



1 **Part II**  
2  
3 **Mutilating**  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41



PROOF



## 3

From Books to Skoob; Or, Media  
Theory with a Circular Saw*Gill Partington*

In spring 1967, in a basement on the Charing Cross Road, books were turning into something else:

A paper bicycle was ridden in a space occupied by three paper balloons of about 24" diameter. The bicycle avoided the balloons at first but began to hit and finally burst them, releasing water. There were some machines disguised as printed paper, one that sawed up a book, while another vibrated deafeningly from inside more newspaper with a book in front of it shaking ... Latham's film material *Talk* and *Speak* was projected continuously as books were being sawn upon a circular saw; giving an intermittent, amplified soundtrack. A girl was covered up in the end wall where the screening was, layers of newspaper being stuck across her. She had a long green plastic tube for communication ... The film continued as pipes and balloons and people were all connected up variously and the structure was gradually blown open and polythene tubing and large balloons took over the scene.<sup>1</sup>

For four consecutive Saturdays during April, the artist John Latham commandeered the basement of Better Books, inviting collaborators and spectators to be part of the loosely scripted, multi-media anarchy of something known as *Book Plumbing*.<sup>2</sup> The phrase itself suggested some incongruous possibilities, presenting the book in an unfamiliar and peculiarly mechanical light; part of a wider, interconnected system. If, as Latham declared, 'language is only one pipe out of five possible ones that put us in touch with what is going on', then he seemed intent on exploring the ways in which writing might intersect with other kinds of 'pipe'.<sup>3</sup> The room, its every visible surface strewn with books and



26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41

*Figure 3.1* John Latham, 'Book Plumbing' (photo: Jennifer Pike)

newsprint, was a tangle of criss-crossing conduits of varying descriptions; 'air blowers', a 'book pipe', a 'PVC voice pipe', and 'a twenty-foot length of polythene tubing filled with plaster of Paris and books ... like a giant tape worm'.<sup>4</sup> The basement was witness to every imaginable configuration, as Latham plumbed books into machines, into each other, and even into humans (Figure 3.1). They were forced into collision with an array of substances, materials, forces and processes; they were pumped full of polyurethane foam, cut up with a circular saw, set in gelatine and covered in melting lard.<sup>5</sup> They were being deformed, distended, dismembered and transformed. But into what exactly?

For Latham, these new entities were 'skoob' – the concept at the heart of his lifelong preoccupation with the book, its parameters and its possibilities. The precise nature and purpose of this transformation is the subject of what follows, but there were many other techniques he employed to effect it, varying in their degrees of violence and convulsion. In September the previous year he had set fire to towers of books

1 outside the British Museum and detonated a pile of encyclopaedias  
2 off the Portobello Road. He had also lately chewed a copy of Clement  
3 Greenberg's *Art and Culture*, which he was in the process of distilling  
4 into liquid form. In fact, over the course of a long career, Latham mutilated and maimed hundreds if not thousands of printed volumes: He  
5 charred them, glued them shut, cut them in half, fused them to one  
6 another, painted over their pages, dissolved them with acid, encased  
7 them in plaster and immersed them in a tank of live piranha fish. He  
8 even invented a new art form: the 'book relief', or wall-hung assemblage  
9 of charred, mangled books, which became his trademark. Latham visited almost every conceivable indignity upon the book, in other words.  
10 Yet despite this, and the prominent role he played in the *Destruction in Art Symposium* in 1966, his aim was never destruction *per se*. His agenda  
11 was quite distinct from that of the symposium's organiser, Gustav Metzger, whose manifestos declared the necessity of 'auto-destructive art' as both iconoclastic protest and psychosocial catharsis.<sup>6</sup> Latham  
12 enjoyed the pyrotechnics and provocation of destruction as public spectacle, conspicuously focusing his attentions on encyclopaedias, art  
13 historical and legal texts as visible emblems of establishment. But his  
14 purpose was to subvert and reinvent rather than obliterate. Spelling the  
15 word backwards signalled the fact that, whatever else Latham did to  
16 books, his aim in the first instance was a kind of temporal derangement;  
17 an intervention into the time of the book.

18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24 The location of his 'skoob tower' burnings, held the previous  
25 September, was carefully chosen in this respect.<sup>7</sup> He ignited his flimsy,  
26 temporary stacks of books and metal outside the British Museum,  
27 with its Elgin Marbles and Caryatids, its weighty sculpture and even  
28 weightier History. But they were also caught between two monoliths of  
29 bookish culture: the Museum's domed reading room and the hulking  
30 presence of Senate House, the University of London library building.  
31 The towers were part book, part sculpture; a hybrid whose ephemerality  
32 subverted the permanence and monumentality of both. Directly outside the enduring stone edifice of the cultural and academic institution,  
33 they were ready-mades whose purpose was precisely to disintegrate into  
34 ashes. Latham referred to them as 'negative sculpture', or 'reverse-order  
35 sculpture'.<sup>8</sup> But it was not simply an inversion or reversal of time he  
36 was after. The temporal disruptions of *Book Plumbing* show that the  
37 transformation he envisaged involved something more complicated  
38 than merely sending books backwards. Upstairs in the bookshop, interactions with literature might be dictated by the attentive, slow, human  
39 time of reading, but down in the basement books were out of their  
40  
41

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41



Figure 3.2 John Latham, 'The Laws of England' (photo: Jennifer Pike)

accustomed place and time. They were shunted off the shelf onto the floor by inflating envelopes and subject to continual process and conflicting time signatures. What set the book in motion wasn't the turning of pages but the revolutions of a circular saw, the violent rotations of the leaf blower suspended from the ceiling, and even the molecular transformations involved in the setting or melting of gelatine and foam (Figure 3.2).

For Latham, these inversions and subversions of the book were part of something bigger. They were a means to elaborate what he called 'time-based structure' or 'event-structure'. The reality we perceive around

1 us, he insisted, is not comprised of objects or things but infinitesimal  
2 instants in time. Only the recurrence of these instants provides the illu-  
3 sion of solidity and permanence. The 'psychophysical cosmology' of  
4 his friends and collaborators Antia Kohsen and Clive Gregory had sup-  
5 plied Latham with the basic principles of this idea in the early 1950s,  
6 but it was the momentary pressure on the nozzle of a spray-paint can  
7 that provided a more visceral and immediate revelation.<sup>9</sup> The result – a  
8 circular dot on the wall – was a gesture that seemed to encapsulate the  
9 paradigm of 'time-based' thinking. It was a statement of pure process  
10 and 'a direct record of what had occurred to make it'.<sup>10</sup> In semiotic  
11 terms, Latham saw the spray-can dot not as representation or signifier,  
12 but as something more akin to an indexical trace. The droplets of paint  
13 were an instant of time itself. This minimal mark was what he called  
14 a 'least-event'; an elemental unit of time whose repetition 'establishes  
15 a "habit" and forms the basis for structures in reality'.<sup>11</sup> It was also the  
16 start of a quest for an aesthetic language through which to explore  
17 and elaborate on this theory, a language in which 'form as art meets  
18 formulation as science'.<sup>12</sup> The 'idiom of 54', as he called it, was the big  
19 bang from which his subsequent work emanated, and the genesis of his  
20 later 'skoob idiom'. Books, for Latham, were a vehicle through which  
21 to express the principles of event-structure, but they were one that had  
22 a particular symbolic resonance. In its conventional form, the printed  
23 book represented everything that he sought to undermine: the solidity  
24 and permanence of objects, the weight of tradition and unthinking  
25 orthodoxy. They were 'reservoirs of received knowledge', and the accu-  
26 mulated detritus of what he called the 'Mental Furniture Industry'.<sup>13</sup>  
27 Transformed into skoob, however, they illustrated the revolutionary  
28 implications of a time-based universe. They were no longer objects in  
29 space but events in time.

30 But is there another way to see these transformations and mutila-  
31 tions? How might we read Latham's works, and indeed his books?  
32 Finding angles from which to approach them presents certain problems.  
33 In its own terms, Latham's work is not merely art, but metaphysics or  
34 science. It constitutes its own distinctive, syncretic cosmology, and  
35 represents nothing less than an attempt to shift human consciousness  
36 from a reality comprised of matter, towards one made of instants in time. If  
37 Latham's work is difficult to locate in a theoretical context, then, it's largely  
38 because it insists so strongly on its own. His art practice comes trailing its  
39 own conceptual system; an overarching theory whose dense and esoteric  
40 vocabulary to a large extent deflects critical dialogue. Like his scientific  
41 mentors Kohsen and Gregory, he sought to 'abandon ... the language of

1 objects for the language of events'.<sup>14</sup> But in Latham's case this involved  
 2 a literal attempt to reinvent words and their meanings. 'Skoob' was only  
 3 one of the neologisms and linguistic inversions he devised. 'Noit' was  
 4 a reversal of the suffix 'tion', for instance. Whereas the latter is used  
 5 to turn verbs into nouns, Latham symbolically turned it on its head,  
 6 transforming nouns or objects into a 'no it'. OHO (sometimes 01-10)  
 7 palindromically indicates the occurrence of a 'least event', oscillating  
 8 from 'state 0' to 'state 1' and back again. Latham's theoretical writ-  
 9 ings stretch and deform the English language to the same extent as his  
 10 work deformed the book, confronting the paradox of expressing his  
 11 event-structure in a written medium that imposes its own, competing  
 12 grammar of objects and permanence. His shifting, evolving terminology  
 13 seems constantly to circle the question of 'idiom', and the problem of  
 14 language and its limits.

15 Ultimately, abandoning the language of objects meant abandoning  
 16 language altogether, as Latham resorted instead to symbol and equa-  
 17 tion. While he lacked formal scientific training, he increasingly tried to  
 18 convert his work into a conversation with advanced physics, going as  
 19 far as seeking validation of his ideas as a scientific theorem.<sup>15</sup> But these  
 20 efforts were only partially successful at best, and this turn to scientific  
 21 symbol and number pushed his theories still further towards the brink  
 22 of intelligibility. In attempting to escape the confines of language he ran  
 23 the risk of closing down communication and critical dialogue altogether,  
 24 becoming 'isolated by his insistence on signalling the end of culture  
 25 and affirming a cosmology that no one but he can quite understand'.<sup>16</sup>  
 26 While Latham may be celebrated as 'one of the few genuine radicals of  
 27 post war art', therefore, he is someone who tends to elude assimilation  
 28 into its narratives.<sup>17</sup> His work was a vehicle for his ideas, but these ideas  
 29 position themselves beyond the purview of Art History and criticism.  
 30 And, despite the fact that his career intersected with many key innova-  
 31 tions and groupings – performance art, auto-destructive art, conceptual  
 32 art, Fluxus and Assemblage – he resists such categories. There were big  
 33 retrospectives towards the end of his career, but these did not disguise  
 34 the fact that in relation to an art establishment that did not know where  
 35 he belonged, he appeared as an eccentric, slightly peripheral figure.<sup>18</sup>

36 However, this chapter is less interested in Latham's place in the  
 37 History of Art, or indeed science, than his place in the history of  
 38 the book. Taking an alternative approach to his work, it reads his 'skoob  
 39 idiom' through the interwoven developments of print and communi-  
 40 cations technology in the twentieth century. Books may have been  
 41 his aesthetic medium, but he was also concerned with their status as



1 a 'medium' in another sense. Latham's project can be understood as a  
2 response to – and working through – the implications of technological  
3 change. Or, to put things another way, his work offers its own distinc-  
4 tive theory of media, but one which finds expression in his practice  
5 as much as his writings: a media theory carried out with circular saws,  
6 pipes, plaster, foam and mutilated books. Moreover, it anticipates in  
7 some striking ways the work of another figure, the recent and influen-  
8 tial German theorist Friedrich Kittler. Reading the two alongside one  
9 another casts new light on Latham's work. In particular, Kittler's notion  
10 of 'time axis manipulation' provides an understanding of Latham's  
11 temporal derangements of the book as something inextricably con-  
12 nected with his film work. To begin with, though, it's the goings on in  
13 the Better Books basement that this parallel reading helps to illuminate.  
14 Latham's acts of 'book plumbing', and his conception of language as  
15 one of several 'pipes' find echoes in Kittler's central thesis of divergent  
16 media channels.

17 For Kittler, writing is a serial storage medium, one that for centu-  
18 ries enjoyed a monopoly. In the era of German Romanticism it faced  
19 no competition. Writing alone was capable of storing linear time, so  
20 visual information and sound had to be squeezed through the 'sym-  
21 bolic bottleneck of letters', and encoded in language.<sup>19</sup> Writing could  
22 thus lay claim to a particular kind of magic, conjuring up the noises  
23 and even images that no technology could yet store: 'words quivered  
24 with sensuality and memory. It was the passion of all reading to hal-  
25 lucinate meaning between lines and letters; the visible and audible  
26 world of Romantic poetics.'<sup>20</sup> The act of reading enabled an imagined  
27 dematerialisation of the page surface, so that writing enjoyed a very  
28 special privilege: it could, in effect, make itself disappear. Readers could  
29 forget they were reading and the book 'would forget being a book'.<sup>21</sup>  
30 At the close of the nineteenth century, however, when the advent of  
31 the typewriter closely coincided with the invention of other technol-  
32 ogies able to store sound and moving pictures, media began to develop  
33 specialised functions. A 'differentiation of data streams' occurred which  
34 transformed the book's place in the media ecology.<sup>22</sup> Writing now  
35 became technologised, but just as importantly, as merely one media  
36 channel among others its monopoly was now lost. Film technology,  
37 able for the first time in history to record and project moving images,  
38 usurped the magic of writing, and 'feature films [took] over all of the  
39 fantastic or the imaginary, which for a century [had] gone by the name  
40 of Literature'.<sup>23</sup> The printed page, newly demoted, emerged anew as a  
41 two-dimensional, inscribed surface, generating meaning through the

1 pure differentiation of typewritten symbols rather than the transcendent  
2 voice of poetry. No longer the ultimate expression of inwardness  
3 or spirit, writing became visible simply as a series of mechanical marks  
4 on a material page.

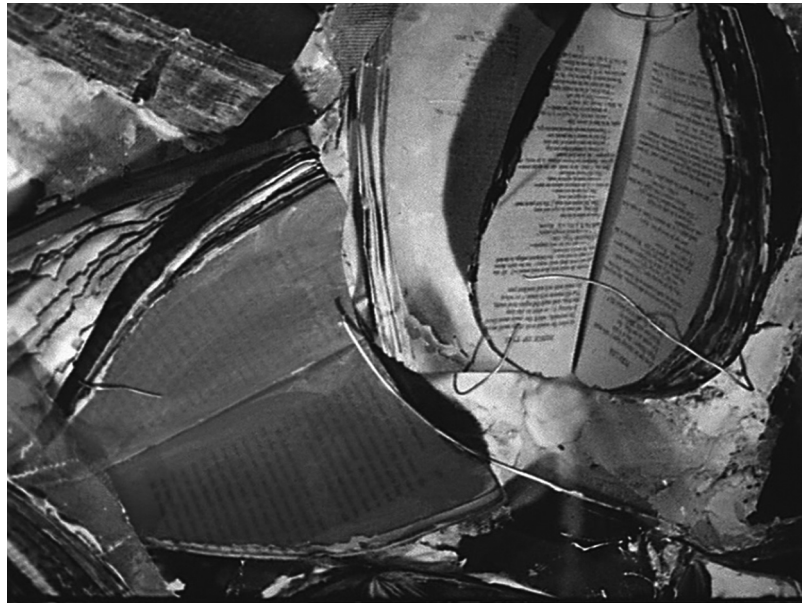
5 This fall of writing into matter and media is what Latham's work also  
6 registers. *Book Plumbing's* bizarre production line of physical transformations,  
7 defacements, dismemberments and augmentations viscerally  
8 enacts the written word's transition from 'Literature' as carrier of transcendent  
9 meaning to something 'mechanised and materially specific'.<sup>24</sup>  
10 It graphically recalibrates the book and its connections. The transformation  
11 into 'skoob' denotes the book's changed parameters, and its emergence  
12 as a new kind of object. But it was not only through such performances and  
13 process sculpture that Latham reflected on the book's altered state. In the  
14 wall-hung assemblages that he made throughout his career, books are  
15 similarly captured in the process of forming new connections and assuming  
16 new shapes. The reliefs often appear as the fallout from some unnamed  
17 violence, with their printed volumes as charred debris, static but unstable,  
18 caught in positions of falling, hanging or exploding from the canvas. Recurring  
19 elements of mangled books, wires and other mechanical detritus continually  
20 rearrange themselves into varying configurations in an attempt to trace the  
21 topography of an emerging network. *1984* (1987) has a telephone connected  
22 to a book, crossing the wires between written and spoken communication.  
23 Other reliefs characteristically have their coagulated clusters of books  
24 joined to one another by a mysterious network of tubes, wires and connectors.  
25 Latham's terminology for these devices – 'voice pipe' and 'earthing pole' –  
26 reinforces the idea that there is a speculative functioning behind this circuitry,  
27 so that the works seem to incorporate books into a set of bizarre and  
28 dilapidated-looking technological devices.<sup>25</sup>  
29 Latham's books appear as ruins, but in another sense they are recreated  
30 as something new, radically reimagined as what might be called an  
31 'inter-medial' object. They are transitional forms hooked up to the grid  
32 of a new technological system.

34 It is this collision between books and other media that underlies the  
35 tortured temporality of Latham's work. On one hand, these book reliefs  
36 interrupt and disrupt linear, bookish time simply because they cannot  
37 be read. They are usually either closed or blackened, and their pages  
38 rarely readable as text. To the spectator, their narrative content is out  
39 of reach, and they arrange themselves instead as a 'new structure that  
40 can be grasped simultaneously'.<sup>26</sup> But to speculate about how viewers  
41 will process Latham's reliefs is perhaps to miss the point of these works.

1 Understanding the subversions of time that he attempted to effect  
2 involves firstly seeing them differently, or rather, not 'seeing' them  
3 directly at all. The type of gaze they invite is not the intent, linger-  
4 ing scrutiny of the art lover, trying to divine their meaning, but the  
5 indifferent, mechanised, blink of the camera shutter. Latham's relief  
6 works present themselves not for the eye, but for the lens, and not  
7 for the viewer but the viewfinder. They are 'inter-medial' not only  
8 because they imagine the book as part of a technological network, but  
9 because these books are criss-crossed by the time of another, compet-  
10 ing media: film. Skoob wrenches the book forwards into the media age,  
11 which does not flow along the narrative arcs of print, but according to  
12 Kittler, 'proceeds in jerks'.<sup>27</sup> And it does this because it is governed by  
13 the time structure of a medium, which is itself comprised of a series  
14 of discontinuous 'jerks'. To understand what Latham was doing to the  
15 written word, it's necessary to know what he was doing with the cel-  
16 luloid image, also. He was more prolific as a destroyer of books than he  
17 was as a maker of films but the two are inextricably linked. The handful  
18 of short 'skoob films', which he made in conjunction with his relief  
19 works, are therefore of crucial importance to his whole project.

20 Around 1960, he began experimenting with stop-motion animation.  
21 Fixing some 50 or so books to a board nearly two metres square with  
22 plaster and mesh, he painted their pages a variety of different colours.  
23 They were held open with metal wires but these were adjustable, so  
24 that pages could be turned and the colours changed. Latham rented a  
25 Bolex film camera, but what he did with it wasn't 'filming' in a con-  
26 ventional sense. Instead, while the camera and board remained static,  
27 Latham photographed frame after frame, turning the pages of certain  
28 books in between exposures. The resulting film, *Unedited Material from*  
29 *the Star*, is one in which the books remain recognisable, if illegible, but  
30 start to assume an abstract quality, so that 'words have been replaced  
31 by a silent, visual language of pure colour' (Figure 3.3).<sup>28</sup> Their painted  
32 pages appear static, but alternate between colours in sudden, flicker-  
33 ing configurations that seem at times to be random, but develop into  
34 shifting patterns and fugues. Indeed, the overall effect of pulses and  
35 rhythms is one that Latham himself compared to the time signatures of  
36 music. However, the temporality of these oscillating, constantly chang-  
37 ing books is more complex, because of what takes place in between the  
38 turning of the pages, but out of sight. The film's 1,500 frames of stop-  
39 motion animation joined together discrete instants, jumping over and  
40 past the manual process of turning the pages, and creating the illusion  
41 of an impossible continuous sequence. The purpose of the film, Latham

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19



20  
21 *Figure 3.3* John Latham, *Unedited Material from the Star*  
22 (photo: Latham Estate)

23 wrote, was 'to project on screen an excerpt from what is an invisible  
24 part of experience'.<sup>29</sup> His technique was a trick with time, therefore, but  
25 one common to all film, since, as Kittler writes, '[t]he making of films is  
26 in principle nothing but cutting and splicing; the chopping up of con-  
27 tinuous motion, or history, before the lens'.<sup>30</sup> The discrete, individual  
28 instants that make up a reel of film are then projected at a rate so rapid  
29 it fools the eye. At twenty-four frames per second, the separate frames  
30 appear seamless, and the effect of continuous movement is recreated.  
31 According to Kittler, 'time axis manipulation' is fundamental to film,  
32 which when it first appeared, brought with it the ability to perform  
33 miraculous leaps in time, to conjure uncanny doppelgangers, to slow  
34 time down, reverse it or speed it up; illusions that no previous technol-  
35 ogy had managed, and which the human eye had never seen.<sup>31</sup> But  
36 it achieves these effects precisely because discontinuity and temporal  
37 trickery is already at the heart of its technology.

38 Put another way, film – just like Latham's 'event-structure' – is a  
39 reality comprised not of objects, but of moments in time. The link  
40 between the two has of course already been established, not least  
41 by Latham himself. The effect of successive instants in time, he

1 notes, 'correspond[s] very well with the effect of continuousness in  
2 discrete frames projected by film machinery'.<sup>32</sup> But the point here  
3 is that the relationship between the two things is not merely one of  
4 'correspondence' or analogy. Event-structure resembles cinematic time  
5 for the simple reason that it is a description of film itself. 'Film work  
6 entered the scene of skoob in 1959', Latham stated, referring to a  
7 studio visit from a Pathé newsreel team that had first given him the  
8 idea of filming his book reliefs.<sup>33</sup> But arguably, film had been there all  
9 along, as something structurally fundamental to his project and his  
10 reformulation of both time and the book. In conceptualising reality  
11 as a discontinuous series of barely perceptible 'least events' he was  
12 providing a *de facto* account of the working of film and its flickering  
13 motion, 'punctured by the insistent event of the frame'.<sup>34</sup> The para-  
14 digm shift he sought to articulate took place not at the level of human  
15 consciousness or advanced physics but at the level of technological  
16 media, and the time structure he struggled to express in his writings,  
17 and which he searched for an appropriate 'idiom' to convey, belongs  
18 to the mechanics of projectors and shutter speeds. Arguably, despite  
19 his restless experiments with different materials and media, paper,  
20 books, metal, detritus, paint and fire, there was only one channel  
21 through which it could properly be expressed, since, in abandoning  
22 the language of objects for that of events, Latham was attempting to  
23 adopt the vocabulary of film. Latham's skoob films staged a clash of  
24 filmic time and book time, therefore, but it was one which, by defi-  
25 nition, could not be recorded in writing. Or, as Kittler puts it, 'film  
26 presents its spectators with their own processes of perception – and  
27 with a precision that is ... accessible ... neither to consciousness nor  
28 to language'.<sup>35</sup>

29 The 'scene of skoob' was a scene necessarily mediated by the camera  
30 lens, therefore. The chopping up of the book and its transformation  
31 from object in space to moments in time is one that film's time axis  
32 manipulation alone makes possible. In a sense, then, Latham's mutil-  
33 ation of books was merely a rehearsal for their filming. His partially  
34 destroyed, unreadable books anticipate and invite their own visual  
35 remediation. Mark Webber notes that the assemblage Latham used  
36 in the filming of *Unedited Material from the Star* was purchased by  
37 the Tate in 1966, whereas the film itself was refused by the gallery:  
38 'It is ironic that one of the artist's best known works was fabricated,  
39 almost like a prop, in order to make a film that was not acknowl-  
40 edged as a work of art in itself.'<sup>36</sup> And although in most other cases  
41 Latham's skoob reliefs were not created for the purpose of stop-motion

1 animation, there is nevertheless a sense in which they are all notional  
2 film 'props'. They await their processing into instants in time by  
3 the film camera, since only this transposition into a rival medium can  
4 truly turn books into 'skoob' (Figure 3.4).<sup>37</sup> As if to prove the point,  
5 in 1970, a decade after *Unedited Material From the Star*, Latham turned  
6 his camera on the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Having previously exploded  
7 and burned encyclopaedias, this time he only subjected its pages to his  
8 relatively benign stop-motion film technique. A tripod was set up at  
9 the Lisson Gallery, with a Bolex camera trained on the open pages of  
10 the encyclopaedia. On this occasion Latham had assistance, and in a  
11 laborious process over several days, the gallery owner Nicholas Logsdail  
12 and musician David Toop photographed four volumes, taking a picture  
13 of each double-page spread before moving the film forward one frame.  
14 Played back at normal speed, this compendious, alphabetised bulk of  
15 facts and figures is compressed into only six minutes. Roughly 50 pages  
16 flash by in a second, flickering blocks of text with only occasional  
17 images recognisable to the eye. The effect is uncanny: as with Latham's  
18 previous stop-motion skoob films, pages turn by themselves, 'as if a  
19 ghost is reading at supernormal speed'.<sup>38</sup> The film is simply entitled  
20 *Encyclopedia Britannica*, yet this is clearly no longer the book, but its  
21 codification and incorporation by another technology and another  
22 temporality. Too fleeting to be intelligible, we can derive no knowledge  
23 from it. It enters our brains nonetheless, not via the slow route of read-  
24 ing and cognition but the faster one of optical nerves, and 'the repeti-  
25 tion of almost similar impulses on the retina'.<sup>39</sup> It presents us with a  
26 sense of our own limits of reading and seeing.

27 So, after a decade of experimenting with physical damage, Latham  
28 transformed a book into skoob, dismembering, subverting and rein-  
29 venting simply through filming it. But if material destruction was  
30 unnecessary then so, it turned out, were books themselves. *Talk* and  
31 *Speak*, the films projected at *Book Plumbing*, represent a subsequent stage  
32 in Latham's skoob films which, crucially, does not involve books at all.  
33 They were what he termed 'disc-operated time signature films', made  
34 by moving paper circles and other shapes against a fixed surface.<sup>40</sup> The  
35 damaged, painted books in *Unedited Material* had produced an almost  
36 abstract pattern, but here they decomposed entirely into pure form  
37 and colour. The other noticeable development is that *Speak* introduces  
38 blank white frames in between the patterns and forms, resulting in a  
39 rapid pulsing and flashing, uncomfortable to watch. They create an  
40 overwhelming sense of visual overload, an assault on the senses that  
41 the band Pink Floyd famously used during live performances at the

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19



20  
21 *Figure 3.4* John Latham, *Unedited Material from the Star*  
22 (photo: Latham Estate)

23 Roundhouse and UFO. They offered to reciprocate, providing Latham  
24 with a soundtrack to the films, but the artist turned them down. He  
25 was less interested in strobing as a psychedelic effect or as an accom-  
26 paniment to music than as an exploration of purely visual perception.  
27 *Talk* and *Speak* focus attention on the eye working at the limits of its  
28 capabilities to process discrete images. They resemble the experiments  
29 in ‘psychophysics’ which Kittler describes as the forerunner of film as a  
30 technology, and which employed stroboscopic flickering and its after-  
31 images to examine the functioning and thresholds of human optics.  
32 ‘Since its inception’, argues Kittler, ‘cinema has been the manipulation  
33 of optic nerves and their time’.<sup>41</sup> It’s these same limits of human opti-  
34 cal capacity that Latham explores, creating films whose sole content is  
35 the discontinuities of cinematic time and our ability to keep up with  
36 and perceive them: ‘In film we have our human frequency range of  
37 conscious perception established in frames per second.’<sup>42</sup> Latham films  
38 filming itself; isolating the media channel in its purest form, from which  
39 any vestiges of narrative time has been expunged.<sup>43</sup> *Talk* and *Speak* do  
40 not communicate in words, and their titles foreground the fact that  
41 language is either absent or has ceased to function. *Talk* has a jumble

1 of disconnected radio voices; its speech cut up and spliced in much the  
2 same way as a celluloid negative. *Speak* also has the sound of language  
3 being cut up: it is wordless, but accompanied by the drone and whine of  
4 a circular saw, whose rotations and tone change and modulate slightly  
5 as it saws a book in half. This time, books were not chopped into pieces  
6 by film itself, but by its soundtrack.

7 Latham's use of his films in live performances and happenings helps  
8 to clarify their key significance in his project as a whole. At the Mercury  
9 Theatre in 1966, as part of Metzger's *Destruction in Art Symposium*, he  
10 staged a performance involving both live actors and a screening of  
11 *Unedited Material from the Star*:

12  
13 Two bodies, one male and painted partially blue, the other female  
14 and light red or orange ... dressed to excess in printed paper, with  
15 books and large headpieces on polystyrene bases ... come to stand in  
16 front of a film for ten minutes.

17  
18 When the film ended, the figures then moved around the stage in elabo-  
19 rate and highly unnatural slow motion, before the screening eventually  
20 began again. The performance was simply entitled *Film*, raising a ques-  
21 tion about where the boundaries of the screen lay.<sup>44</sup> The actors behaved  
22 not as if they were present in the room, but as if their actions were being  
23 artificially altered and modified, slowed down according to the speed  
24 of the film running through the projector. It's an instance of Kittlerian  
25 time axis manipulation, but one which takes place in real life rather than  
26 on the screen. Or, to be more precise, the distinctions between the two  
27 are eroded. The figures on the stage – including the outlandish print  
28 and paper objects in which they were covered – were subsumed into the  
29 logic of film. Events were subjected to what Mark Seltzer calls 'primary  
30 mediation'; a condition in which the real or authentic anticipates and  
31 behaves like its filmic double, and the real ceases to be separated in  
32 any meaningful way from its technological representations. This same  
33 logic was also at play in Latham's show at the Lisson Gallery in 1970,  
34 where a display of sculptural objects on a table included a projector that  
35 screened a film, running on a loop, of those same objects *in situ*. Their  
36 celluloid representations coincided with, and even anticipated, their  
37 physical reality.

38 And so, returning finally to the scenes of elaborate book carnage in  
39 the Better Books basement, where *Talk* and *Speak* were projected on  
40 a loop, it's evident that these films were not merely additions to the  
41 chaos but had a key function. They saturated the environment with



1 their strobing pulse, subordinating all other events and objects to the  
 2 discontinuities of film. The fraught engagements of film and book in  
 3 Latham's work thus took another turn; he had subjected books to the  
 4 'chopping up of motion before the lens', rendering them illegible and  
 5 gradually decomposing them into abstract shapes. Now, however, it was  
 6 not the camera lens but the film itself that was the instrument used to  
 7 dissect the printed book. *Talk* and *Speak* were shown continuously 'as  
 8 books were being sawn upon a circular saw': the physical cutting up  
 9 of books was punctuated by the intermittent flashing of the projector  
 10 so that the action was, in a sense, already chopped into discontinuous  
 11 instants. Books were dismembered twice over. *Talk* and *Speak* signalled  
 12 that the confusion of processes and multiple temporalities in the base-  
 13 ment of Better Books was presided over by one medium in particular.  
 14 The times of disparate media, materials and machines were forced into  
 15 collision, but it was celluloid film that set the pace. So if, as Kittler  
 16 states, all information was once upon a time encoded in writing, and  
 17 forced through the 'bottleneck' of letters, then Latham's re-plumbing  
 18 of the book attempts to reverse this process. He sends written language  
 19 through any number of different channels, reconnecting and rerouting  
 20 it. But, untangling Latham's conglomeration of people, paper and pipes,  
 21 machines and media, it's clear that the book is being rerouted in one  
 22 direction in particular. It is siphoned through the visual data stream of  
 23 film, where it ceases to be a linear, narrative mode of communication  
 24 and becomes caught up in a different time structure, proceeding in  
 25 sudden jumps and cuts which dismember and ultimately dispense with  
 26 language altogether.

27 The printed book and its ongoing twentieth-century identity crisis  
 28 was Latham's muse, and the trail of dismembered, mutilated volumes  
 29 he left behind him was not evidence of destruction, but of a sustained  
 30 effort to rethink and reinvent. He probed, pushed and stretched its  
 31 boundaries, ferociously experimenting with new forms it might assume.  
 32 Battered and charred, his books were no longer quite themselves, but  
 33 a variety of strange, unreadable, hybrid and inter-medial objects. They  
 34 were books seen anew, through the alien, mechanical eye of the film  
 35 camera.

### 36 37 38 Notes

- 39 1. A. J. H. Latham and Lisson Gallery (London, England), *John Latham: Least*  
 40 *Event, One Second Drawings, Blind Work, 24 Second Painting; Nov 11th-Dec 6th*  
 41 *1970* (Lisson, 1970), p. 17.

- 1 2. Managed by the poet Bob Cobbing, Better Books was already established as
- 2 a key location in the countercultural art scene of the mid-1960s, and had
- 3 played host to previous events featuring Latham, cohorts and collaborators.
- 4 3. Charles Harrison 'Where Does the Collision Happen', *Studio International*,
- 5 May 1968, 258–61 (p. 261).
- 6 4. Harrison 'Where Does the Collision Happen', p. 261.
- 7 5. Mark Webber, 'Book Plumbing', *John Latham Films 1960–1971*, DVD with
- 8 accompanying essay (London: Lux, 2010), p. 39.
- 9 6. Gustav Metzger and Andrew Wilson, *Gustav Metzger: Damaged Nature, Auto-*
- 10 *Destructive Art* (London: coracle @ workfortheeyetodo, 1996).
- 11 7. The 'skoob tower ceremony' on 24 September was intended as part of the
- 12 *Destruction in Art Symposium*. In the end, it was not an official part of the
- 13 DIAS, however, since its organiser, Gustav Metzger, had already been arrested
- 14 and charged following controversial performance artist Herman Nitsch's per-
- 15 formance at St Bride's Institute, and was reluctant to risk further problems
- 16 with the police.
- 17 8. Harrison 'Where Does the Collision Happen', p. 261.
- 18 9. Gregory and Kohsen later published the *The O-Structure: An Introduction*
- 19 *to Psychophysical Cosmology* (Church Cookham: Institute for the Study of
- 20 Mental Images, 1959). The authors made much of its scientific credibility,
- 21 and of Gregory's role as retired astronomer, but the book's eclectic mixture
- 22 of science, parapsychology and mysticism, as well as its holistic worldview
- 23 anticipates many aspects of countercultural thought which would become
- 24 influential in the next decade, and later morph into 'new age' thinking.
- 25 10. John Latham, Terry Measham and Tate Gallery, *John Latham* (London: Tate
- 26 Gallery Publications, 1976), p. 9.
- 27 11. 'John Latham in Focus': <[http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/](http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/john-latham-focus)
- 28 [exhibition/john-latham-focus](http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/john-latham-focus)> [accessed 2 October 2013].
- 29 12. John Latham and Ian MacDonald Munro (1989), reproduced in *John Latham:*
- 30 *Art after Physics* (Oxford and Stuttgart: Museum of Modern Art / Edition
- 31 Hansjörg Mayer, 1991), p. 103.
- 32 13. John Walker, *John Latham: The Incidental Person – His Art and Ideas*, illustrated
- 33 edition (London: Middlesex University Press, 1994), p. 36.
- 34 14. Gregory and Kohsen, *The O-Structure*, p. 85.
- 35 15. Latham's correspondence with Stephen Hawking and other prominent
- 36 physicists attempted to elicit an evaluation of his ideas. He seemed con-
- 37 cerned with their status as a valid theorem, and a workable model which
- 38 could be used to speculate and make predictions in the realm of physics. He
- 39 predicted, for instance, that speculations about the existence of gravitons
- 40 would prove groundless. Antony Hudek, Athanasios Velios and Whitechapel
- 41 Art Gallery, *The Portable John Latham* (London: Published by Occasional
- Papers in association with Whitechapel Gallery, 2010), p. 93.
16. Norbert Lynton, in the catalogue of *Arte Inglese Oggi 1960–76*, Milan,
- February 1976, p. 31.
17. David Thorpe, 'What Shows Up', in David Thorpe, Noa Latham and Stephen
- Foster, *John Latham: Time-Base and the Universe* (Southampton: John Hansard
- Gallery, 2006), p. 7.
18. He warrants only one brief mention, for instance, in David Hopkins's survey
- After Modern Art 1945–2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). On

- 1 his death in 2006, the *Guardian* obituary delivered an ambivalent verdict,  
 2 claiming that his 'lurid career featured more prominently in press reports  
 3 than it did in 20th century cultural histories': <<http://www.theguardian.com/news/2006/jan/07/guardianobituaries.artsobituaries>> [accessed 24 May  
 4 2013].
- 5 19. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz, 'Translators' Introduction', in  
 6 Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, illustrated edition (Stanford,  
 7 CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. xxiv.
- 8 20. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, p. 10.
- 9 21. Friedrich A. Kittler, *Discourse Networks, 1800/1900* (Stanford, CA: Stanford  
 10 University Press, 1992), p. 53.
- 11 22. Winthrop-Young and Wutz, 'Translators' Introduction', p. xxv.
- 12 23. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, p. 154.
- 13 24. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, pp. 10, 226.
- 14 25. These descriptions are found in a letter home from New York, where Latham  
 15 was preparing to exhibit two large relief works, *Shem* and *Shaun*. The 'earth-  
 16 ing pole' and 'voice pipe' had become detached, he complained (private  
 17 letter in the Latham Archive, 1961).
- 18 26. Ina Corizen Meairs, 'Art after Physics', in *John Latham: Art after Physics*, p. 15.
- 19 27. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, p. 18.
- 20 28. Walker, *John Latham*, p. 59.
- 21 29. Letter to the BFI from Latham, quoted in Mark Webber, 'Non-Moving  
 22 Movies: The Static Films of John Latham', *John Latham Films 1960–1971*,  
 23 DVD with accompanying essay, p. 10.
- 24 30. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, p. 117.
- 25 31. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, p. 34.
- 26 32. John Latham, 'Time-Base and Determination in Events', reproduced in  
 27 Walker, *John Latham*, p. 195.
- 28 33. Webber, 'Non-Moving Movies: The Static Films of John Latham', p. 14.
- 29 34. Antony Hudek, 'Here Lies the Body', *Noit* (1 November 2013), p. v.
- 30 35. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, p. 161.
- 31 36. Webber, 'Non-Moving Movies: The Static Films of John Latham', p. 13.
- 32 37. The assemblage Latham used in the filming of *Unedited Material from the*  
 33 *Star* was purchased by the Tate, where it remains under the title 'Film Star'.  
 34 However, the film itself was not. The irony of this has been noted by John  
 35 Walker, who argues that the institutional framework of art, which in the  
 36 1960s did not see film as a valid art form, inverted the precedence of film  
 37 and canvas.
- 38 38. The quotation comes from David Toop's commentary on the film *Encyclopedia*  
 39 *Britannica* (*John Latham Films 1960–1971*).
- 40 39. Hudek, 'Here Lies the Body', p. v.
- 41 40. Mark Webber, 'Non-Moving Movies: The Static Films of John Latham', p. 14.
- 42 41. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, p. 115.
- 43 42. Webber, 'Non-Moving Movies: The Static Films of John Latham', p. 11.
- 44 43. Mark Seltzer, *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture* (New  
 York: Routledge, 1998), p. 33.
- 45 44. Also known by the title 'Juliet and Romeo'.