

Harmony of the Spores

John Cage and Mycology

FINDING A COHESIVE LINK between musician John Cage's mycological and compositional pursuits is as frustrating as hunting for summer truffles in November. Cage's quirky obsession with mushrooms may seem like nothing more than a career side note, but his contributions to the field of amateur mycology were actually quite significant. Mushrooms, for Cage, served as a muse of sorts. Adamant about not letting his personal taste interfere with the process of creative discovery, he adopted a ritual of using chance operations to compose and write many of his best-known works. In this regard Cage's taste for mushrooms seems anomalous compared to his other projects. And yet he titled numerous poems, articles, and compositions around mushrooms. It is somehow comforting to contemplate Cage's involvement with mycology, to know that the rigid experimentalist who created *4'33"* and cajoled audiences into enduring lengthy "prepared piano" performances would go home and cook wild mushrooms for his friends.¹ Through this article's focus on mushrooms, I hope to offer a more intimate portrait of this singular and astonishingly productive man, who was revered as a composer, musical innovator, visual artist, writer, lecturer, Zen Buddhist, and anarchist—all in the span of one lifetime. When you add his significant achievements in mycology to that list, it is remarkable that Cage found time to sleep.

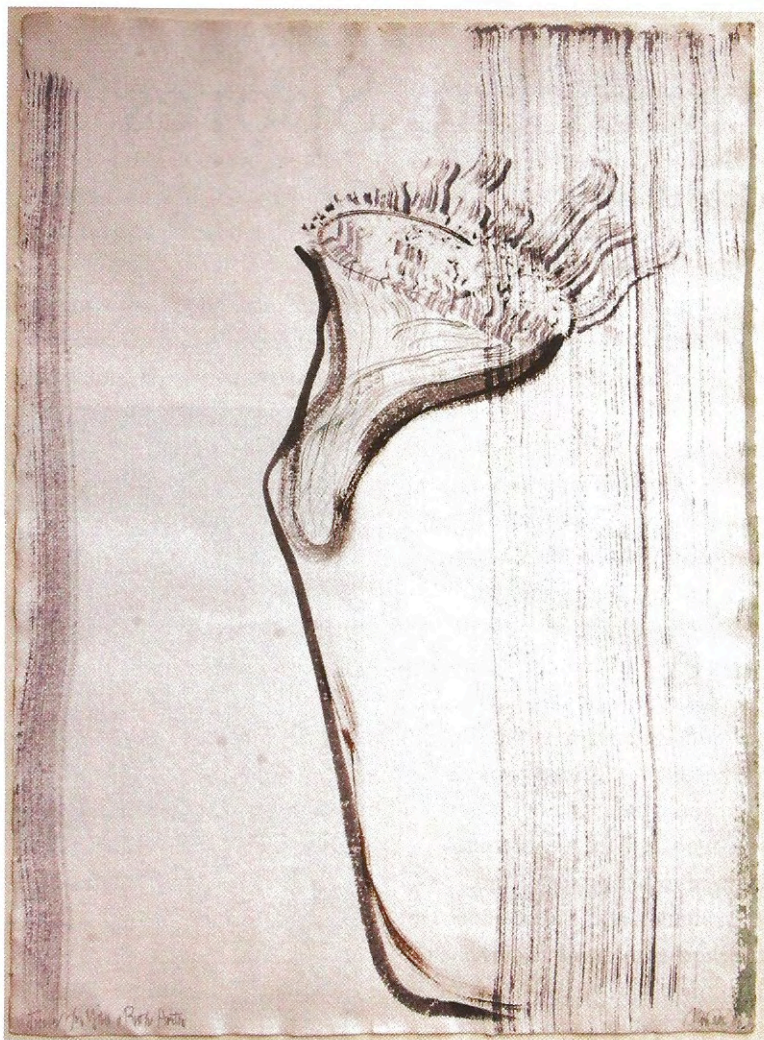
Although many researchers have sought to discover the decisive link between mushrooms and all other things Cageian, success has mostly eluded them. The first to try was Tim Wilson, who in 1983 recorded a program for CBC radio called *Cage in the Woods*. The segment was meant to be a metaphysical exploration of Cage's *weltanschauung* by means of a mushroom foraging expedition. Although the introduction promised to turn listeners into "Alices of a sort under the spell of Cage, a cryptic caterpillar,"² the result was far more chaotic and circuitous than the term *cryptic* implies. Wilson and Cage volley questions at one another like actors in an alternative version of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, with Wilson asking a question



Above: John Cage gathering mushrooms in Mountain Lake, Virginia, 1983.

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and Cage responding with another, more open-ended one. Any attempt to get Cage to imbue the activity of foraging with spiritual import ends with Cage slyly subverting the very terms Wilson proposes. When Wilson mentions coyly that "a lot of people regard mushroom foraging as a sacred activity," Cage answers rather sharply, "I don't think any one thing is more sacred than another. We should brush our teeth and wash our dishes without giving any preference to one thing being sacred and another not."³ When



Above: John Cage, *Vorticella (For Miles and Ruth Horton)*, 1988.

COURTESY OF RAY KASS AND THE MOUNTAIN LAKE WORKSHOP. PHOTOGRAPH BY DEB SIM. © JOHN CAGE TRUST

the program ends, one is left with the sense that Wilson was frustrated by the colossal task of picking out a mushroom-focused argument from Cage's taciturn displays and resigned himself to let the piece stand for itself, no matter how unwieldy it turned out to be.

Twenty years later, in 2008, David W. Rose wrote a long and impeccably researched article for *Fungi Magazine*, in which he set out to fully integrate Cage's practices concerning "mushrooms, music, daily living, and habits of work" into a unified aesthetic.⁴ Rose leaves no toadstool unturned on his journey. He manages to amass an impressive collection of mushroom-related materials, but his analysis, once again, lacks definition. It's as if in his fungi-fueled frenzy to find connections Rose begins seeing mushrooms everywhere, even where they don't belong, and in his effort to perceive mushrooms as Cage's ultimate "teaching-machines," he sees them as tools of silence. "Coming to terms with silence," Rose advises, "is the critical capability: silence leads us to nature, and thence to mushrooms."⁵ Unfortunately, the same could be said about many other aspects of Cage's symbology. Indeterminacy, for example,

the foundation for most of Cage's compositions, is the notion that ideas are not precisely determined or fixed. In their randomness, mutability, and variability, mushrooms are emblematic of this concept, and it is possible that indeterminacy, rather than silence, is the "critical capability" we must come to terms with in order to unravel the greater meaning of mushrooms in Cage's universe.

Using the old literary argument against authorial intent, the possibility of finding the ultimate connection between Cage and mushrooms becomes much more tangible when it turns to the facts, rather than trying to rely on the composer's own nebulous comments on the subject. And facts abound: Cage began to forage for mushrooms in his home of Carmel, California, during the Great Depression as a means of supplementing his meager meals. He realized quickly that mushrooms were not especially nutritious when, after subsisting on them for a few days, he grew very faint.⁶ Despite mushrooms' lack of calories, the activity of

foraging them became a constant throughout Cage's life. His association with mycology is well documented on two levels: one personal and artistic, the other official and public. The difficulty in analysis relates to the personal, artistic level. Were we to draw conclusions based merely on Cage's public involvement with mushrooms, the narrative would be quite simple and straightforward.

By the late 1950s Cage had established himself as a devotee of amateur mycology, reaching out to experts in the field and amassing a considerable collection of books on the subject. He became so competent in mushroom identification that he sold many of the mushrooms he collected to Creative Food Services and to Restaurant Associates, in New York, which supplied, among other high-end restaurants, the Four Seasons.⁷ Perhaps because the pool of applicants was not very large, or perhaps because Cage was an ambitious, highly organized public figure, he was offered a variety of official positions by far more serious mycophiles. His earliest official mushroom capacity was as Vice-Chairman of the People-to-People Committee on Fungi, a program established under the Eisenhower administration to promote peaceful international relations. Cage was responsible for coordinating the work of this committee in the eastern region of the United States. He was joined by his friends and fellow foragers, artist Lois Long and New Jersey naturalist Guy G. Nearing. Throughout his life Cage worked closely with Long and Nearing on a variety of mushroom-related projects. From 1959 through 1960, for example, he and Nearing taught mushroom identification classes through the New School for Social Research. The classes feature heavily in Cage's writings about mushrooms, and it was with the help of students from these classes that Cage was able to found the New York Mycological Society in 1962, arguably his most lasting mycological contribution. Still in existence today, the NYMS boasts over 150 members who meet regularly for walks, lectures, and larger events. Cage's work in establishing the NYMS garnered him the North American Mycological Society's Award for Contributions to Amateur Mycology in 1964.

Perhaps Cage's most public mushroom-related event occurred in 1959, when he was a contestant on the Italian quiz show *Lascia o Raddoppia* (Double or Nothing). The show invited participants to choose an area of expertise, and over the course of a week they were asked a series of questions, each more difficult than the next. One incorrect answer and the contestant was booted off the show. Cage competed as a mushroom expert. His final task was to correctly name all the genera of white-spored mushrooms, which he did, walking away with the *lira* equivalent of six

thousand dollars.⁸ The quiz show garnered Cage celebrity status throughout Italy, as well as offers to join various European mycological societies.

Cage was not only a brainy mushroom pseudo-academic, he was also a highly gifted mushroom cook. Up until the late 1970s he, like many American gourmands of the era, was heavily influenced by French cuisine. He used a lot of cream and butter and loved red meat and red wine (he also loved whiskey, coffee, and cigarettes). Cage's love of food was well documented by others and by himself. In the essay "Where Are We Eating? And What Are We Eating?" Cage chronicled all the meals he ate while on tour with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company in 1975. Mushrooms were definitely on the menu. With its colloquial, good-humored tone and rapid-fire verbal snapshots of life on the road, "Where Are We Eating? And What Are We Eating?" allows the reader to observe Cage the social animal. At times he appears nurturing, commandeering motel kitchens with his bounty of recently foraged mushrooms and creating elaborate feasts for the entire dance company. At other moments he seems endearingly childlike, studding each sentence with exclamation points to communicate his excitement to the reader: "We're going to Athens in southern Ohio. Every mile (we're going seventy!) brings us closer to morels!"⁹ There are even moments in the essay where Cage, usually the center of attention, seems gratefully dependent on the people he encounters. In one episode in Kansas, Cage hands his wild mushrooms over to a motel-restaurant cook. "They came to the table swimming in butter. Carolyn, who isn't wild about mushrooms, had seconds. I complimented the cook. How'd you know how to cook 'em? 'We get them all the time: I'm from Oklahoma.'"¹⁰

In the foreword to this essay, written five years after it first appeared in print, Cage brings the reader up to date on his eating habits. Though the essay describes copious amounts of artery-clogging fare, by the time Cage wrote the foreword he had embraced a macrobiotic diet, on Yoko Ono's recommendation. He writes of his sudden conversion: "For two days I lived in shock. I ate almost nothing. I couldn't imagine a kitchen without butter and cream, nor a dinner without wine." The positive effects on his health, however, helped convince him the diet was worthwhile. "Within a week the pain behind my left eye went away. After a month the toes began to move. Now my wrists, though somewhat misshapen, are no longer swollen and inflamed. I've lost more than twenty-five pounds."¹¹ Perhaps the fact that mushrooms were still permitted in his diet allowed Cage to surrender the butter and booze. "I follow Lima Ohsawa in the cooking of mushrooms, sautéing them in a

little sesame oil, finally adding tamari.”¹² Cage continued to eat macrobiotically until his death in 1992.

Due to his public identity as a mushroom forager, Cage amassed quite a cache of mushroom-related items. In 1971 he entrusted nine archival boxes of mushroom ephemera to the University of California at Santa Cruz. The contents of the Santa Cruz collection meld Cage’s personal and professional mushroom pursuits. Here we find his mushroom watercolors, mushroom poems, and the legendary mushroom book on which he collaborated with lithographer Lois Long and professional biologist Alexander H. Smith.¹³ The collection also contains various mushroom-related gifts Cage received from colleagues and friends: mushroom guide books, a collection of mushroom recipes, even kitschy mushroom paraphernalia like mushroom-print tea towels and a mushroom-print tie. What the contents of this collection say about his persona, however, remains difficult to decipher.

The desire to find direct correlations between mushrooms and any of the concepts in Cage’s musical oeuvre quickly leads to tautology. Cage’s contradictory statements about mushrooms are as uninterpretable as those of the smiling Cheshire cat. “Music and mushrooms: two words next to each other in many dictionaries,” begins one of Cage’s readings from a series of one-minute performances he made under the umbrella title *Indeterminacy*.¹⁴ Many of the minute-long readings Cage incorporated into the performance pertained to mushrooms, and because each piece stands on its own it is tempting to read them as parables handpicked by Cage to illustrate some larger truth. A number of the stories do, in fact, work that way, such as the one about Mr. Romanoff, one of Cage’s mushroom students, who expresses “childlike pleasure” at every specimen he encounters. He takes color slides of the mushrooms and, after smelling one mushroom in particular, asks whether it has been perfumed. The segment ends with Cage warmly quoting his pupil, “Mr. Romanoff said the other day, ‘Life is the sum total of all the little things that happen.’”¹⁵

Because Cage so often ended the *Indeterminacy* stories with a simple, straightforward statement, it is tempting to see mushrooms as representing an obtuse sort of wisdom that we often overlook in our busy, chaotic lives. Indeed, many of the stories have a “stop and smell the mushrooms” feel to them, such as this one about Cage’s mushroom mentor Alexander Smith:

While hunting morels with Alexander Smith in the woods near Ann Arbor, I mentioned having found quantities of *Lactarius deliciosus* in the woods of northern Vermont. He said, “Were the stipes viscid?” I said, “Yes, they were.” He said, “It’s not *deliciosus*; it’s *thyinos*.” He

went on to say that people go through their entire lives thinking that things are that when they are actually this, and that these mistakes are necessarily made with the very things with which they are most familiar.”

Illustrating the simple truths that mushrooms can bring to anyone who cares to stop and consider them is a theme that pops up throughout *Indeterminacy*, but Cage goes even further in the following story, which casts composer Colin McPhee in an unfavorable light, suggesting that Cage was personally disappointed by his reaction. “When Colin McPhee found out that I was interested in mushrooms, he said, ‘If you find the morel next Spring, call me up, even if you only find one. I’ll drop everything, come out, and cook it.’ Spring came. I found two morels. I called Colin McPhee. He said, ‘You don’t expect me, do you, to come all that way for two little mushrooms?’”¹⁶

Cage’s attempt to use mushrooms to draw our attention to things we often overlook is partially attributable to his affinity for the works of Henry David Thoreau, who spent two years in relative isolation meditating on solitude, contemplation, and closeness to nature. When asked about the deeper meaning of mushroom foraging, Cage often mentioned Thoreau. Specifically, when Tim Wilson asked him in their 1983 interview whether he did a lot of thinking while gathering mushrooms in the woods, Cage replied, “I don’t think so. What you’re doing in the woods is looking at what there is to see.” Cage credits Thoreau with this perception, remarking that Thoreau wrote, “What right do I have to be in the woods, if I’m thinking of something out of the woods.”¹⁷ In the sound composition “Mureau” (a melding of the words music and Thoreau, although mushrooms and Thoreau produce the same hybrid) Cage explored several variations of Thoreau’s message, layering them in a sort of textual collage along with other works he found relevant. For example, he whittled down R.H. Blythe’s original haiku, “The leaf of some unknown tree/ sticking/ on the mushroom,” to read simply, “What mushroom? What leaf?”¹⁸

Restructuring and reshaping language focused Cage’s mind in much the same way that foraging for mushrooms did. Mushrooms themselves presented an especially intriguing platform for language play because their names are seemingly fixed. Based on rigid Latinate taxonomy and classification models, mushrooms require rigorous identification methods—after all, misidentification can result in death. But Cage was determined to find a way to keep mushrooms “fresh and experiential” as opposed to “fixed and clear.”¹⁹ If he could not tinker with mushrooms themselves, he could extract and dilute their meaning on a purely linguistic level. Cage was attracted to the musical, polysyllabic names of mushrooms,

and he constructed hundreds of mesostic poems around them and featuring them. In the poem “Song,”²⁰ which Cage wrote for and constructed around the name “JASPER JOHNS,” mushroom varieties appear numerous times, though their meaning is maddeningly vague.

not Just
 gArdener:
 morelS
 coPrini
 morEls
 copRini

 not Just hunter:
 cutting dOwn
 aliantHus
 cuttiNg down
 alianthuS.

Whether this poem was intended to be read as a personal message for Jasper Johns or as a simple language exercise is unclear. For Cage, mushrooms evolved from a philosophical tool to train our minds to the beauty of existence into objects whose meanings continually transform to suit their conjurers’ needs. In yet another mushroom-inspired work, *The Music Lover’s Field Companion* (a humorous take on the common mushroom field guides), Cage begins, “I have come to the conclusion that much can be learned about music by devoting oneself to the mushroom.”²¹ What follows, however, is not a concise or profound deliberation on the true meaning of either entity, but rather a farcical play in which Cage bemusedly remarks, “What a boon it would be for the recording industry if it could be shown that the performance, while at the table, of an LP of Beethoven’s *Quartet Opus Such-and-Such* so alters the chemical nature of *Amanita muscaria* as to render it both digestible and delicious!”²² And yet, it is within the short and farcical *Music Lover’s Field Companion* that we find some of the most whimsical yet poetic writing about mushrooms and music Cage ever conceived:

I propose that it should be determined which sounds further the growth of which mushrooms; whether these latter, indeed, make sounds of their own; whether the gills of certain mushrooms are employed by appropriately small-winged insects for the production of pizzicati and the tubes of the Boleti by minute burrowing ones as wind instruments; whether the spores, which in size and shape are extraordinarily various, and in number countless, do not on dropping to the earth produce gamelan-like sonorities; and finally, whether all this enterprising activity,

which I suspect delicately exists, could not, through technological means, be brought, amplified and magnified, into our theatres with the net result of making our entertainments more interesting.²³

Compared to this lively and quixotic prose piece, Cage’s mesostic poems appear clinical. But, as with most of his artistic pursuits, the ascertainment of meaning and aesthetics were secondary to the experiment itself. Mushrooms offered yet another lens through which to explore experimental production. Cage’s unabashed pursuit of the new and undiscovered may be the only true link among all of his artistic projects. Each subject was a platform from which to spin words, images, and sounds. While mushrooms inspired a staggering amount of artistic output for Cage, they turn the task of writing about Cage in this capacity into a bewildering exercise. Perhaps Cage saw a profound connection between music and mushrooms; more likely he was only trying to make his entertainments more interesting. ◉

NOTES

1. In the prepared piano pieces the strings of a piano were fitted with a variety of screws and then plucked mercilessly by eager virtuosos.
2. Tim Wilson, “Cage in the Woods,” *Inside the Music*, CBC Radio-2 (2009).
3. *Ibid.*
4. David W. Rose, “A Plurality of One: John Cage and the People-to-People Committee on Fungi,” *Fungi Magazine* 1, no. 4 (2008): 27.
5. *Ibid.*, 25.
6. David Revell, *The Roaring Silence* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1992), 43.
7. *Ibid.*, 182.
8. Rose, “A Plurality of One,” 27.
9. Alison Knowles and John Cage, “Where Are We Eating? And What Are We Eating,” in John Cage, *Empty Words: Writing 73–78 by John Cage* (London: Boston: Marion Boyars, 1980), 82.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. John Cage, Lois Long, and Alexander H. Smith, *The Mushroom Book* (New York: Hollander Workshop, Inc., 1972).
14. John Cage, *A Year from Monday: Lectures and Writings* (London: Calder & Boyars, 1985), 34.
15. John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (London: Marion Boyars Publishers Ltd., 1987), 268–269.
16. Cage, *A Year from Monday*, 35.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Rose, “A Plurality of One,” 30.
19. Tim Wilson, transcript of an interview with Cage made in Mountain Lake, Virginia, September 1983 (www.personamedia.com).
20. Cage, *Empty Words*, 10.
21. Cage, *Silence*, 274–276.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*