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The Art of Graphic Design:
Alvin Lustig, Josef Albers, Ray Johnson, and the 1945 Summer Session

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Black Mountain College is widely known for its arts, craft, and literary programs, its famous alumni and teachers, and its innovative approach to education. However the role it played in the development of the field of graphic design education has received less attention and in this essay I seek to bring greater visibility to that. By discussing the 1945 Summer Art Institute class in graphic design taught by designer Alvin Lustig, the experience of Ray Johnson, a Black Mountain College student who attended it, and Josef Albers’s invitation to Lustig to teach both at Black Mountain and later Yale University, I contend that Black Mountain College allowed both Albers and Lustig to develop their theories of design education and allowed them to have an impact on graphic design at a national level. I also want to suggest that the success in graphic design experienced by Ray Johnson, one of their students, also allowed them to see the impact that their educational theories could have upon a student.

In 1945 Black Mountain College had been in operation for twelve years and it had been at its Lake Eden campus for four years. Josef Albers had been there since the beginning in 1933 and, as the head of the art department, he extended an invitation to Alvin Lustig to teach at that year’s Summer Art Institute (fig. 1). This was the second Summer Art Institute offered by the school and Albers was seeking to provide a session with, as he said it, “less personnel and less curriculum” than the previous summer.1
While Lustig had given some lectures about design and art education, his course at Black Mountain College marked his first formal opportunity to teach. His bio in the *Black Mountain College Bulletin* for the Art Institute (fig. 2) mentioned some of his design projects and clients, as well as the yearbook *Visual Communication* that he was hoping to publish. In 1945 Lustig was highly regarded for his design work and he would continue to receive additional accolades in the years to come. He had been designing book jackets since the late 1930s, and the covers he created starting in the 1940s, for the publisher New Directions, increased the company’s sales by three hundred percent. Prior to coming to Black Mountain College he had been hired as the Visual Research Director for *Look* magazine. His presence at Black Mountain even caught the attention of the *Asheville Citizen*, and towards the end of his three-week stay the newspaper highlighted his achievements and teaching at the school.

The College’s promotional brochure (fig. 3) listed Lustig’s class as covering “basic principles in visual presentation” and “problems and criticism starting with simple spatial organization and developing into complex arrangements, involving type, message, [and] psychological intent.” The psychological effect of design was emphasized even in this short description. Lustig would later write about this class in an essay titled *Graphic Design* where he said, “The aim of the course at the Black Mountain Summer Institute was to emphasize the fact that graphic design is slowly emerging as a serious art on its own terms, allowing for considerable creative freedom and maturity, and offering the artist a valid and constructive position in society.” He
continued, “Specifically, the course began by demonstrating its relationship to the basic design classes of Albers, and attempted to show methods of extending and developing these discoveries into the graphic field.”

In the basic design course that Albers taught he emphasized getting the most from the materials you were working with, to “do more with less,” and to study the results carefully. Both Albers and Lustig were interested in psychological effects, and as teachers both facilitated experiential approaches and fostered experimental environments. Their statements about teaching echo the similarity of their views. Albers said, “In school, we can only prepare for individual art work which normally comes after school…[Good teaching] liberates for later personal creation.” Lustig said, “Actually, I don’t really believe that you can teach creative art. I think all you can teach is a certain awareness, and open a number of doors.”

Albers and Lustig had similar perspectives about what could and could not be taught, but both also tried to teach and foster perception to their students. This is reflected in statements made by both. Albers said, “I have not taught painting because it cannot be taught. I have taught seeing.” Similarly Lustig remarked, “Art experience, like all other experiences, has many levels and I think that the ability to make configurational vitality a recognizable factor in human seeing is an activity which is still too rare in art education today. It demands a great deal of the teacher. It demands actually that he or she be functioning as an artist, in the deepest sense, at all times.”

Lustig was well received at Black Mountain College by both the students and faculty. In a letter to New Directions publisher James Laughlin he wrote, “Am apparently quite a success as a teacher. Have a large enthusiastic class. Lots of interesting people...
here, and altogether having a very stimulating time.”¹¹ After the 1945 summer session Albers wrote to Lustig, “Many thanks again for coming to us and for your very helpful and successful course. The more I think it over the more I believe that we should continue such work here. I hope you are able to come again.”¹²

One of the students Lustig met at the 1945 Summer Art Institute was Ray Johnson. This was the first session at Black Mountain College that Johnson, a high school student just finishing his senior year at Cass Tech in Detroit, enrolled in. Johnson is on record for taking Sculpture with Ossip Zadkine, Color with Josef Albers, Design with Josef Albers, and Woodworking with Molly Gregory.¹³ However according to a letter he wrote to Lustig, he also attended Lustig’s class. When he came to Black Mountain College, Johnson already had experience in commercial art and poster design.¹⁴ In the summer after his sophomore year he had worked as an apprentice at a commercial art studio in Detroit. His ‘spot’ designs had been published in New Masses and he had won awards in two poster contests.¹⁵

Figure 4. Ray Johnson letter to Alvin Lustig, circa 1947, pencil on color-printed paper, 10 x 9 ¾ inches. © Ray Johnson Estate, Collection of Elaine Lustig Cohen.
This letter from Johnson to Lustig from around 1947 (fig. 4) offers insights into Johnson’s experience in Lustig’s class, his interest in Lustig’s approach to design, and Lustig’s writings. However this was no ordinary letter from Johnson. Letters he wrote to his parents used the same meticulous pencil handwriting, but in this letter to Lustig, Johnson includes the first sentence “Reptiles on the path in the snow.” This statement provides an idea for the multi-colored lines printed on the paper that Johnson wrote between. Creating an idea for the design in this letter demonstrates a psychological effect, the type of effect that Lustig had lectured about. The reader is left to imagine the reptiles that made these paths, the ways they moved, and to reconcile an unlikely occurrence due to their cold-blooded nature.

While one purpose of this letter was to ask Lustig for leads on a job that Johnson could do over Christmas vacation in New York, Johnson also mentions Lustig’s class at Black Mountain College. Johnson is honest about his participation in the class by saying, “When I was in your course that summer I never said or did much.” However throughout this letter he refers to specific covers designed by Lustig, attempting to prove his interest in design, as well as his continued study of Lustig’s work.

Early in this letter Johnson asks if Lustig saw the cover that he designed for Interiors magazine (fig. 5). Albers helped Johnson get this
commission and it appeared on the November 1947 issue. Lustig also designed covers for *Interiors* and it is highly likely that he was aware of Johnson’s cover since Johnson’s bio and a reprint of his cover were listed in a later issue for which Lustig had designed the cover. Johnson’s approach to this cover was applauded by the publisher. By mentioning this cover Johnson tries to show Lustig his accomplishments, demonstrate his abilities, and emphasize the design field’s recognition of his talents.

In his letter Johnson also comments on Lustig’s cover for Rimbaud’s *Season in Hell* (fig. 6). He asks Lustig, “How did you arrive at the forms on the Rimbaud cover? Did you just draw them?” Such questions attempt to continue a line of learning from Lustig’s work.

The shapes Johnson asks about have similarities to his later *Moticos* (fig. 7) which bear a resemblance to an unpublished fabric design (fig. 8) by Lustig. While the similarities could be perceived as copying or appropriation, it is not as simple as that. Johnson’s *Moticos* were a much more complicated practice of positive and negative space and perception that demonstrate an understanding and his own attempt to teach perception.  

I contend that the similarities revealed in this comparison remind us of the lessons about perception that he learned from both Lustig and Albers. How images are read, and the ways Johnson’s work teaches and makes the viewer aware of perception, are defining characteristics of Johnson’s art.
Johnson also writes, “I was in Asheville today and saw many book covers you designed.” Here he is emphasizing his familiarity with Lustig’s covers and conveying his careful study of them. Later in the letter he even criticizes one cover (fig. 9), “Saw Spearhead cover. Thought it should say more on [the] cover so I didn’t have to go through [the] trouble to go inside store [to] get clerk to go into window to get book because it was [the] only copy to find out what it was about.” Spearhead was a collection of ten years of experimental American writing published in 1947 by New Directions and edited by James Laughlin, the press’s founder and director. The forms on the Rimbaud cover were created in a manner similar to the Spearhead cover so
Johnson may have been making a subtle critique about the similar approach Lustig used for these two different books.

Figure 10. Alvin Lustig, Design magazine, special issue on Black Mountain College, April 1946. © Elaine Lustig Cohen, Courtesy of Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center.

Johnson closes the letter by saying “I am now going to read what you wrote in the Design magazine about Graphic Design (fig. 10),” yet another attempt to demonstrate how he wants to continue to learn from Lustig. Lustig’s essay begins, “In Graphic Design, we deal with the design of the printed page for a specific use, involving technical, economic, psychological, and formal considerations.” Johnson’s letter to Lustig demonstrates his own version of this multi-faceted approach to the page. His commitment to this approach can also be seen in the later promotional pages that he created for his design work in the 1950s (fig. 11) and his A Book About Death in the 1960s (fig. 12).
Lustig kept Johnson’s letter and replied in an undated letter (fig. 13). He mentions seeing and liking Johnson’s *Interiors* cover and compliments Johnson’s design work. Lustig suggests that Bernard Rudofsky at *Interiors* magazine might help Johnson find some design work to do over the holidays and he also suggests a contact at *Fortune* magazine. He answers Johnson’s question about the Rimbaud cover saying, “I just drew them—in fact I drew [t]hem while I was at Black Mountain.” It is likely that Johnson enjoyed learning of this connection between the forms on Lustig’s Rimbaud cover and Lustig’s time at Black Mountain College and it is possible that their smooth undulations may have been inspired by the curves of the mountains surrounding the Lake Eden campus.
Mr. Raymond Johnson  
c/o Black Mountain College  
Black Mountain, North Carolina

Dear Ray:  
I did see your INTERIORS cover and liked it very much. I  
searched my memory trying to remember where I had heard your  
name before—now I know. However, I must confess that I can’t  
connect the name with the face. I’m glad you do such fine  
work.

As you can see I am in California which makes it difficult  
to help you. Have you written Rudofsky of INTERIORS? telling  
him of your problem? He might be able to help you. Another  
person you could contact is Will Burtin, the Art Director  
of FORTUNE who has good feelings for Black Mountain College  
students. At the moment that seems to be all I can suggest.

Has Albers returned from Mexico to Black Mountain yet?  
If he has, please give him my regards. Tell him that I did not  
answer his letters because when he wrote to New York I was in  
California and the other way around. The return addresses  
were all different on his letters. If he is back at Black  
Mountain, I will write him.

As to the Rainbeau cover—l just drew them—I just couldn’t  
leave them while I was at Black Mountain.

Lustig may have played a role in connecting Johnson with the publisher New Directions since Johnson designed a number of covers for them in the years that followed. Interestingly Johnson’s first cover for New Directions in 1956 (fig. 14) was a redesign of a 1944 cover by Lustig (fig. 15) for William Carlos Williams’s *In the American Grain*. This book was in New Direction’s New Classics series. Lustig wrote that for those covers he tried, “to establish for each book a quickly grasped, abstract symbol of its contents, that would by sheer force of form and color, attract and inform the eye. Such a symbol is a matter of distillation, a reduction of the book to its simplest terms of mood or idea.”

Johnson’s design can be seen as conversation with Lustig’s, and as an extension of lessons Johnson learned from Lustig.

By choosing to use a photograph Johnson pays homage to the photographs Lustig introduced for the New Directions Modern Reader series starting in 1946. For this series Lustig developed a distinctive approach to their design that involved photographs. About this series Lustig wrote to Laughlin,

I have just about come to the conclusion that I would like to do them all by photographic means. Using all kinds of methods, solarization, photograms, reticulation, negative melting, debossing, montage[,] I would create a set of vital images and symbols for each book. A certain number of drawn elements would also be used. Although much would be
done with accidentals[,] they would be combined in a very controlled manner that would have a shock effect…Nothing very good had been done in their field yet and this seems like a remarkable opportunity.22

Like Lustig, Johnson integrates the placement of the type with the photograph. Johnson also signs his name on the front cover. But Johnson’s focus on a hand conveys William Carlos Williams’s personal approach to history in the book, a grasp of its content not found in Lustig’s abstract design. A copy of this photograph of a hand is in Ray Johnson’s papers housed at the Archives of American Art. Notes identify it as a photograph of Williams’s own hand further emphasizing the book’s personal perspective. Additional notes state it was “taken under the direction of Ray Johnson when he was designing the cover of the paperback edition of In The American Grain.”23 The photograph was taken by John D. Schiff, a freelance commercial photographer who took other portraits of Williams and a number of artists including Marcel Duchamp, Richard Lippold, Sol Lewitt, and Andy Warhol.24 In these notes Johnson is emphasizing his direction of Schiff the creation of this image, a similar approach Lustig used with experimental photographers including George Barrows, Edward Quigley, Jay Connor, and Thomas Yee.25

Sometime between 1957 and 1961 Johnson also designed a cover for Djuna Barnes’s, Nightwood (fig. 16) in collaboration with his friend Norman Solomon.26 This is yet another cover designed by Lustig in 1946 (fig. 17), but Johnson’s and Solomon’s redesign was never published by New Directions.27 An early novel that portrayed female homosexuality, Johnson’s and Solomon’s design emphasizes a female, gesturing towards the main female character, Robin Vote, in the book. It also recalls a photograph of Johnson taken at Black Mountain College.28 Lustig’s abstract approach suggests the conflicts Robin Vote experiences in her personal relationships.
In 1957 New Directions published Arthur Rimbaud’s *Illuminations* with a new cover design by Johnson (fig. 18), again another instance of a redesign of a 1945 Lustig cover (fig. 19). In this, and in the case of the Williams cover, Johnson seems to be updating designs for the current decade, just like Lustig had done for New Directions in the 1940s. Lustig’s abstract approaches resonated with the abstract art of its time, but these new 1950s editions needed to be updated so that they would resonate with the current artistic and design climate. Johnson’s designs keep Lustig’s lessons in mind while also forging new territory of their own. With the *Illuminations* cover Johnson goes beyond Lustig’s use of photography to push the medium’s boundaries, making visible the Ben-Day dots that make up the photograph, boldly acknowledging its printed nature. This is an inventive move, and one that would predate painter Roy Lichtenstein’s
infamous use of Ben-Day dots in his Pop Art paintings by four years. Johnson’s lettering for the title and author’s name play off the ways the relationships of black and white create the photograph as well as these words. While Lustig’s abstract covers in the 1940s drew upon the work of Joan Miro, Clyfford Still, and Mark Rothko, here Johnson is actually forging his own innovations in art with an approach that would be conversant with the Pop Art that would follow. Johnson’s design emphasizes Rimbaud the person and his own ground-breaking approach gestures towards Rimbaud’s innovative writing in these poems.

In 1960 New Directions published Johnson’s cover for Kenneth Patchen’s *Because It Is* (fig. 20); the line drawing was by Patchen, the lettering and layout by Johnson. Lustig had designed covers for other Patchen books (fig. 21), so once again
Johnson designing a cover for this new book by an author who fits into a lineage of Lustig’s design. Here, as he had in the Rimbaud cover, Johnson shows his versatility with lettering and his ability to vary it according to the tone of the book.

The Patchen cover seems to be the last one attempted by Johnson for New Directions. Letters between him and Laughlin in 1962 reveal the appointment of a new production chief, Mrs. Gilda Kuhlman. Laughlin concludes his letter, “I hope that your painting is going well and that we will be able to have another jacket from you some time later on.” Johnson’s reply to Laughlin a few weeks later mentions misplacing the name of the new art production chief and asks for her name again. He writes, “…I hadn’t recorded in my book the name of the new woman at New Directions you said would look at my recent portfolio of work which I got up to date yesterday and would like...
to show to her….” A handwritten note at the bottom of this letter from Kuhlman suggests that she replied to Johnson, but it seems like the conversations ended there.

In the covers that Johnson designed for New Directions he adopted a conversational approach with Lustig’s earlier covers, while also taking them as an opportunity to demonstrate his grasp of concepts and perception that he had learned from Lustig and Albers. However Johnson also designed a number of book covers from 1957 to 1960 for other publishers including City Lights, Jargon Press, Lippincott, and Harper. In many of these Johnson demonstrates innovative treatments of lettering and a focus on a central, powerful image. In the 1960s Johnson shifted away from commercial design work, but his later work continued to demonstrate his innovative application of lessons he was exposed to in the classes he took with Albers and Lustig.

While Josef Albers is best known for his paintings, teaching, and writing he also had a few forays of his own into graphic design. In 1935 he designed the logo for Black Mountain College (fig. 22) and the seal for the school’s library. In the brochure accompanying these, he quoted Plato and wrote about the absolute beauty of shapes. He also designed record covers for the Provocative Percussion and the Persuasive Percussion series released by Command Records in 1959-61. Here Albers’s use of squares and circles evoke the rhythm and beats of the songs on the albums. While Albers did not refer to himself as a graphic designer, according to one of the instructors who worked with him at Yale, he once casually remarked, “I am not a graphic designer but my nonsense is helpful to them.”

Figure 22. Josef Albers, Black Mountain College logo, 1935. Courtesy of Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center.
While Albers’s teaching at Black Mountain College built upon the classes he taught previously at the Bauhaus, Black Mountain was instrumental for the further development of his own teaching philosophy and the expansion of his perceptual and experimental approaches. In 1950 he was appointed as Chairman to the newly reorganized and named Department of Design at Yale. With this new appointment Albers was able to create a design program that was separate from the fine arts program, but one that had a relationship to the school’s architecture program.

Figure 23. Telegram from Josef Albers to Alvin Lustig, 1951. Collection of Elaine Lustig Cohen, Courtesy of Elaine Lustig Cohen.

Albers’s regard for Lustig as a teacher and designer extended beyond the summer session at Black Mountain. In 1951 Albers invited Lustig to serve as a visiting critic for Yale’s graphic arts program for six-weeks (fig. 23). While this was not Lustig’s first invitation to teach since Black Mountain College, it was one of the few he accepted. This appointment at Yale was structured in a way that he could share his design philosophy with students while also continuing his own practice as a designer. At Yale, Albers, Lustig, and graphic designer Alvin Eisenman, forged new territory in creating a graphic design curriculum and distinguishing it from advertising art and fine arts programs.
While Lustig worked with advanced students as a visiting critic, he also wrote up a document titled *Experimental Workshop in Graphic Design for Yale University*. This plan allowed Lustig the opportunity to combine his previous ideas about design education into a clearly articulated vision for Yale’s program. In it he outlined aims, his thoughts for how the workshop should be organized, details about the program, and needs for the budget. He also wanted to provide exchanges between graphic design professionals and students, and to connect students with research and creative projects in the professional field. These contacts and opportunities were similar to those Ray Johnson experienced at Black Mountain College. Elements of Lustig’s proposal were followed by Yale. Every graphic design student had to take courses in photography, printmaking, typesetting, and Albers’s color class. However Lustig’s time at Yale was cut short in 1953 since he had to stop working with the school then due to his deteriorating vision, which was related to the diabetes that would lead to his early death in 1955.

Yale was the first university in the United States to formally establish a degree program in graphic design. This was a direct result of the work done from 1950 to 1955 when the program was being established by Albers, Lustig, and other design professionals. Many of the students who graduated from Yale’s program were those who achieved success in the field of graphic design while others implemented similar curriculums at other schools.

Without visionary artists and educators like Josef Albers and Alvin Lustig who propelled the establishment of graphic design in the academy, the field of graphic design would not have experienced the boom starting in the 1960s that continues today. What Albers and Lustig were able to achieve at Yale was strongly informed from their time teaching and working directly with students at Black Mountain College. Having a student like Ray Johnson at Black Mountain, who achieved success and recognition in the field while still a teenager also supported the possible results that such education could have for students, even though much of this would depend upon the individual student. Black Mountain College gave artists like Albers and Lustig the space and opportunity to develop their own theories about teaching, but it also gave them the
opportunity to instill a spirit of experimentation and confidence in the personal vision of their students.

A student at Yale oversaw the 1958 publication *The Collected Writings of Alvin Lustig*, another invaluable resource for preserving and disseminating Lustig’s ideas about design and design education. This volume contains Lustig’s essay “Graphic Design,” which Johnson read in *Design* magazine. In it Lustig writes, “The basic difference between the graphic designer and the painter or sculptor, is his search for the ‘public’ rather than the ‘private’ symbol. His aim is to clarify and open the channels of communication rather than limit or even obscure them, which is too often the preoccupation of those only dealing with the personal symbol.” Lustig earned a prominent position as one of the best known graphic designers, and his designs reached this level of public symbol, most pertinent here, his covers for New Directions. However thinking about this definition also allows us to see Albers and Johnson as graphic designers. One can also look at Albers’s *Homage to the Square* paintings as a public way of sharing the lessons in perception that he taught to his students at Black Mountain College, Yale, and through his book *Interaction of Color*. Johnson also achieved this in his later work through his mail art and creation of a mail art network known as the New York Correspondence School, one of the most extensive bodies of visual communication ever created by an artist.

Returning again to Lustig’s essay: “It is in the maturity and richness of this synthesizing task that the ultimate measure of the designer can be found. If he succeeds in being only superficially derivative, he will fail completely in helping to close the gap between art and society. If on the other hand he does as Picasso himself suggests, ‘…take up our researches and react clearly again us,’ he will make a contribution to a field that I am convinced history will eventually honor with the name of Art.” Lustig, Albers, and Johnson were all great synthesizers whose commitment to their art and the fostering perception in others helped “close the gap between art and society” and today each of their contributions to Art are indeed held in high esteem.

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the conference ReVIEWING Black Mountain College 5: Shaping Craft + Design on October 12, 2013 in Asheville, North Carolina.
My understanding of Josef Albers’s teaching and his theories has been informed greatly through the writing of Frederick A. Horowitz in the landmark book *Josef Albers: To Open Eyes*. While we lost Horowitz in 2013 with his writings he left us a great gift, and further showed us what a student of Albers’s could achieve.

Thank you to Bill Wilson and Michael Von Uchtrup for their help over the many years I have been researching and writing about Ray Johnson. Thanks also to Elaine Lustig Cohen, the Ray Johnson Estate, and Alice Sebrell at the Black Mountain College Museum and Art Center for their help with images and permissions.

Currently there seems to be a renewed interest in Ray Johnson’s design work. From July 2-September 29, 2014 MoMA is presenting the exhibit “Ray Johnson Designs” [http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2014/rayjohnson/](http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2014/rayjohnson/). This selection of Johnson’s promotional fliers for his design work draws from the MoMA Library’s collection.

1 Harris quoting Black Mountain College Board of Fellows minutes, May 1945 in Mary Emma Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 104.
5 Alvin Lustig, “Graphic Design” in *Design* magazine, April 1946, 18.
7 Ibid., 73.
11 He also wrote, “Music, lectures, classes and parties follow each other in a vicious and endless circle,” letter from Alvin Lustig to James Laughlin, undated, New Direction Publishing Corp. Records (MS Am 2077.1039) Houghton Library, Harvard University, quoted in Ibid., 181.
12 Letter from Josef Albers to Alvin Lustig, August 30, 1945, Collection of Elaine Lustig Cohen, quoted in *Born Modern*, 180.
13 Raymond E. Johnson student records, Black Mountain College Records, Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina, Asheville, NC.
14 Ibid. At Cass Tech he had taken two courses in graphic design, one in posters, and two courses in lettering.
16 A photograph of Johnson by Hazel Larsen and a thumbnail image of his cover design ran in a 1948 issue that had a cover designed by Lustig. Johnson’s bio starts, “Ray Johnson, the most modest of our cover artists is, we guess, well under twenty. He refuses to give us any information about himself except that he is [a] student at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, mostly with Josef Albers. He asks that we use this space to say something about the College." The biography describes the progressive nature of Black Mountain College and compliments the impact of Johnson’s design. “About this gayest, most deceptively simple cover—Johnson obtained its riotously colorful effects with only black, red, and blue.”
The numbers of these records on Command Records are: RS 800 SD, RS 806 SD, RS 810 SD, and RS 817 SD.

Rob Roy Kelly, “The Early Years of Graphic Design at Yale University” in Design Issues, 17, no. 3 (2001), 11.

The full text of this is reprinted in Heller, Born Modern, 186-187.

Kelly, “The Early Years of Graphic Design at Yale University,” 3.

Lustig, The Collected Writings, 35-36.

Ibid., 37.