limitations imposed by all groups, with the theme in mind. Then, students work individually within these constraints. After the abstract artworks have been completed, discuss the results and what it was like working within an abstract vocabulary. Further discuss the choices - of colour, shape, materials and equipment – to see whether, for example, the shapes or marks established were capable of communicating a message about the theme.