The Incidental Person
January 6 to February 20, 2010

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

Cybele Maylone, Barbara Steveni, Athanasios Velios

The Onion
Romilly Eveleigh, Anna Gritz, Joe at

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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 and social forces, to put forward answers to questions we have not yet asked.”

Diagrammatically, the IP transforms the linear, two-dimensional plane of conflict into a three-dimensional, triangular network that organizes 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. 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 publications and exhibitions such as Inno 70: Art and Economics at the Hayward Gallery, London, in 1971, and, upon the invitation of Jason Zimmermann, Berenice, at Documenta 6, Kassel, in 1977.

Although it was not embraced by all APG members to qualify their engagement, the notion of IP in placements allowed Latham to give 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 reaction 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
tects themselves no longer occupy stable positions in the taxonomic grid 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 – reLaurel Kurtz & Sandy Sampson atonate 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 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 the 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 by one Joseph Beuys, Gustav Metzger and Caroline Tisdall (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 known that the position is approached without preconceptions, temporary enthusiasm,
Notorious short of money, perpetually on the margins of the official art circuit, Robert Filliou andoonbóu was not a self-styled IP but a product of his time, the 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 exhibition of Maskull Lasserre at the gallery One in London. It was while Steveni was searching for material – in the middle of the night, in an industrial estate in Kent – that Filliou met Steveni with Alec Neil and Matthew Warrenirs of London – that she realized how disconnected the artist was from the underlying structures of society, and that she experienced as a “Europeanness”, 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 Austrian monumental artist and painter Joachim Pfeiffer. Together, Filliou and Pfeiffer developed the Poipoidrome, an urban 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 Hertzberger – Pfeiffer relayed the information to Filliou – the Dogons in Mali would greet each other. When two Dogs 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 Pfeiffer hinted at a different form of mutual recognition, a de-centered zone (at least with respect to Europe) for the deployment of Poipoi, an idea that would prove influential in the short-term recurrences of body-events to her or his long-term Michelle Swinehart 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 Brian O’Doherty; only some of its fragments could be performed, highlighted one or a few frequencies. That this exhibition cannot, in good faith, pretend to recover overlooked IPs in official art history, no more than it can legitimate an aspired to representative 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, economic depression, terrorism, religion, 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 The Print Factory’s manifestations serves to underscore the potential of incidentality to address the innumerable events that constitute our contexts, from the apparently trivial to the perturbingly monumental.

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 and expertise that are taught 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 scale.