The upsurge in interest around late 60s conceptual art and its correlate, the ‘dematerialization’ of the art object, offers the chance to make potentially radical conjunctions with layers of history that have not been fully played out. This renewed interest, demonstrated by large attendances at the “Live in Your Head” show held at the Whitechapel earlier this year, seems to be indicative of an attempt to re-inject some social combativeness into an art world that is full to bursting with people wanting to act as the “high priests of show business.”

What is revealed by a glance at this history is that beyond homogenised categories and stylish mimicry there are practices that are always already heterogeneous. We discover that the ‘dematerialization’ of the art object was variously concerned with a rejection of morphology and aesthetic scopism, with the rise of a text-based practice and an accent on process rather than product. The submerged legacy of conceptualism is one which encourages a rejection of art’s ideological role in society.

Through an examination of language, perception and the entrapment of desire in representational, the more radical proponents of conceptualism were part of an avant-garde trajectory that submitted the institutions of art to a critique. As with their precursors they were led towards the pursuit of their practice in new dynamics of a social field. That such a ‘dematerialization’ of the artist is now only a submerged legacy is, in part, a measure of how far the art institution has been engaged in a retro-projection that only benefits the econometrics of the ‘yba’. Historical associations have been separated and ransacked under the pressure to produce.

There has been a recasting of the spectator upon the art object which, injected with a knowing style, has re-strengthened the divide between artists and spectators and had the effect of re-privatising the means-of-expression. There has been the activity of ‘nomination’ wherein the artist’s agency is only minimally drawn towards the specialisation of his/her own role. There has been a submission to the ‘popular’ rather than a testing of the possibilities of what could be accepted as ‘popular’.

Those artists who have unquestioningly acceded to their delegated role as the vanguard of an hyper-real image culture—and as such always eminently exchangeable—have not only been talked-up as the inheritors of the cult of conceptualism, but have bemusedly become as popular as advertissements. What follows is a critical tracking of developments in industry (1968-1975) were only minimally aimed at the incidental persons themselves and of what it was the APG as an organisation wanted to act upon in order to change what?

That the incidental persons, free from having to make an art-object, could have been in a position to examine the flows of desire within the social relations of workplace and government departments, is, in terms of the dematerialization of the art object, one of the most efficacious ‘materials’ there could be. But any ‘success’ in such a direction is not the nomination of desire in such an environment as a surrogate ‘art piece’, but what that desire, as a material force “releasing the impulse to act”, brings into being once it is conscious of itself as an active force in conjunctures with the desires of others. What it was that the APG, as facilitating administrators or as incidental persons, intended to change becomes crucial.

Did they want to change society or did they want to change society’s attitude to art?

**‘going public’**

In constituting a move away from the art institution and in encouraging artists to “take determined control of their social function” the APG seemed to offer a radical direction. Their placements in industry (1968-1975) were only minimally negotiated through means of a funding body. Eschewing expectations about a resultant art-work, they could be autonomous enough to develop lines of enquiry about social dynamics. The very ‘aimlessness’ of the APG’s brief could swing a focus onto the aims of commodity producing industries; the incidental persons could also bypass that layer of administration and curatorial mediation that still censors social art today.

The APG were working around areas of dissolving the ‘divide’ between the artist and the public and moving further towards ‘dematerialization’. The problems, much vaunted at the time, as to who or what constitutes the ‘spectator’ of conceptual art, could, with a APG practice that involved itself with submerged social dynamics, come to materialise desire and work-relations as the conceptual objects of group participation and person...
The open-ended application of an individual's transversal and intuitive knowledge, there is, in the "impulse to act" of the APG, a mindset that seeks legitimation for an art practice not from the art institutions themselves but from industrial and government professionals.

**Time-based theories**

Latham's keenness to reference Rauschenberg's blank canvas as a "turning point" in the shift from an object-based art brings forth two other works of the 50s that were in line with Latham's belief to make art reflect upon its social purpose: John Cage's 4'33" and Guy Debord's Howlings in favour of Sade. These two precursors of 'dematerialization' highlight potential areas of radical conjunction for conceptual art: music as eminently 'dematerialized', communicating in a "counter-literal" way, and after Debord's film experiments, revolutionary politics as the very process of combined work in the social field to effect wide-reaching change. Both these pieces raise the notion of duration, to get "unstuck"... For Cage and Debord, Latham's 'time-based' theories, whilst functioning to illustrate the dematerialization of the art object and leading to the "micro-event of desire and the 'impulse to act"', come, perhaps, to be satisfied with finding a new status for art as that which, when the theories are extended to a cosmological level, forms the basis of a Grand Universal Theory or 'meaning of the world'. Latham's time-based theories, being content with the fixity of a specific 'impulse to act', faired quite considerably when we sense that what is being removed from the 'time-based' approach is the notion of history as the social continuum we are actually living.

Whilst such an approach may allow for the effects of an APG placement to be seen over a longer duration than is normally allotted an artist-in-residence, whilst it admits to process and reflexive reassessment, it does not appear to take account of what occurs prior to the placement, the very history that the incidental person would bring into a situation and the very history of that situation itself. If Debord and Cage looked elsewhere for their legitimation, if they raised the concept of duration and, in leaving it empty, gave it political overtones by inferring into the silence and blankness that it was necessary for its recipients to take action to define time in a space-time continuum, then, perhaps Latham's error, with half an eye turned towards eternity, was to show duration and attempt to fill it with an overarching theory that may have functioned as a "brief" to which the incidental persons were encouraged to adhere.

When it is a matter of groups seeking common objectives and directions for action, it is perhaps such over-arching theories, with their undertow of disciple-inducing didacticism, that have the negative effect of one group member waiting for others to get up to 'speed'. How far do such theories, in their channelling of multiform objectives and directions for action, it is perhaps such over-arching theories, with their undertow of disciple-inducing didacticism, that have the negative effect of one group member waiting for others to get up to 'speed'. How far do such theories, in their channelling of multiform disciplines (civil servants, industrialists, architects etc.) whilst still orbiting such terms as 'contract' and 'art-object' did not amount to an active pursuit of des-specialisation but brought forth the 'incidental person' as a specialist in his own right.

For Debord the ultimate situation would be a revolution, an insurrectionary event. For such situations to come about means that its participants must be passionate enough to desire a change of social structure. A passion which becomes an 'impulse to act' precisely because it is despecialised and seeks not to be allotted a professional role but the polymath role of remaking a society. The starting point for Debord was that participation is essentially open to the degree that it becomes creativity in the social field regardless of its being defined as an "art" activity. What remains unrecorded is how the ramifications of this latter sense of 'impulse to act' made up the passions and their inevitable confrontation was overlooked or strategically omitted from the overall approach of the APG.

### Independent interest

On record as renouncing a "Frankfurt School orthodoxy of apartheid between artists and government",11 Latham's displeasure with what appears to be a continual criticism of the APG's tack is worthy of sympathy to the extent that 'leftist purity', in refusing the testing practice of contradiction, can often remain at a level of intellectual idealism akin to the ghetto it lambasts.

Latham, speaking before the time-based theories took a firmer grip on him, referred to knowledge as being for experts and as that which renders thought unnecessary.22 In many ways this encapsulates the success and failure of the APG in that he was prepared to uproot himself, almost make himself blank, and enter a situa-
tion knowing nothing about it at all. As a blueprint for the incidental person it may not have been realistic but it was a means of changing a situation with Kafkaesque inequities. “They certainly had no wish to listen to my questions, but it was precisely because I asked these questions that they had no wish to drive me away.” The conscientious bureaucrats of a Governmental Department could, by means of an APG placement come to gain some ‘outside’ knowledge about their operations and the social realities of the people concerned with managing. An APG placement was not one-sided; just as the danger of bringing about the release of a “latent public impulse” can be steered back on course by a combination of ‘specialists’, a wilful ignorance can not only be welcomed as a surface to project upon, but can be exploited.

The APG intended to “promote a public interest independent of the interests of the parties involved.” The blank space necessary for such an endeavour makes the competing definitions of what constitutes the public interest too similar. With this promotion of an ‘independent interest’ the incidental person becomes, once again, the transcendental artist rising above politics. Paying next to no attention to the historical make-up of the State as that body which seeks to maintain sectional class interest as the public interest, is as idealistic as the leftist purify that recoils from the often invigorating contamination of contradiction. When married to other ex post facto assertions such as the claim made that art should be a work complementary to rather than opposed to that of governing bodies, the source of a new equilibrium, it is tantamount to seriously underestimating the connection between capitalism and government and making such linkages invisible. Such an operation, then, reveals that the APG was not seeking to change society but society’s idea of art: “Artist placement was intended to serve art...assuming that art does have a contribution to make to society at the centre.”

Serving art as if to serve some article of faith, power lies at the ‘centre’ in the offices of government to re-collapse the advances made by the ‘dematerialization’ of the art object in the direction of a work in the social field and to deny the power of a government’s subjects to change their situation. As such it touches upon the problems of the APG approach in that the incidental person is turned back into an artist by means of their ‘professionalisation’. This makes for an accord between APG and the Government Departments in that the incidental person as a ‘salaried’ rather than a ‘waged’ employee becomes identifiable as a management representative involved in the ‘decision making’ concerns of the government department. If this perhaps represents the contradictions of the industrial placements between ‘shop floor’ and ‘top office’—in that outcomes emanating from the incidental person’s presence are more of a policy making kind—it does not remove the sense that the APG were seeking legitimation from the authorities by ultimately proving their responsibility to the aims of that authority: “a new component necessary to parliamentary democracy.”

Spoof work

Given this compatibility between the APG and the left-liberal slants of Government Departments, it is interesting to note the lengthy negotiations and the legitimating assurances of the “civil service mem-orandum,” it took Steveni and Latham years to get the placements up and running. Prepared to sacrifice their own careers, they put themselves through the machinations of a capitalistic democracy intent on keeping control over cultural activities through the auspices of the Arts Council. They were witnesses to having their projects filed and their input erased from the historical record. The overtoned echo of the APG is such that its most recent effective work seems to be submerged either in the desiring effects of a placement’s “microeffects” or in what Sir Roy Shaw (then General Secretary of the Arts Council) dubbed as a ‘spoof’ work—a reappropriation of a state controlled culture, extensively documented through correspondence by Latham and Steveni. This ‘spoof work’ began in the unprecedented situation of an art initiative, that of the APG, being brought to fruition in the governmental placement without the financial assistance or political backing of the Arts Council.

By the turn of the government placements had ended, the APG doggedly persisted in seeking representations to the Arts Council and other government departments to continue their work. The Arts Council continually rebuffed their approaches, cutting not only their access to funds but cutting the APG out of the historical record, refusing the existence of correspondence that was part of APG’s possession and becoming increasingly obstructive to the APG’s appeal for funds from other bodies. This situation led Latham and Steveni to appeal and reappeal against decisions, to consult their MPs and eventually to meet with the Shadow Arts Minister. At all turns their dogged persistence, after some ministerial support, met with a brick wall. In ‘Report of a Surveyor’, Latham paraphrases a letter from Sir Roy Shaw, to the then shadow Arts Minister in which the APG is misrepresented and maligning to the degree that, it is inferred by Latham’s paraphrasing, the Shadow Arts Minister reconsider his supportive interest in the group. This letter, under special protection of the Art Council’s Royal Charter and consequently, Latham informs us, to take effect unchallenged leads Latham, not unduly, into detecting the whiff of a conspiracy: “It may have been the assumption that interest to administrator’s own careers is the chief factor, or it may be that some internal state security is believed, or imagined, to be threatened.”

The “public interest” in which the APG hoped to serve independently is, in this ‘spoof work’, revealed, at the first turn, to be the site of an inevitable conflict that even the most informed and combative of artists could not compete with alone. Whether this unchallengeable edict from on high was informed by a wariness as to the perceived challenge of APG placements to the APG-Inspired Arts Council ‘residency’ scheme or whether it was a failure of the subversive potential of the incidental person strategy is not a choice to be made, it is both at the same time and maybe more: This ‘spoof work’ unhealthily for those who believe the state is run by the half-wits who front it, that the threat implied by the incidental person was being taken more seriously by others than it was by the APG themselves: “If there is thought to have been a threat of intent in APG activity in any way suggesting plots to undermine the system, then may it be brought into the open.”

Official secrets

The ramifications of this ‘spoof work’ may be seen to be pessimistic and to offer no further strategies of continuation for a radical ‘event-based practice that seeks to re-orientate and to “cause to change” by tracking the desires in social situations. But maybe such pessimism is itself strategic.

The governmental route has perhaps been tried and tested by a route that is hopelessly compromised; not least by the fact that the APG through the ‘spoof work’ reveal, in the space of their practice, the presence of other ‘incidental persons’ who do not have the encumbrance of an artistic identity to shake off. As functionaries, personifications of their job description, would presumably make sure that such a re-occurrence of the APG route would meet with short shrift. The APG work in the social field, whilst compromised by an inchoate belief in democratic capitalism and by a professionalisation rather than a de-specialisation of artists, has, nonetheless continued to keep open a concern to effect social institutions other than art institutions. Their escape from the self-referentiality of art may have been successful in terms of a refutation of the art object, but it has been won at the expense of reconvening the art object as governmental reports which, in the case of Ian Breakewell’s placement for the DHSIS in the area of mental health, has been and perhaps still is, subject to the official secrets act.

This tangible outcome of Breakewell’s placement as a ‘textual work’, in perhaps revealing the ultimate sanction that a Governmental Department could wield over a placement in order to make sure desire didn’t break out in the social field in unmanageable proportions, does not therefore undermine the slow seepage of effect that the placement had for those who participated in it and, who knows, led to a growing distrust of those institutions where social control and governance is practised like an art.

Such exposure is the APG’s legacy and this is where Latham’s time-based theories work at their most efficaciously. As he says: “perhaps we have to consider that all action is potentially, if not directly linked to what happens on the subsequent enactment.”

For subsequent enactments to keep occurring there needs to be a variety of follow-throughs which would include the testimony of the incidentals persons and other APG members through to an embracing of the political potential of desire as a material force in the examination of social relations. Such a desiring presence of people who neither identify as revolutionary initiates or artist-professionals, is crucial in widening the scope of subsequent enactment. If such enactment is to escape from refying its experience in predetermined categories such as ‘art’ or ‘government’ and, as a result, limiting the range even of its own ochettes. Such a ‘revalorizing’ of daily life, a process much concerned with making social relations visible, needs the continuing uprooting of the ‘experts’ rather than their continuing attempts at lead-weight coherence, an uprooting that enables those who feel they have access to the means of expression to give encouragement to those who are coming-to-expression. An improvisatory element, in which all begin from ‘zero’, could be one ramification of a conceptual art practice as could be the lent-moment made possible through those ‘dematerialized’ forms that carry along with them the “rejection of any a priori identity of the artwork.”

With no prescriptions in place, that activity could escape the purview of any and all institutions and in immersing itself in a socio-historical continuum in which desire can come to be ‘materially visible as radiant energy’ is perhaps where dematerialized artists meet with imaginative realities, desires outstrip their containment within institutions and build their own. Practice becomes invisible but ever-present.
Notes

5. Ibid, p19.
6. Ibid.
7. Rolf Sachsse reports that a great deal of dissen-
sion arose within APG members over the issue of adherence to these time-based theories which have been further developed by Latham and Steveni in the late 80s and coincide with the APG’s being renamed O+I. See Sachsse, ibid, p49.
8. For Project Sigma and its dynamo, the ‘novelist’ Alexander Trocchi, see the reprints in Break/Flow No.1 or Andrew Murray Scott (ed), Invisible Insurrection, Polygon, 1992.
11. Latham, ibid, p49.
15. Latham, ibid, p40.
16. Latham, ibid, p35.
17. Steveni, ibid, p18.
19. Latham, ibid, p60.
20. Latham, ibid, p52.

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