

# black mountain – educational turn and the avant-garde

*Marking the last phase of the collaborative practice-based project Black Mountain Research between Freie Universität Berlin and Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart – Berlin, the symposium 'Black Mountain – Educational Turn and the Avant-garde' brought together a group of outstanding scholars to discuss past and current models of artistic practice and laboratories, various methods of experimental practice-based research, unpredictability and dilettantism, and collaborative knowledge production in academia and museums as educational institutions.*

*Black Mountain College (1933 – 1957) developed an unprecedented prominent genealogy of artists, scientists, and intellectuals in the neo-avant-garde of the 20th century. With minimal structure, borne of both idealistic inclination and economic necessity, its experiment in education would prove innovative, yet provisional and ultimately untenable. As an educational art institution, it established performative practices of interdisciplinary learning and researching, which included at least two crucial factors: collaboration and experimentation. This unique complicity of an educational turn and the emergence of an avant-garde is of crucial interest in today's debates on issues of education and pedagogy in art, science, and academia under precarious economic circumstances.*

*Hosted by Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart – Berlin, the symposium 'Black Mountain – Educational Turn and the Avant-garde' took place on the last weekend of the exhibition 'Black Mountain. An Interdisciplinary Experiment 1933 – 1957' (from 05.06. to 27.09.2015) and was organized in collaboration with Freie Universität Berlin and Dahlem Humanities Center.*

*The conference's program is available via:  
[black-mountain-research.com/education/](http://black-mountain-research.com/education/)*

*Videos of all lectures are available via:  
[black-mountain-research.com/conference-videos-on-education/](http://black-mountain-research.com/conference-videos-on-education/)*



**James Elkins**

*What is Research?*

“My moral here is, that it is necessary to manage two often incompatible goals. One of them is keeping the assessment of arts open, flexible and non-institutional for all the obvious reasons, but the other one is specifying with precision when it is possible, because, I don't believe, within existing institutional structures that it is possible to escape this. You have to start a Black Mountain to complete the escapement; you have to work with it, if you don't start your own Black Mountain.”

**James Elkins is E.C. Chadbourne professor in the Department of Art History, Theory, and Criticism, School of the Art Institute of Chicago. His most recent book is 'What Photography is'.**

**Matt Wright**

*Black Mountains of Vinyl – The Turntable and Compositional Thinking*

“The notion of thinking about turntables as a kind of metaphor for artistic research is one that is interesting for me, because of the notion of erosion. [...] In relationship to artistic research, we need to think about this in relationship to artistic research, too, the notion of keeping the theoretical underpinning very sharp and very close to the moment. I am very much interested in the notion of, for instance, spontaneous dissertations, which I am sure would be quite a difficult notion, but this is the other part of what we are talking about at this symposia, isn't it? This notion of experimentation.”



**Matt Wright is professor of Composition and Sonic Art at Canterbury Christ Church University in the UK. He works as a composer, improvising turntablist and installation maker.**



Annette Jael Lehmann is professor for Visual Culture and Theater at Freie Universität Berlin. She has a strong inter- and cross-disciplinary focus in research and in practice-based collaborations with various institutions in academia, art and culture.

Annette Jael Lehmann  
Black Mountain - Educational Turn and the Avant-Garde in Past Tense

“How can we make our research about the history of Black Mountain College productive for our current practices in teaching and learning in a more immediate, or even naïve way? In other words – and this may be my central question for today – what are the potentials of inter-institutional collaborations and research practices for the precarious autonomy of art and education today? My hope is that our collaboration of the university and the museum in Black Mountain Research can become a venue for a continuous collaboration between otherwise distinct forms of cultural knowledge production and display of art addressing the public. I also hope, that our discussions today allow spreading sparks of reflections and seeds of pragmatic suggestions for this process, asserting a visible distance from relativism or nihilistic defeatism, which I often observe in the contemporary art world and the humanities.”



Eva Díaz is assistant professor in the History of Art and Design Department at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. Her book 'The Experimenters: Chance and Design at Black Mountain College' was released last year by the University of Chicago Press.

Eva Díaz  
The Black Mountain College Experiment Revisited

“Within my argument which is to think like what would be the kind of key Black Mountain College idea in terms of pedagogy and form and for me it was really this sense of experimentation as self-contradictory as it is, because you have the Albers' version of experiment, which is this kind of careful testing of variation in the interest of changing habits of perception. And then along comes John Cage in 1948 and essentially explodes that notion of experimentation and considers an experiment any situation that outcome is unknown. So none of this careful assessing and weighing of variables, but to really imagine experimentation as creating indeterminacy.”

Chris Salter  
Alien Agency - Techno-Science, Art and the Limits of Knowing

“In other words artist researchers, I want to argue, actually make substantially different claim than other disciplines both scientific as well as interpretive like the humanities, which is to focus on the idea that making is not just only a discursive contribution to the world, but it enacts the world that is actually proposed. [...] If there is a great ontological divide between nature and culture, nature and society, legitimate knowing and episteme versus practical knowledge and techne, than there is maybe another divide on the current debates about research creation, art and research. A methodological one between practice, what artist creators do versus what they think from afar. This is the invitation for all the scholars in the room to get their hands dirty, wet, scraped, [...] with spills from cells to go into the studios and labs with artists and researchers to get a sense of the messiness and at the same time of the unpredictability of making things.”



Chris Salter is an artist, University Research Chair in New Media, Technology and the Senses at Concordia University and Co-Director of the Hexagram network for Research-Creation in Media Arts, Design, Technology and Digital Culture, in Montreal. His latest book is 'Alien Agency: Experimental Encounters with Art in the Making'.

Dieter Lesage  
Art, Research, Experiment - The Academy Revisited



Dieter Lesage is professor at RITCS | Royal Institute for Theater, Cinema & Sound in Brussels. His latest book is 'Art, Research and Politics. Essays in Curatorial Criticism (1999-2014)'.

“The educational complex today haven taken the educational turn seems to be a Black Mountain complex. If we define a complex as a correlation of concepts, what then are the concepts that figure prominently in the rhetoric of those curators who took the educational turn? I believe that a curatorial rhetoric can be diagnosed as pertaining to the Black Mountain complex, if it refers to the following three key concepts as crucial in its artistic endeavors: interdisciplinarity, experiment and self-organization. [...] In a sense it seems as if we, representatives of European academies, are so traumatized by the bureaucratic processes in which we are drawn that we have begun to think of Black Mountain College as the best school we have never been to. As such we seem to suffer from the Black Mountain syndrome, which seems to be the core of our educational complex. The question is, whether we still have the energy and the courage to turn the Bologna process in a different direction, to climb another mountain hoping to find our Lake Eden?”