

extraordinary human being.”¹⁹⁸ At BMC, however, Fuller went further, letting students and colleagues behind the curtain, showing all the awkwardness and beauty of a person struggling to turn a corner in himself.¹⁹⁹

Thus, we arrive at an answer, or set of answers, to the question, Who is the formative educator?²⁰⁰ First, we must recall the crucial point that, in an important sense, students themselves must be the drivers and lead architects of their own formative education. As Albers puts it, “Individual nourishment is the task of the individual himself.”²⁰¹ So our first answer is: the student. But this does not mean that formative education can be entirely autodidactic. We need teachers to help us arrange a meeting with ourselves, to point us toward and help us make use of valuable formative resources, and to model for us the soul action that we are seeking to undertake. Learners need to see the fruits of formative labors, the achievement of character. This includes exemplary qualities such as emotional depth, imaginative range, intellectual precision, moral sensitivity, and political clarity. It also includes the distinctiveness of each character. It is moving to see how individuals cobble together a self with disparate materials and hold themselves together amid internal conflicts and external buffeting. And, as we have been stressing, learners also need to see the labor itself. They need examples of persons-in-process, models of how to engage the harrowing work of self-cultivation with courage, energy, grace, seriousness, humor, and perseverance. So, who is the formative educator? The formative educator is someone who can serve as a catalyst, midwife, and model. And we can now read the question as a statement: *who* is a formative educator. It is centrally the distinctive who-ness of the teacher that catalyzes and inspires.

THEATER AND WINGS

Because of its inherent tendency to disclose the agent together with the act, action needs for its full appearance the shining brightness we once called glory, and which is possible only in the public realm.

—Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*²⁰²

Everything that lives, not vegetative life alone, emerges from darkness and, however strong its natural tendency to thrust itself into the light, it nevertheless needs the security of darkness to grow at all.

—Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis in Education”²⁰³

Earlier we noted our tendency to dichotomize formal and informal education, imagining that beyond the intended lesson there is only the happenstance of experience. This distorts our understanding of formative education in at least three ways. First, it blinds us to the crucial role of the relational and the adventitious in the scene of classroom learning. The enactment of curriculum depends, as it were, on the local weather; and this depends in turn on the surrounding atmosphere, the ethos in which classroom learning is embedded. Second, this dichotomy obscures all of those educational experiences that develop precisely *across* classroom and non-classroom spaces. It was only by tracing Rumaker's zigzag route—from his chance exchange with Virginia outside the dining hall to having his story torn to shreds in front of his peers in Olson's writing workshop and back to the dining hall, where Rumaker stewed over and digested the challenge Olson had laid at his feet—that we could hope to understand his transformative experience. Finally, it renders invisible the formative intentionality built into the spaces, practices, and rhythms that structure everyday life in a place such as Black Mountain.

In our discussion of the college so far, one such experiential structure has stood out: the stage. And this is a formative element that confounds the distinctions between formal/informal, academic/experiential, curricular/extracurricular, and intended/incidental. At BMC, we have found all of the following: the stage in the classroom (Wunsch's theater pedagogy); the stage as classroom (Bucky's debut); the classroom as stage (Olson's writing workshop); and the community as ongoing theater-in-the-round (Rice's "goldfish bowl"). In this section, I want to explore not only the extent, but also the limits, of this dramaturgical conception of formative education. At Black Mountain, it turns out, not all the world's a stage. Crucially, the college knew to temper its theatrical ethos with a complementary formative principle, providing space for solitude and structuring time for recollection.

It is not only the literal stage that is of interest as we explore the aesthetic-existential model of formative education that flourished at Black Mountain. That said, we also should not minimize the centrality of the performing arts to the life of the college. The BMC dining hall doubled as a performance space, and many evenings were given over to plays, readings, dance recitals, and concerts. In the early years of the college, for example, there was a concert every Saturday night. However, quantity doesn't tell the whole story. Whether as company or audience, the BMC community was constantly tackling difficult new material and forms. Black Mountain is legendary

for its early championing of avant-garde modernism, but this should not be confused with the search for a new canon. It is rather a restless search for forms that renew and extend our modes of perception and thought. In 1948, that challenge was the surrealism of Satie's *Ruse of the Medusa*. Only a couple of years later, we find MC Richards, David Tudor, and John Cage again challenging their received ideas about the theater by together working through the ideas of Antonin Artaud, then virtually unknown outside of France. (Richards would go on to publish the first English translation of *The Theater and Its Double*, in 1958, offering a key inspiration for a generation of experimental theater in New York and beyond.²⁰⁴) Or consider dance: while the larger world was still digesting the modernity of Martha Graham, Black Mountain was helping launch the important departure from Graham represented by the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, which held its inaugural performances at the college in August 1953.

The phrase avant-garde likely conjures up the detached, knowing stance of the aesthete. I am suggesting that the passion for aesthetic novelty and difficulty at BMC stemmed from what is essentially the opposite source: a commitment to wide-awakeness and a willingness to risk one's settled conclusions. Consider, for example, David Tudor's piano recital in August 1951, which included pieces by Schönberg, Webern, Boulez, Cage, Feldman, and Wolff.²⁰⁵ It was not enough to embrace the difficult chromaticism, atonality, and serialism of the Second Viennese School: here Tudor is already trying to break through the crust of Schönbergian convention by opening himself to the "affective athleticism" of Boulez's "Piano Sonata No. 2" and the aleatory play of the New York School.²⁰⁶ It is said that *de gustibus non-disputandum est* (in matters of taste, there can be no dispute). Black Mountain never got the memo. When Cage suggested that he devote his 1948 summer performances to working through the entire (if then small) oeuvre of Erik Satie—giving three half-hour evening concerts per week over the eight-week term—Albers insisted that Cage preface each concert with a ten-minute talk that could make these ultra-minimal compositions "seem reasonable."²⁰⁷ Good idea until, in one of these explainers, Cage happened to decry the "deadening effect" of Beethoven's emphasis on harmony, setting off a war with BMC's Germanophiles.²⁰⁸ Erwin Bodky promptly launched a series of counter concerts, featuring Beethoven's later quartets, prefaced by his own mini-lectures refuting those "who would disparage Beethoven's reputation."²⁰⁹ The mounting tensions were only

finally defused when a raucous food fight broke out in the dining hall—an informed and passionate public indeed.

It is not only the ideal of wide-awakeness that drove this interest in novel and difficult aesthetic forms, but also BMC’s holistic educational impulse. Mirroring the interdisciplinarity of its curriculum, the BMC stage was itself partial to *Gesamtkunstwerk*. In the next section, I describe in detail the 1952 aleatory, mixed-media, theater-in-the-round piece (Cage’s *Theater Piece No. 1*) now considered to be the first “happening.” But already in the late thirties, under the direction of Xanti Schawinsky, Black Mountain was staging “total theater,” proto-performance-art pieces such as *Spectodrama: Play, Life, Illusion* (1936–1937) and *Dans Macabre: A Sociological Study* (1938).²¹⁰ Indeed, Schawinsky’s work was meant not only to draw from a range of art forms— theater, music, dance, painting, poetry—but also to be integrated into the “academic” curriculum. For Schawinsky, “the stage was to be a laboratory for synthesizing through non-analytical, non-literary means ideas being explored in all disciplines of the curriculum.”²¹¹ Schawinsky himself describes *Spectodrama* as “an educational method,” in which a working group, bridging the arts and the sciences, creates staged representations to express the fruits of their inquiries, as they search for a “a new alphabet that might provide more complex means of . . . communication.”²¹² Though Schawinsky had already begun to develop a theater of “total experience” during his time at the Bauhaus, a holistic institution in its own right, at Black Mountain he found that he had more “professional and artistic scope” so that “an educational crack at the whole man seemed to be in order.”²¹³

To reiterate, this was no conservatory for aspiring actors. Black Mountain was equally committed to both sides of the equation clearly stated by Albers when he writes, “any education separated from art is no general education. Also, any art training unrelated to general human development is no education.”²¹⁴ Given the college’s small size, Emil Willimetz (student from 1937–1940) recalls,

to have a play at BMC almost every available body needed to be impressed. As shy as I was in public performances, Wunsch managed to get me into Irwin Shaw’s *Bury the Dead*, Clifford Odets’ *Waiting for Lefty*, and Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*.²¹⁵

So the literal stage was a central feature of the Black Mountain (extra)curriculum, whether you were “impressed” to play a part, worked backstage, or participated as an audience member. However, as Albers indicates, the

goal was not a theater program as such. Everything turns on whether the literal stage can become an existential one. Literal theater, we must admit, can fail as formative experience for performers and audience alike. Conversely, you don't need to be in drama class to experience the "theater of display and witness."²¹⁶ Indeed, as we have seen, all aspects of life in this fishbowl of a college—teaching and learning, working and playing, making and conversing—were shot through with a heightened awareness of the dynamics of self-disclosure and interpersonal recognition.

To frame this idea, we have been drawing on Arendt's concepts of natality and action, her distinction between generic, predictable behavior and the kind of self-enactment that can never "be expected from whatever may have happened before."²¹⁷ Behavior begets more behavior, and so we each trudge along in our usual mode—no less strange for its ubiquity—of being simultaneously wrapped up in personal concerns and out of touch with our distinctive personhood. But every so often a different sort of space opens up, what Arendt calls a "space of appearance."²¹⁸ As we are drawn together by a common concern, the distinctive vectors of our approaches are thrown into relief. The *res publica*, the public thing, occasions self-enacting "deeds" (Arendt's term of art for actions that speak volumes and words that make waves), which in turn stimulate the deeds of others, the meanings of which are found in yet further self-enacting responses.²¹⁹

Formative educators of all stripes work to occasion such moments and rejoice when they occur, moments when an individual student suddenly steps forward from the ensemble to take a solo. It is not simply that people have been hiding, trying to blend in, and finally risk more authenticity. Rather, the dynamics of the group, and of the material itself, occasion the discovery of a new aspect of oneself, allow one to come into oneself in a new way. A student, let's call him Dan, suddenly reveals his Dan-ness not only to the group but also to himself. I have seen a good seminar group, without skipping a beat in their seriousness about the task at hand, laugh with delight at the grace of these serendipitous moments of, to coin a term, *personation*.

But disclosure is one thing and exposure is another. In the epigraphs to this section, we see that Arendt offers a both-and logic when it comes to this key aspect of human flourishing.²²⁰ Arendt is clear that we need spaces of recognition and occasions for self-disclosure. For example, she prefaces her account of action with this passage from Dante:

In every act, what is primarily intended by the doer . . . is the disclosure of his own image. Hence it comes about that every doer takes delight in doing . . . since in action the being of the doer is somehow intensified. . . . Thus nothing acts unless [by acting] it makes patent its latent self.²²¹

However, she is just as clear that we need spaces of retreat from “the glare of the public,” from the demand to discover and enact our who-ness in concert with others. This capacious, dialectical philosophical anthropology suggests an important principle for formative higher education: human growth requires a rhythm of engagement and withdrawal. And that is just what BMC offered. To illustrate this rhythm, let’s next peek in on Albers’s studio pedagogy, gathering another example of how a classroom space can serve as a theater of display and witness. Later, we will see how Black Mountain provided space to withdraw from the pressures of the interpersonal and modulated the tempo of discovery.

★ ★ ★

The more I think of it . . . the greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to *see* something, and tell what it *saw* in a plain way. Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see.
—John Ruskin²²²

As soon as the college was up and running, Rice’s top priority was to find someone to teach art. “Don’t ask me how or why I know it,” he was often heard to say, “but if I can’t get the right man for art, then the thing won’t work.”²²³ But finding the right person would not be easy. For Rice rejected the traditional way of incorporating the arts into general education, as a series of great works authored by others to be admired by the student. “The country is swamped with appreciators,” he quipped.²²⁴ At Black Mountain, the goal was to foster persons “in whom there is a nice balance of forethought, action, and reflection,” and this meant engaging the students themselves in practices of production and performance.²²⁵ It is this active component, Rice explains, that makes art “the best medium” for general education:

In history, sociology, psychology, economics, and the rest, there is plenty of action to be reflected upon; but it is *not the action of the student himself*. . . . They do not and cannot begin with the individual student as . . . the one who is doing the doing. This is why we at Black Mountain begin with art. The artist thinks about what he himself is going to do, does it himself, and then reflects back upon the thing that he himself has done.²²⁶

As we saw earlier, Rice has a complicated relationship to learner-centered education. While he is happy to embrace learning-by-doing, he wants nothing to do with that strain of progressivism that elevates relevance over rigor. Rice was seeking an art professor devoted to the rigors of perception and production, not someone offering structureless sandboxes of self-expression. The trick is to steer away from freedom-as-license without colliding back into learning-as-compulsion. The arts steer us toward this truly progressive middle ground because artmaking is not about rule-following but neither is it a matter of making up the rules as you go along. As Rice puts it, “the arts are least subject to direction from without and yet have within them a severe discipline of their own.”²²⁷ But what exactly is this “severe discipline”? Here I read Rice as referring to the fact that an artist works in a medium, or a complex of materials and cultural givens that function as enabling constraints.

If that last phrase sounds paradoxical, it is because we tend to suffer from a case of myopia regarding freedom, mistaking freedom from constraint (“negative freedom”) for the whole of freedom (which includes a “positive” aspect). To cure ourselves, let’s try a thought experiment.

Imagine a baseball game in progress. There is a runner on first who has been given the green light to steal second base. As he takes his lead, it does seem correct to say that his freedom to steal is curtailed on all sides: the shortstop is covering second; the catcher stands ready to throw him out; the first baseman is holding him on; the pitcher, who has a solid pickoff move, is looking him back to first; if the play is close, the umpire will decide his fate.

But now notice what happens when we remove these constraints. First, let’s delete the umpire and opposing team. While the runner is still free to run to second (in fact, he could crawl to the bag!), it is no longer clear in what meaningful sense he is still free to steal the base. Now let’s remove his team as well. Is he still a baserunner? In any case, let’s go ahead and remove the bases, and erase the boundary lines. In fact, let’s uninvent baseball altogether, so that its rules and history never existed. What do we find?

A man stands alone in a field. There is nothing stopping him from sprinting 90 feet in any direction he chooses. At the same time, indeed as a result, he is utterly unfree to steal second base, or even to conceive of the project.

This is not to deny that some constraints prevent us from carrying out our projects. The recent roadwork near my house has most certainly reduced my freedom to pick up my daughters from school! It is to remind ourselves

that action is not only vulnerable to being blocked: it can also be hollowed out. The freedom to conceive and carry out projects requires a thick medium of action, one that enables even as it constrains.

It is precisely because they push back in distinctive ways that artistic media enable distinctive forms of expression. The structure of granite determines how it chips. Paint drips, dries, and appears according to the laws of gravity, viscosity, and optics. Dancers too deal with gravity, along with the facts of anatomy. The alternating stresses of iambs locks the poet into a particular rhythm. And as a result, happily, one can say quite different things in a granite sculpture, a painted canvas, a choreographed dance, or a poem in iambic tetrameter. Conversely, the surefire way to tell that you have walked into a stinker of an art exhibition is when there is a pamphlet waiting for you at the end, explaining what the pieces were getting at. It turns out that what you saw were merely visual analogues of ideas already worked out in ordinary prose, not thinking in a medium. Contrast this with, say, Francis Alÿs's *Paradox of Practice 1* (1997) or Doris Salcedo's *Shibboleth* (2007). In the former we find someone pondering how "sometimes making something leads to nothing" (the piece's subtitle) and doing this thinking through the enabling constraints of movement, video, and a giant block of ice on a warm day.²²⁸ In the latter, we encounter ideas—about the exclusion of immigrants and outsiders, about the barriers we erect and the passwords we expect—formed in concrete and steel mesh. MC Richards, offers this nice description of her encounter with medium at the potter's wheel:

There was, first of all, something in the nature of the clay itself. You can do very many things with it, push this way and pull that, squeeze and roll and attach and pinch and hollow and pile. But you can't do everything with it. You can only go so far, and then the clay resists.²²⁹

Thus, even while art fosters independence, it teaches us that, in life, wishing doesn't make it so.

The problem for Rice was finding someone steeped in craft discipline who also saw artmaking as part of general education. When colleagues asked Rice if he wanted BMC to be an art school, they received a sharp reply: "'God no!' he'd thunder, 'that's the last thing I want.' They're the most awful places in the world."²³⁰ Where the art schools were turning out "little tin pot artists," Rice wanted explorers of the very "grammar of the art of living."²³¹ Where professional artists tended to be "spiritual porcupines" "hiding in their lonely

places,” Rice wanted civic poets who would “go into the center of life *and belong there*.”²³² Where the arts were full of brand-name individualists (“peddlers, each crying his own wares, and crying down his fellow peddlers”), Rice wanted genuine individuals, artists whose investigations of form were also a search for an “integrity of relationship,” demonstrating how one devotes oneself to the polis while “giving up . . . nothing of” oneself.²³³

Let’s review Rice’s seemingly impossible wish list. He wanted someone to teach art experientially, as a firsthand process of discovery, not as a series of finished (if not fully embalmed) works completed by others. At the same time, Rice wanted someone who knew that the rigor mortis of scholasticism was not the only possible form of rigor in aesthetic education. He sought a commitment to craft that would counter the tendency in learner-centered education to treat freedom as license and creativity as vacuous self-expression. But that was not all. He also wanted someone who could untether such craft knowledge from art-school pre-professionalism, someone who taught art as general education, not as specialized training aiming to “turn out a professional dauber, designer, fiddler, or actor who will become ‘famous,’ [so that the faculty can] . . . bask in his glory.”²³⁴ Could there really be a teacher of art who simultaneously satisfied all three of these ideals? Indeed, almost miraculously, before the first term was up, Rice found just such a person in Josef Albers, the Bauhaus “crafts master” exiled by Hitler’s rise to power.²³⁵

On Albers’s first day at BMC, at a reception welcoming him and his wife Anni, he was asked what he hoped to accomplish. The epigrammatic Albers wasted no words: “I want to open eyes.”²³⁶ A year later, in the *Black Mountain College Bulletin*, he elaborated on his pedagogical approach:

From his own experiences the student should first become aware of form problems in general, and thereby become clear as to his own real inclinations and abilities. In short, our art instruction attempts first to teach the student to see in the widest sense: to open his eyes to the phenomena about him and, most important of all, to open to his own living, being, and doing. In this connection we consider class work in art studies necessary because of the common tasks and mutual criticism.²³⁷

Albers wastes no time before signaling his commitment to experiential education. Throughout his career, he questioned the educational value of passing on the “deadwood” of a knowledge disconnected from conduct, a

process he described (five years before Freire would famously expose education's "narration sickness") as "auditory discipleship."²³⁸ As a critic of schooling, Albers was ahead of his time. Two decades before the publication of *A Nation at Risk*—the alarmist, Reaganite report that many use to date the turn toward high-stakes, standardized testing—Albers was decrying that we have confused the educated person with someone skilled in "memory acrobatics," and that we always place "retrospection before creation, and thus re-search before search."²³⁹

At the same time, Albers the crafts master was not about to let experiential education devolve into a free-for-all. He rejected what he described as the "poor heritage given to us by so-called progressive education."²⁴⁰ Throughout his career, he consistently distinguished his aims—"disciplined seeing and sensitive reading of form. . . . [the] syntax and synopsis of visual articulation"—from what he called "the present fashion of self-expression and over-individualization."²⁴¹ On his reading, art education suffered alternately between the disease of discipleship—which comes in various strains, he mused, including "Picassobia," "Matisseitis," "Kleptomaniac"—and an "epidemic . . . of self-expression."²⁴² Between imitation and premature bids to originality (he was known to scold students who signed their practice compositions), art students were missing out on the arduous but worthwhile task of developing their vision. In another formulation, Albers suggests that the art world seesaws between an objectivist version of realism and a subjectivist version of expressionism.²⁴³ Art, he counters, is neither "a report on nature [nor] . . . an intimate disclosure of inner secrets."²⁴⁴ The former reduces seeing to what Albers calls "outer sight" or "ocular seeing."²⁴⁵ The latter just replaces seeing with saying. Albers champions the neglected third option, which he calls "inner seeing" or "inner perception conditioned by imagination."²⁴⁶ Unlike self-expression, which is thought to be spontaneous, this "double-faced insight into our means and ourselves," insists the crafts master, requires sustained effort and remains "ninety-nine percent perspiration."²⁴⁷

Just as strong as Albers' commitments to craft and experiential education was his belief in general education. He shared Rice's disdain for pre-professionalism.²⁴⁸ "First, we seek contact with material," Albers wrote. "It is not our ambition to fill museums: we are gathering experience."²⁴⁹ To understand Albers's approach, however, we need to distinguish several different ways of thinking about general education. Typically, we see Gen

Ed as something piecemeal, as a set of distribution requirements meant to hedge against specialization. The idea is that, since knowledge is divided, students ought to learn at least a little in each division. Albers falls into a second camp, one that seeks to provide students with foundational experiences, where knowledge remains undivided. Albers captures this idea in a topographical metaphor:

Education is somewhat like a mountain (sometimes maybe like a hill). . . . The broader the base, the higher and firmer the top. The higher the top, the broader the view. Therefore, in school, in college, in university, first and second and third comes general education as a necessary foundation for all specialized studies which come later.²⁵⁰

Notice that, even as one progresses from basic exercises to more advanced work, the goal for Albers remains breadth of vision. Even within the foundational approach, Albers stakes out his own position. One familiar version of the foundational model sets out a list of books whose greatness transcends disciplinary splintering; another identifies core intellectual skills to be acquired before one proceeds into specialized study. Albers and Rice wanted Black Mountain to go a step further, aiming not only for intellectually synthetic courses but for experiences that integrate mind and body, knowing and doing, personal conviction and impersonal findings.

Again, art is no curricular cure-all. Indeed, we may find our experience in museums and concert halls deadening or distracting, an irony Dewey savors by coining the term “anesthetic.”²⁵¹ Whether it is set “upon a pedestal” as the work of genius or stowed in side cubbies as a series of technical specializations, art is too often detached from ordinary experience. For Albers, then, it was not only a matter of turning to art as a foundation; one must also seek the foundational in art. At Black Mountain, he taught not only the foundations of drawing and painting, but searched for even more fundamental building blocks. He taught an entire course on color. The centerpiece of his curriculum was his introduction to design sequence, or *Werklehre* (literally learning how to work), engaging students in a hands-on investigation of the properties of materials. One part of the sequence, *matière*, concerned our haptic relation to materials, investigating their textural possibilities. In “materials,” proper, students investigated capacities “such as compression, elasticity, and firmness, tested through folding and

bending.”²⁵² Anni Albers, who taught weaving at the college, speaks to the foundational role and formative potential of this approach:

We are overgrown with information, decorative maybe, but useless in any constructive sense. We have developed our receptivity and have neglected our own formative impulse. . . . And this fact leads to a suggestion: we must come down to earth from the clouds where we live in vagueness and experience the most real thing there is: material.²⁵³

While this advice certainly applies to aspiring artists, it was aspiring humans that the Alberses had in mind. Encounters with materials can nurture universal sensitivities of soul, Josef Albers suggests, helping “to discover and unfold ability, to discover and cultivate human relatedness.”²⁵⁴ For Albers, craft does have vocational implications, but not as training for a specific practice. In his classes, Albers worked to foster precision, economy of effort, and care for materials, dispositions needed in all forms of work.²⁵⁵ And it is not only visual artists who need to learn how to see. More than three decades after attending Albers’s classes, Rice offered this testimonial: “[He] gave you a pair of eyes—you saw things. . . . I’ve never forgotten him. . . . Hardly a day passes but my eyes say ‘Albers.’”²⁵⁶ The arts for Albers were not a specialized domain but a ground in which we found the roots of all of the capacities—civic, aesthetic, moral, spiritual—needed to lead a good and meaningful life. He targeted civic virtues such as the awareness that “life has greater forces than economic interests” and the quality of not waiting “to lead others or to be led” because one is “occupied in leading [one]self.”²⁵⁷ He sought to educate the imagination by expanding perception, writing that “the many-fold seeing, the many-fold reading of the world makes us broader, wider, richer.”²⁵⁸ He stressed ethical formation, speaking of how the arts constitute a “school of intentions,” and how they cultivate the situational responsiveness central to practical wisdom.²⁵⁹ And he speaks of the forming of a “spiritual constitution.”²⁶⁰ As Albers puts it at one point, “the fundamental art problems are always the same—the discovery and revelation of the human soul.”²⁶¹

But how does this cohere with Albers’ disdain for self-expression and his aforementioned aim to open students’ vision to the “phenomena about them?” Doesn’t soul discovery and revelation amount to navel gazing? Here we need to further explore Albers’ escape route from the dilemma between “objectivistic realism” and “subjectivistic expressionism,” his idea that

aesthetic education can yield a “double-faced insight into our means and ourselves.” In this regard, Albers pedagogy resonates with Arendt’s philosophy of action. Both point to a type of self-revelation that challenges the ordinary logic of self-expression.²⁶² Arendt makes this point in a memorable passage:

This disclosure of “who” in contradistinction to “what” somebody is—his qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings, which he may display or hide—is implicit in everything somebody says and does. It can be hidden only in complete silence and perfect passivity, but its disclosure can almost never be achieved as a wilful purpose, as though one possessed and could dispose of this “who” in the same manner he has and can dispose of his qualities. On the contrary, it is more than likely that the “who,” which appears so clearly and unmistakably to others, remains hidden from the person himself, like the *daimōn* in Greek religion which accompanies each man throughout his life, always looking over his shoulder from behind and thus visible only to those he encounters.²⁶³

Arendt contests the basic premises of self-expression, that one knows who one is and can decide when to share it. This presumes a level of self-transparency and autonomous control that we do not possess. It is not only that we disclose more than we intentionally express, but that our distinctive who-ness eludes willful self-expression. For Arendt and Albers alike, while self-knowledge remains both possible and worthwhile, it necessarily becomes heteronomous and indirect.

Here is where we return to the idea of the space of appearance. Earlier we considered the passage from Dante about the delight in actions that intensify our being and disclose who we are, “making patent the latent self.” Albers was no Dante, but he did write poems, and in one he sounds this very theme:

There is no world without a stage
and no one lives for not-appearing.
Seeing of ears invites to speak,
knowing of eyes invites to show.²⁶⁴

Even as Albers was discouraging the usual competition of the atelier—Who is the most sophisticated or accomplished? Who is the next big thing?—he was constantly inviting students into a theater of comparison, into a space of appearance. The typical photograph of Albers teaching at Black Mountain shows a group of students tightly gathered around an array of student works spread out on the floor.²⁶⁵ Albers is crouching down, pointing to a

feature of one of the works, talking through what he sees in and through the work, what he notices about what it notices. As if it were a physics diagram, we can see the interaction of the vectors of attention: with their eyes fixed on the work in question, the students' lines of sight are inflected by Albers's looking, and indeed by what is revealed about their own angles of vision.²⁶⁶

To be clear, comparison here does not mean competition, unless it is a contest with oneself in a struggle to see more. This was not math class, with students called to the board to demonstrate the correct solution. Consider, for example, Albers's "four worlds" exercise, which tasked students with using the same four colors and a common formal language "to create four compositions as different in 'climate' or feeling as possible."²⁶⁷ The point of the exercise is to understand how colors work—colors react to each other in juxtaposition in ways that are largely beyond our control—but Albers expected and welcomed a diversity of genuine understandings. "We have to conclude," Albers says, "that every need is manifold and that in any task there never is only one solution"²⁶⁸ It is true that Albers had a dictatorial side. It was his way or the highway, except that his way was for you to work assiduously in finding your way. A complex figure, Albers is said to have been "an authoritarian who demanded that students think for themselves" and a "control freak" who engaged in classroom antics and delighted in surprises.²⁶⁹

A chief inspiration for students was Albers's "total absorption in whatever was at hand."²⁷⁰ One student remembers that "the excitement that he conveyed was electric," adding that Albers "would look at things and see them as though he'd never seen them before. . . . It was a feeling of first time, every time."²⁷¹ Another student describes how this motivated her:

It was his excitement at seeing a *matière* that made the difference. He'd go crazy at seeing these pieces that people brought in. We'd see him dancing around and carrying on! Well then, we'd go out and look at things differently. I did one piece using pressed fern leaves and mica, and put a huge amount of work into it. What would make a young girl go out and do all that? It was the fact that he so totally gave himself to the pieces that we brought in.²⁷²

And in a sense, Albers and his students, were seeing these things for the first time. *Materialgerecht*, doing justice to the material, is achieved not by converging on its supposedly singular essence but by articulating its manifold

nature. Thus, Albers distinguishes between “factual facts” (physical facts, abstracted from experience) and “actual facts” (the way in which the physical enters always variously into the flow of experience).²⁷³ In a poem titled “On My Work,” Albers writes “that form demands/multiple presentation/manifold performance.”²⁷⁴

For Albers, aesthetic education runs aground when either knowledge or self-knowledge is taken as its singular aim. What Albers is searching for in his pedagogy is precisely lines of “congeniality,” leading to a mutual disclosure of self and world.²⁷⁵ Consider Albers’s famous leaf studies.²⁷⁶ In selecting and arranging one or more leaves, students are cultivating what Albers calls “substantial lived insight.”²⁷⁷ They are not wrapped up in a bid for self-expression. It is about the leaves, about structure, form, and color. But neither are they neutral cataloguers of nature. Perhaps an awkward expression captures it best: they are attempting to see *with* the leaves. They are cultivating what Albers calls “visual empathy.”²⁷⁸ As the students articulate the relationships among the leaves, they also enact their relationship to the leaves—their “elective affinities,” to use Goethe’s famous phrase. Even as the students help the leaves perform their manifold nature, the leaves help the students declare and discover themselves.²⁷⁹

It is the opportunity to witness this dance of disclosure—this mutual revelation of the leaves’ manifold nature and the who-ness of each student—that accounts for Albers’s electric state. One BMC student describes him as “totally animated, always on fire, giving off little sparks all of the time.”²⁸⁰ And here is Albers himself getting excited by the plurality of perspective revealed through a comparison of studies:

See how different the mentality is, how different the attitude is, how different the tempo and climate, and the temperature. . . . See the difference in palettes. See the difference in placement. See the difference of concentration or distribution. . . . They don’t come from one school; when you look [at them] straight and unprejudiced, they come from twenty schools. It looks that way. No! They come from twenty students who are just true to themselves.²⁸¹

In this way, the college classroom can become a metaphorical theater, a stage on which to explore and enact character, stance, and vision. The students are not asked to declare their opinions on world events. They are asked to walk the woods on the hunt for interesting mica and ferns. And, in

sharing their vision of and insight through these ferny friends, enrollment in the studio begins to increase. The number of bodies remains the same but now here and now there, a *daimōn* appears, a distinctive “who” that supervenes upon, but cannot be reduced to, the wheres, whens, and whats of the person. In the play of perspective, Albers and his students may witness the profound event that is coming into one’s own, that is revelation of soul action. Emerson captures the magnitude of such moments when he writes,

The power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is that he can do, nor does he know until he has tried. Not for nothing one face, one character, one fact, makes such an impression on him, and another none. . . . The eye was placed where one ray should fall, that it might testify of that particular ray.²⁸²

★ ★ ★

Life is essentially periodic. . . . Lack of attention to the rhythm . . . of mental growth is a main source of wooden futility in education.

—Alfred North Whitehead²⁸³

It is the rare social interaction that offers what we have been calling a theater of display and witness. At Black Mountain such spaces of interpersonal and intrapersonal encounter were especially prized. That said, even if we could maintain this charged state, we would not want to spend all of our time there. We do need to act before witnesses, but we also need a reprieve from this demand. A flourishing life involves a movement between appearance and withdrawal, a rhythm of engagement and release. And it is just these spatial and temporal structures we find at Black Mountain, embodying the intentionality built into so-called informal learning.

First, let’s consider the architecture of appearance and withdrawal. As we have noted, students found many of the spaces at Black Mountain to have a fishbowl quality. In classes, at meals, during college meetings, in rehearsals and performances, on work shifts, in the communal dorm rooms, students found themselves repeatedly exposed to the intensity of the interpersonal, to the dynamics—at once delightful and disturbing, edifying and exhausting—of recognition and misrecognition, self-enactment and self-evasion. For this reason, there was one overriding residential principle at Black Mountain: each student must have a private studio or study (both terms were used).²⁸⁴ To experience an Arendtian space of appearance, to meet others in

their distinctiveness and bump into aspects of your own who-ness you hadn't anticipated, is indeed a gift. But then one needs a chance to *recollect* oneself, to *regroup*. The plural nature of these terms is fitting, as solitary space is not monologic. Consider the aphorism that was so important to Arendt: "Never is a man more active than when he does nothing, never is he less alone than when he is by himself."²⁸⁵ To withdraw from the tumult is not to quit the work of self-discovery. Indeed, soul action may intensify as we sit with the discordant aspects of ourselves and work to understand why the example of others inspires, troubles, challenges, or resonates. We need a space where we can seek to understand and integrate those aspects of ourselves revealed in the tumult of interpersonal encounter. And just as it is with others that we find ourselves, so it is often when we are "alone" that we begin to take in the other with whom we have been interacting. In the "quiet" of the study, the voices of others may become loud indeed.

What the study does provide a pause in the "action," in the Arendtian sense. We experience a relaxation of the pressure of our accumulating record: this is what I prefer, what I do, what I stand for, what I laugh at, what I don't laugh at, whom I like, what I am interested in, and so on. The problem, Kierkegaard remarks, is that "life must be understood backwards. But then one forgets the other principle: that it must be lived forwards."²⁸⁶ A moment of repose, a break in the action, provides at least some consolation amid this existential comedy. "What seems required," David Blacker writes (speaking of the importance of spaces for inwardness in a democratic society), "is some way to 'catch up' with ourselves, some method by which we might render the ends of our activities graspable, in both the sense of understanding them and also (potentially) manipulating or otherwise altering them."²⁸⁷

The literal space of the studio is crucial. It makes a difference to be able to close a door and sit at your own desk. It matters too that the college has set this space aside for you. The name on the door declares that one of the events at this college is your ongoing relationship with yourself. But the literal space is not enough. It is nothing more or less than a reminder of and home for a habit of inwardness. And, as I have already begun to indicate, the spatial and temporal dimensions of this practice are intertwined. When we speak of a contemplative "space," we mean something temporal as much as spatial. It is quiet, solitary space, furnished with various reminders

of my ongoing conversation with myself; and it is a time to catch up with ourselves, a moment of repose, a break in the action.

That said, I do want to talk about a specifically temporal intervention, designed to facilitate this rhythm of appearance and withdrawal. In the scene on the porch, we considered how college students need a reorientation from the heteronomous, instrumentalist logic of studenting—dragging the highlighter across the page of the required reading; racking up credits en route to a credential—to a self-directed engagement following a logic of discovery. The former has a characteristic temporal structure: grind, grind, grind, release. In this mode, work loses its playful, world-discovering, self-engaged aspects; play loses its seriousness and becomes merely downtime. We called the alternative *skholé*, recalling the Greek term for seriousness unyoked from necessity, for freedom rising above license. *Skholé* is neither grinding through nor powering down, but tuning in. It is not an offbeat in the rhythm of production, but an alternative rhythm of engagement.

But *skholé* is not the kind of thing that can be permanently installed, like a statue of alma mater. Even at a place such as Black Mountain, attuned to wide-awakeness, the hum of engagement can start to flip over into a culture of busyness. We can start to turn our choices into a harness. We continue to plow a row merely because that is the continuation of the line. With *skholé* in mind, Michael Oakeshott called college “the gift of an interval.”²⁸⁸ Sometimes students need to be offered the gift of an interval within the college experience itself. BMC had a tradition to accomplish just this. Duberman explains:

An invention of the second or third year was “the interlude”—a periodic announcement, without advanced warning, that all classes would cease for a week so that everyone could have a chance to try something they had to defer because of lack of time—whether reading Shaw, attempting to write poetry or sitting in the sun.²⁸⁹

To explain this tradition, all point to the intensity of the place. Interludes were called, Duberman explains: “when the schedule got too top-heavy with events, when the momentum of activity began to get manic.” “It was by no means a sea of tranquility,” Arthur Penn recalls, more like “a broiling ocean where everybody was at a kind of high pitch.”²⁹⁰ Charles Perrow concurs: “When tensions seemed to be near the breaking point,

the Rector . . . might call an ‘interlude.’”²⁹¹ Hannelore Hahn takes the story from there:

Josef Albers would get up, and one evening, put his spoon against the glass—ding, ding, ding—and say, “As of this evening, until a week from tonight, all classes are suspended and this is a lesson in leisure time.”²⁹²

The interludes were an interesting combination of an injunction and a release from obligation. Specifically, Perrow recalls, students were directed to branch out:

All classes were cancelled, and students and faculty were enjoined to do a project that was completely different from what they had been studying or teaching. The wave of euphoria was instant, and trips to Asheville, hiking in the surrounding mountains, swimming in the little lake, building rafts, painting if you were in literature, intense reading if you were a painter, and cooking on your hot plate filled the days. One or two of these were necessary each semester, and they cooled the hothouse.²⁹³

Though it was “a time to ease off, to regroup,” Duberman notes, the “interludes were not vacations.”²⁹⁴ In fact, as Sarton recalls, it would often be during the interludes when “the best work gets done.”²⁹⁵ Hahn emphasizes this same point, pointing not to a specific injunction but rather the desire to live up to expectation that you could organize your own time:

The result of this trust that a human being will learn from that was phenomenal, because I don’t remember seeing anybody getting drunk or going into town and wasting his time. No, double time, you worked harder at whatever was of interest to you. People really created during that time.²⁹⁶

Sarton tells a story that combines these themes of redoubling one’s efforts and trying something new. In her English class, she gave a presentation on Yeats that so affected a classmate that when an interlude was declared the classmate spent the “the whole week studying . . . Yeats.”²⁹⁷

Normally, we think of being freed *from* work. But if our work—as project, as search—has degenerated into busywork, then we need to be freed from that, freed to work. The interlude interrupts the “what is expected of me” mindset, returning students to the question of what interests them. Like a debt jubilee, it releases students from that particular state of unflourishing we might call “past due,” that state in which we start experiencing each day

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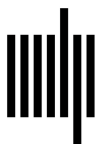
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