

The Incidental Person

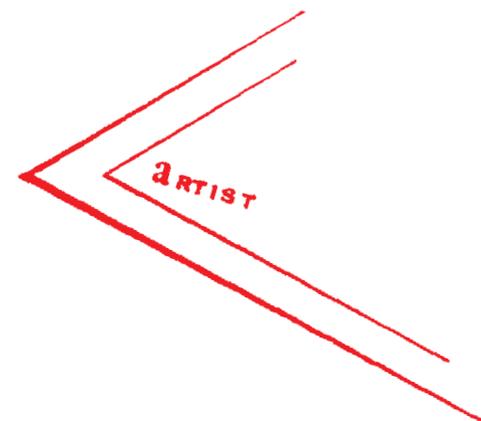
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Curated by Antony Hudek

Contributors' names appear in red in the text. Darker red indicates faculty and students from Portland State University MFA Art and Social Practice Concentration.

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Cover image: Invitation to APG seminar, Royal College of Art, London, 27 October 1977 (detail), John Latham Archive (JLA), reference 10/2411, Folder 188.



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the incidental person admit one



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The British artist John Latham (1921–2006) coined the expression the “Incidental Person” (IP) to qualify an individual who engages in non-art contexts – industry, politics, education – while avoiding the “for/against”, “you vs. me” disposition typically adopted to resolve differences. The IP, Latham argued, “may be able, given access to matters of public interest ranging from the national economic, through the environmental and departments of the administration to the ethical in social or **Ron Bernstein** orientation, to ‘put forward answers to questions we have not yet asked.’”¹

Diagrammatically, the IP transforms the linear, two-dimensional plane of conflict into a three-dimensional, triangular network that fosters the flow of ideas and the interconnections between individual perspectives.

Though the IP was Latham’s own term, it was to find practical application within Artist Placement Group, or APG, the “artist consultancy and research organisation” conceived in 1965 by Barbara Steveni and established a year later with Barry Flanagan, Latham and Jeffrey Shaw.² (APG’s fluctuating membership would include over the years, among others, Ian Breakwell, Stuart Brisley, Garth Evans, David Hall, Anna Ridley, Rolf and Ros Sachse, as well as industrial and political representatives.) Steveni’s role in negotiating invitations (not commissions) from private corporations, non-profit organizations and governmental bodies was instrumental to APG’s success in placing artists in situations where they would be paid and, more importantly, would enjoy – at least during the placements’ initial feasibility period – complete freedom from any contractual obligation to produce a material outcome (be it an object or a report). Discussions around the various APG initiatives would then be imbedded in art and non-art contexts, in the form of pub **Barbara Steveni** discussions and exhibitions such as *Inno 70: Art and Economics* at the Hayward Gallery, London, in 1971, and, upon the invitation of **Jason Zimmerman** Joseph Beuys, at *Documenta 6*, Kassel, in 1977.

Although it was not embraced by all APG members to qualify their engagement, the notion of IP in placement allowed Latham to give a **Ariana Jacob** particular form to the “time-based” or “(T)” framework upon which he based his work. In the (T) framework, any thing – from the molecular interaction to the explosion in the universe – is determined not by basic

elements of space and matter (this would be the space-based or (S) framework), but by time, and by the basic temporal unit Latham called “the least event”.

The implications of the shift from space-and-matter to time-and-event are far-reaching. Gone, for example, is the division between subject and object. Formerly perceived as ontologically different, in the (T) framework subject and object co-exist in varying simultaneous temporal frequencies or, to use Latham’s terminology, in various “time-bases”. **Obj Joachim Pfeufer** reflects themselves no longer occupy stable positions in the taxonomic grids belonging to distinct disciplines. If, as matter, a rock formation, an eighteenth-century chair, an encyclopedia and a microchip belong to incompatible categories of objects, as events they partake in a shared infinite “score”, their positions defined in terms of relative frequencies – **rel Laurel Kurtz & Sandy Sampson** native to one another but also to the person determining their position. Thus the chair (made of wood, crafted over time in a particular historical context, in which I am sitting) may intersect in an event-based structure with the rock (developed over millennia, but extracted only recently by sophisticated machinery).

Another opposition to dissolve as a consequence of the shift from matter to time is that between art and politics. For art and politics have no particular significance beyond the context of their formulation, and the quality of a certain politics, no less than of an art practice, depends on its relative long-term effectiveness and appropriateness to its intended time and place. There is some irony to the fact that APG is now being seen as a prime example of a politicized artistic collective, when at the time it was taken to task **Keiko Sei** (most notably by Stuart Brisley, Gustav Metzger and Caroline Tisdall) for being politically neutral. This apparent neutrality – which was in fact a repudiation of the politics/art divide – represents a key characteristic of the IP for Latham:

In the course of conducting a professional role an APG artist (Incidental Person) has to *approach* all contexts without any declared personal bias (if one exists). The work will demonstrate or indicate the strongest lines of difference in interpretation if it is **k Katy Asher** known that the position is approached without preconceptions, temporary enthusiasms,

publicly declared causes supported, political formulations already circulated. The strength of a well-stated new viewpoint can be the greater for this adopted independence, the political impact included.³

Finally, incidentality lifts the entrenched opposition between artist and non-artist. What the creative individual (an expression covering anyone dedicated to a particular life practice) brings to bear on situations is not a set of skills honed in art school and rewarded (or not) in the market place, but an awareness of her or his relative position on an infinite and infinitely variable temporal score.

This ability to see both the object qua object and the object as a dynamic web of forces allows the IP to imagine novel solutions without a particular expertise of the field under scrutiny. APG's radicalism lies precisely in the desire to promote the inclusion of the individual sometimes referred to as an "artist" into the wider complex of events that inform our world, from the food we ingest as singular body-events to the decisions we make as collective social events. If the IP can only be, by default, an "artist", "this is not to say that any person who takes up an art medium will qualify as an IP within the meaning of this specification".⁴ To avoid the confusion between the artist-as-IP (potentially anyone) and the professional "artist", we might as well

dispense with the public use of this word artist, in the same way that we are supposed to be dispensing with sex-discriminatory and value-judging language. APG has put forward alternatives from time to time, Incidental Person having some advantages, if referring to one in whom certain specially formulative capabilities show up. There is a tendency for society to abandon such a person, who then comes under impossible pressures. The APG is interested in such people, whether they have run the intuitive line of "artist" or some other...⁵

APG, however, was not aimed at recuperating self-proclaimed outsiders and pacifying radical practices; rather its core belief was "that society is starved of an important informing ingredient when creative people are kept outside the working parts of governments, organisations and institutions".⁶

Notoriously short of money, perpetually on the margins of the official art circuit, Robert Filliou undoubtedly qualifies as an IP for his steadfast conviction that society was starved for creativity, not the creative person for social status. Filliou in fact played an incidental part in the emergence of APG: while staying in Latham's and Steveni's house, Filliou and Daniel Spoerri asked Steveni (Latham was in the US at the time) to find discarded material for their contribution to the 1962 Festival of Misfits at Gallery One in London. It was while Steveni was searching for material – in the middle of the night, in an industrial estate in full activity on the outskirts of London – that she realized how disconnected the artist was from the underlying structures of society, and that she experienced a "Eureka moment", as she put it, which led to the founding of APG.

In the early 1960s, Filliou was living in Paris, where he befriended another IP, the American-born architect and painter Joachim Pfeufer. Together, Filliou and Pfeufer developed the Poipoidrome, an ambulant architectural environment in which visitors/users could give free reign to their imagination and where the distinction between work and play would blur. The Poipoidrome owes its name to "poipoi", an expression with which – according to the Dutch architect and ethnologist Herman Haan, who relayed the information to Pfeufer – the Dogons in Mali would greet each other. When two Dogons crossed paths, one would ask the other "How is your cow?", to which the other would answer "Poipoi". Every subsequent question would then receive the same "Poipoi" response. By naming their structure after this ritual of politeness, Filliou and Pfeufer hinted at a different form of mutual recognition, a de-centered zone (at least with respect to Europe) for the deployment of generous and futile creativity.

Taking Filliou's and Pfeufer's Poipoidrome into account expands the definition of incidentality to include, after APG's first two tenets – that "context is half the work", and "the function of medium in art is determined not so much by the factual object, as by the process and the levels of attention to which the work aims"⁷ – an emphasis on generosity and the value of (free) exchange. For Latham, language and money were the two most divisive mediums in contemporary

society, and in his view the IP, when placed in a new context, was expected to be able translate them into the (T) framework, where the value of money and language disappears in favor of longer-term preoccupations such as investment (rather than speculation) and poetic intuition (rather than administrative know-how). All the incidental projects featured in this exhibition stress the durational, the slow or progressive encounter over the quick fix, since the IP knows full well that time is not (always) money, but rather a means of approaching a context, of exploring the different angles from which to study a given situation and seek to improve it.

When, instead of "masters" and "visionaries", the IP is chosen as the unit with which to narrate the history of art (or any other history), the canon quickly finds itself open to question. Substituting the names of Picasso and Pollock with Cage and Duchamp is not nearly incidental enough: a "true" incidental history of art would have to consider the "artist" at varying frequencies and in different contexts, from the short-term recurrences of body-events to her or his long-term effects on others, as well as the long-term effects of other persons and contexts on him or her. In sum, an incidental history would be impossible to transcribe; only some of its fragments could be performed, highlighting one or a few frequencies.

It follows that this exhibition cannot, in good faith, pretend to recover overlooked IPs in official art history, no more than it can legitimately aspire to representing a lineage of IPs from Latham to today. More incidentally, *The Incidental Person* at apexart seeks to underscore the power of the incidental approach to such problematics as global warming, reading, political repression, singing, horseback riding, money, family, raft-building, printing, psychiatry and making pancakes. The question is not whether such approaches warrant the name of art, but whether the diversity of their manifestations serves to underscore the potential of incidentality to address the innumerable events that constitute our contexts, from the apparently trivial to the purportedly momentous.

Postscript

There is something both unsettling and gratifying about not opening packages one receives, like the box of home-baked biscuits R.'s mother sends him, or used to send him, every year. The package received in 2008 may have been the last, he sensed, and so he refused to open it. The box would remain unopened: an inert thing sitting on a shelf, wrapped in brown paper, weighed, addressed, its content priced and described, scribbled over with handwritten words and numbers.

Opening or not a received package presents, in R.'s words, an "essential ethical dilemma". Not opening betrays a wish to kill time, to preserve a gesture doomed to pass in the unwrapping, to not face the obligation of catching gratitude with reciprocal generosity. On the other hand, opening may betray an indifference to the giver's intention, in favour of the object's materiality, its capacity to fulfill or disappoint expectations.

This exhibition, curated from across the Atlantic, had to contend with this dilemma, of whether to open the packages sent directly to the gallery by the participating IPs – without the curator having had a chance to see them – or try to preserve the gestures, the unwrapped gifts, in their incidentality. In order for the dilemma to remain open, unresolved, APG's 1971 exhibition at the Hayward and Filliou's and Pfeufer's Poipoidrome served as structural models for the spatialising of fundamentally temporal, event-based practices. Opened packages, like documented events, allow the process of giving to be recorded and to continue. May this exhibition, then, at the cost of having contributed to objectifying incidentality, at least open onto nothing but a renewed appreciation for the incidental approach.

Antony Hudek

For more on *The Incidental Person*, and to see images of works in the exhibition, please visit: www.apexart.org/exhibitions/hudek.

- ¹ *The Artist as Incidental Person: new role vis-à-vis government*, John Latham Archive (JLA) 13/4231, Folder 335.
- ² *Artists & Decision Making*, APG Research, London, 1988, JLA 13/4654, Folder 347, Sub-Folder 349.
- ³ *The Incidental Person – approach to government*, JLA 11/2745, Folder 233, Sub-Folder 242.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ *Studio International*, March–April 1976, pp. 169–170.
- ⁶ *The Incidental Person/Approach to Government*, JLA 6/1781, Folder 85.
- ⁷ Ibid.