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The conceptual artist John Latham (1921 – 2006) is sometimes cast as disconnected to the currents of British visual culture. Latham’s idiosyncratic cosmology based upon time and events and incorporating human creativity rather than matter and energy is used to distinguish this disconnection. However, this paper argues that his work can be seen as closely related to that of other mid-century cultural producers who were engaged with alternative cosmic speculations, and part of a broader shift in the register of representation. Papers from the Latham digital archive help make this case.

Keywords: John Latham, mid-century, Skoob, conceptual art, cosmology

Introduction

In this paper I want to counter a general tendency in critical accounts of John Latham and his work to hold him out as somehow against the grain of British visual culture in the mid-twentieth century. To do this I reconnect him to other movements and personalities in visual arts, countercultural developments in discursive experimentation, and in developments in performative cultural politics. This reconnection to his context is articulated around an argument concerning the shifts in the register of representation that can be identified in the post-war period which were responding to the circulation of new ideas about matter, energy and the cosmos emerging from the popularisation of models in the new physics of Einstein and others.¹ Although Latham had his own idiosyncratic cosmology which rejected these new conventions, his work engenders similar traits, especially his work from the mid-century period of interest here – the 1950s to the 1970s. This period encompasses a time during which he was at the height of his popularity and producing some of his most recognisable pieces. During it he was developing the concepts

that underpinned his art and associating with groups like Fluxus and Sigma, art world figures like Lawrence Alloway, and William Seitz, and popular countercultural icons like Pink Floyd. The core of what motivated Latham as an artist can be found at this time².

Until recently, apart from his artwork, secondary material incorporating interviews with Latham and critical accounts of his work have been the only sources available. These have been useful to me, but in addition I have made use of the AHRC funded Ligatus creative digital archive of Latham's records.³ The archive consists of Latham's papers left after his death in 2006. Sadly he did not keep systematic records so there are significant gaps in coverage.⁴ However, for my purposes, the most useful records have been the personal correspondence to his family and others. Apart from correspondence to curators and critics, his letters home have proved especially useful and of those, the letters he wrote to his family whilst on a trip to New York in late 1962, written during a significant moment in his career, have been particularly illuminating.⁵

John Latham

John Latham (23 February 1921 – 1 January 2006) was born in what is now Maramba, Zambia but was in 1921 Livingstone, Rhodesia. He went to preparatory school in Bulawayo and upon returning with his family to England he attended Winchester College in Hampshire until he was eligible for service. During the Second World War he served in the navy as a torpedo boat commander. After demobilisation he attended Regent Street Polytechnic moving on to the Chelsea School of Art and Design.⁶ These cursory details of Latham's early personal biography are often all that appears in catalogues and critical engagements with his work. His professional biography is more fulsomely elaborated, the highlights of which

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3 include the use of books, spray painting, time based rollers and destruction in his art, the
4
5 idiosyncratic cosmology that motivated this work, and his co-founding with his wife Barbara
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7 Steveni of the Artists Placement Group (APG) in 1967.⁷
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11
12 Latham's work is most often described as conceptual art and it was a label with
13
14 which he seemed to have been comfortable not least because he expended a great deal of
15
16 effort articulating the cosmological outlook that underpinned it. He also took care to
17
18 distance his output from the prevailing currents in mid-twentieth century visual culture in
19
20 Pop, Op, Kinetic and assemblage art. Correspondence in the archive indicates how careful
21
22 he was to control the narrative accompanying his work - all was subsumed to transmitting
23
24 his cosmological message. As his career began to take off in the early 1960s for instance, he
25
26 resisted the inclusion of some of his works in mixed exhibitions.⁸ It was that drive to
27
28 proclaim difference that has inflected the critical accounts of his work too. John Walker is
29
30 the critic and art historian most associated with Latham, having interviewed him on
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32 numerous occasions and published extensively on his work.⁹ Walker enhances that sense of
33
34 separateness from contemporary flows in visual culture and his accounts contain faithful
35
36 and painstaking renderings of Latham's complex ideas and intentions. However, following
37
38 Latham's death Walker revealed that their professional relationship was problematic and
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40 that Latham had been quite overbearing in the way he attempted to dictate the content of
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42 his critiques.¹⁰
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53 The control of his image as an artist and of how his work ought to be exhibited and
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55 interpreted is evident throughout Latham's career. In late 1962 he spent a few months in
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57 New York, producing his work from a room in the Chelsea Hotel and mixing with the city's
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art crowd. His letters home describe regular social meetings with Lawrence Alloway who had in the previous year moved to New York to take up the position of senior curator at the Guggenheim. Others who appear in this correspondence are William Seitz, Claes Oldenburg, Jasper Johns and Kenneth Noland. These were at the time key figures in city's art scene, but Latham was not at all comfortable with that scene. He struggled in particular with the incorporation of the 'popular' in contemporary art, something which conversely, Alloway had been celebrating for some time.¹¹ Writing home early in his stay he notes, 'All this "popular" culture – it's no more popular than schoolboys private languages ... All the time here one is up against imitations ... I'm still unmoved and depressed that anyone should find it important ... I definitely am out of the club'.¹² But the figure on the scene for whom he expressed most suspicion in his letters was the art critic Clement Greenberg. Greenberg was he sensed the key figure who defined the nature of the artists' network in New York and his approval was paramount to success. In one letter he recounted an evening out with his new acquaintances in which he said he had learned 'a lot about how the "in-group" works – I really believe it's the School of Greenberg, apparently a very potent man – altered many people, Alloway inter alia'.¹³ A few weeks later, he describes having been talked under the table by Greenberg and of how he wilfully misunderstood his work with books.¹⁴ This frustration with Greenberg's unwillingness to comprehend his work led to correspondence with him in the following summer about a misinterpretation of one of his book reliefs. The only evidence in the archive of this exchange is a cursory postcard from Greenberg apologising for its brevity which he explained was because he was reluctant to 'discuss art within the framework of notions like space & time', and that for him, the book reliefs were as he had stated before, 'Cubist, and partly so, in the feeling of their design'.¹⁵ Having a

powerful critic and gatekeeper misunderstand him in such a way must have been irksome to Latham who, as we will see, was meticulous in outlining his underlying philosophy.

Winding forward to 1967 this correspondence and his history with Greenberg casts a slightly different light on a defining moment in Latham’s career, his dismissal from a teaching position at St Martins School of Art. The story of that event, although one that he certainly elaborated and mythologised, concerns the return of a library book in unreasonable condition. The book in question was Greenberg’s very successful 1961 *Art and Culture* and the state it was in was a result of a classroom exercise with his students in which he had asked each of them to rip out pages, chew them and spit them out. He later distilled the chewed pages, bottled them into a phial and presented the remains in a red leather case. The resulting piece is known as *Chew and Spit: Art and Culture* and is no doubt inspired by Fluxus with whom he had been associating. Although Latham positioned *Chew and Spit* as forming one string of his book art motivated by disrupting the stifling linearity of language, it was surely also a further expression of his unwillingness to be identified as part of ‘the club’ and aligned to any movement in the contemporary avant-garde.¹⁶

Mid-century cosmology and the representational register

To re-contextualise Latham, I want to draw connections between a range of practices and developments in visual culture, Latham’s output and the ideas and practices that underpinned it. The shift in the register of representation that I want to reconnect him with was not solely confined to the work of artists like Latham, but can be identified in a wide range of practises in British visual culture from remarkably diverse sources. Underpinning this development was a drive to enact, represent or figure ‘cosmic speculation’, as artists

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2
3 'pursued energy, contemplated space-time, in a spirit of clearing away, starting from zero,
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5 from a tabula rasa'.¹⁷ It is here that I would claim that a significant driver of shifts in the
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7 register of mid-century representation lie. A range of cultural producers were modelling,
8
9 hypothesising and speculating on the cosmos in reaction to a new cosmology that since the
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11 popularisation of Einstein's theoretical advances suggested a vital, processual and at once
12
13 material and immaterial take on nature, matter and the cosmos. Although not fully
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15 replacing a renaissance outlook, this cosmology augmented and sometimes undermined
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17 those modernist ways of seeing with less certain and more nuanced apprehensions of
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19 material and materiality. It is not at all important that the complex ideas engendered in
20
21 Einsteinian physics were fully comprehended by cultural producers, more that the
22
23 questioning of long-held beliefs about the fundamentals of matter, the universe, time, space
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25 and light were challenged and recast and in their cosmic speculations, artists and others
26
27 were responding to this. In the visual culture that emerged, though varied, one can identify
28
29 four key characteristics: works that were interactive, performative and multi-sensory in
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31 their nature; practises that revealed and explored a particular take on materiality, the visible
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33 and the invisible; aesthetic tactics that were anti-lineal in motivation; and an emphasis on
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35 the processual and motion.
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46 It is difficult to find an artwork or mode of cultural politics from the mid-twentieth
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48 century that does not entail to some degree the first of these aspects, the performative,
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50 embodied or participatory. Especially from the mid-1950s onwards, multi-sensory and
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52 immersive aesthetic experiences were commonplace and significantly, not confined to the
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54 spaces of the artists' studio or formal gallery spaces. Indeed, they thrived in the more
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56 informal and far less 'professional' spaces of nightclubs and impromptu front room
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performance. Put simply, representational practices, broadly defined, increasingly engaged with a range of senses, not just sight.¹⁸ Beyond art movements and collectives, the most obvious environment in which one found this aesthetic characteristic was in the multimedia lightshow. Multimedia lightshows were impromptu orchestrations of sound and light, the most renowned in Britain being those associated with groups like Pink Floyd and The Soft Machine. Whilst some lightshows became large commercial affairs incorporating underground and expanded cinema footage, for the most part they remained low-tech manipulations of swirling hot oils on overhead projectors accompanying recorded sounds. Distinguishing both amateur and professional forms of the lightshow however was a drive to connect with the viewer-participant and make them part of a collective perceptual experience by engulfing them in a multi-media environment. The stated aim for many lightshow artists was to evoke the embodied senses of the audience, to ignite a shared realisation and make them an active component of the representational practice. And the meta-representations that emerged were often inspired by cosmic models.¹⁹

In terms of the second characteristic, conveying the underlying motivation of awakening in its viewer-participants an alternative sense of materiality, Op Art is the most obvious mid-century form reflecting this desire. Although I can find no comment from Latham on Op, it is arguably the contemporaneous movement with which he shared most common ground in terms of motivation, though not aesthetic form. Op developed decentring and deconstructive strategies through the use of non-figurative abstraction. That abstraction was a response to a new cosmology that inspired and motivated many artists and involved a departure from old ideas of matter and energy: what was solid and visible could also dematerialise into invisible energy. Bridget Riley worked with ideas of mass and

energy, material and immaterial, once noting that her paintings act on the viewer like 'electrical discharges of energy'.²⁰ In her work then, matter could materialise and dematerialise upon perception. To represent such a fundamentally different apprehension of nature with its associated reimaginings of energy, matter and cosmos, required an abstracted aesthetic which did not readily recall associations. A different register of representation was required which moved beyond representation into a form of meta-representation in which the artist modelled rather than represented to capture the relativistic and processual nature of the cosmos.²¹ The new iconography developed by Op artists which incorporated repeated shapes and geometric patterns moving across the plane of the canvas, conveyed and modelled the impermanence and instability of material. Upon viewing, illusions of movement and colour gave the sense of this and the key space of these works in which affect was generated, was not the painted surface but the space between the viewer and the plane of the canvas. This dematerialised and decentred space is where, like the multi-media lightshow, the embodied and participatory encounter of this modelled cosmos happened. Victor Vasarely more often verbalised this cosmic motivation: the 'nature of the figural painters was that of Lamarck and Linnaeus; ours is that of Einstein, Planck and Heisenberg'.²²

The third characteristic of mid-century representational practice is a disruptive tendency directed towards linear discursive forms which manifested in a range of theoretical and practical developments not especially confined to art. This was driven in part by theorists such as Herbert Marcuse and Marshall McLuhan who had gained a reputation beyond the academy and proposed that language shaped consciousness and actions from within.²³ Although Marcuse's one dimensional society was all-encompassing and

inescapable, McLuhan was more optimistic and suggested that evolution in the modes of communication would shape a new globalised, connected consciousness. Both however worked with a similar notion that language and its communication through a variety of media somehow shaped reality. This was an outlook that found expression in a variety of places, not least in literary movements that worked to subvert the dominance of the word. William Burroughs for instance evolved the Beat Generation's experimentation with language and expression to devise deconditioning tactics that would break the hold of the word on the world. Apart from his adaptation of the disruptive cut-up technique that deconstructed one reality from linear discourse and reconstructed an alternative, he also proposed in London's *International Times* (*IT*) the use of tape recorders to break the linearity of language and disrupt it as an organising mechanism: 'listen to your present time tapes and you will begin to see who you are and what you are doing here mix yesterday in with today and hear tomorrow your future rising out of old recordings you are a programmed tape recorder to record and play back'.²⁴

These ideas resonated particularly with the counterculture in 1960s Britain and their best graphic expression can be found on the pages of London's underground press. They were charged by the same anti-technocratic anti-logical positivist ideals and underground press editors and journalists gave space to McLuhan, Marcuse, R.D. Laing, Paul Goodman and so on. But more significantly, many publications began to experiment with the presentation and the manipulation of language. The London underground press are a prime example which Latham would have undoubtedly encountered in the city. *IT* and *Oz* used graphic and linguistic strategies to undermine the linearity of the written word and its embodiment and sustenance of one-dimensional society. These included superimposed

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3 graphics obscuring the text, multi-coloured inks, shifting fonts, unjustified left and right
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5 hand margins, the use of unusual jargon, and so on. These strategies were designed to break
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7 the linearity of linguistic expression in a search for an alternative means of expression that
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9 more effectively enacted a new sense of the world. Like the lightshow and Op, this was also
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11 about participation because the reader had to work at piecing together a meaning and
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13 became literarily a co-respondent in the process.²⁵
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20 The fourth characteristic of representations of mid-century cosmic speculation was
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22 the incorporation of motion and process. Developments in kinetic art exemplify this best.
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24 The earliest kinetic art of the 1920s such as that of Moholy Nagy was a reflection of a desire
25
26 to make sense of a speeded-up world which never came to rest. By the 1950s and 60s
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28 kinetic art reflected new understandings a range of different motions in nature. The new
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30 conceptual models of nature recast it. In the words of Gyorgy Kepes, 'the stable, solid world
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32 of substance which in the past was considered permanent and preordained, is understood
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34 as widely dispersed fields of dynamic energies. Matter – the tangible, visible, stable
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36 substance in the old image of the physical world – is recast today as an invisible web of
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38 nuclear events with orbiting electrons jumping from orbit to orbit'.²⁶ The movements in
39
40 nature modelled by kinetic artists were of that new cosmology, movements like the track of
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42 solar systems through galaxies, the clouds of electrons around an atomic nucleus which
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44 could not be palpably sensed, but could be modelled and brought to the senses. Frank
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46 Melina was probably the most outspoken in expressing this motivation. His art was about
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48 'communicating new visions of the universe as found through scientific research to the
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50 community at large'.²⁷ To do this he developed systems that visually engaged the viewer
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52 such as the projected light system Lumidyne. The titles of his Lumidyne pieces illustrate
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what he wanted to produce experiential models of: *Paths in Space* (1963), *The Cosmos* (1965), the *Nebula* series (produced between 1961 and 1974), *Away from the Earth II* (1966).²⁸ Many therefore were fascinated with cosmic speculation. And it was in this environment and at the same time that John Latham was developing his own take on materiality and cosmology. Contrary to how Walker portrays him then, Latham was not at all ‘unusual’ in having ‘long-standing interest in scientific theories of life, matter, space and time, especially those of physics and cosmology’.²⁹

Latham’s art and cosmos

For the period in focus here there are two important media in Latham’s work, the spray gun and the book. The spray gun was a serendipitous find: he was living in Bordon in Hampshire and trying to establish a market gardening business and needing to creosote a fence on the property he acquired a spray gun and quickly realised its potential for his art.³⁰ The early spray paint canvases were much less considered and ‘conceptual’ than his later efforts in the medium and characterised by, according to Tisdall, a ‘beautiful energy that has more to do with an intuition of the relationship between man [sic] and his world than with standard picture-making processes’.³¹ In these, the images emerged in unconscious style whereby ‘imagery and forms were found during the activity of painting rather than pre-conceived’.³² There is also evidence in his early spray paintings of a frustration with the plane of the canvas and a drive to penetrate the surface by cutting it.³³ When he then began to incorporate books into his canvases, that disruption of the plane was more clearly articulated. The book reliefs that he produced sometimes also incorporated spray painting and other found objects with the liberal use of Polyfilla to help support the cut-up and sculpted books. Books then were a useful found object in the sense that they enabled

Latham to achieve another dimension and initially at least, the titles and subjects of the book were not important. As he developed his concepts he would only later incorporate the use of books more completely into his cosmology as his 'Skoob idiom'. Whilst continuing with his reliefs he also broadened his use of books, producing three-dimensional sculptures and most famously his Skoob towers – towers of interleaved books around three metres high, some in a metal framework and on a stand, which were ceremonially burnt at various carefully chosen sites.

Whilst some of this work is certainly striking in appearance and, in the case of Skoob towers spectacular, accounts of them and their aesthetics have played a secondary role to the idiosyncratic cosmology that Latham devised and attempted to enact in his art. He and his critics narrate two points of emergence - two encounters - in the early 1950s that sparked it: his experience of Robert Rauschenberg's blank *White Painting* (1951) and his 1954 meeting with the astronomer Clive Gregory and his wife, the parapsychologist and animal ethologist Anita Kohsen. Kohsen and Gregory were dissatisfied with western science and its tendency to fracture and discipline knowledge, the same dissatisfaction that Latham also claimed to be reflecting in his work that exceeded the plane or frame of the canvas (the flat surface representing the ideological, disciplinary and religious veneer that obscured a single reality all experience). The couple were developing a psychophysical cosmology that would unify not only science and art but also mind and matter. To do so meant looking beyond even the new cosmology's recasting of materiality and to consider events as more appropriate building blocks than fundamental particles. They sought a 'new comprehensive world system based on a 'language of events' to replace the traditional language of objects. The smallest unit of this – 'analogous to the Planck Constant in Physics - was the micro-

event'.³⁴ Central to their theorising was the integration of human intuition because if one abandoned materiality as a foundational block and replaced it with the event, both matter and consciousness were constituted by events of varying time scales and so indistinguishable.³⁵ For Latham it suggested a rationale to justify an intuitive approach to his work because the creative consciousness was integrated into the time-based cosmology and 'informational relationships' could be discerned creatively *and* scientifically.³⁶

The Rauschenberg encounter chimed with this emerging cosmology as a dematerialised form and yet one that was unified in the sense that it suggested a 'dimensionless point'³⁷, a point of zero space and zero time from which the universe emerged – no event and no object. The cosmology that emerged from the Rauschenberg encounter and the Gregory and Koshon collaboration was intended to be an all-encompassing theory which would 'provide a common basis for understanding reality'. Accept it and all the divisions that separate humanity would disappear. It is difficult to overemphasise how deeply held this realisation was for Latham. It set an agenda for the rest of his life and he expended a great deal of effort expounding it, often describing his mission to explain as a campaign. He felt that he was making 'discoveries' and as time went on when nobody seemed to listen he began to feel that the British authorities in particular sought to 'obfuscate', 'disinform' the public and even 'outlaw' his findings.³⁸

Following his 1954 revelation³⁹ his art became conceptually focused on process and event beginning with the spray paintings. He developed these around his notion of the 'least event', his fundamental temporal unit replacing the particle: in his words, the concept 'particle' 'as a non-reducible element is discarded on the basis that it is not minimal with

respect to time'.⁴⁰ This concept was practically realised in relatively simple terms, the spray gun mark being a least event on a zero state blank canvas or macrocosmic context, a 'quantum-of-mark'. Apart from the dematerialised focus on time, the significant difference between this cosmology and the prevailing new cosmology was that this quantum of mark in the spray painting was also 'a quantum of human creative energy'.⁴¹ The spray paintings, as models of this newly realised cosmology therefore embodied the history of their own creation⁴² where, as Latham noted 'Motivation and Structure have become one and the same'.⁴³ The spray paintings were then a 'statement of pure process ... The statement was a direct record of what had occurred to make it'.⁴⁴ He would later add another phrase to his nomenclature to help elucidate his least event theorem, 'noit', defined as not nothing, a least event being an 'incidence of not-nothing on nothing, for a least instant ... the basis of a structure in events'.⁴⁵ As least events repeated in the same macrocosmic context so relationships and patterns emerged giving the sense of materiality through events. In the spray paintings then as soon as three or more sprayed dots appeared on the white canvas, relative scale and shape could begin to be determined, modelling in other words the events which gave shape to the cosmos. Like the spray paintings, the cosmos was an accretion or iteration of 'insistently recurring events' giving the sense of the solidity and permanence of things.⁴⁶ One of Latham's most well-known paintings from his 1954 revelation *Man Caught Up with a Yellow Object* (1954) (Figure 1) **embodies** this practical philosophy well. The figure emerges from the repeated action of the spray gun, each dot of paint representing a unit of time and human creativity but coalescing into a solid figure.

Eventually the reconciliation of his use of books as a medium with his developing cosmology advanced beyond a desire to break the plane of the canvass to a more fulsome

appraisal of the book as a useful object to demonstrate his outlook. Like his spray paintings, books were accretions of black marks on white backgrounds, each individually representing a least event but adding up to something concrete. Similarly, like his spray paintings, it was only in the viewing of the book as an object rather than in the reading that the recurrent least events that made them could be apprehended as one. Reading books on the other hand was a linear process evoking a successive temporality. Like paintings, books were at once temporal in the sense that a series of events coalesced to make them, and atemporal in the sense that all of those events could be apprehended by viewing them as an object. Books were also informational and as such were part of the creative element that had a role to play in his cosmology. In a 1964 letter, one of many in the archive to curators and editors that corrected misunderstandings of his work, he expressed it thus: 'I am of course heavily engaged with words - it seems they are winning - but not just through the use of books as literature. Certain equations have turned up: By its structure a book provides a contrasting and authentic new ordering of black on white with the primitive mark .. as though a certain density of informational interaction generates it's [sic] own condensation of space-time'.⁴⁷ To highlight these aspects of books in his art he variously cut them back to expose their strata, deconstructed them, plumbed them together, burnt them and painted them. The book art that resulted which he began in the early 1960s to term 'Skoob idiom', were certainly individual and striking as art objects and it is undoubtedly their look that gained him acceptance, for a while at least, into the avant-garde art establishment (Figure 2).

The second half of the 1950s saw him relocate to London and was dedicated to him developing his cosmology and producing artworks reflective of it. He relied quite heavily on his parents to support his endeavours as well as his young and growing family during this

time, in one letter detailing his family/work accounts and a shortfall of £630 per annum that he hoped they could make up. In the same letter he tries hard to justify their ongoing investment in him declaring that others 'of conviction' thought his work worthwhile.⁴⁸ But it is also clear that his parents worried about his direction, had some doubt about his talent and abilities and capacity for success.⁴⁹ Their concern continued well into the time that he gained notoriety. After reading a magazine interview with him for instance they were concerned that he came over too vaguely and wanted more definitive, less enigmatic answers. His response was telling and helps explain why his concepts are often tricky to grasp: 'perhaps what actually came out, which was that "a book looks more like a book when I've finished with it than when [sic] it was before" will be found to be a more potent and loaded statement than any explanation, and will be remembered for longer.'⁵⁰ It seems that this was a tactic developed because he was often misunderstood, misinterpreted and ridiculed.⁵¹ But there was another motive for Latham, as he noted in the same letter to his parents: 'I sense a general attempt to curb my words anyway. In the catalogue to the exhibition ... no reference is made to my interpretation ... the convenient misprint of the titles, (*Relief System* instead of *Belief System*) may have not been so inadvertent as they say'.⁵²

Given the lack of appreciation for it, it was not his cosmology that attracted Latham to the fashionable art establishment in the early 1960s, but the style of his work. The height of the courting between Latham and the new art establishment was his brief time in New York in 1962 and throughout it he did not miss an opportunity to outline his philosophy. In his first letter home to the family his intentions for the trip were clear: 'I'm giving myself one month. Do you realise that if this campaign comes off it will be one of those legendary

episodes of history - the assaulting of New York, its invasion by Skoob'.⁵³ His letters recount dinner party conversations but most are tinged with the disappointment of not being heard. Talking with Alloway who had 'pressed for an account of why I use books I told them about the spray gun, the discreteness of the dot & so on, & how it became a book, & there was total silence'⁵⁴. At a restaurant reception after the opening of a Museum of Modern Art exhibition in which one of his pieces was displayed he recounted once again being asked 'why books - and I looked at my watch. Then they caught on & I asked for extended attention if they wanted and answer. I must have done not too badly because I have been invited out to Thanksgiving (Thursday) with Seitz'.⁵⁵ A letter relating another art scene gathering suggests that there was in the end some resentment towards the New York scene as they refused to comprehend his motivations: 'Called on to account for work gave it, and stoned [sic] silence before subject changed ... After my account of why I use books I'm convinced painters here paint too much for art intelligentsia & so are ... provincial'.⁵⁶ Reflecting back twelve years later in a letter to his father, it appears that the lack of comprehension that met him had the effect of strengthening his resolve. In it he described his 1954 meeting of minds with Gregory and Kohsen, of how immersed he had been that he only realised ten years later that 'rest of the world had been left behind', by that he also meant the art world, and that he 'had to verbalise this position from my own study area (art)'.⁵⁷

Cosmic connections

Latham's post-Newtonian but anti-Einstein take on cosmology that eschewed space and matter and focused on time and events has marked him out as different. Curators and critics have been so struck by Latham's peculiar take on the new physics and his vociferousness in

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2
3 proclaiming it that the connection to his context tends to be obscured. The retrospective
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5 exhibition of his work in the year of his death at the John Hansard Gallery in Southampton
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7 for instance further underlined the idiosyncratic nature of his output and outlook by
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9 creating 'for the first time, a coherent exhibition that integrates the various aspects of the
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11 artist's long and varied career' and connecting each of these aspects with a faithful
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13 rendering of his time and event-based cosmology.⁵⁸ However, in terms of what Latham
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15 produced, he was not that unusual for mid-century visual culture and he too was part of the
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17 shift in the register of representation which in turn was a reflection of speculation around
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19 cosmic nature. In these final sections of this paper, I want to further reconnect him to this
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21 context.
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29 In his New York letters home there is a strange contradiction. Whilst on the one
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31 hand he was resolute in his criticism of the 'popular' in art, suspicious of Greenberg's
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33 gatekeeper role, and demanding that his fellow artists heeded his cosmic proselytising, on
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35 the other, he was clearly affected by his experience in the city and the art scene there. It
36
37 had a significant effect on his work and shaped his future direction in ways that have not
38
39 been acknowledged. He was so taken by it that the letters indicate he considered bringing
40
41 the family over to live despite worrying about the standard of accommodation they could
42
43 afford and how his children might mix with 'inconsiderate' 'yankee kids'.⁵⁹ His stay at the
44
45 Chelsea Hotel was highly productive. Amongst the regular requests for Polyfilla he recounts
46
47 the making of many 'objects' most of which seem to have involved books, reporting that 'I
48
49 am now prepared to do anything with a book & if it then looks more like a book I'm
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51 satisfied'.⁶⁰ He was working in his Skoob idiom and producing assemblages of framed
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53 canvas, Polyfilla and variously mutilated books. The second-hand books he found relatively
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expensive and quite ‘trashy’ and not at all ‘classics’, but their colourfulness engaged him.⁶¹ Indeed one of these structures he produced from his room he described as ‘very gay’.⁶² The sense of vitality also caught his imagination, writing in letters to his sons about the scale of the place, the trains and their engines for instance.⁶³ And he wanted his work to reflect that grander scale, to put on an exhibition that would ‘work on the scale of all the rest of the things here’.⁶⁴ The spectacle of the city too affected him, although it took some getting used to its showiness, especially the more eccentric atmosphere of Greenwich Village where ‘people do just act crazy because – well it’s like that and nobody notices or if they do it’s good’.⁶⁵ With his new art scene acquaintances he experienced happenings and although he expressed mixed feelings about them - ‘Oldenburg’s looked rather dull’ – he was considering it as a means to enhance his Skoob idiom, noting ‘I don’t mind something happening but I don’t want it laid on’.⁶⁶ His short stay in New York undoubtedly sparked a new direction in his work and when he returned to London, whilst he certainly did not replicate abstract expressionist or pop art iconography, he did incorporate a greater sense of performance and spectacle.

It cannot be a coincidence that upon return Latham developed his Skoob tower ceremonies which he convened between 1964 and 1968 across Britain. They were his take on the happening and also shaped by his closer involvement with a range of countercultural and avant-garde groups with whom his ideas chimed. The first ceremony took place in July 1964 at a Sigma meeting in Oxfordshire at which he mixed with others who shared a suspicion with accepted modes of communication and were attempting to find alternatives, including Alexander Trocchi, R.D. Laing, David Cooper and Jeff Nuttall. Sigma were, like Latham, focused on the power of expression and engaged in a project to seize control of the

means of expression.⁶⁷ After the inaugural event the ceremonies were not associated with Sigma and were sometimes set up in symbolically significant sites in terms of the impact of linear discourse, such as law courts, Senate House and the British Museum, using carefully selected texts. Crowds gathered at the ceremonies to witness the immolation of books which, given the tight interleaving of their pages, often took a few hours to burn and sometimes ended with the arrival of the fire brigade.⁶⁸ Tying the deconstruction of towers of books to his cosmology was easy for Latham, destroying them both reversed their temporality, as indicated in the inversion of the word 'books', and was atemporal in the sense that the event could be apprehended as a whole: 'Skoob as a form of literature, to be read as what happens/ed, to be looked at whole'.⁶⁹ And Skoob was an appropriate intuitive 'language' through which to express the laws of his cosmology, Skoob 'is the mathematics, and it's visually accessible, you don't have to decode it like literary maths'.⁷⁰ As a reverse sculpture Skoob towers were event-based objects, but dematerialised objects that lasted in the memories of the event amongst the viewers and participants (Figure 3).

The creative destruction involved in Skoob towers was also showcased at the Destruction in Art Symposium (DIAS) on the South Bank in London during September 1966. The month long symposium featured works by auto destructive artists like co-organiser Gustav Metzger and Jean Tinguely and was driven, like Latham by the belief that art could produce 'new forms of knowledge, perception, and insight'.⁷¹ Latham had probably connected with them via Fluxus with which Barbara Steveni had a closer association. Whilst the dematerialisation implied and modelled in the work of most DIAS artists did not accord with Latham's own cosmology, his involvement is indicative of how much he was connected to contemporary trends in 1960s London. DIAS, although involving a number of artists was

very much a product of London’s countercultural underground and involved some of its key figures, and featured widely in its first newspaper, *IT*, the first issue of which was published in the following month.⁷²

Latham was certainly a figure on the countercultural scene in the city, taking part in what is generally regarded as its foundational event, the Albert Hall happening in 1965. The Albert Hall performance was planned with Jeff Nuttall. He was to paint himself blue, wear a headdress made from books and paper covered balloons and do battle with Nuttall. Unfortunately the performance was never seen because Latham had passed out having painted his whole body. That aborted engagement aside however, Latham worked with some key figures and organisations in countercultural London. He collaborated for instance with Pink Floyd who had used his 1962 film *Speak* as a back projection during some of their performances. *Speak* consisted of abstract coloured shapes and strobe effects not unlike the expanded cinema that would emerge later in the decade.⁷³ Latham asked Pink Floyd to supply a soundtrack but it seems that he was not satisfied with the outcome and instead substituted his own soundtrack consisting of the recorded sounds of books being demolished by an electric saw. His connection to the city’s counterculture was also evident in his teaching engagement at the Anti-University of London, which was established in February 1968 and delivered a curriculum shaped by radical politics, RD Laing’s existential anti-psychiatry and the artistic avant-garde.⁷⁴ But it was his *Skoob* towers and his *Skoob* idiom that most connected him to events of the 1960s and he was fully aware that it made him popular amongst the counterculture, noting in correspondence that the *Skoob* idiom has ‘become of very great interest, particularly to a rising generation’.⁷⁵

Conclusion

The connections and commonalities between Latham's work and the practices of representation in this period go deeper than an occasional collaboration or association with fashionable movements and musicians. His work also shared characteristics with a range of other contemporaneous cultural producers who were involved in similar, though more mainstream cosmic speculations. Each of the traits associated with representations motivated by a desire to reflect mid-century ideas of matter, energy and the cosmos and bring them to the senses of their consumers can be found in Latham's spray paint and book/Skoob output between the 1950s and 1970s.

His first piece purchased by the Tate for £450 in 1966 was his *Film Star* (1960) (figure 2), so called because it was actually the subject of one of his first films, *Unedited Material from the Star*, is a case in point for the way he incorporated process into his work.⁷⁶ It mainly consists of 50 open books of various sized with their corners rounded off and their spines set into Polyfilla. Pages of the books are painted in 12 colours and the film of the piece involved a stop-motion sequence of the books changing colours giving the impression of a constant change of state. This was then a picture in process although he was annoyed that the Tate did not take the time to change its appearance more often, to 'show some 10,000 states' and to give an impression of 'unexpectedness and non-familiarity that is a key to interest and a lively encounter'.⁷⁷ The processual was central to much of his other work in the 1960s: his Skoob towers were mobile in their nature, albeit as disintegrating and dematerialising forms; his spray painted pictures, as palimpsests of the events that made them, also emphasised process. In all of these, as Richard Hamilton later expressed it, the art work is 'an arena of performance in which an event is metaphored'.⁷⁸

His Skoob tower ceremonies are, alongside elements of the underground press and aspects of psychedelia, one of the most spectacular expressions of anti-linear cultural politics in the 1960s. They were direct and celebratory attacks on the word that owed a great deal to Latham's experiences of happenings in New York and London and his peripheral association with a series of other groups. But they also owed something to a general atmosphere of suspicion with logical positivism and in particular the power of language to shape reality. Latham was in search, as many others were, for a non-verbal, intuitive means of communication through which to express his cosmic outlook and to do so in a way in the event could be comprehended holistically rather than linearly. As such, Skoob also reflected a trend towards interactive, multisensory, performative and participatory aesthetics. The event of the ceremony was one in which the participants both saw, felt and smelt the burning books, but the event itself was not confined to the moment of experience but intended to be carried beyond it in the memory. That sense of awakening is a common trait in works reflecting new cosmologies and with an emphasis more on the affective dimensions over and above the figurative.

When Latham returned to the spray gun in the early 1970s his paintings took on an added dimension. In addition to the kinds of cosmic modelling that he developed from 1954 onwards in pieces like *Full Stop* (1961) in which he modelled the cosmic process by using repeated least events of the spray gun accreted into a large black dot, he added a more affective and participatory dimension. His *One Second Drawings* were a new representation of his fundamental particle - a least event – and consisted of a series of 60 one-second sprays of black paint on white board. Each painting was timecoded and logged using a

1
2
3 system he had devised and the experience of these pieces was, as he stated in a letter to the
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5 Tate who he felt had not displayed them correctly or enough, 'not conveyed in any other
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7 artistic idiom, and the view of the world it affords will give an account of History that is
8
9 hidden in verbalised versions'.⁷⁹ Latham took these affective aspects further with his *One*
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11 *Second Drawings* because the logging system he devised was designed to record different
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13 'operators' who produced them. In this way he enhanced the modelling of his cosmos by
14
15 adding an affective, performative dimension with those executing the one-second spray
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17 painting embodying his event-based cosmology. Making visible the invisible (or making
18
19 material the immaterial) like this is a trait shared in various Skoob objects but also as noted,
20
21 many other representational practices around at the same time. To present and bring to the
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23 senses the alternative understandings of materiality, energy and time required more-than-
24
25 visual techniques which incorporated the embodied subjects of viewer-participants.
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34 In some way then, each of the four characteristics of mid-century representation can
35
36 be found in the work of John Latham. This is not to diminish his output because he had a
37
38 distinctive and innovative style, especially in his work with books, and nor is it to belittle his
39
40 cosmic speculation because many others too were engaged in modelling interpretations of
41
42 matter, time, space and energy in their work. Rather, it is to redress the balance away from
43
44 a narrative initially sustained by him and later by his critics that emphasised a disconnection
45
46 to contemporary events and movements. In doing so one can begin to appreciate his art
47
48 differently and be less inclined to frame it with the often confusing texts discussing time
49
50 bases, noit, least events, and so on that accompany it in galleries and essays, and more open
51
52 to its relational context, of how it connects to wider themes in visual culture from the mid-
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54 twentieth century. Latham's work for me is most vivid in the mixed exhibitions that, if the
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correspondence in the archive is representative, he was not at all keen on. But in mixed exhibitions, such as the Tate’s 2004 1960s retrospective *This Was Tomorrow* in which two of Latham’s pieces appeared alongside other iconic works by Pop, Op, Kinetic, conceptual and assemblage artists, one can more easily make these connections with a wider visual culture of the mid-twentieth century and reconnect John Latham as a significant contributor and not an esoteric misfit.⁸⁰

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Notes

¹ Others have explored the influence of ideas in the new physics on art movements, notably Linda Dalrymple Henderson. For a concise account of her ideas see Henderson ‘The Image and Imagination’. A fuller account can be found in the recently revised Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension*. However, the influence on post-war visual culture has yet to receive a great deal of attention, though see Rycroft, ‘Art and Micro-Cosmos’.

² Latham’s work on Time-base rollers and the Observer RIO series as well as his application of ideas in the form of his art practice through the Artists Placement Group is out of the scope of this paper, which is more focused on the development and early evolution of his cosmic outlook in his spray paint and book work.

³ The archive can be accessed via <http://www.ligatus.org.uk/aae/>. It consists of scans of a range of materials from newspaper clippings to draft contracts. There is no narrative to help one connect them although it is fully searchable using keywords and date ranges. For an account of the archive, the process that went into making it, and designing the innovative access protocol, see Velios, 'Creative Archiving'.

⁴ This was because, according to Steveni, in conversation with Latham and Hans Ulrich Obrist, Latham did not archive 'He's too much in the present' (Obrist and Steveni, *John Latham*, 8).

⁵ These letters, written sometimes daily over a three month stay, are the closest one gets to a diary from Latham.

⁶ Latham's biography is clearly outlined in Walker, *The Incidental Person*. The archive provides some interesting personal details not in Walker's account.

⁷ The APG is not my focus here but there is a great deal of interest in the way in which the organisation reflected Latham and Steveni's outlook. For a sense of this see Corris 'From Black Holes to Boardrooms'; and for a partisan account, see Slater, Latham and Steveni, *The Art of Governance*.

⁸ In a November 24, 1962 letter to Barbara Steveni (BS) from the Chelsea Hotel he says 'I have written to Kas [Kasmin Gallery] that I don't care about being in mixed exhibitions', <http://www.ligatus.org.uk/aae/node/3182>. There is also much correspondence in the archive to curators with exacting instructions on how to display his work correctly.

⁹ For example see Walker, 'Artist Placement Group (APG)'; Walker, *The Incidental Person*; Walker, *The Spray Gun*; Walker, 'John Latham'.

¹⁰ This was published online: Walker, 'The Perils of Publishing'. In 2009 Walker also released online the legal letters detailing the dispute between himself and Latham over the content of his book *John Latham: The Incidental Person*.

¹¹ Alloway had recently published two of his key and influential essays on the topic: Alloway 'The Long Front'; Alloway, 'Arts and the Mass Media'.

¹² Letter to BS written in the Chelsea Hotel, October 13, 1962:
<http://www.ligatus.org.uk/aae/node/3224>. Latham's quite privileged upbringing does perhaps establish a distinction between him and other artists who made a name for themselves in the 1950s and 60s. Many of the vanguard of British pop artists for instance, although also serving during the war, and although a similar age, came from more modest backgrounds

¹³ Letter to BS from Chelsea hotel, October 21, 1962:
<http://www.ligatus.org.uk/aae/node/3200>.

¹⁴ Letter to BS from Chelsea hotel, November 3, 1962:
<http://www.ligatus.org.uk/aae/node/3186>.

¹⁵ Postcard from Clement Greenberg June 1, 1963:
<http://www.ligatus.org.uk/aae/node/3063>.

¹⁶ *Chew and Spit* is in effect however a Fluxus box. On Fluxus tactics and aesthetics see in particular Higgings, *Fluxus Experience*.

¹⁷ This is useful phrase coined by Guy Brett in his introduction to the Hayward Gallery's 2000 kinetic art exhibition catalogue *Force Fields*: Brett, 'The Century of Kinesthesia', 65.

¹⁸ Op Art for instance, even though most examples used the conventional materials of paint and canvas, was geared towards engaging the embodied eye and mind of the consumer.

The viewer was then an embodied participant in generating the experience of the artwork, an experience which was thoroughly haptic, involving the evocation of a range of senses, albeit ones activated by perceptual responses arising from the physiology of sight – see Barrett, *Op Art*. British Pop Art too was in part founded on the immersive, multi-sensory aesthetics favoured by Richard Hamilton and later, the Independent Group in their early exhibitions/happenings. The ICA's Growth and Form (1951) exhibition for instance was an immersive environment through which the participant-viewer navigated images, models and projections of scientific perspectives on the fundamental structures of nature and matter. See Moffat, 'A Horror of Abstract Thought'.

¹⁹ Rycroft, 'Lightshows'.

²⁰ de Sausmarez, *Bridget Riley*, 29.

²¹ Rycroft, 'The Nature of Op Art'.

²² Pellegrini, *New Tendencies in Art*, 167-168.

²³ The key and popular works that expressed these sentiments at the time were Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*; Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*; McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride*; McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*.

²⁴ Burroughs, 'The Invisible Generation', 6;

²⁵ See Rycroft, *Swinging City*, 101-120.

²⁶ Kepes, 'Introduction', ii.

²⁷ Quoted letter from Frank Malina in Gadney, *Aspects of Kinetic Art*, 30.

²⁸ Much of Malina's work can be viewed via

<http://www.olats.org/pionniers/malina/malina.php>.

²⁹ Walker, *The Incidental Person*, 2.

³⁰ Walker presents two different versions of this, one in 1995 in which it was a fence that required creosote and then in 2008 when it was a bungalow, Walker, *The Incidental Person*, 16; Walker, *The Spray Gun*, 7.

³¹ Tisdall, 'Mahtal Remains', 10.

³² Walker, *The Incidental Person*, 16.

³³ Conzen-Meairs, 'Art After Physics', 11.

³⁴ Conzen-Meairs, 'Art After Physics', 11.

³⁵ The full exposition of Gregory and Kohsen's psychophysical cosmology was published five years later in *The O-Structure*: Gregory and Kohsen, *The O-structure*.

³⁶ Latham, 'Quantum of Mark', 16.

³⁷ Conzen-Meairs, 'Art After Physics', 32.

³⁸ Walker, *The Incidental Person*, 2. This reaction was coloured by Latham and Steveni's experience of the withdrawal of Arts Council funding from their APG venture.

³⁹ In later writings he referred to the day in October 1954 as "Io54" or "Idiom of 54", Conzen-Meairs, 'Art After Physics', 11.

⁴⁰ Latham 'Least Event as a Habit', 252.

⁴¹ Walker, *The Incidental Person*, 20.

⁴² Walker, 'John Latham', 717.

⁴³ Latham 'Least Event as a Habit', 252.

⁴⁴ Measham, 'John Latham', 9.

⁴⁵ Latham 'Least Event as a Habit', 252.

⁴⁶ Walker, *The Spray Gun*, 10.

⁴⁷ Letter to Fitzsimons February 29, 1964, copied to Alloway and Kasmin and complaining about a bad and inaccurate review that Fitzsimons had published <http://www.ligatus.org.uk/aae/node/3059>.

⁴⁸ Undated letter from Latham to his parents from the late 1950s <http://www.ligatus.org.uk/aae/node/3424>.

⁴⁹ In 1958 they asked their London-based friend and spiritualist Mona Rolfe to give them some feedback. She suggested that John get a 'menial' job to see him through whilst not distracting him from his artistic pursuits. The request for monitoring their son's affairs appears to have been made because they were worried about the education of their grandson who was destined for one of the London County Council schools. There were two letters from her on this matter from July 6, 1958 and July 22, 1958. <http://www.ligatus.org.uk/aae/node/3466> and <http://www.ligatus.org.uk/aae/node/3354>.

⁵⁰ Letter from Latham to his parents from January 8, 1960: <http://www.ligatus.org.uk/aae/node/3244>. Richard Hamilton would later note the same issue with Latham's use of language which was 'uncompliant of interpretation even by his most eager friends. So original is his intelligence that the linguistic expressions he uses to expound his ideas are as much interventions as the thoughts themselves': Hamilton, *John Latham Early Works*, 12.

⁵¹ In a 1968 interview however, he stated that his art was the paramount means though which to communicate his message: 'Yes, I always imagine when I've done something that the point is self-evident'. See Harrison, 'Where Does the Collision Happen?', 261.

⁵² Letter from Latham to his parents January 8, 1960: <http://www.ligatus.org.uk/aae/node/3244>.

⁵³ Letter to family from Chelsea Hotel dated October 13 1962:

<http://www.ligatus.org.uk/aae/node/3224>.

⁵⁴ Letter to family from Chelsea Hotel dated October 13 1962:

<http://www.ligatus.org.uk/aae/node/3224>.

⁵⁵ Letter to BS from Chelsea hotel dated November 20, 1962:

<http://www.ligatus.org.uk/aae/node/3226>.

⁵⁶ Letter to BS from Chelsea Hotel dated November 12, 1962:

<http://www.ligatus.org.uk/aae/node/3228>.

⁵⁷ Letter to his father probably from August 10, 1975:

<http://www.ligatus.org.uk/aae/node/3462>.

⁵⁸ Foster, 'Foreword', 5.

⁵⁹ Letter to his family from the Chelsea Hotel December 3, 1962:

<http://www.ligatus.org.uk/aae/node/3202>.

⁶⁰ Letter to BS from Chelsea hotel November 6, 1962:

<http://www.ligatus.org.uk/aae/node/3190>.

⁶¹ Letter to BS from Chelsea Hotel November 10, 1962:

<http://www.ligatus.org.uk/aae/node/3206>.

⁶² Letter to BS from Chelsea Hotel November 27, 1962:

<http://www.ligatus.org.uk/aae/node/3180>.

⁶³ Letter to his son John Paul from Chelsea Hotel October 28, 1962:

<http://www.ligatus.org.uk/aae/node/3188>.

⁶⁴ Letter to BS from Chelsea Hotel November 27, 1962:

<http://www.ligatus.org.uk/aae/node/3180>.

⁶⁵ Undated and incomplete letter to BS from Chelsea Hotel:

<http://www.ligatus.org.uk/aae/node/3212>.

⁶⁶ Letter to BS from Chelsea Hotel December 3, 1962:

<http://www.ligatus.org.uk/aae/node/3202>.

⁶⁷ Trocchi's manifesto for Sigma sets this out: see Trocchi, *Sigma: A tactical Blueprint*.

⁶⁸ Walker, 'John Latham', 718.

⁶⁹ Conzen-Meairs, 'Art After Physics', 15.

⁷⁰ Harrison, 'Where Does the Collision Happen?', 258 (168?????)

⁷¹ Stiles, 'The Story of the Destruction in Art Symposium', 41.

⁷² For an account of this, see Rycroft, *Swinging City*, 83-100.

⁷³ The definitive account of this genre is Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema*. For an interesting account of the British development of the genre see White 'British Expanded Cinema'.

⁷⁴ Although he appears on materials associated with the Anti-University, it is not clear that he ever actually taught there.

⁷⁵ Letter to Norman Reid dated November 21, 1967:

<http://www.ligatus.org.uk/aae/node/3045>.

⁷⁶ Letter dated May 20 1966 from the Tate confirming the purchase of *Film Star*:

<http://www.ligatus.org.uk/aae/node/3049>.

⁷⁷ Letter to Norman Reid dated November 21, 1967:

<http://www.ligatus.org.uk/aae/node/3045>.

⁷⁸ Hamilton, *John Latham Early Works*, 12.

⁷⁹ Letter to the Tate January 5, 1981: <http://www.ligatus.org.uk/aae/node/290>.

⁸⁰ The pieces were *Film Star* (1960) and *Burial of Count Orgaz* (1958), the latter a relief composed of books and other found objects and spray painted black. Stephens and Stout, *Art & the 60s*.

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John Latham, Man Caught Up with a Yellow Object, 1954. Oil paint and commercial emulsion paint on hardboard, support, 1221 x 977mm. © John Latham Estate, courtesy Lisson Gallery, London.
324x406mm (96 x 96 DPI)

John Latham, *Film Star*, 1960. Books, plaster and metal on canvas, 1600 x 1981 x 228 mm. © John Latham Estate, courtesy Lisson Gallery, London.
403x330mm (96 x 96 DPI)

John Latham, *Skoob Tower* ceremony: *National Encyclopedias*, (September 1966). Bloomsbury, London.
Photo John Prosser.
169x114mm (96 x 96 DPI)