

Now forget everything you ever knew or thought or saw, and imagine there was nothing,
nothing at all. A blank, dark nothing.

The story is that in this dark blank, a littlest song sang ^{her}self. And when that was over and
it was blank and dark again, the song sang ^{it}self again. The song became so interested that she
sang herself over and over again, ^{and} ~~so~~ ~~that~~ she became a steady note, ~~which/what~~ trilling.

A while later she noticed something - she had no space and no difference, so as she noticed this ~~s~~
she slowed down a little. And there was now a different song, and a space came between the two of
them

Song and Habit

Contribution to *Now Forget Everything you ever Knew*¹

John Latham viewed the universe as fundamentally a structure of purely temporal events. To understand how the universe could be spatial as well as temporal he explored the idea that space emerges from a difference between two purely temporal patterns of event, which he called Habit A and Habit B. His first sustained statement of this idea is at section 3 of his essay 'Time-Base and Determination in Events'. This was published in the exhibition catalogue *State of Mind: John Latham* (Düsseldorf Städtische Kunsthalle, 1975) and later reprinted in a slightly different version, *Time-Base and Determination in Events* (London, Tate Gallery, 1976). The idea is further developed in his *Event Structure: approach to a basic contradiction* (Calgary, Syntax, 1981).

Habits A and B are presented as an alternation of an occurrence of a least event and an occurrence of nothing. The difference between them is that Habit A continues in the same direction while Habit B reverses back on itself, changing direction after each occurrence of the least event. Habit A is accordingly described as a traversing event and Habit B as non-traversing. Habits A and B together provide a contrast that John conceived as bringing a spatial dimension into existence.

My guess is that this piece of poetic writing is an exploratory metaphorical depiction of both the origin of all things and the origin of space that predates these theoretical writings. The littlest song is a least event. The song singing itself or herself in this dark state of nothingness is an occurrence of a least event against an empty background. The song singing herself over and over again is Habit A.

The alternation between song and nothingness is like a trill, except that instead of an alternation between slightly different notes the alternation is between a note and its absence. The constancy of this alternation can be regarded as producing a steady note.

Describing a least event as a song, and the song as becoming interested suggests a mental component to fundamental microstructural elements. John saw no sharp division between mental and nonmental because he viewed them both in terms of a more basic comprehensive frame of reference, which he called the time-base spectrum. Teleological, goal-directed activity

¹ For the October 2020 Chelsea Space exhibition *John Latham: Now Forget Everything You Ever Knew*, I was invited, along with Anna Barham and Ifeanyi Awachie, to produce a short response to an untitled undated text from John's archive. The three of us participated in an open discussion of the text as part of the show. Documentation can be found at <https://www.chelseaspace.org/archive/latham-info.html>

occurs at all levels and scales of existence on this spectrum, not just the biological and psychological. The song's becoming interested leading to her singing herself over and over again finds expression in John's theoretical writings in his use of the term 'insistance' to talk of this tendency for events to recur, changing the spelling of the term to reflect his special meaning as something with connotations of intentional activity.

Habit B exists in contrast to Habit A in John's theoretical writings as an unexplained contingent fact. But here the song in Habit A is given mental powers of observation, preference and action, which it uses to transform the habit into a slower version of Habit A. This produces a different habit so the comparison between them involves a difference. But does it introduce a space between them?

My guess is that John came to think of this difference as solely temporal and not a good way of seeing how space could emerge from purely temporal habits. I think it is likely that he subsequently came up with the idea of Habit B as a more plausible contrast to Habit A for the emergence of space.

I write about the role of these habits in John's worldview and their appearance in some of his artworks in NOIT—4 pp. 102-111.