

# One Hundred Years of Revolutionary Experiments in Art Education

1. Eva Díaz, *The Experimenters: Chance and Design at Black Mountain College* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). I was first a student at the Whitney Program in 1998 and later taught curatorial studies there until 2008. I served on the advisory board for the Whitney Program 50th anniversary celebrations 2017–18.
2. See Laura Zornosa, “Roy Lichtenstein’s Studio Becomes Home to an Artistic Community,” *The New York Times*, February 23, 2022.
3. See Susan Cahan, *Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power* (Durham: Duke University, 2016). For a discussion of the 1971 boycotts of the Whitney’s 1971 exhibition *Contemporary Black Artists in America*, see Darby English, *1971: A Year in the Life of Color* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).
4. For a discussion of the founding and first forty years of the Whitney Program, see Howard Singerman, “In Theory & Practice: A History of the Whitney Independent Study Program,” *Artforum*, February 2004. For a series of reminiscences and essays reflecting on the legacy of the Whitney Program upon its 50th anniversary, see the issue “The Whitney Independent Study Program at 50,” *October* 168 (Spring 2019).
5. The Whitney Program had its greatest support from Whitney Museum directors Jack Baur, director from 1968–74, Tom Armstrong 1974–90, and its departing director, Adam Weinberg. Several unsupportive Whitney directors tried to curtail or control the program’s political direction, or tried to terminate the program entirely.
6. The book *Independent Study Program: 40 Years, Whitney Museum of American Art 1968–2008* (New York: Whitney Museum, 2008) contains a trove of information about past and current faculty and guest speakers, as does the Whitney Program website: <https://whitney.org/research/isp>, accessed November 14, 2022. Video footage from the presentations given at the Whitney Program’s 50th Anniversary Symposium, held at the Whitney Museum October 19–20, 2018 are available at <https://whitney.org/media/39707>, accessed October 1, 2022, including a talk I delivered during the panel “Pedagogy and Critical Practice.” The full list of symposium presenters can be found at

Eva Díaz

Having published a book on Black Mountain College, which was written during several of the ten years I had a close affiliation with New York’s Whitney Museum Independent Study Program, I have been asked countless times to explain what the relationship between these two lodestone institutions of twentieth- and twenty-first-century art pedagogy might be.<sup>1</sup> It is as pressing an occasion as ever to understand how decisions about the material constitution and appearance of form can change the patterns and perceptions that contribute to inequity. These institutions, the Whitney Program and Black Mountain College, are among several that have proposed a unique role for art in the polemics and pedagogy of alternative cultural values, seeking both formal and social-political innovation. Now that the Whitney Program, after existing for more than half a century in a state of remarkable continuity, will be transitioning to a new phase of its existence, this moment presents a timely opportunity to begin situating it in its historical and institutional contexts, including by teasing out its relationships to prior art educational models such as Black Mountain. For while the Whitney Program, also known as the “the Independent Study Program” or “ISP,” this spring completed its fifty-fourth year under the continuous directorship of Ron Clark, he retired at the conclusion of the last academic year, and under new director Gregg Bordowitz the program will be moving locations from Chinatown in Manhattan to a building in the West Village donated by the Roy Lichtenstein Estate.<sup>2</sup>

Not only is the Whitney Program noteworthy in its longevity under one individual’s steadfast leadership, the story of how it developed into what it is today is equally remarkable. The program emerged out of a peculiar concatenation of political pressures and institutional desires in the late 1960s. In part responding to the Civil Rights movement, art museums during this period began to create education divisions to expand their audiences, in particular to attract underrepresented minorities.<sup>3</sup> The Whitney Program was founded in 1967–68 as a subset of a newly formed education department at the Whitney, with Clark very soon after tapped as the program’s leader.<sup>4</sup> Invested in New Left politics of democratization, Clark created a structure at its very inception that emphasized independence from the day-to-day operations of the museum. Public protests against the lack of diversity in the Whitney’s curatorial and administrative staff in 1969, following the student- and worker-led uprisings in May 1968 in Europe and protests against the Vietnam War in the US, injected an element of urgency to the program’s curriculum, which increasingly focused on a systematic critique of power in art and in society.<sup>5</sup> The Whitney Program eventually adopted a twice-weekly meeting schedule addressing these issues, divided between reading seminars with short texts assigned for discussion, led by Clark or by core faculty, and presentations by visiting artists and theoreticians.<sup>6,7</sup>

The annual student cohort is composed of about fifteen visual artists, who are provided small studios; seven “critical studies” students (writers and researchers); and three to four curatorial students, who collaborate on an exhibition and catalog.<sup>8</sup> Alums of the program include many of the artists, writers, and curators most associated with social and political critique in the field of contemporary art.<sup>9</sup> The readings and speakers have been guided by Clark’s expertise and interest in psychoanalytic, feminist, post-colonial, and Marxist theories, in particular.



**Gayatri Spivak, pictured with Ron Clark and students, leading a seminar at the Whitney Independent Study Program, 2006** (photographer unknown; photograph provided by Whitney Museum Independent Study Program)

<https://whitney.org/events/isp-50th-anniversary>, accessed November 14, 2022.

7. Core faculty included Benjamin Buchloh, Hal Foster, Mary Kelly, and Laura Mulvey; the roster of visiting speakers included Vito Acconci, David Harvey, Alfredo Jaar, Chantal Mouffe, Martha Rosler, Gayatri Spivak, and Fred Wilson, among others.

8. Compared with its premises in a large loft at 384 Broadway that the program occupied until 2001, the facilities it is leaving at 100 Lafayette were modestly sized, with small office-like studios ringing a seminar room, a small office for archives, and an administrative office.

9. Alumni include Mark Dion, Andrea Fraser, LaToya Ruby Frazier, Félix González-Torres, Jenny Holzer, Emily Jacir, Glenn Ligon, and Rirkrit Tiravanija.

10. Students and collaborators included El Lissitzky, Nikolai Suetin, and Lazar Khidekel.

11. Among the best discussions of Malevich is the chapter “God is Not Cast Down,” in T. J. Clark’s *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999). A history of UNOVIS is

To return to the Black Mountain connection, the desire to link it to the Whitney Program presumes that Black Mountain College, among several other experimental arts-oriented schools of the past one hundred years, is in fact a progenitor of the Whitney Program. A potential genealogy of art schools of the last century implied by that assumption might be sketched as follows, moving from the early to mid-twentieth century:

**UNOVIS**, which is an acronym for the Russian of “Champions of the New Art,” was founded in 1919 at the Vitebsk Art Institute, Belarus. Kazimir Malevich was appointed its head by outgoing director Marc Chagall in 1920.<sup>10</sup> UNOVIS disbanded in 1922 due to an ideological split between productivist art and design practices aiming to effect change during the revolutionary period, and Malevich’s philosophical suprematism, with its high degree of nihilism advocating for the near complete eradication of artistic form.<sup>11</sup>

**The Bauhaus**, which translates as “building house,” was founded in 1919 in Weimar, Germany as a state-sponsored school by architect Walter Gropius. It changed to a workshop, not studio-based, teaching model in 1923 and moved to Dessau in 1926. The faculty included Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, Oskar Schlemmer, and László Moholy-Nagy.<sup>12</sup> The Bauhaus emphasized laboratory study of form in carefully varied, often visual experiments stressing dynamic construction and composition. It disbanded in 1933 at its last location in Berlin, while headed by architect Mies van der Rohe, due to political and financial conflicts exacerbated by the rise of Nazism.<sup>13</sup>



**Members of UNOVIS, Vitebsk, with Malevich in profile before blackboard, 1921** (photographer unknown; photograph in the public domain).

**El Lissitzky, *The Works of the Department of Architecture, Vkhutemas, Moscow, 1927***, brochure cover (photographer unknown; photograph in the public domain)

found in Maria Kokkori, Alexander Bouras, and Irina Karasik, "Kazimir Malevich, Unovis, and the Poetics of Materiality," in *Celebrating Suprematism: New Approaches to the Art of Kazimir Malevich* (Leider, Netherlands: Brill Publishers, 2018), 105–25.

12. Its students, many of whom took up faculty positions at the institution, included Anni and Josef Albers, Gunta Stölzl, Herbert Bayer, Max Bill, Marianne Brandt, Xanti Schawinsky, and Marguerite Wildenhain.

13. For a concise history of the Bauhaus, see Éva Forgács's excellent *The Bauhaus Idea and Bauhaus Politics* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1991). Further key reference volumes are Rainer K. Wick's important and well researched *Teaching at the Bauhaus* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2000); Frank Whitford's compendium of letters and primary sources in *The Bauhaus: Masters & Students by Themselves* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 1993); and the essential brick of a book about the school put out



**Vkhutemas** was founded in 1920 in Moscow by government decree as "The Higher State Artistic and Technical Studios." The faculty included Aleksandr Rodchenko, Lyubov Popova, Naum Gabo, Konstantin Melnikov, Varvara Stepanova, and El Lissitzky.<sup>14</sup> In 1927 it was renamed Vkhutein, changing its designation from "Studios" to "Institute." The artists associated with the organization used formal experimentation in geometric abstraction as a practice of social education, employing mass-produced materials such as steel and plate glass, while emphasizing color as form.<sup>15</sup> Vkhutein disbanded in 1930 due in part to the failure of students to gain a foothold in industry. In 1932 Stalin issued a decree abolishing independent artistic and cultural organizations, initially in literature, and when the meeting of the First Congress of Socialist Writers convened in 1934, it inaugurated "socialist realism" and effectively ended formal experimentation in Russia.

**Black Mountain College** was founded 1933 in western North Carolina as a liberal arts college governed and owned by faculty and students. The arts faculty consisted of Anni and Josef Albers, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, R. Buckminster Fuller, Willem de Kooning, and Robert Motherwell, among others.<sup>16</sup> With its many German émigrés, Black Mountain faculty members were invested in projects of formal experimentation such as geometric abstraction and serialized production, which later included dome architecture, chance-based musical composition, and explorations of monochromatic painting. The college disbanded in 1957 due to financial and administrative pressures.<sup>17</sup>





**R. Buckminster Fuller's dome assembly at Black Mountain College, 1949** (photograph by Masato Nakagawa; © and provided by State Archives of North Carolina, North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources)

in 1962 and translated into English in 1969, Hans Wingler's *The Bauhaus: Weimar Dessau Berlin Chicago* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1978). For a review of the literature published on the occasion of the Bauhaus's 90th anniversary, see my article "We Are All Bauhausers Today," *Art Journal* 70, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 115–18, which includes a discussion of the comprehensive Museum of Modern Art catalog edited by Barry Bergdoll and Leah Dickerman, *Bauhaus 1919–1933: Workshops for Modernity* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2009), among other recently published volumes on the topic.

14. For more on Vkhutemas, see Anna Bokov, *Avant-Garde as Method: Vkhutemas and the Pedagogy of Space, 1920–1930* (Zurich: Park Books,

Earlier I used the word “experimental” to provisionally connect the Whitney Program to Black Mountain College and prior visual arts oriented educational endeavors such as those mentioned above. But what do we mean by “experimental art” or “experimental arts education”? Is “experimental” even a useful term to describe Black Mountain College or the Whitney Program? To answer these questions, it is helpful to have a working definition of the “experimental” in art, as well as to strive for some clarity about interrelated concepts, such as progressive, critical, or radical pedagogies.

**1. Experimental art pedagogy: Characterized by innovations in art based on a close study of the material constitution and visual appearance of form, often in order to dehabituate ingrained habits of perception. It was first undertaken in the early part of the twentieth century in order to overturn traditional arts training—the academic instruction system based on painting and drawing, first from engravings, then casts, then old masters, and culminating in the study of the live model—and to disrupt some hierarchies of classroom pedagogy, and in so doing to supplant art traditions with modern, often abstract art.**

**2. Progressive education: Distinguished by flexible organizational structures in which learning is understood as a process of personal growth and social transformation. It emphasizes experiential learning and leans heavily on the work of philosopher John Dewey in the early part of the twentieth century, in particular his methods of experimental education that employ techniques of “learning by doing.”<sup>18</sup>**

**3. Critical pedagogy: A form of progressive pedagogy, rooted in the work of Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire, that teaches students to question forms of power and domination, in part by having them codirect the classroom environment.<sup>19</sup>**

**4. Radical pedagogy: Typified by a study of left-leaning politics and critical theory in order to question social hierarchies and accomplish social equality and justice, most often grounded in a Marxist perspective.**

2019), and Victor Margolin, *The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, 1917–1946* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

15. Vkhutemas initiated a basic course in which the core of the new training was developed. It consisted of various disciplines: (1) Color (taught by Lyubov Popova), (2) Revelation of form through color, (3) Color in space, (4) Color on the plane, (5) Construction (taught by Aleksandr Rodchenko), (6) Simultaneity of color and form on the plane, (7) Volume in Space, and (8) Particularities of fragmented color as it relates to abstract composition. By 1923 changes in the disciplines were instituted: (1) Plane and color—painting and graphics, (2) Volume and space—sculpture, (3) Space and volume—architectural disciplines.

16. Its students included Ruth Asawa, Ray Johnson, Robert Rauschenberg, Dorothea Rockburne, Kenneth Snelson, and Cy Twombly).

17. In this genealogy one might also consider the Subjects of the Artist School: A New Art School, which was somewhat of an offshoot of Black Mountain College. It was founded in 1948 on East 8th Street in Manhattan by Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, William Baziotas, and David Hare, and speakers included de Kooning, Cage, Ad Reinhardt, among others. Motherwell, de Kooning, and Cage had previously taught at Black Mountain College. Closed after one year, it became “the Club,” a discussion group that continued in various forms throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Herein is the origin of the New York School, another way in which Abstract Expressionism has been described.

18. Dewey most clearly articulates the “learning by doing” methodology in his book *Experience and Education* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997, first published 1938), though a discussion of “learning by doing” can be found much earlier in his career in *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: Free Press, 1997, first published 1916), 184.

19. See Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2009, first published 1968).

20. One might add as an ancestor to the Whitney Program the New School for Social Research, New York. Founded in 1919 by philosopher John Dewey, economist Thorstein Veblen, historian Charles A. Beard, among others, which gave a home to the University in Exile in 1933, including émigrés who fled the Nazis Erich Fromm, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Max Wertheimer, Hannah Arendt, and Roman Jakobson.

21. The Frankfurt School was founded by Carl Grünberg after the *Erste Marxistische Arbeitswoche* conference, which was attended by György Lukács and Karl Korsch, among others.

With these four concepts in mind it is obvious that situating the Whitney Program as an inheritor of experimental arts education programs, a category where we can confidently place UNOVIS, Vkhutemas, Bauhaus, and Black Mountain, will only ever be a partial history. Those historic art programs offered the equivalent of an undergraduate curriculum with studies initiated in a foundation course in which the examination of form in its material constitution, spatial context, and visual appearance was emphasized. Study of color as a unit of construction and composition was paramount. Only upon completion of the foundational course would students begin to specialize in workshops, which, while not necessarily medium-specific, tended to hone technical skills by way of a close laboratory-like study of materials, often with the aim of revolutionizing the production techniques and distribution forms of art.

Black Mountain College gets us closer to the model of the Whitney Program than UNOVIS, Vkhutemas, or the Bauhaus does, because its hybrid organization promoted arts and liberal arts training, foregrounding the discursive and the historical as much as the close study of material. But to truly understand the Whitney Program’s unique form of revolutionary experimentation we have to contend with the radical element of its pedagogy as laid out in the definition of radical pedagogy I provided: that is, the Whitney Program’s emphasis on critical theory. That emphasis on critical theory comes to the Whitney Program in large part from the Frankfurt School, which, beginning in the 1920s, embarked on a critique of the culture and social forms of modernity, exploring the anomie and alienation at the heart of capitalist class inequality.<sup>20</sup>

The Frankfurt School was less a school than a research center—the Institute for Social Research—affiliated with a Marxist working group, which included György Lukács and Karl Korsch, both were funded by Felix Weil, a wealthy young scholar at the University of Frankfurt.<sup>21</sup> The institute was officially established in early 1923 as an affiliated program of the University of Frankfurt in Germany. In 1930 Max Horkheimer became the director, with Theodor Adorno, Otto Kirchheimer, Leo Löwenthal, Herbert Marcuse, Erich Fromm, Walter Benjamin, and Siegfried Kracauer at various times associated with it. Emphasis was on the study of aesthetics and politics, mapping transformations of the culture landscape reconfigured by “culture industry,” changes in contemporary perception, new



**Participants of the Marxist Work Week, including Friedrich Pollock, Georg Lukács, Felix Weil, Karl and Rose Wittfogel, Christiane Sorge, and Karl Korsch in Geraberg, Germany, 1923**, figures connected with the newly founded Institute for Social Research, affiliated with University of Frankfurt (photographer unknown; photograph in the public domain)

22. The Whitney Program reading seminars blend several theoretical positions, of which Marxist critical theory is but one, but for these purposes I am tracing the influence of schools of art and thought on the structure and curriculum of the Whitney Program.

23. Horkheimer, "On Critical Theory," originally published in *Discussion on Theory and Praxis 1966–1969*, 1989, 237. Republished as *Towards a New Manifesto*, R. Livingstone (trans.) (London: Verso 2011).

24. Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht, and Georg Lukacs, *Aesthetics and Politics*, Frederic Jameson, ed. (London: Verso, 2007).

technologies of reproduction, and the emergence of a mass society. This is the origin of the practice of critical theory, in which class struggle, material culture, and Marxism are explored, in conjunction with Antonio Gramsci's theories of cultural hegemony.<sup>22</sup>

Less obvious is what the institute's approach was at the level of pedagogical practice. Horkheimer later, in the late 1960s, painted its teaching aims very broadly and in Manichaean (and near messianic) terms: "If one wishes to define the good as the attempt to abolish evil . . . this is the teaching of Critical Theory."<sup>23</sup> And, aside from how the topic was explored in epistolary debates between Adorno, Lukács, Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, and Bertolt Brecht, there was little specific emphasis on artistic training in Frankfurt School theory.<sup>24</sup> There was no testing of artistic form (material analysis, the study of visual appearance, or creating new modes of production or means of distribution) in laboratory or workshop settings, nor was the institute's project the practical investigation of experimental production techniques with which to create revolutionary art forms to alter visual and cultural perception. In short, the Frankfurt School was never a site of material production.

Nevertheless, there are great continuities between the zones of the experimental and the radical in education. Experimental art-oriented schools like Black Mountain College and the critical theory emphasis of the Frankfurt School share the argument that form is ideological. While, of course, all form has meaning, artistic forms have particular social and historical significance. Cultural meanings



can be changed in part by creatively altering the material constitution and appearance of form.

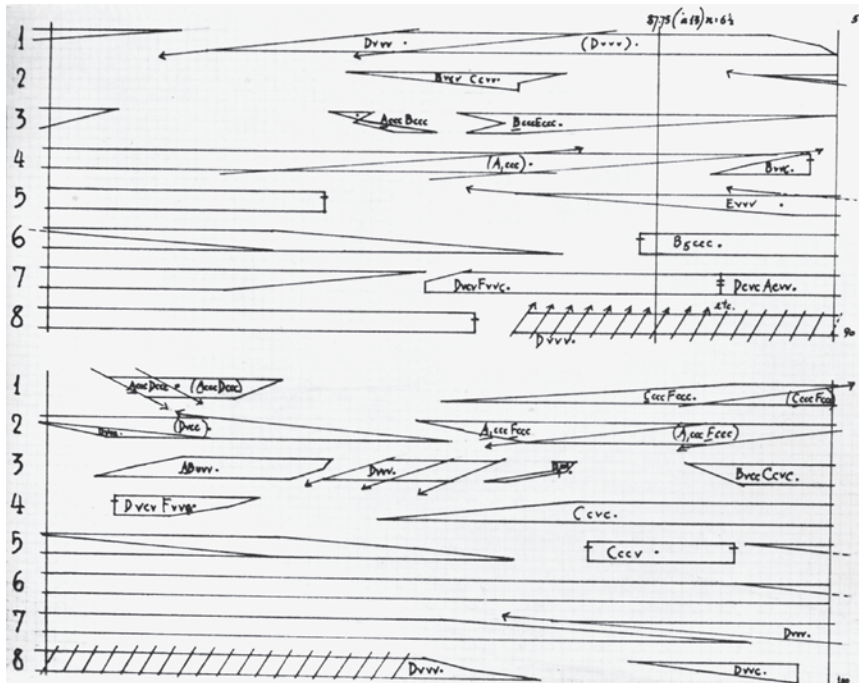
Yet it is clear that the terrain we find ourselves in when we talk about the Whitney Program's pedagogy is less about education as formal experimentation and far more about the exploration of political radicalism in the interest of enacting progressive, if not revolutionary, social change. At the Whitney Program the models of cultural-political praxis offered by the Frankfurt School percolated alongside the important influence of British cultural studies figures like Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams. The Whitney Program is a theory- and reading-based study of the efficacies of politicized art as undertaken by a group of often post-graduate artists, who come to the program with prior advanced artistic training, mixed with a group of critical and curatorial students, frequently pursuing higher degrees in humanities disciplines like art history and philosophy. In many ways the students of the Whitney Program, at least the art students, have benefited, in their prior education, from the institutionalization of formal training in experimental art programs founded on the example of the models of Vkhutemas, the Bauhaus, or Black Mountain.

The Whitney Program is radical in the sense of literal meaning stemming from the Latin word *radix*, or "root," in how it questions the basis of art at an ideological level: what roles it serves and how it can align with other forces in society advocating for social justice; racial, gender, and class equality; and economic redistribution. It does so to disturb assumptions about the role of art in modernity, rather than reinforcing and disseminating accepted understandings. The Whitney Program has always operated as a modestly sized endeavor, on the fringes of the very museum that supports (and at times has barely tolerated) it, but its theory-driven curriculum has had long-lasting impact.<sup>25</sup> Nearly every university or postgraduate visual arts program operating today seeks to educate students in the theoretical paradigms the Whitney Program first introduced to its students in systematic fashion in the 1980s, while also using its same methods of theory-based reading seminars.

Perhaps it is a misapprehension about the Whitney Program—that it provides experimental arts training or that it is a site of critical or progressive pedagogy, as opposed to its being a hub for radical pedagogy—that leads some detractors to attack its methods. At innumerable moments, if I mentioned having worked at the Whitney Program, I have been cornered by someone critical of its perceived didacticism or inflexibility, or another who opines that its strong director role betrays New Left models of decentralization. The Whitney Program is a "program," and in its case this program is invested in training students in politically radical theories of culture, not the perpetual reinvention of classroom structures, which is sometimes (mis)attributed to critical pedagogy, nor in the collective experiments in laboratory-like exploration of form carried out in experimental art pedagogies.

In this sense too, experimental arts-oriented schools like Black Mountain College are erroneously seen as exemplifying critical pedagogical practices when in fact their teaching methods could be quite programmatic. Josef Albers's emphasis on the fundamentals of form, which he brought from the Bauhaus to Black Mountain as the foundational *Vorkurs*, the famed and much-emulated preliminary course all Bauhaus students were required to take before specializing

25. For more on the recent history of the Whitney Program and its sometimes precarious existence, Eva Díaz, "Bubbles, Fabric, and the Common People," in *Harvard Design Magazine*, no. 44 (Fall/Winter 2017).







**Josef Albers, Black Mountain College, for *Life* magazine, 1946** (photograph by Genevieve Naylor; © and provided by Genevieve Naylor/Reznikoff Artistic Partnership)

**John Cage, *Williams Mix*, instructions for tape splicing, 1952–53**, page 5 of 193 (artwork © and provided by John Cage Trust and Music Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts)

**R. Buckminster Fuller leads the first World Game Seminar, New York Studio School, 1969** (photographer unknown; © Estate of R. Buckminster Fuller; used with permission)

in specific workshop study, was often seen as dogmatic in its attempts to create specific protocols around testing procedures. And when, for example, John Cage found students unwilling to enroll in his summer 1953 class at Black Mountain, the stated goal of which was to apprentice helpers to do the tedious work of cutting and splicing bits of magnetic tape for his composition *Williams Mix*, he canceled all formal teaching for the term. For the cost of one dollar Buckminster Fuller licensed those who completed his course as “student dymaxion designers,” making them eligible later to earn an “unlimited designation” when they had demonstrated in their design work further allegiance to Fuller’s own “dymaxion principles.”

As eccentric as these pedagogical agendas may seem to us now, the force of the ethical project of making students aware of the conventions of form production is evident in the influence of projects undertaken by Black Mountain teachers once they left the college. John Cage taught a battery of “experimental composition” courses from 1956–58 at the New School.<sup>26</sup> These courses single-handedly birthed the Fluxus art movement, which sought to connect Cage’s experiments in indeterminacy and unknown outcomes with the scripting of everyday actions in an attempt to dissolve distinctions between art and life.

Fuller’s teaching on college campuses led to the founding of Colorado’s Drop City commune and the *Whole Earth Catalog*, two touchstones of the 1960s

26. His students included Dick Higgins, George Brecht, Robert Whitman, Al Hansen, Allan Kaprow, and Jackson Mac Low.

counterculture. In an overtly activist vein, Fuller's World (Peace) Game project, initiated at the New York Studio School in 1969 and taken to many other venues in subsequent years, was a heuristic device to encourage college students' participation in managing global resources. As an educational simulation, students were invited to collect and share data about global resources and weapons represented as chips moved around the large, sometimes floor-bound gameboard, performing global planning at a collective level in order to return the responsibility of design (both in the sense of physical construction and information management) to college students.

For his part, after his nearly twenty years at Black Mountain, Albers restructured the Yale School of Fine Arts to become the chair of its new Department of Design, where he taught from 1950–58.<sup>27</sup> Richard Serra credited Albers with encouraging students to exfoliate the crust of habit and initiate new means of creative vision through materiality. Years later he reflected,

**You would think that the regimentation coming out of the Bauhaus was very rigorous, but Albers' design course was very experimental. . . . Albers' approach to color was not mechanistic but very playful. . . . He was constantly investigating the characteristics of different materials, and part of his teaching was to encourage just that.**<sup>28</sup>

So, like any program, the Whitney Program possesses a defined structure and goals, and its programmatic aspects have helped shape a community sharing theoretical insights that connect the project of political transformation to practices undertaken by visual artists, as well as theorists and curators of visual culture and art history. From the posters and other textual pieces highlighting everyday yet overlooked discriminatory ideologies produced by Jenny Holzer, the performances that foreground the legitimation of dominant cultural values in museums and other cultural institutions carried out by Andrea Fraser, or the consideration of the structural disinvestment in historic Black and working class communities put forward by LaToya Ruby Frazier, to mention but a few from among the hundreds of practitioners emerging from the program, most share a concern with joining the theoretical project of critique with the exigencies of giving form to demands for equality and justice. The Whitney Program leans on the arts training many participants have received by way of the dissemination of the experimental arts curricula of UNOVIS and Vkhutemas, the Bauhaus and Black Mountain, combining those traditions with collective, seminar-based investigations of artistic practice and the cultural and political urgencies of the present. That is a stake many have sharpened there.

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27. Albers taught at Yale after temporary appointments at Pratt Institute, Harvard School of Design, and the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm, Germany. His students at Yale included artists Eva Hesse and Richard Serra (the latter acting as a research assistant in preparing Albers's book *Interaction of Color* in 1961).

28. Serra quoted in "Richard Serra with Phong Bui," *The Brooklyn Rail*, June 2006.



**Ron Clark at the Whitney Museum  
Independent Study Program, 2017** (photo-  
graph by Eva Díaz)