

Text for talk: An Introduction to The Glyph at Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center on August 7, 2022

Thank you, Jeff, and Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center for inviting Polly, Yukiko and me to your home here in Asheville. We are truly honored to be bringing our reconstruction of *The Glyph*, an historic 1951 collaboration between four legendary artists, all faculty at Black Mountain College that summer of '51: dancer/choreographer Katherine Litz, composer Lou Harrison, painter Ben Shahn and poet and rector of Black Mountain College, Charles Olson, who sparked this iconic work into creation.

*The Glyph* was part of the school's '51 summer of, so-called, glyph-gifts and became known simply as The Glyph Exchange. This work that you will see today is truly emblematic of Black Mountain College's experimentation and creative interaction. Choreographer/performer Litz described *The Glyph*'s origin as "a common idea of a glyph expressed by the different art forms, a compound image contained in a single work."

It was poet Olson who kicked off this creative process. Olson lived in the Yucatan for 4 months in 1951 studying the ancient Mayan glyph stones. He wrote to fellow Black Mountain poet Robert Creeley from the Yucatan: "What wilds me is that here, in these glyphs, is the intimate art! The inside stuff (as against the mass and space of the buildings (god-stuff))." For Olson, the Mayans were, he wrote, "hot for the world they lived in and hot to get it down by way of a language that is loaded to the gills...a kind of imagination driven towards a hot world, which is called creative power." It was the glyph stone's fluency as both text and image and their play between the figurative and abstract that Olson hoped would be generative for artmaking back at Black Mountain College. On his return to Black Mountain, he immediately gifted a newly inspired glyph-like poem of his own making to painter Ben Shahn, a poem that begins by waving the word 'race', glyph-like, and then explores it as event, ideogrammic image and enigma. Shahn immediately responds to Olson's poem with a drawing that is a glyph-like form from the anatomy of the human body that, through further abstraction, has become an ideogram. And now Olson, to enlarge the exchange, gives a new glyph-gift poem to choreographer Litz and composer Harrison. Harrison responds with a 6-part piano and percussion score and presents it to Litz who creates a dance that Shahn's glyph drawing, enlarged into a four-by-eight foot flat, serves as design, and stage flat for Litz's danced entrances and exits. Poetry, painting, music, and dance have thoroughly interplayed and closed any gaps in this inspired chain of glyph-giving! The work premiered August 24, 1951 at Black Mountain College, only a few weeks after the glyph gifting had begun. Such was the spirit and love of experimentation that seems part of the collective DNA shared by the remarkable artists and faculty of Black Mountain College!

This excitement about process and experimentation in the creative development of performance work began with Josef Albers' invitation in 1936 to Xanti Schawinsky who

was a student and collaborator at the Bauhaus with visual and theater artist Oskar Schlemmer. Schawinsky's Stage Workshop at Black Mountain College engaged the theater student in what was called Fundamental Phenomena: Space, Form, Color, Light, Sound, Music, Movement and Time. Theater was explored as a play of geometric forms and light, not a verbal, narrative structure to engage the personality of the performer and audience, but a more objective world of pure form.

After Schawinsky left Black Mountain College, the center of theater experimentation became the Light Sound Movement Workshop taught by Betty and Pete Jennerjahn in the late 40's. The search was for a structured relationship of light, sound, and movement that was basically non-verbal. Olson was involved in these workshops and a year later, in 1951, this spirit of experimentation, interaction and exchange of ideas was crystalized in his own glyph exchanges that created the collaborative work you will see today.

It was in fact the visual artist Anni Albers, arriving at Black Mountain College with her husband Josef Albers in 1933 at the school's inception, who brought many of the wonderfully generative ideas that became the heart and soul of creativity in the *performance* process at Black Mountain College. In writing from the late 40's Anni Albers, in fact, extended her thinking about visual art materials, inspired by her own dozen trips to Mexico, to the very use of *spoken words* and *movement* in the performing arts:

"Words and gestures... are often not clearly recognized in their specific capacity as elements of form... They seem to be materials familiar to us through their daily use. But as media of art, they have to be newly mastered just as any other material has to be."

Olson himself will pick up on this theme in his 1950 proclamation for the future of poetry, the inspiring essay *Projective Verse*, where he will begin to break down the materials of language, Anni Albers-like, for the future writer's new path: "the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE// the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE."

You'll see today this principle of the artist grappling with her material in the 1951 dance by Litz: her exquisite use of the smallest gestures and how they build, step by step, syllable by syllable into lines/phrases that magnificently make up *The Glyph*. And Litz seems to follow verbatim the other Olson dictum in his *Projective Verse* essay for the new writer/creator where "ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION... Get on with it, keep moving, speed, the nerves, the perceptions, the split-second acts, where one perception must move on another." Subsequently a radical dance of almost constant metamorphosis is created in August, 1951 by Katherine Litz at Black Mountain College.

These inter-developments in the arts between writers, choreographers, visual artists and composers, exemplified by *The Glyph*, flourished at Black Mountain College, and the very following year, 1952, John Cage brought together pianist David Tudor, visual artists Robert Rauschenberg and Franz Kline, dancer Merce Cunningham,

painter/dancer Nicholas Cernovich and poets M.C. Richards and Charles Olson, all to simultaneously perform and exhibit their work in the dining hall of Black Mountain College. What was later referred to as Theater Piece No. 1. There were no scripts, rehearsals or costumes. There *were* only time brackets for everyone involved. It is often cited as the first Happening and one could draw a line from the experiments of Xanti Schawinsky in the 30's through the work of the Light, Sound, Movement Workshop of the 40's, and the glyph collaborative exchanges in '51, all directly to the Cage '52 Happening. One would also be mapping out, with each subsequent event, a growing sense of artistic freedom for both the individual and collective, along with a growing sense of serendipity in surprising synchronicities, and joyous cacophony. "Things that can take their place alongside the things of nature," in the words of Charles Olson describing the emerging beauty of artistic collaboration at Black Mountain College.

Black Mountain College was a unique moment that continues to inspire. We continue to hope that we are all part of something that would have Black Mountain College's thrilling collaborative spirit and creative ferment. We think skeptically that maybe it's only possible from the welter of specific historic calamities that brought a particular people, students and faculty, together. And, we may think, not replicable in our time. But I believe we would love to see what our own time of challenges, may I say disasters, could yield creatively and socially by bringing us together collaboratively. It seems a perfect time to learn from Black Mountain College. To be reminded of the importance of the arts as a generative and redeeming force in a culture. If art were to become central to our education and experience, what might emerge from ourselves and our communities at this troubled, fractured, time?

Please let me introduce Yukiko Takagi who will speak in more detail about the late, great composer/humanist/activist Lou Harrison. After her introductory words she will start the performances today with Harrison's wonderful six sonatas for cembalo or pianoforte. Yukiko. Thank you. Please, all enjoy!