Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College, 1933-1957
edited by Helen Molesworth and Ruth Erickson (Yale 2015)

IMAGINARY LANDSCAPE

HELEN MOLESWORTH

1
RUTH ASAWA

Her story is as improbable as America itself. Her parents were born and raised in Japan. Her mother was from a village known for its silkworms, and her father was an itinerant farmer who arrived in America with nothing save for a prodigious work ethic; their marital union was arranged for them by others. Born in California in 1926, Ruth Asawa was the fourth of seven children. She grew up in a hardworking farming family: chores structured all of the days except Saturdays, when she and her siblings went to Japanese school, where they were introduced to calligraphy. Looking back on her experience as an eight-year-old with a brush in her hands, she said, "It was like a dance. Lift your feet up and lift your hands. You have to work so this round curve turns into the next stroke."[1]

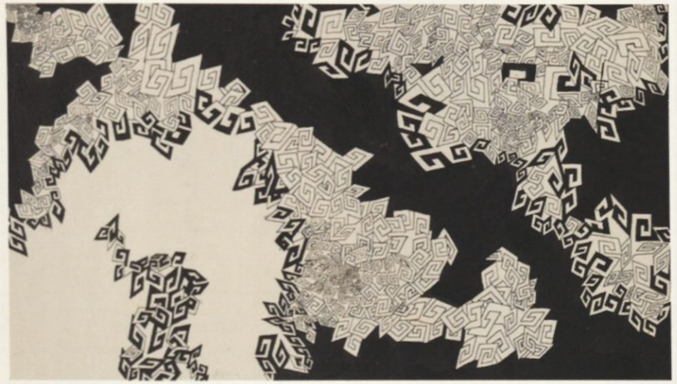
Her hardscrabble life was subject to two powerful, seemingly contradictory, social forces: First was the burgeoning progressive education movement in the public schools in California, which augmented Asawa's interest in art and furthered her sense of herself as a member of a community. Second was her family's internment, along with thousands of other Japanese immigrants and United States citizens, in camps by the US government during World War II. She was pointedly not made bitter by her confinement—at the Santa Anita racetrack and then at Rohwer War Relocation Center in Arkansas. Refusing victim status, she participated fully in the communal life established in the camps, which included informal introductions to other artists.[2] When her time in the camps ended, she went off to a teacher's college in Milwaukee, where she met Elaine Schmitt Urbain, who ultimately, along with Urbain's friend Ray Johnson, begged Asawa to join them at Black Mountain College.

Asawa was a precocious student. She readily absorbed instructor Josef Albers's courses in design, drawing, and materials. Her drawing of meanders displays a highly sophisticated use of positive and negative space, complete with a large jagged swath of black ink that creates a ravine-like space diagonally across the page, adding energy, speed, and depth. Her study of hands and feet flaunts an almost feral intensity as the motifs repeat centrifugally on the page. Repetition was at the heart of the matter for Asawa; it appeared in her early drawing assignments for Albers's courses and again when she took the "BMC" laundry stamp and used it to cover the page in an undulating pattern as evocative of a woven curtain as it is of falling rain. Her early drawings offer repetition as both formal exploration and tactile pleasure, the DNA of what would become her most iconic works, the suspended crocheted-wire sculptures.

In 1947, Asawa, like many of her contemporaries at Black Mountain College, made a trip to Toluca, Mexico, where she joined Josef and Anni Albers, who were spending their sabbatical year there. While in Toluca, Asawa volunteered as an art teacher and ended up a student of the local basket weavers.[3] Her use of crocheted wire to form intersecting bulbous biomorphic sculptures was as original as it was a perfect marriage of the lessons she had learned from her instructors at Black Mountain. Josef Albers insisted that art display a rigorous understanding of its material properties, and Asawa's wire sculptures exploit wire's malleability, linearity, and light weight. Albers's printmaking during the Black Mountain years was a veritable dictionary of the slippage between figure and ground, inside and outside, positive and negative space—all ways of seeing and perceiving that Asawa's sculptures exploit to the hilt. On campus during the summer of 1948, she was present for R. Buckminster Fuller's first attempt at raising a geodesic dome, and her wire sculptures can be seen as an exploration of wire's capacity for tensile construction. The use of a textile-based method is a deliberate nod to the profound influence of Anni Albers, a noted Bauhaus weaver with a strong belief in the communicative properties of textiles. And, finally, the biomorphic shapes, the interlocking, undulating forms, the vaguely anthropomorphic way they hold space, each one acting as an analogue for a human body, were derived from being in and watching Merce Cunningham's dance classes.

1. Ruth Asawa, quoted in Daniell Cornell et al., *The Sculpture of Ruth Asawa: Contours in the Air* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 11.
2. For more on how the camps and Asawa's Japanese-American identity played out in her art, see Karin Higa, "Inside and Outside at the Same Time," in *The Sculpture of Ruth Asawa*, 30–41.
3. One of the hallmarks of progressive education was to allay the hierarchy between teacher and student. For more, see Ruth Erickson, "A Progressive Education," in this volume, 76–80.

previous: Elni Sihvonen, *Color Transparency*, n.d. Color transparency and graphite, 6 ⅞ x 8 ⅞ inches.
opposite: Ruth Asawa, *BMC (BMC.76)*, n.d. Ink on paper, 21 ½ x 17 ½ inches.



top, left: Ruth Asawa, *Collage of Fern Leaves*, n.d. Leaves on paper, 16 ¾ x 20 inches.
top, right: Ruth Asawa's wedding ring, designed by R. Buckminster Fuller, n.d. Estate of Ruth Asawa.
middle, left: Ruth Asawa, *Meander Straight Lines (BMC.59)*, c. 1948. Pen, ink, and gouache on paper, 7 ⅞ x 13 ½ inches.
bottom, right: Alvin Lustig, cover of *Design* magazine, April 1946. The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation.
bottom, left: Ruth Asawa, *Studies of Hands and Feet*, n.d. Ink on tracing paper, 19 x 24 inches.

following spread: Joseph Fiore, *Black Mountain, Lake Eden*, 1954. Watercolor on paper, 14 x 18 inches.

Asawa was one of the many students and faculty who left Black Mountain only to carry its seeds to other terrains. In a letter to Albert Lanier, a fellow Black Mountain student whom she would soon marry (Fuller designed her wedding ring and Anni Albers gave her some black fabric to make a wedding dress),[4] she wrote: "I no longer identify myself as Japanese or American, but a 'citizen of the universe.'"[5] Asawa and Lanier settled in San Francisco, where he became an architect and she experienced nascent art-world success in the 1950s, raised their six children, and ultimately started the first arts program in the San Francisco public schools (the Alvarado Art Workshop, 1968–73). Her whole life was structured by her commitment to learning and teaching art—the core tenets of a Black Mountain College education.

2
HARPER'S MAGAZINE

In 1935, the journalist Louis Adamic was hoping to escape the "tempo and confusion" of New York with a few days of pastoral driving through the South. Born in Yugoslavia, Adamic, who had received a prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship three years before, was encouraged to visit Black Mountain College by a friend at the Guggenheim Foundation. Upon his arrival at the college, he was given a guestroom and an invitation to dinner. The talk at supper continued long past midnight. His visit to the campus, which he expected to last for only a few days, stretched to two and a half months and resulted in the essay "Education on a Mountain: The Story of Black Mountain College," which was published in the April 1936 issue of *Harper's Magazine*. At the time, the school was three years old, and the article garnered the college its first serious encounter with publicity. The myth making had begun.[6]

Adamic's article gushes enthusiasm on every page: "In BMC there is no head-cramming. There education is *experience* that involves in action the whole person."[7] He enumerated the philosophy of the college: No required courses; one-on-one student-teacher relationships through tutoring; no classes were allowed to conflict with the elementary classes in music, drama, and the visual arts; students and faculty eat together and serve one another meals; the student government is lively and participates in college governance along with the faculty; communal living makes the individual aware of his relation to others; teachers take classes along with the students; and, most important, "one of the efforts, in which the entire community continually participates, is to bring to each one's consciousness his uniqueness—and this is not only as a potential scientist or plumber, but as a person who, being endowed with imagination, is an artist."[8] Sign me up.

The article continues, as if charting the life cycle of an extraordinary moth, by detailing the students' immersion into the community: "Are they not of the elect? Have they not turned their backs on Harvard and Vassar?"[9] He describes the initial joy of the students and its transformation into self-doubt, which then gave way to the pleasure of self-discovery. Adamic singled out three great teachers: John Rice, a classicist who taught Plato; Josef Albers, a recent German immigrant escaping the Nazi regime, who taught art; and Robert Wunsch, who ran the theater program. Adamic noted the "observer effect": "This article, which brings [the college] more or less into the open for the first time, is likely to affect it drastically."[10]

The die had been cast, and this utopian boosterism would continue throughout the college's existence. *Design* magazine dedicated a special issue to Black Mountain in 1946. Students and faculty produced myriad brochures designed to lure students who, in paying tuition, would keep the place going. Sunny and optimistic images of young people studying, working the land, and making art created an image of an educational utopia. But by 1957 it was over. The college had lost its way, lost its funding (not that there was ever much), and lost its ability to sustain itself. The world had changed. Born in the midst of the Great Depression, the college survived through World War II, experienced a boom in the flush years of the GI Bill, and began to decline in the early 1950s. By the time the college closed, many of the artists, faculty, and students who had been involved were famous. More than a decade later, historian Martin Duberman's now-classic page-turner *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* would spearhead a new era of Black Mountain mythmaking.[11]

4. Aiko Cuneo, Ruth Asawa's daughter, in conversation with the author, December 13, 2012, San Francisco.
5. Asawa, quoted in *The Sculpture of Ruth Asawa*, 51.
6. In the months just after the article was published, the college received forty or fifty letters of inquiry a day, but letters and applications from students who had read it consistently arrived for many years. Martin Duberman, *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* (1972; repr. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 119.
7. Louis Adamic, "Education on a Mountain: The Story of Black Mountain College," *Harper's Magazine*, April 1936, 520.
8. Ibid., 522.
9. Ibid., 523.
10. Ibid., 525.
11. See Duberman, *Black Mountain*. Martin Duberman's book was a watershed volume for several reasons. The timing was fortuitous: the book was published in 1972, in the midst (or the aftermath depending on what periodization one prefers) of the 1960s experiments in alternative lifestyles, neo-avant-garde practices, radical politics, and the nascent women's and gay-rights movements. Black Mountain College seemed an apt prototype for the playing out of many of these ideas. The book is also legendary because of the manner in which Duberman wrote it. Suspect of grandiose historical truths, Duberman was engaged in his own experiment: how to write a history that acknowledged the personal investments of the historian and showed how those investments shape the historian's account. Duberman frequently inserted the first-person voice, for example, sometimes even imagining himself part of the faculty meetings he summarizes. At times wonderful and at others maddening, the text remains fascinating regarding the role of the historian in the process of history making. The book, and its subject, became somewhat mythological in part because Duberman, in keeping with his insistence on the role of the first person, wrote the volume as an openly gay man, a brave act in 1972 and one that positions the volume within the history of gay rights as much as it does within the legacy of Black Mountain College.

top: Kenneth Kurtz delivering a lecture in front of a South Pacific map, c. 1941.
bottom: Photo shoot of Kenneth Kurtz's lecture, c. 1941.

top: Picnic to celebrate the visit of Aldous Huxley, 1937, with John Evarts, Anne Chapin Weston, John Rice, Huxley (facing away from the camera in the foreground), and Barbara Dreier.
bottom: John Rice and students at work, n.d. Photo by Helen Post Modley.

3
JOHN RICE

We must realize that the world as it is isn't worth saving;
it must be made over.
—John Rice[12]

In 1933, when Ruth Asawa was seven years old, John Rice, a classics professor at the conservative Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida, was dismissed from his duties. Then, as now, the firing of tenured professors made the national news. The president of Rollins would not be persuaded to change his mind—not by the press, not by the findings of an independent review that exonerated Rice of any improprieties, and not by the resignations of fellow faculty in solidarity with Rice. The deed was done, and Rice—a maverick teacher who had disapproved of debating "because it encouraged the participants to try to win rather than search for the truth,"[13] an instructor who encouraged his students to put "rights above duties"[14]—found himself with radical ideas and no job.

Some of Rice's students felt that the Rollins administration had soured against them, and they quit the school, joining the faculty who had resigned in solidarity with Rice to persuade him to start a new college, one rooted in the principles of progressive education that he had espoused. One of those faculty members was Theodore Dreier, a physics teacher from an affluent New York family; his aunt was Katherine Dreier, an art collector and cofounder, with Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray, of the Société Anonyme, which organized lectures, concerts, publications, and exhibitions of the most advanced art of the day. Theodore Dreier's colleague Robert Wunsch, a drama teacher, suggested that the new school could be established on the grounds of a Christian summer camp called the Blue Ridge Assembly in North Carolina. The buildings were large and stood empty except during the summer months. Dreier was close to members of the Forbes family, who, on hearing of the plan to create a new school, committed ten thousand dollars to the enterprise. Black Mountain College was born.

In the beginning, there were twenty-two students. The faculty decided not to have a board of trustees, meaning that they and the students effectively owned the school. Given the meager funds, several faculty members took room and board as their sole compensation. Decisions were made in the Quaker meeting style, meaning the community achieved consensus on an issue by speaking in turn and elected representatives subsequently implemented those decisions.[15] It was determined that the students and faculty would live and eat together. They would serve one another meals, and students would work in the kitchen and on the grounds to offset their tuition. They were to be a community as much as they were to be a school. They meant to exemplify progressive education's most prominent theorist and advocate John Dewey's mantra "learning by doing." It was a grand experiment.

The Western Regional Archives of North Carolina, where the Black Mountain College papers are held, contain several photos of Rice. We chose two. In one, he is at a picnic convened to celebrate Aldous Huxley's visit to campus. Round, wire-rimmed glasses sit on his full face, giving him the owl-like appearance stereotypical of academics. Surrounded by students and trees, he is in animated conversation with Huxley. In another, taken by Helen Post Modley, he sits leisurely in the background, gazing off into the distance, arms folded in his lap, smiling. In the foreground, we see a young man and a woman:

The boy is shirtless, with a pickax and broken stones at his feet. It is simultaneously an image of maturity and gender parity, relaxation and work. At the time the picture was taken, Rice was about forty-eight years old, the age I am as I write this essay. Yet, in comparison with the students, he looks like a grandfather. "We should realize that there is a wisdom of youth as well as a wisdom of old age."[16]

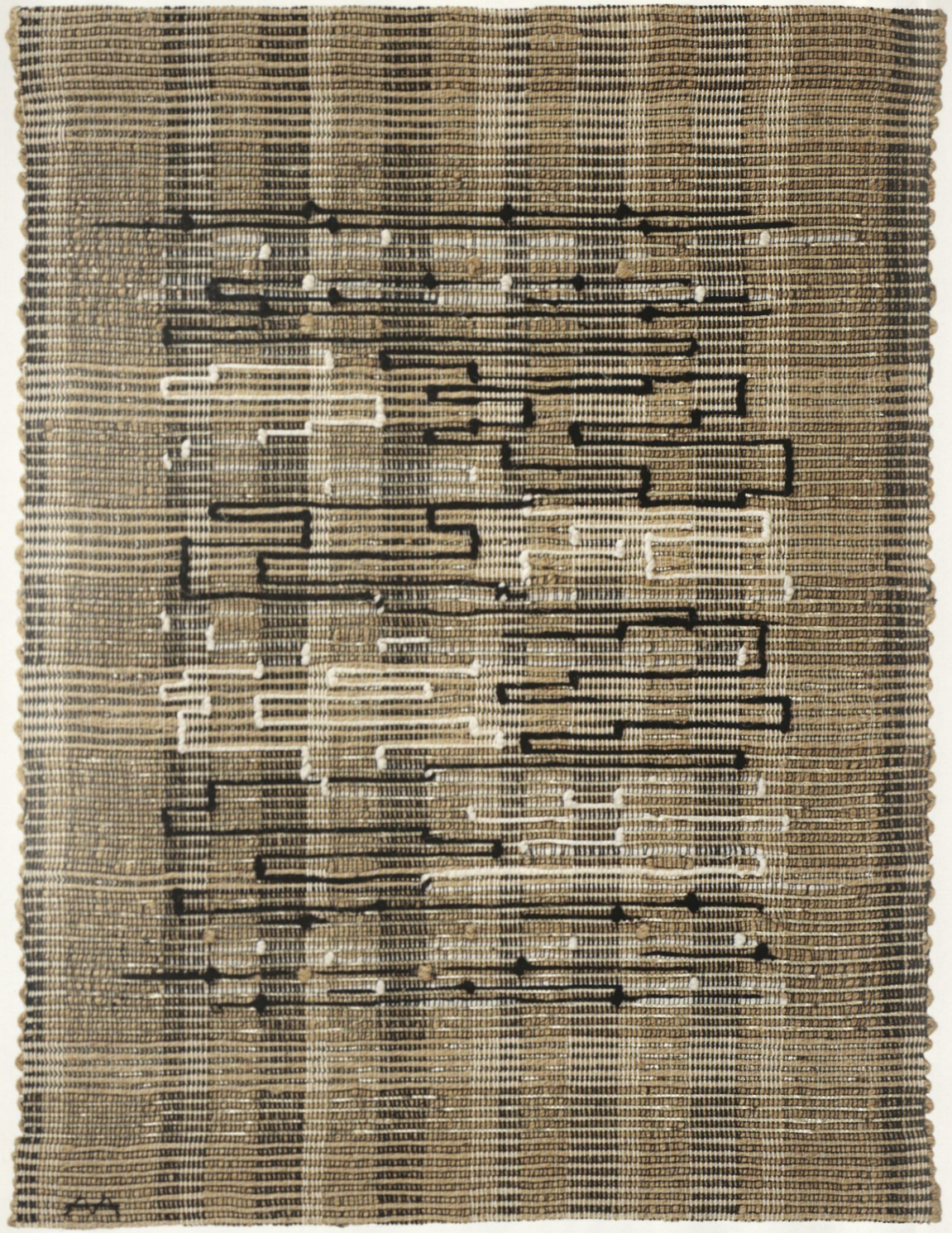
Ironically, Rice, a man who knew little about art and knew no artists personally before founding Black Mountain, insisted that art be at the center of the curriculum. Refusing its typical designation as extracurricular, he felt that art "should no longer have a precarious existence on the fringe of the curriculum but . . . should be at the very center of things."[17] According to Rice, "There are things to be learned through observation [that] cannot be learned any other way. Whatever cannot be expressed in words cannot be learned through words."[18] Rice felt that art not only occupies a possible zone outside of language but also holds the potential to enable individuals to make choices—and choices, he stressed, were at the heart of a truly democratic society. The arts, he felt, "when properly employed [are] least subject to direction from without and yet have within them a severe discipline of their own."[19] Martin Duberman elegantly summarizes Rice's thinking when he suggests that learning art taught students "that the worthwhile struggle was the interior one—not against one's fellows, but against one's 'own ignorance and clumsiness.' The integrity an artist learns when dealing with materials translates into an integrity with oneself and other men."[20]

4
ANNI ALBERS

In 1938, Anni Albers drafted an essay called "Work with Material" that appeared in the *Black Mountain College Bulletin*. She had arrived at Black Mountain five years earlier, an accomplished weaver, a former Bauhaus student, a Jewish-born refugee of Hitler's Germany, and the wife of artist Josef Albers. She was also a writer, a skill honed at the Bauhaus, where she wrote articles about the school for popular magazines. "Work with Material" might have been a manifesto in more strident hands, but Albers makes her points plainly and subtly: "Material, that is to say unformed or unshaped matter, is the field where authority blocks independent experimentation less than in many other fields, and for this reason it seems well fitted to become the training ground for invention and free speculation."[21] It seems like formalism, until you realize that for Albers "authority" is hardly an abstract value and "independent experimentation" is not an anodyne virtue. Working with materials was a way of "being close to the stuff the world is made of" and a way to have "faith in one's own strength." Materials were an "adventure" because they introduced "boundaries for a task of free imagination." Threads, yarn, fibers, arranged via warp and weft, were Albers's materials. Traditional functional woven objects, such as tablecloths and upholstery, were augmented by Albers's foray into experiments

12. John Rice, quoted in Adamic, "Education on a Mountain," 519.
13. Duberman, *Black Mountain*, 2.
14. Ibid., 4.
15. See ibid., 22.
16. John Rice, "Fundamentalism and the Higher Learning," *Harper's Magazine*, May 1937, 592.
17. John Rice, quoted in Duberman, *Black Mountain*, 38.
18. Rice, "Fundamentalism and the Higher Learning," 595.
19. Ibid.
20. Duberman, *Black Mountain*, 40.
21. Anni Albers, "Work with Material," reprinted in *Selected Writings on Design*, ed. Brenda Danilowitz (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), 7.

top: Anni Albers at the loom, n.d.
bottom: Trude Guermonprez, *First Snow*, n.d. Cotton and wool, 75 x 42 ½ inches.



32 Anni Albers, *Black-White-Gold I*, 1950. Cotton, jute, and metallic ribbon, 25 x 19 inches.

with pictorial weavings meant to hang on a wall with all the authority and self-consciousness of painting. While at Black Mountain, from 1933 to 1948, she both established the weaving program and made some of her most ambitious works.

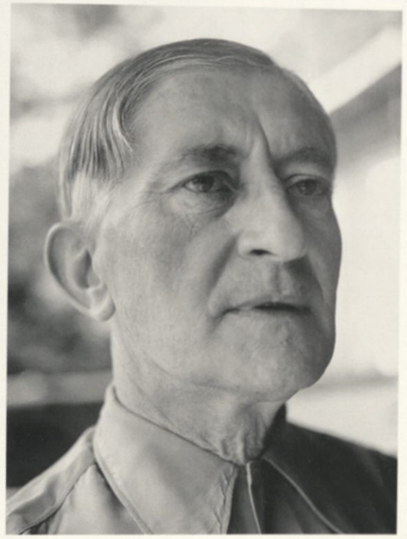
It's safe to say that nothing influenced Albers more than her trips to Mexico—seven in total during her years at the college. Her exposure to contemporary Mexican and pre-Columbian textiles shaped her approach to weaving and, by extension, materials. Confronted with a culture that did not possess written language, she was convinced that Andean and Mayan textiles were a form of sophisticated communication.[22] In her pictorial weavings *Monte Albán* (page 149) and *Ancient Writing* (both produced at Black Mountain in 1936), she explored nonlinguistic forms such as hieroglyphs, pictograms, and abstract shapes. She did so by deploying a technique she had seen in Meso-American textiles, a floating weft—a weave in which an extra horizontal (weft) thread is picked up and pulled across the weaving. Since it serves no structural purpose, it can be used for remarkable decorative effects, and Albers used this technique "to 'draw' lines on the surface of the woven structure."[23] Albers did not think the cultures and the artifacts she was encountering were primitive; instead, they prompted her to write, "We easily forget the amazing discipline of thinking that man had already achieved four thousand years ago. Wherever meaning has to be conveyed by form alone, where for instance, no written language exists to impart descriptively such meaning, we find a vigor in this direct, formative communication often surpassing that of cultures that have other, additional methods of transmitting information."[24]

5
JOSEF ALBERS

We do not always create "works of art," but rather experiments; it is not our ambition to fill museums: we are gathering experience.
—Josef Albers[25]

While Black Mountain founder John Rice didn't personally know any artists, he did have entrée to the higher echelon of the Museum of Modern Art and an auspicious fifteen-minute meeting with philanthropist Edward Warburg and the young curator of architecture Philip Johnson. After listening to Rice's dream of a liberal arts college that would place the arts at the center of its curriculum, Johnson felt he had the right man for the job: Josef Albers, the legendary art teacher at the Bauhaus (the most famous art school of the first half of the twentieth century), which had recently closed to avoid accepting Nazi teachers. Albers was fresh out of a job and, further compounding matters, his wife, Anni, a distinguished alumna and Bauhaus instructor, was Jewish. Rice sent a telegram to Albers inviting him to teach, to which Albers famously replied, "I don't speak English." Rice, equally famously, responded, "Come anyway." Theodore Dreier, always more pragmatic than Rice, wrote the Albers couple a long letter in German, explaining the college, its philosophy, its stature, and its limited financial resources. Tickets were booked, transatlantic travel was undertaken, and on December 5, 1933, Josef and Anni Albers arrived in Asheville, North Carolina, fresh from Berlin, to start their new lives.

22. Virginia Gardner Troy, *Anni Albers and Ancient American Textiles: From Bauhaus to Black Mountain* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2002), 119.
23. Ibid., 117.
24. Anni Albers, *On Weaving*, cited in ibid., 122.
25. Josef Albers, quoted in Leah Dickerman, "Bauhaus Fundaments," in *Bauhaus 1919–1933: Workshops for Modernity* (New York: Museum of Modern Art), 17.



top: Hazel Larsen Archer, *Anni Albers*, c. 1948. Gelatin silver print, 9 x 6 ¼ inches.
bottom: Hazel Larsen Archer, *Josef Albers*, c. 1948. Gelatin silver print, 8 ½ x 5 ⅞ inches.

No decision was more fateful for the course of Black Mountain College than the arrival of Josef and Anni Albers. Josef had already encountered the philosophy of John Dewey, whose book *Democracy and Education* was translated into German in 1916. A gifted and experienced teacher, he had begun teaching art at an elementary school before becoming the primary instructor of the Preliminary Course (*Vorkurs*) at the Bauhaus from 1923 to 1933. Albers imported the tripartite structure of the Bauhaus fundamentals course—consisting of drawing, color, and work with materials and forms—to Black Mountain. His work began immediately, with Anni acting as his translator until his English improved. After a few years, Anni established a weaving studio and commenced working and teaching alongside Josef.

One of the hallmarks of Albers's teaching was his assignment of uniform class exercises in color, design, and *matière* (material studies), which would be followed by class discussions. All students were asked to perform the same assignments. How

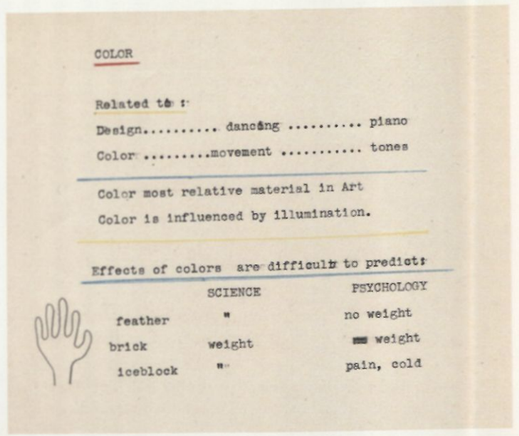
Josef Albers with students, including Ray Johnson and Hazel Larsen Archer, n.d.

Robert De Niro Sr. with student drawings, c. 1939–40.

the assignments were completed was up to the students, but a rigorous core instruction was at the root of Albers's method. He thought of teaching art as analogous to teaching a language, hence students had to begin with the building blocks of aesthetics; he called drawing, for instance, a "graphic language" that was both a "visual and manual act."[26] His drawing assignments were rudimentary and involved drawing simple forms—such as ellipses and meanders. Repetition was essential, hence one finds pages of student drawings covered with the same form repeated many times over, hovering between idle doodles and allover compositions. Students were asked to draw with their less-dominant hand as a means of alienating themselves from their bodily habits. Self-expression was actively discouraged; for "experience shows that in young people this encourages artistic conceit but hardly results in a solid capability which alone can give the foundation and freedom for more personal work." That, he went on to say, "will develop best afterwards and outside the school."[27] Moreover, there was an overall understanding that though it had placed art at its core of instruction Black Mountain was not an art school; it was a liberal arts college. Rice summed up the concept:

> A beginning is often best made by persuading the student to submit himself to the discipline of one or more of the arts. It is for this reason that no classes are allowed to conflict in the schedule with the elementary courses in Music, Dramatic, or the Fine Arts. There is no expectation that many students will become artists; in fact the College regards it as a sacred duty to discourage mere talent from thinking itself genius; but there is something of the artist in everyone and the development of this talent, however small, carrying with it a severe discipline of its own, results in the students becoming more sensitive to order in the world and within himself than he can ever be through intellectual effort alone.[28]

In addition to these rudimentary drawing exercises, group discussion was a key element of Albers's classes. Completed exercises were placed on the floor to be critiqued by both students and Albers. Looking, handwork, and critical assessment were the backbone of the Albers pedagogic method. It sounds rigid—and Albers had long had a reputation as a disciplinarian—but the open and ethical qualities of Albers's teaching remain one of his most compelling legacies, and nowhere is this more evident than in his color exercises.[29] He felt that color was "the most relative medium in art,"[30] and his systematic explorations of color, which involved testing one color against another and subtly shifting a color's context, elucidate how perception is radically contingent. This idea may at first seem counterintuitive, since color surrounds us and our agreement on its nature (leaves are green, the sky is blue) seems as putatively straightforward as our understanding the distinction between land and sea. But Albers's color course, during which pieces of colored paper were cut up and collaged in various ways, proved that the experience of color was ultimately fungible. A piece of blue paper looks and behaves one way when placed on a red background and utterly differently when placed on a green background. The piece of paper has remained the same,



COLOR

Related to :

Design..... dancing ..... piano

Color .....movement ..... tones

Color most relative material in Art

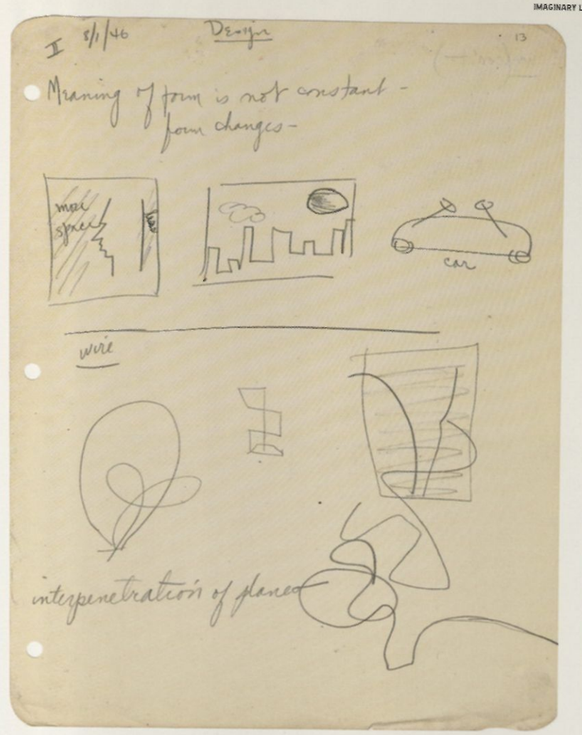
Color is influenced by illumination.

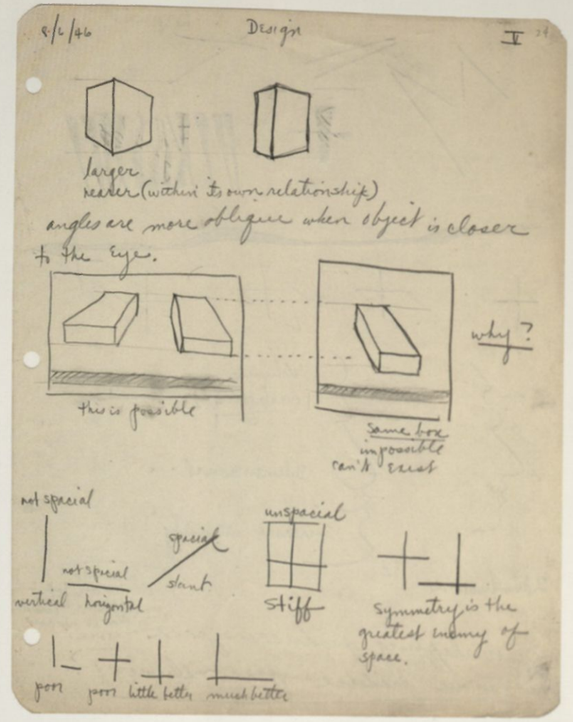
Effects of colors are difficult to predict:

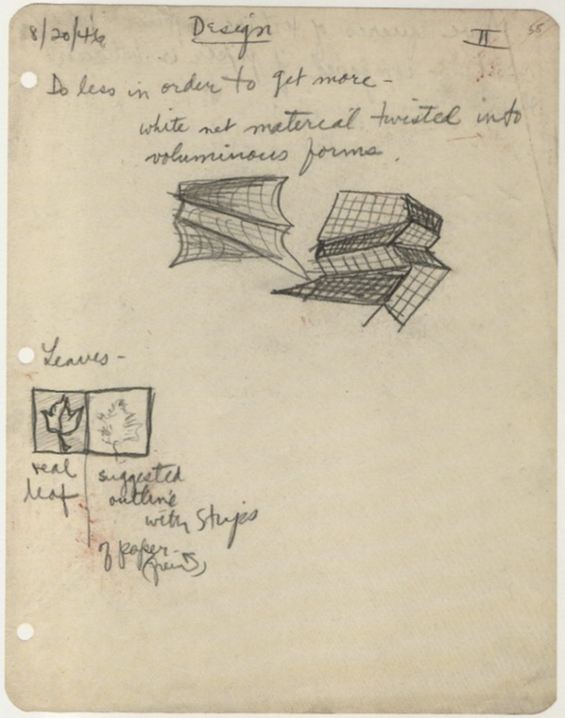
	SCIENCE	PSYCHOLOGY
feather	"	no weight
brick	weight	weight
iceblock	"	pain, cold

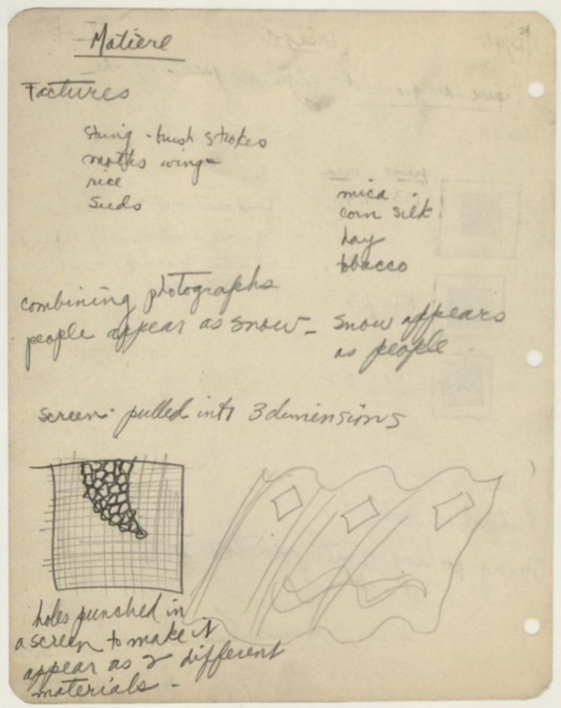
Detail of a page from student John Urbain's notebook, n.d. Black Mountain College Museum and Arts Center.

26. Josef Albers, "Concerning Art Instruction," *Black Mountain College Bulletin*, no. 2 (1934): 4.
27. Ibid.
28. John Andrew Rice, "Black Mountain College," *Black Mountain College Bulletin* (1935); cited in Jonathan Hiam, "Music at Black Mountain College: The European Years, 1939–46," PhD diss., University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 2005, 27.
29. Eva Diaz examines the ethics of Albers pedagogy in "The Ethics of Perception: Josef Albers in the United States," *Art Bulletin* 90, no. 2 (June 2008): 260–85.
30. Elaine de Kooning, "Albers Paints a Picture," *ArtNews* 49, no. 7 (November 1950): 57.









Josephine Levine's notes from Josef Albers's color and design class at the 1946 Summer Art Institute. Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina.

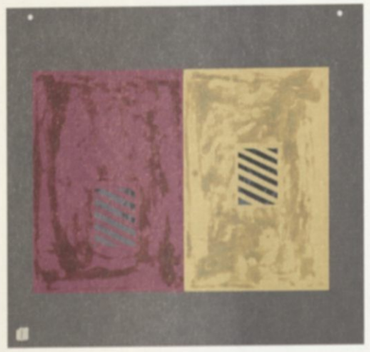
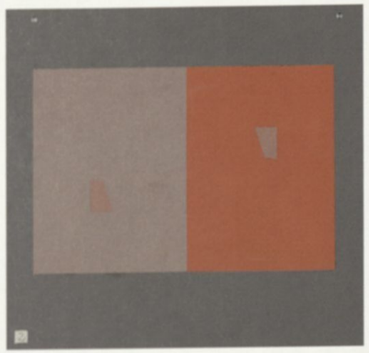
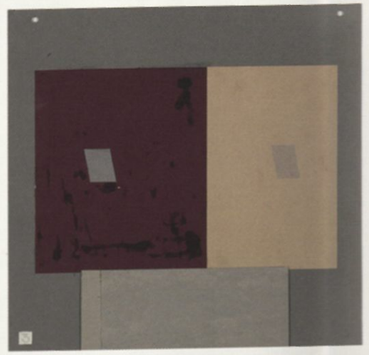
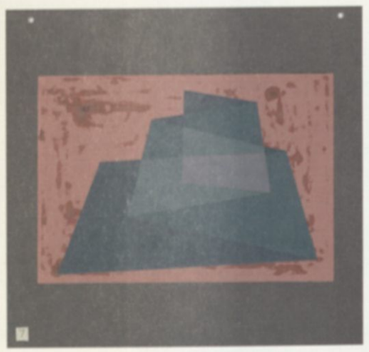
This exhibit presents only one phase of the study of color which is given as a year course at BLACK MOUNTAIN COLLEGE, Black Mountain, N.C. Other areas include: Thematic Free Studies, Objective and Non-objective Color Sketches, Practical Application (i.e., to weaving, ceramics), and a course—"Color and Man", which is a study of the use and concept of color from pre-history to the present.

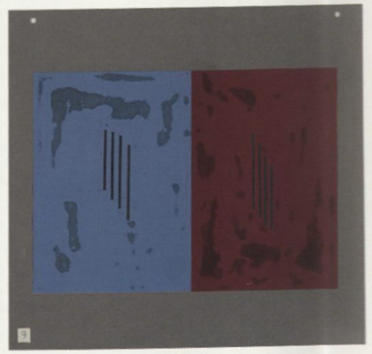
1. COLOR CHANGE; a choice of two backgrounds and a single, flexible color. This superimposed color takes on a different complexion depending upon the background's influence. The grays are the same.
2. COLOR CHANGE; here the single imposed trapezoid of color tends to look like the opposite background. It is an independent color.
3. COLOR CHANGE; Two unlike colors tend to look the same depending on the affecting backgrounds. Their comparative identity is revealed under the flap.
4. COLOR in LIGHT & SHADE; From four arbitrary colors there is derived a repeat at another proportionate value level.
5. TRANSPARENCY; an illusion of transparent colors producing still other colors when overlapping done with opaque construction and coated papers.
6. TRANSPARENCY; same as 5 except that the illusion is enhanced by using glossy opaque paper.
7. COLOR LAYERS; using the idea of a transparent ribbon or gelatine folded over and over upon itself, changing as the layers increase.
8. VIBRATION; colors selected having a brilliance and an opposing hue which, because of the eye's desire for relief, appear to shift and form outlines in foreign colors.
9. COLOR CHANGE; the same idea as expressed in 1 and 2. Here black becomes green.
10. COLOR INFLUENCES SIZE & SHAPE; the light grays are identical in size and shape, but appear unlike because of color and placement.

FREE STUDIES; (not especially pointing up any of the single color effects, but possibly including them or developing from them).

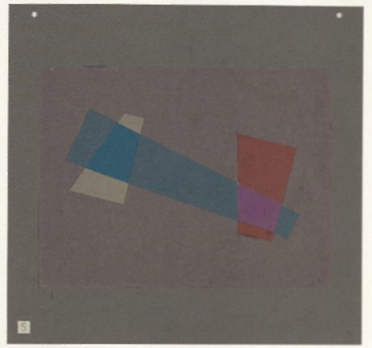
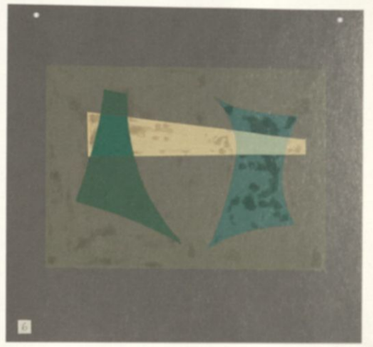
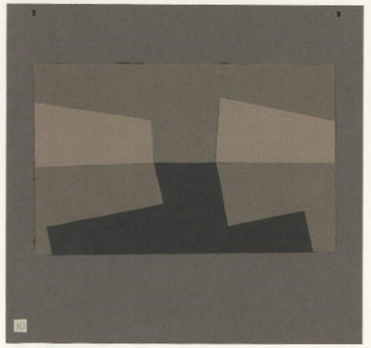
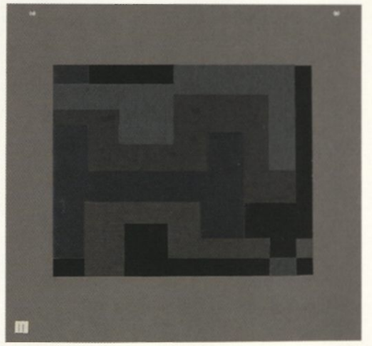
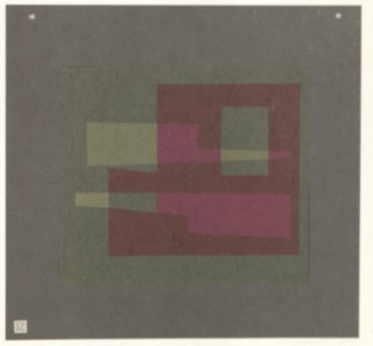
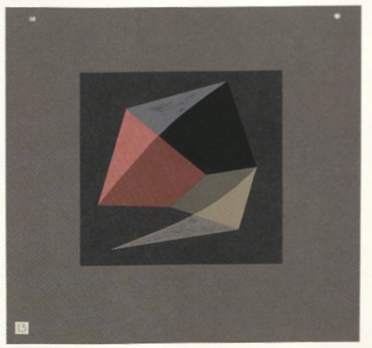
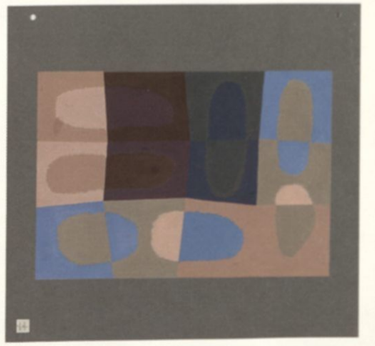
11. There are blacks and blacks.
12. Planes, space, and penetration
13. Planes and volume
14. Close values (casein)

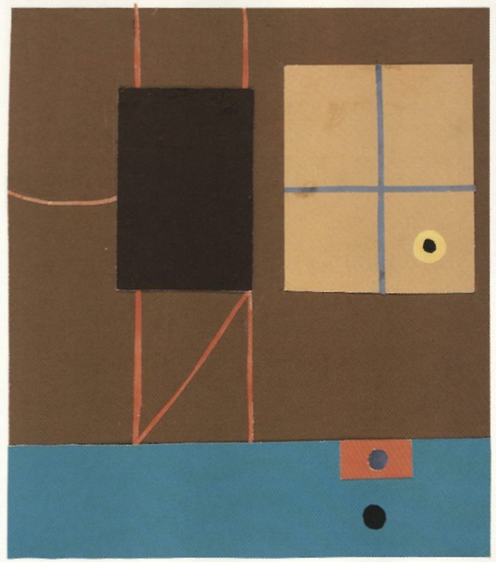
W. P. JENNERJAHN, COLOR & DESIGN

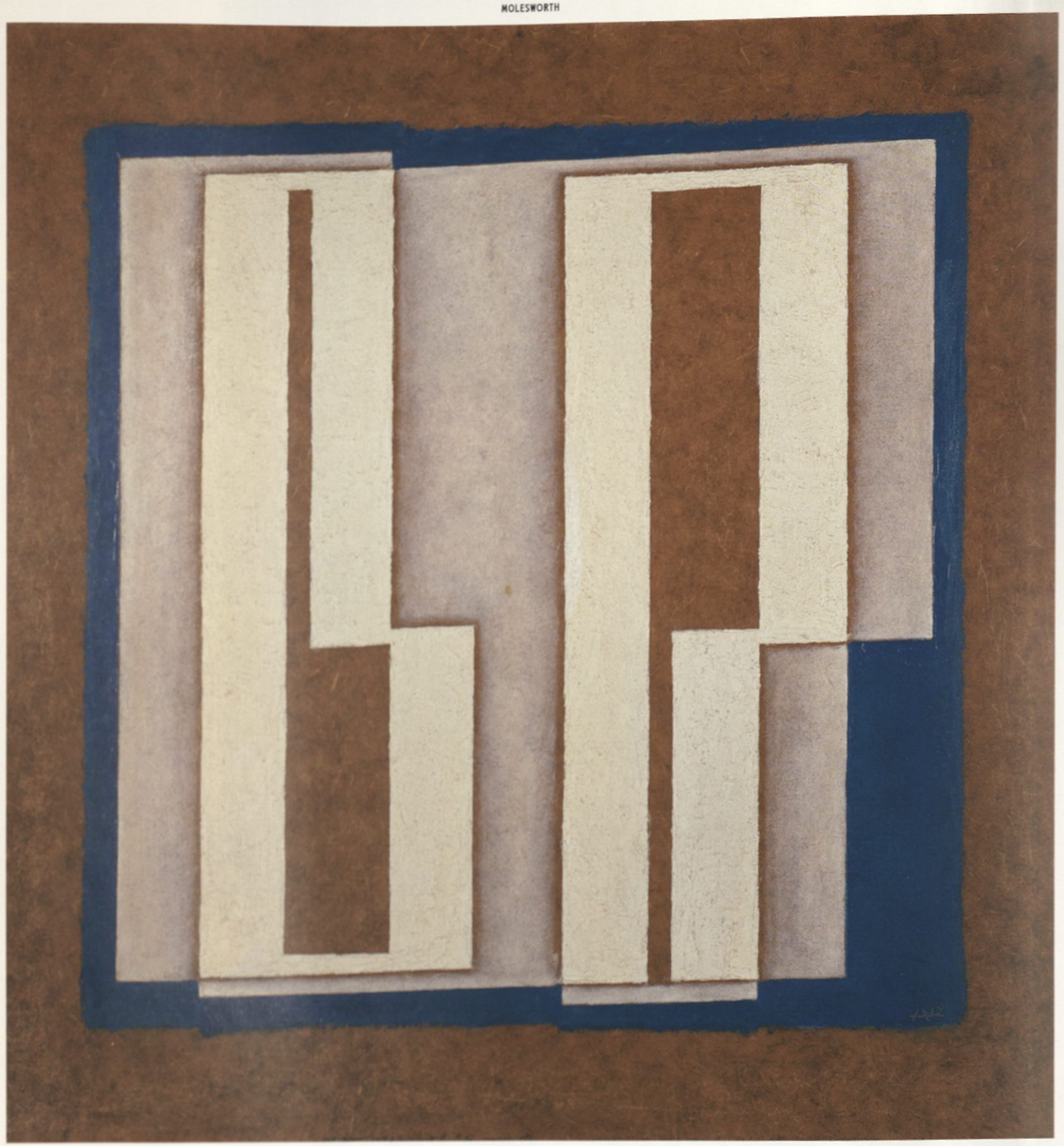


W. Pete Jennerjahn, *Color and Design: Color Study Demonstration of Principles*, n.d.
3 printed text panels and 14 panels of collaged Color-aid paper on board,
14 x 14 ¾ inches each.



above: **Jacqueline Gourevitch**, *Window and Sun*, 1951. Oil on canvas, 34 x 28 inches.
opposite, top: **Don Alter**, *Transformation*, 1949. Casein on paper, 5 ¼ x 8 inches.
opposite, bottom: **Don Alter**, *Construction*, n.d. Collage on paper, 8 ½ x 7 ½ inches.



Josef Albers, *b and p*, 1937. Oil on Masonite, 23 ⅞ x 23 ¾ inches.

Josef Albers's color-theory class at the 1944 Summer Art Institute.
Photo by Josef Breitenbach.

but our perception of it is completely different. The implications of this exercise are (at least) twofold: Albers's students learned, first, that color, like drawing, is a building block of aesthetic experience, and, second, that they could control and deploy the various effects of color combinations in their own work. Color's "clinical" deployment was a crucial aspect of Albers's desire to teach his students the fundamentals of picture making. If drawing is a graphic "language" then perhaps color occupies the realm of adjectives or adverbs.

The relativity of our experience of color has philosophical and ethical implications, as well. If our experience of a piece of colored paper can change so demonstrably, then what sure footing do we have when we appeal to "common-sense" truths like color? How are we to proceed in the wake of such profound relativity? Albers was emphatic in his own work that "*there is no final solution in form; thus form demands unending performance* and invites constant consideration—visually as well as verbally."[31] The statement is worthy of unpacking. Albers insisted that "every form has meaning," by which I understand him to mean that there is no "content" or subject matter without form. That form—color, line, shape—is a given, as if in a geometry proof. But unlike a given in a mathematical proof, these forms are subject to perception—what Albers called *experience*. If form so intimately relates to perception, then its meanings and/or effects are capable of great transformations through context. Meaning and experience are then also relative. Their relativity mandates the ethical position of "unending performance" and "constant consideration." If there can be no "final solution," a turn of phrase that Albers could hardly have been immune to, then there can be no absolute version of truth, because our perceptual apparatus does not allow it. The task of training students to see, "to open eyes," as Albers often said, was to facilitate their critical awareness of the made qualities of the world around them, to make them self-aware of their own experiences to better prepare them for the democratic work of making considered choices.

Albers's interest in perception could be seen in his own work, as well as in his class assignments. Elaine de Kooning felt that Albers was "a master of optical illusion," because he would "try to make a ruled line look bent or a flat color seem modeled."[32] He did so in part to test repeatedly the act of making against the act of perceiving. This was exactly what was at stake in the *matière* studies, for which students were tasked with making one material look like another, such as making a cigarette ash resemble a rock. In this regard, Albers was not a staunch modernist, at least not in the vein of Clement Greenberg, who was in the midst of formulating a modernism of pure opticality. Rather Albers insisted on the relativity of color, the perceptual instability of human experience, and the need for a constant performance or testing of innumerable variables.[33]

His Variant works (see page 148) and, certainly, his lifelong project *Homage to the Square* put him at the crux of the shift from modernism (with its fidelity to medium, its shoring up of grand narratives, its belief in verifiable truths) to postmodernism (with its embrace of interdisciplinarity, its sense of the irresolvable and the definitively unfinished, and its eschewing of moral truths in favor of situational ethics). I'm not at all sure that Albers would have agreed with—let alone relished—his role in this shift, which is perhaps the dilemma of any extraordinary practitioner who straddles, by virtue of generational accident and world-transforming events, movements within *Kunstwollen*.[34] But his young student Robert Rauschenberg—whose work prompted critic Leo Steinberg to first use the term *postmodernism* in arts criticism—recognized it. Rauschenberg later recalled, "When Albers showed me that one color was as good as another and that you were just expressing a personal preference if you thought a certain color would be better, I found that I couldn't decide to use *one* color instead of another, because I really wasn't interested in taste."[35]

6
SUMMER

In 1937, the college purchased property three miles away from the Blue Ridge Assembly, around the manmade and lyrically named Lake Eden. The acres of farm- and woodland that bordered the lake were dotted with rustic cottages and included a large building with a dining hall. The acquisition facilitated two of what would become defining characteristics of the Black Mountain experience: the building and work programs and the summer sessions. No longer renters, the faculty started to dream of a more permanent, year-round existence for the college. Bauhaus architects Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer were asked to design plans for the new campus. Cost prohibitive, those plans were never realized. Ultimately the well-regarded editor of the *Architectural Record*, A. Lawrence Kocher, joined the faculty as resident architect and promptly began designing and constructing, with the help of the students, the main building on campus—the Studies Building.

31. Josef Albers, *Interaction of Color* (1963; repr. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971), 73; cited in Eva Diaz, "Experiment, Expression, and the Paradox of Black Mountain College," in *Starting at Zero: Black Mountain College, 1933–57* (Bristol: Arnolfini, and Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, 2005), 45. Emphasis added.
32. De Kooning, "Albers Paints a Picture," 41.
33. Elaine de Kooning writes, "Thus he considers each painting a variant rather than a final solution, leaving the way open for endless experiment." Ibid., 57.
34. *Kunstwollen*—loosely translated as "the will to art"—is a term derived from the art historian Alois Riegl that signifies the tendency in an age toward a given style or form, which may happen with or without the intention of the individual artist.
35. Robert Rauschenberg, quoted in Calvin Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors* (New York: Viking, 1965), 199–200. For Leo Steinberg on postmodernism, see Leo Steinberg, "Other Criteria," in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 55–92.

top: Heinrich Jalowetz in concert with Frederick Cohen, c. 1942–44. Photo by Will Hamlin.
bottom: 1944 Summer Art Institute faculty, with José de Creeft, Jean Charlot, Amédée Ozenfant, Bernard Rudofsky, and Josef Albers. Photo by Tom Milius.

This new, permanent home meant that the students and faculty no longer had to vacate for the summer months. In 1944, Heinrich Jalowetz, the much-beloved music teacher, organized a summer music institute in honor of composer Arnold Schoenberg's seventieth birthday. Jalowetz had been one of Schoenberg's "most admired students"[36] and "was probably the single most beloved figure in Black Mountain's history."[37] Jalowetz (or "Jalo," as he was called) had been a prominent conductor in Europe but in 1933 was forced from his Cologne post as part of a Nazi purge. He spent six more years in Europe before deciding to leave for the open position at Black Mountain. He arrived in 1939 with his wife, Johanna, who taught bookbinding and voice. While there, Jalowetz prepared a two-piano arrangement of Schoenberg's 1942 *Ode to Napoleon*,[38] a late work for string quartet, piano, and reciter that Schoenberg explicitly produced as an "anti-Hitler" work, stating: "I knew it was the moral duty of intelligentsia to take a moral stand against tyranny."[39]

The 1944 Summer Music Institute—dedicated to the theme of "interpretation"—turned Black Mountain into a mecca for Schoenberg studies. Jalowetz opened the session by advocating for the role music could play in "the stupendous task of reconstructing our shaken world," and the work of music in opposition to tyranny was amplified in Rudolf Kulish's course Democratic Practices of Ensemble Playing.[40] Josef Albers invited visual artists to be present that summer, many of whom were also European: photographer Josef Breitenbach; sculptor José de Creeft; French expatriot and assistant to Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, Jean Charlot; French critic and painter Amédée Ozenfant; and Bernard Rudofsky, who taught clothing design in advance of his invention of the perennially popular Bernardo sandal. Gropius came to give lectures, as did the directors of education at the Baltimore Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art.

These art sessions flourished in subsequent summers, bringing an influx of new students, specifically art students. New faculty, hired especially for the summer, also immeasurably energized the college. The summer sessions and their rosters of impressive teachers, more than anything else, consolidated Black Mountain's identity as an art school, even though, in fact, it was not one. The summer sessions permitted an extraordinary form of cross-pollination. Many students and faculty who attended the summer sessions returned to their hometowns and institutions with tales of the intellectual and aesthetic permissiveness and freedom that permeated the school. New York School painter Jack Tworkov summed it up in a letter to his sister and her husband:

> This place is apt to do more for my education than I can do for the students here. Would take a very long letter to describe this place. It is in the mountains and the landscape is superb. It is a very good place to spend the summer. But it is not in the physical aspects of this place that is [*sic*] interesting. But a principle of community living and education that I have heard about but never saw put in practice. These people are willing to take the consequences of what they preach—which is most unusual. In essence there exists the utmost freedom for people to be what they please. There is simply no pattern of behavior, no criteria to live up to. People study what they please, as long as they want to, idle if they want to, graduate whenever they are willing to stand on examination, even after only a month here, or a year, or whatever, or they can waive all examinations, and graduations. They can attend classes, or stay away. They can work entirely by themselves, or they need not work whatever. They can be male, female, or fairy, married, single, or live in illicit love. The instructors can hold classes or tutor individually, meet their classes as often or as little as they want to. Yet much work is being done here. There are wonderful scholars, artists, and musicians here. There is a quality of good manners, not based on formal behavior, that is impressive, gentle and sweet.[41]

There would be many legendary summers at Black Mountain: In 1946, Albers invited the painter Jacob Lawrence, who came with his wife, the artist Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence; the sculptor Lee Amino; the photographers Nancy and Beaumont Newhall; the woodworker Molly Gregory; and Gropius. The faculty roster for the summer of 1948 alone ensured the mythic status of Black Mountain—including, as it did, Willem and Elaine de Kooning, Merce Cunningham, John Cage, R. Buckminster Fuller, Peter Grippe, and Richard Lippold, among others. That summer, the student body swelled to seventy-seven students, many there courtesy of the GI Bill. Almost none of the summer faculty was

36. Martin Brody, "The Scheme of the Whole: Black Mountain and the Course of American Modern Music," in *Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art*, ed. Vincent Katz (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 246.
37. Duberman, *Black Mountain*, 172.
38. Author's notes from presentation by Martin Brody at a Black Mountain College roundtable, February 21–22, 2014, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston.
39. Arnold Schoenberg, "How I Came to Compose the Ode to Napoleon," reprinted in *Journal of the Arnold Schoenberg Institute* 2, no. 1 (1977): 55. Cited in Hiam, "Music at Black Mountain College," 49.
40. See Mary Emma Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 94.
41. Jack Tworkov, *The Extreme of the Middle: Writings of Jack Tworkov*, ed. Mira Schor (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 285.

Amédée Ozenfant, *The Sleeping Canyon*, 1945–46. Oil on canvas on Masonite, 52 x 39 inches.

top: Peter Grippe, *Man with Hammer*, 1941. Terra-cotta, 14 x 10 x 15 inches.
bottom: José de Creeft, *The Cloud*, 1939. Stone, 13 7/8 x 12 3/8 x 8 1/4 inches.

1946 Summer Art Institute faculty, with (left to right) Leo Amino, Jacob Lawrence, Leo Lionni, Theodore Dreier, Nora Lionni, Beaumont Newhall, Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence, Ise Gropius, Jean Varda, Nancy Newhall, Walter Gropius, Molly Gregory, Josef Albers, and Anni Albers.

paid a salary but received instead room and board and some relaxing time in the country. In the background, there was considerable faculty strife, alliances had been formed, grudges established, and the utopian idealism of the early days was starting to fade.[42] But the summer sessions continued, and efforts were made to suspend disagreements during the summer period when the campus was flooded with guests and students.

In 1949, Albers asked Fuller to convene a group of teachers for the summer, and Fuller obliged by inviting painter Emerson Woelffer and his wife, the photographer Dina Woelffer; Nataraj Vashi and his wife, Pra-Veena, came to teach Indian dance and philosophy; and the husband-and-wife team Jano and John Walley taught ceramics, jewelry, and the basic arts classes. All came from the Institute of Design in Chicago—a school founded by László Maholy-Nagy that had largely been modeled after the Bauhaus. Other sessions consolidated around a particular medium, such as that of 1951, when photographers Harry Callahan, Arthur Siegel, and Aaron Siskind came together. Such focus inspired the fall 1952 Pottery Seminar, which hosted British ceramist Bernard Leach; Bauhaus potter Marguerite Wildenhain; Japanese curator and historian Sōetsu Yanagi; and Shōji Hamada, a potter who would go on to become a Living National Treasure of Japan.

The list of impressive proper names continues, and the archival record is filled with fleeting glances of people who were not yet famous but were in the early days of shaping their chosen medium, of profoundly challenging the forms inherent to it, artists who were in the process of becoming the historical personages we now accept them to be. What is perhaps more remarkable than the names themselves is the constellation of ideas and intimacies Black Mountain made possible. Unlike the Bauhaus, which offered training explicitly aimed at producing a working artist, Black Mountain College was looser when it came to the relations between cause and effect. The faculty, in its heterogeneity, produced a set of what historian Ernst Bloch would call "conditions" rather than espousing a pedagogy that would be the "cause" whose "effect" would produce a certain "type" of student. Bloch, in a valiant attempt to render the Hegelian drive toward progress more nuanced, suggests that cause and effect are not purely teleological but rather reciprocal, effecting and causing one another in turn ("Causality is in no way static . . . but is a process.")[43] To complicate our too-easy historical model of cause and effect, he offers the idea of conditions, which "set the possible, but they do not do anything. The realization of the possible as something new occurs through the subjective factor working as an active cause in human history."[44] To my ear, this sounds like an apposite description of what happened at Black Mountain College: a set of conditions was established—through the accident of geography, the devastation of world war and its attendant forced migrations and economic hardships, and the coincidence of its attending faculty and students—and the possibilities thus lay *in potentia*.

The summer sessions modeled a form of artistic community, one that de Kooning took with him to New York in 1950, when he helped to found the Artists' Club, a gathering dedicated to the presentation of avant-garde ideas. Albers cast the die strongly with his first invitations. Known as a disciplinarian in the classroom, he was exquisitely catholic in his taste, purposely inviting people whose work was nothing like his own (the Social Realism of Lawrence, the incipient Abstract Expressionism of de Kooning, the whimsy of Lyonel Feininger, the biomorphism of Amino). This kind of heterogeneity continued even after Albers departed Black Mountain, with poet Charles Olson taking the lead in summer invitations, asking dancers as disparate as Cunningham and Katherine Litz, poets as divergent as Robert Duncan and Robert Creeley. Indeed, the practice of inviting guest artists to visit for short teaching stints was to become part of the culture of American art schools for the rest of the twentieth century.[45] Black Mountain helped to establish the idea that an art school is a place of competing and diverse ideas, where the task of the faculty is to commit to a sense of rigor instead of personal taste, and the job of the students is to navigate the complexity of the options, in the hope of finding their own paths through what John Cage called "the big question," namely, "What are you going to do with your time?"[46]

42. As with any small community composed of strong-willed individuals, Black Mountain College was subject to a series of internal schisms—many of which were political in nature, inasmuch as they tended to revolve around issues of leadership and power. Such disagreements were especially charged given the lack of a board of trustees or other form of outside governance. Duberman charts the first series of debates surrounding college founder John Rice's departure from the college in his chapter "Schism," in *Black Mountain*, 114–52. Duberman and Mary Emma Harris each offer accounts of the next major breakdown at the college, which ultimately led to the departures of Theodore Dreier and Josef and Anni Albers. See Duberman, "The Split," in *Black Mountain*, 172–211; and Harris, "Reorganization and Resignation," in *The Arts at Black Mountain College*, 164–65.
43. Ernst Bloch, "Causality and Finality as Active, Objectifying Categories (Categories of Transmission)," *Telos*, no. 21 (Fall 1974): 105.
44. Ibid., 104–5.
45. See Howard Singerman, *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). Notably, the California Institute for the Arts (CalArts) and the Bard College MFA program both cite Black Mountain, with its heterogeneity and interdisciplinarity, as a model in their founding.
46. John Cage, interview with Richard Kostelanetz (1968), in *John Cage: An Anthology*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991), 28.

top: John Evarts playing piano, with Josef Albers, seated (with cigarette), at Halloween party, n.d.
bottom: Saturday night dance in dining hall on Lake Eden campus, c. 1945.

Clemens Kalischer, *Black Mountain College, 1948, The Ruse of Medusa by Satie*, 1948. Gelatin silver print, 11 x 14 inches. Asheville Art Museum, Black Mountain College Collection.

7
SELF-ENTERTAINMENT

In 1947, there were forty million radios in the United States and about forty-four thousand television sets (with probably thirty thousand in the New York area alone).[47] Suffice it to say televisions played no role at Black Mountain College, and while there was likely at least one radio on campus, one encounters little evidence of it in the literature or the archive. There was, however, an enormous library of recorded music, which had been given by Thomas Whitney Surette.[48] Student Michael Rumaker recalled his Black Mountain College days as saturated with ambient music, from the sounds of students practicing their instruments to David Tudor teaching himself Pierre Boulez's notoriously difficult Second Piano Sonata, to poet Charles Olson playing a Miles Davis record over and over again.[49]

The role of performance at Black Mountain is typically reduced to the mushroom-like appearance of John Cage's *Theater Piece No. 1*. Widely considered the first Happening, it included almost all of the performative arts: dance, music, and poetry. However, this event, conducted on an August evening in 1952, was one among hundreds of performances. The tradition of the community entertaining itself after dinner was established in the early days of the college, when it occupied the Blue Ridge Assembly. Music instructor John Evarts played "waltzes, polkas, square dances, and other songs" after dinner on Saturday evenings for dances that were attended by faculty and students.[50] During the years before the war, women wore long dresses and men sported suit and tie for these events. Small student-printed announcements publicized recitals that included works by Beethoven, Bach, and Bartók.[51] The Black Mountain community seems to have smoothly moved from high to low culture, not only in music but also in film. According to alumna Jacqueline Gourevitch, the dining hall's furniture was rearranged after dinner for screenings of films ranging from those of Buster Keaton (from which she learned that "a funny thing could be serious") to those of Sergei Eisenstein.[52] Similarly, former student Mary Fiore remembered that she "danced a lot," that photographer Hazel Larsen Archer screened movies borrowed from New York's Museum of Modern Art, and that the "theater was fantastic."[53]

Robert Wunsch, one of the Rollins dissidents to follow Rice to Black Mountain, initiated the theater program.[54] True to the heterogeneity of the college, the theater program also made room for Xanti and Irene Schawinsky's version of Bauhaus theater, with abstract costumes and nonnarrative scripts. Theatrical performances took place throughout the college's existence and ranged from the conventional stage plays of Thornton Wilder and Irving Shaw to avant-garde works such as Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Erik Satie's *The Ruse of Medusa* (with an all-star cast that included R. Buckminster Fuller, Elaine de Kooning, and Merce Cunningham). Students were involved in the creation of both costumes and sets for the theater, and this work blurred into costume parties. Fiore remembers one with a medieval theme. Color slides taken by Josef Albers document costumes for a Valentine's Day ball in 1940 (pages 100–101), and a black-and-white photograph shows Robert Rauschenberg working on a costume for Carnival.

The mutability between art and entertainment, between work and play, was essential, not only because the mission of progressive education was to train democratic citizens capable of "the pursuit of happiness" but also because it allowed for shifting positions between artist and audience. This fluidity suggested that making art was not an isolated activity, nor was membership

in an audience a permanent condition. Rather the move between the two positions (actor and audience) was constitutive of the social fabric in which members have equal and rotating obligations to one another. This quality of life at Black Mountain College echoed through summer-session faculty member Ben Shahn's lecture "The Education of an Artist," when he asked his audience to consider the following question: "Besides the questions of what to paint and how to paint and the one I cannot attempt to answer—how to live—there is a further question which I often ask myself. That is, for whom does one paint?"[55] His answer, oblique as it was, came later in the lecture: "The public function of art has always been one of creating community, that is not necessarily its intention, but it is its result."[56]

8
COSMOPOLITANISM

Black Mountain College is a small cosmopolitan community of students and teachers living together, an education stressing democratic cooperation.

—Black Mountain College brochure[57]

On December 5, 1933, the *Asheville Citizen* ran an image and notice about the recent arrival in town of artists Josef and Anni Albers from Berlin. Anni stands in furs and a cloche hat with a black net veil; Josef looks stunned, his tie as snug as a noose. The picture could have been taken by Grant Wood; a veritable European Gothic. They had landed in the rural American South. Part of the myth of Black Mountain College is that it represents, in microcosm, the historical trajectory of post–World War II art, namely that the concentration of avant-garde art making and theorizing would shift from Europe to America. Threadbare from its retelling, the tale can be found on any average American art historian's bookshelf, in such titles as *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, *The American Century*, and *The Triumph of American Painting*.[58] It's no wonder that the hegemonic bias of this narrative infiltrated the early critical writing on Black Mountain. Mary Emma Harris's still-indispensable *The Arts at Black Mountain College* includes

Germans To Teach Art Near Here

Professor Josef and Frau Albers, above, of Dessau, Germany, where they taught art in the famous Bauhaus school there until Hitler's policies caused it to close recently, this week joined the faculty of Black Mountain college at Blue Ridge to conduct an art department in the college.

Asheville Citizen 12/5/33

Germans On Faculty At Black Mountain School

Josef And Frau Albers Named Instructors In Art There

With Professor Josef and Frau Albers, of Dessau, Germany, as instructors, an art department has been established at Black Mountain college at Blue Ridge near here.

Professor and Frau Albers were until recently members of the faculty of the Bauhaus school in Dessau, which was world famous as an exponent of the international idea of art. The school was forced to close because of the national educational policies of the new Hitler government. The two art teachers were brought to Black Mountain college, the only college in the United States under direct faculty control, by the New York Museum of Art.

Internationally Known

Having served as an instructor of art at the Bauhaus school for the last decade, Professor Albers is internationally known in, [illegible]

...curves for his glass painting and for his unusual method of art instruction.

Frau Albers is considered an outstanding textile designer of Europe, having taken an active part in the German movement to revive the art of textile weaving. She is noted for using unusual materials in her weaving, especially a synthetic material made largely of straw, which she uses in making tapestries.

At the Bauhaus, the course on "Material Technic," given by Professor Albers, was the only one required of students in all departments—the theater, dance, music, and art. The German professor says that it is his theory that all artistic creation is a kind of "form-giving," and that the four structure of all creative work is the same. He, therefore, advocates that the art student should choose an art medium for personal expression only after the student has obtained a general education.

"Professor Albers may exert an influence in this country that will fundamentally change present methods of approach to art education," M. M. Warburg, trustee of the Museum of Modern Art, declared in discussing the German artist's ability. Dr. F. R. Georgia, professor of chemistry and president of Black Mountain college, said:

Completes Art Faculty

"Professor Albers' main interest in his work," Mr. Warburg continued, "is the drawing out of creative possibilities in his students by a series of experimental exercises in technic."

The addition of an art department to the newly founded Black Mountain college, which is in its first year of education completes its faculty for art training. Miss Hilda Loram has charge of the dramatics department of the college and teaches English, and John Evarts is professor of music.

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Page from *Asheville Citizen*, December 5, 1933.

the chapter "An Essentially American Venture," and Martin Duberman's long discussion of the intellectual schisms at Black Mountain often circulates around the purported tensions between the differing values held by the Europeans and the Americans teaching at the college. Such powerful narrations have contributed to the idea that some of Black Mountain's infamous schisms and its ultimate demise came about from the conflicts between an old-world European gentility and a brash, new, self-centered Americanism. How else to explain the school's programmatic evolution: from the full community of students and faculty taking Albers's Friday design course to atomized, one-on-one student visits with such painters as Theodoros Stamos and Jack Tworkov? How better to narrate the divide between Albers's doggedly repetitive class assignments (an example of the European tradition of rote memorization) and the free-form drawings that the Abstract Expressionist painters encouraged (which could be seen as exclusively American)? And how neatly such a framework helps explain how the musical landscape dominated by Beethoven and Schoenberg shifted to the more experimental one that highlighted John Cage's compositions featuring a prepared piano, magnetic tape, and radios. How better to describe the change in the faculty's literary endeavors, from one typified by M. C. Richards's groundbreaking translations of Erik Satie and Antonin Artaud to one characterized by Charles Olson's obsession with his own native fishing town of Gloucester, Massachusetts, and his critical work on Herman Melville?

That such intellectual and pedagogical sea changes were accompanied by a generational shift (Heinrich Jalowetz and Albers were born, respectively, in 1882 and 1888, Olson and Cage in 1910 and 1912) only serves to further consolidate the easy trap of cause and effect this story traffics in so expertly. The notion of America's triumph over Europe more generally inflects other tales about Black Mountain College: for some, it was a utopian community, an idyll of artistic and personal liberties; for others,

47. "History of Television," *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_television, accessed August 2014, citing Robert Shagawat, "Television recording—The Origins and Earliest Surviving Live TV Broadcast Recordings," *Early Television Museum*, http://www.earlytelevision.org/pdf/Television_Recording_Origins.pdf.pdf, October 4, 2004, updated April 2011.
48. Thomas Whitney Surette, founder and director of the Concord Summer School of Music, taught briefly at the college and was a member of the advisory council from 1933 until his death in 1941, at which point he willed his entire music library to the college. Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College*, 32.
49. Michael Rumaker, *Black Mountain Days: A Memoir* (2003; repr., New York: Spuyten Duyvil, 2012). Rumaker on Olson and Davis, 162–63; on ambient music, 278–84.
50. See Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College*, 32.
51. For a full accounting of all of the music played in recital at Black Mountain College, see Hiam, "Music at Black Mountain College."
52. Jacqueline Gourevitch, conversation with the author, March 17, 2014, New York.
53. Mary Fiore, conversation with the author, May 20, 2014, New York.
54. The most authoritative account of theater at Black Mountain is that of Harris, in *The Arts at Black Mountain College*, 36–46.
55. Ben Shahn, *The Shape of Content* (New York: Vintage, 1957), 145. Shahn was on the Black Mountain faculty during the summer session of 1952.
56. Ibid., 150. Shahn goes on to give examples: "the religious community created by one phase of art, the peasant community created by another." If we follow Shahn's logic, then one result of placing art at the center of Black Mountain's curriculum was to create a community of artists who functioned equally as practitioners and audience.
57. Black Mountain College brochure, box 1, folder 3, Mary Caroline Richards Papers, 1898–2007, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.
58. Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Barbara Haskell, *The American Century: Art and Culture, 1900–1950* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, in association with Norton, 1999); Lisa Phillips, *The American Century: Art and Culture, 1950–2000* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, in association with Norton, 1999); Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism* (New York: Praeger, 1970).

top: The Hindu dance and philosophy instructor Nataraj Vashi practicing yoga, summer 1949. Photo by Masato Nakagawa.
bottom: Carlos Mérida on the porch of Lee Hall, spring 1940. Photo by Claude Stoller.

it represents the failure of the utopian dream, its demise proving that academic infighting is the poison that will kill us all. This juxtaposition, with its stark contrasts, neatly reflects a parallel dispute about the American-European post–World War II relationship: one side of that quarrel reasons that an American exceptionalism came to define freedom, tout court, and the other side holds the equally pessimistic view that the American utopian experiment failed because it needed the ballast of old Europe to support its overreaching aims. While it is certainly true that the profound and painful schisms that existed at the college might have been geographically inclined and generationally inflected, I find that another Black Mountain College appears neither idyllic nor failed, when viewed through the lens of cosmopolitanism.

In its early years, Black Mountain College saw its faculty, both in art and the social sciences, grow through the migration of teachers who were escaping the horrors of war-ravaged Europe. That migration to the United States was a forced one, and many of those faculty members looked beneficently on their new country; it had offered them safe haven in a storm. Black Mountain College was suffused by rhetoric about democracy. It was a community dedicated to enabling the critical thinking deemed crucial to the task of performing the duties of democratic citizenship. But it's worth asking what version of community was being modeled. Albers set a strong course by routinely inviting artists who differed from him. So, too, his trips to Mexico with Anni resulted in an open road between Asheville and its even more southern neighbor. News of muralists, archaeological sites, and ideas about design and art traveled back and forth along this route, equally carried by faculty and students. The "Old World" values of Europe met the "New World" values of pre-Columbian Mexico, in a heady mix where ideas such as "form" and "art" were the lingua franca. This cross-cultural exchange happened repeatedly at Black Mountain College; indeed, it could be argued that it typified the Black Mountain experience. Most people who came through Black Mountain College stayed for a year, sometimes a summer, and then moved on. They brought with them news from afar: Willem de Kooning brought the first glimpses of a burgeoning movement in New York; Cage disturbed the Germanic musical imagination with the work of French composer Erik Satie; Nataraj Vashi and Pra-Veena introduced the dance and philosophy of India; Paul Goodman heralded the earliest stirrings of what would become the sexual revolution; Roland Hayes merged classical opera with African-American spirituals; Charles Olson and Ben Shahn brought their shared fascination with coding and decoding, born during their days in the Office of War Information; and Shōji Hamada and Sōetsu Yanagi lectured on Buddhism and the Mingei craft movement from Japan . . . the list goes on. Far from producing a utopian culture of anodyne art-for-art's-sake or fostering the idea that community means a group bound together by similar heritage or shared interests, this mix of individuals privileged the heterogeneity of cultures, ideas, and practitioners.

The question remains: what to make of all of this diversity? Given the intensely discursive nature of life at Black Mountain College, we can assume that the faculty and students weren't interested in difference for its own sake. What then did this concentration on community—extolled in the college's early promotional literature and instantiated in the communal dining room and the work program—and heterogeneity mean? One way to parse the differences between the artists at Black Mountain is to compare two differing examples of their relations to music. For instance, an early college brochure stated, "Black Mountain believes that in a shaken world of ideas, music, as a world of inner order, can help toward developing that community for which we all toil."[59] Later, in the 1950s, composer Stefan Wolpe, a former Bauhaus student who fled Germany and arrived in the US via Russia and Palestine, would write that music as a form served to "make connections, bump against one another" and that it had "immediate, delayed, distant, shifting, single, many, similar, dissimilar, direct, vague, and opposite goals."[60] What appears to be at stake is the role art might play within a community of shared and competing interests and desires. The early Black Mountain text implies that the harmony achieved by music—the coming together in unity of many players in one composition, for instance—is the task of art specifically and of community life more generally. By contrast, Wolpe's diaristic notes imply an interest in the possibility of discord and misalignment. In both quotes, we hear the formal attributes of music and the social dynamics of communal life being analogized to each other, so much so that I find it tempting to read the attributes each writer assigns to music as a description of Black Mountain itself.

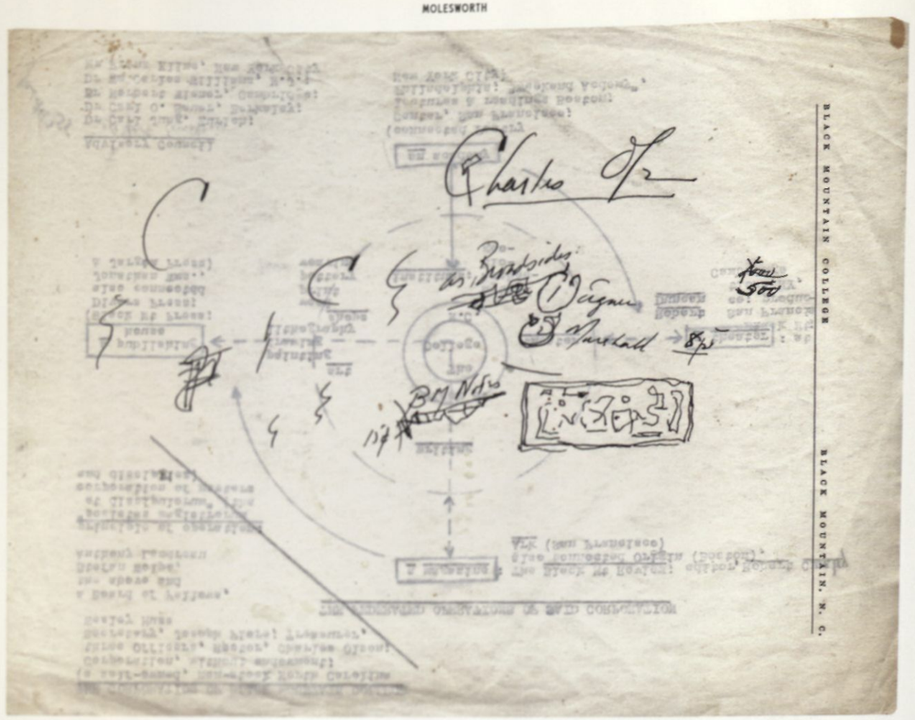
Heinrich Jalowetz working with a student vocalist, n.d.

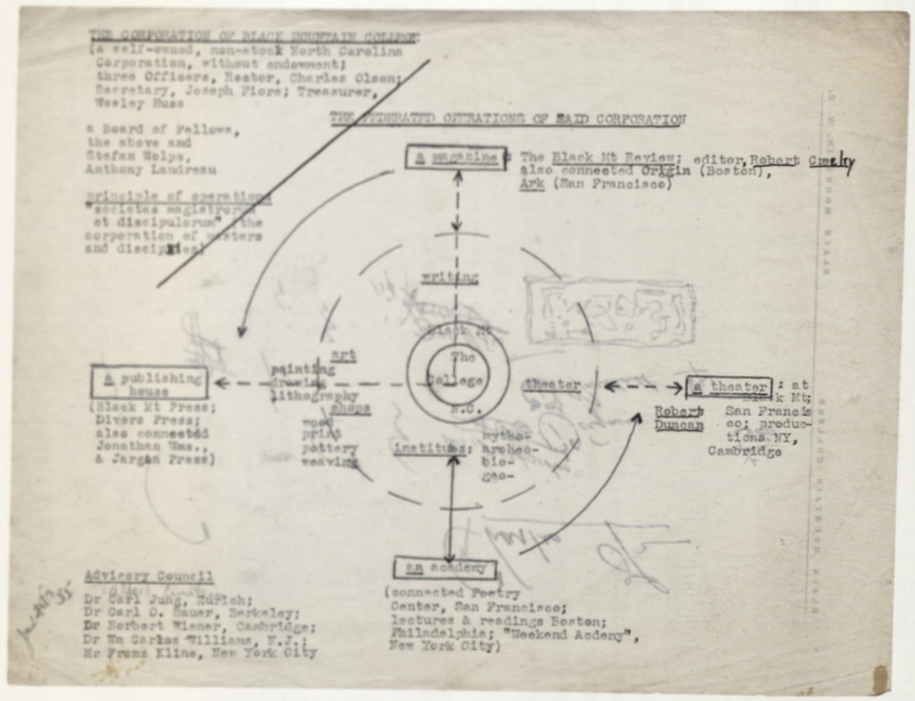
These citations might also point toward another way of parsing the divisions and tensions that occurred at Black Mountain. Rather than seeing these social dynamics as purely geographic or merely generational (though they were both), Wolpe's description of music-as-community can be considered in terms of a shift away from a humanist view of democracy and community to a cosmopolitan perspective on those difficult ideals. Postcolonial theorists have challenged the idea of the cosmopolitan subject as an urban effete who effortlessly traverses national boundaries aided by the ease of class distinction. Rather, they describe a twentieth century distinguished by forced migrations, expatriation, and large diasporic movements. Many scholars have come to see modernism as a way of dealing with the "historical and political transformations of community, transformations that occasioned . . . an almost desperate effort to recoup community in the form of nationalism and facism."[61] In the face of the Nazis' draconian endgame version of "community," cosmopolitanism emerges as an alternative way of thinking about the social fabric, its contracts, and the problems of individuality and belonging. For Kwame Anthony Appiah, the cosmopolitan subject differs from the nationalist subject through a concern with the human rights of all persons, not just the ones like them. Even further, for Appiah, "the humanist requires us to put our differences aside; the cosmopolitan insists that sometimes it is the differences we bring to the table that make it rewarding to interact at all."[62]

The lens of cosmopolitanism allows Black Mountain to be seen less as a failed utopian experiment in community and more as a living example of radical democracy in action, an experiment in the practice of community that requires neither consensus nor harmony. Likewise cosmopolitanism does not imply pure detachment. I have come to see Black Mountain as a site of what Bruce Robbins has called the "reality of (re)attachment, multiple attachment, or attachment at a distance."[63] Here, subjects, as Homi Bhabha has written, come "into being in the moment between these two locations, in the moment of translation that occupies the interstices."[64] Hence the intense relativity of color that preoccupied Josef Albers can be read as a model of subjectivity, as well as an exploration of a specific formal pictorial problem. For subjects, like color, are differently inflected and available for dissimilar perceptions in disparate contexts. And, to further the analogy, we can glean from Albers's insistence on the discipline of repetition that our sense of self, as much as our creative work, is subject to repetition and performance.

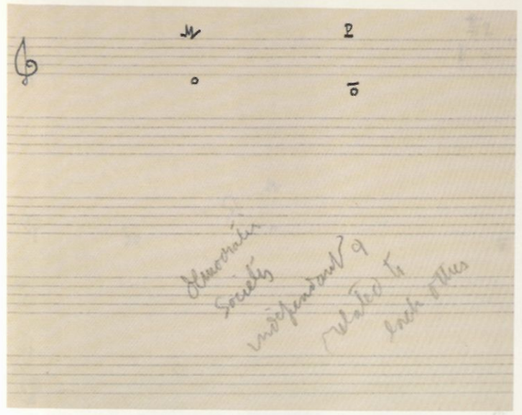
Perhaps this is one way to understand Cage's composition *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* (1951). The score instructs twelve pairs of performers to play twelve radios according to time signatures, one performer controlling the volume and the other controlling the tone. The radio stations would be local, the performers individual, and the radios may or may not be the same model. The resulting performance in which everything is all mixed up—cacophony punctured by fleeting moments of coincidental harmony—is hilarious and infuriating, confusing and pleasurable. The repetition of the score necessarily produces infinite singular variations on the core, shared structure. This jibes with a small handwritten note of Cage's I came across in

59. *Black Mountain College Bulletin* 1, no. 3 (February 1943).
60. Stefan Wolpe, quoted in Brigid Cohen, "Diasporic Dialogues in Mid-Century New York: Stefan Wolpe, George Russell, Hannah Arendt and the Historiography of Displacement," *Journal for the Society of American Music* 6, no. 2 (2012): 159.
61. Jessica Schiff Berman, *Modernist Fiction, Cosmopolitanism, and the Politics of Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 3.
62. Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Cosmopolitan Patriots," *Critical Inquiry* 23, no. 3 (Spring 1997): 638–39.
63. Bruce Robbins, quoted in Berman, *Modernist Fiction, Cosmopolitanism, and the Politics of Community*, 16.
64. Homi Bhabha, quoted in ibid., 17.





Charles Olson, *Plan for the Operation of Black Mountain College after 1956* (verso and recto), c. 1954. Ink on paper, 8 ½ x 11 inches.



Detail of a page from one of John Cage's 1958 musical-notation books. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

one of his composition books at the Getty Research Institute. In it he had scrawled, in pencil, on the back of a page, "democratic society independent & related to each other."[65] The equal emphasis on independence and interconnectedness produces tension, but not only tension. Certainly, when Merce Cunningham decided that all the elements of a dance—music, scenography, choreography, and costume—could be conceived of as acting independently from one another, that is, when he ruptured the synthetic relations between dance, music, costumes, and lighting, he showed us that radical parity coupled with independence can produce moments of joy.

One of Black Mountain College's last "official" documents is Olson's diagram circa 1954, typewritten on onionskin paper, of how the college might be saved, how it might continue despite the fact that it had nearly run out of funds (so much that the dining hall was closed, there was no coal to heat the buildings, and the remaining faculty and students, who had retreated to small cabins up on the hill, were, by some accounts, painfully hungry). "The College" is typed at the center point of the diagram's concentric circles. Then, like a map, it branches out into quadrants that are marked not by direction but by types of institutions: a theater, an academy, a magazine, a publishing house, assigned with far-flung locations: Cambridge, Massachusetts; New York; Berkeley, California; Philadelphia; and San Francisco. Activities—painting, lithography, and writing—move away from the center to these outposts. North Carolina appears on the map in the center; underneath, it reads "mytho-, archeo-, bio-, geo-." The diagram speaks to a desire for preservation through atomization. It is a dream picture of a cosmopolitan college of satellite institutions held together by a centripetal force, a myth at its center: Black Mountain College.

It's easy to see the diagram as born of desperation. Olson took over the leadership from Albers, acting as defacto rector until his official appointment in 1954, and the ship was sinking on his watch. To his credit, he did not abandon it: after the college closed, he stayed on to finalize its financial affairs, as well as its psychic ones—namely, the dispersal of John Rice's library and the arrangement of long-term care for the gravesites of the beloved Jalowetz and the equally adored mathematics professor Max Dehn.[66] Truth be told, Olson's plan is not so far removed in spirit from that of the college's founders. According to M. C. Richards, "At one time Rice said he thought the college should disperse every ten years into smaller units. . . . This was to avoid too much stability. It was to be faithful to the chaos out of which creativity constellates."[67] The diagram shows how Olson was trying to save what he felt was most important about the place. In an earlier document, written in 1952, when the days were sunnier and warmer, he had penned the following: "Black Mountain College carefully recognizes that, at this point in man's necessities, it is not things in themselves but *what happens between things* where the life of them is to be sought."[68] This rhymes with Bhabha's earlier description of the cosmopolitan subject, whose identity comes not from a rooted place but rather from a movement *between* places, such that the relationships between places is what is of interest and value. In his minor manifesto about what Black Mountain had to offer the prospective student in 1952, Olson suggests that although there are "no ideas but in things"—a phrase of William Carlos Williams he was fond of quoting—things (institutions, education, poetry, art) were meaningful only through the energy that transpired between them. Thus, some years later, he could imagine, in a diagram largely made up of gaps between lines and shapes, an institution dispersed across time and place, an institution whose energies were not rooted in a specific location but whose fertile seeds were carried by individuals to many places. It's as if the diagram visualizes Gertrude Stein's question, "What good are roots if you can't take them with you?" Her quip must have rung in Olson's ears when he sent a postcard from Washington, DC, to Black Mountain student Fielding Dawson with the following bit of verse:

> whatever you have to say, leave
> the roots on, let them
> dangle
> And the dirt
> just to make clear
> where they came from[69]

9
FORM

Every form has meaning. To understand the meaning of form that is the conscious seeing of and feeling for form is the indispensible condition of culture.

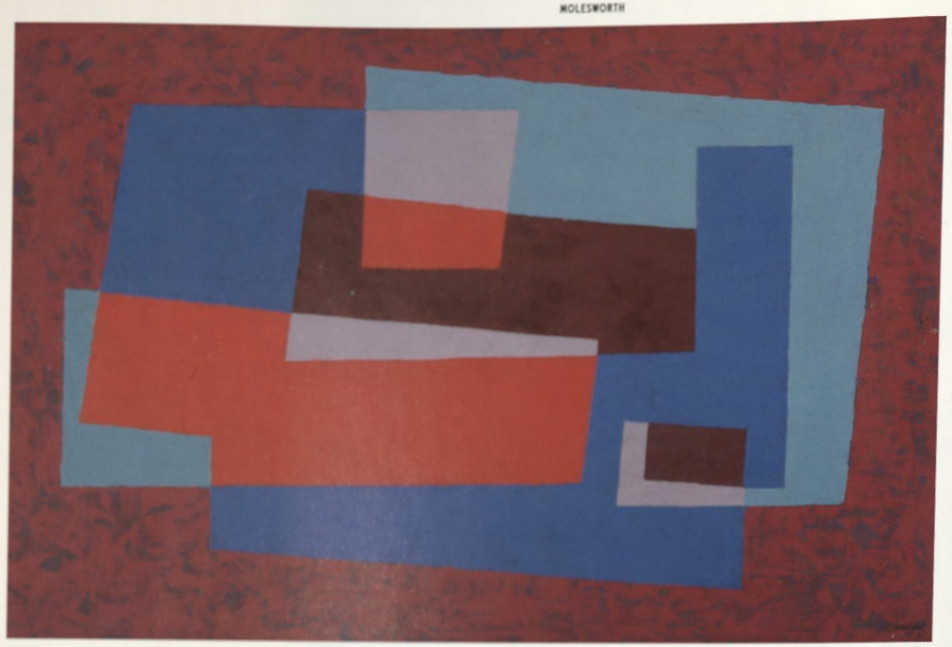
—Katherine Frankforter, class notes from Josef Albers's design class, August 18, c. 1942–45[70]

Form is never more than an extension of content.

—Charles Olson, paraphrasing Robert Creeley[71]

In art, form is the shape or structure of an object. While many of the artists at Black Mountain differed in their approach to pedagogy and the ultimate meaning and/or uses of art and culture, and while they diverged in their views of community, politics, and institutional procedures, nearly all were committed, in profound ways, to the exploration of form. This tendency was firmly established when Josef Albers arrived and instituted the fundamental courses in color and design that he had been perfecting during

65. John Cage, inscription in a musical notation book, 1958, object reference 970077, Special Collections, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.
66. See Duberman, *Black Mountain*, 438.
67. M. C. Richards, "Black Mountain College: A Personal View of Creativity," in *Opening Our Moral Eye: Essays, Talks and Poems Embracing Creativity and Community* (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1996), 67.
68. "BMC Prospectus for Spring Semester, Feb. 11–June 7, 1952," reprinted in *Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art*, 202.
69. Charles Olson, "These Days," in *The Archaeologist in Morning*, quoted in Fielding Dawson, *The Black Mountain Book, A New Edition* (New York: Croton, 1970), 76.
70. Katherine Frankforter, class notes from Black Mountain College, 1942–1945, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.
71. Charles Olson, "Projective Verse" (1950), in Olson, *Human Universe and Other Essays*, ed. Donald Allen (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 51–61. Also available online at http://writing.upenn.edu/~taransky/Projective_Verse.pdf, accessed August 2014. "Projective Verse" first appeared in *Poetry* (1950).



opposite, top: Kenneth Noland, *Untitled*, 1947. Oil on board, 16 x 24 inches.
opposite, bottom: W. Pete Jennerjahn, *Study In Orange, Gray, and Ochre*, c. 1947. Oil on Masonite, 20 x 16 inches.
above: Josef Albers, *Black Frame*, 1934. Oil on Masonite, 15 ½ x 23 ⅞ inches.

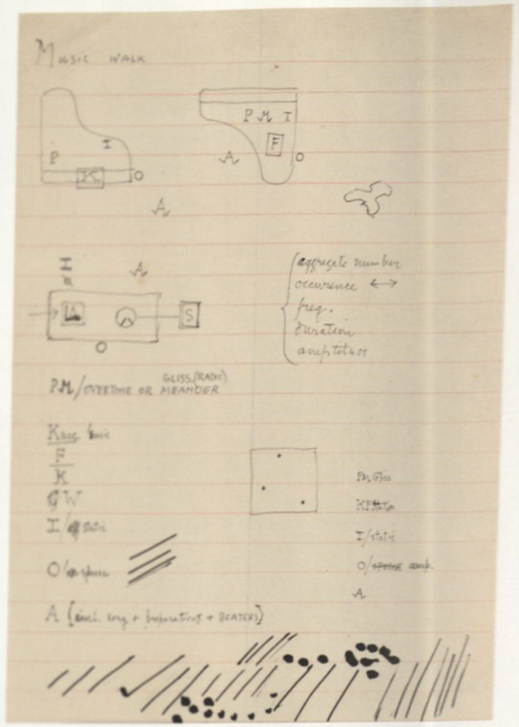
his tenure at the Bauhaus. Tailored to meet the needs of the many nonart students at the college, these courses became the backbone of arts teaching at Black Mountain.

Albers didn't just teach the fundamentals of form in his classes; he repeatedly explored them in his own work, too. His first painting at Black Mountain, *Black Frame* (1934), is a modest and awkward affair. A black picture frame levitates above floating, off-kilter, rectangular planes of verdant green and sky blue. The background of the image is a bifurcated plane of color: rust above and navy below. It's as if Albers found himself in the dissection lab of a biology class; for in *Black Frame*, he diligently pulls apart the constituent parts of a picture: frame, interior, foreground, background, and color. Albers continued this dismantling of the components of images in his prints, where he played with how lines could create three-dimensional space on two-dimensional planes. In his early paintings, he experimented with color to create foreground and background by testing the visual perception of color and shape.

Color preoccupied him for decades to come: he felt it was crucial to understand visual form, and he found color, out of all of art's attributes, to be the most variable, the most slippery. In 1963, long after his tenure at Black Mountain, he wrote: "Practical exercises demonstrate through color deception (illusion) the relativity and instability of color. And experience teaches that in visual perception there is a discrepancy between physical fact and psychic effect."[72] If every form has meaning and the task of discovering that meaning is the very fabric of culture, then Albers had assigned himself the most difficult problem of all: to explore color is to investigate the variables that constitute life (light, context, individual perception, and memory). This kind of inquiry refuses the dogmatic and the all-knowing and prohibits the stifling of creativity that comes from confidence, competence, or habit. Or, as student Ati Gropius understood it in her class notes: "Since art is documentation of human mentality through visual form art is fundamentally concerned with the relationship of appearance to behavior, in other words, the emotional meaning of form."[73]

John Cage originally arrived at Black Mountain as Merce Cunningham's accompanist, but he soon made his presence felt as an ambitious thinker. Cage came to Black Mountain numerous times, including the legendary summer session of 1948 and also during the summers of 1952 and 1953. This period coincided with the time Cage was working through his new ideas about musical composition and his radical rethinking of the forms music could take. The first and most prominent intersection of Cage's new line of thought and the Black Mountain community came in 1948 when he arranged a series of evening concerts of the music of Satie. Given the investments of the musical community at Black Mountain in the Germanic tradition, Albers asked Cage to lecture on Satie's importance. Cage obliged with "Defense of Satie." It was a manifesto in sheep's clothing, offering "the first full articulation of his own personal view of composition."[74] If Albers's project was to isolate color then Cage's was to articulate an equally fundamental aspect of music: time. He put it contentiously: "There has been only one new idea since Beethoven. And that new idea can be perceived in the work of Anton Webern and Erik Satie. With Beethoven the parts of a composition were defined by means of harmony. With Satie and Webern they are defined by means of time length."[75]

Cage observed that sound and silence both depended equally on time, and he began to see silence and sound as similarly important to the compositional process, which led him to

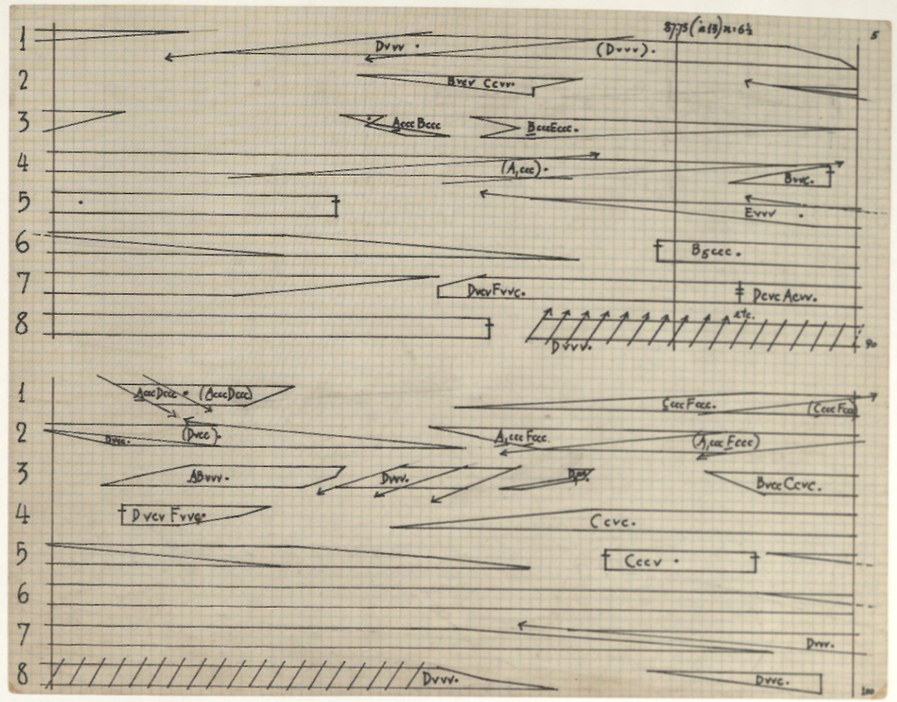


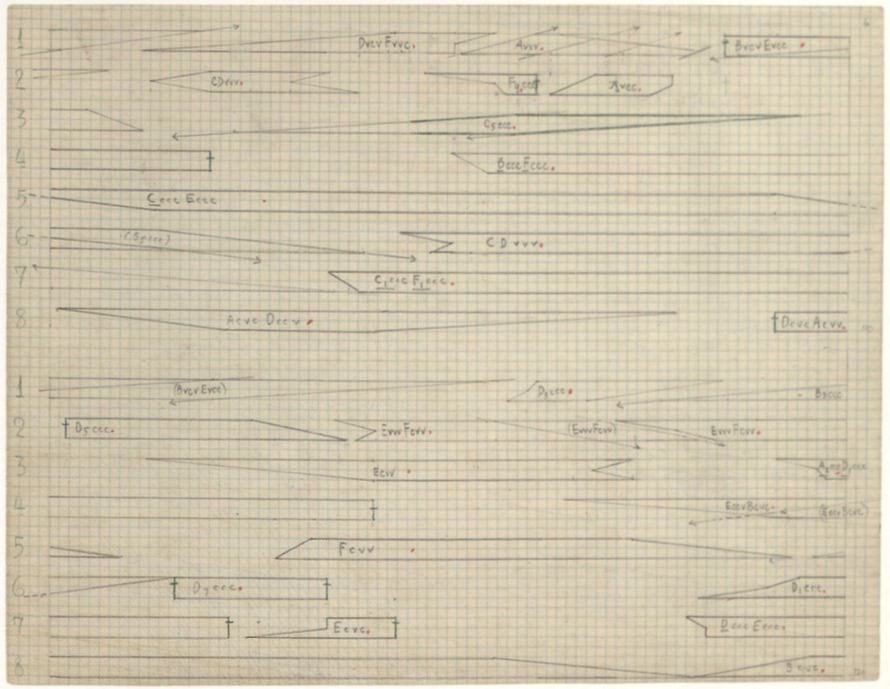
John Cage, *Music Walk (Notation Plan)*, c. 1958. Pen and ink on paper, 8 ¾ x 6 inches. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, The Dorothy and Herbert Vogel Collection, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund, Patrons' Permanent Fund, and Gift of Dorothy and Herbert Vogel, 1991.

conclude that "of the four characteristics of the material of music (pitch, loudness, timbre, and duration) duration, that is time length, is the most fundamental."[76] For Cage, the game was to eliminate the "decadence" of the authorial flourishes that emanate from music's other three characteristics in order to stem what he argued was Beethoven's "deadening of the art of music."[77] Legend has it that Paul Goodman, whose liberal attitudes with regard to sexual politics did not extend into musical taste, was so infuriated by Cage's attack on Beethoven that he stormed out of the room after the lecture.[78]

Cage wanted to replace harmony with time as music's primary modality, so that music could "imitate nature in the manner of her operations." The quote is from South Asian philosopher Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, and Cage repeated it often. Instead of trying to evoke the natural world through music's capacity for affect (e.g., swelling harmonies or the mimicry of natural sounds), Cage began to deploy randomness as a means to represent nature structurally in the formal logic of the composition. (For instance, the natural event of a flock of birds taking off, circling, and landing, is different each time. And this is precisely

72. Albers, *Interaction of Color*, 2.
73. Ati Gropius, class notes from August 1946, box 67, Black Mountain College Research Project Papers, Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina, Asheville, NC.
74. James Pritchett, *The Music of John Cage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 38.
75. John Cage, "Defense of Satie" (1948), in *John Cage: An Anthology*, 81.
76. Ibid.
77. Ibid.
78. Cage recounted this version of the story to Martin Duberman, but as Duberman explains in a note: "There's an unaccountable, major contradiction in Cage's version of this episode as he told it to me in our telephone interview of April 26, 1967. Paul Goodman, he said, not Bodky, had been the man outraged by the anti-Beethoven talk—so much so that 'from then on—even to the present day, [we are] not on speaking terms really. We do speak now but I rarely see him, and we don't search one another out . . . he was absolutely indignant.' But Goodman wasn't at Black Mountain in the summer of 1948, so it would seem that Cage had blended together two episodes from his memory." Duberman, *Black Mountain*, 515–16, n50.





both: John Cage, *Williams Mix*, 1952. Marker on paper, 8 ½ x 11 inches.

the point: randomness is the essential "manner" of nature.) When he borrowed Satie's "relatively banal sounds" derived from generating music based on a time signature and crossed them with randomness, he was attempting to mimic nature's "manner of operations." Cage's observation that non-Western music was not predicated on harmonic structures furthered his interest in the potential relationships between Eastern philosophy and nonharmonic music. *Williams Mix* (1952), made while he was in residence at Black Mountain, is an early and seminal example of Cage's theories turning into his compositional practice. Composed entirely by meticulously splicing and reassembling magnetic-tape recordings, *Williams Mix* runs the gamut from mechanical noises to recorded music, and the score, a nearly inscrutable drawing on graph paper in which gridded squares correspond to periods of time, does not remotely resemble a traditional score with notes on a staff. The work's title is honorific, signaling the financial support offered by Paul and Vera Williams, who were fellow travelers at the college. The summer Cage worked on the piece, he offered it as the subject of a class, but the students were too wise to show up, knowing that class participation would mean hours of painful cutting and splicing. The resulting work is an aural landscape that is nearly nondescript in aggregate. It is difficult to isolate the elements or to discern how it was constructed, but as a whole it constitutes a consummate "sound poem" comprising what any twentieth-century Western citizen might have heard on a daily basis: a blur of sound. *Williams Mix* led Cage toward his lifelong use of chance procedures as an engine for the composition of music that imitates nature's primary operation—random acts of duration structured equally by sound and silence.

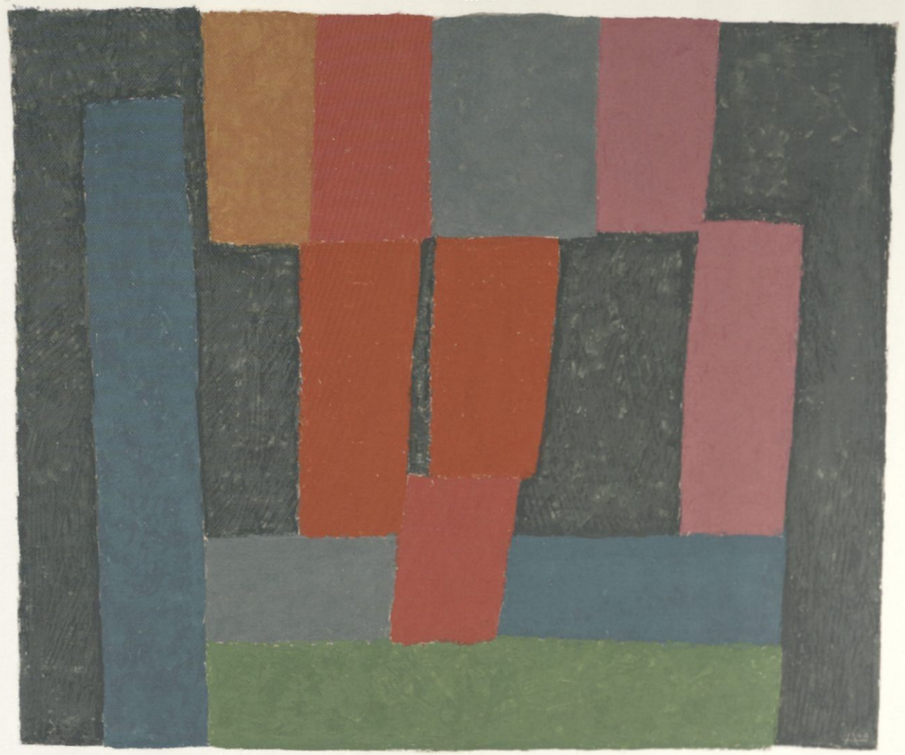
For most of the 1950s, the poet Charles Olson was the unlikely leader at Black Mountain. During his time at the college, he wrote one of his most important aesthetic treatises, "Projective Verse." In it, he staked his claim for a poetry, and perhaps even prose, that resisted "closed verse, the verse which print bred."[79] Olson demanded instead that verse must "put into itself certain laws and possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings."[80] Here we can hear shades of Cage, whose plea for silence as well as sound was integral to his thinking. So too for Olson; listening and breathing were as important to language as writing and reading. The primary task of new verse was to break away from the stranglehold of convention, to liberate language from rhyme and meter, and, ultimately, to free poetry to concentrate on its two most rudimentary formal elements: syllable and line.

The syllable, Olson argued, comes from listening, and the joyfulness of words stems from how they are heard and compounded by the ear: "the ear which has collected, which has listened, the ear, which is so close to the mind that it is the mind's, that it has the mind's speed."[81] Syllables are assembled, arranged, and laid out in line, and the line's logic must be that of the writer's breath. His (it was almost always "his" in Olson's world) breathing becomes the pace of the poem, and hence dictates its velocity and tempo, rather than any predetermined temporal arrangement. Here's how Olson puts it: "The line comes (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment that he writes, and thus is, it is here that, the daily work, the WORK, gets in, for only he, the man who writes, can declare, at every moment, the line its metric and its ending—where its breathing, shall come to, termination."[82] As different as Albers's paintings are in affect and tone from Olson's poems, it is tempting to analogize their interests and methods here. If Albers zeroed in on color as one of paintings' constitutive components and the one most available to individual perception, then Olson trained his attention on the syllable as the building block of poetry and the line as its most individuated element. Lest the individual and his breath become too sentimental an ideal, Olson strongly notes the role of mechanical mediation to the process: "It is the advantage of the typewriter that, due to its rigidity and its space precisions, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, which he intends."[83] Breath, speed, tempo, space: as much as the essay delves into the building blocks of poetry, it also perhaps betrays the exposure Olson had to music and dance at Black Mountain.[84]

Olson was well aware of his attempt to overhaul poetry, to reshape its foundation; in "Projective Verse," he paraphrases in all caps the assertion of his friend Robert Creeley that "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT."[85] It is provocative to flip the order, for, recalling Albers, "all form has meaning." But the order seems beside the point, since, for both Albers and Olson, form and content are in a dialectical relationship suffused with intimacy: you cannot have one without the other. The same is true of Cage's understanding of sound and silence, of nature, "in the manner of her operations" and man-made sounds. For Olson, this intimacy is further conveyed through his understanding of the proximity of writer and reader, speaker and listener. Olson cannot imagine a poem that sits on a page alone, in a book silent. Rather, his address is always to another, and during the Black Mountain years that "other" was most often Creeley, to whom his *Mayan Letters* were written and to whom his magnum opus, *The Maximus Poems*, is dedicated, with the following epigraph: "All my life I've heard/one makes many."[86]

Albers, Cage, Olson: the three men could not have been more different from one another in temperament, training, pedagogical style, and personal politics, and yet they were each committed to the formal roots of their disciplines and mediums: color, time, breath. As much as they fell back on the building blocks of their mediums, they remained open to the present: Albers used mass-produced colored paper and paint directly from the tube, Cage made music with magnetic tape and the radio, and Olson relied on the typewriter. Though they each emphasized the operations of individual perception in their work, they also understood that perception is always mediated. In reckoning with

79. Olson, "Projective Verse."
80. Ibid.
81. Ibid.
82. Ibid.
83. Ibid.
84. Robert Duncan, who taught at Black Mountain in 1956, was also deeply invested in the problem of form. He recalled the teaching methods there as follows: "We dealt first with vowel sounds and took quite a long time with that. Then consonant clusters, and then we did syllables. . . . Perhaps thinking of the work Albers had done earlier at Black Mountain, my idea was to work with the materials of poetry, when a technique applies, and everything else would be their own account." Duncan, quoted in Lisa Jarnot, *Robert Duncan: The Ambassador from Venus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 153. My thanks to Steve Evans for bringing this passage to my attention.
85. Ibid.
86. Charles Olson, while living in the Yucatán, wrote *The Mayan Letters* from December 1950 to July 1951 to Robert Creeley. Creeley edited and assembled the letters and published them in 1953. Charles Olson, *Mayan Letters*, ed. Robert Creeley (Palma, Majorca: Divers Press, 1953); Charles Olson, *The Maximus Poems*, ed. George F. Butterick (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).
87. "BMC Prospectus for Spring Semester, Feb. 11–June 7, 1952," reprinted in *Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art*, 202.
88. One of the many charges against postmodernism is that it lost sight of the problems of form and replaced them with the problems of representation. What emerges from a rethinking of Black Mountain is the strong line of continuation and filiation that postmodernism has with modernism; this suggests that there is perhaps something to be gained through reengaging with the aesthetic and political possibilities of form.
89. Olson, "Untitled," *The Maximus Poems*, 343.
90. Kobena Mercer, "Romare Bearden, 1964 Collage as *Kunstwollen*," in *Cosmopolitan Modernisms*, ed. Kobena Mercer (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 126.



Josef Albers, *Growing*, 1940. Oil on Masonite, 24 x 26 ¾ inches.

the effects of quotidian technologies and their impact on the individual, they are each of their time: as they dug for the root, they nevertheless remained grounded in the present, which saved their art from taking on the airlessness of pure formalism.

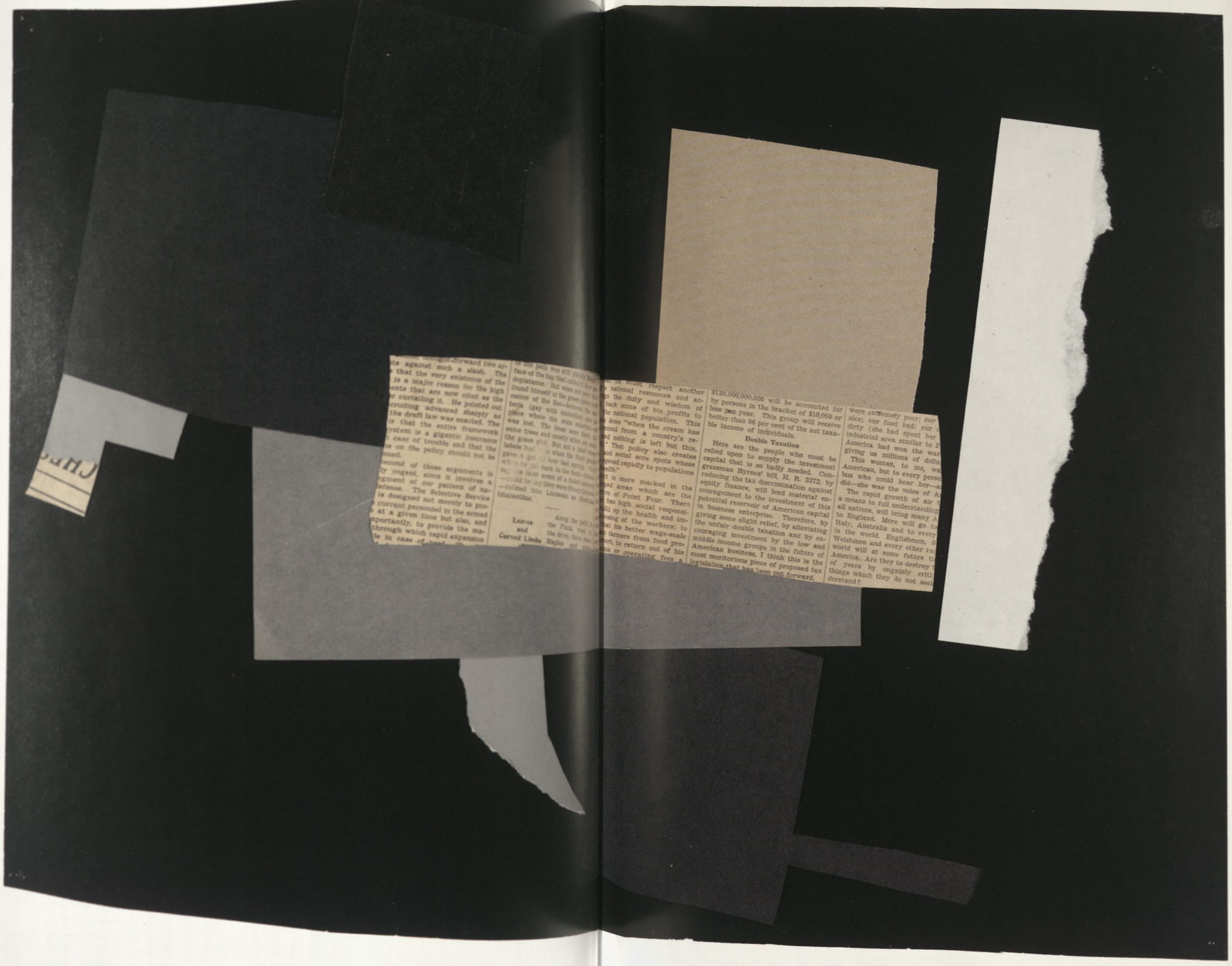
They also explored the in-between—Albers, in the relativity of color's perception; Cage, in the parity of sound and silence; and Olson, in the movements connecting writer and listener. Indeed, both Albers and Cage shared Olson's sense that "it is not the things in themselves but what happens between things where the life of them is to be sought."[87] It is precisely the space between their formal rigor and their openness to perception and its contingencies that places their practices in the nascent shift from modernism to postmodernism, and turned Black Mountain College into the unlikely wellspring of avant-garde culture.[88] Olson would suggest in a poem written after his time at Black Mountain that he, like many of the artists of the college, saw both the whole and the fragments:

> I looked up and saw
> its form
> through everything
> —it is sewn
> in all parts, under
> and over.[89]

10
COLLAGE

Etymologically the word *collage* means "to glue"; colloquially it means to cut and paste. Either way, collage—the assembly of various parts into newly composed wholes—is one of the most dominant aesthetic procedures of twentieth-century art. It began when Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque incorporated everyday things like scraps of wallpaper, newspaper clippings, or a piece of rope into a picture, and it extended into Dada and Surrealism, where it came to represent the violence of modernity and the fissured nature of the human psyche. It can be seen in individual, eccentric applications, such as in the oeuvres of Joseph Cornell, Edward Kienholz, and May Wilson. It fueled the information age, through the airwaves of radio and television, and it is now structural for the digital age, as evidenced by everything from hip-hop sampling to postmodern pastiche. Collage as an aesthetic, a practice, and a philosophy dominated twentieth-century art and life.

Art historian Kobena Mercer has suggested that collage may be the *Kunstwollen*—the German word for an aesthetic form that is nearly inseparable from the social dynamics of its age—most associated with cosmopolitanism, observing that it is "compelling to think of the formal dynamics of collage as especially relevant to the hyphenated character of diaspora identities historically shaped by the unequal interaction of African and European elements."[90] Mercer elaborates: "the formal principle of collage and montage lies in the purposive selection of signifying elements, found or taken from disparate sources, that are combined in unexpected juxtapositions to create something new



Sewell Sillman, *Values in Neutrals*, n.d. Collage on paper, 15 x 20 ½ inches.

that exists as an independent form in its own right."[91] In Mercer's assessment, collage works through a radical twentieth-century subject position as much as it breaks through the loggerhead of inherited forms (painting, photography, sculpture, etc.) to forge a distinctly new form.

Collage was originally smuggled into Black Mountain by Josef Albers's color-theory course. Albers preferred using mass-produced colored paper—because its color and texture was uniform—over paint, which he found "difficult, time-consuming, and tiring" to mix.[92] He also extolled the virtues of making do with what was readily at hand, as evidenced in the extraordinary leaf studies that were conducted during the fall, when the trees were ablaze with color. The Depression-era culture of frugality and "making do"—extended by wartime rationing—likely caused Albers to encourage his students to use "waste strips found at printers and bookbinders; collections of samples of packing papers, of wrapping and bag papers, of cover and decoration papers. . . . Also, instead of full sheets of paper, just cutouts from magazines, from advertisements and illustrations, from posters, wallpapers, paint samples, and from catalogues with color reproductions of various materials."[93] Hence, cutting, pasting, gathering, disassembly, and reassembly—essentially the operations of collage—were all by-products of the primary color-theory lesson. These activities happened as well in the *matière* studies, as the students made assemblages composed of a variety of materials—seeds, corrugated cardboard, and eggshells—to exploit myriad visual and tactile properties.

Thus collage, ushered in under the rubric of color and materials, took hold at Black Mountain and in some ways can be seen as paradigmatic of the work that was produced there. It wasn't only Albers doing the cutting and pasting. During the summer of 1952, John Cage was working on *Williams Mix*. As his first composition made exclusively from meticulously cut and spliced magnetic tape, the work was rooted in collage. Charles Olson's landmark "Projective Verse" was an assemblage of fragments from his epistolary friendship with poet Robert Creeley. Collage was everywhere at Black Mountain—so much woven into the fabric of making there that it went unremarked upon. Even the prominent Abstract Expressionists who taught at Black Mountain engaged with the technique: Robert Motherwell was a highly accomplished collagist, working in a strong Cubist vein; Franz Kline used torn pages of the phone book as a ground for his drawings; and Willem de Kooning collaged elements into his painting *Asheville*, a work made at Black Mountain during the summer of 1948.

Ironically, the Black Mountain student most associated with collage—Rauschenberg—did not make many collages during his time there.[94] But he was honing his skills as he explored textures and tactility: he made ravishing blueprints of verdant plant matter (a series started in collaboration with his former partner and fellow student Susan Weil) and heavily painted blackish-brown wet canvases outside, embedding them with North Carolina dirt and pebbles. Each of these bodies of work signals an interest in wholeness—that is, in the gestalt of the picture plane, as promised in Abstract Expressionism. The one-to-one indexicality of these works heightens the unified nature of the compositions. He was learning how to make a whole before he proceeded to privilege the parts.

A definitive moment of self-conscious collage at Black Mountain came in the form of performance, namely Cage's *Theater Piece No. 1*. In the summer of 1952, the composer assigned each of his performers—David Tudor, Merce Cunningham, M. C. Richards, Rauschenberg, and Olson (maybe—memories are particularly fuzzy when it comes to *Theater Piece No. 1*)—time signatures, during which period they could do what they liked. The principle of collage was thus transported into performance.[95] Some accounts suggest that the young Rauschenberg—precocious, joyful, and rebellious—may have played Édith Piaf records, and others recall that one of his White Paintings was suspended from the ceiling. After that summer, Rauschenberg moved to New York and began to assimilate the various teachings of Black Mountain, and perhaps no lessons were more important than those he learned from dance and performance.

Rauschenberg first came to Black Mountain College in 1948 to study for the academic year with Albers, and he returned in the summers of 1951 and 1952. During this period, dance became an important part of the curriculum. Inspired by Cage and Cunningham's initial visit to the college in the spring of 1948, the college hosted choreographers Katherine Litz and Elizabeth Jennerjahn. Cage and Cunningham returned to the college several times, overlapping with Rauschenberg in the summer of 1952, when Rauschenberg took Cunningham's classes, a fact beautifully documented by photography instructor Hazel Larsen Archer. In the summer of 1953, Cunningham founded the Merce Cunningham Dance Company at the college.[96] Soon after forming the company, Cunningham asked Rauschenberg if he would make a set decoration for a new dance, *Minutiae*. More than any other single work, Rauschenberg's freestanding set decoration, which shares its title with Cunningham's dance, weaves the threads of personal relationships and artistic inspirations that emerged from Black Mountain's interdisciplinary nurturing of dance and the visual arts. Cunningham described it as a "wonderful object! Colors, comic strips all over it. You could pass through it or under it or round it. He made it out of stuff he'd picked up off the street. I loved it because it was impossible to know what it was."[97] Rauschenberg would only later invent the neologism to articulate the third term he created between painting and sculpture: *Combines*.

Composed of paint, newspaper, found objects, and fabric on an open wood structure somewhat evocative of a Japanese screen, *Minutiae*, with its dramatic palette and textural materials, stems directly from Albers's *matière* studies. Moreover, the panels of color-blocked fabric evoke Albers's color studies, and its physical structure recalls the woven Room Dividers that Anni Albers had exhibited at her retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art a few years earlier, in 1949. Cage's use of chance is recalled in *Minutiae*'s seemingly random arrangement of collage elements, as well as in its free, or open, form, which encourages physical interaction. Finally, *Minutiae*, which initiated the artist's ten-year collaboration with the dance company and propelled Rauschenberg's own emerging sculpture practice, is formally self-sufficient, reflecting Cunningham's radical belief in the autonomy of the elements of a dance event—dance, music, and scenography. Considered "one of the most significant of the early combines,"[98] it was enhanced

91. Ibid.
92. Albers, *Interaction of Color*, 6.
93. Ibid.
94. Better known for their experimentation with collage at the college were students Ray Johnson and John Chamberlain. See Ruth Erickson's entry on Ray Johnson's *Untitled* (c. 1951) in this volume, 182.
95. For an in-depth account of *Theater Piece No. 1*, see Ruth Erickson's "Chance Encounters: *Theater Piece No. 1* and Its Prehistory," in this volume, 298–301.
96. See Katherine Markoski's "The Formation of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company," in this volume, 360–63.
97. Merce Cunningham and Jacqueline Lesschaeve, *The Dancer and the Dance: Merce Cunningham in Conversation with Jacqueline Lesschaeve* (1985; repr., New York: Marion Boyars, 1991), 55.
98. Paul Schimmel, "Autobiography and Self-Portraiture," in *Robert Rauschenberg: Combines* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005), 218. Schimmel argues that "it is conceivable that the challenge of creating a set piece for the stage was just the impetus that Rauschenberg needed to move from the two-dimensional world of painting into the three-dimensional world of sculpture and the four-dimensional world of performance." Ibid.

Robert Motherwell, *The Displaced Table*, 1943. Tempera, wood veneer, paper, ink, graphite, and colored pencil on canvas, 43 ¼ x 32 ⅛ x 2 inches.

Robert Rauschenberg, *Minutiae*, 1954/1976. Oil, paper, fabric, newsprint, wood, metal, plastic, mirror, and string on wood structure, 84 ½ x 81 x 30 ½ inches.

John Reiss, *Color Control*, n.d. Collage and gouache on paper, 14 x 22 inches.

by the dancers' costumes, made from fabrics of the colors of the sculpture, leading to the suggestion that "as [the dancers] moved around the construction their bodies blended into what could be described as a living collage."[99]

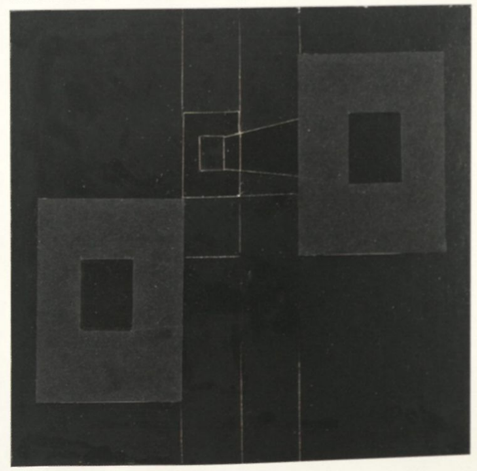
From our vantage point, in 2015, Rauschenberg is practically considered an old master. So how can we recall the radicality, the utter disruption, that collage and, in turn, the newly invented Combine brought to painting and sculpture—not to mention the assault it provoked on the ontological definition of art as such? Especially when the language and practice of collage now affects nearly every part of culture? How can we ensure that the "PAST IS PRESENT AT THE MOMENT OF WRITING," as Olson contended in his teaching? Or, his even more difficult historical imperative, "if the subject is worth anything it should change the object."[100]

One way is to remember Merce Cunningham's distinct pleasure at not knowing what the object was. Another might be to return to the words of one of Rauschenberg's earliest, most trenchant critics, the art historian Leo Steinberg. Steinberg's essay "Other Criteria," first published in 1968, over a decade after the closure of Black Mountain College, is legendary; for in it the critic admits to his confusion in the face of the new. Rather than immediately dismissing Rauschenberg's work, however, he found himself looking very, very closely at it. He marveled at how his picture planes were surfaces "to which anything reachable-thinkable would adhere,"[101] and how his canvases or Combines were "no longer the analogue of a visual experience of nature but of operational processes."[102] For Steinberg, they exemplified the flatbed picture plane of work made on a horizontal surface like a desk, worktable, or printing press. It was a "matrix of information" that dealt with a "different order of experience," one distinct from that of the unified picture planes of Abstract Expressionism, which Steinberg saw as the last gasps of landscape painting.[103] Rauschenberg's works were constructed on the basis of a horizontal mode of organization that was "called upon to maintain a symbolic continuum of litter, workbench, and data-ingesting mind."[104] They were a "shake up which contaminates all purified categories," leaving in its wake something Steinberg called, for the first time in art history, "post-Modernist."[105] Postmodernism, as put into motion by Rauschenberg in 1954, stemmed directly from the relational formalism of Josef Albers, Cage, and Olson, as well as from the rigor of Anni Albers's approach to materiality and from the intimacy of the camera's lens via Hazel Larsen Archer.[106]

Minutiae is a painting and a sculpture, a sculpture and a prop, a screen and a divider. It is simultaneously a summation of all that Rauschenberg learned at Black Mountain and a launching pad for the postmodern era. But mostly it was a gift—for Cunningham—that contained an inside joke for the dancers: behind the exterior panel, where they sometimes paused, Rauschenberg placed strips from Otto Soglow's popular comic *The Little King* at eye level, which wordlessly depicted "his majesty attending an exhibition of modern sculpture," good for a moment or two of humor while the dancers caught their breath.[107]

99. Charles Stuckey, "Rauschenberg's Combine Mode," in *Robert Rauschenberg: Combines*, 206–7.
100. Charles Olson, quoted in Dawson, *The Black Mountain Book, A New Edition*, 216. (Emphasis in original).
101. Steinberg, "Other Criteria," 88.
102. Ibid., 84.
103. Ibid., 85.
104. Ibid., 89.
105. Ibid., 91.
106. For more on Larsen Archer's work see Alice Sebrell, "There Is Another Way: Hazel Larsen Archer, Photographer, Educator," in this volume, 186–88.
107. Stuckey, "Rauschenberg's Combine Mode," 199.

Nicholas Cernovich, *Black Textures*, n.d. Collage, 8 ½ x 9 inches.



11
HAPTIC

There is no such thing as a Black Mountain aesthetic, no dominant trend that unifies the artistic production of this small community. The work is too heterogeneous for that, and its practitioners were too idiosyncratic and individualistic to produce anything as old-fashioned as a style or, more aptly, a school.[108] This state of affairs is a frustrating one for art historians, whose disciplinary task is to assemble and order, so better to explain how and why art objects come into being, how they operate, and what they mean. In the game of narrating the art of the mid–twentieth century one idea garnered a lot of traction: that of critic Clement Greenberg, who fortuitously visited Black Mountain in the summer of 1950, with his then lover, the painter Helen Frankenthaler. Two years earlier, he had written the still-important article "The Crisis of the Easel Picture," in which he summed up the effect of the emergent ethos of Abstract Expressionism: "Just as Schoenberg makes every element, every voice and note in the composition of equal importance—different but equivalent—so these painters render every element, every part of the canvas equivalent; and they likewise weave the work of art into a tight mesh whose principle of formal unity is contained and recapitulated in each thread, so that we find the essence of the whole work in any one of its parts."[109] Even though Greenberg is specifically referring to the eruption of Abstract Expressionist painting in New York, his description applies equally well to the kind of thinking that pervaded the experiments at Black Mountain. Indeed, later in the essay, when he writes, "it corresponds perhaps to the feeling that all hierarchical distinctions have been exhausted, that no area or order of experience is either intrinsically or relatively superior to any other,"[110] he sounds more like John Cage or Josef Albers than the grandfather of painterly formalism. But Greenberg was unable to sustain this openness and, in reviewing Willem de Kooning's first one-person show in New York for the *Nation* that same year, he wrote: "de Kooning's insistence on a smooth, thin surface is concomitant of his desire for purity, *for an art that makes demands only on the optical imagination*."[111]

Perhaps, in the end, Greenberg's argument held so much sway because art that relies heavily on the optical can be better reproduced in photographic images. But the majority of art at Black Mountain might be called "extraoptical." And if any description can encompass the whole of the Black Mountain aesthetic, it might be the haptic, as opposed to the purely optical. While the dictionary may define *haptic* as "relating to the sense of touch, in particular relating to the perception and manipulation of objects using the senses of touch and proprioception," the word, when used in reference to works of art, denotes those works that engage visuality through an appeal to tactility. Haptic objects intertwine visuality and tactility so thoroughly that they are inextricable from each other.

Such a recasting, away from the prioritization of visuality, allows us to think about the production of woodworking, architecture, collage, and pottery nonhierarchically. Thinking through the matrix of the haptic might offer a way around now-hackneyed classifications of art and craft to permit a full engagement with the stated aims of Black Mountain, which was to enable "learning through doing." There is a tacit assumption that "learning through doing" means using one's hands and one's brain, a disruption of the Cartesian model of subjectivity that privileges the mind over the body. At Black Mountain, there was a desire to teach students to become more aware of the world around by instilling in them respect for the acts of both perception and process, all in the

previous: Faith Murray Britton, *Matière Study*, 1941. Paper, paint, fabric, corrugated paper, magazine images, wheat seeds, and other materials, 15 x 20 inches.
above: Trude Guermonprez, *Leaf Study VI*, 1948. Natural linen and jute, 20 x 8 inches.

service of honing their critical skills. Even though Albers's stated aim was "to open eyes," it's hard to imagine that the teacher of the *matière* studies was interested solely in the "optical imagination"; and certainly Anni Albers's commitments to exploring materials and producing both functional and nonfunctional weavings mitigate Greenberg's claim that the fundamental role or purpose of art was in service to visuality alone.

The social fact of the Great Depression augmented Josef and Anni Albers's commitments to the go-between of art and craft and to materials. In a culture of scarcity, Black Mountain students were encouraged to use the materials at hand in their work: this meant leaves were incorporated into collages and bark into *matière* studies, and students gathered stones from adjacent fields and forests to construct the buildings they designed. This catholic approach to materials resulted in scores of deeply tactile works, a quality extended through works across disciplines with no apparent coordination. Photographs of a pot by Karen Karnes or Marguerite Wildenhain (see, respectively, pages 271 and 113) are not merely flattened images of a three-dimensional object; we perceive the tactility of these objects—their sensuous curves (Karnes) and their regimented sculptural bas-relief (Wildenhain). On the one hand, it seems clear that pottery and weaving engenders less optically inflected material objects; on the other hand, it seems just as clear that photography produces some of the most flat and optical artworks. But, in a beautiful coincidence, photography as practiced at Black Mountain also consistently explored tactility. This was as true of Josef Breitenbach's 1940s explorations

108. Even the Black Mountain School of Poetry, a moniker hatched by poetry editor Donald Allen, does not coalesce in a particularly cohesive manner, as it includes poets as disparate as Denise Levertov, Robert Creeley, and Allen Ginsberg.
109. Clement Greenberg, "The Crisis of the Easel Picture" (1948), in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 2, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 224.
110. Ibid.
111. Clement Greenberg, "Review of an Exhibition of Willem de Kooning," in *Clement Greenberg*, 229 (emphasis added).

Josef Breitenbach, *The Mechanic, New York*, c. 1946–49. Gelatin silver print, 13 7/8 x 11 inches.

opposite: Josef Breitenbach, *Abstraction (Thin Ice In the Woods)*, 1946. Gelatin silver print, 13 ¾ x 10 ⅞ inches.
above: Aaron Siskind, *North Carolina 9*, 1951. Gelatin silver print, 11 x 14 inches.

Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled (from Portfolio I, 1952)*, 1952. Gelatin silver print mounted on board, 5 ⅝ x 3 ¼ inches.

of colored printing and photograms, which led to highly haptic abstract and representational images, as it was of Arthur Siegel, Harry Callahan, and Aaron Siskind's strategies, which all accentuated the texture of whatever they were photographing. Similarly Hazel Larsen Archer's extraordinary images of Quiet House (see page 189) focus on the textures of the building's materials and heighten them with subtle framings of light and shadow. Student photos taken in Larsen Archer's class—for example, Jacqueline Gourevitch's pictures of woven chair seats (page 199) and Robert Rauschenberg's double exposure of filigreed foliage and his own image—also concentrate on the texture of their subjects.

And it wasn't only visual artists who were working within the visual-tactile divide. Bauhaus theater teacher and designer Xanti Schawinsky called his theater productions "Spectodramas," describing them thus: "'Spectodrama' comprises the fields of optics, form and color, acoustics, sound, language, music, time, space . . . architecture, technology . . . and illusion."[112] W. Pete and Elizabeth Jennerjahn also picked up on this interest in multisensorial experience in their Light Sound Movement workshop, which might be seen as an early iteration of Cage's experiments with fully integrated yet wholly autonomous forms of performance in *Theater Piece No. 1*.[113] While it is unusual to think of the haptic within the realm of music, it is hard not to consider the haptic qualities of Cage's prepared piano; for Cage deployed the tactility of his instrument to render it "extra-aural," showing that the haptic as a strategy was available to musicians as well. Indeed Cage's extension of the haptic into the realm of music shows us how the haptic works to reorganize the senses and expand the body's capacity for proprioception—the unconscious mechanism for perceiving one's body in relation to movement and position.

What emerges here is neither a master narrative of the triumph of the haptic over the optic nor a consolidation of a house style. Rather, the concern with the haptic, shared across mediums, registers that one effect of interdisciplinary practice might be an unhooking of a one-to-one equation between sense and medium (looking and painting, hearing and music, for example): hence Anni Albers makes pictorial weavings, Cage prepares a piano, Josef Albers engages in acts of optical illusion attentive to material properties, and Aaron Siskind makes photographic images textural. All these works of art test the viewer's perception, and many of them move into the realm of proprioception. Olson even wrote a poem about it after leaving Black Mountain, following through on some ideas embedded in his earlier "Projective Verse":

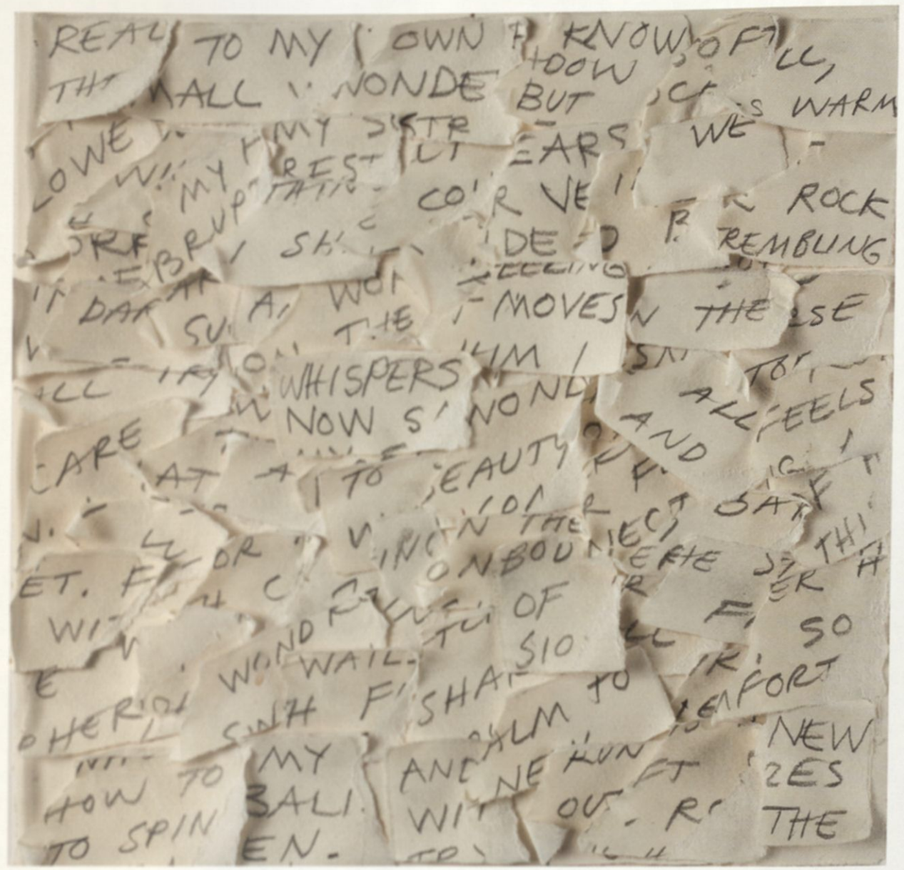
> To which
> PROPRIOCEPTION: the data of depth sensibility/the
> "body" of us as
> object which spontaneously or of its own order
> produces experience of, "depth" Viz
> SENSIBILITY WITHIN THE ORGANISM
> BY MOVEMENT OF ITS OWN TISSUES.[114]

112. Xanti Schawinsky, "Spectodrama: Contemporary Studies," *Leonardo* 2, no. 3 (July 1969): 286.
113. See Erickson, "Chance Encounters."
114. Charles Olson, "Proprioception," *Collected Prose*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 181.
115. M. C. Richards, *Centering: In Pottery, Poetry, and the Person* (1964; repr., Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 9.
116. Ibid., 13.
117. Frankforter, class notes.
118. Anni Albers, "Handweaving Today: Textile Work at Black Mountain College," *The Weaver* 6, no. 1 (January–February 1941): 3.
119. *Black Mountain College Bulletin* 9, no. 4 (Spring 1952), PC 1678, Duberman Collection, College Publications. Cited in Katherine Markoski, "Elective Affinities: Artistic Practice at Black Mountain College, 1948–1953," PhD diss., Johns Hopkins University, 2013, 218.
120. John Chamberlain, quoted in Robert Creeley, "Olson and Black Mountain College," in *Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art*, 302.

When the senses become unhooked from a medium, the mind and the body find new ways of communicating sensory information. This detachment is not easily reproduced in slides and hence is not easily transmitted in an art-history classroom. Such maneuvers were deployed again and again at Black Mountain, and perhaps explain Merce Cunningham's great innovation: the disconnection of the constituent parts of a dance (music, choreography, lighting, scenography), allowing them to function independently of one another in a way that literally pulls the viewer's senses out of alignment with one another and reorganizes them.

The effects, or potential effects, of this new sensory capacity are subtle and verges on the synesthetic. M. C. Richards, who arrived at Black Mountain as a faculty member in literature and left as a student of pottery, wrote in her deeply influential book *Centering*: "Sometimes the skin seems to be the best listener, as it prickles and thrills, say to a sound or a silence; or the fantasy, the imagination: how it bursts into inner pictures as it listens."[115] She also recounts the words and actions of her first pottery instructor at Black Mountain, Robert Turner, who established the pot shop: "He was centering the clay, and then he was opening it and pulling up the walls of the cylinder. He was not looking at the clay. He had his ear to it. He was listening. 'It is breathing,' he said; and then he filled it with air."[116]

The pursuit of the haptic, then, opens up the possibility for both the reanimation and the (re?)embodiment of the senses. The engagement of all senses appears to lead to a kind of reciprocity as well—a concern as much with listening *and* speaking, or with touching *and* breathing, seeing *and* touching. This maneuver debunks the Cartesian version of the aesthetic self that holds the visual as supreme over the other senses, just as the mind presides over the body. The early days of Black Mountain were marked by the master optical illusionist Josef Albers's core instruction, which according to the class notes of student Katherine Frankforter were designed to promote "permanent criticism and permanent doubt."[117] His aspiration to "open eyes" was not intended to privilege the visual as such but rather to situate the visual as a part of a larger whole. Anni Albers suggested that the haptic might be a way in which to stay close to the materials at hand: "to form materials presupposes responsiveness towards the material, a flexibility of reaction, and this flexibility is one of the factors we will need for times to come."[118] With the hope, during the midst of world war, that the world could be rebuilt, Anni Albers intimated that working with materials, making art using your hands *and* your eyes, ultimately generates a kind of nimbleness—which I read as consummately physical, psychic, and intellectual—that is constitutive of the capacity to make empathetic and hence ethical choices. The legacy of the Alberses at Black Mountain—and their concerns with form that led to the haptic—endured and can be read, as late as 1952, in a college bulletin that claims, "Our central and consistent effort is to teach method, not content; to emphasize process, to invite the student to the realization that the way of handling facts and himself amid the facts is more important than the facts themselves."[119] It appears that the "handling of the facts," consciously or unconsciously, at Black Mountain was a task of the total human sensorium, an assignment that gave rise to a privileging of the haptic over the optic, of fluidity over stasis, of curiosity over assuredness, sentiments summed up by student John Chamberlain when he said that Black Mountain was a place "where people were more interested in what they didn't know than in what they did."[120]



Susan Weil, *Secrets*, 1949. Graphite and paper on board, 10 x 10 inches.

12
GOSSIP

Despite the current vogue in contemporary art and theory for the archive, I must confess I don't like them.[121] All that dried-out paper. The musty smell. The rules and regulations. Not my kind of party. Plus I'm at least as likely to be overwhelmed by what's not there as by what is. The Western Regional Archives at the State Archives of North Carolina contains boxes and boxes of photographs taken at Black Mountain College, and not one of them documents John Cage's *Theater Piece No. 1*. (The archives are overseen by a force of nature, Heather South. Without her reservoir of good will and good humor, I never would have been able to survive my archive anxiety.) Reams of paper promise a veritable treasure trove: needles, haystacks.

Then there's the problem of the dead. They have no privacy. I sat, bewildered, at the Getty Research Institute reading M. C. Richards's love letters to David Tudor. Their correspondence betrays a fairly one-sided affair, as Richards extolls the virtues of the everyday, while imploring Tudor to respond. Why do all love letters sound the same? Why do people so consistently couple along the romantic-unromantic axis? Why am I reading these private letters? In Tudor's papers, I came across a letter from Cage, an apology, the kind of letter one writes after one has overstepped a line: did Cage come on to Tudor? If he did, it's clear he was roundly rejected. Later that day, the curator of the collection told me that Ray Johnson and Richard Lippold, who met at Black Mountain, became lovers when they returned to New York. Was I the last to know? My mind reels: why does Martin Duberman refer to Jess as Robert Duncan's "friend"? Was the Albers marriage as open as it seems from the letters? Whose recollection of *Theater Piece No. 1* should we trust?

On each research junket, I picked up a tidbit of extraneous information, which I judiciously/pompously chose not to transcribe into any of my three Black Mountain notebooks. Not relevant. Not publishable. What does that have to do with art or the college or my argument? Even so, after picking up a tidbit at one stop, I'd deploy it at the next one, to soften someone up, to open a door, to impress, to assure people I had something new to say. Maybe I should have written them down after all, because now I don't have the box numbers for proper footnotes.

I suppose I thought that the archive would produce a set of facts that I could marshal into a narrative: they did and I have. But the gossip mounted, and it didn't consolidate the facts or the truths—which is one of its negative functions. Instead it cast a queer light on "official" documents, such as class notes, oral histories, and the many memoirs—even on Duberman's magisterial *Black Mountain College: An Experiment in Community*. The line between a historical document and gossip began to blur. For what are class notes if not hearsay, a form of creative translation, rife with the possibility of mishearing? Is an oral history conveyed in the 1970s—fifteen to twenty years after Black Mountain closed—by Duberman or Mary Emma Harris—any more or less reliable than the accounts from my interviews with Black Mountain College alumni thirty-five to fifty years later?

121. See Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October*, no. 110 (Fall 2004): 3–22.
122. Gavin Butt, *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948–1963* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 7.
123. Ibid.
124. Irit Rogoff, "Gossip as Testimony," in *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings*, ed. Griselda Pollock (London: Routledge, 1996), 62.
125. Ibid., 63.
126. Frank O'Hara, *Art Chronicles 1954–1966* (New York: George Braziller, 1975), 52.
127. Karen Karnes, conversation with the author, December 3, 2013, Concord, MA.

And what is a memoir other than one person's fallible memory masquerading as authority? What was it about Black Mountain that led Duberman to insert himself and his own point of view and identity so thoroughly into his historical account of the college? And why have I continued this tradition of embedding self-doubt into my own attempt to come to terms with the myth of the college?

Questions like these led me to a recent spate of scholarship on gossip and the role it might play in the creation of historical narratives. Typically gendered feminine, seen as idle or malicious, perceived as a low form of culture, and fundamentally disparaged as neither serious nor reliable, gossip is undergoing something of a renaissance in the hands of queer theorists such as Gavin Butt and Irit Rogoff, who see its possibilities as a form of "postmodern testimony." Rather than bracket gossip off from fact, Butt suggests that gossip can "displace so-called verifiable truths" and render them "as projections of interpretive desire and curiosity."[122] This displacement in the name of articulating psychic investments in material is, for Butt, a way of queering "the very ways in which we might think of the evidential."[123] Hence my own internal pause when I found myself quoting class notes in this essay: what kind of veracity was I hoping to achieve? On the one hand, I told myself that I was returning authority to the student; on the other hand, I had to admit, I was also offering it as proof of my own due diligence as a "scholar."

Rogoff offers a slightly different tack: she is interested in understanding "the persistent appearance and reappearance of gossip in close vicinity to master narratives, in particular grandiose historical moments or achievements in Modernism."[124] For Rogoff, gossip appears as a narrative device that points to gaps and elisions in master narratives. Not fictional, but rather phantasmatic, gossip is an eruption in the text that betrays the desires of both the gossiper and her historian but also, and more importantly, destabilizes "a confident 'knowing,' since gossip is usually accompanied by certain qualifying frames."[125]

Gossip, then, is not a way of securing the authority of the writer; instead it acknowledges a kind of radical unknowability in which the authority of the text, of history, or of any overarching truth claims, remains in play. Such is the kind of text I hoped to write, for I felt certain that there could be no definitive text that could tell the story of the years between 1933 and 1957 in the environs of Black Mountain, North Carolina. Certainly, there are historical facts: who arrived where and when. And there are the undeniable social facts that shaped the place—the Depression, progressive education, World War II, the GI Bill—each of which contributed to the horizon of possibility, to paraphrase historian Ernst Bloch, engendered by the assembly of various groups of individuals and their ideals and ideas. But ultimately the logic of gossip spurred me to avoid the romance of a story with a beginning, middle, and end, in favor of a tale structured by polyphony, fragments, and a narrative strategy of alloverness. I wanted to heed Franz Kline's quip to Frank O'Hara: "To be right is the most terrific personal state that nobody is interested in."[126] Nonetheless I know that my own desire for Black Mountain remains bifurcated: I wanted to debunk the myth as much as I wanted to prove it true. (Because in an era such as ours, dominated as it is by the monetization of art and education, to work on a small art school where almost no one got paid is a kind of Hail Mary pass.) I knew all of this in a flash when, as I neared the end of an interview with Black Mountain's pottery instructor Karen Karnes, she said to me, benevolently, but with transparent exasperation: "You contemporary people have so many questions, because you think there are answers."[127]