

# Black Mountain College is Dead, Long Live Black Mountain College!

by Eva Diaz, Guest Curator

Black Mountain College endures in the small but exceptional canon of profoundly unconventional places in America. These sites—Woodstock, Berkeley, San Francisco and Greenwich Village in the 1950s and 60s—are locations in the cultural imagination where radical artistic innovation and vanguard social communitarianism have fostered alternative visions of what creative, progressive, democratic culture can be. That is not to say that Black Mountain College isn't used as a key example of art as wrought by conflicted genius and riven with disabling internal struggle. Indeed, if Black Mountain was a limitless "galaxy of talent," to use former student Ray Johnson's ironic phrase, it was also characterized by both years of bitter dispute and moments of evanescent harmony. However, romanticizing the College is a disservice to the rigorous artistic practices and influential teaching methods that emerged in its brief twenty-three year existence. For the College, founded in 1933 though hopelessly under-funded by its closure in 1956-57, has shaped, like perhaps no other place in America, the terrain of visual culture and the possibilities for artistic practice in ways that are still being measured.

Yet myths of grand, romantic failure have their perverse pleasure because these stories about the past seem to hearken, in a nostalgic fashion, to a time of now-lost plenitude. On occasion Black Mountain College participants fueled these myths of exceptionalism, though more often than not the routine tasks of running a college on a shoestring budget demanded momentous attention. I can think of no better example to illustrate the College's contradictory sense of place than ex-student Susan Weil's 1949 suggestive collage *Secrets*. Commonplace miscommunication and the miasma of day-to-day argument—these are the mundane features of a small, isolated society. Weil's paper collage is a palimpsest of overlapping voices communicating all too well the suspicions, misunderstandings and loss of fellowship that characterized the College.

The College's complicated field of social conflict belies even knottier disputes about the stakes and purpose of artistic practice. Black Mountain is arguably the most important site of the cross-

pollination of European modernist art and its American counterparts, and the methodologies of practice that emerged there have enduring consequences to our contemporary notions of art. These arguments, in particular around issues of experimental practice and expressionism, represent a key outpost of long-waged debates about the nature of artistic production.

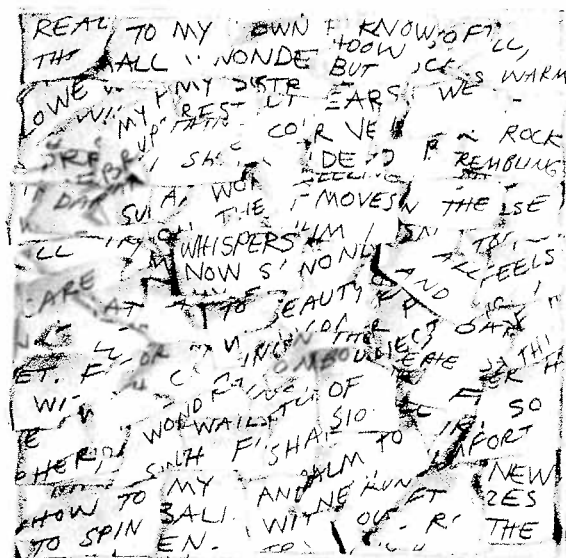
A spirit of artistic innovation was at the core of Black Mountain College's educational philosophy; in a 1937 College bulletin, Anni Albers encouraged her students and other artists to "leave the safe ground of accepted conventions." Experimentation was in fact a complicated and contested concept that included projects as varied as hard-edged abstraction, dome architecture, chance-based musical composition and explorations of monochromatic painting. Those using the concept of experimentation laid claim to practices that stressed innovation without personal expression; all viewed their experimental procedure as interrelating art and life and therefore imbuing art with crucial relevance. Rigorous procedures of testing—through both methods of chance and through investigations of order and design—resulted in thorough redefinitions of what art could be. The models of experiment initiated at the College represent important directions of post-war art practice, elements of which would be sampled, if not wholly adopted, by Black Mountain College students and subsequent practitioners.

Expressionism, on the other hand, was reaching its zenith in America during Black Mountain College's years of operation. Visitors to the College such as painters Franz Kline, Willem and Elaine de Kooning and the critic Clement Greenberg advocated Abstract Expressionism as the preeminent mode of art making, arguing for art as a realm of emotion and subjective feeling expressed through the crucible of paint or some other intractable medium. Visual artists of an expressionist bent found like-minded company at the College with poets such as Charles Olson, Robert Creeley and Jonathan Williams. Expressionism's motto of immediacy and individuality can be characterized by Williams' paraphrasing of his teacher (and College Director) Charles Olson: "You've got to take hunches, you've got to jump and then see what you've got to operate as though you knew it. Take chances, jump in there and see what happens." Discussions at Black Mountain College about the complicated nature and effects of experimentation were always themselves in dialogue with such counter-tendencies towards spontaneity and expression.

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If one considers the College in terms of its locale, two of the most unlikely Black Mountaineers were Josef and Anni Albers. Exiles from Nazi Germany, both were teaching "masters" at the Bauhaus, a school whose radical pedagogy encouraged new considerations of the function of art within industrial society. As it turned out the Bauhaus—closed in 1933—and Black Mountain—opened that same year—shared many characteristics as progressive educational institutions and as zones of experimental art practice.

Upon his arrival in Black Mountain, Josef Albers famously declared (in his halting English), "I want to open eyes." Albers's pronouncement indicated a desire to create an audience—for his art, and for practices of abstraction more generally—which would be tutored in new perceptual strategies. In the courses he taught at the College (from 1933 until his departure in 1949), Albers stressed the



ABOVE: Susan Weil, *Secrets*, 1949.

COVER IMAGE: Robert Rauschenberg and Susan Weil, *Light Borne in Darkness*, ca. 1951.

"experience" of a laboratory environment and promoted a form of experiment that could dynamically refashion routine habits of seeing.

The work Josef Albers created while at the College reflected a process of experimentation with the fundamental elements of form, particularly the coloristic and geometric relationships organizing the appearance of forms on two dimensional surfaces. For instance, in Albers's woodcut entitled *Astatic* (1944), interlocking irregular white and gray trapezoids and triangles are attached in what appears to be a sequence of folds. Yet areas of apparent overlap are visual illusions — each white or gray form is adjacent to

its neighbor, not nearer or farther from the surface. As one follows the connections to find the outline of a half-perceived three dimensional object, the impossibility of extracting such an illogical dimensional form from the matrix of surrounding woodgrain summons once again an overall flatness to the image. The contingent structure of the jigsawed composition in *Astatic* generates optical challenges: the viewer wonders, is it more two dimensional than three dimensional? is it a unified shape or several intersecting or even disparate, overlapping forms? Though Albers disdained association with the later Op Art artists, his work exposes the rudimentary material conditions necessary to construct spatially ambiguous



Josef Albers, *Astatic*, 1944.

images.<sup>2</sup> Albers's interest in recognizing illusions of form represented an attention to, and possible rearticulation of, ingrained habits of perception.

Anni Albers was a master weaver concerned with both the material and social conditions of craft production. She constantly tested definitions of what constituted art as opposed to craft, and felt that the two categories could be at times merged in well-designed objects, whether they be paintings, prints or weavings. Albers viewed the weaving workshop as a laboratory-like environment where one could carefully test and alter the organization and appearances of forms, as opposed to tolerating mediocre mass-produced consumer goods. Challenging conventions about who was authorized to construct art objects was a form of social resistance to Albers, yet it was her confrontation with the medium, the "struggle with a rugged material," that represented her highest challenge to passive consumer culture. As she wrote, "Resistance is one of the factors necessary to make us question our work procedure... when experimenting, we are forced into flexibility of reaction... we have to use imagination and be inventive."<sup>3</sup>

The renowned summer institutes at the College supplemented regular faculty such as the Alberses with guests and students of tremendous energy and talent, often at very early stages of their careers. One of the most memorable of these sessions was during the summer of 1948, which attracted a stellar cast of future luminaries including John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Elaine and Willem de Kooning and Buckminster Fuller. Frequently these summer institutes produced unexpected and enduring collaborations between disciplines.

John Cage arrived at the College in 1948 as Merce Cunningham's accompanist. He brought with him nearly all eighteen extant scores by the French composer Erik Satie and a copy of Satie's 1913 play *The Ruse of Medusa*. Cage antagonized many of the



Elaine de Kooning, *Black Mountain #6*, 1948.

College's German émigrés by exclusively performing Satie's oeuvre throughout his stay; particularly infuriating to them was his prefacing speech denouncing Beethoven's harmonic tradition in favor of Satie's emphasis on rhythm and duration. In contrast, Cage's production of Satie's long-neglected play was universally admired. Student Arthur Penn (later known for his film *Bonnie and Clyde*) directed Buckminster Fuller as the Baron Medusa, Elaine de Kooning as his daughter Frisette and Merce Cunningham as the "costly mechanical monkey," with sets by Willem and Elaine de Kooning.

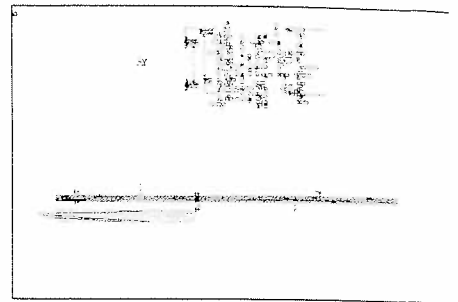
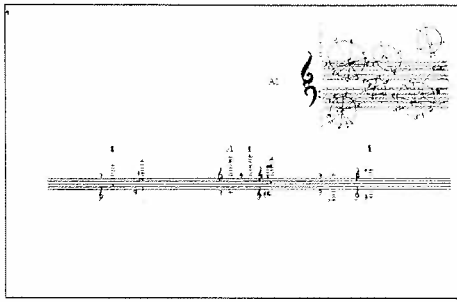
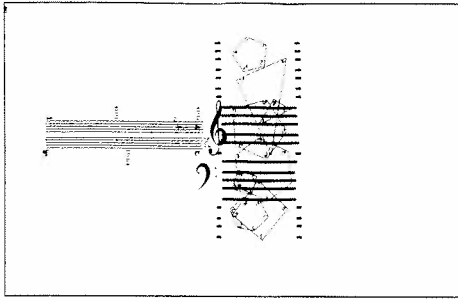
*The Ruse of Medusa*, characterized by absurd monologues and unrelated musical interludes, alerted Cage to the possibility of arbitrary relationships between actions within a performance. Cage's production, however, was still a scripted play and functioned quite successfully as a comedic piece, lending levity to the challenge that his lectures on Satie posed. It was on his next visit to the College, in 1952, that he radically disrupted previous incarnations of performance by introducing overlapping activities and narrative fragmentation. By the time he returned, Cage had already begun utilizing pseudo-chance compositional methods derived from parameters provided by the I-Ching. But it was faculty member M.C. Richards' translation of Antonin Artaud's *The Theatre and Its Double*, with its call for forms of theatrical performance beyond the scriptures of literature, that provided Cage his greatest inspiration for the 1952 *Untitled Event*, also known as the first "Happening."

Late that summer, Cage and pianist David Tudor formulated an idea for a piece involving multiple participants who would each perform discrete activities to overlap over a period of 45 minutes. According to Cage, he proposed that Charles Olson and M.C.

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Clemens Kalischer. "The Ruse of Medusa" production photograph. 1948.

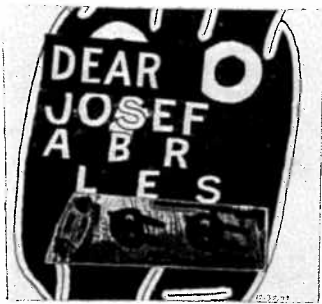


John Cage. *Concert for Piano and Orchestra (for Elaine de Kooning)*, 1957-58.

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Richards read their poetry, student Robert Rauschenberg display his paintings and play records and Merce Cunningham dance. Tudor was to perform on the piano, and Cage would read from a previously prepared lecture on Zen Buddhism. To Cage, although the event represented "the centrality within each event and its non-dependence on other events,"<sup>4</sup> he had in fact established strict time brackets and organized the event with particular temporal and locational guidelines. Cage's employment of what I term a "chance protocol" in *Untitled Event*, one of particular parameters (duration, assignment of specific tasks to performers or an agreed-upon use of certain tools or instruments) governing the execution of the latter work, represented an attempt to sever experimentalism from determining factors such as artistic intention or argumentation. This constituted his most revolutionary break from previous models of performance.<sup>5</sup>

As Cage was incorporating ambient and unfamiliar noise in musical composition and performance, he was also redefining what a music score could be. In his *Concert for Piano and Orchestra (for Elaine de Kooning)*, for example, traditional musical notations of staves, bars, keys and notes are replaced with diagrammatic forms to be interpreted by the composer or musicians. This democratization of musical language guaranteed that every performance would be unique and unpredictable. For, as Cage argued, the definition of experiment was "an act the outcome of which is unknown."<sup>6</sup>



Ray Johnson, *Untitled (Dear Josef Albers)*, 1993.

As performance at Black Mountain College was being expanded to incorporate happenstance events, painters there were testing the boundaries of an image's legibility by exploring the ultimate "anti-art" provocation—the monochromatic canvas. Robert Rauschenberg's prolific output during his years at Black Mountain included his so-called "Black Paintings," in which he layered dirt and paint over newsprint, as well as entirely white canvases. John Cage once referred to this series of "White Paintings" as "airports for shadows and dust."<sup>7</sup> Cage was intrigued with how these canvases seemed to enhance the experience of typically overlooked events—the way, for example, the paintings amplified shadows or their color and appearance varied according to changing light conditions. Cage credited Rauschenberg with opening up a space of apparent emptiness that was in fact full of diverse activity and experience. Cage paid tribute to Rauschenberg's challenge of empty openness in 1952 when he composed *4'33"*, a score lasting four minutes and thirty-three seconds including no intentional sound on the part of the performer. The score's "silence" was in actuality full of "sound"—the coughs, fidgets and whispers of

the audience in addition to any other ambient noise. Cage argued that just as there was no emptiness in the "White Paintings," there was also no silence in life.

Ray Johnson also explored the monochrome—several works from his "Moticos" series consist of whitened cardboard sheets perforated with irregular marks; another work utilizes the newspaper transfer process that Rauschenberg also employed to produce faint images on a white field. Yet the bulk of Johnson's work consists of witty painted collages and texts he mailed to friends and enemies, museums and galleries alike. His "New York Correspondence School"—of which he was the founder and only active participant—pioneered what has been termed "mail art." He used his mailings to comment on cultural figures and events and to devise intricate word plays and ambiguous puns, all the while developing visual dialogues between his work and that of colleagues. He often plundered his previous works to create new collages, as with *Wall*, in which he cut up and reworked abstract paintings from his days as Josef Albers's student into a murky black field not unlike Rauschenberg's *Untitled (Black Painting)*. In his collages Johnson often carried on extended conversations with distant icons and close friends, as with his work *Dear Josef Albers*, in which a letter's form of address—"Dear"—is appropriated as an affectionate homage to his influential teacher.

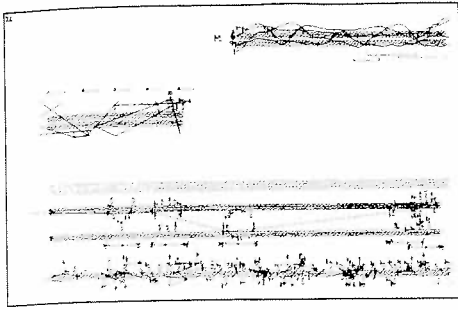
Buckminster Fuller, in contrast, was hardly interested in ambiguities: he came to Black Mountain College with a very clear plan. In the mid 1940s Fuller had begun experimenting with geodesics (defined as the arcs of great spheres). This stimulated a shift in his interest towards the smooth and continuous tension of spherical surfaces as opposed to the rigid stress points created by right angles. Because they mirrored the form of the earth itself, spheres were a main component in Fuller's argument that he was discovering the universal laws of nature occurring on "spaceship earth." In analyzing spherical forms, Fuller extracted the tetrahedron—a pyramid with four sides—as the fundamental component from which one could abstract the structural behavior of all spheres. A series of regular and irregular tetrahedrons could be combined to constitute a near-spherical form, thereby distributing load through multiple points spaced throughout the structure. Fuller termed his innovations in geodesic construction "energetic geometry," and he created several models similar to his later *Closest Packing of Spheres*. When he arrived at Black Mountain in 1948,

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Masato Nakagawa, *Buckminster Fuller with Model, Black Mountain College*, 1949.

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he collaborated with sculpture student Kenneth Snelson in further developing what Fuller termed "tensegrity," an engineering principle of discontinuous compression and continuous tension that extended his energetic geometry. Tensegrity would prove vital to Fuller's later success in engineering geodesic domes and is still integral to contemporary engineering; it is what allows radio towers to stand without external bracing.

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The spirit of collaboration at the College in many cases became the foundation of lifelong friendships, unlikely partnerships and even more lasting arguments. Cage and Josef Albers forever disagreed about the role of chance in artistic production; Albers abhorred Cage's incitement towards artworks left open to accident. Cage and Fuller, the Zen anarchist and the technophile respectively, came together over their mutual appreciation of smoothly functioning management. Cage credited Fuller's advocacy of technocracy with providing greater social and personal freedom. As Cage explained of his own version of apolitical anarchy, "You see what anarchy needs in order to be practical is that all the utilities work... If, in other words, the water works, the food works and if there's money, and so on, if people have what they need, then anarchy gets along beautifully."<sup>8</sup> Albers and Fuller maintained a mutual admiration through their long lifetimes, sharing a desire that a better design of society could be achieved by a close attention to the formal constitution of the objects surrounding us.

The College's role in initiating new methods and objects of artistic production, and new ways of generating avant-garde critiques about the construction and representation of reality is unparalleled. The ambitions of Black Mountain College participants to transform habits of perception, systems of intention and patterns of tradition have critical implications for understanding art practices of the 20th and 21st centuries. Learning a few of the lessons of Black Mountain will allow us to marshal the hard-fought gains of the past towards a better future, and to observe nascent zones of innovative culture happening in the present.

<sup>8</sup>Quoted in Martin Duberman, *Black Mountain College: An Exploration in Community* (New York and London: WW Norton, 1972), 406.

Albers termed his work "perceptual art"—he was interested less in the optical registration of visual data on the eye than on how this visual data was received by the mind.

Ann Albers, *Selected Writings on Design* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001).

John Cage interviewed by Martin Duberman, April 26, 1969, p. 15 [NC State Archives].

Cage tried to take the show on the road, so to speak, by billing a series of similar events to be hosted by various universities a "Package Festival," though the success of that venture is unclear.

These unknown outcomes he termed "indeterminate" as to their performance, though they were organized with carefully determined procedures. John Cage, "Experimental Music: Doctrine," in *Silence* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 13.

Cage, "On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Work," *Silence* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 102.

John Cage interviewed by Martin Duberman, April 26, 1969, pp. 23-24 [NC State Archives].

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This brochure marks the Asheville Art Museum's continuing commitment to exploring the vibrant legacy of Black Mountain College. Not only is this focus important to understanding our regional cultural heritage but ongoing scholarship into the environment, the artists and the art created at Black Mountain College informs our appreciation of aesthetic developments central to the 20th and 21st centuries.

The Museum conceived *Black Mountain College: A Community Celebration 2006/07* to bring students, residents, newcomers and tourists together in appreciation of this remarkable aspect of our shared history. Outstanding partner organizations including the University of North Carolina Asheville Office of Cultural and Special Events, Asheville Symphony Orchestra, Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center and the Diana Wortham Theatre added their expertise to that of the Museum presenting an amazing array of opportunities for education and entertainment throughout the year.

The Museum's series of three exhibitions and innumerable public programs took a closer look at issues central to understanding the phenomenon that was the College. Historian Mary Emma Harris continues to be an inspiration. Curator Beth Venn was an early influence in shaping our vision of the series. The Staff of the Museum and guest artists and scholars brought their tremendous talents to bear and finally, Guest Curator Eva Diaz brought her broad expertise and passion to the exhibitions and this publication. Without her dedication they would not have come to fruition.

Complex projects such as this require the support and involvement of many. The lenders, including individuals, artists, galleries, museums and institutions are noted on the checklist and we thank each of them for agreeing to loan precious works to the Museum.

Essential support for the project and this publication was received from the National Endowment for the Arts, which believes a great nation deserves great art. Crucial additional sponsors of the Black Mountain College exhibition series and public programs include Asheville Savings Bank, the Friends of Mountain History, the Maurer Family Foundation, the North Carolina Arts Council and the Seth Sprague Charitable and Educational Foundation.

Black Mountain College, a product of its time and place, fostered extraordinary experiments in material and form and engendered tremendous creativity through collaborations and interdisciplinary dialogue. Its lessons continue to resonate today.

— Pamela L. Myers, Executive Director, Asheville Art Museum

John Cage, Poster for the *Package Festival*, ca. 1953.



# **Black Mountain College**

AN EXHIBITION SERIES

Its Time and Place

Experiments in Material and Form

Collaborations and Interdisciplinary Dialogues