



The Black Mountain College and the White Mountain Graduate School

by Sally Atkins
(first published in POIESIS)

Black Mountain College was an experimental liberal arts college, located in a rural mountain area in Western North Carolina. It lasted 23 years, from 1933 until 1956, and it enrolled fewer than 1300 students. Nonetheless, it is considered one of the most innovative and fascinating experiments in the history of education and the arts. It had as its purpose the education of the whole person with an insistence on the central role of the arts in that purpose. Many books have been written about the college, and many more have been written by those who studied or taught there. Recently a new museum was begun in Asheville, North Carolina to showcase the college's continuing influence in the arts.

The European Graduate School EGS is an international professional graduate school, providing graduate and postgraduate education in the expressive arts and communication, in the Swiss alpine village of Saas Fee. Despite differences in cultural and historical contexts and differing purposes, the two schools share some important similarities. Paolo J. Knill, Provost of the European Graduate School, has referred to EGS as the „White Mountain College“ with a nod to the artistic and experimental heritage of Black Mountain College. In this article I wish to tell a small piece of the story of Black Mountain and to reflect upon the nature of community in which learning and the arts play a central role, as they did at Black Mountain College, and as they do presently at the European Graduate School.

My interest in both schools is more than academic. Black Mountain College existed near the town where I grew up. I was eleven the year it closed. Both Black Mountain campuses, the Blue Ridge Campus (the Blue Ridge Assembly of the YMCA) and the Lake Eden campus (Camp Rockmont) were places where I went on outings and picnics as a young person. I know the landscape of Black Mountain

In the 1980's, as a young professor at nearby Appalachian State University I had the opportunity to meet the poet and potter, M. C. Richards, who had taught at Black Mountain. Her ideas about the arts, education, creativity, and community have exerted a continuing influence on my thinking. Her references to Black Mountain, both in her writings and in personal conversations, furthered my curiosity about the school. Furthermore, throughout my life I have been inspired by the innovative works of artists such as Merce Cunningham, John Cage, Josef and Annie Albers, Robert Rauschenberg, Jacob Lawrence, and Buckminster Fuller. Likewise, I have been touched by the writings of M.C. Richards, Charles Olsen, Fielding Dawson, Michael Rumaker, and Robert Creeley.



European Graduate School EGS
Arts, Health & Society Division

I have continued to reflect upon the impact the school must have had on these artists and writers. Martin Duberman (1973) called his seminal work about Black Mountain Black Mountain College: An Exploration in Community. Vincent Katz (2002) called his more recent edited work Black Mountain College: An Experiment in Art. These phrases, “exploration in community,” and “experiment in art,” touch a yearning in me. Currently, as a core faculty member at the European Graduate School, I am intensely involved in teaching and living the experiment of academic community centered on the arts. So I approach the subject not as an outside observer, but as Duberman himself did. The issue, he says, is not whether the historian (I would add researcher) should be known, but how. Like Duberman, I have attempted to place myself in relationship with the material, to let it touch me, tug at me, make me ever more curious. It continues to do so. The rich diversity of perceptions and commentaries about the Black Mountain experience continue to open to new and ever more complex questions about art, education, and community. This is a personal response to some of the stories, written and told about Black Mountain, as well as to those stories currently being lived at EGS.