Abstract

Flat Time House Institute (FTHo) was initiated in 2008 in the house that John Latham (1921-2006) occupied until his death, the site of his decade-long experiment with the idea of Flat Time. FTHo, led by curator Claire Louise Staunton, commissions ongoing artistic projects that come out of the Artists Placement Group tradition (itself an interesting experiment in the temporality of the commission and the artist as an “incidental person”), hosts an archive, artists’ residencies and an alternative education programme run by artist and educator John Hill.

For the 2015 PARSE conference on Time, FTHo presented a screening programme, pairing moving image works from contemporary artists with films by John Latham, using his Time-Base Theory as a curatorial device. The selected works perform the various bands of Latham’s time-based spectrum—from Least Event (quantum) via the frequency of human perception, to human reproduction, to cosmos. The article and image selection documents the screening and the ideas behind it.
Flat Time House—Curating the Time-Base

JOHN HILL
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CLAIRE LOUISE STAUNTON
Claire Louise Staunton was Director/Curator at Flat Time House and at Inheritance Projects (London). In 2015 she took up the position of Research Curator at MK Gallery, Milton Keynes, where she leads public programmes and research activities on new town urban planning, communities and art in partnership with the Open University. She is a PhD research candidate in Curating Contemporary Art at the Royal College of Art.
FLAT TIME HOUSE INSTITUTE (FTHo) was initiated in 2008 in the house that John Latham (1921-2006) occupied until his death, the site of a decade-long experiment with the idea of Flat Time. A central figure in the London underground of the 1960s and 1970s, Latham was a founding member of the Artist Placement Group (APG), an artist-led programme of experimental placements within major corporations and institutions, which focused not on the art object but rather on the time-based process of art making as a social practice of decision taking. FTHo (led by curator Claire Louise Staunton from 2012 to 2016) commissioned artistic projects that often come out of the APG tradition—dealing directly or indirectly with Latham’s theories of time—hosts an archive, artists’ residencies and an alternative education programme initiated by artist and educator John Hill. FTHo announced that it would be closing its premises in August 2016 and continuing as a nomadic curatorial project led by Gareth Bell-Jones.

For the 2015 PARSE conference on Time, FTHo presented a screening of films, which was an experiment in curating time, employing Latham’s time-base theory as a curatorial device. FTHo the house and the institute, even before Latham’s passing, has been a testing ground for theories of time, and art making’s potential to embody and illustrate cosmological phenomena. For Latham, the universe was structured by repetitive and networked events in multi-dimensional time, out of which objects and space emerge. The “least event” was for him a discharge of potential and the subtlest and shortest moment out of which all other events are made. The “least event” represented creation from a lost original event and through its insistent repetition of varying lengths, all phenomena come into being. In this universe of events, the event is a unit of measurement, and the “time-base spectrum” is a scale along which all events—physical, cultural, or psychological—can be measured and related to one another (this is what Latham meant as “flat time”). Art and physics are infinitely inter-relatable. Importantly for Latham, the “incidental person”, often an artist, is an observer who can both enact events and be sensitive to them beyond anthropocentric perceptions of passing time.

The curatorial, understood as an event in knowledge, and the act of curating as a practice in which events are staged, is a discipline acutely attuned to temporality. The screening at
the PARSE conference was a challenge for us to reconsider filmic time and the event of the frame in relation to Latham’s theories. Using two screens, our filmic composition set up a dialogic relationship between John Latham’s 1971 film *ERTH* (the result of a commission, negotiated by APG, from the UK National Coal Board) and a series of selected works. This screening performed the various bands of Latham’s “time-based spectrum”—from “least event” to the frequency of human perception, to human reproduction, to cosmos. It was our aim to overlay various concurrent time-bases in order for the viewer/observer to move beyond the intelligible content of the frames and become sensitive to complex events, or to perceive the different time scales represented and, in some cases, performed through the artworks.

**Erth and Parallel Screenings: A Description of the Works and their Juxtaposition**

Zircon is a 4,400-million-year-old crystalline mineral, not much younger than the Earth itself, formed in its earliest crust and still found in the Jack Hills of Western Australia. In Nicholas Mangan’s *A World Undone* (2012), zircon fragments, ground to dust, are captured in airborne constellations that invoke a time both before the Earth’s formation and beyond its possible lifespan, reaching beyond our limits of perception. John Latham’s *ERTH* (1971) begins at a scale of “one thousand million years”, with the image of a *One Second Drawing (Least Event)*, a splattered spray paint image that for Latham linked the moment of artistic making to the “whole event” of its context. Latham’s constellation-like spray drawings, which he started making in 1954, created an infinitely complex image from the smallest gesture, a picture of molecular, biological or cosmological structure within the quantum of a mark. This artistic act enabled him to think in new ways across the different scales, flattening the plane of time where different events could be related.

In Latham’s time-base theory an event’s position on the “time-base spectrum” is not determined by its duration, but by its central period of repetition. Band P, $10^9$ seconds, or roughly 30 years, marks the centre of a human reproductive
generation. In reality, however, all events are complex patterns of overlapping and connected frequencies. Keren Cytter’s *Der Spiegel* (2007) presents a loop of human sexual anxiety. The tension caused by conflicting frequencies of human life—“a man with 50 years of experience and a 16-year-old soul”—can be mapped onto time-base theory’s separation of intuitive, rational and instinctive motivations, each with their own diminishing period along the time-base.

These embedded loops appear as narrative in the mise en abyme of Stuart Croft’s *Drive In* (2007), which presents a story trapped within the time of its own telling. In Flat Time Theory, an event’s time-base does not determine exact repetition; events change in structure and complexity with each iteration, affecting the fabric of flat time that informs them. Though the story being told repeats exactly, our experience and understanding expands with each retelling, changing the relationship of the present moment to the whole event.

The relation of moments to the larger events they comprise is also a temporal tension in Jennifer West’s *Salt Crystals Spiral Jetty Dead Sea Five Year Film...* (2013), which documents the degradation of 70mm film stock given a mud bath in the Dead Sea, stored in a bucket for five years, then dragged across Robert Smithson’s Spiral Jetty and washed in the Great Salt Lake. The resulting images are a product of chemical and mechanical erosion of the celluloid. The high-grade film stock, intended to capture a fraction of a second in incredibly fine detail, instead is used to document a much slower process. *Spiral of Time Documentary Film...* (2013) details this story in triple-exposed 16mm film, treated with hair dye, vinegar and brine. The repeated action of exposing the film to two of the world’s saltiest bodies of water, five years apart, gives the film a slowness despite the speed with which each individual frame is presented. Again, the five years become frequency, rather than duration. As West says: “the film may be further corroded now, but the digitised version lives as a document of its state in 2013.”

Though best known for his highly acclaimed feature films, Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s *Cactus River* (2012) is an example of his experimental, deconstructed shorts, one that he shot and edited alone. It records a day spent with Jenjira Pongpas, star of four of his films, and her new American husband Frank, at
their home near the Mekong River in Northeast Thailand. The constancy of the flowing water provides the score to daily life, but, in this screening running counter to ERTH, the film’s frame rate decelerates until it comes to rest on a single still photograph. Parallel movements of time can again be seen in the film’s credits, where the Thai date 2555 is translated to English as 2012.

At this point in Latham’s ERTH, the steady countdown in decremental units of time, passes itself, counting slower than time passes. Wojciech Bruszewski’s YYAA (1973), an early example of the Polish film, video and digital artist’s deconstructions of language, sound and image, presents a single half-word scream that is held for an impossible three minutes, the note modulated in response to a system of randomly changing lighting. The artist uses the medium of film to stretch out a single act beyond human capability. According to Latham’s Flat Time Theory, the time-base of the event (the scream) remains constant even as its duration in clock time expands.

Patrick Tarrant’s Phi Phenomenon 2 (2015) is a restaging of Morgan Fisher’s 1968 film Phi Phenomenon. Shot on out-of-date stock, and featuring a clock fortuitously found on eBay, the film is the result of multiple experiments with hand processing. In the screening, Tarrant’s film coincides with the point in ERTH at which Latham spliced in a section of his earlier film Britannica (1970). Both the original Fisher film and Latham’s Britannica address, in different ways, the fact that we see movement in film where no actual movement is presented to the eye. The materiality of film is brought to the fore in Phi Phenomenon 2 to show that the strip of film bearing the clock’s image is moving, and it is moving fast.

The programme concluded with Anne Tallentire’s Through Air, commissioned by FTHo and curator Lucy Reynolds for the exhibition Winter Garden in 2015. Coinciding with the emergence of the human scale in ERTH, at which point (wo) man comes into view, the repetition of a human breath captures one of the fundamental frequencies of life. The dispersal of matter on a molecular level is in symmetrical opposition to Mangan’s opening constellations of dust. As with Latham’s One Second Drawings, it is the structure, rather than the material, that allows us to find connections between events across a billion years.
Screen 1

Jennifer West, *Spiral of Time Documentary Film* (16mm negative strobe-light double and triple exposed – painted with brine shrimp – dripped, splattered and sprayed with salted liquids: balsamic and red wine vinegar, lemon and lime juice, temporary fluorescent hair dyes – photos from friends Mark Titchner, Karen Russo, Aaron Moulton and Ignacio Uriarte and some google maps– texts by Jwest and Chris Markers’ Sans Soleil script – shot by Peter West, strobed by Jwest, hands by Ariel West, telecine by Tom Sartori), 2013.

Screen 2

Jennifer West, *Salt Crystals Spiral Jetty Dead Sea Five Year Film* (70mm film negative floated in the Dead Sea and given a healing clay bath in extreme heat in 2008 – stuffed in a suitcase, placed in studio buckets, covered in clay and salt for five years – dragged along the salt encrusted rocks of the Spiral Jetty and thrown in the pink waters in 2013 in below 10 degree weather – Dead Sea floating and mud baths by Mark Titchner, Karen Russo and Jwest – Spiral Jetty dragging and rolling by Aaron Moulton, Ignacio Uriarte and Jwest – DIY telecine frame by frame of salt covered film by Chris Hanke), 2013.
Artists’ Biographies

Israel-born Keren Cytter makes film, theatre and installation work and is best known for her textually based video art.

Melbourne-based artist Nicholas Mangan makes film installations that investigate the relationship between energy and social transformation.

Stuart Croft was a British artist film-maker whose work focuses on themes of power, recurrence, entrapment and desire.

American artist Jennifer West is known for her digital films that are made by hand, manipulating film celluloid.

Apichatpong Weerasethakul is a Thai independent film director, screen-writer and film producer.

Film-maker Wojciech Bruszewski initiated and analysed complex relations of video/film representation, represented reality and the human perceptive-cognitive system.

Patrick Tarrant, UK, is both a film-maker and a researcher with a specific interest in non-fiction modalities, from home video to documentary and the portrait film.

British conceptual artist John Latham worked in mixed media and was a central figure in the UK countercultural scene from the 1960s.

Anne Tallentire is an Irish feminist artist working with film and installation, examining the subtle movement of day-to-day life.