

1. Exhibition travelled to the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA (21 February–15 May 2016) and the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio (17 September 2016–1 January 2017).

LEAP BEFORE YOU LOOK: BLACK MOUNTAIN COLLEGE 1933–1957, INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART, BOSTON, 10 OCTOBER 2015–24 JANUARY 2016¹

Reviewed by Johanna Gosse, Columbia University

What is an exhibition? Is it a machine for generating experience? Or rather, is it a specific medium, equipped with its own inherent logic, or to borrow Clement Greenberg's famous phrase, a 'unique and proper area of competence'? *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College, 1933–1957*, organized by the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in Boston, offers an opportunity to reconsider what an exhibition is, and, more to the point, what it can be expected to do.

Black Mountain College was a short-lived experiment in liberal arts education located near Asheville, North Carolina. Though the school shut down in 1957, it has since achieved mythical status as a home-grown American avant-garde utopia. During its near quarter-century of existence, the College was host to catalytic encounters between an international cast of artists, writers and thinkers, many of whom influenced or directly participated in what Allan Kaprow called 'the alchemies of the 1960s' (1958). As a result, the name 'Black Mountain' refers not so much to a specific time and place or cohesive style, but rather, to an illustrious list of faculty and alumni who collectively have exerted a disproportionate influence on post-war American art. Beyond its influential diaspora, the College's broader legacy (and its persistent utopian myth) is rooted in the communal ethos and intersecting practices that characterized campus life: experiential learning, interdisciplinary collaboration, the work programme, direct democracy, and the opportunity to create art in relative freedom from market pressures. Though its reputation as a utopian



Figure 1: Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College 1933–1957, 2015. Installation view. Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston. Photo: Charles Mayer.

enclave was cemented early on, from a twenty-first-century vantage, Black Mountain signifies a disappearing horizon of unfettered experimentation that appears increasingly foreclosed in our hyper-speculative, neo-liberal present.² It is tempting to cathect to the Black Mountain myth precisely because it conjures up a seemingly distant, if not completely vanished, ideal.

Perhaps this is why, almost 60 years after its closing, Black Mountain is attracting increasing attention from scholars and curators, with large-scale exhibitions mounted and publications appearing on both sides of the Atlantic.³ In 2015, a Berlin-based research initiative organized a series of symposia that culminated in a large-scale exhibition at the city's Hamburger-Bahnhof Museum, which combined archival material and artwork drawn primarily from private German collections with an extensive programme of collaborative events involving art schools.⁴ Opening after the Berlin show but organized independently from it, the ICA show pursues a similarly ambitious, survey-like scope, though with a stronger emphasis on art produced during or in the immediate wake of residence at the College (Molesworth and Erickson 2015). If in Berlin, Black Mountain was portrayed as a fertile ground from which the figure of the artist could emerge, in Boston the figure is not so much the individual artists as the *work of art*, in the dual sense of both process and outcome.

Leap Before You Look's curator Helen Molesworth (now Chief Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles) and assistant curator Ruth Erickson have assembled a dazzling array of work across diverse media; in each gallery, more familiar works of painting and sculpture freely intermingle with jewellery, textiles, design, music, video, live performance, collage, watercolour, drawing, ceramics, photography and poetry, both printed and spoken.⁵ This curatorial inclusivity even extends to furniture and equipment used at the College – a wooden desk and stool, a weaving loom, a Steinmann grand piano – which introduce the means of production into the exhibition context. Similarly, the galleries are framed and flanked by mural-sized black and white archival photographs depicting scenes of study, creativity and leisure, as well as essential extracurricular tasks such as growing and preparing food, construction and maintenance of infrastructure, and the perpetual demands of self-governance, activities that consumed campus life as much as teaching, learning and art making.

Lofty notions of an avant-garde arcadia are brought down to earth by these reminders of manual labour, scarce resources, lack of privacy, social isolation and inevitable interpersonal conflict. This is not to say that Black Mountain was not a joyous place – there is also plenty of sunbathing, picnicking, dancing, costume parties, affection and laughter on display. Yet, by visually registering the physical and psychic challenges that framed artistic production, *Leap* draws illuminating parallels between the types of discipline demanded by communal living and the myriad expressions of artistic discipline demonstrated in the works on view.

Black Mountain was utopian in the true sense of that word: deeply implausible, a firecracker sparked in the backwoods of the Jim Crow South during the height of the Depression. Nestled deep in the rural recesses of the Blue Ridge Mountains, the campus relocated during its first decade to a larger site next to a small lake called (almost too perfectly) Lake Eden. Needless to say, this was an unlikely setting for some of the most influential developments in post-war American art outside New York City.

2. One exemplary contemporary account is Louis Adamic (1936).
3. For instance, Eva Díaz (2014) considers the role of experimentation at Black Mountain by focusing on the work and teaching of three faculty members, Josef Albers, R. Buckminster Fuller and John Cage. The memoir of a former student, Christopher Benfey (2013), was recently reissued in paperback. In 2005, a mid-sized exhibition about Black Mountain opened in London, accompanied by the catalogue *Starting at Zero: Black Mountain College 1933–57* (2005).
4. The Berlin exhibition was documented in an extensive catalogue, *Black Mountain: An Interdisciplinary Experiment 1933–1957* (Eugen Blum et al., 2015).
5. This layout roughly corresponds to the chronology of the College community during three overlapping periods: from the arrival of Bauhaus professors Josef and Anni Albers soon after its founding, until their departure in 1949; the era of summer sessions from 1944–53, which witnessed residencies from influential figures like Fuller, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Willem and Elaine de Kooning, Franz Kline, Greenberg, Helen Frankenthaler and others; to the final, Charles Olson-helmed years of the 1950s, when the so-called Black Mountain School of poetry took root.

The prefatory gallery foregrounds these inhospitable conditions using archival materials and graphic timelines, which embed the institutional narrative within the context of major historical events. So the story goes: Black Mountain was founded by John Andrew Rice, an iconoclastic professor of Classics (a field conversant in origin myths) who, along with a sympathetic band of faculty and students who rallied in support, was expelled from Florida's Rollins College for espousing radical ideas and unbecoming conduct. Rice envisioned an institution that embodied the tenets of progressive education as theorized by the American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, who advocated experiential pedagogy or 'learning by doing' and argued that education and democracy are mutually dependent and reinforcing. Black Mountain's first entering class was admitted in 1933 once necessary funds were raised, yet inconsistent enrolment and financial instability would prove a foregone conclusion throughout its 24-year existence. From these inauspicious circumstances, Black Mountain emerges as a plucky, experimental implementation of American progressivism, one whose utopian aspirations appear inextricably bound up with its fraught historical context – global economic precarity, the rise of fascism in Europe, the outbreak of world war, and subsequent post-war political reaction.

This begs the obvious question framing this exhibition: could such a radical experiment succeed today, in an era when both social and artistic encounters, at least within the developed world, increasingly occur on virtual platforms instead of in real life? Decades before Rice attempted to implement his ideas at Black Mountain, Dewey forcefully argued that human beings are intrinsically 'social organisms'. Arguing against the notion that society is merely an aggregate of autonomous individuals, Dewey insisted that 'men are not isolated non-social atoms, but are men only when in intrinsic relations' ([1888] 2008). If the individual subject is constituted in relation to other subjects, Dewey contends, then a democracy can only represent its citizens in 'so far as they have become organically related to one another, or are possessed of unity of purpose and interest'. Embodying such a democratic unity of purpose and interest, the Black Mountain community pursued thorough continuity between art and everyday experience. At a time when the concept of 'social practice' tends to dominate discussions of politically engaged contemporary art, Black Mountain thus presents a pre-Internet pre-history of socially engaged forms of artistic practice that were, however, far less invested in engaging or transforming the public sphere than in producing their own ideal microcosmic version of it.

Visitors to the ICA exhibition are primed by this didactic introduction to view the College's edenic community as a perpetual underdog, its existence threatened by global economic and political crises, by persistent racial, religious and sexual bigotry, and by the ever-present spectre of failure – both in terms of institutional viability and the more quotidian forms of experimentation. One emblematic example of failure is R. Buckminster Fuller's *Supine Dome*, the collapsed geodesic structure built by a cohort of students and faculty during one of the legendary summer sessions. Photographs documenting the dome's unsuccessful construction are included in a section dedicated to experimental architecture and design, just one instance of how, within Black Mountain's process-driven environment, courting failure was an essential precondition for progress. The lesson was to embrace the risk, without reservations.

The first section of the exhibition focuses primarily on works and studies by Josef Albers, whose teachings at Black Mountain were derived from his basic

design curriculum at the Bauhaus. Though Albers is best known for his colour theory (published in 1963's *The Interaction of Color*), another, equally influential, component of his pedagogy were his *matière* exercises, collage studies that involved recombinations of everyday materials. At the ICA, the *matière* are exhibited in a slide show of archival photographs documenting student works that Josef amassed over many years – a testament to the respect he accorded to students' work. Just as Albers's colour theory used strategies of juxtaposition to reveal the radical contingency of colours in perception, the *matière* applied similar relational principles to found objects and materials, including organic matter like eggshells, orange peels, and leaves; industrial products like fabric, buttons and wire; miscellaneous printed and textured papers; and sundry forms of detritus. Students practised manipulating visual perception through close observation of a material's construction, surface and texture, its response to tools, and by combining it with other materials to create illusory impressions. The resulting *matière* might appear rough or smooth, wet or dry, chalky or matte, rough or slick, hard or soft – a kind of haptic *tromp l'oeil*.⁶

In her thoughtful and exhaustively researched catalogue essay, Molesworth describes the aesthetic philosophy that Albers (along with John Cage and Charles Olson) developed at Black Mountain as 'relational formalism'; furthermore, she credits this approach as the foundation for the emergence of postmodernism in American art.⁷ While on the surface, *Leap* might seem like an eclectic group show spanning multiple decades, movements and mediums, the concept of 'relational formalism' indeed provides a useful framework for decoding the Black Mountain DNA that knits these works together into a loose network of aesthetic heredity. In this sense, the relational (and, by extension, the social) emerges as a core interest of the arts at Black Mountain, bringing its relevance to contemporary practice into sharp focus. This welcome interest in relationality notwithstanding, it is the far less fashionable term – formalism – that actually guides the curatorial decisions at work. Faced with the problem of exhibiting a body of work characterized by aesthetic pluralism, the solution developed here is a formal one, which allows the works to correspond across medium, style and context, via a shared, if condensed, visual language.

Besides relational and formalism, a third term we might add to the list is rigour. Albers' classes were notoriously rigorous. When an August 1948 *Time Magazine* profile called Albers 'the greatest disciplinarian in the United States', the description compelled a young Robert Rauschenberg to enrol at Black Mountain midway through the fall term. Recalling his somewhat testy relationship with the eminent German professor, Rauschenberg stated, 'I'm still learning what he taught me, because what he taught had to do with the entire visual world. He didn't teach you how to "do art." The focus was always on your personal sense of looking' (Rauschenberg quoted in Tomkins 1980: 198–99). These lessons in visual perception reverberate throughout the works assembled for *Leap*, such as an untitled painting by one of Albers's most devoted students, Ray Johnson. This rare early work, which survives only because Johnson gifted it to his close friend and classmate Ruth Asawa, is comprised of a dense matrix of colourful, interconnected lines. The painting's quilt-like geometry could be seen to anticipate Johnson's later interest in dematerialized networks of communication and correspondence, which found its fullest expression through his conceptual mail art practice. And yet, as much as Albers's *matière* exercises undoubtedly provided Johnson an opportunity to develop his own unique ways of seeing, by positioning his early painting

6. Descriptions of Albers's *matière* exercises can be found in Andrew Beggs's essay in the exhibition catalogue, as well as in Mary Emma Harris (2002).

7. In a sentence that testifies to the sweeping, if at times subtle, art historical ambitions undergirding the exhibition, Molesworth writes

Postmodernism, as put into motion by Rauschenberg in 1954, stemmed directly from the relational formalism of Albers, Cage, and Olson, as well as from the rigor of Anni Albers's approach to materiality and from the intimacy of the camera's lens via Hazel Larsen Archer.

(Molesworth and Erickson 2015: 63)

8. Duberman's well-known account of the event features his signature self-reflexive mode of writing history in which the veracity of narratives is continuously called into question (see Duberman 1993: 370–79).

in close proximity to the weavings of Anni Albers, Josef's spouse and fellow ex-Bauhaus professor, *Leap* makes an even more compelling case for her influence. Exhibited alongside work by her weaving students, Anni's textiles are at once humble in size and material, yet stunningly complex in facture and design. Both Alberses were deeply influenced by the ancient arts of Mexico, where they often visited and even brought along students. This interest in Latin American art, and specifically pre-Colombian abstraction, speaks to the atmosphere of cosmopolitanism at Black Mountain, one that persisted despite its rural locale and small population.

In addition to her textiles, Anni's practice included eccentric jewellery made from everyday objects like bottle corks, aluminium washers and paper clips. Her use of readymade materials speaks not only to a resistance to craft hierarchies at Black Mountain but also to a Depression-era ethos of 'making do', a *bricolage* approach that can be observed across a wide range of work in the exhibition, regardless of medium. Even within the specific medium of painting, standard art historical hierarchies and narratives – namely, the hegemony of modernist abstraction and the post-war triumph of the New York School – are subtly challenged via unexpected juxtapositions. In one section entitled 'Modernisms', paintings by familiar Abstract Expressionists like Franz Kline, Willem and Elaine de Kooning, Jack Tworkov and Robert Motherwell hang alongside canvases by lesser-known figures like Pat Passlof and Ray Spillenger, as well as figurative works by Jacob Lawrence and Gwendolyn Lawrence Knight (one of the many 'faculty wives' who make impressive contributions to the show), and a painting by the social realist Ben Shahn. Stressing continuity over rupture, this configuration suggests that modernism looks differently when refracted through the lens of Black Mountain, which here emerges as an intergenerational gateway or zone of exchange between the inter-war European and post-war American avant-gardes.

In this sense, the ICA show is less argumentative than conversational, more interested in convening visual exchanges between artists than making overarching, necessarily reductive claims. A variety of surprising aesthetic and morphological correspondences emerge from these arranged encounters. In one of the larger galleries at the core of the show, Ruth Asawa's hanging crocheted wire sculpture *Untitled (S. 272)* (1955) is installed across from Rauschenberg's *White Painting (Four Panel)* (1951/2015), which is suspended above a grand piano in an imaginative restaging of an intermedia performance organized by John Cage in 1952, *Theater Piece #1*. Thanks to Black Mountain historian Martin Duberman, Cage's event is often referred to as the first happening, although the specifics remain hazy, subject to the vagaries of human memory.⁸ As the flat, white screen of Rauschenberg's monochrome canvas confronts Asawa's hand-wrought biomorphic lattice, we are confronted with two poles of abstraction, lured into unexpected correspondence by gravity's pull.

Hanging behind and visible between the interstices of Asawa's metallic webs is a blueprint photogram showing the full-length, nude body of artist Susan Weil, who was married to Rauschenberg when both were enrolled at Black Mountain. The curves of Weil's body echo the contours of Asawa's sculpture, arousing a sense of erotic tactility as well as anxiety over the lost presence of the body, indexed via the photographic medium and the bulbous mesh voids. To the left of this collaborative photogram stands Rauschenberg's *Minutiae* (1954/1976), an early combine that resembles a folding-screen, and was commissioned by Merce Cunningham as set design for his dance of the



Figure 2: Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College 1933–1957, 2015. Installation view. Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston. Photo: Liza Voll.

same name. As Molesworth notes in the catalogue, the collaged surface of *Minutiae* immediately recalls the radical juxtapositions of Albers's *matière*, just one of countless points of visual correspondence that proliferate throughout this self-reflexive installation. Across from *Minutiae* is a small, elevated stage, host to an elaborate programme of live performances, readings and events scheduled for multiple days per week. When unoccupied, a looped video of dance films is projected on its back wall, including a 1970s' performance of Katherine Litz's *The Glyph* (itself a landmark instance of intermedia collaboration at Black Mountain) and of Cunningham performing *Changeling* (1958) and *Septet* (1964), which allow us to imagine how *Minutiae* might have looked and functioned with dancers onstage. Extending this visual call-and-response is *Shortstop* (1958), a sculpture by John Chamberlain, one of many surprising associates of the College. With its gnarled, twisted metal sheets that suggest an industrial disaster or car accident, *Shortstop* poses a violent retort to Asawa's tensile forms as they hover ominously nearby. It is satisfying to recognize and decipher this drama of forms as it veers between romance, comedy and tragedy. But does it bring us any closer to understanding the legacy of Black Mountain?

If Black Mountain signifies a lost utopia, then visiting a museum for a few hours is clearly an inadequate form of redress. Beyond the pleasures of formal correspondence, *Leap* deploys another 'solution' to this inexorable problem in the form of time-based media – performance, both live and documented, and recordings, and recordings of spoken poetry and music – which aim to snap the viewer back into attention by animating otherwise inert arrangements of objects. One of the more dubious examples of this is the exhibition's soundtrack, a playlist of familiar works by Duke Ellington, Arnold Schoenberg, Erik Satie and others. The selections reference the interests of faculty members such as Heinrich Jalowetz, a former Schoenberg student and much-beloved Black Mountain professor who organized a 1944 summer institute in celebration of his mentor's seventieth birthday, and John Cage, a champion

of Satie. This musical accompaniment also re-enacts the spontaneous playing of records while working in the studio, school dances, and during multimedia events such as *Theater Piece #1*. Yet, like the ambient score piped into waiting room or shopping mall, recorded music promotes a sense of passive distraction rather than active contemplation.

At the beginning of this review, I suggested that an exhibition might function as a medium, loosely defined as a set of expressive, technical and material conventions contained within a specific range of limitations and possibilities. Like any medium, an exhibition can be deployed to address a particular question or problem – be it narrative, representational, political, phenomenological or aesthetic in nature. In *Leap*, the question-slash-problem is twofold. To start, how do you represent the legacy of a legendary site of cross-disciplinary experimentation and artistic radicalism? Though *Leap* champions these values, it does not internalize them, and instead relies on the traditional format of museum exhibitions and the ultra-conventional setting of the white-cubed gallery. Instead, experimentation is channelled into its inventive, often surprising, aesthetic juxtapositions and correspondences, regardless of medium or affiliation. This is where *Leap* is most successful, and, not coincidentally, most interactive – when it invites, and even demands, sustained visual attention. A second, more intractable problem is of how to translate the sustained, durational and often arduous journey of artistic development that characterized living and working at Black Mountain into the compressed, relatively passive, experience of a museum visit. To this task, the exhibition medium is inherently inadequate.

But enough about what this exhibition does not and probably could never successfully accomplish. The bigger, more perplexing problem is the stubborn nature of utopias. As any science fiction fan knows, deliberate pursuit of utopia risks spoiling it, or, worse, inadvertently producing its nightmarish flipside – from commune to cult, secluded idyll to *No Exit*. Fortunately the ICA avoids hagiography and epic narratives of Phoenix-like ascent and tragic decline. Here, Black Mountain utopian myth is neither debunked nor left perfectly intact, and instead the exhibition's dual focus on aesthetic form and the texture of the everyday suggests something perhaps even more resilient: an archaeological recovery of lived experience, traced through various expressions of its experimental genome.

Exiting the final gallery, one emerges into a corridor with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking Boston Harbor. The tides' ebb and flow suggests a panoramic metaphor for the ephemeral nature of experience, and a more literal reminder of the campus's lakeside environs. This parting view prompts the question yet again: could Black Mountain exist today? Were financial struggle and political crisis necessary preconditions for its radical project to take root? Had the College survived, would it have inevitably lapsed into a diluted pastiche or tourist attraction? Perhaps, then, the expulsion from Lake Eden was a fortunate fall, pre-empting the gradual impoverishment of its ideals. Likewise, perhaps a provisional utopia is all we should expect from an afternoon spent in an exhibition.

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LIVERPOOL BIENNIAL 2016, VARIOUS LOCATIONS, 9 JULY–16 OCTOBER 2016

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Arriving at the 2016 Liverpool Biennial on the day of its opening night, my first encounter with the citywide exhibition was passing workers completing the construction of Mariana Castillo Deball's *To-day 9th July 2016* in Liverpool One, en route to Tate Liverpool. This is one of a number of works sited on the public streets of the city. A large wooden stair-like structure, the work, I later read, is part of the 'Monuments to the Future' episode. 'Episode' appears to be *the* word of this year's Biennial. Reading through the guide and the accompanying publication, the term 'episodic' is consistently used to refer to the curation, which this year has not been undertaken by a team of curators but, as was pointed out to me by a (curator) friend, a 'curatorial faculty'. I begin to fear the worst; that the Biennial has become a victim of its own hype.

Returning to the episodes (which, it becomes apparent, is just another way of referring to themes), the Biennial is organized around six: Ancient Greece, Chinatown, Children's Episode, Monuments from the Future, Flashback and Software. Connecting with the city itself, the episodes were chosen as moments within Liverpool's history. As such, the organization of the Biennial is built upon an engagement with both linear time (historical and futuristic) and narratives. The Ancient Greece episode refers to the architectural style of Liverpool in the 1800s (some of which remains today), adopting the grandeur of neoclassicism, to reflect the city's wealth and power during