

## **Anni Albers & Dirk Nowitzki Walk Into a Bar...**

By Rose Bouthillier

*Included in Art Criticism & Other Short Stories, edited by Helen Reed (Blank Cheque Press, 2019). This text first appeared in the Walls to the Ball, a catalogue for an exhibition by Hazel Meyer, published by ARTSPACE, Peterborough, in 2012. Here, a chance encounter between the German-American textile artist Anni Albers, of Bauhaus fame, and German basketball player Dirk Nowitzki imagines the collision of two discrete worlds.*

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It's a warm day in June. Evening quiet has settled in, and a hazy, sidelong light filters down through the cobbled streets. Tucked down an alley lies the doorway to a darkened tavern, easily passed by. Inside, it's muffled, cool, and glowing. Here for a private drink on her birthday, Anni Albers gets up from her table and heads for the bar. Dirk Nowitzki leans there and gazes up at the TV, where Game 1 of the 2012 NBA finals is just starting. The Oklahoma City Thunder up against the Miami Heat. Dirk's beer arrives and he takes a seat at one of the many empty, worn wooden tables. Observing his rapt interest in the game, Anni decides to approach the shy looking man...

"Prost!" she raises her glass. "To sport!"

"Prost!" replies Dirk, gesturing at the chair across from him.

"Do you play?" Anni inquires. Dirk nods, eyes glittering. Something about this stately older woman puts him at ease. He tells her about that first, sure feeling: about the sensation of holding a soft, stippled basketball in his hands, about the brisk swish of a net, about knowing just how it was all meant to be. He tells her about his swift rise to fame. By the age of nineteen, Dirk had become one of the top players in Germany. Later, he had moved to America to play for the Dallas Mavericks, where he went from booed to beloved.

Anni identifies with the power of his calling. "In my case," she says, "the threads caught me... really against my will. To work with threads seemed sissy to me. I wanted something to be conquered. But circumstances held me to threads and they won me over." She tells him about arriving to study at the Bauhaus in 1922 only to find that disciplines such as architecture were closed to women. Of the options open to her, textiles appeared to be the most tactile, structural, a medium that integrated expression and utility.

They reminisce about their dear friends, Josef and Steve. More than friends—the best of friends. Partners and teammates. Companions. Dirk pulls out his wallet and shows Anni a picture of his godchildren, Steve's twin daughters. Anni tenderly recalls buying Josef's shirts and socks, then loses herself in a description of the graceful Egyptian figurine that Josef gave her on her twenty-third birthday, which has never left her bedside.

Another round arrives.

Anni speaks of her weaving days at the Bauhaus, of material experimentation, of free and limitless expression. She speaks of this developing into a philosophy where aesthetics and utility were equally considered, where working through materials was both spiritual and practical.

"My coach Holger once told me to practice with my mind as well as with my body," Dirk recalls. "He said, 'If you want to be a good player, you have to learn how to learn.'"

Anni nods. "Television, my great teacher, tells me that astronomers are finding ever more simplifications of order, unifying ever more everything."

They speak of forms and loops, of relationships between shapes and figures and bodies, about patterns and motions. They speak of the importance of practice. Of late nights spent in the gym, in the studio, solving problems, pondering the abstractions of their respective disciplines. Always striving to advance. Neither one mentions their accolades (how Anni was the first weaver to have a solo exhibition at the MoMA or how Dirk was the first European MVP in the NBA). It's always the next thought, the next motion, which holds the most potential.

"How do we choose our specific material, our means of communication?" Anni ponders aloud. "Something speaks to us, a sound, a touch, hardness, softness, it catches us and asks to be formed. The more subtly we are tuned to our medium, the more inventive our actions will become."

"I'll do anything to get better," Dirk says. Then, musingly, "That *is* what this is all about, isn't it?" Anni pauses thoughtfully, before replying with a faraway look.

"To give our actions the meaning we want them to have implies questioning them anew and becoming conscious of their implications...."

Dirk scrambles to write this down on a cocktail napkin.

Anni chuckles. "There is, of course, a most legitimate urge in everyone to use his hands..."

Quiet falls over the bar. Gazing at one another, the artist and the basketball player touch palm to palm, lining their fingers up. In the background, a buzzer sounds; Thunder 105, Heat 94. Anything seems possible.

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*Quotes and anecdotes were drawn from the following sources:*

*Albers, Anni. Anni Albers: Selected Writing on Design. Edited by Brenda Danilowitz. Hanover: University Press of New England, 2000.*

*Feeney, Kelly. "Anni Albers: Devotion to Material," In Anni Albers. Edited by Nicholas Fox Weber and Pandora Tabatai Ashbaghi. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1999.*

*Zuehlke, Jeffery. Dirk Nowitzki. Minneapolis: Lerner Publications Company, 2008.*