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Conceptual Artist John Latham Transformed Books Into Art. Now His Works Are on View in New York

A new exhibition at Lisson Gallery tracks the pioneering conceptualist's career through his experiments with books as material.

artnet Gallery Network, June 12, 2018



John Latham, *Distress of a Dictionary* (1988). © The John Latham Foundation. Courtesy of Lisson Gallery.

SHARE



There's a long history of visual artists incorporating books into their work, from Duchamp in the early 20th century to Samuel Levi Jones today. But perhaps no artist is more associated with the practice than British conceptualist [John Latham](#), who has integrated books into his paintings, assemblages, sculptures, and other works since the late 1950s.

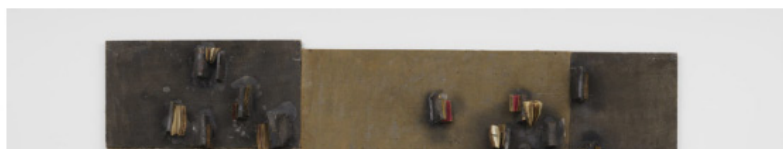
A new exhibition on view at one of [Lisson Gallery](#)'s New York spaces, "[John Latham: Skoob Works](#)," uses the artist's interest in the book as a framing device to survey his long, multifarious career and the many contributions to conceptual art and theory that he made along the way.



John Latham. © The John Latham Foundation. Courtesy of Lisson Gallery.

Latham was born in Livingstone, Northern Rhodesia (what is now Maramba, Zambia) to English parents, and he moved to the UK at an early age. He enrolled at Regent Street Polytechnic in 1946, and then the Chelsea College of Art and Design in 1947. He had his first solo show at Obelisk Gallery in London in 1954, where he showed a selection of paintings done with a spray gun—an unprecedented gesture at the time.

In the late '50s, Latham first introduced books into his work, using plaster to adhere the object to his spray-painted canvases—such as in his 1958 work *Burial of Count Orgaz* where he recreated El Greco's 1586 painting of the same name with collaged books and other found items. Soon after, he came up with the name for the work: "skoob"—"books" spelled backward—which he continued to use for decades after.





John Latham, *Great Uncle Estate* (1960). © The John Latham Foundation. Courtesy of Lisson Gallery.

The earliest works dating in the Lisson exhibition date back to the early 1960s, a time in which Latham was making large wall reliefs with books. *Great Uncle Estate* (1960), for instance—the largest such work the artist ever created—is a 10-foot-wide, multi-panel assemblage with patches of books arising from the canvas surface like mountains on a topographical map. Half of the volumes are positioned outward, their pages held open by wire; the other half are turned inward, leaving a mystery as to what they contain.

In the late '60s and '70s, Latham branched out to freestanding book sculptures—"skoob towers"—which were composed of old law books, encyclopedias, and popular periodicals stacked atop one another. After building these structures, he would burn them (often publicly, as he did with the Destruction in Art Symposium in London 1966).



Installation view of "John Latham: Skoob Works" (2018). © The John Latham Foundation. Courtesy of Lisson Gallery.

That same year, while teaching at St. Martins School of Art in London, he encouraged students to take literal bites out of Clement Greenberg's landmark collection of critical essays, *Art and Culture*, then asked them to chew the pages and spit them out. Latham collected the masticated pages and fermented them in acid for a year before returning the concoction to the school. In other events, Latham installed pipes into his book structures and

ran expanding polystyrene foam through them—a metaphor for the dissemination of information.

In the '80s, Latham began a new body of sculptures in which he bisected Bibles and other liturgical texts with large panes of glass—a theme he would revisit throughout the rest of his career. In his 1988 work *They're Learning Fast*, for instance, he installed a text he had written four years earlier about the British government's inadequate art funding ("Report of a Surveyor") in a fish tank surrounded by live fish.



John Latham, *They're learning fast* (1988). © The John Latham Foundation. Courtesy of Lisson Gallery.

For Latham, the book symbolized a variety of ideas—institutional knowledge, the transmission of information, the limits of communication. In a sense, he was also something of an open book himself. In 2003—three years before his death in 2006 at the age of 84—he announced that his home and studio were a living sculpture and instituted an open-door policy for art students and anyone else who wanted talk art.

"John Latham: Skoob Works" is on view at [Lisson Gallery](#) in New York through June 16, 2018.

LISSON GALLERY

T Magazine

12 September 2017

T THE NEW YORK TIMES STYLE MAGAZINE

Are Artists the New Interpreters of Scientific Innovation?

By GISELA WILLIAMS SEPT. 12, 2017

WHEN WE THINK OF ARTIST residencies today, we think of the [MacDowell Colony](#), in the woods of New Hampshire, and of the [Skowhegan School](#), in Maine. There's the [Rome Prize fellowship](#), at the city's American Academy, and Donald Judd's [Chinati Foundation](#), in Marfa. To be an artist in residence means removing yourself from the noise and obligations of regular life, and instead getting to concentrate on your creative life, often in a beautiful locale.

But once, an artist residency meant something very different: being embedded squarely within regular life, an experience meant both to inspire artists and to infuse what were seen as artless environments with creativity. In 1966, an artist named Barbara Steveni and her husband, John Latham, the influential British conceptual artist, started the Artist Placement Group, or A.P.G., in London, the goal of which was to embed artists in industrial and government organizations, to allow them to both learn about and to have a voice in the world of business and science — and then, when possible, organize exhibitions of work inspired by those experiences. Latham himself spent time at the Scottish Office in Edinburgh researching industrial waste heaps called “bings” that were created by distilling oil from shale, and the artist David Hall made 10 short films, called “TV Interruptions,” that were broadcast uncredited on Scottish Television and are now regarded as landmarks of British video art. The project, which was renamed Organization and Imagination, or O+I, in 1989, was considered groundbreaking and important enough that the Tate bought the [A.P.G. archives](#) in 2004.

Meanwhile, in the U.S., two visionaries were also campaigning for a greater collaborative relationship between modern art and science: Gyorgy Kepes, who founded the [Center for Advanced Visual Studies](#) at M.I.T. in 1967, and the artist Robert Rauschenberg, who, around the same time, co-founded [E.A.T.](#) (Experiments in Art and Technology) with the engineers Billy Kluver and Fred Waldhauer and artist Robert Whitman, to initiate and support collaborations between artists and scientists. (Their most publicized project was a series of installations, including a water-vapor sculpture

by Fujiko Nakaya and physicist Thomas Mee, made for the dome at the 1970 world's fair, Expo '70, in Osaka, Japan.) Two years later, NASA invited Rauschenberg to witness the launch of Apollo 11, the first manned voyage to the moon — an experience that resulted in “Stoned Moon,” a remarkable series of lithographic prints.

This kind of residency eventually fell out of favor for the luxury-summer-camp variety. But in the last few years, there's been a resurgence of interest in the idea of inviting artists to observe, learn and work within mainstream government agencies and institutions, among entrepreneurs and scientists as well as among the artists themselves. In this innovation-hungry age of TED Talks and Silicon Valley, every company seems to be launching an experimental lab that is meant to foster innovation through the cross-fertilization of ideas in a variety of disciplines, including the creative arts. Two years ago, the art collector Dasha Zhukova donated a million dollars to M.I.T. to create an artist residency there in her name. At the same time, the work of artists like Thomas Struth, Vija Celmins, Tom Sachs and Olafur Eliasson is driven and influenced by the rapid pace of discoveries in scientific fields from artificial intelligence to astrophysics. The photographer and architect Hiroshi Sugimoto has repeatedly explored the relationship between image and evolving technology, including in his Lightning Fields series, for which he used a 400,000-volt Van de Graaff generator to apply an electrical charge directly onto film.

Gerfried Stocker, the artistic director of [Ars Electronica](#), a think tank that started a festival celebrating arts and sciences in Linz, Austria, in 1979, believes that artists have become “cultural missionaries” in a time of “intensive transformation driven by new technology.” It's crucial, he says, “that humanistic voices address the ethical and moral questions created by this transformation.” Ars Electronica helped institutions like the European Organization for Nuclear Research (known as CERN, its acronym in French), as well as the European Southern Observatory, when they recently founded their own artist residencies. With the assistance of Ars, CERN — which is based in Switzerland and is home to both the Large Hadron Collider and the world's largest particle physics research facility — initiated Collide, its flagship art residency program, in 2011. Monica Bello, the head of [Arts@CERN](#), explains, “The objective at CERN is to understand the fundamental structure of the universe. This is extremely compelling to artists, as they are often interested in studying matter itself.”

CERN HAS SINCE HOSTED about a dozen international artists through Collide, including Julius von Bismarck, a German artist who creates installations, often humorous, that are typically inspired by science, nature and technology. At CERN, he staged several interventions, including locking 30 physicists underground and asking what they saw in the dark, pushing them to describe physical matter that couldn't be seen. More recently, CERN has partnered with FACT, the [Foundation for Art and Creative Technology](#) in Liverpool, England, which helps to produce as well as to provide a space to show the work inspired by the CERN residencies.

“Science is too important to leave to the scientists,” says Mike Stubbs, director of FACT. “Science has kind of become a new church, but it's clear now that technology has not been applied to everyone in society to their benefit. We need voices from the arts and

sociocultural disciplines to provoke important debates.” As the artist Thomas Struth says, “My feeling is that somehow, since the 1980s, politics are always running behind the development of technology, and it’s very hard to create a legal framework to control what’s happening. Maybe artists are looked to because of their freedom and critical analysis, and because in general they are not corrupted. Someone brings up the self-driving car and within no time, someone yells, ‘Hurrah, the self-driving car!’ It’s like, who needs it? What about more public transport?”

At the same time, institutions like CERN need artists to translate their findings to a larger audience. “Often experiments are invisible,” says Stubbs. “They just exist as pure data.” Agencies like CERN benefit when well-known and respected artists emphasize the importance of their work and explain it in an accessible visual medium. Stubbs takes it even further: “I think it’s absolutely essential that artists are part of the process not just in terms of visualizing information but how we understand scientific culture.” It’s also worth remembering that the cultural divide between art and science is a relatively new one; for much of human history, the two fields were not oppositional, but collaborative. This relationship reached its apotheosis in the Renaissance era, whose most famous artist — Leonardo da Vinci — was also a scientist. Art was aligned with religion, but it also explored the natural and physical world. In the Victorian era, however, the two worlds diverged into what the British physicist C. P. Snow called “the two cultures”; these projects, and the people involved in them, aim to correct this schism. “Artists are no longer concerned with creating artwork that reflects or interprets reality; rather, they want to be active agents in creating it,” says Stocker, of Ars Electronica. “That means that artists need to have an even deeper understanding of the mechanics behind science and technology.”

THE SEARCH FOR that understanding has been a kind of revelation for the contemporary figures involved in these new partnerships. A few months ago, when the artist Olafur Eliasson was in Montreal, he visited Buckminster Fuller’s 20-story geodesic dome, built for the 1967 world’s fair. “It gave me a great boost of creativity,” he says. “That was a time when there was a strong confidence that technology and creativity would shape the future.” Three years ago, Eliasson was awarded a several-weeks-long residency at M.I.T. He used the time to work on a project called “[Little Sun](#),” a portable solar lamp that he designed with the engineer Frederik Ottesen, which is sold at high cost in wealthy countries so that it can be sold cheaply in poor ones. According to Eliasson, the lamp is meant to raise the question, “how can we create an affordable global energy system that factors in human emotion, creativity and desire?” His work, he says, often grapples with “how to tell people that they are not consumers of the world, they are co-producers of the world.”

Struth, who will be showing large-scale studies of recent work at the Marian Goodman Gallery in New York in November, has made his own artist residencies in science-related businesses and agencies over the years just by asking. Earlier this year, he spent several days in Houston taking photos at NASA. Struth says that despite the fact that he is extremely skeptical and critical of certain technological developments and the way they’re used, he enjoys working with scientific researchers: “They tend to be very open.

They have certain similarities with artists because they are working on something they don't know or can't see."

Then there's the conceptual artist Jorge Mañes Rubio, who in 2016 began a residency at the [European Space Agency](#). The agency had announced plans to create an international moon village: "There was no budget but it was an important call to space agencies and private companies. Mars is far too distant of a goal, so the moon seemed like the next step," explains Rubio, whose works are often about re-engaging neglected places and cultures.

After spending time with the ESA's Advanced Concepts Team, which is based in the Netherlands, Rubio decided he would build a moon temple. Despite the team's discomfort with the idea — they worried it was too religious and new-age for their purposes — he proceeded, spending months with experts to learn about the moon's geology and the practicalities of living in an atmosphere with one-sixth the gravity of Earth's. Rubio ended up designing a structure that could be 3D-printed from moon dust, giving it a utopian-adobe look. But the best part of the project might have been both his and his new collaborators' understanding that science, contrary to popular belief, is not immune to the thrill of romance, the pull of magical thinking. "There was a lot of friction about building a temple," Rubio recalled, "but then someone said, 'Actually I like this idea. What if we just build this temple and leave? Maybe we decide not to stay and we just create a beautiful space to celebrate the earth's relationship with the moon.'"

LISSON GALLERY

The Guardian Online
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Art
The Observer

A World View: John Latham; Speak review - a time-bending experience

★★★★★

Serpentine Gallery; Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London
From proto-psychedelic film to book chewing, the hardcore conceptual art of John Latham continues to inspire

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[175](#) [9](#)

Laura Cumming
[@LauraCummingArt](#)

Sunday 5 March 2017 08:00 GMT



i 'Moments of time and culture briefly embodied': installation view of John Latham's work at the Serpentine Gallery. Photograph: Guy Bell/Rex/Shutterstock

Time it right, and you could enter straight into the most dizzying spectacle - a million coloured circles hurtling towards you on screen. Discs flash and whirl in the darkness, accompanied by what might be the sound of distant rioting but is actually a circular saw. The furious buzz is perfectly attuned to the constant strobe. It feels like a cross between a mind game and an apocalyptic countdown.

John Latham's *Speak* (1962) was screened by Pink Floyd at an early Roundhouse gig. The band even wrote a soundtrack, which the artist rejected, preferring his own tape-recorded saw. To experience this famous work in the 21st century is to feel the elasticity of time, for it is both a period piece of the early 60s and an eye-popping shock - forever young, cool and now.



John Latham, right, with fellow artists Ivor Davies and Gustav Metzger (centre) in 1966. Photograph: Beverley Goodway/Associated/Rex/Shutterstock



Latham (1921-2006) is probably best known for getting his students at St Martins to chew up a library copy of Clement Greenberg's detested *Art and Culture* and spit it out. (Their mastications, [fermented and preserved in vials](#), belong to the Museum of Modern Art in New York.) Latham lost his job for failing to return the book in readable condition, and gained his evergreen reputation as an establishment goad. Even at his death, he was [at loggerheads with Tate Britain](#) for withdrawing from display a work that embedded copies of the Bible, Torah and Qur'an in chunks of glass. He saw their action as pusillanimous.

Latham himself was never afraid to offend. When he built - [and then burned](#) - a tower of encyclopedias, the historic resonances were clear, all the way back to Savonarola. Books were both ideas and objects to him, and he even spoke of using them as alternatives to paint. They stood, too, as instances of history, moments of time and culture briefly embodied. And time was Latham's true subject - his perpetual medium and obsession.

The Serpentine's [long-awaited survey](#) includes time-based paintings - pigment flicked at the canvas, the cartoon splats a measure of the rapidity with which the action took place - and several of his [one-second drawings](#) from the 1950s.

Latham used a spray gun to shoot a second's worth of black paint at a white substrate. The result is a perfect record of the event, of ejected particles moving through space, and a

kind of constellation in reverse - black stars in white outer space.

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Latham's 1962 film *Speak* at the Serpentine: 'both a period piece and an eye-popping shock'. Photograph: Luke Hayes



Latham [lived in Flat Time House](#) in Peckham, south London (where another pair of gigantic books - interleaved so they can never be read - still hangs [in the window](#)). His theories about time are so nebulous as to be beyond my grasp, and indeed that of several catalogue contributors, including [Richard Hamilton](#), who confessed he had no clear idea what his friend was talking about. Latham seems to have believed that time consisted of a series of events, that space was not the measure of the universe but time, and that the chief characteristic of all art was "its extensions in time".

This is certainly the prevailing theme at the Serpentine Gallery. There are paintings where the high-chrome stripes simply fade away - here and then gone - or explode as if shot by a bullet. Silk-screened words arrive and then vanish, shifting from the present to the past. Canvas is twisted up like a curtain, knotted to one side as if to let in new light; or hangs, spattered and torn from its frame, like some poor deflated flag. Each work speaks of the moment of its making, but also of the past and future.

Latham was a hardcore conceptualist, and some of his work is as tough to look at as it is to comprehend. "THE MYSTERIOUS BEING KNOWN AS GOD is an atemporal score, with a probable time-base in the region of 10^{19} seconds." What does this mean (lettered large on the wall) if it means anything at all? Latham insisted that his art consisted of events and not images. Yet the film in which the pages of the Encyclopedia Britannica rush past at warp speed is extraordinarily expressive in visual terms, not least for being such an antique artefact in itself by now. What it shows is an Ozymandian vision of time: whole civilisations passing rapidly away.



i 'Here and then gone': Forcefield, 1967 by John Latham. Photograph: © the John Latham Estate; courtesy Lisson Gallery.



Latham's continuing influence on younger artists is apparent in [Speak](#), an anthology of homages at the Serpentine Sackler Gallery that features a great variety of works, from word pieces to impromptu ping pong and billiard games to an interview with John Latham filmed by [Douglas Gordon](#) in 1999; the catalogue transcription is full of Gordon's illuminating insights, connecting Latham's one-second drawings, for instance, with [the black page](#) in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*.

[Cally Spooner](#) presents a wittily ludic wall drawing, in which separate lines trace her person (at chin height) against the rise and fall of the pound and the development of her own career according to the market website [artfacts.net](#); as if time, or indeed life, were susceptible to such meaningless measurements. And the Cuban artist [Tania Bruguera](#), reflecting on how representative art came to be distorted by Castro's regime, explains in an absorbing film how she came to an artistic language of political gestures in the true spirit of Latham.

But most startling is Turner prize winner [Laure Prouvost](#)'s darkened chamber of glass objects, each glowing in a sudden coloured spotlight on its plinth, and each a commemoration of something vital to our daily existence: a glass of water, cheap but precious; an egg frying in a pan; a scarlet human heart. Elevated by the process of being blown in Venetian glass, they are accompanied by an abrupt son et lumière conveying the alterations of time.

Prouvost was once Latham's studio assistant, and this is in part a remembrance of their life together, from the fruit they ate to the teabags drying on the radiator. But every object is more than itself. The installation is both a private story and a public narrative describing our human experiences in twinkling emblems; it is both moving and stunning.

● [A World View: John Latham](#) is at the Serpentine Gallery, London until 21 May.
[Speak](#) is at the Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London until 21 May

L I S S O N G A L L E R Y

Evening Standard

2 March 2017

EveningStandard.

John Latham at Serpentine Gallery: Heirs to an agent of transformation

A World View: John Latham

Serpentine Gallery, W2 3/5

Speak

Serpentine Sackler Gallery, W2 3/5

John Latham's art is difficult to grasp, partly because he didn't want it to exist in conventional terms. For him, objects were only a conduit for deeper thought; his ideas represent an alternative theory of the universe in response to a too-rational world.

He proposed a cosmology defined by time not space, which makes putting together a show of his work difficult. Much of what you see is only an arcane residue or document.

His one-second drawings, an example of what he called a "least event", are made with a one-second spray of black paint onto canvas. His roller blind paintings, presented as conventional abstracts here, were originally blinds over windows, sometimes only partially glimpsed.

Books are attached to canvases, singed and overpainted, cut or torn and suspended in glass or plaster. This looks like violence, but it's more esoteric, about re-envisioning language and knowledge. He wanted to change the artist's role in society: his work in the Scottish landscape as part of the Artist Placement Group, which he

co-founded, appropriates bins of coal waste as a figurative sculpture. Artists, for him, were agents of transformation.

This partly explains Latham's enduring influence, the basis of *Speak*. It's a hotchpotch of a show, with four artists of differing tempers and style emphasising how broadly Latham's ideas can be interpreted.

The responses range from oblique reference to homage. Cally Spooner has created a kind of self-portrait across time: a graph which plots her metabolic rate, her artistic status and the fluctuations in the pound against the euro on the wall around the space.

Tania Bruguera's contribution is an interview about her APG-like social art and call for others to take action, while Laure Prouvost creates a sensorily rich and whimsical sound, light and sculptural installation, subverting language, as Latham did.

Latham's words are material for Douglas Gordon. His statements are printed and reversed in a text wall — reversal is at the core of both artists' work. Gordon finds a playfulness in Latham, with billiard and ping-pong tables evoking his theories in the forms of games. A video of the young Gordon talking to Latham, again mirrored on another monitor, is a portrait of the thoughts of both artists, embodying the show's spirit.

Until May 21 (020 7402 6075, serpentinegalleries.org)

LISSON GALLERY

FAD

6 March 2017



BETA
Cool Art & Stuff

A World View: John Latham; Speak review – a time-bending experience

Time it right, and you could enter straight into the most dizzying spectacle – a million coloured circles hurtling towards you on screen. Discs flash and whirl in the darkness, accompanied by what might be the sound of distant rioting but is actually a circular saw. The furious buzz is perfectly attuned to the constant strobe. It feels like a cross between a mind game and an apocalyptic countdown.

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Exhibitions

A Lesson in Sculpture with John Latham

Henry Moore Institute Leeds 24 March to 19 June

Spanning the latter half of the 20th century, John Latham's career was richly paradoxical and open; a basis for the Henry Moore Institute, ten years after his death, to bounce around the work of 16 international artists whose paths overlapped variously with his. Any comparisons between the artists are rarely explicit and often circumstantial, resulting in a contextual looseness that refrains from this being a historicising survey of his work. Instead, Latham is introduced here as the central host welcoming an array of profile-raising VIP guests, freeing him of any unjustly parochial view as a British eccentric.

A main Latham paradox to consider was his reconception, in the 1960s, of the artist as an 'Incidental Person' (an exceptional individual who, embedded within industry, education or science, had an advisory role whose only remit was to break down these discrete specialisations, with no requirement for material outcome – see Sophie J Williamson's 'The Art Project' AM366) yet he continuously mythologised his own artistic biography as the misunderstood outsider and he produced markedly tangible art objects. A lover of wordplay, he must have enjoyed the ambiguity of the word 'incidental', in the sense of unimportant or tangential, to play down the elevated position of the artist while also referring to an incident, in the sense of disturbance and, euphemistically, a crime or disaster, therefore conversely returning us to the notion of the artist as agitator or at least initiator of noteworthy events. It is because of, rather than despite, these contradictions that his work continues to hold relevancy.

Carey Young's *Inventory*, 2007, provides us with a close analogue of this Incidental Person paradox. Employing scientists from the University of Cambridge and the University of London, she has calculated the market value of the chemical elements present in her body by weight at the time of the exhibition and this is displayed on the wall. Young's current value is £50,207.53 (a big increase on past occasions the piece was exhibited). Human worth here is set as though in a dystopia of recycling, where the market pervades even to a molecular level; perhaps an extreme conclusion to organ trafficking that occasionally hits the headlines? Cast as the Incidental Person, she is accounted for either as a bunch of commodity prices, quantifiable like a robot, or satirically in the sense of mocking obsessions with 'body image' and 'selfie culture', and furthermore damns traditional depictions of the female body in art. While it might not be her intention to revolutionise the accepted status of the artist as Latham had hoped, Young's version of the artist is equally displaced.

Another witty intervention is Marcel Broothaers's *Trois Tas de*

Charbon (Three Piles of Coal), first made 1966-67, whose three small piles of coal on the floor of the gallery are punctuated absurdly by a Belgian flag, conflating the coal industry with colonialism and sand castles. The coal-pile theme continues into the small rear gallery where another pile, belonging to Mary Kelly's multimedia video, sound and film installation *An Earthwork Performed*, 1970, depicts a man shovelling coal purposelessly for the camera. These and Latham's *Study for Bing Monument*, 1976, and *Niddrie Woman Site*, 1976, a project where the Incidental Person declared a series of mountainous heaps of shale in Scotland as public artworks, certainly underlines the impression that fossil fuels were a big issue in the 1970s. The curators allow visitors to draw their own conclusions about this (which I applaud), despite coal not being a material closely associated with Latham.

Moving on from that curatorial digression, the exhibition includes numerous examples of Latham's familiar book iconoclasm where he carves, glues, burns and daubs old tomes as raw construction materials for sculpture and, in an early example, a painting. These are alongside other book iterations, such as a vitrine containing Marcel Duchamp's *Green Box Notes to The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even*, 1934, from the institute's own library. Also appearing are Cornelia Parker's *My Soul Afire*, 1997, and *Just When I Need Him Most*, 2005, burnt hymnals, where damage to the books has occurred, anecdotally (as is always the case with Parker's found objects) from a lightning strike on a church rather than by the artist's own hands.

Whether it is the wrath of God or the wrath of the artist is an important distinction to make, as Latham's violence to books was prompted by his anger directed at inherited systems of knowledge; for Latham, language was suspect and books stood as manifestations of this malign power. Scheduled to take place after my visit, the artist Neal White has been commissioned to remake one of Latham's best-known works, the notorious *Skoob Tower* ('Books' spelled backwards) of 1964-66, where a tower of books is ceremonially burned. However, in our age of discontinued paperbacks and digital publishing, and with Nazi book-burning atrocities less fresh in the memory, one wonders whether this will be so publicly outrageous. Later in the programme of 'Event Sculptures' is Annea Lockwood's *Piano Burning*, 1968, on 11 May (presumably keeping the West Yorkshire Fire Service busy once more) and Gordon Matta-Clark's *Garbage Wall*, 1971, to be recreated by local students from 25 May.

Latham had a knack for touching the nerves of the public and institutions of the 1960s and is rightly associated with that historical zeitgeist. However, it was his resolution to tackle, head-on, cosmological issues that meant that controversy followed him up to a few months before he died in 2006, when Tate Britain, responding to panic after the 7/7 bombings in London, cancelled plans to exhibit his work *God is Great*, 1991, a sculpture that incorporates a sliced and glued copy of the Qur'an. This might suggest that he

was truculent, but his humour was far more whimsical than that. Moreover, what this exhibition makes apparent, by situating his

work next to more didactically provocative works by other artists, is his formal playfulness and experimentation. ■

NEIL ZAKIEWICZ is an artist.



Annea Lockwood
Piano Burning
1968

'A Lesson in
Sculpture with
John Latham'
installation view



ArtReview

John Latham *Spray Paintings*

Lisson Gallery, London 1 April – 7 May

Halloween, 1954: an astronomer and animal ethnologist couple, with an interest in the paranormal, invite artist John Latham to create a mural for a party in their Hampshire home. In response, Latham gets a spray gun from an ironmonger and spurts their white wall (or, in some accounts, their ceiling) with black paint. The resulting burst of dots sets off a series of associations for the artist: a sculpture, performance, drawing and painting all at once, that looks like an inverse night sky. The spray gun becomes a regular feature in his work, but also a tool to think through his growing theory that physics has got it all wrong: the basic unit of the universe isn't the particle, but a minimal, time-based something, anything, happening – what he later called a 'least event'. Latham's widespread influence hasn't been so much the result of his early splotchy part-figurative paintings, or his later muddy, messy assemblages and destructive performances, but is more due to his persistent promotion of the artist as a sort of eccentric natural philosopher.

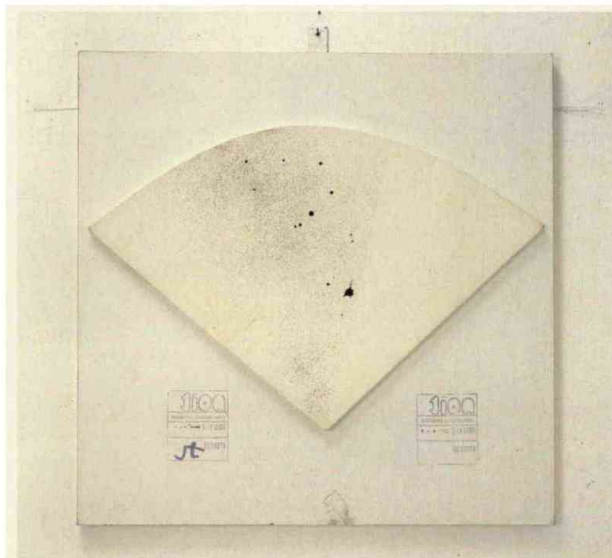
His playful and somewhat arbitrary cosmology animated all kinds of heavy metaphors used in his work: books as knowledge, glass as a sort of existential clean slate and sprayed paint – as is the focus of this show of his 'Spray Paintings' from 1955 to 1995 – as the universe itself in formation. Upstairs, a few bits of wood and panels from desks have been painted white and flecked with black as 'one second drawings'. The left side of *Two Noit. One Second Drawing* (1970–71) remains blank, the right side contains a dozen heavy spots and hundreds of tiny marks. Two official-looking stamps mark each side as a 'noit' (another of his conjectured terms of time measurement), the left side noted as taking place the last second of December 1970, the right occurring the first second of January 1971.

The main body of the exhibition, though, is several large, colourful shapes sprayed onto unprimed canvases. These works are bold, graphic, surprisingly more akin to the language of advertising than any metaphysical vocabulary. Black, yellow and white racing stripes run down *Painting not out of a Book* (1963), while the faded neon yellow and burnt orange in *Untitled Painting*

(1963) slope down the painting with a more gentle curve, both works fading in the middle to an unknown vanishing point. The best of these works is *Untitled (Roller Painting)* (1964), a two-metre-plus canvas that unfurls to the floor with an electric motor; lines of red and black flow down like water, with wisps of half-hidden pinks and blobs of purple. Up close, these forms disintegrate, returning to their atomised dots of spray, merging with the water stains and marks of rust and tape that pock the canvases. It would seem the spray gun gave Latham not just a conceptual jolt, but also an excuse to have fun with shape and colour.

But that brief glimpse into a sunnier, more lighthearted side of his practice is the most this exhibition provides. The unspoken tragedy behind all this is the imminent closure of Flat Time House, Latham's former home and studio in Peckham, a 'living sculpture' and embodiment of his idiosyncratic approach. The building, as a site for events and experimentation, has been a more appropriate context for exploring his ideas than these bits of wood and unprimed canvas, giving more of a framework for understanding how a few spatters on a rolled-up bit of cloth might point towards a whole different scientific paradigm. But after eight years as a residency and exhibition space, it's going to be left to be devoured by the London property market. This show emphasises how much Latham's work needs framing and narrative around it to give it its trajectory; like the Halloween and New Year's Eve that precipitated his momentarily cosmic excursions, there were always quite mortal circumstances that provided the boundaries for his flights of fancy. We never act in a complete void – there is no clean slate or, as Latham was seeking, single unified theory that will bind us all. It's that seeking, rather than what arrived on the surfaces of the canvas and wood themselves, that reminds us that we can still benefit from wildly gesticulating artists' theories that try to prod at and undermine the ground we think we're standing on: it's a serious zaniness that is sorely lacking in how today's artists envision their role in the world.

Chris Fite-Wassilak



Two Noit. One Second Drawing 1970–71, board-mounted on Conti board,
paint, 61 × 61 × 3 cm. Photo: Ken Adlard.
© The John Latham Foundation. Courtesy Lisson Gallery, London

LISSON GALLERY

The Brooklyn Rail

6 April 2016



On John Latham's Films

by Nathan Dunne

The former house and studio of British conceptual artist John Latham is tucked away among a row of sleepy terrace houses on Bellenden Road in South London. Known as Flat Time House, after Latham's idiosyncratic theory of time, the façade has been replaced with a giant cantilevered book-sculpture called *How the Univoice is Still Unheard*. Since the artist's death in 2006, Flat Time House has been transformed into a dynamic gallery space for younger artists with a curatorial program focused on Latham's theoretical ideas and their continued relevance. On a recent visit I discovered the artist's films, which form a key part of his work produced in the 1960s and early '70s. Although Latham is known predominantly for his paintings and sculpture, these films are some of his most fertile experiments with form, utilizing paper cutouts, stop-motion animation, and sound-collages.

After the Second World War, having witnessed the sinking of the *Bismarck* during his Navy service, Latham studied at Chelsea College of Art and began experimenting with spray-paint on canvas. His amateur interest—and misunderstanding—of theoretical physics, led him to develop an antithetical cosmology that rejected space in favor of time. Latham's rejection of space as the primacy of art was also a rejection of Clement Greenberg's *Art and Culture*, a text that had been introduced into the British art school curriculum following the Coldstream Report of 1960, with a view to making art schools more "academic." His personal dislike of Greenberg was also due to the notoriously pontifical art critic having dismissed his work as "patly cubist."

While teaching at St. Martins College in 1966, Latham devised a performance that would become his most famous sculpture. He invited half a dozen guests to his house and had them chew pages of *Art and Culture*, which he had borrowed from the college library. The pages were then spat into a glass container and converted into a liquid. Latham was soon sent an overdue notice for the book that he returned to the library in a glass phial with a label that read: "the essence of Greenberg." He was dismissed from his teaching post the following day; the work was later bought by the Museum of Modern Art. Throughout his life Latham published numerous papers attempting to elucidate his theory of Flat Time, such as "Time-Base and Determination in Events," (1976) and "Event Structure" (1981). But for all his emphasis on time, it is language that emerges as

the most powerful driver of his work. As in the performance of *Art and Culture*, where language is reduced to an object, Latham's films during this period are obsessed with the way language is manipulated for power and authority. In *Speak* (1962), pieces of colored paper are layered over one another in a psychedelic assault. As the strobe increases it's as though the viewer is being pulled into a void bruised by rainbows. The ten-minute film was first projected during early performances of Pink Floyd at a church hall known as The Tabernacle in Notting Hill Gate. However, when the film was prepared for an exhibition, Latham created his own soundtrack, placing a microphone on the floor to pick up the rhythm of a circular saw that he was using to cut up books. The result is a blistering white noise that never lets up, a bottled scream where language is suppressed beneath the frenetic sequence of light.

Talk Mr Bard (1961) also features stop-motion colors, but with a more nuanced approach to language. Samples of radio and television broadcasts run into one another among a sputtering of French and Mandarin that quickly begin to drown in static. As the audio becomes incomprehensible, two words flash up: "FISH" and "BARD." "FISH" emphasizes the circular form of the cutouts as a blinking fish-eye that is unable to fix on language. The eye is always slippery, losing words before they form sentences. "BARD" is an obvious reference to Shakespeare: Latham is taunting the playwright's status at the center of the Western literary canon. The challenge is for language to overcome the babble of voices and fix on meaning through the veil of colors. Latham is suggesting that as Shakespeare tries to speak his words become images.

The approach to language in these films was heavily influenced by James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. Latham regarded the novel as a work that succeeded in marrying text and image in a wholly new way: the density of the portmanteau letters, words, and phrases served to interrupt the temporal act of reading in favor of multiple image renderings, many of them with roots in at least two languages or dialects. In his writing on the novel, Latham argues that trying to read according to a linear pattern misses the point of the work. Joyce's use of words like "zeemliangly," "applecheeks," and "wordpainter" are meant to arrest the reader's eye and become images on the page. By disrupting the temporal experience of reading, the reader is challenged to re-learn the act according to a new language where the words, letters, and dialects criss-cross in a dizzying pattern of starts, stops, and flowing visual fragments.

In *Erth* (1971), just as in *Speak* and *Talk Mr Bard*, Latham embraces this text-as-image play. The film begins with a dot of spray paint that enlarges into a black screen, a reference to the Big Bang. A soft German voice is then faded over the black at random intervals. Although it's difficult to make out the exact words, it sounds like the voice is counting down the age of the universe. An image of Earth swims into view only to be replaced by a volume of *Encyclopedia Britannica*. With single-frame shots of every page in the volumes, the encyclopedia is rendered unreadable.

The image becomes increasingly overexposed until the camera zooms in over images of city-scapes and fields.

In the film's title, the "Earth" has been removed to suggest the separation of individuals from their environment. In contemplating Earth, the viewer is disconnected from the world without adequate knowledge and connection to the universe of which he or she is a microcosm. The snatches of voice emphasize this disconnection as if captured from an astronaut's faulty transmission. Latham believed that the encyclopedia was a false repository of knowledge and in rendering it unreadable he created a cosmology where the objects remain the same but display endless variation and development. Like Joyce, he was attempting to combine different elements into a new, unitary form.

Over the last decade, these films have been rediscovered as part of Latham's major body of work. Following a screening in 2000, the Lux Centre in London worked with the artist to produce a DVD and arranged for several films to be included in the touring exhibition "*Shoot Shoot Shoot*." Latham's art is characterized by its formal innovation and these films are extraordinary examples of the way he pushed the limitations of sculpture, sound, and language. His restless experimentation, coupled with his meticulous attention to detail, meant that his work exhibited formal ingenuity unmatched in British art of the late twentieth century. This formal and material innovation is what makes his films so compelling.

LISSON GALLERY

The Guardian
16 April 2016

theguardian

Anatomy of an artwork John Latham's Sleep

The paint

Spray paint only became readily available commercially in the late 1940s, so this work, in which it is mixed with hand-painted emulsion on board, is an early example of its use in contemporary art. It comes as no surprise, however: Latham was always an innovator and is regarded as a great figure of the British avant garde.

The event

This piece laid the groundwork for the artist's idea of the "least event". This philosophy saw Latham produce a whole new cosmology in which existence as we know is made up of "events". The least event is the closest



the artist can achieve to nothing. Tricky stuff, but it did lead him to produce a whole series of paintings involving spray cans used for just one second.

The woman

This not to say this work is about nothing. In fact, for all the painting's debt to abstraction and the artist's avant-garde spirit, here Latham returns

to one of the oldest subjects in art, the reclining woman.

The history

This painting has had a colourful life. It is one of 15 paintings first

work by the British conceptual artist John Latham

shown in London in the mid-1950s, only to be sold down the Six Bells pub on the King's Road a decade later. It only resurfaced a few years ago.

The renaissance

Latham seems to be having a moment just now. Sleep is the starting point for Lisson Gallery's exhibition of the artist's spray works, while other work by the artist is also included in concurrent shows at the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, Modern Art Oxford, and London's Tate Britain. **OB**

John Latham: Spray Paintings, Lisson Gallery, NW1, to 7 May

LISSON GALLERY

FT Weekend

26-27 March 2016

FT WEEKEND



FTWeekend

Critics' choice

Life&Arts

John Latham: The Spray Paintings

Lisson Gallery, London

A Lesson in Sculpture with John Latham

Henry Moore Institute, Leeds

"No one has seen any point in shooting a spray gun on a white surface, but to my question it held a dizzy promise." So John Latham reminisced about the gun he acquired from an ironmonger in 1954. He took it to the party of astronomer-philosopher neighbours and created a mural on their ceiling, atomising pigment to suggest strange constellations.

Hinged on transience and chance, Latham's early spray works seldom survived. Lisson's show begins with the rare 1955 "Sleep", where myriad marks just suggest a reclining female form. Such ghostly pieces evolved in the 1960s to "roller" paintings with faint bands of colour punctuated by tiny dots coming into definition by accumulating with others as the canvas is rolled up and down.

By 1970 Latham had pared the medium down to the

instantaneous "Noit" (One second Drawing) series, created by a set of instructions and stamped with the exact moment of production.

Latham's concerns were time, converging mind and matter, art and science, creation and destruction, and breaking through what he saw as an impasse in painting. Spray painting, he said, "destroys the picture plane in a legitimate way . . . is both abstract and referential . . . [and] can be 'read' in several ways, as mathematics and as a memory trace." His influence on conceptual art continues, as traced in Leeds' sculpture exhibition including his iconic "Skoob Tower" burning, described by Latham as a "sculpture in reverse" – "skoob" is "books" backwards – realised by Neal White; Gordon Matta-Clark's "Garbage Wall", Annea Lockwood's "Piano Burning", and works by artists including Cornelia Parker, Tony Cragg and Katie Paterson.

lissongallery.com, 0207 724 2739, April 1-May 7; henry-moore.org, 0113 246 7467, to June 19



'Untitled' by John Latham (1964-65)

The John Latham Foundation/Lisson Gallery

Apollo

11 February 2016

http://www.apollo-magazine.com/the-march-of-time-at-modern-art-oxford-celebrating-50-years/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=the-march-of-time-at-modern-art-oxford-celebrating-50-years

APOLLO

THE INTERNATIONAL ART MAGAZINE



Sleep (2014), Elizabeth Price, video still. Courtesy of the artist and MOT International London & Brussels

The march of time at Modern Art Oxford: Celebrating 50 years

EMMA CRICHTON-MILLER

Modern Art Oxford is one of a clutch of British art institutions founded in the 1960s. Like Ikon Gallery in Birmingham and London's Camden Arts Centre, both of which celebrated their half-century last year, the gallery now stands as an international beacon of contemporary visual culture. The Museum of Modern Art Oxford (MoMA) was opened in 1965

by architect Trevor Green, and quickly established a reputation for mounting groundbreaking shows of significant artists, from the UK and abroad. This year Modern Art Oxford (as it has been known since 2002) celebrates its half centenary with a year-long series of evolving exhibitions, collectively entitled 'KALEIDOSCOPE' (until 31 Dec).

This title is an attempt to do justice to the more than 700 diverse exhibitions mounted here since the gallery opened. Green's original intention was to establish a permanent modern art collection. But right from the start, MoMA Oxford was a 'Space Place' – as its first exhibition in 1966 was titled – a place for ideas as much as artworks. In 1969 the museum hosted South African artist Roelof Louw's seminal installation, *Location*, which consisted of a large, thick black rubber band running around the walls of the upper gallery. Richard Long exhibited in 1971; in 1973, then director Nicholas Serota invited Sol LeWitt to draw directly on the gallery walls. Since then, Joseph Beuys, Hans Haacke, Alexander Rodchenko and Marina Abramović have all had solo shows. In 1986, MoMA showed avant-garde Japanese art, while in 1993 a two-part exhibition introduced audiences to dissident contemporary Chinese art. When the gallery changed its name in 2002 it was an acknowledgement that it was never going to be a museum in the traditional sense: Tracey Emin exhibited neon works, drawings, films and sculpture that same year.



'Seein's Believin' (1961), John Latham. Courtesy the artist and Lisson Gallery

In 2012, the gallery's talented director, Michael Stanley, died aged 37. It has been the task of his successor, Paul Hobson, to articulate anew the gallery's purpose. For Hobson, who studied at Oxford University, the gallery's commitment to engage with ideas, to understand art 'as a system of visual knowledge' is fundamental. He is also dedicated to extending the range of artists (particularly women), the gallery shows, and to broadening the way exhibitions are constructed: think of last year's 'Love Is Enough', a joint display of Andy Warhol and William Morris curated by Jeremy Deller. 'We work really hard not to become an off-shoot of a blue-chip commercial gallery,' Hobson says. Modern Art Oxford has always

mixed disciplines, attempting to reach beyond a narrow art world to the whole city and beyond. The gallery is also there, Hobson emphasises, to serve as a platform for artists: 'We try to provide an opportunity for artists to find their moment,' he says. Last year Modern Art Oxford organised the first UK solo show of the Austrian artist Kiki Kogelnik. Once a well-known contemporary of Warhol and Lichtenstein in New York in the '60s, she was subsequently written out of the history of Pop Art.

This 50th anniversary has been an excuse to dig deep in the gallery's archives. A random analysis of the many texts produced over the years found that 'time' was the most frequently used word – spookily appropriate. As a result, time is a recurring theme in KALEIDOSCOPE. Furthermore, to reflect the multilayered, slippery nature of time, all the artworks will mostly have been shown in the gallery at some point in the past, gathered back for fresh consideration at large expense and logistical difficulty, or are newly commissioned.



Still from 'De-extinction' (2014), Pierre Huyghe. Courtesy the artist, Hauser & Wirth, London and Anna Lena Films, Paris

In the first exhibition of the KALEIDOSCOPE programme, 'The Indivisible Present' (until 16 April), Douglas Gordon's terrifying *24 Hour Psycho* (1993), the Hitchcock film slowed down to last a whole day (first shown here in 1996), is displayed alongside Yoko Ono's *Eye-Blink* (1966; first shown here in 1997), and John Latham's teasing sculpture *The Moral High Ground* (1988; first shown here in 1991). Elizabeth Price's frenetic,

complex animation *Sleep* (2013) is here by virtue of Price's long association with the Ruskin School of Art, while Pierre Huyghe's luxurious contemplation of deep time in *De-extinction* (2014), a film focused on mosquitoes caught in amber, goes on public display here for the first time. Other works in this thoughtful show include New York-based, German artist Viola Yeşiltac's exquisite photographs of fragile paper sculptures caught at the moment of falling. These new works are part of the artist's ongoing series *I Really Must Congratulate You on Your Attention to Detail*, and probe the borderland between sculpture, photography and performance.



'Untitled', from 'I Really Must Congratulate You on Your Attention to Detail' (2012), Viola Yeşiltac

Hobson's vision for the year is that one exhibition will dissolve into the next, with the gallery never closing, allowing the audience to experience the 'behind-the-scenes' process of constructing curated shows. 'The Indivisible Present', for example, will slowly transform into the next show, 'A Moment of Grace', from 22 March but won't be fully realised until 16 April. Not a great believer in the false certainties of history, Hobson feels this is the best way to communicate the ongoing recreative energy of this impressive art centre. Happy Birthday Modern Art Oxford!

'KALEIDOSCOPE' runs until 31 December and 'The Indivisible Present' runs until 16 April, both at [Modern Art Oxford](#).

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LISSON GALLERY

Flash Art

October 2011

<http://www.flashartonline.com/article/john-latham/>

Flash Art

John Latham

So what can we say to have gone on?

by Elisa Kay



Skoob Tower Ceremony at MOCA Los Angeles on the occasion of the exhibition "Out of Actions," (1998) Courtesy John Latham Estate.

February 23, 2011, would have been John Latham's 90th birthday. There was a little gathering at his house, Flat Time House (FTHo), to celebrate and to unravel *The*, a roller painting he made in 1976. *The* has just been fitted with a new motor and transformed from inert hanging canvas back into the kinetic painting it once was — a literal action painting. *The* is a score, played out like the notes of a tin music box as its pins roll over the turning cylinder. Like a musical score it exists, in its entirety, all the time, but is experienced by a viewer only as it is activated in time; specifically the time it takes for the canvas to pass over the rolling cylinder and reach the floor.

The is one of many works by the artist that have been overlooked in the last few decades but which are now being dusted off and reanimated. It dates from a period when Latham was a hugely productive and energetic force in the development of conceptual art in the UK. Latham's students and peers from the '60s and '70s, including Barry Flanagan, Ian Breakwell, David Lamelas and John Stezaker, have acknowledged his influence, and he is an increasingly relevant figure for younger artists. Of course, he never actually went away — he was making work right up until he died in 2006 — but while his object-based artworks are preserved in memory and museum collections, his big contribution to conceptual and time-based practices during the middle decades of the 20th century has perhaps been obscured by the passing of time.

The is a large canvas with stenciled letters set out in a grid, attached along its upper edge to a mechanized roller. It can be viewed from front and back, but either way the grid of upside-down letters is near impossible to form into words until the canvas is in motion. When its bands of letters roll over the front of the barrel, you can read them, not horizontally — the roller turns too fast to read across the lines — but vertically. Each column begins with the letter "h"; each statement stems from the same root before branching off. John A. Walker, in his 1994 monograph *John Latham: The Incidental Person: His Art and Ideas*, suggests that the artist used these bands of text to describe multiple fields of knowledge that possess a common origin, but divergent histories thereafter. Latham was concerned with the way in which each discipline develops its own specialist language, eventually rendering itself incommunicable to the next. In order to wring any meaning from the roller's text, the viewer must "specialize," adopting a tunnel vision to follow a narrow line of enquiry, which inevitably comes at the expense of an understanding of the whole event.

“Hot connys laid up in Hong Kong??? Hokum a shaver beg onion????????? How come ewes ate a half ton mum?” Each line of text is an attempt to articulate the existential question that, through crude and comic sound-alike variations, recurs like a refrain over the course of Latham’s career, in his artworks and his writings: “What can we say to be going on?” The title *The* offers a kind of answer, and as John A. Walker writes, it “was derived from... the last word in James Joyce’s novel *Finnegans Wake*; a word pregnant with infinite possibilities.”

Like much of his work from this period, the roller has the look of conceptual art but, despite the shared aesthetic, Latham was attempting to articulate something quite different to his peers. Since the mid-1950s he had been developing his theory of a time-based universe. Time-Base Theory (Latham also used the terms Event Theory and Flat Time) describes an event-structured universe in which every phenomenon can be organized within a time-based spectrum; from an event of least duration at the short end of the scale, to the whole universe at the other. Between these two points the physical, metaphysical and para-psychological can be understood within the same system, something that modern science cannot accommodate due to its extreme levels of specialization. As a human being — a body event — the higher your “center of gravitas” on the spectrum the more perspective you have on “what’s going on,” because you see a bigger part of the whole picture. Latham considered the space-based alternative to be automatically divisive because it is constructed from isolated objects and matter. Language is an instrument of the object-based universe because it is structured around nouns. He developed the term “noit” as a challenge to this: as a reversal of the suffix “tion,” which creates a noun from a verb, the noit was a way to activate the noun and have it exist in time.



Distress of a Dictionary (1988). Courtesy Lisson, London and the John Latham Estate. Photography by Ken Adlard.

Latham frequently spoke of the origins of his theory in the home of two friends, the scientists Clive Gregory and Anita Kohsen, who asked Latham to make a mural for a Halloween party in 1954. Feeling that a brush painting wasn't quite the thing, Latham searched for a more suitable means of production and came up with a household spray gun. The resulting instantaneous spatter of black on a white surface was a revelation; the distributed spots of ink were pleasingly simple as a representation of a fixed moment in time, but the same image could simultaneously connote the cosmos represented in negative; infinite complexity from extreme simplicity of means. The spray gun became a very important tool for Latham from that point. Early spray paintings were worked up with figurative elements, floating hands and feet or full human figures with titles such as *Sleep* (1955) or *Man Caught Up with a Yellow Object* (1954) suggestive of their subject matter. By 1970 Latham returned to the minimalism he had admired in his original action (he called it the *Idiom of '54*) and presented the spray gun paintings as a series of "noits" or "One-Second Drawings" (1970-77). These were completely unmediated blasts of sprayed ink onto simple white surfaces, sometimes painted board, sometimes standard sheets of printer paper.

A few years after the spray gun discovery, Latham was introducing assemblage elements into his work. One day, just looking for an oblong form, a book came into view in the studio and he used it. Books immediately provided an easy symbolism for both language and knowledge, particularly an institutionalized, top-down knowledge, congealed in the form of reference books and leaving little scope for independent thought. *Great Uncle Estate* (1959-60), a major work from this period, even provided a composite character representing the whole western canon. The work is Latham's largest book relief, with around 100 books placed onto the canvas surface, their pages painted red, blue, gold or gray, with adjustable wires to hold the pages apart, allowing for the transformation of the canvas according to which pages are on view.

Books were the subject of Latham's several "skoob films" he made from 1959 to 1960 ("skoob" is another reversal: "books" spelled backwards). These are stop-frame animations of his book-relief canvases transforming frame by frame in a flicker as the books' pages are turned between shots. A few years later they became the raw material for radical actions including the *Skoob Tower Ceremonies* (1964-68; 1996-1998) during which towers of books were formed into slow-burning chimneys and incinerated at symbolically loaded locations including the British Museum and the London Law Courts.

My own relationship with John Latham and his work began at school with a teacher who had studied at Central Saint Martins. My teacher retold, as I'm about to, the stock story of *Still and Chew/Art and Culture* (1966-67). I say "story," as the episode passed into legend some time ago. Aided by his student Barry Flanagan, Latham invited his Saint Martins students to his home for a party. A library copy of Clement Greenberg's *Art and Culture* (1961) was passed around; everyone tore out a page, chewed it up and spat it out. Latham then fermented the mulch for nearly a year, before returning the resulting distilled liquid to the college library in a glass phial labeled "essence of Greenberg" (the ubiquitous Greenberg was an agent of *Great Uncle*). As well as being an effective way to gain the attention of impressionable art students (over four decades and still going strong), *Still and Chew/Art and Culture* was a touchstone in Latham's career, summing up not only his problems with language and institutionalized education, or the "Mental Furniture Industry" as he termed it, but also the role of process in his work and the effects of time upon materials and perception. It was also an expression of the radicalism that would relegate him as an outsider and troublemaker.



Installation view at Flat Time House, 210 Bellenden Road. Courtesy Lisson, London and the John Latham Estate. Photography by Ken Adlard.

Some time after that first encounter with *Still and Chew/Art and Culture* I met John, and later still I worked at his home FTHo. On reflection, it is Flat Time House that is Latham's largest book-relief, not *Great Uncle Estate*; the house has a Face, the large shop window of which is punctuated by two giant books, their pages layered together — another technique of Latham's for rendering a book unreadable. The spine of one book bears the title *How the Univoice is Still Unheard*; the "univoice" would be Flat Time as a unifying "theory of everything." Like many of Latham's later book reliefs, the two books extrude from a glass plane, in this case the window. Glass was the last of Latham's three primary materials, with the glass plane replacing a white ground in most of his work from the '80s onward. As a state zero from which human history evolves, transparent glass was even more effective than unmarked canvas. Beyond the glass membrane of the Face, Latham thought about the house as an organism. He called it a living sculpture; each of its rooms has a function. The very first room, behind the book-relief, Latham called the Mind, and this was where he would talk to visitors about his theoretical ideas. The works in this room are like demo versions of works expressing the most persistent themes of Latham's work since the '50s. All his big ideas are here as well as all his major materials (books, canvas, glass, the spray gun) in miniature form: a cosmology in a microcosm.

The house also has a Brain, the location for office and archive and rational thought (as opposed to intuitive thinking, which happens in the Mind). A corridor leads to the skylit studio at the back of the house. This forms the part of the house that is now public, and it horseshoes around the Body Event: the kitchen, bedroom and bathroom, where “sitting, lying and plumbing” happen. For a while, I was the body inhabiting the Body Event. Now, whenever possible, there will be an artist living there. So far Laure Prouvost and Bea McMahon have inhabited the Body of FTHo.

Like the statements on the roller, there are many divergent ways in which one could introduce Latham’s work or try to sum up his achievements. When the artist attempted to do this himself, he would invariably start in 1954 with the spray gun, but you would end up somewhere different every time. Despite the incredible diversity in his work, there’s an extraordinary and highly unusual constancy to it, which springs from the ubiquity of his theoretical ideas. Constancy, but not necessarily clarity; the very same artists who have cited Latham as an important influence have often, in the very same breath, declared their lack of understanding of the ideas that underpinned his practice. Nicholas Logsdail, Latham’s gallerist for 40 years, likes to recount how Art & Language came to see a Latham show at Lisson Gallery in 1970. They told Logsdail that they thought Latham was a genius, but they didn’t understand a word he said. Such a contradiction begs the question, hatpin to shave of a ding-dong?

Elisa Kay is curator at Flat Time House, London.

John Latham was born in 1921 in Livingstone, Northern Rhodesia, now Zambia. He died in 2006 in London.

LISSON GALLERY

Wire Magazine
November 2010

WIRE

On Screen

Films & DVDs



John Latham *Talk Mr Bard* (1961)

John Latham *Films 1960–1971*

LUX/Lisson Gallery DVD

British painter, sculptor, conceptual artist and film maker John Latham (1921–2006) consistently pushed the boundaries of artistic activity. His visionary world view combined artistic, philosophical and scientific ideas in a theory of “event structure”, explaining the universe not as atomic particles and waves, but as recurring time based events of finite duration. Scientific and philosophical communities may have ignored them, but these ideas had their value in inspiring a totally original artistic output.

Latham's six stop-time films were integral to that output, and have now been restored and released by the Lisson Gallery, which represented him, on an 80 minute DVD. In his excellent accompanying essay, curator Mark Webber comments on the link between cosmology and practice: “In order for the function of time to be analysed, it is stopped. Events take place between frames. Under his camera, nothing moves.” The DVD also includes footage of the 1967 *Book Plumbing* happenings, Latham's 1970 exhibition, and his since-destroyed work *Big Breather* (1973), all shot and edited by the

artist. The disc ends with commentaries on the films by David Toop, Latham's son Noa and others.

Three of the six films feature Latham as “bibliophobe”, as one commentator of the time described him. From 1958, Latham began to introduce torn, overpainted and partly burnt books into his assemblages. Despite the terrible Nazi resonance of book-burning, he wasn't afraid to present books as sources of error as well as truth. In the 1960s his students at St Martin's School of Art feasted on Clement Greenberg's *Art And Culture*, spitting out the results for Latham to distil and decant as *Spit And Chew: Art And Culture* – the school fired him, apparently for failing to return the book to the library in readable form. Visiting his wonderful Flat-Time House in Peckham today, it's impossible not to be affected by his improbable book sculptures and reliefs.

The six films are in pairs, the first of each pair a kind of study for the second. All the films have a readymade, artisanal quality – as Webber comments, Latham's approach was casual, “concerned more with the overall effect than the individual frames”. *Unclassified Material* and *Unedited Material From The Star*, both from 1960,

are ‘skoob’ films – ‘books’ backwards – with book-relief assemblages as raw material. The flickering images of books opening and closing like butterfly wings, their colours changing, produce a kaleidoscopic effect. As Noa Latham explains in his commentary, the silent *Unclassified Material*, with its “unstable [visual] beat”, explores the possibility of applying a musical quality to film. *Unedited Material*'s roughly edited, interrupted commentary comprises quotes from Kant and Nietzsche, and the voices of philosophers Onora O'Neill and Bernard Williams – the constant deferral of meaning has an absurdist quality that's never far from Latham's work.

Talk Mr Bard (1961) is a hectic stop-frame animation described in the original catalogue as “an abstract movie by the notorious bibliophobe and skoob erector”. Instead of the unwieldy paintings, its material comprises paper shapes manipulated on a working surface, with a pop-cultural resonance, and a logorrhoeic quality to the continuous, garbled BBC-derived commentary. The minatory *Speak*, probably from 1962, extends the technique – the coloured-disc animation is stroboscopic rather than kaleidoscopic, reinforced by the soundtrack Latham

recorded of a circular saw cutting through piles of books. It's tantalising to learn that the artist had rejected a specially-recorded soundtrack by Pink Floyd, and one composed by his friend, free jazz pioneer Joe Harriott – this at least shows the prescience of his musical affiliations.

The epic *Encyclopedia Britannica* is a stop-frame animation that documents several volumes of the reference work, one two-page spread for every frame of film. The tedious job of photographing a single frame of each spread was undertaken by David Toop, and when his work proved unsatisfactory – his page-turning hand kept creeping into the images – Lisson Gallery owner Nicholas Logsdail. *Earth* from 1971 – at 24 minutes, the longest film here – was produced for the National Coal Board as part of a negotiation for an artist placement that never eventuated. It reflects Latham's fascination with the images of the Earth that became ubiquitous with the Apollo space missions, which are intercut with periods of black silence, against a countdown in German added for an exhibition in Germany. This excellent DVD illustrates a neglected side of an artist who is finally receiving the recognition he deserves.

Andy Hamilton

ARTFORUM

John Latham

WHITECHAPEL GALLERY/KARSTEN SCHUBERT/LISSON GALLERY

John Latham, who died in 2006 at the age of eighty-four, remains best known for encouraging students at Saint Martins School of Art to chew up pages from the library's copy of Clement Greenberg's *Art and Culture* and returning the book as fermented spittle. The action (organized with Barry Flanagan) cost Latham his part-time job and established his provocative and, some might say, profoundly unscholarly reputation. Several exhibitions in London this past summer showed that it is the right moment to reassess Latham's work and influence, not only beyond the Greenberg-chewing story but also, crucially, beyond the critical framework established by the artist. Latham's famously cranky theorizing and eccentric scientific aspirations were fascinating but incomprehensible, and were delivered without the irony that might have elevated them into the realm of poetic interpretation. Where books are mangled, so, it might be said, are words and ideas.

The greatest discovery in this reassessment is that of Latham as pioneer avant-garde filmmaker. A DVD set of all his films is being released this month; over the summer, along with other screenings and a condensed survey of his work, the Whitechapel Gallery showed his rarely seen "Target" series, commissioned for Channel 4 Television in 1984: abstract compositions of flashing target forms combined with urban imagery reminiscent of the experimental films of Len Lye. Alongside were exhibited monochrome spray-painted works, a table of books bisected with glass (*Table of Law*, 1988), and pieces from the "Planets (Clusters)" series, hanging spheres made of plaster, books, and other items—as well as a selection from the John Latham Archive (kept at Flat Time House, the artist's former residence in South London, where two studies for the multipanel work *The Story of Rio*, 1983, were recently on view). One of these archival documents relates to his first exhibition, in 1949 at the Kingly Gallery, London, with John Berger, and others refer to the Artist Placement Group, which Latham established with his wife, Barbara Steveni, to place artists in business and government. Most intriguing is Latham's 1988 letter to Margaret Thatcher stating that a "very basic discovery" he had made regarding the connection of art and science required approval at the highest level of the British government. There is no evidence that he was joking.

At Karsten Schubert a very different Latham appeared, a more elegant, classical figure. The show included the "Canvas Events" series from 1994, understated assemblages of spray-painted canvas twisted on wooden stretchers, in a delicate combination of physical and pictorial tension. Alongside was Latham's monumental early book-collage work *Great Noit*, 1962, two canvases decked with symmetrical agglomerations of books, wire, machine fragments, and springs caked in plaster and painted to resemble lead. The heavy, postapocalyptic feel of this piece is reminiscent of the works of Wolf Vostell (and one also cannot help thinking of Anselm Kiefer) and suggests associations not only with the Nouveaux Réalistes but also with Robert Rauschenberg. *Great Noit* is a seminal work and captures a pictorial ambition that is not always so evident in Latham's later career.

The Lisson Gallery presented the most comprehensive of the exhibitions, and also the most historic, in part by revisiting Latham's first show at the gallery, in 1970. The stated attempt at a "physical embodiment of Latham's concept of the Time-Base spectrum within the landscape of the gallery," however, made for a more obscure display. A video of a panel discussion that took place after the 1978 performance of Latham's *Government of the First and Thirteenth Chair*, and the inscrutable assemblage *even tstructu re*, 1966–67, were indecipherable for the uninitiated; yet this was amply compensated for by the extraordinary film *Erth*, 1971. The rear-projected film shows a flashing image of Earth, gradually zooming in to show details of human life and the human body. A laconic female voice counts down in German from "eintausend Millionen Jahre" to a single second, at which point the film abruptly ends. Here more than anywhere else one gets a coherent feeling of Latham's anxious, apocalyptic worldview and, above all, of the presence of an eschatological current, the doomsday scenario of technology erasing nature: compelling reasons for the continued relevance of Latham's work today.

—John-Paul Stenard

REVIEWS

terrorism as their impetus, concern a kind of curiosity different from that directed toward the intimate lives of other people. The great theoretical weakness of "Exposed" is therefore the failure of its catalogue to illuminate the nature of the link it posits between voyeurism and surveillance—and yet the exhibition does hang together as evidence that these are both manifestations of the human predilection to know more than we are supposed to know. Still, though the exhibition includes video and DVD projections, its emphasis on the printed photograph dates it. In the catalogue, Phillips takes note of the role of photography in the worldwide response to the repression following the 2009 election in Iran, adding, "For a few weeks, the only available photos and first-hand accounts came not from professional media organizations but from private cell phones." Proliferating through social media, they were also primarily seen on phones and computers. A future exhibition on this topic will have to find a way to display this new, viral form of image ontology. Yet maybe that doesn't change the image's essential function as an instrument of curiosity. Paul Strand's *Blind Woman*, 1916, illustrated in the catalogue, will always be emblematic: an image of a woman pretending she can't see, made by a man who was pretending that he wasn't looking at her.

—Barry Schwabsky

John Latham

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LISSON GALLERY

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John Latham,
4th, 1976, color
film on 35 mm,
24 minutes,
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Installation view,
Lisson Gallery

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—John-Paul Stenard

Tacita Dean

FIFTH STREET GALLERY

Tacita Dean's new film, *Gateway Event*, 2009, is a 108-minute edit of a three-day rehearsal that Merce Cunningham led with his dance