

NOIT — 1

JL: Time-Based Portraits

November 2013

Guest Editor: Antony Hudek

NOIT is a creative journal published by Flat Time House and Camberwell Press.

Comprised of new writing and visual contributions, **NOIT** will explore the theoretical concerns and artwork of John Latham, and their continued relevance.

The title **NOIT** is a term Latham created by reversing the suffix '-tion' which converts verbs into abstract nouns.

Its inversion 'noit' therefore transforms nouns into actions or events. 'Noit' can also be read as 'no it', the sign of an activity that 'defies its own definition by denying the validity of any given definition' (John Latham, 1970).

Flat Time House Institute (FTHo) is a gallery, archive and artist's residency space in the former home and studio of John Latham (1921–2006), recognised as one of the most significant and influential British post-war artists. In 2003, Latham declared the house a living sculpture naming it FTHo after his theory of time, "Flat Time". Until his death, John Latham opened his door to anyone interested in thinking about art.

It is in this spirit that Flat Time House opened in 2008. Today, FTHo is a dynamic and autonomous institution with an emphasis on research-based art.

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'Here lies the body'

Antony Hudek

For the first issue of *NOIT*, I invited a number of people who knew John Latham or are familiar with his work to remember an episode or incident involving the artist, his art or ideas. Each episode is ordered in the issue according to its 'time-base', Latham's term for an event's temporal signature, from very brief and precise to very long (or vague or open-ended). By classifying these recollections chronologically, but not linearly, the issue aims not only to reveal new facts about Latham but also to connect the disparate dots, as it were, of his friends, family and those who acknowledge (or not) his influence. This network of names and places scattered across time and space raises questions about how to remember Latham seven years after his death, in print and mainly through language – two mediums he fought so hard to transform. Yet despite the mainly linguistic form of the present collection (which Latham would have no doubt viewed with suspicion) the following entries remain true to the artist's unshakable belief in the event-structured nature of our universe, by dwelling not so much on the man himself as on the temporal folds and creases his ideas have generated, and continue to generate.

In Latham's view, a unique or, as to use his terminology, 'least' event did not exist as such, at least not in our everyday conception of existence: it is only through repetition, or 'insistence', that the event's absolute singularity can appear, necessarily deferred and patterned, that is, rationalised by the human mind incapable of conceiving absolute and positive difference (the 0 without the 1). Latham's early use of the spray gun and later deployment of translucent glass are attempts at representing creation from a lost original event. The very futility of the act constitutes its aesthetic value, beyond the rational grasp of a mind bent

on demonstrable facts and stable objects. Yet this aesthetics of the ungraspable unique event is not alien to the scientist or philosopher: they too attempt to reverse engineer the universe to its big bang, or seek to derive principles from what eludes capture, such as language. Art after physics would be this point of convergence where disciplines come to terms with their shared pursuit of the eventfulness of the cosmos.

Many of the reminiscences in this issue refer to Latham's trespassing of the norms and boundaries of the static, into the space-time of the event – much more difficult, although not impossible to chart. Latham, we are told, would not hesitate to modify the appearance of his art on display in museums, to the consternation (or, more rarely, complicity) of their staff. This contempt for permanence had a straining effect on his relationships with individuals and organisations – that is to say, with legacy. Latham's trenchant ghost (yet always a gentle one, as many of the authors here hasten to add) continues to undermine the stability of any monument one would want to erect to him, including this journal. 'Latham' remains too dense, too playful, too quick to coalesce, at least for now, into a fixed entity, those to which museums and publishers devote retrospectives and monographic tomes.

Latham's short film *Britannica* is an apt reminder of his playful and disrespectful attitude towards any presumption of immutable knowledge. Two entries in this issue return to the context of the *Britannica's* production, Latham's solo exhibition at the Lisson Gallery in 1970 where the encyclopaedia was filmed, frame by frame, for a number of hours each day. *Britannica* reduces the body of knowledge collected in the encyclopaedia to a mere six minutes of strobe-like pages turning at accelerated speed. No time for words, the film seems to suggest, only the repetition of almost similar impulses on the retina, itself connected to the brain. Powerless to process the incoming data, the 'mind/body duality resolves itself by aid of the visual, pre-literal

image of an event'.ⁱⁱ In other words, or in the absence of words, the body becomes shock-absorbent, one event in a string of interconnected events constituting this particular experience. This nameless cognitive-somatic activity may come close to what Latham referred to, in many different contexts, as 'noit' – if something could indeed be 'no it' – since it 'defies its own definition by denying validity to any given definition',ⁱⁱⁱ particularly those proffered with all the self-assurance of an encyclopaedia.

Latham's *Britannica* makes clear that, despite the recurrence of books in his art, he was more interested in what they stand for, namely logocentric power, than in what they purport to say. As several authors in this collection observe, Latham's book objects – however destroyed, burned, spray-painted or oozing with plaster – act as traps for interpretation: one is always tempted to read into them. By blocking this interpretational urge, Latham's work irritates, but also forces the viewer to look beyond the (intel)legible to become sensitive to events. Thus *Britannica* is not so much a lesson in speed-reading as in speed-thinking and -looking. No scientific or verifiable knowledge will result from its viewing: 'The conception of "science" ... as straightforward logic is a misser', writes Latham. Know it, and all you get is 'sighence'.^{iv}

Both Latham's *Britannica* and his various *Time Base Rollers* – rolled canvases mechanically activated by the viewer to scroll up or down – owe a debt to filmic time punctuated by the insistent event of the frame. The *Roller's* centre represents anthropological time, where the human eye ceases to see individual frames and begins to believe in continuous motion.^v This sliver of realism is belied by the simultaneous time bands occurring alongside anthropological time: from the least event to the extreme left of the *Roller* to the most protracted astrophysical and metaphysical times to the far right. Latham had begun mobilising canvases as early as 1963, but these early works still allowed the viewer to engage in non-reflexive

contemplation, and his or her anthropocentrism to go unchallenged. In the *Time Base Rollers* from the early 1970s onwards, by contrast, Latham alters painting in a similar way as he did books: into cognitive and aesthetic traps thwarting the viewer's pursuit of aesthetic, scientific or any other kind of predetermined knowledge. By adopting the *Roller's* unfurling of various concurrent time bases, this issue of *NOIT* overlays the anthropological times of John Latham and his peers with the much longer and blurrier time bases of his ideas and art.

Comprehensive and disembodied knowledge is thus impossible. Noit, Latham tells us, 'deals with a grammatical distinction between a neuter world and a presumably sexual one. So no it means to dispense with those distinctions leaving the whole event as a manifestation of the personal...'^{vi} In seeking to avoid the 'it' of the impersonal, the 'whole event' becomes a manifestation of the sexualised, the local and the specific. But this personal is not merely the subjective, which sees only the slimmest line of clarity in the wider swath of time. This issue – *NOIT No I* – seeks to avoid at once the 'it' and the 'I', by covering as much of Latham's life as possible from a multitude of personal points of view, without lapsing into hagiography or mythology. Just as Latham could imagine West Lothian mounds of shale as outlines of prehistoric figures seen from above, this issue aims to re-member Latham's corpus from the altitude offered by historical distance. But biographers, scholars and other monument-spotters are bound to be disappointed: these parts fail to cohere into a body; the chronology is erratic, redundant at times, even contradictory. This is not about impartial or intimate knowledge, but about conveying the dynamics of an 'individual engaged on an activity that is undefined in its own terms, so that he is able to "speak" to all levels'.^{vii}

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ⁱ John Latham, 'Least event as a habit... how basic is physics?', *Studio International* (December 1970), p. 252.

ⁱⁱ John Latham, undated letter to Jürgen Harten, Jürgen Harten Archive, Berlin.

ⁱⁱⁱ Latham, 'Least event as a habit...', p. 252.

^{iv} John Latham, 'Noit for Control', *Control* n. 3 (1967), n.p.

^v John Latham, 'Time-Base Roller' (c.1972), *The Portable John Latham*, Antony Hudek and Athanasios Velios (eds.), London: Occasional Papers, p. 51.

^{vi} John Latham, 'Noit Terms' (c.1972), *The Portable John Latham*, p. 106.

^{vii} Letter from the 'noit panel' to APG, 19 October 1970, Tate Archive, London.