

Institution: University College London		
Unit of Assessment: UoA32 - Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory		
Title of case study: Transforming Public Understanding of Anni Albers and Changing Perceptions of the Significance of Weaving and Textiles in the Modern Art Museum		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2004-2018		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Briony Fer	Professor of Art History	1990-present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2018-2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words) <p>In 2018 Fer co-curated a major retrospective exhibition of Bauhaus weaver Anni Albers, introducing the work of an overlooked woman artist who used textiles as her medium to an exhibition-going audience [text redacted]. It marked a watershed as the first exhibition at Tate Modern (or indeed in any of the world's leading modern art museums) to focus exclusively on a textile artist, influencing the strategic direction of the museum and expanding the scope of its collection. By breaking down traditional divisions between art, craft and design, the exhibition transformed the cultural dialogue on the role of woven textiles in modern and contemporary art and life for exhibition visitors, fashion and textiles practitioners and professionals.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words) <p>Briony Fer's research reconfigures the geographies and narratives of modernism and ranges from early 20th-century abstraction through to contemporary art. Fer has focused on the key role played by a number of important women artists, such as Eva Hesse and Lygia Clark, in histories of abstraction in Europe and the Americas, with a special focus on their approach to material processes [R1, R2, R3]. Her work on Anni Albers, who began as a Bauhaus weaver and whose career continued for many decades after emigrating to the USA in the 1930s, expands on many consistent themes in her research; in particular her preoccupation with the way Anni Albers – whose career has long been overshadowed by that of her husband Josef Albers – negotiated the language of abstraction through textiles. Fer's research on Albers has been influential in three significant areas, as detailed below:</p> <p>The key role weaving played in the history of modern art: Fer has argued that weaving, though an ancient craft, is also distinctively modern, thereby offering a fresh account of the history of modernism and showing how a woman weaver was at the forefront of the modern project [R4]. Approaching the loom as a technological apparatus, Fer has insisted on Albers as a preeminent modernist, for whom the grid was embedded in her technique. The research she has published on the contested legacies of utopian avant-gardes has dealt frequently with the survival and adaptability of geometric abstraction in different historical circumstances [R5]. She has developed these ideas in relation to Anni Albers, whom she situates as an artist who used weaving as other artists used painting: to articulate a set of beliefs about the world they lived in.</p> <p>Expanding geographies, particularly in relation to Central and Latin America: Fer has shown how Albers plotted an alternative history that expanded the conventional geographic and time limits of art and design histories, rather than simply plundering the art of other cultures as a form of primitivist appropriation [R4]. By placing a textile imaginary at the centre of what she calls Albers's 'global visual atlas', Fer offers a new interpretation of modernism and its global histories, reaching back to ancient times as well as forward to contemporary practices. She has also explored these expanded geographies in her work on Mexican artist Gabriel Orozco, especially his 'collages' made of Japanese textiles [R6].</p> <p>Weaving, textiles and architecture: Fer has advocated for rethinking the archive and bringing to the fore hitherto neglected areas of Albers' work as a weaver and textile designer, especially her collaborations with key modernist architects, like Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, Philip Johnson and Riccardo Legorretta. Albers' insistence on the textile as the original 'wall' and the</p>		

earliest form of human shelter was placed in the context of modernist architectural theory and practice [R4]. Fer has also uncovered significant new materials on the Rockefeller Guest House, for which Albers designed the textiles, in the Phillip Johnson Papers (at the Getty Research Institute Special Collection).

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- R1.** *The Infinite Line*, Yale University Press, 2004. Monograph was reviewed positively in the *Art Bulletin*, *Art History*, the *Oxford Art Journal*, *Building Design* and other peer-reviewed journals.
- R2.** 'Lygia Clark and the Problem of Art' in *Lygia Clark The Abandonment of Art 1948-88*, Museum of Modern Art New York 2014.
- R3.** *Eva Hesse Studiowork*, Yale University Press 2009. Submitted to REF2014. Shortlisted for the 2010 Banister Fletcher Award for the best book on art and architecture and praised by jury for the quality of scholarship and ambition of the publication.
- R4.** Original research conducted for the exhibition catalogue co-edited by Ann Coxon, Briony Fer, and Maria Müller-Schareck: *Anni Albers*, Tate Publishing and Koenig Books, 2018. Main essay by Briony Fer, 'Close to the Stuff the World is Made Of', 6000-7000 words, plus the shorter essay on Anni Albers' teaching at Black Mountain College 'Exercises', published in both English and German editions. Fer's main essay has been specifically mentioned in numerous journal reviews including *Art History*, *Art Forum*, *Apollo* and *The Journal of Modern Craft*. Submitted to REF 2021.
- R5.** 'Abstraction at War with Itself' in *Adventures of the Black Square: Abstract Art and Society 1915–2015*, Whitechapel Art Gallery, 2015, catalogue essay.
- R6.** *Gabriel Orozco: Rotating Objects* Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, 2016.

All outputs available on request to UCL.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Anni Albers has been doubly marginalized, first as a woman artist conventionally seen as subordinate to her more famous husband, the Bauhaus artist Josef Albers, and second because her medium was weaving and therefore traditionally seen as craft, not art. From 9 June to 9 September 2018, K20 gallery in Dusseldorf showed the exhibition 'Anni Albers'. It then moved to Tate Modern, London, where it ran from 11 October 2018 to 27 January 2019. Both were co-curated by Fer together with Ann Coxon (Tate) and Maria Müller-Schareck (K20) and sought to recognize Albers' contribution to modern art and design. Through the leading role she played in creating the successful exhibitions at K20 and the Tate Modern, Fer has transformed knowledge and understanding about Albers and changed perceptions about the place of weaving, and textiles more broadly, within the history of modern art, across curatorial, arts and public spheres. Her contribution has been recognized by the Executive Director of the Albers Foundation, who writes 'Without Briony Fer, the exhibition of Anni Albers at Tate Modern would not have occurred, and without the exhibition at Tate Modern, Anni's reputation would not have had the overdue and splendid boost it now enjoys' (A).

Fer was initially invited by the Director of Tate Modern to co-curate their Anni Albers exhibition on the strength of her innovative research re-thinking the geographies and narratives of modernism from the development of geometric abstraction to contemporary art [R1, R6]. Fer was involved in all aspects of the curatorial process for both venues, and especially for the conceptualization of the exhibition and catalogue and including the checklist of exhibits; and for Tate the installation process, the press campaign and the public programme. According to Maria Müller-Schareck, Curator at K20, 'Fer's engagement with the archives [...] directly helped to shape the exhibition, including the way we thought about and exhibited Anni Albers' source materials and the items from her collection' (B). Both Müller-Schareck and the Director of Tate Modern emphasise that Fer's 'understanding of Albers' work in the context of 20th-century art was essential to the way we envisaged the exhibition in its final form' (B). The atlas of world weaving conceived of by Fer, and at the heart of the exhibition, included examples of Albers' own collection of textiles from Latin America, as well as woven items from Africa and Japan. The display resisted a problematic primitivist appropriation of the art of other cultures, instead

exploring the rich archive of Albers' book *On Weaving* to trace the complexities of 'a modern aesthetic in relation to both an ancient and a modern global culture' [R4]. As the Director of Tate Modern puts it, 'Fer's research contributed to the conceptualization and execution of this critically-acclaimed exhibition [...] Her idea of incorporating a 'global visual atlas' of Anni Albers' source materials [...] is evidence of the depth of scholarship that informed the show, but was – equally – an attractive and absorbing central focus' to the exhibition (C). For the Director of Tate Modern, Fer's 'academic reputation significantly enhanced the authority of the curatorial team.' Overall, [text redacted] visited the exhibition (45,000 at K20 Dusseldorf, [text redacted], reflecting the massive increase in visibility for the artist the exhibition achieved and success in attracting a wide audience. Tate's Annual Report 2018/2019 called it 'one of the biggest successes of the year' (D).

Realising the strategic aims of the museum

The Albers exhibition was the successful outcome of the working relationship between Fer and the two partnering institutions K20 Dusseldorf and Tate Modern, providing 'proof of the importance of bringing together academic and curatorial knowledge and experience', attests Müller-Schareck (B). The exhibition supported the stated aim of both institutions to promote the work of women artists. As the Director of Tate Modern put it, 'the exhibition was conceived as part of Tate's Strategy to [...] reconsider artists [...] who have been marginalized in conventional accounts' (C). The exhibition redressed an omission in their programming; in their previous exhibitions on Bauhaus history, 'Anni Albers' work had notably been absent from this narrative' (C). The exhibition was pivotal to Tate's growing commitment and 'strategic imperative' (following the acquisition of a body of work by the textile artist Magdalena Abakanowicz) to bring textiles and other craft-oriented techniques 'back into consideration within a more broadly defined fine art context' (C). The show's success boosted the strategy on new acquisitions, for example, a work by a British weaver, Peter Collingwood (long recognised within the craft tradition) has been acquired for the Collection for the first time, and a large-scale work was gifted to Tate by the major textile artist Sheila Hicks 'in light of [Tate's] commitment to stage the Anni Albers exhibition', attests Co-curator Ann Coxon in (E). The exhibition set a new benchmark for Tate's commitment to the inclusion of modern textile-based art in a global context, with Tate Accounts listing Anni Albers as a high-profile exhibition that represented one of its key achievements of 2018-19 (p.6 of D). The exhibition has thus played an important role in a longer process of breaking down entrenched divisions between art and craft, as noted by journalist Corrine Julius in *Selvedge Magazine* who complained at the lack of textile work owned by the museum and commented 'This show shifts that culture, hopefully permanently' (F).

Engaging fashion and textile interest groups and crossing traditional boundaries

While traditionally exhibitions of textiles have been held in museums dedicated to the applied and decorative arts like the V&A, the fact that the show was held in major international museums of modern art like K20 and Tate shifted the emphasis to Albers as an artist comparable with other major modern artists of the 20th century. In a deliberate attempt to cross boundaries between weaving, art history and fashion, the exhibition successfully targeted designers and makers. In her review in the *Journal of Modern Craft*, textile artist Alice Kettle praised the way the show had demonstrated the 'contemporary relevance of [Anni Albers'] work to current material discourse' (F). The weaver and textile artist Ismini Samanidou, who has worked closely with the legacy of Albers' work, has stressed the exhibition's role in changing perceptions of weaving as an art medium: 'For the many textile artists and weavers who saw the show it also brought into the public realm many works that had never been seen before and inspired many new possibilities for contemporary practitioners working with the medium. The exhibition has had a huge impact on the way textiles and weaving in particular is understood and can be appreciated as an art medium [...]. As an international educator I have seen the positive impact the show has had to the many art, design and architecture students who visited the show and how it has helped them understand the potential and importance of weaving and textiles today' (G). The reception in the fashion world was equally positive, leading to widespread media coverage. In two Instagram posts which received 2258 likes, celebrated Nigerian-born British fashion designer Duro Olowu, who had included two works by Albers in the show he curated at the Camden Arts Centre (*Making and Unmaking* 2016), called the exhibition a 'long overdue

retrospective' which was 'powerful and beautiful' and praised Fer's 'exceptional curation' (H). Fer led a curator's tour with London-based fashion designer Roksanda and team, including the Fashion Director of *Vogue*, chief content Officer of MatchesFashion and Womenswear Director of Selfridges (15 cultural influencers in total). Albers was subsequently the cover image for high profile fashion magazines including *Harper's Bazaar* (November 2018) and was a major feature story in *Vogue* (October 2018). In November 2018, *Wallpaper* published a feature in which fashion brands Roksanda, Hermès and Paul Smith explained the influence of Albers on their output. *Harper's Bazaar* ran a special 'Collectors Edition' on the relationship of art and fashion off the back of the show and invited fashion writers to explore cross-overs, with a special focus on Albers (F). Designer Paul Smith produced a small capsule of Albers-inspired clothing in collaboration with the Albers Foundation timed to coincide with the exhibition. In a sold-out event at Tate on 17 November 2018, Fer introduced Smith, who talked about Albers and the exhibition in conversation with the design journalist Alice Rawsthorne (H).

Introducing Anni Albers as a major modern artist to a large public and transforming the cultural dialogue around the role of weaving and textiles.

The exhibition enabled Tate to reach new audiences. The grassroots campaign targeted weaving groups (on Instagram and inviting craft and textiles communities to attend the press morning), with positive feedback from weavers: [text redacted] Twitter users frequently commented that the exhibition had 'inspired' them and posted photographs of the resulting creative outputs: 'Knotted weaving inspired by [...] #AnniAlbers #Tate' (H). Over 20 events were organised to target many different publics as well as the usual gallery-going public, ranging from 'Conductive Coding' (20 January 2019) where 28 attendees participated in an audio description tour of the Albers exhibition then wove interactive swatches using electro-conductive thread, to a Uniqlo Tate Late (30 December 2018) that specifically targeted young audiences new to the museum. [Text redacted]. Fer led 6 public events (e.g. at K20 5 September 2018, B) as well organizing 2 international conferences (at Tate Modern 1 December 2018, 231 attendees and at UCL 26-7 January 2019, 350 attendees) which brought together artists, designers and makers with art historians and curators to transform cultural debate. Fer appeared in the BBC 4 programme 'Anni Albers: A Life in Thread' filmed in the exhibition at Tate Modern (broadcast 21 August 2019, [text redacted] and the Radio 3 programme 'Haus: Work Women of the Bauhaus' (broadcast 28 April 2019) (H).

[Text Redacted]. This reach demonstrates that the exhibition brought Albers to a large public audience. As the Director of Tate Modern states, the show had 'an important place in building and shaping the public's understanding of a crucial but overlooked artist and a wonderfully rich but underappreciated history of textiles' (C). Fer's research was 'essential' to the conceptualization of the exhibition, which transformed understanding of the importance of weaving and the work of women weavers like Albers for the modernist project, understood in an expanded global context, attests Müller-Schareck (B). As the first full-scale retrospective of the artist in a major international museum, the show and associated public programme vastly expanded public understanding of weaving as an art, promoting the artist's enduring achievement and bringing benefit, as the Executive Director of the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation explained, 'to art-lovers all over the world' (A).

Fer's arguments for Albers reached an audience beyond exhibition visitors through extensive media coverage on the artist and the ongoing significance of her weaving practice. Her article for *Tate Etc.* issue 44: Autumn 2018 drew on [R4] (circulation 151,000). Fer led the press trip to K20 Dusseldorf in advance of the Tate show. The press coverage included major features, previews and reviews in 106 press outlets, from all major newspapers, fashion and life style magazines and specialist design and craft magazines (F). In *Art Forum* (October 2018), Lynne Cooke (Senior Curator at the National Gallery Washington) reviewed the show at K20, praising how the exhibition 'sidestepped ... stale polemics in favour of a radical re-reading of Albers's art and contribution'. Picking up on the 'world atlas' of weaving, she cited Fer's catalogue essay [R4] to show that Albers' understanding of the relationship of the modern to the ancient past 'set her at a distance ... from her counterparts in Europe, whose reductive primitivizing amounted to primitivist appropriation' (F). Several critics and curators listed it as

one of the best exhibitions of 2018 (critic Adrian Searle of the *Guardian* placed it no. 2 in top ten of shows of 2018) (F).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- A. Testimonial: Executive Director, Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, USA.
- B. Testimonial: Maria Müller-Schareck K20 Dusseldorf, Germany.
- C. Testimonial, Director of Tate Modern.
- D. Tate Annual Report 2018-19 and Tate Accounts 2018-19
- E. Testimonial, Ann Coxon, Senior Curator Tate Modern and Co-curator of the exhibition.
- F. Press Dossier
- G. Testimonial, Ismini Samanidou, Weaver and Textile Artist, Eastbourne and Athens
- H. Media links and documentation
- I. [Text redacted]