

BLACK MIRROR

THE EXPERIMENTAL 1930s UNIVERSITY THAT STILL INFLUENCES EDUCATION TODAY

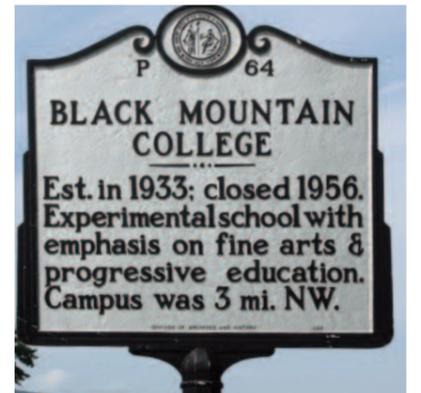
Daniel Scheffler

The year 1933: Europe is on the precipice of war, the Philippines find independence and Mahatma Gandhi is released from prison in India. But over the pond in America, in a small North Carolina mountain town called Asheville, the world is changing in an altogether subtler – but not insignificant – way: the Black Mountain College is born.

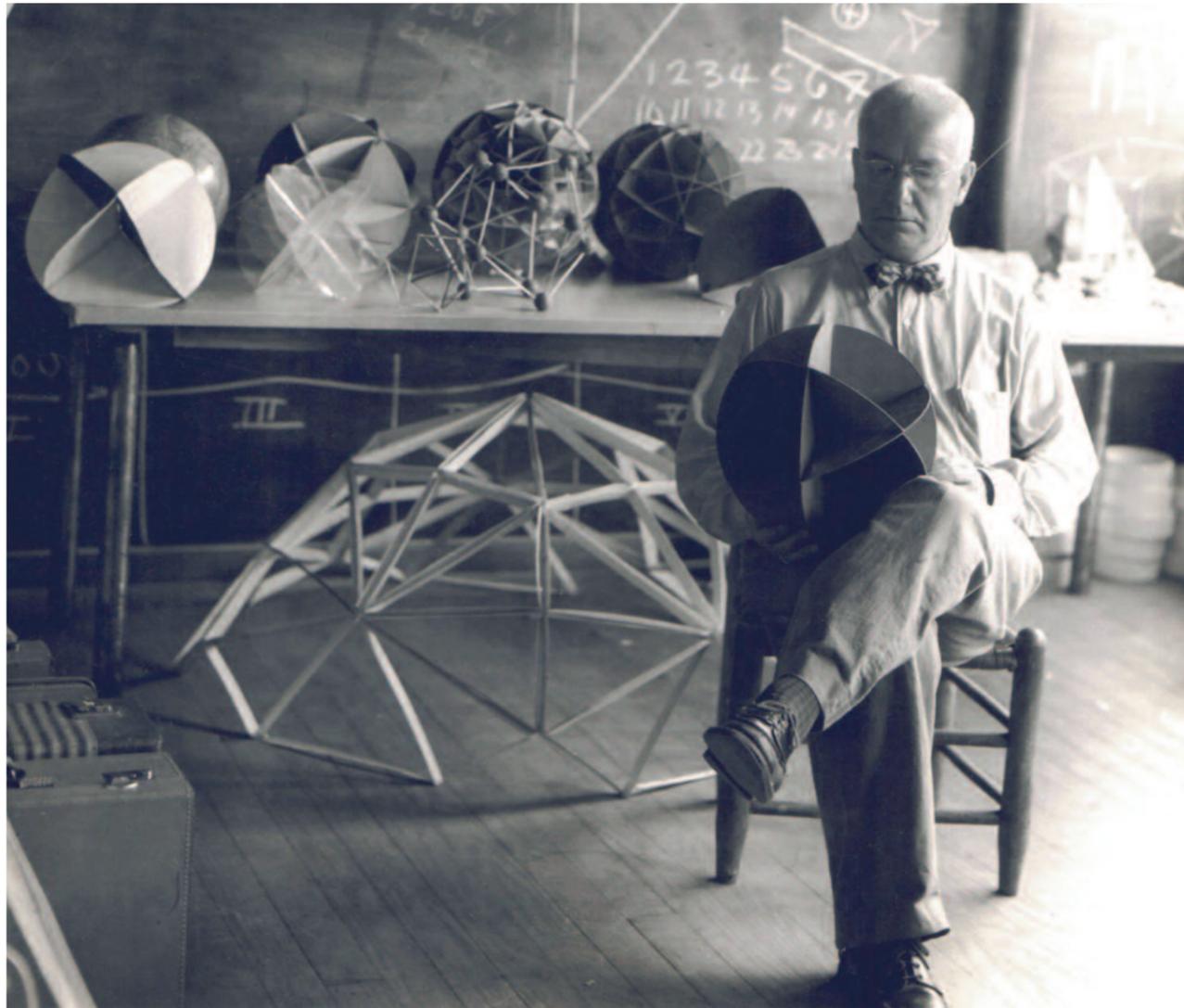
Conceived by mercurial scholar John A Rice, Black Mountain College (BMC) was forged from a desire to create a new type of educational system based on John Dewey’s pragmatic, progressive principles. Dewey, a philosopher and psychologist, was a firm believer that “education and learning are social and interactive processes” which to him meant that school itself is where social reform should happen.

He wanted students to thrive in a democratic environment where interaction with the curriculum was encouraged and pupils “should have the opportunity to take part in their own learning”. BMC embraced the utopian ideals of the progressive education movement, stating that the arts should be the centrepiece of the curriculum, whether it be weaving and knitting, painting and sculpting, or music and photography. The lofty – if rather fuzzy – ideal: to “better educate citizens for participation in a democratic society”.

“I find the depth and breadth of the Black Mountain College story endlessly fascinating,” says Alice Sebrell, Program Director at Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center, an organisation that provides access to historical materials related to BMC. “It connects to some of the most central and pivotal events and milestones of the 20th century, including WWII, The Depression and McCarthyism. It pointed the way ▶



Clockwise from above: A sign commemorates the closure of the college; the stylised Black Mountain College logo, which appeared on many of its documents; the Lake Eden campus building, which was designed by the school’s architecture professor; world-renowned American dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham, who was a teacher-in-residence at BMC; avant garde pianist David Tudor, who was a faculty member at the BMC



From top: Richard Buckminster Fuller with his famous geodesic dome, 1949; students at work at BMC

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► toward the most adventurous artistic experiences of the 20th and 21st centuries.”

The revolution started slowly but with purpose. Among the first faculty recruits were Europe's most progressive teacher/artist-husband/wife duo Josef and Anni Albers as BMC's chief evangelists. Though they didn't speak a word of English they gladly left the turmoil of Hitler's Germany for the American South, not quite knowing what to expect from this small mountain college.

A 1952 college bulletin stated: “Our central and consistent effort is to teach method, not content; to emphasize process, to invite the student to the realization that the way of handling facts – and himself amid the facts – is more important than the facts themselves.”

At the time, BMC's methods were seen as radical – naturally it was one of the first institutions in the South to be integrated with both African American students and teachers – but its numbers swelled from an initial 13 faculty members and 26 students to encompass more (exact numbers are unclear, but around 1,200 passed through its doors over its 24-year history). “Graduating” in the traditional sense wasn't a priority and the few diplomas it did hand out were as good as useless for most employers. That didn't stop it from gaining a reputation for producing some impressive creative talent, though. There's Robert Rauschenberg, who anticipated the Pop Art movement with his large-scale prints; the abstract painter Kenneth Nolan who is one of the most noted “American Color Field Painters”; and sculptor Ruth Asawa, known as the “fountain lady” for her industrial wire works.

After seven years renting the YMCA Blue Ridge Assembly building, the group purchased a 667-acre piece of land at Lake Eden for which it would become famous. Bauhaus architect Walter Gropius was commissioned to design the campus but his vision far exceeded the college's meagre budget. Instead BMC's architecture professor, A Lawrence Kocher, designed a “single facility that would house classrooms, space for an art room, storage, student studies, and faculty apartments”. It was a four-phased project, of which only the first phase was ever built. There were several other buildings constructed for the college – including Jalowetz Cottage, Minimum House and Cabin 24/25 –

all notable for their “International Style” architecture. Additionally, the faculty and students designed and built the farm buildings and the “Quiet House” (a meditation cabin in the woods that inspired social critic Paul Goodman's play of the same name).

Today, the architecture remains but the college is long since departed (it's now known as Camp Rockmont for Boys, a Christian summer school whose wholesome American values are deliciously at odds with those of the institution it replaced). Perhaps inevitably for an institution that so gladly shirked orthodoxy, it was brought down by the system – it couldn't pay its bills. Good intentions don't keep the lights on, it seems. Amid dwindling numbers of students, a 1957 court order wound the institution up for good.

But while it may be gone, it's not forgotten. Fast-forward to today and the BMC is once again making an impact. “Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College 1933-1957” debuted in October at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, after which it will travel to Los Angeles at the Armand Hammer Museum, and on to Columbus, Ohio's Wexner Center for the Arts, finally closing in June 2016.

This first comprehensive US exhibition on the college features more than 260 objects from around 100 artists, including Josef and Anni Albers, Ruth Asawa, Willem and Elaine de Kooning, Buckminster Fuller, Robert Motherwell, Robert Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly. There are “frequent in-gallery performances” that bring to life music and dance performed during the college's heyday, including reconstructed choreography by Merce Cunningham and avant-garde compositions by John Cage. “Black Mountain College set an important historical precedent for thinking about relationships between art, pedagogy, democracy, and globalism,” says show curator Helen Molesworth, who wanted to highlight the college's role in shaping major movements in postwar art and education, from contemporary dance and music to New American Poetry.

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