

Black Mountain: An Interdisciplinary Experiment 1933–1957

*Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin*

*September 2015*

A letter from one of the Black Mountain College founders, Theodore Dreier in North Carolina, to artist Josef Albers in Dessau, begins the Hamburger Bahnhof's exhibition. Dreier is turning down Albers's salary request. The educator and engineer outlines the college's mission over three typewritten sides of cream paper: to be a democratic and interdisciplinary academy, with an equal and experimental approach to the arts and sciences; to concentrate on process and method, rather than results. He assures Albers that, in any case, little money will be needed for the style of life he will lead in the North American wilderness.

It's enough to convince Albers, who replies more briefly, in German (we can see the translation of certain words noted in the margins), to join this early experiment, "on which we wish to place a good deal of emphasis [on] working out a well-balanced community life". Next come formalities on securing a US visa, anxieties as to how he and his wife will get out of Germany – it was 1933 – and would there be enough room for Anni's loom? Anni Albers would go on to teach weaving at Black Mountain – the subtle colours of her geometric textile works are on display later in the show – while Josef conceived one of the college's foundational courses, "Werklehre", as he called it, a combination of drawing, colour theory, and design.

This first exchange is a revealing documentation of the prerogatives of the academy as they were forged, with strong influences from John Dewey's philosophy of educational reform. The letters also signal the beginnings of wartime escape from Germany to America, to which the first section of the exhibition is dedicated, as many European emigrés, including those from the recently closed-down Bauhaus, became teachers and students at Black Mountain College. This cross-Atlantic aspect explains the relevance of the Black Mountain legacy for Berlin, where today the influx is reversed, albeit under less urgent circumstances, as American artists populate the city's art scenes.

The exhibition's structure, designed by Berlin-based architecture collective raumlaborberlin, divides the museum's long railway-station hall into

zigzagging sections, with scholastic touches such as wooden listening stools and rows of theatre seating. Plans of Black Mountain College's own architecture show Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer's aborted vision for a three-winged building, and A. Lawrence Kocher's modernist Studies Building, which members helped to construct on the edge of Lake Eden in order to keep costs down – financing far-flung projects was tough, even then. A joyful image of students hanging off a Buckminster Fuller dome reminds us that Fuller constructed one of his first domes during an early summer school, the group-build of his geodesic technologies encompassing Black Mountain's progressive philosophy.

The college's union of disciplines is shown in the multimedia selection of works, from the pleated-paper specimens of Josef Albers's classes, to Ruth Asawa's bulbous wire sculptures, and photographs of Xanti Schawinsky's "spectodramas" – radical theatre productions with graphic costumes and spatially bold sets. "Glyphs" by the poet Charles Olson is held up as an example of translation across forms; its title stands for compositional carving, and we see lines of poetry become a performance in which a woman in a black sheet emerges from behind a single white line.

Olson would go on to direct the college after Dreier had departed in 1949, overseeing a turn to a more US-centric, literature-focused, and eventually, troubled faculty. New modes of the later years include the minimalist scores of guest lecturer John Cage, and long-time teacher Hazel Larsen Archer's expressive photographic portraits – of practitioners in their studios and students working free-spirited in the grounds, of the almost touching feet of dancers, limbs in flight.

But, with declining intake and funding difficulties due to the anti-communist fears of the McCarthy era, the college formally closed in 1957. Examples of Olson and poet Robert Creeley's *Black Mountain Review* fill the last vitrines, with cover designs by Japanese visual poet Katue Kitasono, whose falling triangles show an understanding of volume, space, and page that Josef Albers would have supported.

It is in archival uncovering that the exhibition reveals most behind-the-scenes gems – college schedules, admissions forms, flyers for happenings featuring the college's monochromatic target logo. But this text-heavy presentation calls

for a highly engaged visitor, eager to read the small print and lengthy contextualising texts on the Bahnhof's walls. Sporadic performances of music and words by students from German and Scandinavian colleges attempt to enact these archives, but the end result comes across as more studious than the school's own approach.

Still, the spirit set up by the college speaks to elements of more experimental education today, though it existed well before "cross-disciplinarity" had become a buzzword, and before "creativity" had been voided by corporate branding. Black Mountain College established a flexible infrastructure and open attitude that could facilitate its avant-garde goals, and make something substantial out of its signifiers. Today, post-academic institutes find home less in remote country campuses, and more on online platforms accessed at dispersed locations, whose technologies enable – we have to hope – contemporary kinds of collective workspace.