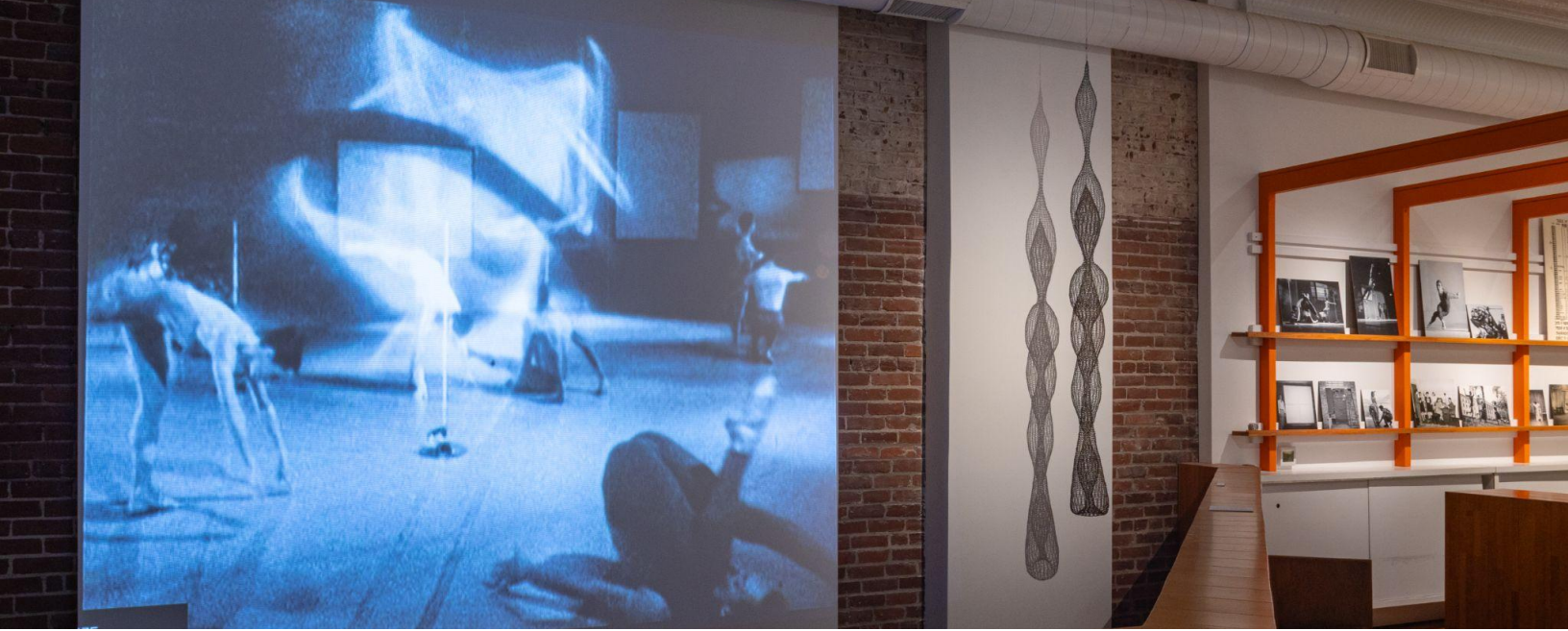




No Fixed Points in Space

Black Mountain College and the Performance of Education

Jeff Arnal

Inspired by the exhibition: *Points in Space: Performance at Black Mountain College*
Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center in collaboration with the John Cage Trust

Variations V (1965–66) brought together John Cage, Merce Cunningham, David Tudor, Gordon Mumma, Nam June Paik, Stan VanDerBeek, Billy Klüver, Robert Moog, dancers, engineers, electronics, film, architecture, and chance within a single collaborative environment.

Music became movement. Movement became image. Image became architecture. Technology became choreography. Chance became composition.

The work dissolved familiar boundaries between artistic disciplines until each became inseparable from the others. Nothing unfolded in isolation. Every action responded to another. Every participant altered the whole. The performance became less a fixed composition than a field of relationships whose possibilities remained open.

Rather than representing the culmination of an artistic revolution, *Variations V* invites us to look backward and ask a different question:

What kind of place makes a work like this possible?



OVERTURE

In the autumn of 1965, audiences encountered something they had never quite seen before. As dancers crossed the stage, their movements activated antennas and photoelectric cells that triggered sounds, projections, electronic circuits, and shifting fields of light. Music did not accompany dance. Film did not illustrate performance. Technology did not function as scenery. Each element continually responded to the others, producing a work that unfolded differently every time it was performed.

Today, *Variations V* is often celebrated as one of the defining works of twentieth-century interdisciplinary art. It anticipated interactive installation, multimedia performance, and digital practice by decades. Yet its lasting significance lies not simply in technological innovation or formal originality. It emerged from a way of working in which collaboration was not an occasional strategy but a fundamental condition.

The artists who created *Variations V* did not arrive at this approach suddenly. Their willingness to blur the boundaries between music, dance, visual art, architecture, engineering, and performance had been shaped over many years through shared projects, conversations, friendships, and collaborations. They learned to work within structures that admitted freedom, allowing unexpected relationships to emerge without requiring every outcome to be known in advance. In this sense, the performance embodied an educational philosophy as much as an artistic one.

Many of those practices were cultivated at Black Mountain College.

Between 1933 and 1957, the College became an unlikely gathering place for artists, musicians, dancers, architects, poets, designers, scientists, and educators who believed that learning emerged through experience rather than instruction alone. Yet its openness did not arise from the absence of structure. Influenced by John Dewey's vision of education, shaped by the rigorous pedagogy of the Bauhaus, and sustained through shared governance, labor, and daily life, Black Mountain created an environment in which disciplined practice and intellectual freedom continually informed one another. Students worked alongside faculty. The classroom extended into the studio, the workshop, the dining hall, the concert stage, and the surrounding landscape. Performances became conversations. Conversations became collaborations.

This essay is not an attempt to tell the complete history of performance at Black Mountain College. Rather, it is a companion piece to my conversation with Jeffrey Lependorf, Executive Director of the John Cage Trust, presented as part of the Chance Encounters series. Many remarkable performances took place at the College, but the performances themselves are only part of the story. More important are the educational structures, communal practices, and habits of attention that made those performances possible.

Seen from this perspective, *Variations V* becomes less a destination than a point of departure. Rather than asking how such a work was made, we might ask what kind of educational environment could nurture the habits of curiosity, discipline, collaboration, and openness from which it emerged.

That question leads us back to Black Mountain College.

Movement I

How Do You Exhibit Performance?

Performance presents museums with an unusual problem.

A painting, a sculpture, a musical score, or a photograph can be collected, conserved, and displayed. A performance resists such preservation. Once it has ended, what remains are fragments: programs, costumes, scores, photographs, recordings, correspondence, recollections, and the objects that once participated in an event now irretrievably past.

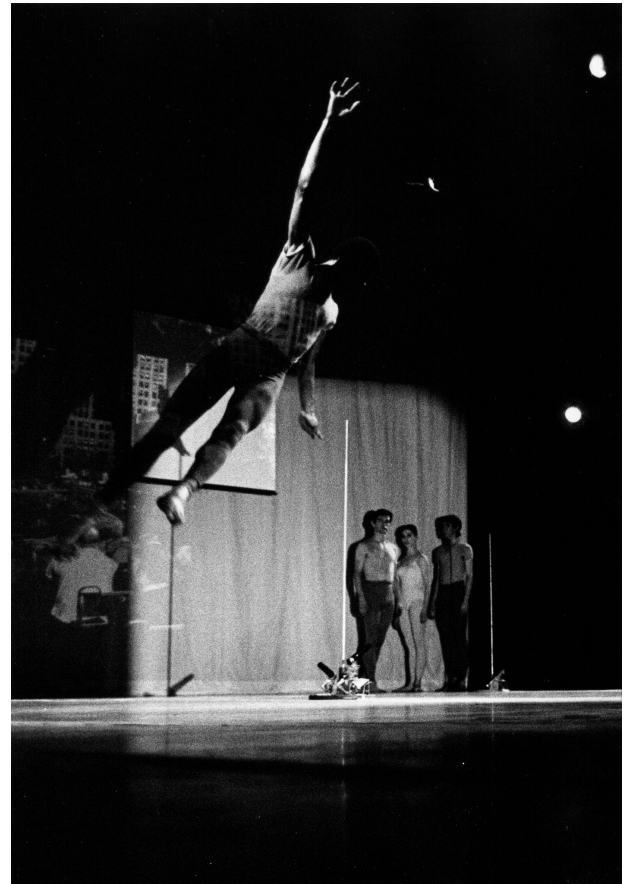
Yet these traces are not insignificant.

Rather than documenting a completed work, they invite us to imagine relationships that once unfolded among artists, audiences, spaces, and ideas. They point beyond themselves toward an experience that can never be entirely reconstructed. Every attempt to exhibit performance therefore becomes, in part, an act of interpretation.

The exhibition *Points in Space: Performance at Black Mountain College* embraces this challenge. Rather than attempting to recreate performances that can no longer be repeated, it assembles the objects, documents, artworks, and archival materials through which their histories continue to resonate. Visitors encounter scores beside photographs, costumes beside correspondence, recordings beside visual art. Meaning emerges less from any single object than from the conversations that develop among them.

This way of thinking reflects something fundamental about Black Mountain College itself.

Performance there was never simply a finished event presented before an audience. It grew from a larger educational culture in which rehearsals became classrooms, conversations became collaborations, and daily life became inseparable from artistic practice. The performances mattered, but they were possible only because a community had already learned how to think, work, and inquire together.



Variations V. Merce Cunningham Dance Company; John Cage, David Tudor, Gordon Mumma (musicians); films and projections by Stan VanDerBeek and Nam June Paik. Courtesy of Merce Cunningham Trust.

Museums therefore preserve more than objects.

They preserve evidence of relationships.

Perhaps that is all any museum can ultimately preserve.
Not performance itself, but the structures, conversations, and
communities that once made performance possible.

What were those structures?



Installation photos of *Points in Space: Performance at Black Mountain College, BMCM+AC, 2025-2026*.

Movement II

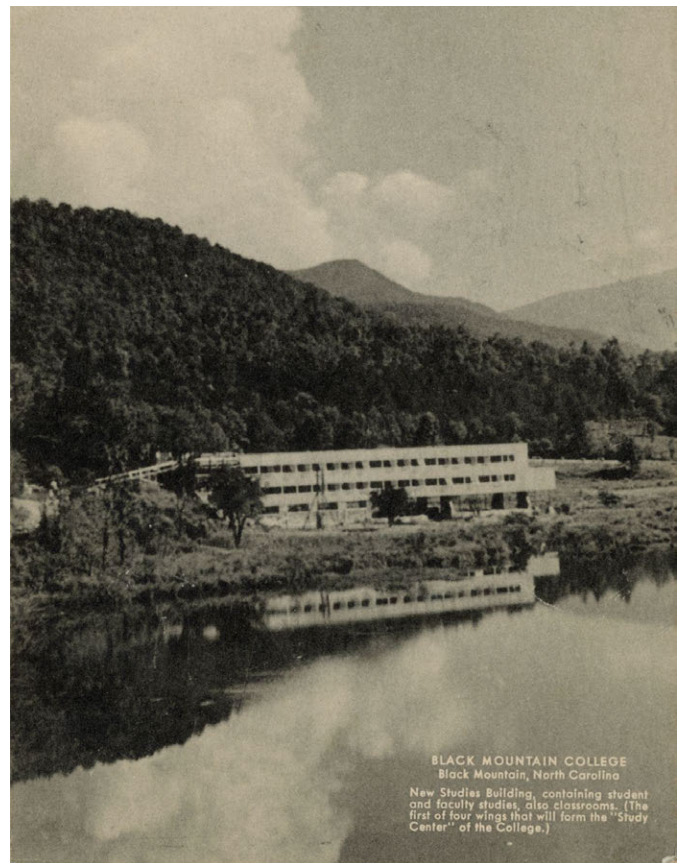
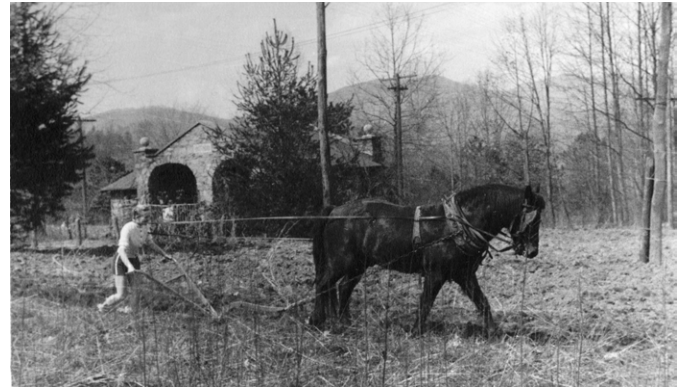
Before John Cage

The answer begins long before John Cage ever arrived at Black Mountain College.

Founded in 1933 during the depths of the Great Depression, Black Mountain emerged from an educational experiment rather than an artistic one. Its founders rejected the idea that learning consisted primarily in the transmission of established knowledge from teacher to student. Instead, they imagined education as a shared process of inquiry grounded in experience, responsibility, and community. John Dewey's conviction that democracy was "a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" became more than a philosophical ideal. It shaped the daily life of the College itself.

Students and faculty did not simply occupy the same campus. They governed the institution together, shared meals, maintained buildings and grounds, debated ideas late into the evening, and participated in the practical work necessary to sustain the community. Education unfolded not only through lectures or assignments but through the continual exchange of labor, conversation, and lived experience. The distinction between classroom and campus gradually became difficult to maintain because learning occurred wherever people worked and thought together.

At the same time, another educational tradition took root in the mountains of western North Carolina. Josef and Anni Albers arrived from the recently closed Bauhaus, bringing with them an extraordinary commitment to disciplined observation, material investigation, and experimental practice. Their presence transformed the College, not by replacing Dewey's democratic ideals with European modernism, but by placing the two traditions in sustained dialogue. Black Mountain became one of the rare places where American progressive education and the pedagogical legacy of the Bauhaus informed one another. Openness and discipline were understood not as opposing values but as mutually dependent ones. Careful structure created the possibility for genuine freedom.



Josef Albers, *Students painting window frames at BMC*, c. 1941-43. Courtesy of The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation / ARS. | Kenelm Winslow, *Student working BMC farm*, c. 1936-1938. Collection of BMCM+AC. Gift of Kenelm Winslow, Jr. | *BMC postcard*, c. 1940-1942. Collection of BMCM+AC

This educational philosophy attracted an unusually diverse community of artists, musicians, architects, dancers, poets, and scholars. Xanti Schawinsky dissolved conventional boundaries among theater, painting, movement, and design through his Stage Studies. Composers including Heinrich Jalowetz, Edward Lowinsky, Stefan Wolpe, Hugo Kauder, and Ursula Mamlok carried musical traditions shaped by European modernism while embracing an educational environment that encouraged conversation across disciplines. Architects attended concerts. Musicians visited painting studios. Poets wandered into rehearsals. Such encounters were not organized as interdisciplinary projects. They emerged naturally from the daily life of a small community in which people continually encountered one another's work.



Performance occupied a central place within this culture, but not simply as presentation. It functioned as a mode of inquiry.

Rehearsals became classrooms. Concerts became conversations. Public performances extended discussions already unfolding in studios, workshops, and around the dining tables. Students participated alongside faculty not merely as observers but as collaborators whose questions and contributions shaped the work itself. Performance was valued less as a finished product than as a means of thinking together.



Nowhere did this become more visible than in the Summer Music Institutes. Beginning in 1944, the College invited internationally recognized performers, composers, scholars, and students to spend weeks living and working together on campus. Rehearsals remained open. Faculty performed alongside students. Meals became seminars. Formal instruction dissolved into conversation, and conversation returned again to performance. The Institutes did more than present concerts; they temporarily intensified the collaborative culture that already defined the College.

The influence of these gatherings extended well beyond Lake Eden. Concerts were broadcast on WWNC radio, bringing both historical repertory and contemporary music to audiences throughout western North Carolina. Visiting artists transformed the College into a regional center for cultural exchange, while residencies such as Roland Hayes's in 1945 challenged prevailing assumptions about race,

artistic excellence, and public life. Black Mountain increasingly functioned less as an isolated college than as a laboratory whose experiments radiated outward through performance, publication, and conversation.

Observers recognized that something unusual was taking place. Following the 1945 Schoenberg Festival, the composer Roger Sessions described Black Mountain's work as "the most important thing that has ever happened in musical education in America." His praise acknowledged more than an ambitious series of concerts. It recognized an institution that had begun to rethink what musical education itself might become.

By the late 1940s, artists at Black Mountain had already grown accustomed to moving across disciplinary boundaries. The College had created educational structures robust enough to accommodate disagreement, disciplined enough to sustain inquiry, and open enough to allow discoveries that no one could have fully anticipated.

When John Cage first arrived in the spring of 1948 and returned that summer for the Satie Festival he did not introduce these ideas to Black Mountain College. He entered a community that had been patiently cultivating them for fifteen years.

Movement III

Satie Summer

By the summer of 1948, Black Mountain College had already become an extraordinary place to live and work. Its rhythms differed from those of most colleges. Classes, rehearsals, meals, lectures, performances, manual labor, and conversation did not occupy separate spheres but flowed into one another throughout the day. Learning emerged less through the transmission of knowledge than through sustained participation in a community. Artists taught, but they also listened. Students studied, but they also contributed. Education unfolded not only in classrooms but wherever people remained open to one another's ideas.

The Summer Music Institute grew naturally from this culture. Rather than inviting artists simply to perform, the College invited them to live together for weeks, sharing meals, attending rehearsals, debating ideas, and participating in the everyday life of the campus. Careful planning made these encounters possible, but what emerged from them could never be fully anticipated.

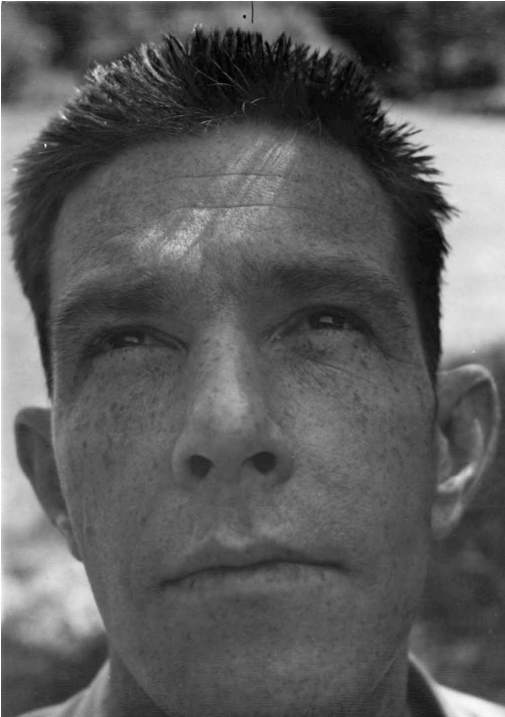
John Cage first visited Black Mountain briefly in the spring of 1948. Students watched him prepare the piano, attended his performances, and gathered afterward for coffee and conversation. When he returned that summer, he entered not an institution waiting to be transformed but a community already accustomed to crossing disciplinary boundaries and questioning artistic conventions.

He later recalled discovering in Josef Albers "a structure which admitted the freedom," recognizing in Albers's educational philosophy ideas remarkably close to his own. The affinity, he remembered, was immediate: they were "like two peas in a pod."



John Cage Playing Piano for the Satie Festival and two photos of *The Ruse of Medusa*, 1948. Photos by Clemens Kalischer. Collection of BMCM+AC. Gift of the Artist.

The summer assembled an extraordinary constellation of artists, educators, and students. Josef and Anni Albers were joined by Buckminster Fuller, Merce Cunningham, Willem and Elaine de Kooning, Arthur Penn, M. C. Richards, Richard Lippold, and many others whose names have become familiar through later histories. Yet the significance of the Institute lay not simply in the presence of celebrated figures. Students, staff, visiting artists, and faculty lived together as members of a temporary community whose daily interactions proved as consequential as any formal performance. One event has come to symbolize that remarkable summer: the first American festival devoted entirely to the music of Erik Satie.



At the time, Satie occupied an uncertain place within musical history. Overshadowed by Debussy and frequently dismissed as eccentric or naïve, his music stood outside the dominant narratives of nineteenth-century musical development. Cage championed Satie not because he rejected history, but because he proposed another history. Satie's concern with duration, clarity, and repetition suggested possibilities obscured by the Beethovenian tradition of harmonic development that still dominated concert life. The festival therefore became more than a celebration of a neglected composer. It invited listeners to reconsider the assumptions through which musical history itself had been organized.

Not everyone agreed.

The programming generated spirited debate among participants, revealing that Black Mountain's openness did not depend upon consensus. Disagreement formed part of its educational life. Ideas were tested through argument as readily as through performance. The value of the Satie Festival lay not in establishing a new orthodoxy but in creating a community willing to question inherited ones.



Elsewhere on campus, Buckminster Fuller struggled to realize his first geodesic dome. The structure famously collapsed before it could stand, yet the experiment became one of the defining memories of the summer. Failure itself entered the educational process. Students and faculty learned as much through unsuccessful attempts as successful ones. Discovery depended not upon avoiding mistakes but upon treating them as occasions for further inquiry.

The same spirit animated conversations throughout the campus. Mornings dissolved into rehearsals. Afternoons became lectures. Evenings gave way to concerts that frequently continued as discussions long after the audience had dispersed. Cage would later remember that some of the most important exchanges took place over meals, where lively conversation became as significant as formal instruction.

Looking back, it is tempting to describe the summer of 1948 as the moment when John Cage transformed Black Mountain College.

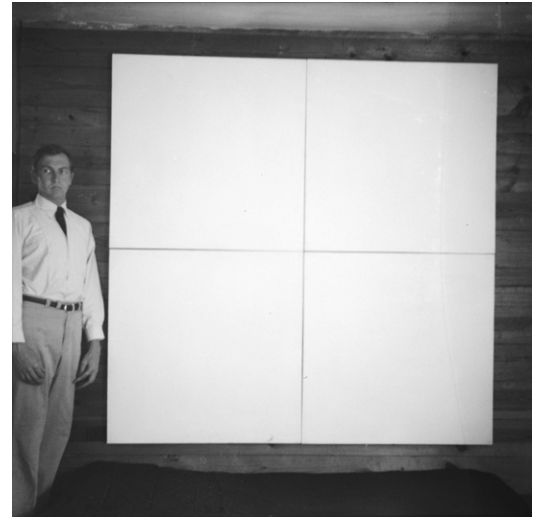
The historical record suggests something more reciprocal.

The College had already spent fifteen years cultivating an educational culture grounded in associated living, disciplined practice, intellectual openness, and shared responsibility. Cage undoubtedly influenced the community he encountered, but he also discovered an institution whose deepest assumptions resonated with his own emerging ideas. Black Mountain did not teach him what to think. It provided a structure within which new relationships, conversations, and artistic possibilities could emerge.

The lasting significance of the Satie Festival therefore lies less in the concerts themselves than in the community they brought into being.

The performances eventually concluded.
The conversations continued.

From those conversations emerged collaborations that would reshape music, dance, architecture, poetry, visual art, and performance for decades to come.



Movement IV

Collaboration Becomes the Medium

By the early 1950s, collaboration had become more than a pedagogical method at Black Mountain College.

It had become a way of making art.

This transformation did not occur through the announcement of a new artistic movement or the publication of a manifesto. It emerged gradually through the everyday life of the College. Artists wandered into one another's classrooms. Painters attended concerts. Composers worked in the theater. Architects collaborated with dancers. Poets joined rehearsals. Students moved easily among disciplines, carrying ideas from one studio into another. The boundaries separating artistic practices became increasingly permeable because the boundaries separating people had already begun to dissolve.



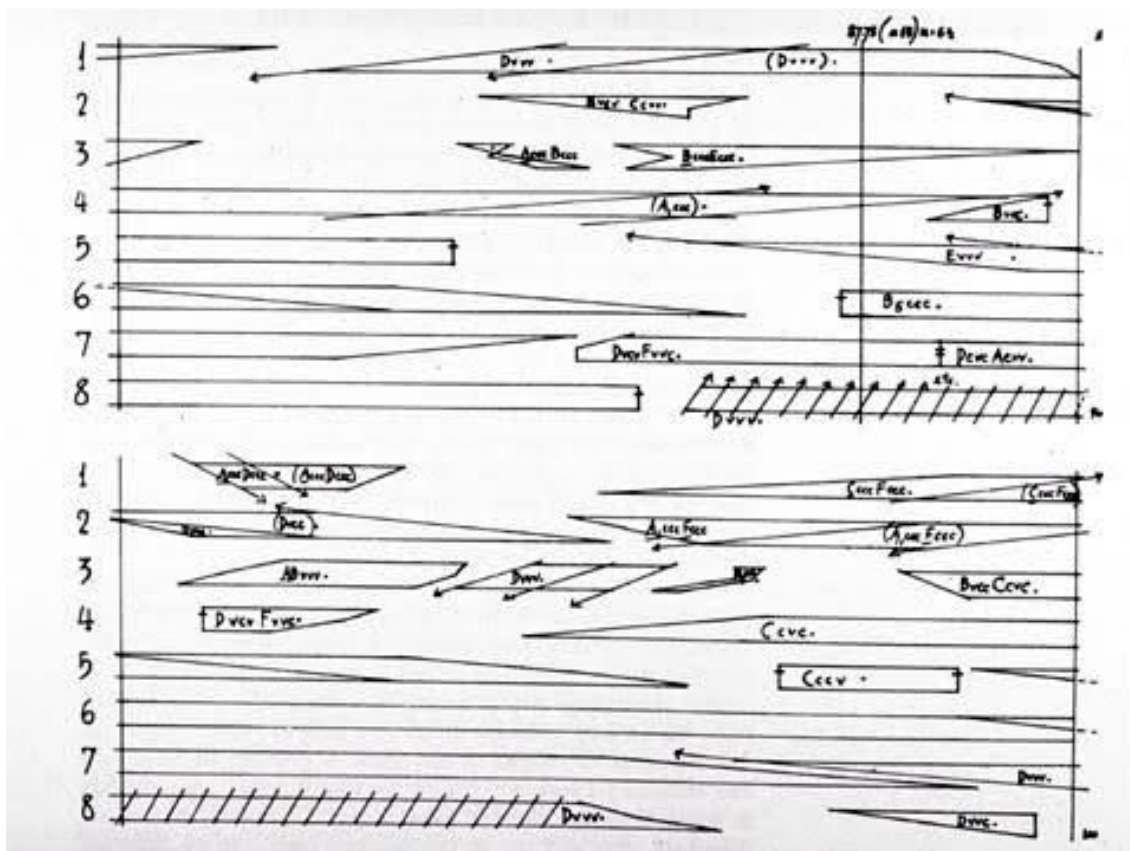
Yet collaboration at Black Mountain did not require artists to abandon their individual disciplines. Quite the opposite. Painters remained painters. Dancers remained dancers. Musicians remained musicians. Rather than blending their practices into a single unified form, they learned to work alongside one another, allowing independent artistic languages to coexist within shared space. Years later, Cage would describe this relationship not as influence but as dialogue. The arts, he insisted, did not need to imitate one another in order to respond to one another.

Within this environment, the artwork itself began to change.

Music no longer served simply as accompaniment. Dance no longer illustrated musical form. Architecture became something more than a setting. Painting extended beyond the canvas. Performance increasingly emerged through the relationships among independent actions rather than through the execution of a predetermined plan.

Collaboration ceased to be merely a means of producing an artwork. It became the artwork itself.

This transformation unfolded across the College in ways both large and small. Xanti Schawinsky's earlier Stage Studies had already dissolved conventional distinctions among theater, design, movement, and visual composition. The Light Sound Movement Workshop invited students to investigate the relationships among projected images, bodies, sound, and space. M. C. Richards's translation of *The Theater and Its Double* introduced new ways of imagining theatrical experience. Cage's attempt to organize a class around the composition that would become *Williams Mix* ultimately proved unsuccessful, yet even failure became part of the educational process. At Black Mountain, experiments were valued not because they always succeeded but because they opened new questions.



John Cage, Score for *Williams Mix*, 1952.
Image via *John Cage Werkverzeichnis* (Edition Peters, New York 1962, p. 41).

The culmination of these explorations came during the summer of 1952 in the event later known as *Theater Piece No. 1*.

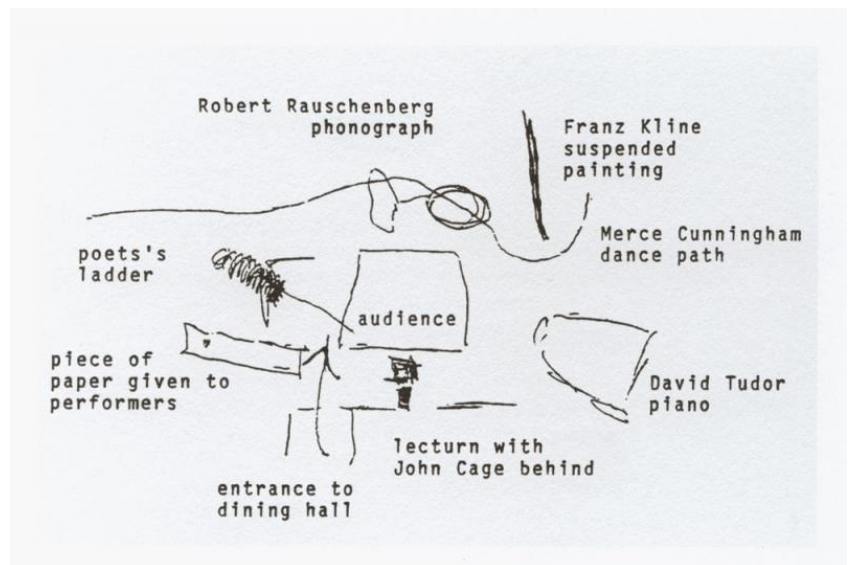
Although later histories have often described it as the first Happening, the performance resists such tidy classification. No script survives. Contemporary accounts differ. Participants remembered different events. Some recalled Cage reading from a ladder while Merce Cunningham danced through the audience. Others emphasized David Tudor at the piano, Robert Rauschenberg's *White Paintings*, Charles Olson's poetry, M. C. Richards speaking from another ladder, or the dogs wandering through the dining hall. Each recollection reveals only part of an experience that no single participant could entirely perceive. Perhaps that uncertainty is precisely the point.

The performance did not present a unified spectacle before a passive audience. It invited each person to assemble the work through acts of attention. Multiple events unfolded simultaneously without submitting to a single organizing perspective. Every spectator experienced a different constellation of relationships. Meaning emerged not from any individual performance but from the conversations created among many independent performances sharing the same space.

The event therefore did not introduce collaboration to Black Mountain College.

It revealed a collaborative culture that had already become second nature.

By 1952, the participants had spent years living, teaching, arguing, rehearsing, building, and eating together. They had learned to trust that meaningful work could emerge without requiring complete control over every outcome. Collaboration had become less an artistic technique than a habit of thought cultivated through the educational life of the College itself.



M.C. Richards, *floor plan of John Cage's "Theater Piece No. 1" (1952)*, drawn for William Fetterman in 1989.

Seen from this perspective, Theater Piece No. 1 appears less as the beginning of performance art than as the visible expression of a community that had already transformed its understanding of artistic practice. Historians understandably return to the event because it anticipated so many later developments. Yet its deeper significance lies elsewhere. It demonstrated what became possible when artists educated within a culture of shared inquiry brought their independent practices into sustained dialogue.

The lasting achievement of Black Mountain College was therefore not the invention of a new artistic genre.

It was the creation of an educational culture in which collaboration itself became a creative medium, allowing artists to discover possibilities that none of them could have fully anticipated alone.

Those discoveries would not remain at Lake Eden.

When the College eventually disappeared, its buildings would fall silent. Its conversations would continue.

Movement V

The Experiment Leaves the Mountain

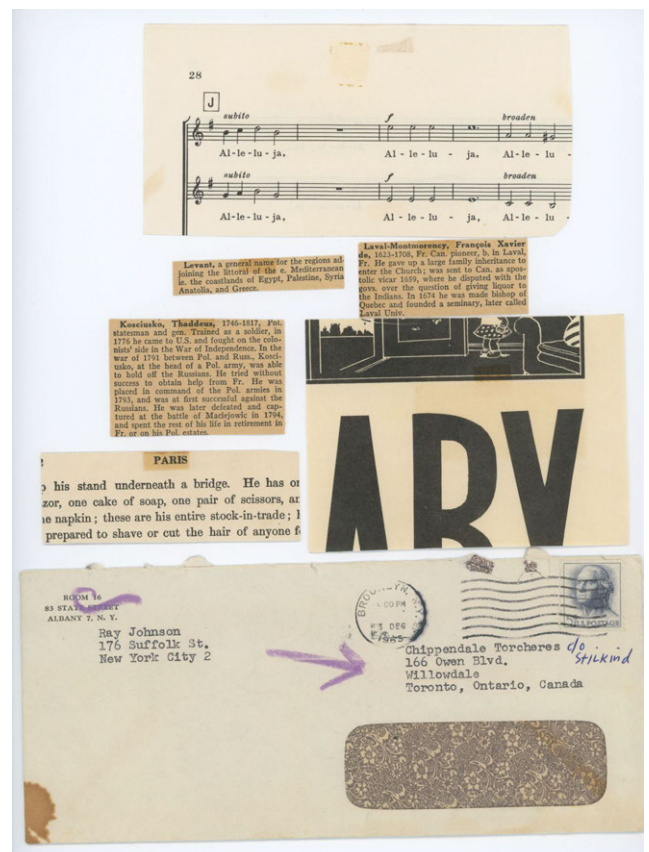
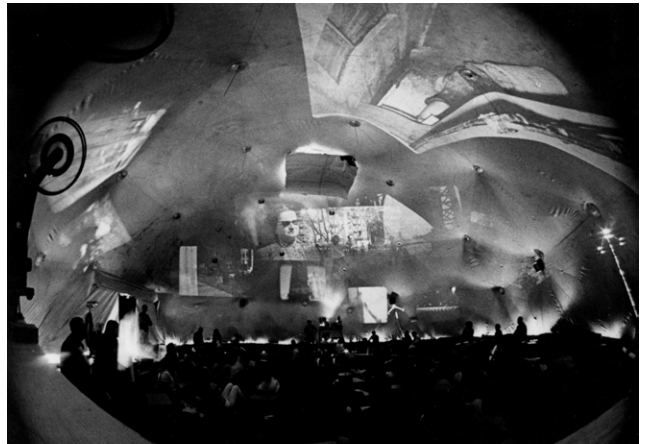
Black Mountain College closed its doors in 1957.

Financial uncertainty, declining enrollment, and years of institutional struggle finally brought the educational experiment to an end. The classrooms emptied. The workshops fell quiet. Concerts and exhibitions ceased. Like many small colleges, Black Mountain disappeared from the educational landscape. Or so it seemed.

What ended in 1957 was an institution. What continued was a community.

The College had never been defined solely by its buildings, curriculum, or administrative structure. Its most enduring achievement was the network of relationships it had cultivated over nearly twenty-five years. Artists, musicians, dancers, architects, poets, designers, teachers, and students left Lake Eden carrying with them habits of working that could no longer be confined to a single place. They had learned to approach artistic practice through collaboration, conversation, disciplined inquiry, and openness to unforeseen possibilities. Those habits proved remarkably portable.

John Cage and Merce Cunningham continued developing performances in which music and dance occupied the same time and space without illustrating one another. David Tudor expanded the expressive possibilities of experimental performance. Robert Rauschenberg carried the collaborative spirit of Black Mountain into painting, performance, and the visual culture of postwar America. Buckminster Fuller pursued increasingly ambitious investigations of design, systems, and architecture. Charles Olson transformed literary education through his teaching and through the Black Mountain Review. Countless others, less widely celebrated but no less significant, carried the College's educational practices into schools, universities, museums, studios, concert halls, and communities throughout the United States and abroad.



Cage, Cunningham, and Rauschenberg, 1987.
Courtesy of Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI).

Bobby Hansson, *Stan VanDerBeek's Movie Drome at Design-In*, 1967. Courtesy Stan VanDerBeek Archive
Ray Johnson, *Untitled mail art*, 1963. Collection of BMCM+AC. Gift of Marie Stilkind.

What connected these artists was not a shared aesthetic.

Their work often differed dramatically in form, medium, and intention. Some embraced abstraction while others remained committed to representation. Some worked with emerging technologies while others returned to traditional materials. Some achieved international prominence while others devoted themselves to teaching or community practice.

Their common inheritance lay elsewhere.

They shared confidence in an educational culture that encouraged dialogue across disciplines without requiring consensus, valued process as highly as product, and understood collaboration not as the surrender of individual voices but as the creation of circumstances in which independent practices could encounter one another in unexpected ways.

The College, in other words, did not produce a school of art. It produced a way of working.

That way of working continued through an ever-expanding network of friendships, collaborations, performances, publications, classrooms, and institutions. Former students and faculty did not simply reproduce what they had experienced at Black Mountain. They adapted its educational principles to new circumstances, creating fresh communities in which conversation again became collaboration and collaboration again generated unforeseen possibilities.



Perhaps nowhere is this continuity more visible than in *Variations V*.

Created nearly a decade after Black Mountain College closed, the work gathered together relationships that had matured over many years. Cage and Cunningham's long partnership provided its foundation. David Tudor's extraordinary musicianship, Nam June Paik's investigations of electronic media, Gordon Mumma's circuitry, Billy Klüver's engineering, Robert Moog's emerging synthesizer technologies, and Stan VanDerBeek's immersive film environments each retained their distinct identities while contributing to a shared performance. No single medium governed the event. No participant controlled the whole. Independent artistic practices unfolded simultaneously, continually responding to one another without surrendering their autonomy.

The performance was new. The habits that made it possible were not.

In this sense, Variations V was not merely influenced by Black Mountain College.

It was Black Mountain College performed elsewhere.

Not a reconstruction of the institution, nor an attempt to preserve it, but the continuation of an educational culture that had learned how to survive beyond the place that first nurtured it.

This helps explain why Black Mountain continues to matter. Its legacy cannot be measured solely through celebrated alumni, influential artworks, or historical firsts. Those achievements remain important, but they are consequences rather than causes. More enduring is the demonstration that education can create communities in which curiosity flourishes, dialogue crosses disciplinary boundaries, and sustained relationships become the foundation for discoveries that no individual could have achieved alone.

The campus at Lake Eden no longer functions as a college. The conversations begun there, however, have never entirely ended. Like a performance whose final note continues to resonate long after the musicians have left the stage, Black Mountain survives not as a fixed historical moment but as an ongoing practice of thinking, making, and learning together.

Its buildings belong to history. Its relationships continue to shape the present.



FINALE

Black Mountain College Was a Performance

What, then, was Black Mountain College?

It was a school, certainly. It occupied a campus, granted degrees, balanced budgets, appointed faculty, admitted students, and struggled with the practical realities that confront every educational institution. It was also a community of remarkable artists whose work transformed music, painting, architecture, dance, literature, design, and performance.

Yet none of these descriptions fully explains why the College continues to resonate nearly seventy years after it closed.

Its significance lies not only in what was taught there, nor even in what was created there. It lies in how the institution itself functioned.

Black Mountain College was itself a performance.



Houck Medford, *BMC Studies Building*, 2023

Not a performance in the theatrical sense, but a continually unfolding act of associated living. Its meaning emerged through participation rather than prescription. Like the performances it nurtured, the College existed through relationships: between teachers and students, artists and audiences, work and conversation, discipline and freedom, individual practice and collective inquiry. It was never finished. It was continually being made by the people who inhabited it. Its founders did not attempt to design an educational system capable of producing predictable results. They created structures that admitted freedom. Shared governance, communal labor, artistic rigor, intellectual openness, and everyday conversation formed the framework within which discovery might occur. Learning became less the transmission of established knowledge than the cultivation of circumstances in which something genuinely new could emerge. Perhaps this helps explain why Black Mountain has resisted every attempt to define it completely.

Historians have called it an experimental college, an artistic community, a democratic institution, an American Bauhaus, an incubator of the postwar avant-garde. Each description captures part of its character while leaving something equally essential beyond reach. Black Mountain never settled into a single identity because it continually changed through the people who passed through it. Like a performance, it remained responsive to each new participant.

Late in his life, John Cage described an experimental action as "an action the outcome of which is not foreseen."

The sentence has usually been understood as a definition of his music.

It also illuminates the educational philosophy that Black Mountain had been patiently developing for years.

Not because the College celebrated uncertainty for its own sake, nor because it rejected planning or discipline. On the contrary, it depended upon both. Its founders understood that meaningful discovery requires carefully constructed environments in which freedom can be exercised responsibly. The unexpected does not emerge from the absence of structure. It emerges when structure creates room for genuine inquiry.

That conviction shaped nearly every aspect of life at Black Mountain.

A conversation after dinner became the beginning of an artistic collaboration. A rehearsal became a classroom. A painting influenced the way someone listened. A composer wandered into a dance studio. Students built classrooms alongside their teachers. Work, learning, and daily life continually folded into one another until the institution itself became a living composition whose outcome no one could fully anticipate.

This is why performance offers such a useful way of understanding Black Mountain College. A performance cannot be reduced to the objects it leaves behind. Scores, photographs, costumes, recordings, and archival documents are indispensable, yet each points beyond itself toward relationships that once existed among people gathered in a particular place and time. Museums preserve those traces not because they are the performance itself, but because they remind us that the real work happened between them.

Perhaps the same is true of institutions.

Buildings remain. Archives endure. Artworks enter museum collections. Yet an institution ultimately lives through the relationships it creates, the habits it cultivates, and the questions it teaches people to continue asking long after they have left.

That may be Black Mountain College's most enduring achievement.

It demonstrated that education can be understood not as the efficient delivery of information, but as the creation of a community in which disciplined inquiry, shared responsibility, and creative dialogue make unforeseen discoveries possible.

There are, as Albert Einstein said, no fixed points in space.

Perhaps there are no fixed points in education either.

Black Mountain College reminds us that the most enduring institutions are not those that preserve certainty, but those that continually create opportunities for people to think, work, and discover together.

Its buildings belong to history. Its performance continues.



CODA

A Way of Thinking

The story of Black Mountain College is often told through remarkable individuals and extraordinary works of art. Those achievements deserve the attention they have received. Yet to focus only on what the College produced risks overlooking its more enduring contribution.

Black Mountain was never simply a place where artists learned techniques or launched influential careers. It was a community organized around the belief that education could be lived as a shared creative practice. Knowledge emerged through conversation, collaboration, disciplined work, attentive observation, disagreement, and daily life. Learning was not confined to classrooms or studios but unfolded wherever people remained genuinely open to one another and to the possibility that something unexpected might emerge.

That way of thinking continues to resonate because it addresses questions that remain deeply relevant today.

How might museums become places of active inquiry rather than repositories of completed histories?

How might classrooms encourage discovery rather than simply transmit information? How might artists, educators, scientists, and communities create environments in which independent voices can enter into meaningful dialogue without surrendering their differences? How might institutions build structures that admit freedom?

Black Mountain College offers no blueprint.
Its founders would probably have distrusted one.

The College never sought to create a formula capable of being repeated elsewhere. Every generation confronted different circumstances, different communities, and different questions. What Black Mountain demonstrated was not a model to be copied but an attitude toward learning: one that understood education as an unfinished process sustained through curiosity, responsibility, collaboration, and shared experience.

The performances eventually ended.
The exhibitions closed.
The concerts concluded.
Students graduated.
Faculty departed.
The College itself disappeared.
The questions remained.

They continue wherever artists work across disciplines without predetermined hierarchies. They continue wherever teachers and students become collaborators in the pursuit of understanding. They continue wherever conversation becomes inquiry, inquiry becomes discovery, and discovery opens possibilities no one could have entirely foreseen.

Perhaps this is why Black Mountain continues to feel less like a historical episode than a continuing conversation. Its legacy does not ask us to recreate the College or imitate its achievements. It asks something both simpler and more demanding.

What kinds of communities might we create if we understood education less as the transmission of certainty than as the cultivation of relationships?

What kinds of institutions might emerge if collaboration became a way of thinking rather than simply a method of working?

And what kinds of performances - artistic, educational, and civic might become possible if we were willing to create structures that admit freedom?

That is also the work of Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center. Through exhibitions, publications, performances, artist residencies, and public programs, the Museum preserves the history of the College while continuing the conversations it began. Its purpose is not simply to remember Black Mountain, but to ask what its ideas might still make possible.

The question that opened this essay therefore remains, appropriately, unanswered.

What kind of place makes a work like *Variations V* possible?

Black Mountain College offered one remarkable answer.

The rest is up to us.

