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Experimental Photography and Education

Bauhaus, Black Mountain College and the Institute of Art and Design

ringl + pit
Ellen Auerbach (1906 - 2004) and Grete Stern (1904 - 1999)
Komol, 1931

After writing last week's email on Minor White, Walter Chappell, and Paul Caponigro I began thinking more about Minor's quote "The camera records superbly, it transforms better." In regard to transformative imagery and pioneering experimental photography, The Bauhaus probably had the most influence on our medium both in Germany and in America. Including photography, alongside other established mediums in their curriculum, was in itself an innovation. I find it fascinating to trace the influence the Bauhaus had in both education and art. We are still benefiting from their philosophies and impact as students, teachers, and artists today.

The Bauhaus

The Bauhaus existed in three different cities in Germany from 1919 until 1933 when the Nazi Regime closed it. Much of the staff emigrated to different parts of the world, many to America.

The school's curriculum combined crafts with fine arts and an emphasis on design. The architect Walter Gropius founded the school. In Germany, the Bauhaus "style" became influential in forming the "Modernist" style in architecture, art, design, interior, and industrial design, typography, and graphic arts. Staff included Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, and Lazlo Moholy-Nagy. As the locations changed in Germany from Weimer to Dessau and finally Berlin, the directors and faculty changed, but the philosophy of integrating the arts and focus on design remained as the foundation of the curriculum.

Ellen Auerbach (1906 - 2004)
ringl + pit

ringl + pit
Ellen Auerbach (1906 - 2004) and Grete Stern (1904 - 1999)
Grete Stern, 1929

Ellen Auerbach, born in Germany in 1906, began studying photography in l929 with Bauhaus Professor Walter Peterhans. Also studying with Peterhans was Auerbach's childhood friend Grete Stern. In 1931 Auerbach and Stern opened Studio ringl & pit in Berlin. They became known for their avant-garde approach and incorporating elements of Surrealism in advertising photography.

On a trip to Chicago in l939 Ellen Auerbach met Fairfield Porter, an insightful art critic and realist painter, who was included in the inner circle of Alfred Stieglitz’s world. Fairfield invited Ellen and her husband Walter Auerbach to spend a few weeks with him on Great Spruce Head Island in Maine, which resulted in a life long friendship with photographer Eliot Porter, Fairfield's brother. Sixteen years later, Porter and Auerbach worked on a collaborative project photographing hundreds of churches and religious art in Mexico. They traveled for nearly a year and covered ten thousand miles of terrain, visiting small, rural villages whose churches were already in ruin, and whose art and religious iconography has since been destroyed and or taken. The photographs, in both black & white and in color are remarkable in their artistic, emotional, and historical content. This work resulted in the award-winning publication *Mexican Churches*, published by the University of New Mexico Press in 1987.

Ellen Auerbach (1906 - 2004) and Eliot Porter (1901 - 1990)
Mexico, 1956

Ellen Auerbach (1906 - 2004)
Queretaro, Mexico, Xmas Market, 1955

While Janet was working with Eliot Porter on the *Mexican Churches* book we had the opportunity to visit Ellen in New York. In her 90's she was living in her fifth-floor walk-up on the Upper East Side. We immediately fell in love with her, looking at work, and hearing stories about her Bauhaus years. She and Grete Stern were in the last photography class and the only woman students of Walter Perterhans. She relayed an assignment he gave that I have used many times in my years teaching. Each student is given an egg, a length of string, and a piece of window screen. Since the Bauhaus emphasis was on design much imagery was camera-less created as photograms. This assignment gave ringl & pit a foundation for their collaborative compositions. If you look at more of the early advertising work of ringl & pit, you will see these elements appear again and again.

Today's video will give you an opportunity to meet both Ellen Auerbach and Grete Stern and hear from them about their live and work together as ringl + pit and individually.

ringlandpit
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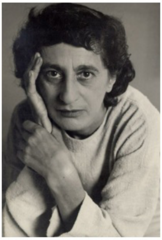
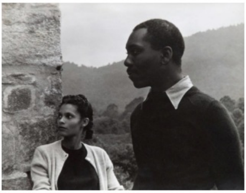
Black Mountain College

Black Mountain College was founded in 1933 and located in North Carolina. This innovative school embraced the teachings of the American philosopher John Dewey who professed "learning by doing." This innovative school attracted influential faculty and students involved in the arts of the 20th Century. Walter Gropius, founder of the Bauhaus, and Josef and Annie Albers, both former Bauhaus faculty, brought the ideas and philosophy of the Bauhaus and integrated them into the "arts experience" and curriculum at Black Mountain.



Nancy Newhall (1908 - 1974)
Anni Albers, Black Mountain College, 1948



Nancy Newhall (1908 - 1974)
Gwen and Jacob Lawrence,
Black Mountain College, 1946

The faculty included John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Robert Motherwell, Jacob Lawrence, and Buckminster Fuller to name a few.

In 1946 Josef Albers invited Beaumont and Nancy Newhall to teach at the Summer Institute of the College. That summer Beaumont delivered four lectures on the history, approach, and aesthetics of photography. These lectures inspired future students to learn the process and technique of making photographs. Beaumont wrote in his journal:

"...I announced at my first lecture that I did not intend to discuss photographic technique. However, I added that I would be glad to meet any students who wanted technical advice at our cottage. Next morning a dozen or so students knocked at our door and we had an informal class on our front lawn. ..."

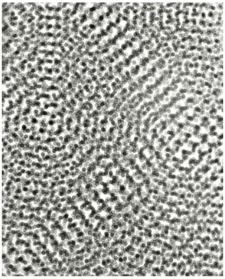
The school had no darkroom that year, but when the Newhall's returned the following year college rector Theodore Dreier invited Beaumont to join the faculty and had a darkroom constructed.

Nancy Newhall (1908 - 1974)
Buckminster Fuller, 1948

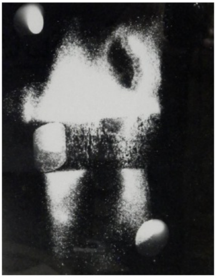
The Newhall's cherished their time at Black Mountain. They found the school a remarkable example of cooperative and conscientious living while the curriculum presented not just an integrated way to learn, but an integrated approach to life, specifically life as an artist. During their time at Black Mountain, Nancy Newhall spent days photographing while Beaumont was teaching. Her images remain as a visual journal of the landscape, students, and faculty. In the past 20 years, in my role as co-executer of the Newhall Estate, Nancy's photographs from Black Mountain are the most requested works in our holdings. They have been part of exhibitions throughout the world. The interest in this school still grows. An integrated approach to learning continues to be explored by educators at all levels. The ideas behind "open classroom" in elementary education are also based on the teachings of John Dewey.

Other photographers who have taught at Black Mountain beside the Newhall's are Harry Callahan, Barbara Morgan, Arthur Siegel, and Aaron Siskind.

Institute of Design



Arthur Siegel (1913 - 1978)
Lucidagram, 1968



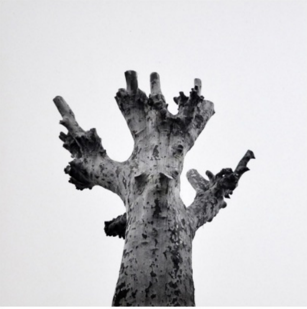
Gyorgy Kepes (1906 - 2001)
Untitled, 1947

In 1937, Moholy-Nagy, former Bauhaus teacher, was asked to start a new design school in Chicago. It was first named the New Bauhaus since the philosophy was basically unchanged from the Bauhaus' original curriculum. A series of financial difficulties forced the closing and re-opening of the school those first years and the name was later changed in 1939 to the Chicago School of Design, and in 1944 to the Institute of Design. Faculty included artists such as, John Cage, Harry Callahan, Buckminster Fuller, György Kepes, Arthur Siegel, and Aaron Siskind.

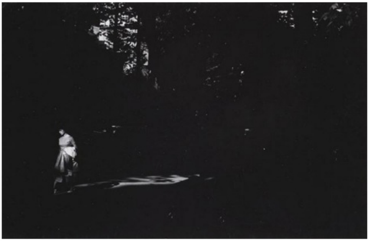
While Moholy was on his way to Chicago for the opening of the New Bauhaus he stopped in New York to meet the Newhall's. Nancy helped him write his speech, which he was to deliver to the financial sponsors of the school. Photography was an important part of the curriculum and in the summer of 1946, an extraordinary photography program was offered. Headed by Moholy-Nagy and Arthur Siegel the staff consisted of six photographers that included Berenice Abbott, Paul Strand, Weegee, and two editors including Roy Stryker. Beaumont was the photo-historian.

Many notable photographers of the 20th Century studied and taught at The Institute of Design. Both Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind were connected to the school and not only furthered the aesthetics of the teachings in their works but also furthered the curriculum ideas when they both went on the lead the Photography Program at The Rhode Island School of Design.

Harry Callahan (1912-1999)



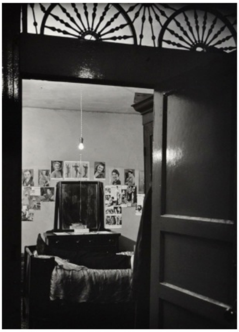
Harry Callahan (1912 - 1999)
Untitled, 1956



Harry Callahan (1912 - 1999)
Woman in Light, Spain , 1956

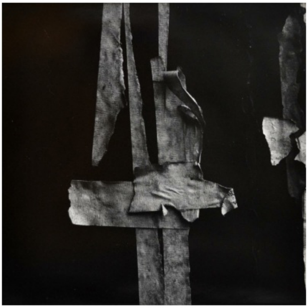
After attending a lecture and workshop by Ansel Adams in 1941, and a meeting with Alfred Stieglitz in 1942, Callahan decided to devote his energies to photography. By 1946 he had established a strong enough reputation in the filed to secure an invitation by Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, a veteran of the German Bauhaus, to teach at Chicago's Institute of Design. The school's experimental philosophy was formative for Callahan, who would become instrumental in introducing a vocabulary of formal abstraction into American photography at a time when descriptive realism was the dominant aesthetic. He taught a summer course at Black Mountain College in North Carolina in 1951 and eventually left the Institute in 1961 to chair the photography department at the Rhode Island School of Design. Callahan held that position until 1973 and retired from teaching altogether four years later.

Aaron Siskind (1902 - 1991)



Aaron Siskind (1903 - 19991)
Bedroom Through Doorway, Harlem (From M.C.B.) , 1940

Influential as both a photographer and a teacher, Siskind made his first earnest attempts at photography in 1931/32. Moved by documentary photographs on display in New York City at the Film and Photo League (the forerunner of the Photo League), he joined the group and became active in the production of such projects as "*Harlem Documentary*" and "*Portrait of a Tenement*." However, almost from the beginning, a certain dissonance existed between the documentary and social-political goals of the League and Siskind's emerging preoccupation with formal and esthetic concerns. Siskind, later recalled, "*for some reason or other there was in me the desire to see the world clean and fresh and alive, as primitive things are clean and fresh and alive. The so-called documentary picture left me wanting something."*



Aaron Siskind (1903 - 19991)
New York 202, 1978

Aaron Siskind (1903 - 19991)
Feet 119, 1957

In the early 1940's a major change took place in his work. Siskind left the league and thereafter worked in an increasingly abstract, personal, and contemplative mode. He photographed organic objects, for example, rocks as flat shapes on the surface of the picture plane, rather than as objects with the pictorial illusion of possessing three dimensions. "*For the first time in my life, subject matter, as such, had ceased to be of primary importance. Instead, I found myself involved in the relationships of these objects, so much so that these pictures turned out to be deeply moving and personal experiences.*"

In 1948 he met Harry Callahan, who, in 1950, invited him to The Institute of Design, the New Bauhaus, in Chicago to teach photography. Siskind became head of The Department of Photography at the Institute. From 1971 - 1976 he served as a faculty member at The Rhode Island School of Design.

This video was produced by RISD in 1972 celebrating both Siskind and Callahan. It serves as a nice introduction to both these artists' work and approach to their photography.

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Tomorrow Is BEAUMONT'S BIRTHDAY
(1908 - 1993)

The Museum of Fine Arts of New Mexico, now the New Mexico Museum of Art, published a memorial tribute pamphlet entitled "*Colleagues and Friends*" in 1993. Here is a short piece that Janet and I contributed to the publication:

I think we both knew that the memoirs would be our last project together. Beaumont began his memoirs by rereading the daily journals' that his parents kept throughout their lives, a tradition that Beaumont continued. With much excitement, he called to me, "Read this", as he found the day his parents met, described separately in each of their journals. This continual sense of excitement and quest for discovery was an integral part of Beaumont.

The years we spent together were a privilege I will always cherish. The weekly tapes we made, the stories he told me, time and again, each time with a new twist or emphasis that revealed yet another layer to make them the first time.

Many considered his manner "Old World". His kindness, dignity, and scholarship set him apart from others. Beaumont's door and studio were open to everyone. The seeds that Beaumont sowed at the Museum of Modern Art, George Eastman House, and the University of New Mexico, have grown into a dense and wondrous forest. It gave Beaumont great pleasure to see the fruit from those trees, as each of his students went out into the world and opened up new and exciting areas in the history of the medium, and to also know that photography is now part of every serious art program. To those of us who have had the privilege of being with Beaumont, we not only need to continue tending his fields, but also to emulate his remarkable generosity and accessibility. After all, it was Beaumont that we loved, not just photography.

This video is from a 1971 interview with Steve James at the Eikon Gallery in Monterey, California. In this video, Beaumont discusses his groundbreaking first exhibition at MOMA, as well as offering an informal overview of the History of Photography. Enjoy.

We again want to thank you for the feedback. Your emails and calls mean the world to us and continue to motivate. We have had some wonderful responses.

Many of you have also asked about accessing our previous emails. We have added a new page on our website entitled "History of Photography". All our past and future weekly mailings will be located there for viewing. Please feel free to share them and encourage interested parties to join our mailing list under "contact".

Thank you, please stay safe, healthy, productive, and involved.

Please visit our website **www.photographydealers.com** to view our current inventory.