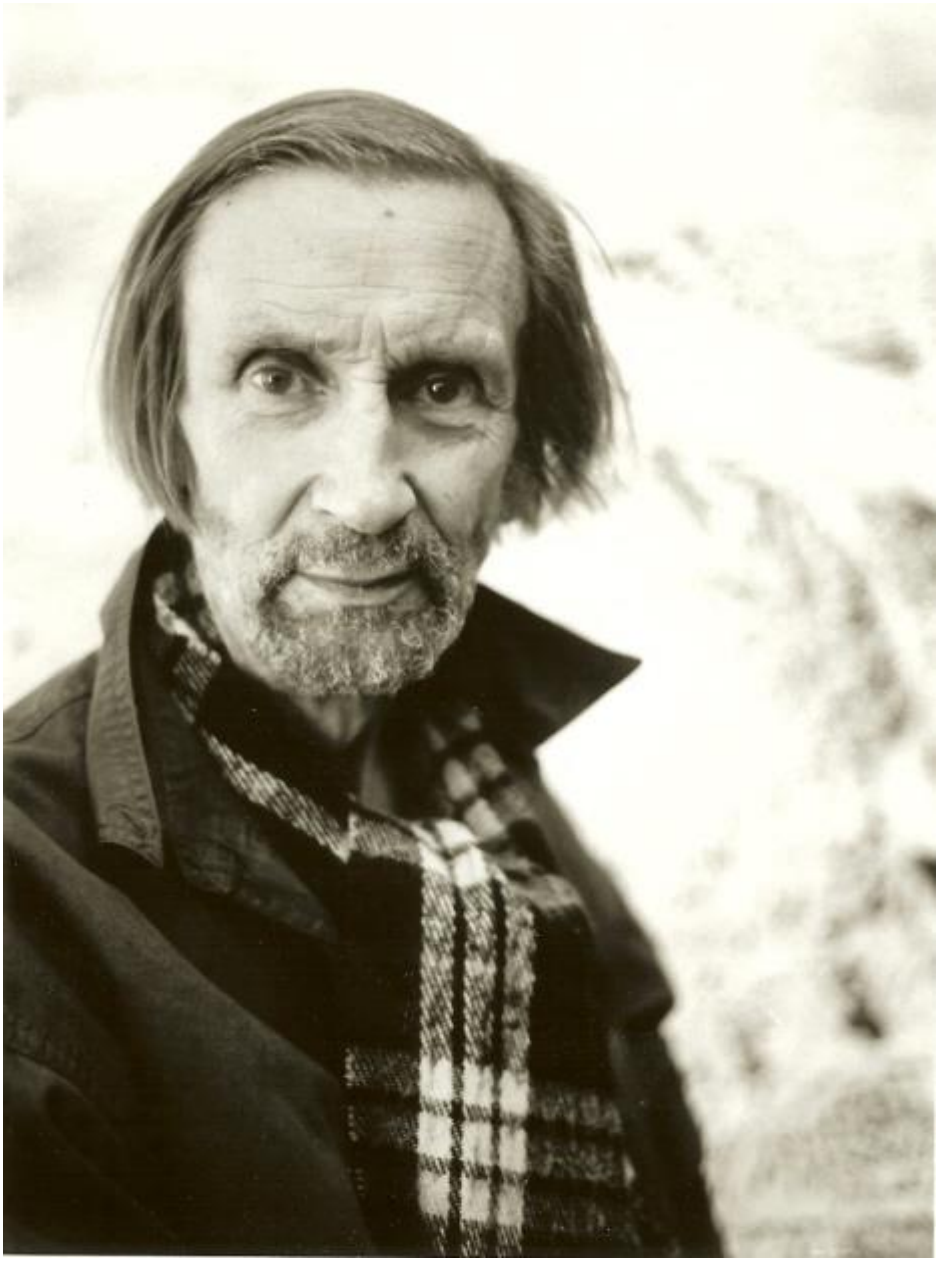
THE LAST AVANT-GARDIST: JOHN LATHAM'S HOLISTIC VISION [1992]

JOHN A.WALKER (COPYRIGHT, 2009)



Portrait of John Latham in 1994. Photo copyright John A. Walker.

'Perhaps the only genuine radical in British art of the post-war era', Waldemar Januszczak, *The Guardian,* 1987.

'A poor artist and a bogus philosopher', Tim Hilton, *The Guardian,* 1991.

These contrasting critical judgements illustrate the divergent responses John Latham's art regularly provokes. To some he is a visionary, to others a vandal. He has been called an anarchist and a conservative. His position in British art is a curious one; he is both known and obscure, a success and a failure, respected and despised. The indifference, antagonism and misrepresentation emanating from some quarters of the art world is matched by the strong backing of the Lisson Gallery, shows at the Tate Gallery, works in major international collections and a considerable acknowledgement of the importance of his contribution over several decades to assemblage, performance, destructive and conceptual art, experimental film and video.

'Art after Physics', a major retrospective exhibition of Latham's work at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, [October 1991-January 1992] provided a rare opportunity for the present generation of undergraduates, most of whom have never heard of Marshall McLuhan, to discover one of Britain's most important living artists. Latham is a prophet more honoured abroad than at home; the Oxford show originated in Stuttgart at the Staatsgalerie, and the last substantial retrospective exhibition of his work was initiated by the Stadtische Kunsthalle,

Düsseldorf, in 1975.

Latham's return to Oxford marked the resumption of a debate begun in 1963, when his reliefs, constructed from burnt and torn books, were shown at the Bear Lane Gallery. At the time they prompted strong debate amongst students and in the press, and the challenge to language and books presented in their contention that Western civilisation was a 'burnt-out case' worried many academics.

I had thought through my years of study of Latham that I had mastered his work, but the extent and variety of the Oxford exhibition stopped me in my tracks, inviting a complete reassessment. The titles and fragments of text in one book relief alone suggest a plethora of allusions - to Latham's own life, to art, literature and science. The Oxford exhibition contained over forty works including spray-gun paintings, book reliefs, a time-base roller and the infamous, anti--Clement Greenberg piece *Art and Culture* (1966/7), a documentation of the action *Still and Chew.* Chrissie Iles [the curator] had also added several extra works: two early paintings from the 1950s - one, *Praying Figure,* indebted to Francis Bacon; three glass and book reliefs from the early 1980s; and a new, free-standing glass and book sculpture, *God is Great,* which incorporates the Bible, the Koran, the Talmud and the Torah. The works fitted the upper galleries of the museum splendidly and their arrangement and hanging were exemplary.

Latham, like Francis Bacon, is rare amongst British artists in finding inspiration in Spanish art. The blackness of his reliefs echoes the blacks so typical of Velasquez; *The Burial of Count Orgaz* (1958) is based on a painting of the same

name by El Greco.

John Latham, *Burial of Count Orgaz*, (1958). Tate Gallery Collection. Photo copyright the John Latham Estate and the Lisson gallery.

----------There is something poignant and tragic about Latham's assemblages of charred and

damaged books, wire and plaster. German scholars tend to discuss his art and ideas from a philosophical perspective, but the historical and social contexts must not be forgotten. The book reliefs, for instance, were made during the era of 'bomb culture' and CND marches, a decade or so after the World War in which Latham fought, in which over 50 million died and in which the horrors of the holocaust and atomic explosions occurred.

Since European 'civilisation' caused this unprecedented outbreak of violence, destruction and atrocity, it could be argued that Latham was right to indict it, to depict civilisation as a ruin, a system dominated by logic and language which had gone terribly wrong. Given such a perspective, he would eventually have to search for the source of the error, and in doing so he was undoubtedly right to learn from scientists like Clive Gregory and Anita Kohsen (with Latham, founders of the Institute for the Study of Mental Images in the 1950s), who were committed to inter-disciplinary research for the purpose of understanding the totality and not just the parts. He was also right to devise an alternative conceptual schema - 'event structure' - which he felt would help to overcome the divisions between nations, between science and art, and between science and religion which, for many centuries, have bedevilled the human species.

As an artist who has made time and events rather than objects and space his primary concerns, Latham has made several important contributions to the transitory, temporal medium of performance. Factual descriptions and photographic documentation of some of his performances in the 1960s can be found in *John Latham: Least Event,* a booklet published by the Lisson Gallery in

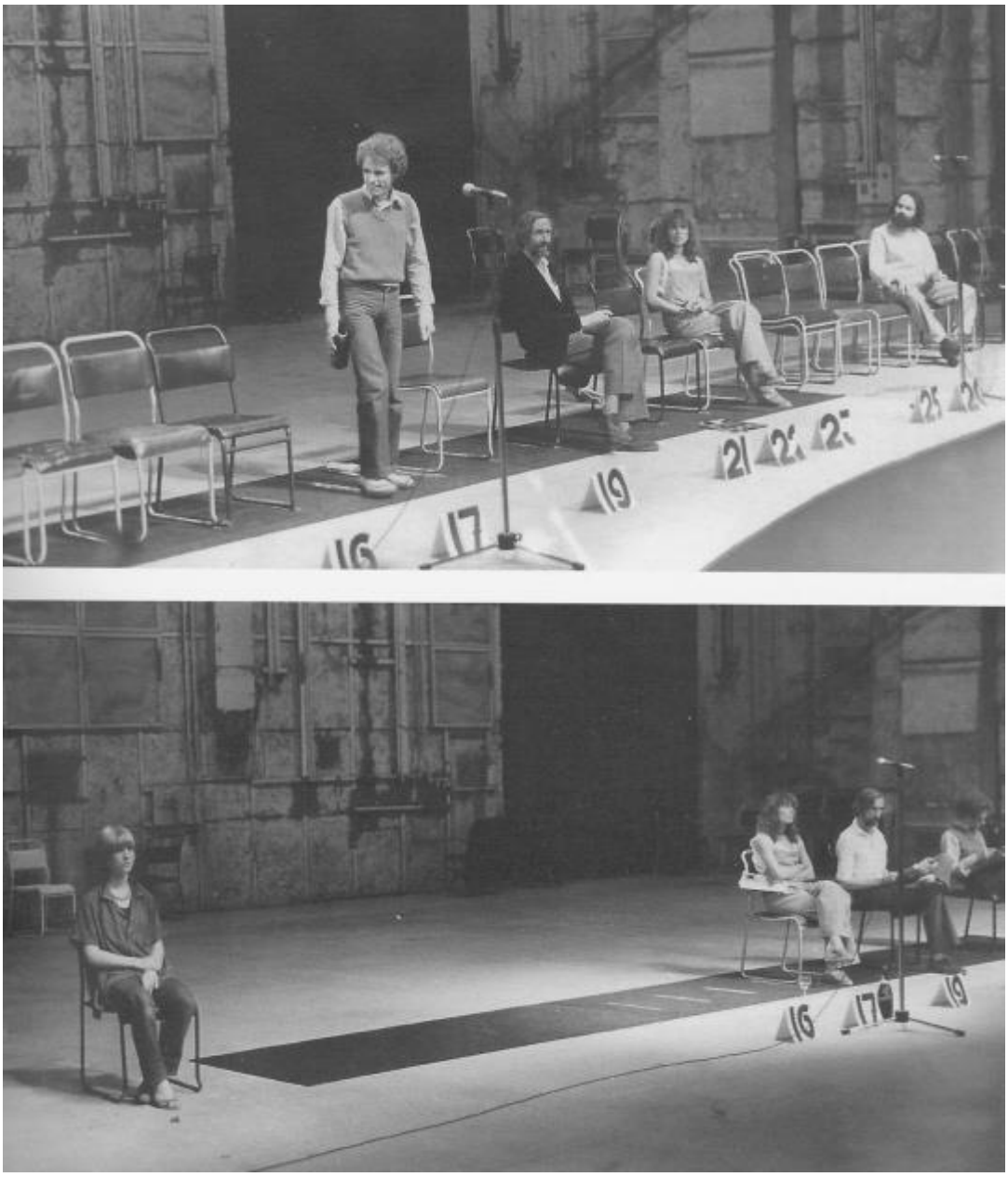
1970. To gain a complete picture of Latham's work, one needed to have more information than was available at Oxford about these non-object based activities: for example, his contributions to the Destruction in Art Symposium held in London in 1966 (his Skoob Tower ceremonies which took place in the streets and adventure playgrounds); and the 'book plumbing', mixed-media performance events and environments created, with other artists, in the basement of the alternative bookshop Better Books in the Charing Cross Road in 1967.

John Latham, Skoob Tower event Bloomsbury, 1966. Photo John Prosser.

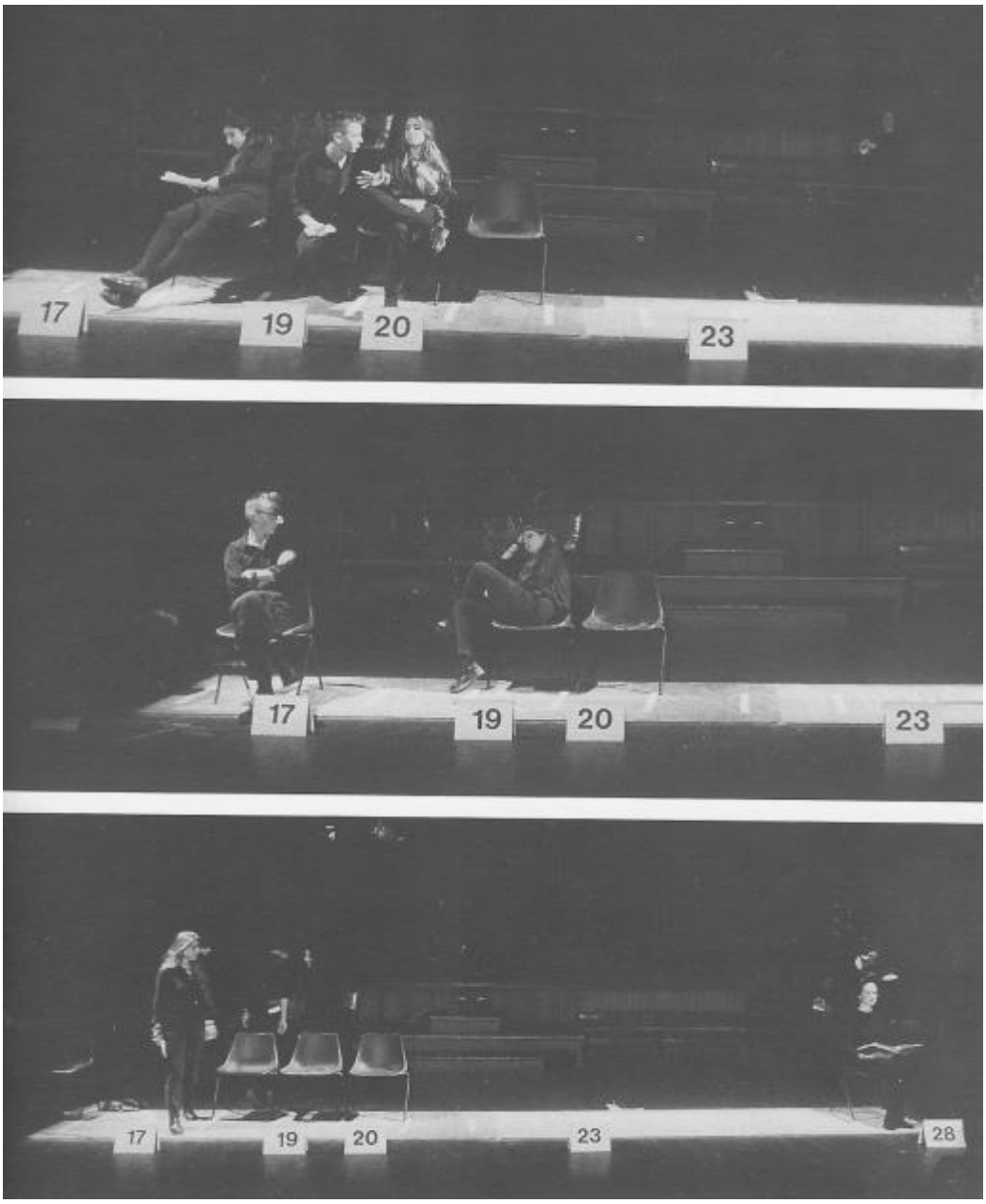
The exhibition itself did not include a reconstruction of the three-dimensional structure *Skoob Box* (1960, later destroyed) or of the ecological work/marine tool

Big Breather **(1973), or of the polemical, triangular display unit** ***Offer for Sale,*** **a piece about art and economics exhibited in The Gallery, London, in 1974. Nor did it describe in any great detail the research Latham undertook with the Artist Placement Group (APG) during its projects in Scotland and Germany. It was, however, valuable to see the re-interpretation of his performance piece,** ***Government of the First and Thirteenth Chair,*** **first performed at the Riverside Studios, London, in 1978 and performed during the exhibition by students from the Ruskin School of Art, at the Oxford Union. There were also two showings of his films from the 1960s and more recent video pieces at MOMA and at the London Film Makers' Co-op - a belated tribute, since his experimental films have been largely omitted from standard histories of independent and avant-garde British cinema.**

In ***Government of the First and Thirteenth Chair*** **(the Oxford performance of which was recorded on video) chairs are the key props, echoing the game of musical chairs, or Ionesco's tragic farce** ***The Chairs*** **(Paris 1952, London 1957). Philosophers and conceptual artists are also fond of citing mundane objects such as chairs: witness Joseph Kosuth's** ***One and Three Chairs*** **. To Latham, the chairs are ready-mades with certain useful properties: stability; a close relationship to the human body; different bases from which the sitter can speak with different voices; and the potential for several to occupy the same space, by means of stacking.**



John Latham*, Government of the first and thirteenth chair*, (1978). Performance, London: Riverside Studios. Photos Rolf Sachsse.



John Latham*, Government of the first and thirteenth chair*, (1991). Performance, Oxford: Oxford Union Debating chamber. Photos Christopher Moore.

The performance, in two parts, employed a director (Latham himself), several actors and thirteen chairs, eleven black and two white. The first part began with

a David Toop sound track 'The Chair Story', followed by silent actors placing a single chair in position, then knocking it over, repeating the action until a second chair was introduced which traversed a circle around the first, until they were eventually stacked. This sparked off a champagne celebration and at this point Latham and three other actors left the audience and joined the action. (Breaking frame foregrounded the artifice of the art form, at the same time as illustrating the idea that the observer is also part of the event).

In the second half, chairs were positioned in rows on a carpet outlined with a numbered grid. The actors moved around, sat on chairs and hid behind them, debated and argued. Their verbal discourse varied in tone and emphasis according to the chair they occupied, following a script which Latham had encouraged them to interpret and improvise. The piece ended with several remarks: 'Performance art is comprehensive. Performance science is not'. 'Ideas are dangerous ... nothing will come of it.' 'Nothing? Nothing? In art, nothing is the form of everything. Everything will come of it.'

Government of the First and Thirteenth Chair **was intended as a visual demonstration and exploration in real time of Latham's belief that there is a correlation between the sources of human action and the different bands of what he calls the 'time-base spectrum', a concept also found in his motorised** ***Time-Base Roller*** **(1972). The various numbered bands of the 'time-base' represent, schematically, all evolutionary developments which occur between the first moment of the cosmos and the 'whole event'. The human life span exists between bands 17 and 30, hence the thirteen chairs of the performance's title. In**

Part One of the performance the appearance and disappearance of the chair could represent the creation of something from nothing, a process which is repeated until it becomes a 'habit'. It could be said that the two chairs represent two traditions science and art - which, after a period of conflict, synthesize, restating Latham's contention that in 1954, when he executed his first spray paintings, the two separate traditions of science and art converged.

In Part Two, the chairs are arranged in a line along the time-base spectrum painted along the strip of carpet. The actions and discussions which take place represent an elaboration of Latham's 'event structure' theory. Latham's works increasingly recapitulate his own historical development. A single meaning cannot be distilled from *Government* … because it is designed to generate associations. Like the evolution of life itself, it becomes more complex over time and reflects the influence of chance. Latham has compared it to a Rorschach ink blot which encourages viewers to project their own meanings onto it. Indeterminacy is built in, just as it is in the workings of nature.

Several critics have complained of difficulty in understanding Latham's ideas and the quasi-poetic, quasi-scientific language he uses in his writings, some going as far as to conclude that he is a 'bogus philosopher' (Tim Hilton). The two cultures syndrome C. P. Snow identified decades ago still persists in Britain; most lovers of art and literature are scientifically illiterate, and vice versa. The fact that only a few of Latham's critics might be able to understand, say, quantum mechanics, does not mean that Latham's theory is meaningless or without practical consequences. Works of art which attempt to transcend both

art and silence, reason and intuition, necessarily do not conform to existing categories. Even if one cannot grasp Latham's theories, or decides that they are mistaken, the general thrust of his project is still of value. His insistence on the importance of taking into account the whole event of the cosmos and of the needs of society as a whole has been more clearly indicated in recent years with the realisation of the ecological crisis humankind now faces.

Latham on a panel of speakers re APG at *Documenta VI,* Kassel, 1977, Beuys is in the foreground wearing a hat. Courtesy Tate Archives © Edition Staeck. Photo: Caroline Tisdall

----------Latham is arguably the British equivalent of Joseph Beuys. The parallels between the two artists are striking. Both were born in the same year, saw active service during

the Second World War [since they fought on opposite sides they could have killed one another!] , and have produced work embracing objects and actions, made with the conviction that the artist had a crucial part to play in changing society for the better; both had a deep interest in science, and clashed with their respective educational systems and officialdom. Beuys invited Latham to take part in the programme of his 'Free International University' at Documenta VI in 1977. Beuys has achieved a much greater degree of fame and commercial success, but time may well prove Latham to be the more profound artist.

I have dubbed Latham 'the last avant-gardist' because, since the death of Beuys in 1986, he seems to stand alone as an artist who is inspired by a holistic vision containing lessons which, should they be heeded, would be of benefit to all humanity.

This article first appeared in the British magazine *Performance*, nos 65/66, Spring 1992, pp. 28-33. John A. Walker is a painter and art historian. He is the author of several books about art and mass media, and a monograph on Latham: *John Latham - the Incidental Person - His Art and Ideas*, (London: Middlesex University Press, 1995).

John Latham

The incidental person – his art and ideas

JOHN A. WALKER