

## Joanne Laws

Expanding systems of classification for plant species in the late eighteenth century, combined with widening readerships for natural history journals, as well as advances in print-making processes, to create increased demand for professional botanical illustrators. Forming the 'jewel in the crown' of LCGA's Permanent Collection, *The Mushroom Book*, 1972, has the initial appearance of horticultural publications of that era, comprising high quality illustrations denoting various types of mushrooms. However, the edition of 10 original lithograph prints draws the viewer in to reveal something far more radical, providing unique art historical insights into the post-war American avant-garde. The book is the result of collaboration between mycologist Alexander H. Smith, textile designer and illustrator Lois Long and musician and conceptual artist John Cage, who seemingly had a life-long interest in mushrooms. The assortment of mushroom species depicted by Long in her meticulous botanical drawings are annotated in Smith's accompanying scientific notes, which are printed on Japanese paper overlays. This pristine, traditional format is subverted through Cage's textual contributions of Lettristic poetry and speculative handwriting.

## Textual Offerings

Using words, Cage creates curious trails through landscapes that were familiar to him. Obscured and unreadable in places, I found myself scrutinising overlapping words and incomplete sentences, hunting for meaning the way one might forage for mushrooms in a dense forest. A psychogeographic approach is evident in Cage's widespread references to town-lands, dates and roads including the 'Palisades Interstate' – a highway located close to where the artist lived during the 50's and '60's. Some of this information is relayed in maps and sketches which offer aerial views, directions, botanic surveys and personalised footnotes such as 'Lois' house', all of which created a sense of rootedness in this local terrain. A preoccupation with musical and literary structures is also apparent in numerous references to 'composition' and the 'division of whole into parts'. From Cage's scrawls, the viewer gleans fragments of the era's civil unrest, attested to in the comment: '*the situation is changing rapidly*'. In one instance, Cage refers to the 1966 New York City Transit Strike (a city-wide halt

to subway and bus transportation) when, according to Cage, ‘*many people became hitchhikers*’. The artist’s writing is permeated with quoted material and references to influential artists and thinkers of the time.

### **New York in Flux**

Given that *The Mushroom Book* was printed and published by Hollanders Workshop Inc., New York in 1972, it seemed hugely fitting and poignant for it to be displayed alongside another remarkable asset in LCGA’s Permanent Collection: a series of **lithograph prints** acquired by Jim Sheehy, a cork-born printmaker who worked in Hollanders Workshop during the 1970’s. Appearing to echo Cage’s effusive handwriting (in its unwillingness to be confined within the parameters of the page), Sam Francis’ lithograph *Untitled*, 1970, memorialises the ‘leakages’ occurring at the edges of printing plates. The inky configurations of Willem de Kooning’s *Souvenir of Montauk*, 1970, also featured, alongside prints by Josep Pla, Jean-Michel Folon and Maryan – a Polish painter and Auschwitz survivor formerly known as Pinchas Burstein, who changed his name after becoming an American citizen in 1969. Most striking for me, were three incarnations of James Rosenquist’s influential vision, embodied in the Day-Glo cinematic offerings of *Short Ends*, the watery fountains of *Silver Skies* primary hues, and in a monochrome rendition of Rosenquist’s iconic ‘*Spaghetti*’.

*The Mushroom Book* and the contemporaneous collection of lithographs attest to a particularly momentous period in art history, which placed the New York art scene at the centre of activity. In short, we are witnessing a pivotal moment when the spontaneous tendencies of the post-war Abstract Expressionist movement gave way to the emergence of Pop Art. Confronted with these elements, I was hugely grateful for the foresight shown by collectors such as Sheehy, who – in the important act of preserving and donating this work – has made it visible to Irish audiences well beyond its original time and context. The archival function of civic collections has become a particularly topical issue in the Irish context, as the proposed deaccessioning of paintings from the Beit collection at Russborough House remains a prominent national concern.