OFF THE WALL: THE DRAWINGS OF LOTHAR GÖTZ

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Lothar Götz calls his East London studio ‘the mouse-hole’, and with reason. A partitioned space at the back of a warehouse, it is, like Götz himself, small and neat. On a desk are 200 or so colour pencils, laid out in what is clearly a system or order, although of what kind is not instantly clear. It is, Götz says, constantly changing: on the day I see it, some colour sequences (if they are sequences) are 20 or more pencils long, others just a handful. Most seem random. Perhaps the pencils’ secret lies in their lengths: they have been laid out so that their blunt ends describe a straight line, their points a continuous wave. Form or colour? Form *and* colour? The relationship between the two is central to Götz’s work.

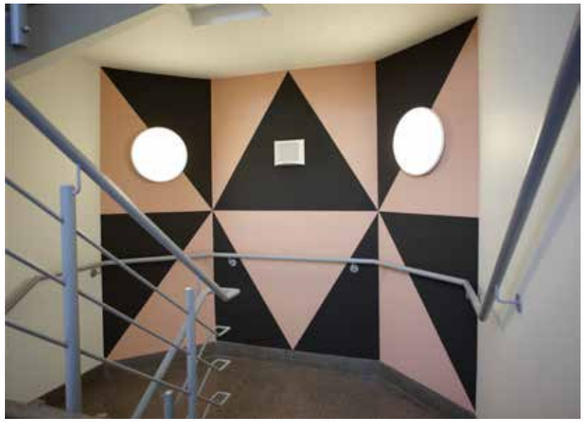
This work, for over a decade now, has involved the painting of walls; sometimes of very large walls, sometimes all the walls of very large spaces. For obvious reasons, the mouse-hole contains none of these works, nor much suggestion of them. Götz does not work from models or maquettes. ‘I start with the space itself’, he says. ‘I don’t have a pre-existing formula that I bring to a room. It’s a conversation – what I think, plus what the room tells me. Or, as I like to say, what the room wants.’ This conversation takes place in the space itself, not in Götz’s studio. ‘It would be impossible to come to a room without an idea, but I work hard to get rid of it beforehand’, he says. ‘Often, curators say, “Can we send you an image of the space?” And I say, “No. I have to empty my mind of any other ideas”… I sit there in the space, gazing around and drinking endless cups of tea. Often, there’s a moment of despair when I think nothing’s coming. Then it does, even if it’s later, in the bath or on the flight home. It comes.’

This raises the question of precisely what the East London studio is for, and how what Götz does in it relates to what he does out in the world. Before considering this, it would be as well to examine what his architectural works are, and what they are not.

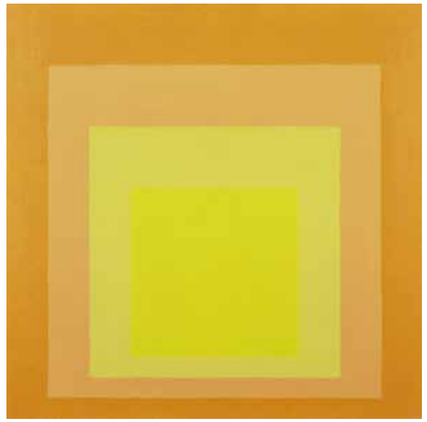
It is always tempting, in trying to place an artist, to reach out to history. In this case, a specific moment suggests itself: namely, the Bauhaus and, in particular, the work of Josef Albers. Götz’s wall paintings are abstract – which is to say no more than that they do not obviously set out to represent anything – and they are geometric. To take one work at random – *Round Trip* (2008; p.8), an installation of 51 walls painted in four stairwells of the Ministry of Justice Building in Petty France, London – his geometric abstraction takes the form of an interplay of isosceles and right-angled triangles. Götz repeats the same pattern again and again over 14 floors worth of landings: an isosceles triangle in the centre of the composition, with three lesser right-angled triangles to each side. His manipulation of colour – colour intensities and colour values – in these 14 triangles makes each wall seem different from the others, their impact is in turn static, vibrant, cool, hot and so on.

The idea that, in context, there is a perfect colour for every form, that forms *generate* perfect colours, goes back in German aesthetic thought beyond the Bauhaus to Goethe. It was still very much a live issue in the Weimar and Dessau of the 1920s, though, and remained of central concern to the work of Albers for the following half century, both in his classic study *Interaction of Color* (1963), and in the great sequence of paintings of his last years, the Homage to the Square (1950–76). Albers, too, made abstract geometric wall installations for in-between spaces where the public passed: his great, lost screen, *Manhattan* (1963; p.9), set above a bank of escalators in Walter Gropius’s Pan Am Building in New York, springs most relevantly to mind.

Götz, born in 1963, recalls being taught by a generation of German artists for whom abstraction remained a given, the heroic mode, the only form of painting untainted by recent history. Albers and his wife Anni, both abstractionists, left Germany for America when the Bauhaus was shut down in 1933 under Nazi pressure. In 2007, in a series called Houses for the Bauhaus Masters, Götz made a pair of drawings with the title, *Haus für Anni und Josef Albers* (p.10); he



Round Trip, 2008, mineral paint on wall, four staircases: 3 × 12 floors and 1 × 13 floors, dimensions variable, installation view, The Ministry of Justice, London



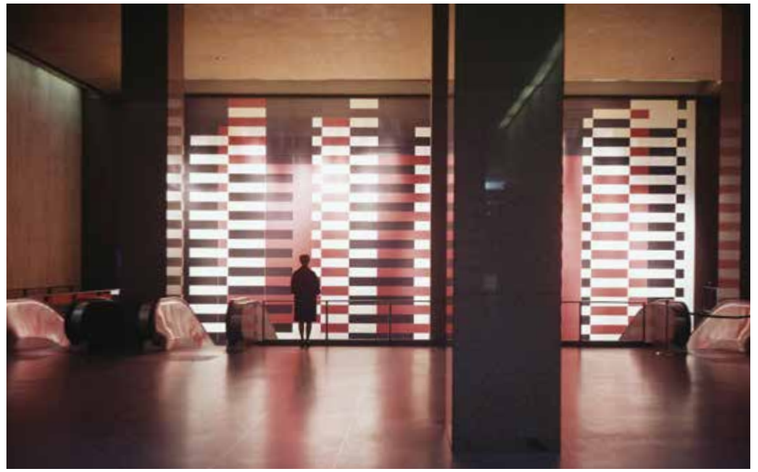
Josef Albers, *Homage to the Square: Joy*, 1964, oil on board, 76 × 76 cm, 29 7⁄8 × 29 7⁄8 in

followed this up, a year later, with a mural in Zürich called *Fasching bei Albers* (Carnival, Albers-style; p.11). Add to this the fact that Götz, like Josef Albers, was born a German Catholic, and comparisons seem compelling. So it comes as something of a surprise to hear him say, 'I read the statements of the artists at the Bauhaus and I think: How *dare* you?'

Götz qualifies this. 'It was all new then – statements like that needed to be said. But we live in different times now, where many more things are possible.' Abstraction, in the 1930s, may have been heroic, but it was also moral, prescriptive and didactic. Piet Mondrian's programme for painting his studio in Paris started from the certainty that walls, and the lives lived within them, would be inherently better if they were made to conform to the ideals of Neo-Plasticism. The room could be any room; the point was to bend it to the Neo-Plastic will. This is the polar opposite of Götz's humanistic approach to space, in which the room itself is the generator of whatever comes after. Before studying at the Royal College of Art in the mid-1990s, he had been taught at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf by the painter Gerhard Merz. Merz, in the 1980s, pioneered a style of work that synthesised painting and architecture and which he called 'Archipittura'. 'But his view was always that you had to find exactly the right space', Götz says, 'and that is not what I'm about at all'.

His insistence that the room comes first means that Götz's architectural work is necessarily intuitive, ordered in the way that the colour pencils on his desk are ordered. Bar the fact that the forms of that work have so far tended to be abstract and geometric, most things are up for grabs. The focal point of Götz's wall installations is Götz himself. But it is, nonetheless, a dialogue: what a space says to him. And this suggests the role of the mouse-hole in his art. A small, neutral space, with nothing particular to say for itself and no demands of its own, it allows him the freedom to be himself. Götz points at a drawing on his studio wall, a cross-hatched image in colour pencil on paper that looks like loose-knit tweed. 'The wall works start from the architecture, the colour grows from the space', he says. 'You can't say a room is abstract – it's real and it's there. But this – I was probably feeling silver that day. Then purple and green just grew from it.'

There's a world of difference between a wall work and a work on a wall. Götz points out that he has done 'very few classic wall paintings', which is to say, paintings that use a wall simply as a support rather than as a generator of form and colour. In a curious inversion, his drawings are more like that classic painting type. They mark, perhaps, the latest attempt to answer a question that Götz has been asking himself since he signed on as an MA student at the Royal College of Art in 1996. He talks about his early attempts to paint on canvas, and how they failed. (This, too, he shares with Josef Albers, who painted on fibreboard because canvas 'ran away from the brush'.) 'I didn't like canvas, it's too soft', Götz says. 'I tried and tried again – I mean, canvas painting *is* art, it's what painting is. I kept asking myself, am I a painter or am I not? After the RCA, I said: "I'm not a painter". Then a few years later, I said: "I am a painter".'



Josef Albers, *Manhattan*, 1963, formica panels, 810 × 1680 cm, 318 7⁄8 × 661 3⁄8 in, installation view, Pan Am Building, New York, c.1963

He was, though, a specific kind of painter, one whose art had a semi-performative quality. 'With wall works, you always have to deal with other people', Götz says. 'You work in public. People are always watching you.' They also have set ideas about what you're doing. 'The moment you paint on walls, people think you're decorating', Götz says. 'They say, "Can you do my bedroom as well?" And I have to say, "It's really nothing to do with that".'

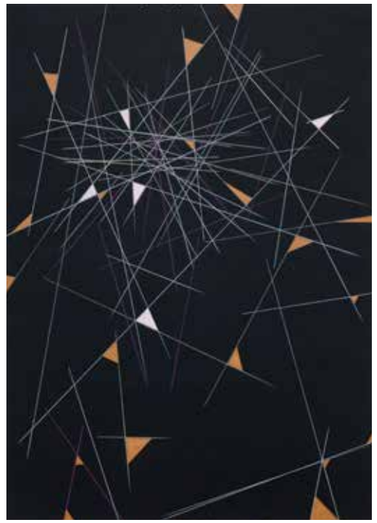
This is not to suggest a Bauhaus aloofness on his part. Where Götz differs from Albers and his kind is in his willingness to embrace the D-word – decoration – in at least some of its inflected variants. 'There's a different way of using the term', he says. '"Decoration" has its roots in a classic sense of decorum, of decor – a thing that has a meaning. It's not shallow or meaningless. I enjoy just looking at a red square or a black square. In the same way, I love decorous rooms, decorous buildings.' Nonetheless, working in architectural spaces was only answering some of the questions Götz was asking himself about his own art, and about what kind of artist he was. Others would be addressed in the small, private space of his studio. 'Around 2000, I started to do A4 drawings as a separate practice', he says. 'Now perhaps 40 per cent of my work is these drawings, and 60 per cent wall works.'

This, naturally, begs the question of the relationship between the two. The temptation is to see the separate parts of Götz's practice as either antithetical to each other or as complementary; at any rate, as different and distinct. 'With the wall works, I think: what would happen if we didn't use our eyes?' Götz says. 'You can *feel* the space. Colour is body-related.' With the drawings, the starting point seems much less the body and much more the eye, the hand and the right-hand side of the brain: 'I have an abstract head – things I see become immediately non-figurative', Götz remarks. The distinction from his wall-based work is important. 'To me, this feels very much like painting with a pencil', he says, pointing to one of the handful of drawings on his studio wall. 'It's what I think abstract painting is: not thinking.'

So what is this as-yet-unnamed cross-hatched image on his studio wall? It is one of a body of similar works, begun in 2012, various of which were included in a show of Götz's drawings at the Contemporary Art Society (CAS) in London from July to October 2014. Some of the group are in colour pencil on paper, others in colour pencil on gouache-prepared board. Most are untitled, although not all: recent examples, also shown in 2014 at the Petra Rinck Galerie, Düsseldorf, were the Crossed Lines series and *Mirror-Silver* (2014; p.39). Still other drawings at the gallery were on 180 × 120 centimetre aluminium panels. Like the pencils on Götz's studio desk, they have a sense of being at once randomly arranged and strictly ordered. The artist suggests that making the cross-hatched works is 'a bit like weaving a carpet'.

The comparison is interesting. Götz's question, 'Am I a painter?', is one that has been asked by many other artists over the past 50 years. Generally speaking, it forms part of a broader, postmodernist anxiety about what it means to use paint, how paint is to be used. Albers and Mondrian were taught painting as a skill,

Haus für Anni und Josef Albers, from the series Houses for Bauhaus Masters, 2007, coloured pencil on paper, 84.1 × 59.4 cm, 33 ⅛ × 23 ⅜ in



Construction for Alexander Rodenchko (4), 2010, acrylic and coloured pencil on paper, 77 × 55 cm, 30 ¼ × 21 ⅝ in

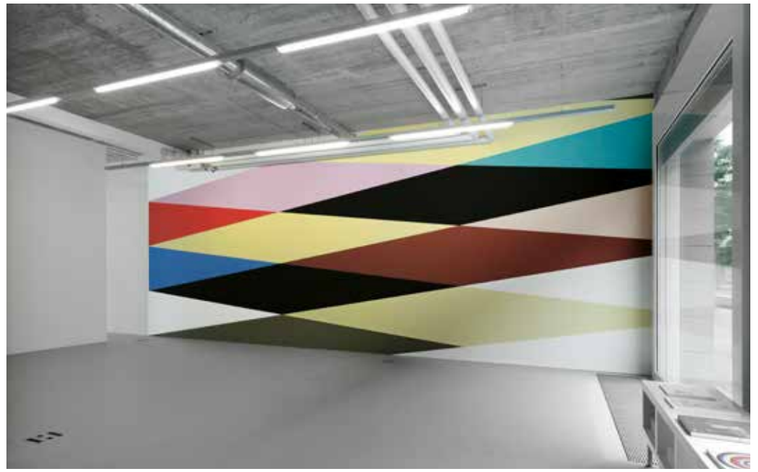
as well as a language for debating questions of aesthetic philosophy. The rudiments of that skill, from the priming of canvases to the laws of perspective, have largely disappeared from mainstream art-school curriculums: philosophy is the thing. This change has thrown up a number of subsequent questions: what does it mean to paint? How to paint? Why paint at all? That Götz is addressing them with pencil and paper, by drawing rather than simply by painting, is intriguing.

Let us take the Crossed Lines series. Like the similar paper work on the wall of Götz's London studio, they are drawings that look woven; Götz compares the process of their making to weaving. At times, the warp is dominant, at others the weft; lines may be tightly or loosely packed, thicker or thinner, betraying more or less pressure of the hand. Some lines are short, some run across the entire image; they may begin at the edge of the paper or, sporadically, wherever Götz chooses to start them; they are variously orthogonal or diagonal. In terms of history, Crossed Lines may remind you of the gridding of an Agnes Martin or – a modernist world away – of the diagonal/orthogonal interplay of Alexander Rodchenko, one of Götz's heroes in art. (Two of the drawings in the Contemporary Art Society show were called *Construction for Alexander Rodchenko (4)* and *(5)* (2010).) The tendency of the grid in the Crossed Lines series to rearrange itself as the viewer changes position – overlapped squares and rectangles appear and disappear with each movement of the head – might even call to mind Op art.

To make things yet more complex, many of Götz's drawings – many of the drawings in his CAS show – are named after artists with whom he has some kind of connection, mostly painters. There are well-known names (Josef Albers, Alexander Rodchenko, Ben Nicholson); names of artists who may have taught Götz, or at institutions he attended (Paul Huxley); those whose work interests him, or who share broadly similar aims (Karl-Heinz Adler, Daniel Robert Hunziker); or are simply friends or coevals (Neil Gall). In this context, the idiomatic meaning of the phrase 'crossed lines' seems to take on new weight: there are plenty of things going on in Götz's drawings, many of them apparently contradictory. The Crossed Lines series seems insistently different from the bars-and-circles geometry of *Retreats (Neil Gall)* (2012), which seems pointedly unlike the silver-pencil *House for Karl-Heinz Adler* (2012; p.32). And yet all are similar in having been made in the past two years and, of course, in being drawings and not paintings.

It doesn't do to read too much into the titles of works, but it is hard to dispel a sense that the Crossed Lines series is in part the portrait of its own complexity. It is, and sets out to look, hand-made: in that, the works seem to position themselves against the conceptual abandonment of hand-making. Götz's comparison of their facture to weaving, and the fact that they look woven, are telling. They are crafted and they look like craft, less Josef than Anni Albers. The drawings could not be digital works, nor photographic ones: their point would be lost. They could, though, be paintings.

Götz talks about the making of another drawing in the CAS show, an untitled colour pencil piece on 120 × 90 centimetre gouache-painted board. This,



Fasching bei Albers, 2008, mineral paint on wall, dimensions variable, installation view, *Mit Fritz im Beton Haus*, rahncontemporary, Zürich

too, has the feel of fabric, perhaps of flame-stitched cloth. As, classically, with a painted canvas or panel, the entire surface is covered with pigment and marks. 'Effectively', Götz says, 'I was working in ten-centimetre bands – some from left to right, some from right to left. Every new band goes over the boundary of the one before it – you end up with a number of layers, finally.' He pauses. 'I remember I thought: I'll just add some pink here. Then that changed the total balance of the picture and I had to re-start the whole thing from scratch.' It's hard not to feel that there's something perverse about this way of drawing, something Sisyphean, self-defeating. The thought recurs: it would have been so much easier to have made this image in paint.

All this makes the relationship of Götz's drawings to his painted wall works unexpectedly complex. Seen in one way, the main difference between them is pragmatic: if he could make wall paintings in colour pencil, you feel, he might. Scale obviously precludes this – at a rough guess, the total area of wall covered by *Round Trip*'s 51 painted sections must be getting on for 1000 square metres. To blur the boundaries still further, many of Götz's drawings are of, or at least are inspired by, fantasy architecture. His 'house' for Josef and Anni Albers is a case in point: it is site-specific, even if the site is in Götz's mind. And beyond that again are drawings that behave like wall paintings in being both relatively large-scale and integrated into the architectural detail of the rooms in which they hang. Into this last (and typologically puzzling) class come the group of drawings Götz made as a commission for the dining room of the Soho private members' club House of St Barnabas – works that mix media, styles and typologies, which seem to allude, in their clearly demarcated parts, both to Götz's drawings and to his existing wall paintings.

These new St Barnabas images hint at the relationship between Götz's recent drawings and his better-known wall paintings: they are part of the same process and yet distinct from each other, conjoined but separate. 'I'm an abstract artist, and yet the things that inspire me – a flower, a Renaissance painting – aren't abstract', Götz says. In the Renaissance, his wall works might have been thought of as part of his active life, his drawings part of his contemplative existence. 'The older I get', Götz says, 'the more I see that the things I do refer back to my upbringing. It was quite Catholic, really, lots of Baroque churches. I sat there, as a little boy, looking up at the colours; and still, whenever I'm in a Baroque church, there's always a moment of the sublime. The feeling I had then persists.'