

The art of gove

The Artist Placement Group 1966-1989

Howard Slater

The upsurge in interest around late 60s conceptual art and its correlate the 'dematerialization of the art object' offers the chance to make potentially radical conjunctions with layers of history that have not been fully played out. This renewed interest, demonstrated by large attendances at the 'Live In Your Head' show held at the Whitechapel earlier this year, seems to be indicative of an attempt to re-inject some social combativeness into an art world that is full to surfeit with people willing to act as the "high priests of show business."¹

What is revealed by a glance at this history is that beyond homogenised categories and stylish mimicry there are practices that are always already heterogeneous. We discover that the 'dematerialization' of the art object was variously concerned with a rejection of morphology and aesthetic scopism, with the rise of a text-based practice and an accent on process rather than product. The submerged legacy of conceptualism is one which encourages a rejection of art's ideological role in society.

Through an examination of language, perception and the entrapment of desire in representation, the more radical proponents of conceptualism were part of an avant-garde trajectory that submitted the institutions of art to a critique. As with their precursors they were led towards actively pursuing their practice in the dynamics of a social field. That such a 'dematerialization' of the artist is now only a submerged legacy is, in part, a measure of how far the art institution has been engaged in a retro-projection that only benefits the econometrics of the 'yba'.

Historical associations have been separated and ransacked under the pressure to produce. There has been a recentering of the spectator upon the art object which, injected with a knowing style, has restrengthened the divide between artists and spectators and had the effect of re-privatising the means-of-expression. There has been the activity of 'nomination' wherein the artist's agency is only minimally drawn towards the despecialisation of his/her own role. There has been a submission to the 'popular' rather than a testing of the possibilities of what could be accepted as 'popular'.

Those artists who have unquestioningly acceded to their delegated role as the vanguard of an hyper-real image culture—and as such always eminently exchangeable—have not only been talked-up as the inheritors of the cowl of conceptualism, but have bemusedly become as popular as advertisements. What follows is a critical tracking of just one of the vectors that could be said to have emerged from the conceptual practice that was represented by the 'Live In Your Head Show'.

Maximum enthusiasm

Dematerialization of the art object can only presage a 'void' if the passing of the art object is mourned. The mourning itself, in substituting a mimetic trace for the lost object, is, in the case of conceptualism's adherents, refashioned many

times over from this trace to become fixated on, for instance, the 'pictorialism of a text based practice', or in the populist adventurism of indexing creative activity that has escaped the art institution.

For John Latham and Barbara Steveni of the Artist Placement Group (APG), the potential disappearance of the art object was not an occasion for mourning but an ongoing continuation of attempts to give art a purpose 'outside' its immediate and overly obvious remit in the art institutions of gallery and museum.

As a spur to the APG's formation in 1966, Latham's own practice as an artist and theorist can be seen as part of a wider context of engaged activity. Examining the boundaries of what constitutes visual art or language and becoming conscious of the social role allotted to creative workers as 'exports' for national cultures, he came to view the creation of art objects (be they novels or paintings) as similar to the creation of manufactured commodities.

He gained notoriety through his creation of Skoob Towers (sculptural constructs made from books and burnt in public places). This led to explorations in jettisoning an object-base for art and, as an outgrowth of his association with *Project Sigma* and *The Destruction In Art Symposium*, led to a desire to work directly with a "total context of people" via the APG², and to developing the 'time-based' conceptual means of resisting the mono-dimensionality of art as a commodity.

Aligning himself with developments in physics Latham came to view 'events' rather than the 'particles' as a more apt basis for a socially engaged artistic endeavour, events spanning micro-moments and cosmological durations that, it was hoped, could be communicable as spurs to action and participation rather than as objects of self-reflexive contemplation.

If the art object was coming to be dematerialized, similarly the concept of 'artist' was to be overturned and redefined and Latham eventually worked-up the term 'incidental person' as a description of the intentions of artists engaging in the social field.

This can be seen as relating to one of conceptualism's 'advances' in terms of the artists' own 'individuality' becoming the subject of art. But rather than produce a static subjectivity where the artist's person, commodified, becomes an institutional currency, the hope for the incidental person it seems, was that the performative aspect of work within industry and government departments would not be seen through the prism of the art institution. The conceptual activity of the incidental person, in becoming immersed in the unfurling dynamics of the workplace, in maintaining a fluid position of independence and 'affectivity', would come to "generate maximum public involvement and maximum enthusiasm" so as to "release the impulse to act."³

This impulse to act, which raises desire but leaves it unexpressed, could have become an area of concern and dissension within the APG, in that:



Image:
Derek Boshier
from *Live in
Your Head*

not foisting a 'brief' upon the potential placements, but nonetheless holding them to 'feasibility studies', leads to questions around the desires of the incidental persons themselves and of what it was the APG as an organisation wanted to act upon in order to change what?

That the incidental persons, free from having to make an art-object, could have been in a position to examine the flows of desire within the social relations of workplace and government departments is, in terms of the dematerialization of the art object, one of the most efficacious 'materials' there could be. But any 'success' in such a direction is not the nomination of desire in such an environment as a surrogate 'art piece'; but what that desire, as a material force "releasing the impulse to act", brings into being once it is conscious of itself as an active force in conjunctions with the desires of others. What it was that the APG, as facilitating administrators or as incidental persons, intended to change becomes crucial. Did they want to change society or did they want to change society's attitude to art?

'going public'

In constituting a move away from the art institution and in encouraging artists to "take determined control of their social function"⁴ the APG seemed to offer a radical direction. Their placements in industry (1968-1975) were only minimally negotiated through means of a funding body. Eschewing expectations about a resultant art work, they could be autonomous enough to develop lines of enquiry about social dynamics. The very 'aimlessness' of the APG's brief could swing a focus onto the aims of commodity producing industries; the incidental persons could also bypass that layer of administration and curatorial mediation that still censors social art today.

The APG were working around areas of dissolving the 'divide' between the artist and the public and moving further towards 'dematerialization'. The problems, much vaunted at the time, as to who or what constitutes the 'spectator' of conceptual art, could, with an APG practice that involved itself with submerged social dynamics, come to materialise desire and work-relations as the conceptual objects of group participation and person-

rnance

al responsibility that unfurls over time, rather than as the contemplative still-lives of an institutionally directed spectatorship that undifferentiatedly repeats the limits of its own confines.

A release of the "impulse to act", the materialisation of desire in the social field as a rhythm between restraint and possibility, is, so the APG thesis implies, no longer a matter of spectators being grouped by an institution but more a matter of bringing into rhythm the differential speeds of spectatorship, contemplation, self-expression and production, and pursuing the resultant activities without seeking their artistic legitimisation.

Whether or not this is an idealistic projection onto the APG's industrial placements is maybe besides the point. If we take into account the strike wave creativity of the working class of this period or the potentiality of an 'imagined' APG then the actual outcomes of an APG placement will always pale.

However, as a concerted response to a still activated neurosis of artists to feel 'alienated' or 'outside' the wider society, the APG was one endeavour that sought to take conceptualism into a more engaged, inter-disciplinary, direction rather than take it towards its ever-impending 'individualised' canonisation. The resultant 'work' of an APG industrial placement could have been labour itself or, exoticization of the working classes, or desire and social relations, or a union meeting, but it was also a practice that insisted upon the de-specialisation of the artist's role and the transformation of the exhibition into a zone for social research.

This latter point seems to be the case with the 1971 show *Art & Economics* which the APG staged as a 'going public' with its activities to that date: a melange of displays, time-based documentation, the sound of steel manufacture and discussions with "artists, industrialists, trade union representatives, MPs and others."⁵

Bringing such people into the public sphere could have made-for an injection of accountability and democracy by extending the placement to utilise the art space as a forum. However, the previous quote attends to a case of the workers themselves becoming subject once more to dematerialization. The compromised nature of the APG endeavour which takes on a radical semblance when it is contrasted to the object-based aestheticism of the art institution, comes across as increasingly naive when it is a matter of articulating what it is that the APG sought to change.

In providing a space in which the 'incidental persons' could operate independently of government directives the APG was actively encouraging "context related concepts"⁶ which would in many circumstances be the autonomous province of the 'incidental persons' themselves. In this way much of APG's activity would rest with the personal testimony of the various 'incidental persons' and the people with whom they worked. In the absence of such information, where it seems that the 'micro-event', as a means of registering desire, can come into fruition as the apt subject of discussion as to APG's efficacy on a smaller, intimate scale, we are left, in this piece, with the retrospective views of Latham and Steveni and with the visibility of APG's move towards Governmental Department Placements after 1975. This demarcation point, coming roughly at a time of growing working class militancy, and with the retrospective subsumption of worker-participants by their trade union representatives is, perhaps, illustrative of the artist-as-professional and hints that, underlying the

open-ended application of an incidental person's transversal and intuitive knowledge, there is, in the organisational 'unconscious' of the APG, a mindset that seeks legitimisation for an art practice not from the art institutions themselves but from industrial and government professionals.

Time-based theories

Latham's keenness to reference Rauschenberg's blank canvas as a 'turning point' in the shift from an object-based art brings forth two other works of the 50s that were similarly intended to make art reflect upon its social purpose: John Cage's *4'33"* and Guy Debord's *Howlings in favour of Sade*. These two precursors of 'dematerialization' highlight potential areas of radical conjunction for conceptual art: music as eminently 'dematerialized', communicating in a "counter-literal" way, and after Debord's filmic experiments, revolutionary politics as the very process of combined work in the social field to effect wide-reaching change. Both these pieces raise the notion of duration.

In contradistinction to Cage and Debord, Latham's 'time-based' theories, whilst functioning to illustrate the dematerialization of the art object and leading to the "micro-event of desire and the "impulse to act", come, perhaps, to be satisfied with finding a new status for art as that which, when the theories are extended to a cosmological level, forms the basis of a Grand Universal Theory or a 'meaning of the world'. Latham's time-based theories, being content with the fixity of a specific turning point, a conjunction between art and physics through the Einsteinian auspices of 'all matter being at a dimensionless point', falter quite considerably when we sense that what is being removed from the 'time-based' approach is the notion of history as the social continuum we are actually living.

Whilst such an approach may allow for the effects of an APG placement to be seen over a longer duration of time than is normally allotted an artist-in-residence, whilst it admits to process and reflexive reassessment, it does not appear to take account of what occurs prior to the placement, the very history that the incidental person would bring into a situation and the very history of that situation itself. If Debord and Cage looked elsewhere for their legitimisation, if they raised the concept of duration and, in leaving it empty, gave it political overtones by inferring into the silence and blankness that it was necessary for its recipients to take action to define time in a space-time continuum, then, perhaps Latham's error, with half an eye turned towards eternity, was to show duration and attempt to fill it with an overarching theory that may have functioned as a 'brief' to which the incidental persons were encouraged to adhere.⁷

When it is a matter of groups seeking common objectives and directions for action, it is perhaps such over-arching theories, with their undertow of disciple-inducing didacticism, that have the negative effect of one group member waiting for others to get up to 'speed'. Furthermore, to what extent do such theories, in their channelling of multiform desires in the direction of the theorist as 'expert', give rise to a situation in which the "impulse to action" is fettered by considerations of 'correct' adherence? Such problems could be seen to have been operative not only with the APG but with Debord and his Situationist comrades.

This hum of contradictions is probably the fate

which would befall anyone who attempted to sell a 'situation' to the government. Indeed, in terms of those situationist ideas disseminated in the early 60s by *Project Sigma*⁸, Latham's time-based move towards what he calls 'event structure' is synchronous but fundamentally divergent from the Situationist International's notion of 'creating situations'. However, it is just such a concept that Rolf Sachsse informs us that the APG deliberately adopted and adapted: the lack of a contract between incidental person and the host agency, the de-materialised nature of the work with social relations and the impassioning of the participants towards a "release of the impulse to act" could all combine to bring about a situation.

In some ways then there is an APG alignment with one extrapolation of 'creating situations' which Guy Debord made in 1957:

"If we take for example the simple gathering of a group of individuals for a given time, it would be desirable, while taking into account the knowledge and material means we have at our disposal, to study what organisation of the place, what selection of participants and what provocation of events produce the desired ambiance."⁹

On inspection, the APG's 'situation' is more closely confined than that of Debord's open-ended description. If we bring in Debord's later comparison of a constructed situation as a means of making our own history¹⁰, our own times, then the APG construct a situation whose ambiance is professional. Bringing together people from various disciplines (civil servants, industrialists, architects etc.) whilst still orbiting such terms as 'contract' and 'art-object' did not amount to an active pursuit of de-specialisation but brought forth the 'incidental person' as a specialist in his/her own right.

For Debord the ultimate situation would be a revolution, an insurrectionary event. For such 'situations' to come about means that its participants must be passionate enough to desire a change of social structure. A passion which becomes an "impulse to act" precisely because it is de-specialised and seeks not to be allotted a professional role but the polymath role of remaking a society. The starting point for Debord was that participation is essentially open to the degree that it becomes creativity in the social field regardless of its being defined as an 'art' activity. What remains unrecorded is how the ramifications of this latter speed of endeavour, the releasing of passions and their inevitable confrontation with authority, were overlooked or strategically omitted from the overall approach of the APG.

'independent interest'

On record as renouncing a "Frankfurt School orthodoxy of apartheid between artists and government",¹¹ Latham's disgruntlement with what appears to be a continual criticism of the APG's tack is worthy of sympathy to the extent that 'leftist purity', in refusing the testing practice of contradiction, can often remain at a level of ineffectual idealism akin to the ghettos it lambasts.

Latham, speaking before the time-based theories took a firmer grip on him, referred to knowledge as being for experts and as that which renders thought unnecessary.¹² In many ways this encapsulates the success and failure of the APG endeavour in that he was prepared to uproot himself, almost make himself blank, and enter a situa-

tion knowing nothing about it at all. As a blueprint for the incidental person it may not have been realistic but it was a means of charging a situation with Kafkaesque inquisitiveness:

"They certainly had no wish to listen to my questions, but it was precisely because I asked these questions that they had no wish to drive me away."¹³

The conscientious bureaucrats of a Governmental Department could, by means of an APG placement come to gain some 'outside' knowledge about their operations and the social relations they were concerned with managing. An APG placement was not one-sided: just as the danger of bringing about the release of a "latent public impulse"¹⁴ can be steered back on course by a combination of 'specialists', a wilful ignorance can not only be welcomed as a surface to project upon, but can be exploited.

The APG intended to "promote a public interest independent of the interests of the parties involved."¹⁵ The blank space necessary for such an endeavour makes the competing definitions of what constitutes the public interest too simple. With this promotion of an 'independent interest' the incidental person becomes, once again, the transcendental artist rising above politics. Paying next to no attention to the historical make-up of the State as that body which seeks to maintain sectional class interest as the public interest, is as idealistic as the leftist purity that recoils from the often invigorating contamination of contradiction. When married to other *ex post facto* assertions such as the claim made that art should be a work "complementary to rather than as opposed to that of governing bodies... the source of a new equilibrium",¹⁶ it is tantamount to seriously underestimating the connection between capitalism and governments and making such linkage invisible.

Such an operation, then, reveals that the APG was not seeking to change society but society's idea of art:

"Artist placement was intended to serve art... assuming that art does have a contribution to make to society at the centre."¹⁷

Serving art as if to serve some article of faith and assuming, perhaps through wilful ignorance, that power lies at the 'centre' in the offices of government is to re-collapse the advances made by the 'dematerialization' of the art object in the direction of a work in the social field and is to deny the power of a government's subjects to change their situation. As such it touches upon the problems of the APG approach in that the incidental person is turned back into an artist by means of their 'professionalisation'.

This makes for an accord between APG and the Government Departments in that the incidental person as a 'salaried' rather than a 'waged' employee becomes identifiable as a management representative involved in the 'decision making' concerns of the government department. If this perhaps removes the contradictions of the industrial placements between 'shop floor' and 'top office'—in that outcomes emanating from the incidental person's presence are more of a policy making kind—it does not remove the sense that the APG were seeking legitimation from the authorities by ultimately proving their responsibility to the aims of that authority: "a new component necessary to parliamentary democracy."¹⁸

Spoof work

Given this compatibility between the APG and the left-liberal strands of Government Departments, it is telling that after lengthy negotiations and the legitimating assurances of the "civil service memorandum", it took Steveni and Latham years to get the placements up and running.

Prepared to sacrifice their own careers, they

put themselves through the machinations of a capitalist democracy intent on keeping control over cultural activities through the auspices of the Arts Council. They were witness to having their projects filched and their input erased from the historical record. The overtone of the APG is such that its most socially effective work seems to be submerged either in the desiring effects of a placement's 'micro-effects' or in what Sir Roy Shaw (then General Secretary of the Arts Council) dubbed as a 'spoof work': the exposure of a state-controlled culture, extensively documented through correspondence by Latham and Steveni. This 'spoof work' began in the unprecedented situation of an art initiative, that of the APG, being brought to fruition in the governmental placements without the financial assistance or political backing of the Arts Council.

By the early 80s, when the term of the governmental placements had ended, the APG doggedly persisted in seeking representations to the Arts Council and other government departments to continue their work. The Arts Council continually rebuffed their approaches, cutting not only their access to funds but cutting the APG out of the historical record, refuting the existence of correspondence that was in the APG's possession and becoming increasingly obstructive to the APG's appeal for funds from other bodies. This situation led Latham and Steveni to appeal and reappeal against decisions, to consult their MP and eventually to meet with the Shadow Arts Minister. At all turns their dogged persistence, after some ministerial support, met with a brick wall. In 'Report Of A Surveyor', Latham paraphrases a letter from Sir Roy Shaw, to the then shadow Arts Minister in which the APG is misrepresented and maligned to the degree that, it is inferred by Latham's paraphrasing, the Shadow Arts Minister reconsider his supportive interest in the group. This letter, under special protection of the Art Council's Royal Charter and consequently, Latham informs us, to take effect unchallenged leads Latham, not unduly, into detecting the whiff of a conspiracy: "it may have been the assumed threat to administrator's own careers that is the chief factor, or it may be that some internal state security is believed, or imagined, to be threatened."¹⁹

The "public interest" which the APG hoped to serve independently is, in this 'spoof work', revealed, at the first turn, to be the site of an inevitable conflict that even the most informed and combative of artists could not compete with alone. Whether this unchallengeable edict from on high was informed by a wariness as to the perceived challenge of APG placements to the APG-inspired Arts Council 'residency' scheme or whether it was a fear of the subversive potential of the incidental person strategy is not a choice to be made; it is both at the same time and maybe more. This 'spoof work' reveals—unhealthily for those who believe the state is run by the half-wits who front it, that the threat implied by the incidental person was being taken more seriously by others than it was by the APG themselves:

"If there is thought to have been a thread of intent in APG activity in any way suggesting plots to undermine the system, then may it be brought into the open."²⁰

official secrets

The ramifications of this 'spoof work' may be seen to be pessimistic and to offer no further strategies of continuation for a radical 'event'-based practice that seeks to release the "impulse to change" by tracking the desires in social situations. But maybe such pessimism is itself strategic.

The governmental route has perhaps been tried and tested and seen to be a route that is hopelessly compromised; not least by the fact that

the APG through the 'spoof work' reveal, in the space of their practice, the presence of other 'incidental persons' who do not have the encumbrance of an artistic identity to shake-off but who, as functionaries, personifications of their job description, would presumably make sure that such a re-occurrence of the APG route would meet with short shrift.

The APG work in the social field, whilst compromised by an inchoate belief in democratic capitalism and by a professionalisation rather than a de-specialisation of artists, has, nonetheless continued to keep open a concern to effect social institutions other than art institutions. Their escape from the self-referentiality of art may have been successful in terms of a refutation of the art object, but it has been won at the expense of reconvening the art object as governmental reports which, in the case of Ian Breakwell's placement for the DHSS in the area of mental health, has been and perhaps still is, subject to the official secrets act.

This tangible outcome of Breakwell's placement as a 'textual work', in perhaps revealing the ultimate sanction that a Governmental Department could wield over a placement in order to make sure desire didn't break out in the social field in unmanageable proportions, does not therefore undermine the slow seepage of effect that the placement had for those who participated in it and, who knows, led to a growing distrust of those institutions where social control and governance is practised like an art.

Such exposure is the APG's legacy and this is where Latham's time-based theories work at their most efficaciously. As he says:

"perhaps we have to consider that all action is potentially, if not directly linked to what happens on the subsequent enactment."²¹

For subsequent enactments to keep occurring there needs to be a variety of follow-throughs which would include the testimony of the incidental persons and other APG members through to an embracing of the political potential of desire as a material force in the examination of social relations. Such a desiring presence of people who neither identify as revolutionary initiates or artist-professionals, is crucial in widening the scope of "subsequent enactment" if such enactment is to escape from reifying its experience in predetermined categories such as 'art' or 'government' and, as a result, limiting the range even of its own ghettos.

Such a 'revolutionizing' of daily life, a process much concerned with making social relations visible, needs the continuing uprooting of the 'experts' rather than their continuing attempts at lead-weight coherence, an uprooting that enables those who feel they have access to the means of expression to give encouragement to those who are coming-to-expression. An improvisatory element, in which all begin from 'zero', could be one ramification of a conceptual art practice as could be the lent-momentum made possible through those 'dematerialized' forms that carry along with them the "rejection of any a priori identity of the artwork."²²

With no prescriptions in place, that activity could escape the purview of any and all institutions and in immersing itself in a socio-historical continuum in which desire can come to be 'materially' visible as 'radiant energy' is perhaps where dematerialized artists meet with imaginative revolutionaries: desires outstrip their confinement within institutions and build their own. Practice becomes invisible but ever-present.

Notes

1. Joseph Kosuth: Introductory Note by the American Editor, *Art & Language* No.2 in Lucy Lippard: *Six Years—The Dematerialization of the Art Object*, Studio Vista, 1973, p148.
2. Jeremy Blank: Unpublished Interview With Latham, London, 17/12/91 (courtesy of Matt Hale).
3. Latham: *Report Of A Surveyor*, Tate Gallery, 1986, p59.
4. Barbara Steveni: *Will Art Influence History?*, 'And' Journal of Art No.9, 1986, p18.
5. *ibid*, p19.
6. *ibid*.
7. Rolf Sachsse reports that a great deal of dissen- sion arose within APG members over the issue of adherence to these time-based theories which have been further developed by Latham and Steveni in the late 80s and coincide with the APG's being renamed O+I. See Sachsse, *ibid*, p49.
8. For Project Sigma and its dynamo, the 'novelist' Alexander Trocchi, see the reprints in *Break/Flow* No.1 or Andrew Murray Scott (ed), *Invisible Insurrection*, Polygon, 1992.
9. Guy Debord: Report On The Construction Of Situations in *Situationist Anthology*, p25, Bureau Of Public Secrets, 1981.
10. Guy Debord: Critique Of Separation, *ibid*, p35.
11. Latham, *ibid*, p49.
12. Latham in Terry Measham: Latham, p14, Tate Gallery, 1976.
13. Franz Kafka: The Great Wall Of China And Other Short Works, p152, Penguin 1991.
14. Latham: Report Of A Surveyor, *ibid*, p59.
15. Latham, *ibid*, p40.
16. Latham, *ibid*, p35.
17. Steveni, *ibid*, p18.
18. Latham, *ibid*, covertext.
19. Latham, *ibid*, p60.
20. Latham, *ibid*, p52.
21. Latham quoted by Ina Conzen-Meairs: *Art After Physics*, *ibid*, p29.
22. John Roberts: *The Impossible Document*, p12, Camerawords, 1997.

An unedited version of this article will be downloadable from www.infopool.org.uk