

Applying Artists' Methodologies to Archiving: a Case Study of John Latham's Archive

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Abstract

Key documents of an artist's archive have played an important role in the development of his work, therefore it is important to study such material. In this paper we describe our methodology for digitising and publishing the personal archive of John Latham (1922-2006), a pioneering artist who strongly believed that artistic methodologies can be applied to other disciplines. Because of the importance of the artistic methodology in Latham's work and life (his house was conceived as a living sculpture), we felt that the methodology applied to the digitisation and study of his archive should, if possible, follow the same principles. Therefore, our main challenge was to develop an archiving methodology based on the artist's practice and theory.

In this paper, we explain the artist's main theory, the "Flat-Time" theory, and we explain how we plan to organise the archive documents so that their classification fits this theory. We investigate the use of the open source content management system "Drupal" for implementing the classification. We conclude with a summary of our proposal and a technical section on the digitisation methodology of the documents.

Introduction

This paper is a proposal on the use of online content management tools for the digitisation and presentation of the archive of the artist John Latham. Our proposal attempts to significantly modify traditional archiving approaches by building an archiving framework which follows Latham's theory and practice. We have decided to deviate from well-established archiving methodologies because Latham's work is exceptional in the art world as explained next.

It is very rare for artists to formulate proposals for the development of the cosmos in the same detail as Latham's proposals. Latham's work is an exceptional example of an artist who through artistic experimentation with new techniques, developed a complete cosmological theory and managed to offer a model based on which physical and social phenomena can be explained. His theory was respected by scientists despite the fact that he was using a non-scientific language.

Having proved, through his own practice, that artists' methodologies can be used for theoretical work in physics and social sciences, Latham believed that artists should be involved in every aspect of social, economic and political fields. Conveying this principle became one of his main anxieties and in our proposal we try to elevate and apply it to archiving.

For Latham, the world develops through a sequence of events. This timely sequence links the events to each other and

therefore the inter-relation of events is important. This necessity affects our choice of software tools in the development of the online archive, where robust tools for mapping relationships are essential. At the end of this paper we consider an online content management system, developed with this principle in mind, as a possible implementation tool.

Although our future intentions are to investigate Latham's theory from a scientific point of view, the main scope of this work is to promote the artist's theory and offer access to his relevant documents and artwork. We begin by offering some background material.

Latham's theory

In 2006 Tate Britain refused to exhibit [1] what John Latham thought was an important artwork for illustrating his theory[2]. The artwork, "God is Great" (1991), consists of vertical glass panels with copies of the Bible, Talmud and Koran protruding from it. The glass symbolises the state of "non-extendedness" according to Latham, i.e. the state when no events have occurred, but all possibilities for any event exist. The copies of the books symbolise the three popular religions as "ideological event structures" evolving from that state of non-extendedness, showing that every philosophical, and in this case religious, theory is based on the same set of rules as defined by the glass. Tate Britain saw this artwork as a risk of dividing the British public on different religions, whereas the artwork's main message was that of unification.

Latham developed a complete theory on the structure of both the cosmos and human societies. However, because he was not a scientist, he came to his conclusions by following his artistic intuition rather than strict scientific methodologies. Therefore, the best way to explain Latham's cosmological theory is following its development chronologically instead of attempting to approach it through mathematical formulas.

Event structures

An important characteristic of Latham's work is the use of the spray-gun. Latham was fascinated by the spray-gun impressions on a blank sheet of paper where, in the seemingly random distribution of dark spots, Latham could see structure. At the same time as using the spray-gun, Latham became involved with the "Institute for the Study of Mental Images" (ISMI), founded by two scientists: C. Gregory and A. Kohsen whose cosmological theory, the O-Structure, was summarised in a 1959 publication [3]. In this publication, one of the central ideas is the existence of a "minimum event" as a unit or building block with which the

cosmos can be measured or constructed. Latham's spray-gun art was interpreted by the two scientists in this context and inevitably their theory influenced his work thereafter. The event based unit for the cosmos was redefined by Latham as the "Least-Event", i.e. an action which takes place in the shortest possible length of time. The spray-gun drawings are a perfect illustration of this principle where a paint droplet touching the blank paper is a minimum event (One-Second Drawing [17" 2002] [Time Signature 5:1], 1972). A group of droplets indicate a system of events which can become more and more complex leading to any possible structure, physical or ideological, that organisms can experience. In all this, Latham does not consider space as a way to understand the universe and insists in its representation based on events. Therefore, the cosmos is understood as collections of events in time rather than a spatial system.

Having established the parallelism of a single droplet of paint as a Least-Event, Latham then investigated the ways in which events interact with each other. In his book "Report of a Surveyor" (1984) [4, p.30], Latham explains this interaction as an enactment of events on a predefined score, meaning that the possibility of events is given (as if in a score), but the actual events occur based on choices. This is clearly not a deterministic system since the equivalent of "free-will" will define the sequence of events, however there is a finite choice of possibilities. Therefore, events develop based on choices which are made available at any time from a complete range of possibilities.

This idea led to another important concept in Latham's work, that of different types of time.

Three types of time

By considering the Least-Event as the starting point of everything, Latham produced a model for reaching a description of our current universe. The "Time Base Roller" (1972) is an important piece of his work where an attempt to visualise event structures is made. This work features a sheet of canvas rolled around a rotating cylinder. The canvas unfolds as the cylinder rotates, revealing its front side momentarily and then its back side as it hangs from the cylinder (figure 1). In the viewer's momentary view of the front of the canvas, certain letters are evident which could be considered as events with different frequencies or different completion times or different "time-bases" according to Latham. These frequencies are sorted from the shortest to the longest, with the Least-Event being on the left of the canvas (point A) and, for example, the age of a universe at the right (close to point Z). Social events such as religious systems are placed in a high time-base (low frequency) since they greatly affect the development of society. At any moment the viewer experiences a collection of events which lead to the view of a universe (not necessarily our current universe). The rolled canvas holds every possible universe at any time and since the canvas is a thin sheet of material, Latham named this "Flat-Time". The "Time Base Roller" is a good way of visualising Event Structures but perhaps Latham's parallelism with music is more useful for describing the three types of time [4, p.23].

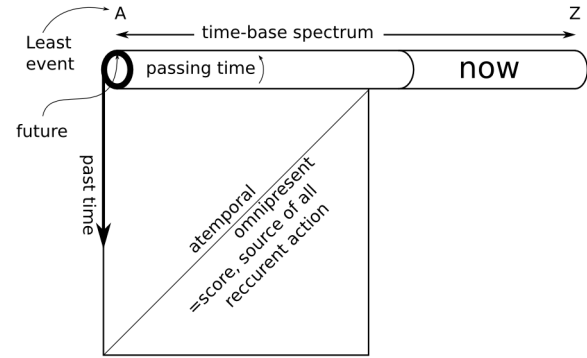


Figure 1: Time Base Roller (after Latham [5, p.111])

Performing a piece of music occurs over a certain period of time which is what we all understand as passing time (1st type of time). In order for the music to be performed, notes (another form of Event) have certain frequencies (2nd type of time) which as a group give the sense of music at any given time. Finally, these notes have been predefined in the score and therefore they constantly exist as part of it. This omnipresent existence of notes, or events, is the 3rd type of time. Therefore, each event structure has three time components: the clock-time, the frequency of each event and its omnipresent aspect.

Although the above offer good ideas for modeling our world, it lacks a link with the physicality of the events in space. Latham made an attempt to explain this and developed the OI-IO concept (OHO).

State OHO

Latham believed that contradictions in physics were inevitable because space has been the starting point of interpretation. Although he avoided using space as an element in his theory, inevitably he needed to explain what it is. In "Report of a Surveyor" [4] he introduces the concept of "State O" and "State I". It has been particularly difficult to clearly comprehend the two different states but we can loosely define State O as "non-extendedness", a state where nothing has occurred but anything can potentially take place. The transition from State O to State I indicates the expression (or the enactment) of an event in space. Latham had been influenced by Plato when considering this schema, where the flat glass panels, so frequently used in his work, are the idealistic concept of events whereas the books protruding from them are the physical incarnations of these events or event structures.

RIO - APG

As mentioned at the beginning, Latham's theory includes both cosmological structures and social structures. This came as a derivative of Gregory's and Kohsen's work, which addressed both fields according to the same principles. In fact, the strength of Event-Base theory is that it can as easily model an ideological system as it can an astronomical system. Latham believed that conflicts in society exist because most people fail to see that events are the common base of every social structure. The minority of people who are able to see that, he called "Reflective

Intuitive Organisms” (RIOs): organisms who can see beyond the traditional forms and are ready to explore new ones. Latham considered artists as RIOs and therefore believed that artist's contributions to society should be more than simply creating gallery art. This idea was strengthened by the foundation of the Artists' Placement Group (APG) with the key contribution of Barbara Steveni, Latham's wife. APG's role was the promotion of artistic methodologies in industry and government departments by placing artists at key roles within various organisations.

The application of artistic practice in other disciplines has also been our motivation in this project. The digitisation and classification of the archive's documents will be attempted using what essentially is an art-based approach based on Latham's philosophy and artwork. Before we explain what our proposal for this artistic archiving approach is, it is appropriate to describe the archive in its current state.

John Latham's archive

The archive of John Latham is a unique collection of documents, which not only illustrate his development as an artist, but also hold important material for the understanding of his theory.

Archive description

Latham's archive is made up of approximately 8000 documents comprising largely A4 paper documents with handwritten, typed and computer printed text, in 15 archive boxes. About 5 years ago they were taken from virtually unordered piles and placed loosely in chronological order under Latham's guidance.

Following the artist's death in 2006, a process was started to record these documents more thoroughly using basic physical and subject fields. This developed into the preliminary survey of the archive for both archival and conservation purposes. Details of the overall condition of each document were recorded alongside other information including size and material. With a view to a future digitisation project, each document was assessed on the method for digitisation, i.e. whether it can be unfolded and placed flat in a scanner or be photographed from a distance. In terms of document metadata, Dublin Core definitions were used to describe each document in the survey database. Although identifying the relevant information on each document was not always possible, survey teams focused on the author, date and subject of the document concerned. The subject was drawn from a controlled vocabulary which was occasionally expanded to include new terms. Each document was also assigned a unique number in the database.

We hope that the preliminary survey of the archive will form the basic material for the development of the archive as Event as proposed in this paper.

Physically, each document was placed in acid-free folders and in new acid-free storage boxes. All corrosive materials, such as rusted paperclips, were removed and kept separately.

Important documents

Among the 8000 documents, the most common types found are correspondence, unpublished theoretical notes and press clippings about Latham, or of interest to Latham. There are also

financial documents, exhibition invitations, images, diagrams, meeting minutes and agendas plus many miscellaneous documents.

There are several interesting series of documents in the archive but some of them stand out. These include a long group of letters written by Latham to his parents during the second world war when he was in the navy. These give a fascinating insight into the mind of the young Latham. Another long group of correspondence details Latham's placement in Scotland in the mid 70s. Many other letters, spread out through the archive, collectively record Latham's approaches to, and in some cases correspondence with, great artists, scientists, politicians and other notable figures of the 20th century. These include Noam Chomsky, Stephen Hawking, various Tate directors, secretary generals of the UN, the Queen, John Lennon and Yoko Ono, to name but a few. It is difficult to assess the importance of all these documents without a closer study of each individual one, but we expect these documents to form the cornerstone material of the digitised archive in its final implementation.

There are also innumerable iterations and reiterations of different aspect of Latham's theories which illustrate an otherwise unparalleled view of the development of this side of the artist's work.

In the following section we describe the principles based on which we will implement Latham's archive as event online.

Archive as event

Computer software engineering is an established field of science. A large part of research work in this discipline involves the development of computer models for a variety of applications in other fields. It is reasonable to suggest a similar approach for Latham's theory, i.e. developing a computer model of Flat-Time theory and testing it by using experimental data from the physical and social sciences. This interesting idea was in fact investigated by the artist himself who in collaboration with the professor of theoretical physics Chris Isham of Imperial College, London, set the principles of such a project. Regrettably, funding was difficult to confirm so the project was never implemented.

Although, investigating that idea is certainly within our future research interests, for this project we have decided to approach the archive from a content point of view. This is in agreement with the main scope of our work which is to promote the artist's ideas through his own archive. Having decided that the Internet is the best medium to communicate the archive, this paper proposes the use of an online content management system for the organisation of the archive as an event structure. In the following paragraphs we outline our intentions more specifically.

Document as event

A reasonable way of mapping Latham's theory to an archive is to consider the whole archive as a collection of events – an event structure. Adopting this concept as our starting point, we propose to consider documents of the archive as separate events with their own time-base. Different documents will probably have different time-bases and therefore there should be a time-base ranking system for the archive similar to the cylindrical line of event of the “Time Base Roller”. Assessing the time-base of each document is a challenging process and, although some rules can be

used, such as the document's influence to Latham's work, we expect it to be inaccurate. This initial time-base assessment could be refined by using statistical data from the archive itself. This data will essentially be the popularity of each document once the archive is published online. We assume that the more popular a document, the more important it is and therefore it will be placed in a higher time-base. The less popular a document, the less important it is and thus it is placed in a lower time-base. A collection of low time-base documents will presumably lead to the creation of a higher time-base document.

Omnipresent archive – transition of state

As mentioned earlier another important aspect of Latham's work is the omnipresent nature of an event. The enactment of such an event is indicated by the change of state of the event from State O to State I. Since we consider each document to be an event we need to describe the transition between State O and State I. The digital surrogate of the archive suggests a by definition solution to this problem. Each document is predefined in a database which is stored in a computer disk. Its representation on the computer screen is by definition a change of State, from something that offers the potential of a document to something that an organism can experience. Therefore, we propose the omnipresent nature of the archive in that its digital existence will be constantly accessible and access to the documents will mark a change of document state following the OHO principle.

Document hierarchies

The interaction of events and the formation of event structures was an important part of Latham's work. As mentioned earlier, his model was not deterministic and the development of events is in no way predefined in the same way as events themselves are predefined. However, the relation of events was finite and the progression of an event structure is therefore finite as well. In our attempt to model this principle in the archive, we consider the progression of one document to the other by offering a finite number of possibilities. Each document should be a derivation of other documents, possibly in a parent-child model. We propose the organisation of the archive documents in multiple hierarchies, where each document is the result of previous documents. The parent document of all documents should be the the equivalent of the Least-Event.

Document classification

The above proposals are rather challenging when approached from a traditional archiving point of view. As our main scope is to make Latham's theory more accessible (and for purely practical reasons) we propose to adopt a controlled vocabulary based on thematic subjects by extending the one used in the preliminary survey. This will offer an additional way of navigating through the archive.

Content management system

Having described the possible classification methods for the archive documents, which include both sequential and hierarchical structures, we have undertaken some initial investigation work to identify a specific content management system which will be able to accommodate these data structures. In the variety of possible

products we consider the open source content management system "Drupal" [6] as a possible candidate for implementing Latham's online archive. Drupal offers robust tools for modelling a variety of data structures and is a fairly customisable system which can be adapted to our specific presentation requirements.

Summary of proposal

To summarise, our proposal for the organisation of the digitised documents of John Latham's archive evolves from the main principles of Latham's cosmological theory. We consider each document of the archive as an event and we pay particular attention to the navigation from one document to the other, to match the sequential evolution of events, which according to Latham, offers limited options at any given time. For this reason we have chosen a number of ways to inter-relate documents and we are considering robust tools for their implementation. Finally, we have considered Latham's idea for linking time with space through the enactment of events. This is conveniently offered by the nature of digital files which are omnipresent (stored in a computer) and change state when presented on the screen.

We appreciate that, by delving deeper into Latham's theory different approaches to organising his archive may be possible. We expect this initial proposal to change during the process of this research project and we anticipate to publish our progress in future papers.

Digitisation

Having summarised our proposal for the structure of the archive, we will briefly mention some technical details about the digitisation technologies and equipment we will use:

List of digitisation technologies to be used:

Digital camera	NIKON D300
Capture format	Lossless RAW
Quality control	Williams and Burns chart [7]
Archive format	JPEG2000 (XML box)
Image metadata	Z39.87 [8] (XML)
Document metadata	Dublin Core [9] (XML)

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Authors' Biographies

Dr Athanasios Velios has studied archaeological conservation at the Technological Educational Institute (TEI) of Athens. He completed his PhD at the Royal College of Arts in London on Computer Application to Conservation. He has been working in digital documentation in conservation for the past 10 years. In 2003 he became a Research Fellow at the University of the Arts, London working on the digital description of bookbindings. In 2008 he became Assistant Director of the Ligatus

Research unit and is now working on the digitisation of John Latham's archive.

Simon Gould studied art history (BA Hons) at the University of Nottingham and Curating Contemporary Art (MA) at Goldsmiths College. He specialises in interdisciplinary art projects. He has curated various exhibitions in London for institutions including the National Institute for Medical Research (NIMR) and the London School of Economics (LSE). He has been a Curatorial Research Fellow at the late John Latham's house Flat Time Ho working on archiving Latham's papers, writings and other documents as well as curating exhibitions and publications with artists informed by Latham's ideas. He currently holds a post at University College London as a Contemporary Projects Curator for the UCL Museums & Collections.