

The Wire pg 72
1st November 10

On Screen

Films & DVDs

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.

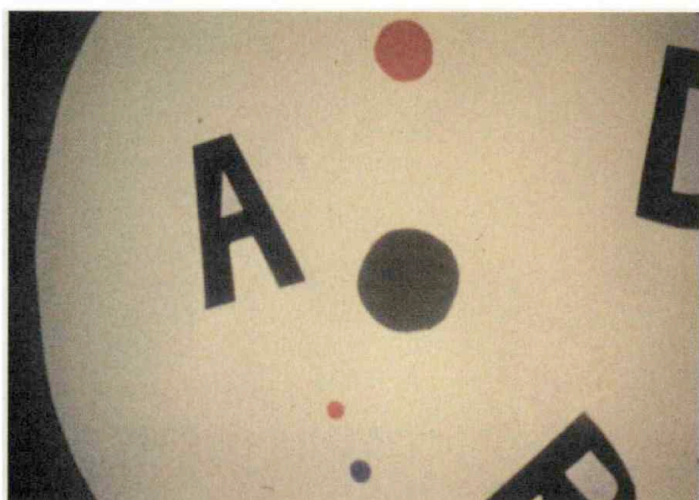
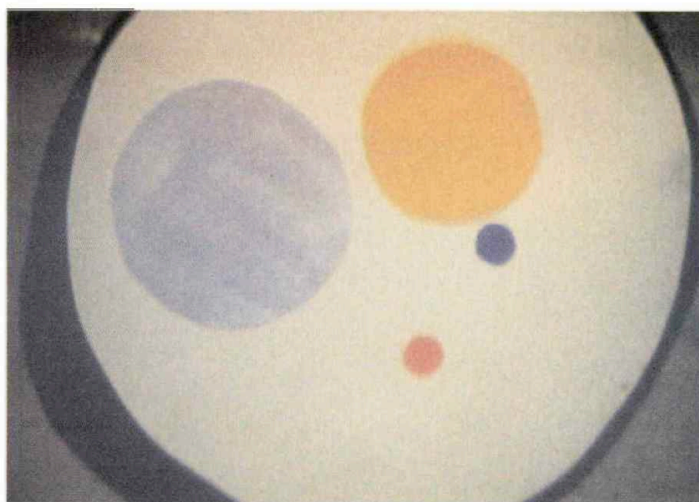
The epic *Encyclopedia Britannica* is a stop-frame animation that documents several volumes of the reference work, one two-page spread for every frame of film. The tedious job of photographing a single frame of each spread was undertaken by David Toop, and when his work proved unsatisfactory – his page-turning hand kept creeping into the images – [Lisson Gallery](#) owner Nicholas Logsdail. *Erth* 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

52-54 Bell Street
London NW1 5DA

T +44 (0)20 7724 2739
www.lissongallery.com

LISSON GALLERY



John Latham *Talk Mr Bard* (1961)