

# **NOIT—2**

**Burning**

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**Guest Editor: Lisa Le Feuvre**



## On Burning

What does it mean to burn? Burning is active; it is a process that can both renew and destroy. It is an action requiring an object to act upon, be that literally or metaphorically. To burn is to deploy affect: burning is an event that impresses itself on the existing state of things. Burning is a narrative that moves from potential to ignition to burnout and, sometimes, to afterglow.

This second issue of *NOIT*, the journal of John Latham's (1921–2006) FlatTime House, is dedicated to the topic of burning. The name FlatTime House is derived from Latham's theory of FlatTime, and in 2003 he declared the building a living sculpture. I immediately accepted the invitation to be Guest Editor – this unique opportunity to think through a topic of study generated from Latham's work and thinking with artists, art historians and curators filled me with enthusiasm.

The subject of burning, an action central to Latham's ideas, developed from a series of research events programmed at the Henry Moore Institute, where I am Head of Sculpture Studies, to accompany the trio of exhibitions: *Jean Tinguely: 'Spiral' (1965)*, *Stephen Cripps: Pyrotechnic Sculptor and Dennis Oppenheim: Thought Collision Factories*. These three artists deployed acts of burning in various ways, each working with the unpredictable nature of fire – indeed, they all made sculptural events that required the fire service to be called. The twenty-seven-minute spectacle of Tinguely's (1925–91) auto-destructive machine *Homage to New York*, presented in the garden of the Museum of Modern Art in 1960, came to an end when it burst into flames and the New York Fire Department was called; Cripps (1952–82), himself a member of The London Fire Brigade, caused flames to dance at The Acme Gallery in London in 1978 during an explosive performance that brought a fire engine to the rescue; four years later, Oppenheim's (1938–2011) firework-laden sculpture *Launching Structure #2* filled the

Bonlow Gallery in New York with smoke, and the fire service had to rush in to evacuate spectators. Fireworks, as Jo Melvin thoughtfully discusses, fascinated Oppenheim. He saw them as an analogy to the creative process and to the artist's endemic fear of ideas running dry.

Cripps, too, employed fireworks as sculptural material and, as artist William Raban recalls in the following pages, his careful control of the volatile medium of fire made each of his pyrotechnic sculptures singular events that impacted on all of the senses. Burning, to use a term coined by Ursula Ströbele, is 'polysensual': it involves sight, sound, taste and smell, as well as the sensation of heat on the skin. Fire is a palpable medium, with the action feeling its way into the future through reports recorded though words, sounds, images – the legacy of after-glow. To experience burning with only one sense is to spark in the imagination another four registers of perception.

Fireworks and flares are at their most material at the very moment when they begin to dissolve, a visual spectacle that unfolds to a soundtrack of bangs and bursts. Annea Lockwood embraces the sound of burning in her works: in her interview with Irene Revell she describes how her search for a perfect burning sound led her to ignite a piano, a process whose visual effects were a background to the 'popping sounds' and crackling of flames. Where there is burning there is smoke, an ephemeral material that travels to sites far from the fire-event and intimately into the body through the mouth and nose. Anthony McCall presents in this journal issue scores from his *Fire Cycles III* (1974), a sculpture-event that used fire, and its travelling companion, smoke, over an extended duration. For those who were there, it was an immersive experience: the smoke literally entered the body. He used drawings to plan each fire event, developing these into scores that opened the possibility of future realisation. Marlie Mul's project for 'Burning' pays attention to smoke; her concern, though, is the ingestion of second-hand cigarette smoke. In a set of drawings produced specifically for *NOIT*, she reflects on an activity that has been

variously associated with social values, its promotion and control reflecting hegemonic order.

The act of burning is dynamic: it is a transformative process that evokes alchemy, the medieval forerunner of chemistry. As Donald Smith tells us, Derek Jarman pronounced that 'Fire destroys the old, creates a place for the new'. Camila Sposati studies such transformative qualities of burning, with her research spanning a number of sites, including a burning gas crater in Darvaza, located in the centre of the Karakum desert in Turkmenistan. This 60-metre wide, 20-metre deep hole has been burning since a gas-exploration accident took place. Burning can be intended, or accidental. It requires a human agent and, as Marin Sullivan notes, with the rare exception of spontaneous combustion, fire is dependent on a reactant and a human actant. For burning to occur, fire needs to be ignited and, in turn, that ignition requires material – be it gas, books, pianos or cigarettes. Burning is an active declaration unfolding over time and working on matter. It is a source of light and energy, a consumer of material. Sustained fire lets off light and heat: basic forces that are essential to human survival. Perhaps it is the precarity of fire that makes it so evocative. Lucy Reynolds discusses Annabel Nicholson's use of 'precarious light sources', paying particular attention to the work *Matches* (1974), where two performers read from a text about candle-power by match light. The strike of a match can ignite or fade away: it is an instant that is sustained only by the matter that fire meets.

The focus of this journal is on burning within the realm of art, but of course this is a register where fire-starting acts are consciously created. The examples discussed here are mindful of the charge of a gesture that elsewhere is used for different goals, be it destruction for partisan gain, to encourage growth, to continue a ritualistic tradition, to alert, to heat, to induce fear, to welcome, to celebrate. The list is long. Burning accompanies human activities. Art is concerned with trying to understand our place in the world; fire is undeniably part of that. Burning was of

vital importance to John Latham. Claire Louise Staunton traces his 'Skoob Tower Ceremonies' from the first of these book-burning events in 1964 at Braziers Park, carefully thinking them through Latham's own Time-Base Theory. At the end of these pages is a DVD onto which a series of 'Skoob Tower Ceremonies' have been burned. In 2014 artist Neal White, working with curator Sophie von Olfers, presented the exhibition *God is Great (10<sup>-19</sup>) – John Latham and Neal White* at Portikus in Frankfurt. Here, the dynamism and event-quality of the 'Skoob Tower Ceremonies' was maintained through their presentation some eight years after Latham's passing. As William Raban notes, Latham is a 'great British artist of the post-war period' – a claim clearly evidenced by his legacy and lasting impact.

I would very much like to thank all of the contributors for their thoughtful responses. I have learned a great deal from every text. Very special thanks are to Claire Louise Staunton of FlatTime House for making the invitation; it has been a pleasure to work with Claire, as well as John Hill and Mary Vettise, who have tirelessly worked on the production of this journal. I hope that this issue, to use the terms of our subject, ignites new research through its proposal of burning as a productive force and fire as a medium for art-making.