

**“Glyphing” at Black Mountain College:
New Artistic Languages in the work of Anni Albers, John Cage, and Charles Olson**

The legendary Black Mountain College, founded in 1933 near Asheville, North Carolina, cultivated a fascinating and avant-garde community of artists at the forefront of postwar culture in America. While short-lived (the school closed in 1957), the institution’s model of arts-centered education and its distinction as a meeting place for exchange between artists are of everlasting import.

In this thesis, I offer a selective view of Black Mountain’s legacy by writing about three of its prominent artists and their projects, including the German artist Anni Albers, composer John Cage, and poet Charles Olson. Through close readings of several of their works of art I uncover similarities in their creative convictions, focusing on their notions of writing and language to seek alternative means of artistic communication. I do this with particular attention to Black Mountain’s widespread interest in the Mayan Hieroglyph, or “glyphs,” as I often refer to them, to study how these three artists conceptualized and idealized the idea of abstract “language.”

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“What I am trying to get across is that material is a means of communication.”
—Anni Albers

“I have nothing to say and I am saying it and that is poetry as I need it.”
—John Cage

“Whatever you have to say, leave
The roots on, let them
Dangle

And the dirt

Just to make clear
Where they come from.”

—Charles Olson

INTRODUCTION

I. Roots

As a child, my artist mother used to drag me to museums across New York City, a two-hour train ride South of my hometown in Athens, New York. I hated these seemingly endless art excursions until I realized that I was creative. Then I started paying attention.

In my dream life I would have moved on to attend Black Mountain College, home one of America's most alluring artistic histories, existent between 1933-1957 near Asheville, North Carolina. Instead, my interests in creative writing, fine art, and dance at Mount Holyoke led me to a professor in the English Department, Christopher Benfey, and his compelling family memoir. *Red Brick, Black Mountain, White Clay: Reflections on Art, Family, and Survival*, published in 2012, is a mix of memoir, biography, cultural history, and art history. The work moves through Benfey's mother's ancestry, a North Carolina world of brickmakers and bricklayers, then wanders across the ocean to tell the story of his father's German lineage. Section two is what hooked me: the stories of his great aunt and uncle, the great Bauhaus Modernists Anni and Josef Albers, who fled Nazi Germany for the rolling Blue Ridge mountains of Black Mountain College.

The institution's storied past deserves far more space than I can afford in this introduction, but what I want to communicate most is its fascinating history of collaboration between legendary avant-garde artists. Founded in 1933 by scholar John Andrew Rice and engineer Theodore Dreier, the radical institution's style of arts-centered education cultivated an experimental community of artists at the forefront of postwar culture in America. (I like writer

Carol Kino's labeling of it as a kind of "Shangri-La for avant-garde art.")¹ First came Josef Albers, who began directing the institution's art program, his wife, Anni, who taught weaving, and Bauhaus figures who landed there in a similarly hasty retreat from Germany: architect Walter Gropius, and artists and designers Xanti Schawinsky and Oskar Schlemmer. Later emerged the postmodern wave for which the school is most lionized: Robert Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly, Ruth Asawa, Elaine and Willem de Kooning, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Jacob Lawrence, Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Shoji Hamada, Buckminster Fuller, Aaron Siskind, and Franz Kline, among many others.

Modeling itself after the progressive theories of John Dewey's participatory education methodology, AKA "learning by doing," the college strived to maintain a sense of community in which education completely permeated life.² Faculty and students worked and ate with each other on campus, and students were as much valued for their creative contributions to the community as their professors. Students were also active in the school's decision-making processes and general administration, which decided to forgo a common curriculum, formal grading, and regular exam systems.³ It was even up to students when they wanted to graduate (many never did, since most students left after just a couple years, or never wanted to complete the school's erratic, ad hoc exit examination).⁴

There were obstacles, of course. Ridden by the depression and war-era setbacks, severe and constant financial difficulties slammed the institution, which owed its existence to wealthy patrons.⁵ At the college's start in 1933, professors were given room and board, but no salary—

¹ Carol Kino, "In the Spirit of Black Mountain College, an Avant-Garde Incubator," The New York Times, 16 March 2015.

² Duberman, Martin B. Black Mountain; An Exploration In Community, (New York: Dutton, 1972) 25.

³ Dubmeran 34-35.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Dubmeran 29.

whatever staff was granted in the future remained modest, and the college's personnel were always vulnerable to cuts.⁶ In tangent with conflicting leadership personalities, the pressure to support and shape its tiny community (usually only around sixty people) fostered a passionate and often intense environment. And while Black Mountain's generally progressive social stance can be thought of as prefiguring the liberal enlightenment of 1960's counter-culture, it was still plagued by gender bias and Southern racial tensions (the heartbeat of its very campus was an antebellum-style hall named after Robert E. Lee).

A lot of what I've gauged about Black Mountain's atmosphere and creative drive came from Martin Duberman's fabulous, definitive history of the school, *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community*. I spent last summer reading it on the subway back and forth to work from Brooklyn, usually overheated and crowded as I starred the margins in blue. One passage from page 355—by this page, it must have been July—reasons out the college's widespread experimental nature in a helpful way:

There was a search on simultaneous fronts for the personal voice, for the immediate impulse and its energy, for the recognition of (even surrender to) process, to the elements of randomness, whimsy, play, self-sabotage. Those elements are hardly new in the arts, but had recently gone either unrecognized or been dismissed as peripheral . . . The effort to open up experience and expression meant learning new languages—and also, rediscovering some of the predecessors who had done comparable excavations.⁷

Yes, it was this collaborative drive to find new artistic *languages* that united this tumultuous, visionary place. This makes me think about a review in *The New York Times* of Benfey's book,

⁶ Duberman 21.

⁷ Ibid., 355.

including a quote about Benfey's repeated motifs of exile, water, and other themes in his work that I resonated with: "Surely the experience of art is about recognizing and exploring patterns."⁸ For as much as Black Mountain was made up of a wild, diverging group of characters, I found among them three artists whose audacity led me to group them together: Benfey's great aunt Anni Albers, composer John Cage, and poet Charles Olson.

II. Glyphs and "Glyphing"

What does "glyphing" mean? Let's start with its nominal form, "glyph," an abbreviated version of "hieroglyph." According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a "glyph" or "hieroglyph" is "a sculptured mark or symbol, or a figure of some object, as a tree, animal, etc., standing for a word (or, afterwards, in some cases, a syllable or sound)."⁹ Now, what does this have to do with Anni Albers, John Cage, or Charles Olson? Hieroglyphs, and Mayan Hieroglyphs in particular, were a widespread interest at Black Mountain among students and teachers alike, likely initiated by the Alberses' frequent trips to South America and Mexico during the 1930's and their exposure to art and culture there. Remarking on the glyphs and nonlinguistic formations she discerned in ancient Andean and Mayan textiles, Anni once wrote:

We easily forget the amazing discipline of thinking that man had already achieved four thousand years ago. Wherever meaning has to be conveyed by form alone, where for instance, no written language exists to impart descriptively such

⁸ Adam Goodheart, "The Shape of Things to Come: 'Red Brick, Black Mountain, White Clay,' by Christopher Benfey," *The New York Times*, 20 April 2015.

⁹ "Hieroglyph," Def. 1a, *The Oxford English Dictionary Online*, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 5 April 2016, <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/86804#eid1583466>>.

meaning, we find a vigor in this direct, formative communication often surpassing that of cultures that have other, additional means of transmitting information.¹⁰

Despite the fact that real progress in deciphering Mayan hieroglyphs did not emerge until the 1950s,¹¹ Black Mountain individuals were interested, mostly, in the notion of “the glyph’s fluency as both text and image.”¹² Like poetry itself, glyphs can represent words and ideas in an abstract, adjustable style—each may be represented in varying visual and syllabic combinations (see figure 1, example of Mayan glyphs). “Glyphs” can be thought of in the general pool of ideograms (the OED calls these symbolic representations or visual metaphors), like a handicap sign in a parking lot, a logo without text, or roman numerals.¹³ As Daniel Belgrad wrote of the (generally) postwar, avant-garde fascination with these kinds of visual sign-symbols in art, “As a means of communication rooted in sensory experience and materiality, ideograms were thought to structure experience differently than the abstractions of modern language.”¹⁴

“Glyphing,” the verb, represents something a little more abstract. I first heard the term coined by Richard Colton, a former member of Twyla Tharp dance, at The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston during an introduction to a performance I’ll describe later. He was using this invented verb, I think, to describe the general spirit involving the glyph’s use at Black Mountain: in general, I think it represents the creative act of applying the glyph or embodying glyphs in creative work.

¹⁰ Helen Molesworth, “Imaginary Landscape,” *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College, 1933-1957*, (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2015) 33.

¹¹ Kate Erin Dempsy, “Weaving Correspondence,” *Black Mountain Studies Journal* 2.

¹² Ruth Erikson, “Between Media: The Glyph Exchange,” *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College, 1933-1957*, (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2015) 330.

¹³ “Ideogram,” Def. 2, *The Oxford English Dictionary Online*, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 5 April 2016 <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/91006?redirectedFrom=ideogram#eid>>.

¹⁴ Daniel Belgrad, *The Culture Of Spontaneity: Improvisation And The Arts In Postwar America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 78.

In an effort to touch on my interest in language and writing in this exploratory paper, I use the glyph as my framework. I do this because the glyph offers a way to reference language and writing both metaphorically and literally. For each artist that I study in this paper, that is, I argue how the glyph might be thought of as an effort to articulate a new artistic language that intentionally avoids conventional forms. For Albers, this meant representing glyphs rather than alphabetic text in her work *Ancient Writing*, a hanging weaving about writing. For John Cage, this meant implementing theorist Antonin Artaud's concepts of a gestural "language in space" and abandoning written script in his famous performance piece *Theater Piece No. 1*. For Charles Olson, this meant intuitively constructing poetry "by field" and without traditional versification.

I do three things in this paper, a combination of research, analysis, and theoretical writing. First, I give a taste of Black Mountain's legacy by writing about three of its most prominent artists and their projects. Second, I identify parallels in these artists' creative ideologies through close readings of their work. Third, I use notions of writing and language to deconstruct the works that I study, commenting on how writing and language influenced each artist. The artists and works I have chosen here represent, roughly, the creative areas of study that have most impacted my life (fine art, performance, and poetry); aside from this idea, I simply find Albers, Cage, and Olson emblematic of what made Black Mountain's creative atmosphere fascinating.

Chapter one studies the German weaver Anni Albers' artistic style as influenced by the artist Paul Klee and Andean weavings. In unpacking how she uses grid structures and symbols to convey meaning without a definitive narrative, I argue how Albers renders messages about visual language, and by analogy textual language, in her work *Ancient Writing*. In chapter two, I study

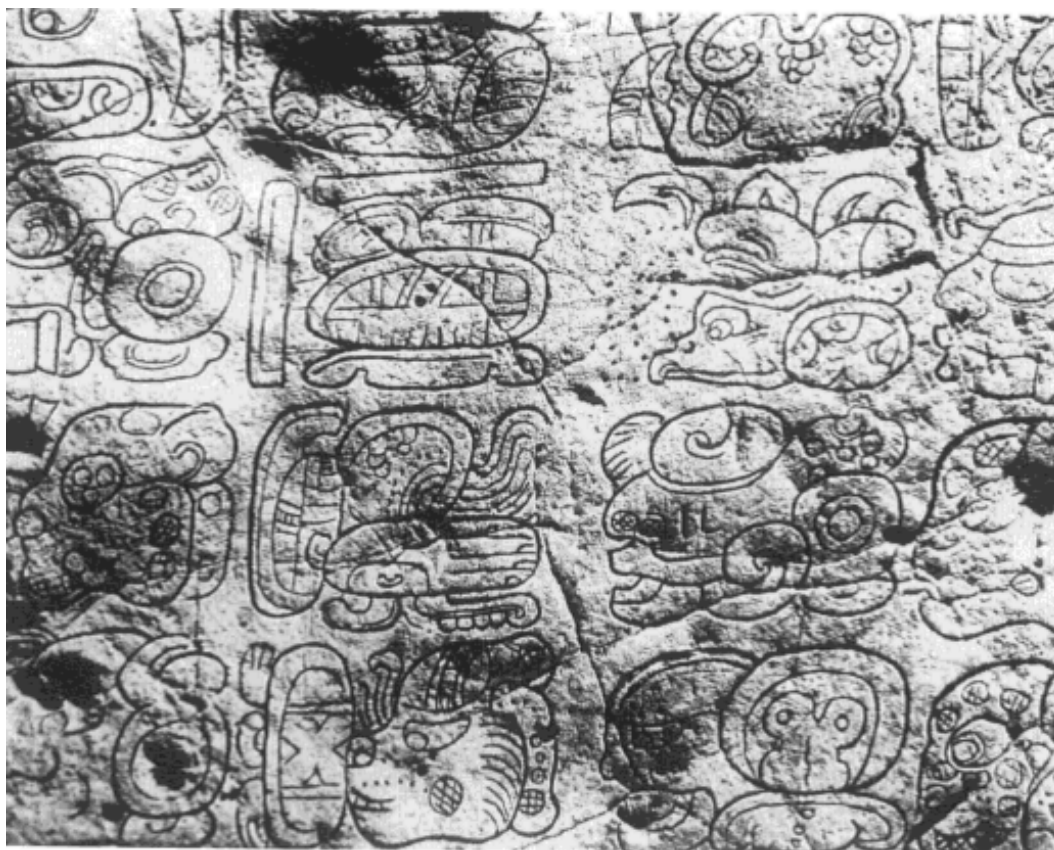


Fig. 1 Maya glyphs

John Cage's performance piece *Theater Piece No. 1*, the most acclaimed event in Black Mountain's history. In my analysis of the performance I focus on Cage's rejection of speech in theater and how he envisions a theoretical language through gesture, intuition, and simultaneity, with theoretical groundings in the French poet and playwright Antonin Artaud's work *The Theater and its Double*, translated by Black Mountain artist M.C. Richards. In chapter three, I review Charles Olson's monumental essay on poetics, "Projective Verse," to study a poem from his collection of letters and journal entries, *Mayan Letters*, and also his poem *Glyph*. From there I write about his participation in Black Mountain's famed "Glyph Exchange," and how The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston reimaged this historical collaboration.

CHAPTER ONE: Anni Albers: Materiality as Communication

I. Beginnings

“Beginnings are usually more interesting than elaborations and endings. Beginning means exploration, selection, development, a potent vitality not yet limited, not circumscribed by the tried and the traditional. For those of us concerned in our work with the adventure of search, going back to beginnings is seeing ourselves mirrored in others’ work, not in the result but in the process.”

-Anni Albers, *On Weaving*¹⁵

In characterizing the avant-garde drift at Black Mountain, biographer Martin Duberman points out that artistic tendencies like impulse, experimentation, and the exhibition of materiality and process in new works had been largely dismissed by formalist criticism of the period, which “emphasized product, the order brought out of ‘chaos,’” the fidelity to established forms—the ‘statement,’ not the struggle that produced it.”¹⁶ In general, avant-garde and formalist art and ideology shared a similar deliberateness in their opposing intentions—that is, either to maintain tradition or to move beyond the past and rework tradition. In their quest to define new ideologies, however, some Black Mountain artists willingly embraced the past in their work. One figure in this group was the German weaver Anni Albers.

Why begin with Anni? For one, her weavings—large, abstract, tapestry-like works—broke ground early in the art world. Employing unconventional materials (think cellophane and jute) and constructions (interlacing, twining, weaving) in visually compelling forms, Albers conjured textiles as a medium for modern art. She became integral at Black Mountain with the influence of this work, initiating weaving as among the most instrumental divisions at the college

¹⁵ Anni Albers, *On Weaving*, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1974) 52.

¹⁶ Duberman 335.

and inspiring the likes of Robert Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly, and Ruth Asawa. Anni was also instantaneously foundational in the school's administration for her role in translating her husband Josef Albers' German, making possible his position as rector and Professor of Art at the college. The more important story here, however, is the genius and mystery of her work during her time at Black Mountain as Assistant Professor of Art until 1949, a position she used to promulgate Bauhaus pedagogy and amass new creative material that greatly inspired the community's artistic spirit. Her work communicates compelling messages about writing and language, and offers sensitive thought about visual and metaphysical communications between artist and viewer. In this framework it is worthwhile to consider Anni as not only a fine artist, but a writer.

II. Foundations: Paul Klee and the Grid

Albers' way began with painting and discontent. Born in 1899 in a prosperous Berlin household, Albers studied with the German impressionist Martin Brandenburg in her native city and at the School of Arts and Crafts in Hamburg, testing her aspirations to become a painter. It was around the time of her 1922 arrival at Walter Gropius' famous school of design in Weimar, the Bauhaus, when she realized the need to alter her vision: "I felt that the tremendous freedom of the painter was scaring me and I was looking for some way to find my way a little more securely," the artist said in a 1968 interview.¹⁷ At twenty-three years old, she fell into the Bauhaus weaving workshop, a creatively abundant atmosphere for Albers—she described the beginnings of the workshop as experimental, with early improvisational textiles "striking in their newness of conception in regard to use in color and compositional elements—objects of often

¹⁷ Sevim Fesci, Oral history interview with Anni Albers, July 5, 1968. (Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution).

quite barbaric beauty.”¹⁸ Gradually, utilitarianism entered the workshop’s consciousness, bringing heightened awareness to the physicality and demand of material, and more focused training in the mechanics of weaving.¹⁹ Albers seemed to consider both parts of the workshop’s developmental stages, the experimental and material-driven, and the process-driven, in her early work. Exhibiting unparalleled deftness at the loom and with textiles, as a student she created markedly geometric, minimalist compositions evoking the De Stijl style (see fig. 2, her glorious work *Black White Red* from 1926).

While Albers has cited the influence of Gunta Stölzl in these early creations, other “Meister” (master) teachers held strong impact—it was Paul Klee, out of a group of influential artists like Johannes Itten, Vassily Kandinsky, and László Moholy-Nagy, who became Albers’ great inspiration.²⁰ The Swiss-German painter’s theoretical writings on structure and composition were of great import to the Bauhaus weaving community; for Albers, Klee’s fixation on geometric forms, pattern, and rhythm made direct commentary on the grid formations of her loom structures.²¹ “I find that [Klee] probably had...influence on my work and my thinking by just looking at what he did with a line or a dot or a brush stroke, and I tried in a way to find my way in my own material and my own craft discipline,” she once said.²² His ideas laid the groundwork for Albers’ structured, orderly approach to textile production, which heightened Albers’ attention to the synergy between construction and pattern that would become integral to her own methodology.

Virginia Gardener Troy records a fitting entry from Klee’s 1922 lecture notes to describe

¹⁸ Anni Albers, *Selected Writings On Design*, (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2000) 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁰ Virginia Gardener Troy, *Anni Albers and Ancient American Textiles*, (Burlington: Ashgate, 2002) 23.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Virginia Gardener Troy, “Thread as Text: The Woven Work of Anni Albers,” *Anni Albers*, (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1999) 31.

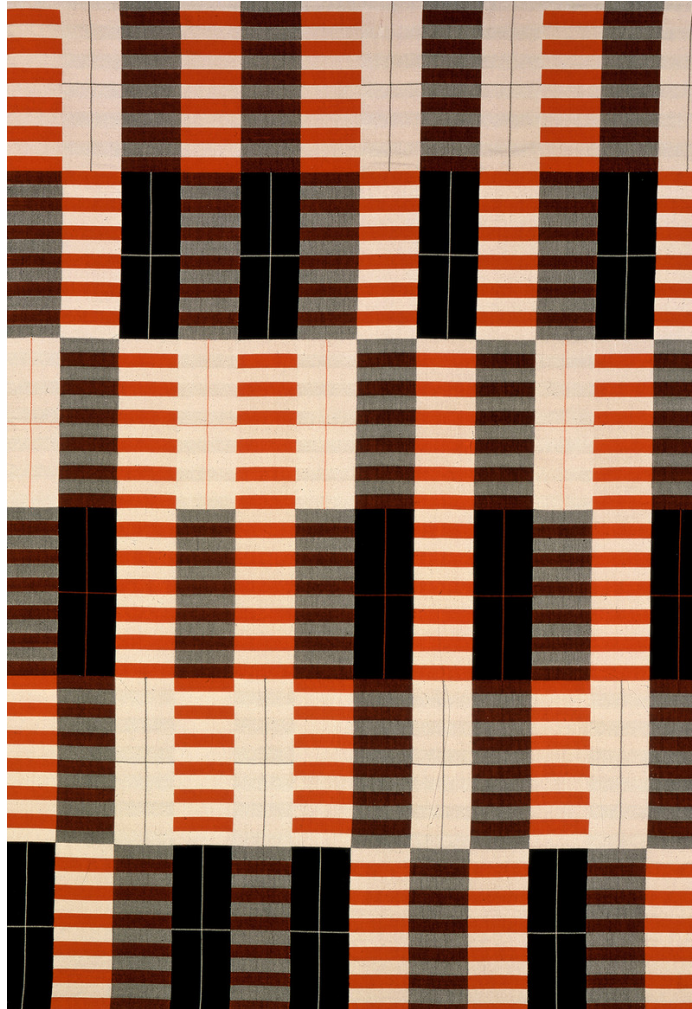


Fig. 2 Anni Albers, *Black White Red*, 1926

this attention to compositional structure: “Composition at its most ‘primitive’ and ‘pure’ occurs through the repetition of a single line or unit in a parallel sequence . . . the greater the unit is manipulated through multiplication, division, under and overlapping, and displacement, the more complex and dynamic the producing variations of the checkerboard, and generating systems and structures within a grid format.”²³ One of Klee’s works from 1927, rendered in the middle of a two-year period between 1927 and 1929 when Klee was teaching theory in the Bauhaus weaving workshop, shows how his works and teachings once became specific to weaving.²⁴ *Beride* (*Wasserstadt*), or *Beride* (*Town by the Sea*) (fig. 3), a series of penned geometric patterns on paper blanketed by horizontal lines, demonstrates his preoccupation with thread-like marks and units on a grid.²⁵ While shapes and lines diverge from its underlying horizontal bars, each mark correlates somehow with its structure, as though adhering to one long weft system.

A spray of dots above a central, plant-like shape, for instance, rests orderly on lines like music notes; in the bottom right-hand corner, a shape suggesting a body displays a rush of scattered pattern still adhering to the points and lines moving across the work. Albers’ wall hanging *Black White Red*, pictured on the previous page, manifests this layering, mirroring, and repetition. Arranged in six rows of twelve thin rectangles, the work recalls something like paper folded and pressed repetitively into an accordion. Each row shows great variation in pattern, color, and shading that at first seem disparate, but repeat across the weaving. While this placement allows places for the eye to pause and explore, it also induces an overall-ness that makes the eye jump around—the sensation reminds me of Rosalind Krauss’ essay “Grids,” in which she studies how grids extend into or compress space:

²³ Troy, *Anni Albers and Ancient American Textiles* 85.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

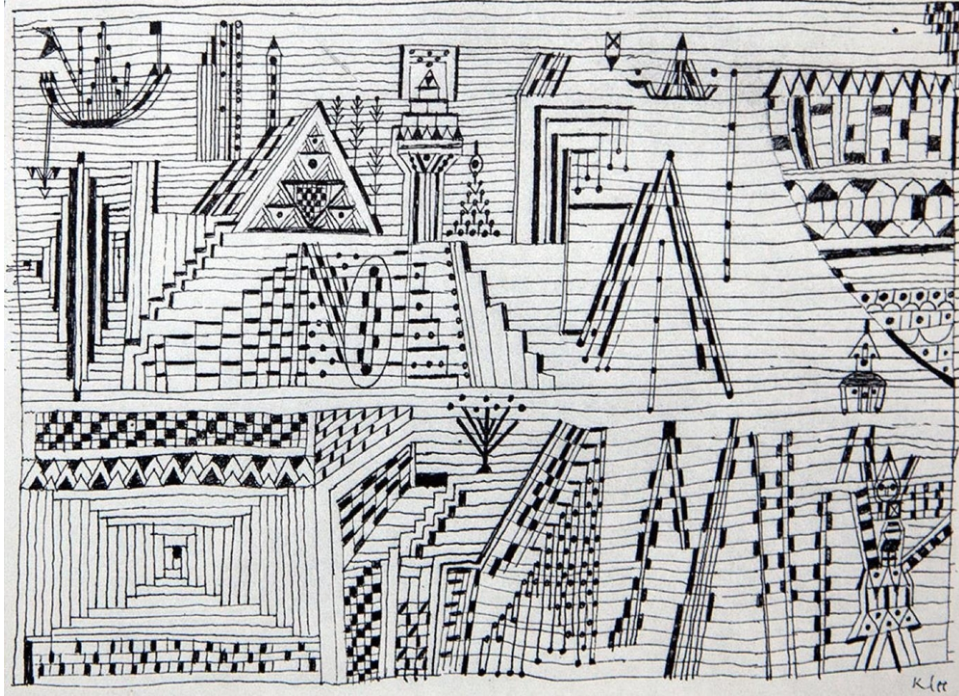


Fig. 3 Paul Klee, *Beride (Wasserstadt)*, 1927

I have witnessed and participated in arguments about whether the grid portends the centrifugal or centripetal existence of the work of art. Logically speaking, the grid extends, in all directions, to infinity. Any boundaries imposed upon it by a given painting or sculpture can only be seen—according to this logic—as arbitrary. By virtue of the grid, the given work of art is presented as a mere fragment, a tiny piece arbitrarily cropped from an infinitely larger fabric. Thus the grid operates from the work of art outward, compelling our acknowledgement of a world beyond the frame. This is the centrifugal reading. The centripetal one works, naturally enough, from the outer limits of the aesthetic object inward. The grid is, in relation to this reading a re-presentation of everything that separates the work of art from the world, from ambient space and from other objects.²⁶

Albers' repetitious grid does not mandate what the eyes see, or again, how the eyes should travel, but suggests multiple ways of seeing—it makes us see *differently*. A famous quote from Klee supports this idea: “Art does not reproduce the visible but makes visible.”²⁷

In a 1999 review for a show at Matthew Marks Gallery in New York, my favorite art critic Roberta Smith deems a similar-looking Albers work, *Black White Gray* from 1927 “already full of affinities to the work of Paul Klee, . . . completely unabstract—it suggests a baby blanket,” she writes, and “its contrasting blocks of gray, some of them embroidered with plus signs, begin to read as the windows of a house or a cemetery full of crosses.”²⁸ It's tempting to assign this deliciously sinister symbolism to *Black White Red*, too, though I'd also like to consider the possibility of its ordered, netted composition as the start and end of its subject

²⁶ Rosalind Krauss, “Grids,” *October* 9 (1979): 61.

²⁷ John Elderfield, “Old Art Terms # 5: Making Visible,” *Artsy*, 2013, 6 March 2015 <<https://www.artsy.net/article/johnelderfield-old-art-terms-number-5-making-visible>>.

²⁸ Roberta Smith, “Art in Review; Anni Albers, Robert Beck, Cady Noland, Joan Semmel, Nancy Shaver,” *The New York Times* 6 August 1999.

matter. The work's "most 'primitive' and 'pure'" geometric composition, as Klee might label it, was something new in Modernism that worked to evade narrative or symbolic meaning. As Krauss defines it in "Grids," the grid was a defiantly secularized, emotionless token of modern art that, in defiance of art as home to religious feeling, worked well to disguise underlying meaning:

In the early part of [the 20th] century there began to appear, first in France and then in Russia and in Holland, a structure that has remained emblematic of the modernist ambition within the visual arts ever since. Surfacing in pre-War cubist painting and subsequently becoming ever more stringent and manifest, the grid announces, among other things, modern art's will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse.²⁹

Albers' clear lack of narrative in *Black White Red* reflects this idea and characterizes her early Bauhaus work. At the same time, however, Albers was interested in the way her work could communicate a compelling message. While lacking any notable "text" or story, Troy argues that the underlying grid structure of something like *Black White Red* relates an important idea about language, the act of reading itself:

The geometric patterns that she created within a grid format are essentially self-referential in that they are inherent to the work's structure; at the same time they suggest both the image and the idea of text. The viewer scans the images for clues to a code, and by doing so becomes engaged in a perceptual activity not unlike that of reading.³⁰

²⁹ Krauss 51-52.

³⁰ Troy, "Thread as Text: The Woven Work of Anni Albers" 30.

III. Toward the Glyph: Visual Sign Language and Ancient Handicraft

I'd like to return to Klee's *Beride (Town by the Sea)* with a focus on its more figurative and emblematic figures, most noticeably in the upper left and lower right registers of the work. Because these evocative, heavily patterned shapes are not fixed to any clearly definitive meaning, they have the power to represent multiple things at once. In abandoning the kind of traditional, straightforward narrative that Krauss references, these shapes are not reproductions of objects, but constructions open to interpretation ("Art does not reproduce what we see. It makes us see."). The boat-like shape on the left, for instance, could be thought of as abstractly representing not just a boat, but travel, speed, water, et cetera. Troy writes:

From Klee Albers would have learned that an abstract symbol, such as an arrow, can be read within the context of a pictorial sign language whereby a sign can refer to an object (arrow) or an idea (movement) . . . Klee used pictographic signs such as arrows in his art, as well as actual calligraphy inscribed letters and numbers. He often arranged these marks and abstract symbols within a stratified format, thereby increasing the allusion both to writing itself and to the overall image of a text, two concerns that Albers was to deal with.³¹

While Troy designates these referential shapes as signs, symbols, and pictographs (a pictorial symbol for a word or phrase), I also call these glyphs because of their shared function as a kind of visual sign language.

This semiotic material was something that captivated Albers, who was invested in the notion of visual language. Aside from finding inspiration having to do with this in Klee's work, Albers found another major example in the imaginative, ancient handicraft of Andean weavers.

³¹ Troy, Anni Albers and Ancient American Textiles 120-121.

Major German-sponsored archeological sites were abundant in Peru at the time Anni was at the Bauhaus, and museums, most noticeably the Berlin Museum für Völkerkunde, were in effect flooded with Andean art; it's likely that this influx inspired Klee, and definitely Anni.³² Albers “was amazed that Andean culture seems to have no written language, and she concluded that the textile medium itself ‘was their language...their way of speaking about the world.’”³³

Once she left the Bauhaus, Albers' own work transformed upon her discovery of a new formative inspiration: starting in the 1930's, Anni made at least seven trips to Mexico and South America with Josef during her time at Black Mountain, where she learned about and collected Mesoamerican and Andean art.³⁴ Hailing ancient Peruvians as the “greatest culture in the history of textiles,” Anni came to admire and aspire to the technical finesse of Andean weavers. Certain discovered design structures and methodologies inspired her to experiment in her work and teaching.³⁵ Her use of the backstrap loom, a practice common in indigenous communities throughout Bolivia, Mexico, and Peru involving a strap across the weaver's back to control the direction of the thread, for example, brought into play increased physicality and possibility for improvisation with color and texture in her weavings.³⁶ The simplicity of the loom (a construction of only a few strategically placed rods supporting the weft, or the crosswise threads on a loom) leaves no obstruction between the artist and her creation. This notion, the *direct* translation of thought onto material—“what I am trying to get across is that material is a means of communication,” Albers writes—reinforces and builds on Albers' Klee-inspired ideology

³² Ibid., 26-27.

³³ Troy, “Thread as Text: The Woven Work of Anni Albers” 31.

³⁴ Helen Molesworth, “Imaginary Landscape,” *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College, 1933-1957*, (New Haven: London: Yale University Press, 2015) 33.

³⁵ Dempsey, “Weaving Correspondence.”

³⁶ Troy, “Thread as Text: The Woven Work of Anni Albers” 31.

about the *direct* interplay between structure and design.³⁷ Indeed, this order, this claim of the material, this flexibility of the loom, allowed for a new means of artistic language.

Always interested in the mark of the hand, Albers also embraced the Andean technique of the floating weft, in which extra thread, sown above a woven surface, “floats” to resemble something like a drawn or written line.³⁸ As Albers said of Andean art, “Along with cave paintings, threads were among the earliest transmitters of meaning.”³⁹ This new attention to expressive, almost calligraphic mark-making translated to the great interest Albers found for herself in Pre-Columbian culture, something I have begun to touch on: Maya hieroglyphs.

IV. Ancient Writing: Glyph and Material

Albers’ fascination with the glyph may be accordingly pointed to in one of the first “hangings” she makes in the United States, *Ancient Writing*, from 1936 (fig. 4). Conjuring the idea of a visual language, Albers weaves geometric shapes across a composite of dark cotton, rayon, and linen as though to render words on a page; subtle horizontal stripes of the weave, like lined paper, almost, work to hold the shapes, which I’d like to think of as *text*, in place. Broad strips of white at the weaving’s borders, perhaps referencing margins, work to the same degree. At the same time, the text drifts in no explicit pattern across its surface, and, being a color lighter than the black background, seems to drift toward the viewer. There is further tension in the way the shapes fix and release themselves in their spacing and interactions: pauses, like space for

³⁷ Albers, *Selected Writings On Design*, 10.

³⁸ Troy, “Thread as Text: The Woven Work of Anni Albers” 31.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.



Fig. 4 Anni Albers, *Ancient Writing*, 1936

thought, rest between the shapes in some areas, while surges of energy between others placed closely to one another create a dialogue.

The nature of this dialogue, and the communicative essence of this piece in general, does not easily lend itself to one category of meaning. Its mix of straightforward and metaphorical components, rather, both offers and rejects the idea that “ancient writing” makes up the central subject of this weaving—the title indeed alludes to the glyph, and that must mean the geometric shapes, or text, in my view, are to some capacity visual translations of the glyph. But Albers was more interested in what glyphs could symbolize (this, I think, is the real subject of *Ancient Writing*) rather than what they actually represented: “considering Anni’s preoccupation with the visual character of language it is more likely that she...was drawn to the ancient languages’ indecipherability,” Kate Erin Dempsey writes in an article for the journal *Black Mountain College Studies*.⁴⁰ That word—indecipherability—nearly contradicts Albers’ insistence of her glyphs as legitimate means of communication. So how is something indecipherable, or not able to be understood, a mechanism to garner meaning? The answer must lie in the notion that Albers references another meaning of language through glyphs. In her essay *Art—A Constant*, she writes:

A distinction is necessary, to any artistic end, between the medium serving a purpose outside itself and the medium in its own right as for instance words used for reporting vs. words used in poetry. Some media have to be released from their representative meaning to make them fit an artistic purpose. Words and gestures, as an example, are binary in that sense. As they are not clearly recognized in their specific category as elements of form, they are often chosen as means by those

⁴⁰ Dempsey, “Weaving Correspondence.”

who feel same vague urge for expression. 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.⁴¹

Let's unpack this poetry. It's not enough to acknowledge Albers' glyphs in *Ancient Writing* as something only metaphorically opposite of written language. It should be considered what *kind* of metaphor Albers touches on through them, and through that kind of metaphor, what kind of language. To put it another way, what does "metaphorical" language specifically mean in the context of Albers' work? Her psychology of language, it seems, is not logical, but, rather, associative and metaphorical.⁴² That is, because Albers is able to communicate her creative subjectivity directly onto the material of the weave, her viewer intakes this through the filter of her own subjective eye and experience. This translation functions as a kind of emotional or metaphysical exchange.⁴³ Albers' use of the glyph becomes, then, something at once metaphorical and direct: direct, again, in her distinct reference to it, and its inspiration on her, but metaphorical in the way she places value on its lack of recognizable meaning. Albers' glyph "is neither purely abstract nor purely representational"—"it is charged with inborn energy, a potential, and it has provocative but ambiguous significance."⁴⁴

As in *Black White Red*, the semiotic references (the text) that drift across *Ancient Writing* also make direct reference to the linear patterns of both its surface and interior structure. The motifs in *Ancient Writing*, while different in shape, size, and placement, still reference something sequential in their shared geometric nature. The grid format of the weaving, while undeviating in its repeated and exact directions of thread, also allows for tension and expression through its

⁴¹ Albers, *Selected Writings On Design* 14.

⁴² Belgrad 82.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

variation in pattern and density. Different or more compact fills in the text, for instance, take on shapes like crosses, checks and dots, resulting in diverse tactile qualities—these, Albers writes, produce “tactile-textile illusions” that draw attention to both form and its haptic consequences.⁴⁵

She explains:

The fact that warp and weft appear on the surface in equal amounts and intersect visibly leads to the use of contrasting materials and colors for them, thereby underlining the original structure of the weave. Emphasizing this structure still further are stripes in either warp or filling and, one step further, checked effects.⁴⁶

In this appeal to texture through form, I think, emerges another idea again rooted in the idea of material as communication, this time from curator Helen Molesworth:

When the senses become unhooked from a medium, the mind and the body find new ways of communicating sensory information . . . the engagement of all the senses appears to lead to a kind of reciprocity . . . this maneuver debunks the Cartesian vision of the aesthetic self that holds the visual as supreme over the other senses.”⁴⁷

It seems Albers was sensitive to this idea: “For ability to form materials presupposes responsiveness toward the material, a flexibility of reaction, and this flexibility is one of the factors we will need for times to come,” she wrote in an article about Black Mountain’s textile production.⁴⁸

One striking element of *Ancient Writing* is the way it forwardly exposes its principle grid structure while at the same time drawing the eye away from it with this mentioned textural force.

⁴⁵ Albers *Selected Writings On Design* 72.

⁴⁶ Anni Albers, *On Weaving* 39.

⁴⁷ Molesworth 71.

⁴⁸ Anni Albers, “Handweaving Today: Textile Work at Black Mountain College.” *The Josef & Anni Albers Foundation*, 6 January 2016 <<http://www.albersfoundation.org/teaching/anni-albers/texts/#tab0>>.

Though strictly geometric in pattern, the hanging itself waves organically, and has a pleasing, soft compactness about it that provokes the sense of touch. This eases the rigidity of its latticed order, something that becomes most apparent when viewed up close to the piece. I was lucky to have this experience during a January visit to the Smithsonian American Art Museum's off-site storage facility in Maryland. Housed in a nondescript, brutalist concrete building, *Ancient Writing* sits there in a rack among roughly 10,000 works of art. When I walked into the site, the paintings & sculpture collections manager had rolled out the hanging on a large wooden table, which felt oddly casual for how much I had been thinking about the work. Someone comes to see the piece once a year, he told me.

But when he shone a bright lamp on the fabric, it gained a brilliant quality again—in the light I could see little patches of glittery thread in the weaving that I hadn't noticed before. Against their black composite, these patches show themselves clearly only at certain angles and sometimes disappear completely when viewed straight on. I wondered what this meant for Albers, who embedded definite, bright shapes beside them—despite the contrast, however, the subtle continuity of the grid linked the shapes and fills. “Material form becomes meaningful form through design, that is, through considered relationships. And this meaningful form can become the carrier of a meaning that takes us beyond what we think of as immediate reality,” Albers once wrote.⁴⁹ This suggests something similar to an idea again from Krauss' essay “Grids,” in which she argues that the minimalist quality of the grid works well to disguise underlying meaning, if it has any. In a sense Albers tries to defy meaning in *Ancient Writing* by employing the non-narrative grid, while simultaneously upholding meaning through her glyph-like text. But despite Albers' clear delineation of the glyphs in *Ancient Writing* (through

⁴⁹ Anni Albers, Selected Writings on Design, 68.

variation in color and pattern), they are, again, because of their geometric nature, extensions of the weaving's grid, fixed to its repetitious structure. As Krauss writes:

In the cultist space of modern art, the grid serves not only as emblem but also as myth. For like all myths, it deals with paradox or contradiction not by dissolving the paradox or resolving the contradiction, but by covering them over so that they seem (but only seem) to go away. The grid's mythic power is that it makes us able to think we are dealing with materialism (or sometimes science, or logic) while at the same time it provides us with a release into belief (or illusion, or fiction).⁵⁰

Whether Albers's work disguises or "covers" meaning through its own abstraction, or whether its meaning could ever be so straightforward as to reveal itself anyway, remains open to question.

What can be sure, however, is her manipulation of the glyph to dig into questions of the anti-narrative, and how form and "meaning" are bound up in each other. And, more in relation to what Krauss has to say, the largely associative, but at the same time restrictive capabilities of this form. It will be this new kind of abstract, compelling experimentation that links Albers to her postwar counterparts at Black Mountain.

⁵⁰ Krauss 54.

CHAPTER TWO: John Cage's Poetry of Space

I. "Nothing," says John Cage

Just as Anni Albers sought an alternative language through tactile and structural signals in her weavings, the American composer John Cage was a Black Mountain radical who promoted alternative means of artistic communication. The shift in this paper from craft to performance reveals an important trend in the mid-century American avant-garde: perhaps ironic in this conversation bound up in language was these artists' shared obsession with rejecting it (in its conventional sense, at least). Cage, the paradigm here, was famous for promulgating silence as an art form, often using the word "nothing" to describe his creative intentions: "nothing is accomplished by writing a piece of music / nothing is accomplished by hearing a piece of music / nothing is accomplished by playing a piece of music / our ears are now in excellent condition," he wrote in *Silence*, his provocative book of essays and lectures.⁵¹ In the same tune, Cage reflected how "every something is an echo of nothing."⁵²

"What is this nothing that poetry says and that every something echoes?" music critic Kyle Gann poses in his introduction to *Silence*.⁵³ The answer is inexplicable, and not necessarily meant to be defined, though it's helpful to consider what Cage suggested by introducing the word. Cage's "Nothing," I think, meant redefinition and defiance, meant defying Western musical conventions and definitions of acceptable or admirable sound. "Nothing" meant experimenting with new "instruments" (tape recorders, bathtubs) in pursuit of a new musical

⁵¹ John Cage, *Silence: Lectures And Writings*, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1961) 32.

⁵² Kyle Gann, "Foreword to 50th Anniversary Edition," *Silence: Lectures And Writings*, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1961) 18.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 18.

language. “Nothing” meant freeing work of subjectivity and even logic. The word signified a new, universal poetry that was about embracing chance and the beat of everyday life.

Beginning in 1951, Cage gave rise to these ideas through his use of the *I-Ching*⁵⁴ to make chance compositions that eclipsed decision-making: “My work became an exploration of the non-intention. To carry it faithfully I have developed a complicated composing means using I-Ching chance operations making my responsibility that of asking questions instead of making choices,” he wrote.⁵⁵ A notorious embodiment of this ideology was Cage’s 1952 opus “4’33,” a four-minute and 33-second-long piece during which no music is played. Its three sections (with durations of thirty-three seconds, two minutes and forty seconds, and one minute and twenty seconds) were determined using the *I-Ching*, and marked by a performer closing and opening a piano lid.⁵⁶ As the musician gazes at a stopwatch, he flicks through the pages of the “score.”⁵⁷ Meanwhile, the audience listens to the everyday sounds that happen to pass through the performance space—the faraway hum of the air conditioning, a cough, an audience member’s shift in her seat.⁵⁸

Cage provoked fascinating questions and debates about his embrace of silence, of “nothing,” in compositions like this. For the purpose of this essay, I consider these similar principles in the context of his involvement with theater at Black Mountain. Similar to his musical ideology concerning silence, Cage’s abandonment of script and narrative—finding “silence” in his rejection of language—marked a fascinating and profound change in the history of performance in America. Like Anni Albers, Cage wanted to transcend comprehension in his

⁵⁴ The ancient Chinese divination text. Cage would use its complex, chance-derived features to make compositional choices randomly. For more, see Eva Diaz’ *The Experimenters: Chance and Design at Black Mountain College*, pp. 79-80.

⁵⁵ Eva Diaz, *The Experimenters: Chance And Design At Black Mountain College* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2014) 79.

⁵⁶ Diaz 87.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

art—for him, this meant not relying on written language. This kind of experimentation was a long time coming: as theater historian Arnold Aronson writes, “by the fourth decade of the twentieth century, the narrative organization of theatre and literature was under serious attack.”⁵⁹ The development of postwar avant-garde theater in America is a large and complex history—my intentions here are to focus alone on Cage’s seminal contributions. In place of a detailed chronicle of the avant-garde’s trends and development from me, here’s another contextual quote from Aronson: “. . . this [avant-garde] theater was not fundamentally linear, illusionistic, thematic, or psychological, certainly not in any conventional sense. It was a non-literary theater—meaning not that it lacked language but that it could not be read in the way a work of literature might be.”⁶⁰

Cage also enforced and embodied Black Mountain’s collaborative nature through his performances by embracing mixed media and artistic partnerships. In his work, he writes, artists should not be “isolated from one another but engage in a ‘dialogue.’”⁶¹ Cage worked extensively with Merce Cunningham, for example, so much so that it is hard to think about one and not the other in the context of Black Mountain. Like Cage in music, Cunningham was in the same league with other dance masters like Martha Graham, George Balanchine, and Isadora Duncan in his redefining what it meant to choreograph, to dance, and to perform.

One particular theatrical project at Black Mountain, considered the first “happening,” embodies Cage and Cunningham’s inventive, ideological correspondence: *Theater Piece No. I*, the famous 1952 performance that set chance theater in motion. After reflecting on Cage’s inspirations for this work, with a particular focus on Antonin Artaud’s theories, I will attempt to uncover how the piece conceptualizes theatrical language. The exploration will also touch on the

⁵⁹ Aronson 22.

⁶⁰ Aronson 5.

⁶¹ Ibid., 21.

work's sensory means of communication through dance, and its overarching consideration of art and life as extensions of each other.

II. Avant-garde Origins: Erik Satie and Antonin Artaud

Back in the late forties when Black Mountain was distinguishing itself as an alternative arts institution, Cage was emerging onto the experimental art scene on the West Coast. After studying Fine Arts briefly at Pomona College in California and composition with Schoenberg, Cage published his 1937 credo *The Future of Music*, in which he famously declared that “the present methods of writing music [...] will be inadequate for the composer, who will be faced with the entire field of sound.”⁶² He not only called for a new range of sound collected from the everyday—“wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise...whether the sound of a truck at 50 mph, rain, or static between radio stations, we find noise fascinating”—but a new method of notating noise, and new ways of configuring it.⁶³ This prompted Cage's reach for chance procedures, allowing “flexibility, changeability, fluency and so forth” in a new kind of composition he called “nonintentional music.”⁶⁴

Principles from Zen Buddhism and the *I-Ching* inspired these ideas, placing value on indeterminacy and void-like states of mind. Cage described these states, Eva Diaz writes, as “the ‘flow-through’ of experiences that break down the ego's barrier. Breaking down this barrier, for Cage, revealed the dominance of ‘no-mindedness,’ or non-intention, in the world, which could be accessed via an experience of the body as a vessel for sound.”⁶⁵ For Cage, the notion of the

⁶² RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance: Live Art 1909 to the Present*, (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1979) 80.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 81.

⁶⁵ Diaz 88.

void distinguished the mind as more open and accepting of flux and aleatory events, as opposed to a static mental state fixed in routine.⁶⁶

Cunningham adopted similar methodology in his work at this time. Unfulfilled by the emotional expressiveness and reliance on music advocated by Martha Graham, whose company he joined in 1939, Cunningham became interested in the idea of randomness and everyday movement in dance.⁶⁷ Like Cage, he started using experimental procedures like the *I Ching* to craft his choreography and, by 1948, the two had been collaborating for nearly ten years (Cunningham danced to Cage's music on occasional tours around the country). It was Cunningham that was responsible for bringing John Cage to Black Mountain—in April 1948 the dancer was invited to perform at the college, and Cage tagged along as his piano accompanist.⁶⁸ Right after, both were invited to the college's legendary 1948 summer institute with the likes of Willem de Kooning, Buckminster Fuller, Richard Lippold, and others.⁶⁹ It was at this time that Josef Albers, then rector of the school, extended Cage a teaching position in music composition.⁷⁰

Cage spent that summer obsessed with the French composer Erik Satie's experimental approach to music. Attracted to the simplicity of his embrace of repetitive, measured rhythm and duration, Cage found great inspiration in Satie's denial of the sentimental or grandiose in his music. Writer and filmmaker Jean Cocteau once wrote of Satie's music:

Too simple for ears accustomed to highly spiced sounds. That is the tragedy. Satie does not clothe his genius, never clutters it up with costume or jewel. His genius

⁶⁶ Ibid., 89.

⁶⁷ "Merce Cunningham." *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*. Encyclopedia Britannica Web. 21 February 2016 <<http://www.britannica.com/biography/Merce-Cunningham>>.

⁶⁸ Diaz 61.

⁶⁹ Duberman 288.

⁷⁰ Diaz 61.

is unclad, and without the slightest modesty. To go naked, for Satie's music, was an act of modesty *par excellence*.⁷¹

Noel Orillo Verzosa writes similarly about Satie's accessibility, his stripped-down compositions, in a way harkening back to Cage's fascination with void-like states of mind: "Especially after 1918, Satie's cultivation of pure emptiness, or empty purity, was taken to be a fundamentally modern phenomenon."⁷² In reverence of the composer, Cage delivered lectures at Black Mountain all summer about his meticulously measured compositions (Most of these have been characterized as diatribes rejecting the genius of Beethoven and the Germanic tradition.) An extension of this was his self-styled "Amateur Festival," during which Cage played Satie's piano works from his cottage with the windows open, drawing his audience to the surrounding lawn.⁷³

In the midst of Cage's obsession with Satie blossomed his interest in avant-garde theater. That same summer he staged Satie's pre-World War I (and only) play, *The Ruse of the Medusa*, translated by Black Mountain poet M.C. Richards, directed by student Arthur Penn, and featuring Willem and Elaine de Kooning, Buckminster Fuller, and Cunningham.⁷⁴ The "lyrical comedy with one act," a production of absurdist theater, disregarded seriousness in its aesthetic and framework.⁷⁵ As Eva Diaz writes in her study *The Experimenters: Chance and Design at Black Mountain College*, "*The Ruse of the Medusa*'s ambiguities—its absurd monologues and unrelated musical interludes, combined with dance and physical slapstick—alerted Cage to the possibility of seemingly arbitrary relationships between actions in a performance."⁷⁶ Arthur Penn makes further commentary on the performance, noting the significance of "the opening up of

⁷¹ Noel Orillo, Jr. Verzosa, "The Absolute Limits: Debussy, Satie, and the Culture of French Modernism, ca. 1860—1920," *RILM Abstracts of Music Literature* (2008) 141-142.

⁷² Verzosa 142.

⁷³ Duberman 300.

⁷⁴ Diaz 61.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 63.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 77.

space, the disappearance of lines of demarcation, the play flowing out into the auditorium, temporarily catching up the audience, then flowing back onto the stage.”⁷⁷

This production signified both an important revamping and evolution of Black Mountain’s theater program, first established in the 1930s and grounded in Bauhaus methodology, thanks to the work of Josef Albers’ colleague Xanti Schawinsky. The Swiss émigré’s non-verbal, mixed media performances were typical early theatrical explorations at the school; Schawinsky describes his work *Spectodrama*, for instance, as “symphonic inter-action and effect; color and form, motion and light, sound and word, gesture and music, illustration and improvisation.”⁷⁸ While these productions shared similarities with *The Ruse of the Medusa* in its experimental design and unorthodox acting, Bauhaus theater differed greatly from Cage’s ideology. Schawinsky had studied under the head of the Bauhaus theater workshop, Oskar Schlemmer, a proponent of unity and organization in theater to make a statement against life’s unruly and disconnected nature.⁷⁹ Cage rejected their formal dealings with visual allusion, ordered spaces, and the ability for a production to be repeated in favor of theatrical whim and arbitrariness. What drew him to Satie’s play was its illogic and slapdash quality: “Cage claimed that Satie’s investment (far from disinterestedness) in antagonizing or shocking his audience—the ‘power to irritate expressed in Satie’s call to ‘despise art’—inspired Cage’s staging of the play at Black Mountain.”⁸⁰

This kind of thinking aligns closely with Cage’s interest in the French dramatist, poet, actor, and essayist Antonin Artaud, whose essay *The Theater of Cruelty* advocated a kind of

⁷⁷ Duberman 303.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 90.

⁷⁹ Diaz 68.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 64.

theater that could shock its spectator into a new perceptual dimension.⁸¹ During a trip to Paris after his 1948 Black Mountain summer experience, Cage's new friend Pierre Boulez turned him onto Artaud—Cage then shared his work with David Tudor and Mary Caroline Richards, who translated *The Theater and its Double* into English.⁸² Like Anni Albers, Artaud was interested in providing a sensory experience that rejected narrative representation. "If people are out of the habit of going to the theater it is because we have been accustomed for four hundred years, that is since the Renaissance, to a purely descriptive and narrative theatre—story-telling psychology," he wrote.⁸³ With this ideology, Artaud staunchly opposed reliance on text and written language in performance. He declared that "Instead of continuing to rely upon texts considered definitive and sacred, it is essential to put an end to the subjugation of the theater to the text and to recover the notion of a kind of unique language half-way between gesture and thought."⁸⁴

Let's keep that word *gesture* in mind while considering Artaud's vision of theater, an explosion of light, movement, dance, music, kinetic art, painting, pantomime, and chanting—active forms of expression that could represent true human feeling beyond the capacity of words.⁸⁵ For Artaud, that is, gesture represented action and expression that not only *left out* words, but offered meaning that *transcended* whatever information or feeling words could express in the first place. And this theatrical "language," Artaud explained, was registered not only by the ear, but by the whole body and mind, and could permeate the entire performance

⁸¹ Arnold Aronson, *American Avante-Garde Theatre: A History*, (New York: Routledge, 2000) 30.

⁸² Duberman 370.

⁸³ Antonin Artaud, *The Theater And Its Double*, (New York: Grove Press, 1958) 76.

⁸⁴ Artaud 89.

⁸⁵ James Roose-Evans, *Experimental Theatre: from Stanislavsky to Peter Brook*, (New York: Universe Books, 1984) 76.

environment. “In place of the poetry of language [Artaud] proposed a poetry of space,” theater director James Roose-Evans writes.⁸⁶ As Artaud said,

. . . language cannot be defined except by its possibilities for dynamic expression in space as opposed to the expressive possibilities of spoken dialogue. And what the theater can still take over from speech are its possibilities for extension beyond words, for development in space, for dissociative and vibratory activity upon the sensibility.⁸⁷

A gesture’s visual qualities contribute to this “language in space.” Note Artaud’s use of “hieroglyph” in his description, a word I’ll reflect on later in this chapter (note where I’ve emboldened words):

Here too intervenes (besides the auditory language of sounds) the visual language of objects, movements, attitudes, and **gestures**, but on condition that their meanings, their physiognomies, their combinations be carried out to the point of becoming signs, making a kind of alphabet out of these signs. Once aware of this language in space, language of sounds, cries, lights, onomatopoeia, the theater must organize it into veritable **hieroglyphs**, with the help of characters and objects, and make use of their symbolism and interconnections in relation to all organs and on all levels.⁸⁸

Artaud’s ideas were the wellspring of Cage’s theatrical pursuits after *The Ruse of the Medusa*. Like Artaud, Cage envisaged a theater with new perceptual parameters, sensory profusion, and simultaneity. It would be in 1952, upon his return to Black Mountain for another summer session, that he would finally carry out these ideas.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Artaud 90.

⁸⁸ Artaud 90.

III. “ . . . And the professors’ wives licked popsicles”: The lawlessness of Cage’s *Theater Piece No. 1*

The most appropriate way I can imagine beginning this section is with a description of the famed event itself, offered here from the diary of student Francine du Plessix Gray:

At 8:30 tonight John Cage mounted a stepladder and until 10:30, he talked of the relation of music to Zen Buddhism, while a movie was shown, dogs barked, Merce danced, a prepared piano was played, whistles blew, babies screamed, coffee was served by four boys dressed in white, and Edith Piaf records were played double-speed on a turn-of-the-century machine. At 10:30 the recital ended and Cage grinned while Olson talked to him about Zen Buddhism, Stefan Wolpe bitched, two boys in white waltzed together, Tudor played the piano, and the professors’ wives licked popsicles.⁸⁹

How was this supremely wild happening ever conceived? After Cage introduced Artaud to M.C. Richards and David Tudor back at Black Mountain, the three feverishly read and reflected on his works together. Cage and Tudor, in particular, were inspired enough to envision a piece of theater that could embody their conversations: “Our ideas were so electric at that time,” Cage wrote, “ that once the idea hit my head—and I would like to give David Tudor equal credit for it—I immediately then implemented it.”⁹⁰ Cage started by mapping out performance brackets totaling forty-five minutes, then began soliciting talent to fill them: he invited M.C. Richards and college rector Charles Olson to read poetry, David Tudor to play anything on the piano, student

⁸⁹ Duberman 372.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 370.

Robert Rauschenberg to display paintings and play records or project slides, and Cunningham to dance.⁹¹

Little preparation went into the performance otherwise. An instruction fragment given to one of the performers details Cage's only rules for the performance:

“Projector:
Begin at 16min.
Play freely until 23 min.
Begin again at 24:30
Play freely until 35:45
Begin at 38:20
Play freely until 44:25”

With no traditional musical notations or stage directions, these instructions portioned out performance slots open to complete interpretation and improvisation. The directions show language at its most basic function, stripped down as an Erik Satie composition might be. As Eva Diaz notes, “De-skilling musical language beyond its notation in bars, notes, keys, and measures guaranteed that every event could be simply performed and would produce unique and unpredictable results.”⁹² The effect was a grouping and layering of distinct creative show—a whirlwind of performance, noise, visuals, and movement happening simultaneously. Theater historian Arnold Aronson raises Michael Kirby's idea of “compartmentalization” to describe Cage's performance goals here: as opposed to traditional narrative theater, which calls for a sequential progression of the work in which each part of the production generally depends on the last to make sense, Cage sought to isolate each of these sectors and give them complete autonomy.⁹³

⁹¹ Ibid., 370.

⁹² Diaz 82.

⁹³ Aronson 38.

Let's turn to the performance itself. On a warm August night, a group of students and professors assembled to experience Cage's "anarchic," unscripted work.⁹⁴ Contrary to the improvised nature of the individual performances, Cage's whimsical arrangement of the performance space showed off a certain deliberateness: gathered in the school's cafeteria sat a central pool of chairs, arranged in four inward-facing diamonds and separated by diagonal rows. Each chair donned a small, empty white cup, with no instruction for use—at the end of the performance, Cage recounted, "girls came in from the kitchen with pots of coffee and filled the cups," even over the many that had, over the course of the performance, been converted into impromptu ashtrays.⁹⁵ Above this hung a "canopy," as Eva Diaz elegantly describes it, of Rauschenberg's monochromatic paintings.⁹⁶ M.C. Richards' drawn map of the performance (fig. 5) illustrates this setup (with slight variation). It's tempting to note the glyph-like appearance of the drawn objects, and what they could mean without the text placed next to them. I wonder, for instance, if Richards meant to draw a face with a speech bubble interrupting Cunningham's dance "path," or what she meant by the jagged lines emerging from the poet's ladder, or the giant square perhaps representing the piece of paper given to performers. More than anything, they suggest a certain excited energy rather than any concrete message, which I think reflects the nature of the event it maps. The drawn images are symbols, ideas, abstract, messy, haphazard.

Note the audience sitting in the middle of this wild activity, totally enveloped by performers and objects. By positioning the spectators at the center of the action, they physically became part of the performance, itself an experimental concept, and one directly borrowed from Artaud: "a direct communication will be reestablished between the spectator and the spectacle, between the actor and the spectator, from the fact that the spectator, placed in the middle of the

⁹⁴ Duberman 370.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 371.

⁹⁶ Diaz 80. (Likely Rauschenberg's *White Paintings*)

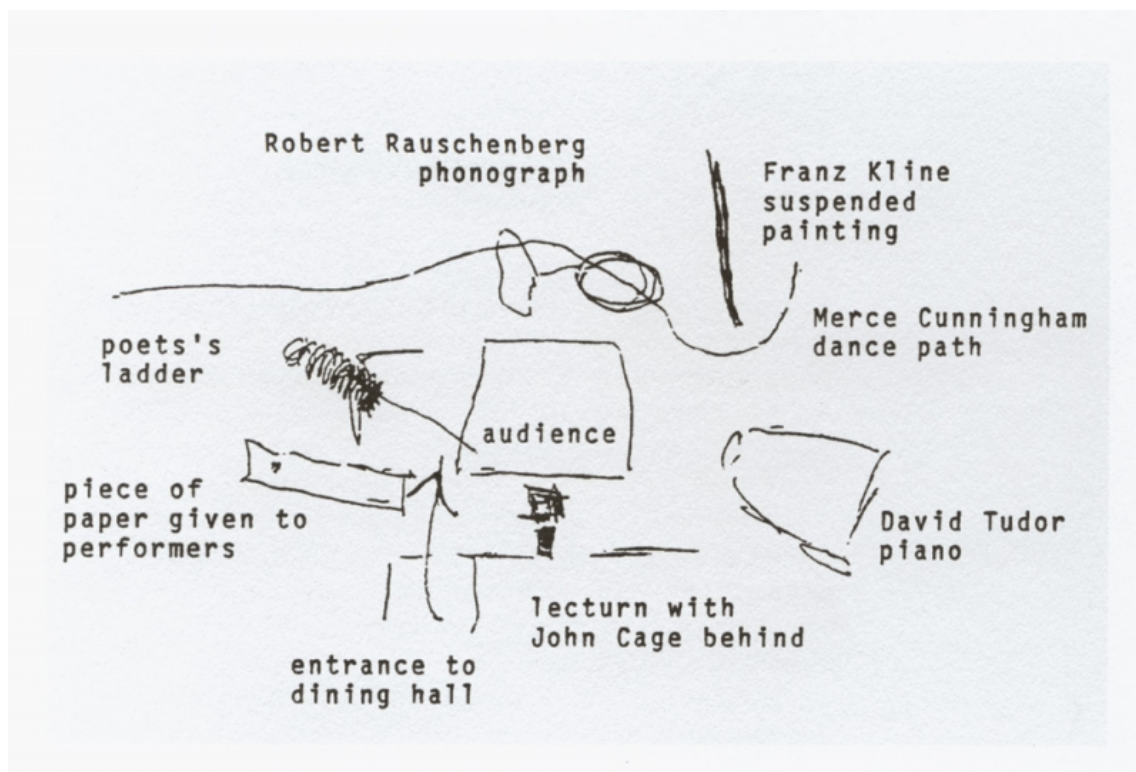


Fig. 5 M.C. Richards' map of *Theater Piece No. 1*, 1952

action, is engulfed and physically affected by it.”⁹⁷ But the center is also unusual in the way it abstracts perspective—forced to turn, look behind shoulders, and strain to observe the simultaneously occurring events, each viewing experience must have differed from the next.⁹⁸ That’s part of the reason why, I think, written accounts of the performance fluctuate so greatly. And because the event escaped any footage or photographs, its proof lies mostly in these alone.

Among all the accounts of this performance, Martin Duberman’s collection of interviews with some of the performance’s spectators presents the most comprehensive view of the happening; another interview—with Carroll Williams, a “part-student,” “part-instructor” in printing at the college—from his book *An Exploration in Community* indicates the gaps and variation in these reports:

If you imagine a square, a perfect square of chairs, there was a cross shape dividing them into four separate units. And this permitted the dancers to dance down these two aisles through the audience at any time. So that Merce Cunningham and a part of his then company—the company he had at the time, the group—were dancing. John Cage was reading . . . He also was performing a composition which used radio . . . duck calls and various sound effects . . . and I can’t remember whether there was a motion picture projector used or not.

Somehow I think there was.⁹⁹

As Duberman notes, “there’s no certain way of separating the memory distortions from the actual variations in perspective—and that would probably please Cage.”¹⁰⁰ Like the performance itself, these accounts involve great levels of subjective interpretation. It’s ironic that, despite its

⁹⁷ Artaud 96.

⁹⁸ Duberman 372.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 373.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 372.

rejection of writing as a force that should drive performance, *Theater Piece No. 1* now exists primarily through writing—through written memory. What this written memory allows us to imagine is important here, though what it manages to express is something enigmatic in a way very different, of course, from *experiencing* the event itself.

IV. Artaud's Hieroglyph

One way I'd like to understand the experience and meaning behind *Theater Piece No. 1* traces back to Artaud's notion of the hieroglyph ("Once aware of this language in space, language of sounds, cries, lights, onomatopoeia, the theater must organize it into veritable hieroglyphs").¹⁰¹ As I've written about Anni Albers' interest in the hieroglyph, the job that the hieroglyph was doing in her work was to express that meaning in art does not have to be precise. The hieroglyph's indecipherability represented a way of communicating that dug deep into the human psyche—while it could not communicate rational meaning, it could communicate ideas about the impossibility of communication. It could comment on the indecipherability of language itself. This is something, I think, that *Theater Piece No. 1* taps into. As Eva Diaz writes, "in his proposal of a chance protocol, Cage argued that a new dimension of perception could be revealed outside human facilities of organization and intention."¹⁰² What I mean by bringing up the hieroglyph here, then, is that it makes sense to compare the notion of it—Artaud's notion of it, Albers' notion of it—to describe the complexity of Cage's intentions for his performance piece. Cage was interested in totally reordering his spectator's perceptions, an idea that doesn't always make sense or is easy to describe. Artaud's phrase "language in space," however, is easier to

¹⁰¹ Artaud 90.

¹⁰² Diaz 60.

conceptualize, and characterizes *Theater Piece No. 1* accurately. “Language in space,” that is, can represent *Theater Piece No. 1*’s reach to performance as communication instead of literal language as communication. Artaud uses this phrase “language in space” to characterize his idea of “hieroglyph.” Let’s see his use of the term again:

Here too intervenes (besides the auditory language of sounds) the visual language of objects, movements, attitudes, and gestures, but on condition that their meanings, their physiognomies, their combinations be carried out to the point of becoming signs, making a kind of alphabet out of these signs. Once aware of this language in space, language of sounds, cries, lights, onomatopoeia, the theater must organize it into veritable hieroglyphs, with the help of characters and objects, and make use of their symbolism and interconnections in relation to all organs and on all levels.

Artaud writes that theater should organize its “language in space” into “hieroglyphs,” and by use of the “symbolism and interconnection” of its “characters and objects.” What he touches on here, then, is the kind of multi-faceted dimension of hieroglyphs, or the simultaneous meaning they have the power to express. By presenting “characters and objects” at once, and maybe in an arbitrary fashion as in *Theater Piece No. 1*, they start to garner new meanings and relations to one another. The result is a theater associative by nature and one that spurs creative and sensory connections. This reflects Cage’s intentions in creating a performance with simultaneously occurring parts. As Diaz writes,

That life involves a surfeit of difficult sensory information was its peculiar, splendid anarchy, according to the logic Cage set out in *Theater Piece No. 1*. The simultaneity of events was the indelible and the inescapable fact of the modern

world, and Cage's happening created a situation that intensified its pandemonium.¹⁰³

The glyph as representative of this simultaneity, then, also represents the notion that life and art are inextricably connected. While Cage sought to create illusion through theater, to place the spectator in a totally new frame of mind, he saw this illusion as a real and valuable link to reality. In *The Theater and Its Double*, Artaud emphasizes the importance of theater that imposes itself off the stage and on the everyday mind of the spectator: "between life and theater there will be no distinct division, but instead a continuity."¹⁰⁴ Similarly, in an interview with Martin Duberman, Cunningham touched on the import he thought simultaneity held in *Theater Piece No. 1*, relating the performance to quotidian motion and thought: "I think the [value]...is in respect to the way life itself is all these separate things going on at the same time. And contemporary society is so extraordinarily complex in that way. Not only things going on right around you, but...things you hear instantly over the television, that are going on someplace else."¹⁰⁵

V. Merce Cunningham in *Theater Piece No. 1*

In all my research of Cage's famous performance piece, I found little conjecture about Merce Cunningham's role in it, and, as a dancer, I couldn't resist investigating myself. First, the central placement of the spectator in *Theater Piece No. 1*, in opposition to the distancing proscenium stage, was integral to Merce Cunningham's choreographic style. The movement and positioning of his own body, I think, also played an important role in the physical orientation of

¹⁰³ Diaz 82.

¹⁰⁴ Artaud 126.

¹⁰⁵ Duberman 377.

Theater Piece No. 1. In observing M.C. Richards' map, with consideration to the varying written accounts of the event in mind, one can discern that most of the individual performances involved not physical movement, but some other kind of sensory transmittance (mostly visual or auditory). Varying accounts register Cunningham as dancing around and through the performance, chased by a roving dog. As the performance's moving part, his fleeting point of focus must have further complicated the viewer's perspective, tangling up an already chaotic visual assemblage.¹⁰⁶ Perhaps Cunningham, in disrupting perceptual and spatial boundaries by this moving around and through the audience, actuated the other performances around him. While Cage upheld that each simultaneously occurring performance in the piece "was not causally related to one another," Cunningham's winding dance could have fostered random and intuitive physical interactions between them, and in return spurred connections between the separate events and performers in the mind of the spectator.¹⁰⁷

Cunningham's likely style of movement in the performance deserves further analysis. First, his tendencies to breach regular movement patterns with chance-operated methodology, as indicated in early solos ridden with "elements of playfulness and spontaneity" performed at Black Mountain in the late 1940's, must have disrupted expectations for ordered choreography and repetition (especially considering how new modern dance was to the world at the time of the performance).¹⁰⁸ The likely irregularity in his movement would not have only instilled a kind of off-course physicality in the performance, but perhaps disorienting experiences with the time and rhythm that accompanied it—completely fresh terrain that could "shock viewers into a new notion of space," as Cage had planned for the performance.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 372.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 370.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 299.

¹⁰⁹ Diaz 90.

In a phenomenological sense, connections between a body in performance and its audience similarly transcend limits of feeling, time and space—in *The Dancer's World*, Rudolf von Laban discusses “the invisible yet ubiquitous “currents which are constantly moving between [dancing] bodies.”¹¹⁰ “The dancer is at once seismographic receiver and transmitter of these ‘currents’ or ‘waves,’” he writes, and is constantly in a state of “‘stirring,’ affected by and affecting others through a type of vibrating energy of ‘pulsation.’”¹¹¹ If Cunningham dances past the audience and other performers, his “current” dislodges physical boundaries between performer and spectator. This concept of vibrating, transcendental energy is an important part of Artaud’s *The Theater of Cruelty* in its imagining of performance as a new mechanism for metaphysical experience. “Theater,” Artaud writes, should invite “possibilities for extension beyond words, for development in space, for dissociative and vibratory action upon the sensibility.”¹¹²

Like the way Cunningham sidesteps logical or expected formations in choreography, Artaud’s “cruel” theater evades linearity and intention, fixing a new, unexpected headspace that promotes “deeper and keener perception.”¹¹³ In an analysis of Cunningham’s use of chance and energy in his choreography, Dee Reynolds’ study *Rhythmic Subjects* offers a useful synthesis of these ideas between Artaud and Cunningham:

Rather than acquiring significance through its relation to past and future, each present moment of a movement can be broken down into a complex set of relationships to a number of events that are happening at that moment, but which, because they exceed the perceptive capacity of the spectator, also “split open” the

¹¹⁰ Lucia Ruprecht, “Gesture, Interruption, Vibration: Rethinking Early Twentieth-Century Gestural Theory and Practice in Walter Benjamin, Rudolf von Laban, and Mary Wigman,” *Dance Research Journal* 47.2 (2015): 30.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Artaud 89.

¹¹³ Ibid.

moment by making the spectator aware of what he or she is unable to fully register.¹¹⁴

This “splitting open” of the mind in its processing of concurrent images and stimulus, and its inability to “fully” register it all aligns, I think, with Cage’s idea for *Theater Piece No. 1* and what Eva Diaz identifies as an awakening of the “doubled world of his or her own unconscious.”¹¹⁵ In an almost paradoxical sense, the immediacy and chaotic shock of Artaud’s vision of a performance environment was meant to instill both a new hyper-awareness and “void-like” state in the spectator, something Artaud defined as an intense condition of the mind somewhere between dreaming and thought.¹¹⁶

This sense of illusion and awareness in experimental theater was something previously explored at Black Mountain through Schawinsky and Schlemmer, but, again, through formal theatrical techniques (costuming and scripts, for instance) and mechanisms of control (codified interactions between performer and spectator), not improvisation.¹¹⁷ What Cunningham helped Cage convey here moved past these more traditional theatrical tools, advocating instead a fundamentally new and sensory performance experience. The performance, in turn, helped lay foundations for Cunningham’s own creative venture, the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. Rooted in a radical artistic philosophy honoring simple movement, choreography designed using chance procedures, and the belief that music and dance need not coordinate in performance, the company thrived until its conclusion in 2012. (I was at Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival for the company’s performance of Cunningham’s *Sounddance* on July 26, 2009—strangely, the night Cunningham died.) With its newly woven-in artistic partnerships, including the aesthetic

¹¹⁴ Dee Reynolds, *Rhythmic Subjects*, (Hampshire: Dance Books Ltd., 2007) 156.

¹¹⁵ Diaz 91.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

assistance of Robert Rauschenberg, who designed sets, costumes, and lighting for over ten years with the company, and musical assistance from David Tudor and especially John Cage, *Theater Piece No. 1* proved the catalyst for the company's success.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ Duberman 383.

CHAPTER THREE: Composition by Field and the Compound Image: Charles Olson's Projective Poetry

I. "The Big O"

Simultaneous with Merce Cunningham and John Cage's arrival at Black Mountain was the American poet Charles Olson's in 1948, there to fill a temporary teaching position left open by his friend Edward Dahlberg. A highly contentious and influential writer, Olson took inspiration from early Imagist poets like William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound and was a seminal figure in postmodern poetics. Critical of conventional Western language patterns and what he considered the phonetic alphabet's reductiveness, he advocated a new kind of poetry rooted in spontaneity and objectivity. His lofty, humanist treatises sought to define entirely new thought systems, classifying logic as a barrier in the arts and in human understanding. Some scholars are weary of his pretensions. Included in a list detailing Olson's oddities (his propensity to stuff food in his pockets at dinner parties, his study of American musical comedies) writer Guy Davenport defined Olson's lectures as "achiev[ing] depths of incoherence" and his poetry "inarticulate."¹¹⁹

His eccentricities reached far beyond this. Nicknamed "The Big O," Olson stood at a physically massive stature of six feet seven inches tall. Aside from escapades in the Yucatan, writing seriously about Herman Melville at Harvard, and a stint in the State department under Roosevelt, Olson served as rector of Black Mountain. He introduced a new focus on writing at the college, which had, up to its twilight in the 1950's, been dominated by the visual arts. Martin

¹¹⁹ Guy Davenport, "Olson," *The Geography Of The Imagination: Forty Essays*, (Boston: David R. Godine, 1997) 81.

Duberman explains this transition well, emphasizing how “Charles Olson was unquestionably the heartbeat of Black Mountain during its last five years”:

By late 1952, Olson had converted Black Mountain into [an] “arts center” [with] . . . much more emphasis on the literary than the visual arts, and an ever more disheveled physical plant; a place distinctive, in other words, not in endowment, numbers, comfort, or public acclaim, but in quality of experience, a frontier society, sometimes raucous and raw, isolated and self-conscious, bold in its refusal to assume any reality it hadn’t tested—and therefore bold in inventing forms, both in life style and art, to contain the experiential facts that supplanted tradition’s agreed-upon definitions.¹²⁰

How does Olson’s attitude toward writing differ from Albers’ and Cage’s? For the latter two, writing was present in their work through its repeatedly referenced absence or transformation. If writing didn’t define their work, as in Cage’s *Theater Piece No.1*, then it materialized in a new form, as in Albers’ glyphs of *Ancient Writing*. As expected of a poet, Olson handled the phonetic alphabet as his medium—what he shared about writing with Albers and Cage was a conspicuous desire to abandon its typical applications. For him this meant using language in the most objective way possible by renouncing linear narrative and ordered versification in his poetry, and allowing process—all that unrefined thought and intuition involved in creating something—to be laid bare in his work.

¹²⁰ Duberman 355.

II. “Projective Verse”

Among Olson’s far-reaching works, his manifesto from 1950, “Projective Verse,” is his most influential and distinctive one. In this call for a “new poetics,” Olson introduces the idea of “composition by field,” or open verse, which favors speed, intuition, and unorthodox spacing in the construction of a poem. Rejecting what he considers the limiting criteria of traditional meter and rhyme, Olson instead emphasizes the breath as the poet’s most important tool: “Verse now, 1950, if it is to go ahead, if it is to be of essential use, must, I take it, catch up and put into itself certain laws and possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings.”¹²¹ What does this mean? In one sense, the breath helps deliver syntax directly to the reader without interference. As the poet writes what comes to his mind, he follows the natural flow of his breath in its construction. As a result, the poem’s spacing—all its pauses, spaces, and enjambments—and general structure emerge as a mirroring of his breath, and without worry of the language making sense or following conventional verse patterns.

This preoccupation with breath follows three primary concerns that make up Olson’s open verse: “the kinetics of the thing,” “the principle,” or “the law which presides conspicuously over such composition,” and the “process,” or “how the principle can be made so to shape the energies that the form is accomplished.”¹²² First, arguing that a poem should be an immediate and uninterrupted flux of energy from poet to reader, Olson writes how “every element in an open poem (the syllable, the line, as well as the image, the sound, the sense) must be taken up as participants in the kinetics of the poem.”¹²³ When Olson says “kinetics,” he means the general sense of movement and power in a poem. Second, the “principle” behind this idea of constant

¹²¹ Charles Olson, “Projective Verse,” *Human Universe, And Other Essays*, (New York: Grove Press, 1967) 51.

¹²² Olson 52.

¹²³ Ibid.

movement comes from Black Mountain poet and Olson's friend, Robert Creeley: "Form is never more than an extension of content."¹²⁴ Form should also be unpremeditated, Olson argues.

Writing should not only be immediate, but without premeditation, editing, or adornment; this kind of thinking lines up with his interest in art as process, in expressing the struggle of creating. A work should freely show its unprocessed self, all its blunders and unaffected developments.

Third, the "process" that allows this "energy discharge," this idea of poem as projectile, becomes possible through Olson's concept of "field composition," which dismisses logical sequencing or progression as a way to write: "the FIELD, if you like, where all the syllables and all the lines must be managed in their relations to each other."¹²⁵ Robert Creeley once wrote in response to "Projective Verse" that Olson's "notion of the poem as a field at once clears us from the usual sense of progression, i.e., that we have a line, building forward perhaps to 'climax,' and then relaxing to an 'end.'"¹²⁶ Like John Cage's interest in script-less, anti-narrative performance, or Albers' employment of the non-narrative grid, Olson too jettisoned the easy line of ordered, narrative imagery as a means of transferring ideas.

Instead, his "field composition" allows for perceptions, rather than meaning, per se, to follow one after another. This is an idea borrowed from critic and poet Edward Dahlberg (Olson's friend and mentor):

Now (3) the process of the thing, how the principle can be made so to shape the energies that the form is accomplished. And I think it can be boiled down to one statement (first pounded into my head by Edward Dahlberg): ONE PERCEPTION

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Marjorie G Perloff, "Charles Olson and the 'Inferior Predecessors': 'Projective Verse' Revisited," *ELH* 40 (1973): 285.

MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION. It means exactly what it says, is a matter of, at all points (even, I should say, of our management of daily reality as of the daily work) get on with it, keep moving, keep in, speed, the nerves, their speed, the perceptions, theirs, the acts, the split second acts, the whole business, keep it moving as fast as you can, citizen.¹²⁷

In turn, the kind of poetic activity that Olson advocates is one both organic and formulaic. His insistence on speed and instinct beat out potential for refined turns of phrase, appealing texture, or careful imagery—in a projective poem, words move like bullets, forceful waves of action. It is primarily this mannerism that separates Olson from the Objectivist poets and the Imagists that preceded and inspired him, like Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. These other movements, by contrast, were aestheticist in the sense that they sought exactness in syntax, clear and comprehensive images.¹²⁸

III. Olson and the Maya Hieroglyph

Olson's own disjointed, paratactic, and often obscure writing reflects his interest in exposing the thinking mind as an artistic act. One example is his correspondence with Robert Creeley, *Mayan Letters*, during a five-month archaeological stint in the Yucatan (“*Si j’ai du goût, ce n’est guères/que pour la terre et les pierres*,”: if I have any taste, it is only for earth and stones, Olson wrote in one of his famous poems, “The Kingfishers”).¹²⁹ “Some time towards the end of 1950, it

¹²⁷ Olson 53.

¹²⁸ “Objectivism,” [Poetry Foundation Online](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/resources/learning/glossary-terms/detail/objectivism), Poetry Foundation, 15 March 2016. <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/resources/learning/glossary-terms/detail/objectivism>>.

¹²⁹ Guy Davenport, “Scholia and Conjectures for Olson's 'The Kingfishers'.” *boundary 2* (1973): 260.

was in December I think, but the letter isn't dated, I heard that Charles Olson was off to the Yucatan," Robert Creeley writes in the preface to *Mayan Letters*.¹³⁰ "A sudden 'fluke'—the availability of some retirement money owed him from past work as a mail carrier—gave him enough for the trip."¹³¹

Inspired by the Alberses' visits to Mexico, Olson had become fascinated by the rich culture of the Maya civilization, and especially by its hieroglyphic writing system. Two styles of symbols organize the roughly 800 that constitute the written language: hieroglyphic signs, which represent animals, humans, and scenes from everyday life, and signs representing syllables.¹³² Graphic, versatile, and associative, these intricate, curving symbols to Olson embodied a means of communication wholly suitable to the complexity of human thought.

As Steve Evans writes in an essay about *Mayan Letters*, "[Olson], like the Alberses, carried back to North Carolina a renewed engagement with a fundamental element of his art: in this case, the letters—in the sense of the epistolary unit of exchange and concrete letterform."¹³³ On March 20, 1951, Olson wrote to Creeley:

Christ, these hieroglyphs. Here is the most abstract and formal deal of all the things this people dealt out—and yet, to my taste, it is precisely as intimate as verse is. Is, in fact, verse. Is their verse. And comes into existence, obeys the same laws that, the coming into existence, the persisting of verse, does.¹³⁴

Dated between February 18 and July 1, 1951, Olson's seventeen letters range from manic streams of consciousness to expressive musings on the genius of the Mayans.¹³⁵ One entry from

¹³⁰ Charles Olson, *Mayan Letters*, (London: Cape, 1968) 5.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² "Mayan hieroglyphic writing," *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*. Encyclopedia Britannica. Web. 21 February 2016 <<http://www.britannica.com/topic/Mayan-hieroglyphic-writing>>.

¹³³ Steve Evans, "Charles Olson: Mayan Letters," *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College, 1933-1957*, (New Haven: London: Yale University Press, 2015) 322.

¹³⁴ Olson, *Mayan Letters*, 43.

April 1st (see following page) is a striking hybrid of these, and takes the form of one of his projective poems. Aesthetically, the poem's downward, swinging arrangement exemplifies Olson's "composition by field" idea. The way "sun" unhinges from the beginning block of text, as if a sudden rush of energy toppled it over, propels down into a flow of correlated images—perceptions following one after another. This winding string of mostly concrete imagery (snakes, ticks, vultures, jaguar, etc) visually maps out Olson's idea about "the proportion, the distribution of weight" in the "glyph world."¹³⁶ In other words, Olson attempts to distribute images through the poem as Maya hieroglyphs might express them: in a non-hierarchical, merely associative manner. When Olson writes, "What continues to hold me, is, the tremendous levy on all objects as they present themselves to human sense, in the glyph world," he seems to say that each object mentioned bears equal validity.¹³⁷ Even when he writes, "&, above all, / human eyes / hands / limbs," as if to grant the human body specific importance with the phrase "above all," the form in which these images are presented does not distinguish them from the rest of the poem's central cascade of words.¹³⁸ They are "distributed and accurate" as the other images, falling and carving the negative space characteristic of a poem composed by field.¹³⁹

It's tempting to compare the visual nature of this spontaneous poem with Anni Albers' *Ancient Writing*. Just as Albers' weaving sorts its geometric blocks, its text, like glyphs on a surface, Olson's poem does the same with its words and space—"form is never more than an extension of content," Olson wrote, though here his poem's form completely *embodies* its subject of the glyph.¹⁴⁰ When paired next to Albers' weaving, the arrangement of Olson's poem

¹³⁵ Evans 322.

¹³⁶ Olson, *Mayan Letters*, 66-67.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Olson, "Projective Verse," 52.

Sunday april 1

... What continues to hold me, is, the tremendous
levy on all objects as they present themselves to
human sense, in the glyph world. And the propor-
tion, the distribution of weight given same parts of
all, seems, exceptionally, distributed and accurate,
that is, that

sun
 moon
 venus
 other constellations & zodiac
snakes
 ticks
 vultures
jaguar

 owl
 frog
feathers
 peyote
 water-lily
not to speak of
fish
 caracol
 tortoise
&, above all,
human eyes
 hands
 limbs

(PLUS EXCEEDINGLY
CAREFUL OBSERVA-
TION OF ALL POS-
SIBLE INTERVALS OF
SAME, as well as ALL
ABOVE (to precise di-
mension of eclipses, say,
& time of, same etc. etc)



Fig. 6 Anni Albers, *Ancient Writing*, 1936

draws enough attention to itself to qualify as a satisfying visual object—plastic art. This possibility brings to mind the German writer and philosopher Gotthold Lessing, who in 1766 famously differentiated art that presents its parts *nacheinander* (after one another), or *nebeneinander* (side by side). In essence, Olson’s poem exists in parts that stand independently of one another in space and present themselves in a sequence (a reader moves through time to apprehend the poem)—*nacheinander*. An artwork like Albers’ piece, however, exists all at once, and doesn’t draw attention to the temporal as it does its positioning in space—*nebeneinander*.

What can it mean for Olson’s poem to stand both as writing and a visual object, to present itself both in time-space and all at once? Writer Eliot Weinberger draws on this idea of the poem as *object*, as a kind of tableau:

For those who cannot read [glyphs]—and this was articulated most notably by Charles Olson in the Yucatan in the 1950s—the glyphs have a concreteness, a weight, that does not exist in alphabetic writing: the word is an object. And more: it appears, to the outsider, that each glyph, each word, has the same weight. The glyph-covered stela becomes the ideal, irreducible poem.¹⁴¹

Weinberger’s line “each glyph, each word, has the same weight” parallels Olson’s idea from *Mayan Letters* that “the proportion, the distribution of weight” in a projective poem gives each word equal value.¹⁴² While each word can be thought of as an object, as Weinberger suggests, a poem containing them can also stand on its own as an object.

Olson, too, fixated on this notion: for him, a word or poem as *object* signified something at the core of humanity and art. His theory of “objectism,” a play on “objectivist” poetry,

¹⁴¹ Eliot Weinberger, *Outside Stories, 1987-1991*, (New York: New Directions, 1992) 36.

¹⁴² Olson. *Mayan Letters*, 66.

proposed a kind of writing that strips language of lyricism and versification that gets in the way of writing as a reflection of man's simplest, purest state. As he writes in *Projective Verse*:

It is no accident that Pound and Williams both were involved variously in a movement which got called "objectivism." But that word was then used in some sort of a necessary quarrel, I take it, with "subjectivism." . . . What seems to me a more valid formulation for present use is "objectism," a word to be taken to stand for the kind of relation of man to experience which a poet might state as the necessity of a line or a work to be as wood is, to be as clean as wood is as it issues from the hand of nature, to be as shaped as wood can be when a man has had his hand to it. Objectism is the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the "subject" and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out) and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects.¹⁴³

And for a work to be an *object*, in Olson's mind, means it is rooted in breath. Following the system proposed in "Projective Verse," the reader pauses at the word "that" before the poem's word waterfall, and for a duration roughly equal to that of the line preceding it. This back and forth arrangement of space in a poem, "a progressing of both the meaning and the breathing forward, and then a backing up," Olson argues, makes for poetry completely oriented toward the oral. As an oral form, poetry can bound the body—the poet, the reader—to the work involved, and even to life itself. To construct a projective poem it to undertake "a seriousness sufficient to

¹⁴³ Olson, "Projective Verse," 59.

cause the thing he makes to try to take its place alongside the things of nature,” Olson writes.¹⁴⁴ It is to fully realize one of man’s greatest and most natural capacities:

Breath is man’s special qualification as animal. Sound is a dimension he has extended. Language is one of his proudest acts. And when a poet rests in these as they are in himself . . . then he, if he chooses to speak from these roots, works in that area where nature has given him size, projective size.¹⁴⁵

Beyond this, even, was a desire to design a new vision of reality, to transcend conscious perception (not unlike Cage’s intentions for *Theater Piece No. 1*). In working with the breath, Olson intended for his poetry to access linguistic and existential associations of which the mind was unaware.

IV. “The Glyph” poem

In order to get his own language as close as possible to the glyph, Olson sought to redefine the function and structure of words themselves. In 1945, Olson read the work of art historian Ernest Fenollosa for the first time, copying his essay “The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry” nearly word for word in his diary.¹⁴⁶ Published in 1919 by Ezra Pound, the work studies and advocates the way Chinese characters put together parts of speech, and visualizes its image-centric nature as a new model for poetry. English, Fenollosa wrote, is encumbered by a “lazy satisfaction with nouns and adjectives.”¹⁴⁷ Free of static grammatical configurations, the ideogram (a written character symbolizing the idea of a thing without

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 60.

¹⁴⁶ Belgrad 84.

¹⁴⁷ Ernest Fenollosa, *The Chinese Written Character As A Medium For Poetry*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008) 58.

indicating the sounds used to say it) instead allows for an active, polyvalent, and provocative kind of notation. Unlike phonetic letters, the graphic structure of Chinese characters reflects meaning, and can simultaneously take on the quality of an adjective, noun, or verb at once. As Fenollosa writes:

A true noun, an isolated thing, does not exist in nature. Things are only the terminal points, or rather the meeting points of actions, cross-sections cut through actions, snap-shots. Neither can a pure verb, an abstract motion, be possible in nature. The eye sees noun and verb as one: things in motion, motion in things, and so the Chinese conception tends to represent them.¹⁴⁸

Fenollosa provides an example of this with the phrase “Man Sees Horse”:

Suppose that we look out of a window, and watch a man. Suddenly he turns his head, and actively gives his attention upon something. We look ourselves, and see that his vision has been focused upon a horse. We first saw the man before he acted; second, while he acted; third, we saw the object towards which his action was directed. In speech, we split up the rapid continuity of this action, and of its picture, into its three essential parts or joints, in the right order, and say “man sees horse.”¹⁴⁹

人	見	馬
<i>Man</i>	<i>Sees</i>	<i>Horse</i>

Comparing this phrase with the Chinese notation (shown above), however, he writes:

[In] the spoken word, there is no natural connection between thing and sign; all depends upon sheer convention. But the Chinese method [proceeds upon] natural

¹⁴⁸ Belgrad 84.

¹⁴⁹ Fenollosa 44.

suggestion. First, there stands the man upon his two legs. Second, his eye moves through space, —a bold figure—represented by moving legs drawn under the modified picture of an eye. Third, at the end of the eye’s journey, stands the horse upon his four legs. The thought-picture, [therefore], is not only as well called up by these signs as by words, but far more vividly and concretely. Legs belong to all these characters: they are alive. The group holds something of the quality of a continuous moving picture.¹⁵⁰

Olson’s poem “Glyph” (see on the following page) demonstrates Olson’s attentiveness to this idea. Written in response to a glyph-inspired drawing by his friend Ben Shahn, the work centers on the word “race” as a compound image or meaning, using diverging imagery to uncover its possible correlations. Without context, the work is bizarre and irritating in its vagueness. It describes the scene of an auction house in the town of Black Mountain, where Olson walked in with a young black boy, Alvin, the nephew of the college’s cook Jack Lipsey.¹⁵¹ Daniel Belgrad helpfully spells out Olson’s intention for the poem in his work *The Culture of Spontaneity*:

Olson proposes the word “race” as an abstraction with multiple meanings marking an emotionally charged idea-complex in American culture. His poem attempts to reconstruct the complex of meanings surrounding the word, by providing an ideogrammic image that locates “race” in the context of a specific utterance and telescopes it outward.¹⁵²

“Race” becomes a super homonym in the poem: “race” both as in the noun “competition” or the

¹⁵⁰ Fenollosa 44.

¹⁵¹ Ruth Erikson, “Between Media: The Glyph Exchange,” *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College, 1933-1957*, (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2015) 329.

¹⁵² Belgrad 91.

GLYPH

(for Alvin,
& the Shahns)

Like a race, the Negro boy said
And I wasn't sure I heard, what
Race, he said it clear
 gathering
into his attention the auction
inside, the room
too lit, the seats
theatre soft, his foot
the instant it crossed the threshold
(as his voice) drawing
the whites' eyes off
the silver set New Yorkers
passed along the rows for weight, feel
the weight, leading
Southern summer idling evening folk
To bid up, dollar by dollar, I

Beside him at the door.

verb “compete,” and “race” as in the noun relating to physical type and sometimes ethnicity. “Like a race” helps distinguish the possible verbal form of “race,” as in a competition, but “I wasn’t sure I heard” seems to acknowledge, in a kind of meta way, the word’s greater weight. The line “Race, he said it clear” affirms this realization, an understanding of the word’s most obvious form, as a noun, and gains more sinister associations as the poem moves forward—namely Southern segregation, and details recalling a slave auction.

Olson conceived of the syllable as a building block of language more variable than a word itself (and consequently, more similar than a word to the function of the glyph). “The mind is brother to [the ear] and is, because it is so close, is the drying force, the incest, the sharpener . . . it is from the union of the mind and the ear that the syllable is born,” Olson writes.¹⁵³ Functioning both as a phoneme (a unit of sound) and a morpheme (a unit of meaning), the monosyllabic word “race” opens connections in the mind as an ideogram might, Olson suggests. Elsewhere in the poem, words might be similarly broken down to uncover relevant feeling: “attention” to its last two syllables, ten/tion, recalling the word “tension,” “summer” to its first syllable, “sum,” and “threshold” to “thrash” or “hold.”

While not visual like a glyph, the syllable can offer a similar flexibility in the way it draws mental connections. Just as Olson proposes in *Projective Verse* how a reader should pause for the duration of space following a word, as in the space around “gathering” from this poem, I think that he would similarly encourage a reader to pause at, to pause *within*, every word in the piece. In this sense, each word, or each syllable making up a word, becomes its own snapshot of image or thought. Each word becomes like a poem in its own right—an exhausting way to read,

¹⁵³ Olson, “Projective Verse,” 54.

in my mind, but evocative in theory. I can't help but think of one of the OED's definitions of "hieroglyph": "*humorously*. A piece of writing difficult to decipher."¹⁵⁴

V. The Glyph Exchange: Olson at ICA

Walking into the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, on a Tuesday afternoon in January was like entering some dream world. Inside the museum, that glass house edging the bright blue of Boston harbor, everything was grey and smooth and hushed. I had never visited before, and marveled at the emptiness. The whirl of its strange, 140-square-foot glass elevator in the lobby drew me to a map of the current exhibits—level three. I went up.

"Leap Before You Look" was the ICA's sweeping 2015-2016 exhibition on the history and art of Black Mountain College, and its largest exhibition to date. Moving into the gallery full of objects and stories I was reading about—everything immediately and distantly familiar—felt like I had walked through the soft wall into the surreal world of a Carroll-esque Looking-Glass House. Blown-up photographs on the exhibit walls showed students, professors, and visiting artists in a kind of "behind-the-scenes" fashion: farming, dancing, looking attractive. When I curved into a cove of Anni Albers' weavings, the story started coming together. There they were, next to her husband Josef Albers' prints and even triumphing over them in their grandeur, and there were John Cage's elegant-looking musical scores, there was Rauschenberg's pink set design for Merce Cunningham's dance company, there was a de Kooning, there were sheets of

¹⁵⁴ "Hieroglyph," Def. 2b, *The Oxford English Dictionary Online*, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 5 April 2016, <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/86804#eid1583466>>.

Olson's poetry and copies of *The Black Mountain Review*. How easy, how difficult, to organize Black Mountain's disciplinary repertoire.

My second visit to the show a couple of months later was to see a performance titled, appropriately, *The Glyph*, a dance choreographed by Katherine Litz, scored by Lou Harrison, staged in front of a drawing by Ben Shahn, and inspired, finally, by Charles Olson's poetry. The performance was part of a series inspired by or imitating notorious works associated with Black Mountain, all staged in the middle of the museum exhibit. When I was there, a crowd had pooled around a marley dance floor rolled out in the gallery, interrupting the careful arrangement of objects on display that surrounded the impromptu stage. Bathed in the flat light of the gallery space, the setting was a more sterile, though accurate, representation of its 1951 original (see figure 7). A reproduction of Ben Shahn's drawing, *A Glyph for Charles*, sat in the stage's corner—a boxy, brushy rendering of a human torso, the image teeming with curious energy. When a fat piano sitting next to the stage let out a couple of sharp riffs, a dancer wearing a stretchy, black tube of a garment peeked out at us from behind Shahn's drawing. I remember her also wearing a party hat, but my captivation prevented me from taking immediately scrupulous notes (I escaped the museum with two furtive photographs, though, alas, no party hat there, either). I studied the anticipating crowd, mostly older, obscure glasses-wearing types, wondering if they were skeptical of the unfolding scene.

Two figures (former American Ballet Theater dancer Richard Colton and Bob Scanlan, a Harvard theater professor) suddenly emerged onto the stage to give the performance context. *The Glyph*, they explained, was first performed at Black Mountain in 1951 after Olson's return from the Yucatan.¹⁵⁵ Thrilled by his new archeological interest, Olson landed back in North Carolina

¹⁵⁵ Erikson 329.

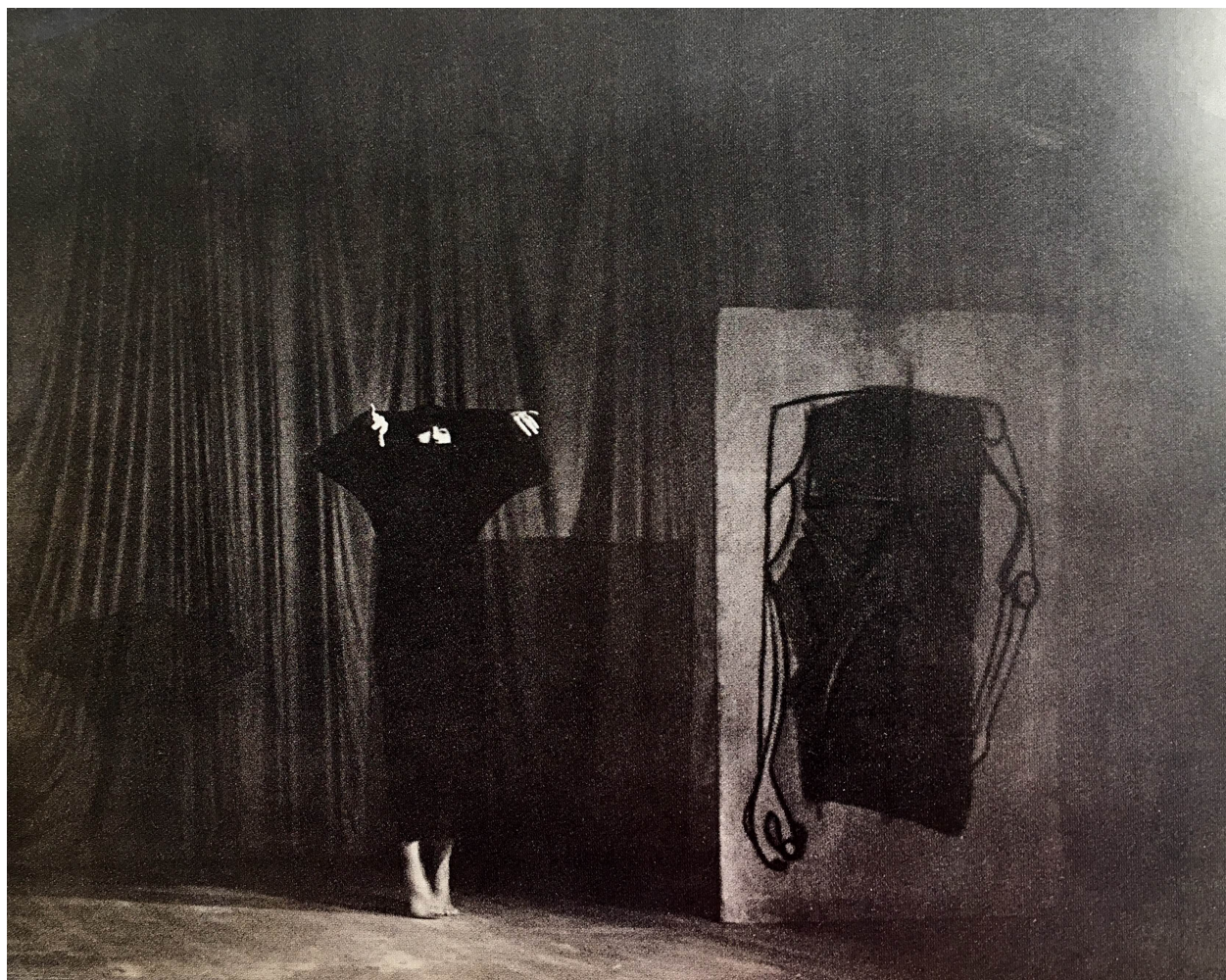


Fig. 7 Katherine Litz performing *The Glyph* at Black Mountain College, 1951.

with brimming inspiration that spurred a series of collaborations culminating in *The Glyph* performance (in the ICA exhibition catalog, Ruth Erikson calls the specific collaboration leading up to and including this performance “the glyph exchange”).¹⁵⁶ At this point rector of a financially struggling Black Mountain, Olson valued this kind of collaboration as specific to the institution, deeming it one of the college’s greatest assets. In a letter to prospective donor Wilbur Ferry, Olson wrote enthusiastically about *The Glyph* as a demonstration of Black Mountain’s community (notice how “projective” slips into his description):

[One] of the reasons why just what is happening here does happen—the bringing of action in art itself is noticeable. I would put it—have put it—that projection, with all its social consequences, is the mark of forward art today. And it is one of the best ways we find out the kinetic secrets of projective art—the very way we do it—is to put art in action, to join the arts in action, to break down the stupid walls, even the wall of art as separate from society! (Ben [Shahn] can tell you what a happy business happened amongst four of us guest faculty this summer—a GLYPH show, initiated by Ben as the consequence of his giving me a drawing as a trade-last for a poem, and now, because of these two acts, [Katherine] Litz the dancer has added me to her repertory, a GLPYH, with set by Shahn, and my words set to music by [Lou] Harrison).¹⁵⁷

While not technically a “happening” like *Theater Piece No. 1*, it’s interesting to see Olson source the word in this letter as often as he does (“[One] of the reasons why just what is *happening* here does *happen*,” “[Shahn] can tell you what a happy business *happened*”). Something about the shared energy in Cage’s performance must have caught on with Olson. The first mentioned

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Belgrad 143.

instance of his circuitous glyph exchange, Olson's poem "Glyph" and Shahn's torso drawing, inspired Lou Harrison to compose an incongruous six-movement piano work—also titled *The Glyph*—for Litz to choreograph to, accented with bells, claves, a gong, and a pitchfork (the pitchfork absent, unfortunately, at the ICA performance).¹⁵⁸

Choppy piano brought out the ICA dancer, moving erratically and circling around the stage wearing an array of graphic expressions. While the work left out narrative, the dancer's whimsy and abstract movement made it resolutely comic and borderline absurd. Generally, her movement was not overtly technical. While executed elegantly (cleanly drawing her black costume over her head and circling her upper half, blind, must have taken practice), the mostly small, turned-in movement emphasized how the dancer carved the stage space more than how her body itself moved—something embodying, in fact, Olson's ideas about composition by field. Rather than detailed, careful movement, the choreography was designed to push energy across the stage in bursts. At the end of each of the six movements, for example, the dancer would run back to Shahn's drawing, then re-emerge with an energetic expression of a new gestural style. Like Olson's idea in *Projective Verse*, movement seemed to inspire new movement, perceptions following and spurring new perceptions.

While cryptic at its surface, *The Glyph*'s various parts were communicating a message about the nature of language that Olson had been exposed to through the idea of the glyph. As Litz explained it, "the common idea of a Glyph expressed by the different art forms was simply a compound image contained in a single work."¹⁵⁹ At the core of the performance, that is, was the notion that the glyph, a "complex of text and image, abstraction and figuration," could render

¹⁵⁸ Erikson 330.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

multiple meanings.¹⁶⁰ Able to correlate music, dance, image and text at once, these meanings were not necessarily fixed or linear, but associative. Olson's review of Litz' performance, published in the *Black Mountain Review*,¹⁶¹ applauded her kinetic drive, and encouraged her to even further remove any symbolic connotation in her movement: show "the possibilities of the body's parts," he wrote, ". . . so that . . . their physicality is in front of you so clean of all reference that it is like when the finest painter confronts you with paint in the power of itself as pigment."¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ Erikson 329.

¹⁶¹ Olson founded this magazine in 1954, which ran through 1957 with Robert Creeley as its editor.

¹⁶² Belgrad 159.

CONCLUSION

It is impossible to neatly categorize what kind of art and collaboration Black Mountain College engendered during its brief existence. Rooted in experimentation, chance, and spontaneity, and equally fascinated with visible labors of process, materiality, and new practices of perception, the abstract forms and ideas created there varied wildly. Yet there was something unifying among those figures who so famously participated in the community: a desire for a new language, a new means of sharing and involving the world in their creative processes. My study of Anni Albers, John Cage, and Charles Olson has provided three example of this. In an effort to display how they were in the vanguard of experimental art, I've rifled through their abstract thinking with the (equally abstract) symbol of the glyph. With this approach I have demonstrated how they were casting new ideas about visual language and alternative ways to use and conceptualize writing.

Almost anything can be art, I think I've learned, or can lead to art. More interesting is how creative individuals defend this idea in the context of their own work, how history absorbs their defense, and how it specifically shapes and grooves artistic morphology. Art movements, whether in fine art, theater, dance, or poetry, progress in unmysterious ways: the ballooning of extraordinary talent from a few artistic individuals inspires trends and configures itself into a school of thought, then someone disagrees, has new ideas, and starts the cycle over again. Black Mountain is an exemplar in this canon, and one of the most influential in molding how we've landed where we are in art today. What makes the school so intriguing now, besides this trajectory, is the menagerie of stories that contributed to its collective sense of artistic upheaval, and how, since much of the Black Mountain community has passed by now, these stories are

taking on lives of their own. This is reminiscent, I think, of my earlier comment about the role of memory in *Theater Piece No.1*, about how it relies on these memories to “exist.” Instead of trying to pin down what exactly happened during such an event, to conceptualize the performance as an experience designed for that night in 1952 alone allows for a better understanding of its chance-derived essence. To accept the limitations of its “factual” history is to recognize its exercise of impulse, its attempts to alter perception—things that cannot be felt by reading about the event alone. What reading offers, rather, is a kind of experience that will help Black Mountain endure: the absorbing experience of simply imagining what it was like—the desire to imagine.

What I have contributed to these stories is the allure they hold for me, and a comparison between individuals that haven’t often been compared in Black Mountain scholarship. As for this study’s value to me, I will likely never be moved by a weaving as I was by *Ancient Writing*, and will forever revel in the idea of *Theater Piece No. 1* as a completely vogue, romantic, mysterious event. I will never be an avid proponent of Olson’s poetry, but the animal intensity of “Projective Verse” has inspired my own poetry in a sort of baffling way, triggering a desire to let go of my calculated tendencies in creative work. This is what happens when you study something closely: it augments and integrates itself into the texture of your life, of every experience. This is something, I like to think, that these three artists I’ve studied would advocate.

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