

Three Models of Design at Black Mountain College

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Under Consideration

the experimenters: chance and design at black mountain college
by Eva Díaz (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2015)
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The *experimenters* is among the most challenging and rewarding studies of art and design associated with Black Mountain College. The culmination of more than a decade of research and writing, the book is a tour de force of comparative analysis, exploring the work of three faculty in three artistic fields: Josef Albers in visual art, John Cage in music, and Buckminster Fuller in architecture. Probing well beyond mere comparison, though, Eva Díaz articulates the collaborative insights, creative tensions, and incompatibilities among the three, from which she emerges with three distinct and provocative understandings of what “experiment” can mean.

What occasions her study is the coincidence of the artist-designers’ presence and pedagogy at the College particularly in the memorable summer institute of 1948, but extending to the summers of 1949 and 1952. Though the occasions were relatively brief, like many encounters at Black Mountain, they were generative of new approaches and processes of design that would extend well into succeeding decades. The spark of experimentalisms was particularly apropos of the College, which was itself an experiment in education with a hospitable openness to innovation. Ironically, the seminal meetings of the three men came at a moment when the College was in the throes of crisis over identity, finances, and future direction. By the early 1950s, the College was falling into steady decline toward closure. But the artistic ferment of these summers lived on.

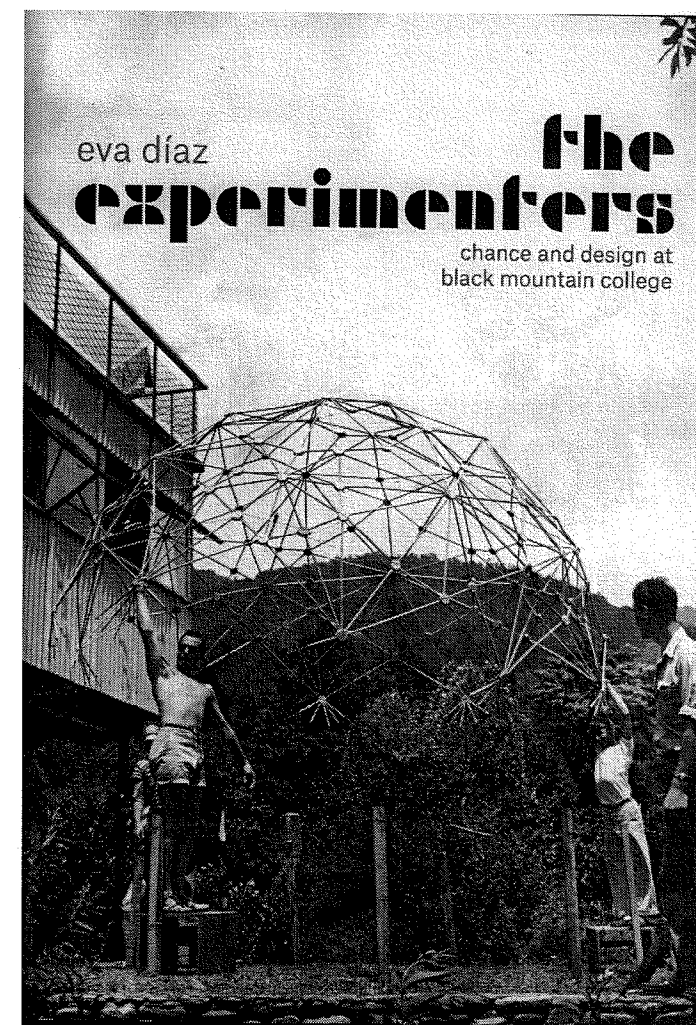
The author’s dazzling dexterity with language not only enriches her text but enables her to express the three approaches

to experimentalism in complex and subtle variations. In both the introduction and the epilogue, as well as the individual chapters on each artist, Díaz tries out slightly different wordings as if she were holding a prism to the light and experimenting herself with different ways to word the distinctions she discerns. In one dense but concise version, she describes the “three models of experiment” this way:

the methodical testing of the appearance and construction of form in the interest of designing new, though ever-contingent, visual experiences (Albers); the organization of aleatory (chance-generated) processes and the anarchical acceptance of indeterminacy (Cage); and “comprehensive, anticipatory design science” that tests traditional artistic and architectural forms, and embraces temporary failures, in order to teleologically progress toward a utopia of efficiently managed resources (Fuller). (9)

With each artist she also offers iconic phrasing that helps the reader hold in mind each approach: for Albers, contingency of form; for Cage, chance protocol; for Fuller, comprehensive design. For each she also describes a process—controlled variation, random indeterminacy, short-term failures—that exemplified what, for each artist, constituted experimentalism.

In order to carry this ambitious project through, Díaz has to work in the literature and practice of each field, and this she accomplishes with astonishing depth and perception. In successive chapters, she places the artists in the context of their formation prior to arriving at Black Mountain, and explores their work in conversation with other artists and critics. She begins with Albers, by far the longest tenured at Black Mountain, having arrived within months of the College’s founding in 1933. She traces his work from the Bauhaus where he formulated his Preliminary Course of “ordered and disciplined testing of the various qualities and appearances of readily available materials” in the service



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of an “ethics of perception”: a “corrective against stagnant perceptual habits in the culture at large,” opening the way to “cultural transformation and growth” (18-19). His methods flourished at Black Mountain, where he remained for 15 years despite other offers to entice him away. His approach well suited the aspirations of John Dewey, whose ideal of progressive education was influential at Black Mountain and other experimental colleges founded in the 1920s and '30s. “Empowering individuals with attentive perception laid the foundation for an educated citizenry,” Díaz summarizes their common view, which would lead to “careful change, reform, and improvement” (49-50).

As director of the summer institutes, Albers exercised the freedom to invite artists and practitioners of diverse practices. One of those with whom he had in common only the desire to transform, not the method, was John Cage. A generation younger and Los Angeles-born, Cage stirred up an immediate conflict with the German heritage in the College by advocating recovery of the neglected insights of Erik Satie and the fearless risk of experimental performance. Through his summer 1948 staging of Satie’s absurdist drama *The Ruse of Medusa* and his own summer 1952 *Theater Piece No. 1* that became known as the first “Happening,” Cage explored the possibilities of chance and randomness. Díaz puts this approach into conversation with a wide range of performance perspectives, from the Bauhaus influences of Xanti Schawinsky (also at Black Mountain College in the 1930s) to the stimulus of his immersion in silence through Zen Buddhism. Cage’s break with the meticulously controlled and staged Bauhaus method (Albers and Schawinsky) in favor of collapsing the boundaries between art and life, performer and audience, in the service of chance—culminating in his conception of the silent piano piece 4’33” while in residence at Black Mountain in 1952—staked out a tension with Albers that ultimately ended their artistic relationship.

Yet Cage’s risk-taking Americanist breaks with tradition found a colleague and friend in Buckminster Fuller, 20 years his senior but a companion in willingness to fail in creating something entirely new. Fuller, a last-minute substitute as teacher of architecture in summer 1948, returned in summer 1949 with a year of teaching in between at the American version of a “New Bauhaus” at the Institute of Design in Chicago. Black Mountain was Fuller’s first teaching appointment, and led to a turn toward pedagogy that he also shared with Cage (and of course, with Albers as well).

Fuller’s often quirky but sometimes brilliant experiments had been regularly dismissed in the preceding decades, but at Black Mountain he found a rare receptive audience. His infectious zest for trial and error, and his fearlessness at the prospect of failure, caught the imagination of many students and faculty colleagues. At Black Mountain College, he assembled elements of design and production that would prove key to his visionary search for comprehension of systems of a sustainable world. Díaz puts his work in conversation with other architectural innovators such as Gyorgy Kepes and László Moholy-Nagy as together they pioneered moves away from thinking of design as the production

of objects and toward design as intelligible pattern and process. Fuller, too, was breaking with the Bauhaus design approach focused on aesthetics, in favor of design that explored, prototyped, and advocated more useful and productive structures—especially structures for living.

My primary interest in this book is in the history of higher education, in particular the liberal arts, and especially the so-called “experimental” colleges with which Black Mountain College is typically grouped. So I found myself asking continually in my reading of Díaz what difference it made that the three forms of experimentalism coincided at Black Mountain, and what role the College itself had in nurturing the collaboration and collision of these three approaches. On this score, I confess to disappointment in Díaz’s repetition of some uncritical bromides about the College. She describes it as beginning on the grounds of a “summer camp” (though the accompanying photo is the 1940s Lake Eden campus) in “a far-flung corner of North Carolina” (2). Her setting the scene this way evokes her often repeated descriptions of the College’s setting as “rural Appalachia” (1, 15), isolated, or remote.

This perspective distorts and ignores the heritage of experimentalism already thriving in the region before the College ever started: schools for building creative practices from the crafts of the Southern Appalachians (John C. Campbell Folk School, Penland, and Crossnore); nearby Asheville as a center of architectural and artistic expression, cosmopolitan tourism, and progressive education; innovative planned communities such as E.W. Grove’s partially completed designs that became the Lake Eden campus; a neighboring Farm School (today’s Warren Wilson College) for teaching emerging technologies of agricultural production; and the numerous mountain camps and religious retreat centers that were often seedbeds of socially progressive ideas. This book misses a chance for an even richer discussion of experimentalism connecting what was taught in the College with what was emerging in the surrounding culture.

Díaz also refers to the College as an art school (55), which it most decidedly was not. The summer institutes offered primarily (though not exclusively) courses and presentations in the arts. The central focus of the college curriculum, though, was precisely not on the arts per se, but on the arts as disciplined practices that would transform the approach to all the liberal arts. But this leads to another distinction the author does not fully explore or explain, namely, the gap between the short-term summer institutes with faculty, many of whom stayed only a few weeks, and the long-term liberal arts collegiate program that endured over 20 years. What Black Mountain College really was, and how this gap can be reconciled institutionally and historically, remains an endlessly fascinating question.

Like all good books, this one stirs in the reader a wish that the author had extended her discussion to additional questions. What was provoked for me by her articulation of the three experimentalisms, and a topic she did not explore, is what these varied models would mean for rethinking what an “experimental” college is supposed to be. Black Mountain College was notable

for creating coincidences and collaborations among faculty and students that in many cases determined future careers and productivity and spun off additional communities of experimentation. Albers happened to be seeking refuge from Nazi Germany when Philip Johnson connected him with John Andrew Rice and Ted Dreier, among Black Mountain's founding figures, in 1933. Cage landed on the 1948 summer institute faculty almost by chance, having originally come only as Merce Cunningham's accompanist during a visit the preceding spring. Fuller was a last-minute hire when other architects could not come.

But there was more to Black Mountain than chance. A thought experiment I would like to try, inspired by Eva Díaz, is to play out how experimental colleges drew upon or exemplified the three approaches she describes. All the colleges formed in the Deweyan spirit understood education dynamically as practice, process, and performance, and all thought the dispositions they cultivated could be a catalyst for social transformation. But they varied, as did these three artists, in degrees of control over curriculum and pedagogy, in the free play they allowed for chance and coincidence through collaboration, and in the larger systemic social vision they advocated. Locating Black Mountain College in this range of approaches could further illuminate its distinct character.

Of course, no experimental college was static any more than any of the three artists. Each college had a unique story of how their experimentalism changed and evolved over time. Charles Olson, the poet and pedagogue who emerged from tangling with Fuller in summer 1949 to become Black Mountain's last rector, penned in "Maximus to Gloucester, Letter 27 [withheld]" the memorable phrase, "An American is a complex of occasions." So is an American college, a place and occasion from which startling innovation may spring. We have Eva Díaz to thank for demonstrating so compellingly how Black Mountain College was such a place.