

Moreover, the structure of Cage's music was often set up so that it could be as well expressed by the absence of sound materials as by their presence.³ The practice and the process of listening, even if one is listening to silence, are as important as the accomplishment of having appreciated a piece of music. What is crucial is the development of a person's ability to truly perceive the sound of a truck passing at fifty miles per hour.

The methods of Joseph Albers, who taught visual arts at Black Mountain, was described as a process that placed an increased awareness of the visual world at its core. John Rice wrote that Albers "gave you a pair of eyes – you saw things."⁴ This is worlds apart from accomplishing the goal of turning out a professional artist or leading a student to produce a finished, masterful work.

Blocky and rigid, a posture which submits every element of learning to the service of a specific and pre-meditated goal stifles the creative exploration which seems to have billowed through Black Mountain College. Josef Albers, who refused to refer to his student's work as anything but studies, wrote that "We are content if our studies of form achieve an understanding vision, clear conceptions, and a productive will."⁵ Duberman writes that at Black Mountain, "the focus was less on shaping civic forms than individual human beings."⁶ This sharply derails not only career-driven education but also ideological pedagogy pointed at translating a particular effect to a field or industry.

In tune with shaping an individual rather than a finished product, Albers believed that students could be brought, through their studies, to "readiness," to the kind of sensitivity that might allow them "not to miss the chance of finding and presenting a new idea, a new seeing."⁷ John Cage regarded Albers as an "amazing man - because he combined the strictness of German thinking and the ability to inspire people with the possibility of their own individual freedom."⁸ This emphasis on developing the individual more than their final

³ *Silence: Lectures and Writings: Composition as Process*, John Cage, pg 19

⁴ *Black Mountain College, An Exploration in Community*, Martin Duberman, Northwestern University Press, 1972 pg 46

⁵ *Black Mountain College, An Exploration in Community*, Martin Duberman, Northwestern University Press, 1972 pg 49

⁶ *Black Mountain College, An Exploration in Community*, Martin Duberman, Northwestern University Press, 1972 pg 48

⁷ *Black Mountain College, An Exploration in Community*, Martin Duberman, Northwestern University Press, 1972 pg 47

⁸ *Black Mountain College, An Exploration in Community*, Martin Duberman, Northwestern University Press, 1972 pg 300

product or career at Black Mountain seems a reasonable safeguard against final-product or accomplishment-driven pedagogy in general, as it would be difficult to find a teacher proud enough to think themselves capable of orchestrating a human being in to a *finished piece* at the age of twenty-something.

A temptation, given the energy of Cage's and Albers' words and practice, might be to turn this viewpoint itself in to an ideology which paints demonizing target signs on *career* or *product*. Certainly the lives of Rauschenberg, deKooning, Olson, and so many of the students and teachers associated with Black Mountain stand between the college and such a brazen ideology.

There is a story, recorded recently in a quieting variation by Rochester story artist Jay Stetzer, about a youth who goes to a wise man seeking the secret to enlightenment (an honorable goal), and is told to do away with everything he has, even the clothes on his back, and go to a cave to meditate. Taking this to be a concrete method, the youth sells everything except for his loin cloth and travels to a cave, where he begins to meditate. Before long, though, he is disturbed by a mouse chewing on the hem of his cloth, and so he finds a cat to keep the mouse away. When the cat needs to be fed, he acquires a milk cow – the keeping of which disturbs his meditation. In search of a helper to milk the cow, he finds a wife, who bears him children. When the children need to be cared for, he plants a garden and builds a house. It is in this state that the wise man finds him, and asks what happened. Assuming an air of condemnation, the husband, father, and farm-owner sheepishly describes his path and stumbles gently on the realization that he *has* found enlightenment. Rigid interpretation would have made a goal of asceticism and awkwardly pursued its metaphysical benefits, but through his journey young man eventually loosens his grip on meaning as a goal and in the process of exploration, stumbles in to the embrace of enlightenment.⁹

The potent paradox here is that seeking enlightenment as a goal blocks the possibility of it being attained – like trying to catch smoke in your hands – while allowing oneself to be absorbed in to the process of pursuit, almost forgetting the goal, is the best way to attain the “goal.”

⁹ “Fables in Four Minutes” (track 7: “Enlightenment”), Jay Stetzer & John Teleska

Being Absorbed in to Process



Merging with Subject

The landscape painter painter George Inness held a view of process which might have found great harmony at Black Mountain. His own work showed a tremendous abandon to the Joy of process exactly in harmony with Albers' refusal to call any student work anything but a "study" or a "good beginning." Even late in his career, when Inness had attained some notoriety, he infuriated some of his patrons by borrowing back his paintings for some small alteration and returning the piece to them almost entirely painted over with a new image. In his studio he was even more ruthless with unsold canvases, painting over images that were no longer in "movement." The state of a "finished" or "fully resolved" piece seemed to him an almost intolerable stagnation.¹⁰ Similarly, the abstract painters sprouted at Black Mountain College, from deKooning to Motherwell. tended to view process and movement as paramount – the only chance of infusing life in to a "finished" piece. A painting is a record (an index?) of the creative process.

There is a similarity between a painting as a finished product and knowledge as a codified piece of information. Speaking about the attaining of knowledge as a tool for power or as an end in itself, Inness places himself eloquently in the arms of learning as a vehicle for growth and life. The hard, the fixed, and the empirical kinds of knowledge were not an end in themselves for Inness. In an 1879 interview for *The Art Journal*, Inness softly subverted the strength of the saying, "*Knowledge is Power*". Rather, he suggests,

*Knowledge is the seed which, in order to be useful, must be covered up, and die within the warm soil of human affection. It is good to have such a seed, if we plant it. ...When the love of learning is separated from the love of use, it obtrudes itself at the expense of beauty.*¹¹

¹⁰ George Inness and the Visionary Landscape, Adrienne Baxter Bell, George Braziller, Inc. New York, 2003

¹¹ George Inness, Writings and Reflections of Art and Philosophy, Adrienne Baxter Bell, George Braziller, Inc., New York, 2006, pg 80

Loosening the powerful white-knuckled grip that empiricism often exercises over knowledge, and submitting to the sway of human affection is a foundational stone in a bridge built towards Inness' world. His is a space where impassioned love for subject engulfs the creator and his process in an inspired ecstasy. There is an element of submission here. In the same interview for *The Art Journal*, Inness said that

*The real difficulty is in bringing the intellect to submit to the fact of the indefinable – that which hides itself that we may see it. The intellect naturally desires to define everything. It cannot define God; therefore it cannot trust him.*¹²

Submission to God, for Inness, who believed that all of nature was imbued with revelations of God, was closely tied to a submission to nature (in much the same way the figures in his paintings are often absorbed by light's power in to their surroundings). As the individual becomes unified with nature, the need to intellectually and empirically define either God or the world through which God flows, lessens. In merging with the nature, which contains God, the individual is brought closer to God, and has less need of defining Him empirically.

There is a correspondence between the figures in Inness' paintings being absorbed in to light and the aim of having a student absorbed in to the process of learning at Black Mountain. While the former requires letting go of the *goal* of becoming a naturalist, the latter requires letting go of the goal of attaining knowledge or a degree (which Black mountain did not really offer). Similarly, the accomplishment of appreciating music is in tune with the accomplishment of defining a truth or a piece of knowledge. *Accomplishment* rings in a chord with *ownership*. Innes wrote of his practice: "*You must suggest to me reality – you can never show me reality.*"¹³ To have something suggested to you, you must be at least somewhat caught up in the process of exploring. Albers' students had beauty suggested to them that *they* might be changed and continue to pursue it. This is very different from beauty being *shown* to them that they might *have* it. Buckminster Fuller writes that

¹² George Inness, *Writings and Reflections of Art and Philosophy*, Adrienne Baxter Bell, George Brazillier, Inc., New York, 2006, pg 81

¹³ *George Inness and the Visionary Landscape*, Adrienne Baxter Bell, George Brazillier, Inc. New York, 2003, pg. 17

the *exact* truth can never be attained or told. We can reduce the degree of tolerated error, but we have learned physically, as Heisenberg discovered, that exactitude is prohibited, because most exquisite physical experiment has shown that “the act of measuring always alters that which is measured.”¹⁴

Some of these ideas about being absorbed in to learning or the landscape as a process without a concrete goal of defining or measuring a subject are echoed in the thinking and writing of the American Transcendentalists, who were active during Inness’ lifetime. The parting lines of Walt Whitman’s Song of Myself ring resonantly in tune with the enveloping light of Inness’ painting “The Bathers”.

The last scud of day holds back for me,
It flings my likeness after the rest and true as any on the shadowed wilds,
It coaxes me to the vapor and the dusk.
I depart as air I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,
I effuse my flesh in eddies and drift it in lacy jags.
I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles.¹⁵

The merging with the dust, the coaxing to vapor and dusk, and the effusion of self in to the environment are overwhelmingly strong images in these few lines of poetry. They conjure up a sublimation of ego and a holistic fluidity between all elements of nature, man included. The current runs with consistent and joyful force through George Inness’ figures.

Buckminster Fuller writes that this incomprehensible universe

can have no “beginning” or “ending.” Vast numbers of scientists yet labor vainly to account for the misconception of beginnings and endings. We have at minimum the neutron and the proton, which always and only coexist, the electron and the

¹⁴ Critical Path, Buckminster Fuller, St Martin’s Press, New York, 1981, pg xxxvii

¹⁵ Song of Myself, Unabridged, Walt Whitman, Dover Publications, Inc. 2001, pg 54

positron, the neutrino, antineutrino, and all. There is no single building block – there are only complexes of complex systems.¹⁶

Knowledge, process, enlightenment, and creativity are things which can not be owned, measured, or codified. They suffer or refuse to come together like smoke in clasped hands when the attempt is made. This idea, seemingly so present in the life of Black Mountain College, is a breath of expansive fresh air to me. It is possible that one day I might comprehend it enough to let it breathe in my practice and teaching.

The ideas tossed around in this essay might empower the approach of Josef Albers to the function of Art in teaching described by Duberman:

Along with the belief that art put one in touch with every field of endeavor (“Art reaches from the plaza to the church”), Albers also felt “you can build the general character through art.” In short, Albers had never conceived of art as an incidental endeavor on the periphery of life, but rather as a process of sensitization and insight applicable to every aspect of life, one that integrated all fields of learning.¹⁷

¹⁶ Critical Path, Buckminster Fuller, St Martin’s Press, New York, 1981, pg 7

¹⁷ Black Mountain College, An Exploration in Community, Martin Duberman, Northwestern University Press, 1972 , pg 49

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