

The Ruse of Medusa

John Cage, having stirred up outrage in the Black Mountain music department by lecturing on the music of Erik Satie (and condemning the German tradition) encouraged MC Richards to translate Satie's Ruse of Medusa. The performance was directed by Arthur Penn with choreography by Merce Cunningham, who played the monkey, with a tail designed by Richard Lippold. The sets were designed by Willem and Elaine de Kooning and the performance was documented by Clemens Kalischer.

The Glyph Exchange

The Glyph Exchange was a multi media event that took place in summer 1951. Charles Olson (Gallery 4), the poet, had a longstanding passion for Mayan hieroglyphics, coded messages and expressive gestures. He saw something elemental and mythic in the dance of Merce Cunningham, the painting of Cy Twombly (Gallery 4) and abstract expressionists such as Franz Kline (Gallery 4) - and in the movement of the potter shaping clay on a wheel. For the Glyph exchange the composer Lou Harrison wrote a score for prepared piano and Ben Shahn (Gallery 4) contributed glyph-like paintings. Katherine Litz interpreted Olson's glyph poem in dance.

Untitled Event, 1952

By contrast, Olson was suspicious of Robert Rauschenberg's white paintings and Cage's chance-determined music. **Untitled Event**

was a multi-media performance devised by Cage and consisting of a number of unrelated solos including dance, film and slides, paintings, poetry readings, gramophone records, a lecture and piano. Its documentation exists only through descriptions and memories of those who participated in and witnessed the event. After Cage's death, notes for one part of the performance, the **Projector**, were found amongst his papers.

Cage described the event later: 'At one end of the rectangular hall... was a movie, and at the other end were slides. I was on a ladder delivering a lecture which included silences and there was another ladder which MC Richards and Charles Olson went up at different times... Robert Rauschenberg was playing an old fashioned phonograph that had a horn..., and David Tudor was playing piano, and Merce Cunningham and other dancers were moving through the audience. Rauschenberg's pictures (the **White Paintings**) were suspended above the audience... They were suspended at various angles, a canopy of painting above the audience.'

The audience was part of the event. Performers were given time brackets within which to perform with no indication of content, giving the event what has been termed a score of 'indeterminate notation'. The performance, known as the first 'happening' has become legendary.

This sheet is intended as an introduction to the exhibition. Please speak to a steward for further information. An exhibition catalogue is available from the bookshop price £12.95.

Introduction to the exhibition

Starting at Zero: Black Mountain College 1933 - 57
5 November 2005 – 15 January 2006

Set in rural North Carolina, Black Mountain was not an art school. Its wide-ranging curriculum put the arts at the centre of life, in an environment intended to encourage learning through doing. At Black Mountain it was believed that the imagination could be trained to equip people to deal humanely with a complex and uncertain world.

Black Mountain College, like the modern arts in America, was formed in great part by the migration from Europe in the 1930s. Its ethos, linked to multi-disciplinary arts practice and to a philosophy that bound art and living together, was founded on the structured programme of the Bauhaus, the art and design teaching institute, recently closed by Hitler.

Starting at Zero, presents traces of events and performances, memories and photographs, letters and exam papers, reconstructions and work produced at the College.

**Gallery 2:
First Principles**

In December 1933 the painter Josef Albers and his wife the weaver Anni Albers arrived from Germany to run Black Mountain's art courses. In America, the Alberses were making their new beginning; they looked not back to Europe but to the history of South and Latin America to orientate themselves.

Other colleagues from the Bauhaus, now also in America, were asked to participate at Black Mountain, amongst them the architect Walter Gropius, a former Bauhaus Director, the painter Lyonel Feininger and Xanti Schawinsky, who brought experimental theatre to the college. For fifteen years, until they left in 1949, it was the Alberses' powerful philosophy of art and life, Josef Albers's drive to 'open eyes', that gave the founding ideals of the college their most far reaching expression.

Gallery 3: expression and experiment

From 1945 onwards summer arts institutes were held at Black Mountain. These attracted extraordinary groupings of then more or less unknown and sometimes impoverished artists and thinkers, including the painters Willem and Elaine de Kooning, the polymath R. Buckminster Fuller, the critic Clement Greenberg, the musician and artist John Cage and the choreographer Merce Cunningham.

At Black Mountain R. Buckminster Fuller experimented with and built the first Geodesic Dome, John Cage devised the multidisciplinary event now known as the first 'happening', incorporating Robert Rauschenberg's white paintings and the Cunningham Dance Company was founded.

Gallery 4: The Final Phase

In its final phase, Charles Olson dreamed of encompassing the whole of experience in his experimental writing and his experimental college – and wished to bring Josef and Anni Albers back to make the dream work.

Charles Olson, the painter Ben Shahn, the composer Lou Harrison and the dancer Katherine Litz enacted the multi-media 'glyph exchange' in 1951, referring to Olson's passion for Mayan writing, which had also been an inspiration for Josef and Anni Albers on their visits to Mexico in the 1930s and 40s.

Charles Olson believed in the mythic, expansive, expressive gesture, whether in writing, dance, painting or pottery. A Pottery Seminar took place in 1952, sparking a debate about tradition that was

important to the crafts in America and the last years of the college saw the publication of a periodical of new American writing, *The Black Mountain Review*, and the growing reputation of the Black Mountain poets.

Experiment

Black Mountain College is often referred to and discussed in terms of 'experiment', whether it be in the context of education, community, or art. The range of works within this exhibition reveal that an experimental approach to art, life and ideas was pursued in many different ways.

In Gallery 2, the series of abstract colour paintings by Josef Albers, are examples of the artist's methodical testing of colour combinations, appearance and optical effects. For Albers, experiment "embraces all means of opposing disorder and accident". This series of works fulfills this requirement, as did much of the systematic trial and error style teaching that he encouraged at the college.

John Cage's work and ideas, some of which are presented in Gallery 3, (with related work by him and others in **Playing John Cage** in Gallery 1) takes another approach to experimentation, embracing chance, randomness and accident within his ways of working.

Affinities and Conversations

Black Mountain College was a place for the forming - and sometimes the breaking - of friendships and for exchanges of ideas and cross fertilisation, through teaching and association.

The Alberses willingness to start afresh, to analyse the properties of colour, materials and design and the relationship between

elements, with an emphasis on the process of art, created an atmosphere where rigorous analysis and juxtaposition became aesthetic and moral principles. Card, newspaper and brown paper were made use of, grasses, seeds and metallic threads were woven, collages made of leaves; jewellery was constructed from hairpins, paperclips and grommets. For Josef Albers's students Ray Johnson and Robert Rauschenberg collage became fundamental to their practice.

The friendship and creative collaboration between the musician John Cage and the choreographer Merce Cunningham predated their first visit to Black Mountain and lasted until Cage's death in 1992. At Black Mountain their relationship with Robert Rauschenberg deepened. Cage's friendship with Robert Rauschenberg developed at Black Mountain in summer 1952. Rauschenberg was making his black and white paintings (Gallery 3). The white paintings were the impetus for Cage to develop the silent work *4' 33"*. 'I was reluctant to do the silent piece until I had the encouragement from Rauschenberg's white paintings', Cage stated. In a letter to his New York Dealer, Betty Parsons, Rauschenberg describes his new work: 'They are large white (1 white as 1 GOD) canvases organized and selected with the experience of time and presented with the innocence of a virgin.'

The network of associations between Cunningham, Cage, Rauschenberg and the abstract expressionists such as Willem de Kooning and Jack Tworkov (Gallery 3) can be seen in Rauschenberg's photographs and in the way that works in the exhibition have been exchanged between artists, given or dedicated to friends.

Some Black Mountain Events

The Geodesic Dome

Josef Albers organised the 1948 summer institute. The faculty included John Cage and Merce Cunningham, who had visited the college in the spring, and Willem de Kooning, who came with his wife the painter Elaine de Kooning. At the suggestion of John Cage he had replaced the painter Mark Tobey, who was ill. The sculptor Richard Lippold and his wife Louise, a dancer who had studied with Merce Cunningham, brought their family in the hearse in which they camped.

Buckminster Fuller (Gallery 3) provided the main project of the summer: work on the first geodesic dome. 'Geodesic' means 'relating to the form and structure of the earth'. It is also a term that corresponds to straight on a curved surface: a direct flight does not follow a straight line because the earth is curved. Fuller describes making calculations for his dome at Black Mountain. When the dome, made of strips of Venetian blind, failed to rise it was named 'the supine dome'.

The next summer Fuller returned to Black Mountain with some of his students from the Institute of Design in Chicago, having developed the dome further. He built a dome from prefabricated pieces, erected it with the use of cables and tested a plastic skin. 'Tensegrity' was the name invented by Fuller for a structural principle developed by a student at Black Mountain, Kenneth Snelson. He met Fuller in 1948 and made sculptures in which compressed members were separated by tension members. Later, there was friction between Snelson and Fuller because Snelson felt that Fuller had taken over the system he had evolved.