

Theatrum Fungorum: John Cage's Mycology and Photomechanical Reproduction

I. "Opportunities for Perception": John Cage's Mycology

"What a boon it would be for the recording industry (now part of America's sixth largest) if it could be shown that the performance, while at table, of an LP of Beethoven's Quartet Opus Such-and-Such so alters the chemical nature of Amanita muscaria to render it both digestible and delicious! Lest I be found frivolous and light-headed and, worse, an "impurist" for having brought about the marriage of the agaric with Euterpe, observe that composers are continually mixing up music with something else [...]. I prefer my own choice of the mushroom. Furthermore it is avant-garde." (John Cage)¹

John Cage once told the mycologist Alexander H. Smith that, were he to begin his life again, he would choose to be a botanist.² Anyone who has read Cage's literary works – *Silence, M, Empty Words* – has come across the mushroom stories: his failed attempt to survive on wild mushrooms during the Depression in Carmel; how he jumped off a grounded plane and found *Tricholoma equestre*, for the first time, in the woods along the airstrip; watching the aurora borealis in a cemetery after a failed mushrooming excursion; his hospitalisation for skunk cabbage poisoning, complete with adrenaline injections and stomach-pumping; finding *Pluteus cervinus* behind the medical centre; countless sandwiches of left-over mushrooms; his founding of the New York Mycological Society in 1962, with Guy Nearing, Lois Long, and others; his \$6,000 of winnings, spent on a VW microbus, for answering questions about mushrooms on the Italian game show "Lascia o Raddoppia"; "morel: music conducted in spring by trees"³; Mr. Romanoff, the pharmacist in Cage's mushroom identification class who wanted to perfume one particularly delicious fungus; bringing children to the zoo with

1 Music Lovers' Field Companion, *Silence*, p. 275.

2 Conversation with John Cage, *John Cage*, p. 13.

3 Writing for the Second Time Through *Finnegans Wake*, *Empty Words*, p. 134.