

## AN INTRODUCTION TO FLAT TIME HOUSE

When commissioned to produce a sculpture for the regeneration of his street in Peckham, John Latham chose not to produce a traditional public sculpture, but rather his house itself. For the passer-by, the most apparent manifestation of his intention is the book sculpture that pierces the front of his house. Held by the glass pane of the front window of the house, it hovers, suspended half in the public realm and half inside. He renamed the space FLAT TIME I-IO, usually referred to as Flat Time House.

Latham had lived on Bellenden Road since 1983 but the process of commissioning and production led to him reconsidering the nature of the building he lived and worked in. At the point of the work's completion in 2003 he had come to think of it as an organism, describing it as a living sculpture. The space is anthropomorphised appropriately with each room taking the title of a part of the body. The first room is the Mind, the following, the office, is the Brain. Further on, through a corridor, lies the Body Event comprising of kitchen, living room, bathroom and bedroom. The Hand which lies at the rear of the house was Latham's studio and now forms the main gallery space. The large book intersecting the front window is the Face, a signifier for all the activity that takes place within.

Latham died in 2006 but Flat Time House was set up as an art institution in his former home two years later, with the intention of communicating his theoretical ideas and their continued relevance. With its large plate glass frontage, on a bright day the white walls and floor of the Mind make it luminous. It was fashioned as it is specifically for the communication of Latham's ideas. He considered this room a semi-public space and would sit in a folding chair and present his ideas to those interested. He selected four works to hang in the space to give a concise introduction to his work and ideas. They act almost as diagrammatic tools to aid access his concept of Flat Time and the institution continues to lead tours introducing his ideas to visitors.



*Proto Universe* (2003) Glass, foamboard, wood

The first work to consider is *Proto-Universe* (2003). Made from a two equally sized panes, the left is of glass and the right is a white monochrome sheet of foamboard. He began using glass in the late eighties and in his system of signifiers, transparent glass represents 'state 0', literally nothing - no time, but also that outside of time - the atemporal. The white pane signifies what Latham defined as the 'least event', this can be understood as the shortest duration that can affect us. The 'least event'

can be understood as equivalent to a Planck Time, the time required for light to travel in a vacuum a distance of one Planck length, approximately  $5.39 \times 10^{-44}$  s. This unit of time, named after Max Planck, represents the rough time scale at which quantum gravitational effects are likely to become important. This essentially means that whilst smaller units of time can exist, they are so small their effect on our existence is negligible.

Latham ascribed to the Big Crunch theory of the universe. This proposed model for the universe suggests that the metric expansion of space eventually reverses and the universe recollapses, ultimately causing a reformation of the universe starting with another Big Bang. As such, his understanding of the cosmos was one that was infinitely cyclical; a succession of universes expanding from a big bang to a point of maximum extent and then contracting until another another big bang takes place.

When considering *Proto-Universe* within this model, the plane of glass, or 'state 0', is not equivalent to a non-existent *before* the big bang, but rather as a non-dimensional transition point between one universe and the next. The white plane, representing a 'state 1' or 'least event', can thus be understood as the in initial step in the creation of a new universe. The work *Proto Universe* describes the creation of the universe as a point of transition, something Latham referred to as the 'paradigm shift'.

Latham conceived of Flat Time as a way of bringing together an understanding of the world as we experience it with scientific models of how the universe is constructed. Latham considered the big bang a paradigm shift, but so too was Einstein's publishing of the theory of relativity within the history of science. All that was understood in physics was put to one side as a new understanding of the universe came forth. Within the field of art history, he suggests Rauschenberg's painting of white monochromes in 1951 was a paradigm shift as everything that went before was concluded and a fresh start began. Latham too understood there to have been a paradigm shift within his own practice through his first use of spray paint in 1954.



*Organism Somewhere* (1980) Spray ink on paper

In the early Fifties Latham and his partner Barbara Steveni moved to Fleet, Hampshire. Living nearby were Clive Gregory (1890–1964) a respected astronomer and the first director of the University of London observatory, and Anita Kohsen (1925–1984) a parapsychologist and animal behaviourist. Gregory and Kohsen shared a dissatisfaction with the perceived fragmentation of

knowledge into myriad disciplines and beliefs. Together they developed a unifying theory of the universe they named 'psychophysical cosmology'. Latham was profoundly influenced by their ideas and was named an honorary founder member when they later created the Institute for the Study of Mental Images.

In 1954 Gregory and Kohsen were hosting a Halloween party and invited Latham to paint a large mural in their house. Rather than using brushes as he had done previously, Latham used a spray gun to burst clouds of black paint onto the ceiling. At the time he had been doing some maintenance work on their house, using the device to paint the outside. But the invitation led to a revelation, the potential for a short eruption of spray to create a mass of painted specks led him to feel, for the first time, his work was embodying the ideas inspired by Gregory and Kohsen. The act of spraying paint was an expression of existence coming from nothing, a 'least event' emerging from a 'state 0'.

This breakthrough led to a continued use of and development of the spray technique over the succeeding years. *Organism Somewhere* (1980) is an example of what he called his *One Second Drawings*, a series of spray works on paper he began in 1970. The sprayed mark simultaneously recalls a negative image of the cosmos, an atomic structure and an organic structure under microscope. In the Mind gallery, this work can be considered a step further in complexity and duration from *Proto-Universe*. Moving from a state 0 in glass to the white plane of the 'least event', in this work the atomic, cosmological and the living are conflated in a one second event.



*Book Relief Triad* (2003/1959) Ink, plaster, books and white duck on wooden boxes

*Book Relief Triad* (2003/1959) refers back to a series of works Latham made between 1959-60 called the *Observer Reliefs*. These three canvases represent the three states of human existence that Latham identified. He argued that each state equal to a different duration, with more complex or enlightened modes of experience corresponding to longer durations. He used the three protagonists of the Dostoyevsky novel *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) to explain these states. Lowest on the wall, the canvas with a book partly burned and covered in plaster represents the Mitya state, the elder brother. The second work with book emerging from the canvas represents the Ivan state, the middle brother of Dostoyevsky's narrative. The third uppermost, unmarked canvas represents the younger brother, the Alyosha state.

Mitya, the cluttered book relief, represents the instinctive being, whose behaviour is genetically determined and non-reflective, closest to an animal state. At Flat Time House this corresponds to

the Body Event, the space for eating, sleeping and living, activities he thought of corresponding to a more immediate and shorter duration. The more ordered relief, Ivan, represents the rational being, at once empowered and limited by their intellectual state and learned or received knowledge. This state is represented by the Brain at Flat Time House, the office with archive and site for administration. For Latham this mode of rational thought requires a consideration of longer duration than that of pure survival.

The Alyosha state is the most enlightened and also considerate of the highest duration. It represents the reflective, intuitive being who can encompass the characteristics of the other two but also has the ability to observe things as a whole and is capable of original thought. For Latham, this position in society was held by the artist, but not limited to artists. He used the term 'Incidental Person' to describe this individual, a phrase which first appears in an undated document titled *Definitions and Observations*. John Latham writes: 'This term was invented to distinguish a new type of individual from the more general "artist"... The I.P. is a resource and an instrument of change with those organisations responsible for future societies everywhere'. He understood artists in the first instance to be best adept to this approach as opposed to those who were institutionalised or 'knowledge experts' within that system.

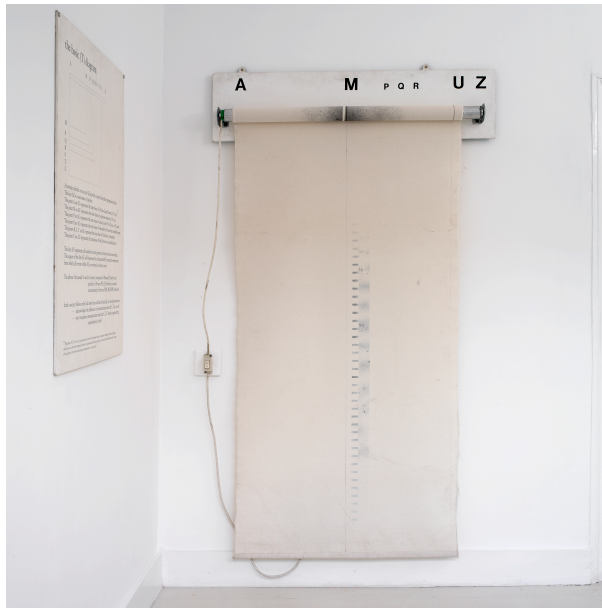
The Alyosha state is represented at Flat Time House in two spaces. The rear gallery, the Hand, was previously Latham's studio, where he made his artwork and as such a site for intuitive production. The Mind space, where these works are displayed, is intended as a site for reflection upon the intuitive process. In the Mind, those that visit are encouraged into the state of the Incidental Person; a site for reflective and intuitive thought enacted through the works Latham selected.



*How the Univoice is Still Unheard* (2003) Mixed media cantilevered window sculpture  
(currently de-installed for restoration)

Latham made his first book-relief in 1958 and continued to use books in his work until the end of his life. As with his use of the spray gun and glass, the material itself is imbued with meaning. Their extrusion from a surface represents the accumulation of human knowledge and experience over time from a common point, represented by the glass or canvas support. By intersecting, burning and interleaving the pages of the books they can no longer be read in a linear manner. Once manipulated the books cannot operate as hierarchical structures of received opinion but rather propose an intuitive understanding of themselves, and as such of human knowledge.

Latham's largest book-relief work is cantilevered through the front of Flat Time House. The spine of the first of two books bears the title *How the Univoice is Still Unheard*; the 'univoice' being Flat Time as a unifying principle of everything. The pages of the books are interleaved so they cannot be opened and the sculpture is intersected by the plane of glass, which makes up the front window of the space. For Latham this work constitutes the 'Face' of Flat Time House as a living sculpture. It exists at the membrane between the body and the exterior.



*Time-Base Roller with Graphic Score* (1987) Canvas, electric motor operating metal bar, wood, graphite.

The final work that Latham selected as representative of his ideas is the *Time-Base Roller with Graphic Score* (1987). A long canvas with spray-painted stripes is wound round a turning barrel operated by an electric switch. Above the barrel, at the top of the canvas is the time-base, a spectrum of durations from short to long, demarcated by letters from A to Z.

At the extreme left end of the canvas is point A - the 'least event', the shortest duration. As we move to the right durations get exponentially longer until we reach point M. This is the shortest duration perceptible to a human, Latham suggested this as  $1/24^{\text{th}}$  second, or equivalent to standard film frame rate - the point where a film frame transitions from a series of static images to constant movement. Consequently points A to M represent durations outside the realm of direct human reference, the atomic. Moving towards the right, durations become increasingly lengthier until we get to point P, Q and R. The instinctive, bodily interaction with the world of Mitya and the Body Event space at Flat Time House is at point P. Position Q corresponds to a rational interaction with the world, as with Ivan and the Brain. R is the longer duration of the reflective intuitive Incidental Person, Alyosha and the Mind.

Continuing right along the time-base towards longer durations, Latham suggested that points R, S and T are where 'art' is positioned, and, although Latham did understand there to be such a thing as definitive truth, S, T and U would be the location of what humans understand truth to be. As such, in Latham's cosmology art (RST) forms a bridge between human experience (PQR) and truth (STU). At the very end of the right side of the canvas, U represents the Universe as event, the duration of the entire universe at present, the duration since the big bang. Beyond the end of the canvas at U to the extreme right of the time-base and above the bare barrel is point Z. This is the duration of the Universe at maximum extent, or of all possible universes.

These sequence of these letters correspond to Latham's 'Time-base', one mode of understanding time according to the artist. The barrel of the roller itself represents a second conception of time. This is where we find State 0, both nothing and the atemporal, beyond the edges of the canvas and omnipresent beneath it. The third and final notion of time is activated when a switch is turned on and the canvas begins to unravel, this is passing time. The spray painted flecks on the canvas represent events occurring on different frequencies, or time-bases, as described by the letters along

the top edge. These marks face away from us and can only be seen through the reverse of the canvas and along a narrow band along the front of the roller.

When the switch is flipped the barrel turns, unrolling canvas until the whole length is unfurled. Most of the painted surface of the canvas remains obscured from our view most of the time, as it is either rolled up around the barrel or visible only from behind. The surface becomes only briefly visible along the narrow strip of the time-base along front of the cylinder before falling down behind, where only the reverse is visible. The continuous change in what can be seen on this narrow strip represents the passage of time and our understanding of the universe being restricted to our lived experience of it. The impression of the painted surface through the reverse of the canvas lacks the immediacy of the present, denoting an estrangement from events that have passed and those yet to come.

The *Time-Base Roller with Graphic Score* diagrammatically brings together the concepts explored in the other works in the Mind. Operating in four dimensions, Latham uses the roller as model of the universe understood as a musical score. The capacity of a flat canvas to represent an entire Universe is at the root of the term Flat Time.

An introduction to Latham's cosmology shows that the investigation of time expressed in these works is apparent throughout the work of his entire career. The mode he chooses to express the name for his house is an extension of this; choosing FLAT TIME I-IO, the 'House' becomes a transition point between state 0 and state I. This is one way the artist expressed his intention for the house itself to be understood as an artwork and culmination of his understanding of time. Integral to its position as an artwork and living sculpture, is the activity that takes place within and its relationship to the world outside.

The Face sculpture constitutes a symbol of the accumulation of received opinion by human kind. It acts as an interface between the activity within Flat Time House and that outside. It is positioned half outdoors in the sphere of wider society, transitions through a sheet of glass – a State 0 paradigm shift – into The Mind, the space of reflective thought which operates in tandem with The Hand, the space for intuitive production. This mode of thought is dependant upon the rational administrative work that takes place in the Brain, and this in turn is dependant upon the instinctive and domestic activity that takes place in the Body Event. Flat Time House operates as a system, and each of these modes of activity need to be active for the living sculpture to stay alive.

In order for Flat Time House to remain the work Latham intended, it needs to be inhabited and domestic activity needs to take place in the Body Event. Consequently the space has become a site for residencies, artists living in the house, eating and making artwork in the same spaces as Latham. Administrative work for the institution continues in the Brain, which remains a space for rational thought. It now also houses the John Latham Archive and academics travel from around the world to research the artist's thinking in this space. However, the institution's primary function is as a site for reflective-intuitive thought. This is demonstrated through an original artistic programme that includes exhibitions, experimental curating, workshops, screenings, publications, event-based performances and educational programming. Flat Time House aims to facilitate new discoveries and research into the fields of experimental art from the 1950s onwards in Britain and beyond, as well as to support the work and thinking of young and emerging artists and curators by creating a safe space in which to experiment.

Until his death, Latham opened his door to anyone interested in thinking about art. It is in this spirit that Flat Time House opened as a space exploring the artist's practice, his theoretical ideas and their continued relevance. Flat Time House aims to make a wider audience aware of Latham's work and ideas, his spirit of discovery, and through his example to understand and appreciate the crucial role of art and the artist in society.

All photographs Ken Adlard, courtesy John Latham Foundation