

## Nothing's Happening: A Black Mountain College Project

Louise (Lea) Gilbert  
Drama Department  
The University of North Carolina Asheville  
One University Heights  
Asheville, North Carolina 28804 USA

Faculty Advisor: Lise Kloeppel

### Abstract

An ensemble of UNCA students created and performed a devised piece of theater using the history of Black Mountain College (BMC) and John Cage's *Lecture on Nothing* to explore the idea of experimental artmaking. Using a non-linear lens, *Nothing's Happening: A Black Mountain College Project* reflects on devised theater, its associated performances, and the intentional community intersections of both devised theater and the subject matter of BMC. The organization of this paper is based on the structure of Cage's *Lecture on Nothing*. In accordance with the *Lecture on Nothing*, there are five different sections to this paper. The first section is an explanation of the layout and brief overview for the reflection. The next four sections cover as follows: Material, Structure, the Here and Now, and Silence and Method. Within these sections, various artmaking groups will be compared and reflected upon: the UNC Asheville ensemble, Black Mountain College, and the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. These artmaker's reflections of past and present personal experiences revealed that every devising process must have a structure, method, and material, but those differ based on each distinctive process. While this project was a unique devising process, the intentional community and thoughts surrounding experimental artmaking created a connection across distance and time. Using the path of UNC Asheville's ensemble and the history of Black Mountain College as the lens to look through, this reflection aims to explore intentional community and devised theater within the framework of Cage's *Lecture on Nothing*.

## 1. First Section

### 1.1 John Cage's *Lecture on Nothing*

"I am here, and there is nothing to say."<sup>1</sup> This statement starts off John Cage's *Lecture on Nothing* as well as the performance aptly named *Nothing's Happening: A Black Mountain College Project* devised by a University of North Carolina Asheville (UNCA) student ensemble in the spring of 2019.

The *Lecture on Nothing* is an experimental composition written by John Cage and performed as *Theater Piece No. 1* in the dining hall of Black Mountain College (BMC) in the summer of 1952 during what has become to be known as the First Happening.<sup>2</sup> In this piece, Cage breaks down his concept of "nothing" in an avant-garde and non-linear fashion and explores different musical terms and their connection to life. The *Lecture on Nothing* can be viewed as a meditation in a way with its rhythmic, repetitive structure, silent section, and content it delves into.<sup>3</sup>

### 1.1.1. original score of the Lecture of Nothing

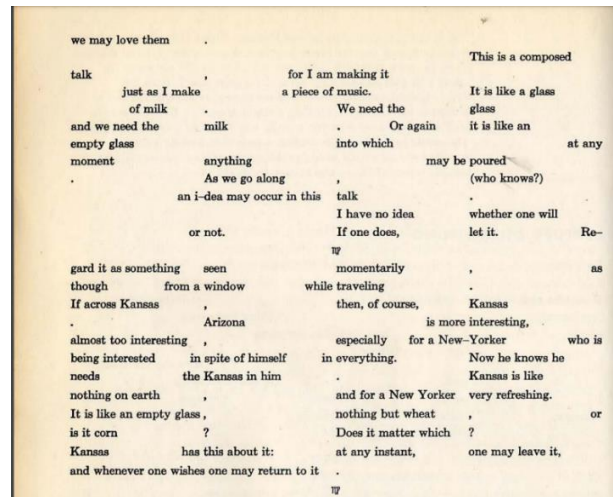


Figure 1. Partial copy of original *lecture on nothing*.

Figure 1 shows an example of one of the eighteen pages that makes up the *Lecture*.<sup>4</sup> Composed with a strict rhythmic structure in mind, Cage still wanted the composition to be read “with the rubato which one uses in everyday speech.”<sup>5</sup> Broken into five sections, the *Lecture* focuses on a concept for each section. The First Section is a self-description summed up at the top of Figure 1 by stating, “this is a composed talk for I am making it.”<sup>6</sup> The Second Section follows structure, the Third Section—material, the Fourth Section—here and now, and the Fifth Section—silence and method.

### 1.1.2. updated scoring of Lecture on Nothing

[illegible]

Figure 2. Partial copy of updated scoring on *lecture on nothing*

Figure 2 illustrates the updated form that the director of the UNCA ensemble created and is what the ensemble used for rehearsals and later went into the finalized script as well.<sup>7</sup> They are the same two small sections as the original example. In this version, each line was split up into eight measures each with a 1/1-time signature effectively creating a two-measure line with a 4/4 time signature. Within each small section, there are three shaded phrases and two unshaded trading on and off. On the right-hand side, each line is numbered creating a twelve-line section and a label for each section; these are 1.3 and 1.4 within the larger part of Section One. It is labeled this way for all five sections of the lecture.

### *1.1.3 reflection mimicking Lecture on Nothing*

This reflection is inspired by the form that the *Lecture on Nothing* created following five different sections. This first section is a brief description of what the reflection will detail as well as a condensed history for the project. The second section follows material, the third section—structure, the fourth section—the here and now, and the fifth section—silence and method.

## 1.2 Devising Project with SITI Company

In the Spring of 2019, the UNC Asheville Drama Department contracted the SITI Company to guide a fifteen-member ensemble in a devising process. Devised theater is known, at its most simple point, as theater without a script. The SITI Company is known for their devised and movement-based theater and their focus in the training of Viewpoints and Suzuki Method.<sup>8</sup> Lise Kloeppel, the Drama Department faculty advisor for the project, chose Leon Ingulsrud, a member of the SITI Company, to be the in-residence director for the UNCA ensemble. While devised theater can be about anything, Leon Ingulsrud chose to focus on Asheville's nearby rich history with Black Mountain College and more specifically John Cage's *Lecture on Nothing* which was composed and performed within *Theater Piece No. 1* at the college.<sup>9</sup> Ingulsrud already had a past with the *Lecture on Nothing* having performed the SITI Company's version of *Theater Piece No. 1* in June of 2018.<sup>10</sup> The SITI Company has always referred to themselves as the "grandchildren of Black Mountain College" as well.<sup>11</sup> Because of this, the *Lecture on Nothing* became the ensemble's guiding force and backbone throughout the entire process.

### *1.2.1 personal understanding of project*

The students working in the process were given the *Lecture on Nothing* text and the knowledge that they would be working with the SITI Company training in the use of Viewpoints and the Suzuki Method as guidelines in what the project would be about. The ensemble went through an application process and were asked why they wanted to be a part of the process. Personally, I applied for the chance to work with a John Cage piece and to truly learn what "devised theater" was having only a rough idea that it might be more creative, communal, and improv based.

## 1.3 Black Mountain College Background

### *1.3.1 John Andrew Rice and Josef Albers*

Black Mountain College was founded by John Andrew Rice and operated from 1933-1957 as an intentional community full of students and faculty focused on experimenting within the liberal arts.<sup>12</sup> An intentional community's purpose is to create a community full of individuals who are focused on accomplishing the same goal.<sup>13</sup> Rice soon hired Josef Albers, and, as were many of the faculty at BMC, Albers was a German refugee who came to the United States looking for a fresh start.<sup>14</sup> Black Mountain's roots not only consisted of German faculty, but also of the experimental artistic methods brought over from Germany's Bauhaus Theatre.<sup>15</sup> Although Albers hardly spoke any English when he first came to BMC<sup>16</sup>, the campus community did not seem to mind and Albers ran the art program placing a lot of emphasis upon experimentation.<sup>17</sup> Rice and Albers were both strong-minded men who oftentimes had differing opinions.<sup>18</sup> One of the founders, Theodore Dreier, stated, "Rice is the man who makes the college a continuing possibility . . . but Albers is the one who makes it turn out to be what it is more than Rice or anybody knows."<sup>19</sup> One person at BMC, Louis Adamic, stated Rice was the college's "center, its core" while Albers was "the strongest diffused influence on the place."<sup>20</sup> Rice may have gotten the college's start, but Albers was what made it so dynamic.

### 1.3.2 Josef Albers vs John Wallen

Another dynamic at Black Mountain College which will be brought up again in Section Three, was the Josef Albers and John Wallen relationship. John Wallen taught psychology and brought a heavy community focus to Black Mountain College<sup>21</sup> while Josef Albers taught art and focused heavily on the individual.<sup>22</sup> There was always a lot of friction between Albers and Wallen. Albers wanted to create and explore art and experimental action which is why he and Cage connected so easily.<sup>23</sup> For a time, because Albers and Wallen were at such odds, art and community seemed diametrically opposed.<sup>24</sup>

### 1.3.3 John Cage's connection with Black Mountain

In the Spring of 1948, John Cage and Merce Cunningham visited Black Mountain College to respectively perform and dance for the campus community.<sup>25</sup> Albers was so taken with Cage and Cunningham's view on experimental art that he invited them to come back and teach. Albers and Cage found they had similar mindsets when it came to structure and content.<sup>26</sup> Cage and Cunningham came back for the summer of 1948 to teach at BMC and transformed the school into a "laboratory" of experimental artmaking.<sup>27</sup> Cage had a two-part agenda: to explore new relationships between art and music and to fix the "failure of communication besetting modern music."<sup>28</sup> This is something he also addressed four years later in the *Lecture on Nothing* in Section 5 when he talked about how Texas had no music because it only had recordings. If the records were to be removed from Texas, "someone [would] learn to sing."<sup>29</sup> During that summer, Cage gave a talk: the "Defense of Satie." Here, he stated that Beethoven had no point, along with many other idolized Western musical structures that dominated American music. Again, this point was echoed in his later written *Lecture*. The "Defense of Satie" was extremely contentious and lit a match for the fire the *Lecture on Nothing* would soon create.

In 1952, when Cage returned to Black Mountain College, he wrote the *Lecture* in a span of one day<sup>30</sup> and performed it by that August evening.<sup>31</sup> That evening performance was what became known as *Theater Piece No. 1* as it didn't have a name at the time. Cage invited other colleagues to be a part of this performance and gave a short list of timed instructions such as "Begin at 16 min. Play freely until 23 min."<sup>32</sup> With dancing, poetry, speaking and compositions taking place at random interludes from colleagues such as Cunningham and Robert Rauschenberg, it was nearly impossible to recreate the method of the performance.<sup>33</sup> Cage himself sat atop a ladder and recited his *Lecture on Nothing*. While it is likely the most well-known performance of the evening, this was one of the many performances that sparked the first "Happening." The Happening was a moment in time when the students and faculty at BMC "spontaneously" put on performances of experimental art, dancing, music, and singing.<sup>34</sup> Since that first Happening, the community of Black Mountain and Asheville have put on a performance for the past couple of years known as the ReHappening in the same location where the college was once in operation.<sup>35</sup>

John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and Robert Rauschenberg influenced each other and inspired one another with their work while at BMC together creating an "interdisciplinary nurturing of dance and visual arts."<sup>36</sup> Even though the 1950s were known as the decline of BMC, it produced some its greatest works during this time like the first Happening, Rauschenberg's black and white paintings, and the start of Merce Cunningham's Dance Company.<sup>37</sup>

### 1.3.4 the drama program

In the 1930s, Drama was taught by many different instructors, two of whom were Robert Wunsch<sup>38</sup> and Xanti Schawinsky.<sup>39</sup> Wunsch taught at BMC first, was deeply passionate about the college and was known as one of the kindest professors on campus as well.<sup>40</sup> He was more traditional when it came to exploring theater. Wunsch focused on theater with an educational lens and thought drama was "a meeting place of all the arts, [and was] the 'best substitute for experience,' as a social force in a community."<sup>41</sup> His idea of experimenting was to write and perform a new play and plan costumed dinner parties.<sup>42</sup>

Xanti Schawinsky was a student of the Bauhaus Theater that was based in Germany—where Black Mountain College's experimental nature and modernization of theater came from. He came to teach at the college in 1936.<sup>43</sup> Schawinsky viewed Black Mountain as a laboratory to experiment within by "synthesizing through nonanalytical, nonliterary means."<sup>44</sup>

In 1947, Irving Penn came to teach at Black Mountain.<sup>45</sup> There had been just under a ten-year gap where theater was all but nonexistent at the college.<sup>46</sup> Irving thought "that although people might not be interested in theater as theater, they might certainly be interested in techniques of theater, and particularly Stanislavsky's, that could be applied

elsewhere and in other forms.”<sup>47</sup> Penn decided to focus on using personal experiences to find creative content to explore. When Penn starting working through scenes, he started using the dining hall as a makeshift performance space<sup>48</sup> setting up the future stage Cage would use in his infamous *Theater Piece No. 1*.<sup>49</sup>

## 1.4 Bringing the Project Together

Using the *Lecture on Nothing* as an outline for both the performances and this reflection, *Nothing's Happening: A Black Mountain College Project* will detail the devising process, and intentional communities through a non-linear lens using Black Mountain College history and the ensemble's own process to support the reflection on structure, materials, the here and now, and method.

## 2. Second Section: Materials

“Now about material. Is it interesting? It is and it isn't. But one thing is certain. If one is making something which is nothing, the one making must love and be patient with the material he chooses. Otherwise he calls attention to the material, which is precisely something.”<sup>50</sup> Cage's section as described in the quote, is about material. Material can refer to physical material and settings, skills and communications of people, and specific training that was used. There are two different periods of material that will be discussed: Material Then and Material Now. Material Then refers to all the material the ensemble knew they had access to during the rehearsal and performance processes. Otherwise stated as retrospect, Material Now is all the material the ensemble can see now that they are out of the rehearsal process.

### 2.1. Material Then: Devising within an Intentional Community

In a devising process, the artists potentially have every material at their disposal except for a script. There were constraints, however, specifically with the *Nothing's Happening* process because the ensemble knew they would be changing spaces for rehearsals and would be performing in two different countries. This meant the physical materials needed the ability to travel easily. The students were also studying under Ingulsrud, a member of the SITI Company, which meant training would specifically be the Suzuki and Viewpoints methods.<sup>51</sup> The original material, Cage's *Lecture on Nothing*, took a nonlinear lens which meant putting together a piece from a nonnarrative point of view.

### 2.2. Material Then: Physical Material and Spaces

#### 2.2.1. physical material

At both Black Mountain College in the 1930s and UNCA's ensemble in 2019, multiple sets and large budgets were almost nonexistent. Black Mountain used their dining hall as an improvised stage with a “gray cyclorama and two baby spots.”<sup>52</sup> There were also foot pedals actors could use to turn the lights on and off.<sup>53</sup> The UNCA ensemble was traveling and rehearsing in so many different spaces that too many props or intricate staging were impossible to have. Instead, the ensemble learned how to adjust quickly to each space and would tape down a twelve block by eight block grid on the stage in less than three minutes creating a physical representation of one of John Cage's small sections in the *Lecture on Nothing* as seen in the earlier Figure 2.<sup>54</sup> The props the cast used were only the essentials: a violin for the violinist, sections of the *Lecture on Nothing* printed out for the actors, four archivist files, a typewriter, a wearable cloth, and acting cubes. Most everything doubled as something else. The files were used by the actor playing Heather South, the archivist, but also stored the *Lecture on Nothing* scripts. The wearable cloth became the bulletin board when worn, and a bed when set on the floor of the space.

Each space added something new and different to the process. They were a mixture of old and new spaces for the cast which aided the members in turning on their “art brain.” The “art brain” was something the ensemble referred to when viewing a material with an artistic lens as if seeing it for the first time. Rehearsals were held in a dance studio the ensemble had never been in before, an acting lab that they had all been in and rehearsed in many times before, and a rehearsal space in a proscenium theater that they were not used too.

### 2.2.2. old Black Mountain campus at Lake Eden

The ensemble performed the *Lecture on Nothing* by itself in the same dining hall John Cage did for a ReHappening at the original campus of BMC on Lake Eden. Some of the ensemble members reflected on the performance at Lake Eden for the ReHappening.<sup>55</sup> Being in the same space that Cage and Black Mountain College students had once been in, the ensemble felt a connection to the text and history that had not yet felt in the process.<sup>56</sup> One of the students explained that it felt good to tune into a piece of work in that setting as well as rehearse and perform in so many different spaces because each connection and awareness of the space was different.<sup>57</sup>

### 2.2.3. Carol Belk Theater at UNC Asheville

The ensemble performed *Nothing's Happening* in UNCA's own round theater, Carol Belk, a place where the cast was very comfortable. The ensemble debuted *Nothing's Happening* in Asheville on the weekend of April 18-21<sup>st</sup>.<sup>58</sup> The show was a blend of the past and current as evidenced by the performers' costumes as well as the content. The best description for the show the ensemble found was that it was a love letter of experimental artmaking. Using the *Lecture* as the undercurrent, it was spoken for the entirety of the show with a different metronome for each of the five sections to keep the performers on beat. Within each section, there were different performance pieces happening. Included in the performance were archival pieces such as Ati's letters, a young woman who went to BMC and would write home to her long term boyfriend, and a bulletin board section, where the ensemble would give voice to a few of the many oftentimes funny announcements that would be pinned to BMC's board. One student voiced the archivist of the Western Regional Archives, Heather South, who helped the ensemble find all the archival piece to begin with. One student also took on the role of John Cage and performed a portion of the "Defense of Satie." There were also performance pieces written with the dialogue of the *Lecture*, and chance operations built in. Chance operations was a technique John Cage used to compose the *Lecture*. The technique could be done with something as simple as rolling a die and the number it landed on determined what action the composition would take. The chance operations within the show decided how certain members of the ensemble would move, form shapes, or even what parts of the *Lecture* they would speak. The only dialogue that didn't come from a BMC source was a current-student written piece by one of the ensemble members detailing the frustrations of being a student and artist.<sup>59</sup> This was presented at the end of the show right before the last small section of the *Lecture on Nothing*.

### 2.2.4 Edinburgh festival fringe performances

The ensemble performed in completely new spaces while performing in Edinburgh: the Greenside Venue<sup>60</sup> at the Royal Terrace and performing on the Royal Mile.<sup>61</sup> After performing in Asheville, the ensemble performed through the International Collegiate Theatre Festival (ICTF) at the largest theater festival in the world: Edinburgh Festival Fringe in Scotland.<sup>62</sup> Before leaving for Edinburgh, the ensemble participated in a short "bootcamp" period where the script was looked at again and the group learned to resync with each other. At this point in time, the script's ending was changed to become more cohesive with the rest of the show.<sup>63</sup> Instead of showcasing only frustrations from one student's perspective, it was balanced with multiple students' perspectives of past and present succinctly stating different frustrations and successes found within art and education. This was taken to Edinburgh and performed during the week of August 3<sup>rd</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> in front of an international audience which gave a completely new dimension to the performance.<sup>64</sup>

There was also a preview of the performance on the Royal Mile which brought a different awareness to the group—a direct connection to the audience. Hundreds of performers tried to get the attention of the thousands of people walking the Royal Mile, so it was a fight to hook and connect with potential paying audience. According to one student, the piece was the most alive then because we had a personal investment to connect to another human in mere seconds.<sup>65</sup> The ensemble quickly adapted to the current state and became in tune with each other as "the process had prepared us to be able to do that."<sup>66</sup>

## 2.3 Material Then: Suzuki and Viewpoints

Irving Penn, a drama professor at BMC in the late 1940s, felt John Wallen's community process for discussions occasionally lacked a shape which is "the one thing that [Penn] really did understand, which was how to structure an improvisation."<sup>67</sup> This is vital to understand for all devising processes. While devising may not have a strict form, it

needs to have a structure in order to shape anything at all. For the SITI Company and for Leon Ingulsrud, this meant focusing on Anne Bogart's Viewpoints and Tadashi Suzuki's Suzuki method.<sup>68</sup>

Viewpoints focuses on six different materials: space, shape, time, emotion, movement, and story. Throughout the first rehearsal period, Ingulsrud taught the ensemble how to strip down each element and see the possibilities with each concept. The ensemble would start to walk around whatever space they were in, what Ingulsrud called "the flow," then they would focus on different key elements.<sup>69</sup> Sometimes they were a dot in space with other dots, sometimes they were individual shapes, and sometimes two shapes together created a movement. This is where I made the discovery that I could be a mover even if I wasn't a "dancer." More of the ensemble found value in Viewpoints compared to Suzuki because Viewpoints helped turn the "art brain" on and they could more easily connect to how it was going to be incorporated into the show.<sup>70</sup>

Suzuki draws on the strength and flexibility of the whole body through physically rigorous exercises focusing on concentration and form.<sup>71</sup> The ensemble memorized some text from Dante's *Inferno* and had to state it while in these poses. Through this, they discovered that in the struggle and working through the weaknesses in their own body, their voices would come out powerful and strong. This Japanese training method was not meant to be written but has instead been passed orally from teacher to student for the past couple decades.<sup>72</sup> Suzuki had the most divided reaction among the group.<sup>73</sup> Many instinctively did not like it but learned to appreciate what it was doing for them through discipline. However, more than a few students stated that they were confused and did not understand how it connected to the piece they were creating.

## 2.4. Material Then: Nonnarrative Focus

Black Mountain has always had a history with a nonnarrative lens. Schawinsky, the drama professor at BMC from 1936-1938, studied the stage through non-literary means.<sup>74</sup> He used "the fundamental phenomena: space form, color, light, sound, music, movement, and time."<sup>75</sup> This follows very closely to Anne Bogart's six Viewpoints. Schawinsky's performances, although different from Cage's ideas in the sense that they had been prepared and rehearsed beforehand, followed the same "nonnarrative form of performance in which the media of lights, movement, and music were of equal or greater importance of conveying the ideas than the verbal text."<sup>76</sup> With this approach occurring in the drama program and through the *Lecture on Nothing*, the ensemble had plenty of source material to read through and begin to experiment with. Eventually, one visit to the archives later, the ensemble had chosen and constructed a couple of different pieces including Letters from Ati, Bulletin Board postings, and a snippet of Cage's "Defense of Satie."

## 2.5 Material Now: Retrospect

The ensemble came in with so many questions about the process: how the performance was going to be created, what the piece was going to be about and when they would get the script. Now, all those questions have been answered. The show is finished, and in retrospect, the students can see that there was a final answer for everything and that questioning the process seemed foolish. In the final part of this section, Cage writes, "but the final answer makes the questions seem absurd whereas the questions, up until then, seem more intelligent than the answer."<sup>77</sup> At that point in time, the ensemble had no idea what came next. It is easy to point out in retrospect what went wrong, or how they would make that better, but when they were in the middle of the process, they could not tell. The students just had to keep asking what the next decision was going to be. When Rice founded Black Mountain College, he had no idea what they were doing with the college, if it was going to survive, or how big of an influential impact it would have on the world today. He had a thought and put it into action, and that's all anybody can do in a devising process as well. Stop questioning, and just start trying.

## 3. Third Section: Structure

Cage states in the *Lecture*, "Structure without life is dead. But life without structure is unseen. Pure life expresses itself within and through structure. Each moment is absolute, alive and significant."<sup>78</sup> Throughout the *Lecture*, Cage consistently struggles with the concept of structure and experimental action. While he wants the excitement of the unknown and life to express itself, he also understands that a structure, even an extremely limited one, is required for any moment in life or piece of art. No matter how loose the constraints are there is a structure and guideline that moves the process forward. Both the devising process and the building of intentional communities at BMC and through the

theater wanted to have a loose flexible structure to open up a lot of possibilities. These groups all wanted the chance for individual experience within a community.

### 3.1. Devising

This devising structure that has been described has been done so with the ability to look back through time and see the confines of the structure. However, during the actual process, many members of the ensemble simply felt lost and unstructured. In any experimental process, a contract should be formed and agreed upon. This is specifically mentioned in *Black Mountain: A Exploration in Community* by Duberman, “if the contract between the class and the teacher had been specific and mutually agreed upon, [the teacher] could have foretold the consequences which would follow from failing to meet standards which he himself ... helped to decide.”<sup>79</sup> A contract needs to be formed in any creative process. The confines Leon Ingulsrud gave for the project were to use the *Lecture on Nothing* in some capacity, start without a script, betray current expectations, and have a personal stake in the show.

After the show was over Ingulsrud told the ensemble that there was not a hard line between “devised work and any other kind of work.”<sup>80</sup> It was just a variance in the amount of information given. Starting without a script, for example, is starting without information that a playwright would normally provide. Then, the actual process of working on a piece without a script, or devising work, changes the expectations and process. All the expectations Ingulsrud had at the beginning were completely transformed by what each individual member of the ensemble contributed to the piece. Ingulsrud mentioned that “in a sense, it met my expectations by betraying all expectations” because he was hoping the completed piece would turn out quite differently than what he was picturing at the beginning.<sup>81</sup> Looking back at the first week of the personal journal I kept throughout the process, January 29, 2019, was the day Ingulsrud discussed the standards to be put in place.<sup>82</sup> He specifically stated that he wanted each member to have a piece in the show was theirs: a stake in the performance and reason to need to do the piece.

### 3.2 Intentional Community

Intentional Communities in some respects have become synonymous with terms like communes and collectives. However, an intentional community is any group of people who come together usually living together as well with a similar goal in mind and work together to make their idea become a reality.<sup>83</sup> Black Mountain College was an intentional community where the focus on radical arts and ideas become the foundation for what the college was known for.<sup>84</sup> The ensemble of *Nothing's Happening*, while not a usual form of intentional community, became a temporary one when the ensemble, director, faculty advisor (Lise Kloeppel), and faculty members involved found a common goal to create a devised show. This runs true for most theater processes with a group of people. While creating a show, a strong bond is quickly created between the members because each member knows that they hold a personal stake in the process. This proves the idea that “it’s possible to have a group who would live closely together and would develop a relationship that would be a virtuous circle instead of a vicious circle.”<sup>85</sup>

Black Mountain College and *Nothing's Happening* had democratic intentions and tried to create a more horizontal hierarchal process: creating an open discussion between teacher and student, and director and actor. *Nothing's Happening* became a space where each member could explore their own ideas, and then Ingulsrud and Kloeppel would help shape where those ideas could fit within the show.

Effectively communicating and creating became possible through the creation of small groups. Without realizing it through the process, we, the *Nothing's Happening* ensemble, spent most of rehearsal time split up in different, small groups.<sup>86</sup> This is also where we got most of our work done and put together large pieces of the show including the choreography for parts of the Ati Letters found in the archives and the repetitive movements for Section Four of the *Lecture on Nothing*.<sup>87</sup> John Wallen at Black Mountain College also realized that small groups were more effective. Communities as a whole cannot make effective decisions together, so in order for democracy to work, smaller groups must be formed, and members of the community must take turns leading and following.<sup>88</sup> In one example, Wallen split people into smaller groups to discuss the work program at BMC and that decision resulted in excellent discussions, and a decision being made.<sup>89</sup>

### 3.3 Artistic Individual, Community

Throughout the show and the readings into the history of Black Mountain College, there has been a lingering question concerning the “artistic individual” and the “community” and whether they work together or in opposition.



The opposition places “individual” and “community” on opposite sides of the spectrum. “Individual” focuses on self-growth as a key element.<sup>90</sup> Duberman writes, “at Black Mountain, the priorities had been set: individual ‘cultivation’ took precedence over public issues . . . and to achieve status in the community one had . . . to be *unusually* original, dynamic, fertile, cogent.”<sup>91</sup> Community through the arts could be perceived as only physical individual action because each member live selfishly, for their selves, and only care about their proportion of growth. This is the view Alber’s at BMC had settled on while Wallen took the side of community. While the “artistic individual” and “community” could potentially coexist and support one another, “the self-consciousness and polarization produced by Wallen’s presence (and above all, by Alber’s negative reaction to him), for a time made [them] appear antagonistic forces.”<sup>92</sup> The community approach then would have to draw people in who forgo distinction and instead are skilled at communicating and relationships.<sup>93</sup> However diametrically opposing the “artistic individual” and “community” appear to be, they are more intertwined than not, and can only occur where the other has also appeared.

Together, the “artistic individual” and “community” create a stronger force with each other. All learning is self-learning, but it can only occur in interpersonal relationships through a community.<sup>94</sup> “Black Mountain had always been dedicated to two enterprises—establishing a community in which people shared common purposes and responsibilities, and creating a climate in which . . . the highest excellence might flourish.”<sup>95</sup> Black Mountain College focused on the individual using their skills: painting, sewing, dancing, for the common good of the community.<sup>96</sup> This is also what made the *Nothing’s Happening* rehearsal space so unique. The loose, exploratory structure of the process showed the value of “a heterogeneous group able to challenge rather than simply reinforce other’s views.”<sup>97</sup>

This was something I had learn while going through the rehearsal process as well. At first, I thought the individuals in the ensemble were too different to create a cohesive product, but I soon realized that it was how we were able to have such an interesting product.<sup>98</sup> This change in thought can be best described by two entries I made, one day after the other. “3/25/19—How are we supposed to be an ensemble if we just keep thinking of ourselves as individuals? / 3/26/19—I am very excited with what we are coming up with. I honestly thought I would be more frustrated with all of our minds not melding, but all of these ideas are so different that we can incorporate them all in some way.”<sup>99</sup> While the artistic individual sets out with the intention to grow the self, the result is a growth in the community as well. This is best summed up by Ben Shahn, a summer faculty member, who stated in a lecture, “the public function of art has always been one of creating community, that is not necessarily its intention, but it is its result.”<sup>100</sup>

### 3.4 Reflections

#### 3.4.1. feelings within process

The *Nothing’s Happening* ensemble was given the option to be a part of two voluntary reflections: one in person/virtual that acted as a debrief,<sup>101</sup> and the other through a google form where nine metrics were given to rate and short-answer questions were given to create a more structured reflection.<sup>102</sup> When asked about their expectations versus reality, many students expressed similar views. They didn’t know what they were getting into, there was much less structure than anticipated, and there was more of a focus on physical technique than there was in writing a script. A few others mentioned being confused throughout the entire process and appreciated what the product turned out to be but did not feel the appreciation until they had the hindsight to see the journey taken to get to the finished product. In the moment, it felt lax in the organization and confusing in the process. The students felt comfortable with what they knew, and until that moment where they were devising for the first time, most of the students had learned to create within a certain set of rigid, formal instruction. This sentiment is echoed in the book *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* where the author, Duberman, states, “drawing on the familiar distinction between negative freedom from rules and constraint and positive freedom to be constructive and creative, Wallen argued BMC [focused] too much on producing the first kind (‘laissez-faire’) . . . and not enough on the second (‘democracy’).”<sup>103</sup> While Ingulsrud strove for the democratic approach, to be “constructive and creative,” many students craved the negative freedom and to be given constraints because that’s what had become the normalized form of learning.<sup>104</sup>

#### 3.4.2. Ensemble’s reflections post project completion

The ensemble was given a voluntary reflection form to complete.<sup>105</sup> Nine out of fourteen members of the ensemble completed it. At the top of the form were a total of eleven metrics to rate: four based on the reach or scope of the project and five based on different qualities of the project. They were instructed to rate each metric on a sliding scale from one to five: one meaning the term was unimportant the process and five meaning the term was vital the

process. Pictured below in Figure 3 and Figure 4 are the two highest scoring metrics in each category of reach and quality.

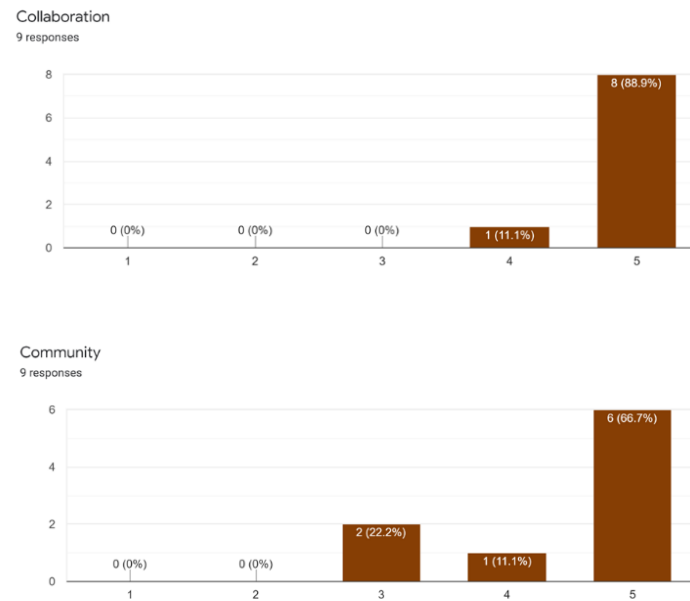


Figure 3. Reach metrics: collaboration and community

Figure 3. Collaboration was the highest scoring metric overall with eight out of nine of the ensemble members labeling collaboration as vital to the process. The Community metric varied with six members rating it as vital while one rated it a four, and two other members rated the term as an average three out of five.

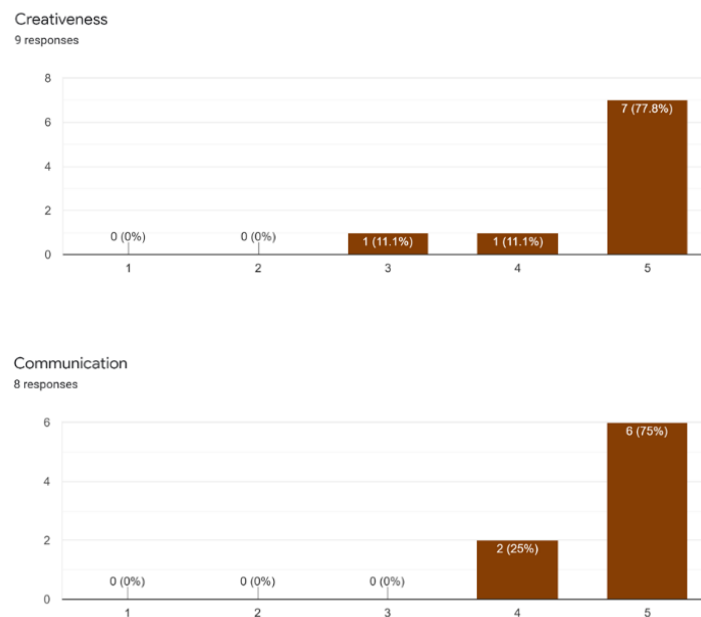


Figure 4. Quality metrics: creativeness and communication

Figure 4. Creativeness was the second highest scoring metric overall with seven out of nine rating the term a five while the two other votes were evenly split on the scale of three and four. The ratings for the communication metric

were kept within the four and five part of the scale with six members rating the term a five, two members rating it a four, and one member opting not to answer.

A possible reason why Community, although one of the four higher scored metrics, was only rated at 66.7% believing it was a vital part of the process was due to the lack of clarity on what community meant.<sup>106</sup> When asked later in the reflection in a short answer response if the members felt like they grew as a community with their ensemble, all of the replies were a resounding yes.<sup>107</sup> After completing the reflection, a couple of students mentioned that they were not sure what the context was meant for the term Community: whether it was the community the ensemble built together, was the audience connection, was the connection to Black Mountain College, or the community that was built at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. At this point in time, however, I had not settled on the word “intentional community” as a key term.<sup>108</sup> This is the power of community though; it can connect to so many different groups and people.

The other three highest scoring metrics: collaboration, creativeness, and communication are also extremely tied to the idea of community especially from an artistic and intentional Black Mountain explorative view. The only way to have an effective community that works well together to create experimental “action” are to have effective communication lines. Taking Black Mountain’s idea of democracy<sup>109</sup> and John Wallen’s practice of small groups,<sup>110</sup> led the ensemble to collaborate better by creating more of a horizontal hierarchy where faculty and students can have a two-sided conversation as well as more efficiently problem-solve ideas. And without individual creativeness throughout the intended community, there would not be experimental action wanted through both the theater and Black Mountain College. The qualities of creativeness and communication led to the collaboration and community felt throughout the process.

## 4. Fourth Section: Here and Now

### 4.1. Here We Are Now

“Here we are now. . . Slowly as the talk goes on, we are getting nowhere and that is a pleasure. It is not irritating to be where one is, it is only irritating to think one would like to be somewhere else.”<sup>111</sup> At this point in time, not unlike his “Defense of Satie,” Cage’s *Lecture* turns from a somewhat rational argument on structure, form, and material to a meditation and “spiritual transcendence.”<sup>112</sup> The Fourth Section bares a repetitive structure where the same two small sections or units are repeated seven times in a row with the only change being the unit number. The ensemble learned to take pleasure in the repetitiveness. The relevance to life is seen as well. The “process of readjustment and reevaluation is lifelong.”<sup>113</sup> Lives themselves are cyclical and in constant motion, but so are the lives between different times. The Black Mountain College communities were easily seen through the current students’ perspectives because they are still in the same “place” that they were seventy years ago. Duberman even repeats this concept by writing, “the high degree of communication within the community binds you to your past, to your selves in other situations.”<sup>114</sup> The UNC Asheville students so easily connected to *Nothing’s Happening* after visiting the archives and the old campus because they could see themselves in the students.

### 4.2. We are Getting Nowhere and That is a Pleasure

Black Mountain College didn’t just affect the students and faculty that went there but made a “ripple effect of waves” in the way contemporary art is viewed today “in ideas about collectivity and resistance, performance and social practice.”<sup>115</sup> The SITI Company considers themselves the “artistic grandchildren” of BMC.<sup>116</sup> When the SITI Company took up residence in Western Carolina in the Spring of 2019, they brought these experimental ideas back home to the current students living by Black Mountain. These ideas were physically brought back through time to the place they began.

### 4.3 Connecting Students Through Time

In the archives, the *Nothing’s Happening* ensemble came across pictures of the Black Mountain College bulletin boards. The board had hand written and typewritten notes strewn across it with notices like, “Will anyone kenning the whereabouts of the key to the tea cookie locker please give it to the present tea dispensers,” and “will the person who took twelve bottles of beer from my case please return the bottles.”<sup>117</sup> Scribbled across the bottle notice was a handwritten, “Empty?” and another reply, presumably from the person who wrote the note that stated, “and who

borrowed my case of beer?”<sup>118</sup> These short snippets of daily life at Black Mountain College immediately connected with the students at UNCA. While bulletin boards have updated with modernity to social media now, the students could easily hear the voices for those who wrote the notes and could think of similar examples in their own life. This created an atmosphere of connection and was only intensified when they visited the physical place on Eden Lake where BMC once operated and performed in the same dining hall on a ladder where John Cage and countless other students once stood and ate and created.<sup>119</sup>

#### 4.4 Struggling to Recapture

It is not possible to recapture the past completely. It is easy to “come upon somebody’s experience in the past that you know related to your own current struggle, [but] you can almost never. . . recapture the amount and kind of detail needed to convert a vicarious encounter into a direct one.”<sup>120</sup> This is part of the reason why the nonnarrative form of *Nothing’s Happening* was so valuable. The ensemble wanted to capture the parallels and make connections through costumes with both 1940s inspirations and current, but most importantly why they didn’t want to make it a recreation. The show was something entirely new with strong connections made to the past. While the shape of the show was entirely modern, all the lines in the show come from the students and faculty at Black Mountain College. The only exception was at the very end of the show when they let their own words bleed through to make that connection through time stronger. The ensemble created a conversation and found out a way to “bring [themselves] to the topic” but didn’t make it about themselves.<sup>121</sup> They just brought themselves in enough to hear a dialogue occur between the two time periods.

This ends in a realization that it is impossible for me to impart all Black Mountain College’s history or even all the history that I know.<sup>122</sup> Instead, I can impart a specific strain of information and thought that I have reflected on and processed.

### 5. Fifth Section: Silence and Method

#### 5.1. Silence

##### 5.1.1 “that is finished now. it was a pleasure”<sup>123</sup>

#### 5.2. Method

In 1961, John Cage wrote *Silence* containing the line, “What is the nature of an experimental action? It is simply an action the outcome of which is not foreseen.”<sup>124</sup> What is method? This is a difficult question to answer and varies based on the prompt. In the case of *Nothing’s Happening*, the ensemble’s structure was a devised piece of theater and the method became experimental action. Through the lens of this written paper, the structure is a nonnarrative reflection, and the method is Cage’s *Lecture on Nothing*. The one idea that can be pinned down with method is that it’s active. Method needs to be actively enforced (or ignored) to exist but cannot exist as an inactive concept. Duberman explores this further with, “the operative choice isn’t whether to become active, but in which areas and what ways.”<sup>125</sup>

##### 5.2.1. method is a marriage

In the *Lecture*, method is seen as a marriage of form and content. At Black Mountain College, method is seen as a marriage between community and art. These examples mirror each other as community is type of form and art is a type of content. This is seen time and time again. Mary Emma Harris in *The Arts at Black Mountain College* writes about Albers’ and Cages’ connection with each other. She quotes Cage agreeing with Albers’ ideals, “Both the mind and structure delight in precision, clarity, and the observance of rules. Whereas form wants only freedom to be; it belongs to the heart. So it’s dialectic between the mind and the heart. . . the marriage of form and content.”<sup>126</sup> Form and content are equal to structure and materials which are all equal to method. Method helps artists to know where they stand with their experimentation even if that means knowing nothing.

### 5.2.2 knowing nothing

John Wallen would sometimes ask the students and faculty at Black Mountain College what they thought it stood for. Wallen was often told that “it didn’t stand for anything.”<sup>127</sup> Black Mountain College did stand for something. It stood for the same thing *Nothing’s Happening* stood for: nothing and the exploration of that.

Looking back on the devising process, I can label the steps we took to get the piece we produced, but in the moments in time we were making those decisions, we didn’t know the method or how to find it. The same is true for the methods of future devising processes. Every process will be different with a different intention and community behind it.

Using the method of the *Lecture on Nothing* one more time, the last line sums it up quite clearly, “All I know about method is that when I am not working I sometimes think I know something, but when I am working it is quite clear that I know nothing.”<sup>128</sup>

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