

LISSON GALLERY

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## Press Release

John Latham

*Skoob Works*

May 2 – June 16, 2018

504 W 24th Street, New York

Opening: May 1, 6 – 8pm

Lisson Gallery presents its first New York exhibition of British artist John Latham (1921–2006). The exhibition reveals Latham's remarkable multi-faceted practice through works made throughout his career, focusing on his "skoob" pieces, and highlighting his powerful contribution and lasting influence on the global development of Conceptual art.

John Latham began using books as a medium in 1958, extending his earliest spray-painted canvases into the third dimension by creating reliefs wherein the publication emerged from plaster on canvas. Titled "skoob," a reversal of "books," the works invert the traditional function of literature, typically read in a linear and temporal manner, to create an object that can be consumed spontaneously and without structure. Latham was attracted to their flatness and their diverse formal properties when they were opened or manipulated – in some cases sawed, sliced or even burned. And while they also symbolized language and institutional knowledge, Latham noted: "It was not in any degree a gesture of contempt for books or literature. What it did was intend to put the proposition into mind that perhaps the cultural base had been burnt out."

While artists from Marcel Duchamp to Jasper Johns incorporated books into their work, no other visual artist exploited the material so consistently and to such an effect as Latham. The exhibition at Lisson Gallery features a selection of the artist's early book reliefs from the 1960s, which consist of books and a variety of other materials including scrap metal, wires, gauze and nails, attached to a flat rectangular surface with plaster. The largest book relief ever created, *Great Uncle Estate* (1960) will be on view. Originally designed to cover an entire wall in Latham's living room, it is composed of ten sections and features around 100 volumes. Each section of the monumental relief includes a book opening towards the canvas as well as other fragments opening toward the viewer – creating an arrangement that contrasts the hidden and repressed with the open and accessible. Color also plays a vital role in this early work, where different page openings are painted red, blue, gold or gray, with adjustable wires to hold the pages apart so that depending on which page is exposed at a particular moment, the spectator encounters a different hue. Also included is *Four Phases of the Sun* (1963), which incorporates an interest in astronomical time scales that later informed Latham's *Time-Base* works and his theoretical writings. The idea of four phases was influenced by the scientific notion of the sun as a red giant and stars as white dwarfs, and the periods in which they give rise to biological life on the planets.

The exhibition also includes freestanding "skoobs" and a "skoob tower" from the late 1960s and 1970s, which the artist saw as challenging the museum concept of sculpture as solid and permanent objects. The rectangular "skoob towers" are made from discarded art books, law books, encyclopedias and copies of *Punch* and *The Economist*, all opened at right angles and stacked on top of one another. They were then slowly incinerated or exploded, some during the seminal Destruction in Art Symposium of 1966, emphasizing the role of traditional modes of thought and hegemonic institutions in stifling original thought and their inefficiency in conveying knowledge and truth.

During a series of events in 1967, Latham began to insert pipes into books, pumping polyurethane through them. Named “book plumbing,” he explained that this is analogous for how information is transmitted from source to source and from generation to generation. *The Laws of England* (1967) is an early example of this series. The experiments led to the expanded foam works, including the *Classical Painting* series of the late 1980s – three of which will be on display in the exhibition. Sculptures from the 1980s which incorporate glass will also be on view, including *Moral High Ground*, in which Latham overtly incorporates religious texts and addresses liturgical literature by placing its dismembered parts between panes of glass – a theme he would continue until his death.

Highlighting Latham’s provocateur nature is his seminal sculptural work, *They’re Learning Fast* (1988): a fish tank containing a number of piranhas and waterproofed inserts with extracts from Latham’s philosophical treatise, *Report of a Surveyor*. This text, written by the artist in 1984, addressed the failure of the British government in supporting art. As the viewer moves around the tank, the printed texts appear and disappear, due to the mirroring effect caused by the reflections on glass and water. Layered with meaning, the flesh-eating fish no doubt represented the British art establishment who criticized Latham’s theories, and the multiple reflections within the tank also called for humankind to reflect upon the nature of its existence.

### **About John Latham**

John Latham (1921–2006) was a pioneer of British conceptual art, who, through painting, sculpture, performances, assemblages, films, installation and extensive writings, fuelled controversy and continues to inspire. His emphasis on process in action and language, and his theories which have focused on time and event over the object, have provided models for a generation of younger artists. A visionary in mapping systems of knowledge, whether scientific or religious, he developed his own philosophy of time, known as ‘Event Structure.’ In this doctrine he proposed that the most basic component of reality is not the particle, as implied by physics, but the ‘least event,’ or the shortest departure from the state of nothing. The entire universe is to be viewed as a system of events in time, rather than objects in space. Thus, for Latham all artworks were considered events and were activated as such through diverse processes ranging from spraying, chewing, shredding or spitting to simply declaring. From the visual representation of time (known by Latham as the ‘quantum-of-mark’) in the early spray paintings and *One-Second Drawings*, to the book reliefs of the 1960s, the roller paintings of the 1970s and the late glass tower works which incorporated bits of all theorems, John Latham maintained a steadfast devotion to exploring the most complex cosmological ideas and questioning the traditional notions and structures of art, science and philosophy. The seminal “skoob” happened in 1966, while Latham was teaching at St Martins School of Art. Latham borrowed a copy of Clement Greenberg’s recently published art history opus, *Art and Culture* from the school’s library. Latham then invited his students to join him in a ritualistic ceremony: the chewing and spitting out of select pages of the book. Latham decanted the vestiges into a phial, doused it in acid and yeast, and fermented it for a year, then returning the liquid he described as ‘Essence of Greenberg’ to the school. The *Spit and Chew* event poked at Greenberg’s emphasis on space and form, which was contradictory to Latham’s focus on the function of time in art, and cemented itself as a key example of conceptual art. The resulting artwork, *Spit and Chew: Art and Culture* (1966-69) is now owned by the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

John Latham was born in Livingstone, Northern Rhodesia (now Maramba, Zambia) in 1921. In 1946 he enrolled at Regent Street Polytechnic, London, UK and then studied painting at Chelsea College of Art and Design, also in London, from 1947 to 1951. His work was included in the 2017 Venice Biennale, and was the subject of an exhibition, *A World View: John Latham*, on view at the Serpentine Galleries, London, UK in the same year. Additional solo museum exhibitions include Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, UK (2016); Triennale di Milano, Milan, Italy (2014); Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, UK (2010); P.S.1. Contemporary Art Center, New York, NY, USA (2006); Tate Britain, London, UK (2005); Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart, Germany (1991); Société des Expositions du Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, Belgium (1984); and Städtische Kunsthalle, Düsseldorf, Germany (1975). His work was shown in many group exhibitions including documenta 6, Kassel, Germany (1977) and the Venice Biennale’s 2005 edition.

In 2003, John Latham declared his house and studio a living sculpture, naming it FTHo after his theory of time, ‘Flat Time.’ Until his death, Latham opened his door to anyone interested in thinking about art. It is in this spirit that Flat Time House opened in 2008 as a gallery with a program of exhibitions and events exploring the artist’s practice, his theoretical ideas and their continued relevance. It also provides a center for alternative learning, which includes the John Latham archive, and an artist’s residency space.

### **About Lisson Gallery**

Lisson Gallery is one of the most influential and longest-running international contemporary art galleries in the

world. Today the gallery supports and develops 58 international artists across two exhibition spaces in London and two in New York. Established in 1967 by Nicholas Logsdail, Lisson Gallery pioneered the early careers of important Minimal and Conceptual artists, such as Art & Language, Carl Andre, Daniel Buren, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, Richard Long and Robert Ryman among many others. In its second decade the gallery introduced significant British sculptors, including Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, Anish Kapoor, Shirazeh Houshiary and Julian Opie, to the public for the first time. In addition to a number of renowned artist estates, including Roy Colmer, the Leon Polk Smith Foundation and the John Latham Foundation, the gallery represents leading international artists such as Marina Abramović, Ai Weiwei, John Akomfrah, Susan Hiller and Tatsuo Miyajima. It is also responsible for raising the international profile of a younger generation of artists led by Cory Arcangel, Nathalie Djurberg & Hans Berg, Ryan Gander, Haroon Mirza, Laure Prouvost, Pedro Reyes and Wael Shawky.

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