



LEAP AHEAD
A dance class in front of Black Mountain College's first home in North Carolina's Blue Ridge Mountains. "We were all foreigners, so to speak, in that setting. It enhanced that kind of participatory, creative openness," says former student Theodore Dreier Jr.



Go Tell It on the Mountain

Artists from Josef Albers to Robert Rauschenberg gathered at Black Mountain College, leaving a legacy that a new exhibition examines.

BY CAROL KINO

IN AN ENORMOUS HALL, someone is playing the piano while a handful of people dance in and around the audience, one chased by a barking dog. All-white paintings hang from the ceiling, and towering over everything is the impressive figure of the composer John Cage, standing on a ladder and delivering a lecture on the relationship between Buddhism and music. Those, at least, are some of the chaotic goings-on that unfolded during Cage's *Theater Piece No. 1*, the 1952 event that many consider the first happening. Yet this watershed occurrence did not take place in some studio in New York or Los Angeles. Instead, the environs resembled a mountain resort, with shingled lodges and stone cottages amid the oak, hemlock and pine trees, ringed by blue-tinged mountains and clustered around a picturesque lake. The bucolic location in North Carolina's Blue Ridge Mountains was the final campus of Black Mountain College, a kind of midcentury cultural Camelot that opened in 1933 and boasts a legacy far more extensive than its 24 years of existence suggests. Black Mountain was not only a wartime refuge for artists and intellectuals fleeing the Nazis but was also a hotbed of progressive education where many renowned postwar cultural figures were formed.

The year after Cage's happening, for example, while Jerome Robbins was premiering a ballet in honor of Queen Elizabeth II's coronation to a starched and white-gloved audience in New York, Cage's partner, Merce Cunningham, would return to that same camp dining hall in North Carolina to spend weeks rehearsing with seven dancers. There, he created the groundbreaking company that would later shake up the dance world with a choreography untethered to conventional compositional demands, such as narrative and music.



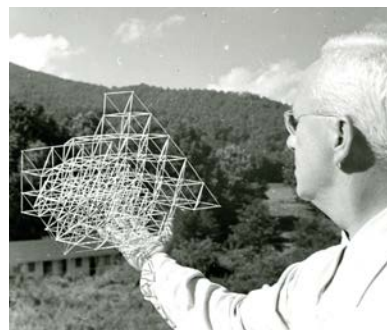
COLOR FIELD

Clockwise from top: Students walk from the campus barn; Robert Rauschenberg's 1956 painting *Small Rebus*; writer Francine du Plessix Gray as a student. Above: *Growing*, a 1940 picture by Josef Albers. "I'm still learning what he taught me," Rauschenberg said later. Below: Students in Albers's 1944 summer class on color theory.



ABSTRACT IDEAS

Clockwise from above: Willem de Kooning's 1948 piece *Asheville*; an untitled work from the same year by his wife, Elaine, who was a student; summer program director Buckminster Fuller with a model.



"THEY ONLY HAD ONE RULE AND THAT WAS 'BE INTELLIGENT.'"
—ALICE SEBRELL



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THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ROBERT MOTHERWELL, *THE DISPLACED TABLE*, 1948, TEMPERA, WOOD, VENEER, PAPER, INK, GRAPHITE, AND COLORED PENCIL ON CANVAS, 43 1/4 X 17 1/2 INCHES; ANNE SEBRELL, *FRANCINE DU PLESSIX GRAY*, 1953, OIL ON CANVAS, 10 X 10 INCHES; JOHN CAGE AND MERCE CUNNINGHAM, *THEATER PIECE NO. 1*, 1953, MOUNTED ON PAPER, 17 X 21 1/8 INCHES, BOTH © THE JOSEF AND ANNI ALBERS FOUNDATION/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY NEW YORK, TIM NIGHSWANDER/IMAGING 4 ART; COURTESY WESTERN REGIONAL ARCHIVES, STATE ARCHIVES OF NORTH CAROLINA, ASHEVILLE, NC

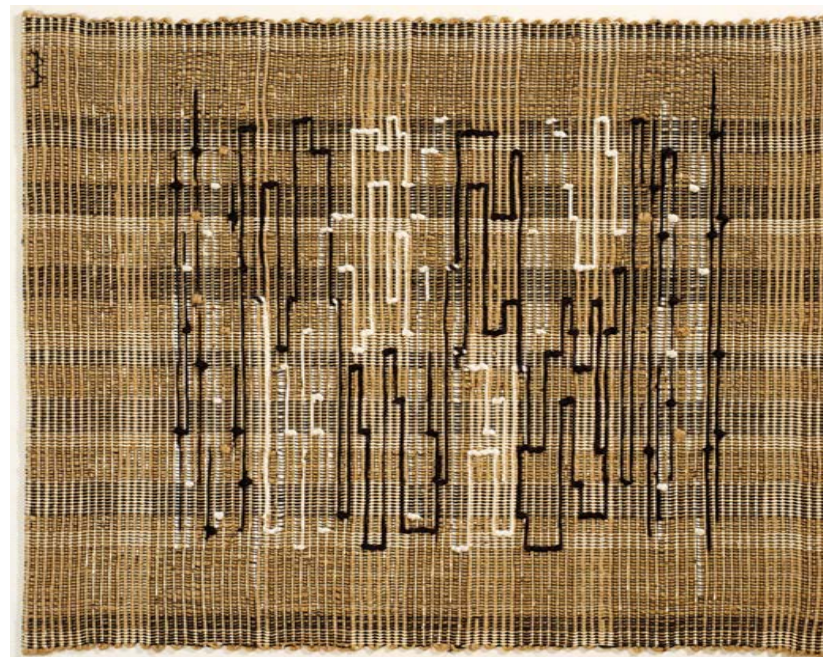
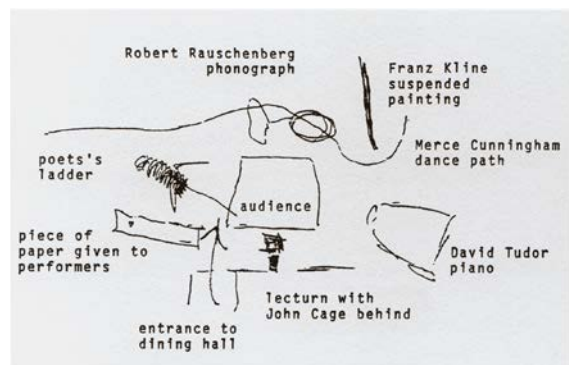


CREATIVE TIME

Above: *The Displaced Table*, a 1943 work by Robert Motherwell, who taught painting. Right: Student Cy Twombly's 1951 painting, *MIN-OE*. Below: The Studies Building, which students helped build in the early '40s.



GREAT MINDS
Below: John Cage and Merce Cunningham on a summer sojourn from the college in 1953. Far below: Cage's *Theater Piece No. 1*, as mapped by his fellow teacher, the poet and potter M.C. Richards.



WOVEN TOGETHER Along with her husband, Josef, Anni Albers fled Germany after the Nazis closed the Bauhaus school, where they had been teaching. They arrived at Black Mountain College in 1933, where she founded the weaving department. Below: A 1947 gouache by Anni Albers, *Knot 2*. Right: Her textile piece, *Black-White-Gold I*, from 1950.



"BLACK MOUNTAIN WAS SO SEXUALLY OPEN. MARRIAGES WOULD COME THERE AND BREAK UP."
—DOROTHEA ROCKBURNE

Black Mountain wasn't limited to performance. Josef Albers, the great Bauhaus teacher who fled Nazi Germany for the United States and arrived at Black Mountain as a professor in 1933, sent students like painters Robert Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly out into the fields and woods to gather rocks and leaves for their studies of color, material and abstract form. His wife, Anni Albers, who would later be the first textile artist to have a solo show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, ran the weaving workshop. Willem de Kooning taught at Black Mountain in 1948 while his wife, Elaine, studied painting, before he returned to New York to found the fabled abstract expressionist hangout known as the Club; drips of paint from that era are still visible on a former studio floor. And it was in one of the school's meadows one day in 1949 that the visionary inventor Buckminster Fuller, there to direct the summer program, raised the first large-scale geodesic dome. In its heyday, Black Mountain was also known for mathematics, history and science: Natasha Goldowski, who worked on the Manhattan Project, later taught chemistry and physics there, and Albert Einstein visited in 1944 and subsequently became a member of its advisory council.

"Black Mountain is a myth, but it was mythic in its inception," says Helen Molesworth, chief curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, who is organizing the first major American museum show to examine the school's legacy, *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College, 1933-1957*, opening this month at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art. "The people who made it had a lofty sense of what they were doing before it even started. They were trying to form a better world." The exhibition will feature work by nearly 100 artists. Along with stars like the architect Walter Gropius and the Alberses, it includes figures like the sculptor Ruth Asawa, the collagist Ray Johnson and the funk potter Peter Voulkos, together with scores of photos and archival materials, as well as dance and music performances held within the galleries.

Other 20th-century art luminaries passed through the college too, including the abstract expressionists Robert Motherwell and Franz Kline, Russian-born WPA muralist Ilya Bolotowsky and Jacob Lawrence, the African-American painter whose Great Migration pictures were the subject of a recent MoMA retrospective, all drawn largely by Josef Albers's allure. From the start, "Albers had an international reputation, and so did the college," says Alice Sebrell, program director of the Black Mountain College Museum and Arts Center in nearby Asheville, which was founded in 1993 to honor the school. "He was very open to artists whose work was different from his own. The whole package was appealing to artists who were doing non-mainstream work."

From today's vantage point, the reality of Black Mountain College as a crucial nexus for artistic, intellectual and even political activity is coming into sharp focus. Artists, scholars, educators and curators are increasingly recognizing that its unique environment was essential to the flowering of mid-century American art and culture, a place where the avant-garde of Europe and the United States came together and created something new. The past year has seen another major show, *Black Mountain: An*

Interdisciplinary Experiment 1933-1957, at Berlin's Hamburger Bahnhof, which explored the creative contributions made by German refugee artists and intellectuals who converged at the school during the Nazi era. A new book, *The Experimenters: Chance and Design at Black Mountain College*, was published last December.

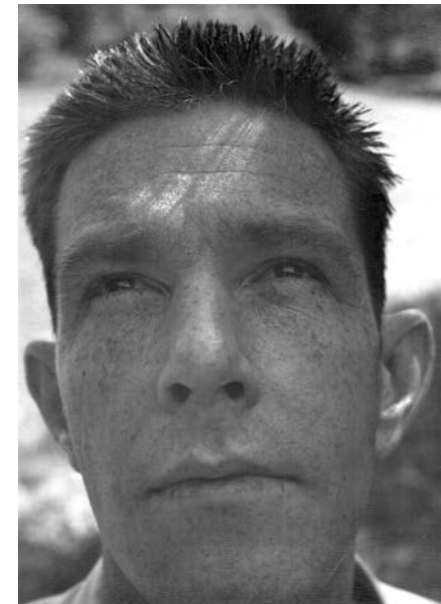
"Today Black Mountain seems so *avant la lettre*, so proto-Beat, proto-hippie, so completely off the known of the region but also of the nation," says Eva Díaz, the book's author. In a contemporary art world riveted by the idea of experimentation, she adds, "Black Mountain is often invoked as a touchstone."

The school's interdisciplinary outlook is like catnip to curators and academics because it anticipated the current interest in performance art, craft and design. Artists are fascinated by it too: "There's a growing need for us to be socially engaged, to want an interaction with a larger aspect of society," says photographer and sculptor Sara VanDerBeek, whose

some kind of art experience, which is not necessarily the same as self-expression, the student can come to the realization of order in the world," they state in the catalog for the first year. "The direct result of the discipline of the arts is to give tone and quality to intellectual discipline." Revered alternative educator John Dewey, a friend of Rice's, visited frequently and was supportive of their efforts.

Their mission, Molesworth says, was to prepare "a student to be a member of a democratic society"—and that ambition only intensified as war drew near. That same year, the Nazis had forced the closure of the Bauhaus, the radically experimental and highly influential art school in Berlin. On the recommendation of Philip Johnson, then curator of architecture at MoMA, Rice and Dreier recruited Albers, one of its most formidable teachers, to direct their art program, as well as his wife, Anni. Other Bauhausers, like Gropius and Xanti Schawinsky, whose theatrical work prefigured performance art, followed. Although

CLASS VALUES
From left: Former Bauhaus teacher Josef Albers, who arrived in 1933 and whose goal was "to open eyes"; his wife, artist Anni Albers; de Kooning taught painting; Cunningham launched his dance company at the school in 1953; Rauschenberg as a student; Cage often collaborated with Cunningham.



father, the experimental filmmaker Stan VanDerBeek, studied at the college from 1949 to 1951. "That's in keeping with the things they were discussing and engaging in at Black Mountain."

BLACK MOUNTAIN opened on September 25, 1933, in the depths of the Great Depression, with what today seems like a hopelessly utopian plan: to create an institution led by teachers, rather than administrators, offering a liberal arts education focused on the arts. One of its founders was John Andrew Rice, a classicist fired from Florida's Rollins College for his generally provocative attitude, which included leading his students in Socratic questioning, rather than following the standard curriculum; announcing that "a chisel is the most beautiful thing in the world"; and wearing nothing but a jockstrap to the public beach. His co-founder, Theodore Dreier, was a physics professor who quit his Rollins post in protest of Rice's firing. Their aim was to produce critical thinkers, not artists. "Through

Albers spoke little English, his ambition was clear. As he told the people who welcomed him at the college, "I want to open eyes."

A chance recommendation from a former Rollins faculty member who summered in the area had led them to a boys' camp in North Carolina that had lain empty in the off-season. By the time Albers arrived, Rice and Dreier had already set up their first campus there, at the YMCA Blue Ridge Assembly, in a glamorously porticoed white building that still looks like Tara on the mountainside. They began with 22 students and 13 faculty members, most of whom worked for little more than room and board. Everyone was expected to participate in decision making and to help with maintenance or raise food on the communal farm. Other than that, there were no requirements, apart from taking Albers's course on form and materials and Rice's on Plato. In 1936 a favorable article in *Harper's* drew further attention to the school. Word of mouth carried it after that, aided by gifts and loans from benefactors and wealthy students. (There was also the fundraising, enabled by Dreier's

membership in a deep-pocketed clan: He came from a line of wealthy German-American industrialists, and an aunt, Katherine Dreier, had founded the Société Anonyme, an artist-led museum, in New York in 1920 with Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp.)

"The teachers who were at Black Mountain were there because they really believed in freedom and education," says abstractionist Dorothea Rockburne, who heard of it as a teenager in Montreal and began saving money to attend, which she finally did, from 1950 to 1954. She took science with the physicist Goldowski, but her most profound connection was with the German mathematician Max Dehn, with whom she studied topology, linear algebra and Euclidean geometry.

Part of what made Black Mountain special was the mix of disciplines, the intensity and the fact that everyone was together so constantly in the remote location. "We were all foreigners, so to speak, in that setting," says Theodore Dreier Jr. (the son of the co-founder),

summer art and music sessions, initiated by Albers, began in 1944, a dizzying array of instructors arrived, including the art critic Clement Greenberg, the choreographer Agnes de Mille, the gamelan composer Lou Harrison and the photographer Harry Callahan—most long before they became well known.

That same year, in keeping with its democratic convictions, Black Mountain became the first college in the South to integrate, 20 years ahead of the Civil Rights Act. The first African-American student, Alma Stone Williams, was a pianist; the painter Jacob Lawrence came to teach two years later.

Rauschenberg arrived as a student in 1948, the year that de Kooning came to teach painting. De Kooning, who was broke, gladly signed on in exchange for a train ticket, \$200 and room and board. (He was hired because Albers had asked Cage to find him a painter with a completely different style.) Decades later, Rauschenberg recalled his time there studying with Albers as formative. "I'm still learning what he

taught me," he said. "What he taught had to do with the whole visual world, and it applies to whatever you're doing, gardening or painting or whatever."

By then, Black Mountain was already well known for its multiplicity of approaches and personalities. "I remember it as being very liberating," says the novelist and biographer Francine du Plessix Gray, who spent the summers of 1951 and 1952 there, painting with Motherwell, dancing in Cage's happening, having an exhilarating romance with the poet Jonathan Williams (the co-founder of the Jargon Society press) and studying writing with the poet Charles Olson. Olson, who'd previously taught at Harvard, ran the college in its final years and frequently strode through campus bare chested, wearing a woolen serape.

That sense of liberation extended to personal relationships, too. "Black Mountain was so sexually open," Rockburne says. "Marriages would come there and break up because the guy would come out." Rauschenberg, as a student, left his new wife for Twombly. M.C. Richards, who taught literature and drama, abandoned her husband for

another faculty member, the composer David Tudor; together with Cage and others, they soon established the fabled commune the Land in Stony Point, New York. And Olson, who ran the school in the '50s, forsook his wife and child for his student paramour, who bore him a son.

As for the founders, Nicholas Fox Weber, the executive director of the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, says in his 2009 book, *The Bauhaus Group*, that Josef was probably having an affair with Dreier's wife, Bobbie, a dancer who'd studied with Isadora Duncan, and that Ted and Anni were likely lovers too. ("Based on the photos Josef took of Anni and Bobbie together in the nude, the chemistry between the two couples was powerful and extensive," Weber writes.)

"Even though there were times that people did things that others disapproved of, the general attitude was 'You can do what you want as long as it doesn't harm others,'" Sebrell says. "They only had one rule and that was 'Be intelligent.'"

But that sort of freedom wasn't why Black Mountain fell apart. With no deep-pocketed board to guide it, the school steadily went broke and suffered endless internecine squabbles. And as the country recovered from the war and its cultural life became reinvigorated, the original clarity of purpose seems to have foundered. Dreier moved to General Electric, where he helped develop power sources for the first nuclear submarine. A few months later, Albers left to found the first graduate design department at Yale. As for Rice, whose provocative nature had led to his ouster from Black Mountain years before, he took up a second career in fiction, writing stories about life and race relations in the South for *The New Yorker* and others. The school's final campus is now Camp Rockmount, a Christian boys' summer camp.

Yet even toward the end, Black Mountain must have been grand. "It was a place for people who were undecided about what to do in life," Gray says. "Of course, most of us are when we're 20. It was a liberation from the stilted condition of regular American education." ●

FROM LEFT: JOSEF ALBERS, C. 1948, 8 1/2 X 5 7/8 INCHES; ANNI ALBERS, C. 1948, 9 X 6 1/4 INCHES

FROM LEFT: WILLEM DE KOONING, C. 1948, 10 X 7 INCHES; MERCE CUNNINGHAM DANCING, C. 1952-53, 8 3/4 X 5 7/8 INCHES; ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG, N.D., 15 3/8 X 11 INCHES; JOHN CAGE, N.D., 12 1/2 X 9 3/8 INCHES; ALL GELATIN SILVER PRINTS BY HAZEL LARSEN ARCHER, MUSEUM AND ARTS CENTER, BLACK MOUNTAIN COLLEGE AND HAZEL LARSEN ARCHER AND BLACK MOUNTAIN COLLEGE MUSEUM AND ARTS CENTER

who studied music there before transferring to Harvard, later becoming a psychiatrist. "It enhanced that kind of participatory, creative openness."

The college was never accredited, largely because the founders wanted to remain independent from outside influences. Its largest class was 100, and only 66 students ever graduated. But great teaching was always the byword. Although the constantly evolving curriculum always included classroom instruction, Rockburne recalls that most of Dehn's teaching "took place on our morning walks to the waterfall five days a week. He would explain to me the mathematics of nature," pointing out examples of probability theory and Fibonacci progression as they occurred in plants. "I always had the sense that my teachers were living for me."

By 1941, just before the United States joined the war, the school had raised the money to buy its own lakeside campus. It moved after the faculty and students had spent a year and a half constructing a two-story, 202-foot-long, streamlined modernist compound known as the Studies Building. When its