

Hamburger Bahnhof

BLACK MOUNTAIN COLLEGE // AN INTERDISCIPLINARY EXPERIMENT 1933–1957

By Caroline Picard



[THE SEEN]

FINDING BLACK MOUNTAIN: A WORKING MODEL FOR SENSIBLE MEMBERS OF SOCIETY

The idea of Black Mountain College has baited my imagination since it first emerged into my experience—an accidental and auxiliary reference—from the otherwise vast sea of culture. The college came up periodically thereafter, breaching conversations as a peripheral point of reference, its significance intuited rather than explained. A friend’s father reciting a Robert Creeley poem in a kitchen the morning before his daughter’s graduation. He made a point to recreate Creeley’s breath. As one unfamiliar with the poet, I asked about the author. “A Black Mountain Poet —” my friend answered. “He was asthmatic so he wrote in short lines.” Or again, encountering the various manifestations of John Cage reproduced by privately smiling colleagues and students, learning thereafter not only that Cage taught at the small experimental school but further, that the first happening took place *there* also. Merce Cunningham’s dance company was similarly founded on the premises. Or again, in Gloucester: my partner and I arrived at a plaque fixed to the first floor of a modest apartment building. “Charles Olson / Poet / 1910–1970.” This place, clearly inhabited by others with all the banality of life’s material encumbrance: plastic chairs, ashtray, a few neglected plants, a contemporary child’s toy. Again, I asked, Who. “Polis is I!” My partner answered; he’d drawn us here on purpose. “Olson said the *polis* is only as large as the distance its citizen walks in a day...” Me confused still. “He was also the last Rector at Black Mountain.” Black Mountain: a spirit you find in a mirror standing right behind your shoulder. The flood of influence is constant: MC Richards, Elaine and Willem deKooning, Arthur Penn, Clement Greenberg, Katherine Litz, Robert Rauschenberg, Helen Frankenthaler, Cy Twombly, and Einstein just to name a very few. How did everyone end up there?

Black Mountain shifted into focus as I accumulated these references according to an oral, and largely accidental, network. A recently hired professor mentioned how, like many liberal arts colleges, Mills was inspired by Black Mountain. A newspaper article announced that a public art high school in San Francisco renamed itself after its founder, Ruth Asawa—another student of Black Mountain. Black Mountain surfaces within singular artistic acts as well: Stephen Laphisophon’s *Black Mountain* (2012) drawing, for example comprised of the college’s name scrawled in black ink on paper. Written like revolutionary graffiti, a call to arms, the drawing acts as an homage that, as the letters deteriorate crookedly in Laphisophon’s hand, convey some sadness too. A loss. Just as Olson’s plaque points to the breadth of a life, while failing to describe its nuance, Laphisophon’s quotation calls to mind the *idea* of Black Mountain to such an extent that one feels the absense of its flesh-and-blood dimension.

In another example, Chicago-based photographer Eileen Mueller’s series of black and white photographs provide glimpses of the school’s archive within a larger visual frame. *Construction of silo: placing stones in concrete* (2011–2014), includes a primary, yet small historic photograph of a man and woman working side by side at Black Mountain—him in a brimmed hat, her with gloves and a coat. The image is blurry, sitting akimbo on a large wooden desk with a crisply defined wood grain. In *Please Return to Josef Albers, Black Mountain College, Black Mountain, NC* (2011), one sees the reverse side of a photograph without accessing the image that Albers wants returned. As with a photographic negative, its lights and darks are reversed and the text

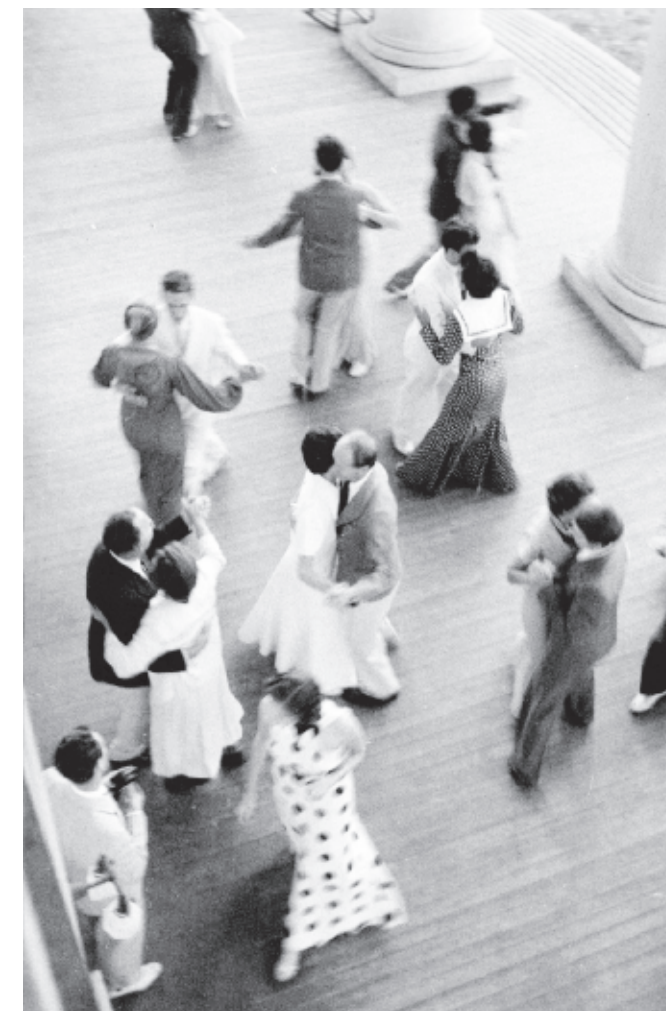
is similarly backwards. In this series, Mueller creates facsimiles with an archivist’s appetite, emphasizing the remote vulnerability of her source material. Rather than provide the viewer unmediated access to Black Mountain’s fragments, Mueller emphasizes the ways in which an archive leaves its visitors unrequited.

As someone who enjoys feeling at once excluded from the mythology of Black Mountain, and wants to access its histories, I was eager to discover a related group exhibition in Berlin. From June–September of this year the Hamburger Bahnhof is hosting a robust group exhibition entitled *Black Mountain: An Interdisciplinary Experiment 1933–1957*. The survey, curated by Dr. Eugen Blume and Dr. Gabriele Knapstein, collates original correspondences, college publications, photographs, audio recordings, interviews, and architectural plans amidst original artworks by Black Mountain students and faculty; here the curators are turned into archeologists to produce a tightly choreographed installation that unpacks the intersection of lives and works facilitated within the institution. Correspondences between the college’s co-founder, John Rice, and Bauhaus alumni Anni and Josef Albers, begin the show. Rice asks the couple to join him to start an experimental college. Josef would lead the art department. Anni would teach textiles. The Albers agree. The year is 1933, Hitler has just been elected chancellor, and The Bauhaus is closed as a result of pressure from the party. Rice’s proposition gives the couple an opportunity to continue their visual and educational work overseas; a seed of the Bauhaus legacy thereby crosses the ocean and hatches in the little well-known North Carolina locale. In the show’s exhibition catalogue, Anni Albers describes her first encounter with the place, having heard rumors that it was a nudist colony, “When we arrived in Black Mountain, North Carolina, which just as well could be the Philippines or something like that in our mind, we met the first people... And the secretary, a very healthy, luscious girl greeted us on the porch, and I remember that her fat little pink toes were in sandals. And I thought, ‘Well, maybe this [nudist colony] is a true story.’”¹

With such beginnings, the exhibition takes an understandably German-centric path, charting how the arrival of immigrating professors fits “neatly into the larger narrative of the flight of assimilated, secular, educated Jews and anti-fascists from the discriminatory and ultimately deadly grasp of the National Socialist Germany.”² While not emphasized in the exhibition, some American students were responding to parallel conditions. Born from Japanese parents, Connecticut-born Ruth Asawa spent much of her childhood in internment camps. She arrived at Black Mountain in 1946, after being refused the teaching opportunities she would need to finish her degree because of “lingering ill-will against the Japanese.”³

As the exhibition points out, the groundwork of Black Mountain was laid by outsiders; refugees of circumstance, all arriving to North Carolina with various backgrounds and highly developed skill sets. A central question amongst this largely disenfranchised group—John Rice himself was fired from his previous teaching post—would explore the notion of good citizenship: a question always in play and never settled. With that question in mind, the Black Mountain community was eager to rebuild a better world using aesthetics, education, and collaboration.

The exhibition’s archival materials



TITLE PAGE:
Black Mountain College: Buckminster Fuller Class, Lake Eden Campus Sommer, 1949. © Courtesy of Western Regional Archives, States Archives of North Carolina. Photo: Masato Nakagawa.

LEFT, TOP:
Exhibition: "Black Mountain, An Interdisciplinary Experiment 1933-1957" at the Hamburger Bahnhof—Museum für Gegenwart—Berlin. Photo: Hazel Larsen Archer: Elizabeth Schmitt Jennerjahn und Robert Rauschenberg dancing, ca. 1948. / Cy Twombly, Untitled, 1951. / Robert Rauschenberg: Pink Door, 1954. / Robert Rauschenberg: Untitled [Black Painting], 1952. / © Nationalgalerie im Hamburger Bahnhof, SMB / Thomas Bruns.

LEFT, BOTTOM:
Exhibition: "Black Mountain, An Interdisciplinary Experiment 1933-1957" at the Hamburger Bahnhof—Museum für Gegenwart—Berlin. / Von links: Cy Twombly: Untitled, 1951. / Robert Rauschenberg: Pink Door, 1954. / © Nationalgalerie im Hamburger Bahnhof, SMB / Thomas Bruns.

ABOVE:
Exhibition: "Black Mountain, An Interdisciplinary Experiment 1933-1957" at the Hamburger Bahnhof—Museum für Gegenwart—Berlin. © Nationalgalerie im Hamburger Bahnhof, SMB / Thomas Bruns.

RIGHT:
Josef Albers: Tanz auf dem Portikus der Lee Hall, Blue Ridge Campus, 1934-38. © The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2015.

proceeds chronologically, while interspersed with a-chronological artworks, including a large painting from Josef Albers' color studies, *Homage to the Square: On the Way* (1959), a suite of textile experiments by Anni Albers including *Study in textile appearance through imitation in corrugated paper* (1934), Paul Klee's *Felsenkammer* (1929), and a hanging, woven sculpture by Ruth Asawa, *Untitled S. 055* (1950). The works are positioned to illustrate a visual conversation between its members: Anni Albers' interest in squares and weaving corresponds both to Asawa's woven screen sculpture, and the rectangular color studies of Klee and Albers, all of whom similarly respond to one another. The works themselves are additionally nested within the specter of daily life — something undeniably present via letters, diaries, and photographs of college life by Helen M. Post — while remaining nevertheless remote, as something conjured or imagined by a constellations of effects, rather than grasped and inhabited as a place.

— Passing a glass vitrine of books read at the college (i.e. *Theoretical Soil Mechanics*, by Karl Terzaghi, or *An Introduction to the Theory of Relativity* by Peter Bergmann) a subsequent nook in the exhibition emphasizes the act of teaching: one black and white silent video captures Josef Albers in a drawing class. Students walk around the classroom Albers' instruction, practicing their ability to chart circles' bounds and proportionality according to the student's changing perspectives. More artworks by Black Mountain alumni appear in this same nook, such as the cardboard collage paintings by Ray Johnson, hung beneath a looped slide projection of additional student works.

The Black Mountain student body is consistently emphasized—not only for its talent, but also (and perhaps most of all) their unique ability to activate, challenge, and thereby fulfill the institution's potential.

— “Other colleges, we knew, existed as ends in and of themselves... Black Mountain, we said, would be a means; the end was the individual.”⁴ As such, initiating professors built a flexible, participatory framework whose constituents had the power to modify and participate at will. Within that main premise, science and art were integrated. “The sciences and arts were taught with equal esteem at the college, and the arts were supposed to contribute, as part of a comprehensive education, to the students' development as sensible members of society.”⁵

While no less idealistic (in most cases) contemporary institutions often negotiate a pressure to measure the value of a degree according to the professional placement of alumni. I am reminded here of Frederick Wiseman's 2013 documentary, *At Berkeley*.⁶ UC Berkeley could not be more opposite from Black Mountain in many ways—Berkeley is public, massive, with sports teams, and a spanning legacy. Nevertheless, as Wiseman's film reveals, it shares a deep-seated idealism about the potential for multi-disciplinary education to transform society for the better. Throughout the documentary, footage from trustee meetings decry government funding cuts, emphasizing the pressures faced by higher education today. Ever increasing withdrawal of state support obliges the college to raise student fees. By becoming more expensive and less accessible, the trustees worry about a reciprocal diminishment of campus life. Occasional footage of construction of a new gym interrupts these discussions, recalling the impulse institutions of higher learning have to engage in; an arms-race-like competition with fellow universities. Like for-profit businesses, many colleges focus on constant, visible self-improvement—new gymnasiums, new libraries, new dormitories, or theatres—not only to wow prospective students with state of the art facilities, but also to establish quantifiable bench marks of institutional success. On the one hand, Berkeley suffers from state budget cuts; on the other, in order to maintain the visual prestige of its reputation, it is committed not only to its remarkable curriculum (which Wiseman's film also captures) but to provide students with the best (always The Best) material provisions.

In answer to that predominant logic, it is striking to look into a glass-covered vitrine with architectural plans and college brochures for Black Mountain fundraising. In 1940, Black Mountain decided to design and construct a new building. In its brochures, the school argues everything be done as affordably as possible; in keeping with Black Mountain's progressive multi-disciplinary education, and based on the \$2,200 the college had available for construction—which, by the way, “had to cover the cost of a tractor, the building materials, and Godfrey's [the site manager/building contractor] salary”⁷—the building was constructed by Black Mountain constituents. “Students and faculty volunteer one to three afternoons of work a week... The construction of the building and the planning of

Everything at Black Mountain had a self-made confidence; as if participating members stubbornly insisted that the materials at hand were assets rather than limits.

- ¹ *Black Mountain: An Interdisciplinary Experiment 1933–1957*, Eds. Eugene Blume, Matilda Felix, Gabriele Knapstein, Catherine Nichols, [Spector Books, Leipzig] 2015; [excerpted interview between Josef and Anni Albers in conversation with Martin Duberman, November 11, 1967] p. 76.
- ² Brenda Danilowitz, “From Albers to Wolpe: Unravelling the Networks of Émigré Scholars and Artists at Black Mountain College,” *ibid.*, p. 59.
- ³ Asawa's Life, “1942–Internment,” <http://www.ruthasawa.com/life.html>.
- ⁴ John Andrew Rice quotation, *Black Mountain: An Interdisciplinary Experiment 1933–1957*, 2015, 34.
- ⁵ Eugene Blume and Gabriele Knapstein, Introduction, *Black Mountain: An Interdisciplinary Experiment 1933–1957*, p.11.
- ⁶ Frederick Wiseman's *At Berkeley*—Official Trailer [Documentary], viewable at www.youtube.com/watch?v=3L2_yLBrQsM
- ⁷ Matilda Felix, “Constructing Experience,” *Black Mountain: An Interdisciplinary Experiment 1933–1957*, 2015, p. 201

its furniture and textiles are, of course, particularly valuable as specific laboratory problems for the students in the Architecture and Art courses. Even more important, however, is the fact that students come to realize the difference between a practical job and intellectual study—in method, in material dealt with, and in the total quality of experience.”⁸ Not only did the college insist on the interrelation of sciences and arts, but it also leveraged the school's most basic architecture as a site for interactive learning, leaving the final result of that building in the hands of its polity. That does not mean it was easy—as Rice's co-founder Ted Dreier wrote in a letter, “Will you ever forget the swamp we had to drain, the stream we had to divert, or the piles we had to drive? I am sure that none of us who participated ever will. And yet it all looks so easy to those who come later and see it done!”⁹

Everything at Black Mountain had a self-made confidence; as if participating members stubbornly insisted that the materials at hand were assets rather than limits. With such successful results then, one cannot help wonder: does one really need professional-grade facilities to experiment? Do such facilities help or hinder the students and thoughts they claim to serve?

— The exhibition at Hamburger-Bahnhof museum is no less provocative—Buckminster Fuller appears alongside plans for his collapsible geodesic domes—a concept which failed at Black Mountain, but succeeded thereafter with help from Black Mountain students. John Cage has various manifestations as well, including a score inscribed to Josef and Anni Albers; footage of Merce Cunningham's choreography streams in a darkened room. The Albers themselves disappear after a separate room that documents a sabbatical trip to Mexico (they left Black Mountain in 1949), and the background context of the school changes as well. While not emphasized in this show, Black Mountain remained doggedly liberal in the midst of Cold War conservatism.¹⁰ Its interest in integrating spoken, written, visual, and scientific languages similarly endured. Cy Twombly's stunning black and white painting *Untitled* (1951) on view mirrors Olson's interest in early linguistic forms—an investigation similarly explored in *The Glyph*—a looped black and white video in the same room that documents Katherine Litz's embodied, performative translation of Olson's originating *Glyph* poem. By collaging historical documents with college publicity materials,

photographic portraits, and original artworks, the various types of material on view converse with one another, giving visitors the chance to feel the affects of a poly-vocal discourse.

— *Black Mountain: An Interdisciplinary Experiment 1933–1957* comes at a significant time. Following the 2016 class' collective withdrawal from the University of Southern California (USC) MFA program, where all alumni from 2005–2014 signed a letter of support for the group's decision. Shortly thereafter, the 2015 class called for Dean Erica Muhl's resignation, noting a “strategic dismantlement of a formerly renowned studio arts program.”¹¹ The *LA Times* reflects on the collective sense amongst the USC community that Muhl's interests are shifting from the studio arts to “buzzier academic programs that draw the tech set,”¹² emphasizing digital production, business management, and venture capital. While worrisome, the shift reflects a pervasive trend in prioritizing wealth. Black Mountain presents the alternative institutional model—one strangely radical by today's standards, not only for its shoestring budget, but also because of its radical integration of language, visual art, performance, math, and science (disciplines that *still* observe respective boundaries). It encouraged its students to become “*sensible* members of society.” This strangely modest agenda was not explicitly about fostering genius for its own sake.

— And maybe for that reason, there is a final surprise in *Black Mountain: An Interdisciplinary Experiment 1933–1957*. The final work of the exhibition is *Performing the Archive*, a terminal area with a large wall of archival boxes, a piano, tables, and typewriters. Here students from various humanities departments of eight different European universities engage the Black Mountain Archive in a series of actions: movements, readings, or activities according to scores prepared by artist and composer Arnold Dreyblatt. In the hands of these students, the archive becomes a malleable and exploratory medium in and of itself.

— Black Mountain poet, and former student Ed Dorn once said, “One of the things people say now is ‘I wish there was a Black Mountain around,’ without realizing that it was only around then and never reproducible because it was the result of a certain configuration of people who coincided at that time.”¹³ As one who stands outside of the intimacy of that place, I would argue that it was not simply the people

themselves that made Black Mountain, but also the historical conditions those people arrived from, their geographical locale, the material resources at hand, and the intense, collective desire to find a working model for citizenship. In a world that now measures value largely according to material gain, it is worth remembering Black Mountain as an alternate paradigm. There, its constituents explored education as the medium of a shared, artistic experiment. The benefit of that experiment continues to reward us today.

— *Black Mountain: An Interdisciplinary Experiment 1933–1957* runs at the Hamburger Bahnhof, Museum für Gegenwart – Berlin through September 27, 2015.



ABOVE: Black Mountain College: Josef Albers Zeichenkurs auf der Veran-da der Lee Hall, Blue Ridge Campus Frühling, 1936. © Courtesy of Western Regional Archives, States Archives of North Carolina.

- ⁸ Felix, “Constructing Experience,” *Black Mountain: An Interdisciplinary Experiment 1933–1957*, 2015, 204, footnote 15, p. 204.
- ⁹ Felix, “Constructing Experience,” *Black Mountain: An Interdisciplinary Experiment 1933–1957*, 2015, p. 207.
- ¹⁰ “Lingering at the Threshold between Word and Image.” Tate Modern. Lingering at the Threshold between Word and Image. Web. 02 Aug. 2015.
- ¹¹ <http://mfanomfa.tumblr.com/>
- ¹² Miranda, Carolina A. *Los Angeles Times*. Los Angeles Times, “2016 Class Withdraws in Protest.” Web. 02 Aug. 2015.
- ¹³ Ed Dorn, *Black Mountain: An Interdisciplinary Experiment 1933–1957*, 2015, p. 9.