

## &gt;&gt;EXHIBITION

**THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE ORGANISATION: ARTIST PLACEMENT GROUP 1966-79**

Until 16 December

Raven Row Gallery, London E1

Review by Herbert Wright

Right: John Latham stands beside his *Big Breather*, developed during his placement with engineers Proteus-Bygging, outside Imperial College, London in 1972

Below: Sculptor Garth Evans had an APG placement with British Steel, resulting in sculpture, a film (both showing at the exhibition at the Raven Row Gallery here) and a book

In the Sixties, the artist-in-residence in a non-artistic organisation was unheard of (precedents such as war artists or Leeds University's Gregory Fellowship notwithstanding).

In 1965, artist Barbara Steveni suggested that industrial companies host and fund artists, and a year later she and fellow artist John Latham set up the Artists Placement Group to serenade British industry with the serendipitous proposition that it would gain from the artist's insights.

A few responded favourably, resulting in not just an alteration in the relationship between art and society, but also with works well ahead of their time. APG is now largely forgotten, but Raven Row's comprehensive retrospective highlights its historical significance, with lessons for today.

Its exhibition is heavy on documentation, in particular the correspondence between APG and host organisations. Early output is most striking. For example, sculptor Garth Evans was 'placed' with British Steel 1969-70, and a photography book, film and his own sculpture resulted.

The film, shot outside at a Greenwich steel works, is wonderfully atmospheric. In an industrial landscape strewn with steel beams rusting before our eyes on a damp day, Evans discovers a ready-made sculpture in a welding-exercise structure abandoned in the semi-desolation. It's not quite a David Smith, the pioneering American metal sculptor, but it has a muscular,



COURTESY THE JOHN LATHAM FOUNDATION

chunky presence. British Steel was an enthusiastic APG client, and cited Smith in justifying Evan's placement.

Other organisations must have been mind-boggled by the APG artistic outputs. Ian Breakwell made a film called *The Journey* with British Transport Films in 1975, which is basically him and a woman looking out from a train, set to his spoken reverie about sex complete with female orgasm sounds. APG was very single-minded about maintaining artistic freedom with its placements.

APG's apogee was probably the 1971 Hayward Gallery show *inn70*. Its centrepiece was *The Sculpture* – a room where artists and industrial figures talked across a table. Visitors watched through a PVC curtain or on monitors. It was one of the least attended and most critically panned in the Hayward's history. But who else (Warhol's commoditisation of art aside) was addressing the interplay of art and commerce?

After the show, APG targeted

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government agencies, perhaps responding to political criticism about pandering to corporate culture. Latham's 1975-76 placement with the Scottish Office is notable. Local bings (huge slag heaps from a century of oil-shale mining) captivated him, and in the spirit of Marcel Duchamp (and Evans at Greenwich) he declared them 'Works of Art'. He conceived a *Bing Monument*, two giant books intersecting on a bing, and three model studies are shown. If built, it could have redefined West Lothian like Gormley's *Angel of the North* did for Gateshead in 1996.

Other APG ideas also predated contemporary developments. For example, Latham's *Big Breather* (1972), developed with engineering firm Proteus-Bygging, mounted bellows on a 9m-high column outside Imperial College, demonstrating sea energy harvesting, well before any renewable agenda. *Reminiscence Aids* (1978-79) was a group effort led by Mick Kemp with the DHSS. It used nostalgic film clips and recorded reminiscences to engage the elderly – art with a community objective.

After 1979, APG's focus moved from artist placement to ideas consultancy. Steveni remains vocal about APG today, and a 2005 film of her is included in the show.

The Sixties saw a disconnect between art and industry; this excellent exhibition shows that APG's bridging of the gap was radical and productive. In an art world awash with hype and conceptualist fatigue, maybe artists should be revisiting our few remaining factory floors.



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