

The following letter appears in Laura Kuhn, ed., *The Selected Letters of John Cage* (Wesleyan University Press, 2016).

To The New York Mycological Society

December 11, 1964 | Stony Point, New York

Shortly after returning from my recent six-months tour, I had several conversations and read some correspondence, which made it clear that there is certain unrest in the New York Mycological Society. The following is an attempt to improve the situation. As you will note below, members may simply ignore this letter, reply to it in writing, or call for a meeting in which the various matters mentioned below and others, if wished, could be discussed. If this way of dealing with problems is found to function, it can be taken as a precedent and followed in the future by any member when he feels that some problem has arisen that requires attention.

By way of preface, it may be remarked that the Society has no constitution or parliamentary law, and no officers other than the secretary and the treasurer. There are, however, five founding members who established the Society, set the dues and fees and who have arranged the lecture and walk schedules and done the various things necessary to get information out and membership in. What was wanted was a fairly unorganized anarchic situation, without responsibility being placed heavily on anyone's shoulders. This desire arose from two circumstances: a visit I made with Guy Nearing to a New Jersey Garden Society where, during an extended parliamentary meeting, members took the opportunity to haggle with one another and to produce several hours of mutual misery and (for someone like myself who was not concerned) boredom. The second circumstance was the fact that the Society was formed following several years of Mushroom Identification classes which were taught at the New School by Guy G. Nearing, myself, and Lois Long. In this class situation, enrolled students quite rightly depended on the teachers and leaders. This brought about an adolescent rather than adult social situation and the responsibility — in view of possible poisonings not only from mushrooms but from wasps and snakes too and accidents from falling rocks, crumbling cliffs, etc.—was greater than the leaders cared to continue having. Therefore the classes were stopped and the society was established. The dues were set rather high in order to ensure a serious membership and to give the society funds with which to operate: to engage lecturers, rent necessary rooms, and to celebrate the conclusion of each year's hunting with a banquet. All of this was determined undemocratically by the founding members. Though the intention was and is to bring about a free, so-to-speak, unruled or anarchic group, this intention

was had by a few people: the founding members. One might complain that politically speaking the New York Mycological Society has been and to a lesser extent still is an oligarchy.

But there is no need for this state of affairs to continue. Let it be remembered, however, that the Society will surely continue and prosper only if the members do not get involved in the various activities that make people miserable: disagreements about this and that. Difficulties between people should be avoided. All that is necessary is an annual program of lectures and walks and a banquet. Hopefully we will all more or less reap the benefits which include more experience and knowledge of mushrooms, pleasant hours and days in the woods and fields away from concrete and metropolitan air, and the society of people who spend their working hours in a great variety of ways. (I get, for instance, to be with people who aren't composers of experimental music, and this is refreshing.) As Mr. Nearing says, the Society works and there is much reason to keep it working. Now there is some dissatisfaction among some of the members. On top of this during the past months there were scarcely any mushrooms. In view of all this, please think about the matters listed below and let me have your remarks. Space is also provided for your bringing up matters not listed.

1. In the case of a drought such as we have suffered this year, should the walks be cancelled? It has always been Guy Nearing's view that when the fungi were not in evidence that a study of the lichen could be pursued; however, this year, to Mr. Nearing's amazement, even the lichen were dying.
2. We now require of members \$2.00 for banquet reservation, over and above their annual dues. The banquet costs the Society \$10.00 per person, and we are obliged to let the chef know precisely how many people are coming. The founding members settled on this formula of a special fee. Are you for it? If not, how would you solve the problem of knowing how many are to be provided for?
3. At the time that we found Joe Hyde our chef, we considered various restaurants in New York City. None offered so much for \$10.00 not to speak of the excellent quality of food and drink. Furthermore we were delighted with the situation: a home in the country. Please indicate whether you are happy with the present banquet arrangements or whether you wish to change them. If the latter, what are your suggestions?
4. We have had several lecture series. Some have been by professional mycologists, another by amateurs. It is now my view that whether we understand what they say or not that we should limit our lectures to ones given by professional mycologists in the hope that we will learn something even if we don't particularly enjoy it. What do you think? There aren't many professional mycologists available in this area. We might each year have different talks from

the same ones: Dr. Rogerson, Dr. Bigelow, Stanley Smith, Dr. Alexander Smith, etc.

5. There has been some lack of understanding about what a founding member is. They are dues-paying members with the exception of Guy G. Nearing and myself: we have been made honorary members, but I was not so originally. Ralph Ferrara, Lois Long, Esther Dam and I made Mr. Nearing—who had taught and led us so much—an honorary member. Subsequently Prof. R. M. MacIver and I were made honorary members not having to pay dues. Would you prefer not to have honorary members, or would you like each year to elect one (instead of their being chosen by the founding members)?

6. Individual membership in the Mycological Society of America now costs \$2.00 rather than \$1.00 (contrary information in the recent *Mycophile* notwithstanding). Shall we continue individual membership? Or shall we just have group membership at \$8.00 for the society? If the latter, you would not receive mailings from the Mycological Society of America. At present we take out that membership for you.

7. Ralph Ferrara proposed that full-time high school or college science students be allowed free admission to our lectures and attendance on our walks when they are brought as guests. Are you for this or against this? (It may be remarked that some of the privileges we have at the New York Academy of Sciences are given because we are promoting interest and knowledge in mycology.) Or do you have some thought, for instance, about a student fee, which could be, say, 1/4 of the usual \$2.

8. Do you think we should continue to emphasize long distance weekend trips along with alternative local trips? Do you have suggestions for places to go? Both far away and near?

9. Do you think the offices of secretary and treasurer should be permanent, that is, held until the officer resigns, or do you think there should be a vote for officers and, if so, how often?

10. Leonard Steiner after conversation with Lois Long has been in correspondence with Harry Knighton regarding an eastern meeting place for the 1965 People-to-People Sub-Committee on Fungi Convention. This is not officially the responsibility of our Society, but publicity has suggested that it is. Do you want the Society to be officially involved? Should there be a committee and, if so, who should be on it? My own feeling is that it should not be official, but that it would be good if Leonard Steiner succeeds in working something out with Knighton.

11. Are there any other matters that you think should be discussed by membership?

12. Should all of this be handled through the mails? Or should there be a special meeting? (It would have to be in December before the plans for next year's activities are mailed out in January.) And if so, when and where? The where would be either in one of our homes or at the New York Academy of Sciences. The when could be Tuesday, December 22.

Please ignore the above or reply to John Cage, Stony Point, New York 10980, hopefully as soon as possible so that if a meeting must take place arrangements may be made. If the majority do not require a meeting, I will let you know through the mails the result of this questionnaire.

Let me take this opportunity too to say that I have missed being on the walks this year—even though there was a drought—and that I look forward to those of 1965 when, the Lord willing, there will be rain and circumstances propitious for fungi.

Sincerely,

John Cage

A few words about cited individuals:

In Cage's 3., Joe Hyde (1927-2007) was a legendary chef who settled in the family home in Sneedan's Landing in Rockland County, New York, where he mostly gave classes and catered private dinner parties. He would author *Love, Time and Butter: The Broiling, Roasting, Baking, Deep-fat Frying, Sautéing, Braising, and Boiling Cook Book* (New York: R.W. Baron, 1971).

In Cage's 4., more fully, Clark T. Rogerson, Howard E. Bigelow, and Stanley J. Smith, all noted mycologists. (Technically, Smith was a bryologist.)

In Cage's 10., The 1965 People-to-People Sub-Committee on Fungi Convention was initiated by Harry S. Knighton (1915-1999), an electrician, steel mill worker, and field naturalist in Portsmouth, Ohio, who wanted to bring mycology to the masses. See David W. Rose, "Notes from Underground: A Plurality of One—John Cage and the People-to-People Committee on Fungi," *FUNGI* 1, no. 4 (Winter 2008): 25-35.