

John A. Walker's Book

John A. Walker's *John Latham: The incidental person – his art and ideas* provides some background knowledge of recent art history and the art scene at the time John was active, and gives a helpful and thorough account of the many different facets of John's life and work. It's a very well researched book, and it's a pity that John didn't like it and had a falling out with John Walker over it. I recall three reasons why John was dissatisfied with it. First, John felt that the rationale for the book came across as the bland claim that he was a senior British artist and thus warranted attention. Second, John wanted the book to endorse his message, which John Walker understandably thought lay outside his professional expertise. And third, John wanted the book to vindicate his claim that the Arts Council had spearheaded a systematic effort at suppressing his work and undermining the Artist Placement Group. In my view John Walker grants John's claim a considerable degree of credibility. To John's disappointment, I was never able to take an interest in this complex issue.

One difficulty I occasionally experience with the book is in separating what is John Walker's interpretation from what are attempts to encapsulate John's views based on discussions the two had while the book was being prepared. An example that comes to mind is the discussion of John's film *Erth*. Walker says the film starts and finishes with images of the Earth from space, and that it represents a countdown of the age of the universe. This makes no sense to me and it's hard to believe it was based on anything John said in discussion. In the soundtrack to the film a woman's voice provides a countdown from a thousand million years to one second. This could be understood as a countdown to the present moment at which a person is seen not from space but from a few metres distance doing something on, or to, the surface of the planet. Or it could be taken as a countdown from long time-based views of the Earth to shorter and shorter time-based views. Passages such as this get repeated by subsequent writers without any specific citation, so that readers have no idea that this may just be John Walker's interpretation of the work.