

## BMC Intro

(1)

BMC was founded on the outskirts of a small North Carolinian mountain town in 1933 and closed down 24 years later in 1957. The College was established with the aim of providing an education in the arts and sciences, loosening conventional distinctions between student and faculty, and faculty and administration, that usually served to specialize roles and bolster hierarchical distinctions. With minimal structure, borne of both idealistic inclination and economic necessity, Black Mountain's experiment in education would prove innovative, yet provisional and ultimately untenable.

Black Mountain College's institutional organization was peculiar and problematic, however it developed an unprecedented prominent genealogy of artists, scientists and intellectuals, mainly consisting of an elite of European exiles from Nazi Germany as well as the coming postwar American neoavantgarde. The breadth of famous participants amongst them Josef and Anni Albers, Ruth Asawa, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Buckminster Fuller, Clement Greenberg, Walter Gropius, Willem de Kooning, Robert Rauschenberg, Xavi Schwinsky or Cy Twombly is until today most impressive. Two works of the collection Marx at the Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart – Berlin, one by Robert Rauschenberg and by Cy Twombly were created at the Black Mountain College in 1951/52 and stimulated the first ideas for the curators Eugen Blume and Gabriele Knapstein to develop the forthcoming exhibition “Black Mountain – Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts“ in June 2015. Our cooperation between the museum and the Freie Universität aims at a multifaceted exchange, involving students and educational institutions in various activities as well as including digital platforms such as a BLOG open to the general public to approach this complex subject from various perspectives. During this three-year collaboration our goal is not a reconstruction of aspects of Black Mountain's history and the wide spectrum of important work being done during its existence. Our goal is rather a reflection and potential reactivation of models of creativity developed in this institution in a broader sense.

In our first workshop we were very honoured to bring together a group of distinguished scholars to discuss the category of “creative dynamics” in art, science and education, as well as the dynamics of creativity in education and society, which unfolded at Black Mountain College.

Or most important outreach to the public and a platform of collaboration in itself is the BLOG: <http://black-mountain-research.com/>

### **Exhibition 4th of June**

Symposium 25th 26th September „Black Mountain Modes of Experience (Making Art-Exploring Education-Shaping Communities)“

In my todays contribution to the festival Tacit or Loud at the Inter Arts Center in Malmö will try to highlight some aspects of our approach to BMC and the modles of creativity unfolded there, which included three factors: risk-taking, community life and experimentation.

### (2) Education and teaching/ Risk taking

„Put together Europeans and Americans, educated and uneducated, lazy and energetic, the Left and the Right; add to this the snobberies of artists and intellectuals and one can easily see how fertile it was for problems, but this also created opportunities for problem-solving.“ These and other statements underpin the atmosphere of education at BMC. As an institution it did not function as a harmoniously structured community, where everyone was in their specific place, taken up with the duty allocated to them, equipped with the proper pedagogical, artistic or intellectual skills. Instead BMC nutured a paradigm shift from the roles of a teacher or a student as a given social position, often times in disruptive ways. Yet BMC unfolded community processes to set of unprecedented capacities in co-creation and collaboration. The padagogical practices at the BMC invited to think

about educational practices beyond passivity-activity oppositions as well as body/mind dualisms, aiming at educating the whole person in more than a logocentric accord. Teaching methods were counting on active students, on a mental as well as a practical and physical level, constantly trying to provoke their minds to further actions. Although there were no required courses, no set schedule of examinations and no formal grades, the education at BMC was extremely demanding. Accordingly one student remembered: „If you didn't bring something new to every single class, a new idea or piece of work, you just didn't want to show up.“

In the summer of 1948, the inventor Buckminster Fuller constructed his first geodesic dome, a human shelter construction. Though in its early constructions it failed to rise and was called “the supine dome,” by Elaine de Kooning, one of Fuller's students. This design however was ultimately successful and became an architectural model worldwide a few decades later. Trail and error or even failure in many ways became at times truly liberating force at BMC, opposing a predetermined path towards knowledge, actions or results. The necessity of making mistakes, as Buckminster Fuller has prominently declared, was considered as part of the pedagogical practices and a key factor in the interplay of opposites and contradictions. The possibility of failure indeed shifts the focus from a final result to the potentiality or inactuality, as described by Giorgio Agamben, but also to experiences of disturbance, frustration and disorientation for all people involved. However the constant regeneration and renegotiation of self-organising patterns at work was able to generate a common sense of co-creation and co-evolution, allowing the interplay of various people and disciplines.

A syllabus of teaching was not a fixed entity but rather collectively elaborated and generated through a constant shift between various formats of perception and practice, presentation and representation. One of the most famous examples of such a class are Joseph Albers „Farbexperimente“. In Albers' words: „What counts

here – first and last – is not so-called knowledge of so called facts, but vision – seeing. Seeing here implies Schauen and is coupled with fantasy, with imagination.“ And a student commented: „Albers was not interested in creating a treatise on color. He was not giving rules about colors – he was giving us tools to unlock what he considered the magic of color.“

This understanding of education as co-creativity implies that learning as well as teaching are carried out as performative processes that unfold themselves while happening, consisting of an ever-changing set of processes that manifest themselves while they are acted out. Albers accordingly proclaimed: „A healthy belief that there is no final solution in form; thus form demands unending performance and invites constant consideration—visually as well as verbally.“ BMC thus unfolded an educational model that addressed as well as in part transgressed active/passive/ body/mind, master/student, art/science dichotomies by travelling in an interplay of opposites that opened up an creative space of communitarian creative practices. This ideal sounding concept was however deeply rooted in pragmatism. The so called work program at BMC mirrored nothing but a pragmatic eclecticism of tasks to be fulfilled by everybody, necessary to sustain the life on campus. In the memory of student Mary Gregory: „We had graduate architectural students sent to us to get practical experience in building. We did build several buildings designed by faculty and students. We did have a farm which supplied meat, milk, vegetables ... There was a woodworking shop where we built furnishings, lab equipment, utensils for parties and small houses for pigs – Our labor was needed.“ This work experience program was crucial in particularly „in the world at war“ as well as the post-war world: „Art at Black Mountain College is based upon art as an active, appreciative and creative force permeating all activities of life:“ (quote from Black Mountain Bulletins)

The velocity of exchange between art and life as well as various art forms and sciences can be illustrated by numerous examples. The ‘glyph’ exchange in summer 1951 was directly precipitated by an encounter with Southern racial politics and a productive misunderstanding. The poet Charles Olson was in the town of

Black Mountain with Alvin Lipsey, the young nephew of the College's black cook, where they encountered a local auction. The boy exclaimed, 'It's like a race.' Olson, startled by the allusion to slave auctions, wrote a brief, purportedly spontaneous poem about the scene and gave it to the painter Ben Shahn who was at the College for the summer. Returning the gift, Shahn painted *A Glyph for Charles*, produced, like several other works he completed at the College, in what he termed a 'palimpsest' style without erasures of any kind. Lou Harrison, an associate of Cage's hired in his absence, composed a work entitled 'The Glyph' for the 'prepared piano, 2 bells, claves, pitch fork, &, perhaps, gong' which he gave to Katherine Lutz. She then choreographed a dance using the Harrison score and an enlarged version of the Shahn painting as primary set design. That it created a synergetic attitude of collaboration amongst his colleagues at the College speaks to an eagerness to employ a practice responsive to improvisatory change and immediacy. Each collaborator produced their contribution separately but rapidly, overlapping in the word-image 'glyph' a palimpsest of multiple practices much as the referent 'race' contained multiple meanings. As Lutz stated, 'The common idea of a Glyph expressed by the different art forms was simply a compound image contained in a single work.'

### (3) Experimentation

These and other forms of collaboration and exchange were embedded in a basic disposition of risk-taking at BMC and unfolded itself as experimentation. Experiment was the key word of this institution, not creativity. In 1938, Anni Albers wrote an article in the *Black Mountain College Bulletin* called „Work with Material“ where she explicitly referred to experimentation and the development of personality. „Free experimentation ... can result in the fulfillment of an inner urge to give form and to give permanence to ideas, that is to say, it can result in art, or it can result in satisfaction of invention in some more technical way. But most important to one's growth is to see oneself leave the safe ground of accepted conventions and to find oneself alone and self-dependent. It is an adventure which can permeate one's whole being.“

Thus experiments at BMC were a strategy to actively stimulate the processes of artistic and scientific production, used as a mediator to negotiate between artists, students and their projects and last but not least personalities. Experimental practises were performing life, art and scientific investigations as community experiences on a daily basis. With small classes and one-to-one tutoring students and faculty were in close everyday contact. Meals were eaten together and students often told that they learned as much over mealtime conversations as they did in classrooms. The dining hall of BMC was the locus of intellectual and creative activity, and hosted among many other events the now famous „Untiteld Event“ in 1952. The dynamics between the functioning of the college as community and experiments as collective activities was nurtured by diverse and often contradictory concepts by teachers of what experiments meant and how they were conducted. For Albers, experiment, in his words „embraces all means opposing disorder and accident.“ It represents a careful procedure of testing socially and historically constructed perceptual understandings in art against deceptive optical registrations. To Cage, experiment ruptures patterns of reasoning which hypothesize testable limits. As he stated, „The word “experimental” is apt, providing it is understood not as descriptive of an act to be later judged in terms of success or failure, but simply as an act the outcome of which is unknown.“ In Fuller’s model, experimental procedures are those by which the ‘valid data’ of ‘what is really going on in nature’ can be formulated conceptually by artists (also by him described as ‘comprehensive designers’) thereby exposing the conventionalized knowledge claims (‘myths’) of an overly specialized society.

Experiments at BMC were actions marking what Deleuze coined „the cleavage of causality“, expanding the pure cognitive notion of knowledge, which is based on understanding the logical chain of cause and effect or action and reaction. Experiments at BMC hardly determined knowledge, they rather offered fluid structures of experiences. Consequently prominent artists and scientists began to re-conceptualize their understanding of an experiment, by a number of experiments. A notion of experiment that provoked an engagement with the

uncertain, highlighting what is contingency, indeterminacy and chance, with an emphasis on the ephemeral and the incomplete in contrast to permanence and durability. Experiments in that sense sort out potentiality, without focussing on a required degree of innovation, evidence or efficiency.

Experiments were so to speak the precarious glue interweaving various models and practises of creativity, specifically conducted to construct work environments that immerse the participants in an experience of collective creation. One key example of how experimentation and education worked together at BMC stems from the traditions of the Bauhaus. The Bauhaus-influenced theatrical tradition practised at the College is most prominently exemplified by Xanti Schawinsky's productions. Schawinsky, a student of Bauhaus theater master Oskar Schlemmer, taught at Black Mountain for several years in the late 1930s. Schawinsky's concept of theatrical staging, emphasized in his Spectodrama: Play, Life, Illusion proclaims: „That we arrive at a Theater of Knowledge.“ And: „If so to this purpose, teaching and learning are shifted in regular intervals the classroom to the stage as a practice ground and a laboratory for demonstration ... . And Schawinsky continues: „The working together of scientists, artists, economists, musicians, composers, psychologists, engineers and sociologists thus becomes a reality in which sharp boundary lines disappear and give way to the free inter-acting flow of thought, idea and knowledge.“ Experiments were supposed to invoking trials of new or different experience in which intentions or results are not forecast beforehand, but rather in the words of Buckminster Fuller were initiating „a search for tasks that needed to be done that no one else was attempting to do.“

#### (4) Creativity today

In contemporary society and in particular the economy creativity has become a key concept and actual force of transformation. Creativity serves as an unquestioned mantra of collective and institutionalised practices, it is the key strategy of innovation, efficiency or even perfection. There is no recent theory of collaborations that does not

emphasis the importance of self-organisation and the collective production, stressing the fact that the participants involvement entails physical action and that their experience of interactive practices is both affective and embodied. In other words participants ideally experience a sense of shared growth and development as they together are responsible for the creation of the work or production in general. Modernist aesthetics called in a long tradition for a radical rethinking of the divide between production and consumption. Paradoxically co-creation, coproduction and participation as key concepts in the field of cultural creation have indeed helped to redefine postcapitalistic ideologies of production to be rearticulated as a cultural or even artistic endeavour. And in turn the spheres of art and academia have become increasingly bound to post-industrial economic structures, where terms such as “creativity” now circulate as hard currency in the branding of corporations and universities alike. The increasing value placed on cultural capital (in Pierre Bourdieu’s formulation), and the rise of the so-called “experience economy” have blurred lines between production and consumption, making it increasingly difficult to define what constitutes creativity, and to identify what it is used for, and to what ends. Our workshop aims at challenging the notion of “creativity” as an increasingly blurred category and a unprecedented force in the creative economy as well as educational institutions. How, where and for whom exist spaces for risk-taking, community-life and experimentation, if at all? By looking at the ideologies of creativity we also aim at developing a critique of forced creativity intertwined with both the conception of the selfcultivation as well as the creative self as an exploitable resource. In a climate of instability and forced austerity, academics, artists and cultural workers face an increasingly precarious position. For some, present conditions challenge the very category of creativity altogether, and give renewed urgency to the question of art’s and humanities purpose or “usefulness” in a period of an utilitarian educational regime under the sign of post-fordism. In which way could stimulating the discussion about Black Mountain work as an precursor to models of creativity and collaboration today? Which models of creativity serve best in overarching transdisciplinary concepts and practices to solve global problems



such as homelessness, hunger or environmental disasters? Or on contrary is there a need for a profound criticism that tends to deemphasize or even disavow creativity as a relevant category altogether? BMC college in the 1930 until 1950s and other alternative institutions in the late 1960th such as the Free International University had ideologically overlapping concepts in which the purpose of creativity was to educate the whole person, with a focus on the role of the arts and creative thinking in every profession and thus imbuing arts and humanities with crucial relevance for society. Drawing upon their legacy there is a numerous spectrum of new institutions, reforms within institutions, or even counter-institutions concerned with unfolding creativity, fostering scientific development and/or artistic critique. Today the ideal of communitarian education as one of cooperation, collaborating and co-evolving with other humans is unquestioned, however in reality often becoming a (dead) end in and of itself.

How can both of our institutions the museum and the university, depending on the calibration of self-referential ideological, bureaucratic and financial factors, take on a role as vital archive of past practises and models, as well as an incubator of future processes, and a present-tense laboratory for public education, provocation, and dialogue? Could creativity in this context unfold itself in form of experimental tactics, as defined by Michel de Certeau in *Practice of Everyday Life*? Experimental tactics which were temporary, provisional, flexible, and should operate within the very spaces and structures of the system they endeavor to challenge or resist and have a game-like or playful quality, constantly testing the unforeseen possibilities of a given situation.

At this point I would like to conclude my approach to BMC and its legacy with a humble sence of incompletion and open-endedness, last but not least referring to the perfect simplicity in which Joseph Albers explained his motivation to teach at this college. Upon his arrival at Black Mountain in 1933, Albers famously responded to his welcome ceremony at the College by stating: „I want to open eyes.“