Olson’s Poetics and Pedagogy: Influences at Black Mountain College¹

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Critical to Charles Olson's development as a poet and teacher² were his years at Black Mountain College. During Olson’s Black Mountain years, 1949 through 1956, Olson’s thinking about poetics and teaching were influenced by numerous faculty members from various disciplines at Black Mountain...influences that Olson did not always acknowledge, perhaps because the influencing ideas arose in conversations at the school and not in texts that he read, critiqued, and put to use. Scholarly attention to Olson’s development during these formative Black Mountain years as a poet and teacher has largely focused on the influence of poets and writers: Dahlberg³, Pound, Williams, Melville, and his contemporaries, Duncan and Creeley. However, attention to the non-literary influences on Olson during these years opens additional important aspects of his poetics and his pedagogy.

There are exceptions to the focus on the literary influences on Olson’s poetics, notably Charles Stein on Olson’s use of Jung and Shahar Bram on Olson’s use of Whitehead...whose works deeply informed Olson’s thinking during his Black Mountain years.⁴ In one of the early scholarly works on Olson, Paul Christenson includes a brief discussion of the Gestalt psychology ideas, from Horkheimer and particularly Paul Goodman, that would have had currency at Black Mountain, but Christenson does not develop an explicit connection between Gestalt psychology and Olson’s ideas of the organism, self, and field.⁵ In Olson’s Push, Sherman Paul includes a similarly brief discussion of the influence of dance and the dancers at Black Mountain College on Olson’s ideas about the importance of the body in the act of expression.⁶

Given the range of the literary influences on Olson’s work, the limited attention to the non-literary influences on Olson’s poetics and pedagogy is understandable. The framing of Olson as a poet-pedagogue began in another one of the early critical, scholarly works on Olson: in 1978 with Robert Von Hallberg’s seminal study, Charles Olson: The Scholar’s Art. That framing was explicitly invoked again 30 years later in Alan Golding’s 2010 essay “From Pound to Olson: The Avant-Garde Poet as Pedagogue.” Though
both these works are focused on the literary context of Olson’s poetics and pedagogy, Von Hallberg and Golding describe or refer to aspects of or passages in Olson’s work that (unintentionally) open possibilities for further research into the influences on Olson at Black Mountain College. When one takes up that research, one sees that Olson’s methods as poet and teacher are grounded significantly in a pedagogy and poetics developed there. It is a pedagogy and poetics of both process and engagement with material grounded in our senses, a pedagogy and poetics of material and use.

But first the initial framing and the openings: Von Hallberg characterizes Olson as “a poet-pedagogue” to whom “subject matter must again be...central.” He later states that Olson inherited from Pound and Whitman the notion of “the poet as secular teacher.” Immediately after identifying that poetic lineage of the secular teacher, he states that this “is not a fruitful way of defining the function of a poet who knows and speaks only of that which can be verified by the senses.” The reason why von Hallberg does not regard this as fruitful is because he claims that a poet cannot teach “things” and that the learning of things is a learning “in an altogether different sense from the way one learns to live in a community.” The latter distinction is certainly accurate, but ironically Olson learned how things can be used in teaching from his community at Black Mountain College, in particular from Josef and Anni Albers, as shown later in this essay.

Some 30 years after Von Hallberg’s work on Olson, Alan Golding takes up the characterization of Olson as a poet-pedagogue in his essay on Pound and Olson. Like von Hallberg, Golding focuses on Olson’s content rather than method. Golding discusses Pound’s paratactic method of composition as his method of pedagogy as well, saying of it that “Parataxis as a pedagogic method rests on the principle of self-evidence” and later Golding writes of Pound’s Canto XIII that “the central pedagogy at work there is oral, that of energetic conversation.”

Although Olson also used parataxis as a method of composition, Golding focuses on the content of two of Olson’s poems in which Olson critiques Pound’s work: “I, Mencius, Pupil of the Master” (the master being Pound) and “The Praises”—written by Olson in 1949, which is the same poem Von Hallberg explicated in his assessment of Olson as a scholar-poet during the Black Mountain years (an explication that Golding references and extends in a direction specific to his thesis about Olson’s pedagogy).
Golding quotes from “The Praises,” “What has been lost / is the secret of secrecy” and uses those lines to support his contention that the poet was aligning with a coterie\textsuperscript{11} approach that allowed only initiates to participate and that “too many having too little/knowledge” set the limits of participation.\textsuperscript{12} But like von Hallberg, Golding’s discussion of pedagogy focuses on content.

Olson’s poetry at this time, however, was in many respects a “saying goodbye to all that.” A different characterization of Olson’s pedagogy and poetics emerges when one looks at the influences of the “energetic conversations”\textsuperscript{13} at Black Mountain College on Olson’s poetics and pedagogy as method...and the later manifestation of those influences in his essays and poems. Golding’s Olson is the late 1940s Olson...a man still extracting himself from the influences of Pound and Edward Dahlberg (the correspondence with whom contains none of the non-literary influences that came to Olson while at Black Mountain College).\textsuperscript{14}

During Olson’s years at Black Mountain College, including his intermittent stints when he first began to teach at the college, his poetry, poetics, and pedagogy were influenced by a range of ideas that would have largely come to him during the energetic conversations that took place on the small campus during lunch and dinner (which students and faculty were required to attend): conversations with faculty members who taught math, physics, painting, weaving, and pottery (among other subjects). These conversations opened Olson to disciplines that he had not deeply attended to before and provided ideas for his poetry, poetics, and teaching that were more about method and use of materials than content—ideas that helped ground his poetics and pedagogy in the body’s engagement with objects.\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{The Materials}

Golding cannot be faulted for applying his thesis to a period of Olson’s work and for attending to details that support that thesis. Von Hallberg’s characterization of Olson at Black Mountain College likewise is accurate, but neither author acknowledges a period limitation nor the other influences during that period that would manifest themselves in Olson’s later writings in the 1950s and 1960s. Without acknowledging those influences, one misses critical aspects of Olson’s developing pedagogy. Early evidence of those
Black Mountain influences can be seen in Olson’s work of the late 1940s, including even the poem that Golding cites. For instance, later in the stanza from “The Praises” that Golding quotes are lines that indicate a distinctly different orientation toward knowledge. The whole stanza reads:

What has been lost
is the secret of secrecy, is
the value, viz., that the work get done, and quickly,
without the loss of due and profound respect for
the materials\textsuperscript{16}

Golding implies that what Olson validates in his poem is secret knowledge held by initiates. The whole stanza, however, runs counter to that conclusion. The significant value is not “the secret of secrecy” but “that the work get done” and that the materials be respected. This is consistent with Olson’s insistence in his teaching at Black Mountain College that his students work “their own stuff”\textsuperscript{17} and with the importance placed at Black Mountain College on the inherent quality of materials in the creation of a work of art.

Specifically, Josef and Anni Albers’ creative work and teaching at Black Mountain College conveyed to Olson the importance of materials. \textit{Work} and \textit{materials} are two words that go to the heart of Josef Albers’ method as a teacher—and were fundamental to the teaching throughout Black Mountain College, a method that clearly influenced Olson and his push to move students’ attention away from content and institutional knowledge toward process and individual responsibility.

The Albers went to Mexico in the 1930s and 1940s to study pre-Columbian Mexican art. Everyone at Black Mountain College was aware of what Josef and Anni Albers had seen of pre-Columbian textiles, pottery, and pyramids in Mexico (in various locations, including the Yucatan where Olson would conduct his archaeological studies in 1951)\textsuperscript{18}. The Albers documented their findings in photographs, brought back objects with them to Black Mountain College, and created works inspired by what they saw there. And what Josef Albers wrote in 1937 about the work he saw in Mexico became a part of Black Mountain College and Olson’s pedagogy:
Every work of art is based on a thinking out of the material. Mexican plastics [i.e. sculptures] are done mainly in stone and clay. But the respect the Mexican sculptor always had for his material never leaves us in doubt about his material. All stone work is definitely stony, all clay work remains clay-like, every stone is obviously carved...Let us recognize again the great discipline of the Mexican sculptor.

It teaches us: Be truthful with materials.\textsuperscript{19}

Olson clearly also learned the import of materials from Anni Albers as well. In her essay, “Glyph-World: Reading and Writing at Black Mountain College”\textsuperscript{20} (included in the book that accompanied an exhibit on the arts at Black Mountain College at the Nationalgalerie im Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin in 2015), Catherine Nichols convincingly argues that Olson’s ideas about Mayan glyphs are directly indebted to Anni Albers’ work. Nichols writes that Olson “carried on the historical, linguistic and aesthetic interrogation of pre-Columbian cultures pursued by Anni Albers since the 1930s” (360). Nichols specifically cites Anni Albers’ essay “Work with Material” (written in 1937 at Black Mountain College)\textsuperscript{21} and its obvious influence on Olson’s thinking (though never acknowledged by him).

Anni Albers wrote that when students work with materials, they “experience the excitement of creating while...being restrained by the ‘irrevocable laws’ of material.” She also made a broader statement in that essay about modern civilization and mankind’s relationship with materials that could practically be read as a paraphrase of the Heraclitus aphorism that Olson quotes at the beginning of The Special View of History in 1955 (“Man is estranged from that with which he is most familiar”). Albers writes, “Civilization seems in general to estrange men from materials, that is, from materials in their original form.”\textsuperscript{22}

In another essay, Anni Albers extended her thinking about materials to words as well:

Words and gestures...are often not clearly recognized in their specific capacity as elements of form.... They seem to be materials familiar to us
through their daily use. But as media of art they have to be newly mastered just as any other material has to be.\textsuperscript{23}

In many of his essays, Olson writes of the materials of poetry in a way consistent with Anni Albers’ emphasis on materials in her work and writings. For her, the materials were fiber, wood, stone; for Olson, the syllable, the line, and breath. In “Projective Verse” Olson argues that the poet must attend to the materials at hand and their use, must work the line, specifically, “as wood is [worked], to be as clean as wood is as it issues from the hand of nature, to be shaped as wood can be when a man has had his hand to it.” If given such attention, the poet’s work creates a thing that can “take its place alongside the things of nature.”\textsuperscript{24}

The likeness, the influence, becomes even clearer years later in Olson’s course description for his class on “The Art of Writing in the Context of Post-Modern Man.” There he writes:

The proposition is the simplest: to release the person’s energy word-wise, and thus begin the hammering of form out of content....each class...is to search for a methodology by which each person in the class, by acts of writing...may more and more find the kinetics of experience disclosed—the kinetics of themselves as persons as well as of the stuff they have to work on, and by.\textsuperscript{25}

Although Olson never explicitly acknowledges the Albers pedagogical influence on him, the conversations in the dining hall at Black Mountain College would have made evident to Olson a way of approaching the materials of the poem akin to theirs. Robert Duncan, in his preface to \textit{The Special View of History}, cites Josef Albers’ teaching when discussing his own approach in the classroom at Black Mountain College:

We dealt first with vowel sounds and took quite a long time with that. Then consonant clusters, and then we did syllables. These were exercises, not instructions or information I had to give them. Perhaps thinking of the work Albers had done earlier at Black Mountain, my idea was to work with the materials of poetry...and everything else would be their own account.\textsuperscript{26}
By the time Duncan arrived at Black Mountain College in 1956 to teach, which began with him holding “conferences” with Olson about what to teach (and perhaps how to teach?), the Albers had been gone for years. Their approach to teaching and their ideas about working with materials, however, were still clearly part of the energetic conversation at Black Mountain College.

Although not naming Josef and Anni as the original inspiration to look at crafts in relation to their approach to creating poems, Robert Duncan states in a 1961 lecture that he delivered at the home of University of British Columbia professors Ellen and Warren Tallman:

Olson, and I, and Creeley too, constantly read the latest things on the origin of other crafts because we think of them not just as crafts but as art, and as discoveries of form, so that it is very interesting too that the first forms that appear on pottery and on clay tablets are borrowed from weaving.²⁷

A few years after the Albers had left Black Mountain, Olson as rector recruited several potters²⁸ to come to the college to teach during its summer program. Olson wrote to the potter Marguerite Wildenhain, “I have taken on this potter post as a sort of personal gauge, why, I can’t say, except that it damn well interests me as an act (pots do)...It is tied up severely with my own sense of what is now the push in the old-fashioned arts.” And shortly after in his letter, he cites “Projective Verse” and summarizes the crux of his poetics there: “Objects. Solids, Speech as Solid, Kinetic. Movement.”²⁹

There are no accounts of Olson putting his hands to clay and creating pots while at Black Mountain College, but clearly he at least observed and understood the role of the hand and fingers in touch with clay in the act of creating objects. The fact that he would even make such a statement as the following in “Human Universe” is surely indebted to what he observed in the acts of creating by the potters at Black Mountain College: “the fingertips...knowing knots in their own rights, little brains (little photo-electric cells, I think they now call the skin) which, immediately, in responding to external stimuli, make decisions!”³⁰ Precisely what the potter’s fingers do in the creative act.
Method

Josef Albers also influenced Olson’s pedagogical method. Olson was dogmatic about students using themselves, their experience, and not imitating anyone else in their writings. Albers could be harsh in criticizing anyone for imitating Matisse, Picasso, or Klee. Albers’ pedagogical lineage followed the German progressive tradition stemming from Goethe. And following Goethe, Albers “posited ‘direct observation’ as the only reliable test of reality; only by seeing for yourself could you be certain that your conclusions were sound.” Likewise, “What mattered were particulars.” These ideas, though going back to Goethe, had a contemporary lineage for Albers, coming to him in his years teaching at Bauhaus. Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius drew upon the 19th century progressive education ideas of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi and Friedrich Froebel. Pestalozzi “put into teaching practice the idea that children learn best through self-activity and spontaneity, exploring through direct and concrete observation.”

Relying on “direct and concrete observation” is precisely how Albers conducted his art classes. In those classes, Albers would hesitate to answer a student’s question because he wanted them to discover the answer: to experiment, to observe, and to find the answer through their own direct experience, not his. As he wrote,

> The result [of experiments] is the students’ own experience and possession, because it has been learned rather than taught. Learning is better than teaching because it is more intensive; the more we teach, the less students can learn.
> 
> [“Werklicher Formunterricht”]

Some of this diction of seeing and direct observation clearly became part of Olson’s methodology as poet and teacher. Unlike his exchanges with Edward Dahlberg in the 1940s and early 1950s, which often become a contentious battle of erudition, Olson seems to have learned from Albers in an uncharacteristically quiet and unacknowledged way. But the influence is unmistakable. During the 1950s and into the 1960s, as best expressed in his “Under the Mushroom” talk of 1963 during his teaching stint at Buffalo State, Olson regularly cited Melville’s letter to Hawthorne in which Melville writes, “By visible truth we mean the apprehension of the absolute condition of present things.”
Olson earlier in this talk noted about “visible truth” that “all you can do is show your own experience and actually, literally report how true you think it is.”

An insistence upon one’s reliance and truthfulness to one’s own experience informed Olson’s teaching; it was an approach designed to open students to the possibility of their own experience. Among the most extensive records of Olson’s teaching at Black Mountain College are his 1953 lectures, *The Chiasma, or Lectures in the New Sciences of Man*. In those lectures, Olson moves from his broad pronouncements about space in *Call Me Ishmael* to an attempt at a concrete understanding of space, of the geography one inhabits. The shift is from making a pronouncement before knowing what one says. The knowing came later...and convinced Olson that one *does* before one *knows*, that “knowledge” as content is false, *knowledge as doing* is essential. Following a research junket in the West a few years earlier, where he met and was influenced by the geographer Carl Sauer, Olson writes in *The Chiasma*,

the way now we find out anew what place is to us: a valley is an experience of a cup of the earth, is, in this way, the way we can find again, by dealing with the earth in a compass a single human being can encompass (with his eyes, his sense) his direct tactile and motor participation in the earth.

The influence of Sauer is evident here because Sauer, as Olson knew, once retraced the steps of parts of Cabeza de Vaca’s journey on the Road to Cibola. And Olson came away impressed that, as a confirmed walker himself, this was how one came to know a place. Such knowledge of place was rooted in physical measure. As he wrote to Ed Dorn about studying A. K. Lobeck’s physiographic maps of the United States, “locate stuff...to get that topographic sense in the mind as you have in the feet.”

This insistence on the physicality of understanding received confirmation in an unacknowledged source at Black Mountain College...another influence that would have come to Olson through conversations at Black Mountain. Erwin Straus, a professor of psychiatry, fled Germany in 1938 and taught at Black Mountain from 1938-1945. Straus
was a student of Edmund Husserl and an unrelenting critic of Pavlovian behaviorism and Descartes’ separation of the mind from the body.

Olson likely had not read Straus’ writings, which were translated, collected, and published in English in the 1950s and 1960s. Straus’ ideas expressed in essays like “The Forms of Spatiality” and “Lived Movement” (the first published in German and the latter in French in the 1930s) surely would have been discussed in any case as an enduring part of the conversation at Black Mountain when Olson first arrived for a summer teaching stint in 1948. The evidence that Straus’ thinking about phenomenology persisted at Black Mountain is perhaps behind Olson turning to the Oxford English Dictionary for the term phenomenology while developing his Lectures in the New Sciences of Man (prior to his time at Black Mountain, Olson did not use this term nor refer to its import to poetics). The definition of the term itself and the phenomenological approach that Straus articulated would have resonated with Olson.39

Straus critiqued objectifying concepts of space to insist on “the primary forms of lived experience.” He stressed how our movement in space, defines space...for us. Straus writes,

> When we speak of proprioceptive sensation, we are... definitely comprehending the experience of the live body...in relation to its surroundings or to the world....The opening wide of live body space into its surroundings.

And later in this essay:

> The space in which we live is as different from the schema of empty Euclidean space as the familiar world of colors differs from the concepts of physical optics....As immediately experienced, space is always a filled and articulated space.40

Straus was unrelenting in his critique of mechanical definitions of the human body and human experience. A key element of his critique centers on dance as an essential defining characteristic of human experience. He writes, “Physiology, satisfied with an account of the mechanics of the body in motion, can do no more than to represent
dance movement as a combination of motor elements.”

Olson likewise turns to dance as part of his moving away from the mechanical. In an essay that he wrote in 1952, “The Necessary Propositions,” Olson takes up methodology as the primary question in moving to a body-based art. Arguing that by doing so, the arts move away from “the machine” as central in our society. He writes:

> Dance will help us to pass over any drag of our thinking about the machine’s place in our already swiftly moving advance in any of our arts....the body—our own—is now base, and that our attentions are constantly corrected in terms of its imperatives—how best to put that in one word, *kinetics*, say? (I had a dream recently in which I heard Merce [Cunningham] say, Dance is an object and an action.)

Given Olson’s emphasis on the body in his poetics, his connection with dance, which started when studying with Massine during his graduate school years at Harvard, becomes increasingly evident while teaching at Black Mountain. Karlien van den Beukel demonstrates how Olson’s involvement with dance at Black Mountain was critical to his kinetic-based poetics and pedagogy. In “Why Olson Did Ballet,” Karlien writes:

> This dance play [Apollonius of Tyana] is the most important of the plays that Olson was writing in 1951, as he sought to move his Black Mountain College teaching from Poundian pedagogy into dance collaborative production.

Van den Beukel’s phrase “collaborative production” aptly describes where Olson’s pedagogy was headed during these years. How Olson worked with his students and their writings at Black Mountain College did become collaborative. One of Olson’s students, the writer Fielding Dawson, recounts Olson as a teacher, observing that at first Olson didn’t know how to proceed. He didn’t know how to handle the students. According to Dawson, Olson learned how to teach the night when he couldn’t get the rhythms of a piece Dawson had written. Up to that time, Olson would read each student’s work out loud. In effect appropriating their voices. But the night when he couldn’t “get” the rhythms in Dawson’s piece, Olson stammered, retried, and became
self-conscious. Another student said, “why not let Fee [Fielding] read it?” And Olson let him. “From there on,” according to Dawson, “each of us read our own work, and we all discussed it, before Olson read his work.” Dawson’s point was that on that night, which he refers to in his book on Black Mountain as “The Night Olson Learned How to Teach,” Olson learned to listen to their voices…and each of them learned to assert themselves.

Dawson’s account of Olson on this night at Black Mountain College gives a concrete example of Olson realizing in his own way the tradition of the Dewey-Rice-Albers approach to teaching. It is not an example of Olson lecturing on content or dazzling with an array of wide-reaching references. Rather, it is Olson as poet-teacher hearing their voices and opening his classroom to the development of the person through that person’s expression of his or her own work. In the concluding lecture of The Chiasma, Olson states:

> My own investigation of personage has been governed by that question I think event raises, of proportion proper to it, and that question I have said I think object holds, & teaches, that precision phenomena have for us who can see and hear and touch and grip, that on things we hone what we are...we also sharpen who we are, both by what we do & what we do it on.

Key points in this passage and others quoted earlier suggest numerous possibilities for further studies of the influence of the arts at Black Mountain College on Olson’s poetics. His emphasis on the importance of objects in this quotation, for instance, could open to a new look at “Projective Verse” and his emphasis in that essay on objects and objectism…one could shift the critical focus from Olson’s use of ideas from predecessor poets (Pound and Williams) to his colleagues and the students at Black Mountain and their works. “Projective Verse” and other essays and poems by Olson could be looked at anew from the vantage point of what he would have seen and touched while at Black Mountain: pottery by Richards and Wildenhain, weavings by Anni Albers, sculpture by Cy Twombly, wire sculptures by Ruth Asawa, and much more.
With the exception of the years between the closing of Black Mountain College and his teaching stint at SUNY Buffalo and the years between his teaching at Buffalo and at the University of Connecticut, Olson taught from 1949 until shortly before his death in January of 1970 and was a guest lecturer at times during those years when he did not hold a teaching position.

In addition to influencing Olson’s developing poetics, Dahlberg was responsible for recruiting Olson to Black Mountain College. For the extent of Dahlberg’s influence on Olson, see their correspondence: In Love, In Sorrow: The Complete Correspondence of Charles Olson and Edward Dahlberg, edited with an introduction by Paul Christensen (New York: Paragon House, 1990).


Ibid, 207.

Ibid, 207.


What was described by Robert Duncan in a letter to Olson in 1955 as the poet’s “kind and kin,” An Open Map: The Correspondence of Robert Duncan and Charles Olson, eds. Robert J. Bertholf and Dale M. Smith (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2017), 74.

Golding notes that the recently passed G.I. Bill funded a number of students who attended Black Mountain College. Whether intended or not, his comment implies this was contradictory to the exclusivity of a coterie of initiates. However, the only criteria that seems to have excluded anyone from participating in Olson’s classes was a student’s lack of commitment: “his classes revolved around the discussion of reading or work that students brought in with them. In fact, they had to bring work or they couldn’t come [to class].” Knowledge or lack thereof was not the entrance criteria. Martin Duberman, Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1973), 395.

See the chapter “Education as Conversation” in Mary Emma Harris, The Arts at Black Mountain College (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1987), 214-239. See also John Cage’s remarks about the role of conversations at BMC: “What I think was so important at Black Mountain College was that we all ate our meals together. For instance, I was teaching music composition, but no one was studying with me. I had no students. But I would sit at a table three times a day and there would be conversations. And those meals were the classes. And ideas would come out.” See Richard Kostelanetz, Conversing with Cage, quoted in Black Mountain: An Interdisciplinary Experiment: An Interdisciplinary Experiment, 1933-1957 (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2015), 101.

Dahlberg is responsible for Olson teaching at Black Mountain College. Dahlberg was hired to teach there but after two weeks was appalled by the location and left...recommending to Josef Albers that Albers hire Olson as his replacement. Duberman, 319-322.

As stated earlier, while discussing Paul Christiansen’s mention of Gestalt psychology, Olson himself never acknowledged the influence of Paul Goodman and only hints at knowing Goodman’s work in this


17 Joel Oppenheimer, quoted in Duberman, 401.

18 In fact, had the Albers not gone to Mexico, Olson would not have gone to the Yucatan. Granted it was the painter Emerson Woelffer while at Black Mountain who urged Olson to go, but that urging was prompted by what he saw in the materials that the Albers brought back from Mexico.

19 Josef Albers, "Truthfulness in Art," *Joseph Albers in Mexico*, ed. Lauren Hinkson and Joaquin Barrientos (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2017), 50. The essay was written in 1937 and is included in this Guggenheim Museum exhibit catalogue along with the photographs that Albers took in various locations in Mexico during his and Anni’s trips there.


23 Anni Albers, "Art—a constant" (1939), ibid, 14. The 2017-2018 exhibit of her work at the Guggenheim Bilbao was fittingly titled *Anni Albers: Touching Vision*.


28 For the importance of the potters and pottery to the poetics at Black Mountain College, see Charmaine Cadeau, "Handling Poetry, Hearing Pottery: M.C. Richards and Black Mountain College," *Appalachian Journal: A Regional Studies Review* 44, nos. 3-4/45 nos. 1-2 (2017/2018): 310-317. Cadeau provides an insightful contrast between Richards’ and Olson’s poetics regarding the physicality of making poems. However, Olson was more indebted to the potters and their sense of material, and thus more akin to Richards poetics, than is apparent in his well-known, published essays.

29 "Letters to Marguerite Wildenhain and Bernard Leach," *Olson: The Journal of the Charles Olson Archives* no. 8 (1977): 22-23. There is no record of Olson drawing ideas directly from Wildenhain, but her writings include observations about the making of pottery that would have resonated with Olson: “A spout of a pitcher had...live form because it was actually discovered through fingers, and not abstractly, as a theoretical concept in the brain, but through contact of a finger with its material.” Marguerite Wildenhain, *Pottery: Form and Expression* (Palo Alto: Pacific Books, 1959), 57.

30 *Collected Prose*, 160-161.

31 Olson was notorious for attacking what he regarded as false, inherited social attitudes expressed in the writings of his students. Francine Gray du Plessix, highly critical of Olson in many respects, acknowledges the lasting value on her own writing method of his admonishing the students in his workshop to realize “what is his or her ground, get to that, citizen, go back there, stand on it, make yrself yr own place, and move from that.” *Black Mountain College: Sprouted Seeds: An Anthology of Personal Accounts* ed. Melvin Lane (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 200.
33Ibid, 84.
34Ibid, 85. This essay was originally published in the journal *bauhaus* in 1928. It was translated by Fredrick Amrine, Nathan Horowitz, and Fred Horowitz for *To Open Eyes*.
36Ibid, 78.
39Olson quoted from *The Phenomenology of Perception* by Merleau-Ponty (influenced by Straus) in his talk “Under the Mushroom,” given in 1963 while he was teaching at Buffalo State. *Muthologos*, 108.
40Erwin Straus, “The Forms of Spatiality,” *Phenomenological Psychology: The Selected Essays of Erwin W. Straus* (New York: Basic Books, 1966), 27, 32. This essay was first published in German in 1930...note Straus’ use of the term proprioceptive. Olson’s use of the term and understanding of proprioception has always been attributed to his reading of Norbert Wiener, which he did while sitting in on Natasha Goldowski’s “seminar on cybernetics from the galley proofs of Wieners first book” (Duberman, 396).
41Ibid, 20.
42The library at Black Mountain College had a copy of Siegfried Gideon’s *Mechanization Takes Command*. A copy of that book with underlining, likely Maud’s transcription of Olson’s underlining, is in the Maud-Olson library in Gloucester. I am indebted to Judith Nash, the collection’s librarian, for this information. For the persistence and importance of Olson’s move beyond the mechanical, see the opening paragraph of his 1969 essay, “The Animate versus the Mechanical, and Thought,” *Collected Prose*, 368.
48Charles Olson, “Cy Twombly,” in *Collected Prose* ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). In this essay on Twombly, Olson writes, “…his sculptures...are properly made up from what wire, bone, stone, iron, wood he picks up, and so do respect the facts....” p.177.
49 Although Olson never mentions Ruth Asawa’s work there as a student, he surely saw her works and even did a reading of Tarot cards for her before she left the college, see Marilyn Chase, *Everything She Touched: The Life of Ruth Asawa* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2020), 62.